

BOMBING WITH

Our target today is Madras, Oregon, just an hour's flight from *Super Rabbit's* base in Salem. We'll carpet-bomb it with history. The enemy is time, time that consigns beautiful old aircraft to the junk heap. As a small-plane pilot, the goal for me is selfish: Fly this 21,500-pound bomber (today's weight) and even land it.

Super Rabbit, a reference to Bugs Bunny, is a North American TB-25J Mitchell Bomber that began life in Kansas City, Kansas, in 1945 as an orphan—it never went to war, it went to storage. Nobody wanted it. After that, its life improved

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER



TH HISTORY

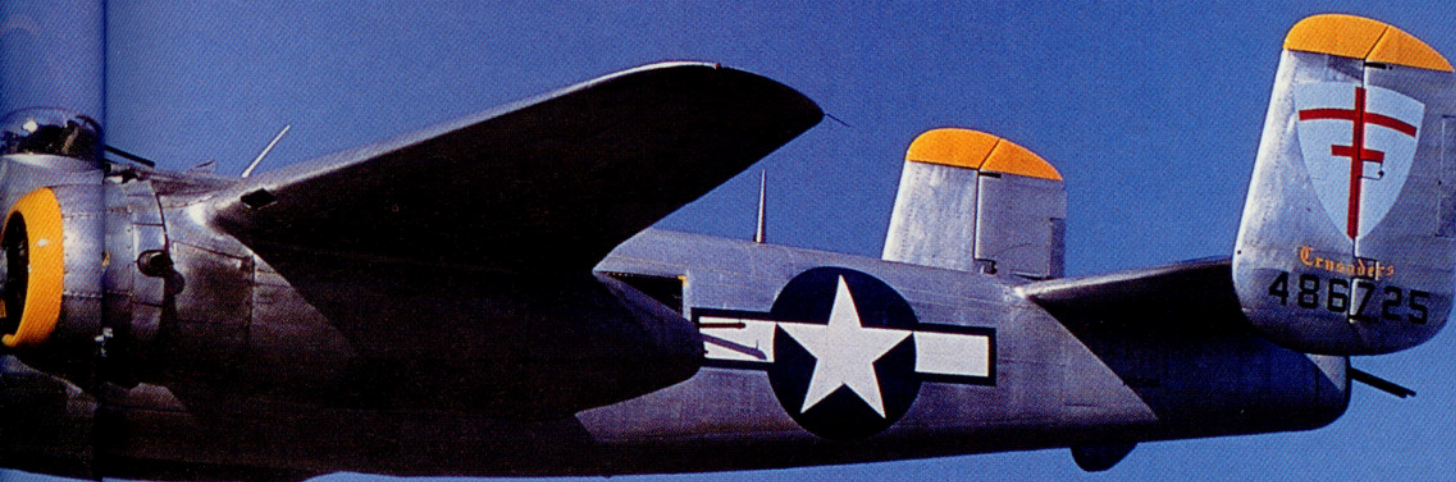
Super Rabbit becomes a super teacher

BY ALTON K. MARSH

little. Sold to foster parents in Venezuela, it was finally left to rot in La Paz, Bolivia.

Time can be a friend as well as an enemy. As the years passed, enthusiasm grew for the restoration and preservation of warbirds. The twin-engine bomber was found and given enough attention to fly it home to the United States.

In 1987 it returned to American airspace, but could fly no farther. Near Cocoa Beach, Florida, an engine quit; 10 min-



utes later the second engine failed. Out of engines and options, the bomber safely belly-landed in a swamp and finished its journey to a Florida airport on a truck.

The rough times weren't over. After extensive repairs, the aircraft made its way to California where the present owner, Jim Morgan of Salem, fell in love with it. During the flight to Oregon, *Super Rabbit* proved it still had one violent burst of bad luck left to exorcise. Near Fresno, California, the left engine erupted in flames that threatened to burn off the wing. The pilots that day were Jeff Wright and Wayne Cartwright, two of several pilots still flying it for Morgan. But that was the day the bomber's luck changed: Cartwright and Wright got the engine shut down and the fire out. After extensive repairs and restoration, the aircraft is flying the airshow circuit today.

It's not the biggest shows that attract *Super Rabbit's* handlers—the smaller ones are more fun because the bomber is the star.

