



The Army Air Forces turned to dive-bombers for accuracy, but the A-24 Banshee found itself in the wrong places at the wrong times.

The Last of the Dive-bombers

By Walter J. Boyne

In warfare, as in business, timing and location are everything.

The classic Douglas dive-bomber of World War II served the Navy brilliantly as the SBD Dauntless, while the virtually identical A-24 Banshee had only a mediocre career with the US Army Air Forces. There were many reasons for this, but the main one was the combination of the Navy's long-standing training in dive-bombing and the nature of its targets, which allowed the SBD to perform.

In contrast, dive-bombing was thrust upon the heavy-bomber-centric AAF following the spectacular successes of the German Junkers Ju 87 Stuka in





the initial phases of World War II. The undeniably menacing look of the Ju 87 certainly made the pitch easier as well.

When at last the AAF sought to obtain a dive-bombing capability, it took delivery of Douglas A-24s (erstwhile Navy SBD-3s) in mid-1941. Unfortunately, the Banshee had too little performance and was too late in the game. The AAF service of the A-24 might be characterized as brave but undistinguished. Yet during the same time period, the naval SBD Dauntless versions of the aircraft were writing history in a series of decisive battles from the Coral Sea through Midway and well into 1944.

The Dauntless was ultimately replaced by the larger, faster, but less forgiving, Curtiss SB2C Helldiver, but it remained a favorite among Navy and Marine fliers.

The Navy and Marine Corps saw in dive-bombing a solution to two problems. The first was accuracy, essential for Marine close air support, but the second was creating a weapon that could fly from the crowded decks of an aircraft carrier to deliver an armor-piercing bomb on an enemy ship.

Even relatively large carriers such as *Lexington* and *Saratoga* could not carry medium or heavy bombers. The task had to be left to smaller airplanes such as the Curtiss F6C Hawk or multipurpose biplanes such as the Curtiss F8C Falcon.

Lt. Cmdr. Frank Wagner, commanding officer of strike squadron VF-2, began demonstrating dive-bombing in March

1926, and instructed his squadron in the technique.

He made Navy history on Oct. 22, 1926, with a surprise dive-bombing mock attack on ships of the Pacific Fleet, using the Curtiss F6C-2 single-seater. By 1928, the Navy was confident enough in the technique to order the Martin XT5M-1, which offered both a torpedo and a dive-bombing capability. One of the demanding requirements called for the new Martin to be able to pull out of a terminal velocity dive with a 1,000-pound bomb still attached.

Sopwiths and Zeppelins

The Curtiss Co. exploited the now-intense Navy and Marine Corps interest with the further development of the basic F8C into the famous Helldiver series of dive-bombers. Nascent US dive-bombing capability is vividly portrayed in the 1931 film "Hell Divers." The nominal stars are Clark Gable and Wallace Beery, but the real stars are the airplanes, including the Curtiss F8C-4, Great Lakes TG-1, Martin T4M-1, and others as well as *Saratoga* and the dirigible USS *Los Angeles*.

The Army Air Forces, meanwhile, may have waited until just before the US entry into World War II before finally turning to dive-bombers, but the discipline itself extended back before World War I.

Left top: An A-24 on the ramp on Makin, in the Gilbert Island chain. Left bottom: German Stukas in 1943. Above: An RA-24B assigned to Air Transport Command.

During the 1910-20 Mexican Civil War, an American named Leonard Bonney flew his Moisant monoplane in the service of the Mexican government. A report of his combat activities said Bonney allegedly dived on enemy positions, releasing his small, spherical dynamite bombs prior to pulling up.

His reason for doing so, no doubt, was accuracy, and it was accuracy that prompted many early attempts at dive-bombing during the First World War of 1914-18.

