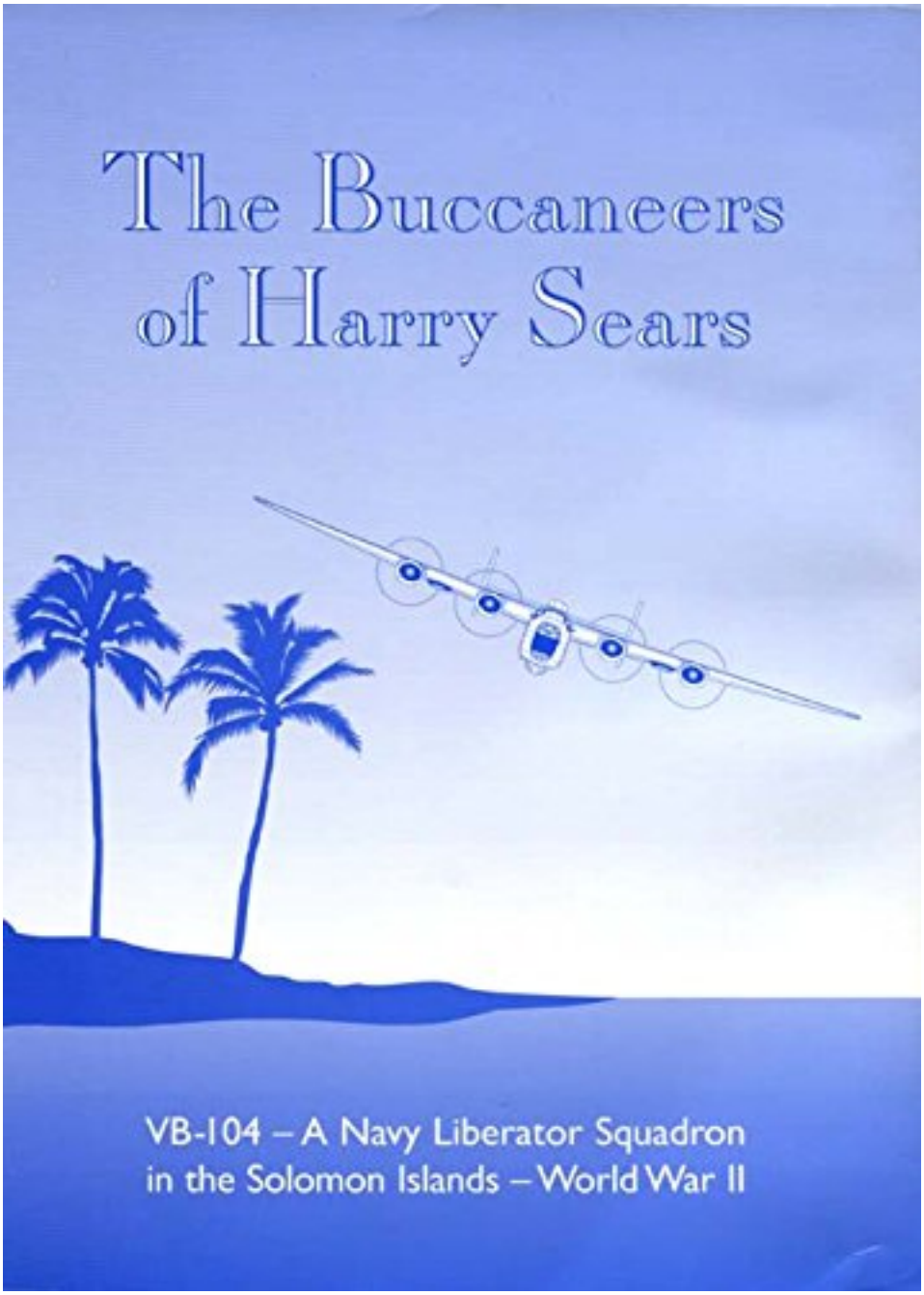
The Buccaneers of Harry Sears



VB-104 – A Navy Liberator Squadron
in the Solomon Islands – World War II

The Buccaneers of Harry Sears

The History of Navy Bombing Squadron 104

World War II, April 1943 to April 1944

Solomon Islands

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The Bucaneers of Harry Sears
First Edition

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Dedication

"Pete" Luedeka

"Leading chief" of VP-51, VP-71 and VB-104 provided excellent supervision over squadron enlisted personnel. He was not too strict nor too lenient. He knew where everyone was and what they were supposed to be doing. He knew the Navy and the navy way. He might tell you what you did wrong but not necessarily how to do it right – this you had to learn. Some said he never slept. He always had a cigarette in his hand or mouth – a chain smoker. I believe he made three squadrons the "Best the Navy had." I served with him in all three squadrons – from November 1940 to June 1944.

Charlie Ehemann ex ACRM USN

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Preface

This book is for a very special group. We have written it for ourselves, the surviving members of VB-104 who fought our part of World War II in the South Pacific. With this book, we can recall and savor our memories of a job well done under an inspirational and skillful leader, Harry E. Sears. Rekindled memories are readily shared with shipmates and passed on to family and friends.

Our book is divided into two parts. **Part 1** begins with 7 December 1941 and deals with the people, organizations, and events that led to the formation of VB-104. It traces the course of a Navy P-boat squadron, VP-71, from the Atlantic to Hawaii and the South Pacific, covering the squadron's role in the Battle of the Coral Sea and deployments along the Hawaiian Sea Frontier at Canton, Johnston, and Midway Islands. Part 1 also traces the early war days of a very special Naval Aviator, Harry E. Sears, to Kaneohe and his rendezvous with VP-71. At Kaneohe, the muscle of VP-71 and the spirit and leadership of Harry Sears were melded to make VB-104. Part 1 continues with the transition of VB-104 from PBY flying boats to PB4Y-1 bombers. Flight logs and recollections of pilots and aircrewmen are the source documents for Part 1.

Part 2 begins with the deployment of VB-104 to the Solomon Islands and continues through the seven months of combat there. It closes with accounts of the relief from combat and the squadron's return to Hawaii and San Diego. An accounting of the enemy destroyed or damaged appears in an appendix. Part 2 is a synthesis, in diary form, of information from VB-104's original documents, War Diaries and Aircraft Action Reports, as well as pilots' and aircrewmens' flight logs and sea stories.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The War Around Us. It is a curious byproduct of the secrecy of war that the people doing the fighting are held ignorant of the larger picture of the operation and the part their fighting plays. While VP-71 and VB-104 were fighting in the Pacific, pilots and aircrewmen had no idea how their actions fit into the campaign

against the Japanese. We often did not know what our other crews were doing and rarely knew about the operation of other Navy aircraft squadrons and surface forces, to say nothing of our Marines and Army. We correct that here by adding to the descriptions of our actions something about the activities that were going on around us, but unknown to us at the time. Thus, an objective of this book is to explain and understand our actions in the larger picture of the operations in the South Pacific. To accomplish this, I have prepared charts (maps to you landlubbers) to help recall far away places visited long ago and to place our actions in a clearer geographic setting. I have judged it appropriate to use the place names as we used them at the time, ignoring the new names of the political units that have emerged since the close of World War II.

However, more important than the geography are the events of the campaigns in the South Pacific. To learn what was going on around us, I have consulted many books dealing with the early war days in the South Pacific. Most useful were three volumes of *History of United States Naval Operation in World War II* by Samuel Eliot Morison. *Volume IV, May 1941 - August 1942* covers the Battle of the Coral Sea; *Volume VI, 22 July 1042 - 1 May 1944* deals with the drive up the line of the Solomons, and *Volume VII June 1942 - April 1944* describes the conquest of the Gilbert and the Marshall Islands—the advance of the Central Pacific forces across the end of our sectors. (See References for complete citations.) These three volumes contain information dealing directly and indirectly with the times and places of VB-104's operations. I have added information from these books to our narrative to place VB-104's daily activities into a broader context.

War Diaries and Aircraft Action Reports. The primary source documents for the actions of Navy Air Squadrons were Aircraft Action Reports (ACA Reports or AARs) and monthly War Diaries. The squadron Aircraft Intelligence Officer wrote these reports on the spot, had them signed by the Commanding Officer, and then passed them up the chain of command. Copies of these reports finally came to rest in the Operational Archives, Naval Historical Center, Washington Naval Yard, Washington, D.C. Unfortunately we do not have ACA Reports and War Diaries from VP-71, indeed such documents are rare for the early days of the war.

Fortunately, VB-104 prepared both War Diaries and ACA Reports. Gathering these original documents fifty years after they were written was no small task. Admiral and Mrs. Sears visited the Naval Historical Center, located the 44 VB-104 Aircraft Action Reports and monthly War Diaries (except for August and September 1943 when no VB-104 War Diaries were prepared), and arranged to have *microfiche* of them sent to me. Prints from the *microfiche* proved very difficult to read so the first job was to retype them to give clear copies that would yield good photocopies. Charlie Ehemann retyped a few of the ACA Reports. He

also sold bound copies of complete sets to thirty or forty shipmates who were curious about our combat reports from the Solomons.

After each combat flight, the ACI Officer interviewed the PPC and occasionally others. If the PPC had seen nothing of interest, there was no report. If, however, some minor skirmish had occurred, it was noted and included in the War Diary. If the ACI Officer thought the action was important, lots of shooting and bombing with damage to the enemy, he wrote an ACA Report. The report, giving detailed account of the operation, was sent up the chain of command. Pilots and aircrewmen did not review what Ming wrote. Most pilots that I have talked to never saw an ACA Report until nearly 50 years after they were written. VB-104's first ACA Reports (August through December 1943) were written on squadron letterhead. In January 1944, the squadron began using an official Navy form "Form ACA-1." The title of this form was "AIRCRAFT ACTION REPORT" and the blank form itself was classified "RESTRICTED (Reclassify when filled out)." Completed forms were routinely classified "CONFIDENTIAL." [Note: AC or A/C was the standard abbreviation for "aircraft."]

We have incomplete sets of the ACA Reports and War Diaries of our sister squadrons, VB-102 and VB-106. Their independent reports of joint operations have been very useful.

Individual Flight Logs. Each naval aviator and aircrewman was required to record all of his flights in the official Navy little brown book "N. AER. 4111 AVIATORS FLIGHT LOG BOOK," provided free of charge. Many pilots and aircrewmen have carefully preserved their logs and many have answered our request for copies of the portions of their logs pertaining to flights in VP-71 and VB-104. The detailed information in these logs has made it possible to bring together information not included in War Diaries and ACA Reports. Indeed, most of what we know about the early war days of VP-71 comes from the individual flight logs of Wright, Montgomery, Isner, Austin, Jim Smith, Niehaus, Rolland, Stafford, Shepherd, Humphrey, Donald, and others.

Individual flight logs have been very valuable, but unfortunately, someone told pilots and aircrewmen of VB-104 not to enter detailed remarks in their logs. Fortunately, the skipper, Whit Wright, Jeff Hemphill, Ed Hagen, and a few others ignored these instructions and produced logs rich in information. A great tragedy destroyed the logs of our aircrewmen. Near the end of our tour in the Solomons, someone gave them new log books and told them to copy into them only the bare data for each of their flights, ("Date, Type of Machine, Bu. No. of Machine, Duration of Flight"), eliminating all comments, notes, and remarks. Their original logs were confiscated. It is difficult to imagine someone's mind so distorted as to think that a few cherished personal notes by an aircrewman would be detrimental to our Navy or aid to our enemy. Our aircrewmen gave so much

of their lives to the squadron and the war effort that they surely deserved to keep their personal notes.

Copies of 33 logs representing 15 of VB-104's 19 combat crews have been available.

Combat Crew	Flight Logs of:
Sears	Sears
Smith	Smith
Wright	Wright, First Pilot Dempster, Top Gunner Sottolano
Montgomery	Monty, First Pilot Keiser, Co-pilot Jones, Navigator Sparenberg, Top Gunner Bomar
Alley	First Pilot Dodson, Belly Gunner Gordon, Bow Gunner Lymenstull
Feind	First Pilot Burton, Co-pilot Custer, Waist Gunner Parham, Co-pilot/Bombardier Weller 1 page, Sept '43 only
Stoppleman	First Pilots Hagen (through 1 Dec '43) and Hemphill
Donald	Donald, Co-pilot Bauer, Plane Captain Rolland
Clagett	First Pilot H. J. Thompson
Devorachek	NONE
Van Benschoten	Co-pilot Bittenbender, Plane Captain Ostwalt
Humphry	Humphrey, Co-pilot Lodato
Hager	Bow Gunner Hodge
Swinton	Swinton, Co-pilot Finley
Searls	First Pilot DeGolia
Anderson	NONE
Honey	NONE
Reichert	First Pilot Lyle
Essen	First Pilot Hagen (New crew formed 1 Dec '43.)

We also have the flight log of G. A Miller, PPC in VB-102, that has helped us to understand some of our joint operations with that squadron.

Sailor's Yarns and Sea Stories. Some of the most valuable entries in this book are the stories from individual squadron members. Many of these cover specific events in detail and have been inserted in the text as quotes. Others have been used to personalize, substantiate, clarify, and/or amplify actions described in our ACA Reports and War Diaries. Some written accounts submitted are very general musings, generated by a mind wandering through the memories remaining after 50 years. Many of these bits have been used here and there and have enriched the text.

Charlie Ehemann and I have had many discussions with pilots and crewmen by telephone and at recent reunions. These have provided useful ideas and

valuable information.

Photographs. We have been unsuccessful in getting any combat photographs from the Operational Archives. The *microfiche* obtained by Admiral Sears show that photographs were included in our original ACA Reports, but *microfiche* negatives of these photos are not suitable for making prints for publication. Fortunately, our Tour Book from First 104, prepared in 1944 by Howard Gossage, includes excellent reproductions of our best combat photos as well as pictures of our flight crews and our camps at Guadalcanal, Munda, and San Diego.

A Special Note. Much of the source material from squadron members was obtained through the persistence and charm of Charlie Ehemann.

Conventions and Style. We used rank of the moment. For example, LtCdr Sears formed the squadron but Cdr Sears led us home to the States. Most of the first pilots and co-pilots joined 104 as ensigns but left the squadron as lieutenants junior grade. Scond class petty officers became first class. Nearly everyone moved up a rate or rank.

Acknowledgments

Most of the hale and hardy of VB-104 helped, at least by sending copies of their logs or answering our questions. A few made special contributions and deserve special mention.

Vice Admiral and Mrs. Sears answered my nagging questions and when they did not hear from me, they telephoned to spur me on and answer important questions that I had not thought to ask. Helen Sears sent a treasure trove of published articles, photographs, and unpublished manuscripts that the skipper had accumulated over the years. Rear Admiral James Smith returned the special bit of manuscript that presented difficult questions with flag promptness and thoroughness.

John Alley, Tom Dodson, Lyme Lymenstull, and H B Tillman provided plenty of information about the "Alley Gang." Herb Donald, Leo Bauer, "Roho" Rolland, and Bill Sams flew, reminisced, and reported together. Their "Donald Crew Stories" stand out in Part 2. The reader will soon learn to enjoy and anticipate stories of the Feind Crew from John Burton and Charlie Vey. Lody Lodato reported from the Humphrey Crew and Larry Shepherd recalled some tales of VP-71 in the battle of the Coral Sea. John Alley, Herb Donald, and Jim

Smith read early drafts of several chapters.

Dru Stainback and "Yousie" Yuzapavich, because of their positions of prominence as radiomen in the skipper's crew, were able to write interesting and important stories.

Bob Swinton has written the story of his life and kindly sent in a copy of a fine chapter dealing with his days in VP-71 and VB-104. Jimmy Mathews has written a very readable account of his time in VB/VPB-104 (both tours).

When our chapters approached final form, Charlie and I sent them out for review, asking for comments, additions, and corrections. They were worked on and promptly returned as follows: Ray Karls and Ed Hurlburt Chapters 7 & 8; John Alley Chapter 9; Sloan Bomar Chapter 10; Herb Donald Chapters 10 & 14; Jack Bartell, Chapters 11 & 12; Jim Smith Chapters 12 & 13; and Jess Kennedy, Chapters 13, 14 & 15.

Early in our requests for information from pilots and aircrewmen, we realized that we would be getting only a few log books. I decided to see if some of the widows had by chance kept these records. I called Ginger Hemphill, chatted briefly, then asked if she still had Jeff's log from his days as a naval aviator. Ginger responded with a firm, "You bet I do!" A photocopy of the VB-104 portion of Jeff's log arrived in two days. Similar responses were made by Louise Keiser, Louise Niehaus, Mary Sparenberg, and Finley's daughter, Ruth Ann.

Shirley Gordon, perhaps volunteered by Flash, has used her valuable professional expertise to proof read and copy edited all of Part 1. A. M. Lodato read and corrected the first compilation of Part 2.

This book is far richer with the contributions mentioned above. But, of course, Joyce, with skill, grace, and love, did more than anyone can imagine.

With all of this help, errors of substance have been minimized, perhaps eliminated. All errors that remain are mine.

Introduction

While World War II was confined to Europe and North Africa, our Navy's patrol squadrons were flying Neutrality patrols in the Atlantic. Their planes, PBY Catalinas, were reliable and rugged seaplanes that did not require landing fields or elaborate bases. They could operate from the bays and lagoons of the islands and shores of the world's oceans, serviced by special Navy ships. Although PBY's armor and armament were World War I vintage, in a Navy dominated by battleships, these venerable seaplanes seemed more than adequate.

PBYs were functioning well in the Atlantic, protecting convoys from the German U-boats that were trying to stop the flow of materials from the US to Britain. In addition, PBYs could land and take off from rough seas, and thus were a very serviceable plane for rescue at sea. They also could fly long range search, droning on endlessly over miles and miles of ocean, flying out 600 or 800 miles from their bases to find and report enemy forces. But who needed long range patrols? In a battleship navy, the crucial naval engagement would involve surface forces, ultimately battleship against battleship, slugging it out with guns that ranged over 20 miles, not 600 miles.

It was no secret that PBYs were slow, lacked firepower, and were sitting ducks for enemy fighters–Cold Turkey Patrol. But they were doing all that was expected of them.

On 7 December 1941, the Japanese changed the way we played the game. Japanese naval aircraft, bombers, torpedo planes, and fighters, arrived UNANNOUNCED over Oahu in the Hawaiian islands. Everyone soon learned that the Japanese planes had knocked out our battleships but, luckily for us, our carriers were at sea and escaped. Much less publicized, was the destruction of our PBYs by the Japanese carrier planes. Thus, in one attack, the Japanese, (1) demonstrated the power of carrier attacks, (2) eliminated our battleships, forcing us into a carrier war, (3) showed us, as they attacked undetected, that our search planes were ineffective, and (4) eliminated our PBYs and our ability to conduct

searches. The Japanese had eliminated our battleships and we never even saw one of their ships!

But would early warning have helped us at Pearl Harbor? Not necessarily. Even with over eight hours warning, MacArthur's planes at Clark Field in the Philippines were on the ground, parked in neat rows, perfect targets for Japanese high altitude bombers.

Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, our searches were improved to a limited extent by equipment and tactics. For example, self-sealing fuel tanks and armor improved the PBY's survival against enemy fighters, and new night tactics as "Black Cats," allowed PBYs to hit targets that would have been impossible to approach in broad daylight. However, improved tactics and equipment could do just so much for the PBY. Although this venerable plane served well through the entire war, the Navy recognized that it needed (1) new attention to long range patrols and the early warning that they provided, and (2) new squadrons with a new patrol plane to lead the way across the Pacific. The new plane would need longer range and the ability to stand up to enemy fighters. It would not replace PBYs, but would provide a new level of patrol and attack.

After a year of depending on PBYs in the Pacific, the Navy formed three long-range parol bombing squadrons using large 4-engined B-24 Liberators inveigled from the Army Air Corps. These Navy Liberator squadrons, VB-101, VB-102, and VB-104, were a new breed, operating from strange new places, flying their land-based aircraft from coral and Marston matting runways. These new units of Navy patrol-bombing had moved ashore and joined the "Coconut Navy." At home among PT boat squadrons, Seabee outfits, and Marines, these squadrons would develop experienced and successful naval aviators and aircrewmen who had never served aboard a Navy ship.

Navy Patrol Bombing Squadron 104 was one of those special squadrons that come along just once in a while, even in a long, popular war. The squadron made two very successful combat tours to the Pacific in the war against Japan. It was the only patrol bombing squadron to receive two Presidential Unit Citations, one for the deployment to the Solomon Islands and another for the deployment to the Philippine Islands. The first squadron, VB-104 Buccaneers, was led by Harry E. Sears. He built on the operations of the two earlier squadrons, VB-101 and VB-102, but raising his patrol-bombing squadron to a new level—patrolling and attacking with unprecedented aggression. The second squadron, VPB-104 Screamers, was led by Whitney Wright. Whit had been operations officer under Sears on the first squadron, so it is understandable that the second squadron started at very high level of operations and got even better.

It was the brave and able men that came from VP-71, Navy Liberators, and the magic of a special skipper, Harry E. Sears, that set VB-104 on its course.

PART 1

VP-71 and Harry Sears, the Origin of VB-104

December 1941 to August 1943

Chapter 1 Navy Patrol Squadron 71

The Early War Months Northwest Atlantic, Central & South Pacific (7 December 1941 to 11 January 1943)

VP-71 was a seasoned patrol squadron of the Atlantic Fleet flying "neutrality patrols" in PBY-5 Catalina seaplanes from the bays along the shore of the northwestern Atlantic Ocean. The squadron, operating with a sister squadron, VP-72, had been "at war" with German U-boats and the foul north Atlantic weather.[1]

On December 7, 1941, VP-71 was based at Naval Air Station (NAS) Quonset Point, Rhode Island, with flight crews operating from advanced bases to cover the shipping lanes of the North Atlantic. Most of the squadron's patrols went out of Argentia, Newfoundland, at latitude 47 degrees north, and Greenland, at latitude 60 degrees north. There seemed to be no clear objective and no end to this duty. The Japanese changed all that.

Our PBY patrol squadrons, based in Hawaii, had not detected the Japanese carriers as they approached Pearl Harbor and the Japanese carrier planes roamed

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[1] Our source documents for the operations of VP-71 from 7 December 1941 though January 1942 are: Flights Logs: Pilots M. V. Montgomery; James Austin; Whitney Wright; Joseph Isner; James Smith; Herb Donald; Robert Swinton, John Humphrey; Aircrewmen Ken Stafford; A. R. Niehaus; A. E. Rolland; Larry Shepherd (May, June, July 1942 only) AND what appears to be a photocopy of the official Navy Report on the bombing raid on Tulagi, Solomon Islands, 28-29 May 1942.

over Oahu with little opposition. Japanese bombs and torpedoes sank our battleships and strafing destroyed our PBYs. Before the attack, there were over fifty PBYs for patrol duty out of Oahu. After the attack, there were four flyable PBYs at Pearl and three at Kaneohe. These few surviving planes flew almost continuously, trying to intercept the Japanese fleet if it tried a second attack. Hawaii needed help!

The Navy badly needed patrol squadrons for convoy duty in the North Atlantic, but squadrons were now more urgently needed in Hawaii. VP-71 and VP-72 received orders to head for the land of the "hula-hula." The pilots and crewmen of VP-71 must have been pleased to leave the cold of the North Atlantic for the balmy days of the Sandwich Islands.

Thirty-six hours after VP-71 crews heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor, they began moving south from their advanced bases in the north Atlantic, through Quonset Point to congregate at NAS Norfolk. Mark Montgomery, a junior pilot, flew from Argentia to Quonset Point on the 9th of December and on to Norfolk on the 11th. Joe Isner, a senior pilot, flew from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Quonset on the 12th and on to Norfolk on the 14th. PPC Erhard, with co-pilot Jeep Austin and radioman A. R. Niehaus, flew from Argentia to Quonset on the 10th and on to Norfolk on the 15th.

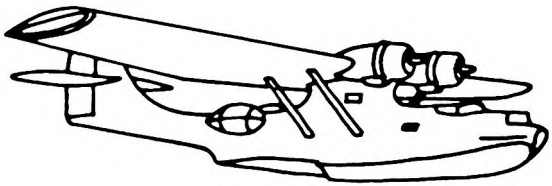
At Norfolk, VP-71 received a secret weapon! Lt(jg) Whitney Wright, his crew, and a PBY from VP-81, left Key West on the 9th for NAS Jacksonville and flew on to Norfolk on the 10th. When they arrived at Norfolk, Wright, his crew, and the plane were in VP-71.

When the two dozen PBYs of VP-71 and sister squadron VP-72 left Quonset Point for Norfolk, they made a mass of planes that New York City had never before seen. Lone PBYs, innocently trudging up or down the coast or landing at Floyd Bennett on Jamaica Bay, were an everyday occurrence, but a mass of planes? *Air Raid!*

In reporting the air raid, the *New York Times* of 10 December 1941 bannered, "A large flight of Navy flying boats from the North Atlantic . . ." caused the alert. The *Times* went on to describe the turmoil that an unexpected air raid, not a scheduled drill, caused in a large metropolis. Fire trucks and police cars circled blocks with their sirens pulsing, serving as an impromptu air raid warning system. The schools were closed while VP-71 flew on innocently, they thought, to answer the call to Pearl Harbor.

The squadron regrouped at Norfolk and prepared for the flights to Hawaii. Lt Mead, co-pilot Monty, and radioman Stafford, in PBY-5 Bureau Number (Bu. No.) 2297, were the first to leave for Hawaii. They flew from Norfolk to NAS

Pensacola on 16 December and the next day on to NAS Corpus Christi. PPC Jonas (with mech Rolland) and PPC Erhard (with co-pilot Austin and radioman Niehaus) caught up with Mead and on the 20th they all flew from Corpus to NAS North Island, San Diego and the next day, 21 December, on to NAS Alameda. Their flights from San Diego to Alameda took eight hours because they flew anti-sub patrol along the coast as they headed north. With war in the Pacific only two weeks old, Japanese submarines were off the California coast and enemy surface ships were expected there. On 23 December 1941, a Japanese sub sank the 440-foot tanker *Montebello* off the California coast at Cambria, approximately 40 miles north of Port San Luis (San Luis Obispo). The sub first torpedoed *Montebello* then surfaced and used its deck gun to shell the tanker. VP-71's patrols along the coast were serious business.



PBY-5 Catalina, a sea plane, water landings and takeoffs only

Late on Christmas Day, Mead, Jonas, Erhard, and five other planes from VP-71 and four from VP-72, took off from San Francisco Bay and headed for Hawaii. Heavily loaded with extra fuel, the planes climbed so slowly as they turned west that they flew UNDER the Golden Gate bridge! The VP-71 planes made the overnight transpac in 18.5 to 19.0 hours, landing at Pearl Harbor on 26 December. After a brief pause at Pearl, they made the short hop to Kaneohe Bay Naval Air Station on windward Oahu. On 28 December, with one day of rest, Erhard flew an 11.0-hour patrol out of Kaneohe. VP-71 was fighting the war in the Pacific. Not all of VP-71's flights to Hawaii were uneventful.

Charles Ehemann, patrol plane first radioman, has recorded the exciting parts of his Argentia to Hawaii flights in his memoirs. Of his flight from San Diego to Alameda, Charlie writes, "Our crew had to land at sea because San Francisco Bay was closed by fog. We landed near Point Reyes Light House and spent the night in a small bay there. The next morning, we went on in to NAS Alameda." PBYs were indeed tough and versatile. Charlie writes of his arrival in Hawaii, "We landed at Pearl Harbor on Christmas Day, even though we were supposed to have gone to NAS Kaneohe. Oil was still one inch thick on the water in the bay at

Pearl Harbor and we spent several days cleaning the hull of the plane after we got to Kaneohe."

Whit Wright and Joe Isner also had some exciting times on their way to Hawaii. In a flight of six planes, Whit and Joe flew the same route as Mead and Jonas, but were a few days behind them. On Christmas Day, icing conditions over the mountains just east of San Diego forced an unscheduled stop on the Salton Sea in the southern California desert. The planes were loaded with good rations for the special day. In Whit's words, "Flight leader assured us of good rations for the Christmas Day flight, he knew the Supply Officer! The rations were great, turkey, candies, fruit, nuts, all the fixings. The trouble . . . all the turkey was in one plane, the nuts in another, the sweets in a third and so forth. My crew ended up with the bread . . . enough to feed the biblical multitude. John Alley was with me on that flight." John Alley's recollections differ somewhat from Whit's. John remembers, "Our flight across Texas was mostly at 48 knots ground speed, and up-drafts and down-drafts drove us nuts! Isner, I think he was the lead plane, all of a sudden, with no warning, would be 1200 feet higher than we were. We poured on the 'coal' to climb, and the next thing we knew, we'd be 1000 feet higher than he!! That's why we landed at Salton Sea. Unfortunately, we landed at the south end, while our Christmas dinner was at a base at the north end! We had saltines and dill pickles on Salton Sea for Christmas dinner. During the night, we had to run the engines to keep from drifting. Why the anchors didn't hold, I don't know. The next morning, we took off and flew the 30 miles to our dinner, then departed for San Diego, arriving late in the afternoon."

Wright and Isner flew to Alameda on 27 December, patrolling along the way. They were offshore, looking for the sub that sank *Montebello*. They stayed in the San Francisco area for a month, without flying. No one knows why these crews did not follow the other VP-71 crews to Hawaii. John Alley recalls, "We did a lot of partying while in SF, and I read 'Gone with the Wind' in two days." On 28 January, Wright, and Isner flew their planes back to San Diego and on 30/31 January, they made the overnight transpac to Kaneohe Bay. Whit Wright, on 2 February and Joe Isner, on the 3rd, flew their first long patrols out of Kaneohe.

By the end of December, three weeks after patrolling in the North Atlantic and having flown nearly one third of the way around the world, most of VP-71's planes and flight crews were operating out of Kaneohe. The squadron was flying the long, 12-hour searches, 700 miles out and back—covering the waters where the Jap carriers had launched their planes.

In the old-time Navy of 1941, patrol squadrons were self-sufficient units. They had enough people to beach planes, change engines, and do all of the usual maintenance and repairs. In addition, the squadron had cooks, carpenters, and

medical corpsmen. The squadron could bake a cake, build a hangar, or cure a bad cold. All these valuable squadron members of VP-71, over 100 men, were not in flight crews so they went to Hawaii by surface transportation. The ground personnel at Quonset Point were picked up by USS *Albemarle* and taken to Norfolk. There they boarded a troop train to NAS Alameda, arriving there on Christmas Day. Alameda had no barracks for the men so they bedded down in a hangar. On 6 January 1942, the VP-71 gang also passed under the Golden Gate Bridge, but not in PBYs. They were aboard the Navy transport, USS *Wharton*. They rejoined the squadron at Kaneohe in mid January.

Getting there the hard Way! Herb Donald, later to be a senior PPC in VB-104, reports following a difficult route to VP-71. "On 7 December 1942, I was aboard a ship (with a hangover) alongside the pier at Norfolk Naval Station ready to sail for Argentia to join VP-71. With news of the attack, departure was delayed and I was ordered to join VP-71 in Kaneohe. We took a 'troop train' to San Francisco and after Christmas, a Navy transport to Pearl Harbor, seeing the devastation on January 7, 1942, just one month after the attack. It was reported that a torpedo wake was seen crossing our bow while enroute! I then flew as co-pilot to Conrad." Herb's first flight with VP-71 was a patrol out of Kaneohe on 14 January 1942. He was fresh out of flight school with 252 hours.

In January of 1942, VP-71 flew long patrols to the northwest of Oahu and flights back toward the states, covering convoys as they approached Hawaii. These convoy patrols were the same kind of flights VP-71 had been flying in the North Atlantic but with two exceptions. The squadron was now flying in the warm, beautiful weather of the trade winds in 20-degree latitudes rather than in the cold, ugly weather of the 50- and 60-degree latitudes of the North Atlantic. They were now looking for Japanese subs and carriers instead of German U-boats. January flights also included patrols out of Hilo, and PPC King flew to Palmyra and patrolled there from 21 to 29 January. Would the Jap carriers make a second attack, this time coming in from the south? King made certain that they would not approach from that direction undetected.

Through February 1942, VP-71 continued the same duty, flying 12-hour patrols from the bay at Kaneohe. In March, the squadron began flying patrols from advanced bases on Canton, Johnston, and Midway islands. For example, on 3 March, Jeep Austin flew to Johnston Island, patrolled every day and returned to Kaneohe on the 10th. Monty flew to Johnston on the 11th, replacing Jeep, and patrolled there every day, returning to Kaneohe on the 17th. Whit Wright's turn at Johnston was the last week in March. Earlier in March, Whit flew some short

hops out of Kaneohe that foretold of things to come. He flew "radar experimentation" flights with Ken Stafford along, and later in the month flew a "torpedo drop" in Kaneohe Bay.

At the end of March, Kaneohe was getting new planes, PBY-5A amphibians! Monty and Isner went to San Diego, flew some test hops in new PBY-5As and transpac-ed overnight on 11/12 April. Monty flew for 19.5 hours in Bu. No. 05042, Isner 19.8 in 05027.

In early April 1942, as VP-71 started its fourth month in the Hawaiian area, Lt(jg) James Smith, USN, joined the squadron. Jim was a year out of the Naval Academy and fresh out of flight school with 250 hours flying time under his belt. His first flight in VP-71 was 10 April 1942, 4.2 hours bounce in a PBY-5C. Jim Smith remembers his first days in VP-71: "When I reported, Cdr Frank Brunner was the skipper—a fine man. After a couple of weeks he was detached and Lt George Mead took over. He was a good pilot, drunk or sober, but a horrible skipper. Lt Jim Johnson became exec, and they couldn't stand each other so things were not so pleasant."

For the rest of April, VP-71 crews flew a few flights in 5As but most of their patrols were in their old water planes. Montgomery's log has the following special entry: "Ens. Mark V. Montgomery, AVN, USNR is qualified as Patrol Plane Commander. April 15, 1942. F. Brunner, Lt. Cdr. USN, Cmdr." Jeep Austin's log contains a similar entry. When Monty and Jeep qualified as PPCs they had flown patrols in the North Atlantic, transpacs, and patrols in the Central Pacific. They had over 1000 hours of Navy flying time recorded in their logs.

On 18 April, while VP-71 was lazying around Kaneohe, *Hornet* CV-8, escorted by *Enterprise* CV-6, launched Doolittle's B-25s for their raid on Tokyo. Late in April, the lazy days at Kaneohe were over for VP-71.

South to the Coral Sea– VP-71 left Kaneohe and flew via Palmyra, Canton, and Fiji to Noumea, New Caledonia. The first flight, Monty, Wright, Jonas (radioman Shepherd), Isner (co-pilot Clagett, mech Rolland and radioman Sams), and Blouin (radioman Stuckey), left Kaneohe on 27 April and arrived in Noumea on 4 May. The second flight, leader Johnson (co-pilot Jim Smith), Sinclair (radioman Niehaus), new PPC Jeep Austin, and other crews, left Kaneohe on 30 April and arrived in Noumea on 6 May. The third flight, led by CO Mullins (first radioman Stafford), left Kaneohe on 2 May and arrived in Noumea on 7 May. VP-71 took 13 planes to Noumea, most of them planes that the squadron had used to hunt U-boats in the chilly water of the North Atlantic. Sixteen VP-71 PPCs went to Noumea. In addition to the two newly ordained PPCs, Austin and Monty, there were Mullins, Mead, Johnson, Sinclair, Conrad, Jonas, Erhard,

Ross, Sholes, Wright, Minner, Isner, King, and Blouin. All were old hands from the Atlantic Neutrality Patrols.

Whit Wright, in a 1993 letter to Charlie Ehemann, reflected on VP-71's leaders. "George Mead was the XO and Moon Mullins was the CO. We called them 'Jug Head' and 'Jug Butt.' The former because he drank all the time, and the latter because Mullins was a little guy with a big ass. The latter (Mullins) rarely flew, but Mead had the reputation of being a great flyer."

Jim Smith recalls that he made the Noumea deployment by a special appeal. "I was not scheduled to go south to the combat theater, but begged Jim Johnson to take me. There was one pilot who did not want to go and wanted to stay with his girl friend in Kaneohe—so Jim Johnson kindly took me in his crew and left the other guy in Kaneohe."

Allied Forces - - Battle of the Coral Sea
TASK FORCE 17 Rear Admiral Jack Fletcher
TG 17.5 CARRIER GROUP Fletcher in *Yorktown*; Fitch in *Lexington*
(cruisers, destroyers and oiler *Neosho*)
TG 17.9 SEARCH GROUP, Commander George H. DeBaum
Tender TANGIER (at Noumea) Cdr. DeBaum
VP-71 & VP-72; 12 PBY-5 (Catalina)[29]

[29] Half of these arrived 4 May P.M.

Adapted from Morison, vol. IV, pp. 18-20.

At Noumea, VP-71 and VP-72 were Task Group 17.9, part of Rear Admiral Fletcher's Task Force 17, with *Yorktown* CV-5 and *Lexington* CV-2. Both VP squadrons operated from the large seaplane tender *Tangier* AV-8. *Tangier*, the command ship for TG 17.9, handled all the maintenance on the PBYs and served as a dormitory for the PBY hot pilots, mechs, ordnancemen, and radiomen. VP-71 started patrols out of Noumea on 5 May, with Wright and Isner flying 600 miles into the Coral Sea. The squadron provided patrols every day; crews flying every other day. Why all this rush to get our PBYs patrolling the Coral Sea?

From 29 April to 1 May, as VP-71 was moving south, a Japanese *support force*, composed of the light carrier *Shoho*, cruisers and destroyers, and a Japanese *striking force*, built around large carriers *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku*, headed south from Truk. The Japanese had grandiose plans for these task forces. *Shoho* was to support the Japanese troops landing at Tulagi, in the Solomons, and then

join *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* in the Coral Sea to destroy the U.S. Fleet. *Shoho* would then support the landing of Jap troops at Port Moresby in New Guinea, and *Shokaku* and *Zuikaku* would raid bases and cities in Queensland, northeastern Australia: Thursday Island, Coen, Cooktown, Townsville. (See map, page 13)

Admiral Fletcher's Task Force 17, with *Lexington* and *Yorktown*, was in the Coral Sea to oppose the Jap carrier force and stop the Japanese advance on Australia. VP-71's role was to fly searches northwest from Noumea into the Coral Sea, first searching for the Japanese carriers and then searching for our oiler *Neosho*.

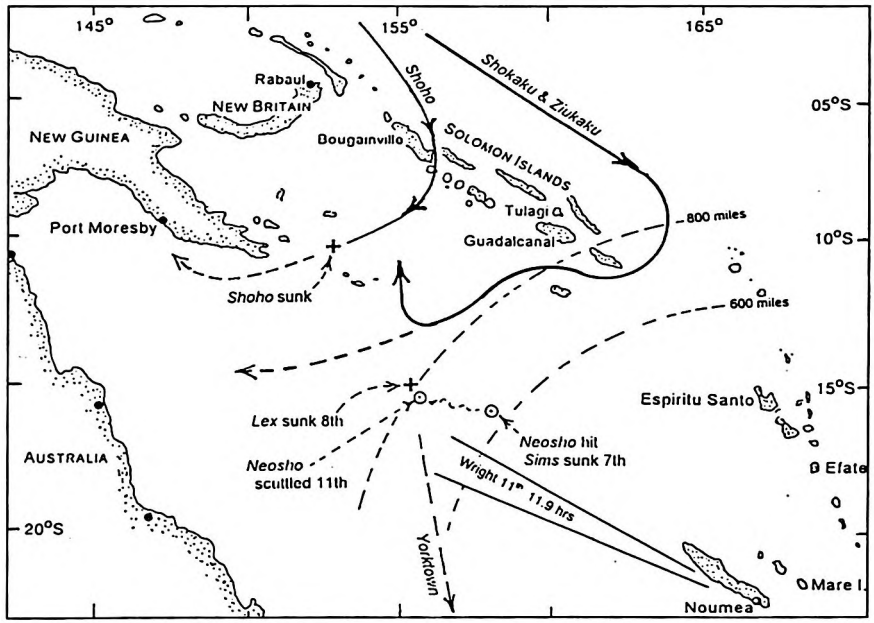
The Battle of the Coral Sea, May 3-7, 1942, was the world's first carrier battle. *Shoho* was sunk, *Shokaku* severely damaged, and *Zuikaku's* air group destroyed. The Japanese force was turned away from Australia and returned to Truk. Japanese carrier aircraft sank *Lexington*, damaged *Yorktown*, and badly damaged their large oiler USS *Neosho*. A Jap patrol plane had reported *Neosho* to be a US carrier, so she got special attention from the Japanese carrier planes. With no propulsion, *Neosho* drifted westward, alone but not forgotten. Neither US nor Australian ships or planes came to her assistance. Unfortunately, *Neosho's* navigator gave an incorrect position for the attack so the drifting oiler was lost. VP-71 got the assignment of searching for *Neosho's* remains and her survivors.

From Morison, p. 35-36: "During a lull in the engagement this officer [*Neosho's* navigator] took a fix from the sun and Venus but plotted it wrong . . . As a result of the error, search for survivors did not commence at the proper point.

"For four days, 7 to 11 May, *Neosho* drifted westerly before the trades. All hands were frantically trying to keep her afloat. The dead were buried and the wounded cared for as well as conditions allowed. Admiral Leary ordered the PBYs based on tender *Tangier* at Noumea to search for survivors, and early on the 9th sent out destroyer *Henley* to rescue any floaters reported by the Catalinas and take off the rest of *Neosho's* crew. Owing to the navigator's mistake they had the devil's own time accomplishing their mission. The oiler was picked up only about noon 11 May by a PBY. She reported to *Henley*, and that afternoon the destroyer took off the 123 men still on board and scuttled poor 'Fat Lady'."

*Neosho*was first sighted by an Australian PBY and then by a Noumea-based PBY. *Neosho* had drifted west, where she was only 600 miles from the large Australian seaplane base at Bowen but 800 miles from Noumea. In a bull session at a VB-104 reunion, Whit Wright explained that VP-71's BIG DEAL in the Coral Sea Battle was looking for *Neosho.* Unfortunately, he did not know who found her.

Curiously, the Battle of the Coral Sea was not a victory for TF-17, but it was a success. Our side lost more ships than the Japanese, but stopped the Jap advance on Australia and New Guinea.



The Battle of the Coral Sea

On 10 May, with the Battle of the Coral Sea in its cleanup stage, PPC Blouin, co-pilot Antonik, first radio George Stuckey, and mech Bill Lloyd, were flying a patrol out of Noumea. Near the end of the sector, Tony Antonik was in a bunk and Lloyd was in the after station. No one noticed a Japanese 4-engined flying boat, a Mavis, draw near them but they did notice tracers flying past the PBY and bullets hitting the plane. There were a few bullet holes in the PBY but fortunately none in any of the crew. Bill Lloyd had to wait one year, three months and 18 days before he could help shoot down a Mavis and get even. More than even.

The portion of the Pacific War that frames the Battle of the Coral Sea was one of diverse and widely scattered actions: 18 April, Doolittle's Tokyo raid; 6

May, Corregidor surrender. From Morison, IV, p. 61-62. "On 10 May Admiral Shima's invasion force destined for Ocean and Nauru Islands got underway from Rabaul, only to lose flagship *Okinoshima* to United States submarine S-42 next day and to be recalled to Truk on the 15th when a patrol plane warned Inouye that unfriendly carriers had been sighted some 450 miles east of Tulagi. That was Halsey's task force roaring down from Pearl. But it was too late for *Enterprise* and *Hornet* to change the situation; they never entered the amaranthine waters of the Coral Sea, now unvexed by the keels of fighting ships. [footnote 42] Halsey arrived near the New Hebrides 11 May and from 12 to 16 May operated eastward of Efate and Santa Cruz. On 16 May Cincpac ordered him back to Pearl Harbor, and he arrived 26 May."

Patrolling and Bombing– After the Battle of the Coral Sea, our forces in the South Pacific were reorganized. Rear Admiral Fletcher and Task Force 17, lord and master of the South Pacific, headed north, but *Tangier* and VP-71 remained at Noumea. Rear Admiral John McCain came aboard *Tangier* as Commander Aircraft South Pacific Area (ComAirSopac). VP-71 continued flying regular patrols in the Coral Sea but now under John McCain. The regular patrols were uneventful but the squadron soon added high altitude bombing flights to its repertoire.

The Japanese, thwarted in their efforts to capture Port Moresby and attack Australia, were moving southeast in the Solomon Islands. They were building bases there so their planes and ships could extend their dominance over the oceans to the southeast, and thus close the sea lanes from the United States to Australia. They intended to isolate the land that they could not invade. When our carriers withdrew to the north—because intelligence was predicting the Japanese move on Midway and Hawaii—one of the few forces standing in the way of the Japanese move southeast through the Solomons was the PBYs at Noumea. VP-71, a few crews from VP-72, and some Australian PBYs began flying night bombing raids on the new Jap bases in the southern Solomons. The efforts of the brave men flying the PBYs on these missions may seem puny to some as we describe them here. But at the time, there were no Army Air Corps B-24s and B-17s to drop larger bomb loads, and there were no runways from which they could operate. Only the reliable, water based PBYs were there to do the job.

The 900-mile flight from Noumea to Tulagi (1800 miles round trip) was too long a ride for PBYs with a bomb load to deliver. It was necessary to stage the raids through very fragile and temporary advanced outposts where the PBYs could land, top off their gas tanks, and continue on to their targets in the Solomons. The VP-71 raids were by three-plane sections, each plane carrying

four 500 pound bombs and lots of empty beer bottles. The crew would toss the bottles out of the PBY's after station and the bottles were supposed to make an eerie whistle as they neared the ground. Our crews guaranteed that the empty beer-bottle-bombs would reduce the morale of the Japanese. They certainly did that, because morale values are relative, and *emptying* the beer bottles on brief "shore parties" did indeed raise the morale of our crews.

Our 500-pounders could do considerable damage, but our bombings were intended to be nuisance raids to keep the enemy awake in muddy fox holes. Fifteen months later, many of VP-71s Noumea pilots and crewmen would be on Guadalcanal in VB-104. There, Japanese Bettys, called Washing Machine Charlie, would make similar nuisance bombing raids. But with our forces stuck at Noumea and the Japanese advancing down the Solomon Island chain, VP-71 was *their* Washing Machine Charlie.

VP-71 flew four night bombing raids to the southern Solomons with various results. The first was on 29/30 May, when three planes, led by Mead, with wingmen King and Erhard, bombed the new Japanese seaplane base at Tulagi. The 500 pound bombs started large fires near buildings, docks, and oil tanks, and the beer bottles also did their job.

Although the bombing was a great success, the three PBYs had difficulties getting back to Noumea. On their way to Tulagi, the Mead, King, and Erhard crews had made a refueling stop. Charlie Ehemann recalls that their refueling spot was at a remote bay at the northwest end of New Caledonia. But the squadron made all later refueling stops at Efate, and on 23 May, six days before the Mead raid, Jeep Austin flew from Noumea to Efate and return. Perhaps Jeep's flight was to check out or supply the "fueling" spot on Efate, and perhaps Mead (and Ehemann) stopped at Efate instead of at "a remote bay at the northwest end of New Caledonia." Wherever the Mead raiders stopped, a small gas crew was waiting to top off their gas tanks. But even this 160- to 180-mile boost had not been enough. The Mead crew, with co-pilot Monty and first radioman Charlie Ehemann, spent a long time in the air. Monty wrote "19.8 hours" in his log. Monty always summed his flight time on missions that involved two or more flights. Had he recorded more accurately he would have written: 1.5 hours Noumea to refueling stop, then 18.3 hours on to Tulagi and back to Mare Island. The three planes, out of gas, landed approximately 100 miles east of Noumea. King and Erhard landed in the open sea, and Mead landed just offshore of Mare Island. Erhard's plane, badly damaged in the landing, was stripped of all useful gear and scuttled. King and Erhard, with Gardner as plane captain and Niehaus as first radioman, gassed from a rescue vessel, *Meredith* DD-890, took off from a slick that she kindly provided, and flew to Noumea.

Mead had burned his last drop of gas over Mare Island, so he made a dead-stick landing near its shore. The plane promptly sank but the crew made it ashore in the rubber life rafts. After three days and two nights on Mare Island, Mead and his crew were picked up from their island paradise. Wright and Johnson flew searches for the lost crew on the 30th and 31st, not knowing that Mead and his crew, Monty and Ehemann, were having a ball on Mare Island. On 1 June, Wright and his crew (co-pilots Alley and Sederquist, and radiomen/mechs Yaden, Reid, and Skelton), and PPC Johnson and his crew (co-pilot Smith), landed at Mare Island after their anti-sub patrols. Whit took on five of the lost crew and Johnson four (Monty rode with Johnson) and hauled them back to the stark confines of *Tangier* at Noumea. Monty's log shows eight people in the Mead crew on the Tulagi bombing. Whit and Johnson took nine people to Noumea. Whit either transported a Mare Islander to Noumea or someone miscounted passengers.

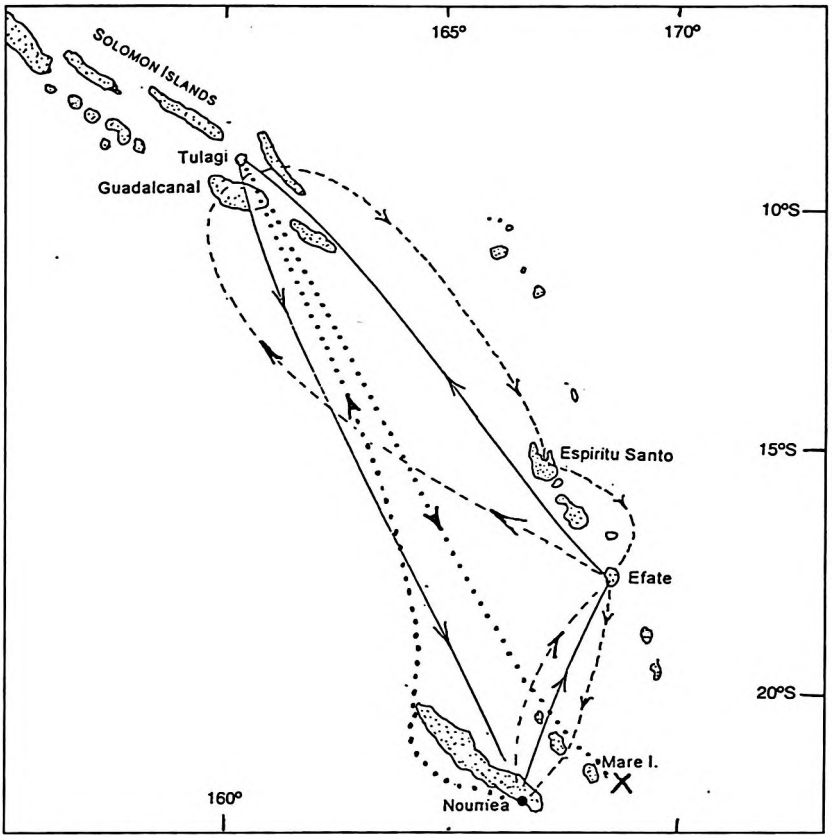
Through June, VP-71 continued searches and anti-sub patrols at Noumea, missing the world's second carrier battle, the Battle of Midway. Coral Sea was a setback for the Japanese Navy but the Battle of Midway was a major defeat—one from which the Japanese carriers never completely recovered.

In mid-June, *Curtiss* AV-4 arrived at Noumea and Rear Admiral McCain, now Commander, Naval Air, South Pacific, and VP-71 moved aboard. On 20 June 1942, *Curtiss* relieved *Tangier* and the following day *Tangier* headed for the west coast for overhaul.

VP-71's second raid on Tulagi was on 25-26 June. Three planes started the raid by flying to Havannah Harbor, Efate for a refueling stop: Wright and co-pilot Alley were in 2327; Isner and plane captain Rolland were in their plane, 2356; King, with Smith, was in 2360. Johnson, serving as commander of the raid, and Admiral McCain, along to see how things were done, were in King's plane.

There was no tender at Havannah to service the planes, only several sailors ashore in the forest with a small motor boat and a supply of 55-gallon drums of aviation fuel. The sailors ferried drums out in the motor boat and refueled the planes using hand pumps.

A minor accident marred the stop at Havannah. King taxied 2360 onto a coral head and Smith, in the navigation compartment, found himself standing on coral in water up to his knees. Johnson, Smith and Adm. McCain commandeered Isner's plane, 2356, and led the raid. Of course, "Roho" Rolland, plane captain of Bu. No. 2356, stayed with his plane. Isner stayed at Efate.



Tracks of VP-71 bombing raids

• • • • • • Tulagi; Mead, Erhard and King, 29/30 May

——— Tulagi; Johnson (with Adm McCain) and Wright, 25/26 June and "Henderson" Field, Guadalcanal; Jonas and Sinclair 8/9 July

— — — — "Henderson" Field, Guadalcanal; Wright (and others) 13-15 July

Two planes, Johnson and Wright as PPCs, took off to heckle-bomb Tulagi. Jim Smith, Johnson's co-pilot, recalls that "It was a horrible night weatherwise, vicious thunderstorms, lightening, heavy rains, real rough, and I'm not sure anyone knew our real location." John Alley, Wright's co-pilot, has recently recorded: "My recollection of the Tulagi 'raid' was that it was a complete bust! First, Adm. McCain, Sr., was riding with one of the three planes (I think it was in Johnny Johnson's plane, and I think Jim Smith was co-pilot) which tore the bottom on landing/taxiing at Efate. At any rate, then the Adm. ended up with Johnson, and Whit and I were flying wing. We climbed to twelve or thirteen K and got into heavy clouds. We finally gave up and, fearing a collision, let down to about 1300 feet. (We weren't within fifty miles of Tulagi.). Whit sent me back to the tunnel hatch to get a drift sight (we were already heading back to Noumea). I threw out a smoke bomb on which to take my sight, when ka-whooomp! I was bouncing around in the tunnel! Whit had decided to jettison the bombs. He did it one (or a pair) at a time, I discovered, after I lined up my pelorus on the nice big splash only to get the effect of the second drop! After getting a pretty good drift, I went to the nav. table and plotted our course home. Meanwhile, Whit decided to get some altitude for better ground speed. We had a beautiful moon, and when we broke into daylight and saw New Caledonia, we were dead on track! Some Alley luck, because how could a drift at 1300 feet hold good at 9000 feet for several hours?"

For most of this raid, Admiral McCain rode in the co-pilot seat and drank many cups of coffee. The crew stood by to direct the Admiral to the relief tube but he held fast in the right seat. The pilots and crewmen of this raid saw McCain as a gutsy leader and a very nice person—with a world class bladder.

The final event of this mission was by Joe Isner. On the 28th, he flew 2360, its bottom now repaired, back to Noumea, but this was not the end of 2360.

Monogram Models offers a of kit of a PBY-5 Catalina, Kit 5609, and gives the following information: "Your Monogram Models Catalina specifically represents PBY-5 Buno 2360, This aircraft, of VP-14 was stationed at NAS Kaneohe Bay, along the eastern coast of Oahu Island. It survived the Japanese attack on the Hawaiian Islands of December 7, 1941." The decal placement instruction page for this kit records the following: "PBY-5, BUNO 2360, was assigned to NAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii at the outbreak of the war. It was temporarily assigned to VP-71 on 18 April 1942, then returned to VP-14 on 15 June, 1942. On 26 August 1942, 3260 was burned by its crew to avoid falling into the hands of the Japanese after it had been severely damaged." Monogram

Models could add to their account of 3260 that it served well in the Battle of the Coral Sea and in the first US bombing raids on Guadalcanal.

In the first two weeks of July, VP-71 continued to operate from Noumea. The squadron flew short anti-sub patrols and long-range searches. All were uneventful. The exciting hops were two more night raids to the Solomons, but now with a new target—the new Japanese airfield on Guadalcanal. From Morison IV, p. 261: "On 5 July Admiral Nimitz received a bit of news that sparked off the whole operation. An American reconnaissance plane observed that the Japanese were starting to build an airfield—the future Henderson Field—on Guadalcanal."

Lt(jg) Jonas and Sinclair flew on the squadron's third hi-bomb raid to the Solomons. We know of this flight from the logs of Larry Shepherd, first radioman in the Jonas crew, and A. R. Niehaus, first radio in the Sinclair crew. Jonas, Sinclair, and one other PPC left Noumea on the 7th and landed at Efate. On the 8/9th, they flew the long bombing run to Guadalcanal, dropped their 500 pound bombs, and returned to Noumea. This VP-71 raid on the Solomons was the first one that went smoothly.

VP-71's fourth and final raid on the Solomons also hit Guadalcanal's "Henderson" field. Johnson led this flight in Bu. No. 2356, with Rolland as plane captain, but without his usual co-pilot, Jim Smith. Johnson, Wright (2327), and Isner (2342) left Noumea on the 13th, landed at Havannah Harbor, Efate, and topped off their tanks from a gas barge. On the 14/15th, they bombed the Jap airfield on Guadalcanal and returned to Espiritu Santo where they remained overnight. The next morning, the 15th, they flew Espiritu Santo to Havannah Harbor, Efate, then Havannah to Noumea. The raid was a success and all planes returned without damage.

It is difficult to evaluate the success of VP-71's heckling raids on Guadalcanal and Tulagi. Perhaps they helped! The Japanese became stuck on Guadalcanal, unable to move further southeast. But they were able to dig in on Guadalcanal and our Marines had a devil of a time getting them out.

In mid-July 1942, the squadron headed north through Fiji, Canton, and Palmyra to Kaneohe. While at Canton, Wright flew a 7.5-hour side hop to photograph Howland and Baker islands. Sinclair and Jonas arrived at Kaneohe on 13 July. Monty, Wright, Johnson (co-pilot Smith) arrived there on 21 July, and Mullins (first radio Stafford) arrived there on the 22nd. Austin lingered in the South Pacific, arriving at Kaneohe on the 26th. Three months in the South Pacific and the Battle of the Coral Sea had made VP-71 a tough and experienced patrol squadron.

Kaneohe Duty Again– In August, VP-71 stayed at Kaneohe flying 12- to 13-hour patrols in PBY-5Cs and bounce hops in PBY-5As. On 6 August 1942, Conrad gave check rides in a 5A to PPCs Wright, Minner, and Sholes. Whit exclaimed in his logbook, "Check out in 5A - landing on land!" The 5A bounces were on the mat at Kaneohe and gave the VP-71 pilots experience with a *tricycle landing gear*. Stay tuned.

August was a good month to be out of Admiral McCain's patrol group in SoPac. On the 5th, the small tender *McFarland* began operating PBYs from the Santa Cruz Islands, and on the 8th, another small tender, *Mackinac,* began operating PBYs from a bay on the northeast shore of Malaita. This was serious business—the Japs were only 60 miles away at Tulagi. (See McCain's Air-search Plan, Morison, vol. V, p. 24.) These PBYs flew sector searches to prevent surprise attacks on our Marines as they landed on Guadalcanal and Tulagi on 7 August. Unfortunately, these patrols were not enough. Jap cruisers came down the slot on the night of 8/9 August and won the Battle of Savo Island. In addition, the Japanese also established bases on Nauru and Ocean—two islands that would later be important to VB-104. Morison, vol. VII, p. 77: "Already, in the last week of August, the Japanese had seized the two phosphate islands, Ocean and Nauru."

VP-71 had participated in the Coral Sea Battle, then remained at Noumea in the South Pacific, missing the Battle of Midway. Then the squadron moved north to Kaneohe, missing the tough battles during the days of the landings on Guadalcanal and Tulagi.

In September, VP-71 remained at Kaneohe, flying patrols and bounce hops. Some crews made short deployments to Canton, Johnston, and Midway. October was more of the same—except . . .

Rickenbacker– Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, World War One ace, was on an official mission as a "consultant and courier" in the South Pacific.[2] At Oahu, Hawaii, the Army assigned him a crew and a B-17 to take him on his tour. On 21 October 1942, Rickenbacker was on the first leg of his journey, from Hickham Field, Oahu to Canton Island, but his crew failed to find the island. The crew successfully ditched the B-17 and all on board were safely afloat in three inflated life rafts before the plane sank. The Rickenbacker crew hoped for a prompt

[2] Rickenbacker's account of this event is in *Seven Came Through, Rickenbacker's Full Story*, by Captain Edward V. Rickenbacker, 1943. Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc. Garden City, New York. Other information is from logs, interviews and letters from Isner, Sams, and Stuckey. Because Funafuti was just west of the Date Line there is a possibility of confusion of dates. The VP-71 planes would have stayed on west longitude (Canton) dates as that was our practice when flying along the Date Line.

rescue but instead they started a long and trying voyage at the whim of winds and currents.

VP-71 crews, all old Canton hands, flew to Canton to search for Rickenbacker. For example, Lt Conrad, with Donald as co-pilot, made a dash from Kaneohe to Canton on 23 October to help in the search. Conrad flew Rickenbacker searches out of Canton on 25, 26, and 28 October, with no success, then departed Canton for Kaneohe on the 30th. All of the early searches for Rickenbacker were unsuccessful, and little hope remained that he would be found.

Joe Isner, with Bill Sams as his first radioman, flew from Kaneohe to Canton, arriving there on 29 October. At Canton, Isner was the senior PPC, commanding six VP-71 crews with PBY-5As. VP-71 flew patrols to the west, looking for Japanese task forces that might come storming out of bases in the Marshall and Gilbert islands. The squadron also kept a lookout for Rickenbacker life rafts.

While 71 looked for Jap task forces, the three Rickenbacker rafts drifted southwest, and by Tuesday, 10 November, the rafts had reached the vicinity of Funafuti. (See map p. 51) Rickenbacker had seen, but not been seen by, single-engine float planes, OS2Us, on routine patrols from Funafuti. Frustrated, the Rickenbacker crew decided that the three rafts should separate to increase the chances of being sighted by the OS2U patrols. In the afternoon, Lt Cherry, pilot of the B-17, alone in the smallest raft, was picked up and taken to a "Navy tender" at Funafuti. Another raft landed on a nearby island and the three occupants were brought to the tender. When Cherry was picked up, he would have reported that the other rafts were nearby and the word on this must have spread, at least as far as Canton.

Late in the day of Wednesday, the 11th, after 24 days in a life raft, Rickenbacker and the two others in his raft were picked up by a Funafuti OS2U. One survivor rode inside the OS2U, but Rickenbacker and the other had to ride out on the wings. With a passenger on each wing, the OS2U could not take off, but began to taxi toward Funafuti. After a short taxi ride, Rickenbacker and the other wing-rider transferred to a PT-boat for a more comfortable ride with food and water. Rickenbacker went directly to the island, not to the tender.

The next morning, Thursday 12 November, the survivors that had been taken to the tender came ashore. The Rickenbacker crew was now the problem of the island, not the tender. In the afternoon, a Navy "flying boat" brought in two doctors from Samoa: Capt Jacobs, a Marine, and LtCdr Durkin.

VP-71 to the rescue! Friday, 13 November 1942, two VP-71 PBY-5As (Joe Isner in Bu. No. 04997 and Anderson, with radioman George Stuckey and mech Henry Butler) flew from Canton to Funafuti. For this flight, Isner wrote in his log

"Rickenbacker Search, Canton - Funafuti." Why did Isner and another VP-71 PBY-5A head for Funafuti on a "Rickenbacker Search" flight? Canton and Isner must have heard of Cherry's rescue and that Rickenbacker and the others were still adrift near Funafuti. Therefore, when Isner reached Funafuti he circled the tower while his radioman, Sams, asked by blinker if Rickenbacker had been found. The tower blinkered "YES" and then reluctantly gave the 5As permission to make the first landings on the unfinished strip. If Rickenbacker had not been on the island, Isner would have stayed in the air and searched.

The runway on Funafuti was being prepared as a narrow fighter strip with coconut trees close along each side. Isner saw that it would be a tight fit for the long wings of the PBY, so he lowered the wingtip floats, as if to make a water landing, thus shortening the PBY's wing by a few feet. The first PBY to arrive at Funafuti, the one from Samoa with the two doctors, had not used the strip. Rickenbacker called it a "flying boat" and it must have landed in the lagoon.

Isner recalls that there was not much on Funafuti, just "a bunch of Marines" that had secured the island and Seabees constructing a landing strip. Our Marines from Samoa, not from Espiritu Santo, had secretly occupied Funafuti on 2 October 1942. Every effort was being made to keep our occupation of Funafuti a secret from the Japanese. The secret was well kept. The Japanese did not know enough to bomb Funafuti until April 1943.

Bill Sams has recorded his recollection of Rickenbacker and Funafuti in a letter to Charlie Ehemann, dated 13 March 1990. "After landing, the pilots took off [Note: "took off" walking, not in a plane.] for a long time. When they came back they told us that Rickenbacker was rescued but they hadn't been able to reach the outside world on their radio. Isner asked me if I could contact the outside and I told him no problem. We moved our plane over to some trees and reeled out a half wave length antenna to a tree. I called CQ with an O priority and immediately got an answer . . . from Washington, D. C. I sent Isner's message that Rickenbacker had been rescued and after several repeats and holds we established a watch schedule, beginning every hour on the hour. This was spaced out later."

The tender was certainly in CW contact with the outside world and must have reported that they had Cherry aboard on the 10th. However, to keep our occupation of Funafuti a secret, CW traffic would have been limited. It is interesting to note that General Hap Arnold in Washington, D. C. did not inform Mrs. Rickenbacker that her husband had been found until Saturday, 14 November. He must have learned about Rickenbacker from Sams' message sent late in the day of 13 November. Rickenbacker had not been on the "Navy

Rickenbacker (left) and Capt Jacobs, .50 caliber machine gun between them, in after station of PBY-5A. Photo by W. L. Sams, first radioman in Isner crew, VP-71.

Lt Isner, PPC in VP-71, assisting Rickenbacker from port blister of PBY-5A. Inscription reads, "To my good friend 'Lt. Joe Isner' in full appreciation of your efforts. Eddie Rickenbacker Nov-18-42."

tender"so only the Funafuti Marines and Seabees and VP-71's crews had seen Rickenbacker.

On 15 November, the three PBYs involved in the Rickenbacker rescue left Funafuti for Samoa. Isner loaded Rickenbacker, his pilot, Capt Cherry, and the flight surgeon, Capt Jacobs, into his 5A and flew from Funafuti to Wallis, 4.0 hours. Others of the Rickenbacker group flew to Wallis in the second VP-71 5A,

piloted by Anderson. The third PBY, the "flying boat" went along but did not carry any of the Rickenbacker crew. Gas was scarce on Funafuti so a refueling stop at Wallis was necessary. Joe Isner remembers a fringe benefit of the Wallis stop—ice cream! Rickenbacker also remembered, and wrote in his book that it was pineapple ice cream! From Wallis on to Tutuila, Samoa, took only 3.0 hours, and there, Joe Isner turned his priority passengers over to the Army Air Corps. On the 17th, Isner flew from Tutuila to ice-creamless Canton, 6.9 hours, and went back to patrolling.

In a nut shell, the Army Air Corps dumped Rickenbacker in the ocean. Navy planes picked him up and flew him to an ice cream parlor. Big difference. Joe Isner kept in touch with Rickenbacker through the years, seeing him whenever their paths in aviation crossed.

NOTE: Our documentation of VP-71's role in the Rickenbacker caper includes several photographs. Bill Sams has snapshots of Rickenbacker and Dr. Jacobs together and of Cherry alone, all taken in the after station of the 5A. Joe Isner has an 8 by 10 glossy of himself helping Rickenbacker on the ladder of a 5A. A heavy bandage can be seen on Rickenbacker's right hand. Stuckey has a photo of the exterior view of a 5A blister, showing Stuckey, Butler, Anderson, an unidentified officer, and four of Rickenbacker's crew.

New PPCs– In November and December, the experienced and well-seasoned PPCs of VP-71, the ones who had been plane commanders in the Neutrality Patrols in the Atlantic, were relieved and sent Stateside. There was one exception—Whitney Wright stayed with the squadron. New patrol plane commanders came from within the squadron. Monty and Jeep had been jumped to PPC for the Battle of the Coral Sea and John Alley had made PPC in early August, soon after returning from Noumea. Jim Smith made PPC on 15 November and Antonik and Clagett, both Coral Sea veterans with over 1000 hours and at least one transpac, made PPC about the same time. Without Coral Sea experience, but with 1000 hours, transpacs, and many patrols out of Canton, Midway or Johnston islands, were new PPCs Donald, PPC on 1 December 1942, and Humphrey, PPC 19 December 1942. Herb Donald flew his PPC check rides with Whit Wright and Arch Sinclair. Feind, then Stoppleman, Dvorachek, Van Benschoten, and Hager would have made PPC during this period. Unfortunately, there are no records to show where they were during the squadron's deployment to Noumea nor are the dates of their ascensions to PPC recorded. We know only that as the senior PPCs went stateside, these VP-71 first pilots took over. By early January of 1943, most of the pilots who would be the PPCs of VB-104 were gaining valuable experience as PPCs in PBY-5Cs and PBY-5As in VP-71. Later,

Swinton, (March 1943), Searls, and Anderson, probably in that order, would be ordained as PPCs in VB-104.

A Hot Run to Sydney, Special Delivery– On 23 October 1942, Whit Wright, with a pick-up crew, grabbed the assignment of ferrying a new PBY-5C, Bu. No. 04461, to Sydney, Australia. Tough duty! On this designer crew, Tony Antonik and Ace Neidlinger were co-pilots, Krejci was plane captain, and Berg was 2nd mech. Jack Stevens was first radio and Dru Stainback, second radio.

Whit and crew flew the usual route south, Palmyra-Canton-Fiji-Noumea-Sydney. On the Canton to Fiji leg, they passed over the water where Rickenbacker had been lost two days earlier. They flew at low altitude to search for life rafts, but without success. At Sydney, Whit landed and anchored in Rose Bay. During the three days that their PBY bobbed at this anchorage, the crew suffered the indignities of many unsolicited, but not discouraged, visits to their PBY by the curious young ladies of Sydney.

The ferry mission was completed when Whit turned the new PBY over to VP-101 in exchange for a stripped, war-weary PBY, Bu. No. 2455, no longer useful in the South Pacific. The trip home for Whit's ferry crew started on 31 October. They flew Sydney to Brisbane, and then the usual Noumea-Fiji-Canton-Palmyra-Kaneohe. The PBY carried an overload of passengers on the leg to Brisbane. As our forces began moving north in New Guinea, Brisbane was becoming a large US base and many people were looking for a ride from Sydney to Brisbane. Whit Wright did his share.

As he made the beach at Kaneohe, Dru Stainback was heard to sing, "I've seen it all, I've been to Sydney! I don't want a . . . "

November and December saw more transpacs, Kaneohe patrols, and bounce hops, most of the latter in PBY-5As. On 6 November, John Alley went to San Diego the fancy way. He had started on a ship that returned to Pearl with mechanical difficulties; then was given orders for commercial air transportation to the west coast. Nothing but the best for Alley—a PanAm Clipper to San Francisco, then a ferry flight in a PBY from San Diego to Kaneohe. Between landing in the Clipper and taking off in the PBY, there must have been a few days to frolic in 'Frisco and dance in 'Dego. John Alley offers no confession.

Monty and Jeep also managed to get back to the States and ferry two PBY-5As to Kaneohe. Whit Wright, Herb Donald, and several other VP-71 crews flew 5As to Canton in mid-December and remained there well into January. Christmas in Canton? For Whit, it must have been penance for Sydney.

The New Year, 1943, started with VP-71 doing much the same old thing. Crews were bouncing and patrolling at Kaneohe and patrolling from the usual advanced bases. Then on 11 January, Harry E. Sears reported aboard as skipper of VP-71—charged with an important and unusual task. He was to double the size of the squadron so that it could be split to form two squadrons.

One squadron was to be a new version of VP-71, equipped with new PBY Catalina flying boats, each with a nucleus of a crew from old VP-71. Sears was to make this Neo-71 ready to receive a new skipper who would retrain the squadron for a tour to the South Pacific.

The second product of this split was to be a new squadron, VB-104, equipped with Navy Liberators, PB4Y-1s, also staffed with seasoned crews from old 71. Sears was to serve as skipper of this new squadron, training its crews and developing a new capability and mission—patrol and attack into airspace held by the Japanese.

Chapter 2 Harry E. Sears

The Early War Months Anacostia, D.C. Kaneohe Bay, Oahu, TH
(7 December 1941 to 11 January 1943)

Harry Edward Sears was born in Beverly, Massachusetts on 22 August 1906. He graduated with honors from the U. S. Naval Academy in 1928. After serving on the battleships *Mississippi*, *Pennsylvania*, and *Oklahoma*, he entered flight training and was designated a Naval Aviator in October of 1930. His first aviation assignment was in Cruiser Scouting Squadrons attached to *Chicago* and *Indianapolis*. Later he was on the carrier *Yorktown* where he flew in Torpedo Squadron Five. In the summer of 1940, he reported to the Naval Air Station, Anacostia, Washington, D. C.

This record of naval service is impressive but it tells little about the man. People who served with Harry Sears saw him as a tall, well built and handsome man with a friendly, outgoing manner. He was a natural teacher and often stopped to chat briefly with his junior officers and enlisted men. His pleasantries were loaded with information and one was well advised to listen carefully. His ability as a pilot and naval officer were the highest. With his easy manner, he made it clear that he expected similar excellence from those that served with him.

December 7, 1941 found LtCdr Harry E. Sears at Naval Air Station Anacostia, Washington, D. C., serving as Operations and Engineering Officer. This position gave him his choice of many flights and interesting duties required by the White House and the Navy Department. There were new transport planes to be ferried

in from the West Coast and the everyday utility flights made duty at this station an aviator's paradise. Part of the job was greeting VIPs and VIPIs (Very Important Person *Indeed!*). How important?

On 18 June 1942, a big PanAm Clipper landed on the Potomac, taxied toward Anacostia, turned into the wind, and anchored. That was Sears' signal to get the station's motor whaleboat underway to pick up the distinguished foreign visitor and bring him ashore. Prior to shoving off, Sears threw a crew's mattress, all of three or four inches thick, across the forward section of the boat. As the motor whaleboat approached the stubby seawing of the big plane, the cabin door opened and, bracing himself against the swell, out stepped a short, portly gentleman with a huge, unlighted cigar in his mouth. Making his way gingerly down the wing, he stood on its tip waiting for the boat to synchronize its up and down motion with that of the plane. Sears' valiant coxswain steadied his boat close aboard the seawing, taking care not to get under it lest the whaleboat be capsized if the seawing rolled down on them.

When a lull occurred, Sears stretched out his hands to Churchill's. He grasped Sears' hands, put his foot on the boat's gunwale—and then it happened! The bow of the boat dropped and the little man lurched forward. They both fell into the mattress on deck in the foresheets, Churchill in Sears' arms! Churchill quickly scrambled to his feet and both gentlemen sat down and had a good laugh. Churchill was most interested in the whaleboat's diesel engine and requested, and got, a detailed dissertation from Sears. Just a day in the life of Harry Sears before VB-104.

While Sears hauled some VIPs in whaleboats, he flew others about in transports, R5Ds or R4Ds. During June, Sears' air passengers included: Fleet Admiral E. J. King; the Duke and Duchess of Windsor; Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, Royal Navy, and Lady Cunningham. Sears was also special-pilot for Vice Admiral Halsey while Halsey was in Washington in July and August of 1942. Sears was well prepared for his big VIPI flight in the Solomon Islands.

