

## Rescue of USS *Indianapolis* Survivors

3 AUG 45

From: CO VPB 23

Action: CNO (DCNO) AIR

Information: COMMARLANAS, CTG 94.11, COMAIRPAC,  
COMAIRPACSUBCOMFWD, COMFAW 2,  
COMWESCAROLINES

PBY-5A in bound trip 6472 landed at scene of *Indianapolis* sinking to take men aboard who might not have survived until ship arrived. Suffered damage on water during night due to heavy load of survivors and sea conditions. Unable to take off so abandoned and destroyed. Replacement required.

—Message sent by commanding officer, Patrol Bombing Squadron VPB-23, regarding the loss of a Catalina patrol bomber while rescuing survivors of the cruiser USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35), sunk on 30 July 1945 by the Japanese submarine *I-58*.<sup>1</sup>

On 2 August 1945, Patrol Bombing Squadron VPB-23's duty officer received a phone call in late morning from his counterpart at VPB-152, informing him that one of its planes had sighted survivors approximately 275 miles from Peleliu at position 11°30'N, 133°30'E. The report ended with, "PV will stay on station until Dumbo arrives."<sup>2</sup>

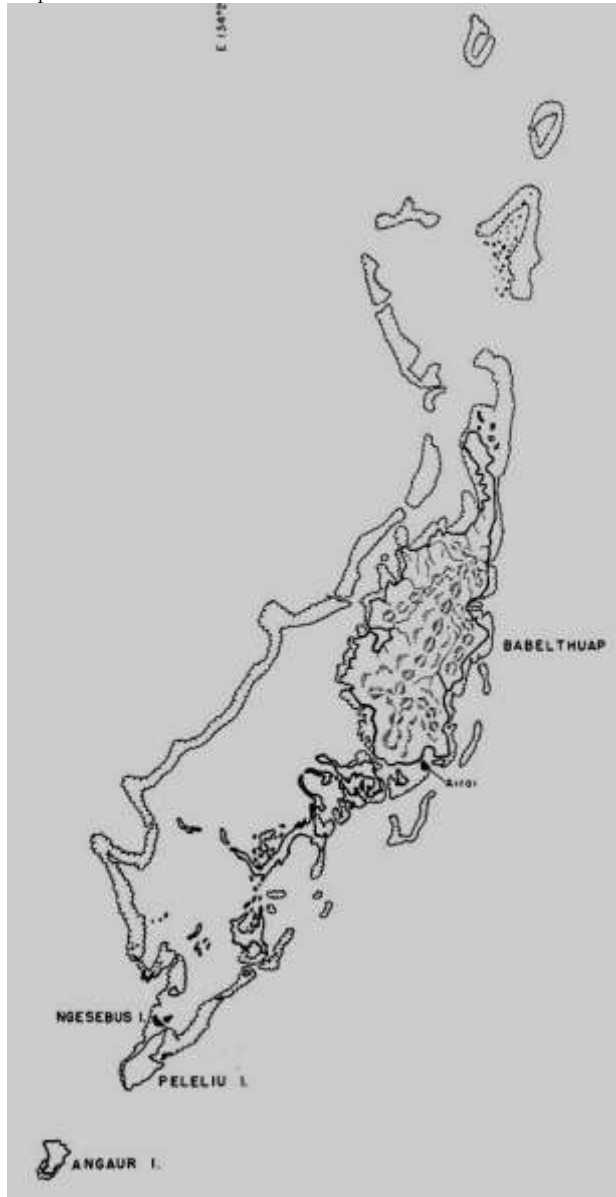
The planes of both squadrons were operating from the U.S. Marine Corps air base on Peleliu, in the Palau island group, to provide air-sea rescue in support of U.S. Army Air Corps B-29 strikes on the Japanese home islands. Air-sea rescue missions were also provided in support of USMC air strikes on Japanese positions on islands bypassed by American forces as they leapfrogged across the Central Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

The Palau Islands lay in the eastern approaches to the southern Philippines. The group was made up of a cluster of volcanic islands, fragmented coral atolls, and islands of limestone composition, surrounded by reefs. Until its capture by U.S. Marines in autumn 1944, Palau had been the site of a Japanese advance naval base and assembly point for fuel, ammunition, and supplies moving between Japan and the

2 Chapter 1

southwest Pacific. Peleliu and Angaur, at the southernmost tip of the group, were the only islands developed for use by U.S. forces.<sup>4</sup>

