

When Plumbing Fixtures Ruled the Skies

Humor and American Ingenuity at Work

BY JAMES P. BUSHA

By the time the first shot was fired in 1914 during the “war to end all wars,” the airplane was barely out of its infancy stage. The early “knights of the air” puttering around in their mostly wooden and fabric-covered flying contraptions were mere observers to the large-scale battles that lay below them. As they flew over the spiderlike trenches, gaining intelligence on enemy troop movements and buildups, pilots often encountered a fellow enemy observer nearby. As they flew by one another, they periodically exchanged a crisp salute or gentle wave because, after all, these were chivalrous gentlemen—that was until the sticks and stones started flying.

As the war on the ground progressed, so too did the action in the air. These men of high esteem and honor soon adopted an almost medieval tactic that began with one of the observation pilots throwing a rock, heavy chain, or railroad spike at the other pilot in attempts to knock his foe down. It wasn’t until someone brought a brick to a gunfight that aerial combat forever changed. As soon as machine guns replaced pistols and bombs

replaced rocks, the killing machines of the air drastically changed how future wars would be fought. Although the horrors of war continued on and off for decades, some of these men, particularly those sent out to bomb strategic targets, sought to introduce a little humor into their daily missions as a way of coping with these inherent dangers. Here are just a few examples of some of the unconventional ordnance they dropped.

Opposite, top: Skyraiders had two wars in which they could deliver plumbing ordinance: Korea and Vietnam. (Photo by Budd Davisson)

Center left: A Douglas AD-4 Skyraider with Attack Squadron 195 (VA-195) Dambusters waits for its next mission to unload its “Special Ordnance.” (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

Center right: Not to be outdone by their Navy brothers during the Korean War, members of VA-25 mounted a toilet to an underwing pylon of an A-1H Skyraider for a mission over North Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

Bottom: Armorers from the 388th BG load 500-pound “Easter eggs” for special delivery to Adolf Hitler for his April birthday, 1944. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)





Capt. Max H. Mortensen,
Sgt. Gerald E. Paquette,
Sgt. William S. Baily, Sgt.
Talmadge O. Epps, and
Sgt. Neal H. Ryan are all
smiles with their specially
crafted kitchen sink they are
about to drop on a Japanese
target. (Photo courtesy of
James P. Busha)

SINK ATTACK!

By Lt. Roman H. Ohnemus, U.S. Army Air Forces, Retired

SOUTH PACIFIC, SEPTEMBER 1944

The 345th Bomb Group (BG) was first activated at Columbia Army Air Base, South Carolina, in November 1942 and was christened the "Air Apaches." As a B-25 bomber group, it was broken into four bomb squadrons (BS): the 498th, known as the "Falcons"; the 499th, "Bats Outta Hell"; the 500th, the "Rough Raiders"; and the 501st, the "Black Panthers."

The 345th BG was sent to the Southwest Pacific Theater in 1943 and began flying missions from Port Moresby, New Guinea, earning the recognition of the first Air Force combat group sent to the Pacific in World War II. I joined them in mid-June 1944 and was assigned to the 501st Squadron, flying my first combat mission in late July 1944.

Although the twin-engine North American Aviation B-25 Mitchell was originally designed as a medium-level bomber, the crews in the Southwest Pacific Theater quickly augmented our B-25s into low-level strafers, bombers, and all-around tormentors of the Japanese. To accomplish this new role, modifications were made to the B-25s. The bottom turret was removed and replaced with a fuel tank, which allowed for extended range. The three .50-caliber machine guns in the nose, operated by the bombardier-navigator, were replaced with four forward-firing .50-caliber machine guns along with twin side-pack .50-caliber machine guns mounted on either side of the lower fuselage. A "flying fortress" in its own

right, the newly improved gunship employed eight forward-firing .50-caliber machine guns along with the twin .50 calibers in the top turret and tail, and a .50-caliber machine gun at each waist position.

During WW II, the 345th BG was credited with sinking 260 enemy ships and destroying 260 Japanese planes on the ground and more than 100 in aerial combat during the 26 months of continuous combat. But one of its most unusual missions occurred on September 19, 1944 when one of my sister squadrons, the 500th BS, loaded some "special ordnance" in the belly of a B-25 called *Rita's Wagon*.

