

Mallard Over Tahiti 1951-1955

By Alex Frame

Hotson and Rodina's valuable book on the elegant twin-engined post-WWII amphibious flying boat, the Grumman G-73 *Mallard*, traces the individual histories of many of the 59 examples produced at the company's Long Island, N.Y., works between 1946 and 1951. But of the 29th production airframe, the authors were able to say only that it:

"Had been sold by the Ford Motor Company to the Government of Tahiti. Little is known of this operation, other than the aircraft was named "Ciel de Polynésie" (Sky of Polynesia). It returned to the U.S. and sat for sale in 1956-57, then was reported demolished or sold but was never heard of again." (Fred. W. Hotson and Matthew E. Rodina Jr., *Grumman Mallard: The Enduring Classic*, Robin Brass Studio, Montreal, 2006, p.72.)

Perhaps the following information and images may help to fill the gap, at least for Grumman *Mallard* F-OAII's Tahitian days. Many of the details are taken directly from the logbook of my father, Captain A. Frame (1916-1983), a wartime flying boat pilot who was awarded the DFC in 1941 for service in 210 and 228 Squadrons (RAF), particularly in the evacuations of Greece and Crete in 1941, and who later served with 490 Squadron (RNZAF) and commanded 204 Squadron (RAF) in West Africa. [Author's note: The earlier of these episodes, and other aspects of his flying career, are more fully described in my recently published book *Flying Boats: My Father's War in the Mediterranean*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2007.]

Mallard F-OAII first flew for Air Tahiti in 1951, and was involved in one of the oddest airmail inaugurations in the South Pacific when, on May 3, 1951, with Captain Joseph Pommier at the controls, it made the journey to Aitutaki in the then New Zealand-administered Cook Islands.

The *Pacific Islands Monthly* of June 1951 recorded the reception on alighting:

It was approached only by persons wearing gloves and masks. It was then realised [sic] that Tahiti, from the New Zealand viewpoint, is infected with polio and is tabu. . . The seaplane returned to Papeete with its load – simply the most extraordinary incident in the dismal record of the many attempts to establish an airmail service for Tahiti.

Captain Frame joined Air Tahiti in February 1953 from the colorful Bryan Monkton's financially exhausted Trans Oceanic Airways based at Rose Bay in Sydney. The *Mallard* served mainly in linking the principal islands around Tahiti (Raiatea, Huahine, and Borabora), and to improve the reach of the Government of French Polynesia to the outlying island groups. The logbook records a four hour 'mercy flight' to Anaa in the Tuamotu Islands on April 12, 1953. Frame's laconic style: 'evacuation sick native (harpoon).' On July 1, 1953, the logbook records a flight to Hikueru: 'vol sanitaire – emergency alighting fuel shortage.'



Air Tahiti's Mallard by the Fare Ute hangar in Papeete, 1953. Soon after, the flying boat base moved out of town to Fa'aa. (Frame family collection)



The true amphibian, Mallard F-OAll of Air Tahiti, shows its capability as it powers out of the water and up the slipway at Fare Ute in Papeete harbour in 1953. (Frame family collection)

In June 1953 the *Mallard* made a six day atoll-hopping journey through the Tuamotu Islands with 10 government officials: to Anaa, Hikueru, Hao (later associated with the French nuclear tests), Tureia, Mangareva (where the flying boat moored alongside the French naval vessel *La Moqueuse*), Reao, Amanu, Raroia, Makemo, Fakarava, and Niau. In some cases, the *Mallard* was the first aircraft to alight in these lagoons, each of which presented its own array of coral-heads and dangers for a landing flying boat. Further details, together with the amusing account of one of the encounters, may be found in the book to which reference has been made.

In August 1953 Air Tahiti became R.A.I. (Réseau Aérien Interinsulaire), and in October of that year Captain Frame flew the *Mallard* on the inaugural air link to Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands with French soldier-turned-politician Colonel Louis Castex aboard. Castex was on a mission to evaluate the possibility of building an international aerodrome on Tahiti. Others aboard were Pierre Challier, a leading figure in Tahiti aviation and veteran of WWII combat flying, the chief administration officer in the Marquesas, M. Reboul with wife and son, and M. Roques, the head of postal services. The flight engineer was Maurice Diard, later killed in the crash of *Catalina* F-OAVV at Raiatea on February 19, 1958. Details of the journey may be found in Patrick O'Reilly's valuable work *Tahiti et L'Aviation*, published by the Société des Oceanistes in 1974. At Taiohae, the chief of Nuku Hiva, Stanislas Taupotini, renamed the aircraft 'Te Manu Nui o Nukuhiva' (The Big Bird of Nuku Hiva), and the *Mallard* thereafter proudly bore those words on its nose.

