

Those Mexican Bellancas

written by Santiago Flores | September 14, 2018



Not many people know that Mexico, under the leadership of President Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, sided with the Spanish Republican government during that country's bloody Civil War. In fact, Mexican volunteers were present in the Spanish battle fronts up until 1938, when the *International Brigades* were demobilized. Additionally, Mexican diplomats set up companies through which the Republic obtained equipment, weapons and ammunition from countries around the world. These supplies were then transported to Spain in Mexican ships, including those of the Navy. This ample material and moral support continued even after Cárdenas had left power, since his successor, General Manuel Ávila Camacho, negotiated with the Vichy government the release of the Spanish refugees in France and organized their resettlement in Mexico.

Shortly before the fall of the Republic, the arrival of Spanish refugees increased considerably and the Mexican government began running out of money for resettling them. Thus, the Spanish regime didn't waste any time and funneled money, gold and other valuables to the Latin American country. In addition, the local branch of the *Junta de Auxilio a los Republicanos Españoles* -JARE- (Spanish Republican Assistance Committee), an organization that had been formed for collecting money to help settling the Spanish refugees around the world, set out to obtain funds by any means in order to provide the newly arrived with food and a place to stay.

The Republic's debacle also left behind aircraft and 'aerial material' that had been bought by the Republican regime and that hadn't reached Spain on time. In fact, a legal and political infighting developed between the regime of General Francisco Franco Bahamonde and the countries where these airplanes -and their spare parts- were stranded. Franco's objective was to reclaim them or at least collect the money that had been paid for them. Among the 'aerial material' being sought by Franco were three Boeing 247 transports, 22 Bellanca aircraft and its spare parts, 37 Pratt & Whitney R1830 engines plus their spare parts, 25 Pratt & Whitney SB4G engines as well as 35 Hamilton propellers, all totaling US\$2.1 million.

Those "Bellanca aircraft" were in fact model 28-90B "fighter-bombers" that the Republican air force had acquired through a façade aviation school, supposedly established in Greece, at a price of US\$45,750.00 each. Right after their purchase, the 28-90Bs and the Boeing 247s were placed in storage in the U.S., under close supervision of the Spanish Republic Embassy in Washington D.C. However, after General Franco took power, his regime began demanding the U.S. to release these aircraft. Regarding how these airplanes ended up in Mexico, Aviation Historian Gerald Howson, in his otherwise excellent book "*Aircraft of the Spanish Civil War*" (Putnam, 1990), mentions the following:

"On 27 January 1939... Juan Negrín ordered Colonel Francisco León Trejo, Chief of the Republican Purchasing Commission in the United

States, to sell all the aircraft not yet delivered at fifty per cent of their purchased price. Miles M. Sherover offered a mere ten per cent, which was refused. Eventually President Cárdenas of Mexico, whose government had been the only one in the world openly supporting the Republicans throughout the civil war, bought the aircraft at full cost price, the money being used to pay for the sustenance of the Republicans arriving in Mexico."

According to Mexican sources, however, it seems that the Mexican government was given the opportunity to purchase the airplanes at a symbolic price of US\$1.00 each, something that contradicts completely Howson's affirmation. Whatever was the case, by 22 May 1939, the 22 28-90Bs and the three 247s had reached the docks of Port Veracruz where they were placed in "open storage." Shortly after, it was discovered that some of the airplanes had sustained damage, but it wasn't clear if they had been damaged during their stay in the U.S., or if it was the result of mishandling during their shipment to Mexico. Thus, in order to save them from further damage, the Secretary of National Defense, General Jesús Agustín Castro, ordered the aircraft transferred to the Balbuena military airfield, in outskirts of Mexico City.



The Bellanca 28-90B being assembled at the 1st Air Regiment's hangar. Two Boeing 247s can be seen in the background. (Photo: Ing. Enrique Velasco)

Upon their arrival in Balbuena, the aircraft were placed in the main hangar of the *1er. Regimiento Aéreo* (1st Air Regiment), and shortly after, mechanics of the two air regiments based there, under the supervision of Chief Mechanic Angel Santa Ana Carabeo, began assembling them without even inspecting the extent of the damage that the airplanes had. In fact, Lt. Antonio Domenech -a Spanish mechanic- in a report dated 20 November 1939, stated that he did not have any chance to inspect the Bellancas before the assembly work commenced.

