



Nicknamed “the Flying Basket” owing to its woven-bamboo construction, the sole PAF-IST XL-14 Maya, bearing its experimental category registration PI-X-104 on its fins, taxis out for a test flight circa early 1953. The machine was a co-operative materials-research project developed by the Institute of Science & Technology (IST) and the Philippine Air Force (PAF).

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BAMBOO BIRDS & OTHER RARE SPECIES

INDIGENOUS AIRCRAFT DESIGN IN THE PHILIPPINES, 1951–58

Although aviation gained a foothold in the Philippines as far back as 1911, the nation never managed to develop an aircraft industry based on its own homegrown designs. A number of aircraft conceived specifically to investigate the incorporation of local materials in aircraft manufacture were built and flown during the 1950s, however, as **NICK STROUD** explains



NOT GENERALLY RENOWNED for its aeronautical endeavours, the Philippines can nevertheless claim south-east Asia’s earliest encounter with manned powered flight, when American aviator James C. “Bud” Mars thrilled spectators in his Skylark pusher biplane (a modified Curtiss design) at the Manila Carnival on February 21, 1911. Mars was part of a Pacific Aviation Exhibition tour organised by fellow American Capt Thomas Baldwin, who followed Mars’s Skylark display at the Carnival with a demonstration of his own Baldwin Red Devil, the pair having arrived with their dismantled aircraft aboard a steamer from Hawaii ten days previously.

The exhibition had not gone so well in Hawaii, where the locals had quickly established a principle that has caused headaches for airshow organisers ever since; why pay for a ticket to enter the showground when you can see an air display from any nearby vantage point? The Manila Carnival organisers must have found a way to sidestep this issue, as the pair of aviators made numerous flights during the week-long festival. Baldwin sold his machine before the duo moved on to complete the Pacific tour with visits to Thailand, Hong Kong and Japan. (The Red Devil was later used by the first flight school in the Philippines, opened by Lt Frank Lahm of the US Army Signal Corps in March 1912. On the 21st of that month Lahm became the first military pilot in the Philippines to fly a military aircraft, when he flew an imported Signal Corps Wright Model B from the capital’s polo field.)

A replica of the Mars Skylark built by students

at the Philippine Air Transport & Training Services College of Aeronautics in 2011 now hangs in the Philippine Air Force Museum at Villamor Air Base near Manila.

THE EARLY YEARS

Since 1898 the Philippines had been under the administration of the USA; and, eight years after Mars and Baldwin’s historic adventures at the Manila Carnival, the Curtiss Aeroplane & Motor Co opened a branch in Manila in the autumn of 1919, from which two former US Army pilots, Maj Joseph Stevenot and Capt Alfred Croft, operated a Curtiss Jenny and a Curtiss Seagull flying-boat. The pair carried the first air mail in the Philippines, from Manila to Cebu and Iloilo, on November 29 that year.

At around the same time, a young pilot from Iloilo, José Tinsay — who had learned to fly in the USA and acquired a Curtiss Oriole — began charter flights across the Guimaras Strait that separates Iloilo on the island of Panay with the thriving town of Bacolod on the neighbouring island of Negros. Aviation was beginning to take a foothold in the Philippines, in both commercial and military terms, and the first Filipino military pilot to qualify to fly was Lt Leonicio Malinao of the Philippine National Guard Aviation Unit, who soloed in a Curtiss JN-4 Jenny on April 20, 1920. By the mid-1930s the Philippine Constabulary had established an aviation branch, mainly using Stearman Models 73 and 76 biplanes and 1917-vintage Curtiss Jennies to locate bandit hideouts.

A number of fledgling airlines had also spread

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP Although not the most elegant of designs, the XL-15 Tagak was the third of the PAF-IST’s collaborative efforts, and offered a rugged, capacious aircraft made with locally-sourced materials. **OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM** Looking like a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog with twin fins, the Maya prepares to alight after a test flight.