

The small, tubby F4F/FM-2 Wildcat is one of the important, yet often forgotten Allied fighters of World War II. Designed in 1935 by the Grumman Aircraft Corp., the XF4F-3 was the first all-metal, carrier launched, monoplane fighter purchased by the U.S. Navy. The F4F beat out competing designs from Brewster and Seversky. The robust and agile F4F was the primary front line fighter of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps at the onset of World War II. This Wildcat proved to be dependable and was loved by pilots and maintenance crews alike.



The first Wildcats to see action were flown by the Royal Navy. Both Britain and France placed orders for the F4F-3 (although with different engines and armament layouts) during late 1939 and early 1940. The aircraft ordered by the French were claimed by the British after France fell in the fall of 1940. Known as the "Martlet", British Wildcats claimed their first victory on Dec. 25, 1940, almost a full year before the first American Wildcats saw action at Wake Island. The Wildcat was America's primary naval fighter through the end of 1942. However, during 1943 most Wildcat squadrons were re-equipped with either the larger Grumman F6F Hellcat or the Chance-Vought F4U Corsair.

By late June 1942, Grumman found itself hard pressed to maintain maximum production of both the F4F and TBF Avenger, while also beginning to tool-up the F6F Hellcat production lines. As a result, production of the Wildcat was transferred to five East Coast General Motors automobile plants. The General Motors FM-2 was the most numerous Wildcat variant produced. From mid-1943 to the end of the war, General Motors' Eastern Aircraft division built 4,777 FM-2s -- nearly 70% of all Wildcats produced. The FM-2 differed from the original Grumman F4F in a number of ways. The FM-2 had a lighter, yet more powerful Wright R-1820 radial engine. Additionally, the plane carried four rather than six .50 caliber machine guns and was often fitted with HVARs (High-Velocity Aircraft Rockets) for use against ground targets, ships or surfaced submarines. The FM-2 also had a larger tail than the standard F4F to counter the increased torque produced by the Wright engine.



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