

Finland's

One of the most scenic airfields in Finland is home to VL Viima II OH-VIG – considered to be among the country's finest and rarest vintage types.

Stefan Degraef explains why

finest

Right
Demonstrating the type's slightly swept back wing, Phil Lawton formates on the cameraship.

ALL STEFAN DEGRAEF

The Finnish Air Force (Ilmavoimat) turned to the newly founded state aircraft company Valtion Lentokonetehtäas (VL) to augment and eventually replace its Czechoslovakian-built Letov Š 218 Smolik basic trainers in the early 1930s.

Led by chief engineer Arvo Ylinen, the resulting blueprint was a striking single-engined, two-seat, mixed-

Exclusively Finnish

Initially operated alongside German-built Focke-Wulf Fw 44 Stieglitz aircraft by the Lentosotakoulu (Training Air Wing) at Kauhava Airfield in western Finland, a small number of Viimas were allocated to frontline squadrons as logistical and support assets. During the Winter War (1930-1940) and Continuation War (1941-1944) with the Soviet Union, the type flew countless pilot-familiarisation sorties over the border areas. The aircraft's outstanding manoeuvrability and

in a slightly widened cockpit. Following its initial flights in this configuration, a larger rudder was fitted to compensate for the aerodynamic changes caused by the adaption. Operated by the Finns until the late 1950s, the last examples of the type were replaced by Swedish-built Saab 91D Safir basic trainers. Of the remaining ten



construction biplane featuring staggered wings of different spans. It was fitted with a seven-cylinder 150hp (110Kw) air-cooled Siemens-Halske Sh 14 radial powerplant, was named the Viima (Gale in English) and took to the skies for the first time in December 1935.

However, its performance was considered underwhelming. Heading back to the drawing board, VL soon produced the much improved Viima II. Flying initially on October 12, 1937 with test pilot Jorma Visapää at the controls, the Ilmavoimat placed an order for 20 examples a year later – the first of which was received in July 1939. The rest had arrived by December of that year.

low-speed handling capabilities made it an ideal platform for forward communication with friendly ground units, but more importantly to mount observation flights to counter Soviet scouts infiltrating the border. Those Viimas assigned to frontline units were made less conspicuous while operating under the threat of enemy fighters, thanks to a tactical camouflage of olive green and black on the upper surfaces and light grey/blue undersides, in place of the more traditional Day-Glo orange wings and tail-section.

Serving solely with the Ilmavoimat, the Viima was used primarily as a liaison asset following the end of hostilities in 1945. However, to allow it to operate all year round – especially during Finland's harsh winter season – the type was soon modified with a Perspex canopy which resulted

aircraft, six were sold on the civilian market.

European wanderer

The first serial-produced Viima II to roll out of VL's Tampere factory in southern Finland, the aircraft that became OH-VIG, started life with the military serial VI-3. Delivered to Kauhava in 1939, it was given the moniker *Haijala* in memory of Hannes Haijala – the Ilmavoimat's first appointed Lentomestareita (Flight Master – a rank used by the service from 1925-1952). In May 1960, with more than 4,000 flying hours 'on the clock', VI-3 was withdrawn from



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Top right
Powered by a seven-cylinder Siemens Halske Sh13A4 radial engine, the Viima has a top speed of around 100kts (186km/h).

Right
Built around two box spars, the Viima's fabric-covered wings are of unequal span and supported by an N-strut.

Opposite top left
During Finland's Winter and Continuation Wars, frontline Viimas gained typical Ilmavoimat camouflage of olive green and black over light grey/blue undersides. The aircraft is seen at its picturesque home of Räyskälä Airfield in southern Finland.

Opposite top right
The Viima is a nimble performer despite its somewhat bulky appearance. Thankfully, through the efforts of its owner, the type is staving off extinction from Finnish skies.

military service along with six other examples and auctioned to a handful of flying clubs across Finland. Given the Finnish serial OH-VIG, like the others they were used mainly as glider tugs until far more modern types took over and the Viima population gradually declined to almost zero. Sadly, the willingness and motivation needed to maintain these vintage aircraft during the 1960s was almost non-existent, leading to the eventual 'extinction' of the Viima from Finnish skies.

