



Like a scene from a World War II airfield, these newly renovated and reconditioned B-26 bombers stand in a row at the Medford municipal airport. All military equipment and armaments have been removed and 500-gallon borate tanks installed. These planes must be kept ready to get into the air only minutes after being called into action by U. S. Forest Service Dispatcher Doug Finch.



Bill Rosenbaum, left, and his chief mechanic, Tim Keffer, go over plans for the installation of four 500-gallon borate tanks in this partially reconditioned PB4Y2. The four-engine aircraft is the only plane yet to be completed, but Rosenbaum said he expects it to be finished in plenty of time for this year's fire season.

Bombers Converted To Keep State Green

By GEORGE H. BELL
Mail Tribune Staff Writer

Mechanics of Rosenbalm Aviation, Inc., have nearly completed work on the last of eight World War II bombers designed to convert them into borate tankers for use in fighting area forest fires this summer.

The bombers were purchased from a private individual in California late last fall, and were flown to the Medford municipal airport. Included in the purchase were five B-26's, two PB4Y2's, and a Lockheed PV-2, all surplus aircraft which still contained military fittings and equipment from their war service.

Conversion work was started by Rosenbalm's four mechanics under the direction of chief mechanic Tim Keffer, at the end of the fire season in October, and about five to six weeks was necessary to transform each plane from a weapon of war into a weapon for fighting forest fires.

Planes Renovated

The planes were renovated inside and out. New "skin" had to be applied in several instances, the military equipment had to be removed, and bubbles and machine gun turrets taken off and sealed over.

Since several of the planes hadn't flown in years, it was necessary to go completely through the engines, liberally replacing worn parts, and to install new brakes, wheels, interior wiring and tires.

Most of the spare parts can still be obtained through government surplus, Rosenbalm said, so the cost of replacement was reasonably low. However, the supply is exhaustible, and when it runs out, costs for parts are expected to soar as much as 50 per cent, he said.

Two 500-Gallon Tanks

Two huge tanks, each capable of holding 500 gallons of the fire-smothering borate solution, were installed in the twin-engine B-26's and the PV-2.

The larger, four-engine PB4Y2's were fitted with four of the 500-gallon tanks, making them the most formidable instruments in the forest service's arsenal of weapons against the fire-enemy.

Following completion of the renovation work on one of the PB4Y2's (the other planes have already been finished), an official from the Federal Aeronautics Agency must inspect the planes to see that they conform with government standards and specifications. If the planes are found airworthy in all respects, the official will issue a license which will permit the aircraft to operate.

Planes Re-Examined

At stated intervals thereafter, the planes will be re-examined to insure that they continue to meet the FAA's standards.

This kind of conversion work is not new to Rosenbalm and his crew. They have, during the past few years, converted some

12 or 13 tankers for use by other borate operators in the region.

These newly-converted planes bring Rosenbalm's total complement to 10 aircraft, making his the largest operation of its kind in the area, and one of the largest on the Pacific coast. Some 11 pilots will be maintained on his staff this summer during the fire season, ready to fly the planes wherever the U. S. forest service directs.

Rosenbalm's planes and equipment are leased to the U. S. forest service, and overall control of their operation during the fire season is directed by Dispatcher Doug Finch, whose offices and command post during fire operations are located in the Medford post office.

