

Naval Aviation in WW II

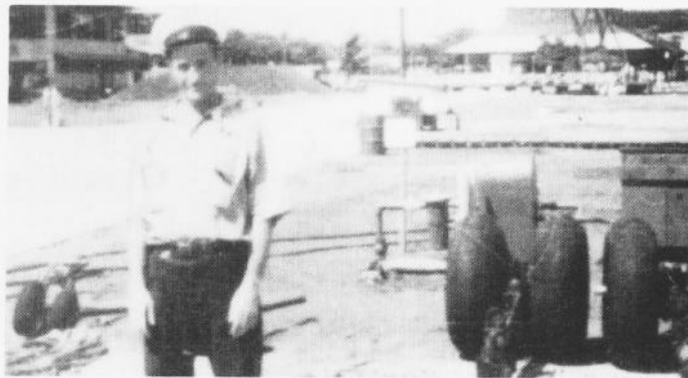


PBY-4 21-P-10 (BuNo 1216) conducted the last PatWing-10 patrol from Java in March 1942, survived the Allied campaign in the Far East, and was later turned over to the Royal Australian Air Force.

Photos courtesy of The Baltic Group Archives

The Pacific Neutrality Patrol

By Cdr. Louis B. Dorny,
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One of VP-21's chief petty officers with PBV beaching gear and barracks under construction in the background, Sangley Point, 1939-40.

Any WW II buff knows about the U.S. effort in the Atlantic known as the "Neutrality Patrol." The United States did all kinds of things in the months before Pearl Harbor to support those who would become its wartime allies short of actually getting involved in the shooting, and it came to that on occasion. Fewer are aware of the extension of the Neutrality Patrol into the Far East. It proceeded under the same guise — that of protecting U.S. interests by active patrolling on a near-wartime footing — but it achieved several other purposes as well. It was these other purposes, such as getting some reinforcements to the hard-pressed Asiatic Fleet in the Philippines, that formed the real impetus of the move.

Extending the Neutrality Patrol to the Far Pacific

By mid-1939, Japan posed nearly as threatening a scenario in Asia as Germany did in Europe, but in the western Pacific, where the U.S. possessions in the Philippines and Guam were dangerously exposed, our ability to build up defenses was limited under post-WW I treaties. Accordingly, our military and naval forces faced a tactical situation — if not strategic — that was simply untenable. In hindsight, our position had already deteriorated beyond recovery, but in the divided opinions of the day, few saw the facts clearly and all were loath to simply concede the issue to the Japanese. One of the stop-gap

measures for the situation was to get the Asiatic Fleet some long-range reconnaissance capability, and in 1939, this meant the Consolidated PBV flying boat, which later became famous as the *Catalina*.

It was, however, not just a matter of sending a squadron to the Philippines; that constituted reinforcement which, under the treaties, allowed Japan to build up their Pacific island mandates to a comparable degree. It was Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, that gave President Roosevelt another option and, always looking for ways to put the Navy into the limelight, he created the "Neutrality Patrol" to monitor and oversee the security of American sea approaches in the Atlantic Ocean. It was only a slight stretch of the imagination to extend the idea to the Philippines, and the order went out to the Pacific Fleet as well to provide forces to establish the Neutrality Patrol in the Far East. Thus, it happened that the Asiatic Fleet received a squadron of flying boats in September 1939.

