

VP-45: THE FIRST SQUADRON BASED AT ATTU

FOREWORD

The early history of VP-45 is unique in that it started with six flight crews hastily assembled and commanded by the senior officer, Lt. Robert L. Donley. The squadron was ordered north to the island of Adak in the Aleutians, leaving NAS Sand Point, Seattle on 21 April 1943, on a "secret mission."

A group of maverick Navy Pilots and Crew who quickly learned survival tactics, midnight reconnaissance, foraging, innovation, and improvisation became top priority and the order of the day.

The squadron came to full strength on 4 July 1943, when an additional six flight crews, under the command of LCDR Carl H. "BON" Amme, joined the original dirty half-dozen on Attu.

The following information on VP-45 is from a collection of records from flight logs and other personal notes from 25 April 1943 through 30 May 1945 when the squadron was decommissioned at NAS Norfolk, Virginia.

Lt. William H. Maxwell  
PPC-Pilot

Lt. Erwin H. Johnson  
PPC-Pilot

VP-45: WHERE-WHEN-WHO AND HOW

21 April 1943 - 1 October 1943

The Naval Air Station at Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island, Washington, became operational in early 1943. Shortly after 1 January 1943, pilots and crews were gradually assigned to the station for operational training in the Consolidated Aircraft-- The PB4Y (The Old Gray Goose).

Flight instruction was under the direction of Lt. Robert L. Donley, Lt. Marshall Freerks, Lt. J. A. Lindgruen, Lt. Jones and several others all of whom had previous flight experience in the Aleutians, and enemy action at Dutch Harbor. It was a foregone conclusion that we were in training for assignment in the Aleutians. At this time the islands of Kiska and Attu had been taken by the Japanese. They were well entrenched and fortified in preparation for expanding up the Aleutian chain to the mainland of Alaska and the northwest. In fact, the entire west coast of the USA was on "ready alert" in anticipation of enemy attacks.

Our training consisted primarily of instrument flying, lost plane procedure, night flying, and gunnery. The radio range for the airport at Everett, Washington, was frequently used for instrument approach and landings. Gradually, the complement of flight crews was increased with the addition of other pilots who had prior experience at Dutch Harbor and other Aleutian stations. By March 1943, new planes had arrived from NAS North Island, San Diego.

Lt. Robert L. Donley was placed in command of a group of six flight crews designated as VP-45. Each crew consisted of a Patrol Plane Commander (PPC), 1st. Pilot, Navigator, and a crew of five enlisted men (two Aviation Mechanics, two Radio Operators, and one Ordnance man).

21 April 1943. VP-45 was commissioned with: Lt. Robert L. Donley, PPC and CO; Ens. George Owen, 1st. pilot; Ens. Roy White, Navigator; Lt. J. A. Lindgruen, PPC; Ens. C. Schwartz, 1st. pilot; Ens. Chris Finsness, Navigator; Lt(jg) Roy Evans, PPC; Ens. Gary Harthcock, 1st. pilot; Ens. Walt Soehner, Navigator; Lt(jg) J. C. Coonan, PPC; Ens. John Smirtic, 1st. pilot; Ens. R. Fisher, Navigator; Lt(jg) W. O. Chaddick, PPC; Ens. Erwin H. Johnson, 1st. pilot; Ens. M. Barrett, Navigator; and Lt(jg) J. Johnstone, PPC; Ens. L. Hammons, 1st. pilot; and Ens. T. J. Gilleand, Navigator.

25 April 1943. Squadron VP-45 departed NAS Sand Point, Seattle, Washington, with orders to report to Pat Wing Four Commander Adak (Leslie Gehres). Intermediate stops were made at Sitka, Kodiak, and Dutch Harbor, finally arriving at Andrews Lagoon on Adak on or about 2 May 1943. There the squadron awaited further orders. Security was tight although the "scuttle butt" was that we would provide air support for the fleet in the retaking of Attu. The six crews were a maverick bunch anxious to get on with it and questioned to whom we were attached. Ground crews and other support personnel were non-existent. We drew supplies from the Army depot and all intelligence and weather information came from the Army. Frequent test flights were made and planes and crews were kept on the alert and ready.

