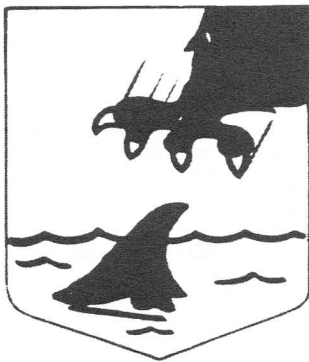




Above are the emblems of two of the Italian anti-submarine patrol squadrons of postwar years, the 86th Gruppo Antisom (upper) and 87th (lower).

The Curtiss SBC-5 (U.S. designation SB2C-5), went into Italian service in latter 1950 and the last of them was withdrawn in mid-1959. The Helldiver at right, of 86th Gruppo, was photographed near Grottaglie airfield, Taranto, Italy. (Lt. Giannotti, courtesy of Giancarlo Garelo)

HELLDIVERS IN ITALY

By GIANCARLO GARELLO

(Photos — Garelo Collection, except Lt. Giannotti)

When Italy signed the NATO Pact in 1949 the Italian Air Force (I.A.F.) was fighting for survival. With a few obsolete aircraft in bad condition, and airfields still showing the effects of the war, a renewal of the line was badly needed. The Mutual Defence Assistance Pact (M.D.A.P.) provided the basis for a new start, with a substantial number of refurbished USAAF and US Navy airplanes.

Among the latter were 24 Curtiss SB2C-5 Helldivers, followed by 14 more on two different occasions. Later two other aircraft were added to the I.A.F. inventory under peculiar circumstances, as reported below.

The first SB2C-5s (in Italian service they became S2C-5, dropping the B in accordance with the Peace Treaty that forbade the use of *bombers* by the I.A.F.) arrived in the fall of 1950 and were assigned to the 86th Gruppo (162nd and 164th Squadriglie) based on Grottaglie airfield, near Taranto. The first Gruppo Commanding Officer was temporarily Capt. Vodret, followed by Lt. Col. Pelosi, who took charge on the first of March 1951.

General conditions were critical because of nonexistent airfield facilities and aircraft serviceability was very poor. Also the technical knowledge on the part of the ground personnel was still insufficient (e.g., airborne radars were an absolute "first" for the I.A.F.). However, in spite of all the difficulties the Unit personnel, pilots and ground staff together, went to work and in the following March (1951) the 86 Gruppo S2C-5s were ready for the first exercises in cooperation with the Italian Navy.

In June '51 Helldivers operated from Malta in an Anglo-Italian exercise, carrying out simulated attacks with bombs and rockets against naval units. Intense training was carried out during the year, and a satisfactory combat readiness was obtained at the cost of two casualties, Lts. Guerrini and Sbertoli. The anti-submarine capabilities were reinforced with the adoption of the "hunter-killer" tactics, using an AN/APS 4 radar-equipped S2C-5 in company with another which carried rockets and depth charges for the kill.

While flying activity within the 86 Gruppo was steadily increasing, a second unit was coming into being in July 1952 on Catania airfield, using 164th Squadriglia aircraft and personnel as a first nucleus for the new 87 Gruppo A/S (Anti-sommergibili).

The number of exercises of all kinds reached a peak in 1953, many of them in cooperation with U.S., British and French naval units. Advanced training activities spanned from convoy support and coastal defence against enemy landings to rocket and torpedo attacks, while antisubmarine warfare was carried out until the S2C-5 were supplanted in this particular task by mid-1953 with the new PV-2 Harpoons of 87 Gruppo.

The Italian Navy wanted very strongly to create a Naval Aviation of its own, and with this purpose began sending a number of officers to the United States to become Naval Aviators. In the meantime the I.A.F. fought strenuously this irritating attempt on the assumption that "everything that flies belongs to the Air Force," and finally succeeded in having a law approved stating

Left: 86 - 6 near Grottaglie airfield.

Below, another view of S2C-5 on Grottaglie landing mat.

In the cockpit, Cpt. Tedesco, of Italian Air Force. At bottom, Lt. Giannotti by S2C-5. He was forced to bail out of his Helldiver, 86 - 43, on routine flight from Grottaglie to Catana.

Opposite page - "The Line" - at Grottaglie. (Courtesy of Lt. Giannotti)

that A/S Gruppi were to belong strictly to the Air Force while flying crews had to respect a 50/50 proportion of Air Force and Navy personnel.

