



PBY-5, 1942, at start of takeoff run.

by CDR Allan Rothenberg, USN (Ret.)

**A**sk any Naval Aviator, young or old, if he remembers the old PBY “Catalina.” Almost to a man they will say, “sure, good ole Dumbo—used for Air Sea Rescue,” or “yeah, it took off at 100 knots climbed at 100 knots, and flew at 100 knots.” Except for those who flew them, the extraordinary missions the old Cats flew were some of the best kept secrets of World War II. The Cats flew night torpedo missions, night bombing and intruder missions, as well as replacing and bringing out Coast Watchers in the Solomons.

They were officially dubbed the “Black Cats” when Adm. Aubrey Fitch, COMAIR-SOPAC, on 14 December 1942, designated VP-12 as the squadron which would ever after be known as the *original* “Black Cats.”

I hate to be the one to inform the world of U.S. Naval Aviation that Adm. Fitch was wrong! Many of us, operating from the USS *Curtiss* in Segundo Channel, Espirito Santos and New Hebrides, were “painting” our PBYs with soap and lampblack for night operations as early as October, 1942. I believe the first use of “Black Cat” was originated by Lt. James O. Cobb of VP-11 in late

October 1942. Cobb was preparing to overfly Guadalcanal’s Henderson Field one night, and preferring not to be shot at by friendly batteries, sent a message to General Geiger which read “THE BLACK CAT FLIES TONIGHT.”

However, I’m getting ahead of my story. The first and unique *new* mission of the PBY—the nighttime torpedo attack—originated at the Battle of Midway.

Why were PBYs sent to Midway Island in the first place? Let’s start with the night of March 3–4, 1942. On that night, Oahu was raided by two enemy four-engine flying boats. Owing to a fortunate overcast, their four bombs missed Pearl Harbor and fell harmlessly into the Punch Bowl crater. Although not sighted, the planes were identified by sound and bomb fragments as “Emilys.” On March 10, another one was detected near Midway and shot down by four Marine Corps Brewster Buffaloes based at Midway. Intelligence correctly deduced they started from Wotje atoll and refueled by submarine at French Frigate Shoals—about halfway between Midway and Oahu. Hawaiian Sea Frontier undertook to rid the area of Japanese subs and patrolled and mined the

area. Two YP boats (converted Pacific tuna boats) were left at Islands such as Lisianski and Layson.

Commander Rochefort, *Cincpac* Combat Intelligence Officer had already broken the Japanese Code and had convinced Admiral Nimitz that Midway would be attacked on in early June.

The buildup of PBYs at Midway began on 22 May when six PBY- 5As from VP-44 under command of Lt. Cdr. R.C. Brixner arrived. By 30 May, 32 PBY-5s and 5-As from VP-14, 23, 24, 51, 72, 91 and 44 were on hand. Twenty two PBY-5s operated from Sand Island, and the ten PBY-5A amphibious aircraft operated from Eastern Island under the command of Lt. Cdr. John Fitzsimmons, C.O. of VP-24. Overall command of the Army, Navy, Marine Air detachments was given to Cdr. Logan Ramsey—R. Adm. Patrick Bellinger's operations officer. Starting on May 22nd, sector searches were flown daily by PBYs to a distance of 700 miles from Midway commencing at 0415 each morning. The search patterns ran from south-southwest to north-northeast. One lone PBY took off during the "graveyard watch" in order to be at the estimated launching positions of the approaching Japanese fleet at dawn. As luck would have it, by 2 June a stationary front had developed about 300 miles northwest of Midway. This front was a rough one, high seas, low visibility right down to the wave tops. It was so dense, in fact, that Admiral Nagumo actually lost visual contact with ships of his striking force. Since few of our PBYs at Midway were radar equipped, enemy ships were usually picked up visually in such weather.

Our sector searches had started not a day too soon. The invasion fleet left Yokosaku and Kure on 20 May, while the four-carrier strike force sortied on 27 May. On the 29th, Adm. Yamamoto's flagship, the giant battleship *Yamato* departed to trail the strike force at a distance of 300 miles.

