

UNIQUE MISSION

GOING AIRBORNE TO RECORD THE WORLD'S ONLY THREE FLYING CURTISS SB2C HELLDIVERS

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL BOWEN, VAUGHN LARSEN, AND MICHAEL O'LEARY

When the subject of the Curtiss SB2C Helldiver comes up in airport conversation, few individuals are more enthusiastic about the World War II dive-bomber than Ron and Diane Fagen. The Fagens, along with son Evan, operate the fantastic Fagen Fighters WWII Museum in Granite Falls, Minnesota, that comprises a fine selection of flying aircraft. "We spent 17 years restoring our SB2C-5 back to authentic WWII condition," stated Diane as she admired the line-up of Helldivers parked on the ramp at the National Museum of WWII Aviation for a unique photo mission to capture the only airworthy examples in the air.

"I must admit, I just love the sight and sound of the Helldiver," said Ron. "When it flies over, I am captivated by its unique shape — that broad wing and big tail make for an aircraft like nothing else in the sky. Once we started the museum, I knew I wanted to obtain an SB2C but I also realized it was going to be a difficult search because of the type's rarity."

Curtiss had established a reputation for building rugged multi-purpose aircraft for the US Navy and the name Helldiver had been used on previous biplanes built by the company. The name really caught the public's imagination during the 1930s and drew forth images of diving biplanes with the wind screaming through their wire rigging.

As the 1930s progressed, the United States entered into a massive

rearmament program because of building military tensions in Europe and Asia. The Douglas SBD Dauntless had been ordered into series production to provide the Navy and Marines with a modern, all-metal monoplane that could be utilized for pin-point dive-bombing. The worth of the Dauntless would be proven during 1942 in the skies near Midway Island.

In the late 1930s, aeronautic design was moving at a fast pace and Navy officials knew a replacement for the Dauntless would have to be ordered. The Bureau of Aeronautics wanted an aircraft that was faster, stronger, and could carry a bigger weapons load. Negotiations with Curtiss would lead to contracts for the XSB2C-1 that would also carry on with the name Helldiver. The prototype of the rather portly bomber took to the sky on 18 December 1940, a bit less than a year away from the disaster at Pearl Harbor.

There were immediate problems with the aircraft. "I have always been a big fan of the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk," said Ron. "I have restored and flown several and it is just a great aircraft. The designers of the P-40 got everything right. It is a simple, rugged fighter that perfectly performed its mission but when the company started with the Helldiver, it just seems that everything got much more complex."

With the prototype, there were handling and structural problems. Part of the problem came from a Navy requirement for an unusually short



Diane and Ron Fagen were the masterminds in putting together the historic formation flight. (PB)

Perfect formation of the world's three flying Helldivers as they head out from Colorado Springs on 20 August. In the lead, Ray Fowler is piloting the Fagen Fighters WWII Museum's SB2C-5 (BuNo 83321); Charlie Hainline is in the National Museum of WWII Aviation's SB2C-1C (BuNo 75552); while Ed Vesely is in the Commemorative Air Force SB2C-5 (BuNo 83589). (Paul Bowen)