

# PRECIOUS METAL

## THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BOMBER



**NAME.....DOUGLAS**

**RANK.....INVADER**

**SERIAL NUMBER .....44-35788**

I am sure there are many of us for whom a place or location will, forever, hold our fascination, for whatever reason. For me, the iconic airport of Van Nuys, California has an endearing quality that, right from my first ever visit almost 30 years ago, remains as strong as ever. Why Van Nuys ? The sheer variety and diversity in aviation the field holds is just as special as its rich contribution to aviation history.

It was this history that first brought me here. It seemed the airfield had something interesting or unique around every corner. Thirty years ago the place was still a warren of side roads and leafy lanes leading to endless hangars, with long forgotten and abandoned airframes littering every ramp. Some of these were real rarities and almost all with an unusual story to tell. Van Nuys was also where the incredible family of Guppy outsize cargo transports was born. Designed by the infamous Jack Conroy, the conversion was carried out by On-Mark, who was also responsible for possibly the most successful post war corporate transport the On-Mark Marksman conversion of post war A-26 Invaders, the last word in sumptuous executive travel before the invention of



biz-jets. On my first visit, derelict propliners shared space with wrecked GA types, whilst behind open doors were the beginnings of the many ambitious warbird restoration projects the field has produced.



It was on one of these visits to Van Nuys that I first made the acquaintance of one very special person with a similar ambitious project, Mr Howard Keck. A very successful business man with a passion for airplanes and their history that is evident from the first meeting. Inside Mr Keck's particular hangar was a partially dismantled Douglas A-26C Invader airframe, rather appropriate for Van Nuys I thought, which he told would become the last word in Invader

restorations when it was finished. Unlike the On-Mark examples before it, this Invader had not succumbed to any modicum of 'civilianization' and was, according to Howard, the best example of its kind anywhere in the world. Although in a slightly dishevelled state, in the early stages of a full 'ground-up' restoration, it was clear that this airframe was completely intact and, would indeed, become a beautiful airplane once again, something I would eagerly look forward to seeing when the time came. Over the ensuing years Mr Keck and I remained in regular contact on the progress of the restoration and, upon hearing that the Invader was ready to return to the air, very keenly and happily accepted his very generous invitation to come and fly with and photograph it, the results of which illustrate this article.

Perhaps not the best known or recognised example of America's prodigious wartime bomber production, it subsequently gained notoriety for having served in more theatres of conflict than any of its equals. Korea, Vietnam, the Belgian Congo, Biafra, Indonesia all operated Invaders and it



gained favour with many Central America dictatorships, where the type flew with the armed forces of many of the countries in this region. Even today, Invaders continue to do battle in the Pacific Northwest fighting an enemy that can never be bombed to the negotiating table, forest fires !

A product of the legendary designer Ed Heinemann, the Invader suffered a slow and protracted development, eventually reaching combat units in Europe and the south west Pacific during the closing stages of World War Two. The high speed and sleek design featured an innovative and highly advanced laminar flow wing design, bestowing terrific performance to such a large aircraft



and one of the important factors for its later popularity in the post war corporate world. Its combat qualities included two remotely-controlled gun turrets equipped with twin .50 calibre machine guns, controlled from the gunner's position in the rear fuselage, which could be augmented by various nose armament configurations, by virtue of inter-changeable nose sections, depending up-

on the Invader sub-type. This was all incorporated around an immensely long weapons bay, intended to carry aerial torpedos, though never actually used operationally. Early models had a rather clumsy cockpit glazing configuration, which lead to problems in early service, which forced changes in operational mission formations due to the poor visibility to the forward right from the single pilot seating position.

These troubles initially lead to the type being blacklisted by both the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Air Forces, though it excelled in the European theatre of operations where it was seen as the perfect replacement for the A-20 Havoc, eventually replacing most Bombardment Groups' Martin B-26 Marauders and North American B-25s. The canopy problem was eventually overcome in late 1944, with the adoption of the now familiar style glazing came to the fore, though the new bulged design prevented the upper turret guns being fixed in a forward position, for strafing by the pilot.

