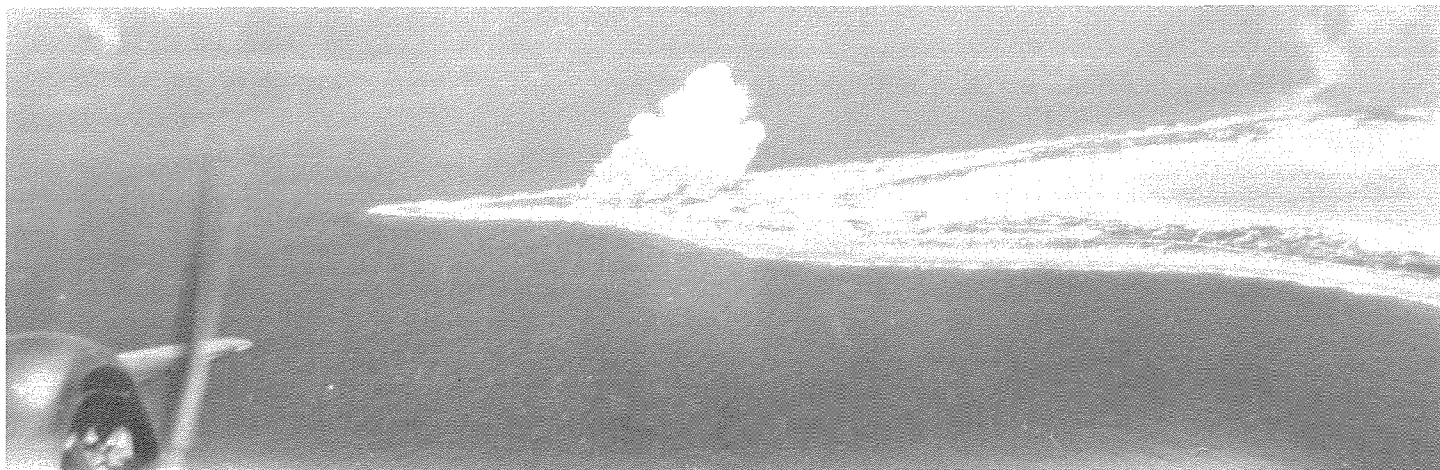




Wake Island 1945. Pilot's eye view of a VPB-121 strike against the gun emplacements and barracks area near Peacock Point. George H. Charno, Jr.

PACIFIC PRIVATEERS

VPB-121 IN WORLD WAR II

by Joseph C. Woolf

Art by Bob Casey

Patrol Bombing Squadron 121 was commissioned on Oct. 1, 1944 at Camp Kearney, California.¹ The C.O. of the new squadron was a seven-year veteran of naval aviation, Lieutenant Commander Raymond John Pflum. Pflum had just completed a tour as Executive Officer of VP-1, flying Coronados in the New Georgia-Rendova-Vangunu campaign. Many of his patrol plane commanders were also combat veterans. Lieutenant George H. Charno, Jr., of Kansas City, Missouri, for example, came to Camp Kearney from the deadly Bay of Biscay patrols flown by VB-110 out of Dunkeswell, Devonshire, England. He had earned a DFC in February, 1944, for a daring attack on two heavily armed German ships.² Other PPC's of VPB-121 had just completed assignments as primary instructors and ferry pilots.

In November, the squadron received the first of its combat aircraft—the Consolidated PB4Y-2 Privateer. This heavily armed patrol bomber was a development of the PB4Y-1 Liberator. A single massive vertical tail replaced the Liberator's twin tail and the forward fuselage had a seven-foot section inserted between the wing leading edge and the cockpit. This extension housed radar, electronic countermeasure and radio equipment. With the related external antennas and domes all this circuitry required, the forward fuselage of the Privateer looked like a warthog's snout. Pilots who were transitioning from Liberators found the Privateer more comfortable, somewhat easier to fly. The flight characteristics of the two planes were very similar. And, the Privateer's additional firepower was comforting.³ Each Privateer normally carried a crew of 12 men.⁴ In addition to the PPC there were two co-pilots, one of whom performed primarily as navigator, and nine ratings who filled the positions of plane captain; second mechanic; first radioman; second radioman; first ordnanceman; air bomber and three ordnancemen (gunners). There was no inflexible rule about which ratings would be at a particular station at any one time; rather the emphasis in VPB-121 was on all crew members having a working knowledge of every other crew member's job. It was common practice, in fact, for each man to take a turn in the co-pilot's seat and follow through on flying and landing the plane.

As the crews formed at Kearney they began to work their way through the training syllabus prescribed by Fleet Air Wing 14. This training concentrated on basic anti-submarine warfare; radar bombing; high and low level bombing; glide bombing; gunnery attack and defense tactics; fleet missions and tactics; night flying and advanced navigation. From Camp Kearney, VPB-121 was

scheduled to stop over at NAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, for some additional work and then to proceed to Stickell Field, Eniwetok Island in the Marshall Islands to begin operations.

The first leg of this deployment—Kearney to Kaneohe Bay—posed no particular problems for most of VPB-121's Privateers. The first group, a three plane flight, left Kearney on the night of January 6, 1945. These planes and those to follow over the next few days were loaded down with a mass of equipment and replacement parts needed to sustain operations in the forward area. Most of the squadron supplies and the majority of the personnel, both flying and non-flying types, went to Hawaii aboard the USS Windham Bay. The major interruption to the smooth aerial transfer to Kaneohe Bay came on the night of January 11 when Privateer #59477, Lt.(jg) Frank J. Leary, PPC, lost all four engines (probably because of carburetor ice) 500 miles out from California and was successfully ditched, dead stick, into a stormy sea. All aboard escaped injury and were picked up by a Coast Guard PBM the next day. Leary's previous tour in PBY "Black Cats" probably aided him in the remarkably successful ditching. Even though no lives were lost, the loss of #59477 was still a real tragedy for the squadron: cached among all the gear aboard her were approximately 20 cases of whiskey. One of Leary's first remarks when he got back on the beach was to apologize for losing all that booze!⁵

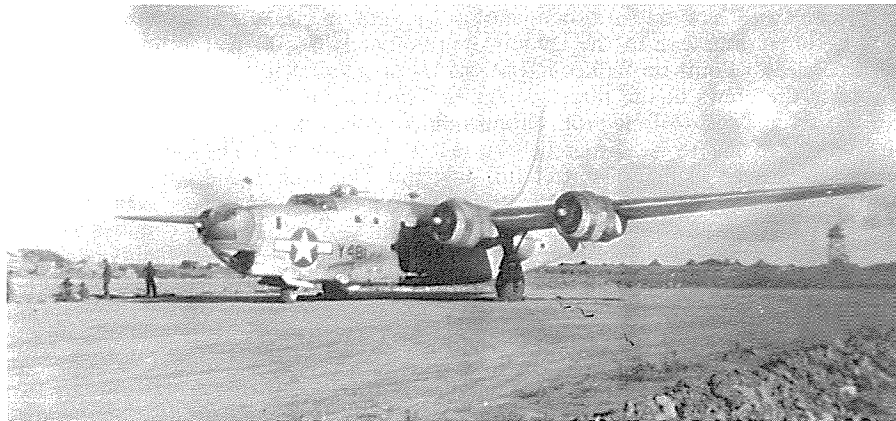
The most significant event of VPB-121's stopover at NAS Kaneohe Bay came on January 25 when 12 planes were detached to Midway Island to set up an anti-submarine barrier in hopes of snaring a Japanese sub reported to be en route to the shipping lanes. None of the sorties flown in the 15-day exercise produced anything more exciting than a couple of "disappearing" blips on radar.

