

Recollections of the First Trans-Pacific Flight

by Captain Victor Wright

(Editor's Note: Captain Wright, former senior check pilot and air cargo executive for Pan American World Airways, was a member of the plane crews which blazed the first commercial air routes across the Pacific. Captain Wright retired in November 1962 at age 60 and lived in Miami until his death in June 1967.)

It was 30 years ago, on the afternoon of November 22, 1935, that our Pan American *China Clipper* took off from San Francisco Bay on what was not only the first scheduled transoceanic flight in history but also the first flight across the Pacific to the Orient. There was a huge crowd to see us off from Alameda, on the Bay front, and there were a lot of speeches about what the flight meant, but I don't think anyone mentioned what was uppermost in the minds of those of us in the crew—that this was also to be the *China Clipper's* first ocean crossing.

We had made the first four survey flights, during which we had island-hopped as far as Guam, in a smaller flying boat, the S-42. The M-130 or *China Clipper*, which had been designed and built especially for Pan Am's ocean routes, was a much larger and faster plane with a greater range. We'd picked up this first *Clipper* at the Baltimore factory several months before and flown her down to Miami, where we made a number of flights so that we could get acquainted with the airplane. Then we ferried her out to San Francisco by flying across the Gulf of Mexico and the narrow part of Mexico at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (as the *Clipper* was a flying boat, we had to stay as close as we could to water) and then up through Acapulco and San Diego to San Francisco.

After the S-42, the *China Clipper* seemed pretty big to us. The hull of the *Clipper* was 90 feet from bow to stern, from the pilots' compartment to the after end of the cabin. Since we would be carrying no paying passengers on the early trips, they'd stripped the seats and furnishings out of the cabin to make room for mail and cargo. So there was plenty of room to move around in but no place where you could make yourself really comfortable. But that didn't bother us because we knew that with a new plane and a new ocean to fly, we'd be too busy to do much resting. As a matter of fact, we had a bunk up forward, but I don't remember anyone using it.

Our departure from Alameda was spectacular, though we didn't plan it that way. After leaving the waterfront ramp, Captain Musick circled on the water a few times to warm up the engines and then headed up the Bay toward the looping wires of the San Francisco-Oakland bridge, then being built. As we left the water a convoy of escorting planes closed in behind us. It had been our intention to fly over the bridge, but Musick quickly saw that with the engine cowl flaps open he wouldn't be able to get up enough speed to clear the wires, so he nosed the *Clipper* down at the last moment and went under the bridge cables, threading his way through the dangling construction wires. We all ducked and held our



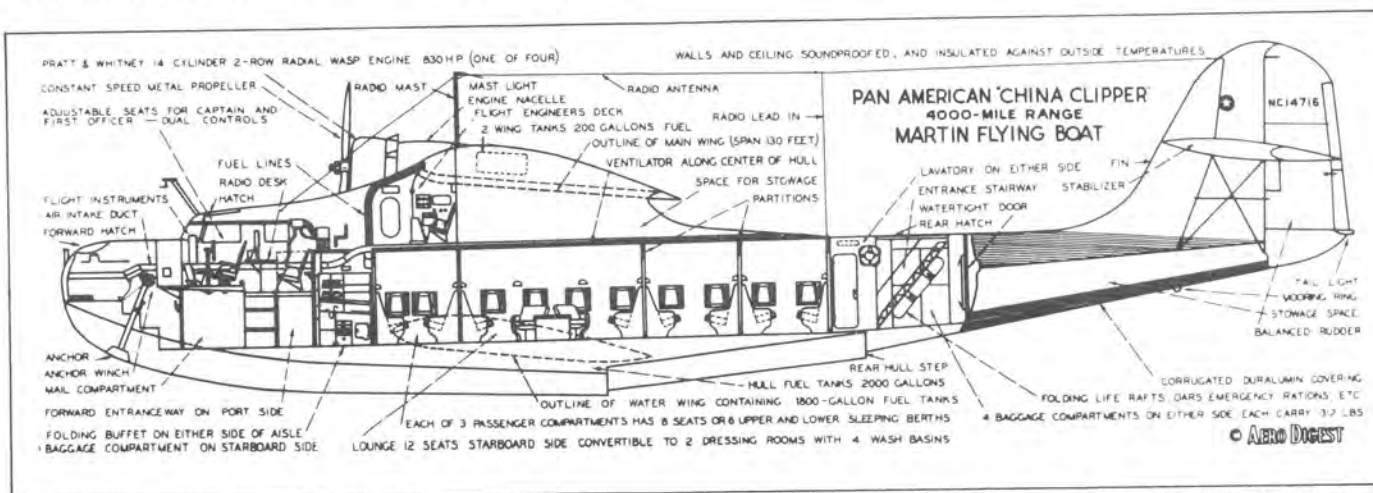
Captain Musick disembarking at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on April 17, 1935, after flying the 2400-mile leg from San Francisco in 18 hours 9 minutes at an average ground speed of 132 mph. The survey plane, *Pan American Clipper*, was flown on four survey flights during the spring and summer months of 1935 as the mid-Pacific bases were readied, one by one. (Pan Am)



