



## THAI TREASURES

### A VISIT TO THE ROYAL THAI AIR FORCE MUSEUM By Dave McDonald

The history of the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) began in 1911, under the reign of King Vajiravudh, after Belgian pilot Mr. Van Den Born made the first flying demonstration of a Henri Farman IV aircraft in Thailand. Suitably impressed, His Royal Highness Marshal Phitsanulok Prachanard, Chief of Staff of the Royal Thai Army put forward the idea of setting up an Air Force Division and selected three promising officers - who were later acknowledged as the founding fathers of Thai aviation - both in flying training and aeronautical engineering. Major Luang Sakdisulyavudh, Captain Luang Arvudsikikorn and 1st Lt. Thip Ketudat were sent to France for training where they eventually graduated in 1913. The officers returned to Thailand by sea, accompanied by four Breguet III biplanes and four Nieuport for the newly created unit. The newly named 'Army Aeronautical Department' was established and the first hangar built at Sra

Pathum Airfield. As aviation in Thailand developed the original airfield was deemed too small so the government decided to move to its permanent site, Don Muang, in 1915.

The Ministry of the Defence realized the importance of air power not only for military purposes but also for other areas such as commercial aviation and transportation. Consequently it was decided that being called 'Army Aeronautical Department' did not entirely cover the operational brief of the new service and the Ministry of Defense issued an order in December 1921 changing the name of 'Army Air Division' and 'Army Flying Group' to 'Air Division' and 'Flying Group' respectively.

On 9th April 1937 the Ministry of War elevated the Air Force Division to the status of the Royal Thai Air Force, an independent service under the Ministry of War...the rest, as they say, is history!

*In 1934 the RTAF procured twelve V93S Corsairs from the U.S. and commissioned them in reconnaissance, attack and bomber missions. Photo- Dave McDonald.*



Hawk 75



Boeing 100E



Corsair V93S



Ki-55



*The museum's original location was on the west side of the airport before moving to the east in 1968.*



THE MUSEUM

The Royal Thai Air Force Museum was set up in 1952 with the purpose of collecting and restoring defence articles from different periods of Thai aviation history up until the present. The current museum was constructed on 26th March 1968, completed on 15th November, 1968 and officially opened to the public on 24th January 1969. The exhibits at the museum feature many types of aircraft rarely found anywhere else in the world and in some cases are the only known survivors. If you are in Bangkok it is well worth the effort to try and visit the museum, although it can be somewhat difficult to get to! The most convenient way to visit previously was to set aside several hours before a flight out of Bangkok's Don Muang International Airport, as the museum is positioned relatively nearby on Paholyothin Road. However this has now become more challenging with the new Suvarnabhumi International Airport in operation as of late September 2006. This has unfortunately caused a substantial drop off in casual visitor numbers, especially tourist groups from Hong Kong and China, whom, although having little interest in the historical significance of the aircraft, liked to pose for photographs beside them!

THE EXHIBITS

Building One houses the aircraft flown by the RTAF following WWII and indigenous designs. Among the highlights here are the two aircraft of naval design; the Fairey Firefly I, c/n F7402, MB410 of which the RTAF received ten F1s and two T2. These were designated 'Attacker Type 4' in Thai service. The Curtiss SB2C-5 Hell-diver Bu.83410, c/n 366 is one of six that was supplied by the United States in 1950 and the RTAF designated them 'Attacker Type 3'. Two liaison types are on display, the Stinson L-5 Sentinel, c/n 44-16985, ten of which were purchased from the RAF when they were based at Rangoon in January 1947, and the Piper L-4 Grasshopper, c/n 45-4773, which is one of forty two of the type purchased as war surplus from the Allies after WWII. One of the more unusual types is the full scale replica of the locally designed two-seat bomber, the 'Baribatra' of 1927. Around twelve were built by the Aeronautical Service Workshops at Don Muang up until 1933 and were powered by a Bristol Jupiter, BMW, Curtiss D-12 or Pratt & Whitney Hornet engine. Three accurate replicas were built in the 1990s and two are on display at the museum. No collection would be complete with at least one example of the venerable Tiger Moth, c/n 82794 and T-6 Texan c/n 51-14666. There are two of the latter, one of which is dis-



Dave McDonald

The Ki-55 Tachikawa 'Ida' was a small two-seat army cooperation aircraft with fixed undercarriage. The type saw considerable use with the Imperial Japanese forces in Asia.



