

They Stood the Watch...
The Story of Patrol Squadron Eleven at NAS Kaneohe Bay

By Dave Trojan, Hawaii Aviation Preservation Society Member



A VP-11 crewman keeping watch in a PBY blimp during a lengthy patrol
(Photo courtesy of Robert O'Conner Collection)

This is the story of Patrol Squadron Eleven (VP-11), a Navy PBY Catalina Patrol Squadron of WWII stationed at Naval Air Station Kaneohe Bay Hawaii. The purpose of this account is to tell the details of the mostly-untold description of this PBY Catalina squadron just prior to and at the beginning of WWII along with the horror and panic that greeted Patrol Squadron Eleven on that sleepy Sunday in December 1941. This chronicle also tries to capture the courage and self-sacrifice of those who kept the faith when hope was lost and their will to turn tragedy into triumph and defeat into victory. This story is pieced together from a variety of sources including war diaries, action reports, message traffic, official and personal correspondence, and other documents. This narrative is dedicated to the memory of those who gave their lives for their country, while serving in VP-11 during World War II.



PBY Catalina's fly over NAS Kaneohe Bay during base commissioning ceremony (Photo courtesy of Cliff Dohrmann Collection)

NAS Kaneohe Bay was formally established on 15 February 1941 as a seaplane base for Navy patrol squadrons. In July 1941, Naval Air Station Kaneohe Bay became the headquarters of Patrol Wing One and VP-23 was the first to transfer to this newly commissioned Naval Air Station. Accordingly, it was renumbered as VP-11, the identity it carried and made famous during WW-II. At that time the first digit of the Patrol Squadron matched its parent Patrol Wing's number and the last digit indicated the squadron's sequence within the wing. NAS Kaneohe Bay was the home of three squadrons VP-11, VP-12, and VP-14. Each of the three squadrons operated 12 Consolidated PBY Catalina seaplanes. The Patrol Squadrons began flying search and reconnaissance missions in the Central Pacific and from tender supported locations near Johnson Island.



Kaneohe Bay on 1 October 1941, note the PBY aircraft on the ramp. (Photo from National Archives)



PBY Catalina on the ramp at NAS Kaneohe Bay (Photo courtesy of Cliff Dohrmann Collection)

In early October 1941, VP-11 mass-flew 13 PBY-1s back to North Island California, then to Corpus Christi, Texas and onto Jacksonville Florida. The squadron received twelve new PBY-5s in late October 1941. They then flew the planes back to NAS Kaneohe Bay and arrived on 28 October 1941, thus becoming the first squadron to formation fly its entire fleet both ways across the Pacific. There were a total of 81 PBY Catalina's available in Hawaii in early

December 1941. Fifty-four were new type PBY-5's recently ferried to Hawaii and 27 were PBY-3's having over three years service and worn from hard training use.



PBY Catalina's in formation flight (Photo courtesy of PBY.COM)

Upon receiving their new aircraft, the PBY-5 airplanes were experiencing shakedown difficulties and were hampered in maintenance by an almost complete absence of spare parts. Furthermore, an aircraft modification program for installation of leak proof fuel tanks, armor, and modified nose sections was in progress. The aircraft were not fully ready for war until these installations were completed. As the year progressed the squadron was put on an expanded work schedule and by the fall, all of the aircraft were fully armed with machine guns on all flights.



PBY-5 Catalina undergoes engine change at NAS Kaneohe Bay (Photo courtesy Cliff Dohrmann Collection)

Maintenance crews struggled to maintain aircraft with no spare parts and insufficient manpower. The squadron was stretched thin and operating on a shoestring. Although their operating allowance was 301 sailors, VP-11 was manned with about 190 enlisted sailors. The material situation of the patrol squadrons in early December 1941 made the upholding of continuous extensive daily searches impracticable. The squadrons maintained intensive training operations on the new aircraft while preserving the maximum practicable availability of aircraft for an emergency. Continuous and extensive patrol plane operations, by the PBY-5's, were unworkable because every time the planes flew they used up vital spare parts for which there were no replacements. The main effort was expansion training, expansion meaning the qualifying of personnel to form additional patrol plane crews, and to qualify the aircrews in their main jobs. To complicate matters even more, shortly before December 1941, a number of patrol planes were assigned for operational control to various task forces of the Pacific Fleet for training operations. Insufficient parts and the lack of essential equipment along with the squadron's training schedule and accompanying maintenance load continued to preclude regular and sustained long-distance patrols needed to provide adequate warning of an imminent attack. There was a general perception of safety and security in the Hawaii and it was believed that if war were to come, it would not start here.



