

U. S. AIRCRAFT IN THE FRENCH/INDO-CHINA WAR

by

J. M. C.

After the liberation of France from German forces in 1944, the French Military Command began to think of the possibility of joining its Air Force to those of its Allies operating against the Japanese in the Far East. Such participation became necessary after the Japanese blow in Indo-China in March of 1945. It was then decided to send an expeditionary Air Force to operate in the Burma-Indo-China Theatre. This force was to comprise several "Mosquito" squadrons, plus logistical supporting aircraft.

The project was annihilated by the quick collapse of the Japanese in that area, but a squadron of French planes had been formed in India, and, equipped with C-47/"Dakota" transports, it was the first unit to be sent into Indo-China. The situation was very confused; before the Japanese evacuation they had given aid to all nationalist movements appearing, thanks to the long absence of the French. Attempts to regain control of Indo-China territory was rendered difficult by the nationalist movements and by the Chinese occupation of northern provinces. The most important nationalist movement, the now famous Viet Minh, had begun to organize a totally new, independent state, its forces armed with Japanese and Chinese weapons.

Troubles inevitably occurred, and many incidents arose between the disembarking French forces and the Viet Minh during 1946. The C-47 squadron rendered enormous services during this period, though it was reinforced very slowly with some observation planes and another squadron with JU-52's. Suddenly in December, 1946, the Viet Minh arose and simultaneously attacked French soldiers and civilians in all places. Although the night massacre which was attempted did not destroy all the French people as they had hoped, the Viet Minh forces provoked a war which was to last seven and one-half years!

The conflict began as so many other incidents had been started between France and her colonies, with very limited serial support. During the following weeks numerous small units or hastily armed French civilians, besieged by guerillas, could only be supplied by C-47's or Ju-52's before freeing by army columns. Few planes were then considered necessary. From 1947 to 1950 a slowly increasing number of aircraft, never important in total quantity, supported ferocious but limited jungle fights. Communication difficulties in this country, either mountainous or marshy, made air transport vital. During 1949 there were three cargo squadrons, two equipped with AAC1's (French built Ju-52's) and one with "Dakota's", and small numbers of multi-purpose NC701's (French built Siebels 204). Also two fighter-bomber squadrons were equipped with "Spitfires". Liaison, artillery spotting, and casualty evacuation were jobs for a few Stinson L-5's and Morane 500's (French-built Fieseler Storch).

As smuggling was an important armament and ammunition supply source for the Viet Minh, the French Naval Air Service became very active. It tried to control coastal waters with a limited number of Consolidated PBYS-A "Catalina's" and Grumman JRF-"Gooses". From time to time, for important operations, an aircraft carrier came from France to launch "Seafires" and Douglas "Dauntless's" against Viet Minh bands.

Editor's Note: The author is at present serving his country and must, for the time being, remain anonymous due to the classified nature of his work.

Many other types of aircraft were seen in the area from 1946 to 1949, but they were secondary in importance in operations: a "Mosquito" squadron made a short appearance, some Republic "Seabee" amphibians were used for liaison, civilian flown Nordyn "Norsemen" helped supply small towns, or a lone 6045 could be seen briefly during this first stage of the War.

One fact is apparent at this time - U. S. aircraft had a comparatively minor role in the early operations against the Viet Minh. Only the "Dakota" was important and regular, but planes of this type had been obtained from Great Britain and were principally used in strategic liaison and transport. Direct troops supply or paratroop assault was left to the obsolete but efficient Ju-52 (there were some exceptions.) All other U. S. built types were in limited numbers. During the years when the French Air Force had P-47's, Martin B-26's, P-63's, Photo-"Lightnings" and "Mustangs" forming the bulk of its home based squadrons, none of these efficient combat types were sent to the Far East.

Two possible explanations may be given: The French Command and Government were desirous of limiting the scale of the war and attempted to regain the friendship of the Indo-China population. Massive air attacks would have contradicted such policy, and the available non-U. S. aircraft seemed sufficient then. Command was certainly hostile to the use of such war means as napalm bombs (or flame throwers for infantry) and wanted only pinpoint bombing used; no carpet bombing of civilian areas for humane reasons.

