

The Golden Age of Wave-Top Ops



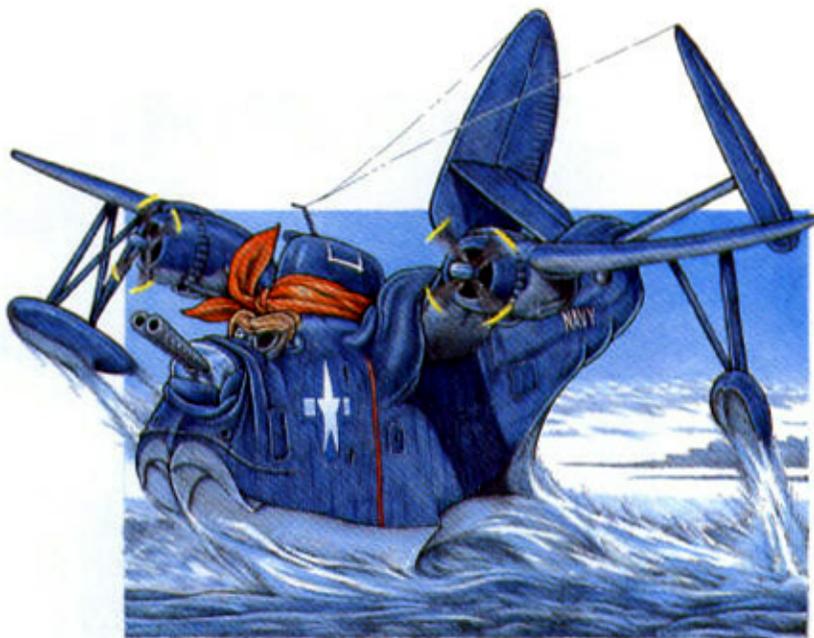
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The Navy acquired its first aircraft, the A-1 Triad floatplane, in 1911. For the next 20 years, floatplanes and flying boats were Naval Aviation's most prominent hallmark. These aircraft were biplanes, put together with wood, canvas and wires, the standard construction for that era. Traditional construction may have been familiar, but it significantly limited the possibilities of seaplane size, performance and operations. In the 1930s advancements in structures, materials and propulsion made possible new and significantly more potent generations of seaplanes. For the next three decades, seaplanes profoundly expanded the Navy's capabilities and influence.

Ultimately, the seaplane's days with the Navy were numbered. In the long run, it seemed that all of the missions important to the Navy could be accomplished more efficiently with either carrier- or land-based aircraft. The last operational seaplane flight was made by a Martin SP-5B Marlin of Patrol Squadron 40 on 6 November 1967, thus ending a truly unique and remarkable chapter in the history of Naval Aviation.

The Cat Steps Out

The Navy's first patrol bomber, Consolidated's PBY *Catalina*, the *Cat*, was probably the most recognized species of the seaplane breed during the late 1930s and 1940s. Built in larger numbers than all other U.S. seaplanes combined, many regard it as the most successful flying boat ever produced. It first flew in 1935 and ended its operational service with the Naval Reserve in January 1957, a remarkable span of service for a design grounded in pre-WW II technology. Even after its Navy career ended, the *Cat* continued to serve as a water-bomber, a transport to inaccessible areas, and a recreational vehicle for well-heeled sportsmen.



The Seamaster

Martin's P6M *Seamaster* was probably the most advanced flying boat ever built. It was designed for mine laying, photo-reconnaissance and nuclear strike missions. It unofficially beat world speed and altitude records, but no official record attempts were made. The *Seamaster's* performance was so good that it was probably as much a threat to the U.S. Air Force in the perennial roles-and-missions turf battle it fought with the Navy as it was to our cold war enemies. Sadly, when the Navy pulled the plug on the *Seamaster* in 1959, it also brought an end to the future of the seaplane as a Navy species.

The Not-So-Ancient Mariner

As the *Catalina* aged, the need for a more capable and advanced successor became apparent. The result was Martin's PBM *Mariner*. With its distinctive gull wing and twin tail, the PBM flew the same variety of missions during WW II as had the *Catalina*, including submarine hunting, sinking ships, hauling cargo and personnel, scouting and reconnaissance, and rescuing downed fliers. After the war, the *Mariner* served in the Korean War and with the U.S. Coast Guard. It was retired after 16 years of operational service.



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