On Midway, the pilots and crews of the PBYs got little rest. Pilots and crew had spent the first days in the BOQ and barracks, but were then moved to dugouts where comforts were few, and sleep at a premium. Twelve-hour, 1500-mile flights were flown almost every day, with addi-

tional time being taken up in briefings and debriefings. The briefings emphasized that our primary objective was to locate a single Japanese fleet approaching Midway and report it without being seen ourselves! There was never a mention of *two* Japanese fleets.

On June 3rd., fate reached its fickle finger to tap Ens. Jewell (Jack) Reid on the shoulder. On that day, Jack Reid and his crew in a VP-44 PBY-5A were excited. Reid had a premonition that his crew would sight the Japanese Fleet on this day. "Our patrol was uneventful the first 700 miles," he said. "Our radioman, Chief Musser, was guarding the Midway radio frequency on one receiver and listening to Japanese traffic on the other. He told my navigator, Ens. Swan, the Japanese were using a low, short-range frequency and we were close to the source." So Reid decided to fly another 30 to 40 miles. "We were flying course 270 at 1000 feet," Reid said, "At the end of 730 miles, just before I was to turn north, I spotted what at first appeared to be specks on the horizon, or dirty spots on the windshield. After a second look, I shouted, "Enemy ships 30 miles dead ahead!" Ens. Hardeman snatched the binoculars, and after looking, shouted, "You're damned right they're enemy ships!" The time was 0900. Reid immediately dived the PBY until it was skimming the white caps and turned north. He made no attempt to count ships at that point, but he could see three columns heading east. A message was encoded to Midway: "Sighted main enemy fleet, course 090, range 30 miles." His greatest concern at that moment was to remain unseen. Reid's tactics worked. He maneuvered until the PBY was on the same heading as the enemy fleet, then from a distance of about 25 miles, he and his crew fed data on numbers and types of ships back to Midway for the next two hours with no hint of having been seen by the Japanese. Reid counted 17 ships (there were actually 28) identifying them as battleships, cruisers, destroyers, transports, fuel tankers and supply ships. No carriers.

Finally, with minimum fuel remaining, Reid broke off and headed for Midway. He was told to land in the lagoon, because B-17s and B-26s from Pearl Harbor had taken

up all spaces along Eastern Island's runways. Just after touching down, Jack lost one engine due to fuel starvation, and as he hooked the buoy, the other one quit. They had been in the air for 14.3 hours!

With no carriers reported by Reid, Cdr. Ramsey was unconvinced that this enemy fleet coming in from the east was the *strike* force. So was Adm. Nimitz. He radioed Adm. Fletcher that the PBY had found the *invasion* force, not the *strike* force, and to expect the strike force the next day.

Whatever its mission, the enemy fleet could not be allowed to continue on unmolested, so at noon, 9 B-17s dispatched from Midway to bomb it. With all B-17s radar equipped, they found the ships and made their run at 10,000 feet. The Japanese returned with anti-aircraft fire. When each side was checked for damage, none was found.

Darkness fell, but the defenders of Midway saw no reason to cease harrasing the invasion force. That afternoon two PBYs

had arrived, each carrying two torpedoes, and Cdr. Ramsey quickly conceived a plan for a night torpedo attack, the first ever for PBYs—a decision that was to change forever the tactical use of the PBY at night. (By the time the war was over, PBYs had accounted for the sinking or disabling of hundreds of thousands of tons of Japanese cargo vessels, troop transports and warships, as well as providing fire spotting for fleet units during night operations. Curiously, their exploits are not widely known except to a few aviation buffs, and the surviving aircrews.)

