

Interview with Bill Wambach who flew SBD's for a short period while he was in the Navy.

By Kevin Korterud

"I was checked out in an SBD-5 at Beeville Texas on March 7, 1946 by Ensign Maderich (I still have my flight logbook). 1.3 hours. I flew SBD-5's solo on March 8th (1.6 hr.), March 9th (1.5 hr.), and twice on March 11th (1.5 hr. & 1.8 hr.).

I also remember meeting up with two other cadets - pre-arranged without anyone else's knowledge - in our SBD's, far from the home field. The most fearless guy took the lead, with me 2nd and the 3rd guy in trail. He led us down VERY low over the Nueces River, where he proceeded to follow the twists & turns between the trees on the banks. I recall not trusting his judgment and rising over the trees a few times. Then, I saw a dam ahead. I rose, but he stayed low until the last second. I saw a sailboat just above the dam, and it flipped flat in his propwash. We all pulled our noses up so the sailors couldn't read our plane numbers. Then, we flew wide around the base as we heard all the angry chatter over the radio. We approached from a different direction & landed without getting caught. If we had been caught, I'm sure we'd have been washed out, even though we were only a week from graduating!

I was a Naval Aviation Cadet at the time. Those were the last training flights before I got my wings & commission as 2nd. Lt., USMCR(NAVC) on March 20th 1946. I never got to fly an SBD again. I was sent home to Inactive Duty May 5, 1946. I was in the Inactive Reserve till May 14, 1949, flying only SNJ's.

However, on Sept. 10, 1999, Tom Barnes gave me the privilege of flying in the back seat of L82GA with Col Mike Rettke as PIC, from PDK north of Atlanta to Falcon Field (FFC) for the airshow. What a thrill for this Old Goat to be in an SBD again more than 53 years after my 'hotrodding' as a 20-yr-old cadet!"

### **Read the full transcript of the interview**

#### ***What kind of training did you receive to fly the SBD?***

Kevin, I know I had a cockpit checkout, for sure. But, I can't remember whether my instructor on that first SBD flight was in the front seat, or the back seat. It would seem logical that, after the cockpit checkout, he would want me to be in the front seat, in order to have the full complement of instruments & controls.

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#### ***Was the color scheme like ours?***

Yes, very much like the Dixie Wing's.

**What was your first flight like in the SBD?**

Kevin, I'm not sure what the first flight was like, but I do remember that, before I got my chance, I witnessed a burning SBD that had crashed on take-off. We were walking to the chow hall for lunch when we heard the sirens, and saw the plume of black smoke just off the base. Several of us ran to the fence, vaulted it & got near the fire. We saw the firefighter in the asbestos suit pull the charred body of the pilot from the cockpit. He was an officer who was going to get married as soon as he got his wings. Sad.

One of my fellow cadets had a close call when he forgot to remove the batten from the rudder. He nearly hit the tower on take-off, but the controller talked him through climbing to altitude & doing violent maneuvers to shake off the batten. It worked & he landed safely.

I also remember meeting up with two other cadets - pre-arranged without anyone else's knowledge - in our SBD's, far from the home field. The most fearless guy took the lead, with me 2nd & the 3rd guy also in trail. He led us down VERY low over the Nueces River, where he proceeded to follow the twists & turns between the trees on the banks. I recall not trusting his judgment & rising over the trees a few times. Then, I saw a dam ahead. I rose, but he stayed low until the last second. I saw a sailboat just above the dam, and it flipped flat in his propwash. We all pulled our noses up so the sailors couldn't read our plane numbers. Then, we flew wide around the base as we heard all the angry chatter over the radio. We approached from a different direction & landed without getting caught. If we had been caught, I'm sure we'd have been washed out, even though we were only a week from graduating!

**What did you like the most about it?**

I liked the extra power that the SBD had, over the SNJ. We didn't get to practice diving or dive-bombing, because they had wired the flaps up. We were so close to San Antonio Army Air Force Base that the top brass KNEW we'd try to impress the AAF cadets.

**What did you like the least about it?**

I just wanted to be a fighter pilot in the much faster Corsairs or Mustangs, which is why I applied for the 11 slots to get commissioned as a Marine. Unfortunately for my dreams at that time, 90% of us were sent home to Inactive Duty right after graduation, because WWII was over, and we were too expensive to keep on full officer's pay, plus 50% flight "skins".

**Any other insights would be welcome!**

Kevin, now, as an old man approaching 80, I thank God that WWII ended before I had to try to dive-bomb & strafe the home islands of the Japanese. I'm sure they would have fought like heroes to defend their homeland, and I very likely would have died.

I do wish that, after all that training in tail-wheel first, dead stick landings, I'd been able to test myself in carrier landings & take-offs. Since 1988 I've been enjoying flying as a pilot again in Cessna 172's & 152's. That was a 39 year gap when I was aching to be a pilot, but concentrated on raising 6 kids.

Bill Wambach - 1st Lt., USMCR (NAVC)