

Capt. Charles Chandler operates a Lewis machine gun as Lt. Roy Kirtland prepares for takeoff on-board a Wright Model B biplane in 1912. Chandler, the first commander of the Aeronautical Division of the Signal Corps, was also the first person to fire a machine gun from a plane. It didn't take long for aviation pioneers to see the potential of aircraft as weapons. During World War I, aerial combat, bombing and close air support were born.



Courtesy, U.S. Air Force Museum

Armed with
.50-caliber
weapons and the
knowledge they
can die on their
next mission,
aerial gunners
stand up to the
best the enemy
can muster.

Hunched behind a pair of .50-caliber machine guns in the tail of a B-24 Liberator, Robert Sweatt could only watch the Ju-88 fighter unload its 20 mm cannons into his plane as he hastily tried to unjam his guns.

"My gun would fire two short bursts and jam," said the 81-year-old veteran, recalling a 1943 mission over Germany.

Narrowly escaping the first attack from the Luftwaffe fighter, Sweatt's entire body clinched up as he watched the German swoop around for his second attempt.

"I knew he had us. He was so close I couldn't shoot him. The bullets looked like golf balls coming right at us," he explained as his voice got louder. "He couldn't have been a hundred yards from me."

Then BOOM!

"A P-38 Lightning came out of nowhere and hit him right in the middle," he said.

As a member of the 389th Bomb Group's 566th Bombardment Squadron during World War II, Sweatt flew on 17 missions over Europe. His squadron was in one of three 8th Air Force B-24 groups that took part in the Ploesti mission — one of the war's most daring heavy bomber raids of oil fields in Romania. The fields were estimated to be supplying 60 percent of Germany's crude oil. Of the 177 planes and 1,726 men who took off on the mission, 54 planes and 532 men failed to return.

If you were to ask Sweatt about his other missions, he could describe each one in vivid detail. There was the time his plane sustained heavy damage from a wake of flak, and the crew courageously flew the bomber across the coast of England at 200 feet with two engines out. The aircraft landed in a sugar beet field about 150 feet off the coast. On another mission, his plane was shot down by German ace Egon Mayer. That was the last mission he and his crew flew. Sweatt was the only survivor.

He was just one of about 297,000 gunners trained in the Army Air Forces after the Japanese attacked

The **BIG GUNS**

by 2nd Lt. Chuck Widener

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7, 1941. Gunners, of course, defended the bombers while riding “shotgun.” They were an integral part of the flying fleet during World War II since they served in every theater of operations, and gunners today continue the legacy while serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. But it was 29 years before the attack on Pearl Harbor that the art of aerial gunnery began.

The first to draw

On June 7, 1912, Capt. Charles Chandler, an early visionary and proponent of arming aircraft, fired a Lewis machine gun from between his legs while flying at about 500 feet onboard a Wright Model B biplane. He fired about 45 rounds at a 6-by-54-foot target. Some 14 rounds found their way to the target, making Chandler the first aerial machine gunner.

Amazingly enough, it wasn't until 1915 that mounted machine guns began popping up on planes. Observers who sat in the rear cockpit of early World War I model warplanes, such as the DeHavilland DH-4, quickly learned the advantages of a mounted machine gun.

The observer/gunner positions were typically held by enlisted members, so little attention was given to those who filled the slots until they began scoring aerial victories. Sgts. Albert Ocock and Philip Smith of the 8th Observation Squadron each claimed a victory

Student gunners fire .30-caliber machine guns at night at Harlingen Army Air Field, Texas, during World War II. Many gunners relied on tracer rounds to hit targets during the war.

USAF photo



in the St. Mihiel offensive, and it wasn't long before the enlisted observers/gunners found themselves flying with bomber squadrons.

Sgt. 1st Class Fred Graveline of the 1st Day Bombardment Group shot down two German planes during his 15 missions. He flew more combat sorties than any other enlisted man in World War I.

Others began claiming victories as well. During the Meuse-Argonne offensive, the final battle of World War I, American observation plane gunners shot down an estimated 55 German warplanes. Gunners aboard bombers reportedly knocked out another 39 of the 357 enemy planes shot down by American fliers, a significant accomplishment, considering there were only 23 aerial gunners on the front in France.

