

POSTWAR AIRCRAFT DISPOSAL

by Scott A. Thompson

AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II THE UNITED STATES government implemented a program to dispose from its control the massive inventory of surplus military aircraft and parts on hand at the cessation of hostilities. The disposal program had been developed over the span of several years and was a planned process which sought to avoid the mistakes which occurred in the American disposal policy after World War I and yet satisfy the many demands of supply, budgetary constraints, postwar projections and political, industrial and military concerns.

The administration of aircraft disposal fell to a myriad of governmental agencies with numerous programs and overlapping jurisdictions. Disposal administration covered both domestic and oversea American surplus aircraft. The Surplus Property Board initially had overall authority over the process, with the Reconstruction Finance Corporation handling the domestic program. By 1948 over 37,000 aircraft were processed as salable (sold for the purpose of flight) while another 27,000, mostly tactical aircraft, were sold as unsalable: that is, for nonflight use or scrapping. The adminis-



tration of the aircraft disposal program was transferred to the War Assets Administration in early 1946 and by 1948 the program was largely completed. the undignified destruction of these American war planes

Despite its apparent numerical successes, the disposal might be accurate to fault the federal government for being, process was not without its critics or scandals as many aspects perhaps, unusually efficient in the prosecution of the establishment of the program administration were later called into question.

which resulted in various journalistic disclosures and a Congressional inquiry. However, issues raised by these revelations 1949—While it was recognized by government policy planners rarely called into question the disposal policy itself; rather, that aircraft disposal was but a component of the overall the focus centered upon questionable bidding procedures postwar disposal policy, it was acknowledged that surplus and concern that the government was derelict in not obtaining aircraft and aircraft parts would be the largest single class of ing the maximum revenue from the surplus sales. surplus property in the program, both in number and dollar

The policy makers in the United States government, both value.¹ To understand the establishment of the aircraft disposal and military, realized very early in the war the problems of the disposal program, however, it is necessary to examine the of demobilization and disposal of the planned fleet of war general disposal of surplus government property as it developed planes which were, at that point, not yet even rolling off the production lines. Studies were begun in 1943 and policy was set by 1944 as to the course the process would take and,

though later modified by the sheer numbers of aircraft involved, As the U.S. economy began to shift to a wartime footing in

Lineup of veteran B-17s at Kingman in February 1947. (William T. Larkins)





1941, an accumulation of surplus government property was created just by the termination of peacetime programs. While the war effort absorbed some of the surplus, it was largely left to the individual agencies of the federal government to arrange for disposal of any excess material. Overall jurisdiction of the process was charged to the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department. Wartime production and adjustments of production, particularly as new designs replaced obsolete products, dramatically increased the amount of unusable material with unneeded spare parts, incomplete products, and tooling. As the management of excess property became a problem, various proposals were set forward to create a cohesive administrative body which would coordinate and oversee the various disposal programs across the federal agencies. Toward that end, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9425 on 19 February 1944 which established the Surplus War Property Administration (SWPA) under the Office of War Mobilization and transferred the functions of the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department to the new administration.² The SWPA was intended as a short-term planning body while awaiting the Congressional legislation which would firmly establish a federal disposal agency.

Efforts of the SWPA concentrated on the formulation of disposal policy which emphasized the designation of various federal agencies as the disposal administrator for a particular class of property, whether it be aircraft, production plants, or real estate. On 21 April 1944, SWPA Regulation 1 designated disposal agencies and established surplus declaration and disposal procedures. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) was designated the disposal agency for surplus aircraft and parts within the Continental United States, while the Treasury Procurement Division was the designated agency for aircraft within U.S. territories and possessions. The Foreign Economic Administration (FEA) was charged with disposal of aircraft and parts overseas in noncombat areas, while the mili-

tary services were responsible for that task in their combat areas.

The intent of the SWPA was carried forth in legislation entitled "The Surplus Property Act of 1944" which was approved on 3 October 1944. The Act set forth the general disposal policy goals of the government in lengthy and complicated legislation. Essentially it established a three-member Surplus Property Board (SPB) which took over the jurisdiction of the SWPA. The Surplus Property Act left to the SPB the formulation of general policy and controls of disposal, and directed the SPB to designate disposal agencies within the federal establishment. The disposal agencies were to form their own policies as to the disposal of their assigned property. It is important to note that the Surplus Property Board was charged only with the administration of general policy and was not involved in any specific disposal process. Three members, Guy M. Gillette (Chairman), Edward H. Heller, and Robert A. Hurley, were appointed by Roosevelt and confirmed by the Congress. They held their first full meeting on 23 January 1945 and named Alfred E. Howse as the Administrator to the Board. The SPB, though consisting of three members, was budgeted for a staff of 377 to help oversee the policy process.³

On January 24, 1945, the SPB established an Advisory Board with representatives of 19 concerned governmental agencies. Included were members of the Civil Aeronautics Board, the Navy and War Departments, the RFC and the FEA.⁴

The Board began the process of implementing regulations, special orders, and temporary regulations, which sought to control the developing procedures. Many of the regulations duplicated or superceded earlier SWPA regulations. SPB Regulation 1, established 2 April 1945 and effective 1 May 1945, was entitled "Designation of Disposal Agencies and Procedures for Reporting Surplus Property Located within the

Veteran of over 75 combat missions, "Fearless F" awaits an undignified end at Kingman.
(William T. Larkins)

Colorful nose art adorns this modified B-24D at Altus, Oklahoma, in mid-1945.
(George Hale via Randy Walker Collection)

Eager Beaver was a B-17F at Altus, Oklahoma, in mid-1945. This B-17 was the first aircraft to be transferred to an educational institution under SPA regulations. The B-17 went to the Williamsport Technical Institute, Pennsylvania, in July 1945. (George Hale via Randy Walker Collection)

Continental United States, its Territories and Possession." This regulation retained the RFC as the disposal agency for all aircraft and aircraft parts located within the United States, its territories and possessions. The regulation also retained the Foreign Economic Administration as the disposal agency for aircraft and parts located in foreign areas outside of combat areas.⁵

Beginning with its initial designation of the disposal agency for most of the domestic surplus property, the RFC established an elaborate network of offices within its confines to administer the program. The RFC had originally been established in early 1932 as a Depression-related agency to administer a variety of federal recovery programs. The RFC had built a number of domestic military bases during the war and its tentacles through the numerous aspects of the American economy lent itself to the surplus disposal process.

