



Airplanes in the US Freedom Pavilion: The Boeing Center at The National WWII Museum



When World War I began in 1914, airplanes were only eleven years old, having been invented in 1903. These were simple planes that did not play a large role in the fighting. But by the time World War II started in 1939, airplanes had become much improved—faster, stronger, safer, and more deadly. Some planes carried thousands of pounds of bombs, some launched torpedoes or rockets, some could take off and land from aircraft carriers, and some could fly so high they couldn't be shot down from the ground. Air power was to be an important part of many battles during WWII.

Read about our historic warbirds and look up any words you don't know. Then answer the questions on the second page.



The B-17 "Flying Fortress" Heavy Bomber

The rugged B-17 heavy bomber was developed as a strategic bomber in the 1930s. It proved so efficient that it served in every theater of the war. Legendary for its ability to sustain heavy damage in battle, B-17s were most often used for daytime raids over Germany, as well as to attack Japanese shipping in the Pacific.

"My Gal Sal"

"My Gal Sal" was one of the first of thousands of B-17s to fly the treacherous northern air route from the United States to England. On 27 June 1942, horrendous weather conditions forced this B-17 to make an emergency landing on a Greenland ice cap. The entire crew survived the 10-day ordeal by getting the aircraft's radio into operation again and transmitting an SOS, which resulted in their rescue. The plane remained on the ice for more than fifty years before being recovered and restored.



The B-25 "Mitchell" Medium Bomber

The B-25 bomber gained fame in the daring April 1942 Doolittle Raid. Lt. Col. James Doolittle humiliated the Japanese military by dropping bombs a stone's throw away from the Emperor's Palace in Tokyo. The Doolittle Raid's B-25s were the only aircraft to bomb Tokyo until 1944 when B-29 Superfortresses began operating from the Marianas Islands. The B-25 bomber was used in every theater of war, as both a bomber and a ground-attack aircraft.

The Burma Bridge Busters, 490th Bombardment Squadron

The 490th Bombardment Squadron was known as the "Burma Bridge Busters," specializing in the bombing of bridges that would interfere with Japanese supplies and reinforcements in Burma. This B-25 is painted in the markings of one of the aircraft known to have been flown by the squadron. The aircraft had 14 forward-firing .50 caliber machine guns it used on Japanese anti-aircraft defenses that were prevalent around the bridges of Burma before dropping 3,000 pounds of bombs on the bridges themselves.



SBD "Dauntless" Dive Bomber

Dive bombing requires precise maneuverability and accuracy to hit a moving target. The Douglas SBD Dauntless was sturdy enough for pilots to dive nearly straight down on an enemy ship. The US Navy's primary dive-bomber at the war's start, the bomber earned its reputation at the 1942 Battle of Midway, sinking four Japanese aircraft carriers. By some accounts, the Dauntless sank more Japanese ships than any other plane.

SBD-3 Dauntless Dive Bomber

Our SBD-3 was built by Douglas Aircraft Company at El Segundo, California and is a combat veteran of the Guadalcanal Campaign in the South Pacific. In the spring of 1943, this plane was assigned to Navy Bombing Squadron 10 aboard the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* for a short time before being returned to the States to serve as a trainer at Naval Air Station Glenview, Illinois. In November 1944, this aircraft was lost on a training flight in Lake Michigan where it remained until 1990 when it was recovered by the US Navy and restored to its present condition.



TBM "Avenger" Torpedo Bomber

The Avenger made its combat debut at the Battle of Midway in 1942. Six Avengers from Midway Island attacked the Japanese carrier strike force, but only one damaged Avenger made it home to Midway. None of them scored hits on the Japanese ships with their torpedoes. Despite this disappointing action at Midway, the Avenger served as the US Navy's primary torpedo bomber, effectively attacking enemy shipping throughout the Pacific.

The "Bayou Bomber"

This aircraft is depicted as Lt. Thomas C. Lupo's Avenger at the Battle off Samar, one of the three naval battles collectively known as the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Flying from the aircraft carrier USS *Fanshaw Bay*, Lupo made repeated attacks on the IJN (Imperial Japanese Navy) *Yamato*, one of the largest battleships in history. After Lupo expended all of his ammunition, he continued attacking the *Yamato*, throwing a Coke bottle and other loose items from his aircraft at the ship.



The F4U "Corsair" Fighter Plane

This fighter's inverted gull-shaped wings gave the aircraft a very recognizable face when viewed head-on. They were designed to provide ground clearance for the massive 13-foot propeller. On its maiden flight, she broke the speed record for a single-seat fighter aircraft by exceeding 400 miles per hour. The Corsair entered combat in 1943. Renowned for its speed, ruggedness, and firepower, the Corsair excelled as both a fighter and an attack aircraft in support of ground forces.

The Black Sheep Squadron

Due to the urgent need for fighter squadrons in the Solomon Islands area in the summer of 1943, Marine Fighting Squadron 214 was created using replacement pilots from other squadrons. Under the command of Major Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, this self-proclaimed "Black Sheep" Squadron shot down 97 Japanese aircraft and damaged another 103 during two six-week tours of duty, making the Black Sheep one of the most effective flying outfits in the South Pacific at that time. This aircraft is painted in the markings of one of the aircraft known to have been flown by the squadron.



The P-51 "Mustang" Fighter Plane

Controlling the air proved key to controlling the ground. The late war introduction of the P-51 Mustang fighter was invaluable to the Allied victory. Its long-range capability allowed the Mustang to fly cover for Allied bombers. Previously, these had suffered heavy losses when unescorted. Mustangs modified by the British to use Rolls-Royce Merlin engines became some of America's most capable wartime fighter planes.

The Tuskegee Airmen

The P-51 Mustang could escort heavy bomber formations all the way to Berlin and back. Between 1941 and 1946, roughly 1,000 African American pilots were trained at a segregated air base in Tuskegee, Alabama. The most famous of these Tuskegee Airmen served in the 332nd Fighter Group, also known as the "Red Tails" for the distinctive markings of their planes. Together with the 99th Fighter Squadron they flew more than 15,000 sorties and lost 66 men in the line of duty. This aircraft is painted in the markings of one of the aircraft known to have been flown by the squadron.

1. Based on what you've read, what are some characteristics of a successful military airplane?
2. Why do you think each type of plane was given its nickname (Mustang, Avenger, etc.)?
3. If you had a museum and could only display one of these planes, which plane would you choose, and why?