



Our Pacific Sky-Lane

Capt. Cuckmore

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7TH AIR FORCE

ONE blacked-out Hawaiian midnight in January of 1942, three B-17s were wheeled out of bomb-scarred hangars at Hickam Field and rolled to the edge of the mat. Flight crews, guided by dimmed flashlights, approached the ships. The feeble rays of their lights played on engine nacelles, ran up and down landing struts and across all movable parts of the huge planes.

No item of inspection was slighted. It was a thorough, last-minute check, for the planes were about to take-off on a trip that would require top-flight performance. Theirs was to be the inaugural flight of a new trans-Pacific war-time ferry route for the Army Air Forces.

One by one the Fortresses taxied to the end of the mile and a quarter strip. For a minute or two they sat there, the roar of their engines rising and falling as the pilots—Captains Hobson, Hewes, and MacPherson—warmed up the motors and checked their instrument panel. Then they turned into the wind. The first plane started its run, gathering speed. In a score of seconds the control tower clicked past the wing tip. As it reached the last hangar the Fortress lifted and moments later passed low over the ghost town of housing units that cluster alongside the Kamehameha Highway leading to nearby Pearl Harbor. Planes number two and three followed in quick succession.

They were on their way to the battlefront in Java, hopping southwestward via a string of Pacific islands and atolls most of which had never before seen a land plane. Only

Kingsford-Smith, fourteen years earlier, had ever made a similar trip. Actually, the two flight lines would differ by hundreds of miles of latitude most of the way.

Only a few Army men saw the Fortresses take off. A handful of officers—the late Major General Clarence L. Tinker, Commanding General of the Hawaiian Air Force; Colonels Albert K. B. Lyman, B. L. Robinson and Bob Fleming of the Corps of Engineers, and Colonel Gordon Blake of the Air Forces watched as the blue exhaust flames of the B-17s moved out over the cane fields, turned across a darkened, sleeping Honolulu, then out to sea across Diamond Head. After the sound of the motors died away into the night one of the men said, "Well, there go the first planes on the long road to Tokyo." Someone mentioned that "The Road to Tokyo" would be a good name for the war-baby.

General Tinker had his own thought on the subject, and since the name he offered was a good one and since he was a General, his suggestion stuck. "I believe we ought to call it The Southern Cross Airways," he said.

AND, thus, without fanfare, was born the aerial sky-lane that today rivals the North Atlantic Newfoundland-British Isles run and the South Atlantic Natal-Africa routes in strategic importance. The Pacific line has been opened more than a year, yet most of its operating details are strict military secrets. Most of the bases the planes use have never

been mentioned in public print in connection with the route; many of the alternate fields—some of them nothing more than clearings in a coconut grove, others dredged coral strips—are names that would send even a veteran beachcomber to an atlas. Most of the bases, both primary and secondary, are far out on the Pacific combat frontier. Some of the airports have been bombed, some shot at from Jap subs.

At Fiji the biggest menace seems to be mosquitoes. At one of the New Caledonia fields the native deer were so numerous they became a hazard. There's no record of a plane hitting one of them while taxiing, but the deer used to graze right at the edge of the runway. Sometimes this proved too much of a temptation for some homesick nimrod who would unlimber his .30 caliber and blaze away. It was good sport, shooting deer from a side window of a B-17 or from a parked jeep, and it made good reading in the letters back home, but it unfortunately was dangerous to the welfare of the encampment, a few eucalyptus trees to the rear of the hunting grounds. One of the squadrons, as a result, had to establish game laws, prohibiting deer hunting in camp. "Anyone wanting to shoot deer will check in with the sergeant before going out," reads the order.

Some of the South Sea airfields, except for their cane-field and coconut settings, could be a ferry station somewhere in England. P-38s sit next to ancient tow-target Vincents. RNZAF Hudsons bunk next to C-47s, De Havillands and Beaufighters mix with B-26s, and even Gypsy Moths and L-5 Grasshoppers get together.

The South Pacific route was in the planning and construction stage long before we entered the war. Early in 1941, we had one "aerial life-line" open to the Far East. It

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was the above-the-Equator Hawaii-Midway-Wake-Guam run. This route had been successfully tested by a couple of flights of B-17s that were sent to the Philippines, but it admittedly was of dubious value in case we got in a scrap with the Japs. The run was highly vulnerable, cutting across Nipponese lines of communication and surrounded by Jap-mandated bases. It didn't have much of a chance. That's why Major Roger Ramey and Captain Brooke Allen of the Hawaiian Air Force were sent below the Equator and across the date line early in 1941 to find a better lane for land planes. They traveled by PBV, steamship and fishing boat and with Dutch and Australian airmen over much of the South Seas, gathering information, maps and photos for Colonel Lyman's construction crews.

Later, another party headed by Major Gordon Blake went out from Hawaii to survey mid-Pacific islands. After the Southern Cross Airways got under operation General Tinker put Gordon Blake, now a Colonel, in operational control as his troubleshooter, passenger agent, freight manager and communications chief. Today Colonel Blake probably knows more about Allied territory in the Pacific than any other man in uniform.

