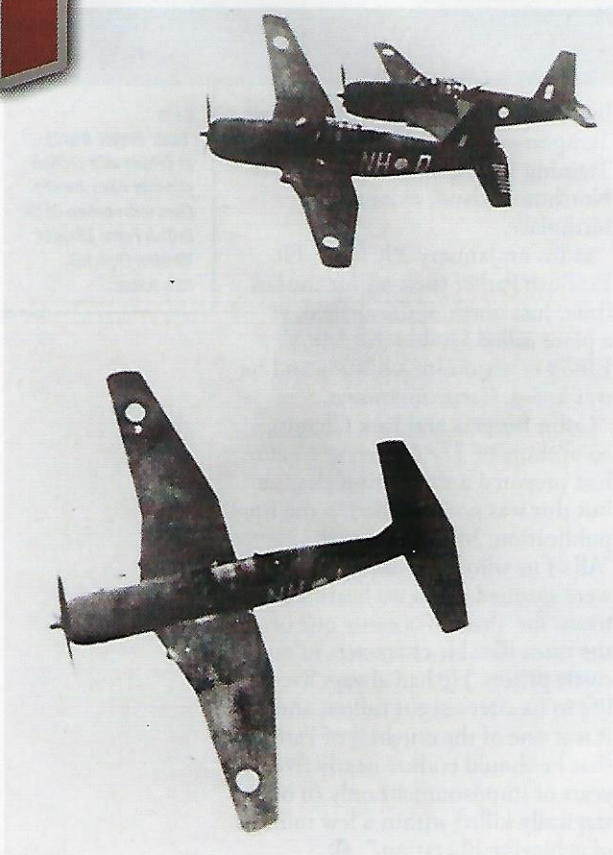


NO Flack NO fun



Shunned by the US and the RAF, the Vultee Vengeance gave a good account of itself in New Guinea. **Jim Grant** records the exploits of the cranked-winged bombers



BY THE TIME World War Two had broken out the United States – particularly its Navy – was strongly committed to dive-bombing. The lessons of the Luftwaffe's Blitzkrieg tactics using Junkers Ju 87 'Stukas' to help slice through Poland and France in 1940 had been well learned.

The Army Air Corps initially put land-based versions of the Navy's Curtiss SB2C Helldiver Douglas SBD Dauntless into service. Vultee Aircraft of Nashville Tennessee developed its model V-72 and the USAAC ordered this as the A-31 and A-35 Vengeance.

But, by the time the type was ready for service the USAAF, as the USAAC had become, had found that tactical fighter-bombers were just as useful as dive-bombers *and* were capable of defending themselves after delivering their

bombs – unlike 'Stukas'.

A USAAF report submitted in July 1943 recommended that production of land-based dive bombers should be discontinued. It emphasized the tactical problems of aircraft that needed complete air superiority in which to operate successfully, the necessity for an additional crew member and the more complex maintenance required. The US Navy, flying in different circumstances, continued with its dive-bombers.

In mid-1943 the US Directorate of Military Requirements describes the A-31 and A-35 programme as: "a shining example of the waste of money, material, manpower and time in the production of an airplane which this office has tried to eliminate."

By 1943, Australia and the RAF had already ordered the type. Both



RAAF VENGEANCES

- Mk.I:** A27-1 to -15, Northrop-built V-72s diverted from British orders.
- Mk.IA:** A27-16 to -99, Northrop-built A-31-NOs
- Mk.II:** A27-200 to -257 Vultee built-V-72s
- Mk.IIA:** A27-258 to -321 Northrop-built V-72s
- Mk.IV:** A27-600 to -640 Vultee-built A-35B-15-VNs
- Mk.IVA:** A27-400 to -422 Vultee built A-35A-VNs and A27-500 to -549 and A27-560 to -560 Vultee-built A35B-10-VNs

The RAAF used three variants which did not necessarily match the RAF's designations. The last RAAF Vengeance was accepted in May 1944, the month that production was terminated.

