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DEVIL DOG



# DEVIL DOG DETAIL

*Only a tailgunner can afford to look back.*

BY STEVEN L. THOMPSON



It would take a brave man to accuse Ozzie Parrish of being a misty-eyed nostalgic. Peering up at *Devil Dog's* starboard Wright R-2600-29 like a disgusted drill instructor contemplating a sloppy squad, Parrish is anything but the stereotypical Confederate Air Force Colonel. In fact, although he wears the gray shirt, name tag and wings of the CAF, his squadron's red baseball cap is not adorned with a CAF Colonel's Falcon insignia, but with a Marine master sergeant's chevrons. Above and behind Parrish, *Devil Dog's* fuselage declares that his rank is no fluke; each of the VMB-612 squadron members listed in yellow stenciled letters carries an enlisted rank, either sergeant or corporal. Queried about this, Parrish scratches his chin and wipes his hands on a grimy rag hanging out of his oil-smeared trousers. "Can't have a whole squadron full of colonels," he says, gravel-voiced, and in between his words there is just the hint, the faint suggestion, that the other aircraft parked here at the CAF's Harlingen, Texas, showplace with those lengthy rolls of sponsoring "colonels" on their fuselages are somehow out of uniform. It is a Marine attitude, but Parrish has earned it. Like many of VMB-612's people, he is ex-Marine himself, and *Devil Dog*, the dull blue North American PBJ-1J hulking above him as he sweats even in the midst of a Texas thunderstorm, is, of course, restored to mimic a Marine bomber.

Parrish has no time for questions today, rain or not. It is the first day of

AirSho 82, the CAF's annual four days of recreating World War II in the air, and Parrish is clearly in charge of getting the *Dog* airborne and keeping it there. His leathery face is screwed into a blank glare as he squints into the exhaust stacks. It is not the look of someone who joins the CAF to touch long-ago glory, to sit around theme-restaurant bars and bring back rum and Cokes, Air Corps Pink, the Andrews Sisters and the Last Good War. It is the look of a man who knows that airplanes, by God, have to be *made* to fly. It is a crew chief's look.

Today Parrish is concerned about oil leaks around a pushrod tube and valve cover. *Devil Dog* came to the CAF as a retired Air Force TB-25K, and Parrish has been a part of its transformation. He knows it well; knows that it has been flown only a few times since restoration, knows that its brand-new props are a major source of worry. And he knows that too much oil is dribbling out of the cowl flaps.

Big Wright radials always have puked oil, of course. It is likely that when VMB-612 was commissioned at MCAS Cherry Point on 1 October 1943, some crew chief peered up exactly as Ozzie Parrish does today, doggedly plugging the more egregious leaks. If you were sufficiently imaginative, you could hazard the guess that hard-bitten men like Parrish, with calloused hands and tight lips—wrench spinners and tin benders—might feel some mystical connection with that past, and that the knuckle-bruising



hardware itself was the link that brought them into the CAF world. You could hazard it, but you should not expect an enthusiastic response. Not even Harlingen's flight line is a place for metaphysics.

And yet the man who made *Devil Dog* possible lists the study of the world's religions as one of his passions. Brig. Gen. "Mad Jack" Cram, USMC-Ret., was C.O. of Marine Bombing Squadron 612 all those years ago. It was he who slung a pair of torpedoes under the wings of a PBY-5A and headed out to sink some of the ships of the Tokyo Express, that nightly freight train of barges and transports jammed with the Japanese troops and supplies that kept the Marines fighting for every malarial inch of Guadalcanal in 1942. Cram and the *Blue Goose* sank a ship and returned with 175 holes and one engine to a welcome that included his new nickname and the Navy Cross. It is doubtful that Jack Cram took the medal too seriously. He was 36 years old at the time, a Major, and already had been chief pilot for the state of

*Without wrench-spinners like Ozzie Parrish, the CAF would never fly.*



Washington, a fixed-base-operation owner/manager and co-author of Civil Aeronautics Administration flight training manuals. What impressed him most about the incident was the inability of aircraft to sink ships at night—which, in the South Pacific, is when the Japanese sailed.

