

The Neutrality Patrol:

To Keep Us Out of World War II?

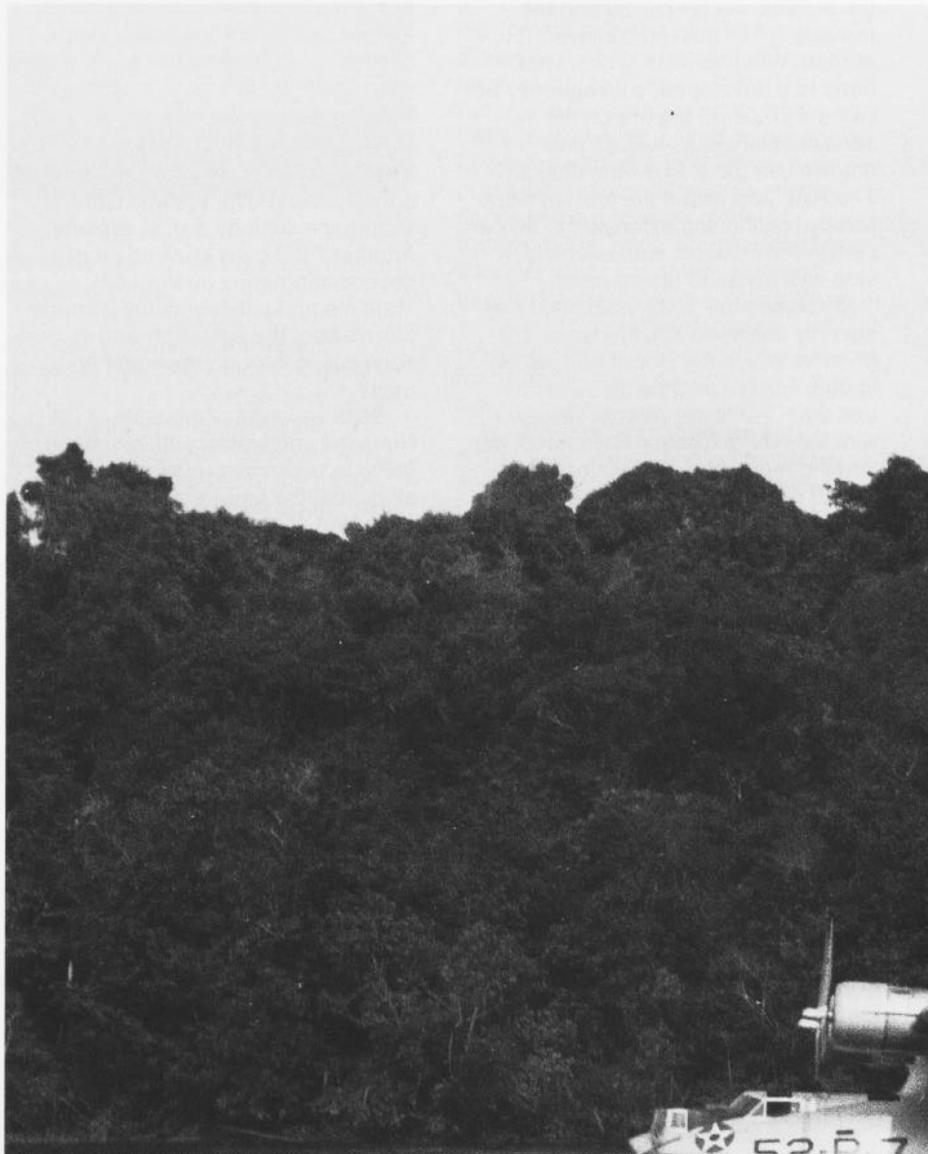
Part 1 of 2

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

On September 1, 1939, the German invasion of Poland began a long anticipated and feared WW II. Declarations of war against Germany by Britain and France two days later showed that the war would undoubtedly expand to all of Europe – a repeat of the beginning of WW I in 1914. The Allies would again be dependent on support by the United States for supplies and munitions which could reach them only aboard ships crossing the Atlantic. Germany would surely make every effort to halt such traffic by U-boat and surface raider attacks and the Atlantic would again, as it had in WW I, become a major battleground. It was a foregone conclusion that the war in the Atlantic would endanger the neutrality of the United States, and the Navy moved promptly to minimize the threat.

