

Transocean Air Lines, Refugees, and Aviatrix Ruth Nichols 1949

By Ed Martin



Transocean Air Lines Logo

Transocean Air Lines was formed in 1946 following WWII by United Airlines Capt. Orvis M. Nelson and a group of pilots. Captain Nelson had flown with the U.S. Army Air Transport Command during the war and his experiences led to plans for development of an unscheduled airline that would operate charter services particularly in the Pacific region.

Originally formed as Orvis Nelson Air Transport Company (ONAT) and incorporated Transocean Air Lines Inc. on June 1, 1946. Operating out of Oakland and adopting the acronym TALOA—from its telegraphic cable address, Transocean Air Lines Oakland. Two Douglas C-54A Skymasters, the military variant of the Douglas DC-4, were acquired from the U.S. Army Air Corps. First flights were originated under a subcontract with United Airlines operating military flights between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Transocean continued to grow and expand its operations, including diversifying into contract aircraft maintenance. In 1947 Transocean Air Lines received a contract to move 7,000 English emigrants to the Province of Ontario, Canada. That was followed by a contract with the International Refugee Organization (IRO), a temporary specialized agency of the United Nations, established in 1946 with 26 member states for the care and the repatriation or resettlement of Europeans made homeless by WWII. The U.S. provided about 40% of the IRO annual \$150 million budget. In 1949 Europe was rebuilding after the war and many refugees were trying to re-build their lives. The IRO recognizing that genuine refugees and displaced persons constitute an urgent problem signed a contract with Transocean Air Lines to fly 25,000 persons displaced by WWII to South America and Australia, this required daily flights from Munich and Rome.

The International Refugee Organization chartered a Transocean Douglas DC-4 to transport a group of Italian emigrants to Caracas, Venezuela. There were 47 Italian

emigrants on board plus two Transocean employees. The crew consisted of nine and all were Americans, with the exception of an Italian stewardess, the ninth crew member listed was Ruth Nichols, famous American aviatrix, serving as a stewardess although she had no flight duties. She joined the flight in Rome at the last minute returning from a worldwide tour promoting the International Children's Emergency Fund.

In 1946 the International Children's Emergency Fund (ICEF) was created by the United Nations Relief Rehabilitation Administration to help children affected by WWII. The ICEF was for child health purposes generally and aid was to be distributed to all children, without discrimination.

Taloea FLIGHTS FOR AUGUST

WESTBOUND FROM THE MAINLAND TO HAWAII—WAKE—GUAM

DATE	FLIGHT	781	782	783	784	785	786	787	788	789	790	791	792	793	794	795	796	797	798	799	800
Aug 1	San Francisco	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 2	Oakland	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 3	Portland	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 4	Seattle	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 5	Honolulu	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 6	Wake Island	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 7	Guam	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 8	Tokyo	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 9	Manila	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 10	Honolulu	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00

EASTBOUND FROM HAWAII—WAKE—GUAM TO THE MAINLAND

DATE	FLIGHT	801	802	803	804	805	806	807	808	809	810	811	812	813	814	815	816	817	818	819	820
Aug 1	Honolulu	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 2	Wake Island	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 3	Guam	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 4	Tokyo	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 5	Manila	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 6	Honolulu	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 7	Wake Island	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 8	Guam	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 9	Tokyo	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00
Aug 10	Manila	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00	10:00

TRANSOCEAN AIR LINES

Transocean timetable for their Pacific routes (Westcoast to Hawaii, Wake Island and Guam and reverse) for August of an unidentified year. (From www.timetableimages.com. Bjorn Larsson collection)

On December 11, 1946, a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly brought the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) into being.

The *Guardian* newspaper listed the crew as follows:

Captain Edward Bessey,
First Officer Richard Hall,
Navigator, James Bauman,
Radio Officer Thomas Robert,
Second Officer John Moore,
Radio Officer Supernumerary Herbert Asbell,
Purser Ralph Fischer,
Stewardess Luigina Cerabona
Ruth Nichols listed as stewardess.

The two Transocean employees were Mrs. Grace Derr, and Mr. Theodore Derr, of Oakland, California.

The flight route to Venezuela was Rome-Shannon-Gander-New York-San Juan-Caracas.

