

AGAINST THE DDS

HISTORY CONSIGNS THE BUFFALO TO THE STATUS OF SECOND-RATE FIGHTER.

PETER LONDON REVEALS THAT
IN FINLAND IT WAS A
FORMIDABLE
WEAPON





The late summer of 1939 was a tense time for those living in Finland. August's Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact effectively divided Eastern Europe into spheres of influence. The USSR had clear intent to invade Finland, its tiny neighbour. Foreseeing this, the Finnish Government had been striving to re-arm since the spring. One of the countries it approached was the USA; the urgency was such that an over-riding requirement was quick delivery.

The Soviets invaded in November and the so-called 'Winter War' erupted. Facing huge enemy forces, the Finns fought ferociously. By December, Finland had ordered 44 Brewster Model 239 fighters, powered by 950hp (708kW) Wright

R-1820-G5 Cyclone radials. Most had originally been contracted for the US Navy and were diverted to the Finns minus their operational equipment.

Assembled at Trollhättan, Sweden, by SAAB personnel, and delivered via Norway in early 1940, each Brewster was fitted with three 0.50in machine guns and one of 0.30-calibre. Reflector sights and seat armour were also installed. Allocated serials BW-351 to BW-394, only a few had entered service when hostilities ended in March 1940. The signing of the Moscow Peace Treaty on the 12th led to Finland ceding 11% of its land area to the Soviet Union, among other concessions.

By May the Brewsters had been allocated to the Winter War

combat veterans of Lentolaivue 24 (LLv 24 - Squadron 24), part of Lentorykmentti 2 (LeR 2 - Aviation Regiment 2). Consisting of four flights, each nominally of eight machines, LLv 24 began flying the new type at Helsinki's Malmi civil airport, but by August had left for Vesivehmaa to the northeast of the capital. Pilots deemed their new mounts to be excellent gun platforms, giving them the affectionate nickname 'Sky Pearl'.

INTO ACTION

Fighting with the Soviets resumed as the 'Continuation War' broke out on June 25, 1941. Three days previously, Germany had torn up the Non-Aggression Pact and through Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia had begun.

The aluminium factory finish of the Brewsters hastily gave way to camouflage of forest green and black with light grey undersides. In British and Commonwealth service the type was named the Buffalo, but the Finns never adopted the moniker. Today, the Brewster is widely viewed as a poor performer, but LLv 24 used them to shattering effect against the Soviets.

Above
Brewsters of 2/LeLv 24 in September 1942. In the foreground is BW-354 'White 6' flown by Heimo Lampi; it displays the squadron's lynx motif forward of the cockpit.

BREWSTER ACE: HANS WIND

Hans Wind was the top scorer on Brewsters, claiming 39 aircraft destroyed before moving to the Bf 109G. His final total amounted to 75. Wind was seriously wounded in June 1944 during a dogfight with a large force of Yak-9s and Bell P-39 Airacobras. He made it back to base and recovered from his injuries, but did not fly any more combat missions.

Left

Lt Hans Wind of 3/LeLv 24 with his mount BW-393. By that stage, he had 33 'kill' markings.





BREWSTER COLOURS

To indicate individual flights the Brewsters received colour coding: 1/LLv 24 wore blue spinners and rudders with a white tactical number. 2/LLv 24 had black spinners and rudders with a white number. 3/LLv 24 had orange spinners and tactical number, the rudder number painted directly onto the camouflage. 4/LLv 24 had white rudders, red and white hooped spinners and black tactical numbers.

Widely applied to the fighters' forward upper fuselage, LLv 24's insignia was a lynx silhouette created using a white outline. In addition, 2/LLv 24 sported an elk motif, while 4/LLv 24 adopted a white osprey silhouette with a fish victim.

Brewster engine cowlings were often yellow, with matching fuselage bands and outer underwing panels. In winter, areas of white were applied to the fighters' topsides.



Top
Between the Winter and Continuation Wars, BW-370 was tested with a non-retractable faired ski undercarriage.

Above
Wearing green and black camouflage, BW-356 at Tiiksjärvi with 2/LLv 24, autumn 1942.

