

the
CIVIL SAVAGES

HISTORY OF THE LITTLE-KNOWN FOUR CIVILIAN NORTH AMERICAN AJ SAVAGES

BY MILO PELTZER

This is the story on how surplus ex-US Navy North American Aviation AJ Savage nuclear-capable attack bombers came to be successful aerial fire-fighting tools. Four AJs made it onto the United States civilian register in early 1960 and two of those would be used as fire-bombers for seven years, while one would become today's sole surviving Savage.

Our tale begins in summer 1957 at Long Beach Municipal Airport in southern California. At the time, the airfield was packed with war-surplus

aircraft. This was well before such machines became collectors' items and they were at the field to be modified into aircraft that could make their owners some money. James Routh had purchased a surplus Consolidated PBY-6A (BuNo 46649/N9546C) in early 1956 and turned it into a large air-tanker — the first of its type. At the end of the 1957 fire season, Routh tallied his income and expenses and found that the air-tanker PBY had paid for its purchase, conversion,

and operation — plus it turned a very small profit.

The success of Routh's Catalina created a feeding frenzy and launched an industry. Everybody who was anybody was buying and tanking any type of surplus military aircraft that they could get their hands on: B-17s, TBMs, and B-25s were the main targets for conversion. A Mitchell could be purchased for as little as \$2500 out of Tucson, Arizona, and the more desirable Grumman TBM-3s were available at the Navy's storage and disposal site at NAF Litchfield Park for as



Some questioned what BAT painted on tip tanks on Tanker 88 meant. It was an acronym for Bellroy Airtankers. Owner John Jackson didn't like it and it was gone in short order. Note Rod Crouch's neat blue and white 1955 Buick Special. Crouch was a fixture around the Long Beach Airport for a number of years. He worked for everyone around the airfield, even Douglas Aircraft. (M. Peltzer)

little as \$4000 for a nice one.

A lot of the conversion work was taking place at Long Beach Airport and, by 1959, a group of local businessmen thought that if they put their talent and money together that they, too, could turn a profit by operating air-tankers. Gathering to take advantage of this opportunity was John M. Jackson, a local oil man; James F. Conroy, an aeronautical engineer; John "Don" Campbell, former chief pilot for James Routh Aircraft Co.; and Robert G. "Bob" Christopherson, an aeronautical engineer and large aircraft pilot.

These four men formed a new company known as Bellroy Air Tankers, a division of J.M. Jackson Inc., and set out to research a suitable aircraft for conversion and, to this end, they contracted Glen St. George, known for his dealings in surplus WWII airframes. St. George and Christopherson made a trip to Litchfield Park, and at Allied Aircraft's storage yard adjoining Litchfield Park, they viewed a number of options. The pair found what they were looking for: The North American Aviation AJ Savage.

They knew that the Navy had recently retired all the AJ-1s and were about to retire the later AJ-2 variant.

Having recognized the potential for the AJ Savage as an air-tanker, representatives from the Jackson Co., attempted to negotiate with the Navy a deal to acquire 40 (!) AJ-2s, but to no avail. Given the fact that numbers of surplus warplanes had been smuggled to Latin America, the government may have been concerned about the purchase of 40 nuclear-capable long-range bombers. However, a deal was soon made with Bob Gallaher, the owner of Allied Aircraft, for three AJ-1s (BuNos 124158, 124164, and 124167) for \$7500 each. There was,



Tanker 88 at the Long Beach Municipal Airport on 20 May 1960. The brand-new air tanker is just out of the paint shop and taxiing out to begin its first series of test flights since conversion to aerial fire fighter tanker. Pilot Bob Christopherson and flight engineer Jack Hennessey made the first flight since it had arrived from NAF Litchfield Park some two months earlier. (M. Peltzer)