Exciting as life for a Naval Aviator was at Anacostia, Sears longed for something else. His dream of commanding one of the new Navy Liberator squadrons became an obsession. Sears said, "This is it!" when on 12 September 1942 he got the chance to check out in a Navy PB4Y-1 Liberator with Eddie Sanders of Flight Test (PB4Y-1, Bu. No. 31936, 1.4 hours). One of Sears' pilots at Anacostia, Bruce Van Voorhis, had received orders to NAS Kaneohe, Hawaii, where the PB4Y squadrons were forming. Van Voorhis and Sears had made several flights together in PB4Ys, including Sears' last Anacostia flight on 9 November. Sears then had two weeks' leave and travel time to get to San Diego where his next flights were in PB4Y-1s at the Transition Landplane Unit,

Transition Training Squadron, Fleet Air Wing 14, at North Island. After 7.0 hours of instruction in 4Ys, 26 thru 29 November, Sears soloed and was off and running in the Navy Liberator business. After a few hops around California, Sears transpac-ed from Hamilton Field to Hickham Field, Oahu (10 December 1942, PB4Y-1, Bu. No. 31950, 15.9 hours).

To his dismay, Sears did not immediately get a squadron command, serving instead on the Staff of RAdm Marc Mitscher, Commander, PatWing Two at Kaneohe. While on staff, Sears had to stand by and watch LtCdr W. A. Moffett put the finishing touches on VB-101, the Navy's first Liberator squadron, and then watch LtCdr Bruce A. Van Voorhis form VB-102. Sears' time on Mitscher's staff was short but important. Mitscher had *Hornet* at Midway and had come to PatWing Two after that battle. Mitscher and his staff changed the way patrol squadrons operated. In his book, *The Magnificent Mitscher*, Taylor (1954, p.104) writes, "[Mitscher] . . . had his own ideas on patrol-squadron operations. He felt patrol squadrons should be highly mobile, versatile units, capable of getting into action quickly and operating with a minimum of supplies in an advanced combat area." Sounds like Sears to us!

Sears was not a ground-gripper as a member of Mitscher's staff. He flew with Lt Jonas of VP-71, to Palmyra and on to Canton in a PBY-5A, returning to Kaneohe the next day with Lt O'Connor. Sears was starting to learn the operation area of PatWing TWO, serving as eyes and ears for Mitscher.

Harry E. Sears

Sears let the Admiral and his Chief of Staff know that he wanted a 4Y squadron but Mitscher wanted Sears on his staff. On 23 December 1942, Mitscher received his orders to the South Pacific to be Commander, Fleet Air, Noumea, under Halsey. Mitscher called Sears into his office and quietly said, "Sears, now you can have your damned squadron; get the hell out of here—and good luck!"

It is interesting that LtCdr John T. "Chick" Hayward was on Mitscher's staff with Sears. He remained on Mitscher's staff at Noumea, but he too escaped to get

a PB4Y-1 squadron. Hayward became CO of VB-106, the next Pacific PB4Y-1 squadron to form after VB-104. So Mitscher, with his radical ideas about Navy patrol squadrons, spawned the two hot PB4Y squadrons of the Solomons.

When Sears became the commanding officer of VP-71, we soon learned that he led by example—"follow me, this is the way." We also found him to be an outstanding teacher. He taught us to fly Navy Liberators and to do our jobs in a way that made us a proud and successful squadron. Sears was the best man in our squadron. If the Navy hadn't appointed him our commanding officer, we would have elected him to that post.

References:

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Chapter 3 A Perfect Mix—Sears and 71

11 January to 10 April, 1944, Kaneohe Bay, Oahu, TH

At Kaneohe on 11 January 1943, LtCdr Harry E. Sears took command of VP-71. His orders were to conduct a training and development program that would establish two new squadrons from the remains of a crack PBY squadron, VP-71. Sears was to prepare a new Navy Liberator squadron, VB-104, and start the reforming of old VP-71. To fulfill his assignment, Sears first had to become familiar with VP-71, then expand the squadron and, finally, select two groups; one to become VB-104 and the other neo-VP-71. He then had to introduce the Navy Liberator to PBY crews and check out pilots in the new plane. "No hurry, Skipper, lots of time, just do all this in under three months."

Sears had started planning the formation of a Navy Liberator squadron from a PBY squadron in his dreams while he was at Anacostia. He continued forming his dream squadron as he watched and waited while serving on Mitscher's staff at Kaneohe. Sears began to apply his ideas when he took command of VP-71 but the development of his plan was a slow, drawn out process. New planes came to Kaneohe slowly, and planes went first to VB-101 then to VB-102. Sears and 71 would have three months to work in PBYs.

Sister squadrons– As Sears started his command of VP-71, the squadron was flying PBY-5As but the air and ramps in Hawaii were full of PB4Y-1s. Two other Navy Liberator squadrons were forming.

VB-101– In November of 1942, the P-boat crews of VP-51 began training in PB4Y-1s. The squadron was soon designated VB-101 with LtCdr. W. A. Moffett its commanding officer. VB-101, the Navy's first Liberator squadron, went to the South Pacific in mid-January of 1943 and operated from Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal. VB-101's Liberators were without nose turrets; their "greenhouse" noses bristled with four .30 caliber machine guns. VB-101 formed in such a hurry-hurry program that there was no time to think about nose turrets.

VB-102– At Kaneohe on 15 February 1943, VP-14 "divided" to form VB-102, the Navy's second Liberator squadron with Bruce A. Van Voorhis as commanding officer. Van Voorhis had been one of Sears' pilots at Anacostia and had left there just long enough ahead of Sears to get the squadron ahead of him. VB-102 deployed to Guadalcanal in late April of 1943 in planes equipped with nose turrets. The PB2Y Coronado flying boats at Kaneohe were serving as transport planes, so their Consolidated tail turrets were removed and installed in the noses of VB-102's Navy Liberators.

The Navy also was forming Liberator squadrons in the Atlantic. VB-103, VB-105 and VB-107 were the early squadrons there. They formed in numerical sequence with Pacific squadrons VB-104, VB-106 and VB-108.

There was an advantage for 104 to be the third Navy Liberator squadron formed in Hawaii. Although the slow process of forming a squadron was frustrating for Sears, he took advantage of the opportunity of watching other squadrons form, then avoided their mistakes and built on their successes. Gradually, VB-104 emerged.

When, in this gradual process, did VB-104 originate? Those impressed by official dates might say 11 January 1943, when Sears took over the remains of old VP-71. Others might point to the official commissioning date of 10 April 1942. However, the romanticists among us would say 104 originated in Sears' mind at Anacostia; the pragmatists would say during training at Kaneohe; but the purists would say on Guadalcanal—when we swarmed over the three Japanese destroyers.

Inspection and familiarization– When Sears came to VP-71, he found the squadron scattered over the central Pacific, in the command area known as the Hawaiian Sea Frontier. Crews were either at, coming from, or going to Canton, Johnston, or Midway. They were patrolling west from these islands, our most advanced bases in this area, toward the advanced bases of the Japanese in the Gilbert, Marshall, and Wake islands. From the 11th to the 19th of January, the skipper attended to squadron paper work and then started flying to see his

squadron's area and meet his people. There was no doubt that Sears was a flying skipper.

On 20 January, Sears started flying patrols out of Kaneohe and making deployments to the advanced bases. On the 27th, he flew with Isner in a PBY-5A, Kaneohe, Palmyra to Canton. He flew patrols out of Canton, visited by air all the little outlying islands around Canton, and on the 30th, he made a quick round trip to Funafuti. Sears returned to Kaneohe on 15 February. On the 21st he went to Midway with Jim Smith and returned on the 25th with Lt Laughlin. On the 3rd and 4th of March, Sears flew Kaneohe to Midway and return, this time with Dvorachek. Back at Kaneohe on 15 March, having flown with his squadron at Canton and Midway, the skipper started the serious business of forming a Navy Liberator squadron.

Expanding– To make two squadrons out of one, Sears would need more pilots and aircrewmen. Through January and February, VP-71 received new pilots right out of flight school. Just as Herb Donald had joined VP-71 in December 1941, right out of flight school with 252 hours; and Jim Smith had joined the squadron in April 1942, right out of flight school with 248 hours; Finley joined 71 in January 1943, right out of flight school with 262 hours; and, on 6 February 1943, I joined 71, right out of flight school, with 257 hours. There was no operational training for PBY pilots. Out of flight school, into the Fleet. While Finley and I were joining VP-71, the pilots that traveled to Hawaii with us went to Kaneohe Headquarters Squadron or other PBY squadrons at Kaneohe. In mid to late March 1943, several of these new pilots joined VP-71, some destined for the new VP-71 (Murphy, Duba, Lasater, Serrill, W. N. Lloyd) and others for VB-104 (Bill Lyle, Lody Lodato, Dagwood DeGolia, Jeff Hemphill, Jock Sutherland). By the end of March, VP-71 was bulging with pilots and aircrewmen.

Navy Patrol Planes– At the onset of WW II, the Navy was patrolling with three kinds of flying boats: PBY Catalinas, PB2Y Coronados, and the new PBM Mariners. The huge Coronados, the Navy's only four-engined flying boat, proved to be better transport and air-sea rescue planes than combat patrol planes and soon were converted to that role. The Navy's pride and joy, however, was a new twin-engined flying boat, the Sea Ranger, which Boeing was to develop and produce. It would be the Navy's largest flying boat, even larger than the Coronado. It would have a tall, single vertical tail and plenty of power. Each of its two engines would generate a whopping 2000 horsepower.

The Sea Ranger would have five hydraulically powered turrets, each with two fifty-caliber machine guns. Boeing was to design the turrets and ERCO was to

build them. Nose, tail, and top turrets would be the ball type and the other two would be teardrop blister turrets at the port and starboard waist area.

The original Sea Ranger, the XPBB-1, flew on 19 July 1942 but production would take time. The first planes would not reach the fleet until mid-1943. The Navy couldn't wait. Boeing built only one Sea Ranger; when the Navy cancelled plans for production, it became known as the Lone Ranger. Had plans for the Sea Ranger continued, VB-104 would have followed in the footsteps of VP-71—water takeoffs and landings, buoys and beaching ramps, and catapult shots. *Catapult shots!?*

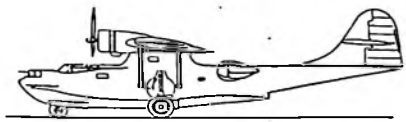
The Navy's specifications for the Sea Ranger required that it could be catapulted from 300-foot long barges. Seaplane tenders would tow these barges from lagoon to lagoon in the Pacific. Fortunately, about the time of the Battle of Midway, someone in the Navy realized that there was no need for a new bigger and better seaplane. The Navy could do a super job of patrolling in an Army Air Corps bomber of proven design that was already in production. But which army bomber, the B-17 or the B-24? The word in the Army was that the B-17 Flying Fortress, the big 4-engine tail-dragger, was easy to fly while the B-24 was a widow-maker. The Navy got the B-24 to be its long range patrol bomber. How was the Army persuaded to give planes to the Navy? The horse-trading involved is of interest.

The Sea Ranger was ready for production in a Boeing plant that the Navy had constructed in Renton, near Seattle, Washington. The Army wanted Boeing to build B-29s. If the Navy would give up on the Sea Ranger so Boeing could use the Reston plant for B-29s, the Army would give the Navy some B-24s from the Consolidated plant in San Diego. The Navy jumped at the deal. In July of 1942, the Army and Navy made a formal agreement. The Navy would receive some Army aircraft that were beginning to flow more readily from the aircraft production lines. In September, the Navy began receiving a trickle of Army Air Corps B-24 Liberators. They were flown across the bay from the Consolidated plant to Naval Air Station, North Island where the Navy christened them PB4Y-1s. Unfortunately, the Navy did not give them a fancy new name and continued to call them Liberators. Consolidated delivered the planes with the customary Army dirty-brown paint job and the Navy left them that way. A new name and some blue paint would have been a big improvement, but anything was better than catapult shots from barges.

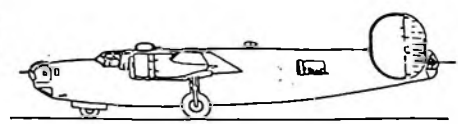
The first few Navy Liberators went to the Transitional Training Squadron, Pacific, in San Diego. Deliveries to Fleet squadrons began in November 1942—nine months before the scheduled delivery of the Sea Ranger. Navy

Liberators would allow the Navy to redefine the operations of its patrol squadrons, and, in addition, develop new squadrons for high altitude photo reconnaissance.

The Navy Liberators had two important features in common with the PBY-5A—they were the same overall size and both had tricycle landing gear. The old Catalinas were 63 feet 10 inches long and the PB4Y-1s were 66 feet 4 inches long, only two and one half feet longer. Wing span of the venerable P-boat was 104 feet and the wing span of the PB4Y was 6 feet longer, 110 feet. Similarities stop here. The PB4Y was heavier, faster, had more horsepower and more firepower than the PBY. Differences between the two planes far outweighed the similarities.



PBY-5A



PB4Y-1

The PBY weighed in at 17,500 pounds empty and 34,000 pounds fully loaded. The heavier PB4Y weighed 32,500 pounds empty and twice that fully loaded. Old PBYs lumbered along at about 110 knots, making the faster Liberator, cruising at 150 knots, seem like a whippet to former PBY pilots. The two engines of the PBY developed a total of 2400 horsepower, 1200 each engine—not enough. The four engines of the Liberator, at 1200 hp each, gave the plane 4800 hp—almost enough. Pilots in prop planes could never get enough horsepower.

It was guns and turrets, in addition to immediate availability, that made the Liberator a sure thing for the Navy. The single fifty-caliber machine guns in the PBY's after station blisters were modest weapons and the thirty caliber machine guns in the nose and tunnel hatch were nearly worthless. The twin fifty caliber machine guns in power turrets mounted in the Liberator's top, tail, and belly could deliver a heavy fire. A nose turret for the Navy Liberators was something else.

The army delivered the B-24s with greenhouse noses from which protruded four thirty-caliber machine guns, mounted singly; a configuration little better

than the nose of the old PBY. VB-101, the first Navy Liberator squadron to form in the Pacific, went into combat with planes sporting the greenhouse nose. Atlantic squadrons did likewise. A picture in *Privateer, The PB4Y-1 and PB4Y-2 in Service* (George Welsh, 1993, Skyword Press, San Diego) shows a crew of VB-107, a south Atlantic squadron, posed beside their plane "Macahyba Maiden." The crew seems happy in spite of the greenhouse nose on their plane. Greenhouse noses might have been OK for the Atlantic squadrons, but they were no good against head-on runs by the Japanese fighters. Sears and Van Voorhis were not going to take Navy Liberators, even with their dirty-brown paint jobs, to Guadalcanal without nose turrets. Both Van Voorhis and Sears got nose turrets, but by different means.

When Van Voorhis was forming VB-102 at Kaneohe, the Coronado squadrons there were converting to transport service and removing their Consolidated tail turrets. These old tail turrets quickly found homes in the noses of Van Voorhis's Liberators. The turrets were ugly and the planes looked the same coming and going. However, these tried and proven turrets worked, and the South Pacific was full of extra nose/tail turrets and spare parts. Good hunting!

Sears, with a little more time to work on the nose turret problem, came up with a more elegant solution. Back to the Sea Ranger! ERCO had a contract to build ball turrets for both the nose and tail of the Sea Ranger but only two were used—nose and tail of the Lone Ranger. Sears convinced the Navy brass to put the Sea Ranger turrets in the nose of the PB4Y-1s. Those of us who served with Sears were not surprised that his, and all following Pacific PB4Y-1s, came with ERCO ball nose turrets—the Cadillac of all nose turrets. Sears expected the best.

There was one important limitation of the PB4Y-1, but one welcomed by the 4Y pilots. Unlike the PBY, Liberators could not carry a torpedo!

Check-outs– When Harry E. Sears came to VP-71, he brought lots of magic; one of his best tricks was knowing how to fly a PB4Y-1 Navy Liberator. Sears' first big job was to select some P-boat pilots and teach them to fly PB4Y-1s. He gave his "familiarization" flights in two PB4Y-1s, Bu. Nos. 31939 and 31938, that belonged to HEDRON, Kaneohe Headquarters Squadron. These were training planes, stripped and light as a feather, and therefore somewhat tolerant of less than perfect landings and takeoffs. Sears would take two or three pilots on what he recorded as "familiarization flights" and give each pilot one hour of instruction—air work and a few landings. The skipper's students were a diverse lot. Some were the "old" Lt(jg) co-pilots of VP-71 who would be PPCs in VB-104 while others were boot ensigns who would be PP1P (patrol plane first pilots) and co-pilots. The prospective PPCs had about 1000 hours but many of the boot

ensigns were recent graduates from flight school. All these pilots, however, had experience in PBY-5As so the tricycle landing gear of the Navy Liberator was nothing new.

Between 15 March 1943 and 18 April, the skipper flew 22 instruction flights, a total of 47 hours. He got a first hand look at most of the pilots that would be PPCs and first pilots in his new squadron. Although Sears gave instruction flights to most of the pilots that would be in his new squadron, he needed some help so he developed a trickle down system.

Sears first checked out Whit Wright with hops on 15, 16, and 20 March. The morning flight on the 20th was Whit's "Final B-24 check out." The up-check from Sears made Whit an instructor, so in the afternoon Whit taught Montgomery and Jerry Didier what he had just learned from Sears. Monty was an advanced student when Whit got him; he had already had a flight with Sears the previous day. Whit flew 17 instruction flights, taking a second look at students that Sears had started. Sears needed more help than Whit could provide. On March 29 and 30, Sears instructed Jim Smith; Whit polished him off on the 31st; and then Jim got busy giving instructions and checks to other pilots.

By the special date of 10 April, VB-104's birthday, Sears, Wright, and Smith had flown over 50 familiarization and instruction flights. They had instructed, evaluated, and selected enough prospective PPCs, PP1Ps and co-pilots to staff the new PB4Y squadron. But instruction and checkout flights were not over, they would continue throughout VB-104s training and deployment—sandwiched between combat flights.

Instruction spread beyond the training that Sears, Wright, and Smith gave to the "student" pilot in the cockpit. Although they devoted most of the time to pilots who were PPCs in PBYs and would be PPCs in PB4Y-1s, co-pilots watched every minute of instruction and learned by watching, if not by doing. Also, on each instruction flight, prospective second mechs and second radiomen watched experienced plane captains and first radiomen do their jobs. Chain letter instruction worked. In a little over a month, the squadron converted P-boat pilots and crews to PB4Y-1s. There was still a lot of flying to do in PBY-5As and old water-bound PBYs, but everyone in 104 was now checked out for his job in Navy Liberators.

While Sears was flitting about, meeting his squadron on their advanced bases, flying searches and patrols with us and teaching us to fly Navy Liberators, some of his pilots did more than the usual patrols over blue water and whitecaps.

Two men in a tub– On 7 January, flying a 5A out of Canton, Whit Wright and first pilot Tom Dempster searched for, and finally located, two men in a small rowboat. The two men were at sea, 35 miles from Hull Island. This was a successful search but not a rescue—the two men wanted no help! Strange things happened when patrolling the waters of the central Pacific.

Army Deserters– On 12 January, Donald flew a patrol to the west of Canton and recorded in his log, "search for an unidentified tack force - on way back searched Gardner and Hull islands for Army deserters from Xmas I." Deserting from General Patton's camp at Desert Center, California to go to The Hollywood Canteen is one thing, but deserting an island in some "nowhere" part of the Pacific is nutty. Army life on the worst of the Pacific islands must have been better than deserting into the open ocean.

Army Ditchers– The Army Air Corps bomber crews, trained to fly by wire (telephone wires) and railroads, had difficulty finding the very small islands in the very large ocean. Ditchings of Army B-24s and B-17s in the greater Canton Area were frequent. VP-71 had been involved in the transport of Rickenbacker and his crew from Funafuti to Tutuila, Samoa after his rescue. Now, yet another Army bomber was down, this time a B-24. On 20 January, Whit Wright, with co-pilots Van Benschoten and Dempster, flew all night, Canton to Funafuti. On the 21st, he searched for the lost Army B-24 but did not find it and returned to Canton on the 22nd. On the 21st, Tom Dodson, co-piloting for Lt(jg) Bruce, flew Canton to Funafuti at night. He returned the next day, the 22nd, but recorded no success for the search. At the same time, 21 January, Lt O'Connor and Lt(jg) Donald, with three other pilots (Cunningham, Goodman, and Lloyd) and plane captain Rolland, flew Canton to Funafuti to search for the lost B-24. They did not find the downed crew but someone did. On the 22nd, O'Connor and Donald returned Funafuti to Canton with three B-24 survivors as passengers. Unfortunately, Navy secrecy, confusion, and scuttlebutt led many to believe that these survivors were from the Rickenbacker crew, lost and found three months earlier when they had ditched their B-17. Not so. In Rolland's log, "B-24; 3 survivors," is overwritten to "B-17" and "Rickenbacker" added. Larry Shepherd has written a detailed account of Rickenbacker being brought from Funafuti to Canton. He describes Rickenbacker being carried from one plane to another on someone's back because no stretcher was available. Not so.

Donald's Sub– On 30 January, Herb Donald and his crew, flying a 5A out of Canton, found a Japanese submarine. In the crystal clear waters of the central Pacific, subs could be seen even when they were submerged below periscope depth. Herb recalls the incident very clearly: "The only time I carried a torpedo

and no bombs or depth charges, I located a Jap sub! The torpedo was for attacking the Jap fleet! I investigated a slick on the smooth sea and saw the silhouette of the sub, balancing in the water below torpedo level! I thought of dive bombing with the torpedo but thought it would only be wasted. Our base identified the sub as enemy--we marked its position with smoke lights and left when it was barely visible." This would have been an easy kill with depth charges and there would have been one less Japanese submarine to stalk our ships.

Northeast from Canton—The Mail Run to Fanning and Christmas Islands– Not all of the Army garrison troops on Christmas and Fanning Islands had gone over the hill, or more accurately over the beach. Headquarters for the army detachments for those two remote islands were on Canton and from Canton they got mail, emergency supplies, and attention from Army brass. VP-71 often delivered the goods. Wright flew Canton to Fanning on 13 January and in the afternoon flew a short hop, taking some army people for a bird's-eye view of their island. The next day, Whit flew Fanning to Christmas, 1.6 hours, and on the 15th, he flew Christmas to Fanning 1.3 hours, and then back to Canton.

Charlie Ehemann was a radioman on a mail flight to Christmas Island. He recalls landing on the water and unloading canned food and mail into a small boat. On 1 February, Jim Smith flew a 5A, Canton to Christmas and return, 16.8 hours, 7.0 nite. On February 15, co-pilot John Burton flew Canton to Christmas. On the next day he flew Christmas to Fanning and return, and on the 17th Christmas to Canton. An army officer, Col Jenna, went along for the entire ride, careful not to be left behind. Yes, VP-71 even delivered the brass.

French Frigate Shoals– While most of the squadron's action was at Canton, some crews flew routine patrols from Kaneohe and Johnston. One flight from Kaneohe was memorable. On 20 January, Sears and Isner in a 5A landed on the runway at Tern Island, French Frigate and returned to Kaneohe. This flight was a "ribbon cutting," the first landing on the new field. This tiny coral runway served as a fuel stop and emergency field for air traffic between Hawaii and Midway. On 19 March, Wright, Hank Campbell, and I flew a 5A to French Frigate Shoals and return. We delivered mail and new recruits for the mini-base there.

On 23 March, Joe Isner in a 5A made the usual service call at French Frigate, but with a new wrinkle. He stayed overnight. The next day he flew on to Midway and flew a patrol out of Midway on the 28th. On the 31st, he flew Midway to Pearl Harbor with five stretcher cases in his 5A. VP-71 and their trusty PBY-5As were being asked to do everything. If it needed to be done, Sears' squadron could do it.

Dumbo at Midway– In February, VP-71 was getting larger every day with the addition of new pilots and aircrewmen. The squadron began shifting operations, having fewer crews at Canton and more at Midway. The submarine base at Midway received the message that one of our submarines 600 miles west of the island had a crew member with acute appendicitis. On 14 March 1943, three VP-71 crews in PBY-5As, with Lt Sinclair as flight leader and Lt(jg) Donald and one other PPC as wingmen, flew a search line to find the sub. Donald and his crew spotted the sub and called in the other planes. While his two wingmen circled overhead, Lt Sinclair made the open sea landing, took the sick sailor aboard and delivered him to the hospital on Midway. This search and rescue flight was no big deal. There was no fanfare. This was just three Catalinas doing the job expected of them throughout the war in the Pacific—but the guy with the bad appendix must have thought it was a big deal!

A sign of the times– As more and more of our pilots checked out in PB4Y-1s, our special delivery flights to outlying bases were in 4Ys. For example, on 25 March, Wright, with Didier, Murphy, and Keiser as his co-pilots and navigators, flew a 4Y Kaneohe-Palmyra-Canton. They had no difficulty hitting tiny Canton right on the nose, and returned to Kaneohe on the 26th. On April Fools Day, 1943, Wright, Smith, Bill Lyle, and I flew a 4Y to Canton, again with perfect navigation. We delivered mail, urgently needed small items, and a few new faces for the base at Canton. Having found Canton on the way down, Lyle and I had no difficulty hitting Hawaii on the return flight.

Chapter 4 VB-104 — Stuck in Catalinas

10 April to 15 June 1943, Kaneohe Bay, Oahu, TH

Finally, all the efforts of Harry Sears paid off! On 10 April 1943, the Navy officially established VB-104, a Navy Liberator squadron flying PB4Y-1s. It was not a surprise because Sears had been assured of command of a Navy Liberator squadron when he assumed command of VP-71 three months earlier. It was a surprise, however, that VB-104 continued to operate in PBYs. For the next two months, Sears organized his new squadron while they continued the same old patrols in PBYs.

The old assemblage of bloated VP-71 was now two squadrons; the assignments of personnel to one squadron or the other were official. Everyone was now either in VP-71 or VB-104. There was no more fence-sitting. LtCdr Kelly Harper arrived to take over the command of VP-71 and train it as a new PBY-5C Catalina squadron. VP-71 was water-bound and destined to suffer water landings and takeoffs, but no catapult shots.

The official establishment of VB-104 allowed Sears to organize his dream squadron, select his own crew, and wait patiently for PB4Y-1s. He assigned important duties (besides flying) to his senior PPCs. Lt James Smith became executive officer; Lt Whit Wright flight officer; and Lt Mark Montgomery, the fourth senior PPC, became engineering officer. The squadron's complement of PPCs, besides the four mentioned above, was: Lt John Alley; Lt(jg) Fred Feind; Lt(jg) R. W. "Stoppy" Stoppleman; Lt(jg) Herb Donald; Lt(jg) Ben "Tony"

Antonik; Lt(jg) Page Bowie "Page Boy" Clagett; Lt(jg) H. E. "Deevo" Dvorachek; Lt(jg) Robert "Van Ben" Van Benschoten; Lt(jg) John "Humph" Humphrey; Lt(jg) Don Hager; Lt(jg) Robert "Stormy Joe" Swinton; Lt(jg) W. D. Searls; Lt(jg) A. E. "Big Andy" Anderson; and Lt(jg) N. M. Honey.

Specialists, whose duties did not involve flying, held the squadron together:

Operations Officer Lt Bud Murray;
Flight Surgeon Lt J. L. Messersmith, MD;
Personnel Officer Lt Robert Sims;
A. C. I. Officer Lt R. E. Ming;
Radar Officer Lt C. H. Heinke;
Leading Chief Pete Luedeka ACMM;
Radio Chief K. P. Stafford ACRM;
Chief Machinist Rip Riley ACMM;
Ordnance Chief H. R. Schuler ACOM;
Structures Lloyd G. Shepherd AM1c;
Yeoman W. L. Smith Y1c.

In the days just before 10 April, the senior pilots were busy putting together the 18 crews that would be VB-104. Many of these crews flew together for the first time on the 9th and others on the 10th, still operating in PBY-5As. On 9 April, two new crews flew their first missions. PPC Searls (co-pilots DeGolia and Joslyn, plane captain E. O. Emery, first radio J. R. Plank) and PPC Clagett (co-pilots Lyle and AP Harbidge, plane captain S. E. Pruitt, first radio P. A. Smith) left Kaneohe for Johnston Island where their patrols would take them toward the Japanese base on Kwajalein Island. VB-104's first deployment was modest indeed.

The official establishment of VB-104 did not change the daily routine for P-boat pilots and aircrewmen. The shift from PBYs to Navy Liberators was slow to develop. VB-104 continued to fly old PBYs but some of these flights were of interest. There were two special "Dumbo" open sea landings and also deployments to Midway, Canton, and Johnston islands.

Two Dumbos: Smith and Humphrey– On 20 April 1943, Jim Smith was PPC for the station duty plane. Late in the afternoon, the crew was called out and told that there was a plane down in the ocean some 200 miles south of Hilo. Smith's orders were to "Proceed out and see if you can pick up the crew." Smith doesn't remember his crew, not even the co-pilot, they were just the unlucky guys, like Jim, who had the duty. After the beaching crew launched the PBY-5C and removed the beaching gear, Smith made a routine takeoff from Kaneohe Bay and

headed for the DR (dead reckoning) position given for the downed plane. After reaching this "vague vicinity," Smith started a square search. In good luck, he soon located a raft, with seven men aboard, bobbing around in the very rough seas with swells 20 to 25 feet high.

Jim Smith recalls his limited experienc as a PPC. He had never made a full-stall landing at sea, but his first, and last, full-stall at sea was perfect. Safely on the water, Smith and his crew had trouble keeping track of the raft. In the rough seas, they could only see the raft when both the raft and the PBY crested at the same time. Smith's after station crew put a life preserver on the end of a line out the port blister, and Jim cut the port engine so the prop wouldn't hit the guys in the raft. Jim maneuvered until the raft crew caught hold of the line and life preserver and his after station crew pulled the raft up to the blister. Seven really seasick men scrambled aboard.

Fortunately, the port engine started and Jim's only problem was taking off from a rough sea as it was getting dark. After a few bounces off the tops of the larger swell, the good old PBY stayed in the air and Jim headed for Kaneohe. A perfect night landing on Kaneohe Bay delivered the rescued crew to safety.

In August of 1943, Jim Smith received recognition for his rescue. In his log is an insert that reads:

BOMBING SQUADRON ONE HUNDRED FOUR,
11 August 1943

Pursuant to Cincpac ltr. Pac.-08-rel P15/BA, ser.o1623 of 11 July 1943 and Sec. Nav. despatch 102050 of June, 1943 Lieut. James H. Smith Jr., USN, was this date at quarters before VB-104 presented with Air Medal and Citation by Commander H. E. Sears, USN, on behalf of the Sec. of Navy, and Commander in Chief, U. S. Pacific Fleet, in the name of President of the United States, for meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight as a Patrol Plane Commander on April 20, 1943 in the Hawaiian Area.

H. E. SEARS
Commander, U. S. Navy
Commanding

Our Executive Officer, Jim Smith, was VB-104's first decorated hero! The seven men that Smith rescued would not agree with Jim's self evaluation that he

was not a very experienced PPC. They must have told a tale about being rescued by the hottest PBY pilot in the Fleet.

On 22 May 1943, John Humphrey and his crew (first pilot Heider, co-pilot Lodato) caught the special Dumbo duty when the squadron received word that a PanAm PB2Y Clipper had ditched some 600 miles southwest of Oahu. There had been little, if any, damage to the plane. It needed some repairs, however, before taking off from its watery landing spot. Humphrey's assignment was to fly as soon as possible to the downed plane with materials and a mechanic to do the necessary work. The tale of the downed PB2Y Pan American Clipper is one that Ens Austin (Lody) Lodato will never forget.

"Since first pilot Lt(jg) Hugh Heider was a more experienced navigator than I, he did the navigating. The usual 'lost plane procedure' is to fly to the last reported position of the downed plane and, if it is not in sight, to make a 'square search' until sighting the plane.

"This procedure begins at the last reported position of the missing plane. The search plane flies one mile into the wind, turns 90° to starboard and flies a mile crosswind. Turning to starboard once again, the plane now flies two miles on the downwind leg and another two miles crosswind, all the time turning to starboard. The pilot keeps flying a mile further on each downwind and upwind leg, extending the search area until the missing plane is sighted.

"After a fruitless search, Hugh checked the wind direction and strength as best he could. Returning to his navigation chart, he calculated and plotted the course the downed plane took on the ocean as the wind blew it. A crewman's sighting of the downed PB2Y demonstrated the accuracy of Hugh's calculations.

"In short order, John led a destroyer to the downed PB2Y, which was gently rocking on the swells. Communication between both planes indicated that the Clipper's crew had already made the necessary repairs and was waiting for a calmer sea before taking off. John decided to make an open water landing anyway.

"Everyone in the PBY made the necessary adjustments for this maneuver. Hugh and I changed places. Going to the navigation table, I sharpened several pencils. The force of an open water landing would probably pop some rivets on the PBY. It was the navigator's job to stuff pointed pencils wherever rivets were missing. The water would swell the wood of the pencils and prevent any more sea water from getting into the plane.

"Then I belted himself into the navigator's chair, and the first radioman belted himself into his. Those men not in duty stations where they would be secure, lay strapped in the bunks amidships. A head count disclosed a radioman

who had nowhere to go. The repairman apparently was in the radioman's station. What to do?

"Picking up a handful of sharpened pencils, I got out of the navigator's chair. Then I sat on the navigation table and, gripping the table-top as best I could, waited for John to land the plane on the ocean swells.

"Humphrey intended to do a full stall landing between wave crests. Unfortunately, the Catalina bounced off the crest of a wave and dropped down hard. The pressure of the sudden drop pulled me free of the navigation table. After rising some three feet in the air, I crashed down on its top. The shock ran from the base of my spine to the top of my head; I had an instantaneous splitting headache.

"When the plane settled, I wriggled off the navigation table and crawled forward to the nose of the plane. An examination revealed that the force of the landing had popped three rivets; I immediately pushed a sharpened pencil into each of the three holes.

"As soon as the plane was secured, all hands climbed onto the wing to get a good look at the Clipper, all that is except me. I crawled into an empty bunk and lay there hoping my splitting headache would go away. Several persons tried to get me to go out on the wing, telling me that the fresh air would help but that I might get seasick lying on a bunk. I decided to stay where I was. Eventually John and the rest of the crew got back inside the PBY, started the engines, took off and returned to Kaneohe Bay. To this day, I have no recollection of the return trip; I slept through it all."

Midway– On the evening of 7 May 1943, there was unusual activity in the hangar and offices of VB-104. Five crews, Smith, Alley, Johnston, Clagett, and Swinton, were preparing for an emergency deployment under the command of our executive officer, James Smith—destination unannounced. After evening chow, the crews received plane assignments to PBY-5Cs that they checked and gassed. The Alley crew watched a HEDRON ordnance crew install torpedo racks on the underside of each wing of their plane. **Torpedo racks?** Dropping torpedoes from PBYs is serious business. Something big was in the works.

With the planes ready, the crews got orders to pack their bags with gear for 10 to 14 days and be at the planes for a dawn takeoff—destination Midway. By morning, the scuttlebutt was that a Japanese fleet was heading toward Midway and our five crews were to dash out there and be on the ready. We would get there 11 months and one week after the famous carrier action of the "Battle of Midway." Recently, Tom Dodson, co-pilot for John Alley, commented about this deployment to Midway. His only recollection was, "Alley was the best man at

handling a PBY on the water that I ever saw." Smooth words from a rough Texan[1].

At dawn on the 8th, Kaneohe Bay was smooth as silk, an unfavorable condition for water takeoffs and landings. Lyme Lymenstull remembers the morning very well: "Another plane was put into the water shortly after we were. The first of our planes started to take off and could not break the friction to get airborne so they chopped the throttles. We went further back in the bay, called the harbor master with our problem and he sent a speed boat to run in the area where we would take off. This made waves that allowed us to get airborne." VB-104 crews, charged with becoming PB4Y-1 jockeys, were on their way to Midway in waterbound PBYs.

The flight from Kaneohe to Midway was one of the most scenic long ocean flights in the Pacific. From Kaneohe, the route circled the north shore of Oahu, then went on northwest to the beautiful north shore of Kauai and the Na Pali coast. West-northwest from Kauai, the route passed small islands, rocks, pinnacles, beautiful coral lagoons, and reefs strung all the way to Midway. Nihoa and Necker, small islands or large rocks, marked the way to very large French Frigate Shoals with its tiny Tern Island, expanded by dredging to make a small runway. The prominent feature of the French Frigate area was La Perouse Pinnacle. On toward Midway were Gardner Pinnacles, Laysan Island, Lisianski Island, and the ring of small islands of Pearl and Hermes Reef. The pinnacles were striking, standing out of the water like Empire State buildings. Imagine what La Perouse and Gardner thought when they came upon these pinnacles in the middle of the ocean. More striking from the air were the shallow waters of the reefs, showing every shade of blue and green, the lighter shades outlining the white coral sands of the low islands. Navigating to Midway was as easy as finding your way down Main Street in your own hometown.

Midway, at Lat. N 28° 12′; Long. 177° 22′W, was well north of the Tropic of Cancer and 1135 miles WNW of Oahu. Since 1903, it had been a major station on the trans-Pacific cable, and, since 1935, it had been a major stop on the PanAm Clipper route to the western Pacific. Wake Island, approximately 1000 miles WSW of Midway, had also been a PanAm stop and cable station. Those services stopped when the Japanese captured Wake Island on 23 December 1941.

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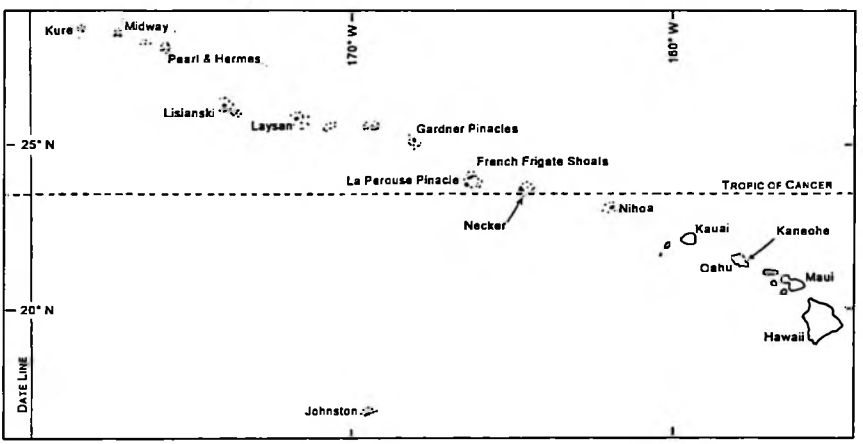
[1] Much of our information on our deployment to Midway comes from the manuscript memoirs of Robert "Stormy Joe" Swinton, PPC, and accounts written by two members of the Alley crew, H B "Tillie" Tillman (first radio) and Allie "Lyme" Lymenstull (aviation machinist mate).

Now, Midway was the end of the line for the Pacific cable and the jumping-off point for our subs heading to Japan and our bombers raiding Wake.

Midway was approximately 130 miles east of the International Date Line. Most of our patrols went westward across the Date Line, so we flew the first hour or so of our patrol today, most of it tomorrow, then returned and landed at Midway today.

Three of the five crews that departed Kaneohe made it to Midway without incident. The Swinton crew turned back because of engine trouble when about



The scenic route from Kaneohe to Midway

100 miles out of Kaneohe. The Alley crew made the trip to Midway an "E" ride. Alley was to rendezvous with a squadron of SBDs and an R4D (C-47) and "mother hen" them to Midway. Lyme recalls, "The SBDs had belly tanks that would let them fly the 500 miles to French Frigate Shoals, a little less than half way to Midway. French Frigate was a coral atoll where they had driven pilings around tiny Tern Island, pumped it full of coral to make a landing strip with a gas storage tank and several small buildings. The French Frigate station crew lived on a rusty ship anchored in the lagoon."

In trying to keep up with the high speed, fast flying SBDs, Alley had burned half of his fuel. When the SBDs landed on the French Frigate strip, Alley landed on the lagoon and coaxed a gas barge to come out and refuel his PBY.

The crew of the French Frigate gas barge was most unhappy to have this unexpected chore. It involved using a hand operated pump to move gas from

fifty-gallon drums into the PBY. J. B. Thompson, Alley's co-pilot, often retold the story about the gas barge and the PBY riding the rough water of the lagoon. The Alley after-station crew was concerned that the barge would drift under the main struts of the PBY, the PBY would come down on the barge, and the struts would be bent. Bent struts would have given the Alley crew some temporary duty on French Frigate Shoals. The Alley guys told the barge crew to keep their damn barge away from the struts. The French Frigate crew did not appreciate this suggestion. They were a tough lot, most sent to duty on French Frigate as disciplinary action. They only conformed to the request to stay away from the struts when someone in Alley's after station crew worked the slide of his .45 to put a round in the chamber. After that, the gas barge crew showed loving care for the struts of the PBY. Sailors at French Frigate Shoals were immune to the threat of assignment to a bad duty station; they were already at the worst. They understood, however, the click of the action of a .45. Best guess is that it was Lyme's .45 that did the clicking. With the extra gas, Alley flew on to Midway.

At sunset on 8 May, the special mission had four crews on Midway and one crew, Swinton, still at Kaneohe. The next day, 9 May, Alley, Johnson, Clagett, and Smith flew long, 11-hour patrols. They operated from the old PanAm China Clipper sea plane area off the eastern end of Sand Island (the western of the two islands of Midway). They did not have to carry torpedoes and they sighted no enemy. Searls, operating from the island, flew a 2.0 hour patrol in the old, unarmed PB4Y-1. Searls? How did the Searls crew get involved in this Midway madness?

The Searls crew was a bonus for the hurry-up defense of Midway. On 5 May, Searls (co-pilots DeGolia and Joslyn) flew from Kaneohe to Midway in one of our stripped-down PB4Y-1s, 31939. This was a routine flight, one that the squadron flew often—out one day and back the next. These flights were to carry passengers, mail, and urgently needed small supplies between Midway and Kaneohe. On the following day, 6 May, Searls headed back to Kaneohe with a plane load of passengers. Soon after takeoff, #1 engine caught fire and Searls returned to Midway. While Searls waited for the engine to be replaced, the Midway scare developed. The engine fire on the 6th had gotten the Searls crew and 31939 a layover ticket for the Midway operation.

While our first patrols from Midway were out, Swinton, on his second attempt, and Antonik, a late addition to the Midway gang, flew from Kaneohe to Midway. There was no "hoopla" with the Antonik crew's departure. The crew had returned from Johnston on the 1st, bounced a 5A on the 4th and flown a very long Kaneohe patrol on the 5th. Antonik flew to Midway in the plane that Swinton had returned on the previous day. When Swinton and Antonik landed

at Midway, they brought 104's strength to seven crews, one transport PB4Y-1, a loaner PBY-5A, and six PBY-5C water planes.

One of the several nuisances of operating PBYs from the water was the need to keep a taxi crew on each plane. Although we tied our planes securely to buoys, various events could make immediate taxiing necessary. Therefore, a qualified taxi-pilot, a tower mech, and someone to handle the buoy, anchors, and sea-anchors had to be on each PBY at all times. You ate, slept, and flew in your trusty P-boat. With luck, you could escape the buoy tieup. If there was room ashore, you could taxi your plane to the beaching ramp where it was grabbed by a beaching crew, fitted with "training" wheels, and hauled out of the water. During this scare, Midway had more planes than sets of beaching gear so some planes had to stay in the water.

On the 10th, our Midway crews flew 10-hour patrols. Searls, operating from the airfield, borrowed a 5A and the rest of our crews, operating from the lagoon, flew our 5Cs. On the next day, 11 May, we were at it again, with Searls patrolling in the transport 4Y-1. Most of the crews flew their last Midway patrols on the 14th; but 104 was not finished at Midway.

On the 15th, Clagett (co-pilots Lyle and Harbidge) flew 11.7 hours from the water in a PBY-5C and Searls (co-pilot DeGolia) flew 12.8 hours from the land in the "loaner" PBY-5A. These flights were part of the Army B-24 raid on Wake. Bill Lyle remembers the Army Air Corps briefing at the "O" club the night before the raid: "The 'Colonel' in Charge was giving the pilots the 'word' when a 2nd Lt jumped up and yelled, 'What's the color of Hershey?' His compadres all yelled, 'Brown! Brown! Brown!' The rowdies were escorted out of the briefing for being Drunk and Disorderly." Dagwood DeGolia wrote in his log for the flight, "Scouting line for bombing attack." The "Scare at Midway 'Joint Forces' Operation" closed with a raid on Wake by Army B-24s—attended by old faithful PBYs.

Radioman H B Tillman remembers flying in a Dumbo PBY for the Army raid. "The Army attempted to bomb Wake Island. We were in sight of Wake with no guns, only a 'Very' pistol. We didn't see a plane, Japanese or ours. My understanding was that the Army Air Corps on this raid never located Wake Island." Wake is a tiny spot in the ocean, 1000 miles from Midway and at the maximum range for Army B-24s with a bomb load. The Army 24s had no margin for error; no extra fuel for a search. They either hit Wake on the nose and made their bombing run or turned back to Midway.

When Clagett landed after his last patrol, the water in the lagoon was very rough and one prop was bent by wave action. Then, while the beaching crew was attaching the beaching wheels, a surge lifted the PBY and dropped it on the ramp,

popping many rivets out of the keel. While the plane was on the beach being repaired, Clagett met a fellow officer who had orders to leave Midway. His departure was complicated by the musical instrument in his gear—a piano. Page agreed to haul this piano to Kaneohe! The piano, something less than a concert grand, just squeezed into the after station of Page Clagett's PBY.

We never did carry torpedoes but there was a torpedo scare! Lyme recalls that the Alley crew was on standby at their plane which was on beaching gear near the launching ramp. "All of the sudden a siren sounded and a couple of ordnance trucks, with red lights flashing, came into view. Each had a torpedo behind them and they pulled up under our plane. They started scrambling all over the plane to rig the torpedoes. We were speechless! The pilots showed up and we asked them what the score was but they did not know. They were having a difficult time with the torpedoes and finally 'Mo' Mahaley, our ordnance man, said, 'Let's give them a hand before they screw up the plane.' We finally got the torpedoes hung and came down off the wing. Our pilots had said earlier that we would only have a skeleton crew if we were going on a torpedo run. We were drawing cards or straws to see who would go. About then, one of the base ordnance officers with the trucks said, 'OK. We wanted to make a test run to see how long it would take to load torpedoes if we had to.' Our pilot gave him a real chewing out and we were ready to kill them. All that scare for nothing."

On 17 May, the squadron headed back to Kaneohe. The action that caused the dash to Midway was over. Clagett's plane, loaded down with a piano, made a safe trip to Kaneohe. Swinton[2] provided the excitement for the day. In his own words; "We were on our way back to Kaneohe. I headed our PBY into the wind out on the water ready for takeoff and noticed the island garbage tugboat right in my path. Instead of waiting for it to get out of the way, I headed to the left of its position and started my takeoff. I had to be sure not to steer too far to the left because of a retaining wall about 20 feet high. While the hull was still in the water, my flight path seemed to be safe to miss the wall. What I failed to take into account was that we had lifted out of the water and the wind was blowing me toward the wall. Too late, I was about a foot too low and a foot too far left to miss the wall. The wing pontoon hit the wall and crumpled. I pulled the power off, landed and returned to the dock. The rest of the planes in the group flew on to Hawaii. The damage was so bad that they had to replace the outer left wing."

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[2] Swinton did not record this very short flight and accident in his log. In his memoirs, he wrote that the accident occurred on the 15th and the "rest . . . flew on to Hawaii." All the logs from the other crews show that our planes flew back to Hawaii on the 17th.

Swinton spent a very embarrassing week on Midway. One of his co-pilots, "Jumpin' Joe" Weller, used the time to improve his pool and bowling. A new float was flown out from Kaneohe and installed. Swinton and Didier made a test hop on the 20th and the whole crew flew to Kaneohe the next day.

"Torpedoes" and "Japanese fleet" meant dangerous assignments but thoughts of war are lost from our present day memories of Midway. When we talk about Midway at our reunions, the topic is always Gooney Birds. We spent eight days on Midway, four days flying patrols and four days playing with Gooney Birds.

VB-104's deployment to Midway may have been trivial in the war effort but it served to get seven crews, over one third of the squadron, working together and developing mutual confidence and respect. Sending seven crews to Midway does not seem like much, but we gave them all we had. Two of our crews (Humphrey and Van Benschoten) were at Johnston and six (Stoppy, Monty, Feind, Wright, Donald, and Sears) were picking up new Navy Liberators in San Diego. Midway was a garden spot compared to our next island playground.

Canton Special– We had no sooner returned from Midway than we were off on another chase; a smaller group made a longer deployment to Canton Island. On 21 May, five crews, Austin, Van Benschoten, Searls, Clagett, and Dvorachek, left Kaneohe in PBY-5Cs—good old water planes again—bound for their first stop at Palmyra. (We do not have a log from the Deevo crew but other logs mention that Deevo was on this Canton deployment.) Jeep Austin was the senior officer and the leader of this Canton contingent. For this deployment, Jeep had Mike Keiser as his co-pilot. (Our crews were still unsettled; Mike would become first pilot with Montgomery.) At Palmyra, Van Ben's plane developed a gas leak so he returned to Kaneohe while the other four PPCs flew on to Canton, settling there on the lagoon in the afternoon of 22 May. Van Ben made it to Canton on the 24th. On 4 June, Whit Wright arrived at Canton with Montgomery and Honey (and others), left them on Canton, and took off that night for Kaneohe with Dvorachek (and others). The squadron needed Deevo at Kaneohe to take the crash course in how to fly a PB4Y-1 without crashing. His instructor? Whit Wright!

At Canton, the 104 crews operated from the lagoon and flew the usual schedule: fly one day, rest the next day, standby on the third day, fly the next, etc. When situations required special searches, the crews flew every other day.

Canton Island is 170 miles south of the equator at Lat. S 02° 50', 171° 43' W; one of a cluster of atolls called the Phoenix Islands. Like most of these Pacific spots, position was everything. Canton is 760 miles southwest of Palmyra, 680 miles north of Samoa and 720 miles northeast of Funafuti. Most planes traveling

between the South Pacific and Hawaii made a landing on Canton's runway or lagoon.

Canton is an unusual atoll because the land makes a nearly continuous loop, broken only by two openings into the lagoon. It was a dismal island unless you were desperate for a place to land, some gas, and a square meal, well, something to eat. There were only a few trees on Canton, planted by PanAm, and little vegetation of any kind. The water in the lagoon, away from the opening to the sea, was pee warm and did not invite swimming. Near the channel to the sea, where the lagoon was regularly flushed with ocean water, swimming was more refreshing. The channel through the reef and island was narrow, allowing only small ships to enter the lagoon. Supplies were always a problem. Throughout the year, daily air temperatures were 95° Fahrenheit around noon and 75° just before sunrise. Humidity was always high; rainfall was scarce and unpredictable.

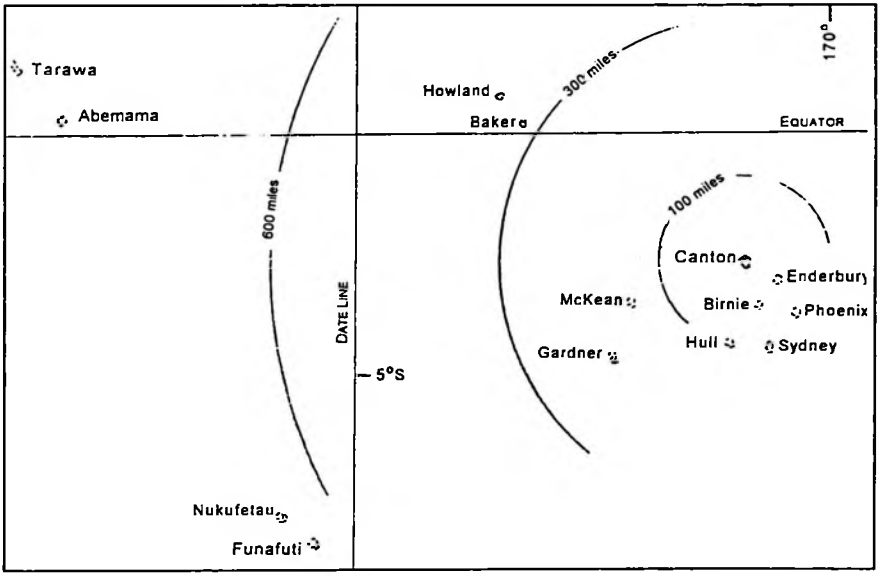
In 1938, PamAm developed Canton as a Clipper stop on its route to New Zealand. With the onset of World War II, Canton became an Army Air Corps base with a coral runway, serving the same functions for military planes as it had for PanAm. PBYs continued using the old PanAm seaplane base.

While most planes used Canton as a stepping stone, we used it as a base. Our patrols out of Canton went to the northwest, toward the Japanese bases in the Gilbert Islands. It was 490 miles to the date line if you headed due west and 950 miles to Tarawa it you headed a little north of west. We knew nothing special about Tarawa; it was just a spot on our maps. We flew 600-mile patrols, averaging 11 hours, and made some shorter hops on special searches. A little over 500 miles west northwest of Canton is a very special spot on our globe—the intersection of the International Date Line (the 180th meridian) and the equator. A plane circling this point flies in four hemispheres and goes from today to tomorrow and back to today. Pilots and aircrewmen who have circled this magic spot are a small, exclusive group: Knights of the Golden Dragon.

Of equal interest were two small islands, Howland and Baker. About 50 miles apart, these two islands are 180 miles east of the date line, just north of the equator and 360 miles northwest of Canton. Amelia Earhart had expected to land on Howland, 2 July 1937, when she was lost at sea on the New Guinea to Howland leg of her around-the-world flight. Howland's 2400-foot airstrip had been prepared for Earhart. Americans had colonized Howland and Baker, both dry islands and without lagoons, in 1936. Japanese flying boats strafed and bombed and Jap subs shelled both islands in December of 1941. The colonists left the islands early in 1942. When 104 was flying around Howland, the runway was not usable because of both Japanese and American bomb craters. In September 1943, four months after our crews were flying over Howland and

Baker, our Army troops landed there. They built a fighter strip on Baker and rebuilt the old Amelia Earhart strip on Howland for an emergency airstrip. During the Gilbert and Marshall operations, an Army fighter squadron operated from Baker.

Our five crews spent almost three weeks on Canton, averaging eight patrols in that period. On 27 May, our crews began flying every other day, noting in their logs that they were making special searches for an Army B-24 that was down at sea. On 30 May, they went back to flying one-in-three although continuing to



VB-104's patrol area during Canton deployment in PBY-5Cs

look for the missing B-24. One of the occupants of the downed B-24, perhaps a crew member, was Lou Zamperini, a world class miler at The University of Southern California. At USC, Zamperini had attended classes with Bill Lyle, one of the searchers, co-pilot with Page Clagett. A major part of the search for Zamperini was checking all of the small atolls around Canton to see if the B-24 crew had managed to get ashore. On the 28th, Searls checked Gardner and Hull, southwest and south of Canton.

On 1 June, Van Benschoten, with co-pilots McCutcheon and Bittenbender, made the usual aerial search of Hull Island then landed in the lagoon of Phoenix Island, a small atoll 90 miles southeast of Canton. Van Ben was the only PPC to land on an outlying island lagoon. Buck Montoux, mech in the Van Ben crew, has recently written his recollections of landing in the Phoenix Island lagoon. "Remember the B-24 search and particularly the landing at Phoenix by Van Ben and crew? Well, when we buzzed the beach, there were many very light skinned natives with very light hair. Of course we all wanted a closer look at the wahines as attire was very sparse on the bottom and nothing aloft. Get the idea? We tried to taxi ashore but lookouts on both wings tips and in the nose could see nothing but coral head after coral head. So Van Ben aborted our quest for anthropological enlightenment. He was one fine pilot and a real good person." Bitt also has written his recollections of Van Ben's landing at Phoenix. "As we flew by the shore, the natives waved their grass skirts, and so Van and McCutcheon felt we just had to land. Van stationed me in the bow for the water landing. As the hull cut through the later, I saw the coral heads passing under us. They appeared to be only a foot or two under water and I expected any one of them to rip the hull open. When we settled to a stop, I told Van that we had better get out of there because of the shallow water over the coral heads. So, without paying the natives a visit, we turned around and took off, and again I expected to hit bottom. But we made it." Oh, for the life of a P-boat sailor.

On 2 June, Austin checked Sydney and Hull islands, both 100 miles south of Canton. On the 7th, Clagett and Lyle made a special check of Birnie Island, just 30 miles south of Canton. They saw nothing of the downed B-24. Zamperini was found, but not by 104.

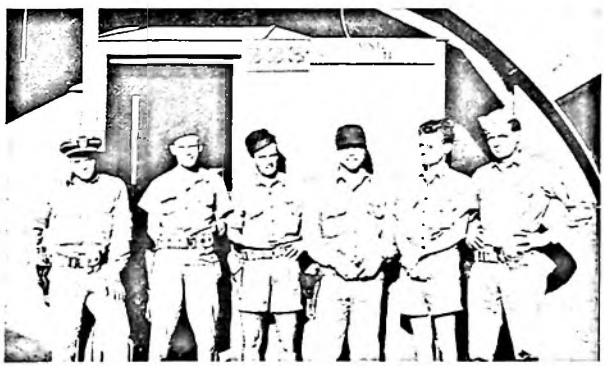
Some of us recall that the five crews of VB-104 went to Canton just for the Zamperini search. Nothing in individual logs indicates that was the case. The crews flew regular patrols on the 24th, 25th, and 26th of May, and did not write in their logs about the B-24 search until the 27th and 28th.

Our crews made the two-day return flight to Kaneohe without incident, arriving at Kaneohe on the 12th and 13th of June. Clagett got back to Kaneohe a day early by flying a 11.1 hour search out of Canton on the 10th that ended at Palmyra. He flew to Kaneohe the next day. Our crews recall that the searches from Canton were interesting and the time there was not unpleasant, but they were eager to get back to Kaneohe and their new PB4Y-1s. For a hot, new PB4Y-1 squadron we were spending a lot of time in P-boats.

Johnston Island Patrols– Johnston Island (now called Johnston Atoll) was a poor hunk of real estate in a marvelous location. From the air, the view of the

extensive coral reefs, with water colors ranging from clear dark blue to light green, was spectacular. The only dry land was a strip of coral about one mile long and 100 yards wide with a mound of coral midway along one side. From the air, Johnston looked like a large carrier, made of dirt, aground on a beautiful reef. There were no trees but lots of birds that made their living off the sea and used Johnston for a place to nest and shit.

Location was everything. Johnston was about 600 miles west southwest of Oahu, 450 miles south of French Frigate Shoals and all by itself. If you wanted a piece of ground in this part of the Pacific Ocean, Johnston was your only choice. Later in the war, Johnston would become a stop on the air route from Oahu to the Marshall and Marianas islands and points west. But now it was the end of the line—next stop Japanese airfields on Kwajalein in the Marshall islands. Patrols from Johnston were designed to detect Japanese advances toward Hawaii from Kwajalein and Truk. Johnston was also a last stop on the route our submarines took to these Japanese bases. Subs stopped at Johnston for some fresh vegetables, mail, a swim, and last minute instructions. Their stop was not without added danger.



Pilots Tony Antonik, Little Andy, Big Andy, Horse Thompson, Bird Dog (USMC), Jock Sutherland. Johnston Island in front of VMSB 223 ready room. May 1943.

To enter the lagoon at Johnston, our subs had to line up on the markers that indicated the channel through the reef and proceed on this track at slow speed. In this approach, they were sitting-ducks for torpedoes from Jap subs that had only to sit off Johnston and wait for one of our subs to do the predictable approach or departure. We helped. One of our planes met each of our subs approaching Johnston and escorted it to the reef. We looked into the crystal clear waters where we could see enemy subs even when they were below periscope depth. We provided a reverse escort as our subs departed.

Our crews at Johnston flew every day. When we were not escorting subs, we flew patrols in the general direction of the Marshall Islands, which were just over

1000 miles to the southwest. Some days we flew 300 milers and other days 500 milers, the latter nearly half way to the Marshalls. The International Date Line was 620 miles west of Johnston. No one ever mentioned in their logs that they crossed it on Johnston patrols.

Little Johnston Island was protected by our two PBY-5As and one-half of VMSB-223, a marine SBD squadron. There was also a Grumman Duck, but the scuttlebutt was that it was there only to make certain that the island CO could get in his flight time to draw flight pay. The other half of VMSB-223 was at beautiful Palmyra. Most of our crews had been to Palmyra, the Johnston half of VMSB-223 had not. We enjoyed teasing them with tales of beautiful Palmyra and how lucky the other half of their squadron was to be on beautuful Palmyra and how unlucky they were to be on Johnston. We often let our imaginations run away and described Palmyra as over-run with Dorothy Lamour types.

Henry "Buster" Butler, plane captain, Antonik Crew, Johnston patrol, stbd waist, PBY-5A.

Moaning Birds were a memorable feature of Johnston Island. They dug burrows for nest sites and spent the night in their burrows moaning. The huts that we lived in had chicken wire around their bases to prevent the birds from getting under them to do their moaning. Occasionally, a bird would locate next to the hut and start moaning. One of the SBD pilots would grab the official Moaning Bird Baseball Bat and go on the hunt. In a few minutes we would hear swat, bang, and the exclamation, "Got 'em!" Everyone was now awake, even those who had slept through the moaning.

A more serious problem with the moaning birds was their habit of sitting on the coral runway very early in the morning, waiting for some signal to take off and head out to sea for their daily fishing trip. When we took off through these birds, they rose into the air and banged off our plane, usually removing all of the fixed radio antennas. We cranked out our trailing antenna on most of our flights. On one takeoff, Tony Antonik collected a moaning bird in the oil cooler air scoop, which made him return to base and clean feathers and a little meat from the scoop before he could take off again. A partial solution to this bird problem was to have two jeeps race down the runway ahead of the plane on takeoff.

Fortunately, Antonik never caught a jeep in his landing gear, but a few times he came close.

Our crews usually went to Johnston for two weeks. We checked out a freshly serviced PBY-5A from Kaneohe HEDRON, flew to Johnston, and relieved one of our crews there. The next day, the new crew flew Johnston patrols and the relieved crew flew back to Kaneohe. A fourteen-day tour at Johnston involved flying every day, for a total of approximately 80 hours. Fortunately, none of us ran into a large Japanese task force headed from Truk to Hawaii.

We often had passengers on our dull patrols, an indication of the level of boredom on Johnston. SBD pilots went along with us, attracted by the cooler air, lack of moaning birds, and soft bunks.

A more personal note from Johnston Island I enjoyed the lazy days at Johnston. We went there as a few guys doing their jobs in a PBY and returned working together as a fine crew. Tony Antonik was a great PPC to fly with and he taught Jock Sutherland and me a lot about flying patrols in PBY-5As. He did not need to help us with navigation. Jock had a masters degree in chemical engineering and mathematics was a cinch for him. I had not finished my undergraduate work but my last math courses had been a year of plane and spherical trigonometry and a semester of vectors and engineering drawing. Both Jock and I were very familiar with vectors and spherical triangles so the most difficult part of dead reckoning and celestial navigation for us was trying to use the forms or work sheets and the bulky volumes of H.O. 214, then H.O. 218, that the Navy provided. When we abandoned using the "HOs" and the forms, things were easier.

The mainstays of Antonik's PBY crew were Henry "Buster" Butler, plane captain and aviation machinist mate, and W. D. "Dru" Stainback, first radioman. Our second radioman, well tutored by Dru, was W. Mazurek. All three were outstanding individuals and experts at their jobs. Jock, Buster, Mazurek, and I became the nucleus of this crew, together for the entire tour. We trained Stainback so well that the skipper stole him for his first radioman. No problem there, Mazurek moved to first radio for us. Then the skipper took our PPC and we had the devil's own time trying to break in a replacement for Tony.

My second week on Johnston, the Humphrey crew was there. I remember this week very well because I got to know Humph's co-pilot, A. M. Lodato. On the second week of my second trip to Johnston, the Swinton crew was there and I got to know one of his co-pilots, R. M. Finley. I flew the remainder of the war with Lody and Fin—Johnston Island to Tokyo and the Sea of Japan via Guadalcanal, Tinian, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Lody and Fin became my lifelong friends.

Tony Antonik provided the only excitement that we saw or heard of at Johnston. Returning from one of our long patrols, Tony sat staring at the depth charge on our port wing. He insisted that he recognized that depth charge as one he had carried in the South Pacific during the Coral Sea Battle in 1942. Tony decided to drop it and see if it would explode. There was no explosion, just the same splash as a 250-pound rock. When we landed at Johnston, all hands noticed the depth charge was missing and hoped we had sunk a Jap sub. Everyone thought Tony's trick was funny, except the Johnson Island skipper. He was madder than hell at Tony for wasting a depth charge. Tony took none of his tirade. He kept repeating that the depth charge was no good. It did not explode. Tony emphasized that it was fortunate that he had dropped the "dud" in a test and not on a Jap sub. We soon left for Kaneohe, but only after Tony had enjoyed a few days as a local celebrity, "The guy who had dropped the depth charge."

Who went to Johnston? When 104 came into being, 10 April, Clagett and Searls were at Johnston. Antonik replaced Clagett and, in a week, Humphrey replaced Searls. On 30 April, Van Ben arrived and on April Fool's Day, Antonik headed for Kaneohe, leaving Humphrey and Van Benschoten to do the honors at Johnston. Our flight log records are incomplete so we do not know who relieved Humphrey but this unknown crew served a week with Van Ben. Another unknown crew relieved Van Ben (We had crews at Midway at this time; another squadron may have covered Johnston.) and then Tony Antonik relieved one of the unidentified crews. This was Tony's second time at Johnston. His was the only crew to do two tours on Johnston. Antonik shared the last week of this tour with Swinton. Anderson and his crew replaced Antonik, and the Swinton crew finished our responsibilities on Johnston, returning to Kaneohe on 15 June.

On 11 and 12 June, the crews and planes deployed at Canton returned to Kaneohe and on the 15th, Swinton returned from Johnston. These dates of mid-June 1943 mark the end of VB-104's operation as a PBY squadron. From then on, it was PB4Y-1 Navy Liberators all the way.

Chapter 5 Transpacs, Training, and Travel

Mid-June to late August 1943 San Diego, Kaneohe, Guadalcanal

PBYs were now things of the past. We were devoting all of our time to PB4Y-1 Navy Liberators. First we worked on accepting our new planes in San Diego and flying them to Hawaii. Then we concentrated on intensive training, learning not only to fly our new planes but to fight with them. Finally, well-trained but bored with practicing, we traveled to the combat zone.

Transpacs– Forming a PB4Y squadron at Kaneohe kept us focused on our training and safe from the bright lights of San Diego. However, to pick up our new planes, we had to fly to San Diego. There we waited patiently for our planes to arrive from the Consolidated plant and made fleet-ready at Naval Air Station, North Island. Fortunately, Sears insisted that each crew fly to San Diego well before their new PB4Y-1 was ready. As a result, most of our crews fought the Battle of San Diego for many days, resting occasionally in the Pickwick Hotel or the Hotel del Coronado. When a new plane was ready, its crew flew a short check flight or two, said long goodbys, and then tackled the transpac, the 2100 mile flight across the eastern Pacific to Hawaii.

Most of our transpacs were to deliver or return our new PB4Y-1s, but VB-104's first two transpacs were for PBY-5Cs—the newest model of the water-only PBY. Two PPCs, Swinton and Anderson, made these flights. Each of their ferry

crews included two co-pilots and three crewmen. With Swinton were co-pilots Jerry Didier and Bob Finley and crewmen Berg, Palatini, and Anania.

On 20 April, the Swinton and Andy ferry crews rode an Army Air Corps LB-30 troop transport from Hickham Field on Oahu to Hamilton Field in California and then south to Palmdale. From Palmdale to Long Beach, they rode with the Army but in a different plane, a C-47 (DC-3). At Long Beach, Swinton borrowed his sister's car, complete with gas ration book, and with Andy, and probably others, drove from Long Beach to San Diego. Testing and accepting the two PBY-5Cs took two weeks and the crews found time to enjoy San Diego. On the morning of 3 May, Andy and Swinton flew short test flights in their new planes and in the afternoon they took off, loaded with gas, on their way to Kaneohe. For transpacs, we removed the PBY's bunks and installed temporary gas tanks. Running out of gas was usually not a problem on transpacs in PBYs.

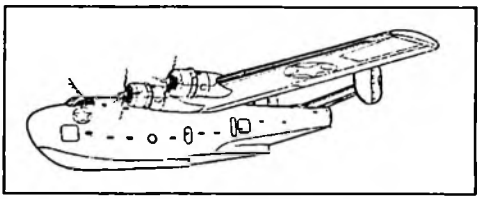
Well into the flight, beyond the point-of-no-return, the two PBYs encountered an exceptionally strong weather front. Andy elected to go under the storm at 1000 feet, but Swinton decided to remain at cruising altitude and try to find a hole in the clouds. Swinton flew in extreme turbulence for one hour and finally broke out of the clouds, the turbulence having tossed him down to 1000 feet. Both planes made it to Kaneohe. Swinton flew for 19.5 hours (12.0 nite). His experience with the weather front on this transpac earned him the nickname "Stormy Joe."

Jerry Didier, Swinton's co-pilot, told the story of this flight (usually more than once) at every 104 reunion. He closed each rendition with the remark, "When we taxied up to the beaching ramp at Kaneohe, *both floats were in the water.*" Only P-boat flyers will realize that this is only possible if the plane is sinking, very heavily loaded, or the wing is bent down. Jerry maintained that the extreme turbulence bent the main wing spar and 08375 became a source of spare parts for the Kaneohe PBYs. We don't know why VB-104 was involved in ferry flights for these two PBY-5Cs instead of our new PB4Y-1s. Perhaps it was just a chance to get some experience for Swinton and Anderson and to get the two crews a few days in San Diego.

VB-104 began ferrying PB4Y-1s in early May 1943. The Sears and Feind crews went first class on an overnight Boeing Clipper flight to San Francisco on 5/6 May. On 6 May, Montgomery (with co-pilots Honey and Swanson and first radio Ehemann) and Donald (with co-pilots Goodman and Bauer, Rolland mech and Sams radio) went Kaneohe to San Francisco, at a lower class—in the hull of a Coronado PB2Y. Whit Wright and his ferry crew went to San Diego at this time but we have no information of the class level of his travel. On the 9th,

Stoppy and his ferry crew went to San Francisco in a PB2Y-3 operated by PanAm. All these crews were at North Island in San Diego by May 10. Jeff Hemphill, Stoppleman's co-pilot, wrote the only interesting item in any of the pilots' logs for these flights. Jeff recorded the name, Miss Jensen, RN, but not the 'phone number, of the hostess on his airline DC-3 flight to San Diego.

The Feind and Wright crews were the first of this ferry group to transpac. On the morning of the 22nd, they flew short test flights and, in the afternoon, departed for Kaneohe. Wright was in Bu. No 32073 and Feind in Bu. No. 32077. Feind's co-pilot, John Burton, flew this hop after a one day honeymoon at the Hotel del. Stoppy flew his transpac on the 23rd. All three transpacs were uneventful. On the 24th, Montgomery, in 32072, and Donald, in 32071, started a transpac and as they approached the point-of-no-return, they reversed course and returned to San Diego. At the halfway mark, Donald's "Howgozit" chart showed inadequate fuel to reach Hawaii, therefore the return to San Diego. Herb's plane had plenty of fuel but the gauges had indicated otherwise.



PB2Y-2 Coronado

On the 26th, Herb Donald started his second try at a transpac with this result; "At the point of decision, I was ordered [by radio] to 'return to base.' I sent the message, 'Have ample fuel to reach destination. Advise.' San Diego said, 'Return to base.' I sent, 'JIG your last message,' they sent 'Return to base.' I knew I could make it back in spite of the headwind. When base Ops realized what they had done, they were sweating. A very embarrassed and apologetic commodore was alongside when I cut the engines. He said the ensign on duty had not told him of my message. (After that they assigned a more experienced officer to that duty--about a year later I caught it.) The flight took 15.6 hours. I wonder if that is a record?"

On the 27th, Monty, and, on the 29th, Herb Donald flew uneventful transpacs to Kaneohe. Herb Donald remembers his transpac very well; "The gauges were still wrong even though we had changed to #32074, which became 'Donald's Duck'--a name the crew picked. Bill Goodman was navigating. I told him to report fuel on board as whatever the 'Howgozit' said we should have. All Lies! All went well except the auto pilot was out. I couldn't stay awake and Leo (Bauer) was tired. He had just gotten married during the delay of our transpac."

On the 25th, Sears flew his new plane, 32048, to test its hot, new Erco ball nose turret. He flew his uneventful transpac on 27/28 May. The skipper got everything right on the first try.

By the first of June, VB-104 had six new PB4Y-1s at Kaneohe, but more planes were needed to provide the squadron with its complement of 15 planes. On the 1st and 2nd of June, the Smith and Alley crews rode a Boeing-Clipper from Oahu to San Francisco and then flew to San Diego in an R4D. Alley flew 32075 to Kaneohe on the 10th and Smith flew 32080 to Kaneohe on the 17th.

Humphrey and his crew flew to Alameda on 2 June 1943, in a NATS PB2Y-3. Humphrey, with his co-pilots, Heider and Lodato, hung around San Diego until 5 July 1943, when they flew an uneventful transpac to Kaneohe in 32076. The Humphrey crew set the squadron record (perhaps the all-Navy record) for layover in San Diego—thirty-two days. Heider paid the price. On a flight physical taken soon after his return to Kaneohe, he scored a very bad, low number on his Schneider, a cardio-vascular fitness test. After the physical, Heider got a butch haircut and Jock Sutherland had a field day—"Hairless Hugh Heider with the Minus Four Schneider."

Between 6 and 10 May, we returned four PB4Y-1s to San Diego and brought out four new ones. These two-way transpacs were: Stoppy, back to San Diego in 32061 and return to Kaneohe in 32069; Feind, back in 32071 and return in 32070; Wright, back in 32074 and return in 32081; and Sears, back in 32077 and return in 32060. All these returned planes would find their way back to our squadron. Wright, with co-pilots Dempster and Skeem, made a second trip to San Diego on 11 June. They did not fly again until 22 June, when Whit and Dempster flew a 1.4-hour acceptance check in 32081. This was the plane that Whit always called "The Queen," although the crew branded the plane's side with "Whit's Shits." This check flight was memorable. In the "remarks" column of his flight log Whit recorded, "San Diego test – WAVES Grey and Smith passengers." Leave it to Whit.

The last ferry crews were Antonik, Searls, Van Benschoten, Montgomery (again), and Clagett. All but the Clagett crew had flown to San Diego in the bilges of PB2Y-2 Coronados; the Clagetts went first class in the Boeing Clipper. Bill Lyle recalls the Clipper flight: "Our crew (Clagett) flew to San Francisco on a Pan-American Clipper. What a flight. We took off from Oahu about 4:30, had cocktails then dinner at 6 pm. Played cards 'til 10 pm and then retired to 'Pullman type' berths. We were awakened at 6 am, had breakfast and landed in San Francisco Bay."

The return transpacs were: Antonik in 32079, with Jock Sutherland and me and check pilot LtCdr Bales; Searls, 32074 (again); Van Ben 32071 (again); Monty 32062; Clagett 32073 (again). Three of these planes were on their second transpacs; we had returned them to San Diego in early May. Other crews had a chance to frolic at the Pickwick Hotel in San Diego and at the Hotel del in Coronado and fly transpacs but we have no log books for these crews.

