

The plane truth

Aerospace engineers never die; they keep on restoring the old birds they built • By Corey Callaway

MEET THE VOUGHT Retiree Club. This motley crew of highly skilled craftsmen is spending its golden years building – and rebuilding – aircraft just as they constructed them when they were gainfully employed. Some projects are restorations; others are fabrications from the ground floor up. But all the planes are museum-quality once finished.

One of the club's current projects is the O3U-3 Observation Aircraft. It was also known as the O3U-3 Corsair Observation plane, and it was the first Corsair. It was outfitted with the Pratt & Whitney R1340 engine.

The U.S. Navy requested the plane to be rebuilt, and it could be displayed at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Fla. There are six of the original Pratt & Whitney engines available from the Navy, and one was

sent to the club for the fabrication project minus its pistons. It seems the Navy did not want anyone taking it for a joy ride once the build was complete.

The frame is steel tubing welded together, the wings are made of wood and canvas. Basically it is an old-fashioned biplane.

THE O3U-3 HAS A singular float under the main fuselage and two smaller pontoons under each wing for ballast. There was only room for a pilot and a gunner who manned a Browning 30-caliber machine gun. This plane was not a fighter but a reconnaissance aircraft. The gunner would have to stand up and mount the machine gun and remain standing to fire it. The machine gun was used only in self-defense; the aircraft was not built as a fighter.

The gas tanks on this bird were located on either side of the pilot and gunner. They had one fire extinguisher shared between them in the event of a fire. More than likely, the fire extinguisher was of absolutely no help if there was a fire. Vought Retiree Club member Stan Bullard jokingly suggested that it was probably used to put out a cigar when the pilot dropped it from his mouth onto the floorboard.

The O3U-3 was launched from a battleship with a catapult. It would be flown 15 to 20 miles out from the fleet for what was the advanced early warning radar of the time – only without the radar. Upon return, the airship would land near the battleship on the water, and it would be retrieved by a crane. Some cruisers used the O3U-3 as well.

CHANCE VOUGHT WAS the founder of Vought Aircraft. In "An Introduction To Vought," Dick Atkins of the Vought Aircraft Heritage Foundation described the founder: "He was an engineer, pioneer aviator, aircraft designer, aviation consultant, aviation journalist and aircraft manufacturer. He was a contemporary of the Wright Brothers, Glen Curtiss, William Boeing and all of the other mover and shakers of American aviation." The O3U-3 was the last project in which Chance Vought participated.

As a side note, an O3U-3 was featured in one of John Wayne's movies, where he crashed it into a lagoon. Funny thing though – John Wayne could never fit into the O3U. He was well over 6 feet tall, and the tallest pilot of an O3U could realistically be was 5 foot, 2 inches. Currently the O3U-3 is one of two restoration projects on which the Vought Retirees are working. Eight other aircraft have been completed.

Today, you can find four of them at the Frontiers of Flight museum located at Love Field. There, you will see the A-7B Corsair II, an RF-8G Photo Crusader, the V-173 "Flying" Pancake and the Regulus II Supersonic Cruise Missile.

The Flying Pancake was one of the flying wing designs that pioneered concepts that



Members of the Vought Retiree Club are spending their golden years building – and rebuilding – aircraft just as they constructed them when the planes were introduced. Some projects are restorations; others are fabrications from the ground floor up. But all the aircraft are museum-quality once finished. (Photo: Dwayne Lee of Southern Flair Photography)



The O3U-3, with its singular float under the main fuselage and two smaller pontoons under each wing for ballast, was featured in a John Wayne movie.

would later be used in aircraft such as the Stealth Bomber. According to Wikipedia information on the V-173 Flying Pancake, "Aeronautical engineer Charles Zimmerman advocated the concept of 'discoidal' aircraft, the so-called 'Zimmer's Skimmers.' The V-173 later proved Zimmerman's theory of a near-vertical-takeoff-and-landing-capable fighter."

The McAuliffe-Shepard Discovery Center in Concord, N.H., houses an F8U-1/YF8U-2 Crusader Fighter.

IF THE O3U-3 winds up at the National Naval Aviation Museum, it will find company in the VE7 Bluebird, which happens to be the first contracted aircraft Chance Vought obtained from the U.S. government.

Another prominent aircraft at the museum is a F6U-1 Pirate Fighter, which was the first jet built that used an after burner.

In New Orleans at the National World War II Museum, you will find the F4U-X Corsair Fighter Bomber. And, finally, the F7U-3 Cutlass, the other current project on which the Vought Heritage Foundation is working, will be returned to the USS Midway Museum in San Diego, Calif.

BACK TO THE RETIREES ... The Vought Retiree Club was formed in 1996 for social activities. Shortly thereafter, perhaps out of boredom, the club included special projects that led to the development of a historic archive, website, restoration projects and the creation of the Vought Aircraft Heritage Foundation. It is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization and is used to raise funds to purchase planes and parts for restoration projects.

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The foundation's stated mission is to continue to work to preserve Vought's name and heritage as long as it has people, money and facilities to do so. But there's a dilemma: This crew of talented craftsman has recently lost its work space and is in need of a new home. The foundation has two aircraft that are in the middle of fabrication and restoration: the O3U-3 Corsair and the F7U-3 Cutlass Fighter. They

are currently stored in six trailers on the old Vought Manufacturing Facility on Jefferson Blvd. in Grand Prairie.

THE RETIREES CLUB and the Foundation need approximately 22,000 square feet of space with three-phase electrical capability, as well as access to highly compressed air to run their machinery. The building needs an oversized door and 26-foot ceilings, a tall order

but necessary to accomplish the group's goals. They are also looking for more members with experience or an interest in learning a new skill – and they certainly

can use monetary donations.

Help keep our city safe and not let these idle hands turn to mischief. Pass the word, and help them find a place to work and keep them occupied.

The Heritage Foundation currently meets on the third Tuesday of every month at David's Bar-B-Q at 11 a.m. Interested volunteers are welcome to attend. **A**