

Cat needs cash splash to fly home

Restorers have mounted a mission to install the plane as a museum centrepiece

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SEAPLANE enthusiasts are being asked to roll up for a "splash-in" at the former Rathmines flying boat base on Lake Macquarie next month to support moves to bring another Catalina back to Australia.

The Catalina Flying Memorial Ltd has acquired another wartime Catalina in Portugal and hopes to make it a centrepiece of a museum at Rathmines, north of Sydney.

Supporters of the project have already contributed money to acquire the aircraft and engineers have brought it to the stage where it is ready to fly, but more money is needed to finalise preparations and fly it home.

Enthusiasts have already brought one Catalina back to Australia, but that one, housed with the Historical Aircraft Restoration Society at Albion Park, NSW, operates as a land plane only.

The aim of the seaplanes association is to have the PBY6A Cat operate in the environment for which it was originally designed.

"It will be unique in Australia and perhaps the world — a Catalina housed and operating from a historic base on a waterway that is ideally suited for this purpose and in a community where some still remember the sights and sounds and stories of the Cats," Seaplane Pilots Association chairman Phil Dulhunty

said. "Our new PBY Catalina is still in Seia, Portugal, ready for the ferry flight but waiting for some fairy godfather to donate us some money for the flight."

"The avgas alone is estimated to cost between \$75,000 and \$100,000, as the old bird consumes 80 gallons an hour and is flat out at 100mp/h."

"With about 12,000 miles for the trip, that's 120 hours at 80 gallons — 9600 gallons or 43,680 litres at various prices along the route from \$1 to \$3 per litre."

The Catalina played a pivotal role in the World War II Pacific theatre, which enthusiasts liken to the Spitfire's role in the Battle of Britain.

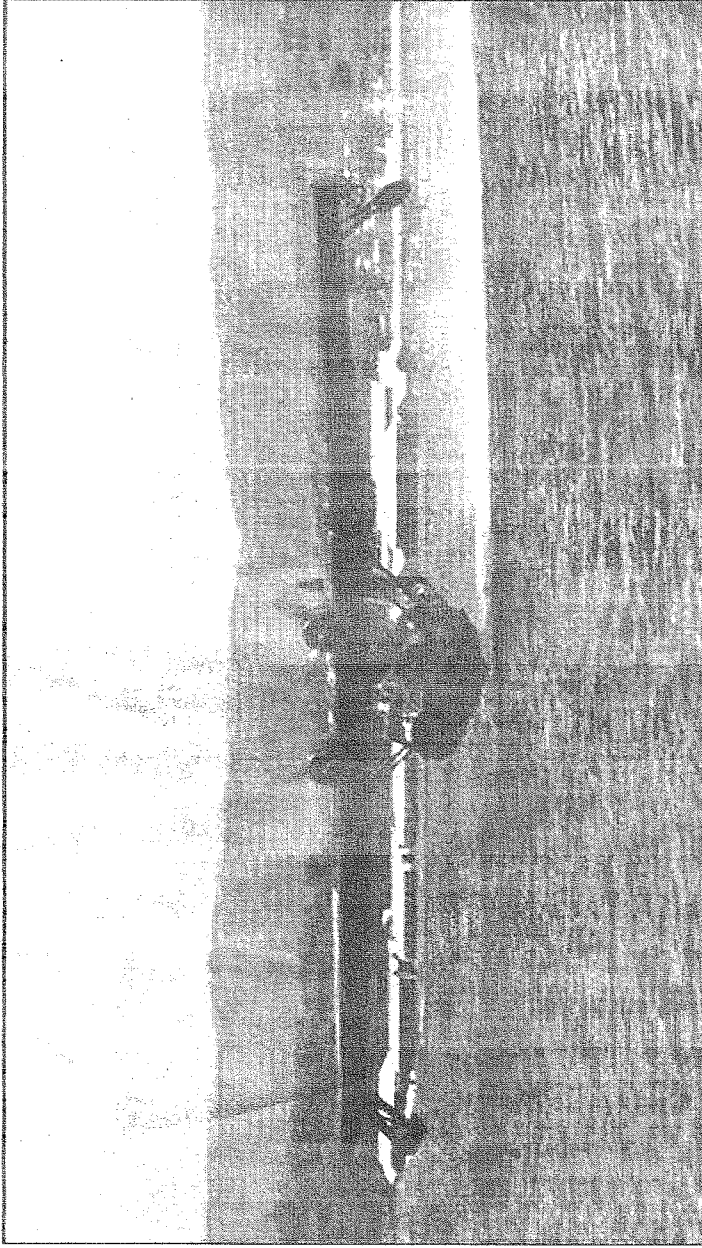
It was a slow, long-range aircraft that could stay aloft for more than 20 hours and was used behind enemy lines for bombing runs, mine-laying, depth-charging, air-sea rescue and long-range reconnaissance.

The US-built plane had a distinctive profile with two engines mounted high on the wings, a flying boat hull and gun turrets. Some had wheels for land as well as sea operation while others were straight seaplanes.

Rathmines was the biggest flying boat base in the world, developed from 1941 to accommodate a growing fleet of Catalinas.

It accommodated some 168 Cats between 1941 and 1945, along with 600 crews and about 6000 airmen.

It has now been heritage-listed



Seabird of prey: A Catalina takes off from the world's largest flying boat base at RAAF Rathmines on Lake Macquarie during World War II

by the NSW Government and an application is in for funds to construct hangar-style buildings for use as a museum.

Mr Dulhunty said the Catalina in Portugal was one of the last made by Consolidated and was originally called Manutara II. Ironically, this translates as Frigate Bird II, the same name as the Catalina flown by Australian aviation pioneer P.G. Taylor. It went to Chile, where it was put into storage before it was converted to a fire bomber in

Canada, returned to Chile and ended back in storage.

It was then leased to Aerocondor in Portugal before the company lost its contract about seven years ago.

"So it has just been sitting there and it's in a pretty good area as far as corrosion is concerned — in the foothills away from the sea — and it's in surprisingly good condition," Mr Dulhunty said.

"We've had five engineers over there getting engines going,

checking it all out, scraping out little bits of corrosion and putting electronics into it — radios transponders and things like that.

"It's now ready for its first test flight and to get a ferry permit to bring it out here."

The group has approached fuel companies for assistance with fuel and Mobil has offered a carnet, but it was not clear where this could be used on the proposed route via India.

Professional ferry pilot Jim Hazelton had also offered his

services free of charge. Mr Dulhunty said being able to use the Cat in water was a key part of bringing it back.

He said this would mean it would cost more to maintain and operate but this was seen as essential.

"We're saying this is what distinguishes the Catalina from every other warbird — it's a flying boat," he said.

"The splash-in on September 29 will also be used officially to rename the waterway near Rathmines Catalina Bay.