

Semper Fi in the Sky

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The newly restored PBJ-1J is rolled out for an engine run-up

The warbird world is replete with professional restorations of basket cases and re-creations of dataplate specials, of wing spars remanufactured, complex fittings artfully crafted, rare airplanes rising phoenix-like from behind closed hangar doors. But the story of this one-of-a-kind North American PBJ-1J—the Navy version of the Army Air Forces' B-25J Mitchell—is as much a tale of people as it is of nuts and bolts, clevos and rivets.

Over a two-decade period, a movable cast of some 12 to 15 faithful volunteers did nearly all the gruntwork and artistry and much of the fundraising to restore the world's only remaining PBJ-1. And not only has it been restored to authentic World War II colors and condition, it's flying again. Some of these volunteers traveled considerable distances to the Camarillo, Calif., hangar where the airplane is based. Most had day jobs when the restoration started, but many have since retired and shifted from weekend work to nearly fulltime.

During WWII the Marine Corps flew the Navy's PBJ-1s. One story has it that North American was manufacturing the twin-engine bombers so fast that the Army Air Forces had more Mitchells than they could crew, so they offered the extras to the Navy, which in turn handed them over to the Marines.

Trusted aviation historian Joe Baugher, however, tells a more complex tale involving a big Navy-owned aircraft factory in Renton, Wash., that the USAAF wanted for B-29 production. In return for the Navy canceling the Boeing PBB-1 Sea Ranger flying boat, due to be manufactured at Renton, the AAF would turn over all anti-sub flying duties to the Navy and provide it with B-24s, B-25s and Lockheed Venturas to do that job.

The Marine Corps received 706 PBJ-1s out of the total of nearly 10,000 B-25s built. Only eight of them later found their way into civilian hands. Seven of those eight have since crashed, been junked or disappeared, and this sole authentic former Marine Mitchell remains. At least two B-25s have been repainted as PBJ-1s, but their owners—one of them the National Naval Aviation Museum, in Pensacola—admit that they “represent” PBJ-1s but aren’t the real deal.

That lone remaining PBJ-1J never flew in combat; it was simply built, delivered to the Navy several months before the war ended and then sent to the War Assets Administration for disposal. It was sold in turn to a variety of civil operators. During the 1950s and ’60s, a budding Continental Airlines used it as a crew trainer and shuttle, then it passed through the hands of several corporate operators, including an electronics company that used it as an aerial testbed.

In 1988 this sole survivor was acquired by the Commemorative (then Confederate) Air Force, and five years later was assigned to its Southern California Wing for eventual restoration. Not a basket case by any means, the airplane was actually flown from Midland, Texas, to the SoCal Wing’s Camarillo headquarters...though its doughty CAF crew might have had second thoughts about being airborne had they seen all the internal corrosion later discovered by the restoration team.

Since it seemed to be a working airplane, the group figured it had been granted a project that would need little more than cosmetic work and a paint job. That gift horse’s mouth clamped shut as soon as a SoCal crew taxied their new PBJ out for a quick spin. They made it no farther than the run-up pad before a variety of gauges either dead or in the red convinced them that the bomber was far from airworthy.

Though some disassembly and cleanup work was done in the interim, serious restoration began in 2003 that included removal of the engines; the wings outboard of the engines; and all fuel, oil and hydraulic tanks and plumbing. The fuselage interior was stripped, and mods from the airplane’s corporate career were removed. An airstair door had been added to the aft fuselage and the bomb bay eliminated. A plywood floor had been installed, with control cables rerouted from the fuselage sidewalls to the under-floor area. And of course the top turret was long gone, though the bombardier’s glass nose had survived.

Many of the airplane’s corroded internal formers, stringers and longerons had to be replaced, and often they were of unusual curves and shapes that required expensive subcontracting. By the late 2000s the restoration was competing with a major national recession, and every nickel was squeezed until the buffalo squeaked.

A B-25 is no B-17, but it is still a large airplane, a massive metalworking project for a dozen people who stand hip-high to its main-gear tires. (Resto-serendipity: When the team decided that it needed to send the PBJ’s big wheels out for expensive professional tire mounting, a casual visitor to the hangar mentioned that he routinely mounted way bigger tractor tires. He did the job for free.)

Typical of the airplane's complexity were the cowl-flap actuator bearings, all 56 of which had to be replaced. Much of the fuselage and wings had to be reskinned, and at times the airplane looked like a forest of clecos (spring-loaded devices that are temporarily substituted for rivets to hold sheet-metal panels in place). Nor was the PBJ restoration the team's only task. They were also the SoCal Wing's maintenance and repair guys, with a fleet of 11 other warbirds to keep on flight status for airshows and revenue rides, ranging from a Zero and a Bearcat to a particularly needy C-46.

The SoCal Wing's PBJ has been painted as MB 11, a strafing aircraft from Marine bomber squadron VMB-611 that went down in May 1945 during a mission over Davao, on the Philippine island of Mindanao. It was being flown by Lieutenant Doit Fish, the father of SoCal Wing member David Fish. He was lost during the same mission that claimed VMB-611's well-known commanding officer, Lt. Col. George A. Sarles; the squadron was informally known as "Sarles' Raiders."

The Marines were never encouraged to plaster fancy names and nose art on their airplanes, probably a reflection of the Navy's own reluctance to personalize airplanes at least in part because carrier-borne aircraft stay on the ship while pilots come and go. So MB 11 carries only a small globe and anchor and "Semper Paratus" under the pilot's window.

When the Marines got their PBJs, they modified them for the missions they needed to fly. Radar pods were added for night shipping interdiction, racks for 5-inch rockets were mounted under the wings and extra .50-caliber guns were brought aboard for anti-ship strafing and close air support. MB 11 has been restored with rockets and four guns in cheek pods below and aft of the cockpit, plus a starboard-wingtip radome. The most effective PBJ radar setup was a protuberant above-the-nose radome that had a wider scan than the wingtip pod and provided better handling. But it made the airplane look like a Pixar caricature of Jimmy Durante, so SoCal elected to go with the more classic look.

The wingtip pod also allows for a prime passenger seat behind the glass nose, which is important because revenue-ride flights will be an essential part of MB 11's operations. After a successful engine run-up last December, taxi tests and the installation of instruments and communications systems necessary for flight, the immaculately restored PBJ took to the air for the first time in 23 years on May 15, 2016. More info at cfsocal.com.