The SPB gestated into the Surplus Property Administration by legislation passed 18 September 1945. While the organizational body of the new Administration was widened in scope and manpower, the policy charge remained the same: establishment and prosecution of the overall disposal policy of the federal government.

However, by the end of 1945 it was becoming evident that the organization of the RFC disposal programs was becoming cumbersome. While the RFC had created numerous offices and divisions to handle their expanding disposal programs, there were many jurisdictional conflicts. To solve some of the internal organizational problems, the RFC transferred all of its disposal functions into the War Assets Corporation (WAC) on 15 January 1946. The WAC, a subsidiary of the RFC, had existed as the Petroleum Reserve Corporation before the RFC renamed the organization on 15 November 1945.⁶

To solve the overall disposal organizational problems, Executive Order 9689 transferred all the functions of the Surplus Property Administration with respect to domestic disposal into the WAC effective 1 February 1945. The executive order also provided that the WAC would be re-established as the War Assets Administration as a separate agency from the RFC and under the jurisdiction of the Office for Emergency Management on 25 March 1946. Thus, the RFC lost all of its disposal programs to the newly established WAA, and the policy-making jurisdiction of the SPA was also placed into the new WAA.

To reconcile the jurisdictional conflicts between the Surplus Property Act of 1944, the Congressionally established Surplus Property Board and Surplus Property Administration, and the new executively established War Assets Administration, the WAA went through one final metamorphosis. On 1 July 1947 the functions of the War Assets Administration were transferred back to the Surplus Property Administration. The Surplus Property Administration was renamed the War Assets



Administration, thus satisfying the intent of the Surplus Property Act of 1944 and making the WAA a statutory organization. The War Assets Administration continued as an agency through 1 July 1949, when its functions were transferred to the newly created General Services Administration.⁷

The SPA regulations were constantly being reworked and amended. On 21 December 1945, SPA Regulation Number 4 was issued which covered "Disposal of Aircraft and Components and Parts of Aircraft" which attempted to put forth the entire related policy in one place. This was further modified on 30 May 1946 when the WAA revised the regulation and placed it into Part 8304 of Chapter 23 of the Federal Regulations. Part 8304 was the last major change to the regulatory guidance, and included sections on pricing policy, disposal policy for each class of aircraft, disposal to educational and memorial use, and various guidelines for reports and records.⁸

At this point, when considering the organizational structure of the disposal agencies as they related to aircraft, a summation is pertinent. Prior to January 1946, the primary office handling the program was the Office of Surplus Property, Aircraft Division under the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. The Division had several sections which included the Education Disposal Section. During the last half of 1945 the Defense Plant Corporation, a subsidiary of the RFC, also handled sales of aircraft which weighed less than 5,000 pounds. Between January 1946 and March 1946 was a period of transition between RFC and WAA jurisdiction. After March 1946 sales were handled by the WAA which



utilized various offices such as the Office of Aircraft Disposal, within which the Surplus War Aircraft Division operated. Also involved with WAA sales was the Office of General Disposal and, later, the Office of Aircraft and Electronics Disposal. As can be noted, the general administrative structure constantly changed through the postwar period.

Aircraft Disposal: Studies and Development of Policy 1944-1945—The specific policy toward the disposal of surplus aircraft was developed out of two reports which were completed in 1943 and 1944. The first report was initiated in the autumn of 1943 when the Army Air Forces contracted with the Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration to perform a study on the subject. This report was titled "Disposal of Aircraft and Major Components Thereof" but became known as the Harvard Report and was completed in May 1944.⁹

In early 1944 the SWPA set up an interdepartmental committee to obtain the best possible guidance in establishing the disposal policy. The State, War, and Navy Departments were represented, as were the RFC, FEA, Civil Aeronautics Administration and Bureau of the Budget. The committee was headed by I. Welch Pogue, Chairman of the Civil Aeronautics Board and the resulting report became known as the Pogue Committee Report. The efforts of the Harvard group were integrated into the Pogue Committee.¹⁰

Both working groups looked at other aircraft disposal experiences, particularly the American experience at the end of World War I, to analyze the perceived problems. There was major concern that much of the lack of aviation development which occurred through the 1920s was a direct result of the ample supply of World War I surplus equipment. This was particularly felt in the area of aircraft engines. The reports noted that over 20,000 new *Liberty* engines were on hand at the conclusion of World War I, and that military budget limitations and the supply of stored engines forced aircraft designers to build new airframes around the old engine, thus choking off new engine development. It was also noted that

of the 12,500 surplus World War I American aircraft, half were sold to the public. The remainder remained in the military inventories and were used through the 1920s. This was detrimental to the development of both civil and military aviation and imposed a severe liability to the aircraft manufacturers in trying to find a market for new products.¹¹ It was thus perceived that the sale of surplus planes and engines at extremely low prices was a threat to the national aircraft industry, and that a large inventory of surplus tactical aircraft would make it difficult to obtain authorization to purchase new equipment.

During World War II the national aircraft industry had become an extremely valuable asset and one which the policy planners felt was irreplaceable. The report noted that the:

"maintenance of American air power depends not only on the establishment of a nucleus of facilities and skills for military production but also on the promotion of civilian aviation. . . . The development of civilian aviation is also required for assuring high levels of postwar employment. High levels of postwar employment will depend on the expansion of prewar markets and the creation of new markets for private industry."¹²

Other areas of study concentrated on the logistical and budgetary limitations of trying to deal with the vast numbers of aircraft and parts expected to be surplus at the conclusion of the war. Also noted in the reports as an area of great concern was the distribution of surplus materials to other countries, and the political administration of such transfers.

As a method of organization, the Harvard Report divided the surplus equipment into five classes, as follows:

Class A: Tactical aircraft, including heavy trainers. Useful for military purposes only.

Class B: Transport aircraft. Primarily used for scheduled transport service.

Class C: Personal aircraft, including primary trainers. Adaptable to personal flying, fixed base operations, training, and miscellaneous uses.

Aerial view of the WAA storage depot at Altus, Oklahoma, probably in late 1946 or early 1947. The majority of the aircraft on the field appear to be B-17s with a number of B-24s and other types.
(Museum of the Western Prairie Collection, Altus, Oklahoma)

Unusual tongue-in-cheek advertisement put together for use in marketing the endless supply of surplus aircraft. (Via A. Kevin Grantham Collection)

Class D: Aircraft equipment and components. Of general use for military and commercial purposes.

