

FLEET AIR CONCENTRATION - 1935

by

William A. Riley Jr.

The high-point of naval training in the mid-30's was the annual Fleet Problem, scheduled for the spring of each year. During this period surface and air units, operating together, developed tactics and tested methods in anticipation of the conflict which navy men believed to be but a matter of time. However, the Fleet Air Concentration, which followed immediately, held the greater interest for those in the aviation branch. As shown on the attached chart, all of naval air was represented at the Naval Air Station, San Diego. Only the Coco Solo and Pearl Harbor patrol squadrons and the few independent East Coast units were missing.

In 1935, the training period began with a fly-by over the city in which all available aircraft participated. The capability of naval air to put 400 planes in the air was unusual enough to warrant newsreel coverage and editorial comment. Outside of bringing the three carrier air groups (LEXINGTON, SARATOGA, RANGER) together at one time, there was little change in their training. For the battleship and cruiser units, ordinarily aboard ship by sections however, summer brought the only opportunity to operate in squadron strength. Communication, gunnery and cross-country training were emphasized, providing all personnel with much-needed experience as well as the chance to renew old friendships. All facilities at North Island were taxed to capacity during this period. With 12 carrier squadrons operating from the landplane line, aircraft were wing-to-wing, as battleship and cruiser squadrons, in rotation, changed from floats to wheels and joined the crowd. The VO/VS beach was also a hive of activity with ramp space at a premium, while VP-7, VP-9 and VJ-1 held forth on the patrol plane side.

Several interesting experiments and tests were conducted during the summer, the most noteworthy being that of camouflage. Several aircraft in almost all carrier and patrol squadrons were painted in a variety of designs; ranging from light gray through various dazzle patterns. To facilitate removal, a water-soluble paint was used. The contrast between the colorful standard markings and the camouflage was remarkable; affording a preview of the color schemes to be used in WWII. A not-so-productive demonstration was the assignment of VO-3B (BatDiv 3) to test its amphibious capabilities aboard a carrier. Operating O3U-1's with Model "B" Grumman floats, about half of the squadrons nine aircraft returned via barge. The debacle could not have been unexpected as past experience had proved the inability of the convertible-amphibious type to withstand the rugged going of carrier landings.

A number of interesting aircraft were aboard the station at various times, among them being the; Lockheed XR20-1, Kinner XRK-1, Curtiss F9C-2, Boeing F3B-1 and the competing XP3D-1 and XP3Y-1. Drawing the most attention, however, was the Pougla XTBE-1. The clean lines of the low wing configuration, as contrasted with the bulky T4M's and TG's, caused much favorable comment. Real excitement ensued upon its first appearance when the pilot actuated the wing-folding gear near the end of the roll-out and taxied to the line with the wings in folded position.

No one seemed aware of the fact at the time but, in retrospect, it is obvious that naval air was near the end of an era in 1935. With the Yorktown squadrons already forming, the Enterprise soon to follow and the Hornet in the offing, San Diego would eventually be inadequate to handle more than a part of the expanding air strength. New bases, more squadrons and additional personnel were on the way; the day when everyone knew everyone else was drawing to a close. That the training was sound and the personnel superior was fully demonstrated in WWII. The pilots and technicians who struggled through the lean years formed the hard core around which was built the Task Forces and Fleet Air Wings, operating more than 100 carriers and 40,000 aircraft, to lead the world's largest navy to victory.

Table 1. NAVAL AIR UNITS - SAN DIEGO, 1935

<u>SQDN</u>	<u>SHIP</u>	<u>TYPE</u>	<u>TAIL COLOR</u>	<u>A/C</u>
VF-2B	Lexington	F2F-1	Yellow	18*
VF-5B	Lexington	FF-1	Blue	18*
VS-3B	Lexington	SF-1	Yellow	18
VB-1B	Lexington	BM-2	Yellow	18
VF-6B	Saratoga	F4B-4	White	18*
VS-2B	Saratoga	SU-2,3	White	18
VB-2B	Saratoga	BFC-2	Red	18*
VT-2B	Saratoga	TG-2	Red	18
VF-3B	Ranger	F4B-4	Green	18*
VS-1B	Ranger	SU-4	Green	18
VB-3B	Ranger	BG-1	Green	18
VB-5B	Ranger	BF2C-1	Green	18*
VO-1B	BatDiv One	O3U-1	Red	9
VO-2B	BatDiv Two	O3U-3	White	12
VO-3B	BatDiv Three	O3U-1	Blue	9
VO-4B	BatDiv Four	O3U-3	Black	9
VS-5B	CruDiv Two	OJ-2	Blue Stripe	4
VS-6B	CruDiv Three	OJ-2	Red Stripe	8
VS-9S	CruDiv Four	O3U-1	White Stripe	8
VS-10S	CruDiv Five	O3U-1	Yellow Stripe	12
VS-11S	CruDiv Six	O3U-3	Green Stripe	16
VS-12S	CruDiv Seven	O3U-3	Black Stripe	12
VP-7F	San Diego	P2Y-3	Blue	6
VP-9F	San Diego	PM-2	Red	6

Notes:

Suffix "B" - Battle Force

Suffix "F" - Base Force

Suffix "S" - Scouting Force

* - Liaison aircraft attached (SF or SU type)