Having flown almost 1,000 flying hours in its post-Ilmavoimat career, VI-3 – now registered G-BAAY – re-appeared in 1970 at Booker Airfield (today's Wycombe Air Park), Buckinghamshire in the UK. Undergoing an extensive restoration, the aircraft, which regained its original open cockpit and was finished in an overall dark green scheme, undertook its debut post-restoration flight in October 1974. The larger rudder remained untouched.

Later that year, the aeroplane was used in the filming of director Jack Gold's 1976 World War One flying epic, *Aces High*, sporting a notional 'Red Baron' scheme. Repainted shortly afterwards into its original two-tone black and green Ilmavoimat livery, it was later finished in Luftwaffe-style training colours – similar to those worn by the Fw 44 Stieglitz. Settling into a routine of flying around various UK events with different owners over the next decade, G-BAAY surpassed 5,500 flying hours. On November 23, 1989, VI-3 left the UK to join Robert Landuyt's Flying Legends Collection at Kortrijk-Wevelgem Airport in Belgium. Registered OO-EBL, the Viima was a welcome

addition to the group, becoming a regular and welcome airshow and fly-in attendee across Europe.

Unfortunately, 'EBL was heavily damaged in an accident in 1994 and sent to Skysport Engineering in the UK for a complete rebuild. Re-joining the collection some time later it, along with the rest of Robert's fleet, was offered for sale following the death of its owner – triggering an exodus of vintage aircraft types from the country. Cancelled from the Belgian register on June 14, 2011, the aircraft was purchased – together with Landuyt's Bucker

Enter an Englishman

By sheer coincidence the aircraft was 'resurrected' by Phillip Lawton, an English aviation enthusiast well known in Finland following his masterful restoration of Hawker Hurricane Mk.IIB G-CBOE. Having moved to the country, he was looking for an old Finnish vintage type of his own and came across D-EVVI in 2015. After negotiation he purchased the machine, which again was registered OH-VIG, some 45 years after leaving its native country.

Following a thorough technical inspection and minor overhaul, the aircraft was ferried to its current home at Räyskälä airfield, in Southern Finland. Constructed as part of a defensive ring of military aerodromes to defend

Helsinki against enemy air attacks, it is home to the Finnish Sports Aviation Academy and

is one of the busiest General Aviation strips in Finland.

The Viima's 'relationship' with the more common Focke-Wulf Stieglitz enables a relative easy-going availability of spare parts for its Siemens Halske radial. The acquisition of aerobatic carburettors, from vintage aircraft engine specialist Luftfahrttechnischer Betrieb Dirk Bende in Germany has enabled Phil to fully display the Viima which, with a purpose-fitted smoke system, flies a dynamic routine. ●

Above right
Phil Lawton's Viima is based at Räyskälä airfield, northwest of Helsinki, where there are opportunities for it to be flown over similar territory to frontline examples used in the search for Soviet scouts infiltrating the border.



Bü-133C Jungmeister OO-EII – by a collector in Germany. Unbelievably, having bought and added

the Viima as D-EVVI on the German register, the new owner was far from interested in flying it. Becoming no more than a 'hangar queen', VI-3 was destined to be forgotten once again.



Viima survivors



A second Viima-trainer (ex-VI-15, now OH-VIE) is currently under restoration in Helsinki. Scheduled for its first flight in 2021, it will be finished as it was in 1943.

First flown on October 11, 1939, Viima VII VI-17 is still airworthy today as OH-VIF. Equipped with a closed canopy, this airframe amassed more than 4,430 flying hours while serving with the Ilmavoimat. Finland's third 'known' example of the type is currently under restoration by three Viima aficionados in Helsinki, having retrieved the incomplete airframe (serial VI-15) from a technical training school at Rovaniemi, Lapland. With its first post-restoration flight expected sometime in 2021, the aircraft is being rebuilt to 1943-standard with original instruments mounted in both cockpits. In 1943 the aircraft served with Hävittäjälentolaivue 24 (Fighter Squadron 24) at Suulajärvi Airfield, in what is now western Russia. Viima VI-6 (OH-VID), located in the Kauhava Air Park, was expected to be returned to flying condition, but was never finished. In 2017, the machine changed ownership and was put on static display. Modified to its original open cockpit configuration, the fuselage, rudder and horizontal stabiliser have been left untouched. At least one additional stripped down and engineless Viima 'hulk' is said to remain in Finland, but time will tell if other 'barn finds' come to light in the future.