AIR CLASSICS

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AIR CLASSICS

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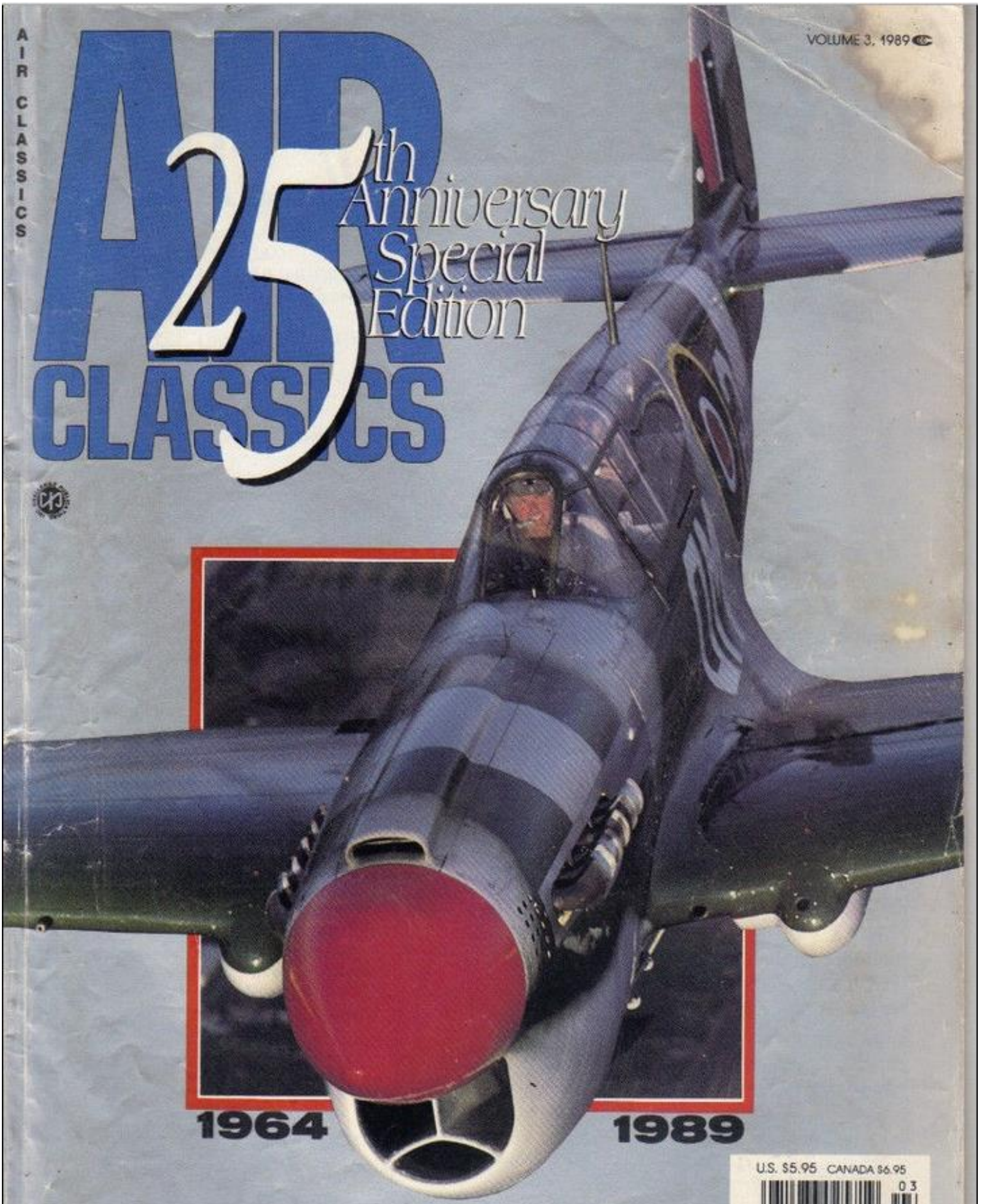

