

## Number 66260



Plane missed war but still fought on  
Number 66260 served Navy, Coast Guard and fire efforts

By Kevin Vaughan, Rocky Mountain News  
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She came together in a cavernous plant in bustling world War II San Diego - 19 tons of military muscle disguised beneath her shimmering aluminum skin.

She was a PB4Y-2 "Privateer", the U.S. Navy's version of the B-24 Liberator, one of 739 churned out over a two year period by workers at Consolidated Vultee.

Her makers stamped her with a unique number - 66260 - and sent her out to take command of the skies.

But on the day she rolled off the assembly line - July 28, 1945 - she was, essentially, a warrior without a war. The first atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, Japan, nine days later. Then another rained death on Nagasaki three days after that.

And that was it.

It was over before it began for this warbird with a 110-foot wingspan; with 12 machine guns; with a belly capable of unleashing tons of bombs. Or so it seemed.

she spent time in a patrol squadron and in storage, then found new life with the U.S. Coast Guard, where among those who flew her was a young airman destined to climb all the way through the chain of command.

Then she was retired again, left in the Arizona desert for four years before being sold at auction for scrap.

But before anyone got to her with a cutting torch, she was sold again - for \$1 in 1958 - and mechanics bolted heavy tanks into her belly and she began life as a firebomber.

For 45 summers, she lumbered above the flames, helping tame blazes all across the united States.

And then, in a horrifying instant, it all ended about halfway between Estes Park and Lyons, at a place designated as the Lion Gulch trailhead. Her left wing ripped free just moments before a planned slurry drop, and she roared into the ground in a ball of fire, taking with her two pilots who loved working magic above the flames in a lumbering warbird that had been destined for the scrap pile so many years before.

The B-24 Liberator was one of the workhorses of the American war effort in Europe. Though it was overshadowed by the B-17 "Flying Fortress," it had the highest production run of any American bomber, 19,256 in all..

A variant of the B-24, designated the PB4Y-1, had been sold to the Navy in late 1942.

But Navy officials wanted a plane more suited to work over water, and to that end, the PB4Y-2 was designed. It was basically a B-24 with a stretched fuselage and a single fin that replaced the distinctive double tail of the Liberator.

The name "Sea Liberator" was considered, but because she was a different plane, she got a different moniker.

Consolidated Vultee - known in the business as Convair - cranked up production on the new planes, and the first aircraft were delivered in March 1944.

With a top speed of 237 miles per hour, a range of 2,800 miles, and enough firepower to blast a submarine to bits, she was an ideal plane for patrolling the far reaches of the South Pacific.

But 66260 came along too late for that.

By the time she rolled off the assembly line, the production run was almost done, with only 64 more to follow.

She was initially assigned to Patrol Squadron 40, but by May 1947, she rested in a storage yard at Litchfield Park, Ariz., a Naval Air Station located 16 miles outside Phoenix.

There she sat until August 1952, when a young Coast Guard pilot named Marion G. Shrode Jr. accepted the plane from the Navy and flew it once - from Litchfield Park to San Diego.

She was one of 13 Navy Privateers turned over to the Coast Guard.

By October 1952, she was in the air, the distinctive yellow tail stripe of the Coast Guard marking her silvery body.

John Redfield, then a 35-year-old lieutenant in the Coast Guard, was at the controls for one of her first trips in her new livery - a 2,300-mile journey from Barber's Point, Hawaii, to the Pacific outpost of Wake Island. It was Oct. 3, 1952, and the flight was uneventful.

"It was a good plane," said Redfield, now 85 and living in New Roads, La. "I enjoyed it immensely."

The same couldn't be said the next day.

Redfield was in the air, headed for Hawaii, when an air-traffic controller on Wake Island asked him to turn around and escort a Pan Am clipper with a bad engine to the isolated atoll.

During the escort, a Pan Am co-pilot snapped a picture of 66260, Redfield at the controls, above the clouds. It's a photograph that adorns a wall in Redfield's home today.

For a time, the two planes rode side by side through the sky before an uneventful landing at the Wake Island airstrip.

"It was memorable - that's for sure," Redfield said as he looked back on that day a half century ago.

On Oct. 17, 1952, two weeks after Redfield's escort trip, the plane was officially commissioned as a Coast Guard aircraft.

The following month, a young pilot named Owen Siler made his first trip in 66260, one of two co-pilots who flew from Barber's Point to Wake Island so he could get certified in the Privateer.

