

John Leslie: Pioneer

by Peter Leslie



John Leslie works on the China Clipper in 1935

My father worked for Pan Am from 1929 to 1970 and, for a time, was Juan Trippe's probable successor until he was stricken with polio. He left me boxes of his personal Pan Am papers and memorabilia. For years historians have contacted me seeking information on the early days of international commercial aviation.

Two years ago I "holed up" and read every word: letters, memos, technical documents, news clippings, speeches and memoirs. What emerged was my book "Aviation's Quiet Pioneer," available on Amazon, and a personal view of my father that was new to me.

My father majored in Art and Archeology. He compiled an extraordinary two volume

architectural history of the ancient world. After immersing himself in the distant past, he enrolled in 1926 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to get a degree in the emerging field of aeronautical engineering, an abrupt shift of gears.

My father described himself as a decent engineer, but more interested in hands-on applications than in theory. He was as proud of his qualification as Aircraft Engine and Aircraft Mechanic as he was of his two MIT degrees. He could go out on to the shop floor and strip down an engine. Juan Trippe described him as having "developed the engineering technique for long range flight which made possible the first commercial air service across the Pacific."

A memo to employees shows his concern for all parts of the aircraft, not just the marvelous new engines or latest navigational gear. A priest who read my book said, "Your father followed the Rule of Benedict, a 5th century monk, who wrote that scullery dishes were as important as a chalice." My father would have liked the ancient historical reference. He was, in the words of one historian, a man who could get men and machines to work together.

I saw my father, ever a student of the past while engineering the future, as a believer in Occam's razor. Occam, a 14th century logician, always favored the least complex theory or plan. More recently, Kathleen Clair, Juan Trippe's well-known secretary, said to me, "Everyone knew your father was a brilliant administrator." But where did that come from? I think that his being chosen in 1931 to be one of the first six Sloan Fellows at MIT was the seminal formative experience.

Alfred Sloan, the president of General Motors, started the program at MIT to train promising young engineers to run complex systems and organizations. At the end of the intense program each received a masters degree in degree engineering and business administration. John Leslie often referred to that as the most important educational experience of his life. His subsequent annual letters to Mr. Sloan chronicle how he put to good use what he learned as Pan Am spanned the oceans and gave birth to a new industry.



Juan Trippe and John Leslie