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Mr. Pacific

My Years with William Mullahey

November 2009 - Based on an Interview with Mr. Lee Umphred

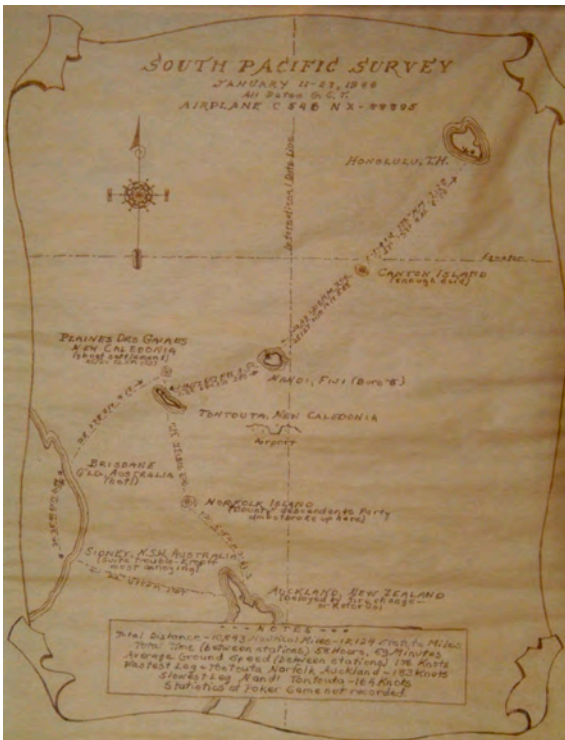
One of the last of the "Greatest Generation"

by Neal Davis, Sr.

Introduction

Mr. Lee Umphred is my 91 year-old father-in-law and while not serving in the military, he served in another important part of the war effort, Mr. Umphred worked for Pan American and was stationed in Honolulu from 1943 to the end of war. This is his story.

1943



1946 southern Pacific Pan Am Survey Flight Chart

My part of World War II started when I was working for Pan American Airways at Treasure Island that was the Pacific Headquarters for the famous Clipper seaplanes. While unknown to many at that time, Pan American was still flying a limited number of passengers to the western Pacific islands during the war, but most flights were carrying military personnel and cargo as well. I was working in the Industrial Relations Office at Treasure Island. The job included writing responses to routine inquiries and questions from customers and potential Pan American passengers. One day I was given an inquiry that was a bit tricky that required some finesse and discretion to answer but I managed to put an answer together that satisfied both the

customer and Pan American management. When the San Francisco manager traveled to Honolulu to talk with Bill Mullahey about the need for more help at the Honolulu facility, he recalled some of my work at Treasure Island and recommended they add me to the Honolulu staff.

So . . . in early 1943, I started my venture into the Pacific and my part in World War II. At that time, Pan American Airways was under contract with the U.S. Navy to accomplish two things: work on and improve routes to the western Pacific and to teach the naval aviators to fly the seaplanes.

At that time, William (Bill) Mullahey was the manager for the Pacific Region and headquartered in Honolulu. Bill was a rare breed. He was born on the mainland but the family moved to the Islands when Bill was still a youngster giving him the opportunity to become a world-class surfer. Bill's father worked for the Pacific Commercial Cable Company. The company was contracted to lay telephone cable across the ocean floor from the U.S. mainland west coast to Hawaii and beyond to the far western Pacific. Bill was most knowledgeable about the Pacific and one day I recall asking him why he knew so much about the area and he responded very simply, "It's my home!" It struck me as a very simple answer. In fact, Bill was one of the most respected in Hawaii and possessed a great love for the Pacific Ocean. He carried this knowledge with discretion and class. In fact, he was given the name, "Mr. Pacific."



Bill Mullahey gets ready to dive again at Wake Island, 1935.

Because of his superlative aquatic abilities, as a young man, he was chosen to accompany the North Haven expedition that Pan American sent to the mid-Pacific islands in early 1935, where flying boat bases would soon be opened. Bill's job was to set the dynamite charges on the coral heads which had to be cleared from the lagoons to enable flying boats to safely land. That November, Pan Am launched the first scheduled trans-Pacific air service to the Hawaiian Islands and beyond with its fleet of Clippers.

Bill's work ethic did not go unnoticed by Pan American's management. He went on to serve as airport manager in Hawaii from 1936-1939, and he became regional director in the early 1940s. Several times, he was offered a promotion that would require transferring him and his family, but each time he turned down the offers

simply responding, "I was raised in the Pacific, love the Pacific and this is where I want to spend the remainder of my life." Case closed.

