

The Other Wildcats

In Flight USA

Scott Schwartz



An Eastern Aircraft FM-2 in flight; note the shorter cowl. Most surviving Wildcats are General Motors-built FM-2s, which are powered by the nine-cylinder Wright Cyclone engine. (Scott Schwartz)

Although it was intended to be a replacement for the F4F Wildcat, the “Zero-killer” F6F Hellcat was still being developed during the early part of 1942. The company planned to stop the production of Wildcats altogether, once the Hellcat was ready for front-line service. Because the transition on the assembly line from one aircraft to another would not be instantaneous, Grumman had to find a way to maintain a steady stream of combat aircraft coming off the line, while Hellcat production gained momentum.

The answer was to have another company build F4F Wildcats and TBF Avengers.

In the meantime General Motors had stopped making passenger cars shortly after the U.S. entered the war. This left several G.M. plants with nothing to produce.

Discussions between the Navy, Grumman, and General Motors resulted in the Trenton, N.J. plant being assigned to build TBF Avengers, while the Linden, N.J. plant would build the F4F-4 Wildcat. All of this would be handled by General Motors’ Eastern Aircraft Division.

Naturally, the F4F-4s being produced by Eastern Aircraft were not called F4F-4s. Instead, these aircraft were designated as FM-1s. Eastern Aircraft was contracted (on April 18, 1942 –

the date of the Doolittle raid, by coincidence) to build 1,800 FM-1s, and the plan called for Grumman to provide Eastern with 10 partially-assembled F4F-4s to familiarize the Eastern staff with Wildcat construction. These were actually the first FM-1s to be built, and the initial flight of an FM-1 took place on Aug. 31, 1942. Like the F4F-4, these ten FM-1s were armed with three .50 caliber machine guns in each wing. And, as with the F4F-4, combat pilots complained about the reduced firing time with the six guns (more guns meant that less ammunition could be carried), and about the aircraft's sluggishness due to the weight of the extra guns. Accordingly, the FM-1s that were built after the initial ten, were equipped with only two guns in each wing.

Powered by a 14 cylinder, 1,200 horsepower Pratt & Whitney R-1830-36 radial engine that was equipped with a two-stage, two-speed supercharger, the FM-1 could hit approximately 320 mph.



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Though outclassed by its replacement – the F6F Hellcat – there was still a place for the tubby Wildcat on board the U.S. Navy's incredibly large fleet of small escort carriers. This is because the FM-1 was, well, smaller. More of them could be carried aboard these mini-carriers, and they served well, as anti-submarine and ground-attack aircraft, along with TBF/TBM Avengers.

Production of the FM-1 was halted, after 1,150 of them had been built, including the 311 that had been given to Great Britain's Fleet Air Arm (which initially referred to the aircraft as Martlet V's, and later as simply Wildcats). This was in September of 1943.

Your author has attended airshows, during which surviving Wildcats have been flown and/or displayed. It may surprise some to learn that most of the surviving flyable Wildcats are quite different than the version flown during the Battle of Midway.

Beginning in 1943, Eastern Aircraft started building a lightweight version of the Wildcat, which was known as the FM-2. The chances are that the Wildcats seen at airshows today are FM-2s; more than 4,000 of them were built, and more of these survive than any other Wildcat variant.

The FM-2's airframe was 500-pounds lighter than earlier versions of the Wildcat. In addition, the FM-2 was powered by a 1,350 horsepower Wright R-1820, nine-cylinder, which was supplemented with a single-stage, two-speed supercharger. The lighter weight and increased horsepower resulted in a very effective combat aircraft, and the FM-2 saw service with escort carrier squadrons in both the Atlantic and in the Pacific theater – the aircraft soldiering on until the end of the war.

Given that some civilian-owned FM-2s have been incorrectly painted in early World War Two paint schemes, it may be difficult to distinguish the FM-2 from the earlier FM-1/F4F variants. As stated earlier, most surviving Wildcats are FM-2s. But just for good measure, here are some other things that the observer can look for in an attempt to identify the Wildcat variant.