Packing heat

By the mid-1930s, gunnery technology had improved vastly along with aircraft design. With the advent of bombers like the B-17 Flying Fortress, B-24 Liberator, and B-26 Marauder, gunners were challenged to defend the heavy bombers armed with .50-caliber Browning machine guns.

To meet the high demand for gunners after the start of World War II, the Army Air Forces began training enlisted gunners at seven schools, and fired out graduates at the rate of 3,200 per week. That's roughly 166,000 students per year. By September 1944, an unbelievable 227,827 gunners had been trained.

A great percentage of gunners were volunteers who took their training seriously. Like bombardier trainees,

USAF photo



they knew they had but one destination after training — combat.

Sweatt was one of those volunteers despite the rumors that the average lifespan of a gunner was about 17 seconds.

“I know we were scared,” he said. “We always knew someone was coming after us. You just didn't pay attention to it.”

Another volunteer gunner of the World War II era was Jim Crouse, who flew missions over Japan from India on the B-29 Superfortress.

The premier bomber of its time, the Boeing B-29 incorporated new technology and a sophisticated design that greatly changed aerial gunnery.

“We thought, ‘My God. What is this?’ There were no guns,” said Crouse of the B-29. “It was secret. No one knew why there were no guns.”

But there was a gun — a 20 mm cannon in the tail located between two .50-caliber machine guns. The gunner was placed at a

The Cholon area of Saigon was raked with gunfire from AC-47 Spooky gunships when the city was overrun by the Viet Cong during the Tet offensive in 1968. From 1964 to 1969, the AC-47s successfully defended 3,926 hamlets, outposts and forts. They fired more than 97 million rounds and killed 5,300-plus enemy soldiers. No outpost or village under gunship protection was ever lost to the enemy.

sighting station as many as 60 feet away from his guns. Using a remote control system and APG-15 radar, the gunner could fire at enemy targets without concern for windage and other gunning techniques. “We fired on a few fighters,” said Crouse, who flew 16 missions. “It was still scary.”

B-29 gunners continued to be scared as they entered the Korean War. Chinese intervention signaled a new escalation in the war as B-29 gunners encountered the first MiG-15 attacks. It was an unfair fight considering the gunners aboard the slower propeller aircraft faced enemy jet fighters that were much faster and more maneuverable. But no one told the gunners they were the underdogs.

Though 16 B-29s were lost to enemy attacks between November 1950 and November 1951, aerial gunners were credited with 27 aerial victories. Sgt. Harry Lavene, a tail gunner, was credited as the first enlisted member to down a MiG-15.

As the United States entered combat in Southeast Asia, time had overtaken the classic portrait of the aerial gunner aiming through the sights of his machine

gun at enemy fighters and replaced it with an aircraft systems expert.

"I flashed back to every World War II movie I'd ever seen," said Master Sgt. Robert Miles of the day he entered the Air Force to become a gunner on the B-52 Stratofortress. "I quickly realized it wasn't so glorious."

Using the automatic system on earlier B-52 models, the gunner would radar-scan, lock-on, track and fire

four .50-caliber machine guns — each spitting out about 1,200 rounds a minute for a lethal total of 4,800 rounds. Depending on the model, a gunner could sit in a compartment in the bomber's tail or up front with the rest of the crew, although the guns remained mounted in the tail.

"It was really 1950s technology, but it got the job done," Miles said.

A new breed of gunner

As a present day modern aerial gunner, Airman 1st Class Vanessa Dobos has little in common with gunners from World War I. Though Dobos does fire a massive machine gun from the deck of a ... well ... helicopter, perhaps her greatest distinction is the fact she's a woman — the Air Force's first female aerial gunner.

While her job as an enlisted aircrew member on the HH-60 helicopter may be different, Dobos is remarkably similar to her predecessors. She wants to fly.

Unexpected start

Raised in the small town of Valley View, Ohio, her interest in the military was sparked by her father. Described by Dobos as a "history buff," her dad talked

a lot about America's past heroes while they often watched classic war movies.

"He instilled in me so much respect for our country's past heroes," she said.

Near the end of her senior year in high school, she found herself talking to a recruiter. She told him she wouldn't consider a job if it wasn't flying-related.

"I had no intention of joining," she said. "I didn't realize how few enlisted aircrew jobs there were."

