

Pan American Airways Route 6.

The so-called FAM-22 service from Miami to Leopoldville, 1942.

Route 6 was the designation given by Pan American Airways to the route between Miami and Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo. Much has been written about this route, mostly inaccurate and fanciful, but research during the past three or four years has shown that the flights were not part of the regular scheduled civilian routes but a military operation as part of the Special Missions flown on behalf of the US Army in support of "The Congo Route", an alternative aircraft ferry route to the Middle East.

There are no "Trip Summaries" for Route 6 in the Pan American Airways archives, which is hardly surprising since there are no trip summaries for any of the special mission flights between the United States and the West Coast of Africa. All of these flights were semi-clandestine in nature and it is thought that the publication of timetables and allocation of a Route number for the Leopoldville service were part of a deliberate deception to hide the true nature of the flights.

Only twelve round trips were made on this route, between the 20th of December 1941 and the 17th of October 1942, after which the aircraft used for this service, "Capetown Clipper" NC-18612 was returned to Special Mission duties in November 1942.

Very little mail was carried by these Leopoldville flights; documentary evidence in the Pan American archive show that in revenue terms the Route 6 flights generated only 0.6% of the total revenue generated by the Special Mission flights. Documents also show that the US Post Office was irritated by the fact that these military flights were carrying small amounts of civilian mail for which the CAB had not even set a mail rate.

FAM-22; Fact or Fantasy?

After hundreds of hours studying thousands of pages of primary source documents, it is possible to reach some conclusions about the Pan American wartime flights between Miami and Leopoldville. Rather than attempt to tell the entire story in one very long document, it is probably more digestible to examine each aspect as a short "bite" of information, both to help readers to understand the sequence of events, and to allow time for informed comment and questions on each topic as it appears.

First the basic facts about the actual flights between Miami and Leopoldville. There has been much misunderstanding in the past, based on hearsay and personal opinion(s), with a general belief that a Boeing B-314 flew a regular fortnightly schedule carrying mail between Miami and Leopoldville via the West Indies, Brazil and West Africa. This has now been shown to be incorrect [Ref 1], and from the data available in the Richter Library at the University of Miami, the table below shows the probable actual flights together with references for those who wish to use them. Apart from the proving flight and the first philatelic flight, there were twelve round trips numbered 6001/2 to 6023/6024 on Pan American Route 6 (Miami to Leopoldville).

Route 6 departures from New York.

Information from Pan American records.

- 6001 20 December 1942. Became Special Mission 06. Mail carried on return from Leopoldville. NC-18612
- 6003 15 January 1942 (16 Jan. Miami). Special Mission 10. NC-18612
- 6005 20 February 1942. Became Special Mission 16 from Leopoldville onward. NC-18612
- 6007 12 April 1942. Inaugurated 2 shuttles Natal-Fish-Lagos on route 6.
- 6009 05 May 1942.
- 6011 28 May 1942. Became Special Mission 32 on return to Natal from Leopoldville-Lagos-Fish Lake, then shuttled between Natal and Lagos before returning to New York.
- 6013 Date not yet confirmed.
- 6015 06 July 1942.
- 6017 05 August 1942. NC-18612
- 6019 30 August 1942. NC-18612
- 6021 22 September 1942. NC-18612
- 6023 17 October 1942. Last flight on route 6 to Leopoldville. NC-18612

References from Special Collection 314, Richter Library

6017,6019, 6021, 6023 confirmed dates Box 260 Folder 56. Letter dated 23 November 1942 confirming there were no Route 6 flights after 6023/24.

6005, 6007, 6015 confirmed dates Box 260 Folder 54.

6011 confirmed dates Box 260 Folder 33.

6003, 6007, 6009, 6011, 6015, 6017, 6019, 6021, 6023 all listed by Berry/Rodina from PanAm records.

