



United States Coast Guard
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Coast Guard History Program

“Best Shot”

by

Gerrett Gregory, USCG (Ret.)

Autobiography:

I was hired by the Coast Guard as a surfman to fill a vacancy at Ashtabula, Ohio, however, the guy I was replacing changed his mind about leaving his surfman's job. I was still hired and sent to Oswego, New York. I was initially assigned to take fingerprints for ID cards: all of those who came near the lake had to possess this card the Coast Guard issued--that was my daily task. After five p.m. I went on beach patrol as a lifeguard, as everyone came to the surf station to swim because of the security of the life guards. Remember in 1938 there were no other life guards or harbor police--the surf stations or later named lifeboat stations did all of those activities. That was the case at least, in harbors which were fortunate enough to have the so called "Surfboat Station." I was then sent to Galloo Island where a new station was being constructed. This is the station where Mr. Wilson [Warrant Boatswain (L) Alston J. Wilson, USCG] was the skipper, the guy I loved and faced the 1938 hurricane with.

I left Galloo and was assigned to the Navy and the Marines as an instructor. I was then further assigned to the USS *Alcyone* (AKA-7) where I served as Boat Division Commander--one hundred four people in the division. I instructed Marines as well as Navy personnel. My DD-214 shows combat before war started; twice after war started. I transferred from the Navy Department back to the Coast Guard. "Name my assignment," anywhere--OCS, flight school--whatever I wanted, name it. Name it I did, I wanted to go back to the security I knew before I was transferred to the Navy, I wanted to go back to Galloo, that secure place of my childhood where my roots were--it was secure. After a while, on Galloo, I was impatient to get back to more active duty. So I asked for Alaska. In Alaska I was assigned to the school for aids to navigation stations. There were five of us in the class. The major function of these aids to navigation facilities were their radio beacons, which could be heard around the world. It is understood that my classmates were all killed on their first year assignment.

After three years of remote, isolated duty, I was offered aviation school. Midway through my training there the fellow running the school was killed in an aircraft accident. I was assigned to run the school in his place. After about nine years in Air-Sea Rescue, I was assigned to Headquarters. I then retired from the Coast Guard.

I went to work for a large aerospace company and found myself assigned to production tasks. After being evaluated and taking many exams, I was assigned to engineering management. Still wanted to be a licensed professional engineer with an identification number in California. The licensing board was contacted requesting that I be able to take the written exam which was declined, because, as they stated, I had no formal engineering education. Again, their decision was challenged. Their response was the professional engineer's written examination--the written exam that would be taken after completing college. Just the opportunity that was needed; I was licensed as a Professional Engineer, Industrial Engineering # 3618 in California.

I retired from the aerospace company. I then started certifying aircraft for the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] and flying patrols for the Coast Guard Auxiliary, from the Mexican border to Santa Barbara, every weekend. I flew other assignments for the Auxiliary on weekdays. I then retired from the Auxiliary after seventeen years of service.

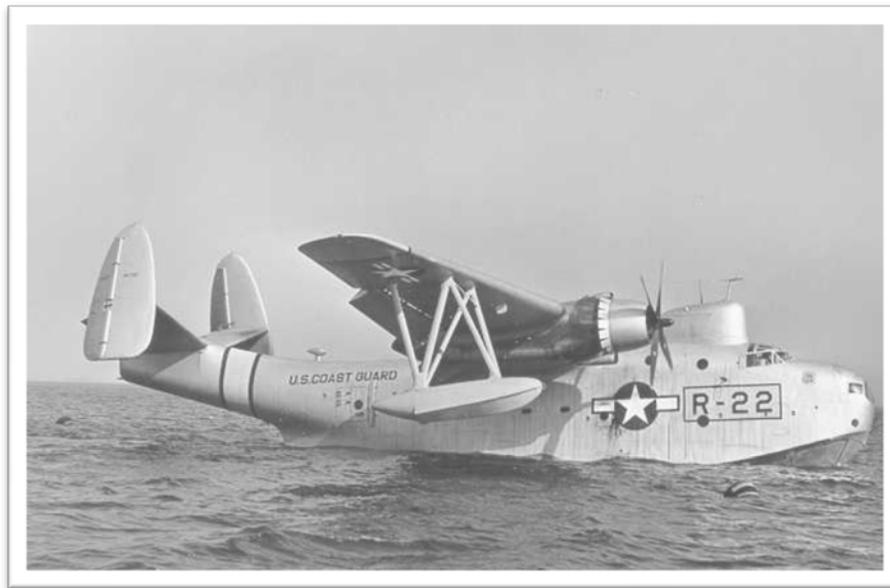
The following is a story by Surfman Gerrett Gregory, USCG, who was assigned to the Navy from the Treasury Department, U.S. Coast Guard, as an instructor in amphibious operations. He will relate his three years of wonderful experiences with our Navy as he remembers it--thank you dear reader -- Gerrett Gregory, Coast Guard Veteran and Author, March, 2012.

