

6-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Sullivan, John J. (1989) "One a Day in Tampa Bay: B-26 Bomber Training at MacDill Air Base during World War II," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol11/iss1/5>

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“ONE A DAY IN TAMPA BAY”: B-26 BOMBER TRAINING AT MacDILL AIR BASE DURING WORLD WAR II

by John J. Sullivan

In 1942, a dark year for Americans, groups flying B-26 medium bombers began to train at MacDill Army Air Force Base, a raw military installation only recently carved out of a narrow peninsula jutting for about two and one-half miles into Tampa Bay.¹ At MacDill, as German and Japanese victories shocked Americans, young men, plucked out of comfortable civilian life only a few months earlier, struggled to master weapons of war.

The B-26 Martin Marauder medium bomber was not easily mastered. With a crew of six, it was designed for medium altitude bombing attacks at high speed carrying a substantial bomb load. It bristled with .50 caliber machine guns for defense. Army Air Force planners believed it would reach its target undetected, drop its bombs with precision and defend itself effectively against enemy fighter planes as it streaked back to the base.²

The Marauder's narrow wings and two powerful engines gave it speed in flight, but they also gave it exceptionally fast landing and takeoff speeds requiring long runways. It had vicious stall propensities; few pilots felt confident that they could fly it with just one engine operating.³ Regular Army Air Force pilots called it a “hot” airplane. The young pilots enrolled in hurry-up training programs called it “widow maker,” and “Baltimore prostitute,” commemorating both the city where many were built and its disreputable character. Throughout the Army, fliers repeated the sour phrase, “One a day in Tampa Bay,” which summed up the Marauder's reputation.

In the latter part of 1942 at MacDill, thirty-four accidents claimed fifty-six lives despite a favorable climate and air approaches free of obstructions.⁴ As one disaster followed another, fear verging on panic spread among the medium bomb groups. Every pilot of the 320th Bomb Group, with the exception of the commanding officer and his executive, expressed a desire, formally or informally, to be transferred away from B-26s.⁵

Local civilians also expressed concern. A growing uneasiness in Tampa may have been heightened by the comment made at a public meeting by an Army Air Force officer who explained that “The vital drive, the urge to fly in a manner approaching recklessness and lack of fear are qualities which have made American pilots feared and respected in combat--these same qualities have also contributed to some accidents in routine operations.”⁶ Some of the reckless flying was in violation of regulations. Since low flying aircraft alarmed animal herds and ranchers, the Army responded to complaints by painting large numbers on the sides of aircraft so that they could be identified and reported.⁷

General Henry H. Arnold, Chief of Air Staff of the Army Air Forces, was deluged with complaints about the B-26. Some plain words came from Brigadier General Samuel M. Connell, Commander of the III Bomber Command at MacDill, who wrote: “This is a very hot airplane



MacDill Army Air Force Base during World War II, showing (clockwise from the top): A flight of B-26 Martin Marauders over the Gulf of Mexico; the hanger line with B-26's on the apron; a maintenance crew at work on a B-26; the right wing and motor of a B-26; base headquarters.

Photograph courtesy of the Center for Air Force History.

and in my opinion it is poor policy to try to train fresh school graduates to fly B-26s unless they are given transition on a plane similar [to it].” He recommended creation of a board to investigate the aircraft, and he called for a stop in production if its faults could not be corrected.⁸

Arnold appointed a special investigation board headed by Major General Carl Spaatz to determine whether production should be continued. Arnold knew that combat airmen could not wait for the best possible weapons; they had to fight with the arms available. The board recommended that production be continued with several changes in the plane’s design, including wider wings.⁹

To ease the morale problem in the B-26 groups, Arnold ordered his best pilot, Jimmy Doolittle, to “take a B-26, fly it under any and all conditions, and then go down to the B-26 outfit, take command, and show those boys that flying this ship was no different from flying any other.”¹⁰ When Doolittle finished this assignment, he had the young pilots making both landings and take-offs on one engine. He later described his experience: “The B-26 Marauder was an unforgivable airplane and it was killing pilots because it never gave them a chance to make mistakes. . . . I checked it over, flew it and liked it. There wasn’t anything about its flying characteristics that good piloting skill couldn’t overcome. I recommended that it continue to be built and it was.”¹¹

Doolittle’s efforts were significant, but the B-26’s reputation was not easily altered. With criticism of the bomber continuing, Arnold asked the country’s best woman pilot to fly the Marauder. Jackie Cochran flew the aircraft, and while recognizing its faults, she saw no reason why it should not be continued in service. She suggested to Arnold that the women pilots of the organization she headed fly B-26s. Arnold agreed, and 150 pilots of the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots began ferrying duties with B-26s. During World War II they logged many thousands of miles with only one minor accident.¹² Modifications recommended by Spaatz, Doolittle, Cochran and others made the newer models safer and easier to fly. The fine record of women pilots improved the Marauder’s reputation, but the B-26 remained a “hot” airplane to the men training for combat with it.