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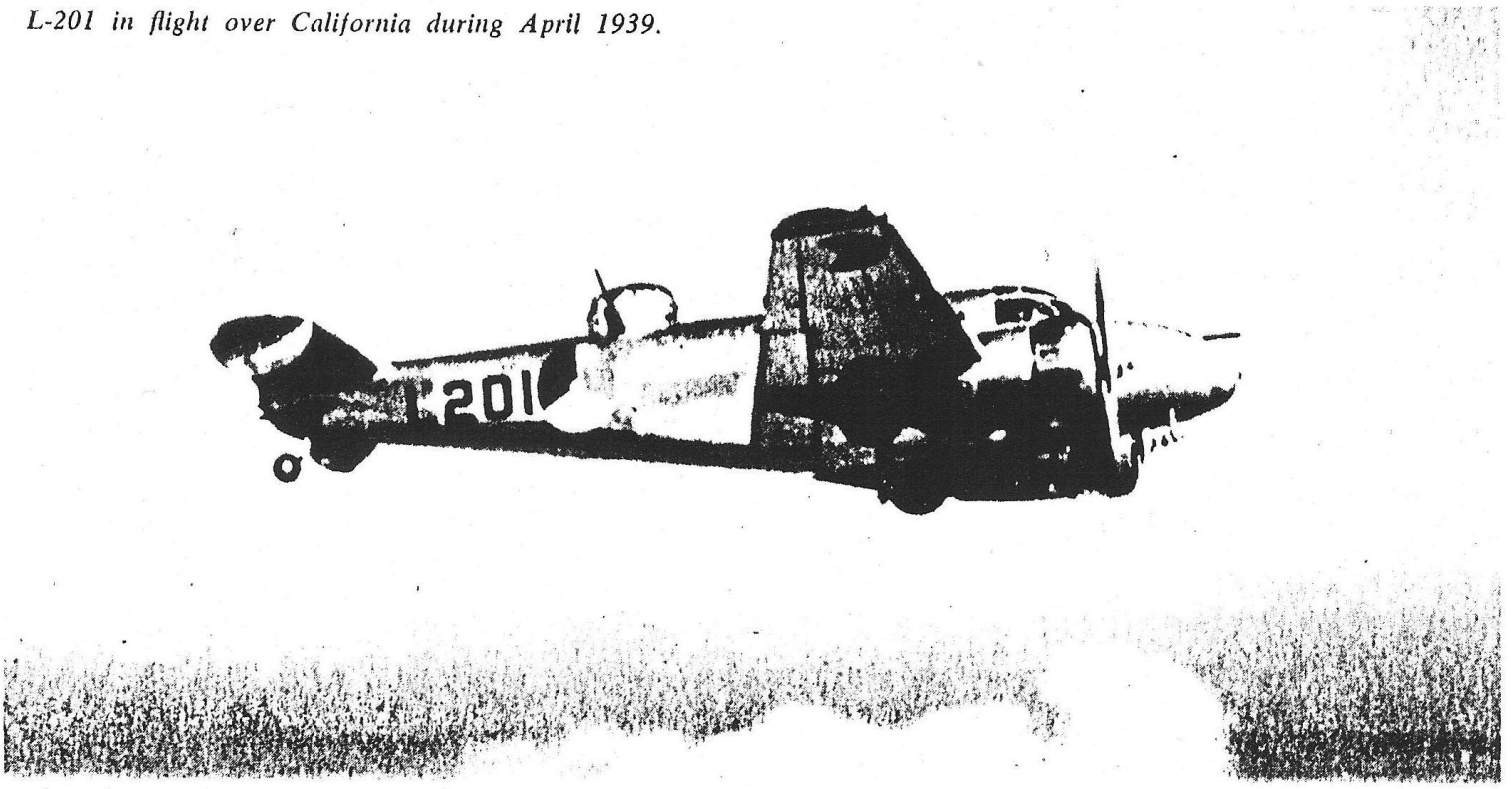
The incredible story of five fighter pilots who escaped from the Japanese in a patched-up Lockheed trainer

L-201 in flight over California during April 1939.



"ORGANIZED RESISTANCE BY THE ARMY MUST END. THE NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES ARMY CEASES TO EXIST AS A UNIT!"

The voice from Radio Bandung at Java, which only a few days earlier had reported optimistic appraisals of the war situation, now sounded grave.

It was Sunday evening, 8 March 1942, and *Vaandrig* (Ensign)* Pelder, better known to his friends as "Pulk" (Tiny) because of his size, decided that it was high time to get on with his effort to escape from the approaching Japanese.

"Pulk" Pelder was a young fighter pilot in the Netherlands Indies Army Air Corps. Only a few months earlier he had been posted to the 2nd *Afdeling* (Squadron) of Group 5 (*2-VLG-V*) equipped with Brewster Buffaloes.

His unit was stationed at Semplak airfield, a 3,500 foot grass strip two miles North of Bogor and some 30 miles from the capital Jakarta. Situated in the foothills of the West Java mountain range, Semplak had an excellent climate and life was good for the pilots of the Group. Being a pilot in those prewar days meant being popular and, with the social life of Jakarta close-by, a young guy had little left to be desired.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the Netherlands East Indies had immediately declared war on the Japanese and, as part of a previously arranged plan, the Group was sent out to reenforce the RAF at Singapore.

On 10 December 1941, Pelder and his comrades flew to Kallang airfield on Singapore Island. Combat conditions in Malaya were an eye-opener for all aircrew, British and Dutch alike. The Buffalo's lack of self-sealing tanks and armor had not seemed so important in the good days at Semplak, but their lack was now taking a heavy toll.

On 28 December, after a few difficult weeks at Singapore, Pelder's Flight was directed to the airfield at Palembang (Sumatra) where they provided fighter cover for large convoys sailing up Sumatra's East coast to Singapore. This relatively quiet duty lasted more than three weeks, with little real action. Finally *2-VLG-V* returned to its homebase Semplak.

On 22 January 1942, part of Pelder's squadron flew up to Samarinda airfield in Borneo, to participate in the battle for the important oil-island of Tarakan. Pelder stayed at Java because of lack of aircraft, but his time for action was soon to come because the loss of Borneo set the scene for the final onslaught on Java.

The first large Japanese air attack came on 9 February 1942. Batavia and Semplak airfield were attacked by five Kawasaki Ki-48-1 (Lily) bombers and 19 Nakajima Ki-43 (Oscar) fighters of the 90th, 59th and 64th *Sentais*. All the Dutch could put up as air defense was eight Brewster 339s. Of these eight fighters only two got away undamaged. Two pilots were killed and one seriously wounded, while one bailed out. Ensign Pelder's Brewster was hit but, although wounded himself, he managed to land his aircraft while fuel streamed from the punctured tanks. Six aircraft lost was a bit less than the Japanese claim of seven Dutch shot down and four damaged (out of the eight Brewsters which participated!), it was nevertheless more than the Dutch could afford. Pulk Pelder had to be hospitalized.

