

Helldiver Gunner: My SB2C Was One Tough Bird

ROBERT F. DORR



U.S. NAVY

“On the way back from the last strike on Japan,” reads the official caption for this portrait of SB2C Helldivers in formation. The planes are from radioman-gunner Jim Samar’s squadron, VB-80, aboard the USS Ticonderoga (CV 14) and needed belly fuel tanks for this long mission on August 15, 1945, the final day of fighting in the Pacific.

It was built by a plane maker in decline. Pilots badmouthed it. Some dismissed it as “the Beast.” It has been neglected in World War II literature and is a rare sight today, at any air show. The Curtiss SB2C deserved better press.

We often forget that most warplanes had more than one crew member. Most of the Helldiver recol-

lections that follow come from former Aviation Radioman 3rd Class Jim Samar, 83, who belongs to a largely ignored population of veterans—radioman-gunners who filled the back seat of the SB2C during Pacific fighting. But first let’s quote a pilot to prove that not everyone thought the Helldiver was beastly:

“The old SB2C did ‘vertical’ pretty good,” said retired Lt. Cmdr. Leon-

ard “Len” Plog, 85, of Arlington, Texas, who flew from USS Essex (CV 9) against the Japanese home islands near the war’s end.

He was, of course, referring to flying straight down at a target, often the open stack of a warship at sea. Plog disagrees with pilots who considered the Helldiver an inadequate replacement for the older but beloved SBD Dauntless. “I flew the



COURTESY OF JIM SAMAR

Jim Samar aims his twin .30-caliber machine guns into the sky from the back seat of an SB2C Helldiver at Oceana, Virginia, in summer 1944. Samar was en route to fighting in the Philippines and over the Japanese home islands.

SBD in training. The SB2C was faster with a bigger powerplant and had a four-bladed prop that was quite ef-

ficient," said Plog. "There were some initial problems with handling, and it wasn't unforgiving, but it carried a heavy load and took a lot of punishment."

The head of the Helldiver engineering team was not Curtiss' well-known Don R. Berlin (who gave us the P-40 Warhawk) but the company's Raymond C. Blaylock. The plane was built around the 1,900 hp Wright Cyclone R-2800 14-cylinder two-row radial piston engine. After a 12-foot Curtiss Electric three-blade propeller proved inadequate, the four-blade propeller (from the same manufacturer, with the same diameter, and with root cuffs) was introduced with the SB2C-3 model. The SB2C-4 introduced "cheese grate" upper and lower wing flaps that were perforated like a sieve; they did nothing to increase drag but did enhance stability.

Industry turned out 7,141 Helldivers including SBF versions assembled by Fairchild and SBWs from Canadian Car & Foundry. The versions built in the largest numbers were the



COURTESY OF JIM SAMAR

Aviation Radioman 3rd Class Jim Samar poses beside a Curtiss SB2C Helldiver while in training at Naval Air Station Oceana, Virginia, in the summer of 1944. The twin-tandem sliding canopies of the two-seat SB2C look complicated, but worked well.

COURTESY OF LEONARD PLOG



Retired Lt. Cmdr. Leonard "Len" Plog flew the SB2C Helldiver with squadron VB-83 aboard the carrier USS Essex (CV 9) in the final months of the war in the Pacific. He admired the SB2C. Plog later piloted the F9F-3 Panther on the Navy's first jet combat mission in July 1950 and was credited with shooting down a North Korean Yakovlev Yak-9 fighter.

SB2C-1 (978), SB2C-2 (1,112), SB2C-4 (2,045), and SB2C-5 (970).

Bomb Carrier

Unlike the Dauntless, the Helldiver offered an internal bomb bay, which could accommodate a 1,000-pound bomb and be closed by hydraulically operated doors.

SB2C stood for "son of a bitch second class," according to critics. The plane initially garnered a reputation for poor stability, structural flaws, and poor handling. Britain rejected the Helldiver after receiving 26 Canadian-built examples. Lengthening the fuselage by 1 foot (to 49 feet, 8-3/4 inches) and redesigning the fin fixed the aerodynamic problems, and in retrospect, it appears stability and structural issues were exaggerated—although more than one Helldiver broke in half when making a hard tailhook landing on a wooden carrier deck.