Right
S/Sgt Eero Kinnunen's BW-352 'White 2' of 2/LLv 24, hidden in woodland at Selänpää, summer 1941.

On the first day of hostilities, June 25, two Brewsters from 2/LLv 24 (LLv 24's second flight) tackled 27 twin-engined Tupolev SB bombers of the 201st SBAP (High-Speed Bomber Air Regiment) near Turku on Finland's southwest coast. Between them, Cpl Heimo Lampi (in BW-354) and S/Sgt Eero Kinnunen (BW-352) dispatched no fewer than five SBs.

Lampi reflected on his attack on the second victim: "I turned back in behind its tail once more and hit the bomber's port engine with a short burst. Trailing flames as well as smoke, the aircraft dived into the water."

By the evening LLv 24's pilots had flown 77 missions and the Soviets had lost ten SBs. Patrols by 1/LLv 24 continued until 02:00 hours the following morning, there being little true darkness during the night at that time of year.

On June 30 three 1/LLv 24 aircraft destroyed three SBs near Lahti. The citizens of that city were so grateful they sent the unit a huge box of sweets.

KARELIAN CAMPAIGN

Finland was striving to recover Karelia, the eastern territory surrendered to the USSR after the Winter War.

On July 9 as the Finns assembled along the redrawn Soviet border, Brewsters of 3/ and 4/LLv 24 led by the CO, Major Gustaf Magnusson, clashed with 15 Polikarpov I-153 'Chaika' fighters of 65th ShAP (Attack Air Regiment) over Lahdenpohja. Eight Soviet biplanes were claimed destroyed and four damaged, for no losses.

Soviet forces were driven eastwards. On August 12, six 3/LLv 24 Brewsters engaged around 20 I-153s of 65th ShAP that were strafing Finnish troops. Nine Chaikas were claimed; W/O Ilmari Juutilainen in BW-364 dispatching three.





Left
BW-353 after
a nose-over at
Kontupohjassa, Karelia,
in February 1942.

Below
Pilots of 4/LLv 24
hurrying to their
Brewsters.



Sgt Nils Katajainen downed two more, his fifth 'kill' in total, making him the first all-Brewster 'ace'. Friday the 13th proved unlucky for a Polikarpov I-16, which fell as a fireball to the guns of 1/LLv 24's Sgt Yrjö Turkka.

Led by Captain Jorma Karhunen, eight 3/LLv 24 Brewsters found and destroyed three I-16s of 155th IAP (Fighter Air Regiment) attacking Finnish troops on September 23. Leaving the immediate scene, the force circled in radio silence until six more I-16s appeared. The Finns dispatched five of them.

Three days later Karhunen's flight shot down six I-153s. In a second dogfight that day three more enemy fighters were claimed – Karhunen in BW-366 added two kills to his account and Juutilainen (BW-364) three.

The tension of combat flying was eased a little for LLv 24 by the arrival of Peggy Brown. While on leave in

July, Karhunen had met a young lady with a beautiful Irish setter. She was finding it hard to feed her pet since food was rationed. The dog, named Peggy Brown, took to Karhunen; it was agreed he would look after her until the war ended.

Knowing she would be a diversion for his flyers, Major Magnusson welcomed the animal. Peggy Brown enjoyed her new surroundings, seeing the pilots off on their missions and welcoming them on return. She became the best-known mascot of the Finns' military forces.

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

In December the Finnish army halted its advance and dug in. By then, during seven months of fighting LLv 24 had claimed no fewer than 135 Soviet aircraft shot down. They had suffered just one combat loss; BW-385 had been destroyed by flak. Even allowing for mistaken or duplicated claims, particularly in large engagements, the Finns' results were exceptional. Why were the Brewsters so successful?

Prior to hostilities Gustaf Magnusson had met with Luftwaffe pilots who'd fought in the Spanish Civil War. He learned about Soviet aircraft vulnerabilities, preferred methods of attacking them, and the best ways to organise his own forces.

