

THE FINEST PISTON ENGINED FIGHTER TYPE EVER BUILT

A research project to quantify the unique integrity of

Grumman F8F-2 Bearcat 121776



An informational report describing the attributes of the F8F Bearcat, the collective and individual history of Bearcats and specifically the odyssey of U.S.N. Bureau number 121776. In aviation there are few aircraft that are truly regarded as the best in an unequivocal sense. The F8F Bearcat is considered the best piston engine fighter of all time. The F8F Bearcat's origins are unique amongst fighter aircraft, and its excellence was due to a tremendous desire by its designers to build the best. This report is designed to capture the special qualities of Bu. 121776, and to educate perspective custodians about the aircraft.

Specific Attributes to Value for the Grumman Model 58 Bearcat**The Grumman F8F-2 Bearcat is the highest performing fighter aircraft of the piston era.**

It has no equal or peer in performance or ease of handling at its limits and would have been an incredible interceptor. Piston fighter aircraft existed from 1915 through 1952 and the F8F of 1945 is the greatest of its kind. While the F8F-1 is slightly faster based on pilot reports from friends that fly both types, the F8F-2, due to its taller tail and trim system remains trimmed perfectly throughout its speed range. It is the best flying fighter of the two variants allowing the pilot to be “guns on target” all the time.

There are only civilian 12 Bearcat owners worldwide, it is one of the hardest to obtain of all fighter aircraft and its owners are an exclusive group.

Owner exclusivity is a hallmark of the Bearcat. There are only 12 private owners of this type of aircraft worldwide. Of the 22 Bearcats that exist worldwide, six (6) of them are owned by governments. Four (4) in Thailand and (2) are retained in the United States. There are 16 civilian owned F8F Bearcats on the planet. Fifteen of the 16 are maintained in the U.S., but a closer look at ownership details shows 7 of them belong to ultra-high net worth individuals. Ownership at that wealth level means these 7 aircraft are removed from any financial pressures experienced by most “simply wealthy” enthusiasts. To be specific four of them are with the Lewis Fighter Fleet in Texas, two more are with Commanche Warbirds in Texas and recent Ezell restoration 95356 is with the Walton family in Arkansas. The remaining nine aircraft constitute the “viable” market that a potential buyer could assume some ability to make a credible offer.

The exclusivity of Bearcat ownership places the owner into one of the rarest of clubs, owner of the greatest performing fighter aircraft of all time. It is also the greatest piston powered Grumman “Cat” and the last of a proud line of U.S. Navy radial engine fighters. It is a historically important aircraft that should you purchase a project; it is extremely expensive to consider a “resurrection restoration”. It must be understood that the current number of surviving Bearcats will not increase substantially as is currently possible with the P-51. Further, it has been declared by a prominent shop that only two more Bearcats could possibly be constructed from the wreckage that exists, and the years and funds required would both be significant.

The normal hold time by an owner for his F8F Bearcat is among the longest of all vintage aircraft.

A look back at the past sale dates of F8F's is instructive to a prospective buyer in that on average airworthy Bearcats are owned for more than twenty years before being offered for sale. The longest family ownership of an F8F was 58 years, but 25 years is common. It is generally owned by men who have a stable of fighters before they obtain a Bearcat. After Bearcat ownership the other fighters are sold off at intervals, but the Bearcat generally is the last to go.

The Sale Frequency of the F8F is Infrequent and Unpredictable.

With a twenty-year lookback we can see that Bearcat sales are infrequent. They are also very difficult to track from a value standpoint due to the private nature of their sales. The current decade may see F8F's come up for sale, with perhaps as many as 5 of them could be offered by 2030. The price asked, however, must take into account the rarity and difficulty in obtaining one as well as its superlative performance and long hold times. As a review, Bearcat sales are listed below.

2020-2029 There have been two sales in this decade. Walt Bowe purchased project F8F-2 121679 in June 2022 that had been put on the market for \$3,000,000.00 USD in 2018. The long market soak was due to the fact that this aircraft had been damaged in 1964 in a gear up landing and was then obtained by the Coutches Family in 1966. The aircraft is not known to have flown after this trade. The purchase price may have been \$2.6M USD but the aircraft required a restoration by the new owner. The other aircraft was F8F-1 Bu. 95356. Wrecked 26 April 1969 the heavily damaged fighter was rebuilt over a half century long period. Dusty Dowd gathered parts and pieces for 40 years before the aircraft went to the Ezell Restoration facility in Texas during 2012. Entering a focused effort to finish it in 2017 the aircraft took 5 years of full-time work to complete and may have cost its owner, Mr. Stuart Walton, around \$8,000,000.00 USD. As of 23 August 2023, the aircraft had been flown twice.

2010-2019 Just one sale occurred during this decade, the actual aircraft focused on in this article! Bu. 121776 sold to Mr. John O'Connor by the Lone Star Flight Museum. The aircraft cost about \$2.1M USD when the sale and test flying was completed.

2000-2009 This was a decade defined by a huge shift in Bearcat ownership, with 7 aircraft changing homes. There was a Bearcat sale in 1997 and 1998, but by the year 2000 none were offered. Mr. Steve Hinton obtained Bu 121707 in an estate sale as a wrecked project in 2005. For airworthy sales offerings, no F8F was traded until 2006. There were three sales in that year, two to Mr. Rod Lewis. The first was Bu 95255 an F8F-1 restored from a Vietnamese project recovery and then Bu. 122629, the famous and fearsome "Rare Bear" of Lyle Shelton. It seemed that Mr. Lewis intended to race his racing Bearcat after he learned the ropes in his stock F8F-1 at the time. Mr. John Sessions also purchased F8F-2 Bu 121752 during 2006.

Three more sold in 2008 with Mr. Rod Lewis again buying two more F8F Bearcats! Longtime restoration project Bu. 121614 had been wrecked in 1968 by the CAF and had been stored until 1992. At that time the plane's restoration was started by Steve Hinton's Fighter Rebuilders and the aircraft was a part time project until 2006. Purchased by Mr. Lewis in 2008 the aircraft flew 6 May 2009 and has been owned by him ever since. He also purchased Bu. 122619 from the Whittington/Buccarelli group in 2008, this long held Bearcat acquiring the nickname of "Chrome Cat" due to its chromed landing gear and other parts that were customized during its 1970's south Florida ownership. Lastly Dan Friedkin purchased Bearcat Bu 121748 that had been imported by Ray Dieckman from France a couple years before for \$3.2M USD. This was a low time and very well-maintained aircraft. Finally in 2009 Jens Meyerhoff was able to purchase early F8F-1 Bu. 90454 that had been owned by Preston Parish for 32 years.

Flying the F8F Bearcat is an “Ultimate High” activity.

The F8F Bearcat is said by owners to be the easiest of fighters to fly, and a spectacular handling aircraft in crosswinds. The original Navy Pilot Manual Section II paragraph 18.2 states that “Crosswind landings: Landings have been made in 90 degree crosswinds up to 50 mph.” Mr. John O’Connor has landed his Bearcat while flying with two others in their Bearcats in a 40 knot crosswind and said it was no problem. James Dale says that the F8F-2 while not as fast as the “dash one” has a better ability to stay trimmed through power changes as you maneuver the aircraft. He believes it would have been an incredible fighter due to its ability to always be trimmed up and ready to shoot at any time. Very few men get to experience it, but all who have say it is unparalleled. Many have said they will never sell their Bearcats.

Grumman Designed the Aircraft as a Private Venture to Build the Best Fighter Ever

The Bearcat was a company financed private project during WWII that endeavored to build the very best piston engine fighter ever. No restrictions or contract limitations were ever applied to the design. No other fighter aircraft was designed this way, and the resultant aircraft was so good that the design entered service with only detail modifications. The viewing of the Fw-190 during WWII by Leroy Grumman seems to this author to have been the initiator to build the ultimate aircraft after seeing Kurt Tank’s brilliant radial engine fighter design. It’s no compromise design history initiated without a hoped for contract is unique among fighter aircraft.

