

Patrol Aviation in the Pacific in WW II



Part 2

By Capt. Albert L. Raithel, Jr., USN (Ret.)

From its mid-1942 arrival until September 1944, Fleet Air Wing (FAW) 1 squadrons and tenders were scattered over hundreds of miles covering the South Pacific. They operated from locations such as Henderson Field, Guadalcanal; Vanikere and Halave, Tulagi Island; Mathorn Sound and airfield, Onodongo Island; Segi Point Field, New Guinea; Green Island; Emirau and at Topokina Field, Bougainville Island. Altogether, more than 30 squadrons, including squadrons of PBYs, PB4Ys, PVs, TBFs, SBDs, Marine F4Fs, and several New Zealand PBY and PV squadrons were under FAW-1's control.

As the Allied war machine gathered speed, not only were new squadrons available for forward deployment but new and improved equipment led to new tactics. Where darkness and weather had provided effective cover for early enemy operations, airborne search radars made possible night search and attack. VPs 12 and 54

pioneered these early night missions in the Solomons area. VP-12 has been credited with originating the term "Black Cats" as applied to these night search and attack missions conducted by PBY *Catalinas*. Armed with bombs, torpedoes, and guns, these far-ranging missions proved to be very effective in denying the night to the enemy.

From the beginning of the war, patrol aviation had been a 24-hour-a-day operation, limited primarily by lack of assets rather than lack of targets. The extended Japanese Empire relied upon extensive shipping of all types to transport raw materials to Japan, and to provide logistics support to the garrisons guarding the far-flung empire. These extended shipping lanes provided ready targets for allied submarines and aircraft.

While FAW-1 aircraft battled their way up the Solomons chain, FAW-10 in western Australia and FAW-17 (established in September 1943) in eastern Australia began their moves

A Privateer, armed with a highly successful Bat antishipping missile, departs on patrol.

northward through the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) and Papua, New Guinea. Together, they formed a spearhead pointed at the Philippines.

In addition to the coverage of supply convoys sailing from Port Moresby, the PBYs supported a clandestine land scouting force far in the interior jungles of New Guinea. Thirty-six flights were made to the junction of the Yellow and Sepik rivers in central New Guinea, about 100 miles west of Wewak, behind the Japanese lines. Forty-eight tons of supplies and numerous personnel were carried in. These 1,000-mile-round-trip missions crossed the 12,000-foot-high Owen-Stanley Mountains. Since low clouds were almost always found on the north side of the mountains, the *Catalinas* flew just below the clouds and just above the treetops as they followed

the Sepik River down the mountain to the junction where there was an area large enough for landings and takeoffs. Thunderstorm build-ups on the return trip often necessitated flying at altitudes which approached the PBY's 19,000-foot ceiling. In December 1943, Japanese build-ups in the area compelled evacuation of the force; 219 Australian soldiers and 12.5 tons of supplies were flown out.

As Allied forces advanced westward along the north coast of New Guinea, patrol operations increased with heavy air-sea rescue efforts combined with bombing of port, fuel, and communications facilities and attacks on shipping. Through the end of 1943, VPs 101, 11, 52, and 34, supported by *Heron*, *San Pablo*, and *Half Moon*, were assigned to FAW-17. All these units had been previously assigned to FAW-10, based in Perth, Australia. FAW-10 now made plans for movement north to the Philippines.

In the central Pacific, FAW-2 squadrons were busy conducting long-range photoreconnaissance and night bombing raids. As land-based patrol aircraft became more numerous, provisions had to be made for basing and support of their operations. Previously, in order to facilitate detachment operations, most administration and maintenance had been assigned to the new Wing Head-

quarters Squadron. Maintenance detachments called Patrol Aircraft Service Units (PATSU) were assigned to tenders and airfields to provide administrative maintenance services to aircraft being supported. The Navy's code word "ACORN" was used for the organization of men and equipment designed to rapidly build and operate new airfield facilities, or to rehabilitate captured airfields. A PATSU was assigned to an ACORN to provide support for attached patrol aircraft units. Where several aircraft types were operating from the same base, an augmented unit known as a Combat Aircraft Service Unit would be provided to the ACORN. Other type aircraft service units existed and occasionally provided services to patrol aircraft. These land-based facilities became increasingly vital as the build-up of land-based PBY-5A *Catalina*, PB4Y *Liberator/Privateer*, and PV *Ventura/Harpoon* aircraft accelerated.