The Rabbit's foot works

Perhaps the aircraft's luck has been borrowed through name association with the Wright brothers, since many of its pilots are either named Wright or, like Wayne, at least come close. Another of the qualified pilots is Bert Wright, no relation to Jeff. (When Bert Wright and Jeff Wright fly the bomber together, they are jocularly referred to as *the Wright brothers*.)

Once repaired and safely landed in Salem, the medium bombardment airplane was ready for its new mission: education. For the past three years, *Super Rabbit* has taught airshow crowds in the Northwest what it was like for crews to blast their way through enemy aircraft with only a dozen .50-caliber machine guns and to drop bombs from a flack-filled sky. Morgan bravely lets the public touch it, climb aboard it, and—for a \$300 donation—even ride in it.

His rewards are measured in emotional units, not monetary ones. There was the former B-25 pilot who safely belly-landed during the war despite losing an arm to enemy bullets, and another who stepped aboard and—transported

The 53-foot-long *Super Rabbit* is a crowd pleaser.



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back in time—recalled war stories that his wife had never heard. Still another veteran looked at the *Rabbit* and said, "I wish I was young again, because I'm in love."

"I love World War II history," Morgan said. "I'm so proud of what those guys did to give us our freedom." He happily foots the bills (the *Rabbit* consumes 200 gallons of fuel an hour but can carry more than 1,000) so that younger generations might experience history. His friends say that he does it out of the goodness of his heart.

"Most of the restored ones have perfect polish and paint, but this one looks like it has been working," said this particular B-25's historian, Jack Cook. "It looks like it has been flying and working. It is almost like a time capsule."

The never-ending preflight

Today's mission is, in old Army Air Forces parlance, a *milk run*. We'll drop a load of history on the already-patriotic ranchers of Madras. My crew assignment is to ride and even to fly this B-25 bomber from Salem to Madras, attend an airshow, do the same the next day, then fly the bomber

home and land it under the watchful eye of instructor and check pilot Cartwright. (Yes, the life of an AOPA Pilot writer is far from an easy one, but I accept the duties willingly to spare others the hardship.)

The bomber is checked, and then checked again. Carpenters measure twice and cut once: Bert Wright, a retired lumber company executive, performed the preflight checklist yesterday, a day before takeoff, and is doing it again now. There might be something loose, or an oil leak where it is not expected. (There are many normal oil leaks—that's just the nature of large radial engines.) Preflight actions cover six pages of the checklist. If you think that sounds like a long one, consider that the "normal operations" section requires 14 pages, while emergencies take another nine.

While the myth of the lucky rabbit's foot appears to be working, the *Rabbit's* feet are another story. Tires are increasingly hard to find. Morgan gets by with recapping the old tires, but the pilots are aware that they must be careful when landing and taxiing.



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Off to Madras

The guys up front, Cartwright and Bert Wright, are all business, using command and response checklists like an airline crew. Both have flown for a living. Passengers, including family and friends, are warned that the 1,700-horsepower Wright Cyclone R-2600 engines are noisy, and I stuff in earplugs even though I am using an electronic noise-canceling headset. We are asked to unplug our microphone cords during takeoff so that the noise won't overload the aircraft's intercom system.

I am seated 10 feet behind the pilots and beneath the top-mounted turret gun, feet on a retractable rest two feet above the escape hatch. The belly hatch is the front door to the cockpit.

Nothing rumbles to life like a radial, a big one, sputtering and spitting smoke, cylinders coughing as they wake. "I want my coffee *now!*" they seem to say. Taxi to the runway is smooth, with an occasional lurch left or right. I'll find out more about that tomorrow, after I *land* it. The bomber is a challenging vehicle to handle on the ground.

Wright is right: At full takeoff power the racket is felt as much as heard. There isn't much of a view from the back, but

that will improve during cruise when my seat partner and I can unbuckle and walk up front, headsets still in place. The bomber lifts off at 113 knots and begins to climb toward the Cascade Range to the east.

Sooner than I expected, Wright is unbuckling and folding back the left half of the armor-plated copilot's seat so that I can have a turn at the controls. They are heavy. "It takes a lot of throw to initiate a turn," Wright explains.

The instrument arrangement is confusing. I find the air-speed indicator once, and then never see it again. (I was told later we cruised at about 220 mph IAS [191 kt].) Designers must have put all the instruments in a bucket and slung them at the panel. Where they stuck, they stayed. "That was before the T-configuration [used in instrument flying]," Wright says. Climbing to 7,500 feet, I give Mount Jefferson wide berth, although winds are calm: The mountain towers another 3,000 feet above us. Cartwright is living in the moment, recognizing that he is flying a piece of history over spectacular snow-capped mountains, and he isn't paying for it. For added enjoyment, the 11,239-foot Mount Hood shines on the northern horizon.



