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## A CAP for the Sub Threat

In the early months of World War II, the US was not prepared to deal with the German submarine threat. A civilian organization, CAP, volunteered to help fill the gap.

**O**N DECEMBER 7, 1941, Japan, Germany, and Italy declared war on the US. Germany immediately began submarine attacks on US shipping, concentrating on the sea-lanes along our East Coast. The results were catastrophic for the movement of oil from Gulf of Mexico ports to the northeast and for shipment of supplies to our European Allies. In January 1942, twelve vessels were sunk along the coast. In March forty-two went down, and by May the toll was so high that no figures were released to the public. The US military did not have enough ships and planes to combat the German menace.

Fortunately, one organization could take significant action to help limit the attacks—the Civil Air Patrol. Organized a week before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and placed under the Office of Civilian Defense, CAP was composed of private pilots and support personnel who believed that war lay just over the horizon and knew they could perform many services to help the military. Its members, who ranged from millionaires to mechanics, served in units throughout the country, personally providing many of the aircraft and spare parts. Before the war ended, CAP numbered 100,000 men and women from eighteen years of age to more than fifty.

In February 1942, CAP requested—and finally was granted—permission to conduct submarine patrols in aircraft of at least ninety horsepower. Their function was to find enemy submarines, then call in military aircraft and ships to sink them. Funds were provided for two bases, at Atlantic City, N. J., and Rehoboth, Del. Eventually twenty-one CAP bases would dot the coast. CAP volunteers were paid from five to eight dollars per day to cover their expenses.

Submarine patrol was hazardous duty. Few of the pilots had any over-water flying experience, but their patrol areas lay from twenty to 100 miles offshore. They flew at 300 feet, too low to use parachutes. Patrols often were carried out in weather below Army and Navy minimums. Their light planes were not designed to survive ditching, which could be fatal, especially in winter. Because of these perils, female CAP pilots were not allowed to volunteer for submarine duty, but they flew in other capacities.

CAP located more than 150 submarines, many of which were given the *coup de grâce* by the Army or Navy. Eventually the light planes capable of carrying two 100-pound bombs or a depth charge were armed and single-handedly sank at least one submarine, damaging several more. German captains soon learned that the appearance of a light plane meant that heavy help was on the way and that a crash dive was in order. As time passed, the combination of CAP and military might drove the submarines further and further from shore with a drastic reduction in US and Allied shipping losses.

There were many acts of heroism by CAP sea-patrol crews. One in particular deserves telling, not only because of the valor displayed by the crew but also because it earned the first two of more than 800 Air Medals awarded to CAP members.

On the afternoon of July 21, 1942, a CAP Fairchild aircraft went down about twenty miles at sea from the CAP base at Rehoboth. A radio call from the crashed plane's sister ship gave the location. CAP Maj. Hugh R. Sharp, Jr., commander of the base, and CAP Lt. Edmond I. Edwards immediately took off in an old Sikorsky amphibian, bucking a strong northeast wind. When they reached the crash scene, the left wing float of the amphibian was damaged while landing on the rough sea and was taking on water. Edwards climbed out on the hull and located Henry Cross, the pilot of the downed plane, who at first was hidden by ten-foot

swells. His observer had disappeared and never was found.

From his precarious perch on the hull, Edwards threw a rope to Cross, who appeared to be paralyzed. With great difficulty, the Sikorsky was maneuvered close enough for Edwards to reach Cross and pull him aboard, where it was apparent that his back had been broken. Now, as the sun set, the challenge was to get the injured man ashore and to a hospital, but the listing amphibian could not take off in its damaged condition, let alone withstand the rough sea. It would have to be taxied to shore. To keep the plane on an even keel, Edwards crawled out on the right wing and clung there until a Coast Guard ship arrived and towed them to shore. A chilled and soaking Edwards had been on the wing for more than seven hours when the rescue was completed. Henry Cross recovered and returned to duty with CAP but was not able to return to flying.

For this feat of skill and courage, the first Air Medals awarded to CAP members were presented to Major Sharp and Lieutenant Edwards by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in a ceremony at the White House. These were the only Air Medals awarded to CAP members for specific actions. The other 800 were for sustained operations in hazardous conditions.

When CAP ended its patrol missions, its antisubmarine units had flown nearly 87,000 missions totaling some twenty-four million miles over water, helped defeat the submarine menace, and rescued many survivors at sea. Other units continued to assist the military in many ways. According to Gen. H. H. "Hap" Arnold, fifty CAP members lost their lives serving the country during World War II.

CAP became an auxiliary of the Air Force in 1948. Its members serve the US today as they have for more than half a century, flying ninety percent of landbased search-and-rescue missions for civilian aircraft, conducting counterdrug surveillance, training cadets, and participating in aviation education. CAP is a resource that far outweighs its modest cost. ■