

# Patrol Aviation in the Pacific in WW II

## Part 1

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The development of patrol aviation in the Pacific in the 1920s and 1930s set the pattern for operations in the months after Pearl Harbor. Beginning with a little-remembered mass flight of San Diego-based flying boats to the Panama Canal Zone and return during the winter of 1920-21, Pacific patrol planes exercised in long-range deployments and advanced base operations supported by seaplane tenders.

By 1934, with the advent of the Consolidated P2Y, Squadron VP-10F pioneered deployment of aircraft from the West Coast to Hawaii. From that time, mass flights in succeeding years were conducted in support of annual fleet exercises. They involved extensive tender-based operations from French Frigate Shoals and Midway and Johnson islands. *Langley*, recently converted from CV-1 to a seaplane tender, supported the first mass patrol squadron deployment to Alaska in 1937.

For their participation on the side of the Allies during WW I, Japan was awarded a mandate over former German possessions in the Pacific. This mandate included the Marshall, Caroline, and Mariana islands, with the exception of Guam, a U.S. possession. Beginning in 1932, the mandated area was closed to foreign access. Though forbidden by terms of the mandate, Japan was free to arm the area, undetected and unmolested. Various international treaties agreed upon during the 1920s and 1930s created a situation where "wishful thinking" replaced "informed reason," and the economic depression served to focus

American attention on domestic problems while lending support to the forces of isolationism.

Responsible officials in government reacted to pass legislation increasing the size of our understrength Navy. Following congressional direction, in 1938, the Secretary of the Navy appointed a board under Rear Admiral Hepburn charged with determining which naval bases should be enlarged and which new ones should be constructed. The board report called for a chain of new naval air bases as far west as Guam. The list recommended bases at Sitka, Kodiak, and Unalaska, Alaska; Ford Island and Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii; Midway, Wake, Johnson, and Palmyra islands; and an advanced fleet operating base at Guam. Congress dropped Guam and Wake Island from its original authorization. With the passage of the 1939 Appropriations Bill, the Navy Department contracted with a consortium of the nation's largest construction firms, named officially "Contractors, Pacific Naval Air Bases." The bases resulting from this program became the facilities from which patrol aviation expanded across the Pacific during WW II.

