



SHORT FINAL

*A YOUNG COPILOT LEARNS
THE ROPES ABOARD A
FLYING FORTRESS*
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ADVENTURES WITH **TANKER 15**



Tanker 15 unloads on a fire. The retardant tank was equipped with four doors and the pilot could choose to use from one to four doors on his drop.

To begin, let's get some of Tanker 15's historical information out of the way. This Flying Fortress was built by Douglas as B-17G USAAF 44-83868, making its first flight on 4 July 1945 as one of the last Forts built. It was transferred to the US Navy, ferried to NAS Johnsville, and converted to PB-1W BuNo 77233. It was retired to NAS Litchfield Park on 2 December 1957 with a total of 3484 flying hours and placed for surplus sale. The first owner was American Compressed Steel and the plane was registered as N5237V. It was then flown to Love Field in Dallas and parked with a number of other PB-1Ws and offered for sale. The FAA certificated its gross takeoff weight at 65,000 pounds. The main fuel tanks, holding a total of 427 gallons each, are located in the wings behind each engine. Engines burn 50 gallons per hour each; oil capacity is 37.5 gallons (across) each engine. The fire-fighting slurry tanks holds 1800 gallons of retardant at ten pounds per gallon — a total of 18,000 pounds. This particular old PB-1W still had a lot of non-essential military items that had not been stripped out. At sea level, our full load consisted of 350 gallons (across) each tank, full oil, and 18,000 pounds

retardant. This brought Tanker 15 to 64,000 pounds, and on a hot day she would not climb out of ground effect (50/60 feet) until the landing gear was up, which takes about 20+ seconds to retract. You will find this information to be pertinent as our story unfolds.

Our tale starts in the early 1970s when the family and I were living in Montara, California (Half Moon Bay). I had made up my mind to quit the hard-hat diving business and get into crop dusting. At that time, I had a Comm/Inst/CFI/Multi certificate and had accumulated about 750 hours with maybe 200 of that in tailwheel aircraft. Tailwheel aircraft are more difficult to handle on the ground and tailwheel aircraft with multiple engines have an even higher level of orneriness.

It took me about a year of traveling all over California to realize it was easier to be a "made man" in the Mafia than to get an agricultural flying job. I once told an operator that I had Stearman time. He said that meant nothing to him. "Do you have any Consolidated Fleet time?" he replied No! But I do have a lunar landing under my belt! His answer: "That's nothing — a guy before you said he had two and I didn't hire him either!"

It was February 1974, when I talked to an ag operator in Colusa, California, by the name of Davis Aviation who said if I would start as a flagger and loader for one year (at \$1.25 per hour) he would put me in a seat the next year. I should have taken notice that his lips were moving, therefore he was lying. What he was really saying is "I need an idiot to do all the grunt work around the hangar and then, when the season starts, to stand all day in the fields waving a row flag while getting sprayed with God only knows what." All of this was to be completed as the sun baked your brain in 105-degree temps. Usually your two bottles of water lasted until about 10 am. Oh, and forget about eating. This is why they pay the big bucks. You'll love this part: I yelled into the receiver to "hold that job, I'm coming."

I quit my \$ 12.50+ per hour hard-hat diving job and left for Colusa. I soon found that washing those ratty old Stearman dusters was as close as I was ever going to get to an ag job. So, when I had time, I went back to Half Moon Bay and picked up the AT-6D (I was in a partnership with nine other guys) and flew back to Davis Aviation. In the evenings after work, I would

fly over town when I returned to the airport, I would find a few folks who wanted a ride. I actually made more money flying rides in the T-6 than Davis paid me.

One afternoon I did a ride with a guy named Rob who said he was also a pilot so in one of aviation's best traditions, we went to a local bar. As the drinks went down, I began to realize what a BS'er this guy was. He said I had done a first-rate job flying aerobatics and that he was so impressed he would hire me to be his co-pilot on a B-17 air tanker. The requirements were: 1000 hours total time, 100 hours B-17 time, and a Comm/Inst/Multi. The job paid \$700 per month and \$10 per flight hour, plus expenses away from base.

My answer was, "Is that all? Got you covered across the board. Put me in, coach".

"Great, be at Jack Henry's duster strip tomorrow at 8 am and bring a bag," said my new friend Rob.