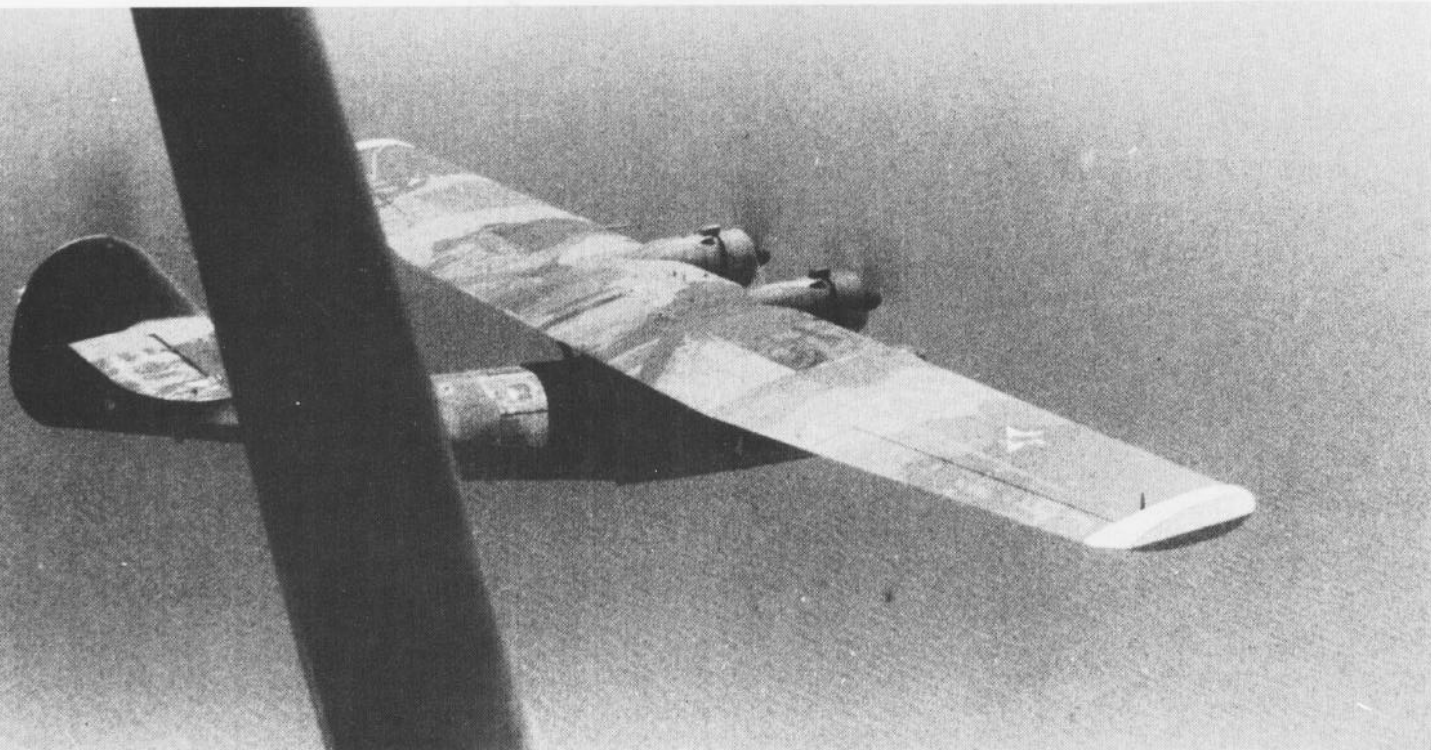
At Pearl Harbor, swift action was the order of the day. The squadron selected would have to make a heretofore unprecedented massed flight across the Pacific from Hawaii to the Philippines. (The image that this evoked in 1939 was something akin to the launching of a space shuttle in 1991 and should not be understated.) The aviators were more than anxious for the chance to prove themselves and their planes. Long-distance flights by bombers and flying boats were often in the news in those days, and Pan American Airways had recently

established its commercial flying boat passenger service across the Pacific, but a squadron-sized transpacific flight on short notice was still a tall order for the 1939 Pacific Fleet. It had never been done before!

Getting VP-21 to Asia

Patrol Wing Two, with headquarters at Pearl Harbor's Ford Island naval air station, selected their newly arrived Patrol Squadron (VP) 21 for the assignment. VP-21 had just completed reequipment with the "Dash 4" model PBV, the most advanced flying boat in Navy service at the time, and it was best suited for the short-fused movement to the Far East. The squadron personnel were assembled in a hangar on Ford Island, told of the deployment, and sworn to secrecy. Swaps with men in other squadrons were quickly arranged, bags packed, airplanes loaded, and VP-21 took off on the morning of September 19 for the Philippines.