The Blue Angel Bearcat livery connects the Owner with the World’s Greatest Aerobatic Team

The Bearcat is the signature piston engine display aircraft of the U.S. Navy Blue Angels. Bu. 121776 has worn Blue Angel colors for almost two decades and has displayed with the Blue Angels on many occasions. Any subsequent owner joins an aircraft with access to the U.S. Navy’s Flight Demonstration team and some of the visibility and status that befits the greatest Flight Demonstration Team on the planet. For any buyer, the unique access granted to a prospective owner is a serious responsibility that would be conferred by the owner at the sale. All buyers must understand that not everyone is qualified to own Bu. 121776 and must be carefully considered to protect the legacies of the aircraft and the past owners.



The Absolute Piston Engine Speed Record and Air Racing

Two F8F Bearcats have held the World Air Speed Record. One of them holds the Time to Climb Record, the Speed Record as well as many Reno Air Race Championships to its credit. Race 77, the "Rare Bear" is the most spectacular looking and sounding racer in existence and is currently stored with Mr. Rod Lewis in Texas. While the aircraft is heavily modified, the basic and perfect shape of the original XF8F-1 still shows through in this Bucky Dawson photograph. Speed record at 528.069mph!



National Air and Space Museum

Bu. 121646 is preserved as a World Air Speed Record breaking aircraft in the National collection of the United States of America at the Smithsonian Institution. She set a record many thought would never be broken 16 August 1969 at 482.46 mph!



Surviving F8F Bearcat Airframes Present Day

F8F-1 D.18 90454 N9G Jens Meyerhoff of Falcon Field, AZ, "3F8".

F8F-1 D.205 94956 displayed at RTAFM Don Muang AB Bangkok 2023.

F8F-1 D.527 95255 Tan Son Nhut 87, Salis recovery, N58204 Lewis Fighter Fleet

F8F-1 D.628 95356 N7247C Completing a 5 year restoration Ezell Aviation, Walton.

F8F-1B D.779 122095 RTAF, ex Bangkok, recovered ff 2.99, Tom Wood N2209.

F8F-1B D.804 122120 RTAF, display, restored 1993-2003, flew Thailand as "1234".

F8F-1 "342" In storage with Tango Squadron, Takhli RTAFB, no engine.

F8F-1 "43104" In storage with Tango Squadron, Takhli RTAFB, complete.

F8F-2 D.988. 121614, N747NF San Antonio, TX, RTAF markings. Lewis Fighter Fleet.

F8F-2 D.1020 121646, N1111L, Speed Record 483.041 mph configuration, preserved NASM.

F8F-2 D.1053 121679, N818F, Restoration and in yellow paint scheme, Walt Bowe, CA.

F8F-2 D.1081 121707 N1027B to Kaman, crashed Osh., restoration, to c/n D.1262, S Hinton.

F8F-2P D.1084 121710 USNAM Pensacola 1964 for display, display 2023 USNAM restored.

F8F-2 D.1088 121714 G-RUMM ex N4995V, N700HL, Stephen Grey, TFC Duxford U.K.

F8F-2 D.1122 121748 N1DF, ex N1029B, N224RD, Comanche Warbirds, Texas, airworthy

F8F-2 D.1126 121752 H800H, ex N7827C, John Sessions, Seattle, WA, airworthy

F8F-2 D.1148 122619 N14WB, ex N7958C, San Antonio, Texas, Lewis Fighter Fleet

F8F-2 D.1162 121776, N68RW, Blue Angels markings, John O'Connor, DE, airworthy

F8F-2 D.1171 122619, N777L, **Rare Bear; Record 528.33**, preserved, Lewis Fighter Fleet.

F8F-2 D.1190 122637, N8TF, ex N1033B, N198F, Comanche Warbirds, Texas.

F8F-2 D.1227 122674 N7825C Commemorative Air Force, based Camarillo, CA, airworthy.

G-58B D.1262 N700A, "Redship", Grumman Aircraft, to Fornoff, PSAM 2023.

Historical Beginnings:

The fighter aircraft is the most peculiar of aircraft for its basic purpose is to destroy aircraft of any type in aerial combat. Within that requirement is the fact that other fighter aircraft must be able to be bested in single combat as well. With that, a fighter aircraft is not merely an acrobatic aircraft with guns, but a thoroughbred racehorse, a skilled heavyweight prize fighter and an instrument that a grand master of chess could wield against an equally cerebral foe. No other mechanical contrivance has such an illustrious precedence of design, nor as pure a purpose. The fate of a nation can rest on an aircraft of this type, and the most storied fighter plane of all time, the Spitfire, has been canonized by the people whose island it defended.

The Spitfire Mk.II became legend defending the island against a determined foe that was very comparable, the Me-109E-3. The Battle of Britain from July 10 to October 31, 1940, was an effort by the German Forces to force the British government to sue for peace. The failure of the Luftwaffe to achieve this objective, and the resistance of the British people meant that the Germans had suffered their first military defeat. The continued efforts of both sides to create better aircraft never abated, and the Germans released a new aircraft in late 1941. The German aircraft was at first considered to be a modified American design due to its radial engine configuration, and for a time was actually not believed to be "true" by the Air Ministry. By January 1942 the Fw-190 became regarded as a super fighter that could not be measured by the normal inline engine thinking of the time.

The Fw-190 remained a mystery for the RAF until 23 June 1942 when Werk number 313 was landed by mistake at RAF Pembry in South Wales. Impressed into the RAF as serial MP499 the fighter was extensively tested and compared to enable RAF pilots to better survive in combat against the very capable aircraft. Its revolutionary cooling system, excellent armament and speed and agility impressed the RAF evaluators and after flight testing was complete the plane was scheduled for destruction in armament trials in order to evaluate current armaments. The short interlude post testing and prior to destruction allowed information learned from MP499 to be offered to American military and industry pilots for a brief look. Grumman Aircraft Corporation in Bethpage, New York had been hard at work creating a successor to the F4F Wildcat since February 1938. Grumman had flown their XF6F-1 on 26 June 1942 with the Wright R-2600 engine and while performance was good, the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 of 2,000 horsepower made it a much better aircraft.

With F6F-3 Hellcats entering production and the satisfaction of building a plane that would for the Navy relegate the Japanese Zero to a distant second place, Grumman was interested to see this Fw-190 and compare it with their Hellcat. In early 1943 President LeRoy Grumman (Naval Aviator #1216 and Test Pilot), B.A. "Bud" Gilles (U.S. Navy Fighter pilot since 1926, Test Pilot and MIT Engineering graduate) and Vice President for Experimental Engineering Bob Hall, (engineer, race plane designer, test pilot), all traveled overseas, a great journey in early 1943 to see the aircraft. It is said that they worked in their rooms at night sketching a fighter that they "should have designed" according to Corwin Meyer. The Fw-190 was 3,200 lbs. lighter than the F6F at 8,750 lbs. and only 300 horsepower shy of the F6F with excellent maneuverability and controls. While some dispute the fact the MP499 was the impetus for the F8F, I disagree.

It is related by Corwin Meyer in his book that both Gilles and Hall got to fly the aircraft, and it is written in other sources that the last "recorded" flight of the aircraft was 29 January 1943 . The aircraft was struck off charge 18 September 1943, nine months later so it is possible that this was the aircraft "borrowed" by the Grumman pilots although it is not recorded in the official records. I believe that this aircraft was shared by the RAF to the party from Grumman and that the aircraft profoundly impressed them.



