

# FLIGHT LINES

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Alabama Remembers  
General Asa N. Duncan





# ALABAMA REMEMBERS

## General Asa North Duncan

Approximately 300,000 Alabama men donned service uniforms during World War II, and more than 6,000 Alabamians lost their lives in military service; 4,600 in combat and 1,600 in non-combat situations.



Brig. General **Asa North Duncan** (1892-1942) was born in Leighton, Alabama. His military service began as an enlisted man in the Alabama National Guard on duty at the Mexican border in 1917. He was subsequently commissioned an officer in the Alabama infantry. He later served with the American Expeditionary Forces in France during World War I.

Upon returning to the U.S. after the war, he attended flight school and became Commanding Officer of the 49th Squadron at Kelly Field in Texas. In May 1922, Duncan was assigned as an instructor for the Alabama National Guard at Birmingham, AL and later commanded the 20th Bombardment Squadron at Langley Field in Virginia.

From 1922 until the early beginning stages of World War II, Duncan served in many assignments including Commanding Officer of Luke Field in Hawaii (1935) and March Field in California (1936), and on to Washington, DC (1939) as head of the Personnel Division in the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps.

In August 1941, Colonel Duncan was appointed Commanding Officer of the Savannah Army Air Base (*Hunter Field*) in Georgia. Then, in January 1942, the U.S. Army Air Forces activated Savannah that comprised three major subordinate units: the Eighth Bomber Command, the Eighth Fighter Command, and the Eighth Ground Air Services Command, all units comprising what ultimately was to become the Eighth Air Force. Brig. General Ira Eaker took the Eighth Bomber Command Headquarters to England. In May 1942, Lieutenant General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, (U.S. Army Air Force Commander), chose Major General Carl Spaatz to command the Eighth Air Force. Duncan, who had now been promoted to Brig. General, was ordered to the European Theater of Operations, and became Chief of Staff of the Eighth Air Force, under Major General Spaatz.

The Eighth Air Force was originally designated as the U.S. air element of Operation Gymnast, the early plan for the Allied invasion of northwest Africa.

On November 17, 1942, General Duncan, a passenger on a B-17F "*Flying Fortress*" en route from England to Maison Blanche in Algiers, via Gibraltar crashed, in the Bay of Biscay off the coast of France, killing all 11 service members aboard.

General Duncan is memorialized at Cambridge American Cemetery, Cambridge, England and at Oakwood Cemetery in Sheffield, Alabama. One of the six Liberty ships which were converted at Point Clear, Alabama into floating aircraft repair depots was named in his honor. It was commissioned, *Brig. Gen. Asa N. Duncan (ARU(F)-4)*. During the war, this vessel provided support facilities for the U.S. Army Air Force at Saipan and Iwo Jima.



## Brigadier General Asa N. Duncan COMMENDATIONS

- ★ World War I Victory Medal
- ★ World War II Victory Medal
- ★ Army Distinguished Service Medal
- ★ Legion of Merit
- ★ Purple Heart
- ★ American Campaign Medal
- ★ Army Presidential Unit Citation
- ★ Army Good Conduct Medal
- ★ European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign



# "BIRTH" OF THE 8<sup>th</sup> AIR FORCE



The following transcript is a declassified SECRET memorandum signed by **Asa North Duncan** that describes the formation plan establishing the 8th Air Force that Duncan was named its first Chief of Staff.

~~SECRET~~

HEADQUARTERS 8TH AIR FORCE  
Savannah Army Air Base  
Savannah, Georgia

DECLASSIFIED  
R00 BY: 2003  
BY: AFHAG  
Date: 1 Sep 97

February 18, 1942

SUBJECT: Recommendations on Changes in Composition of the 8th Air Force

TO : Chief Army Air Force, Munitions Building, Washington, D. C.

- In compliance with par. 6, Memorandum of January 2, 1942, from Chief, Army Air Forces, Subject: Organization of Air Task Force (to be designated the 8th Air Force) for Mobile Reserve Corps, the remarks and recommendation outlined below are made. The entire contents of this letter has been discussed with the Task Force Commander, Maj. Gen. Lloyd P. Fredendall and has his approval.
- The Air combat units of the 8th Air Force as at present constituted consist of:
  - One Bomb Gp (M) equipped with B25 airplanes
  - One Bomb Gp (L) equipped with DB7 airplanes
  - Two Pursuit Gps (I) equipped with P39F airplanes
  - One Obsn Gp of 4 medium Obsn Sqdns
  - One Photo Sqdn
- The 8th Air Force is to become a part of the Task Force which is now preparing plans for movement to and operations in the "Gymnast" Theatre. The actual requirements of air combat units in the "Gymnast" will naturally depend on the forces employed against us. The occupation of this Theatre will constitute a threat against the Axis Powers which, in my opinion, will not be ignored by them. This threat will sooner or later be met and if Germany continues her past policies it will be met in force. Until such time as the Task Force is established in the "Gymnast" Theatre in sufficient force to launch an offensive, its operations will be of a defensive character and its success depends, among other things, on its ability of protecting the port facilities on its one and only usable port of Casablanca. To do this requires pursuit aviation for local protection and bombardment aviation for counter-air force operation against enemy bombardment and sea craft. A few of the outstanding points which dictate the strength, type of units and their equipment of the Air force necessary in this Theatre are as follows:
  - The Axis Powers can operate with heavy bombardment against the "Gymnast" Theatre from air bases already constructed in France and Italy (800 to 1100 miles) and with medium and heavy bombardment from air bases in Spain already constructed or in process of construction.
  - The 8th Air Force, having no heavy bombardment, cannot use counter-air force measures against air bases in France and Italy.