Carefully planned to maximize daylight and avoid nighttime landings in the unfamiliar harbors, the first stop was at Midway Island, where they gassed at the Pan Am base and spent the night. When readying for takeoff the next morning, one plane had to be left behind with a bad engine. They spent two nights at Wake Island, then hopped onward to Guam and another two-night layover. It was typhoon season and a storm was brewing in the Philippine Sea, but, undaunted, VP-21 bored onward to Manila Bay



Asiatic Fleet camouflage on a PatWing-10 PBY-4. The lack of waist blisters and the older style rudder identify this as a "Dash 4" but the locally prepared multitone scheme, thought to be shades of blue and gray, conceals nearly all the former markings.

through the fringes of the typhoon – in an open formation with PBYs spread some two miles across the sky.

Supporting a Long Deployment to Asia

Like many other deployments, the logistics and preparations of the men behind the scenes get lost in the shuffle. In the case of VP-21, it was more than simply deploying to the end of a long supply line. In 1939, there was no supply line and no base at the other end to park your flying boat when you got there. The United States had taken Cavite from the Spanish navy in 1898, patched up the place, and painted a little here and there, but certainly never improved the place to handle large fleet units and squadrons of flying boats. Aviation on the Asiatic station had always been the weak sister, and by 1939, amounted to just the floatplane detachments on the fleet's two cruisers and a handful of utility planes based on a converted mine sweeper tender, *Heron* (AVP-2), providing target towing and mail services. The miniscule aircraft overhaul

shop at Cavite could do a fair job on one of the cruiser scouts or utility planes, but supporting a full squadron of large flying boats was another thing altogether.

Fortunately, the Navy's largest seaplane tender was available to be sent along as the primary support facility. *Langley* (AV-3, ex-CV-1) – by then starting her third career after many years as the Navy's first aircraft carrier – loaded spares and equipment at Pearl and sailed for the Philippines in advance of the flight, including several days through the same typhoon, arriving the day before the PBYs. She had laid out mooring buoys and was ready to refuel and service the big planes upon their arrival.

But *Langley* was really only a band-aid-type fix. Days and hours anchored in tropical waters contributes to quickly multiplying marine growth on the aluminum aircraft hulls, impairing performance in the air. The tender could hoist one plane onto her well deck for major servicing; only the small Pan Am seaplane ramp at Cavite allowed two or three more of the PBYs to be pulled out of the less-than-pristine waters of Manila Bay.

Also, the area has its share of storms, and more than one night was spent "under way," i.e., spread out across the bay, taxiing into the storm and trying to stay out of each other's way. This was risky business, chewed up engine hours, and exhausted the crews.

On one occasion, a barge broke loose in a squall and drifted down on some of the moored planes, staving in wing float struts and knocking dents in hulls. One PBY broke its mooring line and was blown ashore in a storm. These experiences were tough on airframes, but fortunately nothing that the ingenious mechanics and metalsmiths could not fix. VP-21 needed a real naval air station!

Commandant 16th Naval District had long planned for a naval air station on Sangley Point adjacent to Cavite and, therefore, was able to immediately start work on a seaplane ramp at the site. When Admiral Thomas C. Hart took over as Commander in Chief, Asiatic Fleet in June 1939, he felt the site on Sangley Point was unsuitable, too restrictive, and far too exposed, but he also recognized clearly that time was no longer a plenti-

ful commodity. NAS Sangley Point was established before war began but was never fully operational until the war was over. Even with these pressures, however, it was no small achievement for at least part of the seaplane ramp to be ready in early January 1940. Thereafter, the planes were beached and the heavy black antifouling paint necessary to protect the hulls when anchored was stripped off. During the process, one PBY caught fire and had to be stricken. It was VP-21's only loss of an airplane.