The day war began in Europe the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) informed U.S. forces that German U-boats were ready to begin operations in Atlantic shipping lanes, and reports indicated that a dozen German merchant ships were being armed as raiders. The advisory noted that neutral merchantmen, including U.S. flag ships, could expect similar actions by the British and that it was the duty of the U.S., as a neutral, to prevent such activities in our territorial waters and to assure no interference with our rights on the high seas. The Neutrality Act of 1935, made further restrictive by amendment in 1937, forbade arms exports, either direct or by transshipment, to any belligerent and was looked upon by isolationist groups as the best insurance against U.S. involvement in a European war.

W. E. Scarborough



In February 1941, VP-52 was at San Juan, P.R., and flew a survey party to British Guiana to inspect a "destroyers-for-bases" site for a future naval air station. No. 7 is moored for an overnight stop on the Essequibo River, upstream from Georgetown.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued his first proclamation of neutrality on September 5, 1939, declaring in part that any use of U.S. territorial waters for hostile operations would be regarded as unfriendly, offensive, and a violation of U.S. neutrality.

The Navy had initiated action on September 4, by CNO dispatch to Commander, Atlantic Squadron, directing establishment of air and ship patrols to observe and report by

classified means movement of warships of the belligerents within designated areas. The patrol would cover an area bounded on the north by a line east from Boston to latitude 42-30, longitude 65; south to latitude 19; then around the the windward and leeward islands to Trinidad.

The next day CNO amplified his directive by ordering classified contact reports on foreign men-of-war approaching or leaving the U.S. East Coast or the eastern boundary of the

50 Years Ago – WW II

March 19: To assist in the identification of U.S. aircraft on the Neutrality Patrol, fleet activities were authorized to apply additional National Star Insignia on the sides of the fuselage or hull of aircraft so employed.

April 25: USS *Wasp* (CV-7) was commissioned at Boston, Mass., Capt. J. W. Reeves, Jr., commanding.



At Coast Guard Air Station, Charleston, the Coast Guard flew Douglas RD-4, Grumman J2F-2, and Fairchild J2K-2 aircraft on coastal and inshore patrols. In return for shared facilities, VP-52 provided copilots for RD and J2K flights. Building at bottom center was a converted warehouse for squadron shops and offices.

Caribbean. Ships sighted by the patrols, both air and surface, were to be identified by name, nationality, estimated tonnage, color, and markings, and were to be photographed whenever possible. Course and speed were to be estimated and all information was to be recorded and reported on return to base.

On September 6, Commander, Atlantic Squadron reported to CNO that the patrol was operating and by the 20th, when a revised Atlantic Squadron OpOrder (20-39) became effective, Atlantic coastal waters from Nova Scotia, Canada, to the Lesser Antilles, West Indies, were under daily surveillance by surface and air patrols. Forces involved were primarily patrol planes from Patrol Squadron (VP) 51 (12 PBV-1s), VP-52 (6 P2Y-2s), VP-53 (12 P2Ys), and VP-54 (12 PBV-2s) of Patrol Wing (PatWing) 5 and VP-33 (12 PBV-3s) of PatWing-3, plus four seaplane tenders assigned to the PatWings.

Surface forces were battleships and cruisers of the Atlantic Squadron and their attached OS2U and SOC aircraft of Observation Squadron (VO) 5 and Cruiser Scouting Squadron (VCS) 7, *Ranger* (CV-4) with her air group, and *Wasp* (CV-7), which was not yet in commission. Forty destroyers plus an undetermined number of old



destroyers (to be recommissioned) and about 15 old submarines were the assigned surface forces.

Aircraft patrols were initiated by the patrol squadrons, deployed to assigned Neutrality Patrol bases – most of them ill-equipped to support aircraft and crews for flight operations at the level required for daily patrols. General orders to the patrols stressed safety of the operations, avoidance of nonneutral acts, and the exercise of care in approaching vessels to avoid actions which might be interpreted as hostile.