Two Vengeances are known to exist, both in Australia. The most complete is EZ999, the last Mk.IA built, now at the Camden Aviation Museum, Victoria. A27-247 (formerly RAF AF929) is being restored somewhere in the Eastern States, using parts from a number of airframes.

in September did 12 Squadron fully move to its new base. Even then coastal patrolling continued to be its main activity and strikes on enemy positions were infrequent.

Such was the lack of aerial activity in the western half of Dutch New Guinea that no Japanese aircraft were seen between October 9, 1943 and July 5, 1944. On the latter date, 12 Squadron was ordered back to Australia. On its return the unit was re-equipped with Consolidated Liberators as part of a heavy bomber wing.

Left
RAAF Vengeances at Nadzab, New Guinea, in 1944. At least nine aircraft of 21 Squadron can be seen.

RAAF OPERATIONAL VENGEANCE UNITS

Squadron	Code letters
12 Squadron	NH
21 Squadron	MJ
23 Squadron	NV
24 Squadron	GR
25 Squadron	SJ

countries managed to prove the US view of the Vengeance to be in error. In the close support role in Burma, low-flying RAF examples were highly effective. It was in New Guinea that the RAAF put the crank-winged type to good use.

When the Australian Government placed its order for Vengeances it believed that they could be delivered quickly. However only 15 had been received by the middle of 1942 and some of these were issued to a flight of 4 Operational Training Unit to prepare aircrew.

"...clouds were right over the ridge, preventing a vertical dive. Finished up diving through the clouds and made one low attack on target at 200 feet..."

Barely in action

It was not until late in the year that sufficient aircraft, and tutored aircrew, had been gathered to fully equip the first unit, 12 Squadron, based at the airstrip at Batchelor, south of Darwin. Even then 12 was initially restricted to coastal patrol, escorting ships and similar duties.

Finally, on June 18, 1943, 12 Squadron carried out its first active combat operation when 12 Vengeances flew out to Bathurst Island. Escorted by Bristol Beaufighters of 31 Squadron, an attack was made on Selaru Island in the Netherlands East Indies.

Shortly afterwards the unit deployed to Merauke in Dutch New Guinea but this was effectively a swamp and personnel spent much of their time at Cookstown in Queensland. Only

Support task force

The next two units to receive the Vengeance were 24 and 23 (City of Brisbane) which began to receive their aircraft in June 1943. In August 1943 24 Squadron was based at Tsili Tsili in New Guinea and began operations on September 7 in support of Australian Army fighting at Finschhafen and Lae.

The unit proved an effective addition to the Allied forces in the area and it was moved forward to Dobodura to support the Australian 9th Division's amphibious landings at Sattelburg. These began on September 28 and finished on October 1 when the final attack was made and the Japanese withdrew in disarray.

In September 1943 77 Wing comprised the Vengeance-equipped 21 (City of Melbourne), 23 and 24 Squadrons. No.21 arrived at

Far left
Three machines from 12 Squadron peel off into a dive, Dutch New Guinea, 1943.



Laverton-based target-tug A27-414 showing off the cranked wing.

THAT CRANKED WING

The Vengeance was not an attractive aircraft but it had an aggressive appearance which fitted its name. Its unusual wing, with a cranked centre section leading edge, was the result of the centre of gravity being too far forward due to design changes.

Instead of moving the wing aft, which would have involved a major redesign, the centre section was swept back, which gave the distinctive 'kink' to the outer wing sections and restored the centre of gravity to the correct position.



"Went too low on this bash and scared myself by having to go up a mountain side at 110 mph."



targets on Shaggy Ridge. 12 aircraft took off at 09:45 and were over the target 10:45. Target was indicated by smoke shells but CO could not see them for 15 minutes by which time the clouds were right over the ridge, preventing a vertical dive. Finished up diving through the clouds and made one low attack on target at 200 feet using 45-second delay fuses."

Shaggy Ridge was a vital operation and the Vengeances did a great job of blasting the Japanese off their side of the hill. The following day 7th Australian Division HQ thanked the RAAF and advised it that the enemy positions on Green Pimple Ridge had been totally destroyed.

Nadzab in January 1943 followed by 23 in February 1944.