On the morning of February 28, Lt. Cmdr. Pflum led the first flight of three planes to Eniwetok by way of Johnston Island. For the next four months VPB-121's primary job was to protect the Hawaii-Marshall Islands supply line through patrol of the seas and neutralization of bypassed islands.

Pacific strategy had called for assault and occupation of relatively few of the total islands held by the Japanese. This strategy left intact Japanese garrisons on Wake Atoll; and on such islands as Wotje, Mille, and Jaluit in the Marshalls and Truk and Ponape in the Carolines. U.S. airpower had been battering some of these islands since 1943. The bombing campaign had been carried out primarily by Army Air Force B-24s and Navy and Marine land-



Raymond J. Pflum, C.O. of VPB-121, Aug. 1944 to Sept. 1945. In the Korean War he commanded USS Bataan (CVL-29) from April to August 1953. Later Head of the Anti-Submarine Warfare Plans and Policies Section of Office of Chief of Naval Operations until retirement as Rear Admiral, December, 1957. Pflum died December 11, 1965.



VPB-121 Privateer #59481 running up engines on Eniwetok.

based aircraft, with an occasional carrier strike and naval bombardment thrown in for good measure. In later 1944, Japanese raids on the Mariannas' B-29 bases had caused the shifting of most of the Air Force effort further west for attacks on Japanese staging areas in the Bonin and Volcano Islands.⁶ After October 1944, neutralization of bypassed islands was left increasingly to the Navy.⁷ Cumulative effect of the years of bombardment and aerial blockade had been devastating. Except for supply runs by Japanese submarines, the islands were physically isolated from the homeland. Meager food stocks the blockade-running subs brought in were never sufficient. Men of the Japanese garrison on Wake, for example, were forced to supplement their rations with fish until the nets rotted; by planting small gardens fertilized by human excrement and by eating island birds and even the rats.⁸ The men were so weak by early 1945 that they could work for only two hours a day.⁹ And yet, by their very existence, the garrisons posed a potential threat to American supply lines. Despite constant bombing, island airfields were kept in good repair and, theoretically at least, it was always possible for the Japanese to fly in bombers and to raid American shipping.¹⁰ This potential danger could not be ignored. Attacks on the islands continued to the end of the war.

VPB-121 was to be concerned with two of the bypassed islands: Wake and Ponape. Wake Atoll, consisting of the three islands of Wake, Wilkes, and Peale, lay 537 miles northeast of Eniwetok. Although no Japanese aircraft had visited the island since June 1944,¹¹ Wake's well-developed system of runways could have supported a major aerial offensive—if left alone. Ponape, 362 miles to the southwest, was a supply center for the Japanese Marshalls. It had a harbor, an airfield, a seaplane base and a settlement, Ponape Town.¹² In conjunction with the PBM squadrons, VPB-19 and 26, based on Parry Island, VPB-121 would fly daily reconnaissance—"snooper"—patrols over Wake and Ponape and, at irregular intervals, launch bombing attacks against the two islands. Since October, 1944 the Navy land-based bombing campaign against Wake had been carried on primarily by the PV-1s of VPB-133.¹³ Monthly tonnage totals of bombs dropped on the Atoll had been declining steadily since October¹⁴ as the major theater of conflict shifted westward. This decline was about to be dramatically reversed.

When Lt. Cmdr. Pflum's flight landed on Johnston Island en route to Eniwetok they were alerted to be ready to take part in a massive search then underway. On February 25 commander of the Strategic Air Force, Pacific Ocean Areas, Lieutenant General Millard F. Harmon, had taken off from Guam en route to a conference in Washington. Somewhere between Kwajalein and Johnston Island his plane had disappeared.¹⁵ The three Privateers of VPB-121 refueled and flew on to Eniwetok, landing at Stickell Field on March 2 (March 1 was lost in crossing the International Date Line). Pflum flew to Kwajalein the next day to meet with the Commander Shore Based Aircraft, Marshalls, Gilberts Area

and was ordered to join the search next day with all available aircraft. He flew back to Eniwetok to organize the squadron effort. Two more Privateers arrived from NAS Kaneohe Bay on the 3rd. All of the planes flew to Kwajalein to begin search flights on the 4th.

What was called "the greatest air and naval search ever undertaken in the Pacific"¹⁶ failed to find any trace of Lt. Gen. Harmon and his party. There was a suspicion that Harmon might have been intercepted and shot down by a Japanese aircraft somehow sneaked into one of the bypassed islands.¹⁷ According to General Woods, C.G. 4th Marine Air Wing, a decision was made to immediately increase the weight of the attack on islands from which an interception could have originated.¹⁸ Perhaps as a result of this decision the monthly tonnage of bombs dropped on Wake rose from 13.75 tons in the previously recorded month (January) to 83.75 tons dropped in March, a more than 600% increase.¹⁹ VPB-121 would drop most of these 83.75 tons.²⁰

After flying eight fruitless sorties from Kwajalein on the 4th and 5th, the squadron returned to Eniwetok on the 6th and were at once ordered to bomb the airfield on Wake. The five Privateers were all equipped with bomb bay fuel cells. By the time these had been removed so that each plane could carry 9x500-pound general purpose bombs, it was too late to take off and still arrive over Wake in daylight. The attack was consequently rescheduled for first light on the 7th. The revised plan called for a takeoff at 0230 hours with Pflum leading one section of the five-plane division and Lt. J.B. Rainey leading the other. The attack would be made in the half light just before dawn, each plane gliding in on individual bomb runs from 8,000 feet to the release altitude of 4,000 feet. The primary target was the intersection of the runways "A" (east-west alignment) and "B" (northeast-southwest alignment). Privateer #59474, Lt. William McElwee, Jr., P.P.C., and two others carried 5x23-pound fragmentation clusters for use against planes, should there be any, or against structures and men caught in the open.

The raid went much as planned except that one plane had to abort because of radio-radar failure and in spite of rescheduling the raid, when the attack began at 0630 it was still too dark for the bombing results to be seen. The Japanese did not begin firing until the third Privateer began its bomb run, but their AA fire was intense throughout the rest of the raid. After unloading the 500-pound GP's on the runway, Lt. McElwee turned #59474 for a second run to drop the frag clusters on the Japanese bivouac area northwest of runway "B". These living quarters were on the shore of channel between Wake and Peale Island, about 350 feet south of the command post of Rear Admiral Sakaibara Shigematsu, commander of Wake since December, 1942.²¹ Located on top of the Admiral's sand-covered heavy timber and steel CP were four batteries of 25mm anti-aircraft guns under the command of Lt. Mitina, IJN.²² As Lt. McElwee's Privateer roared in toward the target it was blasted by 25mm cannon fire.²³ #59474 burst

into flames and flew on for a couple of miles, trailing smoke and fire, before crashing into the lagoon approximately 1,500 feet north of Kuku Point on Wilkes Island. Its flaming wreckage was visible to the crews of the three remaining Privateers as they began the flight back to Eniwetok. Pflum immediately called for a PBM rescue plane to be dispatched to search for survivors. The "Dumbo" arrived in the area after full daylight. The broken and burnt wreckage of Lt. McElwee's Privateer was in two major pieces, floating in the middle of a spreading oil slick. A splotch of bright green marker dye may have given a moment of hope to the men in the PBM. But they spotted no survivors—the green marker was only the forlorn remains of a smashed dye packet, not a signal. As the PBM circled, one of the broken halves of the Privateer sank below the surface.

