

★ THIS IS the twelfth of a series of short sketches of squadrons in World War II. It is based on reports filed with Aviation History and Research in DCNO(Air).

# BLACK CATS VPB 52

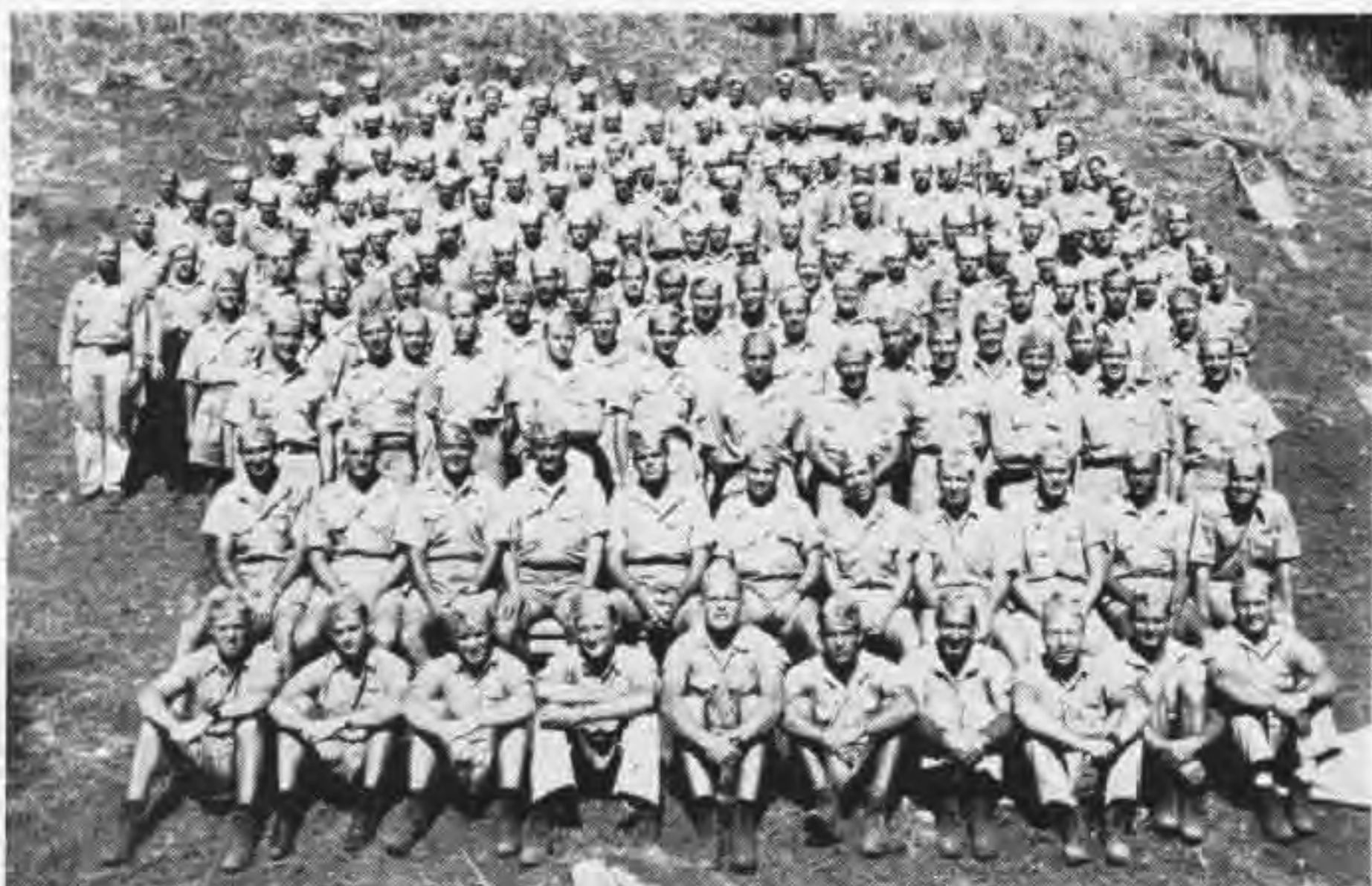
IN JUNE 1943 there arrived at NAS KANEHOE one of the oldest squadrons in the Fleet. VPB-52 commanded by Cdr. Frank M. Nichols. Its pilots were flying *Catalinas* which were old when the war began. But though the planes were old, clumsy and slow, the pilots were not. It took more than ordinary seamanship to man these flying tubs. It required skill and faith of a high order to make the *Catalinas* achieve feats which won for VPB-52 a Presidential Unit Citation.