MP499, the Fw-190A-3 as seen by the party from Grumman Aircraft photographed 8.42

During early 1943 Grumman was locked in battle with the Chance Vought company for the U.S. Navy fighter contracts. While the Hellcat was simpler and better in some ways than the earlier F4U Corsair, the party had to be a tough point to face. That the Fw-190 was a marvelous design was not lost on them either. What happened during wartime at Grumman then is somewhat remarkable. LeRoy Grumman chose to send a confidential memorandum to the Chief Engineer, Bill Schwendler on 28 July 1943. In that letter he proposed to create a special program to develop "a small fighter plane, which could be used on small or large aircraft carriers, and with a performance superior to the F6F." His provided specifications were:

- a. A plane with the size and dimensions of the F4F Wildcat
- b. Normal gross weight of 8,500 lbs.
- c. Two speed Supercharged R-2800 engine.
- d. Armament consisting of (4) .50 caliber guns.
- e. Internal fuel capacity of 170 gallons
- f. Bubble type canopy
- g. Wide track undercarriage providing adequate propeller clearance.
- h. Performance superior in every way to the F6F Hellcat.
- i. Power loading of 4 lb./horsepower and a wing loading of 33 lb. sq. ft.

Most unusually he added that the design study should be made *before* approaching BuAer and that the study *should be given priority over jet propulsion studies*. The final item in the postscript was a note that the design should be called a “converted carrier” fighter to prevent the Navy Bureau from overloading the aircraft with gear. This project, with no Navy prospective contract or input was purely company funded and set out to create a unique and world beating fighter aircraft.

Examining his specifications and comparing them with the Fw-190 that the team examined is illuminating. The size, weight, canopy, fuel capacity (169 of the Fw-190 vs. 170 for the F8F proposal), landing gear type, and armament that were specified by LeRoy Grumman in his memo were nearly identical to Fw-190A-3 MP499, so it is pretty difficult to argue that the captured plane had not directly inspired them. The additional fact that Grumman self-financed the project without any contract or even specification issued by the Navy is noteworthy as well. This was a private company effort during wartime to simply build the best piston engine fighter possible based on what they had seen in the Fw-190. The planned aircraft would be the 58th design for the Grumman company.



Day One: Company Test Pilot Bob Hall runs up Bu. 90460 at Bethpage 21 August 1944

The Grumman Model 58 Develops

The Navy was worried about the feasibility of jets though they had ordered two XFD-1's from McDonnell in January 1943. In autumn 1943 Grumman notified the U.S. Navy's BuAer about Design 58 and the Navy immediately took notice. With the power to weight ratio being 50 percent better than the F4U or F6F aircraft types, Design 58 spoke directly to the Navy's desire to field the fastest climbing fighter possible. The USN signed a letter of intent for two prototypes to be ready within 8 months on 27 November 1943. Named the XF8F-1, Bu. 90460 was first flown by Bob Hall 31 August 1944 and while the plane was behind schedule the outstanding performance of the aircraft left the Navy jubilant. After the September test flying program was completed the USN bet big on the Bearcat, ordering 2,000 of them during October 1944. In February 1945 the GM Eastern Division plant was contracted to phase out the FM-2 Wildcat and begin building the F3M-1 (the Eastern designation for the F8F-1) and scheduled production for 1,876 examples. By April 1945 they doubled the existing Grumman order to 4,000 aircraft and directed Grumman to have the F6F Hellcat replaced on the production line by March of 1946. The private venture had paid off in an incredibly big way with 5,876 F8F's on order! In due time the plane became known as the "Bearcat" joining the historic feline nomenclature of Grumman Navy Fighters.



On 21 September 1944 the month old XF8F-1 posed for a company photograph, the second aircraft 90461 would not fly until 2 December 1944. This aircraft, 90460 would go into the NACA wind tunnel at Langley on 13 December and stay until 5 February perfecting the airflow and drag of the aircraft. Released back to the Navy, she began testing guns aboard the aircraft and crashed fatally on 18 March.

VJ Day cancelled most contracts and put the aircraft factories out of work in a matter of weeks. The Eastern Company never produced a single Bearcat. Grumman saw their production orders slashed by 70 percent, an amazing result as most fighter types were cancelled altogether. The greatness of the aircraft meant that just it and the F4U-4 Corsair would continue in production, and the Corsair as an attack aircraft. Grumman built 1,263 F8F Bearcats for the Navy plus 2 civilian models in 10 different versions. F8F Bearcats were never used in an armed conflict situation by the USN, even though the plane was in service during the Korean War. Truth be told there was never a need to protect the carriers from “Red Air” and the splendid interceptor, having no opponent, was left at home. It is perhaps the greatest irony of all that this aircraft never met another in aerial combat.

The Bearcat joined the fleet right away, and eventually equipped a total of 9 Squadrons.

The Blue Angels, and the first “Airshow” Bearcat

The first Navy squadron to receive the Bearcat was VF-19 during May of 1945 and they immediately began working up in the fighter for the upcoming invasion of Japan. The F8F was to enter combat during November of 1945 when that invasion, Operation “Olympic” was scheduled to take place. As we know, the war ended, and the contracts were either cancelled or curtailed. The peace that followed was supposed to be a time of victory for the Navy, but the atomic bomb that “won” the war was now viewed by many as far more worthwhile than a carrier battle group. Flight demonstrations across the USA and public relations efforts became of prime importance. The Navy created a display squadron to showcase their skills and their history.



Stood up in April 1946 with secondhand F6F Hellcats the new “Blue Angels” were assigned the “best fighter” F8F-1 Bearcat during August of 1946 and uniquely for any military team went to the factory to pick up their new mounts. These “zero time” aircraft had been prepared by Grumman specifically to fly

demonstrations, and most “combat” equipment was left out, with armor plate and the tailhook assemblies removed after production. Then Lieutenant Alfred Taddeo went to Bethpage with the Blues and recalls “To save even more weight Grumman engineers stripped out the armor plate and the tailhooks. We asked how that affected the flight characteristics and they calculated no significant difference.” As an insight to how razor sharp the Bearcat’s stability is, he continues. “As the team was enroute to NAS Jacksonville we received an emergency radio call instructing us to land at NAS Norfolk. They informed us that they recalculated their weight saving activities after we took off and sure enough the Bearcats center of gravity was moving aft as we burned fuel. Landing at Norfolk took full back tab and a big pull on the stick. Needless to say, the tailhooks were replaced along with some additional ballast.”

The team moved to NAS Corpus Christi during the Fall of 1948 and joined the large number of Bearcats based there at the time. The following photo shows two Grumman “trainers” based at NAS Corpus Christi at that time, an F6F-5 Hellcat and behind, and “B 258” an F8F-1 Bearcat. Though the Blues were displaying this superlative aircraft technology was moving very quickly, and the transition to jet aircraft began with straight wing F9F Panther jets during the 1949 season. On 20 August the F9F Panther flew its first show at Beaumont, Texas and the four ship Bearcat diamond formation slipped into history. The Blue Angel Bearcats were serial numbered as follows, and it appears they were simply overhauled, repainted, and dispersed back to normal squadrons.

- | | | | | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 94781 | 94843 | 94880 | 94985 | 94986 | 94989 | 94969 |
| 94990 | 94992 | 94996 | 95000 | 95021 | 95037 | 95124 |
| 95134 | 95144 | 95187 | | | | |





The plane that created a legendary team, the “Blue Angels” F8F Bearcats toured the county in the immediate postwar era with a panache and sense of elan that is now world famous. The Bearcats of the time were all flown by combat veterans as team leads and the displays were simply magical. It was practice for the team announcer to narrate for the crowd what the team was doing and phrases like “the four of us have 60 Japs surrounded” indicated the fighting spirit and pride of victory the nation felt at the time.

Bearcats were stored at NAS Litchfield Park for MDAP or Military Defense Aid Package sales to friendly foreign governments. The F8F-1 and F8F-2 were also sent in numbers to NAS Corpus Christi for use by new pilots as single seat advanced trainers. The Bearcat for all its excellence was now prized for its forgiving nature and for many aspiring Navy pilots it was the first “single seater” they flew. For example, Apollo 11 Astronaut Neil Armstrong’s first fighter flown was an F8F-1 Bearcat.

Because Bu 121776 was a NAS Corpus Christi aircraft, and all of the test pilots and astronauts of the time passed through there as they began their Naval Flight career, it must be assumed that several astronauts, test pilots and distinguished aviators flew the aircraft. The students of the 1950’s were senior pilots by the mid 1960’s and between those storied pilots and the Vietnam War, many Navy and Marine pilots would have been exposed to this F8F-2.