No.77 Wing functioned within 10 Operational Group, which included 78 Wing with three squadrons of Curtiss Kittyhawks. The CAC Boomerangs of 4 Squadron were soon added, flying as target-markers and in the air support role. This group acted as part of a mobile force requested by General George Kenny.

the Huon Peninsula. This set the pattern for many future strikes.

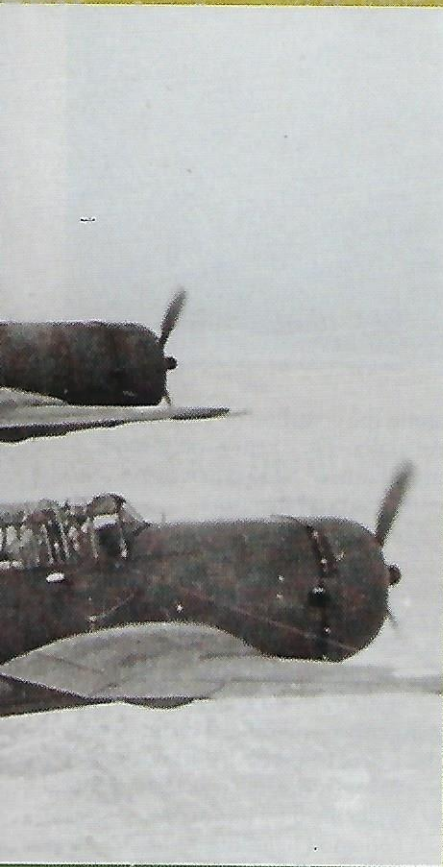
Two highly-maneuvrable Boomerangs marked the target with cannon fire, or smoke and the Vengeances then bombed it. If the sky was clear of Japanese fighters, the escorting Kittyhawks came down to tree-top level and finished the job with 0.50in machine-guns.

The first operation of this nature was carried out at Shaggy Ridge, an almost vertical hell on which monkeys would have been more at home than men. The ops record for January 20, 1944 notes: "Squadron briefing at 08:30 hours for



Shaggy Ridge

No.10 Group's first task was to support the 7th and 9th Australian Infantry Divisions in their campaign to clear the Japanese from



Operations were frequently carried out by aircraft from more than one squadron and one exceptional raid was the destruction of enemy barges at the Nambawiri River. The vessels were hidden in caves cut out of the hillsides but two waves of 24 Vengeances destroyed them.

On January 27, bridges were the next target: "Up at 05:45 hours for a strike against targets north of Alexishafen. Took off 07:30, were to rendezvous with some [USAAF] 5th Air Force B-25s over Gusab but they were 25 minutes late, so we bombed bridges on the Bogadjin Road. Went too low on this bash and scared myself by having to go up a mountain side at 110mph."

The conflict in New Guinea was a war of attrition. The Japanese had

Clockwise from above left

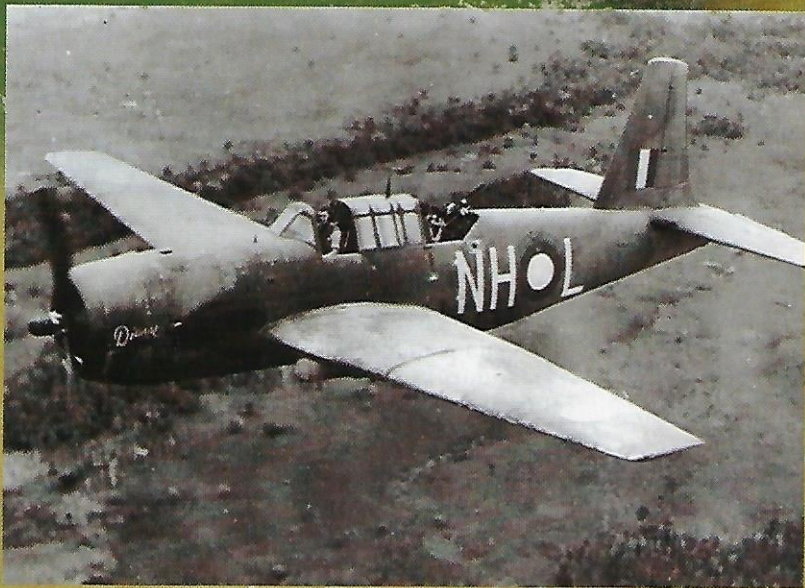
Three aircraft from 24 Squadron over Queensland.

