

THE SMASHER

PAUL MANTZ, THE DEVELOPMENT OF AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN HOLLYWOOD,
AND A FLEET OF THREE SURPLUS B-25 MITCHELLS - PART ONE

BY SCOTT THOMPSON

Paul Mantz is a name familiar to almost anyone who has an interest in American aviation history, and also to those who study the Hollywood efforts to weave the dramatic exploits of daring-do that took place in the mid-20th Century. Also familiar is the converted North American B-25 Mitchell bomber, which became known as *The Smasher*, that Paul Mantz employed as a camera ship from 1946 until his untimely death in 1965. *The Smasher* was, in fact, the first of three specially modified B-25s used by Mantz's last company, the

famed Tallmantz Aviation, that were easily spotted due to their distinctive Cinerama camera noses. Now, the story of Mantz and *The Smasher* can be a bit more complete due to the acquisition of early airplane logbooks for his famous B-25.

Briefly, the history of Paul Mantz and movie flying began in 1931 when he performed the aerial stunts for movie *The Galloping Ghost*, which featured famed football player Harold "Red" Grange (whose nickname was "The Galloping Ghost" and this name would, of course, be applied to a post-war P-51D

Mustang racer) trying his luck at acting. The following year, he flew his Travel Air 16-K through an open-ended hangar at the Bishop Airport in California for a scene in *Air Mail*. As a point of interest, Mantz underbid the normal group of "Hollywood pilots" to get this job. The other pilots had formed the Associated Motion Picture Pilots and this led to a dispute that was taken to the American Federation of Labor. The decision to allow non-union member Mantz and his team of pilots to fly was dependent on an equal number of union pilots being hired for non-flying duties.

Mantz enjoyed a continually growing role in the stunt flying

A rare view of some of the aircraft at Stillwater, Oklahoma, on 25 June 1946. Records are hazy at best, but it appears the Texan and Hellcat went to the Oklahoma Agriculture and Mechanical College. The same thing may have happened to Mustang 44-15738 but it is also noted the plane may have been sold to a local mechanic (possibly after use by the school) and then smuggled to Israel. At the time, Israeli agents were scouring the USA for Mustangs. The B-25H is 43-4106 that was delivered to the USAAF in August 1943 and was the second H model. The record card for this aircraft shows it went to Walnut Ridge for disposal. However, this Mitchell was later purchased by Bendix and flown as N5548N. Needless to say, we welcome further information from readers.



business until, by the late 1930s, he was the dominant Hollywood pilot. Mantz ran United Air Services from the Union Air Terminal at Burbank. He corralled most of the Hollywood stunt flying, either doing it himself or making the necessary arrangements for planes and pilots. The thing that set him apart from the other stunt pilots is that Mantz was an able businessman. He organized his company to provide exactly what the Hollywood studios needed when they needed it. Besides flying before the cameras, Mantz provided the camera ships for the air-to-air and air-to-ground film work. The two primary camera planes used were his Lockheed Sirius 8A (NC117W) and his Boeing 100

(NC873H), though there were others as needed from his stable. The Sirius proved to be the most versatile, with a large ring camera mount installed for a photographer aft of the cockpit as well as two underwing camera mounts.

Mantz began to realize the real money in Hollywood was not



Brash and aggressive, Paul Mantz showed up in California during 1929 ready to tackle Hollywood. He had been kicked out of the Army Air Corps as a cadet when he performed a dangerous stunt. However, Hollywood wanted little to do with him since he did not have membership in the Associated Motion Picture Pilots. To get membership, you had to have flown in a movie so it was a real "Catch-22."



Paul Mantz obtained North American B-25H Mitchell USAAF 43-4363 from an RFC storage lot located at Stillwater, Oklahoma, along with 474 other surplus aircraft. He saved eleven, including this B-25, and had the rest scrapped. Three received civil registrations in a block: NX1202, NX1203, and NX1204. The first and last were assigned to his P-51C racers while the B-25H became NX1203. This view shows the airplane at Phoenix in 1948. The nose markings say "Weath-Air Inc., President Paul Mantz." The last vestiges of its AAF markings remain visible under a thin coat of spray-on aluminum paint. (William T. Larkins)