

An aerial photograph of six T-28 aircraft flying in a loose formation over a lush green landscape of farms and fields. The aircraft are trailing thick white smoke, creating a dramatic visual effect. The planes are in various colors, including white, blue, and red. Some have "U.S. AIR FORCE" and "NAVY" markings. The background shows rolling green hills, trees, and some buildings, suggesting a rural setting.

# The Trojan Horsemen

*The six T-28s of the Trojan Horsemen trail smoke over the farms and fields of Wisconsin during EAA AirVenture 2008. The team is the only six-ship T-28 team in the world.*



# POWER AND PATRIOTISM

The Trojan Horsemen Salute the U.S. Armed Forces

By Michael J. Gallagher

The T-28 Trojan is one of my favorite warbirds. It is big, loud, and is a combat veteran with an extensive fighting history in Southeast Asia and other theatres. A growling radial engine drives this hulk around the sky with amazingly nimble maneuverability. At low altitude, it can out-turn even a P-51 Mustang!

But now imagine six of these hulking warbirds in formation trailing smoke with patriotic music echoing over the airshow PA system. The Trojan Horsemen team is the only six-ship T-28 warbird formation & aerobatic demo team in the world and Jim Stitt is the team's founder and managing member.

## Choosing the Trojan

Jim Stitt has been flying for over 25 years. He holds a commercial pilot license, and is an FAA certified flight instructor with instrument, multi-engine, and rotorcraft ratings. Jim resides in Cincinnati

and is the Commander of the EAA Warbirds Squadron 18.

Jim and some of his fellow warbird pilots were flying T-34s and T-6s in airshows when the T-34 wing spar problems cropped up several years ago. They figured the T-34 would probably not return to aerobatic status affordably or soon, so Jim bought his T-28 for the express purpose of founding a warbird formation team.

"The ideal aircraft needed to be a legitimate warbird with a combat history," said Jim. "It needed to generate excitement and create a connection with audiences, but still be reasonably cost-effective." Jim and the team selected a patriotic theme for their performance to salute the United States Armed Forces, so they wanted the aircraft to be built by a U.S. manufacturer and flown by American pilots. Uniqueness was another consideration. "Lima Lima was already using the T-34s," says Jim. "AeroShell, the Skytypers, and others were using T-6s, but no one had a T-28 team."

Jim was looking for a plane with a real combat lineage, and while the T-28 was originally designed as a 1950s era trainer, it was later

modified for combat and was used extensively for ground attack and close air support in Southeast Asia. Ordinance included two 50 caliber machine guns, fragmentation bombs, and rockets.

As a former advanced trainer, T-28 is fully aerobatic, flies well in formation, and is reliable to fly IFR to and from show sites. "T-28s are great airshow airplanes," says Jim. "They are big – standing almost 13 feet tall at the tail; they are fast; and they are loud with that growling 1425 HP radial engine. Six of them have a commanding presence on the ramp and in the air."

Jim explained that the real clincher for him was the people

so for a flock of flying Trojans. Jim started gathering together some of the best in the T-28 community to become the Trojan Horsemen. Jim first recruited Jack "Skids" Mitchard, a retired Navy Commander who flew F-4 Phantoms and F-14 Tomcats during active duty, and later as a Naval Reservist. As a student Naval Aviator, Jack flew the T-28 at NAS Whiting Field and has owned one in civilian life for 10 years. Mitchard is currently a Captain and check airman for a major airline, and has served as T-28 formation lead at both the Oshkosh and Sun 'n Fun warbird airshows. Skids helped Stitts evaluate and select the other team members and continues serving that role, today. Skids flies the #6 solo aerobatic position and is alternate formation lead.