Operating from bases on Wallis, Canton, Nukufetau, and Funafuti islands in the Phoenix and Ellis Island groups, missions were flown against Tarawa and Makin in the Gilbert Islands, and against Maloelap, Mili Atoll, Jaluit, Kwajalein, Wotje, and targets of opportunity in the Marshall Islands. VB-137 flying PVs and VB-108 and VD-3 flying *Liberators*, combined with VPs 53 and 72 flying PBYs, supported by

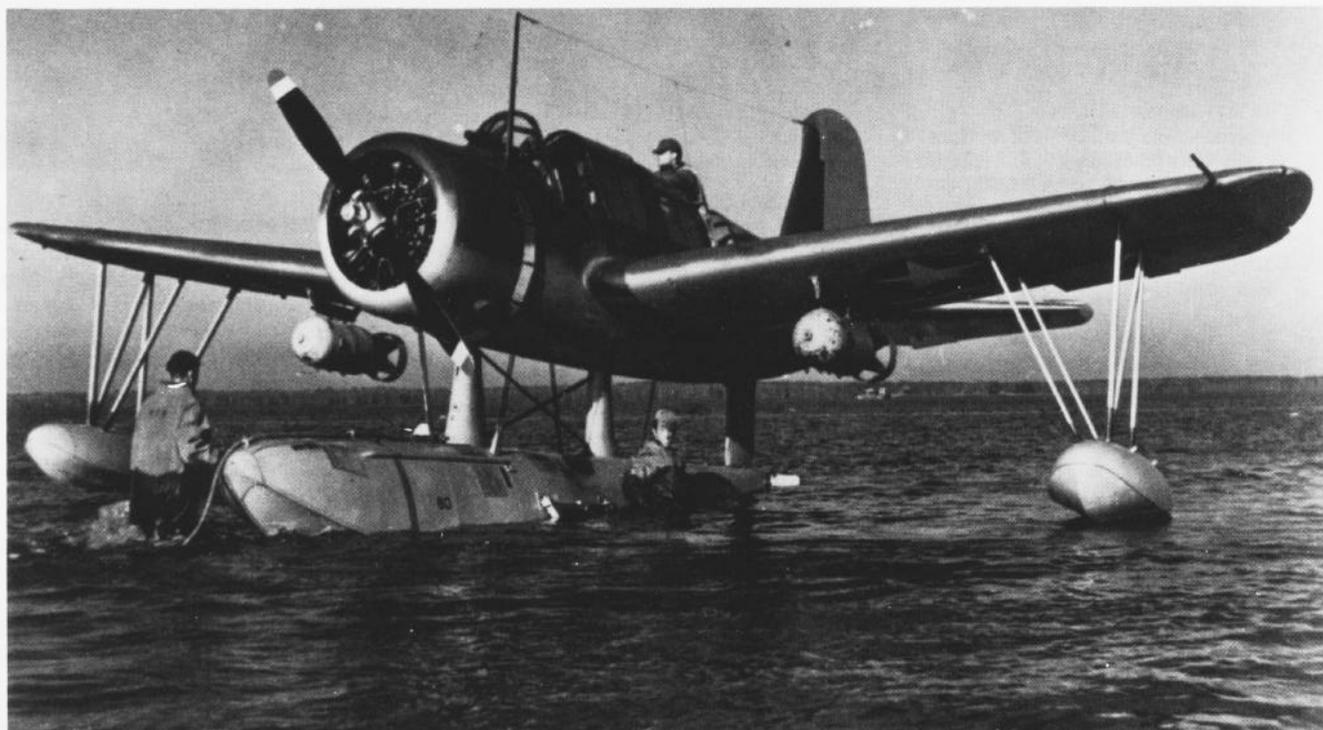
the tenders *Curtiss* and *Mackinac*, at Funafuti. The Gilbert Islands were occupied in November 1943.

