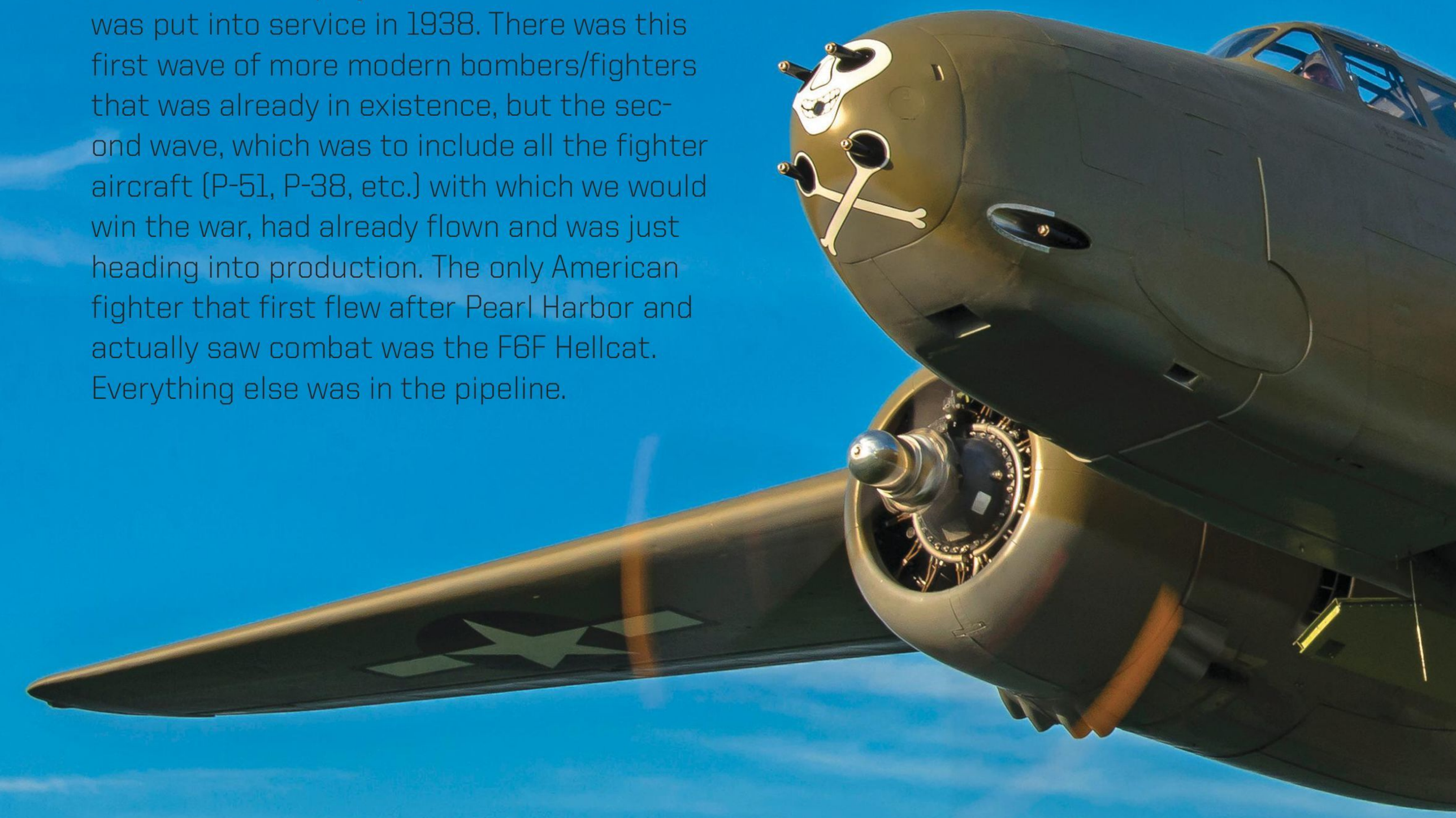
THE A-20 HAVOC STORY

An Unknown Warrior

BY **BUDD DAVISSON**

When America went to war in December 1941, it was right in the middle of an interesting technological period. At the time, we had been upgrading our fighting forces, coming out of the biplane era, for at least five years. In fact, the B-17 project first flew in 1935 and was put into service in 1938. There was this first wave of more modern bombers/fighters that was already in existence, but the second wave, which was to include all the fighter aircraft (P-51, P-38, etc.) with which we would win the war, had already flown and was just heading into production. The only American fighter that first flew after Pearl Harbor and actually saw combat was the F6F Hellcat. Everything else was in the pipeline.