Other members of the original core team include Jeff "Kazie" Clark who flies the #1 formation lead spot. Kazie has been flying warbirds for over 15 years and produces airshows. Ralph "Skydoc" Glasser has owned his T-28 for almost 20 years and flies the #5 solo aerobatic position. Skydoc has served as T-28 Formation Lead at Oshkosh, and is also an accomplished skydiver. Walt "Smokey" Fricke, who flies #3 and alternate lead, is a decorated combat veteran who flew Huey's in Vietnam and was founder of the Veteran's Airlift Command. Wing #2 pilot Paul "Badger" Walter's T-28 has over 2,000 hours of actual combat time and six hits. His son is an F-16 pilot and



in the T-28 community. "The hardware is important, but its people that make the essential difference," he explained. "What I found was a friendly group of knowledgeable, experienced, and skilled pilots dedicated to preserving these flying museums, and flying them safely and with precision. Many are either former military aviators or airline pilots with airshow experience. They are also a personable and fun-loving group with a strong sense of camaraderie. So I bought a T-28 and started cherry-picking a team."

## Fielding the Team

The logistics of coordinating a large team can be a challenge, especially when the aircraft are individually owned and hangared in different locations all around the country. "A team act has more entertainment value and impact on the audience," says Jim. "The downside is the costs are higher and it is more challenging to field a team, especially of six. I liken it to herding cats at times!"

Even a herd of cats needs organization and planning, especially

Iraqi war veteran. Lisa Heindinger, who formerly worked on other airshow crews, coordinates the team's logistics on the ground before and during the shows. She also narrates the team performances.

Jim said that the team has expanded beyond the original core members so they have the depth to fill their performance calendar with the inevitable maintenance issues and personal schedule conflicts. The rest of the Horsemen include former F-15 driver Jack "Flash" Mangan, Paul "Slider" Woods, former A-4 and AV-8 Harrier driver Art "Kaos" Nalls, Gordon "Gordo" Richardson, Rick Cureton, Ken "Spider" Karas, Jim "JR" Rohlf, Luc Joly, Doug "Boots" Hulse, Freddie Cabanas, former astronaut Joe Edwards, Albert Heindinger, and Lynda "Killer" Kilbourne.

*Opposite page: The Trojan Horsemen stacked in echelon formation over the Wisconsin countryside near Oshkosh (photo by Scott Slocum). Above: The Trojan Horsemen team at Oshkosh 2008 (left to right): Ralph "Skydoc" Glasser, Jack "Flash" Mangan, Jack "Skids" Mitchard, Ken "Spider" Karas, Jim "Stiffie" Stitt, Jeff "Kazie" Clark, and Paul "Badger" Walter (photo by Jim Froneberger).*



Above: The Trojan Horsemen in their big delta formation at Sun 'n Fun 2008. Left and below: The four-ship trail formation as seen from the ground and from inside Paul Walter's #2 aircraft (photos by Jim Froneberger).

It is always a challenge to field a 6-ship team, and it requires some sacrifices from the team members. Most of the team members are either self-employed or have jobs with some scheduling flexibility. It is ultimately the dedication, professionalism, and commitment of each member to the team, to the airshow producers, and to the audiences that makes the magic happen.

With the team members responsible for their own aircraft maintenance and living in different parts of the country, it could be a challenge to practice and maintain performance proficiency.

All the team members have extensive formation and aerobatic experience in the T-28, so that makes the challenges easier to overcome.

"We all get together at the beginning of the season to go over any changes and for several days of practice and evaluation," explained Jim. "One important quality of a team member is to be able to check his ego at the door and accept criticism. We arrive at each show a day in advance to survey the area, pick out landmarks for the routine, and practice. We also walk the routine before each performance for visualization, and debrief every flight. All members are very conscientious about maintenance and our A&P mechanics use specialized inspection criteria."

