



ALASKAN ANTICS

As Japan ravaged the Pacific, Royal Canadian Air Force bombers flew to protect Alaska and British Columbia, shielding supply lines and, as *Pierre Olivier* shows, spawning a maritime mystery

The war in the Pacific was just weeks old by the time the Japanese were claiming major successes against the United States and the British Empire.

The conflict had started with a hard-hitting punch: on December 7, 1941, the Kidō Butai carrier group raided the key US anchorage at Pearl Harbor, devastating the capital vessels anchored in 'Battleship Row' and damaging base facilities. This was followed three days later with

another decisive jab as Japanese aircraft sank the battlecruiser HMS *Repulse* and the battleship *Prince of Wales*.

With the Royal Navy's Force 'Z' destroyed and the US Pacific Fleet reeling, there was little to stand against the rising sun. Thailand fell and allied with its invader. The British colony at Penang fell too, as did Hong Kong, Wake and Guam, all by the end of December. Only the joint American-British-Dutch-Australian Command



“Soon Singapore fell just as had Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Rabaul... Japanese ambition seemed unstoppable as conquering eyes focused again to the east”

BRISTOL BOLINGBROKE MK.IV
9026 YO-U (BACKGROUND)
FLEW THE FIRST 8 SQUADRON
PATROL FROM ALASKA ON
JUNE 13, 1942 DND/RCAF



BOLINGBROKES OVER ALASKA

RIGHT FG OFF J MCARTHUR (SECOND LEFT) AND CREW, L-R: FLT SGT G ANDERSON, FG OFF W SMITH AND FLT SGT F JOHNSON AT ELMENDORF, MID-1942 CANAV BOOKS COLLECTION

remained an obstacle, but this was responsible for a vast theatre stretching across the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines.

Allied resistance in those territories and in Malaya was swept aside through January and soon Singapore fell, just as had Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Rabaul. Japanese ambition seemed unstoppable as conquering eyes focused again to the east. As part of the Allied response the Fairchild-built Bristol Bolingbroke of 8 Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), transferred to Western Air Command in January 1942, beginning a little-known deployment where the weather often proved a greater foe than the submarines the bombers sought.

Trouble in the Aleutians

Operating along the Canadian Pacific, it joined 115 Squadron, also Bolingbroke-equipped, under Squadron Leader Edwin Reyno. Once established at Sea Island, near Vancouver, Sergeant Manuel's crew in 9032 flew No.8's first patrol on February 1. However, despite numerous scares, there were then few Japanese vessels in theatre.

A larger effort against the US territory of Alaska began in early June 1942. Japanese carrier aircraft twice raided Dutch Harbor in the first-ever air attacks on continental United States and from June 3,



the Japanese launched successful invasions of the Aleutian Islands of Kiska and Attu. This prompted a request to the Canadians for support; within hours RCAF elements, including ten Bolingbroke of 8 Squadron under Sqn Ldr Charles Willis, flew north to Anchorage. Part of 'X' Wing, RCAF, commanded by Wing Commander Gordon McGregor, the Bolingbroke were bombed up and held at readiness. After a week they began flying anti-submarine patrols having received a signal from Major General Simon Buckner of US Alaska Command, informing them of a contact and ordering them to attack.



RIGHT THE SS NORTHWESTERN (WHITE SMOKE) AND OIL FACILITIES AT DUTCH HARBOR BURN FOLLOWING THE IJN RAID OF JUNE 4, 1942 US NATIONAL NAVAL AVIATION MUSEUM

BELOW ALASKA PRESENTED THE BOMBER SQUADRONS WITH OFTEN DIFFICULT AND HAZARDOUS WEATHER CONDITIONS, SUCH AS HERE, AT ELMENDORF, IN FEBRUARY 1943 CANAV BOOKS COLLECTION

“When reports of a Japanese landing on St Lawrence circulated, it necessitated an immediate response. Excitement spread, given the nature of the deployment so far”



On June 13, three aircraft (9026/YO-U, 9025/YO-X and 9072) lifted off to search for a possible contact in Prince William Sound in the Gulf of Alaska. In Bolingbroke Mk.IV YO-U, Fg Off Willis and his navigator, Fg Off R B Kelly, reported sighting a submerged object but poor visibility prevented confirmation. The following day Fg Off Woods' crew patrolled the Alaskan coast through the Portage Pass to Kodiak and the Cook Inlet, escorting a US troopship. Frustratingly, there was no sign of enemy activity, prompting the squadron diarist to note, perhaps containing his considerable



exasperation, that "...possibilities of the unit seeing combat whilst based here seems extremely remote".