The squadron flew four Hawaii-to-San Diego transpacs and at least 22 San Diego-to-Hawaii transpacs to get two PBY-5Cs and our 15 new PB4Y-1s to Kaneohe. Transpacs became routine for us. The 2100 nautical mile hop was the equivalent of a 1000-mile patrol, but with no Japanese to contend with.

Training– The squadron's home during training was Kaneohe Bay Naval Air Station on the windward shore of Oahu. Crews flew training hops almost every day, and often our dessert for a morning or afternoon flight was a night flight. No one complained. We had volunteered for VB-104, and we had a good idea of the job we had to do, although we did not know just where we would be doing it. We learned that LtCdr Harry Edward Sears was a marvelous commanding officer. Everyone was very pleased to be with him in the warmer parts of the Pacific. However, if Sears had mustered the squadron one morning and said, "I'm going to the Aleutians," we would have donned an additional aloha shirt and followed him. Leadership is a rare attribute. Some people have it, some people think they have it, and some people wish they had it. Sears had it!

So the heck with Honolulu. We practiced high altitude bombing in three-plane sections and in 12-plane divisions. We practiced formation flying in the daytime and when we got good enough at that we practiced formation flying at night. This was new stuff for a bunch of P-boat pilots who were accustomed to long flights, low and slow and alone. We practiced gunnery, gunnery, and more gunnery. If we couldn't do anything else, we could shoot. Our mechanics, radiomen, and ordnancemen were all experts in at least one of our turrets or waist hatch machine guns and they were all crack shots. We did not practice navigation. P-boat pilots could navigate.

On 1 July, the Navy recognized what we already knew, that Harry Sears was an outstanding Naval Aviator and squadron commander. The Navy did something about it, promoting Lieutenantt Commander Sears to Commander. We all admired his shiny new scrambled eggs.

All crews were supposed to practice feathering engines and flying on three and two engines. This was to be done at a safe altitude of several thousand feet. Naturally, some crews stretched this exercise. In a recent letter, Leo Bauer, co-

pilot with Herb Donald confessed. "On the 30th of July, while on a training flight over Kaneohe, we feathered all four engines at 12,000 feet, rate of descent 750 feet per minute, airspeed 135 mph. The engines were restarted at 7000 feet. Precautions taken were: the APU [auxiliary power unit] was started at 12,000, also we donned parachute harnesses and had chutes close by. The idea of feathering all four engines was due to Whit Wright doing the same the day or two before. Commander Sears immediately said no more of this!"

We interspersed our training flights with some good times. Buck Montoux has recently written: "Some of our boys came back from liberty with shaved heads. All hands laughed like hell so they grabbed someone and shaved his head. This continued until nearly the whole outfit was bald. Have a picture of my crew, beautifully bald. At muster the next morning, when Mr. Van Benschoten showed up, we all doffed our caps in greeting. He dead-panned it, only to come back to the ready room at noon, doff his hat to the crew, just as bald as we were. Quite a man."

We practiced anti-submarine tactics, instrument flying, landings and takeoffs, takeoffs and landings, and everything else that could be done in a PB4Y-1. We even did some things that the designers at Consolidated Aircraft did not have in mind for the plane. We learned lots of things, but, most important, we learned that we had not only a great skipper but we had a great plane. Bring on the bad guys!

Travel– In mid-August, the squadron began the big move. We flew training hops until just before departure, took two days off to pack, and headed south. We left Kaneohe with 15 near-new PB4Y-1s and 18 flight crews. The skipper, Swinton , and Stoppleman departed Kaneohe on the twelfth. With the hill at the windward end, the mat at Kaneohe would not allow us to take off with a heavy load so the three crews flew to Barber's Point, west of Honolulu. There, they loaded their tanks with gas and used the long runway to start their journey south. Sears and Swinton headed south for Palmyra Island but Stoppleman flew back to Kaneohe, probably with some plane trouble.

After a night's rest in beautiful Palmyra, the two crews continued south, crossing the equator and the International Date Line (losing a day) and spending the night on Wallis Island. The International Date Line was drawn east of the 180th meridian in this region so that all of the French islands could operate on the same date. The next day, Sears and Swinton crossed the 180th meridian and landed at Nandi, in the Fiji Islands. From there they headed west and landed at Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. Espiritu Santo, code name *Button*, was the

main headquarters and the fleet anchorage for ComSoPac units fighting in the Solomon Islands.

Wright, Donald, Feind, and Stoppleman (Stoppy had passengers ACI Officer Ray Ming and squadron Chief Mech Rip Riley) left Kaneohe on 15 August. They went from Palmyra to Wallis, then skipped Fiji, flying directly from Wallis to Espiritu Santo, losing a day as they crossed the 180th meridian and arriving there on the eighteenth. The next day, Sears, Swinton, and Stoppy flew from Espiritu

The Planes! The Planes!

Bu. No.	Name	PPC	Crew #
32048	Sears Steers	Sears	Crew 1
32060	Momentary Dysentery	Swinton	Crew 14
32061	Mark's Farts	Montgomery	Crew 4
32069	The Schooner	Stoppleman	Crew 7
32070	Saints & Sinners	Feind	Crew 6
32071	Red's Devils	Van Benschoten	Crew 11
32073	Pistol Packin' Mama	Clagett	Crew 9
32074	Donald's Duck	Donald	Crew 8
32075	Open Bottom	Alley	Crew 5
32076	You Got It	Humphrey	Crew 12
32077	Vulnerable Virgin	Hager	Crew 13
32079	Wata-Honey	Searls	Crew 15
32080	Unapproachable	Smith	Crew 2
32081	Whit's Shits	Wright	Crew 3
32083	Astro Arsenal	Dvorachek	Crew 10

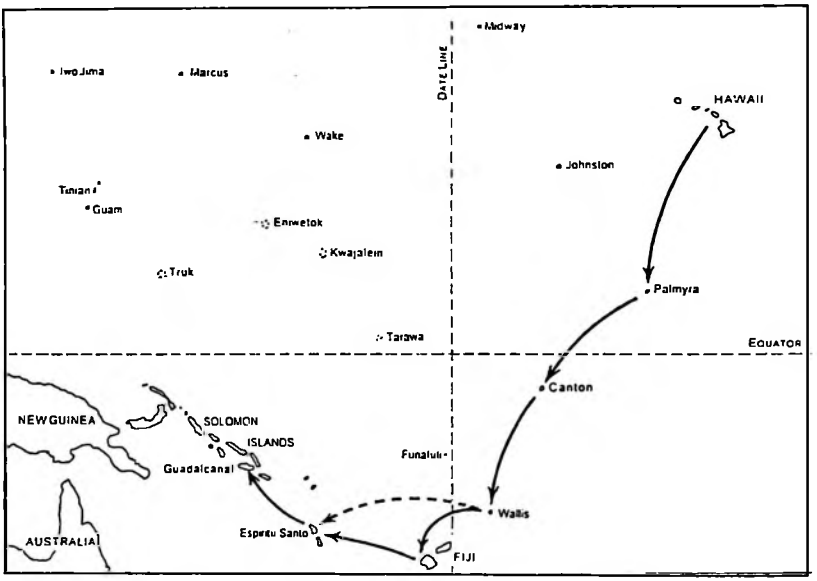
Note: Three crews did not have planes: Crew 16, Anderson; Crew 17, Honey; Crew 18, Reichert.

to Guadalcanal. Stoppy had caught up with his section after his abort at Barber's Point had put him back with the Wright section. Sears, Swinton, and Stoppy occupied the squadron's new home at Carney Field on 19 August 1943. On the night of the 19th, we had crews on Guadalcanal, south of the equator and west of the International Date Line, and on the night of the 18th (the same night) we had crews still at Kaneohe, north of the equator and east of the Date Line. Not at all confused by all of this, the three crews on Guadalcanal took just one day to get organized and flew patrols on the 21st. Fortunately, these first patrols were uneventful.

Montgomery, Van Benschoten, and Humphrey left Kaneohe on the 16th, Hager departed on the 18th; and the tail-enders—Smith, Alley, Clagett, and

Searls—left on the 20th. They all stumbled along the route that skipped Fiji and made it to Carney. Smith and Searls took last place in this odyssey, arriving on Guadalcanal on the 26th—while most of the squadron was off bombing three Japanese destroyers.

We do not have logs from anyone in the Dvorachek crew, so we do not know when and by what route they made the Kaneohe-to-Guadalcanal passage. Three crews—Anderson, Honey, and Reichert—did not have their own planes and got to Guadalcanal as passengers scattered in our 15 planes.



The track south. Dashed line shows short cut taken by later crews.

Lots of strange gear was loaded aboard our planes for the trip south. Rumor had it that several cases of whiskey and Five Island Gin were in the bomb bays. Here and there were bottles of booze in parachute bags and sea bags. Page Clagett brought several cases of V-8 juice and a bicycle. Page, still alive and well in Washington, D.C., drank his way through the war—on V-8 juice. While the juice was a success, the bicycle was a bust. Have you ever tried riding a bicycle

though the paths and roads of a place like Guadalcanal where the roads were "paved" with soft, sticky mud a foot deep?

No bicycles for Sears. Ever practical and imaginative, he carried a small electric refrigerator in his bomb bay. This refrigerator "flew" three tours in the South Pacific—passed along from VB-104 to VB-115 and back to VPB-104. It is probably still running somewhere in the Philippines.

Chapter 6 Combat Flight Crews

The Crews of VB-104 Buccaneers, The Solomon Islanders

(prepared by Charles Ehemann)

August 1943 Going South

A prime objective of our training at Kaneohe was to establish combat flight crews, teams of pilots and aircrewmen that worked well together. During training, there were many changes, with aircrewmen and pilots moving from one crew to another. Gradually, the best possible arrangement emerged and stabilized. In very early August, about two weeks before training was complete, the crews became fixed. After that, only very unusual circumstances justified changes.

The functional units of a VB squadron were the individual flight crews. The squadron was largely an administrative unit of combat crews, setting standards, providing examples and leadership, showing esprit, and coordinating crew actions. Operations were not done as a squadron. On some early raids, our commanding officer led nine planes and crews, half of the squadron, on formation bombing raids. However, these important raids were only a small part of VB-104's operations. Most events involved the operation of one plane–one crew–acting alone. Each single plane operation was under the direction of the squadron, the Wing, Commander Aircraft Guadalcanal, and Commander Aircraft Solomons. Thus, single planes had some restrictions–the general orders for the mission. However, the events of each operation were always unpredictable, and

meeting those events within the guidelines set by the multiple command groups was up to the individual patrol plane commander (PPC). Once a plane took off, it was no longer under direct control of the base, such as fighters were under control of a fighter director. The PPC followed the original basic orders, and ad-libbed. Communications with the base were by coded CW messages–hardly the convenience of a cell phone.

Patrol Plane Commanders– The PPCs had great authority, earned through successful service as a first pilot. Immediate decisions and all responsibilities were his. It was his plane, his mission and his skill that made the mission a success. His name identified the crew. But, in fact, the PPC alone in his plane was useless. It was virtually impossible to solo a Navy Liberator. Even bounce hops required, in addition to a PPC or first pilot, a co-pilot, a plane captain and a first radioman. In a combat mission, the requirements were even greater. Indispensable were, gunners in the bow, top, belly, and tail turrets, and one on each waist gun, a navigator, and a bombardier. The written reports of our combat actions said the PPC strafed, or the PPC bombed. It would be more accurate to say that the PPC flew the plane on a run that allowed the gunners to strafe with their machine guns. The PPC did not have a gun to shoot. Our reports usually recorded that the PPC bombed this and that. True in part. The PPC could not open the bomb bay doors (except for emergency jettisoning) and could not set up the controls to make his pickle drop the desired bombs. Dropping bombs with the "pickle," in Navy Liberators a button on the pilot's control wheel, took great skill—and, help from someone in the bombardier's compartment.

First Pilots and Co-pilots– In addition to a PPC, each crew had two or three additional pilots. They had the same training as the PPC but had less experience. A few were lieutenants junior grade, most were ensigns, and nine were chief or first class aviation pilots. Aviation pilots were enlisted men with the same wings and the same flying duties as officer pilots.

Plane Captains– In each crew, the senior enlisted man, usually an ACMM or AMM1c, was designated the plane captain. He was the boss of the enlisted men of the crew. The plane captain was responsible for the major preflight of the aircraft. This involved a general examination of the aircraft and particular attention to the engines and fuel load. The plane captain and his crew pulled the props through, unbuttoned cowlings to inspect each engine, and drained water from the gas strainers. During preflight, the plane captain prepared the "yellow sheet." This document recorded detailed information about the plane and crew.

It was the only record of who was aboard the plane as it took off. The plane captain signed the yellow sheet, giving his certification that the plane was ready to fly. The PPC added his signature, accepting the plane and the plane captain then left it with the ground crew. After the flight, additional information was added to the yellow sheet and it became the final record of the plane for that flight.

In flight, the plane captain transferred and managed the gas load, kept a watch for oil leaks, and usually fired the port waist machine gun. Working with the plane captain was two or three other aviation machinists mates who manned the bow, belly, and tail turrets.

First Radiomen– The senior, most experienced radioman in the crew was the first radioman. His battle station was at the radio desk, where he listened to the communication circuit, copied and sent all CW messages for his plane. The first radioman was also relief gunner in the top turret. A second radioman in each crew manned the top turret, and relieved the first radioman on the "desk," as Roho so clearly labels this station. The hot, bright sun on the head of the top turret gunner and the incessant looking for fighters "coming out of the sun," and the constant flow of dots and dashed into the ears and brain of the first radioman, made alternating jobs necessary. Too much of the dots and dashes were as bad as too much sun. Variety was more than the spice of life for our radiomen, it was essential.

Ordnancemen– In addition to duties as gunners, crew ordnancemen checked the bomb load, fuses, and ammunition and did minor repairs on turrets and guns. Although each gunner cleaned his own guns, the crew ordnanceman supervised this operation.

Bombardiers– Usually trained as ordnancemen, the bombardiers were experts in the use of the Norden bomb sight. They rode the compartment forward and below the pilots and aft of the bow turret. There, they managed the bomb drop control panel, selecting the bombs to be dropped and the intervalometer setting that would drop the bombs in train, with the impact spacing set for the target size. Bombardiers did not navigate, but all pilots were trained bombardiers. Some crews operated without bombardiers, sending the co-pilot doing the navigation on the flight deck down to the bombardier's compartment to set the bomb drop. Bombardiers manned the bow turret when the regular gunner needed relief.

The following is a list of crews as the squadron left Kaneohe, headed south.
(Ranks and rates are those at the end of our tour)

CREW 1

Cdr H.E. Sears	Patrol PlaneCmdr
Lt B.P. Antonik	First Pilot
Lt(jg) U.L. Neidlinger	Co-Pilot
Lt(jg) J.D. Shea	Co-Pilot*
Cole, L.J., ACMM	Plane Captain & Waist Gunner
Stainback, W.D., ARM1c	First Radioman
Colclasure, H.L., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Yuzapavich, X.F., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Little, L.D., AOM1c	Waist Gunner
Kelly, J.J., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
Pedigo, D.A., AMM2c	Tail Gunner
Weston, G.N., ACOM	Bombardier

* To Wright crew

CREW 2

Lt J.H. Smith	Patrol PlaneCmdr
Lt(jg) E.W. Essen	First Pilot
Gossage, H.L., Lt.(jg)	Co-Pilot & Bombardier*
Molloy, T.J., CAP	Co-Pilot
McIntyre, J.R., ACMM	Plane Captain
Gress, B.E., ACRM	First Radioman
LaRue, G.H., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Utzinger, R.J., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Merkel, T.V., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Yoakum, T.J., AOM1c	Belly Gunner
Pierson, H.W., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Gilliland, R.L., AMM2c	Tail Gunner

* To crew 19, 1 Dec.

CREW 3

Lt W. Wright	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) T.L. Dempster	First Pilot*
Lt(jg) J.D. Shea	First Pilot**
Skeem, R.J., CAP	Co-Pilot

Conti, A.J., ACMM	Plane Captain
Cearley, C.E., ARM1c	First Radioman
Crozier, F.E., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Sottolano, N.S., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Coverdell, R.E., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Robertson, J.H., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Griffiths, R., AOM2c	Belly Gunner
Hurlburt, E.G., AMM2c	Tail Gunner

*Wounded, returned to States

**6 December from Sears, replaced Dempster

Crew 4

Lt M.V. Montgomery	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) N.M. Keiser	First Pilot
Ens G. W. Jones .	Co-Pilot
Pate, A.E., CAP	Co-Pilot
Ens C. H. Sparenberg	Navigator
Tajan, J.M., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Ehemann, C.L., ACRM	First Radioman
Bartell, J.A., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Finady, W.F., ARM2c	Top Gunner*
Bomar, E. S., ARM3c	Top gunner**
Tatham, L.R., AOM1c	Waist Gunner
Wood, J.R., AMM1c	Tail Gunner

*To Crew 19 on 1 Dec **replaced Finady--from pool

CREW 5

Lt C.J. Alley	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) T.L. Dodson	First Pilot
Lt(jg) J.B. Thompson.	Co-Pilot
Lloyd, W.G., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Tillman, HB, ARM2c	First Radioman
Lymenstull, A.J., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Gaynor, T.H., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Mahaley, F.S., AOM1c	Waist Gunner
Gordon, F.L., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
Perret, A.P., AOM1c(AB)	Bombardier

CREW 6

Lt. F.L. Fiend	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) J.H. Burton, J.H.	First Pilot
Lt(jg) N.W. Weller	Co-Pilot & Bombardier
Custor, P.J., CAP	Co-Pilot
Vey, C.D., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Conrad, J.J., ARM2c	First Radioman
Forrester, W.R., AOM2c	Bow Gunner
Emerson, G.W., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Parham, L.E., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Goldbaum, E.W., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
Mercurio, M., AMM2c	Tail Gunner

CREW 7

Lt R.W. Stoppleman	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) J.D. Hemphill	First Pilot
Karls, R.L., AP1c	Co-Pilot
Thornton, R.M., AMM2c	Plane Captain
Whist, H., ARM1c	First Radioman
Kennedy, J.R., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Levesque, E.L., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Fullmer, R.J., AOM2c	Waist Gunner
Wales, W.T., AMM1c	Waist Gunner*
Martin, G.D., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
Russey, J.D., AMM2c	Tail Gunner
Gruner, G.W., AM2c(AB)	Bombardier

*To Crew 18 then 19

CREW 8

Lt H.L. Donald	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) Goodman	First Pilot
Ens L.R. Bauer.	Co-Pilot
Rolland, A.E., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Sams, W.L., ARM1c	First Radioman
Knudsen, W.F., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Felice, A.D., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Osiecki, C.M., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Hammond, R.L., AOM2c	Belly Gunner
Foelsch, W.F., AMM2c	Tail Gunner

CREW 9

Lt P.B. Clagett	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) H.J. Thompson	First Pilot
Lt(jg) W.W. Sutherland	Co-Pilot
Butler, H.E., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Mazurek, W., ARM1c	First Radioman
Wren, R.A., AMM3c	Bow Gunner
Williams, R.J., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Hunacek, R.L., AOM2c	Waist Gunner
Sellman, J.C., AMM1c	Belly Gunner
Mathews, J.E., AMM2c	Tail Gunner
Webber, Lee, AMM2c(AB)	Bombardier

CREW 10

Lt H.E. Dvorachek	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) H.E. Campbell	First Pilot
Lt(jg) P.D. Riley	Co-Pilot
Jeska, H.O., AMM2c	Plane Captain
Bennet, J.C., ARM2c	First Radioman
Masters, G.W., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Griskiewicz, J.A., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Jones, H.W., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Keogan, B.H., AOM2c	Belly Gunner
Hagendoorn, W.F., AMM2c	Tail Gunner
Green, L.F., AOM3c	Bombardier

CREW 11

Lt R.S. Van Benschoten	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) L.P, McCutcheon	First Pilot
Lt(jg) Earl Bittenbender	Co-Pilot
Ostwalt, W.M., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Parker, J.F., ARM1c	First Radioman
Maule, C.I., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Houck, H.B., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Kelsey, R.L., AOM2c	Waist Gunner
Montoux, G.F., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
White, G.W., AMM2c	Tail Gunner

CREW 12

Lt J.F. Humphrey	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) W.H. Heider	First Pilot
Lt(jg) A.M. Lodato	Co-Pilot
Ready, J.E., ACMM	Plane Captain
Robinson, D.L., ARM1c	First Radioman
Hawkins, C.W., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Laming, J., ARM1c	Top Gunner
Owens, O.L., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Lofton, B., AOM2c	Waist Gunner
Hunt, C.E., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
Devine, J.P., AMM!c	Tail Gunner
Lunn, G.C., AMM2c	Waist Gunner*
Weston, R.M., AM2c(AB)	Bombardier

*replaced injured Owens

CREW 13

Lt D.M.L. Hager	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) P.E. Pettes	First Pilot
Woody, G.B., AP1c	Co-Pilot
Thomas, S., ACMM	Plane Captain
Anderson, E.J., ARM1c	First Radioman
Hodge, N., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
McAnnich, R.O., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Miller, T.L., AOM2c	Waist Gunner
O'Brien, A.S., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
Farr, W.R., AMM2c	Tail Gunner
Faslun, R.V., AMM2c(AB)	Bombardier

CREW 14

Lt R.L. Swinton	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) G.L. Didier	First Pilot
Lt(jg) R.M. Finley	Co-Pilot
Berg, J.A., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Anania, A.B., ARM1c	First Radioman
Westover, J.H., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
McDonald, E.J., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Ralston, J.H., AOM2c	Waist Gunner
Dillon, M.J., AMM2c	Belly Gunner

Palatini, P.J., AMM2c	Tail Gunner
Lipscombe, E.W., AMM2c(AB)	Bombardier

CREW 15

Lt(jg) W.D. Searls	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) R.M. DeGolia	First Pilot
Lt(jg) H.S. Joslyn	Co-Pilot
Emery, E.O., ACMM	Plane Captain
Plank, R.J., ARM1c	First Radioman
Browning, F.P., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Nelson, D.E., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Page, J.E., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Verret, L.J., AOM2c	Waist Gunner
Roller, R.J., AMM1c	Belly Gunner
Franko, R., AMM2c	Tail Gunner

CREW 16

Lt(jg) A.E. Anderson	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) M.O. Andrews	First Pilot
Lt(jg) J.C. Parker	Co-Pilot
Pate, D.E,. AMM1c	Plane Captain
King, W.B.. ARM1c	First Radioman
Weinschenk, M.M., AOM1c	Bow Gunner
Healy, E.B., AOM3c	Waist Gunner
Flack, R.E., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
Nichols, J.M., AMM2c	Tail Gunner
Solari, D., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Martin, R.H., AOM1c(AB)	Bombardier

CREW 17

Lt(jg) N.M. Honey	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) L.E. Swanson	First Pilot
Lt(jg) Leslie Watt	Co-Pilot
Gwaltney, W.E., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Snuffer, B.E., ARM2c	First Radioman
Johnson, D.E., AOM2c	Bow Gunner
Kvaratius, J.P., ARM2c	Top Gunner
Conover, G.I., AMM2c	Waist Gunner
Leishmann, R.O., AMM2c	Belly Gunner

Beard, W.F., AMM3c	Tail Gunner

CREW 18

Lt(jg) L.J. Reichert	Patrol Plane Cmdr
Lt(jg) William Lyle	First Pilot
Harbidge, W.C., CAP	Co-Pilot
Pruitt, S.E., AMM1c	Plane Captain
Smith, P.A., ARM1c	First Radioman
Lose, R.C., AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Wotherspoon, J., ARM2c	Top Gunner*
Wales, W.T., AMM1c	Waist Gunner*
Semanisin, G., AMM2c	Belly Gunner
Schiselbauer, W.J., AMM2c	Tail Gunner
Bass, C.C., ARM3c	Tp gunner**
Phaneuf, C.A., AOM1c(AB)	Bombardier

* To crew 19 on 1 Dec.

**Replaced Wotherspoon

PART 2

War Diaries Written with Hindsight from 1994

VB-104 – The Buccaneers' Combat Tour

in the Solomon Islands

August 1943 to April 1944

Introduction to Part 2

Part 2 is largely a compilation of the source documents produced by VB-104: War Diaries, ACA Reports, and pilots and aircrewmen's logs. All of this has been spiced with recently written recollections and "sea stories' by some of the squadron members, explained by maps, and clarified by comments on the broader aspect of the war in the Solomons. I have made no attempt to glamorize or concentrate our records, except that the dull days are recorded briefly while the hot actions are told in more detail. Thus Part 2 will answer the question: What was it like to be in a hot Navy patrol bombing squadron in the Solomons? Of course our time in the Solomons was not one slam bang action after another; as in any business, there were dull days with a lot of waiting and watching.

Chapter 7 Three Jap DDs, a Mavis, & a Gunboat

19–31 August 1943 Carney Field, Guadalcanal

Our first planes arrived on Guadalcanal on the 19th and a week later the last of our planes landed. On Guadalcanal, we relieved VB-101 and joined VB-102, the other PB4Y-1 squadron. We shared a camp with 102, flew some joint missions with them, and shared the duty of patrolling the seas north and west of the Solomons.

Our neighbors on Carney field were four Army 13th Air Force B-24 squadrons. We used the runway and parking areas closest to the ocean; the Army squadrons were inland from us. All the areas of Carney, Navy and Army, were connected by taxiways. One morning, after unusually heavy rains, our Marston matting runway was "floating," so we taxied inland and took off from an army runway. We also found the Army a source of spare parts and corned beef.

All aircraft squadrons in our area, whether Army, Navy, Marines, or New Zealand, operated under Commander Aircraft Solomons (ComAirSols), so we were closer to the other B-24 squadrons than the names "Army" and "Navy" would indicate. We flew the same kind of plane, painted the same color, shared food and spare parts, and operated from the same runways. Most important, the army B-24 squadrons would be our bombing partners on three high-altitude attacks on Japanese airfields on the southern end of Bougainville. They kindly let us join them as the fourth (and tail-end) squadron. We later did some radar jamming for them on their difficult raids on Rabaul.

When we arrived in the Solomons, Guadalcanal had been declared secured and more or less free of Japanese. We were warned about wandering off into the tropical rain forests because of the possibility that some Jap soldiers had missed the last barge home. The only Japs that bothered us were the aircrews in Betty bombers that often interrupted our sleep, and once destroyed one of our planes, with their one- or two-plane night air raids. We called these Japanese bombers "Washing Machine Charley." Just over a year earlier, VP-71 planes had been the Jap's "Washing Machine Charley" over Guadalcanal. Now, our forces on islands to the northwest were getting most of the heavy work of Japanese night bombers.

The long struggle to secure New Georgia Island, with its valuable airfield at Munda, had ended just as we hit the Solomons. On the night of 6-7 August, six of our destroyers had fought the Battle of Vella Gulf, between Kolombangara and Vella Lavella. It was a perfect operation for our forces. Our destroyers sank three Japanese destroyers; not one of ours was hit. After several battles that had been losses or draws, our floating Navy was in need of a great victory and got it.

Our troops had landed on the southeast shore of Vella Lavella on 15 August, hus leapfrogging the very heavily defended Kolombangara. Invading and securing lightly defended Vella Lavella provided a nice piece of level ground in the southeast corner of the island. Here our Seabees built a new airfield from scratch, not a redo of a captured Japanese strip.

The Japanese had a large sea plane base at Rekata Bay on the northwest end of Santa Isabel. It would be evacuated and inoperative soon after our arrival.

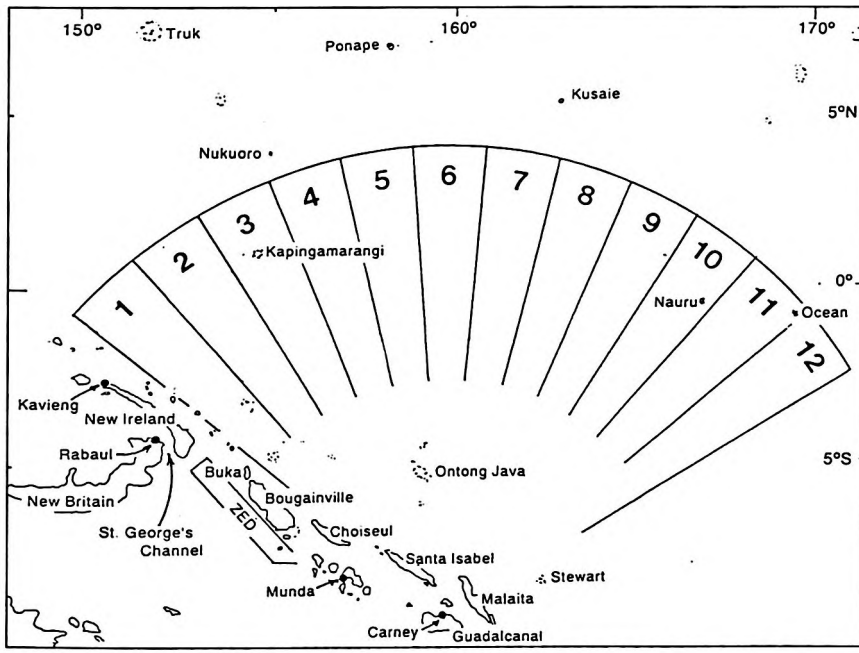
Thus, when we took over our patrols, New Georgia, Rendova, and most of Vella Lavella were controlled by our forces. Kolombangara was still loaded with bypassed and probably irritated Jap soldiers. Santa Isabel was not friendly ground although there were no major enemy forces there, and Choiseul was definitely in Japanese hands. From Rendova and Vella Lavella westward it was Japanese all the way to Tokyo.

Our patrol area from Guadalcanal fanned out from the northwest to the northeast. This semicircle was divided into 13 sectors each 9° wide and 800 miles long. Sector 1, on an axis of 315°T, was a "scenic route" with land, atolls, or at least reefs in sight all of the way. It was a navigator's dream. All the land, the atolls, and the ocean in that area were in the hands of the Japanese. Some sectors, such as 8 and 9, were water all the way with not one rock to blemish the endless ocean.

Patrolling one of the sectors required flying 1650 nautical miles (1650 x 1.15=1899 statute miles). If we encountered no enemy to occupy additional time, we spent a little over 10 hours in the air. We usually took off just after sunrise, 0630, and returned about 1700, an hour or so before sunset. Guadalcanal is only

10 degrees south of the equator so day length throughout the year remains at approximately 12 hours.

One of our sectors did not rate a number and had a curious route. The Zed Sector tract headed west from Guadalcanal then northwest along the southwest shores of the Solomon Islands—Russells, New Georgia, Rendova, Treasury —and then along the southwest shore of Bougainville to Buka and into the waters off St.George's Channel. Zed Sector was also an oddball in takeoff time and duration. We departed after all of our longer sector flights were airborne, usually leaving Carney at midday. Even an uneventful coverage of Zed Sector took seven hours, which meant a night landing at Carney.



The search sectors flown by VB-102 and VB-104 from Guadalcanal

19 August When the skipper arrived at our facilities on Carney Field, Guadalcanal with his two wingmen, Stoppleman and Swinton, he found conditions to be unsatisfactory by his standards. Seven months later, on 29 March 1944, in his summary report, written as we finished our tour in the Solomons, he wrote: "Upon the squadron's arrival at Guadalcanal, the existing efficiency of

operations was not considered satisfactory due to a multitude of factors, the most important of which are as follows: unsatisfactory living conditions adversely affecting the health and morale of squadron and PATSU personnel, the inadequacies of maintenance facilities, the disrepair of airstrip and taxiways, and poor airplane dispersal, the lack of coordination existing between the two independent squadrons and the current method of conducting search, which did not utilize the full potentialities of the PB4Y and its equipment. Upon request, ComAirSols authorized the formation of a group. On August 20, 1943, the Navy Long Range Search Group came into being and all existing difficulties gradually became eliminated, resulting in more efficient and effective operations." (Quote from Summary Report: 29 Mar 1944. From: The Commander Bombing Squadron ONE HUNDRED FOUR. To: The Commander Fleet Air Wing ONE. Subject: Report of activities, VB-104. 3.)

20 August On this date the Navy Long Range Search Group was formed, Commander Harry E. Sears, USN, Commanding.

21 August The first 104 patrols from Carney Field, Guadalcanal were: Sears 10.0 hours in Sector 5, Stoppleman 11.2 hours in Sector 6, and Swinton 9.9 hours in Sector 7. There is no mention of enemy contacts in pilots' logs so these patrols must have been uneventful. Sectors 5, 6, & 7 were "cold" sectors with nothing to see but white caps and Ontong Java, a large beautiful atoll, populated by friendly natives. These cold sectors were perfect places for crews to fly their maiden patrols. Since only a few of our planes and crews were at Carney, we probably flew three of VB-101's patrols and they flew the other two or three. Probably the first of their crews left for Kaneohe, Hawaii and stateside on this day. When our patrol crews returned to base they found that the Wright, Feind, and Donald crews had arrived from Espiritu. We now had one third of our squadron, six crews, on Guadalcanal.

When the skipper took off on his patrol this day, our squadron learned something very important. We learned that we had a skipper who would **lead** us. He would fly his hops in turn. We would soon learn that he would fly more than his share of the flights, take all of the most difficult, demanding, and dangerous flights and do a better job than anyone else flying PB4Y-1s. What more could we ask?

23 August Our second day of patrols was: Wright 2.3 then 11.1 hours, Feind 10.0 and Donald 10.8. When Whit got one hour out into his sector, he had to feather an engine and return to base. He got the standby plane and flew a full sector. None of the three crews saw anything to write about in their logs. In the

early afternoon, two more of our crews, Montgomery and Humphrey, joined the group at Carney. Their arrival would have released more crews of VB-101 to start that long awaited flight home. A pattern was now established. Our crews arrived in the early afternoon, were given the next day to unpack and get settled, and flew a patrol the following day. That was plenty of time to get settled. Moving into living space vacated by VB-101 usually meant shoving a parachute bag or two under a WW I war surplus army cot and placing a few personal items on an old .50 caliber ammunition box.

24 August Sears, Stoppleman, and Swinton made their second patrols, setting up our usual rotation of flying every third day. Our routine was fly, day off, standby day, fly, day off, standby, and so on. So we flew one in three unless something happened to get us in the air on our standby day. Something often did. The patrols on this day, 24 August, were not routine.

Sears flew 12.2 hours in Sector 1, out along the Jap held territory northwest of Carney. In his log, the skipper wrote this account of his hop. "Sector search, No. 1. South of Santa Isabel, north of Choiseul, Bougainville, Buka, Green Is., Feni Is., Tanea, Mahur, Tabor, Tench, Emirau, Mussau Is. Intercepted by 16 Zeros, 2 Bettys Lat. 2° 13'S, 153° 16'E enroute Truk to Buka. Shook them in clouds. Contacted CL or DL 10 mi off Buka Passage. Rec'd A.A. Fire. Possible SS contact N Manning Strait. Over Rekata Bay dark. 3.0 instr. 3.2 nite." Rekata Bay was the Jap seaplane base on the west end of Santa Isabel. Flying over that base just after sunset must have caused an air raid alert, put the Jap pilots and crews in their fox holes, and probably interrupted their evening meal. A nice little touch for Sears to end his very eventful flight.

Stoppleman flew Sector 3, two sectors over from Sears. First pilot Hagen wrote in his pilot's log, "1st Betty." Hemphill recorded, "Contact one Betty - No firing. Guadal to Kapingamarangi." Stoppy flew 11.2 hours which was more than enough time to get to the end of the sector and have a little time to chase a Betty. The Bettys were out in force today. VB-102 pilot Miller saw a Betty over Ontong Java.

Swinton flew Sector 2 for 9.9 hours and co-pilot Finley wrote in his log that they saw Tauu and Nukumanu. Tauu was in Sector 2 and Nukumanu in Sector 5. Either the Swinton crew flew well off course or Fin got his *Nuku's* and *manu's* mixed up.

What were these Bettys that the skipper and Stoppy were meeting out in their sectors? In Japanese, they were Mitsubishi G4M2s, but all Japanese planes were given official nicknames for the convenience of our pilots and Aircraft Intelligence Officers. Bettys were the Japs' workhorse twin-engined bomber. They did the same search job in the same area that we did, except, of course, their

sectors ran 90° to ours. We would see many Bettys and shoot down a few, but we saw far more than we would shoot down.

Bettys had little or no armor, so they were easy to shoot down—if we could catch them. For armament, they had a top blister or turret that mounted 7.7 machine guns. The gunner stood on the deck outside the electrically powered turret and moved himself around with the turret. There was a 20mm cannon in the tail, but it was mounted on a slide, not a turret, and had only a restricted cone of fire to the rear. There were single 7.7 mm machine guns in each waist hatch. This armament was not a serious threat to our planes—that we know of. We lost planes to unknown causes; the losses may have been due to Bettys' armament.

Bettys were faster than our 4Y-1's. If we had an altitude advantage and saw them before they saw us, we had a good chance of diving on them and downing them with a good volley from our fifties. They always ran from us—for good reason. The Betty was a fine plane, but, because of its lack of armor and comparatively poor fire power, it was not much in a fight.

Boys and Girls and Japanese Military Aircraft To avoid the tongue-twister English names for Japanese aircraft, the Far East and Pacific Theater Commands devised the Allied Code-name System for Japanese Aircraft. They gave male names to: Army & Navy Fighters, single or twin engine (Zeke, Rufe) and Navy Reconnaissance seaplanes (Pete).

Female names were given to: (1) Army and Navy Reconnaissance aircraft land- or carrier- based, single or twin; (2) Navy Torpedo Bombers and Dive Bombers (Val, Judy); (3) Army and Navy two- or four-engine Bombers (Betty, Nell); (4) Navy Flying Boats (Mavis), and (5) Army and Navy Transports. The last-mentioned had female names beginning with the letter "T" (Tess, Topsy). Training aircraft were named after trees and gliders after birds.

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25 August Whit Wright flew the tricky Zed sector in the usual 6.6 hours, and Montgomery, Van Benschoten, and Humphrey averaged 11 hours in regular sectors. All patrols were uneventful. In the afternoon, the Clagett and Alley crews arrived from Espiritu, so almost all of the squadron was at Carney and the VB-101 crews were on their way home.

On the night of 25 August, three Japanese destroyers left Rabaul, or perhaps Buka, and headed southeast down the north shore of Bougainville. After sunset, they approached the northwest end of Choiseul and began evacuating the Japanese sea plane base at Rekata Bay. Perhaps loading was delayed, or perhaps they thought our patrol planes going out over Rekata soon after sunrise on the

26th would overlook or ignore them. They guessed wrong. The Sears' Boys found the three DDs and throughout the day, VB-104 crews, plus three crews from VB-102, shadowed and bombed the three Japanese destroyers. This day- long action, the first combat by VB-104, involved eleven of our crews and was the closest thing to an all squadron action that we ever had. We learned something about ourselves and served notice to others, that VB-104 had a fighting skipper and he was backed by fighting crews.

26 August The squadron's first Aircraft Action Reports recorded most of the actions involving three Japanese destroyers. VB-104's Aircraft Intelligence Officer, Raymond Ming, prepared the ACA Reports, and Commander Sears approved them.

VB-104 sent four crews flying our now familiar 800 mile sectors on "Routine search patrol from Carney Field, Guadalcanal." Feind was in Sector 1, Stoppy in Sector 2, Donald in Sector 3, and Anderson in Sector 4. Our planes took off soon after sunrise in weather that was clear and sunny and they fanned out in their sectors. Our first patrol in PB4Y-1s had been going just like the old ones in P-boats. Today things were different!.

Donald and his crew were starting Sector 3, which would take them out and around Kapingamarangi. As they climbed out from Carney, their course took them over Iron Bottom Sound, Savo Island, and diagonally across the Japanese-held Santa Isabel Island near Rekata Bay. The weather was clear with the usual scattered, fair weather cumulus clouds with bases at 2000 feet and tops 4000 feet. Visibility between the clouds was 35 miles and Donald intended to make his patrol at 8000 feet. At 0700, they were on course 333°T, 150 miles from Carney and had just cleared the coast of Santa Isabel, when Bill Knudsen in the bow turret and C. M. Osiecki in the port waist, sighted three destroyers, making 20-25 knots and headed northwest, away from the Japanese sea plane base at Rekata Bay. Herb Donald did not know if the destroyers were friends or foe. Bill Goodman was in the co-pilot's seat and Leo Bauer was navigating so it was Leo's job to encode contact reports and he began encoding a message about contacting three Jap destroyers. Herb thought that the DDs were so close to Guadalcanal that they might be friendly so decided to challenge them with the proper blinker signal for the date and time. Here there is some disagreement; some crew members recall that the blinker challenge was sent by Osiecki from the port waist while others recall that first radioman Sams, squeezed into the cockpit and sent the blinker. Either way, the destroyers responded with flashes that no one in the Donald crew could read. The flashes were not blinker; they were the muzzle blasts of 5 inch anti-aircraft guns! Herb quickly deduced that the destroyers were enemy.

Herb Donald remembers, "The first two rounds from the DDs exploded port and starboard of us at our altitude. The third was in between but I was in a diving right turn away from the destroyers. At long range, that was damned good shooting." Herb continued his dive to a lower altitude while Leo and "the radioman at the desk" A. D. Felice sent the contact report. Donald continued circling the destroyers, closing in on them until they opened fire and then turning away out of range.

Soon after contacting the destroyers, the Donald crew noticed Jap fighters. Donald recorded seeing 9 Zeros; Leo Bauer reported 7 Zeros and 2 Kates. Kates were Jap torpedo/scout planes (wingspan 52 feet) larger than the Zero fighters (wings 40 feet), but the two planes had very similar silhouettes. The whole CAP did not attack the 4Y but the Donald crew recalls that one Kate, flying at 300 feet, started a run on the 4Y's starboard beam, coming out of the sun's rays. Roho Rolland, on the starboard waist gun, spotted the Kate, reported it and Herb turned toward it. The Kate broke off out of range and turned away toward the destroyers for protection.

Donald continued circling the DDs for about 30 minutes and then received a CW radio message from base telling him to continue on patrol. Who knows? There might be a larger force in his sector just over the horizon.

Herb flew out to the end of Sector 3 and on the way back he circled Kapingamarangi for one hour. Roho Rolland remembers that they spiraled in on Kapingamarangi, finally flying so close that he could see the wooden tower on the main island. This was the Donald crew's first look at this Jap seaplane base. A close look with a cautious approach was necessary. No Japanese showed themselves at Kapingamarangi. Continuing homeward, Herb's crew again flew over Rekata Bay but no Jap destroyers were in sight.

Unfortunately there was no Aircraft Action Report of Donald's contact with the destroyers and there was no Squadron War Diary prepared for August so all of the information that we have about VB-104's first contact with the enemy comes from the flight log books of Donald, Bauer, and Rolland, their recollections of this action, and the recollections of first radioman W. L. Sams.

Anderson and his crew were flying the second VB-104 plane to contact the three destroyers. There is an Aircraft Action Report describing Andy's contact, the first such report prepared by the squadron, but there are no flight logs or recollections from the crew. Andy was flying a routine search patrol from Carney and judging from the sector assignments of others crews, he was in Sector 4.

The three destroyers were not in Andy's sectors so I believe that he was the last of our planes to take off and was instructed to locate and shadow the destroyers that Donald had found.

According to the ACA Report, Andy and his crew were cruising under the clouds at 1500 feet, where visibility was 35 miles. When they sighted the three Jap DDs at a distance of 15 miles, whoever was navigating and the radioman, sent the contact report: 3 Jap DDs; time 0802; course 329° T; speed 18 knots. The ACA Report for this action gives the DD's position: "05-10 S Lat., 158-00 E. Long." This position does not align with the other positions given in this action by Donald, Feind, and Sears. I have found other mistakes in latitude and longitude given in our ACA Reports. I think that Ray Ming was having trouble with south latitude and east longitude.

Contents of pilot's logs for 26th---3 DD's.

Donald [11.0 hours]

Herb's log:: "contacted 3 Jap destroyers, 9 zeros, about 35 rounds AA fired at us-Zeros did not attack, circled Jap base of Kapingamarangi for 1 hour."

Leo Bauer's log:: "3 DD's, 1 barge, 7 zeros, 2 Kates + AA"

Stoppy in Sect. 2 [12.1 hours];

Hemphill's log:: "Sector 2, contact 1 CL / 2 DD, tracked and attacked. Flack holes in two spots."

Feind [10.5 hours]

Burton's log:: "Bombed Jap CL - 2 DD - (2 Haps, 1 Betty)."

Custer's log:: "Contacted 7 Zeros &2 Bettys, refused combat —Bombed 3 - cans."

Andy climbed as he approached the destroyers and while among the clouds at 4000 feet and 5 miles from the destroyers he drew bursts of A/A. He turned 180 degrees back into the clouds. The crew noticed fighters above them, at 8000 feet, just beginning to attack the lone PB4Y-1. Andy reversed course and emerged from the clouds to check on the DDs. When he saw them for the second time he got A/A from the destroyers and attacks from the fighters. There were 10 fighters, one Zeke and nine Haps (land based), providing CAP for the DDs.

The fighters were not very aggressive and broke off their runs when Andy's gunners opened fire. Only one attack, a head on run by the Zeke, came close to the 4Y-1 with the Zeke pressing in to 100 yards. Fire from the fighters was with 20mm cannons in each wing and 7.7s synchronized through the prop. Andy continued using the cloud cover to avoid the fighters while keeping track of the

three Jap destroyers. After 30 minutes of this action, Andy sent an amplifying message about the DDs and continued on his assigned patrol.

Why did these DDs merit a CAP? Perhaps there were VIPs aboard. How successful were they in evacuating Rekata Bay? In 1984, two Japanese soldiers were found on Santa Isabel Island. They had missed the boat.

The ACA report by Commander Sears, who would be involved later in the day with these same three destroyers, contains the note that "1 PB4Y-1 (VB-102) for special search and shadowing" was employed. We have no more information about this plane, but it was probably the VB-102 stand-by plane, and it probably took off for the "shadowing" detail soon after the second contact plane, Anderson, was ordered to continue patrol. We were, indeed, acting as a Group, not two independent squadrons.

Our other two patrol planes, PPCs Stoppleman and Feind, were on their way home from the end of their sectors when they saw the three Jap destroyers. They had not seen any ships on their way out but the destroyers had moved northwest into their sectors.

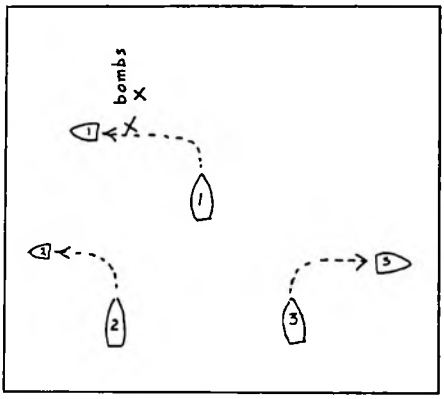
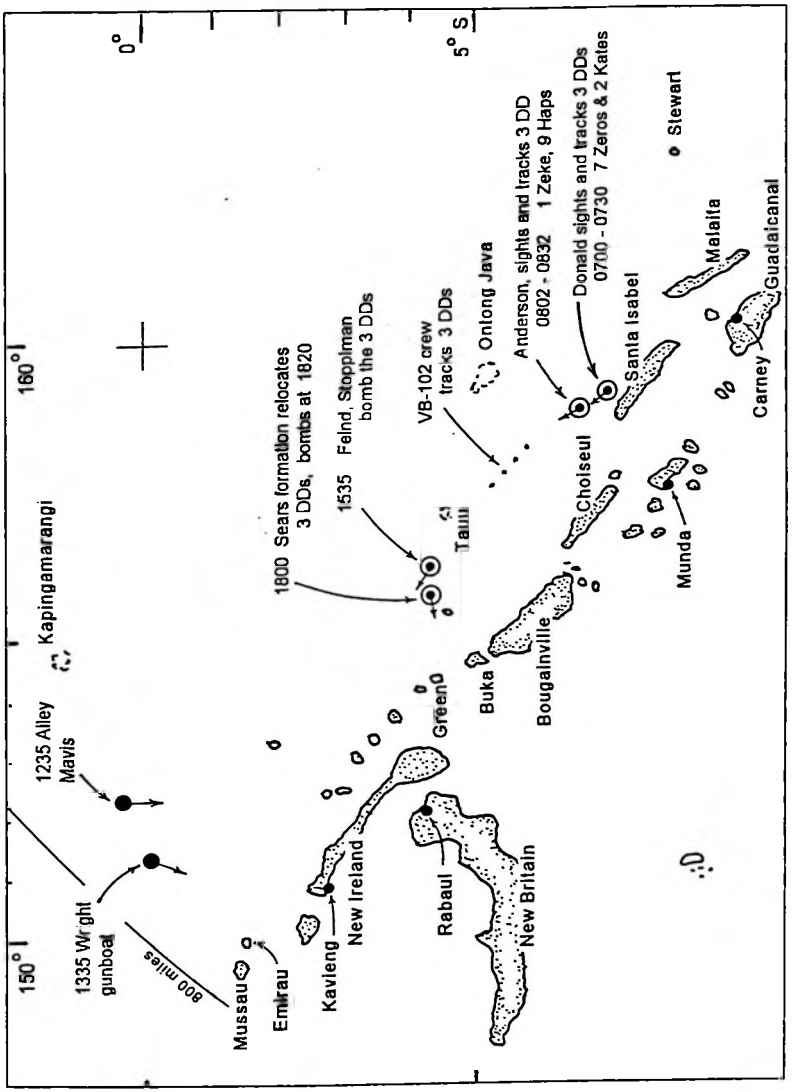


Diagram from Feind ACA Report

Fred Feind and his crew found the three destroyers at 1535, Lat. 04°20'S, Long. 156°00'E, course 300°T, speed 15-20 kts, seven hours after Donald had seen them. An Aircraft Action Report on Feind's encounter with the destroyers gives a good account of his attack.

Feind was flying at 10,000 feet as he approached the DDs and he had no difficulty seeing them in the good weather—still 0.4 cumulus clouds, bottoms at 2500 feet, visibility 30 miles. The DDs were now without their fighter cover and Crew 6 had to contend only with moderate, inaccurate A/A that was off in range and deflection.

Feind and his crew made one bombing run on the destroyers from 5 o'clock and dropped two 500 pound bombs armed with contact fuses. The DDs were cruising in "V" formation and the Crew 6 bombardier, Ens Nolan Weller, aimed at the lead ship. As the bombs were released, the three DDs took violent, evasive action making full speed radical turns. The lead DD and the one in the #2 position turned to port but the DD in the #3 position turned to starboard. Either the #3 destroyer goofed, or he deliberately turned away from his leader to avoid



3 DDs - 26 August Gunboat and Mavis - 28 August

turning into the bomb impact point. One bomb hit approximately 75 yards off the the lead ship's stern; the other was very wide. There was no physical damage to the destroyers but perhaps their crews wondered who were the "eager asses" flying these 4Y-1s.

Stoppleman and Crew 7, co-pilots Jeff Hemphill, Ed Hagen, and Ray Karls, were also on their way home when they encountered the three DDs. Unfortunately, no ACA Report was prepared on Stoppy's encounter, but we have Jeff's and Ed's logs and Ray's recollections. Jeff remarked that they "tracked and attacked" and got shot at. They had flack holes in their plane as proof. Hagen recorded "1st Flack." Ray Karls recalls, "I was flying co-pilot at the time and we came in about 5000 feet to draw fire from Feind's crew as they made their run at higher altitude. I will never forget Stoppy telling me not to get too close to those cans. He was watching with binoculars and I was flying the plane. Of course I kept getting closer and closer. I believe that we drew their fire which enabled Feind's crew to make their bombing run. The A/A was extremely heavy and we took a lot of hits."

Stoppy would have been able to track the destroyers until approximately 1730 when his remaining fuel supply necessitated heading home. If we saw nothing to interrupt our regular progress, it took us approximately 10 hours to fly our 800 miles sectors. Feind flew his sector in 10.5 hours; he probably spent 0.5 hours making his bombing attack. Donald flew for 11.0 hours, one hour longer than expected. However, he tracked the destroyers and circled Kapingamarangi. Stoppy flew for 12.1 hours, so his "tracked and attacked" must have taken two hours. The flight times seem to check out.

After our regular search planes had finished their attacks, the Jap DDs, were alone, but not for long. Our "eager ass" 4Y-1s were not finished with them. They had yet to meet Commander Harry Sears!

Sears took off at 1353, about one and a half hours before Feind and Stoppleman attacked the DDs. He was serious about all this, leading eight other 4Y-1s, five from his own squadron, VB-104, and three from the other squadron in his group, the very seasoned and experienced VB-102. The 104 crews were: Wright, Crew 3; Montgomery, Crew 4; Alley, Crew 5; Clagett, Crew 9; Hager Crew 13; Van Benschoten, Crew 11. Van Ben returned to base after 1.9 hours in the air because of "mechanical difficulties." Each plane carried eight 500 pound G. P. bombs, each bomb armed with a Mark 21 .025 sec. nose, and a Mk. 23 .01 tail fuse. Sears was delivering 64 bombs to the three DDs.

The planes rendezvoused at 2000 feet, and Sears led them north to Ramos Island, a small but prominent rock between Malaita and Santa Isabel. At Ramos, the skipper turned northwest, north of the Solomons chain, and headed for the targets. The formation flew directly to the DDs, sighting them at approximately

1800 (one half hour after Stoppy had left them), at 04°00'S. 155°40'E, 90 miles northeast of Buka Passage.

The DDs were in an open V formation on course 260° T, steaming at speeds estimated to be 25-30 knots. Sears had his planes at 15,000 feet in a javelin formation, stepped down. He spent nearly thirty minutes, weaving his formation toward and then away from the destroyers, each move toward them being the feint of a bombing run. Each time Sears faked a bombing run, the individual DDs in the formation took violent evasive actions—radical high speed turns. Finally, the skipper made an approach from the west (out of the sun) on the starboard bow of the second ship in the formation. The 500 pound bombs were away at 1820.

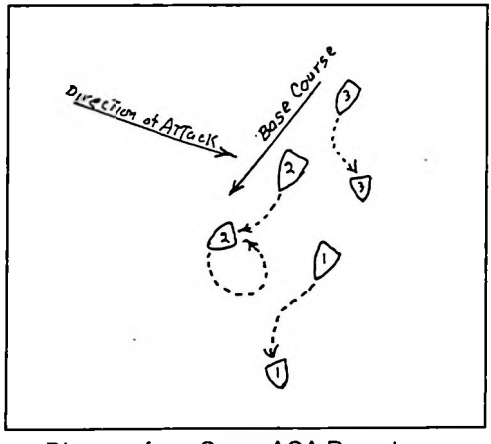


Diagram from Sears ACA Report

One bomb was a direct hit on the bridge of the target destroyer. Observers noted contact flash and smoke. Three hits were close aboard. The destroyer went dead in the water, and the other two ships stood by to assist. After about 10 minutes, the damaged ship got under way at a reduced speed of 15 knots. It left a long trail of smooth water astern, indicating a presence of oil.

AA from the destroyers was heavy but inaccurate as to bearing and range. Altitude was good. A shell fragment struck one of our planes causing minor damage but no injuries to personnel.

The three ships were identified as Teratsuki class destroyers through interpretation of photographs taken by the contact plane.

In the Navy, we often heard, "In keeping with the highest tradition of naval service" and "Above and beyond the call of duty." Most squadron members were not sure what these words meant, but we knew that, by following Harry E. Sears around the South Pacific in PB4Y-1s, we were going to find out.

When the destroyer hunters returned to Carney Field, they found that the Smith and Searls crews had arrived from Espiritu. All 18 of VB-104's crews were now together.

27 August Humphrey, Searls, and Reichert flew routine, uneventful patrols to the north and east in the cold sectors. Smith flew the Zed sector south of Bougainville, departing in the late afternoon and returning at night. These were special patrols for the Smith, Searls, and Reichert crews. First patrols were always special!

Only two days after the squadron had tackled the three Japanese destroyers and chased them out sectors 1 and 2, our planes were again out in these sectors. We were learning that sectors 1 and 2 were our hotspots. Wright and Alley found some Japanese to deal with in the second actions for VB-104.

28 August Van Ben and his crew flew Sector 5, 10.8 hours but saw nothing to report. We don't know who flew sectors 3 and 4. Pick two from Deevo, Andy, and Honey. However, John Alley in Sector 2 and Whit Wright in Sector 1 had hot times.

John Alley and his crew were flying Sector 2, adjacent to Whit. The day was clear and sunny with visibility 40 miles. At 1235, Lat. 00°20'N, Long. 152°15'E, they sighted a Mavis. The large, four engined flying boat was on course 172°T, the track from Truk to Rabaul, cruising at 8000 feet at a speed of 150 mph. Alley was at 5000 feet: the Mavis 3000 feet above and 15 miles ahead off his port bow. Alley climbed at an air speed of 170 mph and overtook the enemy plane. He had not lowered the belly turret because he was going to attack from below; and the lowered turret would reduce his plane's speed and rate of climb.

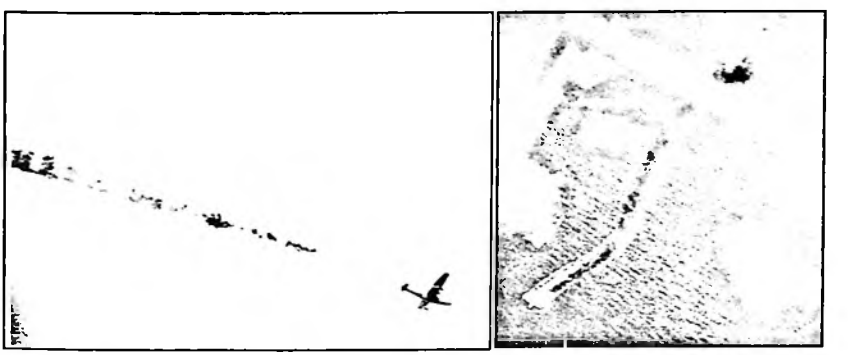
Alley was concerned about the 20mm cannon in the Mavis' tail, because his gradual approach was in the cannon's cone of fire. As Alley maneuvered into his attack position from below, there was no indication that the Mavis crew was aware of the 4Y-1. Over the intercom, bow turret gunner Lyme Lymenstull "called off the rings" in his gunsight, giving everyone the range to the Mavis. Lyme, Tillman in the top turret, and Lloyd on the port waist .50, saw that all of the gun hatches on the Mavis were closed. If any hatch opened, all gunners were to fire at it

When 500 yards from the Mavis, Alley's gunners opened fire; their bullets hitting the plane must have been the first indication to the Mavis crew that an enemy plane was near them. Lyme fired four short bursts from his bow turret, a total of 200 rounds. His first burst went into the #4 engine, the second into #3 and, as the Mavis' starboard wing dropped, he got bursts into the #2 and #1 engines. Lloyd burned out the barrel of his 50 caliber; he was evidently so excited that he forgot short bursts were necessary. A year earlier, when Lloyd was flying in a PBY in VP-71 a Mavis shot at him, and he was eager to even the score.

It seemed forever for the gunners but only seven seconds after the opening bursts, both starboard engines of the Mavis caught fire, flames trailing one plane length behind. The enemy nosed over and spiraled in smoke and flames until crashing into the sea. It took only 150 to 200 rounds from each of Alley's three gun stations to down the Mavis.

Mavis

Moe Mahaley was on the starboard waist .50 and could not bring his gun to bear. Instead, he grabbed the large K-20 camera that we carried and took one of the most famous set of combat photos of the war. He shot 19 pictures from the moment before the Mavis started burning until it hit the water. The attack was so dramatic and the pictures so good that an account of the shoot-down and three of Moe's photos appeared in *Newsweek* in November 1943. There was also an article about this action in *Liberty* magazine



Two of Mo's pictures: Mavis hit and burning . . . . . burning and spinning

The Mavis was a bit old-fashioned but a very serviceable sea plane used at this time largely for transporting very important people. Scuttlebutt had it that there was a senior well-known admiral aboard the Mavis that Alley's gunners put into the ocean.

Having expended a lot of fuel chasing the Mavis, the Alley crew looked anxiously at the fuel sight gauges as they neared Guadalcanal. About thirty minutes from Carney, the fuel in the sight gauges would surge up a little and then disappear. Alley radioed the field that he was coming in low on gas and could not tolerate a wave-off. After a perfect landing, all four engines died at the end of the runway; a tractor pulled the 4Y to its hard stand—fuel management to the last drop by a fine crew.

Whit Wright was flying near the end of Sector 1, Lat. 00° 08'S, Long. 151° 15'E, on the shipping lane between Truk and Kavieng. At 1335, just an hour after Alley downed the Mavis, Whit and his crew saw what they later decided was either a Jap gunboat or sub-chaser. It was 85-100 feet long with a 15 to 20 foot beam. It had stick masts fore and aft, a pilot house amidships and single gun-mounts fore and aft. Whatever kind of a vessel it was, it was no junk. It was all-steel construction and had approximately eight feet of freeboard. When sighted, the vessel was holding course 200°T and making 12 knots toward Kavieng. However, throughout the attack, the gunboat turned in tight circles.

Whit spent 25 minutes making strafing runs on the gunboat, and his gunners prevented the Jap gunners from manning their deck guns. The Japs did fire a small calibre machine gun mounted on their deck house but scored no hits on the 4Y-1. After pouring many .50 calibre rounds into the vessel, Whit decided to bomb it.

His plane carried 500-pounders armed with contact (instantaneous) fuses, so he released the bombs from 500 feet altitude. That was *almost* high enough; there were only five shrapnel holes in the plane from the bomb bursts. Whit's plane was nearly "hoist by its own petard." The first two bombs were very near misses; the one bomb dropped on the second run was observed to land and explode alongside port amidships. When Whit left, the ship was emitting black smoke and listing badly to port with only a foot and a half of freeboard.

Whit headed home on the inbound leg of Sector 1, passing over Green Island in the very late afternoon. If Whit had turned south about 60 miles, he would have seen a Jap force of 1 CL, 3 DDs and 2 AKs east of St George Passage. And if Whit had stayed around this force until dark, he would have seen a lone Black Cat, PBY-5, Bu. No. 08403, drop a 500 pound bomb on the deck of the CL and come very close to hitting one DD with the only other thing left to drop, a depth charge. If Whit could have made radio contact with the daring pilot of this PBY-5, he would have met Paul Stevens. Wright meeting Stevens here was a near miss of 60 miles and a few hours. They did get together later, Wright as skipper and Stevens as his executive officer in 104's second deployment. It was indeed a small war in a large ocean.

29 August Whit Wright and crew headed for Espiritu Santo in Bu. No. 32081. The facilities at Espiritu would repair the damage that Whit's plane had sustained on the 28th.

Skipper flew the Zed sector and had his first look at two Japanese stronghold islands, Treasury and Buka, but he saw nothing to shoot or bomb. Smith flew Sector 10 and, at low altitude, cruised within 15-20 miles of Nauru. Don Hager and his crew flew their first regular patrol in 11.2 hours, nothing sighted.

30 August Just three days after shooting down the Mavis, Alley and his crew were flying the Zed sector. Near Treasury Island, south of the southeast end of Bougainville, they saw a Betty and gave chase but were unable to catch the swift plane. Old Mavis was too easy, young Betty was too fast.

Now Hear This, Chow Down. These famous Navy words, shouted and heard with enthusiasm, had no meaning in the Navy Search Group camp on Carney Field, Guadalcanal. The food was terrible. I don't know what it was like in the enlisted men's camp but the food in the Officers' Mess was the worst that I ever experienced in the Navy. And now, with many years' perspective, I can say that it was the worst food I have ever been served in my life. It got better, but that is not remarkable, for it had a lot of room for improvement. Even with improvement, it still qualifies for my all-time-worst award.

Herb Donald has a somewhat different recollection of the Officers' Mess at Carney, and I repeat his words here, prefaced by noting that Herb had been in the Pacific for well over a year, and I contend that he was suffering diminished capacity in regard to evaluating the quality of food. In defense of Carney chow, Herb recalls, "We had a friend in the Army Air Corps who would occasionally join us for a meal because he said our food was better than theirs. I guess everything is relative."

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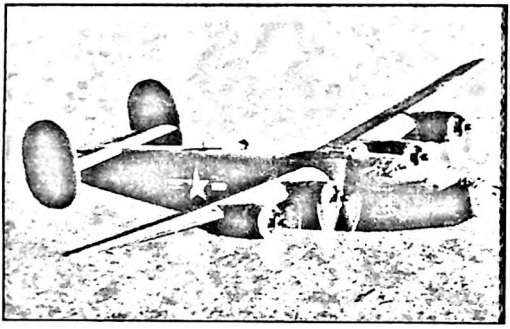
31 August The Hager crew, Crew 13!, had all the luck; they were first to find some targets at Kapingamarangi. Hager surprised the Japs, caught five Rufes on the water and his gunners hit all of them in a single, fly-by "strafing run." There is no ACA Report for this action, but Nathan Hodge, Hager's bow gunner, made a clear and detailed entry in his flight log. As we assemble all of the records of VB-104's actions, we have learned of several events that deserved to be recorded in an ACA Report but were overlooked. It must have been that events were happening so frequently that Ming could not keep up with them. In this instance, Ming had the tracking and attacks on the three destroyers to record. Then, probably with those unfinished, Alley shoots down a Mavis and Wright sinks a

gunboat. Don Hager's oral report on the strafing pass on the Rufes at Kapingamarangi was low priority. Perhaps if Hager had turned back for additional runs he would have made it in print.

August had been a wild month! Training, travel, and combat all packed into 30 days. (August has only 30 days when you cross the date line!) September might be more lively but it could not be more diverse.



PB4Y-1 Bu. No. 32061, *Mark's Farts*, Crew 4
Solomon Islands, 1943.

Chapter 8 Bombing with the Army, traveling with Eleanor, exploding Nell, and splashing Betty

September 1943 Carney Field, Guadalcanal

The last few days of August, our first taste of combat *a la Sears,* was just a warmup for September. In addition to keeping Lt. Ming busy writing Aircraft Action Reports, we would enter the political field, almost crossing paths with two presidents! Japanese barges would become a favorite target, and our planes would need maintenance that could not be provided by our service unit at Carney. For 100-hour checks and engine changes, we flew our planes to Espiritu Santo. The crew would get a good rest and fill the plane with beer for the return hop.

1 September We thought we were finished with practice bombing, not so. In mid-morning, Sears led a division of our planes on an "almost real" bombing attack. The division (Sears, Alley, Feind, Stoppleman, Clagett, Humphrey, Swinton, Searls, and one other) climbed to over 20,000 feet, rendezvoused with some F6Fs, and dropped some real bombs on a poor, defenseless rock. Practice today, the real thing tomorrow.

While half of the squadron practiced hi-bombing, one of our crews went out in the hot sectors. Van Ben flew Sector 1 for a long 11.3 hours. Monty and Hager both went out over Ontong Java. Hodge, in the Hager crew, entered a note in his log about the natives waving at them. The Hager crew responded to the friendly

natives by tossing them some cigarettes. Donald sighted a Jap bomber but lost it before contact could be made.

The squadron's patrols left Guadalcanal, then flew north over Tulagi Island. There, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, rested and healed after his ordeal in the sinking of his torpedo boat, PT-109, was reporting for duty and getting a new boat. This special PT boat was armed with 40mm and 20mm automatic cannons —armament for attacking barges at night. The Japs would get hassled, Kennedy by night and Van Benschoten by day.

Japanese barges usually hid by day and did their work in darkness, but on this day, Van Benschoten found a barge that was getting an early start on its night's work. Van was returning from Sector 1 and finishing his patrol along the southwest coast of Choiseul. At 1745, about a half hour before sunset, his crew sighted a small island covered with lush green vegetation. This island attracted their attention because it was moving!—making 15 knots on a course of 315°T. Van and his crew were the first in our squadron to see a Jap barge, piled high with green vegetation, masquerading as an island. When Van Ben and McCutcheon, in the co-pilot seat, realized that they were dealing with a Jap barge, they dove into a strafing run. The bow and belly turrets fired 150 rounds each, and the tail turret fired 50 rounds. They scored many hits on the barge. In response, the barge made a sharp turn to starboard and headed for the beach, opening up on the 4Y-1 with a light caliber machine gun, probably a 7.7. None of the Jap bullets hit Van's plane.

Van Ben reported the barge to be the large variety, 50 to 60 feet long, with a beam of 9 to 12 feet. When he continued on patrol, the barge was beached and emitting a thin column of black smoke. Barges were tough little boats, so this one probably was repaired to fight again, but not this night. It would also need a new crew!

Whit Wright and crew returned from Espiritu Santo where they had taken Bu. No. 32081 for a check and repairs. Espiritu was also our rest and relaxation spot. While waiting for their plane, the crew did not have to fly patrols and had access to a beer garden, relatively good chow, and an ice cream parlor.

On Japanese Barges and Sampans. The Japanese troops on Guadalcanal and southeastern New Guinea were at the far end of long supply lines that required a large fleet of transports and cargo ships. Our submarines had sunk many ships of this fleet, so the Japanese turned to another means of transport that was ideal for coastal travel. They built many of what we called barges. Local small shipbuilders in China and the Philippines turned out hundreds of these vessels. Many were made of wood and equipped with diesel engines that could propel the craft at 8 to 10 knots.

The hulls of these barges were shaped similar to the sampan that was so common in the harbors of Asia. The bow and stern were square, with the bow rising gradually so that the boat could serve as a landing craft able to nose into sandy beaches or swampy shores. Some had a "tail gate" arrangement in the bow to facilitate loading and unloading wheeled equipment. The craft were various sizes, some 40, but the larger 60 feet long. They had small machine guns mounted on the bow and stern and a small cockpit amidships for the helmsman and crew. The barges were open, that is, without a hold, but could carry 100 to 140 men or 10 to 20 tons of cargo. Several barges could do the job of a small troopship or freighter.

Top of the line in Japanese barges was the *Daihatsu.* These were similar in size and shape to the wooden barges, but were made of steel with some armor for the coxswain and the diesel engine. They carried heavier armament than the wooden barges, and when carrying troops, the soldiers' weapons added to the guns fixed bow and stern.

These barges, wooden and steel hulled alike, were very important to the Japanese forces on the Solomon Islands, so "barge busting" was important to us. A successful attack on a Japanese barge meant putting more than 100 troops out of action or eliminating tons of precious cargo—food, ammo, or fuel.

Some of our Aircraft Action Reports describe our attacks on sampans. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Fifth Edition, 1939, has the following entry: ***sam´pan*** *A skiff, used in the river and harbor traffic of China and Japan, propelled usually with a scull.* The barges had hulls the shape of a sampan, however, barges were larger, propelled by diesel engines, and far more seaworthy. In retrospect, I think some of the vessels that we called sampans were barges with a "covered-wagon" like awning amidships, that gave the barge the look of the traditional sampan. We also seem to have used "sampan" for all of the small cargo vessels with pointed bow and stern that were obviously not barges. (See description of Van Benschoten's sampan, 25 September.)

During the last ten days of August, the squadron had established its job in the Solomons—just chase Japanese destroyers out of our sectors, shoot down a Jap plane here and there, and destroy an occasional gunboat. We had forgotten Whit Wrights' watch-words, "The more you do the more you can do." When the Army invited us to go bombing with them, we accepted.

There were at least three Army B-24 squadrons based on the inland runways of Carney Field. Three or four times per week, when weather over the targets was suitable for bombing, the three squadrons formed a large, 27-plane armada,

climbed to 20,000 feet and dropped their bombs en mass on one of the Japanese airfields of Bougainville. Their invitation gave us the fourth position in the armada—Tail-end-Charlie. The Japanese anti-aircraft artillery could dry fire on the lead squadron to get the feel for deflection, cut their fuses on the second and third squadrons, and pour the flack into us. Fortunately, by the time the Japanese gunners were firing on us, the bombs from the army were exploding and spoiling the gunners' concentration.

2 September The high-altitude bombing practice of the previous day was put to the test in this bombing raid on Kahili Airfield, the large Japanese base on the southeast end of Bougainville. Kahili was the airfield from which enemy planes were attacking our bases in the Solomons and our supply ships supporting the new landings on Vella Lavella—104 to the rescue.

The skipper took off at 1245, leading our division of nine planes. The PPCs were: Sears, Alley, Feind, Stoppy, Clagett, Humphrey, and Swinton plus two other crews that we cannot identify. [Pick two from: Honey, Dvorachek, Anderson]

The skipper led us out over Cape Esperance, where at 1344 we joined three Army Air Corps B-24 squadrons at 8000 feet. We were the fourth squadron and Tail-end-Charlie in this mass of more than 40 B-24s. At 1442, our escort of 100 fighters joined us over Munda at 18,000 feet. We followed the Army out over Choiseul, finally making the bombing run on Kahili from NW to SE, releasing our bombs at 1604 from 21,300 feet. Each of our planes carried 20 100-pound general purpose bombs with instantaneous fuses, a total of 180 bombs for Kahili. A few of our bombs hung in the racks, and six went in the water but the rest hit the target, the revetment and dispersal areas near the runway. Kahili and Ballale, a nearby island, produced moderate to heavy AA.

After releasing their bombs, the Army formations broke up, but we held formation until break-up over Guadalcanal. The Army guys were more experienced than we were at this type of operation; perhaps they knew something that we did not know. With our neat formation, we certainly looked better than they did.

We should have gotten points for style and degree of difficulty for the last division is always the toughest spot. By the time the third section of our division got over the target, the Jap AA gunners had worked out our altitude and solved the deflection. Our planes received a total of 13 shrapnel holes. John Humphrey's top turret gunner, ARM2c Jack Laming, suffered minor injuries.

We saw no enemy fighters, but they were somewhere above because they gave us our first look at their air-to-air phosphorous bombs. Japanese fighters

dropped phosphorous bombs that they aimed to explode above and ahead of their target aircraft. The bombs appeared to be a giant fireworks display with burning bits of phosphorous radiating and falling from the explosion point. No phosphorus hit any of our planes.

Phosphorous bombs were dropped on me several times throughout the rest of the war but I was never hit and I never heard of anyone being hit by one. It was always scary to have them dropped on you, and the Japs must have gotten some satisfaction out of dropping them. As far as I know, however, the Japs went zero for many. They never hit anything.

