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THIS PAGE: Interesting 1961 photo of de Havilland Tiger Moth PG685/A-4 at Biak Island where a squadron of Dutch Hawker Hunters was sent in 1960 to defend Netherlands New Guinea against rebelling Indonesians. Two Tiger Moths arrived to serve as glider tugs for base personnel interested in the sport. This Dutch Air Force plane still wears its RAF serial on the fin. In late 1962, the Tiger Moth was abandoned during the Dutch withdrawal. It wound up in the Philippines and then in the USA as N1300D during 1965 and is still current.



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PHOENIX FALCON

FROM LITERAL ASHES TO AN INCREDIBLE RESTORATION, THE STORY OF HOW A UNIQUE AIRCRAFT, A TRAGIC FIRE, AND A SKILLED MAN CAME TOGETHER TO RECREATE URUGUAY'S FIRST MODERN MILITARY AIRCRAFT
BY RAMIRO S. PIACENZA

During the 1930s, the Curtiss-Wright Corporation worked on the concept of an aircraft that could use a variety of engines, landing gear that could be either fixed or retractable according to customer preference, and by making small changes to the central fuselage, adapt it to different missions. Under the leadership of George Page Jr., the St. Louis branch of the company created the CW-19, an all-metal, low-wing cantilever monoplane of conventional configuration with fixed landing gear and tandem seating.

Based on the CW-19, Curtiss expanded the design to develop the CW-21, a single-seat light fighter-interceptor of which 62 examples were built for the Chinese Nationalist Air Force and Royal Netherlands East Indies Army Air Force. Once more, Curtiss developed the idea further and created the CW-22,

a civilian sport or training aircraft but also suitable for military roles such as combat trainer, reconnaissance, and general-purpose aircraft. The CW-22 first flew in 1940.

Fitted with a 450-hp Wright R-975-28 Whirlwind nine-cylinder air-cooled radial mated to a two-blade variable-pitch metal propeller, the two-seat, low-wing, all-metal aircraft had retractable landing gear, was able to achieve a top speed of 189-mph at sea level with a service ceiling of 21,800-ft.

The aircraft was sold to The Netherlands for use in the East Indies (25 aircraft) and Turkey (50), but when the United States entered WWII, the need for military aircraft of all types spiked.

Curtiss took this opportunity to present an advanced trainer version, designated CW-

22N, to the US Navy. To cope with the need for trainers, the Navy ordered 150 examples in November 1940. Further orders brought the total to 305 SNC-1 Falcons (BuNos 6290-6439, 05085-05234, 32987-32991).

NEW HOME IN URUGUAY

Uruguay remained neutral during WWII, and the nation's geographical location kept the South American country well away from the battle fronts. However, the incursion of the German cruiser *Graf Spee* in 1939, put the Uruguayan armed forces on high alert. Three French Potez XXVs and three Waco JHDs of the *Aviación Militar* (Uruguayan Army Aviation), armed with light bombs were sent to intercept the ship. Luckily, they didn't



SNC-1 Falcon 206 seen at the EMA during 1943. The aircraft was one of nine Falcons employed by the Uruguayan Army Aviation for the advanced flight training program. Two de Havilland DH.82 Tiger Moths can be seen in the background.

have to intervene, but this incident brought to the attention of the Uruguayan armed forces the sad fact regarding the obsolescence of their combat equipment, especially aircraft. A military commission was appointed and sent to the United States to acquire new aircraft in April 1941. As a result, the branch started receiving batches of modern aircraft including four North American AT-6 Texans, 21 Fairchild PT-19 Cornells, and nine Curtiss SNC-1 Falcons.

The acquisition of Falcons, together with Texans, brought flight training to a new level, introducing pilots to modern equipment. It is also worth mentioning that the Falcons and Texans were the first all-metal, retractable gear aircraft operated in Uruguay. Deliveries of the SNC-1s started in August 1942, when the first examples arrived disassembled and crated at the port of Montevideo. From there they were transported by rail to the Capitan Juan M. Boiso Lanza Air Base where the Falcons were reassembled, flight tested, and given serials 200 to 208.