Nothing appealed to Dobos until another recruiter mentioned a career field that had just opened to new recruits — 1A7X1, or aerial gunner.

"Just the title caught my eye," she said, and to her

parents' surprise, as well as her own, she signed up that day.

Under pressure

A few months later, Dobos found herself in basic military training and later at the basic aerial gunner course at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M. She was not aware she was on her way to becoming the Air Force's first female gunner until midway through training.

"I went from being another airman in the crowd to someone who people would always be watching and analyzing," she said. "In some ways, I was afraid that people in the helicopter world were already prepared to be disappointed in me. I figured there were some people with hard feelings about a girl in the job. I was determined not to let them down."

And she didn't.

As a member of the 66th Rescue Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., Dobos "mans" a .50-caliber machine gun aboard an HH-60 Pave Hawk. Her main role is caring for the guns and other defensive systems. However, she's also responsible for briefing passengers and helping other crewmembers with the weapons, defensive systems, hoist and other equipment.

It's the job her predecessors from World Wars I and II performed as they flew in their bombers through the flak-filled skies swarming with enemy fighters. It's the job she's prepared to perform in her helicopter during combat rescue missions while receiving enemy ground fire and dodging rocket-propelled grenades. But that's not a reasonable comparison, according to Dobos.

"I really love my job," she said. "I enjoy learning about the history of my career field, but I don't compare myself to gunners from [World Wars I and II]. Those men deserve a lot more credit than I do."

— 2nd Lt. Chuck Widener

Until B-52s flew against air opposition during the Vietnam War, gunners had few chances to score kills. In fact, gunners claimed a mere five MiG kills with only two confirmed.

Staff Sgt. Samuel Turner became the first B-52 gunner to shoot down enemy aircraft when he hit a MiG-21 during Operation Linebacker II. Airman 1st Class Albert Moore downed the second MiG-21.

By August 1973, gunners had flown 126,615 combat sorties. With only two kills confirmed, their guns proved ineffective against enemy fighters as 17 B-52s were lost to enemy attack. Still, gunners proved invaluable as they helped keep a close visual watch for surface-to-air missiles.

A new sheriff

But another breed of gunner was being born aboard the AC-130 Spectre gunship as it ripped apart the Vietnam countryside. Armed with two 20 mm and two 40 mm Gatling guns and later a 105 mm howitzer, the gunship's gunners kept the cannons roaring and ammunition coming. Like their predecessors from World Wars I and II, they were weapons experts and could fix any malfunction as the warplane continued its mission. During its last two years in Southeast Asia, the AC-130 destroyed or damaged 55 percent of enemy tanks.

The gunship is still used today along with the HH-60 Pave Hawk and MH-53 Pave Low helicopters. These aircraft are mainly airborne during search and rescue missions like the one on March 2, 2002, when Staff Sgt. Kevin Stewart placed his life on the line to save three wounded soldiers in Afghanistan.

At the time, Stewart was a gunner for the 66th Rescue Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. His HH-60 swept the landscape about 100 feet off the ground searching for three injured soldiers. The sky lit up with explosions from rocket-propelled grenades. Despite bad

by Staff Sgt. Aaron Allmon II



AC-130U Spooky gunners (from left) Staff Sgt. Scott Rodatz, Senior Master Sgt. George Celis and Staff Sgt. Erik McNabb from the 4th Special Operations Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Fla., load 105 mm rounds into a howitzer during an exercise. Aerial gunners were introduced to the first gunships in 1965.

coordinates and the distraction of enemy ground fire, Stewart spotted the correct landing zone. Using his .50-caliber minigun, he cleared a space for the soldiers to escape.

"I never really saw any small arms fire," said Stewart, whose adrenaline rush was so great that all he could do was his job. "I watched the video a month after the mission. My mother would probably cry if she saw it."

Over the years, a lot of combat footage has been recorded that would make any patriot cry, and aerial gunners have put their lives on the line in much of the action. From Stewart's encounters with the Luftwaffe to Stewart's battle with the Taliban, gunners have stood up to the best the enemy could dish out, a testament to the gunner's vow:

"So if we're to be the gunners, let us make this bet. We'll be the best damn gunners that's left this station yet!" ☺

by Dennis Carlson



Airman First Class Vanessa Dobos