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WHITE CAT**

# ON ASSIGNMENT



## CATCHING A CAT

**Photographer:**  
Damien Burke/  
HandmadeByMachine.com

**Aircraft:**  
Plane Sailing's PBY-5A  
Catalina

**Date:**  
23 June 2005

**Location:**  
Essex

**Brief:**  
To snatch the first air-to-air  
photos of the Catalina in  
her new overall white  
USAAF colours.

Plane Sailing's Catalina, lovingly dubbed the 'Rasta Cat' by some airshow-goers due to its former scruffy but colourful firebomber paint scheme, underwent a repaint in June. She emerged from the paint shop at Cambridge in an overall gloss white livery with minimalist markings to represent an aircraft flown from RAF Halesworth in WW2, namely 44-33915 *Sophisticat*, one of the US Army Air Force's OA-10A Catalina amphibians operated by the 5th Emergency Rescue Squadron of the 8th Air Force. This was one of several such aircraft used to locate and rescue downed Allied airmen, and was detailed to search for a ditched USAAF P-51D Mustang pilot on 30 March 1945. The OA-10A landed on the North Sea near the Dutch coast but was unable to take off again because of engine troubles, and was attacked and sunk by Me262s the next day — thankfully, both the crew of the Catalina and the P-51 pilot were rescued. However, the unlucky P-51 flier was,

unfortunately for him, picked up by the wrong side! The loss of 44-33915 is commemorated, along with all other 8th Air Force aircraft losses, on the glass panels entitled 'Counting the Cost' along the entrance walkway to the American Air Museum at Duxford — which, coincidentally enough, is where this Catalina is now based.

Flying a thirsty aircraft like this purely for a photo shoot is not really an option, so arranging the assignment meant taking a look at Plane Sailing's calendar and picking an airshow transit flight that would fit the bill. 23 June jumped out immediately as being a long transit to the AirPower 05 show at Zeltweg in Austria — having passed my geography exams at school, I was pretty sure this involved a sector over water, which is just where I wanted the aircraft to be for at least some of the photos. This met with the approval of Plane Sailing and the day in question dawned bright and sunny, an incredible stroke of luck during what has been an awfully grey year. After a brief last-minute panic about being

able to fly the cameraship into Duxford early enough that morning (sorted thanks to a friendly FISO), we briefed the shoot and let the Catalina pilots, Rod Brooking and Keith Sissons, get on with starting their big white beast. It takes time for the old girl to warm up, but soon enough we were both airborne and routing north of Stansted's control zone before turning towards Clacton and beginning the shoot.

The Cat's arrival at Zeltweg was restricted to a particular time slot, putting the crew under a certain amount of time pressure if they did not want to be forced to divert elsewhere. Conscious of this, I intended to get most of my shots without requiring the PBY to deviate from its intended course, instead using the superior agility of the cameraship to reposition around the subject aircraft to get shots from various angles while remaining at a safe distance. Regardless of that, from time to time the rumble of her engines could be made out above the noise of the camera



aircraft's own powerplant. Sparkling in the sunlight over the green fields of Essex, she made a magnificent sight — and a very appropriate one, given the amphibian's new markings with their East Anglian connection. Had USAAF OA-10As in these colours been seen in these very skies during WW2, I wondered? One of the privileges of doing this sort of thing is just being able to take the camera away from your eye for a few moments in order to drink in the sheer spectacle of a beautiful aircraft in its element.

All too soon, the coast was in sight. So, after a couple of quick turns over the most photogenic bits of coastline available to us, it was time for the final sequence of shots. We followed the Catalina out over the North Sea for a few minutes until the muddy water cleared a little and then peeled away to go back to base — and dig through a CF card full of shots! Meanwhile, the PBV made it to Zeltweg late that afternoon after a big trip for this wonderful old aircraft.

Plane Sailing operates the Catalina for the Catalina Aircraft Ltd syndicate and, at the time of writing, still has two shares available — see the organisation's web site at [www.catalinabookings.org](http://www.catalinabookings.org) for more details, along with information on airshows at which you can see the PBV. The same site also provides a link to The Catalina Society, members of which support the Catalina's ongoing operation.

