

BOMBING IN THE BEAST

Ben Case and the SB2C Helldiver

BY ROBERT F. DORR

“We were launched while our fleet was 180 to 200 miles northeast of Manila. My group was assigned to hit Japanese ships in Manila Harbor. As we approached our dive area at 10,000 feet, big, black puffs of smoke from anti-aircraft fire began popping all around us.”

Leslie Bennett Case, known as Ben, is describing the first combat by Air Group Eighty aboard USS Ticonderoga (CV 14) on November 5, 1944.

Case was a dive-bomber pilot flying Curtiss SB2C-3 Helldivers in Bombing Squadron Eighty, or VB-80. Case was the shortest guy in the squadron, a New Orleans boy who tipped the scales at 140 pounds, sat on a telephone book to fly, and understood too well why some said the SB2C designation meant “son of a bitch second class.”

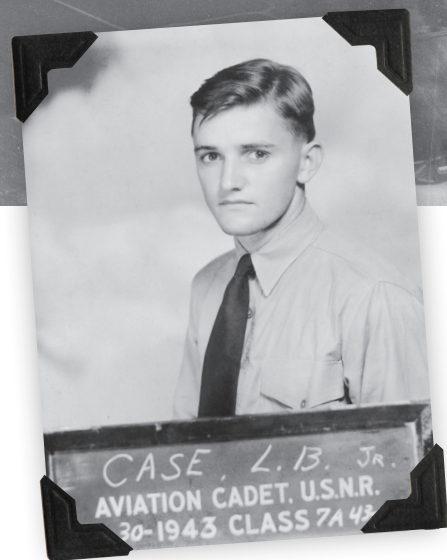
The Helldiver was a product of a Curtiss factory in Columbus, Ohio, rife with quality control issues and manufacturing flaws. Now on his first combat mission, Case had already spent almost a hundred air hours trying to master the airplane. And now Japanese anti-aircraft gunners around Manila were trying to kill him while Nakajima Ki-43 Hayate, or Oscar, fighters lurked in the distance, awaiting their chance.

It was hotter than blazes in the cockpit. “When they send us up north where it’s colder, I’ll know we’re winning the war,” a squadron mate had said.

Case and his fellow ensigns in VB-80 were young, all under 21. Their leaders were senior lieutenants with fewer logbook hours and lesser cockpit skills. Often, Case and his buddies were coping with mediocre leadership “while struggling to tame the beast” – because “Beast” was another term critics bestowed on the SB2C.



The sole remaining airworthy Helldiver is operated by the Commemorative Air Force. It is the last production variant, SB2C-5, and has been restored several times in its long service with the CAF. (Photo by Phil Makanna/EAA)



Above: Ben Case's squadron mates in Curtiss SB2C-3 Helldivers of Bombing Eighty flying near Oceana, Virginia, in May 1944 as the squadron prepares to go aboard USS *Ticonderoga* (CV 14). In 80-B-31 are pilot William B. Klenk and radioman-gunner William Saari. In 80-B-12 are Don Monson and Howard Arthur Young. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy, via Robert F. Dorri)

Inset: Future Helldiver pilot Ben Case as an aviation cadet on June 30, 1943.

Case's target was a Japanese merchantman, the equivalent of a Liberty Ship, moored beneath black bursts of anti-aircraft fire and white puffs of cumulus. On the approach with radioman-gunner Bill Jorgensen alert behind him, Case drilled himself on the routine that had been pumped into his head: "You let the target slide under the left center-section leading edge. You slow to dive-brake deployment speed of 125 knots. You perform a split-S with rudder and aileron to throw yourself into a vertical dive. You keep your nose on the target, remember your "never exceed" speed of 350 knots, and prepare to release your bombs at 1,800 feet for maximum effect.

"As we get over the target, we peel off from our formation and individually roll over into a new vertical dive, descending through a maze of orange balls (smaller caliber fire) getting the target ship in our gunsight and dropping our bombs when we're down to 1,800 to 2,000 feet, almost graying out from the force of gravity (Gs) as we pull out and hightail it at full throttle away from a shoreline ringed with AA fire installations..."

