

Charley Lorber in the Atlantic

This is the final segment in the continuing saga of Charley Lorber's adventuresome life as an aviation pioneer.

BY JOHN HAYNES

When Lorber transferred from the Pacific to the Atlantic Division, Pan American was hopeful of beginning direct passenger service from the United States to Europe. As early as 1936, they had the aircraft to do it—the Martin 130. Two years later they had an even better plane—the giant Boeing B-314. However, they were continuing to have difficulty obtaining landing rights in England. Imperial Airways had not yet developed aircraft capable of making the Atlantic hop and, being a government-owned airline, would not provide reciprocal rights to Pan American until they were able to fly similar routes themselves. That time would not come until 1939. In the meantime, Lorber was assigned to the New York-Bermuda run, which was made twice weekly by both Pan American and Imperial Airways. This route provided valuable experience to Pan American in cold Atlantic conditions and soon led to the installation of the first inflatable rubber wing de-icing boots on any commercial aircraft.

Weather in the Atlantic was frequently treacherous. Pan American's network of weather stations around the Western Hemisphere would normally

enable them to delay or cancel flights which would be flying into unsafe weather conditions. But the North Atlantic during winter months was not an area where storms could be

to any rescue operation which might be able to assist, including Pan American's base in Bermuda. Charley Lorber had just arrived there himself, inbound from New York on his "Bermuda Clipper."

Lorber got the call about the Cavalier from Imperial's base manager. The plane was carrying 13 passengers and crew. Without hesitation, Lorber phoned his own crew scattered around the island, told them to report to the harbor immediately and instructed the mechanics to top off the fuel tanks and to start the engines for their warm-up. All was ready to go and the big Sikorsky S-42 lifted off on its rescue mission within 35 minutes of the initial alert—a new time record for Pan American. Aloft, they flew for two and a half hours

directly toward the ditching location, into the heart of the storm. However, it became apparent that since daylight was fading and the winds too strong to attempt low flight, they had better retire for the day.

During the night, surface vessels steamed to the downed plane's location, found 10 of the survivors and brought them aboard. They told of how the Cavalier had broken apart on impact and sunk within 15 minutes.



easily predicted. And so it was in January of 1939 that one of Imperial's new Short-Sunderland flying boats, the "Cavalier," found itself in trouble on the way from New York to Bermuda. In a moderate-strength storm, the Short lost all engines in quick succession to carburetor ice and was forced to ditch several hundred miles north of Bermuda. It was able to radio an SOS and its position before it went down. Word was quickly relayed

All got out of the plane and hung on to floatation devices and each other, waiting for rescuers. Three unlucky ones had drifted away and were not found.

The following day, Lorber's normally scheduled return flight from Bermuda to New York went out as planned but flew directly to the spot of the Cavalier's sinking. Lorber flew over the site three times, hoping to spot the still-missing three passengers, but to no avail. Despite the loss, Lorber's actions had solidly proven the viability of fast-response air search missions. It had also added to the esteem in which Lorber was held in the aviation community.

On May 20, 1939, the 12th anniversary of Lindbergh's Atlantic crossing, Pan American's dream of a cross-Atlantic commercial flight was finally realized. The maiden flight, carrying mail only, had been scheduled to test the viability of the new air route. It would fly from New York to Southampton, by way of the Azores, Lisbon and Marseilles. Pan American again wanted the top pilots to make the trip and so selected Captains La Porte and Lorber, both rated "Masters of Flying Boats." The round trip was flown without any mishaps. Since this flight carried mail only, there were many sacks of mostly first day covers, which needed to be cancelled and stamped with a special cachet at each stop. This the crew helped do by supplementing the local Post Offices' meager staffs at every stop. The flight was not all work, though; the crew stayed at the most lavish hotels at every stop. And there were many new friends and admirers met along the way. In arriving at their England destination and returning by the same gen-



Pan American's "Four Horsemen of the Atlantic," Capts. Sullivan, Gray, La Porte and Lorber.

eral route, they had traveled 80 hours in the air and had been gone seven days.

Lorber carried on the Atlantic crossings, with passengers, on both the Southern route via the Azores, and the Northern route via Botwood, Newfoundland and Foynes, Ireland. However, after war broke out with Germany's invasion of Poland, Pan American was prevented from flying into England or France because of the

On a morning in January 1941, Lorber flew his clipper into Bermuda from New York for a layover on its way to Lisbon. As he tied up to the dock at Dartell's Island and the passengers departed, a staff of British censors came aboard. Their spokesman said, "Capt. Lorber, we are going to remove your mail." "Why?" asked Lorber. "Orders from the home government for censorship." Lorber protested, "You can't do that. This is a

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Neutrality Act. Lorber's clipper flights then terminated when they got as far as Lisbon or Foynes.

Later that year, England began its long, lonely struggle to survive the war with the Axis. And because it was distrustful of Axis collaboration with American interests, it adopted a policy of censoring any mail which happened to transit any of its territories. Although not announced, this included U.S. mail carried by clipper ship on its way to Europe.

United States vessel." "Yes we can, you are in Bermuda waters." Lorber stood his ground. "The only person I will allow on this aircraft," he said, "is the port doctor, according to custom. I'll do everything in my power to prevent removal of that mail." He ordered the censorship staff ashore. As they disembarked, the leader blew a whistle and a launch filled with British marines put out from shore. Each was carrying a rifle with

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CHARLEY LORBER

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fixed bayonet. When they reached the ship and boarded, Lorber, relenting, said "The situation is now obviously out of my hands." All 1,800 pounds of mail were removed. Lorber demanded a receipt for the mail and, later ashore, filed a formal protest with the local British Consul against the seizure.

