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The B-58 Blunder: How The U.S. Abandoned Its Best Strategic Bomber

The B-58 Blunder

How the U.S. Abandoned its Best Strategic Bomber.



A technological marvel, years ahead of its time—until an outrageous blunder sent this aircraft to its early death.

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Synopsis

Highly effective weapons of war that often cost millions of dollars can easily end up in a trash pile due to quick and uninformed decisions. This work is a case study on how the B-58 supersonic bomber came to a premature death in the U.S. military, largely because of infighting among military and civilian leaders, who failed to understand the value of this fantastic airplane. It was a technological marvel for its time and the very best pilots and navigators were chosen to fly this unique aircraft. At its maximum speed of 2.2 Mach (1,452 mph) it was 2 times faster than the muzzle velocity of a .45 caliber bullet. It could fly faster and out turn most fighters of its day and was also capable of flying close to tree top level just below the speed of sound. It was nearly undetectable by enemy radars due to its speed and low radar cross section and was better at flying through heavy turbulence due to its solid delta wing design. It had a highly accurate navigation and bombing system. It had a capsule ejection system for the safety of the aircrew and was capable of getting airborne in only half the time required by other bombers. Told for the first time, this is the inside story that dispels the unproven myths surrounding the demise of the B-58 and why this magnificent airplane should have been saved. Its loss from the nuclear armory was a severe blow to our "Cold War" deterrence strength. The B-58 was a bomber that set the standard for fear in the heart of an enemy. Its loss was a strategic mistake. The author provides lessons learned and recommendations for military and civilian leaders, going forward, to hopefully prevent future blunders like what happened to the B-58.

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Customer Reviews

I highly recommend this book about the B-58. I flew this fantastic aircraft from 1965 to 1969. But, Col Holt tells the inside story of how politics and infighting among Air Force Generals destroyed this beautiful and highly efficient aircraft. I was a DSO (systems operator) at Little Rock Air Force Base when the wing was suddenly deactivated. Those of us stationed there were shocked when we opened up the local newspaper in October, 1969 to find out all B-58s were to be removed from service. Less than 3 weeks later, we all started getting transfer orders. Most pilots went to Vietnam, navigators to B-52s and FB-111s, and DSOs to KC-135s. By January, 3 months later, all traces of our wing and 45 B-58s were gone! I had seen military bases closed before, but nothing at the speed this happened. The sad thing was that none of us really knew why we were so suddenly removed. The most logical rumor was that Air Force was given a budget choice between keeping the B-58 and buying the newer FB-111s. Also, as time went on, we started believing the myths about maintenance problems, operating costs, accident rates, and design flaws. But, none of these were true! As an insider at the Pentagon, Col. Holt sets the record straight about how just a few Generals decided they would rather keep 4 older B-52 wings than retain the most sophisticated bomber in the Air Force. He also does a great job of dispelling all the myths that were made up about the B-58. All of us in the B-58 program were hand-picked from either B-47s or B-52s, and we knew there was no comparison with other aircraft. The B-58 was stronger, faster, and more accurate than any other bomber at the time. Again, a great book for a aircraft/military historian, or lovers of great aircraft. I flew 3 models of the B-52, the B-58, KC-135s, RC-135s, and was a staff officer with the SR-71. The B-58 was definitely the highlight of my 21 years in the Air Force. Sad day in history when it was lost!!

I've always thought the B-58 to be a futuristic Beast. From its first flight in 1956 to its last in 1969, it always oozed sleekness, speed and sex. I was based at Davis-Monthan AFB when they started flying in to be stored at MASDC (AKA "the Boneyard") during late 1969. Eventually most of the remaining Fleet of 86 or so was there, in two lines in the In-processing area of MASDC. At the time I

accepted the statement that they were being retired to free up funds for the forthcoming B-1. Over the next few years, whenever I saw them in deep storage, I was struck by the fact that they weren't fully pickled, and that security around them was fairly lax. I wondered if someone at HQ/USAF had a more personal reason to get rid of the Hustlers (the ghost of Curt LeMay's closing out the whole B-36 Fleet years earlier for no other reason than he wanted an all-jet fleet kept plucking at my thoughts). And now a retired Colonel who was part of the B-58 Crew Force and later at SAC and AF HQ has confirmed those lingering suspicions. Chapter 5 of this short (127 page) text gives the answer why the 58 was grounded so quickly. It turns out that a couple of Generals at SAC HQ colluded with Congress and the then-SECDEF (Robert Strange McNamara) to sacrifice the 58 in favor of retaining a couple of Wings of older B-52s and increasing the Minuteman ICBM Force. Using a variety of weak excuses, all documented and refuted in this book, the Hustler was shot down in mid-career by its own side. And for no good reason. The older B-52s in question were retired a few years later anyway and the Minuteman Force was capped at 1,000 missiles. The 58's did not linger long in retirement, but were cut up in the mid-late 70's. A few (8?) escaped the scrapper and remain in Museums (NMUSAF, PASM, SACM, Travis AFM, Edwards AFB, and elsewhere), (some glorious, some derelict) to remind us of what might have been. This self-published soft cover book is short, with a larger font, and often a fair amount of space between the lines to puff up the text. If it were done in the font and line size size of - say - Miller's slightly longer (152 page) book on the B-58, it would be closer to 40 pages. It is NOT an operational or technical history of the B-58 - rather it is more like a memoir, which is what I think the Author intended. If you are looking for a much more detailed history of the B-58, Jay Miller's "Convair B-58 Hustler - the World's First Supersonic Bomber" (Aerofax, 1985, Midland Publications, UK, 1997) remains the gold standard. But as a look behind the scenes of the political side of aircraft production and retention, it is most illuminating. Recommended for all B-58 Fans.

A quirky book. Mostly anecdotal tales of a Navigator and his personal feelings on the B-58, including an interesting but odd aside featuring an wholly theoretical conversations by Russians on the merits of the plane. Several side stories that are interesting but not related to the B-58. Odd transitions that begin with such chapter headings as: "This is a B-52". Then he will relate a story or two on the plane, and he may or may not go into technical details. Do not get this book for technical details. The capabilities of various planes are not compared side by side. While the B-58 was undoubtedly a victim of Air Force and political maneuvering, the reality is that its days were probably always numbered. The even more advanced and faster (though slightly smaller) F-111 was already

coming into service.

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