The cockpit is 20 feet in the air and the nose blocks the view.

The Madras Air Fair

Madras, a town of 5,000, lies in the heart of ranching country on the dry east side of the Cascade Range. The residents dress like cowboys because they are, not because they want to be, and show their patriotism because it's authentic.

From the copilot's seat, I start a descent and know there are very few minutes left of my dream flight—Wright will return to the copilot's seat soon for landing. Cartwright generously allows me to circle the town to let them know the star of the show has arrived. I parade above what looks like Main Street. As we pass a school athletic field on the left, Cartwright notices lots of little faces looking our direction. Once past the town, I turn the bomber around and head for that football field, hoping they are as thrilled to see a B-25 as I am to find an audience.

Wright returns to the controls and the bomber slows to less than 147 kt (170 mph) to lower the gear, then finally 113 kt for final approach and 104 kt over the numbers. Lowering the gear is a three-lever, two-handed operation, and seems in keeping with the confusing panel. From my seat well behind the pilots, it appears the landing flare is like a horse rearing—the cockpit is 20 feet in the air and the nose blocks the view. The delicate nosewheel must be held off the runway until the aircraft has slowed. The wingspan is 67 feet, nearly equaling the 75-foot runway width. There are no clues about how to make the actual landing in the 1947 pilot handbook I purchased for this trip. I'll have to learn on the job if I am to land

Pilot Wayne Cartwright (above left) used to fly for a living. Now he barnstorms the country in the *Super Rabbit*.

it tomorrow. Fittingly enough, we have touched down on what was once a Boeing B-17 bomber field.

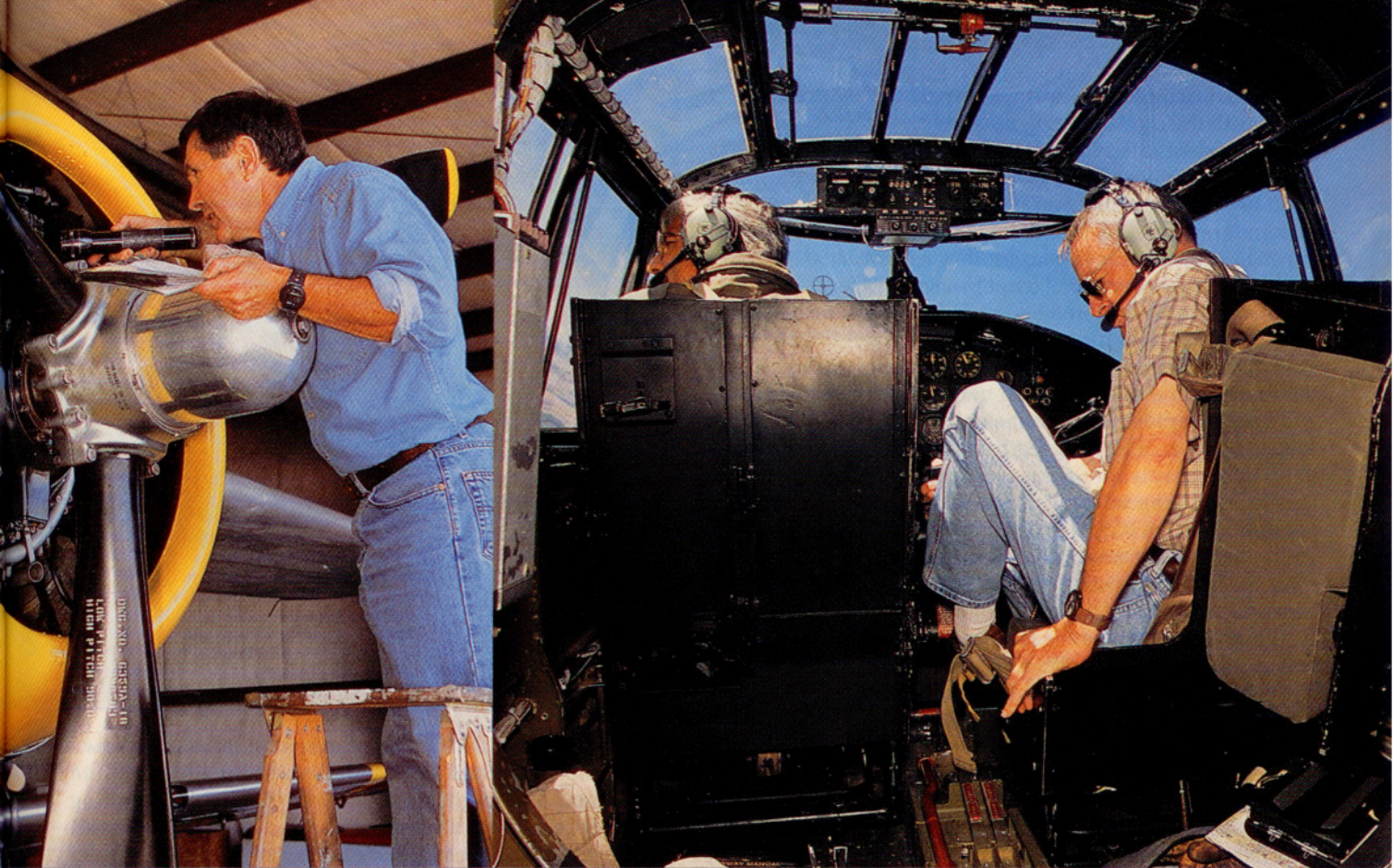
Cartwright and Wright are discussing where to park their 53-foot-long attraction. Once the engines are stopped a crowd quickly gathers, and I take my time descending the ladder through the belly hatch, hoping to be identified as part of the crew. Jeff Wright, having flown another vintage aircraft to the show, is there to greet us.

