

Eisenhower's B-25

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A Mitchell bomber was specially modified to serve as General Eisenhower's personal frontline transport

As Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during World War II, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower needed to be able to travel—quickly—to meet with top alliance leaders and field commanders and get a close-up view of the unfolding war.

Eisenhower had an eclectic collection of aircraft at his disposal for a variety of uses, but only one was specially made for him. It was a heavily converted B-25 Mitchell medium bomber, built and modified by North American Aviation, the same company that produced the B-25s that attacked Japan in 1942 in the famous Doolittle Raid. Eisenhower's B-25—serial No. 43-4030—is poorly documented and deliberately so.

The year it was built, American P-38 pilots in the Pacific executed a daring, long-range mission to shoot down a bomber known to be carrying Japanese Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, who had planned and carried out the 1941 Pearl Harbor attack. His death was a severe blow to Japan's strategic effort and morale. Army censors did not want German pilots to be able to repeat that success by shooting down Eisenhower, and so photography of his aircraft was severely restricted—especially because it had a unique profile.

Although by early 1944, B-25s were rolling off the North American-operated Kansas City plant at a sustained pace of about 300 per month, a VIP version of the Mitchell was a wartime rarity. Serial No. 4030 came to be known as RB-25J(3), denoting that it was a rebuilt airplane and only the third Mitchell to be specially modified.

The factory-fresh aircraft, with full combat capability and wearing camouflage paint, flew from Kansas City to North American headquarters at Inglewood, Calif., on Feb. 29, 1944. There it was immediately turned over to the Field Services department for extensive modifications. A small cadre of the large plant's most capable mechanics and technicians was assembled and then divided into two work shifts. Presaging today's concurrency in aircraft construction, modifications were accomplished even as the engineering paperwork was being drawn.

Donald H. Kennedy was the factory engineer designated to oversee and document the modifications. There were two reasons North American wanted extensive records of the build: First, the company wanted to be able to defend its work should the airplane, with an American icon aboard, ever be lost to suspected structural failure. Second, if it proved a success, the company wanted to be able to build more like it if orders were received.

Photographs taken during the modifications confirm what Kennedy wrote decades later: "No effort was made to hide work on the special B-25, which stood in the open among others undergoing changes too late to include on the production line. Obviously, the best concealment was none at all."

Kennedy held frequent consultations with a number of specialists who would visit the work site. The Stress Department engineer would stop by for at least 30 minutes daily. Others from heat and vent, fuel systems, and the talents of an "electrical man" were called on to ensure project integrity.

The Pressure Was On

Kennedy was "impressed by the worker who accomplished the life raft installation in the tail gun compartment entirely on his own, with no drawings, so that a cable from the pilot could open the hatch and deploy the raft."

As D-Day—the invasion of France—approached, the Army became increasingly anxious for delivery. "I had a hard time keeping up with the two shifts of workmen that modified the plane," Kennedy noted. "Sometimes the day crew would curse and tear out something done by the night gang. When possible, I made sketches before the work, but there was no way one could keep ahead. The pressure was on."

From Douglas aircraft, "commercial [airliner]-type blue wool aircraft seats were obtained ... and installed. Plastic sheets were carried up the sides about halfway and blue or gray cloth the rest of the way, including headliner. The installation was not too good, as the workmen had no experience with cloth," Kennedy recalled. The airplane could comfortably seat 10 people—including pilots and other flight crew.

A folding map table extended the full width of the narrow passenger compartment, the lavatory was relocated farther aft, and a telephone was installed for contact with the pilot or ground stations.

Now bearing the military designation VB-25J, the Mitchell was test flown, photographed, and accepted by Army Air Forces for flyaway on May 12, 1944. After intermediate stops, North American was informed that it safely arrived at Eighth Air Force in England. No further updates were provided as to its fate.

Hoping for any shred of information about "his" airplane, Kennedy followed the war news closely. A War Department dispatch dated July 29, 1944, disclosed that Eisenhower, in "air-conditioned comfort," had visited the front twice in a secretly constructed fast medium bomber, with blue cloth upholstered armchairs, folding worktable, and a telephone, to observe allied armies. The dispatch identified the flight crew as Maj. Laurence J. Hansen, pilot, and Capt. Richard F. Underwood, copilot. (The dispatch contained at least one bit of puffery since the B-25 had no air-conditioning).

The dearth of further information led aviation historians to speculate that Eisenhower seldom utilized it; however, recent research has turned up evidence that he used the B-25 frequently—but not exclusively—during the year following the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944.

