WE FLY WITH JACK ERICKSON'S RARE COLUMBIA-BUILT J2F-6 DUCK

THE DUCK FROM MADRAS

BY PHILIP MAKANNA/GHOSTS

The Erickson Aircraft Collection's J2F-6 Duck airborne near its home at Madras, Oregon. Doug Griffin was the pilot of the Duck while John Baldwin was the rear seat gunner. Jim Martinelli flew the Texan camera plane.

We are truly fortunate that one of World War Two's aviation workhorses has survived, albeit in small numbers. That aircraft is the Grumman/Columbia J2F-6 Duck. Over the years, we have covered several surviving Ducks, but the subject of this article is Jack Erickson's J2F-6. First, let's discuss the type and its history. The J2F-1 first went aloft on 2 April 1936 and had been created by Grumman as a utility amphibian for the US Navy. The plane was a development of the earlier and similar JF series. The J2F-1 was fitted with a Wright R-1820 Cyclone of 750-hp and some 29 aircraft would be built and delivered. The Duck would become Grumman's first production aircraft and the beginning of a long line of famous Naval airplanes.

Budgets were extremely tight during this time period due to decreased military spending and the devastating effects of the Great Depression but the Navy found the type so useful that funding was found for the J2F-2, and the entire run of 21 aircraft was delivered to the US Marine Corps. This variant had provisions for armament including two machine guns and underwing racks for light bombs. Power was slightly upgraded with a Cyclone capable of 790-hp. The J2F-2A was basically the same but had a few minor changes and nine were modified from -2s for use in the Neutrality Patrol over the Caribbean. These aircraft had two .30-cal machine guns in the rear cockpit and additional underwing racks for light bombs/depth charges.

Production moved ahead with the J2F-3 — these machines being contracted in January 1939. Twenty were built and some were utilized for Naval Attaches, Commandant of the US Naval Academy, and as "Admiral's Barges." This variant also had the 790-hp Wright R-1820-36 but all were delivered unarmed.

As war began to engulf the Far East and Europe, American aircraft orders greatly increased and 32 J2F-4s were built under contracts issued in September 1939 and these were basically the same as the -3. At this point, Grumman was being flooded with orders for Wildcats and other new combat aircraft including the Avenger. In July 1941, the final variant of the Grumman-built Duck, the J2F-5, began to appear. This version had more power in the form of a Wright R-1820-50 of 950-hp fitted under a much deeper cowl. The Bureau of Aeronautics contracted for 144 -5s and, besides the larger engine, these Ducks were a bit more warlike with underwing racks strengthened to hold 325-pound depth charges.

With Grumman overwhelmed by increasing combat aircraft orders, a decision was made to transfer future Duck production to the Columbia Aircraft Corporation. This company could date its roots back to December 1927 when it was created by Charles A. Levine and Giuseppe Bellanca as Columbia Air Liners Inc. Levine and his pilot, flying a Bellanca monoplane, had nearly beat Lindbergh across the Atlantic and the new company was created to build a variety of advanced aircraft along with record-breaking designs. However, they had opened at just the wrong time and the Great Depression engulfed the company.

By 1941, the business had become Columbia Aircraft Corporation located at Valley Stream, Long Island, New York, and was closely involved in supplying Grumman with aircraft components. So, it was logical that Columbia would be picked to continue production of the Grumman Duck. This variant was the J2F-6 and it would be not only the most combat-capable Duck but also the variant produced in the greatest numbers — some 330 built under license. It should be noted that Columbia quickly and efficiently set up the facilities to produce the aircraft.

The J2F-6 became a real "jack of all trades" for the US Navy and US Coast Guard. The type was incredibly versatile, rugged, easy to maintain and fly, and, with the more powerful radial, could get in and out of areas usually denied other amphibians. Although completely obsolete when compared to other combat aircraft, the Duck saw its share of action but really distinguished itself when it came to rescuing downed aviators and sailors that had abandoned their sinking vessels.

One would think that with the end of the war the Duck would be quickly pulled from service. However, this was not necessarily true. Many examples were sent to Reconstruction Finance Corporation/War Assets Administration fields where they were stored awaiting sale to civilian buyers or scrapping. In the meantime, selected aircraft continued operation with the USN and USCG with a few traveling as far as Antarctica to participate in expeditions. The USAF recognized the importance of the type and obtained a few examples as OA-12As for SAR duties in Alaska. Some refurbished examples were also supplied to nations friendly to the USA.

When it came to selling surplus Ducks, there were a number of takers that needed the Duck's unique capabilities for operation with civilian enterprises. The Limited Type Certificate for the Duck (including J2F-3/-4/-5/-6) was issued to R.B. Utterback of Long Beach, California, on 6 May 1947 as LTC #17-2. At the time, there were about ten Ducks at Cal-Aero Field being offered for sale and it appears most of these were sold except for several that were damaged when a freak windstorm passed through the rows of stored aircraft.

Our subject J2F-6 was built as BuNo 33559 (only entering service on 26 May 1945 — Duck production contracts were cancelled with the atomic bombings of Japan) and would go on to operate from Naval Air Stations New York, Weymouth, Quonset Point, and Chincoteague. When the USN was finished with the aircraft, it went, according to museum officials, to the USAAF and operated as an OA-12A until withdrawn from use and offered for sale in 1949. The first owner was American Automotive Company who paid $727 for the amphibian and registered the aircraft as NL3960C.