

Claude J Brown Memories

Introducing the Douglas A-26 Invader

The A-26 Invader, built by the Douglas Aircraft Company, was a late comer to combat operations in World War Two. This is the story of one of its first enemy encounters in the hostile skies over Europe.



by C. J. Brown

This article was dictated to Robert D. Askins over the span of several months. Askins, a former USAF and Air National Guard F-4 pilot himself, found the stories particularly interesting and exciting. "Brownie", who spent 26 years in the USAF, states that this combat flying was the most intense experience of his life.

Through all of 1943 and the summer of 1944, I was serving as an instructor pilot in the Martin B-26 Marauder at Barksdale Field, Louisiana. The Air Corps was putting together the initial cadre of pilots to introduce the new Douglas A-26 Invader to combat duty in the European Theater. All of my buddies had volunteered for, and been selected for this new training. Having just returned from a special assignment in Dayton Ohio, Wright Field, where I was test-flying equipment as it was modified from the original design, known as Accelerated Service Test, I was just a little late putting my name into the hat.

I worried that if I missed the chance to upgrade to the A-26, I would also miss the chance to see any combat in Europe. I discovered that a Colonel Kelly was in charge of the new outfit. Soon I found myself standing in front of his desk, volunteering for duty with the A-26. He thanked me for my interest but said, "Sorry - I'm filled up and have all the people I need."

"Colonel," I said, "before you dismiss me, let me tell you of my qualifications. I've been up at Wright Field flying accelerated service tests. I have flown the A-26 and I now have forty-five hours in it. That's more than any of your people have."

The Colonel shot a hard look in my direction. He said, "Ok Lieutenant. You meet me tomorrow morning at Operations with an airplane. We'll see how you fly on my wing."

At the assigned time the next morning, we fired up our airplanes and took off. For the next twenty or thirty minutes he

A very nicely restored and operational Douglas A-26 Invader, as seen in a modern day museum. This aircraft is an A-26C, later designated an RB-26C and carries the Serial Number 44-3564. Photo: A.A.S.

did everything he could to shake me from his wing, to no avail. After about an hour of flying we came back to the field. The Colonel called me on the radio, and ordered me to report to his office. He said that I had done a good job and would be his first alternate, should anyone drop from the program.

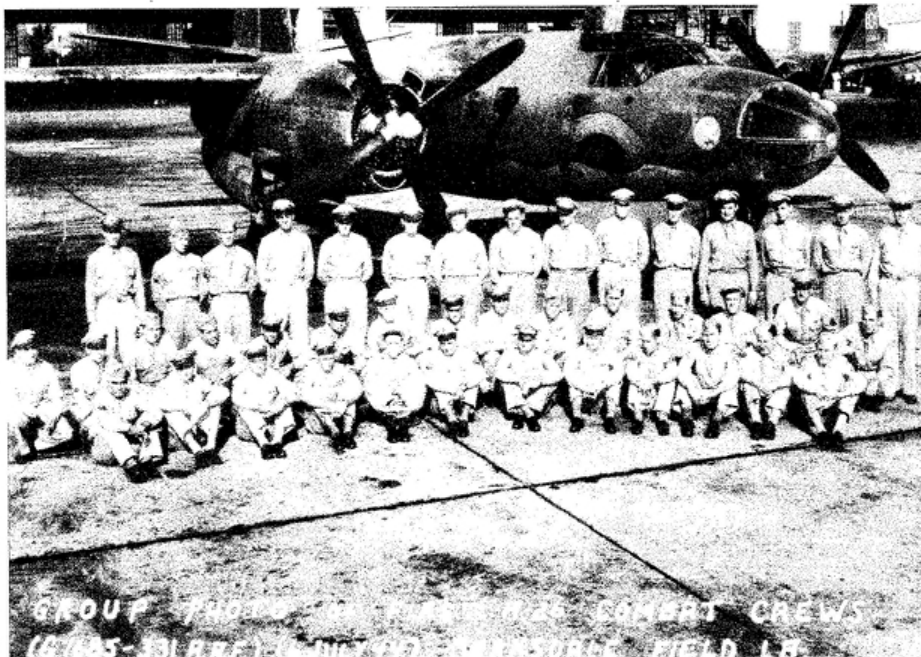
This didn't raise my hopes too much because he had selected the best people we had. I was surprised when I got a message from the Colonel that I was in. It was many years later that I learned that the squadron commander - a good man - was dropped because he just couldn't fly formation to suit Colonel Kelly. The Colonel had no choice but to replace him. I was lucky and I got the call.

