

General Eisenhower's Modified B-25J Used During World War II

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North American B-25J Mitchell, twin-engine, medium bomber that was modified into a VIP transport by North American for use by General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe during World War II. On display at the South Dakota Air and Space Museum, Ellsworth Air Force Base. This and subsequent photographs: Lieutenant Colonel George A. Larson, USAF (Ret.), photo collection.

When the North American B-25 *Mitchell*, twin-engine, medium bomber is mentioned in conjunction with World War II events, the first American air raid on Japan, after Pearl Harbor, first comes to the main conversation. On 18 April 1942, United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) Lieutenant Colonel James H. Doolittle in a B-25 took-off from the rolling and pitching deck of the aircraft USS *Hornet*, leading fifteen other B-25s in a surprise bombing raid against the Japanese home islands, Tokyo and surrounding cities. The B-25 was a versatile aircraft. One B-25J, during WW II, was converted to a Very Important Person (VIP) transport and is currently on display at the South Dakota Air and Space Museum, outside the main gate to Ellsworth Air Force Base.

The B-25 airframe was selected for modification into a VIP transport. North American Aircraft took out of military service, aircraft serial number 40-2165 to determine what modifications had to be made and the extent of those alterations. The B-25 was flown to North American's production plant located at Kansas City, Kansas. North American engineers designed and made the following changes to the *Mitchell's* structure and configuration:

1. All non-essential military equipment was removed from the aircraft, including armor plate, guns, crew items and bombing related items.
2. Five over-stuffed passenger chairs were installed in the aft, now designated, passenger compartment.

3. A drop-leaf desk installed across the width of the passenger compartment at the rear of the compartment.
4. An intercom was installed, allowing communications between the passenger compartment and the pilots' cockpit.
5. The nose was flared over.
6. Windows installed in the passenger compartment for natural light and view out the aircraft.
7. A flare unit installed behind the gunner's position to allow the aircraft to fly over a proposed landing area at night, release the flares to light the runway or landing area below.
8. Two additional seats were installed ahead of the bomb-bay, aft of the cockpit.
9. The bomb-bay converted to carry luggage.
10. One sleeping bunk installed in the crawl way between the cockpit and passenger compartment.

North American (VIP) B-25J Specifications

Wingspan:	67 feet 7-inches
Wing area:	610 square feet
Length:	52 feet 11-inches
Tail height:	16 feet 4-inches
Powerplant:	(two) 1,700 hp Wright R-2600-92 <i>Cyclone</i> radial piston engines
Maximum speed:	272 mph
Cruising speed:	230 mph

Service ceiling:	24,200 feet
Range:	1,300 feet
Empty weight:	19,480 pounds
Maximum weight:	35,000 pounds
Crew:	Pilot and Co-pilot

The North American B-25J was the final production variant of the *Mitchell* medium bomber, produced at the North American plant, Kansas City, Kansas. North American built a total of 4,318 B-25 medium bombers. But, after the test airframe was modified, only three additional aircraft were modified. The decision was made by the War Department to modify a B-25J for General Dwight Eisenhower, Allied Supreme Commander. B-25J, aircraft serial number 40-4030 was selected to be modified, although more extensive than the alterations done on the test airframe (40-2165).

1. The top of the bomb-bay was removed and lowered to create a comfortable passenger compartment, as on standard U.S. airliners.
2. To accommodate bomb-bay alterations, additional structural supports were added to the wing center section's carry through structure.
3. The area below the bomb-bay was fitted with auxiliary fuel tanks, providing for a maximum range when carrying passengers and baggage.
4. Four leather passenger chairs were installed in the passenger compartment. Two facing to the rear at the front of the compartment and two along the left side of the compartment.
5. Two metal arm chairs, with padded seats, were installed behind the cockpit, facing aft.
6. Fold-down, drop-leaf desk fitted at the rear of the passenger compartment, across the width of the fuselage.
7. A walnut storage cabinet installed about the desk.
8. Four windows were installed on either side of the upper fuselage in the passenger compartment.
9. Luggage racks installed, airline style, above the passenger seats along the side of the fuselage.
10. To make room for the over-stuffed chairs along the left side of the passenger compartment, the tail gunner's entry hatch was sealed, repositioned farther to the rear of the aircraft, toward the tail.
11. The passenger compartment's interior walls were covered with sound proofing material (insulation) to reduce noise from the aircraft's two engines.
12. The insulation covered with airline type paneling.
13. Standard USAF interior olive drab paint color replaced by a lighter color, general's blue.
14. The rear gunner's position was removed, to allow space for installation of a life raft, which could be jettisoned if an emergency ditching had to be made in water.
15. The bombardier's position was covered with sheet-metal.