Throughout June, 8 Squadron flew 600 hours on operations and to extend its coverage three aircraft deployed 280 miles north to Kodiak Island where the detachment operated in primitive conditions. Among the problems encountered it was found that the 'Boleys' racks were incompatible with US bombs, necessitating field modifications. Spares were also in short supply and repeatedly improvisation proved the order of the day.

Excitement and Frustration

Inactivity was never a concern; the aircrews were kept busy, but frustration grew. On July 11, after receiving reports of a ship being torpedoed, 8 Squadron flew three searches. The first was by Flying Officer Tinsley, who escorted a troopship in Prince William Sound; the others were entirely uneventful.

Two days later, three more aircraft were detached to Nome on the Bering Sea, some 500 miles west of Anchorage. Tinsley with Fg Off Myers as observer flew up to establish the detachment and Flt Lt MacDonald's and Flt Sgt Watkin's crews followed. It was a dreary location with two gravel runways surrounded by rolling tundra, but weather was more predictable.

This was welcomed; the only accommodation was tented and there were no hangars.

Initially, two Boleys were held on alert while the third flew daily patrols south to Nunivak Island, returning to Nome by way of Stuart Island and Norton Sound. Once more, to the irritation of frustrated crews, the greatest danger remained the unpredictable and savage Alaskan weather. Despite it being summer, fog was an issue and several sorties were affected by bad conditions. Elmendorf field, the base at Anchorage, was plagued fierce squalls known as williwaws.

Even at Nome the weather could still be challenging, but the workload increased. By early August the detachment was mounting two daily patrols above icy waters, one north, another south. When the United States Army Air Forces' (USAAF) B-24 Liberator detachment was withdrawn from Nome on August 21, the Canadians again upped

TEACHING THE COMMONWEALTH TO FLY

Numerically, the most important contribution made by the Bolingbroke was in training

Accounting for more than half of all variants built, the Mk.IV-T gave long and sterling service within RCAF Training Command and helped provide a steady flow of trained aircrew under the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan.

Usually painted in a variety of colourful yellow schemes, the 'Boley' flew with a host of training units (notably the Bombing and Gunnery Schools) all over the prairies. More also served with Operational Training Units for target towing duties such as 8 OTU at Greenwood, which flew the Mk IV-TT.

Without the Boley, the strategic bomber offensive and myriad other tasks would not have been possible. However, at the end of the war the faithful trainer was withdrawn. Most ended up at various dumps from where, years later, a few were salvaged to form the basis of several superb restorations now in Britain, Canada and the United States.



patrol frequency, expanding their search area into the Bering Strait.

A tantalising glimpse of action finally came just over a week later: a possible submarine was detected by direction-finding but after four patrols the hunt was called off. This trend continued, even as events took a dramatic turn. When reports of a Japanese landing on St Lawrence Island about 250 miles west of Nome circulated, it necessitated an immediate response. Excitement spread, especially given the nature of the deployment so far, but when Fg Off Arnold's crew flew to investigate, they found zero evidence of Japanese activity.

First Loss

With the onset of winter, the detachment continued to operate from Nome until October 21. Elsewhere, even the most inhospitable conditions did not disrupt flying. Canadian grit, endurance and determination

ABOVE BOLINGBROKE IV-TS OF 8 BOMBING AND GUNNERY SCHOOL AT LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, ON JULY 16, 1944 BRISTOLS

BOLINGBROKES OVER ALASKA



ABOVE RCAF BOLINGBROKES SHARE THE WINTERY DISPERSAL AT ANNETTE ISLAND WITH A USAAF B-26, C-47 AND P-39S, JANUARY 1943 USAF

through the last months of 1942 was recognised with the award of the Air Force Cross to Pilot Officer George Woods and Warrant Officer Thomas Lindsay. Both completed more than 60 patrols and at least 300 hours flying. The squadron continued operations until March 1943, when it returned to Sea Island and was re-equipped with Lockheed Venturas.

