

# *World War Two Flying-boats over the Zululand Coast*

*by Jeff Gaisford*

THE Greater St Lucia Wetland Park is a World Heritage Site famed for its beautiful scenery, basking hippos, flamingos and pelicans. In its centre lies the great expanse of Lake St Lucia itself, drawing tourists from all over the world eager to experience the wonders of Zululand's greatest natural attraction. The area is rich in history. The view of the southern lake from the easily accessible Mission Rocks view-site on the Eastern Shores en route to Cape Vidal is fantastic. Behind you lies the blue expanse of the Indian Ocean, and at your feet lies the shining reach of the south basin of Lake St Lucia. Right in the middle of this view lies a relic dating back to the darker days of the Second World War.

Sixty-eight years ago the world was at war and different wings soared over the

marshes of St Lucia. German U-boats were sinking a great deal of Allied shipping off the east coast of South Africa, and to counter this the Royal Air Force sent 262 Squadron, equipped with twin-engined Catalina flying-boats to the Cape. As the U-boats moved east so did the Catalinas, basing themselves at Congella in Durban Harbour, with an operational base in Catalina Bay on the Eastern Shores of Lake St Lucia. In building the new base RAF staff dynamited the nearby Mission Rocks on the sea-shore for stone to make concrete for foundations and roadways. The blast-marks are still clearly visible to this day.

The Catalina was a big, graceful aircraft that could undertake extended patrols of more than 24 hours. It carried six depth charges that, if dropped accurately, could easily sink a submarine. St



*Catalina A flying somewhere over the North Coast*

Lucia, with its flat terrain and open expanses of sheltered water, was an ideal base. The Catalinas would come and go at all hours and for night landings used a flare-path (as the landing area was called) marked by a double line of small boats each equipped with a strong lantern and moored diagonally across the lake from Mitchell Island towards Charter's Creek on the western shore. Life at the Eastern Shores base was eventful – there were encounters with hippos and crocodiles – and crewmen in the Catalinas used to take pot shots with heavy-calibre machine guns at basking crocs as they flew along the Lake. The resident game warden was soon banging on the base-commander's door!

On the night of 7 June 1943 the realities of operational flying struck hard. Catalina E of 259 Squadron, based in Madagascar, was coming in to land from the south end of the flare-path. As the big flying-boat approached

Mitchell Island on its final run, it suddenly lost power in one engine, stalled and crashed into the shallows of the Lake, killing all but one crewman. Base staff salvaged what they could from the wreck, sinking several sections of concrete pipe into the mud to use as foundations for a working platform. These relics are often all that can be seen of the site. Pelican flocks also used it as a perch. As time went by it collapsed slowly and today is little more than a collection of corroded aluminium pieces protruding from the mud. As a ranger I waded in calf-deep water to the wreck in 1982 with two colleagues James Wood and Paul White, wishing at every step that I could lift both feet from the water. Around us grew matted sea-grass and amongst this lived numerous mud-crabs the size of dinner plates and armed with powerful pincers. The sea-grass surged ominously as these monsters scuttled from us. Even then

there was little left of the wreck. Corrosion had severely reduced it, but we removed an intact part of the tail and this is stored at St Lucia.

On 25 June 1943, in the dark before dawn, Catalina H of 262 Squadron RAF taxied out to the threshold of the flare-path at the Mitchell Island end. It was due to fly an extended patrol to Madagascar, down to Durban and back to St Lucia and was heavy with fuel, ammunition and depth charges. It was an absolutely windless night and the lake surface was like glass. All seaplanes and flying-boats require a degree of “choppiness” on the water during take-off to allow them to “unstuck” from the surface and a launch was sent out to plough up the surface. But it was not enough. The big, heavily laden flying-boat, with both engines bellowing, ran interminably, climbed steeply, then stalled and went into a sideslip, plummeting into the lake where it exploded with a great flash of burning fuel. All but one of the crew perished. The wreck of this aircraft lies in a deeper part of the Lake and its location is unknown at present. All but one of the bodies of the crew were recovered by Royal Navy divers and buried in the Stelawood Cemetery in Durban. The late Jeff Selley, whose family used to own

the Estuary Hotel at St Lucia, was on leave from the army at the time, heard of the crash and took a boat powered by a spluttering Seagull outboard motor 22 km up the estuary in the dark to help the RAF. He was told to be careful of anything that might look like a dustbin as it could be an unexploded depth charge!