In constructing some of the bases, Colonel Lyman used British equipment and men to get the job done. The work was not scheduled for completion until mid-1942, but when the war broke out the task was rushed threefold. The pony-express air line gained operational status in record time. When the first planes went through, they refueled from 55-gallon drums and the crews slept on cots under the planes' wings. The islands were practically defenseless. The whole thing was run on a day-to-day, plane-to-plane basis in its first months. The constant threat of the advancing Japanese, the rudimentary nature of radio and technical aids for long cross-water hops, the bumpy runways, the temporary flow of supplies to the island dots, made constant personal supervision a necessity. No Army manual covered the problems that arose each time a plane took off. Yet surprisingly few planes were lost in those first days of war.

Since its rugged birth the ferry route has grown to a transport line of major importance in our successful maintenance of the long Pacific battlefront. Compared with those early trips from California to Australia, in the days when ferry pilots didn't know for sure whether the Japs would beat them to the next stop, the present traffic is doing an enormous job. Dozens of planes daily are winging over the Pacific. General Henry H. Arnold's plane holds the flight record, 35 hours and 10 minutes, from Brisbane to San Francisco. The best elapsed time during the Southern Cross Airways days

was made by Consair's Captain Ted Howe, who flew from Amberly Field to Hamilton Field in 42 hours and 31 minutes. Captain McMacon, another contract veteran, has made the round trip from the States to Australia and back in five and a half days.

Types of planes that have made the Australia run include B-17s, B-24s, C-47s, C-53s, B-25s and B-26s. P-38s have made it from Hawaii to Australia. The planes are flown not only by ferry pilots, veterans of the Atlantic route, but also by Army pilots, some of whom have never flown a body of water larger than San Francisco Bay.

In its year and a half of operations the Southern Cross Airways, now the Pacific Wing of the Air Transport Command, has carried thousands of military and government passengers. Hundreds of tons of priority war cargo have been sent "down under" to the Solomons and New Guinea



fronts via this route. Not all the space, however, has been given over to G. I. Early cargo records, for instance, list one kangaroo, transported to California from Australia by Captain Haigains. A General, needing some uniform material, had some wool yardage delivered to him via I.B-30. One urgent request from a wind-blown stenographer at Hickam Field for a card of bobby pins (Honolulu's five-and-dime had sold out) was filled by Hamilton Field. Colonel (now Brigadier General) "Blondy" Saunders' cigars always received a high priority on the Solomons run. Dogs, rat poison and flit guns were on the early freight lists. A bathing suit for an Australian Colonel's wife was sent from San Francisco. Some coffee percolators made a rush trip to Australia shortly after the Americans moved in, ". . . because Aussie coffee just isn't

ILLUSTRATED BY
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made right." Then a second kangaroo was sent up to California to provide heart interest for the first kangaroo.

Travelers who have made the long trip recall many famous landmarks, including Hawaii's Diamond Head (which, incidentally, doesn't look like much from the air). Fiji's "Handle-bars" Carriker, an Air Forces captain and genial major domo in the land of the Bula Boys, belongs in the Airways Baedeker because of his startling waxed mustache. There is the flat coral island that has its level monotony broken by one lonesome palm tree. There are the sunsets, some of the Pacific's best, viewed from the sagging canvas chairs on the veranda of the Fiji Officers' Club.

MUCH of the credit for pioneering the Southern Cross Airways should go to civilian pilots flying under contract to the United States Government and to RAAF Ferry Command flyers. Captain Ernest W. Gray of San Diego, California, is typical of the commercial skippers who are keeping Australia closely linked to the United States. Gray was a veteran of the Pacific even before we got into the war, having twice delivered British-purchased PBVs to the Philippines. He was on his way to Wake Island the morning the Japs took their stab at us. He was delivering a plane destined for Singapore and was between Midway and Wake when he got word to turn back. He spent that night at Midway, sitting in a dugout while Jap cruisers and destroyers shelled the place. Captain Gray returned to Honolulu and the mainland, but the following March found him on his way again, this time delivering a B-25 to Dutch flyers in Australia. Today Captain Gray is taking C-87s back and forth to Australia.

Captain Stan Young, another commercial pilot who was on the South Pacific run in its early days, illustrated the type of flying that was sometimes needed to get planes through from one island to another when he flew a four-engine bomber for five hours with number one and two motors out. He had a new crew on board, but his experience brought them through, despite the fact that to keep his altitude he had to heave all loose baggage and gear into the Pacific.

The record made by the Southern Cross Airways in its day and the record the ATC is making today in moving cargo and personnel foreshadow a tremendous Pacific air transport system in post-war days. A veteran flyer of the Pacific air route pointed out what it may be like when he said:

"Even under the inconvenience and uncertainties of a war we have airfields out here in the middle of the ocean that compare favorably with many metropolitan airports in size and ability to handle traffic. After the war — after we beat the Japs — there will be so many planes flying across the Pacific that it will look like the vicinity of a training field. From the States to Australia in thirty hours or less, and to the Philippines or China in a day and half. As for Japan, she probably won't be worth flying to." ☆