

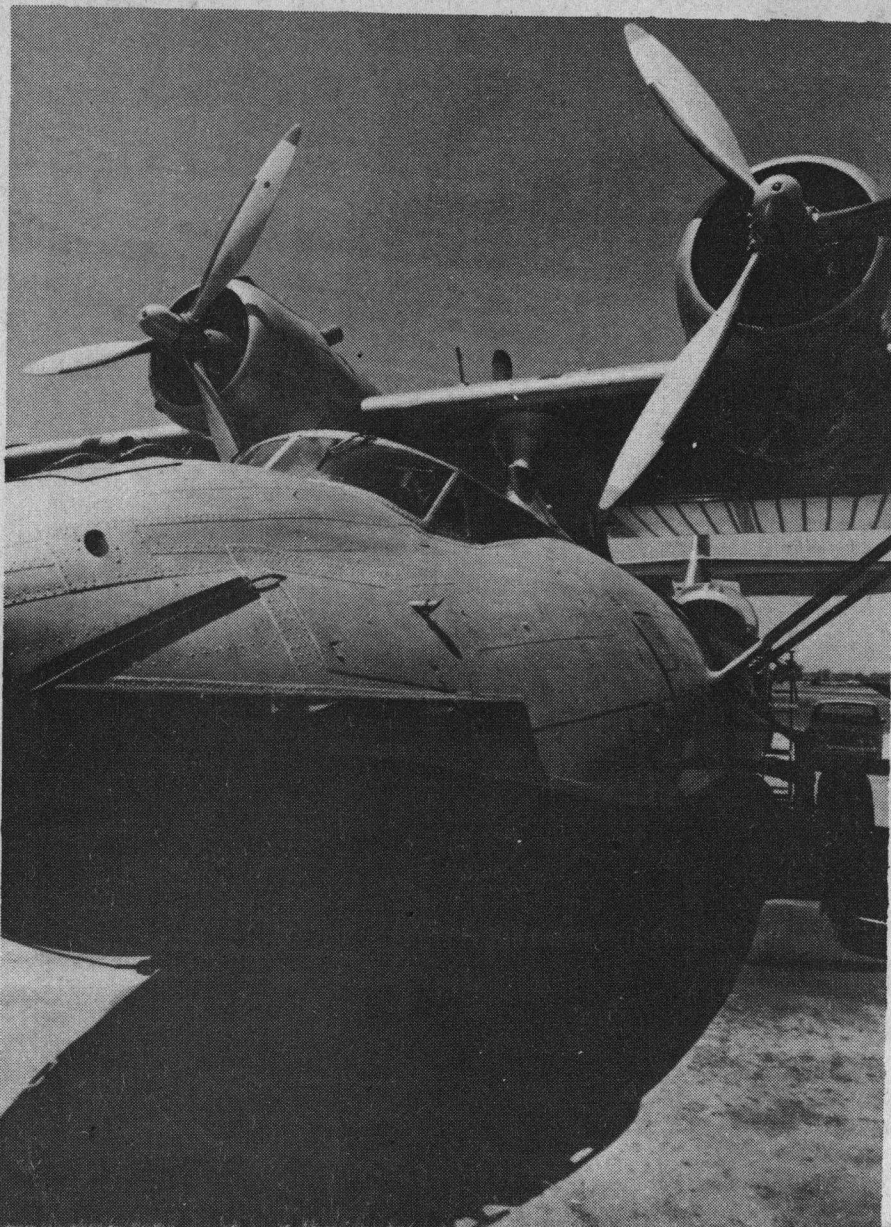
Flier assembles own fleet of WWII vintage warplanes

By BILL AKERS

If by some miracle of reincarnation a World War II soldier found himself standing on the apron in front of the Larkin Aircraft hangar at Watsonville airport the other day, he would have been right at home.

Parked there were three airplanes — a P-51 Mustang, a PBY Catalina and an F4U Corsair — all of which were among that war's most famous fighting aircraft.

But if the soldier seemed confused, there would have been good reason for it. The PBY — a huge amphibious plane, sat duck-like and shining in the sun, stripped of all national markings. The F4U bore the colors of the French Naval Air Force and the Mustang was sporting a paint job that would have gladdened the heart of a Hollywood interior decorator.



