

Covert
Invader

An anonymous-looking B-26 Invader parked up in a world trouble spot in the 1950s and 1960s could provide more than a hint of Central Intelligence Agency activity. The Douglas light bomber was the attack workhorse of choice for covert missions – it was robust, easy to maintain and readily available from USAF stocks.

Originally designated in the attack category as the A-26, but ‘upgraded’ to B-26 in 1948, the Invader had already seen extensive action in the final months of World War Two and in the Korean conflict.

Clandestine operations were not restricted to the CIA and it was the USAAF that first made use of the type’s versatility. Activated at Furth, west Germany, in December 1945, the 45th Reconnaissance Squadron, 10th Reconnaissance Group, included an element known as ‘X Flight’ operating all-black FA-26Bs (later designated RB-26s) with a forward-looking 24in K-18 camera in the nose.

These supported Project ‘Casey Jones’, the urgent and secret post-war mapping of Europe and North Africa, and also flew ‘Birdseye’ photo-recce missions over eastern



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In the 1950s and 1960s, if the CIA wanted to take military action, the B-26 was its weapon of choice.

Vic Flintham explains

Germany. The unit moved to Fürstenfeldbruck in March 1947, transferring its remaining RB-26s to B Flight of the 7499th Support Squadron (SS) in July 1948, relocating to Wiesbaden in August 1950.

During the Berlin Airlift the Invaders, together with other types, made regular runs along the air corridors, ostensibly as fast couriers. Known internally as the 'Berlin for Lunch Bunch', each flight was carrying out detailed photo-recce. For these 'Red Owl' missions the Invaders were equipped with one 12in lens K-17 and one 24in lens

K-22 vertical camera to capture installations along the routes. In May 1955 the remaining five B-26s were transferred to the 7405th SS and corridor flights by the type continued until July 1958.

The black Invaders had made a valuable contribution to western intelligence, photographing a wide range of targets for some 13 years from the end of World War Two. It is also likely that several B-26s flown by Polish crews

were used for agent infiltration and resupply in the Balkans around 1950.

Countering Castro

Cuba was the first Latin American country to receive Invaders, 16 arriving in late 1956. In January 1957 Fidel Castro began his insurgency against the right-wing Batista regime and some were used in desultory fashion against the rebels. Batista was overthrown by January 1959.

Of the original aircraft several had crashed or been sabotaged but, aware of the likelihood of an

Below
A-26A Invader 17676 on show at the National Museum of the USAF at Dayton, Ohio. ALL VIA AUTHOR



SPOT FACT CIA-contracted pilots flew B-26Ks against rebels in the Congo in the 1960s



Above B-26C 917 of the Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria at Havana, 1960.

Right A burning Cubana DC-3 at Santiago de Cuba Airport.

overseas-backed invasion or counter-revolution, the reorganised air force (Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria, FAR) began reinstating as many as possible and finding reliable crews to operate them. Castro's fears were well founded.

In 1959 Guatemala asked the US for B-26 bombers to upgrade its air arm. After some delays, eight were delivered in July 1960, their provision eased by the CIA which had its own intentions. Immediately on delivery the aircraft were diverted to Retalhuleu in the southwest of Guatemala where they were used by American instructors to train rebel Cuban airmen for a forthcoming counter-revolution in Cuba.

In April 1961 the airmen departed for Nicaragua while the aircraft were redelivered to their rightful owners, the Guatemalan Air Force, a little the worse for wear. Over time, serviceability deteriorated and by 1968 all were scrapped.

In the 1950s the US Government saw several socialist or nationalist governments in its sphere of influence as being communist and therefore possible targets for subversion or even overthrow. They included Cuba, where the CIA began planning to replace the Castro regime through a popular uprising.

To function covertly, the agency



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worked through a series of cover organisations, most conducting legitimate business. The earliest of these was Civil Air Transport (CAT), formed in 1946 in Southeast Asia, and in 1960 Southern Air Transport was acquired to support operations in Latin America from bases in Florida.