Class E: Unabsorbed surplus. All planes and components not useful for flight purposes.¹³

This classification system was carried forth and used through the disposal program.

A few of the conclusions of the Harvard Report are as follows:

"The War, Navy, and State Departments should have the objective of using surplus disposal as a positive instrument to create sound foreign relations and future trade, especially export trade which may expand United States productive capacity.

"After the Army Air Forces has declared a given number of planes in a particular theater 'surplus' and the War Department specifies no other military need for them, all the used planes should be surveyed at location ... a substantial proportion of the surplus should be salvaged at location. . . .

". . . Lend-Lease transport models, insofar as practicable, be nominally repossessed. . . . The ultimate world distribution of United States transport models should be related to peacetime need and national policy rather than the chance result. . . .

"Surplus class A planes should be held at foreign bases until agreements on international policies, if any, are concluded. Only after it becomes clear that planes will not be sold in the export market should these planes be placed in class E, where they will be held for nonflight educational or exhibitional use, broken down into useful components, or scrapped."¹

When placed into the time-frame the Harvard Report was completed (May 1944), the outlines of the developing aircraft disposal policy can be seen. Much of the report concentrated on the political aspects of the process as they applied to foreign relations, dealing with aircraft operated under Lend-Lease, and setting a pricing policy for domestic and foreign sales.

In July 1944, in the course of studying the most efficient and cost-effective way of disposing of surplus aircraft, the Army Air Force brought a war-weary B-24 into Patterson Field, near Dayton, Ohio, for a special project. The B-24 was towed into a hangar and a crew of mechanics broke the bomber down into its smallest component parts. Careful time records were kept to document the required manhours and at the completion of the disassembly process the resulting parts were spread across the hangar floor. Representatives of various industries were brought in to examine the material and determine whether any use could be found for any of the parts. The overall conclusion was that, while some parts were usable, it was cheaper and safer for manufacturers to purchase new items for their products. Little beyond scrap value could be found for the remains of the B-24. It was found that 782.51 manhours were expended to break the bomber down

FOR SALE!!

COME ONE!!!
COME ALL!!!

Get in on the ground floor; be the first in your neighborhood to own a fine, second-hand four-engined bomber. Think of it — your very own!!!

HUNDREDS TO CHOOSE FROM



Priced for quick sale

AT ONLY ... \$38,000

Look at these advantages!

- * Uses only 240 gallons of gasoline each hour.
- * Original cost near \$250,000 — you save \$212,000.
- * Conversion to civilian use shouldn't cost much more than purchase price.
- * Fuselage construction allows seating just a clubby 14.
- * Thoroughly tested (over at least one ocean and one combat zone).
- * Needs only 5,000-foot runway for takeoffs and landings.
- * Needs only small service crew (six to ten men).

Act now and act fast — see the United States Government for further details.
It's got LOTS of surplus aircraft.

(The planes mentioned in this advertisement are not fictitious.
This advertisement is. See Page 2 for the story.)

at a total labor cost of \$3,200. The resulting 32,759 pounds of material was worth \$2,400 in components and scrap. Thus, it was determined that the most cost-effective method of disposal was recovering the aluminum and other metallic content for other uses.¹⁵

The Pogue Committee Report incorporated much of the work done by the Harvard Report. It took a closer look at some of the foreign political implications of the disposal process. The report put forth the opinion that:

"World-wide political and economic significance will be attached to surplus aircraft. There will be important questions of national and international policy which will be involved in the division of surplus aircraft between domestic and foreign markets, in the establishment of sales and pricing policies in both of these markets in their interrelationships, in the specific allocation of transport aircraft, and in the general coordination of the disposal of surplus aircraft in the best interests of the United States. Policy determinations on these matters should combine national and international perspective, should be coordinated, and should be sensitive to conditions which are certain to be changing rapidly."¹

The conclusions drawn by the Pogue Committee Report were the basis for much of the policy set forth by the SWPA and SPB and are excerpted as follows:

"Uses must be found for as many as possible of the thousands of surplus aircraft which will become available.

"An orderly method of disposal, satisfying the legitimate market and using industry channels in a normal way, appears to hold the promise of greatest benefit to our national interest.

". . . tactical aircraft will be either so war-weary, or so



Aerial view of part of tactical aircraft stored at the Stillwater Depot in 1946. Nearly a dozen of these aircraft survived in the Mantz Collection. (Oklahoma State University Collection via Woody Harris)

Explanation of three classes of surplus aircraft. Class D were aircraft parts, while Class E was unabsorbed surplus. (Via A. Kevin Grantham Collection)

obsolete, that they will have no military or other appreciable value.

"After all the aviation needs for surplus aircraft have been met, we believe it probable that large surpluses will remain. Markets for these remaining surpluses will exist in educational, experimental, memorial, and miscellaneous non-aviation uses.

"After any worthwhile salvage of usable components in the otherwise useless remainder has been completed, we recommend the balance be scrapped.

"Most important is the necessity of preserving as a national asset the capacity of our permanent aircraft manufacturing industry for research, development, and production of aircraft and aeronautical devices of the very latest types. Air power is today the key to national security."¹⁷

The Problem of Tactical Aircraft—The disposal of the tactical, or Class A, aircraft was considered to be a major problem through most of the studies as it was presumed that these aircraft were fundamentally unsalable. In a special report to Congress on 23 November 1945 entitled "Aircraft and Aircraft Parts," the Surplus Property Administration examined in detail the process of disposal for all classes of aircraft. However, with regard to the tactical aircraft it identified some limited uses in foreign military forces and a specialized demand in the civil fleet but anticipated a huge unabsorbed surplus. Though the report significantly overestimated the actual number of surplus tactical aircraft it clearly established the policy toward Class A aircraft which was quickly implemented.

The report projected that 89,200 tactical aircraft would be surplus by June 1946.¹⁸ The total number of surplus Class A aircraft through the entire postwar period was closer to 27,000. However, the report identified three possible areas of utilization for these aircraft. First, with regard to foreign military usage, it outlined a policy whereby the War, Navy, and State Departments would advise the SPA from time to time of the types of aircraft which could be disposed of to designated governments. This policy differed from the late wartime policy whereby the War and Navy Departments would set aside aircraft earmarked for foreign military forces before declaring them surplus.¹⁹

The second area examined was commercial use. The report noted that the RFC had asked the military service which aircraft could be sold into the civil fleet without endangering

national security and made those aircraft potentially available for sale. It was next determined if the CAA would, in fact, certify any of the warplanes for civil use. The report noted that "almost all the combat types so far put up for test have been rejected for certification and it is probable that almost all other combat types would also be rejected." However, it was stated that this should not preclude the sale of these aircraft as there were certification options with restricted or experimental licenses. Also, it was felt that there was a very limited market in commercial schools, movie work, aerial photography, and advertising, and that every attempt should be made to sell into this market to accomplish some economic good.

