

Enduring Heritage

A Dauntless SBD recovered from the bottom of Lake Michigan now flies high at Chicago's Midway Airport.

BY DICK SMITH



Midway Airport's Douglas SBD-4 Dauntless hangs at the center of an exhibit commemorating the Battle of Midway.

cables were attached to the vintage dive bomber, and it was pulled to the surface. The Dauntless was then taken to Crowley's Yacht Yard, a boat storage facility on the South Side of the city, where it was partially disassembled and washed down with fresh water.

Navy records indicate that more than 100 various carrier aircraft crashed into Lake Michigan while involved in carrier qualification exercises during WWII. During the war years, the Navy had converted two old paddle-wheel, coal-burning steamers, *Sable* (IX-81) and *Wolverine*, to a type of aircraft carrier that was used for training operations. With 550-foot flight decks lying comparatively

THE LOG OF USS WOLVERINE (IX-64) on September 14, 1944, listed the crash of a Douglas SBD-4 Dauntless into Lake Michigan in the usual military facts-only manner: "0935. Commenced flight operations. 1001. SBD [B-16] crashed into lake off starboard bow...in 70 feet of water. Pilot: Ensign A.G. O'Dell, USNR, was picked up by C.G. [Coast Guard] 83476. 1003. Stopped engine. 1012. C.G. 83476 came alongside with pilot. 1013. Commenced steaming on various courses at various speeds for flight operations." The log went on to report that Ensign O'Dell suffered the following injuries: "(a) Minor contusion of right shoulder. (b) Numerous jagged lacerations of the face, chin and forehead."

As to the aircraft, Douglas Dauntless SBD-4 Bureau No. 10575, there is no further mention in the log of the aircraft or its disposition. Its exact location was unknown until 1988, when it was discovered by a crew from the Chicago-based firm of A&T Recovery. Using a sonar device, the A&T team located the World War II dive bomber in about 85 feet of water near downtown Chicago.

In 1991, using a remotely piloted underwater vehicle, the recovery team cleared away much of the sediment and bottom debris that had accumulated in the nearly 50 years that the aircraft had rested on the floor of Lake Michigan. The airframe appeared to have quite a bit of damage from the crash, and the landing gear had been ripped off. Since all naval aircraft are designed to be lifted,

low over the lake waters, *Wolverine* and *Sable* were a far cry from frontline vessels. They did, however, provide a suitable substitute in the qualifying of as many as 15,000 pilots for operations on ships serving in the battle zones. Some of those students had received training at Glenview Naval Air Station, in the northwest suburbs of Chicago.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM of Naval Aviation took charge of the recovered Dauntless and contracted with Black Shadow Aviation to do a complete restoration. The partially disassembled aircraft was loaded on a flatbed trailer and trucked to a restoration facility near Jacksonville, Fla., for the year-long project. The first task in the restoration was to wash out all the dirt and silt that remained inside the dive bomber—nearly 1,000 pounds of mud and debris.

When found, the Dauntless had been resting on its belly on the lake bottom. Due to contact with the lake bed and the crash, the aluminum on the underside of the fuselage had to be removed and replaced. The metal on the wings also showed signs of severe decay, damage from the crash and electrolysis caused by the aluminum reacting to minerals in the lake water. The wing ribs, however, proved to be salvageable.

There were a few surprises during the renovation. For example, one of the restorers came across a watertight compartment while he was removing the aluminum from

DEPARTMENT OF AVIATION, CITY OF CHICAGO

the center section of the wing (the Navy had designed this compartment to help keep the aircraft afloat after a water landing, in order to give crew members time to evacuate the aircraft before it sank). When the restorer opened the compartment, a pair of ladies' bloomers fell out. The restorers decided that the underwear must have been put in the compartment as a joke.

Another item found on board was one of the crew's mapping boards. Even though the acetate cover on the board was yellowed from time and the effects of the lake water, distinct pencil markings were still visible, indicating where the pilot would find the carrier and the heading he was to fly to intercept the vessel.

One of the most pleasant surprises was the excellent quality of the aluminum used by Douglas Aircraft to build the Dauntless. Wherever the metal had not made contact with the bottom of the lake, it cleaned up well and looked almost new once the crew had finished with it.

The cockpit section turned out to be particularly difficult to reconstruct. The restoration crews tried to salvage as much of the original as possible, but in the end virtually all of the instruments had to be remade.

AFTER MORE THAN a year of work, the SBD was completed—but not in Navy colors. In April 1996, the aircraft was shipped to the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force (NMUSAF) at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Restoration specialists there painted it as an Army Air Corps A-24 Banshee in World War II camouflage colors of olive drab and neutral gray. Number 10575 was exhibited in the markings of an aircraft from the 91st Bomb Squadron, 27th Bomb Group, as it would have appeared in the Philippine Islands in 1941. In reality, the A-24s never made it to the islands. The Japanese invasion of the area resulted in the shipment of dive bombers being diverted to Australia instead.

In all, the U.S. Army Air Corps received a total 168 A-24s, which were essentially SBD-3s with modified electronics, no tail hook and a large pneumatic tail wheel. The Army had taken an interest in the aircraft because of its dive-bombing capabilities after witnessing the Germans' success with their Junker Ju-87B Stukas in France and Poland. Banshees operated in the Dutch East Indies for a short time, but their lack of success and high losses caused them to be withdrawn from frontline service.