VP-11, PBY-5 aircraft 11-P-4 during maintenance at NAS Kaneohe Bay (Photo courtesy of Cliff Dohrmann Collection)

There were insufficient patrol planes and crews in the Hawaiian Area to effectively do the job required. A flight crew routinely conducted one patrol every third day. A flight crew could do more than that for short periods but physical fatigue became a problem when conducting continuous search operations. For the Commander of a search group to be able to state with some assurance that no hostile aircraft carrier could reach a spot 250 miles away and launch an attack without prior detection would require an effective daily search. It was estimated that to conduct a search through 360 degrees, to a distance of at least 800 miles, assuming a 15-mile radius of visibility, would require a daily 16-hour flight of 84 planes. Therefore, to conduct a continuous search of this type would require an overall force of approximately 200 aircraft, 252 aircrews to allow for crew rest, adequate spare parts and ample well-trained maintenance personnel for such operations. Furthermore, each of the big Pratt & Whitney R-1830 radial engines required about 42 gallons of gasoline per hour. It was estimated that an average of more than 82 engine changes and a fuel consumption of over 1,980,000 gallons of gasoline would be required per month to carry out such an operation.

The PBV Catalina aircraft was the only type of plane the Navy had to conduct this type of search. The maximum distance a PBV aircraft could fly out to and return was considered about 800 miles. Even with such an effort, the search effectiveness was estimated to be only fifty percent. The fifty percent effectiveness was based on twenty-five mile visibility and the

various weather conditions of visibility in the Pacific. No PBY aircraft in the Pacific was equipped with radar at that time. If radar had been available at that time it would have increased the effectiveness of the patrols. Facilities were gradually being built up and obsolete planes were being replaced however, the Atlantic Fleet was receiving the priorities. Only 81 patrol planes were available to do a job that required more than twice as many and personnel were just learning the new aircraft equipment.

On the morning of 7 December 1941, there were 36 patrol planes at Kaneohe Air Station, 33 patrol planes at Pearl Harbor, and 12 patrol planes at Midway. Twelve of the planes at Pearl Harbor had just returned on 5 December after completing an extensive tour of duty at Midway and Wake Islands and required much needed maintenance. Patrol Squadron Eleven had a total of twelve aircraft assigned to them; all their aircraft were parked at NAS Kaneohe Bay on the morning of December 7, 1941. Despite the maintenance problems, all twelve PBY's were on standby so they could be made ready for operations within four hours notice. The disposition of planes before the attack included: two planes in the hangar, four planes at the south end of Hangar One, and six planes on the ramp. Only the duty section for the day and some personnel who had arrived early to take over the ready duty were present at the start of the raid.

NAS Kaneohe Bay was the first military installation on the island of Oahu to be attacked by aircraft of the Japanese Imperial Fleet on the morning of 7 December 1941. At 7:52 am, the first wave of nine enemy fighters circled at low altitude over NAS Kaneohe Bay, took aim at the control tower and four sadly helpless PBYs moored in the bay and started their attack with machine guns. Then they circled and started another low-level strafing run concentrating their efforts on the aircraft on the parking apron. This attack lasted for some fifteen minutes. One of the very first targets was the Wing Commander's OS2U-1 Kingfisher on the flight line. At the time a chief petty officer was turning over the propeller by hand and it was apparently thought to be a fighter preparing to take off. The OS2U-1 Kingfisher was thoroughly riddled with bullet holes. Most of the attacks were directed at the planes on the ground and in the water but there were some strafing of cars and quarters in addition to the main attack.

