

# Return of the AERONEER

UNIQUE DESIGN FROM THE  
LATE 1930s IS SLATED FOR  
RESTORATION

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

During the late 1930s, America was beginning to slowly feel its way out of the Great Depression. When it came to aviation, this meant that many new designs were also being made available to the military, airlines, and private sectors. These were sleek all-metal machines that were replacing the previous generation of fabric-covered biplanes. During the mid 1930s, aeronautics had taken a huge leap forward and the economic situation meant that these aircraft were finding suitable markets.

When it came to civil aviation, companies like Ryan were in the forefront with the sleek STA and the SCW coupe. Other manufacturers were also vying for increasing their market share and one of those companies was the Aero Engineering Corporation who had designed and built an all-

The Phillips Aeroneer is seen finished as the X-PT (but before having the wording "McMasters Special" added to the sides of the fuselage) during the filming of *Power Dive* at Metropolitan Airport in Van Nuys. In the background is the equally rare Cornelius LWI Freewing X13706.

metal two-seater named the Aeroneer 1-B. During the late 1930s, this aircraft attracted a huge amount of publicity. Today only the most hardened aviation enthusiasts recognize the name, but all that is about to change.

Aero Engineering had designed a cantilever low-wing that was built in five separate sections built around a single spar located at 30% chord. Ailerons were metal framed but fabric covered. The aircraft had split flaps with an area of 25-square-feet.

The sleek all-metal fuselage housed a cockpit for two sitting side-by-side with dual controls under a sliding canopy. The aircraft was initially fitted with a Menasco C-4 inverted four-cylinder engine although provisions were made for taking larger six-cylinder Menasco powerplants. The tail surfaces were conventional. The main landing gear was enclosed in handmade spats that gave the plane a rakish Art Deco look.

It is unclear when the plane first flew but it was flying at the end of 1936 with test pilot Albert C. Reid. Aero Engineering had planned a run of 15 aircraft but lack of financing caused a reorganization with James A. Phillips taking over (Phillips acquired several other aircraft types for possible production) and the company was moved to Hangar 2 at Metropolitan Airport in Van Nuys, California. However, another year of work went into the place before it was awarded Approved Type Certificate No. 693 on 31 October 1937 (oddly, the ATC was assigned in June 1938 but retroactively dated back eight-months and this could not have done marketing the type any good).

Now known as the Phillips Aeroneer 1-B, the type was displayed at numerous venues including airshows and air races. With the world marching closer to global war, perhaps the time for the Aeroneer had come and gone.

Hoping to sell aircraft, Phillips quickly reconfigured the Aeroneer into something he called the "X-PT." At

the time, just about every aviation company in America was attempting to sell training aircraft to the US government and Phillips was no exception. The plane was fitted with a more-powerful six-cylinder inverted Ranger and given a couple licks of paint, but it was basically the same aircraft.

However, the US military was not particularly favorable

Another view of the Aeroneer from *Power Dive*. By this point in time, the aircraft had been fitted with an inverted Ranger six-cylinder engine.



Aeroneer taxiing out from the Douglas factory at Clover Field, Santa Monica (note the B-18 Bolos in the background) during filming of *House Across the Bay*. Film sequences with the aircraft were shot by Alfred Hitchcock.

with side-by-side seating and the X-PT did not make the cut of the many trainers ordered by the government.

At the time, Metropolitan Airport, with its proximity to Hollywood, was a hotbed of filming and the Aeroneer appeared in a number of films including *House Across the Bay* (United Artists, 1940). (The scenes with the Aeroneer, as the Crane X-PT filmed at Clover Field in Santa Monica, were actually shot by Alfred Hitchcock.) Next up was *Power Dive* (Paramount, 1941) starring Richard Arlen who was featured in numerous aviation films of the time period. The plot involved numerous aerial escapades (some with the Aeroneer, but many with a strange little light aircraft called the Plxweave Greenleaf CT-6A). Our resident film expert James H. Farmer called the movie "good program entertainment taking full advantage of the [then] interest in aviation and national preparedness." The final film effort involving the Aeroneer (that we can find) is *Sky Raiders* (Universal, 1941), which is a twelve-part serial revolving around the aircraft factory Sky Raiders Incorporated that has created a new high-speed fighter (no

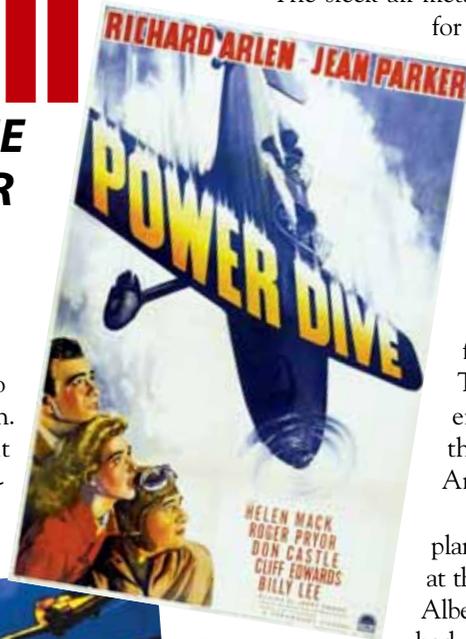


prizes for guessing the aircraft). The plot revolves around a Nazi agent attempting to steal the designs for the fighter and a new bombsight, the Boeing 314 Clipper, and other exciting high jinks. Some of the exterior scenes were shot at Metropolitan and Grand Central Air Terminal.

The history of the Aeroneer during the war is unclear but one reference notes it was purchased by MGM. At the time, studios were buying such aircraft for use in films as they were available at give-away prices since the government had banned private flying during the war.

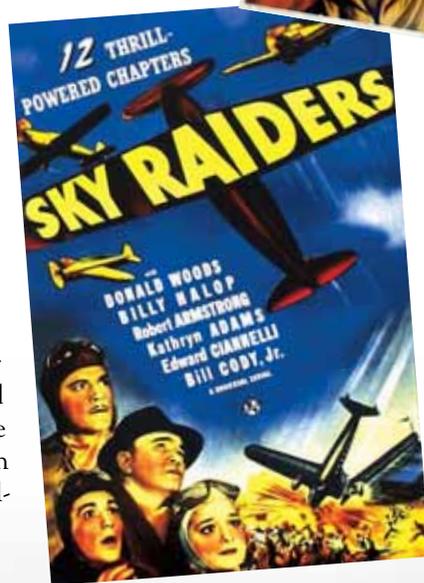
During the 1980s, the damaged but essentially complete Phillips Aeroneer was to be found in a shed at a small private airfield near Buckeye, Arizona. It was owned by Don Underwood (who had collected numerous other rare and interesting flying machines) and he intended to eventually

restore the plane to its former flying glory. That was not to be. In January 2018,



Poster from *Power Dive* with the aircraft being an artist's interpretation of the Greenleaf CT-6A.

The Aeroneer also appeared in the twelve-part serial *Sky Raiders*.



The Aeroneer shortly after arriving at L.D. Hughes' shop at Minter Field.

The aircraft still retains the Ranger engine with which it last flew.

Don's estate sold the Aeroneer to a new owner who had it transported by road to L.D. Hughes' restoration shop at Minter Field, Shafter, California. For many years, L.D. has been crew chief for the Unlimited Mustang *Strega* but is also well-known for his exacting restoration work. We will be reporting on the Aeroneer project in future issues. **AC**