Neutrality Patrol Operations

With the completion of the ramp, basic living quarters, and maintenance facilities at Sangley, the squadron entered a new phase. *Langley* could be released from direct support at the main base and commence exercising at what the Navy then called "advanced base operations." Considering that Cavite was, in a very real manner of speaking, an advanced base, the resolve to push operational readiness yet farther was remarkable. In advanced base operations, planes from the main base flew out to a tender – located at some geographically advantageous point in a sheltered bay or cove which offered the planes a suitable landing site and anchorage – took on fuel, and launched their patrol from this advanced point. The Navy's seaplane tenders were designed, equipped, and outfitted for precisely this type of challenging yet highly effective and tactically flexible operation. Given a nearly ideal collection of islands and bays like the Philippines, advanced base operations allowed VP-21 with a tender or two to extend the already significant range of the PBY.

Actual patrolling of the waters in and around the Philippines, the purpose of the Neutrality Patrol, was started soon after arrival under the direction of the naval district commandant. Movements of merchant shipping was a high priority item, as was a continual watch for submarines.

While there was a remote threat from the Axis powers in Europe (several German raiders did work in Pacific waters in 1940), it was a very

remote threat, indeed. No one was under any illusions. It was the Japanese who we were watching, and a large merchant and fishing fleet under their flag meant that their vessels were constantly popping up everywhere, not always with only commercial interests in mind and often just where we didn't want them at all. With the PBYs flying "neutrality" patrols, few merchantmen moved in and around the Philippines without being rigged at some point by a U.S. Navy flying boat. District Operations was soon awash in contact reports and able to maintain a reasonably good plot of shipping movements in the area.

From February 1940, the movements of *Langley* and *Heron* read like an exotic travelog of minor ports and remote anchorages, at each place perhaps only a few hours to fuel and service a section of flying boats, launch patrols, and then on to the next one: Puerto Princessa, Palawan, from where a division of PBYs refueled before flying their first patrols far out over the South China Sea; San Pablo Bay off Tacloban, Leyte, near where MacArthur would return only a few years later; and more. To get a feel for what his new flying boats could do, Adm. Hart himself signed on for a patrol from the southern islands toward the Japanese base at Truk in the Carolines. It turned out to be a "nothing to report" patrol, but the ad-

miral had a better view of his forces and their capability.

The squadron quickly accumulated the experience not only with the PBY-4 itself but with the weather and geography of the area, and developed the teamwork and sharpness of an organization doing everything they would do in wartime, short of dropping live bombs and torpedoes at real ships and shooting bullets at other airplanes. But this was the limit of the objectives of the Neutrality Patrol in the Pacific, and the spin-off benefit was the increased operational capability and readiness of the Asiatic Fleet.

During this period, the PBYs wore the additional marking unique to the Neutrality Patrol. By March 1940, the star on the bow was in common use. Unlike their Atlantic Fleet counterparts, the Philippine-based boats also wore a large national ensign painted across the upper hull aft of the wing and again on the underside of the wing on each outer panel. The merchant sailors may not have been able to recognize the silhouette of a PBY as American, but they certainly could identify the Stars and Stripes and the white star insignia.

To allow for major overhaul of VP-21's planes, VP-26, another Patrol Wing Two squadron at Pearl and the only other one equipped with PBY-4s, flew out to the Philippines in June 1940 to exchange 14 of its newly over-



NAS Sangley Point, 1939-40. The Neutrality Patrol star on the bow was not yet applied to these planes, although 21-P-12 (BuNo 1214) wears the national ensign across the hull amidships, signifying the Asiatic Fleet. 21-P-12 was destroyed by Japanese fighters at Darwin, Australia, February 19, 1942. 21-P-3 (BuNo 1222) was one of a PBY det on Luzon upon which Adm. Hart was depending for air transport to Java on Christmas Day, 1941. All three were destroyed by enemy fighters and the admiral made the journey by submarine.

Naval Aviation in WW II

hauled "Dash 4s" for VP-21's 13 aircraft. The entire operation went off without a hitch.