The Japanese were still established on Attu and Kiska at the beginning of 1943. Adak and Amchitka had been occupied by the U.S. Army and preparations were being made to dislodge the Japanese from the Aleutians. Attu was secured in May and Kiska was occupied without a fight on August 15. The Japanese had evacuated the garrison.

After initial night attacks on the Japanese Kuril Islands by VP-43 PBYs, the mission to carry the fight was passed to the *Venturas* and later *Harpoons* of VBs 131, 135, 136, and 139. This mission came to be called the "Empire Express." The PBYs of VPs 43, 45, 61, and 62 also operated under FAW-4 during this period. Finally, in August 1945, the PB4Ys of VPBs 120 and 122 took over the "Empire Express" mission.

Tenders assigned to FAW-4 included *Teal*, *Casco*, *Williamson*, *Hurlburt*, *Avocet*, and *Thornton*. VSs 48, 49, 56, 70, and 45, flying inshore patrols with OS2U *Kingfishers* along the Aleutian chain, were also assigned to FAW-4.

The long period of preparation and build-up for our final advance in the Pacific had ended. The Gilberts operation had been the prelude to the



The little-remembered inshore patrol. Thousands of tedious hours were logged by Kingfishers on this vital but unheralded mission.

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Marshalls campaign. Operating from bases in the newly won Gilberts, patrol planes flew long-range searches and photoreconnaissance in support of the invasion force. In a near textbook operation, the invasion of Kwajalein and Majuro, supported by the carriers and gunfire support ships of the 5th Fleet, was completed on February 4, 1944. Thereafter, FAW-2 forces moved into bases in the Marshalls in support of the projected invasion of the Mariana Islands.

By mid-February 1943, the southern Solomons campaign came to an end with the occupation of Green Island. From this time, FAW-17 "Black Cats" targeted the Rabaul-bound supply convoys. Enemy strongholds, principally Rabaul and Kavieng, were targeted by the *Liberators* of VB-106, beginning in early 1944.

Michael G. Kammen, in his extensive study of tender-based open-sea seaplane operations, has noted: "The Marianas represented the next logical stepping stone. They lay directly across our path north to the Imperial homeland and west to the Philippines. The Marianas enabled the Japanese to stage land-based aircraft to any island in the western Pacific. The larger islands of Saipan, Guam, Rota, Tinian, and Pagan were valued as bases for defense and communications. Tanapag Harbor, Saipan, provided the Japanese with a fueling and supply station for ships en route to and from the Empire.

"The American objective was the es-

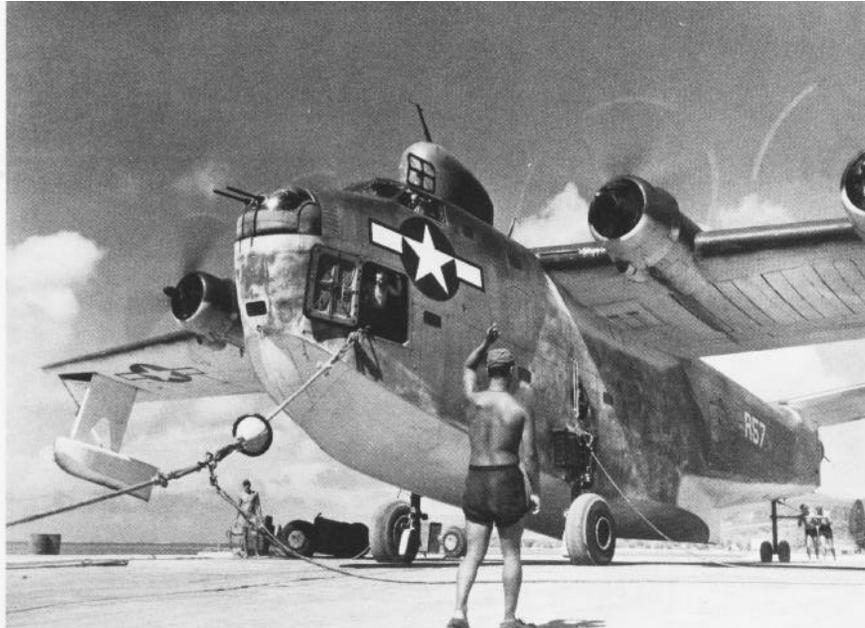
JATO – first used at Iwo Jima – greatly increased the capability of Mariners in open-sea and heavy takeoff situations.