By the 10th of February all of VPB-121's aircraft were together at Stickell Field. More raids were made against Wake on the 9th, 14th, 18th, 20th, 23rd, and 26th. On the 18th of the month the first bombing raid was made on Ponape. These first combat operations were flown by six to eight aircraft per strike. In VPB-121's four months of operations from Eniwetok, out of 37 bombing attacks made against Wake and Ponape only 10 were made by more than one plane and most of these occurred in March. In April, all of the strikes against Wake and Ponape were made by Pflum and the squadron executive officer, Lt. Cmdr. Kirmse, in single plane "snooper-bomber" (combination reconnaissance and bombing) attacks. In May, with the exception of one six-plane attack on Wake on the 11th, all the strikes against Wake and Ponape were made by single planes. Pflum struck Wake on the 1st, 4th, and 16th; Ponape on the 6th, 13th, 20th and 23rd. Kirmse bombed Ponape on the 25th and 30th and Wake on the 28th. The remaining strikes against Wake in May were made by other crews. After bombing the industrial area of Ponape Town on his May 20 raid, Pflum made repeated low-level strafing runs on local shipping targets. A 50-ton tug, 25-ton lighter and two whale boats were sunk or left sinking and their crews shot up. On the 23rd he blew up a small fishing boat in the same area.

In June, the squadron made one six-plane raid against Wake on the 6th. Two small fishing boats outside the reef were strafed by one of the planes after the bombing. On the 17th the squadron made its final major attack on Wake. In terms of planes participating and of total tonnage dropped, this was the largest single attack of VPB-121's campaign. Eight Privateers dropped 18 tons of bombs on airfield, bomber dispersal area, fuel and ammunition storage areas, Heel Point radar station and living quarters and workshops. Pflum flew a ninth Privateer as low-level target spotter and photo plane and VPB-19 furnished a PBM "Dumbo" for the mission. Pflum made one more "snooper-bomber" against Wake in June and attacked Ponape twice. Kirmse bombed Ponape on the 14th.

These bombing attacks were only a small part of VPB-121's job on Eniwetok. The real day-after-day business of the squadron was found in searching the seas around the island for Japanese submarines attempting to either supply the cut-off garrisons or sink American shipping and in daily reconnaissance flights to Wake and Ponape. These flights invariably found the runways on Wake, no matter how recently bombed, to be repaired and blocked by apparent oil drum obstructions criss-crossing their length. In four months over 350 of these long and mostly monotonous sorties were flown.

On the 21st of April, the squadron was partially grounded by the passage of a tropical storm through the Eniwetok area. The storm also caused problems for ships in the area. Destroyer Escort Dempsey (DE26) was ordered to go to the assistance of Submarine Chaser #1273, out of fuel and in danger of foundering. Because the DE was uncertain of SC1273's position she requested an air search by VPB-121. The first crew dispatched, Lt. Leary in #59477 (which the crew had picked up in California as replacement for the ditched Privateer), was forced back by almost impossible flying conditions. Pflum delegated himself for a second try. He managed to locate the Dempsey to obtain a course to fly toward the SC, estimated to be 30 miles away. But when he arrived at the estimated position there was no sign of the SC. Pflum

continued on the course another 10 miles and finally sighted the small wooden-hulled vessel wallowing helplessly in the high seas. He took up station over the SC and for the next nine hours or so he homed the Dempsey to the position. Fuel exhaustion finally forced him to leave at midnight but by then the DE had the sub chaser's signal rockets in sight and eventually was able to take her in tow.

On the 14th of May, nine Privateers were scrambled to fly Combat Air Patrol over shipping in Eniwetok lagoon. The CAP flights continued on the 15th and 16th but no Japanese raid materialized. On June 20, three VPB-121 aircraft were called upon for low-level reconnaissance support of Operation "Fuddle," the attack on Wake by the Lexington, Hancock and Cowpens of Rear Admiral Ralph Jennings' Task Group 12.4.²⁴ On June 21, squadron aircraft participated in another submarine hunt. On that date the landing craft repair ship Endymion (ARL-9) was damaged by a torpedo from I-36 but an energetic sea and air search failed to catch Cmdr. Sugamasa and his boat.²⁵

At the very end of VPB-121's stay on Eniwetok an interesting interception was effected by three of the squadron's Privateers. Intelligence had warned that the Japanese hospital ship Takasaga Maru was en route from Japan to Wake, ostensibly to evacuate the worst of the garrison's casualties, i.e., those nearest death by starvation. The Privateers found the hospital ship and guided the Destroyer Murray (DD-576) to an interception. Murray personnel boarded and made a search to insure that the ship's mission was indeed humanitarian and not a covert attempt to get food or arms to the Wake garrison. No contraband was found. Two days later when the Takasaga Maru was again located and searched after stopping at Wake, 975 emaciated casualties were aboard.²⁶

The squadron historian summed up VPB-121's stay on Eniwetok in these words:

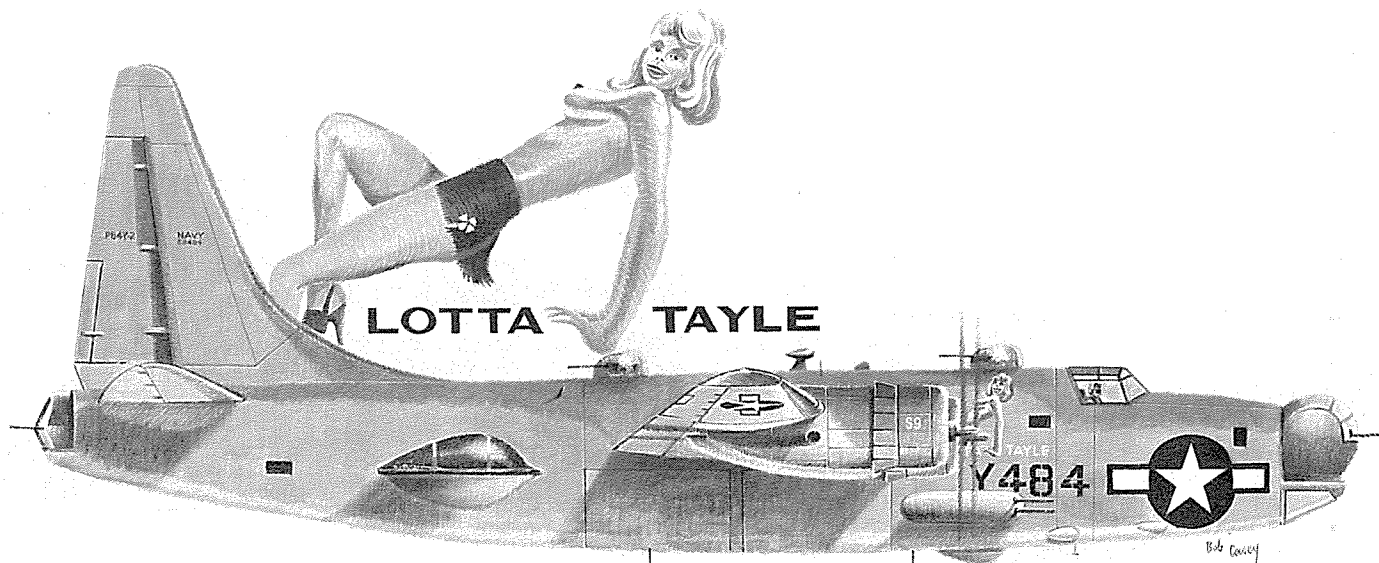
... it was more than the deficiencies of the island that made the stay disagreeable. It was the squadron's delay in getting to where the real war was being fought that was the concern of the men . . . everybody was anxious to fly where they could set their gunsights on the Empire of Japan itself.

