

Foreword

In his latest book, *Salvation from the Sky*, David Bruhn has again tackled a subject which has not received much attention from contemporary military historians. The details of the heroic rescues undertaken by these airmen have often been ignored by historians who tend to focus on offensive actions undertaken by forces the air-sea rescue units supported. David is to be commended for his description of the significant effort involved in rescuing survivors of Allied aircraft downed over water. The brave actions by the many aircrew involved in air-sea rescue during the final stages of the war against Japan in the Pacific, receive suitable recognition in *Salvation from the Sky*.

The Allied strategy for defeating Japan in the Pacific revolved around two loosely coordinated campaigns. The first was a thrust across the central Pacific by the US Navy under US Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet, Admiral Chester Nimitz. This began in 1942 and as well as the US victories in the Coral Sea and Midway, involved the invasion of the Solomon Islands and the progressive recapture of the occupied islands towards Japan. The second was an advance from Australia, through the island chain on the south west rim of the Pacific. This campaign started with a move by US and Australian forces under the Supreme Commander Allied Forces, Southwest Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur in south eastern New Guinea. The campaign continued along the north coast of New Guinea, then continued into the north-eastern islands of the Netherlands East Indies (NEI now Indonesia) and then to the Philippines which were reached in October 1944. The two campaigns coalesced at the Philippines with the US Third Fleet supporting MacArthur's forces.

As the Allied forces fought their way across the north coast of New Guinea, they were given air support by the USAAF Fifth Air Force, which included No. 9 RAAF Operational Group (No. 9 OG). By early 1944, Allied offensive operations in the South West Pacific Area swung to the north-west, by-passing the large base the Japanese had established at Rabaul. In order to ensure that the Japanese forces in Rabaul were contained, No. 9 OG remained in Papua, establishing a new headquarters at Milne Bay, effectively becoming the RAAF area command for Papua and south-eastern New Guinea. It was renamed Northern Command in April 1944 to better reflect its function.

The RAAF's mobile air operations were assumed by the No. 10 Operational Group (No. 10 OG). Formed in September 1943, No. 10 OG began combat operations in north-western New Guinea and the Allied campaign in Western (Dutch) New Guinea. By September 1944, during the Battle of Morotai, No. 10 OG had grown to encompass 12 flying squadrons and two airfield construction wings, as well as the requisite support units. As a result of this expansion in size, No. 10 OG was renamed the First Tactical Air Force in October 1944.

The RAAF started to develop its air-sea rescue capability by forming No. 1 Rescue and Communications Squadron in Port Moresby in October 1942. In the search and rescue role, the Squadron used Walrus, Dornier Do-24 and Catalina flying boats. Operating at low level, they proved versatile and quite effective in evading Japanese aircraft. Taking advantage of the low take-off and landing speeds, they were able to land in small clearings that other aircraft could not have utilised. The squadron's Walrus aircraft were also able to put down on narrow rivers where the larger Catalinas were unable to land. It was reformed as No. 8 Communications Unit in November 1943 at the major Allied base at Goodenough Island near Milne Bay off the eastern tip of Papua. In addition to communications duties, it provided rescue services north to New Britain. The Unit moved to Madang in November 1944.

From December 1944, a number of Air-Sea Rescue Flights (ASRF) were formed: 111 at Madang, 112 at Darwin, 113 initially at Morotai and then at Labuan. Some of these units were also equipped with motor launches that could be used to recover personnel when alighting on the water was not possible. In July 1945 two more Flights were formed: 114 at Cairns and 115 at Morotai (using four of 113's aircraft when they moved to Labuan).

ASRF carried a crew of seven, as opposed to nine for mining missions. In addition to rescues, ASRF aircraft flew SAR (Search and Rescue) patrols to cover strikes or transiting aircraft, support operations for amphibious landings, evacuation of wounded, transport of prisoners, insertion of commandos and extraction of escapees. In this last role ASRFs (mainly No. 113 Flight) cooperated with the Allied Intelligence Bureau.

By April 1945, Air-Sea Rescue had evolved to the point where it was part of the planning of an air operation. Air-Sea Rescue Catalinas provided cover for many of the Allied bombing missions flown in the region. In these operations, the Catalina held in a safe area within visual range of the target, observed the attack and provided assistance to any of the attacking aircraft in distress.

The Catalina flying boat, designated PBV by the US, was the primary aircraft used by the RAAF Air-Sea Rescue Flights. The RAAF made an early decision to buy the Catalina. The first batch was ordered in August 1940 and delivered between February and October 1941. The RAAF eventually acquired 168 Catalinas and formed four Squadrons, five Air-Sea Rescue Flights and some ancillary units. The Squadrons conducted a wide ranging and significant aerial mining campaign against the Japanese. The aircraft were retired soon after the end of the War and most were disposed into civilian service.

The Catalina flying boat was one of the durable and effective aircraft of the second World War, with the significant operational feature being its extreme range, with endurance of up to 31 hours flying time depending on the load carried. Although slow and ungainly, Catalinas distinguished themselves in World War II. They were used successfully in a wide variety of roles for which the aircraft was never intended. PBVs are remembered for their rescue role, in which they saved the lives of thousands of aircrew downed over water. Flying boats such as the Catalina placed a special demand on training air crews who not only learnt to fly the aircraft, but needed to learn manoeuvres in sea conditions which were usually associated with naval operations.

The Rathmines RAAF seaplane base at Lake Macquarie on the NSW central coast was a significant facility. It was a centre for training, housing the Operational Training Unit for Catalina crew, providing training to over 200 Catalina crews during the war. The Base was also important as a repair centre for the flying boats and was the location of a Flying Boat Repair Depot. New flying boats manufactured in the US were converted at Rathmines for RAAF operational duties.

The RAAF had made a significant contribution to the war in the Pacific. In August 1945 when the war against Japan ended, the RAAF had some 175,000 personnel operating 6,000 aircraft. A majority, almost 132,000, were serving in the Pacific. That theatre was also the focus for all but 20 of the RAAF's 75 flying squadrons. At this point the RAAF had evolved into the fourth largest air force by size behind the USA, USSR and UK.

However with the war over, Australia accelerated its demobilisation plans for the armed services, so that by the end of October 1946 the RAAF had dropped to 13,000 members. This process still had some way to go, with the post-war low for the RAAF reducing to a strength of just 8,000 at the end of 1948.

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Salvation from the Sky covers the air-sea rescue activities from the time the Allied offensive against the Japanese began with the invasion of the Solomon Islands and the campaigns farther west in New Guinea and the Netherlands East Indies. It is not only a comprehensive treatment of the significant impact the small number of air-sea rescue aircrew made on saving lives during the final stages of the War in the Pacific, but is a very enjoyable read giving many examples of the acts of courage and sacrifice involved in the rescue and recovery of downed aircrew.

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