

WWII veteran recalls: While most ships sailed - this big one we flew!

by Robert "Bob" Buchin

Eugene W. (Pete) Benoit of Churchville recounts these impressions as a flight engineer aboard a U.S. Navy PB2Y flying boat, the "Coronado," during the Pacific War. The surrender ceremony aboard the U.S.S. Battleship Missouri, Tokyo Bay: September 2, 1945, ended this war after Japan's acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration, August 14, 1945.

After some cajoling, Eugene Benoit shares this story with others, agreeing to a question and answer format, to document some of the events of his military life. "I'm not much of a hero," he says. "I think the real heroes never came back."

•What was a "flying boat?"

A big airplane with a boat-hulled bottom: center keel, bulkheads, and water-tight compartments, just like a ship. Carrying big loads great distances, they couldn't be just a seaplane with floats.

Through the war and much after, they were the biggest aircraft, with crews more like seamen. Always bigger than land planes with the same engines, but lacking their speed; nations built flying boats to traverse oceans and reach areas not prepared for normal planes.

•Consolidated PB2Y "Coronado" - What did this one do better than the others in the U.S. Navy?

Greatest range and load carrying capacity. This fact spared us from much sub-hunting and rescue missions tasked to others. Just as ships once sailed great oceans alone, so did we, by mastering unusual teamwork and husbandry of resources. For instance: to pioneer Pacific routes to China, Pan Am Airways made fuel management, itself, a new science. Here's where I came in.

•Who made up the crew? What did you do?

Two pilots, navigator, two flight engineers, radioman, orderly/cook, finally the skipper - who tied us all together. As flight engineer, I oversaw the entire ship's mechanical condition, all sub-systems, especially takeoff readiness. Then to get there: I established the right distribution of cargoes to ensure the right center-of-gravity. I tailored the right fuel/air mixtures and engine speeds to the pilots, as these must be refined throughout the flight.

•Where did you hail from?

Born December 1923, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, west of Boston: known by its paper mills and a steel mill mostly for saws. Later moved to Connecticut with my dad, a toolmaker. On the eve of Pearl Harbor: already in the machinist trade at



Eugene "Pete" Benoit sits in his study surrounded by memorabilia including a wedding picture of his wife, Peggy, who passed away two years ago, a model of the PB2Y Coronado, on which he served as a flight engineer during the war in the Pacific, and holding a framed picture of the wing insignia of the Naval Air Transport Service. Photograph by Walter Horylev.

Remington Arms; with evenings at Bridgeport Engineering school to become a full mechanical engineer.

•How did the moment find you at the Pearl Harbor news?

Doing homework as dad heard it on radio. Hours later, with my work gang in a bull-session as to what this war would do to us, as individuals. Still a teen, I was not yet in prime draft category.

•How did you enlist? How did you get on-board?

The draft got me by February 1943. Standing before all three services, spurning the Marine's wish for my munitions background, I announced my wish to 'fly Navy' and it worked. After a frigid boot camp at Sampson, Seneca Lake, I found myself at Memphis, Tennessee, learning aviation from the ground up. Graduating at the front of my mechanics class, I was invited into our Naval Air Transport Command. Adm. Nimitz wanted Pacific air service like the Army Air Force, but modeled

after Pan Am's infrastructure. My next schooling took me through Pan Am Airways at LaGuardia, NYC, impressing into me - more the 'airline' and less the Navy, mightily enough to supplant my fighter pilot dream.

•Where did missions take you?

Consolidated Corp. (San Diego) brought their planes to our 'home' in Alameda, California. From Alameda, first to Honolulu. Then from Hawaii, we followed the war's progress 'everywhere' westwards: towards Australia, the Central Pacific, Philippines, and beyond. Like the old Pony Express, we dropped-off our flying boats at places - to rest us! (the crew) - not our planes, quickly departing with fresh crews.

•What sort of cargoes?

You name it! Admirals, VIPs, passengers, love letters, bulldozers, spare engines for big bombers, and things that counted every day: your mail both ways, refrigerated blood to let your loved ones avoid that premature island grave to come home instead, and cash to pay everyone doing their job.

•What made handling a flying boat different from a land plane?

Taxi? You steer by the prop-wash on your rudders. And playing-off one engine against another. We used reverse-thrust to stop nose-first, anchor & dock. Takeoff? Without a tugboat, you turn sharply to face the sea. During the roll, you head for that best moment, to break from the right 'wave-swell' dropping-off behind you - leaving you airborne. Otherwise, if too choppy, you might loft-off a wave-swell prematurely, just to splash down again. But, if too smooth, there's not enough basic 'chop' to break you free of suction. Often, a crash boat preceded us to 'comb' the waters ahead to give us just the right amount of waterchop. Landing: To not skip as a stone, you must kill your lift just the instant before you splash down.

•What makes a mission hazardous or very difficult?