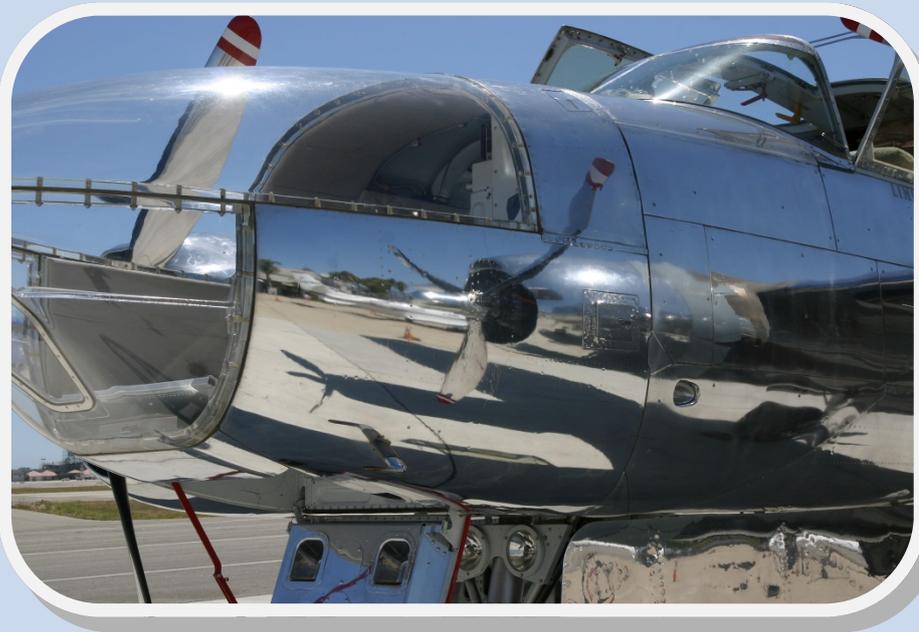
Douglas A-26C Invader N126HK turns heads where ever is goes and is the mark against which all other warbird restorations should be judged. Unlike many contemporaries, which seem to be as much 'new-build' as genuine original parts, this vintage 65 year old shows no such dubious provenance. This Invader's value is further enhanced by never having suffered any form of 'civilianisation' following military demob, instead it remained in complete stock military configuration, quite a rarity indeed for a survivor of this breed.

With an immense affection for the type, proud owner Howard ensured the restoration of this classic was without compromise. Although the exact history of 44-35788 immediately after it was saved from the smelter in the late 1940s has not been documented with any certainty. It is known that the L.B. Smith Aircraft Corporation of Miami, Florida purchased the aircraft from the War Assets Administration sometime in the late 1940s. L B Smith specialised in the refurbishment and modification of



former military C-46 and C-82 airframes as well as producing components for airliner interiors. The company hit upon the idea of using the Invader airframe as a basis for a completely new executive transport, named the Biscayne. After one conversion, the company decided to re-think things and scratch build a whole new fuselage, which was mated to Invader wings and empennage, which it named the Tempo. L.B. Smith were, ultimately, unsuccessful in their venture into aircraft manufacturing, beaten by the more popular yet no more practical Invader conversions from On-Mark, however, not before they had acquired a substantial stockpile of airframes from which to draw their potential conversion material, which included N8058E, the one time 44-35788.

