

# THE MARTIN MAURADER B-26 BOMBER AND D-Day 1944

By

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*NOTE: This exciting article was written about 1994. Sid told me about it recently and sent me a draft copy to read. It turned out to be very interesting as to the history of the Martin B-26 World War II bomber. Several time periods are addressed in the article and are identified here to provide reader continuity. This article really changed my understanding of what a great airplane it was, and how it came about to be. Ray Ziehm*

## 1994 France

On June 6, 1994 I stood in the American Military Cemetery at Draguignan, France just north of the Riviera. We had bicycled there from a start in Nice two days earlier. One of the cyclists in our group had flown a C-47 fifty years earlier that dropped parachutists over that region at the onset of the invasion of SE France just two months after D-Day. A week later at the start of our next bicycle tour, we were joined in Avignon by a man who had just come from the 50th anniversary Celebrations of D-Day in Normandy. On June 6<sup>th</sup> 1944 he piloted a glider which crash landed in a farmer's field. The co-pilot was killed and Lee was seriously wounded. I spoke to both of these men about their wartime experiences, and also watched the extensive French TV coverage of the celebration which lasted over a couple of weeks. During that time I began wondering about the role of Martin built airplanes in the war in France, of which I really knew very little. Of course, I had heard of the B-26 and even saw one on display at the museum at Wright Patterson AFB in the early eighties.

## 1956 Baltimore

When I came to Middle River in April 1956 to work in Pete Clark's Aero Department evaluating sites for the jet powered P6M SeaMaster, the Glenn L. Martin Company was near the end of its glorious role as a producer of airplanes. Aside from the P6M, some P5Ms were still being made, and across the road at plant 2, the B-57 medium bomber line was in production. The Matador guided missile series was also in development and production. I had the opportunity to watch the awesomely beautiful SeaMaster takeoff and fly in the skies over Middle River. It was spine tingling. A scant four years later, we all agonized over the sight of the SeaMasters being chopped up and sold by the pound to a Baltimore scrap dealer. Barely a decade later, many folks pondered on the role such a mine-laying seaplane might have played along the Mekong River in Viet Nam. I heard Martin's President Bill Bergan's famous speech, more a statement of fact than of policy, that we were out of the airplane business, and then went to work on Pete Clark's Apollo Program for Lee Bogema.

## 1994 Littleton

Upon my return from France this July, I decided to learn more about Martin aircraft's role in the battle for Europe. Bob Cochrane is someone I've known for a few years. At a dinner group event late this summer, we were discussing his recent visit to England & France for the D-Day celebrations. I found out for the first time that he piloted a B-26 over Europe in 1944 and 1945. After checking with Al Gibson on the possibility of doing this article, I took up Bob's offer to show me the B-26 material he had collected and kept. Al suggested I contact my old neighbor, coworker, and MARS member, Jim Tughton, who, I learned had worked on the B-26 line from its beginnings in 1940 to the last plane in 1945. Almost everything that I learned was from Jim and Bob, and Bob's friend Joe McNamee, a B-26 bombardier.

## 1939 Baltimore

In 1939 Peyton Magruder and his small group designed the B-26 to meet the requirements, as Bill Harwood puts it in his book, for a medium bomber, to fly as fast as a fighter and carry the load of a heavy bomber. In August 1939 the Glenn L. Martin Co. was awarded a contract for \$16 million for 201 B-26 aircraft. No prototype was called for as the award was made solely on the basis of the proposal and the reputation of the Company. Fifteen months later, the first airplane rolled out of the newly-built Plant 2, and three months after that delivery to the Army began. Jim Tughton remembers that at the peak, eight aircraft came off the line daily. Engine run-ins occurred around the clock at the Middle River Airport, until in response to pleas from employees living in adjacent Aero Acres, a few hours of quiet time was provided nightly. It was a "hot" airplane, and in the pre-war days of 1940 and 1941 it was handled by experienced flight and ground crews that had time to learn the aircraft.



After Pearl Harbor Day, many of the experienced crews were sent to the Pacific, to be replaced by “green” instructors and maintenance people to handle the greatly increasing number of new pilots and aircraft. Early-on arrivees at B-26 Transition School had no experience in multi-engine aircraft, to be trained by instructors, who themselves had little experience. Crashes occurred, and the B-26 acquired a bad reputation and many denigrating nicknames. Inquiries were mounted, and contract cancellation threatened. This was to occur frequently over the six years of B-26 production, the most famous was the Truman Senate investigation. As would happen again, strong proponents of the B-26 who were using it in combat, recommended better training methods and various improvements to the aircraft to keep it in production.