Roger Miller songs pour from the public address system, interspaced with gospel music. A vendor's stand is selling ice cream so fresh that its ingredients may have been in the cow only hours earlier. The Madras Elks offer meals near where a local model airplane club is putting radio-controlled models through loops and dives. A human-powered blimp resides in the hangar near the Elks' food stand, ready to give demonstrations whenever the air is calm. Someone hands me the local paper. The Madras Air Fair shares the front page of the weekly *Madras Pioneer* with stories about abandoned puppies found in a dumpster and the construction of a nearly completed Safeway. It is quite possible that our bomber is the biggest news in town.

Back at the bomber, a circle of the curious becomes two deep, then three. A little girl looks up at the left engine, mouth agape, then at the other, and says, "Look Daddy, it has two moons." Her last name is Wright, but the Madras resident is no relation to all the other Wrights we have brought along today.

Super Rabbit performs

Tonight Cartwright and Bert Wright will perform once, making flybys and, if the pyro man on the ground gets it right, simulated bombing runs. They must wait until a skydiving act called



The wingspan is 67 feet, nearly equaling the 75-foot runway width.

"Fireman Bob's First Jump" is completed. An actual local firefighter has agreed to a tandem jump with an instructor.

The timing of the bomb run with the special effects on the ground is a little off, but the crowd doesn't seem to mind. I am along on the run, but with assigned crew duties as required by regulations. Still, there is time during the flight to crawl down a tunnel from the crew compartment into the bubble canopy nose where a Norden bombsight resides. As we approach the runway, I call over the intercom, "I have the airplane. I'm starting my run." I am encouraged to give the enemy heck, or something stronger.

Later a formation flight is made so that AOPA Pilot photographer Mike Fizer can take the air-to-air photos for this article. Jeff Wright is at the controls now, and his join-up with the photo aircraft is as smooth as a second hand as it reaches the 12 o'clock position.

The next day the hare proves its speed during another performance as it races two jet-powered dragsters on the runway below. Thanks to a late start by the flagman directing the dragsters, the slower bomber is able to win the race. I am along again as required crew. Duties include removing the pilot escape hatch as we taxi in front of the crowd to our parking spot, waving an American flag. It is August 2001. In 17 days, a national crisis will erupt with tragic results that will change life in the United States, yet this crowd's patriotism needs no prompting by disaster. I easily hear the cheering for the flag, even while standing with my

Bert Wright (above center) takes meticulous care of the B-25. The author tries to move around in the cockpit (above right).

head out of the cockpit close to the throaty bass of all 28 cylinders of our two engines.

After each flight, Wright is wiping the airplane down, looking for any unusual leaks or loose parts. It is as though he never stops preflighting.

