AT EZELL AVIATION, RESTORATION IS NEARING COMPLETION ON THE ONLY SURVIVING BREWSTER F3A-1 CORSAIR

The Last BREWSTER

BY NICHOLAS A. VERONICO

Brewster test pilot Ralph Romaine pulls an F3A-1 in close for an air-to-air portrait. Somehow the rumor got started that the Brewster Corsairs were sub-par, but test pilot Romaine dismissed such notions. (Ralph Romaine via A. Kevin Grantham)

At some point, a point that is now lost to history, the Brewster Corsair got a bum rap. During World War II, Brewster had its share of labor troubles compounded by a series of aircraft designs that underperformed. Thus the company never reached its full potential. Caught up in a guilt-by-association reputation were the company's license-built Corsairs.

In 1940, the F4U Corsair design was one of the hottest things with wings. Vought licensed production to the Brewster Aeronautical Corporation in November 1941, and to the Goodyear Aircraft Corporation one-month later. Brewster built 735 Corsairs, with half of that production going to the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm. The US Navy closed Brewster's production line at the end of June 1944, because the company was continually behind schedule delivering the much-needed Corsairs. The Navy shuttered Brewster because of labor issues, not for how its Corsairs performed.

Brewster production and engineering test pilot Ralph O. Romaine said, "From the feedback we received from the Aircraft Delivery Units of the US Navy, the Brewster Corsairs were considered of very high quality and trouble-free. History was never very kind to Brewster for some reason. At the time of contract termination, for the convenience of the government, it was stated in the media that the unit cost [per Corsair] at Brewster was excessive to either Chance Vought or Goodyear. I have always found this hard to believe. The total employment at Brewster was a bit less than 4000 and they were producing about 100 Corsairs a month. Later I learned that Goodyear in Akron had in excess of 12,000 workers and a production rate, in the same period, of 150 Corsairs a month."

The stripped remains of F3A-1 BuNo 04634 as found by Lex Crawley sitting in a swamp near the Marine Corps air base at Cherry Point, North Carolina. (Lex Crawley)

There is a possibility that the F3A-1 will be at AirVenture 2017. US Marine Corps Maj. Art Reiner (who had the rather unique career of flying with the USN, USMC, and USAF) stated: "When we were at Goleta (near Santa Barbara, California), we had a number of different models of Corsairs on which we would do our training flights. Even though some modern historians claim that the Brewster problems were more to due with unions and the like, all our F3A-1s were red-lined for speed and prohibited from aerobatics after several shed their wings during flight training and combat maneuvers. We were all a bit apprehensive towards the Brewster machines. I would imagine that several of the wrecks and still in the Pacific off Santa Barbara. I lost a friend in one of the crashes. The cause of the wings coming off was later traced to poor quality wing fittings. I remember noting in my bog book that the Brewsters were unsafe to fly and always looked at the Bureau Number and designation block to make sure I would not draw one for a training flight."

In spite of what propaganda of the period tells us, there were labor issues and strikes across the United States during World War II that impacted not only Brewster, but other aircraft factories and shipyards as well. Each strike had an affect on war production, and Brewster as a company was terminally impacted by this unrest.

The Corsair's reputation should be intact, no matter which company built the individual aircraft. Brewster's production was the smallest, and with half of those built going to the Royal Navy. The Brewster Corsair population was further reduced by those involved in accidents, and then subtracting those scrapped after the war, it should be no surprise that only one Brewster F3A Corsair survives. However, it survives because it was hidden in a swamp for decades.

SOLE SURVIVOR

The sole surviving F3A-1, the US Navy accepted BuNo 04634, on 8 January 1944. Interestingly, the record card shows an assignment to "PAC" on 28 January 1944, and its next assignment, to VMF-124, takes place seven-months later in August 1944. One has to wonder if this indicates an overseas combat assignment? The Corsair was then assigned to Marine Air Wing (MAW) Nine, then Headquarters, MAW 92, and on 8 December 1944, it was assigned to a Marine Fighter Squadron (the number can't be discerned from the handwriting on the record card), then on 23 December to Service Squadron Ninety-One (SERVRON 91). In January, February, and March 1945, BuNo 04634 was reported as part of the aircraft pool at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, North Carolina. This reporting is probably in error because 2nd Lt. Robin C. Pennington perished when he bailed out of the aircraft on 19 December 1944, and