13 May 1943, "D" Day Attu. VP-45 was directed to fly to Attu and report to the commanding officer of Task Force Six. We were to provide air support and ASW coverage. The weather was miserable - rain, low ceilings and visibility of maybe up to 300 yards. There were absolutely no navigational aids except a map supplied by Army intelligence. The island was totally unfamiliar to both the Navy and the Army forces. After 11-12 hours flight time with fuel limited, we were instructed to locate Massacre Bay and the adjoining cove where the USS Casco should be at anchor. Massacre Bay we knew was on the southeast coast of the island. All six crews

eventually found the Casco which in itself was remarkable. The USS Casco was an aircraft tender and served as our base of operations. Living quarters were comfortable and the food and toilet facilities were great.

14 May - 25 June 1943. During this period the squadron provided ASW sector searches to the north, east and west. Each was about 700 nautical miles out, 50 across and then back to Attu. The weather was always the biggest factor. Seldom did we have decent conditions. Most of the flight time logged was instrument time and dead reckoning navigation. Whenever possible we would obtain wind drift readings and the navigators were constantly at work. They were all very experienced after several flights. On these ASW sector searches, we were able to obtain radio bearings on several stations located on the Kamchatka Peninsula of Russia. This enabled us to obtain a definite fix at the outer edge of our sector flights. This was very helpful and the radio frequencies were exchanged with other flight crews. Finding Attu and Casco Cove was always a challenge. It is a credit to the flight crews and the training we received back in Oak Harbor that VP-45 did not lose one single crew during this period. The only casualty was our radio operator, ARM 1C R. L. Hammons, who died on plane watch one night from carbon monoxide fumes.

In addition to the sector flights, the squadron was involved in a number of other activities such as flying Army Officers (General Simon Buckner) and others around the island on observation flights, dropping surrender leaflets, spotting enemy positions and gunfire.

By the end of June 1943, Attu had been retaken and, except for isolated instances, all enemy resistance had ceased. During this time Lt. Robert L. Donley returned to Seattle.

4 July 1943. The rest of squadron VP-45 consisting of six flight crews and supporting staff joined us at Attu with Lt. Cmdr. Carl "Bon" Amme as CO and Donley



as Executive Officer. We were surprised to learn that we had a new CO. Donley was very popular, low-key, an extremely great pilot and leader. Under the circumstances he had done a most commendable job and was well respected by officers as well as the enlisted personnel.

During July and until 15 August 1943, the squadron continued sector searches in preparation for "D" Day at "Cottage" (Kiska).

10 July 1943. Lt(jg) Hagen made contact in a southern sector search with 4 Jap ships, cargo and transport ships. The Army sent out some B24's and B25's from Amchitka but never made contact due to weather and the lack of fuel. Of course that day the weather was bad with a very low ceiling. Lt(jg) Chaddick circled above the overcast and over Hagen who was circling the Jap ships. The Army flyers made several attempts to let down through the overcast but pulled up and eventually returned to base. Chaddick let down and joined up with Hagen and they sank one and damaged a second before having to return to base. In the meantime VP-45 sent out other planes to continue the contact, however, contact was lost - too bad, because no doubt these were some of the enemy forces that were in the process of abandoning Kiska.

16 July 1943. Lt(jg) Chaddick and crew were forced to ditch some 5-10 miles out from Massacre Bay. They had tried several times to get into Casco Cove but could not do so. Several hours later they were picked up by the USS Teal. The PBV was taken in tow and reached Casco Cove the next day. The Teal had to lay off shore since the visibility was zero/zero and they could not find the entrance to the harbor.

23 July 1943. Lt(jg) Buskirk with Pilot "Pete" Maxwell were forced to land at sea due to weather. They waited it out and when things cleared up, took off and eventually found their way back into Adak. Such was life in flying, or trying to in the Aleutians. VP-45 was probably one of, if not the only squadron with duty in the

Aleutians, that never lost a plane or crew. That is an enviable accomplishment and safety record since it was not at all unusual for a squadron to lose 25-50% of the original complement.