Map 1-1



Palau Islands in the Western Caroline Islands

Squadron VPB-152 operated twin-engine Lockheed Ventura PV-1 patrol bombers, while VPB-23 flew the PBV-5A Catalina—an amphibious aircraft capable of landing either on the water or, using retractable beaching gear, ashore.<sup>5</sup>

Photo 1-1



PV-1 Ventura patrol bombers en route to Brunei, Borneo, circa 1945.  
National Archives photograph #80-G-331264

Photo 1-2



A PBV-5A waits off Morotai (an island located 300 miles northwest of Sansapor, New Guinea) during amphibious landings by U.S. Army forces, 15 September 1944.  
National Archives photograph #80-G-257979

#### 4 Chapter 1

VPB-152 had been carrying out routine anti-shipping searches and patrols from Peleliu. On 12 July, the squadron's mission changed to special weather flights and rescue missions. For this new task they were assisted by three PV-1 Ventura aircraft from VPB-133. The patrol bombers could either carry 3,000 pounds of bombs, six depth charges, or one torpedo, and were also armed with machine guns for self-protection. They had a cruising speed of 170 mph, and range of 1,360 miles if carrying one torpedo, or 1,660 miles with six 325-lb depth charges.<sup>6</sup>

While the Venturas could drop life rafts or other gear, or direct other aircraft or ships to survivors found at sea, they could not land to provide direct assistance. Thus for the rescue operation being described, the guidance, "PV will stay on station until Dumbo arrives" (in the report on survivors sighted in the water, north-northwest of Peleliu), referred to the PV-1 Ventura overhead the men in the water, remaining on the scene, awaiting a PBV-5A Catalina to take over the air-sea rescue operation. "Dumbo patrols" or "Dumbo aircraft" denoted open ocean rescue missions.

### **PBY CATALINA AIR-SEA RESCUE OPERATIONS**

The venerable Catalina served in every theater of war, and carried out several types of missions. These included long-range reconnaissance, nighttime anti-shipping operations, and air-sea rescue. Later models of the PBY were equipped with radar and Magnetic Anomaly Detection equipment for use in the detection of enemy submarines.<sup>7</sup>

Organized "Dumbo" operations in the Pacific Theater was born during the Solomon Islands Campaign. Dumbo planes in the Solomons were seaplanes stripped of all non-essential heavy gear. Guns were loaded and manned, but no bombs were carried. The seaplanes rescued pilots whose planes were shot down, or failed for any reason. PBY-5s sometimes alone, or at other times escorted by fighters, were dispatched to pick up survivors. In many cases, the planes landed within easy range of enemy shore-based artillery in order to rescue downed pilots. In such circumstances, fighter aircraft employing diversionary tactics endeavored to keep the enemy as busy as possible away from the rescue operations.<sup>8</sup>

### **DISCOVERY OF SURVIVORS**

LTJG Wilbur G. Gwinn, piloting a Ventura at 3,000 feet on a regular sector search, had spotted the survivors by accident. Noticing a large oil slick on the sea below, he descended to 900 feet, and followed the slick (with a radius of about 30 miles) to its origin, hoping to find a

damaged Japanese submarine. At 1118, aircrewmembers sighted splashing swimmers in the water, and Gwinn immediately send a message that thirty survivors had been sighted about 280 miles north of Peleliu, and requested assistance. As a result, Navy ships were ordered to the scene, but the closest one would not arrive for some time. Meanwhile, LCDR George C. Atteberry (commanding officer, VPB-152) took off in another PV-1 and sped toward Gwinn's position, with LT Robert A. Marks (from VPB-23) following in a PBY-5A.<sup>9</sup>

Following discovery of the thirty survivors, Gwinn searched the entire area. After finding up to 150 personnel in the water, he dropping emergency rations and equipment to the men who seemed to be without rafts. When later asked about his impression upon finding the first survivors, Gwinn responded:

I don't know—it was a funny feeling. The oil slick was large, seeming to indicate a large vessel having been sunk, but I didn't know of any large craft being lost or going down, and didn't know just what kind of vessel it was.<sup>10</sup>

After dropping the rescue gear, Gwinn circled around until Atteberry arrived mid-afternoon, then left immediately. Marks reached the scene well after the other plane. He had launched a minute earlier than Atteberry but PBYs, with a cruising speed of 105-125 mph, were much slower than PVs.<sup>11</sup>

## **FINAL VOYAGE OF THE USS *INDIANAPOLIS***

Unbeknownst to the aircrews overhead, the men in the Philippine Sea below were all that remained of the USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35). The loss of the heavy cruiser to torpedoes fired by the Japanese submarine *I-58*, followed the completion of a secret Allied mission that directly contributed to the end of World War II.<sup>12</sup>

