



A-2 jacket patch for the 54th Fighter Squadron.

WAR OF THE ALEUTIAN LIGHTNING

AT THE HARSH "TOP OF THE WORLD," P-38 LIGHTNINGS OF THE 54th FIGHTER SQUADRON, COMBINED WITH OTHER UNITS, FOUGHT A SUPERIOR JAPANESE FORCE AS THE ENEMY INVADED AMERICAN TERRITORY- PART TWO

BY STEVE BLAKE

The Allied forces continued to be on the move in the Aleutians. On 12 January 1943, they occupied Amchitka Island, which is only 70 miles southeast of Kiska. Work was immediately begun on an airfield there — Amchitka AAF — and the first aircraft (P-40s of the 18th FS) landed there 16 days later. Kiska's floatplanes had immediately begun attacking the occupation forces, and kept up their attacks for over a month, inflicting a fair amount of death and destruction relative to their small numbers. (The A6M-N could carry two 132-pound bombs and the E13A two 551- or four 132-pounders.) On a rare clear day, they could be seen from an observation post on Amchitka's

northwest tip taking off from Kiska Harbor. (There had also been occasional reconnaissance flights over and bombing attacks on Adak, usually by a single aircraft.)

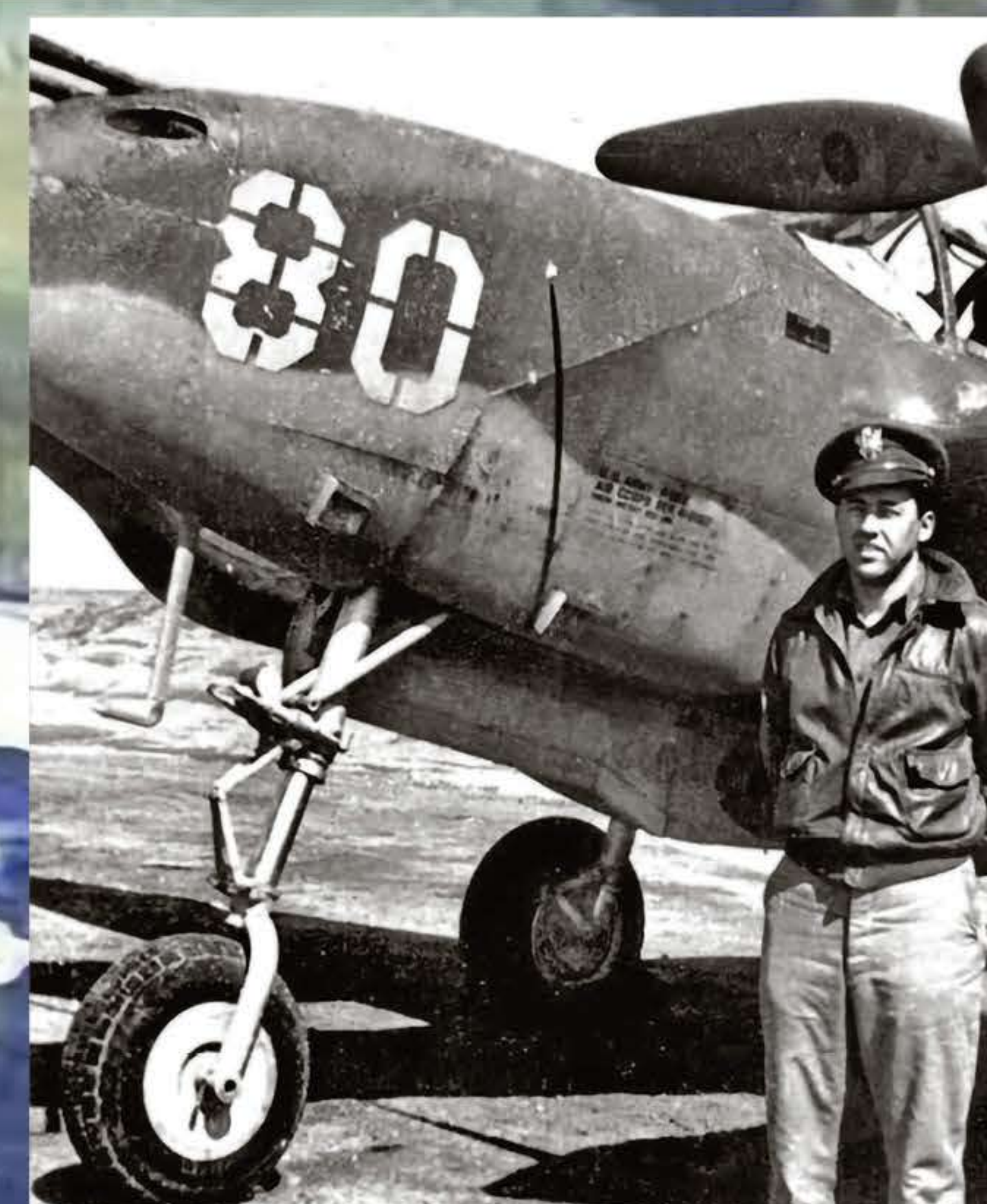
The 13th of February was an eventful day for the 54th FS. Just before noon, a P-38 flight led by Capt. Morgan A. Giffin and accompanied by a lone B-25 was patrolling over Amchitka when Giffin intercepted and shot down what he identified as a "Mitsubishi 97 twin float" off the west end of the island. There was no such type; it was obviously either a Rufe or a Jake.