24 July 1943. Lt. Weimeyer, while on a sector search, experienced engine problems in the area of the Komandorski Islands (Russian). In looking for a safe landing spot, he was fired upon by shore batteries and hit. He located a small lake in a remote part of the island and landed safely. Lt(jg) Roy Evans was flying the adjacent sector and, upon hearing the "Mayday" call from Weimeyer, was able to get a bearing on him. Evans landed along side Weimeyer's plane and picked up the crew. He then sank Weimeyer's plane, took off and returned safely to Attu. At that time Russia was not at war with Japan. Being a neutral, Russian would have taken Weimeyer and his crew and interned them for the duration. Of course, we were aware of the fact that we were to avoid penetrating Russian territories, keeping at least ten miles off any Russian coast line.

The reference made by CO Amme regarding this incident and the radio silence may have very well taken place. The only time any of us broke radio silence was to broadcast a contact report or "Mayday." For obvious reasons radio silence was maintained to prevent enemy detection.

During this period (July 1943) VP-45 did attempt to make two night bombing raids on the Naval Base at Paramushiro, the northernmost island of Japan. This would require a flight in excess of 1800 miles. The strategy was to fly south of the southern tip of Kamchatka and west over the sea of Ohotsk, placing us west of the base at Paramushiro, then make a 180 degree turn approaching the base from the west. Hopefully, this would avoid early detection and after the bombing run we would be headed east back toward Attu. Due to weather the results could not be confirmed, but nevertheless, it was great for morale and we may have sent a message. The names of the flight crews making these flights are not available.

15 August 1943. "D Day" for (Cottage) Kiska. The weather was extremely bad as we left Attu and no better over Kiska. That day the planes from VP-45 were in the air from 12 to 14 hours and since the weather was terrible we could not get back to Attu. Therefore we went to Adak and the friendly confines of Andrews Lagoon. VP-45 mission was to conduct ASW and air coverage for the invasion. Visibility was less than 300 yards with a ceiling of 200-300 feet. We certainly could not see any signs of enemy activity and I am certain if the Japs were there, they did not see us.

The following experience was typical of what often happened while flying under these conditions. While on ASW during D-Day at Kiska, radar contact was made with an unidentified object just off Kiska Island, depth charges armed and all guns manned as we made our run to the target, 200-300 foot ceiling with visibility of several hundred yards, and suddenly dead ahead a rocky mountainside. Most casualties in the Aleutians were the result of crashing into the side of a mountain while flying under instrument conditions.

After landing late at night on the 15th at Andrews Lagoon, Adak, we learned that our invasion forces had met with little if any resistance on Kiska. Where were the Japanese? Within four hours of our landing at Adak, we were ordered to report to operations where we were briefed and ordered back into the air for support to our landing forces. Aerology advised that the weather at Attu was still zero/zero - the same over Kiska - would be the same at Adak for the next 24-36 hours. We knew this. We had been in it for the past 12 hours. Final statement from Aerology, "Well, you can see what it is like here now, it won't get any better. Frankly I don't know where you guys will find a place to land after you leave Adak." That was good enough for us. Not only were we exhausted from the previous flight, one of our planes had developed some radio problems, another hydraulic, and others ignition,



etc. Captain L. E. Gehres said, "Get the planes in the air and I will wait here and sweat you back safely." VP-45 was only one of several squadrons that were grounded that day.

Later we received word that the U.S. forces had made unopposed landings on the island and that the island and the Japanese Naval Base had been recently abandoned. The Japs had been successful in vacating the island under cover of the fog of the past several days. We learned that weather at Attu was clearing, so we left Adak and continued to fly anti-sub searches to the south and west of Kiska hoping we might contact the fleeing Japanese forces. No luck, and so we flew back to Attu with many flight crews logging more than 25 hours during the two days.

