



A 'Kitty' with Claws

Contributed by Frank Parker

ONE OF THE highlights at Warbirds Over Wanaka this year was a repeat of a P-40 Kittyhawk live firing (albeit with blank ammunition) its 50 calibre machine guns. This was the culmination of considerable effort and foresight, some of it from many years ago.

It is worth remembering that the World War II era fighters we admire today are in fact weapons systems. The whole reason for these wonderful aircraft was to shoot guns or drop bombs; the aircraft, although an integral and important part of the overall result, was toothless without its armament.

How did this come about at Wanaka. Firstly the aircraft: This particular Kittyhawk (a model P-40 N-1) was constructed in 1943 by Curtiss Aircraft Company and delivered to the RAAF where it was allocated to No.75 Squadron. Following a landing accident in 1944 it was removed from service and languished at the abandoned Tadi Airfield until it was recovered by an expedition led by Charles Darby in the mid 1970's. Fast forward another 20 years and the aircraft was then rebuilt by Pioneer Aero Restorations for Charles and Garth Hogan. At this stage the wings were rebuilt to accommodate the weapons systems with a mind to future fitment.

For Warbirds Over Wanaka 2008 Garth went through the process to fit and fire the weapons. Obviously an approach to the local Police Arms Office where you then suggest you wish to fire some machine guns from your aeroplane is not received lightly. It is however, permissible as a Historical

technician 'Gunner' (what other nickname would be appropriate) Ashford who served his time as an armourer with the RNZAF on No.75 Squadron Skyhawks.

Then the day for a test arrived. This was also a challenge as the guns had to be 'choked' to provide the correct back-

pressure to operate the mechanism and several attempts were required to fine tune.

And so the big question: What's it like to fire a machine gun from a WW II fighter. If only the answer was as simple as the question. It is obviously a great privilege to pull the trigger for the first time in 66 years on this particular aircraft. It quickly reminds you what

this aeroplane is all about. It is a weapon. It was made to destroy things. In the cockpit first up is the checklist; area safe, armament master 'ON', gun solenoid 'ON', fly the aircraft into position, squeeze the trigger. Then straight from the war comics, rat-a-tat-tat. With a cyclic fire rate of 700+ rounds per minute (times six guns) you only use short 1-2 second bursts as in fact a full load of ammunition is less than 30 seconds firing. Because the gun mechanism absorbs most of the recoil as it reloads there is not a lot of 'rattle and shake' when the guns fire, though from the noise of the gun mechanism and report of the rounds firing it is obvious there is a lot of action

Re-enactment. Indeed this is the provision used by 'Warhorse' and other re-enactment groups at various venues.

In the case of the P-40 there was a further consideration as the spent cartridge shells are ejected from the aircraft. This required acceptance from CAA under the requirements of 'dropping articles from aircraft' and was only possible after a risk analysis of where the cartridges would fall, consideration of ricochet (or is that bounce) patterns and appropriate safety factoring for the crowd line.

Once this was cleared there was the task of fitting and checking the armament. This was completed by professional armaments



With flashes of fire spurting half a metre from the gun muzzles and spent cartridge shells pouring from the wings at a rate of 4200 rounds per minute, Frank Parker makes a low pass at Warbirds Over Wanaka with his finger on the trigger. Firing the guns on the Kittyhawk was a highlight for many at Wanaka. Gavin Conroy picture.



One of six Browning M-2 50 calibre machine guns.



At 700 rounds per minute, per gun, what looks like a lot of ammunition doesn't actually last very long.



Three guns in place and ready for business. Note the spaces in the hinged panel for spent cartridge shells etc. to fall through.

going on. Look out on the wing leading edge and you are in no doubt as the guns 'spurt' flashes half a metre from the muzzle as they fire..... YA HOO (and that has nothing to do with web searches !!)

The guns are Browning M-2 50 calibre machine guns and the bullets are half inch or approx 13 mm (for younger readers) in diameter. This weapon can trace its roots to the Browning Model 1917 machine gun of WW I. The basic design is still manufactured today. For further information Google 'Browning Machine Gun' and waste an afternoon !

The P-40 N-1 (ZK-CAG) is fitted with six 50 calibre guns. For its time this was awesome 'stopping power' and although the P-40 never made it as a fighter in WWII it was well acknowledged as a ground attack aircraft in the African, Pacific, Italian and Russian Campaigns.

And so at Wanaka this year I was the guy who got to 'squeeze' that trigger - sometimes you get lucky. However it is important to acknowledge all those who made this possible; Charles Darby who recovered the wreck and the armaments from the wastes of PNG, Garth Hogan who rebuilt the aircraft with the foresight to provide for a functioning armament fit, the engineers, the armourers, and of course the aircraft's current owners. Cheers, FP.



Finding oneself lined up in these sights was not a good place to have been.

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