

“Normal Requirement”

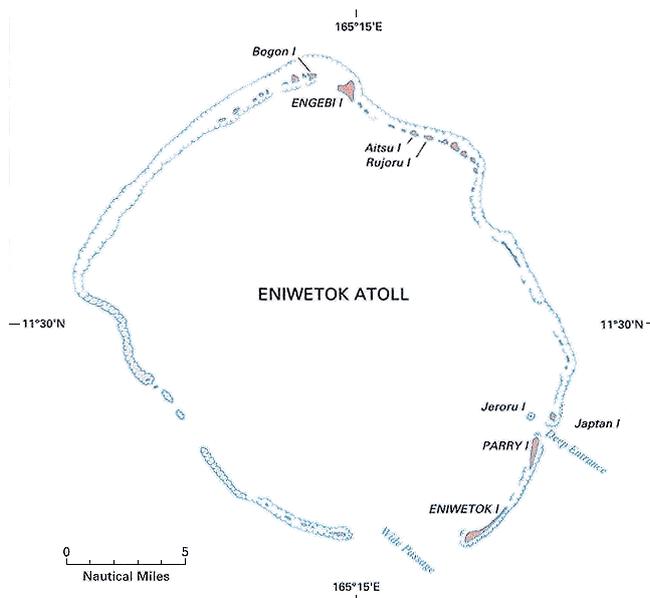
The Navy’s Worst Ever Aircraft Accident

By David Trojan, USN Retired



Navy PB4Y-1 taxi for take off

There were many tragic accidents with great loss of life and aircraft during World War Two. One accident in particular stands out from the rest due to the greatest number of aircraft destroyed and damaged due to one accident. Normal requirements at forward operating bases during wartime were very different than stateside training. The fast paced drive across the vast Pacific stretched resources and pushed aircraft to their limits and beyond. Exceeding the maximum gross takeoff weight allowance in PB4Y-1 aircraft became routine and was the **normal requirement** during wartime operations. Overcrowding at tiny Naval Advanced Bases (NAB) in the South Pacific was also a **normal requirement** during a time when supplies and aircraft were building up for the drive to defeat Japan. These two factors lead to one of the wars most tragic events when over a hundred aircraft were destroyed as a result of these wartime operating conditions.



Map of Eniwetok Atoll

Eniwetok Atoll, consisting of 30 small islands of sand and coral, lies about 326 miles northwest of Kwajalein, in the Marshall Islands group, in the South Pacific. The circumference of the atoll is 64 miles and the maximum elevation is 15 feet. Eniwetok Island is two miles long and a quarter mile wide. Code named 'privilege' by the Americans; the island was captured from the Japanese on February 20, 1944. With the Marshall Islands under American control ten weeks ahead of schedule, allied engineers started construction for the next phase of the island hopping campaign toward the Japanese home islands. Immediately after Eniwetok Island was captured, Navy Seabees began building a Naval Advance Base (NAB) and an airfield. The airfield was named in honor of Lt. John H. Stickell, Naval Aviator and former RAF pilot, who died from wounds received in action during a low-level attack on Jaluit in the Marshall Islands. The speed with which these islands were seized and transformed into fleet and air bases, often within weeks, astonished the Japanese and facilitated the fast-paced U.S. advance across the Pacific.



Bulldozer operators carve out an airstrip on Eniwetok following the island's seizure.

Eniwetok Island was built into a major staging area. On 11 March 1944, less than one month after Eniwetok Island was captured, the first plane landed and on 5 April 1944, the first mission by permanently based bomber squadrons was flown from Stickell Field. The completed field, 6,800 feet long and 400 feet wide, had two taxiways, facilities for major engine-overhaul, and housing for aviation personnel in Quonset huts. A tank farm of twelve 1,000-barrel tanks,

with piping, a floating pipe-line 1,200 feet long, and a tanker mooring, was completed for aviation gasoline on Eniwetok Island by May 1944. Completion had been delayed by the explosion of an LCT in March, which reduced the status of completion of the tank farm from 80 to 30 percent. Eniwetok served as a rear anchorage and repair base and kept tabs on the bypassed Japanese island bases in the area. The airfield was often used as a ferry strip for B-24 and B-25 on missions to Truk and other targets. Eniwetok's airfield allowed the Marshall Islands to be dominated by air. One Navy Officer described the place in July 1944 as "A place of desolation. A flat barren stretch of sand with a long airstrip and one big canteen operated by the Army, was all there was. There were as many B-24s and B-25s as could be handled on that long spit of land."



Stickell Field, Eniwetok Island in 1944

As activities increased, the land area became insufficient to support these activities properly. To overcome this difficulty, Quonset huts were erected atop one-story buildings in order to save space, a measure which proved very practical.