For reasons unclear, the Oscar fighters engaged

only one Helldiver over Manila, exchanging fire with inconclusive results. In that first action, Case was credited with scoring a hit on the ship he bombed, which later sank.

Helldiver history

Case's 16,600-pound Helldiver was designed to be faster and more robust than the Douglas SBD Dauntless of Battle of Midway fame. But the SB2C was the product of a planemaker whose fortunes were in decline and who permitted shoddy practices on the factory floor. "We felt it was up to us to learn this airplane," said Case. "We sharpened our skills on the job and eventually I could say I controlled the airplane rather than it controlled me. But the Helldiver always demanded all of your attention."

The Navy ordered the SB2C in 1939. The new aircraft was a low-wing monoplane similar to the Brewster SB2A Buccaneer, against which it competed successfully. Ironically, Brewster was the only aircraft manufacturer with poorer workmanship and corporate management than Curtiss.

Apart from having an internal bomb bay not found on the Dauntless, the SB2C was unremarkable: Its 49 ft. 9 in. wings folded for carrier stowage, another feature not found on the Dauntless. With pilot and radioman-gunner in tandem, the

latter with a seat that could rotate in any direction, the Helldiver was built around the 1,900-horsepower Wright R-2600-20 Double Cyclone 14-cylinder twin-row radial engine driving a 12-foot four-bladed Curtiss electric propeller. The powerplant experienced some early developmental issues but these were resolved more quickly than were aerodynamic and structural problems associated with the Helldiver.

First flight of the prototype XSB2C-1 (bureau no. 1758) on December 18, 1940, was followed by the flight of the first production SB2C-1 on June 30, 1942. The Helldiver got off to a poor beginning, gaining a reputation for aerodynamic and handling problems. Britain rejected the Helldiver after receiving 26. The U. S. Army curtailed plans to put its A-25 Shrike version into combat.

The reputation was worse than the airplane, the Helldiver's issues nearly always exaggerated. Curtiss resolved aerodynamic problems by lengthening the fuselage by one foot and redesigning the fin. Curtiss built 978 SB2C-1 models and a single XB2C-2 seaplane before turning out 1,112 SB2C-3s with minor changes to engine and propeller. The principal version was the SB2C-4, of which 2,045 were built, with redesigned flaps for improved dive performance, a propeller spinner and eight under-wing stations for 5-inch high velocity aircraft rockets. Curtiss built 970 SB2C-5 models with increased fuel capacity but most arrived too late to see combat. Total production was 7,141 Helldivers including SBF versions assembled by Fairchild and SBWs from Canadian Car & Foundry.

Ben Case pinned on his ensign's bars and aviator wings on October 19, 1943, two days before his 20th birthday. Soon afterward he read a news story about the first Helldiver combat mission, a carrier-launched strike on the Japanese fortress at Rabaul, New Britain, on November 11, 1943. At the time, Case was learning dive-bombing in the hapless SB2A Buccaneer at the training base at Cocoa Beach, Florida. They always seemed to send him to places where it was hot.

Squadron start

Case's squadron, VB-80, was not exactly famous and missed early fighting in the Pacific, but Case took pride in being a plank owner when the squadron formed at Wildwood, New Jersey, on February 1, 1944. The squadron began with the SB2C-1C model, which had the flaws of early Helldivers. On February 10, a crash killed a pilot and gunner. Case and his fellow ensigns blamed



Top: In the rush to war after Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government subsidized a new plant at Columbus, Ohio, just for the production of the new Helldiver monoplanes. It was plagued with initial production problems, and resulting in a generally poor opinion of the SB2Cs. (Photo courtesy of Joe Gertler) **Bottom:** Amid the struggles Curtiss faced in bringing the Helldiver to combat capability, they found time at the Columbus factory to bring out a selected secretary for aviation photographer Hans Groenhoff to capture several classic Kodachromes of a factory fresh SB2C-4. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

the mishap on poor advice from a middle-grade officer. The VB-80 skipper, Lieutenant Edward Anderson, was a Midway veteran with a Navy Cross on his chest but lieutenants immediately below Anderson had more rank than flying hours.

