

## F3F Biplane Barrels Back

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*Chris Prevost's newly refurbished F3F-2, formerly displayed at the Lone Star Flight Museum, bears the colorful markings of VMF-2 (Kyle Dykes).*

Grumman F3Fs would have been iconic fighters if only because of the vivid colors that graced every one—bands, chevrons, cowlings and panels of red, blue, green, white and yellow. Most definitely yellow. The colors were the U.S. Navy's 1930s code to denote squadron, carrier affiliation, pilot rank, even an airplane's appointed flying position in its section.

But the F3F had more than just a full palette going for it. It was the Navy's ultimate biplane fighter, the end of one era and the beginning of another, since the F4F Wildcat was the F3F's direct descendant. The F4F was hardly a monoplane F3F, however, as is frequently claimed. All the two airplanes have in common is the clunky, hand-cranked retractable landing gear and some of the fuselage. Grumman built only 164 F3Fs, and they almost certainly would have been ineffective combat planes—poor cockpit visibility; minimal two-gun, rifle-caliber armament; and lousy gun platforms because of longitudinal instability. But their aggressive, bumblebee look and the fact that they were the very last biplane fighters in the U.S. inventory have made them classics. (They weren't the last Navy biplanes, though: The Curtiss SBC Helldiver followed them by two years.)

The first restored "F3F" to fly during the warbird era was owned by Doug Champlin, and operated during the early 1970s. It was in fact a Grumman G-32A, one of two civilian two-seat versions that Grumman built for company use. (A third civil single-seater was built as the Gulfhawk II, for Gulf Oil airshow pilot Al Williams.) The Champlin G-32A was wrecked after an in-flight fire and then reconstructed by Texas restorer Herb Tischler. At the same time, Tischler

built from the ground up three F3F-2s incorporating parts and data plates from several burnt-out hulks salvaged in Hawaii. The plan was to sell the new F3F-2s to finance the restoration of the two-seater, and the three -2s indeed were sold and eventually dispersed to a variety of owners.

One of them is today with Kermit Weeks in Florida. Another is owned by James Slattery and is usually on display at the Chino, Calif., warbird roost Planes of Fame. And the third F3F-2 is now in the hands of Chris Prevost, proprietor and chief pilot of the Vintage Aircraft Company, a restoration shop and biplane-rides site in Sonoma, Calif.

Prevost has just returned to the air the airplane you see here, which made its first post-restoration flight last September. It was previously displayed at the Lone Star Flight Museum. In September 2008, Hurricane Ike put many of the museum's aircraft, including the F3F-2, under water, so Prevost's work consisted largely of correcting corrosion damage and converting the aircraft from display-only to flight status.

Looks like Prevost did his work well. And who knows? Perhaps a good saltwater bath reminded the old Grumman of its original carrier-borne mission.