

DUSTIN W. CARTER

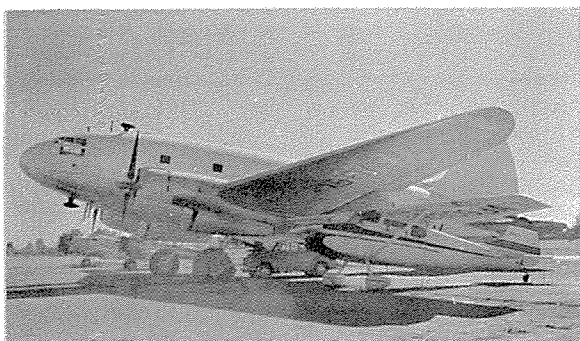
DUSTER COUNTRY

The Imperial Valley section of Southern California is one vast garden of such crops as melons, alfalfa, lettuce, cotton, etc., and, consequently, employs a large force of agricultural aircraft. Although this area is fairly close to my home, I had never made a trip to it with the one purpose of shooting pictures of these dusters and sprayers. For a couple of years I had discussed this trip with my friend and fellow AAHS member, Hank Arnold of National City, California. Finally, the opportunity came to allow us to get away for a weekend, so my wife, our two boys and I drove down to National City on a Friday evening to stay with the Arnolds over-night to permit Hank and me to plan our trip.

Dawn found the five of us on our way toward Calexico, California, a little town located on the California-Mexico border. The airport is located only a few yards from the border and, as expected, there were several planes of Mexican registry on the field. These were a couple of PT-17 dusters and a



Ross Dusters use Stearman PT-17s and NAF N3Ns that have been modified with an R-985 engine.



C-46 (XB-FIY). Also on the field were the general run of planes such as Bonanzas, Cessnas, Pipers, etc., and two Stearman sprayers with the name "Bor-



These red and white biplanes are outfitted either as sprayers or dusters.

From Imperial, we headed north to Brawley where we found two N3Ns returning after a morning



ges" on the tail. One of these red and white PT-17s was equipped with the new "Spanflow" spreader, the other with standard spray gear was working that morning spraying defoliate on the cotton.

Driving north through El Centro, we stopped at Imperial Valley Airport where two agricultural operators are based, Valley Insecticide Spraying Company (VISCO) and Ross Dusters. The green and yellow VISCO airplanes are modified Stearman PT-17. They are equipped with R-985 engines (450 hp Wasp) and the special duster wings similar to those made by National Aircraft Company, Van Nuys, California. VISCO is equipped with sprayers and dusters.

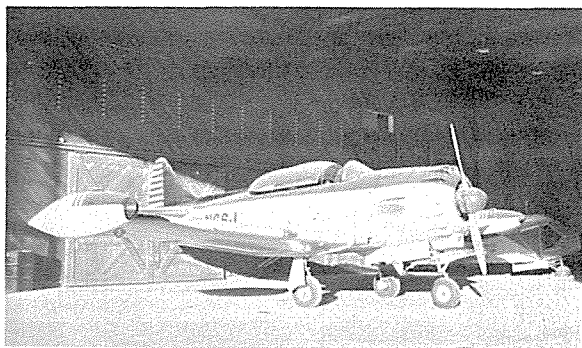


of work. These black and yellow sprayers belonged to Farm Air and were modied with the "National" type wings. One ship had an R-985 and the other was equipped with an R-1340 (650 hp) and a three bladed adjustable pitch propeller.

As we motored on north to Calipatria, we located the airport quickly by the large metal hangar. This large building seemed out of place situated on this otherwise bare airport. As we browsed around the hangar, we met the mechanic for the Farm Air operation and he supplied the answers to some of our questions. First, the large hangar had been built by a farmers' association that had proposed to air ship, in large

quantities, their perishable produce. The construction of the hangar was as far as the plan progressed so it now provides maintenance headquarters for Farm Air. Second, this chap maintained that the three blade propeller on the sprayer at Brawley was off a Boeing P-12. Inside the hangar we found many N3Ns, some in original configuration. Piper dusters and a Grumman F8F-1 Bearcat in civil register and a beautiful metallic blue paint job.

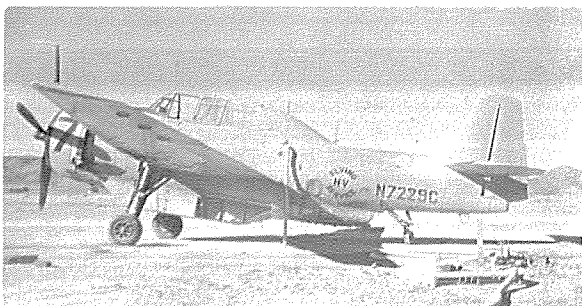
We headed north and drove along the east coast of the Salton Sea and on into Thermal, California. Here we found a couple of PT-17 dusters, undergoing a complete overhaul, and a couple of Piper dusters. Inside the ex-War II military hangar we found more Piper dusters and



two Call sprayers and the Bacon Super 6 (a highly modified North American Aviation T-6). The Super 6 was sitting near the open hangar doors and the late afternoon sun spotlighted it perfectly for good photos. This ended our first day of shooting as we headed toward Indio and a good night's sleep.

Sunday morning we headed toward Palm Springs and enroute we stopped at Palm Desert to visit the Desert Air Motel. We were amazed to see a large number of private aircraft parked on an all-grass airport. After obtaining permission from the field attendant, we proceeded to shoot these ordinary airplanes on an extra-ordinary field. We soon discovered that a golf tournament at the adjoining golf course was responsible for the large array of aircraft. The only craft that may be termed unusual was a turquoise and white T-28 and a modified Grumman Widgeon finished in black and white and trimmed in red Da-Glo. The Widgeon carried the insignia of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary on the bow. This spot is, without a doubt, the most pleasant place to photograph airplanes.

A short stop by Palm Springs Airport revealed nothing of interest, so we pushed on to Ryan Field, Hemet, California. This field is located reasonably close to the mountain areas, making it ideally suited as a base for fire-fighting aircraft. One operator has four bright orange Eastern TBMs equipped



with water borate tanks. Three of the TBMs were poised in a state of alert close to a large water borate tank that had a large hose connected to the water fill valve on each airplane. Apparently, the water tanks can be filled as the pilot warms up the engine for a quick take-off. In addition to the TBMs, there were several N3Ns equipped for the same mission. One N3N was modified in a most interesting fashion. It was equipped with an R-1340 engine



with a beautifully made, chrome plated, collector type, exhaust system. The entire engine installation was very carefully and neatly executed. The forward cockpit was removed and a large borate tank installed. The aft cockpit was completely covered by using components from a BT-13 canopy. The BT windshield, sliding hatch and rear fixed hatch cover were used to enclose the cockpit. The landing gear was completely faired and the wheels equipped with nicely shaped pants. The airplane was finished with all aluminum paint with red and yellow trim. The entire modification gave the N3N an air of antiquity that is associated with the biplanes of the mid-thirties.

Out on the flight line was a chrome yellow Beech T-34B Mentor that still carried all of the military markings except the National insignia which was replaced by the civil register number. On the wings it bore black block letters U.S.F.S. (U.S. Forestry Service). This airplane is used by the director of the fire-fighting operations to direct the drop runs of the borate carriers.

By the time we had finished shooting our pictures, the long rays of the late afternoon sun called our attention to the long drive back to National City and brought a close to our day of photography.

This two-day trip did not reveal any really rare or old aircraft but was one of the most pleasant photo trips I have taken.

Dustin W. Carter

NOTE: All photos by D.W. Carter, 9533 San Miguel Ave. Southgate, California.