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# AIR BATTLE NOTES FROM THE SOUTH PACIFIC NO.26 NAVY LIBERATORS vs JAPANESE PLANES

NACI-COMSOPAC

20 OCTOBER 1943

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Introduction

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In recent months the PB4Y (Navy Liberator) has proved itself outstanding in single combat with Japanese fighters in the course of long range searches from Allied held bases in the South Pacific. In the period from September 2 to October 8, PB4Y's operating from Guadalcanal fields have destroyed 13 Japanese planes and damaged six others without the loss of a plane or crewman. Slight damage was inflicted on four of these Navy operated Liberators and 2 PB4Y's had an engine shot out. One gunner was slightly injured.

A study of 21 missions which produced enemy contacts shows that while the Japs varied their approaches, the most popular approach was between 5 and 10 o'clock from slightly above. Only on one occasion did the Japs appear to make a concentrated attack on the PB4Y and in all of the 12 runs made on this day, the Japs masked their attacks in such a way that only the port waist and belly guns of the PB4Y could be brought to bear. There seemed to be no adopted method of attack as various other approaches were from astern and below, from 2 o'clock and overhead.

#### THE PB4Y ON THE DEFENSE

The inability of the Japs to hit on an attack doctrine is further emphasized by their failure to make concentrated mass runs. Single attacks were the rule with the other planes in the attacking force, if any, remaining out of range and making no effort to close until the original attacker had pulled out of range or had been destroyed.

It should be borne in mind that all of our planes operated individually and on no occasion did any PB4Y have escort or supporting planes. The primary function of our planes was to search for Japanese shipping and/or aircraft and to report positions. All contacts were made on such missions, with one exception,

Planes encountered by the Liberators ordinarily were Zekes or Bettys but one Pete and two Haps were badly damaged and two other Haps were among those destroyed. A Dinah and another Pete were engaged by our planes but these escaped destruction.

On at least two occasions, the Japanese fighters did not use tracers. This innovation also has been practiced by their night fighters or patrol planes. A PV flight to Ballale at night in the same period was attacked by a plane which did not fire tracers.

The Japanese, likewise, have demonstrated another peculiarity in their recent tactics. When a dozen Japs rose to meet a PB4Y near Nauru on one occasion, one plane stayed well out of range, flying wing on the Liberator, but making no effort to close when the other attackers pressed home individually. Two other Zekes closed within 300 feet of the Liberator but did not fire a single shot.

Conclusions naturally reached from these weak attacks by a variety of Japanese planes on PB4Y's show that the enemy is not anxious to attack our patrol planes; that a single PB4Y is able to defend itself from sporadic passes by more than one Jap plane and that only the most common evasive tactics and cloud cover are necessary to assist the lone patrol plane in these skies. A typical defense contact was made September 28 at 1305/L approximately 60 miles due north of Buka Island. The specific objective of this PB4Y was reconnaissance in a sector from Guadalcanal. Six Zekes and two Haps made the first attack and six Haps the second. When all the firing was over, two Haps and one Zeke had been destroyed and there had been no PB4Y casualties.

The Jap planes were cover for 8 DD's on a course of 125 degrees True. In the first attack, before which the PB4Y climbed from 2,000 feet to 9,000 feet, the Zekes made individual runs on either quarter but seldom closed to effective range. One Zeke closed in on a no-deflection run and had his tail blown apart from about 500 feet distant. Contact with the enemy was lost in clouds for 10 minutes but suddenly Haps appeared in line-astern coming up on the starboard beam. Other Haps took position astern and almost on the same level as the PB4Y.

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The Japanese went through the same routine of making individual and ineffectual runs. At least four Haps were hit. One of them pulled up to a stall not over 500 feet ahead at about 1 o'clock and quickly exploded and disintegrated under the combined fire of bow and top turrets. Another Hap, coming in slightly above and astern, was hit one-two-three by the top turret, tail turret and belly guns. He burst into flames and showed a wrecked tail assembly.

In the words of the combat report, "the outstanding feature of the combat was the glaringly obvious inexperience and/or lack of skill of the enemy pilots. They did not coordinate attacks and they were extraordinarily weak on gunnery. In addition they gave our gunners numerous no-deflection shots."

In this same period, a PB4Y photographic plane successfully defended itself against six passes made by two Japanese fighters near Choiseul. This Liberator had accompanied two others, with fighter cover, to Choiseul but when weather prevented a complete photographic coverage, the other Liberators with the fighters returned home. The third Navy Liberator, however, elected to stay and got what pictures it could. The original sighting placed the Japs 8,000 feet below but as they climbed, the Liberator nosed down. When contact was effected, the Liberator opened up, shooting one Jap down in flames and extensively damaging the other. The Liberator registered 250 miles per hour in making its get-away. It was not damaged.

#### PB4Y ON THE OFFENSE

The first week of October demonstrated the offensive power of Liberators out on patrol. While previous successful attacks on enemy planes had been primarily defensive, on six occasions the PB4Y's attacked and shot down Bettys.

These attacks, uniformly successful whenever a Liberator came within range of the Bettys, apparently showed that Bettys have insufficient power in one engine to stay in the air or to make any defense maneuver. On October 5, and again on October 8, the PB4Y's shot out an engine in a Betty, causing the plane to make a water landing and become an excellent target for strafing by the big four-motor planes.

The October 5 attack took place when the Liberator was on regular patrol 150 miles east of Ontong Java. The Betty plummeted into the sea when its port engine was shot out. It was strafed and left in a sinking condition. The next day, another Betty was chased and destroyed 80 miles WSW of Ontong Java and this time the Liberator lost an engine but returned safely to base without injury to personnel.

On October 7, 105 miles WSW of the same group of islands, a Betty, being chased by a Liberator, darted into a cloud but the American plane came out of the cloud 800 feet above the Betty and closed, shooting the Japanese plane down without damage to itself.

The fourth attack in four days came October 8 when a Betty was engaged for 25 minutes, losing an engine and making a forced water landing. It was strafed, set on fire and went down. The Liberator lost an engine and a gunner was slightly injured.

Another highly successful offensive day had been September 29 off Empress Augusta Bay, Bougainville. The PB4Y was at 5,500 feet when it sighted a Betty at 2,500 feet. A steep diving turn enabled the Liberator to close at 275 mph on the enemy's stern from above. From 500 yards, the Liberator opened fire from top, bow and belly turrets, causing the Betty to begin a series of shallow banked turns and it headed for the water, opening fire but the gunners were inaccurate and the Liberator was able to overtake and turn inside the Betty to pour fire into the fuselage and engines. Flames appeared in the Betty's starboard wing root. It was necessary for the Liberator to chop throttles to 240 mph to prevent overshooting prior to the enemy's banking sharply as it lost altitude and went into the water, exploding upon impact.

The Liberator expended 1,300 rounds. It was not damaged.

(The attached photographs show a Betty which has just been shot down by a PB4Y on 5 October.)

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