And should this phantom soldier have wandered inside the hangar he would have found more surprises, for parked there were a little biplane, a Pitt Special, seemingly straight out of the Tailspin Tommy days of the 1930s; and a SkyLark, an airplane that never existed until Larkin designed and built one.

But while the soldier is fictitious, the airplanes parked there are real. The three warplanes are among the last of their kind, relics of an era when they flew the world's skies by the tens of thousands.

The Pitt Special was brand new, the third of these exquisite little aerobatic airplanes that Larkin has built.

The SkyLark is to be the culmination of a dream Larkin has had since he was 15 years old — a lightweight, easy-to-fly, simple-to-

build airplane that almost anyone can afford to own. This is the prototype of a plane he hopes soon to market in kit form.

Taken as a group, this was about as unlikely an air fleet as you'll find anywhere, but unusual airplanes aren't an unusual sight at Larkin's hangar. A lot of them have come and gone — P-51s, P-47s, P-38s, B-25s, and even a rare B-18, a plane that not many people knew existed and only aging airplane buffs can remember. Larkin found this one abandoned in an airplane graveyard in Mexico.

Around Larkin's hangar you get the feeling of what flying was all about a quarter-century or more ago, before jet engines and computers took all the romance out of it. With these old planes around there is enough residual nostalgia about that you expect Pat O'Brien and Jimmy Cagney to come around a corner ragging at each other, followed by a chuckling Frank McHugh in coveralls and a greasy rag hanging out of his back pocket. (That allusion will make sense only to those old enough to remember all the flying movies this trio appeared in.)

And in Larkin's obvious affection for these old planes, you see that the adventure hasn't gone out of the business for him. A pilot since 1941, he has flown a lot of kinds of planes under a lot of conditions. (He also patented the Plantronics lightweight headset and was the founder and one-time president of the company that manufactures them.)

He and one of his employees — Pete Bell, a 20-year-old pilot who has that same, undefinable "pilot" look about him that Larkin has — flew the PBY and another just like it back from Denmark last year.

Larkin purchased them from the Danish Air Force, sight unseen. When he went over to pick them up he found them partially disassembled in the revetments where they had been sitting out in the open for the previous two years.

He and Bell reassembled the planes and then flew them back in two journeys that would have stirred the souls of Wiley Post, Roscoe Turner, Clarence Chamberlain or any of the other seat-of-your-pants flyers of the early days.

One of the pair of PBYs was sold to something called the Confederate Air Force museum in Texas. The late William Penn Patrick bought the other one for his own aircraft museum. Larkin is now negotiating with the estate to get it back.

The P-51 sitting on the apron once belonged to Larkin. It now belongs to a man in San Jose who "uses it for transportation," Larkin said. It was in for a retouch on its glamorous paint job. Whether in Air Corps olive drab or Hollywood red, white and blue, the Mustang is one of the most beautiful aircraft ever built.

And so was the one sitting next to it, the



Unspoiled beauty of Lake Mitchell in British Columbia made perfect overnight stop.

had in World War II, and certainly the best in the Naval air corps. Marine Col. Gregory "Pappy" Boyington and his Black Sheep were the scourge of Pacific skies in their Corsairs. Boyington shot down 28 enemy planes and another Marine air ace, Maj. Joe Foss, shot down 26. So good were these planes that the kill-to-loss ratio for Corsairs during World War II was 11 to one.

A relative late-comer to the war, the Vought F4U Corsair prototype first flew in 1940. The first production planes were delivered to the Navy in 1942 and the plane saw its first combat at Bougainville in February, 1943.

It is a big plane, with its 40-foot wingspan and weighing 14,000 pounds. It was among the first of the propeller-driven planes to hit the 400 miles an hour mark. Later versions had a ceiling of 44,000 feet and an effective range of 1,000 miles.

The plane again saw action in Korea where it was used for tactical support for the ground troops.

After the war they were built for carrier service in the French Navy which used them until the early 1960s. Production stopped in 1952 after 12,571 of all types had been built.

The plane that came to Larkin's was one of those built for the French Navy. It is owned by Jack Flaherty of Monterey, a man who buys and restores old military classics. He also owns a P-38 that Larkin once owned.

US, Larkin said, some in use as borate bombers in forest fire work. A man in Florida recently acquired one and said he'll fly around the world in it.

Denmark was using them for air rescue work in the fjords and around the North Sea, and for air support to isolated snowbound villages.