Patrol Wing Ten Established

At this point in the story, the swiftly evolving development of patrol aviation and the prewar build-up of the Navy catches up with the often neglected Asiatic Fleet. Not only was the Navy organizing most of its patrol squadrons into wings, but there was serious consideration of major reinforcement of U.S. positions in Asia. At one point, the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet even identified *Yorktown* (CV-5) and the Second Marine Air Wing for assignment to the Asiatic Fleet! But as it worked out, most of the Pacific Fleet's modern submarines, plus two destroyer seaplane tenders, *Childs* (AVD-1) and *William B. Preston* (AVD-7), and the now veteran VP-26 with their overhauled PBY-4s actually made the trip. With their arrival on December 16, 1940, Patrol Wing (PatWing) Ten was established at Cavite, Captain Frank D. Wagner commanding, with two squadrons – VP-101 (ex-VP-21) and VP-102 (ex-VP-26) – Utility Unit Asiatic Fleet, and the four tenders *Langley*, *Childs*, *William B. Preston*, and *Heron*.

Neutrality Patrol activity increased accordingly. Patrols out to all points of the compass – from westward over the South China Sea through the northern vectors toward Japanese occupied Hainan Island, the China coast and Formosa, to the east over the Philippine Sea – filled in the picture of maritime movements throughout the sea approaches to Luzon. Then as now there was heavy traffic through San Bernadino Strait, the main transpacific waterway from eastward through the Philippines between Luzon and Samar, and PBY patrols covered the entire region every few days. Occasionally, some official liaison flights took a PBY to Hong Kong, Borneo, or even Singapore.

Both circumstances and initiative combined to achieve a remarkable result. Within a rather short period, the two squadrons were operating at a

very high level of efficiency and a remarkable degree of integration. Just before the war started, the wing renumbered VP-102's 14 planes from the series 102-P-1 through 14 to 102-P-16 through 29, in order to avoid confusion with VP-101's series 101-P-1 through 14. Seldom were naval aircraft given squadron-assigned numbers in a series so high, but this innovative move reflected the close cooperation between the two squadrons and contributed to the wing's effectiveness by reducing communications confusion.

With all this, however, the operating tempo was not as great as it appeared. Remember, this was pre-WW II and operating budgets were still encumbered by the low allocations of the depression years. Many of the pilots would have flown more often had the schedule allowed, but there had to be the continual weighing of the basic managerial equation: how much of my resources do I expend in what areas to focus on which parts of my job and still retain some flexibility to respond to

the unexpected. It was no simpler then for Capt. Wagner than in 1991 for General Norman Schwarzkopf.

Other measures were taken to improve readiness during these last few weeks of peace. The PBYs were cycled through the shops in pairs for minor maintenance and repair. When possible, engines with high hours were changed to maximize operational flexibility. The fabric on the wing was changed and other details attended to. It is an indication of the prudence of those sailors working under great pressure that when war came, the last pair, 101-P-13 and 101-P-14, were nearly completed.

On Patrol During the Last Days of Peace

On Luzon, with the feelings of being virtually surrounded by the Japanese, the southern route to the Dutch East Indies and Australia seemed very vulnerable to a Japanese thrust into the Celebes Sea from the Mandates. A



PBY-4 21-P-8 (BuNo 1218) anchored off Cavite, September 1939. This aircraft was shot down by enemy fighters during a bombing run on invasion shipping off Kema, Celebes, in January 1942.

PatWing-10 detachment based on first *Langley* then *Preston* at Malalag Bay on Davao Gulf sent daily PBY patrols eastward over the Philippine Sea and informally but effectively linked up with similar Dutch navy patrols farther south.

There was great jubilation at the arrival of the first of the Army Air Corps' impressive B-17 *Flying Fortresses* in October 1941. There was also great concern and question as to how the big bombers should be used in wartime. Short of that, they clearly added to the reconnaissance resources, and their greater speed and higher altitude performance made them most suitable for the northern sectors flying up to the Formosan coast and beyond. The Army was promptly assigned these sectors and used their bombers to good effect, but the Army came without any pretext of "neutrality patrol" – their job was reconnaissance in advance preparation for strategic bombing, and they were very serious about it.

