

CHARLIE FORTY SIX, Part II

Some Exploits Told

By Dave Stern



An unidentified Curtiss C-46 in the livery of Andes Airways. Date and location are unknown. (Photo from Thompson Productions via the author's collection)

In the late 40s, U.S. military operators retained ownership of some C-46s and leased them to qualified operators, but declared others surplus, while those retained in military service flew well into the 1950s, before retiring. In 1948, Claire Chennault and Whiting Willauer, founded CAT (Civil Air Transport) using surplus C-46s and several C-47s.

In December 1949, CAT *Commandos* and *Skytrains* escaped the Communist seizure of mainland China by evacuating all personnel and aircraft to bases in Hong Kong, Formosa, and Tachikawa. CAT fought legal battles concerning ownership of their grounded aircraft in the Hong Kong courts, but eventually shipped their corroded transports to a salvage yard in Santa Barbara, where they were sold piecemeal as spare parts.¹

In America, the War Assets Administration decision to surplus C-46 and C-47s stymied Curtiss plans to produce their CW-20 civil transport. The ironic twist is that surplus *Commandos* fulfilled the CW-20's planned role by flying cargo and passengers in the U.S., Central and South America, Asia, and Alaska, but not with the CW-20's planned interior appointments and "stepped windshield."

Hundreds of civilian and ex-military pilots initiated non-scheduled charter passenger and freight lines, with surplus C-46s, especially in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska.

Non-scheduled passenger and freight lines such as Talon, MAT, the man-wife team of Arctic Pacific Inc., Skycoach

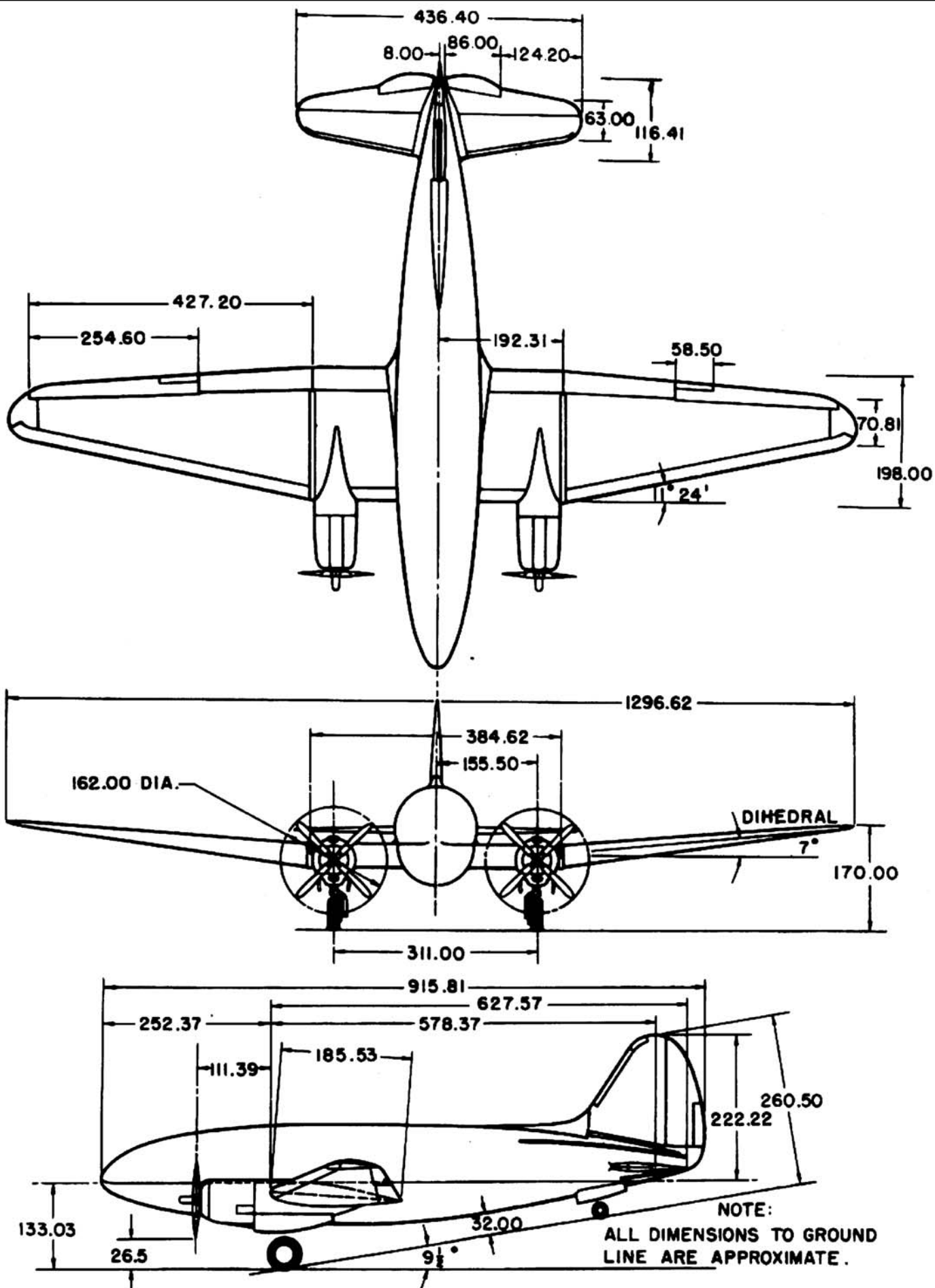
Express, All American Airways, U.S. Aircoach, Coastal and Air Transport Associates (ATA) briefly flew *Commandos* before ceasing operations due to the post-war glut of start ups. ATA charged a mere \$69 to fly Seattle to Anchorage, and only \$60 southbound return.