Larkin bought the last two last year after months of dickering. He said he had never seen the inside of a PBY until he went to Varloese, near Copenhagen, to pick up his new acquisitions.

"They were in a pretty sad looking state," he recalls. "The engines had been taken off, and the grass was growing up around them in the revetments."

For some reason, the PBY wing was designed so that the trailing half of it was covered with fabric instead of an aluminum skin. After two years out in the weather, this fabric was badly deteriorated. "A bird sitting on it would have fallen through," he laughed.

Borrowing a hangar from the Danes, Larkin, Bell and friend, Vic Holloway, spent the next three weeks patching the fabric, mounting the engines and generally making them flyable again.

In July they took off for the first of the two flights to bring them back to Watsonville. It was the first time Larkin or Bell had flown one of them, but after getting the feel of it as

The second flight, a month later, took 10 days and 61 flying hours. Larkin, Bell and Larkin's son, Kevin, made this trip, taking their time coming home, hopping from lake to lake across Canada.

They made most of the trip home flying at 300 feet and at an indicated air speed of 110 knots. "You just saw the whole world", an enthusiastic Larkin declared. "You could watch the same pine tree going by for 15 minutes."

For navigation Larkin had a 30-year-old radio direction finder on board. This was for the hop across the Atlantic.

The first leg of the flights took them from Denmark to Prestwick, Scotland. On the second flight, when they landed at Prestwick they found a good portion of the wing fabric had blown off. Unable to find fabric there, they patched up the holes with mending tape and took off for the North Atlantic crossing to Iceland.

On this trip the RDF went out "as soon as we got in the air." Using jumper cables from the main batteries to power, "we fired up the RDF every hour or so to get a heading. We just felt our way," Larkin said, but they found Iceland "without any trouble."

From Iceland to Greenland, a two-hour flight by jet, they flew for eight hours through a storm. They landed at BW-1, a famous airstrip during World War II, down

It took two 1,200 HP engines to lift PBV off water.



Corsair was top Navy fighter in World War II.

Corsair, with its inverted gull wings. It is called by some the best fighter plane the US

It came in with its French Navy paint job pretty much in tatters. It left resplendent in a proud new set of US Navy blues, all of its former glory restored. It is truly an aeronautical work of art. (It is just sad that it and the P-51 were built for killing instead of for their beauty.)

As he does with most of these old planes, Larkin fell in love with the two PBVs. While flying them, Larkin said, "you feel just like Capt. Nemo in the Nautilus. You can roam around inside them..... it's just marvelous."

Various versions of the PBV were a mainstay in the Navy's air arm from 1936 through World War II. Used for anti-submarine patrol, rescue and other special over-water missions, the PBV was a familiar sight in the sky wherever the US Navy went. During the war Russia, Canada and England manufactured their own versions of it.

The PBV is a big airplane, with a 104-foot wingspan; it is 63 feet long, 20 feet high and tips the scales at 35,000 pounds. It didn't break any speed records; some of the later versions were able to fly 179 mph and up to a 14,700-foot ceiling. Their range was roughly 1,600 miles.

After building about 4,500 of them, Consolidated Aircraft shut down its production line in San Diego in 1944. A few more were built at other locations for another couple of years after that.

The Navy stopped using them after World War II for the most part. The Coast Guard picked up from there, using them for rescue work, but stopped that 20 years ago.

Now there are a half-dozen left around the

it rolled down the runway, recalled that it "flew like a dream."

The first flight home took 12 days and 53 flying hours.



The 'office' in the PBV — a clutter of instruments.

which Larkin said is located 48 miles up a blind fjord in an area "with the worst weather in the world."

"You have only one chance to get in there," he said. "If you miss it the first time, you just keep going. There's no going around for a second try."

At Greenland they found another "monstrous chunk" of fabric had blown off in the storm. To repair it they had to build a tent around the wing and put a stove inside the tent to get it warm enough to work the fabric and "dope." All this while a snowstorm raged outside.

"By the time we got to Goose Bay, Labrador, we felt we were home," Larkin said. "From then on we just meandered across Canada."