A reflection of what the war against the bypassed islands meant to the Japanese can be found in the words of a survivor of the Mille garrison interrogated after the war:

Q. How did you keep your men busy after the 1st of January 1944? A. The main occupation was making gardens to provide food. Q. Did you build up your protection more? Was that important? A. We were very assiduous in building fortifications until June 1944; then we gave up the idea. We felt it was more worthwhile to grow food than to build fortifications.²⁷

VPB-121 was ordered forward to Tinian and Iwo Jima and began the transfer on July 3. Except for three planes and crews left behind at Eniwetok to fly special weather reconnaissance, the move was completed in two days. First operations—barrier patrols—were flown from Tinian on the 7th and the squadron's move to Iwo Jima began the next day. From July 8 until the end of the war, the squadron was to be officially based at Iwo Jima with Tinian being used as a rear maintenance base. Planes and crews were rotated back to Tinian at approximately weekly intervals. Average availability of planes and personnel at each island was three planes and four crews at Tinian; 9 planes and 11 crews at Iwo.

VPB-121's primary job during these last weeks of the Pacific War was support of Task Force 38's series of air and naval strikes along the Japanese coast. Beginning in July and scheduled to continue through mid-August, Task Force 38's raids were the first phase of Operation Olympic, the landings on Kyushu planned for November 1, 1945.²⁸ On days when the Fleet was not launching strikes, planes of VPB-121 and those of other Iwo-based units were used to erect an aerial barricade between Japanese reconnaissance planes, boats, and Kamikazes and ships of the Task Force. Even as VPB-121 moved up to Iwo Jima, Task Force 38 was steaming to the northeast of Volcano Islands heading directly for the coast of Honshu for carrier strike on Tokyo on the 10th.²⁹ Barrier patrols which VPB-121 immediately began to fly were usually of 9 to 14 hours' duration; planes taking off at 30-minute intervals throughout the day and night.



In addition to regular barrier patrols, during the next weeks the squadron also flew sector searches. These daily anti-shipping flights covered the coast of Honshu from 135 east longitude to the southeastern tip of Hokkaido. The searches were usually flown by two planes, both to increase bombing effect against ships and for mutual protection in case of Japanese interception, now a constant threat. When found, ships were attacked at mast-head height. On the attack run, the bow gunner began firing first. His burst was the signal for side and rear turrets to open up. Side and tail gunners pointed their guns straight down and began to fire short bursts, adjusting their aim as the ship swept into view below. Destruction of small fishing vessels could be accomplished by machine guns alone; for attacks against larger ships general purpose bombs and incendiaries could be dropped. Some VPB-121 Privateers packed additional destructive power. Soon after arrival on Iwo, Pflum's personal aircraft, #59484 ("Lotta Tayle"), and at least one other were modified to carry two 2x20mm cannon packs, one on each side of the fuselage below the cockpit.

Lt. Cmdr. Pflum's Aircraft Action Report of a sector search on 22 July illustrates the tactics used in attacking Japanese shipping:

On 22 July, 2 PB4Y-2 aircraft, No. 59447, Lt. Cmdr. Pflum pilot, and No. 59306, Lt. Bassett pilot, were flying a search sector which extended from Iwo Jima, home base, to the south coast of Honshu. At 1323H in position 36-00N, 130-15N, a position just inside Sagami Nada [the southern part of the broad seaward opening bay which serves as a sheltering foyer for Tokyo Bay to the north], two columns of surface craft were sighted on course 320T running dead slow. The first group consisted of 3 Sugar Dogs [150 to 300-ton supply vessels with one hatch³⁰] and 2 luggers, while the second group, ¾ mile to the northwest, was made up of 2 Sugar Dogs and 1 tug towing 2 barges.

Lt. Cmdr. Pflum started the first of a series of 7 coordinated runs. On this run, the lead plane dropped 2x250# GP's scoring 2 hits on a Sugar Dog which broke up and sank. Lt. Bassett, flying wing, attacked the first column a few seconds later from a slightly different angle with 3x250# and 2x100# GP's all of which landed short. He pulled up and turned on the second column on which he let go with 3x250# 2x100# incendiaries. This string ripped up the convoy destroying another Sugar Dog. All GP's in the two planes were fused 4-5 second delay. Both planes strafed heavily on all runs, expending a total of 4200 rounds and 4160 rounds respectively.

After the second and third runs the remaining boats and barges were scattered and badly damaged, two crews desperately abandoning ship.

On the fourth run, Lt. Cmdr. Pflum dropped 4x250# GP's and 2x100# incendiary clusters. Several near misses were observed, one of which blew a hole . . . in the side of another Sugar Dog. This ship was seen to be taking water

through this hole in quantity and settling fast.

After three more strafing runs, it was thought advisable [sic] to conserve the remaining ammunition for the return leg of the sector. As this engagement was broken off, the following situation prevailed:

- 2 Sugar Dogs sunk by direct bomb hits;
- 1 Tug listing to port and sinking by the stern;
- 2 Fuel Barges burning fiercely;
- 2 Barges ablaze;
- 1 Sugar Dog with large hole in side settling port;
- 1 Sugar Dog with large fires on stern and in engine house.

As the planes withdrew to the south a large oil slick covered the entire area. This was liberally littered with oil drums, planking, debris of all kinds, and Japs, both dead and alive. . . .

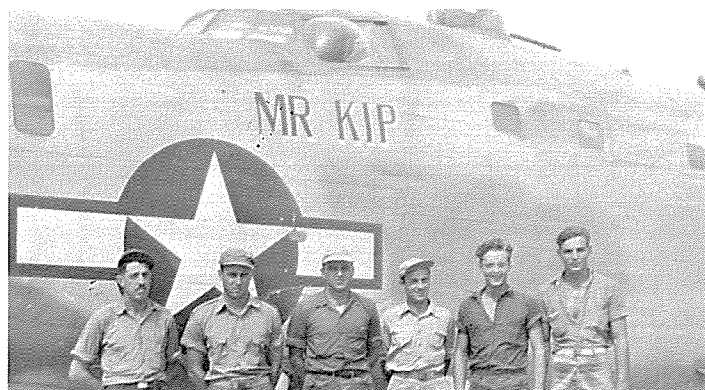
During attacks on the ships, return fire had been "meager and inaccurate." Privateers also drew five or six bursts of equally inaccurate heavy AA, probably fired from a battery near Tateyama Naval Base just to the east. AA exploded high and behind the planes.

But even "meager" anti-aircraft fire could be deadly. A few days before Pflum and Bassett's attack, Lt. Charno in #59424 ("Mr. Kip") had been making a radar search for shipping targets off the Honshu coast. At 1330 hours blips were picked up on the scope and Charno let down through the clouds to investigate. Two medium-size transports were spotted plowing along on parallel courses about 1½ miles apart. The surprised Japanese ships immediately began to close up on one another for mutual fire support. Charno began a run on the nearest ship. He swept across it from stern to bow releasing five bombs and strafing. Two bombs exploded on the ship, one amidship; the other forward, stopping it dead in the water. A Japanese aboard the ship fired at the Privateer as it thundered away. Two muzzle flashes—two rounds fired—were seen. Charno was turning to come in for another pass when crew members reported that the bow gunner, AOM2/c James M. Cumbach, had been wounded. Charno at once broke off the attack and set course for Iwo. The bow gunner had been hit by two 12.7mm machine gun bullets which punched through the right rear plexiglass of the MPC turret. Cumbach died before Charno could get him to Iwo's medical facilities.

