

The complete formation  
overflying the airfield of  
San Martino Gusnago  
G ORLANDI



# A Classic Quintet

With the intention of forming a display team using variants of the North American T-6 family, five pilots and their aeroplanes descended on Italy's San Martino Gusnago – as **Simone Bovi** discovered



RIGHT AT-6G I-HRVD  
displays its very smart  
RAF scheme S SORLINI



It's early morning in the heart of northern Italy's Padana Valley as the crisp summer sun cuts through the sky and banishes the last of the condensation glistening on a group of aeroplanes on the grass airfield near the village of San Martino Gusnago. However, it is five North American T-6s parked next to the hangar that attract the most interest as it's believed there are just six flying in the country. Finished in a variety of schemes, the quintet has gathered from across Italy for one



LEFT The AT-6F I-FKVE wearing the penguin crest adopted by 61° Stormo Italian Air Force CIRILLO DONELLI



LEFT Resplendent in yellow, AT-6 I-BWUL looks as it did while at the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment, Boscombe Down CIRILLO DONELLI

purpose... to form a display team. The idea was that of Angelo Abico, a former Italian Air Force Fiat G.91 pilot who now flies Boeing 787 Dreamliners. As can be imagined, with so few T-6s believed to be airworthy in Italy, Angelo (who owns and operates AT-6F I-FKVE) already knew several of the other pilots involved with the ubiquitous type – including two of his closest friends, Giancarlo Fè and Sandro Pagliarin. Another former military aviator, Giancarlo

owns I-BWUL, a 1943 Canadian-built example, while acclaimed aerobatic pilot Sandro flies I-SSEP, an ex-USAAF/USAF machine that later served with the Italian Air Force.

As is often the case, news in the aviation world spreads like wildfire and it wasn't long before Angelo's concept reached respected warbird pilots Mario Cotti and Giovanni Marchi and the latter's daughter, Silvia Sorlini, who own I-UOGI and I-HRVD respectively. All three were in favour of

BELOW Sandro Pagliarin climbs aboard T-6G I-SSEP G ORLANDI



RIGHT Job done! The five-ship, with I-SEEP in the lead, breaks for landing G ORLANDI

the initiative, as Silvia revealed: “The idea was already in the air – or better, was born in air! We were attending an airshow in Montagnana in June 2019 with Mario and Marchi. After briefing, we decided to present the audience with a three-ship. The flight itself represented a turning-point and [afterwards] Angelo Abico suggested we create a Harvard formation team. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it took until September [2020] for us all to get together.”

**From flight to fruition**

It was going to prove challenging to get the aeroplanes and pilots in the same place at the same time, but as Sandro Pagliarin explained: “We thrived on overcoming the logistical difficulties in getting to San Martino Gusnago. We all come from different parts of Italy, but passion and friendship helped us do it, together with the hospitality of Silvia and Giovanni.” Also assisted by several former members of the nation’s aerobatic display team, the Frecce Tricolori, the T-6 pilots gained



**“But because of the slow speed, you cannot get distracted – no inattentiveness is allowed”**

knowledge and experience in the art of formation flying. Ironically, during the first day of training, one of the team’s briefings was interrupted by the scream of jets as the Frecce passed by on its way to open the 91st Italian Grand Prix at Monza.

Starting with two separate formations – a two- and a three-ship – Giovanni Marchi commented: “Each flight started with a detailed briefing. The T-6 is a slow and heavy aeroplane and because of that you cannot get distracted – no inattentiveness is allowed... you must stick to the leader. If piloted correctly, it will easily fly through all of its permitted manoeuvres. Although we split the formation, we took off one after the other – the growls coming from the aircraft in front was celestial music to our ears!”