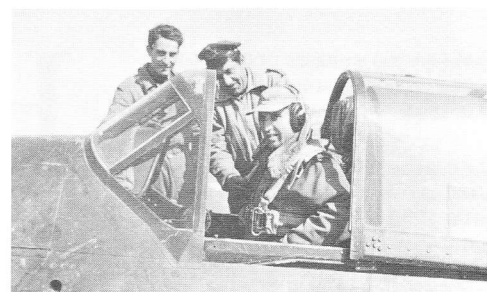
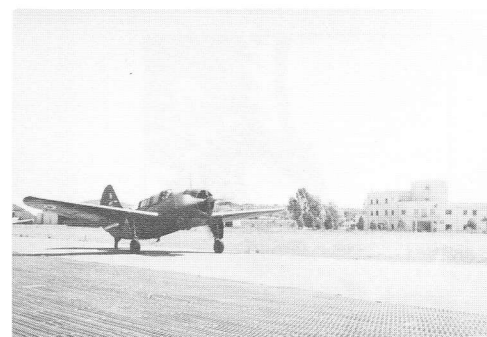
In 1954 the 161st Squadriglia received their first FV-2's and handed the S2C-5's over to the 162nd and 163rd Squadriglie. The Harpoons took over the anti-submarine duties, owing to their increased capabilities both in endurance and in electronic components, and the S2C-5's were relegated to the attack role. Many aircraft were by now approaching obsolescence and this fact, together with an increasing lack of spares gave way to a gradual reduction of Helldivers activity in the following years.

From 1956 onward Helldivers carried out second line duties, such as cooperation with D.A.T. (Air Defense) units and target towing for Army and Navy gunners. Serviceability fell very rapidly. The 86 Gruppo was transferred to Napoli-Capodichino airport (20 Feb. 1957) and rearmed on S2F-1 Trackers that boosted A/S capabilities, while two sections of S2C-5's remained on Grottaglie and Guidonia airfields for target towing duties.

The last Helldiver was finally withdrawn from active service on 26 Feb. '59; Lt. Giannotti flew the last hop, and brought his plane to the junkyard with mixed feelings. He could not forget the day when six months before his faithful 86-43, on a routine flight from Grottaglie to Catania, caught fire and had to be abandoned in mid-air. Ordering the gunner/observer to bail out, Lt. Giannotti headed the S2C-5 toward the mountains and left the blazing aircraft just in time to avoid the explosion that sent showers of debris all over the countryside. At the end of a long descent Lt. Giannotti realized that it was his lucky day. And lucky it was indeed, since he landed exactly in the middle of Maropati, a small town near Reggio Calabria, while a crowd gathered to welcome him with cheers and applause.

Operational activity of the 87 Gruppo had ended several years before with the return of the last 5 aircraft of this type to the 86 Gruppo at the beginning of 1954.

In Sicily the S2C-5's experienced the same problems already met by their forerunners in Grottaglie. Lack of spares, the poor state of airworthiness and complete absence of facilities forced the Gruppo personnel to a constant struggle to keep the Helldivers in flying condition. Fortunately, after a few joint exercises with





British and American units in Sardinian waters, the backbone of 87 Gruppo was reformed on the newly arrived Harpoons and the Helldivers were relegated to training and second line duties. By the beginning of 1954 there were no more Helldivers on Catania airfield, the last machines of this type having been handed back to the 86 Gruppo.

During the summer of 1952 a group of Italian Navy personnel, pilots and mechanics together, were following a training course with U.S. Navy Squadron VA-5 in Corpus Christi, Texas. Two of the Station's Helldivers were ceded to the Italians while consideration was being given to the opportunity of creating an Italian Naval Aviation, to be equipped mainly with combat planes intended to cover the attack role.

Unofficial Naval insignia, consisting of the usual Italian roundels (red, white and green) with an anchor superimposed on the fuselage and wings, were hastily applied to these "first" two

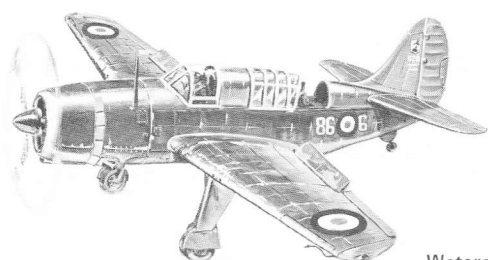
Italian Navy aircraft; the Italian Navy crest was painted on the rudder.

