

Captain Robert Potter Molten II 1886-1940

*by Curtis G. Molten,
grandson of CAPT Robert P. Molten II*



Captain Robert Potter Molten was born in Philadelphia and graduated from the US Naval Academy in 1911. His Naval career began aboard the USS Minnesota. Later he served on gunboats operating off the China coast. He married Elizabeth Gibbs Wylly in Shanghai in 1915.

In World War I he was the engineer officer of the USS Baltimore, a minelayer, and received the Victory Medal, mine laying class, for his work in placing the North Sea Barrage.

In 1919 he was appointed aid and Flag Lieutenant on the staff of the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet. In 1921, after two years duty at the Naval Academy, he enrolled for aviation instruction at the Naval Air Station in Anacostia, and then served with the air squadrons of the battle fleet for two years.

He was made head of the air defense department of the aircraft carrier Langely, after three years as Commander of the Naval Air Station at Coco Solo in the Panama Canal Zone. From the Langely he went to the Lexington, and in 1929 was appointed aid to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Aeronautics.

From 1932 to 1934 he commanded the aircraft squadrons and attending craft as well as the air base at Coco Solo. One of his missions was described in an article in the Saturday Evening Post. Commander Molten, aboard one of two P-2-Y-2 Flying Boats,

flew surgeons to the Galapagos Island for an emergency operation saving a Mr. Robinson who had experienced a ruptured appendix. They flew blind for almost 12 hours in a rain storm so strong that it stripped the paint off of the struts and burnished the metal leading edges of the wings. They were forced to fly close to the ocean surface so they could estimate the force and direction of the shifting winds and attempt to keep on course. They arrived at Tagus Cove just as night was falling and were able to save Mr. Robinson. Commander Molten wrote to Mr. Robinson later: "Now as to the Navy's part and something about the officers and men. The Navy is a queer outfit. All hands growl, but the Navy is our very life. We thrive on work. Idleness is what palls. You were in trouble. We had been told to assist. We wanted to assist. Some of us happened to go to you, but it was an 'all hands' job. Washington was vital interested and so was the ordinary seaman at Coco Solo who greased the controls on the planes. The cook who got the food together had his hand in the pie. When we returned everyone wanted to know 'Will he live?'"

In 1935 he was graduated from the Naval War College and became the Executive Officer of the USS Saratoga. There he remained until June, 1937, when he came to the office of the Naval Operations Chief working in the plans section.

On March 15th 1939 he became Commander of the USS Saratoga, and died aboard his ship in Hawaiian waters of coronary thrombosis.



Robert married Elizabeth Gibbs Wylly in 1915 in Shanghai, China, and they had three children: Robert Potter 3d (1916 - 2011), Richard Wylly (? - ?), and Alice Lalor (? -).



Robert Potter Molten II & III

Naval Career

- US Naval Academy: June 30, 1906 – June 2, 1911
- “Minnesota”:
July 5, 1911 – December 23, 1912
- “Saratoga”
February 7, 1913 – June 27, 1914
- “Samar”:
June 30, 1914 – January 20, 1915
- “Helena”
January 20, 1915 – June 9, 1916
- “Baltimore”:
September 14, 1916 – October 28, 1918
- “Denver”:
December 1, 1918 – January 13, 1919
- “Pittsburgh”:
January 13, 1919 – April 30, 1919
- “Alabama”:
May 19, 1919 – August 28, 1921
- US Navy Dept:
August 19, 1919 – June 20, 1921
- “Minnesota”:
June 1, 1920 – September 2, 1920
- Naval Air Station:
July 5, 1921 – January 3, 1922
- “Argonne”:
January 8, 1922 – January 28, 1922
- Pacific Fleet:
January 28, 1922 – May 4, 1922
- CO VF-2
May 4, 1922 – September 19, 1922
- Air Squadrons:
September 19, 1922 – March 12, 1923
- CO VF-2
March 12, 1923 – February 23, 1924
- CO Coco Solo, CZ
March 1, 1924 – June 15, 1927
- “Langley”:
June 15, 1927 – February 13, 1928

- “Saratoga”: February 1928 – March 1928
- “Lexington”: April 1928 – December 1928
- “Langley”: December 1928 – May 1929
- Navy Dept. May 1929 – June 1932
- CO Fleet Coco Solo June 1932 – June 1934
- Naval War College June 1934 – June 1935
- “Saratoga”: June 1935 – June 1936
- Cincus, PA June 1936 – June 1937
- Office of CNO July 1937 – March 1940
- “Saratoga” March 1940 – May 28, 1940

Robert and Elizabeth are buried at The Arlington National Cemetery in Section 2, Grave #4774 & #4774 NS

Sources

1. Obituary (paper, date, etc. unknown)
2. “The Flying Big Boats” by Murney Mintzer, The Saturday Evening Post, August 1, 1936.
3. Voyage to Galapagos by William Albert Robinson, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York 1936
4. Family Papers