RIGHT Mario Cotti in T6-4M I-UOGI after the flying display CIRILLO DONELLI



RIGHT T-6G I-SEEP wearing the colours of the Italian Air Force’s 4° Stormo CIRILLO DONELLI



FAR RIGHT The agricultural landscape of the Padana Valley contrasts with the bright liveries of the Harvards S SORLINI





While discussing the team's work-up, Giovanni revealed that each flight in the T-6 makes him think back to the type's heyday: "The T-6 was used by countless countries to instruct pilots who would later fly the likes of the P-40, P-51 Mustang, Hurricane and Spitfire during World War Two. Throughout the first day, we briefed, flew and de-briefed – stopping only for a drink, something to eat and to refuel the aeroplanes. While we were on the ground, we would discuss any improvements needed to ensure the next flight was better than the last."

However, after many sorties – all in the face of unseasonably warm temperatures and fatigue fast approaching – the first five-ship growled overhead San Martino Gusnago, much to the delight of those there to see it. Cavorting around the skies as the sun slowly

sank towards the horizon, the aircraft landed to the rapturous cheering and applause of those gathered to watch history in the making. With smiles all round, the aircraft were readied to do it all again the following day.

Silvia explained: "We spent the day practising and trying different formations – the main purpose of this is to highlight the history of these aircraft. At the end of the last flight, concentration and professionalism was soon replaced by cheering and relaxed emotions – we had done it. But it is all thanks to the passion and commitment of Giovanni, Angelo, Giancarlo, Mario and Sandro... a Texan team, made in Italy!" **FP**

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## Team aircraft

### AT-6G I-HRVD – owned by Giovanni Marchi and Silvia Sorlini

Operated by the Italian Air Force between 1955-76, the aircraft that became I-HRVD suffered three minor flying accidents before it was withdrawn in 1976. Sold to a scrap merchant in 1981, the airframe was eventually purchased by Luciano Sorlini, who undertook a total restoration. Taking to the skies again in May 2000, Luciano's daughter inherited the aircraft following his death. It currently wears RAF markings and the serial KF729.

### AT-6F I-FKVE – owned by Angelo Abico

Built during 1944 as 44-82322, this machine began life as US Navy SNJ-6 BuNo 112187. Retired in 1956 with more than 8,000 flying hours, it was sold to Brazil in the early 1960s where it spent several years with the nation's aerobatic display team – the Esquadilha da Fumaça (Smoke Squadron). In 1976, the airframe joined Brazil's civil register as PT-KVE before moving to Italy and being noted as D-FKVE. Restored, it was sold in 2016, registered as I-FKVE and finished in its current Italian AF colours.

### T6-4M I-UOGI – owned by Mario Cotti

Rolling out of the Canadian Car & Foundry Company's Fort William, Québec, factory, the aircraft that was to become I-UOGI served with the Aeronautica Militare as MM.53863. Sold onto the civilian market following its withdrawal, it was destined to be scrapped. However, in 1998 it was purchased by Pino Valenti who, with the help of Sergio Arban, commenced a restoration to flight. Taking some 5,000 hours, it flew again on January 7, 2006. It is finished in a 1950s US Marines Corps scheme, and Mario has owned the machine since 2017.

### AT-6 I-BWUL – owned by Giancarlo Fè

Built in 1943 by Canada's Noorduy Aviation and delivered to the Royal Canadian Air Force as 43-13116 in March 1944, this Harvard was later transferred to the RAF as FT375. Serving throughout World War Two, the aeroplane was transferred to the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough, Hampshire, before being sent to the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment at Wiltshire's Boscombe Down in 1946. Used as a low-speed camera platform until 1994, it was sold into civilian hands two years later and registered as G-BWUL. After passing through several owners, the aircraft was added to Italy's civil register as I-BWUL in 2015 and has retained the yellow livery it gained at Boscombe.

### T-6G I-SSEP – owned by Sandro Pagliarin

Constructed as a T-6D 44-80865 for the USAAF during 1944, this machine was upgraded to a 'G' in 1951. Serialled 51-14462, the aircraft was delivered to Italy under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program the following year and allocated the serial MM.4101. After its retirement in 1976, the wrecked aircraft was discovered in an Italian theme park and chosen for restoration in 1999. Flying again by 2004, it now wears the colours of the 4° Stormo's 604th Squadriglia while serving at Grosseto Air Base during the 1950s-60s.