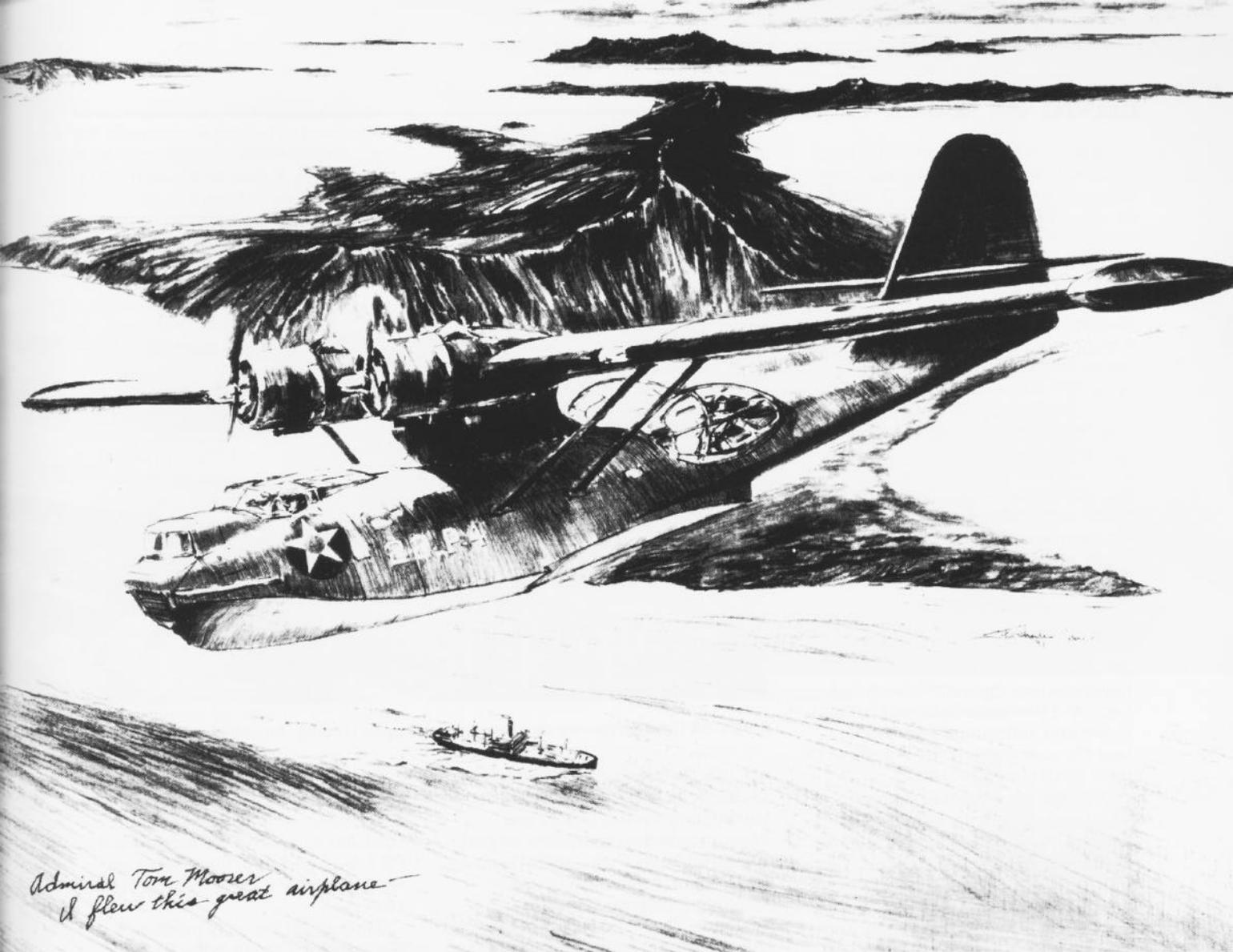
Throughout the 1930s, the major vessels assigned to the Pacific were home-ported on the West Coast. Annual battle problems were conducted either in the vicinity of the Panama Canal or in the Hawaiian area, with return to home ports upon completion of the exercises. Pearl Harbor served as an advanced base for the units deployed to Hawaii.

Japanese aggression in China resulted in a decision by President

Franklin D. Roosevelt to keep the battleships in Pearl Harbor following completion of the 1940 battle problem instead of returning them to their West Coast home ports. Rear Admiral P. L. N. Bellinger, Commander, Patrol Wing (PatWing) 2, found his command with far greater requirements for aerial search and patrol than his limited assets would permit.

Following notification that PatWing-2 would be the last wing in the Navy to be equipped with modern aircraft, RAdm. Bellinger prepared a comprehensive report advising the Chief of Naval Operations of the low state of operational readiness of PatWing-2 and recommending required actions to correct the situation. This report became a blueprint for subsequent remedial actions, but additional support was slow in coming. In October 1941, PatWing-1, with three squadrons, deployed to the unfinished base at Kaneohe Bay from San Diego. Combined with the four squadrons assigned to PatWing-2, Bellinger had seven PBY *Catalina* squadrons under his command. Several of these squadrons were equipped with the obsolescent early models of the PBY.

For many months before war began, the Fleet Commander had insisted upon a heavy schedule of daily patrols, each lasting about 18 hours. This heavy patrol schedule combined with an equally heavy training load resulted in maintenance workloads that could not be supported with available assets. Based upon an evaluation of available intelligence that if war came it would come first in the Philippines and Southeast Asia, the new



*Admiral Tom Moorer  
I flew this great airplane*

Artist John Charles Roach was advised by retired Admiral Thomas H. Moorer on this pencil drawing of Moorer's VP-22 PBV during WW II. Then-Lt. Moorer and his crew were flying patrol missions out of Darwin, Australia, when they were shot down by the Japanese. They were picked up by a freighter, which was strafed and sunk. Moorer and his crew made it to Melville Island, where they were rescued three days later by an Australian subchaser.