Armourers about to winch a bomb into a No. 24 Squadron Vengeance at Nadzab.

Mk.IIA A27-209 'Diane' of 12 Squadron, Dutch New Guinea.

Mk.IV A27-401 awaiting disposal at the end of World War Two.

Vengeance IA A27-9 after conversion to a target-towing aircraft. It survived until at least February 26, 1951, when it was transferred to the Australian Fleet Air Arm for fire-fighting practice.



great difficulty in re-supplying their forces, fuel and ammunition were scarce, and some bypassed units were forced to grow their own food.

Alexishafen was bombed and strafed on February 17 and on the 24th a number of villages were raided and worked over with machine-gun fire – 24,000 rounds of '50-cal' was used that day.

A 24 Squadron pilot reported on March 1, 1944: "We were over Madang strip again. I find that I am getting very blasé about these shows now. Just sit on your dingy for a couple of hours and get a sore bum. No flak, no fun."

Called south

Similar attacks were carried out until early March 1944 when the Vengeances were ordered out of New Guinea by General Kenny and sent back to Australia. He reasoned that the work they were doing could just as easily be done by the Lockheed P-38 Lightnings, Curtiss P-40 Warhawks and Republic P-47 Thunderbolts in the theatre.

One pilot reported this announcement on March 9: "The important news today is that just before tea Wg Cdr Fyfe rolled in to tell me that the squadron is posted south. We are going to Camden" ➔



Top left

A 25 Squadron example after a repairable accident - note the 'stopped' prop.

Top right

A pair of Mk.IIs of 23 Squadron, probably in New Guinea. Note the different and crude application of the white theatre markings on the tail.

Above

Newly arrived, A27-17 of 4 OTU, Williamtown.

Right

'The Snifter', Mk.IIA A27-249 of 25 Squadron being used as a backdrop by a group of smiling aircrew.

Below

Bare metal Mk.IIA A27-288, with what appear to be SEAC pale blue and blue national markings.

ALL COURTESY OF THE RAAF AVIATION HERITAGE MUSEUM OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

– everyone is very excited.” No.10 Group’s three Vengeance units left New Guinea on March 13, 1944.

These three were destined for conversion to heavy bombers and on their return two of them handed in their aircraft, while 21 Squadron retained theirs for an unexpected task. The aircraft of ‘A’ and ‘B’ Flights played the part of Ju 87s in the movie *Rats of Tobruk*.

They retained their Australian camouflage scheme and had extra

large swastikas painted on their white fins and rudders, and iron crosses on the normal positions, to show that they were the bad guys. Filming took place between April and July 1944 with the Vengeances dive-bombing a suitable area of sand.

Towing targets

One other operational unit received Vengeances, 25 (City of Perth) Squadron, which used its late-model Mk.IVs to carry out patrols

along the coastline of Western Australia. They kept these aircraft until January 1945 when it too was converted to Liberators.

The Vengeances remained in RAAF service until the end of the war, serving as target-tugs with 7 OTU and as communications ‘hacks’ with 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 Communications Units.

The aircraft had a rather mixed reputation, and official disinterest by the USAAF and RAF authorities did not help. In Australia, at least, it was generally liked by its aircrew.

It had good handling characteristics and the cockpits were spacious and comfortable. A number of navigators commented on the unforgettable experience of facing backwards during a vertical dive.

Those who did not like them pointed out the problems with engines and the disastrous effects of hydraulic failure on landings. Vengeances which made a wheels-up landing were, despite appearances to the contrary, frequently so badly damaged that they had to be written off, however the aircrew usually survived unscathed, due to its sturdy construction.

Despite the decision to withdraw them from New Guinea, RAAF Vengeances gave the Japanese a hard time. When suitable targets were available – and these became increasingly scarce as the war progressed – and good weather conditions permitted the operation, the results achieved were outstanding. ●

