Tora! Tora! Tora! Val

THIS MODIFIED VULTEE BT-13 VALIANT HAS LED AN IMPRESSIVE MOVIE AND TELEVISION CAREER

BY DOUG FISHER

For any aviation enthusiast visiting Long Beach Airport in southern California during the 1950s and 1960s, Steward-Davis Inc. was a definite "must stop" because the company was always working on unusual and exotic aircraft for a variety of customers. The company ramp housed everything from PBY Catalina "aerial yachts" to Fairchild C-82 Jet Packets. However, during 1968, one of the company's most interesting projects was well underway. Under a contract for MGM Pictures, Steward-Davis was converting a fleet of surplus WWII aircraft into an aerial armada for the upcoming blockbuster movie *Tora! Tora! Tora!* detailing the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

This excellent photograph shows two of the completed BT-13 Vals at Long Beach — painted and unpainted. The modifications on N56867 are clearly shown. (Steward-Davis)

Story board from *Tora!* showing the Vals in action. (MGM)

The ramp and hangar space was full of a collection of Catalinas, Texans/Harvards, a P-40E, an SBD-5 Dauntless, and a host of Vultee BT-13s. Texans were being cut apart and made into stretched Kate torpedo-bombers while more sedate alterations turned the venerable advanced trainers into Zero fighters. The Vultees were being used to create a fleet of ten Japanese Val dive-bombers — the aircraft that did so much damage to Battleship Row.

The modifications (as can be seen in one of the photos) were relatively basic, but actually also quite clever. Fiberglass wheel pants, vertical fin extension, dive brakes, etc. really made the old BT appear like the aggressive Japanese dive-bomber.

The planes were completed on time, shipped to Hawaii for filming and then returned to Long Beach for disposal. In the fabled MGM auction, the Zeros, Kates, and Vals were put up for sale. Prices were really low. Challenge Publications purchased six of the aircraft and returned them to flying condition.

Many of the planes were acquired by the then-Confederate Air Force and eventually morphed into the CAF's famed *Tora!* airshow routine — one of the best Warbird displays done in this country. The aircraft have also appeared in other movies and television shows and this brings us to our subject aircraft.

Matt Nightingale displaying the BT-13 Val near Chino Airport. "It is just a delightful, straightforward flying aircraft," states Matt.

In one of the most ominous scenes from *Tora!,* the fleet of Japanese warplanes flies over unsuspecting plantation workers as they head completely unopposed to Pearl Harbor and other American military targets. (MGM)

Founder Ed Maloney always had an interest in saving veteran aircraft with movie histories, so Planes of Fame has some really significant airframes from this category, including the BT-13 Val and Charles Nungesser's World War I Hanriot.

"As readers know, Ed Maloney always had an interest in veteran aircraft utilized in movie work," said Matt Nightingale as he stood by the side of the Planes of Fame Air Museum's BT-13 Val. "Ed managed to get this aircraft and it was moved to the museum's back lot where it sat for a number of years. When the movie *Pearl Harbor* came about, a decision was made to utilize the aircraft in the film so we got it back to fine flying shape, flew it to NAS North Island in San Diego, and then had it shipped to Hawaii where it did a lot of flying.

"Now that the aircraft was back flying, we decided to keep it that way. It is just a great flying old airplane and flies pretty much exactly the same as a stock BT-13," said Matt. "Lots of the POF pilots have flown the plane and everyone likes it. The Vultee is simple to maintain, easy to fly — once you get it going you just trim it out and it flies and flies — and with 140-gal of onboard fuel [burning about 25-gph] the range in tremendous. All the movie modifications have held up really well — remember, these modifications took place a half-century ago and back then no one was thinking about operating them after the film was completed."

Considering the number of BT-13/BT-15 Valiants built, the percentage of flying survivors is quite low so these Val replicas are an important addition to the ranks of airworthy Warbirds. "Besides working the Val as a Japanese dive-bomber in *Tora!, Pearl Harbor,* and other productions, we also modified the aircraft to appear as the record-breaking Hughes Racer for the film *The Aviator,*" recalled Matt. "Talk about a stretch of the imagination!"

Today, the BT-13 Val is regularly flown and is a popular part of the museum's yearly airshow where it is regularly "shot down." Visitors to the museum can view the BT-13 Val up close and personal, but, and perhaps more importantly, the museum is also slowly restoring an original Val back to flying condition. This is a very long-term volunteer project but, when completed, will add an extremely significant WWII aircraft to the roll of flying Warbirds. So, stop by the POF when you have a chance to view these most interesting survivors. **WI**