Jim Samar knew nothing of any of this. He does not remember hearing unkind talk about the SB2C. Samar



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The SB2C Helldiver series began with this XSB2C-1 posing in the cold at Curtiss-Wright Corp. Plant No. 1 in Buffalo, New York, on December 13, 1940. The aircraft made its first flight five days later on December 18 but was destroyed in a mishap on February 8, 1941. It had a natural metal fuselage and yellow wings. On production Helldivers, the size of the fin and rudder were enlarged and numerous internal improvements were made.

was an 18-year-old, riding his bicycle in Webster, Massachusetts, on December 7, 1941, when someone told him the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. After exploring ways to get aviation duty, Samar joined the Navy in January 1943.

After boot camp, he spent six months in aviation radio school in Jacksonville, Florida, followed by aerial gunnery school. "It was a challenge to learn to fire those twin .30s," he said, referring to his machine guns. On October 19, 1943, Samar made his first flight in an SBD Dauntless, then the Navy's standard dive-bomber.

In January 1944, Samar joined Bombing Squadron 80, or VB-80, at Wildwood, New Jersey, and then at Oceana, Virginia. In a newspaper story, he read that the SB2C Helldiver, intended as a Dauntless replacement, had gone into combat. Possibly, he read of the first Helldiver combat mission by squadron VB-17, which attacked Rabaul, New Britain, on November 11, 1943. Before Samar's first month was finished, his squadron traded its Dauntlesses for Helldivers.

Samar felt enormous satisfaction in completing training and becoming a gunner for Ensign Jim Newquist. "There were times when I didn't know if I would make it," he said. In June 1944, a squadron Helldiver encountered engine trouble over the Chesapeake Bay, and the crew bailed out. A rescue boat picked up the gunner, who survived, but the pilot's parachute cord snagged the boat's propeller, and he was dragged to the bottom—one of 13,000 Americans lost in aviation accidents while preparing to get into the war. "That could have been me," Samar said.

To Sea, To War

VB-80 went aboard the carrier USS Ticonderoga (CV 14) and joined the Allied invasion of the Philippines. Ironically, Samar's first combat mission on November 5, 1944, proved to be his most dramatic. The target was Japanese-held Clark Field near Manila. It was the only time Samar fired at a Japanese warplane.

A Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabusa fighter, known to the Allies as an Oscar, am-

bushed the SB2C carrying Newquist and Samar. "I gave him a burst, and he left," Samar said. "I saw my tracers go into his engine. I saw smoke erupt from his engine." The Oscar fell from view. No one saw whether it went down. Samar did not receive credit for an aerial victory but believes he shot the Oscar down.

Between November 5, 1944, and January 21, 1945, Samar's squadron launched 26 missions (11 of which he flew) against Japanese targets in Luzon, Formosa (Taiwan), and French Indochina. He still has a logbook with cryptic entries ("bombed shipping in Manila Bay"). For Samar's final Ticonderoga mission, a January 15, 1945, strike on Takao Harbor, Formosa (the Japanese name for Taichung), the Helldiver rushed through a storm of anti-aircraft fire. Pilot Newquist was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, gunner Samar the Air Medal. On January 21, Samar's personal diary described Ticonderoga coming under kamikaze attack:

"This afternoon it happened," he wrote. "A Jap plane got through.



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An SB2C Helldiver from USS Shangri-La (CV 38) in flight. The radioman-gunner's crew position is shown to good advantage in this aerial portrait, but on this occasion the back-seater was wielding a camera rather than machine guns. Helldiver crews routinely flew with both canopies open.



SB2C Helldivers in flight.

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Not every Helldiver flight ended happily. According to the Navy's caption, SB2C-4 Helldiver (bureau no. 18956) went over the side from the escort carrier USS Charger (CVE 30) on June 21, 1944. Interestingly, the caption discloses that pilot Lt. O.R. Brown "received minor head injuries" but does not deign to disclose the fate of the radioman-gunner, though the SB2C was almost never flown solo. Charger was a Virginia-based training ship.

