

THE LOCKHEED VENTURA IN BOMBER COMMAND

The American-built Lockheed Ventura played a limited role with Bomber Command. The Ventura was developed from the Lockheed Lodestar transport, as a replacement for the Lockheed Hudson. They were used for daylight attacks against short-range targets in occupied Europe.

Delivery of Venturas to the RAF began during September 1941 and the aircraft served with 21 Sqn (August 1942 - September 1943), 464 (Australian) Sqn (September 1942 - July 1943), and 487 (New Zealand) Sqn (September 1942 - June 1943). Bomber Command considered these units as 'light, day squadrons) operating within 2 Group.

Venturas flew their first combat operation on November 3 1942, an attack by three aircraft of 21 Sqn against a factory at Hengelo which was diverted, to become a raid against railway lines instead.

The first larger scale raid took place on December 6 1942 when 47 Venturas from all three squadrons took part, along with Mosquitos and Bostons, in a daylight, low-level attack against the Philips radio and vacuum tube factory at Eindhoven in the Netherlands. The raid did not go well -nine of the Venturas were shot down and 37 were damaged, 23 of them by bird-strikes.

Following these major losses, the Ventura squadrons switched to medium-altitude operations and attacked numerous targets in occupied Europe. On April 4, a formation of 24 Venturas were sent to bomb the Caen/Carpiquet airfield while another 24 Venturas were sent to attack the shipyards at Rotterdam. Five of the Venturas were shot down. On April 21, when Venturas of 21 Sqn hit the marshaling yards at Abbeville, three more were shot down by fighters.



Six months later on May 3 1943, twelve Venturas of 487 Sqn were tasked to attack a power station on the northern outskirts of Amsterdam. It became the worst operation any single squadron endured during the war.

One aircraft returned early and the remaining eleven proceeded with an escort of three squadrons of Spitfires. Unfortunately, an earlier Spitfire sweep alerted the enemy defences while the Ventura force was still approaching at low level over the North Sea. Unfortunately as well, an exceptional number of experienced German fighter pilots were present at Schiphol airfield for a conference. Sixty-nine German fighters were thus up in the air near Amsterdam when the Ventura force crossed the Dutch coast. Some of the German fighters engaged the Spitfires while the remainder attacked the bombers. Nine Venturas were shot down before reaching the target and a tenth was badly damaged but managed to return to base.

The only remaining Ventura from the formation was that of S/L L.H. Trent, a New Zealander. His Ventura, completely alone, pressed on to the target and bombed it. The bombs just missed but some blast damage was caused. This last Ventura was then immediately shot down. S/L Trent and his navigator were the only survivors and became Prisoners of War –ten of the eleven Venturas had been lost. S/L Trent, who somehow managed to shoot down a Bf 109 with his fixed, forward-firing guns, was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions. Twenty-eight of 487's aircrew were killed and twelve became Prisoners of War. Three of those killed were RCAF. (S/L Trent's VC Citation is printed below and provides additional details)

On May 24, 487 Sqn resumed operations. An attack on a power station and coking plant at Zeebrugge came off without losses. On May 29, 21 Sqn attacked Zeebrugge again. Two Venturas were involved in a midair collision. One made it back safely, but the other was lost.

On June 22 1942, W/C R.H.S. King, commander of 21 Sqn and his crew were killed when their Ventura was hit by flak during an attack on an enemy gun position near the Abbeville-Drucat airfield.

The Ventura was never very popular with its Bomber Command crews. Losses were high, and the aircraft was not really suitable as a bomber. The RAF Venturas were replaced by deHavilland Mosquitos during the summer of 1943. The last Bomber Command Ventura sortie took place on September 9 1943.

A total of 997 Ventura sorties took off on operations, with 709 attacking their target. Forty Venturas were lost in action. A total of thirty-seven RCAF airmen were killed while serving with the three Bomber Command Ventura Squadrons.

Ventura Specifications

Engines: Two 1850 hp Pratt & Whitney S1A4-G Double Wasps air-cooled radial engines.

Performance: Maximum speed 312 mph at 15,500 feet.

Cruising speed: 272 mph.

Initial climb rate: 2035 feet per minute.

Service ceiling: 25,000 feet.

Normal range: 925 miles.

Dimensions: Wingspan 65 feet 6 inches, length 51 feet 5 inches, height 11 feet 10 1/2 inches.

Weights: 17,233 pounds empty, 22,500 pounds loaded, 26,000 pounds maximum.

Armament: Two 0.303-inch machine guns installed in dorsal turret. On later production aircraft the number of guns in the dorsal turret was increased to four. Twin flexible 0.303-inch machine guns were mounted in the extreme nose. A pair of flexible 0.303-inch machine guns were mounted in a ventral position behind the wing trailing edge. Two fixed forward-firing 0.50-inch machine guns were installed in the upper decking of the nose.

Typical Bomb Load: 2500 pounds could be carried in an internal bomb bay.

S/L Leonard Henry Trent's Victoria Cross Citation:

On 3 May 1943, Squadron Leader Trent was detailed to lead a formation of Ventura aircraft in a daylight attack on the power station at Amsterdam. This operation was intended to encourage the Dutch workmen in their resistance to enemy pressure and the target was known to be heavily defended. The importance of bombing it, regardless of enemy fighters or anti-aircraft fire, was strongly impressed on the aircrews taking part in the operation. Before taking off Squadron Leader Trent told the deputy leader that he was going over the target whatever happened. All went well until the eleven Venturas and their fighter escort were nearing the Dutch Coast. Then one bomber was hit and had to turn back. Suddenly large numbers of enemy fighters appeared. Our escorting fighters were hotly engaged and lost touch with the bombing force. The Venturas closed up for mutual protection and commenced their run up to the target. Unfortunately the fighters detailed to support them over the target had reached the area too early and had been recalled. Soon the bombers were attacked. They were at the mercy of fifteen to twenty Messerschmitts which dived on them incessantly. Within four minutes six Venturas were destroyed. Squadron Leader Trent continued on his course with the remaining three aircraft, and in a short time two more Venturas went down in flames. Heedless of the murderous attacks and of the heavy anti-aircraft fire which was now encountered, Squadron Leader Trent completed an accurate bombing run, and even shot down a Messerschmitt at point blank range. Dropping his bombs in the target area he turned away. The aircraft following him was shot down on reaching the target. Immediately afterwards his own aircraft was hit and went into a spin and broke up. Squadron Leader Trent and his navigator were thrown clear and became prisoners of war. The two other members of the crew perished. On this, his twenty-fourth sortie, Squadron Leader Trent showed outstanding leadership. Such was the trust placed in this gallant officer that the other pilots followed him unwaveringly. His cool unflinching courage and devotion to duty in the face of overwhelming odds rank with the fine examples of these virtues.