Also, an alternative, international opinion was divided against this war, considered generally as a colonial war. The most of the nations had not realized the importance of Indo-China for Communist penetration. South East Asia and Viet Minh was believed to be more nationalistic than communistic. This was thought to apply particularly well to the United States. Therefore French policy was perhaps to avoid shocking U. S. public opinion by the use of U. S. built weapons.

During 1949 the situation deteriorated rapidly as Mao Tse Tung's forces rushed rapidly toward Southern China and the Indo-Chinese border. Communist victory in China meant that supplies could be furnished directly from Chinese factories to the Viet Minh which was then concealing its true direction less and less. Since 1945, local Chinese authorities had here and there sold quantities of armament to the Viet Minh, in spite of French frontier posts. After 1949 the VM could receive any quantities they desired and openly sent their troops for training in Chinese camps. Such help permitted quick transportation of VM forces and their best guerilla units were becoming well equipped regular regiments, possessing anti-aircraft light batteries and field artillery.

The French command suddenly discovered how the old style operation had given way to a true war. French troops were hastily withdrawn from the Chinese border, leaving the way open for more Communist supply. The first U. S. built combat types appeared when a complete French Air Force P-63C "Kingcobra" squadron was sent there. It was too late, and this strong addition did not permit the other few obsolete planes to prevent the Cao Band Magic disaster. More powerful weapons were necessary than tired "Spitfires" and old Ju-52's.

As the Korean War began some months later, the U. S. government no longer hesitated to furnish necessary aircraft. To strengthen the P-63's, "Hellcats" were supplied during the last half of 1950 and helped to break the first big Viet Minh offensives. These attacks were launched by new style, heavily armed Communist divisions, and appeals for a bombing force to supplement close support by fighter-bombers became necessary. Douglas B-26B and C "Invaders" being delivered immediately permitted the

establishment of bomber squadrons and transport units were simultaneously reinforced by changing their Ju-52's for "Dakotas".

As the Chinese threat appeared progressively more dangerous (and anybody could fear a direct intervention as in the case of Korea) "Bearcats" appeared during 1951. In the early months of 1952 there were in French Indo-China:

- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ squadrons of "Bearcats"
- 1 squadron of "Hellcats"
- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ squadrons of B-26 "Invaders"
- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ squadrons of "Dakotas"
- $\frac{1}{2}$ squadron of AAC1's (Ju-52)

This general renewal of aircraft left but small numbers of Ju-52's and Siebel 204's, and the artillery spotting force of Morane 500's as non-U. S. built craft in the Air Force. At the same time Aeronavale (French Naval Air) had left its "Catalinas" for PB4Y-2 "Privateers" as well as re-equipping the carrier borne flotillas with Curtiss SB2C-4 "Helldiver" and F6F "Hellcats".

This force had a major role during all battles from 1951 to 1954. Close cooperation with counter-attacking combat teams permitted victory of the Vinh Yen (May 1951). Nghia Lo in October 1951 was a triumph of the French Air Force: encircled garrisons were air supplied by "Dakotas", and later extricated by paratroops launched from these same planes. The fighter-bombers gave close support and destroyed targets pinpointed by the slow-flying Morane 500's.

Na San (November 1952) and Louang Rabong (October, 1953) demonstrated how a sufficient number of cargo planes was able to supply French ground forces more effectively than thousands of coolies could do for the Viet Minh. Bombers, dive-bombers and fighters could compensate for numerical superiority of an attacking force to permit destroying assault waves; simultaneously they could harrass the enemy's walking logistics line.

These battles required great numbers of aircraft. The setbacks at Moa Binh in December 1951 and again at Nghia Lo in October 1952 were provoked by lack of power and range of available aircraft. These failures appealed for new planes; more "Bearcats" to replace the "Hellcats" and to organize new squadrons, more "Invaders", and new C-119 "Packets". At the very last stage of the war "Corsairs" were to appear, but they came too late during the Dien Bien Phu battle of March to May 1954. This decisive fight was lost in spite of gallant actions. Desperately planes of all types attempted to stop the assaults, to annihilate enemy artillery and mortars, and to supply the trapped garrison. Their numbers were insufficient, and the Dien Bien Phu defeat was quickly followed by the end of the war.