After another bomb-run performance, it's time to barnstorm. Several spectators have made \$300 donations each to see history in action and ride in a B-25. They'll see the flimsy protection from enemy bullets that young crewmembers had during World War II. If physically fit, they'll be able to transit a narrow passageway above the bomb bay that leads from the tail- and waist-gunner positions to the cockpit. And there they will be able to crawl through the claustrophobic floor tunnel down the lower left side of the aircraft to the nose. I stay on the ground until they return, as does the 12-year-old daughter of one of the crew, Miranda Polston. If there had been room, it would have been her first airplane ride.

One rider emerges from the bomber after the flight and says only one word: "Ghosts." He had imagined the crew in war, he explains, and could nearly see the history in action— young crewmen in battle.

And now, to land it

While I'm sorry to see the airshow end, its closing means I am that much closer to landing a B-25. Again, Cartwright and Bert Wright handle the takeoff chores. The pilot handbook makes it clear that takeoffs require the full attention of highly trained pilots. It suggests "holding the airplane down after takeoff in order to reach single-engine control speeds as soon as possible" and retracting the landing gear "as soon as the airplane is defi-

nately airborne." Minimum control speed with the right engine inoperative is 115 kt, while it is 126 kt with the left engine inop. Without those speeds, there won't be enough airflow over the rudder to counteract the yaw from the operating engine. (Loaded to its maximum weight of 33,500 pounds, the bomber takes nearly 5,000 feet to clear a 50-foot obstacle.)

Once airborne and well before reaching Mount Jefferson west of the Madras airport, I am again given the copilot's seat. Young Polston is in the waist-gunner position: *This* is her first airplane ride. I had told her prior to takeoff to blame any flying she did not like on me.

Once past the more rugged portions of the Cascades, and descending gently for Salem, Cartwright has me maneuver the aircraft, doing steep turns and slow flight. My reaction is the same as when Wright learned to fly it. "What was surprising to me," Wright said, "was the low stall speed of about 70 mph. Stall characteristics are so stable. It doesn't want to fall over on a wing, and it has a real high nose attitude."

All a B-25 wants to do is lumber straight and level, a perfect trait for a bomber. Turns are done by the grunt-and-twist-the-yoke method, and the slumbering bomber seems to answer, "Oh, all right, I'll turn if I must." It is heavy on the elevators, as well.

The 12-year-old in back finds the turns and maneuvers a little more exciting than she had expected, but otherwise she is enjoying seeing that the people on the ground really *do* look like ants. She also learns about air pressure, and I level briefly when an adult traveling with her requests more time to clear the child's ears. I notice what appears to be a quick

For a \$300 donation, spectators can take a ride in the B-25.



conference between the two pilots as they evaluate how I have done so far, and whether they want me to continue with a landing. Wright has been watching while standing behind my seat. I get the nod.

Polston, now with equalized ears, is watching out the open waist-gunner position waiting for the gear to come down as I join downwind for Runway 31 at Salem McNary Field.



Cartwright lowers the gear and handles the engine controls. All I have to do is drive.

Here we go

How appropriate: A scared rabbit (me) landing a *Super Rabbit*. Coming down final approach I am thinking, "This isn't a good idea." The runway seems so narrow, and my bomber seems so

big. More than 9,800 B-25s were built, yet only 24 remain flying. Let's not make it 23. The centerline is going to be really important, I am thinking, even though the runway is twice as wide as the one at Madras. Cartwright manages the power so that the airspeed is correct: "130 [mph]," he calls.

In the flare now: back, back, back faster on the yoke. Remember the bucking stallion image from previous landings. Cartwright encourages me to pull harder—more nose-up attitude. The cockpit should be about 20 feet in the air at touch-down. At 15 feet we thump firmly to the runway—not that bad, but firm enough to draw the attention of Polston. (Most of my landings are better than that, Miranda.)

Once down on the mains, the nosewheel properly high, Wright offers a congratulatory slap on the shoulder. No greaser, but all the parts are still there.

Taxiing a B-25 is much more difficult than flying it. Steering is accomplished by differential braking, and the brakes are powerful. Push just a little and the airplane tracks in the proper direction. Push a lot, and not only do you swerve, you can rip the recapped tread off the tire. Cartwright seems very interested in how I taxi. Cook opens a hatch in the nose and stands half out of the airplane, taking a picture of my intense concentration. One wrong jab of the brakes, and he could go off balance.

Pulling into a parking spot, I nearly exceed the turning allowance for the nosewheel, and Cartwright suggests we call it a day; let the lineman tow it the remaining few feet. After all, the bomber has another mission next weekend, dropping a heavy load of history on an appreciative audience. Although expensive to operate, it can't afford to stay in the hangar. **ACPA**

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