





Warbird WIDGEON

SEAPLANE WITH A SECRET

Looks can be deceiving. Take Sam Valadez's beautifully preserved Grumman Widgeon, for example. It appears every inch the quintessential civilian amphibian; however, lurking beneath its sheep's clothing lies a secret...it was once a submarine hunter

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Lake Norman Airpark (14A) is a small airfield community located in Mooresville, North Carolina, a suburb of Charlotte. There are over 90 aircraft there, of which the vast majority are single-engine. So when Sam Valadez cranks up his twin-engine Grumman G-44 Widgeon, people notice. Probably the largest airplane based at the airpark, the Widgeon does not look like a warbird. Its modest orange-and-white color scheme belies the fact that during World War Two it was outfitted as a submarine hunter.

Grumman designed the G-44 Widgeon for the civilian market, basically as a smaller companion to the G-21 Goose. The first example flew in 1940, but by the time full-scale production began the focus had turned to military requirements. Between 1941 and 1945, Grumman built 200 of these aircraft, designating them as J4F-1 for the US Coast Guard and

J4F-2 for the US Navy. Widgeons also served with the US Civil Air Patrol and Britain's Royal Navy. The J4F-1s differed from their civilian counterparts in the addition of a hatch on top of the fuselage for loading stretchers and a wing rack installed beneath the starboard wing that could hold a depth charge, bomb, raft, or search and rescue gear. The US Coast Guard acquired 25 J4F-1 aircraft, purchased in two groups. The initial order consisted of eight aircraft delivered from

Opposite: The classic Widgeon amphibian owned by Sam Valadez was originally built as a J4F-2 and was delivered to the US Navy in 1944.

Above: A US Coast Guard Widgeon during World War Two, operating as a submarine hunter armed with a depth charge. *Bill Bailey Collection*



Clockwise, from right: Sam Valadez, the proud owner of G-44 Widgeon, NC68102.

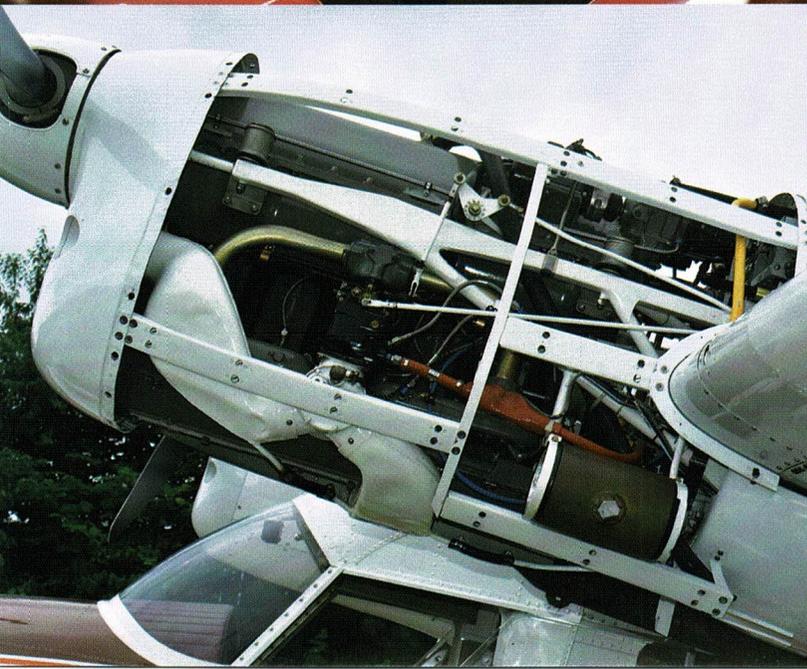
Civilian cheat lines hiding the extra baggage door on the starboard side.

NC68102 is one of the few Widgeons to retain its original Ranger L-440-5 air-cooled inverted six-cylinder inline engines.

The smart cockpit of NC68102 has a distinct 1950's vibe.

The big curved windscreen of the Widgeon was retrofitted by George Pappas.

Janitrol heater in tail with custom scoop.



Grumman on July 7, 1941. These aircraft were given USCG service numbers V197 through V204. The following year the second batch, consisting of seventeen aircraft, was acquired. The first J4F from this batch was delivered to the Coast Guard on February 25, 1942, and the final was delivered on June 29, 1942. These aircraft were given the service numbers V205 through V221.

