

THE PBY IS TWENTY YEARS OLD

By A. A. Hoehling



NEXT to the turkey buzzard, the veteran PBY Catalina is probably the most durable thing with wings. While a new breed of jet plane can become obsolete almost as soon as it has been test flown, the Navy's famed flying boat continues to plod stoically on. Still in Naval and Coast Guard use for air-sea rescue and training, it is also doing yeoman service for a variety of civilian masters.

From Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, lobster companies fly their catches in them to Portland and Boston. In the jungles of South America and Africa, missionaries find these lumbering flying machines a dependable ally in bringing light into darkness. In other out-of-the-way places the same aircraft can be spotted, often drab and battered, hauling freight and passengers.

This year, the great old performer of World War II's far-flung fighting fronts is twenty years old. In many ways her fame surpasses even that other workhorse, the DC-2. While the helicopter wrote its own pages of aeronautical history in Korea, this

"barge with wings" has left exploits in her wake which probably will never be equalled — patroller, rescuer, snooper on many Pacific horizons. Out of reach of enemy guns, she was also dive-bomber, fighter, a slightly bulbous, sluggish but nonetheless spirited avenging eagle, nemesis of thousands of tons of enemy shipping, pot-shotter at unwary Japanese ground troops.

Low-flying, often noisy, they were a familiar sight during the war to cities on both coasts and along the Gulf of Mexico. And they brought their own type of heart-warming beauty to countless survivors of torpedoed ships, downed airmen in shark-infested waters and others in need of speedy help. In a pinch they could — and did — pack literally dozens of survivors into their utilitarian, spacious hulls.

The big flying boat was born in the shops of the Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation, in San Diego. The company turned out 2,783 of them, while many others were built under license.

Its 104-foot wingspan and 130

mph. cruising speed made it quite a big, fast aircraft in 1933. Its gross weight of eighteen tons was something, too. For a power plant it had two 1,200 hp. Pratt and Whitney engines, and its cruising range of 3,000 miles left no doubt in the Navy's collective mind that here was a plane it could love, honor and cherish.

BEFORE long the Catalina became a legend. Forced into roles for which it was never intended, the PBY soon accumulated its own Bunyonese lore.

Consider the war record of Patrol Bombing Squadron 54. In the course of a long combat tour it flew from over forty Pacific bases, rescued 237 wounded men, pilots and Philippine guerrillas, and had the audacity to attack a Japanese task force of battleships, cruisers and destroyers.

On the night of December 26, 1944, Squadron 54 was ordered to send three planes with 500-pound bombs and attack the force of two battleships, one heavy cruiser, and five destroyers which was shelling Mindoro. Only two of the "Cats" got through to the targets, the other drifting away from the flight in the foul weather through which the pilots had to fly on instruments.

Kenneth J. Sanger, the squadron's commander, flew five hours before finding the Jap fleet. He dove his flying-boat through the anti-aircraft barrage for the cruiser.

Three of his bombs, near misses, shook and jolted the dodging ship. The fourth exploded thunderously on her bow.

Returning home from this attack, one of Commander Sanger's alert crewmen sighted life rafts in the water. The skipper made a water landing and picked up twelve crew members of a downed flying boat. After the crew had climbed into their rafts, they had been bombed and strafed by enemy aircraft, one man being wounded seriously. He died before the PBY made home base.

Operating earlier, from Leyte Gulf, "54" pilots calmly landed their "Cats" alongside enemy-held islands to rescue downed pilots, wounded soldiers, and Filipino guerrillas. On December 31, before the invasion of Luzon, Commander Sanger landed his plane near that island, rescued eight pilots and a wounded Army sergeant who had been working with the guerrillas.

On another occasion, one of the squadron's PBY's was forced down at sea eighty miles from its base in the Admiralty Islands. Unable to regain enough power for a take-off, the plane's crew taxied it through rough sea for eighty miles back to its base—a record for long distance taxiing, probably not surpassed to this day.

Another pilot, Lieutenant F. W. Sinclair, after flying reconnaissance through some of the world's worst weather in the Aleutians, was trans-

ferred to warmer climes — in the Marshalls. He was on a “Dumbo,” or rescue mission, one evening after a B-25 Mitchell bomber had been shot down twenty miles off Jaluit.

Nearly dark when he arrived at the scene, the evening was suddenly punctuated by pistol flashes. The survivors were signaling from rubber life rafts, tossed by heavy seas.

It was quite a feat to bring the big plane down on the rough water, and in failing light. Water landings at best are hazardous, because of lack of altitude perception, and many students have lost their lives practicing even under ideal conditions. But Sinclair was successful, in spite of fifteen-foot swells.

The cold, drenched survivors were quickly hauled aboard the plane, but it was too dark and rough to attempt a take-off. They had to wait for morning — while Army and Navy flyers alike became seasick.

Come morning, and a happy ending — the PBV got off and returned safely to base.

ENSIGN Troy Beavers had been out on search patrol when the weather closed in. Unable to land at his base or find an opening in the “front,” he kept circling. He found a break in the storm over an enemy-occupied atoll and decided to set down. Gas was low and a Jap-lagoon landing was preferable to setting “Dumbo” down in the storm-lashed sea.

