

The DeHavilland DH-4 Workhorse of the Army Air Service

ASPJ STAFF



Airmen consider the DeHavilland DH-4 the workhorse of the US Army Air Service both during and following World War I. The Aviation Section of the Signal Corps selected this aircraft over competitors such as the French-built Spad XIII, the Italian Caproni Bomber, and the British SE-5 because of its compar-

atively simple construction and its adaptability to mass production. The DH-4 could carry six 11-kilogram (25-pound) Mark II bombs, two DeRam DR-4 cameras, a wireless transmitter, and two wingtip flare holders. Defensive armament consisted of two fixed, forward-firing .30-caliber Marlin machine guns, along with two flexible .30-caliber Lewis machine guns at the observer's position. The American version of the aircraft included the newly developed 400-horsepower V-12 Liberty engine. With a maximum speed of 198 kilometers per hour (124 miles per hour), the Liberty-powered DH-4 matched, and often surpassed, the speed of most other fighters of the time.

The Air Service used the DH-4 primarily for day bombing, observation, and artillery spotting. The first American-built DH-4 arrived in France in May 1918, and the 135th Aero Squadron flew it in combat for the first time in early August of that year. Aircrews criticized the DH-4's design, dubbing it the "flying coffin" because of the 254-liter (67-gallon) main fuel tank that separated the pilot and observer compartments. This feature not only made communication between the crew members difficult, but also proved hazardous if the aircraft went down. Although actual mishap figures indicated that the aircraft was no more susceptible to a fiery crash than any of its contemporaries, the nickname stuck with the DH-4 throughout the interwar years.

Although a total of only 1,213 DH-4s eventually served in France, in less than four months after the first ones arrived, they had proved their worth. Pilots and observers who flew DH-4s received four of the six Medals of Honor awarded to aviators during World War I. Lt Harold Goet-



ler and Lt Erwin Bleckley earned medals posthumously for flying numerous missions over enemy lines to drop much-needed supplies to the survivors of the "lost battalion." Sacrificing their lives, they completed the first successful American combat-airlift operation. The other Medal of Honor recipients who flew the DH-4 included 2d Lt Ralph Talbot and Gunnery Sgt Robert Robinson of the First Marine Aviation Force.

The DH-4 continued in military service for many years after the war, serving in the 1920s at McCook Field, Ohio, as a flying test bed for turbosuperchargers, propellers, landing lights, engines, radiators, and armament, in addition to routing flying operations with tactical units. The DH-4 made a number of notable flights, such as the astounding trip from New York to Nome, Alaska, in 1920; Jimmy Doolittle's record-breaking transcontinental flight in 1922; and the first successful air-to-air refueling in 1923. The US Army Air Service—later the Army Air Corps—operated these aircraft until 1932.

The US government used the DH-4 as its principal aircraft for airmail service, which began in 1918. For night flying, engineers added special flame-suppressing exhaust stacks to it to prevent night blindness in crew members. After 1927 a number of airmail DH-4s entered service as forest-fire patrol aircraft and long-range patrol aircraft, covering the expansive western wilderness. A few transferred to the new airlines that took over the mail services in 1926–30. Innovative private pilots adopted the DH-4 for various purposes when large numbers of them became available as government surplus in the 1920s, using them as crop dusters, transport aircraft, air ambulances, and barnstormers at county fairs. Indeed, by the time it finally retired from service, the DH-4 had evolved into over 60 variants.

To Learn More . . .

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