One interesting special mission directed by Washington was a photo recon flight to the Spratley Islands located in the South China Sea. The Spratleys didn't really amount to any more than now, but there was perceived potential for surreptitious use by an enemy. And so the order came for the wing to scout the islands and report. The pilots were briefed for the worst and would not have been surprised to find Japanese fighters over the islands upon their arrival. In this event, a lone PBY flew over and took a batch of photos that revealed no activity at all. The photos were sent by an Army bomber onward to Washington and the matter was closed.

With the Japanese occupation of French Indochina in July, the western sectors became very sensitive, but only from about mid-November were they extended to actually come in sight of the Indochina coast. The PBYs, of course, were watching for Japanese shipping movements along the coast. This was not difficult in itself, but the question on everyone's mind was how long the Japanese fighter planes would allow the PBYs to continue. Many patrols during this

period encountered fighter planes, and some even made passes on the flying boats that were much like attack runs. Capt. Wagner's metaphor was one of "two stiff-legged dogs" meeting each other in the alley. The fight had not started, but the lines were being drawn ever more sharply. A PBY sighted 20 transports in Camranh Bay on December 2. The next day's patrol counted more than 50, with cruisers and destroyers in support. On the third day, the patrol reported the harbor empty! Within 48 hours, British and Australian planes from Malaya had sighted the invasion convoys steering across the Gulf of Siam.

On Sunday evening, December 7, 1941, the same day that would in a few hours dawn so abruptly in the mid-Pacific, the last PBYs returned from their patrols after dark. By the time the men had hosed the planes down with fresh water to get the corrosive salt water off, serviced, and gassed them to be ready for immediate takeoff the following morning, it was well past midnight. Only two hours later the staff duty officer in the Asiatic Fleet headquarters on the Manila waterfront was handed a flash message originated by Patrol Wing Two headquarters at Ford Island: "AIR RAID ON PEARL HARBOR. THIS IS NO DRILL!"

The Neutrality Patrol's work was finished.

War Comes to Asia

War brought disaster for Patrol Wing Ten, the Asiatic Fleet, and all the Allied forces in Asia; events would show the measures to reinforce the United States' position in the Philippines were too late and, in any case, too little. The most serious deficiency was the marginal ability of the Allied forces to field really proficient fighter aircraft to control the skies. Patrol Wing Ten was among the many Allied units to suffer at the hands of the Japanese Mitsubishi A6M *Zero-Sen* fighter planes. On the very first morning of the war, six *Zeros* from the carrier *Ryujo* scoured Davao Gulf. *Preston's* patrols missed the carrier, but the *Zeros* found *Preston*, worked her over, and sank two PBYs on the water. Altogether, in the 80-plus-day campaign that followed, Patrol Wing Ten – including VP-22, which flew out to reinforce the wing in January – lost a good many excellent people, 42 of 45 PBYs, and the tender *Langley*. By March, the remaining PBYs were in Australia, with the Philippines and the East Indies under the Rising Sun. ■

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50 Years Ago — WW II

October 1: The Aviation Supply Office was established at Philadelphia to provide centralized control over the procurement and distribution of all aeronautical materials regularly maintained in the general stock.

October 8: Organizational provision of guided missiles was made in the fleet by the establishment of "Special Project Dog" in Utility Squadron 5, to test and operate radio-controlled offensive weapons and to train personnel in their use.

October 13: The Bureau of Aeronautics directed that all fleet aircraft be painted nonspecular light gray except for surfaces seen from above the aircraft, which were to be blue-gray. In late December, this color scheme was extended to shore-based airplanes except trainers.

October 20: USS *Hornet* was commissioned at Norfolk, Va., Capt. Marc A. Mitscher commanding.

October 21: In tests with MAD (magnetic airborne detector) gear, a PBY from NAS Quonset Point, R.I., located the submarine S-48.

October 29: Patrol Squadron 82 received the first of a planned full complement of PBO-1s at NAS Norfolk. Assignment of these aircraft, originally destined for the British and painted with British markings, was the beginning of what became an extensive use of landplanes by patrol squadrons during the war and, although it was not yet apparent, was the first move toward the eventual elimination of the flying boat from patrol aviation.