18 August 1943 through September 1943. The squadron conducted sector searches and obtained weather information. There really was not much to do or accomplish, except try to improve our living conditions.

After Attu had been secured, the Sea Bees constructed Quonset huts for us. The squadron moved ashore from the USS Casco and the USS Gillis. Conditions were primitive and the mud deep. When we were not flying, we busied ourselves with "home" improvements. We built a shower from a couple of 55 gallon drums, diverted water from a stream, heated the water with pipes rigged to pass through and around a wood burning stove. We had scavenger "requisition" missions nightly to obtain anything we thought we could use. The Quonset huts were heated with pot-bellied stoves and the coffee was always hot and ready.

About this time the salmon had started to run up the fresh water streams. It was no problem at all to reach down under the bank and grab one. Barbecued salmon soon became a treat. We would filet the fish, baste them with olive oil (if available). It became a favorite dish.

On a rare, clear and beautiful day word was received that Captain L. E. Gehres would arrive for his first visit and inspection at Attu. He landed at Alexia



Point, where an airstrip had been built. We were there to greet him. After landing, he proceeded to bestow the Air Medal to his pilot and the Distinguished Flying Cross to himself for "hazardous and meritorious flying under extremely bad weather conditions." No one was impressed. That night we prepared barbecued salmon for Gehres, his staff, and the squadron. The only recognition we wanted was a survival "ribbon."

28 September 1943. Two crews, Lt(jg) Chaddick and Lt(jg) Johnstone, of the original six crews were ordered to return to NAS Sand Point. By this time the planes were beginning to show signs of salt water damage and stress. Two of the planes in the worst condition were stripped of all but the most essential instruments and other parts and the hulls reinforced with cement. We departed Attu with stops at Adak, Dutch Harbor, Kodiak, and Sitka. We knew that the planes would withstand just a few more sea landings. We could fly only when weather conditions were clear and unlimited. Before leaving Sitka for NAS Sand Point, we were advised that the weather enroute would be good with no problems. However, as we approached Vancouver Island, we encountered bad weather with the ceiling down to several hundred feet with visibility of no more than a mile. Johnstone joined up on Chaddick's wing and we flew in formation (Johnstone's plane had been stripped of all but the primary flight instruments) as we picked our way toward Neah Bay at the western tip of the State of Washington. We picked up the radio range at Everett, Washington, worked the range and made an instrument approach, still in formation, landing on Lake Washington at NAS Sand Point. The many hours we had spent on instruments and working that radio range the previous spring really paid off that day.  
(1 October 1943)

Shortly thereafter the rest of the squadron left Attu for NAS Sand Point and was given 30 day leave with orders to report back to NAS Oak Harbor, where most of the original PPC's were reassigned and the 1st. pilots promoted to PPC.

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR—More on VP45 and the Komandorski incident

Dear Ole:

I read the letter in the March Newsletter from John Coonan of VP45 with great interest. All of this happened 54 years ago and memories tend to fade so after reading the article I went to my log book and squadron records to relive the days of VP45 while sitting in the comfort of my Bellevue, WA home. Here's what I remember with the help of records.

First, the squadron of VP45 aircraft that were sent to the Aleutians for the retaking of Attu consisted of six PBY-5's. Second, I was the commanding officer of that group. John Coonan referred to Lt. W.J. Wehmeyer as being involved with that first group. I don't recall a Wehmeyer in VP45 at that time and I could not find a record of his being in the squadron.

VP45's operation officer, Lt. (jg) Lloyd Carpenter, Sun City West, AZ, recalls that Lt. Cleon Stitzel was the pilot who landed his VP45 PBY on the lake in the Komandorski Islands. Carpenter does not recall a Wehmeyer in the squadron. He does recall that Lt. Roy Evans was patrolling the adjoining sector and that his crew responded to the call to land on the Komandorski lake and rescued Stitzel and his crew.