Repeated heavy air attacks decimated the British and Dutch fighter force over West-Java and the desperate efforts of the pilots accomplished nothing to stop the Japanese. Pelder could consider himself lucky that he survived the episode in a hospital.

In the early morning of 1 March 1942 the Japanese landed on Java's north coast and resistance by ground troops proved very ineffective. The Government center of

*Ensign is used here as rank for lack of an exact equivalent. The Dutch term *Vaandrig* indicates a junior officer rank below 2nd lieutenant.

ESCAPE FROM JAVA

Bandung was declared an open city which would not be defended and, on 7 March, the Japanese broke through the last defense line at Lembang and resistance collapsed. The same day Pelder was released from the hospital and, in the early morning hours of 8 March, Bandung surrendered.

Confusing orders resulted in a virtual free-for-all. The order to cease resistance had previously been understood to be ignored and to be the signal for continued guerrilla action in Java's mountains. Apparently these orders had now been cancelled and all personnel were expected to surrender. Pelder received orders to hand in his pistol and await the Japanese but he instead decided to go South to try to find a way to escape from Java. During the afternoon of 7 March he left Bandung in the company of a sergeant-mechanic he knew, and the latter's wife. Driving east, away from the Japanese advance, they reached the small lake near Tjileuntja, where Pelder saw a Dutch Navy PBY-5 Catalina. It made several attempts to take off from the small lake, but apparently was unable to get off the water and, after a while, it taxied back in.

This might be the chance Pelder was looking for. He approached the flying boat commander, Navy Lieutenant A. Witholt, and asked if they could get a place on the airplane. The PBY certainly had the range to get to India or Australia and space should be no problem. As a matter of fact, a sister ship of this same PBY had, a few weeks earlier, rescued no fewer than 79 survivors from a torpedoed Dutch freighter, undoubtedly the world record (87 men including crew). When Witholt heard Pelder's request for a ride he shrugged his shoulders and laughed. He had already dumped a lot of his fuel to lighten the flying boat, but a wind from the wrong direction, the high altitude of the mountain lake and the hot afternoon weather made it impossible to get the PBY off the small lake.

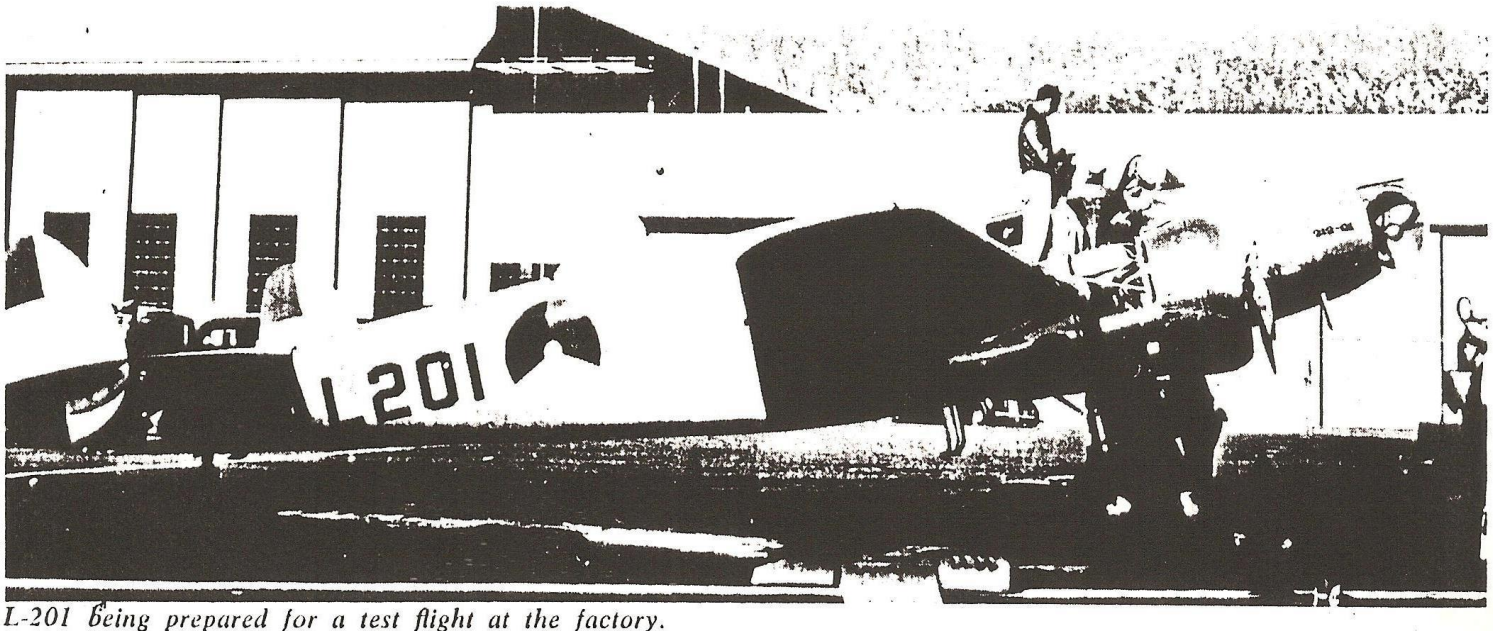
Pelder then made a proposal. He knew from his flight training days that there was a fuel storage dump on Java's coast, at the small airstrip at Pameungpeuk, only 60 miles away. If Witholt drained his fuel until he had only enough left for the short hop to the coast, he could get the PBY off the lake and refuel in the bay adjacent to Pameungpeuk airfield. Witholt liked his plan and because it had now become too dark to take off anyway, they agreed that Pelder would drive to the coast and get the fuel drums hauled out on the small jetty where the PBY could tie up.