VP-51: Deployed PBY-1s to San Juan, P.R., departing Norfolk, Va., on September 12, with first patrols flown on the 13th. The squadron utilized seaplane facilities, including ramp and hangar, of Pan American Airways at the San Juan airport, housing crew and supporting activities in tents on the airport. The site utilized was the area on which the future Naval Air Station (NAS), San Juan would be built, construction starting in 1940. VP-51's patrols covered harbors and shipping lanes in the West Indies from Puerto Rico to Trinidad, with special attention to the southern approaches to the Caribbean through the Lesser Antilles.

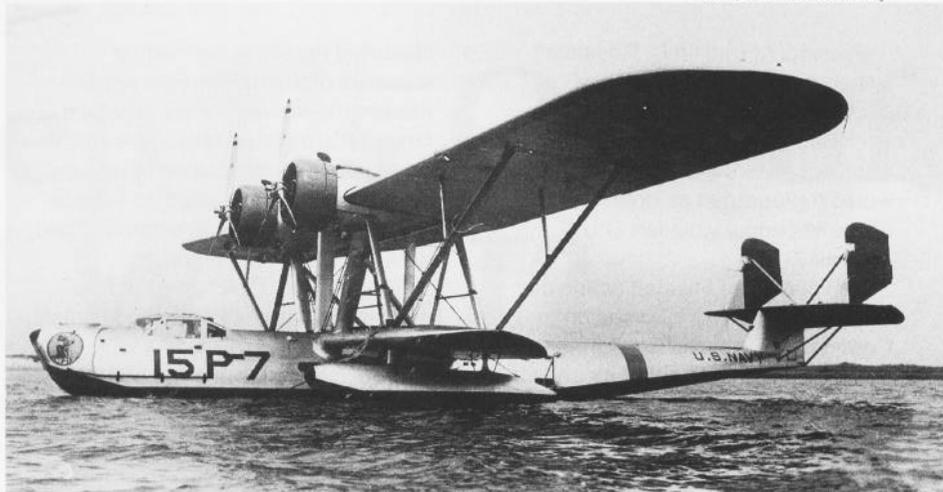
VPs 52 and 53: Both continued flying P2Ys from home port Norfolk, patrolling mid-Atlantic coastal shipping lanes, coordinating operations with Atlantic Squadron destroyers. VP-53 had returned to Norfolk September 1 after a regular summer deployment to Annapolis, Md., for midshipman aviation training.

VP-54: Based at Norfolk, deployed a detachment of PBY-2s to Newport, R.I., operating from the Naval Torpedo Factory Air Facility on Gould Island in Narragansett Bay, R.I. Daily searches were coordinated with destroyer surface patrols in the assigned offshore areas.

VP-33: Deployed PBY-3s from Coco Solo, Canal Zone, to Guantanamo, Cuba. Patrols covered the area from Guantanamo to San Juan, coordinated with VP-51, destroyers, and the cruisers *Tuscaloosa* (CA-37) and *San Francisco* (CA-38).

Cruisers *Quincy* (CA-39) and *Vincennes* (CA-44): Patrolled sea approaches between Norfolk and Newport. Battleship Division 5 and

Courtesy of Fred C. Dickey



VP-15 (later redesignated -53 and -73) P2Y-2 off Breezy Point, NAS Norfolk, Va., Spring 1939. Neutrality Patrol star on bow was not authorized until March 19, 1940.



PH2W. J. Henning

52-P-10, Spring 1941. These PBY-5s were transferred from San Diego-based VP-14 in January 1941. To expedite operations and conserve funds, VP-14 markings (black stripes on tail) were retained and only squadron numbers changed.



Courtesy of Capt. Wm. Hardaker

CGAS Charleston hanger shared with VP-52 for major P2Y maintenance. Coast Guard aircraft in photo, left to right: J2K, J2F, RD, and two J2Fs.

Ranger were based at Norfolk as a reserve force.