We all knew that war was serious business—life and death, actually. But as "kids in control of killing machines," we still had a sense of humor and good old American ingenuity. Two sergeants in the Intelligence section of the 500th BS decided to construct a faux two-faucet, single-drain kitchen sink out of metal in their spare time. Once completed, it was painted bright white and signed by

several members of the squadron. The 500th BS commanding officer (CO) Capt. Max Mortensen had his armorers load the sink into his Mitchell bomber, with the hope that he would drop it right in the laps of the surprised Japanese at Sidate Airdrome. But due to a shorter-than-expected approach during the bomb run, the sink ended up in a palm grove on the outskirts of town. Regardless of the damage assessment, it was a direct hit for morale within the bomb group.

Note: *Rita's Wagon* was the last B-25D that was transferred out of the squadron, with a total of 18 months in combat and 100 missions under its belt.

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Low-level B-25s roar over Dagua, New Guinea, unleashing parafrags over a line of Japanese airplanes. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)



WHEN PLUMBING FIXTURES RULED THE SKIES

EVERYTHING AND THE KITCHEN SINK

By Cmdr. Marvin Quaid, U.S. Navy, Retired
KOREA, 1951-52

The Douglas Skyraider was simply a marvelous airplane to fly and fight with—too bad we didn't have it ready in time for WW II. It was faster than any of its predecessors, carried a bigger payload, and could dive almost straight down on a target. It was as strong as an ox, with that big, reliable Wright R-3350 engine pulling us along, and yet it was as graceful and stable as a tightrope walker when it came to landing aboard a carrier. In spite of its behemoth size, the Skyraider had a relatively small cockpit, with every button, switch, and handle just an arm's length away. Most of the time, our squadron, VA-195 "Dambusters," carried an assortment of ordnance consisting of either three 2,000-pound bombs along with some rockets on the outer-wing stations or three 1,000-pound bombs and 12 250-pound bombs on the hardpoints. The bottom line to flying a heavily loaded Skyraider from a



Right: Lt. j.g. Carl Austin was the lucky pilot to drop "The Kitchen Sink" over North Korea. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

Below: Ensign Marvin Quaid, co-conspirator for the Korean "sink drop," poses on the wing of a VA-195 Skyraider. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

carrier deck off the Korean coast was that it didn't matter how much or what you strapped beneath its wings as long as the wind blew right down the deck.

When I returned for my second cruise during the Korean War in 1952, I became the



flight schedule officer on USS *Princeton* (CVA-37), with VA-195 assigned to Carrier Air Group 19 (CVG-19). I can remember that, during World War II, the saying among aviators was, "We hit them with everything but the kitchen sink." So it was with that thought in mind—and the urge not to be outdone by our forefathers—that the maintenance and ordnance gang on the ship came up with a brilliant idea: strap a kitchen sink to a bomb! Some of the ship's sailors, led by an old WW II salt who happened to be the ordnance chief, fabricated the sink in the metal shop. They painted it bright white, installed a drain tube, and even went so far as to stencil the words "The Kitchen Sink" on the side of it, just in case you couldn't figure out what it was. Once the sink was strapped to the underside of a 1,000-pound bomb, a small squabble began to erupt in the squadron—everybody wanted to drop that sucker!

The CO, with his Solomon-like wisdom, told me to set up a raffle to pick the lucky winner before we had a mutiny on our hands. Lt. j.g. Carl Austin won the drawing, and I won the right to be his wingman on the next bombing mission. Unfortunately, this would be no milk run as the target selected was the heavily defended North Korean capital city of Pyongyang. To make matters worse, the weather went sour on us and the flak was thick, accurate, and intense. Even the MiG-15s made a run on us—thankfully, with no success. I locked onto Austin's wing as we made our bomb run onto a military storage unit. We made a quick go of it as the ground fire was thicker than anything I had ever encountered before. Our Skyraiders unloaded everything we had hanging from our wings, including that kitchen sink, and we tried to get out of there as fast as we could. Regrettably, our operations officer, Lt. Cmdr. Lynn F. DuTemple, did not pull out of his dive and was lost in combat. There was both sadness and jubilation when we returned to the ship, minus one American-made sink.

On our return back to the United States, we docked at Naval Air Station Alameda and were greeted with a large banner that said, "Welcome Home, Lt. Austin—from the Plumbers of Local 38, San Francisco Bay." The plumbers greeted us on the dock and made Austin an honorary lifetime member of their union for installing that sink in downtown Pyongyang.