The very first flight of a Mexican 28-90B occurred on 13 September 1939 at Balbuena, the aircraft being flown by Major David Chagoya who, at the time, was the Chief Instructor of the *1er. Regimiento Aéreo*. According to witnesses, even General Castro, the Secretary of National Defense, came to the airfield to see the airplane fly. Surprisingly, minutes before take-off, the Chief of the *Military Aeronautics Department* (forerunner of the Mexican Air Force), Colonel Alberto Salinas Carranza, requested a parachute, a flight-helmet and a pair of goggles, and climbed onto the 28-98B's rear cockpit. Fortunately, the 30-minute test-flight was successful, with the aircraft reaching speeds above 480 Km/h in sustained flight, while the landing speed was registered at 110 Km/h. Interviewed by the press after the flight, General Castro stated that these "new aircraft" had been acquired in order to "modernize" the Military Aeronautics Department, and that more were coming. Behind the scenes, however, the reality was quite different...



Major Chagoya and Colonel Salinas right before taking off during the official presentation of the 28-90Bs at Balbuena, on 13 September 1939. (Photo: Revista Kukulcán.)

In Service...

By 1939, the Mexican Military Aeronautics Department was organized in two air regiments and a military aviation school. Of these, the 1st Air Regiment, led by Lt. Col. Antonio Durán González, had three squadrons equipped with Vought/Azcarate Corsair and Consolidated Model 21-M airplanes. The 2nd Air Regiment, on the other hand, was led by Colonel Rafael Montero Ramos, and had also three squadrons equipped with Vought/Azcarate Corsair and Vought V-99M airplanes. The aviation school, whose director was Colonel Luis Farrell Cubillos, had in its inventory an array of training aircraft that included Fleet Model 11-A biplanes, Fleet Model 10-32D biplanes, and Ryan STM monoplanes. Both air regiments were based at Balbuena airfield, while some airplanes were periodically deployed to the various military zones around

the country, upon requirement. On its part, the aviation school was located in Monterrey, Nuevo León.



The 28-90Bs right after assembly, photographed at the 1st Air Regiment hangar at Balbuena. (Photo: Ing. Enrique Velasco.)

Up until this day, there's no certainty on which unit of the Military Aeronautics Department received the newly acquired 28-90Bs. A good guess can be made, though, if one follows the way other airplanes had been assigned to the air regiments after their purchase. For example, the Consolidated Model 21-M, of which ten were bought in 1937, went to the 2nd squadron of the 1st Air Regiment; the next aircraft acquired, which were ten Vought V-99M, were assigned to the 1st Squadron of the 2nd Air Regiment. Thus, the next aircraft to be acquired, which happened to be the 28-90Bs, would have to go to the 1st Air Regiment, although it's uncertain to which squadron. It is not known how many of them were pushed into service neither. There's photographic evidence, however, that at least 7 airplanes were on the flight line on 13 September 1939, during their official presentation, and there are reports that no less than 15 were assembled.

Even though these airplanes could be equipped with bomb-racks and machine-guns, there is no proof that the Mexican 28-90Bs were ever armed. These aircraft didn't have any insignia or national color markings painted on neither. In fact, they didn't even have serial numbers assigned, and the pilots registered the construction number of the airplane they just have flown in their logbooks instead! The reason behind this was, surprisingly, that the National Defense Secretariat was hoping to get rid of the 28-90Bs as soon as possible. The objective was to sell them to the highest bidder in order to obtain funds for the Spanish Republican Assistance Committee, who needed money urgently for continuing resettling the refugees. (Based on this premise, it seems that the real owner of the airplanes was the Spanish Committee and not the Mexican government!)

Unfortunately, the relationship of the Mexican pilots with the newly acquired 28-90Bs got off to a dramatic start, since on 14 September 1939 (the day after their official presentation), Major Raúl Azcarate (pilot in command) and Captain Cuauhtémoc Aguilar crashed near the town of Tlupetlac, after a 90-minute flight. Maj. Azcarate was killed upon impact, while Capt. Aguilar was badly injured.



Wreckage of the 28-90B that crashed on 14 September 1939, killing Major Azcarate. (Photo: Casasola Collection.)

Even though the cause of the accident was determined to be a mechanical failure, the local press blamed the pilots for their lack of experience on the aircraft type. In fact, Capt. Enrique Velasco Rivas, member of the 2nd Squadron of the 1st Air Regiment, sent a letter to the editor of "El Universal" newspaper, which was published on 19 September 1939. In his letter, Velasco stated that he was astonished to see that less than 24 hours after the accident had taken place and with the investigation only beginning, the newspaper had blamed it on the pilots, saying the the 28-90Bs where "too fast" for the Mexican aviators. In the end, Velasco stated that many of his fellow pilots had flown faster aircraft while they were training in the United States, and suggested that all reporters should get their information directly from the Military Aeronautics Department and refrain from publishing hearsay.