Stationed at the Canal Zone and other Caribbean bases between 1940 and 1943, VPB-52 was first geared to battle and then went to war, patrolling the seas against enemy forces that might try to attack the Panama Canal.

When the squadron completed its Atlantic operations in the spring of 1943, its log was filled with the names of bases from which this country sent out its challenge to the enemy U-boats—Bermuda, Guantanamo Bay, San Juan and Natal. VPB-52 was a seasoned squadron ready to strike unremittingly the enemy in the southwest Pacific.



LUMBERING FIGHTER WAS SQUADRON'S INSIGNE



BLACK CATTERS AND CREWS DURING PERIOD WHICH WON VPB-52 PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION

Proceeding from Kanehoe in the summer of 1943, VPB-52 went to Perth where the squadron spent nine weeks. Five planes were kept at two bases to the north, so from Exmouth Gulf, Geraldton and Perth, daylight searches were made over the Indian Ocean with an occasional day or night convoy mission undertaken.

From 23 November to 31 December 1943, VPB-52, commanded by Lt. Cdr. Harold A. Sommer, operated from a base at Namoai Bay, New Guinea. It was in this period that their *Black Cat* operations, executed with force and daring, cost the enemy surface forces tons of shipping. Masthead bombing attacks made in the dead of night by VPB-52 pilots in their pitch black *Catalinas* were a vital factor in warfare against the Japanese in the Bismarck Sea area, then a focal point of the Pacific offensive.

Pioneers in low altitude glide bombing attacks at night, VPB-52 pilots had developed a technique that was certain, sure—and deadly. The pilot would approach his prey at about 1,000 feet, then glide or dive to masthead level and release the bombs in train. Usually the *Catalina* was loaded with two 500-lb. and two 1,000-lb. general purpose bombs, fused for a 4½-second delay. No bombsight was used, the pilot simply sighting by seaman's eye and releasing the bombs from the cockpit.

On the night of 24 November, Lt. William J. Lahodney made an attack on a cruiser escorted by three destroyers 70 miles north of Rabaul. Since a previous attack had alerted the force, Lt. Lahodney was challenged by intense AA fire from all the ships. Undeterred by this salute, Farragut's airborne successor glided to 150 feet before releasing his bombs, two of which hit the cruiser. Although his plane was badly

shot up, Lahodney made it safely back to base, winning for valor the Navy Cross. The *Black Cat* was really tough! As one pilot put it, "She can absorb lead like a migrating goose and wing on through flak."

Another accomplishment must be chalked up to Lahodney's credit. Just prior to these operations, he was instrumental in having four forward firing .50 cal. guns installed in the bow of his plane, an installation which was later used in other squadrons. Thus armed, *Cats* effectively strafed surface craft.

ON THE night of 30 November, Lt. William J. Pattison, a veteran of Atlantic patrols in the Bermuda area, spotted a large convoy just south of Kavieng apparently headed for Rabaul. Despite AA fire, Pattison decided to direct his aim at the largest ship, the one at the head of the column. It was a 15,000-ton tanker that succumbed to the two bombs Pattison directed at it. The ship was destroyed by the flames that immediately enveloped it. For this aggressive and effective attack, Lt. Pattison received the Silver Star.