Fleet Commander, Admiral Kimmel, called off the heavy patrol schedule.

On the eve of war, Pacific patrol aviation was deployed as follows: PatWing-1, Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, three squadrons; PatWing-2, Ford Island, Hawaii, four squadrons with one deployed to Midway; PatWing-4, Sand Point, Wash., two squadrons with one deployed to Alaska; and PatWing-10, Cavite, Philippines, two squadrons with one at Sangley Point and the other at Olongopo. Detachments were dispersed in the southern Philippines. Other Pacific patrol squadrons not operating under wing control were located at Alameda and North Island, Calif.

December 7, 1941. As dawn broke on Oahu, three planes of VP-14 were airborne on routine patrols. Shortly after 6:30 a.m., the crew of 14-P-1, in coordination with *Ward*, attacked a

midget submarine in the approaches to Pearl Harbor. Without realizing it, they had fired the first shots in the air war against the Japanese Empire. No further action was taken regarding this attack.

With the exception of the three planes on patrol, four aircraft on training missions, and VP-24 deployed to Midway, all Hawaiian-based patrol planes were parked closely, in neat lines, to facilitate defense against sabotage, considered by authorities to be the most probable threat. At Kaneohe, four PBVs were at moorings in the bay. Before the morning was over, the vast majority of the aircraft of six squadrons was damaged or destroyed. None of the few search aircraft available were able to locate the Japanese carrier force.

War came to PatWing-10 about four hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The seaplane tender *William B. Preston* was attacked in Davao Gulf and two of its PBVs were sunk by strafing. The aircraft of the wing were well dispersed. Fuel and other material had been prepositioned in lakes, swamps and coves, and other places where operations could be supported from areas offering some concealment. PatWing-10's missions were to search for and attack the Japanese from advanced bases whenever possible, and to search and scout for the Asiatic Fleet as it retired southward to the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), according to the War Plan. Evacuation of key personnel from the Philippines and rescue were vital secondary missions.

On December 10, a Japanese force of two battleships, a light cruiser, and two destroyers was sighted and five PBVs from Los Banos attacked, causing damage to a battleship.

## Naval Aviation in WW II

By mid-December, PatWing-10 was reduced to less than one squadron of operable aircraft. Captain F. D. Wagner, the Wing Commander aboard the tender *Childs*, deployed south. The wing successively operated from Balikpapan, Borneo; Menado, Celebes; finally arriving at Soerabaja, Java, on December 21. From December 26 through mid-January, the wing was assigned long-range search missions, flying from Ambon in the Ceram Islands. Dutch and Australian patrols also flew from Ambon, and cooperation, particularly with the Australians, was excellent. Numerous rescue operations were conducted as Allied forces retreated ahead of the advancing Japanese onslaught.

On January 11, 1942, six PBYs of VP-22 arrived at Ambon from Pearl Harbor via Darwin, Australia. In these early days of the war, there was no established pool of spare aircraft or advanced bases with supplies in the forward areas. Operations were "ad hoc," and the resourcefulness of flight crews and maintenance personnel kept the operations going in spite of almost insurmountable odds.

With the evacuation of Ambon in mid-January, the normal method of operation was 2-3 plane detachments with the tenders *Preston*, *Childs*, and *Heron* at various locations throughout the NEI and at Darwin. In late January, the combined Allied Forces attacked a fleet of 31 Japanese ships in Makassar Strait, and for a short time turned the Japanese back. Patrols continued.