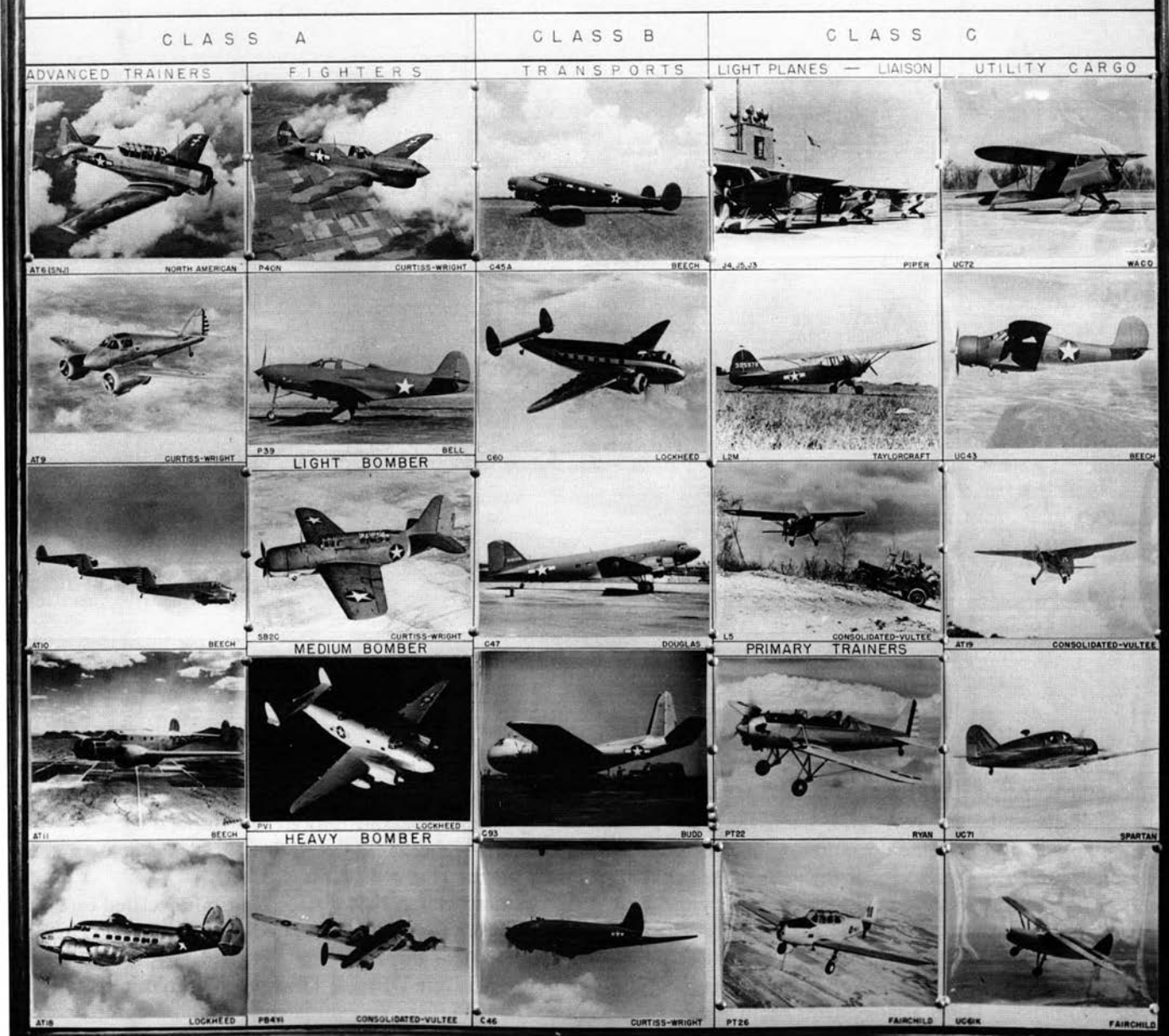
Finally, educational, memorial, and experimental uses were considered. On 12 May 1945 the SBP had initiated, with Regulation Number 4, a program whereby qualifying educational institutions could obtain aircraft for a nominal fee. The regulation was entitled "Disposal of Surplus Aeronautical Property to Educational Institutions for Non-Flight Use," and the program was successful. It had been widened by subsequent amendment to include experimental and memorial use. Already, several hundred surplus aircraft had been released to educational institutions. There was an increasing number of tactical aircraft also being transferred to communities for war memorials, and further use in experimental programs was to be encouraged.²¹

However, after all of these uses were considered it was obvious that there was going to be a large amount of unabsorbed surplus. The report considered three alternatives. First was the possibility of storing and maintaining the aircraft. Based upon the average cost of \$20 per aircraft per month storage costs, it was estimated it would cost \$25 million to store the aircraft in 1946, which was considered excessive. Another suggested possibility was abandoning the aircraft at the storage depots, but this was quickly rejected because it was contrary to the stated intent of the Surplus Property Act of 1944. The obvious option was to position the aircraft for eventual scrapping and smelting and this became the announced policy of the SPA.²²

This policy was clearly articulated to the public by a number of pamphlets including one December 1945 document entitled *White Elephants With Wings* published by the SPA. It was designed to educate the public on what was going to happen to the aircraft and explain the basis for this policy. A telling statement from the pamphlet reveals "the fear of airpower strategists is that taxpayers, seeing thousands of surplus warplanes parked on airfields all over the country, will ask, 'Why not use these planes before we buy more?'"²³ It concludes that:

"With the end of the war, there will soon be war-weary and obsolete aircraft stacked wing to wing on many airfields. Some of them will glisten when the sun shines on them and it will be hard to believe that they cannot be used. But they will