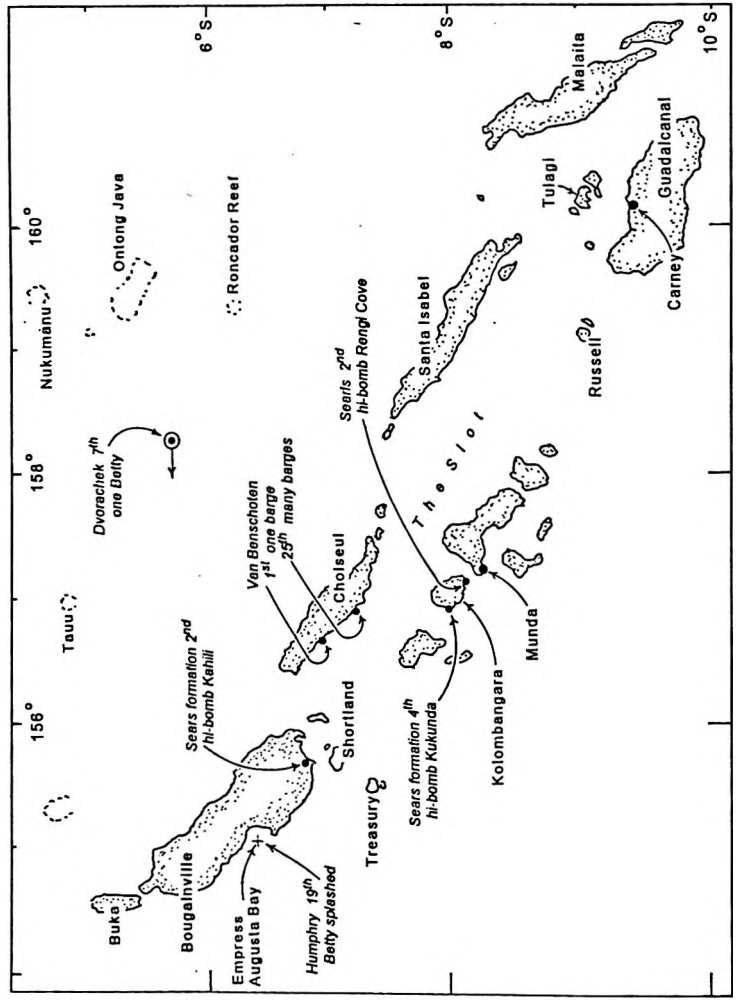
The Searls crew had a special role in today's bombing. Our skipper was thorough and well prepared for Kahili. He was not going to look bad to our enemy, the Japs, nor to our rivals, the Army Air Corps, by going over Kahili in our first hi-altitude bombing effort with a vacant spot in our nine-plane division. Searls followed our main formation as a tenth plane, poised to replace any of our guys who had to turn back because of engine trouble.

When it became apparent that all nine planes in our formation would make it to Kahili, Searls pealed off to make a solo run on the Jap installations at Ringi Cove, near Vila Field, Kolombangara.

Our ground forces were now well established on New Georgia and Vella Lavella, and chasing Japanese soldiers right and left. To escape, the Japs took the night barge connection to Kolombangara, where they added to the largest concentration of Japanese troops in the central Solomons. Kolombangara was "loaded." Any hit along the coast of Kolombangara would probably get some Jap troops, their equipment, or at least some of their communications. Searls hit 'em.

Searls approached Ringi over Blackett Strait, where the Jap destroyer had rammed Jack Kennedy's PT-109. Searls released his 100 pounders from 23,000 feet at exactly 1605, just one minute after the skipper's formation had released their bombs on Kahili. How is that for perfect timing? The Searls' bombs hit repair shops and supply bivouac areas on the northwest shore of Ringi Cove. There was no AA from Ringi, so the drop was a bit of a "milk run" for the Searls crew.

We gave ourselves a "Well Done" for this mission. Ray Ming wrote in the ACA report: "The entire operation was conducted in an orderly and efficient manner, rendezvous and attack procedures well coordinated." This raid took only 5.5 hours, just a half-day job to old patrol crews.



September Aircraft Action Reports — in and around the Solomon Islands

While most of the squadron went hi-bombing, Whit Wright flew the Zed Sector in the usual 6.8 hours, 1.5 nite. He found nothing going on along the southwest coast of Bougainville and at Buka Passage. Reichert did a regular patrol with only whitecaps to report.

3 September Smith did Sector 1, and Van Ben was in Sector 3, once around Kapingamarangi. Hager flew his patrol in 31955, a loaner from VB-102. Donald started his patrol but his crew noticed a gas leak. "Roho" Rolland, Donald's plane captain, recalls: "After take off, a gas leak from the starboard wing developed at the filler cap. It reached the turbine and we had a sheet of fire from the wing's trailing edge to the tail. We lighted up the early morning sky. Donald was told of the situation and we were still climbing. He asked for suggestions. I told him to nose it over when you can and he did, which put the fire out and broke the suction. He made a beautiful overload landing. Foelsch, the tail gunner, vomited his guts out when we were on the ground. Got into the standby plane and resumed our mission, 11.6 hrs."

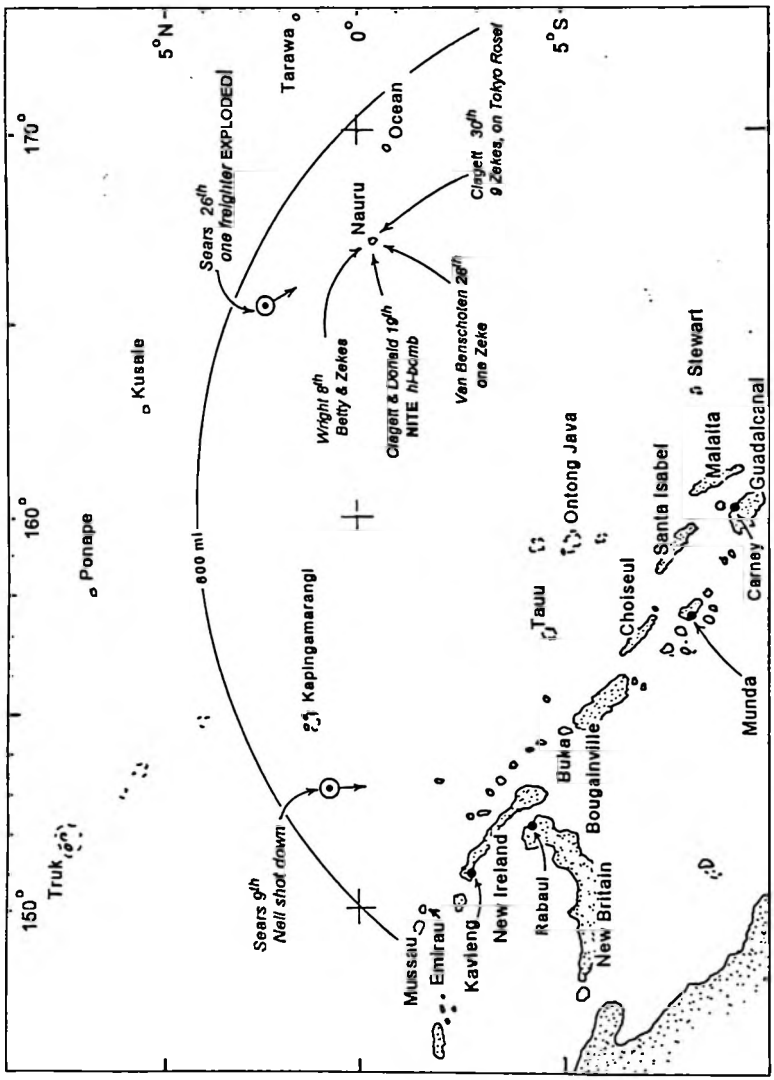
Herb's overweight landing would have had the designers at Consolidated biting their drafting pencils. The gas leak was a bad one. Over 100 gallons of gas were lost in the short 0.8 hour flight. Donald and crew jumped into the standby plane and flew a full sector, 11.7 hours (1.2 nite).

None of our patrols saw anything to report

4 September The Kahili Bombers of 104 were at it again but this time we were headed for Ballale Island, the source of most of the flak that we got on our first Kahili raid. The skipper took off at 0917 with his nine-plane formation: Sears, Alley, Stoppleman, Clagett, Humphrey, Swinton, Searls, and two others. This time Searls and his crew were part of the main formation, not an airborne standby and solo bomber.

This mission was not as flawless as the Kahili raid. For starters, the weather was lousy. We were over Cape Esperance at the right time and altitude for rendezvous with the army B-24's, but they were no-shows. We climbed to the place and time of rendezvous with our fighter escort, but they were also no-shows.

Without fighter cover, the skipper decided against going to Ballale, the flak island off Kahili, and headed instead for our alternate target, Dolo Cove, Kolombangara. Bombing Kolombangara was like bombing your own backyard. It was only 200 miles from Carney Field. Somewhere over Munda, we picked up an unscheduled escort of four F4Us, probably the Munda CAP. With the bad



September Aircraft Action Reports – near the end of long sectors

weather in the Solomons grounding both US and Japanese army planes, the Marine F4Us had nothing better to do than "mother-hen" us.

The weather over Kolombangara continued generally bad, with squally conditions and heavy overcast with scattered openings. We circled in our usual attack formation, a stepped-down javelin, and remained in the target area for one and a half hours. An opening in the clouds allowed us to start a bombing run from north to south along the west coast of the island. At 1251, we released the usual load of 100 pounders from an altitude of 13,000 feet. Most of our bombs fell in the water along the shore line of the bay. It was just as well. Our drop had been on Kukunda Bay, in peaceful times a "Seventh Day Adventist Mission area." With our view of the ground limited by heavy clouds, we had mistaken Kukunda Bay for Dolo Cove.

Our ACA report notes that we observed six "float type Zekes" above us at 22,000 feet. They made no passes at us, nor did they drop any of their famous phosphorous bombs. "Float type Zekes" were more conveniently called Rufes. Ming's knowledge of the nomenclature for Jap planes must have been in the process of development. With the Kahili end of Bougainville socked in, these Rufes may have come from Rekata, the Japanese sea plane base on nearby Santa Isabel. Our volunteer fighter cover must have gone home early.

5 September This was a minor patrol for the war, but a big deal for the Donald crew. They had a long ride, 11.5 hours, in one of our hot sectors to the northwest where they sighted a Betty and gave chase. Without sufficient advantage of altitude and surprise, they could not get close enough to the Betty to blast it. They did get off a few well-aimed rounds at long range and received a few rounds of 20mm from the Betty's tail cannon in return. There is no ACA report for this action but Herb Donald wrote in his log, "Encountered and attacked Jap 2-engine bomber, Mitsubishi 01--it stayed out of range and ran away firing its cannon - no damage either side." We were getting closer to Bettys.

Smith flew Sector 6, out and back over Ontong Java, while Hager and Feind had equally uneventful patrols. Van Ben had an all too common early morning hair-raiser. Van took off, had engine trouble and immediately landed —overweight of course. He did his full sector in the standby plane—no strain.

The Humphrey crew flew to Espiritu Santo. Their plane, 32076, needed service and the crew needed a bit of rest and relaxation. Our base at Espiritu was a luxury resort compared to our camp on the 'Canal.

7 September We were beginning to learn how to do a better job of patrolling our sectors. Today's action was the squadron's first close battle with a Betty.

Dvorachek and his crew were in Sector 4, on their way home, and only 240 miles (one and a half hours) from Carney. At 1445, when 65 miles southwest of Ontong Java, they spotted an enemy plane, 10 miles off their port bow. It proved to be a Betty making 165 knots on course 270°T. The Betty was headed toward Buka but it was well south of the track from Nauru to Buka, so this Betty must have been on a patrol.

The Betty was at 1000 feet; Deevo was at 2000 and unobserved by the Betty. With this slight advantage of altitude and surprise, Deevo made a port wingover into a power dive to intercept the unsuspecting Betty and get on its tail. Deevo's gunners poured 950 rounds into the enemy plane as the 4y closed to 200 yards.

Deevo and crew observed "two mid-sized holes in the port wing-root of the Betty" and watched their tracers pour into the cockpit area. The Betty made no response until Deevo's gunners opened fire. With tracers entering and whistling past his cockpit, the Jap pilot increased speed and dove for the water. He was last seen skimming across the waves and widening the distance between his Betty and our 4Y-1. Deevo's bow, belly and top turret plus the port waist gunners did the firing. It was not until the Betty was out of range that its tail gun position fired two bursts of 20mm rounds but did not hit Deevo's plane.

Deevo recorded in the ACA Report: "Betty was camouflaged with a dark black fuselage, medium blue wings with a single yellow stripe on each."

Alley was in Sector 1, out the scenic route north of Bougainville and New Ireland. Mike Keiser, navigating for Alley and co-pilot Dodson, remarked in his log that they saw a Betty. We were seeing Bettys but we still didn't have the knack of catching them.

Monty, with Jeep Austin sitting in as his co-pilot (regular co-pilot Mike Keiser was doing a guest spot with Alley), was also chasing Bettys—two of them. Twice during this patrol of the Zed Sector, Monty and Jeep sighted and made high-speed runs on Bettys, but were unable to bring either within range of the crew's .50s. The Bettys just hit their throttles and left Monty and Jeep in their dust, or spindrift.

This was Jeep's last flight in 104. He left the squadron to ascend to a position as a pilot on Adm Halsey's staff. Monty and Jeep had been together since their days as boot ensigns in VP-71 flying Neutrality Patrols in the Atlantic. It was a nice touch that Monty and Jeep shagged two Bettys on their last flight together.

Paul Stevens, a future executive officer of 104 but still a stranger to us, was up from New Guinea in his Black Cat PBY "dive bomber," trespassing on the end of Monty's and Jeep's Zed sector. He attacked 3 AKs off St. George's Passage and hit the largest one with a 650-pound bomb. He then strafed a small AK off Buka Passage. Every day, in the late afternoon, 104 or 102 sent a plane out in our Zed

sector that covered the waters off St. George's and Buka. We never saw any Jap ships there. The Japs moved their shipping at night to escape our search planes, the New Zealand PV's, and Army B-25's that Airsols sent into the area in the daytime. But the Jap ships then got Stevens on the late, late show. They would have been safer in broad daylight.

8 September Whit Wright's bold and successful attack on this day set a new standard for our squadron and probably for other squadrons of our type in the Pacific. Wright was on a routine search patrol in Sector 10 with the weather clear and sunny—visibility unlimited. As he approached Nauru, he flew only 50 feet above the water in order to sneak in under the island's early warning radar. Nearing the island, Whit saw an AK (freighter) moored to the loading dock on the southwest tip of the island. A destroyer was one mile offshore, screening the AK.

After sighting the Jap ships, the Wright crew saw a Betty about five miles ahead. It was about five miles from the island, wheels down and turning into a long final approach, apparently intending to land. Whit intercepted the Betty and *climbed into an attack from below!* Flying at low altitude preparing to land, the Betty's pilot must have thought that Whit had climbed up out of the water. As Whit crossed under the Betty, his gunners opened fire and continued firing as Whit flew along with the Betty about 200 feet off its starboard beam. The initial burst by Whit's gunner had put out the Betty's port engine. Whit and his gunners observed no further damage to the Betty because they were distracted by seven Zekes. Whit dove back down to the water, and his gunners shifted their sights from the Betty to the Zekes. Flying at 20 feet above the water and at rated power, Whit beat a hasty retreat. The Zekes made about 15 runs on the 4Y-1, but most of these runs were broken off early. Only two of them came in over Whit's plane. Although Whit's gunners hit two or three of the Zekes, they observed no damage to the Jap fighters.

E. G. Hurlburt in Whit's crew remembers this action very well. "I was Whit's tail gunner, and on this shootout with the Betty and Zekes at Nauru, I reported 'Pilot from tail turret.' Whit replied "Go ahead Two Gun.' I answered, "There are three Zeroes aft, 5, 6, and 7 o'clock.' Whit replied, 'Stay with them.' I often wondered why he made that reply. So my first reunion, in Nashville in 1977, my question to Whit was why that reply. Whit stated, 'Hell, I had to say something.'

"The Zeroes stayed with us for about 40 minutes and they put one hundred and twenty holes (120) in our aircraft."

Many of our patrols looked in on Nauru without drawing the attention of enemy fighters, but Whit had caught Nauru with a lot going on. The DD was

protecting the AK from submarine attacks, and the CAP of Zekes was guarding against an air attack. The Betty pilot was a bit unlucky. If he survived his interrupted approach to a landing, he had a great sea story to tell his buddies. And, I'll bet that throughout the rest of his flying career, he thought of Whit every time he lowered his wheels and turned on final.

The cold sectors were giving us some action. In Sector 5, Smith sighted a Betty over Roncador Reef. He chased it for 15 minutes but could not get close enough for a shot. Feind and Van Ben had uneventful searches. Hager chased two Bettys, and Donald, in Sector 9, had a close call. He encountered a Jap sub that submerged before he could make an attack. Then, when he heard on CW radio that Whit had more than enough fighters at Nauru, he turned east to help. Whit eluded the fighters on his own so Donald headed for home. With the sub contact and the run toward Whit added to his regular patrol, Donald was very low on fuel.

Herb Donald remembers what he calls his "Empty Tanks" patrol very well. "We descended from 8000 feet to play hide and seek with a Jap sub. Then when it refused to surface, we climbed back to continue patrol. It took a lot of fuel. Also, much fuel had siphoned from the tanks on takeoff and climb-out. On the way back, one engine cut out. On checking, we found it was out of fuel. Other tank gages read the same amount. We levelled tanks and started the dead engine.

"I told the crew that when the next engine cut out that was my order to bail out; I would circle and land near them so they could get the rubber boat stored in the top of the fuselage. Sams said he wanted to go down with me as co-pilot and I said OK.

"As we approached Carney Field, there was a low cloud along side the runway. I thought it was small and didn't want to go wide because of the fuel conditions so I stuck close to make a dive for the runway if an engine cut. We entered the cloud and as seconds passed, we didn't break out. I started an instrument approach and let-down. We broke out with the runway dead ahead. It was not Carney but a new field and the runway was not completed! I shot for a short field landing but there was a bulldozer at the near end of the runway. The driver jumped off and ran as our wheels straddled it. As there were no taxiways, I stopped in the middle of the runway, got out and kissed the ground. Rolland on top of the wings with a measuring stick said three tanks would not wet the stick and one tank had one inch of fuel! We had logged 12.0 hours of flight time.

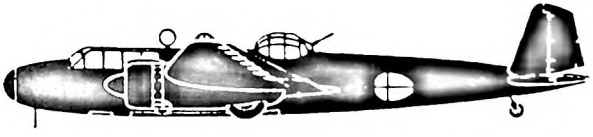
"The next day, with a minimum of fuel and crew, Bill Goodman, Albion Rolland, and I flew back to Carney Field. We may have disappointed the crowd of workers who had gathered at the end of the runway to see if we could make it!

"I don't remember the name of the airstrip. Later, when taxiways were added and the runway completed, we would taxi the long way from Carney to take off from there on patrol."

9 September The squadron was flying the sectors to the west, Stoppleman in Sector 1, Sears in Sector 2, Swinton in Sector 3, Alley in sector 4 or 5, and Clagett in the Zed Sector. Stoppy saw a Betty and gave chase at 210 mph, but the Betty crew saw the 4Y-1, and the Jap pilot poured on the coal. Our 4Y-1s were simply not fast enough to catch an alert Betty, so Stoppy could not get close enough for a shot. In the adjacent sector, Sears saw a Nell with a sleepy pilot and crew.

The skipper was on a routine search patrol in Sector 2. The weather was excellent; there was the usual one-tenth scattered cumulus clouds at low altitude, but otherwise visibility was unlimited. In such weather we flew our patrols at 8 or 9 thousand feet, a very favorable altitude for our planes and for coverage of our sectors with our radar and the eagle eyes of our crews.

Early in the patrol, when 80 miles northeast of Kieta, Bougainville, Sears sighted a Betty. He chased it to within 40 miles of Kieta, could not gain on the swift plane, so he turned northwest to continue on patrol.



Nell

At 1120, Sears sighted a Nell at Lat. 00° 45' N, Long. 153° 08' E, about 100 miles west of Kapingamarangi. Flying at 12,000 feet, it was headed for Buka on the track from Truk to Buka. Sears poured on the coal, came up under Nell and closed to 150 feet, slightly below the Nell's port quarter. The enemy plane made no response and was not aware of the 4Y-1 until Sears' gunners—Colclasure in the bow turret, Yuzapavich in the top, and the starboard waist gunner—poured a five second burst into the Nell's port engine, fuel tank, and wing-root. In the climb up to the Nell, the nose of the 4Y-1 was up in the air, and Yuzapovich recalls that he asked the skipper to drop the nose so he could sight on the Nell. The Nell's port wing burst into flames, and a second later the plane exploded. The

skipper and his crew observed numerous flaming pieces, including two large sections, fall and crash into the water. Sears' gunners had downed the Nell with only 150 rounds.

The Nell did not get a chance to fire at Sears and his crew, but the 4Y-1 did sustain some damage. Parts of the exploding Nell hit Sears' plane, causing a one-foot square hole in the right aileron and a dent in the leading edge of the starboard wing between the engines.

The instant before opening fire, Sears and his crew had a good close look at the Nell. It was in excellent condition with standard camouflage. Nells were first put into service in 1937 and were among the first planes to be recognized as superior to the planes being manufactured in the United States. Nells were used first for long range bombing of the cities of China, but were most famous for sinking HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* on 10 December 1941.

The Nell that the Skipper and his crew shot down was probably on a transport mission to Buka and may have had Japanese Army "big shots" on board.

10 September This day we had early morning takeoffs for the cold sectors with Smith in Sector 9, Van Ben in Sector 6, and Monty, Feind (with the Reichert crew), and Searls in the rest of the eastern sectors. Because our planes were overloaded, take off was often the most dangerous part of combat flights.

Seconds after his early morning, overloaded takeoff, Searls lost the port outboard engine, #1, on Bu. No. 32048, the skipper's plane. Skillful flying kept the plane in the air and brought it around for an emergency landing. Unfortunately, no one had jettisoned the bomb load; with the bombs and full gas load, the plane weighed well above the maximum allowable landing weight.

As the Searls crew was about to land, another plane turned onto the runway and started its takeoff, causing Searls to abort the landing. For security reasons, there was no radio control of planes using our field, but of course no plane should EVER take the runway in front of a plane about to land.

To begin another landing pattern, Searls made a left turn, into the dead engine, causing the plane to lose altitude. When he did get straightened out on final, he was low and tried to make a no-flaps landing. Searls' first pilot, Dag DeGolia, recalls, "By the time our wheels touched down, we were half way down the runway, going about 120 knots. There was no way the brakes could get us stopped. We were headed straight for the searchlight at the end of the runway which was surrounded by sandbags. Our right landing gear tried to go over that pile of sand. The #3 engine somehow missed the searchlight, but the landing gear collapsed and the plane spun to the right into the field at the end of the runway.

All switches had been turned off to prevent fires. There was gas spouting around, but no fires.

"Somehow we all got out through escape hatches. One of the crew had attempted to jump before we hit the searchlight. He and another crew member were hurt but not seriously. These two crewmen, John Benjamin Graham and Wallace Victor Harwood, evidently were sent to a hospital for recovery. To my knowledge, there is no record of them returning to the squadron.

"The right spin around the searchlight was fortunate. If the plane had spun to the left, it would have fallen into a large hole, an old Jap ammunition dump, about ten feet deep."

On this day, Humphrey and crew returned from Espiritu in their plane, 32076; the crew and plane as good as new.

11 September We had the hot sectors, with the feature flight by Searls. He made the flight schedule without even a day of rest after losing an engine on takeoff, making an overweight, no-flaps landing, and turning the skipper's plane into spare parts. Without hesitation, Searls poured on the coal and did his sector in 10.3 hours, ending his patrol with a light, slow, full-flaps landing.

Donald sighted a sub full on the surface but he was 20 miles away and it submerged before he could attack. Hager and Wright, Sector 4, flew uneventful patrols.

13 September We had the hot sectors but nothing super-special happened. Smith in Sector 2 bombed a 200 ton ship from 10,000 feet—no hits. Searls and Alley saw nothing. Clagett and Reichert chased Bettys on their otherwise routine patrols. There were so many Bettys flying searches across our hot sectors that we or the 102 crews saw them on most days. Bettys were like the weather, everybody talked about them but nobody did anything about them.

Whit Wright flew 32081 to Espiritu, to get his plane rested and his crew serviced.

14 September Montgomery had Sector 10, once around Nauru. Co-pilot Jones wrote in his log, "2 Nells, 2 AK's." Our other patrols were: Van Ben in Sector 9, 9.8 hours, Feind, 9.6, Hager, 9.5, and Donald, 11.5. Herb Donald flew very long patrols as if he was being paid by the hour. He was! We all were. We got flight pay, an additional 50% of our regular pay, but four hours flying a month was enough to qualify. Herb's 11.5 hour patrol was almost enough hours to get him flight pay for three months.

15 - 16 September Two quiet days! Clagett, Humphrey, Stoppy, and Swinton flew hot sectors on the 15th and Feind, Reichert and Searls flew cold sectors on the 16th—no actions. Our last scrap requiring an ACA Report was Sears' Nell, so Intelligence Officer Ray Ming had a week off.

A Tale of the South Pacific [From an unfinished manuscript by VAdm Sears with additions from Dru Stainback, Sears' first radioman; Lyme Lymenstull, bow gunner in the Alley crew, and Sears' personal flight log.] In the early days of WW II, Eleanor Roosevelt was determined to visit the South Pacific war zone and comfort the wounded. This proposed desire on her part met with stiff opposition from the President and the senior naval commanders in whose commands she would require inordinate attention for her safety and logistic support. The loudest complainer was Admiral Bull Halsey, Commander, South Pacific, who would be charged with her well being during this female invasion of his sacrosanct domain!

But Eleanor, a charming, mild-mannered, well-loved lady most of the time, could be a feisty tough fighter if her will was denied. The first to fall was the President who practically told her - you're on your own. The rest was easy despite the anguished howls of King, Nimitz, and Halsey. The buck fell on the latter to arrange the trip.

The flight to Noumea, New Caledonia, Halsey's headquarters, was easily arranged on a VIP flight from Australia as was the flight to the burgeoning base at Espiritu Santo, jumping off spot to the war zone. Eleanor, by this time, had been joined by Miss Collette Ryan, a big, friendly Australian attached to the International Red Cross; she was to be her constant companion on her dangerous mission.

How to get the First Lady and her companion to the war zone on Guadalcanal was the next problem. Surface transportation was out of the question due to the risk involved. The Japs were still making nightly forays with the heavily-gunned Tokyo Express down "the slot." Air was the only solution and Halsey thought of his heavily-gunned Navy Liberators (PB4Y-1s) and Sears, CO of VB-104 and the Navy Search Group operating out of Carney Field.

Sears had flown the Admiral several times in Car Div Two and at Anacostia, so Halsey's next choice was simple. Send Sears and his crew to Espiritu Santo and fly the ladies to Guadalcanal. Make it at night to arrive just before dawn. This was the safest procedure; however, Henderson airfield was severely bombed the next day!

On 13 September, Sears flew down to Espiritu in routine fashion, having negotiated the 625 nautical miles several times before. He was flying John Alley's plane, 32075, because Searls had earlier crashed the skipper's own plane into spare parts. Lymenstull recalls that the skipper selected 32075 because it had a Jap flag painted on it for a Mavis shot down and three bombs painted on it for three high altitude bombing raids.

We prepared the plane as best we could to accommodate our distinguished guests. The painting of the beautiful lady on the nose of 32075 was left for all to see, but the plane's name, "Open Bottom," was judged indelicate and was painted over. As one prepared to board 32075, two open bottoms were apparent—the open bomb bay doors on the bottom of the Navy Liberator and the open bottom of the beautiful lady.

For comfort during flight, a plywood cargo liner was installed in the bomb-bay upon which two passenger type seats were securely fastened. Flight jackets and several thick Navy blankets completed the accouterments.

On 16 September, Sears flew 32075 on two check flights. Nothing must go wrong when Mrs. Roosevelt was aboard. On the morning of 17 September, Mrs. Roosevelt and her companion, Miss Ryan, boarded Sears' plane and made the flight from Espiritu to Henderson Field, Guadalcanal in 3.9 uneventful hours. Our crews usually dozed on our flight between Espiritu and Guadalcanal but on this special flight Sears' gunners were alert and he even had a fighter escort.

Mrs. Roosevelt's stay on Guadalcanal was short. On 18 September, one day after her arrival, Mrs. Roosevelt boarded Sears' plane and flew to Espiritu. Sears' flight log has the remark, "Mrs. R co-pilot for 2 hrs and on landing!" That shows how important we co-pilots were—even the President's wife could do our job!

Whit Wright, his crew, and his plane, 32081 "Whit's Shits," played a minor and little known role in the "Mrs. Roosevelt" caper but close enough to Mr. Roosevelt that "Whit's Shits" was temporarily covered by some washable brown paint. Whit flew to Espiritu when Sears did on the 13th. PATSU crews gave his plane the necessary service and Whit then provided his CENSORED "Whit's Shits" as standby plane for Sears on the day he flew Mrs. Roosevelt to Guadalcanal. On the morning of the 18th, Whit shuttled his plane to Henderson Field, so it could again serve as the standby plane, this time for the Sears/Roosevelt flight from Henderson back to Espiritu.

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17 September While the skipper was flying Mrs. Roosevelt from Espiritu to Henderson Field, Swinton and his crew slept in. Stormy Joe had the afternoon flight, Zed Sector to Buka. Van Ben flew Sector 5, out over beautiful Ontong

Java atoll and the Hager crew saw "two fighters & bomber." Herb Donald flew Sector 3 and wrote in his log, "Bombed and strafed weather station on Kapingamarangi just for practice." *Just for practice?* Herb, it's a little late, but I have to tell you something. Just four months before your "practice" at Kapingamarangi, the LATE Commanding Officer of VB-102, Van Voorhes, went out to bomb Kapingamarangi. He did not return from Kapingamarangi but the nice men in the Navy Department sent his next of kin a Congressional Medal of Honor. It is fortunate that the Japs recognized that your attack on Kapingamarangi was only practice.

18 - 19 September The morning of the 18th, we sent out only two regular patrols—Stoppleman and Alley in cold sectors. Then Whit Wright returned from Henderson while the pilots & aircrewmen were waiting around for "the word" on the big deal planned for the night. In the late afternoon and evening of 18 September, 12 crews prepared for a night formation bombing attack on the aircraft and aviation installations at Nauru. We were to bomb from medium altitude, 9 to 10 thousand feet. Someone chose this altitude because it was the safest. It was above the effective range of automatic anti-aircraft weapons and below the most effective altitude for the large anti-aircraft guns. It was also a convenient altitude because we did not need to wear oxygen masks and 10,000 feet was point blank range for our bombardiers. The skipper was away providing air-taxi and guide service for Mrs. Roosevelt, so our Executive Officer, Lt. J. H. Smith, was our flight leader.

The plan for this flight was excellent. Each plane was to carry 20 one-hundred pound bombs with instantaneous fuses. As the formation passed over the Nauru airfield, 240 bombs were to rain down on aircraft, gas tanks, service vehicles, and their owners.

The execution of the plan was awful—SNAFU NAURU. Soon after our 12 planes took off between 2255 and 2317, things began to go wrong. The landing gear of Searls' plane would not retract so he returned without getting far from the field. Only 10 planes made it to the rendezvous at 3000 feet over the field. When flight leader Smith was 200 miles out, engine trouble forced him to return to base. Thereafter, seven planes spent a lovely night flying over a beautiful moonlit Pacific: Wright 9.3 hours; Montgomery 9.6; Reichert. 9.0; Alley 8.2; Van Ben 9.0; Humphrey, flying with the Hager crew, 8.1; and one other. Only two planes found Nauru: Clagett 9.9 hours (6.0 nite) and Donald 9.7 hours.

Clagett. The flight to Nauru on the night of 18-19 September was the most spectacular event that had happened to me in my 22 years of life, and I remember things as if they happened yesterday. Our preflight ritual was as always: Page

Clagett was last to come aboard and he delivered his usual mini-speech, stating that I was second in command. If anything happened to him, I was to remove him from the seat and take command. I navigated all of our flights and Jock Sutherland was always in the co-pilot's seat.

After takeoff, I sat at the nav table for a short while and noticed that we were heading south in our climb. I stood and leaned into the cockpit and found Page and Jock trying to catch up with a white light that they saw occasionally and assumed to be a tail light of a PB4Y-1. I pointed out to Page that the light was a star, and he was heading south and would soon hit the mountains of Guadalcanal. Page turned 180 to port and headed north. I recall that we joined some of our planes and I have the very vivid memory of seeing St. Elmo's fire on another plane. We had gasoline drooling out of our filler caps and I wondered if St. Elmo's fire could ignite gasoline.

We soon lost sight of the other planes, presumably when all planes turned off their navigation lights as scheduled. I was now busy navigating, getting a departure from Malaita. I tracked Page as he swung back and forth on headings generally east of north as he looked for other planes. After about one hour, Page realized that we would not join other planes so we continued our mission as a single plane. We did not see another plane until the end of our flight at Carney Field.

Page asked for a course to Nauru and I told him to just hold the course that he was on and quit yawing about hoping to see the other planes. We were now at 9,000 feet at standard cruise. I began serious navigation, passing the bubble octant up to Jock so he could shoot stars on our beam. I worked out the sights and when one was plotted, I gave Jock the octant for another sight on the same star or another star on our beam. Jock shot every navigation star that would give us a course line. I ignored speed and had Page hold the same magnetic heading. The numerous star sights that we took during our second and third hours of flight gave us our track line that was taking us to the west of Nauru. In addition to taking star sights, I also took a very short but restful nap as was my custom.

About three hours after takeoff, we switched from shooting stars on our beam to shooting stars ahead and astern. As before, Jock worked the bubble octant and I pushed the pencil. Several lines across our track gave us our speed, a running fix, and a determination of wind speed and direction at our altitude. Page peeked and learned that we were tracking to a point west of Nauru. He was as nervous as a pregnant bride because he wanted to head directly toward the island. I finally worked out a time to turn to a heading that would take us over the island. Page was so eager to get to Nauru and blast the Japs that he turned early. In a few minutes, I gave him a corrected heading.

Right on schedule, our indefatigable first radioman, Mazurek, got the island on radar and gave us our distance from the island. We continued on course and at the time that I had posted to be over the island, and with the island now imbedded in the sea return on our radar, none of the lookouts could see the island. The only clouds were 4/10 cover down at 2000 to 4000 feet, but we should have seen the island between the clouds. Page turned to me and yelled that we could not see the island. I replied with a gesture indicating that it is directly beneath us. At that instant, Jock stuck his head out the bubble side window and shouted: "I see surf breaking on the shore." We were directly over the island.

The Japanese were as quiet as church mice, or shrine mice? They held their fire and did not turn on their searchlights, hoping that we would not see them and would go away. They had good discipline. Not one Jap nervous trigger finger squeezed off a tracer to give away the position of the island.

Our approach to the island had been on a course of approximately 070°T. Now directly over the island, we had to fly away from it so we could approach on a bombing run. When Jock said on intercom that he could see surf, all of the lookouts (Butler and Hunacek in the waist, Wren in the bow, Selman in the belly, and Mathews in the tail turrets) now knowing what to look for, could see the surf line between the clouds. Our intrepid and skillful bombardier, Lee Webber, now had a good look at the island. The moonlight made the surf easy to see once Jock had told us what to look for. Page turned away from the island and then Webber directed Page back to the island in a bombing run while I took up my bombing battle station, sitting under the flight deck and leaning back into the bomb bay. From there I could put my hand on the "bomb bay door operating handle" and keep hitting it. This prevented the bomb bay doors from creeping closed and actuating the safety switch that prevented dropping the bombs through closed bomb bay doors.

I was looking down through the open bomb bay and could see no sign of life below. As our bombs left the bomb bay, the island of Nauru seemed to explode with gunfire. Looking directly down into all those tracers gave me the feeling that each one was heading directly toward me. I felt as though I were sitting on the apex of a cone of fireworks. As I write this I can close my eyes and see that cone of tracers as clearly as I saw them in the wee hours of 19 September 1943. Searchlights were also part of the Nauru light display, and although they occasionally hit our plane with their beam, they never locked on us. After all that Japanese fireworks, there was not one hit on our plane.

When Lee Webber called bombs away, the guys in our after station, Henry "Buster" Butler and Hunacek, threw bottles and junk out of the waist hatches. Page turned to starboard and pushed over a bit, now as eager to get away from

Nauru as he had been to get to it. Clagett's 20 bombs hit the runway area, but in the dark we could not see what damage had been done.

Our flight home was uneventful. We knew the winds, so we had a good heading that would take us to Carney Field. We saw two bright stars rise on the eastern horizon and Page "challenged" both with the appropriate letter sent by the Aldis lamp. The crew watched the sunrise and I had another short nap. Page made his usual fine landing.

Donald. Herb Donald and his crew also made a successful bombing of Nauru's airfield. Herb has sent the following fine account of his flight. "Heading for Nauru Island in loose formation, I decided to get some rest before the pre-dawn attack. I turned the flying over to Bill Goodman, telling him to fly on the port light of the plane that was leading us and lay down on the flight deck for a few minutes. On returning to the cockpit, Bill pointed to the red light he was following. To my dismay I realized that it was Venus rising on the horizon!

"We then began a futile attempt to locate the rest of the formation. Not a single plane could be found. Our leader had aborted the flight without breaking radio silence. We then took up our own navigating for Nauru. At the expected E.T.A., with no radar contact, we took several courses for a radar search. As I was about to give up and turn back, Art Felice, our second radioman, got a blip on the radar screen and we started to attack. We did not see another plane and the island seemed asleep. On the bombing run down the runway the bombs did not release, apparently because the bomb bay doors had moved a little causing the safety switch to function. However, the crew was able to drop their beer bottles with razor blades wired on that were expected to scream down and go "plop." I informed the crew that we were told not to make a second pass. We were all in favor of finishing what we started. I made a 270° right turn for a quick run across the runway. Rolland climbed in the bomb bay with a screw driver and held the safety switch while the bombs dropped. By that time the island was fully awake. As the twenty 100# bombs began to drop in sequence, we were bounced by ack ack and the cockpit was bright with light. As each bomb was released in timed sequence a red light would flash on the instrument panel. I thought it would never quit. As we were leaving, Foelsch, our tail gunner reported a fighter on our tail and his guns began firing. I put the plane in a dive. Looking back I could see tracers arching up at us and passing underneath. He obviously mistook ground fire for a fighter.

"The report I received from the crew was that the first two or three bombs hit the water and the rest walked across the runway and on into the adjacent area."

Did the Japs hear the bottles whistling down on them? Did they think the unusual sound was a new and terrible weapon? We hope so! Did the Japs recover any of this junk? If they did, were they confused and concerned about it? Yeah!

The ACA Report. The ACA Report does not agree with what the Clagett and Donald crews remember, and the report is inconsistent within itself. In the report, the "First" plane dropped bombs at 0447 L, nine minutes AFTER the "Second" plane dropped its bombs at 0438 L. Good fun this. SNAFU NAURU included the ACA Report. The weather section of the ACA Report gives the cloud cover as ".5/10 scattered," which is one tenth of 5/10 or 5/100. Our ACA Reports had trouble with decimals. We were often shot at by Japanese guns that were ".20mm cannons."

Why Nauru? The Japanese were well established on Nauru by August of 1942. The island was to serve as their base for dominating the Gilbert Islands and the shipping lanes between Pearl and the South Pacific islands and Australia. Nauru was a big rock, not an atoll. It had caves and cliffs that made it easy to defend and plenty of room for airfields. Nauru had everything—except a harbor.

Nauru was a high priority target at the time of our night raid on 18-19 September. Located only 380 miles from Tarawa, Nauru was included in Operation Galvanic, our invasion of the Gilberts. At the same time that we were trying to bomb Nauru, a carrier task force [*Lexington*, CV-16, the new "Lex"; *Princeton*, CVL-23; *Belleau Wood*, CVL-24] was raiding Tarawa. As part of the Tarawa operation, Nauru was scheduled to be invaded by our Marines on 20 November. However, our "brass" decided that the rocky cliffs, caves, and tunnels made the island too tough for a landing and it was bypassed, not invaded. The decision was a good one. Nearly a year and a half later, a similar rock pile with cliffs, caves, and tunnels, Iwo Jima, would prove to be a tough island to capture.

Army B-24's also made night raids on Nauru but attacked as individual planes in sequence, not in a large formation as we had tried. A current acquaintance of mine was an Army B-24 plane commander on night Nauru raids from Carney. He declines to describe the success that the Army had, but "SNAFU NAURU" is his term for their flights.

19 September The planes from the Nauru raid returned in the morning hours, and we had no fresh crews to send out on patrol. Our sectors went begging, or perhaps VB-102 flew some of them. Most of us hit the sack.

A few hours after sunset, the Jap nuisance bombers, Washing Machine Charlies, came over and got lucky. They were probably aiming at "downtown," Henderson Field, but overshot and hit us. Several "daisy cutters" landed in the

revetment area of our field. The Humphrey plane, 32076, loaded with bombs and fuel, took a direct hit and was destroyed.

Although Washing Machine Charlie visited us on most nights that clear skies and moonlight provided the opportunity for bombing, his only damage to our squadron was the destruction of 32076. All of his visits, however, brought the howls of our air raid sirens and interrupted our sleep. Anyone able to sleep through the sirens was shaken awake by the blasts of our own anti-aircraft fire that was loud but ineffective. The last of the Japanese bombing raid provided the most spectacular aerial show on Guadalcanal.

Soon after this raid began, our searchlight converged on a Japanese plane, later identified as a Betty, and moments after being illuminated, a cone of fire from one of our night fighters hit the Betty from below. The Betty went down in flames, accompanied by a spontaneous chorus of cheers from all of our people on Guadalcanal. Minutes later, the searchlights converged on a second Betty and the night fighter, attacking from above, caught it in a cone of fire. This second Betty went down in flames, also accompanied by cheers and shouts from the appreciative audience. We have no official records of this famous action but everyone that was on Guadalcanal that night remembers it. Each observer has his own recollections of the event but no one can recall the exact date. The account that I have written above is a consensus; some observers recalling only one Betty. Perhaps they were in their foxholes for one of the shootdowns. Others recall seeing Japanese parachutes but most do not. Everyone agrees, however, that our superstar night fighter was an Army Air Corps guy in a P-38. There may have been more air raid alerts but we were not bombed nor did we see more spectacular shootdowns.

20 September The all-nighters from Nauru were still resting but we had some fresh pilots to do our patrols. Sears, having returned from joyriding with the "girls," Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary Ryan, took the hottest of our cold sectors, Sector 10. He spent 11.2 hours doing a thorough reconnaissance of Nauru. Unfortunately, the forty 100-pound bombs that we put on Nauru had not made any noticeable change.

With Humphrey probably attending to the loss of his plane, first pilot Hugh Heider, co-piloted by Lody Lodato and Howard Gossage, was PPC for a short patrol, 9.0 hours. Swinton did Sector 6, also as a shortie, 9.2 hours. We must have been going out just far enough to make certain that the Japs were not at our doorsteps. Only Sears did his sector in the long form.

21 September OK, guys. Everybody's rested. Back to a full patrol schedule: Smith in Zed, 6.4 (1.4 nite) no incident; Wright Sector 3, 10.2, Kapingamarangi; Clagett 11.0; Reichert 9.1; Alley 10.2. We saw nothing, or as Rip Riley put it, "Zero, Circle, Cipher, Oh."

22 September Nothing exciting today. Searls and crew flew 32079 to Espiritu for the usual rest and repairs. Van Ben took the day off and McCutcheon played PPC with Bittenbender and AP Pate for co-pilots. They did Sector 6 in 8.8 hours; "Saw planes and a front" according to Bitt's log. Donald "Circled Jap island of Nauru." Herb couldn't get enough of that island. Monty and Stoppy (Sector 7) flew our other two patrols.

23 September I have only the entry in Lodato's log so no details are available but the Humphrey crew saw THREE Bettys in 10.3 hours in one of the hot sectors. Swinton flew Sector 1, 10.1 hours and Feind was out for only 5.3 hours.

24 September Whit Wright flew 200 miles beyond the end of Sector 7 to get the first look at Kusaie, a big volcanic island with a 2000 foot peak in its center. We thought it was loaded with Japs. It should have been loaded with Japs, but we would later learn that it was not a major Jap base. It did not have an airfield so there was little danger from Jap fighters. Clagett, Reichert, and Alley covered the rest of our cold sectors.

There were two noteworthy events that did not directly involve our squadron. VB-102 had the hot sectors and G. A. Miller and his crew flew Sector 1. Miller recorded in his log, "10.0 hours. 6 DD, 1 CVE, 2 AK, 2 barges." The flight time shows that Miller flew an 800 mile sector. Sector 1 was our busiest, but it seldom got this busy and never before nor after did any of us see a Jap CVE (small carrier).

A second big event for the day was the opening of the fighter airstrip at Barakoma, on the southeast tip of Vella Lavella. This put our fighters, Marine F4Us, 40 miles closer to their targets on Bougainville and only 130 miles from our favorite target, Kahili airfield.

25 September This was our day in the hot sectors: Van Ben Sector 1, 11.5 hours; Monty in Sector 2, 11.2; Smith in Sector 3, 5.0, returned because of generator trouble; Stoppy in Sector 4, 10.4. Herb Donald flew the Zed Sector, 6.0 (1.5 nite) covering the waters south and southwest of Buka. None of our planes saw the destroyers or the small carrier that Miller had seen on the previous

day, even though the flight times for Van Ben and Monty indicate that they went out well beyond 800 miles.

Returning from Sector 1 in mid-afternoon, Van Ben elected to search the southwest coast of Choiseul. Starting his search at the northwest end of the island, he was headed southeast. At 1530, Lat. 06° 41'S; Long. 156° 26' E, he sighted the first of several barges. This one was 50-55feet long and 12 feet wide and well camouflaged with "jungle growth shrubry." It was approximately one-quarter mile from Choiseul and heading toward shore at a speed 5 kts. Van Ben dropped one of his 500 pounders from 1500 feet but overshot the barge by 200 feet. Van could not drop the bombs from a lower altitude because they were armed with contact fuses, and shrapnel from the bombs would have hit his own plane. Disgusted with this type of bombing attack, Van Ben closed the bomb bay doors and let his gunners work on the barge with 400 rounds from their fifties. During this action, Van Ben spotted four more barges beached nearby.

Proceeding along the coast, Van's crew spotted six more barges; then, at 1555, he saw a large, heavily loaded supply sampan "laying-to" just offshore. He made two strafing runs on this vessel, expending 900 rounds, and left the vessel "in sinking condition barely above surface of water." Van's crew saw no personnel during any of these attacks. This supply sampan was estimated to be 50 feet by 9 feet with an upswept schooner stern and motor whale boat type bow. Not a barge, this vessel!

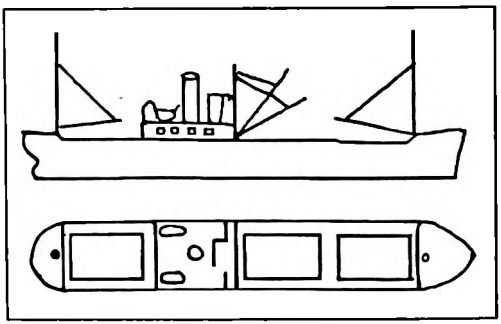
Why all of these barges? When our ground forces jumped from Munda to Vella Lavella, they bypassed the heavily defended island of Kolombangara. Now the only way for the Japanese to evacuate their troops from Kolombangara was by barges operating along the southwest coast of Choiseul. They made the dash from Choiseul to Kolombangara and back at night and hid along the shores of Choiseul in the daytime. At 1530, Van Ben was seeing the beginning of the Jap's night barge activities. Van Ben was in fast company. In his 4Y-1, Van hunted these barges by day; in a heavily armed PT boat, John F. Kennedy hunted them by night.

26 September The squadron had the cold sectors to the northeast: Swinton Sector 7, 9.0 hours; Hager around Nauru, 9.2, Feind 9.3; Heider 9.8. Hugh Heider was first pilot in the Humphrey crew, but today he was PPC. Lody flew his regular spot in the right seat and Joe Shea was added to the crew to do the navigating. These three crews saw only whitecaps but Sears, patrolling Sector 9, found a neat little Japanese cargo ship.

Sears' AK was about 100 tons and had a Japanese flag painted on top of the bridge structure. Identifying this bucket as Japanese was no problem. The AK

was at Lat. 02° 15' N; 165° 25' E, making 15 kts on course 150°T headed for Nauru This position was 750 miles from Guadalcanal and 180 miles from Nauru. Time of sighting was 1200, so Sears was probably returning on the inbound leg of his sector.

The skipper tried a bombing run, dropping three 500 pounders. Since the bombs were armed with contact fuses, the release had to be from high altitude. The skipper made his run at 6000 feet. The bombs straddled the wake of the AK 100 feet off of her stern. There was no apparent damage to the AK, but the three 500 pounders must have gotten all the Japs to their battle stations.



Drawing from Sears' Action Report

After the bombing run, the skipper descended to 500 feet and began a series of strafing runs, passing over the ship as low as 50 feet. Sears' gunners were crack shots, and they could hardly miss with strafing runs at 50 feet, so they poured many tracer and armor-piercing incendiary bullets into the AK.

The third strafing run was directly up the wake of the AK, the bow and top turrets firing into the stern of the ship. When the 4Y-1, at an altitude of 300 feet, was about 500 feet from the target, the vessel exploded. A huge ball of flame ascended to about 1000 feet, and great quantities of debris rose to about 2000 feet. Sears made a violent wing-over to the right to avoid running into the flames and airborne debris! He almost succeeded. The skipper was flying a loaner, 32075, John Alley's "Open Bottom." When the crew inspected the plane after returning to base, they saw that #1 engine cowling had been damaged by flying pieces of the AK.

After the explosion subsided, Sears made a few passes by the AK, or what was left of it, to observe the damage. The explosion of aviation gasoline had blown off the afterhold. Wrecked lifeboats, hanging from forward davits, dragged in water. The AK's speed was down to six knots, large quantities of smoke poured from fires in the after part of the ship, and there was oil trailing in her wake. She was well down by the stern and maneuvering with difficulty.

Sears made several more strafing runs with his gunners concentrating their fire on the engine room space at the water line and at the base of the stack. Small fires flared and occasional puffs of black smoke popped out of the stack. The gunners

expended a total of 3000 rounds of .50 caliber ammo in 15 strafing runs on the AK. That done, the skipper then continued on patrol, leaving the AK listing slightly to port, down by the stern, and aimlessly meandering in the water.

Donald and crew flew 32080 to Espiritu for the usual R 'n' R—rest and repairs.

27 September Just a light duty day even though we had the hot sectors. Wright in Sector 2, 11.1 hours, had a brief "Skirmish with Betty;" Reichert in Sector 3 looked over Kapingamarangi; Clagett 11.1; Alley 9.3; Dvorachek 10.0. We know about this Deevo flight because Ed Hagen's log shows that he took Hank Campbell's place as co-pilot. Smith flew a special search, 10.9, for the Jap ship Sears had bombed on the previous day. Smith found an extensive oil slick but no sign of the vessel. He also took a close look at Nauru but saw no AK there, either beached or in the anchorage.

Searls & crew brought 32079 back from Espiritu.

28 September The squadron was again flying the sectors to the northeast: Monty; Searls; Van Ben; Stoppy. Monty had engine trouble just after takeoff and had to make an overweight landing. Only Van Benschoten's patrol generated an action report. At 1220, as Van Ben was passing 10 miles north northwest of Nauru, a lone Zeke flew out to attack. The first run by the Zeke was a determined one, pressed in to within 50 feet and firing all the way. On the second run, the Zeke broke off as soon as Van's gunners began to fire. The lone Zeke made no more runs on the 4Y-1 but continued inaccurate 20mm fire from extreme range off the port bow. The action with this Zeke lasted 20 minutes.

Van's evasive actions were flying into clouds where available and turning into the attacking fighter. Van Ben's gunners could see their bullets hitting the Zeke, but they saw no damage to the fighter. The 4Y-1 received one 20mm hit on the lower portion of the port vertical stabilizer and rudder.

The Jap fighter operations from Nauru were unpredictable. Some days they let us take a close look at the island without making a response; other days they sent out a lone fighter to take a few shots at us, and on still other days they used several fighters and made a great effort to shoot our plane down.

Van Ben had caught the Japs in their one fighter response mode and had handled the situation very well.

29 September Humphrey and his crew were early birds in the Zed sector and got the worm. According to Ens Lodato's log, their first attempt at flying this sector lasted 0.6 hours. Their plane had a gas leak so they returned to Carney and took the standby plane. Lody recorded in his log: "Saw 2 Bettys, got one."

Humph and his crew were becoming expert at sighting Bettys. On the 23rd of this month, 5 days earlier, they had seen 3 Bettys but made no shooting contact with the fast Jap patrol bombers.

Humphrey was cruising the Zed Sector at 5500 feet. The day was very hazy, visibility only 10 miles, and there was a solid overcast at 14,000 feet. We usually flew Zed in the afternoon, returning after dark, but for some unknown reason, Humphrey was flying it in the morning. The first Betty zipped by so fast that Humphrey decided not to try to chase it. At 0849, about 10 miles southwest of Empress Augusta Bay, the Humphrey crew sighted their second Betty, this one five miles away off the port bow. The Betty was cruising at 2500 feet, making about 165 mph on course 125°T, perhaps coming from Rabaul or Buka and heading for Kahili to pick up a bomb load and bomb us on Carney field after dark.

Using his altitude advantage, Humph made a steep, diving turn at rated power and soon had an indicated air speed of 275 mph. The 4Y-1 closed rapidly on the unsuspecting enemy plane, so much so, that Humphrey had to chop the throttles and slow to 240 mph, or he would have overshot the target. At 500 yards, the gunners opened fire on the Betty with the bow, belly, and top turrets. The Betty increased speed to 240 mph and began streaking for the water in a series of shallow banked turns. Betty opened fire with its tail 20mm and top turret 7.7s. The enemy gunners were poor shots: most of 20mm passed 50 feet or more below the 4Y-1.

Humphrey was able to turn inside the Betty, and his gunners continued pouring bursts into the Betty's wings, fuselage, and engines. The enemy plane was now at 500 feet; the 4Y 250 feet above, slightly astern, and still pressing home the attack. A fire broke out at the Betty's starboard wing-root, and the plane banked sharply to starboard, rapidly losing altitude in a tight turn until its starboard wing plowed into the water. The plane exploded on impact. There was much floating debris, but there were no survivors.

Ammunition expended by the Humphrey gunners was: bow turret, Claude Hawkins, 700 rounds, top turret, Jack Laming, 400 rounds, and belly turret, C. E. Hunt, 200 rounds. There were no bullet holes in the 4Y-1. The Jap gunners got Maggie's drawers!

The paint job on Humphrey's Betty was very different from the one that Dvorachek and his crew eyeballed and shot at near Ontong Java on the 7th of this month. Humphrey's Betty (or former Betty) was camouflaged with light and dark brown mottling and a few splotches of green. There were none of the yellow racing stripes that Deevo had seen.

Dvorachek had hit the first Betty for the squadron but the Humphrey crew was the first to shoot one down. Humphrey had something special going with Jap Bettys. He would see more and shot down more than any other 104 crew.

Playing second fiddle to Humphrey, Wright flew Sector 1 and sighted ten DDs off Buka. Sears flew Sector 3, "way out" and bombed Kapingamarangi. His attack did not rate an ACA report from the mighty pen of Ray Ming. Swinton, Alley, Hager, and Reichert took care of the other "hot" sectors.

30 September We were still alternating groups of sectors with VB-102. One day they would have the low number sectors to the northwest, seeing Bougainville and Kapingamarangi, and we would have the high number sectors to the northeast, seeing Nauru and Ocean. The next day we would switch; they would fly the sectors to the northeast and we would fly to the northwest. On this day, we had the eastern sectors but only Clagett, flying a "Routine Search Patrol" in the sector that looked in on Nauru, found any excitement. For some reason Clagett attracted nine Zekes, probably the whole Nauru fighter squadron. Two days earlier, Van Ben rated only one Zeke from Nauru, but this day Clagett got the works.

The weather around Nauru was the usual for this time of year—0.4 to 0.5 cumulus, bases 2000 tops 5000 feet. The clouds were so thick that we could not search the surface from high altitude, hence we were patrolling below the clouds where visibility was very good. According to the ACA Report, the entire action took place in and among the lowest clouds, 2000 to 200 feet above the water. I recall that the altitude range was 2500 to ZERO feet.

The fighters attacked at 1130 and kept after us for 40 minutes, making runs from all directions. Our gunners fired a total 3000 rounds, the bow turret gunner Wren, leading with 1000 rounds. The first few fighter runs were pressed in close to us in spite of our return fire; but in later runs the fighters broke off their attacks as soon as our gunners opened fire. Someone estimated that the fighters made a total of forty passes, ten to close range.

The Aircraft Action Report for this flight does not seem as clear and concise as most of ACI Officer Ray Ming's accounts. For some reason, Ming must have had difficulty translating Page Clagett's story of the action. For example: Where did the Jap fighters intercept us? The ACA Report says 15 miles ENE of Nauru. I say 15 miles WSW. Reciprocals are easy to confuse—us from Nauru or Nauru from us. I was navigating and I say we were WSW.

Here are three quotes from the ACA Report to which I have added my comments:

(1) "Starboard waist gunner caught one at 250 yards as it made a nearly vertical climbing break away (exposing belly) and was last seen entering thin cloud below in an inverted spin with fire coming out of engine cowling. After station observer states Zeke was maneuvering with difficulty." I agree that a Zeke in an inverted spin below 2000 feet is in great difficulty!

(2) "The bow and belly turrets developed cross fire on one attacking from 11:30 o'clock and below. Broke off in straight spin emitting stream of light and dark gray smoke, disappearing in clouds below." This is a nonsense statement. Belly and bow turrets and a plane at 11:30 are almost in a straight line. How could there be a cross fire?

(3) "Generally broke off attack with steep climbing turn above and invariably exposing belly to our gunners. Several [fighters] hung it on the prop from below falling off in spins." This entire operation was at very low altitude. How could Zekes recover when "falling off in spins"? "Several" must have spun in!

The result of all of our shooting was: one Zeke believed destroyed, one seriously damaged and possibly destroyed. We escaped with only moderate damage to our plane and fortunately no one in the crew was hit. One 20mm shell entered the port elevator (outboard end) and passed through the vertical stabilizer. Another entered the starboard side of the fuselage near the after tunnel hatch and exploded, leaving 6 holes on port and starboard sides. Another 20mm entered the bottom of the bomb bay, after end port side, where it exploded and made 14 holes and severed the "hydraulic flap control line." There were approximately 15 holes from 7.7 bullets in the fuselage and one in No. 1 prop.

As always, I was navigating and Jock Sutherland was in the co-pilot seat. As the Zekes started buzzing around us, Page turned back to the nav table and started hurriedly explaining to me that he wanted our encoded message to say "We are attacking." About that time the top turret started firing and I pointed to indicate that Page should get his head back in the cockpit.

After we sent our prepared message, "Being attacked by fighters," I spent many minutes encoding a message as requested by Clagett, saying that WE were ATTACKING the Zekes. I am not certain that this longer message ever got sent or even completely encoded.

Page did a superb job of flying—diving, climbing, making flipper turns, matching the Jap fighters maneuver for maneuver. Page tried to fool the Japs by diving straight for the water. He succeeded in fooling Jock, who hauled back on the yoke, and he must have fooled the fighters for they circled us for a minute. We were still attacking when "Heavy cloud cover terminated the encounter." No one wrote that we ran and hid in the clouds.

In the evening after this flight, a group of us were in our Quonset hut listening to disk jockey Tokyo Rose on Radio Tokyo. Between records, she announced, "One Liberator shot down over Nauru today." We were the only Liberator at Nauru that day, so she must have meant us. Glad to have disappointed her.

While Clagett was busy at Nauru, the squadron had some departures and arrivals. Stoppy and his crew took 32069 to Espiritu and Donald returned in 32080.

September would prove to be our most action-packed month. We did lots of good work and did not lose a plane. The night SNAFU NAURU was our poorest moment, but our good hops far outnumbered that one bad one. The squadron was proud that our Commanding Officer, Harry E. Sears, had been selected from all of the Army, Navy, and Marine pilots in the South Pacific to take Mrs. Roosevelt on her tour. If I had to pick someone to fly my mother around the Solomons, I would have picked our skipper. Franklin D. Roosevelt knew how to pick pilots for special missions.

With September out of the way, bring on October!

Chapter 9 Special Betty Hunts & Long Fuses

October 1943 Carney Field, Guadalcanal

During September, a major shift had occurred in the Solomon Islands part of The War in the Pacific. Our forces had leapfrogged heavily defended Kolombangara and taken lightly defended Vella Lavella. At the end of September, the Seabees opened Barakoma, a new fighter strip on the southeast tip of Vella Lavella. Barakoma was brand spanking new, not a captured and improved Japanese strip. The last third of September, the Japs had started retreating from Kolombangara and Vella Lavella. They were very good at getting their troops out of an island; they had the two necessary ingredients: over 100 of the large *Daihatsu* barges and the practice sneaking out of Guadalcanal. Now they did an even better job in the central Solomons. Barges, coming and going between Bougainville and Kolombangara via the southeast shore of Choiseul, would continue to be a main item on our agenda.

October brought some early Christmas presents, a Japanese submarine for the skipper, Bettys for our gunners, and delayed action fuses for our bombs. We would start masthead bombing—seaman's eye!

To be certain that we got our fair share of Bettys, we sent out planes on Special Betty Hunts. On days that we had the cold sectors and weather permitted, one of our planes would cruise around the Ontong Java area at 8000 feet, hoping to pounce on an unsuspecting Betty. We required the advantages of altitude and surprise, so we made Special Betty Hunts only on clear days, when we could see

the Bettys at 1000 feet from our perch at 8000. Success depended on the eagle eyes of our gunners.

In the previous six weeks, we had developed a familiarity with our search area. Names like Nukumanu, Kapingamarangi, and Kolombangara rolled off our tongues. Our sectors covered the famous track of Amelia Earhart. The flight on which she and her navigator were lost had started in Lae, New Guinea and was to have ended at Howland Island, 350 miles northwest of Canton. The track between Lae and Howland passed near Buka, Ontong Java, and Ocean Island, crossing our search area from Zed Sector to Sector 11. There were no Japanese in these places at the time of Earhart's flight. They came into this area after Pearl Harbor. We were operating over famous white caps although we were five years too late to meet Amelia.

1 October We had the hot sectors, and we would have them on alternate days, the odd days of October. Searls was in Sector 1, out and back on the scenic route in 10.5 hours. Sears was in Sector 5, over beautiful Ontong Java and Roncador Reef in a long 11.0 hours. Between them were Van Ben, Donald, and Burton; John Burton taking Deevo's place as PPC of the Dvorachek crew. A lone Zeke attacked Searls and crew but otherwise his sector and all others were quiet. The Hager crew had the Zed sector and some special passengers. Aboard were three Marines, LtCol Shapely, an intelligence officer, and a sergeant. The passengers were interested in observing and photographing the southwest coast of Bougainville, especially Empress Augusta Bay. The officers observed and the sergeant photographed. Most of our Zed sector flights carried passengers who were interested in this coast of Bougainville.

Page Clagett flew 32073 to Espiritu Santo for service. Jock Sutherland and I had visions of ice cream dancing in our heads.

2 October This was a slow day in the cold sectors: Wright in Sector 8, Swinton Sector 9, and Reichert, Humphrey, and Alley in unknown sectors. Alley flew for 7.1 hours, not long enough for a regular patrol. Tom Dodson's and Flash Gordon's logs do not mention any mechanical problems with the plane.

3 October We had the hot sectors to the west with Searls flying Zed, Jim Smith in Sector 2, and Monty in Sector 3. Smith had a "Scrap with Betty" and put many bullets in her, but he was unable to keep up with the Betty and she got away.

There is no ACA Report for Montgomery's flight in Sector 3, but it was a long one, 12.2 hours. The logs of Monty's co-pilots tell the story. Jones' log reads: "Strafe and bomb barges off Choiseul Island." Mike Keiser wrote: "Bomb and strafe Jap barges - photograph Kapingamarangi." It is strange that the authors of

our ACA Reports ignored some attacks on barges while they wrote about other barge attacks with enthusiasm and verve that might have been more appropriate for the sinking of a carrier. It is my guess that during this period our Army, Navy, and Marine planes, PT boats and destroyers were sinking and burning so many Jap barges near Choiseul that there was not enough interest in another barge attack to generate the enthusiasm to write another Aircraft Action Report.

4 October This was another quiet day with Van Ben flying (without Bitt) Sector 7, Sears in Sector 8, and Feind in another cold sector.

Wright, with Humphrey and Heider, flew 32009 for 3.8 hours to the Stewart Islands. Whit's log notes that the flight was for "plane acceptance." Humphrey and his crew flew it on patrol the next day and it was officially transferred from VB-102 to VB-104 on 1 November.

Stoppy returned from Espiritu with 32069 and a load of passengers. A noted one was Cdr "Buck" Brandley, C/S of our Fleet Air Wing.

5 October Stoppy flew the Zed Sector in 6.9 hours (1.0 nite) and he took along an aerographer to prepare a special weather report. The area covered by Zed, southwest of Bougainville and Buka to the mouth of St. George's Channel, was of great interest to the planners of ComSoPac's next operations, hence the special aerographer. Swinton flew Sector 3 as a shorty, logging only 9.5 hours, but had enough time to see a Betty and two subs. Also flying in hot sectors were Wright, Reichert, Alley, and Humphrey. Humph was in our "new" plane 32009.

The Japanese must have increased their Betty patrols across our sectors because for the next four days, VB-102 and VB-104 would shoot down four Bettys, one each day. Today, LtCdr Fowler, CO of VB-102, was out in Sector 9. At 1336 he was returning to base on course 210°T. Emerging from a rain squall he sighted a Betty about one-half mile distance on a converging course. Fowler and his crew quickly destroyed the Betty.

6 October This was not a big day for us in VB-104 because we flew to the east where the action wasn't. All of our regular sector patrols, Smith Sector 9, Searls Sector 8, and Montgomery Sector 6, were uneventful. Hager and Donald made a special effort to do some good for the war effort.

Our patrols had been seeing so many Bettys in the Ontong Java area that someone got the bright idea to send our planes there just to hunt Bettys. VB-104's squadron records do not mention such flights, but Herb Donald and Leo Bauer mention them in their logs. (See below). Also, VB-106, a PB4Y-1 squadron to join us in November, describes such flights in their War Diary.

Don Hager and his crew flew 9.9 hours, either in Sector 5 or on a Special Betty Hunt. Over Ontong Java they spotted a Betty that was, in "Gremlin" Hodge's words, "hauling ass for the clouds above." The haul was successful for the Betty and not even Gremlin in the bow turret could get in a shot.

Herb Donald and his crew took off early in the morning on a Special Betty Hunt. Herb wrote in his log, "Mission was to intercept and shoot down twin engine bombers." Co-pilot Leo Bauer wrote, "Guadalcanal Betty Patrol." We are fortunate to have this 7.2 hour flight recorded in Herb's and Leo's flight logs. This Betty patrol was negative, but wait 'til next time! Along the coast of Choiseul, the frustrated Betty lookers found five barges and gave them a thorough strafing with the ammo they had hoped to use on Bettys. These barges were the last that we saw of the Jap operation that got most of their troops from Kolombangara to Bougainville. Events of the coming evening were critical for our floating Navy.

Returning to base after a "Recon," Lt(jg) Albrecht, of VB-102, sighted and attacked a Betty at 1455, Lat. 05° 40'S, Long. 158° 00'E. The Betty was on course 250°T, headed for the southern end of Bougainville. Albrecht was able to approach the Betty out of the sun and get close enough to shoot it down before the Betty could use its superior speed to escape.

In the afternoon of this day, a Japanese surface force left Rabaul and headed into the Slot. There they intended to evacuate the few troops remaining on Vella Lavella. The force consisted of six destroyers, three destroyer transports, and several smaller vessels, sub chasers, patrol boats, and landing craft. Near midnight, northwest of Vella Lavella, three of our destroyers met this Jap force and exchanged torpedoes and five-inch gunfire. The three destroyer transports turned back to Rabaul. One Jap destroyer, *Yugumo*, sank, and the other five headed back to Rabaul, chased off by the arrival of three more of our destroyers. The Japs sank one of our destroyers and damaged two others. Fortunately, the three of our destroyers that arrived too late for the battle were there in time to rescue survivors and assist our two damaged destroyers. But it is the little side stories, not the box score, that shape our understanding and recollections of combat in the Solomons.

Morison reports these two stories in Vol. VI, p. 251, of his account of the Battle of Vella Lavella. Our destroyers picked up survivors until it was necessary to head back to base in the final hours of darkness. The least damaged of our destroyers, *O'Bannon*, left some of her boats adrift at the scene for any remaining survivors. Three Japanese officers and 22 enlisted men, survivors from *Yugumo*, used one of *O'Bannon's* boats to make their way home. Our PT boats arrived at the scene at sunrise and picked up the remaining survivors from *Yugumo,* 78 men. Morison wrote, "One of these struck a final blow for the Emperor by killing a sailor of PT-163 who was giving him a cup of coffee."

The Battle of Vella Lavella was the last naval battle of the central Solomons. While all the destroyer action was going on, the Jap sub chasers, patrol boats, and landing craft evacuated all of the enemy troops from Vella Lavella.

7 October At sunrise, during the final cleanup of The Battle of Vella Lavella, Sears flew Sector 1, Stoppy did Sector 3, and Big Andy Sector 4, while Feind (probably Sector 2) and Humphrey (probably Sector 5) did the other hot sectors. Only Humphrey, Anderson, and Sears saw anything to report. In the afternoon, Van Ben flew an uneventful Zed Sector with an Army aerologist aboard.

Humphrey and his crew, as recorded in Lodato's log, flew a regular patrol and sighted two Bettys. Both Bettys got away from Humphrey, but not from Anderson (see below). Most unusual on this flight was Humphrey's landing at Vella Lavella, followed by the short flight of 1.5 hours back to our base at Carney Field, Guadalcanal. We had one airfield on Vella Lavella, the new strip that the Seabees had opened at Barakoma, so it must have been there that Humphrey landed. Lody explains why. "On 7 October, we landed at Vella Lavella after spending 10.2 hours on patrol. We used up quite a bit of gas chasing the Bettys that we saw. That was the day when I plotted over 40 (!) course changes. John, Hugh and I agreed that we had better land at the first available airfield, Vella Lavella.

"We picked up more gas and then taxied out to the very end of the fighter strip. We knew it was going to be a bit hairy getting up to flying speed before we ran out of runway, a runway which had been built for fighters, not for Liberators. Obviously, we made it.

"That evening I went to the club to get a drink and 'calm down' a little. I was sitting next to Fin, kibitzing the poker game. He wanted to get a beer at the bar, so he asked me to play his hand, which had already been dealt. I won it, and the one after it. When Fin got back to the table, everyone told him about my winning the two hands. I started to get up to get to my sack and collapse, but Fin put a hand on my shoulder and said, as nearly as I can remember, 'You got the power; you play my hands; I'll bankroll you.'

"So sleepy that I paid little attention to hands and bets, I managed to win some more money for Fin. When the game finally broke up, he gave me half his winnings. I tried not to take the money, but he insisted. Then I left the O Club, staggered into our hut and collapsed on my cot."

Anderson and crew were outbound in Sector 4, cruising at 8000 feet. They were flying above scattered cumulus clouds, bases 2000 feet, tops 7000. Visibility between the clouds was an excellent 40 miles. At 0842, Lat. 06° 00' S, Long. 158° 40' E, 20 miles southwest of Ontong Java, Andy and his crew spotted a Betty, on course 070°T, five miles dead ahead at 8500 feet. Another PB4Y-1,

probably Humphrey, was chasing it. Andy saw the Betty dive for the water with the other 4Y in pursuit so he took a course parallel to the chase but maintained altitude. The ACA Report continues, "However, contact was retained during ensuing 30 minutes of chase through use of full throttle and gradual dive. At 0930 L.[yes, time given in ACA! hjt] enemy was observed turning to port while entering a low lying cloud area. Upon emergence, Betty was attacked from 9 o'clock high by the PB4Y-1 instigating the chase and who subsequently lost contact as Betty turned abruptly inside to port."

The Betty was now at 200 feet with Andy 6000 feet above and 5 miles astern. Andy began a slight dive, jettisoned his five 300 pound bombs and closed to two miles at 2000 feet. He went to rated power (50") and closed rapidly to firing range while receiving heavy fire from the Betty's 20mm tail cannon.

Andy's gunners opened fire at 500 yards and as Andy pressed in closer, they knocked out the Betty's tail cannon and top blister guns, "thoroughly" lacerated the pilots' compartment and set the starboard engine on fire. The entire inside of the Betty was on fire and it began maneuvering with difficulty, losing speed in a series of shallow banks to alternate sides of its course. Andy rode formation on the Betty's port wing from 50 yards and his gunners literally shot the enemy to shreds in mid-air before the final explosive crash on the water. At impact (0930 L.) [See 0930 time above, hjt] one occupant of the pilot's compartment hurtled 200 feet along the water.

[Note: The ACA Report contains an obvious error in times for this action. It gives 0840 for initial contact. 0930 L. as the time the Betty escaped the first PB4Y-1, and 0930 L. as the time Andy shot down the Betty. Obviously the two events were not simultaneous. Andy was 6000 feet above and five miles astern of the Betty when he watched the first PB4Y attack the Betty and then lose contact with it.]

Andy's bow, top, and belly turrets fired a total of 2000 rounds, the bow leading with 1000. The ACA Report states that there was a complete photographic record of this action so someone was shooting with the trusty K-20 camera. The Betty scored no hits on Andy's plane.

The Betty was the usual solid drab brown with meatballs on undersides of wings and both sides of fuselage aft.

The ACA Report on this action appears to be deliberate in not identifying the pilot and crew of the first PB4Y-1 to engage this Betty. I have flight logs from pilots in all five of our planes in the hot sectors and only Humphrey's co-pilot, Lodato, mentions chasing a Betty but he makes no mention of an attack. It is most probable that a VB-102 pilot on a Special Betty Hunt chased and attacked this Betty. Our ACI Officer, Ray Ming, would have known who did the first chase, but he was careful not to spill the beans.

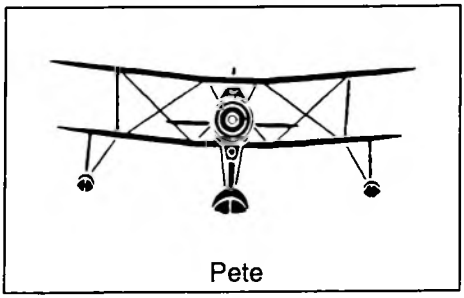
This Betty was not expecting a second PB4Y-1 and must have thought the sky near Ontong Java was full of PB4Y-1s when Andy jumped her.

Sears flew the usually busy Sector 1 and at 1225, 70 miles north northwest of Kavieng, near the Japanese held island of Emirau, he sighted three AKs (freighters) and three DDs. This convoy was on course 000°T, making 15 knots. The three freighters were making their way back to Truk, having delivered their cargo to Rabaul or Kavieng. The three destroyers would probably escort the AKs northward to a point that was outside of our regular patrol zone, 800 miles from Guadalcanal, and away from the Emirau-Kavieng area, a likely place for our submarines to be patrolling.

Skipper was carrying five 300 pound bombs armed with instantaneous fuses. Instantaneous fuses made a masthead bombing attack impossible so he made a bombing run from 6000 feet on one of the AKs. All of the bombs were wide of the target.

Jap aircraft, two Zekes and three Petes, were covering this convoy but only the Petes attacked the 4Y-1. Before the bombing run, the Petes released braces of depth charges from above, trying to damage Sears' plane. The Petes were probably on anti-sub patrol over the convoy, for they did not carry the phosphorous aerial bombs that they usually used against enemy aircraft. We have no idea why the Zekes did not attack Sears.