By mid-1942 the German submarine war extended into the Gulf Sea Frontier. In response, the US Navy increased the number of aircraft available along the Gulf Coast. Bill Bailey, a historian and renowned expert on the Grumman Widgeon, says, "Most of the Widgeons that actually carried depth charges were operated by the US Coast Guard. Interestingly, the only one that is credited with a confirmed submarine kill was flown by the Civil Air Patrol. This occurred on July 11,



1942." Less than a month later, on August 1, 1942, pilot Henry C. White and radioman George H. Boggs, Jr., took off in V212 for an antisubmarine patrol south of Houma, Louisiana. White spotted a surfaced U-boat and attacked. An expanding oil slick lended credence to the belief that the U-boat had been sunk or severely damaged. It was first thought that White had sunk U-166. However, postwar analysis and the finding of wrecks on the sea floor during exploration by an oil company, revealed that this was not the case. In fact, V212 had actually attacked another U-boat, U-171, which was able to continue its operations.

After the war, Grumman redesigned the aircraft to make it more suitable for civilian operations. A new hull improved its water-handling, and six seats were installed. A total of

76 of the new G-44As was built by Grumman, the last being delivered on January 13, 1949. Another 41 were produced under license by the Société de Construction Aéronavale (SCAN) in La Rochelle, France, as the SCAN 30. All in all, 317 Widgeons were built, of which a reported 70 were later converted to Super Widgeons by McKinnon Enterprises at Sandy, Oregon. The conversion featured replacing the engines with 270hp Avco Lycoming GO-480-B1D flat-six piston engines and various other modifications, including modern avionics, three-blade propellers, larger windows, improved soundproofing, emergency exits, and increased maximum takeoff weight. Additionally, Pacific Aerospace Engineering Corporation offered conversions of SCAN 30s, powered by 300hp Lycoming R-680-13 radial engines. These were later known as the Gannet Super Widgeons.

Sam Valadez's Widgeon was built for the US Navy as a J4F-2, manufacturer serial number 1351. It was assigned BuNo 37721 and was delivered to the Navy on January 22, 1944. Not a lot is known about the military history of 37721. After delivery, it was assigned to Station Operations, NAS Tongue Point, on the Cleveland-class Light Cruiser USS *Astoria* (CL90) from August 1944 until April 1945. What is known is that USS *Astoria* sortied with TF38 on December 11, 1944, for its first war cruise.

The Fast Carrier Task Force (TF38 when assigned to the Third Fleet, TF58 when assigned to the Fifth Fleet) was the main striking force of the US Navy in the Pacific War from January 1944 through the end of the war in August 1945. Its mission was to serve in the anti-aircraft screen of the carriers, while its planes supported the landing. On March 14th, USS *Astoria* returned to sea with TF58 to begin support of the campaign to capture Okinawa in the Ryukyu Islands. During that operation, *Astoria* remained at sea with the fast carriers for 80 days while its planes struck at shipping, airfield, and other installations on and around Kyushu, Shikoku, and Honshu, as well as on Okinawa and the surrounding islands.

In May 1945, BuNo 37721 was reassigned to NAS Seattle. By that point, the end of the war was in sight and it became apparent that the Widgeon's useful days with the military were numbered. It was finally struck off US Navy aircraft inventory on July 31, 1946. It is not known whether this particular airframe ever carried or dropped a live depth charge. However, it still has the six attachment points for the depth charge intact.

Following its career with the US Navy, 1351 was spared the fate of many World War Two aircraft. Rather than being broken up for scrap, it was sold to Lee Mansdorf of Los Angeles, California, for an impressive \$7,500 on November 6, 1946. Later that month, it was reregistered as a G-44, NC68102. The following year it was sold to General Construction Company of Seattle, Washington. A year later it was bought by Petroleum Navigation Company, also in Seattle. In 1949, the first of many modifications occurred when a dual-control yoke was installed.



Above: Grumman Widgeon NC68102 now calls Lake Norman in North Carolina its home.

Opposite: The timeless grace of Widgeon NC68102 captured against the azure waters of Lake Norman. With Sam Valadez as its caretaker, the future of this valuable warbird Widgeon looks assured for many years to come.