During WW II, USAAF Major Laurence J. Hansen was General Eisenhower's pilot: *After D-Day, beginning in July 1944, when I returned to England after a flight from the United States, we were given (myself and co-pilot Captain Richard Underwood) a modified B-25J VIP transport.*

Pearle McKeogh, during WW II, was a WAC assigned to General Eisenhower's military staff, beginning in North Africa and on through the end of the war in Europe. *I was among the first group of WACs to complete training and graduate from the U.S. Army training facility located at Fort Des Moines, south of Des Moines, Iowa. I was assigned to General Eisenhower's military staff in North Africa. I remained with him from that time through the end of WW II in Europe. My future husband, who I met while working on the general's staff, was Eisenhower's enlisted aid. I saw the B-25J when it was first delivered and frequently flew on the aircraft when we moved or transferred the general's headquarters.*

Hansen: *After our forces established a beach head in France, we began to use the B-25J quite frequently and many times we would have as many as eighteen P-51 Mustangs and Royal Air Force Spitfires for airborne escorts for cross channel protection. The B-25J would fly at an airspeed of 240 mph. On several occasions, once we were on the ground, the fighter pilots would remark to us that our plane was quite a problem to deal with as far as escorting because of its speed. We would usually cross the channel between Portsmouth, England and the Cherbourg Peninsula which was some sixty miles of open water. Several weeks after the invasion, the general moved his headquarters to Granville, France, which is on the Cherbourg peninsula. We operated from this location with the B-25J until our troops were several miles beyond Paris and then moved to Versailles, a few miles out of Paris.*

On 2 September 1944, we took-off early in the morning, the B-25J to Laval, France to pick-up General Hoyt Vandenburg. General Eisenhower was aboard enroute to a meeting with General Omar Bradley at Chartres, France. Upon landing at Laval, we found nothing but a mud hole and the field was very rough. I radioed the four P-47 fighter escorts not to land because of the condition of the field. Under one-half power we taxied in the mud to pick-up General Vandenburg. I was in a hurry to get airborne because we were holding the escorts overhead. We took-off from this short field and became airborne when suddenly a British Piper Cub liaison aircraft was seen taking-off at a 90 degree angle on our left and we were on a collision course. However, a flare was shot up in front of the Piper Cub by a ground controller and its pilot made an aerobatic maneuver avoiding us. I was at this point very unmaneuverable and just above the point of stall. From there we flew our passengers to Chartres and met General Bradley.

We were informed by General Bedel Smith that a heavy storm was kicking up at our destination of Ponterson, France and that we should not waste too much time at Chartres or consider canceling the flight. The meeting was very short and we took-off as quickly as possible and right after take-off we noticed the right engine was on fire. Flames were shooting out from around the engine nacelle and we immediately turned and landed again at Chartres and I ordered everyone out of the aircraft right in the middle of the runway. We found out that due to rough field conditions at Laval we had broken several exhaust stacks and the fire was burning the ignition harness and other flammable items inside the engine nacelle. Once temporary repairs were made, I flew it back to Ponterson. My co-pilot flew General Eisenhower out in a L-5 liaison aircraft.

Because of the need for a larger capacity and longer range aircraft, I recommended to the general that we obtain a C-54 type aircraft, which he agreed to. In November 1944, I flew

back to the United States to be checked out in a C-54. We took delivery of the first two C-54s in May 1945.

The post WW II history of General Eisenhower's B-25J is interesting:

1. After WW II, the B-25J was flown across the North Atlantic to the United States, assigned to Bolling Field, outside Washington, DC, as a cargo hauler under the military designation as a CB-25J.
2. In 1948, the aircraft was again assigned in the role as a VIP transport, under the military designation of VB-25J, assigned under operational control of the 1100th Special Air Mission Group. The VB-25J was used to fly VIPs in the United States from one air base to another as required.
3. January 1953, aircraft transferred to the 1254th Air Transport Group, operating out of Washington National Airport.
4. August 1958, aircraft transferred to the 1001st Air Base Wing, Andrews Air Force Base, located outside Washington, DC.
5. December 1958, the B-25J was flown to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona to the Aircraft Maintenance and Regeneration Center (AMARC) for open air storage once prepared for storage.
6. February 1959, the aircraft was stricken from active Air Force inventory and then later sold to a commercial company for private flight operations.
7. In 1981, the USAF purchased back the B-25J, transporting the VIP aircraft to Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota. It was restored by museum volunteers from the South Dakota Air and Space Museum back to its 1944 configuration and appearance when used by General Eisenhower.
8. In 1982, the B-25J was placed on display at the Museum.