By the end of November 1952, he'd logged 40 hours in the plane.

He flew it in February and March of 1953 - including an escort of another ailing Pan Am clipper. And then he used it for a search in September 1953, logging another 5.2 hours at the controls.

Perhaps his most memorable flight, however, came on Nov. 27, 1953.

A captain who headed up search-and-rescue operations in Hawaii - who far outranked Siler at the time - needed four hours in the air to qualify for flight pay. He took up 66260, and Siler went with him.

They flew around the islands, eventually returning to Barber's Point. The captain may have ranked higher, but he wasn't much of a pilot.

"He made a lousy landing," Siler, now 80, said from his home in Savannah, Ga. "We could have shot him down and it would have been better."

But if there was one thing Siler understood, it was the chain of command. "I kept my mouth shut," he said.

Siler's career saw him rise to the rank of admiral, and in 1974, President Richard Nixon appointed him to head the Coast Guard. He held the post until he retired in 1978.

He remembers 66260, and the other Privateers he flew, with fondness.

"I liked the plane very much," he said. "and we operated it as our bread-and-butter-type airplane when I was in Hawaii."

On Jan. 14, 1954, the plane was flown to the Coast Guard Air Station in San Diego, where it was scheduled for an overhaul.

According to Navy and Coast Guard records, however, mechanics concluded that it was going to need such extensive work that it wasn't worth it.

For the second time in its life, 66260 was mothballed at Litchfield Park, stricken from the Coast Guard's roster on Feb. 18, 1954.

For five years, 66260 sat in the desert, her nose and cockpit windows covered with tarps.

On Feb. 14, 1958, the u.s. Navy sold 66260, apparently at an auction, to Ace Smelting Inc. of San Antonio.

Ace smelting no longer exists, but it's almost certain the company planned to scrap the plane.

A copy of the old bill of sale, preserved on microfilm, is tucked away in a filing cabinet in a Federal Aviation Administration office in Oklahoma city. Someone took a pen and marked through the price, so it's uncertain what Ace Smelting and the company's president, Robert Thompson, paid for the plane.

She avoided the scrap heap, however, perhaps because of a logistical problem.

"It's a possibility that they just couldn't get anybody out there to get it," said Alan C. Carey, author of *Above an Angry Sea* and other books about American bombers.

Whatever the circumstances, one thing is clear: On July 10, 1958, Big Piney Aviation of Roy, Utah, bought 66260 from Ace smelting Inc.

For \$1.

Within days, she'd been fitted with tanks in her old bomb bays and took to the skies as a fire bomber.

On Feb. 25, 1959, Big Piney's owner, Truman E. Miley, used 66260 as collateral to obtain a \$6,190.32 loan, which he paid off in a little more than a year.

On Jan. 7, 1961, 66260 changed hands again, sold to another Big Piney Aviation Inc., this branch in namesake Big Piney, Wyo., for \$1 and "other considerations," which weren't spelled out on the bill of sale.

A little more than four years later, Miley, the Big Piney Aviation president, sold 66260 to Avery Aviation of Greybull, Wyo., which, in turn, sold her to Hawkins and Powers Aviation in May 1969.

Through all the ownership changes, 66260 chugged along. She was modified several times. She was fitted with newer, more powerful engines.

She carried a big, black "123" on her nose, signifying her as Tanker 123 in the federal fleet of slurry bombers.

Her last flight began at 6:15 p.m. on July 18 at Jefferson County Airport in Broomfield.

The Big Elk Fire was roaring near Lyons, and 66260 had work to do.

In the cockpit were Milt Stollak, 56, a longtime pilot, and Rick Schwartz, a 39 year-old whose wife was expecting their first child.

They climbed off the runway and into the sky, heading north for the quick trip to the blaze. Two other tankers and a helicopter were all in the air, as was a U.S. Forest Service pilot in a lead plane.

The air was smooth, void of the turbulence usually found above fires. Stollak and Schwartz circled overhead, waiting for another tanker crew and a chopper pilot to pour their slurry and water onto the fire line. Everything seemed normal.

Seconds later, it all changed.

The left wing broke free. Flames shot from the plane, which banked and fell to the ground. Stollak and Schwartz died instantly.

It was 6:40 p.m.

Only 10 days short of her 57th year of existence, 66260 was gone. She took two veteran, savvy pilots with her.

It was not the ending that anyone could have wanted for brave men and for a mid-20th-century warbird that served so long, so well.