

Pan Am at War

by Robert Gandt

Marking the 70th Anniversary of America's entry into World War II

Sunday morning, 7 December, 1941.

An era was ending. In the space of a few violent hours, the United States had shed its lofty detachment from the conflicts of Europe and Asia. And as the dawn rolled westward over the Pacific, the most glamorous chapter in commercial aviation was coming to a close. The transpacific routes pioneered by Pan American Airways — and the elegant chain of specially constructed island bases — were now a combat zone.

America was at war, and so was Pan Am.



A Boeing B-314 takes off at dawn
Pan Am Historical Foundation

One of the first to know was Lanier Turner, captain of Pan American's B-314 flying boat *Anzac Clipper*. Turner and his crew of ten, with their seventeen passengers, were an hour from arrival at Pearl Harbor when they received the report: Pearl Harbor was under attack by enemy airplanes. Stunned, Turner pulled out the ship's briefcase that contained his sealed war emergency orders.

Farther to the west the Martin M-130 *Philippine Clipper*, commanded by Capt. John "Hammy" Hamilton, had just taken off from Wake Island lagoon, bound for Guam. By radio Hamilton received the news about the Japanese attack on Hawaii. And with the news came new orders: the *Philippine Clipper* was to return immediately to Wake and evacuate all Pan American personnel. An enemy attack on the island could come at any time.

In the South Pacific, the B-314 flying boat *Pacific Clipper* was midway between New Caledonia and New Zealand, en route to Auckland. Capt. Bob Ford learned about the Japanese attack with the further news that the Japanese were on the move throughout the Far East. It meant that the *Pacific Clipper's* return route to the U.S. had been cut off.

Standing on the seaplane dock at Hong Kong Kai Tak airport, Capt. Fred Ralph was watching the ground crew finish loading the *Hong Kong Clipper*, a Pan

American S-42B flying boat. Ralph had already been briefed about the Pearl Harbor attack, and his orders now were to get the Clipper—and its passengers—out of Hong Kong before the Japanese arrived. His scheduled destination, Manila, was already under attack. Ralph's plan was to fly the S-42B to Kunming, China, landing in a nearby lake.

In the next instant, Ralph realized they were too late. He heard the rumble of engines. To the north he spotted the silhouettes of airplanes descending over Sha Tin Pass. They were headed directly for Kai Tak.

On the opposite side of the planet, Pan American president Juan Trippe was at his roll top desk in the Pan American offices of the Chrysler Building. It was Sunday afternoon in New York. Trippe was trying to make sense of the incoming reports. All Pan American's ocean bases—Honolulu, Midway, Wake, Guam, Manila, Hong Kong—were in jeopardy. In even greater jeopardy were four of his precious flying boats. Their crews and passengers were out there somewhere, caught up in the Pacific War.



The Hong Kong Clipper at Hong Kong
Courtesy Jon Krupnick, author
Pacific Pioneers



Capt. Lanier Turner
Courtesy Jon Krupnick, author
Pacific Pioneers

Aboard the *Anzac Clipper*, still inbound to Pearl Harbor, Capt. Lanier Turner opened the sealed contingency orders that flew aboard every transpacific Pan American flight. The instructions seemed clear enough: Turner was supposed to divert his flight to Hilo, on the island of Hawaii, about 150 miles south of Pearl Harbor. But Turner had cause to be worried. The instructions had been written before anyone knew where — or from what direction — an enemy might attack. Where was the Japanese task force now? Was an invasion coming? Were enemy fighters in the air between him and Hilo? Would Hilo also come under attack?

No one knew. Not until two hours later, when he alighted in the harbor at Hilo, did Turner learn the extent of the destruction at Pearl Harbor. He intended to refuel and immediately depart for San Francisco, but he found that there was no Pan American staff at

Hilo, nor were there pressure fuel pumps. Fueling the giant flying boat by hand took the crew until the next day. On the night of Monday, December 8, they departed Hilo in blackness and radio silence. By the time *Anzac Clipper* reached California, Turner and his crew had neither shaved nor slept in a bed for seventy-two hours.

At Wake Island, beyond the international date line, John Hamilton had just landed the *Philippine Clipper* back in the lagoon when the Navy and Marine commanders of the Wake garrison presented him with a request: before he took off and headed east, would he take the *Philippine Clipper* on a patrol, escorted by Marine fighters, to sweep the sea around Wake for incoming enemy forces?

Hamilton agreed. But while the big Clipper was still being fueled at her mooring, Hamilton heard the distant drone of engines. Flying beneath a low squall line, two formations of enemy aircraft came roaring in from the north.

In the next few minutes the Pan American base, built with the spirit and sweat of adventurers from the expedition ship *North Haven*, was blown to bits. The Clipper loading dock disappeared in a geyser of debris. A Japanese warplane strafed the *Philippine Clipper*, stitching a line of bullets across the fuselage.

When the enemy planes had left, Hamilton climbed from the ditch where he'd taken cover. Smoke was billowing from the destroyed facilities. He ran to the Martin flying boat, expecting the worst. Despite the bullet holes in her fuselage, the *Philippine Clipper* appeared to be intact. Hamilton gave the order to strip every nonessential item from the aircraft—cargo, baggage, passenger amenities—and round up all the passengers and Pan American employees.



