

Thinking about World War II United States Navy planes, I'd start by calling the F4U Corsair "glamorous". The F6F Hellcat never had the Corsair's gull-winged good looks (nor a "bubble canopy"), but was one helluva fighter plane. The big TBF Avenger was a heckuva torpedo bomber pretty much throughout the war. And, sorry to say, the big SB2C Helldiver had a helluva name, but was pretty much a disappointment: it's pretty well known pilots preferred the Plain Jane "Slow But Steady" Douglas SBD Dauntless that the Helldiver had been designed to replace.

But, the blend-in-with-the-wallpaper Dauntless pretty much turned the whole tide of the Pacific war around in 1942 at Midway, sinking FOUR Japanese aircraft carriers: Yup, Turned The Tide of the Twentieth Century's biggest war. Before Midway, we were playing defense. After Midway, thanks to the Dauntless, we began our war-ending island-hopping offense: invading, among other islands, Guadalcanal, Saipan, Okinawa, and Iwo Jima, mainly because of the strategic value of their airstrips,

On Sunday, December 7, 1941 six Japanese aircraft carriers, Akagi, Kaga, Hiryu, Soryu, Shokaku, and Zuikaku, launched 40 torpedo planes, 100 bombers/dive bombers, and 43 Zero fighter escorts towards Pearl Harbor. Six months later, on June 4, 1942, four of the carriers—Akagi, Kaga, Hiryu, and Soryu—were at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean near the small Midway atoll, thanks to bombs dropped by Slow But Steady Douglas SBD Dauntlesses.

In the May 6-8, 1942 Battle of the Coral Sea, the Shokaku had been crippled and the "plane shy" Zuikaku had returned to Japan on May 10. Thus, the Japanese Navy, after June 4, 1942 had, truly, only one undamaged operational large aircraft carrier.

Let's see what we can find out about the history-changing SBD. But first, let's talk about Midway, a 2.4 square-mile atoll, about 1/3 of the way between Hawaii and Japan. I never realized this, but it is one island short of being the western-most island of the Hawaiian archipelago! On a globe, or a world map, it is a speck: a tiny dot. It consists of two small islands, Sand and Eastern—basically low, crappy volcanic islands, the highest point being 43 feet above sea level—surrounded by a six-mile-diameter coral reef.

'Slow But Deadly'

Let's Talk About the

Douglas SBD Dauntless

by Ralph Ferrusi



A U.S. Navy Douglas SBD Dauntless dropping a bomb, circa 1942.

Photo: US Navy



But, early in World War II, because of its location, Japan decided it was the second-most important military target in the Pacific—after Pearl Harbor—therefore, it had to be invaded. Thus, the Battle of Midway, where 3,364 men died in the air and on the sea surrounding its crappy 1,549 acres. Nowadays it is mostly known for its population of millions of irascible, forever-entrenched gooney birds, a.k.a. albatrosses.

Let's leave this history lesson for a while, and return to the Scout Bomber Douglas:

The Dauntless dates back to the 1935-vintage Northrop BT-1. In 1937 Northrop was taken over by the Douglas Aircraft Corporation. In 1937 the BT-2 was developed from the BT-1 and became the basis of the SBD, that was designed by Ed Heinemann

and his team at the Douglas El Segundo, California plant. Just about all SBD's were built here and at Douglas's Oklahoma City plant. It first entered service in mid-1939 with a 1,000 horsepower Wright Cyclone radial engine. There was a United States Army Air Force version of the SBD, dubbed the A-24 "Banshee".

Distinctive perforated split flaps/ dive-brakes were incorporated to eliminate tail buffeting during diving, and, unusual for carrier aircraft, its wings did not fold, increasing their structural strength: a Really Good Thing for a dive bomber.

Eventually over 2,400 SBD-5's, equipped with a 1,200 horsepower engine and an increased ammunition supply were built.

After Midway, SBD's operating both from carriers and Henderson Field played a major role on

Guadalcanal, proving lethal to Japanese shipping, sinking the carrier Ryujo, a cruiser, and nine transports.

Here's news: on the other side of the world SBD's from the USS Ranger and two escort carriers saw action in November 1942 in Operation Torch, the Allied landings in North Africa, and eleven months later attacked German shipping around Bodo, Norway, from the Ranger.

By 1944 the U.S. Navy began replacing the SBD with the more powerful Curtiss SB2C Helldiver, but... even though Helldiver had a more powerful engine, a higher maximum speed and could carry nearly a thousand pounds more in bomb load, as mentioned before, many dive bomber pilots preferred the SBD, which was lighter and had better low-speed handling characteristics, critical for carrier landings.

The June 1944 Battle of the Philippine Sea was the last major engagement of the Navy's carrier-borne SBDs, though Marine squadrons continued to fly



SBDs until the war's end.

The Dauntless was one of the most important aircraft in the Pacific War, sinking more enemy shipping in the Pacific than any other Allied bomber and, it had the rare distinction for a bomber of having a "plus" score against enemy aircraft: credited with more victories over enemy planes than

losses due to enemy action!

"The last SBD rolled off the assembly lines at the Douglas Aircraft plant in El Segundo, California, on 21 July 1944. From Pearl Harbor through April 1944, SBDs had flown 1,189,473 operational hours, with 25 percent of all operational hours flown off aircraft carriers being in SBDs. Its battle record shows that in addition to six Japanese carriers, 14 enemy cruisers had been sunk, along with six destroyers, 15 transports or cargo ships and scores of various lesser craft."

As of this writing, out of 5,936 SBD's/A-24's built, there are six survivors in the United States: two A-24's and four SBD's, and, 16 on display in various locations.



Here's the nuts-and-bolts SBD-5 specs:

General characteristics

- Crew: 2
- Length: 33 feet 1.25 inches.
- Wingspan: 41 feet 6.375 inches.
- Height: 13 feet 7 inches.
- Empty weight: 6,404 pounds.
- Gross weight: 9,359 pounds.
- Max takeoff weight: 10,700 pounds.
- Fuel capacity: 260 US gallons in non-metallic self-sealing fuel tanks
- Powerplant: 1,200 horsepower Wright R-1820-60 Cyclone 9-cylinder air-cooled radial piston engine.
- Propeller: 3-bladed Hamilton-Standard constant-speed.

Performance

- Maximum speed: 255 mph at 14,000 feet.
- Cruise speed: 185 mph.
- Range: 1,115 miles.
- Service ceiling: 25,530 feet.
- Rate of climb: 1,700 feet/minute.
- Armament
- Guns: 2 × 0.50 inch forward-firing synchronized

Browning M2 machine guns in engine cowling

- 2 × 0.30 inch flexible-mounted Browning M1919 machine guns in rear.
- Bombs: 2,250 pounds.

Footnotes:

Dive bombing accuracy: in the engagement that sank the Akagi, Kaga, and Soryu there were nine certain hits from 47 planes: 19 %, about one out of every five. Four out of five dropped in the ocean... Japanese dive bombers were much more accurate, because they released their bombs at lower altitudes: around 500 feet rather than 2,500-1,500 feet.

Of 41 Douglas TBD Devastator torpedo planes launched early in the battle at Midway, 35 were shot down.

A huge turning point at Midway was when SBD pilot Lieutenant Commander Wade McClusky by chance sighted a single Japanese destroyer and followed its bearing directly to the then-unknown location of the enemy fleet. This was a history-changing slice of time.

The Shokaku was torpedoed by an American submarine during the Battle of the Philippine Sea and sank June 19, 1942, two weeks after Midway.



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