

Battle of the Atlantic

Naval Patrol Operations off the Coast of Brazil

As part of our Naval Aviation historical series, this article addresses Naval Patrol operations off the coast of Brazil during WWII and is contributed by author John W. Coe, whose latest book, "Crommelin, the Decline and Fall of 'Bomb-Run' John" is set for release by the Naval Institute Press in June.

by John W. Coe, photos courtesy the National Museum of Naval Aviation

At the start of World War II, even before the time the United States was officially a combatant, shipments of vital war supplies were being transported across the Atlantic by American and Canadian merchant vessels. This effort was initially designed to bring necessary material to Great Britain, and later to support the Soviet Union once they were no longer allied with Germany.

In the beginning of these operations, losses to Allied shipping were nothing short of catastrophic. German U-boats, under the command of Gross Admiral Karl Doenitz, sank unarmed and largely unprotected Allied merchant vessels, especially in a gap south of Iceland, where land-based aircraft assets vital to anti-submarine warfare lacked the range to reach and protect these ships from submarine attacks.

In response, the Allies gradually developed several anti-submarine technologies to successfully combat the German U-boats. Among these were the development of RADAR search capabilities, the development of acoustic technologies (initially called ASDIC and later referred to as SONAR), the breaking of the German codes by codebreakers at Bletchley Park in England, and the use of convoys instead of single ships - a tactic that had been used successfully during World War I. The final innovation was to bring aircraft to the effort, which led to the development of American escort carriers equipped with Grumman F4F Wildcats and Grumman TBF Avengers. These planes allowed American Naval Aviators, in conjunction with surface naval vessels, to protect Allied convoys by finding and sinking German U-boats. Gradually, U-boat losses began to cripple the German U-boat fleets, and what once was a formidable German war asset now turned into large metal coffins. The tide had changed in the North Atlantic.

German Admiral Doenitz's reaction to these new circumstances was to move his U-boats first into the Central Atlantic, and finally into the South Atlantic, where they would attack convoys carrying vital war supplies north to ports in the United States. Admiral Ernest J. King had already anticipated this move. In a secret memorandum dated July 30, 1941, Admiral King outlined his "Priorities for a Two-Ocean Navy Building Program."

In this memorandum, Admiral King developed a number of concerns based on what he termed "qualitative rather than quantitative assumptions." He noted, "The determining theater of operations in opposition to that of the German-Italian-French Navies in the Atlantic Area is the Natal area off

Brazil." He based this assumption on the view that "the U.S. Lines of communication (in the Atlantic) are some 2,200 miles long and are readily flanked along the eastern portion of the North Coast of Brazil."

Admiral King also noted that there would be two areas of "maximum opposition - the Pacific-Asiatic areas against the Japanese Navy

and, German-Italian-French (Vichy) navies in the Atlantic." He further stated that, in the Atlantic area, "the determining theater of operations is the Natal area off Brazil."

To this end, Admiral King saw the necessity of establishing an Allied naval presence along the coast of Brazil. Diplomatic negotiations began with Brazil to allow the United States to establish naval bases in the region. Admiral King also felt that San Juan, Puerto Rico and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba would be inadequate bases from which to counter major axis submarine activity in the South Atlantic. Rear Admiral Jonas H. Ingram, Commander of the Cruiser Patrol Division in the Caribbean and South Atlantic,



Martin PBM-3 Mariner operating from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (U.S. Navy photo)



Consolidated PBY Catalina in flight (U.S. Navy photo)

concluded. Accordingly, the United States initiated discussions with the Brazilian government, which led to the establishment of a number of American Naval bases in Brazil. These discussions and subsequent agreements became known as the Washington Accords. These accords, formally referred to as the Brazil-United States Political Military Agreement, went into effect on 23 May 1942. The implementation of these accords was carried out by the Joint Brazil-United States Military Commission (JBUSMC) and served as a prelude for Brazil entering WWII alongside the Allies.

Previous positive diplomatic and military relations with Brazil guaranteed the success of the Washington Accords; notably, the recognition by the United States of Brazilian independence from Portugal in 1824. Later, in 1890, the first Pan-American Conference of American States was held where a number of issues were discussed, ranging from military to economic integration. Further, in 1914, a United States Naval Mission arrived in Rio de Janeiro with a fleet of warships. These actions set the stage for the establishment of several United States Naval patrol bases along the coast of Brazil during World War II.

These new bases were located at Natal, Recife, Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and Fortaleza. Each of these bases were assigned a particular type of Naval Patrol aircraft, including PBM-3 Mariners at Rio de Janeiro and Bahia, PV-1 Venturas at Natal and Recife, and PBY Catalinas at Natal. Each aircraft had decidedly different flying characteristics. The PBM-3 Mariner had the greatest range and endurance, while the PV-1 Ventura had the greatest speed, and the PBY Catalina was a proven and capable platform that ultimately became the most popular patrol aircraft in the Navy Patrol inventory.

In addition to the aforementioned American Naval Bases, the British Royal Air Force established similar patrol bases along the west coast of Africa, as American Patrol aircraft flying out of Brazilian bases could not patrol the entire gap between Brazil and West Africa. British assets were used to fill the gap from bases located at Port Etienne, Dakar, Bathurst, Freetown, Harper, Lagos and other locations along the west coast of Africa. Through this combined Allied effort, the slot between Africa and the east coast of Brazil could be adequately covered and patrolled.

This combined Allied operation proved to be successful. In 1943-1944, the Germans lost 14 U-boats in the slot between West Africa and the east coast of Brazil, with most of these losses due to U.S. Navy patrol operations and RAF land-based aircraft in West Africa. The combination of aircraft with surface assets provided the powerful offensive punch that turned the tide of battle in favor of the Allies in the South Atlantic.

Samuel Eliot Morison in his monumental *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* said it best: "Once more, control of the air enhanced control of the sea."



Lockheed PV-1 Ventura (U.S. Navy photo)

About the author: John W. Coe has spent most his working career in education and education-related activities, including as a public school teacher, a professor at three universities, a higher education consultant and legislative consultant for the Wisconsin Education Association, and as a legislative liaison for Wisconsin Public Television and for the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board in Madison, Wisconsin.