

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