When the Petes made their "fighter" runs on Sears, his gunners met them with .50 calibre fire from all turrets and the two waist guns. The bow turret and starboard waist gunners scored several hits on two of the Petes, and saw each retire with black smoke trailing. Sears ended the battle by leaving the scene in cloud cover.



Pete

The ships put up a heavy but inaccurate anti-aircraft barrage. There were no injuries aboard the Sears plane but one 20mm shell was found in the No. 1 engine intercooler. Petes did not carry 20mm guns, the Zekes had 20mms but they did not attack, so the 20mm shell must have come from one of the ships.

The Petes' attempt to aerial bomb Sears with depth charges nearly proved disastrous for the Japs as one depth charge landed very close to a destroyer. If only this depth charge had hit just ahead of a destroyer and exploded under her hull. US newspapers could have carried the headline, "Sears tricks Jap plane into sinking own destroyer." And of course the article would have continued, "New,

innovative, imaginative tactic developed by daring naval aviator may hasten end of war, with our forces in the passive role of tricking Japs into destroying their own forces."

Smith flew a bounce hop, 1.4 hours. Clagett returned from Espiritu in 32073. Co-pilot Jock Sutherland was now the proud owner of a hand cranked ice cream maker, lots of powdered ice cream mixes, and the new title, ComIceCreamRon.

8 October We had the sectors to the northeast, numbers six through ten, and added a sixth flight, a Special Betty Hunt. Wright did Sector 10 around Nauru with Reichert and Alley in adjacent sectors. They saw nothing to report.

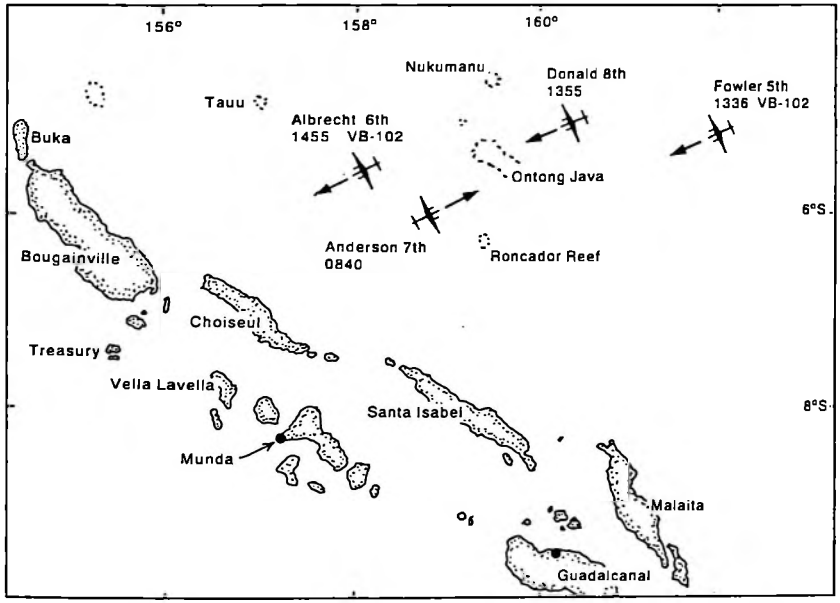
Monty flew 7.9 hours on a special search for Bettys. We don't know where Monty and his crew searched, but the vicinity of Ontong Java was a favorite place for Bettys. Monty didn't get a nibble but Herb Donald and his crew were in the area.

Donald was on a "Routine Search patrol," not a Betty hunt, cruising at 8000 feet with scattered cumulus clouds below him and visibility 40 miles. Herb was on course 185°T, returning from the end of his search of Sector 7. He and his crew had already spent nine hours staring at whitecaps and the tops of cumulus clouds and listening to the drone of four engines. At 1355, Lat. 05° 10' S, Long. 160° 20' E, about 20 miles east of Ontong Java, the Donald crew spotted a Betty. It was flying at 1000 feet, on course 250°T, headed toward Bougainville. The Betty crew must have been heading home from patrol, having spent several hours looking at whitecaps and cumulus clouds and listening to the drone of two engines.

The Betty was five miles to port, so Herb maneuvered into a position directly above the Betty. He then throttled back. What's this? Throttled back? A slow PB4Y-1 throttling back to catch the much faster Betty? Damn tootin'. Herb flew with his brains, not just the seat of his pants. He throttled back to let the Betty get ahead of him so he could begin a gradual descent, trading altitude for airspeed and thus keeping up with the Betty without a lot of power. Herb descended to a position 2000 feet above and behind and to the port side of the Betty. As he closed rapidly his gunners opened fire. Hammond, in the belly turret, got the Betty's 20mm tail cannon gunner as his target. The belly turret had an automatic sight, so Hammond determined the range to the Betty. When Hammond fired, the waist gunners, Osiecki and Rolland knew they were in range. Bill Knudsen in the bow turret had the best shots but even Foelsch in the tail got off a few rounds. The starboard waist gunner, Rolland, emptied his gun and went to the bomb bay for more ammo to reload. Herb kept inside the Betty's shallow banked turns to prevent the continuous fire of the Betty's tail 20mm cannon to bear on him.

Accurate and intense fire from Herb's gunners started smoke pouring from both of the Betty's engines. They thoroughly riddled the Betty's fuselage and return fire ceased. The cowling of the starboard engine fell off, allowing flames to trail well beyond the tail of the enemy plane. .

The Betty lost speed, bounced once on the water and then appeared to try to gain altitude but crashed in a full stall. Herb circled the floating wreckage, strafing it twice. Following the last strafing run, four survivors were swimming in the water, one was dead in the water and another was on a floating wing tip.



Locations, courses, dates, and times of Bettys shot down by Sears' Navy Search Group during October 1943. These data suggest that the Japanese were flying a barrier patrol based on southern Bougainville and extending out over Ontong Java along axis 070-250°T, out in the morning and back in the afternoon.

Herb's gunners fired 3000 rounds of .50 caliber and received fire from the 20mm tail cannon and 7.7 machine guns in Betty's waist hatches and top blister. Herb's plane received eight 7.7 machine gun hits and three 20mm-cannon hits. One of the 20mm shells exploded, and a 7.7 bullet entered the port side of the cockpit and passed within six inches of Herb. A miss is as good as a mile. Bill Sams, ARM1c, first radioman, was in the top turret. A bullet hit his turret, shattering the plexiglass and putting one of his guns out of action. Sams was hit

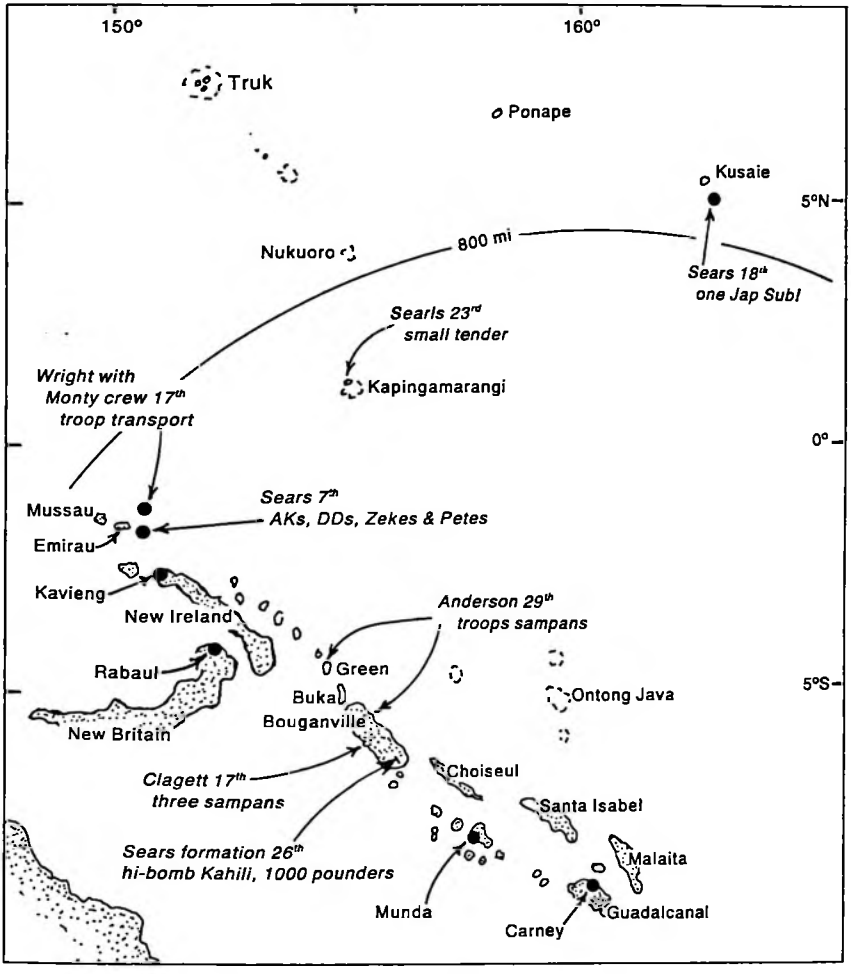
in the chest by a bullet and the flying plexiglass lacerated his chin and mouth. Others described his wounds as minor. As usual, it depends on whom you ask whether wounds were severe or minor. Fortunately, Sams was the only person in the Donald plane to be hit.

Herb and his crew, having battled the Betty for 25 minutes, headed toward Guadalcanal. A 7.7 round had gone through #7 cylinder of #2 engine so they made the last leg of their patrol on three engines. They landed safely at Carney field, 10.3 hours after their early morning takeoff.

Herb Donald, on October 8, 1943, wrote the following account of his Betty-bashing. "I was sitting rather listlessly in the cockpit with Leo Bauer at the controls when someone said over the intercom, 'There's a Betty underneath us!' I banked left and saw the bomber well over a mile below us heading in our direction and to the right of our course. I throttled back and started a diving attack. As we were about to overshoot, I made a right and left turn to stay behind while closing within range. We got their attention when we opened fire at extreme range. Then a slug fest ensued. We had six fifties that could bear on him. He had his top turret and waist 7.7's and a 20mm cannon in the tail that I could see firing in five-shot bursts. Our tracers could be seen entering the plane and deflecting out. I saw one of their rounds explode, a black puff, before reaching us (Our intelligence officer didn't believe this).

"I kept superior altitude as we settled down to a tail chase. As his higher speed opened the gap I would push over and close in; all at long range. That way our top turret could bear on them. He would make sweeping turns and I would cut inside, shortening the distance. One bullet smashed into the top turret wounding Sams and putting his guns out of action. He grabbed a camera, came into the cockpit and started taking pictures. By then, our bow and belly turrets were jammed, so we had no guns firing forward. I told Rolland and Osieki to stand by and made left and right turns while they got off shots from the single .50 caliber guns in the waist hatches. As I nosed over to close the gap again, the bow and belly turrets came back on but soon the rounds seemed to be spiralling due to burned out barrels. Then we saw a piece of the bomber's cowling fly off and the starboard engine started smoking. As he slowed down we were close behind and above. I saw two bombs drop side by side from the fuselage. I waited for the explosion to blow us out of the sky--a trick I had planned to use if pursued. There was no explosion! The Betty touched on the smooth water, bounced out and stalled-in as we overshot them. I made two more passes as some of them were in the water and one was on the wing trying to inflate a rubber raft. As we left, a huge fire ball had engulfed the floating plane.

"One bullet had passed through my intercom and under my seat six inches from my butt. Another had broken the cockpit windshield above and right of Leo



Locations for October Aircraft Action Reports on Surface Targets

Bauer's head. One of the three cannon hits had exploded in the bomb bay. We learned later that there were many more than the seven 7.7-mm hits than we first reported. Leo was the only co-pilot because at the last minute, Bill Goodman had to stay behind due to illness. On the diving attack, the air speed indicator passed the red line like someone waving a finger. The sudden change of air pressure nearly burst Leo's ear drums due to blockage. We had fired 3,000 rounds of

ammunition in the 25-minute engagement. We had to return on three engines due to damage to #2.

"I vowed to do a neater job if we ever got another chance--and the next time we did."

Herb Donald did a superb job on this attack, so it is of interest to note the following. The ACA Report for Anderson's Betty, shot down on 7 October, concludes with the sentence, "The pilot and crew deserve full recognition for this meritorious achievement." There is no such entry in the ACA Report of the Betty shot down by Donald and his crew. In its place is the general statement about the Navy Patrol Group, VB-102 & VB-104: "This group has destroyed a total of four (4) Bettys in the past four days. Two being credited to each squadron." I have reviewed and compared the Anderson and the Donald shoot downs and I am unable to see that one attack was more daring or demonstrated more bravery or more skill than the other. Both attacks accomplished the same; a dead Betty is a dead Betty!

While Donald was downing the Betty, Swinton flew to Espiritu in 32009, our new acquisition from VB-102. The freebie from 102 needed some work.

Special Duties Involving Flying Straight and Level. On the 8th, the Dvorachek crew, with navigator Sparenberg, began flying the squadron's planes, swinging the compasses in the air using the astro compass. Swinging the compasses on the ground was impossible because there was no compass-rose and the iron Marston matting perturbed the earth's magnetic field. Sparenberg was in the Montgomery crew but joined Dvorachek for these special flights, which Sparenberg recorded as "JR, Cactus Special." There was a total of 14 flights in all, swinging 13 planes. One plane, 32075 (Alley's *Open Bottom*), was done twice. Curiously, Deevo swung the compass of his own plane, 32083, while flying a patrol: October 20, Sector 6, 10.2 hours. Deevo swung all of the squadron's planes except Wright's 32081 and Stoppy's 32069. This seems like a make-work project. We often used the astro compass to check the compass deviation while flying a sector. Planes could have had a compass check on every patrol if necessary.

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9 October This was a quiet day in the hot sectors. Smith in a short Sector 1 (8.7 hours) strafed a barge, and plane captain J. R. McIntyre, ACMM, was hurt. Van Ben flew a long Sector 2 (11.4 hours) and Clagett flew an extra long 11.8 hours. The Van Ben and Clagett crews, a total of 18 pairs of eyes watching for a total of 23.2 hours, saw nothing. Hager's sector took him over Ontong Java where he saw two Bettys. The faster Bettys flew away from the 4Y. Ontong Java was definitely the place to see Bettys.

10 October Leaving Stoppy at home, Hagen was PPC with co-pilots Jeff Hemphill and Karls and flew Sector 8. This was Ed Hagen's first hop as PPC. Sears flew Sector 7, flanked by Reichert and Humphrey. Feind flew a short patrol, probably a Special Betty search. The hot sectors to the west had five sectors plus the short Zed search. It seemed to even things out that when flying the five cold sectors, there was opportunity to fly a Special Betty Hunt.

Monty flew a short bounce for his co-pilots, Keiser and Jones.

11 October Today's Flights: Monty Zed Sector; Donald Sector 1; Clagett Sector 2; Wright Sector 4; Dodson Sector 5.

Monty flew the Zed flight with Jeff Hemphill from the Stoppy crew as his co-pilot. He must have shortened the patrol because of mechanical difficulty and landed at Munda. He remained there overnight and flew back to Guadalcanal the next day.

Tom Dodson flew as PPC of Alley's crew, with Bittenbender serving as the third pilot.

Wright flew Sector 4, logged 10.8 hours and went out 40 miles beyond the 800 miles that the sector required. Wright's objective was to give the beautiful atoll, Nukuoro, the once-over. Nukuoro is about 165 miles north of Kapingamarangi, a long canoe trip, but the inhabitants of both islands are very similar—physically, linguistically, and culturally Polynesian. Even with a good, long look at the island, Whit and Tom Dempster wrote in their logs that they saw the island, but they did not describe what they saw. Our patrols went over many beautiful atolls so we were not impressed by just another beautiful atoll. If Whit or Tom had seen Dorothy Lamour or signs of Japs they would have let us know.

Clagett flew 11.4 hours in Sector 2. My log remarks, "3 Haps." I remember the three Haps (=Hamps, Zekes or Zeros) very well. We were flying at 8000 feet when Buster Butler, our plane captain, saw them at 3 o'clock level. I was concerned that they would climb above us and make diving passes but they stayed at our altitude. Well out of range of our fifties, they entertained us with a series of beautiful slow rolls. After their mini air-show, they dove off toward Bougainville. It was a crazy war.

After dark, two Bettys from Rabaul armed with torpedoes flew into Iron Bottom Sound and hit two liberty ships, sinking one, the *John H Couch.*

13 October The thirteenth was an unlucky day, at least for the skipper and his crew. We had the sectors to the west, the skipper in the Zed sector, Wright in Sector 1, 10.9 hours and Stoppleman in Sector 2, 10.8. Reichert 7.8 and Humphrey 10.0 covered two other hot sectors. None of our crews saw anything to report but the skipper had lots to shout about at the end of his Zed search.

At our St. Louis reunion, October 1995, three of Sears' crewmen got together and reconstructed some of their exciting times flying with the skipper in Crew 1: X. F. "Yousie" Yuzapavich (now translated to Josephs), ARM2c, second radioman/top turret; Lee Little, AOM1c, first ordnanceman/stbd waist gun; Dru Stainback, ARM1c, first radioman/radar. Dru prepared the narratives.

Sears and his crew flew the Zed sector in terrible weather. Lee Little recalls dodging through several squall lines and being in and out of rain for the whole flight. Sears got very close looks at many Jap hot spots; Buka, the west shore of Bougainville, Kahili, Ballale, and the Shortlands. The lousy weather probably made possible close approaches to Jap bases without getting blasted by their AA.

The Zed patrol departed around noon and usually carried a special passenger. We had been hauling Army Aerologist, Marine Infantry Officers, Navy Amphibious Landing Officers, and other interested but unidentified parties. It seemed that everyone wanted to ride the Zed sector to get a look at the next invasion sites. In two weeks, our forces would occupy Treasury Island, make an in-and-out feint of a major invasion of northwest Choiseul, and land Marines, in force and to stay, at Torokina, Empress Augusta Bay, on the southwest coast of Bougainville. Yousie, Little, and Stainback remember a squadron officer was a passenger on this Zed flight. They think it was Lt. Murray, Squadron Operations Officer.

Dru Stainback's account notes, "Returning, we got into more heavy rain shortly after complete darkness had fallen, and as we started our recognition turns upon approaching Guadalcanal I discovered a possible mis-function in our IFF. The IFF started producing atypical interference in our radar picture, and I informed the skipper that our IFF may not be responding to interrogation properly. In any event, the CACTUS CW radio circuit went into an 'air raid mode,' transmitting food groups continuously in plain language to alert the circuit they were shutting down for an air raid."

Our early warning radars would have been tracking Sears' plane and interrogating its IFF for the past two hours, so last minute failure of the IFF should have been no serious problem. Nevertheless, in the darkness of early evening, the skipper and his crew were approaching our base at Carney Field, almost safely home. They made all the proper recognition turns and probably fired the correct Very pistol flares, two colored balls, selected from all six combinations of red, green, and yellow.

As Sears turned in toward Carney, wheels down and preparing to land, one of our own armed cargo ships began shooting at him. The shooting was contagious and a second ship opened up on the skipper and his crew.

Dru Stainback reports: "What happened next can best be described as being in the middle of a 4th of July fireworks display. A large ship almost below us

opened up with a number of antiaircraft weapons, tracers converging on us, around us and through us with what seemed to be hundreds of rounds.

"When the ships started firing, searchlights came on and Lee Little, in the starboard waist, was blinded by one or more searchlight beams full in his face.

"Our passenger (Lt. Murray?) was confused and agitated by the sudden, unexplained events. Standing on the flight deck without earphones and with extremely limited vision, he was understandably 'out of the loop.' He asked Yousie, 'What are they shooting at?'"

"'Us!,' Yousie replied."

There was no excuse for the gunners on these ships to fire on our PB4Y-1. The Liberator was a very common plane in our area, flown in and out of Guadalcanal, day and night, by both the Navy and the Army. Conversely, the Japs in our area were not operating any aircraft that resembled a Liberator. They had no four engine plane and no plane with twin tails. Furthermore, the Zed Sector plane went out every day and its return to Carney well after sunset was routine. But of course, there is always someone who does not get the word.

Some excited gunnery officer flunked aircraft recognition and gave the command to fire. Unfortunately, the ships' gunners were good. They hit Sears' plane with several 20mm shells—in the starboard wing, #1 engine, and port empennage. Fortunately no one in Crew 1 was hit.

Dru Stainback now records: "When Yousie arrived at our plane the next day to clean his guns, the metalsmiths working on the damage reported 124 holes in the aircraft, and they were amazed that no human damage had resulted.

"My personal reaction to this traumatic event followed the usual sequence; sudden stark terror, a high rush of adrenaline, and enormous relief to get on the ground. I wasn't sure whether the touchdown would be a landing or a crash. But I do know that, once again, I felt renewed confidence, respect and admiration for the skipper. Our landing was most likely very difficult. Were the runway lights still out because of the raid? Probably. Did the searchlight illuminate the cockpit just before landing? Possibly. Did we momentarily expect another AA battery to open up? Definitely. And with more than 100 holes in the plane, that landing was just routine for the skipper!

"I will never forget how the skipper appeared as he climbed out of the plane—super cool, as usual, but very angry, commandeering the duty Jeep for an immediate chat with that ship.

"Skipper never told us what he said to that ship's C.O. All he ever says is 'You don't want to know!'"

Swinton flew old reliable 32009, Espiritu to Henderson to Carney

14 October Tom Dodson PPC'd the Alley crew without Alley. Hank Campbell joined Dodson and regular co-pilot J. B. Thompson. The Montgomery crew flew a patrol without Monty; John Alley was their PPC. Monty must have been very ill. He flew on the 12th, missed his next three turns, and made his next patrol on the 22nd. Clagett and Swinton in Sector 10 rounded out the day's flights.

15 October We were flying the sectors to the west again as we did on alternate days. Humphrey and crew flew the Zed Sector and Lody wrote in his log "saw 1 Betty at Buka." Our cargo ships that got Sears on the 13th did NOT fire at Humphrey. After Sears talked to them they probably wouldn't fire on a Jap boarding party carrying meatball flags and yelling "Banzai."

Searls had an uneventful patrol in Sector 2. Van Benschoten stayed home and first pilot McCutcheon took the crew out in Sector 3. Jim Smith flew a short Sector 5.

16 October We had the cold sectors and they were icy. In sectors 6 through 10 were Sears, Swinton, Reichert, Dempster, and Stoppy. Dempster? Tom Dempster took Wright's crew out in Sector 9 with Jeff Hemphill, borrowed from Stoppy, the third pilot. Whit would fly tomorrow with the Montgomery crew.

17 October We were out to the sectors to the west again with Clagett doing the Zed Sector and Wright in Sector 1. Donald and Alley saw nothing in their sectors. Montgomery was still on the sick list so Wright took his place in the Montgomery crew.

Today's flights by Wright and Clagett involved important firsts for the squadron. Wright was the first to do masthead bombing, made possible by delayed action fuses, and Clagett was the first to do radar countermeasures against the Japanese, made possible by Ens Kreilick and his gear aboard Page's plane.

Delayed Action Fuses We had been carrying bombs with instantaneous fuses which made our minimum altitude for bombing approximately 1500 feet (any lower and the fragments from our own bomb would hit our plane). We had been strafing enemy ships at masthead height but could not bomb at that altitude, so bombing and strafing were separate attacks. In masthead bombing, the bomb hits the target or water when it is directly beneath the plane. If the bomb explodes at the instant of impact, it destroys the plane which is only 50 to 75 feet above it. Bombs armed with fuses that explode four to five seconds AFTER impact, give the plane that interval to get out of the way of the explosion. In the four to five seconds, the plane travels about 1500 feet, giving the tail gunner the best view of the explosion, 1500 feet away and in the exact spot that he occupied just 4-5

seconds earlier. In masthead bombing there is considerable margin for error. Bombs that hit the water "short" of the ship are just as damaging to the vessel as a direct hit. Bombs that hit "short" may either dive or "skip." If the bomb dives into the water, it explodes under the ship and buckles her plates much the same as a mine. If the bomb "skips" off the water it hits into the side of the ship. Of course, if the point of impact is a little "longer" the bomb hits directly into the side of the ship. The skip is a frequent event in this type of bombing and masthead bombing is often called skip bombing. If two or more bombs are released on a run, with the intervalometer automatically spacing the points of impact by 50 feet, the margin for error is increased. Masthead or skip-bombing is point-blank bombing, it is difficult to miss even a small vessel.

The Army Air Corps had great success with skip-bombing in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea on 3 March 1943. Twin-engine bombers, A-20s and B-25s, used bombs with five second delay fuses to destroy a large convoy that was attempting to reinforce the Japanese troops at Lae, New Guinea.

We needed delayed fuses so we could bomb and strafe on the same run at masthead level. We had obtained at least a small supply of 4-5 second delay fuses. Whit Wright was the first in our squadron to use them on his attack today. Clagett, however, was still carrying instantaneous fuses.

Enemy Radar Our planes were forever nosing into new Jap territory and looking over their bases. Why not carry equipment and operators in our planes that could receive enemy radar signals? Even as we flew our normal patrols, radar countermeasures people and equipment could plot the location and frequencies of Japanese radar, learn something of their range and tracking abilities, and get sufficient information so jamming could be done when appropriate. A special unit, so secret that we called it simply "Radar," was attached to our squadron. The boss was Lt. Johnny Johnson, but he spent most of his time in Noumea. With us on permanent assignment were Lt(jg) Paul Kreilick, and his men, Flanagan, Greenberg, Flanick, and Beauseoeil. Paul was one of the elite in Quonset Hut 1-2—Whit Wright house-mother. Members of the Radar Gang rode with us using their special gear to receive Jap radar signals. On this date, I recorded in my log that Kreilick was with us in the Zed Sector. In all of the records that we have, this is the first indication of the **Special Radar Countermeasure Unit.**

Wright, sitting in as PPC of the Montgomery crew, was near the end of Sector 1, 70 miles northwest of Kavieng and 45 miles northeast of Emirau. At 1150, they sighted a convoy that was making 12-15 knots on course 150°T, headed for Kavieng. The prize in this three-ship convoy was a large AT, an 8000-ton troop transport. With the transport was a small AK of 4000 tons and one DD of the *Sendai* class. Whit caught the destroyer out of position to give AA support

to the transport; the DD was probably more concerned about our subs and thus gave Whit an opening.

Wright was carrying five 300-pound bombs with 4-5 second delay fuses, so all his runs were skip-bombing at masthead height. Whit attacked the troop transport, ignored the AK and avoided the DD. Bombs were released by "pickle" from the cockpit with the intervalometer set to release the bombs in ripple salvo with not more than 20 feet spacing. On the first run, the DD fired with 20mms but these rounds fell short. Jack Bartell AMM2c, bow gunner, had the best seat in the house. He recalls that, "The majority of these rounds was bouncing off the AK."

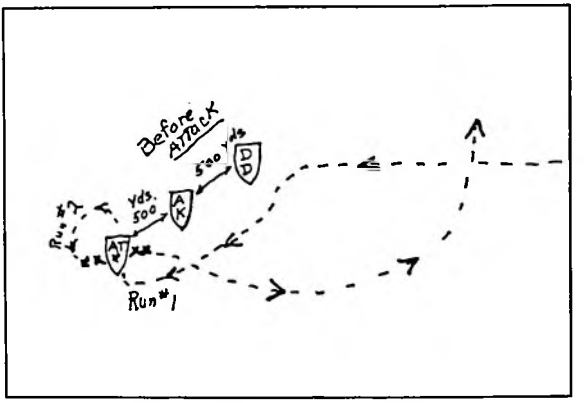


Diagram from Wright's ACA Report

The first bombing run, bow to stern on the transport, was perfect except the bombs did not drop. Our bomb bay doors had a safety switch that prevented the bombs from dropping when the bomb bay doors were closed. During bombing runs, the bomb bay doors sometimes crept slightly closed, just enough to activate the safety switch. Jack Bartell recalls, "Finady was in the top turret and I was in the bow. On our first run, we silenced both 3" guns, bow and stern on the transport. The first run picture showed this." The transport also fired two smaller guns from the starboard side and high in the superstructure and some of the fire from the transport must have come from the troops on deck. Whit turned to port and started a second run.

This second bombing run was on the starboard beam of the transport from a direction that prevented the DD from firing on the plane. The AK was between the transport and the DD so the destroyer could not fire on Whit without hitting the AK. These guys from Maine were always thinking! Strafing by Whit's gunners, really Monty's gunners, was effective on both runs. The troops on the weather decks of the transport were easy targets for all turrets. Although the strafing was very effective, it was the bombs released on the second run that did the serious damage.

One, and probably two, of the five bombs hit the transport about 30 feet aft of the bow. Two other bombs exploded in the water close enough to the transport

to buckle her plates and let in some sea water. Heavy smoke began to billow from the place where the bombs had hit, and the transport began to settle by the bow. Whit retired to the north, away from the fighter bases on Emirau and Kavieng.

Was a Jap mystery fighter in the area? The ACA Report for this action records that one Jap plane, an Adam, made an incomplete run from 6 o'clock on the 4Y-1 but broke off when the turrets fired at it. I say mystery fighter for two reasons. First, after Whit reviewed this report in November of 1994, he told me that he did not remember a plane making a run on them. None of the crew, the Montgomery crew, recorded or remembers another plane in the area. It is also possible that our Intelligence Officer Ray Ming imagined the Adam attack. Ray had the first, last, and only word in our ACA Reports so the Adam attack stands.

Whit did not stay around to watch the transport sink. He had no more bombs and the gunners of the 4Y-1 were no match for the gunners of the destroyer. Photographs taken after the second run show the transport to be settling by the bow with a large, serious fire forward. Best guess is that she did not make it to port but the AK and DD probably were able to save many of the troops.

This attack by Whitney Wright is the first recorded use of masthead bombing in VB-104. The action occurred about 27 miles north of the position where Cdr Sears attacked the 3 AK, 3 DD, 3 Petes and 3 Zekes on 7 October (see map).

For this and other actions, Whitney Wright received the Navy Cross but the crew that he borrowed from Montgomery got nothing.

Page Clagett departed Carney to search the Zed Sector at about the time Wright was bombing the transport near the end of Sector 1. Page was carrying four 300 pound general purpose bombs and two 100 pound daisy-cutters, all with *instantaneous* fuses. The daisy-cutters had a two foot extension on the nose fuse that made the bomb explode while it was still above ground, sending out a ring of shrapnel. These bombs were designed to cut daisies and Japanese hiding in the daisies.

I was navigating this flight, coaxing Page and co-pilot Jock Sutherland to greater things and entertaining two distinguished guest-observers along on the flight. Ens Paul Kreilick had his radar signal receiving gear in the bombardier's compartment and he recorded the Japanese radar frequencies that were operating in this area. A Marine Captain was aboard to have his first look at Empress Augusta Bay, a place that would soon be his battleground. Our instructions were to fly a regular patrol and give no special attention to Empress Augusta Bay. We were to make the usual sweep along the bay, flying at 500 to 700 feet, so the Marine Captain could take some low angle pictures of the shore and eyeball the place. Why was this marine so interested in Empress Augusta Bay?

In 14 days, on 1 November, this Marine Captain and many other Marines would land here in operation Cherry Blossom. So why not circle and give the

Captain a good look at Torokina Point where the landing would take place? A long look at Empress Augusta Bay by a Navy search plane might have tipped off the Japanese to the landing there.

On this flight, we were doing more than joyriding a special radar officer and a Marine Captain. Just southeast of Empress Augusta Bay, we sighted three sampans. They were riding very high in the water so they had already unloaded their cargo. Clagett dropped all of our bombs in two runs on the largest of the sampans. All bombs missed. Release was from the awkward altitude of 1500 feet because of the instantaneous fuses. If he could have released at masthead height, Deadeye Clagett would have guaranteed a hit on the largest sampan, but with instantaneous fuses we would have peppered our plane with fragments from our own bomb. Our plane probably cost more than all three of the sampans together.

After the bombing, we made 15 strafing runs, expending 1800 rounds. Our gunners made many hits, but there was no apparent damage to the wooden vessels. The two small sampans ran onto the beach but the largest one remained bobbing in deeper water.

The ACA report says that the largest vessel fired 15 rounds of 20mm at us "plus 5 small parachute bombs." I have no recollection of these or any other parachute bombs. Perhaps I was busy serving coffee to our two distinguished guests, Ens Kreilick and the Marine Captain.

18 October Even the cold sectors offered prizes to those who would go the extra mile, look at one more whitecap, and snoop under one more rain squall. On this calm day, our lineup was: Searls Sector 6; Sears Sector 7; Van Ben Sector 8; Humphrey Sector 9; Feind Sector 10. Searls and Humphrey saw nothing, but the other three patrols were noteworthy.

Bittenbender and Ostwalt noted in their logs that they flew with **Lieutenant** Van Benschoten. Van had lost his "jg."

According to John Burton's log, Feind bombed a sub off Nauru but for some reason Ray Ming did not prepare an ACA Report. In the coldest sector, Sears had a hot time with a Jap sub. His "text book" attack is well documented with pictures and a detailed ACA Report, but first a word about submarines in the Pacific.

Subs were a big deal for us in the Pacific. In my opinion, our subs were better prepared for WW II than any other branch of our Army, Navy, or Marines. I have always thought that this was because you can't "goof off" in a boat that you deliberately sink even during practice operations. On 11 December 1941, one of our subs, *Gudgeon*, left Pearl to patrol along the coast of Japan and sink Jap ships. She went off on a war patrol with four days notice. So our subs were special and large parts of our search area were set aside as safe zones for them.

Thus it was very rare that any of our planes got a shot at a sub in an area where we were free to attack. Sears got such an opportunity and, as you would predict, he did not waste it.

Sears was well past the 800-mile end of Sector 7, returning from a reconnaissance of the Japanese held island of Kusaie. He was out there because of his idea that the Japs had learned that we were flying 800-mile sectors, and they felt free to go about their business if they stayed beyond the 800-mile radius from Guadalcanal.

At 1304, just 35 miles south of Kusaie and 75 miles beyond the end of Sector 7, the skipper was cruising at 9000 feet. His first radioman, Dru Stainback, reported a blip on the radar, 16 miles to port. The Skipper turned toward the blip and homed in on it for a minute or two and then the blip was lost, probably in the sea return. Sears descended in a spiral and broke out of some low clouds at 3000 feet. After several minutes of visual search, the sub was sighted 10 miles away. She was making 15 knots on course 310°T, headed back to Truk.

Sears dove to 100 feet as he flew up the wake of the sub. G. N. Weston, bombardier, released the five 300 pound bombs fused with our new toy, 4-5 second delay fuses. Sears' run was perfect and Weston's drop was perfect. The bombs hit all around the sub. Some skipped and exploded at the surface, others dove into the water and acted as depth charges. The bow, belly, and tail turrets sprayed .50 caliber bullets all over the sub.

The skipper had caught the sub napping. Surely the sub's crew heard the 4Y-1's engines but they must have thought the plane was friendly because the sub was still on the surface, just starting her crash dive, when the bombs hit her.

First radiomen in our crews did not have a ringside seat for most of our battles. Their ears and eyes were glued to the radio and radar, but when the bomb bay doors were open, they could look down past their right hip, and see the bombs hit the target. When Dru Stainback looked down to see the bombs hit the sub, he saw a Jap crewman jump overboard. The crash dive had left the Jap stranded on the weather deck of the conning tower and the 50 caliber bullets from the bow turret were rattling around there, so over the side he went.

Skipper turned back from his run to fly over the spot where the sub had submerged. He could see the sub just below the surface of the clear water as she slowly emerged from the blast area. She was in a bow up position, perhaps just way out of trim or trying to surface. Almost immediately, the vessel disappeared.

A disadvantage of stretching out sector searches beyond 800 miles was that we had very little gas to burn while circling an attack sight. Sears was unable to stay around to see if the sub eventually surfaced. As it was, Crew 1 wrote 11.6 hours in their flight logs.

On our ASW (anti submarine warfare) patrols, you had to get a signed statement from the Japanese captain to get credit for sinking his sub. The official word on Sears' sub was: ". . . though no external damage was apparent, it is believed that considerable internal damage must have been suffered due to the close proximity of the bomb explosions."

The past two days, 17 & 18 October, had been productive ones for 104. Wright had bombed a large Japanese transport ship loaded with troops and the skipper had bombed a Jap fleet submarine. Oh yes, and Clagett had scattered sampans and conducted a "Cook's Tour" of Empress Augusta Bay. Not bad for a bunch of ex P-boat crews now fighting in the coconut navy with B-24s cajoled from the Army and called PB4Y-1s. Our planes were so Army that they were still painted dirty brown. Guess there was a shortage of blue paint.

19 October Stoppy did Sector 1; Swinton Sector 2; Wright Sector 3. Other crews took care of sectors 4, 5, and Zed. The Montgomery crew, with Feind taking Monty's place, returned to base on three engines, 4.3 hours. Reichert, Alley (with Boulger taking J. B. Thompson's spot as navigator this day) and Donald flew somewhere but reported nothing.

Wright flew the only patrol of interest in spite of our having the hot sectors. He sighted no Japs on this patrol, but it was a landmark flight. Sector 3 went out directly toward Truk, and Whit stretched the sector to 920 miles in 11.2 hours. He saw nothing to report at Kapingamarangi but when he flew the cross leg he was only 180 miles from Truk. This was as close as any of our Navy planes had ever been to Truk. Truk was still a mighty place; it had not yet felt the sting of our fast carrier task force.

20 October This was a slow day in the cold sectors. Dvorachek did Sector 6, with Sparenberg navigating; Searls flew Sector 7; Smith did a short Sector 10.

Van Ben flew 3.3 hours swinging his own compass in the air with Bitt on the astro compass. For some reason, Van did his own compass and Deevo flew, for him, a rare patrol.

Fred Feind and crew flew 32073, Clagett's plane, to Espiritu.

21 October All the hot sectors were cold. Swinton was in Zed; Sears Sector 2; Stoppy Section 4; Van Ben, without Bitt, Sec 5. Reichert and Humphrey filled out our team for today. Humphrey took off, discovered a gas leak, returned to base, got the standby plane and did his patrol.

Whit Wright had a bounce hop for Jones and Molloy but the 0.7 hours would have given them few landings.

22 October We were in the cold sectors to the northeast and Monty, recovered from whatever had ailed him, was back flying. Alley, like Monty, saw nothing and although Donald made a special search for shipping at Nauru, he also saw nothing. Whit Wright, the sector stretcher, flew Sector 6, almost due north out of Carney. Sector 6 was one of our coldest sectors but Whit warmed it up by flying for 10.9 hours and stretching the sector to 900 miles. He saw nothing to report.

23 October Van Ben, Smith, and Clagett flew uneventful sectors. Searls attacked a ship at Kapingamarangi and when word of his attack reached our squadron, Wright and Stoppy took off on special strikes to back up Searls.

The Japanese on Kapingamarangi were unpredictable. Some days we could flat-hat them and they would make no response. On other days, they would just shoot back a little, but when their supply ship was delivering their *sake* and rice, they could be downright nasty. Searls and crew were making our daily check of Kapingamarangi when they spotted a small tender anchored in the lagoon and unloading cargo. Searls made a bombing and strafing run but he was flying so low that the coconut trees obscured the vessel. Since his run was off to one side, he released no bombs. He quickly did a "one-eighty" and started a second run, this time with the vessel clearly in view. One 300 pound bomb, with a plug in the nose and 4-5 second delay fuse in the tail, was released from 150 feet. The drop was long, the bomb passing just over the deck of the tender. Strafing on both runs was accurate and smoke could be seen coming from portholes in the tender.

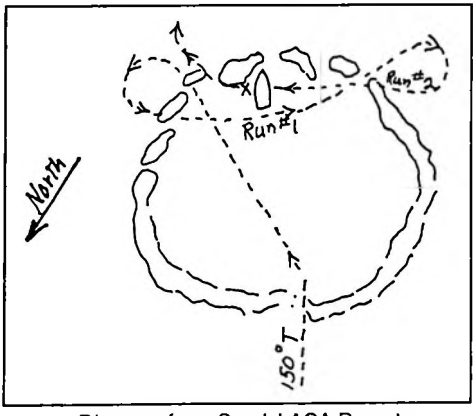


Diagram from Searls' ACA Report

On the second run, Ens Harper Joslyn was in the bombardiers' compartment. A 7.7 bullet creased the right side of his head and shattered his earphone. Fragments of bakelite from the earphone hit the eyes of a crewman who was standing behind Joslyn. With unknown injuries to his crew in the bow compartment and no one there to serve as bombardier, Searls flew to the south, headed for home.

Neither man in the bow compartment was seriously wounded, but it was a close call for Joslyn. He spent a day or two in MOB 8 Hospital, near Henderson

Field. Harp made light of his injury although we all knew that if the round had hit one inch to the left it would have killed him.

R. M. DeGolia has written a few comments concerning his fellow co-pilot. "Joslyn was on the bombsight. (We had not gotten to making low level runs with the pilot doing the dropping.) As we tried to make a bombing run we were fired upon and Joslyn received a wound on his head around the temple. There was much blood and pain but we were able to get Harp Joslyn home to the hospital. He was in great pain so I gave him a morphine shot. Of course he liked that and wanted more. I learned later that you never administer morphine for a head injury."

Harp Joslyn enjoyed showing everyone his Purple Heart Medal and said that the scar and medal would be good for many free drinks when he got Stateside. Unfortunately, he was lost at sea on a later patrol and never made it back to the States.

When Searls sent the radio message saying that he was leaving a damaged small AK or tender at Kapingamarangi, the Wright and Stoppy crews took off to finish the vessel. Wright and Stoppy did not reach Kapingamarangi until after dark and were unable to find any sign of the Jap tender. She may have hunkered down next to the dock with all lights out or she may have made it out of the lagoon and scurried back to Truk.

Monty and crew flew to Espiritu in 32060.

24 October This was a very dull day in the cold sectors for Reichert, Humphrey, Swinton, and Sears. Even Sears in Sector 10 to Nauru could not make anything happen.

25 October Smith flew the Zed Sector and explored the coast of Bougainville. He had the honor of flying our last Zed Sector. In a day, the south side of Bougainville would become so crowded with our ships and planes involved in the landing at Empress Augusta Bay that there was neither need nor room for our Zed flight. Donald, Alley, and Clagett flew uneventful sectors and Stoppy flew Sector 12, seeing Stewart and Ocean islands.

Our well-established pattern of alternating the northwest hot sectors and the northeast cold sectors with VB-102 was beginning to break down. In the past, Sector 10, once around Nauru, was the highest number sector that we flew on a regular schedule. On some days we flew Sector 11 to take a close look at Ocean Island, but Ocean had no air base so was never of great significance. I believe that the PBYs squadrons, such as VP-71 based at Tulagi, usually flew sectors 11, 12, 13 etc. What's up?

Strange things were going on in the Upper Solomons. The coming attractions would bring a series of special amphibious landings, ComSoPac Halsey's Bougainville campaign—the next major leap up the Solomon chain. Everyone pitched in so we did new and different things. PBYs would do Dumbo work, evacuating wounded and picking up and flying VIP commanders over their beachhead operations. So we flew the eastern sectors usually covered by PBYs. On the 27th, our forces, mostly New Zealanders, would land and establish a seaplane and PT-boat base in the Treasury Islands, and our Marines would make a feint at a major landing on Choiseul. Then on 1 November, our Marines would land and establish a beachhead, complete with fighter strip, on Empress Augusta Bay. These operations required that all Japanese air bases on Bougainville be secured.

Our share of closing Kahili would be joining the Army Air Corps on another, but special hi-bombing run. We would no longer fly the Zed Sector. It would be full of our destroyers, light cruisers and PT-boats on the water and F6Fs, F4Us, P-38s, TBFs, SBDs, and B-25s in the air. The landing at Empress Augusta Bay would be a big turn-on for the Japanese and they would start hauling warships, planes, men, and supplies from Truk to Rabaul. The Truk to Rabaul cruise line went through our part of the ocean—the ends of sectors 1 & 2.

Closing the Jap airfields along Buka Passage, on the northwest end of Bougainville was a special problem. Halsey did it as a Navy job, no Army Air Corps involved. Light cruisers and destroyers would shell the Buka airfields and our carriers, yes our carriers, would clean out what the shelling left. And, Searls and his crew would help a little with a night snooper ahead of the cruisers and carriers.

The big deal of the next few days was, of course, the reappearance of our carriers, old ones and brand new ones. For months, our forces in the Solomons had been asking, "Where are the carriers?" They were here, and WHAMMO, Buka Passage and Rabaul would never be the same.

When we arrived on Guadalcanal in August, the New Georgia operation, was in its last stages. There was lots of tough fighting going on in the rain forests around Munda, but the success of the operation was never in doubt. VB-104 was involved in some of the cleanup, hitting destroyers and sinking barges involved in evacuating defeated Jap troops. With the Bougainville operation, we were in on the very ground floor. We flew the early tours in Zed Sector and Sector 1, covering both coasts of Bougainville. We did everything else asked of us and closed or bent westward the Truk-Rabaul shipping route. We were in the Bougainville Campaign from beginning to end. So here we go!

26 October Two of our crews flew unusually cool sectors. Stoppleman was in Sector 12 and next to him was Searls in Sector 13, out over the Stewart Islands. Molloy was with Searls in place of Joslyn who was still in the hospital having his head wound tended by Navy nurses.

We flew our last joint bombing raid with the Army. The target was the same old Kahili Airfield on the southeast end of Bougainville but the bomb load was something new for us and special for the Japs—1000-pounders.

Sears led the flight and with him were Wright, Donald, Reichert, Van Ben, and two other crews (Pick two from: Dvorachek, Anderson, and Honey). Sears joined 24 Army B-24s and then a fighter escort of 17 P-38s covered our formation of 31 bombers. Our crews saw no Jap fighters so the P-38s must have done a good job, perhaps by intimidation.

The run on Kahili started at 21,000 feet with bombs released at 1029 from 19,500 feet. Each of our planes carried five of the 1000 pound beauties and Sears laid them right down the runway. Our usual operations for these kinds of bombing runs were to have all bombardiers watch the skipper's plane and at the instant that the first bomb dropped from his plane, all of our bombardiers were to hit the bomb release. On this flight, some of our planes released in salvo, apparently attempting to make a really big hole in the runway with five 1000-pounders hitting and exploding together in one spot.

The best weapons to close Jap runways would have been bombs armed with long delay fuses but perhaps they were not available to us this early in the war. We used to joke that when our bombing runs on the Kahili runway started, the Japanese would have their Korean laborers crouched along the runway, each holding a basket of coral. When our bombs had exploded, the laborers would dash out onto the runway, fill the craters, and make the field as good as new. The laborers would have a job to fill the craters made by salvos of five 1000 pound bombs.

Paul Kreilick and his magic radar listening gear must have been in one of our planes because our ACA report gives the radar frequencies for Ballale Island, Kahili, and a third undetermined location.

Why these 1000-ponders on the Kahili runway? The next day, 27 October, would be a big day and Halsey wanted the Japanese planes at Kahili to stay on the ground, or at least have a bumpy takeoff.

Our hi-bombing flights with the Army were not very gratifying. We felt more at home operating as single planes out in our sectors over the open ocean or along the shores of Japanese held islands. With our new 4-5 second delay fuses, we were eager to do our own skip-bombing and leave the hi-bombing to the Army.

27 October Swinton flew Sector 1 and saw "5 sampans on Green," while Alley and Humphrey flew negative patrols. All was quiet for 104 on this important day but others outfits were going places.

Just after sunrise, New Zealand forces landed on Treasury Island, about 40 miles south of Kahili. They came to stay, and in a short time we had a base there. Later in the day, our Marines landed on the southwest shore of Choiseul, near the west end of that long island. They did not come to stay. Their job was to look and sound like a major invasion, a diversion for the coming big landing at Torokina, Empress Augusta Bay. Of course the Marines did their job, although getting in was a bit easier than getting out.

28 October Searls flew Sector 12 and Smith Sector 13 with Van Ben and Clagett next to them. PB4Y-1s flying old P-boat sectors!

Fred Feind and crew flew Espiritu to Guadalcanal in 32073, having taken 073 to Espiritu on the 20th. While waiting for it to be repaired, they rode a S.C.A.T. R4D to a short vacation in Noumea. Van Ben would soon follow in Fred's wake on serious business.

29 October The squadron flew seven sectors, Anderson Sector 1, Wright Sector 2, Sears Sector 3, Stoppleman Sector 5, Reichert, Donald, and Humphrey probably in 4, 6, and 7. We were not needed in the Zed Sector.

Big Andy in Sector 1 had the only excitement. Outbound along the northeast shore of Bougainville, at 0945, Andy and his crew saw a large sampan, 50 feet long, anchored off the beach in Tinputs Harbor. This anchorage was 40 miles northwest of Kieta and 40 miles southeast of Buka Passage.

Andy used all of his five 300 pound bombs on this sampan and although the bombs had 4-5 second delay fuses, he chose to drop from 700 feet. Big Andy reported, "One sampan destroyed." Further out the sector, at 1045, Andy flew around the lagoon at Green Island. Green was a beautiful atoll, located about 70 miles northwest of Buka, but loaded with Japanese. Andy and crew spotted a large sampan underway close ashore inside the lagoon. This sampan, estimated to be 80 feet long, was loaded with Jap troops. Andy had dropped all of his bombs on his first sampan of the day so now he relied on his gunners. They poured 2000 rounds into the sampan and troops. The sampan was destroyed and an "undetermined number of troops killed." Andy and crew received light 7.7 machine gun fire from the bow of the sampan and some rifle fire from the shore, but there was no damage to their plane. For good measure, Andy's gunners strafed a warehouse and bivouac area. This was a bad day for the Japs on Green Island but the worst was yet to come. In three and one half months, Green would be one of our bases and all of the Japanese would be gone.

Van Ben flew 32071 to Espiritu and then kept right on going to Noumea. Fred Feind had apparently opened trade relations with the French, so the day after Fred returned from Noumea, Van Ben flew there for "supplies."

Alley flew 32077 to Espiritu for needed repairs and scheduled maintenance and Monty flew 32060 from Espiritu to Guadalcanal. The PATSU at Espiritu would finish servicing one of our planes in the morning and get a new one to start work on in the afternoon.

30 October We were in the lonesome cold sectors to the east: Smith, Swinton, Clagett, and Monty. Smith flew Sector 12, stuck in a rut; he had flown Sector 13 on his previous patrol. Searls must have drawn the short straw because while the other patrols got to buzz the hula girls in the Stewarts, Searls got to fly a night snoop around Buka and New Ireland. Searls flew 10.2 hours, most of this in the wee hours of 31 October. DeGolia's log records nothing special for this night's work but it was an important snoop. On the following night, 31 October-1 November, RAdm Merrill's TF39, four light cruisers, screened by RAdm Burke's destroyers, would move into the area snooped by Searls and shell the airfields of Buka and Buin. Our floating Navy's part of the war had moved on to Buka and Searls and crew had scouted the way. Destroyers were overrunning the end of our old Zed Sector.

31 October We flew uneventful patrols in the hot sectors. Stoppy in Sector 3 did Kapingamarangi and Wright stretched Sector 4 out to Nukuoro, again. Reichert also flew one of the hot sectors.

Our South Pacific Dutch Trader, Van Benschoten, flew 32071 from Tontouta, Noumea to Espiritu, loaded with supplies. The PATSU gave 071 its much needed checks and repairs while the Van Ben crew guarded the supplies and enjoyed the high living at Espiritu.

The end of October is a very artificial dividing point for operations in the western Solomons. The month closed with the start of the big show, the landing on Treasury and the big fake to Choiseul, and continued without interruption to the landing in force at Torokina on 1 November. The Torokina show would go on for some time.

Chapter 10 Two Big Oilers & a Freighter Sunk; US Carriers in the Solomons!

November 1943 Carney Field, Guadalcanal

We got a special gift from VB-102. At the beginning of this month they officially transferred two of their planes, Bu. Nos. 32009 and 32012, to VB-104. One of these planes, 009, would soon become a noncombatant, used for ferry flights and the other, 012, would be lost at sea on 15 November. In the crew picture section of the VB-104 Tour Book, the Anderson crew, Crew 16, is posed in front of 32009, *America's Playground*, and the Honey crew, Crew 17, is posed in front of 32012, *Jungle Fever*. These planes must have been assigned to these heretofore planeless crews. Reichert and crew remained planeless.

November would stand out as the month that our carriers came to help out in the Solomons, flattening Buka, reducing Rabaul, and even making a pass at Nauru. The carriers were just loaners from the Central Pacific show but their help was greatly appreciated.

These were happy days for VB-102. Our sister squadron for the past two and one-half months was going home. VB-102 was a fine squadron but overdue for relief, having completed six months on Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal.

On 2 November, the first planes of VB-106 arrived at Carney field to relieve VB-102 and by 11 November all combat crews and planes of VB-106 had arrived. During this period, VB-102 crews headed for Kaneohe and Stateside. For

example, Miller and his crew left on the 7th, flew Espiritu-Samoa-Christmas, and arrived at Kaneohe on the 11th.

VB-102 left behind one old war-weary, 31975, which VB-106 accepted "solely for ferry hops and for instrument and gunnery training." VB-106 arrived with a new look in VB crews. Unlike VB-102 and VB-104, with three pilots in each crew, most of the VB-106 combat crews had two pilots, one PPC, one first pilot (co-pilot), and one "non-pilot Navigator-Bombardier." VB-106 had lost a crew and plane on 18 October on a flight from Canton to Funafuti so the squadron arrived with 17 crews and 14 planes. Shortly after arriving at Guadalcanal, "an 18th crew was constituted from the available flight personnel of the squadron, complete except for a PPC who is 'borrowed' from VB-104." This quote is from VB-106 War Diary for November 1943. I have no recollection of one of our PPCs being loaned to VB-106. VB-106, Cdr John T. "Chick" Hayward, Commanding, was a fine squadron. Their planes and crews were new, but with experience from brief deployments to Midway and Canton.

1 November The month began with a bang—the biggest thing that had happened in the South Pacific since the landing on Guadalcanal. After the New Zealanders occupied Treasury Island and our Marines made a feint at a major invasion on northwest Choiseul, the Marines went ashore in force at Point Torokina, Empress Augusta Bay, on the southwest coast of Bougainville. Although VB-104 played no direct role in this landing, we had hauled Marine observers along that shore prior to the landing.

While the Marines were going ashore nearly unopposed, we were doing our usual searches to the north of Bougainville, going out far enough to cross the Japanese shipping lanes between Truk and Rabaul. We would soon be heavily involved with the response that the Japs made to the Marines' leapfrog action.

The Marines at Torokina got some cover from the floating Navy and land based carrier aircraft. Just after midnight on the 1st, Adm Merrill's TF-39, four CLs and Burke's DDs, bombarded Buka and Buin airfields to prevent these fields from launching aircraft against Torokina. In addition, Adm Sherman's TF-38, with *Saratoga* and *Princeton* went up the northeast coast of Bougainville and on the 1st and 2nd, launched full strikes with their carriers against the airfields of Buka and Buin. The carrier planes found Merrill's and Burke's bombardment had left very little for them to bomb and strafe.

On 1 November, G. A. Miller of VB-102 flew one of our hot sectors, Sector 2. He remarked in his log that he saw *Saratoga* and *Princeton* and their escorts.

As the Marines went ashore at Torokina, the Sears crew flew Sector 11 and Humphrey flew Sector 10. The skipper gave a hard look at both Nauru and Ocean

and Humph took many photos of Nauru. The Japs on these islands probably had not yet heard the news about Torokina, or they would have jumped all over the lone 4Y-1. Our carriers north of Bougainville would be heading southeast, passing south of Nauru, so that island was getting attention to make certain that the Japs did not move a bombing group in there. Swinton, Sector 13, and Donald were covering the area south of Nauru.

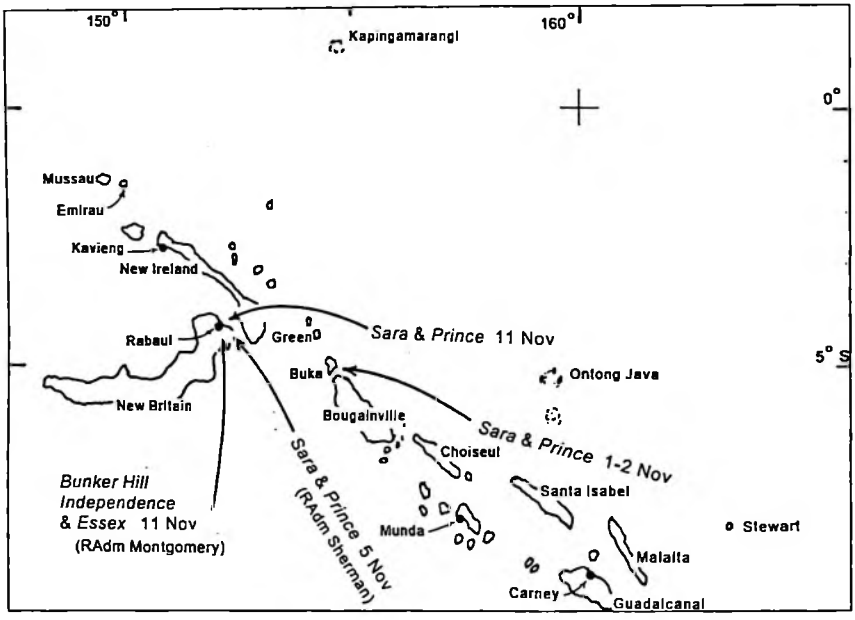
2 November TF-38 remained east of Bougainville and launched a second raid on the Buka airfields before heading southeast for a rendezvous with fleet oilers near Rennell Island, south of Guadalcanal. Our crews flew easy patrols. Searls flew Sector 1 in 10.6 hours; Montgomery, passing over Ontong Java, patrolled 10.2 hours; Clagett took a long time patrolling somewhere, 11.2 hours, 5.4 at night. Smith was in Sector 3 for 11.6 hours and remarked in his log, "Bad Night, 5.5 nite, Short gas--landed Munda. Refueled at Munda, 1.5 to Guadal." None of our patrols saw anything to report. Some of our crews must have seen *Saratoga* and *Princeton* but refrained from noting the sighting in their logs.

On the night of 1 November, a division of Japanese heavy cruisers had left Rabaul to attack the Marines ashore at Torokina. RAdm Merrill met the Japs with his division of light cruisers and, in what is called the "Battle of Empress Augusta Bay," drove the Japs back to Rabaul. Had this battle gone the other way, the Marines ashore at Torokina would have been bombarded by Jap cruisers.

Meanwhile at Truk, Admiral Koga must have been furious after getting the news that the Marines had walked ashore at Torokina. A few days earlier, unable or unwilling to send his carriers, he had dispatched their crack Navy air groups to Rabaul. Now he readied all the warships that he could spare: Adm Kurita with seven CAs (heavy cruisers, *Takao, Maya, Atago, Suzuya, Mogami, Chikuma,* and *Chokai*), one CL (light cruiser *Noshiro*), and four DDs with the usual support ships, AKs and many AOs (tankers). The heavy cruisers would be a problem for Halsey. The largest warships that Halsey had in his Solomon Islands floating-navy were light cruisers.

3 November We had the sectors well east of Bougainville. Stoppy flew a short Sector 6, 1.0/8.9, the first hop short due to engine trouble. Feind patrolled for 8.2 hours and Donald had a short special hop, 3.7 hours. Donald wrote in his log, "Started search for Jap convoy to attack, recalled by base before contact." Herb must have been out after Adm Kurita's heavy cruisers departing Truk. Our knowledge of this Jap force's departure could have come from one of our subs or from our reading the Japanese Naval Code.

Whit Wright was flying Sector 11 and Reichert was in Sector 12, checking on Ocean. It is interesting to note that our daily patrols put us in two theaters of operations. Our flights to the north and east were part of operation *Galvanic*, VAdm Spruance, the invasion of the Gilbert Islands, notably Tarawa. Our flights



The carrier attacks on Rabaul, 1 thru 11 November 1943

to the northwest were part of the operations under ComSoPac, Adm Halsey, and ComSowestPac, Gen MacArthur, against the western Solomons, New Ireland and Rabaul.

Wearing his Gilbert Islands operations hat, Whit Wright was flying between Nauru and Ocean under broken clouds with bases at 3000 feet. At 1200, his crew sighted a Jap AK. Whit estimated its size to be 1500 - 2000 tons and its course and speed to be 100°T, 10 knots. It was sailing through smooth seas on a course from Nauru to Ocean. Whit turned toward the AK in the usual skip-bombing/strafing run. On this first run, he released three of his five 300 pound bombs in train, the first landing short, the second exploding on the stern and the third hitting long by 40 feet. On the second run, Whit intended to release the last two bombs but the intervalometer did not work and only one dropped. It

exploded directly under the ship's stern and lifted and swung the ship to port. A geyser of water momentarily covered the ship. The last bomb, released on the third run, hit slightly to port of the ship.

During all of these runs, Whit's gunners strafed and the Jap gunners fired back with 7.7 and 20mms. On the final strafing run, the AK exploded when the plane was directly over the ship at an altitude of less than 200 feet. The plane went up and the ship went down. The AK capsized to port and went down by the stern but the 4Y kept flying.

The explosion of the ship did major damage to the 4Y-1 and injured two of its crew. Sotolano was taking pictures with the K-20 camera. The explosion knocked it out of his hands and it was not seen again. The plane's catwalk was bowed upward, the hydraulic system was out, and there were 154 fragmentation and bullet holes in the plane. But it kept flying!

Lt(jg) T. C. Dempster suffered a severe wound to his jaw, and belly turret gunner Robert Griffiths, AOM2c, received severe lacerations about the face and eyes. Whit flew the plane back to Carney and landed it without flaps and brakes, the aircraft coming to a full stop only as it rolled gently off the end of the runway. The plane, Bu. No. 32081, indelicately named *Whit's Shits*, would remain constipated and unable to fly for six weeks while our PATSU crews took it apart and put it back together. Tom Dempster's wound was so severe that he was moved to a hospital Stateside.

Whit's crew collected Jap souvenirs on this flight. In their plane they found pieces of deck plating from the AK and many chunks of her cargo, which someone on Guadalcanal determined to be the explosive AMATOL. This AK was visiting the nitrate islands, Nauru and Ocean, and her cargo may have been ammonium nitrate, the main ingredient of amatol.

4 November This was the Big Day! VB-104 would begin to feel Adm Koga's response to the Torokina landing. In the early hours, Sears went out Sector 1, Anderson Sector 2, and Humphrey Sector 3. They flew out our regular sectors but their ACA Reports did not record the "Specific Mission" for these flights as the usual "Routine search patrol." Instead, the missions were titled "Search for enemy shipping and or task forces." Swinton flew 9.3 hours in Sector 5; unlike the others, however, he saw nothing to report. Later in the day, Montgomery and Searls would fly long hops in support of Sears.

Sears had made a pre-dawn takeoff and was beyond the end of his sector soon after sunrise. At 0730, at Lat. 00° 20' N; Long. 150° 40' E, about 825 from Carney Field, 180 miles north of Kavieng and 120 miles from the nearest Jap airfield, which was on Mussau, the skipper and his crew sighted two Jap AOs

[oilers] escorted by two DDs. They were on course 210° T, headed for Kavieng or the passage west of Kavieng, the route to Rabaul. Adm Kurita's seven heavy cruisers were further west, headed toward the Admiralty Islands but destined for Rabaul. They were keeping just outside of the 800 mile radius from Guadalcanal that they seemed to know was the scheduled limits of our patrols.

The two tankers were biggies. They were identical in appearance, sister-ships, 554 feet long and nearly 11,000 tons. At the sighting, Sears sent the all important contact report: What; Where; When; Course; Speed. Sears' contact was no longer a secret. The Japs knew where their tankers were, Sears knew where they were and now Halsey knew where they were. With the cat out of the bag at 0730, two thing happened; Sears attacked and Halsey passed the word to send more 104 and 102 planes and crews.

With his reporting responsibility fulfilled, the skipper started a masthead attack on the nearest oiler. He dropped his bombs from just 125 to 150 feet above the water so his gunners were eyeball to eyeball with the enemy gunners on the tanker. The next best thing to sinking one of Kurita's heavy cruisers was destroying their fuel supply.

On this first run, Sears released two bombs just a fraction of a second apart, timed to impact about 50 feet apart, while his gunners poured .50 caliber bullets into the ship. The first bomb was short and the second passed over the ship and exploded in the water. When the Sears crew looked back to see the bombs explode, the water spout from the second bomb obscured the explosion of the first bomb. The ACA Report for Sears' attack does not give the bomb load that his 4Y-1 carried but our other planes carried five 300-pounders with 4-5 second delay tail fuses and Sears must have had the same load. The crew in the after station could see the release and impact of the first bomb directly below their plane, even if they could not see its explosion. They reported that it hit short of the ship's stern and must have either skipped into, or dove under, the stern of the #1 tanker. Strafing by Sears' gunners was intense and accurate; their incendiary rounds started fires along the tanker's deck. Sears' gunners counted about 10 Japs manning the 3" or 5" guns on the tanker, but strafing secured these crews and silenced these guns. There were several machine gun positions on the tanker which were also silenced by strafing. Eyeball to eyeball indeed. Sears and his gunners now turned to the other tanker.

After this one-run attack on the #1 oiler, the skipper made a similar run on her sister-ship, Sears' #2 AO in the ACA Report. He made this run on the port beam scoring two bomb hits into the engine room compartment on the stern of the vessel. These hits set off a large explosion followed by fire and dense smoke. Strafing on this run also silenced the large caliber stern gun mount and started

five separate fires on the bow and bridge of the doomed tanker. When Sears circled to observe the damage done by this attack, he saw that this #2 tanker had her entire after section ablaze and was emitting very heavy columns of white smoke.

The gunners of the two Jap tankers must have flinched. The 4Y-1 received only minor damage—15 holes from 7.7 machine gun fire. Fortunately, no one in the plane was hit. But what about those two Jap destroyers?

Throughout the two attacks, the DDs were throwing up a barrage of light and heavy A/A but made no hits on the 4Y-1. The DDs even attempted to throw 5" shells into the water in front of the plane, hoping the plane would fly into the columns of water from the exploding shells. Sears reported that this fire was accurate in range but trailing. Having expended his bomb load, the skipper got some welcome assistance as he was turning out of his second attack.

Anderson and his crew entered the scene from his search area in Sector 2 at 0735, just five minutes after Sears had started his attack. Big Andy must have talked to the skipper on VHF but there is no record of any communication. Big Andy made a run on the burning tanker #2. He strafed but did not release his bombs on this run and then quickly turned to make another run. The ACA Reports that on the second run, "5 bombs were released in salvo from 35' altitude with two or possibly three scoring hits squarely amidships. Remaining two seen to explode 30 and 40 feet short of target." The ACA Report seems to be describing bombs that were dropped in train, not in salvo. And did Andy really release from 35 feet. You bet he did!

When Big Andy and his crew returned to base, they found a 10 foot length of Jap antenna cable caught in the lower portion of the port vertical stabilizer. The crew all laughed and said, "Andy was trying to tow that sucker into port." When Andy had pulled UP from his bomb drop, his vertical stabilizer had captured a length of the Jap radio antenna. Yes, he most certainly released his bombs when just 35 feet above the water. Can't miss eyeball to eyeball!

When Skipper and Big Andy left the scene, the #2 tanker was burning in two places. It was 554 feet long so it had enough room to support two separate fires. Smoke continued to pour from her stern and similar smoke now poured from amidships. She was making a big oil slick and had no headway. There is little doubt that she was destroyed and would sink. None of her load of fuel would get to the ships and planes of Kavieng and Rabaul.

Neither Sears nor Andy reported further on tanker #1. She could not have gone very far during the 10 minutes that Sears and Andy were working on the #2 tanker. Fifteen knots was a fantasy speed for Japan's big tankers. Even if tanker #1 had not been disabled by Sears' bombs, she could have traveled only 2 or 3

miles after his attack and should have been in sight of both Sears and Andy. It is a bit of a mystery why Andy did not attack tanker #1 rather than the fiercely burning and probably doomed tanker #2. Making masthead runs on burning tankers or cargo ships was very dangerous. PB4Y's were lost in WW II when burning or smoldering ships exploded under or ahead of them while they were making masthead runs. The two tankers and their escorts had seen the last of Sears and Big Andy but other Navy 4Y-1's would be along soon.

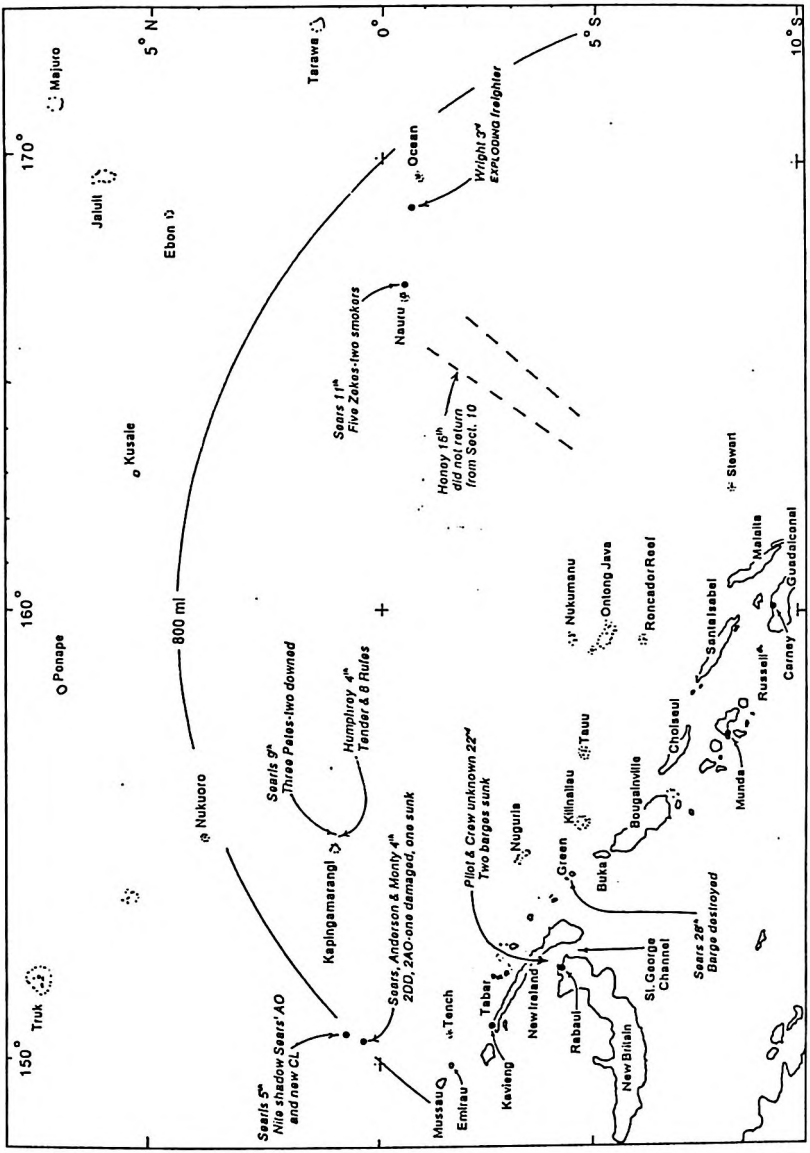
LtCdr G. H. Fowler, CO of our sister squadron VB-102, attacked a large tanker over three hours after Sears' attack. The VB-102 ACA Report gives the following information: "AO of approximately 5000 tons, escorted by DD, contacted at 1050L at 00°-10'N and 151°-00'E, dead in the water. This target possibly the same ship previously attacked by 61V29 and 62V29 as separately reported. She was low in the water surrounded by an extensive oil patch." This tanker must have been Sears' #1 and Fowler underestimated its size.

The positions given by Sears and Fowler are 22 miles apart, however three hours of drift and differences in navigation by the two planes could account for this distance. The radio calls, 61V29 and 62V29 referred to Sears and Anderson, respectively. VB-104 ACA Reports never gave the radio calls of our patrols. We learn the first of our radio calls from a very thorough ACA Report of VB-102.

Fowler was able to make one run on the disabled oiler before the DD closed in to provide AA fire. He dropped six 300 pound bombs with 4-5 second delay fuses with an intervalometer setting of 30 feet. From Fowler's action report; "One hit on deck amidships. One very near miss to starboard, with heavy underwater explosion. No burning or list or other evidence of serious damage."

Fowler reported that the tanker that he attacked showed no "visible evidence of damage" except that it was dead in the water. Best guess is that Fowler had sighted Sears' #1 tanker which must have sustained damage to her shaft and propeller and/or her rudder. One of Sears' bombs, the one that hit short and "must have skipped into or dived under the stern," had done the invisible damage that left this large tanker dead in the water. I'll bet that when Fowler left this tanker, its crew thought they were finished with 4Y-1's from Sears' Navy Search Group. Wishful thinking.

Montgomery and his crew attacked tanker #1 at 1810, not long before sunset of this day, 4 November. Monty would have taken off at around 1300 to get to the tanker at 1800. Of course, Sears had radioed the position of the tankers, so Monty went out looking for what Sears, Andy, and Fowler had left. Monty was definitely not on a "routine search." Knowing Monty (I served with him in the Pacific for three years in three different squadrons.), I can imagine that he volunteered all over the place to get a shot at the tanker.



Locations for Aircraft action reports, November 1943

Monty probably flew out to the tanker at an altitude of 8000 feet. Our planes flew efficiently at that altitude and the fine weather of 4 November allowed the best visual and radar search from that altitude. Monty found the tanker dead in the water, on an even keel and surrounded by a large oil slick. He made his first bombing run at 7500 feet and I think he bombed from that altitude because he continued his search approach into a bombing run. This was the quickest way to attack the tanker. His bomb from this altitude missed so he quickly descended to a working altitude—200 feet.

Monty made four masthead bombing and strafing runs from abeam on tanker #1. He dropped the remainder of his five 300 pounders on these runs and his gunners pumped 3500 rounds of .50 caliber into the tanker. Monty got a close look at the tanker in his masthead runs and noted that she had fenders over her side. She must have been preparing for assistance from a large ship that would come alongside. The ACA Report of Monty's action says that all of the bombs missed and "Check of equipment found discrepancies in bomb racks." Maybe so, but it was the short "misses" that usually caused the serious but unseen damage.

Monty and crew were in the air for 12.6 hours. Out and back time from Carney to the tanker would have been about 10 hours so Monty must have spent over two hours making the attack and searching the area. Chief Aviation Pilot (soon to be Ensign) Jones and Mike Keiser, co-pilots with Monty, made some welcome notes in their flight log. From Jones' log we know that in addition to bombing the tanker, they sighted TWO destroyers, one CA (heavy cruiser) and a sub! They must have seen the other destroyer from the original convoy of two AOs and two DDs. Mike's log says, "Sight Jap ATAGO & 2 DD, 1 AK. Bombed negative and strafe. Patrol up slot (6.8 nite)." By a slip of the pen, Mike made the AO an AK. More about the heavy cruiser next.

Searls and his crew made the last visit to tanker #1 at 0426, in the wee hours of 5 November. The poor guys on the disabled tanker #1 must have thought we had an unending supply of PB4Y-1s. There is no ACA Report on Searls' visit because he was on a snooper hop and did not strafe or bomb the tanker. No bullets, no bombs, no ACA Report. Fortunately, Cdr Sears included a brief report of Searls' snooping in his ACA Report and I have R. M. DeGolia's log book. Dag, co-pilot with Searls, wrote in his log "14.5 hours. Guadalcanal Patrol. All nite flight. Tracked two convoys north of Kavieng - 3 AK, 3 DD — 1 CA, 2 DD, 1 TKR." Dag's "3 AK, 3 DD" was a new convoy that had moved into the area. The "1 CA, 2 DD, and 1 TKR" was the original AO #1 of Sears, its original DD plus a CA and its DD sent over by Jap Admiral Kurita (see below). Searls probably took off from Carney at 2200 on the 4th and returned the next day about noon.

