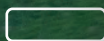




**FAGEN FIGHTERS'
NEWLY RESTORED
GRUMMAN F6F-5 HELLCAT**



STORY BY SAM OLESON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT SLOCUM

BETWEEN THE YEARS 1942 and 1945, more than 12,000 Grumman F6F Hellcats were produced, primarily for U.S. Navy operations in World War II's Pacific theater. The F4F Wildcat's larger, faster, more capable brother helped the United States gain air superiority over the Japanese from 1943 onward and became one of the most successful fighter aircraft in history. It's credited with more than 5,000 kills, or around 75 percent of the Navy's aerial victories during the conflict. With the sheer amount of Hellcats built and the elite status it rightfully earned during the course of its service, it's amazing — and a shame — that only a handful of the rugged fighters are still flying.



GIVE

95M

44M



Fan van Fagen, EAA 659292, of Fagen Fighters WWII Museum in Granite Falls, Minnesota, feels the same way and is doing something about it. After a two-and-a-half-year restoration in California, Fagen Fighters' F6F-5 Hellcat is flying again and sharing the story of the brave men who flew and maintained this aircraft aboard aircraft carriers in the middle of the Pacific during the fight against Japan.

"I felt it was something that we could add to our museum to represent something that's not as [well] represented," Evan said of the Hellcat. "Everybody loves Mustangs, and there's a lot of Mustangs, and they're a great fighter, arguably the best one. But you hear a lot of people talking about the Hellcat kind of the same way and Navy aviation out of carriers, pitching decks, terrible atmospheres, a lot of tough navigating."

Because you don't see a lot of Hellcats, especially in the Midwest, Evan said it became a mission to find one and restore it.

"I just thought it was important to get that piece of history in front of people and educate them about it a little bit because it's a major contributor to the successful ending of World War II," Evan said.



AIRCRAFT YEAR, MAKE & MODEL:
1945 Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat

LENGTH: 33 feet, 7 inches

WINGSPAN: 42 feet, 10 inches

HEIGHT: 13 feet, 1 inch

SEATS: 1

POWERPLANT MAKE & MODEL:
Pratt & Whitney R-2800-10

HORSEPOWER: 2,000

PROPELLER: Hamilton Standard

MAX SPEED: 340 knots

CRUISE SPEED/FUEL CONSUMPTION: 180 knots at 75 gph

MAX RANGE: 945 miles

MAX RATE OF CLIMB: 2,600 feet per minute - normal

SERVICE CEILING: 37,300 feet

EMPTY WEIGHT: 9,238 pounds

MAXIMUM GROSS WEIGHT: 12,598 pounds

SPECIFICATIONS



ACQUIRING THE HELLCAT

Boasting an impressive collection of World War II aircraft, including two P-51 Mustangs, two P-40 Warhawks, a P-38 Lightning, FM-2 Wildcat, B-25 Mitchell, and multiple trainers and gliders, Fagen Fighters is one of the premier warbird museums and operators in the Midwest. Missing from that collection was the U.S. Navy's most successful fighter during the war — the Hellcat.

A few years back, Evan, who is the chief pilot at Fagen Fighters, began his search for the rare warbird.

“There’s certain airplanes out there that strike a chord with people, and you hear them talk about them,” he said. “And I had just heard a lot of people — not just warbird pilots, but people that had a lot of experience, a lot of seasoned warbird pilots, and everybody — talked very highly of the Hellcat and how they handled well. They were great fighters.”

So, he started researching and learning more about these rare airplanes. He was hooked.

“So, then [I] kind of not seriously began searching for one thinking, ‘Okay, if I ever came across one, I’m going to make something work,’” he said.

The moment that turned Evan’s Hellcat search from casual to serious came when he was in California for air show legend Bob Hoover’s birthday party and happened to visit Yanks Air Museum in Chino. While touring the facility, Evan first laid eyes on the F6F-5 that he’d eventually fly. But not yet. After returning to Minnesota, he called Yanks to ask if its Hellcat was for sale. Yanks’ response was a firm “no.” Evan would continue to inquire about it for years and thought it to be a fruitless pursuit until he received a phone call from Yanks founder Charles Nichols.

“One day out of the blue, Charles called me and said, ‘I’ll sell it if you buy it today,’” Evan said.