Six of the I.N. officers were trained in the latest attack tactics, and finally the two S2C-5's were put on board the aircraft carrier MIDWAY which was then bound for a Mediterranean tour on 1 Dec. 1952. Lt. (jgs) Volpe and Valente, I.N., were charged with transferring the first naval aircraft onto Italian soil. But, unknown to them, the whole program had come to an end, owing to the I.A.F. opposition to every attempt to create a new Flying Service.

The two junior officers were launched on the 20th of December off the French town of Marseille. With contradictory instructions from the I.N. headquarters, and though lacking suitable navigation charts, they headed for the Neapolitan airfield of Capodichino where they created a confusion upon landing, due to the unofficial insignia sported by their "unauthorized" aircraft.

A "diplomatic incident" broke out immediately between the I.A.F. and the I.N. and the latter had finally to give up, handing over the two contended aircraft early in the following year. Thus ended the first attempt to provide the I.N. with an aeronautical component; years later the I.N. helicopters were allowed to carry the anchor symbol on their fuselages, but combat units within the Service never materialised.

For lack of aircraft carriers the Helldivers in Italian service were land-based, and therefore all arresting gears were removed upon arrival. Also the observer-operated twin mounting for two .30 calibre guns were removed, all armament consisting in the two 20mm. wing guns. An airborne radar (AN/ASPS 4) was fitted under the right wing when "hunter/killer" tactics were carried out. After withdrawal from first-line duties the last remaining Helldivers were modified as target-tugs and had a towing gear installed. The S2C-5 was very popular among the I.A.F. crews and



Watercolor sketch
By L.M.R. Hefley



During a brief period in the immediate postwar years, the Italian Navy was attempting to set up its own air arm, and send a small number of pilots to Corpus Christi, Texas, by arrangement with the U.S. Navy, for flight training. Subsequently, Italian Naval pilots and aircrewmembers were integrated into the Italian Air Force. Here is one of the S2C-5's with the "unofficial" marking of the Italian Navy, photographed at Corpus Christi Naval Air Station.

is still remembered with affection, though the type claimed a high toll of lives: 10 pilots or crewmen were killed as consequence of the many accidents in which more than 15 Helldivers were involved.

With regard to the color scheme in Italian service, the Helldivers retained the original Navy dark blue, while unit and individual numbers were reported on both sides of the fuselage. The unit

insigne was generally painted on the fin, although this practice seems to have been followed only by the 86th Gruppo machines.

Shortly before their final disposition S2C-5s had the night blue paint removed and the original metal finish reappeared, with a large yellow band aft the canopy. Also the engine cowling was painted in bright yellow, while black and yellow stripes were applied under the wings.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Giancarlo Garelo was a Lt. Cdr. in the Italian Navy (class 1953-57), and in 1959-1960 underwent flight training with the U.S. Navy (class OI-9) in Pensacola (Fla), Memphis (Tenn) and New Iberia (La) where he got his "wings of gold" on S2F anti-submarine aircraft. In Italy he has flown I.A.F. S2F's Trackers of 86th and 87th Gruppi, and in 1967-68 was in command of the I.N. Minesweeper TODARO and the corvette SIBILLA.

He resigned from active duty in 1969 and is now an airline pilot with Alitalia. Cdr. Garelo is a member of Air Britain - Italian Research Group, and a regular correspondent of *Interconair-Aviazione E Marina* magazine of Genoa.

EDITOR AND MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY RESIGN

Your Editor and Membership Recording Secretary have resigned effective with publication of this Summer 1974 issue of the JOURNAL. Over the past nineteen years we have been totally involved in the affairs of AAHS, as Member No. 5, as Founding Director in incorporating the Society, and as holder of every office from President to Managing Editor. Indeed, that use of the Editorial "we" has taken on new and stronger meaning, for without the active support of my wife, who has likewise given up much of her time, those meetings, the hours spent in study, correspondence, and in editing, would have been much, much less. We have written completely every issue of the NEWSLETTER since

its inception, now over 7 years. We formed committees and spearheaded the publication of the JOURNAL in those periods between editors in 1959 and 1968, and since 1969 we have done the total chore, from mailing that tie clasp to giving the final look at the printer's proof sheets. It has become too much.

We want to see the growth and success of the Society continue. We urge all members to participate, for that is the "name of the game." Spread the word, get those new members, exchange those pictures, help each other with data, for it is the fraternal spirit of cooperation in the aims of AAHS that has brought us thus far. That's what AAHS is all about!

Mr. & Mrs. James J. Sloan