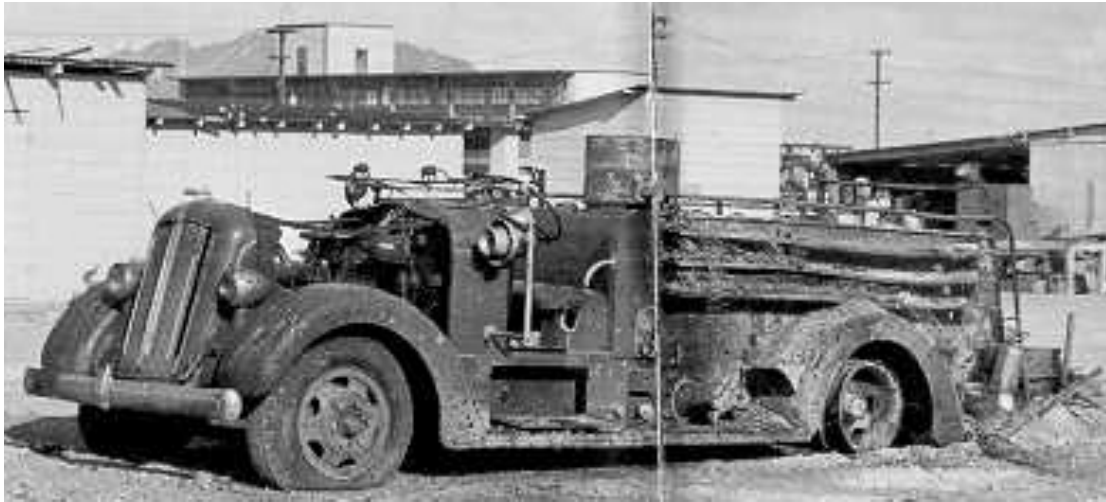


Wrecked autos and hangar at NAS Kaneohe Bay (Official U.S. Navy Photograph, from the collections of the Naval Historical Center)



PBY-5 seaplanes burn out of control on the tarmac at Kaneohe Naval Air Station. (Photo courtesy of the National Park Service)

The Japanese had caught the Americans completely by surprise. The first attack set ablaze all the planes that were on the water and some of those on the ramp. The second attack hit additional planes, setting more aircraft on fire. Squadron personnel took immediate steps to get machine guns into action and to save the planes not yet on fire or those not too far-gone. During the chaos, squadron personnel were also severely strafed on the roads in automobiles attempting to get to the hangar area. After the first two strafing attacks, all efforts were directed at moving salvageable aircraft away from those that were engulfed in flame. The strafing Japanese fighters destroyed NAS Kaneohe Bay's only fire truck, which was badly needed.



Ruined NAS Kaneohe Bay fire truck. (Photo from National Archives)



Sailors moving a PB4Y near Hanger #1 NAS Kaneohe Bay (Photo from National Archives)



Attempting to save a burning PBY at Kaneohe Bay during the Japanese raid. (Official U.S. Navy Photograph, from the collections of the Naval Historical Center)



Japanese first wave strike photo of NAS Kaneohe. Note burning aircraft on flight line (Photo Courtesy of University of Hawaii)

After a brief lull in the attack, at about 9:30am a formation of nine, two seat bombers came in from over Kaneohe Bay after following the coastline from Kahuku Point, at an altitude of about 1000 feet and dropped bombs on the hangar occupied by Patrol Squadrons VP-11 and VP-12. This attack caused the greatest loss of life because a considerable number of men were in the hangar getting replenishment ammunition. Two bombs directly hit the hangar and two more close alongside. Immediately behind this wave of bombers were nine additional bombers that also dropped more bombs on the base. After the bombing attack there was a final strafing attack at about 10 o'clock.



Retrieving guns from a burning PBY (Photo courtesy home of heroes.com)

It didn't take long before squadron crewmen and ground personnel shook off their astonishment and managed to get machine guns into action against the enemy. Offensive actions taken by VP-11 squadron members included firing back from machine guns that were mounted in a plane being removed from the hangar shortly after the raid started. Due to the continuous attacks by the enemy, the machine gun positions in the plane were soon abandoned and hastily set up near the south end of the squadron hangar with as much ammunition as the men could carry. One machine gun nest eventually contained four machineguns, 1 Browning automatic rifle, and one Lewis Gun. The other machine gun nest contained two machine guns in a semi-protected spot. Harm inflicted upon the enemy by ground fire from the base included damage to between four to six planes that were seen to be either smoking or spraying gasoline. One enemy plane crashed into the base of Pu'u Hawai'i Loa, northwest of what is now known as "Kansas Tower" and two other Japanese aircraft crashed into Kailua Bay.