The Veteran's Airlift Command (VAC) is closely associated with the Trojan Horsemen. The Horsemen serve as the VAC Honor Guard Flight Team. Founded by team member Walt "Smokey"

Fricke, the VAC provides free air transportation to wounded warriors, veterans, and their families for medical and other compassionate purposes through a national network of volunteer aircraft owners and pilots. Walt is a decorated combat veteran who flew hundreds of combat missions as a helicopter pilot with the 68th Assault Helicopter Wing in Vietnam and received 21 Air medals, the Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star, and a Purple Heart. Walt spent six months in a hospital 700 miles from his hometown recovering from combat injuries sustained while flying in Vietnam. He claims his healing only began in earnest when his family was able to gather the resources to make a trip to visit him. He founded the VAC so that others could receive the same benefit. Former Senator Bob Dole serves as the Honorary Chairman of the VAC National Advisory Board. A portion of the fees paid to the team at each show is donated to the VAC.

For more information, please see [www.veternasairlift.org](http://www.veternasairlift.org).

### The Performance

The Trojan Horsemen's airshow performance was designed to emulate the U.S. military six-ship jet teams. "It's important to always keep something in front of the crowd, so along with six-ship passes, our routine alternates passes between the four-ship formation and solo pilots #5 and #6," Jim says, describing the airshow routine. "Being slower than the jets, we don't need to take as much time and



space to turn, so as one pass is leaving the box, another is entering."

Jim says the basic routine was "tweaked" during their first year, and they are "always making improvements." The Air Force and Navy developed the formation procedures that the Horsemen use and most of the team members are ex-military.

Warbird owners are a generally patriotic group, as are most airshow audiences. "We often receive standing ovations from the crowd, and tears of gratitude from vets and their families," says Jim. "What more noble purpose could we have than to honor the veterans whose sacrifices made it possible for us to enjoy the freedom we have and do what we do."

At EAA AirVenture 2008 in Oshkosh, I was able to watch the Trojan Horsemen perform and then had the unique opportunity to fly in Jim "Stiffie" Stitt's T-28 during a team practice flight. The first impression from the ground was even more impressive from the air with mere feet separating my aircraft from the others in the formation.

The flight in Jim's Trojan was not aerobatic as only the solo pilots perform aerobatics, but nonetheless, it was breathtaking. Diamond, delta, wedge and trail formations were performed with absolute precision. Formation lead Jeff "Kazie" Clark called each formation change over the discrete frequency using a precise cadence much like that used by the military formation teams.

One of the most interesting formation changes to observe was the transition from the "clean" to the "dirty" configuration for the slow speed pass. Established in diamond formation and approaching from show right, Kazie called for the speed brakes and landing gear. The team "dirtied-up" the aircraft and slowed while still maintaining their precise positioning on the leader. After passing show center, the team reversed the process as they accelerated away to show left.

The final maneuver performed during the Oshkosh airshow was the horizontal bomb burst, executed while flying directly at the



Top left: With gear down, the Trojan Horsemen diamond formation presents their "dirty pass" at Sun 'n Fun 2008 (photo by Jim Froneberger). Right: The view from #4 as the echelon banks left (photo by Michael J. Gallagher). Above left: Jeff "Kazie" Clark leads the team on the taxiway at Oshkosh (photo by Scott Slocum). Right: The author in Jim Stitt's T-28 (photo by Jim Froneberger).

crowd of spectators. From the ground it looks like a gentle bank from each of the six aircraft, but in the back seat of Jim Stitt's T-28, it was anything but gentle. The appearance from the ground is deceiving. The left bank was instant, with about a 4 G pull and about a 90-degree turn to the left.

One maneuver that was not used during the airshow at Oshkosh, but which can be part of the team's routine is a strafing run that would normally employ pyro during an airshow. During our practice, the six-ship formation flew in trail after the horizontal bomb burst and then banked toward the selected target on the ground. It wasn't very hard to imagine what it would be like with guns blazing from the six T-28s as we screamed toward the ground while flying low over the rustic Wisconsin countryside!

Impressive from the ground, breathtaking in the air, the Trojan Horsemen have a presence and impact unlike any other warbird performance today. Catch them at an airshow near you!