It was then rumoured to have been owned by a wealthy Texan businessman in the oil industry and covertly flown by the CIA in connection with the Bay of Pigs incident against the communists in Cuba in the late 1950s. Subsequently, in 1962, it was noted in outside storage at Charlotte, South Carolina where it languished until as late as 1972, remaining in completely stock military layout, with the exception of a missing upper gun turret. In 1977 it was acquired by warbird collector John Stokes and moved to



his base at San Marcos, Texas. Here it remained for the next few years, during which time ownership transferred to Joe Mabee of Midland, Texas between 1981 and '82, suggesting a possible connection to the Confederate Air Force. This was short lived, however, as in November 1982 the Invader was donated to the EAA Aviation Foundation Museum, at their headquarters in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. A long restoration by

Wiley Sanders in Troy, Alabama was begun in 1987, eventually being returned to Oshkosh in 1994 and placed on static display, occasionally being dragged out to join the more active warbirds on display during the annual EAA Oshkosh airshow week in July every year. Upkeep of the Invader was more than the EAA Museum could manage and eventually it was decided its future would be more secure elsewhere. In 2000, Courtesy Aircraft of Rockford, Illinois were contracted to market the sale of the Invader on the museum's behalf

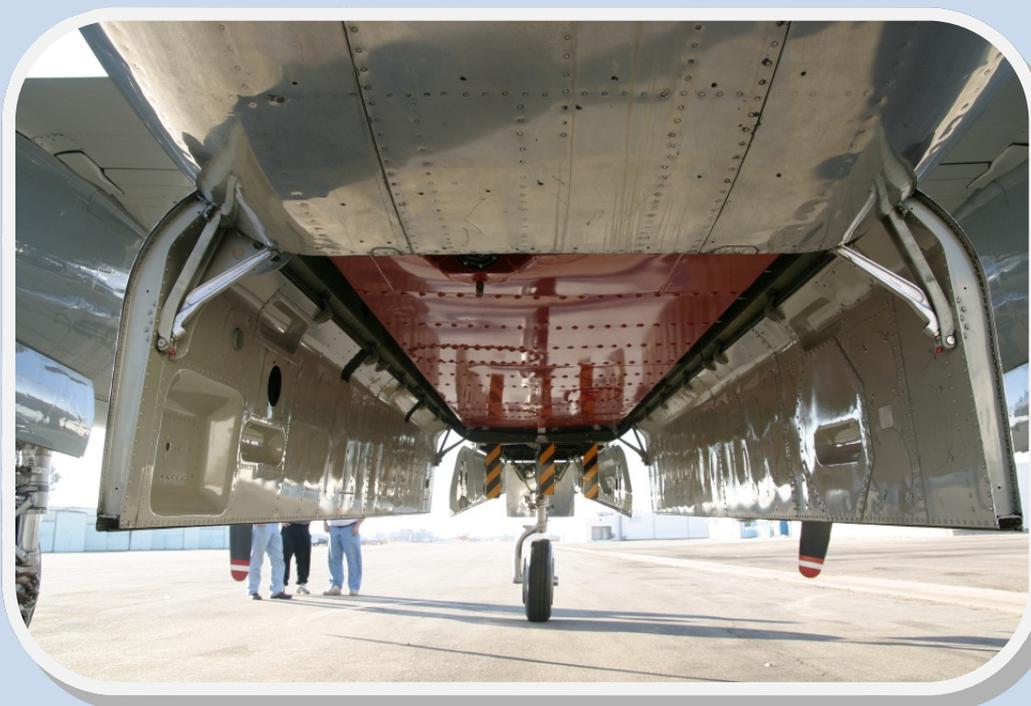
Says Howard, "I have always thought that the A26 was the John Wayne (maybe Cary Grant too) of bombers, so to speak, and that it deserved a lot of respect". With such thoughts and a long time passion for the type, Howard made an offer to Courtesy Aircraft and in April 2001 became the new owner, when it was registered to Howard Keck/A-26 Company Inc, Van Nuys, California as N126HK. "The reason I purchased the A26 was because it was the lowest airframe time A-26 in the world, with little more than 1,200 hours on the airframe" and so began a three-year and very expensive restoration", which was undertaken by famed aircraft restoration guru and ace air-racing pilot Matt Jackson. Incredibly, when Howard acquired the aircraft it was still in completely stock military condition and un-restored and, although it had undergone a restoration of

sorts in the 1980s, it was rarely, if ever, flown. After being prepared for delivery to Van Nuys, about one hour into the ferry flight home the right engine catastrophically blew up, Howard comments “... luckily, Matt was in the left seat not me. He feathered the prop, retarded the engine and flew right back to Rockford, Illinois”. Howard shipped out a spare engine he had in the hangar, which Matt replaced and flew it back to California without further incident. Once safely inside Howard’s large hangar on Daily Drive at Van Nuys airport, the three year long restoration started.



