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The Ditching of The “Sovereign of the Skies”

by John Marshall

A Gentler Time

It was a gentler time. Flight attendants were not yet so-called, and political correctness were merely words in a dictionary. Stewardesses they were, and they wore perky little hats and white gloves, and nylon stockings with seams that ran straight up the back of the legs, thank you. A journey aboard a modern airliner, especially a trans-oceanic one, was an incredibly romantic adventure, and the passengers preparing to board Pan American’s flight 943 from Honolulu to San Francisco on that balmy October evening in 1956 were excited. Purser Pat Reynolds stood at the top of the stairs at Honolulu Airport and greeted the 24 boarding passengers that were going to be in her charge for the next ten hours aboard the flight to San Francisco. Their chariot that night was a Boeing Stratocruiser, Model 377, at the time the largest airliner in the sky. She was the Pan American Clipper “Sovereign of the Skies” registration number N90943. Powered by four huge Pratt & Whitney 4360 engines and pulled by Hamilton Standard propellers, the Stratocruiser was the state-of-the-art airline transport; there was no more luxurious airliner anywhere. She had recently arrived from the Orient and around the world, and was finally headed back to her home base at San Francisco. Her flight crew that night consisted of veteran Pan Am skipper Dick Ogg, First Officer George Lee Haaker, Navigator Dick Brown, and Flight Engineer Frank Garcia.

The passengers were a mixed bag. There were the Gordons, a young couple traveling with their two tow-headed twin girls, barely three years old, a French physician, two middle-aged California ladies traveling alone. Businessmen, holiday vacationers, young marrieds, they were typical of those that flew across oceans in 1956. What was not typical was the adventure that was to befall the crew and passengers of the “Sovereign of the Skies” during the next few hours.

An Uneventful Night

At 26 minutes past eight o’clock, Honolulu time, the big Boeing lifted from the runway at Honolulu Airport. Captain Ogg pointed her bulbous nose out past Diamond Head and into the darkening eastern sky, and

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took up a heading for California. The flight plan called for a flight of 8 hours and 54 minutes, leveling off initially at 13,000 feet, and then, just prior to the equal time point, climbing to 21,000 for the remainder of the trip. The big Pratts rumbled their song as they settled down into the cruise portion of the flight. The weather was good and the air smooth. Dick Brown would have no problems locating his favorite stars to navigate by on this evening. Flight Engineer Garcia carefully leaned the engines and set the spark advance, keeping close track of the fuel they were burning. In the cabin Pat Reynolds and her colleagues, Mary Ellen Daniel and Katherine Araki set about serving a light supper to the passengers. Soon the lights were dimmed and the passengers settled in for the night. Pillows and blankets appeared, and they slept.

A Runaway

Flight 943 cruised into the night at 13,000 feet until close to the midpoint of their Pacific crossing, when their clearance to the final level, 21,000, was approved by ATC. Garcia set the engines at climb power, and she climbed easily upward to the new level. In a few moments they leveled off, and the crew once more allowed the aircraft to increase speed, settling into the routine for the final pull to San Francisco. Stewardess Mary Ellen Daniel had just stepped onto the flight deck to take coffee orders from the crew. Lee Haaker, who was doing the flying, had just called for cruise power, and Frank Garcia began easing the throttles back from the climb setting. Suddenly, in an instant, the placid atmosphere of the flight deck was shattered, and everything changed. The soothing beat of the engines was interrupted by a shrill high-pitched whine; the airplane lurched, Mary Ellen staggered, and almost fell. The propeller noise increased quickly, and First Officer Lee Haaker, who was flying the airplane, felt the controls vibrate. A quick glance at the engine instruments told the crew the bad news: the prop on the number 1 engine was running away. Haaker saw that the RPM was rapidly approaching the upper limit; it was over 2900 on the gauge, and he quickly pushed the feathering button to bring it under control. At the same time he slowed the huge Boeing and lowered 30 degrees of flaps. This was the “book” solution to the problem; at the lower speed the propeller would be easier to control. Frank Garcia, meanwhile, pulled the mixture to cutoff and shut off the fuel to the number 1 engine, and pulled back the throttles on the other three to help slow the airplane. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to help. The needle on the number 1 tachometer hit the upper limit of the gauge and stayed there. They had a true runaway.

