

THE NAVY'S LIGHT BOMBING WING

by

William A. Riley Jr.

The increasing importance of dive bombing, as demonstrated by the Marines in Nicaragua in 1927, led to the establishment of the Light Bombing Wing on 1 July, 1928. Two of the Navy's four fighting squadrons were redesignated at this time: Fighting Five, one of the newest squadrons, became Light Bombing One and Fighting Six, the oldest unit in naval air, became Light Bombing Two. Other than the change in names there was little difference in the day-to-day operations of the two units. Both continued to utilize fighter-type aircraft and remained an integral part of Aircraft Squadrons, Battle Fleet.

With its history dating from the Air Detachment, Pacific Fleet in 1919, Light Bombing Two had pioneered many of the techniques that were standard procedures in the middle '20s. In 1921, as Combat Squadron Three, it was equipped with Loening M-80 monoplane fighters - a type with a well deserved reputation for being dangerous to handle. Vought VE-7s were received in 1922, when LT Frank Wead was serving his first tour of duty as commanding officer. The squadron was redesignated Fighting Squadron Two in March of 1923. During these early years the unit was based at the Naval Air Station, San Diego, but served brief tours of duty aboard battleships spotting for long-range battle practice. In April, 1924, under the command of LCDR N.B. Chase, VF-2 had the honor of being the first squadron to qualify aboard the Navy's first carrier, the U.S.S. LANGLEY.

Re-equipped with Vought UO-1s, the squadron cruised to Hawaii in 1925 aboard the U.S.S. LANGLEY and to Panama in 1926. "Spig" Wead, now a LCDR, again assumed command in July, 1925 and served until April, 1926. Forced to retire from the Navy because of a serious injury, he found his way to Hollywood and became famous as the author of many movie scripts, most of them based on some phase of aviation. The story of his life was recently filmed as "Wings of Eagles." Some of the more well known of his scripts are: "Dirigible," "Dive Bomber," "Hell Divers," "Test Pilot," "Ceiling Zero," and "They Were Expendable." Most of these films have been shown on television in the past few years, giving the aviation historian an opportunity to view a variety of old-time aircraft.

In 1926 and 1927, Fighting Two operated mixed equipment - Boeing FB-1s and Curtiss F6Cs. During this time the squadron insignia was a shield over crossed machine guns with conventional r-w-b- tail stripes being used. In the latter part of 1926, VF-2 began training enlisted men as aviation pilots and on 1 January, 1927 the unit was designated an enlisted men's squadron. All pilots, planes and equipment, including the insignia, were transferred to form Fighting Squadron Six. Boeing FB-5s were received in 1927 and a photo of No. A-7123, presumably at the 1927 National Air Races in Spokane, shows the aircraft bearing the shield insignia but with solid white tail surfaces. "6-F-14" appears on the fuselage side as well as on the under side of the lower left wing.

In "The Sky's The Limit" D. W. "Tommy" Tomlinson, then Lieutenant, USN, tells of his embarrassment at the ineffectual performance of the Navy pilots at the 1927



Curtiss F6C-1 (VF-2)



U. S. Navy Curtiss F6C-3 (VB-1)

U. S. Navy



Boeing FB-5 (VF-6)

U. S. Navy



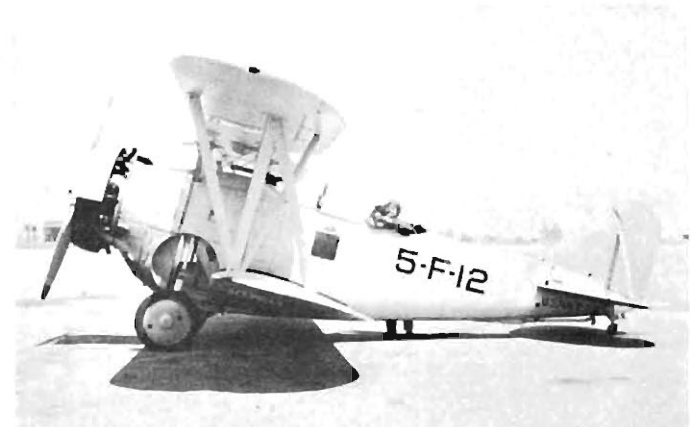
Boeing F4B-2 (VF-5)

U. S. Navy



Boeing F4B-4 (VF-6)

(Larkins)



Grumman FF-1 (VF-5)

John C. Mitchell



Brewster F2A-1 (VF-3)

Herb Kelly



Grumman F3F-1 (VF-4)

(Larkins)

Spokane NAR. The Army's "Three Musketeers" - Williams, Woodring and Cornelious - were the stars of the show, performing formation aerobatics that made them famous. Upon assuming command of Fighting Six in April, 1928, Tomlinson instituted an intensive training program covering aerobatics. Replacement of the FE-5s with Boeing F2B-1s provided an aircraft far more suitable for aerobatics and the squadron soon became famous for its precision in all types of flying.

Sometime in 1927 the now famous "Crazy Kat" was adopted as the squadron's insignia. Upon return from the Hawaii cruise of 1928, on 1 July, the unit became Light Bombing Squadron Two. Chosen to represent the Navy at the 1928 National Air Races in Los Angeles the squadron presented one of the first public demonstrations of dive bombing. Meanwhile, Tomlinson, with "Putt" Storrs and Bill Davis as his wing men, led the "Three SeaHawks" in low-altitude aerobatics that at least equaled, if not surpassed, the Army's "Three Musketeers." The only Navy casualty during the Races occurred when LT George H. Hasselman was injured in a crash during the 60 mile squadron race. It was at the 1928 Races that the Boeing XF4B-1 made its first public appearance; winning the free-for-all pursuit race, with LT T. P. Jeter at the controls.

