

Port Washington isn't exactly an international destination. Yet there was a time, some 50 years ago, when this bay community was aviation's eastern gateway to America.

It all began in 1937, when a fledgling airline with grand ideas, Pan American World Airways, determined to conquer the North Atlantic, as it had the Pacific, the Caribbean and the eastern coast of South America to Brazil.

Port Washington was chosen as the

How Port Washington Gave Birth to Pan Am

By Denise Duffy Meehan



eastern terminus of a circuitous route that included New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Ireland and finally Southampton, England. Why it was chosen was a combination of geographical merit and available resources.

The airships that challenged "The Pond" were called flying boats because, in a sense, they were. As water-bound as tadpoles, (they were giant forerunners of today's seaplanes) the boats required long stretches of smooth water to get aloft. So, the shelter of Port Washington's Manhasset Bay, and the expanse of

the Sound beyond Plum Point gave Port Washington a leg-up on other waterfront communities in the race for the international sea-airport.

But it was the seaplane facilities of the American Aeronautical Company, manufacturers of the Savoia Marchetti airplane, that sealed the deal. The company had constructed a waterside facility in 1929—operating it as a test base for its S-55 and S-56 aircraft (available for a mere \$7,373 fly-away) and as a rental hangar/ramp—called the New York Seaplane Airport. Pan Am purchased the 12-acre parcel in 1933, intending to use the large

hangar for storage while continuing to lease space in the smaller building to private seaplane operators.

In 1936, this small hangar made a minor stand in aviation history by hosting two German flying boats exploring the airspace over the Atlantic. The Aelous and the Zepher were distinctive as they were the only aircraft of this class to be launched via catapult from a mothership, the Westfalan.

No doubt this German effort and the other great aviation rivalries added to the zeal with which the Pan Am base was fitted for the U.S. Airline's own

surveys. (Survey was the official term used to describe the testing of heretofore uncharted air routes.) Announcement of the upgrade to over-ocean airbase was made April 2, 1937. On June 18, Pan Am's first commercial passengers to be flown over the northern Atlantic were carried from Port Washington to Bermuda.

In order to gain landing rights in the Crown territories, the U.S. agreed to permit Imperial Airways, the British precursor to BOAC and later British Airways to land in Port Washington.

Icing conditions forced the airlines to

Pan Am would depart Port Washington on July 3, 1937 in its "Clipper III," with Captain Harold Gray and a crew of seven aboard at the same time Imperial Airways' "Caledonia," with Captain Wilcockson in command, left Southampton, England for Port.

All backers (Imperial was not only flying for the Crown but also France and Germany) would share their results, and the unwritten rule was all glory would get equal play. So, even though the Pan Am boat reached its European landfall on target and within six minutes of its estimated ar-

Even though Captain Gray reported to the Irish press that the trip "was a nice little joy ride," it was hardly a lark. Navigation prowess and extreme vigilance accounted for the dead-on landfall at the River Shannon, but it was strong nerve that actually got the crew there.

Being the 11th aircraft to succeed after 86 attempts to cross the Atlantic was less important than the other points this survey set out to prove. As one newspaper reporter put it, Pan Am proved that crossing the Atlantic was out of the realm of stunt flying and within the grasp of commercial aviation. And that grasp encompassed Port Washington. Fifteen hundred spectators turned out to greet the Clipper on her return home.

Still, those that would make money on the routes had a long way to go. Aircraft capable of making the crossing was a priority. The Sikorsky S-42B used to pioneer northern and then southern Atlantic routes was inadequate for the task. It had required 2,300 gallons of fuel, 160 gallons of oil and 1,995 pounds of spare equipment to make the first survey. While nothing was spared operationally, little in the way of amenities was provided for the crew. Their meals consisted of celery, olives, soup, salad and strawberries. And while the high cruising altitude with open windows to aid in celestial navigation (at times 11,000) required heavy outer garments, the flight suits were not fur-lined as reported.