TYPICAL SURPLUS AIRCRAFT

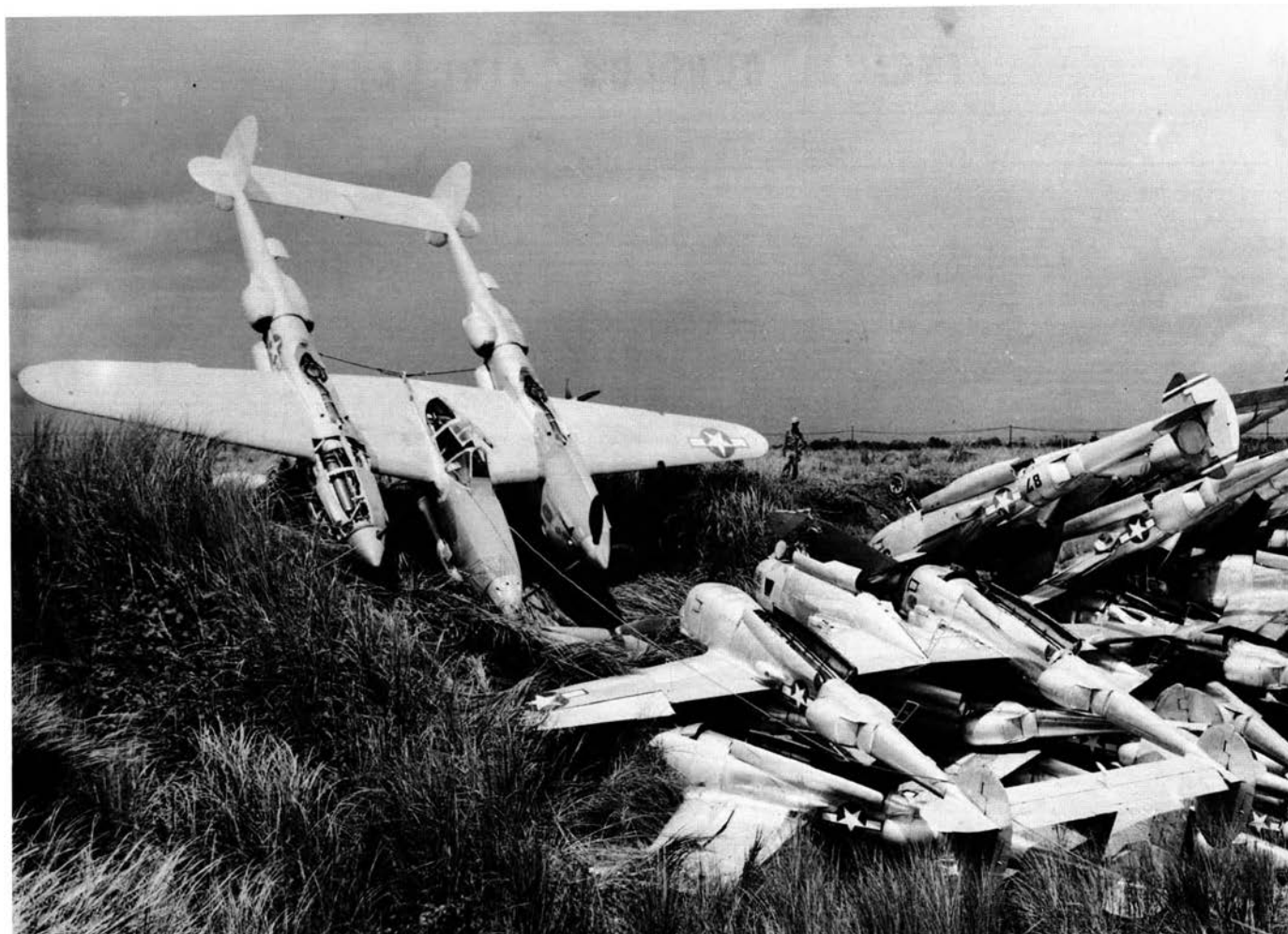


have been condemned only after every practical use has been studied. They will be awaiting the day when manpower is available to take them apart and put their metal back into use.²⁴

Process of Disposal 1943-1945—The military, particularly the Army Air Forces, had been dealing with surplus aircraft since 1943. Most of the equipment was “war-weary” veterans which began to accumulate at oversea bases as the new equipment began to appear in the various theatres. On 25 September 1944 the SWPA conferred upon the Foreign Economic Administration the authority to administer a program to salvage and scrap surplus combat aircraft at overseas locations. Listings dated 13 September and 29 September 1944 were compiled by the War Department and forwarded to the SWPA administrator as to what aircraft would be covered by the program and were updated several times through June 1945. On 14 October 1944 similar authority was granted to

scrap all spare parts which had no apparent commercial use. Lists of critical items were also compiled by the FEA, Navy and War Departments and pertinent equipment was removed from the aircraft before salvage.²⁵

The Foreign Economic Administration had been formed on 25 September 1943 by Executive Order 9380 and replaced the Office for Emergency Management. The FEA was to consolidate governmental activities as they related to foreign economic affairs and was charged with administering the Lend-Lease program.²⁶ Presumably it was the Lend-Lease program which provided the initial connection between the FEA and the overseas disposal program. Executive Order 9630 terminated the FEA on 27 September 1945 and its Lend-Lease and disposal activities were transferred to the newly created Office of Foreign Liquidation under the Department of State.²⁷ The Foreign Liquidation Commissioner (FLC) took over the overseas disposal program after the reorganization.



It should be noted that the overseas salvage program was only administered by the FEA (and, later, the FLC) while actual scrapping decisions and operations were carried out by the military under the authority of the various theatre commanders. A specific policy was also developed by the FEA which applied to surplus property in the Southwest Pacific, whereby such surplus equipment located in remote or inaccessible locations would be salvaged at the discretion of the theatre commander. Other arrangements could also be made which could range from the removal of a few critical items so as to make an aircraft unairworthy or the complete destruction of surplus material remotely located. Other procedures were also developed to handle the overseas strappings of Lend-Lease materials which, basically, required that listed critical equipment be removed from the aircraft and returned to U.S. jurisdiction. The remaining equipment could be scrapped by the using government, the salvaged material being payment for the salvaging service.²⁸

Details of the FEA and FLC programs are largely unavailable; however, USAAF aircraft record cards for many aircraft, particularly B-17s, which were stored in European depots beginning in the summer of 1945 indicate surplus aircraft were turned over to the jurisdiction of the FEA through 1945, and the FLC through the end of 1946. The actual fate of the aircraft is unknown but all indications point to local scrapping at the depot locations. Overseas disposals which occurred after 1947 are less clear as to what office or agency handled the program and it may have been handled at a military level.