In December 1950, the aircraft was sold to William DeVille Smith in Dillingham, Alaska. In January 1951, it was reregistered as N68102. At this point the aircraft had 1,641 hours. In June 1955, several structural modifications were made, including the addition of hull vents, a keel reinforcement, and the removal of a false step. There are contradicting reports about the history of N68102 over the next eleven years, but what is known for sure is that on June 10, 1966, the Widgeon was sold to George Pappas of Anchorage, Alaska. Inducted into the Alaska Aviation Hall of Fame in 2015, Pappas was an Alaskan legend, widely regarded as an artist with sheet metal. He is credited for having repaired countless aircraft during his 61 years in Alaska.

During the 26 years that Pappas owned the Widgeon, he made a number of upgrades and improvements to the aircraft.

These included: vacuum-pump conversion of belt drive off of magnetos, one-piece bubble windshield, control cables to tail routed through floor, extra baggage door added to starboard side, hull re-riveted with flush-head rivets, updated hydraulic system, hump removed out of instrument panel, installed Cessna seats, and wing tips.

The Widgeon was painted in its current color scheme in 1988. Interestingly, despite all of the modifications and upgrades that were made to this airframe, the plane retains its original Ranger L-440-5 air-cooled inverted six-cylinder inline engines, rated at 200hp each. However, the original fixed-pitch wooden propellers were replaced by metal Hartzell two-blade, constant-speed props.

Of the 314 Widgeons built, Bill Bailey estimates that there are probably 50 in the US that are in flying condition. He continues, "There are many more carried on the register that are not in flying condition. Of the ones flying in the US, there are only a handful that still have the original Ranger engines."

In 1994, Pappas sold his restored Widgeon to an owner in Washington state, who then sold it to Dan Abbott of Salem, Wisconsin, in 2007. Enter Sam Valadez. Valadez, age 56, was an extremely successful real-estate agent, developer, and home builder living in Illinois at the time. He says, "I have

always been fascinated by airplanes and learned to fly in 1998. As a kid, I enjoyed building and flying model airplanes. So as an adult, I decided to build the real thing. In 2001, I started building a Vans RV-9A and actually earned my IFR rating in the 9A.”

Fast-forward to 2009. Valadez met his wife, Tammy, whose father is the legendary aircraft collector and restorer Chuck Greenhill, whose accomplishments include salvaging/restoring/reincarnating several warbirds from the waters of Lake Michigan and the Bahamas. Valadez continues, “One of his favorite airplanes was the Grumman Goose. Chuck gave me the seaplane bug with his Goose, and I was hooked! Chuck enlisted Brian Vanwagnen, Midwest seaplane guru to teach me the fine art of flying a Widgeon.

“One day at Chuck’s hangar, I met one of his friends, Dan Abbott, from Salem, Wisconsin. Dan owned the first Grumman Widgeon I’d ever laid eyes on, and, boy, was she a beauty! It was literally love at first sight. Not too long after that, I purchased an M-7 Maule from Chuck. But before I could take delivery of it, Chuck said he would do me a favor and traded it for Dan’s Widgeon. The next thing I knew, I was the proud owner of this beautiful seaplane. By the way Dan loved and cared for the Widgeon, he and Brian instilled in me that we are just caretakers of these

magnificent machines and it was now my turn to take care of her. Dan took a lot of pride in the airplane and spent countless hours teaching me the nuances of this particular treasure. Sadly, Dan passed away from cancer February 2021, and he is sorely missed.”

In 2018, Valadez decided to retire. He and Tammy left Illinois and moved to Mooresville, which is located on Lake Norman. He bought a lot at Lake Norman Airpark, on which he has built a hangar and house. On the bottom level of his hangar is a huge workshop, containing, among other things, five complete run-out Ranger engines for his Widgeon and a large collection of NOS (new old stock) parts to rebuild them...still in boxes. Valadez continues, “Fortunately, there is a very active network of Widgeon owners, who can be very helpful in providing parts as well as expertise on how to get things done. They can usually tell you how to fix it, find it, or fabricate it.”

One more thing about his workshop. Sometime in the foreseeable future, Sam Valadez looks forward to rebuilding his beloved Widgeon. “The old girl is in pretty good shape for being 78 years old. Nevertheless, she’s starting to show her age. I really look forward to giving her a thorough exam and refurbishment so that she can live to see age 100! That seems like a pretty good goal to me.” **WD**