We flew alone, unarmed, much at night, sometimes approaching 16 hours. Once past Honolulu, no real maintenance facilities, scant or no radio aids. You had to 'know' your ship before departure, load and



The US Navy Long Range Transport Flying Boat - Consolidated Vultee (Convair) PB2Y Coronado

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balance her carefully, get the right crew, properly 'work the sails' once underway, or be lost.

•How did you eat and sleep as you could?

Once past Hawaii, we slept in quonset huts or tents. One sleepless windstorm, under coconut trees: ripened coconuts bounced incessantly off my hut with one consolation: loud 'bonks' were atop my 'roof', not my body. We ate in chow lines if still open. Sometime K-rations and odds 'n' ends from the store. We often 'snacked' aloft: our orderly used the range to pressure-cook meals using anything that came his way: powdered eggs, potatoes, milk, bouillon cubes, canned meat and bacon. He was indispensable. Aloft, we had bunks to rest, every four hours on and off.

•What sort of places seemed popular to the crews to hang-out?

West of California, Hawaii, where I enjoyed swimming, especially Kaneohe Bay, hiking that endless ocean of pineapples, to and fro. (You got the best fresh pineapples atop French vanilla ice cream.) Bob Hope and Betty Hutton visited frequently. Stateside, the San Francisco Bay area was unmistakably popular and crowded. Using a typical two to three day shore leave, you might start from nearby Treasure Island, or the Embarcadero, to the numerous bistros, dance halls, saloons. Reno was the 'Las Vegas' of our time. I once took an eastward train towards Chicago, recalling the uncanny Great Salt Lake. But never enough leave time to get home.

•What "stateside" media reached you? What was popular, other than mail of course?

The "Mid Pacifican" newspaper was popular. But past Honolulu, you got pretty isolated. Otherwise, you got summaries, off a mimeograph, called "Dirty Purples." We should have got more Armed Forces Radio, but the ground crews kept filching our earphones.

•How did you first hear of Japan's surrender and of any preceding atomic events?

Nobody I knew grasped the full import of 'atomic' until after the war, but 'false' surrenders started popping up. Then one day, two hours aloft from Saipan, we caught the news on a Shreveport, Louisiana station (our ad hoc direction-finder). Background cheers ... steady and unmistakable. Arriving into Honolulu, what a scene!

•What postwar fears and anticipations did the crew murmur about?

Back to the 'states' as soon as possible! Me? After so long in the Pacific, just to feel and smell honest-to-goodness New England terra-firma again. For now, more sensitive at who was getting home ahead of us, how long we had to hang out, we didn't talk serious futures yet.



Ray Villa, a friend of Benoit's, stands on the tail of the flying boat, giving a visual comparison of the size of the craft. "That's a whale of a tail," Benoit says.



Eugene Benoit, the newly-minted aircraft mechanic home from U.S. Navy aviation school in Millington, Tennessee. Benoit annotated the photo with the caption: "Why can't I just stay home?" At right, March 1945 - Peggy Benoit worked on military aircraft. Eugene Benoit refers to her as "Peggy the Riveter."



Gene Benoit holds a model of the PB2Y Coronado on which he flew as a flight engineer. He served on more than 30 of the planes in a three-year period and "probably flew around the world about four or five times." Photograph by Walter Horylev.

•Can you summarize the import of this "forgotten" ship?

At peak: our squadron (VR2) became 54 flying boats. Six daily flights sallied from Alameda, California. Flying 1,813,892 plane-miles/month, with 6,479,416 ton-miles/month, averaging 7,144 lbs./flight, roughly into an 8-room house. (Author's note: This transport could carry 16,000 lbs. - a cargo capacity not approached by other in-production flying boat, Allied or Axis.)

•Any remaining Consolidated PB2Y "Coronado's" left?

Just one at Pensacola Naval Air Station, Florida, maintained by the museum.

•Do you recall some picturesque incident only a flying boat crew could witness?

Splashing into coral reefs and lagoons: What unworldly hues of blues and greens! Sailing or flying over won't do. Some VIPs exploited us to get that vaunted three hour 'certification' into their resume, then maddened when we had to cut to just two hours or so, bespoiling their chance before having to leave. Sometimes, the Navy used our plane to dump the base's accumulation of beer bottles and cans way 'out there.' Coming down, en masse, emitting whistling sounds, like bombs!

•How did you finally get here - Churchville?

I flew through January 1946 before discharge. Already burned-out from so many Pacific hours away and aloft, I spurned Pan Am's offers. But, returning home, the handwriting-on-the-wall faced me attempting to wedge back into Remington Arms, now with surplus personnel, even with return privileges. Fortunately, dad was monitoring a much wider picture for both of us, using his connections to get me to Brockport with him, via expanding G.E. franchises in postwar consumer good. Here I met Peggy, but only much later did she disclose her wartime role: inspecting the engine-ignition wiring for Navy aircraft. Soon enough, the University of Pittsburgh was pioneering new housing construction in Churchville and we got this one. And still from here, my departed Peggy and I continue to well-wish our beloved Aline and Leo, our grandchildren, friends, neighbors and readers. God bless the United States. And peace.

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