



Kermit Weeks inspects the B-25B forward fuselage after it arrived at Chino.

LAST RAIDER

KERMIT WEEKS IS HAVING THE LAST SURVIVING B-25B MITCHELL RESTORED TO FLYING CONDITION TO HONOR THE DOOLITTLE RAIDERS AND A TIME WHEN AMERICA STOOD UNITED

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY AND STEVE WHITBY

When I viewed the B-25B project at Chino, I realized that something had to be done to honor those incredible Americans that flew against all odds to strike back at the Japanese Empire during the darkest days of the Second World War. Speaking was well-known aviation preservationist and visionary Kermit Weeks. The Florida pilot had just done an inspection of the world's last surviving North American B-25B Mitchell, USAAC 40-2347 — just three serials from Doolittle's plane). Only 120 B-25Bs were built at the North American Aviation (NAA) plant at Mines Field (now Los Angeles International Airport) as the company tooled up to produce aircraft

for a world that was already at war. It was an amazing time at NAA as thousands of employees were being hired to build Texans, Mitchells, and a new fighter that had been named the Mustang. America was arming the Free World and the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor was still in the future.

"After speaking with Carl Scholl, we worked out a plan to return the B-25B to the sky," said Kermit. "I already have a B-25J that Aero Trader did and I know the company is fully capable of bringing the B-25B back to its original condition. Our program is to restore the aircraft in a rapid manner so it can be presented to the public as a reminder of what our nation

did to save democracy."

Things are changing at Chino Airport. Aero Trader's long-time partner Tony Ritzman has retired and new plans have been created that will form an extremely exciting, forward-looking organization that will help change the future of historic aviation. More of that a bit later.

"As *Air Classics* readers know, I quickly developed a passion for the B-25 Mitchell," said Carl Scholl. "For whatever reason, the Mitchell grabbed my full attention back in the 1960s and the stars sort of aligned to allow me to move forward on what would turn into a life-long quest to preserve and fly these historic aircraft. However, it did not start that way. At that time, there



One of the last operational B-25Bs was 40-2254, which was photographed late in 1943. Original paperwork shows this aircraft cost taxpayers \$96,024. It was delivered on 30 September 1941 and was damaged on 10 March 1942 at Ellington Field and illustrated elsewhere in this issue. Repaired, the aircraft returned to service and designated as an RB-25B/Class 26 on 24 April 1945. It was flown to Bush Field, Georgia, on 29 September 1945 for storage and possible sale. However, there were no buyers and it was scrapped.

were a number of semi-abandoned B-25s scattered around southern California airfields and I began examining them. I found an example I could afford and purchased the plane. What was I thinking? You have to remember that Mitchells weren't worth much during that time period. Jack Hardwick had operated a business supplying parts for Mitchells to foreign air forces. Located in El Monte, California, Jack had a very large yard that was packed with Mitchell parts, components, and airframes. For a B-25 nut, this was heaven. However, Jack wanted out of the business and what he could not sell he was getting ready to scrap — this included the B-25 inventory. In fact, a deal was already basically in place to scrap out the Mitchell stuff and clean off the lot for commercial development.

I recall walking into Hardwick's office where he was smoking a cigar. He looked at me and said, 'Buy all this stuff and you will be the B-25 King.' Then he just started laughing. Little did I realize. I managed to put together a deal with Mike Pupich and Joe Davis to save everything. It was not easy and it involved a lot of back-breaking work and the goodwill of a number of individuals that did not want to see all this history go into the smelter. By doing this, I had the parts I needed for my own B-25." The Mitchell inventory would eventually find a home in the desert where the dry weather would be ideal for the long-term survival of the B-25 horde. "At



Lobby card for *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*.

that time, I had a lot of things going on," recalled Carl. "I was learning to fly, had acquired my first B-25, and was phasing out of my previous business so I could concentrate on restoring my Mitchell. It quickly became known that I was interested in getting just about anything to do with B-25s so that I could support my Mitchell and that is when Ed Maloney came to me with a deal I could not refuse."

Ed Maloney was America's pioneering post-war aviation preservationist. Without his foresight, today's Warbird world would



The forward fuselage after arriving at Chino.



The nose carries this unusual bat insignia and the wording *Happy Halloween* can barely be made out. We have researched these markings but have not come up with any information.