

195. Vickers OA-10A serial #44-33883
2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron, 5276th Rescue Composite Group



During the first year of the war, there was no Army Air Force rescue organization in the SWPA, although U.S. Navy PBVs carried out limited rescue duties. The Fifth Air Force Rescue Service was established in early 1943, pioneered by Major John Small Jr., who found “*universal interest in rescue,*” but no infrastructure in place. With one enlisted man as assistant, he began to direct search and rescue missions, using any means that came to hand. For over six months he continued these efforts, commandeering aircraft from operational units, as well as the RAAF, including their Small Boat Unit. Two OA-10s were finally assigned to this fledgling outfit in August 1943, but it took nearly another year before the first substantive AAF rescue unit reached the theatre, the 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron. By then, Small’s office had nonetheless effected 54 successful rescue operations. When the 2nd ERS arrived in theatre, it was equipped with one headquarters and four operational flights, consisting of 30 officers and 205 enlisted men, complemented with twelve OA-10 Catalinas, four AT-11s, and four L-5s. By January 1945, unit strength had been increased to 67 officers and 270 enlisted men, with the Squadron operating nine OA-10s, two C-47s, and one C-45. By April 1944, a total of 455 rescues had been accomplished in the SWPA.

During the first year of operations, it was decided to assign all rescue organizations to Fifth Air Force headquarters. Thus the Fifth Air Force Rescue Service became the 5276th Rescue Composite Group (CG) on 24 September 1944, combining the 3rd Emergency Rescue Squadron and the 14th Emergency Rescue Boat Squadron. In April 1945, the 6th Emergency Rescue Squadron was also assigned to the 5th Emergency Rescue Group, successor to the 5276th CG. Within each rescue group, individual flights often found themselves widely separated. Contrary to a reputation for reliability, the OA-10s first proved problematic in theatre, and were frequently damaged in water landings, and all Canadian-manufactured OA-10s were delivered with faulty radio equipment which had to be replaced. B-17s equipped with lifeboats began arriving in the Pacific in the spring of 1945, however these too brought their own unique problems, since the rescue squadrons had no qualified B-17 mechanics, and parts were scarce.