(Most aircraft record cards for aircraft which were processed through these programs indicate the disposal agency as the last entry whether it be the RFC or WAA for domestic disposals, or the FEA or FLC for overseas.)

Beginning in late 1944 domestic aircraft declared excess to military needs were turned over to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for disposal. The RFC had established within itself the Aircraft Disposal Division to administer the program. In 1944 plans were initiated to establish domestic storage and sales centers and by August 1945 30 sales-storage depots and 34 sales centers were in operation. Each sales-storage depot, which was primarily placed on surplus military fields (the RFC also was designated the disposal agency for surplus real estate), and each sales center, which was located near market areas, was operated by an RFC contractor and administered by an RFC field office.²⁹ For example, the RFC Oklahoma City Office's Aircraft Division administered two sales centers—Muskogee, Oklahoma, at Hat Box Airport and Cimarron Field near Oklahoma City; and two sales-storage depots at Ponca City Airport at Ponca City, and Searcy Field at Stillwater, Oklahoma.

After August 1945 it was decided to close all sales centers and concentrate salable surplus aircraft at five storage-sales depots. This decision was primarily taken to reduce the storage costs and make it easier for purchasers to select aircraft.³⁰

However, the number of storage-sales depots was constantly changing through the last half of 1945. The military greatly increased their surplus declarations beginning in

Surplus P-38s, minus armament, being destroyed at Clark Field, Luzon, Philippine Islands in July 1946. (Harry Merrick Photo via Harry Gann)

A famous B-17F about to leave Altus, Oklahoma, for display under the RFC's educational program. The *Memphis Belle* is shown here in April 1946 with the flight crew as it is readied for its ferry flight to Memphis. Contrary to many published accounts, the Belle's markings appeared to have remained intact through its post-combat use as a crew trainer. (Museum of the Western Prairie Collection, Altus, Oklahoma)

October 1945 and some sales centers apparently were not closed. By the end of 1945 the RFC was still operating 29 storage-storage depots across the country.³¹

The majority of the sales centers were organized for the disposal of Class C aircraft, although tactical aircraft were also available. Class C was composed of liaison, trainers, and utility cargo types and were considered by the RFC as the most salable category for general disposal. Established prices ranged from \$450 for a BT-13 to \$8,250 for a B-25 to \$32,500 for a B-32. AT-6s were available for \$1,500, while a P-38 was offered at \$1,250 and a P-51 at \$3,500. Terms for veterans included 15 percent down payment for aircraft weighing more than 5,000 pounds and the loan was carried at four percent per year. The storage lots were authorized to issue ferry permits to the owner's home base, after which the aircraft was grounded pending CAA certification. The CAA did not get involved at the storage depots, and the aircraft did not receive a CAA civil registration number until the new owner complied with required modifications and inspections at his home base.³²

Class B aircraft, or the medium and heavy transport aircraft were handled differently. Initially, beginning in July 1944, in demand transport types such as the C-47 and C-54 were placed into an allocation program. Purchase prices were established which included conversion allowances for CAA certification and were set based upon the earning power of each type. Leasing arrangements were also available to allow quick use of surplus transports while awaiting new equipment from manufacturers. The SPB estimated, in November 1945, that 10,500 transport planes of all types would eventually be declared surplus.³³ It was decided that a number of these aircraft would be made available to foreign users, primarily to assure usage of U.S. equipment overseas and broaden the demand for U.S.-manufactured products.³⁴ By mid-1947, 1,750 medium and heavy transports (C-46, C-47, and C-54s) had been sold to both domestic and foreign airlines. On March 31, 1947, 90 percent of the 256 DC-4s operating in the U.S. airline fleet had been converted from surplus C-54s.³⁵ Aircraft Disposal for Educational and Memorial Use—As noted earlier, the RFC initiated a program in May 1945 which provided for commercially worthless aircraft to be transferred to eligible educational institutions for technical programs. The first aircraft to be transferred was a war-weary B-17F which went to the Williamsport, Pennsylvania Technical Institute.³⁶ Under SPA Regulation Number 4, receiving schools had to pay transportation fees and a nominal disposal cost to obtain the aircraft. However, pricing policy provided a B-17 for \$350 and a new Pratt & Whitney R-4360 was offered for \$10. Central to the transfer of the aircraft was that the receiving institution had to sign a statement that the aircraft was for non-flight purposes and had to be rendered non-airworthy or dismantled prior to disposing of the aircraft. In



November 1945 the University of Southern California took advantage of the program and obtained 12 aircraft including a B-17, B-25, P-38, P-61, P-47 and a P-63. USC had the aircraft brought to Santa Maria Airport in California for use at their technical school.³⁷ In December 1945 the program was expanded to include a wide variety of public institutions which enabled local municipalities to obtain aircraft for memorial use. Once again, a small transfer fee was required and the aircraft were allowed one-time ferry flights to their new owners. However, once again a scrapping provision was written into the transfer arrangement which restricted any further sales without government approval.³⁸

The Scrapping of Tactical Aircraft—Class A aircraft were largely concentrated onto six storage depots located at Walnut Ridge, Arkansas; Kingman, Arizona; Ontario, California; Clinton, Oklahoma; Altus, Oklahoma; and Albuquerque, New Mexico. General sales of these aircraft were permitted under the guidelines set by the RFC up until late spring 1946 when the decision was made to offer five of the fields for sale as scrap for disposal. The advertisement for bids was made on 10 June 1946 and awarded on 1 July 1946. Within four months each of the fields (with the exception of Altus, Oklahoma, which was sold later) had been turned over to private contractors who organized the smelter operations. The original bid process required that the smelting operation be completed within 14 months of the bid award, and most firms had completed the job by the end of 1947.