A war-weary warrior from VPB-216 ready for the trip home – Saipan, November 1944.

establishment of air and surface bases from which future operations against Japan might be launched. The airfields on Saipan, Guam, and Tinian would provide bases for long-range bombers, while fleet facilities at Guam would be useful in the establishment of advanced fuel and supply bases nearer the home grounds of the Japanese fleet." Extensive preparations for the Marianas campaign were put into high gear.

As the Allies advanced up the north coast of New Guinea, patrol aircraft were able to extend their area of operations. In April 1944, supported by Task Force 58 carriers diverted from the central Pacific specifically for the operation, General MacArthur's southwest Pacific forces captured the Hollandia area, providing additional



A PB2Y Coronado preparing to launch. Though few in numbers, they were very effective in the Okinawa campaign.

bases for the eventual invasion of the Philippines.

The Marianas campaign imposed new conditions on patrol aviation. Extensive search and patrol coverage of the approaches to the Marianas was required to guard against Japanese interference with the vast support and amphibious forces involved in the invasion of Saipan. As no airfields were available to support operation of shore-based patrol aircraft, it was planned that patrol support for the invasion would be provided by tender-based seaplanes. The PBM-3 was available for the first time in the Pacific in sufficient numbers to support the operation.

Garapan anchorage and Saipan Harbor provided the initial seadromes. After several days of bombing, landing forces went ashore on June 15, 1944.

Within 48 hours, PBMs of VPB-16 had commenced open-sea operations from that area. *Ballard* provided tending and seadrome control initially, followed by *Pocomoke* and *Onslow*. On June 20, a detachment of three VH-1 PBMs arrived. Heavy weather made it necessary to move the seadrome to a less exposed area. This reduced the exposure to bad sea conditions but potentially exposed the aircraft to anti-aircraft fire during takeoffs into the offshore wind. VPB-16 was followed by VP-216 with PBMs and a detachment of VP-72 PBYS. VP-202 initially provided daily mail flights to Kwajalein and return. It forward deployed to Saipan on July 17, operating off *Pocomoke*, *Chandeleur*, and *Mackinac*. *Onslow* also assisted VP-202. *Yakutat* supplied subsistence and quarters for a PATSU. These forces provided the vital search, patrol, reconnaissance, and rescue services that were necessary for the success of the initial phase of the operation prior to the arrival of land-based squadrons.

Following the gigantic air battle between Japanese strike aircraft and American carrier aircraft, known as the "Marianas Turkey Shoot," the Japanese carrier forces were located by PBMs. The resulting battle is remembered as the Battle of the Philippine Sea. Next, plans were made for the assault on Peleliu, Anguar, Ngesebus, and Ulithi in the Palau Islands, as a prelude to the projected invasion of the Philippines. Patrol aviation carried out wide-ranging search, patrol, bombing, and photoreconnaissance missions in support of preparations for this assault. In August, FAW-1 departed the Solomons and moved to Saipan, as-

suming responsibility for patrol operations in the central Pacific. FAW-2 resumed preparation of squadrons gearing up for later operations in the forward area, and such patrol activity as was required in the South Pacific.

In the Palau operation, it was again decided to use seaplanes as the advanced patrol force until the arrival of land-based aircraft. The seadrome was established in Kossol Passage, an open roadstead, on September 16, 1944. Squadrons participating in this operation, which was characterized by very rough water conditions, were VPs 16, 202 and 216, VPB-21, and VH-1. The seadrome was maintained by *Chandeleur* (CFAW-1 flagship), *Pocomoke*, *MacKinac*, *Yakutat*, and *Onslow* which arrived at Kossol Passage on September 16. In addition to covering the western Caroline operations, patrols were flown in support of the capture of Morotai, NEI.

