



**FRIDAY NIGHT
OLDIES**
BY DOUG FISHER

*SURPLUS EX-MILITARY AIRCRAFT LONG BEFORE THEY
BECAME MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR RESTORATIONS*

As we have noted numerous times in this series, if it were not for the fire-bombers and ag operators, then today's supply of restored Warbirds would be much, much fewer. Thousands of Boeing Stearman Model 75s were converted to sprayers and dusters and they were accompanied in this difficult line of work by the less numerous Naval Aircraft Factory N3N-3. The last American military biplane, the final N3N-3s were phased out of service in 1958. Along with the available airframes came lots of spare parts. The vast majority of N3N-3 ag aircraft were converted to carrying Pratt & Whitney R-985 450-hp radials that had been stripped from surplus Vultee BT-13s. One such N3N-3 was N45111 that was flown by Sanders Aviation, one of the larger ag operations of the time period. Photographed during September 1975 at a duster strip near Tempe, Arizona, the aircraft displays numerous ag modifications and proves that no two ag N3N-3s were alike. The registration for this aircraft was listed as still be active into the early 2000s.



Wearing a distinctive yellow and green color scheme, highly-modified N3N-3 N44875 flown by Preston-Allen Aviation awaits its next spraying mission. Ag work is dangerous business and on 14 April 1977, the plane was climbing out from Vondrahae Strip at Brawley, California, when the chemicals onboard apparently exploded. The pilot managed to land the plane, which ground looped and then burned. He escaped but the N3N-3 was consumed. The craft's registration was cancelled on 1 June 1977. The plane was photographed at Ranch-Aero Strip in Holtville, California, during September 1975.



With tires flat and prop and rudder missing, N3N-3 N44867 had certainly seen better days. Photographed at Vernon, Texas, on 8 October 1978, the plane had been withdrawn from service in favor of newer equipment. N44867 was obtained by the then-Confederate Air Force and put into flying condition but one source has it listed as destroyed in a 1991 crash.