

Fate of GUBA I

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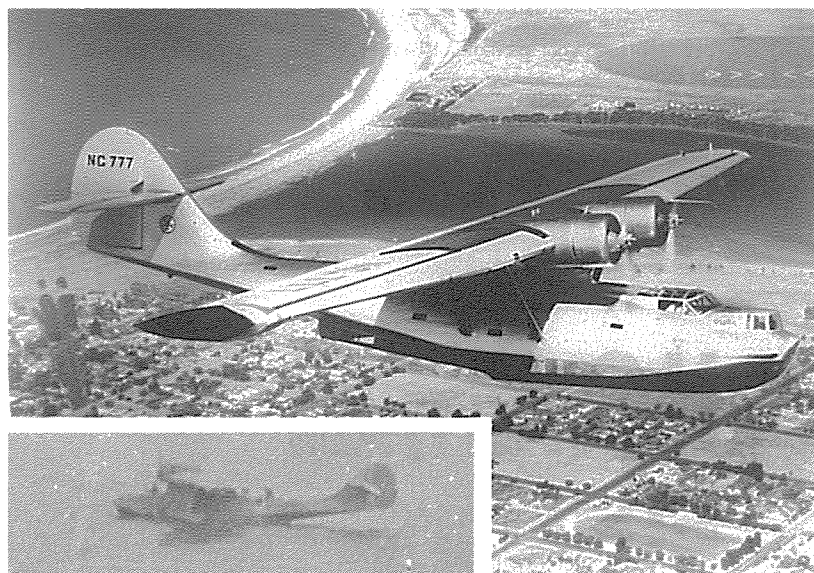
Bill Scarborough's excellent series, "The Consolidated PBY – Catalina To Canso, appeared in the AAHS Journal, Vol. 16 (1971) No. 1. On page 30, second column, he stated: "GUBA returned to Russia and its ultimate fate is now unknown." The following pertains to its fate.

Researching the delivery of aircraft to the Russians during WWII involving Lend-Lease, an interesting sidelight story involving a Consolidated flying boat Model 28-1 has turned up with a twist of irony.

Actually there were two Consolidated boats (Catalina type) purchased by Dr. Richard Archibold for exploration in the South Seas New Guinea area. Both were registered NC 777 possibly as one replaced the other. Model 28-1 GUBA I was tested in the San Diego area June 1937 and then was sold to the Russians for the unsuccessful and massive search of missing Soviet Flyer Levanevsky and his crew in the Arctic. Australian-born Sir Hubert Wilkins¹ headed the search missions. Purchase was made by the Amtorg Trading Corp. and registered L-2. Amtorg purchased a further three aircraft in 1937 as Model 28-2's (PB-1) "cargo mail boats" including a license agreement which called for assembly and test of the first aircraft in San Diego. The others were in knockdown form put together for shipment with screws and bolts. These were the only boats that did not feature Pratt and Whitney twin Wasp (R-1830) engines, but rather the Wright Cyclone R-1820 G-3 which the Russians already had construction license for. GUBA II was a Model 28-3 that had ice shields on the hull. It was flown to Miami, Florida Dec. 3, 1937. Some 150 flights were flown in the South Pacific before being sold to the British Purchasing Commission. Sold to BOAC Oct. 1940 for transport service to West Africa registered as G-AGBJ.

Meanwhile GUBA I apparently remained in service with the Soviet government. In Robert Carse's book, "A Cold Corner of Hell, the story of the Murmansk Convoys 1941-1945, page 206, has this bit of interesting information: "Commander Frankel² was convinced that he should save the American merchant ship (Liberty – WINSTON SALEM, a survivor of the ill-fated Convoy PQ.17, which was aground on the Soviet island of Novaya Zemlya) and her valuable cargo. The Russian Naval authorities at Arkangelsk assigned him to a Catalina flying boat which would take him north to the ship. The plane took off with some difficulty July 19, 1942 and CMDR. Frankel remarked that it was not new and having some hard use. The wings had a gentle up and down motion like that of a seagull riding a breeze. Then he noted a label on the battery case in the cockpit with the inscription: *Expressly designed for the Museum of Natural History*. He questioned the pilot about this and was told that the plane had been flown by Sir Hubert Wilkins in Arctic exploration work several years before the war.

After arrival CMDR Frankel remained with the ship several days which was lightened and floated off the beach in high tide with the aid of tugs. Under heavy escort, the ship



GUBA I (Courtesy Ed Leiser San Diego Aero-Space Museum)

GUBA I (inset) off the coast of Novaya Zemlya July 20, 1941. Photo taken by Tom Grogan, a member of the USN gun crew aboard the grounded Liberty merchantman Winston-Salem.

reached Arkangelsk July 28. Frankel further stated, "After arriving in Arkangelsk, I learned that two days after the ship had left (July 24 plus 2) a German submarine came in to Moller Bay and shelled the weather and radio station destroying the Catalina which was still moored there. This was probably the foundation for the rumor that I had been killed in the plane."

In Vol. I of *Chronik des Seekrieges 1929-45*, page 237, this revelation comes to light: "In search for the remaining ships of Convoy PQ.17 sighted by German reconnaissance off the west coast of Novaya Zemlya, the U.601 (LTCMDR Grau) on July 26 shelled the Soviet Polar Station Karmakuly, destroying two aircraft and on 1 Aug. sinking the steamer Krestyanin (2513 tons) off the Kostin Strait." While there appears to be a discrepancy in dates, it does confirm the end of GUBA I.

Now here comes the twist of irony. This writer having a nose for submarine losses due to aircraft, was bugged by the number U.601 until he searched and found that the U.601 (CMDR Otto Hansen) had been sunk NW of Narvik, Norway, on February 25, 1944 by a Coastal Command *Catalina* (DA-), of 210 Sqdn! The U.601 had set out on the 24th with the *Werwolf* pack comprising of: U.312, 313, 362, 425, 674, 713, 739, 956, 990 in concert with the *Hartmut* pack: U.315, 366, 472, 673 to attack Convoy JW.57 bound for Murmansk. During this operation, U.713 was also sunk by the ancient DD, KEPPEL (D.84).

REFERENCE

1. Explorer Sir George Hubert Wilkins (1888-1958) learned to fly in Australia in 1910. His most notable flight was in a Lockheed Vega I (s/n 4), in April, 1928 from Point Barrow, Alaska to the island of Spitzbergen. The exploration flight was sponsored by the Detroit News and flown by Alaskan bush pilot Ben Eielson. For this Wilkins was knighted. Following further exploration and aerial mapping in the Antarctic by Wilkins, the Vega was sold to Argentina.
2. Actually he was Capt. Samuel Benjamin Frankel, USN, Ass't. Naval Attache who served in North Russia for 3½ years, retired as RADM and still among the living.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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