Even Transocean Airlines folded. That airline, the brainchild of a reported 19 mixed USN and USAAF pilots flying operations in Okinawa prior to the surrender, was based in Oakland, Calif. A successful but secret Transocean contract involved flying 45 tons of Siamese gold from Tokyo, Japan, to the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, with fuel-oil stops in



A C-46D of an unidentified JASDF Inspection Unit, Hamamatsu AB, Japan, 1971. When the JASDF retired their C-46s, a few were purchased by Cliff Everts, owner of Everts Air Service. Today his maintenance operation occupies Wien Air Alaska's ancient hanger at Fairbanks International Airport, Fairbanks, Alaska. (From the author's collection)

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A Japanese Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) C-46D assigned to an ADC Squadron at Iruna, AB, Japan, 1973. The JASDF received 35 operational C-46Ds. (Photo by Mr. Nagakubo from the author's collection)



This C-46, belonging to Bolivian Airways, was used to haul both freight and passengers. Date and location are unknown. (Photo from Thompson Productions via the author's collection)

Anchorage, Alaska. Transocean operated some Alaska based C-46s that flew Navy contracts delivering supplies, mail and fuel oil to the Petroleum Reserve No. 4 (Pet-4), and the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory (NARL) of the Office of Naval Research, at Point Barrow.²

Ironically, our WWII Pacific enemy, the Japanese, became the largest military operator of an aircraft that helped defeat them.

The JASF (Japanese Air Self Defense Force) formed on July 1, 1954, received 35 operational C-46D transports. Other postwar *Commandos* flew in the military colors of Brazil, Chinese Nationalist Air Force, Dominican Military Aviation Corps, Israeli Air Force, Republic of Korea and Peru.³

In Alaska, it had been the natural progression of things to heavily work any available aircraft capable of earning its keep. *Commandos*, C-47s and Fairchild's boxy twin-boom C-82 *Packets* were no exceptions.

C-46s served with the aforementioned non-scheduled airlines and with Wien Air Alaska (three C-46s, two C-82s and a Boeing 247), Reeve Aleutian Airways (four), Cordova Airlines (one), Alaska Airlines (two), Interior Airways (five C-46s and two C-82A *Packets*), Everts Air Service (three), and Great Northern Airlines aka Fairbanks Air (five).⁴

Trans Arctic Airways with three C-46s based in Alaska purchased three additional C-46s from Costa Rica. Everts Air

Service, purchased ex-JASDF *Commandos* and flew them to Alaska. The firm continues flying the type today delivering fuel oil to remote villages.

In 1923, President Warren Harding signed an Executive Order establishing the Naval Petroleum Reserve Number 4 in northern Alaska (NPR-4). The Navy initiated secret operations in this Indiana-sized real estate in 1944, by performing exploratory oil and gas drilling. In 1945, the secret classification was dropped and Navy drilling activity was henceforth reported in the media.

Navy Barrow Expedition (Barex) ships delivered thousands of tons of heavy equipment and supplies necessary for each summer operation. After WWII, the Navy augmented Barex supply ships by contracting the Territory's airlines to provide "line haul" air-supply services from Fairbanks airport.

