



North American Aviation T-28 Trojan

The Last Great Warbird? contributed by Rob Silich

Continuing our series on NZ Warbirds aircraft, Pilot Rob Silich contributed this article about his favourite aircraft. Rob is a 1200 hour PPL with a background in Pitts aerobatics. He has been involved with 'Warbirds' since 1988 and a member of the Roaring 40's Display Team for the past three seasons. He is passionate about his flying and the T-28 Trojan in particular.

Considerably larger than the T6 it boasted an 800 bhp Wright R1300 and although this was regarded as somewhat underpowered it was felt to be representative of the way the new jets flew at lower speeds. The USAF was obviously impressed enough to order two XT-28 prototypes in May 1948 which differed only

1956 they were being retired in favour of the twin jet T37 trainer, with the last of the A model soldiering on at Air National Guard units as late as 1960.

The Navy meanwhile, had by 1952 seen how well the A model was performing and borrowed two from the Air Force for evaluation. The summary of the evaluation

must have screamed for more power in what was basically an ideal aircraft because by April 1953 the first Navy T-28B took to the sky.

The only major change was the 1425 bhp Wright R1820 engine. By early 1954 the Navy had the B model in service and it wasn't long before the Air Force saw how much of an improvement the updated aircraft was over their A models. Quite a few B models began to

show up in Air Force colour schemes, both officially and unofficially!

Superb versatility and long service life

In this form the T-28 was to give excellent service with both the Navy and Air Force right through until about 1980 and it is fondly remembered by several generations of fast jet pilots for its basic abilities and good manners. Right from the start the T-28 had been versatile as a trainer

in their conversion to tricycle undercarriage configuration. Production orders for the first 266 of an eventual 1194 T-28A aircraft followed soon after the first flight in 1949.

Entering service

The T-28A entered service in April 1950 in its intended role of advanced jet trainer, with pilots going on to the Lockheed T-33 and subsequently the F80 and F86 fighters. Though they performed their job well, by

BY LATE 1947 the US Navy and Air Force both wanted new advanced trainer aircraft to supersede the SNJ/T6 or Harvard as we know them. Obviously North American Aviation (NAA) were the prime contender for this job, although by no means the only one. Lockheed also expressed a serious interest because the aircraft were to be used to train pilots for the first generation jet fighters then

entering service - and as Lockheed pointed out, a lot of these fighters were theirs too.

However the vast experience gained by NAA in producing thousands of T6s won out and the XSN2J-1 prototype was soon flying trials for the Navy. Easily recognisable as a T-28 prototype in the air, this aircraft was still a taildragger and looks to have had more than a few parts taken directly from the T6 and P51 inventory, notably the undercarriage.



Converted for aircraft carrier operations with a tail hook and stronger undercarriage, the Navy T-28C model was first flown in 1955. Gavin Conroy photograph from Warbirds over Wanaka 2008.

because it could be fitted with underwing pods for all types of armaments training, including 30 and 50 caliber machine guns, bombs and rockets, not to mention fuel tanks.

The avionics and weapons systems were identical to the latest frontline aircraft and were configured to be kept up to date. The large and comfortable cockpits were equipped with dual controls for EVERYTHING down to minor electrical items, with the ability to shift control authority to either front or rear at any time. The standard oxygen system has six hours supply for each cockpit because the aircraft is capable of flying for that long and that also explains the relief tube under both seats!

A long service life was due to the basic soundness of the design which lent itself to numerous modifications for all sorts of different roles. The Navy T-28C was first flown in 1955 and

was converted for aircraft carrier operations with a tail hook and stronger undercarriage. The D model was created when many of those retired A models were updated to the T-28B spec from about 1960 and given four additional hard points under the wings so that vast amounts of ordnance could be hauled aloft.

Why, you ask? The D models were mostly used in South East Asia in the 1960s where they saw significant action in counter insurgency and FAC roles before more suitable (ie. purpose built) aircraft were available. The French Air Force did a similar thing to create the Fennec model for a similar reason. The Fennecs were put to good use doing similar work in their colonies in North Africa.

One pilot, 5000 missions

To give some idea of just how much action the T-28 saw during those turbulent years, one Laotian pilot flying in the CIA's so called "secret war" in Laos flew well over five thousand combat missions in T28s before being killed in action. No

World War II pilot even comes close to that sort of record.

Why you should want one

Most of the Warbird T-28s presently flying came onto the market during the late 1970's and early 1980's. They were quickly snapped up by those who knew them already, ie. ex military pilots who had enough loot from their airline job to buy a few toys.

They are an excellent Warbird aircraft



Just one T-28 is on the register in New Zealand. Syndicate owned and based at Ardmore, pilot Rob Silich considers it to be an ideal warbird. Gavin Conroy photograph from Warbirds over Wanaka 2008.

for the same reasons that they were an excellent military aircraft. They are reasonably fast and easy to land compared to any taildragger piston fighter. They have two very comfortable seats and a large baggage locker so your beloved darling can also enjoy the trip. They are relatively cheap to operate compared to any other piston aircraft in the same bhp class. They have a long range when sensible power settings are used and are a delight to fly when it's playtime. They will easily turn inside a Mustang at any altitude, even if they can't outrun one. And if you can just lure the unwary P-51 down to low level, he can't outclimb you either!

T-28 in New Zealand

Only one T-28 has ever made it to New Zealand, T-28C number 140563 was imported by the late John Greenstreet in 1989 and has been syndicate owned and operated since 1991. It was one of the last T-28s to come from the US military aircraft storage facility at Davis Monthan in Arizona.

The aircraft actually conforms to the old Group C, so if you could fly a Piper Arrow, you could fly the T28. The biggest difference is the fact that the seat of your pants is about six feet further from the ground even when taxiing, so the super absorbent carrier rated main landing gear can come in very handy!

Many people have commented on the unique sound of the aircraft and there is no confusing it with anything else. It comes from the fact that there are six separate

short exhausts for the nine cylinders, and you only really hear the ones on the near side of the aircraft. This and the fact that each cylinder has a volume of some 202 cubic inches, representing nearly 160 bhp at full noise!

It sounds much better on the inside. The nearest sounding aircraft is the Polikarpov I16 that the Alpine Fighter Group restored a few years ago, because it has a licence built version

of the same engine and nine separate exhaust stacks.

The last great warbird

The T-28 was the last large piston engined trainer aircraft in the US military inventory, because they have good reasons for standardising on the use of jet fuel rather than avgas. As such, it is the last aircraft that really has anything in common with the warbird favourite WWII fighter aircraft. Although there are plenty of jet trainers and early jet fighters now flying in warbird circles, the likelihood of there ever being A4 Skyhawks, F4 Phantoms or F14 Tomcats in private hands any time soon looks distinctly remote. Just the sheer cost of operating the likes of a Hawker Hunter or F86 Sabre would surely rule out the even more expensive and complicated jets?

So the T-28 may be from a more modern era, but retains a lot of the character of the piston fighters, at a fraction of the cost. It performs almost as well, and is a lot more useful to travel in. Why wouldn't you want one?

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