The S-42 trans-Pacific survey plane, *Pan American Clipper*, departing San Francisco on the first leg of the proposed Pacific airway, April 16, 1935. Note that the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge have not yet been hung at this point. Survey crew: Capt. Edwin C. Musick, First Officer R.O.D. Sullivan, Navigator Fred J. Noonan, Junior Flight Officer Harry R. Canaday, Flight Engineer Victor Wright, Radio Officer Wilson T. Jarboe, Jr. (Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)

breaths until we were in the clear. I think the little planes must have been as surprised as we were, but they all followed us right through.

For that first leg of the trip—the long, overnight hop to Honolulu—there were just us seven crew members aboard the *China Clipper*. There were two pilots, plane commander Musick and Sullivan, two engineers, both of us named Wright but unrelated, navigators Noonan and King and radio operator Jarboe. Each of us was trained for more than one job, so that we could spell one another during long flights. For example, though I was primarily an engineering officer at that time, I also held a transport pilot's license and a

Cross-section of Martin M-130 *China Clipper*.

(Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)

radio operator's certificate, so I could fill in at those posts.

With no passengers, we could dress for comfort on the flight to Hawaii. As soon as we'd cleared the coast we got out of the uniforms we'd worn for the departure ceremonies and put on something comfortable, as they say, for the 21-hour flight which lay ahead. I wore a pair of red pajamas and bedroom slippers, I remember, and the rest of the crew were just about as informal. We were a strange-looking bunch of trailblazers.

In those days we didn't have all the instruments and the cockpit indicators they now use and the engineer had to roam around the *Clipper*, spot checking the various control systems. And whenever the navigator needed a hand, one of us would have to go back to the after end of the cabin and check on our drift by sighting on the flares he had released. Then there were frequent fuel checks and conferences with the plane commander, as we were always trying to get as many miles as possible out of the engines for the fuel we used.

All this kept me moving around from one end of the *Clipper* to the other during that long night flight to Honolulu. I walked through the dawn, which caught us by the tail, and had breakfast from the sandwiches I carried in a paper bag. And I was still walking when the peaks of Hawaii rose out of a cloud bank in the west. (And I was still walking when we raised the Philippines. I often claim I'm the only man who ever walked across the Pacific.)

By that time we'd been out almost 20 hours and even the non-walkers were feeling a little weary. And then Captain

Musick surprised us. We were told to shave (in cold water, at that) and get back into uniform. There was some grumbling, but we realized later that this was a master stroke. Getting cleaned up not only made us feel better—when the crew stepped off the *Clipper* all spic and span you'd have thought we'd just taken a swing around the harbor. It made the ocean crossing look routine.

There was an official reception at Honolulu, but it was small scale. We'd been through Hawaii on four survey flights and flying the Pacific was getting to be old hat to the people



