



Two Douglas SBD-5s of French Naval Air Service's Flottille 4B while flying over their Cognac base early in 1945. (Etablissement Cinematographique des Armees)

## *Dauntlesses in French Service*

By J. CUNY

During the 1930s, the French "Aeronavale" tested specialized dive bombing planes of Loire and Geurdau-Leseuzze design, but World War II came before more than 30 such machines had been built. There was then no alternative but to buy U. S. built aircraft. Vought SB2U Vindicators were obtained and used, orders were placed for Curtiss SBC-4 biplanes and there was interest in Douglas 8A2 attack bombers. All of these types, however, were obsolete before they could be used, and few saw service before the 1940 Armistice.

The French Air Force next received dive bombers from the U. S. during the 1943-44 period. These were Douglas A-24B Dauntlesses (probably between 40 and 50 planes) and Vultee A-35 Vengeances (probably some 20 planes). At this time operational conditions were such that dive bombers appeared to be condemned even before delivery. Thus neither A-24s nor A-35s were placed in frontline service to face the still powerful German fighter opposition of 1943.

These French dive bombers were given secondary duties. Vengeances were mainly used as target towers in North Africa--notably for anti-aircraft ground artillery training, supplementing or replacing Martin 167s in this role. A-24B's were delivered in small numbers to existing fighter units, to be used as advanced trainers or fast liaison machines, and to the fighter school at Meknes, to be advanced and aerobatic trainers. Actually, by the beginning of 1944, several fighter groupes had received a handful of these planes, and the Meknes school operated some twenty A-24s. Several had been delivered to other Moroccan or Algerian training bases.

Only one unit was operational with A-24s under actual combat conditions. This was the newly created,

and remotely situated, GB 1/17 "Picardie." This Groupe assumed Desert Police and Coastal Command missions from several Syrian and Lebanese bases with a miscellaneous assortment of aircraft, including Bristol Blenheims and Potez 25s. An escadrille was created and received a dozen Dauntlesses which were based at Rayack, Syria. However, the A-24s were not to become famous in the Desert Police role.

In the Spring of 1944 the crews received dive bombing and night flying instruction, and as early as April 1944 they were probably earmarked for a very peculiar job--aerial supply and fire support for French Maquis (guerillas) fighting against the Wehrmacht in mountainous regions such as the Alpine Mountains. In fact, when crews received instructions to ferry their planes west to North Africa, they really thought they would have to help the large Alpine Maquis, like those in the Vercors Mountains. Planes were ferried only during August 1944, and at this time such large guerilla organizations had proven unable to resist, for a long period, the powerful, German repressive columns. In the Vercors case, air support had been the decisive factor...against the Maquis!

If the F.F.I. (French Guerilla Organizations) thus had to operate with smaller formations, they became more and more active. The project to give them specialized air support units was never cancelled, the "Groupement Patrie", with Colonel Morlaix as Commanding Officer, was specially created. It included a groupe of A-24s with 10 planes coming from Syria and a similar number from Moroccan schools to form two escadrilles.

The new Groupe was numbered 1/18 "Vendee", receiving a bomber unit number, 18, despite being classed as

a fighter-bomber groupe. Its commanding officer was Cdt Lapios, who had previously been an escadrille commander of GB 1/17 A-24s. The 1st Escadrille (Syrian crews) was led by Cdt Lapios himself and Capitaine Boucherie. The 2nd Escadrille (Moroccan crews) was led by Cne Maillefer.

On 10 September 1944 the planes landed at Toulouse, the important town in southern France that had been liberated from the Germans by its region's powerful guerillas without any regular Army intervention. The A-24s immediately began to survey and attack columns which were hurriedly retreating north toward the German border. These actions were very dangerous for the A-24s as the junction of Allied forces moving from Normandy and southern France became imminent. Any German unit that was delayed was threatened with capture, and these units thus fought desperately. Light flak was the major enemy of the A-24s, and three planes were shot down and most of the others damaged during the retreat, the Allied junction of 12 September 1944, and the subsequent attacks on the trapped Atlantic coast enemy fortresses.

The 12th of September found the A-24s operating from Bourges in central France. This base was very similar to an island with enemy forces moving all around it, and it suffered small scale air attacks and guerilla ambushes. The air attacks themselves did not "close the gap" on the enemy, but they were responsible for the capture of many enemy troops.