Immediately Pelder and his two friends went on their way but after a few miles they were stopped by a Dutch Army roadblock near the lake. They were asked for their orders and then were locked up as suspected deserters. Pelder could not convince his captors that Bandung was already being abandoned, but after a few phone calls the post commander realized the hopelessness of the situation and let Pelder go. The roads were full of retreating army troops and the drive in black-out conditions through the mountains was dangerous and tiring.

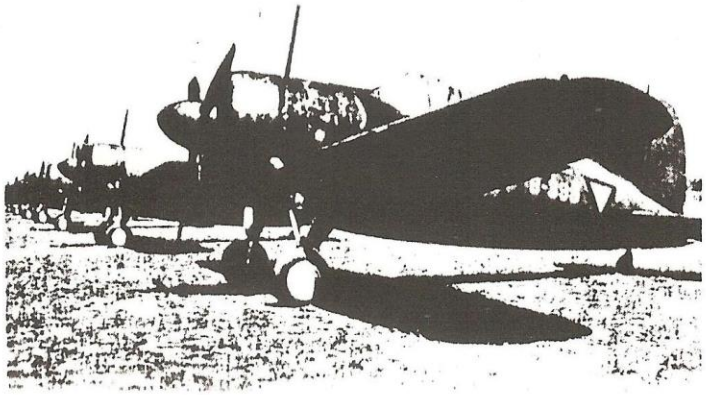
Very early in the morning of 8 March 1942, Pelder finally reached the Pameungpeuk airfield. The field was full of damaged airplanes, Lockheed 212 twin-engine trainers and a few Curtiss P-40E fighters which had arrived at Tjilatjap on the ship *Seawitch*. The fighters had apparently been dispersed to await assembly. The Lockheeds belonged to the *4e Afdeling* of *Vliegtuig Groep VI* (4th Squadron, Group VI, or *4-VLG-VI*) which had been formed from flight school personnel on 5 December 1941, and performed maritime reconnaissance duties. The Lockheed 212 was a military version of the Model 12 commercial twin, and had a .30 caliber gun fixed in the nose and one in a semi-retractable turret. There had been plans to evacuate the Lockheeds on the carrier *USS Langley*, but when this ship was sunk on 27 February, the Dutch "destroyed" the Lockheeds by retracting the landing gear while on the ground.

At a rubber plantation near the airfield, named Langen Estate, Pulk Pelder found the commanding officer of the Lockheed squadron, First Lieutenant A. L. Cox (later a general in the Dutch Air Force). Lt. Cox listened to Ensign Pelder's plan but apparently thought it an unlikely story and was not interested. But he did not object to Pelder's moving fuel drums out to the jetty on the bay. This heavy task was accomplished by about 6 a.m. and now all he could do was wait for Witholt and his PBY.

About the same time Pelder was joined by four ser-



L-201 being prepared for a test flight at the factory.



Line-up of 2-VLG-V during 1941.

". . . The field was full of damaged airplanes . . ."

geant-pilots of No.232 (Hurricane) squadron of the Royal Air Force who had driven in with a group of British personnel from the town of Garut, which by 10 p.m. the previous evening had also been declared an open city. Like Pulk Pelder, they did not follow the orders to surrender but made for the South coast of Java looking for a chance to escape. Pelder told them of the PBY which was expected by 7 a.m. and they decided to take a chance on a ride in the flying boat.

At the agreed time the Catalina appeared and circled the field but then, to Pelder's utter disappointment, it disappeared without even trying to land. Pelder went back to the plantation headquarters. Disgusted and tired he decided to go to sleep and wait for things to happen. The Sergeant and his wife, as well as most of the RAF men, left the airfield.

After a few hours Pulk Pelder was awakened by explosions caused by a Dutch Army demolition team which had began to blow up the airfield, a sure sign that the Japanese could not be far off. To top it all off, he received a phone call from Lt. Witholt, who told him he had landed at Bagendit Lake, just North of Garut and 40 miles away from Pameungpeuk. Witholt said he was sorry, but he thought the surf in the bay was too rough to land. Pelder was outraged and told the PBY pilot that the sea was smooth as a mirror and that the PBY had been so high that he could not have judged the waves properly. But it was to no avail, Lt. Witholt would not return.

The few hours sleep and the maddening phone call from Witholt had given Pelder enough incentive not to give up yet. He got together with the RAF pilots to discuss their situation. The four young sergeants were from different backgrounds but united in their goal not to get caught by the Japanese. Two of them were Australians, (including Sgt. Pierce) one a New Zealander (Sgt. D. L. Jones) and one a Canadian (Sgt. R. Mendizawal).

The five young men decided to have a good look at the Lockheed planes on the airfield to see if one could be made flyable. To their surprise, they found one aircraft still standing on its wheels. This aircraft was L-201, the first of the 212 series, completed in March of 1939. L-201 did not have a battery when the airplanes were made unserviceable, so the gear had not been retracted. Still, the ground crews had done a pretty good job on the aircraft by driving a truck into the tail surfaces, but otherwise the aircraft was in apparently good shape.

Immediately it was obvious to everyone what had to be done. If they could swap a tail section from one of the other Lockheeds, L-201 could be made flyable. Before starting repairs, they installed a battery and cranked up the engines, which ran perfectly.