Confirmation of twelve round trips (24 Atlantic crossings) comes from PanAm general practice, using odd numbered flights outward and even numbered flights as the return; but more persuasively from taking the logged flying hours of approximately 60 hours New York to Leopoldville and 60 hours return, a total round trip of 120 hours and dividing this into the total chargeable flying hours for flights 6001 to 6024 inclusive given in [Ref 2]. This confirms that only twelve round trips were made on route 6 Miami to Leopoldville in the period December 1941 to October 1942, after which the route closed. The averaged round trip flying hours are taken from actual flight records and crew logbooks. Note that these are flying hours and not journey times, so do not try to work out dates of arrival and departure from them.

Those are the factual records: now to the fantasy.

Attempts to derive a flight schedule have been made in the past by Aitinck & Hovenkamp [Ref 3] and Boyle [Ref 4] without much success, but the most recent publication of a schedule for the Miami-Leopoldville flights is that of Proud [Ref 5]. In this we find three pages of data purporting to be a record of all flights between Miami and Leopoldville up to March 1943, but if we remove the philatelic first flight, as in the table above, we find no less than 32 flights listed between 21 December 1941 and 8 April 1943. Since it is fairly clear from a wealth of primary evidence that the last flight on Route 6 left on the 18th of October 1942, the flights listed by Proud after that date are sheer fantasy.

Eliminating those flights listed after 18 October 1942 the Proud table still shows 22 flights in the period when Pan American records show only 12. More fantasy. In the preface of [5] an explanation is given by the author that dates shown in italics (in the tables) "*are not actual and have been arrived at using the timetables or interpolation.*" This is a helpful comment but it does follow, as confirmed by Crotty in an interview with Proud [Ref 6], that dates shown in normal type are to be taken as provably correct. With one exception (8 February 1943 and hence fantasy in any case), all Proud's listed flights from the US are shown as provably correct.

So how do we check this proof? In any normal quasi-academic text we would look at the references. Unfortunately, and as is generally known, Proud does not give any references, so the information cannot be confirmed. Bland statements to the effect that "*Information came to me in bits and pieces*" [Ref.7 and 8] can hardly be regarded as adequate; so here is the challenge:-

Either the table compiled by Proud is fact or it is fantasy. The evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that it is largely fantasy.

- [1] Wilson J. *"Pan-Am Special Missions and FAM-22"*. Air Post Journal. December 2011.
- [2] PanAm Archive Box 105, Folder 26.
- [3] Aitink, Hans E. and Hovenkamp, Egbert. *"Bridging the Continents in Wartime"*, (Enschede, The Netherlands. 2005).
- [4] Boyle, Thomas H. *"Airmail Operations during WW2"*. American Air Mail Society, Mineola NY 1998.
- [5] Proud Edward B.. *"Intercontinental Airmails Volume 1"*, Proud Publications, Heathfield, Sussex 2008.
- [6] Crotty, D. *"Interview with Ted Proud"*. Air Post Journal. June 2009.
- [7] Crotty, D. *"Intercontinental Airmails Vol 1, Transatlantic and Pacific; a review"*. Air Post Journal. September 2008.
- [8] Wilson J. Correspondence with Edward Proud as reported in Air Post Journal August 2009 p.338.

FAM-22; What was it all about?

It has become clear that the story of the Pan American Airways wartime flights between Miami and Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo was, initially, largely written in the absence of much factual evidence, with the result that a whole generation of airmail collectors grew up believing in what was, essentially, a fantasy. The romantic idea of a PanAm Clipper making its lonely way across thousands of miles of ocean carrying the mail between continents can be dismissed in the light of recent detailed research using primary source documents located on both sides of the Atlantic and by the application of some common sense to the question posed in the title of this article.

