LEND-LEASE BOMBER

AERO TRADER HAS COMPLETED THE REBUILDING OF A MUSEUM-QUALITY STATIC B-25J

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

When Nazi Germany suddenly invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, British Prime Minster Winston Churchill promised, on the same day, British aid to the Soviets. The USA did the same on 24 June — even though the USA was not at war. The Soviet Union would become a "black hole" into which weapons and munitions would be poured at a prodigious rate. Initially, the USA demanded that the Russians pay for their new weapons in Russian gold and currency that had been frozen by the government in USA accounts: for example, those accounts that had been set up during the Spanish Civil War. On 28 September, the Anglo-American Supply Mission arrived at Moscow for a series of conferences on what sort of weapons the Soviets would need and how they would be supplied from October 1941 to June 1942. For example, Roosevelt planned on sending 300 aircraft per month during the June 1942/June 1943 timeframe.

The Soviets received huge supplies of war materials but the subject of this article is aircraft. The Soviets wanted more fighters but the British could barely cover their own needs so an agreement was made that would see American fighters (P-39, P-40, P-63) supplied to the Soviets but charged to British Lend-Lease accounts. Aircraft were sent via ships but extensive aerial supply routes were set up — the most famous being the Alaska-Siberia Route (ALSIB) that saw huge numbers of American aircraft flown to Fairbanks, Alaska, and handed over to the Soviets who would then fly them through Siberia and western Russia.

The first flight of such aircraft took place on 9 October 1942 when a batch of a dozen Douglas A-20 Havocs headed for Fairbanks. These were the first of a stunning 7923 combat aircraft delivered via the ALSIB Route up through August 1945.

Mitchell Masters — Tony and Carl with their latest project.

Many of the aircraft were supplied through a complex series of "Protocols" and "Pre-Protocols." For example, UK "Pre-Protocol" supplies consisted of 200 Hurricanes, 200 Tomahawks, four Mustang Is for testing., and ten Airacobras listed as spares.

"Pre-Protocol" deliveries from the USA saw a batch of 59 P-40s and five B-25Bs that were paid for from the released Soviet accounts. Protocol deliveries started with the US/UK providing 1800 aircraft each during the First Protocol (1 October 1941 to 30 June 1942).

Aero Trader is certainly no stranger to Russian-marked Mitchells as can be seen by the magnificent B-25J-25-NC 44-30456 restored for collector Rod Lewis.

The Mitchells were delivered in several different paint schemes — from the flat Olive Drab/Neutral Gray on the restored aircraft — to a Russian-specified scheme of gloss black undersurfaces and semi-gloss top surfaces (the gloss withstood the Soviet weather much better than the flat paints). The gloss can be seen in this view of 44-30793 taken by long-time Challenge contributor Ben Brown who was a ferry pilot on the ALSIB route. (Ben Brown)

The US contribution consisted of 828 Bostons/Havocs and 72 B-25s to make up a delivery of 100 bombers per month.

To create the same number of fighters, 100 P-40Es were supplied mainly from British Lend-Lease consignments. After some 30 had been shipped, the Soviets were offered 100 Curtiss O-52s but soon said they did not want any of the pudgy aircraft. The numbers were met with increasing supplies of P-39s and P-40s. The Soviets made demands for more advanced aircraft such as P-38s, P-47s, and P-51s but these were easily sidestepped by the Americans who realized the folly of sending the Soviets advanced equipment.

The Third Protocol (1 July 1943 to 30 June 1944) saw the Soviets make an amazing request for 6000 Airacobras along with 1200 A-20s, 600 B-25s, and 360 C-46 or C-47s. The Americans countered with 1200 P-39s and 600 Hurricanes. For the Fourth Protocol (1 July 1944 to 30 June 1945), the Soviets demanded from the Americans some 2400 P-39s (USA offered 2400), 600 B-25s (300), 240 B-17s (none supplied), 360 C-47s (240), 120 C-46s (none).

The Soviets really liked the North American B-25 Mitchell since it was rugged, heavily armed, and could operate in the extremely cold combat fronts. Going through records, it appears that the USA authorized a total of 914 Mitchells of different variants, and sources report that either 865 or 870 actually arrived (a number of aircraft were lost *en route*).

The subject of this article has been restored for a new aviation museum in Russia that is attempting, among other goals, to have at least one example of every type of aircraft supplied via Lend-Lease.

The completed Russian B-25J rolled out of one of Aero Trader's hangars at Chino on 7 September. The plane will form part of Russia's largest aviation museum.

MUSEUMS