

The Neutrality Patrol:

# To Keep Us Out of World War II?

Part 2 of 2

By Capt. William E. Scarborough, USN(Ret.)



VPs 55 and 56 were the first fleet squadrons to fly the Martin PBM-1. 55-P-1 is hoisted aboard a tender, probably Albemarle, at an unknown location and date.

Courtesy of David W. Lucabaugh



Part 1 of this account of U.S. Naval Aviation's participation in the Neutrality Patrol appeared in the March-April 1990 issue. In Part 2, the author describes the operations of Navy patrol planes in the hunt for the German battleship *Bismarck*, and summarizes the final developments of the Neutrality Patrol until U.S. entry into WW II.

The German battleship *Bismarck*, on her first operational sortie, had been engaged by a British force in Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland early on May 24, 1941. HMS *Hood* was sunk by *Bismarck* which then, in company with her escort cruiser, *Prinz Eugen*, eluded the British force and disappeared. The search effort which was launched to locate the German ships included the PBYs of VP-52 in what was certainly a broad interpretation of the Neutrality Patrol!

Of the 11 planes at Argentia, Newfoundland (52-P-6 was at Quonset Point, R.I., on a logistics flight), four - 52-P-5, -9, -10, and -11 were scheduled for a search of western Greenland on the 24th for signs of German occupation. That flight was delayed by weather but at about 1330 crews standing by in the planes were ordered, by blinker light signal from the ship, to prepare for immediate takeoff. By 1430 pilots arrived at the planes and after a hurried crew briefing, with no details of the "highly classified" (*sic*) mission, engines were started and the planes took off at about 1440. They were to proceed to an area south of Cape Farewell, Greenland, to search for a ship (*Bismarck*, of course, and some crew members recall bags of bullet-hole plugs being delivered to each plane!). The consensus of interviewees was that planes were unarmed, with instructions to maintain

contact if a sighting was made, and to send contact reports in plain language on the International Emergency CW frequency, 500 kc. After join-up the four PBVs climbed on top of the cloud deck, proceeded to the assigned area, and let down to about 700 feet for the search.

Visibility was limited but a scouting line was formed (then standard procedure) and search of the area in the rapidly dwindling daylight began. When darkness and limited visibility made further effort fruitless, the flight leader ordered an individual return to base. During the climb, icing and turbulence were encountered but all planes found clear areas between layers and proceeded toward Argentinia. As the planes continued on course, the cloud tops built up and eventually the PBVs were at 20,000 feet to stay clear of the clouds to avoid icing. The extreme cold and lack of oxygen contributed to navigation problems resulting from numerous course changes to avoid build-ups and, at dawn, as the planes approached Argentinia, only one flier – legendary Navy P-boat pilot Chief Boatswain Pat Byrne – was sure of his position. Radio contacts with *Albemarle* (AV-5) brought word of worsening weather and orders to proceed to the southwest to find an alternate landing site, if fuel levels permitted, or to hold over the ship and make an instrument approach when the weather improved.

Of the planes in the first group only 52-P-5, flown by Byrne, made an instrument letdown and landed outside

Argentinia harbor in Placentia Bay, about 15 miles from *Albemarle*. Too short of fuel to taxi in and with a favorable 40-plus-knot wind, Pat cut the engines and sailed the PBV into the harbor! Of the other three planes in the group, Number 9, flown by Ensign Dexter Rumsey and the writer, found a hole and let down for a safe landing at Jamestown on Trinity Bay on the east side of Newfoundland. When weather at Argentinia improved, Number 9 was able to get in, with a total of some 22 hours in the air and fewer than 100 gallons of fuel remaining. Number 10 heeded the ship's radioed advice and headed southwest, breaking into clear weather over Nova Scotia and continuing for a landing at Newport, R.I., with about 20 hours flight time logged.