Sailors man machine guns in a bomb crater at NAS Kaneohe Bay
(Photo from National Archives)

The following is an account told by Dallas H. Jones, a VP-11 squadron member when the Japanese attacked Kaneohe Naval Air Station in Kaneohe, Hawaii on December 7, 1941. "I was asleep in the barracks when someone yelled the hanger was on fire! The Japanese fighters were strafing the hangers and barracks. I knew then that we were at war; I jumped up and ran down to the hanger, oblivious that 20mm and 7.7mm shells were striking the ground all around me. I jumped in one of the burning planes near the hanger and took one of the .50-caliber machine guns and a box of ammunition and handed it to another Ordnance man, Red Scarbrough; we carried it to the edge of the tarmac where a truck from Public Works was parked, loaded it on the truck, and went to the Public Works maintenance building. We obtained a 6-foot piece of pump pipe and a sledgehammer. We drove the pipe in the ground in an open area about 50 yards from the hanger, near the bombsight shop. We were in a position [where] we could see the Japanese bombers as they approached. We loaded the ammunition in the gun. I held the gun on the pump pipe while Red Scarbrough did the firing. The hot shells were hitting my neck as he fired. I could not move because I was holding the gun down. I saw the bombs fall from the Japanese bombers; I could see only a round ball, so I knew they were going to hit close by. When the bombs hit the hanger, it appeared to bulge out on all sides and then settled back. I saw a 1935 Ford go in the air as high as the hanger. I could hear ammunition in the planes exploding as the planes burned. We continued to fire until the Japanese bombers were out of sight."

An after action survey revealed that all planes actually at the base at the time of the attack were put out of commission (33 patrol planes, 1 OS2U-1 and a J2F-1 belonging to the Air Station). The only three patrol planes not destroyed were the ones on the dawn patrol. One of these was attacked by a number of enemy fighters in the air, receiving considerable bullet holes, but was not stopped and remained in service. The hangar occupied by squadrons VP-11 and VP-12 was completely destroyed. Casualties at NAS Kaneohe Bay totaled 19 dead and 69 wounded.



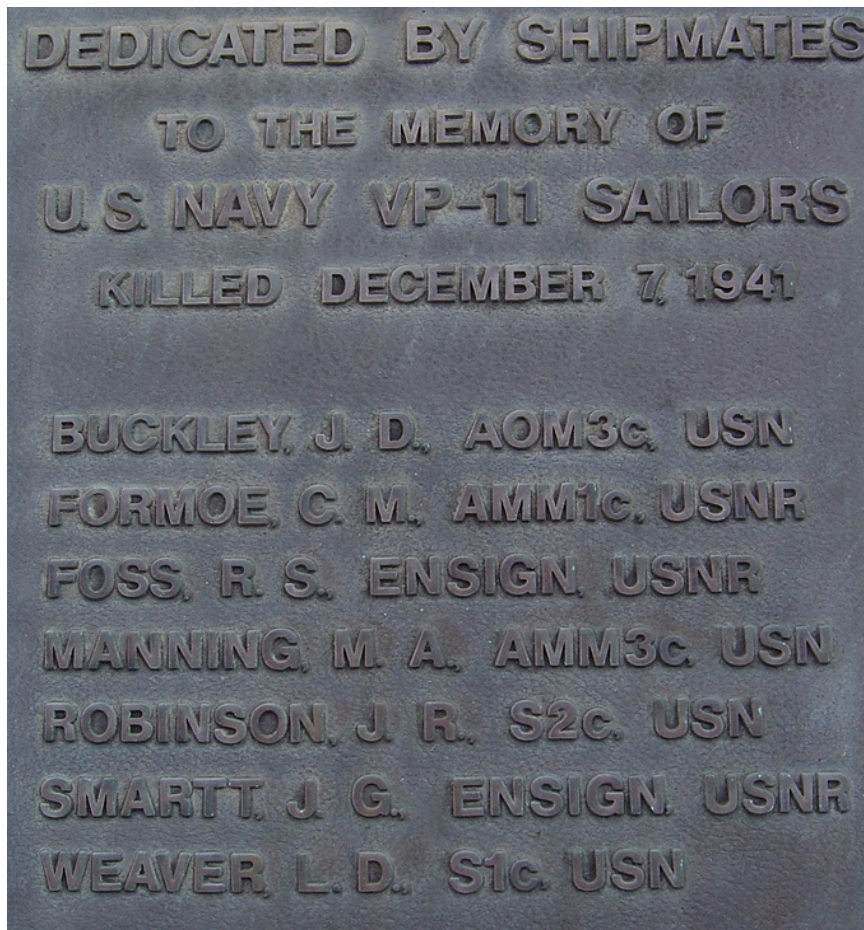
Hanger after the Japanese raid, 7 Dec 1941. (Official U.S. Navy Photograph, from the collections of the Naval Historical Center)



