

Virginia Aviation History Project



Fighter Command

by Linda Burdette

Imagine yourself as a young person during World War II. Your dream is to join the “fly-boys” and you’ve been working on that dream. You’ve already had your basic training in an aircraft with the BT label (BT = Basic Trainer) and now you’re ready for the Advanced Trainer. You arrive at a small airport in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, wearing your best leather jacket and carrying your goggles (got to look the part, don’t you know?) You are continuing your flight training in one of the “Yellow Horde” – an AT-6 Texan-Harvard. The first thing that strikes you about the plane is its distinctive mustard yellow fuselage. Because this is a training plane, it needs to make a point of standing out. After all, as a trainer plane, the last thing you want is to be mistaken for a combat machine by people on the ground. “The Pilot Maker” is one of the more printable nicknames you’ve heard for the AT-6 Texan by student pilots who trained on it. It is a twin-seat trainer with a completely enclosed glass canopy, a tall body and low-set rectangular wings, student in front, instructor in the rear.



Mark and Mary Ellen Hutchins with their AT-6 Texan

You climb into the aircraft with your instructor pilot. After some brief instruction you fire up the engine. And that’s when you hear it – the incredible roar of the Pratt & Whitney R-1340-S3H1 engine. For your introduction to the AT-6, the instructor decides to do some aerobatic flying. After all, the AT-6 is a pilot’s airplane; it can roll, Immelmann, loop, spin, snap and vertical roll. It was designed to give the best possible training in all types of tactics, from ground strafing to bombardment and aerial dogfighting. And you know that this is what you’ve dreamed of for so long.

For us in the 21st century, this old-fashioned dream may seem completely out of reach. But think again. There

is a company in Winchester, Virginia, which specializes in taking us back in time to experience that thrill. Fighter Command is the brainchild of Mark and Mary Ellen Hutchins, who offer rides in their vintage AT-6 Texan-Harvard. From May until the end of October, Mark sells 30, 45, and 60-minute rides during which the guest pilot has an opportunity to fly the aircraft under his supervision and guidance. He may even demonstrate a series of aerobatic maneuvers although he admits that he modifies the aerobatics to fit the guest pilot's comfort level.

Requirements are fairly straightforward. One must first purchase a flight certificate, which is good for one year. Rides are scheduled after the flight certificate has been purchased. Weather permitting; flights are available by appointment, Monday through Friday. Due to increased air activity at the Winchester Airport, including student training flights and glider operations, weekend flights are no longer practical. Guest pilots should be under 6'6" tall and under 250 lbs. The intrepid fighter-pilot-in-training may also purchase an onboard video tape of the flight. One camera is mounted on the tail looking forward over the canopy and a second camera on the dash looks back at the pilots.

The only difference in the World War II era training flight described above and today's flight with the Fighter Command is your seat. The Fighter Command puts all passengers in the rear seat of the cockpit for safety. They report that other companies that fly their passengers from the front have had landing accidents or collisions on the ground and some of their pilots have had near misses in the air, primarily because the instructor pilot's vision was obstructed. Also Fighter Command operates in a fairly high traffic area and flying the passenger in the front cockpit, while it might be a little more fun for the passenger, would add an unnecessary level of risk for a recreational flight.

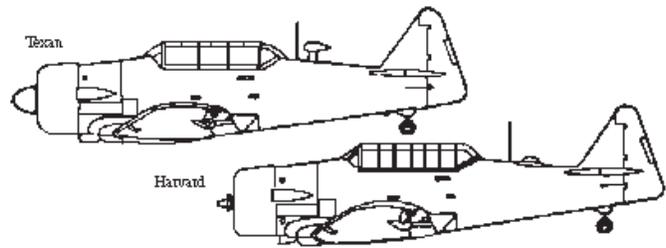
The instructor pilot is also the owner. Mark Hutchins is a CFII (Certified Flight Instructor Instrument) with over 2000 hours of dual instruction given and 3200 hours total time of which 1700 hours are in the T-6/SNJ. Hutchins grew up in an Air Force family; his father, Stan Hutchins, is a decorated WWII 15th Air Force B-24 pilot, with 33 missions, including the famous oil refineries at Ploesti. The 332nd Fighter Group (Tuskegee Airmen) occasionally flew cover for Stan's squadron, the 824th Bomb Squadron of the 484th Bomb Group, as they flew missions over Austria, Germany and Yugoslavia during which time no bombers were lost to enemy fighters. It's easy to see where he inherited his love of flying and his enthusiasm for WWII aircraft.