Hansen became one of Eisenhower's personal pilots. Born in 1917 and raised in Cleveland, he spent his teen years first dabbling in model airplanes, before flipping two dozen damaged motorcycles for profit after repairing them. He saved his earnings and spent them on pilot training.

By 1942, First Lieutenant Hansen was piloting Boeing B-17s on combat missions from England to France. In November, he received temporary orders to proceed to North Africa; his bombing days were over. For the next four years his new role would be as a VIP transport pilot—at first in B-17s—with other aircraft types to follow. It was at Algiers, Algeria, where Hansen first met Eisenhower. The two men subsequently established mutual trust and forged a lifelong friendship.

Hansen wrote about the arrival of a new B-25 airplane, which was to be used for fast, escorted flights back and forth across the English Channel. After the beachhead in France was established, they began to use the B-25 frequently, and many times there would be as many as 18 Mustang and Spitfire escorts for cross-channel protection.

Kay Summersby, who started out as Eisenhower's chauffeur and became a commissioned US Army officer and his aide, wrote of one such crossing in her 1948 book, *Eisenhower Was My Boss*.

"On July 29 I flew over with him in a B-25 escorted by fighters. We landed on a muddy airstrip known simply as 'A-9.' It was my first visit to Normandy and my first step on liberated Europe. ... We stayed only a few hours and then returned to England."

Airfield A-9 was an austere and temporary P-51 and P-38 forward operating base near the Normandy town of Le Molay. The single runway of steel mesh was 4,000 feet long.

Only one image of 43-4030 in wartime service or with Eisenhower has been located. The serial number on the tail is not visible; however, the unique side windows in the aft fuselage, combined with special sheet metal modifications to cover the tail gun mounts, make it evident that the aircraft is Eisenhower's special B-25J.

External modifications bestowed a unique appearance on the Mitchell. The aircraft was shorn of turret and all other armament. The nose was customized, and there were extra windows installed in the aft fuselage. It was likely the only B-25 in Europe during 1944 with this distinctive profile, thus making it a much sought-after prize for Luftwaffe pilots.

There is documentation that during this same time, Eisenhower also commuted in a special two-seat P-51 because it was faster and safer. As Allied battle lines advanced, a favorite activity was surprise visits to the troops on the front. Eisenhower made one or two of these ad hoc inspections per fortnight while also conducting many scheduled meetings with Allied military and civilian leaders.

The usual channel crossing was between Portsmouth, England, and the Cherbourg Peninsula. This was some 60 miles of open water. Several weeks after the invasion, Eisenhower moved his temporary headquarters to Granville, France, where Summersby and the other personal staff took up residence in a small, but cozy, oceanside villa.

It Goes Down

Eisenhower operated from Granville with the B-25 until American troops were several miles beyond Paris, when his headquarters was relocated forward to the Paris suburb of Versailles.

As expected, the Mitchell was durable and reliable. It was compact enough to get into and out of the smaller, sometimes sodden, airfields close to rapidly advancing Allied ground forces.

However, on Sept. 2, 1944, even the sturdy B-25 proved susceptible to poor airfield conditions. The aircraft was damaged, which disrupted Eisenhower's travel plans and put his safety at risk. Summersby wrote that, at this time, Ike had decided to visit Gen. George S. Patton, Third Army commander.

"'I'm going up and give Patton hell,' [Eisenhower] said, worrying because the Third Army's spectacular advance stretched supply lines to the snapping point." Eisenhower departed in the B-25 early the next morning for planned face-to-face discussions with other generals.

Hansen continued the story: "On Sept. 2, 1944, we took off early in the morning in the B-25 to Laval, France, to pick up [Maj. Gen.] Hoyt Vandenberg. General Eisenhower was aboard, en route to a meeting with Gen. Omar Bradley at Chartres, France. Upon landing at Laval, we found nothing but a mud hole, and the field was very rough. I radioed to four P-47 escorts not to land because of the condition of the field. I was in a hurry to get airborne because we were holding the escorts overhead."

During the hasty departure, they found themselves on a collision course with a British Piper Cub taking off at their 90 degree position. A controller fired a flare to divert the Cub. Hansen continued: "I was at this point very unmaneuverable and just above the point of stall." The challenges of the day were just beginning and they would continue until after darkness fell.

At Chartres, the planned lengthy meeting between the generals was shortened when reports of bad weather to the west came in.

"We took off as quickly as possible and right after takeoff we noticed the right engine was on fire. Flames were shooting out around the engine nacelle and we immediately landed again." The airplane was evacuated on the runway. The fire was the result of multiple broken exhaust stacks on one of the engines caused by the rough runway at Laval. Hansen stayed with the damaged B-25 and ferried it out later that same day, but Eisenhower, a warrior constantly on the move, did not have the patience to wait for repairs.