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The RTAF bought two Boeing 100E in 1931 and they served up until 1949, making them the last operational Boeing biplane fighters in the world.



Dave McDonald

Twenty four of the Curtiss Model 68B Hawk III were delivered to Thailand during 1935-36, some of which were active until 1949.



Michael Orling

Twelve Hawk 75Ns were delivered to Thailand. They were involved in the Thai invasion of Indo-China in January 1941 and saw limited combat against the invading Japanese in December 1941.





Salpinik Promthep

In December 1951, the RTAF received twelve Fairley Firefly which served with Wing 7 until 1954.



Salpinik Promthep

Forty-two United States Piper L-4 Grasshopper liaison aircraft were purchased at the end of WWII. This was followed by ten Stinson L-5 Sentinels (rear) in 1947.



Dave McDonald

In 1950 the RTAF purchased thirty Spitfire Mark XIVs from the United Kingdom.



Dave McDonald

The United States supplied 204 Grumman F8F-1 Bearcat fighters to the RTAF where they were designated 'Fighter Type 15'



Dave McDonald

The Skyraider is a composite of several airframes and is most likely a refugee from the Vietnam War.

played in front of Building Two, (c/n 44-81796), these being the survivors of 138 aircraft delivered to Thailand, where they were active from 1948 to 1981.

Building Two is really the highlight of the exhibition and the reason a visit is a must for those interested in unique aircraft of yesteryear! It houses several extremely rare and some 'one of a kind' survivors, the Boeing 100-E c/n 14888 being one of them. The initial aircraft in this series of Boeing biplane fighters were the Types 83 and 89, which first flew in 1928. The US Navy adopted the design and placed an order for 27 aircraft as the F4B-1 (Boeing Model 99), the first aircraft being delivered in May 1929. The US Army Air Corps followed suit, ordering the aircraft as the land-based Boeing P-12A. Further orders raised the production total to 586 examples, with overseas customers including Brazil and Spain. The Thai military bought two of these aircraft in September 1931. Another sole survivor is the Vought V-93S Corsair, c/n 14682. On 30th March 1933, twelve observation-attack Vought V-93S Corsairs were purchased and shipped to Thailand in 1934 where they were designated 'Attacker Type 1'. The aircraft served in the reconnaissance, attack and bomber role. Later the RTAF Directorate of Aeronautical Engineering was able to produce 150 Corsairs in 1936, 39 & 40, and they became the first air combat fleet to serve in the French Indochina conflict during October 1940-May 1941. The aircraft on display is one of these license built machines.

In early 1935 an order was placed with the United States for 24 Curtiss Hawk III and a manufacturing license was also purchased. The first twelve Hawk IIIs were shipped to Thailand in August and the remaining dozen arrived in late 1935, where they were designated 'Fighter Type 10'. Fifty Hawk IIIs were locally built during 1937 and 1939. This Hawk on display appears to carry no serial numbers, although an engine number of 23399 has been quoted for this machine. Another of the Curtiss Hawk family is displayed, the Curtiss Hawk 75N, c/n 12763, 'Fighter Type 11'.



Twelve Curtiss Hawk 75N fighters were also ordered from the US and transferred to Thailand in 1937. The 75N is a light-weight 'export' version, with a fixed spatted undercarriage and powered by the Pratt & Whitney R1830 radial. The type saw limited action, against France when Thailand invaded Indo-China in January 1941. One such skirmish occurred on 11th January when four Hawks escorted nine Martin B-10s to bomb a French airfield at Nakorn Wat. They were intercepted by four Morane Ms 406 fighters and in the ensuing combat two MS 406 were claimed destroyed. The Hawks returned to action on December against invading Japanese forces, four being lost during the opening battles with the remainder eventually falling into Japanese hands.