Aerial view of the hangar area, 9 December 1941, two days after the Japanese air attack destroyed nearly all of the station's patrol planes. Note wrecked hangar in center. (Official U.S. Navy Photograph, from the collections of the Naval Historical Center)

The squadron had received the first shots of WWII from the Japanese and may have suffered the first U.S. casualties of the Pacific theatre. Seven Sailors from the squadron were killed, twenty sailors were injured and three of those were seriously injured. The following personnel from VP-11 lost their lives or were severely wounded in courageous performance of duty on 7 December 1941.

FOSS, Rodney Shelton, D-V (G), USNR. Deceased
SMARTT, Joseph Gillespie, A-V(N), USNR. Deceased
FORMOE, Clarence Melvin, 414 20 46, AMM1c, USNR. Deceased
MANNING, Milburn Alexander, 337 12 54, AMM3c, USN. Deceased
WEAVER, Luther Dayton, 381 35 39, Sea1c, USN. Deceased
BUCKLEY, John Daniel, 201 81 68, AOM3c, USN. Deceased
ROBINSON, James Henry, 372 29 81, Sea2c, USN. Deceased
NASH, Kenton (none), 368 36 41, Y1c, USN. Seriously Injured
BYRON, Harry George, 114 95 60, ACMM(PA), USN. Seriously Injured
CROWNOVER, Joseph Talley, 268 25 28, RM1c, USN. Seriously Injured



Bronze plaque on the south end of the eastern exterior wall of Hangar 101 lists the seven VP-11 Sailors killed during the attacks. (Photo by Dave Trojan)



A PB4Y burns at NAS Kaneohe, 7 December 1941 (Photo from National Archives)

The squadron suffered greatly on 7 December 1941. Of the squadrons twelve aircraft, seven were completely burned, one plane was wrecked by guns and bombs beyond repair, and four planes were badly damaged but left in a repairable state. The Catalinas beyond repair were cannibalized for parts and relegated to the scrap heap. Practically all hangars, office equipment and provisions were destroyed. The Navy's patrol planes in Hawaii had been reduced from 81 to four flyable and a few repairable in just two hours. Items that were saved included: all squadron personnel service records except one, all personnel flight logs, propeller logs, engine logs, plane logs and the master flight logs; however, the aircraft logs were not much use without the aircraft they were assigned to.



Salvaging a PB4Y-1 on the ramp at NAS Kaneohe Bay, 8 December 1941, note wing fabric burned off, burned metal on the forward fuselage and detached pontoon. (Photo from National Archives)

Salvageable aircraft were painstakingly pieced together and put back into service. The best the squadron could do for the next few months was to repair the few remaining aircraft to be able to conduct patrol missions. The squadron was dealt a bad hand and they had no choice but to play with it. Everyone knew the game would be rough but no one foresaw the grim reality of what lay ahead. While awaiting replacement airplanes, personnel, and equipment, flight crews were assigned to fly as relief crews on airplanes from other squadrons. This was the dark days of World War II; the news reported only losses and retreats around the world for the allies. Making matters worst, the squadron lost two more aircraft to accidents within the next six weeks. On 16

December 1941 a VP-11 PBY crashed at sea near Pearl Harbor and on 12 January 1942 another squadron PBY aircraft crashed during a faulty night landing in Kaneohe Bay.