Captain Ogg had been sitting at the navigator’s station, and he quickly regained the left seat. He had some rapid decisions to make. His first action was to make a radio transmission to Ocean Station Vessel “November,” a Coast Guard cutter named the “Ponchartrain,” that was permanently stationed midway between Hawaii and the mainland. She was there to provide navigational assistance as well as to render whatever other help might be required by an airplane flying over that loneliest stretch of the Pacific. Incredibly, flight 943 was less than 40 miles from the ship, and Ogg motioned to Haaker to pick up the bearing to the cutter.

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Don't Miss This Fantastic Pictorial History of Pan Am Available Online

For a trip through Pan Am's history with pictures and photos, go to our website -www.clipperpioneers.com - and click on the powerpoint presentation. It's just great!

You can now access the mailing and phone list of your fellow Clipper Pioneers. Go to the Clipper Pioneer website - www.clipperpioneers.com - and scroll down to the bottom of the home page. Click on “Members Only” - when the password box pops up, type in the user name and password in your printed edition of this newsletter. You will be able to access the current list of names, address, phone #s, and email addresses there.

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An uncontrollable runaway prop presented a considerable problem. Unlike a damaged engine which could be stopped and the propeller feathered into a minimum drag configuration, a runaway acted like a flat plate disk out there in the slipstream, creating terrible drag. Ogg knew that if they were unsuccessful in controlling the number 1 prop, they could well be faced with the ultimate horror of ocean flying: a ditching at sea.

The aircraft had been in a slow descent as they headed toward the Ponchartrain, the crew trying several times to unsuccessfully feather the uncooperative prop on the number 1 engine. Ogg finally told Garcia to cut off the oil to the engine in hopes that it would eventually seize, stopping the prop. A few minutes later there was a momentary decrease in the prop speed, followed by a heavy thud, and an increase again in the RPM. They had been successful in freezing the engine, but now the prop was just windmilling in the air-stream.

More Bad News

At 5,000 feet they added power to level off, and received another surprise, one that effectively sealed the fate of the unlucky Stratocruiser. The number 4, the outboard engine on the opposite wing, was not responding; it would only run at about half power. The vital signs were all pretty close to normal, it just wouldn't produce the power. The crew discovered that they could keep the airplane in the air with rated power on the inboards, and partial power on number 4. They also found that if they slowed to 140 knots the problem prop out there on number 1 was just barely controllable at the upper limit of the tach, but 140 was about twenty knots below efficient two engine cruise speed.

It wasn't long before the crew sighted the Ponchartrain, it was a bright clear night and visibility was good. Some quick calculations revealed what they already knew to be true. With only two good engines trying to pull their reluctant brethren as well as sixty-five tons of airplane, they only had fuel for 750 miles. It was over 1,000 miles to the nearest dry land, be it San Francisco or Hawaii. There was a finality to it now; they were committed to a landing in the Pacific. In a way, however, they were incredibly lucky. There was fuel enough to loiter over the cutter until sunup, when they would be able to accomplish the ditching in full daylight, and they wouldn't have to wait long to be rescued; their rescuers were already alerted and waiting, 5,000 feet below. They set up a large orbit over the Ponchartrain and awaited the morning.

Dick Ogg and Frank Garcia turned the controls over to Lee Haaker and went aft to see to the preparations in the cabin. Pat Reynolds and her crew had already gone through the aisle and briefed their charges; Ogg and Haaker wanted to be sure that everyone knew how to handle the over-wing exits and the escape lines. Ogg later remarked on how calm everyone was, it was almost becoming a non-event. One concern that the captain had was the placement of the passengers in seats over the wings; he was afraid that when they struck the water the spinning prop on number 1 would dig into the sea, spin the aircraft around and break the tail off.

When he returned to the flight deck Ogg had time to really think about the landing he was about to make; the last landing that the “Sovereign of the Skies” would ever make. It was difficult to imagine that everything that they looked at and touched in the spacious cockpit would soon be at the bottom of the sea. The book said to land the airplane parallel to the major swells and across the secondary swell. Ocean pilots often mused about how one would ever accomplish such a thing at night, or in a storm-tossed sea. Dick Ogg and his crew were lucky; it would be daylight, and the sea below was glass calm. He would fly her down as slow as

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possible, with the gear up and full flaps, and the nose slightly raised so that the huge flaps took the brunt of the initial impact.

Soon the sky paled in the east, and the sharpening horizon took on more definition. Below were the comforting lights of the Ponchartrain. It was a beautiful morning, just right for a ditching, Ogg thought. . He made one last orbit and picked up the PA mike. “There is absolutely nothing to worry about,” he said. “Things couldn’t be better. I’ll give you a ten minute warning, and then at one minute to touchdown I’ll tell you, ‘this is it.’”