Quonset hut Operations building variation at Eniwetok showing Quonset huts erected atop one-story buildings.

Navy squadron VB-116 deployed with PB4Y-1s to Eniwetok 7 July 1944 and began operational patrols and sector searches by the 12th of July. They flew sorties against Japanese radar installations on Truk and Ponape Islands, and made radar plots at 1500-, 1000- and 500-foot altitudes. These plots helped airstrikes pick approach directions, which would minimize alert time for the enemy. The PB4Y-1 aircraft was a navalized version of the B-24 Liberator with very little change and were assigned Navy Bureau of Aeronautics serial numbers. Many Navy patrol squadrons were designated "VP" at the beginning of World War Two, but by mid-1942 their designation had changed to "VB" for heavier-than-air bombing.

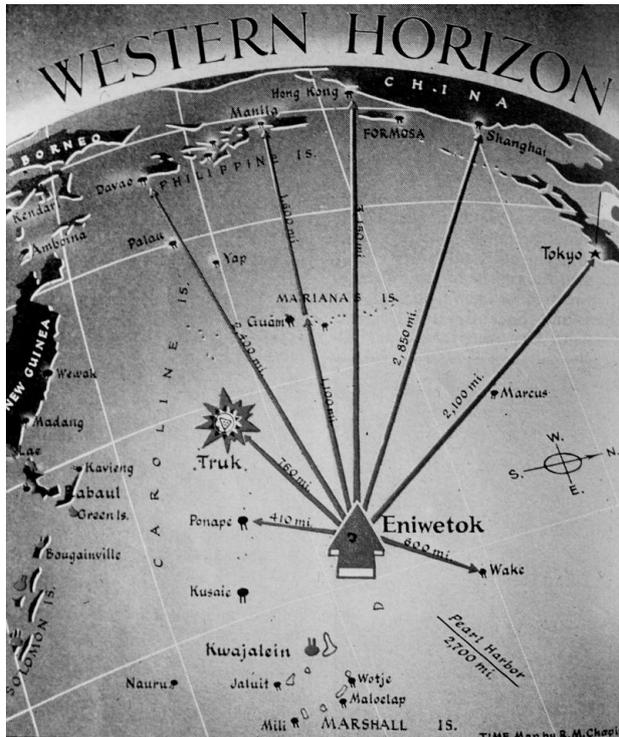
On 9 August 1944, there were 340 aircraft parked in the carrier aircraft replacement pool area crowded on the small island of Eniwetok and lined up along the sides of the short airstrip. Maximum use of all available space was used to park all the aircraft and most had just arrived that day. The carrier aircraft were assigned to a Carrier Air Service Unit as replacement aircraft as needed to support the rapidly advancing forward operating units. Safety factors normal to rear areas and continental operations were by necessity reduced. The usual right of way clearance on either side of a through runway simply did not apply.



PB4Y-1 belonging to VB 116 takes off from a Naval Advance Base in the Pacific.

At 10:26 pm, Lieutenant R. C. Anderson attempted to take off his overloaded PB4Y-1, Buno 38766, ex USAAF B-24 serial number 44-40348, assigned to VB-116. The PB4Y-1 was carrying nine 500-lb bombs and its gross weight was 66,000 lbs. The emergency maximum gross weight of the PB4Y-1 aircraft was listed at 64,000 lbs. During the war the combat loads regularly exceeded 65,000 lbs often at 67,000 plus. With the extra weight the controls were mushy and soft. Operating PB4Y-1 aircraft in excess of their recommended gross weight had become routine and a **normal requirement** in the area to accomplish its combined mission of reconnaissance and strike. As the aircraft just lifted off, the Pilot cut throttles and aborted his take-off due to darkness, load and rolling runway. The pilot thought he was still on the runway mat, but was actually airborne. With a thirty degree cross-wind the plane drifted left and crashed into the parked carrier planes immediately adjacent to the runway. As the plane collided with the first row of parked airplanes, it carried away wing tips off the folded wings, canopies and came to rest in the parking area fifty-yards past the end of runway and twenty yards to the left. The PB4Y-1 plane burned with the fire spreading to other parked aircraft. The fire then caused the low order detonation of all nine 500-lb bombs and was instrumental in extending sphere of devastation to include the loss or damage of 106 aircraft. Eighty four planes out of the 106 were destroyed or so damaged as to be unfit for further use. The type of planes destroyed included F6F-3, 16 aircraft; FM-1, 11 aircraft; SB2C-1, 12 aircraft; SB2C-3, 3 aircraft; and TBM-1, 42 aircraft. Another 22 aircraft were damaged, but repairable. Nine members of the crew were killed, but miraculously, two crewmen survived. The crew included: Pilot Lt Romone C. Anderson A-V(N) USNR/Killed, Ens. T. M. Pettit A-V(N) USNR/Killed, Ens. O. B. Tully A-V(N) USNR/(died of injuries Aug 15th, 1944), AMM1c L. Johnson USN/Seriously injury, Sealc H. A. Heper USNR/Killed, ARM1c J. W. Chalmers USNR/Killed, ARM3c A. F. Burkhartemeyer USNR/Seriously injury, AOM2c J. D. Rothwell USNR/Killed, Sealc A. A. Van Winkle USNR/Killed, Sealc E. Petri USNR/Killed, and AOM3c G. A. Ehinger USNR/Killed.

