Saga of YUCCA LADY

HOW A SMALL, DEDICATED BAND OF AVIATION PROFESSIONALS SAVED A BOEING B-17G FLYING FORTRESS FROM AN ATOMIC WASTELAND

BY ORRIN L. CARR

Tanker 99 ready for its next mission.

About 70 crow-flying miles from Las Vegas, hard by the eastern reaches of Death Valley, begins a broad expanse of alkaline flats known as Yucca Lake. The "lake," bone-dry for eons, is a parched and barren landscape; atomic bombs could hardly render it more desolate — at least so thought the Atomic Energy Commission when they selected it as a testing ground.

This forbidding wasteland was the intended final resting place for a proud old Flying Fortress. After years of honorable service in the military, she would now give her last full measure of devotion on the rack of science. In 1951, she was flown into the Nevada Test Site and subjected to years of shock-blast tests from A-bomb explosions. Finally, the tests completed, her tortured, radioactive remains were dragged to the edge of the dry lake and unceremoniously dumped with tons of other radioactive scrap.

The battered old queen already reflected little of her glorious past. And now what atomic hellfire had left undamaged, Mother Nature set out to finish. For years the blistering desert winds drove sandstorms through her broken body, filled her interior and engines with abrasive grit, sandblasted the fabric control surfaces to tatters. Winter hailstorms lashed through her gaping wounds to raise still more havoc. Here the fallen queen would have succumbed to an inglorious end, but fate reached out to intercede.

With the advent of fire-bombing forest fires out in California, in the late 1950s, old WWII bombers were suddenly in demand — especially the B-17. The Flying Fortress could haul a respectable load and was always known, "as an airplane a pilot can trust." But when they looked for them, aviation entrepreneurs were shocked to find that the B-17 was now an endangered species.

During WWII, armadas of B-17s struggled through the *flak*-studded skies of *Festung Europa,* and droned victoriously over vast reaches of the Pacific from Alaska to Tokyo. Then the curtain rang down on the big war, and suddenly they belonged to history, their recent glory as dim as the Alamo's. For thousands of these old warriors, the last flight to anywhere would be to bleak desert boneyards like Kingman, Arizona, where they would be abandoned to scavengers.

These industrial vultures often recouped their original investments by peddling the hi-octane fuel left in the tanks, then gleefully hauled the weathered carcasses off to the smelters for pure profit. By the mid-1950s, of some 13,000 Fortresses hammered out by Rosie and Ralph the Riveters, only a scant few remained — and those only by the grace of being in service for other causes. Furthermore, most of their owners were just not selling — for any price. Those who coveted a B-17 would cage one of these precious birds only by the dint of diligent bartering and scrounging.

But a B-17 scrounger par-excellence was one A.B. "Abe" Sellards. Abe had launched his aviation career working a lone Stearman duster. In time, he abandoned pea-patching for the somewhat wider horizons of borate bombing (as it was popularly known at the time) parlaying his little biplane into three B-25s and a B-17. Still later, he threw in with two partners, Gene Packard and Floyd Stilwell, operating as Aviation Specialties, Inc. Among other WWII aircraft, their combined forces would comprise the world's largest privately owned armadas of B-17s. With this peacetime airpower they hired out to wage campaigns against the new Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse — forest fires, fire ants, assorted insects and bugs, which yearly laid waste to crops, animal life, and natural resources. The bulk of their fleet was the B-17, especially desired for its four-engine safety when operating over densely populated areas. An increasing demand for its services meant a never-ending quest for additional equipment — eventually leading to the dusty shores of Yucca Lake.

One February day in 1965, the trio found themselves on these cold windswept salt flats. They had come to determine if this old bomber still retained enough of her vital parts to hold forth hope of resurrection. Just recently the AEC had determined that the radioactive contamination had drained from the wreck and she was offered for sale as scrap.

Yucca Lady **became a part-time project at Aviation Specialties, but the idea behind the rebuild of the former MATS SB-17G was always the same — create a Flying Fortress that had been built from the ground up as a fire-bomber. The aircraft was photographed at Falcon Field during April 1969. (M. O'Leary)**