Attention to detail

For the Cuban venture US citizens were engaged to train the Cuban pilots through the Double-Chek Corporation. Help was sought from the Alabama Air National Guard, which had flown the B-26 up to 1957. At least 20 former USAF B-26Bs were purchased

from stocks at Tucson, Arizona, by Intermountain Aviation for use by the so-called Liberation Air Force (LAF). Zenith Technical Enterprises was responsible for conversion work and the Invaders were operated on behalf of the CIA by the Caribbean Marine Aero Corporation.

Cuban rebel aircrew were trained in Florida, then Retalhuleu and Puerto Cabezas in Nicaragua. In March 1961, some aircraft began supply and leaflet dropping. By the end of the month landing craft had been commissioned and the rebel army trained: this was Brigade 2506 which would invade Cuba in the south at Bahía de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) with seaborne and airborne landings in Operation 'Pluto', with the CIA managers promising total air cover.

Castro's FAR operated out of three main bases close to Havana, flying Lockheed T-33 armed jet trainers, B-26Cs and Hawker Sea Fury FB.11 fighter-bombers. Although serviceability was poor, it would be essential to remove the threat posed by the FAR at the outset.

Newly elected President John F Kennedy had reservations about the overall plan and demanded the initial attacks on Cuban bases be confined to strikes by eight B-26s two days before the invasion. The cover story for the raids was that they were carried out by at least one defecting FAR Invader, which then flew to Miami.

Early on April 15th, eight B-26s in spurious FAR markings took off from Nicaragua to target the FAR. Armed with two 500lb and ten



260lb fragmentation bombs each, the aircraft struck at dawn. Two of the attacking B-26s had to land at Key West and Grand Cayman while another crashed in the sea with the loss of the crew.

As part of the cover story, B-26B '933', flown by LAF pilot Mario Zuñiga, turned up at Miami on April 15. Reporters soon spotted that the aircraft appeared not to have fired its guns, had obviously incorrect markings and was in any event the wrong type: the FAR flew the glazed-nose C-model, not the 'solid nose' B-26B.

Lockheed U-2 reconnaissance photographs indicated that no more than five FAR aircraft had been destroyed, with more damaged. Further air strikes were prohibited until after the invasion.

Bay of Pigs

The landings began just after midnight on the 16th, but without

air cover the ships were soon easy targets for FAR T-33s and Sea Furies and several were lost along with large quantities of ammunition. At dawn the following day six Curtiss C-46 transports flew over the landing area to drop 177 paratroops.

During air strikes on the 17th, B-26s attacked a Cuban armoured column with some success but during the day four LAF Invaders were brought down by T-33s or Sea Furies.

By the end of the 18th the position was desperate for the rebels; supplies and ammunition were running out. With a shortage of willing Cuban crews, the decision was taken locally to use American volunteer pilots. Three sorties were flown on the 19th but two B-26s were lost with their four US crew.

In the event, the Bay of Pigs episode was a shambles. Intelligence was poor: there was no internal uprising and insufficient air cover left the insurgents vulnerable.

Above
Falsely marked rebel B-26 intended to facilitate the counter-invasion of Cuba.

Below
CIA B-26B - marked as '933' of the Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria - at Miami.





Above
A former Bay of Pigs B-26 in use with the Nicaraguan Air Force.

Right
One of the B-26s sent to Clark AFB as part of 'Mill Pond'. VIA WARREN THOMPSON

Below
B-26C Invader preserved in the US in Cuban liberation force markings.

Sumatran rebels

Newly independent Indonesia sought to add to its air force (Angkatan Udara Republik Indonesia, AURI) of inherited P-51 Mustangs and B-25 Mitchell bombers with B-26s in 1949. This was to no avail, as the type was needed in Korea, and then Indo-China.

There were various uprisings within Indonesia over succeeding years and the US Government was concerned that the central, nationalist government was moving towards communism. The CIA started operations in the region in 1957 in Singapore, borrowing three P-51s from Philippine Air Force stocks, and three B-26Bs were taken from the USAF holdings at Clark Air Base, Manila. All markings were removed from the aircraft in preparation for Operation 'Haik'.

In February 1958 a group of politicians and army officers declared the province of Sumatra independent. At the same time there was a rebellion in the eastern island of Sulawesi

(previously known as the Celebes).