Among the first of these was to preempt what was regarded as the major German aerial threat of the time, the Zeppelin. The war was scarcely two weeks old when on Aug. 14, 1914, the French sent clumsy Voison bombers, flown by inexperienced pilots, to bomb the airship hangars at Metz, France. One pilot who dropped his bombs by diving on the target obtained the best results. Two months later, the British Royal Flying Corps sent Sopwith Tabloids against the Zeppelin sheds at Duesseldorf in Germany, and once again the best results were obtained by diving to a low altitude before dropping the bombs.

There were many other examples of aircraft diving to ensure accuracy



in bomb delivery, including accounts by Arthur Gould Lee in his book *No Parachute*. However it appears the first truly preplanned and practiced dive-bombing attack took place on March 14, 1918, when 2nd Lt. William Henry Brown dived his Royal Aircraft Factory S.E. 5a on a German supply barge in a French canal, sinking it with a 20-pound Cooper bomb.

Brown's technique was adopted by other British flying units, but the grievous losses suffered in ground attack overshadowed these successes, and dictated the course of Great Britain's dive-bomber development for the next two decades.

The Royal Air Force eschewed close air support and concentrated instead on light bombers, which reached their peak with the handsome but useless Fairey Aviation Co.'s Battle in 1937. The Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm was a bit more advanced, however, and that year contracted for a true (if generally ineffective) dive-bomber, the Blackburn Skua.

The United States began its dive-bombing experience with an unlikely aircraft, the de Havilland DH-4. This large, slow but sturdy aircraft was used by the Marine Corps in Haiti against the mercenary Cacos in 1919, and against the "Sandinistas" in Nicaragua in 1927 and 1928.

The Army Air Service's Third Attack Group demonstrated dive-bombing at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland

on Sept. 1, 1919. The Third conducted active dive-bombing attacks along the Mexican border for the next two years.

The newfound American fascination with dive-bombing was mirrored in Germany, which was engaged in a systematic program to develop dive-bombers. The rebuilding German air arm was encouraged to develop dive-bombing by the enthusiasm of Ernst Udet. An ace from World War I with 62 victories to his credit, Udet had observed American dive-bombing, and persuaded Hermann Goering to purchase two export versions of the Curtiss F11C-2 Goshawk, which had a very short and not too successful career in the US Navy.

Horn of Jericho

The Junkers firm took advantage of this developing interest and entered the dive-bombing field by clandestinely developing the K 47 as a civil aircraft, testing it in Sweden in 1932.

This led in time to the history-making Ju 87, a Sturzkampfflugzeug, the generic term for dive-bomber, which led to the infamous nickname Stuka. This became a proprietary term for the malevolent-looking Ju 87 with its inverted gull wings, spatted undercarriage, and drooping pointed nose.

The Ju 87 had a troubled development life, including numerous crashes and the firm opposition of then-Col. Wolfram F. von Richthofen, a cousin of the famed Red Baron of World War

A Douglas A-24 on static display at the National Museum of the US Air Force, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.

I, Manfred von Richthofen. Udet prevailed, however, and the Ju 87 entered combat in the Spanish Civil War in 1938. The Ju 87 dropped the very first bombs of World War II when three Stukas bombed the approaches to the Dirschau Bridge over the Vistula River in Poland on Sept. 1, 1939.

The sinister Stuka went on to great success in the Polish, Danish, Norwegian, Dutch, Belgian, and French campaigns, serving as flying artillery and working hand-in-glove with fast-moving Panzer divisions.

The Stukas were rugged aircraft, able to operate out of forward fields, generating many sorties in the course of a day. Their accuracy was phenomenal, and in the early days, their sound had a profound psychological effect upon the relatively green troops they were facing. The Germans had added to the natural noise of a diving aircraft the wind-driven "Horn of Jericho" to terrify the enemy.

Journalists reported on the success of the Ju 87 and the term "Stuka" became identified with quick victories.

There was tremendous popular and political pressure on the Army Air Corps to obtain a dive-bombing capability, which it filled by obtaining 168 SBD-3s and designating them as A-24s. These were essentially Navy aircraft with the

deck hook removed and a pneumatic tail wheel tire replacing the solid Navy version. Over time a further 170 A-24A and 615 A-24Bs were obtained, versions respectively of the Navy SBD-4 and SBD-5.