The squadron moved to Oceana, Virginia to join *Ticonderoga* and Air Group 80 with its TBM-3E Avenger (VT-80) and F6F-5 Hellcat (VF-80) squadrons. Now, the squadron re-equipped with SB2C-3 Helldivers, with the longer fuselage and were more pilot-friendly. After a stopover in San Diego, *Ticonderoga* reached Hawaii where the

men rehearsed combat flying. There, one of those mid-level leaders, Lieutenant Paul Kalat, made an error the ensigns never forgot.

Kalat led eight Helldivers into a thunderstorm.

It was a judgment call, flying straight into storm clouds at night. It might have worked. They might have gone straight through via the fastest route and come out the other side.

The half-dozen VB-80 veterans interviewed for this article agreed it was the wrong call. No one knows exactly what happened inside those wet black thunderheads, but two aircraft failed to emerge on the other side. Ensigns William Weippert and Howard Stearns with radioman-gunners Andrew Wadowsky and Nicholas Katsaros joined the surprisingly high number of Ameri-

In addition to *Ticonderoga*, carrier planes on this strike by Task Force 38.3 came from USS *Essex* (CV 9) and USS *Langley* (CVL 27). Pilot George Walsh of VB-80 remembered Ben Case being “the calmest guy among us” when the Helldiver pilots were getting ready.

Said Walsh: “We had no briefing on the evening of the 10th before knocking off to sleep. My bunk was on the port side along the waterline. The first indication that plans had changed is the shuddering of the hull as the turbines went to full power and the sound of the sea swishing past the walk of our stateroom communicated urgency. We were headed back into battle. Still, the combination of sounds and motion had a lulling effect and we slept soundly.”

Said Case: “We were confident, now, at the controls of the SB2C. We’d managed to find workarounds when our mid-level leaders come up with dumb ideas. We’d seen the Japanese at their best. We’d been focused on them killing us,” said Case. “Now, we faced the unpleasant reality of the Helldiver doing the job it was designed for — of us killing them.”

Ormoc slaughter

“We carried one 1,000-pound bomb in the fuselage bay. Later, we also carried a 250-pound bomb under each wing, or four rockets, but those were for land targets,” said Case. The Helldiver’s two, wing-mounted, 20 mm cannon were always useful for strafing. The radioman-gunner was armed with two flexible .30 caliber guns.

“The Japanese transport ships were trying to bring forces from Manila to the western side of Leyte be in position to attack General MacArthur’s troops from behind.

“We had the sun behind us at 15,000 feet. We didn’t use oxygen. We were bullet-proof kids and considered oxygen to be optional below 18,000 feet.

“A huge cloud filled the sky in front of us. The term ‘mushroom cloud’ hadn’t been invented yet, but that’s what it was — because Air Group Fifteen under Commander David McCampbell had gone in ahead of us and blown up a Japanese ammunition ship.

“We made a high speed run-in, increasing speed coming in on the target. I was strung out 300 or 400 feet behind the Helldiver in front of me. I pulled back on my blower [turbocharger] and got ready to dive. The Japanese transports ran from left to right in front of us on the open water as we approached over the Leyte land mass.”

Only sporadic gunfire greeted the Helldivers. They rolled in. Ormoc became a one-sided action. Not one of the Japanese ships reached its destination. Admiral Hayakawa perished amid the carnage. “They suffered tremendous loss of life,” says Case.

can flyers who lost their lives while preparing for a war they never reached. The exact number is not known: the Army lost 15,000 men in training while figures for other U.S. military service branches including the Navy are elusive. That happened on October 2, 1944 off Hawaii. Squadron VB-80’s first combat, described at the start of this article, came on November 5 at Manila.

