

# THE VETERAN

**THE SPIRIT OF NORTH CAROLINA IS A VETERAN OF MORE THAN 300 COMBAT MISSIONS OVER VIETNAM. IT WAS ALSO THE PROTOTYPE OF THE MONARCH 26 SERIES OF EXECUTIVE AIRCRAFT**

**BY MICHAEL O'LEARY**

Let's think about this — the “newest” WWII Warbird is 72-years-old (I am using 1945 as the cut-off point even though production for a few combat types continued after Japan's unconditional surrender). That means the majority of our surviving WWII aircraft have long, fascinating, and often complex histories. This statement certainly applies to the Douglas A-26

Invader that currently flies as *Spirit of North Carolina*.

For a portion of this story, we have to go back into the 1800s and the colonial policy of France. During that period, France had established control over a great deal of Indochina. Included in this territory was Vietnam and that nation's government was run by French nationals with Vietnamese being employed in low-echelon, low-paying government jobs. The French clenched Vietnam in a tight — and corrupt — fist, taking control over the production of profitable items such as opium, salt, and alcohol. In the southern portion of the nation, huge tracts of land were either given or sold at extremely low prices to a new wave of French settlers and Vietnamese collaborators. Much of the land was developed into vast rice plantations and the country became a leading international supplier of that commodity.

By the end of 1940, Japanese forces had occupied a great deal of Indochina — often slaughtering the native population for no reason. Since France had quickly surrendered to Germany in June 1940 and the new French Vichy government was pretty much an ally of the Nazis, the Japanese decided to let the colonial French continue administering the area.

In China, those opposed to Japanese — and French —



George Lancaster (left) and Jerry Tate with the *Spirit of North Carolina*. rule created a communist/nationalist organization known as *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi* — the League for the Independence of Vietnam, usually known as just *Viet Minh*. Leader of this group of fighters was Nguyen Tat Thanh, better known in the west as Ho Chi Minh. The *Viet Minh* provided the only real resistance to the Japanese and they were aided by the Office of Strategic Services — the predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency. The OSS helped build up and supply the *Viet Minh* into a small guerilla force that would harass the enemy.

Even though it was too late, in March 1945 the Japanese decided to oust the Vichy French government and take direct rule over Vietnam. Accordingly, the *Viet Minh* increased its guerilla attacks against the Japanese.

When the atomic bombings ended the Second World War, the *Viet Minh* found themselves to be the strongest political/military force in the nation but that was a misnomer since they were relatively few in number and very poorly equipped.

The French, of course, wanted back in since Indochina presented a tremendous profit center. However, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam an independent nation on 2 September 1945 and said he would negotiate with the French an end of colonial rule but the French wanted no part of that and began sending military units into Indochina.

Open warfare began in November 1946 when the French shelled Haiphong Harbor and the *Viet Minh* and the French were soon engaged in direct combat in what the Vietnamese called the War of Resistance. The French moved quickly and seized several key cities, forcing the *Viet Minh* to head north.

At this point, the French *Armee de l'Air* was relatively weak in the area and the most potent combat aircraft were some Spitfires and Kingcobras. Transport aircraft such as Ju 52 and C-47s were used as bombers, with the bombs being rolled out of cargo hatches. The United States government was watching what was happening in Indochina with a great deal of interest.

Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence had closely followed America's 1776 declaration but the Truman administration was very worried about the growing power of communist Soviet Union and that nation's influence over the rest of the world. The rise of a new communist government was viewed as unacceptable and on 8 May 1950, Truman announced that the USA would be providing aircraft and

other military supplies to the French for the fight in Indochina.

The French were initially going to be supplied with a huge quantity of F-51D Mustangs but the outbreak of the Korean War meant those aircraft would be going to the USAF. Truman stated F6F Hellcats would be supplied instead but the French needed a hard-hitting medium bomber. So, despite the needs of the Korea War, the decision was made to supply a squadron of Douglas B-26 Invaders to the *Armee de l'Air*. In November of 1950, the USAF began training French crew in Invaders and 17 B-26Bs and eight B-26Cs were withdrawn from USAF stocks, refurbished in Japan, and given to the French.

The first Invader combat mission was undertaken on 1 February 1951. By 1 October, the small force had dropped

1767-tons of bombs and 218 napalm bombs — which was quickly become the weapon of choice. It was soon obvious that there were not enough Invaders to handle what was becoming a rapidly expanding war. At the start of 1954, *Armee de l'Air* units were overextended and were using huge amounts of ammunition and weapons (which the USA was supplying).

The Korean War was over so the American government decided to supply many more Invaders — enough to equip new squadrons with 25 aircraft each. Also American mechanics were shipped to Vietnam so that the planes could be kept operational. The Invaders were not officially transferred to the French and remained on USAF inventory.

The fighting rapidly escalated and even with the new supply of Invaders, Bearcats, and other aircraft, it became clear that the French could not win. The battle for the fortress of Dien Bien Phu (March to May 1954) saw con-

tinuous aerial activity against the enemy besieging the French fortress.

Dien Bien Phu fell on 8 May and an incredible 14,000 French troops surrendered.

During the air action, seven Invaders were lost and most of the crews had to be grounded from battle fatigue after flying non-stop missions. This led to a settlement with the *Viet Minh* that divided the nation into North and South Vietnam and France surrendered all claims in Indochina and relinquished control in Vietnam north of the 17th parallel to the new communist government led by Ho Chi Minh.

This was a stunning defeat for France and there was a noticeable drop in national morale. The United States had supplied 113 B-26Bs, B-26Cs, and RB-26Cs to the French in

Indochina. These aircraft equipped three bomber groups: *Groupe de Bombardement 1/19 Gacogne*, *GB1/25 Tunisie*, and *GB 1/91 Bourgogne*, while the RB-26Cs formed a recon flight known as *Escadrille de Reconnaissance Photographique ERP.2/19 Armagnac*.

Some 25 Invaders were either shot down or lost to flying accidents during the fighting. The B-26 force dropped 18,500-tons of bombs in 33,000 flying hours and 15,000 missions. The units disbanded in Indochina and the aircraft were returned to the Americans. The French never paid for one Invader.

## LIFE AFTER FRANCE

Many of the veterans of combat over Indochina were flown to Clark Field in the Philippines and parked in long