The very first A-24s were immediately dispatched to the Philippines in November 1941, intended for the 27th Bombardment Group (Light).

However with the Japanese attack on the Philippines, the aircraft were diverted to Australia, arriving in Brisbane in December 1941. These A-24s, some already used aircraft when the AAF obtained them, had seen hard service in large-scale Louisiana maneuvers in September 1941, and were dirty and in bad mechanical condition.

Meanwhile, the personnel of the 27th were subject to the true rigors of warfare, landing in the Philippines and being given a wide variety of duties. Col. John H. Davies, the 27th's commander, and 12 pilots attempted to fly out to Australia in a Douglas C-39 and two Douglas B-18s, but got only as far as Java.

Other officers and men were transported from the Philippines in five separate submarines, running the gauntlet of the Japanese fleet.

Sadly, around 400 members of the 27th were left behind in the Philippines, where they fought with the ground forces until surrender as part of the 1st Provisional Air Corps Regiment. Many were killed, and the survivors had to endure the infamous Bataan Death March.

On Feb. 5, 1942, the pilots and ground crew of the 27th assembled in Australia were ordered to move to Malang, Java. Fifteen aircraft of the 91st Bombardment Squadron arrived on Feb. 17, but only seven A-24s were available for the dawn attack on Japanese vessels landing troops on Bali.

The bombing results were poor, and the A-24 was no match for the Japanese fighters it encountered. Lacking armor and self-sealing fuel tanks, the Banshee was slow, short-ranged, and vulnerable to combat damage.

On Feb. 27, the A-24s participated in the disastrous battle of the Java Sea. A fortunate decision was made to withdraw the unit from Java, and it returned to Australia where it would later be equipped with the more suitable Douglas A-20.

By March 1942, a total of 42 officers, 62 enlisted men, and 24 of the A-24 Banshees were assigned to the



A Dauntless, the Navy's legendary dive-bomber, drops its weapons load. The nearly identical AAF Banshee never achieved similar success.

8th Bombardment Squadron, 3rd Bomb Group, and stationed at Charters Towers in Queensland, Australia.

The few remaining A-24s in Australia were tasked to defend New Guinea. On July 26, 1942, seven Banshees attacked a Japanese convoy, but were in turn attacked by fighters. Six of the A-24s were shot down, and the aircraft was subsequently withdrawn from combat.

This was not the end of the road for the Banshee, however. As the US gained air superiority in the Pacific, a later version of the aircraft, the A-24B, was introduced.

Passing the Torch

This version of the Navy's SBD-5, employed a 1,200 horsepower engine and was faster than its predecessors. It served with the 407th Bomb Group, flying against the Japanese-held island of Kiska, Alaska, in mid-1943. Other Banshees went to the 531st Fighter-Bomber Squadron and the 86th Combat Mapping Squadron.

The 531st flew from Makin Island against Japanese forces in the Marshall

Islands and did well, in what were by then fairly permissive skies. On most missions, they had fighter cover, either AAF Bell P-39s and Curtiss P-40s, or Navy Grumman F6Fs.

In other parts of the world, dive-bombers soldiered on. The veteran Ju 87 served until the last day of the war for the Luftwaffe. However by 1944, all the air forces of the world realized the latest single-seat fighters could also function in the close air support role, and could do any dive-bombing required. Thus the dive-bombing torch was passed to aircraft such as the Hawker Typhoon, Republic P-47, and Focke Wulf Fw 190.

Although withdrawn from combat, A-24s continued to serve as trainers or target aircraft. Some remained in service until 1950 and, as the "A" designation was canceled, received the redesignation of F-24.

In the A-24-SBD comparison, the Dauntless undoubtedly outshined the Banshee. Although the airplanes were essentially the same, the environment, the training, and the targets were vastly different. ■

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