



Lockheed PV-2, BuNo V37155, CB-2 of VPML-3, after wheels up landing at New France Field, 13 May 1947. (Photo - USN)

VPML-3 MEDIUM LAND PATROL SQUADRON

By GARY R. FARRAR

I was transferred to VPML-3, NAS Coco Solo, Canal Zone on 15 January 1947 from a PB4Y-2 Privateer squadron operating from the east coast of the United States. VPML-3 was one of three squadrons assigned to Fleet Air Wing 3 Headquarters, Caribbean Command, based near the seaport town of Colon, R. P. The two other units, composed of Martin PBM-5 Mariner flying boats were stationed at the adjacent seaplane base. They were quartered in two large hangars one of which we shared for flight line duties and maintenance.

Our planes, Lockheed PV-2 Harpoons, operated from New France Field, an army strip carved out of the jungle some years before. This field was shared with a P-61 detachment and one P-47 squadron which later converted to F-80 jets. The air station was approximately three quarters of a mile away and connected to the field by one long taxiway.

As an Aviation Ordnanceman 3/c (Aerial Gunner) I was assigned to fly as top turret gunner, as well as maintain the armament and bombing system on one of the squadron's nine planes. Before arriving at Coco Solo, VPML-3 was stationed at NAS Edenton, North Carolina, Argentia, Newfoundland and Adak, Alaska. While in Alaska during WW II, VPML-3 obtained its squadron insignia, an Alaskan husky head famed against a snow and pine background. This insignia was carried on the starboard bow just aft of the nose radar cap.

Specifically, the squadron training exercises included bombing-gunnery, rocket, search and reconnaissance flights and an occasional flare-drop mission. APX-6 radar-bombing gear was installed on all of the squadron aircraft with one plane being fitted for tow-target equipment. Generally, flying time was divided among navigation, GCA, bounce-ups and instrument flights.

Under command of Lt Cmdr Harris and Lt Cmdr Byrd, Executive Officer, VPML-3's flight personnel were composed of 20-25 pilots and 35 aircrewmembers. Normal crew consisted of pilot, co-pilot, radioman, ordnanceman and crew chief. On long overwater hops, an extra pilot was carried to handle navigation chores.

The PV-2 Harpoon, Lockheed Model V143 was an enlarg-

ed version of the earlier PV-1 Ventura with a greater performance and war load of eight rockets, one 1,800-lb. torpedo carried internally, or an alternate load of 4,000 pounds of bombs or depth-charges. Armament totaled five .50 cal. bow guns, two 50s in the Martin 250 CE-13 power-driven dorsal turret and twin 50s, hydraulically-operated, in the ventral position.

First deliveries of the Harpoon to Navy VPB units were in the early part of 1945. These aircraft had to be ferried back to the factory at Burbank, California, when dive tests by Lockheed test pilots showed definite structural weaknesses in the new wing design.

The PV-2, although a stable aircraft on its two R-2800 -31 P&W 18-cylinder engines, was considered a pilot's nightmare on one engine. Only on two occasions did we hear of a fully war-loaded Harpoon returning to base after an engine failure. Both incidents reportedly took place in the Pacific during WW II after the individual aircraft dumped everything overboard that could be pried loose.

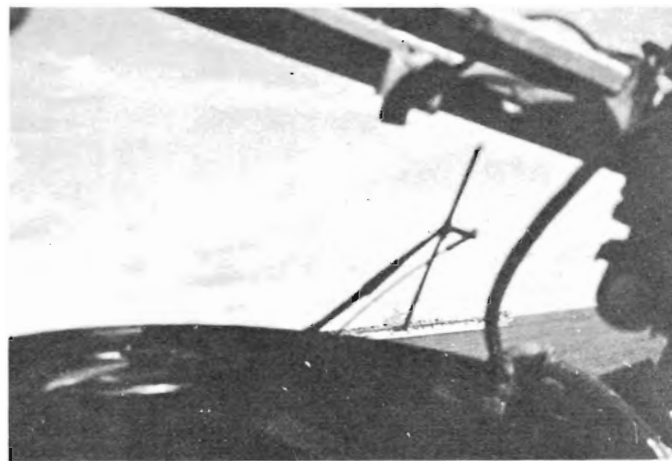
During my tour with VPML-3 only two accidents occurred. One took place when Pink Rat #2 (call sign) experienced landing gear trouble due to a hydraulic malfunction and landed with the wheels up. The second accident resulted from an aircraft taxiing into one corner of the hangar at night. No serious injuries were incurred from either mishap.