A little after 1600, the afternoon of a beautiful day, the alarm at the Coast Guard Air Sea rescue station at San Diego California sounded. A Navy fighter had ditched, in the Pacific, about 35 miles west of Pt. Loma.

Everyone was scrambling to get the ready PBM airborne. To put it mildly when the alarm goes off, "all hell breaks loose". That colorful statement aptly describes those first moments after the alarm was sounded. Either someone was about to die or they need a lot of help right now. That was the reason for the Coast Guard Air

Station. The mission to provide all the help needed, if possible stabilize the situation, to prevent further deterioration as quickly as possible. Rescuing those who were in immediate danger, and for the others, move them to a safer environment immediately. Sometimes it takes a little longer.

This was the situation that beautiful day in September, when all hell, broke loose. A dear friend and fellow Coast Guardsman, Ken Bilderback, and a great PBM sea-plane pilot, came running over, saying “come with me, be my flight engineer on this one.” The airplane or rather seaplane that we would climb into was the Martin Mariner; the plane which was called the PBM an abbreviation for “Patrol Bomber by Martin.”



Martin PBM-5 Mariner

At this time let me tell you a little bit about the sea plane called the PBM. Martin Aircraft Company was the designers and the manufacturers. For the time in history it was a very large seaplane. Its weight was in the 43,000-pound area. It had a large wingspan of one hundred seventeen feet. It carried about 3400 gallons of 115/145 gasoline that was when drop tanks were installed in the bomb bays. Each engine had a 40-gallon oil reservoir. The crew varied in numbers. A crew of eight seems about right. The first PBMs were powered by two R-2600 Wright compound radial engines. The later models were powered by the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 18 cylinder engines. The later ones had a four bladed Curtis Electric propeller that had a reversing feature. The reversing feature was a great help when attempting to maneuver on the water.

At the ends of the wings there were fixed floats that provided stability when taxiing on the water. The wings were the gull wing type. This design raised the engines above the water allowing the use of high power engines

and large propellers. It had a twin tail. The tail also had a machine gun-turret. There were two fuel jettison tubes just below tail-turret that looked like twin cannon barrels to the uninformed. Aft of the wings there were waist doors on each side of the aircraft. These doors were also hinged in the middle. On the forward half of the doors were mounting brackets for the JATO bottles, which were used for, take off in some circumstances. Each door could accommodate two JATO bottles, which were usually jettisoned after takeoff. These planes were strictly seaplanes. Before the seaplane left water it was necessary to install wheel assemblies, which allowed movement on land, those assemblies were called beaching gear. They attached to each side amidships and at the tail. All of the beaching gear was 360 degree steerable allowing the seaplane to be moved sideways if necessary.

After the PBM-5, another model came along, a more or less experimental aircraft the PBM-5A. This aircraft had retractable tricycle landing gear. Its fuel load was greatly reduced which resulted in less range. All of the PBMs had a large auxiliary power plant, with the ability to furnish electrical power continuously for all of the ships electrical needs. The motor/generator arrangement was installed on the flooring above the bunkroom. The engine's functions, other than the propeller, throttle and ignition were handled by the flight engineer, the pilot would tell flight what he needed. The controls were duplicated only for the throttle and propeller control, although the fuel low-level warning lights were redundant to the pilots. The flight engineer did not have the mag switches at his location. Now that I have introduced you to the seaplane called the Mariner or PBM, the story will continue.

LT Bilderback came over, saying, "Come on LT be my flight engineer." We were on our way in a flash. The beaching crew were in their wet suits; the diesel cat was manned and running. Waiting by the boarding ladder as the crew scrambled aboard. One, two, three and two pilots, we were all there climbing up the portable ladder to get inside. At the PBM waist hatch inside the plane, the ordnanceman Bridge and the relief flight engineer were busily rigging the JATO bottles on the waist hatch half door. Scrambling thru the bunkroom up to the flight deck, grabbed my chute harness and life jacket strapping them on and at the same time getting the master switch on and starting the Andover APU. The inside lights came on. "Hurrah we have power". The two pilots were busily checking out the cockpit and turning on the radios, PPI scope and the radar, just generally getting things ready to go, fly that is. The radioman began cranking up his receivers and transmitters. The APU was surging trying to keep up with the load it was suddenly subjected too. The chute harness was on--placing

