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*"IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE FIRST AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE
GOVERNMENTS OF THE USSR AND THE USA, 48 PBN-1 "CATALINA" FLYING
BOATS WERE TRANSFERRED FROM THE USA FOR THE SOVIET NAVAL AIR
FORCES DURING WORLD WAR II."*

PBN-1 Catalinas in the Soviet Union!

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(Editor's note: The Russian language original version is an MS-Word document and the photo gallery is rendered as a power point slide show. If you choose to view the Power Point Photo Gallery, invoke the gallery, right click to go to "full screen," view the gallery, and at the conclusion just press the refresh button on your browser to return to the article.)

The Chief of the Naval Section of the military mission of the USA in the Soviet Union, Rear Admiral Olsen communicated: “PBN aircraft will be used in military operations against submarines and surface ships in the open sea.”

In the United States, the aircraft went from the factory in Philadelphia to a base in North Carolina, situated three miles from Elizabeth City. Here everything necessary for the training of the Soviet crews which would ferry the PBN-1s was set up.

By the beginning of March 1944, the training base and associated logistical support was ready. Vice Admiral Bellinger, naval air commander for the Atlantic Fleet, took all measures to ensure that the Soviet crews would be trained quickly, but effectively.

The combat crew of a flying boat consisted of seven: two pilots, one bombardier-navigator, one radio operator, one flight engineer (aviation mechanic), and two gunners.

The Soviet command decided to train 26 crews consisting of 135 persons with the intention of ferrying 48 flying boats in two transits. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs A. Vyshinsky approved this plan.

The U.S. plan was to send the crews by convoy from Murmansk and by air from Krasnoyarsk to Fairbanks. It is interesting that during the preparation stage, the Soviet defense attaché and his assistant, lieutenant colonel of aviation Maksimovich flew to the factory in Philadelphia on February 21, 1944, where they examined the PBN-1 and its armament. They permitted Maksimovich to fly out over the ocean and test the plane’s guns. Having studied the “flying boat” at the

factory, Maksimovich was a big help to the Soviet pilots at the base in learning to fly the plane and master its weapons systems.

The first ten aircrews comprising 50 individuals flew from Krasnoyarsk to Fairbanks March 28 on two C-47 transports. They were already hard at work at the Elizabeth City base on April 3. By this time everything had been done for the organization of quality, uninterrupted training.

The difficulties associated with the lack of interpreters were eliminated by increasing their number to five. Ninety-nine persons were already being trained at the base by April 25, 1944. The good relations of the U.S. command and base personnel towards the Soviet crews and the good living conditions and organization of the training were worthy of note. By that time, 21 pilots were already flying the PBN-1 independently. On April 22, the commander of the PBN-1 ferry group, Lieutenant Colonel Vasilyev, flew into the base. He set May 20 as the date when the planes would be ready to fly out. By that date, all the aircraft commanders would be fully trained in day, night and instrument flight operations. On average, plane commanders received 45-50 hours of flight instruction, while division commanders (seven individuals) received from 80 to 120 hours.

The navigators studied the route of flight. Groups of four "Catalinas" were formed for the flight, headed by the most experienced pilots. The following routing of the aircraft was proposed: Elizabeth City-Norfolk-Newfoundland-Shetland Islands-Murmansk. In the final version several changes were made to the route as follows: Elizabeth City-Norfolk-Newfoundland-Iceland-Murmansk. On the first two stages of the flight, that is, as far as Reykjavik, there were two

Englishmen aboard each Catalina, a navigator-pilot and a radio operator.

The flight routing was more than 4700 miles. Weather conditions for flights across the Atlantic along this flight path were a deciding factor. Thus, meteorology presented special demands for the safety of the crews. The U.S. Navy weather service and communications took upon themselves the task of providing communications and weather data to the Soviet crews from Elizabeth City to Reykjavik and as far as 5 degrees East longitude. But the Chief Directorate of the Hydro-Meteorological Service (HMS) of the Red Army carried out the preparations and provided the meteorological information for the Iceland-Murmansk leg. The weather bureau of the HMS Directorate in Murmansk prepared the weather forecasts.

Located at the airports for the interim landings in Newfoundland (Gander Lake) and Reykjavik were representatives of the Soviet naval missions in the U.S. and England along with HMS synoptic specialists to organize receipt of the airplanes and preparation for the next leg of the flight route.

Preparation of the aircraft for take-off from the original base and from the interim airports, refueling, and correction of technical problems noted during flight and landings were handled by a team of American and English technicians working in the presence of the flight engineer of the given aircraft's aircrew.

Between May 25 and June 11, 1944, the first 25 aircrews flew out on their planes. They covered the first portion of the flight, Elizabeth City-Norfolk-Lake Gander, in 10-12 hours, the second leg, Gander to Reykjavik, in 13-16 hours, and the third leg, Reykjavik-Vaenga (now

renamed Severomorsk, near Murmansk), in 14-19 hours. The total time for the flights ran from 37 to 47 hours.

All the aircraft except for No. 25 arrived in Vaenga inlet. Aircraft No. 25 (with Colonels Vasilyev and Mosuyepan) flew out of Reykjavik in a pair with Boychenko's plane at 1700 hours on June 17. They flew for about seven hours, maintaining communication with one another. The last communication from Vasilyev to Boychenko was at 0015 on June 18 in which he reported that he was "on course heading 066 degrees at an altitude of 500 meters and the water was visible." At this time, Boychenko's aircraft was located at Point III: 67 degrees, 30 minutes North latitude and 1 degree, 00 minutes East longitude. Vasilyev's plane could have been 20 miles from him (approximate communications range). The weather was very bad.