Highlights of VPML-3's stay in the Canal Zone were the periodic navigation hops to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Roosevelt Roads, Puerto Rico or stateside. Fleet maneuvers in 1948 saw VPML-3 fly to Waller Army Air Field, Port of Spain, Trinidad, via Venezuela. There they participated in mock strikes against the Aircraft Carrier USS Leyte and other ships of the Atlantic Fleet. An excellent proficiency rating was given to VPML-3 during this week-long exercise.

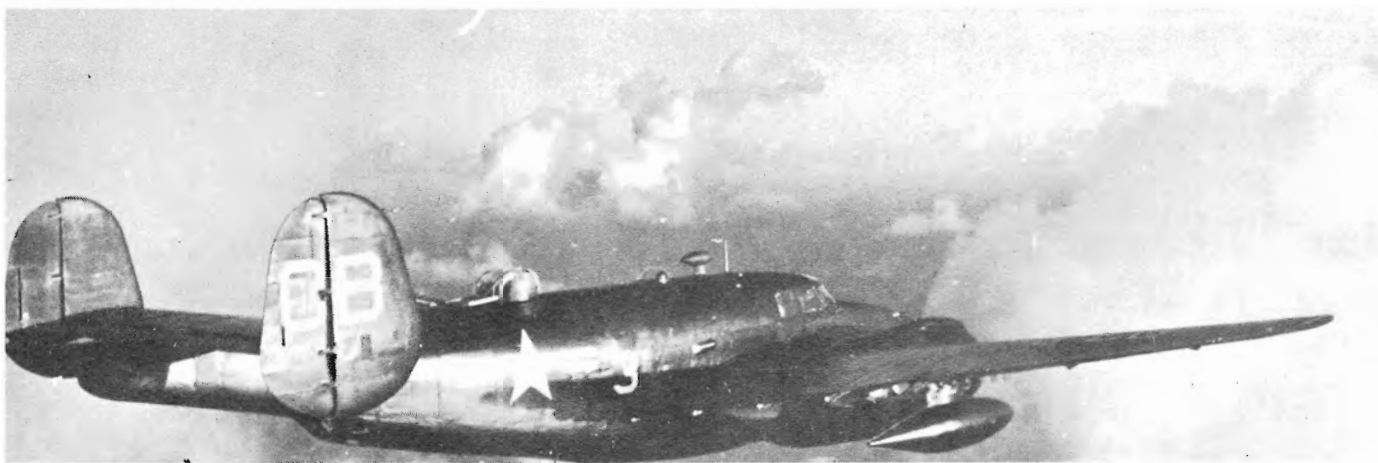
In late 1948, VP-3 (the unit's designation had been changed 1 Sept 1948) phased out its PV-2s and began receiving P2V-2 Neptunes, the second version of the type that flew nonstop from Australia to the U. S. By June of 1949 VP-3 was fully operational on the new type.



Four Lockheed PV-2 Harpoons of Navy Patrol Squadron, Medium Land, Three, strung out in left echelon over jungle country south of Colon, R. P. (G. Farrar)



Approaching the aircraft carrier USS Leyte from below flight deck level at 260 mph as seen from the cockpit of CB-5 during Fleet Maneuvers during 1948. (Farrar)



Flying through clouds off the coast of Panama is CB-3 with 75 gallon drop tanks attached beneath wings. (Farrar)



Squadron CO Lt Cmdr Harris, third from left, pilot Ensign Young, fourth from left, with the flight and ground crew of CB-1, BuNo V37147. (Farrar)