He was taken aback that the museum was suddenly willing to sell, but Evan couldn’t pass up the opportunity. He talked with his family, made a deal, and bought it.



RESTORING 'THE HELLCAT'

The **F6F-5 Hellcat** that Evan purchased from Yanks was built in 1945 and accepted by the U.S. Navy as BuNo 78645 on March 2 of that year. It initially served two tours with VF-14 before serving stateside at VF-80 at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida. 78645 completed its military service in a reserve unit at NAS Squantum in Quincy, Massachusetts, where it flew as a drone. Following its final military assignment, Evan's Hellcat went through a couple of private owners before it was eventually purchased by Charles in 1978, and it remained at Yanks until 2017.

To restore the Hellcat to pristine, airworthy condition, Evan hired Fighter Rebuilders, conveniently located at Chino Airport. Founded by legendary warbird and air racing pilot Steve Hinton, EAA 181203, Evan knew that Fighter Rebuilders would do the project justice.

"I thought it was an obvious choice because it was on the same field, and Steve Hinton has a lot of experience with the Hellcat," Evan said. "And I wanted to go somewhere where they knew the airplane itself and not someone taking something on for the first time."

It was important to him to work with people who had experience working with Hellcats, so this was a good fit, Evan explained.

"To my knowledge right now, there's only about seven [Hellcats] that are airworthy," he said. "And of those seven, about three [are] flying. So, you don't have a lot of people to choose from."

Heading up the project at Fighter Rebuilders was Steven Hinton, Steve Hinton's son and an accomplished warbird pilot and air racing legend in his own right. He won seven national championships while flying highly modified P-51s at the Reno Air Races. Steven's mission was getting the Hellcat into flying shape, which required the replacement of various parts and an overhaul of the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engine that was performed by Anderson Aeromotive in Idaho.

"As we started opening it up, getting the engine off, it was pretty apparent that all of the hoses — fuel hoses, oil hoses — were real old," Steven said. "They were rock hard."

The fuel system definitely needed some work. The Hellcat has three bladder tanks — two in the center section wing and one in the fuselage. Those were rotten, Steven said.

"IT WHISTLES THE WHOLE TIME YOU'RE FLYING IT. AND THE FASTER YOU GO, IT WHISTLES MORE. AND THEN WHEN YOU COME DOWN, YOU BRING POWER BACK TO LAND, YOU DROP THE GEAR AND YOU OPEN COWL FLAPS, THINGS LIKE THAT. IT STARTS TO MAKE A NEW WHISTLE, JUST A HAUNTING SOUND." — EVAN FAGEN

Fighter Rebuilders out of Chino, California, performed the restoration on Fagen Fighters' Hellcat, earning the Golden Wrench award at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2021 for its beautiful work.

TRIBUTE TO AN ACE

Fagen Fighters' Hellcat is nicknamed *Death N' Destruction* and is painted to match the scheme on the F6F that Don McPherson flew as a Navy ace during World War II. For years, Evan was looking around for a paint scheme for his Hellcat and eventually found the design he wanted, which was used by Don in the Pacific more than 75 years ago.

"I was actually looking for a paint scheme long before I had purchased one because I'd been on a hunt for a Hellcat for a long time," Evan said. "Then I found this scheme and saw an article about Don, and my wife, Melissa, looked up his number and I called him up. I called him out of the blue, and he picked the phone up. And that's how our friendship started. We've been friends for about four or five years now and talk regularly. But I wanted to ask permission to paint it in his markings, and he was happy to do so and excited."

Don flew with the Navy from 1942 to 1945 and was there for some of the most significant battles of the Pacific theater, including Iwo Jima, the Philippines, and Okinawa. He closed out his service by flying over the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay during Japan's official surrender on September 2, 1945.

With the Hellcat being a single-seat aircraft, Don spoke about the unique way that he trained to fly the airplane.

"It's a one-seater, so how do you learn to fly it? You don't have an instructor to take you up and introduce you," Don said. "What they did is they gave you time enough to get in the cockpit and study all the instruments and gauges, and then they blindfolded you and you had to pass a blindfold checkout. You didn't have to learn every single little control, but blindfolded you had to be able to pick out the ones that were the most important when you were in flight. That wasn't much of a problem. I got by with that all right. Then you just get in and you start flying it — field carrier landings is what they called them. They'd have a circle marked out in a grass strip, and it was to prepare you for approaching carrier landings. You had to slip or slide the airplane, whichever you needed to do to lose altitude so you'd land with the wheels in the circles."