The last plane of the first group, 52-P-11, was trapped above the overcast with fuel nearly exhausted and the crew preparing to bail out when a hole in the clouds suddenly appeared. After a tight spiral letdown into a narrow valley, which led them to the sea and Forteau Bay, Labrador, a safe landing was made after some 20 hours in the air. The crew anchored off a beach near a cluster of houses and after confirming their location by talking to men who rowed out to the plane, contacted *Albemarle* for instructions. Advised to remain where they were for the night, they were assured fuel would be flown in as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, winds increased during the night and changed direction, forcing the crew to seek better holding ground for the anchor and shelter from ice floes being driven by the wind. During the move, Naval Aviation Pilot Bob Weber, who was handling the anchor, was swept off the bow by a wave which broke over the PBV. Ice floes driven by the wind had cracked the bomber's window and punctured the hull below the water line, resulting in leaks which flooded the bow compartment to the floorboards. The loss of buoyancy resulted in seas breaking continuously over the bow and the plane taking on more water. The plane commander then decided to beach the PBV to avoid further damage, and to seek help for a search for Weber. A sand beach about half a mile away was selected as the best site available and

the plane was beached there with no additional damage.

Local fishermen, alerted by the sound of engines, had seen Weber swept off the bow and launched a boat to search for him. Continuing the string of near-miracles, the two men rowing the boat found semiconscious Weber and rowed back to the beach, towing him with his arms over the stern of the boat, one of the rescuers holding onto them to keep Weber's head above the water. Uninjured, though his fleece-lined flight suit had been slashed by a propeller as he was swept under the wing, Weber was taken to a house and after being stripped and rubbed down was put to bed. Later in the day he was moved to a mission clinic in the settlement and remained there under the care of a resident nurse until he was returned to *Albemarle* by plane.

W. E. Scarborough Collection



Peninsula at left center is site of future NAS Argentinia, Nfld., in September 1940 photo. Seaplane mooring area was in small bay opposite anchored ship. Two small, conical islands at right center were known to all P-boat pilots as "the Mae West hills." Usual takeoff from the seadrome started at lower end of the harbor and extended past the famous hills!

With the help of the local people, the plane crew rigged a block and tackle to haul Number 11 clear of the breakers, to prevent further damage and to make the damaged areas accessible. The crew turned to with materials and tools aboard the plane and prepared the hole in the hull and the cracked bomber's window for repair. Later that day, May 26, a PBV arrived from Argentinia with a repair party and fuel. After completing repairs, sand was dug from beneath Number 11 and it was refloated with the help, again, of the fishermen. The relief plane then returned to *Albemarle* with Bob Weber. At the suggestion of the local people, the PBV took off and flew to a better anchorage for the night in nearby Red Bay. The next morning, after an uneventful night, 52-P-11



W. E. Scarborough

56-P-9 taxis in Willoughby Bay, off the Breezy Point seaplane ramps at NAS Norfolk, Va., Spring 1941.

finally took off for Argentina, with a fuel stop en route at the Royal Canadian Air Force base at Botwood.

The other seven PBVs flying the search mission – 52-P-1, -2, -3, -4, -7, -8, and -12 – were launched near sunset at 1720 on the 24th, proceeding independently to reach the search area south of Cape Farewell at sunrise. Weather en route was like that experienced by the first group – poor with ceiling and visibility near zero below the clouds with icing and heavy turbulence in the clouds. With unknown winds and no opportunity for star sights, aircraft positions were uncertain, at best, but the flight continued toward the search area until it was ordered by the flight leader to return to base, weather conditions obviously making visual search impossible.

Most of the return flight was on instruments, in icing and increasingly severe turbulence. On approaching Argentina, the aircraft were advised by radio, as the first search group had been, that conditions were below minimums and not expected to improve. Planes with sufficient fuel were directed to continue to Halifax, where weather was forecast to be suitable for landing. Those with low fuel states were advised to hold and to attempt instrument approaches when the weather improved.