History of the flight from the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) Accident Investigation Report:

“On August 14, 1949 a Transocean Air Lines Douglas DC-4, N79998, departed Ciampino Airport in Rome, Italy, at 16.08 and proceeded towards Marseille, France, at an altitude of 8,500 feet then direct to Shannon, Ireland. Except for the fact that the No. 3 engine operated roughly when the mixture was in auto lean, the flight progressed without incident. At approximately 23.00 the flight descended to 3,500 feet, which was above a layer of stratus clouds. The original ETA (estimated time of arrival) of 00.21 over Shannon was revised several times en route, but all such times passed without the flight observing Shannon Airport. Actually, although unknown to the crew at 23.00 the aircraft had been flown beyond Shannon and was over the North Atlantic. It was not until 00.50 or later that a turn was made for the return course to Shannon. At 01.06 the flight alerted Air-Sea Rescue facilities at Shannon and gave its position flying inbound at a track of 80 degrees. The ground speed was estimated to be 140 knots. The flight continued towards Shannon until 02.40 when all fuel was exhausted, and at which time the aircraft was ditched, seven miles northwest of Lurga Point on the Irish Coast. The aircraft remained afloat for about 15 minutes during which time the crew and the passengers evacuated manning all but one of the life-rafts. Aircraft circling over head were able to direct the British Trawler *STALBERG* to the scene. Seven passengers and one crew member died as a result of exposure or drowning, all others were successfully rescued”.

According to the “Miracle on Galway Bay” (1949) the ditching was almost perfectly executed. Two American passengers claimed the crash landing was so smooth they were not even thrown from their seats. Stewardess Luigina Cerabona speaking Italian was able to guide the shocked



Most of Transocean Skymasters were converted military C-54s similar to this USAF MATS C-54. (AAHS photo archives)

Italian emigrants into the life rafts. Unfortunately, in the darkness and confusion seven of the passengers misunderstood the commands and jumped into the sea. In the moderate swells the tail section detached and struck the Radio Operator Herbert Asbell killing him as he jumped from the fuselage.

The *STALBERG* based at Grimsby, on the east coast of England, was fishing in the North Atlantic west of the Aran Islands off the Irish Coast, when the Transocean DC-4 ditching occurred. Shannon Air-Sea Rescue communicated emergency messages picked-up by two TWA airplanes (probably Lockheed Constellations) flying in the area of the ditching. One TWA plane communicated with the troubled DC-4 and dropped two flares to light the water landing area and the Skymaster is reported to have ditched between the lighted flares. The second Trans World airliner after dispatching its passengers at Shannon returned to the scene of the downed aircraft.

Michael G. Walling in his book, *In the Event of a Water Landing*, details the second TWA airliner's efforts to assist.



Map indicating approximate ditching location of the Transocean Skymaster () about seven miles Northwest of Lagura Point on the Irish coast. Shannon Airport location is indicated with the ✈. (Google Earth image)*

"We soon arrived back in the area and located the rafts, TWA Captain Arbuthnot later wrote, "they appeared to be overloaded and we decided to make an attempt to drop one of our life rafts hoping it would inflate and land near enough to be useful. I flew over them at about 100 feet and when everything looked just right I signaled the two crew members who had the raft positioned at the rear door to kick it out. When the raft hit the water either it did not inflate, or it split open. In any case, it sank like a rock."

"At this time I noticed several fishing trawlers about five miles from the life rafts. Due to rough seas, the trawlers could not see the rafts so we made a pass over them and dropped one of our landing flares. This enabled the fishing trawlers to home in and approach the rafts. After a great deal of maneuvering the trawler managed to rescue 50 of the 58 that had been aboard".

It was two hours from the time the aircraft ditched until the survivors were pulled to safety.

Later two Royal Air Force (RAF) aircraft arrived on the scene and one a Halifax assisted in directing the trawler to the downed aircraft.

A Pan American Airways Lockheed Constellation with Capt. Allen Reedy in command en route from Newfoundland to London described the scene as follows:

"The crashed plane and survivors in the water were first sighted near Kilkee, about five minutes flying time from Ireland. Captain Reedy said on landing in London" that the Skymaster pilot was about 12 to 15 minutes out of Shannon and would have needed another 40 to 50 gallons of petrol to get him in. We heard conversations for 30 minutes between the pilot and a Trans World airliner. The whole manner of the pilot was quite calm, we heard him say he was very low on fuel, that he had about 20 minutes of fuel left. He reported he had two engines out and was down to 75 feet. Later he said he had got another engine back and was up to 1,000 feet. Another time he said he thought he was going to make it, but there was no doubt in my mind he was drawing into the water. There was a cloud layer from 400 feet to about 1,200 feet. At 2.35am., the Skymaster fired a red flare and both we and the Trans World airliner saw it. At 2:40 am the Skymaster announced he was going into the water. I believe he said something about "Pull it



The Grimsby trawler Stahlberg that picked up the survivors. Inset shows a grainy AP photo shot of the rescue. (www.Grimbsbytelegraph.co.uk and AP photos)

back, pull it back," as he was talking to his other pilot. Later he said he had touched first time."