A one-page summary of the B-26 issued by Martin, and lent to me by Jim Tuchten, has many salient facts. Production of 5266 aircraft included 3681 built in Baltimore and 1585 in Omaha. The B-26 entered combat in the Pacific in March, 1942, and fought in every WW II theatre except China, Burma, India. It had the lowest loss-in-combat ratio of any Allied bomber, less than ½%.

## 1943-1945 US-Europe

Bob Cochran earned his pilots wings at Turner Field, GA in July 1943, finished B-26 transition school at Dodge City, Kansas in October, and crew training at Barksdale Field in Shreveport March 27, 1944. He and his crew picked up their B-26F at Hunter Field, GA two days later, and the next day began their eighteen day flight to England. The plane had no armament, but carried extra gas in a bomb bay tank. The armorer/gunner went by ship to further lighten the aircraft. The first leg was to Homestead Field in Florida, then to San Juan, Puerto Rico. On April 4 they arrived at Atkinson Field in British Guiana, a day later at Belem, Brazil, and another day later to Natal, Brazil. Most of the legs were 5-6 hours, but next came the eight hour overwater flight to Ascension Island. Navigation skills were minimal, and they relied heavily on the radio compass. The next three days included flight legs to Liberia, Dakar, and seven hours to Marrakech in French Morocco. Here they had to wait five days for clearing weather before the final leg of almost eight hours to England. They were forbidden to overfly Spain, instead swinging out over the ocean on a route well known to the Luftwaffe for whom the unarmed bombers were easy prey.

After delivering the B-26, the crew spent three weeks at an English Redistribution Center, followed by three more in North Ireland doing combat flight training and British flight procedures. They arrived back in England on June 5, 1944, at Station 169 at Stansted as part of the 497<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 344<sup>th</sup> bomber group, 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force. The 344<sup>th</sup> was known as the Silver Streaks because many of the planes crews had removed the camouflage paint, wholly or partially. It was found to serve little purpose and slowed the airplane.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Air Force was first to the beaches on D-Day. In the lead were 54 B-26 aircraft of the 344<sup>th</sup> battle group, the Silver Streaks. Different accounts give different numbers of aircraft flying that day. J. K. Havener's book "The Martin B-26 Marauder", lists 486 from the eight groups. Daniel Ford's article in the July 1994 issue of Smithsonian AIR&SPACE, says 424. There was no uncertainty that they were all B-26 Marauders. Regrettably a two page spread in LIFE magazine the following week showed an artist's incorrect depiction of the scene full of B-25 medium bombers. In truth, most were Marauders headed for what would become known as Utah Beach. To the east at Omaha Beach, 1100 high altitude heavy bombers, B-17s and B-24s were at work. Bombing through the clouds at unseen targets, most of the bombs hit way long. Only a few shorts actually hit the beach. Three thousand men were lost that day at Omaha Beach. The "miracle" at Utah Beach, where the U. S. 4<sup>th</sup> division lost only 12 men on D-Day was at least partially due to the B-26s bombing at low altitude. The altitude flown by the B-26s that day has been the subject of much discussion. The determining factors were the cloud height and the position of your "box" in the formation, and your position in your "box".



Joe McNamee, who joined the 497<sup>th</sup> as bombardier/navigator in March 1944, remembers going in that day below the clouds at 1500 feet, although the lead plane flew at 3500 feet. The B-26 was designed to bomb at medium altitudes of 8,000 to 10,000 feet. Both Joe and Bob flew many more missions after D-Day. Bob's log lists 65 missions, often two a day through mid-February 1945. Joe remembers being escorted by P47 and P51 fighters on some of his outbound flights. There were some Polish manned Spitfires that flew escort for his B-26. Joe saw German fighter aircraft only once after D-Day. Four of them destroyed another B-26 in one pass.

Both men had interesting experiences relating to the B-26. Bob's Pitot tube was knocked off in a near collision with another aircraft. Without Pitot tube information with which to control airspeed, landing was extremely difficult. Another B-26 led Bob's plane in, maintaining the proper airspeed for him to follow. One day Joe's plane experienced loss of prop pitch control on takeoff. This was not the runaway prop that plagued early B-26 trainees, but was caused by the loss of electrical power due to the battery being drained by the wheel door motors. A misplaced pin kept the doors from closing, so the motors kept running. The plane had barely enough power to make it back to the landing strip. Bob's log showed many missions in August and September to the seaport and gun emplacements of Brest, so many that years later on a visit to that city in Brittany he was loathe to tell of his wartime experiences.