Numbers 1, 7, and 8 found holes in the overcast and landed in Shoal Harbor on Random Island, Newfoundland. Numbers 3 and 4 were able to let down and landed in Fortune Bay, west of Placentia Bay. Number 2, nearly out of fuel, landed off St. Mary's Island, Quebec. Last of the group, Number 12, reported on the water safely, out of fuel, on the north side of Anticosti Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

As weather improved on the 25th, six of the PBVs were able to fly back to Argentina during the afternoon, all of them logging 20 to 22 hours in the air for the mission. On the 26th, the squadron flew fuel to Numbers 2 and 12 and both were back in Argentina later that day. Number 12 had provoked a minor international incident at Anticosti Island when some of the crew went ashore in a raft to check on their location and were unable to communicate with the French-speaking natives. The natives assumed the fliers were German and the advance guard of a Nazi invasion force! Their report to Canadian authorities generated a precautionary air defense alert as the Canadians had not been advised (as they normally were) that the search mission had been launched on the 24th.

Although this extension of the Neutrality Patrol mission had been unsuccessful, it had demonstrated that the pilots and flight crewmen were resourceful and that the rugged PBV then, as it did repeatedly during WW II, could be depended upon to bring her crews home. The exercise had also demonstrated that communications equipment and its operators needed improvement and that accurate weather forecasts were essential if North Atlantic seaplane operations were to be successful.

On July 1, 1941, as part of a general reorganization of fleet patrol squadrons, Patrol Wing (PatWing), Support Force was redesignated Patrol Wing-7, continuing as a unit of Support Force. Wing PBV squadrons 51, 52, 53, and 55 were redesignated 71, 72, 73, and 74. The last, after receiving 3 PBM-1s from VP-56, was equipped with 12 PBM-1s. VP-56 and its remaining PBMs became a transitional training unit under

## Naval Aviation in WW II

Commander, Patrol Wings, Atlantic Fleet. A new patrol wing – 8 – was established, with several old redesignated squadrons and some newly established ones assigned. Although a part of Support Force, PatWing-8 provided little more than training service for the remainder of 1941 and was transferred to the West Coast after the start of the war.

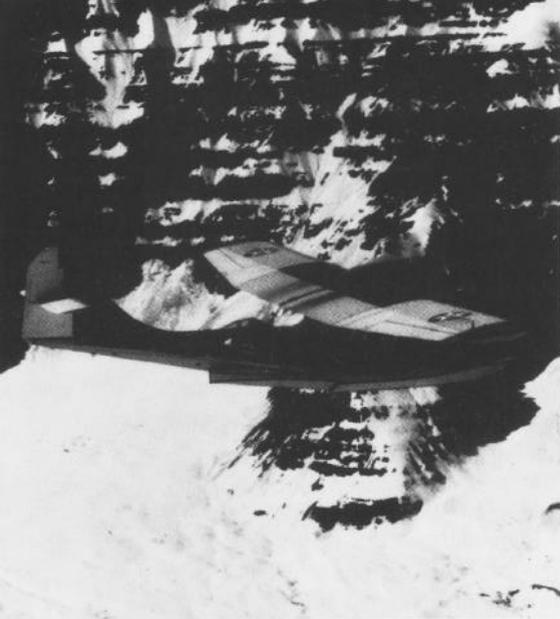
Summer 1941 proved an active time for the squadrons, both in Newfoundland and at home in the States. Patrols and convoy escort were major tasks but there were also surveys of Iceland, Greenland, and Labrador, and search and rescue missions. On the heels of the *Bismarck* search, on May 29, VP-52 deployed 4 PBVs to Iceland. Based on *Belknap* (AVD-8) at Reykjavik, the planes surveyed the east coast of Greenland where Danish weather stations were suspected of being in German hands. Flights on May 31 and June 5 located the stations, with no indication that they were in use and, on June 8, the detachment returned to Argentina.

Later in the month the squadron ferried old planes to Norfolk, Va., turning them over to newly commissioned VP-43. New PBV-5s in blue-gray over light-gray camouflage, with self-sealing fuel cells, armor, and revised waist gun stations, were picked up and flown back to Quonset Point and Argentina. Increased weight and the rough nonspecular camouflage reduced speed, decreased rate-of-climb, and extended takeoff time and distance significantly in comparison to the earlier PBV-5s. Squadron markings were in black and the Neutrality Patrol star on the bow, authorized on March 19, 1940, was continued in use. (The star was also authorized for *Ranger* (CV-4) and *Wasp* (CV-7) air group aircraft and was moved to the aft fuselage when a December 1940 directive changed ship-based aircraft color to overall light gray.)

