

Airplanes I Have Known -

C-47 42-93585

by Roger W. Story

What you might call financial constraints have always limited my exposure to new airplanes except, that is, when Uncle Sam was footing the bill. Then, on occasion, I was lucky enough to be assigned to fly a brand new expensive machine. I recall a PT-19, a BT-13 and a couple of “Useless” 78s in that category; and then there was C-47 42-93585.

In June 1944 ‘585 arrived at Hamilton AAFB on the shore of San Francisco Bay about the same time that we did, having made one test flight and the trip up from the factory before it was assigned to us - total time less than 10 hours. We were a crew of absolute strangers. 1st Lt. Tom Gavey, pilot; 2nd Lt. R. Story, copilot; 1st Lt. Paul “Smitty” Smith, navigator and Cpl. Bill Meyers, radio operator. Of the four of us, only Smitty had ever flown anything much bigger than a puddle jumper. Now our orders stated that we would deliver ‘585 to Brisbane, Australia, which as near as I could figure was some 8,000 miles over water with perhaps 200 miles of that within sight of land. We were going island hopping and the first hop was a doozy - 2,600 miles, more or less, to Hickam Field, Hawaii.

We were able to squeeze in just one test flight before the big event. In three hours we went through everything in the book (and some that wasn’t) and she came up clean as a whistle. (NOTE: The Japanese did not invent quality control.)

The next time that we saw her she had been outfitted with eight 100-gallon fiber auxiliary tanks mounted on wood frames, four on each side of the cabin. This brought our total fuel up to 1,600 gallons, good for maybe 18 hours at cruise. It also made the fuel and oil weight at takeoff very close to five tons and gross weight over 32,000 lbs. - or about three tons more than the CAA maximum gross for the same airplane. This really simplified things. Takeoff was go/no go; we reverted to single-engine status with twice the probability of failure.

The runway at Hamilton was quite long for that era, about 8,000 ft. as I recall. About halfway down it, tail up, tires still firmly planted and the two P & W’s doing the very best they could, Gavey says “Feel this thing. I’m not sure it’ll fly.” He was right. It was about like pulling on a fence post. I suggested trim and he rolled in a little that helped some but it was mostly a matter of letting her go until we got enough speed. This happened shortly before the end of the runway and I cycled the gear as quickly as I could when he called for it.

We had taken off to the northeast, headed inland and had to turn back over the bay. This we did quite gingerly, still at max power. As we got squared away over the bay and aimed at the Golden Gate Bridge, Smitty, who was standing behind us, suggested that maybe we ought to consider going under it instead of over. But we cleared it by at least 100 ft. and eased

off on the power about the same time.

It was early evening as we left the coast and chased the sunset. Thirty miles out we passed the Farallons, still scratching for altitude. Rough seas were pounding those solitary rocks. They were certainly an impossible haven; still they were to be our last landfall until Diamond Head so they marked the transition from that sense of the familiar to the unknown.

At briefing that morning we had been introduced to the latest development in long distance flying - they called it cruise control. We were given an extensive set of charts and tabulations; a program of power settings for use throughout the flight, guaranteed to extend our range and endurance. Having worked our way up to 8,000 ft. we tilted her forward and I read off the first settings for RPM and MP. We were both disgusted with the result. It was too low a setting and the airplane was so bogged down it was pitiful. Gavey stood it for about 10 minutes then went back to climb power to gain a few hundred feet, nosed down to 8,000 and set the power at 2,000 rpm and 22 inches MP. With that kind of treatment she perked up a bit and we were on our way. We made one reduction in MP later and that was it. So much for that early version of cruise control. I folded up the charts and gave them to Smitty for filing.

There have been many arguments, pro and con, some highly technical as to the existence of the so called “step” in setting up an airplane for cruise. The C-47 was definitely a step airplane, with at least two conditions of stability for one cruise power setting, especially at heavy weights. If you approached your final altitude from above and at a higher power setting you ended up at a higher cruise speed and maintained that margin as you burned off fuel.

What was left of twilight disappeared quickly. The night was dark and almost featureless. A high haze layer obscured all but the brightest stars.

Navigation was no problem. The Coast Guard provided two ships stationed at the one-third way points with non-directional beacon (NDB) operating on a schedule or on call. Smitty kept track too, sighting stars and plotting our position every hour.

