

Mission into DARKNESS

Flying the **SB2C Helldiver** into probable suicide

BY LT. FOSTER E. LOONEY, USNR (RET.), AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH

"On June 19, 1944, Task Force-58's (TF-58) fighter and dive-bomber aircrews celebrated the combined destruction of 380 Japanese airplanes during the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot. But our exhilaration was almost dashed the very next day when we went hunting for the fleeing Japanese fleet. Those of us flying the SB2C Helldivers were literally sweating bullets as we flew our aircraft to the limits of fuel starvation. As I droned over the black inky water below on that 'Mission Beyond Darkness,' I wondered if I would ever find my carrier, the USS *Hornet* again."

—Foster E. Looney, VB-2 SB2C Helldiver pilot





The Commemorative Air Force operates the only flying Helldiver of more than 7,000 built. BuNo 83589 was acquired by Ed Maloney from a trade school in 1963 and passed to the CAF in 1970. Following an engine failure in 1986, N92879 returned to flying status and often is seen at Midland, Texas. (Photo by Phil Makanna)



Foster Looney poses in front of "The Beast"—the SB2C Helldiver. (Photo courtesy of author)

Earning my wings of gold

When I joined the Navy in 1943 as a 19-year-old kid from Texas, I knew I wanted to be a fighter pilot. Heck, every guy who wanted wings in the Navy lusted after fighters more than a pretty girl! Besides, who in their right mind would want to be strapped to a slow-moving dive-bomber? By the time I had been sent to Navy boot camp in 1943, I had already earned my pilot's license in a J-3 Cub. I think the time I spent in the Cub gave me a leg up over the other guys as I wound up finishing first in my class. My wish came true as I was selected to proceed on to the Navy fighter program in Miami, Florida. Unfortunately, my wish turned into a nightmare one week later at morning muster when the base commander advised us that the Navy desperately needed dive-bomber pilots. His selection method was quite simple; he walked along in front of us and said, *"You, you and you just volunteered for dive-bombing school at Jacksonville, Florida. Congratulations, gentlemen!"*

As if being forced out of fighters into dive-bombers wasn't bad enough, the Navy decided to whisk me away from the nice warm Florida

tropics to the bitterly January cold temperatures of Chicago, Illinois. And who ever said the Navy didn't have a sense of humor?! The first order of training a new dive-bomber pilot was to get us carrier qualified. After getting checked out in the SBD Dauntless, I was sent out over Lake Michigan to practice my landings aboard the short decks of the USS *Wolverine* and USS *Sable*. I actually

In full combat configuration with rear guns unshipped and bomb-bay doors open, the CAF Helldiver represents Bombing Squadron Five aboard USS *Franklin* (CV-13) in early 1945. "Big Ben" suffered catastrophic casualties in a conventional dive-bombing attack off Japan on March 19 of that year. (Photo by Phil Makanna)

Dauntless vs. The Beast

On paper, the Curtiss SB2C Helldiver topped the Douglas SBD Dauntless in nearly every category. The '2C was bigger, faster, carried more ordnance, and had folding wings. But Curtiss-Wright lagged badly in delivering fleet-ready aircraft, so the veteran Dauntless continued winning battles into 1944.

When Helldivers entered combat in November 1943, the crucial 1942 phase of the Pacific War was well past. SBDs had scored major victories at Coral Sea, Midway, and throughout the Guadalcanal campaign, and remained front-line carrier bombers for another seven months. The '2C's first major battle was the Philippine Sea clash in June 1944, completely replacing carrier-based SBDs thereafter. The SB2C-3 and later models served well at Leyte Gulf and beyond, carrying the war to Japan itself in early 1945. Seldom considered as accurate a bomber as the Dauntless, the Helldiver nonetheless sank considerable Japanese shipping by V-J Day. —Barrett Tillman





SB2C Helldivers of Bombing Squadron (VB) off the carrier *Hornet* (CV 12) wing their way towards targets on Saipan while supporting the amphibious assault on the island in June 1944. The white dot on the tail of the aircraft was a symbol painted on all *Hornet*-based aircraft to note assignment to that flattop. (Photo courtesy of Hill Goodspeed)

enjoyed flying the Dauntless; heck, it would pretty much fly itself. It was very stable and easy to fly—kind of like a SNJ. It had two main problems though; one, it couldn't carry any load to speak of and two, it only had one speed—slow! It didn't matter if you were horizontal or vertical with it—it flew along at the same constant slow speed. With my carrier qualifications complete, I was given orders to report to Naval Air Station Alameda, California, where I would meet the SBD's evil stepsister—the SB2C Helldiver.