In 1997 the City Council of Chicago passed a resolution expressing interest in having the Dauntless returned to the city to become a major part of an exhibit at the redesigned Midway Airport. (In 1949 the Chicago City Council had changed the name of Municipal Airport to Midway Airport to honor those who served in the historic battle.) The

city had previously put a Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat on display at O'Hare International Airport similar to the one flown by Medal of Honor recipient Lt. Cmdr. Edward "Butch" O'Hare. As a result of the City Council's resolution, the Dauntless Memorial Committee was formed, with many of the city's largest corporations donating significant amounts of money and services toward the project. The committee's major contributors consisted of McDonald's Corporation, the Boeing Company, the Tribune McCormick Foundation, A. Epstein and Sons International Architects, the National Museum of Naval Aviation, A&T Recovery, Crowley's Yacht Yard, Leopardo Construction Company and Southwest Airlines. Along with contributions from many other companies, foundations, aviation enthusiasts and private donors, more than a million dollars in cash and in-kind services were donated to bring the Dauntless to Chicago and provide for its exhibition.

The committee, on behalf of the city, requested that the NMUSAF send the SBD to Chicago, where it would be a centerpiece in the exhibit at Midway Airport. After museum officials repainted the dive bomber in Pacific theater Navy colors of blue-gray topsides and light gray undersides, it was disassembled and trucked to the Windy City.

When the Dauntless arrived at the boat yard on the city's South Side, where it had originally been taken after being recovered from Lake Michigan more than a decade earlier, officials discovered that it had been painted with the wrong identification number on the fuselage sides. Quick work corrected the oversight, and the Dauntless had to now be readied for the trip to its new home.

In preparation for the dive bomber to be exhibited at the airport, employees from the Leopardo Construction Company broke down a portion of the east wall of the Midway terminal building. Then a scaffold was built and set into place to receive the aircraft.

Since Midway is an active commercial airport, all preparations for placing the SBD inside the facility had to comply with government security regulations imposed as a result of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It was decided that the actual installation would be done on a Friday night, with assembly and final installation completed on the following Saturday evening, when airport operations and travelers would be at a minimum.

At 9 p.m. on Friday, August 20, 2004, a crane lifted the disassembled Dauntless up to the opening in the terminal wall. A crew then carefully maneuvered the 6,000-pound aircraft through the opening and pushed it inside. The SBD next had to be guided 800 feet through airport corridors to a point across from the food court on Concourse A.

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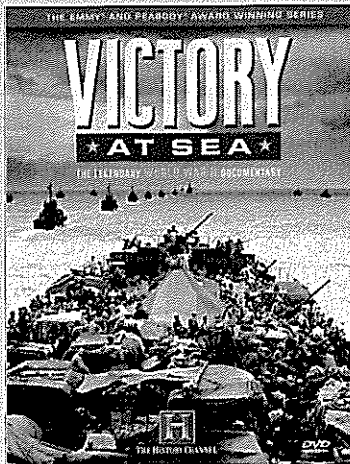
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During the next evening and into the early morning hours, the aircraft was reassembled and lifted into position in the concourse. By 4 a.m. on Sunday, August 22, the major portion of the installation project was complete.

At the dedication ceremony, which took place on September 2, 2004, Mayor Richard M. Daley said: "This airplane is much more than a museum piece or a historical curiosity. It is a symbol of American values, a tribute to the courage and skill of our armed forces, and a reminder of just how much we owe to the men and women who made up what has rightly been called 'the greatest generation.'"

The Dauntless now hangs in a place of honor at the center of an exhibit commemorating the Battle of Midway. It has been repainted with the side identification number "B-3," flown by Ensign Frederick T. Weber during the Pacific battle. Weber served as a member of the 1st Division of Bombing Squadron 6 (VB-6), assigned to the carrier *Enterprise* on June 4, 1942.

In the morning and late afternoon, Bombing 6 made two attacks on the Japanese Mobile Fleet that had been poised to invade Midway Atoll. In the first action, Weber in his SBD, the third aircraft in the first section, dived on the Japanese carrier *Kaga*. The VB-6 after-action report stated that "at least three 1000 pound bomb hits were observed on that target and it became a mass of flame and smoke." Since only three of the aircraft in Weber's squadron carried 1,000-pound bombs, the official report concluded that he and two others from his squadron had apparently scored direct hits on the carrier. Weber survived the first attack of the day and returned to *Enterprise* to refuel and rearm.

That afternoon VB-6, along with aircraft from VB-3, based on the carrier *Yorktown*, again attacked the Japanese fleet. The dive bombers had to go without fighter escort, because the Grumman F4F-4 Wildcats were needed to guard their carriers against a counterattack by the remaining Japanese flattop, *Hiryu*. As Weber and his colleagues arrived over their target, they were jumped by a combat air patrol of Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero fighters. Weber was still getting in position to begin his dive on *Hiryu* when his Dauntless was hit by enemy fire and crashed into the ocean. On July 3, 1942, the Navy officially listed him and his gunner, Aviation Ordnanceman 3rd Class E.L. Hilbert, as killed in action.

For his role in the sinking of *Kaga*, Weber was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross and retroactively promoted to lieutenant junior grade. The replica of the aircraft he flew during that last mission now holds a place of honor at Midway Airport, reminding all who see it of the dedication and sacrifice of those who fought and died at the Battle of Midway. †