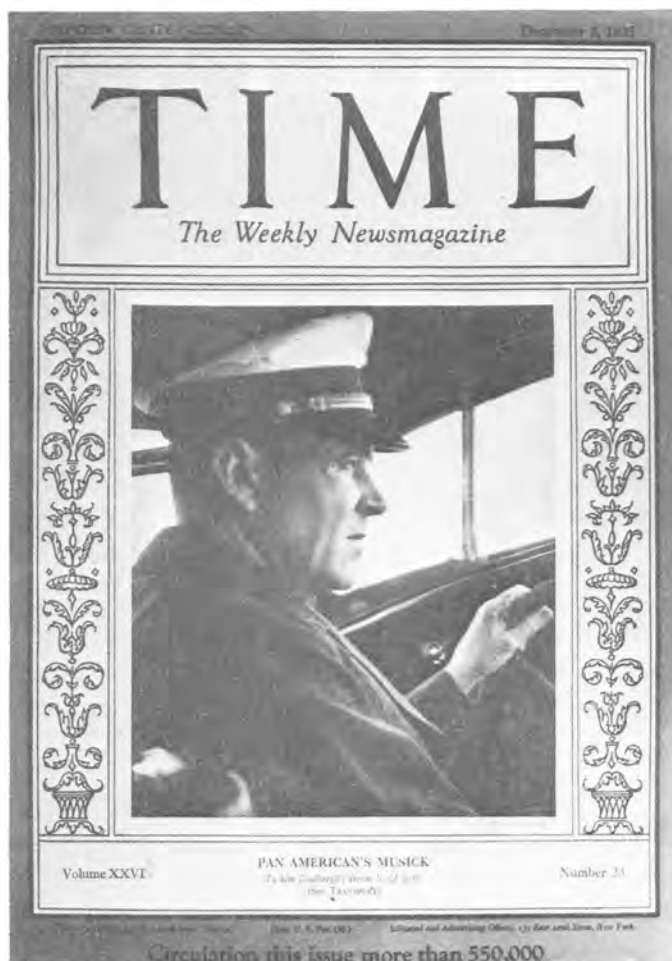
Second Flight Engineer Victor Wright and Navigator Fred Noonan on the inaugural flight of the *China Clipper* November 22, 1935.

(Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)



Capt. Victor Wright 30 years after the flight of the *China Clipper*, on which he was Second Flight Engineer. Captain Wright holds under his arm the flag which was flown at the bow of the *China Clipper* as it taxied to its mooring on Manila Bay November 29, 1935.

(Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)



Time magazine cover December 2, 1935. (Photo by Dick Kruse with permission of Time Inc., New York, N.Y.) Copyright 1935 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission from Time.

out there. But the welcoming committee and all our Navy friends seemed to be impressed with our carefully creased uniforms and our white caps and our bright and shining faces. There were some speeches and they handed out leis. All I wanted by that time was a place to sit down.

That night at Honolulu we loaded up with a lot of food and equipment for the island bases. And we took on 14 company passengers, replacements for the ground staffs on the islands. We could do that because the flight to Midway was only about half the distance of the San Francisco to Honolulu hop, so we carried less gas. And the navigation on this leg was simple. It was a daylight flight and we followed a curving chain of reefs and islands, covering the 1380 miles in 8½ hours.

During the survey flights we had enjoyed our layover time at Midway—fishing, swimming and teaching the gooney birds to fly by holding them over our heads and racing down the beach. On this trip, with a new type of plane, we were kept busy checking over the *Clipper* and taking the island maintenance crews on conducted tours of the ship. All this had to be done with the *Clipper* floating out in the lagoon.

On the way to Wake Island the next day we passed two "signposts" on an otherwise lonely and vacant ocean. The first was the International Dateline, which added a day to our schedule. This produced an interesting situation toward the end of our trip. A second passage occurred when we overflew the Matson liner, the *PRESIDENT LINCOLN*, which was on its



China Clipper moored to PAA landing barge at Manila after completing the first trans-Pacific airmail flight November 29, 1935. Manila Hotel in background. Luneta at right. (Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)



Captain Musick and crew disembarking upon arrival at Manila November 29, 1935. (Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)



Captain Musick and crew being escorted ashore at Manila by Philippine reception committee November 29, 1935. (Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)



People of the Philippines pay tribute to crew of the Pan American World Airways' *China Clipper* (center in dark uniforms) upon arrival in Manila marking the inauguration of trans-Pacific air service November 29, 1935.
(Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)



Spectators on Luneta awaiting arrival of *China Clipper* at Manila, P.I., November 29, 1935.
(Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)

from SAN FRANCISCO

(ONLY)

Total Mail	1,837 lbs.
Number of Bags.....	58
Numbers of Letters.....	110,865
for Honolulu	46,561
for Guam	19,958
for Manila	44,346
Number of Stamps Sold.....	206,414

from MANILA

(ONLY)

Total Mail	1,789 lbs.
Numbers of Bags.....	49
Numbers of Letters.....	98,480
for Guam	5,098
for Honolulu	18,663
for San Francisco.....	74,719
Number of Stamps Sold.....	231,033

Mail loads of the *China Clipper* on the inaugural flights—westbound and eastbound in 1935.
(Pan Am File Photo via Dick Kruse)

way to Japan. This gave us a welcome chance to check our navigation, for which we used dead reckoning, shots of the sun and the island-based radio direction finders which kept a constant watch over the flight. We were on course—as we had to be on this leg, for Wake Island was just a pinpoint surrounded by the vast Pacific. Actually, our flight went so well that we landed on the lagoon at Wake five minutes ahead of schedule.