On the night of 13 December, Lt. (jg) Rudolph Lloyd, found a light cruiser at anchor in the outer reaches of Kavieng Harbor. Although it was a clear night with a full moon, Lt. Lloyd pressed his attack to a low altitude, scoring hits on the target. AA fire hit his plane again and again, but did small damage to the *Catalina*. Another Navy Cross winner for VPB-52.

By the time VPB-52's tour of night offensive attacks had been completed, 31 December 1943, its attacks had resulted in damage to two cruisers, two submarines (assessed by the squadron as sunk), and three destroyers. In addition, 34,000 tons of merchant shipping were sunk, 10,000 tons probably



sunk and 32,000 tons damaged. In all, 137 missions were flown. Patrol coverage was also given for the bombardment by Seventh Fleet cruisers and destroyers of Gamata, New Britain, on 29 November. Coverage was provided for the invasion force at Arawe, the night of 14 December.

**I**N THE Presidential Unit Citation bestowed upon VPB-52 almost a year later, tribute is paid the squadron for its outstanding service in the Bismarck Sea area from September 15, 1943 to February 1, 1944: "Rendering pioneer service in changing the passive, defensive search into a bold and powerful offensive, Patrol Squadron FIFTY TWO has utilized the full potentialities of the PBY seaplane and its equipment, locating enemy task force units and striking dangerously by night in devastating masthead, glide-bombing attacks to insure vital hits on the target. Dauntless and aggressive in the fulfillment of each assignment, the gallant pilots of Squadron FIFTY-TWO conducted daring, lone patrols regardless of weather in a continuous coverage of this area, intercepting and attacking so effectively as to inflict substantial damage on hostile combat and other shipping, to deny the enemy the sea route between New Ireland and New Britain and thus prevent the reinforcing of important Japanese bases."

The first two months of 1944, VPB-52 was stationed at Port Moresby where it engaged in convoy and air-sea rescue missions. Then, after a period of rest, the squadron moved up to Seeadler Harbor in the Admiralties to conduct daylight searches to the north.

On March 28th, Lt. (jg) Robert D. Kunkle wished for a moment he were safely back home in Indiana. When he was on patrol 125 miles north of



COMMODORE COMBS PRESENTS DFC TO LAHODNEY

Manus, he spotted what he thought to be a friendly task force. As he approached to investigate, he was attacked by four F6F's. The Hellcats pumped 37 .50 caliber slugs into the Catalina before they recognized it as friendly. Although his aileron cables were severed, Kunkle brought the crippled Cat safely back to base. But Death had travelled near, escorted by Folly who laughed at IFF.

While based in the Admiralties, VPB-52 made six medium altitude bombing attacks against airfields at Woleai in the Carolines and two on air facilities at Wakde Island off New Guinea, all at night. Air-sea rescue missions were flown for strikes on Woleai, Truk and Yap Islands.

From May 15 to July 16, night operations, principally anti-shipping, were conducted from Humboldt Bay, Hollandia, over Vogelkop Peninsula and Geelvink Bay. During the tour, 53 night scouting missions were flown in cooperation with the Seventh Fleet to

support landings at Wakde, Biak and Noemfoor Islands.

From the middle of July to the end of the tour in December 1944, VPB-52 stationed at Biak, engaged in air-sea rescue missions which were hardly less exciting than *Black Catting*. To land the bulky *Catalina* in the open sea, sometimes within range of enemy shore bases, was no simple task, its hazard occasionally increased by rough seas.

One open sea landing, typical of 13 such rescues in which 33 downed airmen were saved, was spectacularly made off Rabaul 15 October 1944 by Lt. Richard Stell, an excellent *Black Catter*.

A Marine *Dauntless* had made a forced landing. The raft which carried the pilot and crewman was drifting shoreward despite the efforts of its frantic paddlers. There wasn't time for an American surface vessel to reach them. A *Cat* must get them out or they would be captured. Although the sea was rough and shore batteries were geysering the sea around the drifting raft, Lt. Stell elected to attempt rescue. The heavy load of gasoline—800 gallons—added to the hazard of landing under these conditions. Stell made a safe landing, picked up the survivors and took off. One shell landed close but did not hit.