Earlier, the US had sent RDF (radar) sets to the Vancouver and Victoria areas to be manned by

RCAF personnel and to support the Bolingbroke Mk.IV long-range fighters of No.115 Squadron, which had swapped eight of its Boley Mk.Is for the heavy fighters in November/December 1941. In one of these, 9118/BK-V, that Plt Off Harry Clarke made a wheels-up landing on January 28, 1942, though with little damage. Sgt Allan Houston was not so fortunate. Two days later, his Bolingbroke Mk.I crashed at Cowichan Bay; he was 115's first fatality.

Prince Rupert, in British Columbia, was the main port of embarkation for units destined for Alaska and so became an obvious target. Japanese submarines were certainly capable of shelling the facility or of launching floatplane strikes. The USAAF developed an airfield on Annette Island, in the extreme southeast of Alaskan territory and around 60 miles north of Prince Rupert, to defend the port with 115 Squadron tasked with providing the necessary air cover.

Accordingly, in mid-April Harry Clarke with Flt Lt Lay and Fg Off McCaskill conducted a survey flight along the coast to Annette Island, checking the runways and facilities in this extremely remote area. Only then did 115 Squadron move Bolingbrokes there, joining 'Y' Wing, RCAF, under Wg Cdr Deane Nesbit. In doing so, it became the first RCAF squadron to be based on US soil.

Mystery Submarine

Once there, 115 Squadron met with the same frustration as experienced by their colleagues in 8 Squadron, soon to be based to the north.

The first sortie came on May 13, 1942; at 12:20pm, a contact was reported off Harris Island, about 180 miles north-northwest.

RIGHT THE RCAF'S ALASKAN 'X' WING WAS COMMANDED BY GORDON MCGREGOR (LEFT) AND 'Y' WING BY DEANE NESBITT (RIGHT) PAC



SQUADRONS HONOURED

RCAF Admin Order 62-00/04 listed the Battle Honours its squadrons had been awarded. However, policy was to retain the '400-series' squadron numbers used by the RCAF overseas, so no Home Establishment units remained in existence post-war.

Nonetheless, for posterity, the document listed the honours these squadrons were entitled to and recorded that the Battle Honour 'Pacific Coast 1942-1944' was awarded to 8, 115 and 147 Squadrons, all members of which also received the Pacific Star.

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However, the scrambled aircraft spotted nothing.

A further report detailed another sighting just 30 miles west of Annette. Flt Lt Fred Curry, Plt Offs Blatchford and Aylesworth and Sgt Chamut searched for the suspected submarine. It proved to be yet another uneventful patrol when, with eyes on, the ‘periscope’ turned out to be a submerged tree. The following month the commanding officer was replaced by Sqn Ldr Ralph Ashman, who had previously served on bomber-reconnaissance duties and the squadron was officially re-designated as a bomber-reconnaissance unit to better reflect its role.

Perhaps fresh leadership and wealth of experience paid off as, finally, on July 7, 115 saw action.

Four Boleys were scrambled after a US Coast Guard cutter reported coming under attack. Flt Sgt William Thomas and crew in 9118/BK-V patrolled above the Dexter Entrance. Navigator, Plt Off Leonard Shebeski, noticed a disturbance in the water and the

crew’s keen eyes spotted a 100ft ‘cigar-shaped’ object venting white smoke or vapour. At 5.59pm, they dropped a single 250lb anti-submarine bomb, claiming a direct hit, with wireless operator Sgt Bob Kenning transmitting the contact report.

But the crew were in doubt. Most patrols had been uneventful so far – had they really found a submarine? On return to Annette the crew almost convinced themselves that they had hit an unfortunate whale.