Beast of burden

When I finally laid eyes on the Helldiver for the very first time, all I could mutter was, "Oh my god, it's a monster!" The SB2C was definitely not a Dauntless. The fuselage was longer by over three feet, its wingspan was eight feet longer and its max speed of 295mph made it seem like a jackrabbit compared to the tortoise-like speed of the Dauntless. Although it may have been bigger and faster, the Helldiver in my mind won the contest for bad vices. For one thing, the Helldiver had fully hydraulic brakes—it could stop on a nickel, let alone a dime! Those took some getting used to, especially coming off of a SBD, which had more automobile-type brakes—you had to practically push them through the floor to get it to stop. Not so on the Helldiver; all you had to do was nudge one pedal lightly and you were going

to go that way in a hurry, whether you wanted to or not. Woe onto the careless Helldiver pilot who didn't have his feet synchronized! Although I thought the ground handling of the Helldiver was bad, I thought the flying characteristics were miserable!

Most airplanes can be flown hands-free with the correct trim settings—not so with the Helldivers. You had to fly this monster every second it was in the air. If you turned the stick loose for more than a few seconds, it was going to end up wandering somewhere—up, down, or sideways. Even when the later models of the Helldiver came out, you still had to wrestle with it to keep it straight and

When the canopy was opened, the defectors opened on both sides to reduce the turbulence in which the gunner had to work with his Browning .30 calibers. (Photo by Paul Bowen)



Taming the Beast

In polite company, the Curtiss SB2C Helldiver was called "The Beast." Among sailors it was often the "SOB Second Class." How the Navy tamed The Beast is a story relevant today, when nonperformance and cost overruns are all too typical.

With a long record of providing aircraft to the Army and Navy, the Curtiss-Wright Company entered the 1938 design competition for a new carrier-based dive-bomber with an internal bomb bay. Project engineer Raymond Blalock had been with the company since 1929 and oversaw the design from schematic to prototype. First flight in December 1940 revealed stability problems, and the X job crashed two months later due to a balky Wright R2600 engine. Another prototype

was destroyed in December 1941.

Problems only continued: weight ballooned by 3,000 pounds due to combat equipment and improved structural integrity while performance diminished: from 360 to 320mph but landing speed—crucial to carrier operations—increased.

Through 1942, the Navy and Marines relied upon the Douglas SBD, victor of Midway and savior of Guadalcanal, but the Dauntless was showing its age. Its external ordnance made it slower than the '2C with less "stretch" in its smaller airframe, but continuing delays kept the Beast out of combat until November 1943.

Many SB2C-1s were retrofitted with modifications after delivery, but eventually, the company and the Navy found the right combination. The "dash three" Helldiver, delivered in 1944, performed reasonably well, and with the last SB2C-5s, total production reached 7,100 from Curtiss and subcontractors, including 900 Army A-25s. —Barrett Tillman



The re-built XSB2C-1 prototype (Bu.Aer. 1758) glides over the Pennsylvania countryside in its attractive pre-war colors. After its R-2600 engine packed up during approach on February 8, 1941, it was repaired and modified with a lengthened fuselage, larger rudder, and an autopilot to deal with its inherent structural and stability vices. Flying again by October 1941, continued flight testing soon revealed further under-design issues when its wing failed during a dive test. The "Beast" was in for a protracted journey to fleet service. (Photo courtesy of Stan Plet)

level at all times. The Helldiver just refused to be a normal airplane! Oh, sure, it was faster and could now keep up with the fighters and torpedo bombers. And yes, its defenses were better as it carried a higher bomb load along with 20mm cannon in its wings and two .30 caliber machine guns in the rear cockpit. On paper, it seemed that in all aspects the Helldiver should be a better airplane, but in reality, the SB2C was definitely no SBD, and I found out the hard way during combat in mid-1944.

Baptism of combat

I had been stationed in Hawaii in 1944 awaiting my orders to report to the Pacific Theater. The waiting didn't take long at all as I received the call to report to the USS *Hornet* (CV-12) as a replacement for a dive-bomber pilot lost earlier in a launching accident. When I joined Air Group 2 on May 3, 1944, I was assigned to VB-2 as part of the squadron commander's division. I was assigned a rear seat gunner named Frenchy Chartier and I thought it was a winning combination—a Texan up front and a Cajun from Louisiana in the back! Because I was the low man on the totem pole, I became the number six dive-bomber in the diving sequence, also known as the "tail-end Charlie." I quickly found out how deadly last place could be.

My first mission occurred on June 12 with

strikes against pre-invasion targets on Guam. We went after shore batteries and AA positions on the island and had been briefed on the positions of the targets. The problem was when we flew over them at 12,000 feet, all we could see were the tops of trees. It didn't take long for the Japanese gunners to give us a little hint where they were as they opened up on our squadron as tracer rounds filled the air. As the first Helldiver pushed on over, I was able to see that Japanese gunners were well behind the first diving Helldiver. They weren't much

better on the second Helldiver as their rounds were well out in front of it. But they were quick learners because by the time the number three Helldiver was pointing downward, they pretty much had us zeroed in. I quickly figured out that being the last one to dive would not be the healthiest place to be!