The French Expeditionary Air Force had then attained its peak and about 90% of its aircraft were of U. S. construction or design.

- 4 squadrons of "Bearcats"
- $\frac{1}{2}$ squadron of "Corsairs"
- 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ squadrons of B-26 "Invaders"
- $\frac{1}{2}$ squadron of "Dakotas"
- $\frac{1}{2}$ squadron of C-119's and $\frac{1}{2}$ of AAC1's (Ju-52)

Other aircraft included Noratlas Cargos, numerous Morane 500's, some Cessna "Bird Dogs" and the remaining Siebel 204's. Hiller 360, Westland built Sikorski, S-51's and S-55's were the helicopter force, used since 1951 for evacuation work.

After the Geneva Armistice these French squadrons left the Far East progressively. The majority of the planes were either returned to U. S. bases or transferred to the newly created state, South Viet Nam (not Viet Minh). The last of the French roundels disappeared from Indo-China skies in 1955.

TYPES OF AIRCRAFT USED IN THE INDO-CHINA WAR

	<u>U. S. Designed</u>	<u>Other</u>
Fighter-bombers	Bell P-63C "Kingcobra" Grumman F6F-5 "Hellcat" Grumman F8F-1 "Bearcat" Vought F4U-5 "Corsair"	Supermarine "Spitfire" Mks. VII, VIII, IX, XVI Supermarine "Seafire" III
Dive Bombers	Douglas SBD-4 "Dauntless" Curtiss SB2C-4 "Helldiver"	
Bombers	Douglas B-26B and C "Invader"	DeHavilland "Mosquito" VI
Naval Patrol	Consolidated PBV-5A "Catalina" Grumman JRF-1 "Goose"	
Photo Reconnaissance	Douglas RB-26C "Invader" Grumman F8F-1 adaptation	NC701 (Siebel 204)
Observation/liaison	Stinson L-5 "Sentinel" Republic "Seabee" Cessna L-19 "Bird Dog"	NC701 (Siebel 204) Morane 500
Transport	Douglas C-47B "Dakota" Fairchild C-119 "Packet"	AAC1 (Ju-52) Nord 2501 Noratlas
Civilian Aircraft used for military transp.	Norduyn "Norseman" Beechcraft 18	DeHavilland Canada "Beaver" Bristol 170 "Freighter"
Sometimes requisitioned	Douglas DC4	So 30P "Bretagne" Se 2010 "Armagnac"
Miscellaneous		Aichi "Jake" Mitsubishi "Dinah" Idore et Olivier 6045
Helicopters	Hiller 360 Westland-Sikorski S.51 Westland-Sikorski S.55	

NOTES ON THE PRINCIPAL TYPES OF U. S. BUILT AIRCRAFT

General rules for Markings

All planes were left in their original scheme, painted or non-painted. French National Insignias, the standard Blue, White, Red Roundels had a thin yellow line surrounding. Tail stripes were painted over the entire rudder area or placed into a small triangle in the middle of the fin.

Most of the squadrons painted their own insignias on their aircraft, generally on the sides of the nose for multi-engined planes, or the sides of the engine cowling for others. Some squadrons using similarly painted planes of the same type used bright color painted nose, or bright painted circles surrounding individual marking letters as a means of recognizing aircraft of each unit. The individual numbers on ex-U. S. planes were retained but these were sometimes masked by the rudder tricolor stripes.

Douglas C-47 "Dakota"

All "Dakotas", with perhaps one exception, were C-47B's. They were used for all kinds of missions; long-range France to Indo-China trips, cargo transports, parachute supply, and paratroop attacks. They had the principal responsibility for the supply of big fortified but isolated positions like Na-San, Xieng Khouang, or Dien Bien Phu camps. In many cases they landed under fire from enemy automatic arms. These planes were either painted khaki with light blue under surfaces, or bare metal finish. To differentiate the planes of various squadrons each unit painted the nose with a different color and put an individual letter over a circle of the same nose color.