On 6 December 1944 after 18 months in the Pacific, VPB-52, detached from the Seventh Fleet, turned home.

ComAirPac's farewell commendation was a merited salute: "Many Alohas from Hawaii. VPB-52 and her *Black Cats* have made a record that will long stand in the forward combat areas. ComAirPac takes pride in extending congratulations on behalf of Air Force, Pacific Fleet. May you enjoy your well earned leave half as much as the slant eyed Nips will your absence from the combat zone. Well Done."



STELL (FRONT, CENTER) AND CREW MADE DARING RESCUE IN THEIR 'CAT.'



LT. KUNKLE'S CREW ESCAPED HELLCAT BULLETS IN NEAR TRAGIC MIX-UP



# NAVAL AIRCRAFT

# Cat

Known variously as *Catalina*, *Canso* and *Nomad*, the PBY was one of the U.S. Navy's most useful aircraft during WW II, with more produced than any other flying boat before or since. The first prototype of this long-lived seaplane, originally designated XP3Y-1, was ordered in 1933 and flew two years later. The *Catalina* featured a cantilevered parasol-mounted wing with retractable floats which became the wing tips in flight. The prototype established a new world seaplane distance record in 1935, flying from Norfolk to Coco Solo. The 825-hp engines of the XP3Y were replaced by 900-hp models in the PBY-1's ordered in 1935 with first deliveries to VP-11F in 1936.

PBY-2's and -3's were ordered that same year and -4's in 1937. The last three copies of the PBY-4 came equipped with the now familiar waist-gunner blisters that were to mark all future versions. By mid-1938, 14 squadrons were flying PBY's. As WW II spread across Europe and then Asia, there were increased demands for a dependable long-range seaplane. Britain ordered PBY's for use in the RAF Coastal Command and named them *Catalinas*. The name stuck and was adopted in the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The Free French, Dutch and Russians all procured PBY's. The USSR had first shown an interest in 1937 when it obtained civilian models for mail-cargo service and was licensed to build its own GST version.

In December 1939, the Navy ordered 200 PBY-5's mainly to bolster the Neutrality Patrol. First deliveries were made in September 1940. By the time the U.S. entered WW II, most VP units had -5's. The -5A amphibious version made its appearance in late 1939 and displayed much greater utility with little decline in performance. The *Catalina* saw its first wartime action in the English Channel with the RAF and soon achieved fame by locating the *Bismarck*.

In U.S. service, the PBY filled a variety of roles from ASW and reconnaissance to search and rescue. The Army Air Corps and Coast Guard also employed PBY's in various ways.

Canadian-built PB2B and PBV-1A versions, nicknamed *Cansos* in RCAF service, were produced in large numbers and the Naval Aircraft Factory also went into production with a PBN-1 *Nomad*.

Approximately 3,300 PBY types were produced during the war for the various services and Allies. At their peak employment, PBY's equipped 29 U.S. patrol squadrons. This number dropped rapidly toward war's end as more modern seaplanes and land-based patrol aircraft replaced them. But the *Catalina* survived and for several years was a familiar SAR plane at naval air stations around the country.





# olina



## Length

PBY-1/2	63'6"
PBY-5/5A	63'10"
PBY-6A	62'11"
PBN-1	64'8"

## Height

PBY-1 thru 5	18'6"
PBY-5A	20'2"
PBN-1	21'3"
PBY-6A	22'4"

## Wing span

PBY-1 thru 5	104'0"
PBN-1	104'3"

## Engine/horsepower

PBY-1/2	R-1830-64	900 hp
PBY-3	R-1830-66	1,000 hp
PBY-4	R-1830-72	1,050 hp
PBY-5/5A/6A, PBN-1	R-1830-92	1,200 hp