We had a very compressed training period. We only had a few A-26s and a bunch of people to get trained. Thus training proceeded pretty much around the clock until we all got out



A Douglas A-26C Invader on the ramp of a French airfield in 1945. This aircraft, from the 391st Bomb Group is an A-26C-25-DT - Serial Number 43-22624. All A-26s were redesignated B-26s in 1948. Photo: C.E. Luenneman via Warren Thompson

required flying time. Soon we were off to Hunter Field in Savannah Georgia. New A-26s arrived. My gunner/engineer – Herb Sunderland – and I were given a new hard-nosed gun ship A-26. When the top and bottom turrets were locked in forward position, this version of the A-26 had sixteen forward-firing .50-calibre machine guns. It was a formidable strafing machine. The glass-nosed A-26 had a bombardier/navigator position in the nose and six fewer machine guns.



Herb and I gave her a shakedown test flight of about three hours. We found her satisfactory and declared we were ready for the trip to the European theater. This would be via the North Atlantic route. We were delayed on our journey across the Atlantic by a terrible storm. On 5 August 1944, the day finally arrived. Herb and I were assigned a navigator – Lieutenant John Main – for the crossing. Those of us who were ready departed at thirty-minute intervals for the first leg to Bangor Maine. We encountered weather most of the way and flew through a bad thunderstorm. The weather was bad for other members of the group as well, some encountering severe thunderstorms. One aircraft was lost but somehow the crew survived.

Our second leg of the trip was an uneventful flight to Goose Bay, Labrador. The third leg however, was something else indeed. We got an excellent briefing on our route and approach to Greenland, including a film of the approach to landing. We were scheduled to land at a field known as Bluiewest 3. The film depicted the proper approach procedure to a runway that was hidden between two mountains. The runway sloped some three hundred feet from the ocean to the top end. That end of the runway rested at the foot of a glacier. The special approach was necessary because the mountaintops were generally shrouded in clouds. You approached the airfield by flying up a fjord for several miles. The only identifying feature to successfully finding the field was a sunken ship in the fjord. By counting a few seconds after passing the ship, then starting a hard right-hand turn you would – hopefully – roll out lined up with the runway. At least that is what the briefer

The majority of the initial Invader pilots were drawn from the ranks of those currently flying the Martin B-26 Marauder.
Photo: C.J. Brown

told us. If you waited until you saw the runway, you would overshoot and find yourself flying up an ever-narrowing fjord into the mountains. Somehow we counted our seconds correctly and landed up the hill that served as the runway.

After shutdown of the engines, we discovered that a cowl flap was stuck. I made the mistake of putting this information in the aircraft log. The Base Engineer grounded the airplane on the spot. As the A-26 was a new piece of equipment, spare parts were hard to obtain. We were stymied until a cowl flap motor was flown in. Herb and I installed the new part. The cowl flap was still not working, but not wanting to spend the war in Greenland, I told the base engineer that the problem was fixed. We figured if we cranked the flap half open, the engine wouldn't overheat, nor would the drag be too severe for the remainder of the flight to England.