Rather than flying in rigid 'vic' formations, Finland's Brewsters typically adopted a flexible, highly effective fighting group, a loose pair making up the basic tactical section. This could easily be doubled to create a 'schwarm' or finger-four

shape, the two pairs sometimes flying at staggered altitudes.

When attacking Soviet fighters, often the Brewsters would dive on the enemy flat-out, make a single pass firing from close range, perhaps 50 yards (45m) or less. They would then climb in readiness for another strike. This technique proved very successful and the enemy found it hard to counter.

Unescorted bomber groups in tight defensive wedges were usually attacked from behind and below. The Finns felt that at times, Soviet crews failed to watch the skies adequately, while their evasive manoeuvres could be predictable. When attacked, the enemy would sometimes assume defensive circling formations which actually made them easier to destroy.

Many of LLv24's pilots were Winter War veterans. By contrast, the enemy was often inexperienced or less well trained; this stemmed partly from the Soviet Air Force purges of the late 1930s. Heavy casualties against the Finns worsened the situation and thousands of Soviet airmen were dying in the terrible war with Germany.

In fighter-to-fighter engagements the I-15 and I-153 were slower than the Brewsters; however, they were significantly more manoeuvrable. Captain (later Major) Eino Luukkanen commanded

"Our Brewsters were fat hustlers, just like bees. They had speed, agility and good weaponry too. We were happy to take them anywhere to take on any opponent"





Above
HLeLv 26's 1st Lt Erik Teromaa with Brewster BW-361, summer 1944.



Above right
Brewster BW-352 with white winter camouflage applied over its green and black topsides finish, early in 1943.



BREWSTER ACE: ILMARI JUUTILAINEN

With a total of 94 victories, Ilmari Juutilainen became Finland's highest-scoring ace; of his kills, 34 were with the Brewster. Having declined a break from operations to undergo officer training, fearing he'd lose his combat touch, Juutilainen remained a Warrant Officer. Like Wind he survived the hostilities.

Left

W/O Ilmari Juutilainen became Finland's highest-scoring fighter pilot.

"I immediately pulled up the nose of my Brewster and watched two crew members jump from my victim. The Russian aircraft splashed into the sea"

1/LLv 24, initially flying BW-375 in which he claimed 4½ victories. Of the I-153 he wrote that his pilots: "acquired a healthy respect for the superlative powers of manoeuvre possessed by this aircraft."

The Finns were fond of their tubby interceptors. S/Sgt Jouko Huotari: "The Brewster was quite nice and pleasant to fly. Everyone usually praised it. It was a gentleman's aircraft."

Ilmari Juutilainen: "Our Brewsters were fat hustlers, just like bees. They had speed, agility and good weaponry too. We were happy to take them anywhere to take on any opponent."

INCREASING CLAIMS

In January 1942 the Brewsters of 2/LLv 24 moved north to Tiiksjärvi, to fight Soviet Hawker Hurricanes that had arrived in the Murmansk and Kandalaksha regions. Despite winter conditions and short days, combats continued. On March 29, Hurricanes strafed Tiiksjärvi; in return eight Brewsters engaged around a dozen Hurricanes of 152nd IAP, claiming eight shot down.

The Soviets set off to attack Tiiksjärvi again on April 6, with a

mixed force of 14 bombers and 12 fighters – but they were picked up by Finnish air defence outposts. Already airborne on patrol, eight defenders under 1st Lt Lauri Ohukainen flying BW-372 intercepted the Soviets close to the airfield.

Several enemy aircraft were downed; the Finns claimed two Ilyushin DB-3 bombers and 12 Hurricanes. The Soviets reported losses of one SB plus six Hurricanes, two from 609th and four from 767th IAPs. The outcome has since been debated but it seems four fighters were destroyed by Brewsters, one shared between the defending aircraft and Finnish anti-aircraft fire, and one downed by ground fire alone. The Soviets claimed seven Brewsters, but in reality all returned.

By late March, the Finns pushed to recover the Soviet-occupied island of Suursaari in the Gulf of Finland, south of the mainland. Air support for the attack included war-booty I-153s and SBs, repaired and pressed into service, together with Brewsters of 3/LLv 24.

