



During World War II the U.S. military envisioned launching flights of armed Mexican free-tailed bats against Japan. Much more than idle speculation, the bomber-bat program was developed and tested for more than a year, and thousands of bats died for the war effort.

The U.S. Army drafted the bats from roosting caves in Central Texas and from Carlsbad Caverns. The program called for fitting bats with miniature incendiary bombs and timers, refrigerating them to induce sleep-like torpor, then tucking more than 1,000 of them onto trays inside a collapsible carrier that looked like a bomb. Dropped from a plane, a parachute would deploy at 1,000 feet, the carrier would drop away and the trays would separate.

The idea was that the bats would rouse from torpor and fly into Japanese homes and buildings for shelter. In the best case, from a freetail's point of view, the bat would gnaw through the string that held the bomb to its chest, then fly safely away. But with or without the bat, the bomblet would explode into flames after some brief period of time.

It never seemed to work out that well in tests. Most of the bomber bats simply couldn't wake up in time to take flight and were killed when they hit the ground. Nearly all the others flew away, disappearing into the countryside with their dummy bombs. When fully awake, however, they seemed to fly at least short distances when armed with about half an ounce of a napalm-like substance.

At an air base, some bats armed with live explosives apparently escaped through an open door at one point, starting fires in a hangar and a general's car. Enthusiasm for bomber bats waned in the Army.

The bats and their program (renamed Project X-Ray) were transferred to the Navy in October 1943, and eventually to the Marine Corps, whose bat-flight tests produced a number of impressive fires. Nonetheless, the project was canceled in 1944.

*Much more information and documentation about this military project is available in **Bat Bomb, World War II's Other Secret Weapon** by Jack Couffer, and "The Bat Bombers," by C.V. Glines, in the October 1990 issue of **Air Force Magazine**, on which this article was largely based.*

BCI members can read about the U.S. military impressive efforts to conserve bats at bases around the country in the Summer issue of BATS magazine.

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