There can be little doubt of the single-minded ambition of Juan Trippe, the President of Pan American Airways, to make his airline the dominant player on the world stage. Having effectively achieved control of the Caribbean and South American markets and spanned the Pacific, his eyes turned to the crossing of the South Atlantic into Southern Africa and beyond towards India and the Far East in order to complete a round-the-world airline service using Pan American's new Boeing 314 Clipper flying boats. The ideal pivot point for such a service would be Leopoldville, since this was already linked into Southern Africa by the Belgian airline SABENA and would make an ideal jumping-off point for a trans-Africa route to the Indian Ocean at the continent's narrowest point. Much has been made of an agreement reached in 1941 between Pan American and SABENA at Leopoldville but study of the actual contract shows that this simply appointed SABENA as ticket agents for Pan American in the Congo, and the supporting correspondence reveals acrimonious exchanges between the two companies, eventually leading to termination of the contract by Pan American on the basis that SABENA were giving preferential treatment to their own passengers. However, it did give Pan American their first foothold in Africa.

This was the plan so far, but war in Europe changed the situation and as detailed in [1], Trippe was either drawn into, or willingly participated in the scheme to provide military assistance to the British war effort in North Africa by providing trans-Atlantic transport of men and materiel and trans-Africa transport from the West coast of Africa into the Middle East. The shortest route from West Africa would be across the Sahara from Accra or Takoradi in the Gold Coast to Khartoum and on to Cairo, but the presence of French Vichy forces in Senegal, both air and naval, posed a potential risk. Accordingly both the British and American military, in a splendid example of left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing, carried out independent aerial surveys of a trans-Africa route further South on the African coast and too far from Senegal to allow the French to mount raids. This route was known as the "Congo Route" and began in (guess where?) Leopoldville and followed the Congo River across Africa to the East Coast and the existing BOAC route from Durban in South Africa up to Khartoum, Cairo and the pathway to the Middle East and India.

Trippe's plans were interrupted by the US Military as early as August 1941 as shown in a letter from the Manager, Pan American Atlantic Division dated 26th January 1943 and headed "Army Contract No. 21207" [2]. In this letter we find a summary of the situation in 1941:

"With respect to the airline operation contemplated by the contract it was the intention that Pan American should apply to the Civil Aeronautics Board for a Certificate of Convenience and Necessity covering the route between the United States and the Belgian Congo and that the operating costs should be covered by the customary fixing of a CAB mail rate. The first step was taken but no CAB rate was ever established because it was subsequently decided to cover the operating costs by means of a straight charter between the Army and Pan American."

This is the moment (August 1941) when the operations to Leopoldville were lost as a civilian airline route and taken over as a military project by the United States Army. Note that this is considerably before the attack on Pearl Harbour and the entry of the United States into the war. The fact that the CAB did not see it necessary to set a mail rate suggests that there was no need, since the Miami to Leopoldville service was not intended to carry civilian mail. However, some civilian mail was actually carried, as detailed in the conclusions to this article.

The letter goes on thus:

"Contract 21207 terminated in the latter part of 1942....." which confirms that the Army contract flights to Leopoldville ended as described in [3] and [4]. However, the "Capetown Clipper", NC-18612 did not return to civilian service but remained as part of the Special Mission fleet of four aircraft as detailed in [5] from Col. W.F. Volandt to Pan American Airways dated November 7, 1942. It instructs Pan American that they are now to operate NC-18612, *"previously employed under Contract 21207"*, over a new route from Miami to Fisherman's Lake *"or over such other routes and between such other points as may from time to time be directed by the Commanding General, the Air Transport Command....."*

So – Trippe's civilian route from Miami into the Congo never happened, and the entire, but short-lived service on this route was operated entirely as a military operation, and even after the flights ended in late October 1942, the aircraft flying the route was retained in military service, as can be checked by the re-appearance of NC-18612 in the Special Mission flight schedules from November 1942 onwards. Why was it so short-lived? The answer may lie in the History of the Army Air Forces [6] which contains the following:

"The Congo route, as it became known, now took the form of an alternate airway into the Middle East. Bases were constructed at Point Noire in French Equatorial Africa, at Leopoldville and Elisabethville in the Belgian Congo, and at Nairobi in Kenya. In the dark days of 1942 this alternate route offered insurance against loss of the central African airway, but the rising fortunes of Allied military operations soon robbed it of value. Even before the

fall of Tunisia in the spring of 1943, the Congo route no longer possessed military significance." (my emphasis)

And again:

"Air Transport Command had next to find the personnel to man the bases on the coastal route. One source of manpower was found in the 14th Ferrying Group, previously assigned to the Congo route, the alternate airway to Khartoum and the Middle East by way of bases in French Equatorial Africa, the Belgian Congo, and Kenya Colony. The group's headquarters had been set up at Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo, and one of its three authorized squadrons had been activated when Allied successes in the north rendered the Congo route superfluous".

And again:

"From Accra on the west African coast to Karachi in India, the main air route extended nearly 6,000 miles, while auxiliary lines, exclusive of the now inactive Congo route, brought the total mileage to over 10,000".

At this point, those who hang their hats and their reputations on the existence of "Timetables" will be saying *"But my precious timetables say that this was a mail route"*. Bearing in mind that this was a secret military operation, what better way to try and disguise its presence than by pretending that it was a purely civilian mail service. Certainly Juan Trippe would support the printing of schedules and "timetables" because that laid down a marker for his post-war ambitions to establish his round-the world flights. A comment in [2] reads:

"When Contract 21207 was issued the War Department marked it "Secret" which has interfered with the proper distribution of copies to those vitally concerned with its execution".

In other words, the secrecy was extended even to Pan American staff who were trying to run the service. What a way to run an airline (or a war).

Conclusions.

The twelve round trip flights from Miami to Leopoldville that took place intermittently between December 1941 and October 1942 were part of an entirely military operation and had no significant civilian purpose. Previously held views on the so-called "FAM-22" mail route are just plain wrong, and I am sure that the subject of timetables and their use during WW2 will be addressed by someone in due course.

Despite the entirely military nature of these flights, some civilian mail was carried, much to the annoyance of the US Post Office Department as shown in a letter dated June 5th 1942, from the Second Assistant Postmaster General to Mrs. Archibald, Assistant Vice President of Pan American Airways which says:

“With reference to inbound and inter-country mails carried by your planes on FAM-22, it is pointed out that waybills have not been received for the purpose of submitting claims to foreign countries.....this Department is in receipt of a letter from the Postal Administration of Belgian Congo requesting that the claims against said country be submitted as soon as practicable.”

Mail carried on the actual flights from Leopoldville is difficult to identify (but it can be done) and rare, since on a revenue basis it only comprised 0.6% of the total revenues generated by the Pan American military flights across the South Atlantic during 1942 [see Ref 3].

As for me, I think I have exhausted this subject; I have certainly exhausted myself, but I hope not the readers of my articles on the topic.

John Wilson
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References.

- [1] Bender, M. and Altschul, S., *“The Chosen Instrument”*, (Simon & Schuster, New York. 1982).
- [2] ASM 0341 Box 333 Folder 9. Richter Library, U. of Miami.
- [3] Wilson John, *“Pan American, FAM-22, Special Missions, 1942 and 70 years of misunderstanding.”* (“Air Post Journal”, Journal of the American Air Mail Society, December 2011), and (“Cameo”, Journal of the West Africa Study Circle, January 2012).
- [4] Wilson, John, *“FAM-22; Fact or Fantasy?”*, (“Air Post Journal”, Journal of the American Air Mail Society, May 2012)
- [5] ASM 0341 Box 24 Folder 41. Richter Library, U. of Miami.
- [6] Craven, Frank W. and Cate, James L. *“The Army Air Forces in World War II Volume VII”*. First published by the University of Chicago, 1958. New imprint by the Office of Air Force History, Washington D.C., 1983.