Douglas B-26 "Invader"

Basic types were the B-26B (strafer), B-26C (leader) and the RB-26C (photo). However, the French Air Force had received, by the end of the war, so many different planes that no strict rule could define them. It was thus possible to see B-26B's with B-26C wings, and to add confusion, many were modified to become leaders but with reinforced armament for strafing use. The "Invaders" were used for many types of offensive actions; horizontal and glide bombing, strafing, low-level tactical armed reconnaissance, strategic photo reconnaissance, etc. Their versatility gave them the distinction of becoming the most hated by the Viet Minh troops and coolies. Their range permitted them to carry out missions over every part of Viet Minh controlled territory.

Most of the B-26's were bare metal finish (silver colored) and only RB-26's and some late-coming B-26B's were painted black. Part of them retained their U. S. individual and buzz numbers. French stripes were always painted on the rudder. As on the "Dakotas" and for the same reasons, each squadron adopted the individual letter painted on colored circles to avoid unit confusion.

Bell P-63 "Kingcobra"

All of these were P-63C's turned over to the French Air Force at the end of WWII. They were already tired, and could not give a very good account of themselves. They were thus quickly superseded by "Hellcats" directly delivered by the U. S. All P-63's were bare metal finish, with the squadron insignia on the pilot's door. Tricolor stripes were placed either on the rudder or smaller size on the fin, and each plane retained its U. S. number on the fin.

Grumman F6F "Hellcat"

F6F's used in Indo-China were the -5 variant, and while the French Air Force planes used two 20 MM. guns and four 50 cal. guns as armament, the Aeronavale carrier based "Hellcats" use six 50 cal. guns. The "Bearcat" ultimately replaced it in the FAF but Naval Force planes were present up to and including the 1st Dien Bien Phu battle. All planes retained the U. S. Navy dark blue finish; FAF squadrons painted their insignia upon the sides of the engine cowl.

Grumman F8F "Bearcat"

The majority of these had four 20 MM cannon as armament and were either F8F-1 or F8F-1B. They proved to be a formidable weapon for ground attack use and carried also extra drop fuel tanks, napalm bombs or rockets. "Bearcats" took part in all of the important battles from Nghia to Dien Bien Phu, and those based inside the great fortified camps like Na-San and Dien Bien Phu gave very close infantry support, sometimes less than 2 miles from their takeoff strip. A number of them had special belly pods with cameras and were used for photo-reconnaissance.

All "Bearcats" retained their U. S. Navy midnight blue color, squadron insignia were painted on the sides of the engine cowl, and French stripes were indifferently painted on the fin or rudder. Also some squadrons placed color circles on the fin.

Curtiss SB2C-4 "Helldivers"

Aeronavale used a number of these on two carriers operating along the Indo-China coast. They proved useful in giving continuous umbrella air support over mountainous areas far from the French Air Force bases. Also, they took part in the battle for Dien Bien Phu, being then based at the FAF airfields. These were all painted in their original midnight blue and had flotilla numbers on the side of the fuselage at the rear, and if a flotilla insignia was assigned, this was painted at the top of the fin.

Consolidated PBV-5A "Catalina"

For coastal patrol, Aeronavale used only the "Catalina" and then not as a flying boat, but as a land-based patrol plane. Sometimes these took direct action as bombers against Viet Minh forces and some planes were even seen flying low, their crews firing machine guns from the waist ports. All those used were painted entirely white and had flotilla insignia on the sides of the forward fuselage and a flotilla number on the sides of the rear fuselage. French stripes always on rudder.

Grumman JRF "Goose"

Aeronavale used these like they were light, short-range "Catalinas", armed with small bombs and machine guns. All were U. S. Navy dark blue in color, with the flotilla number on the rear of the fuselage and French rudder stripes.