number # 1 starter switch in energize and as soon as its starter flywheel started spinning the right engine starter was energized also. The booster pumps were actuated the left starter switch placed to engage. The primer was activated, the pilot was asked for "switch on left engine." "Bingo" she was turning on her own. A tornado was forming behind it. The mixture control went to the lean position. Ten seconds later the right engine got the same treatment, turning, creating its own tornado. We were rolling; the guy on the cat was setting one hell of a pace. We hit water with a splash, the beaching gear was gone. We were taxiing, up on the step. The ship was closing up very fast. LT Bilderback said "Gerrett I am going to see if I can get this thing off the water. Please give me auto rich on both." The manifold pressure gauges were to the red line.

The JATOs fired; we were off and on our way to save someone's butt, which was not to be. The sea was very choppy with lots of little white caps. The pilot briefed the crew on the situation and where the search stations would be located. His ending statement was "we are going to give this guy "our best shot, we're going to get him." Arriving on scene, the radioman informed the base of our location. All eyes now were now searching the ocean's surface for signs of the survivor. Bridge, the Ordnanceman, called out, "I got him," he waved. The PBM was in a tight orbit around the area where the sighting was made. The man in the water had disappeared. We searched for two more hours and into the darkness. Everyone was searching, without seeing anything in the water other than the oil slick that was sometimes visible blowing down wind. It became dark. The pilots discussed the situation, and they decided to terminate the search due to darkness. The station would send a boat to continue the search. Everyone in the aircraft knew all too well what that meant; the guy in the water would die. We closed the plane up and headed home, as we turned to leave the area there was not a dry eye in the entire crew. They all knew too well. We wept not only for the person we could not find in the ocean below them, they wept because of their own failure and frustration. We were unashamed of our tears.

The trip back to the air station was routine. I went on watch at operations. In a couple of hours we heard that the search boat had recovered the pilot's body, they were on their way home. Bilderback came over to operations where I was on watch. We went down to the small boat dock to meet the search boat. After it was secured, we went aboard, and to the stokes litter, Bilderback pulled the covering off of the pilot's face. He looked at the face for a minute saying, softly "he is just a kid." Then he sort of leaned down beside the litter saying sort of to himself and sort of to the dead man before him, "we gave it our best shot, I guess it was not good enough." We walked back to operations, in silence, busy with our own thoughts.

Appendix

Note 1.

Lt. Bilderback and the author were dear friends. There was a bond, as they were both ex-Surfman.

Note 2.

Bridge the Ordnance man referred to, a few weeks later was in a PBM crash off the China Coast, he was captured by the Chinese and executed.

Note 3.

The Coast Guard PBM 5A crashed off Point Loma it was piloted by Captain MacDiarmid. The author was usually Captain MacDiarmid's flight engineer this time however the flight engineer was Ollie Young. He was slightly injured. There were no other injuries or loss of life. The plane is still where it crashed. Scuba divers report it often.

Note 4

JATO is an acronym for "jet assisted take off".

Note 5

About the author:

At an early point in his life, on his father's shoulders, watched Surfmen (Coast Guard) removing a crew from a very large collier that had foundered in a blizzard near Stoney Point light on his family's farm. He was hooked to be a Surfman, a Coast Guardsman. He became a Surfman. He was in the hurricane of 1938 in a thirty-six foot motor lifeboat. The Skipper of the boat was also the Skipper of the Life Boat Station, a man he dearly loved. Just before World War two started he was assigned to the Navy and the Marines, being an assault boat instructor in the South Pacific and other places. After the war started he remained with the Navy and the Marines for nearly three years. He returned to the Galloo Island Life Boat Station after his tour with the U.S. Navy. While he was away his dearly beloved Skipper was drowned in a boating accident. The Skipper's body was not recovered at the time of the accident. The author later found the body of his Skipper while on a routine boat patrol. After about nine months on the Lifeboat Station, the author was transferred; he was the Officer-in-Charge of several isolated aids to navigation stations in remote Alaska.

Serving three years of isolated duty, he attended Aviation School at San Diego Coast Guard Air Station. Before he completed the Aviation School, the CPO in charge of the school died in an aircraft accident. The author was put in charge of the school. He ran the school, instructed, and also went flying as a crew member and flight engineer, on many rescue missions.

“Best Shot” points up that fact your best efforts sometimes are not good enough no matter how hard you try.



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