On July 3, four of the new planes, with auxiliary hull tanks to compensate for the fuel capacity lost to the self-sealing tanks, departed Argentina for Reykjavik. One of the group,



PH2 W. J. Henning  
USS Albemarle at anchor in Argentina harbor, June 1941. Reason for "Dress Ship" unknown.



PH2 W. J. Henning

**VP-52 searched coast of Greenland in June 1941 for suspected German-occupied Danish weather stations but found no evidence of occupants.**

72-P-12, failed to arrive in Iceland and was presumed lost to the weather or to an explosion while transferring fuel from the hull tanks. Extensive search of the route and the Greenland coast failed to find any trace of the plane, VP-72's first-ever loss of a crew.

This VP-72 detachment provided escort cover for a task force which landed a U.S. Marine Corps force in Iceland on July 7. On the 13th, the task force departed to return to the States and was escorted out of the harbor and for the remainder of the day by the PBYs.

During the summer, the Argentinia detachments of VPs 71, 72, and 73 began a rotation program, later including VP-74, which regularly exchanged deployed planes and personnel at the advance base with those at the home ports, Quonset Point and Norfolk. Crew training and major maintenance were conducted in the States while operational flights received priority at Argentinia.

On July 19, VP-74 deployed a three-plane PBM-1 detachment to Argentinia. The addition of the PBMs, with new demands for structural and engine maintenance, stretched *Albemarle's* resources and support

**VP-51 PBY-1s at San Juan, P.R., March 1940. Crew lived in tents at edge of field on San Juan airport and PANAM base. Building at right center was sick bay.**

capability to their limits. By early August, a detachment of VP-74 PBMs and VP-73 PBYs, based on *Goldsborough* (AVD-5), were providing routine convoy escort in the North Atlantic shipping lanes from Skerja Fjord, near Reykjavik. Convoys were covered up to 500 miles from base and a regular antisubmarine warfare patrol of Denmark Strait between Iceland and Greenland was flown. From August 6 through 20, VP-71 conducted a three-plane survey of Greenland, based on *Lapwing* (AVD-1), in Tungdliafik Fjord on the west coast of Iceland. This was a joint U.S. Army/Navy project.

During this period both the PBYs and the PBMs began receiving early model British radar, the ASV with antenna arrays on hull-mounted posts. The transmitting antenna posts on the sides of the forward hull were vulnerable to damage by boats tending planes at the buoys and there was little success in keeping the gear operational.

In August, Roosevelt and Churchill held the historic six-day conference in Argentinia aboard *Augusta* (CA-31) which produced the Atlantic Charter, released to the public on August 14. During preparations and for the duration of the conference, PatWing-7

squadrons flew a heavy schedule of offshore and harbor patrol, guarding the site.

Seaplane operations from Iceland, severely hampered by a lack of any facilities ashore, were by far the most difficult yet experienced by the Neutrality Patrol forces. Crew messing and berthing aboard the converted WW I destroyer seaplane tenders were so limited that most of the crews preferred to stay aboard the planes at the buoys. That was so until the Iceland weather began to display its true character later in the year, with winds of 50 to 60 knots and high sea states the norm. Temperatures were rarely far above freezing and living aboard the uninsulated, unheated PBYs became an ordeal. The PBMs were better but still far from comfortable. Servicing aircraft at the buoys was a brutal test of skills, perseverance, and dedication.

As the countdown toward WW II continued during the final months of 1941, the Neutrality Patrol operations moved ever farther from "neutrality" toward active support of the Allies. Convoy escort and ASW patrol planes began carrying general-purpose and depth bombs during the summer months. Orders for attacks on hostile forces threatening U.S. and non-Axis



foreign flag shipping were in force and were amplified and extended by Argentia Air Detachment OpOrders in September and October, based on Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet (CinCLantFlt) orders. These directives were explicit regarding the protection of shipping: "Escorting ... convoys ... and destroying German and Italian naval, land, and air forces encountered."