The rest of the squadron was long gone, so we were preparing to make the crossing alone when I was approached by the Canadian pilot of a Mosquito fighter-bomber. As he was without a navigator, he wanted to tag along on my wing. We had an uneventful flight, except that the Mosquito was so fast that he was unable to stay right on my wing. He would fly great circles around us in an effort to keep us in sight. We reached Iceland without many problems, but that night there was a terrific storm. A B-24 Liberator bomber was trapped above the airfield without enough fuel to return to

Greenland. The storm was so terrific that the B-24 was soon laden with too much ice to fly. The pilot lost control and the airplane spun in, crashing only a few yards from our quarters for the night. The crew of the B-24 perished in the crash.

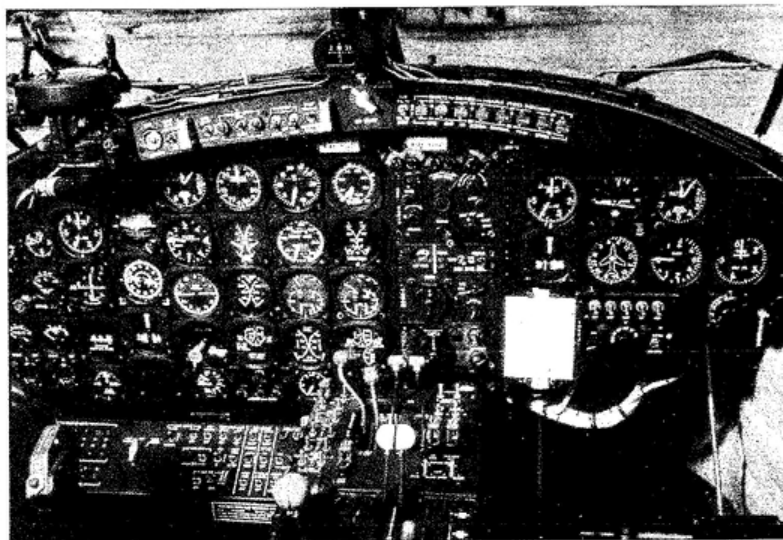
Our next leg was to Scotland. We found the rest of our group waiting there. Now on to Great Britain and combat! This leg was fairly risky, not because of the weather or distance, but because arriving aircraft were restricted to narrow flight corridors. Each airplane had to continually identify itself over the radio to the British Air Defense Forces. The British didn't hesitate to fire at anything that was out of the corridor. The corridor operations were so tricky that the

British sent a lead plane to guide us to our new home, an airbase about 35 kilometers above London near a town called Great Dunmow. We were assigned to the 386th Bomb Group, 553rd Squadron, for housing and administration, but we were left alone to introduce the A-26 to combat operations.

Our beginning at Great Dunmow was not a good one. As the British lead plane dropped us off at our new home, we received instructions to land from the tower. Unfortunately, the fellow in the tower failed to note the direction from which a 20 to 30 knot wind was blowing. We lost two of our very rare and very valuable glass nosed aircraft, as they were unable to stop on the runway in such a severe tailwind. Several others were piled up at the end as well. I didn't know what had happened, but as I attempted to land, I knew that something wasn't right so I went around. There at the end of the runway I viewed the remains of several brand new A-26s. Finally the tower changed the landing direction and the rest of the Squadron landed with out incident. The other pilots at Great Dunmow were very impressed with our arrival show!

The Squadron flew a few missions from Great Dunmow. They were easy, cake runs. Our crews took quite a ribbing from the combat pilots who had seen the worst the Germans could throw at them. We flew two or three more easy missions then we were assigned a target in Holland, the "Bergen op Zoom."

Our pilots were briefed to, upon landfall, fly up an estuary to avoid heavy flak. The Germans were smarter than we figured them to be. They had transferred most of their heavy antiaircraft guns to barges, which now floated in the estuary. They were lining this waterway for quite a few miles. It was our first really rough mission. I got shot up pretty bad. No one was injured, but according to the official citation I got later we had about one hundred holes in our airplane. The right engine failed before the bomb run, but I was able to



Above: The cockpit of an A-26 Invader, circa 1945. Note the reflector gun sight on the upper left glare shield. Photo: John Meyers via Warren Thompson

Below: Lieutenant C.J. "Brownie" Brown in the cockpit of an A-26 Invader somewhere over France, circa 1944. Photo: C.J. Brown



hang in formation, drop my bombs, and make it back to England on one engine.