Experience during the first month of operations dictated changes in the deployment of the forces to improve coverage of the assigned areas. VP-52 moved to the U.S. Coast Guard air station located on the Cooper River in the Charleston, S.C., navy yard in December. Renovation and modification of existing buildings provided facilities to house crew and squadron administrative and maintenance activities. The air station supplied a seaplane ramp, aircraft parking area, and shared space in a small hangar. Officers were quartered in the Coast Guard BOQ. Moving the squadron proved a major exercise in itself.

VP-52 had been home-ported at NAS Norfolk since it was first commissioned as VP-14 on November 1, 1935, when the station was NAS Hampton Roads. As a self-supported squadron, a full allowance of maintenance equipment, spares, records, and myriad other authorized and unauthorized odds and ends accumulated required packing and loading aboard railroad cars for the move south. The operation was further complicated by a full schedule of training flights in addition to daily patrols of the assigned areas offshore.

VP-33's initial move to Guantanamo posed problems similar to those of VP-52, somewhat diminished by the in-place facilities of the fully operational naval station there. However, the October move of the VP-33 detachment to Naval Station, Key West, Fla., long out of service and



Courtesy of David W. Lucabaugh

Great Lakes BG-1 of USS Wasp Bombing Squadron 7 at Chambers Field, NAS Norfolk, in 1940. Obsolescent aircraft were frequently utilized during preliminary training of new air groups. Wasp was not yet commissioned but her air group was assigned to the Neutrality Patrol.

moth-balled, demanded much effort by the plane crews and their support personnel. Key West businesses and the population in general were so pleased by the arrival of the PBYs and several submarines that a celebration, including a parade on the main street, was staged! A VP-33 contingent turned out for the event. The Key West detachment flew regular patrols from Dry Tortugas to Miami, Fla., and to the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico, covering the Florida Straits and the Yucatan Channel.

In November 1939, VP-53 exchanged P2Ys for a mixed bag of older model PBYs – 3 PBY-1s, 3 PBY-2s, and 3 PBY-3s. In February 1940, the squadron moved to Key West, remaining there until April 1941 when it returned to Norfolk and exchanged the old PBYs for new PBY-5s.

Also in October of that year, *Ranger* and her air group had joined the Cruiser Division (CruDiv) 7 ships and their VCS-7 SOCs to form a strike group with long-range search capability, on standby to fill gaps in the areas covered by the regular patrols. In November, a surface patrol of destroyers was established in the Gulf of Mexico to track shipping in that area. The Navy patrol effort was expanded by Coast Guard surface and aircraft coverage of inshore areas and cooperation by exchange of information, assuring complete area coverage and recording of all contacts.

On October 16, Commander, Atlantic Squadron expanded his earlier orders to the patrol forces with the issuance of OpOrder 24-39. In addition to reporting foreign men-of-war, "suspicious" vessels were to be noted and both they and men-of-war were to be tracked until their actions were considered satisfactory. All units of the Atlantic Squadron were included in the task organization but the major portion of the patrol activity was conducted by the patrol squadrons and destroyers, the latter primarily responsible for developing (visually checking at close range) contacts made by aircraft. Employment of the battleships was minimized and the ships of CruDiv-7 were soon withdrawn from the patrol for other duties.

The scope of Neutrality Patrol operations gradually expanded during 1940. Concurrently, the aircrews normally required training in all aspects of patrol plane operations –

Murphy Collection via Fred C. Dickey



Vought SBU-1s of Scouting Squadron 42 and other USS *Ranger* air group squadrons based at NAS Norfolk in 1940. *Ranger* and *Wasp* air groups were included in the aviation assets of the Neutrality Patrol.

tactics, instruments, navigation, gunnery, bombing, etc. For example, VP-52 deployed detachments from Charleston to advanced bases such as Parris Island and Winyah Bay (both in S.C.) for operations with the aircraft tenders *Owl* (AM-2) in August and *Thrush* (AVP-3) in October. In addition to regular patrols, a normal schedule of training flights was flown from the advanced bases.