The aircraft losses were finally replaced on the first of April 1942. Patrol Squadron Eleven received new PBY-5A seaplanes from the U.S., equipped with airborne search radar (ASE) for spotting ships on the ocean surface. The Consolidated Catalina flying-boat patrol aircraft were the first type of U.S. aircraft to carry radar in operational service. Sector searches around Oahu were begun as soon as crews could be checked out on the new equipment. Between two and four planes took off daily between 6:00-7:30AM and did not return until 6:00-8:00 PM. Twelve to fourteen hour monotonous missions in the immense Pacific were typical. They would fly out to a distance of about 800 miles and return. There was little to do except monitor systems and stare at the repetitious seascape. At times their patrol altitude was at only 750 feet above sea level. Daily missions were flown in all types of weather conditions in search of the Japanese invasion fleet that never arrived.



PBY on patrol in bad weather (Photo courtesy of William A. Barker Collection)

On 5 April 1942 tragedy struck again! A VP-11 crew flying a PBY-5A Catalina, loaned from VP-91, serial number 2487, crashed on Oahu near Makapu'u Point while returning to base in zero-zero visibility, killing the entire crew. The weather was so bad that the gray clouds merged with the indefinite darkening horizon. Maneuvers with a horizon obscured by darkness were an invitation to disaster. The PBY-5A Catalina crew slammed into a hillside while attempting to determine their position. The pilot unwittingly descended into the darkness and shadow searching for home. Extremely bad weather, darkness and low visibility were major contributors to the accident. The crash completely demolished the plane and killed the entire crew instantaneously. It was believed that they might have mistaken Makapu'u Lighthouse for Barbers Point Lighthouse due to the bad night weather conditions. Pilot fatigue was also

undoubtedly a contributory cause of the crash. The Pilot and crew had been in the air a total of 12.3 hours at the time of the mishap.

The crewmembers were:

William H. Howe, Ensign, Patrol Plane Commander

George L. Doll, Ensign, First Pilot

Orren A. Roberts, AMM1c (NAP)

Joseph H. Hayman, AMM3c

Jack Parrish, ARM2c

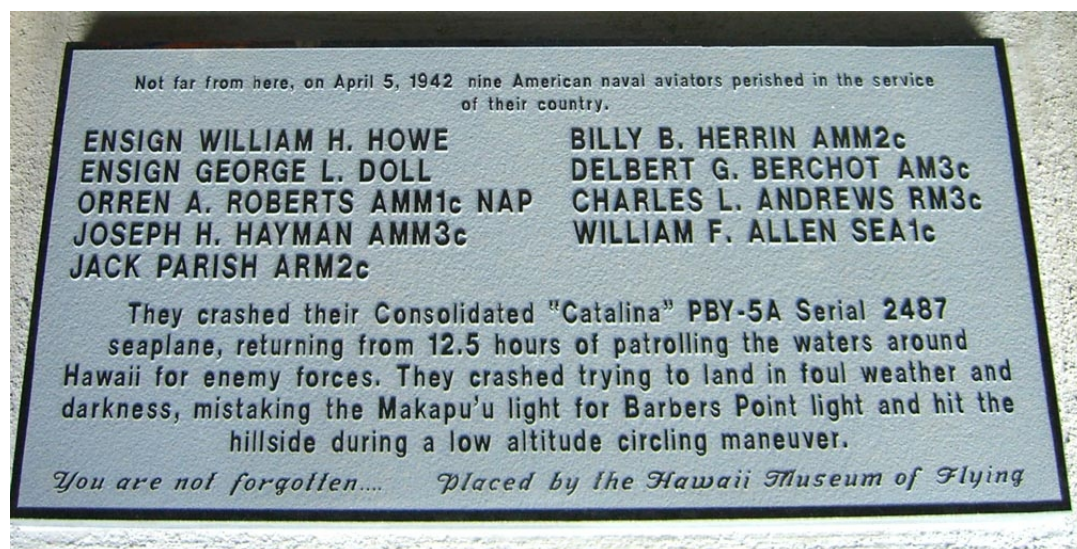
Billy B. Herrin, AMM2c

Delbert G. Berchot, AM3c

Charles L. Andrews, RM3c

William F. Allen, Sea1c

Debris from the PBY Catalina still lies above a lonely windswept cliff near Makapu'u Lighthouse. A few bits of twisted and corroded metal are all that remain. Most of the wreckage burned or was cleaned up long ago. Dirt, rocks and grass have slowly enveloped the rest. Bent and distorted parts testify to the force of the collision. The blue-grey paint color remains on a few parts. The largest piece of aircraft is the mangled aluminum and iron front landing gear mount. A glint of shine can still be seen on the mount. The wreckage is all that remains to bear witness to the brave crew. The Hawaii Aviation Preservation Society commissioned a granite memorial marker commemorating the crew's ultimate sacrifice. The marker was recently placed at the Makapu'u State Shore Side Park near the overlook at the summit and they plan on placing an additional plaque onboard MCBH Kaneohe.



