

THE SMASHER

HOW "HOLLYWOOD PILOT" PAUL MANTZ USED HIS FLEET OF SURPLUS NORTH AMERICAN MITCHELLS TO PIONEER THE DEVELOPMENT OF AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHY FOR THE MOVIE INDUSTRY - PART TWO
BY SCOTT THOMPSON

Paul Mantz was busy in the early 1950s. One notable flight occurred on 13 January 1951. Mantz and N1203 were on location for the several weeks of January filming for the RKO production of *Flying Leathernecks* while based at MCAS Pendleton, near San Diego. For one sequence to film a bombing run, a technician erroneously detonated explosives early, just as Mantz was approaching the target at a very low altitude, the resulting blast slightly damaging N1203. Don Dwiggins in his book *Hollywood Pilot* notes they somehow staggered back to Burbank with Mantz (supposedly) saying "We had to practically rebuild it... but we sure pleased the director." The logbook actually records the B-25 landing back and Camp Pendleton and was flying three days later for more filming. The logbook entry for the flight just records "Building

blown up." Mantz's publicity skills often approached his skills as an aviator. (EDITOR'S NOTE: Don Dwiggins was a hack aviation writer and very little in *Hollywood Pilot* should be believed.)

On 13 March 1952, Mantz, Johnston, and a film crew from Warner Bros. departed California for Alaska to support the filming of *Top of the World*, starring actor Dale Robertson. N1203 and crew were based at Ladd Field near Fairbanks for a month, until 14 April, when they returned to Burbank (EDITOR'S NOTE: The plot of this film is pretty terrible but it should be watched for footage of SB-17Gs in formation, Twin Mustangs, and a C-47 tugging a Waco CG-4A). During that time, flights were made

out to Barter Island on the northern coast of Alaska, as well as locations closer to Fairbanks. The film's plot centered on USAF Arctic operations, and featured Boeing SB-17G air-sea rescue aircraft and some dramatic air-to-air footage shot by cinematographer William Clothier. Also reported, Paul Mantz filmed an actual rescue mission using N1203, footage that turned up in the 1955 theatrical release. Between the ferry flights both ways, flying to filming locations in Alaska, and the actual filming, nearly 80 hours of flight time were added to the logbook of N1203.

The next major project that put Mantz and N1203 to

Classic image of Paul Mantz during the mid-1950s beneath the cockpit of his B-25. The world map and flags that detailed the bomber's travels were added after his first world-spanning trip that began in January 1953. (Tallmantz Aviation)

work was the one for which they became well-known to the general public. On 16 June 1952, Mantz departed Burbank for a memorable four-week cross-country aerial tour featured in *This Is Cinerama*.

Attempting to push back at the infant but threatening television industry that was already sapping movie audiences, and in search of the largest and widest projected movie picture possible, the *Cinerama* technique required three 35mm motion-picture cameras filming simultaneously. The design then had the three films projected on special curved *Cinerama* screens, with the demarcation line between the projections carefully obscured. The resulting *Cinerama* image was more than 140 degrees in width, nearly matching the human field of view, including peripheral vision. Paired with an impressive sound system for its day, the theater experience could not be matched. Unfortunately, the complexity of the *Cinerama* system and the additional cost of three projectors, the sound system, and the multitude of technicians required to operate it all in a theater doomed the effort from the

start. However, a total of seven actual three-strip *Cinerama* productions were filmed (not counting the faux-*Cinerama* films of the mid-1960s).



Mantz and his B-25 were utilized in four of the seven true *Cinerama* films: *This Is Cinerama*, (1952), *Seven Wonders of the World*

(1956), *Search for Paradise* (1957), and *How The West Was Won* (1962).

It turned out that the B-25 had the ideal nose position to mount the heavy



Beautiful view of N1203 at Mantz's base at Orange County Airport during an early fall morning in 1958. During this time, Orange County Airport was extremely remote and surrounded by farm fields. This photo shows the *Cinerama* nose to good advantage. The nose was added in 1954; note the preponderance of additional windows in the upper nose section — ones that later proved problematic. The world map and flags are prominent. Also, on the outboard engine cowls was the inscription *The Smasher*. (John Voss)