With the fire-damaged B-25 temporarily out of commission, Eisenhower commandeered Hansen's copilot, Underwood, and another airplane. They flew westward to Pontorson, another French coastal town just a short drive from Granville. Instead of spending the night or proceeding by automobile, Eisenhower elected an overwater flight back to his Granville

residence with Underwood piloting a small L-5 liaison type aircraft that was kept at Pontorson as part of the Eisenhower's small fleet of various aircraft types. Eisenhower liked the L-5 and sometimes took early evening pleasure hops in them as a means to relax and unwind.

"He [had said that morning] he would be back in a couple of hours," Summersby wrote in her book. She and the other household staff at Granville grew increasingly alarmed when daytime faded into evening and Eisenhower failed to return. They called various airfields "only to learn the great Allied army had no trace of its own Supreme Commander."

Underwood took off with Eisenhower as the weather deteriorated, the airfield was hidden by clouds, and the remaining fuel supply was getting low. They elected to make an emergency landing on the deserted French beach—the second forced landing of the day.

Hansen wrote, "In order to save the plane from the incoming tide, the general and Dick [Underwood] pulled the airplane higher on the beach and in doing so the general wrenched his knee." After securing the aircraft, the pair staggered nearly a mile in the darkness to a road. A soldier, driving a jeep, stopped then stared incredulously at the Air Force pilot and the limping Army general who were both dripping wet and muddy. The GI asked no questions as he rushed them down the road to a warm and emotional reunion at the Granville villa.

Eisenhower was laid up for the next three days with a stiff leg and throbbing knee.

The press reported that Eisenhower had crashed. However, there was no crash and Ike suffered only the wrenched knee.

Hansen persisted for decades in the defense of his copilot, saying, "Underwood did a wonderful job with the uneventful landing on the beach in spite of possible mines and other obstacles."

What Happened Afterward

As Ike's stature and entourage continued to grow, Hansen recognized the need for a bigger airplane with more range. The first of two new C-54s arrived in May of 1945.

With a gap in the trail of evidence, it's assumed that Eisenhower's B-25 was then relegated to the transport of other officers about the European Theater of Operations. In the turmoil following V-E Day, POW repatriation, postwar occupation of Germany, and constant squabbling with the Russians, the connection between Ike and 43-4030 faded from memory. The historical link was not re-established until 1981.

America was awash in surplus warplanes by late 1945. B-25s were cheap, abundant, and docile to fly. They filled a medium-size transport niche in a market then lacking in suitable alternatives. A cottage industry quickly evolved, turning surplus combat B-25s into corporate transports, firefighters, pilot trainers, and airborne filming platforms.

In the decade following the European war, Eisenhower became the 34th President of the United States. Coincidentally, his B-25 was also in Washington, D.C. The Mitchell left Europe and arrived at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C., as a run-of-the-mill bomber-converted-

to-transport aircraft with the new designation of CB-25J in January 1947. Since it lacked a large cargo door, it was better suited as a VIP transport.

In 1958, 43-4030 was reassigned to the 1001st Air Base Wing at nearby Andrews AFB, Md., where it served as a government VIP transport for travel back and forth within the US. Eisenhower may have even seen the diminutive airplane parked on the tarmac with the others as his presidential motorcade arrived and departed Andrews for travels aboard Air Force One.

In December 1958, the B-25J bearing the serial No. 43-4030 was retired, ferried to the "Boneyard" at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., stricken from the rolls in February 1959, declared surplus, and sold for civilian use.

As the economic utility of the war surplus Mitchells faded, some ended up as crash victims while others were sidelined as weary, broken-down hulks at various airports. Many met their fate by becoming scrap metal while a fortunate few found new lives as restored museum pieces.

Eisenhower's airplane passed through several private owners and ended up as property of the Planes of Fame Air Museum in Chino, Calif. The museum noted the factory quality modifications but had no idea of the heritage of the airplane. The top of the bomb bay on a B-25 carries load between the wings. Lowering it to make a sleeping bunk for Eisenhower dictated complicated structural changes that could best be engineered and performed by the factory.

Planes of Fame displayed 43-4030 and flew it in several air shows around California before officials there tracked down its origins with the help of North American and the Air Force.

The Chino museum put the Mitchell up for sale in mid-1981, and it was acquired by the Air Force for placement at the Ellsworth AFB, S.D., museum. After an overnight journey, it touched down and returned to military ownership on Oct. 2, 1981, and local newsmen and former B-25 crew members were on hand to greet it. Following welcoming ceremonies, the airplane was pulled into a hangar so work could begin to restore it to its original appearance.