Following the liberation of central France, the Groupe "Vendee", along with other units of Groupement "Patrie", was ordered to participate in the siege of the German garrisons along the Atlantic coast. The dive bombers moved from Bourges to Vannes and began, simultaneously, to support surrounding Allied ground forces and to assume short range sea blockade of enemy controlled harbors. A-24s were mainly responsible for such opera-

tions over the Lorient fortress and operated as a part of the 14th Tactical Allied Command--after 1 November 1944, the 1st Tactical Air Force (Provisional). Losses and damage to aircraft in September seriously hampered large scale action, but GCB 1/18 could still operate in strength. On 1 November its pilots carried out 31 dive bombing sorties on the important Belz bridge despite heavy German Naval flak. The bridge was only damaged and one plane was shot down, its pilot, Cne Boucherie, being killed.

Small enemy ships constantly tried to establish communications between isolated strongpoints and with neutral and friendly Spain. Countering such attempts, A-24s (and SBD's for the southern part) obtained marked success. They repelled and damaged cargoes, captured a trawler, severely damaged a submarine (which was unable to leave harbor before the end of the war), but lost a fifth plane.

On several occasions one or two A-24s moved to France's southeastern Alpine Front and carried out pinpoint, dive bombing supply missions. They thus aided the French Mountain Troops fighting "Alpine Jaegers" along the French-Italian border in very difficult conditions.

By the beginning of 1945 it appeared impossible to continue maintaining GCB 1/18 at full strength in view of the constant attrition of A-24s. Consequently, some pilots reinforced GC 11/18 "Saintonge" and flew Spitfire Vs (the unit had previously operated captured French-built Dewoitine D 520 fighters), but 1/18 still operated a small number of A-24s during March and April 1945. After Von Rundstedt's December Ardennes Counter-offensive cancelled plans for a general attack on German coastal fortresses, projected for December-January, that action was partially undertaken during April 1945. Targets were strong points at the Garonne Mouth (Gironde)



*Douglas A-24B, 42-54541, "E", of GB 1/17 in flight over North Africa during the summer of 1944. (Cne Botte.)*



*Sgt. Botte's 42-54543, "F", crashed due to fuel trouble on 1 December 1944 in the Vannes area. (Cne Botte.)*



*A-24 operating from unidentified mountain base, probably Alpine Front, end of 1944. (Mr. Koessler Coll.)*



*Two A-24s of the Groupe "Vendee" being readied for a mission during early part of 1945. (Mr. Mutin Coll.)*



A-24B, 42-54694, serving as a fighter-bomber trainer in North Africa sometime during 1944. (E.C.A.)



A-24B, 42-54517, of Meknes Ecole de Chasse in late 1947. Plane originally came from Syria. (Mr. Mutin Coll.)



Three A-24s over Meknes in late 1940s. (Author Coll.)



42-54700 of Meknes School, in 1950s. (Mr. Mutin Coll.)

which isolated Bordeaux Harbor (Royan, Pointe de Grave, Ile d'Oleron) from the sea.

To support these operations the French Air Force used any available aircraft--even obsolete types like the Martin 167 or Douglas DB-7 and seized enemy planes such as Junkers Ju 88s. The main dive bombing was done by Naval Dauntlesses but 1/18 also took part with A-24s, losing its sixth Dauntless.

Following V-E Day, probably some 25 A-24s remained in a flyable condition. All of them were concentrated at the Moroccan Meknes Base, serving in aerobatic and ground attack advanced training. The last of the type was probably grounded about 1953, but it is difficult to establish the exact date. Dauntlesses were replaced by French built Morane 472/475s.

Douglas A-24s did not become famous in the French Air Force, but they did serve with distinction despite relatively high losses. Of 10 planes and crews coming from Syria during August 1944, five planes were lost and three pilots killed.

#### FRENCH NAVY ("AERONAVALE") SBD-5s

As soon as the 1943 French Naval Air Service ("Aeronautique Navale", currently called "Aeronavale") requested planes from Allied authorities, they received U. S. Consolidated Catalinas and Douglas SBD-5 Dauntlesses. Enough SBD's were supplied to permit the re-equipment of two "flottilles" (squadrons) with a view to their participation in southern France operations. French naval crews awaited the landings in southern France with enthusiasm since they would take place in a region they knew well--in WW I most Navy airmen had been trained at bases here, at St. Raphael, Toulon and Hyeres. Unhappily, however, such local experience was not to be used and the SBD's were not delivered until the autumn of 1944.