Cram claims to have been made a fatalist by the experience with the *Blue Goose*. It did not deter him from accepting command of one of the Marine Corps's four squadrons of PBJs a year later. Nor did it stop then Lt. Col. Cram from turning VMB-612 into an experimental unit, whose 16 PBJ-1Js would be equipped with radar and rockets rather than bombs and would prowl the night in search of Japanese ships. By November 1944, the bugs had been ironed out of the radars, the math had been done to perfect firing points for the rockets, and the squadron flew its first combat missions from Saipan. Painted matte sea blue, bomb bays full of fuel tanks, rockets under wings and belly, nose guns replaced by protuberant radomes, the PBJs of 612 did their jobs well. They flew their all-night sorties from Saipan, Iwo Jima, Okinawa. They sank ships, as they were supposed to. They kept the enemy anxious about night operations, as they were supposed to. And then, when V-J Day came, they were suddenly surplus. VMB-612 was decommissioned on 15 March 1946, and the PBJs disappeared into the vast, frenzied demobilization of America.

Their crews demobbed and dispersed too. Their missions became grist for O-Club tales, of interest to few who did not share the same tasks or who were not fascinated by Marine air operations of World War II. Col. Cram went on with his career and retired as a one-star general, living again in Washington. So much for VMB-612; another pile of scrapped airplanes, another boxcar of moldy personnel records, another few paragraphs in the history of a past war. End of story.

But not quite, because Marines stick together. When the CAF acquired *Devil Dog*, TB-25K number 108-174152, some 35 years after VMB-612 ceased to exist, Marine memories ensured that the TB would not be turned into just another Air Corps B-25. Enough people knew about the night rocket attacks of VMB-612 to make the tired trainer into a replica night stalker.

The transformation was nearly com-



*For Mad Jack, airwar wasn't fun. But then, he was a CAA pilot and knew better.*

plete by the time AirSho 82 hit Harlingen along with a heavy rainstorm. Tail number 174152 has become *Devil Dog*, its glass nose replaced by six convincing dummy .50-cal. machine guns, its waist blisters now sprouting a gun each, its tail equally menacing with two black barrels. Standing on its fat Goodyear tires in the gray drizzle, it is as subtle as a cudgel. An Air Corps B-25 painted in desert camouflage looks dainty and gay next to it.

Down the flight line from where wrenchmen such as Parrish nurse half-century-old machinery, CAF headquarters is alive with jostling, gray-uniformed figures. Despite the rain, CAF Colonels bustle about to make the show happen on time. The crowd in the wet but cheery HQ is much like that in any headquarters. People are looking for answers, or for the man who has the answer, or even for the one who knows there isn't any answer. Brightly colored patches are sewn to every shoulder, every sleeve, every back. CAF wings are pinned over every breast pocket. Baseball caps identify this or that squadron or airplane



crew. Few in the headquarters are not part of the heraldic swirl, are not wearing CAF gray.

One of the few is a quiet man in decidedly unmilitary garb who watches from a side hall. If you had seen the Marine publicity photo snapped 40 years ago on an obscure South Pacific island, you'd know its subject even today by his wide smile. Jack Cram stands, extends his hand and flashes that smile in a single fluid motion. He is a smallish man, now in his mid-70s, but his grip is hard and his eyes still know the trick of command. Urged to recount VMB-612's story, he speaks softly and without hyperbole. As his tale unfolds, it becomes harder and harder to place this Jack Cram in the brooding bomber on the ramp.

He sketches the details of the squadron's history not in victories or decorations, but in people; the men he led, the way they flew, fought and died. Forty years later, Cram is still affected by the six crews who never came back. He manifests no untoward emotion as he takes his audience back through the decades to long nights of patrol and combat and even longer days of waiting for missing crewmen; but just beyond the lines around his eyes, there is something unquiet, something gut-

twistingly real that has nothing to do with the delight of flight or the so-called glory of war. Perhaps something like it has kept Cram from drifting into the CAF before now; he knew little about the Confederate Air Force until he was invited to attend this airshow by the new VMB-612. As the rain grudgingly abates, the little group listening to him wind up his story can only guess at what emotions must be bound up with the matte-blue PBJ down the flight line.

Out there, on the ramp, a discreet observer can begin, a little, to understand some of the emotions. Men in their late 50s and early 60s stroll down the line, past P-47s, B-17s, C-46s, past, in fact, every combat aircraft in America's World War II arsenal. Often, the graying men wear a distracted look, a kind of inward thousand-yard stare.

