

Pride of Thailand's Tango Squadron



A Bearcat returns to Thai skies

WASAPA SUWANAPATIP

BY BOB BERGIN

A Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) Bearcat is flying again in the skies over Thailand. One of 129 Grumman F8F Bearcats sent to Thailand in 1950, it flew with the RTAF until it was decommissioned in 1961, then survived decades of service as a gate guard. A Thai foundation working to preserve the country's rich aviation heritage and a restoration team of Grumman retirees put the Bearcat back into the sky.

Bringing a Bearcat back to flying condition was a major goal of Thailand's Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Thai Aircraft and its founder, retired

Group Capt. Veerayuth Didyasarin. The Grumman F8F Bearcat holds a special place in Thailand's aviation history. In the early 1950s, as the Communist threat in the neighboring countries of Indochina was growing, the RTAF started to expand. As part of the expansion, Thailand received a total of 129 Bearcats from the United States. One hundred of these were F8F-1s, while the remaining 29 were F8F-1Bs. The F8Fs served with the RTAF to protect Thailand's borders into the early 1960s, when they were replaced by F-86 Sabres and F-84 Thunderjets.

The Bearcat days were exciting ones for the RTAF, and over the

years many of the Bearcat pilots rose to leadership positions in their service. Among them was Group Capt. Veerayuth's father. Veerayuth is better known in Thailand and to his friends in the U.S. warbird community by his Thai nickname, "Tang." He grew up on RTAF bases, where his father was a pilot and later a base commander. Airplanes were his passion from his earliest days. He remembers watching U.S. aircraft taking off from Thai bases on their way to Vietnam, at times returning with battle damage. He went on to the Thai Air Force Academy and flight training. He was assigned to a North American OV-10 squadron at Chiang Mai in north Thailand.



In 1991, Tang and a group of pilots and airmen assigned to RTAF Wing 41 at Chiang Mai formed a club devoted to preserving aircraft that had a role in Thailand's aviation history. Some of these aircraft were still scattered around the country, sitting forgotten in remote corners of upcountry airfields or serving as gate guards. A few were centerpieces in children's playgrounds. The group named itself the Royal Thai Air Classics Association, but before long became known as "Tango Squadron," a play on the name of the man who had been the association's driving force.

The group's first project was a North American T-28 Trojan. For half a dozen years it had been parked in front of a radio station in the

northern Thai town of Chiang Rai. It had weathered the years well, and although it was not flyable, it was complete. The group received permission to take over the aircraft as a restoration project. It was moved to the Chiang Rai airport, and members of the association spent the next two months bringing it back to flyable condition.

As this was the group's first restoration attempt, Tang felt that he should personally make the first flight. Local villagers had been following the restoration work with considerable interest. When the morning of the test flight dawned, the villagers were there, making bets on whether the radio station's old Trojan would actually get off the ground. The first flight went off without incident, and

Tang eventually flew the Trojan over the mountains and back to Wing 41 at Chiang Mai airbase.

Successfully getting this weathered relic back into the air drew a lot of attention. Not only did the town residents know the Trojan, but because of its prominent parking spot, the airplane had become known to visitors to Chiang Rai. Making it fly again after so many years made a strong impression, and Tango Squadron started to grow. New members came from both active RTAF personnel and from the ranks of the retired officers and men who had flown or worked with T-28s and other types of aircraft that Tango planned to rebuild. Other new members came from Thailand's growing civil aviation sector and even from among



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foreign residents intrigued by Tango and its activities.

When Tango was first conceived, its stated purpose was to preserve aircraft operated by Thailand, but its mission quickly expanded to “developing” Thai aviation. Tango’s thinking was that the preservation of Thai aircraft would provide a record of Thailand’s development in aviation. At the same time, the old warbirds

being restored could be used to create enthusiasm for aviation among young Thais and help teach them aviation technology.

Tango’s old aircraft were magnets for Thai children. Their enthusiasm for the old airplanes and their interest in aviation history would be the foundation on which the future development of aviation in Thailand would be built. Thus, the Royal Thai

Air Classics Association became the Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Thai Aircraft. In January 1992, the association was registered as a Thai foundation. In April of the following year, the foundation and its goals were placed under the royal patronage of His Majesty King Bhumibol. Tango became the foundation’s first president.

In keeping with its mission, the foundation moved quickly to use interest in historic aviation as a springboard. Tango initiated an education project to give children an understanding of aviation science through courses in the history of aviation, flight theory, and other subjects. The kids also got exposure to real airplanes and to the people who work with them—all with the objective of nurturing aeronautical talent.

While education projects were being developed, the work of locating and restoring aircraft continued. The foundation sought permission from the RTAF to take over decommissioned airplanes of the types that flew in active military service. The RTAF was enthusiastic about the idea and became a major supporter of the foundation.

Tango Squadron has put together a collection of aircraft that had a significant role in the history of Thai aviation. While there are multiple



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Group Captain Veerayuth (Tang)



examples of some types, in tight economic times—such as today—a single example is kept in flying condition, and others of the same type are maintained in a “preserved” status. Among the restored and flyable aircraft are two T-6s, two T-28s, one C-47, one C-123, two L-4s, two L-5s, and two Tiger Moths. There is a flying replica of a P-64—an aircraft that was originally built for Siam but went undelivered when it became clear that war in the Pacific was inevitable.