Frank Garcia remembers: “At touchdown I didn’t feel the initial contact of the wing flaps as Dick and Lee did on the control columns...I saw the water spray over the windshield then felt a force pulling me into the seat and noticed the first officer’s control column going back and forth. After that I saw nothing but water covering the windshield, and as soon as it started to recede I knew we were OK. After opening the cockpit door I got a shock when all I saw at the back of the aircraft was the Pacific Ocean.” Just as Dick Ogg had feared, the airplane had slewed sharply to the left, and the tail did indeed break off.

Getting all the passengers forward had been more than just a good idea, it had undoubtedly saved lives.

The rest of the saga was an anticlimax. The flight deck crew quickly abandoned the cockpit and went aft to assist the passengers. The stewardesses had already opened the emergency exits, and the orderly egress had already begun. The only raft that was unusable was the one launched from the main cabin door that got trapped between the tail and the fuselage. It was a remarkable feat of airmanship and skill that Dick Ogg was able to accomplish a water landing in the open sea with a large airliner, not only with no loss of life, but without serious injury. Only five passengers were injured, and they only slightly. The airplane floated for twenty minutes; plenty of time to get the 31 occupants to safety. In fact even the dry and bureaucratic Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB), the body responsible for aircraft accident investigation in 1956, stated in their official report of the accident, “The Board highly commends the crew members for their ability in recognizing the malfunctions and taking correct emergency actions consistent with known procedures.”

In an amusing sidebar, Frank Garcia remembers being billeted with one of the senior CPOs aboard the Ponchartrain enroute to San Francisco. “He told me that Pan Am was going to have my ass,” Garcia says, “because the airplane had been dispatched with enough fuel to make it from the most critical point of the flight to go ahead or return with two engines out. Of course we could have made it, if we’d been able to feather both of them.”

This story originally appeared in “Airways Magazine”. From www.panam.org.

VA to slowly reopen Group 8 door

An estimated 266,000 middle-income veterans - who have no service-connected health conditions, or have ailments rated at “o-percent” disabling - will be allowed to enroll in the VA health-care system starting this summer. They will be the first batch of new Priority Group 8 applicants to gain access to VA health care since former VA Secretary Anthony Principi suspended new Group 8 enrollments six years ago.

Enrollment means access to VA health care in return for modest co-payments, plus hefty discounts on prescription drugs. Read more on www.clipperpioneers.com.

(From The American Legion Magazine, April 2009)

Report from the Convention - from Buck

For those who unfortunately were unable to attend, here is a review of our Pan Am '09 reunion that was held on April 28th thru May 2nd in Tucson, Arizona. More than 200 of our Pan Am retirees and friends attended, including the Clipper Pioneers and World Wings International members. It was open to all of Pan Am. The weather was picture perfect during all four days of the reunion, as usual in Tucson during this time of year. Flowers, cactus, palo verde trees etc, were all in bloom including the beautiful landscape at our DoubleTree hotel. The hotel had very reasonable rates that included a buffet breakfast every morning and great facilities for the reunion. People arriving at the airport were greeted with courtesy transportation provided by the DoubleTree hotel.

After checking in everyone proceeded to the Pan Am room just off the lobby where they were attended by Tori Johnson and the World Wings group plus the Tucson Visitors Bureau, to sign in and collect their favours. (cowboy hats, decorated coffee cups, Pan Am combs pins, etc. and schedules). There were items and books on display and for sale.

After settling in there was an arrivals cocktail party held in the large grassy area beyond the pool where everyone could meet and become reacquainted. Dinner was available in either the dining room or the Mexican cantina, connected to the hotel. A visit to the hospitality suite for cocktails and complimentary drinks was then in order for many. This was manned by Bill Stevens and assisted by Dale Robertson.

On Wednesday morning, after breakfast the tour busses with guides arrived to take half of the group to the historical San Xavier mission, a beautifully restored landmark of Tucson, that was constructed in 1734. Back on the busses they continued through the Saguaro National Park (thousands of cactus) to the famous Sonora Desert Museum which covers several hundred acres, mostly outdoors, that displays animals, creatures, and plant life indigenous to the area. Of interest also are tunnels that lead to a replica of an underground mine and a room with visual displays of the region as seen millions of years ago. The other half of the group had the morning off to visit or shop or to play golf at one of the two golf courses across from the hotel, overseen by J.J. Cunningham.

On this Wednesday evening, the busses again arrived to transport everyone out to the Tanque Verde guest ranch for a western buffet and cowboy music under the stars. The dry clear air was perfect for the campfires and a wonderful evening to remember.