A reminder of the Japanese occupation survives in the form of a Tachikawa Ki-55. Codenamed 'Ida' by the Allies this aircraft was a small two-seat army cooperation aircraft with fixed undercarriage. The type saw considerable use with the Imperial Japanese forces in Asia and 24 of these aircraft served with the RTAF throughout the period of Japanese ascendancy and the immediate post war period.

A further two machines make up the remainder of the aircraft in this section, the Fairchild 24J c/n 720EAM and a replica of one of the first aircraft to be built under license in Thailand - the Breguet 14P - the first being the Breguet III in May 1915. This machine, ex F-AZBH, arrived at the museum as a result of an exchange with Frenchman Jean Salis, who supplied the replica in exchange for a Bearcat in the 1980's.



The Curtiss SB2C-5 Helldiver is one of six supplied by the US, serving until 1955.

Michael Orlong



C-45F Beechcraft, 44-87152 c/n 8411 is an example of the seven which saw service from 1947-59 in the Transport and Communications role.

Dave McDonald

Building Three houses aircraft used during anti-communism campaign and included are the

Cessna Dragonfly and OV-10C Bronco. Building Four contains a comprehensive display of uniforms, awards, weapons, models and artifacts related to the RTAF, and is worth some time looking at, even if only to take a break from the heat-it being the only air conditioned display building!

The last of the hangars, Building Five, displays various helicopters but the highlight, for me at least, are the rocket armed examples of the Supermarine Spitfire XIVe, SM914 and Grumman F8F-1 Bearcat, Bu.94956, D.205. In 1950 the RTAF purchased 30 Spitfire XIVs from the UK and four PR.19 reconnaissance models followed in 1954. The Bearcat is one of 204 that served with RTAF, designated 'Fighter Type 15'.

Turning our attention to the outdoor display, this is where the larger and the majority of the more modern aircraft are displayed. Included in the line up are examples of the Douglas Skyraider, apparently a composite aircraft and likely an ex Vietnam refugee as the type did not serve with the Thais, two DC-3s, c/n 44-76517 and 42-100547 and a C-45F Beechcraft, 44-87152 c/n 8411. Several jets are on display with the recently painted F-84 Thunderjet, c/n 51-10582 and F-86F Sabre, c/n 52-5060 among the standouts.

Entry to the Museum is free of charge, but I do encourage you to drop some bank notes into



Sakpinit Promthep

Two T-6 Texan are displayed at the museum representing the 138 aircraft operated by the RTAF.



Sakpinit Promthep

The venerable DH82 saw service as a trainer between 1951-71. Thirty four of the famous British biplanes were delivered to Thailand.

## RTAF Museum (Dave McDonald 'Classic Wings' issue 67, 2008)

the collection box upon leaving, like all museums they are short of funds! Information relating to individual aircraft is rather sparse, noting aircraft type and performance figures and although the small contingent of staff is friendly enough they have a very limited command of English. The aircraft are in relatively good condition, with several having been repainted in recent times, although the outdoor exhibits do suffer under the oppressive heat, air pollution and tropical storms.

As can be appreciated by the number of outstanding exhibits presented in this article, a visit to the Royal Thai Air Force Museum is a 'must do' for any aviation enthusiast - you will not be disappointed!



Dave McDonald

*The construction of this indigenous two seat bomber began on 5 April 1927 and was named 'Paribatra' (pronounced Boripat) by His Majesty the King. The Boripatra was the first aircraft designed and built by the Thais and two replicas are on display.*



**OPERATING HOURS:** Open Daily from 8.00 a.m.- 4 p.m. Closed on public holidays.

For more information:  
Tel.0 2534 1853 or 0 2534 2113

**Acknowledgments:** Special thanks to Sakpinit Promthep

*The RTAF received forty five North American F-86F-30/40 Sabres. Designated 'Fighter Type 17', they served from 1961-73'*