Castex himself has left an account of the takeoff from

Taiohae, here translated by the present writer from Castex's *Iles, Relais du Ciel*, published by Union Générale in 1964:

'[The Mallard] picked up speed but there was a swell... It bounced violently once, twice, three times, four times. Ouf! The pilot pulled it off the water, nothing broken. We looked at one another. Everything happened very fast and yet the takeoff seemed to last forever.'

Back in Paris, and perhaps with a better appreciation of the difficulties of flying boat operations, Castex duly reported to the Assembly of the French Union on May 6, 1954, arguing for the construction of the aerodrome in Tahiti, giving two major reasons. First, it would provide France with a 'bargaining chip' to secure landing rights for French civil aviation in the U.S. and Australia; secondly, it would end the isolation of Tahiti and make it a vital link in Pacific aviation routes.

On July 23, 1954, the *Mallard* suffered an engine fire on the water at Borabora and the difficulties of repairs required its replacement by *Catalina* F-OAVV. The *Mallard* next appears in the logbook for air tests in October 1955. In November of that year it was sold to Wold, Inc., in the United States.



F-OAll at Taiohae, Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands, October 2-5, 1953. Note the refuelling drums brought in advance from Tahiti by schooner for the return flight, and the tethering rope attached to a coconut tree. (Frame family collection)



Captain A. Frame at the controls of a Short Solent of Trans Oceanic Airways in Rose Bay, Sydney, in 1952, before taking his family to Tahiti. (Frame family collection)

In all, Captain Frame flew 389 hours in this aircraft, which provided a valuable air service to the islands around Tahiti before the progressive arrivals of *Catalinas* F-OAVV and F-OAYD, and in 1958 the Short *Sandringham* (Bermuda) F-OBIP. With the Short *Solents* of TEAL's New Zealand-based 'Coral Route,' which provided the only air link to the outside world in the 1950s, these aircraft became the workhorses of aviation in French Polynesia until the opening of the aerodrome in Tahiti in 1961.

About the Author

Dr. ALEX FRAME, LL.D is a barrister and law teacher, and advises extensively on constitutional questions in the South Pacific. Most recently he has been Professor of Law at the University of Waikato. His 1995 biography of Sir John Salmond (1862–1924), *Salmond: Southern Jurist*, was awarded the E.H. McCormick Prize at the 1996 Montana Book Awards as well as the Law Foundation's J.F. Northey Prize. In 2002 Alex published a study of the way in which our legal system might better reflect Maori customary law: *Grey and Iwikau - A Journey into Custom*. His most recent book, *Flying Boats: My Father's War in the Mediterranean*, appeared in October 2007.

INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

Manuscripts can be on a **CD** or **Floppy Disk**. Macintosh or Windows if it has been purged of viruses. A hard copy of the Manuscript with separate Captions, References or Footnotes, Authors Notes, etc., must accompany the CD or Floppy Disk.

- **Manuscripts** typed on one side of 8 1/2 x 11-inch paper. Include author's name on first page.
- **Computer printouts** fine, but please **NO** fancy type fonts, and no second-generation copies! Your copy is scanned by computer to generate type for printing your article. Italics or fancy fonts are not recognized by the scanner program and errors abound. This increases time required to produce the *Journal* and increases the cost.
- Dot matrix and typewriter of Arial/Helvetica/Geneva fonts read well, but please, ragged right margins for word spacing.
- **Captions**, References, bibliography and author's biography should follow manuscript.
- **Prefer photos** to be glossy but not necessary. Color photos are fine. If you are providing scanned images (we prefer to scan ourselves) they must be highest quality JPEG and at least 300 dpi resolution. For example, an 8"x10" print would be 2400 x 3000 pixels in size. Please **DO NOT** provide prints made on ink jet printers - send the digital image.

• **Adequate captions** should be furnished including credit (original owner/photographer) followed by the lender. Match the caption number with the photo number.

• **Do NOT** attach captions to back of photos—for scanning they must be in manuscript form.

While every effort will be made to safeguard submissions, AAHS assumes no responsibility for the loss of materials. If original photos are of precious nature, it is suggested duplicate prints be furnished.

Journal articles are accepted from AAHS members only except in instances where the editorial staff solicits a journalistic piece of meritorious quality. All articles must have an American flavor. For example, American personnel or planes in foreign service or foreign planes or personnel in U.S. service are acceptable. Not accepted are articles unrelated to America.

A particular subject should not normally be longer than two parts. Exceptions may be made where the subject matter has outstanding merit. Ideal manuscript length for a single insertion is 30 pages, including references, etc. For style and form consult recent *Journals*.

Please include brief author's biography written in third person, together with author's photo.