Shortly after breakfast, on Thursday morning, there was a lady's program with prizes sponsored by Myrl Eisinger as well as the required business meeting for the men. The air conditioned motor coaches with the guides were again waiting out front for the grand tour of the Davis Monthan Air Force Base's high storage facility. This was by permission of the Air Force to drive up and down the rows of thousands of airplanes for about an hour seeing fighters, transports, B-52s, etc. (the bone yard). Truly an awesome sight. The busses then proceeded to the Pima Air and Space Museum, one of the most complete air museums in the country where everyone got off and enjoyed complimentary box lunches with drinks in one of the new hangars. Afterwards the bus rides were continued through the grounds of the museum or a walk through the hangar and building displays. In the evening everyone was brought back to the air museum for a banquet dinner among the World War II aircraft in hangar one. A mariachi band filed into the room with some very lively music. A large screen had been set up next to the very high altitude SR-71 aircraft for a power-point presentation given by Col. Glenn Perry, a former U-2 pilot, about some of his interesting and now unclassified missions.

Friday morning took the other half of the group on the same tour that was given on Wednesday, i.e., the San Xavier mission and the Desert Museum. That evening the crowd gathered for final cocktails in the Sun Terrace room just outside of the grand hotel ballroom to await the gala banquet dinner. Extra people had shown up for this. Some had driven down from Phoenix and others who reside locally. In the room was a large and interesting display of airline artifacts brought out and assembled by retired Northwest Capt. Stan Baumwald, a Pan Am regular.

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When the doors opened everyone filed in and the banquet began. Table centerpieces were gorgeous! They were made and supplied by the World Wings Chapter of Phoenix and consisted of round styrafoam balls painted as globes with flags and destinations of the Pan Am system. On either side of the podium were two four foot Pan Am blue balls painted by the late Capt. Bob Valentine, the founder of the Clipper Pioneers. Large screens outside of these were used for pictures of the old Pan Am aircraft and history flashed on the screens during dinner by Jim Kelso. Music was, by the very top of the line, Lowery organ delivered and provided courtesy of the Fletcher Music company and played with dance music and song by the great entertainer, Jerome Johnson. The very highlight of the evening was an emotional and brilliant talk by Maj.Gen Don Shepperd, again a power point presentation using both screens. This was said by many to be one of the best and most inspiring talks they've ever heard. You may want to read one of his latest books, ("Bury Us Upside Down"). There were a lot of good-bye's then one last go for the hospitality suite. After breakfast everyone left, although some rented cars to stay on to see some of the many remaining sights.

For all those who would like to have been here, - you should have. This may not always be around.

I need to give credit to our team that worked to make this reunion a great success:

Chuck Spencer, vice chairman
 Guy McCafferty, secretary
 Jerry Holmes, treasurer
 Stu Archer, publicity
 Jim Kelso, publicity
 Carmen Jaquet, publicity
 Panamigo, publicity
 Jim Kelso, publicity
 Bill Stevens, hospitality

The World Wings group:
 Tori Johnson, registration
 Linda Bradley, registration
 Carol Adams, registration
 Pat Bond, registration
 Joanne Spencer, registration
 (daughter), Janet, registration
 Sue Forde, newsletter

And now my obligation is done. But I must say it was fun and very enjoyable working with such a good and enthusiastic group. It's time for the next guy to pick up the reins to keep our great family of Pan Am alive.

All the best, until next time, - Buck Clippard

To Your Good Health... Senior Health and Medications

One of the foremost senior health issues of the day is prescription medications. Whether the issue is money or drug interaction, every senior citizen needs to use their head when thinking about medication.

For instance, if your physician prescribes new medications for you, always ask if he has any samples to give you. It's not wise to pay for new medications without knowing you can 'take' them and not have severe side effects. Pharmaceutical companies supply free samples to doctors just for these purposes. Even if getting renewal prescriptions for meds, ask for samples. Make sure your physician knows all of the medication you are taking though, because you want to avoid any drug interaction reactions.

Treasurer's Report: Note to Vets: The government has just reinstated the deal where you can get prescription drugs from the VA - it has been closed for the last several years. To to: www.va.gov for the forms.

- Jerry

*...and God will lift you up on Eagle's Wings, bear you on the breath of dawn,
make you to shine like the sun and hold you in the palm of His hand.*

IN MEMORIAM

Jim Dawson, Pan Am F.E.O., passed away May 31, 2009 in Shelton WA after a long battle with COPD.