"When he first said he was going in the Trans World airliner dropped two flares, the pilot, Captain Adams told me he saw the Skymaster touch down approximately between the two. There is no doubt they would be enormous assistance to the Skymaster".

The *STALBERG* rescued 49 survivors and two bodies, which were landed at Galway on the West Coast of Ireland. The Limerick Steamship coaster *LANAHRONE* arrived later in Galway with six bodies, one passenger remained missing. All passengers were treated at Galway Hospital and most were later released, however six were retained for observation including the Italian stewardess having suffered severe chest injuries.

Reports also indicate the ditched airplane did not break-up but sank bodily. The airplane, built by Douglas Aircraft in 1943, was a C-54A and converted to a DC-4, N79998, c/n msn 3076, with four Pratt & Whitney R-2000 engines. Ruth Rowland Nichols the extra stewardess on the Transocean flight survived the ditching, which was the third crash in her aviation career.

Ruth Rowland Nichols

Ruth Nichols was born in New York, February 23, 1901. Growing up she attended private schools and upon graduating from high school her father gave her a gift of an airplane ride with Eddie Stinson Jr., which spurred her interest in aviation. She received her pilot's license shortly after graduating from Wellesley College in 1924. She survived the North Atlantic Transocean Air Lines DC-4 ditching, which was the third crash in her aviation career. She gained aviation fame in 1928 as a young woman when she was copilot on the first non-stop flight from New York to Miami, Fla., and due to her aristocratic upbringing became known as the "Flying Debutante." She became the first woman pilot for a commercial airline, New York and New England Airways. Along with Amelia Earhart and others, she helped found the Ninety Nines, an organization of licensed women pilots. She participated in the first "Powder Puff Derby," a women-only air race from California to Cleveland, Ohio, unfortunately, resulting in a crash.

In 1931 she was the first woman to attempt a solo transatlantic crossing that resulted in a crash at New Brunswick, in which she was seriously injured. The following year Amelia Earhart became the first female pilot to fly solo across the North Atlantic, landing outside Derry in Northern Ireland. Ruth Nichols was the first woman to hold three international records for speed, altitude and distance, and to pilot a U.S. Air Force supersonic TF-102A Delta Dagger to an altitude of 51,000 ft.. During her career she flew every type of aircraft developed at the time, she led Relief Wings performing mercy missions and became a Lieutenant Colonel in the Civil Air Patrol. She encouraged the Air Force to include women in the space flight programs. She assisted in numerous humanitarian organizations and was enshrined into the National Aviation Hall of Fame in 1992. Ruth Nichols passed away suddenly September 25, 1960. She was aged 60.

The International Refugee Organization continued its resettlement work until 1952. The IRO was replaced by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The total contributed by the IRO member states over its five years of operation was \$400 million. Over 10 million people were rehabilitated during this time out of 15 million who were stranded in Europe.

Due to a worn out boiler the 150 ton Grimsby trawler *STALBERG* was retired shortly after this rescue mission ending her twenty year fishing career.

The Oakland Aviation Museum states:

"At its height the Transocean organization included 10 companies, making it the first aviation conglomerate. The airline itself employed 2,200 persons. Including the personnel of its subsidiary companies, the total number exceeded 6,700. Transocean gross sales



Ruth Rowland Nichols (National Aviation Hall of Fame photo)



Cover for Ernest Gann's book, *The High and the Mighty*. (Amazon Books.com photo)

climbed as high as \$50 million."

By April 1958, after 12 years of business, Transocean's aircraft had flown a total of 1,290,966,900 cargo ton-miles, and 66,828,237 aircraft miles, the equivalent of more than 135 round trips to the moon.

Sadly Transocean Air Lines due to regulatory and financial problems filed bankruptcy in July 1960.

Ernest K. Gann was a pilot for a short while with Transocean Air Lines and was author of the aviation novel *The High and the Mighty* while flying the Hawaii-California route. In 1954 it was released as a movie starring John Wayne. A disguised painted over Transocean Air Lines DC-4, N4865V, built by Douglas in 1942, was featured in the daylight flying sequences and the Honolulu gate sequences of the movie for the fictional airline named "TOPAC", Trans Orient Pacific Air Carrier.

A second former C-54 was used for the shots of the damaged aircraft on the ground at San Francisco. →

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