I had arrived at Midway that same day about 1700 hours. I had been awakened at 0300 that morning and told I was going to Midway. "Midway to what?" I asked. I had never heard of the place. However, by 0700 I was on my way. It was my first flight as a Patrol plane commander, having just qualified the previous week. On arrival at Midway, I had been on the ground about an hour-and-a-half, had dropped off my gear



The crew of the patrol seaplane which first sighted the Japanese invasion fleet approaching Midway Island. Back row left to right: R.J. Derouin; Francis Mussen; Ens. Hardeman, copilot; Ens. Jewell "Jack" M. Reid; R.A. Swannaw. Front row left to right: J.F. Grammell, J. Groovers, P.A. Fitzpatrick.

in a dugout, when the word came for all PBY plane commanders to report to the operations office. I dutifully arrived, and Cdr. Ramsey told us the Japanese fleet had been discovered and was now about 600 miles out, and he was sending out four "volunteer" PBY crews to launch a night torpedo attack. "Lt. Red Richards will lead the attack in Lt. Hibberd's plane," he said "and the volunteers." he continued, "are Lt. (j.g.) Probst, Lt. (j.g.) Davis and (then pointing to me) that little ensign in the back there."

After he finished his briefing, I walked out, and sure enough the ordnance crew was hanging a torpedo on my plane. The torpedoes were 2,200 pound Mark XIII's, designed for air launch, but were erratic weapons of dubious value. Sad to say, they were all we had in mid-1942. Ideally, they were dropped from no more than 60 feet altitude at relatively low speeds. Once in the water they might deviate from their intended course in any direction, up or down, port or starboard, and if by chance they reached the target, there was no guarantee they would explode!

I had never made a torpedo attack, either training or live. Neither had Probst, Davis, or Hibberd. Chief Mathers did have some torpedo experience.

Three of the PBYs took off from Eastern Island at 2115. I was delayed by a stuck mounting ladder which the crew could not detach. Finally, I told the crew chief—C.G. Lawlor, AMM-2—to "take the hatchet and chop it off." He did, and we took off about four or five minutes behind the third plane, Probst's plane, piloted by Chief Aviation Pilot H.C. Smathers. We had been ordered to fly without lights and in radio silence.

When Red Richards, the X.O. of VP-44 told Hibberd to climb through the 2000-foot overcast and set course for the Japanese fleet, he didn't know I wasn't with him. So I continued on alone. Of our four planes, only two—Hibberd's and Probst's—were radar equipped. To add to my troubles, my autopilot was out of commission. It had gone out just before I arrived at Midway, and there had been no time to repair it.

For the first two-and-a-half hours, all four PBYs—three together and me alone—

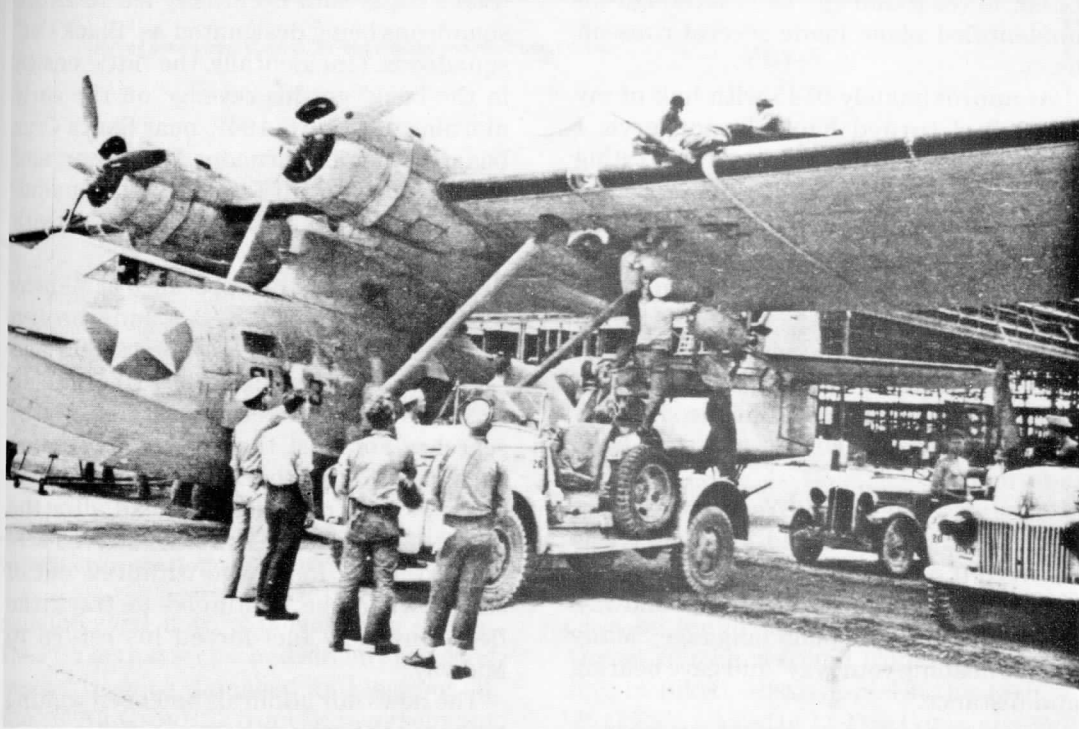
were in and out of the clouds, one moment in rain, and the next in the clear.