On March 28, five Brewsters led by 1st Lt Osmo Kauppinen engaged ten 11th IAP I-153s, destroying five; Ilmari Juutilainen in BW-364

dispatched a brace. That day Suursaari fell to Finnish forces.

In May 1942 the abbreviation of Lentolaivue was amended, the Brewster unit becoming known as LeLv 24. That month, six machines led by Luukkanen provided escorts for aircraft of Major Reino Artola's LeLv 46, a squadron of 11 Dornier Do 17Z bombers. The mixed force crossed Lake Onega, sending a group of Soviet supply barges to the bottom.

Brewsters of 2/ and 3/LeLv 24 fought a large Hurricane formation from 152nd IAP near Lake Seesjärvi on June 25, claiming seven destroyed. This time the Soviets were more effective, shooting down two Brewsters. Lauri Ohukainen crash-landed BW-372 on fire in enemy territory but trudged back to Finnish-held soil. Sgt Kalevi Anttila came down in the same area, in BW-381, also making it home on foot.

GULF BATTLES

Summer 1942 saw an increase in Soviet maritime operations from Kronstadt, near Leningrad. Air activity also escalated in order to protect movements in the Gulf of Finland. In July LeLv 24 was



transferred to LeR 3, and to tackle the new danger, during August 1/, 3/ and 4/LeLv 24 arrived at Rõmpötti, at the Gulf's eastern end.

From June to November 1942, 1/LeLv's commander, Luukkanen, flew BW-393, with which he claimed seven further kills. Typical of his actions was that of July 20; leading three machines over the Gulf he spied a solitary Petlyakov Pe-2 bomber escorted by four fighters.

Selecting the Pe-2 while his comrades faced the fighters, Luukkanen struck the bomber and it: "banked sharply to starboard and then put its nose down as I drew within range. I was surprised to see what appeared to be a torpedo hanging beneath the aircraft. The pilot hurriedly jettisoned this burden in order to increase his speed. I clung tightly to the Russian's tail, loosing short bursts into the empennage and rear fuselage, quickly silencing the

dorsal gunner. I then concentrated on his engines. Without warning, the Pe-2's starboard wing burst into flame. I immediately pulled up the nose of my Brewster and watched two crew members jump from my victim. The Russian aircraft splashed into the sea."

The Gulf air battles intensified. On August 18, ten I-16s were reported near the island of Tytäsaari; eight Brewsters intercepted, led by 1st Lt Hans Wind. It transpired that as many as 60 Soviet aircraft had arrived and Wind was joined by more Brewsters, led by Karhunen and 1st Lt Aulis Lumme. In the huge dogfight that followed, between them the 16 Finns claimed 13 I-16s, two Pe-2s and a Hurricane. Wind, Karhunen (BW-388) and Juutilainen (BW-364) each downed three aircraft. In return BW-378 was destroyed by an I-16, its pilot, 2nd Lt Aarno Raitio was killed. The Soviets admitted losing two I-16s,

a Yakovlev Yak-1 and a Lavochkin LaGG-3.

Autumn witnessed more engagements before winter conditions reduced flying. In November all four LeLv 24 flights moved to Suulajärvi, on the Karelian Isthmus in southeast Finland, just over 50 miles (80km) from Leningrad. The following month, the Brewsters were reorganised into three flights as a result of gradual attrition.

CHANGING TACTICS

By spring 1943 the Finns were renewing their battle against the Soviets' Gulf and Baltic air assets. But the adversary was rearming – his ageing fighters and bombers were gradually replaced by new types. Some of these proved to be very successful. It was also becoming clear that Soviet pilots had acquired hard-won experience of combat tactics.

Above left
Minus its propeller
spinner, BW-384 'White
9' running up.

Below left
Lt Osmo Kauppinen's
BW-388 'Orange 5',
during winter 1942 at
Kontupohja harbour
on the shore of Lake
Onega.