The A-20 was conceived as a light bomber, but its maneuvering ability led to developing it as a ground-attack machine. (Photo by David Leininger)

In production well before the U.S. entry into the war, the original version of the A–20 Havoc didn't have an upper gun turret. Instead, it had a flexible gun firing through an open hatch. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

The net result of Pearl Harbor happening midstream of these changes is that the first year or two of the war saw extremely rapid changes take place as new aircraft took the place of prewar aircraft. There were some very good, useful airplanes in that prewar batch—the P-40 and FM-2 being examples—that labored through the war. There were others, however, that did their duty and seemed to have faded from history. The Douglas A-20 Havoc, which flew in every theater under every Allied flag, was one of those. Few remember it even existed, and it is all but unknown today.

A single-pilot airplane, it was well liked by its pilots, who felt the heavily gunned A-20 flew more like a fighter than a light bomber. As the war wore on, however, it was gradually replaced by newer aircraft and went out of production in September 1944, after 7,478 had rolled off the production line. That sounds like a lot of airplanes—and it is—so it goes against logic that there are only a few in museums and only one A-20

The twin Browning fifties gave the airplane much needed protection to the rear and upper quadrants. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Above: The Havoc served in every possible type of weather condition, from Russia's Arctic north to, in this case, the Pacific south. Note the extra fairing for another .50 caliber above the pilot's head. That makes eight of John Browning's marvelous shooters in the nose. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook) Below: When originally designed, the DB-7 (factory designation) had 450hp Pratt & Whitney R-985s, which may be what are in this prototype. They were quickly changed to R-1830 Pratt & Whitney engines of 1,100hp and went into production with 1,600hp R-2600 Wright Cyclones as on the B-25. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

An excellent example of the maintenance conditions in forward combat areas. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

still flying worldwide. The fact that it is still flying is the result of one of the most detailed, extensive restorations ever done to a World War II bomber-type aircraft. It is part of the massive Lewis Air Legends collection, which is a private museum located at Lewis Ranch Airport in Encinal, Texas. The restoration was commissioned by Rod Lewis and handled by Aero Trader, the well-known restoration company located in Chino, California.

The Douglas design, known in-house as the "DB-7," began life in 1937 as a light bomber designed around 450hp Pratt & Whitney R-985s. Those were quickly replaced by P&W R-1830s, with 1100hp each, and then 1,600hp Wright R-2600s, as were used in the B-25. This was in response to a U.S. Army Air Corps (USAAC) request for a light attack bomber, but the government initially turned it down. The French, however, which were closer to the anticipated battlefield than the USAAC, liked what they saw and ordered 100 aircraft, later increasing that number to 270. All this was done in a semisecret manner because, technically, the United States wasn't in the business of war and didn't want to give the American isolationists anything to complain about. There were a lot of sly winks

The Royal Air Force used the airplane extensively in many theaters, where it was known as the "Boston." Note the hatch: The forward portion gave entry to the single-pilot cockpit, and the rear portion let the gunner into his position. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

The slim, single-pilot cockpit and the A-20's light and responsive controls made it a pilot's favorite. Pilots thought they were flying a fighter. (Photo by David Leininger)

Above left: A-20s could have as many as ten .50s. Above right: John Browning never knew how much his invention would mean to the United States. Below left: No detail was left out of the restoration. Below center: The cockpit could accommodate a big pilot. Below right: The nose was jammed with guns and ammunition. (Photos by Richard VanderMeulen)

The A-20 is a lot of airplane for a single pilot! (Photo by David Leininger)

in governmental circles at the time.

Because the French expected to be in a defensive position (they couldn't have been more right), they ordered the airplane with only 400 gallons of internal fuel. They knew they wouldn't be flying far to find the enemy. When the Germans rolled across Belgium, Luxembourg, and France, taking barely three weeks to push all Allied forces, approximately 300,000 strong, onto a narrow beachhead at Dunkirk, the French were suddenly in no position to take delivery of their entire DB-7 order. The balance went to the Royal Air Force. Those that were already in France were captured and moved to North Africa, where the French Vichy government used them to battle American and British forces during Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of North Africa.

The aircraft proved itself to be an excellent platform for a variety of uses. It was commonly built with either the "gun nose" or the "bomber nose." In gun-nose configuration, the airplane carried as many as six .50s in the nose itself, sometimes joined by two extras mounted outboard and slightly below the others in streamlined pods. A night-fighter version could also carry four 20mms mounted in a tray protruding slightly from the bomb bay.

After the war, most A-20s were left where they were, not being worth the expense and effort of flying them back to the States. Most of those stateside were scrapped, but a few, including the Lewis airplane, were sold and converted to high-speed corporate transports. After the Lewis airplane had an emergency landing, it was eventually abandoned and left in a farm field for nearly eight years. It then bounced around from owner to owner before Lewis finally found it and transformed the tattered airframe into a flying monument to the airmen who took her into combat. It has found a good and caring home. ✢

The Lewis Air Legend's A-20G is the sole flying example of the 7,500 produced. It represents the breed well. (Photo by David Leininger)