It was the Commanding Officer of VB-116 opinion that "The accident was due to failure of the pilot to react to imperceptible drift, and to his temporary misjudgment of the fact that his plane had become airborne." The error on the part of the pilot was aggravated by the crowded conditions of the airfield. The carrier type aircraft that arrived that day were required to be parked at the edge of the upwind end of the mat, because no other space was available. This left insufficient room for any deviation on takeoff from the exact center line of the runway. It was realized that the maximum use of all available space on forward area air strips was vital to the furtherance of the war effort. A number of recommendations were made to preclude another event of this magnitude from happening again.



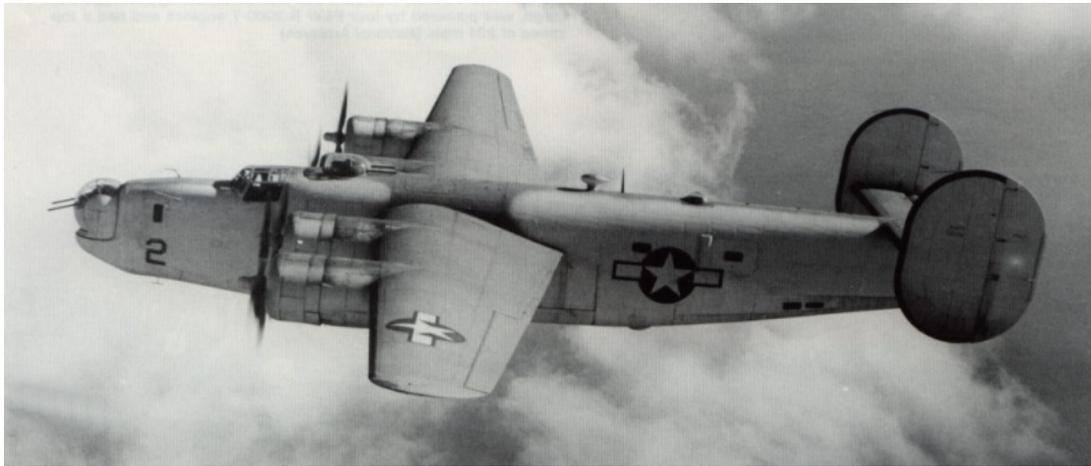
Eniwetok and "Western Horizon" from Time, 1944/02/28

The accident on the island of Eniwetok may be the greatest loss of aircraft due to a single aircraft crash in naval history. Many factors were involved in this incident, but the demands caused by wartime conditions undoubtedly played a major role. The U.S. Navy was building up for the final assault on the Japanese homeland. The large number of aircraft destroyed would have been a set back for operations, but only for a short time. By late 1944, the U.S. dominated the Pacific skies with overwhelming numbers of aircraft. The recommendations from this tragic accident were forwarded up the chain of command and war operations continued. However, exceeding the maximum gross take off weight allowance for the PB4Y-1 aircraft remained as the **normal requirement** due to the long patrol distances. Other PB4Y-1 accidents were to follow. Less than one month later, on 8 September 1944, another heavily overloaded PB4Y-1 plane ran off the end at Navy Advance Base, North Field, Tinian airstrip. The aircraft was a complete loss; however there were no injuries or deaths and no other aircraft were destroyed. The demands of war continued to stress the limits of the aircrews and aircraft.

Eniwetok Atoll would serve as a base for future operations against Japanese-held Truk and the Caroline Islands. Eniwetok atoll also provided airfields for the subsequent invasion of the Marianas. After the war, Eniwetok atoll was the site of the first hydrogen bomb test on November 18, 1952. Today the airfield still remains, but is no longer an active airfield. This story is dedicated to all those who served in Navy PB4Y-1 aircraft.



Recent photo of Enewetak Airfield



Navy VB-114, PB4Y-1 aircraft in flight