I didn't believe a word he said, so the next morning my hangover and I were a little late getting to work at Davis Dusters. The foreman asked what I was doing there, since Jack Henry had called to tell him that he had hired me so I wouldn't be showing up. "WHAT!" I jumped into the AT-6 and flew to Henry's small dirt strip.

It was about 9 am when I walked into the office where I was met by a big man with an even bigger voice. Our conversation went something like this: "Who the hell are you? Who the hell told you it was okay for you to land that piece of crap on my property?"

"Sir my name is Mike H—."

"Heiny, hell! I fired you when you didn't show this morning. Get out of here and don't call me sir!"

"Yes sir, I mean, Jack. But sir, I mean Jack, I didn't believe Rob last night. I thought he was full of crap."

"Okay, okay! Stop whining."

Turning to Rob he said, "Have him fill out an employment application and you two be ready to leave at 6 am tomorrow. Tanker 15 is at Redman, Oregon, and ready for pickup." I completed the one-page form with the same information I had given Rob the night before. Believe or not I was not



Rare photo of PB-1W N5237V on its ferry flight for conversion as a fire-bomber.

asked for my logbook or even a look at my certificates.

At 7 am, with Jack flying, we boarded an Aztec for the 2.5-hour flight to Redman. On landing we taxied up to Flying Fortress Tanker 15, shut down the Aztec's right engine, and Rob and I got out. Jack fired up and was gone. Rob opened the nose boarding hatch, threw in our bags and told me to check the turbine buckets, turn on turbine oil, and do the walk around. With that he swung up and into the small hatch — just like in the movies.

While I was standing there looking at a very big airplane, I heard the onboard auxiliary power unit (APU) start. I was still standing there when the pilot's window slid open and Rob was staring at me. After a long moment he said, "You lying SOB! You don't have a clue and you don't have any time in a B-17!"

I answered with all of the audacity I could muster, hoping he would see some humor in it. "Hey, the airplane I flew was green and this one is silver!" Rob was still laughing when he met me on the ramp. After about an hour of pre-flight training and inspection I was now seated in the co-pilot seat and learning the startup procedures. Needless to say, I was of very little assistance in that first takeoff and flight to Chico, California.

It would be Chico's Aero Union Inc. that would provide a type rating in Tanker 15 to Rob. He was the newest Captain for TBM Inc. (Jack Henry's

fire-fighting company). I attended the classes and flew with Rob, however, TBM would not pay for me to be typed. The training made us a team by the time we left for our primary California station at Porterville. Over the next six months our team performance varied from "Good" at times to "Dumb & Dumber."

I would soon learn that my buddy Rob was a far better liar than me. He had BS'ed Jack on his fire-fighting background, only had one season as co-pilot, but he was a damn good pilot. However, his instrument flying skills were not the best. The bottom line was, we were learning the business together and I think we ultimately preformed very well. It is during our learning curve that my story is centered.

It was a gorgeous day in Santa Rosa, California. After topping off Tanker 15 with 350 gallons across and 1800 gallons of retardant, we were dispatched north of Ukiah to hit lighting strikes (fires). We were to contact the AirCo (USFS airborne controller) for targets. (Note: Tanker 15 had four drop doors and we could pre-select one to four doors). As we pulled up from our fourth drop on a small fire, the AirCo said "very good job Tanker 15, now load and return at Rohnerville."

Rob asked me, "Where the hell is Rohnerville?" I had no clue, but a quick look at the Flight Guide gave all of the info. It is just east of Fortuna, on a plateau above the town. The

For a brief time, N5237V operated as Tanker 65 and the PB-1W is seen returning after a fire drop with Tanker 22, which is now owned by the Collings Foundation.



approaches and length of the strip got my attention: A narrow 4000-foot strip with trees at both ends, uphill to the east. I informed Rob that I did not like the looks of Rohnerville. We then spotted Tanker 17 coming in to relieve us. It was also a TBM tanker and a B-17 (today it's the CAF's B-17G *Sentimental Journey* in Arizona). We asked them where they were out of and their answer was Rohnerville. I then asked what they were carrying out of Rohnerville. Their answer was 300 across and 1800 gallons.