Their service life started with the detachment of four examples to the *Escuela Militar de Aviación* (Military Flight School — EMA) located near the city of Pando while the remainder were sent to *Base Aérea No. 2* (Air Base Number 2) located in the city of Durazno. By 1943, the entire fleet of Falcons



Falcon 205 as it is today — a product of years of hard work.

had accumulated almost 2000 flying hours. Tragedy occurred in 1946, when SNC-1 208 (m/sn 4128) crashed during a routine sortie, with the loss of its crew.

When WWII ended, a large supply of surplus military equipment became available. Uruguay saw a chance to expand the capabilities of the aviation branch,

specially with the incorporation of additional examples of AT-6 Texans and by the late 1940s the type has taken over the training role from the SNC-1.

The surviving examples were transferred to *Base Aérea No. 2*, where they continued flying until 1951 under the *Grupo 2* (2nd Group) and after accumulating another 4583 flying hours, the Falcons





Imposing row of Navy SNC-1s assigned to VN-12 at NAS Jacksonville warming up their Wright radials on 20 December 1941. By 1942, these aircraft were transferred to NAAF Green Cove Springs, Florida.



Banking shot of US Navy SNC-1 BuNo 6291 showing the narrow rear fuselage to advantage.

were retired from active service.

SOLE SURVIVOR

Of the nine Falcons acquired, only SNC-1 205 (m/sn 4130) was marked for preservation in 1959 at the *Museo Aeronáutico*, located in Montevideo. This aircraft had served in both the EMA and in the 2nd Group until retirement.

The Curtiss moved with the museum to a new

location on Centenario Avenue in the country's capital and was at this location when on 4 December 1997 a fire engulfed the main exhibition hall, destroying many of the aircraft. The fire ran wild on the museum floor until the fire brigades were able to extinguish it, leaving 14 aircraft nothing more than burned metal.

Damage to 205 was extensive. A replica of Santos Dumont's pioneering 14bis disintegrated in the flames and dropped from the ceiling with its engine hitting the Falcon's fuselage and splitting it in two.

Flames burned inside the Falcon's cockpit consuming the 15 plexiglass panels of the canopy and completely melting the canopy frame. Both seats were gone, together with the rear instrument panel, control columns, radio control boxes, plus the mountings for the communication and radio navigation equipment; not even the glass of the instruments was spared from the fire.

The excessive heat melted the thin aluminum fuselage skin on both sides of the aircraft and destroyed the entire cockpit floor and lower fuselage structure. Smaller elements like the wooden HF radio antenna mast, plus the landing gear controls and various other command mechanisms located inside the cockpit were also lost. In other words, the Falcon was nothing more than two large chunks of melted aluminum and ashes — all covered with a thick coat of soot and chemical foam.

Museum authorities reasoned the Falcon to be damaged beyond any possible repair and considered the idea of scrapping the remains. While a decision was being undertaken, 205

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An interesting view of a Uruguayan Falcon suspended from the hangar ceiling at EMA with gear retracted and engine running.



was stored outside at a corner of the museum's venue.

A HANDYMAN

In 2005, a group of enthusiasts founded the *Asociación Amigos del Museo Aeronáutico* (AAMA); better known as *Ratones de Hangar* (Hangar Rats) with the objective of preserving the museum's collection. During their first group meeting, they decided the Falcon was going to be one of their restorations.

The challenge was daunting, and the team lacked the proper knowledge and tools to reconstruct the metal components of the fuselage, but Eduardo Luzardo, one of the AAMA members had an idea. Due to a professional relationship, Luzardo was acquainted with Rubens Cordero, an auto mechanic from Montevideo.