Leon Max, a U.S. Army cook during WW II, was assigned to the Officers Mess, Supreme Allied Expeditionary Forces: As a cook at *Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE)*, I served General Dwight D. Eisenhower, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, King George VI and many other high ranking United States and foreign military officers. I saw the North American B-25J Mitchell medium bomber, USAAF, when it was used to ferry General Eisenhower and other Allied military commanders to and from various military planning sessions. These planning sessions were for the airborne and amphibious invasion of Normandy, France on 6 June 1944. The aircraft at the South Dakota Air and Space Museum is the one General Eisenhower used during WW II. In 1995, when visiting the museum, I noticed its two main landing gear tires were in bad shape.

In a telephone conversation to my stock broker, I obtained the telephone number of the Chief Executive Officer, Goodrich Tire Company, which during WW II produced the main landing gear tires for the North American B-25 Mitchell medium bombers. However, the officers were unable to locate two 47S main landing gear tires. I then called Firestone, General and

Goodyear Tire Companies, but they also were unable to locate any 47S tires in their warehouses. However, the first call to Goodrich, in a follow-on conversation, resulted in an exceptional lead for getting tires for the aircraft. I was given the name of Carl Schoel, at Aero Trader, in Chino, California. This company specializes in the restoration of B-25 aircraft. At that time, the company was about to pour new 47S tires into molds recently acquired. Each would cost approximately \$2,000 each. This was too expensive. But, Aero Trader in its warehouse did have two used 47S tires, manufactured in the 1940s, agreeing to sell them for \$1,400, for the pair.

A friend of mine, Sandy Hirschland living in Palm Springs, California was contacted to help raise the funds to purchase the two tires. During WW II, Sandy was attached to General Eisenhower's staff, usually sent ahead when the general had to switch or move his headquarters. He prepared letters and mailed them to over one hundred members of SHAPE, European Theater of Operations U.S. Army Veterans Association (ETOUSA). These veterans responded and money to purchase the two used tires was acquired. But, it took until July 1997, for the tires to be shipped and delivered to the museum and mounted on the aircraft.

On 20 August 1997, the B-25J had its new tires and a hand over ceremony was held at the museum, with the aircraft opened for a rare look inside. The aircraft now sits on three concrete pads, with steel support lifting the three landing gear tires off the concrete slabs to keep the tires from touching the ground. □

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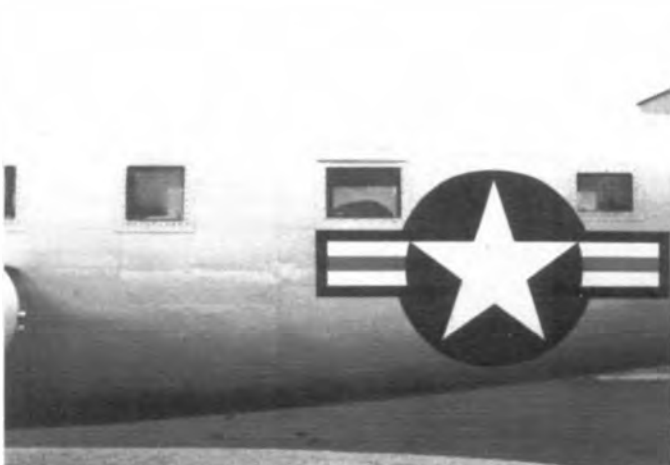


Left: The nose of the B-25J was flared over.



Right: Modified tail section of the B-25J.

Below: Windows along the left side of the upper fuselage of the B-25J



Below: Two metal chairs, located behind the pilots' cockpit, side arm chairs with a padded seat, facing to the rear of the aircraft.





Left: Four passenger type, over-stuffed, green chairs in the passenger compartment of the B-25J. Two face to the rear and two along the left side of the passenger compartment.

Below: View of the cabin looking aft from over the wing spar into the passenger cabin..



Right: View of the cockpit.