The next day, Allied ships scoured the area with the USCGC *McLane* engaging a contact with depth charges. Air bubbles, insulating material and a glistening slick of oil slowly floated to and spread on the surface, confirming that a submarine had been sunk. The US Navy credited the RCAF with sharing in its destruction and Thomas and Shebeski were Mentioned in Despatches.

To this day, the target’s identity remains a mystery. It was recorded as the Ro-32, but she had become a hulk and was in Japan; in

fact, no IJN vessel was lost off Canada and mainland Alaska. A tragic case of blue-on-blue is an intriguing possibility, Soviet Shchuka-class submarines were similar in appearance to the Ro types and curiously the Shch-138 went missing around that time. Officially, she was lost to torpedo malfunction, but Soviet boats did monitor US movements in Alaska.

Securing a Lifeline

Through a bitter winter, 115 Squadron patrolled into 1943. The majority generated no contacts, but there were occasional spots of activity such as on March 25 when US intelligence reported a suspected submarine. ‘B’ Flight flew three patrols while four aircraft of ‘A’ Flight flew for another 13 hours but none confirmed any contact. The next day a Norseman light transport crashed killing all on board, including three squadron members: Sqn Ldr Fred Curry, Flt Lt Ernest Stapleford and LAC Edward McMichael. The squadron’s lengthy Alaskan adventure ended

BELOW A 115
SQUADRON BOLEY
AT ANNETTE ISLAND,
SPRING 1943
CANAV BOOKS
COLLECTION



BOLINGBROKES OVER ALASKA

RIGHT FLT SGT WILLIAM THOMAS (CENTRE) AND CREW COMPLETED THE ONLY SUCCESSFUL ATTACK MADE BY 115 SQUADRON DURING THE WAR CANAV BOOKS COLLECTION

on August 18, 1943 when it returned to Patricia Bay and was immediately re-equipped with the Ventura.

That left a single operational Bolingbroke squadron. Formed in July 1942 for anti-submarine duties, 147 Squadron also operated Mk.IV Boleys. It scoured the approaches to Vancouver, working up at Sea Island and flying its first patrols on November 7, Flt Lt G R M Hunt and crew operating from a detachment established at Tofino on the north tip of Vancouver Island. Soon the squadron was under the command of Wg Cdr G S Austin, and would complete 560 sorties.

Enemy activity was sparse, but that did not mean the work was without note. As Austin dryly noted in one report, his Bolingbrokes "had a nasty habit of running short of oil".

"The first indication of this is when a propeller flies off," he continued, adding: "This naturally does little to increase the aircrew's confidence in their aircraft." In all, the squadron lost four aircraft with 11 killed and two injured. One pilot was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Canada's west coast and Alaska were vital both for Allied security but also in the war against Germany. Not only did the recapture of the Aleutians (complete by mid-August 1943) threaten the Japanese flank,



it better protected Lend-Lease convoys sailing from the United States via the Aleutians or the Bering Strait, to Russia.

The USSR did not declare war on Japan until August 1945. Before then, Japan had been unwilling to hinder the supply line, although submarine attacks did occur. In addition, Alaska was a vital stop in the Northwest Staging Route, through which thousands of Lend-Lease aircraft were ferried by air to Russia, and threats against it could not be left unchecked. Dutch

Harbor was also proposed as the hub for the Lend-Lease transfer of US ships to the Soviets in 1945, which was required to support the planned Soviet moves against the Japanese.

The handover of the vessels and training actually took place at Cold Bay, on the Alaskan peninsula, but security was absolutely paramount.

Fortunately, those waters were largely secure, and although theirs was a quiet tasking, the Bolingbroke patrols had a key role protecting that lifeline. On March 1, 1944, at 7.55am, Fg Off T A Sale, Plt Off Carter and W/O2s Harmiek and Miller, took off in Bolingbroke Mk.IV 9033 on the type's last patrol.

Typically, this final sortie was uneventful. ●

"Austin drily noted in one report [that] Bolingbrokes had a nasty habit of running short of oil. The first indication of this is when a propeller flies off"

BELOW TWO 115 SQUADRON BOLINGBROKE MK.IVS OVER A SNOWBOUND AND MOUNTAINOUS ALASKA DND/RCAF