In late 1928, Boeing F3B-1s were received by the squadron and were retained until the middle of 1931; being flown for nearly three years with only one major overhaul. On 1 July, 1930 the squadron's designation reverted to Fighting Six, Boeing F4B-2s replaced the tired F3B-1s in 1931 and, about the same time, LCDR M. B. Gardner assumed command of the squadron. He was relieved by LCDR R. A. Ofstie in 1933, the year that VF-6 represented the Navy at the National Air Races at Cleveland. Both officers, as did Storrs and Davis, went on to achieve flag rank and important commands in World War II and afterwards.

The sturdy F4B-2 was replaced by the "dash four" in 1934 and the squadron had settled down as a permanent member of the SARATOGA Air Group. The stubby Grumman F3F-1 was received in 1936 and on 1 July, 1937 the squadron was again redesignated, becoming Fighting Three. This change was made so that each of the four squadrons aboard each carrier would bear the same number as the carrier's hull number. One of the first units to operate low-wing fighters aboard carriers, Fighting Three was assigned Brewster F2A-1 aircraft in 1939. During 1939 and 1940 the squadron operated mixed equipment; the Brewsters and the older Grumman biplanes. Grumman F4F-3s were received in 1941, bearing the dull gray "warpaint" that had replaced the bright peacetime color schemes, and were the aircraft with which VF-3 entered WW-II.

Light Bombing One, a mere upstart compared to Light Bombing Two, began its career at San Diego on 3 January 1927 as Fighting Squadron Five, under the command of LCDR O.B. Hardison. Early in its history the unit adopted as its insignia a bear's head over a shield of royal blue crossed by a bolt of red lightning. It was only natural that the squadron should become known as the "Red Rippers," a nickname that has continued through numerous redesignations.

Initial equipment of VF-5 was the Curtiss F6C-2 which was still being used when the squadron became Light Bombing Squadron One on 1 July 1928. A not-to-common photo, dated 8 October 1928, shows No. A-7144 on twin floats, bearing "1-B-10" on the fuselage. This same aircraft, designated F6C-6, equipped with a modified cooling system and "pants" on the landing gear, was flown to fourth place in the free-for-all event in the 1929 National Air Races at Cleveland by LT J.J. Clark.

Boeing F4B-1s were received in 1929, when LCDR J.H. Chapman was in command of

the squadron. A well publicized photo shows No. A-8153 making a touch-and-go landing on a carrier. The aircraft carries full markings; "1-B-7" with fuselage band, insignia and r-w-b rudder stripes. LT David Rittenhouse, a famous Navy racing pilot, was in command of the squadron in 1930, when, on 1 July, it reverted to its former designation of Fighting Squadron Five. During the year, blue was adopted as the tail color of the unit. (Note the photo of 5-F-18 on page 162, AAHS Journal, third quarter, 1957.)

Boeing F4B-2s were assigned in 1932 and were replaced in 1934 by the first of Grumman's long line of Navy fighter aircraft, the two-place FF-1. Equipped with retractable landing gear and enclosed cockpits, the Wright-powered FF-1 quickly became a favorite with Navy pilots. Survivors of the original 27 aircraft were modified to provide dual controls in the rear cockpit and, with other changes, were redesignated FF-2s and assigned to Naval Air Reserve units. A small number of these served the RCAF as the Goblin I after rebuilding by the Canadian Car and Foundry Co.

During most of this period VF-5 operated from the U.S.S. LEXINGTON, participating in the annual cruises and earning a reputation as a "hot" fighter outfit. Grumman F3F-1s were received in 1936 and, on 1 July 1937 in the general redesignation and reassignment that prevailed, the squadron was renumbered and transferred. Now known as Fighting Squadron Four and aboard the U.S.S. RANGER, with that carrier's willow green as its tail color, only the familiar bear's head served to identify the old "Red Ripper" outfit. A further re-equipping and redesignation was to occur prior to the opening of hostilities, however. Grumman F4F-3s were received in 1941 and the squadron's designation changed to Fighting Squadron Forty-One.

The new equipment arrived early enough to carry full peacetime markings, plus neutrality star. An interesting photo, marking-wise, appears in the January 1942, issue of Flying. Apparently photographed at the factory, the unit designation seems to have been applied in anticipation of the renumbering that was to occur. A space for a second digit has been left, the marking appearing as: "4 -F-4" instead of "4-F-4." The aircraft could, of course, be scheduled for assignment to Fighting Forty-Two instead of Fighting Forty-One.

The Navy's Light Bombing Wing was only one of many organizational designations to appear and disappear during the "peacetime" history of naval air. Mainly, it marked the acceptance of dive bombing and pointed the way to widespread use of this weapons technique in World War II.

BRITISH PLASTIC KITS

I have been buying some British plastic aircraft kits from San Diego and am very pleased with the results. Perhaps other members would like to know about this source and the items available.

Kits that particularly interested me are the Gloster "Gladiator", Hawker "Fury", Bristol "Bulldog", Fairey "Swordfish", Avro 504K, Supermarine "Walrus", D.H. Tiger Moth, and the usual World War I items. The kits are all $\frac{1}{4}$ " scale, and sell for \$1.50 each, except for the Swordfish and Walrus which are \$3.00. Write to Mr. J.N. Townsley, 3961D Park Blvd., San Diego, California.

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