Six days after their first combat, *Ticonderoga*’s Helldivers were part of a Task Force 38.3 attack on a Japanese convoy, TA-4, coming from Manila and approaching Ormoc City on the island of Leyte. The date, November 11, 1944, was exactly one year after the combat debut of the Helldiver at Rabaul. The convoy was transporting the Japanese 1st and 26th Infantry Divisions, as well as 3,500 tons of munitions and four long-range artillery pieces.

The convoy under Rear Admiral Mikio Hayakawa became a target for carrier-based naval aviators.



The turtle deck behind the gunner’s position folded down for an unobstructed firing arc. The hole in the bulkhead behind the gunner held a raft and the twin baby Brownings (.30 cal versus .50 cal) had no interrupter to stop him from sawing his own vertical tail off. (Photo by Bruce Moore)



CURTISS SB2C-4 HELLDIVER

Type: Two-seat dive bomber

Powerplant: One 1,900-horsepower Wright R-2600-20 Double Cyclone 14-cylinder two-row radial piston engine driving a 12-foot (3.7-m) four-bladed Curtiss Electric propeller

Performance: Maximum speed, 295 miles per hour (475 km/h); cruising speed, 158 miles per hour (254 km/h); ceiling 29,100 feet (8870 m), range 1,165 miles (1875 km)

Weights: Empty 10,547 pounds (4784 kg); maximum takeoff 16,616 pounds (7537 kg)

Dimensions: Wingspan: 49 feet 9 inches (15.16 m); Length: 36 feet 8 inches (11.80 m); height 13 feet 2 inches (4.01 m); wing area 422 square feet (39.20 sq m)

Armament: Two fixed, forward-firing 20mm cannon with 200 rounds of ammunition each (production SB2C); four, forward-firing .50-caliber machine guns (Army A-25); two flexible .30-caliber Browning M1919 machine guns operated by the radioman-gunner (production SB2C)

At nearly 50 feet span and over 16,000 pounds, the Helldiver earned its nickname of The Beast. Although the 1,900 horsepower Wright R-2600 was supposed to give it a top speed of nearly 300mph, it’s doubtful the pilots ever saw those numbers. (Photo by Jim Koepnick)



Helldiver pilot Ben Case (right) and radioman-gunner Bill Jorgensen pose in front of an SB2C Helldiver in 1945. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy, via Robert F. Dorr)

A couple of Helldivers were hit by anti-aircraft fire but none was lost. Ormoc became a slaughter. Case and the Helldiver aircrews of VB-80 were credited with sinking or damaging three Japanese transports and two destroyers.

Said Case: "After that, we returned to our launching area off Luzon for two more days of bombing in Manila Bay on November 13 and 14, 1944.

"On an early morning strike on the 13th, the anti-aircraft fire from Japanese ships and shore batteries was very heavy. As I pulled out of my dive, in which I scored a direct hit on a Japanese warship, my plane was severely jolted. A medium caliber AA explosive projectile hit the fuselage and portside trailing edge wing root and penetrated into the rear cockpit just under my aircrewman's (Bill Jorgensen's) seat.

"Shrapnel and plane fragments caused deep flesh wounds in Bill's right calf and thigh. The plane shook, rattled and rolled but we made it out to the rendezvous point. We joined up with the rest of our group and high tailed it back to our ship some 175 miles away. My plane was taken aboard first and a medical crew with a stretcher was standing by on deck to take Jorgensen to sick bay. He recovered and on December 15, I presented him with the Purple Heart."

On that mission, another VB-80 Helldiver only a hundred yards from Case's, carrying Ensign John Manchester and gunner John Griffith, was hit by anti-aircraft fire and blown out of the sky. No trace of the dive-bomber or its crew was ever found.

Ben Case brings his SB2C-3 Helldiver (Bureau No. 18877) down on *Ticonderoga's* deck on November 13, 1944, damaged by anti-aircraft fire with radioman-gunner Bill Jorgensen wounded in the back seat. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy, via Robert F. Dorr)



AN "INTERESTING" FAMILY TREE

Wery few "families" of military aircraft ever evolved with such dramatic design changes, as the legendary Curtiss Helldivers. Sharing that same intimidating name, it is hard to believe that the early Curtiss XF8C early fixed gear, fabric covered, 450-hp biplane had anything in common with the massive, all metal, 1,900-horsepower monoplane.