In the meantime, at 8 p.m. on 8 March, news had come over the radio that the Dutch East Indies had surrendered. The surrender order included the stipulation that all military troops had to gather for surrender and that destruction of installations and equipment was forbidden.

Pelder contacted Lt. Cox about his escape plan. Fortunately, Cox turned out not to be too impressed with the surrender rules and allowed the five men to go ahead. In the meantime however the airfield had also been dynamited. Fortunately there was enough room left to get a 212 off.

With a minimum of tools Pelder and the four RAF pilots began the task of swapping the tail sections. Coins served as screwdrivers and ½ inch bolts were removed and installed with a pair of pliers. This being accomplished, the next job was to provide the Lockheed with enough fuel capacity to reach the free world. There was ample gasoline lying around in drums and searching the field they found some spare fuel tanks which belonged to the disassembled P-40s.

These tanks were installed in the fuselage and tied down with rope. Unneeded plumbing holes were plugged with wood and corks. In order to refuel the aircraft in flight, they cut a hole in the fuselage wall. Through this hole a length of fuel hose was stuck, which was then tied to a rod and fastened near the tank filler opening, to prevent the slipstream from blowing it away.

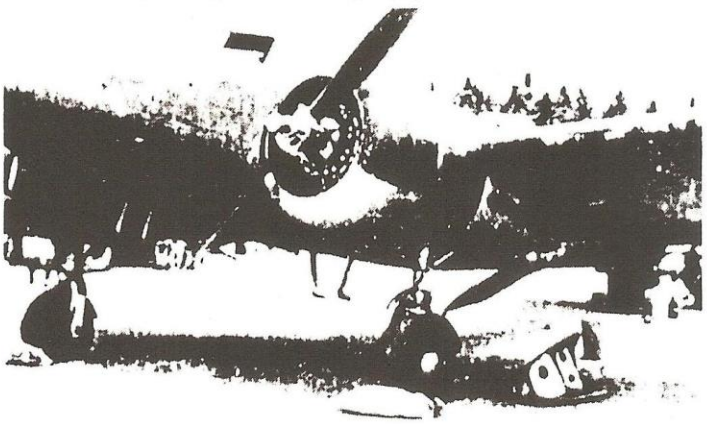
A homemade funnel was inserted in the hose inside the cabin and, with the aid of a gasoline can, fuel could be transferred from the 40 gallon tanks to the wing tanks.

The fuel capacity of the Lockheed 212 had thus been increased from the normal 200 to 280 gallons. In normal cruise the L-212 would burn 43 gallons per hour, so the Lockheed now had endurance of 6½ hours, or some 1,300 miles. This range was not nearly sufficient to reach Australia but, since it was likely that the northern part of the island of Sumatra had not yet been occupied by the Japanese, they were going to try their luck and land there, to refuel and so proceed to Ceylon. The men also found some .30 caliber machine guns which were installed for defense against curious Japanese planes.

At 8 in the morning of 9 March the aircraft was ready for flight. Everyone was dead-tired since they had worked without interruption for over 24 hours, but the Japanese could be expected at any moment and there was no time to be lost. They surveyed the damage on the runway and marked a zig-zag path for takeoff. The single grass runway was 2,700 feet long but much less was now available for takeoff. Moreover, the tail wheel lock did not work!

". . . The Lockheed 212 was a military version of the Model 12 commercial twin . . ."

L-201 at Ceylon after the escape flight.



Ensign Pelder had flown the Lockheed 212 before, so naturally he was to make the takeoff. The aircraft was heavy, but not over gross weight, and with a bit of luck they would make it, if the plane held together. The "new" tail section had had to be forced quite a bit to get it to fit, and there had been no way to check the rigging of the controls.

Pelder taxied to the extreme edge of the field for a takeoff towards the sea. The engines were run up at full power and when they seemed to hold power all right the brakes were released. Sgt. Jones was riding in the right seat and said later he remembered having a sick feeling in his stomach as they zig-zagged down the field, the craters whistling by under the wingtips.

After using all available runway space the Lockheed finally became airborne at about 8:30 a.m. with the aid of the edge of a bomb crater which bounced the aircraft into the air. It cleared a fence by inches and crossed the beach, heading for freedom over the sea. Everyone felt great relief. After making it this far the rest of the trip seemed no problem.

After takeoff Pelder headed West up the Java coast. He kept some distance away from shore but dared not to go too far out because range of the aircraft was critical. Flying along the coasts of Java and Sumatra they had some 1,100 miles to go to their next landing at Medan, the largest city in Northern Sumatra. With the range of the Lockheed now approximately 1,300 miles there should be no problem, but major uncertainties existed in the shape of winds encountered, weather problems and, of course, the question of whether Medan was still in Dutch hands. If the city was occupied the only alternative would be a crash landing on the coast, because there would be insufficient fuel to reach another airfield.