The first two rebel B-26s were deployed to Mapengat, near Manado, in April, where earlier a C-46 had delivered bombs and fuel. Initially crews for the B-26s had been recruited from former RAF Poles working covertly in West Germany in the 7405th SS, which had operated the B-26.

The first rebel strike was on the 13th against Makassar air base, but a second aircraft briefed to attack Kalimantan crashed on take-off killing the crew. Disheartened, the remaining Poles returned to Europe.

On April 18 the government



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dropped paratroops on the main Sumatran rebel base, supported by AURI B-25 strikes. This forced the rebels to concentrate around Manado on the northeast tip of Sulawesi.

Five more Invaders were taken from Clark and prepared for combat, but with American crews seconded from CAT: sorties were flown against Palu and Morotai. On May 18, CIA pilot Allen Pope was shot down and captured while attacking Ambon, probably in B-26B 44-35221. He was tried and sentenced to death but released when the US Government agreed to the supply of C-130 Hercules transports.

taking up their new work at Takhli in Thailand with Bangkok Contract Air Services. Under Project 'Mill Pond' several sanitised B-26s were transferred from Taiwan, but most of the 16 procured came from USAF stocks at Davis-Monthan in Arizona.

Pathet Lao forces were concentrated on the Plaine des Jarres at Xieng Khouang (present-day Phonsavan) which became the target for the first B-26 strike. Planned for April 17, it was cancelled at the last minute. After the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy decided he could not risk another illegal fiasco. The B-26s were withdrawn by August 1961.

There were several losses, including one shot down over the Mekong Delta in November 1962, but by the end of the year the 'Farm Gate' Invaders had flown 1,135 sorties. With up to 4,000 hours on the airframes the B-26s were distinctly 'tired' and ten more were taken from stock under Project 'Big Fence' in January 1963.

Two of these were fitted with a battery of cameras plus infrared mapping and re-designated RB-26L as part of Project 'Sweet Sue'.

They were flown daily from early March, seeking supply movements along the Ho



The loss of Pope's aircraft essentially ended the agency's aerial involvement in the uprising.

Second thoughts

Laos was a troubled land in the late 1950s. Based in its capital, Vientiane, and the south were 'Neutralists' supporting the northern Hmong (Meo) people in their fight against the communist Pathet Lao in the northeast. The latter were backed by the neighbouring North Vietnamese, as were the Royalists. North Vietnam was using trails through eastern Laos to supply the Viet Cong.

The US had an advisory group in Laos from July 1959 and by late 1960 had decided to form a covert air operation to help the Hmong. USAF pilots were 'civilianised' and retrained at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, before

Jungle Jim and Sweet Sue

The US decided to covertly support South Vietnam against the insurgent Viet Cong, believed to be armed by North Vietnam. Launched in early 1961 Project 'Farm Gate' bolstered the South Vietnamese Air Force (SVAf), which operated Skyraiders and armed T-28 Trojans. From storage at Davis-Monthan, 27 B-26s were allocated to Detachment 2A of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron under Project 'Jungle Jim'.

The first four were flown to Biên Hòa in December 1961 and were in action from January. By April 1962 the aircraft were nominally formed into Detachment 2A of the 1st Air Commando Group. The B-26s, which included a number of Indonesian and 'Mill Pond' veterans, flew sorties with a South Vietnamese 'airman' present in each aircraft.

Chi Minh Trail. In the summer of 1963 four ex-Indonesian rebel aircraft were received fitted with wing guns.

By now the pretence of being part of the SVAf was wearing thin and the aircraft became part of USAF 34th Tactical Group. On August 16, 1963, 44-34681 had a wing break off in flight; and then the same thing happened to an Eglin-based B-26 early in 1964. The type was immediately withdrawn from service and a modification programme initiated.

Counter-Invader

The venerable B-26 had proved very effective in small local insurgencies but was showing its age. On Mark Engineering at Van Nuys in California had remodelled a number as executive transports and it was assigned the task of producing an upgraded military version. This ➔

Above
A-26A Invader 64-17645
of the 609th Special
Operations Squadron,
Vietnam 1969.