Toward the end of February, the wing moved south to Darwin. On February 19, the Japanese attacked, destroying all the planes there and badly damaging *Preston*.

After the Battle of the Java Sea, the NEI became untenable and on March 1, the Allied Command was dissolved and patrol aviation removed to Australia.

PatWing-10 had amassed a courageous record against overwhelming odds. From the view of the war in the Pacific as a whole, these desperate early months' operations, and the carrier Battle of the Coral Sea, blunted and stopped the Japanese drive to the south. This period has been termed "...the beginning of the end of tragedy."

While the bitter actions involving PatWing-10 were taking place, patrol aviation in other areas of the Pacific was rebuilding resources and gaining strength for the battles that lie ahead.

PatWing-8 was established at Nor-



A PBY-5A Catalina throws up a cloud of mud upon landing, Amchitka Island, Alaska.

folk, Va., in October 1941 and prior to December 7, had been engaged in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and convoy protection operations as part of the Neutrality Patrol in the North Atlantic. Upon declaration of war, PatWing-8 was transferred to Alameda, Calif. The wing was under the operational control of Commander, Western Sea Frontier, conducting ASW patrols, inshore patrols, convoy coverage, and air-sea rescue services as directed.

PatWing-8 supported the formation and training of new squadrons to operate OS2U, SBD, PV, PBY, PBM, and PB4Y aircraft. It also trained replacement aircrew and maintenance personnel for deployed squadrons, and established new Patrol Aircraft Service Units and Combat Aircraft Service Units, which were subsequently deployed to forward areas. NAS Alameda was designated a terminal for transpac aircraft movements to and from Hawaii, and PatWing-8 guarded and controlled these flights. During the war, 75 squadrons trained and/or operated under PatWing-8 command. These included a blimp squadron and four Army Air Corps squadrons flying Lockheed *Hudsons*.

A "Roles and Missions" decision in 1920 had effectively precluded the Navy from developing land-based patrol aircraft. In order to provide the PBY the ability to carry its own beach-

ing gear, providing increased operational flexibility, the Bureau of Aeronautics contracted with Consolidated to develop the amphibious PBY-5A. The first of these were assigned to the Pacific in December 1941.

Throughout the early months of 1942, patrol aviation in the Pacific worked desperately to rebuild its strength. To provide better administrative support to these efforts, in April, Aircraft Scouting Force was redesignated Patrol Wings, Pacific.

In May, radio interception and our breaking of Japanese codes gave warning of a new threat in the central Pacific, with a feint at the Aleutian Islands. In May, also, PatWing-4 deployed to Kodiak, Alaska, with two PBY squadrons, supported by several small seaplane tenders. The first thrust of the expected attack was a Japanese carrier strike on Dutch Harbor and Fort Glenn on Unalaska Island on June 3. The raid served also to divert attention from the Japanese occupation of Attu and Kiska islands in the Aleutians.

Meanwhile, extensive searches were being conducted in the Midway area, with excellent coverage except in the north-northwest where extremely poor visibility prevailed. VP-44 made the first contact of the battle on June 3. The force, which proved to be the Japanese invasion force, was

shadowed by the PBVs, and during the afternoon, Army B-17s bombed from high altitude without results. Early on the morning of June 4, PBVs staged the first night torpedo attack by our patrol aircraft. One or two ships were reported possibly damaged.

Following a Japanese attack on Midway Island, four Army B-26s made torpedo attacks on the Japanese with undetermined results. The major carrier battle then commenced, which resulted in the loss of all four Japanese carriers against the loss of *Yorktown*. Extensive search operations by patrol planes after the Battle of Midway resulted in the recovery of numerous survivors.

The major offensive thrust of the Japanese navy was halted at Midway, and the threat to Hawaii and the West Coast was removed. From Midway, the road led to ultimate victory, but years of hard patrolling lie ahead.