While Bu 121776 did not serve with the Blue Angels, the precious few Bearcats that remain almost require that one aircraft commemorates that service. Bu 121776 has been marked as a team aircraft for over a decade and has cemented itself as “the” Blue Angel Bearcat. Its unique and distinctive paint scheme is both historic and resonant today. The Blue Angels paint scheme makes this Bearcat a truly special and unique member of the Bearcat family.

**F8F-2 Bu. 121776**

Of the 22 F8F Bearcats in existence the surviving civilian example with the best civilian history in reference to provenance, originality and preservation is Bu 121776. This aircraft was not flown after military service, just one of two aircraft so allocated. All others went through a variety of modifications and uses for three decades. Not flown and used as a wind machine and then stored for two decades the aircraft was not sold until 1996 and was restored in the modern era. That the F8F Bearcat exists in small numbers due to a variety of factors. The unusual thing about the F8F is that two different Billionaires own several of them each and a third Billionaire just had one restored at great cost. In the author's estimation Bearcat market pricing does not reflect a true picture of the aircraft's rarity exclusivity and value. Should 121776 come to market the opportunity and quality of the aircraft should reflect a "once in a lifetime" sale for the discerning collector.

Note: The Blue Angel Bearcat is a guaranteed icon at any airshow and its connection with the most famous military aerobatic team is quite real with this very aircraft flying in formation with U.S.N. Blue Angel aircraft at many airshows for special occasions. Any future owner must understand the responsibility and gravity of the maintaining and care of this aircraft. It is in many ways the best link collectible between yesterday and today and should be valued accordingly.

Differentiation Factors for F8F-2 Bearcat 121776 versus the rest of the Civilian Bearcat Fleet

Bearcat 121776 was the last untouched, unmodified, and never flown since USN use Bearcat to be restored and was restored in the year 2000 timeframe. It in many ways was a time capsule aircraft that was well preserved.

Most civilian Bearcats that were sold to the U.S. Civil Register in 1963 were flown out of Litchfield Park, Arizona and were flown as sport aircraft for the next two decades. Nearly all of them received modifications or were raced by their owners for years.

Nearly all civilian Bearcats bear a wing spar strap modification that was added by a number of different shops as a response to questions raised for the F8F's wing structure. The post U.S.N. use of the Bearcat with the French L'Armee De L'Air in combat for three years showed emphatically how robust the Bearcat structure was. Bu 121776 has its original and sound wing spar as Grumman made it. It may be the only remaining one that is civilian owned that retains that originality.





The new XF8F-2 at NAS Patuxent River during July of 1949. The ultimate version of the model 58.

U.S.N. Bu. 121776 Service History

To clarify the production data for the reader, as Grumman serial number D.1162 this aircraft was the 1,162nd Bearcat produced out of a total production of 1,265 and therefore was built near the end of the production run. There were 880 of the “short tail” F8F-1 and F8F-1B variants delivered. Service use, additional horsepower and small issues with the F8F-1 initiated improvements to the aircraft. On the production line these changes were integrated into the “dash two” version of the aircraft identified as the F8F-2 model. Only 293 “straight” dash two aircraft were completed along with 60 F8F-2P photo recon variants and 12 F8F-2N radar equipped versions. All of them were made between November 1947 and April 1949 and the “tall tail” F8F-2 was a wonder. She had the new R-2800-34W of 2,250 horsepower and 4 20mm cannons as the standard armament and hard points that were proven on the F8F-1B.

Training Use

Stationed at NAS Corpus Christi this F8F-2 was used by new pilots as a single seat advanced trainer. The Bearcat for all its excellence was now prized for its forgiving nature and for many aspiring Navy pilots it was the first “single seater” they flew. For example, Apollo 11 Astronaut Neil Armstrong’s first fighter flown was an F8F-1 Bearcat, though a thorough check of his logbook proved he did not fly Bu 121776.

Because Bu 121776 was a NAS Corpus Christi aircraft, it could be inferred that many of the test pilots and astronauts of the time passed through there and may have flown 121776 as they began their Naval Flight career. Further it must be assumed that several astronauts, test pilots and distinguished aviators

flew the aircraft when she was an anonymous “flightline” aircraft. The students of the 1950’s were senior pilots by the mid 1960’s and between those storied pilots and the Vietnam War, many Navy and Marine pilots would have been exposed to this F8F-2. Her history just waits for the lucky discovery of a connection long since forgotten.



An interesting 1959 photo of the Broomfield, CT Kaman facility, note the F6F Hellcat “wind machine” in the background. This aircraft and the two Beech 18’s were replaced by 121776 and 121707 during 1963.

Kaman Aircraft Wind Machine Bu 121776

As a unique facet to the history of this F8F there were two Bearcats that were used by the Kaman Aircraft Company from 1960 to 1970 as wind machines. This use inadvertently preserved the aircraft and protected them from civilian operational use for three decades. They were probably utilized to support the SH-2 Seasprite development program that was a huge part of the Kaman business at the time. Their first Bearcat is our profiled aircraft c/n B.1162 or Bu. 121776 that was purchased from the U.S. Navy on 22 January 1960 and registered N1030B for ownership/paperwork purposes. There was never a civilian conversion for the plane and this aircraft was simply put into use as a company airfield wind machine. Kaman then purchased a second aircraft, the damaged c/n B.1081 Bu 121707 on 28 April 1960 from a civilian owner in the San Diego, CA area and shipped it to the East Coast as well. It is believed by the appraiser that there were no remaining Bearcats available in 1960, and it is possible that 121776 may have been the last one sold by the USN. Chained down and run up to provide a crosswind for helicopter testing, these aircraft were generally maintained by their remaining in operation and survived a difficult period for vintage aircraft in fine form. No longer needed by 1970, both aircraft were transferred to the USMC Aviation Museum in that year.

Bu 121776 Joins the Civilian Market

The USMC had a brief history with the F8F-2 with a small number being assigned to the Marine Corps Schools in Quantico, VA for ground crew training in the 1950's, but none were ever assigned to operational squadrons. One of the two stored Quantico aircraft was trucked to Mojave in 1978 for restoration by Wally McDonnell Enterprises and upon completion were expected to return to the Museum in Virginia. Something changed during the process and in 1980 the aircraft were transferred to Mr. McDonnell in a sale or exchange for other work completed. In the following photo a good idea of the condition of both of these aircraft could be gleaned. In 1981 121707 was sold to Elmer Ward and subsequently restored. The better preserved of the two, Bu. 121776, however, stayed at the museum in Quantico until 30 April 1996 when she was transferred to Mr. H. Wells and then to Air SRV Inc., a part of the Lone Star Flight Museum in Galveston, Texas on 4 June 1996.

At the time the condition of the aircraft was known to be very good, but the Bearcat was only recently able to be restored. Fighter Rebuilders in Chino had reconstructed a Bearcat, the CAF's Bu 122764 so they had perhaps the most experience at the time. They also advised the Santa Monica Museum of Flight during their reconstruction of Bu 95255 and were a huge part of the process of creating new wing spars for the aircraft type.

The Bearcat wing spar is an extrusion, a very complex fabrication compared to a Mustang or P-40 and also was made from an exotic alloy for the time. This aluminum alloy, called 7075 T6 is substantially stronger than other alloys and its innovative use allowed the carrier based Bearcat to have a light but incredibly strong wing spar. Even today 7075 is considered aircraft grade and is extremely strong for its weight when compared with other metals. During the 1988 to 1990 period a shop was located in the Los Angeles area that had the ability to make a limited number of "spar blanks" for four Bearcats and produced 4 wing spars in 7075 T6. It is believed by this researcher that the spars went to 122674, 95255, 121614 and 121707 over the next decade as those projects progressed. Because the raw material of Bearcats was exceedingly rare, only these 4 spars were made. The engineering done on the replacement spar was extensive and the spars have been in aircraft for close to thirty years.

