

HONORING AN ACE

FAGEN FIGHTERS WWII MUSEUM AND FIGHTER REBUILDERS COMBINE FORCES TO RETURN A HELLCAT TO THE SKY AND REUNITE THE PLANE WITH A NAVY ACE

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Hellcat! Could there have been a better name for the aircraft that destroyed the air forces of Imperial Japan? Probably not. But we must remember the Hellcat was not just an aerial fighter, it was also a warrior that could carry out devastating ground attacks on enemy airfields, shipping, and industry. Powered by the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 radial, one of the greatest of all World War Two powerplants, Grumman built an astounding 12,275 Hellcats in just over two years. Those aircraft would account for 5223 Axis aircraft destroyed.

This article is not going to be a history of a remarkable aircraft type, but rather we are going to focus on one particular machine and the people involved with it. Even with the astounding number of Hellcats produced, today the type is one of our rarest surviving Warbirds. Why? Basically, the end of the war saw

the Hellcat rapidly phased out of front-line service but a large number were transferred to training units and to a rapidly-building US Naval Reserve. Still, there were thousands of Hellcats left over. "When I was doing my book on surplus US military aircraft," recounted historian William T. Larkins, "I found a number of Navy photos and was amazed to see the of Hellcats stored at Clinton, Oklahoma. There were hundreds of them. Wings neatly folded, parked in orderly rows. Some were held for second-line duties and many were converted to drones, but the majority were rapidly scrapped. Civilian buyers had zero interest in obtaining a surplus Hellcat [prices were

around \$500] from the War Assets Administration or the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. In just a few years, they were all gone." However, a very few did survive — usually neglected and parked in the weeds at remote airfields.

Back in 1975, Jim Maloney lined the nose of a Grumman Hellcat up on the centerline of the runway at Compton, California, brought the power up and went roaring down the runway on the plane's flight to its new home at Chino. The aircraft was F6F-5 BuNo 78645 and the civil registration N9265A had been applied for the ferry flight to Chino, which would be its home for the next 40+ years. Back during the 1950s and 1960s, Naval Air Facility China Lake housed many Hellcats converted to target drones. Most were destroyed by the new generation of air-to-air missiles while others became victims of air-to-surfaces missiles and bombs. Periodically, left-over



Steven Hinton and the Hellcat near Chino Airport. After the F6F-5 was delivered to the museum, it did not take Evan Fagen long before going aloft in the aircraft. "It's a wonderful aircraft with superb handling qualities. I made my first flight on 5 April and have flown it a number of times since. It is easy to see that Grumman made this plane for a young ensign with 200 hours of flying time — it's easy to takeoff and land. That wide track landing gear really makes for great handling while on the ground," says Evan.