

# BRIDGE TOO FAR

HOW A PIONEERING CROP-DUSTING PILOT MET HIS END IN HAWAII

BY RON HALTON



If it's the last thing I do, I am going to fly under that damn bridge. I see it out there on just about every flight, just waiting for me." Those were the words of Joseph E. Bell Jr. as he talked to a fellow crop duster pilot at Murrayair, a company that specialized in aerial application work — Hawaiian style. The "golden age" of Hawaiian crop dusting was in the 1960s and numerous surplus Stearman biplanes worked the sprawling sugar plantations.

Joseph Bell had enlisted in the military during the closing days of World War Two with the goal of becoming a fighter pilot. He was born in Oak Park, Illinois, during 1925 and had achieved his goal just before the war ended. Apparently, he still craved

the excitement of WWII flying so he became a crop duster after mustering out of the service.

Crop dusting was definitely a growth industry and it certainly offered a disproportionate number of thrills. Bell gravitated to Arizona where he saw first-hand how hundreds of war-surplus Stearman PT-13, PT-17, and N2S biplanes were being rapidly converted to the new role. There was just about every type of airframe modification imaginable and almost the same number of engine choices. Some of the dusters were left with their original powerplants but the engine of choice soon became the Pratt & Whitney R-985 radial that could pump out a reliable 450 horsepower. Usually,

these engines were removed from surplus Vultee BT-13 Valiants.

The combination of Stearman airframe and R-985 engine seemed made for each other. The Stearman offered exceptional maneuverability while the extra power from the R-985 meant that larger loads could be taken aloft for dusting and spraying while also giving the pilot that extra margin of safety when more power was needed.

There were numerous ag operators in Arizona that were all battling for business as irrigation made former desert land ideal for a variety of important and profitable crops. Into this market came Joe Bell and, given his military experience, he was quickly hired and worked for several

Joe Bell developed a reputation as one of Hawaii's best ag pilots.



companies for seven years, gaining thousands of hours of ag flying time. He quickly developed a reputation as a superb pilot well-suited to the unusual demands of ag flying.

He moved to Hawaii in 1957 and began flying for Murrayair, a pioneering outfit in the ag field that was created by Philip Joseph Murray and Wally Waterhouse. Murray had been active in early ag flying in California before setting his sights on Hawaii where he would go on to develop a number of aviation companies. In 1947, the pair created Murrayair and Phil imported several Stearmans, going to work spraying pineapples for Libby McNeil on Oahu, Molokai, and Maui. However, their insurance was cancelled in 1948 due to problems with over-spraying but tightening of flight rules enabled them to regain the vital insurance.

In 1952, Murrayair expanded to the aerial application of fertilizer and brought over more Stearmans. Somehow, Joe and Phil got together in 1957 and Joe was soon flying for the expanding organization. Sugar was becoming a huge business for



Surplus Stearmans were available in an almost never ending supply to satisfy the growing ag market.

The Stearman biplanes operated by Murrayair helped with Hawaii becoming a major agricultural market.