When 121776 arrived at The Lone Star Flight Museum in 1996 the F8F was being passed over in value terms by more "historic" or "rare iconic" aircraft in the marketplace. Its incredible handling qualities and the reality that very few pilots at that time had any Bearcat time began to affect the value of the aircraft. During the freewheeling 1960's many Bearcats were "borrowed" and flown by trusted friends and magazine writers who were profuse in their praise for the aircraft. After 1990 this never happened. The F8F's were very rare and special, with only a handful regularly flying. Only Rare Bear's fearsome pylon racing and Howard Pardue's XF8F-1 were seen publicly. Lone Star decided by the year 2000 that their F8F-2 project needed to be fully understood from a structural standpoint to justify the restoration they planned to complete.

Hiring Transport Technologies Inc. for the job, this company brought M.I.T. educated F.A.A. Design Engineering Representatives to execute the most modern state of the art analysis of the structure of this very aircraft. It should be stated that it is not known if any other F8F Bearcat has ever received such an

exhaustive study of its extruded spar. The efforts of Mr. Jim Fausz who had a wealth of prior warbird experience prior to this project are today an incredible record to reference regarding the vitality and excellence of the center section and wing spar structure beneath the skin of Bu 121776. No other F8F on the open market that retains its original wing spar is known to have had similar work done with the possible exception of Race 77, the Rare Bear. That aircraft, carrying a heavier R-3350 hybrid engine producing some 4,000 horsepower has been inspected and checked several times over the years. That it continued to race at Reno on its original spar for decades speaks to the excellence of that extrusion in its original condition. It must also be remembered that Race 77 was built from a cartwheeled wreck of an aircraft in 1968, so its starting point was far worse than 121776. To sum up, the aircraft that was restored in 1996 was the best conserved F8F Bearcat that existed at the time, bar none.



An interesting and informative photo of the sister ship to 121776, Bu 121707 photographed in the hangar of Wally McDonnell at Mojave, CA during April 1978. This was one of two Kaman Aircraft Corporation Bearcats that were purchased for use as wind generating machines, tied down and run up to high power settings to provide crosswinds for helicopter testing. What is interesting about the photo is that Kaman did little to the aircraft during their use, with the original markings still being visible under the "surplus" sale overspray applied in 1949. The condition of 121776 was probably exactly the same, although 121776 had no damage history of any kind and 121 707 had been wrecked at Imperial Beach in 1959. The aircraft were well preserved during their time as wind machines evidently.

Reproduced Below and following page are the report on the Bearcat 121776's wing spar. There has always been a lot of conjecture regarding the Bearcat wing as the original design plan to have a frangible tip proved to be unworkable in service. Below are the credentials of the person performing the work, the following page displays the findings of the team.

Rec'd 5-30
TRANSTECH

May 25, 2000

Jim Fausz,
Bluebird Aviation
5660 Munson Highway
Milton, Florida 32570

Dear Mr. Fausz:

The enclosed "Record of Facility Visit" summarizes the activity, observations, results and recommendations from my visit to your Milton Florida facility on May 19, 2000. The facility visit was to evaluate the metallurgical and structural condition of the center wing section of the Grumman F8F Bearcat. In accordance with your request, I have summarized my credentials, education and experience below for your files:

Credentials: Federal Aviation Administration Designated Engineering Representative
- Structures, Transport/Normal Category Airplanes and Rotorcraft
- Mechanical Systems, Transport/Normal Category Airplanes and Rotorcraft
- Powerplant, Turbine, Transport Category Airplanes

Experience: Transport Technologies, Inc. V.P. Engineering,
Fort Worth, Texas April 2000 - Present
Gulfstream Aerospace, Manager of Engineering,
Completions, Dallas Texas March 1999- April 2000
Northrup Grumman Structures Consultant DER Gulfstream G-V Wing
Grand Prairie, Texas March 1996- March 1999
Aircraft Safety Technology, Engineering Director
Fort Worth, Texas February 1991-March 1999
FAA Certification Project Manager, and Aerospace Engineer
Aircraft Certification Division, Fort Worth, Texas 1984-1991

Education: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Undergraduate 1975-1978
The University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona B.S. Metallurgical Engineering
The University of Texas at Arlington, M.S. Mechanical Engineering
PhD Candidate in Engineering at The University of Texas at Arlington.

Your hospitality and assistance was greatly appreciated. If you have any questions regarding the record of visit, please feel free to contact me at (817) 560-9993. Best wishes in your efforts to complete the Bearcat. If I can be of further assistance, please don't hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

Michelle Corning

TRANSPORT TECHNOLOGIES, INC. • 11255 SPUR 580 WEST, SUITE 111 • ALEDO, TEXAS 76008
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The evaluation below details the extent to which 121776 was vetted at the time. The restoration of an F8F had not really happened yet, all of them were simply maintained in place. Only airplanes that suffered engine failures were "restored" but in reality these were just repair jobs and a refresh by today's yardstick. This aircraft was unmolested and the first one the "restoration" industry really has a chance at. Consequently, it was gone through, but almost no structure was replaced except for the outer wing panels which were discarded by Kaman Helicopter in 1963.

Jun 09 00 08:26a

Jim Fausz

850-828-8113

P. 4

ADD
5-30-00

TRANSTECH

Record of Facility Visit in support of the Grumman F8F Bearcat

PURPOSE OF VISIT: The purpose of this visit was to evaluate the metallurgical and structural condition of the spar and spar caps of the center wing section of a Grumman F8F Bearcat. This evaluation was conducted at the request of Mr. Jim Fausz of Bluebird Aviation. The visit and evaluation occurred May 19, 2000 at Bluebird Aviation's Milton Florida facility.

ACTIVITY: A general evaluation for condition, protection and fixturing was completed for the wing center section. This included a check for corrosion, wear, discoloration or deformation of the assembly, details and base material. A complete visual evaluation with a dedicated light source and a 10X power magnifying glass was conducted on the center section spar. The evaluation included a detailed look at fasteners, rivets, bolts and fittings, with special attention given to typical high stress areas such as assembly junctions and forged fittings.

OBSERVATIONS: The aircraft paper work documented this wing center section was from airplane serial number 121776, registration N68RW. The wing center section was secured in a rigid steel fixture and housed in dry, well ventilated insulated building. A few skin panels were removed to provide access. The spar, upper and lower spar caps, cove panels and surrounding skin were stripped of paint and chromate for visual inspection. The major portion of the spar cap surfaces were clean enough to show evidence of the manufacturing mill machining operations. The skin panels were still clearly marked with alloy and temper. Minor corrosion was found in several locations. The steel forging bath tub fitting at the upper right hand side end contained corrosion on the tension side of the fitting hole. This area was marked. On the right hand side of the wing, minimal surface corrosion was found on the outside flange of the lower spar cap where the wing skin appeared to trap moisture at the skin panel edge. At the left hand side upper wing spar cap in the same cove panel as gun mount structure, a sharp line depression approximately 3/16 inch long near where rivet bucktail removed was marked. No cracks were found on the 10X visual evaluation. All installed rivets maintained pull up and grip tension from installation. There were no signs of oblong, oversize or wallowed holes. No popped rivets were found. All fasteners were found to be perpendicular and secured. All manufacturing tooling holes were found to be circular.

RESULTS: Areas of corrosion were marked for cleanup. Small, shallow areas of light corrosion were found in cove panels coincident with gun mounts on both the right and left hand side of the wing. The total area of corrosion was found to be less than five square inches. All areas of corrosion should clean up with minimal material removal, (less than three mils.) There was no indication of wear, twist or permanent deformation. There was also no indication of structural overload that would be evidenced by deformation, loose or missing fasteners, or elongated holes.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Clean minor corrosion, and reapply protection with surface treatment and prime.
2. Blend left hand side depression and dye penetrant inspect for evidence of cracks. This should be done in accordance with the manufactures recommended service procedures.
3. Maintain fixturing during reinstallation of wing center section skins.

