2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON
APO #719

"My Story" by Lieutenant Bill Holbrook

The war gave a lot of the kids who were raised during the great depression a chance to learn to fly. We missed the comradery of hanging around a grass strip scrounging time by washing airplanes. Times were tough and the family needed every dime we could make for shelter and food. If we saved a penny it went toward a chance to go to college. The romance of the Army Aviation Cadet program was in the posters. Mine died in Nashville, the day before I was issued my uniforms. At the U.S.A.A.F. Classification Center, my first night in an Army cot ended at 0330 when I was among those randomly selected for an eight hour course in Mess Management!

Washing out was a disgrace we all feared. Close to half of my primary class at the Hancock School of Aeronautics in Santa Maria, California disappeared into that unknown. Another third were gone when we finished basic at Minter Field near Bakersfield. And a few left Marfa without their wings. In those nine months we received 280 hours of pilot time and enough ground school to enable us to at least recognize some of the terms our ground instructors used in the class rooms. Graduation occurred in the base theatre. The ceremony was presided over by the full bird colonel in command of the field. It was the first time we had ever seen him, or heard anyone of his rank speak. As the ceremony closed he asked for eight volunteers for a "special project". Since we had received our commission some few seconds earlier one brave ex-cadet timidly rose to attention and asked just what a "Special Project" might be. The Colonel politely and with a certain air of enthusiasm mentioned that the Tokyo Raid was an example. The Colonel had his pick of raised hands. I was not one of the volunteers. My hands were too

red from serving on K.P. to be raised above my shoulders when volunteers were called for. My orders stated that I was to be an instructor. So be it.

I received a telegram while I was on my graduation leave. It stated that I was to report to Selman Field, Monroe, Louisiana for duty in a "P-38 Project". Selman Field turned out to be a school for Navigators. There were eight of us. Four of the volunteers and four replacements for volunteers whose navigation scores were not too good. The Adjutant we reported to knew nothing of our mission. He told us we were not allowed to fly as pilot, but were to receive a special course in navigation that would include celestial. We were to learn to calculate our way over the earth by the use of a sextant. We completed the course in about a month and after a few days of waiting for further orders the Adjutant called us into his office and told us we were to report to Pensacola Naval Air Station for training in a special PBY project.

The P-38 was the hottest twin engine fighter in the world. The volunteers had their mouths all set to taste it. We had become one of them in our enthusiasm. The PBY was the oldest aircraft still in production. A giant flying boat, ugly and slow. As far from a P-38 as a machine could be and still be in the air. Our animosity toward the beast softened in Florida's warm sunshine. The duty at Pensacola was the finest life any of us had ever enjoyed. Our instructors treated us like close friends. As Army Officers we had all the privileges of Naval Officers, including use of the Officer's Club. Since the Army had no facilities to train pilots in large flying boats eight of us were sent to the Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida where we received our Navy Wings on January 11, 1944.

I was one of the original pilots of the Second Emergency Rescue Squadron of the Thirteenth Air Force during World War II. Our purpose was to provide air-sea search and rescue for aircraft on combat missions in the southwest pacific. The Squadron consisted of four flights. Each flight constituted to operate its three Catalina Flying boats as an independent unit. The flying boat crew consisted of ten men. The officers were the pilot, co-pilot & navigator. The enlisted crew were the flight engineer, radioman, radar operator, medic, assistant flight engineer, and two gunners. Each crew was trained and went overseas as a unit. The entire flight section of the squadron left Gulfport, Mississippi for the Southwest Pacific together. We arrived in mixed dribbles. The airplanes required modification before they were allowed to leave the states. The work took six weeks. The flight crews spent this time in Sacramento, California. We officers lived with our wives in the downtown hotels. The enlisted men slept on the base but were free the rest of the time. It was a six week going away party!

The crews departed one by one as the planes were approved for overseas service. Of course, the squadron commander left in the first plane available. I was assigned as co-pilot to the operations officer, the second in command of the squadron. It was the airplane assigned to my crew, but my crew was split up to accommodate the ranking officer. We were to be among the first group to depart but a piece of the nose wheel strut dropped off as we rolled down the runway. The airplane shook violently and required a thorough inspection before we could make a second try. We left a week later.

The flight was 19.5 hours to Hawaii then two nights rest. Our transpacific flight was by the way of Canton Island, Tarawa, and Guadalcanal to Townsville, Australia where the Far East Air Force had their main maintenance facility. Our planes were painted arctic

white, the wrong color for the tropic theater. The planes went through another complete inspection in addition to having the top surface painted a dull blue. I was reunited with my crew as the operations officer proceeded north to New Guinea to assume his duties. We waited two weeks eating steak and eggs and drinking Aussie Beer until our plane was ready. By the time we reached our combat base on the Island of Biak, the squadron was reduced to 10 planes. The squadron commander had busted one of them up in an off shore landing far from the combat arena. The second had fuel tank leaks and required a month in Hawaii. We were assigned cots in tents erected on the dirty coral. The crews who had arrived before us were nearing exhaustion. The bombers and fighters were flying maximum range missions. One flight was based 500 miles away on another mission. Our Squadron Commander had taken one of the ships to Cairns Australia purportedly to buy fresh food. He and his crew had yet to arrive in Biak. We started with six airplanes to do the work of nine. It took a minimum of twelve hours to cover each mission. This extended to fourteen to eighteen hours when a search was required. The crews flew two days and rested one. I flew one hundred hours to first month and one hundred and thirty-five the second month after we landed at Biak.

Open sea landings were hazardous. The hulls always sustained damage in an open sea rescue. Sometimes we just popped a dozen or so rivets in the Navigator's compartment and often we bent the stringers and buckled the skin. The crews quickly broke up as individuals like the airplanes suffered under the strain. We flew with whomever operations assigned to the mission just as we flew the airplanes the mechanics put in service.

Our Squadron rescued over seven hundred men during our first year overseas. We lost all of our original planes by the end of the period. Four were destroyed on the ground in air raids and the rest

during water operations. The PBY-5A's we flew were big slow twin engine amphibians. Their rugged dependability saved our lives time after time. Although we wrecked eight planes we only lost one pilot and four crewmembers during that eventful year almost sixty years ago in late 1944 and early 1945.