VP-71 established an advance base operation on *Gannet* (AVP-8) at Kungnait Bay, Greenland, on October 1, but was forced to recall it on the 18th due to the violence and uncertainties of the Greenland weather. Weather at Argentia was little better but operations continued, with convoy escort in the shipping lanes the major effort.

The full impact of the orders regarding protection of shipping was dramatically emphasized by a series of events in the North Atlantic in September and October. On September 4, 1941, *Greer* (DD-145), a destroyer en route to Iceland, was notified by a British patrol plane that a German U-boat was in her area. When asked if she would attack the submarine, *Greer* answered in the negative, having no orders at that time to initiate such action. The British

David W. Lucabaugh Collection



## Naval Aviation in WW II

plane then attacked the U-boat with depth bombs, with no apparent result, and left the area. The submarine, not knowing the source of the attack, maneuvered into position and fired two torpedos at *Greer*, both missing the target. The ship, acting in self-defense, delivered a depth charge attack on the submarine, again with no effect, and resumed course for Iceland. This event resulted in the Neutrality Patrol mission becoming "search and destroy," as in the CinCLantFlt orders referred to above.

Another, even closer indication of the proximity of a shooting war occurred on October 17, when the destroyer *Kearney* (DD-432) was torpedoed with the loss of 11 lives while defending a British convoy off Iceland. The ship limped into port, severely damaged. Later in October, the tanker *Salinas* (AO-19), was torpedoed, with no loss of life but with a huge hole blasted through both sides of the ship. Ensign Bill Hardaker and his crew in 72-P-11 found her on October 30, and escorted her toward St. Johns, Newfoundland. On October 31, while providing convoy escort off Halifax, the old four-stack destroyer *Reuben James* (DD-245) was torpedoed and sank with the loss of 115 lives. These losses brought Congressional action to relax the restrictions of the Neutrality Act by allowing U.S. ships to escort convoys into combat zones and U.S. merchant ships to be armed.

Just five weeks after these final events in the history of the Neutrality Patrol, the attack on Pearl Harbor plunged the United States into WW II. The Neutrality Patrol had served a purpose – though not the one intended by the directives of September 1939, which established the patrol as insurance against U.S. involvement in the war in Europe. What had been accomplished had an immediate and profound effect on the war and, ultimately, on our readiness for war. As it began, the patrol safeguarded our neutrality and the sanctuary our home waters provided for ourselves and for our future allies. Later, it assured the delivery of war material which kept our allies fighting in spite of

R. W. Weber



VP-51 aircraft parking area adjacent to PANAM operations base and hangar on San Juan airport, late 1939. USMC security patrol was on station at all times.

overwhelming odds. And, it created requirements for more and better equipment and the personnel to man it.

Naval Aviation, especially the patrol wings and squadrons, would have been ill-prepared for war had it not been for the demands placed on it by the Neutrality Patrol and the resulting stimulation and training, which produced the high level of operational readiness achieved by the time war came. ■

Note: The writer served in VP-52 (later VP-72) from 1939 to 1943. This account is based on personal recollection, his diary, letters, review of VP-52 flight logs, correspondence and interviews with personnel of VP-52 and other squadrons that flew the Neutrality Patrol, squadron histories, and other historical sources.

Next in the WW II Series: Training Naval Aviators

### 50 Years Ago – WW II

June 14: The Naval Expansion Act included authorization for an increase in aircraft carrier tonnage of 79,500 tons over the limits set 17 May 1938, and a revision of authorized aircraft strength to 4,500 useful airplanes.

June 15: Congress revised its previous action and set the aircraft ceiling at 10,000 useful airplanes, including 850 for the Naval Reserve, and not more than 48 useful airships.

June 25: The Chief of Naval Operations promulgated plans for an expanded flight training program calling for the assignment of 150 students per month beginning 1 July, and a regular increase to an entry rate of 300 per month within a year.