## Maximum speed

PBY-1	175 mph
PBY-5	189 mph
PBY-5A	180 mph
PBN-1	186 mph

## Range

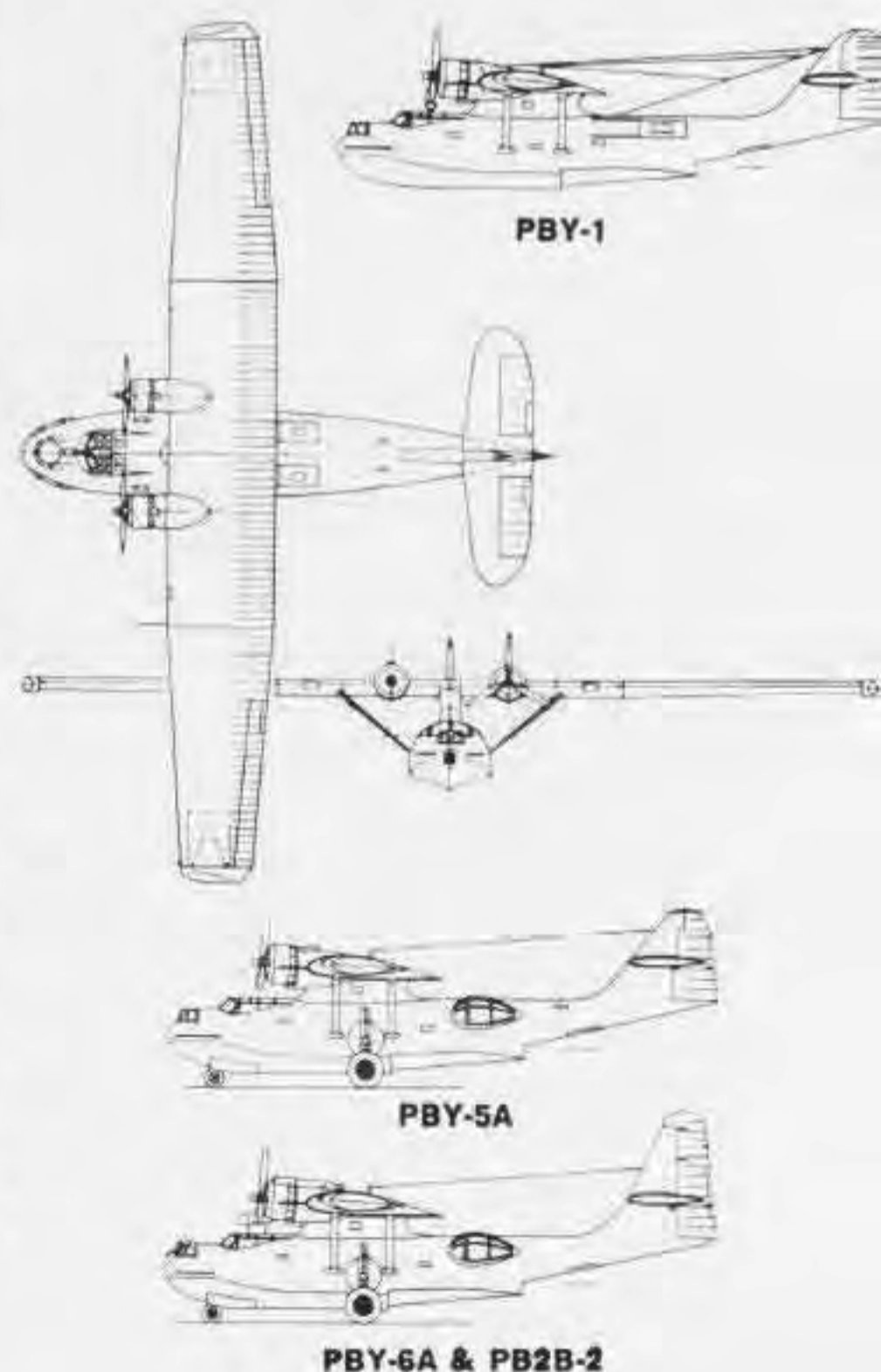
PBY-1	1,375 nm.
PBY-2	2,110 nm.
PBY-5	2,990 nm.
PBY-5A	2,350 nm.
PBN-1	2,590 nm.

