

BILL PALMER

My military experience started in August 1941 when I reported to the Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida to start my naval career as an Aviation Cadet. I had completed The Civilian Pilot Training Program and had a private pilot's license and my pilot's log-book credited me with about 80 hours of pilot experience. So, I was not a complete beginner pilot.

I was about halfway through flight training when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Near the end of the flight training program I had to choose between flying fighters or patrol bombers for my naval flying career. I knew that I couldn't think very fast, so I chose patrol bombers. After graduating from The Pensacola Flight School, with my wings and Ensign bars, in March 1942, I was assigned to Patrol Bomber Squadron, VP-53, being formed at the Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Virginia.



We were equipped with PBY-5 Catalina flying boats. Not the PBY-5A amphibious model. So, we operated off of water. We were assigned anti-submarine duty, to find and destroy German submarines which were sinking many ships in the Caribbean Sea and western Atlantic Ocean. We operated out of Key West, FL, Grand Cayman, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and British Guiana. My crew and I didn't find any submarines but another crew in my squadron did find one and sank it. Patrol duty is the most boring activity you can imagine. Much of it is at night circling convoys hoping to see a sub on radar if one should surface. We could use only red instrument lighting to fly the plane by. Not wide-awake conditions.



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In early 1943 I was transferred to another squadron, VPB-133 being formed in De Land, FL. It was equipped with land planes, Lockheed PV-1 Venturas. It was a military version of the Lockheed 18 passenger Lodestar transport, powered by two 2000 H.P Pratt & Whitney engines. It was an effective gunship, with five 50 caliber machine guns in the nose, two more in the turret and two 30 caliber guns in the tail. We could carry eight 500 pound bombs or depth charges in the bomb bay and eight 3-inch rockets under the wings. With an empty bomb bay we could carry two torpedoes under the wings. The initial assignment for VPB-133 was the same anti-submarine duty in the same area as I had just left with VP-53, except Curacao and Barbados were added as bases.

In mid-1944 Squadron VPB-133 was transferred from the Atlantic Fleet to the Pacific Fleet. We paused briefly at the Naval Air Station, Alameda and did some new crew training at a small naval auxiliary field named "Crows Landing" near Modesto in California's Central Valley. There I met an attractive young lady with whom I corresponded nearly every day of the ten months I was in the Pacific. We were to be based on islands in the western Pacific. Getting there with our planes was a problem. Our planes did not have enough range to fly from the West Coast to Hawaii. The solution was to ferry the planes on an aircraft carrier. So, they were loaded onto the flight deck of The U.S.S. Independence at a dock at the Naval Air Station, Alameda, CA. The day of our departure a large number of friends, relatives and a band assembled on the dock to see us off. Then a funny thing happened on the way to the war. The big carrier moved about a hundred feet away from the dock suddenly stopped. She had become stuck in a mud bank. After several hours of trying to free the ship with the use of several tugboats and the ship's own propellers without success, they loaded one of the ship's anchors onto the stern of a tug boat and dropped it well ahead of the carrier. That worked. The ship pulled itself free with an anchor winch, and headed for the Golden Gate. By then most of the crowd had gone home. I'm sure it was not a funny incident for the ship's captain.

Our planes were unloaded from the carrier in Pearl Harbor. We did some more new crew training at Kaneohe Bay. Then we flew to our new Pacific base on Roi-Namur which is in the Kwajalein atoll, Marshall Islands by way of Palmyra, Kanton, and Tarawa islands. Roi and Namur were two small Islands made into one with a bulldozer pushing sand to make two roads between the two islands.. We lived on Roi and flew off Namur. Our job in that area was to attack Japanese islands with bombs, napalm and machine gun strafing. We attacked islands such as Nauru, Wake, Ponape, Wotje, Jaluit and Kusaie.

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In late 1944 we were moved to Tinian. In late March of 1945 I was part of a detachment of several planes that was sent to Iwo Jima to knock out radar ships south of Japan that were giving the Japanese early warning of our B-29 raids.

In March of 1945 I was ordered back to the U. S. and assigned to the Instrument Flight Instructors School at Atlanta GA. On the way, I stopped in Modesto to visit my lady friend. We became engaged. Her name is Sally. One of Sally's uncles suggested to her parents that they should go to Tennessee and find out whether the potential relatives wear shoes. We were married July 15, 1945 in Chattanooga, TN. I finished Instrument Flight Instructor's school a week later. I was assigned as an instrument flight instructor to the Naval Air Station, Grosse Isle, Michigan, which was an instrument flight school a few miles downstream from Detroit on an island in the Detroit River. I taught instrument flying until March 1946 when I was released by the Navy to inactive duty. I had been on active duty for the entire war with Japan. I had completed only two years of college before the war, so I went back to The University of Tennessee, Knoxville for 21/2 years to get my degree in electrical engineering. I continued in the active reserve until I retired from the navy in 1953 with about 13 years of active and reserve service.