Two units received Dauntlesses on 22 November 1944, "Flottilles" 3B and 4B (soon redesignated 3FB and 4FB), which were sent to France after some training at Agadir in southern Morocco. A part of the crews were veterans who had been flying Martin 167s during the Vichy period (Flottilles 6B and 7B), and among them were pilots who had flown Chance Vought V 156s or Loire 40s with 1940 units (Flottilles AB-1, 2, 3 and 4).

The two Flottilles were under Groupe Aeronavale No 2 which was commanded by Capitaine de Corvette Laine, with Lieutenant de Vaisseau Nicolle as Second in Command. Lieutenant de Vaisseaus Ortolan and Behic commanded 3FB and 4FB respectively, and each Flottille had 16 operational aircraft.

From their arrival in France to V-E Day both units were based at Cognac, giving direct or indirect support to French forces isolating and besieging the German coastal fortresses at Pointe de Grave, Royan, Oleron and La Pallice. They operated under command of 1st TAF (P) as G.A.N. 2 and flew the same type missions as the A-24s. The first mission was flown on 9 December 1944 against Pointe de Grave, and this and other missions suffered mostly from accurate enemy flak.

First loss came on 14 December 1944 when an SBD of 4FB crashed in no man's land after being hit by flak and catching fire. The crew, Goffeny/La Menardiere, both emerged safely from the incident. However, Goffeny was killed (with his observer, Chauvin) on 1 January 1945 when his 4FB Dauntless was destroyed by a premature bomb explosion and fell in the Royan pocket. Third loss occurred on 18 February 1945 when one plane of 4FB was shot down by flak, and the crew, Gerold/Gnenanen, were killed. On 22 March an SBD of 3FB was shot down by ground-to-air rockets near Saint Palais--the crew, Bonnefoy/Bataille, was killed. Final SBD loss was on 3 May 1945 when one plane of 3FB was shot down on Oleron Island with its crew, Auzadou/Lebrun, being killed.

In its five months of operation, G.A.N. 2 never had more than 24 or 25 planes available. Its constant dive bombing and strafing progressively reduced the volume of German flak, and although losses remained about one per month, the number of missions per month was constantly increased. During the peak week, 9 to 16 April, the two Flottilles dropped 320 tons of bombs, averaging 72 sorties per day with 24 operational SBD's. This was also the week when a land attack was launched against strong points at Pointe de Grave and Royan after a massive air assault on the targets by bombers of the U. S. 8th and 9th Air Forces. For their part, SBD's were busy pinpointing and annihilating surviving bunkers and ar-

tillery positions. Successively Pointe de Grave, Royan and Oleron Island were taken by assault, and the La Pallice garrison surrendered on 30 April. Eight days later the war in Europe was over.

Plans were laid by the French Navy to use its SBD's in Pacific operations. However, an aircraft carrier was necessary, and the old French carrier Bearn was obsolete and had, in March 1945, suffered damage in a convoy collision. There was no immediate solution to the problem, and Japan surrendered before French SBD's could operate from any flat-top. By V-J Day, 15 August 1945, Aeronavale had just succeeded in obtaining, repairing and refurbishing an old, Royal Navy escort carrier--



*Crews of Flottille 4FB return to Cognac base in their SBD-5s after dive bombing mission, winter 1944-1945. (E.C.A.)*



*Douglas SBD-5 Dauntless from Flottille 4FB. (E.C.A.)*



*SBD-5 of 3F over Mediterranean coast, 1947. (Author)*



*SBD-5 of 3F landing on Dixmude during 1947. (E.C.A.)*



*Dauntless of 4F landed on Arromanches, 1948. (E.C.A.)*



*Douglas SBD-5s and Supermarine Seafire IIIs of 4F and 1F aboard carrier Arromanches, circa 1948. (Mr. Mutin Coll.)*



*Dauntlesses of 4F over North Africa 1948. (E.C.A.)*



*Meknes A-24B, 42-54703, post war period. (Mr. Mutin)*

HMS Bitter. This was an old U. S. cargo ship, "Rio Parana", modified to escort carrier configuration in 1942 and in very bad condition at the beginning of 1945. It became the French carrier Dixmude.

When the political and military situation in northern Indochina (now North Viet Nam) deteriorated, Dixmude was sent to the Far East with Flottille 4F (formerly 4FB). Its Dauntlesses operated mainly from land bases, wholly so after the Dixmude returned to France to ship French Air Force planes to Indochina. From March 1947 to March 1948, 4F was under command of Lieutenant de Vaisseau Mellet and stationed in the Far East.