General Quarters was sounded, and in about a minute a big explosion occurred while we were in the ready room waiting to man our planes. A Jap kamikaze dived through the flight deck amid ships. We all got out of 'Ready 3' OK through plenty of smoke. The plane went right through the flight deck right to the forward end of the hangar deck."

The carrier's Helldiver pilots were "all okay," Samar wrote, although many TBM Avenger pilots and gunners in another squadron were killed. "The ship is now burning, smoking, and listing to port. Another kamikaze started a dive at us, but we got him and saw him crash in flames. Meanwhile, we were throwing bombs and ammo overboard, and many wounded

were being moved to the flight deck. 'Newq' and I stayed with our skipper, who was also wounded. A third kamikaze came in and crashed on the starboard side of the island, killing and wounding more men."

Because of fire and smoke, Samar expected an order to abandon ship, but Ticonderoga righted herself and limped out of the battle.

No Small Threat

Japanese suicide pilots, or kamikazes, were the biggest threat in the final months of the war: The Navy's historical website credits kamikaze pilots with sinking 26 U.S. combat ships, including three escort carriers, and killing 3,000 U.S. sailors. Samar wrote of "bodies scored and burned

beyond recognition."

As this article was being written, American moviegoers were anticipating Clint Eastwood's film *Flags of Our Fathers*, a new look at the Iwo Jima invasion. Samar was there.

His squadron transferred to USS Hancock (CV 19). Newquist and Samar were over Iwo Jima at H-hour for the February 16, 1945, invasion of that volcanic island. A colonel visited them and told them "each enemy gun or its crew destroyed will save a hundred Marines." The Helldiver's wing-mounted 20 mm cannons and ordnance-carrying capacity would be useful, the colonel said. No one appreciated, yet, how deeply the Japanese were dug into the island's rock and slag.



HAROLD G. MARTIN



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The Army Air Forces' version of the Helldiver never went to war as a dive-bomber. The A-25A Shrike spent much of the war towing targets and serving as a "hack" at stateside bases. A few A-25As were transferred to the Marine Corps where they became SB2C-1A models.

hours of flying time in the Navy, including 45 carrier landings.

Helldivers began to disappear quickly after the war, although the author saw them at Anacostia Naval Air Station, Washington, D.C., in 1947 and 1948. The French used them in Algeria and Indochina. But nearly all are gone now, except in museums and (rarest of rarities) at an occasional air show.

Samar left the Navy in January 1946. He married Betty Tripp in 1957. They have a son and daughter. The former Navy radioman-gunner worked after the war in automobile sales. He became a private pilot, making his first solo flight in October 1945 in an Aeronca 7EC. He logged "a couple of hundred hours" using the GI Bill before giving up on flying.

"I had done my flying," Samar said. So, too, had the Curtiss SB2C with its many achievements and mixed reviews.



"We supported the initial landing," said Samar. "There were no enemy planes. I don't think there was any flak. My pilot made a run with his 20 mm cannons, and we fired rockets into the caves. We could see huge caves, but I never saw a Jap on the island. I fired my twin .30s into the caves, but the Japanese were so deeply imbedded, so far in, that I don't know whether there was any damage. We felt there was small-arms fire around us, but it was hard to tell. When the Marines landed we could see them dropping, getting killed, but we couldn't see who was shooting at them. It wasn't pleasant. The Marines

fell by the hundreds."

On many missions, including those to Takao and Iwo Jima, Samar fired his .30-caliber guns at ground targets. Sometimes he saw results, as when a secondary explosion erupted—but not at Iwo. Samar said the "toughness and versatility" of the Helldiver helped him survive these missions.

Wrapping Up

Samar's notes cover eight missions by VB-80 from Hancock, including five in which he participated. For him, the war ended on March 1, 1945, when his squadron and air group were withdrawn. He had 372.8