Though the majority of the surplus tactical aircraft were dispatched to the six designated fields, a small number of varying types ended up on other fields. One of the more noteworthy were those stored at Searcy Field near Stillwater, Oklahoma. Searcy Field was the prewar airport for Stillwater and had been taken over by the Navy as a flight training field. At the end of the war the Navy turned the airport over to the RFC which brought in 478 tactical aircraft which consisted of B-17s, PB4Y-ls, B-24s, B-25s, B-26s, P-40s, P-47s, and P-51s. On 19 February 1946, in what appears to have been the first field-size sale, the aircraft were sold to movie pilot Paul Mantz for \$55,425.68. Though the sale was made on the basis that the aircraft were sold as scrap, Mantz in-



Lineup of aircraft at Searcy Field near Stillwater, Oklahoma, on 26 June 1946. These four aircraft were transferred to Oklahoma State University for use in their aviation program. The majority of the aircraft on the field were purchased in February 1946 by Paul Mantz and scrapped on the field. The P-51 D was USAAF s/n 44-15738 and may have been exported to Israel later. (Oklahoma State University Collection via Woody Harris)

tended to take a number of aircraft for use in postwar film work. Mantz culled 10 aircraft including two P-51Cs, a B-17F, and a B-25H from the group and brought them to his Southern California base. The rest of the aircraft were scrapped by a partnership put together by Mantz, the Mantz-Heath-Hapgood Company, at Stillwater. Mantz later stated that the sale of the gasoline in the tanks of the stored aircraft more than made up his initial investment, and that some parts on the aircraft were sold back to the government at a substantial profit.³⁹ Mantz used the two *Mustangs* (NX1202 and NX1204) in the postwar Bendix races, and the B-25 (N1203) became the aerial cameraship which was widely used through 1970.⁴⁰

Kingman has become the best known of the tactical aircraft depots. Over 5,400 aircraft, primarily B-17s and B-24s (4,463 total) and fighters (615 total), were brought into Kingman beginning in October 1945.⁴¹ The field had been operated during the war as a B-17 copilot and flexible-gunnery school and was idled by the war's conclusion. Jurisdiction of the field was placed with the RFC's Office of Real Estate Disposal which granted the RFC's Office of Aircraft Disposal use of the field as a major storage center for tactical aircraft.

A private contractor administered the operation of the Storage Depot under the direction of the Aircraft Disposal Section in the Los Angeles Agency of the RFC. Under the terms of the contract, arriving aircraft were to have the national insignia painted out; however, photographic evidence suggests that only the early arrivals were processed as such. It is probable that with the volume of arriving aircraft this policy was disregarded. Efforts were made to place low-time examples of various types into long-term storage. Some of the B-32s were apparently prepared for storage. However, most of the aircraft were simply taxied from the runways across the desert scrub into neat rows.

The *Los Angeles Times* ran a detailed story about the Storage Depot on 1 April 1946. Pertinent excerpts are provided:

"Covering five square miles and stretching for six and one-half miles along U.S. Highway 66, more than 7,000 retired Army bombers, fighters and training planes are parked row on row at the old Kingman Army Airfield, now Storage

Depot 41 of the War Assets Administration. . . .

"The planes began arriving from all parts of the world last Oct. 10. During last December one a minute landed at the depot. . . .

"Some of the big four-engined ships limp in from overseas bases with one or two engines dead, barely arriving at their final resting place in one piece. A few, however, come almost directly off production lines, brand spanking new. . . .

"Originally, 20,000 aircraft of all sorts were expected at the depot, but a month ago Army authorities reduced deactivation of planes to a trickle. The tense world situation was said to have influenced this decision.

"Now only a few planes a day arrive at the depot and 20 percent of all craft with 100 or less flying hours are 'pickled'. This means that preservative oils are forced into their engines and moveable parts are protected against corrosion and the elements. Such ships can be airborne within 24 hours. . . ."⁴²

Of the fighters and bombers to arrive at Kingman, only a few made it back out under their own power. The *Swoose*, a famous B-17D, was transferred by the War Assets Administration to the city of Los Angeles for use as a war memorial and was delivered in April 1946. *Five Grand*, another famous B-17, was transferred to the city of Seattle but was never delivered. The only reports of any aircraft leaving Kingman for use in the civil fleet include 100 P-38s and various numbers of other fighters which had all been sold by June 1946.⁴³

In the spring of 1946 the War Assets Administration offered the five fields containing the tactical aircraft in a sealed-bid offer. An informal invitation of bid went out to interested parties by letter in May 1946 from General James A. Mollison, the WAA's Deputy Administrator for Aircraft Disposal, which outlined the planned terms of the sale.⁴⁴ On 10 June 1946 the formal bid announcement was advertised in



P-38s awaiting an ignoble end, probably at Walnut Ridge, Arkansas.
(John Dienst via A. Kevin Grantham Collection)

national and trade papers. It read, in part, as follows:

"The War Assets Administration will dispose of over 20,000 combat type aircraft as scrap and salvage. These planes are observation, reconnaissance, fighters, and bombers which are ineligible for certification by CAA and cannot be used for flight purposes. . . .

"The sealed bid or proposal must contain an offering for the total nonflyable aircraft on the particular field to which it refers. Offerings for a portion of the nonflyable aircraft on any field will not be considered. . . .

"A maximum period of time has been set for the clearance of all nonflyable aircraft on each field. . . .

"The offering of nonflyable aircraft hereunder is as salvage and scrap only. . . . Each bid shall contain an offering to the effect that the bidder will not retain or otherwise dispose of such aircraft for flight use. . . ." ⁴⁵

The field listing and 16 May 1946 inventory was offered as shown in Table 1.

The bid announcement specified that the Ontario and Albuquerque fields had to be cleared within nine months from bid award, while Clinton and Walnut Ridge were given 12 months and Kingman 14 months to complete the job. ⁴⁶

The bids were awarded on 1 July 1946 to the following contractors:

Albuquerque, New Mexico: Compressed Steel Corporation
Clinton, Oklahoma: Sherman Machine and Iron Company
Kingman, Arizona: Martin Wunderlich

Ontario, California: Sharp and Fellows Construction Company

Walnut Ridge, Arkansas: Texas Railway Equipment Corporation

The fields were turned over to the new contractors in the fall of 1946. Wunderlich, operating under his company name of the Wunderlich Contracting Company, purchased the airplanes at Kingman for \$2,780,000 and took over the field on 17 September 1946.

A Congressional subcommittee of the Committee on

Expenditures in the Executive Departments held hearings in June 1947 regarding certain perceived improprieties of the administration of the sales.

The testimony revealed that Wunderlich, Sharp and Fellows, and the Texas Railway Equipment Corporation formed a company called Aircraft Conversion for the express purpose of administering the overall scrapping of the aircraft on their three fields. ⁴⁷ It was also disclosed that the Texas Railway Equipment Corporation, owned by George and Herman Brown of Houston, Texas, had signed a series of contracts with the U.S. Army in the amount of \$3,500,000 for the Army to buy back various salvaged aircraft parts for their postwar needs. Among these were Curtiss-Wright electric propellers off Consolidated B-32s at Kingman which were to be used on Boeing B-29s in cold weather operations. ⁴⁸ Other parts included those for B-17s and B-25s which were no longer available from manufacturers. Texas Railway subcontracted with the other four field owners to provide parts which were not available on the aircraft located at Walnut Ridge.