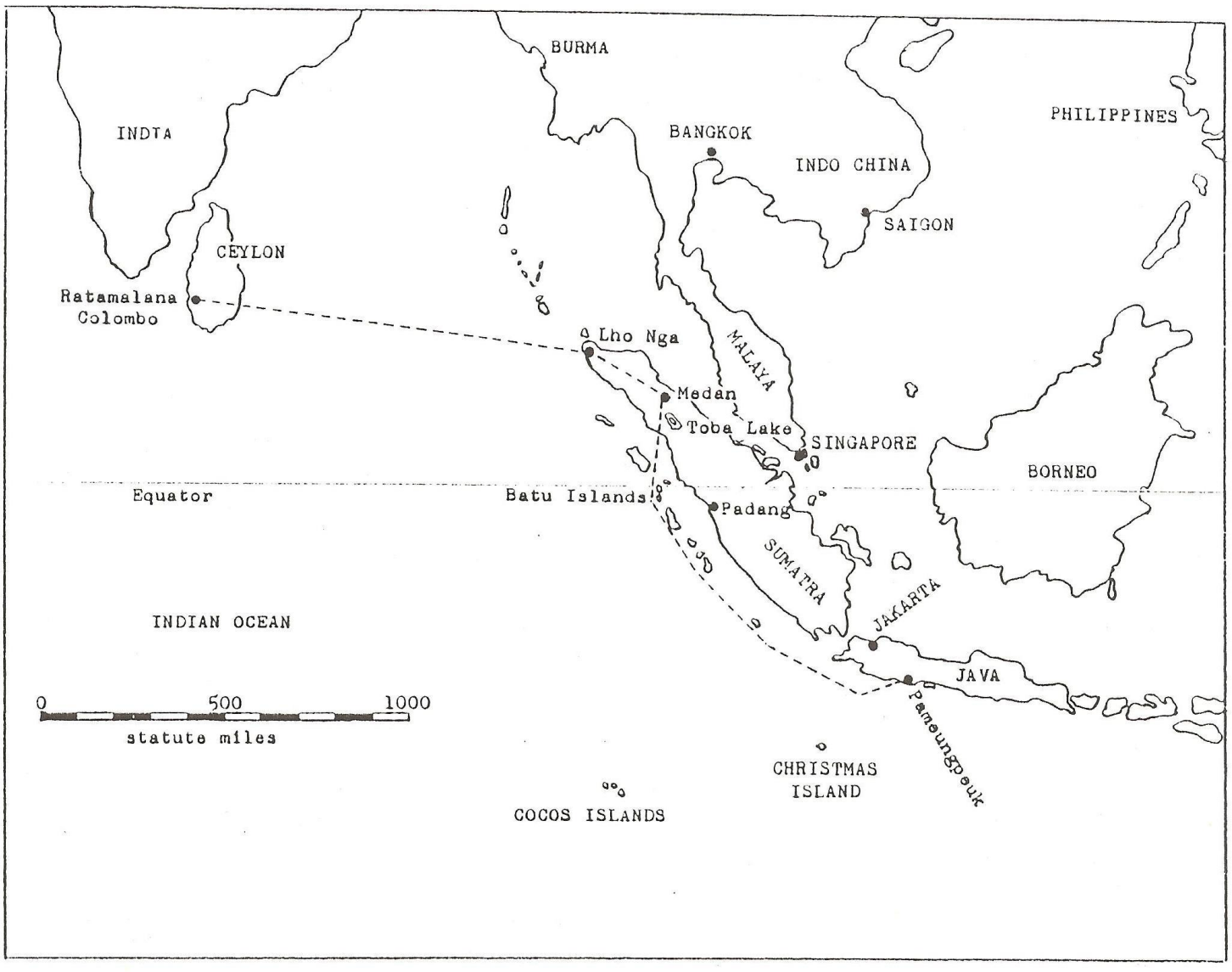
In order to get rid of the gas supply in the cabin, the pilots started to transfer it to the wing tanks as soon as possible. Pouring fuel into the open funnel was a dangerous job because of the fire hazard. Fortunately the hole in the fuselage side provided enough draft to clear the fumes quickly. The Lockheed made good speed and indicated 210 mph. It was known that the Japanese operated carriers south of Java, but no Japanese planes were seen and the Lockheed made good use of the cloud cover.

After flying about 800 miles they reached the Batu Islands and Pelder turned the plane inland and headed north across Sumatra towards Medan. After another 1½ hours of flight over the thick jungle they saw the Malaya Straits and the town of Medan. The airfield was located just outside the city and a quick inspection showed that it was full of obstructions but there were no planes, either Dutch or Japanese. Flying high over the field they saw no activity at all and assumed that there must be an air raid alarm caused by their own aircraft.

This was a good sign because only the Dutch were likely to become so alarmed by their little machine. However, it was high time that someone moved those obstructions, because by now the Lockheed had gone all the distance they could reasonably expect from their gasoline supply.

After circling the field with the wheels lowered and rocking the wings some soldiers in the NEI brown uniform appeared at the edge of the strip. A few low passes convinced them of the plane's peaceful intentions and a group of soldiers ran onto the runway to remove the obstacles. They could also see automobiles racing in from the town. After being airborne for 7 hours and 10 minutes L-201 landed at Medan airfield with 10 minutes of fuel left.

Naturally Pelder and his RAF friends were received



very warmly. They were the first contact the authorities in Medan had had with Java for some time. Pelder was driven to the headquarters of the military commandant at Prapat on Lake Toba, a drive of 110 miles by car.

The commandant, General Overakker, was preparing for guerrilla action against the Japanese and wanted Pelder to brief Allied authorities at Ceylon and arrange for radio contact and support. The long drive to the general's command post again cost Pelder a good night's sleep and he decided to risk staying over one day at Medan. The plane was camouflaged and prepared for the next leg to Ceylon. The local office of a shipping company in Medan provided a map in the form of a tourist folder showing the sea-routes in the Indian Ocean. A fuel stop was planned at the Lho Nga Airfield on the extreme Western tip of Sumatra. There was sufficient fuel there since the field had served as a staging stop for B-17s being ferried to Java earlier in the war. The commandant of Lho Nga airfield was informed about their planned stop by phone. Takeoff at Medan on 11 March had to be made early in the morning to avoid running into the daily reconnaissance plane which the Japanese sent over on an almost fixed schedule. The one-hour flight to Lho Nga posed no problems although they had to go through the same routine with obstacles on the runway before landing.

