

Spanish Stork

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Emilio Garcia-Conde's Fieseler Fi-156 "Storch" in Spanish Civil War Nationalist markings.

[© Dirk Bende via Dave McDonald]

For all its warlike mien and malevolent insignia, the Luftwaffe version of the Fieseler Fi-156 Storch (Stork) is somehow charming—all gawky gear legs, gaping overbite engine cowling, the cabin glazing of a tomato-grower's greenhouse and an Argus inverted V8 that idles like a John Deere diesel. This famous STOL plane, with its slotted, flapped and folding wings, was a superb example of German engineering. Okay, overengineering, particularly when compared to the American approach to the same requirement. In 1941 a prescient Piper salesman, William D. Strohmeier (my own very first flight instructor), sold the U.S. Army on the efficacy of the cheap, sturdy, barebones Piper Cub as a liaison and artillery-spotter aircraft during the Louisiana war games. Though it couldn't equal the Storch's 32-mph low-speed handling, 109-mph top speed or substantial load-carrying capacity, the Piper L-4 was simple and effective.

Spanish pilot Emilio Garcia-Conde admits that he has an L-4 on his list of restoration projects, but first he had German Storch specialist Dirk Bende spend 2½ years restoring this splendid Fi-156C-7. Garcia-Conde's airplane was originally manufactured by the French Morane-Saulnier company in 1944, at a time when the Fieseler works were busy building Focke-Wulfs. Virtually all of its components are original, including the engine and instrumentation, and were part of the basket-case-but-complete condition in which Garcia-Conde bought the STOL bird. (He has installed some modern avionics and instrumentation, but they're hidden from casual view.)

In 1938 the Luftwaffe sent six Fi-156C-3s to participate in the Spanish Civil War, and Garcia-Conde has had his painted to represent one of them, complete with the X'ed rudder and black fuselage roundel. When its final paperwork is issued and it arrives from Bende's shop near Bonn, it will be the sole flying example in Spain.

As tough and capable an old bird as the Storch was, Mr. Piper's Cub eventually got its revenge. What may have been the very last dogfight of World War II on the Western Front took place not between a Mustang and a Messerschmitt but a Cub and a Storch. On April 12, 1945, two Army airmen scouting near Berlin in an L-4 saw a Storch below them and attacked it with their sidearms. Maneuvering to escape at low altitude, the Fieseler caught a wingtip and crashed. The Yanks landed nearby and took the Germans prisoner.

In defense of the Storch, Garcia-Conde points out that the L-4 had dual controls—only a few of the 3,900 Storches manufactured both during and after the war had rear-seat controls—which allowed the Americans more firing opportunities, and that the Germans were probably delighted to surrender to U.S. forces before the Soviets caught them.