

# Lake Michigan's Aircraft Carriers

## by Paul M. Somers

by Hal Marshman Sr

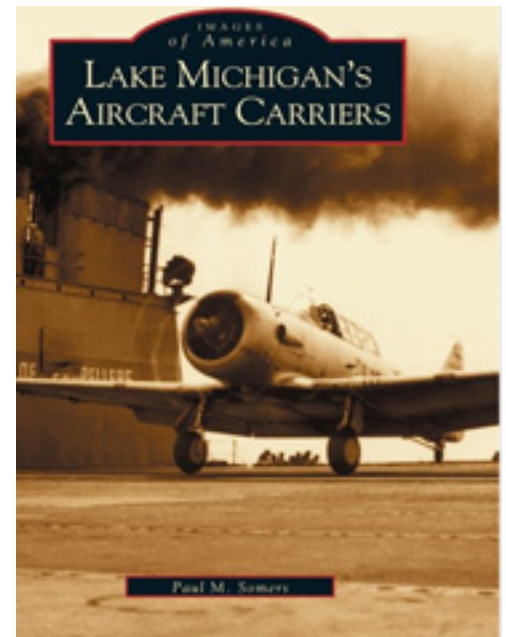
For years I've been intrigued by the stories of side-wheel aircraft carriers on Lake Michigan during World War II. At last, a picture book has been published, in the Images of America Series, about these little-known vessels that did so much to help the US and its allies win the Second World War.

The book begins with a capsule history of aircraft carriers in the US Navy, with pictures depicting the USS Pittsburgh, and Eugene Ely's first airplane take off from a ship in his Curtiss pusher. This is followed by a couple of pictures of the USS Langley, and the chapter closes with a photo of the USS Lexington. Once you've been grounded in the brief history of carriers, the book delves into first, the SS Seandbee, and then the SS Greater Buffalo. These were large lake excursion steamers, coal driven, and side-wheel propelled, multi-decked and in excess of 500 feet in length. There are a good many photos of these ships, and the elegant appointments that attracted so many folks to their cruises on Lake Michigan. There are also diagrams of these two ships, so you can see the manner in which they were set up.

In 1941, US Navy Commander Richard F. Whitehead originated the idea of training carrier pilots on the Great Lakes. This would allow pilots to be trained in

carrier operations, without the risk of enemy intrusion, and would ensure that the Navy's seagoing carriers would be available for the combat operations for which they were built. The Navy started searching for suitable vessels to convert to Lake Carriers, rather than building them from the keel up, a much more economical move. Eventually, they settled on the Seandbee and the Greater Buffalo as suitable for conversion. The ships were stripped of their prewar opulence, and flight decks were built upon the hulls, with a small island built so that prospective carrier pilots would get used to that type of obstruction. As things worked out, the flight decks ended up being wider than those of our fleet carriers, a definite bonus. Once the conversion work was done, the two vessels were renamed the USS Wolverine and the USS Sable respectively.

The book then goes into a description of the actual operations. Pilots flew out to the carriers, performed their training tasks, and returned to the land base from which they originated, none overnighting onboard. There is a good selection of photos of the different airplanes that participated in training ops, from SNJ Texans to TBF Avengers. There are pictures of the crew members' berthing area, the mess facilities, and the poor



seamen selected to hand shovel coal into the boilers. Interesting to see the great clouds of black smoke belching from the stacks, due to the use of coal. There were over 17,000 pilots initiated into the vagaries of carrier landings before war's end, including pilots of the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm. There's even a closeup of a certain Ensign George H. W. Bush, who was carrier qualified through this program.

Sadly, like all things, the book comes to an end with the decommissioning of the Wolverine and Sable, and their subsequent break up and scrapping, all of which is photographically depicted. I now have four of the Images of America series of picture books in my library, including the title which I've just reported on. The others cover the town in which I grew up, Middleborough, MA, the town in which I now live, Weymouth, MA, and lastly, the South Weymouth Naval Air Station, a blimp base during World War II. These books are all profusely illustrated with

photos of different aspects of the communities which they portray down through the years. The Naval Air Station book is probably typical of the Military Base series they publish, showing stages in the original

construction, operational use, and closing histories of those bases no longer in use. I heartily recommend any of these books in which you might find interest. At a cost of roughly \$25, they prove an economical glimpse into

history. Perhaps they do one on your home town, might be worth checking to see. Check your local library or town/city historical organizations