The water levels of Lake St Lucia have fluctuated greatly for millennia and the RAF was eventually forced to move its operations to Lake Umsingazi near Richards Bay as St Lucia became too shallow for the Catalinas. The last Catalina flew from St Lucia on 13 October 1944.

262 Squadron RAF duly became 35 Squadron SAAF, famed for their rescue exploits along the South African coast. The Catalinas were replaced by big four-engined Sunderland Mark 5 flying-boats whose ancestors were the Empire flying-boats that flew a regular passenger service to England before the war.

The squadron base was at Congella in Durban and this required the big flying-boats to land in the harbour. They were forbidden to land there at night, however, due to various after-dark hazards that included the large number of small fishing craft, and they had to land at Lake Umsingazi.



*Sunderland N-RB seen here landing on Durban Bay*



*Sunderland D-RB over Durban*

A 35 Sqn SAAF Sunderland with the registration letters N-RB crashed and sank there on the night of 1 November 1956 in bad weather after a navigation exercise to Europa Island in the Mozambique Channel. A young crewman, 18-year-old Henry van Reenen, survived the crash and, now a businessman in Gauteng, recently told me his tale:

Three Sunderlands flew on the navigation exercise from Durban to Europa Island. Their serial numbers were D-RB and N-RB which was the aircraft I flew in. I cannot recall the registration of the third one. En route our radar set failed. Great waterspouts were rising all around us, forcing us to dodge backwards and forwards and it wasn't long before our navigators had no idea where we were. Without radar we were almost blind

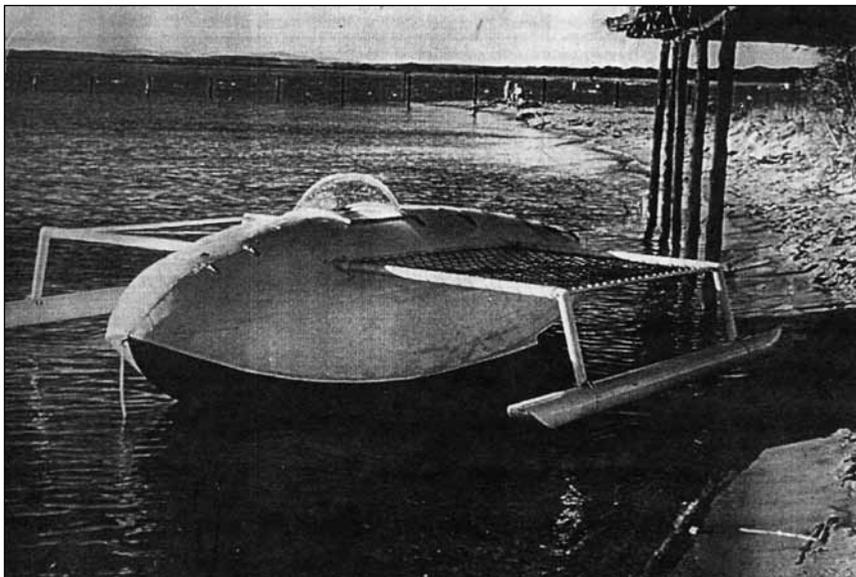
The other two Sunderlands completed the exercise, turned for home and landed safely at Lake