Michelle M. Corning 5/25/2000
Michelle M. Corning, B.S., M.S. FAA DER

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Pictures taken 15 January 2003 by a bystander showing the first flight of F8F N68RW after the restoration by Bluebird Aviation of Milton, Florida. This company was run by Jim and Ann Fausz who apparently had set up shop in Florida to manage and run the restoration for the Lone Star Museum. Tom Gregory did the test flying of the aircraft. Interestingly the center section of the aircraft is painted grey primer, and the cowl and aft fuselage among other parts are blue. This is a far different world than today when aircraft are nearly 100% completed and look "perfect".



The initial restoration was begun in Galveston and continued over a two year period from 1996 through 1998. During September 1998 the aircraft was then trucked to Milton, Florida for completion and flew 15 January 2003. After some initial squawks were worked out the aircraft was delivered to the museum in April of 2003, the plane flew for two years before taking the colors of Blue Angel #1 during 2005.



Some photos of the aircraft on display at Lone Star in Texas. The aircraft was rarely flown during their ownership. Their facility and storage conditions were first rate and the aircraft was maintained in flying condition.

The Sale

Lone Star Air Museum decided to part with 121776 during May 2011 and the aircraft was purchased by the current owner Mr. John O'Connor, a businessman and resident of Chicago, IL who had long harbored an appreciation of the type. After 12 years of ownership Mr. O'Connor is still clearly in love with the aircraft, both as a pilot and as a historian. His custodianship of the aircraft has been an adventure unto itself, and the aircraft's flights with current Blue Angel aircraft and its unique paint scheme have created an iconic surviving pedigree and calling card for the owner of this plane.



Photographed by Eric Dumigan in these two photos, Mr. John O'Connor is briefing for a phot mission with the pilots of the U.S. Navy Blue Angels. The exclusivity of this type of mission cannot be overestimated as fewer than 100 civilian pilots have ever been credentialed to fly with current military aircraft. The dedication and effort put forth by Mr. O'Connor to do this is an incredible effort by any civilian person. The personal honor, the accountability equivalent to a professional aviator and responsibility to fly precisely are critical to be invited to participate in such a flight.



Comparison Aircraft

Should one consider purchasing an F8F Bearcat these are ALL of the aircraft than can be chosen from. It is potentially true that a project Bearcat could potentially be recovered from Thailand where 4 of them allegedly remain. There are also the parts and remains of several crashed F8F-1 and 2 airframes in Texas with Ezell Aviation. Both of these options would require large sums of money and a long restoration period. For the purposes of this work, the following aircraft are the ones possibly available now.

In any estimation of value comparison sales are key for both buyers and seller to accurately gauge their appetite for a particular purchase. With the F8F Bearcat, the time between sales, its rarity, and the very individual nature of each aircraft requires a different approach. To assist in the process of determining value each surviving civilian F8F is profiled as a “comp” or comparison sales offering. In this comparison positive and negative aspects to each aircraft are thumbnailled to allow the viewer of this document to draw their own conclusions as to value and obtainability.

Most of these are simply unobtainable aircraft unless a well over market number is offered. They are cherished family possessions. Currently only two of them, both F8F-1 airframes, seem to be in a position to be sold in the next 3-7 years, and this is just a guess. The rest are very established in their homes. It is possible that Mr. Rod Lewis would sell a couple of his F8F-2 aircraft, but the prices he has sold planes for in the past have been very high, so the high potential cost must be accepted.

The following planes listed are all of the civilian F8F airframes that are available. There are no other complete aircraft. Each of these 16 planes are “the marketplace” and are listed below and profiled on the following pages except for 121776, the subject aircraft shown below.

90454	95255	95356	122095	121614	121679	121707
121714	121748	121752	121776	122619	122629	122637
122674						

G-58B c/n D.1262

**F8F-1** Bu. 90454

Jens Meyerhoff of Falcon Field, AZ, "3F8"

The oldest Bearcat survivor is the 18th one built, registration N9G. Perhaps due to that early build the aircraft ended up at a USN Technical school in Norman, Oklahoma as an instructional airframe for new maintenance personnel. Obtained by E.D. Weiner this aircraft was restored first, flying 24 March 1959 and being a simple alternative to the regulatory problem of flying an F8F-2 at the time. Sold and advertised as an air racer, the aircraft had a long and well photographed life. On 26 May 1995 the aircraft was damaged during a forced landing and restored over a 6 year term to its current condition. Painted as an early F8F-1, this restored aircraft is correctly marked in pre 1947 paint and in excellent condition. Purchased by Jens Meyerhoff in April of 2009, the aircraft has been owned by him for 14 years and could eventually be a candidate for sale and is one of four civilian F8F-1's.

Rare F8F-1 "short tail" aircraft. Faster than the F8F-2, but not as refined as the F8F-2. Beautifully restored and finished after decades of civilian use. Restoration completed 2001 after off airport crashlanding.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor

**F8F-1** Bu. 95255

N58204 Lewis Fighter Fleet

This rare F8F-1 is unique in that it is one of the only "combat veteran" F8F-1's that has survived. After USN service she was shipped to Indochina 28 May 1954, but was stocked in reserve and was not used in operations. By 1956 she had been allocated to the new South Vietnamese Air Force and eventually was preserved as a gate guardian at Tan Son Nhut Airbase until acquired by the Salis Family in 1987. Shipped to the USA there was initially difficulty in registering the aircraft due to its origin, but the plane was restored over a five to seven year period with work being completed at Santa Monica, Mojave and Salinas, California. A new wing spar had to be fabricated for the aircraft as well as many other structural parts. David Price owned the aircraft during this time, selling the plane to Tony Banta in 1997. Both owners raced the aircraft at Reno with good results and no damage. In 2006 the aircraft was sold to the Lewis Fighter Fleet and was Mr. Lewis's first stock F8F Bearcat.

Proven restoration with several years of 350 mph laps recorded at the Reno Air Races. , New Spar and 7 year restoration completed 1995. One of four that is owned by Mr. Rod Lewis in Texas.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor



F8F-1 Bu. 95356

N7247C Echo Matrix LLC. Bentonville, AR

Completing a 5 year restoration Ezell Aviation in Breckenridge Texas this aircraft is the first “basket cae” restoration of an F8F-1 to be completed. The aircraft was first registered and flown civilian in 1963 and had three owners before being crashed near Madison, Wisconsin 26 April 1969. The wreckage became a project that was driven by Dusty Dowd who collected parts all over the country. A dig at the NLA Charleston Rhode Island recovered parts from two buried Bearcats that had crashed there in the 1950’s Bu. 95089 and Bu 121470 and added to the cache. The Texas Bearcats LLC formed in 2012 began a restoration of this aircraft in 2012 and it is believed a second one is underway. This aircraft experienced engine runs during 2023 and is almost finished. It is believed that the aircraft has been acquired by a Walton family member. From Warbird Digest reporting:

“TFLM acquired the wreckage of 95356 and F8F-2 BuNo 121528, along with a multitude of used and new old stock parts from John “Dusty” Dowd of Syracuse, Kansas, as well as the remains of the late-Howard Pardue’s XF8F-1 BuNo 90446 and an F8F-2 that belonged to the late-Robert Kucera. Because it was the best candidate for restoration, Ezell Aviation began to work on 95356 in 2012. One of the key elements of this restoration was the construction of a new stainless steel spar to replace the original aluminum spar. Chad Ezell recently spoke to Warbird Digest about the inherent design flaws of the original spar. The technical aspects are beyond the scope of this report, but in a nutshell the new spar is heavier but is twice as strong as the original. Ezell added, “We’ve made steady progress on it and currently we have the engine on it, the gear is in it, as well as 90% of the sheet metal. One of the big challenges we are working on now is the exhaust panels that run from the exhaust stacks and overtop of the wing. It’s a stainless steel piece that is about 28-30 inches long and it has a lot of curves in it.”