## Crew

8 or 9 in wartime

## Armament

Up to 4,000 lbs. of bombs and/or depth charges on 4 wing stations and a mix of 4 or 5 .30 cal and .50 cal machine guns.





# *Beer Bottles,*



*Above, Black Cat crews relaxed during days, saved empties to drop on enemy at night. Opposite page: at top is a VP-52 flight (note peeling paint which covered national insignia); below, Cats crouch in high seas at Morotai Harbor. They teamed with PT boats on night forays.*





# Bombs and Battles



By Clarke Van Vleet  
DCNO (Air Warfare) Historian

**A** search of the files of various WW II documentary and photo archives to produce this capsule review was generated by the increasing number of requests for information on the famous, but little narrated, Black Cats of WW II. Foremost among those interested is Captain William Scarborough, USN (Ret.), an ex-Catalina pilot of WW II and now Grumman Spacecraft Safety Program Director, whose free-lance research (NANews, January 1972, p. 40) and articles on aircraft for the American Aviation Historical Journal have contributed greatly to the posterity of Naval Aviation. The Nimitz Museum in Texas has been another seeking Black Cat information and insignia. Research by Op-05D2 through the labyrinth of WW II insignia documentation filed at GSA's National Records Center in Suitland, Md., a 12-hour "search-and-seize mission" at the National Archives' photo branch, and a fincombing of the 500 cubic feet of files held by 05D2 laid the foundation for this short piece, which really does not even begin to "scratch" the total exploits of the unsung Black Cats. However, we hope it satisfies some of the mounting curiosity, because like so many, we, too, dig them Cats!



**D**uring WW II when the U.S. and Japan were struggling for control of the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific, the Japanese used the cover of night to reinforce and supply their garrisons throughout the island chain. Barge and small boat traffic by night posed a problem for the U.S. forces until the advent of airborne radar made it possible to intercept the nocturnal shipping.

For this type operation, the PBY *Catalina* proved to be particularly well suited. During the day, the plane was quite vulnerable to enemy fighter and AA attack. (There was more truth than fiction in the story of the PBY pilot who radioed: "Sighted enemy carrier. Please notify next of kin.") But at night its slow cruising speed of 100 mph became an asset. Masked by night, the PBY could safely prowl in search of the Japanese.

The first *Catalinas* equipped for night operations arrived at Guadalcanal in December 1942. They were painted flat black, paint #AM604 (presently #37038). They had been christened *Black Cats* by Commander C. E. Coe, who was on the staff of ComAirSoPac. Designated PBY-5A's,

they were amphibious with retractable tricycle undercarriages. They were powered by two 1,200-hp Pratt & Whitney twin *Wasp* engines and had a wing span of 104 feet and a wing area of 1,400 feet. They weighed over 20,000 pounds empty and could carry approximately 15,000 pounds. Armament consisted of .30 calibers in the nose, .50's in the two blisters, and a .30 in the tunnel hatch. Each carried a ton of bombs, numerous fragmentation bombs, many illuminating flares and some reported, "a generous supply of empty beer bottles" (more of that anon).

The first squadron to arrive in the Solomons with the nocturnal feline was Patrol Squadron Twelve (VP-12). On November 19, 1942, the squadron began deploying from Kaneohe to Nandi, Fiji Islands, and from there forward to Espiritu Santo from where a one-plane detachment was sent to Guadalcanal on December 15. The original *Black Catter*, Commander Clarence Taff, was in charge. Six days later, four more *Cats* arrived and in March 1943 he got the sixth. In that three-and-a-half-month period, VP-12 pioneered 236 missions or flights, total-

ing 1,660 hours, the majority by night. Two planes were lost through operations, one hitting the water during a night torpedo run, the other during a night forced landing at sea. No planes were lost in combat and there were no personnel losses.

WW II Naval Historian Rear Admiral Samuel Morison recounts that "takeoff time was generally scheduled for 2230, which was also the hour for *Washing Machine Charlie* to appear.



