

How Curious – Searcy Field

How come a Hollywood stunt pilot acquired 475 Oklahoma airplanes in a day?

MUSIC: How Curious theme

Rachel Hopkin Script

Hi. Welcome to KGOU's How Curious. I'm Rachel Hopkin.

FX

Sound of old-fashioned plane.

Rachel Hopkin Script

At the start of a 1954 short film titled Movie Stunt Pilot, a small Stearman biplane is flying what seems to be perilously low. Incredibly, it then breezes through the huge doors of a hangar, then shoots safely out the other side, all watched on by a film crew.

The crew's director picks up a radio and speaks to the man in the plane.

FILM SOUNDTRACK

Man's voice – Paul?

Paul Mantz – Anything wrong?

Man's voice – Perfect. Sensational.

The happy director is Otto Lang and the astonishing pilot is named Paul Mantz. According to the tagline of a biography written about Mantz, he was a “showman, daredevil, hero, rogue” who “blazed a legend in the skies.” And although he was born and lived most of his life in California, he's part of a unique chapter of Oklahoma history too.

SEGUE

Ted Huetter

Paul Mantz is one of those fascinating figures that really is a product of the 20th century.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I spoke with Ted Huetter from Seattle's Museum of Flight via Zoom.

Ted Huetter

He was just an extremely skilled aerobatic pilot. And that was his great skill in starting out in Hollywood pictures is that in the 1920s and 1930s, there were an enormous amount of aviation related feature films. It's hard to even imagine today because aviation is just, it's part of everybody's life and it's hard to think of an event in aviation that would really get the headlines, except a disaster. But at that period, it was big news virtually all the time. It was all about setting speed records, setting altitude records, it was about air racing, it was about stunt flying, it was about ... anything to do with aviation was part of American culture at that time, so the people

that excelled in it were famous. In Paul Mantz's case, he became part of the Hollywood celebrity set.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I asked Ted what kind of aviation stunts we might be talking about.

Ted Huetter

The studios would pay pilots pretty good money to do incredible stunts. They usually entailed crashes of some kind, flying into a building, flying under bridges or through buildings, jumping out of airplanes, airplanes spinning into the ground with the pilot having to bail out at a certain altitude so he wouldn't go in with it.

SEGUE

Words of Paul Mantz read by actor

People think of me as a stunt pilot.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The words of Paul Mantz here are read by an actor.

Words of Paul Mantz read by actor

I'm supposed to be a devil-may-care aviator in helmet and goggles, white scarf whipping back, roaring under bridges, flying through open hangars ... deliberately crashing planes into splinters ... driving through narrow canyons in search of more and more thrills. I've done all that, sure. But I am not a stunt pilot. I'm a precision flier.

Rachel Hopkin Script

So he thought of himself as a precision flier rather than a stunt pilot. As he grew in experience, he also began flight scenes and became very good at it. In addition, he had marked entrepreneurial flare. He set up a business which offered aircraft, pilots, standard rates, and insurance – all in one go - to Hollywood studios.

Ted Huetter

He became known as the person to go to when you wanted aerial scenes in your picture, because they knew that he was safe and they knew that they could get the best shot. So he created a business that endured for decades.

Rachel Hopkin Script

And the business was flexible enough to adapt when the movie world fell on lean times.

Ted Huetter

He still had the planes to stay in business, and they were doing crop dusting, air taxi service. They also did mercy flights, air ambulance flights. There's one incredible story where some Navy diver had the bends coming from a dive. They picked up the diver and had to fly him to a decompression chamber. But the thing is, if you're suffering from decompression, the last thing you want to do is fly in an airplane and go even higher. So he is literally skimming the surface of

the water for a couple of hundred miles up the California coast to transport him as fast as possible but at almost sea level.

Rachel Hopkin Script

So on the one hand we have Paul Mantz – precision pilot extraordinaire and entrepreneur– and on the other, we have a specific location in Oklahoma.

FX – Walking towards office building.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I'm at Stillwater Regional Airport with aviator and scholar Tom Wikle. Tom has written about Paul Mantz. He explained how it comes down to a moment in history back in 1945 when this place was still known as Searcy Field.

Tom Wikle

As the war was drawing down, the US government had a problem on its hands in terms of disposing of former military aircraft, so they had thousands. Some of them they gave away, some they gave to other countries, some were used as trainers. But a bigger problem were the bombers and the fighters, because they were really military aircraft, they were combat aircraft. And so many of those aircraft were stored in ... there were 8 fields around the country. Oklahoma actually had three – one in Clinton Sherman, one in Altus, and then one in Stillwater, which was Searcy Field.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The government decided that they should make a special case of Searcy Field and the planes stored there, compared with the other seven sites.

Tom Wikle

At some of the other fields, they – meaning the government – broke up the airplanes. They would slice them up and then they would melt the aluminum, recycle the plexiglass, and other aircraft parts. But in Stillwater they decided to try an experiment – they hadn't really done this before – they decided to make the aircraft available for purchase by a corporation or a private individual. So this was a first of its kind ... they called it a field sale of these surplus aircraft – so here in Stillwater, there were 475 combat aircraft of all types stored on the field.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The government had paid well over \$100 million for the planes.