The incident was kept secret by Pan American and both governments for almost a month until eyewitnesses provided the press with details. When news of the incident finally made its way to the halls of Congress, it immediately caused an international flap. "Time" magazine featured the incident in its World Affairs section with quotes from the participants, which fueled the controversy. Lorber became

a hero of sorts in a political battle with an unlikely antagonist—England. But the issue quickly died down as the two sides came to the conclusion that their common interests needed to supercede their smaller disagreements.

In the Spring of 1940, LaGuardia Airport was just opening. The first flight out of the new facility was flown by Charley Lorber. He attended the dedication ceremonies in which Mayor LaGuardia, Juan Trippe, a Congressional delegation and representatives from Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, Italy, Norway and the Netherlands all participated. A message from President Roosevelt was read. Then, Lorber strode down the long causeway to the waiting B-314, made preparations and got underway for the Atlantic crossing to Lisbon.


When, at last, war came to the United States, Lorber knew that the cross-Atlantic clipper service would be interrupted. By this time, he had made well over 60 Atlantic crossings. He was now ready to tackle whatever new effort necessary to support the war effort. The Pan American pilots were obviously most useful in the long-distance ferrying of the larger aircraft to strategic locations. And the first need at this time was getting bombers to Africa—the British needed support in their desperate attempt to hold Africa from its imminent conquest by Rommel's army.

Lorber joined the effort and flew several ferry missions of aircraft from the United States, down the Caribbean Islands to South America, on to Natal, Brazil, to the tiny island of Asuncion in the mid-Atlantic, and finally on to Accra on the coast of Africa. The flight to Asuncion was particularly dangerous. The lead plane was equipped with sufficient navigational gear to find Asuncion. However, the rest of the planes in the squadron were not so equipped and had to keep the leader in sight to find their way. Lorber always flew the lead plane and many times he would land in Asuncion with fewer planes than what started the flight. Invariably, some of the following planes would lose visual contact and be lost trying to find the tiny spec of an island on their own.

As the war progressed, Lorber took on many other ferrying and transport assignments. He flew to all parts of the world—wherever skilled pilots with good navigational skills were needed. While he was flying C-47s from San Francisco to Pearl Harbor, he took aboard an old colleague, Charles Lindbergh, for a flight to Hawaii. Lindbergh was on his way to the front in Southeast Asia, in the capacity of aircraft design advisor to Ford Motor Co. They shared good memories of

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their times together when they were exploring new Pan American routes over the Caribbean and through the Mayan ruins of the Yucatan jungles.

In the final year of the war, Lorber was asked to test newly built sea-planes—Catalina Flying Boats—for Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Co. outside their New Orleans factory. His job was to take the new planes and put them through strenuous flight tests and heavy landings, to make sure they were both air and seaworthy. The tests were performed on Lake Ponchartrain, a huge, shallow lake just north of the city. It was on one of these landings that Lorber's plane hit a submerged log, ripping open a huge gash in the aluminum hull. The plane quickly sank before Lorber or the co-pilot could escape through the hatch below. The rest of the flight crew, riding in the back of the plane, were able to get out. But they could not save their captain. The man who had survived so many flights in rickety planes, so many harrowing tropical adventures and so many risky wartime missions was finally laid low by the unfortunate drift of a sunken log.

His wife buried him in a Coral Gables cemetery not far from his good buddy Charley Haynes. His family grieved. His friends missed him dearly. His wife carefully put away the awards, medals and news clippings. Wartime life went on. Time passed. And slowly, the memories of Charley Lorber's unique life and adventures faded. □

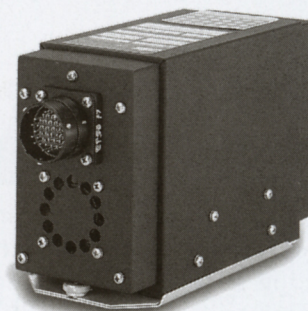
Author's Note: I am grateful to my cousins for their contribution of stories, photos and articles about Charley Lorber: Al Ingle, Charley Lorber Jr., Anne Lorber Ingle, Ruth Lorber Shepard and Dorothy Lorber Smith. And to my wife, Linda, for her patience and support.

Epilogue

By the most incredible of circumstances I learned the whereabouts of probably the only person still alive who flew with Lorber, as his co-pilot, both in the Caribbean and in the Pacific. What strains credulity is that Mr. Harry Canaday, 89, and his wife Luciele, have lived for several years less than three miles from my home! I met them last fall and they shared many stories of these early times. Reading Mr. Canaday's logbooks was one of the greatest experiences of my life. The pages were filled with historic, momentous flights, alive with the names of giants—Musick, LaPorte, Sullivan and Lorber. I had two questions to ask him concerning my grandfather. One, my mother had always said that he was famous for his smooth landings. Was this true? Mr. Canaday replied that he does not remember his landings being smoother than others, but then again he was a Master pilot and he was expected to have superior landings. The second question was of a more serious nature. My mother says that he said flying the Pacific was very strenuous, that he would arrive back in San Francisco exhausted telling of near disasters on almost every trip. Was it as dangerous as he related? Mr. Canaday replied that no, he would not have flown the aircraft if he had felt that it was dangerous. He said, however, that due to the aircraft and routes that they flew, "things happened." His voice trailed off, and that was all that he would say. After saying goodbye I had time to ponder the meeting. And I came to the realization that Canaday, Lorber and all of the others were pioneers of the Golden Age of Flying, who had pushed the limits of technology and human endurance so that we could enjoy the safe, comfortable skies of today. And when "things happened," many of them made the ultimate sacrifice. I wish that I could have met him.

—Al Ingle

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