The renovation took the aircraft back to bare bones, revealing some of its unusual history, including bullet holes in the tail area, probable evidence of its nefarious activities concerning the Cuban Bay of Pigs action. Where possible brand new replacement parts were used in what Howard describes as a “a fairly boiler plate restoration, costing \$3Million, which is fairly standard for an aircraft of its age”. With nothing of the original airframe modified or changed to accommodate a civilian life after its demob, this Invader is a truly rare beast and provided the perfect opportunity to re-create the airframe as it would have been back in 1944, in fact probably better condition owing to the loving care lavished upon it. Well heeled with new wheels and brakes, one of the few concessions to modernity in the restoration was the use of a nose wheel from a Convair 440, fitted with a new tyre from a Gulfstream 3 jet, as used on a number of A-26 firebombers.

Internally, the cockpit was fully refurbished with all new instruments, including some essential new equipment as befits today’s modern, safety conscious world. One unusual addition specified by the new owner was the installation of huge auxiliary bomb-bay fuel tanks, to allow non-stop transit from California to the Hawaiian Islands, which Howard planned though, is yet to do. Two tanks, one of 125 US gallon in the upper forward part of the bay, supplemented by an enormous



675 US gallon tank which extends the entire length of the lower bomb-bay area, was intended to extend the bombers’ ferry range for delivery flights. From a total production run of 2,529 airframes, built at Long Beach, California and Tulsa, Oklahoma, only the first and very last examples of the type were delivered from the factory in a painted scheme, the remainder being completed with



nothing but US national insignia and the plethora of military stenciling to sully the bare metal finish. As if to emphasize this point, and sparing no expense, the tremendous effort to return this beauty back to her former glory was topped off with, quite possibly, the most stunning polished finish one could ever imagine, making the Invader shine better than new, ready for her first post restoration flight on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2004.

Such was the sight as Howard welcomed me at his hangar, to take up the generous invitation for a rare air-to-air sortie. Having been here before, on a very similar 'mission' a few years ago, I was keenly aware that such plans can, and often do, go awry at the last moment for any number of reasons. This time, however, everything worked like clock-work. The aircraft was in fine order, sitting patiently outside its luxuriously appointed hangar; my Beech V-tail Bonanza photo-plane was ready alongside, with both rear cabin windows removed to allow un-obstructed views, as we chatted and planned the sortie waiting for the right time to launch in order to optimise the beautiful late afternoon light. As we taxied to the hold at Van Nuys, biz-jets queuing alongside us enquired as to the type, pedigree and history of the 50 odd year old beauty that was easily the best looking aircraft at the hold for departure. Cleared to take off, we watched the Invader accelerate ahead of us before we began our roll and the race to catch it. With the Invader easy to pick out against the sunset ahead of us, the Bonanza was running in the yellow arc on the air-speed indicator to make the rendezvous out towards the coast, near Point Mugu.



Once both aircraft were safely in a close formation, so began one of the most delightful and picturesque photo sorties I have ever experienced, in the still late afternoon air the polished skin of the Invader sparkled against the long shadows on the mountains below.



At times, the two aircraft were so close the deep rumble of the Invader's engines was clearly audible even over the wind noise through the open windows and formation signals could be made by hand motions rather than radio calls.









After some 45 minutes of cavorting around capturing every conceivable angle and pose, we closed up for a tight formation return to Van Nuys, descending through the familiar southern Californian smog, which at this time of the day against a setting sun, becomes a murky curtain of haze.



With permission from the tower, we continued to follow the Invader down final approach, close to its right wingtip, flying low down the parallel western taxiway to capture the touchdown from the air, before we climbed away to re-join for our final, to land. Magical.