We had our cockpit lights way down and continued to scan the darkness in what seemed a fruitless search; for what we didn’t know. Lights ahead; navigation lights; below and closing fast; someone going east. A small comfort that at least we were not alone in this dark night sky. In all, we sighted eight passings through the night; the route was certainly well traveled.

It was early morning, but well after sun up, when we made out the islands ahead. We were supposed to make a 90-degree recognition turn at a point off Diamond Head, which seemed

unnecessary since we had IFF and HF communication but then “ours not to reason why.” The turn had to be right hand some days and left on others. The radio operator (RO) who was the keeper of the codes advised that this was a right turn day so to the right we went, then started our let down for Hickam.

Shortly, the RO advised us that we had made the wrong turn and we were being challenged to identify ourselves. This we did and apologized for the error but they were not happy with us at all. They had already scrambled two fighters as a precaution. We wondered at what seemed a gross overreaction but then we were 2,600 miles closer to the war.

We landed at Hickam 13 hours and 25 minutes out of Hamilton with plenty of fuel left [Ref. #1 on Pacific Map]. That was good time. Other crews that we talked with took as much as 16 hours under the same conditions but using the cruise control settings.

We had a full day layover at Hickam and we made good use of it. The surf was up at Waikiki so I rented a board and had a go at it - near disaster. After struggling for some time I was just able to get underway and up on my knees when I was damn near rammed by some show-off dude doing 30 knots with his girlfriend standing on his shoulders. We ate and drank at the Royal Hawaiian and went down the street to watch the sailors line up at the cat houses. It was said that when the fleet was in the lines got so long that some would come out after being served and go around to the end of the line.

The next morning we were off before sun up and headed



*Canton Island - airfield is on northwest end of island.
(Image from Google Earth)*

concrete floor of our shelter. A barefoot trip to the latrine was out of the question. We swam in a lagoon that was replenished with sea water only at high tide and consequently saltier than the Great Salt Lake. Someone with big feet and a fast step could probably have walked on it.

It was well after daylight the next day when we took off and headed west/southwest for Canton Island [Ref. #3] a short hop of about 1,000 miles. So far the weather had been good and we were getting used to looking down at nothing but water. About halfway to Canton we crossed the equator. No one realized it but Smitty, who, having crossed it before, was authorized to perform the appropriate ceremonial rite of dousing the rest of us with a canteen of cold water.

Canton was more barren than Christmas and devoid of attractions. We explored some of the shore and I took the opportunity to fire the small 38 revolver I had bought in San Francisco. (I had trouble with directional control of the issue 45.)

Overnight the weather changed. At take-off time a wet mist was streaming across the island and the reported 200 ft. ceiling was an exaggeration. At 4,000 ft. we were clear of the low clouds but scraping the bottom of a solid overcast that was reported to go to 20,000 ft. We went to 10,000 hoping they were wrong but eventually returned to 4,000 and carried on between the layers. This was the shortest leg of the trip; 850 miles to Nanumea [Ref. #4], the northernmost of a small group of islands scattered over about 500 miles of latitude that are known as the Ellice Islands. Sandwiched as we were between layers there was no chance for Smitty to do his stuff. He couldn't even use the drift-meter to check the wind. Somewhere along the way we crossed the International Date Line and skipped a day.

After four hours of following the compass we were still in the same predicament. Nanumea was supposed to have a low-power beacon in operation but there was no sign of it on the earphones as we came up on our ETA. We carried on for about 10 minutes, glued to the earphones as I tuned around the frequency; then it was there; so faint that I was afraid to move



Christmas Island. (Image from Google Earth)

south. The flight to Christmas Island [Ref. #2] was about 1,400 miles. It took us 7 hours and 35 minutes. Christmas is a small island almost on the equator. It was our introduction to some of the harsher more primitive conditions typical of many of our Pacific bases; coral runway, blazing sun. We slept under mosquito nets and ate C rations. But Christmas did offer some unusual attractions, most notably its population of land crabs. There had to be millions of them, they were everywhere. It was impossible to drive without making crab meat out of them. At night you could hear the clatter as they skittered about on the





*Nanumea Island - no sign of the airfield remains.
(Image from Google Earth)*

the dial for fear of losing it. Since our course crossed the line up of the island chain we had to turn either right or left to check for signal fade. Smitty guessed that we were north of course so we turned south - and lost the signal. It had been so weak that we were not sure that turning south had anything to do with it. After 10 minutes on that course with no results we made a 180 and headed north. We picked up the signal about where we lost it and it continued to build in a most satisfying way. When it was strong enough for the ADF to home we decided to scout the lower layer to see if we could get under it.