Just after Midway, it was discovered that the Japanese had occupied Attu and Kiska. Beginning on June 11, an around-the-clock bombing campaign was carried out by VPs 42, 43, and 51



Lockheed Ventura (PV-1), workhorse of the islands.



LCdr. Hal Sommer, C.O. of VP-52, and his "Black Cat" crew, South Pacific.

## Naval Aviation in WW II

PBYs supported by the tender *Gillis* anchored at Nazan Bay, Atka Island. The operation, termed the "Kiska Blitz", ended only when *Gillis* ran out of gasoline, bombs, and bullets. The PBY was not designed as a dive-bomber – but at Kiska, it was flown as one!

On September 1, 1942, Patrol Wings, Pacific, was disestablished and Commander, Air Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet, came into being. It was this command which directed the establishment, equipage, training, and support of Naval Aviation throughout the Pacific. It also controlled distribution of all aviation personnel and all maintenance and repair of assigned aircraft and aviation ships.

The following month PatWing-14 was established at North Island, San Diego, Calif. The functions and operations of PatWing-14 were similar to those of PatWing-8 at Alameda, as were those of Fleet Air Wing (FAW) 6 established at Seattle in November 1942. Through the end of the war, a total of 52 squadrons trained/operated under FAW-14 and 32 squadrons under FAW-6.

On November 1, the designation of all Patrol Wings was changed to Fleet Air Wings in recognition that many diverse types of squadrons and aircraft were then assigned to the

wings under the Task organization concept.

The Japanese offensive in the South Pacific resulted in their occupation of numerous island groups spread across thousands of miles of ocean. If America was to take advantage of its successes at Coral Sea and Midway, it would be necessary to go over to the offensive as soon as possible.

The First Marine Division (Reinforced) was deployed to New Zealand, and plans evolved to invade the Japanese-held Tulagi-Guadalcanal area in the British Solomon Islands. Tulagi was taken on August 9. The landing on Guadalcanal was unopposed. The first aircraft to land on previously Japanese occupied territory was a PBY-5A which landed at Guadalcanal on August 12. By the 20th, the first F4Fs and SBDs had arrived at the just named "Henderson Field." The Cactus Air Force was in business.

Japanese response was not long in coming. For the next year, a series of vicious naval battles took place throughout the Solomons area as both sides attempted to resupply their ground and air forces and to prevent enemy resupply. New Guinea Sound, running from Bougainville to Guadalcanal, between the northern and

southern Solomon Islands, quickly became known as "The Slot."

During the day, Allied air and naval forces were able to control the area, making resupply of Guadalcanal possible. By night it was another story. The Japanese at first ruled the nights. Heavily escorted convoys came down "The Slot" so regularly that they came to be called the "Tokyo Express." There were heavy losses on both sides.

In order to provide operational control of growing patrol activities in the South Pacific, PatWing-1 deployed to Noumea, New Caledonia, in September 1942. Through mid-1944, it had its headquarters successively at Espiritu Santo, Guadalcanal, and Munda, New Georgia Island.

Patrol aircraft tactics were evolving – at first daylight searches and attacks against targets of opportunity, then more aggressive tactics as the battles became more desperate. At this point, it is interesting to look at the situation of PatWings 1 and 2 in the months after Pearl Harbor. The destruction of planes on December 7 made it impossible to maintain squadron integrity, and the period through the Guadalcanal campaign was characterized by extreme flexibility in the assignment and use of both aircraft and crews.

There was a tendency to "pool"



The first Navy Liberator squadron deployed in the Pacific: VP-51 (later VB-101), Henderson Field, Guadalcanal.



Ens. "Jack" Reid and his PBY-5A crew first sighted the main body of the Midway invasion force.

available aircraft and to employ them in detachments rather than by squadrons. Since all Pacific patrol squadrons flew the PBY *Catalina* during this period, the use of detachments, each supported by a small seaplane tender, permitted great flexibility of operations and increased security since few planes were exposed to attack at any one location. The tenders shifted location frequently to decrease detection.