Tom Wikle

They made the purchases by competitive bidding, and they did receive several bids for the aircraft at Searcy, and the winning bid was around \$55,000, and in fact it was only a few hundred dollars more than the second placed bid. And the man who bought the planes ...

Rachel Hopkin Script

... was, of course, Paul Mantz, as I'm sure you've guessed.

Tom Wikle

Mantz tried to convince the movie studios that they should make the purchase. I mean, I don't think he was really intending to buy them himself, but when they didn't, that's when he acted and made the purchase himself.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Apparently, Mantz was convinced that there would be a slew of films about the war – and they'd be needing to feature appropriate aircraft scenes. But even Mantz would have been hard pushed to make use of 475 planes. Still, he had plans.

Tom Wikle

He kept 12 of them, and he sold the remaining aircraft that included himself and two businessmen from Dallas, and this scrap group that he put together that purchased the aircraft basically scrapped all the aircraft. They cut up all the airframes, they disassembled the instruments, they removed engines, they removed plexiglass, and they sold all of this material as scrap for cash. They got about \$160,000 for the aluminum, about \$100,000 for the plexiglass, and – what's interesting – they sold oxygen regulators that they removed from the aircraft back to the army air forces for \$75 each. I guess the army air forces never thought about the fact that there were some valuable things associated with the aircraft. And Mantz actually made a claim that he made his money back just on the aviation fuel that was still in the wings of the aircraft.

SEGUE

Tim Fitzgerald

Let's start on this, this is actually the tail wheel of a P40 that was taken apart here.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Tim Fitzgerald is now a Flight Line Supervisor at Stillwater Regional Airport, but he grew up near the runway here and has been collecting parts of those old aeroplanes since he was a kid.

Tim Fitzgerald

It says Curtis Aeroplane. This is the serial number. This is the part number. I don't know if it has a date on it. I'm looking at it upside down. That's actually a tailwheel for a P40 Warhawk or single engine fighter. That was before the P51. And you can take all the pictures you want.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I did take pictures as Tim showed me numerous artefacts which were discarded in the scrapping process and you can see some of them at this episode's webpage, just search for KGOU and How Curious.

But what of the 12 planes that Mantz kept? Ted Huetter told me that four of them became his favorites.

Ted Huetter

Three of them were P51 fighters and one was a B25 bomber. So the P51s, he used to fly in air races, and he had one of them modified with long range fuel tanks in the wings, which was totally new for a P51. It was a recipe for success, for the Bendix Air Races.

Rachel Hopkin Script

These were prestigious transcontinental speed competitions which ran from the 30s to the 60s.

Ted Huetter

He won three of them in a row after World War II. He was the only person who ever did something like that.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Mantz got even more creative with that B25 according to Tom Wikle.

Tom Wikle

He had it modified by putting in a bathroom. He had a swivel chair put in behind where the bombardier sat. And he used it for filming and he would sit in the swivel chair and direct the filming from the chair. And this plane was called Smasher named for his dad, who was a heavy drinker. And what's interesting is that Mantz flew Smasher over Stillwater and all the aircraft that had been stored here in 1946 for the 1947 Academy Award winning movie, *The Best Years of Our Lives*. And there's a scene where there are three former service members ... there's a guy from the navy, a guy from the marine corps, and an army guy and they're sitting in the nose, and they flew over all the aircraft.

Rachel Hopkin Script

I found the film on YouTube and watched the scene in question.

FILM EXCERPT

Rachel Hopkin Script

It's quite amazing to see – there are planes everywhere, laid out all higgledy-piggledy. By the way, I asked Tom but he told me he thought the actual planes at Searcy Field were all pretty well used, not new, as one of the characters in the film comments.

Smasher was used in numerous movies after that, right up to *Catch 22* in 1970.

But by then, Paul Mantz had been dead for five years. He was tragically killed in an accident whilst flying a plane – not one of the ones from Searcy Field – during the making of a James Stewart picture called *The Flight of the Phoenix*.

I asked Tom Wikle if any of the Searcy Field planes were still around today.

Tom Wikle

Yes. The two P51s that were used in the Bendix Air Races – one of them was renamed – it was Blaze of Glory, it was renamed Excalibur 3. It actually hangs at the Smithsonian Institute. The other P51 is at a museum in Florida.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Tom mentioned one or two other planes held by private individuals or corporations.

Tom Wikle

But what was really remarkable to me, I had no idea that one of the B24 bombers that Mantz purchased and flew for quite a time is now in the Commemorative Air Force and it's called Diamond Lil'.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The Commemorative Air Force is a non-profit that preserves and flies old military aircraft.

Thanks to Tom Wikle and all the contributors to this episode, including reader James Briggs.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

As ever, if you have an idea for a future episode, we'd love to hear about it so please drop us a line at curious@kgou.org.