After training, Don went from San Diego to Pearl Harbor to Maui and then shipped out for combat.

"I was supposed to be [at Pearl Harbor] for three months," he said. "And probably just a little over two months, they got word that Air Group 83 in Maui had a pilot killed in carrier landings. I have no idea how my number came up, but ... one afternoon they flew me over to Maui. And when I got over there, I found out they were all packed and ready to go to combat the next morning. So, I got on a troop transport with guys I'd never met before and went to Ulithi and joined the Fast Carrier Task Force."

This past March, Don had the opportunity to see the aircraft that was painted after the one he flew 75 years ago. Restorer Steven Hinton flew the Fagen Fighters Hellcat to Beatrice, Nebraska, where Don lives. Through Evan's friendship with Don, he's learned a lot about the F6F as an aircraft and gained an even greater appreciation for those who flew them.

"Through getting to know each other and talking, I've learned so much about the Hellcat, so many good things," Evan said of Don. "Being able to have an ace that we can talk to — all of the stories he's told us are amazing. Don has really been someone who's helped inspire us to pursue the Hellcat restoration."



“The original tanks had a bulletproof or a self-sealing gelatin, so if they got shot, it would seal up the tank,” he said. “Anyway, the tanks had been dry for so long, the inner membrane cracked out and that gelatin becomes exposed, and it contaminates the fuel system. I think we were really looking at trying to make the airplane reliable systems-wise.”

Many warbirds are flown maybe five hours a year, and they sit for the rest of the year. Evan wanted to be able to fly this airplane 80 hours a year, like his flagship or go-to airplane, Steven said.

“That’s a pretty good chunk of time on an airplane like that, so we wanted to make sure that the airplane was going to be reliable so he could go do that, not have to fix broken stuff all the time,” Steven said.

Focusing on reliability and safety, the quality of Fighter Rebuilders’ work was impeccable, and Evan was thrilled with the end result.

“It’s fantastic,” Evan said. “The workmanship and the quality is second to none. It took about two-and-a-half years, and Steve did everything right. Our goal was to make this a safe airplane — a reliable, safe airplane — that would last for a long time. And that’s exactly what they did.”

NO TAMING NECESSARY

Following Fighter Rebuilders’ restoration, Fagen Fighters’ Hellcat first flew on January 3, 2021, with Evan taking the controls for the first time in April. He’d never flown an F6F before but had plenty of other warbird flying time. Evan said the experience was pretty much what he was expecting, based on everything he’d seen, heard, and read.

“I’d say it flies as advertised,” he said.

“And what I mean by that is it’s an airplane that you can take a 200-hour ensign in the Navy out of training in a SNJ and put them in a fighter and have them be successful.”

Evan said it’s built well and is an improvement on the Wildcat.

“I fly and I love the Wildcat,” he said.

“But the Hellcat gear is very wide on it, and it lands well. It has great ground handling, good rudder control. It climbs well. It’s got good power. You literally, when you get in that airplane, you wear it because for as big of an airplane as it is, it’s got a tight fit. So, when you’re in the airplane, you feel like you’re literally wearing it.”

One of the distinctive qualities of the Hellcat in flight is a piercing whistle that is just as obvious in the cockpit as it is from the ground.

“It whistles the whole time you’re flying it,” Evan said. “And the faster you go, it whistles more. And then when you come down, you bring power back to land, you drop the gear and you open cowl flaps, things like that. It starts to make a new whistle, just a haunting sound. It’s just really cool and something completely unique to itself.”

Evan said their goal was to make this the best example of a Hellcat out there — and they worked together to make it happen.

“It wasn’t a quick process by any means, but we just set the course to take our time,” he said. “And if it needs to be fixed, we fix it, we replace it. So, Steve was very good at making sure that we stuck to our plan and didn’t rush anything. ... It’s a centerpiece, I would call, of our collection. It’s absolutely beautiful.”