In spite of the increasing tempo of operations and the resulting workload, the effort proved well worth its costs; the experience markedly enhanced the readiness of Neutrality Patrol squadrons for the tasks that lay a scant year ahead in WW II.

The war in Europe during 1940 saw the apparently invincible German forces defeat France and threaten to bring Britain to her knees by the blitz on her cities and the success of the U-boat actions in the Atlantic. The specter of a British defeat and the danger to the United States of such an event were obvious and dictated further expansion of the forces in the Atlantic. In the famous destroyers-for-bases agreement negotiated by President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in September 1940, sites for bases in the Atlantic and Caribbean were exchanged for 50 WW I destroyers. Two of the sites, Argentina, Newfoundland, and Bermuda, presented rent-free as a "gift" for 99 years, would become key elements in the Battle of the Atlantic. Six other sites, in the Bahamas, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua, and British Guiana, were leased, rent-free for the same period.

Both air and surface elements of the patrol force expanded during 1940 as the scope of the operation grew. Pat-Wing-5 at Norfolk commissioned VP-55 on August 1 and VP-56 on October 1. Both were to be equipped with PBM-1s but problems with the new planes delayed deliveries and severely restricted squadron training. Eventually, the squadrons would be merged into a single command, designated VP-74, with all early production PBMs assigned. On November 1, 1940, the Atlantic Squadron was redesignated Patrol Force, Atlantic Fleet and on December 17, then-Rear Admiral Ernest J. King relieved Rear Admiral Hayne Ellis as Commander, Patrol Force. On February 1, 1941, the augmented and reorganized patrol forces

were established under Admiral King as the U.S. Atlantic Fleet.

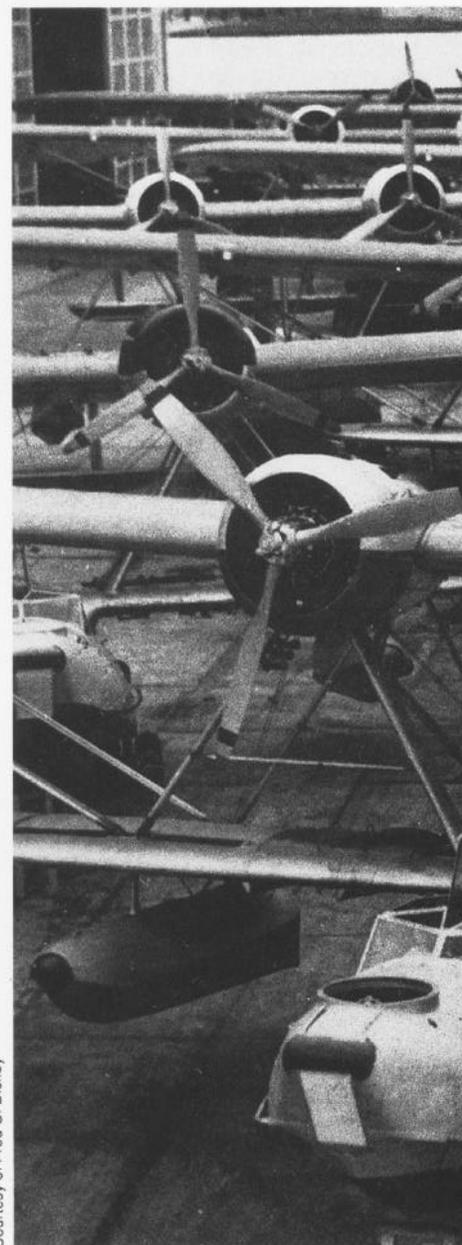
This force reorganization included establishment of task forces responsible for operations in specific sectors of the Atlantic. Task Force 1 – composed of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers – covered the trade routes to northern Europe. Task Force 2 – aircraft carriers, cruisers, and destroyers – patrolled the central North Atlantic. Task Force 3 – cruisers, destroyers, and mine craft – was based at San Juan and Guantanamo to cover the South Atlantic.