Forest Service Has Charge

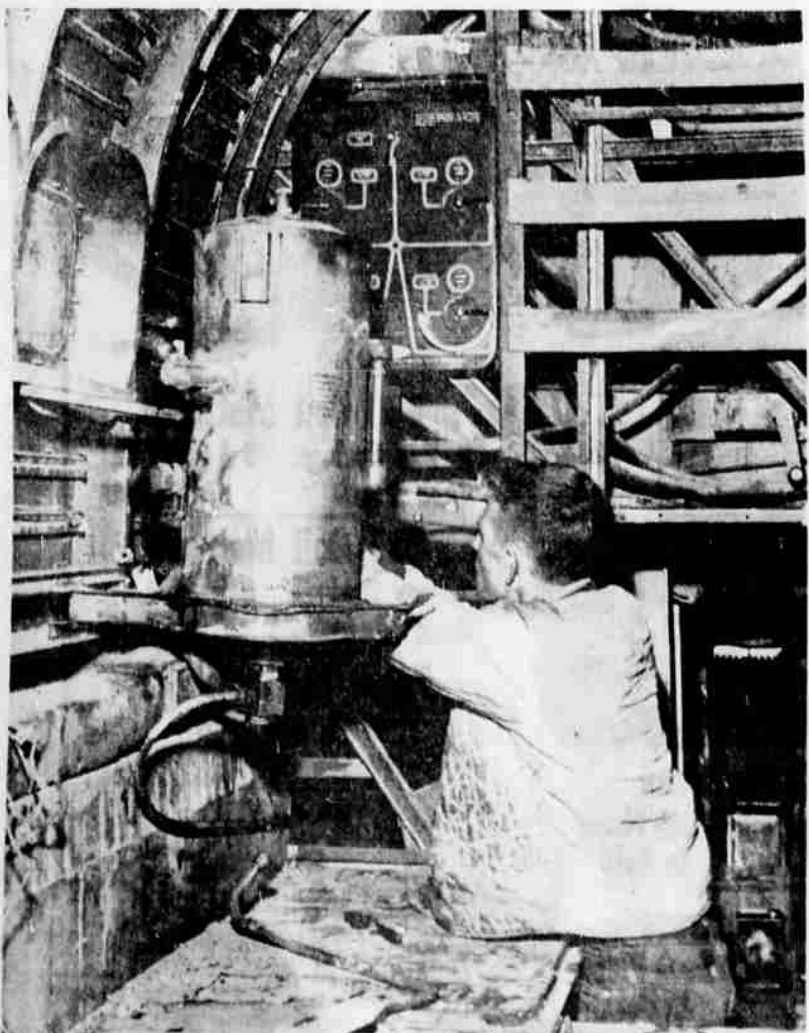
"When the fire season starts," Rosenbalm said, "I just take orders. The forest service has complete charge."

Last year, Rosenbalm's planes operated as far away from Medford as Wenatchee, Wash., and the forests of Idaho. The planes are dispatched to other areas in the region as the need occurs.

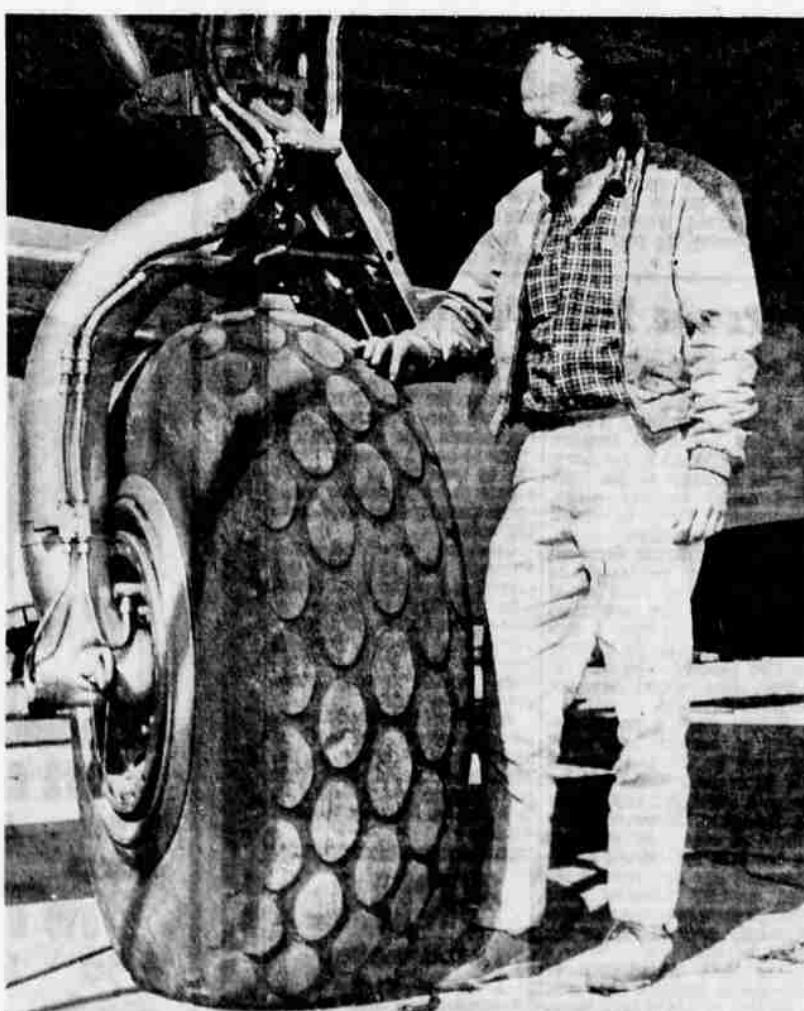
But it is comforting to know that the home base of the planes is the Medford municipal airport, from where, on minutes' notice, they can fly to any fire in the area with their borate loads, and with calm dispatch take effective action — to keep southwest Oregon green.