Lots of sore behinds from that hop. But what about this heavy cruiser that Jones, Keiser, and DeGolia noted in their logs?

Our ACI Officer Ray Ming wrote the ACA Report for Sears' action. In his supplement about the Searls snoop, Ming wrote, "Lt(jg) Searls sighted one large tanker, with 1 CL standing by . . ." The heavy cruiser that Jones and DeGolia had reported, and Keiser had named as the heavy cruiser *Atago*, had been "Minged" down to a light cruiser. Now, over fifty years later, we can identify all the Jap tankers and warships in this action.

Samuel Eliot Morison was commissioned by President F. D. Roosevelt to write the History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II. Therefore, Morison knew before events happened that he would write the definitive history about them. What great foresight by my father's favorite president! Morison had another advantage. He wrote the history after studying the Japanese accounts of their side of the operations.

In his Volume VI, *Breaking the Bismarcks Barrier 22 July 1942—1 May 1944*, Morison records the history of the period during which VB-104 was operating in the Solomon Islands. Morison condensed 104's big action of 4 November to a few lines on page 323, but he does give us the names of the Jap ships.

To identify the tankers, we had descriptions by all observers, excellent photographs taken by someone in Andy's crew, and a copy of the Office of Naval Intelligence book on Japanese ships. The skipper and Ming were able to determine that the tankers were of the *Nissyo Maru* class. Right on. Morison says the tankers were the *Nissho Maru* and the *Nichiei Maru*. What about the heavy cruiser that Jones, Keiser, and DeGolia reported and Ming, a landlubber lawyer, reduced to a light cruiser. Morison says that it was the *Chokai,* a heavy cruiser that Adm Kurita dispatched from his cruiser division to tow Sears' tanker #1 back to Truk. A note in Sears' log book reveals that one of the tankers was "lost en route Truk in tow."

But hang on; our tale for this day is not told. John Humphrey had taken off with Sears and Big Andy in the early hours of 4 November. Where was Humph?

Humphrey and crew flew Sector 3, the right edge of 104's three plane "Search for enemy shipping and for task forces." As dawn broke at 0610, an hour and 20 minutes before Sears discovered his two AOs, Humphrey was 700 miles from Carney and moving in to take a look at Kapingamarangi. Why Kapingamarangi?

Kapingamarangi was about 400 miles south southeast of Truk. This large and beautiful atoll was ideally placed near the tracks from Truk to the Jap bases on New Ireland and the Solomons. It had radio navigation facilities, but no runway,

and served as an emergency ditching site for the land planes that the Japs ferried from Truk to Kavieng, Rabaul, Buka, and points south. The Japanese had a seaplane base on the island and often, but not always, based Petes or Rufes there. Both of these planes had large, single floats and small floats near each wing tip; the blue lagoon of Kapingamarangi was ideal for their landings and takeoffs. Petes were biplanes, a bit old fashioned, but Rufes were the latest hot stuff. They were modern fighters, Zekes (Zeros) with floats instead of wheels.

Seaplane bases require fuel, bombs, ammunition, and the many other items "to keep 'em flying." Cargo ships or sea plane tenders, small enough to enter the lagoon, brought in these necessities.

At 0610, Humphrey got the whole ball of wax. When 1.5 miles east of Kapingamarangi, Humph and crew sighted a small Jap seaplane tender (AVP) which they estimated to be about 125-150 feet long. They immediately made two masthead bombing and strafing runs, releasing one of their 300 pound bombs on each run. Both bombs were near misses, but the strafing started fires amidships which spread over the vessel. Small seaplane tenders were vulnerable to strafing attacks because they carried aviation gas, which had to be kept either on deck or at least readily available for refueling aircraft.

Humphrey was unable to make a third attack because of failure of the bomb bay door mechanism. The crew was unable to watch the burning seaplane tenders because of a problem with Jap fighters—eight Rufes. The ACA Report for this action remarks, "Renewal of floatplane activity at Kapingamarangi after a lull of several months." Admiral Koga response to the Marine's landing on Bougainville included more than sending heavy cruisers and tankers to Rabaul. He re-opened the base at Kapingamarangi for floatplane fighters.

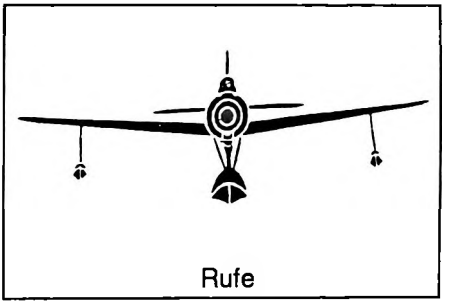
The eight Rufes made an estimated 25 runs on the Navy Liberator. They had every reason to be mad at the guys who had just set fire to their rice bowl and fuel supply. Some of the Rufes must have been low on fuel because they chased Humph for only 10 minutes. Five dropped away; the remaining three continued attacking for five more minutes.

Since Humphrey was flying at masthead attack height when the Rufes appeared, he descended to wave-top level and executed that well know naval maneuver—getting the hell out of there. Except for the first one, the fighter's attacks were uncoordinated and seldom pressed home. Nonetheless, the 4Y-1 sustained serious damage. Hits from the fighter's guns, 7.7s and 20mms, wounded two crew members and did serious damage to the plane. Ens A. M. Lodato, in the co-pilot seat on this flight, remembers:

"This action was the first of only two occasions where I wondered whether I would survive. As I recall, we were concentrating so much on the AVP that we

were almost completely surprised by the fighters. Once again, the PBY maneuver of 'Down to the deck, and fly away from land' worked. One thing in our favor was that John was bombing at masthead height. Consequently, when the Rufes started their attack, we were already at a low altitude, the 'descent to the deck' was a matter of only 200 feet or so.

"The report says that the *port* aileron was hit. My recollection is that both aileron cables had been severed. When they were hit, John turned the wheel back and forth and then said, 'Look, no ailerons.' I don't know what I could have been thinking, but I replied, 'Let me see,' and I twirled my wheel. Sure enough, they didn't work. The saving feature of our plane, one which enabled us to complete a 700 mile flight to Munda, was that we had the Honeywell automatic pilot, which had cables connected to the controls. As a result, until plane captain Jack Ready and his mechs could splice the aileron cables, we controlled them with the auto pilot."


Rufe

The Humphrey attack was the first of three on Kapingamarangi on this day. Some time later, a VB-102 PPC Lt(jg) Thompson spotted the AVP, from which enemy personnel were off-loading drums of gasoline onto outriggers. As the Navy Liberator climbed to make a bombing run, a flight of eight float planes—seven Rufes and one Pete—came out of the sun and started attacking. Since he was flying at 2000 feet, Thompson began a virtual dogfight. By turning toward the attacking planes, he gave his gunners opportunities to demonstrate their coolness and accuracy as they shot one Rufe down in flames and damaged several others.

As in their engagement with the Humphrey crew, the Japanese pilots rarely pressed home their attacks; rather, they tended to turn off within a quarter mile of their target. After 15 minutes, the Rufes headed for home. Thompson's plane received quite a bit of damage: hydraulic system drained, leading edge of port wing torn, scattered hits in the bomb bay. He also returned safely to base.

The Japanese must have decided that they could now go on about their business without further enemy interference. Wrong!! At 1830, another PB4Y-1 from VB-102, this one commanded by Lt Burt "Red" Albrecht, flying at an altitude of 150 feet, sneaked close to the atoll under cover of a rain squall and found five Rufes and a Pete lined up wingtip to wingtip along the inner shore.

Now down to 100 feet, Red made a bombing run punctuated with machine gun fire from his gunners. Although the bombs fell short of their target, accurate strafing set three Rufes afire. Subsequent runs at 50 feet set the other two Rufes afire. To quote the ACA Report, "On the fourth run, a single Jap attempted to climb into the cockpit of one of the Rufes, but was swept off the wing as the Rufe was riddled . . . The Pete . . . was not seen to smoke although strafed thoroughly."

All five of our planes involved in this 4-5 November operation got safely home to Carney Field but Sears and Humphrey took indirect routes. Humph flew straight to Munda to get his damaged plane on the ground as soon as possible. The Skipper came home from the tanker attack along the scenic route! In his own words from his log book he, "Returned over Buka, Empress Augusta Bay, Treasury Is. Dropped in at Munda on way back." At Munda, the Skipper found Humphrey and his crew hitch hiking. Their plane was in need of extensive repairs before it could be flown to Carney Field. The Humphrey crew jumped in with Sears and made the 1.4 hours flight to Carney. End of 104's Big Day, 4-5 November 1943.

What a difference a day or two makes. Forty-eight hours after Sears had started the Big Day in Sector 1, Whit Wright and crew would fly 11.0 hours in Sector 1. They would see nothing to report.

5 November We flew two easy patrols with no contacts, Smith (Sector 4) and Clagett, but it was not an easy day for Adm Halsey. He was concerned about the five Jap heavy cruisers that had made it from Truk, west by south toward the Admiralties then eastward to Rabaul. The Bull had only Adm Merrill's light cruisers, to fight these Jap heavy cruisers if they tried to get to Torokina. But Halsey did have Adm Sherman with *Saratoga* and *Princeton*. At this time in the War in the Pacific, it was far from standard procedure to send carriers against large bases with land based air groups such as Rabaul. Halsey had two choices: Let Merrill's light cruiser deal with the Jap heavy cruisers when and if they came toward Torokina, or break with standard procedures and have Sherman hit Rabaul with *Saratoga* and *Princeton*. But wait a minute! Six heavy cruisers had started south from Truk but now Halsey had only five of them to worry about. Who got the sixth Jap heavy cruiser?

When Sears sank one and damaged another Jap tanker on 4 November, he also eliminated a Jap heavy cruiser! Adm Kurita had to send one of his six heavy cruisers, *Chokai*, to tow the damaged tanker back to Truk. If Sears had sunk **both** of the Jap tankers, *Chokai* would have gone on to Rabaul and Halsey would have had a six, instead of a five, heavy-cruiser-headache. How clever of our skipper

to only damage one of the tankers and send a heavy cruiser on a tow job back to Truk!

Predictably, Adm Halsey took the bold and adventurous choice to deal with the five Jap heavy cruisers poised at Rabaul. He sent the carriers against the land based planes and heavy cruisers at Rabaul.

On the morning of this day, 5 November, *Sara* and *Princeton* were 57 miles southwest of Torokina, 230 miles from Rabaul, when they launched their planes. It was clear in the area, and the sailors on the carriers could see the high peaks of Bougainville to the northeast. They could not see Vella Lavella and the fighter strip at Barakoma on that Solomon Island, but Navy fighters from Vella Lavella provide a CAP for the carriers while their fighters were off to Rabaul. This carrier raid did not sink all the heavy cruisers at Rabaul but it disrupted their refueling, and the heavy cruisers retired to the east and north. They did not bother the Marines at Torokina.

The John Alley crew flew from Espiritu to Guadalcanal and would soon be back in the war. Since 29 October, they had been fighting the "Battle of Espiritu Santo." Here is an account of that action in bow gunner Allie Lymenstull's own words. "We went down to Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides for engine changes and a little time off. The skipper had arranged to get several barrels of wine for Christmas from a French wine dealer there. Several of us went with Mr. Alley to see the guy. He needed containers badly so we scrounged the PXs to get gallon Coke jugs and ended up with several cases of them. He gave us a small barrel, about 5 gallons, to show his appreciation. We took it back to the Quonset hut we were staying in and started drinking. When it was time for the evening movie we filled our canteens and went to the outdoor movie. After the movie, we went back to the barracks, everyone was pleasantly plastered. Mahaley wanted the lights out and he was voted down. He threw a coffee mug at the light and the cup landed on the pillow CAP Pate was sleeping on but missed his head. Mo then said, 'I'll shoot the damn light out.' One .45 shot rang out and it got real exciting. I grabbed the barrel of wine and Flash [Gordon] and I took out down the road and jumped into a ditch, stashing the barrel in a culvert. The SPs were arriving about this time so we stayed away for a while, then sauntered up to the barracks with a 'what happened' attitude. Coffee cups with dregs of wine in them had gotten the SPs attention but no wine was found. Ended up going to bed and sleeping like a rock.

"When our engines were changed, we took the plane for a test hop. Everything seemed OK. The Frenchman arrived with two large barrels of wine and we slung them into the bomb bays and lashed them into place. Taxiing toward the runway, we passed some large Quonset type warehouses. Looking in we saw cases of Cream of Mushroom Soup, Franco American Spaghetti, olives,

Cream of Chicken Soup, etc. Nobody was around so we grabbed a couple cases and threw them into the plane. After a couple of these trips, we had a pretty good haul. Then someone saw us and hollered so we jumped in the plane and took off for 'Cactus' - Guadalcanal - with our extra goodies. Our squadron got to keep one barrel of the wine. The skipper gave the other to the Patrol Service Unit [PATSU] so everyone got some of it for Christmas."

6 November This was another easy day for our group. Donald patrolled for 11.4 hours and Wright, Sector 1, 11.0. This was Joe Shea's first flight as the replacement for first pilot Dempster in the Wright crew. The skipper had come south with four pilots in his crew, himself, Ace Neidlinger, Tony Antonik and Joe, so he had someone to give to Whit.

7 November Our patrols to the northwest were almost uneventful. Stoppy Sector 2; Fred Fiend Sector 3; Swinton Sector 4; Alley with "Jungle Jim" Boulger navigating; Reichert "Cactus patrol neg." When Fred Feind checked on Kapingamarangi, some Petes were there again. They dropped a few of their aerial phosphorous bombs on Feind, but as usual they missed.

8 November This was a light duty day in the cold sectors. Sears flew Sector 5, the scenic route of the atolls, for a long 11.1 hours with no contacts. Montgomery was also out patrolling for 10.3 hours of whitecaps.

Van Ben returned from Espiritu Santo.

9 November We were out to the northwest again flying long sectors: Smith Sector 1, Searls Sector 3; Clagett (12.6 hours,10.0 nite); Donald ; and Humphrey.

It was Searls' turn to visit Kapingamarangi but again, what a difference a few days make. Searls reached the atoll at 1121. The eight Zekes that had attacked Humphrey and crew five days earlier, on the 4th, were nowhere in sight. (Albrecht had taken good care of them.). Three of the less fashionable Petes, probably the same ones that got after Feind on the 7th, attacked Searls. The three Petes first dropped a few phosphorus aerial bombs on the 4Y-1; as always, they missed. The Petes then made the mistake of trying a few fighter runs, but their two 7.7 machine guns, synchronized to shoot through the propeller, were no match for Searls' gunners with their fifties.

The first Pete turned away from his run emitting brownish smoke, and was not seen again. A second Pete, badly hit, was last seen ablaze and diving into the drink. The third Pete made a few incomplete runs and decided to live to fight another day.

On board Searls' plane was one of our special radar experts. He determined that there was no Jap radar operating on Kapingamarangi. Why were the Petes armed with aerial bombs to use on our patrol planes instead of depth charges to use on our submarines? How did the Petes know that a PB4Y-1 was coming, not a submarine? They didn't need early warning radar. A PB4Y-1 flew our Sector 3 every day and went by Kapingamarangi a little after 1100. About two weeks earlier, Searls had bombed a ship that was unloading at Kapingamarangi at 1135. Today he arrived at Kapingamarangi at 1121. The Petes probably thought Searls was 14 minutes early.

From Dag DeGolia, Searls' first pilot: "We again went back to check on Kapingamarangi. This time we were attacked by several Petes. I believe this was the time they dropped phosphorus bombs on us. It is kind of weird to have air to air bombing in those days. Nothing was dropped very close. One Pete was definitely shot down and another must have hit the water but no one could say for sure."

The Pete was a classic; it was a bi-plane! It had a single large center float and small floats outboard under the lower wing. They were ASW patrol planes, but in this instance they had been pressed into service as air-to-air bombers, waiting for the next PB4Y-1 to come along. Co-pilot Harper Joslyn had his earphone and some scalp shot away on Searls' 23 October caper at Kapingamarangi, but this time he came away unscathed.

I have been attacked, and heard about many more attacks, by Japanese using aerial bombs. To my knowledge, not one of our planes was ever damaged by this weapon.

10 November We were well scattered today. Van Ben flew Sector 1 and Swinton Sector 3. Ed Hagen was out with the Stoppleman crew in Sector 11, but without Stoppy. This was Hagen's third patrol as PPC, but his first solo to Ocean Island. Somewhere in between Van Ben and Hagen were Wright, Reichert, Feind, and Dodson. Tom Dodson, with the Alley crew, was flying his 4th solo as PPC. Our crews saw whitecaps and windstreaks but nothing to report.

11 November Monty headed west in 32083, but had engine trouble. After 2.2 hours, he turned back, landing at Munda on three engines. The skipper flew east covering Sector 11 thoroughly; he was out for 11.6 hours. He gave Ocean Island a close look, and at 1030, while he was cruising at 8000 feet about 20 miles east of Nauru, he was jumped by five Zekes. Three of these fighters maintained position on the 4Y-1's stern quarter and made individual runs from six and seven o'clock. The other two fighters passed below and to starboard of Sears, apparently

establishing positions for bow runs. The skipper interrupted that tactic with a sudden diving attack on the fighter's tail. Extensive cloud cover terminated this brief engagement, but not until Sears' gunners had sent two of the Zekes away smoking.

While Sears messed with Nauru's fighters, two of our carrier groups made a second, and bigger, raid on Rabaul. Adm Spruance was about to call all carriers to the Gilbert Islands for operation *Galvanic,* but he left the five with Halsey for one last fling at Rabaul.

Admiral Sherman, still with *Sara* and *Princeton,* went up the northeast coast of Bougainville to a position near Green Island, 225 miles east of Rabaul. In the early morning, the two carriers launched a big strike on Rabaul. Meanwhile, another carrier task force was getting into the act.

RAdm Montgomery, with TG 50.3 built around three carriers, *Essex, Bunker Hill,* and *Independence,* had his ships dangerously close to Rabaul, just 160 miles southeast of that stronghold. When the planes were launched to Rabaul, Montgomery got visitors for a CAP (combat air patrol). VF-17 (CO Tom Blackburn) in F4Us and VF-33 in F6Fs were part of Halsey's "coconut navy," based on fighter strips Ondongo and Segi Point in the Solomons. In exchange for providing CAP, the land-based Navy fighters landed aboard *Bunker Hill* for refueling and coffee.

Rabaul remained a nasty place to visit, but it never recovered from this strike by five carriers. It was bypassed and was no longer of major importance in the war in this part of the Pacific.

12 November On a quiet day for the squadron, Donald patrolled Sector 1, along the east side of the Solomons, for 11.7 hours. He went as far as a Jap fighter base on one of the islands northwest of New Ireland. Humphrey, probably in Sector 2, 11.3, saw "6 fighters with Betty escort." Smith in Sector 3 and Searls in Sector 4 saw nothing to report.

13 November Our old pattern of alternate days flying east then west was long gone. Stoppy flew Sector 1, Wright was in the middle in Sector 6, while Reichert, way east in Sector 11, saw Nauru and Ocean.

14 November Sears flew Sector 4 and roamed west to look at Kapingamarangi, where he counted four wrecked Rufes. Probably the result of VB-102's Red Albrecht's attack. Swinton was in Sector 5 next to Sears. Van Ben had a late takeoff and flew a special night patrol to Bougainville, 9.2 hours (8.2 nite).

15 November Our flights were to the northeast and northwest. Searls was in Sector 5; Smith in Sector 6; Honey in Sector 10. Humphrey also flew a patrol and Alley was a spotter for DDs shelling Bougainville.

Honey and the rest of Crew 17 were lost at sea. The entry in our War Diary is: "On November 15th, Lt(jg) Norwood Minor Honey, A-V(N), USNR, and crew flying Bureau Number 32012, failed to return to base while conducting a routine search flight. Subsequent daily searches were conducted with negative results. Cause remains undetermined." Jim Smith entered on the November page of his log, "N. M. Honey and crew failed to return from routine search - indications of action with enemy at Nauru. Intensive search failed to reveal any traces. Leonard Swanson and Leslie Watt in this crew."

At this time, our squadron had been in combat for almost three months. We had planes damaged and people wounded, but even the most heavily damaged planes had been able to make it back to base and even the most seriously wounded had survived. Now we lost our first plane and crew and must be satisfied with "Cause remains undetermined." Plane number 32012 had been transferred to us from VB-102 when they were preparing to leave for the states. It was an older plane but there is no indication that its age had anything do with its loss.

Unfortunately, our War Diary did not list the names of the co-pilots and aircrewmen that were with Honey and it did not record what the squadron knew about the loss. The notation in Smith's log, "indications of action with enemy at Nauru," strongly suggests that we knew something about what happened to the Honey crew. Now, more that 50 years after the event, we have only faint recollections of a crew that fought with us for less than half of our combat tour.

16 November Donald flew Sector 3 and got in some practice at Kapingamarangi. He strafed shore installations and old Jap planes, probably the wrecked Rufes that Sears reported seeing on the 14th. Most of us got shot at or phosphorous bombed when we visited Kapingamarangi but the Japs seemed to roll out the welcome mat for Herb. Wright flew Sector 2 but saw nothing to report.

Monty flew Bu. No. 32083 back to Guadal from Munda. He had left 083 at Munda on the 11th, when he landed there on three engines after aborting in the second hour of a patrol to the west.

While Monty was off ferrying, Mike Keiser, with Jones as his co-pilot, started a test hop in 32061. Mike lost an engine on takeoff, feathered #2 and landed. No strain for a hot pilot.

17 November We flew our usual sectors to the northeast as special searches for the Honey crew. Sears flew Sector 9, 10.7 hours, "No contacts. Special search for Crew 17" and Van Ben flew Sector 10, 10.9 "special search for Honey." Hagen was in Sector 12 for a short 6.6 hours. This was Hagen's 4th flight as PPC of the Stoppy crew. When he was 500 miles out in Sector 12, he had to feather #4 and return to Guadalcanal on 3 engines. Swinton was in Sector 13, 11.3 hours, and co-pilot Finley wrote in his log, "1 sub."

Monty flew a special hop out Sector 1. He took off in the late afternoon and flew 14.9 hours, much of this time at night and on instruments, and returned to Guadalcanal on the 18th. In the morning of the 17th, before his afternoon takeoff with Monty, Mike Keiser flew a four hour engine run in 32061, the plane which had lost an engine on takeoff the previous day. Mike flew for 18.9 hours of the last 24 hours. Iron Mike!

18 November We were still in hopes of finding some life rafts with the Honey crew in them. Smith flew Sector 8, 11.0 hours, Humphrey 10.3, looked at both Nauru and Ocean. Alley patrolled 9.4 hours, direction unknown.

DeGolia, "self and 1." flew a "high altitude radar test, 20,000 feet" in Bu. No. 32079.

19 November Admiral Sherman seemed unwilling to leave our area. After the last Rabaul raid on the 11th, he headed to Espiritu Santo for refueling and rearming and then took *Sara* and *Princeton* north to the Tarawa landing. Along the way, he paid a call on our nemesis, Nauru, and gave pre-Tarawa practice to his air group. Phil Pettes moved up from first pilot to PPC for the day and took the Hagar crew on patrol. He had a working passenger; "The Baron" Heinke was along to operate the radar. The crew saw Adm Sherman's task force on its way to Nauru but nothing else.

Herb Donald flew 11.3 hours in Sector 10, calling his flight a regular patrol and search for Honey & crew. He circled Nauru, staying 11 miles from its shore, but no fighters came out. Herb doesn't mention seeing our carriers or any damage to Nauru. Searls was in Sector 11 and Wright did Sector 13.

20 November It was a lazy day for us in the Solomons but a busy day for our Marines in the Gilberts. Van Ben flew Sector 7 and attacked a Betty, but as was often the case, the Betty used its speed to escape. Van Ben had a noted passenger, our squadron yeoman W. L. "Smitty" Smith. Sears flew Sector 8 in 11.0 hours, making a long, special search for Crew 17 while Stoppy did the same in Sector

10. Reichert flew a long patrol, 13.5 hours, the extra time because of the Honey crew.

On this busy day in the Gilberts, the Marines fought their way ashore on Tarawa. This was the first step in the Navy's push across the central Pacific—Tarawa, Kwajalein, Eniwetok, the Marianas, Iwo Jima, Okinawa. Tarawa to Okinawa would take a year and six months.

21 November Jim Smith's log recorded an attempted bombing raid on Nauru with the remarks, "Bombing raid on Nauru - Flop - Front - Army leader - group returned - Page, Self & Hager." The best information on this raid comes from the log of Nathan Hodge, Hager's bow gunner: "2.6 hours. Radar man and photographer. Bombing raid to Nauru. Bad weather, turned back to base. Equipped with special radar, we were to jam their radar so the Army could make a surprise bombing raid. We were to bomb and photograph." Hager was flying 32073, Page Clagett's plane, because it had the racks to mount the radar countermeasures gear.

I was not flying my usual spot with Page Clagett so I know nothing about this hop. I know it was short because Smith's log shows only 2.8 hours, Hodge's log (Hager crew) 2.6. I was flying with Ens Andrews, "Little Andy," and Ens Parker, the two co-pilots in the Big Andy crew. Little Andy was flying his first patrol as PPC and I was along to ride the right seat while Parker navigated. I worked the cowl flaps and kept the cylinder head temperatures right on, and Swanson got us out and back to Carney Field. Little Andy PPC'd a flawless patrol. The squadron gave us an old plane, 32009, war surplus from VB-102. They probably wouldn't trust a near new plane to three ensigns. We flew a long patrol, 11.8 hours. I do not remember what Sector we flew but with an old plane and three ensigns we probably got the coldest sector available.

Humphrey logged 11.0 and saw Nauru, so he was probably on a special search for Honey. Monty flew Sector 11, 11.9 hours, and bombed both Nauru and Ocean. He "missed" at Nauru but at Ocean he started a fire and scored a direct hit on a warehouse. All of this attention to Nauru was to make certain that it remained shut down during the Tarawa operation.

22 November Searls flew Sector 2, 10.0 hours; Wright Sector 3, 10.7; Swinton Sector 8, 10.3; Donald 11.5 hours on an uneventful patrol that went out 935 miles.

On this date, an attack by an unidentified pilot was recorded in one of our ACA Reports. This is the first VB-104 Aircraft Action Report that was prepared using the Official Navy Aircraft Action Report FORM. This form has a line or

box to fill in with every bit of information that anyone would ever want to know about an action—except the name of the PPC and the Bu. No. of the plane. We know everything about this action except who did it. We know from the flight logs of individual pilots and crewmen who did NOT fly this hop. By elimination, we can say that it was flown by Dvorachek, Hager, or Anderson.

Someone in 104 was searching the islands along the southwest coast of New Ireland. The plane was at 8000 feet, and, at 1420, the crew sighted two barges that were on course 200°T making 10 knots. The position given is Lat. 03° 48'S; Long. 152° 20'E, which is in the channel between New Britain and New Ireland, 22 miles north of Rabaul. It is unusual that a lone 4Y-1 flying at this altitude and this close to Rabaul did not get the attention of Jap fighters.

The 4Y-1 made a steep, gliding approach on the leading barge, leveling off at 200 feet. On the first bombing run, the unknown pilot "pickled off" and missed with a 500-pounder. On the second run, one of two 100-pounders hit the leading barge amidships and it sank immediately. The plane made three runs on the second barge releasing one 500-pounder on each run. There were no direct hits but the third bomb capsized the barge and it settled slowly by the stern.

The first barge had a 20mm cannon mounted on its bow. Fire from this gun was inaccurate and brief; no hits were made on the plane.

Ed Hagen and Karls flew Bu. No. 32069 on an engine run in, Hagen's 5th solo.

23 November Stoppy flew an uneventful Sector 9. Sears, in Sector 10, made no contacts but successfully employed a radar detector at Nauru. McCutcheon PPC'd the Van Ben crew in Sector 11, 0.7/7.9. Mac returned the first plane because of an oil leak, then flew the patrol in the standby plane. Reichert flew Sector 12, sighting the Stewart Islands.

25 November These were quiet days in our sectors but busy days for our destroyers. The last engagement of surface vessels in the Bougainville operation, The Battle of Cape St. George, occurred on the night of 25-26 November. It involved destroyers from both sides and produced a resounding victory for our destroyers, a victory that propelled the destroyer division commander, Capt Arleigh Burke, into prominence. Not long ago, I stood near the old Ferry Landing here in Coronado and watched our newest Arleigh Burke class destroyer head up the bay to the destroyer base. Admiral Burke is well and appropriately remembered.

This Battle of Cape St. George resulted from the Japanese decision that our forces were going to attempt a landing at Buka. They reinforced Buka with two

of their newest destroyers escorting three destroyer transports. This force, the Buka Reinforcement Echelon, moved in over 900 combat troops and evacuated 700 "useless personnel." The Jap operation going into Buka was perfect, but coming out they met Arleigh Burke.

Capt Burke's five destroyers moved up the southwest coast of Bougainville and into position across the track from Buka to St. George Channel and approximately 40 miles south of Green Island. This was the area that we once covered on most afternoons at the end of our Zed Sector. It was also hunting grounds for Black Cats from New Guinea (see **28 August**). Tonight it belonged to our destroyers. Burke's attack sank both of the Jap destroyers and one of the destroyer transports. Two of the Jap destroyer transports were chased back toward Rabaul, the chase ending only when Burke's destroyers ran low on fuel. Burke's destroyers received not a scratch in this engagement.

As dawn broke, Burke expected to see fighters and bombers from Rabaul, instead he saw the fighter cover that he had been promised, Army Air Corps P-38s from Munda.

After this battle, submarine I-177 from Rabaul picked up a few of the Japaneses sailors but most of them perished. In a few days, VB-104 would be back in this area on an anti-sub sweep, but our tense moments of earlier days at the end of our Zed Sector were gone forever.

26 November Wright flew Sector 1, returning down slot. Smith patrolled Sector 2 and recorded, "Fight with Betty - probable - Saw splash, with no further sign of plane." There is no ACA Report for Smith's attack. Van Ben (Sector 3), Stoppy (Sector 7), and Reichert also flew sectors.

Sears flew Carney to Espiritu in 31975. Sears' brother was skipper of a dry dock at Espiritu and while Sears visited his brother, his crew, led by Lee Little, visited "The Frenchman," Espiritu's famous winemaker. Little recalls that the skipper had obtained a chit signed by a doctor, authorizing the purchase of wine for medicinal purposes. Little and his helpers bought many gallon jugs and two kegs of The Frenchman's fine claret and loaded all of it in the bomb bay. The next day it was unloaded at Guadalcanal—for medicinal purposes only.

27 November There was a large weather system in our sectors that reduced visibility but we flew all of our usual patrols. Dodson PPC'd the Alley crew again, with J. B. Thompson & Boulger. This was Dodson's 5th solo as PPC. Monty flew Sector 10, once around Nauru.

28 November Three crews, Sears, Wright, and Stoppy, took off in the afternoon for an anti-sub sweep of the waters off St. George Channel and north of Buka. They flew up the northeast coast of Bougainville to stay away from the traffic at Empress Augusta Bay, and flew the first two hours in formation. No Jap subs were contacted but Sears found something else to shoot at..

Sears was over Green Island at 1805 where he sighted a barge getting an early start on its nighttime activity. The barge was a large one, estimated to be 50 feet long, and carried a partial load of cargo and a crew of seven. The barge was carefully camouflaged with typical jungle undergrowth, but not completely covered because someone in Sears' crew read 5726Z on the bow.

The skipper made several bombing-strafing runs, dropping four 500- and two 100-pounders. He had no direct hits, but near misses and strafing forced the vessel to beach in shallow water. In a few more strafing run, Sears' gunners completely destroyed the barge.

29 November Smith flew Sector 10 and had a "Good look at Nauru from 8000' - no interception." Van Ben flew Sector 13 in 10.9 hours and Reichert flew 10.5 hours in Sector 12, passing near the Stewarts.

30 November Monty went out in Sector 3 and Swinton flew Sector 9, while John Burton had an instrument hop under the hood in an SNJ.

So ended the month of November. The carriers and big action were shifted to operation *Galvanic*, our invasion of the Gilbert Islands, but there was still plenty for Sears' Navy Search Group to do in the Solomons.

Chapter 11 Donald's Truck - R & R Australia
Adm Sherman's Carriers

December 1943 Carney field, Guadalcanal

December opened with us still in our camp on Guadalcanal, living in the same old huts, and flying our planes from Carney Field. PATSU 1-2 continued servicing our planes. We were no longer getting night bombing visits from Washing Machine Charlie, so maintenance on our planes improved and our training flights increased. Jock Sutherland and I flew a bounce check with Whit Wright and we soloed a bounce hop later in the month. A flight instructor with his own SNJ visited 104, giving many of us a one hour instrument ride under the hood. The squadron's training program went well beyond SNJ hops. First pilots were flying their maiden voyages as PPCs.

In this last month of 1943, the squadron faced different and improved situations. The foothold at Torokina, Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville had grown and the fighter strip would become operational on 10 December. It was comforting to know that as we flew out Sector 1, along the north coast of New Ireland, we had an alternate airport on Bougainville. MacArthur had established his forces on the north coast of New Guinea at Finschhafen and Lae, opposite the west end of New Britain. His operations in New Guinea were occupying Japanese forces that otherwise would be complicating things for us around Bougainville and New Ireland.

December was the beginning of the end for Rabaul, the largest and strongest Jap air base south of Truk and east of the Philippines. Halsey's advanced airfields

in the Solomons and MacArthur's new airfields in New Guinea were within 300 miles of Rabaul. Allied planes at these bases would fly short-haul raids and end Japanese air operations in the area.

By some great fortune, probably more of Sears' magic, the squadron started sending crews, one at a time, to Australia or New Zealand for a week of rest and recreation. We usually flew our own planes to Espiritu Santo and then rode whatever military air transport was available to our destination. The routes were Espiritu to Noumea and then either to Brisbane and Sydney or to New Zealand. For the next three months, we had one or two crews away from the squadron on their jaunt to Australia or New Zealand

1 December A strange day for 104—we lost a crew, temporarily, *gained* a crew, permanently, and flew a few quiet patrols. Whit Wright flew Sector 11 with a close look at Ocean Island. Searls did Sector 10 and looked around Nauru. Lt(jg) Hugh Heider flew his first hop as PPC, with regular co-pilot Lodato. Guest first pilot Dodson made up for Humphrey's absence.

Smith and crew, heading for rest and relaxation in Sydney, flew to Espiritu Santo then on to Australia in an Army DC-3. It was a tough assignment, paving the way for other crews to follow, but someone had to do it.

When Smith headed for R & R with the Aussies, he left his first pilot Eric Essen on Guadalcanal. With the loss of the Honey Crew on 15 November and R & R for the Smith Crew, the Squadron suddenly faced flying our assigned hops with only 16, instead of the regular 18, crews. Sears' Magic formed a new crew. Our skipper had the foresight to bring a few extra people on our journey to the Solomons. When it became necessary to form a new crew, extra *experienced* pilots and aircrewmen, tucked away in nooks and crannies of other crews, were available. When the Smith crew got R & R at Sydney, Essen got Hagen, Weller, Wales, and Wotherspoon. What gives?

Lt(jg) Eric Essen, the most experienced first pilot in our squadron, had been flying in Smith's crew. Eric was over-ripe and spoiling to be a PPC. The skipper found two Naval Aviators in other crews: Lt(jg) Ed Hagen came from the Stoppleman crew; Ens Nolan W. "Jumpin' Joe" Weller came from the Feind crew, where he had been serving quietly as bombardier. Essen had these two fine pilots to help him with his new responsibilities as patrol plane commander. However, it takes more than three pilots to make a crew for a PB4Y-1.

Highly qualified W. T. Wales, AMM1c, came along with Weller from the Feind crew for the important job of plane captain. When he wasn't plane captaining, he manned a waist hatch .50 caliber machine gun. J. Wotherspoon, ARM2c, was Shanghaied from the Reichert crew to serve as first radioman. AOM1c J. A. Bennet became the crew ordnanceman and waist hatch gunner. To

this strong nucleus were added: AMM2c C. E. Roach, bow turret gunner; ARM2c Bill Finady, second radio and top turret gunner; AMM3c E. L. Wilson, belly turret gunner; and AMM3c J. H. Robertson, tail turret gunner. Finady was recruited from the Montgomery crew, in spite of Monty's protest, and Robertson was lifted from the Wright crew, probably while Whit was looking the other way. So there it was, the Essen crew, Crew 19, a brand spanking new crew, but composed of experienced pilots and aircrewmen. We were getting used to Sears' Magic.

Crew 19

Lt(jg) Essen	PPC
Lt(jg) Hagen	First Pilot
Lt.(jg) Weller	Co-pilot
Wales, W.T. AMM1c	Plane Captain Waist Gunner
Wotherspoon, J. ARM2c	First Radio
Roach, C.E. AMM2c	Bow Gunner
Wilson, E.L. AMM3c	Belly Gunner
Robertson, J.H. AMM3c	Tail Gunner
Finady, W.H. ARM2c	Second Radio Top Gunner
Bennet, J.A. AOM1c	Ordnanceman Waist Gunner

On this day, the Essen crew flew their first flight together, "1.4 hours of familiarization." Most familiarization flights were to introduce a crew to a new area. All the members of the Essen crew knew Carney Field, Guadalcanal and the surrounding islands very well. This familiarization hop was to get them familiar with each other. A good crew for a PB4Y-1 was not just any eleven guys checked out in their respective positions in the plane. They had to work together as a team.

2 December The skipper flew Sector 1, logged 11.6 hours, and made a special reconnaissance of Kavieng Harbor. It took about 10 hours to fly one of our 800-mile sectors, so the skipper spent more than an hour messing around Kavieng. He reported 12 AKs (freighters): two large, 15,000 tons; two medium, 5,000 tons; and eight small, 3,000 tons. Skipper also reported one YP, a lightly armed harbor patrol boat. This attention to Kavieng must have been very important because the skipper did the job himself. Why this special attention to Kavieng?

In November, carrier strikes and high and low level bombing raids by Army planes based in New Guinea had made the harbor at Rabaul an unsafe place for Jap transports and freighters. No supply ships were going in and out of Rabaul. To support Rabaul, and retain it as the strongest base in the area, the Japs diverted to the following scheme. They sent their freighters and troop ships into

Kavieng where they unloaded and hustled back north to Truk. In beautiful downtown Kavieng, the supplies and troops were loaded into trucks and started on the overland route to Rabaul! Overland to Rabaul?

Before the war, first Germans and then Australians had built a fine road along the northeast shore of New Ireland. Near Namatanai, a narrow point of the long, skinny island, they extended the road across the island to the south shore at Uluputur. The Japs built a base for barges at the end of this road so their overland route to Rabaul went like this. Trucks from Kavieng moved along the northwest shore to near Namatanai where they turned south. At the barge base, supplies and troops were transferred to barges and carried the 25 miles to Rabaul. The barges could do eight knots, so they could make the passage at night and hide during the day. Kavieng was the critical point in this route, hence the Navy's interest and the skipper's special reconnaissance. The skipper had done his share of discovering how supplies were getting to Rabaul. Later in the month, Herb Donald and his crew, on the 18th, and Anderson and his crew, on the 25th, would stop some of the Kavieng to Rabaul traffic. Later, more of our crews would get involved in closing this pathway to Rabaul, with a little help from friends—two fleet carriers, CV-17 *Bunker Hill* and CVL-26 *Monterey*.

And something special. Essen and his new crew flew 9.9 hours in Sector 7, finding nothing to report after covering over 800 miles of sea water. Why special? This was the new Essen crew's first patrol. The Van Ben crew, with McCutcheon as PPC, flew Sector 8, Stoppy flew Sector 3, around Kapingamarangi, and Donald spent 10.1 hours in a cold sector.

3 - 4 December Quiet days. We flew our usual four or five sectors a day, but our crews saw only whitecaps and beautiful atolls. The two easy days were very welcome.

5 December The skipper made another special reconnaissance, this time of Ocean Island. He covered Sector 12, the narrow wedge of water southeast of Ocean, staying out 11.8 hours, two hours longer than a routine coverage of this sector required. The skipper spent the extra time making a short detour to the north, crossing Sector 11 and taking a good look at Ocean. He saw one float plane, one barge, and three "boats." His spying provoked the Japanese on Ocean to fire heavy caliber AA that was very accurate. Flak hit the 4Y, breaking the windshield and wounding the co-pilot, CAP Ace Neidlinger. PATSU replaced the windshield and Doc Messersmith repaired Ace. Our Search Group flew Sectors 10 and 11 daily to keep close track of Nauru and Ocean; however, on these routine patrols, our planes usually stayed beyond the range of high caliber AA. For a good look, however, a risk of flak was necessary.

Three other crews were out in the sectors next to Sears. The Van Ben crew flew Sector 10 and had a close look at Nauru. Bitt noted in his log that they "Observed fires on Nauru." Essen flew Sector 11 in 11.4 hours and Stoppy logged 10.5 hours in Sector 13. Three days hence, on 8 December, Nauru would get some very special treatment. Fleet carriers and battleships would move in to both bomb and bombard the island; our job now was to make certain that the ocean around Nauru was neat and tidy for their entrance.

6 December The skipper flew to Munda early in the morning and inspected the facilities there to determine if they could accommodate his Navy Search Group. He returned to Guadalcanal in the afternoon. Yes, we would move to Munda, but we had a low priority that would keep us on Guadalcanal until early February. We would move to Munda in early February. Flying from Munda would extend our searches 150 miles westward, but at this time, Munda was more valuable to the Army B-24s of Airsols. They could use Munda to stage B-24 raids on Rabaul with fighter cover coming from Torokina.

We flew our usual sectors to the west and north with nothing to report.

7 December Two years ago today . . . but all of today's patrols were dull. Wright went out Sector 9 while Humphrey, in Sector 10, had no remarks about Nauru. Searls was in Sector 11, Monty patrolled Sector 12, and Hager flew 10.4 boring hours. Reichert patrolled for 5.2 hours, recording no excuse for flying such a short time.

All was quiet around Nauru—until tomorrow.

8 December Stoppy was in Sector 1 where he had the job of looking in on Kavieng. He saw one large AK, one small AK, one DD, and seven sampans.

The skipper flew Sector 2 and sank six small Jap vessels. For some reason there is no Aircraft Action Report for this encounter. Fortunately, the skipper wrote an outline of the event in his log, a short account appears in the squadron's War Diary, and a picture showing some of the vessels appears in our squadron's Tour Book. The skipper called the six vessels "small craft" and the War Diary listed them as "auxiliary craft." The skipper's log gives the position and course of these small craft as, "Sector 2, 740 mi out headed Truk to Buka," (740 miles from Carney Field). The War Diary gives the position as "approximately 250 miles north of Kavieng." These two lines provide a "fix" at 100 miles west of Kapingamarangi and exactly on the track from Truk to Buka. The skipper described the results in a nutshell: "Bombed and Strafed. Sank one, fired one, one dead, 3 trailing oil! All believed sunk". Word of this attack reached ComSoPac and a reply came back, "For this one plane blitz, well done! Halsey."

These "small craft" were not little sitting ducks. They were ocean-going vessels, out in the middle of the broad Pacific, and they shot back with 7.7 machine guns. The boat in the Tour Book picture looks the same as the vessels we would call "Picket Boats" in 1945. The Japs stationed them offshore of their home islands to form an early warning system—warning of attacks by carrier task forces and B-29s on Tokyo and other worthy targets. The skipper's "small craft" plunked a few 7.7 holes in his PB4Y-1, knocked out #3 engine, and put at least one hole in bombardier ACOM (AB) G. N. Weston's pants. Just another day at the office for the skipper and his crew. But what was happening in our eastern sectors around Nauru and Ocean?

Clagett, Reichert, and Essen flew cold sectors with Essen in Sector 8 closest to Nauru. We did not fly our sectors around and east of Nauru. The carriers and battleships had that area to themselves!

Nauru, our nemesis in the east, was in deep trouble. The air groups from two carriers, *Bunker Hill* and *Monterey*, bombed and strafed the island. Then five battleships and several destroyers shelled the island from close range. The BBs threw 810 of their 16 inch shells into Nauru. Now, with the island blasted by our task force, and, with the movement of our forces into the Gilbert Islands, perhaps Nauru would no longer respond to our close looks. Hot dogs!

9 December This was a quiet day for us as we flew sectors to the northeast. Swinton did a short 6.2 hours in Sector 8 but mentioned no reason for the early return. Van Ben flew a full length Sector 9 in 11.0 hours. After a 9.9-hour patrol, Donald recorded "flat tire on landing" Feind patrolled for 5.3 hours. We did not fly Sector 10 to see Nauru licking her wounds.

10 December The strip at Torokina, on Bougainville, opened for business and a few fighters moved in. They were in the hot seat, only 210 miles from Rabaul. Slowly but surely, Halsey moved up the Solomons.

The Alley crew became the Dodson crew for a day. Alley stayed home, J. B. Thompson co-piloted, "Jungle Jim" Boulger navigated, and Tottering Tom Dodson played PPC. A cold sector for Dodson you guess? No. This was Tom Dodson's sixth patrol as PPC, and, for the first time, he got a HOT sector—Sector 1. Fortunately this was a cool day in our hottest sector, but Tom would have handled anything the Japs had. Whit flew Sector 3 in 11.3 hours, with AP Custer sitting in for Whit's regular co-pilot, AP Skeems. Whit lost #3 engine, but still managed to get in some practice gunnery. Monty searched 11.0 hours in Sector 4. Humphrey 11.3, Reichert 9.4, and Hager 10.6, were the other patrollers. Hodge, Hager's bow gunner, recorded, "This was a quiet patrol. The

only interruption we had was when O'Brien started giving out those Spam sandwiches."

11 December Essen started his patrol with two short hops because of a loose cowl flap and then an oil leak. In the standby plane, he did Sector 9 in 9.7 hours. Searls saw nothing for 10.4 hours in Sector 8 while Stoppy and Clagett were in our other sectors.

12 December We were in the hot sectors again. Van Ben was mushing along in Sector 1 and got into a running fight with four Zekes. There is no Aircraft Action Report for this encounter, but our War Diary records, "December 12, four Zekes attacked our search plane off the coast of New Ireland between Feni and Green Islands. Running fight ensued for twenty minutes with one Zeke possibly destroyed, and another damaged." Bittenbender's log mentions this attack and adds the interesting information that our yeoman, W. L. Smith was along for the flight. I hope he got a medal. The squadron must have been getting a little bored with attacks by Zekes when we didn't bother writing an ACA report about possibly destroying one and damaging another. Smitty would have been eager to type it.

Sears patrolled Sector 3 for 11.4 hours and had a good look at Kapingamarangi, pronouncing it well blasted. Our other patrollers were Donald and Feind.

Mike Keiser with Harp Joslyn; Whit Wright with Shea and Custer; Swinton with Finley and Didier; and Humphrey with Heider and Lodato flew bounce hops. Were our counterparts, the Jap pilots of the Betty patrol squadrons, enjoying the luxury of bounce hops for their co-pilots? Probably not.

The other big event of this day was the return of the Smith crew from rest and relaxation in Sydney. Nothing wrong with them that a good night's sleep on Guadalcanal wouldn't cure. The Smith crew, pioneers of the Sydney trip, brought back valuable information on what to take and what not to take. On top of their must-take list was good old American toilet paper. They reported that the Australian TP was too rough to handle.

13 December Our patrols were: Monty flying Sector 7, Swinton in Sector 6, Hager and Reichert checking on Ocean and Nauru.

Searls bounced with his co-pilots, DeGolia and Joslyn. Whit Wright flew a bounce check for me and Jock Sutherland and pronounced us checked out to continue flying with Page Clagett. In the afternoon, Whit flew a total plane check of 32081, repaired after six weeks of hard labor by our PATSU crews after the plane had been nearly destroyed by the exploding freighter near Ocean. Whit flew

3.2 hours and noted, "The Queen Flies Again." Jock and I kept flying but "The Queen" crapped out the next day.

14 December The Smith crew, rested and relaxed after Sydney, went back to work in Sector 1 for 10.5 hours. They made special searches of Feni and Green islands with no incident. The Essen crew flew their fifth patrol, Sector 2, and finally saw something. Ed Hagen noted in his log that they sighted the debris from the "small craft" that the skipper destroyed six days earlier. Searls flew Sector 3 and Wright did Sector 5, flying his old newly repaired and flight-tested 32081. He lost #1 engine so the PATSU had more work to do on "The Queen." Nothing happened to Clagett in 10.8 hours.

The important flight of the day was in a DC-3. The Hager crew departed for points south, Noumea, Brisbane, and a week in Sydney. They were well briefed by the Smith crew—loaded with toilet paper and cigarettes.

15 December Sears was in Sector 6 while the Van Ben crew, with McCutcheon as PPC, flew Sector 7. It took Donald 10.7 hours in Sector 10, where he viewed Nauru from 10 miles, well out of AA range. Stoppy and Feind were the other patrols.

This was a red letter day in naval aviation. Whit Wright received an instrument instruction flight under the hood in the rear seat of an SNJ. Whit wrote in his log, "First single engine hop since 1939." Whit had flown for three thousand hours without torque.

The Reichert crew departed for Sydney, number three in our parade of crews to that fine city. Reichert had been referring to himself as "Erk-Erk on the old Rike-Rike," so he needed the Sydney time more than most. Swinton flew "the range" for 1.5 hours. No one else remembers that we had a radio range at Guadalcanal.

16 December Monty flew Sector 1, 10.6 hours of watching the scenery and keeping a sharp eye out for Zekes and barges. As requested, he made a special reconnaissance of Green Island.

Wright flew the final test hop in good old 32081, the plane that had suffered the AK exploding under her belly. All OK. Essen took his crew out for a bounce hop and Humphrey gave his crew 2.7 hours of instrument practice. Ed Hagen and I got instrument hops in an SNJ.

17 December This was a quiet day for 104 but a big day for Solomon fighter planes and Rabaul. While we were flying sectors to the north and east, the Airsols fighters made a sweep of Rabaul, staging through the new fighter strip at

Torokina. A Marine squadron in F4Us, the Black Sheep of Major "Pappy" Boyington, took off from their base on Vella Lavella (Barakoma), gassed at Torokina, then went on to Rabaul. They also stopped for gas at Torokina on their way home.

Searls flew 10.0 in cold Sector 6. Swinton did Sector 13 in 11.3; co-pilot Fin noted in his log "1 sub." Wright started a patrol in "The Queen,"good old 32081, "0.3 hours, electrical problems." More work for the PATSU. Whit got the standby plane and then did Sector 10 around Nauru in 10.5 hours. Whit was the first to get a close look at our old problem island after it had been worked over by our carriers and battleships. The Nauru guys didn't bother Whit and Whit didn't bother them.

Smith flew to Henderson "for test takeoff," then flew Sector 9 for only 6.6 hours, returning with generator trouble. Humphrey also flew first to Henderson then out on patrol for 9.8 hours. Clagett and I flew a 10.2 patrol with Boulger instead of Jock. We had Paul Kreilick with us, in 32073, doing some mischief with his radar countermeasures gear. We were probably in Sector 11 so Kreilick could check the radars at both Nauru and Ocean.

Another SNJ instrument ride for Ed Hagen and Leo Bauer.

18 December The squadron patrolled the area to the northwest, with sectors 1, 2, and 3 stretched to 1000 miles. Our War Diary mentions that in December we flew stretch versions of our three hottest sectors, but it does not give the date that this special service began. From pilots logs, it appears that sectors 1, 2, & 3 were flown as 1000-milers on the 18th.

Patrol plane crews flew endless hours over the ocean looking for enemy ships, so it was a rare treat for Herb Donald and his gunners to flat-hat New Ireland and get a shot at Jap trucks, soldiers, and their gun emplacements. Donald and crew were returning in Sector 1 where Herb had flown within 10 miles of the large Japanese airfield at Kavieng without getting any attention from Jap fighters. Herb must have been feeling bold as he headed home, flying at tree-top level along the road on New Ireland's northeast shore. Suddenly, the crew spotted a truck ahead and the bow turret gunner destroyed it with one long burst. Moments later, Donald was flying over the Jap airfield at Namatanai (where the highway turns to the southwest shore of New Ireland). Still brushing the tree tops, Herb violated all rules of the airfield's traffic pattern, while his gunners blasted the place, hitting the usual structures and equipment found at airfields.

"Roho" Rolland, plane captain and starboard waist gunner, saw another truck and set it on fire with bursts from his single fifty. The driver ran from the truck and Roho got him with a short burst. Roho recalls that seconds after he hit the truck, as Donald did a wingover at the end of the runway, they saw a group of

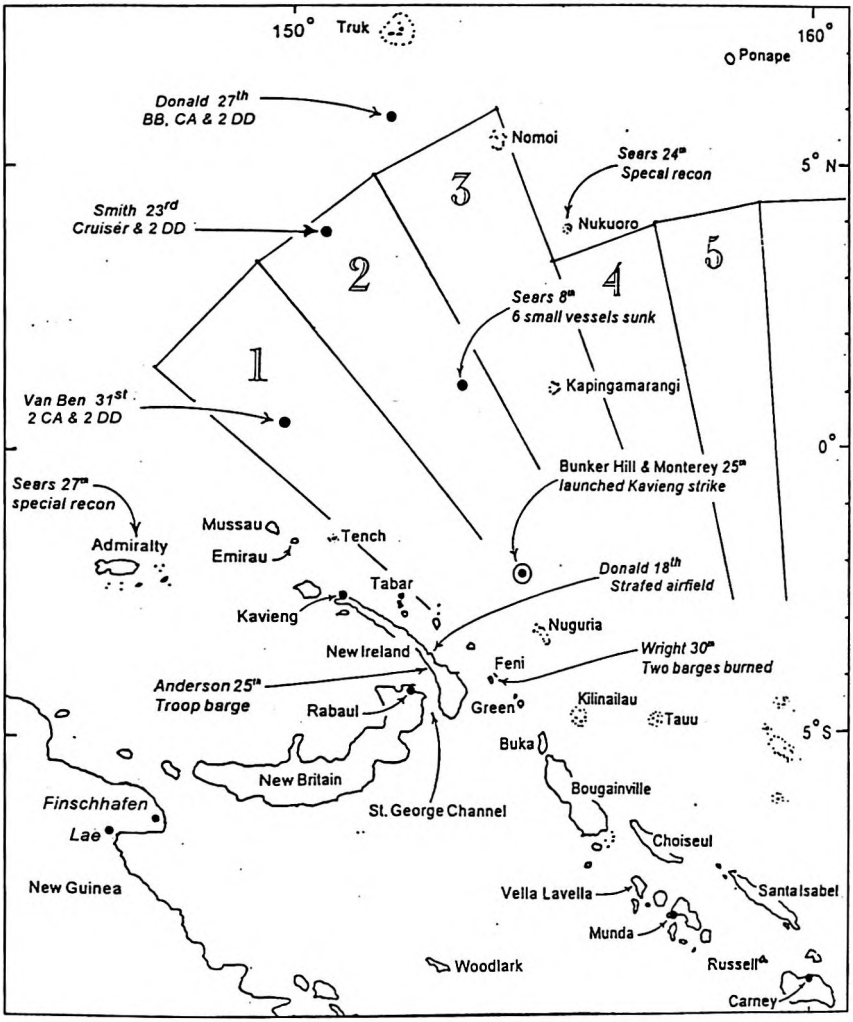
people on the ground, Jap soldiers and natives. The gunners did not strafe because they did not want to hit any natives. As Herb circled at 200 feet, the group broke up, with the natives getting out of sight and the Japs running to their gun positions—40mm anti aircraft guns in sand-bag protection. Roho fired into the gun positions and watched his bullets hit into the top row of sand bags and the Jap gunners. Hammon in the belly, Sams in the top, and Foelsch in the tail turrets also fired as targets came into their view.

Under fire from the Jap 40mms, Herb headed out to sea. Shells from the 40mms passed so close to the 4Y that Hammond claimed he could feel heat from the tracers as they passed his belly turret. Herb finally got so low that the Jap gunners could not depress their guns to fire on him. Roho, in the after station, could see the prop wash kicking up turbulence on the surface of the smooth sea.

The trucks destroyed by Donald's gunners were links in the transport of men and supplies from Truk to Rabaul (see entry for 2 December). Co-pilot Leo Bauer proved to be a man of few words, writing in his log: "Scratch one truck." Compared to Leo, the War Diary was verbose, recording: "December 18, strafing run completed on Namatanai Airfield, lower east coast New Ireland, destroying 1 truck." As customary, the War Diary entry did not identify the pilot and crew so without Herb's, Leo's, and Roho's flight log entries and their detailed recollections, we would not know which crew did this service to reduce Jap trucking on New Ireland. Donald had been in the air 12.7 hours when he landed at Munda for fuel and then made the 1.4 hour night flight back to Guadalcanal.

Herb Donald's strafing attack on the Jap highway and Namatanai airfield was one of the most bold and effective attacks of VB-104's tour. It was done as an extra effort as Donald and crew returned from a 1000-mile sector search. To cover this extended sector, their plane was in a search and report configuration with gas tanks in the bomb bays instead of bombs. They were expected to fly straight home, safe and sound, without making any attacks. Instead, with superb airmanship and gunnery, Herb and his crew strafed a Jap airfield and put a tight kink in their supply line from Kavieng to Rabaul. Lots of bravery in this crew. Why was no ACA Report written for this daring and successful attack? Herb must have been on Ray Ming's list.

Van Ben flew a stretch Sector 2 in 11.7 hours. For plane captain White, the highlight of this patrol was some time in the pilot's seat flying the plane; excitement for the rest of the crew was seeing a floating log. Essen flew a 1000-miler in Sector 3, 12.4 hours, the monotony broken by a "possible sub contact, much debris and a life boat." Stoppy flew Sector 5 over Ontong Java, 10.8. Feind patrolled for 10.2, probably in Sector 4.



Actions, sightings and recons in the northwestern sectors during December 1943. On the 18th, the squadron began flying sectors 1, 2, and 3 as 1000-milers.

19 December The skipper and his crew flew from Carney Field to Guerney Field, Milne Bay, on the eastern end of New Guinea. He returned to Guadalcanal the next day with a brief stop at Woodlark Island. He made "no contacts" on the flights to and from New Guinea, but reported that there was a very good airfield

at Woodlark. I learned of these flights from the copy of the skipper's flight log that he had sent to me. In a recent telephone conversation, I asked the skipper about these flights, thinking that he might report some secret meeting with MacArthur or some plan to move our squadron to New Guinea. No, the skipper just said that he liked to fly so he made the flight to New Guinea to look around.

While the skipper was off to New Guinea, Airsols flew their first big strike on Rabaul. The Army B-24s, still based on Guadalcanal, flew to Munda and launched their raid from there. If necessary, the planes stopped at Munda on the way back to Guadalcanal. Munda's single runway would serve as a staging base for Airsols' B-24s until Rabaul was pulverized. However, squeezed between the sea on one side and hills on the other, Munda was too small to be a home base for Airsols Army B-24s.

We flew the cold sectors to the northeast. Swinton flew Sector 8 for 10.7 hours, Monty dallied in Sector 9 for 11.1, and Alley searched nearby, logging 10.4.

There were two housekeeping flights. Wright flew 32009 to Espiritu and return, and Humphrey flew to the Russells, landed and then returned to Carney. Missions unknown.

Rabaul Simpson Harbor, at Rabaul, was an excellent anchorage, protected on all sides by low hills. The Japanese had occupied Rabaul on 22 January 1942 and started building a garrison and accumulating supplies to support their thrusts southeast into the Solomons and south into New Guinea. The Japanese Army was responsible for the push to the south into New Guinea, where it was opposed by a US Army command, ComSowestPac, General MacArthur. The Japanese Navy controlled the advance down the Solomons, where it was opposed by a US Navy command, ComSoPac, Admiral Halsey.

Although Rabaul never developed a reputation for strength equal to Truk, at the peak of its buildup it had over 100,000 troops and several airfields. Some of Rabaul's airfields had concrete runways. Rabaul also had an efficient early warning radar net that could pick up incoming air raids at 90 miles.

Rabaul had one weakness. The hills that formed the harbor were active volcanoes. They had erupted in 1941 and we wished, in vain, that they would reactivate in 1943.

When the Japanese stopped their advances on Port Moresby (September 1942), and on Guadalcanal (January 1943), the tides of war in the area changed. ComSowestPac and ComSoPac shifted from the defensive to the offensive and both wanted a shot at Rabaul. Fortunately, Rabaul was neutralized and bypassed, but not invaded. An invasion would have been costly in lives, equipment, and time.

MacArthur's bases in New Guinea, first at Port Moresby and then on the north shore in the Buin area, were closer to Rabaul than Halsey's bases in the Solomons, Guadalcanal, and then Munda. Port Moresby was 430 miles and Buin 350 miles from Rabaul. Guadalcanal was 570 miles and Munda 390 miles from Rabaul. With closer bases, MacArthur's land based planes beat Halsey to the punch at Rabaul, but Halsey had carriers.

Rabaul was the major Japanese base opposing Halsey's forces, hence a chronology of the attacks that led to its demise are of special interest to us.

On 12 October 1943, General Kenney's V [Army] Air Force in New Guinea made the first large air raid on Rabaul. B-24s and B-25s carried the bombs and P-38s provided fighter protection. Similar raids continued for several months.

On 5 November 1943, Halsey's *Saratoga & Princeton* made the first carrier raids on Rabaul. Halsey's land based planes in the Solomons could still not reach Rabaul with large raids.

On 11 November 1943, two carrier groups, *Saratoga & Princeton* from the northeast and *Bunker Hill, Essex & Independence* from the southeast, made the second carrier raid on Rabaul.

On 17 December 1943, Airsols made their first fighter sweep against Rabaul.

On 19 December 1943, Airsols flew their first of many large air raids on Rabaul. These raids became possible when Airsols B-24s could stage through Munda and fighters could use Torokina on Bougainville.

On 17-18 February 1944, Capt Rodger Simpson, Destroyer Squadron 12 (five destroyers), treated Rabaul to its first naval bombardment and torpedo attack.. *Sayonara* Rabaul!

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20 December We flew sectors to the northeast: Smith Sector 3, Wright Sector 4, Searls next to him in Sector 5, and Humphrey. This was a big day for Herb Donald. Page Clagett must have had a hangover from V-8 juice, so Donald sat in for Clagett in *Pistol Packin' Mama* doing a sector to the northeast. Paul Kreilick, our radar countermeasures hot-shot was on this flight, checking the radar on one of the Jap islands, Kusaie. Herb enjoyed flying with Jock Sutherland and me so much that he kept us out 11.8 hours. Jock and I enjoyed flying with Herb so much that we didn't complain. None of the crews saw anything to report.

21 December The squadron had the cold sectors to the northeast: Van Ben Sector 6; Sears Sector 7; Stoppy Sector 9; and Essen Sector 10. The Essen crew saw nothing at Nauru. Herb Donald did not fly. He was recovering from a long patrol, PPCing the Clagett crew, but his crew, under the skillful control of Goodman and Bauer, did a shorty, 9.0 hours.

22 December Tom Dodson took out the Alley crew, giving John Alley another day off. This was Tom's seventh patrol as PPC but it was a shorty, only 8.5 hours. Tom wrote in his log book that he got stuck on the taxiway and was late taking off. Swinton flew Sector 4 in 10.9 hours and Feind patrolled for 9.9. All was quiet.

Stretch sectors became the a major feature of our operations. It must have become clear to those making the big decision about our search activities, that the Japs were hauling troops and supplies from Truk to Kavieng and to the Admiralty Islands. The Jap ships on the Truk-Kavieng run had been avoiding our patrol planes by staying west of the end of our 800-miles sectors. We sighted their ships when individual pilots chose to extend their sectors slightly. To keep track of this shipping, the Wing extended sectors 1, 2, and 3 by 200 miles. We flew these three sectors 1000 miles out, 100 miles on the cross leg, and, we hoped, 1000 miles back to Carney. The stretch sectors took about 13 hours if no special reconnaissance or enemy interruptions increased the time. To fly these long patrols, we installed gas tanks in our forward bomb bays and carried no bombs. The search and report phase of our missions was emphasized while the attack phase was reduced to strafing.

Our squadron first flew these long patrols on the 18th, then VB-106 flew them for four days (19-22).. We started them in earnest on the 23rd and flew all three of the stretch sectors for four days (23-26), then either one, two, or all three of them every day for the remainder of the month.

These very long patrols told us that something big was about to happen, but we did not know what it was. We were in a bit of a lull before some very busy days that would involve major units of the United States Floating Navy. Friendly visitors would be coming into our sectors and someone wanted them to find a nice clean ocean.

23 December This was an active day in the stretch sectors for stars Humphrey, Smith, and Wright, and a quiet day in the east for bit players Searls and Monty.

In Sector 1, Humphrey flew for 11.7 hours, 3.3 at nite. He carried three special observers: Capt Quilisy, USMC, Lt(jg) Lowery, USNR, and ANZAC Capt Murray. These officers wanted to tour the islands along the scenic route of our Sector 1 because they would soon be involved in amphibious landings on some of these islands. Humph was more than a tour director. At Green Island, he and his crew strafed three barges. There is no ACA Report and no entry in the War Diary for this action against the all important enemy barges. Ming must have been mingling with other tasks. Without the entry in Lody's log book we would have no written record of this flight.

In Sector 2, Smith took off at 0900 and flew for 14.3 hours, 4.0 at nite. At 950 miles from Guadalcanal, near the end of their long sector, Smith and crew saw part of the Jap navy: two subs, a cruiser, and two destroyers. These surface ships were on the track between Truk and the Kavieng area, but no one recorded whether they were coming or going. Cruisers and destroyers had been pressed into the Jap U-Haul service.

The Japanese were unable to get lightly armed freighters and troop transports, even when convoyed by warships, through our blockade (See Wright, 17 October). Consequently, the Japs began using warships—cruisers and special destroyer transports—to move troops from Truk to Kavieng (See *Yamato*, 25 December). Smith and Jones recorded the cruiser as a CA, a heavy cruiser, but the War Diary "reduced" the sighting to a CL, a light cruiser. To patrol pilots, tight and tense in the seat of their patrol plane, Jap warships looked very large and dangerous. To Aircraft Intelligence Officers, loose as a goose and twice as shifty in their swivel chairs in the squadron's operations office, Jap warships seemed somewhat smaller and perhaps even vulnerable.

In Sector 3, Wright took off at midnight and flew for 15.2 hours (6.0 nite), going out 1025 miles. Near the end of the sector he got the squadron's first look at the Nomoi Islands, a group of atolls about 150 miles south southeast of Truk. At the end of this long sector, Wright was only 100 miles from Truk. This was the closest that any USN patrol plane had ever come to Truk. In spite of roaming this close to this Japanese stronghold, Wright had nothing special to report, or at least nothing that got in the squadron's written records or in Whit's flight log.

In addition to flying the "stretch" versions of Sectors 1, 2, and 3, VB-104 also handled at least two of the cold sectors. Searls spent 10.8 uneventful hours in Sector 9 and Monty flew 10.1 hours in Sector 10, finding Nauru sound asleep.

24 December There were high-ranking hotshots coming into our little corner of the war. Most of the times that we headed out on our western sectors, we left all friendly forces behind. We had one visit from our carriers in early November and we occasionally saw our subs, or more accurately the swirls of our submerging subs. Our subs were usually in the super secret safe corridors that they used to come and go from our bases to their hunting grounds. But, when we were 200 miles or more from Guadalcanal, all the surface ships and planes that we saw were the bad guys. Now the good guys were coming into our territory. Our old Zed sector was being overrun with our surface ships. And, the carriers were coming. RAdm Sherman was moving his two fleet carriers into our sectors north of the Solomons. Steaming carriers into our search area took some balls, but Sherman had his eyes on the **west** end of our sectors—Kavieng Harbor and the Truk-Kavieng shipping lane, no less! So we gave full attention to our newly

lengthened western sectors to make certain that they contained no surprises for RAdm Sherman.

RAdm Merrill and Capt Burke, with their cruisers and destroyers (TF-39), made a pre-Christmas raid on Buka. They shelled all of the targets that they could see and headed back to the southeast. The large Jap garrison at Buka must have gotten the word that the war was not "Going *Their* Way" this Christmas season. Our fighters, now operating out of Torokina, Empress Augusta Bay, had control of the air over Buka and the southeastern end of New Ireland. Our cruisers and destroyers shelling Buka did not have to worry about air attacks. The nearest Jap planes in force were 300 miles away at Kavieng. And they were "short timers."

Essen flew Sector 1 taking off in the pitch black of 0200 and flying out 900 miles to the shipping lanes north of Kavieng. While searching this area, he sighted a Jap DD and an unidentified sub and then hustled back to Munda, landing there 14.6 hours after his take off from Guadalcanal. At Munda, the Essen crew picked up some much needed gas and some passengers, the Donald crew, and flew 1.6 hours back home to Carney.

Iron men, these guys: Two landings, two take offs, a total of 16.2 hours in the air, plus briefings, preflights, ground time in the plane at Munda, debriefing, and securing the plane. From the time they woke up for this flight until the time they got back to the sack was 24 hours. Much of that was "white knuckle time." Iron men indeed.

Stoppy flew Sector 2, well aware of what he and his crew were getting into. Stoppy's first pilot, Jeff Hemphill, wrote in his log, "Cover Xmas Raid Kavieng. 2200 mile Special Search. Night takeoff (3500 gallons). They flew Sector 2 for 13.4 hours, looking, looking, looking. They saw nothing. The way was clear.

Clagett flew sector 3, logged 15.0 hours (4.0 nite) and fortunately saw nothing exciting.

The Skipper flew Sector 4, not one of our 1000-milers, but in the spirit of the day he stretched it out to 840 miles. Near the end of his sector he took a close look at Nukuoro. The atoll offered no return fire and no Rufes rose from the lagoon. Nukuoro was not on any Japanese flyway, but its location, about 280 miles southeast of Truk, gave it some value as an early warning station against attacks on Truk coming from the southeast.

Van Ben flew Sector 5 in 9.8 uneventful hours.

No news was good news for the Kavieng Carrier operation. None of our patrols, not even the long ones, saw anything to deter our carriers from moving on Kavieng. Although our patrols returned to Carney on Christmas eve, none reported making radar contact or sighting a sleigh drawn by reindeer.

There was talk around the squadron about Jam Sessions. The Special Radar Countermeasure Unit attached to our squadron had been listening to Jap radar signals to determine frequencies and range of their early warning units. This portion of their work was passive. But now, no more eaves-dropping mister-nice-guys. Our Countermeasure people were to turn on their *transmitters* and jam the Jap radar signals.

The **Donald** and the **Feind** crews flew special flights as radar jammers for the Army B-24s raiding Rabaul. The Army followed their usual plan. They took off from Guadalcanal and landed at Munda for gas and final briefings. The Donald and Feind crews did the same.

Each of our two crews had the same job, but they were to work independently. Donald had Ens Paul Kreilick, head man of our countermeasures unit, with him. Herb was flying Clagett's plane, 32073, in which Kreilick hac installed racks, electrical outlets, and antennae for his special gear. One of the other members of the countermeasures unit had joined the Feind crew. Our crews were to approach Rabaul ahead of the army B-24 formations and send out signals that would jam both the Jap early warning and fire control radars.

On his way to Rabaul at 22,000 feet, Donald's bow turret ceased to function and his #4 engine lost power, forcing a return to Munda on three engines. While returning, the Donald crew spotted five Zeros flying near the water beneath them. Herb jettisoned his bombs unarmed, resulting in a great splash, but no explosions, in the sea. The Zeros were attracted to this curious splash, circled it, and never did see the lone Navy Liberator above. Surely the Zero pilots never understood what had happened. What strange tale did they tell their ACI Officer?

When the Donald crew returned to Munda, they left 32073 there to get a new #4 engine and rode back to Carney with Essen. (See 30th housekeeping flights).

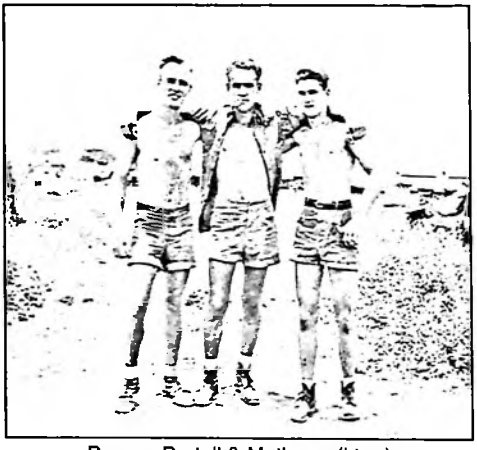
The Feind crew had better luck with their mission. They joined the Army squadrons at 22,000 feet and approached Rabaul ahead of them with their jamming going as planned. John Burton recalls, "Crew 6's instructions by the ACI officer were lead them to the target then slide back somehow thru the formation and take up the 'Tail End Charlie' position so that the heavy fire power defense would provide safety. Mrs. Burton's little boy was dumb—but not that dumb—so when the very heavy Jap fighter interception began over the target, Crew 6's mission was complete. We did a 180° turn and dove for the water (after all we didn't even have one bomb) as the Jap fighters 'zeroed' in on the formation.

"Crew 6 was scheduled to 'do it again' the next day, which was Christmas. Plane Captain Chuck Vey was annoyed by his reveling tent mates—deep in the Christmas spirit while he was drinking black coffee. Alcohol and altitude (22,000) wouldn't mix—especially without a heated flight suit."

We assume the radar jamming was a success. It was good to see our countermeasures people on the offensive.

There was only one housekeeping hop. Alley and Dodson flew a test hop in 32009 to the Russells, landed and then returned to Guadalcanal. This flight must have been part of a celebration for this was Tom Dodson's 24th birthday.

This had been a big day for VB-104 but the night was even bigger. Jimmy Mathews, tail gunner in the Clagett crew, has written a book about his days in VB/VPB-104. In it he gives this account of the return from the Clagett patrol. "Christmas Eve found us returning very late from patrol. It was after eight P.M. when we finally landed. A jeep picked up the pilots, but the rest of us were still cleaning our guns and the plane. When we got ready to leave for camp, it was discovered we did not have the day's password. Now there were still a lot of Japanese soldiers roaming around, and a lot of trigger happy army sentries also roaming around. We had to exfiltrate (sneak off) the airfield! It was well after midnight when we reached camp, which looked as if the bomb had dropped. Bodies were lying everywhere, people propped up against trees with eyes staring wide open, a scene of total devastation. The explanation was simple. One hundred fifty gallons of Espiritu Santo red wine for about one hundred forty five sailors. We got our share the next day. The scene was repeated on New Year's Eve. It should be noted that in every case the crews who were flying the next day did not participate until after the patrol was flown."



Bomar, Bartell & Mathews (l to r)

25 December Christmas Day proved to be a light duty day for 104. Swinton flew Sector 2 with a Lt(jg) Davis and his usual co-pilots, Didier and Finley. Swinton logged 11.2 hours, 2.0 of these in the dark, but saw nothing to report. Anderson and his crew flew the old Zed Sector, and had an interesting action at an unusual spot.

