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HISTORY

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# Silver Bu

Right  
Lausanne-based surgeon  
Eric Chardonens is the  
proud owner of Vampire  
HB-RVN.

Surgeon Eric Chardonens unwinds by flying a former Swiss Air Force Vampire. Stefan Degraff and Ewin Borremans report





# let

**T**raditionally a neutral nation in times of conflict, Switzerland found itself geographically in the middle of the emerging 'Cold War' in Europe during the 1950s. The Alpine state had no option than to keep its armed forces as up-to-date as possible.

Advances in design and performance forced the Swiss Air Force to regularly invest in more modern types. A re-equipment cycle of ten years was deemed necessary to remain at the top of the 'food chain', however older, albeit pristinely-maintained, machines were not withdrawn from service, merely transferred to less demanding roles, such as training. This meant that some types soldiered on with the Swiss when many other nations had sold off their retired examples to private owners.

Switzerland did not wish to export aircraft that had finally reached the end of their useful lives and most were scrapped. But in May 1981, the Office Fédéral des Aérodrômes Militaires (OFAEM

- Air Force Logistics Command) auctioned off withdrawn Pilatus P2 trainers and Dornier Do 27 liaison aircraft, generating 730,000 Swiss francs (then, roughly £169,000).

This financial boost prompted the authorities to organise a second, more ambitious, sale almost a decade later. Seventeen Pilatus P3 trainers and 53 de Havilland Vampire Mk.6 single-seaters and 28 Vampire trainers were put 'under the hammer' at Lodrino in early 1991.

Some of the jets had only 1,800 flying hours 'on the clock' and were still airworthy. Interest was expressed from would-be purchasers in Belgium, Canada, ➔







**"The Vampire's minimal nose cone makes it possible to fully appreciate the breathtaking views, especially when cruising over the stunning snow-covered Alpine peaks"**



Classic 1950s instrumentation, dominated by the fully-functional gunsight.

Eric's guardian angel, the Martin-Baker Mk.3B ejection seat, with a minimum operating altitude of 100-200ft and 90 knots.



France, Norway, Sweden and the USA – OFAEM received over 500 bids to buy these 'old-timers'. Once paid for, the fully-fuelled aircraft were delivered to their new owners. One of the Vampires was Mk.6 J-1197, which was built in November 1952 under licence by the Federal Aircraft Factory – Eidg Flugzeugwerk (known as F+W) at Emmen, Switzerland.

### **New life as a warbird**

Immediately after the 1991 auction, J-1197 was flown to Dole-Tavaux just across the border in France and it was operated from there until 2001. After four years of inactivity at Dole, it was sold to surgeon Eric Chardonnens, who was based at Lausanne, Switzerland – close to Lake Geneva. A spare DH Goblin 4 turbojet came with the purchase.

As the Vampire had been out of





action for some years, it required work to make it fully airworthy again. At the same time, Eric needed to type-convert to the Vampire before tackling his single-seater.

Freed from his busy medical schedule in Lausanne, two week-long training sessions were organised at Dole using Swiss Vampire T.55 HB-RVF (formerly U-1208). Experienced former Vampire instructor Ueli Leutert gave Eric a full ground course to digest before 20 training missions were flown, as per the Swiss Air Force training syllabus.

In June 2005, the jet was permanently transferred from Dole to Sion in Switzerland which offered good year-round weather conditions. After months of intense work, Eric finally took the Vampire aloft for his first solo on September 20, 2005.

### Front seat view

The Vampire's minimal nose cone makes it possible to fully appreciate the breathtaking views, especially when cruising over the stunning snow-covered Alpine peaks. However, such flying is not without its hazards since high winds from the south, sometimes up to 93mph (150km/h) at 12,000ft (3,657m) can cause heavy turbulence.

In addition to this, special care needs to be taken when flying within small, tight valleys, which are often frequented by light aircraft, microlights, helicopters and even para-gliders. Powerlines and cables, some erected by farmers to transport products (especially wood) from the mountain slopes and meadows, are an omnipresent danger.

Based with and maintained by Farner Aviation at Sion, the Vampire is flown almost every month by Eric.





## Getting a Swiss 'Historic' classification

The Office Fédéral de l'Aviation Civile (OFAC - Federal Civil Aviation Board) is in charge of technical, operational and safety directives for the large fleet of classic jet 'warbirds' in Switzerland. OFAC endeavours not to suffocate owners with barrages of costly and bureaucratic regulations.

To obtain a prestigious 'Historic' classification, the maiden flight of a type must have been at least 40 years before application for a Swiss registration. Flying is strictly limited to daytime only and sorties are restricted to demonstration, pilot-proficiency and test flights. When positioning to another aerodrome, landing authorisation *must* be obtained in advance. Supersonic - and even over 250-knot - speeds by civil-owned jets is forbidden by law.

All Historic designated aircraft need to be rebuilt according to the original manufacturer's documentation. A detailed technical survey of airframe and engine, plus full maintenance and logbook history must be sent to OFAC prior to acceptance. Any modifications to the original specification have to be validated by OFAC.

Farner Aviation used to overhaul Vampires for the Swiss Air Force up to 1990, so has plenty of experience in looking after the type. To help keep his silver-coloured jet flying, the surgeon has acquired non-airworthy J-1193 to act as a spares source.

Every October, Eric has a check-flight at Sion in a privately-owned two-seater T.55. An examiner takes him through emergency procedures and 'polishes' his performance. During the summer season, the Vampire and its owner fly aerobatic routines at airshows in Switzerland and France. These displays are often staged in association with other Swiss-based privately-owned Vampires and Hawker Hunters. Wherever Eric flies, his 'silver bullet' never ceases to turn heads. ●



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