

Hood aerodrome: Triplane heaven



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As visitors to Masterton will know, triplanes are a reasonably common sight at the airfield, although always of the German variety.

But this year things have changed with the addition of a Sopwith Triplane replica. This example is one of several Sopwith Triplane replicas designed and built by Chad Willie of Corning, Iowa, in the USA, working from original drawings and original dimensions but incorporating some modern construction techniques including steel tube fuselage, a modern engine and simplified wing construction.

The partially completed aircraft that consisted of basic fuselage frame and tail group was purchased by 14-18 Aviation Trust and shipped to New Zealand where The Vintage Aviator Ltd (TVAL) was contracted to build the wings and landing gear, install the engine and complete the aircraft to flying condition. With initial construction of wings and other parts being completed at TVAL's Kilbirnie workshop, the triplane was then moved to its premises at Masterton's Hood aerodrome to be completed to flying status.

The original Sopwith Triplane, serial N500, was designed as a private venture by Herbert Smith, chief designer of the Sopwith Aviation Company, and had its maiden flight on 28 May 1916 with Sopwith test pilot Harry Hawker at the controls. After only three minutes in the air, Harry Hawker astonished onlookers by looping the aircraft three times, not bad on its first flight!

Production then commenced and a total of approximately 150 Sopwith Triplanes (commonly called Tripe or Tripehound) were built. All, apart from a few examples supplied to Great Britain's allies, were flown exclusively by the Royal Naval Air Service.

The example that is now based at Hood is in the colours of fighter ace Raymond Collishaw, commander of 10 Squadron's B Flight. This flight, more commonly known as "Black Flight", was composed entirely of Canadian pilots and achieved the remarkable claim of 87 German aircraft victories in three months using the triplane. Raymond Collishaw scored 33 victories himself, making him the most successful Sopwith Triplane ace.

All aircraft in the flight had black engine cowlings and black painted fins and were called *Black Maria*, *Black Prince*, *Black George*, *Black Death* and *Black Sheep*. Collishaw's aircraft, N533, was *Black Maria*, a name used by the London Metropolitan Police for a vehicle with lock-up compartments used to transport dangerous criminals to jail.



Power for the original Sopwith Triplane was the 130 hp Clerget 9B rotary engine, giving a maximum speed of 117mph (187km/h) at 5,000ft, and the aircraft was armed with a single synchronised Vickers machine gun.

TVAL fitted a Russian M 14P direct drive 9 cylinder 220hp radial and one of its own replica Vickers machine guns. Attention to detail is always a top priority with TVAL, and the Sopwith Triplane is a perfect example of this.

Irish linen was used for fabric covering to match the clear doped colouring of the original aircraft for the undersides, and Kris Whelan, who handled most of the building project for the company, can be justifiably proud of the finished result. Every detail has been done with the same precision; the reproduction Rotherham pump on the wing strut is a perfect example of the detail that TVAL strives to achieve.

Gene DeMarco, project manager and also test pilot for TVAL, is the only person to have flown the Triplane at this stage, as it is still on a test flying programme. He reports that it is an excellent plane to fly, with a very good roll rate and excellent climbing capability. Top speed is about 115mph and it lands at a comfortable 40mph.

With nearly 13,000 hours and 25 years of flying, which includes time with Rhinebeck Aeroplane Museum, Parker O'Malley Air Museum and Ryder's Museum in the USA, plus of course TVAL, his comments on the aircraft's flying characteristics are high praise indeed and a credit to the builders.

TVAL will re-commence the popular tours of The Old Stick and Rudder Company's hangar at Masterton's Hood aerodrome at the beginning of November. For a small charge, members of the public can indulge in a fully organised guided tour featuring this Sopwith Triplane replica and many other aircraft operated by the two companies.

For more information on all of TVAL's projects and activities, log into its excellent web site at www.thevintageaviator.co.nz