Consolidated PBY-2 "Privateer"

Toward the end of the war the Aeronavale put some of these in place of the tired "Catalinas" and used them as long range sea patrol craft, and partly for bombing far inside enemy held territory. Then they specialized in night attacks during the battles for Na-San and Dien Bien Phu. All were dark blue with the usual flotilla numbers on the sides of the rear fuselage, the flotilla insignia at forward fuselage and

Helicopters

The Hiller 360, Sikorski S. 51 and S. 55 Helicopters became immense favorites with their crews, and with the rest of the Air Force since they obtained great use as evacuation means as well as rescue craft, picking up French pilots from behind the enemy lines after bailouts. The Hillers became known as "ventilators". All aircraft, even those raised by public subscription, were painted khaki, except that after the Armistice some S.55's were painted white and evacuated casualties from Dien Bien Phu, then under Viet Minh control.

Index to markings and insignia drawing

G-47B. A plane used by the 2/64 "Anjou" Squadron. Khaki and light blue colors, deep blue nose and fin circle with white "P" identification letter. Yellow USAF aircraft number. Insignia: Arms of Anjou Province.

P-63C. Used by 2/5 "Ile de France" Squadron. Natural metal finish. French roundel without usual yellow encircling line. Insignia on door: Arms of Ile de France Province.

F8F-5. A plane of 2/9 "Auvergne" Squadron. Insignia: two joined WWI squadron insignias inside yellow and blue blazon.

B-26C. 1/25 "Tunisie" Squadron used this one. Natural metal finish or aluminum painted. Identification letter on fin over yellow circle. The yellow band at top of fin identifies it as a "true" leader, (used as lead plane in low-level bombing), no USAF plane number. Insignia: Two joined WWI squadron insignias inside yellow and blue blazon.

B-26B. Another plane used by 1/25 Squadron, a real hybrid, with B-26B fuselage, B-26C unarmed wings. All black, with red USAF plane number. No insignia when author saw this airplane.

F8F-1. Used by 2/8 Squadron. White identification letter over light blue circle on fin. Insignia: a thistle twig painted on the side of engine cowl.

SB2C-4. Used by Ninth Flotilla, Aeronavale. Individual identification number 4, no flotilla insignia, an anchor over each national marking, roundel and stripes.

"Invader" armament variations.

This drawing depicts some of the B-26's used by FAF. These were typical variations but there were many others. (Index from top to bottom)

B-26B with six-gun nose, six guns in the wings and a dorsal turret only.

B-26B, same as above, but with eight-gun nose, each gun pneumatically cocked.

B-26C with two-gun nose, dorsal and nose turrets, but without wing guns.

B-26C modified by French Air Force. It was delivered with two wing gun gondolas and two turrets. To use it as a strafer, two more wing gun gondolas were added and the belly turret was deleted.

B-26B hybrid, with B-26B fuselage (six-gun nose and dorsal turret) and B-26C wings with two wing gun gondolas.

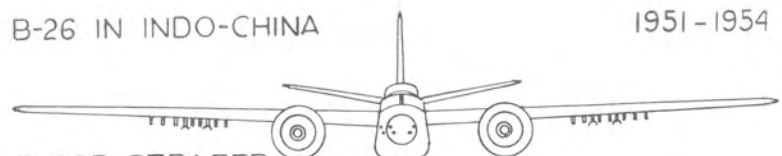


Photos
and
drawings
by
author

B-26B/C Hybrid of GB1/25 "Tunisic" Sq.