Anderson was "Big Andy" to most of us, distinguishing him from his first pilot, "Little Andy" Andrews. It was after this hop on Christmas Day that Jock

Sutherland, the official "nicknamer" of 104 pilots, elevated "Big Andy" to "Tremendous Andy." Big Andy was developing a reputation as one of the most aggressive PPCs flying PB4Y-1s, right up there with the skipper and Whit Wright.

Big Andy flew a special afternoon/night snoop deep into St. George's Channel, along the *southwest!* coast of New Ireland. Big Andy and his crew were 25 miles northeast of Rabaul just offshore from the Jap barge base at the end of the road from Kavieng. This base was across New Ireland from Namatanai airfield, or what was left of that airfield, after Donald and his crew's strafing attack (see 18 December). It was 1840 and nearly dark, when Big Andy sighted a large Jap barge. It had a small deck-house amidship and was loaded with troops. The Jap barge was starting the last leg of the Truk to Rabaul excursion.

Big Andy made this an "E" ride for the barge crew and the troops. He made three strafing runs with his gunners firing 550 rounds of .50 calibre at the barge and troops. The barge caught fire during the second run and exploded after the third run. The barge was destroyed and an "unestimated number of troops killed and wounded." Early in the morning of this Christmas Day, Big Andy's barge day, warships from both sides were active.

The Japs were so desperate to get troops to Kavieng that they tried to use their most powerful warship, the superbattleship *Yamato*, as a troop transport. She left Truk on Christmas morning, loaded with troops for Kavieng or the Admiralties. When only 100 miles south of Truk, our submarine *Scate* torpedoed her. *Yamato* received only slight damaged, but had to go home for repairs and did not make it into our area. Thus, 104 missed the opportunity to see Japan's mightiest warship. Who knows what Harry Sears or Whit Wright would have done with *Yamato* in their sights? But *Yamato* was not the mightiest naval force in our area.

On Christmas Eve, RAdm Sherman had led his carriers (TG-37.2) from east to west across our sectors north of the Solomons. His group was composed of two fleet carriers, CV-17 *Bunker Hill* and CVL-26 *Monterey*, with six destroyers; just enough to serve as plane guards and provide some close-in anti-sub coverage. Two hundred miles east of Kavieng, at dawn on Christmas Day, just before *Yamato* was torpedoed, *Bunker Hill* and *Monterey* launched the first carrier raid on Kavieng.

Although *Skate* had saved *Yamato* from an encounter with *Bunker Hill* on this occasion (December 1943), *Bunker Hill* would catch up with *Yamato* in 1945. *Bunker Hill* was one of the carriers that sank *Yamato* in early April 1945 in the waters southwest of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's home islands..

26 December We had the long thousand-milers to the northwest. Searls flew Section 1 for 13.4 hours and chased, but could not catch, a Betty. Low on gas after the chase, Searls made a fuel stop at Munda on his way back to Carney. Bettys were shadowing our carriers, trying to torpedo them or to set them up for attacks by Jap subs. It was our job, as usual, to keep the Bettys from doing their job. The best way to do this was to shoot them down, but chasing them away was next best. The Searls crew did a good job.

Humphrey searched for 14.4 hours (3.3 nite) in Sector 2 but saw no enemy. Monty flew Sector 3 in 14.7 hours (4.0 nite), and saw Nukuoro Island. In our shorter sectors, still 800 miles long, Smith flew Sector 4, 9.8 hours with no incident. Wright flew Sector 5, 11.5 hours, stretching the assigned 800-miler by 30 miles.

Bittenbender and CAP Pate, with a few of the Van Ben crew, flew a bounce hop at Koli Field, 1.7 hours. Jock Sutherland and I flew a bounce hop. The air was full of 4Ys flown by co-pilots.

27 December We were still flying long patrols to the northwest, *Bunker Hill* and *Monterey* remained in our sectors, and an Admiral was invading our old barge hunting area along the north coast of Bougainville.

RAdm Ainsworth, commanding newly refitted light cruisers *Honolulu* and *St. Louis,* moved up the northeast coast of Bougainville in broad daylight and bombarded the Jap airfield at Kieta. Successful there, he moved northwest along the shore and bombarded shore installations in the Numa Numa harbor area. Showing off a bit, Ainsworth took the long way home, around Buka and back along the southwest coast of Bougainville. We now had to fly 400 miles out Sector 1 to get beyond our own light cruisers.

Sears headed out Sector 1, passing RAdm Ainsworth, and by the time he returned to Carney he had been in the air 15.8 hours. Near the end of the sector he made a detour to the south for a special reconnaissance of the Admiralty Islands. Manus is the largest island of the Admiralties, 50 miles long and 20 miles wide, about half as large as Guadalcanal. Manus was loaded with Japanese troops, hence the island would have to be reckoned with as our forces moved westward. The skipper's thorough reconnaissance was a first step in that direction.

Essen started Sector 2 but went out only 400 miles. He returned to base having logged only 5.8 hours and gave no reason for the short patrol.

Donald flew out Sector 3 for more than 1000 miles until he was 100 miles from Truk. There he discovered and reported one of the usual Jap warship group that was U-Hauling on the Truk-Kavieng run. Donald entered in his log, "Contacted Jap Task Force - 1 battleship (*Mutsu*) 1 heavy cruiser (*Aoba*) & 2

destroyers 100 miles from Truk. Fired on by battleship - Force turned tail for Truk full speed. 3.5 hours nite." The Donald crew was in the air 14.4 hours on this flight.

Donald, Goodman, and Bauer observed the Japanese task force with great care. Herb Donald recalls: "Bill Goodman was in the right seat, recognition book on his lap checking the ships using binoculars. He had identified the battleship *Mutsu* and the cruiser *Aoba* by class when the BB commenced firing. I took a diving turn away on seeing the flashes from the guns. Crew members reported seeing incendiary type explosions (phosphorescent) where we might have been.

"I did not see the ships turn back. They were reported by the sub. We were unable to track the force (as requested) due to being low on fuel. We headed for a nearby island to check our position and then turned for home."

The four cruisers in this class were 7100 tons and carried 8-inch guns—light in displacement but heavy in armament. Our War Diary report of this action does not mention a battleship and reduces the heavy cruiser to a light cruiser. It reads, "December 27, located and tracked 1 enemy CL and 2 DD approximately 1000 miles from base." Our War Diary, as usual, did not mention the name of the PPC nor identify the crew. Ming reduced a battleship and a heavy cruiser to one light cruiser. Ming must have thought Donald could not even count ships. Was the higher command that read our War Diary better served by learning what Ming thought Donald saw rather than by what Donald thought he saw? Battleships south of Truk were not unusual. On 25 December, just two days before Donald's sighting, our sub *Scate* torpedoed the Jap super-battleship *Yamato* south of Truk. There is a second point of irony. Our higher commands were reading the Japanese codes and knew the positions of Jap battleships. They knew there was a *Mutsu* class battleship south of Truk, Donald knew there was a *Mutsu* class battleship south of Truk, only our War Diary was in the dark.

Later reports and published articles attributed Donald's action to Van Benschoten. Both were handsome young rascals with red hair and freckles, so it is possible that reports confused the two PPCs. It is also possible that authors confused Donald's battleship group with Van Ben's sightings on 31 December (which see). We have log copies of Van Ben's co-pilot Bittenbender and plane captain Ostwalt. Van Ben and crew did not fly on the 27th, and neither Bitt nor Ostwalt ever recorded that the Van Ben crew sighted a task force near Truk.

Stoppy flew 10.3 hours in Sector 10, sighting a transport plane on the ground at Nauru. Feind and crew flew a 13.0-hour night patrol on the 27-28th.

Tom Dodson flew a bounce hop, his 8th solo in a 4Y-1.

28 December *Bunker Hill* and *Monterey* remained in our area and we were still flying long sectors—carriers and sectors were quiet. Van Ben flew Sector 2 for 15.1 hours (4.0 nite) and Swinton did Sector 3 in 13.0 hours (3.0 nite).

Humphrey flew an engine run-in, 2.2 hours. Smith's bounce hop with Jones, 0.7 hours, was shortened by plane trouble.

29 December Alley, in Sector 1, flew 11.1 hours and saw "4 planes off Kavieng." Ours or theirs? Smith flew Sector 3 in 14.3 hours, and entered in his log, "took off weighing 66,000 pounds, on instruments. No incident." Humphrey did a 11.3 hour turn around Nauru. Mike Keiser, in Sector 9, on his first patrol as PPC, flew 11.0 hours and sighted a "U.S. Task Force."

30 December The stretch sectors to the northwest were the only ones offering excitement.

Whit Wright flew 16.4 hours (4.0 nite) in Sector 1, setting the squadron record for longest time on a patrol. The ACA Report called the patrol a "Routine 800 mile search . . .," which of course it was not. In 16.4 hours, Wright could have flown two "routine 800-mile" searches. Wright and crew sighted two large, wooden barges, estimated to be 60 feet long. The barges were beached on the south shore of the harbor at Ambitle Island, the largest island of the Feni Group. They were fully loaded with small drums or tins of a type commonly used for oil, gasoline, or kerosene. Camouflage made of "clumps of shrubbery" covered the barges, but Whit's gunners had no difficulty seeing and hitting them. Wright, carrying extra gas but no bombs on this long patrol, made five strafing runs and his gunners poured 600 rounds of .50 calibre into the barges. Incendiary bullets started large fires and black smoke rose 500 feet into the air. Whit thought burning liquid from the cans must have set the wooden barges on fire. Both barges were destroyed. Wright continued on patrol and noted that he could see the column of smoke from 40 miles. At Tabar Island, Wright made a run on a motor launch, his gunners strafed it, and the launch driver promptly ran it aground.

While Whit Wright winged through Sector 1, **Sears** spent 15.3 hours next to him in a long Sector 2. Skipper's flight was less eventful than Whit's, but not without interest. Sears recorded in his log book that he took off with 3,300 gallons of gas and the PB4Y-1 weighing 66,000 pounds. This weight was well above the maximum takeoff weight allowed by the plane's builder, Consolidated Aircraft. The takeoff was, of course, from our usual Marsten matting runway that was like taking off from fly paper. The skipper had the assignment of making a thorough reconnaissance of Nuguria Island. He saw nothing there that merited written comment in his log, but no news was good news. When they launched

their strike on 25 December, *Bunker Hill* and *Monterey* had been "200 miles east of Kavieng." That position was about 50 miles northwest of Nuguria, and as the Task Group continued to operate in the area, they wanted all of the surveillance of Nuguria that they could get. Who better to give Nuguria the eagle eye than Harry Sears?

Searls flew our third long patrol, Sector 3 for 13.9 hours. He gave Kapingamarangi a long look in daylight hours. Stoppy would follow him in a double coverage of Kapingamarangi..

Stoppy flew a special "second" search in Sector 3 to Kapingamarangi, with a night takeoff and 12.3 hours in the air. Out and back to Kapingamarangi was only a nine-hour hop, so Stoppy must have hung around the atoll for a few hours. There was reason for concern that the Japs would bring in the float planes, Rufes and Zekes, from Truk. They had been bringing in Rufes and supply ship regularly and might do it now to get some Rufes to our carriers. To avoid our daily patrols, they might try to bring Rufes and supplies in at night. Stoppy to the rescue—but no Rufe night arrivals at Kapingamarangi.

The usual housekeeping flights went on. Donald, Goodman, and crew flew 32009 to Munda with Hagen and Weller as passengers. Donald returned to Guadalcanal in 32073, the plane that they had left there on the 24th after his aborted Jam Session. Hagen and Weller brought 32009 back to Carney. Smith had his crew out on a bounce hop, shooting practice landings.

31 December Not at all discouraged by the visit from our carriers, Jap cruisers and destroyers continued to fill the shipping lane from Truk to Kavieng. Two Jap forces got to Kavieng, one of two heavy cruisers, *Kumano* and *Suzuya*, and the other, two light cruisers, *Oyodo* and *Noshiro*.

Van Ben logged 14.1 hours in Sector 1, where he located and tracked "2 enemy CA and 2 DD," approximately 850 miles from home base. Van Ben's "CAs" must have been *Kumano* and *Suzuya*. Bittenbender wrote in his log that the cruisers fired "2 salvos at us." Van Ben reported, tracked, but did not attack. We didn't do cruisers.

Donald flew a stretch patrol, 14.8 hours (5.0 nite) out Sector 3 to within 180 miles of Truk.

We did some cold sectors to the east, Essen in Sector 9 and Swinton in Sector 10 around Nauru. And of course, there were the usual housekeeping flights. The Humphrey crew flew a test hop and looked at the scenery over the Russells, and Smith flew a bounce hop for Gossage and Jones. If you saw only the Humphrey and Smith crews on this day, testing a plane and practicing landings, you would not have had a clue that there was a war going on.

With December safely in the record book, we were thankful that we had operated for a whole month without losing a plane. It was reassuring to see our battleships, cruisers, and destroyers shelling our favorite spots such as Nauru, the northeast shore of Bougainville, and Buka. Of course, our carriers were very welcome back in our part of the war. I think we were beginning to feel that we were going to win this war but were well aware that it would be a long haul. So we practiced, practiced, and practiced.

Whit Wright held a practice near the end of each patrol and recorded each practice in his log. A list of these practices, compiled from Whit's log, illustrates the kind of training that we all did: "Gun practice; Gun and bomb practice; Instrument practice; Instruments and gunnery; Gunnery instruments; Gunnery and bombing"

We have no record of our squadron's New Year's resolutions but they must have been about Jap Bettys. In 1944, Bettys would replace barges as our target of choice.

Chapter 12 Big Andy's Easy Betty

January 1944 Carney Field, Guadalcanal

The old year faded into the new with little celebration and no immediate change in our operations. We would continue to fly our sectors as we had in late December, with 1, 2, and 3 as 1000-milers. Airsols fighters and Army B-24s would keep on rousting Rabaul. *Bunker Hill* and *Monterey* would hassle Kavieng and the Jap warships on the Truk-Kavieng U-haul for a few days before going off to join the other new carriers that were coming from the shipyards and joining the fleet. We would soon have our sectors to ourselves. The main concern of the carrier admirals would be neutralizing the Marshall Islands, capturing Kwajalein and Eniwetok, and striking westward into the Carolines. Compared to our previous months, January would be a quiet time, but still with a victory and a loss.

It must have been in this month that we began to realize that we were making progress toward winning the war in the Pacific, but progress was difficult to measure. Because there was no demarked "front line" and the "territory" was water, spotted with a few islands, we needed a special yardstick to measure progress. Advances came in big leaps rather than steady crawls. For example, east of our "cold" sectors, progress had been from Funafuti and Canton to Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands. Tarawa was about 960 miles from Canton and 700 miles from Funafuti so the leap to Tarawa was an advance of about 800 miles. The start and finish of a leap often involved several weeks. The key stages were: island invaded; new airstrip open for fighters; airstrip open for staging large bombers;

airfield home-base for large bombers. In the final stage, the airfield was abandoned or used by transports supplying new advanced bases. The last Jap air raid on Funafuti had been on 18 November, the leap to Tarawa had been on 20 November. Next jump—Kwajalein in the Marshalls, 550 miles from Tarawa.

During the Tarawa battle, 80 Marines invaded and secured Abemama, a large and beautiful atoll only 90 miles south southeast of Tarawa. The Marines embarked from the sub *Nautilus,* paddled ashore in her rubber boats, and then called on her deck gun for support. Abemama cost little to acquire but was of great value. It became a major air base for the assault on the Marshall Islands and home to our sister squadrons in Navy Liberators. VB-108 moved to Abemama from Funafuti and VB-109 soon joined her. There were then four PB4Y-1 squadrons operating in the Pacific—104 (Sears) & 106 (Hayward) in the Solomons and 108 (Renfro) & 109 (Miller?) in the Gilberts. By July 1944, Abemama was empty.

Closer to home, the leaps were shorter and took longer. When we arrived on Guadalcanal, our troops were sloshing about at Munda. They had captured and repaired the Jap airfield and our fighter planes had moved in. Later, the airfield opened for visits by our aircraft and finally we would move there. Our "leap" was only 170 miles. We were toddlers compared to the "big leapers" in the Central Pacific!

Our ACI Officer would write only two Aircraft Action Reports this month, although we continued to destroy barges. Jap barges were no less important; but after going "big time" working with our carriers, we did not glorify all of our barge kills with ACA Reports.

We continued to send crews to Australia or New Zealand for rest and relaxation and they came back to Guadalcanal needing rest and relaxation.

1 January Montgomery and his crew flew Sector 1 and found two large barges at Green Island. With Monty flying the plane and the gunners shooting their fifties, they ventilated both barges, forcing them to beach. After 12.6 hours in the air and burning extra gas messing with the barges, Monty landed at Munda. After a brief stay, he flew the 1.2-hour hop back to Carney. Feind and Alley were also out on patrols, but they didn't even find a barge to shoot at.

While our patrols were finding little excitement, *Bunker Hill* and *Monterey* hit two Jap light cruisers, *Oyodo* and *Noshiro,* and one destroyer. This small force had made it through to Kavieng and was on its was back to Truk. Although the cruisers enjoyed air cover by land-based Zekes, our carrier planes were able to bomb and strafe them. Our planes did little damage to the Jap warships, but at least they served notice that waters between Kavieng and Truk were now the domain or our carrier Navy as well as our patrol plane Navy.

Wright flew a bounce hop for Joe Shea, and Searls had a bounce hop for Harp Joslyn and Dagwood. Training, training, and more training.

There was some mild excitement in the officer camp. Through the all powerful "ALNAV," most of the Ensigns made Lt(jg). Doc Messersmith gave me my physical on 19 January and Bittenbender had his on the 20th, but our official date of rank was 1 January 1944.

2 January Smith flew Sector 2 out 1100 miles, 14.9 hours, and returned down the slot. All that time with no incident. Humphrey, 13.0 hours in Sector 1, strafed four barges on Green and Feni islands. Humph and Smith probably saw our carriers in their sectors but of course did not write anything about them in their logs. We were told not to mention our carriers in our log books. Their presence was "Top Secret." Of course, the Japs knew full well that our carriers were out in our Sector 1 and had been hitting their ships near Kavieng. Was there a danger that the Japs would learn about our carriers from one of our log books?

The Clagett crew flew without Clagett. CAP Pate joined Crew 9 for the day, Clagett stayed home, and I PPCd for 10.8 hours, checking only white caps in one of our cold sectors. Happy New Year, my first patrol as PPC.

Wright and his crew headed for Australia and with them went Searls, DeGolia, and Joslyn, the pilots of Crew 15. The plane captain, radiomen, and gunners of the Searls crew remained at Guadalcanal and flew with our skipper, while his crew, Crew 1, went to Australia. I have never heard an explanation for this arrangement of crew swapping.

3 January Sears, with AP Malloy and Crew 15, flew a cold Sector 9, while Stoppy, Essen, and Donald flew the hot sectors. Essen flew a stretched version of Sector 1 and made the usual quick stop at Munda on the way back. What is this stopping-at-Munda-on-the-way home habit that we were getting into? Our patrols, in Sectors 1 and 2, passed Munda on the way out, and, of course, passed Munda on the way home. Munda was thus a "safety" for us. We could afford to cut our fuel a little closer in these sectors and drop in on Munda if the gauges gave us a nervous look. As soon as Munda could make room for our squadrons, we would move there and sectors 1 and 2 would reach 170 miles further west. For now, we used Munda for emergencies.

Stoppy and crew flew in Sector 3, past Kapingamarangi, all the way out to Nomoi, one of the Mortlock Islands. He photographed a 2000 foot runway, probably on Satawan. The trip to Nomoi and back took a long 14.5 hours. Herb Donald and his crew were in Sector 2, between Stoppy and Essen. It took three hops for Herb to do the sector. Here is the account from his log. "On take off, 2 engines torched so badly that they ignited gas overflowing wing from tanks. Later

sparks were coming out of cowl flaps and trailing 1/4 mile behind plane. We returned and made overload nite landing - took out another plane - on way back landed at Munda for fuel. Then on to Guadalcanal." Can you imagine a crew having a hairy, flaming night takeoff followed by an emergency, overloaded night landing and then stepping into the standby plane to try again? Lots of guts in that crew. Lots of leadership too!

It was on 3 January that Pappy Boyington led some of his Black Sheep, Marines in F4Us, on a routine run to Rabaul. He was shot down, picked up by a Jap sub in the St. George Channel, and taken to Rabaul. He was a captive of the Japanese for the remainder of the war.

4 - 5 January On the 4th, Van Ben did Sector 10, once around Nauru, but found the island quiet. Nauru was still recovering from the pasting that they got from the carriers and battleships on December 8. Feind flew a sector for 11.6 hours and co-pilot John Burton wrote in his log, "U.S. Navy."

Bunker Hill and *Monterey* paid a final visit to Kavieng. Morison, vol.. VI, p. 412 wrote of this raid: "A third strike on Kavieng was made by Admiral Sherman on 4 January. Two Japanese destroyers were encountered retiring at high speed, but only slight damage was inflicted on *Fumizuki*." *Bunker Hill* and *Monterey* left our area on 5 January. They had a date to reload and refuel at Espiritu Santo and then join the other 10 fast carriers for a light workout in the Marshall Islands. The campaign in the Solomon Islands would finish without benefit of carriers.

On the 5th, we had the hot sectors to the west. Humphrey went out 1000 miles, but saw nothing to report. Monty flew a stretch version of Sector 2, and saw the same as Humphrey. Alley flew a long Sector 1 and of course there was always something doing in our hottest sector. Alley and his crew bombed and strafed a small Japanese vessel at Emirau. In individual log books, Tom Dodson called it a tug but Flash Gordon called it a Jap patrol boat. Flash, looking down the barrels of the two fifties in his belly turret, probably had a better view than Tom. Flash recorded in his log, "Bombed and strafed Jap patrol boat, killed its crew. Also photographed Kavieng."

While Humph, Monty, and Alley were fighting the war, Reichert and crew were returning from Australia to the peace and quiet of Guadalcanal. For some unexplained reason, Phil Pettes, Don Hager's first pilot, and Bill Lyle, Reichert's first pilot, ferried an ARMY B-24 from Espiritu Santo to Guadalcanal. With all the Army airplane drivers around it seems strange that we had to ferry one of their planes for them. We have no information about who served as plane captain and first radioman for Pettes. This was the first time that Phil was entrusted with command of a flight—but it was only an Army B-24.

6 - 7 January On the 6th, we flew long but dull sectors. Smith (Sect. 9) and Clagett had nothing to report. Don Hager went out Sector 1, 13.5 hours, and over the harbor at Kavieng, he counted enemy ships and AA bursts. There were about a dozen of each. Reichert patrolled for 13.5 hours, a personal best for Reich, and saw two Zeros. Reichert and Hager had just returned from Sydney—the dangers of King's Cross one day, Zeros and AA the next!

On the 7th, we had Sears, Stoppy, Essen, and Donald fanned out in the sectors to the northwest again. The skipper, still flying with a borrowed crew (the Searls crew, Crew 15), made quite a day out of Sector 1. He took off at 0200 with a "normal load." The night takeoff got him to the end of the sector early in the morning, just as the Japs were going to work. With our usual dawn takeoffs, we routinely reached the end of our sectors in late morning, and of course, the Japs had figured this out. Sears was going to look at the enemy when they were not expecting us. Sears' first job was a reconnaissance of the Jap seaplane base on Mussau Island. From Mussau, he turned homeward and ducked into Kavieng Harbor to report on the shipping, just as Don Hager had done the day before. Sears saw eight large AKs plus several auxiliary vessels and radioed a report to base. Someone wanted the hot dope on the Jap ships at Kavieng—URGENT. We rarely knew why we were asked to do special things like this. Perhaps someone was trying to figure out if it was worth stationing a sub north of Kavieng. Maybe they wanted to know how much Jap shipping was left unscathed after our carriers did Kavieng.

The skipper left Kavieng and headed southeast just as he saw Jap fighters take off to intercept him. He hunted barges along the island chain and the northeast coast of New Ireland with no luck. The skipper wrote in his log, "Front in S. Solomons, shot for Treasury Is. Closed. Landed at Torokina fighter strip. Closed. Hectic." Our Marines had established the beachhead at Torokina, on the southwest coast of Bougainville, on 1 November, so they had been there for 38 days when Sears dropped in. These were tough times at Torokina. The fighter strip was not ready for big planes, but Sears had no other choice. He had been in the air for over 12 hours so he landed on the "closed" field.

R. J. Plank, first radioman on this flight, was sitting in a seat rightly belonging to the skipper's regular radioman, Dru Stainback. When Stainback returned from Australia, Plank made certain to tell Dru about the hot time at Torokina.

Stoppy, with a night takeoff for Sector 2, flew 11.6 hours, but saw nothing to report. He had the same weather conditions as Sears, so he stopped at Munda. The airstrip at Munda had been in full operation for some time and welcomed us as drop-ins. Our flights in Sectors 1 and 2 often stopped for fuel or an overnight

stay. Only Essen, 12.5 hours in Sector 3, and Donald, 10.8 hours for Nauru, landed back at Carney.

8 January The day started with flights finishing the operations of the 7th. The Sears crew took off from Torokina and on the short flight back to Carney they took pictures of Torokina, Piva airstrip (inland at Torokina), and Sterling Island airfields. Stoppy flew home from Munda.

There were the usual housekeeping flights. Bill Lyle and Harbidge flew a bounce hop; it was Bill's first solo. Smith and Jones flew a night bounce and Jock Sutherland and I flew a day bounce. Paul Kreilick rode with Jock and me, exhibiting confidence in our skill at landing on Carney's Marston matting.

The squadron's assignments for the day were the cold sectors to the northeast, to be flown in the short, 800 mile version: Swinton (Sector 9), Van Ben (Sector 8), Feind. None of these crews saw anything to report but tragedy marred our quiet flights to the east. Our War Diary records: "On January 8, 1944, one (1) PB4Y-1 aircraft, Bu. No. 32077, failed to return to base while conducting a routine search mission at sea. Subsequent daily searches in the most probable areas for survivors were negative. Cause remains undetermined, as initially reported by ComBomRon 104 to Sec. Nav. restricted airmailgram dated 10 January 1944."

Our War Diary identifies the plane but not the crew! We all knew it was Crew 10, the Dvorachek crew, and we all had good friends there. Special for me were the three pilots, Deevo, little Riley, and Hank Campbell. I had many very pleasant times with Hank, playing catch in front of our Quonset huts. We both found throwing a baseball back and forth very relaxing.

We flew lots of special search flights looking for this lost crew but we still know nothing about the cause of their loss. They simply "failed to return." An all too common epitaph in World War II patrol plane naval aviation.

9 January Our regular patrols were to the west: Monty, Humphrey, Alley, Hager, and Reichert. All these patrols were uneventful except that Alley saw an enemy plane, and Hager sighted an "American sub and a Betty painted black." The Humphrey crew was without Humphrey. First pilot Heider was PPC with Lodato as co-pilot and "The Baron" Heinke as navigator.

The important flights for this day were two special searches to the east looking for the Dvorachek crew. Smith and Clagett flew these, probably out the sector that had been assigned to Deevo. We do not know what sector that was. We know only that it was a sector to the east, not 8 or 9, because others were flying those sectors when the Deevo crew went down. These special searches found no sign of our missing crew. I navigated the hop by the Clagett crew and

I still remember spending every minute that I was not navigating looking out at the water.

The only good news of the day was for the Feind crew. They left for Australia.

10 January The squadron had the cold sectors to the east so everyone kept a special lookout for the Dvorachek crew. The Essen crew flew Sector 10 for 12.0 hours. At 1615, when they were on their way home and only 240 miles from Carney, they heard SOS on 500 kilocycles. This signal was good news! Each of our planes carried an emergency radio transmitter called a "Gibson Girl." As I remember, these transmitters were 14" x 8" x 8" and were pinched in on the sides so that they could be held between one's thighs. Held in this way, one person could operate the device by turning a crank on the top. Operation was simple. Just turn the crank and the Gibson Girl was stimulated to utter a weak signal of distress. The Gibson Girl did not require a radioman, plane captains and PPCs could do it. When you turned the crank, an automatic SOS signal went out on 500 kilocycles. When the Essen crew heard the SOS on 500kc, they naturally thought they were hearing the Dvorachek crew. Of course there was the possibility that some native on Malaita or the Santa Cruz islands had appropriated a Gibson Girl from an aviator rescued earlier. A crafty native could be using the Gibson Girl to start a "cargo cult." We didn't worry about fakers. We looked and listened, harder and harder.

Charlie Ehemann recalls that the radio equipment in PB4Y-1s was not ideal for monitoring 500kc. The radioman had to change his receiver from the primary frequency to monitor 500kc. We could easily tune the automatic direction finder, mounted on the overhead in the cockpit, to 500kc, but this receiver picked up only the very strong signals of broadcast stations and radio beacons, not the weak signals of a hand-cranked Gibson Girl. However, if the direction finder radio did pick up the 500kc SOS, it should have been possible to get a bearing. Our searches for Dvorachek may have carried special radio equipment to listen for the Gibson Girl's weak signal but the standard radio gear in our planes was not good for monitoring 500kc.

Sears, with AP Pate and Crew 15, flew a special search for the Dvorachek crew, looking in the area northwest of Stewart Island. Stoppy flew Sector 7, probably well away from where Dvorachek went down, but first pilot Jeff Hemphill still noted in his log that they kept a special lookout for the Deevo crew. All of our patrols to the east were flown at altitudes that made it possible to see life rafts or wreckage on the water, and all islands were checked.

This day was the beginning of the end of the Japanese occupation of Green Island. In the dark of night, four PT boats from Torokina entered the lagoon to

take soundings. They learned that LST's could easily enter the pass and maneuver in the lagoon. Stand by Green Island.

11 January On the 11th, we had the sectors to the west and one flight to the east. Only two of these flights were noteworthy. Smith flew a special search for the Deevo crew, covering all of the northeast coast of Santa Cruz Island. We thought that the Dvorachek crew might have landed at sea, made it into life rafts, and drifted south to Santa Cruz. Smith had no luck. Anderson's flight was extra special.

Big Andy and his crew took off at 0620 to patrol Sector 1. Near the end of their 800-mile sector they were at 7000 feet over the northeast coast of Mussau, making another careful search of the area that Sears had covered four days earlier on the 7th. At 1305, Andy and his crew sighted a Betty flying at 1000 feet along the Mussau shoreline, headed southeast toward Kavieng. Andy immediately began a steep descent to intercept the Betty, even though he assumed that the Betty had seen him and would easily run away. To Andy's surprise, the Betty continued on course and gave no indication that its crew was aware that they were about to be attacked. Andy was able to fly unnoticed to a position level with the Betty and range 200 yards. AOM2c R. H. Martin, Jr, in the bow turret opened fire. He riddled the Betty's starboard engine, wing root, and cockpit enclosure with 300 rounds. The starboard engine began to burn with the flames trailing to abaft of the Betty's tail. Martin recalls, "I was in the bow turret. As we broke out of the cloud cover, the turret fogged over and I could not see the sight line--so I just looked down the barrel and used the tracer path to guide my line of fire. It worked."

The Betty lost altitude rapidly, and at 100 feet above the water its starboard engine fell into the sea. The Betty rolled to starboard, the starboard wingtip finally plowed into the water and the plane cart-wheeled. The plane was completely smashed, with only the fuselage aft of the waist blisters remaining afloat. There were no survivors.

The Betty had the usual drab green paint job with meatballs on the after portion of the fuselage and topside of the wings. It had obvious and distinctive tail markings: three horizontal white stripes on the vertical stabilizer.

The Betty made no evasive action and did not fire at the PB4Y. It must have been a transport plane flying into Kavieng.

This was the second Betty shot down by Andy and his crew, and they made this attack look easy. They had downed their first Betty on 7 October after a long, difficult chase and plenty of return fire from the Betty's 20mm tail cannon. Easy does it, Andy.

12 - 13 January We had the eastern sectors on the twelfth and everyone kept an eye out for orange life rafts with the hope of finding the Dvorachek crew—wet but safe. No luck. Stoppy flew Sector 10 around Nauru and Clagett stretched Sector 7 to get a look at Kusaie. Essen, in Sector 8, again heard signals that may have come from a Gibson Girl. Ed Hagen, Essen's first pilot, entered in his log, "Heard signal at 0813 and 1510 on 500kc about 250 miles." They heard the signals both outbound and inbound in this sector, and they had heard similar signals 240 miles out when flying Sector 10 two days earlier. We never located the source of these signals but they caused us to look harder. While the regular sectors were being flown, Alley and crew did a special search of Santa Cruz Island, hoping that the Dvorachek crew had made it safely to that island.

I never knew if we were ordered to sight Kusaie or if we just went out on a Clagett brain storm. Kusaie is not an atoll but a forested, volcanic island with a central peak 2000 feet high. It looked as if it should be a major Jap base, we thought it was a dangerous spot, but it was neither. The Japs had started building an airstrip but never finished it and never established an air base. The runway was probably long enough to serve as an emergency field for flights from Truk to the Gilberts and Nauru. We did not know it at the time, but by extending our patrol we were flying into an area patrolled by the PB4Y-1s of VB-108, based in the Gilberts.

14 - 15 January On the 14th, we flew the cold sectors to the east and they were all cold. The Eric Essen crew, now six weeks old, flew to Santa Cruz Island and buzzed the shoreline and offshore islands looking for signs of the Dvorachek crew. Essen's special flight was the last official search that the squadron made for the Dvorachek crew. The Navy had given up on finding them.

On the 15th, the Humphrey crew jumped in old 32009 and headed for Espiritu Santo, the first leg of their trip to Sydney. They did not fly the most direct route to Espiritu however, but chose to detour somewhat and make an unofficial search of the area where the Dvorachek crew might have drifted ashore. This was the last unofficial search for the Dvorachek crew. Their shipmates had given up on finding them. The end indeed.

We flew cold patrols in the "hot" sectors to the west. Stoppy and crew flew Sector 1, our hottest sector, but even that was cold. They did the whole island chain—Mussau, Feni, Tabar, and Emirau. At Mussau they saw a lonely Pete but a look at it from a distance was all they got.

16 January Reichert and crew made a special reconnaissance of Nauru. Despite intense heavy and light AA fire, they got the photographs ordered. It is difficult to imagine that someone needed more pictures of Nauru. That island must have

been out of the war by now. Army B-24s from Funafuti had been bombing it since April 1943 and the carriers and battleships had given it a working-over. Then, of course, there was our big night raid on 18-19 September, SNAFU NAURU. Reichert's flight was the last special reconnaissance that we would make of Nauru, so perhaps Reichert and crew were taking the "after pictures" to go with the many "before" snapshots.

A more important event in the war was the departure of the Humphrey crew from Espiritu Santo, headed for Australia.

17 January Smith flew Sector 1; but with a late takeoff and bad weather in the sector, he flew only 8.5 hours. Wright and his crew, and the Searls pilots with the skipper's crew returned from Sydney.

18 January Dull times these. We flew the cold sectors to the east and there was only one moment of excitement. The Stoppy crew lost #4 engine soon after take off, returned to base, and made a full load landing with #4 feathered—a no-strain deal for the Stoppy crew. There was one advantage to the hated Marston matting runway. The matting seemed to grab the plane and slow it down. This was great for landings, bad news for takeoffs.

Little, Perett, & Lymenstull

19 January From the War Diary, "January 19, completed a successful radar detection snoop to within thirty miles of the Truk Island group, locating the installations, frequencies, and pulse repetition rate in each area." We have no pilot's log that records such a flight on this date. (See Smith flight 23 January.)

Alley and crew flew from Carney to Henderson where they picked up a Navy spotter and were briefed for a special mission with DDs shelling Bougainville. They flew to Buka Passage where they rendezvoused with our DDs and let the Navy spotter do his job. The DDs would fire one shell at a time until the spotter radioed that they

were on target. The DD responded with salvos until the target was destroyed. Several buildings in the area received this treatment.

The spotting completed, Alley headed to Munda and remained there overnight. Allie Lymenstull remembers, "When we landed we were taken to an area that was being built for us to move into. The mess hall was half under roof and we slept on piles of plywood. It was eerie as the place was crawling with big land crabs and you wondered what was making the noise—Japs or crabs? I remember Gaynor saying that he couldn't sleep like that so he hitched a ride down to the landing strip and slept in the plane." The following morning, Alley and his crew flew the short hop back to Guadalcanal.

While the old "Moss Backed" PPCs sacked out, the hot, new Lt(jg)s were working. The taxi strip between Carney and Koli fields was "out" so they ferried some of our planes from Carney to Koli.

20 - 22 January On the 20th, Alley and crew flew from Munda to Guadalcanal and the next day went on to Espiritu. They were in our old war weary 4Y, Bu. No. 32009, which we used as the Espiritu Shuttle. It was a happy flight for all on board. The Alley crew was ready to board a C-47 for the ride to Australia and their featured passenger, Ens Sparenberg, was headed Stateside. Sparenberg, a navigator in our squadron, would have a short leave at home and then begin flight training to become a Naval Aviator. Flight training as an ensign should be happy times. Think of the sea stories he could tell his instructors about Bougainville, Nauru, and Kapingamarangi. While the Alley crew departed, Smith, Wright, Monty, and Clagett did the squadron's work in the cold sectors.

On the 21st, we had the hot sectors: 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, flown by Donald, Essen, Sears, Stoppy, and Searls. In Sector 1, Donald and crew saw a 5000-ton Jap merchant ship at New Hanover (Lavongali) Island, the large island off the west end of New Ireland. It was burning brightly so there was no need to attack. They also found three small, unoccupied boats. The Donald crew had covered the end of their sector so thoroughly that they were low on gas. As they neared Guadalcanal, their gas sight gauges indicated no gas, so Donald landed at Henderson. Henderson was just a few minutes from Carney so you might ask why Herb did not stretch it out to Carney. Can you imagine being low on gas, passing Henderson and then running out of gas before reaching Carney. Good headwork here by Herb.

Donald and crew must have taken surface transportation to their sacks at Carney. The next day, Herb, Leo Bauer, and a short crew motored to Henderson and ferried their plane to Carney.

Sears flew this day with his own crew after having flown six patrols with the Searls crew. Flying Sector 3, he made the usual close look at Kapingamarangi

where he saw, but did not disturb, "1 sailboat, 1 canoe." Stoppy did Sector 4, Essen Sector 2, and Searls Sector 5. They saw nothing, not even a canoe or sailboat.

On the 22nd, we flew sectors to the northeast and saw nothing.

Motoring on Guadalcanal The drive between Henderson and Carney fields could be made by jeep, command car, or weapon's carrier. By today's standards, these all qualified as off-road vehicles but not recreational vehicles. The road between the two fields was not recreational. During the dry season, it was hubcap deep in slick, slimy mud. During the wet season, or after a heavy rain in the dry season, it was elbow deep in slicker and slimier mud. I recall one ride to the Henderson area to visit Harp Joslyn when he was in MOB-8 hospital. Along much of the route, the command car sank, and we moved forward by pulling the winch cable ahead of the vehicle, fastening it to a tree and winching the car ahead. By alternating trees to the right and left, the car was kept more or less in the middle of the road. So when we say that the skeleton Donald crew motored back to Henderson to get their plane, you can bet that there was mud involved and the motor trip took longer than the ferry flight.

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23 January In a recent letter from Jim Smith, he recalls: "Capt Sears asked me to take this flight. Flew up to Bougainville to new strip at Empress Augusta Bay and landed for fueling of newly installed bomb bay tanks. Took off late in afternoon with a special radar tracking crew to approach TRUK from west, around the southern side at 20 miles to get dope on Jap radar frequencies and blind spots--then radar check of SATAWAN on way back to Guadalcanal. Info on blind spots used by Marine high altitude photo planes that went to TRUK a week or so later and got info for follow on attack by carrier attack force." According to Morison, vol. VI, the Marine photo plane went to Truk on 4 February. The Torokina beach-head was still not secure because of many Japanese soldiers just outside the perimeter.

Clagett flew Sector 1 and destroyed one barge. Barge killing was such ho hum stuff that there was no ACA report written and no mention of the event in the War Diary. It now took "Bettys or better" to open an ACA Report. Searls flew Sector 2, with nothing to report, and Wright flew Sector 3, out and around Kapingamarangi. Somewhere along the way, Wright and crew spotted a Betty, chased it for 15 minutes but were unable to get close enough for a shot.

24 - 25 January On the 24th, Donald flew Sector 10. He observed Nauru from 5 miles and drew no AA fire. Hager and crew flew Sector 1, 11.8 hours, and

looked along the shores of the Jap held islands near the end of the sector. At Mussau, they strafed two barges and at Emirau they strafed and sank a "boat" loaded with supplies. Nathan Hodge, bow gunner in the Hager crew, entered in his log for this date, "found survivors of American boat - all safe, picked up by PBY, were sure glad to see us."

Yeah, Feind and crew returned from Australia.

26 January From the War Diary: "January 26, located 10 Army B-24 survivors in 3 rafts, sent reports to base and stayed on station until rescue planes arrived to pick up survivors." The War Diary does not identify the crew involved. Van Benschoten's co-pilot, Earl Bittenbender, wrote in his log for this date: "Cactus Patrol 7 Circled 3 life rafts (Taga) 2.5 hrs Praise God"

Strange doings with Donald, who wrote in his log "1st Lt Wright USA." Herb must have flown an Army guy on a short, 6.6-hour, flight.

27 January The skipper flew Sector 2 in 14.6 hours, that's l-o-n-g. His log reads. "To 1000 mi. Took Sector 1 extremity also. Recco Kavieng & New Ireland. Special search for CAs. Cold. 4h nite. Sighted 1 Zeke off Namatanai." Stoppy had Sector 3, with Jim Boulger navigating. They bombed the "tower" at Kapingamarangi. Bill Lyle wrote recently that he wonders about the function of the concrete blockhouse in the Kapingamarangi lagoon. This must have been Stoppy's "tower." The modern navigation chart of Kapingamarangi shows no tower in the lagoon. Someone must have finally hit it.

Essen had Sector 5, Monty and Feind flew the two other western sectors, 1 and 2. Feind and crew flew 11.6 hours and saw nothing. They had only one day to rest on Guadalcanal after their ordeal in Sydney. They saw nothing on their long flight in a hot sector. That just shows what a week in Sydney will do to a fine crew.

28 January Here we are on Guadalcanal in the middle of a war and what does our executive officer do on his day off? He took a check ride with "Bales" in an SNJ. Bounce and air work got Smith an upcheck and a safe for solo in SNJs. Lt Cdr R. C. Bales was the executive officer of VB-106. He was the "Lt. Cmdr. Bales" that flew check-pilot for Antonik, Jock Sutherland, and me, and what is now the Clagett crew, on the transpac from San Diego to Kaneohe, 4 July 1943. In 1944, LtCdr Bales became the commanding officer of VPB-119 where he had Gossage, Reichert, and Lyle as PPCs.

Donald and his crew flew PB4Y-1, Bu. No. 32009, our "corporate jet," from Guadalcanal to Espiritu Santo. After three days rest at Espiritu, they boarded

military transport aircraft for the trip to Sydney. The few days rest in Espiritu was probably necessary to get them in shape for the Rest & Relaxation in Sydney.

29 January Our War Diary entry: "On January 29, 1944, one (1) PB4Y-1 aircraft, Bu. No. 32074, crashed upon landing at the Russell Islands. Plane caught fire and exploded resulting in complete destruction of the aircraft. One crew member died of injuries sustained, while another was severely injured. Loss was reported by ComBomRon 104 to SecNav via dispatch dated 30 January 1944." From Jim Smith's log, "Don Hager Crashed - 1 dead. Don Hager cracked up at Russells on landing - did smart job of handling a tough situation. One man in crew killed, plane a total wreck. January 29, 1944." Most of our information about this crash comes from the only surviving member of the Hager crew, bow gunner Nathan "Gremlin" Hodge, AMM2c. Gremlin is alive and well, and still working with no immediate plans to retire. He has sent in a copy of his flight log and discussed the crash via telephone.

Hager was on a test-flight to check new instruments installed in his plane. In beautiful weather, he was making a normal approach to landing on the coral strip in the Russell Islands. The wheels were down and locked and the flaps were fully extended. Suddenly the plane began to yaw and moments later crashed on the runway. The plane came to rest near the end of the runway but the Erco ball nose turret broke away from the fuselage and, true to its name, rolled an additional 150 feet. Nathan Hodge was in the turret, and during the crash or the roll, he received serious injuries to his face and neck. A C-47 flew Hodge from the Russells to Henderson Field and an ambulance took him to nearby MOB-8 hospital. Navy doctors operated to repair injuries to his face. Metal plates were used to replace some bone and the successful treatment left only minor scars. Hodge's injuries were a ticket stateside. He finished his recovery in Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego.

Hodge reports that the man killed was AMM2c William Riley Farr Jr., tail turret gunner in the Hager crew.

Wright flew Sector 1 in the stretch version as usual. Smith flew Sector 2 for extra distance, no incident. Searles flew 10.2 uneventful hours in Sector 3. Van Ben was in Sector 5, 11.0 hours, and took a good look at Ontong Java. Feind flew 10.3 hours, probably in Sector 4.

30 January We had cold sectors to the east with no action. Even Reichert in Sector 10 could get no response from Nauru. Ed Hagen took out the Stoppleman crew with Boulger navigating, while Monty and Essen flew sectors revealing open ocean. Even the skipper, covering Sector 7, found nothing to write about in his log.

Green Island was center stage today. On the night of 30-31 January, a reconnaissance in force landed without opposition. The native Melanesians, 1200 of them, were very friendly and there were only an estimated 100 Japs on the island. The reconnaissance force could have stayed, but embarked and retired. Formal and official occupation would wait for two weeks.

31 January In Jim Smith's log we read, "Smith - Hager, 12 passengers, To Munda & Return." This flight must have had something to do with the Hager crash on Russell Island.

Van Ben flew Sector 3, 11.1 hours and made a low altitude bombing and strafing attack on Kapingamarangi. Did Van get the "tower?"

A big day for Jock Sutherland. Page Clagett stayed home, Andrews came along as guest navigator, I co-piloted, and Jock flew his first hop as a PPC!

January ended with a dull thud. Nothing spectacular had happened since the eleventh, when Big Andy and crew shot down a Betty off Mussau. Our other fancy flights were the special reccos of Truk. The loss of the Dvorachek crew and the crash of the Hager crew were the low points for the month. Our happier thoughts were of the Donald and Alley crews, away fighting the battle of King's Cross in Sydney. Our trips to Australia were so popular that VB-106, joining the fun, had sent their first two crews away for rest and recreation on the 21st. Henceforth, the two squadrons of the Navy Search Group would have four crews in Australia or New Zealand and 31 crews flying at Carney.

Chapter 13 Bouncing Bettys

February 1944, Munda Field, New Georgia

As we started new pages in our flight logs for February, we realized that our cold sectors to the east were in deep freeze. The advances in the Central Pacific (the invasion of the Gilberts and the attacks on the Marshalls) had outflanked our nemeses, Nauru and Ocean islands. We would see no more fighters around these islands and no surface ships supplying them. Nauru and Ocean might get rare deliveries from the Japanese cargo submarines. With no harbor at either island, only clandestine, brief, and nocturnal visits from subs would be possible. The Japs on Nauru must have felt abandoned and unimportant. Served them right!

To the west, we would continue to encounter Japanese, but we would have friends in our sectors. Although the carriers that hit Rabaul and Kavieng in December and early January had left us for the Central Pacific, many destroyers had joined Halsey's forces. The destroyers would stretch their sweeps all the way to Kavieng and we would spot for their bombardments. Six weeks earlier, we had Kavieng all to ourselves and we were Kavieng's main problem. In February, Kavieng would get drive-by shootings from our destroyers. The Japanese must have been getting the message that their conquest of the South Pacific was not going well.

In this month, we would make a big move. Actually, it was a little move as advancement in the war was going, but it was our only move during our tour so it was big to us. The squadron had been based at Carney Field, near Koli Point, Guadalcanal since August 1943.

The move up the Solomons was not all gain. Our PATSU remained at Carney field, sending only a small unit forward to Munda. Light work and emergency repairs were done at Munda, with all heavy work, such as engine changes, done at Carney. This arrangement required many ferry flights between Munda and Carney.

This late in our tour we were beginning to run out of airplanes. As we started operations this month, we had a total of 12 planes, down three from the 15 planes that we brought to Guadalcanal. One of the 12, Bu. No. 32009, was the war-weary hand-me-down from VB-102 that we used to haul freight and passengers. We had 17 combat crews, but two were always away at Sydney or New Zealand for rest and recreation. We would do February with 11 planes and 15 crews.

Both VB-104 and VB-106 were keeping two crews in Australia or New Zealand on R & R. As this month started, the Alley and Donald crews were in Australia, but as the month progressed there was much swapping and changing in the R & R rotations so it is difficult now, over fifty years later, to figure out who went where and with whom. For example, the pilots of the Swinton crew (PPC Swinton and co-pilots Didier and Finley) went to New Zealand at different times. Swinton went 3 February to 21 February with the Anderson crew, Didier went 26 February to 11 March with the Essen crew, and Fin went 5 March to 17 March with co-pilot Jeff Hemphill and probbly the rest of the Stoppleman crew. We have no record of the Swinton crew enlisted men going on R & R, but with the pilots scattered on R & R, the crew was inactive as a unit from 3 February to 19 March. According to Swinton's log, the three pilots of the Swinton crew, Swinton, Didier, & Finley, flew only three patrols together in February and March – Feb. 23, Mar. 19 & 22.

Some of the other pilot switches were easier to figure out but no more understandable. The Montgomery crew did not go on R & R. There is no apparent reason why they did not get their trip to New Zealand or Australia, however, Mike Keiser, first pilot with Monty, was not to be denied. Mike went to New Zealand on 8 February and returned on 25 February. While Mike was away, Jeff Hemphill, Stoppy's first pilot, flew in Mike's place with Montgomery. There is no record of who took Jeff's place in the Stoppleman crew.

Our job continued to be much the same as in previous months. We conducted regular (800 mile) and long range (1000 mile) search patrols in accordance with Commander Aircraft South Pacific Search Plans 1-43 and 2-43 and directives from Commander Aircraft Solomons and Commander Fleet Air Wing One. There also would be some extended reconnaissance missions. Some days, although we flew the usual five patrols into Japanese territory, were dull, dull, dull. We would cover thousands of miles of ocean, atolls, and islands, and not see a single thing to report.

February would prove to be our biggest month for downing and damaging Bettys, our counterparts on the other side. Bagging a Betty was a bit of a crapshoot. Some of our crews looked and looked and never saw one, while other crews seemed to bump into them often. Our sister squadron, VB-106, flew special Betty searches but still was unable to shoot one down.

1 February On the last day of January, our troops had advanced in the Central pacific, landing on the smaller islands of Kwajalein Atoll. They invaded the main hunk of real estate, Kwajalein Island, on 1 February. Kwajalein was a 550-mile leap from Tarawa. As our troops invaded Kwajalein, we flew cold sectors in their general direction, but found no enemy activities to report. Humphrey and his crew returned from Australia. Welcome back.

2 - 3 February On the second, our patrols were out in the hot sectors: Monty in Sector 1, Swinton in Sector 2, and Essen in Sector 3. Only Sector 2 provided any excitement. Swinton had Humphrey's co-pilots, Heider and Lodato, with him while his co-pilots, Finley and Didier, flew a ferry hop from Munda to Guadalcanal and return. Fortunately, Swinton took a close look at the Tauu islands and found some airmen that needed finding. Our War Diary records, "During a low level reconnaissance of the Tauu Islands on 2 February, two white men were observed signaling from the beach. Reports were sent to base, and the following day this squadron provided cover for a PBY dumbo mission that picked up the survivors who proved to be a TBF pilot and enlisted man that had crashed landed at sea following the Christmas Day carrier attack on Kavieng."

On 3 February, the morning after the TBF crew had been sighted, Monty and his crew went to the Tauu islands flying "fighter" cover for the PBY while it picked up the Navy beachcombers.

And a mystery for this date. Anderson and his crew left for rest and recreation in New Zealand. No mystery there, they deserved a good rest, but PPC Robert Swinton went with them, leaving behind his co-pilots, Jerry Didier and Robert Finley, and probably the rest of his crew. John Humphrey, with Swinton's co-pilots Didier and Finley, flew an uneventful patrol. Swinton and Humph must have traded hops (see 2 February) so Swinton could leave for New Zealand with Anderson.

And a milestone on 3 February. Whit Wright flew an uneventful patrol in Sector 10 and logged 10.9 hours. He posted the time in his log book and under remarks he wrote, "Broke 4000 hours."

Lt Seaman and his crew of VB-106 had an unusual and innovative patrol. Near the end of Sector 1 they were 20 miles north of New Hanover (the large island west of Kavieng) where they spotted a Jap convoy of 2 AKs, 2 DDs, and

a smaller ship. Four Zekes attacked the 4Y-1. Seaman's gunners probably destroyed one Zeke and damaged two others, but fire from the Zekes knocked out the 4Ys #4 engine. A quick look at the map showed that a recently occupied ex-enemy airfield at Cape Glouster, New Britain, was the closest friendly place to land. Seaman was 550 from Munda but only 250 to the new-US-old-Jap airfield at Cape Glouster. Seaman landed at this strip, got some repairs from the Army Air Corps, and next day headed home via Finschhafen.

4 February Morison (1990, vol. VII, p. 319) wrote, "The first photographic reconnaissance (of Truk) was made 4 February 1944 by a Marine Corps Liberator of the Airsols command, based at Torokina, Bougainville." We had sent snooper flights to Truck before (see 23 January Smith), but this Marine 4Y was the first **photographic** plane to cover Truk.

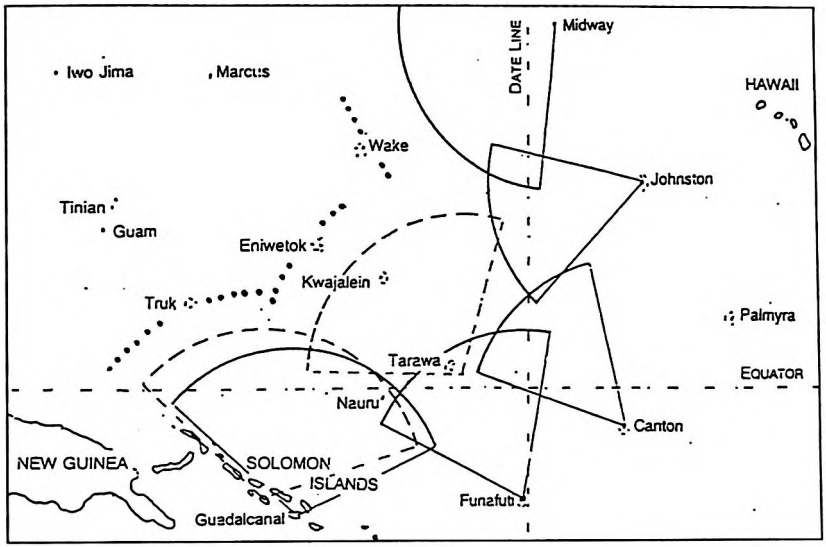
It was our turn in the sectors to the west: Searls Sector 1; Feind Sector 2; Smith Sector 4; Stoppy Sector 5. Two events on these patrols are of special interest.

Our Sector 5 went directly over Ontong Java, and the base legs of Sectors 4 and 6 could be "bent" to give us a view of this beautiful and friendly atoll. It was inhabited by Polynesians, and from the air, all the women looked like Dorothy Lamour and the men looked like John Hall. It was our island of choice for an emergency crash landing. Stoppy and his crew ***bombed*** beautiful and friendly Ontong Java—with old clothes!

Stoppy and his crew were not the only ones to give a helping hand to the natives on Ontong Java. On one of our patrols, our plane captain, Henry Butler, hoarded a large can of Spam and suggested to Page Clagett that we drop it to the natives on Ontong. Jock Sutherland, who hated the green Spam that we were served for breakfast, offered a mild objection, claiming that the natives would be insulted by the offering of Spam. He was overruled by Buster, who assured us that fat was in short supply in the diet of these natives. Page's first "bombing" run was at 150 feet and 180 knots and aligned directly down the axis of the largest island of the atoll. Jock yelled into the intercom just in time to stop Buster from tossing the Spam out the waist hatch. Jock pointed out that a direct hit on one of the natives or their houses by our can of Spam could result in death or destruction. Any aviators that found themselves stranded on Ontong would have some explaining to do. How dangerous is a can of Spam dropped from a Navy Liberator making 180 knots at 150 feet? Forget that little can of Spam on the shelf of your local super market. Our cans of Spam were big. They were 18 inches long and four by five inches on the end. They must have weighed 15 pounds.

We made our second Spam-ing run after careful planning. Page slowed to 150 knots and made his run over shallow water of the lagoon adjacent to the island. I watched the can hit, skip, and settle into the water. At the instant of impact, about 20 canoes left the beach and converged on the Spam. Buster was right, the natives loved Spam — more better than long pig.

I am certain that most of our crews dropped goodies on beautiful Ontong but we didn't treat equally beautiful Kapingamarangi so kindly. Our Squadron War



——— Standard 800 mile search areas, AUGUST 1943.
– – – – 800 mile search areas, FEBRUARY 1944, after advances from Funafuti to Tarawa (Abemama), and Guadalcanal to Munda.
• • • • • • 1000 mile patrols, FEBRUARY 1944.

Diary has the following entry. "February 4, single plane bombed and strafed Kapingamaringi Island. Previous day's search had reported some indications of renewed enemy activity after several months of apparent quiet. Bombs Dropped. 4-500# G.P. Results. None apparent." No Spam for Kapingamarangi. We don't know which VB-104 crew made this attack but the "previous day's search" would have been by a VB-106 crew.

5 - 6 February These were moving days for VB-104 and our sister squadron VB-106. While moving to Munda we kept up our regular patrols and special flights, so the moving flights were done on "days off" or "standby days." On the

5th, Whit Wright flew Guadal to Munda, Munda back to Guadal and then Guadal to Munda to stay. Jock Sutherland and I flew Guadal to Munda and return. Our patrols that went out from Guadalcanal on the 5th and 6th returned to Munda—patrolling and moving in one flight. By the afternoon of the 6th, all crews were at Munda. We were approximately 180 miles "Japwards," out the Solomons. Our camp at Carney Field was empty.

February was moving time for all PB4Y-1 squadrons in the Pacific. Our move to Munda was a little move compared to the leaps in the Central Pacific, but a big move compared to sedentary Midway (see sector map). VB-108 and VB-109, Central Pacific squadrons in new PB4Y-1s, had jumped 650 miles from Funafuti to Abemama, an atoll 90 miles south southeast of Tarawa. Now that's a move. The 1000 mile sectors from Abemama reached as far west as Ponape, but no one told us we were getting help from the east.

On the 6th, Whit Wright flew a long, special mission to the Jap island of Ponape, 920 miles from our new home base at Munda. He did not see any Navy Liberators of VB-108 or 109. This was our first reconnaissance of Ponape, a large volcanic island, nearly circular in outline, with a central peak 2600 feet high. The island had a large harbor and was strategically located, 370 miles east of Truk at Lat. 7° N. The Japanese had occupied Ponape in 1914, so they were well established by the time Whit peeked in on their large airfield. The squadron submitted a detailed report and photographs to Commander Aircraft Munda.

The Alley crew returned from Australia on the 6th. They told horror stories of flying through a hurricane (typhoon) on the leg from New Caledonia to Espiritu Santo. The crew had been held at Tontoutu (the large airfield on New Caledonia) for a few days, waiting for the hurricane to go away. They finally got a ride as passengers in a SCAT (South Pacific Combat Air Transport) C-47 (=DC-3) with Army 1st Lt Delaney at the controls. They flew very low, the safest place, and watched the frothy water beneath them. The weather was so rough that some cargo broke lose and injured ARM2c Gaynor. Tom Dodson wrote in his log, "Nearest to death that I have come so far." Strong words from a calm, cool, and brave Texan. Tom now recalls that the Alley crew kissed the ground after they landed at Espiritu.

Rest, Recreation, and Private Enterprise in Sydney Our crews were good at sharing information. What one crew learned by experience at Nauru or Kapingamarangi was passed on to the other crews so they approached those enemy islands with the best information available. Likewise Sydney. When the Alley crew headed for Sydney, they were aware of the ferocity of Australian toilet

paper and the scarcity of cigarettes. The Alley crew was more concerned with butts than bums. Other less enterprising crews had taken enough TP and cigarettes for their own needs; the Alley crew decided that they would do their part to alleviate the cigarette shortage in Sydney. They departed Guadalcanal with parachute bags stuffed with cartons of cigarettes.

Both Flash Gordon and Lyme Lymenstull have written accounts of the "Cigarettes to Sydney Caper," their stories differing only in the fine details. Flash Gordon's recollections speak for the crew. "Crews returning from Sydney had advised us to take plenty of cigarettes as they could be swapped for whiskey at a rate of 3 or 4 cartons of cigarettes for one bottle of liquor. What you didn't drink, you could carry back to Guadalcanal and sell to your buddies.

"All went well going to Sydney. We found our contact man and were to have free rent in his house overlooking Bondi Beach. He just wanted to swap our cigarettes for liquor. Seven of the eight enlisted men in our crew were staying at the contact's house. We arrived late in the afternoon and he told us it was too late to make the swap that day but it would be completed first thing in the morning.

"Lymenstull and I decided to look Sydney over the first night. When we arrived back at the house that night by cab, every light was on in the house and many cars were parked nearby. We assumed our crew mates had a party going on. When we walked in the front door, we were greeted by a uniformed policeman and a plain clothes detective. The Vice Squad had raided the house. Typically British, the police officers did not display guns. One parachute bag had "F. L. GORDON" stenciled on the top of it. I tried denying it was mine to no avail.

"The seven crew members were taken to the local police station. We called John Alley and he in turn called a Navy captain who was in charge of Naval Operations in the Sydney area. The captain was especially angry as he had been awakened from a sound sleep. We were released by early morning and moved to another location. The captain said we had violated international law and he was writing to our CO, Harry Sears, recommending we be punished.

"We returned to Guadalcanal. Nothing happened for several weeks and we began to think the captain in Sydney was just trying to scare us. Then Harry Sears called the seven of us to his office. He was very angry that we had screwed up the cigarette/liquor deal for the rest of the squadron. Not only had we not brought back any liquor to sell to the other squadron members, we had ruined the chances for other crews who had not yet had their R & Rs in Sydney. He informed us that he had to answer the Sydney captain's letter by endorsement. We all figured we were going to lose stripes. Then he pronounced our punishment; when we weren't flying, we were restricted to the island.

"I talked with Admiral Sears in Norfolk at our 1993 reunion and asked him if he remembered the incident. He smiled and said 'yes.' No wonder he had such a great squadron."

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7 February This was our first full day of patrols from our new airfield. We had the cold sectors to the east and they were ice cold. We needed a few more days like this.

8 February We had the hot sectors but only Essen and his crew, in Sector 4, had any excitement. They had a chance at a Betty, but as usual, the Jap patrol plane used its superior speed to get away. Bettys always got away unless we had a great altitude advantage or could sneak up on them undetected.

9 February We had the cold sectors but one of them was hot! In Sector 8, Van Benschoten and his crew had all the luck. At 1250, approximately 550 miles from base, at Lat. 00° 25' N, Long. 160° 40' E, Van and crew spotted a Betty. Van was flying at 9000 feet, on course 183°T, heading home after having been out to the end of his 800-mile sector. The Betty was seven miles off Van Ben's starboard bow, flying near the water, altitude 500-1000 feet, on course 189°T. Van turned to parallel the Betty's course and started a shallow dive to maintain a position off her port quarter. When the 4Y was at 4000 feet and four miles from the Betty, the Japs must have noticed the 4Y diving on them for they jettisoned two or three bombs, increased speed, but kept the same heading. Van also jettisoned his bomb load, increased power to 2300 rpms and 32 inches, and continued the shallow dive. He stayed on the Betty's port quarter, closing rapidly. After six minutes of this chase, the Betty made a gradual turn to starboard. Van turned inside, closing the range to 2000 feet off the Betty's starboard quarter. The Betty was still 500 feet above the water with Van a little higher.

At this point, C. I. Maule in the bow turret, G. F. Montoux in the belly turret, and W. M. Ostwalt on the port waist gun opened fire. Even with this fire hitting her, the Betty remained at 500 feet, made no evasive maneuvers and did not return fire. Van closed to point-blank range and the three gunners thoroughly riddled the Betty until she went into a shallow diving turn to port. She appeared to be maneuvering with considerable difficulty and crashed into the water.

The Betty's tail section submerged immediately, but the wings and forward portion of the fuselage remained afloat. With G. W. White in the tail turret joining in, Van's gunners strafed the wreckage and the wing section finally exploded. There had been no fire or smoke from the Betty during the attack or before the crash. One life raft and a wheel with rubber tire, floating outside of the

wreckage area, were strafed and destroyed as were two survivors seen struggling toward them. Fragments of debris were all that remained ten minutes after the Betty hit the water.

Van and his crew did not receive one round of return fire from this Betty, although gunners were seen manning the Betty's starboard waist and top blister. What gives? Why no return fire? Where were the alert Jap airmen who had attacked Pearl Harbor? These were strange days in the South Pacific.

This Betty had some unique markings. It was the usual drab khaki with deep brown mottling and meatballs on the fuselage and topside of the wings. Unusual markings were the single white band around the fuselage aft of the waist hatches and the very light PINK wing-tip roundels. The roundels appeared white when first observed from a distance overhead. PINK wingtips?

While Van Ben and his crew were doing the Betty, Cdr Sears flew Sector 11 and gave Nauru a long, hard look. He saw six barges and one sampan in the boat basin. The runway appeared to be in good condition and Sears noted one good VR (transport plane) and several wrecks.

10 February The squadron War Diary has the following information for this date. "Sighted enemy surface force consisting of 4 AK and 1 DE approximately 800 miles from base. Attacked one AK, releasing 4 - 500# G.P. bombs from 1000' but all were wide of target. Attack was made despite heavy AA fire from the DE. Earlier the same day, this search plane spotted land targets for a surface force bombardment along the mid-northeast coastline of New Ireland. No hit or near misses. Regular Search." The War Diary does not identify the pilot and crew on this attack, and we have no individual log that mentions this event. There was no explanation why this drop was made from 1000 feet. For more than three months we had been carrying bombs with 4-5 second delay fuses and bombing from masthead height. Perhaps the 1000 in the War diary should have been typed with one fewer zeros.

The Alley crew was out to the west in Sector 1. Tom Dodson wrote in his log, "Spotting for DDs shelling coast of Bougainville, contacted 5 small Jap ships, missed with bombs, strafed, sweated gas in. 11.9 hours, 2 EQX." [2 EQX = crossed equator twice]. Gordon's log gives same flight time and remarks, "Spotted for our destroyers off east coast of Bougainville." I called Dodson, 28 August 1995, about this flight. Tom remembers spotting for the DDs shelling along the east coast of Bougainville and recalls that the small Jap ships were sampans lying close to the shore. I first thought that it was the Alley crew that was responsible for the action noted in the War Diary for this date (see above), but that appears to be wrong. Dodson's and Gordon's logs confirm that the planes on regular searches were assigned spotting duties on the way out in their sectors.

Tony Antonik and I and three crewmen ferried Bu. No. 32060 to Carney where we remained overnight. I enjoyed the time with Tony. He had been my first regular PPC when we were in PBY-5As in VP-71 and I had learned a lot from him. We stayed at our former camp at Carney. It was nearly empty, pleasantly quiet and, 150 miles behind the war's turmoil at Munda. Tony and I ferried overhauled 32073 back to Munda the next day and rejoined the war.

11 February A very dull day in the sectors to the east.

12 February Sears flew Sector 1 out to 1000 miles, covering the sector thoroughly in 12.0 hours. On the way home, but still 850 from Munda, he lost #4 engine. In a similar situation in the same sector nine days earlier, Lt Seaman of VB-106 had headed for the nearest friendly airfield, a newly captured field on the southwest end of New Britain. Our skipper did it the old-fashioned way; he elected to return to Munda on three engines.

Van Ben was in Sector 2, next to the skipper. He went out 920 miles, sent in the weather and was back at Munda after flying for 12.0 hours. Our planes were getting old and worn so Van had borrowed a plane from VB-106, Bu. No. 32101, to make this flight.

13 February Whit Wright and his crew flew Sector 11 and Searls was in Sector 3. Our established system of alternating the cold eastern and hot western sectors with our sister squadron appears to have been off-again on-again. With many short spotting hops being flown, crews going to Australia or New Zealand, borrowing planes from the other squadron, and the increased presence of our own warships patrolling in our area, we were operating more as a group than as two independent squadrons.

14 February Valentine's Day in the Solomon Islands was filled with activities; some were minor doings but others were spectacular. First, some housekeeping information. The Donald crew staggered in from Sydney, Australia and the Van Ben crew dashed away to Aukland, New Zealand. Our skipper went with Van! How would we make out with our boss, role model, and leader on vacation? We did OK. Sears left us in good hands. Our exec, Jim Smith played CO for a while and Commander John "Chick" Hayward, skipper of VB-106, took command of the Navy Search Group.

On his first day as "Acting Skipper," Smith "did a Sears." He took Sector 1, all 1000 miles of it. On the way home, he stuck his nose in the harbor at Kavieng, where he counted seven Jap AKs. Attacking Kavieng Harbor in a lone Navy

Liberator was out of the question, so Smith sent in the usual contact report and continued on patrol.

In the sector next to Smith, one of our search planes, "sighted and tracked for forty minutes an enemy surface force of 4 AK, 1 CL, and 1 DD. Contact and amplifying reports were sent to base." I am unable to determine which of our crews flew this hop. This entry in our War Diary and Smith's observations of Kavieng Harbor confirm that in spite of our subs sitting off Kavieng and Truk, carrier raids, Army bombers, and our own patrols, the Japs were getting their cargo ships in and out of their last port in the New Britain-New Ireland area.

According to Jeff Hemphill's log, Monty and crew flew Sector 8 and sighted "3 CL 5 DD." Jeff did not say that these warships were Japs and we would hardly expect enemy warships in Sector 8, so I guess he was noting one of our own bombardment groups, perhaps on its way to, or returning from, some work on Bougainville or New Ireland.

Our War Diary records: "Climaxing the day's activity, another search plane shot down a Betty encountered near 00° 42' S, 156° 40' E, while later the same day this same plane scored damaging hits on a second Betty." This TWO Betty job was by, who else, the Humphrey crew.

The following is a blend of information from the ACA Report and co-pilot A. M. Lodato's recollections. At 0615 on a beautiful Munda morning, the Humphrey crew took off on what could have been another routine 800 mile patrol. Carrying a full load of bombs and ammunition, they were flying a sector that took them just a little west of due north of Munda. Having flown over the Tauu Islands, they were 450 miles out in the sector and at their search altitude of 8000 feet. At 0930, they sighted a Betty dead ahead, on course 060°T, altitude 500-1000 feet. Humphrey increased speed, dropped his bomb load, and initiated a diving let-down paralleling the Betty's course. Going downhill, the 4Y was indicating 290 mph. At 4000 feet, Hump gradually flattened the diving angle and reduced speed to prevent overshooting. As he rapidly closed the range at 250 mph, the Betty commenced a slow, continuous turn to port, losing altitude until it was barely 10 feet above water.

Humphrey throttled back to 220 mph and closed to 1800 feet, still slightly astern. Gunners C. W. "Sadie" Hawkins-bow turret, D. L. "Robby" Robinson-top turret, J. P. Devine and Grant C. Lunn-waist hatches, provided the fire power.

The Betty continued to fly just above the waves and absorb damaging bursts. Its port propeller momentarily plowed the water. The plane appeared to recover from the impact, but soon the port engine started smoking. Belly gunner, Billy Lofton, shot the Betty's cockpit cover completely off as the 4Y passed over it at point-blank range. The Betty instantly exploded in mid-air and crashing headlong into the sea. Only small fragments of burning debris remained.

The entire action from the moment of sighting to the crash lasted only nine minutes. Approximately 1000 rounds were expended. The Betty's free gun in the top blister was unmanned and the Humphrey crew observed no 20mm tail gun. Return fire totaling no more than 50 rounds of 7.7 mm, including white-colored tracers, came from both of Betty's waist hatch guns.

This enemy plane was the usual greenish-brown color with red balls topside on the starboard wing and aft of the waist hatch on the fuselage. There was a thin white band around the fuselage aft of the waist blisters. A broad black stripe on top of the horizontal tail surfaces gave the appearance of dual rudders.

Although John Humphrey and his crew had already done a full day's work, they still had the rest of their sector to cover, so back to 8000 feet they went and headed north. After reaching the end of their sector, they flew the crossleg and turned homeward. At 1345, John looked down at the ocean and suddenly exclaimed, "Damn it! there's another one!" It was another Betty, this one at Lat. 01° 20' N, Long. 156° 40' E, on course 170°T, about 40 miles south of the position where they had downed the first Betty on their outbound leg. This new Betty passed directly below the Navy Liberator on course 250°T and at an altitude of 500-1000 feet. Here they go again!

With the Betty directly beneath him, Humphrey had to complete what amounted to a flipper turn to start a diving approach from astern. The air speed reached 300 mph about midway in the dive. Humph maintained the dive too long and could not flatten out soon enough to hold a proper attack position, with the result that he overshot the Betty. However, during the pass, R. M. Weston in the bow and Jack Laming in the top turrets got in damaging bursts. Humphrey made a partial recovery as the Betty turned to starboard and began a series of undulating jinks and shallow turns about 10 feet above the wave-tops. The 4Y was unable to close nearer than extreme range. Humph chased the Betty for twenty minutes, flying 50 feet above and some 500 to 600 yards astern. The 4Y was at rated power and indicating 210 mph but was unable to close on the Betty. Humphrey's gunners fired sporadically until completely out of ammunition. Fuel became dangerously low.

Humphrey's gunners holed the Betty many times during the initial run and subsequent chase, expending 1100 rounds and causing certain damage. During the chase, the Betty's port prop struck a wave while in a shallow turn to port; a bit later, its starboard prop momentarily slashed the water. The Betty recovered quickly both times without noticeable damage. The pilots and crew of the 4Y felt confident that both engines of the Betty were damaged so severely it was highly improbable that the Betty made a safe return to its nearest base, 460 miles distant.

The PB4Y received eight to 10 rounds of 20mm and an estimated 40 rounds of 7.7 mm of return fire with no damaging hits scored. The return flight from the

second Betty to Munda was uneventful. After 11.1 hours in the air, over thirty minutes of which time was spent at rated power chasing Bettys, Humphrey and his crew landed at Munda.

In the ACA Report, the Humphrey pilots made the following observation about their plane: "The top turret concussion, when firing fully depressed and directly forward, is terrific. Breaks loose all radio controls on cockpit overhead, shatters fluorescent bulbs, vibrates split windshield, and side windows fly open repeatedly. In general, loosened and tore out screws and bolts throughout the cockpit."

There is another interesting comment in the ACA Report concerning the waist guns. At high speeds, the waist gunners could not hold their guns against the slip stream.

The second Betty went in the record books as a "probable." This was probably the most probable "probable" of the war.

15 February Donald and his crew, fresh from Australia, got the job of flying to Truk. They approached within 20 miles of that stronghold, logging a nervous 12.5 hours on the long patrol. Neither Herb's log nor the squadron's records give any details of this flight. Anything that Donald and his crew saw at Truk would have been of interest to the commands in the Central Pacific. Our carriers were already on their way to make the first raid on Truk.

