

# Flying



CAF's SBD DAUNTLESS  
U.S. AIRFORCE PHOTO  
BY DAVID TULLIS

# the Ghost

## SBD Dauntless

BY KEITH WOOD  
EAA Warbird No. 551171

**A**s one of the pilots who currently flies the Commemorative Air Force's Dauntless, I often wondered about the history of the airplane. Where was it built? Had it ever seen combat? How many different owners has it had since World War II? Most of what everyone knew (or thought they knew) about the Dauntless was the information that is currently posted on the Dixie Wing's website:

"Our 'lady in blue' and the pride of the Dixie Wing, the Douglas Dauntless SBD-5 dive bomber was assigned to us by the headquarters of the Commemorative Air Force (CAF) in 1991. The Dixie Wing's Dauntless was built at the El Segundo factory in California. After the war, it was sold to Mexico as XB-QUC and used for aerial photography until mid-1964. Ed Maloney acquired it in 1965, and it was subsequently purchased by the CAF in 1970 and flown to San Antonio, Texas, and registered as N54532. It moved to Harlingen, Texas, in October 1978."

Other sources on the Web and in print indicate that the CAF's Dauntless was with Seaboard and Western Airlines after World War II; then it went to the Fuerza Aerea Mexicana (Mexican Air Force); then it was used by an aerial photographer in Mex-

ico; and, finally, it came back to the United States.

Such a brief statement doesn't seem to say enough about this famed aircraft—which is one of just two airworthy models in the world—as it approaches 66 years of storied service, so I felt a little investigation into the history of our Dauntless would reveal some interesting information.

As anyone in the warbird community and in the CAF might, I began my research under the assumption that this airplane was not actually an SBD, but was really an A-24 Banshee, the Army Air Force version of the Dauntless. Indeed, several of the aforementioned publications and websites confirmed this airplane to be an A-24B Banshee. By using the serial number, I found Air Force and Douglas records indicating that Douglas A-24B, 42-54532 was, in fact, one of the 615 A-24B-10-DTs built for the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) under Contract AC-28716 filed on November 12, 1942. It was built not in El Segundo, California, as many would suspect, but in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in September of 1943. It was then delivered to the USAAF on September 14, 1943, with serial number 42-54532 and a construction number of 17371. Upon receipt by the USAAF, it was flown to Oakland, California, then to Long Beach, California, where it was loaded on a

ship and taken to the Hawaiian Air Depot, Hickam Army Air Field in Hawaii. It was then assigned to the 7th Air Force, Pacific theater of operations on October 7, 1943. It was initially assigned to the 420th Sub Depot (Pacific), which was a third echelon maintenance facility.

It is unclear at this point whether 42-54532 was used in combat, as a maintenance trainer, or in the inglorious wartime role as an airfield hack, but it was sent to Hawaii in the time period leading up to Operations FLINTLOCK and CATCHPOLE, which took place in the Gilbert Islands. In December of 1943, shortly after arrival of 43-54532 in Hawaii, A24s from Oahu



TRAVIS REYNOLDS

Keith Wood



and Canton Island assembled on Makin Island to begin taking the fight to the Japanese. Both the 531st Fighter Bomber Squadron and the 86th Combat Mapping Squadron were involved in these operations, and both used A-24s. Many historians say that, after being introduced and performing poorly in New Guinea at the beginning of the war, the A-24s were withdrawn from service by the USAAF. In actuality, Air Force documents show that the A-24s were highly effective against the Japanese in the Gilbert and Marshall Islands in late 1943 and early 1944. The pre-eminent factor in making these A-24 raids successful was the fact that, at the time, the USAAF had established air superiority in the region. With the exception of 41 unescorted sorties over Mille Atoll, the A-24s were accompanied on all missions by P-39s of the 46th and 72d Fighter Squadrons, P-40s of the 45th Fighter Squadron, or the F6Fs of the Navy. Occasionally, even Navy SBD-5s flew with and accompanied the Army A-24s.

At this point, most would say the road in the history of the Dixie Wing's Dauntless gets a little bumpy, but in actuality, it comes to a screeching halt. On July 31, 1944, the AAF listed the airplane on the history card as condition "CON," meaning it was condemned. Even more peculiar is the code used as the reason for the condemnation. That code is "M." "M" in AAF parlance of the time means "Missing Due to Enemy Action." One source I spoke to said, "You are flying a ghost!"

Well, I couldn't be flying a ghost, because I was flying a real airplane. In fact, I know the airplane that I am privileged to fly is quite a legend in the annals of Navy and Marine Corps history, and it is most certainly not a ghost. Dauntless is a loud, 8,000-pound, 1,200-hp, smoke-belching, oil-leaking, avgas-drinking brute of an airplane. It is loved by those of us who fly it today, and it was loved by the thousands of veteran aviators who once called the Dauntless cockpit home, each of whom said a silent "thank you" to

it every time it brought them safely back to solid ground.

For a time, Dauntless was written off, leaving us with a mystery to solve. Did the Air Force sell a wreck to Mexico for parts? Did Seaboard and Western's founders (both former Air Force pilots) see the wreck sitting in Hawaii and buy it? The answer to both of those questions was no, and after my short e-mail exchanges with noted aircraft historians Dan Hagedorn and John Davis, and with the acquisition of another history card, the final pieces of the Dauntless mystery started falling into place.

John and Dan, both members of the Latin American Aviation Historical Society, indicated that the confusion likely occurred because there were actually two Dauntless' produced with the serial number 54532; the first being the aforementioned A-24B, serial number 42-54532, and the second, BuAer 54532, a Navy SBD-5 produced in El Segundo and accepted into Navy inventory on March 3, 1944. As Army Air Forces 42-54532 was lost in July of 1944, the only logical conclusion is that the CAF's Dauntless is, in fact, the Navy SBD-5, BuAer 54532.