Charles Francis Darcy passed away April 30 at age 88. In 1939, he graduated from the mechanics court at Roosevelt School of Aviation, and was immediately hired by Pan American Airways in Baltimore, MD. He was appointed to flight status as a flight engineer in 1942, and retired from Pan Am in June 1976. For more about his life, go to our website.

Retired Col. **Glen John Kaser** (John) passed away at age 74 on Monday, May 11 in Reno, Nevada, after suffering from heart and diabetes related issues. He graduated from Frankfor High School and Purdue University, then entered the U.S. Air Force in 1956, where his dream of becoming a fighter pilot was proudly achieved. He became a pilot for Pan Am after his tenure with the Air Force was finished. He joined the California Air National Guard 144th Fighter Wing in addition, until he ultimately retired at the rank of colonel in 1983.

Dewayne M. Conley, born 8-14-32 in Conde SD, died 5-19-09 in Issaquah WA. He was 30 yrs at Pan Am and 8 yrs with UAL.

Captain **Ellis P. Shanks** passed away at Baptist Hospital, Miami, FL at 7 PM on 05/29/09 after a long hospital stay. He will be long remembered as a fine family man, excellent aviator and instructor and very good friend.

Dan Notine, age 73, passed away on January 15, 2009 of a very aggressive melanoma cancer. Dan a former marine combat pilot in Vietnam hired on with PanAm in 1967 and remained with the airline until its demise in 1991. He is survived by his four children and his wife Addie , who still flies as a flight attendant with Delta airlines. Dan leaves a void that will be difficult to replace.

For more information about each of these friends who will be missed, click on "In Memory Of..." at our website: www.clipperpioneers.com

**Know of someone from Pan Am who has passed?
Email the obit to Jerry Holmes at jerry747@copper.net**

Having trouble viewing the membership list online? When you open the list, go to the top of your screen - you should see that it is set at a percentage. Click on that to make it larger.

**ATTENTION AUXILLARY MEMBERS:
You must let me know if you wish to continue
to receive this newsletter -
otherwise, YOU WILL BE DROPPED FROM THE MAILING LIST.
Jerry Holmes, 192 Foursome Drive, Sequim, WA 98382 -
360- 681-0567 or email jerry747@copper.net**

The Houston Area Pan Am Reunion

will be held at the

Atascocita Country Club, Humble, TX,

on August 1st, 2009 from 10:00am till 4:00pm.

We will have a great meal and visits with old friends, for only \$15 per person...

Anyone wanting information or an invitation, contact:

Brendan "Tex" Love, 906 N Campbell St, Willis, TX 77378

Home 936-856-7329, Cell 936-718-8089 ~ belove@suddenlink.net

Scam Alerts...

Grandma/pa Scam Resurfaces, Deceives Senior Citizens

This one apparently has been around before, but is back with a vengeance!

Beware of 'grandkids' calling from Canada

If you receive a phone call from a grandchild, or anyone else for that matter, claiming that they're stranded and need money, make sure the call is legitimate before sending help.

The Better Business Bureau (BBB) and several state attorneys general are warning that senior citizens around the country are falling victim to a scam being perpetrated by con artists in Canada.

The ploy works like this: You get a phone call from a "grandchild" claiming to have been arrested or involved in an automobile accident while traveling in Canada. The desperate caller asks you to wire money to pay for damage or bail. The amount typically is several thousand dollars; however, one grandmother sent \$15,000, the BBB says.

The scam was seen in 2007, although there has been a major increase in the number of cases reported this year. Since the beginning of 2008, there were nearly 350 complaints to the Canadian Anti-Fraud Call Centre, almost half of them during July and August.

Authorities are not sure how the con artists are obtaining grandparents' names. But they suspect that the calls may, in fact, be random and that the callers are using a technique that relies on you to fill in the blanks. For example, the caller may say, "It's me, your favorite grandchild," hoping that you'll respond with your grandchild's name.

If you get such a call, the BBB urges you verify the caller's identity by calling the person directly or checking the story with a family member. If you've been victimized, contact your state attorney general or other consumer protection agency.

Thanks to those who are sending us great stories! We will be running them in future issues of the Clipper Pioneer newsletter. Do you have a story to share with us? Send it to us! We'd love to print it in the newsletter! Do you have information that would be beneficial to us? Send it along! Let's share the good ideas! You can mail your articles, jokes, and other interesting information to: Jerry Holmes, 192 Four-some Drive, Sequim, WA - or email to jerry747@copper.net.