

P ILOTS do speculate. Gather a group of pilots and soon they are concentrating on what could be . . . what might be . . . Redesigning their planes. Giving them more speed, better maneuverability, more guns, bigger payloads, better defenses. Warrior pilots have fantasies and opinions and recommendations that answer their needs in combat. Very often they are valid.

By the spring of 1944, many of the pilots flying out of New Guinea had been in combat with their B-25s and A-20s for more than two years. Their experience legitimatised the wealth of opinions and ideas they offered freely.

These were the men who had watched and worked out the evolution of the B-25 into the flying machine that made such a great contribution, relentlessly pushing the surviving “Sons of Heaven” out of their Southwest Pacific territory.

That early spring of 1944, hovering over the speculation were rumors of a new warplane being developed in California to replace the workhorses that had brought us as far as Nadzab, up the Markham Valley from Lae. Everyone in the field had heard descriptions of this new machine. No one then in our group had seen it. No official information was offered. No promises had been made and no schedules posted. Eventually we resigned ourselves to the status quo. We would, we surmised, be finishing the war with what we had.

Then, in May the rumors became more substantial. We learned that the new dream weapon would be arriving by ship at the new aircraft depot being developed at recently recaptured Finschhafen. What formerly had been a prime Japanese target would now be the site of assembly for the ultimate airplane. All indications were that this plane would take us to a new level of weaponry.

The plane’s designation was A-26B, made by the Douglas Aircraft Company—the same company that developed and manufactured the A-20 that currently was serving us so well. The rumors promised it would be better than the A-20Gs we were flying.

And finally, toward the end of May, Bill Morrissey, the test pilot from the Douglas Long Beach, California plant, brought in the newly assembled A-26B from Finschhafen. Pilots, crews, staff, we were all impressed with the sight of that mighty bomber touching down on the Nadzab runway.

Being new almost was excitement enough to these war-weary combat crews of the Third.

This plane was more than new. It was a beauty. Its 41,000-plus pounds of gross weight, its 70-foot wing span were promises kept. The greatest piston engine ever built powered it. Each of its two 18-cylinder Pratt & Whitney R2800-27s put out 2,000 horsepower dry. Injecting water into the fuel to hype the engines further increased the power for short periods of time. It was a faster airplane than we were now flying.

The laminar flow wings were comparatively long and slim with double slotted flaps designed for lift, cruising speed and low landing speed. The bomb load at 6,000-pounds was more than double that of the A-20G and the range was more than 2,000 miles, twice and then some the A-20G's range. The A-26B as delivered to us was equipped with eight forward firing fifty-caliber Browning machine guns each with 500 rounds of ammo and two more in the upper rear power turret. A crew of three—pilot, navigator and rear gunner—would fly it.

In a few days, three more A-26Bs from Finschhafen followed for combat evaluation. Our Third Attack Group, longer in the theater with more combat experience than any other attack unit, would test it against the B-25s and A-20s we knew so well.

As Group Commander, I was first up. On June 7, 1944, Morrissey checked me out for local orientation and familiarization flights. Other pilots followed.

Then we headed out looking for suitable enemy targets that would provide live combat tests—short range search and destroy missions. None of them was worthy of the promise of our A-26B as a combat plane.

We flew further north. The nearest Japanese airfield and harbor of any consequence was Manokwari, another 375 miles northwest on the Vogelkop Peninsula. Our target was another disappointment. Making a minimum altitude pass we saw nothing but a few wrecked airplanes on the runways and a couple of damaged ships with a couple of tied up barges in the harbor. Not the formidable enemy we had sought.

We strafed and bombed anyway. We dropped our load of 20, 100-pound bombs along the north shore of the harbor encountering little ground fire—almost none. We had been briefed to expect no air opposition and, although ready, we got none.

The low-keyed missions did give us the opportunity to focus on the plane. Although we agreed the flying characteristics of the plane were excellent—good range, good bomb load, good engines—our overall reactions as low level bomber pilots were negative.



The cockpit arrangements were inefficient. Pilot visibility was hampered, making the minimum altitude formation flying so necessary to our bombing and strafing raids awkward. Both engines extended far forward of the pilot's position, at a level with his line of sight to the left, to the right and to the rear. It was like flying in a slit trench. Couldn't see down; couldn't see level. All you could see was up. That put pilots flying formation with a lead flying minimum altitude hanging on coconut trees or ship masts, or riding up his tail.

Inside a very wide cockpit, too wide for a single pilot airplane, was the seat and one control column placed on the left side, further disabling the pilot's right visibility,

The bomb bay doors were activated by a lever located forward to the right of the pilot seat forcing him to bend down and forward to reach it, again inhibiting his ability to see.

We flew the planes for a month. We tested them in combat singly and in formation against the enemy at Noemfoer, Biak Island, Wakde Island and Manokwari.

All the pilots who finished up the testing experienced similar difficulties. We concurred on the need to report negatively on our combat experiences with the new plane. It was a good single flight airplane, but not the plane for the tactics we were employing so successfully—low level strafing and bombing in tight formation primarily against Japanese shipping over scattered targets. We settled on 32 changes we would recommend be made in an effort to make the plane a combat formation plane usable by us in our kind of war.

We carried our list of 32 grievances with us when we consulted with the Fifth Bomber Command. It moved up with us when we discussed the airplane with the Fifth Air Force at Port Moresby. Our observations eventually reached the top, General, Kenney, and I was instructed to meet with him to give him our report first hand.

General George Kenney had been in the air attack business through 25 years of war, near war and peace. He understood our design problems immediately, placed me on temporary duty with orders to report to the Pentagon and deliver our list of A-26B design deficiencies. His goodbye was, "You go on home and tell them why we don't need it or want it! We'll stay with our B-25s, A-20s and B-24s."

The next day I was in Brisbane, Australia boarding a U.S. Navy flying boat heading east to Hawaii with priority travel orders taking me to Washington D.C. and Army Air Force Headquarters.

In spite of its faults, in the A-26B we were able to cruise at a speed of 235; our old B-25s cruised at 225 mph; the A-20s could push 234. Now, here I was trimmed back to the 120 mph top speed of this Navy flying boat, island hopping through the hot July heat from Australia to Pearl Harbor. It was a tedious trip. I survived for three days on sleeping potions provided by a flight surgeon in Brisbane who