After proving that it could be done, Pan American set out to get the aircraft to make it all feasible. In 1938, Europeans did fly surveys over the Atlantic, and boats representing Air France and Lufthansa utilized the Port Washington facility. Finally, on March 3, 1939 technology caught up with reality when Mrs. Roosevelt christened the "Yankee Clipper," a Boeing B-314. She was taken on a shakedown flight from Baltimore, over the southern route to Marseilles, March 3, and along the northern route between Baltimore and Southampton on March 28.

The first transatlantic airmail departed from Port Washington on May 20, returning May 27. The first revenue passengers departed Port Washington for Marseilles June 28, 1939. Thereafter, weekly service over the northern and southern routes was routine from April through November. Eventually, four B-314

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relocate Bermuda service to Baltimore the following November. Weekly service from Port Washington resumed April 6, 1938 and again in 1939. Rates to Bermuda in June of 1938, including air, hotel and meals, were \$172 per person for seven days, \$262 for 16. In Depression dollars, this translated into a tariff that only the patricians could afford.

When it came time to chart the vast ocean that until then only daredevils such as Lindberg, "Wrong Way" Corrigan and Beryl Markham had flown, it was predetermined that surveys would be done reciprocally.

rival time and Caledonia missed Newfoundland altogether and had to backtrack, arriving one and a half hours late, the press gave them equal standing.

While this example of one-upmanship is dear to the hearts of those who flew her, other aspects of the 15-day, 7,000 mile Clipper III flight interest historians. Among them are the fact that the first airline weather map made for the North Atlantic was utilized and the first "commercial" aircraft sighting of an iceberg was reported to the U.S. Coast Guard.

flying boats served on the routes.

The airships had come a long way in comfort. Constructed at a time when industrial designers had come into their own, the interior of the Boeing was a crossbreed between a gentleman's parlor and a chrome environment. There was room for a crew of 12 and about 34 passengers. The bulk of these being the well-to-do, with enough to do the daring. A large lounge and sleeping bunks were some of the finer features, features that ironically still turn up in the first class sections of aircraft today.

While the boats, as they were floated into the landing docks were impressive, and the spit and polish of the crew taking over their craft at the first bell, then boarding passengers at two bells, was dramatic, the reality of the Port Washington base was disappointing. What would resemble a third world airport today housed facilities such as Customs, Immigration and Public Health, along with the operations division of the airline.

The "terminal" was modest with few amenities. But this, after all, was has been rezoned and purchased by a developer.

Condos may soon be all that stands where aviation once was grand.

just the temporary headquarters. The writing had been on the wall, or more correctly, on the lease, for a permanent home even before the first transatlantic passengers ever departed Port Washington. On May 20, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Pan Am Chairman C.V. Whitney had signed a lease for a municipal airport at North Beach. Today we know it as the Marine Air Terminal at LaGuardia Airport. Ironically, after more than 40 years, Pan American has returned to that terminal, basing its northeastern shuttle operation there.

Port Washington's place in aviation history did not end in March of 1940 when the boats left town. Grumman operated Plant 15 there from April, 1942 until the end of the war. The company even provided a 12-inch reinforced concrete road, now called Sintsink Drive, which was bomb-proof, making it possible to move materials even after an enemy attack. Republic Aviation took over the facilities during the Korean War, manufacturing wings for F84's there.

Soon enough, perhaps only the concrete road and a commemorative plaque at the Town Dock will be all that is left of Port Washington's aviation claim to fame.

IN A PIONEER'S WORDS

To hear it from those who were there is to truly hear it. For aviation buffs interested in the early history of commercial airlines, William M. Masland, of Manhasset, was there.

In a unique first hand style, his book, "Through the Back Doors of the World in a Ship That Had Wings," accurately and lovingly relays the early history of Pan American's Flying Boat Service. The man who was the navigator on the first transatlantic survey, and who eventually became a Master of the Flying Ships himself, tells a tale of a job well done. His book is available through Vantage Press, 516 West 34th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001. The cost is \$14.95, plus \$1.25 postage. New York residents must add sales tax. **G**

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Aviation pioneer William M. Masland, who had been the source of much of the material in writer Denise Duffy Meehan's story, died February 20. He was 79. His interview with Ms. Meehan for Goodliving was his last public appearance.

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