

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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VENGEANCE VICISSITUDE - RAAF DIVE BOMBERS IN NEW GUINEA

Enduring controversy surrounds the RAAF's use of the US-produced Vultee Vengeance dive-bomber during the New Guinea air campaign in World War II. The period of the deployment was not long, nor was the aircraft's service conspicuously good or bad, but debate has continued to focus on whether the RAAF high command was wise to commit this particular aircraft type to that theatre at the time that it did, and the manner of its employment. These are issues with lessons that any evolving force might pause to think about.

The Vengeance was never seen as a war-winning aircraft. Its origins lay in the Vultee Aircraft Corporation's V-72 design from the late 1930s – a time when Germany's Ju-87 Stuka dive-bomber was being operationally tested in Spain's civil war. Built with private not government funding, the V-72 was intended for sale to foreign markets and found buyers in Brazil, China, France, Turkey and the USSR.

After the fall of France in 1940, its order for the V-72 was taken over by Britain, making the RAF a major operator of the Vengeance—most notably in India and Burma. While Britain acquired more under Lend-Lease arrangements, the Americans themselves were not impressed with the Vengeance. They believed it was an inferior type and unsuitable for combat, and accordingly withdrew it from service with US Army Air Corps units.

Australia largely came to this aircraft by accident, rather than design. Indeed, the decision to buy the Vengeance was taken without regard to its role in the RAAF force structure or doctrine. In early 1942, with fears of a Japanese invasion of Australia at their peak, the Curtin Government was desperate to procure large numbers of additional aircraft to achieve the planned expansion of the RAAF to 73 squadrons. The External Affairs Minister, Dr H.V. Evatt, visited Washington in April to obtain assurances that America would supply Australia's needs. He cabled triumphantly that he had succeeded in obtaining an

allocation of 475 aircraft, with some of these—'probably dive-bombers and fighters'—being made available quickly. It hardly mattered to Canberra that it would be taking American cast-offs.

Eventually the RAAF received some 342 Vultee Vengeance aircraft. Although the first of these were received at the end of May 1942, substantial numbers only began to arrive from April 1943—by which time, the crisis they had been meant

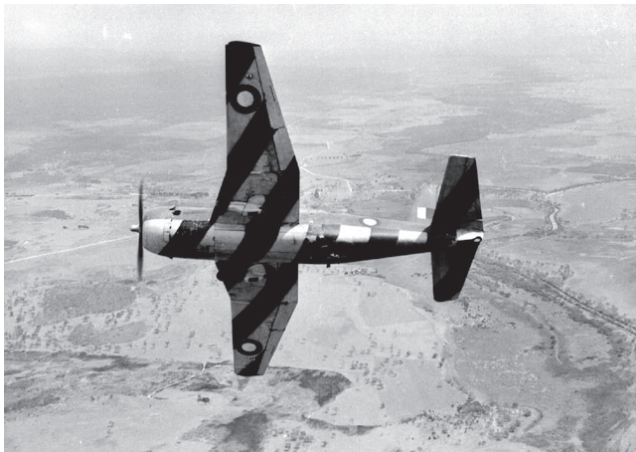
to help avert had effectively passed. The RAAF proved to be in no great hurry to commit these aircraft to action either, although this, too, seems to have been as much a product of poor administration rather than actual intent. During September 1943, the commander of the US 5th Air Force in Australia, Lieutenant-General George Kenny, had requested that the RAAF make available a mobile strike force for operations in the New Britain Area.

The RAAF responded by raising a force of two wings, No 77 Dive Bomber Wing and No 78 Fighter Wing, as part of 10 Operational Group.

The deployment of the three squadrons of 77 Wing proved to be an unacceptably tardy affair. Although 18 Vengeances of No 24 Squadron were immediately sent to New Guinea from Bankstown, NSW, the other two units—Nos 23 and 21 Squadrons—were not dispatched until late December 1943 and 18 January 1944, respectively. The protracted nature of the deployment was hardly an outstanding display of RAAF mobility, since it was caused by a lack of precise planning and transport capacity (although the Service was mainly dependent on American sea and air transport facilities). Unfortunately, 24 Squadron's operational debut also proved less than auspicious. This was largely due to disarray within the unit caused by the fragmented manner of its deployment, but resulted in Kenny's forward commander, Brigadier General Ennis Whitehead, disgustedly reporting that 'we have never gotten a mission out of that unit' and complaining about the standard of 24 Squadron's training.



Whitehead had a point. No 24 Squadron did not record its first strike until 19 December 1943, with only intermittent operations being flown into mid-January 1944. On 16 January, the unit moved to Newton Field, Nadzab, from where it finally commenced daily operations three days later. The two remaining flying units of 77 Wing did not reach Nadzab until 10 and 21 February, respectively. The first strike by the combined squadrons was flown on 22 February. On 8 March the Wing flew its final mission (a bombing raid by 36 aircraft against Rempi village), after which it was returned to Australia and ultimately re-equipped with long-range B-24 Liberator bombers. In the six months of the Vengeance presence in New Guinea, the total of combat sorties flown by all squadrons of 77 Wing totalled 605. By comparison, the three Kittyhawk squadrons of 78 Fighter Wing had flown 784 dive bomber escort missions over the same period, in addition to mounting combat air patrols and escorting American heavy bombers and transport aircraft.



The Official Historian, George Odgers, states that there were three significant reasons for the withdrawal of RAAF Vengeance aircraft from operations. First, they were inefficient when compared to other advanced aircraft available to the 5th Air Force commander. Second, these modern aircraft were becoming available in large numbers which, thirdly, placed acute pressure on space available on a limited number of airfields. It was claimed that a fully loaded Vengeance required the full 6,000 feet of the Newton runway to become airborne—an assertion with which an experienced Vengeance pilot disagrees. Another factor cited against the type was that it was susceptible to repeated engine failures in New Guinea. This seems highly questionable. Although the available records are incomplete, there are only eight recorded incidents of forced landings or aborted take-offs

during operations, only two of which are noted as ‘engine failure’. In fact, 23 Squadron boasted of a 90 per cent serviceability record in February 1944, so the reliability and maintainability of the aircraft does not appear to have been a major issue. The more important consideration may well have been the difficulty of getting logistics into the theatre, with implications for sustainability.

The strategic situation in which the RAAF found itself in New Guinea is another factor that should be taken into account. After the defensive battles of late 1942 and early 1943 had been won by the Allies, planning was in progress for an advance along the north coast of New Guinea, ultimately to fulfil General Douglas MacArthur’s pledge to return to the Philippines. Even though it was never intended by the Americans to take the RAAF with them to the Philippines—as Kenny actually advised the RAAF operational commander, Air Vice-Marshal William Bostock, on 27 September 1944—in reality the RAAF was not equipped to undertake such a strategic role anyway. Essentially, the RAAF in New Guinea was operating in a tactical role, and the Vengeance deployment must be seen from that perspective. No 77 Wing was deployed in an Army co-operation role, supporting the Australian 7th Division, while the 5th Air Force was planning strategic operations for which the Vengeance was inappropriate.

- *The procurement history of the Vultee Vengeance demonstrates the need to align force structure, doctrine and equipment*
- *The importance of meticulous planning to ensure adequacy of operational capability cannot be over emphasised*
- *Capability management is crucial for the optimum use of air power’s inherent characteristics to contribute effectively to larger campaign aims*

The importance of forward planning and adequacy of logistic support to maintain cutting edge capability of war-winning quality was demonstrated by the induction and operational employment of the Vultee Vengeance in service with the RAAF during World War II.



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