The Japanese recon plane, however, had also included Lho Nga in its itinerary. When Pelder had landed the airfield troops rushed the Lockheed under cover because the Jap spotter was due in 5 minutes. Sure enough he showed up at 9 a.m. sharp and the five pilots congratulated each other on their luck.

The Japanese plane circled the field twice and then disappeared. As no one was sure that he had not seen the Lockheed, they decided to head for Ceylon as soon as they could get refueled. On the trip to Lho Nga one of the Wasp Jr. engines had run a little hot and it burned quite a bit of oil, but there was no time to worry about that now.

While the refueling was going on, a report was brought in that nine Japanese bombers had been sighted by the local air raid warning system. Fuel was available in small cans, so nine extra cans were thrown into the cabin for good measure, while the local soldiers pulled the camou-

". . . On 8 March news had come over the radio that the Dutch East Indies had surrendered . . ."

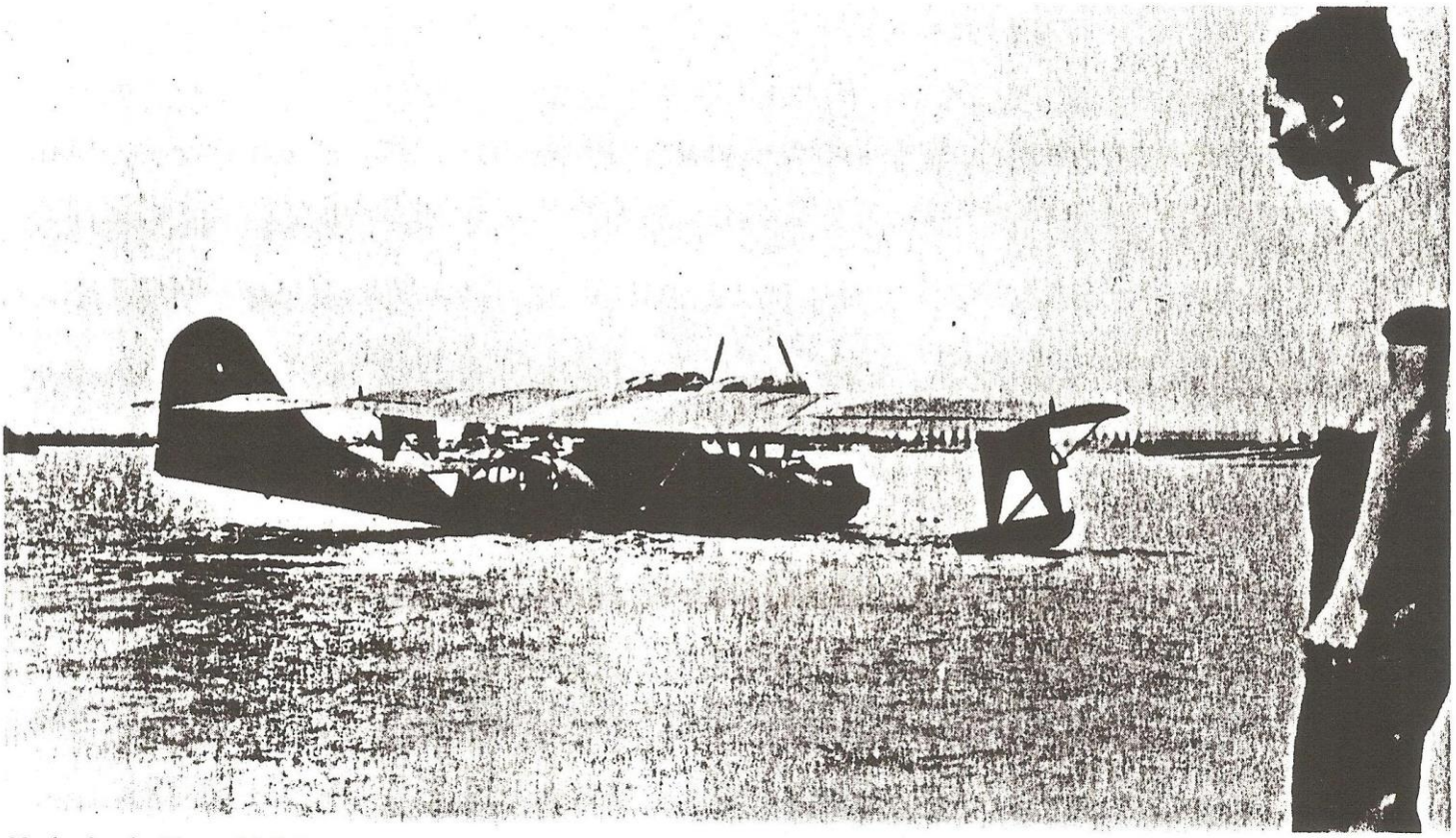
flage nets off. Pelder started the engines and began his takeoff run immediately. Since there was a considerable cross-wind, he could not hold the aircraft straight with the unlocked tailwheel and it ground looped at high speed. Everyone held their breath expecting the worst, but thanks to the quick reaction by Pelder the plane was straightened out and the landing gear did not collapse. One of the sergeant pilots was manning the rear turret and yelled that he could now see the Japanese bombers coming in. To save time Pelder taxied on to the downhill side of the runway and started another takeoff from there.