“To whet the appetites of enthusiasts worldwide, Ezell said there are enough remaining parts to build two more Bearcats, one of which could be built as a dual control aircraft, while the other could be

packaged and sold as a project. That being said, Texas Flying Legends Museum and Ezell Aviation have given fans of the Grumman Iron Works much to look forward to.”



It must be assumed that the cost of this aircraft's restoration would be at the lower limit of some estimates, perhaps \$6,000,000.00, but that is a true guess. The P-38 restoration from a better starting point years ago was close to \$9.5M USD, so this ballpark guess is instructive. There may be two more aircraft coming from Ezell Aviation, but the completion prices on those two projects will be high.

Attributes to value:

Best and most complete restoration to date

A new zero time and perfect aircraft once completed, stainless steel wingspar.

Highest standards of workmanship.

Difficulty of acquisition:

The Walton family is one of the wealthiest in the United States, and no offer will change anyone's life.

The aircraft is unique and would be very expensive to obtain or require years of work to duplicate. Two more projects are available, but their cost to completion would be in excess of \$6,000,000.00 each.

**F8F-1B** Bu. 122095

Tom Wood, Indiana N2209

The "other" Southeast Asian origin aircraft this one was a Royal Thai Air Force aircraft that was delivered during the 1950's. After her service was completed this one was preserved outside the government offices in Bangkok, Thailand from roughly 1965 to 1986. Purchased by the Salis family this aircraft was recovered and then sold to Stephen grey of the Duxford, UK based "Fighter Collection". Stored there from 1988 to 1992 the plane was shipped to the USA for restoration and was restored to airworthy over a 7 year period. This aircraft probably had a new wing spar made in the same run with 95255 and benefitted from the restoration at the same time. Purchased by Tom Wood of Quality Leasing Co. in Indianapolis, Indiana, the plane was finished and first flown in February of 1999. Owned by Mr. Wood since 1998, this aircraft is approaching the 25 year mark for ownership and may be a candidate for eventual sale.

Attributes to value:

Restored by the year 2000, new spar and complete restoration from static hulk recovered from Thailand. Immaculate restoration. Approaching the 25 year hold point for the owner.

Beautifully marked and the only F8F-1B in existence.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor



F8F-2 Bu. 121614

N747NF Lewis Fighter Fleet.

The earliest surviving airworthy F8F-2, this aircraft was the first Confederate Air Force Bearcat and was purchased from Litchfield Park, Arizona by Lloyd Nolen, and Lefty Gardner in 1958 for \$805.00. Flown to Texas, the plane was registered N7957C and was flown for ten years before a wheels up landing occurred 23 August 1968. Repaired the plane rejoined the CAF and flew until May of 1974 when an off airport forced landing damaged the aircraft significantly. Stored by the CAF, it was purchased by Stephen Grey who was seeking a Bearcat and shipped to Chino for restoration in 1986. Purchased against work done by the Fighter Rebuilders staff in 1992, the aircraft was sold while still under restoration to Mr. Rod Lewis in 2008. First flown 6 May 2009 the aircraft received a silver paint scheme and Thai colors.

Restoration from 1992-2009 as a part time project a great amount of care went into this aircraft.

Unknown if the aircraft has a new wing spar, restored after two gear up incidents and long term storage.

Difficulty to obtain is hard to determine, one of four owned by Mr. Lewis.

**F8F-2**

Bu. 121679

N818F Walt Bowe, CA.

Recently sold to Mr. Bowe, this aircraft holds the record for the longest civilian ownership hold, some 58 years! Bud Marquis of Marysville, CA purchased this aircraft as N4992V in 1959 and sold the aircraft to Larry Hamilton of Sonoma, CA in 1963. On 19 February 1964 he was landing at Monterey when the gear folded up and the plane was damaged. By June local resident aircraft dealer Mike Couthes owned the aircraft and while it appears the aircraft was repaired, it is unclear if it ever flew. Stored in his museum for many years and part of the American Aircraft Sales LLC the aircraft was offered and sold to Mr. Bowe for \$2.8 Million USD in 2022. The aircraft, needing restoration, is now being restored in California.

Attributes to value:

Low time and very rarely flown.

Beautiful distinctive paint scheme from the 1960's.

Difficulties for acquisition:

Now a known quantity, the aircraft will probably not be for sale for some time.

A time capsule, but an aircraft that may need extensive work after half a century of storage.

**F8F-2**

Bu. 121707

Steve Hinton, Newport Beach, CA

This F8F, owned by Steve Hinton, will probably not be sold by the Hinton family ever, and is the product of a 40 year effort to return a Bearcat to the Planes of Fame Air Museum. Painted in the markings of the original Bearcat owned by Ed Maloney (now the F8F with Stephen Grey) this aircraft is a triumph of their restoration acumen. Built from the substantial remains of Elmer Ward's Gulfhawk IV restoration which was heavily damaged at Oshkosh in 1993, the restoration lasted from 2005 until 2020, a full 15 year project. This aircraft is similar to the profiled 121776 as it was the other Kaman Helicopter airframe that reached the civilian market during the 1980 time frame. It is aircraft D.1081 but was registered as D.739A, the paperwork for the original Alford Williams G-58A. N3025 is considered a Limited Category F8F Bearcat and is interesting as an F8F-2 flying on F8F-1/G-58A paperwork!

Unique Attributes to Value:

Limited Category G-58A civilian Bearcat Paperwork from the Williams family as NL3025

F8F-2 airframe completely restored after a serious off airport crash by Fighter Rebuilders.

Could be converted to the original 1947 Gulf Oil "Gulfhawk" G-58 paint scheme at some future date.





F8F-2P Bu. 121714

Stephen Grey, TFC Duxford U.K.

Stephen Grey chased the F8F for several years owning project Bearcats Bu. 122095 and then Bu. 121614 before leasing/purchasing N700HL in flying condition during 1981. He loved the aircraft and the Flying Legends show, built around the astonishing collection of the Fighter Collection, showcased the F8F and Stephen with the "Joker" routine flown each year. The Grey family placed the aircraft in the Fighter Collection for 1998 year when she was reregistered G-RUMM. Once owned by Ed Maloney as N4995V and then Harold Beal and Chub Smith, this aircraft is the only F8F in Europe. It is doubtful this aircraft would be sold for any reason. Built a an F8F-2N she was converted to F8F-2P status during service. Surplused to the Air Museum January of 1957.

Attributes of Value:

Operational for 50 years as an airshow aircraft

Early Ed Maloney history and never damaged or raced.

Family that owns this aircraft would be very reticent to sell the aircraft, owned for last 42 years.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor

**F8F-2**

Bu. 121748

Comanche Warbirds, Texas

One of two F8F Bearcats owned by this family, Bearcat 121748 was purchased during 2008, which was 24 years after they bought their first one! aircraft spent 5 years in France in Armee de L'Air colors before being re-imported in 2004 by Ray Dieckman. This Bearcat sold for \$3.2 million dollars in 2008 and was the highest selling Bearcat for the time. Maintained in excellent condition, this low time aircraft was refreshed from 1997 to 1999 by the Sanders family in Lone, CA before going to Europe, then repainted when it returned. It is doubtful that this aircraft will be sold by the Freidkin family.

Purchased by Bob Meyers in 1958 and registered N1029B this was an east coast Bearcat that was licensed ed in Hackensack, NJ. Several owners and registered N618F and N200N. Purchased by the Whittington Brothers from the Beal/Smith partnership in 1980 after Chub Smith was killed the aircraft was stored from 1980 to 1997 in Fort Collins, Colorado. Sold to Geroge Perez in 1998 he painted the aircraft an all over red, color notwithstanding the aircraft then led a reclusive life in Sonoma, CA. Sold overseas as F-AZRJ the plane was with Rene Bouveret from 2000 to 2004. Registered N224RD and currently N1DF with Commanche Warbirds of Texas.