Note: Austin later became an F-4 Phantom Squadron CO during the Vietnam War and was killed on a mission over North Vietnam.



Wearing its early dark blue paint scheme, the Skyraider first proved its worth in providing close air support in Korea. (Photo by Paul Bowen)

ONCE THE SINK WAS STRAPPED TO THE UNDERSIDE OF A 1,000-POUND BOMB, A SMALL SQUABBLE BEGAN TO ERUPT IN THE SQUADRON—EVERYBODY WANTED TO DROP THAT SUCKER!

SKYRAIDER FLUSH

By Capt. Clinton Johnson, U.S. Navy Reserve, Retired
VIETNAM, 1965

When the toilet ordnance dropped, it tilted forward and seemed to stop in midair, almost taking out a fellow Skyraider. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)



AS THE TOILET BOMB TUMBLED DOWNWARD TOWARD THE TARGET, A FORWARD AIR CONTROLLER FLYING NEARBY IN AN O-1 BIRD DOG REPORTED THAT IT "WHISTLED" ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THE TARGET.

workhorse and literally a “flying dump truck” when it came to carrying a bomb load. From napalm, radar pods, fuel tanks, bombs, rockets, and even “special stores” (which were also known as “tactical nuclear bombs”), the Skyraider could carry everything—including a kitchen sink. We had all heard the stories about the “sink” mission in Korea, and as navy tradition goes, we were not about to be outdone by our predecessors.

As our squadron was getting close to finishing our first cruise aboard USS *Midway*, a couple of our ordnance guys stumbled across some of the ship’s company sailors about to throw a cracked toilet overboard. Thankfully, the quick-thinking ordnance men spared the toilet from its burial at sea and claimed the commode for our squadron’s use. The toilet was brought below deck, out of eyesight from any brass, and was polished to a high gloss shine. Our VA-25 Squadron decal, which displayed a black fist holding a red lightning bolt, was applied to the side of the toilet, along with a large black letter E. A specially

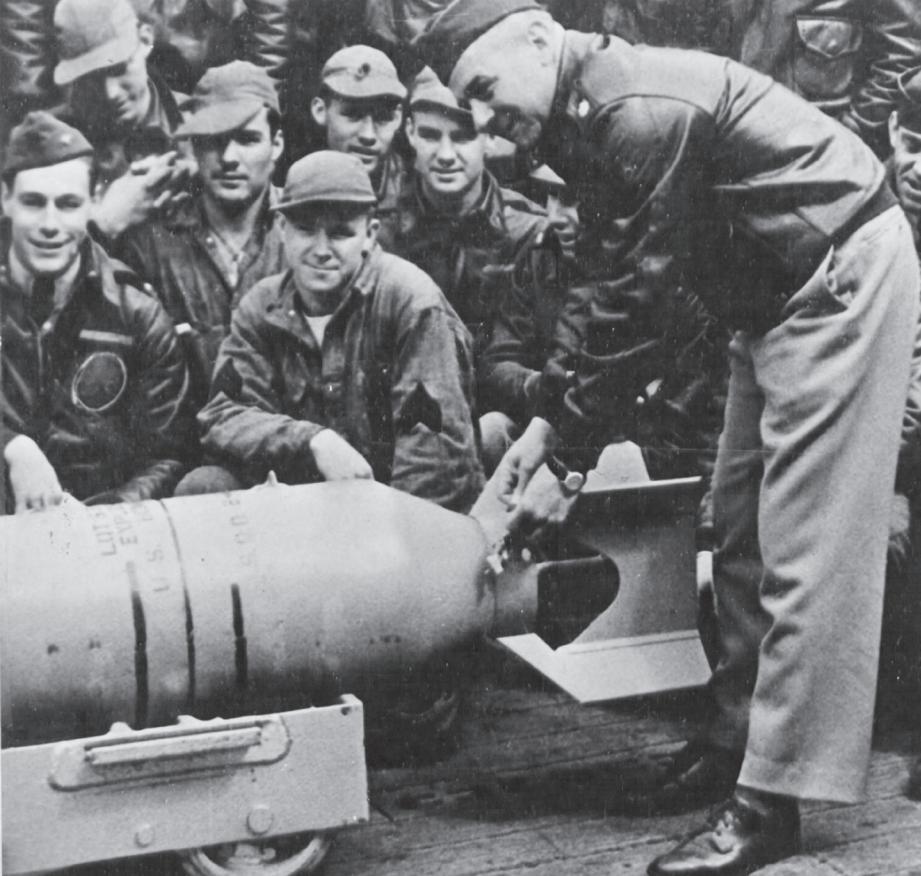
As a naval aviator assigned to VA-25, “The Fist of the Fleet,” I had flown the Douglas Skyraider in combat from the decks of a carrier more than 120 times, either looking for downed pilots during rescue missions or seeking out targets to destroy. I even used the Skyraider as a gun fighter on one mission in

