

SECRET LIVES OF A TEXAN

AIR RACING, MURDER AND MAYHEM, AEROBATICS, SKYWRITING — THE AUTHOR COAXES THE ALUMINUM SKIN OF HIS SNJ-4 TO REVEAL ITS COMPLEX HISTORY

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROGER CAIN EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

Airplanes have secret lives — lives comprising generations of memories lost to time, like unwound watches that have been discarded and forgotten. Walk any ramp on any airport and you see aircraft that are neglected, tied-down in disrepair, corroding back to the earth, or destined for some junk yard. On rare occasion a brave lion comes along hungry for the challenge of a restoration, that all-consuming discovery of what it would be like to rebuild that particular machine and to fly it as others did during

those forgotten decades.

I did not realize it was my calling to restore a North American SNJ-4 Texan until the project was well underway. This "aircraft" was a basket case of piled parts — all of which were hard-riden, ignored, and abused. But that's what I wanted, a ground-up restoration with no part untouched. I wanted to build this SNJ anew and, if I did it right, it would be my "master work" as well as my greatest aviation adventure.

Over a weekend, the engine and mount were removed; the wing center section was in a fixture; and the tube frame and tail cone were unbolted, resting on packing blankets. Thus began the eight

and a half year, 14,000-hour journey with drill motors and rivet guns, bucking bars, and sheet metal along with the seemingly endless application of stripper, primer, and paint as well as the manipulation of all manner of hand tools and hardware, safety wire, and cotter pins. The project was all-consuming by every measure: Time invested, money spent, relationships missed, and sleep ever-wanting. As with any deep addiction, every spare resource went to the chase of parts, disassembly, repair, assembly, paint, and installation. All the while, this brave lion was on the lookout for missing parts and components, trinkets

and hen's teeth that would appoint the project authentically.

But what of its past, this artifact of 80 years? Where was Bureau Number 9985 stationed during the war? What became of it after being stricken from the Navy's register and sold surplus? Who maintained and flew it? How did N55941 come to its disrepair — a death of untold cuts? These questions boiled up, like stripper peeling away years of accumulated paint, revealing hidden secrets. If only its forgotten secrets were as easy to uncover as old paint.

My first breaks in this discovery came from a kindly gentleman at the Smithsonian and by way of an FAA civil title search. Its military history card showed 9985 was accepted on 1 August 1942, 80 years ago as I am writing this article. The Texan was assigned to serve at NAS Jacksonville for Naval Air Operational Training (1942 to 1944), before later serving at NAS Sanford with the Operational Training Unit of VF-6 (1944 to 1946), likely as a squadron hack

since VF-6 was a fighter squadron. The more I learned about its station assignments, the more I wanted to know — a frustrating sentiment akin to searching through one's collection of hardware and not finding the proper length bolt. I eventually found a couple pictures with dozens of SNJ on-line at NAS Jacksonville and NAS Sanford with indistinguishable Bureau Numbers (EDITOR'S NOTE: I can feel Ben's pain! Way too many hours have been spent squinting through a magnifying glass in the attempt to find the "right" serial on hundreds of photos) or cropped images, just missing that key insignia to identify my Texan from the many. The three best images were snapshots of the secret, but provided no deep discoveries.

One such image was included in Dan Hagedorn's

outstanding book *North American's T-6: A Definitive History of the World's Most Famous Trainer*, in which SNJ-4s are on the assembly line at North American Aviation's sprawling plant in Grand Prairie, Texas. The progression of some 80 airplanes upstream illustrated the final assembly of SNJs on 15 July 1942. Dan kindly got me in touch with the photographic archivist of that image, who generously sent me a high-quality scan of the original photograph. One of the airplanes was exactly 100 units downstream from my airplane. The scan was of such high quality that I could count every unit on the line. Had the photo been taken a few days later... alas.

It is doubtful the workers at North American found as much excitement as our small group of weekend restorers did that April Fool's Day of 2017 when we mated the fuselage to the center section of the wing, locking the



Ben Marsh airborne in his SNJ-4 Texan near Lone, California, after the 8.5-year restoration.