Also on the 13th, five heavy bombers, six medium (twin-engine) bombers,

and ten other P-38s bombed and strafed targets on Kiska, including a landing strip that the Japanese were constructing but were never able to finish because of the constant bombardment, from the air and from USN warships. Five Rufes intercepted them and three were shot down by the Lightning pilots — two by now-Capt. George Laven (with #76), bringing his victory total to three, and the other by 1st Lt. Francis A. Evans.

Five days later, two 18th FS Warhawk pilots each shot a Rufe down into the ocean near Amchitka. These were that unit's only air victories.

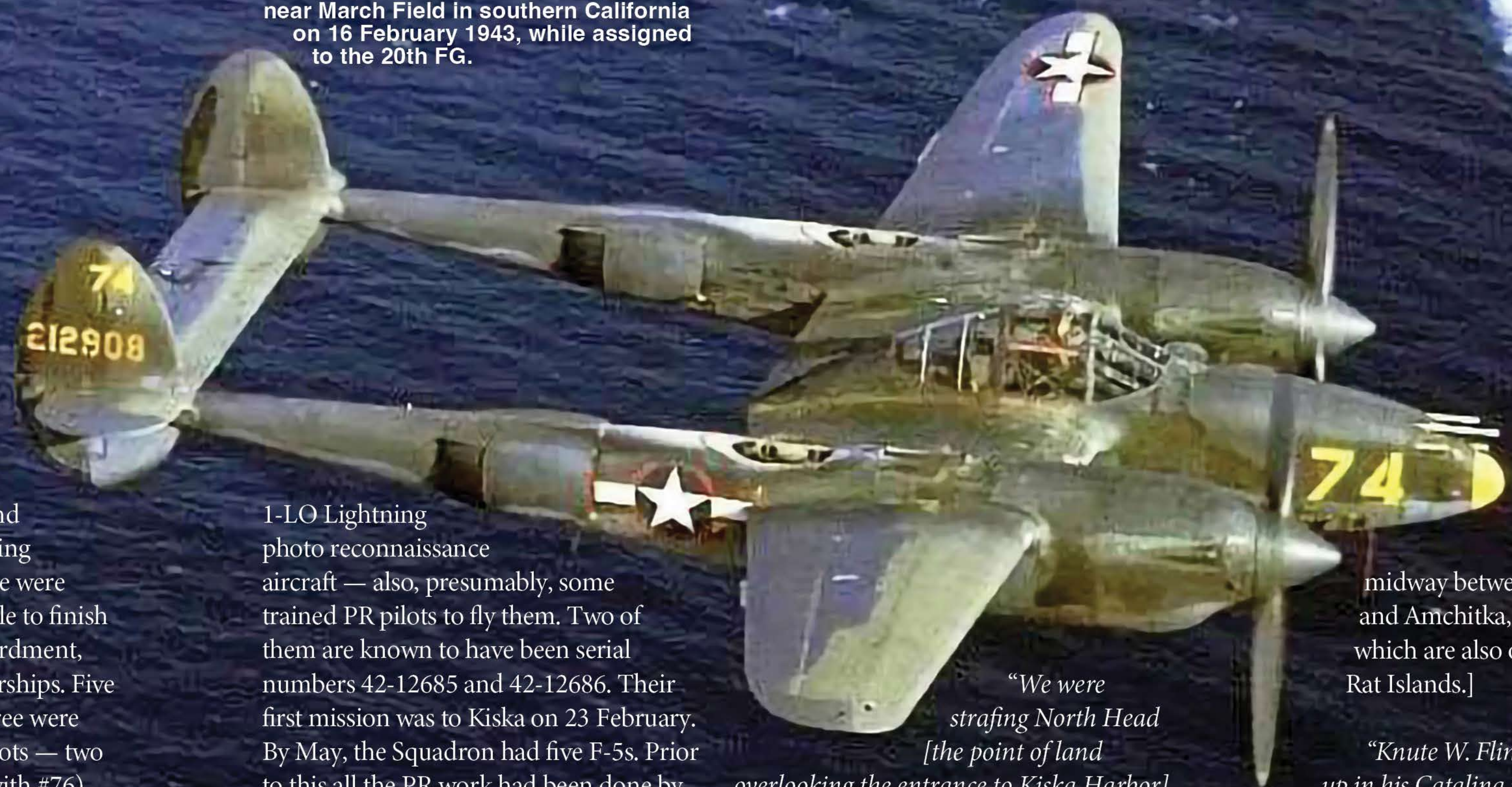
Around this time the 54th FS began receiving some camera-equipped F-5A-