The North American T-6 Texan two-place advanced trainer was the classroom for most of the Allied pilots who flew in World War II. It was designed as a transition trainer between basic trainers and first-line tactical aircraft. Although not as fast as a fighter, it was easy to maintain and repair, had more maneuverability and was easier to handle. It contained such versatile equipment as bomb racks, blind flying instrumentation, gun and standard cameras, fixed and flexible guns, and just about every other device that military pilots had to operate. Only 29 ft 6 in long, its wingspan was 42 ft. Maximum speed in level flight was 205 mph and the ceiling topped out at 21,500 ft. With the original fuel tanks, the range was 750 miles, but this was later increased. And as for that memorable and distinctive roar, the engine has no gearing from the actual crankshaft to the propeller, so at takeoff power at 2250 RPM, the tips of the propeller are actually breaking the speed of sound. The Texan is known by a variety of designations depending on the model and operating air force. The U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) called it the "AT-6", the US Navy, the "SNJ", and the British Royal Air Force (RAF), the Harvard.

The Texan originated from the North American NA-16 prototype (first flown on April 1, 1935) which, modified as the NA-26, was submitted as an entry for a USAAC "Basic Combat" aircraft competition in March, 1937. The first model went into production and 180 were supplied to the USAAC as the BC-1 and 400 to the RAF

as the Harvard I (of which 200 went into service in Southern Rhodesia training under the Commonwealth Air Training Program.) The US Navy received 16 modified aircraft, designated the SNJ-1, and a further 61 as the SNJ-2 with a different engine.

It eventually shifted to the “advanced trainer” designation, AT-6. The differences between the AT-6 and the BC-1 were new squared-off wingtips and a straight-edged rudder, producing the definitive Texan appearance. The AT-6 was designated the Harvard II for RAF orders and 1,173 were supplied by purchase or Lend Lease, mostly operating in Canada as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme.



Drawings depicting differences in the AT-6 Texan and Harvard

Next came the AT-6A which was based on the NA-77 design and was powered by the Pratt & Whitney R-1340-49 Wasp radial engine. The USAAF received 1,549 and the US Navy 270 (as the SNJ-3). The AT-6B was built for gunnery training and could mount a .30 in machine gun on the forward fuselage. It utilized the R-1340-AN-1 engine which was to become the standard for the remaining Texan production. Canada’s Noorduyn Aviation built a R-1349-AN-1 powered version of the AT-6A which was supplied to the USAAF as the AT-16 (1,500 aircraft) and the RAF as the Harvard IIB (2,485 aircraft), some of which also served with the Fleet Air Arm.

The NA-88 design resulted in 2,970 AT-6C Texans and 2,400 as the SNJ-4. The RAF received 726 of the AT-6C as the Harvard IIA. Modifications to the electrical system produced the AT-6D (3,713 produced) and SNJ-5 (1,357 produced). The AT-6D, redesignated the Harvard III, was supplied to the RAF (351 aircraft) and Fleet Air Arm (564 aircraft). Finally the NA-121 design gave rise to 25 AT-6F Texans for the USAAF and 931 as the SNJ-6 for the US Navy.



T-6 Texan in RAF desert camouflage color scheme

The rapid production of the T-6 Texan by North American Aircraft coincided with the wartime expansion of the United States air war commitment. As of 1940, the required flight hours for combat pilots earning their wings had been cut to just 200 during a shortened training period of seven months. Of those hours, 75 were logged in the AT-6.

During 1946, the Canadian Car and Foundry Company developed the Harvard Mk IV trainer to the specifications of the T-6G and produced 285 T-J’s under the same design for the USAF Mutual Aid Program. Designated the T-6G, the Texan saw major improvements in increased fuel

capacity, an improved cockpit layout, as well as a steerable tail wheel. U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy forces in the Korean War modified the Texan under the LT-6G designation and employed it in battlefield low-level surveillance, where it was dubbed the “Mosquito”.

Although the US retired the T-6 from active duty by the end of the 1950s, several nations, including Brazil, China and Venezuela, utilized “the pilot maker” as their basic trainer well into the 1970s. The total production

of the trainer family was an awesome 21,342. Today, over 350 T-6 Texans remain in airworthy condition. Most of the former “hacks” are based in North America and are a reminder of the importance of simplicity in training and function. If you have never seen one, visit almost any Air show, there’s sure to be one, sometimes even a flight of four in a fly-by. Or visit www.giftflight.com to schedule your own ride with Fighter Command.



North American AT-6 Texan

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For The Freeman Family, Flying Is In Their Blood Several have had distinguished careers in the Navy and aviation

By Peter Bacque

Richmond Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

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The golden wings are dull from long and arduous duty.

But they gleam with pride.

When Matthew Freeman won his wings of gold as a naval aviator, the metal insignia he donned was the one his father, Gary, had worn as a Navy pilot.

And those well-worn wings were the very ones his grandfather, retired Rear Adm. Dewitt L. Freeman of Louisa, pinned on when he was a young Navy pilot in 1944.

Witt Freeman’s daughter, Susan Freeman O’Donnell of Virginia Beach, also wore a set of her father’s wings when she graduated from Navy flight training.

“They passed down through all three of us,” said Matt Freeman, a 26-year-old Naval Academy graduate who went into the Marine Corps. “I have a lot to live up to.”