As twilight fades to dusk, above, VP-34 *Black Cat* crew heads for plane they dubbed *Fly-by-Night* to prep for a night prowl. Right, *Cats'* "den" at Pacific base in 1943. One has yet to get its black coat; another creeps toward the sea; hull of third may have been cannibalized.





Pilots and crews would tumble into foxholes when enemy bombs were dropped, man their planes between those bombing runs, take off over the coconut palms, blinded by bright field lights, and be well out over the water before acquiring night vision. Once safely airborne, the principal antagonist became weather. Flying in a turbulent weather front all night was only routine; thunderheads butted the *Cats* mercilessly and often the ghostly fires

of Saint Elmo danced up and down the wings and fuselage. Only radar saved the planes from becoming lost in the sightless void. Then came breathless moments over the target, a fast glide to drop a torpedo or a stick of bombs on a Japanese ship, or a run over a hostile airfield.

"In late December, the *Cats* began to spot for night surface bombardments. These missions were highly successful, not only for making gunfire

more accurate but for good feeling between airmen and bluejackets. Previously there had been occasions when *Cats* gave destroyer crews the jitters by their close-to inspections, and sometimes the destroyers, unable to identify their inquisitors, opened up with anti-aircraft shells. Now they started working together as a team.

"*Cats* played Santa to the Japanese at Buin on Christmas Eve [1942] with a sockful of torpedoes. The holiday





spirit was carried over to New Year's Eve when Lt. Norman Pederson, USNR, over Munda, sounded his plane's crew-warning horn exactly at midnight and released a bomb, a flare and two dozen empty beer bottles."

Another report notes that, though never consumed on missions, beer served a double purpose: a pleasant interlude after tiring all-night missions, and the empty bottles dropped over Japanese encampments gave out a weird banshee-like screech to harass an enemy already overtired.

VP-12 was relieved on Guadalcanal by VP-54 in March 1943. Emulating Cdr. Taff's original *Black Cats*, this squadron spent many a night dropping bombs on Munda and Vila in the softening-up process of those Japanese airstrips. During its tour, 52 crewmen and seamen from other units were rescued, including 27 pilots. One night, C.O. Commander Carl Schoenweiss and Lt. Erhard rescued one *Corsair* and eight *Dauntless* pilots off Rennell Island.

Relieving VP-54 in December 1943, VP-81 later moved to Munda and then on to Bougainville where it based until August 1944. Meanwhile, as the U.S. moved up the island chain toward Japan, Fleet Air Wing 17 was organized in September 1943 to operate in the New Guinea area. Its initial squadrons — VP's 11, 52 and 101 — refined and further developed the night techniques of the first *Black Cats*.

By the end of 1943, operational techniques were generally well established. An average of 3.2 planes took off on missions nightly, each with a standard load of 1,450 gallons of fuel, two 1,000-lb. and two 500-lb. general purpose bombs, each with a Mark 113 tail fuse set for four to five-second delay and a Mark 103 nose fuse set for a delay of 1/10 second. The plane was stripped of tunnel gun and tail armor. The takeoff, without seas or wind, averaged from 1½ to 2 minutes.

Pilots were never told that they must attack from low altitudes, although such attacks could be made in comparative safety. Generally, the visibility, even on bright moonlight nights, did not preclude the low attacks. It was vital, however, that the approach at such times be up-moon. One highly successful *Black Cat* pilot regarded the up-moon attack far safer than attacks on dark nights. It was regarded as extremely dangerous to execute an



attack when the moon was overhead.

The approach on target consisted of a glide from 1,000 feet or more at altitude down to between 75 and 500 feet at the dropping point. Bombs were normally released by intervalometers spaced at 60 to 75 feet. Bombsights were not generally used. The intervalometer spaced at 200 feet of altitude virtually guaranteed one or more hits as long as the run was roughly across the center of a ship and from broad on the bow, on the quarter or stern.

