

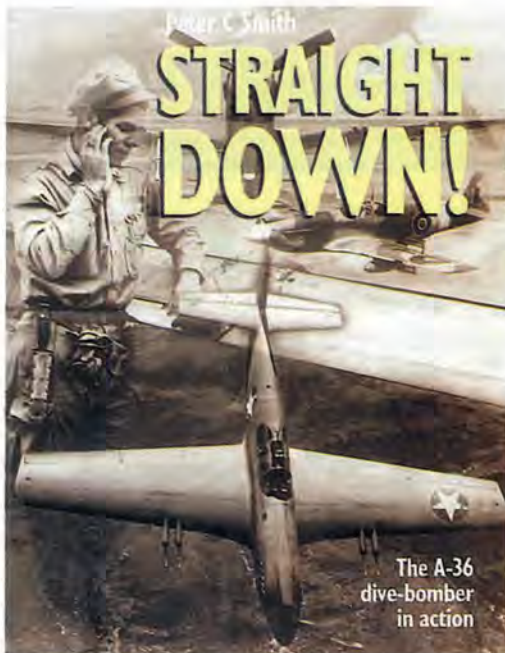
STRAIGHT DOWN!

Peter C Smith

"When we speak of dive-bombing, we mean straight down...right down the smokestack. If your airplane doesn't stand on its nose and lay eggs in their lap, then you are not dive-bombing."

An American Navy pilot during World War II

For the first time the amazing story of the North American A-36 dive-bomber (converted Mustangs) is told in full. The adoption by the United States Army Air Force in 1941 of the dive-bomber is little known. It was largely brought about by one man, General George C. Marshall, then the Chief of Staff, following the stunning success of the German Junkers Ju 87 Stuka in the defeats of Poland, France and Greece. Army co-operation and close air support were in their infancy in the USA and dive-bombing seemed to be the answer.



The trouble was the US Army had no dive-bombers and the hunt was on to find a suitable aircraft to suit the bill. It needed to be fast as well as accurate. The answer came from a surprising source. The North American Company was building the Mustang fighter for the RAF at the time, but orders had dried up. Inspired, the Mustang was fitted with dive brakes from the new Vultee Vengeance dive-bomber, also being developed for the RAF. The result was a sleek, aerodynamic aircraft, able to dive vertically with a good bomb load – the perfect answer to the problem.

This sleek dive-bomber was sent to equip three USAAF Groups and it served with great distinction in Sicily and Italy and in Burma and China, setting up an enviable sortie rate and a high profile of accuracy. It also showed the way for the adaptation of the standard P-51 Mustang fighter for dive-bombing and close support. The RAF also utilised the A-36 in the dangerous low-level reconnaissance role during the Mediterranean campaign.

This story, largely ignored by historians to date, charts the development of the aircraft, the training of the young pilots and finally, through their own eyes, graphic accounts of combat missions in Europe and Asia come to life in unbelievable detail.

Straight Down! is a comprehensive account of the development of the A-36. It is profusely illustrated with over 100 original photographs and contains dramatic eye-witness accounts from the pilots of 27th and 86th Fighter-Bomber Squadrons.

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