

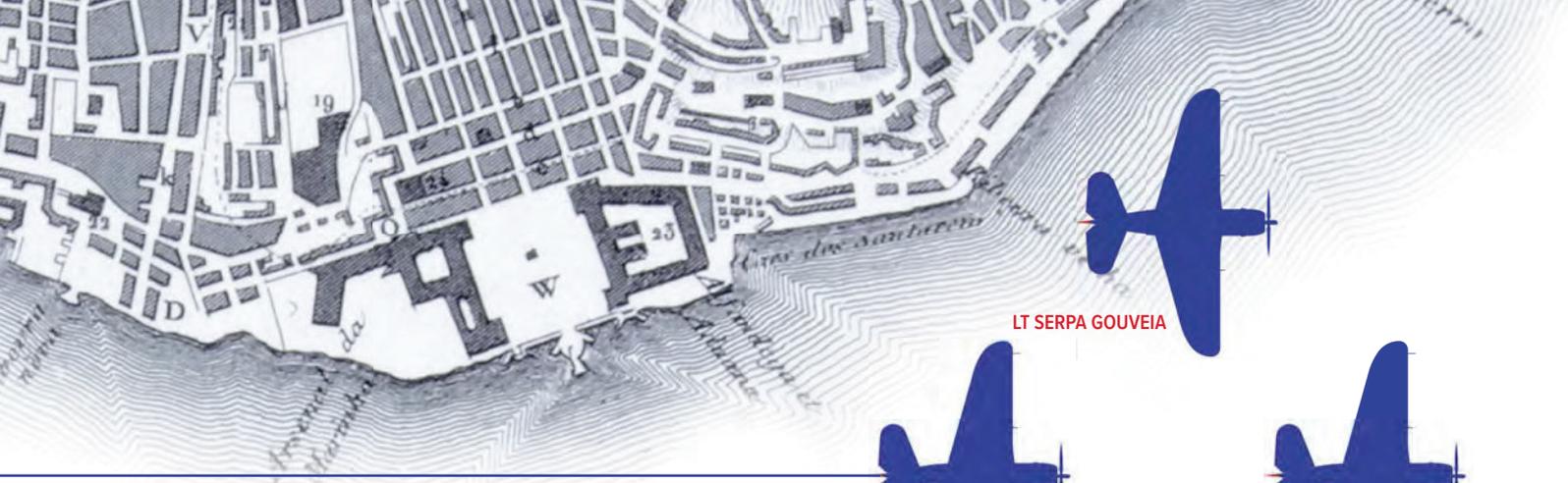
Beauty and the Beast

Filipe Silva investigates the forgotten image of a Portuguese Curtiss Helldiver over Lisbon's stunning waterfront

When it comes to air-to-air photography, there is usually a tale beyond what you can see in the image itself. And while the results often exist far longer than the photographer, the specifics of how they came about – the what, why, where and who – are usually lost or forgotten in the passage of time.

One such image that falls into that category shows Aviação Naval Portuguesa (Portuguese Naval Aviation) Curtiss SB2C Helldiver 'AS-14' – this type being known as 'The Beast', among other nicknames – flying over downtown Lisbon on April 22, 1955. While the film was developed soon after the flight, the photograph itself only came to light during the late 1990s. Since then, it has appealed to me greatly. Not





only does it offer an excellent view of the city in which I was born, but the pilot was a good friend and former classmate of my father – and a man I have known since childhood – Cdr José Cyrne de Castro.

Fly to serve

I recently had the pleasure of speaking to Cdr Cyrne de Castro in the run up to his 90th birthday, about the photograph, how he became a naval aviator and some of his Helldiver experiences.

In today's world where we focus on specialisation and place importance on a person's inherent skills and abilities, as well as their personal ambitions, it seems strange that someone could be ordered to undergo pilot training – whether they wanted to or not. But that is exactly what happened to him in 1953, when aged 23.