Following receipt of orders to make a top-secret delivery at high speed to Tinian, in the Mariana Islands, *Indianapolis* had left Mare Island, California, on the morning of 16 July. The heavy cruiser's commanding officer, CAPT Charles Butler McVay III, did not know the contents of a large wooden crate under guard in the ship's empty port hangar, nor that of a metal canister in the empty flag staff's quarters, only that every hour saved in transport would reportedly shorten the war by a corresponding amount.<sup>13</sup>

Averaging 28-29 knots, *Indianapolis* delivered her cargo to Tinian on 26 July, setting a speed record for the Pearl Harbor leg in the process. After the delivery of cargo and passengers, she made an overnight

## 6 Chapter 1

transit to Guam for routing instructions to her next assignment. *Indianapolis* was en route from Guam to Leyte on 30 July, when she was struck by two torpedoes from the *I-58* (Comdr. Mochitsura Hashimoto) and sent to the bottom of the Philippine Sea. This occurred in darkness in the first fifteen minutes of the new day.<sup>14</sup>

Photo 1-3



USS *Indianapolis* (CA-35) preparing to leave Tinian, after delivering atomic bomb components to the island in the Central Pacific, circa 26 July 1945.  
U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command photograph #NH 73655

No distress signal left the *Indianapolis*, and 200-300 sailors and Marines went down with the ship. Up to 800 of her remaining crew abandoned, most with either pneumatic life belts or kapok lifejackets. Few life rafts were deployed. The fortunate survivors in the rafts had canned meat, malted milk balls, and some water. Most of the crew was scattered, having left the moving ship in piecemeal fashion. Seven different groups of varying sizes became spread out over approximately twenty-five miles. It is thought around 100 men in the water died within the first few hours due to wounds sustained in the torpedo explosions. The others faced death from dehydration, overexposure, exhaustion, shark attack, or simply giving up and sinking down into the sea.<sup>15</sup>

### **HEROIC ACTIONS BY THE PBY CATALINA'S CREW**

As he drew nearer the scene, Marks began picking up signals from Atteberry's PV-1 at 1503, and made visual contact and established voice radio communications forty-seven minutes later. Atteberry advised

Marks that there was a large number of survivors scattered around, and asked him not to drop any equipment until he had observed the whole area. Otherwise, he might drop the whole lot to the first group, not realizing there were others in more desperate need. Marks later described his ensuing actions after VPB-152's commander led him on a 30-minute tour to look over the situation:

Scattered small groups were everywhere, without any help except life jackets, and I thought that they needed the assistance more than the ones on the rafts. I knew that no ship would be on the scene until midnight, so after looking the area over, at 16:05 I commenced dropping survival equipment with the end in view of getting assistance to the small groups who had nothing but life jackets.<sup>16</sup>

Marks dropped all carried survival equipment, as well as his plane's own equipment, except one life raft, necessary for emergency if his own crew had to ditch. At 1625, he sent a message to the base advising of the number of survivors, and asking for additional survival equipment. He then decided a landing would be necessary to gather in survivors, alone in the water. This decision was based on their numbers and the immediate threat posed by sharks, after he observed bodies being eaten by the fearsome predators.<sup>17</sup>

Marks notified Atteberry at 1630 that he was going to attempt an open sea landing, and made all preparations to do so. He chose an area that would facilitate maximizing picking up survivors, and asked Atteberry to fly above him to observe and direct in assistance with the operation. The conditions were extremely unfavorable, and damage to the aircraft resulted from the landing as Marks explained:

At 17:05 a power stall was made into the wind. The wind was due North, swells about 12 feet high. The plane landed in three bounces, the first bounce being about 15 feet high. Immediately after landing a survey of damage done to the plane exposed rivets pulled loose and some seams ripped open. My plane captain and navigator effected emergency repairs, plugging rivet holes with pencils and stuffing the seams with cotton. The radio compartment took on water slowly and would have to be bailed out during the night - 10 to 12 buckets of water per hour. The hull of the ship survived very well.<sup>18</sup>

## 8 Chapter 1

While the navigator was inspecting the damage, the co-pilot went aft to organize the rescue party. The PBY then proceeded to locate the single survivors, aided by Atteberry advising Marks via voice radio exactly where to go.

