

## Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Force

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One of the most versatile, storied branches of Naval Aviation, and one of the least heralded, is the Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Force (MPRF). Today's MPRF consists of land-based, long range patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, including the P-3C Orion and EP-3E Aires II. The force traces roots back to the very beginning of Naval Aviation, to the seaplanes of the World War I-era Navy. However, one of the first remarkable chapters in MPRF history took place in the Southwest Pacific during the bleakest moments of WWII. The warriors who flew "Black Cats" rewrote naval war-fighting doctrine and helped turn back the Japanese advance, indelibly shaping the future of the MPRF.

When America entered the War in December 1941, the Consolidated PBV Catalina was the Navy's workhorse long-range patrol aircraft. It was big, slow, and clumsy and was not considered suitable for combat, especially against skilled Japanese Zero pilots. While it lacked fighter potential, the PBV was amphibious, had a long range, and was extremely durable and resilient.

Today's MPRF prides itself on being multi-mission capable. The MPRF of yester-year, flying the PBV, was no different. They were well suited for long-range patrols, convoy escorts, transport, and anything else that called for flights of long-duration over water. Countless rescues-at-sea, so-called "Dumbo" missions, were also performed. Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines in some of the most remote island locales in the world survived off of the Catalina's re-supply missions.

After the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the subsequent Japanese advance during the following months in the South Pacific, the U.S. and Allied forces faced dire circumstances. What forces had not been killed or captured beat a hasty retreat all the way to Australia. Japan had nearly conquered the whole Southwest Pacific theatre. By March of 1942, only three of the original forty-five PBVs of Patrol Wing Ten in the Philippines had survived. As Allied forces needed every resource available in the fight for jungle islands and atolls between Australia and the advancing Japanese, the PBV were thrust into their combat role.

Out of necessity, the Catalina crews learned to adapt to nighttime flying and fighting, where they were less vulnerable to Japanese fighters and less likely to be spotted by the ships that they were attacking. Crew's began painting their PBVs black to make it even harder to be spotted. These "Black Cats" were nearly impossible for the enemy to see at night with such a paint job (originally consisting of soap and lamp black mixture). Equipped with radar and radio altimeters, the Cats could see in the dark and fly literally just a few feet above water. It was practically impossible for Japanese fighters to attack the low-flying Cats at night without themselves flying into the water.

The Black Cats operated from "tender" ships, primitive airfields, and remote jungle-island enclaves like Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal. They terrorized enemy shipping during nighttime raids by dropping ordnance and strafing with multiple guns, positioned in the PBV's side and nose turrets. One of the most daring missions was the raid on Tonelei Harbor, northwest of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Island chain on October 26, 1942 at the start of the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. It was a 900-mile flight, one way, to attack Japanese ships at

anchorage, at night. The following is the recollection of LT George F. "Blackie" Poulos from an excerpt out of *Black Cat Raiders of WWII*, by Richard C. Knott:

"It was a bright moonlit night with exceptionally good visibility. In order to avoid detection, we flew the last 150 miles at 20 feet above the water in a tight formation. (LT) Jack Coley was the lead plane and his navigation was perfect. We found ourselves going right into the harbor inlet undetected until we had to pull up to avoid hitting the destroyer that was doing sentinel duty at the entrance. Once inside the harbor the formation split up with each of us seeking his own target. Ships were visible everywhere, mostly destroyers and harbor craft then a larger ship, a heavy cruiser in an uncluttered area - a very good target. I swung to the right to allow enough room to make a good torpedo run, a quick turn to the left with just enough time to stabilize the run, and I pulled the release handle at about 300 yards. During the pull-up to get over the top of the cruiser, I pulled the handle to release two 500-pound bombs. The PBY shuddered as the weapons exploded. The crew members at the waist hatches reported direct hits but it was not possible to determine the extent of the damage. Nevertheless, we knew that we had scored, that we had hurt them, and that they now knew that their sanctuary was not safe from the workhorse PBYs."

These night operations proved very successful. PBY squadron VP-52, between November 1943 and June 1944 alone, destroyed or damaged 16 enemy ships with its "combat obsolete" aircraft. Entire squadrons became dedicated Black Cat operators. PBY Black Cat's equipped with radar-detecting equipment became the Navy's first dedicated electronic surveillance aircraft during the same campaign. These squadrons continued to perform reconnaissance, patrol, transport, air-sea rescue, dive bombing, mine-laying, and torpedo attack missions until the very end of the war in 1945. A PBY piloted by LCDR Adrian Marks rescued fifty-six sailors from the stricken USS Indianapolis by landing in the open ocean, filling the interior of the aircraft with as many survivors as possible and strapping the rest to the wings and floats until rescue ships arrived, just weeks before the Japanese surrendered.

Today's Patrol squadrons (VP) and Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadrons (VQ) are both direct descendants of the Black Cats. Just like their forefathers in the South Pacific, the modern-day MPRF is highly skilled, dedicated, and resourceful. They provide a persistent presence in every theatre of operation, whether hunting submarines, pirates and narco-terrorists over water, or supporting troops on the ground. The MPRF has been an integral part of Naval Aviation since the beginning, and with the forthcoming P-8 Poseidon and Broad Area Maritime Surveillance (BAMS) aircraft, the tradition of excellence will continue long into the future.

In honor of the Centennial of Naval Aviation, there will be recognition of past MPRF warrior's contribution to Naval Aviation's illustrious history at the 2011 MPRF Reunion and Symposium, as well as a number of events dedicated to special Heritage celebrations. Please join us the first week in April onboard NAS Jacksonville, FL.

\* For more pictures of the Black Cats and other MPRF aircraft, discussions, and information on the 2011 Reunion, visit our Facebook page at [facebook.com/mprfheritage](https://www.facebook.com/mprfheritage)