Ironically, there was some truth to what had been published by "El Universal." In an interview with Mexican aero-historian Manuel Ruiz Romero, Lt. (R) Baldomero Astudillo -who had flown with the 2nd Air Regiment- told him that his fellow pilots had some reservations regarding the 28-90Bs and considered them unforgiving and too complicated, specially because it was the first aircraft type operated by the Aeronautics Department that had retractable landing gear. In addition, the pilots believed that the 28-90Bs were in bad shape due to the long time they had spent stored and, as an example, they mentioned an incident during which parts of the airplane's fabric came loose and

compromised its flight controllability. Fortunately, in that occasion the pilot was able to make an emergency landing almost immediately.

Less than two months later, during the celebration of the 24th anniversary of the military aviation in Mexico on 15 November 1939, some of the 28-90Bs participated in an air parade along with other aircraft from both air regiments. According to press reports, sixty aircraft were in the air that day. Among the guests that attended this event was the Secretary of National Defense General Agustín Castro, Colonel Salinas Carranza, and the former Spanish Republican Army General José Miaja Menant. Sadly, tragedy struck during the acrobatic demonstration when a Ryan STM of the Aviation School crashed, killing Captain Martín Polín Tapia. As it would be expected, the event was suspended, but half an hour later -and upon request from the military pilots who wanted to honor their fallen comrade- the high command allowed it to continue. Thus, the aircraft performed bombing and staffing runs against an “enemy target” that had been set up at the Balbuena airfield. Unfortunately, the press failed to report if the 28-90Bs were also involved in such demonstration.



Six 28-90Bs photographed at Balbuena, during the celebration of the Military Aviation Day, on 15 November 1939. (Photo: Ing. Enrique Velasco Archives.)

In June 1940, General Roberto Fierro Villalobos was appointed as the new commander of the Military Aeronautics Department. In his book “*Esta Es Mi Vida*” -published in 1964- General Fierro Villalobos stated that after taking up the command of the air service, he was shocked to see the sorry state in which he found the aircraft at the Balbuena airfield. In fact, only one airplane was airworthy, while the rest were nearly abandoned in the hangars. Villalobos promptly reported this situation to the elected president Avila Camacho who, without wasting any time, ordered the funding necessary for refurbishing the grounded airplanes, and a complete renovation of the airfield facilities. (Fierro’s statement is backed by a report of the U.S. Military Attaché, dated on 18 July 1940.)

With enough funds flowing, the Aeronautics Department’s mechanics were able to return most of the 28-90Bs to flying status, as well as the three Boeing 247s. Shortly after, Fierro Villalobos declared them officially in active service. However, the majority of pilots refused to fly them. Unabated, the General ordered a group of senior pilots to start a training program with the 28-90Bs. Among the instructors was Lt. Radames Gaxiola who, later on, would become commander of the 201st Mexican Fighter Squadron.



Bellanca 28-90B photographed at the 1st Air Regiment hangar, in Balbuena. (Photo: Author’s collection.)

The Beginning of the End...



Lt. Radames Gaxiola was in charge of the training program that Gen. Fierro Villalobos established for the 28-90B pilots in July 1940. (Photo: Revista

The training program began on 5 July 1940, and during the following weeks Lt. Gaxiola flew no less than 44 training missions in the airplanes with the constructor numbers 972, 981, 987 and 988. In August, on the other hand, the instructor managed to fly 32 training sorties with the airplanes 972, 981, 983 and 988. By then, the younger pilots were beginning to feel comfortable with the byzantine 28-90Bs and the number of practice flights increased. Sadly, it was at this time that tragedy struck again since, on 21 August, a 28-90B crashed while attempting to land at Balbuena, killing Capt. Enrique Ochoa (instructor) and Lt. Manuel Peña Ávalos. According to other pilots who witnessed the accident, Lt. Ávalos lost control of the airplane just seconds before touching down and it slammed against the ground. Both, Ávalos and Capt. Ochoa were thrown clear out of the cockpit and died instantly. About this accident, the U.S. Military Attaché reported:

"On August 22, 1940, one of the Bellanca airplane recently acquired by the Mexican Air Force crashed at Balbuena airport and was destroyed by fire. The pilots, Lieutenant Manuel Pena Avalos, and the observer 2nd Captain Enrique Ochoa Luque, were thrown clear of the wreckage and killed instantly.

This plane was one of the 21 planes acquired from the former government of Spain, and which, for the last few weeks, have been undergoing assembling, remodeling and test flying, under the direction of Lieutenant Radames Gaxiola, last year's graduate of Randolph Field. This project was reported No.9401 of June 20, 1940.