Derived from the famous line of Curtiss Falcon fighters, the initial 1929 U. S. Navy XF8C and Marine Corps O2C Helldivers were a diminutive 32-foot span, with less than a third of the horsepower of the massive final versions of the Helldiver family, the SB2C series monoplanes, which had a nearly 50-foot span.

The fixed-gear fabric biplanes became popular icons of naval air power through their fame that was greatly boosted by their use in two of the most popular motion pictures of that era. Even today, 80 years later, they continue to be part of the enduring public lore as "the planes that shot down King Kong." At nearly the same time, they were the featured subject and title of another major Hollywood hit, *Hell Divers*, featuring Wallace Beery, and showcasing Clark Gable in an early starring role.

The success of the first series of Helldivers led to the second generation of biplanes, when the SBC series (SB for Scout Bomber) with retractable

landing gear, and nearly double the horsepower, was redesigned to deliver a 1,000-pound bomb. Numerous improvements were made through the mid to late 1930s, and with the biplane, quickly approaching obsolescence, the Navy called for designs of an all-new dive bomber with vastly improved features and capabilities. It was not lost on the Navy, that the weekly movie theater newsreels were full of impressive films of the success and importance of the new German Stuka dive bombers, occasionally used in the Spanish Civil War.

The Navy sought a long-range scout and bomber to replace the obsolescent Douglas SBD and designed to carry torpedoes, depth charges, or bombs. Because it was to operate without fighter escort, the new Helldivers were to have heavy defensive armament and protective armor, and carry a heavy load at a good rate of speed. Among the other required specifications that complicated the project, included the requirement to fit, and be moved two at a time, on an aircraft carrier's elevators.

With high hopes that the new Helldiver could play a significant role in the fleet, the government subsidized a new plant, constructed just for SB2C production, in Columbus, Ohio.

As with all new projects, there were a number of considerable delays and more than the usual share of production and design-change problems. Like the earlier SBC series, the SB2C prototypes were quickly



The XSBC series biplane of the mid 1930s was the second generation Helldiver, with the huge improvement of a retractable landing gear.



At the height of its design evolution, the XSBC-4 of 1938, shown here with its 1,000-pound bomb, and 750hp Pratt & Whitney, was the last of the U.S. Navy biplane combat planes, circa 1939.



The Prototype XSBC-1 of 1940 initially had considerable structural and handling problems. The program was nearly cancelled and the Navy demanded more than 880 design changes before it would be approved for combat.

lost in crashes and structural failures. The new monoplanes had seemingly more problems than were worthwhile, when the initial carrier testing resulted in crashes and losses, with complaints of serious instability and major structural problems.

In 1943, after the initial carrier tests for the SB2C-1 on the carrier *Yorktown* (CV-10), the Captain in charge recommended that further production should probably be abandoned. Before the SB2C series could be accepted for use in combat, nearly a year and a half passed, correcting and incorporating more than 880 design changes. Worse, the delays came during the critical wartime rush to arms, after Pearl Harbor.

The eventual evolution resulted in a long range, speedy, well armored, dive-bomber that could make a difference in combat missions. Some versions with extra tanks and belly tanks could have a range of over 2,000 miles. And with the early machine gun configurations being replaced by two 20mm wing cannon and the radioman-gunner's twin machine guns, with a bomb bay loaded with two bombs and other bomb loads on the wings, it packed a punch. In the end, it was finally worthy of representing the Helldiver dynasty. — Joe Gertler



The first plane to be called a Helldiver, the F8C was changed from a two-seat fighter to a dive bomber in 1929. It was also destined to become a cultural icon as the plane that shot down "King Kong."



Left: The XF8C-7 of 1930 was the second prototype with a modest 460hp Pratt & Whitney. The large circular emblem behind the cowl reads "Curtiss Navy Helldiver." **Right:** The Navy O2C-1 Helldivers were from the same generation. This one is shown with a rare enclosed cabin installation in 1930.