As Rob and I discussed the problems that Rohnerville appeared to have, I made one of those Dumb & Dumber statements: "What the hell, if Tanker 17 can do it we can do it!" We had been in the air for an hour so we were now 300 gallons across. Since we all know that stupid decisions are contagious, Rob smiled and said "You're right. Let's do it!"

As we made our easterly approach to Rohnerville, we were amazed by the height of the trees on the extended center line of the runway. Rob asked me what I thought of downloading to 1500 or 1600 gallons.

My answer was, "I don't know. what you think?"

"I don't know either, maybe," Rob came back.

We were landing downwind because the USFS retardant tank farm was at the east end of the single runway field. We shutdown in the loading area and I got

out to check the turbos and did a quick walk around while Rob viewed the load in the slurry tanks. I was looking at the end of the runway, thinking that those damn trees were high.

Rob called out from inside while loading; "What about downloading?"

"All right, maybe we should," I shouted. Too late! The 1800 gallons of heavy retardant were already onboard. "Shutdown!" Rob yelled to the loaders.

As we settled into the cockpit and went through the startup, we were both looking at the trees. We discussed off-loading a couple hundred gallons, but that would take an hour and really piss off the tank farm crew, to say nothing of showing our indecision and ineptitude. (Note: In hard-hat diving we know that indecision will kill you, but somehow that fact escaped me as I sat in the right seat of the Flying Fortress).

Rob took the runway and lined up with the mains on the threshold and the tail wheel in the weeds and I locked the tail wheel. Our normal takeoff procedure was to hold the brakes and advance the throttles to 32-inches of manifold pressure and 2500-rpm then, when everything was in the green, I would release the brakes.

This takeoff was very different; we went to 40-inches MP and at brake release moved quickly to full takeoff power of 48-inches and 2500-rpm. The B-17 is not a quick starter. It gathered speed slowly downhill into a 10-mph wind. We approached midfield

up on the main wheels at 80-mph.

At that point, an abort could not be accomplished and stay on the existing runway, so we were committed. At our weight we would normally rotate at 105-mph, but I could see that was not going to happen. The only talk in the cockpit was me calling out every 10-mph increment over 80 and that all was in the green. I swear those trees were growing by the second.

I had just called 90-mph when, from my line of sight, the end of the runway disappeared under the nose of the airplane. I hit the landing gear up switch (whatever happened from that point on we would have no need of them), pulled the cowl flaps fully closed, and opened the turbos to full military power. The result was over-boosting and pushing the engine manifold pressure to a point well beyond 50-inches. I never looked to see the resulting manifold pressure.

Indicating 95-mph, we both had our hands tightly wrapped around the yokes and pulled Tanker 15 off, knowing at that point we could not out-climb the damn trees. Looking to the right, we saw a drop in the tree line as it descended down the side of the plateau. Just as Tanker 15 started to shudder at the impending stall, we threw her into a 30-degree right bank with the nose coming down. The right wing grazed through some tree limbs. She was still shuddering but we could see all the way downhill to Fortuna.