France obtained another carrier in August 1946 when the Royal Navy sold to it a newly built escort carrier of the Colossus Class, actually HMS Colossus itself. This carrier became the Arromanches and received the SBD's of Flottille 3F (formerly 3FB) among its complement of planes.

The modern carrier was sent to Indochinese waters at the end of 1948 and operated all available Dauntless aircraft of 3F and 4F. The planes were then becoming old and dangerous, and only a small number of missions could be flown before operations were curtailed. The French Command had hoped to obtain more modern U. S. planes to reequip their units, but this did not come to pass. In any case, the French SBD's had reached their end. They were grounded after returning to France when several fatal accidents occurred, including one which killed 4F's commander, Lieutenant de Vaisseau de Rollin in June 1949.

#### CREW OPINIONS OF THE DAUNTLESS

French pilots apparently liked the flying qualities of the A-24/SBD. Its excellent maneuverability masked its bomber role and pilots, forgetting its design purpose, considered it as a fighter. Even in service it was so treated. Dauntlesses were originally given to bomber units (GB 1/17, 3B and 4B), but the plane's character soon evoked more fighter-like designations for their units (including GCB 1/17, 3F and 4F). Also, the longest period of use of the A-24 was by the Meknes Ecole de Chasse, the French Air Force fighter school. Pilots remember that it was not an exceptional aerobatic trainer (size by itself limited roll speed and it was probably too stable a machine to be "sensitive"), but it could be flown in any maneuver.

Strength of the airframe was excellent, if not phenomenal, but the plane acquired a bad reputation at the end of its naval career due to structural weakness. The Aeronavale mishaps, however, can be explained by the intensive use of the machines over the years with the fast use being under difficult conditions at sea and in a tropical climate.

The engine proved most reliable and the only difficulties experienced were by French Air Force planes suffering minor carburetor troubles in Syria--provoked by Middle East sand.

Armament was sufficient for a 1942 dive bomber, perhaps, but not for the 1944-45 ground attack actions. Even against the disorganized Wehrmacht of 1944, two machine guns firing forward were insufficient. French Air Force pilots rejected the use of the normal gunsight (optical, inside cockpit) to rely only on the external, emergency ring and bead. Their practice was not imitated by Naval crews. Rear armament, twin .30 guns or, rarely, a single .50 gun, was not very useful as French crews never encountered enemy aircraft. Bomb load was sufficient to attack the relatively light targets, infantry bunkers and coastal ships, assigned to the Dauntlesses. Bombs ranging in size from 50-lbs to 1000-lbs were used.

#### CAMOUFLAGE AND MARKINGS

Both A-24s and SBD's were left in their original U. S. finishes. The Army planes were green-base olive drab with gray undersurfaces, and the Navy planes wore the 1944 color scheme of three shades of blue. When the planes were repainted by their French units, this was done with respect to the original finishes.

During WW II the A-24s received the standard French roundels, with a thin yellow outline, and rudder stripes which did not quite cover the whole rudder due to its curved leading edge. Just after V-E Day there was a tendency to use only small sized stripes, in the middle of the rudder, but "all rudder" colors were soon reinstated (and are still officially used today, despite frequent local exceptions).

Since GB 1/17 was a Free French unit, its A-24s received Lorraine Cross insignias on their fuselage which were added to the existing national roundels. Crosses were red on white circles and were of the "sophisticated" type, or of the "straight" type (see author's French Martin 167 article, JOURNAL, Vol 10, No 1).

National markings on the SBD's consisted of roundels painted only in place of the former U. S. insignias (over left wing and under right wing and on fuselage), but the bar to the U. S. insignia disappeared. Apparently, complementary roundels were never painted on the wings. Small sized stripes were painted on the rudder or, rarely, the fin. The traditional emblem of the Naval Service, the anchor, appeared over the tail stripes and wing roundels but never on the fuselage roundels.

Black and white Invasion Stripes were painted on most of the 1944 French aircraft types, sometimes months after the Normandy landings. All A-24s used operationally in France received such stripes. In the case of the Free French Escadrille coming from Syria, the Lorraine Cross insignia was systematically retained and its relative position (forward or behind the national roundel) dictated the position of the fuselage Invasion Stripes on the unit's planes.