Among aircraft that remain in “preserved” status are two T-33s, two A-37s, and one F-86. There are two Spitfires—Mk 14 and Mk 19—that will be restored at a future date and put on static display. There is also a replica T-6-based Kate and two Travel Air 2000s. One of the Travel Airs is the original *Miss Siam*, the first civilian aircraft brought to Thailand. It made a pioneering flight to China and back in 1932. Tang has flown *Miss Siam* all over the country and displayed it where Thais—especially children—can get close to a real piece of their country’s aviation heritage.

Tango Squadron also has eight O-1 Bird Dogs, six of which fly for a Thai Resource Ministry environmental program centered on the Gulf of Siam that monitors sea life

and pollution. Tango Squadron also maintains a flight of paramotors used for search and rescue. The paramotors proved their worth after the December 2004 tsunami disaster, when they were most effective in searching for missing people in mangrove swamps along the coasts.

Tango Squadron also keeps a special display in its hangar in the RTAF base in Chiang Mai: the wreckage of a P-40 that is the only remaining relic of the original AVG Flying Tigers. Hill tribe hunters discovered the wreckage in 1990. Through Tang’s efforts, it was identified as an AVG P-40 that had been hit by ground fire during an attack on the Japanese air force at the Chiang Mai airfield on March 24, 1942. With RTAF help, it was pulled from the jungle and moved to the same air base it had attacked. In 1994, Tango Squadron hosted a large group of AVG Flying Tiger Association members who traveled to Thailand to see the wreckage and, among other things, meet with the Free Thai guerillas who rescued its pilot. In 2003, Tango again hosted the AVG at the dedication of a monument erected in Chiang Mai.

With all of this going on, Tang kept his eye on one particular airplane—a Bearcat. By the early 1990s,

the Bearcat was an almost extinct species in Thailand, but there was still one doing duty as a gate guard. It had been serving with RTAF Wing Two at Lop Buri in north Thailand when it was decommissioned in 1961. It had just undergone an overhaul and was in excellent condition when it was chosen to be the Lop Buri gate guard. There was another reason Tang was interested in this airplane. His father had flown it during the 1950s. This particular Bearcat was his father’s personal aircraft when he served as the operations officer of Wing Two and later as commander of Squadron Two, Wing Two. Tang made the case for preserving that F8F, and Tango Squadron was given approval to bring the aircraft back to flying condition.

In 1995, the Bearcat was sent to Grumman at Bethpage, Long Island, where it was built. At that time, Grumman had a team of retirees who had restored more than a dozen aircraft for static display at museums in America. Some of the team members had worked on the Bearcat when it was in production. The Thai Bearcat was to be the first and only of the team’s restorations that would return to the sky. Their work was completed in early 2003, and the aircraft was returned to Thailand. The original engine was overhauled by a commercial rebuilder in the United States.

The aircraft was prepared for flight at Utapao on the Gulf of Siam, which had been a U.S. Air Force base during the Vietnam War. Tang made the first flight in October 2005. He brought the aircraft back eight minutes after takeoff when the airspeed indicator failed. It was a fortuitous choice.

The engine seized in the rollout after landing. Investigation showed that a connecting rod bearing had melted down and caused extensive damage.

An engine rebuild was not practical, and the original Pratt & Whitney R-2800-34W engine was replaced with an R-2800-99W that originally powered a C-123 Provider. Because of the difficulty of finding spare parts (originally all spares were brought in from sources in the United States) a number of replacement parts were machined in Thailand with the help of the RTAF and a Royal Thai Navy facility at Sattahip, the navy port adjacent to Utapao. Other problems were solved: After the 15th failure of aged, original Bearcat tail wheels, substitute wheels were found in-country.

Once the new engine was installed, the Bearcat was painted in the dark blue color scheme it wore when it first flew in RTAF service. Markings on the aircraft include a winged tiger head on the fuselage, which is the insignia of RTAF Wing One based at Bangkok. Two light-blue stars on the tail represent Wing One's "Starfire" Squadron Two. The large buzz numbers "1234" on the nose and the underside of the wing identify the aircraft as RTAF Wing One, Squadron Two, Flight Three, Position Four. Tang would have liked to see the aircraft painted in his father's colors, but there are no existing photographs of the paint scheme used by Wing Two that would have made an authentic re-creation possible.

The first flight with the new engine was made in February 2007. By the end of the year, the aircraft had completed 35 flights and was based at Bangkok's Don Muang Airport. The Bearcat will be flown at venues where the Thai people can get a close look at a piece of Thailand's long and rich aviation history. The Bearcat will be one of the stars in events being planned to mark the 100th anniversary of Thai aviation on February 1, 2011.

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Tango Squadron Aircraft

Wreckage of William Black Mac McGarry's AVG Flying Tiger P-40 that was hit by ground fire during raid on Japanese Air Force at Chiang Mai on March 24, 1942. The wreckage was pulled from jungle by Tango Squadron. This



is the only remaining reli of the original 100 P-40s sent to Claire Chennault in Burma for the AVG.

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Tango T-28s



Spitfire Mk. XIV.



Tango C-47 in colors of RTAF Transport Squadron 63. During WWII, this aircraft served Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten in India while he was Supreme Commander of South East Asia forces.