At about 0115, Hibberd's radar picked up a group of ships about 10 miles to port. The ships were quickly spotted visually, steaming in two columns. Richards directed his group down-moon of the fleet. The Japanese force, unaware of any danger, steamed placidly ahead. Richards selected the largest ship in the port column and Hibberd moved in at 1000 kts. As the first PBY approached to 800 yds, Richard shouted, "drop the damn thing," and Hibberd pulled the firing toggle. The torpedo dropped from the wing, and the PBY roared up and over what was identified as a transport. One of the gunners reported a bright flash, but Hibberd, aware of the Mark XIII torpedo's erratic reputation, surmised that his gunner had seen only the muzzle blast of a Japanese antiaircraft gun at close range.

Davis in the second PBY began his run on a ship at the same time as Hibberd, aware he had only one shot. Unhappy with his approach, Davis circled for a better one. By this time the ship had turned, presenting her stern. Davis elected to drop anyway. He dropped his fish at 200 yards, probably too close for the warhead to arm. (Later experiments proved if you didn't manually rotate the arming propeller before loading, you needed to release at least 500-600 yards distance.) As Davis pulled over the stern, the ships AA guns and those of nearby ships opened up on him. His port waist gunner let fly with his .50 caliber machine gun as Davis flew past, his were apparently the only missiles to strike the ship. There was no explosion.

Probst, with Chief Smathers at the controls, became separated as Richards went down-moon to start his run. Probst and Smathers found themselves over the Japanese fleet at 1,000 feet. Smathers immediately went down-moon and made his drop at low level, aiming at a large ship at the end of the column. His torpedo ran true and a crewman reported a flash followed by flame. Smathers' fish had hit a tanker, the *Akebono Maru*. It was the only hit of the evening.

Meanwhile, "the little ensign in the back of the room," flying manually and without



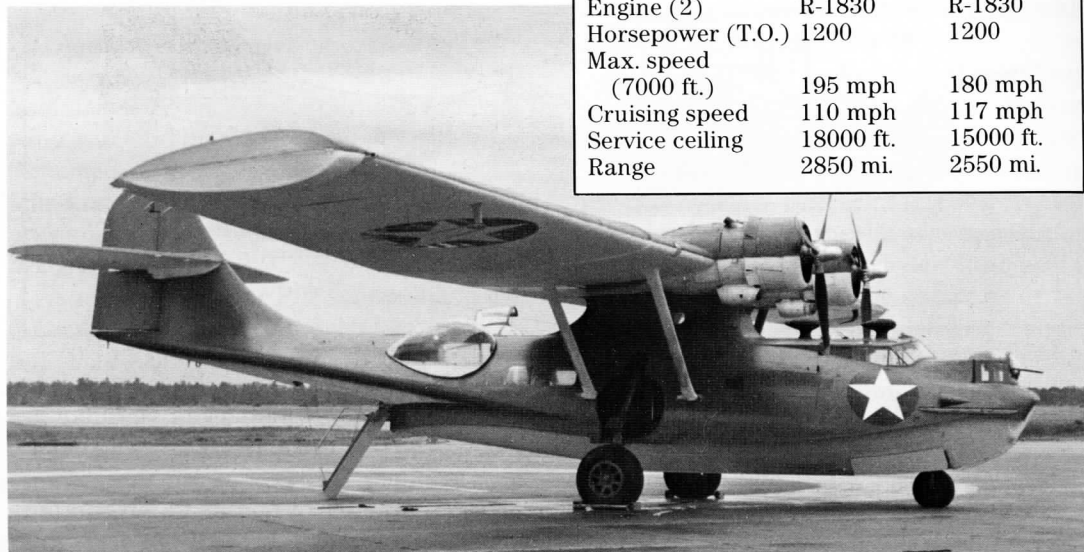
PBY-5 ground crew loading bombs at Midway.