June 1965, when a North Vietnamese MiG-17 showed up and flew through my stream of 20mm cannon shells; unfortunately for him, he underestimated how lethal a Skyraider could be and crashed into a hill. The Skyraider was certainly a

built bomb rack was manufactured to carry the toilet, and it was attached to one of the Skyraider’s underwing hardpoints. With this new “secret weapon” installed, a fuse assembly was placed on the front of the toilet, with a fin unit attached to the rear. Our unconventional weapon, code-named “Sani-Flush,” was now ready to be dropped on Vietnam.

It was decided that Squadron Cmdr. C. W. “Bill” Stoddard would be the lucky pilot to drop the toilet, and it was attached to Skyraider “572” as we prepared to launch another Dixie strike mission into the delta of South Vietnam. We all realized that if the captain of the ship saw the porcelain projectile hanging from our CO’s wing, he would never allow him to launch. So to avoid any trouble, we had a couple of airplane checkers linger between the bridge and the toilet bomb, blocking the view of the captain as the Skyraider taxied forward. As Stoddard spread the Skyraider’s wings and locked them into position, the Skyraider was placed on the catapult and stretched. It was now too late for anybody to stop his launch as he and the toilet bomb were sent skyward on their way to the target. I, along with three other Skyraiders, joined the flight inbound to South Vietnam, and one of the airplanes with us had an old WW II movie camera installed on it that enabled us to record this historic event. As we approached the target, the Skyraider with the camera moved closer to Stoddard’s airplane as he released the toilet bomb. As if in slow motion, the toilet tipped forward after release, and with that big hole in the center of it pointing into the wind, it caused a lot of drag as the toilet seemed to come to a stop in midair. It almost took out the camera Skyraider!

As the toilet bomb tumbled downward toward the target, a forward air controller flying nearby in an O-1 Bird Dog reported that it “whistled” all the way down to the target. We had a lot of laughs after that “Sani-Flush” mission and tried to keep it quiet for as long as we could. Sadly, the North Vietnamese found little humor with our antics and eventually took their revenge out on Stoddard. He was shot down and killed by three surface-to-air missiles in October 1966, during our second cruise as he flew Skyraider “572” over Vinh.



Clockwise from above: With his men looking on, Lt. Col. "Jimmy" Doolittle attaches Japanese medals to a 500-pound bomb prior to its loading onto his B-25B aboard the USS *Hornet* (CV-8) in April 1942. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook) ■ Armorer loads a 500-pound bomb under the left wing of a P-47D Thunderbolt of the 365th FG "Hellhawks" at A-68 airstrip, Juvincourt, France, in the winter of 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook) ■ USS *Wasp* (CV-18) ordnancemen roll out their 2,000-pound "Tojo Specials" during the Philippine/Leyte Gulf action of October 1944. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet) ■ Lt. Col. Eddie Pearcy, commanding officer of VMFA-542, watches as an ordnanceman arms a 500-pound Mk-82 bomb, which would be among the 1,000,000 pounds of ordnance dropped by the squadron's F-4B Phantoms in Vietnam in December 1965. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook) ■ A pre-Christmas message adorns an MK-82 500-pound bomb hung on station one of a A-6A Intruder prior to a mission against the Viet Cong. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



Love Letters of Death

The tradition of attaching messages to and writing slogans, insults, and curse words on instruments of war probably began when rocks, arrows, and spears were launched. The notion of taunting or mocking an enemy is as old as war itself, and it became even more prominent during World War II. With no more than chalk in hand, an armorer, crew member, or other ground personnel used the aircraft bombs and rockets as their personal canvas to send a message to their foes.

War was hell on both sides, and even though there was a high likelihood that the messages would never be read by the receivers, the morale and esprit de corps increased nevertheless, as the boys on the ground developed an even tighter bond with their aerial brothers who would be charged with delivering their "love letters of death." +