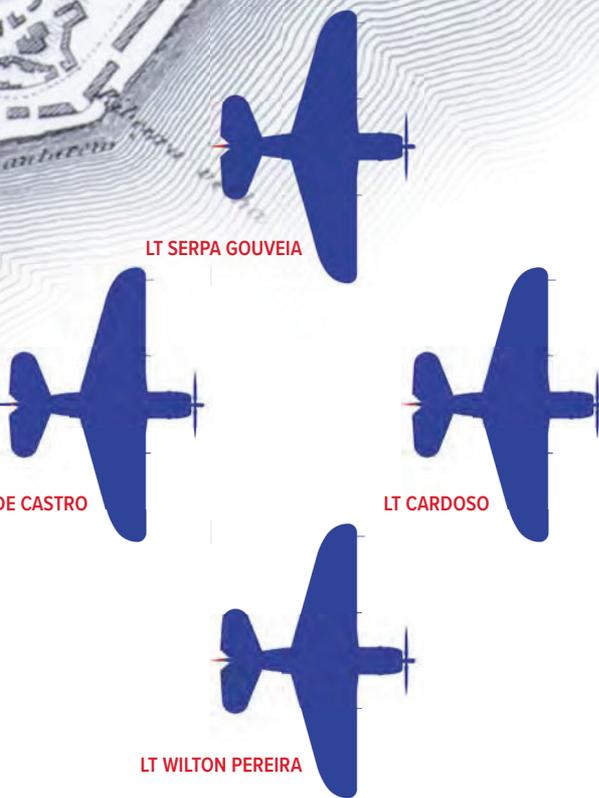
Shortly after being commissioned as a midshipman in the Armada Portuguesa (Portuguese Navy), he was posted to the Gago Coutinho Naval Aviation Centre (NAC) at Aveiro to begin flying training. Although he had never considered joining the aircrew fraternity, a naval officer at the time was expected to fulfil his duties in whatever way was deemed fit

– whether that was navigating a frigate or submarine or even flying aeroplanes. Cyrne de Castro recalled: “I was surprised by my appointment, as the Aviação Naval and Aeronáutica Militar [Army Aviation] were in the process of being merged into what would become the Força Aérea Portuguesa [Portuguese Air Force].”

Once he realised he could not avoid the posting, he approached it with enthusiasm and excelled in his new-found role, coming top of his class. Following basic training on the de Havilland Tiger Moth, Cyrne de Castro went on to fly the then new North American T-6 Texan at Base Aérea No 1 (Air Base No 1) located close to the Sintra mountains in western Portugal. It was there he flew the station's last airworthy Spitfire on its penultimate flight; the pilot after him ground-looped and destroyed the machine.

Qualifying as a second pilot on the Avro Anson, he continued with the composite squadron equipped with Texans and Curtiss Helldivers at Base Aérea No 6 near Montijo.

With further dual instruction undertaken in the T-6, Cyrne de Castro soon progressed on to the SB2C. A skilled aviator, he



explained: “I later became a flight instructor and remained with the Aviação Naval until 1958, before transitioning back to the fleet. I flew for the last time that year, by which time I had some 1,700 hours in my logbook.”

Among his Helldiver recollections were two close calls – the first shortly after taking off from Montijo, as he remembered: “My heart stopped when I looked into the cockpit and realised the red warning triangles indicating the wings were unlocked were visible. Like most carrier-borne types, the Helldiver's mainplanes could be folded.” Fearing they could unlatch any second, Cyrne de Castro hastily turned back towards the base and landed safely – the safeguards built into the Curtiss design working perfectly.

The second event was equally as terrifying. Flying through cloud at

LEFT A moment in time: The then Lt Cyrne de Castro in the cockpit of 'AS-14' as the four-ship passes over Lisbon's Terreiro do Paço
ALL VIA FILIPE C SILVA

BELOW Taken at Montijo during summer 1957 by the author's uncle, this photograph shows Helldiver 'AS-19' taxiing past two PV-2C Harpoons. This is believed to be one of just two colour images of the Helldiver in Portuguese service



RIGHT A dramatic image of a Curtiss SB2C-5 Helldiver (most likely 'AS-5') diving over the Sado River, south of Lisbon, during the early 1950s. Note the type's perforated, split flap dive brakes are deployed



ABOVE RIGHT José Cyrne de Castro poses with a Tiger Moth during flying training at the Gago Coutinho Naval Aviation Centre in 1953. By coincidence, he believes this image was taken by the author's father

RIGHT The author, Filipe C Silva (right), interviews Cdr José Cyrne de Castro – note the essential reading material on the table!

7,000ft, an already worried Cyrne de Castro had become spatially disorientated and inadvertently rolled inverted. He recalled: "I quickly made a difficult and confused recovery that ended with us just a few feet above some treetops. My back seater had not realised there was a problem and was thrilled with the experience – he thought it was intentional!"

Apparently, Cyrne de Castro was as white as a sheet for several hours after landing.