BREWSTER ACE: JORMA KARHUNEN

Jorma Karhunen claimed 25½ victories flying the Brewsters, from a total of 31½. Later he recalled: "The Brewster was good against the older Russian fighters, the Polikarpov I-153 Chaika and I-16. Hence the period 1941 to 1942 was the best time for us. In 1943 it was significantly more difficult when the Russians began to use their newer fighters against us. Later, with the Yaks, Hurricanes, Tomahawks, LaGG-3s and MiGs, it became a fight to the death."

Left

Jorma Karhunen and Peggy Brown photographed in a Brewster cockpit. It's doubtful whether the dog actually flew!

Below
Brewster BW-384 received the name 'Noka' after the company Nokia Oy which had sponsored it. It is seen after the switch-over to the white-blue-white roundel.

The enemy was growing more dangerous.

By then, Hans Wind had compiled a set of lectures for use in combat pilot training. Based on his experiences, the notes recorded: "[Previously] if the bomber formation has had a fighter cover, we [were] forced to engage the fighter escort and the bombers have been able to sneak away.

"For this reason, different tactics were introduced. One section was ordered to attack the bombers. The others tied up the fighter escort making it possible for the section ordered to destroy the bombers to bounce on them. One aircraft in the section must always ensure that the enemy fighters cannot attack either one of them."

Wind recommended: "When shooting from dead six [aft], it is best to get about 20 metres from the enemy, where the prop-wash that was shaking your plane earlier settles down. It is like getting from heavy seas to a calm backwater."

The ace also logged his views on various

Soviet-flown types. He was scathing of the Hurricane: "The easiest [enemy fighter] to shoot down is the Hurricane. It is totally helpless against us below 3,000 metres, and very clumsy and unmanoeuvrable. Whenever you meet a Hurricane, engage it in a turn-fight... it is totally at our mercy. It is best to shoot this plane in the forward part of the fuselage when it almost immediately bursts into flames."

Seventeen Brewsters engaged a group of Ilyushin Il-2 Sturmoviks escorted by 35 Yakovlev Yak-1s, Lavochkin LaGG-3s and La-5s at the Gulf of Finland's eastern end on April 21, 1943. SSgt Tauno Heinonen (BW-354) did not return, and W/O Eero Kinnunen (BW-352) also died, his aircraft hit being by flak; he had amassed 22½ kills.

The Finns claimed 19 Soviets destroyed but reported ominously: "The La-5 proved to be rather agile and completely superior in both speed and ability to climb compared to the Brewster."

A force of 20-plus fighters and a small

number of Sturmoviks were engaged by 18 Brewsters on May 2, south of the Finnish coastal city of Kotka. They dispatched four LaGG-3s but lost Captain Ikka Törrönen in BW-380.

The combat report of 2nd Lt Olavi Puro noted: "The Brewster pulls tighter turns than the LaGG-3. The speed is about the same at the deck. The Russians are very aggressive and enterprising."

NEW BF 109G

Two days later a dozen Brewsters intercepted a group of five Il-2s and ten I-153s, with 12 LaGG-3s above and behind. Nine Soviets were claimed, four by Hans Wind (BW-393), but a LaGG-3 downed Sgt Jouko Lilja in BW-388.

Wind's mission report for the May 4 action mirrors the tactic described in his notes: "We met I-153s protecting five Il-2s south of Peninsula. I darted behind one I-153 and destroyed it at very low altitude. The Il-2s continued towards Kroivolahti.

I was able to go after them as the other





"Flying their rotund mounts in action solidly for almost three years, HLeLv 24 claimed no fewer than 459 enemy aircraft destroyed. Just 12 Brewster pilots had died; 15 aircraft had been shot down"

Brewsters were tying up the Chaikas.

"I fired at the first Il-2 to the base [root] of the wing. The plane caught fire immediately and plunged into the sea. I continued and fired at the other Il-2 with similar results. At Sepeleva I fired at the third Il-2, which started smoking and plunged into the sea at Tolti."

Finland's military Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Carl Gustaf Mannerheim, visited Suulajärvi in May to congratulate the men of LeLv 24 on their achievements. That month, with Gustaf Magnusson posted to command LeR 3, Captain Karhunen became the squadron's CO.