He brought his “Black Cat” in

low over the lagoon with landing lights on, keeping clear of the sharp coral heads that could rip the metal hull like paper. Landing safely, he snapped off the wing lights and taxied back to the less dangerous end of the enemy harbor. He cut the motors.

In the meantime, the Japanese had turned on the lights at their sea-plane ramp, evidently assuming the plane to be one of their own. Signals winked insistently. One of the crew, a gunner, tossed out the sea anchors. The others set up watches by the guns in the blister, the tunnel hatches and in the nose, where the bombardier is normally positioned. They waited.

After a time the Japs caught on. The lights went out. Later the clanking of small boats sounded. But the night was black and the Catalina blended with the darkness. With the first gray streaks of dawn they took off, zoomed in low over the enemy garrison, wagged black wings in insult and headed for home.

Another famous Squadron, No. 52, was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for destroying or disabling more than 90,000 tons of Japanese warships and merchantmen from Midway Islands to the Bismarck Sea. It sank a 19,000-ton tanker and an 8,000-ton merchant ship, and severely damaged two Japanese cruisers and four destroyers. Its combat operations saw the squadron based at Canton, Midway and Johnston Islands, in the Central Pacific, Aus-

tralia, New Guinea, the Solomons, the Admiralties and Biak.

The war ended, but not the usefulness of the Cats — and probably much to the surprise of the War Assets Administration.

The U.S. Rubber Development Corporation was the first to cast the PBY's in their new role of commercial cargo planes to get rubber from inaccessible jungle regions of Colombia and Peru. These strange-appearing aircraft were able to take off from land, pick up their loads from the waterways in the interior and operate as economically as a land plane.

The Barrier Reef Airways in Australia began a regular twice-weekly air service to Heron Island. It reduced to two hours what had formerly been a tedious 21-hour journey by train and boat.

In the summer of 1947, the Noracon Exploration Company of Canada had three huge areas to study in Quebec Province and in widely separated parts of Labrador. Not even the crudest flying facilities existed in the interior. Noracon solved the problem with a fleet of PBY's converted to sleep six people.

THEY are effective not only in the north, but in the south. A major oil company uses them in Colombia and Venezuela to aid in the constant search for new oil fields. Before the advent of the Cats, it was a perilous, 12-day journey by boat, railroad, truck and boat (in that order) from Bogota to arrive at drilling sites.

What's more the big flying boats take off from Bogota's nearly two-mile-high airport with a four-ton payload. On their three- or four-hour flights they clear mountains towering as high as 16,000 feet.

Foreign governments, fisheries and charter operators, on this continent, in Europe and in the Far East, all are using Cats to their advantage. One charter operator in New Guinea reports he used his Catalina to keep a geological expedition in the country's interior entirely supplied with food and other essentials. Every few months, tons of food are carried in. The last haul of fourteen and one-half tons is expected to last for some time.

The capacious old planes seem to have been made to order for regions where airports are scarce, distances great and waterways plentiful. In effect they carry their airports with them, under their wings. They are the only planes in today's market with a ten-ton payload that can operate in the backwoods of the world where waterways constitute the sole landing space available.

Today the Babb Company, of Glendale, California, has all rights to the Catalinas. At quite a variety of prices, they will sell you a PBY, stripped down for hunting or hauling tuna, or beautifully plushed up with bunks, easy chairs, an executive's desk, lavatory and — bar.

Far from being ready for the boneyard, the Cats — as one pilot put it — continue to meow, lustily!

THE CAPTIVE BREEZE



By Joy M. Collins



HERE is the path where the captive breeze lives. Between tall trees its cool length stretches. Beyond the trees, the wide fields spread themselves beneath the ever-changing skies, unto the distant mountains. Close to the path, the tiny wild flowers of springtime listen to the soft voice of the breeze as she sings of her beautiful captivity. And when the blossom trees have thrown petal-pink confetti at the wedding of spring and summer, the song is borne out into the fields. Its notes quiver across a feathered field of barley and hearing them, the golden-eared corn bows low.

The song is to the memory of a night of wondrous glory. Its singing to each new thing that grows close to the path is the choice of the captive breeze above the wandering of the world.

The glory and the wonder of which the breeze sings happened many years ago, but the breeze has not forgotten. She remembers the night on which she came softly over the sleeping countryside to this quiet path. There was a sacred silence here. On either side of the path, tree trunks were soaring pillars to support a roof of leafy branches, whose moving shadows made a flickering

music upon the ground. Between the trees, pale flowers glowed wanly as candles in the dim interior of some old church. Beyond the path from the blue dome of night hung the sanctuary lamp of the moon.

And then, dressed in a garment more shining than the purity of the moon's light, a figure entered the path. With even, gentle steps He came. He did not touch the wild flowers, nor lay His hands upon the cool bark of the trees, but His sad eyes beheld them all. Were they a little less sad then?

Did He Who made the trees to grow and for Whose death one tree was made to die find a little peace among the beauties of His Own creation?

This is the memory held in the song of the captive breeze. For this has she ever lingered by the path. Lest the young flowers that bloom with each new year should ever droop their heads in slumber at the coming on of night; lest the scarlet poppies should ever blow too wantonly in the nearby fields; lest the falling leaves should ever make this sacred path untidy; lest the glory of that night should ever be forgotten; lest He should ever come to walk between the trees again.