Cordero was an aviation enthusiast who had some previous experience working with the metal bodies of transport trucks, but he wasn't an expert on the subject. Luzardo pitched the idea to Cordero about working on the Falcon, "I proposed my idea to him in the little 'office' in his shop. I thought his answer was going to be: 'Are you crazy? No, no!'" Luzardo recalled, but Cordero gave an answer that surprised him: "I will try! But first, I would like to take a look at it before proceeding."

He accepted the job with two

This Falcon was originally operated in the Dutch East Indies but escaped following Japanese attacks and made its way to Australia where it was taken over by the USAAF. Painted in Olive Drab/Neutral Gray and named *Bert*, the plane also had a white tail like many of the P-40s operating in the area.



A Uruguayan pilot poses with Falcon 202 at the Military School of Aeronautics during June 1944.



Turkey ordered 50 Falcons and this CW-22B made a gear-up landing in the Ethiopian desert on 15 December 1942.



Interesting view of an SNC-1 tail unit undergoing repair at NAS Corpus Christi.



conditions: First, that the group provided the required materials, and, two, that he didn't have to face a fixed deadline. He would work on the airplane in his spare time. The AAMA accepted Cordero's conditions, and after getting the support and approval from museum director Col. Roberto Rodriguez, the Falcon restoration was set in motion.

On 27 August 2005, the battered remains entered Cordero's modest workshop. The process was slow, relying on archival photographs and bits of technical information in the form of manuals and blueprints.



Falcon 206 was one of the nine examples ordered by Uruguay.



Our subject aircraft after a gear-up landing.

Cordero was able to reproduce each former and every missing longeron in the Falcon's fuselage.

Working in his spare time while coping with the demands of his business; sometimes months passed by without any changes to the Falcon. This was usually followed by weeks of intense activity on the aircraft; patience and meticulous work was the only way to get the restoration done. Working like a true archeologist, every small piece like the throttle or the rear instrument panel that he retrieved from the fuselage was carefully documented and preserved for the team to carry over to the restoration.

Cordero agreed to mate both sections of the fuselage, but he couldn't tackle the restoration of the cockpit and the canopy. This portion of the project would fall to another



Falcon 205 was added to the museum collection in 1959 and exhibited outside for several years.

AAMA member, Humberto Arioni Jones, who had previous experience repairing, restoring, and even building replicas of antique racing cars. He felt comfortable enough to contribute to this endeavor.

Using the museum's photographic archive, Arioni Jones reconstructed the different elements of the cockpit that were completely melted in the fire. Both instrument panels, the cockpit access footholds, radio



On indoor exhibit, the Falcon was parked under the Santos Dumont replica. When the fire started the blazing aircraft fell on the Falcon, breaking it in two and catching the plane on fire.

NAVAL FIGHTERS NUMBER 112

GRUMMAN F2F/F3F

AND CIVILIAN VARIANTS



BY RICHARD S. DANN

GRUMMAN'S BATTLING BIPLANES!

The Grumman F2F/F3F series of biplane fighters were the last such combat planes utilized by the US Navy. Today, these pivotal aircraft are largely forgotten but GRUMMAN F2F/F3F AND CIVILIAN VARIANTS brings these classics back to life. Author Richard S. Dann has done a masterful job in creating the complete history of the fighters that would lead to the famed F4F Wildcat. Printed on quality paper, this softbound volume contains over 500 illustrations — the largest number ever printed on the two types. There is an individual history of each aircraft built along with squadron assignments, crashes, and final dispositions. As an added bonus, there is complete coverage of the civilian variants produced by Grumman. It is a sobering thought to note that the F2F/F3F dominated US Navy fighter squadrons from 1935 to 1941 and the final F3Fs were assigned to training squadrons just two months before the Pearl Harbor attack. The 192-page monograph is a must for anyone interested in US Navy aircraft.

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The remains of the Falcon were deemed nonrepairable but they were retained rather than junked.