c. Our one group of medium bombardment's (B25's) radius of action extends into Spain only for a distance of about 50 miles for daylight operations (using 75% power), which is not far enough to reach any of the large air bases. For night operations (using 50% power and necessitation altitudes under 10,000 feet) we can reach less than half of the principle air bases in Spain.

d. Our light bombardment (DB7s) can not reach any point in Spain except Cadiz on the southern coast; the airplane will carry only four (4) bombs (English bomb racks) and consequently uneconomical for most support missions for ground troops and therefore limited almost completely to attacks against sea craft.

e. Several months will probably be required to install an efficient aircraft warning service (which doubles pursuit efficiency) due to terrain features necessitating stations being installed east of Spanish Morocco and to the lack of sufficient commercial wire facilities.

f. Seven months are required to transport the present Task Force to the "Gymnast" Theatre.

- The following are carefully considered opinions of the undersigned and are based on the assumptions that the Air Force units will be established on bases in the "Gymnast" Theatre with 25% reserves and with replacements and supplies furnished every 30 days. It is further assumed that when offensive operations are started that the Air Force will be increased to fit its missions.

a. In order to have a better than "50-60" chance of accomplishing our mission the following combat air units with necessary service units are required:

- 3 Bomb Gps (H) with B17 or B24 planes
- 2 Bomb Gps (M) with B25 or B26 planes
- 1 Bomb Gp (L) with A20 planes
- 3 Pursuit Gps (I) with P39 or P40 planes
- 2 Pursuit Gps (I) with P38 or P47 planes
- 1 Observation Gp
- 1 Mapping Sq

b. Any appreciable reduction in the Air Force outlined in par. 4a above can easily result in quick and forceful air attacks by the Axis powers with an excellent chance of complete disaster to our Task Force.

- It is recommended that the Air Units outlined in par. 4a above be authorized and organized as the 8th Air Force.

ASA N. DUNCAN  
Colonel, Air Corps  
Commanding

Copies to G.C., AFCC  
Maj. Gen. Lloyd R. Fredendall

Note: "Gymnast" was the Allied plan for a major amphibious landing in French North-West Africa in the Spring of 1942.





# BIRMINGHAM'S NAVAL AIR STATION



NAS-Birmingham was home to the following naval and marine reserve units:

- ◆ VF-681, VA-681, VP-681, VT-681
- ◆ VMF-541
- ◆ AWS-68
- ◆ AGU-681
- ◆ FASRON-681

And, in 1950, included the following aircraft types:  
26 Fighter, 8 Attack, and 9 Trainer aircraft.



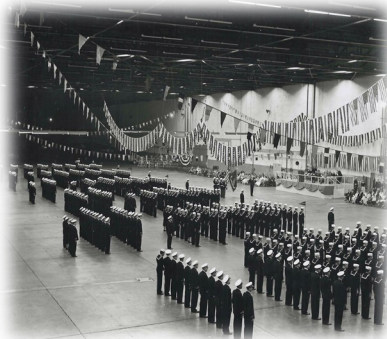
*On the Flight Line: F4U "Corsair" and T2V "SeaStar"*

Commissioned on September 15, 1948, NAS-Birmingham was established with Naval District 6 and served as a secondary reserve training base for NAS-Atlanta.

During the time that NAS-Birmingham was operational, its stated mission was

- to provide training for aviation units and aviation personnel of the Naval Reserve under this cognizance in order to augment Regular Navy forces upon partial or full mobilization;
- to exercise coordination control and furnish logistic support for the Marine Corps Air Reserve Training Command; and
- to support such flight operations of the Regular Navy and Marine Corps as may be directed by the Chief of Naval Operations.

Regular military inspections were a way of life at NAS-Birmingham. On December 6, 1951, the unit assembled for an Admiral's Inspection inside Bay 3 in the hangar complex at BHM.



*Planes On Ramp At NAS-Birmingham*

*AD-1 "Skyraider" and F8F "Bearcat" have wings folded, as when aboard aircraft carriers*



Shown here is CDR. R. F. Lewellyn, NAS-Atlanta, reading the commissioning document for NARDIV 671 to those standing at attention (l to r):

CDR. J.M. Weaver (Navy Marine Training Center)  
LCDR L.J. Strange (NARDIV 671)  
Chief W.D. McGinty (Administrator of NARDIV).

On June 25, 1956, the Birmingham facility was commissioned a naval rework facility (NARF). The NARF was later disestablished on October 1, 1957 when the facilities were sold to a civilian firm that continued running the air rework facility under government contract.