Umsingazi. We eventually packed it in in the late afternoon and headed back towards the South African coast. A thunderstorm had come up, waterspouts kept forcing us to change course, so we headed towards Durban and then turned up-coast in order to find our landing area on Lake Umsingazi. Late that night we sighted the lights of the flarepath on Lake Umsingazi and came down on our final approach. The thunderstorm was still raging with high winds, very heavy rain, hail and great flashes of lightning that lit the sky around us. The Sunderland was about 60 feet off the water when for no apparent reason we dropped onto the surface, hitting very hard. We bounced, then hit the water again. Our pilot, Captain Naude, rammed the throttles open to abort the landing and go around once more, but at about 100 feet the Sunderland stalled under full power and crashed into the lake. The nose was partially

broken off, the co-pilot Lt Col Thys Uys was flung bodily through the cockpit canopy and landed almost 200 yards away. Captain Naude's harness snapped and he was flung back-first against the instrument panel, injuring his back. I was seated in the wardroom below the flight deck with three other crewmen and was catapulted against the bulkhead ahead of us and knocked unconscious. Two of these crewmen were the only fatalities. I came to a few minutes later under water and in pitch darkness. I found some air trapped above me and, after taking a deep breath, swam back through the wardroom into the galley – there I opened a hatch that led to the flight deck, but this was also under water. There was a small perspex dome used by the navigator just aft the main canopy. I found some air trapped there and this gave me a few more gulps.

Acting more on instinct I swam along a passageway to the weapons deck intending to exit the Sunderland through one of two machine-gun

hatches situated on either side of the fuselage just aft of the wing trailing edges. Some flame floats in this compartment had ignited and the interior of the compartment was aflame so I swam underneath the flames to get to the left hand hatch. The rest of the crew were sitting on the left hand wing and Jan Knoll, a Dutch radio officer, heard me yelling. He had been in the wardroom with us and had swum out through the galley and through the viciously sharp tangle of wreckage where the nose had been. He jumped into the water and helped me out, swimming with me to the wing where my friends pulled me up and out of the water. They battled to pull me up because a hook on my Mae West buoyancy jacket had caught on the wing trailing edge. All their pulling was pretty painful! I passed out from the pain of my injuries – I had broken both ankles – and only came to briefly on the boat taking us to shore. We were given first aid and bundled into the back of 1947 Ford ambulance that



*The catamaran ski-boat, complete with domed perspex cake cover usually found in tearooms, which Jim Fenwick fashioned out of the right-hand wing float of Sunderland N-RB, which crashed into Lake Umsingazi in November, 1956*

bounced its way across a terribly rough track to the Empangeni Hospital. Both my feet were dangling off the end of the stretcher and were being mercilessly bounced up and down. One of the medics realised that I was in agony and they shifted me up a bit. At the hospital they cut off our flying suits and gave us another thorough wash! We were later flown to Durban and spent a few weeks recovering in Addington Hospital before being flown to Cape Town in another Sunderland.

Richards Bay in those days was still very wild and the bodies of the two men who died in the crash were only recovered some days later because crocodiles were nosing around the wreck and keeping the divers away. Thys Uys was a bit of a legend in his own right having been involved in the attempted rescue of the survivors of a wrecked ship, the *Dunedin Star*, on the Namibian coast in 1939 flying a Ventura.

As a boy I saw the stripped hull of the Sunderland being winched out of Lake Msingazi in about 1958. Only recently have I found out that full salvage was not possible and the hull was let slip back into the lake. It is probably still there. A local man, Jim Fenwick (now 96 and living in the USA) salvaged the right-hand wing float at that time and

converted it into a catamaran ski-boat powered by an old flathead Ford V8 engine and with one of those large domed perspex cake covers usually found in tearooms as a canopy. This contraption, looking like something from Star Trek, actually went out to sea and must still be in the area somewhere!

In time the Sunderlands were also phased out and were replaced by the big, noisy four-engined Avro Shackletons which were a direct descendant of the famous Lancaster bombers. The “Shacks”, too, were eventually phased out in the late 1980s and have been replaced by ... the good old Douglas DC3 Dakota which had its beginnings at the same time as the Catalinas way back in 1936 when the prototypes of both aircraft flew for the first time!

*(This article was first published as two separate articles in World Airnews.)*

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