The final major combat over the Gulf during 1943 occurred on September 23. Four Brewsters of 3/LeLv 24 and four 1/LeLv 34 Messerschmitt Bf 109Gs (the first of which had arrived with the Finns in March) battled around 20 Soviet fighters. Three Yaks and five La-5s were claimed – three of the enemy destroyed by Brewsters. Later that day, 3/LeLv 24, led by Hans Wind, attacked 15 Soviet aircraft, reporting one Il-2 and six La-5s shot down.

The most successful Brewster pilots received Finland's highest medal for valour, the Mannerheim Cross. Instituted in 1940 and bestowed regardless of rank, during the Continuation War the cross was awarded to 19 Finnish Air Force pilots. Ilmari Juutilainen (LeLv 24's first recipient) and Hans Wind were twice decorated. Other LeLv 24 pilots who received the cross included Magnusson, Nils Katajainen and

Jorma Karhunen.

In February 1944, the Brewster squadron's nomenclature was again amended: LeLv 24 becoming HLeLv 24, the 'H' denoting Hävittäjä (Fighter). The Brewster's final victory with the unit came on April 2, a LaGG-3 destroyed by Heimo Lampi in BW-382; he'd also scored the squadron's first kill with the type.

Flying their rotund mounts in action solidly for almost three years, HLeLv 24 claimed no fewer than 459 enemy aircraft destroyed. Twelve Brewster pilots had died – 15 aircraft had been shot down, while four had been lost in accidents and two during air raids. By May 1944, as Bf 109Gs became available for the battle-hardened unit, the surviving Brewsters were passed to HLeLv 26 at Heinjoki, which in turn relinquished its Fiat G.50s.

LAPLAND WAR

That summer huge Soviet ground forces amassed west of Leningrad, supported by around 1,300 aircraft, and an attack began across the Karelian Isthmus. Finland's Bf 109Gs bore the brunt of the fighting, claiming prodigious numbers of victories.

Meanwhile HLeLv 26's Brewsters were organised as two flights of nine, helping to protect the western side of the Isthmus against Soviet bombers. The squadron claimed 21 destroyed, 1st Lt Erik Teromaa with four kills and 2nd Lt Aarno Juurinen with three; however, two pilots and four Brewsters were lost.

The invasion was halted but a vicious struggle continued along the Finns' defensive front. Finally, in September 1944 a truce was signed in Moscow. Among its terms was the stipulation that Finland's erstwhile ally Germany, whom the Finns had allowed to deploy forces on their northern soil, must be expelled.

In October a brief campaign to oust the Germans began, known as the Lapland War. The Luftwaffe had based Bf 109Gs and Junkers Ju 87Ds



Above left
Pilots of 4/LLv 24 with one of the unit's Brewsters, identified by its red and white hooped spinner, summer 1941.

Above
Admirers in front of BW-373 of HLeLv 26 at Värtsilä, August 1944.
ALL VIA AUTHOR

at Rovaniemi, Lapland's capital. With 1/HLeLv 26, Erik Teromaa in BW-361 flew to Oulu on October 3 and eight aircraft left to escort a Finnish convoy carrying troops for a landing at Tornio, in the Bay of Bothnia.

En route the Brewsters encountered 12 Stukas seeking the same ships. The Finns weren't sure whether to attack, or if their presence might dissuade the Germans from pressing on. The Stukas fired first. In the ensuing combat three German aircraft were damaged and two destroyed; Teromaa and S/Sgt Oiva Hietala had made the final Brewster kills.

Reconnaissance flights over the region followed until October 19. Altogether, Finland's Brewsters claimed 482 enemy aircraft shot down.

In January 1945 the surviving examples were stored, as required under the flying ban imposed by the Moscow truce. During August, a Brewster was released, joining the Finnish Air Force's headquarters for general communications work. Two more arrived in the autumn for use by the Staff Flight, and four in 1946, but two were lost in accidents. The five survivors were finally retired in 1948, and five years later all were broken up.