On July 13, Lieutenants Rainey and Allen encountered Japanese fighter planes—possibly the first encounter by VPB-121 Privateers. They were just beginning a second run on a ship off the coast of Honshu when two fighters, either Nakajima Ki-84 Frank or Ki-43 Oscar, interrupted their attack. The Privateers joined up in close formation and turned out to sea as the fighters got into attack position one behind the other, high and to the side. A stern chase developed. After 10 minutes the Japanese gave up and turned back. In their report Rainey and Allen compared the performance of the Privateer to the fighters: "Enemy fighters able to

assume attack positions easily when PB4Y-2 indicating 190 knots." On the 24th Lt. Rainey, this time flying as wingman for Pflum, had a more fleeting encounter with a Japanese plane. Outside Nagoya Bay, on a sector search, an unpainted radar equipped Nakajima J1N1 Irving, night fighter, passed the two Privateers on a reciprocal course 2,000 feet above and slightly to their starboard. A surprised gunner aboard Rainey's plane fired a burst of 20 rounds with no effect. The Irving pilot, probably equally surprised, continued on his way.

Lt. Cmdr. Pflum had two separate encounters with the Japanese Air Force during a sector search on July 27. Mechanical problems forced his wingman, Lt. Allen, to return to Iwo early in the patrol and Pflum elected to continue on alone. He was cruising along the Honshu coast north of Tokyo sometimes two, some-



Lt. Charno (third from left) and some of the crew members of #59424. "Mr. Kip" was the nickname of Charno's son.

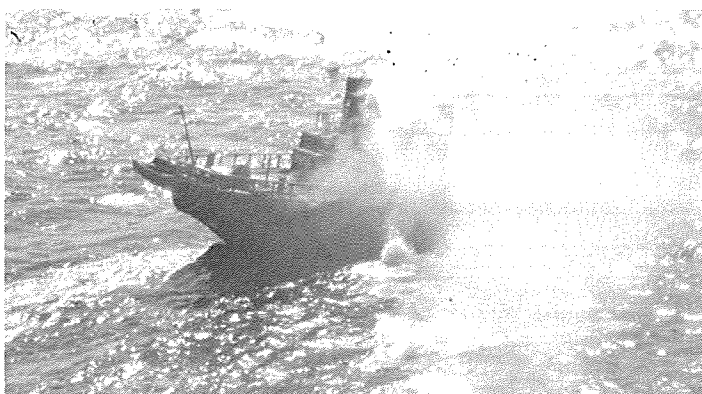
times five, miles from land when he saw 12 fighters scramble from Narute Air Field. The Japanese soon closed with his Privateer. Pflum turned directly out to sea adding power and letting down to 20 feet altitude. The mixed formation of Kawanishi George, and Kawasaki Ki-61 Tony, fighters chased him for about 10 minutes and then left. A high-speed run on the deck was recognized as the best defense the Privateer had against enemy attack.³¹ The low altitude exposed an attacker to the full weight of the Privateer's defensive armament, like a porcupine exposing only her quills to an attacker, and the run out to sea discouraged long pursuits by the short-range fighters. After the 12 fighters disappeared Pflum turned back to the coast and resumed his patrol beyond Narute. On the return leg, two more Japanese intercepted him and he repeated his earlier defensive tactics but these pilots were completely unaggressive. They contented themselves with a display of aerobatics while flying directly above Pflum and made no attempt to attack. After they tired of the air show and departed, Pflum resumed patrol eventually sinking two fishing boats and badly damaging, possibly sinking, a small inter-island freighter or steam trawler.

Four days later Lieutenants Magie and Donahue were attacked in the same Narute area by three A6M5 Model 52 Zekes. These Zekes may have been flown by an experienced pilot and two novices because the interception strongly resembled a training exercise, an object lesson in "How to Attack a Patrol Bomber" performed by a veteran for the enlightenment of the freshmen pilots. As the Privateers turned out to sea, the veteran Zeke pilot, if such he was, dived under them and the two presumed novices took up station in the observation gallery at 7 o'clock high, four miles out. Coming out of the turn the Privateer pilots went to full power in an attempt to catch the veteran at their 12 o'clock low position but he easily pulled away, diving to the deck and at a distance of three miles zooming up in an Immelmann turn. This placed the Japanese pilot in position for a head-on attack on Lt. Magie's Privateer. As the Zeke bore in, Magie's bow and top forward turrets opened up with accurate bursts, blowing pieces off his cowl and possibly wounding the pilot. At least a wound would be a possible explanation for the foolishness of his next



(Above) First Pete aflame and about to crash after bombing Aspro. Both crew members are apparently still alive at this point.

(Below) VPB-121 Privateers sink a Japanese ship in the Sagami Nada, southwest of Tokyo Bay. George H. Charno, Jr.



maneuver: 200 feet out the Zeke broke to Magie's starboard, chandelling between the two Privateers; ending up approximately 1,000 feet above and between the PB4Y-2's and flying in the same direction as they—a most unhealthy spot for the Zeke. The two Privateers brought him under intense crossfire. The Zeke turned to his starboard trailing considerable black smoke and the Privateer gunners continued to fire at him as he fled toward shore, now some 35 miles away. The other two Zeke's closed to within three quarters of a mile but made no attempt to attack and soon left. The "students" must have had mixed reactions about the value of the lesson. Magie and Donahue resumed patrol. In their Aircraft Action Report the two pilots described the Zeke 52 as "Much faster and more maneuverable than [the] PB4Y-2. Able to assume attack positions at will. Apparently well protected as many 50-caliber hits failed to burn it."

VPB-121 also flew air-sea rescue, anti-submarine and weather reconnaissance missions in July and August.

At 0800 hours on August 3, 1945, Lt. Cmdr. Pflum and his wingman, Lt. R.D. Ettinger, took off from Iwo to search for shipping along the Japanese coast. They made landfall at 1205 hours near Hamamatsu Airfield and turned to sweep the coast northward between Hamamatsu and Tokyo. After 45 minutes of flying on the deck, four to five miles off a coast empty of ships, they reached the island of O Shima and turned into the Sagami Nada. With this change of heading Pflum and Ettinger soon became part of an attempt by the submarine Aspro (SS-309) to rescue a downed Army flyer. By the time they returned from this patrol at 1925 hours, Pflum and Ettinger had assured the success of Aspro's attempt by driving off five high-performance Japanese fighters, damaging one of them, and by shooting down two floatplanes attempting to bomb the submarine. The story of the

rescue which they made possible actually began a couple of hours before they left Iwo Jima.³²