B-26 IN INDO-CHINA

1951-1954



B-26B STRAFER



B-26B STRAFER

"D" NOSE GUNS



B-26C LEADER



B-26C LEADER-
STRAFER

DELETED VENTRAL
TURRET



B- B STRAFER

"C" WINGS

"INVADER" ARMAMENT VARIATIONS

U.S. Aircraft - IndoChina 1946-54



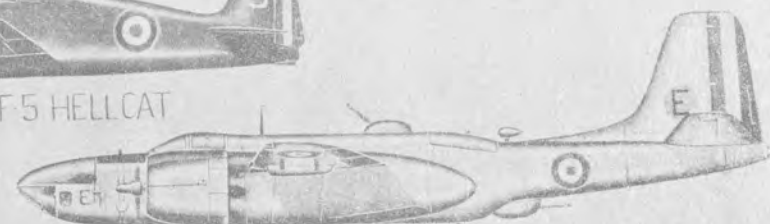
DOUGLAS C47B DAKOTA



BELL P63C KINGCOBRA



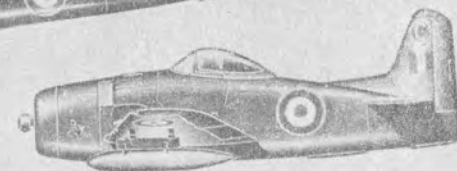
GRUMMAN F6F-5 HELLCAT



DOUGLAS B26C INVADER



DOUGLAS B26B INVADER



GRUMMAN F8F-1 BEARCAT

CURTISS SB2C-4 HELLDIVER



Markings & Insignas



B-26C Strafer of GB1/19 "Gascogne" Sq.



F6F-5 of 2/9 "Auvergne" Squadron J.M.C.



F8F-1 cannon armed, with belly camera pod



F8F-1s of 1/22 "Saintonge" Squadron



B-26C of GB1/25 "Tunisie" Squadron



All black "Athos" of ERB/26 "Armagnac" Sq.



SB2C-4 of 9th Flotilla



P-63C "Kingcobra" of 2/5 Sqdn.

All photos by J.M.C.

INDEX TO PHOTOS

B-26B - This first photograph shows a standard strafer, all natural metal finish except the black painted eight-gun nose. This particular airplane retained its buzz number, BC530. It was used by 1/19 "Gascogne" Squadron.

Hybrid B-26B/C - This second aircraft is also presented in the armament variations drawing, painted all black, with red numbers.

F6F-5 - A plane of the 2/9 "Auvergne" Squadron, with 20 mm. and 50 cal. guns. This particular plane does not show any unit insignia.

F8F-1 - Two fighters of the 1/22 "Saintouge" Squadron with unit insignia painted on the sides of the cowlings just beneath the plane identification letter. Armament differs; the front plane had 50 cal. guns, the other 20 mm. cannon.

Photo F8F-1 - This cannon-armed "Bearcat" had a special belly-pod containing cameras. No insignia. EROM 80 Esc.

RB-26C - This plane was used by ERB/26 "Armagnac" Squadron. As an all-standard unarmed RB-26C it was completely black, with no squadron insignia. The name on the nose was "ATHOS", and three other RB-26C's of this Squadron were named "d'ARTAGNAN", "PORTHOS", AND "ARAMIS", after the famous Three Musketeers.

P-63C - This photograph was taken before sending the 2/5 Squadron to Indo-China. Some planes simultaneously showed the French Tricolor stripes on both fin and rudder. In the Far East the standard wing and squadron markings (here 5T-A, or other letter) were impressed and insignias generally added.

COVER STORY (Continued from Page 1)

dash for New York. This time there was no need to conserve fuel and his indicated airspeed reached 420 mph near Pittsburgh. In the cold near New York the engines cooled too rapidly during the letdown and, as the throttles were opened on final, an engine faltered and the XP-38 rolled into a ball of junk on the adjacent golf course. Luckily it did not burn and Lt. Kelsey climbed out with minor injuries. His flying time was 7 hrs., 2 mins., breaking the record, though unofficially.

So ended the only XP-38, but not so the history of a fighter type. Lockheed constructed 9924 examples in the years that followed, while Consolidated-Vultee made another 113 (P-38L-1-VN). Our cover photo shows the brilliant red "Yippee" flown by chief engineering test pilot Milo Burcham. Actually a P-38J, and the 5000th "Lightning" off the production line, it was called a YP-38 to commemorate the first production series of 13 airplanes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Torn between his love for aviation and for sports cars, Warren M. Bodie keeps pretty busy with both. As a veteran writer and photo contributor with many years of experience in the aircraft industry he is currently employed as Senior Engineering Writer at Radioplane. His credits include a stint as co-editor of "Aeronautica", an assoc. editor for "Year's Pictorial History of Flight" and dozens of articles. He is 35 years of age, married, has two cute kids. Three years were spent in the USAAF, mostly in the ATC Flight Test Unit.