The English reported that Vasilyev's plane was last heard from on June 20 (?) at 0008 hours at a latitude of 69 degrees, 50 minutes North, and longitude of 00 degrees, 20 minutes East.

June 18-28, British "Catalinas" from Iceland and Soviet naval aircraft from the Northern Fleet searched for Vasilyev's plane. A Catalina which had come in with the first 24 aircraft flew out to search on June 28. It flew as far as Latitude 69 degrees 50 minutes North and Longitude 31 degrees 15 minutes East, a search which lasted 11 hours in the air. Vasilyev's downed aircrew was not sighted.

At that time, there were violent storms in the area and it is very unlikely that the crew could have survived in lifeboats after an emergency landing on the water in storm conditions. To ferry the second group of airplanes (there were 23 aircraft still in Elizabeth City), the aircrews of the first 24 planes which had arrived in the Soviet Union

were sent from Krasnoyarsk to Fairbanks and then on to Elizabeth City. The sections were broken into smaller units and, instead of four planes in a section, there were three. From June 26-29, the aircraft were ferried using the same flight routing as before, but part of the airplanes (16) flew on to Arkhangelsk, expending more than 40 hours on the trip. The remaining seven airplanes flew to Vaenga

Thus, in all, 47 "Catalina" airplanes joined the Soviet naval air forces.

Evaluation by experienced officers from the ferry group in Elizabeth City meant that it was incumbent to use a test pilot. Without a test pilot, it was impossible to check out an airplane thoroughly, all the more, since airplanes just out of the factory had been flown only 8-10 hours. It was dangerous to ferry out an airplane with so few flight hours without it being checked out by a test pilot.

We should give due acknowledgement to the heroism of the pilots who took part in these ferry flights. Various flights experienced very difficult conditions, especially, on the Newfoundland-Reykjavik leg, where it was necessary to fly on instruments for 4-7 hours in conditions of icing over.

Special responsibility for supervising the flights lay on the section commanders: Tsurbanov, Ivanov, Tarasenko, Chesalin, Kravtsov, Antonov, Kartashov, Pogorelsky and Chikov.

The experience gained by the section commanders and all the pilots who ferried planes from Elizabeth City was used by them in August-September 1944 to carry out the task of ferrying airplanes from Kodiak (Alaska) to Anadyr (USSR).

One cannot ignore the great contribution of the American flight instructors and technical maintenance personnel of the Army Air Corps, who prepared the aircrews and aircraft, and also the help of the English aviators and crewmembers, who took part in ferrying airplanes from Elizabeth City to Reykjavik on numerous occasions.

The airplanes which came to the USSR were assigned to the naval air forces of the Soviet fleets in this fashion: Northern Fleet – 29, Black Sea Fleet – 10, Pacific Fleet and Baltic Fleet – two each. Four aircraft were kept in reserve by the naval air force headquarters command.

On June 2, 1944, four “Catalinas” were ready for combat flights in the Northern Fleet naval air force. The same number was combat ready in the White Sea military flotilla air forces.

The first mission by a “Catalina” in the Northern Fleet was on June 18, 1944, sent out to rescue the crew of an IL-2, which had landed in Varangerfjorden, Norway.

“Catalinas” in the North were used for detecting enemy submarines and mines in the Barents Sea, Dvinskaya guba (Dvina Gulf), the White Sea straits, in the western and southwestern parts of the Kara Sea, on the approaches to the main base of the fleet, and, in addition, in Varangerfjorden at the end of 1944.

“Catalinas” carried out antisubmarine defense of Allied convoys, detected floating mines, and looked for enemy submarines and mines along Allied convoy routes JW-61, RA-61, RA-61A and others.

On December 4, 1944, three “Catalinas” carried out a search for enemy submarines and mines in a 40-mile zone along Allied convoy route JW-62 and detected a submarine at periscope depth. The aircraft attacked the submarine at Point III: 71 degrees 50 minutes North and 36 degrees 00 minutes East.

“Catalinas” carried out antisubmarine defense of convoys in the south-eastern part of the Barents Sea (convoy UB-4), in Yenisey Gulf (convoy DE-11), in the south-western part of the Kara Sea (convoy DB-16), in the Dvina Gulf (convoys KB-27, BK-30), in the passages of the Iokanka-Kola Gulf (convoy IK-17, IK-18), between the islands of Toros and Maly Oleny (convoy KB-30), and in the passages in the southeastern part of the Barents Sea (convoy DB-7 and DB-9).

“Catalinas” were also used for the rescue of crews of surface ships which had been sunk and airplanes which had been shot down. In this regard, two “Catalinas,” in the region of Podkov Island, detected a group of Red Army sailors from trawler No. 120, whom they rescued and got aboard a ship.

“Catalina” aircraft took part in operations of the naval air forces of the fleets with the mission of rescuing downed crewmen. This provided enormous moral support to the crews of bombers and torpedo planes and also to the fighter planes supporting their combat actions. For example, this occurred in the operation undertaken to sink the training battleship, “Schleswig-Holstein,” at Swinemunde (Swinoujscie, Poland) anchorage in May 1945.

They were also exploited for ice intelligence, transport of cargos, and intelligence on enemy transmissions.

After the end of the war, PBN-1 “Catalina” airplanes were in the combat inventory of Soviet naval aviation for a very long time.



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