Task Force 4 was Support Force, Atlantic Fleet, under Rear Admiral A. L. Bristol, established on March 1, 1941. The support force included destroyers and the patrol wing, with VPs 51, 52, 55, and 56, and the tenders *Albemarle* (AV-5) and *George E. Badger* (AVD-3) attached. On April 5, VP-53 rejoined the wing at Norfolk and, during the month, exchanged its old model PBYS for new PB-5s. The establishing directive for the support force required preparation of the force for service in high latitudes and emphasized training in antisubmarine warfare, protection of shipping, and defense against air, submarine, and surface raider attack. Primary mission of the force was operations from North Atlantic bases to prevent Axis forces from interfering with the shipment of war material from the United States to Great Britain.

Other air and surface forces originally operating with the Neutrality Patrol were subsequently designated Task Force 6 and elements based north of the Gulf and Caribbean became the Northern Patrol. The mission of the Northern Patrol, operating from bases at Norfolk, Bermuda, Narragansett Bay and Argentina, would be to investigate reports of potential enemy vessels and other non-American activity in the North Atlantic. This task gave the PatWing Support Force major responsibility for the advance of Naval Aviation to the north and east to insure safe passage of war materials to Britain.

VP-53's hangar (right) and parking area at Breezy Point, NAS Norfolk, late Summer 1939. The squadron deployed to Annapolis, Md., for midshipman aviation training every summer. VP-52 occupied the hangar on left.

Prior to establishment of the Pat-Wing Support Force, a number of squadron redeployments were directed. VP-54 moved to Bermuda, based on the tender *George E. Badger* and began Neutrality Patrol operations on November 15, 1940. In December, VP-52 exchanged its P2Y-2s (last of the model in fleet service) for PB-5s. The P2Ys were ferried from Charleston to Pensacola for use there in the training squadron. Replacement PB-5s were ferried cross-country from San Diego by VP-14 and delivered to VP-52 at Pensacola during January. VP-52 flew the new planes, as received, to its old



Courtesy of Fred C. Dickey

home port, NAS Norfolk. The move from Charleston was essential as the facilities there could not support PBY operations.

On February 1, 1941, VP-52 was transferred to San Juan for what proved to be a brief taste of tropical operations. The squadron joined VP-51 on still-unfinished NAS San Juan, sharing the Neutrality Patrols through the West Indies to Trinidad. In addition to the patrols there were mail runs and survey flights to island sites of the new stations being built under the destroyers-for-bases agreement. At the end of February, VP-52 was ordered back to Norfolk and, on March