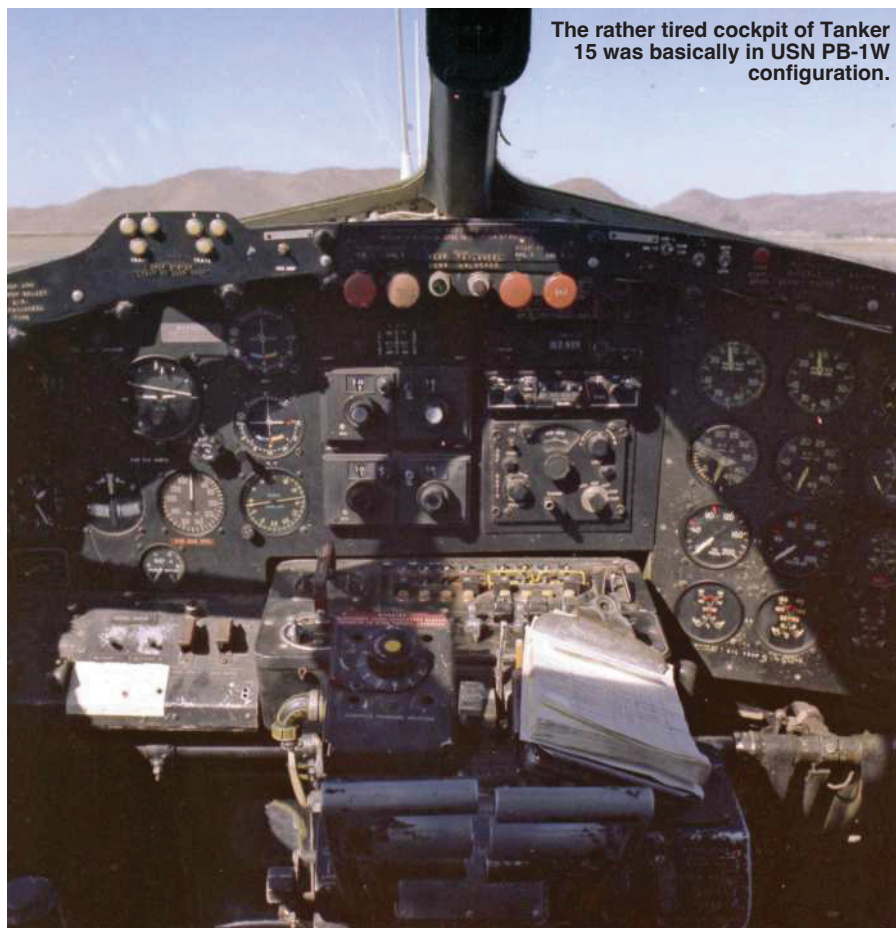
And down we went, picking up speed little by little. Finally, over town at TV antenna and chimney height she stopped shuddering. We were flying! I dialed back the turbos to 48-inches and cracked open the cowl flaps and started nursing the flaps up. By the time we hit 120-mph, we were over Humbolt Bay at 50 feet, had climb power set and the cowl flaps open, and temps started to return from the high end of red. As we started our turn back toward the coast, the first words were spoken by Rob. He keyed his mike and said; "What we are *not* doing again is hauling 1800 gallons out of Rohnerville!"

That evening we were having dinner and drinks with the older and more experienced crew of Tanker 17. After Rob and I related our terrifying takeoff that afternoon, the Tanker 17 guys were speechless. I think we both thought the silence was due to their amazement at our fabulous flying skills that saved the day. To our surprise, Tanker 17's crew was not in the least impressed with us. In fact, just before they got up to leave the table, they gave us one hell of a dressing-down.

Their point seemed to be: How we could be so stupid as to try to haul 1800 gallons out of Rohnerville? I reminded them that I had called and asked what they were hauling out of that field and was told 300 across and 1800! That statement seemed to really set them off. There was screaming and cursing to the point that we were all asked to leave the restaurant.

Out in the parking lot, Tanker 17's Capt. Bobby (who had been Rob's type check pilot) calmed down and began to speak so we could understand. We fully realized he was unhappy with us, but why?

"Yes," he said. "I did tell you what we hauled out of Rohnerville. What you two nitwits failed to understand is that Tanker 17 is a stripped-down Fortress with new engines and props. I thought even you two stupid SOBs would have figured out by now that you are piloting a flying junkyard. Tanker 15's empty weight is 3000 pounds heavier, the engines and props are worn out, and the number three engine is burning 8/10 gallons of oil per hour. Running a generator



The rather tired cockpit of Tanker 15 was basically in USN PB-1W configuration.



Photographer Steve Whitby in the cockpit of Tanker 15 when the Fort was operating out of Hemet, California. Note the streamlined fiberglass nose that had been added by Aero Union. This aircraft is now on display in the RAF Museum in England.

is about all it is good for. And on top of everything else, we know what the hell we are doing and you two quite obviously do not!"

If memory serves me correctly, that was the last time we ever talked to the Tanker 17 crew. However, over more beers we debriefed the points Bobby had made. Our conclusion: He was mostly correct about the shortcomings

of Tanker 15. But he was way off base attacking our piloting abilities! How could he not understand that it was our superior piloting skills that flew a heavier and poorer performing airplane with 300 gallons across and 1800 gallons out of Rohnerville? Unbelievable!

PS: God looks after foolish pilots as well as drunks.

AC