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# THE LOST SQUADRON AND COMANCHE BAY

By Bruno Yoka

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*The writer served aboard CGC COMANCHE during the period described below, the second with this name, a 165-foot class 'A' Cutter of the ESCANABA class, not to be confused with CGC COMANCHE a 143' Ocean Going Tug used as a WMEC.*

Prior to the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese air forces, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt felt he did not have the political support to become fully involved with the war in Europe. America was still recovering from The Depression, and memories of the slaughter on the Western Front had convinced the majority of the population that we should remain an isolated country, avoiding Europe's wars at all costs. However, cataclysmic events such as the fall of France and the evacuation from Dunkirk, and the almost nightly bombings by the Luftwaffe of London's civilians, was tipping American opinion—everywhere people were asking what would happen to them if England fell under the onslaught or surrendered.

Recognizing these fears, FDR addressed the public through his radio speeches and was able to persuade Congress and the population to "loan"<sup>[1]</sup> war materials and weapons, comparing it to loaning a neighbor a fire hose to fight a fire, which would be returned to the owner when the fire was extinguished.

When World War II began for the U.S., the air bases at Narsarssuak and Sondrestrom were already under construction. Pressure was applied by the brass in Washington to complete the bases in order to ferry the planes urgently needed in Great Britain. The areas of Greenland and Iceland were under operational command of the U.S. Coast Guard, under the Command of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet (Greenland Patrol's Task Group Twenty Four).

On 6 July 1941, construction of Bluie West One at Narsarssuak began with the arrival of Greenland's first convoy of ships, led by the *COMANCHE*, who was breaking ice to the base site, and the cargo ship *Munargo*, USAT *Chateau Thierry*, and CGC *RARITAN*. BW 1 was to be the most southern base operating throughout the northern winters, located on a moraine, remnants of an old glacier.

Bluie West Eight at Sondrestrom Fjord was built about 35 miles north of the Arctic Circle, where the *COMANCE* broke ice for the USAT *Munargo* to permit construction on 7 October 1941. An alternate field was located near Disko Island.

Bluie East Two was built at the base of Ikateq Mountain near the east coast village of Amagssalik.

Not until I received the deck logs of the ships *COMANCHE* and *NORTHLAND*, and a declassified publication from Scott AFB, did I realize that we were involved at the beginning of the BOLERO operations.<sup>[2]</sup> The first of four B-17 "Flying Fortresses" tried to fly the northern Bluie West Eight/Sondrestrom Air Base route, while the other B-17s used the southern Bluie West One at Narsarssuak Air Base on June 26, 1942.

The *NORTHLAND*, leaving her J2F-5 amphibian plane at Narsarssuak<sup>[3]</sup> in early May, spent about five weeks in an attempt to break ice in Sondrestrom Fjord for an early entry. Being on radio silence, and unknown to us, the ship sustained damage. *NORTHLAND* departed for the Davis Straits for a position midway between Goose Bay, Labrador and the Sondrestrom Fjord entrance in the proposed location of an ocean station and plane guard station which became station TWO and then BAKER<sup>[4]</sup>. She made an underwater contact, discovering a submarine shadowing her. Running the contact down, *NORTHLAND* dropped five 300-pound depth charges, bringing air bubbles and oil to the surface, indicating a possible. She never did receive credit for it's sinking.

*NORTHLAND* then set sail for Iceland for repairs. It is not known whether she notified the Ferry Command that she was leaving the area, or if there was a communications snafu. So when the first flight of four B-17s made their flight on June 26, 1942, there was no icebreaker at the entrance of Sondrestrom Fjord. Because enemy subs were known to be operating in the

area, it was prearranged for arriving planes to use blinker lights for recognition signals in order for a ship to point its bow to the proper fjord entrance. All cutters and icebreakers operating in the Greenland area were operating on radio silence. Thus, the stage was set for the first ferry flight through Bluie West Eight, and the pilots were on their own to locate the proper entrance. The B-17s were identified as: *My Gal Sal*, *Alabama Exterminator II* and *Sooner*. The fourth unknown B-17 landed at the Bluie West Eight air base.

The first group of B-17s bound for Bluie West One at Narsarssuak were very fortunate on June 26, 1942 in locating the proper fjord entrance. The *COMANCHE's* deck logs are reprinted as follows:

0000 to 0400: Narsarssuak Reach. 12:30 delivered officer messenger mail to Cutter *MOJAVE*. Drifting in fjord with *ESCANABA*, using engines as necessary. 2:40 Army B-17 bound in fjord: 3:05, second B-17 bound in. 3:17 third B-17 bound in. 3:20 fourth B-17 bound in: 3:43 fifth B-17 bound in.