FAGEN FIGHTERS WWII MUSEUM

Founded in 2012, Fagen Fighters WWII Museum is located just outside of Granite Falls in southwestern Minnesota. Museum Director Diane Fagen, EAA 1220167, said her family's aircraft collection began to grow, and it soon made sense to create a legitimate museum for the impressive warbirds they owned.

"It more or less evolved with our family's passion for aviation and World War II-era [aircraft] in particular," she said. "The first warbird that we had was a P-51 Mustang *Sweet Revenge* and then the P-38 next. They were kept in our corporate hangar at the time, and people kept referring to that as the museum. It just gradually grew into a museum, and we kind of fell into it. It's been expanding ever since."

The museum currently has three hangars — one dedicated to trainers, another to fighters, and one that houses the museum's B-25 Mitchell. Fagen Fighters currently has about 15 different aircraft in its collection, as well as a Sherman tank, half-track armored personnel carrier, three jeeps, a tank buster, an ambulance, and other vehicles — all of which are in working order. Among the aircraft in Fagen Fighters' collection are:

- D-model Mustangs *Sweet Revenge* and *Twilight Tear*
- P-38J *Scat III*
- P-40E *Desert Shark*
- P-40K *Aleutian Tiger*
- B-25 *Paper Doll*
- FM-2 *Wildcat*

- Fairchild PT-19 and PT-26
- Ryan PT-22
- Vultee BT-13
- Erco Ercoupe
- JN-4 Jenny
- SNJ-4
- Waco CG4A glider
- Laister-Kauffman TG-4A

Diane said that keeping the museum's aircraft and vehicles in operating condition is important for the experience of visitors.

"To see it is one thing, but to hear it and watch it operate as it did, it's so much more of an experience for people," she said. "That's what we're about."

Since the museum opened nearly a decade ago, its mission has slowly evolved.

"When we opened it, we just thought it would be neat to have the World War II people come back and see what they operated or flew or had some connection to in the service," Diane said. "As it went along, it became more about having their kids come and see what they did, so they can honor their memory and their service and connect with stories they'd never heard. Now it's become more focused on the youth and teaching them what maybe they don't hear in school. Maybe there isn't time to get into details about the war or answer questions they may have. We can do that with real-life examples, rather than just an answer with words."

SHARING ITS HISTORY

Evan purchased the Hellcat with the purpose of returning it to flying condition. He's not going to let it sit in a hangar. He has every intention of sharing this important piece of aviation history with the world.

"I plan on taking it to Oshkosh," he said. "We don't do a ton of air shows. We do probably three, four a year. But I plan on using that as the airplane that I go with often because there's just not a lot. I've never actually seen a Hellcat fly or even start up until the test flight in January. And they're just not represented, especially in the Midwest. ... I want to make sure that people have a chance to see them and look at them and share them and get more exposure to them."

The Hellcat's place in aviation and warfare history is a large reason Evan decided to acquire one, as he's made clear. From a personal standpoint, having the opportunity to sit in the same seat as a 1940s naval aviator is not something lost on Evan — and he doesn't take the opportunity for granted.





Check out the digital edition

of *EAA Sport Aviation* for a video about the Fagen Fighters newly restored Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat.

“It’s very hard to describe [the feeling] because it still hasn’t hit me that I’m able to fly that airplane yet,” he said. “... It’s an honor to be able to get to fly it and to continue these guys’ story – whether it’s a Mustang or a P-40 or a Wildcat – continuing the story of these guys who flew them.”

The original pilots were obviously flying these aircraft in terrible conditions. They were unable to experience and appreciate the airplane in the same way Evan is able to in ideal weather conditions.

“We don’t have to fly them in the conditions these guys flew in,” he said. “So, when you’re flying these things, you enjoy the power and the ability to maneuver. Then you think about what these guys were using them for and the fact that they

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had to keep their eye out for people shooting at them, trying to kill them. ... It’s an honor to get to fly one of those, any of the warbirds, just because you’re continuing the story of these people.”

To cap off the aircraft’s introduction to the public since it began flying earlier this year, Evan brought the Hellcat to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2021 in July and went back to Minnesota with a Gold Lindy in tow as *Death N’ Destruction* was named Grand Champion World War II, while Fighter Rebuilders earned the Gold Wrench for its work on the F6F. *EAA*

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