I quickly changed the tactics I had learned in the SBDs and increased my speed, closed my canopy up tight and increased my angle of approach. I didn't put the speed brakes out very much and jammed my throttle forward. With that forward speed, I wondered if I would have any wings left. But my tactic seemed to work well, as I had the gunners all fouled up. I released my bomb higher than normal and managed to beat them at their own game! The Helldiver turned out to be one tough piece of machinery. It wasn't fun to fly, but it could sure get you there and back.

For the next week, we were sent back to places like Guam, Yap, Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima as we bombed the heck out of airfields, shore batteries and antiaircraft guns. On the 19th of June, during the Great Marianas Turkey Shoot, we returned to Guam where we beat up Orote Airfield as our F6F Hellcats slugged it out with hundreds of Japanese fighters. Although we had great bombing practice during those first few weeks in June, our real test of strength and endurance would occur the very next day.

Mission beyond darkness

On June 20, 1944, Vice Admiral Mitscher, aboard the USS *Lexington* began to devise a plan to destroy the Japanese flattops once and for all. He just had to find them first. As we sat in the ready room aboard USS *Hornet*, we got word that a long-range TBM Avenger finally located the armada. The trouble was it was already late afternoon and when they told us the coordinates, we did the arithmetic and started shaking our heads in disbelief on the fuel needed and the distance involved—it didn't look very good. 250 miles in a Helldiver was stretching it—300 miles was a one-way trip. This would be a maximum effort raid as my Skipper added two more Helldivers to his flight, bringing the total to eight in our division with another division from VB-2 right behind us with six more SB2Cs—each of us carrying a 1,000 pound bomb.

Our sister carriers and VB squadrons from USS *Yorktown*, *Bunker Hill* and *Wasp* also launched Helldivers with a total strike package of 52 Helldivers, 26 SBD Dauntless, 54 TBMs and 96 Hellcats to protect us. Because of our fuel concerns, it was decided that we would launch as soon as possible and not rendezvous around the carrier. Our orders were to go out individually at the most economical fuel consumption we could get because chances are we wouldn't have enough to make it back. At 4:25 p.m., we began to launch and 12 minutes later, 240 airplanes were all on their way to the target that lay 300 miles and almost two hours away. It was a long slow ride as our Helldiver flight was strung out in



The front office—Helldiver cockpit. (Photo courtesy of author)

almost a straight line as we staggered up to 14,000 feet. Funny thing was, I never thought anything would happen to me, you always thought getting shot down or running out of fuel would happen to the other guy. Looking back now, I guess it was foolish thinking—but it was the only way for me to survive.

Hit them hard!

At about 6:30 p.m., our air group commander, flying above the Japanese fleet in a F6F Hellcat became more of a band conductor as he called out our targets. Both divisions of our VB-2 Helldiver squadron were called upon to attack the Japanese



The *Zuikaku* (center) under heavy attack during the battle of the Philippine Sea, June 1944. (Photo courtesy of author)



One kinked Curtiss Electric prop blade and a cockeyed parking angle on the carrier deck tell a tale of minor misadventure for this Helldiver. As the wings fold to compress the bomber's footprint, the extended leading edge slats are clearly visible. Somber hues of this color photo are as much as could be resurrected from a magenta-toned wartime Navy image, the bane of some vintage non-Kodachrome film. (Photo by U.S. Navy via Frederick A. Johnsen)

carrier *Zuikaku*—one of flattops used in the attack on Pearl Harbor. By the time we arrived, it looked like a super Fourth of July celebration going off all around us. They welcomed us with such a heavy barrage of anti-aircraft shells, it actually darkened the already fading light. The *Zuikaku* was in a big wide turn as we set up our bombing run. Naturally, I was the tail-end Charlie in my division, so I had to wait for the other seven Helldivers in front of me to go before I pushed on over.

I decided to go with what worked for me in the past. I pushed the Helldiver over, kept my speed up and buttoned my canopy up tight. I was really moving, going hell bent for everything I could get at full power as the deck of the carrier grew larger in my sight. I opened the bomb-bay doors and released the half-ton bomb as it hurtled for the carrier's deck. I began to pull out and found that my stick wouldn't budge—it was as if it had been set in cement. Try as I might, I couldn't get it to move. I was losing altitude fast and in desperation I put both my feet up on dashboard and reefed the stick back with all my might. As I began to level out, only 100 feet off the water, a new problem developed right in front of me—a Japanese cruiser was dead ahead firing his heavy guns at me.

