

A Gentleman and a Rascal



Autobiography
by
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CHAPTER 10

The Catalina Flying Boat

Front Cover: I wish to thank artist Laura Cole for her kind permission to use the second painting from the triptych **Kimberley Grasses**.

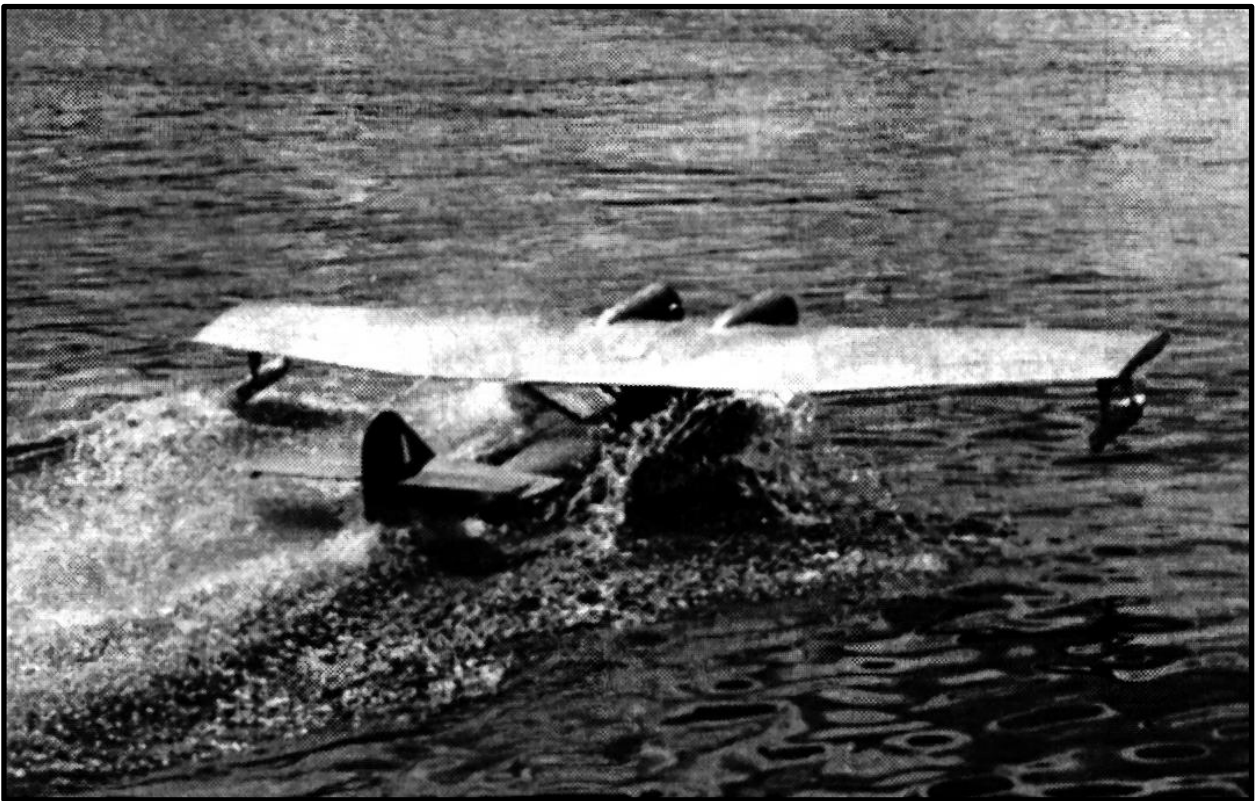
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CHAPTER 10

The Catalina Flying Boat

The Catalina Flying Boat was a very reliable plane. It could fly a longer distance and stay in the air longer than any other plane produced at that time.



The Cat

It had quite comfortable seating for the two pilots and the engineer. The navigator and wireless operator had swivel seats which were alright if you pinched a cushion and tied it to the plane seat. The gunners who were on duty were rather cramped in the turrets, but they were relieved now and again by other crew members. The turrets were not manned until we were in enemy territory. There were four bunks in the middle of the plane where we stored our gear. The bunks folded up against the fuselage. Because it generally took us seven to eight hours to get where we were going, the bunks were in use most of the time. It was the same on the way back from a mission. Our crew of nine included two pilots, one navigator,

two wireless airgunners, two engineer airgunners, one armament airgunner, and one airframe airgunner who could patch up a hole in the hull. Holes in the hull often happened in waters which had not been cleared by a crashboat before landing or takeoff. The flying boats were sixty seven feet long and had a wing span of one hundred and four feet. They were equipped with two Pratt and Whitney engines of one thousand, two hundred HP each. We carried one thousand, four hundred and sixty imperial gallons of fuel and for the Perth to Colombo flight the planes were fitted with extra fuel tanks which carried one thousand, nine hundred gallons. We seldom flew over ten thousand feet because the planes were not fitted with oxygen like the Liberators were. The only time that we went to thirteen thousand, five hundred feet was when we were running short of fuel and we had to go over the Owen Stanley Ranges to get back to Port Moresby, otherwise it took another eight hundred odd miles or eight hours to go around Milne Bay, which we avoided when possible because of the battle going on there and the presence of Japanese warships.