Capt. John Hamilton and crew arrive at Pearl Harbor, Dec. 11, 1941
Courtesy Jon Krupnick, author
Pacific Pioneers

With thirty-four people on board including two seriously wounded, Hamilton taxied the flying boat into the lagoon. On the first take off attempt the overloaded Clipper refused to lift from the water. Hamilton tried again—with the same result. On the third attempt, Hamilton finally coaxed the *Philippine Clipper's* hull off the water. Laboring into the air, skimming low over the sandy beach, he pointed the flying boat's bow eastward.

It was a bittersweet moment. Left to face the enemy were the Marines defending Wake, as well as the civilian construction workers who had come to build the fighter strip. Nor was the

Philippine Clipper out of harm's way. Japanese warplanes owned the sky and most of the sea.

Droning through the darkness, Hamilton learned that Midway, too, had come under attack. From miles away he could see the fires that stood out like a beacon in the night. Hamilton picked out a landing path on the debris-strewn lagoon and managed to bring the *Clipper* down safely. The next day he and his fellow escapees from Wake flew to Pearl Harbor, then homeward to San Francisco.

In the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, air raid sirens were wailing. Fred Ralph and his crew saw the first bombs rain down on Kai Tak airport. Sprinting for cover, they jumped into the water behind concrete dock pilings, realizing too late that they'd chosen an open sewer for shelter.

Explosions rocked the colony. From his shelter, Ralph watched Japanese Zero fighters diving on the moored *Hong Kong Clipper*. Ralph had a special affection for the old Sikorsky flying boat. Her nickname was Myrtle, and she'd been brought to the Far East to service the Manila-Hong Kong segment of the transpacific air route.

Ralph counted six passes. On each pass the enemy bullets traced a path across the dock and into the water—missing the *Clipper*. On the seventh pass, the incendiary bullets struck home. Ralph watched helplessly as Myrtle erupted in flames and burned to the waterline.

That night Ralph and his crew escaped Hong Kong aboard a CNAC (Chinese affiliate of Pan Am) DC-2. For a month, like wandering refugees, they meandered across Asia and Europe, not reaching New York until January, 1942. It was then they learned that Hong Kong had fallen to the Japanese on Christmas Day.



Pan American Capt. Bob Ford
Pan Am Historical Foundation

Meanwhile in Auckland, New Zealand, Bob Ford, captain of the *Pacific Clipper*, was considering his options. The *Pacific* had become a battleground. The route to the U.S. via Pan American's island bases had been severed by the Japanese. Ford and his crew reached a decision: they would take the long way home.

And they did. In an epoch journey that became the stuff of legend, the *Pacific Clipper* flew westward across the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, the Arabian peninsula, the continent of Africa, across the South Atlantic and up the coasts of South and North America. Avoiding enemy

planes and ships, bartering for fuel, parts, and food, the Clipper overflowed three oceans and alighted and took off from harbors and rivers in twelve different countries.

On the morning of January 6, 1942 the startled duty officer in New York heard the radio transmission: "Pacific Clipper inbound from Auckland, New Zealand. Due arrive Pan American Marine Terminal La Guardia seven minutes."

They had entered history. The *Pacific Clipper's* 31,500 mile odyssey was the longest yet made by a commercial aircraft and the first around the world.

Pan American was now at war, but the truth was that the airline had already mobilized for war. More than a year earlier, Juan Trippe had executed a contract with the War Department for the construction of air fields and facilities across South America and Africa. He also made a deal to transfer three advanced B-314 flying boats to BOAC, flag airline of embattled Britain. Two new divisions—Pan American Airways-Africa and Pan American Air Ferries—had been created to operate an aerial highway from the U. S. to the Middle East.

Pan American's ocean bases at Wake, Guam, Manila, and Hong Kong all fell to the Japanese. Thirty-eight Pan Am employees became prisoners of the Japanese. Pan Am's Chinese affiliate, CNAC, managed to evacuate nearly 400 adults and children from besieged Hong Kong before the colony surrendered.

The age of elegance was officially over. Pan American's fleet of luxurious flying boats—nine Boeing B-314s and two Martin M-130 flying boats, including the famous *China Clipper*—were converted to military transports. Every amenity—seats, berths, lounges—were ripped from the aircraft. Each took on a coat of dull sea-gray paint.



Loading up for another wartime mission

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"Special Missions" on behalf of the US Air Transport Command or Naval Air Transport Service were an important part of Pan Am's B-314 wartime activities, and could take an aircraft many thousands of miles to almost any corner of the globe. Here cargo is being loaded for such a trip.

By the end of the war three and a half years later, the world had irrevocably changed—and so had Pan American. Pan Am had flown over ninety million miles in wartime service, more than double the total of all other U.S. airlines. Pan Am crews made over 18,000 ocean crossings and ferried over 500 military aircraft to combat zones. The airline trained more than 5,000 pilots, navigators, and mechanics for wartime duty. Pan Am oversaw the construction of over 50 airports around the planet. For his airline's contributions to the war effort, Juan Trippe was presented with the Medal for Merit—the highest civilian decoration of the United States.

And nothing more. Juan Trippe's bright expectations of post-war recognition and reward for Pan American were not realized. The entry of the U.S. domestic airlines in the military transport effort had broken Pan Am's exclusivity on overseas routes. Now the U.S. airlines were clamoring for authority on the same routes that Pan American had pioneered in the pre-war years. In the coming era, Pan American would compete not only with the airlines of foreign countries but with the domestic carriers of the U.S.

For Pan Am the war was over, but another was just beginning.



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