***Ticonderoga* under attack**

On January 21, 1945, Case returned from a morning strike on Japanese shipping at Kao Hsiung, Formosa, when *Ticonderoga* came under attack by Japanese suicide aircraft, or kamikaze. Two dirty green Yokosuka D4Y3 Suisei (Comet) dive-bombers, called “Judy” by the Allies, slammed into the carrier 20 minutes apart, igniting horrendous fires and explosions.

Most of the Helldiver crews were caught in a smoke-filled ready room below the flight deck. They managed to escape to join the fire-fighting effort. A desperate battle saved the ship but “Tico” lost 144 killed and 200 wounded. The

models — the definitive Helldiver, with nearly all design glitches resolved. A subsequent version, the SB2C-5, did not see combat.

February 16, 1945: “A cold wind whipped across the flight deck as we manned our planes wearing for the first time winter flight jackets, boots and gloves. We flew through overcast skies most of the way to our target, Konoike Airfield, just outside of Tokyo. Most of us said later that we shook or trembled all the way — not sure if it was the weather or the mission. We bombed and strafed hangars, planes on the ground, storage tanks and runways. Anti-aircraft fire was not as heavy as it had been at Manila Bay but there were

a hell of a lot of Japanese planes firing at us as we completed our dives and went out to sea. Our escorting fighters got after them and had a field day. VF-80 shot down 72 Nip planes in one day.”

By now, the Helldiver was routinely carrying four, five-inch high-velocity rockets under each wing. On February 19, 1945, the start of the ferocious battle for Iwo Jima, Case and fellow Helldiver pilots “bombed, strafed and fired rockets along the beaches before the Marines went ashore.” Action over Okinawa followed. In March 1945, a new air group relieved Case’s aboard *Hancock*. Ben Case and his buddies belatedly began a long journey home from his war.

It was customary for naval aviators to complete a second tour of duty in the war zone. Case was preparing to do that when the war ended. As a postwar reservist in 1947, he faced his final challenge from a Helldiver during a stopover while taking one to the boneyard. “I went in for a landing in Shreveport, Louisiana, to refuel and the landing gear would not come down. I had to make a belly landing. As the plane skidded down the runway, sparks were flying every which way. You would have thought it was a fireworks show.”

Case cited two reasons for not staying in the Navy: not being an Academy officer, he expected difficulty competing with Annapolis graduates. And, as his son Les described it, he “decided to get out due to a few close calls caused by inadequate maintenance of the aircraft he flew.”

The younger Case also said, “After the war, my father graduated from Loyola University in New Orleans, and began a 36-year career with Shell Oil. He got married in 1947 and had four kids. He enjoyed sailboat racing in Lake Pontchartrain and on the Gulf Coast.” Born on October 21, 1923, Helldiver pilot Leslie Bennett Case died August 16, 2006. †



Ben Case's aircraft carrier, USS *Ticonderoga* (CV 14) burning after being hit by two kamikaze aircraft near Formosa on January 21, 1945. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy, via Robert F. Dorr)

only Helldiver man to lose his life was Ed Wehr, a pilot who'd asked to be taken off flying status after seeing Manchester blown to bits in front of him. Case happened to be on deck and “was not thinking at all when I dove for cover under an F6F Hellcat. I was hiding under a plane filled with high-octane gasoline and a 500-pound bomb hanging under its belly.”

Ticonderoga survived and retired temporarily from the war. Case and his buddies, certain they were due a break from fighting, transferred to USS *Hancock* (CV 19) and stayed in the fight. Anderson and the executive officer suffered severe burns in the kamikaze attack so Paul Kalat became squadron commander. He was controversial among the pilots because of his role in the Hawaii thunderstorm incident.

After respite at Ulithi, *Hancock's* captain announced on February 10, 1945, “that we were heading north to make the first strikes of the war by Navy carrier planes on the Japanese homeland” as part of Task Force 58. By now, replacement aircraft were arriving and they were SB2C-4