The formation of VP45 began in late February of 1943 when I and Wiljo Lindgren were called into the Commander, Fleet Air at Sand Point (Seattle) and directed to form a squadron of six PBY's to be known as VP45. We were to train crews for a mission, the purpose and destination of which we were not told. The Admiral said he would call us back to Seattle when the mission was finished and give us a duty assignment of our choosing. We received our planes direct from Consolidated and were given priority for anything we needed.

On the 22nd of April I received orders to report to Commander Fleet Air, Seattle who gave me orders to report to VP45 as commanding officer. It should be noted that the squadron was not commissioned at this point. On the 25th of April the squadron left Seattle for Adak with stops at Kodiak and Dutch Harbor. We arrived at Adak on the 2nd of May, landing in Andrews Lagoon. We stayed at the Lagoon waiting orders until the 13th of May when we were ordered to fly to Attu and report to the Commander of Task Force Six. Until that time, we didn't know what our mission was. The weather was bad at Attu and the Task Force was under radio silence, so we set up a patrol, as best we could. When our fuel ran low we were able to raise the Task Force Commander and were told to go to a small cove south of the invasion landing area. There we found the USS Casco after which the cove was later named. Our job at the time was to cover the Task Force for anti-submarine patrols during the period of the battle. In addition to providing anti-submarine coverage and being the only airborne support group at Attu, we were used to transport Army commanders to different places on the Island for scouting and even to drop surrender leaflets on the enemy. On one occasion I took several army officers to Chichagof Harbor after the area was secure. After landing, we took a life raft ashore. I will never forget the scene we encountered. The soldiers were cleaning up the area and making a pile of the dead Japanese. The pile was about six feet high and the stench was terrible. I talked to a soldier who had a bullet hole through his helmet. It missed his head and he seemed to be happy.

When we dropped surrender leaflets on the Japanese we had to have reasonably clear weather as we needed to climb high over the mountains and then drop down across the enemy areas toward the water. As the battle continued, we established patrols to the west of Attu. During these patrols we would occasionally pick up flights of Bettys on the way to make bombing runs on Attu. We would send messages of their position to the Command via the Cruiser's OS2U float planes that were patrolling the Island. The P-38's stationed at Amchitka would then be alerted to meet the Betty's and from what I heard, they had a number of kills. Our squadron suffered no casualties. Occasionally we would take a bullet through the hull which we would patch with rubber sea plugs.

True to his word, early in June, when the battle for Attu was finally over, Comfair Seattle ordered Lindgren and I back to Seattle. However, when I arrived, I found that VP45 was being made a 12 plane squadron under the command of LCDR Carl Amme. Amme had requested I stay on as the executive officer. Admiral Wagner was no long Comfair Seattle, so I didn't get a duty assignment of my choosing. On July 8, 1943 I was back at



VP45 PBY-5's moored at Casco Cove, Attu with the tender, USS Casco, June 1943. (photo from Pat Pateson, VPB135)

Casco Cove and we had a 12 plane squadron of PBY-5's. Shortly after arriving at Casco Cove, Amme led a three plane night flight (Carpenter and Earhart were the pilots of the other two PBY's) to bomb Paramushiro. The entire area was shrouded by overcast so bombs were dropped when they estimated they were over the island. No enemy fire was encountered.

We lived in the airplanes and on the tender until the Seabees completed living facilities and a radio shack on Attu. We moved ashore the end of

July. Near the Quonset huts there was a small stream that contained salmon and Dolly Vardin trout which one could catch in their hands. We built a barbecue pit in the cliff next to the huts and found fish a wonderful change of diet from the usual military mess and K-rations. We continued patrolling to the west and to the north as far as Kamchatka. We also provided ASW coverage for the invasion of Kiska. By October a runway was completed and it was time for the squadron to return our water logged planes to Seattle.

The squadron went on a well deserved leave. It was then that I finally left the Squadron for an assignment at NAS Jacksonville. Then I got married to a wonderful lady who has been my wife for 54 years. I understand that, eventually, the squadron reformed and went to South America. That's how I remember it.

Bob Donley, former CO & XO, VP45  
Bellevue, WA April 1997