Life on the Catalinas was far better than on the land planes because we were always based on the water and we were able to find plenty to do when we were not flying, such as swimming, fishing and beachcombing. When I was transferred to the Liberators we had nothing to do when we were not flying, except an occasional game of football and cricket without a pitch. We only had stumps in the ground and found some paint or whitewash to mark a crease. The base at Fenton was the home of the bushfly. When we went to Morotai we were not far from the beaches but we were not allowed to swim because of hookworm. There were not too many flies, mosquitoes and other flying insects at Morotai because, before they took it over, the Americans had sprayed the whole area with a liquid chemical which was vet)/ effective. There was only a small Japanese garrison there and they took to the jungle and were not heard of again, although the Americans had guards all around the perimeter of the area being used.

When we went out on operational flights we would pack enough food to last for twenty four hours. We had a hot plate so that we could make plenty of coffee and warm things up. Sometimes they would give you a little bowl of stew which you could warm up. My friend Ivan Peirce told me that his flights over to Colombo from Perth were thirty hours and they had to take a lot more food and drink. He had a very, very English skipper who used to get the navigator or the wireless operator to warm up lunch. On that day he said to Ivan, "Can I have my lunch and can I have my favourite tinned sausages. Put them in a saucepan and warm them up. " Ivan relayed the instructions to the navigator, Phil Hicks, who put them on the hotplate and forgot all about them because he was working on something. The bloody tin went pop. The captain turned around and said, "Shit," and Phil replied, "No Sir, they're sausages. " Phil Hicks lives in WA and is a member of the Catalina Club.

I have been asked what the toilet facilities were like on a Catalina. I can tell you this, they did not compare with what we now have on a 727 airliner. We had a funnel which was connected to piping which went down through the aircraft where the "piddle" was caught in the slipstream which took it away. If you needed to open your bowels it was a different matter which entailed a lot of preparation and disposal. We seemed to learn to handle our bowels after a while, but if it was necessary in flight, it became a job and a half. We carried quite a bundle of old newspapers, three or four of which were laid on the floor in the blister department, towards the rear of the aircraft. The two blister gunners would disappear to give you privacy, or maybe to avoid the odour. We always had a roll of toilet paper on board. After you completed the job, the disposal was the hard part and needed experience, or to be shown how to do it by an experienced campaigner. You had to open the tunnel-gun hatch and get rid of your newspaper full of the doings through the hatch. You had to make sure that you did not let the parcel go until your hand was extended well into the slipstream. If you let go too early it would blow back into your face and all over the blister gun compartment, which the returning blister gunners did not like. You only made that mistake once. We carried nine gallons of water on board, for drinking only, or for use on the

lifeboat, so there was no way that you could wash your hands. After I was transferred from the Cats to the Libs I heard that the Cats were equipped with a chemical, portable toilet. They did not have that luxury on Libs and we were often out eleven and a half hours on an operation.

Fuel was always a problem in WA because there was no refinery here until after the war, it must have all been transported by trucks or train to WA. It always happened when we were off the beaten track where we were stuck until 100 octane fuel could be brought to us. There were good supplies of the correct fuel in New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and other bases which we operated from. We often had to use a tractor to pull us towards the shore. In Port Moresby, they had proper moorings in the middle of the harbour and crash boats would come out. They also had one big refuelling barge which had electric motors and which refuelled us in no time. As we landed they would always fuel us up ready for another job. What a target it would be, to be sitting there fully loaded with fuel. All the Japanese had to do was put one bullet in and, Wooph, away she goes. That is why we moved back to Cairns because we could not operate out of Port Moresby any longer. The Japanese had taken Rabaul, Lae, Salamaur and Wewak and their planes could easily reach Moresby.

After the Bismark sea battle, where all twenty two of the Japanese ships had been sunk by the Australian and American bombers, we were sent out on patrol in the Huon Gulf north of New Guinea to look for any survivors from the Japanese convoy, carrying over twelve thousand troops, reinforcements for Buna, Gona and Lae, which the AIF had just about taken from the enemy. We had orders to destroy any Japanese liferafts and boats which were close to land and able to get ashore. We came across a liferaft and one of the Japanese staggered to his feet and held up the Japanese flag, the rising sun. They were in a bad state. About ten of them had been without water or food for two days in that climate, miles from land and had just about had it. Our rear gunner spotted them and asked our crew captain to drop down low so that he could put them out of their misery. Our skipper said that he thought that they would never reach shore so leave the bastards to their misery of a slow death

and a feed for the sharks. That may sound barbaric but we were all well aware of how the Japanese had treated our POWs and we had seen at Milne Bay what they had done to the native women.