0400 to 0800: Omitted log entries dealing in fjord surface observations.

0800 to Meridian: Underway, various courses and speeds. 9:35 commenced backing out starboard anchor in 30 fathoms water with 60 fathoms chain starboard anchor bearing 285 degrees pgc<sup>[5]</sup> radio station tower Simiutak Island. Varde 167 pgc. Radio room began transmitting low frequency radio beacon signals.

9:30 log entries of number four boat taking Capt Aro (USA) and men with radio beacon equipment departed for beach. 10:55 boat returned. 1:05 boat number 4 departed for beach with remainder of Army equipment. 11:05 boat number 4 returned.

Meridian to 4:00 PM: Anchored as before. 1:00 omitted quarters. 1:15 boat departed Gamatron with Commander Boucheron (USN) and Rise, S.E., RM3c (USN). [Note: Gamatron was the code name for the outer marker radio adjacent to the Coast Guard Simiutak ship's radio beacon.]

4:00 to 8:00 PM: Anchored as before. 4:30 Army B-17 headed in. 5:05 motor launch returned. 7:15 launched returned from Gamatron alongside with movie

party. 7:55 Army B-17 headed in.

8:00 PM to Midnight: Anchored as before. 8:05 plane sighted: B-17. Planes passing overhead, heading in at frequent intervals. 9:16 Last plane —Army B-17 sighted after a total of 19 B-17s having passed overhead. 10:20 Gamatron boat departed with movie party. Issued 27 night rations. [signed] R. S. Serenberg, Jr. Ensign (R).

In the days following, while anchored behind an island at the entrance of the fjord, ferry operations began in earnest. Army Air Corps officials predicted a 10% loss in these ferry operations. It turned out that only a 5.2% loss occurred, in spite of the fact that the majority of the pilots had little flying time, there were no landing strips for emergencies or refuelling, and lacked radio-bearing transmitters for navigating. A crash in the icy North Atlantic was certain death. SAR operations were one of a kind: dog teams, ski-equipped aircraft, amphibians and whatever was available were used.

The following month, *COMANCHE* and *NORTHLAND* again became involved jointly.

The *COMANCHE* was moored just a few hours to the newly constructed dock at Narsarssuak Air Base, when dog teams, motor sleds, and extra lumber began to arrive and were loaded on the ship.

With urgency, we departed BW1 for the East Coast of Greenland. And instead of taking the usual route around Cape Farewell, we took an inside passage known only to the experienced Danish navigators. With sheer cliffs on both sides rising to almost a thousand feet and tides making steering difficult, the ship had to increase her headway to full speed.

Exiting Prince Christian Sound on the east coast, the *COMANCHE* began traveling northward. Armed landing parties were sent ashore frequently to investigate survivor huts along its many inlets and fjords for intruders. These huts were emergency shelters built and placed strategically along the coast for stranded sailors or people requiring shelters from the elements.

When entering the many fjords along the east coast and not knowing what the ship would encounter, the crew was at general quarters. The forward 3-inch 50 caliber gun was manned at ready as well as its 50-caliber machine guns on the wings of the bridge.

It wasn't until we approached Angmagssiik that the navigator noticed the coastline began to differ from our navigation charts. Where our charts indicated glacier ice flowing down to the sea, we were looking at an open body of water. With the ship's lifeboat preceding the ship, we sounded out its depth. We had a pleasant surprise—this unknown bay also provided an excellent anchorage.

I was assigned to the optical range finder atop the pilothouse. The quartermaster began asking for distance and bearings to the shoreline, which became simple with this instrument. It took several days for the lifeboat crew to sound out the depth of the entire bay. After charting the bay and naming "Comanche Bay" after our ship, maps were drawn with the new name and sent to the Navy Hydrographic Office. We also distributed them among the ships of the Greenland Patrol. Many of our navigation charts were dated 1892.

With the ship at anchor in Comanche Bay, the dog teams and motor sleds were the first to be unloaded. The two Air Corps liaison officers with us, Captain Innes-Taylor and Major Norman, split into two salvage teams and began their trek to a plane crash site not identified at that time.

Lumber was then put ashore where the ship's carpenter began building an emergency hut on the rocky beach, earning its nickname of "Beach Head Station", which was later manned by meteorologists<sup>[6]</sup>.

Radio units, bombsight stabilizer, machine guns, and wheels still intact with tires attached were brought back to the ship. The IFF equipment caused us some concern, since they were known to carry self-destruct charges. And, most importantly, the Norden bombsight was recovered.

Log entry in the ship's deck log: "18 July 1942. Comanche established Ice Cap Station, Comanche Bay." The ship's captain, LCDR Ralph R. Curry, USCG, then received the nickname "Ice Cap Curry."

