

FROM TRACKER TO TANKER

HOW THE GRUMMAN TS-2A TRACKER WAS CONVERTED TO A FIRE-BOMBER FOR OPERATION IN CALIFORNIA. IT WAS NOT AN EASY TASK

BY STEVE WHITBY

During November 1972, the first four ex-US Navy Grumman TS-2A Trackers were flown into Hemet Ryan Airport from Davis-Monthan AFB. Hemet Ryan was an important WWII training base operated by Ryan Aircraft and dozens upon dozens of PT-22s were based at the field.



The idea for converting the US Navy's Grumman S2F-1 Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) aircraft to a retardant-dropping fire-fighting platform for California came from the California Department of Forestry (CDF) in Sacramento. The CDF had no desire for single-engine aircraft — that lesson had been learned with the faithful Grumman Avenger. Even though dozens of Avengers performed the fire-fighting role with professionalism, an engine failure meant that the plane was going in only one direction — down. The Avengers were powered by Wright R-2600s and had the capability of carrying 600 gallons of retardant.

By the late 1960s/early 1970s, the Navy had literally hundreds of Grumman S-2s in storage at NAF Lichfield Park outside of Tucson, Arizona (many of these were moved to Davis-Monthan AFB when the government decided to merge USAF/USN aircraft storage facilities).

The S-2 went into US Naval service in 1954 and served as an ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare) aircraft operating from land bases and aircraft carriers. Grumman produced some 1185 Trackers while another 99 S-2s carrying the CS2F designation (42 CS2F-1, 57 CS2F-2) were manufactured in Canada under license by de Havilland Canada (during the 1980s, the Canadians gave a lot of thought to extending the operational life of their Trackers through the addition of turbine engines and other updates. Testing showed that the airframe had an incredible

California air attack at its best. Taken from the famed "Smokey the Bear" control tower at Hemet Ryan Airport, Tracker Tankers 70, 71, 72, and 73 are neatly lined up as the sun begins to go down. In the background are three of Hemet's "heavy" air attack Fairchild C-119s. Note auxiliary jet pods atop the fuselage center sections. Also note the tonal changes in airframe color from the first two to the last two Trackers. Tankers 70 and 71 were painted by Hemet Valley while the last two were painted by a contractor at Cable Airport in Upland, California (subsequent S-2s were all painted at Cable).