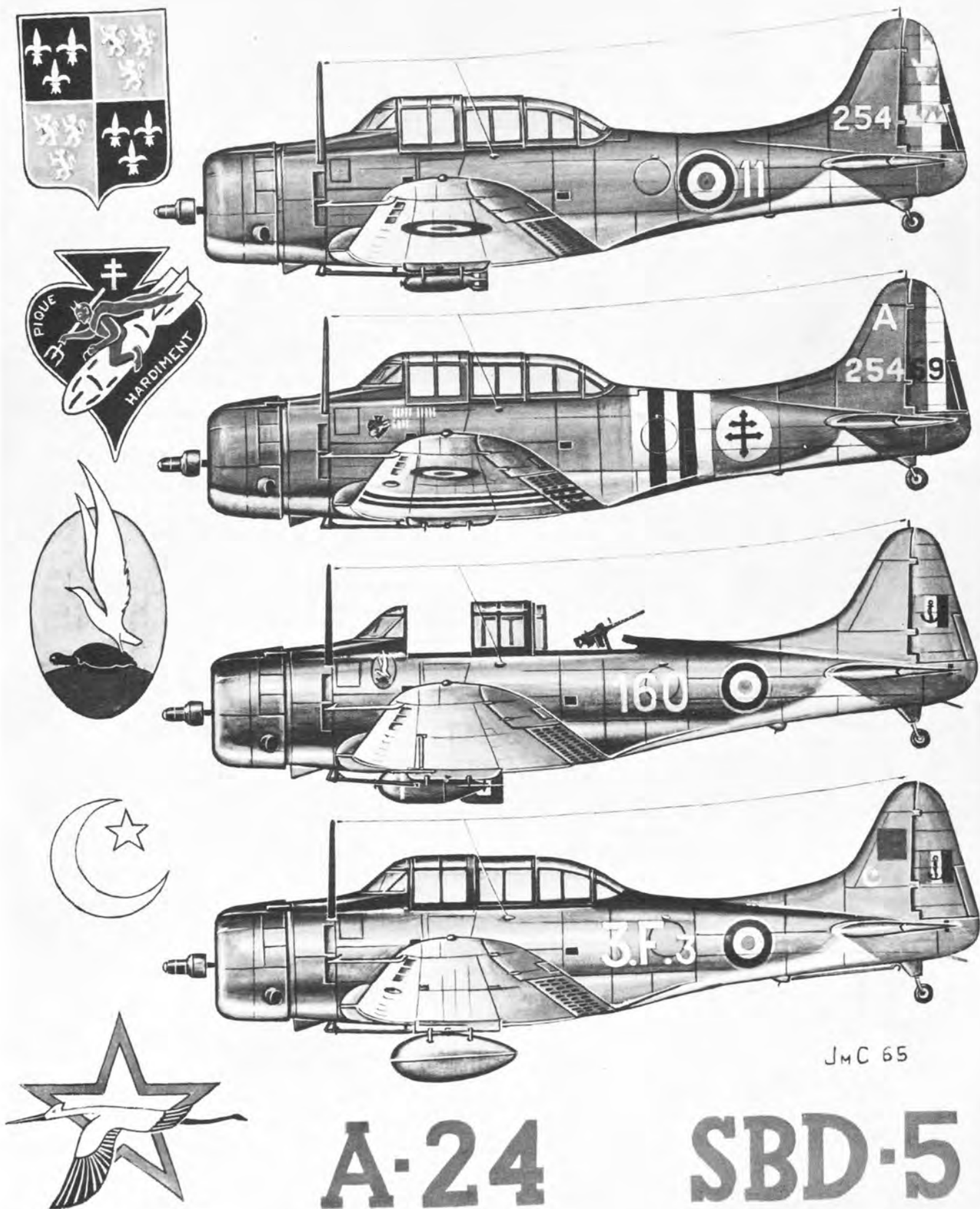
Apparently no SBD's received Invasion Stripes. Other special markings carried by Dauntlesses consisted of bomb symbols to indicate missions flown, and these were placed on the forward sides of the fuselage on both A-24s and SBD's. There is no evidence of Dauntlesses carrying personal insignias.