Naval Aviation in WW II

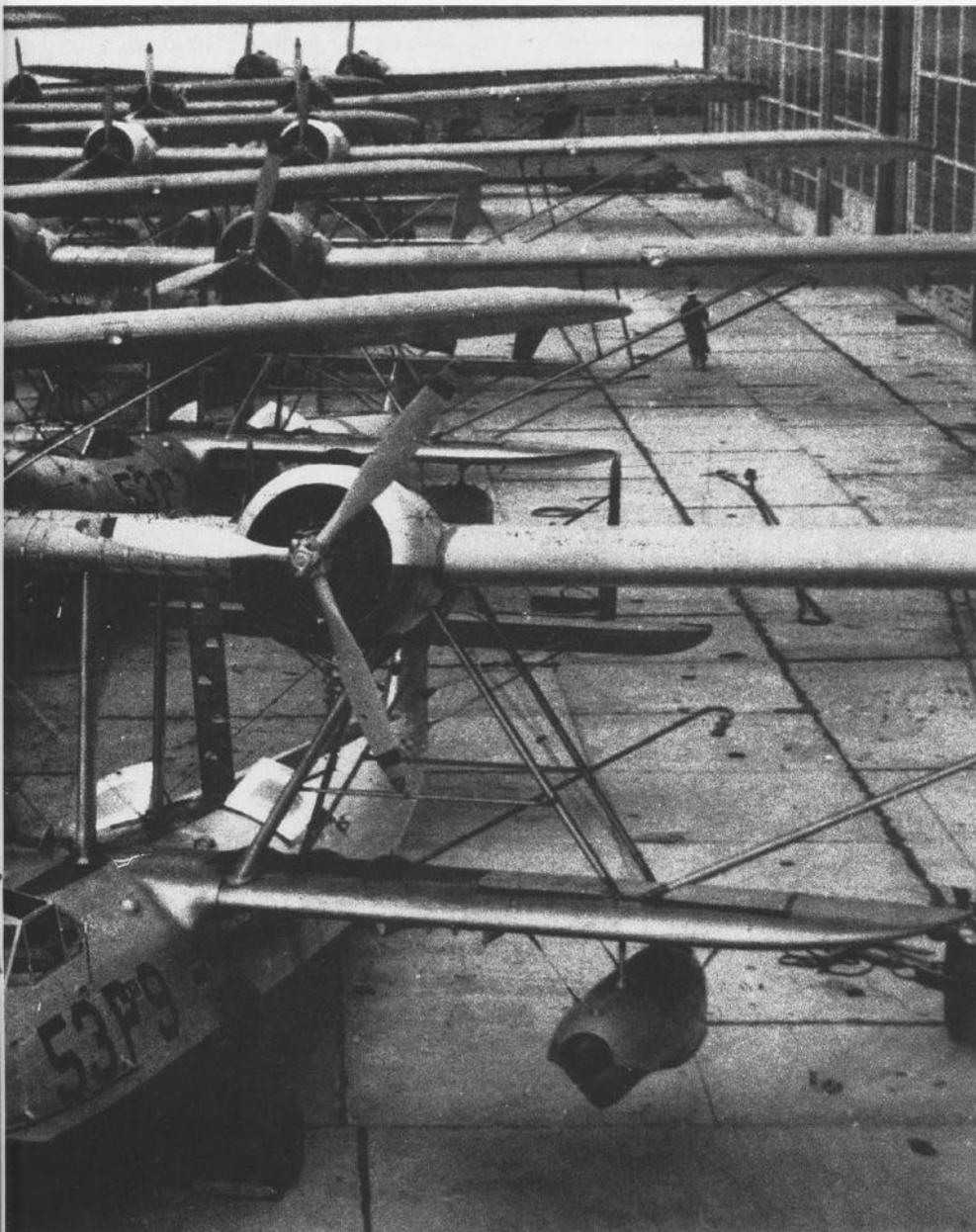
3, all planes departed for the return. For the remainder of the month, the squadron flew patrols and convoy escort and continued intensive crew training at Norfolk.

On April 8, 1941, VP-51 moved to NAS New York (Floyd Bennett Field). Neutrality Patrol activity was expanding, with convoy escort and ASW search in the northern offshore shipping lanes an increasing proportion of the aircraft effort. During April, VP-52 moved again, to NAS Quonset Point,

R.I., another new naval air station under construction. Although this was to be home port, preparations began immediately for the deployment of the squadron to Argentina, Newfoundland, to be based on the PatWing Support Force flagship, *Albemarle*. On May 24, VP-53 was ordered to move from Norfolk to Quonset Point. Construction of the base at Argentina, another of the destroyers-for-bases sites, had not yet begun. The deployment of VP-52 would be the first move toward implementing the mission of the Northern Patrol of the Support Force. The major North Atlantic shipping lanes would now be within range of the PBYs for convoy escort.

Albemarle arrived at Argentina on May 15, with VP-52's ground crew and squadron gear onboard. Preparations for aircraft operations were begun with a seaplane mooring area designated and buoys laid in the southwestern end of Placentia Harbor near the ship anchorage. This operating area was adjacent to the peninsula on which NAS Argentina would eventually be built.

After an attempt on May 18, aborted because of below-minimums weather in Argentina, all 12 VP-52 planes arrived on May 20. The weather was again marginal but, utilizing *Albemarle*'s radio beacon, all aircraft made instrument approaches and safe landings. The next day, the weather was excellent and all crews were scheduled for and flew area familiarization flights. This proved most fortunate because the weather was below minimums on the following two days and, on the 24th, the squadron was ordered to fly a major operation – one of the least-known events in pre-WW II Naval Aviation history. ■



Don't miss Part 2 in NANews, May-June 1990.

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.