At dawn on the 3rd the Aspro was on the surface east of O Shima Island. On this first day of the second week of her seventh and last war patrol, Aspro was steaming toward her assigned life-guard station off the Japanese coast. A P-51 Mustang strike was scheduled against Tokyo later in the morning and Commander James H. Ashley, Jr., of Clinton, Indiana, her C.O., would have Aspro standing by in case any of the Mustang pilots had to ditch. At 0658 a Mitsubishi F1M2, Pete, float biplane, used for anti-submarine patrols, was spotted 10 miles away and closing. Ashley ordered the bridge cleared and took Aspro down. The Pete caused no trouble but Ashley remained submerged until 0857 so that the crew could have breakfast and other morning chores could be taken care of in relative peace. Radio and visual contact was made at 1055 with Aspro's rescue partners for the day, two lifeboats carrying B-17s. The B-17s took up station near the submarine. At 1115 the rescue team was completed when four P-51s came winging in to provide air cover for Aspro. Shortly afterward the fighter strike against Tokyo began and by 1205 the first P-51s could be seen returning southward from Tokyo. Ashley's radioman picked up reports over VHF of two downed P-51s, one south of Choshi, the other ditched inside the Sagami Nada. Ashley dispatched a B-17 to each site to search for survivors. There was one. At 1215 the B-17 in the Sagami Nada radioed that he had located a downed P-51 pilot; had dropped his lifeboat to the man and would stay on the scene as long as fuel permitted. Ashley estimated that it would take at least two hours before he could reach the man; Aspro's top speed of around 20 knots was unattainable today because of the necessity of keeping water ballast for a quick crash dive.

At 1245, as Ashley was approaching O Shima Island, still more than 30 miles from the downed airman, the B-17 pilot was forced to begin the long return to Iwo. As the B-17 headed south, the Mustang pilot, Capt. E.H. Mikes, was busily motoring out to sea at six or seven knots trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Japanese coast.

Shortly before 1250 hours, barely five minutes after the B-17 had departed, Pflum and Ettinger, coming up from the south turned their PB4Y-2s into the Sagami Nada. A lookout aboard one of the Privateers spotted the wake of a small boat. It was Capt. Mikes motoring along. Pflum soon established radio contact with Cmdr. Ashley and told him that the Privateers were en route to his location to guide him in for a pickup and to furnish Aspro air cover if needed. Cmdr. Ashley's four circling P-51s had already reported they were low on fuel and would have to leave in two hours.

En route to Aspro the two Privateer pilots sighted a 700-800 ton Japanese transport and quickly turned aside to attack. Crossing the ship from stern to bow strafing heavily the Privateers made their bomb drops but all were near misses. Pflum circled round to come in again from the ship's starboard quarter. This time his bomb struck squarely amidship and the vessel upended and sank by the bow in 40 seconds.

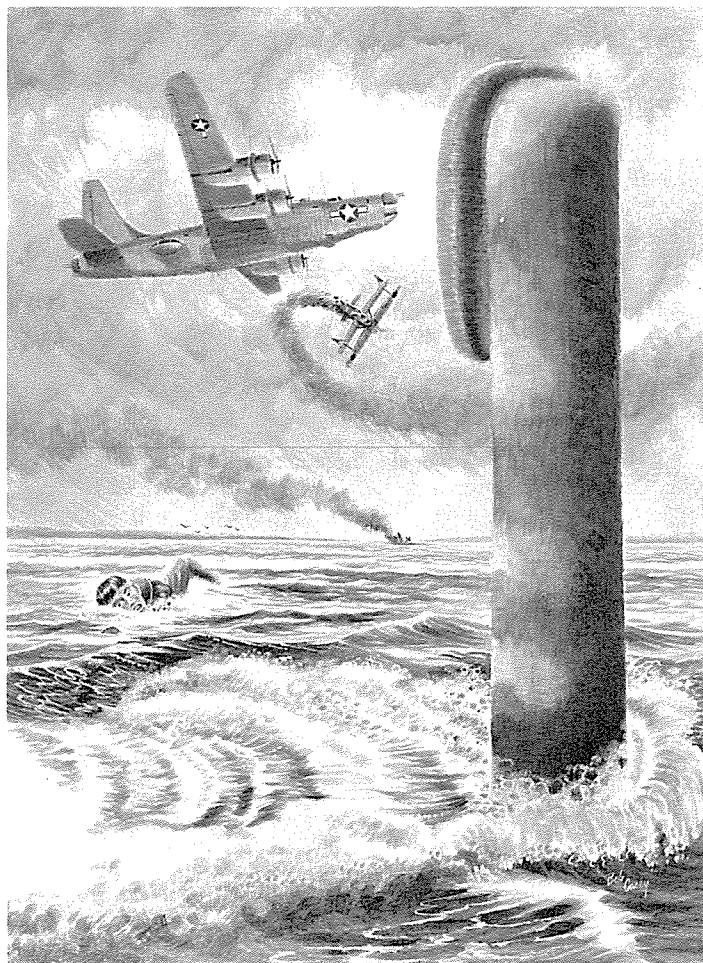
At 1320 hours Pflum and Ettinger arrived over Aspro, now eight miles east of O Shima and 29 miles from Capt. Mikes. They took up escort station over the submarine, circling Aspro at low altitude while the Mustangs orbited higher up at 8,000 feet. The air and sea armada moved peacefully ahead into the Sagami Nada and in 30 minutes Cmdr. Ashley had Mikes' lifeboat in sight; in a few more minutes he would have the airman aboard and Aspro on the way out of these dangerous waters. But there were coastal radar stations at Tateyama Naval Base, 15 miles to the east; a station on O Shima Island; one near Yokohama, plus one Army station north of Tateyama³³ and if these gave no warning of the approach of the planes and the sub, there were plenty of observers ashore who could.

Suddenly five of the Japanese Navy's best aircraft, the Kawanishi George, dropped out of the high cloud cover in a surprise bounce of the four circling Mustangs. A dogfight immediately developed and one P-51 was shot down, crashing 2,000 yards off Aspro's starboard beam. There was no parachute. The full bore

combat maneuvering of the remaining Mustangs rapidly used up their slender fuel reserve and they began to disengage. It was leave now or join Mikes in the water.

As the Mustangs began to pull away one George promptly attacked the two Privateers. He came diving down behind and to port of Pflum and Ettinger who were holding a close, echelon-left formation, stepped up from port to starboard. The George broke away at 1,000 feet taking heavy fire from the upper, tail and port waist turrets of both planes. He pulled off north, smoke streaming thickly from engine and wing roots. Perhaps daunted by the results of this attack the other four Georges now went after safer game—they began strafing runs on Capt. Mikes.³⁴

Cmdr. Ashley released Pflum and Ettinger from their close circling of Aspro to go to Mikes' aid. The two Privateers rushed in but the superior speed of the George enabled easy evasion of the attack. Seeing the Aspro now unguarded, the Japanese headed for her with Pflum and Ettinger in hot pursuit. The two Privateers broke up the George pilots' attack on Aspro but the Japanese



again easily evaded and banked back toward Mikes. A deadly merry-go-round developed with the two Navy patrol bombers chasing the four hot-shot Japanese fighters from Mikes to submarine and back again. The pursuit continued for a couple of revolutions before the Japanese decided to call it a day.³⁵ They disappeared to the east. But there was to be no respite.

