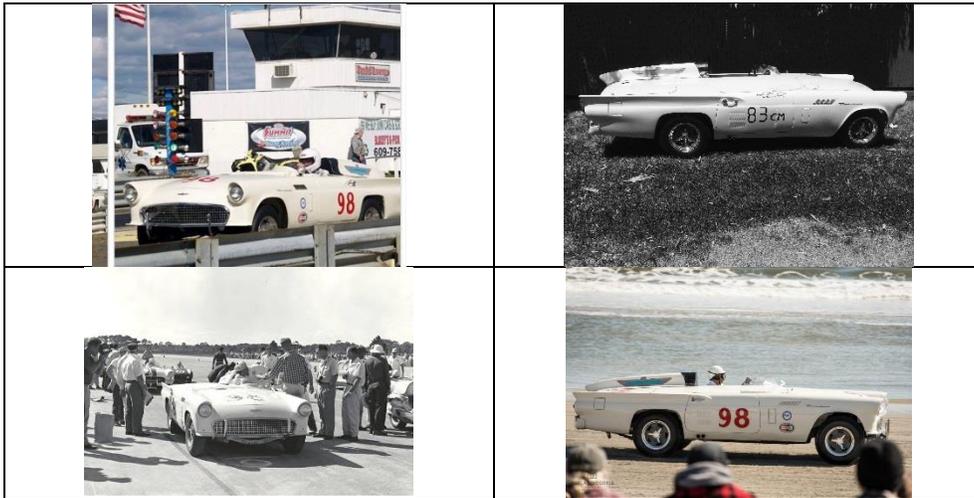


A short history of the Battlebirds – provided by owner Richard Stuck



After a successful 1956 racing season, Ford Motor company decided to go all out to win in the 1957 season, with the aim of knocking the checkered flags out of Chevrolet advertising. Their first objective was the 1957 Daytona Beach Safety and Performance Trials. Peter DePaolo Engineering, the builder of all of Ford's racing cars, was tasked with building two highly modified 1957 Thunderbirds. They were initially called Super Thunderbirds, but the press quickly called them Battlebirds, as they were to do battle with the Corvettes. These two cars, dubbed Domestic Ferraris by Sports Car Illustrated were built to run on the beach in the Experimental class and at the New Smyrna Airport Sports Car Race, which was a feature of Speed Weeks.

The cars were stripped down to the bare essentials and to lighten them even further, aluminum hoods, decks, tonneaus, head fairings and doors were fabricated. A small gauge cluster replaced the dashboard, and numerous holes were punched in supports to lighten the cars still further. The large Thunderbird X frame was removed and replaced with just a cross member to hold the transmission. The engines were set back six inches, down for inches, then two inches to the right to attain the best center of gravity. A myriad of other modifications, too numerous to be listed in a short article, were also performed.

The engines that powered the Battlebirds were also highly modified. The Y-Block 312 was bored and stroked to 347 cubic inches, special blocks were cast to allow for the use of a roller cam. Compressions as high as 15 to 1 were used. Induction systems consisted of Hilborn Fuel Injection, a Paxton VR57 Series One Supercharger or a combination of both. In its various forms, the engine made up to 400 horsepower. A four-speed Jaguar Moss transmission was used, as Ford could not source a four speed in the USA. The other Battlebird used a 368 cubic inch Lincoln engine, bored and stroked to 430 cubic inches with Hilborn Fuel Injection. It also was rated at 400 horsepower.

The cars first competed on the sands of Daytona on January 4, 1957. The Lincoln Powered car, driven by Danny Eames ran 160.356 MPH in the flying mile. In a one way run, the Ford Y-Block powered Battlebird ran 204 MPH, it was the fastest car on the beach.

On the road course at the New Smyrna Beach Airport, the 312 powered Battlebird, wearing #98, finished in first place in Class B and second overall. Marvin Paunch, who was the driver, said he could have won the race, but the Ford suits told him to slow down and save the car because he had beaten the Corvettes and that was all they wanted. (Carrol Shelby, driving a Ferrari was the winner). The Lincoln powered Battlebird, carrying #99, qualified for the race, but did not compete. I spoke to Marvin Paunch many years later, and he told me, "That little Thunderbird gave me just about all I could handle."

When Ford left racing in June 1957, in accordance with The Automobile Manufacturers Association racing ban, both Thunderbirds were sold to Andy Hotton of Dearborn Steel Tubing. The Crew Chief was Dean McCann, the Ford engineer who designed the supercharger set up of the 1957 Fords and Thunderbirds. They competed very successfully throughout the Midwest and Canada from mid-1957 to 1960. Again, they were never beaten by a Corvette. In 1959, the 312 Y-Block powered Battlebird was obtained by Holman and Moody, reliveried and renumbered #22, to compete in the first annual Daytona Speedway 1000KM Sports Car Race. The car was driven by Fireball Roberts, Ralph Moody, Curtis Turner and Joe Weatherly. It finished in the Fifth position having competed against the newest best cars that Europe had to offer. Not bad for an obsolete race car and again, the Corvettes in the race all finished in back of the Battlebird.

The #98 car was sold to Parnell Jones and Vels Miletich where it was briefly converted to a street car for Vels' daughter. After that, it resided in the Parnell Jones Museum for many years. It is currently in a private collection. The #99 Car was sold to an airline pilot who leased the car to the Viva Las Vegas film production company for Elvis to drive in the movie. Before any filming was done, the car was taken for a test drive by a mechanic and was completely totaled in an accident. The owner was paid off, and the car disappeared into the mists of history.

A history of my Battlebird – The display vehicle on view at the AACA Museum, Inc.



I've always been a fan of the Thunderbirds. When I was a young teen, I remember seeing a picture of a Battlebird in Vels Parnell Jones Livery in a car magazine. I considered it the coolest Thunderbird in existence. In high school, I drove a 1955 Thunderbird purchased at a

local Ford dealer for one thousand dollars. Once in a while, I thought about turning it into a Battlebird, and fortunately, that never happened. I owned that car until 2002.

Tom Kitchen has built a replica of every race car driven by Fireball Roberts. He was working on a Battlebird reconstruction but decided to sell it long before it was completed. It was little more than a very tired 57 T-Bird with a tonneau cover and head fairing, but it was a start. In 2011 I purchased the car, and had it brought home.

I began an extensive hunt for original photographs, articles about the car and for people who had been involved with the car. I also closely studied the original which was in California at that time and had been substantially changed for vintage sports car racing. Having done all this, everything that was done to the #98 car by DePaolo Engineering was done to my car. All the necessary aluminum parts were fabricated all the chassis modifications were performed, and a 347 cubic inch 312 Ford Y-Block was built to power it. I was fortunate enough to locate the proper VR57 Paxton Supercharger, which is made of pure unobtainium. I also have the correct Hilborn Fuel Injection System which is yet to be installed. It took one year of full-time work to complete the car, but I consider the car a work in progress as additional information is learned. To make the car period correct, all the graphics were hand painted by Joe Sannutti, a famous paint slinger. Dean McCann, the Battlebird Crew Chief, sat in the car and simply said, "This is the car".

The car is not a trailer queen. It has been drag raced at old-time drag events and made exhibition laps at many of the tracks in the northeast. It was the only post-1934 car ever allowed to make a run down the beach at The Race of Gentlemen, and I regularly drive it to shows, and events. It's a fun car to own and I enjoy teaching people about this short, but very important, chapter in Ford history.

On a lark, I purchased rights the "Peter DePaolo Engineering Co." which had been abandoned. So is the car a re-creation, a re-construction or a continuation car? I just say if Shelby and Holman and Moody could do it, so can I.