After flying ten or twelve missions from England the combat acceptance test was completed and the A-26 was ready for combat. We moved our eighteen crews and airplanes to Villaroche, France. We were sent to the Allied air base known as A-55. Our mission now was to convert the 416th Bomb Group to the A-26. The 416th had been flying B-26 Marauder

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and A-20 Havoc bombers since their arrival in the European Theater, in January 1944. The 416th "borrowed" the A-55 base after the Germans retreated much as the Germans had "borrowed" it from the French.

The Germans had left little in their retreat. There was only one building left standing which the A-26 pilots claimed as their quarters. This went well for a few days, as the only other option was a tent. We rigged a 55-gallon oil drum to burn our used airplane oil as a heater. One morning someone started the fire as usual, but failed to regulate the flow of fuel to the firebox. During breakfast, shouts told us the building was on fire. She was burning gently, when some would-be fireman hit the drum with a bucket of water. Away it blew, spreading the fire everywhere. We lost everything

from our rooms, but were able to salvage records from the front offices. When the fire finally burned itself out we discovered that the Germans had booby-trapped the foundation with land mines. For some reason the mines had not exploded but they were very much alive and we were unaware of our close association with potential death.

It was now October 1944, and the weather is terrible. We had to rely on "Path Finder" equipped aircraft to find our targets. These airplanes had what later became LORAN, a system of radio beams that could be directed to intersect over the target. When the Path Finder dropped his bombs we all released our ordinance. This was very successful but not as accurate as visual bombing. So we flew quite a few Path Finder missions.

That winter, I was promoted to flight lead and assigned a navigator - Jim Kerns. As a flight leader, I now flew an airplane with a glass nose. These A-26s had a crew of three, consisting of the pilot, a bombardier/navigator and a gunner/engineer. As mentioned, the A-26 had great armament. The hard-nosed gun ships had sixteen forward-firing .50-calibre machine guns. The glass-nosed aircraft had six shy of that. The gunner, for both types of Invaders, sat on a tractor seat around a pole in the back of the airplane and had one set of sights. The turrets on the top and the bottom of the fuselage tracked along the line of the gunner's sights. The coverage of fire crossed over from the top turret to the bottom turret with no interruption. There were mechanical delays of course, to keep from shooting the tail off. It was a great system, and it worked fine.

Soon after I was assigned a bombardier/navigator, the winter weather socked us in. Jim and I were given a lot of work



Above: This photograph shows C.J. Brown and his crew just prior to flying back to the United States from France. From left to right: Claude J. Brown - pilot, Jim Kerns - bombardier/navigator, unknown but thought to be a crew chief, and Herb Sunderland - gunner/engineer.
Photo: C.J. Brown

Below: An A-26 of the 386th Bomb Group runs up at St. Trond, Belgium, circa 1945. Photo: John Meyers via Warren Thompson



on a simulated targeting rig that was driven by an electric motor. Jim sat on the top of some scaffolding and looked through a Norden bombsight at a scale map of various target areas. I sat underneath and did the piloting. In the early stages of such simulation this didn't amount to much. That was a

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dreary sort of a way to spend a cold day because the whole affair was outside, mounted atop the concrete floor of an old building. This provided a smooth but cold surface upon which to work.

After lots of these simulations, we finally hit some good weather. Jim and I were assigned a mission in the deputy lead position. I was the lead in the right-hand box of six airplanes, on the leader's right wing. At the initial point, the leader called "IP." This was the point where we broke off into individual flights, and followed the leader on the bomb run. My bomb release would trigger the other five aircraft to drop their load.