Our flight to Guam the next day was a somewhat longer duplicate of Midway-Wake Island hop. We tried various altitudes (the *Clipper* performed best at about 8000 feet) to make the most of the tradewinds which were now pushing us along. As an indication of how flying has changed—at 1200 feet we found it so warm and comfortable that we opened all the windows.

We had a little trick for getting additional radio bearings as we approached Guam. There was a Japanese radio station on Rota, an island about 50 miles north of Guam, and when we were about an hour out of Apra Harbor we'd send out a CQ or "Do you hear me?" signal on the Jap's frequency. Then, while he was answering our call, we'd get a bearing on his station and combine that with a bearing from our own station on Guam to get a good fix on our position. We couldn't use that one too often, though, because in 1935 the Japanese weren't interested in helping anyone establish an airline across the Pacific.

Everybody in Guam seemed to have turned out to give us a welcome. This was just as well, because after we'd landed we discovered that someone in Manila who had scheduled the arrival celebration had apparently been confused by the time changes caused by the International Dateline and had provided us with an extra day of flying time. This meant that if we continued our flight the next morning we would arrive in Manila a day before they were ready to greet us. So we laid over a day on Guam and tried to make ourselves as inconspicuous as possible. That wasn't too easy with people all around the world watching the news of the flight and wondering where you were. We solved that by simply closing down the radio for everything but essential communications.

The Guam-to-Manila leg of the flight introduced a new note, for this was the first time anyone had flown across that particular stretch of ocean. But we were so sure of ourselves by this time—of the *China Clipper* and our flight procedures and the communications network that guarded us along the way—that we just took it in stride. There was a stir aboard when we raised the volcanic cone of Mount Mayan from 11,000 feet and 150 miles out, but that was chiefly because that meant it was time to clean up and get back into uniform for the welcoming celebration at Manila.

They gave us a great reception at Manila. I particularly enjoyed the official banquet and the automobile tour around the city, because I could take them both sitting down. They gave us each several sheets of first-flight stamps commemorating the first mail flight across the Pacific and I managed to get hold of the flag we flew at the *China Clipper's* bow as we taxied in to our mooring. I still have both the stamps and the flag as souvenirs of the first commercial flight across the Pacific—and the memory of a pair of aching feet.

NOTES

1. Fred Noonan was lost while navigating for Amelia Earhart over the Pacific in 1937.
2. Captain Musick perished along with his crew aboard their S-42 survey plane, *Samoan Clipper*, shortly after departure from Pago Pago, bound for Auckland on January 11, 1938.
3. The Luneta is a large park studded in those prewar days by gigantic Royal Poincianas.

LOG OF THE CHINA CLIPPER

(Local Times Throughout)

Arrive	Westbound	Depart
	San Francisco	3:46pm Nov 22
10:19am Nov 23	Honolulu	6:35am Nov 24
2:00pm Nov 24	Midway	6:12am Nov 25
(Time advanced one day due to crossing International Dateline)		
1:38pm Nov 26	Wake Island	6:01am Nov 27
3:05pm Nov 27	Guam	6:12am Nov 29
3:32pm Nov 29	Manila	
Distance Flown: 8,210 miles		Flight Time: 59 hours, 48 minutes
	Eastbound	
	Manila	2:53am Dec 2
6:41pm Dec 2	Guam	6:11am Dec 3
8:57pm Dec 3	Wake Island	6:45am Dec 4
(Time retarded one day due to crossing International Dateline)		
4:49pm Dec 3	Midway	6:11am Dec 4
5:27pm Dec 4	Honolulu	3:02pm Dec 5
10:36am Dec 6	San Francisco	
Distance Flown: 8,210 miles		Flight Time: 63 hours, 24 minutes
Total Distance: 16,420 miles		Flight Time: 123 hours, 12 minutes

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard L. Kruse enlisted in the Army Air Corps in November 1941. He served in the 303rd Bomb Group, Eighth Air Force, England, from October 1942 to August 1943. Flying B-17s, he completed 25 bombing missions over occupied Europe, during which he was awarded the DFC and Air Medal with three clusters. From August 1943 till he was discharged in 1945, Kruse had various training duties in the U.S.

He joined Pan American Airways in July 1945, and retired at age 60 on January 1, 1980, as a B-747 captain. During his career with Pan Am, Kruse logged over 28,000 flying hours, more than 1700 Atlantic crossings and over 200 North Pacific crossings.

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