I remember thinking, as I zoomed on by with my airspeed indicator bouncing off the stops, that they were a bunch of fools wasting such a big gun on a tiny airplane. By now, it was just about dark with no sign of the setting sun and I became an even harder target to hit. I asked Frenchy if we hit the target and he replied, "Yeah, looks to me like you hit it mid-ship." I felt good about that, especially considering the firestorm from hell we had to fly through. I used the excessive speed from my dive to gain some altitude and zoomed back up to 7,500 feet. The sky was dark, there wasn't another airplane I could see anywhere around me—it was awful lonesome up there.



Ditching a Helldiver was a dangerous affair; unfortunately, if you ran out of gas, you had no other choice. (Photo courtesy of author)

Beggars can't be choosy

As I was watching the needle on my fuel gauge slump to one side, I didn't give the Helldiver any more rpm than necessary to stay in the air and no more fuel necessary to keep the prop turning. I was flying towards the location that I thought our carriers were supposed to be and had been droning alone in the black sky for what seemed like an eternity. All of a sudden, I saw another aircraft crossing in front of me and thought, "He must really be lost." I thought, "Oh hell, I might as well be lost with him," as I turned to follow him—good thing I did because he led me right to a carrier. I could see a small red light on the stern

as he made his turn into the groove. As I began to make my own pattern and went past the carrier, the guy in front of me caught the wire and then all hell broke loose—he forgot to safety his guns as tracers were flying all around!

I wasn't about to fly all this way only to get shot down by one of my own, so I stayed clear until the shooting stopped. I made my turn up the groove and it felt like I was chugging along trying to catch up to the flight deck. When I finally got there, I made the best carrier landing in my career—I had to as I didn't have enough fuel to make a go around. As the deckhands moved me forward, some kid jumped up on my wing and directed me well past the barrier. I thought for a second that he was going to run me off the bow. As we came to a stop, he looked at me, then looked up and down at the Helldiver and said in a very excited voice, "Hey, you can't land here! This is the USS *Enterprise* and we can't handle an SB2C!" I smiled at him and said, "Shove it over the side if you like, but I ain't leaving tonight!"

Frenchy and I had just settled down with a shot of brandy when all hell broke loose—Admiral Mitscher had ordered all the other ships to turn their lights on. Unfortunately, once the lights came on, everybody wanted to get aboard at the same time. It was chaotic in large capital letters. There were airplanes racing to beat one another to the deck and this caused the decks to be fouled with crash landings as airplanes ran into one another. With no fuel left in their tanks and nowhere else to land, many of the airplanes had to ditch. It was pitiful to watch.

Helldiver circus

For two days, Frenchy and I enjoyed the hospitality aboard USS *Enterprise* as they sorted out the deck trying to get the airplanes back to their home carriers. When it was our turn to go, they threw in a couple cups of gas for the short flight back to the *Hornet*. As I warmed the engine, I noticed large crowds of sailors gathering up and down the deck and on the catwalks. I had been the first Helldiver to ever land on the *Enterprise* and now I was about to be the first one to attempt a takeoff. I knew the real reason they were watching me—they thought the big beast of a Helldiver would end up in the drink.

With hardly any fuel on board and no bomb load to speak of, I knew they would all be disappointed. As I began my deck run, I had the Helldiver flying by the time I got to the forward-elevator and had my gear up by the time we passed the bow. I laughed all the way to the *Hornet*!

Unfortunately, when I got back, I found out just how costly this mission was. Of the 14 Helldivers launched from *Hornet*, only two remained intact with the other 12 ditching or crashing on a deck. I was one of the lucky ones I guess, and had a newfound respect for the Helldiver—it always brought me back in one piece. ✚



Action Date: 20-Jun-44
Service: Naval Reserve
Rank: Lieutenant Junior Grade
Bombing Squadron Two (VB-2)
Air Group Two (CVG-2)
U.S.S. Hornet (CV-12)

Destination Tokyo—Scoreboard of
Air Group 2 aboard USS Hornet.
(Photo courtesy of author)

The President of the United States of America takes pleasure in presenting the Navy Cross to Lieutenant, Junior Grade (then Ensign) Foster "E" Looney, United States Naval Reserve, for extraordinary heroism in operations against the enemy while serving as Pilot of a carrier-based Navy Dive Bomber in Bombing Squadron TWO (VB-2), attached to the U.S.S. HORNET (CV-12), during action against enemy Japanese forces in the First Battle of the Philippine Sea, on 20 June 1944. Undaunted by hostile anti-aircraft fire, Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Looney carried out a dive bombing attack against major units of the Japanese Fleet and scored a direct hit to assist in the destruction of a large enemy carrier, later returning safe to his base in darkness. By his skill as an airman and devotion to duty, Lieutenant, Junior Grade, Looney upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

General Orders: Commander Fast Carrier Task Force: Serial 0438 (August 20, 1944)