Carrier sweeps covering the southern Philippines were conducted in support of the western Carolines operation. Japanese air opposition was minimal and, consequently, the date for the invasion of the central Philippines was advanced to October 1944.

From formation of the first PB4Y squadron in the Pacific in October 1942 until October 1944, the patrol forces grew from 20 to 77 squadrons. The October 1942 mix was 19 seaplane squadrons and one landplane squadron. The October 1944 mix was 38 seaplane squadrons and 39 landplane squadrons. Thereafter, the total numbers of squadrons decreased when those squadrons flying older aircraft were disestablished as they returned from the

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A Mariner crew, back from patrol, poses for the folks back home.

forward areas. Another factor that was increasingly felt as the war progressed was a major change in policy initiated by Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, in the summer of 1944, whereby all multiengine patrol squadrons, except those assigned to FAW-4 in Alaska, would remain permanently deployed in the forward area and relief of personnel would be by rotation of aircrews.

This policy change was opposed by most of the forward-deployed squadrons as well as CFAW-10 and CFAW-17. Commander, Aircraft, Seventh Fleet, explained the position taken by these forward-deployed commanders stating the resulting disadvantages of the policy, including: the squadrons were never entirely fresh, squadrons were in a constant state of flux, crews did not know each other and squadron esprit largely dis-

appeared, the squadron commander was forced to commit crews to combat without sufficient opportunity for evaluation, the squadron commander never became the veteran of the squadron until he and his crew were about to rotate home, and constant training on fundamentals diluted the amount of time and effort available for development of tactics as changes occurred in the combat area.

The letter was forwarded by Commander, Air Force, Pacific, recommending against changing the new policy. He noted that under the new policy, greatly decreased assets were required to meet combat commitments. The policy was still in various stages of implementation at the end of the war.

From September 1944 until the end of the war, CFAW-10 and CFAW-17

operated under Commander, Seventh Fleet, and since operations were conducted by Task organizations, determination of the wing assignment of individual squadrons became difficult. At this time, PBY, PB4Y, and PV squadrons were assigned, and with the arrival of VPB-20 at Morotai in late October 1944, the PBM was introduced into the two wings. Operating with black painted aircraft, in operations similar to the PBY "Black Cats," the black PBMs were known as the "Nightmares." The name never received public acceptance.

The invasion of the Philippines, beginning at Leyte in October 1944, was supported by VPs 33, 34, and 54 flying PBYs; and VPBs 20 and 25 with PBMs. As operations expanded through the Philippines, missions were flown against the Japanese forces

throughout the southwest Pacific area. In January 1945, major landings took place at Lingayen Gulf on the island of Luzon. This operation was supported by VPB-71 with PB4Ys; VPBs 104, 111, and 119 with PB4Ys; and VPBs 28, 20, 25, and 17 and VH-4 flying PBMs. From the bases secured by the liberation of the Philippines, the Japanese-occupied areas in Southeast Asia and along the coast of China and Formosa provided fruitful targets for patrol operations.

In February, the invasion of Iwo Jima in the Bonin Islands took place. Iwo was needed as a base for fighter escorts for the 20th Air Force B-29 operations against the Japanese homeland, and as an emergency recovery field for damaged aircraft that would otherwise be lost. The operation was supported initially by the PBM-5s of VPB-19. These were the first jet-assisted takeoff (JATO)-equipped planes in the Pacific. PB4Ys of Rescue Squadron 2 also participated in the operation. Due to the extensive ship and small boat traffic close to the beach, it was necessary to lay the seadrome in exposed open sea, 10 miles off the beach. *Williamson*, *Chincoteague*, and *Hamlin* supported the operation until March 6 when PB4Ys began to operate from the airfield.

By March, the Japanese had been pounded but they were not ready to surrender. One more major base was required to support the projected invasion of Japan proper. Okinawa would be that base. Again, facilities for land-based patrol aircraft would not permit the search coverage required, and the seaplane was once again called upon to meet requirements. The Okinawa campaign extended from April 1 until June 21, 1945. The seadrome was laid out at Kerama Retto, a group of small islands lying 10 to 20 miles southwest of Okinawa, which had been recently captured. On March 26, the seadrome and a small boat repair facility were established. For the most complete protection of our forces possible, an extensive pattern of air searches was necessary. These searches reached south to Formosa, west along the coast of China as far north as the coast of Korea, across Tsushima Straits and along both coasts of Kyushu.

