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T-28 Trojan Hidden Desert Bone Yard

By Patrick Dean

All aviation enthusiasts have heard stories of hidden bone yards of vintage aircraft. Some of us have spent days and sometimes weeks chasing these elusive stories in hopes of being the first to find a moment of history. On occasion, when talking with groups of enthusiasts, I have heard stories of a field of WWII aircraft secretly stored somewhere in the desert near Las Vegas, Nevada. Since my interest has always been in heavy-lift aircraft, my imagination often ran away to an assortment of B-17, B-24, or B-29s that somehow escaped the scrap man's smelter. After all, a B-29 was recently found at the bottom of Lake Meade which is only 35 miles from Las Vegas.

After some research and vague third party directions, I decided to take the challenge. After interviewing several individuals claiming to have seen these elusive aircraft I enlisted two friends as driver and navigator. Equipped with our cameras and GPS we drove southeast out of Las Vegas. After about 50 miles of following vague directions we ended up on a meandering dead-end road. We passed a group of small houses in the high desert as we drove into Eldorado Canyon. This is an area that time forgot, a throwback to the 1800s. Believing that we were on the wrong trail our driver began looking for a place to turn around. I was thinking this is another one of those stories created from a wishful imagination.

As we passed the old gold mine and ghost town of Techatticup I spotted the remains of a Grumman OV-1 *Mohawk* standing on its nose in a dirt mound. This definitely was not WWII but since there is no airfield for miles and no reason for an aircraft to be in a canyon this was a good sign. We had to be on the trail of the obscure bone yard. As the road curved and we passed the dirt mound, to our surprise, there was a field of aircraft. They were not WWII vintage as we had been told and not even heavy lift but North American T-28 *Trojans* from the 1950s. We counted over 50 mostly in U.S. Navy colors with a few in Marine and Air Force markings scattered among them. After inspection we determined the *Trojans* were all trainers with no T-28D combat models among them. The majority were T-28Cs with at least one B model. There was an A model in Air Force markings that still had the Wright R-1300 engine and two-blade propeller. The propeller was severely bent where it appeared that an unfortunate cadet



Remains of OV-1 Mohawk. The first indication we were in the right area. Aircraft was blown up in the movie, "3000 Miles to Graceland." (All photos by the author)

landed with the gear retracted. We looked at each individual airframe searching for any T-28D combat versions with wing pylons. We inspected the aircraft in Navy markings and found they did not have arresting hooks for carrier use. They were either all removed or these were land based trainers. It is generally believed that only the Navy aircraft were painted in orange and white and the Air Force in gray. Actually both branches of the military used each color. I don't recall ever seeing Air Force T-28s in orange until the Navy C models were transferred to the Air Force in the 1960s.

The T-28 *Trojan* first flew in September 1949. A combined total of 1,193 T-28A models were built for the Air Force and Navy from 1950-'53. The first model was underpowered with the 800-hp Wright R-1300-1 engine and two-blade propeller. It had a top speed of 283 mph. When the Cessna T-37 was adopted by the Air Force most T-28A models were surplus and went to foreign military forces. An additional 492 T-28B and 301 T-28C models were built with the 1,300-hp Wright R-1820-9DH engines. This improved version had a max speed of 352 mph. They are easily identified by the three-blade propeller.

Later a light Counter-Insurgent model was created by converting over 300 of the sluggish T-28A models to the T-28D. This version was fitted with the R-1820-56S engine. It also had a redesigned stronger undercarriage and three pylons under each wing for ordnance. Some of these upgraded T-28s were supplied to the Vietnamese and Thai Air Force. The Southeast Asia pilots were



T-28 Trojan bone yard. Most are Navy T-28C models, one Marine and one Air Force.



T-28A engine still attached with broken two-blade prop.

trained on the T-28A and C models which brings us to the T-28s found in Eldorado Canyon.

How did they get to the ghost town near a gold mine in a desert canyon with no airfield? After locating the friendly locals at the nearby Eldorado Canyon General Store across from the abandoned gold mine we were told the story. A businessman/pilot from Boulder City, Nevada, owns and flies a T-28. He was searching for spares in Mississippi some years ago. He discovered the military was anxious to dispose of the aircraft and accepted an offer for the entire supply of derelict T-28s that had accumulated.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s the Vietnamese and Thai pilots were trained at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi. The inexperienced pilots were having a high incident rate with the underpowered Air Force T-28As. The trainees were going through a lot of aircraft by performing unintended ground loops and assorted incursions with the ground. The amount of maintenance required to keep the T-28s flying became a problem. I was TDY at Keesler during this time and saw first-hand some of the strange maneuvers that resulted in damage. In some cases two or more damaged aircraft were combined to make one. This increasing shortage prompted the transfer of more powerful Navy T-28C models to the Air Force. As time passed, the damaged and surplus aircraft were stored creating the Mississippi T-28 repository. Eventually, T-28s from other locations were brought together awaiting disposal.

The Nevada businessman purchased the remains of the fleet from military disposal and began transporting them back to the desert three at a time. At one point he wondered if he had made the right decision. He wanted a storage area that was dry and secluded. What better place than a ghost town on a dead end road in the desert. Although some will eventually be scrapped, they are disassembled and the serviceable parts are stored. The airframes are then restored on a when ordered-basis and sold as kits for those fortunate enough to afford to build their own 350 mph vintage toy. In addition to assorted spare parts there are currently over 50 airframes visible at the storage yard. We were told there are enough restorable parts and good airframes to build at least 20 complete aircraft. Given time and sufficient funds one could have their own Air Force.

Although these were not the multi-engine WWII aircraft



April 1970, T-28C at Keesler Air Force Base. Aircraft newly transferred from Navy to Air Force.

we thought we would find in the desert it was not disappointing. It is still quite impressive to see this many aircraft grouped together even when they are broken up. As we walked through them I recalled when I first encountered T-28s in tech school at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas. I was fresh out of basic and learning to be a mechanic. At the time they were just another aircraft to me. I wanted to work on the big stuff but the Air Force had other ideas. We took T-28s apart, changed engines and learned how to run them up. Eventually I got my wish when we trained on the Boeing KC-97. Then I moved on to the C-124. I forgot about the T-28s until years later when I encountered them again on TDY in Mississippi. Now here I was over 40 years later looking at T-28s. The strange thing is I was more impressed now than I was then. I wondered if possibly I worked on some of these aircraft many years ago at Keesler. After all they were transported from Mississippi to the Nevada desert. I will never know but it does the soul good when we are allowed to visit the past.

As for the OV-1 *Mohawk*, it was brought in for the movie "3000 Miles to Graceland." Due to the remote isolated area the little ghost town and gold mine are favored by Hollywood as a location for action and western movie making. The Techatticup gold mine, established in 1861, was the highest producing gold mine in Nevada. There were 12 men working at the mine in 1941. They were all called to WWII and did not return to mining when it was over. The mine never reopened. Today there are occasional mine tours offered and it appears that scrap aluminum from the nearby bone yard has taken the place of the revenue producing gold. In a strange twist the mine closed due to the call of the military. Now about the only reason to go there is to see military aircraft.

Biography

Patrick Dean - Served in the USAF as an aircraft mechanic on C-124 and C-97 aircraft and for a short period on T-28s. Mr. Dean retired from United Airlines after 36 years of service. He has always been interested in heavy lift aircraft. He has taken over 10,000 aircraft photos. His interest is that of a historian with emphasis on the mechanical and technical side of aviation. He has written many aviation articles and is currently compiling the fleet history of the DC-4 / ATL-98 *Carvair* conversion. He is the *Air Britain* specialist on the type.