Another question was raised about why the gasoline in the tanks of the stored aircraft was sold as part of the award. It was calculated that the aircraft parked at Kingman held nearly 3,000,000 gallons of high-octane fuel. On 19 June 1946 an internal WAA letter ordered the fuel to be drained and sold separately on the authority of General Mollison. Some of the fuel had been stored in the aircraft for nearly nine months and was of questionable value unless it was reprocessed. Some of the fuel had already been sold at Kingman for 2.5 cents per gallon. Later, Mollison decided that the June 10 advertisement had committed the fuel in the aircraft to be part of the offered sale, even though the gasoline was not expressly mentioned in the bid announcement and most bidders were not aware the fuel was being included. Wunderlich was later able to sell the fuel for 6.5 cents per gallon to re-refiners and other users. ⁴⁹

Also drawing the attention of the Congressional inquiry were details about the actual numbers of aircraft involved in the sale. The bid offering and bill of sale between the WAA and Wunderlich had specified that 5,443 aircraft were sold. A



Aerial view of the aircraft gathered at Walnut Ridge. These aircraft were sold by lot in July 1946 to the Texas Railway Equipment Corporation for scrapping. (National Air and Space Museum Collection #89-1176)

later inventory determined that there were actually 5,483 aircraft on the field and that Wunderlich had taken possession of the extra 40 aircraft for scrapping. At the other four fields the same situation had occurred and the contractors had paid an additional amount for the extra aircraft. However, correspondence between General Mollison, head of the WAA aircraft disposal program, and Wunderlich revealed that Mollison had granted Wunderlich the aircraft without additional compensation.⁵⁰

The last major irregularity of the transaction was that the WAA granted to Wunderlich a large amount of equipment ranging from trucks and cranes to dishes and linen with which to carry on the salvage operation. Most of the equipment used to break the aircraft apart, except for the three smelting ovens, were all government furnished. Even the guard service and fire protection were largely government paid, which was at odds with the original bid announcement and resulted in a much larger profit to Wunderlich in the scrapping operation.⁵¹

In any event, the actual scrapping operation was under way by February 1947. At Kingman, great care was taken to remove as much of the non-aluminum material as possible to obtain the highest percentage of aluminum in the smelted product. The engines and machine guns had already been stripped from the aircraft. As each aircraft was processed toward the smelter, the work crews first drained the tanks of all fuel and oil for later resale, and 0.50-calibre machine gun shells were removed. Apparently loose shells had earlier exploded during the smelting process and damaged the furnaces. A giant chopping blade was employed to chop each of the aircraft into smaller pieces which would then be fed into the smelters. The extracted aluminum was packaged as 1,500-pound ingots and shipped out to aluminum companies for reprocessing. Wunderlich had three crews working around the clock, seven days a week, working their way through the lines of aircraft.⁵³

The last large sale of surplus tactical aircraft involved those at the Altus, Oklahoma depot. By August of 1946 over 2,400

aircraft were stored at Altus, and in November 1946 the majority were sold to the Texas Railway Equipment Corporation for scrapping.⁵⁴ On 12 May 1947, in another sealed bid sale, the remaining aircraft were sold in several lots, and purchasers included the Esperado Mining Company of Altus, Oklahoma (evidently a thinly disguised subsidiary of the Texas Equipment Railway Corporation) which bought by sealed bid 423 bombers and fighters.⁵⁵ Most of the hundreds of B-17Gs stored at Altus were brand-new aircraft, and had earlier been the source for most of the B-17s which went into the civil fleet after the war. Esperado Mining sold two of the new B-17s to Pratt & Whitney for use in their engine test program. (It's interesting to note that the U.S. Navy surveyed the B-17s stored at Altus in June 1948 with the intention of purchasing them from the Texas Railway Equipment Corporation for conversion to early-warning PB-1Ws, and that as late as June 1950 the Texas Railway Equipment Corporation purchased a sales release from the WAA successor, the General Services Administration, for one of the new B-17s still stored at Altus, so it's apparent that at least some of the aircraft were not immediately scrapped.⁵⁶)

With this last sale the WAA was pretty much out of the business of World War II aircraft disposal. Aircraft components continued to be processed for sale, but for the most part the aircraft disposal process was completed. Through September 1946 the WAA and its prior agency, the RFC, had received over 64,000 surplus aircraft from the U.S. military. Of these, over 37,000 were considered to be salable types, while the remainder, nearly 27,000, were the tactical aircraft. At least 35,000 of the salable types, primarily liaison, utility cargo, basic trainers, and light-cargo aircraft, were sold between 1945 and 1948. By June 1947 over 40 percent of the U.S. civil aircraft fleet were surplus aircraft processed by the various disposal agencies.⁵⁷ In the same period nearly 31,000

aircraft, primarily tactical, were sold for scrap. Sketchy records indicate that around 250 tactical aircraft were actually sold as aircraft for flyable purposes, which should correspond roughly with the size of the immediate postwar civil fleet of fighters, bombers, and advanced trainer types.⁵⁸

Sketchy records also indicate an additional 1,500 tactical aircraft were disposed of for educational or memorial use. In later postwar years many of these aircraft were “sold” by the original receiving educational institutions or municipalities. The new owners quickly learned all about SPB Regulation Number 4 regarding restrictions to sale as they could not obtain the legal title which remained with the government. Financial settlements were required by the new owners with the General Services Administration which were often many, many times their original purchase price for the aircraft. □

TABLE 1”
16 MAY 1946 INVENTORY OFFERED FOR SALE BY BID SALE 1 JULY 1946

	Albuquerque, NM	Clinton, OK	Kingman, AZ	Ontario, CA	Walnut Ridge, AR	Total
Observation	—	264	—	6	—	270
Reconnaissance	4	—	85	—	26	115
Fighters	929	3,852	615	627	1,165	7,188
Light Bombers	16	2,585	54	206	48	2,909
Medium Bombers	35	666	226	165	809	1,901
Heavy Bombers	567	180	4,463	336	2,774	8,320
Total	1,551	7,547	5,443	1,340	4,822	20,703

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