Tribute to the Catalina Crews

Sir Richard Kingsland A.O., C.B.E., D.F.C., former Group Captain of 11 Catalina Squadron, Rathmines stated recently on the Catalina crews he had commanded,

"None of them in their last moments would have ever classed themselves to be what they were, heroes in a most uneven contest, against the might of the Japanese forces. We have seen and read about many deeds of valour, in war and in peace, but few will surpass those of the Catalina crews.

Their work was done quietly without spectacle. Theirs was a long, lonely and exhausting task, with the slow, painfully slow, straight and level runs over the heavily defended targets, in bombing, mine laying tasks in aircraft which were designed for gentler activities.

We have the memory, sacrifice, courage and the enthusiasm for the life of the 322 members of squadrons and air-sea rescues, who gave their lives in the defence of freedom, often while saving the lives of others. We remember the loyalty, mateship, skill and humour which held us together under pressure and danger."

Hardships on Cats

*We fight the war from Hide's Hotel,
Then take off for the jaws of hell,
*Hardships you bastards, you don't know what hardships are.
We fly for 20 hours or more,
Our beards grow long and our bums get sore,*

*Hardships you bastards, you don't know what hardships are.

The rotten bloody river is as narrow as a road,

The wind is always 'cross it and the tide is always low,

We turn the Cat Boat 'cross the wind,

And hope to hell you haven't sinned,

*Hardships you bastards, you don't know what hardships are.

She sticks her nose up in the air,

And cracks her wingtip on a flare, *Hardships...

The flare goes up the bloody nark,

So you bore it up her in the dark, *Hardships...

You get the bugger on the step and try to hold her straight,

The bloody second dickie shoves the throttles through the gate,

The engineer forgets the floats,

and we swerve like hell to miss the boats, *Hardships...

Now we're on a raid across the foam,

Our only thoughts are to get back home. *Hardships...

The clouds come up, great towering Cu,

And all we can do is bust right through. *Hardships...

The target looms up through the night, we make our bloody run,

The buggers let us have it with a six inch ack-ack gun.

The game is hard, it sure does stink,

When all our bombs drop in the drink *Hardships...

We turn her round and head for home,

While overhead the Zeros roam. *Hardships...

Now that we are in the clear,

We think of home and pots of beer. *Hardships...

We're almost home, we 've only got a hundred miles to go,

The engineer calls up and says the petrols getting low,

We throttle back and start to pray,

Then Cairns looms up across the way. *Hardships...

At last we get her down alright,

*After flying all the night. *Hardships...
We muck around and moor her up,
Then go ashore in a Chapman Pup. *Hardships...
We go to the I. O. 's room and spin a bloody tale,
Then off to Hide's Hotel to sink a flaming pint of ale.
Our ears are sore, our eyes are red'
Completely ruined we go to bed. *Hardships...*

Bowen in North Queensland was a flying boat repair depot which all crews spent some time while aircraft were being repaired or engine changes. The RAAF had taken over several houses for us to live in and on one night on my way home from the Officers Mess I had to pass the local hall and there had been a dance on that night. Outside the hall a policeman had one of our crew, an air gunner and was marching him off to the Police Station. I politely told the policeman I would take charge of the airman and he said he was unable to do that but invited me to accompany him to the Police Station to see the Sergeant. I accepted the invitation and went along to speak with the Sergeant. Apparently I was a bit vocal in suggesting that I take the lad back to his quarters because the Sergeant said "I've had enough of your intervention in our affairs and you are arrested for hindering us in the line of duty." The Sergeant looked at me and said "Don't worry, you will be treated with respect as an officer and you can have a cell all to yourself." After about two hours sitting on a hard bed, unable to sleep, the Sergeant came to visit me, he said, "Your young crewman seems to have sobered up and you have cooled down, I'm going to let you both go with a warning not to do this again."

He gave us back our personal belongings including trousers and belt and then used the police car and drove us back to our separate quarters and we arrived back at the same time as the rest of our crew were getting out of bed for a dawn take off back to Cairns to get ready to do a bombing raid over Rabaul that night. The Sergeant wished us luck, shook hands and said to me, "If you ever come into our police station again don't make demands, ask politely and you may get what you ask for." I have always

remembered that instance as a good lesson in life. The afforce never knew that one of their officers and a Sergeant had spent a few hours as a guest of His Majesty.