

THE CATALINA FLYING BOAT



A busy scene as personnel from No. 1 Flying Boat Repair Unit at Lake Boga attend to Catalina A24-69 in 1944. This unit was established in mid-1942 and its capabilities enabled the RAAF to greatly expand the number of Catalinas operated from 1943 onwards.

An attack on Tulagi by two aircraft (A24-14 and -17) on 26 June produced high drama. A24-14 (Squadron Leader Frank Chapman) carried out a successful mission, including low-level strafing using the Catalina's guns and a hand-held weapon employed by a crew member, and returned safely to Noumea. A24-17 (Flying Officer Robert Seymour) also carried out a successful attack but had to make an unscheduled landing at Havannah Harbour in the New Hebrides to refuel instead of flying directly to Noumea. The USN described how this routine task almost ended in disaster:

On the morning of 27 June 1942 ... Seymour was returning to Havannah Harbour due to shortage of fuel after a combat mission the previous night. Consequently Roses [the codename for the island base of Efate in the New Hebrides] was not advised of its return to Havannah which had not been planned. The plane was intercepted near Havannah Harbour by Grumman fighters [US Marine Corps F4F Wildcats], one of which, mistaking the insignia on the top of the wing for that of the Japanese, attacked and caused some damage before he recognised the plane as a Catalina ...

The Commander Aircraft, South Pacific Force, regrets this stupid error on the part of one of his pilots ...

The American pilots were confused by the similarity between the solid red circle in the middle of the RAAF national markings and the red rising sun (*hinomaru*) emblem on Japanese aircraft.

Fortunately, Seymour was able to land safely after the Wildcat broke off its attack. Temporary repairs at Havannah and further repairs at Noumea by a US Navy aircraft tender allowed the Catalina to return to Australia.