The Lockheed had to be banked sharply immediately after it broke ground to clear a large hill. A straight climb-out would have been the safest way to go but that way they would run right into the bombers. By just barely missing the treetops Pelder cleared the hill and banked towards the sea. The Japs now had sighted the small Lockheed and two of them dived down in pursuit. Fortunately they could not get within range and, by staying low and running the engines at full power, the Lockheed 212 outran the enemy. The speed of the little plane surprised the occupants as well as the Japanese.

After the Japanese ceased their pursuit a course for Ceylon was taken up with the aid of the tourist folder. Radio nav-aids were, of course, nonexistent and the magnetic compass of the Lockheed was of questionable value since the local variations were unknown. The distance to Ceylon figured from the small map was some 1,000 miles.

Counting on good luck with the winds, they navigated for Ceylon as best they could and the flight was, considering the circumstances, rather uneventful. Keeping the heading was made difficult by the fact that the aircraft had to be banked in order to get the fuel from the cabin supply into the wing tanks. Fuel transfer was done by means of a hand pump found at Medan.

After some six hours of flight, they sighted towering



Netherlands Navy PBY-5 at Surabaya NAS, Java, during September 1941.

B-25 flown by Lt. Pelder at Batchelor Field, Northern Australia, on 4 May 1943. Aircraft was assigned to No. 18 (Netherlands East Indies) Squadron, RAAF, and carried the nickname Pulk.

". . . The Lockheed cleared a fence by inches and crossed the beach, heading for freedom over the sea . . ."

cumulus clouds which indicated the presence of land. They also saw a convoy heading in the same direction which was a great reassurance.

After reaching the coast they flew along it for some time hoping to find some sign of civilization. The land was identified as Ceylon and, knowing that the capital Colombo was on the west coast, they decided to fly across the island. It was now getting quite dark and, due to the short tropical twilight, it was necessary to find an airfield soon or they might have to ditch the plane on the coast.

Colombo town and harbor came into sight, but no one saw a sign of an airport or had the slightest idea where it was located relative to the city. While over the Colombo navy base someone started to signal to the Lockheed with an Aldis lamp.

Pelder suspected that by absence of the proper reply they would be blasted out of the sky. Not knowing what the signal of the day was he told Sgt. Jones to fire a flare with the Very pistol they had on board. Praying that his action would not explode the fuel fumes which were still obvious in the cabin, Jones fired two star red flares and all remained quiet, on the ground as well as in their own plane!

In the quickly falling darkness Pelder then had the luck to sight another aircraft in the approach pattern with its lights on. By following it, the airport was soon located and with very little fuel remaining L-201 made a safe landing at Colombo's Ratamalana airfield. The landing of the Lockheed with its strange markings caused quite a sensation. L-201 still wore the old Dutch orange triangles which were not commonly known locally.

Ensign Pelder reported to Admiral Helfrich of the Netherlands Navy who had evacuated to Ceylon in a PBY a few days earlier. He was then transferred to a small group of NEI pilots who were waiting in Bangalore, India, to pick up B-25s when the Indies surrendered. This group finally received five B-25s and trained with them for several weeks in India before the aircraft were transferred to the RAF.

With the termination of Dutch flight activities in India, the Lockheed 212 was sold to the RAF, where it was registered LV762 and used by No.320 Maintenance Unit in 1942 and 1943. In 1944 it flew with the ACSEA Communications Squadron until 18 July 1944 when it stalled in a takeoff at New Delhi and crashed.

Sgt. Mendizabal rejoined the RAF in Bombay, while Sgt. Jones and the two Australian pilots went to Australia. Ensign "Pulk" Pelder was also transferred to Australia where he joined the newly formed No.18 (Netherlands East Indies) Squadron of the RAAF flying B-25s. He survived the war and is now a retired Colonel in Holland.

Lt. Witholt and his PBY also made it to Australia and had considerable trouble doing so. Witholt's gamble that he was more likely to find fuel at Bagendit Lake (a temporary Navy base) than at Pelder's fuel storage on the coast almost cost him 3½ years in a POW camp. When he landed at Bagendit he found that the ground crews had just finished cutting the fuel drums with pick axes. With great difficulty they managed to collect the last gallons out of numerous drums and get enough for seven hours flight time, not enough to make Australia. They were told that Padang on Sumatra's west coast might still have fuel, and at approximately 11 a.m. on 8 March the Catalina took off for Padang, a seven hour trip. The next day at approximately 7 a.m. the Catalina left Padang for Australia, with a stop in the Cocos Islands.

Around 11 a.m. that morning, unaware of each other's presence, Witholt in the PBY and Pelder in the Lockheed 212 passed each other at 300 miles distance somewhere south-west off the Sumatra coast, over the vastness of the Indian Ocean, two courageous men, each doing what needed to be done in his own way. Both aircraft would reach their destination. The PBY had a delay of three days in the Cocos Islands when it ran into a coral reef on landing and tore its bottom open. With full power, Witholt ran the boat on the beach and repairs were made by nailing boards over the tear across two compartments and by pouring concrete in the bottom. It arrived in Freemantle, Australia, on 13 March.

In April 1942, Ensign Pelder also arrived in Australia. One of the first people he met in the hotel where he was billeted was Lt. Witholt. The PBY pilot was nearly struck dumb at the sight of Pelder. "How in hell did you get here?" he asked. "I didn't need the Navy for that!" replied Pulk.