Picture perfect

In honour of Brazilian President João Café Filho's visit to Lisbon on April 22, 1955 a sizeable military parade was organised at the Terreiro do Paço (Black Horse Square). Arriving over the sea, the Helldiver squadron at Montijo

– just five miles to the east – was tasked with providing a flypast, as Cyrne de Castro recalled: "The brief was for four Helldivers to fly overhead as the Brazilian president came ashore. With Lt Cardoso in the lead, Lt Wilton Pereira was selected to fly in the number two position on his right with a photographer in the back, and Lt Serpa Gouveia on his left as the number three. I was chosen as the number four to complete the diamond formation."

The plan called for the Helldivers to take off at ten second intervals to allow for the prop wash from the aircraft in front to dissipate. Cyrne de Castro remembered: "We took off to the north and Cardoso turned left to head west out to sea. Forming up immediately, we flew towards our initial reference point, which was the Bugio Lighthouse at



the mouth of the River Tagus, about six miles to the west of Lisbon. I had a good view of the other aircraft as we ran in towards the square at about 1,500ft." Coinciding with President Filho's arrival, the skies of Lisbon were filled with the chorus of four Wright Cyclone

Portuguese Helldivers

Post-war, the Curtiss S2B Helldiver found favour with the French, Italian, Hellenic and Portuguese navies, as well as the Royal Thai Air Force.

With 24 SB2C-5s delivered to the Armada Portuguesa during the early 1950s, in accordance with NATO's Mutual Assistance Pact, the type was initially expected to be operated in the anti-submarine role. However, while some effort was initially made to forward the type in this tasking, Portugal used them primarily to provide aircrew training before transitioning to other types.

The aircraft were painted in overall Gloss Sea Blue, with a red and green rudder and Cruz de Portugal (Cross of Portugal) without the white roundel on the upper left and lower right wings. The Helldivers were initially based at the NAC at Aveiro, but in 1954 were relocated to Montijo following the amalgamation of the Aviação Naval and Aeronáutica Militar. The Portuguese examples – which were equipped with a radio altimeter, an AN/APS-4 air-to-surface radar and had the tailhook fixed in place – were often nicknamed the 'Big-Tailed Beast', 'Two-Cee', 'Son-of-a-Bitch 2nd Class' or simply 'Beast'.



radial engines as the machines roared overhead. As they did, the photographer (whose name has been lost in the mists of time) in the back of Lt Pereira's aircraft waited for the right moment and took the photograph in question. Cyrne de Castro continued: "We made one pass and, with a slight turn to



starboard, landed back at Montijo. The entire flight was over in less than 45 minutes."

It is most likely that the photographer took more images during the flight – all of which were certainly developed at the time. However, this shot was selected as

the best. So, the question arises... what happened to the others? They may be unwittingly hidden somewhere at Montijo or an HQ building. They could have been taken as keepsakes by someone who like them, or even recognised their historical provenance, and are now collecting dust in the darkness of a loft or basement waiting to be found again.

It is also possible they were simply thrown away – 65 years ago, the sensitivity of photographic film was low and unless the photographer

not an everyday occurrence. In fact, it was frowned upon. I recall one occasion smuggling a camera into the cockpit of my single-seat FIAT G.91 – an action that would have earned me at least a dressing down, or a severe reprimand if a senior officer had found out. However, by doing so I was able to obtain some images that have become genuine rarities (see *FlyPast* June 2019).

As it stands, this is the only known image to exist from within the formation over Lisbon on April 22, 1955. Although more than 65



had an incredibly steady hand, and the air was smooth, the exposures could easily have been blurred or out of focus.

The ease with which we can capture any given moment today, makes us often forget just what was needed to take a photograph back then. It was unusual for individuals to own cameras as they were expensive – as was the film and subsequent development. With that in mind, it is understandable that taking unofficial photographs was

years old, it has made it to the 21st century and now endures in digital format. While discussing photos, I asked Cdr Cyrne de Castro if he had any more of himself with his mounts. He recalled: "There is just one of me with a Tiger Moth, which was taken in 1953 – except for official images, it was deemed unlucky to have photographs taken before flying!" **FP**

The author thanks Sid Green and A C Silva for their help with this feature

LEFT Helldiver 'AS-8' awaits its next sortie from Montijo – the same base from which Cdr Cyrne de Castro flew the type

ABOVE A three-ship of Helldivers ('AS-19' is at the top and 'A-2' in the centre, beyond 'AS-23') over the Alentejo plains southeast of Lisbon sometime in 1955

BELOW A pair of Helldivers (left) share the flightline with three Lockheed PV-2C Harpoons at Base Aérea No 1, near Sintra, in 1955

