A BAMBOO ADVENTURE

WE FLY WITH ONE OF THE FEW AIRWORTHY CESSNA T-50 BOBCATS

BY ROGER CAIN

While there are three Cessna T-50 Bobcats flying on the West Coast of the USA, a Bobcat registered N1261N is the only one in which you can get professional training and then rent for a wonderful WWII flying experience. Andy Bibber's Adventure Flight at Lincoln Airport in northern California offers rides and training in this AT-17/ T-50, which is also known to most aviation enthusiasts as the Bamboo Bomber. In a "name the plane" contest at the Cessna factory, the winning name picked from employee suggestions was the "Bobcat," but due to its wood and tube construction, the craft earned the familiar nickname of Bamboo Bomber and this is a name it still carries today. Another name it got from its wood and fabric construction was the "Double-Breasted Cub," and under the UC-78 designation, it was sometimes called the "Useless 78." The US Navy and Marines called their examples the "Box Kite."

The T-50 was built of wood, plywood, steel tube, and fabric. The wing spars were constructed of laminated spruce with truss-style ribs fashioned from spruce and plywood. The prototype T-50 made its first flight in 1939, and was sold to Pan American Airways who ended up buying 14 of them. The Cessna was originally designed and built for the civilian commercial market, and would be cheaper to own and fly than the all-metal Beech 18, but

Andy Bibber standing by the tail of his Bobcat. The rudder is one of the few portions of the airframe that has received recovering. The rest of the airframe still has its original fabric and the RCAF markings can be seen under the civilian paint. (R. Cain)

that all changed as the United States edged closer to entering the Second World War.

President Roosevelt decreed that the nation would need huge numbers of new pilots and massive contracts were issued for primary, basic, advanced, and multi-engine trainers. The multi-engine aircraft were needed in big numbers to train pilots that would go on to fly cargo and bomber aircraft such as the C-46, C-47, B-25, B-17, B-24 and so on.

Civilian aircraft were pressed into war duties, and the first Cessna T-50s entered the military designated as the AT-8. This was the first order for the Bamboo Bomber and it constituted just 33 aircraft fitted with two 295-hp Lycoming R-680-9 radial piston engines. The need would rapidly grow and the first contract was followed by an order for 450 AT-17s powered by 245-hp Jacobs R-775-9 radials and, with many more slight changes, eventually, in 1942, the design was redesignated as the UC-78. The US Navy and Marine Corps also acquired 67 UC-78s and designated them as JRC-1s. Production of the UC-78 ended in June 1943 when the USAAF reasoned that more than enough trainers had been built for the mission at hand.

While the majority remained as trainers in

Andy Bibber and the Bamboo Bomber cruising over the California countryside and displaying the aircraft's 1950s paint scheme. (R. Cain)