In 1943 MacDill was still engaged in medium bombardment training. The training units welded pilots, navigators, bombardiers, gunners, radio operators and engineers into combat crews. The pace they were required to set was determined by the urgency of total war. Forging competent operational units demanded intense formation flying. In spite of B-26 modifications and growing knowledge of how to fly the airplane, the accident rate at MacDill remained high throughout 1943, totalling sixty-three accidents. Some of the aircraft never returned from flights over the Gulf of Mexico.¹³

In 1943 the power of the United States was brought to bear on the Axis nations. Doolittle and Spaatz commanded American air forces fighting Germans in North Africa. From English bases America’s Eighth Air Force began to strike targets in Germany with its heavy bombers. As the penetrations of German air space deepened, heavy losses threatened to curtail the bombing offensive, the only Allied effort that was hitting Germans in their homeland.



A B-26 bomber flying over St. Omer, France, during World War II.

Photograph courtesy of the Smithsonian Institute.

The high command of the Army Air Force decided to rush B-26 groups to England in the hope that medium bombers would take some of the pressure off the heavies. One of the first units to arrive was the 322nd Bomb Group which had finished training at MacDill in September 1942. Major General Ira Eaker, Eighth Air Force commander, welcomed the newcomers, and directed that they begin combat missions as soon as possible. “When can you go after those enemy fighters where they live?” he asked the commander of the medium bomb groups.¹⁴

German radar gave early warning of allied aircraft crossing the English Channel. To escape detection, Eighth Air Force leaders decided to send the B-26s on missions at low altitude. On May 17, 1943, twelve B-26s of the 322nd Bomb Group were sent to attack a power plant at Ijmuidan, Holland. They flew across the North Sea at low level and encountered intense fire from anti-aircraft guns near the target. Bombing results were poor. One week later the 322nd sent its bombers to Ijmuidan again, and a nightmare ensued. Eleven planes set out on the mission; only one returned.¹⁵ Of the sixty crewmen who crossed the Dutch coast, thirty-eight were killed, and twenty captured. Two fliers were fished out of the sea.¹⁶

Immediately following the calamitous Ijmuidan mission, General Eaker ordered a complete re-evaluation of Eighth Air Force doctrine on the use of medium bombers. Investigators concluded that the B-26 could not be used in unescorted low altitude attacks against targets defended by German anti-aircraft weapons without incurring suicidal losses.¹⁷ Eighth Air Force B-26s were given different missions--to support ground forces and to attack carefully selected targets from medium altitude protected by fighter escort. In these roles B-26s compiled a proud

and significant record. Throughout the war in Europe they attacked many kinds of targets including troop concentrations, missile sites, bridges, railroad facilities and air fields.

MacDill Army Air Force base contributed significantly to development of a powerful bomber force in World War II. Every accident was thoroughly investigated leading to a steady improvement in the B-26 safety record. The air crews that trained at MacDill flew gallant missions in every theater of war and made an important contribution to the defeat of the Axis nations.

¹ "History of MacDill Army Air Force Base," 49, archive 286.01-1, Center for Air Force History (CAFH), Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

² "Battlefield Studies," archive 519.041-1, CAFH.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "History of MacDill," 51.

⁵ Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II: Services Around the World*, vol. 7 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 444.

⁶ *Tampa Times*, April 17, 1942.

⁷ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 12, 1943.

⁸ "History of MacDill," 52.

⁹ Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II: Men and Planes*, vol. 6 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 200.

¹⁰ Henry A. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 259.

¹¹ Carroll V. Glines, *Jimmy Doolittle* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1972), 125.

¹² Jacqueline Cochran and Mary Ann B. Brinley, *Jackie Cochran* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 214.

¹³ "History of MacDill," 35.

¹⁴ "Minutes of Commanders Meetings," box 20, Papers of General Ira Eaker, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Roger Freeman, *Marauder at War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978) 49.

¹⁶ Devon Francis, *Flak Bait* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1948), 122.

¹⁷ Robert A. Lovett to Henry H. Arnold, June 18, 1943, archive 319. 1, Record Group 107 38, National Archives, Washington, D.C.