Research shows that BuAer 54532 was delivered to the U.S. Navy in April of 1944. In August of 1944, it was assigned to the Bureau of Aeronautics General Representative in Los Angeles, where it was likely used as a personal transport aircraft until June of 1945. The aircraft was then transferred to the Bureau of Aeronautics Representative (BAR) in Baltimore. It was assigned to the BAR Baltimore until December of 1946, when it went into the pool at NAS Norfolk. There is no evidence that this particular specimen made its way aboard a U.S. Navy carrier, and it was stricken from Navy inventory on February 8, 1947, which reports it "transferred to another agency." The "other agency" turned out to



13 December 1943—A-24B, s/n 42-54459, taxiing at Makin Island.

be the War Assets Administration (WAA), and when the Dauntless was registered in 1947 as NL1339V, later N1339V, the construction number was given as 6046, the SBD-5, BuAer 54532. A review of sale documents from the WAA, however, lists the serial number as 42-54532.

N1339V was registered to none other than Andy Stinis of the Skywriting Corporation of America. Interviews with Stinis' relatives indicate the Dauntless was initially purchased to be a high-altitude sky writer, but as the fuel consumption was more than double that of Skywriting's AT-6s, the airplane was sold.

Dan Hagedorn provided information that N1339V was sold to Cia. Mexicana Aerofoto on October 18, 1951; six days later, the U.S. registration was canceled, noting "exported to Mexico." Cia. Mexicana Aerofoto registered the Dauntless as XB-QUC. From 1951 to 1966, the Dauntless racked up hundreds of thousands of miles flying as an aerial photo ship for Cia. Mexicana Aerofoto. Flying with the company founded by Luis Struck, the pioneer of aerial photography in Mexico, the Dauntless was one of the aircraft Struck used to take countless photos for Pemex, the Mexican Oil Company, the Mexican Electricity Commission, and even the U.S. Department of Agriculture in a study of the Mississippi Delta.

After operating for many years with Cia. Mexicana Aerofoto, on January 11, 1966, the Dauntless was sold for \$1,600 to Ed Maloney from the Movie World Planes of Fame Museum. Maloney displayed the SBD in his museum from 1966 until he sold it on March 4, 1971, to the very colorful Robert Griffin, one of the Confederate Air Force's early donors, who gave Dauntless a new nickname: *Speedy D*. Hailing from San Antonio, Griffin was one of the CAF's first Dauntless pilots and is responsible for purchasing and donating the Dauntless as well as the SB2C Hell-

U.S. NAVY PHOTOS



SBD's at war.





GARY KUHN



R. Oborn from the files of Lt. Col. Cecil Alexander  
 Drawn by R. Oborn May 15, 1944

diver and the FM-2 Wildcat, which are both currently in the CAF fleet.

In 1975, the Dauntless finally made its way aboard an aircraft carrier where it featured in the retire-

ment ceremonies for Adm. Ralph W. Cousins, commanding officer of the Atlantic Fleet on board the USS Nimitz. The Dauntless, sporting a new paint job in the colors of Adm. Cous-

ins, was hoisted upon the flight deck next to the Navy's newest F-14 Tomcat fighter, which was just entering the fleet at that time. Adm. Cousins, credited with a hit on the Japanese carrier Shoho during the Battle of the Coral Sea, was reportedly very pleased and surprised that *Speedy D* was aboard for the ceremony.

In the late '70s and '80s, *Speedy D* soldiered on, but, having never been properly restored, it was becoming known as the "Hangar Queen of Harlingen" (Texas) where CAF's headquarters was based. Eventually, the general staff of the CAF decided to assign the Dauntless to a unit that could completely restore the airplane to pristine condition.

In 1991, *Speedy D* was assigned to the Dixie Wing of the then Confederate Air Force (now the Commemorative Air Force) to undergo an extensive multi-year restoration. The Dixie Wing's restoration team, led by Mike Rettke, Gerald Carlson, Tex Layton, and many others, spent many years restoring the Dauntless to a condition that would make the workers at El Segundo proud.

On a cold February morning in 1999, *Speedy D* took to the air for the first time in nearly a decade. With Mike Rettke at the controls, the Dauntless took to the air and actually lived up to its nickname, quickly outrunning the T-6 "chase" plane that had assembled to assist with the maiden flight.

*Speedy D* has been to hundreds of air shows in the 10 years since its restoration and continues to fly to honor the memory of those members of the "greatest generation" that designed it, built it, and took it into battle.

Other than a handful of museum examples, it is one of only two Dauntlesses that continues to fly. Let's all hope it flies another 65 years. ✈️



LOU STENO PHOTOS

## Dauntless Recovery

On Thursday April 16, a thoughtful nephew, Tom, called and asked if I cared to witness the raising of yet another World War II dive bomber from the depths of our own Lake Michigan. My answer, predictably, was "Are you kidding?"

Every pilot I know is aware of the fact that this has to be one more of the naval aircraft used during the "Big War" to train future carrier pilots on either the USS Sable or the USS Wolverine—make-shift carriers off the shores of Lake Michigan. It was truly an inspirational site to see this aircraft so expertly rescued from its watery grave by the marina crew. As I understand it, this airplane is destined to be restored and sent to a Florida museum. Chuck Downey and several other naval vets were also present and interviewed by the media. And this is the reason I am taking the time to write of this one small, but great day in my life.

Respectfully submitted,  
 Lou Seno, EAA 1472