Pan American's Boeing B-314 Clippers were built for "one-class" luxury air travel. The 74 seats could be converted to 36 beds for overnight accommodation. Additionally, they offered a lounge and dining area. The large Clippers had an average cruise speed of around 170 mph and if maximum weights were carried, the top speed could be 155 mph! The wartime routes we flew initiated out of Honolulu (although not using the B-314's) with flights to the islands of Palmyra, Canton Island, Funifuti, New Caledonia, Auckland, New Zealand, into Sydney, Australia and north to Brisbane, Australia. This completed Pan American's western route at that time with the return trip to the east stopping at the same bases.

I accompanied Bill on two or three trips during the war and observed "Mr. Pacific" at work as he built and improved the routes for the military and Pan American. In addition to the southern route, Pan Am also had a northern route but it was halted during the war. The northern route hopped across to Midway Island, westward to Wake Island and further west to Guam and Manila. I personally did not fly the northern route until after the war.

Toward the end of war, I was both surprised and flattered when Bill asked if I would stay on after the war and support his efforts in continuing to build the airline routes and bases in the Pacific. At the same time my brother was starting up a furniture manufacturing business in the San Francisco Bay area and also asked if I would be interested in joining him in the business. I told both that I would think about the offers and make a decision after the war.

In 1946, Bill was asked to be a part of a survey flight of southern Pacific routes. In addition and coincidentally, the Pan American District Operations Officer from San Francisco arrived and would be on the flight as well. Bill told him I should go and had my passport shipped from San Francisco. Subsequently, a wire from the General Manager's office was received telling Bill to leave me in Honolulu. The message was too late - we were already half-way to the island of Palmyra; our first stop on the scheduled trip!

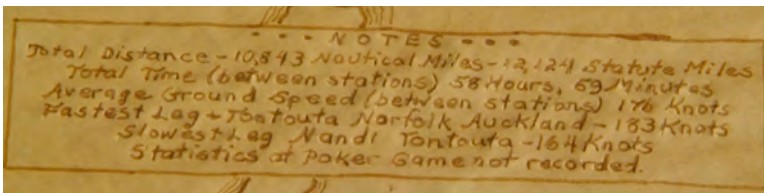


Jan. 11, 1946: survey party . . . ready to go.

We flew on a new Pan American DC-4 out of Honolulu and charted the southern route for Pan American and future airline routes. On this trip, we traveled a distance of 10,543 nautical miles. The total flying time was 59 hours and 58 minutes. This

trip was important to Pan Am in solidifying post-war routes as well as supporting other airline routes to follow. It is of note that Harold Gatty also accompanied us on this trip. I met Mr. Gatty in 1943 through a mutual friend and when he traveled with us on this survey trip, I did not know then his significance and contribution to the development of aerial navigation.

When the flight was completed, the Division Operations Manager flew back to the San Francisco base where he presented a detailed report I put together during the survey trip of *each* Pan American base on the southern Pacific route. The information included the logistics and procedures for purchasing at each base.



Detail from South Pacific route survey map

In the spring of 1946, I was asked to accompany some south Pacific island natives flying via Honolulu to Wake

Island where they were hired to work on the military base. When we arrived, I recall they had only shorts and tee shirts and it was cold at Wake Island on arrival. I really felt for them. Thinking back I made only three or four trips during the war but each one was a story within itself and gave me a sense of contribution.

The last Pacific flight of a Pan Am flying boat occurred in May 1946. Although the seaplane service ended, Pan American left behind a legacy of ambition and first class service never again to be matched and adventure that few airlines have equaled since. I resigned from Pan Am in October 1946, flew back to the mainland and started working with my brother in the furniture manufacturing business.

I have returned to the Hawaiian Islands a number of times in establishing and marketing the family furniture lines. Like Bill, I came to love the islands.

Through the many chapters in our lives, we have opportunities to meet people that have a lasting impact and influence on us. Bill Mullahey was one of those people and he was a true mentor in my early years. He had so much to offer and was indeed an integral and important part of the war effort in addition to building and improving major air routes across the Pacific. Hawaii remained in Bill's - and Pan Am's - heart as Pan Am promoted the islands far in excess of the modest marketing programs of the Hawaii Visitors Bureau.

Recognizing the potential of the market for travel throughout the Pacific region, Bill was an architect of the Pacific Area Travel Association (now the

Pacific Asia Travel Association). The Association started with twenty-five Pacific nations as members and has grown to become the dominant travel organization for the region. As Bill worked to expand travel for Pan Am, he earned the nickname “Mr. Pacific.” Although Pan American World Airways no longer flies, it was a dominant force in Hawaii tourism under Bill Mullahey’s leadership.

As for Bill, he retired to the Monterey, California area and I had the opportunity to visit him a few times when traveling the region on business or to visit family. He passed away in 1981

He, like the great Clippers he flew in, was a man of real character and charm. I will never forget “Mr. Pacific”.

About the author:

Neal Davis, Sr. is a Phoenix-based freelance writer and photographer whose work has appeared in *Airliners*, *Aviation Maintenance*, and *Caribbean Compass* among many other publications.



Lee Umphred on his birthday in 2008