

BLACK

They were called "Black Cats" because they were Navy Catalina Patrol planes...seaplanes, flying boats. They were painted dead-flat black for night bombing operations against Japanese shipping in the Southwest Pacific. In the daytime, they flew air-sea rescue missions, picking up ditched air crews and pilots from the army bomber and fighter strikes.



The PBY Patrol Bomber by Consolidated was considered obsolete in 1939, but it performed miracles all through World War II. Overall, it was a remarkable aircraft, compartmentalized like a flying submarine and usually carrying a crew of 10 to 12. There were three pilots (a patrol plane commander and the two co-pilots who alternated flying and navigating), a plane captain (head mechanic) who rode in the "tower," two radiomen, two ordnance men, plus several machinist's mates. It had several bunks, a small galley, a sit-down toilet, two 50-caliber machine guns in the waist blisters and twin pop-gun 30-caliber machine guns in the nose. It carried 1,450 gallons of aviation gas in the cumbersome wing and 3000 pounds of bombs hanging *under* the wing, plus assorted anti-personnel bombs inside (usually laid on the bunks).



The wingspan of the Catalina was 104 feet, and she wasn't built for speed. She was built for endurance, powered by two magnificent Pratt & Whitney engines that – like the crews – rarely gave up.

It was necessity which obliged the Japanese to supply their positions and



outposts ashore almost exclusively at night. Their ships and barges moved mostly in small convoys guarded by one or more combatant vessels. These operations were carried on throughout the area and it was virtually impossible for U.S. surface combatant forces to stop them.

Ironically, it was also necessity which had turned the PBYs into night creatures. Their slow speeds, which rendered them

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clumsy and vulnerable by day, made them agile and surefooted by night. Radio altimeters allowed them to skim the dark surface of the ocean where fast fighters feared to tread. Their size, which made them easy daylight targets, enabled them to carry large quantities of fuel and weapons, and to range deep into enemy-controlled areas after dark. They could remain aloft all night, searching out their prey with electronic eyes or lying in wait at strategic points.

The Black Cat concept developed naturally through the survival instinct and the determination to strike back against a cruel and unrelenting enemy. No one man or group can be given credit for its genesis. It was the result of the contributions and sacrifices of many, a combination of courage, technology, and the hard lessons of combat.

This capability was used aggressively against the "Tokyo Express." One Black Cat squadron was deployed to a forward area to evaluate the idea. Its planes would take off at dusk and return home at first light. All aircraft in the squadron would be equipped with radar and radio altimeters, and painted with non-reflective black paint. Even the aircraft side numbers would be obliterated so as not to provide a focal point for enemy searchlights.

Today, the Black Cats of World War II are yet another proud chapter of the military effort put forth in epic struggle against totalitarianism.

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