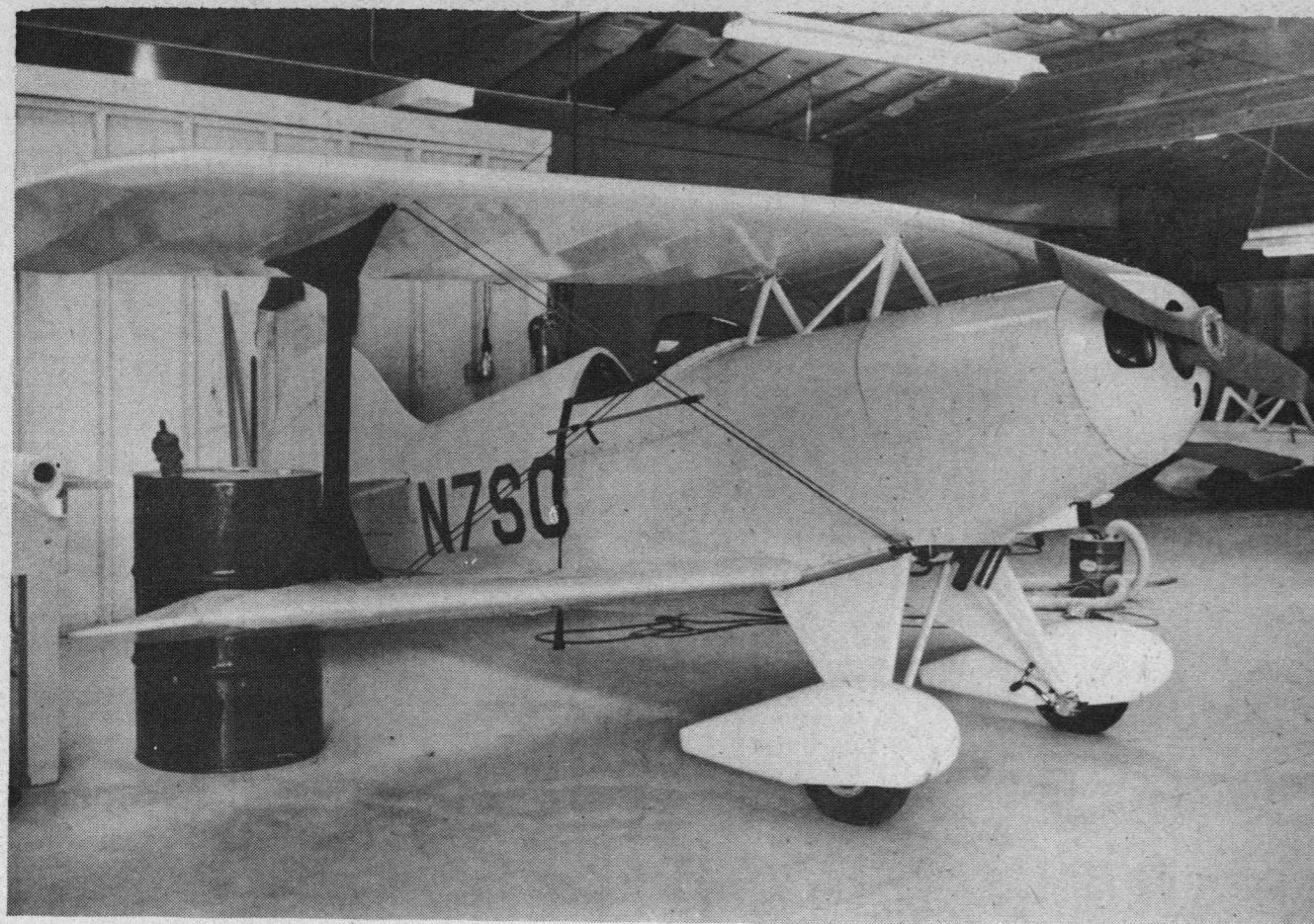
It was the kind of flying Larkin apparently likes. "I would like to make that trip once a month," he said.

Right now his attention is concentrated on the SkyLark, a low-cost, ultra light amphibian that he calls a "flying VW." It is, in fact, powered by a VW engine. Costing about the same as a family auto, Larkin sees the day when anyone can own and fly one.

When perfected, the two-seater land and seaplane will be marketed in kit form for the do-it-yourself flying fraternity, Larkin says, and perhaps eventually sold in completed form.

But while he is perfecting that airplane, he has another idea in the back of his mind. He heard about an old B-17 Flying Fortress that is still being used down in South America as a cargo ship.

"I may go down there and see if I can find it," he declared.



This is the third Pitt Special built by Larkin.



Larkin hopes SkyLark will become a flying VW.