Stan Long and his second #80, P-38E-LO 41-2007, with which he shot down a Mavis flying boat on 4 August 1942. This plane was returned to the US and the pilot bailed out of the fighter near March Field in southern California on 16 February 1943, while assigned to the 20th FG.



The Mavis was relatively heavily armed and carried one Type 92 .30-caliber gun in the nose, two Type 92s in the waist position, one Type 92 atop the fuselage, and one Type 99 Mk. 1 20mm cannon in the tail position.



1-LO Lightning photo reconnaissance aircraft — also, presumably, some trained PR pilots to fly them. Two of them are known to have been serial numbers 42-12685 and 42-12686. Their first mission was to Kiska on 23 February. By May, the Squadron had five F-5s. Prior to this all the PR work had been done by bombers.

The 54th Squadron moved to Amchitka's new fighter strip on 12 March, and three days later a P-38 flight consisting of Lt. Lyle A. Bean, the flight leader; his wingman, Lt. Frank C. Shearin Jr.; the element leader, Lt. John W. "Spider" Livesay; and his wingman, Lt. John K. "Shorty" Geddes; took off from there to accompany six B-24s on another bombing and strafing mission to Kiska. Geddes later described the tragedy that ensued to a newspaper reporter:

"We were strafing North Head [the point of land overlooking the entrance to Kiska Harbor] at about 330 miles-per-hour at ten feet [altitude]. I saw [Livesay's] right engine torch into flame and yelled, 'Feather your right prop, Spider.' We followed him out 25 miles.

"Spider pushed her within 300 feet of Rat Island, where he went down. Between 15-foot rips, I saw him clear the sinking plane, lose his raft to the waves, then struggle for shore in the freezing water. Circling, I saw Spider knocked down twice." [Author's Note: Rat Island is

midway between Kiska and Amchitka, both of which are also one of the Rat Islands.]

"Knut W. Flint, 22, came up in his Catalina patrol seaplane. He flew over low.

A wave hit his hull and jerked out his antennae while they kept milling around for 45 minutes, watching Spider's struggles, hoping, squeezing for him, hating to leave."

According to Flint, as he was quoted in the same newspaper article, "If only his motor had conked out earlier, away from the surf; the waves were too much for my ship. Finally, I decided to land to the lee of Rat Island." (Author's Note: Capt. Flint was the USAAF's very first Catalina

A 54th FS flight off the coast of Attu sometime in late 1943. The flight leader's plane, #74 (P-38G-10-LO 42-12908), was involved in three mishaps: A taxiing accident on 21 December 1943, another on 5 December 1944, and a landing accident on 16 April 1945. The second plane, #80, had been Capt. George Laven's *Itsy Bitsy*, P-38E-LO 41-2069, although he had completed his combat tour by then. It was damaged in an accident on the ground on 1 February 1944. Lightning #84 (P-38E-LO 41-2112) was destroyed in a mid-air collision over Attu's Massacre Bay on 3 December 1944 and its pilot, F/O Bob Stebbins, killed.