At the IP I didn't hear anything from my bombardier. I said, "Jim they called the IP." Jim said, "I'm sorry Brownie, I don't see a damn thing I recognize." So I'm following the leader down the trail maybe thirty seconds or a minute behind, and they open their bomb doors. Again there is silence. "Jim they have opened their bomb bay doors."

"Brownie, I'm sorry. I just don't see anything I recognize."

Another few seconds went by. The leader announced, "Bombs away."

"Jim," I said with considerable emotion, "they have dropped their bombs."

"Sorry Brownie, I still don't see anything."

So we closed the bomb doors. As we left the target it was customary to put the aircraft into a slight dive to pick up about 300 mph and scoot out of the area as quickly as possible. On this occasion I called the leader and asked him for permission to re-attack the target.

"Can I make another run?"

"No boy," came the reply, "Request denied, take them home." I thought we had pulled a major SNAFU.

I got on poor Jim's back all the way home. Said a lot of ugly things to him for the next two hundred miles without relief. "Jim," I said, "We practiced all winter, and the first time we have an opportunity to make a name for ourselves you screw up." I felt we were going to be in big trouble.

We landed without incident, with our four thousand-pound bomb load. Taxing to our area and our hard stand, who should be waiting for us but the squadron commander? Oh brother, I thought, here it comes. I was sure a court marshal was coming our way.

As I climbed out of the airplane he is all smiles, approaches and puts an arm around me and says, "Great job Brownie."

"Sir you don't understand," I said, "We've still got out bombs."

"Yeah, I know," he said. Then he went and shook Jim's hand.

By this time the crew truck had come around to take us to debriefing. I'm in a quandary. I don't know what's happening. When we got to debrief there was a lot of hell raising going on. We learned the leader's navigator mistook the city he was supposed to bomb and he bombed on our side of the

bomb line. The bombs struck a jump off point that General Patton was establishing. It contained a large reserve of fuel and supplies. As I understood it, Patton lost most of his gasoline reserves. The lead bombardier, not Jim, was court marshaled and reduced in rank.

This particular mission stood us in good shape, and we were the talk of the squadron for a few days. Shortly thereafter I was promoted to leading the second box of four flights of six. Our squadron, one of four, led every fourth mission, led the entire formation of forty-eight airplanes. Jim and I led the second box consisting of twenty-four airplanes. Then we were promoted to leading the entire Group. This honor we shared with the squadron commander. So every eighth mission we flew. Every eighth mission the squadron commander flew.

At that time, a tally of fifty missions was the ticket home for rest and recre-

ation. But we never reached that. As we got more and more missions, the Air Force kept increasing the number required to get home. As the second box leader we got to fly only one in every four missions and as a group leader we got only one in eight missions. The war could have lasted another year and we still would have not flown enough missions to get home. I still kid Jim that his skill at target identification kept us from getting home from Europe before V-E Day. By the way, Herb our very capable gunner/engineer was able to complete his missions and beat us back to the States.

We survived and spent several months preparing to transfer to the Pacific Theater by flying more practice missions. In October 1945, Jim and I flew our airplane home via the southern Atlantic route. A fuel tank was installed in the bomb bay, which made it possible to fly the Invader from Dakar, West Africa to Fortelaza, Brazil. This was a flight of one aircraft, 1,900 miles over the South Atlantic Ocean. At the halfway point we contacted a Navy picket ship and learned that V-J Day had been declared. We were disappointed. This meant no blue Pacific operations for us and an end of our combat operations in the A-26 Invader.♦

Photograph Above: Captain C.J. Brown - on the left - and tent mate Jack Buskirk standing in front of the tent that served as their living quarters while in stationed in France, circa 1944. Photo: C.J. Brown



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Picture was taken in front of a B-26 Marauder. The A-26 was still classified at the time.

Herbert Sunderland - front row 2nd from left
 Mike Williams - front row 6th from left
 Jim Houston Corbitt - front row 8th from left

Standing in the back row:
Claude Brown - 7th from the left
Buskirk on Browns left shoulder