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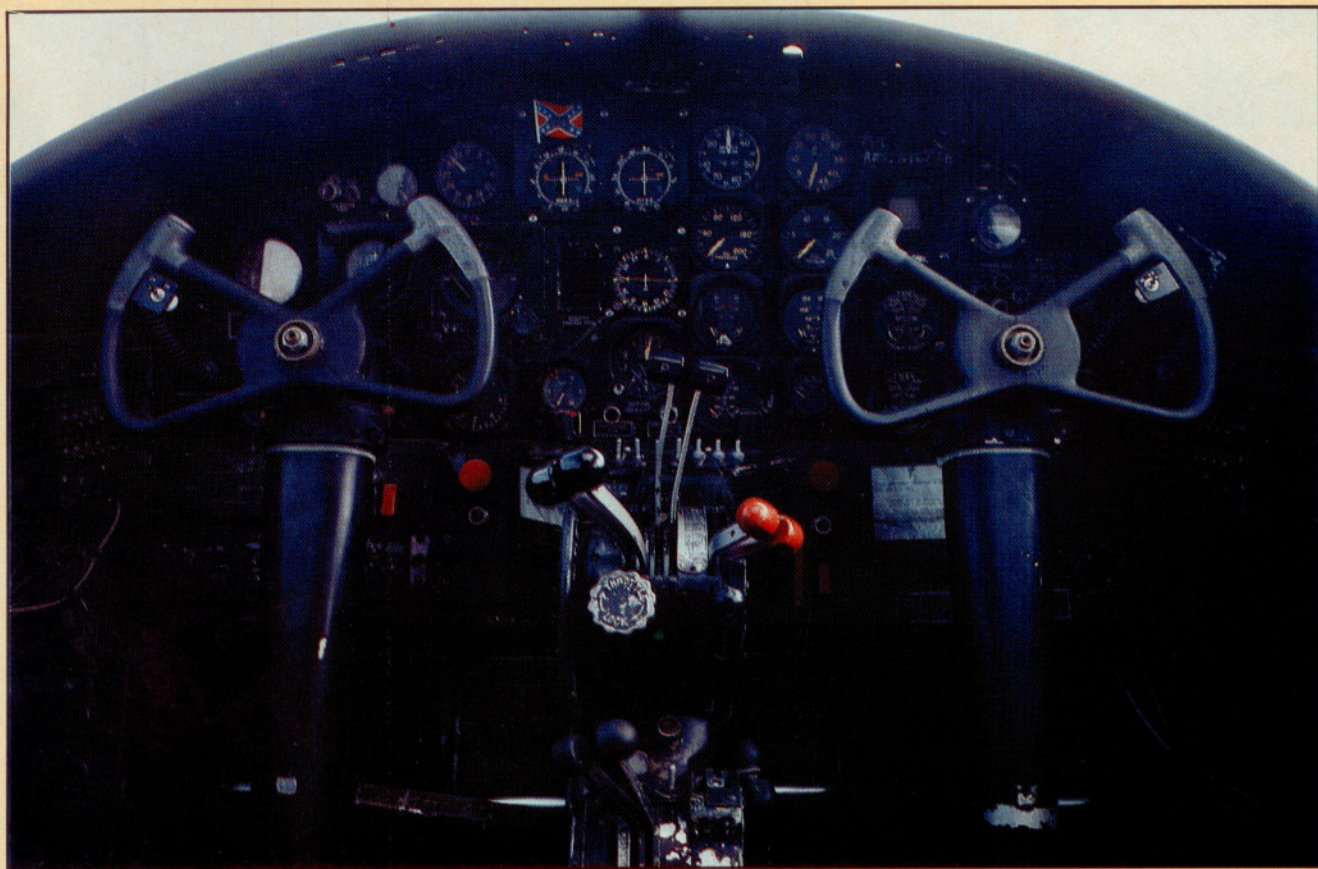
*The PBJ is as subtle as a cudgel. Its pilots need stamina and strength.*

Often, they halt next to a fuselage, a leading edge, an empennage, and gently lay a hand on the aluminum.

This sight is available at any airplane museum the world over. What makes this place and this day different is that many of these men come not just to touch, but to fly. It is not an inconsequential difference.

