

## SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

### AIRCRAFT PROFILE – THE VULTEE VENGEANCE IN RAAF SERVICE

Profile by Robin Shaw

---

The Vultee Vengeance (*right – source Wikipedia*) was a dive-bomber acquired in numbers by the RAAF from 1942-44. The crew of 2 consisted of the pilot and radio operator/gunner. It was powered by a Wright R-2600 Cyclone air-cooled radial engine, had a top speed of 449km/h (279mph), a range of 965km (600 miles), a ceiling of 6,797m (23,500ft), was armed with 2 forward-firing .303 machine guns with two more on a flexible mount and a maximum bomb load of 907kg (2,000lb). A total of 342 was acquired by the RAAF<sup>1</sup>.



#### Background



The success of dive-bombers such as the German Ju-87 Stuka and Japanese D3A 'Val' encouraged many air forces to acquire their own dive-bombers. The RAAF was no exception. It placed an order for 243 Brewster Bermudas (*left – source Wikipedia*). However, development of the Bermuda suffered from repeated delays and it was ultimately found by the RAF and US Navy to be unfit for service.

The Vengeance had first flown in July 1941 and was designed specifically for the export market. 300 were allocated to the RAF under lend-lease. Given the delays in the Bermuda program, the RAF offered the Vengeance to the RAAF in its place. By May 1942,

367 had been ordered and the Bermuda order was cancelled.

The RAF and Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) operated the Vengeance in Burma from late 1942 to mid-1944 with some success, though it was withdrawn soon after. Despite delays in deliveries, 5 RAAF squadrons were eventually equipped with Vengeances, replacing Buffaloes and Wirraways. These were 12, 21, 23, 24 and 25 Squadrons. No. 4 Operational Training Unit also operated examples.

In the face of the Japanese invasion threat, the urge to acquire aircraft – *any* aircraft – was behind the rapid acquisition. In acquiring the type, the RAAF probably believed that in the Vengeance it was receiving a modern aircraft that would have been put to intensive use had it been available in greater numbers in 1942. At least two Vengeances were lost in air crashes in 1943 resulting in the deaths of both crews. By the time the Vengeances were delivered in numbers in 1943, the invasion threat had long passed, and the Vengeance's ordinary performance was becoming obvious.

Experience soon showed that dive-bombing in a non-nautical setting was not the optimal attack tactic in the Pacific. Instead, the preference was for light bombers such as the Hudson, Beaufort, Boston and Beaufighter.

#### Active service

The first RAAF Vengeance operation was a naval vessel escort by 12 Squadron on 2 December 1942. Initial Vengeance bombing operations were against targets in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI). The first operational bombing mission was on 18 June 1943, when 11 aircraft escorted by Beaufighters attacked airfield construction targets on an island in the NEI. The attack was deemed successful and all aircraft returned.

12 squadron was based at Cooktown and carried out anti-submarine patrols and shipping escort duties. Its only combat was an exchange of fire with a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft. 24 squadron was sent to New Guinea at the request of the USAAF to attack targets in and around the Huon Gulf. Bad weather initially halted operations, but successful

---

<sup>1</sup> *Australian Military Aircraft* by David Coles, page 92

raids on Finschhafen followed, some in preparation for an Australian landing and halting a Japanese counterattack there. However, 24 Squadron's operations were hampered by a lack of ground equipment and hurried training.

As part of the preparation for offensive operations in New Guinea, the RAAF formed 77 Wing that included 21, 23 and 24 Squadrons. Among their operations, 24 Squadron supported Australian troops on Shaggy Ridge, acting as flying artillery because the ground forces had no artillery of their own due to the rugged terrain. On these missions they were usually escorted by P-40s.

*Right – 21 Squadron Vengeances at Nadzab, New Guinea, 1944 – source Wikipedia*



Vengeances also attacked and destroyed a defended bridge, airfields and other Japanese positions through early 1944. A raid on Rempi on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1944 would prove to be the last operational mission by the Australian Vengeance squadrons.

### Withdrawal

All Vengeance squadrons were ordered back to Australia immediately after the Rempi operation. It was becoming clear that the performance of the Vengeance was inferior to that of other available types. The USAAF, which commanded the RAAF, made it clear that the Vengeance squadrons would no longer be used on operations<sup>2</sup>. The suddenness of this order so soon after the Vengeance squadrons had arrived caused some consternation and disappointment for RAAF personnel. As a result of this development, the outstanding order for 58 of the type was cancelled.

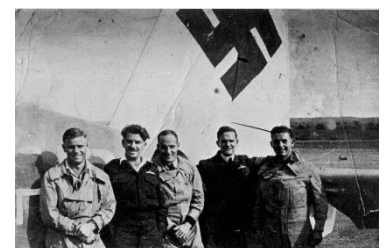
One of the reasons for the USAAF's decision was that it wanted the Vengeances off their airfields to make way for better-performing types. Factors included the Vengeance's lack of adequate range for later Pacific Theatre operations, regular engine failures and difficulty getting airborne with a full load<sup>3</sup>. 21, 23 and 24 Squadrons started to re-equip with B-24 Liberators on their return to Australia, though this was a lengthy process. Only 25 Squadron remained with the Vengeance, based in Western Australia carrying out anti-submarine patrols and army cooperation missions. It began transitioning to B-24s in early 1945. After that, the Vengeance was used for communications and target-towing duties.

The Vengeance was finally withdrawn from service in 1946, with most being scrapped apart from a small batch of 12 airframes transferred to the Navy for ground handling and firefighting training. The only remaining complete airframe is A27-99 held by the Camden Museum of Aviation in NSW (*right – source Geoff Goodall*).



### Vengeance in the movies!

In 1944, some Vengeances of 21 Squadron were painted in German markings to play the part of Ju-87 Stukas in the filming of the movie *The Rats of Tobruk*. Photo – Dennis Craft (left of photo) via David Vincent.



### Summary

Opinions about the Vengeance vary. It has been described as an ordinary performer – neither good nor bad. Others take the view that it was what we would these days call 'dumped' inferior equipment. Some historians have noted that many Vengeance operations were assessed as successful. Others commented that the type was simply unsuited to the RAAF's needs.

<sup>2</sup> RAAF Official History Vol. 2 *Air War Against Japan 1943-1945* p.198

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* p.198

Vengeance aircrew were aware of the type's shortcomings and accepted its withdrawal in favour of more capable aircraft<sup>4</sup>. Not so the Australian Government, which was embarrassed by the withdrawal so soon after so many were acquired at considerable expense – of the order of £90,000 per aircraft.

My thanks to David Vincent for his generous assistance with this profile.



*Photo – David Vincent*

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p. 197