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This pilot's hide-away has a getaway airplane. When it is not parked in the yard, it is cleverly housed right under the long back porch.



## LIFE LIVED AT *FULL THROTTLE*

BY ELIZABETH HEUBECK  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CURTIS MARTIN

A roomy back porch with comfortable furniture and mesmerizing views: cows grazing to the right, the sparkling Chesapeake Bay to the left, the occasional incoming airplane landing on the grassy airstrip front and center. This lovely home creates the perfect oasis for Mike Ashford, former Air Force fighter pilot, investor, saloon owner, and collector of fine art, cars, and airplanes. It's here that this unflagging adventurer reflects on a life lived at full throttle.

"It's my de-pressurization chamber," says Ashford of his tastefully renovated Kent Island home, which he says once looked like little more than a plain cinder block square. "Every time I come here, it restores me."

That feeling of restoration is much easier to come by since the house underwent a massive overhaul two years ago. "Nothing had been done with the place since the 1970s," notes Eamon Seidel, VP of Operations at Lundberg Builders, who dove into the project once he got the green light from Ashford. "He knew he was going to do something with it; he just wasn't sure what," Seidel says. One thing Ashford did know was that a renovation would entail something rather unusual: a porch jutting off the back of the house with an airplane hangar below, the perfect size for his single engine plane.

A guest on Ashford's new and expansive 40-foot-wide back porch, which runs the length of the 2,100-square-foot home, might be lucky enough to sink into the deep cushions of its comfortable couch and be transported back in time by tales from the adventurer's past. The octogenarian grew up in Joliet, Illinois, a steel mill town where the unemployment rate now exceeds 20 percent. There, as a somewhat rudderless adolescent, Ashford recalls getting kicked out of Catholic school, frequently couch-surfing in the living rooms of generous folks, and discovering the dream of one day becoming a pilot.

It all started, explains Ashford, when he'd ride his rickety bike to hang around the regional airport. There, he got to know the former World War II pilots who worked there. He'd clean their planes in exchange for stories and occasional rides. Without guidance from a father figure, says Ashford, the pilots filled in, telling him to "keep his nose clean." He heeded their advice, stayed out of serious trouble, and became an Air Force Captain before moving on to other professional and recreational endeavors—most notably as a pilot and sailor. His exploits led him to hobnob with and befriend people in high places, including his dear friend of decades, the late Walter Cronkite.

Indeed, Ashford's back porch affords the perfect spot for gazing at the small grassy airstrip before him: a view he occasionally enjoys with close friends, a cigar, and a bourbon, while rehashing stories from his fighter pilot days and beyond. Here, Ashford socializes in a far more deliberate manner than at his primary residence in downtown Annapolis. There, the 82-year-old remains somewhat of a local celebrity, thanks to his larger-than-life, decades-long presence as founder of McGarvey's Saloon and Oyster Bar. Ashford

acknowledges that he can't walk down the street in the state capital without running into someone he knows. Here, it's different. If he wants to entertain and act the part of raconteur, he can do so—on his terms. But if he chooses to sit alone with his thoughts, uninterrupted, that's okay, too.

It's just as easy to get lost in memories of Ashford's full life inside his cozy Kent Island home, where there's room enough for what he calls his "I love me" things. Interior decorator Lucy Reithlingshoefer, who artfully displayed his beloved collection of art, photos, books, and other memorabilia throughout his renovated home, says Ashford's collection served as a jumping-off point for the overall interior design. She knew she wanted to create a look for the home that would enhance his impressive personal collection, rather than compete with it. "It kind of tells his life story," says Reithlingshoefer, who, along with her husband Don, owns Annapolis-based Reithlingshoefer Design Studio.

Glancing at some of the photos on the walls, it's easy to see how. Leaning way out of a sailboat into the water. Sitting in the cockpit



The single engine plane can taxi right into the hangar underneath the porch for the night.



The living room has a comfortable saloon-style atmosphere, appropriate for the founder of McGarvey's, one of Annapolis' famous watering holes.

of a stunt plane. Posing with President Bush and First Lady Laura Bush. Enjoying a close-up with Walter Cronkite. Every picture provides a glimpse of Ashford's public life. In bringing together the Reithlingshoefers and Lundberg's Seidel, Ashford assembled a team of trusted professionals to improve the place where he carries out his private life.

Ashford didn't get around to fixing up the house until a washing machine flood, which had caused thousands of dollars' worth of damage, forced him to address it. "It prompted him to say, 'Let's have fun with this,'" says Seidel, who had known and worked with Ashford well before starting this latest project.

Tackling challenges head-on, the team went to work. By adding windows that surround the entire main level of the home, Don Reithlingshoefer allowed light to spill into the primary living space. By moving the entire septic system and overcoming structural engineering challenges, Seidel made room for an airplane to fit in a hangar tucked below the new expansive, second-story porch. At the homeowner's suggestion, Seidel also creatively raised the flooring just under a dining table so that when Ashford sits there to enjoy a meal, he can peer outside and view the airstrip at eye level without having to stand up to see what's happening.

As we gaze outward, we can see how, even here, where he goes to escape his very public life, Ashford remains engaged in what's happening around him. "I like solitude," he says. And perhaps

that's true. But when asked how often he retreats to his Kent Island getaway, he admits that he rarely stays for more than a night at a time. Then it's back to Annapolis, where everybody knows his name. **AH**

CUSTOM BUILDER: Eamon Seidel, CKBR, Lundberg Builders, Inc., [lundbergbuilders.com](http://lundbergbuilders.com), Stevensville, Maryland | ARCHITECTURE & INTERIOR DESIGN: Lucy and Don Reithlingshoefer, Reithlingshoefer Design Studio, [rdsdesignstudio.com](http://rdsdesignstudio.com), Annapolis, Maryland