For one who was not There, to crawl up the flight deck boarding ladder into *Devil Dog* is to be subjected to an intense split-screen experience. On one screen, there is the Technicolor reality of a hand grasping a worn alloy rail where thousands of hands have done the same; there is the pungent heated smell of a cockpit, faintly electric, partly petrochemical, mostly made of sweat and metal. On the other screen, in black and white, scenes from all the Hollywood versions of boarding-the-airplane flick rapid-fire across a mental eye, giving every real image and movement a weird sense of déjà vu.

As the crew settles into the bucket seats and plugs into the intercom, the two sets of images struggle to superimpose. Despite the rain, *Devil Dog's* cockpit is a steam bath. Sweat rolls down every face as the check list is meticulously run through. The airshow already has begun; but to this crew, it









is all remote. Like all crews anywhere, this one cares most about its own role, and it has no collective illusions about that role. This is no group of nostalgics, dreamily imagining themselves making runs on some long-ago and faraway target; this is a flight crew, whose job is to fly an airplane. Period.

As any B-25 pilot will tell you, it is enough. The split-screen déjà vu is wiped out abruptly by the engine-start process. Pilot and copilot work mags and throttles to coax the port Wright to life. And when it fires, it fires hard. The engine coughs, belches blue smoke and then hammers and bangs to a steady rpm. Ears coddled by environmentally conscious turbofans and civilly obedient Lycomings are stunned by the racket. The long, hollow cigar that is the PBJ rocks and magnifies the noise mercilessly. Then the starboard engine stutters to life and the world is blotted out by the measured pounding of 28 gigantic pistons.

Preserving every cup of fuel of the *Devil Dog's* show allotment, the pilot has started the engines at the last possible moment before our roll to the runway. We join two other B-25s—*Briefing Time*, in olive drab, and *Carol Jean*, in desert camouflage—and slowly taxi past the crews working on other aircraft. Above us, the airshow goes on, but no one in the ship pays attention. There is still the runup to do, the tower to listen to.

The bomber jerks and nose-dives as the brakes are applied injudiciously at the end of the runway. A neck reddens, but nothing much is said; everyone knows about B-25 brakes, the most notoriously sensitive and powerful of a generation of cranky binders.

One by one, the other bombers line up and take off. We are following a B-17 section; they waddle to their roll point, then the grass behind them whips to a frenzy as their throttles go forward, and all at once, it seems, they are airborne.

The same is true for *Devil Dog*. As the pilot slowly walks the throttles forward, the crowd watching behind a flight-line fence seems to become unreal. The Wrights reach a crescendo, and there is a sense of being kicked into the air; loaded lighter than it ever was in combat, the PBJ launches rather than takes off.

Control pressures are very heavy. Tendons stand out on pilot and copilot

as the aircraft banks gently into formation behind the B-17s. But the ball stays centered, the airspeed indicator dead on assigned climb speed. *Devil Dog's* pilots are good.

Suddenly the déjà vu returns. Ahead lies the B-17 formation; beside us, flying admirably tight formation, the other B-25s and one section back, a B-26 and an A-20 followed by our own freight train of a C-46 and two C-47s. It is a scene from another time.

Bereft of his own flight tasks, an observer here could lose his bearings easily. The damp green fields a thousand feet below could be mistaken for anywhere in Europe. The explosions that the special-effects crew is making on

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the airfield around which we are slowly orbiting might be the results of one of our earlier echelons' runs over a target with an umlaut in its name.

And then there are the fighters. The sky is alive with them, crisscrossing in pairs. The clouds are gone now, and P-40s, P-51s, P-47s, a P-38 and a Spitfire dance and weave above us, helping the black-and-white film clips blur together with Technicolor reality. Unbidden, the clichés that were not clichés then come tumbling through a mental headset: *on his six, break right, out of the sun, tallyho, tallyho! Big Friends, Little Friends*. The unbidden and unexpected voices in the head mix with the radials' music, and the skyfull of fighters bring something very close to a lump in the throat.

But then, out of the dazzling glare of the sun, two camouflaged fighters with iron crosses and swastikas emblazoned on their flanks sweep into our little fleet. We had been briefed for this, of course. It was all to be part of the show, of course. Not real at all, of course. And yet there is a palpable start inside the cockpit, an unsuppressible flinch.