On September 30, 1944 the group moved to a field in Pontoise, France, within sight of the Eiffel Tower. The recently departed Luftwaffe left few creature comforts for the new occupants. Water was particularly scarce, and Bob remembers shaving with champagne. In Holland, Montgomery's well-conceived, but poorly planned and executed Operation Market Garden had begun in mid-September. This operation, depicted in "A Bridge Too Far" was a catastrophe with 1700 Allied casualties and the virtual elimination of the British 1<sup>st</sup> (Red Devil) division. Bob

Cochrane's first missions after moving to France were against the infamous highway bridge at Arnhem.

On December 16, 1944 the Germans began their Ardennes offensive which caught the Allies completely off-guard. Cochrane's B-26 began flying missions against the Germans in this region on December 18. Although Patton relieved the encircled 101<sup>st</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Divisions at Bastogne on December 26, bombing runs against the retreating Germans continued well into January, with missions on the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> to the Belgian crossroad town of Houffalize. By late January of 1945, the B-26 Marauders of the 497<sup>th</sup> Squadron were bombing the German motherland in the Rhineland Campaign. In March Bob was rotated back to England on his way home. Forty five years later Caryl and I bicycled through this part of Holland that bore no trace of wartime scars. In 1992 we bicycled through the lovely Belgian countryside in this area.

1989 Littleton

In my review of the material lent to me by Jim Tuchton and Bob Cochrane, I learned much more about the Martin Marauder B-26 than I have space to recount here. It was a marvelous piece of equipment, a tribute to the men and women who designed, built and operated it. Regrettably, again, all but a handful of these aircraft were stripped and melted down for scrap metal in Landsburg, Germany or Walnut Ridge, Arkansas. The nose section of "Flak Bait", which flew 202 missions, is on display at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC. Wright Patterson Air Force Base, outside Dayton, Ohio, has a B-26G-10. It was flown by the Free French all over the Mediterranean and Europe for eight months, and later used by Air France to teach fledgling mechanics aircraft disassembly and re-assembly. The Confederate Air Force at Harlingen, Texas is flying B-26C-20-MO which came off the line at Omaha in late 1941. It never saw combat action, but was totally butchered-up by Tenneco who used it as an executive transport. The CAF bought it in 1967, and it sat waiting for restoration funds for another 7 years. In 1984, after an expenditure of \$350,000, this B-26, renamed Carolyn, received its FAA certification. Another Marauder, the short winged, straight rudder, original model was recovered from the Canadian tundra by the owner of the Specialty Restaurant Chain, David Tallichet. It has been under restoration at Chico, CA since some time after its recovery in 1971.

The furious six year story of the B-26 has many chapters, players, and settings. There is a tendency, unfair as it may be, to condense epochs to a few words. The B-25 is remembered for its "Thirty Seconds over Tokyo". Similarly, the thing first remembered about the B-26 is, as Daniel Ford stated, 20 minutes—6:05 to 6:25 A. M., June 6, 1944—over La Grande Dune, which history would know as Utah Beach.

2015 Littleton

I have often thought of the B-26 since I wrote this article. My friend Bob Cochrane has left us as has Jim Tuchton. In 2003, I was at the Palm Springs Air Museum and had the thrill of seeing a B-26 land there. My photos from that day regrettably were lost. In 2009, 15 years after visiting

the American Cemetery in Southern France on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, I stood on the Normandy beaches, Omaha and Utah, and could in my mind's eye visualize the different air actions there 65 years earlier. In the beautiful French countryside nearby, the only traces of the great conflict on those few days are the cemeteries and monuments that dot the region.

#### The Martin B-26 Marauder Specifications

Length: 58 feet, 3 inches

Maximum Speed: 287 MPH

Wingspan: 71 feet

Cruise Speed: 216 MPH

Height: 21 feet, 6 inches

Combat Range: 1150 Miles

Weight Empty: 24,000 lbs.

Operational Ceiling: 21,000 Feet

Weight Loaded: 37,000 lbs.

Guns: 12 50 Cal Browning Machine Guns

Power: two P&W R-2800 radial engines

Bombs: 4,000 lbs. each