No official statement concerning the cause of the accident has yet been issued, but it is believe that the pilot, in attempting to make a practice landing, lost control of the plane and was unable to prevent the crash. Opinion of officers at Balbuena is to the effect that the pilot used bad judgment in handling the controls.

General Roberto Fierro, chief of the Direction of Aeronautics of the Mexican army in a brief statement to the newspapers said:

'This accident, which comes to increase the number of victims of our military aviation, is to be regretted; but it should serve as an example to pilots that they should always obey with discipline of conscientious soldiers the order of their supervisors.'

Lieutenant Pena Avalos and Capt. Ochoa Luque were buried August 22 with military honors in the section assigned to military aviators in the Panteon Civil in Mexico City.

Letters of condolences have been sent by the Military Attaché to General J. Agustin Castro, Secretary of National Defense and to General Roberto Fierro, chief of the Direction of aeronautics.

Signed

Gordon H. McCoy

Lt. Col. (F.A.) G.S.C.,

Military Attache

From M.A. Mexico City No.9481 August 22, 1940"

In contrast, the newspaper "Excelsior" reported that the probable cause of the accident was human error, probably because the pilot got confused during the approach and had lowered the flaps instead of the landing gear. In any case, after this accident, the 28-90Bs were grounded. In fact, the air order of battle of the Aeronautics Department that the U.S. Military Attaché put together on 13 September 1940,

did not list any 28-90B. Also, the *Memoria de la Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional* (the National Defense Secretariat Report of Activities) of September 1940 to August 1941, only listed the air service with the following equipment:

- 12 combat aircraft in service.
- 50 aircraft undergoing repairs.
- 6 aircraft at the Military Aviation School.
- 225 parachutes.
- 82 Colt MG-40 machine-guns for aircraft.
- 166 Mauser rifles (German model.)



One the 28-90Bs photographed in November 1939. (Photo: Revista Kukulcán.)

As soon as the 28-90Bs were grounded, the National Defense Secretariat set out to sell the aircraft. The first solid offer came from Maxwell Brown Company, who was interested in all the aircraft plus their spare parts, and was willing to pay no less than US\$1.2 million. However, a deal was never struck with the U.S. firm due to reasons that remain undisclosed to this day. Shortly after, the National Defense Secretariat was flooded with additional offers, to the point that the situation quickly got out of hand. Even General Francisco Franco -still trying to reclaim the Republican aircraft- got involved and sent the renowned pilot Juan Ignacio Pombo Alonso Pesquera, to try to obtain the airplanes or at least collect the money that the Republican government had been paid for them.

One of Pombo's contacts in Mexico was Colonel Gustavo G. León, a close friend of the presidential candidate for the 1940 elections, General Juan Andrew Almanza. According to some sources, in March 1940, documents were seized from Pombo that uncovered a plan of the *Ejército del Aire Español* (Spanish Air Force) to get the 28-90Bs in exchange of the three ex-Republican Boeing 247s. Such transports would be used during the electoral campaign of General Almanza. In fact, General Franco's regime was hoping that with the election of General Almanza as president, he would facilitate the recovery of the Bellanca aircraft. However, Almanza was defeated in what was termed a "bloody election."

According to local sources, by January 1942, President Ávila Camacho told Indalecio Prieto Tuero, representative of the Spanish Republican government in exile, that the Bellancas would be passed down to the Mexican military, so they could exchange them for more modern U.S. aircraft. By then Mexico was officially at war with the Axis Powers, and needed combat aircraft urgently to patrol the Pacific coast of the country in case of German submarine attacks.

In the end, the U.S. government purchased the 20 engines and propellers of the 28-90Bs for 2.4 million pesos. As part of this deal, six Vought OS2U-3 Kingfishers were transferred to Mexico, in March 1942, which were assigned to the 1er. Regimiento Aéreo, by then operating out of Baja California. In 1943, these Kingfishers were reassigned to the Mexican Navy. As for the 28-90Bs' fuselages, it's been reported that they were sold to Babbco S.A., a Mexican subsidiary of the Charles E. Babb Company of Los Angeles, California, for 15,000 pesos. Then, Babbco sent them to the U.S., where they were used as training aids for the Navy.

Regarding the ex-republican Boeing 247 transports, these were sold to the *Compañía Mexicana de Aviación* in October of 1940, for US\$18,000.00, of which Captain Juan Sixto del Río received US\$3,000 as commission, while 15,000.00 pesos went to the JARE account. (JARE also received the 15,000 pesos that Babbco paid for the 28-90s' fuselages.)

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