For the first three weeks, PBMs and PB2Y-5 *Coronados* carried the search load. More than 8,000 flying hours were flown covering the invasion. Squadrons involved included

VPs 18, 21, 27, 2, and 26 and VHs 1, 3, 4, and 6 flying PBMs; VPB-13 with *Coronados*; and VH-2 with PB4Ys. Fourteen seaplane tenders: *Hamlin*, *Onslow*, *Yakutat*, *St. George*, *Bering Strait*, *Shelikof*, *Chandeleur*, *Kenneth Whiting*, *Casco*, *Suisun*, *Norton Sound*, *Duxbury Bay*, *MacKinac*, and *Gardiners Bay* provided support to a total of 95 aircraft.

On April 7, flying from Kerama Retto, two VPB-21 *Mariners* located the Japanese battleship *Yamato* and its escorts. The *Yamato* was the world's largest warship at the time. The *Mariners* reported the force, vectored carrier aircraft into the kill, and rescued several aviators who had been downed by anti-aircraft fire from the Japanese task force.

Kammen notes: "It was in this area in the concluding months of the war that the air-sea rescue work of the flying boat reached its climax. The spectacularly successful rescue operations for pilots and crews whose planes had been forced down were a vital part of the Okinawa campaign. Seventy percent of those forced down in the open sea during March, April, and May were rescued. On July 14, the seadrome was moved to the east coast of Okinawa to the more

protected area at Chimu Wan, later named Buckner Bay. It was from this seadrome that patrol operations by the seaplane squadrons continued to the end of the war.

On April 23, 1945, *Privateers* of VPB-109 launched two Bat missiles against Japanese shipping in Balikpapan Harbor, Borneo. This was the first use of an automatic homing missile in combat during WW II.

FAW-18 was established in May 1945 to support operations in the central Pacific from the Marianas and Iwo Jima in support of the invasion of Japan. Commencing in June, VD-1 PB4Ys photo-mapped the islands of Kyushu and Honshu in preparation for the invasion.

When the end of the war came, patrol squadrons were dispersed over the vast reaches of the Pacific, keeping pressure on the Japanese anywhere they could be found. Patrol aviation had amassed a glorious record of achievement. ■

Capt. Raithel served on active duty from 1947 to 1981. He was assigned to VP-45, VX-6, VP-28, and commanded VP-47. He flew PBM, P5M, P2V, and P-3 aircraft.

50 Years Ago – WW II

Sep 1: U.S. Naval Air Force, Pacific, RAdm. A. W. Fitch commanding, was established for the administrative control of all air and air service units under the Commander in Chief, Pacific, replacing the offices of Commander Carriers, Pacific, and Commander Patrol Wings, Pacific. The subordinate commands Fleet Air West Coast, Fleet Air Seattle, and Fleet Air Alameda were established at the same time.

Oct 1: Three functional training commands were established for Air Technical Training, Air Primary Training, and Air Intermediate Training, with headquarters initially at Chicago, Ill.; Kansas City, Kans.; and Pensacola, Fla., respectively.

Oct 19: The initial installation and deployment of the ASB-3 airborne search radar was reported. Developed by the Naval Research Laboratory for carrier-based aircraft, this radar had

been installed in five TBF-1s by NAS New York and five SBD-3s by NAS San Pedro, Calif. One aircraft of each type was assigned to Air Group 11 (*Saratoga*) and the others shipped to Pearl Harbor. Remaining sets on the initial contract for 25 were to be used for spare parts and training.

Oct 22: Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company, by amendment to a design study contract, was authorized to construct two 19A axial flow turbojet powerplants. Thereby, fabrication was initiated for the first jet engine of wholly American design.

Oct 28: Procurement of the expendable radio sonobuoy for use in antisubmarine warfare was initiated as the Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, directed the Bureau of Ships to procure 1,000 sonobuoys and 100 associated receivers.