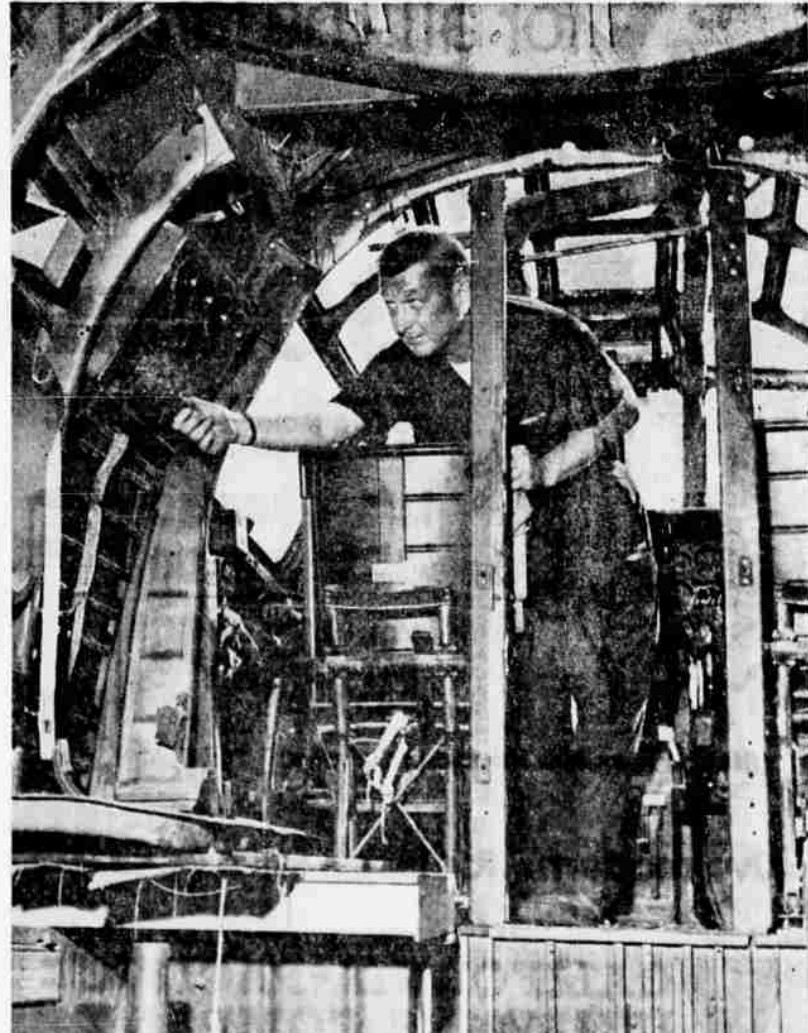
Seen here making tune-up adjustments to one of the PB4Y2's four engines, is Rosenbalm Aviation's chief mechanic, Tim Keffer. This and the other planes will have to meet the rigid standards of the Federal Aeronautics Agency. They will be thoroughly examined by an FAA inspector before an operating license will be issued.



In the interior of the PB4Y2, the only plane on which the renovation work is not yet complete, Ed Canoose, pilot and mechanic for Rosenbalm Aviation, makes repairs to some hydraulic fittings. Several of the World War II bombers had not been flown or used for years, and were in need of extensive repairs.



Bill Rosenbalm, owner of Rosenbalm Aviation Inc., stands under the wing of the huge PB4Y2 and inspects the craft's worn tire. It will have to be replaced. Fortunately, Rosenbalm says, war surplus tires are still available. A tire can be purchased from surplus supplies for about \$80, but the price for a new tire of this size is about \$300.



W. C. (Bud) Purdin, a familiar figure at the municipal airport, stands in the cockpit of the PB4Y2 and checks out the plane's generator control panel. In some instances, Bill Rosenbalm said, extensive rewiring had to be done in the renovated bombers.