Rubens Cordero recreating the center fuselage.

equipment supports, both seats and radio antennas and masts were either reconstructed or repaired.

Finding spare parts for the old Curtiss was difficult, but the AAMA knew where to look. The museum stored components from many aircraft, and this was the source of equipment like the gunsight and the radio loop antenna. When there wasn't a proper replacement, ingenuity came into play. Aluminum tubes from an old vacuum cleaner were used for the control columns, coupled with hand grips taken from a bicycle.

The real challenge, proved to

be the five-section canopy. All the plexiglass was gone, together with most of the horizontal framing. Fortunately for him, the vertical frames, plus the canopy railing survived, allowing for accurate measurements to reconstruct all the elements including 16 new plexiglass panels. Working from his home, Arioni Jones had to remove a thick layer of molten plexiglass that covered the frames. The canopy reconstruction was thorough, reconstructing each frame and even salvaging the bronze screws that held the pieces together from the 1940s!

On 11 October 2014, when Cordero's workshop door opened that morning people could see the results — what used to be two sections of barely recognizable burned aluminum were now assembled into a complete fuselage that looked exactly as it did when the Falcon rolled off the assembly line. The *Fuerza Aérea Uruguaya* provided a flatbed truck and personnel that, together with the AAMA volunteers, transported the Falcon to the new museum's facilities on the premises of the Carrasco International Airport some 17 miles from Montevideo, where restoration continued.

Work was far from over. The cockpit needed to be cleaned and re-equipped with the components, restored by Arioni Jones, together with pieces sourced from the



The canopy frames and seats had to be built from scratch.



The FAU provided a truck to move the newly mated fuselage to the museum.

museum's parts storage. Damage the aircraft suffered during storage while waiting for restoration had to be repaired — bumps and dents in the wingtips, stabilizer, and landing gear covers were fixed. AAMA volunteers assembled the wings, engine, cowlings, and added other details like the loop antenna and small generator propeller that were missing when the Falcon was preserved in the 1950s.

The moment of truth came when the canopy was mated with the fuselage. Here the skills shown by Cordero and Arioni Jones came to the forefront because both elements mated without any issue. The moving parts of the canopy rolled along the railings like new.

After months of detailed work, the Curtiss was ready for a new coat of paint. The AAMA did extensive research in order to reproduce the scheme worn by 205 during its time in the EMA. An FAU technician applied the overall coat of paint, with the AAMA adding the national and squadron insignias, serial, and the national flag on the rudder.

RETURN FROM THE ASHES

Some 19 years had passed since the disastrous fire that transformed the Falcon into a mass of burned metal and, like the mythological bird, the restored Falcon was unveiled to the public on 9 July 2016. Cordero's work and ingenuity was crucial but he didn't live to attend the ceremony, sadly passing away a few weeks earlier.



The Falcon arrives at the museum. The Beech AT-11 in the background is a future restoration project.



The recreated instrument panel.



Now basically complete, the Falcon receives a coat of primer prior to final painting.



Rubens Cordero (right) with Eduardo Luzardo and Humberto Arioni Jones (left).

When asked about why he decided to embark in this project he simply replied: "Because I like airplanes."

Curtiss Falcon 205 has different meanings for everyone — some might see it as one of the four surviving examples of the type, others as a piece of Uruguay's aviation history,

but for those who were involved in its restoration, 205 is the proof that when hard work, passion, and ingenuity are applied then even an old burned airplane can return from the ashes.

The author wishes to thank Eduardo Luzardo, Ricardo Varela, Julio Salvo and those AAMA members who contributed with photographs and information. Their help was crucial for this article. Photographs also came from EMA, FAU, USN, USAAF, Howard R. Holleum, Freddie Gonzales, Col. Aviator Jaime Meregalli, German Perez, Gustavo Necco, and Wilman Fuentes.

AC



The complete Falcon on display in the Museum.