Competitors flying C-46s and C-47s were Transocean Airlines, Wien, and Alaska Airlines. The latter's DC-4 also flew "line haul" flights. All delivered Arctic Contractors (Arcon) personnel and heavy cargo to Pt. Barrow airstrip, a 5,000 foot dirt-gravel runway covered by Marston Mat, or the mixed sand-peat-gravel surfaced Umiat runway. The Navy restricted civilian cargo flights to Barrow at three per week because of military traffic and constantly deteriorating runway surfaces.⁵ Every year, one of the aforementioned Alaska operators won the contract to supply NPR-4 and a new entity, the NARL.



In 1958, Reeve Aleutian Airways purchased the first of three C-46s that flew cargo into the bush. Reeve personnel were delighted with the aircraft's outstanding cargo capacity and its ability to deliver loads to numerous unprepared dirt and gravel airstrips throughout the Territory/State. (Photo by the author)



A clean and handsome C-46 is finished in U.S. Forestry Service colors. When military aircraft are sold by the Government, federal, state and native organizations are notified first and invited to bid. What is not sold through those channels is offered to the public. (Photo Trans Slides from the author's collection)



Bush-pilot Merle "Mudhole" Smith and several partners started Cordova Airlines. They operated small bush planes, the DC-3 and this C-46, N7779B, on charter cargo and passenger carrying flights in Alaska, and to Seattle, Washington. N7779B suffered a collapsed starboard landing gear during a landing, and was rebuilt. (Photo by Norman. E. Taylor from the author's collection)

On August 6, 1947, a Transocean C-46 landed at Barrow with the first contingent of scientists to start the NARL, situated at Barrow on the Arctic Ocean. Sometimes operating on skis, *Commandos*, C-47s, and Navy R4Ds supplied equipment, personnel, mail, supplies, research rockets and related scientific equipment to the NARL, on a yearly basis.

In 1953, after expending over 50 million dollars and nine years of exploratory drilling, the Navy terminated further activity within the Pet-4 Reserve, thus relinquishing their duty as stewards.

Certain executives of "The Seven Sisters," plus various independent Texas barons flew secret missions to Alaska, chartered experienced Alaska bush pilots, and flew throughout the Pet-4 lands, formulating plans to perform "wildcat" sample drilling for oil. From the mid-1950s and into the late-1960s, three C-82 *Packets*, 12 C-46s, seven "Connies" and some DC-3/C-47s operated by the previously mentioned airlines, hauled freight and personnel to Barrow for civilian drilling operations.

Trans Arctic Airlines and Interior Airways also flew equipment and personnel to the ex-Pet-4 lands from Anchorage and Fairbanks. The Seven Sisters executives eventually renamed it the North Slope.⁶ They flew increasingly larger amounts of drilling rigs, drilling mud, supplies, food, workers



Alaska Freight Lines' "land-train" was a 300-ft long, 16-ft wide specially designed and built to haul heavy freight over the arctic tundra. It was known at the "Arctic Monster" or simply "The Monster." (LeTourneau photo from the author's collection)

and anything necessary to operate secret wildcat rigs taking core samples in search of "black gold."

During the mid-1950s, the Alaska operators and their surplus transports were quite busy flying additional cargo flights that supported construction and operation of USAF System 413L, the Distant Early Warning Line (DEW Line) Radar Station Project.

COMMANDO COMPETITION

Tales of *Commandos* and its brethren in Alaska are incomplete without mentioning a relatively unknown competitor known as "The Monster." It is not known what groundling Al Ghezzi's true motivations were, but the owner of Alaska Freight Lines audaciously conceived the bright idea of competing against those surplus air transports in a very unorthodox manner.

In 1954, he contracted the heavy equipment firm of R.G. LeTourneau Corporation, in Longview, Tex., to build an overland freight hauling tractor vehicle that slowly crawled over the eternally mushy tundra to the Pet-4 lands and the northern based DEW Line Stations. LeTourneau's engineers are congratulated for delivering the goods as ordered that also interested the U.S. Army.

The huge *Snow Freighter* with four cargo trailers was 300-feet long and 16-feet wide, thus earning the nickname "Arctic Monster" or simply "The Monster."

The four-man overland locomotive tractor unit housed two Cummins V-12 diesels, each churning out 400 hp to rotate electric generators that in turn, powered an electric motor on each tire. LeTourneau's pride rolled high above the landscape on aluminum rimmed seven-foot diameter tires, sized at 120 inches by 46 inches in width.

Each wheel with its electric drive motor weighed approximately one and a half tons. The \$450,000 monster's total cargo capacity with four trailers was 240 tons. Its cruise speed was not mentioned. Its operational trek covered the Anaktuvuk and Atigyn Pass grades leading up and over the Brooks Range, and carefully descended into the 23-million acre Pet-4 reserve. Even with the strongest of tail winds, the land-roving "Arctic Monster" was far slower than the slowest air transports.