At the time of the first George attack, the Privateer crews had seen three Mitsubishi Petes gaining altitude over Tateyama but had lost sight of them in the next hectic minutes. These Petes now arrived on the scene, just as Aspro was within 50 feet of Mikes' boat. Capt. Mikes, badly sunburned, his shirt torn and bloody, was standing up ready to leap across to the sub's deck as soon as she got closer. Just then one of the Petes began a glide bombing run from off Aspro's starboard beam. Pflum and Ettinger were circling around ahead of Aspro on her port quarter when Ashley alerted them with "Bogey at 3 o'clock!" The two

Privateers racked around to port and headed directly for the Pete. Cmdr. Ashley got off several bursts of 20mm fire at the Japanese before submerging. "As we were practically dead in the water we could only flood down and hope for the best," he reported. The diving Pete launched two hastily aimed bombs at Aspro as he passed over, his dive carrying him between and below Pflum and Ettinger's head-on charging Privateers. As she sank through a depth of 25 feet the bombs exploded wide of Aspro's starboard bow. Pflum and Ettinger each did simultaneous 180 turns in opposite directions, one Privateer banking left, the other right, each coming out of the maneuver behind the fleeing Pete and back in formation. They soon caught him and shot him down in flames. The pilot was dead before the flaming Pete splashed into the water, his body slumped over the controls in the front cockpit. The rear gunner tried to jump but hung up on the horizontal tail. Through the periscope, Ashley watched the Pete crash in a "cloud of smoke and fire about a mile off to port." He kept Aspro down for five minutes until 1426 (1326 by Aspro's clock) and then surfaced near Capt. Mikes:

[1426] Surfaced, C.O. to bridge, survivor coming alongside.

[1427] As I reached the bridge, saw another Pete starting another run on us from a high altitude. This time he was in the clear. All full ahead!

[1427-01] Dived.

[1427-40] Two bombs as we passed 45 feet. Things were beginning to look pretty grim at this point.

But not as grim as Ashley believed. The attack of the second Pete had been almost an exact duplicate of the first attack except that Pflum and Ettinger caught this one before he dropped his bombs. Again the Pete dived in from the starboard beam of the submarine; again Pflum and Ettinger did quick 180's onto his tail. Their report describes the result:

Pflum overtook and attacked him from his starboard quarter. Ettinger pulled up on his tail. With both planes scoring numerous 50-caliber hits, the Pete suddenly went into a vertical climb, half rolled at the top, and dove straight into the water. . . .

The bombs that Ashley heard must have fallen off during the dying Pete's last gyrations.

Through the periscope Ashley watched the Privateers splash the second Pete. "They were certainly doing a magnificent job of eliminating the Jap for us," he reported. At 1440 through raised periscope Ashley could see Mikes, his lifeboat now abandoned, swimming toward the periscope head. After a careful search of the sea and sky he came up to 40 feet and asked the Privateer pilots if it was safe to surface. Receiving an affirmative, at 1444 he brought Aspro up and by 1445 Mikes was aboard.³⁶ The George strafing attack had shot holes in Capt. Mikes' boat and in both life rings; and his left arm had been grazed by a bullet, but otherwise Mikes was okay. Ashley released the Privateers and began a high-speed surface run out of the Sagami Nada. As Pflum and Ettinger headed for home, they saw five Georges and three Petes approaching the Aspro. Cmdr. Ashley picked them up on radar at a range of 6½ miles and crash-dived to 100 feet. No attack developed. He continued his run-out under water. Mission accomplished.

Pflum radioed Iwo: "Survivor rescued XX Splashed two bandits damaged one X Chased 5 bandits X Sank one Sugar Charlie Uncle X Returning to base XXX." The next day Capt. H.R. Horney, the Air-Sea Rescue Task Group Commander³⁷ sent a dispatch to the Commander of the Fleet Air Wing 18, Rear Admiral M.R. Greer at his headquarters in Guam:

The courage, determination and proficiency displayed by Cmdr. Pflum in engagement yesterday considered outstanding and above the call of duty . . . recommend Pflum receive suitable recognition . . . Lt. R.D. Ettinger was flying wing on Pflum and participated in the actions. . . . He displayed equal skill and bravery under Pflum's bold and aggressive leadership XX.

And recognition soon came. On 20 August in ceremonies at Guam both Pflum and Ettinger were presented with the nation's second highest award for bravery, the Navy Cross. Each member of their crews received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Routine operations continued throughout the momentous

days of August. On the 7th Pflum sank another small freighter. On the 11th Lieutenants Rainey and Allen made a sector search along the Japanese coast south of Tokyo. The patrol was uneventful until near its end.

As they traversed the Sagami Nada, intending to make a reconnaissance of O Shima Island and then head for home, the two Privateers were suddenly bounced by a gaggle of Zeke 52s. The well-coordinated attack was a complete surprise to both the VPB-121 pilots. Allen was flying lead at 400 feet altitude and Rainey was behind and to his starboard at 200 feet in Privateer #59495. Both planes were moving through ground haze which had reduced visibility to less than seven miles. The haze extended up to 1,000 feet under broken clouds, with bases at 1,300 feet. Allen's top aft gunner called out the first planes: "Four fighters high at 12 o'clock!"; followed an instant later by a call from Rainey to Allen over the VHF, "Fighters at 8 o'clock!" The two Privateers were thus neatly sandwiched between two separate groups of Japanese fighters, one group attacking Allen head-on, the other group diving in on the port quarter of Rainey's Privateer.

Allen turned steeply into the two attackers charging his port bow. His Number 1 engine was knocked out and his tailgunner wounded as the four fighters passed over his Privateer and dived on Rainey. One of the Zekes was seen to be smoking from hits by Allen's gunners. The sudden drag of the blasted No. 1 engine flipped the steeply turning Privateer around sharply; it stalled and fell toward the sea. Lt. Allen regained control less than 75 feet above the water.

During this emergency three of Allen's crew reported seeing Lt. Rainey's plane on fire, cartwheeling into the water. All that could now be seen was an oil slick and smoke where he had gone in. Allen ran up his three remaining engines to full power and began a harrowing run for home pursued by the Zekes.

Twice more the Japanese delivered well-coordinated attacks, losing one of their number to accurate fire from Allen's gunners, but not managing to inflict further serious damage on the Privateer. When Allen landed, on three engines, back at Iwo the Privateer was found to have been hit twice by 20mm cannon and many times by machine gun bullets. It was learned later that Lt. Rainey's copilot, first mechanic, second mechanic and one of the gunners had been killed in the attack on his Privateer. Rainey and seven of the crew survived to become, briefly, prisoners of war.

Three days later Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration. On the 15th the cease fire went into effect and the war was over. VPB-121's regular round of missions continued throughout the remainder of the month, but with some differences. After the cease fire the daily sector searches only closed to within 30 miles of the coast to minimize the possibility of "incidents" and all planes carried less ammunition on patrol. The squadron continued operations until September 19 albeit on a much reduced level after the signing of the surrender documents aboard the USS Missouri on September 2. On the 19th, Pflum, newly promoted Commander, turned over the squadron to a successor and the men of VPB-121 rapidly began to retrace the path toward home.

REFERENCES

1. VPB-121 was a direct descendant of Patrol Squadron 19 commissioned in 1937. VP-19 became VP-43 in 1939; VP-81 in 1941 and VP-81 was redesignated VPB-121 on October 1, 1944. William T. Larkins in a letter to the author, July 23, 1974.
2. For more details of Charno's career with VB-110 see "The Lost Prince" by Hank Searls.
3. George H. Charno, Jr., in a letter to the author, March 17, 1975.
4. Other Privateer squadrons carried 13 men on occasion. The extra man was the operator of the RCM equipment who rotated among the squadron planes. The RCM gear aboard VPB-121 Privateers was operated by one of the regular crew members. D.A. Rosso, Jr. (formerly Radio-Radar-Countermeasures Aircrewman with VPB-124) in letter sent to author by Lee M. Pearson September 20, 1974, and Charno, *op. cit.*
5. Charno, *op. cit.*
6. Samuel Eliot Morison, "History of U.S. Naval Operations in WW II," Vol. XIV, "Victory in the Pacific," pp. 10, 11.
7. Wesley, F. Craven and James L. Cate, "Army Air Force in World War II," Vol. 5, pp. 581, 584, 585.
7. United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS hereafter) #74, "The Reduction of Wake," pp. 123, 124.

8. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
9. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
10. United States Strategic Bombing Survey #70, Seventh and Eleventh Air Forces in the War Against Japan, p. 10.
11. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
12. USSBS #70, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
13. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
14. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
15. Craven and Cate, *op. cit.*, pp. 530, 531.
16. Russell Landstrom, Associated Press News Annual: 1945, p. 147.
17. Robert Sherrod, "History of Marine Corps Aviation in WW II," p. 239.
18. *Ibid.*
19. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
20. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
21. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
22. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
23. USSBS #74, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
24. Clark G. Reynolds, "The Fast Carriers," p. 365.
25. J. Rohwer and G. Hummelchen, "Chronology of the War at Sea 1939-1945," p. 521.
26. USSBS #74, says 997 Japanese were evacuated. (p. 21)
27. USSBS, "Interrogations of Japanese Officials," Vol. 1, p. 88.
28. Reynolds, *op. cit.*
29. Morison, *op. cit.*, p. 310.
30. Frederick G. Ruffner, Jr. and Robert C. Thomas, "Code Names Dictionary," p. 476.
31. Letter from Commander FAW18 to Commander in Chief, United States Fleet, August 16, 1945 included in VPB-121 War Diary.
32. This account is derived from Aircraft Action Report No. 45, dated May 8, 1945 (contained in the official VPB-121 War Diary); and USS Aspro (SS309), Report of War Patrol No. 7, August 13, 1945. The perhaps inevitable differences to be found in most "eyewitness" accounts are increased in this instance by the radically differing vantage point of the two reporters. Commander Ashley on the bridge of the relatively slow-moving Aspro saw the events of August 3 from sea level, and below; while Lt. Cmdr. Pflum's view was high and fast-moving with constantly shifting angles. Under the circumstances it is remarkable that such close agreement exists between the two reports. All important differences that do exist are noted. All times given have been standardized on VPB-121's zone. Useful for minor details is the story in "Zoomies, Subs and Zeroes" by Lockwood and Adamson, pp. 261-277, and the "Battle Diary" description of the mission. The reader may wish to compare the present account of Capt. Mike's rescue with the version presented in "Zoomies, Subs and Zeroes" and in "Sink 'em All," Charles A. Lockwood, E.P. Dutton, New York: 1951, pp. 342-344; "Undersea Victory," W.J. Holmes, Doubleday, 1966, p. 466; and in "On the Seas and In the Skies," Theodore Roscoe, Hawthorn Book, Inc.: New York, p. 568.
33. USSBS #62, "Japanese Airpower," p. 59.
34. Pflum's report says that the Japanese first started Aspro before attacking Mike's. Both Cmdr. Ashley's account and the "Battle Diary" confirm the initial attack as being on Mike's.
35. Cmdr. Ashley's report seems to specifically deny this round-robin incident: "Zeroes [sic] had plenty of respect for Privateers and did not again approach survivor or us." Ashley does report a Pete attack on his submarine at this time which he says the Privateers prevent. Since the first Pete apparently did not appear until a minute or more after the Georges left, Ashley's "Pete" attack may have been one of the Georges trying to strafe.
36. There is a major inconsistency between the two reports at this point. Pflum says that as Aspro surfaced a "Bogey" appeared; the submarine crash-dived and Pflum and Ettinger chased away this Bogey and another George which later showed up. According to the report, the pilots then told Ashley that they were low on gas and that he would have to make the pick-up immediately and "at 1431K the survivor was rescued and the sub submerged." Once again the "Battle Diary" account agrees with Cmdr. Ashley's version in the main, not mentioning a third attack or crash-dive.
37. Craven and Cate, *op. cit.*, p. 600.

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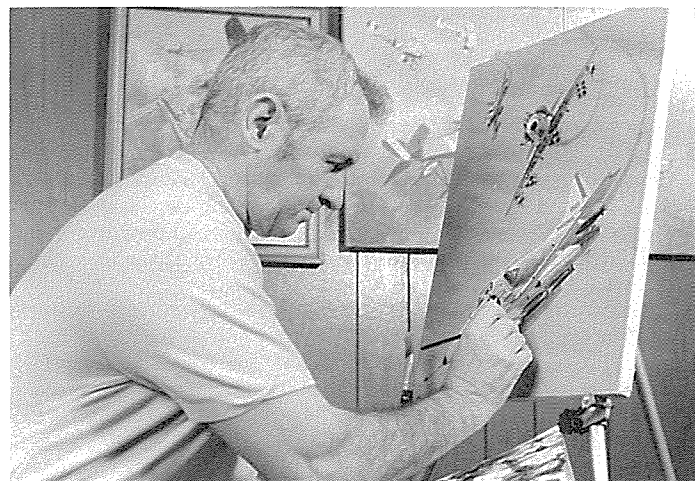
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Primary sources for this history have been the VPB-121 War Diary, October 1944-August 1945; the Summary of Operations of VPB-121, dated September 18, 1945; and USS Aspro (SS309), Report of War Patrol No. Seven, dated August 15, 1945. The author wishes to thank Dr. D.C. Allard, Head of the Operational Archives Branch, for making these documents available.

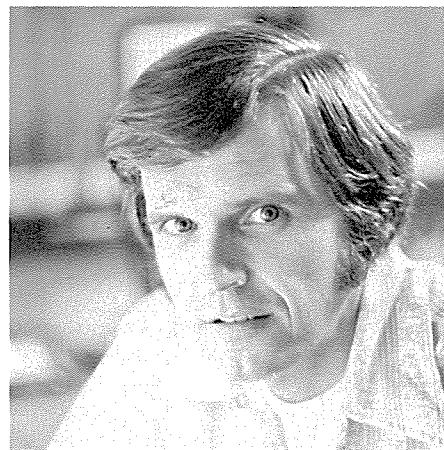
This history would not have been possible without the interest and assistance of Mr. Harry B. Maupin of Birmingham, Ala., formerly Aviation Machinist Mate Third Class with VPB-121. Sincere thanks also to Mr. George H. Charno, Kansas City, Mo., for his invaluable contributions, and to Mr. Lee M. Pearson for his expert guidance and information.

Thanks also to Mr. William T. Larkins and to IPMS Birmingham Chapter members Larry Kelpke and Fred Zak and a special thanks to Mr. Bill Powers, also of IPMS Birmingham.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Artist Bob Casey of Abington, Mass., spends most of his time painting canvases depicting all eras of American Military History from the Revolution to Vietnam. Probably he is best known for his portrayals of combat aircraft; he also has done much work involving combat surface ships and submarines. Actually, Bob knows submarines best having spent 23 years in the Navy's Submarine Force to retire as a C.P.O.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Woolf's interest in Privateer-equipped Navy units grew out of a desire to make a 1/72 scale model of the PB4Y-2. Three models and this article later, his interest is greater than ever. He hopes to develop the story of the Privateer squadrons and welcomes contacts with former pilots, crewmen and others who can contribute anecdotes and/or photographs. He especially would like to contact VPB-121 veterans.