

Aermacchi MB326H (CA-30) trainer

After World War II, Italy was physically and economically devastated. The Aeronautica Militare lacked substantial financial resources to develop a broad range of supersonic interceptors, fighters and bombers it needed to rebuild and defend itself during the jet-powered era of the Cold War. Thus, Italy needed to focus its research and development on a light trainer and fighter with multiple capabilities. Ermanno Bazzochi, who studied mechanical engineering at Italy's top technical university, Politecnico di Milano, went on to become an aircraft designer at Aeronautica Macchi (Aermacchi) in Varese. He presented his design for the MB-326, an aircraft featuring a single Armstrong Siddeley Viper engine. At the time, the Viper was an inexpensive, shorter life span engine designed for target drones, like the Jindivik, yet it proved itself far more reliable. Aermacchi accepted Bazzocchi's design and began production.

Aermacchi's design team put the MB-326 through a long development period, seeking to perfect the aircraft. The first prototype flight took place on Dec. 10, 1957, flown by Guido Carestiato, Aermacchi's chief test pilot. However, the first prototype later crashed during a flight demonstration in Egypt in April 1959. Aermacchi test pilot Nicola Macchia died in the accident. The second prototype flew successfully at the June 1959 Le Bourget airshow in France, attracting customer interest. Further successful test flights led to a 118-aircraft order from the Aeronautica Militare, the first of which entered service in 1962. Aermacchi delivered the first MB-326s to the No. 214 Group Lecce-Galatina aviation school at Brindisi in southeast Italy.

About the time the MB-326 became available for international sales and licensing, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) began looking for a new jet-powered trainer to succeed the aging Wirraway, Vampire and Winjeel. The RAAF sought to implement an all jet-powered training course to prepare its pilots for jet-powered flight from the beginning. RAAF instructors also hoped the MB-326 would provide a baseline for the more advanced French-built Mirage III interceptor the RAAF had recently brought into service.

In August 1965, the RAAF selected the Italian trainer aircraft and test flew it for the first time in Italy in April 1967 for Commonwealth Aircraft Corp. (CAC), which served as prime contractor alongside Hawker de Havilland. Aermacchi and CAC coordinated the delivery before its acquisition by RAAF in October 1968. The CAC production line located at Fisherman's Bend, Victoria, produced the MB-326 while a Hawker de Havilland facility at Guildford, Western Australia, provided maintenance and repair services for all MB-326s. At this point, CAC conducted MB-326 production until the last delivery in September 1972. In all, CAC built 97 MB-326s. Australia was not the only country to build the MB-326 outside Italy; Brazil's Embraer and South Africa's Atlas Aircraft also built the MB-326 aircraft for their respective militaries.

The RAAF used 97 MB-326s in four different squadrons from 1967 until all came out of service in 2000. In the 1970s and 1980s, the RAAF demonstration team, "The Roulettes," flew the MB-326 at flight shows. The MB-326 was later replaced by the Pilatus PC-9 after training many Australian pilots.

TECHNICAL DATA: Aermacchi MB326H

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| Power plant | One 2500 lb thrust Bristol Siddeley Viper 11 turbojet |
| Span | 10.57m (34ft 8in) |
| Length | 10.67m (35ft) |
| Height | 3.71m (12ft 2in) |
| Empty weight | 2,236kg (4930 lb) |
| Loaded weight | 4,300kg (9480 lb) |
| Maximum speed | 806kph (435 kt) |
| Range | 1,512km (816nm) |
| Service ceiling | 44,000ft (13411m) |