The fighters swoop in on *Carol Jean*, making a high stern pass. The bomber jinks and weaves, its top turret spinning frantically to track the attackers. But the fighters knife past, closing on

the B-17's. The foremost fighter, lining up on *Texas Raiders*, suddenly pulls up and rolls inverted. Smoke spews from its guts. It dives away to the ground, but the other German hangs onto the B-17's tail.

Above us, a glint catches the eye. It is the prop of a P-51, the leader of a section directly above. He has seen the Germans; the glint came from the prop spinner as he stood on his left wing and slid gracefully into a screaming dive, followed by his wing man an eye blink later. The Mustang seems to flash past our nose at the speed of sound, its invasion stripes and glittering silver finish giving it a sharkish look.

The German jerks sideways when he sees the Mustang and split-Ss down. The P-51s hang onto him remorselessly. *Devil Dog's* crew strains to follow the swift, silent combat, but the fighters disappear below our nose.

The affair lasted a matter of seconds, but it seemed to stretch for minutes. On the ground, the crowd saw some distant aerobatics, keyed to suitably dramatic commentary. In the *Devil Dog*, the view was much different. Our background was the primitive drumroll of the Wrights, our perspective that of aviators. The fighters were not just images in the blue. We bucketed through their propwash and smoke; they were as real as flaming death.

The stately bombers swing off their initial point, heedless of the fighter's battle. Over the airfield fence, the flight engineer jerks the bomb bay doors open for our bombless run over the airfield. Through the gaping bay, the ground appears as a rushing mass of flame and smoke, details lost in speed. When the doors snap shut, the stink of hot oil permeates the flight deck.

The smell reminds a pilot that the PBJ is not a subtle airplane, nor a complex one by today's standards. No servos aid the pilot or any other flight-crew member; control cables run everywhere, liable to interference, and at the tail gunner's station, elevator horns articulate only inches from a gunner's elbow.

Flying *Devil Dog* is a full-time chore, and the job continues through the landing and onto the deck. The touchy brakes compound the problem of landing in echelon, but despite being tail-end Charlie, we exit the active runway quickly and lead the group down the flight line past the crowd. Cadets from



the nearby Marine Military Academy snap to attention as *Devil Dog* rumbles past, the Marine-ness of the airplane no less a symbol for them than for Jack Cram's boys all those years ago. Engines loping near idle, the PBJ clearly impresses the thousands of people waving from behind the barrier. The instruction is passed to the crew to wave back.

Back on the line, Ozzie Parrish waits with the rest of VMB-612's people, a rag stuffed in his pocket. *Devil Dog* is swung into its parking place, the Wrights run up briefly and then a sudden silence crashes down as the mixture is pulled back. The props *whuff* slowly to a halt. The flight deck hatch in the belly is dropped, the ladder extended and the crew departs. Parrish and the ground crew are told of the squawks. In the nose behind the guns, Dzus fasteners are popped as Parrish climbs up to find out why Number Two's tach stopped working.

Across the ramp, behind the tail of a fat C-46, a man in Bermuda shorts aims a camera with a long lens at *Devil Dog*. He clicks the shutter, lowers his camera and wanders off to peer into

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another airplane. Undoubtedly, he believes he has captured something special with his single photograph, but he has not, because where the experience of aircraft is concerned, cameras lie. He may as well have dragged a stick through the dust, crudely tracing the ship's outlines, for all that his Nikon and Fujichrome will do to tell him what *Devil Dog* is all about.

It may be about those men with the distracted inward gaze who caress aluminum skins. It also may be about little children who stare goggle-eyed at these monsters from another world, real as no *Millenium Falcon* can ever be. It may even be about patriotism, as the official CAF publicists insist.

More likely it is just an airplane, built to bomb, rebuilt to train navigators and then rebuilt again to tell the story of Jack Cram's squadron. To a pilot, that's reason enough for *Devil Dog's* place on the flight line. And given the quiet rewards of restoration, it's possible that it's even good enough for the likes of Ozzie Parrish.

But don't push the question with him. Not when he has to bring a tach back to life. □

*The CAF's finest hour comes  
when it converts corroded junk into  
an airplane that flies again.*