The experience of VP-51 during the first year of the war is an extreme example of this situation. In early December, the squadron was assigned to PatWing-8 at Alameda, but deployed to PatWing-2 in mid-December 1941. It was based at Ford Island for training and operations, maintaining detachments at Midway through early June 1942. During the Battle of Midway, Ensign Allan Rothenburg and his crew participated in the night torpedo mission against the Japanese invasion force on June 3-4.

Also, during June through August 1942, a six-plane detachment of VP-51 was stationed in the Aleutian Islands under PatWing-4. This detachment participated in the bombing operation known as the "Kiska Blitz" from June 11-14.

August 1942 found Ens. Rothenburg, of Midway fame, in charge of a one-plane VP-51 detachment assigned to PatWing-1 in the South Pacific. In October, he torpedoed a Japanese cruiser in a daring night at-

tack. Meanwhile, the rest of VP-51 was transitioning from PBYs to the then-new PB4Y-1 *Liberator*. In January 1943, the squadron deployed to FAW-1 in the South Pacific – the first *Liberator* squadron to forward deploy in the Pacific. In March 1943, it lost the VP-51 designation when it was redesignated VB-101.

From that date until October 1944, land-based patrol plane squadrons were designated bombing squadrons (VB) with three-digit squadron numbers. Other squadrons assigned to Pacific FAWs included long-range photo reconnaissance (VD), rescue (VH), and (medical) evacuation (VE) squadrons. ■

See Part 2 in *NANews*, September-October 1992.

## 50 Years Ago – WWII

**Jul 3:** In the first successful firing of an American rocket from a plane in flight, LCdr. J. H. Hean, Gunnery Officer of Transition Training Squadron, Pacific Fleet, fired a retro-rocket from a PBY-5A in flight at Goldstone Lake, Calif. The rocket, designed to be fired aft with a velocity equal to the forward velocity of the airplane, and thus to fall vertically, was designed at the California Institute of Technology. Following successful tests, the retro-rocket became a weapon complementary to the magnetic airborne detector, with VP-63 receiving the first service installation in February 1943.

**Jul 7:** An agreement was reached between the Army and Navy, which provided that the Army would deliver to the Navy a specified number of B-24 *Liberators*, B-25 *Mitchells*, and B-34 *Venturas* to meet the Navy's requirement for long-range landplanes.

**Jul 12:** Patrol Wings were reorganized to increase the mobility and flexibility of patrol aviation. Geographic areas of responsibility were assigned to each wing, and permanent assignment of squadrons was abolished in favor of assignment as the situation required.

**Jul 24:** The Bureau of Aeronautics issued a Planning Directive calling for procurement of four Sikorsky helicopters for study and development by Navy and Coast Guard aviation forces.

**Aug 1:** A J4F *Widgeon*, piloted by Ens. Henry C. White of Coast Guard Squadron 212, based at Houma, La., scored the first Coast Guard kill of an enemy submarine with the sinking of the *U-166* off the Mississippi delta.

**Aug 7:** Marine Aircraft Wings, Pacific, was organized at San Diego, Calif., for the administrative control and logistic support of Marine Corps aviation units assigned to the Pacific Fleet.

**Aug 12:** USS *Wolverine* (IX-64) was commissioned at Buffalo, N.Y. This ship and USS *Sable*, commissioned the following May, were Great Lakes excursion ships converted for aviation training and were operated for the remainder of the war on the inland waters of Lake Michigan. They provided flight decks upon which hundreds of student Naval Aviators qualified for carrier landings, and many flight deck crews received their first practical experience in handling aircraft aboard ship.

**Aug 13:** Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, directed that an Aircraft Experimental and Developmental Squadron be established about September 30, 1942, at NAS Anacostia, D.C. This squadron, which replaced the Fleet Air Tactical Unit, was to conduct experiments with new aircraft and equipment in order to determine their practical application and tactical employment.