All A-24 aircraft were of the A-24B type which had U. S. Army Air Force serial numbers ranging from 42-54285 to 42-54899. The serials were retained on the vertical fin and rudder even into the early 1950s. A part of the serial number sometimes disappeared after rudder change or new national colors were painted on. Some serials that have been noted are (with those of the 9 of 10 planes coming from Syria underlined): 42-54501, 515, 517, 528, 534, 541, 543, 549, 554, 559, 561, 562, 575, 576, 691, 693 (or 695), 694, 696, 700, 703 and 768.

GB 1/17 planes received aircraft letters, from "A" to "J", and these were painted on the fins during operations. The other escadrille, of the then 1/18 "Vendee" Groupe received complementary letters, from "K" upward. Trainers at the Meknes Ecole de Chasse carried large identification numbers on the fuselage at the rear of



*Morane MS 475 with Meknes insignia, in 1953. (Author)*



the roundels. They were painted in white and ranged from "1" to "27" or even higher.

SBD-5s rarely had their U. S. Navy Bureau of Aeronautics numbers visible. Only one identification has been made and that is plane "150" which was BuNo 36743.

SBD's were initially identified by three digit numbers painted on the sides of the rear fuselage (i.e. 150, 166), and these numbers may have been directly related to the U. S. BuNo. Such numbers were replaced, after V-E Day, by standard French Navy designations (i.e. 3F-1, 3F-3) which were painted in the same location.

#### UNIT INSIGNIAS

Illustrations on the page opposite show five Dauntless unit insignias of which only three were certainly painted on the aircraft. There was possibly one other such insignia, for GCB 1/18, 2nd Escadrille. The insignias, reading from top to bottom, are as follows:

GB 1/17 "Picardie" Province insignia -- this insignia has rarely, if ever, been illustrated before. It was probably never painted on an A-24 but was the dress insignia for crews before operations in France. Historically, its colors were inaccurate--Golden Lis flowers on black quarters, Golden lions on white quarters (which became cream on real metal insignia used by author as an example for this drawing). Real Province shield shows golden lis flowers on blue quarters and red lions on silver quarters.

GB 1/17 A-24 Escadrille (later GCB 1/18, 1st Escadrille) -- This insignia had motto, "Pique Hardiment" (Dive audaciously) on inverted ace of spades ("Pique" in French language means simultaneously "spade" and "dive"). In this, the play on words by the 1944 1/17 commanding officer, Cdt Noel, can be noticed. He forged an adverb, "Picardie-ly" or, in French, "Picardie-ment" ("Pique hardiment"). On the insignia, the devil was red on a silver bomb. The insignia was always painted on the left side of the forward fuselage of this Escadrille's A-24s.

4B (4FB or 4F) -- Insignia was a White Sea Bird on the back of a turtle, and anyone can immediately imagine that this was an old carrier borne unit emblem. It had been used on old Levasseur biplane torpedo bomb-

ers during the early 1930s. Blue sky and blue sea oval. Insignia was painted on both sides of the forward fuselage of this Flottille's SBD's.

3B (3FB or 3F) -- Insignia was a white crescent and star, painted on both sides of the fin of this Flottille's SBD's.

Ecole de Chasse de Meknes -- Insignia was the famous white and black flying stork over Moroccan green star. Author could not find an illustration showing this insignia painted on Dauntlesses, and probably it did not come into use until their replacement by Morane 472/475 aircraft.

#### DESCRIPTIONS FOR SIDE-VIEW DRAWINGS (appearing opposite):

1st Drawing -- A-24B of Meknes Ecole de Chasse, 1945. This aircraft, 42-54575, was photographed by the author at Marrakech with smaller, repainted, rudder stripes.

2nd Drawing -- A-24B of GCB 1/18 "Vendee", 1st Escadrille, operating from Vannes at the end of 1944. This plane, 42-54691, "A", belonged to the unit commander. It bore forward positioned Invasion Stripes while other planes of the unit had their Invasion Stripes positioned to the rear. Aircraft 691 was still flying at Meknes about 1952.

3rd Drawing -- An SBD-5 of Aeronavale Flottille 4FB, based at Cognac during the winter of 1944-45.

4th Drawing -- An SBD-5 of Flottille 3F, about 1948. On this aircraft the previously applied stripes on the vertical fin have been painted over.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The presentation here by Mr. Cuny is the fourth article he has done for the JOURNAL. Each has cast valuable new light on almost forgotten U. S. aircraft that served with the French Air Force during World War II. His previous articles covered the Martin 167 (Vol 10, No 1), the Curtiss Hawk 75 (Vol 11, No 1), and the Curtiss P-40 (Vol 11, No 4).