The enemy had difficulty seeing the *Black Cats* soon enough, during the approach, to aim and commence firing prior to the drop. Normally he withheld his fire until the plane could be sighted visually, presumably to avoid blinding his own gunners with the flashes. The silence of the *Cat's* glide deceived the Japanese until the last moment. Moreover, four to six flares were frequently dropped to cover the getaway during the four to five seconds of delay in bomb fuse action in the low glide attacks.

During November and December 1943, VP-52, headed by Commander Harold Sommer, operated from a base at Namoi Bay, New Guinea. Masthead bombing in the dead of night was a vital factor against Japanese shipping in the Bismarck Sea. On the night of November 24, Lt. William Lahodney glided to 150 feet before releasing bombs on an enemy cruiser near Rabaul. He received the Navy Cross for that action. Lahodney was also in-

strumental in having four forward-firing .50 caliber guns fixed in the bow of his plane, an installation which was later used in other squadrons.

By New Year's Eve 1943, after two and a half months in the Guinea area, VP-52 night attacks had damaged two cruisers, two subs and three destroyers and had sunk 10,000 tons of merchant shipping with another 24,000 tons damaged.

In addition to scratch by night, special missions were a part of the *Black Cats'* trade. For example, VP-11 relieved VP-101 under direct control of the Fifth U.S. Army Bomber Command at Port Moresby. It flew 24 missions deep into central New Guinea on the Sepik River behind enemy lines to supply advanced Allied scouting patrols and to evacuate over 200 Australians when enemy pressure made their position untenable during December 1943. VP-52 took over in January, racking up 94 hours of night food-dropping missions to coastwatchers and castaways, 138 hours on night convoy coverage and 162 on transport, survey and other special missions.

Although there were other squadrons that were considered *Black Cats*, these six were the originals that refined and extended the night techniques, with VP-12 the pioneer. Of the six, three were Presidential Unit Citation winners — VP's 11, 12 and 52. The term *Black Cat* was becoming so popular and proliferated that Admiral Fitch issued the following:





Sniffing out enemy, Black Cats of VP-81 brief at Bougainville, far left. With his .50 cal on the ready, a gunner in plane's blister searches the sky for the enemy, left.

COMMANDER AIRCRAFT, SOUTH PACIFIC FORCE  
PACIFIC FLEET

April 10, 1943.

From: Commander Aircraft, South Pacific Force.  
To : Commander, Patrol Squadron TWELVE.  
Subject: Original Black Cat Squadron.

1. This is to certify for the edification of posterity that the squadron which initially developed and conducted the highly effective night tactics peculiar to "Black Cats" is Patrol Squadron TWELVE. The name "Black Cat" was originated by this command about December 14, 1942, as a term descriptive of the aircraft of Patrol Squadron TWELVE which were specially prepared for these operations.

2. While many other squadrons will follow in the footsteps of Patrol Squadron TWELVE and be known as "Black Cats", the honor of being the original Black Cat Squadron definitely belongs to Patrol Squadron TWELVE.

AUBREY W. FITCH.

Very few *Black Cat* squadrons adopted feline-type insignia; most retained their original emblems although they were not always displayed on the aircraft. VP-12 and VP-52, for example, retained the famous *Argus* and *Lumbering Elephant* emblems, respectively. However, much as fighter units stenciled "kills" on their planes and bombers chalked on miniature bombs for their missions, some *Black Cat* crews painted a basic feline symbol on their planes to represent their first mission. The symbol was later embellished with eyes for the second mission, teeth or whiskers for the third, and on to "anatomical insignia of a more personal nature" for succeeding missions. Practiced more widely was the naming of planes by their crews. Such names as *Black Mac*, *Night Raider*, *Alley Cat One Time*, *We Get Ours By Night*, *Pugnacious Puss* were often painted on the aircraft. So were the famous *Black Cats*.

Osborn





# BLACK CATS



VP-101



VP-11



VP-12



VP-12



VP-81



VP-33



VP-71



VP-52



VP-44



VP-34

## SQUADRON INSIGNIA