

A STAR IS BORN

By

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Coast Guard aviation in 1930 was struggling to find its real purpose. Early visionaries like Lieutenant Commander Elmer Stone, CG Aviator 1, and Lieutenant Commander Carl Von Paulsen, CG Aviator 6, had convinced Coast Guard senior officers to try to find good uses for these new fangled machines. However, things were not going well for the aviators.

There were only thirteen pilots wearing coveted Wings of Gold, and they were flying a hodge-podge of cast-off and borrowed aircraft that were only marginally operational. These aircraft were assigned at two flying bases located at Gloucester, Massachusetts and Cape May, New Jersey.

In 1931 a "star" was born, and Coast Guard aviation's destiny was established. The star was named PROCYON and came in the form of a twin-engine amphibian aircraft manufactured by the Douglas Aircraft Corporation. CDR Norman B. Hall came up with the idea of naming this beautiful new aircraft, and his idea caught on. For many years, all Coast Guard rescue aircraft were named after stars.

The military designation for this thin metal hull, plywood high wing aircraft, was RD, R for transport, D for Douglas. PROCYON arrived at Cape May, New Jersey in February of 1931 and was an immediate favorite of every pilot.



RD-1 Sirius #128 on ramp

In 1932, Coast Guard aviation started to gather momentum. Two more RD's, known as Dolphins, were purchased, SIRIUS (Fig. 1) and ADHARA. These aircraft were equipped with upgraded and more powerful engines, allowing them to get 'on the step' in rough water more quickly and

In 1933, Coast Guard aviation received a much needed public relations boost. An off shore landing by LT Richard L. Burke, CG Aviator 15, earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross. He was among the very first to be so honored. He received the recognition for flying 160 miles southeast of Massachusetts through stormy weather and landing his 'flying life boat' ADHARA on the storm tossed Atlantic Ocean. Successfully recovering a seriously injured crewman from the fishing trawler SHAWMUT, Burke flew him back to Boston Airport where he was rushed to a hospital. Burke and ADHARA had saved a life under extremely difficult conditions.

Later that year, the nation was shocked to learn that the U.S. Navy rigid airship USS AKRON had crashed at sea near Barnegat Light off the coast of New Jersey. RADM W.A. Moffet, Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics was on board along with seventy-two other Navy men.

Lieutenant Commander Stone received word of the crash while he was in Washington, D.C. He rushed to his Dolphin, SIRIUS, parked at NAS Anacostia. He promptly flew back to Cape May through the same storm, which had caused AKRON to crash.



Water Take-Off

Refueling, he conducted a thorough search of the area but could find no survivors. Even though the seas were extremely high, he landed and retrieved several bodies. He could do no more for his Navy friends and fellow aviators.

The Stone and Burke landings at sea in their Douglas Dolphins convinced the Coast Guard hierarchy that this aircraft was capable of performing offshore rescue missions in rough weather. An order was placed for ten more Dolphins, now designated RD-4's. They were all named for stars:

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|----------|-------------|
| - Spica | - Aldebaran |
| - Mizar | - Rigel |
| - Alioth | - Capella |
| - Vega | - Bellatrix |
| - Deneb | - Canopus |



RD-4 #132 Alioth on ramp

Thus, a first "fleet of aircraft" was formed, and an element of standardization became apparent in Coast Guard aviation.

Another opportunity for these stars to shine occurred during and after the Florida Keys were hit in 1935 by the most intense hurricane to ever strike the United

States. Prior to the arrival of the Labor Day storm, newly established Coast Guard Air Station Miami, operating from Dinner Key, launched an aircraft to drop message blocks warning residents, boaters and vacationers of the approaching storm.

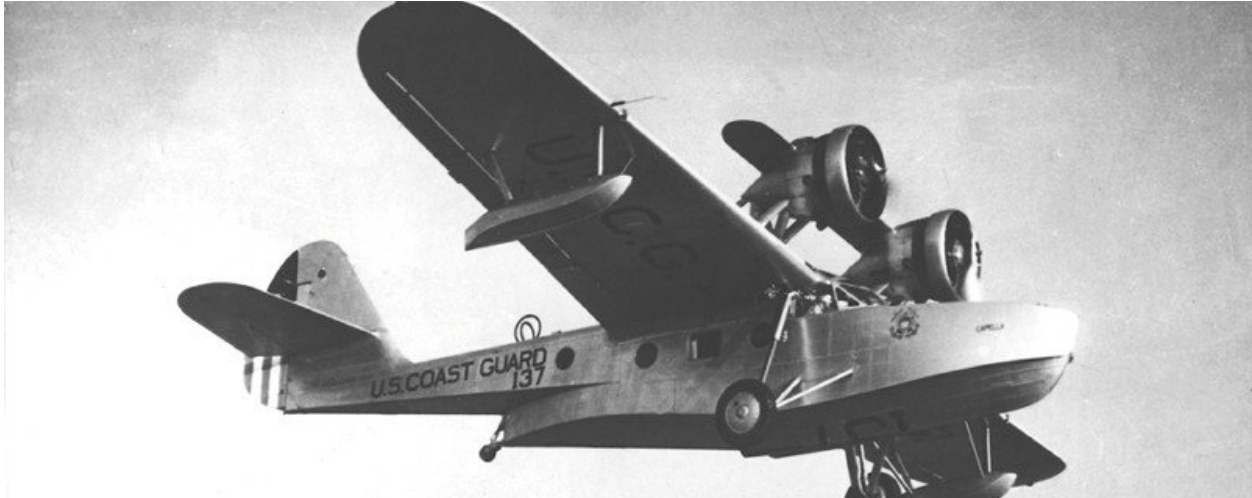
Ultimately, the Category 5 hurricane left 408 fatalities in its wake. The storm destroyed Henry Flagler's railroad connecting Key West to the mainland and is said to have cleared every tree and every building off Matecumbe Key. People caught in the open were blasted by sand with such force that their clothing was stripped away. The pressure at the center of this hurricane was measured at 892 millibars, lowest ever recorded in the United States. In comparison, hurricane Camille, which pounded Mississippi in 1969, measured 909