Above
A-26 44-35663 at
Bien Hoa in 1963.
VIA WARREN THOMPSON

involved a reworked fuselage, larger rudder, redesign and rebuild of the wings, more powerful Pratt & Whitney R-2800s, wingtip tanks, wing hardpoints and a standardised and upgraded cockpit layout.

Designated B-26Ks and occasionally referred to as Counter-Invaders, the 40 for conversion were low-houred machines from a variety of sources, but mainly Davis-Monthan. The first was handed over in June 1964 and the type, with its distinctive square cut propeller blades, was soon operational with the newly formed 602nd Fighter Squadron (FS) at Hurlburt, Florida.

Congo interlude

The vast, mineral-rich central African Belgian colony of Congo gained independence in 1960 – and almost immediately civil war broke out. The southern province of Katanga, under Moïse Tshombe, seceded with Belgian support, while the central government under Patrice Lumumba sought help from the United Nations which responded with troops and aircraft. Lumumba was assassinated in January 1961.

By 1964 the reintegration of Katanga was secured, after which the UN forces departed. Almost immediately there was further fighting in Kivu and Orientale provinces led by left wing Simba rebels. The government recruited mercenaries who in turn sought air support. This was forthcoming in the shape of CIA T-28Bs flown by Cuban Bay of Pigs veterans.

Rebels captured Stanleyville in August 1964, and among the hostages were the staff of the US consulate. This accelerated provision of the more capable B-26 and four B-models were extracted from stock at Manila,

although only two made the journey to the Congo.

Such was the urgency of the situation that three new B-26Ks were delivered direct from On Mark and flown by crews seconded from the 602nd FS, who converted the Cubans to the upgraded version. The Invaders were operated covertly by the Lichtenstein-based Anstalt Wigmo organisation, which handled crewing and maintenance.

The first operational sorties were flown on August 21 and subsequent missions proved highly successful. The B-26Ks carried no internal weapons and used only machine guns and rockets in the support and attack role. When the B-26Bs arrived in theatre they were denied any operational role owing to their age, but an additional two K-models were delivered in January 1965.

The CIA air unit continued to support government forces through 1965 and into 1966. Five Invaders were returned to the US for overhaul and further operations in Indo-China.

Laos reprise

By 1966 there was significantly increased traffic from North Vietnam to the Viet Cong in the south. The Ho Chi Minh trail was in reality a series of roads and paths running from northwest Vietnam to the south. In part it ran through Laos, and then Cambodia, and the US was committed to cutting the supply route.

A unit operating from Nakhon Phanom in Thailand was formed to fly the B-26K. To address Thai sensitivities over having bombers based in the country, the B-26K was redesignated A-26A. Project 'Big Eagle' involved the covert use of strike aircraft in Laos.

On June 11, 1966, Detachment 1 of the 603rd Air Commando Squadron (ACS) was activated with eight A-26As for night missions against the trail traffic. While the crews were regular USAF, the aircraft were unmarked.

From time to time the Invaders also gave close support to CIA units working from various landing sites in-country and in February 1968 flew sorties to help the beleaguered garrison at Khe Sanh in South Vietnam.

A civil-registered On Mark B-26, N46598, based at Udorn in Thailand, was equipped with terrain-following radar. It was used for resupplying covert trail-watching teams in central Laos for a year from April 1967.

There were several organisational changes early in 1967 – the aircraft, now numbering a dozen, forming the 609th ACS. The CO, Colonel Harry Aderholt, was a veteran of numerous clandestine B-26 operations. From mid-1967 the 609th began flying 'Barrel Roll' close support missions in the northeast of Laos and resupplying Hmong troops.

In August 1968 Air Commando units were renamed Special Operations Squadrons and at the same time the tactics changed. The North Vietnamese had consistently increased and improved the anti-aircraft defence of the trail, especially at choke points such as passes and fords, so the Invaders operated in pairs, one strafing and bombing while the second suppressed anti-aircraft fire.

With the emergence of new heavy gunships for interdiction – first the Douglas AC-47, then the Fairchild AC-119 and Lockheed AC-130 – the days of the overworked A-26s were numbered and the last sortie was flown on November 9, 1969. ●