After wrestling with loading this very large and difficult machine, the railroad delivered it to a waiting ship in Seattle that sailed for the port of Valdez. A special carrier was fabricated to haul the land-train to its operating base in Circle City. On its first 240 ton load north, the monster eventually reached its destination, but encountered a series of misfortunes.

During its return trip to Circle City, the monster rolled downhill out of control, jackknifed and crashed to a halt on fire. Meanwhile, *Commandos*, *Skytrains*, *Packets* and "Connies" serenely flew overhead, steadily delivering multiple tons of cargo to the DEW Line sites and the Pet-4 lands on the north side of the Brooks Range. There is more to The Monster's story although enough has been presented here.



The Consolidated Airways Cape Hinchinbrook aerial fuel delivery in action. The black object is a 55 gallon of fuel-oil rapidly free-falling to earth. (Photo courtesy of Margaretta Roberts)



A fuel drum dropped into the soft snow nearly collided with the two trees seen in this photo. The fuel-oil drop only succeeded due to the heavy snowfall. (Photo courtesy of Margaretta Roberts)

The R5C-1 bomb run on Roi Island described in Part I of this article (*AAHS Journal*, Fall 2007) was not the last aerial bombing mission performed by a C-46. The story leads us to Vance and Margaretta Roberts. During the mid-to-late 1950s, they owned Consolidated Airways and operated two C-46s on standby alert in Alaska. They also landed contracts during the construction of the southern Dew-Line AC&W Sites, and flew defense contracts for Western Electric. Their C-46s hauled microwave towers, components, buildings and crews who erected the new microwave towers known as the White Alice Project. During one severe winter in the mid-or-late 1950s, Cape Hinchinbrook White Alice Site (the sites were initially manned for at least a decade) built atop a mountain, was snowed in and required an emergency delivery of diesel fuel.

Landing a C-46 in fresh deep snow was naturally out of the question, leaving one remaining option - an air drop. Consolidated Airways mechanics fabricated a sheet metal chute that was installed in the *Commando's* fuselage, allowing 55-gallon drums of fuel to be rolled down the chute and exit through the starboard door.

The drill was to fly past the station in slow flight with flaps partially extended, while the cargomaster rolled the drums along the makeshift chute and out the door. The deep snow banks actually cushioned the fuel oil drums from heavily impacting the earth and splitting the seams open. However, one drum slammed into a very sturdy tree and neatly folded itself half way around it.

Reeve's C-46s were chartered to fly VIPs around Alaska that extended into Washington State. Reeve pilots flew their C-46s on "chicken charters" from Bellingham and Everett, Washington, to Palmer, Alaska, hauling 15,000 pounds of chicken bodies and parts per load. Their *Commandos* also flew fuel oil into Alaska villages that Reeve pilots were happily ignorant of before learning of their destinations. Robert Reeve finally retired their tired *Commandos* in September 1979, thus becoming an all-turbine airline.⁷

Commandos are still flying in Latin America, as well as other global locations. Sixty-five years after the type's first delivery to the USAAC in July 1942, *Commando* seem destined to outlive the flight and maintenance crews who operated them

in WWII. Any eulogy for this outstanding design is clearly premature as significant numbers of the type will likely continue for many years to come.

Acknowledgements

The author's recently deceased mother collected some relevant Curtiss Wright publicity material during her "Rosy the Riveter" tenure with the company in late WWII. The author's 90-year-old father, a veteran WWII Pacific Marine, also remembered his tenure and Marine aviation stories occurring in that theatre.

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The author also thanks the Niagara Aerospace Museum staff for the in-flight and factory views of the Curtiss-Wright C-46 *Commando*.

Notes

- 1 Malcolm Rosholt, *Claire L. Channault. A Tribute*, 14th Air Force Association.
- 2 "Transocean Air Lines has a Unique History," *Jessen's Weekly*, Thursday, November 1, 1951, pp 26 & 30.
- 3 William Green and John Fricker, *The Air Forces of the World*, 1958 Edition.
- 4 Karl E Hayes & Eamon C Power, "Alaskan Aviation." *Air Britain Digest*, July-August 1979.
- 5 Alaska Department of Aviation, Biennial Report, Progress and Finance, 1951-1952. Tony Schramm-Director, Alaska Aeronautics and Communications Commission, 51.
- 6 Helen L. Atkinson, "Improved Transportation North Slope Key," *Alaska Industry*, May 1969.
- 7 Janice Reeve Ogle, *The WILLIWAW, The History of RAA, 50 years of Service, 1932-1982*. Special Edition, October 1982.