We went down to 500 ft. on the altimeter and held. Eventually we were able to catch a fleeting glimpse of the sea below that allowed us to work our way down. At 100 ft., or so, we were clear. Scatting along at that height was exhilarating after the hours at altitude. It also made the appearance of an island dead ahead quite suddenly and a bit startling. We crossed directly over it; a green jewel not over half a mile across, completely covered with lush tropical vegetation. I was sure that the odds against such a find in this scattered group of islands were long indeed yet as luck would have it we saw two more before eventually zeroing in on Nanumea.

Nanumea was a slightly larger version of that first island we'd seen. Except for the runway and small base facility there was nothing but jungle. We saw to the servicing of the airplane, ate and sacked out.

The next day's trip was 1,150 miles to Henderson Field on Guadalcanal [Ref. #5]. Six hours of nothing but water.

Henderson was still a very active field more than a year after most of the fighting was over. It was now a staging area for many different outfits and had a great variety of airplanes; some of just about every type active in the South Pacific. The transient area comprised a group of Quonset huts on the south edge of the field. These were better accommodations than those we had gotten used to but the food was no improvement. The K rations we had on board were tasting better all the time.

Gavey was quite generous in sharing the pilot's duties on the trip so it happened to be my turn at take off the next morning. There was not much in the way of a forecast available for our route to Brisbane but it was obvious from the look of the sky in the early light that we were going to have plenty of weather to contend with early on.

We took off to the north and made a wide swing to the right over Iron Bottom Sound (so called because of all the

ships sunk there) gaining as much height as we could before turning west. The mountains west of Henderson went to over 7,000 ft. Before we got there though we were swallowed up in the roughest weather I'd ever experienced - a broad area of monstrous tropical thunderstorms spawned by something called the Equatorial Front. This spectacularly violent tropical weather would soon become a frequent, sometimes daily challenge but no training, briefing or even rumor had prepared us for this first encounter. It took 45 minutes to fight our way through. We were slammed around so hard that I was sure something had to give - but nothing did. At times the rain was so heavy I expected to see fish floating by the windshield. The head temperatures headed down and kept going. We closed the cowl flaps, even put the gear down so that we could run at higher power, trying to keep them warm. The turbulence, water, lightning and the din of it all was accompanied by the most spectacular light show imaginable. The props were iridescent pinwheels of corona discharge. Bright displays of color highlighted the water streaming off the windshield and the wing tips sprouted flares. There was so much electricity in the cockpit you could feel the hair rise on your head and arms. Sailors called it St. Elmo's fire but I doubt that their shows were nearly as animated.

We were out of the maelstrom quite abruptly and into bright sunshine, heading south/southwest. This last leg was 1,400 miles; seven hours, looking out and down at that same vast expanse of water. We picked up the Queensland coast about a half hour out of Ipswich, a small town inland from Brisbane, the location of Amberly Field, our destination [Ref. #6]. As we circled around to the west for landing we were all intrigued with the fact that the field was simply a broad expanse of grass with no runway layout. I later landed many times at Amberly and it was always a delight. Setting a C-47 down on smooth turf was the ultimate in slick arrivals.

By the time we had completed all formalities it was early evening; we were tired and hungry, with the emphasis on hungry. It was after hours for the mess but they said they would see what they could do. I expected to be disappointed even though most anything would have looked good considering the fare of the past few days. Partly because of this I suppose, it turned out to be one of my most memorable meals. Things I remember best are the coarse, crusty Australian bread, a big platter of cold roast beef, a delicious soft white cheese that I've never found again and pitchers of cold milk - all this in an atmosphere of warm hospitality on a cool crisp evening. It was an ending fit for a beer commercial.

'585 was one of a group of C-47s allotted to an ATC cargo and passenger operation that eventually covered routes from Sydney to Manila; an operation that I was also assigned to for the next 14 months.

We took the next ship to come along in our operations so I occasionally got to fly '585 again and that was always just a little bit special. I suppose that there is a fair chance that she might even still be flying. She certainly never let us down or even caused us any concern. In 45 hours of flying over 8,000 miles of water I can't recall that we had a single squawk on the Form-1; but then that was characteristic of the breed.