From Munda, Sector 3 headed over Kapingamarangi and directly toward Truk. When flown as a 1000-miler, the cross-leg passed over the waters just south of the ring of coral islets around the large Truk lagoon. From this day on, our Navy Search Group sent a plane to Truk every day, our squadron alternating days with 106.

In a special advance, breaking out of the Solomons, the 3rd New Zealand Division made an easy landing on Green Island. This little island was only 115 miles from Rabaul, 220 from Kavieng, and 720 from Truk. The Japs certainly didn't want us to have a base on Green, but there were just too many little islands for them to defend. Only 100 Japanese troops defended Green and they did little to slow the landing force. Construction of a fine coral runway would take only a few weeks.

We were sorry to lose Green Island to our own troops. Green had been our favorite place to hunt Jap barges and sampans. Big Andy had been first to reduce the Jap population there. On 29 October, he had found a sampan, loaded with troops, cruising in the lagoon. Strafing quickly destroyed the sampan and most or all of the troops. On 29 November, Sears had destroyed a barge loaded with supplies. Humphrey was a double dipper on Green Island barges, getting three on 23 December and four on 2 January. On 1 January, Monty and his gunners had

destroyed two large barges at Green. Why were all these barges at Green Island? According to Morison (1950, vol. VI, p. 413), the island was a main stop on the barge haul that linked Rabaul and New Ireland with Buka, on the northwest end of Bougainville.

16 February This was a dull day indeed. We flew our regular patrols but not a word was reported.

17 February This was a very big day in our part of the Pacific. Our carriers raided Truk, our troops landed on Eniwetok, the Feind crew patrolled to the southern edge of Truk, Monty spotted four DDs shelling Rabaul, and the Searls crew shot down a Betty.

Of course, our carriers were the big show. At dawn, a Fifth Fleet task force with nine fleet carriers hit Truk. NINE! Just after Coral Sea, when our squadron's forefathers were flying the long searches in PBYs, we had three carriers, one severely damaged.

Most of the Jap combined fleet at Truk had taken a powder, but our carrier planes sank what remained and destroyed over 200 enemy planes. For good measure, the carriers stuck around for a repeat performance on the 18th. This one gigantic raid ended Truk's role as the major Japanese base in the Pacific. Without Truk, the Caroline Islands of the Central Pacific and New Ireland in the South Pacific were history. The Japanese on these islands would sit and wait for the war to end.

VB-104 had been sending snoopers to Truk to gather information for the Fifth Fleet guys, in the Central Pacific, and to satisfy the curiosity of our guy, Adm Bull Halsey ComSoPac. The other guy, Dugout You-Know-Who, ComSowestPac, could get his information from the overseas edition of Time Mag.

The Truk raid was not the only setback for the Japanese on this day. While the carriers were busy at Truk, our Marines and Army troops made the initial landing on Eniwetok. The airfield and lagoon at Eniwetok would soon become a large base from which to launch raids into the Western Pacific.

VB-104 played a bit part in the Truk raid. The Feind crew, without Feind but in the able hands of John Burton, flew 11.9 hours and saw the outer islands on the south side of Truk. It was a big deal to see Truk. Burton recalls that near the end of their search they saw another plane and headed toward it. As they drew closer they could tell that it was a seaplane and because of its location, way out at the end of the sector, assumed that it was Japanese. Burton started an attack and at the last minute saw a white star on the hull and ordered his gunners to hold their fire. As he passed under the seaplane he recognized it as a PBM. This PBM

must have been flying a patrol on the south flank of our carriers. Truk is only 900 miles from Kwajalein and 650 miles from Eniwetok. The PBM must have been working from the Kwajalein lagoon.

It is unfortunate that the Feind crew was sent out to the Truk area without any warning that there could be friendly planes in the area. They could have shot down the PBM. Or sunk a friendly carrier! If the Feind crew was surprised to see the PBM, imagine how surprised the PBM crew was to have a PB4Y make a run on them?

Although Navy PB4Ys could stand up to Jap fighters, it was our fighter-vulnerable seaplanes, PBYs and later PBMs, that flew the first patrols into Jap areas. Seaplanes could operate from island lagoons only a few days after the islands were invaded and small seaplane tenders could be anchored in the lagoon. PB4Ys had to wait for a bomber strip to be built with room for the large planes. Thus our first patrol planes in the Solomons had been PBYs operating from a tender on a small bay on the north side of Malaita. Two years later, in the Okinawa campaign, PBMs were operating from tenders at Kerama Retto a day or two **before** our troops went ashore on Okinawa on 1 April 1945. PB4Y-2 Privateers did not make it to Okinawa until three weeks later when there was room for them on Yontan field. The PBMs must have been snooping around Truk as soon as the lagoon at Kwajalein was available, probably just a day or two after the 1 February landing there.

Montgomery and crew on a nite-snooper spent two hours and 20 minutes in the Rabaul-St. George Area, spotting for Capt Rodger W. Simpson's Destroyer Squadron 12. Ray Ming's entry in our War Diary reads, "On the night of February 17-18, provided one plane as spotter and snooper for a 5 DD task force engaged in bombardment of enemy installations and shipping in the Rabaul townsite-Simpson Harbor area and along St. George Channel. The plane stayed at extremely low altitudes while directing the bombardment despite the very intense A/A fired. In addition dropped 20 - 100# A.P. bombs on targets of opportunity."

We gain some admiration for Monty and his crew and some perspective on their work this night from the description of the action in Morison (1950, vol. VI, p.410). Morison wrote, "Five destroyers of Captain Simpson's Squadron 12 threw the first ship bombardment into Rabaul on the night of 17-18 February. Under a heavy cloud-wrack and through frequent rain squalls the destroyers, guided by SG radar . . . , entered St. George Channel before midnight, steamed around Duke of York Island in search of shipping, and fired 3868 rounds of 5-inch on Rabaul town, installations and supply areas during the midwatch of 18 February, while steaming 20 knots under a smoke screen. They also launched 15 torpedoes against shipping in Blanch Bay. Shore batteries opened up on the destroyers about five minutes after the bombardment commenced, but made no hits. After

this exhibition of courage and good seamanship, Simpson retired at 30 knots." After his exhibition of courage and good airmanship, Monty and his crew retired at 160 knots.

From Morison we learn about the low overcast and thus why Monty "stayed at extremely low altitude." It is interesting that Morison made no mention of the spotting done by Monty, but then Ming made no mention of Capt Simpson. Hell's Bells, Ming didn't even mention Monty. Everyone looks through a different knothole and gets their own view of the game.

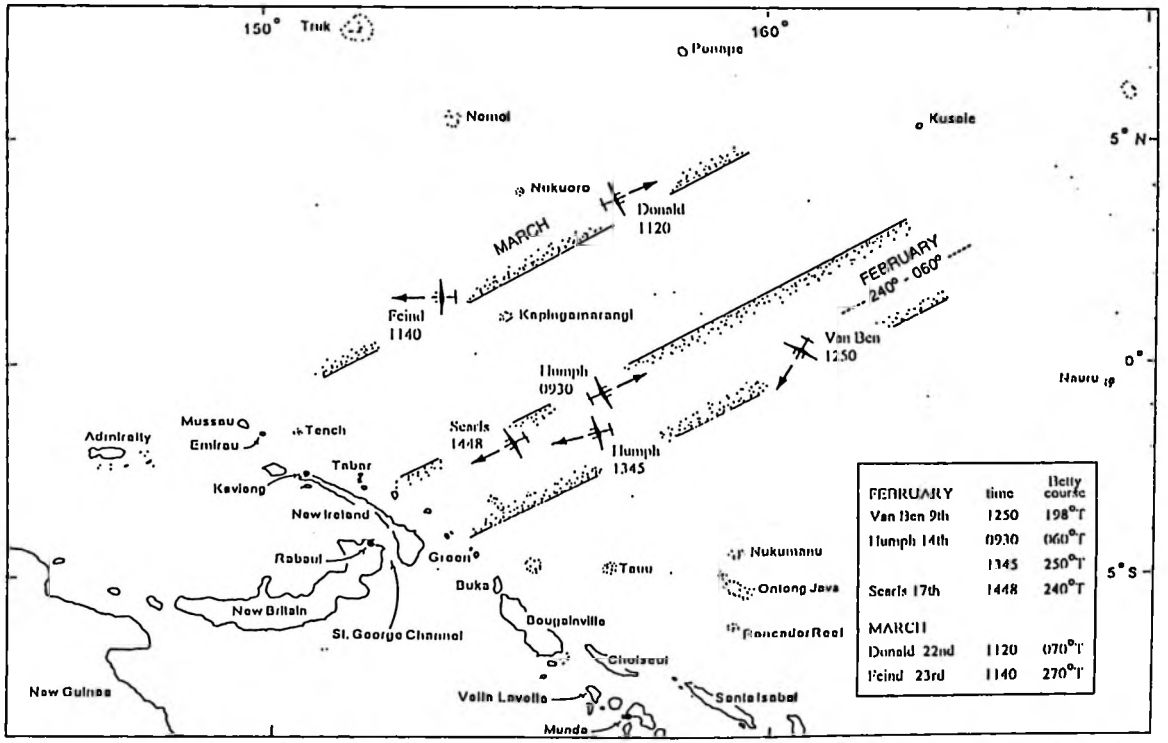
While Monty was at Rabaul, Lt Mitchell of 106 was doing a similar job with our destroyers near Kavieng. What's going on? The only place as scary as Truk was Rabaul, and we have a plane at Truk and another at Rabaul. We were winning the war, that's what's going on. Rabaul was a shadow of its former self and Truk was about to go down the "scary scale" from a 10 to zero!

The 104 War Diary "headline" for today reads, "This squadron shot down its seventh Betty in the vicinity of 01° 43' S; 156° 16' E, while on routine patrol."

While the Feind crew was trucking to Truk, and Monty was readying for Rabaul, Searls and his crew were doing a "Routine 800 miles patrol" in Sector 4. They took off at 0600, climbed out over Choiseul and saw only white caps out to the end of their sector. They flew their cross leg about noon, and when they were almost half way home, at 1448L, they spotted their Betty. Searls was at 10,300 feet on course 170°T; the Betty was at 1000 feet on course 240°T, directly beneath Searls and crossing from port to starboard. The Japanese patrol plane was probably also on its way home, to Rabaul or Kavieng, after a long patrol looking for our carriers.

In a shallow dive, Searls turned to parallel the Betty's course and attack from high on its port quarter. When Searls was at 5000 feet, the Betty spotted the approaching 4Y and started a gentle turn to starboard that Searls followed easily. The enemy's tail 20mm cannon opened fire with about six bursts that fell short. After these bursts, no more fire came from the Betty. Incredible! The only defense was a few bursts from the tail 20mm.

The Searls crew gradually closed to 600 yards, the maximum range for our guns, and the gunners opened fire: F. P. Browning in the bow turret, R. J. Roller in the belly turret, and L. J. Verret on the starboard waist gun. Searls continued the shallow dive and closed gradually to 100 yards, at which point the Betty started a sharp turn to port, attempting to evade the now concentrated barrage from the PB4Y. To prevent over-running, Searls quickly crossed over and maneuvered into position off the Betty's beam. The belly turret and waist gunners



Japanese Betty patrol planes shot down by VB-104 during February and March, 1944. The times, positions, and courses suggest that in February the Bettys were flying a barrier patrol from Rabaul. In March, the Bettys had moved northwest, perhaps flying a similar patrol out of Truk (see Text).

maintained a steady stream of bullets into the enemy plane and its port engine began to smoke heavily. The Betty then made a sharp turn to starboard, and Searls' tail turret gunner, R. Franko, opened up and holed it many times as the 4Y slightly overran the Betty. Suddenly, the Betty nosed over and crashed into the water. Since both engines were functioning and a high rate of speed was being maintained at the moment of impact, Searls believed the pilots were killed and the plane went out of control. There was no explosion before or after the crash and no fires were started. Searls circled the debris but saw no signs of survivors or rafts. The 4Y gunners had fired 535 rounds of .50 caliber. The time, from the moment of sighting to "splash," was about five minutes.

Attacking Bettys from high on their quarter had several advantages. The Betty's tail gunner can not bring his gun to bear. The pilot can't see the attacking plane and must depend on inter-com to keep track of the attacker's position and maneuvers. The 7.7 in the top blister was quite ineffective. In this action, the tail gunner used poor judgement in opening fire from extreme range. The very slight evasive maneuvers of the Jap pilot did not hamper the deadly effectiveness of the PB4Y gunners.

From the ACA Report: "Again, the combination of altitude advantage (at least 3000') and sighting within a reasonably close distance, plus the important element of surprise and gradual let-down approach has provided the **eighth** watery-grave for Bettys shot down by members of this squadron. Three very probables are not included." We were shooting down so many Bettys that Ming was having trouble keeping count. The War Diary says Searls' Betty was the squadron's **seventh**!

Betty Special The Japanese Betty patrol planes were special for us because they were our counterparts, patrolling the same area with the same search mission that we had. When we shot down a Betty while on one of our patrols, we not only provided our command with our search information, but we denied similar information to the enemy. It was the absolute best job that we could do. It was, then, extra special, that during the critical days before our carriers raided Truk, we searched the seas south of Truk and denied the enemy that opportunity.

The four Bettys that we splashed in nine days, 9 thru 17 February, were obviously part of an air patrol screen, probably flying out of Rabaul along the 240° - 060° line (see map). There is nothing in the squadron records to indicate that we were aware of this pattern of Betty patrolling, but it appears obvious now. When we downed a plane in the morning (Humphrey's Betty #1) it was outbound from Rabaul. When we shot one down near mid-day (Van Ben's Betty), it was near the end of its sector, perhaps on a crossleg. When we downed them in the

early afternoon (Humphrey's Betty #2 and Searls' Betty), they were finishing their search and approaching their base.

What were the Jap patrol planes looking for? Our carriers. Everyone must have known that we were building carriers, they were leaving the United States to join the Pacific Fleet, and soon they would be making a major strike. The Japs wanted to know when and from what direction, and hence their barrier patrol across our sectors.

It is interesting that the last four Bettys the squadron attacked made only minor evasive maneuvers and lacked fire power compared to the Bettys that we had attacked in earlier months. I think we were no longer dealing with the first team of Betty crews. In this connection, it is interesting to note U. S. Marine Major Boyington's ride in a Betty. Super-ace "Pappy" Boyington, skipper of the Black Sheep F4U squadron, flying out of Vella Lavella and Torokina, had been a prisoner of war at Rabaul since 3 January 1944 (Sherrod, 1952). On 17 February, Boyington and a few other prisoners were loaded in a Betty and flown to Truk, landing there **during** our carrier raid on that island. Of interest here is "Pappy" Boyington's description of the Betty's crew. It consisted of pilot, co-pilot, and a rear gunner (Boyington, 1958). Only one crewman to man all of the guns and do whatever else the "plane captain" had to do. To be sure, Boyington was riding in a Betty on transport duty, but Rabaul to Truk was a hot run where even transports could expect to be attacked. It is quite possible that most Bettys now operating out of Rabaul had crews such as Boyington described—two pilots and one gunner. A Betty with one gunner would not have much chance against the six deadeye gunners in one of our Navy Liberators.

One of our ACA Reports offered the speculation that the Japanese were sacrificing armament, gunners, and bomb load for an increased radius of patrol made necessary because of the loss of operating bases. Lighter loads would also materially increase their prime defense—speed. It is my pet theory that the better planes and hotter crews of the Japanese patrol squadrons had been battered by attacks on Rabaul and Kavieng. There were no replacements coming to Rabaul, so the Jap Air Command there was using Betty planes and crews that had been serving in transport squadrons (Japanese equivalents of our NATS, MATS, or SCATS) for combat patrols.

The Japanese finally learned where our carriers were when our carrier planes hit Truk on 17-18 February. Our carrier task force had approached from the east, not from the southeast through our area. Once our carriers were located, we saw no more Bettys patrolling across our sectors in February. Our last Betty kill on the 240°-060° patrol line from Rabaul was on 17 February. On the 19th, the Japanese high command ordered all planes at Rabaul to retreat to safer bases.

18 February Essen and his crew flew Sector 1 as a 1000-miler in 14.6 hours. They found three Jap barges along the upper west coast of New Ireland and dropped their 500 pound bombs on them. Two near misses crippled one barge and it was finished off with strafing. There was no ACA Report on this successful attack. Either Ray Ming had writer's block or barges no longer were worth an ACA Report—just a listing in the War Diary. While Essen was in Sector 1, our carriers finished their work on Truk and headed east.

19 February John Alley and his crew had the long patrol, 12.4 hours, to make the daily look at the southern approach to Truk. They saw nothing to report. Our patrols were seeing the southern islands in the reef that fringed the Truk lagoon. We did not see the large volcanic islands with airfields that were at the center of the lagoon, hence our patrols did not report the smoke and fire of the oil storage tanks that had been set on fire by our carrier planes.

20 February Since early January, VF-17, The Jolly Rogers flying F4Us, had been based at Torokina. From there, the squadron's planes rose to escort Army B-24s to Rabaul. VF-17's pilots engaged Jap fighters every day, and never lost a B-24 that they were protecting. On 20 February, however, VF-17 found no Jap fighters at Rabaul. All of Rabaul's planes that could fly had been ordered to rear bases (Blackburn, 1989).

It was not just VF-17 that had made the Jap planes run. Our destroyers were bombarding their airfields, our carriers had neutralized Truk, and our men on Green Island were building an airfield. And of course, we had shot down a few of their Betty patrol planes.

The day the Japanese planes left Rabaul was an uneventful day for 104. Searls flew Sector 1 in 12.7 hours and Humphrey went 1000 miles out somewhere, 12.3 hours. Smith patrolled Sector 10 in 10.8 hours with "no incident," and Feind patrolled 10.8 hours, probably also in a cold sector.

21 February This was a day of note for VB-104. Six months earlier, on 21 August, we had flown our first patrols out of Guadalcanal. The "Word" was that a combat tour was supposed to be six months, so our relief squadron was due in tomorrow. Fat chance. We started working Navy overtime—same pay, extra hours.

All our hops were cold, even the snooper to Truk. Monty and crew extended Sector 3 to do the snoop in 13.5 hours.

The Anderson crew and PPC Bob Swinton returned from R & R in New Zealand.

22 February Essen and crew flew from Munda and landed on Sterling Island, one of the Treasury Group off the southeast end of Bougainville. At the advanced destroyer base there, Essen got instructions to fly to the area southwest of Kavieng and spot for three of our destroyers. Ed Hagen, Essen's first pilot, wrote in his log, "Spotting. 3 DD got 1 AK & several barges SW New Ireland, So. side Kavieng." Essen was spotting for Capt Arleigh Burke in destroyer *Charles Ausburne*. From Morison (1950, vol. VI, p.421), ". . . and after dark the three destroyers, *Charles Ausburne, Dyson* and *Stanly*, operating separately, picked up on their radar screens and sank by gunfire a small freighter and a few barges." Just like Ed Hagen said. Morison reports that later the overcast became heavy and "made plane spotting impossible."

It was 106's turn to do the night spotting for DDs at Rabaul and the Duke of York area. The 106 War Diary records that one of their planes made a special reconnaissance of Kapingamarangi for ComTHIRDFlt [Halsey]. A plane of our search group flew over Kapingamarangi every day and everything that we could do had been done to that island. I can't imagine what "special reconnaissance" was needed.

Jock and I, and the rest of the Clagett crew left Munda bound for Sydney, Australia. What fun Jock and I planned to have!

23 February The 23rd was a big day for Bill Lyle—his first solo in a PB4Y-1. Rip Riley, Chief Warrant Officer and squadron maintenance officer, served as Bill's plane captain. Nothing but the best for Bill.

It was 104's turn again to do the Truk snooper. Whit Wright and his crew took the flight, logging 13.6 hours. According to Whit's log, "Saw Truk for 1st time." The War Diary makes a big deal of saying that Whit patrolled "within 40 miles of Truk" and ". . . returned with information concerning the radio range frequency and identification signals from that base." I believe that we were ignorant of the carrier raid on Truk! We were fat, dumb, and more or less happy doing our assigned tasks, snooping within "40 miles" of Truk, not knowing that the place had been blasted to smithereens by planes from nine carriers.

24 February The usual dull flights but one of some interest. Ben Antonik, with Jeff Hemphill as co-pilot and an unidentified crew, flew Sector 1, bending it around to look at the Admiralties. Even with 14.1 hours of searching, they had nothing to report.

25 February Humphrey and crew had the evening scouting and spotting detail for our destroyers off the upper west coast of New Ireland. They directed DD fire that sank two small auxiliary vessels. At dawn, Chick Hayward, skipper of 106,

had spotted for five DDs (TG-38.4), shelling Kavieng. Hayward, like Sears, was a flying skipper.

Our War Diary records, "Our search plane patrolling within 35 miles of Truk returned with information concerning the radio range frequency and identification signals from that base." It was 104's day to snoop Truk, but we have no pilot's log to account for this hop. I wonder if we were really concerned about "radio range frequency and identification signals?" (See also Wright 23 February) Did we expect to make instrument led-downs on their range? Best guess is that we were getting their **radar** frequencies and early warning detection abilities. We still were not getting close enough to Truk to see the inner islands and the damage that our carrier planes had done.

26 February Whit Wright flew Sector 6, to the north, 11.5 hours. He got out as far at Ngatik Atoll, a group of 10 small, low, palm covered islets 90 miles southwest of Ponape. Whit saw nothing on Ngatik worth reporting; it was just another atoll to add to his long list of Pacific atolls and islands flown over.

The Essen crew plus Jerry Didier from the Swinton crew, cranked up old reliable, 32009, and flew to Espiritu. The next day they risked their lives on SCATS, anything to get to Auckland, New Zealand.

27 February Smith and crew were flying Sector 3. When they were near the Nuguria Islands (Lat. 03° 12' S, 154° 30' E), a group of low, coconut islands 90 miles north of Green Island, they saw a Jap sub crash dive.

Stoppy was back flying with his crew, seeing nothing during 10.1 hours in Sector 10. Searls flew Sector 11, adjacent to Stoppy and also saw nothing. There seemed little reason to send big, bad Navy Liberators into these quiet waters.

28 February We flew our usual patrols but nothing was reported.

29 February Monty and his crew made the "second special reconnaissance of Ponape Island." Monty carried no bombs but he made a strafing run on a small AK three miles off the entrance to Ponape Harbor. The ship and some shore batteries fired scattered and inaccurate AA. Monty and crew reported on installations at Ponape, but special radar detection gear failed to find any indication of radar on the island.

I am not sure why we were making special reconnaissance hops to Ponape. From 15 through 26 February, Army B-24s from Tarawa bombed Ponape, trying to shut down its very fine airfield. When Monty got there, the Ponape Japs probably had no aircraft in service, but they would have been madder than hell and eager to fire their AA. They expected to be invaded, but Ponape, like Truk,

was bypassed, and the more that 14, 000 Jap troops there "sat out" the rest of the war on a beautiful island in the Central Pacific.

On this last day of February, Wright flew Sector 9, Reichert went out over Nukumanu and Ontong Java, and Robert Marion Finley commanded the Swinton crew on his first hop as PPC! Fin loved to fly. He had flown before going in the Navy, flew four years in the Navy, earning a Navy Cross, and then did 25 years with PanAm, retiring as a PanAm Captain. I helped Fin get in Pan Am. Fin had "outgrown" his Navy uniforms so I gave him my best set of blues and he converted them to PanAm—a new hatband, new wings, different stripes, and he was on his way.

And there was one other minor happening this day. The U. S. 1st Cavalry Division landed in the Admiralties. MacArthur was the pusher on this operation We would have the Army camped among the coconut trees on an island near the end of our hottest sector!

What a busy month this was. First we moved from Guadalcanal to Munda and then in nine days, from the 9th to the 17th, the squadron splashed four Bettys. The greatest change for us was our destroyers and troops moving into our search area. Our destroyers had taken over some of our hunting waters and we had become their scouts and spotters. One of our PT-boat squadrons had moved to Green Island and was busy cleaning up the last few Jap barges that we had overlooked.

We were short-timers now, six months in combat and a week past our relief date. We approached March looking for the incoming planes of our relief squadron and thinking of Stateside.

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Chapter 14 Two of our Planes, two Bettys, Lost at Sea. Finishing Touches

March 1944 Munda, New Georgia

Surely this would be our last month in the Solomon Islands. We were ready to move east. The Japanese, at least those that could get transportation, were out of the Solomons. Those in New Ireland and the Central Pacific, Nauru, Ponape, and Kapingamarangi were moving west, or digging in for the duration. Things were looking rosy, but looks would prove deceiving.

Our equipment and crews were showing signs of wear. We were starting this month with 12 planes: 11 were combat ready and one was on limited duty, transport only. Our planes had been in constant use for nine months. They had served through most of our training and had been abused for over six months of combat in the Solomons—all of that time outdoors in the tropics. Our planes needed relief as much as our crews.

Wear and tear on our pilots and aircrewmen were requiring shifts in personnel from one crew to another. Not good, but necessary. The R & Rs in Australia and New Zealand had given each crew a big boost, but the strain of six months in combat was not easily erased. As the month started, two crews (Clagett and Essen), were away and the last crew for R & R would soon leave. The R & R program was drawing to a close.

March is here and here we go. Our last month—we hope!

1 March The skipper returned from his holiday in New Zealand to find his squadron was flying some strange patrols. The Feind crew was on a 12.2-hour reconnaissance of Ponape Island. Ponape was over 920 miles on course 005° from Munda, so while the Feind crew snooped around this big island, their lone 4Y was a long way from a friendly base. The squadron had flown several reccos of Ponape with no serious difficulties from the Japs now stranded there, but even minor damage from AA or enemy fighters could cause a serious problem this far from base. Feind successfully completed the recco of Ponape and headed home.

Plane captain Charlie Vey remembers this flight for more than the look at Ponape: "Just after completing our reconnaissance of Ponape, we spotted a Mavis and gave chase. The Mavis, an old fashioned 4-engine flying boat, was just under some scattered clouds, as were we. We lost the Mavis in a big billowy cumulus cloud before getting in range. No shots were fired and we turned for home. When we started to secure our guns we discovered the belly turret was fouled and we were unable to retract."

Inability to retract the belly turret was a serious problem. In its down position, the turret added significant drag and increased fuel consumption for the long flight home. More important, because the belly turret extended below the lowered landing gear, landing with the turret down would slam the turret into the runway. This would not only crunch the turret, but probably wreck the airframe, and possibly wipe out the entire plane. It was important to solve the problem of the turret that wouldn't retract.

Charlie Vey continues, "The belly turret was suspended from the overhead on a central hydraulic cylinder, flanked by two guide rods about one inch in diameter. Something had hung up when Goldbaum had rotated the turret and the guide rods had attempted to entwine the hydraulic cylinder.

"Bill Forrester (210 pounds of rawboned muscle) tried to straighten the guide rods, to no avail. The hydraulic system coupled with the bomb hoist (with the cable fairlead through a pulley placed above the turret for just such an emergency) couldn't budge the thing. We broke the bomb hoist in our attempt.

"By this time an hour had passed, and we'd used a lot of gasoline chasing the Mavis, so it was important to get rid of the drag, as well as facilitate our hoped-for landing at Munda."

Charlie Vey reasoned that if the turret wouldn't come up, it would have to go down. His solution was to cut out the belly turret and let it fall into the sea.

"The installation of the turret," Charlie continues, "was such that the nuts on the bolts around the horizontal ring that supported it when extended were inaccessible from inside the airplane. As I remember, there were at least six, probably eight, bolts. Forrester and I set to work with a cold chisel, hammer, and

fire axe and in about an hour we managed to drop the turret into the ocean, without causing any structural damage to the plane.

"When the turret departed, the tail rose several degrees and we closed the waist hatches to further reduce drag. I can't tell whether it increased our airspeed, but assume it must have.

"When we landed at Munda (with less that 100 gallons of gasoline) we taxied to the hardstand, left the bomb bay doors closed and the entire crew exited the plane via the belly turret aperture. This caused some surprise to the ordnance and fueling crews, who'd just rolled up."

So there was Bu. No. 32080, *Unapproachable*, safely on the field at Munda, but with a gaping hole where the belly turret should have been. Vey and Forrester had done such a fine job removing the belly turret and consigning it to the depths of the Pacific, that no repairs to the 4Y were necessary. There was an abundance of belly turrets at Munda, salvaged from army B-24s on the scrap heap, so previously-owned turret was installed and 32080 was ready to go.

Our other flights for this day did not match the Feind crew's for excitement and ingenuity. Smith flew Sector 4, 10.1 hours, and gave Kapingamarangi and Nukuoro hard looks. Stoppy flew Sector 5 and made a special "snooper" of Nukuoro, jogging a bit to the west of his sector to check that island. Nukuoro was 150 miles north of Kapingamarangi but inside our 800-mile sector from Munda. To us, the island appeared to be a perfect place for the Japanese to base seaplanes, just as they did regularly at Kapingamarangi. The double-look by Smith and then Stoppy, was to catch the Japanese operating seaplanes after our usual, daily patrol plane had looked at the island and pronounced everything quiet. With our daily, and sometimes daily-double, looks at Nukuoro, we never saw Jap seaplane activity there. Searls flew Sector 2, 10.4 hours, but had no special assignment for snooping. Jim Smith's patrol on this day was special for him and the squadron. This was Jim's last patrol with VB-104. In two days, he would leave the squadron, headed Stateside. The Feind crew still took first prize: The only crew to return from patrol without their belly turret.

2 March Most of our patrols these days were uneventful, but we had some noteworthy housekeeping flights. Harper Joslyn and Dag DeGolia flew an engine run-in hop with Rip Riley as their plane captain. Harp and Dag, co-pilots with PPC Searls, Crew 15, had been flying together for a year. This would be their last flight together.

Van Benschoten and his crew returned from Espiritu in good old 32009. They were rested and refreshed after a week in New Zealand.

3 March Feind, Van Ben, Monty, Swinton, and Wright flew patrols. Whit went way out in Sector 1, looking in on Kavieng and Mussau. Van Ben, just back from relaxing and recreationing, flew Sector 3. Swinton's patrol in Sector 5 was not noteworthy except that he did not have his usual co-pilots, Didier and Finley. Didier was in New Zealand with the Essen crew and Fin departed this day for New Zealand with the Stoppleman crew. Dag DeGolia was now Swinton's first pilot and a navigator on loan from VB-106 was the navigator. [NOTE: Swinton's log gives the date for this patrol as 2 March. DeGolia's log says 3 March. DeGolia's log is correct.] There is nothing in our records that explain why the Swinton crew was dismembered for R & R.

Most noteworthy hop for the day was by the Stoppleman crew. They flew from Munda to Espiritu in our "corporate jet" carrying two of our pilots, Smith and Finley, as passengers. At Espiritu, our executive officer, Lt Jim Smith, said goodby and headed Stateside. He was scheduled to enter a navy engineering school and therefore was leaving the squadron a little early. The Stoppleman crew and Fin went on to New Zealand in an army DC-3 on 5 March.

4 March Tom Dodson, PPC'ing the Alley crew, flew a regular patrol, 9.8 hours, and on his way home, dropped his bombs on an assigned target on Choiseul. Tom recalls dropping from "masthead" height "on some land target." Our War Diary records: "Two planes. Bombing barge staging points, Choiseul Bay area. Dropped 8-500# G.P. 4-5 sec. delay fuse. Target well covered." The normal bomb load on our patrols was four 500 pound bombs, so two planes would have dropped a total of eight bombs. We don't know which crew flew the second plane.

VB-106 made a special raid, not just a "drop your bombs on the way back from patrol" deal. The VB-106 War Diary reports, "Six planes low level bombing Taro Isl., Choiseul Bay. 48 bombs dropped." The bomb load for the 106 planes on this raid, eight 500 pound bombs, was double the normal patrol load. Choiseul Bay was only 100 miles from Munda, so sufficient gas and the bombs were a light load.

Why Choiseul Bay? Choiseul Bay was at the west end of Choiseul Island, just opposite the southeast end of Bougainville. It was the "jumping off place" for enemy barges trying to get back to Japanese territory. The Japs were scrambling west, pursuing the setting sun. They had a long way to go and would have been safer in Choiseul Bay. Further west, on Bougainville and New Ireland, they would get "drive by" shootings by our destroyers. Choiseul Bay and Bougainville Strait, between Choiseul and Bougainville, was "foul ground" with "unmarked underwater rocks." It was a bad place for our destroyers to work, therefore the 4Y-1 strikes. Our defense perimeter around Torokina was still getting heavy

pressure from enemy troops. The Jap barge fleet was trying to get Choiseul troops into the Torokina fight.

5 March We were flying a few little hops, just picking away at what was left of the enemy. Donald and crew flew a short patrol, returning after only 7.1 hours because of engine trouble. They had contacted a submarine, but did not attack because they were not certain that it was enemy. We gave all subs the benefit of the doubt. It was better to let a Jap sub get away than to sink one of our own subs. Somehow, after returning to base, Donald learned that the sub he had seen was enemy.

On the night of the 5th, Van Ben and his crew flew a 10.0-hour, radar detection snoop along the west coast New Ireland, Rabaul, Kavieng, and around New Hanover Island. Two radar officers were along to do the radar detection.

A 106 plane bombed and strafed the Jap supply areas at Monoitu Mission, Bougainville. Another of their planes spotted for Destroyer Division 43 that was shelling Namatanai, New Ireland. We remembered Namatanai very well. Donald and his crew strafed the Jap airfield there on 15 December and Leo Bauer wrote in his log, "Scratch one truck."

6 March Monty, Swinton (with DeGolia and a 106-loaner navigator), and Reichert flew uneventful patrols. Swinton was in Sector 9 and Reich saw Nauru. Reichert got the squadron's last look at Nauru. Our move to Munda had taken us further away from Nauru, while the PB4Y-1s on Abemama were only 400 miles from that island. VB-108 and VB-109, and probably PV squadrons, would have to keep track of nasty old Nauru.

7 - 11 March The first six days of March had been very quiet, with little or no trouble from the Japanese, and we expected the seventh to be more of the same. We had three crews away on urgent business, R & R in New Zealand and Australia, the same number that we sent out on patrol.

On the 7th, Feind flew a 10.2-hour reconnaissance of Kavieng. Seeing Kavieng was no longer anything special, certainly not scary, and Feind saw nothing to report. Alley flew Sector 2 with nothing to report. The Searls crew was in Sector 3, which went out past Kilinailau, Nuguria, and Kapingamarangi. The Feind and Alley crews were flying 10-hour sectors, 800-milers, and Searls must have been doing the same. The Feind and Alley crews returned on schedule, but the Searls crew was late. We watched and waited, to that critical time when we knew they would be out of gas and down somewhere, but not at Munda. The Searls crew did not make it back to any of our bases and were presumed to be lost at sea.

Our War Diary entry reads: "On March 7, 1944, one (1) PB4Y-1 aircraft, Bu. No. 32079, failed to return to base while conducting a routine search mission at sea. Subsequent searches for survivors were negative. Probable cause remains undetermined as initially reported by ComBomRon 104 to Secretary Navy via airmailgram dated 8 March 1944."

As usual, our War Diary did not mention that a crew was lost. With 32079 we lost Crew 15: PPC Searls, co-pilot Harp Joslyn, and a VB-106 navigator who was taking DeGolia's place while Dag flew with Swinton. We also lost plane captain Emery and first radioman Plank. In recent years we have assumed that all of Crew 15 pictured in our tour book, except DeGolia, were lost: Browning, Nelson, Page, Verret, Roller and Franko. In 1995, Charlie Ehemann learned that the regular tail gunner, Robert Franko, missed this flight. Franko had been unable to visit Sydney with his crew because of a bout with dengue fever. He was in New Zealand with another crew when the Searls crew was lost. We do not know who was taking Franko's place in the tail turret.

There is nothing in the squadron's records about this flight beyond the entry in the War Diary. DeGolia recalls that Searls went out a sector that passed near Kapingamarangi. There was no radio message from the Searls crew. Whatever happened, happened so suddenly that there was no time to get off a message. Pilots in adjacent sectors reported that the weather was very bad, so weather may have been a factor. The Searls crew just did not return from patrol; an all too common fate of patrol crews in these early days of the war.

On 8 March, we covered our regular sectors and all other available crews and planes flew special searches. Our Search Group managed to send out four special searches; their only duty was to find the Searls crew. Monty flew for 12.0 hours and Van Ben 11.9. Van landed at Munda with only 185 gallons of gas in his tanks. In addition, VB-106 sent out two special searches in the same area. Our special searches flew at low altitude, low enough to see plane wreckage or life rafts on the water and to see people stranded on islands. Today's searches found no sign of the Searls crew or their plane.

Our regular assigned patrols for this day were: Sears Sector 5; Mike Keiser Sector 6; Donald; and Humphrey. We do not know what crew Mike Keiser, regular first pilot with Monty, took out on his patrol. Perhaps it was Crew 2, its old PPC, Jim Smith, now on his way Stateside.

On 9 March, the second day after loss of the Searls crew, we again flew our regular assigned patrols and sent all other available planes and crews on special searches. Our regular patrols were: Reichert 10.5 hours in Sector 1 along Buka and New Ireland; Swinton, 10.9 hours in Sector 2, sighted, but unable to identify, a sub; Anderson in Sector 3 to Kapingamarangi.

Our special searches for the Searls crew were: Wright 14.0 hours in Sector 3, Alley 10.7 and Feind 11.8 in the same general area. Two planes and crews from VB-106 also flew special searches. For our two days of special searches, only Feind had any success. Jack Custer, co-pilot with Feind, wrote in his log: "Found wreckage of #32079." Charlie Vey, plane captain with Feind recalls, "We discovered a main wheel and low pressure oxygen bottle. Heaved over float light, but the sea was running pretty heavy, with a lot of surface wind and we could not relocate it after turning 180 degrees and attempting to come back down the track"

In the early afternoon, I returned with the Clagett crew from Australia. As we climbed out of the plane, we got the word that the Searls crew had been lost and I assumed that DeGolia had been with Searls. Dag and I had been together since we walked in the gate to Naval Reserve Air Base Long Beach to begin our E-base flight training. Fortunately, I had little time to mourn his loss. Swinton returned from the search for Searls and Dag walked into camp. The shuffling of pilots and crewmen during these final days of our tour had saved Dag. VB-104 was short of pilots but VB-106 had just received a "shipment" of navigators. Swinton's co-pilots were on R & R, so Dag and a VB-106 navigator were still filling out the Swinton crew. Less fortunate, was the VB-106 navigator who had taken Dag's place in the Searls crew.

In the midst of searching for Searls, we lost another crew. Anderson and crew were lost in an attack on a small ship at Kapingamarangi. Our War Diary reads, "On March 9, 1944, one (1) PB4Y-1 aircraft, Bu. No. 32069, failed to return to base while conducting a routine search mission at sea. Fragmentary evidence extracted from the radio logs of other search planes revealed that the missing plane had sent a message at approximately 1100L., which the base did not receive, that he was going to attack a small ship near Kapingamarangi. Approximately at 1130L, several search planes received double urgent signal but the message was never sent and no more signals were ever heard. At 1430L the same day, two search planes from VB-106, sister squadron of the Search Group, attacked and sank a small ship unloading inside the lagoon at Kapingamarangi. During this attack, heavy 20mm. fire was received from the ship as well as small calibre automatic fire from the shore, thus it is assumed that the missing plane suffered critical damage during the conduct of its attack on this ship. Subsequent searches for survivors were negative. The loss was reported March 10, by ComBomRon 104 to Secretary Navy via airmailgram."

As usual, our squadron records do not identify the crew that was flying Bu. No. 32069, but of course we know it was Crew 16: PPC Anderson, first pilot Andrews, co-pilot Parker. Until recently we assumed that everyone in the Anderson crew picture in our Tour Book were lost: the three pilots, plane captain

Pate, first radio Solari, and Martin, Weisenshenk, Healy, Flack, and Nichols. We have recently learned that bombardier, R. H. Martin, was saved by a tonsil. He was in sick bay having his tonsils removed and could not go with his crew on their last flight.

On 10 March, we did not fly any regular sectors, but we continued our special searches, now hoping to find survivors of both the Searls and Anderson crews. Besides a single crew that 106 sent out, the Humphrey crew flew 11.3 hours, checking Nuguria (Lat. 03-21'S, Long. 154-30' E.) and Kilinailau. Lody wrote in his log, "No soap." John Humphrey noted in his log, "Special double cover for lost planes." Humph was searching for planes—both Searls and Anderson. We are not sure if "double cover" means that more than one plane was searching in Sector 3 or that his search was for two planes—Searls and Anderson.

On 11 March we were still searching for our lost crews. Clagett and crew, fresh from Sydney, finally got in on the special searches. Page tried to "catch up" by flying for 14.9 hours in Sector 3, returning to Munda after dark. Montgomery and crew also searched in Sector 3. Neither crew saw anything to report.

Today's special searches were the last of the 13 that we flew looking for wreckage or survivors of the Searls and Anderson crews. However, for the rest of our time in this area, every crew that flew Sector 3, thought of the Searls and Anderson crews and kept looking for them.

The squadron also flew some regular assignments: Van Ben did Sector 9 and Donald flew an ASW patrol near Bougainville. Donald's first flight lasted only 2.1 hours because his plane's batteries burned up, forcing a return to base. After replacing the batteries, Herb went out again for 8.7 hours Returning from his anti-sub patrol, he flew the scenic route down the "slot."

The Essen crew and Didier returned from Australia. We were getting the whole squadron together, what was left of it. No more crews were leaving for R & R and the Stoppy crew, the last of the revelers, would soon return from New Zealand.

12 March Whit Wright flew Sector 11 and checked on Nauru. Swinton flew Sector 6, still with DeGolia and now with Didier. With Didier back from Australia, there was no need for the 106 navigator. Van Ben flew Sector 5 and Alley flew a special patrol checking the Tanga Islands (Lat. 03-30"S, Long. 153-18' E). None of these patrols were eventful.

13 - 16 March The war had turned quiet. We flew uneventful patrols, doing our primary search but mostly hoping by some miracle we would find our missing crews. We checked all of the islands, Kapingamarangi, Tauu, Kilinailau, Nuguria, Ontong Java, Nukuoro, again and again, but we found nothing.

17 March Finley returned from New Zealand, two days ahead of his traveling companions, the Stoppleman crew. Jumpin' Joe Weller and his co-pilot for the day, Bill Lyle, without either of their PPCs, flew a bounce hop on the Munda strip. This was Jumpin' Joe's first solo in a 4Y. Weller and Lyle were trusted, but only with war weary 32009.

Patrols for the day were by Clagett and Humphrey, the Humphrey crew checking Nukuoro and Kapingamarangi—again.

18 March The War Diary shows: "Special radar detection check of Nauru Island while on routine search. Successfully completed. Radar was not operating." There was not much reason for Nauru to operate their early warning radar. They must have been low on gas for the generator, out of spare parts for everything, and losing interest in the war. Monty, Donald, Van Ben, and Essen flew patrols but none of them mentioned checking on Nauru.

The main housekeeping flight was a one hour bounce in 32009, A. M. Lodato in command with DeGolia on the cylinder head temperatures—Lody's first solo. Lody wrote in his log: "First hop as B.P.C."

19 March From our War Diary: "Personnel of Marine Amphib. Command aboard regular search plane for pre-invasion beach-head survey of Emirau Island. Successfully completed." Swinton, with Didier and Finley, his crew now back together, flew Sector 1. With Swinton was LtCdr Finigan who eyeballed Emirau for tomorrow's invasion.

Alley flew one of our patrols and his first pilot, Tom Dodson, wrote in his log "Big doings." Tom was referring to the invasion fleet on its way to Emirau. Wright flew Sector 4 in 11.6 hours and must have seen the invasion fleet, but he followed regulations and did not mention it in his log.

The Stoppleman crew returned from New Zealand and they soon would be back at work. They were the tail-enders in our parade to Auckland and Sydney. Our next R & Rs would be in Honolulu and points east.

20 March Four of our old battleships (*New Mexico, Mississippi, Tennessee,* and *Idaho*), two escort carriers, and many destroyers plastered Kavieng. They were drawing the attention of the Japanese, allowing the 4th Marine Regiment to make an easy landing on Emirau. With mighty Kavieng and Rabaul bashed and bypassed, we were beginning to run out of hunting room. Near the end of our hottest sector, Sector 1, there were friendly battleships at sea and our marines camped in coconut plantations on Emirau.

With MacArthur, ComSowestPac, on the Admiralties and Halsey, ComSoPac, on Emirau, the two commands were only 120 miles apart. In six weeks, Halsey would move north to become a carrier admiral and Dugout Doug would continue his hike to return to the Philippines.

Our only patrol was by Fred Feind, with his regular co-pilot John Burton and sit-in Dag DeGolia. They did Sector 6, well away from the action at Emirau and Kavieng.

Bittenbender, with Mike Keiser as his co-pilot, flew to Carney and return. This was Bitt's first solo and he proudly wrote in his log: "B.P.C."

21 March Clagett, Humphrey, Stoppy, and Bittenbender flew patrols. Humphrey, in Sector 1, saw Mussau, Emirau and "The Chain" but did not mention the invasion. Like Whit, he could keep a secret. Stoppy was in Sector 2, and first pilot Hemphill noted the Emirau task force. Bitt flew Sector 4, with McCutcheon and the Van Ben crew but without Van Ben. This was Bitt's first patrol as plane commander.

J. B. Thompson, John Alley's co-pilot, flew Bu. No. 32009 Munda to Guadalcanal & return. From Flash Gordon's log, we learn that this short flight was J. B's maiden voyage as a plane commander.

22 - 23 March The Betty season opened again! We were always looking for Bettys, but at this time in the Solomons campaign, we were not expecting to see any. How wrong we were. With our battleships and Jeep carriers doing Kavieng and Emirau, the Japs, as well as Tom Dodson, sensed "Big doings." Their Bettys were looking for our big ships, so they could direct their subs to them. All the Jap carriers were in home waters, so subs were their only weapon to use against our invasion fleet.

With the Bettys flying again, Donald and his crew left Munda at 0630 for a routine 800 miles patrol in Sector 5, the area nearly due north from Munda. It was a beautiful day for a patrol, "clear and sunny" with 3/10 overcast, cloud bases at 1800 feet, tops 4000 feet. Visibility was 30 miles. At 1120, the Donald crew sighted a Betty at Lat. 03° 50' N; 157° 00' E.—730 miles from Munda, 400 miles southeast of Truk and 120 miles east of Nukuoro

Donald was cruising at 8000 feet on course 090°T, so he must have been flying the crossleg of his sector. When sighted, the Betty was at 4000 feet on course 070°T., four miles ahead of the 4Y. Donald started a diving turn toward the Betty, and when directly above it, range 1000 yards, the crew opened fire. His turret gunners, Bill Knudsen in the bow, R. L. Hammond in the belly, and Roho Rolland on the starboard waist gun, put a concentrated cone of fire into the

Betty's engines and pilot's compartment. The Betty had not detected the presence of the 4Y until this attack.

Enveloped in tracers, the Betty turned to port and streaked for the water with its starboard engine smoking heavily. Donald easily followed this evasive turn and dove on the Betty, closing to within 300 yards, slightly above, while following a series of evasive turns. In these turns, W. L. Sams in the top turret was able to fire into the Betty. Hit by many bursts, the Betty began loosing speed and the 4Y closed directly over it. With Donald's gunners pouring fire into the Betty, it dove into the water and exploded in a huge sheet of orange flame and white smoke. There were no survivors and only scattered debris. The Donald crew could make out a tail wheel, one side wheel, and part of a wing with a red meatball to mark the watery grave.

The gunners fired a total of 600 rounds in the 45 seconds from the time they opened fire until the Betty hit the water.

The Betty's top blister and starboard waist hatch had returned weak ineffective fire, but there was none of the usual 20mm cannon fire from the tail. R. L. Hammond, the belly turret gunner, thinks his opening burst neutralized this area. None of the Betty's bullets hit Donald's 4Y.

Donald's Betty was a "dirty yellowish brown drab" with suns on wings and fuselage. While we are mentioning style, Donald's Navy Liberator was also a dirty brown drab, but with a beautiful, colorful picture of *Pistol Packin' Mama* on the forward fuselage and a side number, 073, in large, black numbers. Herb Donald was flying Page Clagett's plane.

While the Donald crew was destroying the Betty, Montgomery, Reichert, Swinton, and Essen flew uneventful patrols.

Sears, with Cdr Buck Brandley, Chief of Staff of Wing Commander Ezra Kendall as co-pilot, flew to Nadzab, New Guinea via Finschhafen. Besides his regular crew, the skipper had four passengers. This hop must have concerned VB-106's move to New Guinea, which would start in three days. The skipper was already acquainted in New Guinea. On 19 December, he and his crew had flown from Carney Field to Guerney Field, Milne Bay, on the eastern end of New Guinea. There he had visited with some big shots, then returned to Guadalcanal the next day.

On 23 March, Wright, Alley, and Feind flew our regular patrols. Whit flew Sector 1 and spotted for our destroyers shelling Mussau Island. Alley found nothing to report from Sector 2. Feind and his crew, in Sector 3, had all the action. R. M. DeGolia, freelancing now that his regular crew had been lost, was co-piloting with Feind.

Feind was on a routine 800-mile search in Sector 3, in fine weather for patrolling. Visibility was excellent among the 3/10 coverage of cumulus

clouds—bases 2000, tops 4000 feet. Feind's bomb load was two of our usual 500 pound general purpose bombs plus two unusual "Mark 24 Mines."

At 1140, Feind was 60 miles west of Kapingamarangi, Lat. 01° 30' N, 153° 40' E, cruising at 3000 feet on course 164°T. The course shows that he was on the inward leg of his sector and the position put him 630 miles from base. This action was started by Charlie Vey, plane captain and gunner in the port waist, when he reported an unidentified aircraft off the port beam, altitude 1000 feet, distance six miles, on a converging course. Feind turned 90 degrees to port, but did not see the Betty until after the enemy had sighted the 4Y. The Betty turned to course 100°T, approximately reversing its original course, and dove for the water. Feind immediately lowered the belly turret, applied full power (2500 rpm and 48 inches) and jettisoned his bombs and mines.

The Betty took evasive action, fishtailing and turning to port and starboard. However, Feind, by staying on a straight course while Betty was fishtailing, rapidly closed the range. The Betty's tail cannon fired continuously from the time the chase began and the top blister guns joined in as the range closed. At a range of 3200 feet, Feind's turret gunners, W. R. Forrester in the bow and E. W. Goldbaum in the belly, opened fire. The Betty, then flying between five and ten feet above the water, touched the water twice during the encounter. All members of the flight crew agree that what they had seen was not prop wash on the sea, which was very calm, but that the plane actually hit the water.

The chase continued and by 1203, Feind had closed the range to 2000 feet; then by diving from 1500 to 900 feet he finally closed the range to 1200 feet. All guns were pouring fire into the Betty's engines, fuselage and wing-roots.

The Betty began maneuvering with difficulty. At 1205, 25 minutes after the original sighting, she hit the water. Her tail section broke off and she exploded in a tremendous sheet of orange flame. There were no survivors, and the only floating debris was pieces of the tail. These final bursts of .50 caliber rounds that the Feind gunners put into this Betty were the last shots fired by VB-104 on this tour of duty.

With over fifty years of reflection, Charlie Vey now covers this action in a nut shell: "We came in range off the Betty's stbd. quarter and the bow, port waist and belly nailed him."

In addition to the gunners mentioned above, J. J. Conrad was in the top turret, he fired 300 rounds, and L. E. Parham was in the starboard waist. The bow and belly turret gunners each fired 600 rounds and the entire crew fired a total of 1700 rounds.

There was very heavy but inaccurate fire from the Betty's tail 20mm cannon and top blister 7.7. Due to the speed of the Betty, the attack had to be pressed

directly on her tail, exposing the 4Y to continuous fire from the tail cannon. The 4Y received no damaging hits.

This Betty was painted with grayish-green mottling on the fuselage and the top of the wings. Besides the usual "meatballs," there were two red stripes aft of the waist hatches.

The bomb load that Feind jettisoned merits comment. The "Mark 24 Mines," called FIDOS, were so secret that the Aircraft Action Report took care to note that they were "Jettisoned at the location of the encounter. Compromise not possible." FIDOS were no mystery to plane captain Charlie Vey. He remembers, "We had two of those 'torpedo-like' submarine attack devices. Supposedly capable of homing in on a sub once they were in the water."

When dropped near a sub, FIDO could home in on the sound from its screws and blow its stern off. The trick was to be certain that the sub was not a friendly. FIDOS were not perfect. They sometimes ran in circles, allowing one pilot, much later in the war, to gain a moment of fame when he reported by radio, "FIDO chased his tail."

Sears returned from his trip to New Guinea to find that his guys had destroyed two more Bettys. Downing two Bettys in two days was icing on the cake; Sears must have been tickled pink. There was a friendly rivalry between Sears and Chick Hayward, skipper of 106, in Betty hunting. The Sears' Boys had downed nine Bettys (or 10 if you count Humphrey's bouncer) while VB-106 was still looking for their first!

24 March Fleet Air Wing ONE, in the used plane business, arranged a swap. We gave 106 a good combat plane, Bu. No. 32080, in exchange for one of their non-combatant planes, 31975. This was the best evidence yet that 106 was going to some tough fighting in New Guinea and we were going home.

Our only patrol for the day was Stoppy and crew in Sector 3 for 10.5 hours. When they were 650 miles from base, their #3 engine conked out and they returned to Munda on three engines.

25 March This was moving day for VB-106. Thirteen of their 16 planes flew to Nadzab, near Lae, New Guinea, followed the next three days by their other three planes. In New Guinea, they would operate as a Task Unit under the Army's Fifth Air Force. On the 28th they began flying five 800 mile sectors based on Finschhafen, "pursuant to joint directives of ComAirSeventhFleet and ComAdvon Fifth Air Force."

As 106 departed, we flew two patrols. Van Ben and his crew flew Sector 2 and Essen and crew flew Sector 4. Either the first arrivals of VB-115, or the last

departers of VB-106 must have flown sectors 1 and 3. We were no longer flying the high numbered sectors to the east.

26 March This was the day we had been waiting for. We would fly our last patrols and our first crews would leave for Kaneohe.

THE LAST PATROLS: Sears, Stoppleman, and Swinton had flown our first patrols out of Guadalcanal on 21 August 1943. Now, seven months and five days later, Humphrey and Reichert flew our last patrols. Reichert and crew flew Sector 1 and saw New Ireland, Green, and Treasury islands. Humphrey and his crew went out Sector 2, and had the last look at Nuguria and Kilinailau and "The Chain." And that was it. We had started with three uneventful patrols and we finished with two uneventful patrols. In between, a lot had happened.

RELIEF: None of us remembers the arrival date of the first planes of our relief squadron, VB-115. We know that they were very welcome, and some of them must have arrived before today, because our crews started for home. I can't imagine that our crews would start for home without VB-115 crews on the spot to relieve them. VB-115 would be short-timers here at Munda. Very soon, they would move to the new coral runway on Green Island. At Green, VB-115 would be 280 miles northwest of Munda, and able to send short patrols *around* Truk and long snoops west to Yap and Ulithi. With VB-106 already in New Guinea, VB-115's move to Green would end the days of Navy Liberator squadrons in the Solomon Islands. And thus Navy Liberator squadrons moved westward.

KANEOHE BOUND: The squadron would fly 10 of our vintage PB4Y-1s back to Kaneohe. Eight of these were our original planes and two were the "transport 4Ys" that we had inherited from VB-102. The average load for each plane going home was 18 people plus gear—no bombs, no ammo.

From Munda, the usual migration route to Kaneohe took THREE days: day one Munda to Funafuti; day two Funafuti to Palmyra, with an optional gas stop at Canton; day three Palmyra to Kaneohe. However, these three days of travel, took only TWO calendar days. We crossed the International Date Line between Funafuti and Canton, recovering the day that we had lost when we flew out to the Solomons in August 1943.

The first to leave for Kaneohe, the four luckiest crews, were Wright, Montgomery, Donald, and Van Benschoten. They left Munda and landed at Funafuti on the 26th. The next day, 27 March, they headed for Palmyra, crossing the Date Line so they landed there on the 26th. The next day, 27 March, they flew the short flight to Kaneohe.

Our homeward bound planes were crowded. No one complained. Wright, with his regular co-pilots, Shea and CAP Skeem, left Munda in 32081, the plane that Whit had picked up in San Diego 10 months earlier. With Wright, were guest

PPC Swinton and 14 aircrewmen. Monty flew 32061, with three co-pilots, Mike Keiser, CAP Pate and Ed Hagen. Donald and his regular co-pilots Goodman and Bauer, passenger pilots Essen and Finley, and a load of aircrewmen, flew from Munda toward Funafuti. Their plane, 31975, was an oldie, the non-combatant from 102 via 106 that was even older than 32009. Its compass must have been sick. With a flight deck crammed with experienced navigators, they landed at what they thought was Funafuti. When they climbed out of their plane, the line mechs told them that they were on Nukufetau. The Donald bunch, like the Keystone Kops, jumped back in their plane and flew the 30-minute hop south to Funafuti. The next day they continued homeward, making a pit stop at Canton on the way to Palmyra. Van Ben left Munda with the luxury of four co-pilots, regulars McCutcheon and Bittenbender and extras DeGolia and Weller. Their navigation was perfect.

27 March Stoppleman in Bu. No. 32060, and Feind in 32070, departed Munda bound for Kaneohe along the usual route with a refueling stop at Canton. Stoppleman and crew, with extra co-pilot, Bill Lyle, had fourteen passengers, and "Parsons." Feind had a similar load of passengers, all eager to get to Hawaii.

Charlie Vey, plane captain of the Feind crew, remembers the brief overnight stay on Funafuti: "Some of Crew 18, the Reichert crew, flew as passengers with us on the return to Kaneohe. I very distinctly recall this because, on Funafuti, Sam Pruitt, plane captain of Crew 18, and I unbuttoned #2 engine and fixed an oil leak, while everyone else went to chow. Turned out the chow was provided by a black army anti-aircraft outfit and returnees reported it was awful. Sam and I hiked down the beach about a quarter of a mile to a Seabee camp we'd spotted while up on the wing. Chow was over, but a friendly master-at-arms allowed us in. We had a fine meal, topped off with pumpkin pie better than homemade. Turned out that their baker had been a pastry chef in civilian life. We sneaked back for breakfast the next morning. Found they had a cook who could work magic with powered eggs and actually make them palatable. All in all, the two best mess hall meals I ever had west of 180."

28 March John Alley, with three copilots, J. B. Thompson, Dodson, and Ens G. W. Jones, and 14 crewmen, flew 32075 to Funafuti. The next morning, 29 March, the Alley bunch headed northeast, crossed the Date Line, made a pit stop at Canton, and flew on to Palmyra, landing there on the 28th. The morning of the 29th, Alley took off for Kaneohe but after 30 minutes in the air he lost an engine and returned to Palmyra. Alley and crew sat on Palmyra for a few days and watched other crews pass them on the race to Kaneohe.

29 March The Humphrey crew, with extra pilot Howard Gossage and fourteen aircrewmen, headed for Funafuti and not without some danger. They were flying old, warweary 32009, our "restricted" PB4Y-1—heretofore restricted to beer hauls and shuttle flights. They left Funafuti on the 30th, crossed the Date Line and landed at Canton on the 29th. On the 30th they flew to Palmyra and wished the castaway Alley crew the best of luck. The next day, 31 March, the Humphrey gang flew the final leg to Kaneohe.

As March closed, two planes, three crews, and most of our ground personnel remained at Munda—standing by. The Clagett crew and our plane, 32073 *Pistol Packin' Mama*, had been sitting on the ground since our last patrol on 21 March.

March had been our month of highs and lows. On the 7th and 9th the squadron had lost two crews, on the 22nd and 23rd we had shot down two Bettys, and on the 26th we had sent our first crews to Kaneohe.

Chapter 15 Goin' Home

April 1944 Munda, Kaneohe, and San Diego

As April began, VB-104 was scattered. We had crews waiting at Munda, crews enroute to Kaneohe, and crews at Kaneohe.

1 April April Fool's Day. The official day that VB-115 relieved VB-104. Someone must have saluted someone and said, "I relieve you sir." In the War Diary for March, dated 1 April 1944, there is the sentence, "As of the above date, this squadron has been officially relieved by VB-115 and is proceeding to the West Coast of United States via Kaneohe Bay, T. H., for reorganization."

The Clagett crew sprang into action in 32073, heading east for Funafuti. With us were PPC Hagar and his co-pilots, Pettes and Woody, and lots of mechs, radiomen, and ordnancemen. On April 2nd, having spent a quiet night on Funafuti, Clagett headed northeast, bypassed Canton, and landed at Palmyra. We had crossed the International Date Line soon after leaving Funafuti, so at Palmyra it was April first again, our second April Fool's Day for 1944. Jock Sutherland commented that every day was April Fools Day in *Pistol Packin' Mama*. After a good night's sleep, we awoke to another April 2nd and flew the short hop to Kaneohe.

When the Clagett crew landed and rolled to the end of the mat, we were met by the "FOLLOW ME" jeep and led to the hangar area. There, a sailor signaled with wands to guide us into a parking spot. The sailor was a WAVE.

2 April The Alley crew and passengers, with their engine repaired, flew the short flight from Palmyra to Kaneohe, establishing the squadron slowpoke record, Munda to Kaneohe in six days.

The Planes! The Planes! The fates of the fifteen original planes

Bu. No.	Name	Original Owner	Fate of Plane
32048	Sears Steers	Sears, Crew 1	**Crashed** on runway by Searls, Guadalcanal
32060	Momentary Dysentery	Swinton, Crew 14	Returned to Kaneohe by Stoppy
32061	Mark's Farts	Monty, Crew 4	Returned to Kaneohe by Monty
32069	The Schooner	Stoppy, Crew 7	**Lost at sea** with **Anderson** crew
32070	Saints & Sinners	Feind, Crew 6	Returned to Kaneohe by Feind
32071	Red's Devils	Van Ben, Crew 11	Returned to Kaneohe by Van Ben
32073	Pistol Packin' Mama	Clagett, Crew 9	Returned to Kaneohe by Clagett
32074	Donald's Duck	Donald, Crew 8	**Crashed** landing at Russells, Hager
32075	Open Bottom	Alley, Crew 5	Returned to Kaneohe by Alley
32076	You Got It	Humphrey, Crew 12	**Destroyed** by Jap bombs, Guadalcanal
32077	Vulnerable Virgin	Hager, Crew 13	**Lost at sea** with **Dvorachek** crew
32079	Whata-Honey	Searls, Crew 15	**Lost at sea** with **Searls** crew
32080	Unapproachable	Smith, Crew 2	**Traded** to FAW 1, for 31975
32081	Whit's Shits	Wright, Crew 3	Rtnd. to Kaneohe & San Diego by Wright
32083	Astro Arsenal	Dvorachek, Crew 10	Returned to Kaneohe by Sears

3 April The skipper left Munda flying 32083, Dvorachek's old plane. The route to Funafuti passed over the waters where we had searched so long and hard for the Dvorachek crew. With the skipper were co-pilots CAP Ace Neidlinger and AP Malloy, Crew 1 and special passengers, Lt Murray, Lt Sims, Leading Chief Luedeka, and Yeoman Smith. With the boost of one day from crossing the Date Line, they arrived at Kaneohe on 4 April. The squadron was together again.

At Kaneohe, we fooled and frolicked and went into Honolulu for more fooling and frolicking. After a few days adjusting to civilization in the land of the hula, we headed for California. Some crews flew old planes to San Diego while others gladly took the Navy's first available surface transportation.

Our flights from Oahu to San Diego went with skeleton crews: one PPC, two co-pilots, two mechs and two radiomen; thus most of the crewmen rode a ship from Pearl Harbor to San Diego. Whit Wright flew his original plane, 32081 to San Diego, thus completing the circuit—North Island to North Island with a few hot spots in between. Consolidated should have run Whit's plane backwards through the assembly line and reduced it to aluminum stock. Only Whit flew his old plane to San Diego. Our planes stayed at Kaneohe and some of our crews flew old planes left behind by VB-102. The skipper flew old 31975 to San Diego on 12-13 April. He had a skeleton crew, co-pilots Neidlinger and Malloy, mechs Cole and Kelly, and radiomen Stainback and Yusapavich. Montgomery, Stoppleman, Van Benschoten, Humphrey, Swinton, and Alley, and probably others, also flew the long 14- to 15-hour flight to San Diego.

Jess Kennedy, mech and bow gunner in the Stoppleman crew, remembers his flight back to the States. "Lt Stoppleman elected to bring one of VB-102's old planes from Kaneohe to San Diego when we came back to the States. Stoppy's crew was: Jeff Hemphill as co-pilot, Bob Thornton as plane captain, Hal Whist as first radioman, "Jungle Jim" Boulger as conversationalist, and myself. On the Saturday before Easter Sunday, we flew over to Barber's Point for all the fuel we could get aboard and some chow, and took off for North Island, an all night flight. About half way across, Jeff Hemphill and Bob Thornton had a case of stomach flu and they did not enjoy the trip at all. I was sitting up with Stoppy as the sun was coming up and we spotted the west Coast after flight of 14 hours and 38 minutes. Hal Whist had music on the radio most of the night and just as we spotted the West Coast on that Easter Sunday morning, Dinah Shore was singing 'Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.' I do believe if we had to ditch the plane there we all could have walked on water the rest of the way to North Island. This incident stands out in my mind more than all the times I had the 'H' scared out of me."

The nautically inclined members of the squadron cruised to San Diego on the jeep carrier *Breton* CVE-23. Departure from Pearl Harbor was on 6 April 1944, arrival in San Diego was on 13 April. Lt Raymond Ming, formerly our ACI Officer, was now our tour director for the ocean voyage. "Enclosure (A) Roster of Officers," on Ming's basic orders reads like Who's Who in Navy VB aviation: Feind, Clagett, Antonik, Heinke, Burton, Reichert, Gossage, Hagen,

Bittenbender, Lyle, Sutherland, Weller, DeGolia, H. J. Thompson, and Jones. We do not have a copy of "Enclosure (B) Roster of Enlisted Personnel," but all or most of the squadron members that did not fly home must have been on this list and aboard *Breton*.

The Clagett crew, in spite of Clagett's pleadings, chose to go home by jeep carrier. Charlie Vey of the Feind crew, remembers the jeep carrier ride and reports that AP Jack Custer spent the voyage in sick bay with a strep throat, half high on terpinhydrate and codeine.

In San Diego, we finished our transition from combat crews, willing and able to do unheard of things in our Navy Liberators, to Stateside sailors, but still willing and able to do unheard of things. Between our bouts of revelry and preparations to go on leave, we often thought of our accomplishments and losses. Each of us had indelibly imprinted in his mind some of the amazing things that we had done, and had done to us. Always somewhere in our minds were our crews that did not return with us to San Diego. We had gone to the Solomon Islands with 18 highly trained combat crews. Four of these crews, 22% of our original crews, did not return from patrols and were lost at sea.

Each of us carried an individual summary of our cruise in the Solomons. Fortunately, the squadron produced an official written summary which is reproduced here in an appendix.

There were many medals given to individuals for actions on this tour. The more important medals were presented to Harry Sears and Whit Wright on the spot, during small, brief, but impressive ceremonies on Guadalcanal. Most of the lesser awards, were mailed to our homes. My VB-104 medals arrived at my home by mail after I was busy fighting in another squadron in another part of the Pacific. I did not see them until after the war was over and never bothered to count them. My mother and father enjoyed receiving them so they served a purpose.

The most impressive and appreciated award was the Presidential Unit Citation, earned and worn equally by all hands. The presentation was made to VB-104 at Naval Auxiliary Air Station, Camp Kearney, San Diego, on 1 August 1944. Cdr Sears was front and center for the squadron, flanked by LtCdr Wright, taken briefly from his duties reforming VB-104 for a second tour to the Pacific. Many of the old squadron members were assembled. We were all resplendent in blues, the band played, and in the evening we celebrated.

The Presidential Unit Citation is reproduced here as a fitting closure to this narrative.

THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY

WASHINGTON

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION to

BOMBING SQUADRON ONE HUNDRED FOUR

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

"For outstanding performance above the normal call of duty while engaged in reconnaissance and search missions in the most forward areas of Japanese-controlled territory in the South Pacific from August 15, 1943, to March 1944. Rendering pioneer service in changing the passive, defensive search into a daring and powerful offensive, BOMBING SQUADRON ONE HUNDRED FOUR has utilized to the full the potentialities of the PB4Y and its equipment, striking at enemy task force units and initiating the hazardous masthead bombing attack to insure direct hits on the target. Patrolling approximately 125,000 miles daily regardless of weather and frequently extending the search radius beyond specified sector limits in order to harass the enemy and intercept shipping, this gallant force typifies individual responsibility in the collective efforts of a combat group, unique in its tactics and in the comprehensiveness of its service. Dauntless and aggressive in the fulfillment of each assignment, the pilots and crews of BOMBING SQUADRON ONE HUNDRED FOUR have inflicted substantial damage on hostile ships and installations and have provided information of inestimable value to our forces in their sustained drive against the Japanese in this vital area."

For the President,

James Forrestal
Secretary of the Navy

Appendix

This summary was taken from "Report of activities, VB-104, 15 August 1943 to 29 March 1944" in the VB-104 War Diary:

The types of missions assigned to the squadron have been numerous. In addition to the primary mission of daily search for and tracking of enemy task force units, it has made a number of formation strikes against such land targets as Vila, Kahili, and Nauru, and has conducted one strike against an enemy task force of DLs. Individual aircraft strikes against enemy installations have been made as opportunity afforded. The squadron has also engaged in the following additional assignments:

(a) Special night search and snooper operations.
(b) Radar countermeasures.
(c) Photographic reconnaissance.
(d) The securing of weather intelligence.
(e) Armed escort for long range Dumbo missions.
(f) Anti-submarine activities.
(g) Spotting for task force bombardment.
(h) Reconnaissance of prospective beachheads and airstrip sites.
(i) Leaflet and food dropping missions.
(j) The transportation of important officials.
(k) The transportation of other personnel and material.

In its primary mission of search, the squadron has made numerous contacts with enemy air and surface units through the employment of new search techniques based on offensive principles. Enemy task forces have been intercepted and, on occasion, have been turned back shortly after leaving their bases. Convoys have been discovered and harassed, forcing the enemy lines of communication and supply ever further westward. Enemy search planes have been frequently encountered and during two periods the enemy service of information has been completely disrupted as a result of search plane casualties.

SUMMARY ALL OPERATIONS

Routine Searches*#	1035
Shipping Strikes	7
Land strikes	44
Anti-sub snoops#	5
Spotting Missions#	7
Lost Plane Searches	21
Special Missions (Radar countermeasures, reconnaissance, etc)	10
Administrative Flights	73
Training flights	40
Compass Calibration flights	10
TOTAL	1252
Total Number of Hours Flown	11,993

* 68 extended (1000 mile) searches.
\# 11 of the above flights involved extensive night flying.

ENEMY LAND TARGETS

STRIKES

Date	Target	Location	No. of Planes	Bomb /Plane
2 Sept.	Kahili	Bougainville	9	20-100 #G. P.
2 Sept.	Ringi Cove, Vila Area	Kolombangara	1	20-100 #G. P.
4 Sept.	Kukunda Bay, Vila Area	Kolombangara	9	20-100 #G. P.
19 Sept.	Nauru Island		2	20-100 #G. P.
26 Oct.	Kahili	Bougainville	7	5-1000 #G. P.

INDIVIDUAL PLANE BOMBINGS (Installations, float-plane anchorages, supply and bivouac areas, radio towers, barge hideouts.)

Kapingamarangi	25	Mussau	1
Nauru	2	Rekata Bay	2
Ocean	1	Kieta	1
Green	7	Choiseul Bay	2
Feni	3		

ENEMY AIRCRAFT CONTACTS

In our air to air actions, we *attacked* Japanese bombers and *were attacked by* Japanese fighters. In the attacks, it was clear when the enemy plane hit the water and was destroyed or, after being hit by our fifties, flew away into the sunset. In the latter, the enemy plane was obviously damaged and, by some guesswork, could be considered "probably destroyed" or "a probable." However, when enemy fighters attacked us, it was not always clear: how many there were; how many hit the water; how many were damaged (smokers). No one person in a PB4Y could see in all directions and count all of the fighter runs on the 4Y.

Betty kills:	Donald	2	Additional kills:	Sears 1 Nell
	Anderson	2		Alley 1 Mavis
	Humphrey	2		
	Feind	1		
	Searls	1		
	Van Ben	1		

	Sighted	Destroyed	Probable	Damaged
Betty	61	9	3	4
Nell	3	1	---	---
Mavis	2	1	---	---
Zeke	56	1	1	3
Hamp	12	---	---	---

Rufe	8	1	---	2
Pete	11	1	1	2
Val	3	---	---	---
Unidentified.	12	---	---	---
TOTAL	168	14	5	11

ENEMY SURFACE CRAFT CONTACTS

Sears' tanker was the big prize, and his other tanker, listed here as "damaged," sank under tow to Truk. Sears also damaged a Submarine to become anti-shipping king of the squadron. Whit Wright's Troop transport, severely damaged (with Monty crew), and his exploding AK, where Dempster was injured, give him second place in the squadrons anti-shipping contest. Most crews got credit for some ships, at least a barge or a sampan, but Sears and Wright were the big scorers.

	Sighted	Attacks	Destroyed	Damaged
BB (Battleship)	1	---	---	---
CA (Heavy Cruiser	2	---	---	---
CL (Light Cruiser)	5	---	---	---
DL (Destroyer Leader)	6	3	---	1
DD (Destroyer)	35	---	---	---
DE (Destroyer Escort)	2	---	---	---
SS	1	1	---	1
PG	2	1	1	---
AP	1	1	---	1
YP	1	1	1	---

AM	1	1	1	---
AVP	2	2	---	2
AUX	40	4	2	2
AO (Tanker)	5	2	1	1
AK (Freighter)	52	8	2	1
Barges	77	42	20	14
Troop Transport	1	1	---	1
Total	*229	67	28	24

*Includes 68 sightings in enemy harbors. Does not include 13 submarines unidentified.

Recapitulation

Total enemy ships destroyed and damaged - - - - - - - - - - - - - 51

* Includes 68 sightings in enemy harbors. Does not include 13 submarines unidentified.

CASUALTIES TO OWN EQUIPMENT AND PERSONNEL

Aircraft lost

Probable enemy action (1 by VF, 1 by AA)	2
Operational (2 by mechanical difficulty and/or weather; 1 by faulty field control; 1 by airport and terrain)	4
By enemy bombing of airfield	1
TOTAL	7

Flight crews lost

Probable enemy action (1 by VF, 1 by AA)	2
Operational (2 by mechanical and/or weather)	2
TOTAL	4

Personnel dead (total) Operational landing accident - - - - - - -- - - - - 1

Personnel missing

Probable enemy action	21
Operational	21
TOTAL	42

Personnel wounded in combat (Total) - - - - - - - - - - - - - - *10

Personnel injured (Total) Operational - landing accidents - - - - 2

Personnel lost through sickness (Total) - - - - - - - - - - - - - *1

TOTAL CASUALTIES - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - 56

* 3 wounded, 2 injured and 1 ailing personnel evacuated.

RECAPITULATION OF LOSES

Total aircraft assigned ----------	15
Total aircraft lost ----------	7
Percentage casualties to material ----------	46.7%
Total average personnel assigned ----------	211
Total casualties ----------	56
Percentage casualties to personnel ----------	26.5%