Plaque dedicated to the crew. (Photo courtesy of the Hawaii Aviation Preservation Society)



PBY-5A serial number 2487 front landing gear wreckage (photo by Dave Trojan)

Beginning at the end of April thru June 1942 the squadron sent aircraft detachments to Johnston Island and Barking Sands, Kauai for sector searches. On 1 Jul 1942, VP-11 departed NAS Kaneohe when they deployed to Suva, Fiji Islands. Over the next several months the squadron would be moved from Suva to Noumea, New Caledonia, Tongatabu and Espiritu Santo to conduct search and reconnaissance missions in connection with the landings at Guadalcanal and other fleet operations in the South Pacific.

For six months after 7 December 1941, Japan encountered few impediments to its energetic offensives and drive across the Pacific. In May and June 1942, the carrier battles of the Coral Sea and Midway greatly diminished Japan's offensive power. At both battles, PBY Catalina's were the first aircraft to locate the enemy. Japan was soon on the receiving end of a relentless American drive west across the Pacific and north from Australia that brought vengeance for the attacks on 7 December 1941. VP-11 suffered other mishaps but went on to become a veteran of Naval campaigns from Kaneohe Bay to Leyte Gulf over a 35-month period. The squadron performed a variety of essential duties, including long-range scouting, antisubmarine patrols, convoy escorts, search and rescue and torpedo/bombing attack operations.

A summation of their accomplishments during World War II includes the following: Flew an estimated 48,000 hours in combat areas; Had 31 who lost their lives or were missing in action; Had 9 taken prisoner by the Japanese of which two died while in prison; First complete Patrol Squadron to be deployed to the South Pacific; First to arrive for second deployment; Fine-tuned the traditional U.S. Navy seaplane patrol mission; Introduced new innovations that led to the Black Cat night operations and fine-tuned the technique; Successfully performed the longest torpedo attack against the enemy in history (900 nautical miles); Spent the longest time, and

completed more missions (traditional patrol and Black Cat) than any other squadron; 21 (estimated) survivors rescued from the open sea; 17 (estimated) by landing in sheltered waters; 219 Australians evacuated from behind enemy lines with 17 river landings; Ranks among the top Patrol Squadrons in tonnage of enemy shipping destroyed or disabled.

This story can't illustrate the suffering felt by the loss of friends and colleagues and the shock and dread that seized the nation during the early period of World War II. Words only begin to tell the story of the tragic events of that time and the images of the events remain vivid memories in the minds of the survivors. As we reflect upon these tragic events more than six decades ago I hope you will remember those who were part of the events with an appreciation for their bravery. I hope to have recounted their courage and related how Patrol Squadron Eleven worked through a very difficult time and prevailed. In the words of the Kaneohe Klippers Monument, located in the MCBH Headquarters flagpole area, "They gave their today for our tomorrow". May we always remember the sacrifice made by those who have gone before us in the service of our great nation and may they never be forgotten.



VP-11 Gunner in blister (Photo courtesy of Cliff Dohrmann Collection)



PBY-5A (Photo courtesy of Mark Saldrich Collection)

Length: 19.47m / 63.88 ft.

Wingspan: 31.7m / 104 ft.

Crew: 8

Weight Empty: 9485kg / 20910 lbs.

Weight Loaded: 15420kg / 34000 lbs.

Weight Maximum: 16066 kg / 35419 lbs.

Armament: 1 x 12.7mm / .50-caliber machine-gun, 4 x 7.62mm / .30-caliber machine guns

Up to 1815 kilograms / 4000 lbs. bombs, torpedoes, depth charges

Top Speed: 288 km/h / 178 mph

Range: 4095 km / 2545 miles

Ceiling: 4800 meters / 15748 feet

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