

Vought in World War II and Korea

The attack on Pearl Harbor was a surprise attack-and not a surprise. Americans knew that war was coming, though no one knew just when. Certainly companies like Vought had been pushing to expand their manufacturing capacities for several years before that December Sunday in 1941. But no one could have foreseen exactly what it would mean for America to hurl itself into a war on all fronts. For the second time in its company history, Vought found itself at the center of the grim uncertainties of combat. Four years later, it could share proudly in the great victory, even as it faced the challenge of discovering what peacetime aviation would be in the new world.

When the war came to America, Vought was at work on three aircraft that would prove important to Allied victory-the SB2U Vindicator, the OS2U Kingfisher, and the F4U Corsair. It was not enough to design and test the planes. They had to be built as quickly and as reliably as possible. What this meant for Vought's production can be seen from the numbers. For all Vought designs before the Vindicator, the total number of production units comes to just under 1,500 planes. For the three major designs used in World War II, the production total comes to almost 14,000 planes. In 1944 alone, more than 5,000 Corsairs were produced-more than three times the whole production of Vought aircraft before the war years.

Vought couldn't build them all by itself. F4U's were also built by Brewster Aeronautical and Goodyear. Goodyear's effort was particularly significant. Though it couldn't start on production until it had completed a new plant in February of 1943, it still managed to build 2,000 Corsairs. Vought also sub-contracted with a number of other suppliers for the manufacture of necessary parts.

Building planes for the war effort was the first priority, but it didn't keep Vought's engineers from conceiving new planes. One of them was the XTBU-1 Sea Wolf, a 3-place torpedo bomber with a top speed of just over 300 mph. The press of other production meant that the Navy had to assign production of the Sea Wolf to Consolidated Vultee. They began delivering the planes, now known as TBY-2s, in November of 1944.

During that same year, Vought engineers began drawing up Vought's first jet aircraft, the XF6U-1 Pirate. The plane was so compact that it could be moved around carriers without having to fold its wings. After the war, in April of 1948, a redesigned Pirate was tested with an afterburner. It became the first production aircraft to use that technology.

In the months after the Allied victory, Vought began work on two important programs. The first was a 600 mph jet interceptor, the XF7U-1 Cutlass. This was the first American tail-less design and the Navy's first swept-wing design. A production version was delivered to the Navy in the spring of 1950. The second project begun in 1945 was an air-breathing missile that became Regulus I. It too would make its first flight in 1950. Vought was more than ready for the new decade.

The early years of peace brought Vought another kind of engineering challenge. For reasons of national security, the Navy was intent on distributing essential military manufacturers across the country, moving them out of the congested and vulnerable coastal areas of the Northeast. When North American vacated the modern facilities it had built near Dallas for wartime aircraft production, the Navy proposed that Vought take them over. The advantages were clear: Vought's plant at Stratford was already too small for its new projects and it was beginning to show signs of age. But the challenges were also clear: The company would have to move 1,300 key personnel and their families together with 27 million pounds of equipment-while still trying to produce the F4U-5 and F6U-1. The move was announced in April, 1948 and completed only fourteen months later. It was the largest

overland industrial relocation up to that time, and there were plans in Hollywood to make a movie of it starring Spencer Tracy.