RD-4 Alioth #132 on water

millibars. Andrew, which also later struck the Florida Keys, measured 922 millibars and was classified as a Category 4 storm.

When conditions finally permitted flight, Miami Air Station pressed BELLATRIX and a PJ-2, ARCTURUS into service. For several days, these aircraft rescued dozens of people.



RD-4 Capella #137 in flight (sister ship of Canopus)

Another early award of the Distinguished Flying Cross to a Coast Guard aviator was presented to Lieutenant Commander Frank A. Leamy (CG Aviator 40) for a rescue flight in RD-4 CANOPUS. Near midnight on May 20th, 1937, Leamy and two crewmen departed the new Coast Guard Air Station at Salem, Massachusetts to rendezvous with the fishing trawler WHITE CAP some 50 miles southeast of Boston. A WHITE CAP crew member had been seriously injured, and immediate evacuation was the only life saving option. Leamy navigated CANOPUS to the scene by homing in on the trawler's radio transmissions. The evaluation of existing sea conditions for a landing at night was "none too favorable." Despite the strong possibility of damage to the aircraft and danger to the aircrew, it was determined that a landing was necessary due to the serious condition of the patient. His arm had been severed below the shoulder. A successful landing on the rough sea was accomplished. Leamy was guided only by two flares he had dropped earlier. Following a difficult transfer of the patient to CANOPUS, Leamy executed a takeoff from the water without the benefit of lights. The hour long flight back to Salem was aided by Leamy homing on the null of the air station radio. From trawler to Dolphin to ambulance to hospital. Another life saved by a Coast Guard aircrew and their faithful airplane.



By 1944, all the Dolphins had completed their useful service lives. A few had crashed. Others were sold or scrapped. Little is known about them, and none were located until recently.

Naval Aviation Museum personnel alerted the Coast Guard Aviation Association -- also known as the Ancient

Order of the Pterodactyl -- that an RD-4 was available for donation. The Pterodactyls assisted with the transfer of the aircraft to the Museum and will help restore and rebuild this aircraft for display in vintage Coast Guard colors. The Dolphin will represent the true beginning of Coast Guard aviation and the era of "flying life boats."



EARLY US COAST GUARD – V SERIES SERIALS

Serial	Type	c/n	Cost	Remarks
V109	Douglas RD1	1000	\$36,500	Ex-USN XRD-1 BuNo A-8876
V111	Douglas RD-2	1122	\$43,500	Takeoff in 594ft no wind. Crashed Mar '37
V125	Douglas RD-4	1268	\$60,000	
V126	Douglas RD-4	1269		Crashed in ocean off San Francisco Sep '41
V127	Douglas RD-4	1270		
V128	Douglas RD-4	1271		
V129	Douglas RD-4	1272		
V130	Douglas RD-4	1273		
V131	Douglas RD-4	1274		
V132	Douglas RD-4	1275		
V133	Douglas RD-4	1276		
V134	Douglas RD-4	1277		

EARLY US COAST GUARD SERIAL SYSTEM – INDIVIDUAL AIRCRAFT NAMES*

NAME	Type	3-DIGIT SERIAL
ADHARA	Douglas RD-21	129
ALDEBARAN	Douglas RD-4	135
ALIOTH	Douglas RD-4	132
BELLATRIX	Douglas RD-4	138
CANOPUS	Douglas RD-4	139
CAPELLA	Douglas RD-4	137
DENEK	Douglas RD-4	134
MIZAR	Douglas RD-4	131
PROCYON	Douglas RD	227
RIGEL	Douglas RD-4	136
SIRIUS	Douglas RD-1	128
SPICA	Douglas RD-4	130
VEGA	Douglas RD-4	133

* The US Coast Guard in the thirties was able to make use of one of those fascinating peacetime luxuries that are normally limited to small organizations – the naming of individual aircraft. This practice was so common that many official Coast Guard communications, nearly all press releases and newspaper stories, referred only to the name of the aircraft. These names appeared on the side of the nose and served as an accurate means of identification of the individual aircraft. In photographs where the serial number is not visible, it is often the only means of positive identification.