It was very difficult to see good because of the high swells and without a doubt we would have missed many if it hadn't of been for Commander Atteberry directing our actions. We tried to bring the survivors close to the port side and throw a life raft to them. Considerable difficulty was had because of the speed of the plane taxiing and the survivors were dragged through the water. We had to cut the plane's motors quite a few times and considerable time was lost in starting and stopping. We got better at picking the people up as time went by. We had the ladder out and I had a man on the ladder to grab any men who drifted by. The survivors could not help themselves very much, as most of them were weakened terribly and could not grab the ladder and climb up by themselves. Further difficulties were caused by the fact that the men were burned and every time we grabbed them it caused extreme pain.<sup>19</sup>

Some of those plucked from the sea had broken arms or legs, requiring extreme care in handling them. Between the PBY's landing and darkness, her crew picked up over thirty single survivors; most were in critical condition and would probably not have survived the night. Men brought aboard were given water and limited first aid treatment. Just before total darkness, Marks headed for a group of men on life rafts, which had been dropped to them. He later learned from the doctor of the *Indianapolis*, that they were the ones in the worst shape, and that he had put them on the rafts because of their serious condition.<sup>20</sup>

Marks brought the plane alongside of the rafts and aircrewmembers took the survivors aboard. About twenty-five men were placed on the wing, issued water, and covered by parachutes. During the process of bringing the wounded up on the wing, the fabric covering the trailing edge of its aluminum skin was broken in many places. Several shouts for help were heard nearby and the radioman and another crewman volunteered to go out in a rubber boat to try to find them in darkness. Before long they returned with two additional men. It had been difficult for them to relocate the plane, because the auxiliary unit had gone out and with it, aircraft lights. There were some carbide lights that provided some illumination.<sup>21</sup>



## DESTROYER ESCORT *CECIL J. DOYLE* ARRIVES

Photo 1-4



Undated wartime photograph of destroyer escort USS *Cecil J. Doyle* (DE-368).  
Courtesy of NavSource

Around 2315 that night, 2 August, the plane crew sighted the searchlight of the destroyer escort USS *Cecil J. Doyle* (DE-368). At the same time, an aircraft circled the PBY and dropped parachute flares nearby so that the *Doyle* could locate her. The carbide lights were thrown overboard to provide additional illumination. Upon arrival on the scene at about 0015, the destroyer escort dispatched a motor whaleboat with a doctor and first aid party and commenced transferring survivors. Due to heavy swells, the process was difficult and lengthy, lasting from 0045 to 0330. There were a number of stretcher cases and most of the survivors were only able to stand with assistance.<sup>22</sup>

In order to execute the transfer of the fifty-six survivors, it was necessary for the *Doyle's* motor whaleboat to lay alongside the PBY, and as a result, the boat did considerable damage to the plane. After inspecting his aircraft, Marks decided that a take-off would be extremely hazardous and should not be attempted. Accordingly, he ordered that all salvageable gear be removed and the aircraft be destroyed. At 0600, Marks and his aircrew boarded the boat for transfer to the *Doyle*. At 0720, after taking aboard all survivors, crew, and salvageable gear, *Doyle's* 40mm guns sank the Catalina.<sup>23</sup>

The destroyer escort, commanded by LCDR Graham Claytor Jr. (a future Secretary of the Navy), departed for Peleliu midday with ninety-three survivors on board. Three additional ships had arrived in the early morning hours of 3 August. It was not until they and *Doyle* started bringing survivors aboard that they learned they were rescuing the crew of *Indianapolis*.<sup>24</sup>

## AFTERMATH

Of the 1,195 men who had been aboard the *Indianapolis*, 316 survived. The other 879 lives were lost. The A-Bomb, for which *Indianapolis* delivered components to Tinian, was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August as survivors convalesced in Naval Base Hospital No. 20 Peleliu and Fleet Hospital No. 114 Samar. Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945, bringing World War II to a close. Lieutenant Marks had the Air Medal pinned on him by ADM Chester W. Nimitz, the commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet. He died on 7 March 1998, in his hometown of Frankfort, Indianapolis, at the age eighty-one.<sup>25</sup>

Photo 1-5



Marks and his crew pose in front of a VPB-23 PBV. Front row, L-R: AMM3c Richard W. Bayer, ENS Morgan F. Hensley, ENS Irving D. Lefkowitz, LT Robert A. Marks, unidentified VPB-23 officer and (back row, left to right) AMM2c Donald M. Hall, ARM Robert G. France, S1c Warren A. Kirchoff, and AOM Earl Duxbury  
Courtesy of VPNAVY.com; source unknown