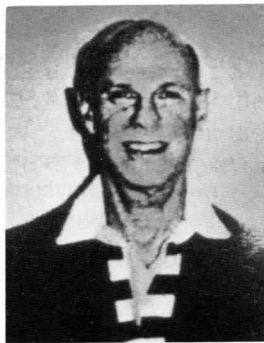
Pilots who flew on the night torpedo mission at Midway. Left to right: Davis, Rothenberg, Richards, and Propst.

## PBY "CATALINA"

	PBY-5	PBY-5A
Wingspan	104 ft.	104 ft.
Length	63 ft. 10 in.	63 ft. 10 in.
Height	18 ft. 10 in.	20 ft. 2 in.
Wing area	14000 sq. ft.	14000 sq. ft.
Gross weight	31800 lbs.	34000 lbs.
Engine (2)	R-1830	R-1830
Horsepower (T.O.)	1200	1200
Max. speed (7000 ft.)	195 mph	180 mph
Cruising speed	110 mph	117 mph
Service ceiling	18000 ft.	15000 ft.
Range	2850 mi.	2550 mi.



The Museum's PBY-5A at NAS Pensacola, Florida.



*CDR ALLAN ROTH-ENBERG was born at Newark, NJ, 16 June 1918; reared in Washington, DC; attended George Washington University; entered Navy preflight June 1940 and began training at Pensacola August 1940. He received*

*his wings and was commissioned ensign in May 1941. His first assignment was to VP-51, flying PBY Catalinas from Norfolk and Bermuda. VP-51 was the first squadron to arrive at Pearl Harbor after the Japanese attack.*

*After the initial PBY night torpedo attack on the Japanese fleet, Al's war service continued in the Solomons area. On Oct. 18, 1942, his crew was responsible for saving 72 survivors of USS Meredith which had been sunk by Japanese carrier planes. He was awarded the Navy Cross for torpedoing a Japanese cruiser near the Santa Cruz Islands on Oct. 16, 1942. Four nights later, he glide-bombed another cruiser off Tassa-*

*faronga.*

*In 1943 he retrained in night fighters and served two more tours in the Pacific aboard USS Wasp.*

*After the war, he commanded VF-71, flying F9F Panthers. His other service included two years at Guantanamo, followed by two years as executive officer of the Naval Missile Facility, Pt. Arguello, CA. He also served as air officer and navigator of the USS F.D. Roosevelt.*

*Besides the Navy Cross, Al wears the Silver Star, 3 DFCs and 3 Air Medals.*

*Retiring from the Navy in 1961, he entered the financial field with Wheat First Securities.*

*At 69, Al is still active in sports. He was with the 1984 Olympic Team as a boxing official. He referees football at the collegiate level and is certified by the International Boxing Federation and referees U.S. and world championship fights.*

*In 1987 he refereed four championship fights, including one in Cartagena, Columbia, and one in Italy. In 1987 he was rated as one of the top ten referees in the world.*

*Al and his wife Doris live in Virginia Beach. They have three children.*