

Youth takes reins in fighter-jet rehab project

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By Roger Phelps (rphelps@ledger-dispatch.com)
Flyboy.

The moniker attached to men who flew U.S. fighter planes over hostile territory - such as the F-86 Sabre jet over Korea - will soon fit a Willow Creek youth who's restoring Jackson's own Sabre.

Austin Thorne, who turned 16 Tuesday, was younger than that when he conceived a plan to restore the battered old fighter moored at Westover Field airport. When on May 5 Thorne won approval from Amador County supervisors to make the effort, he didn't know that his Eagle Scout project will create the sole bar to the old craft's being reclaimed by the U.S. Naval Air Force and removed from the tarmac at Westover.

Local pilot Dave Richards has known it for some time.

"The airport's in a jam," Richards said. "We've got to get the plane fixed soon or the Navy's going to take it."

It was Richards who managed to get the craft for Jackson in the first place from southern California's China Lake Naval Air Base.

Thorne is a member of both Jackson's Boy Scout Troop 78 and the local Civil Air Patrol squadron, is a trained pilot only a month or so from soloing and is all of a sophomore at Argonaut High School.

"The plane is pretty rough," Thorne said. "It needs Bondo work and fiberglass, making sure everything is ready for paint. We need to clean off the aircraft - make sure we haven't missed anything."

An airport-based company, Helimax Aviation Inc., has committed to help, Thorne said. Richards has volunteered technical advice.

Amador County has a donated pot of \$1,500 earmarked for paint purchases in restoring the jet, Richards said.

"I just wanted to give back to part of aviation," Thorne said. "I grew up around planes."

The F-86 began life intended to be used as a drone, an unmanned aircraft controlled remotely and sent up as a target for Navy rocket launchers, Richards said.

At Westover, part of the plan in the Thorne project is eventually to mount the jet above ground, on a pole, with its landing gear raised, Richards said.

Thorne said, "Right now, it's basically just at the airport. Pilots are going to see it, but fighter planes are part of American history. Part of the project is to get the public to see it."

When Thorne finishes shepherding the concept through the official Eagle Scout Project hierarchy - in other words, doing a lot of paperwork - "hard labor" will begin, he said.

"The air patrol likely will help with prepping - the more hands the better, get it done quickly," Thorne said.

At this stage, no estimate exists of money costs that might be involved. The county's pot of paint money will come in handy, Thorne said.

The valuable effort will not go unappreciated, said Dave Sheppard, airport manager.

"We've had the craft at the airport more than 10 years," he said.



Austin Thorne of Willow Creek will organize a refurbishing of Westover Field airport's beat-up F-86 Sabre jet fighter. The U.S. Navy has said it will reclaim the jet if it is not rehabilitated. Thorne will do the work in an Eagle Scout project.

Photo by: [Roger Phelps](#)

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