Reno 1966

France 2002



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor



F8F-2 Bu. 121752

John Sessions, Seattle, WA

Bu 121752 like most F8F's has had a long civilian life, but this one has lived a lot of interesting lives. The first F8F-2 to attempt to be licensed, the aircraft was owned by John Dorr for a while before passing to Tom Matthews and then famed naval aviator Walt Olrich. Raced under numerous names, this aircraft eventually went to England with the Fighter Collection from 1995 to 1998 and was one of two there. Returning in 1998 she went to astronaut Bill Anders on 15 April 1999 and then to Mr. John Session on 7 September 2006. Still owned by him the aircraft is on display at Madras, Oregon with the Air Museum there. Based on a civil judgement against Mr. Sessions it is possible that this aircraft may be up for sale at some point. Registered N800H, she was ex N2YY and N7827C.

Well maintained, though not listed as ever having been restored.

Long civilian history, raced sporadically from 1964 to 1977 at Reno.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor



F8F-2 Bu. 122619

Lewis Fighter Fleet

De-chrome Cat is the ex-Whittington Brothers' "Chrome Cat" a product of the early 1980's warbird movement. There was a time when chroming things was seen as a restoration upgrade, but that was before it was discovered that chroming created corrosion underneath due to electrolysis action. The aircraft's landing gear and other parts were all replaced by spares to allow the aircraft to continue to be flown safely. Originally a Lloyd Nolan and Lefty Gardner CAF aircraft in 1959 this plane went to Harold Beal and Chub Smith from 1973 through 78. Acquired by Don Whittington in 1978, it was customized at that time. The Whittington family was involved in drug importation, auto racing and a bunch of other activities and so the aircraft was displayed "out of reach" with the EAA for two decades in Oshkosh. Passing to World Jet and then Ron Bucarelli the aircraft came up again for sale in 2006. Purchased by Rod Lewis 23 January 2008 the aircraft has been owned by him since that time, and he spent the money and time to de-chrome the cat. One of four that he owns it is doubtful the aircraft will be for sale.

Pictured below at Chino airport in the late 1960's, N7958C with the CAF, is ex N700F and currently registered N14WB with the Lewis Fighter Fleet.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor



F8F-2 Bu. 122629

Preserved Lewis Fighter Fleet.

Registered as N777L the famous “**Rare Bear**” holds the absolute piston engine speed record at 528.33 mph. She also holds the time to climb record as well. Heavily modified, this aircraft is preservation worthy in its own right, and with its famous three bladed propeller and speed record configuration parts in situ, is a unique collectible. Racing was hard though, and the Bear had several belly landings in her career (see below). It is not easy to fly or even a potentially airworthy aircraft due to the unique engine and setup efforts required for flight. It is also evidence that the original unrestored Bearcat is plenty strong and capable. It is hoped that the aircraft will be preserved, but the demise of the Reno Air Races and the lack of public interest in the propeller speed records mean that this aircraft’s accomplishments may eventually fade. A stunning aircraft to those of us who saw her run in the 1990’s. N777L is unique and special and deserving of Museum display in her race configuration.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O’Connor



F8F-2 Bu. 122637

Comanche Warbirds, Texas

Initially Owned by William Johnson of Miami in 1963, sold to John Church of Hackensack in 1966 and then obtained by Dr. Sherman Cooper of Merced, Ca in 1968 this aircraft was bought back by John Church in 1971! Staying in New Jersey for just two years she went to Mr. John Gury in St. Louis in 1973 and stayed with him until 1980. John Herlihy and Cecil Harp owned the plane next, with Mr Harp selling the aircraft to Mr. Tom Friedkin in 1984. With Mr. Friedkin and Cinema Air, the plane found a long term home, and has remained there to this day, some 39 years. Currently held by Commanche Warbirds, the aircraft is maintained in Texas and is one of two the family owns. The aircraft is not expected to ever be sold.

Currently N8TF, ex N1033B and N198F this aircraft is pictured below at Reno during 1971.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor



F8F-2 Bu. 122674

Commemorative Air Force, Camarillo, CA

Registered N7825C to Mr. E.D. Weiner of Los Angeles, Ca in 1958 it is probable that this aircraft was sold to him by the U.S.N. for \$805.00 at Litchfield Park, AZ. Leo Demers of Aurora, Oregon purchased the plane in 1963 and the Bearcat probably made quite a contrast to the large spray aircraft he normally kept around! He resold the plane that same year to Larry Hamilton of Sonoma, she passed to Richard Tobey of Newport Beach, CA in 1966. Sold on to Paul Finefrock in Oklahoma in 1969 he passed the plane to Gary Levitz the same year. Mr. Levitz owned 25C for several years before passing the aircraft either by sale or trade to the Confederate Air Force on 8 February 1972. Unfortunately, on the delivery flight to the CAF the plane was damaged in a forced landing near Harlingen! Repaired the plane flew with the CAF for another 12 years before the plane overturned in another forced landing near Riviera, Texas 19 April 1984. After repairs the plane was ferried to Chino, CA for a thorough restoration that lasted until she flew again 17 December 1991. Flown since then by the CAF in Camarillo, CA this Bearcat has been owned by the CAF for half a century and should continue in CAF ownership in perpetuity.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor



G-58B D.1262

Palm Springs Air Museum

The rarest of the Bearcat fleet is the last one made, #1,262, or G-58B N700A. This aircraft is unique in that it is not an F8F Bearcat, but the “one off” aircraft built at the end of the line for company use. Mr. Roger Wolfe Khan, Field Representative for Grumman was given this aircraft for company use 7 January 1950 and used the “Red ship” as she was known for almost a decade. Grumman gifted the aircraft to the Cornell Aeronautical Labs in Buffalo during July 1959 for their flight test programs. Used there for 6 years, the “Red ship” was sold to Dr. Bill Ross in 1966, an early collector of some very special planes. Bill Fornoff got the plane in 1969, painted it in his “company” scheme and kept the special Cat’ until 1977 before passing it to Doug Champlin in 1981. Displayed at his Fighter Museum in Mesa, AZ for a few years, the plane was sold to Mr. Bob Pond in 1984. Bob achieved the rare feat of collecting “one of each” of the Cat family and it joined the FM-2, F6F, and F7F. Eventually repainted in Dark Sea Blue FS15042 and with Bob’s initials on the tail this aircraft is displayed at the Palm Springs Air Museum and has not flown in almost two decades. While no longer owned by one person, the aircraft is held in a museum collection that is financially strong and well operated. It is not expected that any of these aircraft will come to market in the future. Her original paint scheme was simply beautiful.



F8F-2 N68RW

Mr. John O'Connor



Appendix I

Fates of the Original Blue Angel Bearcats: While it is not possible at this time to say which ones were the first four, 94990, 94992, 94996, 95000 may have been the first few picked up from the factory.

94985 landing Watsonville, CA aircraft wrecked, date unknown.

94986 The first Blue Angels loss, NAS Jacksonville Airshow. Performing during a Cuban eight maneuver the aircraft crashed due to wingtip separation, 29.9.46 Lt. (JG) Ross Robby Robinson killed. Team Aircraft #4.

94989 After team use this aircraft had a hard landing aboard the USS Philippine Sea, 10.3.50, skidded on deck. Possibly stricken after this accident.

94969 Post team use this aircraft ditched 2 miles east of Kaneohe NAS, Oahu. 10.10.48, pilot ok

94990 Sent to training command after team use, wrecked when the landing gear collapsed on landing NAAF Canabiss Field TX 11.02.49.

95134 Allocated to a training squadron after team use, this aircraft lost during a wave off, pilot induced torque roll landing approach to the USS Cabot CVL-26, pilot killed 21.4.52.

95144 Training use, then sent to storage. Sold to French AF 1953, to Thai Air Force 1955, fate unknown.

95187 Blue Angel airshow loss, crashed performing a slow roll on takeoff 24 April 1950 at NAAS Whiting Field, Lt Bob Longworth killed. (Beetle Bomb) This was the yellow "Zero" painted Bearcat.

94781, 94843, 94880, 94992, 94996, 95000, 95021, 95037, 95124 no record



F8F-2 N68RW

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