Rumors aboard ship were that the ship was salvaging the equipment from a couple of planes that crashed on the icecap. Many years later, this plane crash site was identified as the location of the "Lost Squadron" of two B-17s and six P-38s on a secret flight from Bluie West Eight (Sondrestrom) bound for Reykjavik, Iceland.

The war diaries of the *NORTHLAND* on July 18, 1942 read as follows: "In position 59.51N 42.12W skirting Storis Ice Belt and bound for Angmagssiik."

On Monday, July 20<sup>th</sup>, the *NORTHLAND* passed through ice fields into Angmagssiik, and anchored in King Oscar's Harbor at noon. The following day stores were transferred to Kaloni Bestyrer, according to the existing Greenland operations plan.

The *NORTHLAND* being the commanding ship of the Northeast Greenland Patrol, was also under a new set of orders for Task Group Twenty Four under the command of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet, Greenland Patrol operations plan 1-42. This plan briefly stated: "Reconnoitre east coast of Greenland and destroy enemy posts: Assist Greenlanders wherever practicable."

"Wednesday, 22 July. *NORTHLAND* departed for Dannebrog Island to effect rescue of officers and crew members of two B-17s and six P-38s, which made forced landings on the ice cap. Unable to effect entrance into Dannebrog Island due to heavy fog, pack ice, and closely packed icebergs ranging in height to 300 feet, in an area of approximately 25,000 square yards.

"Thursday, 23 July 1942. Noon position drifting in ice. 1900: Underway forcing way through pack ice to Dannebrog Island."

Soon after rescue operations were concluded, the following log entry was made: "12 officers and 13 crewmen of the Army Air Corps aboard." Standing through pack ice and ice bergs of Dannebrog Island at conclusion of day."

"Friday, 24 July 1942. Noon position, vicinity Dannebrog Island, maneuvering through pack ice and icebergs to open water.

"Saturday, 25 July 1942. Noon position anchored Prince Oscar's Harbor, Angmagssiik, Greenland."

It was later learned, a Navy PBY-A then flew the survivors to BW-1 at Narsarssuak Air Base.

"Sunday, 26 July 1942. Various courses through ice Iketeq Fjord. Made survey of site for emergency air strip and returned to King Oscar's Harbor, Angmagssiik, Greenland."

It was only a few days later that the *COMANCHE* met a convoy of ships, which included the ill-fated USAT *Dorchester*, and led them up Ikateq Fjord to the base of the mountain. After anchoring, construction workers began unloading heavy construction equipment. A crane was assembled at the water's edge to assist in the unloading. Surveyors immediately began their work, as small flags began appearing, laying out an emergency landing strip.

The following day, I was asked to assist in the installation of communication equipment. Upon arriving, I discovered only a peg in the ground, marking the location of the operations building. Looking at their proposed location of the new building, I suggested they move it away from the end of the airstrip.

Returning the following morning, I discovered a new building located well away from the end of the runway. Radio equipment was already unpacked and sitting on a makeshift table. Communications were established with Blue West One. The bulldozers were already making their long cuts into the slope for a landing strip.

With the construction of the emergency landing strip well under way, the *COMANCHE* returned to Narsarssuak with the aircraft equipment salvaged at Comanche Bay.

It is often said that what goes around, comes around. The B-17 Flying Fortress "My Gal Sal" final resting place eventually wound up at the Blue Ash Airport, a suburb of Cincinnati, where it was reconstructed to become the "My Gal Sal Memorial" and on whose staff I serve.

*Footnote: After the war, control of these Greenland Air Bases reverted to the Danes, who maintain them. Scandinavian Airways continue to use the bases with an agreement that the U.S. has perpetual usage in times of emergency. The bases were used quite extensively during Desert Storm. Scandanavian Airways has regular polar flights from San Diego via Thule to the Scandinavian countries. Passenger flights across the Atlantic, especially during the wintertime, are thoughtfully considered and planned, even today.*

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[1] The "Lend-Lease" program.

[2] Ferry flight operations on the northern route through Greenland and Iceland to the Great Britain. A

quicker alternative to ferrying aircraft by slow ship subject to U-boat attack was urgently needed.

[3] The ship was not designed to carry aircraft with supporting crew, nor did it have repair facilities.

[4] "BRAVO" in today's phonetics.

[5] Per gyro compass.

[6] Weather stations in this theatre of operations provided forecasts for European operations. The forecast for the D-day invasion of France enabled Gen. Eisenhower to give the "go ahead" for the assault, in spite of the current poor weather in Britain at that time. A cancellation would have had serious repercussions—the continued build-up of German entrenchments and reinforcements would have resulted in higher casualties, or perhaps rejection of the assault.

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