

Pan Am: Way Down South

San Francisco, California, October 12, 1957. Captain Don McLennan* and crew started the four big P&W R-4360 engines on the Boeing 377 Stratocruiser Clipper America for what would be a most unusual mission.

It was a charter flight for the U.S. Navy. The ultimate destination for the flight was just shy of 10,000 miles away, in the Antarctic at 77 degrees 51 minutes S, 166 degrees 40 minutes E - the 6,000 ft. runway at the United States Naval Air Facility, McMurdo Sound; operations base for the Navy's Operation Deep Freeze III.



from a painting by John T. McCoy "Clipper America arrives at McMurdo Sound"
Courtesy SFO Museum, gift of the Pan Am Historical Foundation

The passengers included thirty-six Navy personnel, the U.S. Ambassador to New Zealand and a New Zealand cabinet minister, some reporters, but public attention was directed mostly towards the flights' two Pan Am stewardesses, Ruth Kelly and Pat Hepinstall. The pair were about to become the first women to travel that far south, and although the clipper would be "on

the ice" for less than four hours, their arrival caused a big stir at the bottom of the world - and a great news story everywhere else. U.S. Navy Rear Admiral George J. Dufek, the polar veteran in charge of the operation had suggested that such a flight might provide a great PR coup for Pan Am. Operation Deep Freeze would be probing the mysteries of the massive Ross Ice Shelf. The Pan Am flight would mark the first commercial airline flight to the Antarctic. But the admiral was also in for a surprise.

Three kilometers away from McMurdo was New Zealand's Scott Base, and as the social calendar was fairly wide open at both facilities, invitations were extended to the Kiwis. Many of the personnel at both bases had been there for months, while some were more recent arrivals - "summer people". But it seems the arrival of the two young women was apparently not appreciated universally.



Patricia Heppinstall, Pan Am Stewardess, in Antarctica

According to an article written by Billy-Ace Baker in the *Explorer's Gazette*, official publication of the Old Antarctic Explorer's Association, in 2001:

Commenting on the report that there would be no women on the proposed Pan Am flight to McMurdo Sound, Rear Admiral Dufek said: 'If there are any hostesses they're going to be men.'

The Admiral, before the flight anyway, was adamant about not opening the gates to other requests to accommodate women in what was - in 1957 - an exclusive male bastion. But apparently, the stewardesses' arrival created other conflicts, according to Baker:

The summer tourists made a big fuss over the girls, but some members of the wintering-over party, who had several more months to

spend on the ice, ran away and hid. If you haven't seen a woman in 12 months, it's not going to do you much good to look at one who will be gone in a couple of hours. That explains why there were only 50 men in attendance.

During their brief stay, Kelly and Hepinstall were tasked with judging a beard contest (categories included: longest, blackest, reddest, & sexiest) and were participants in a U.S. v New Zealand dog sled race. The latter event was a failure as far as a picking a winner was concerned, as the stopwatch froze up. So did Pan Am Navigator Earl Lemon's camera, which also froze after getting one picture.

One eyewitness, [New Zealander Vernon Gerard](#), wrote about the day's events, in his blog posting in 2008:

**Women
Are Going
To Antarctic**

McMURDO SOUND, Antarctica, Oct. 13 (AP)—Spring is in the air down here and the men of Operation Deep Freeze III are grooming their beards. Women are coming.

They are two stewardesses on a Pan American Airlines flight scheduled to arrive here at 10 p.m. Tuesday—the first women ever to visit this base for U. S. antarctic explorations.

The men of the operation, who started setting up home here Oct. 1, were preparing a warm welcome for both the stewardesses and the first commercial airlines flight to the antarctic.

Aside from setting the stage for the start of a new round of antarctic explorations, the men work a bit on their beards. They plan a contest for the benefit of the two young stewardesses on their stop here. The men with the blackest, the reddest, the longest and the sexiest beards will win prizes.

At the U. S. base in Little America, closer to the South Pole, the men awaited the first airdrop of supplies since last February. The drop was called off today because 55-below-zero temperatures made it too cold for the men to come out of their shelters to collect them. A message from the pole station later said the temperature had risen—to 50 below—and the men were ready to receive.

Little America said it had word from the Russians at their Mirny base extending a welcome to the U. S. icebreaker scheduled to visit there later in the season. The Soviet oceanographic vessel Ob is planning to visit Little America and other U. S. stations.

U. S. Rear Adm. George J. Dufek, Deep Freeze commander, arrived yesterday and started to prepare for explorations that will take U. S. teams out onto the mysterious Rees ice shelf.

The ice shelf is a mass of ice and snow about the size of France. Mysteriously, the water under it never freezes, although the temperature sometimes reaches 100 below. The ice is believed to be as much as 800 feet thick in some places.

"The crew included two air hostesses and they came . . . on the 8-hour flight from Christchurch, New Zealand and it was outside of Admiral Dufek's jurisdiction. In those days there was a lot of contact between us at Scott Base and Yanks at McMurdo, just 3km away, so we certainly knew all about the 2 girls who were expected. In fact I have a record in my diary of their names!

Miss Patricia Hepinstall and Miss Ruth Kelly said to be blonde! But in full Antarctic cover who would know & even then women changed their hair colour. Like they changed their shoes. . .

Anyway, a big welcome was organized for them even if Admiral Dufek gave it all a thumbs down, and we at Scott were included. My notes of the occasion show that it included a dog team race between sledges of N.Z. Scott Base and the U.S. McMurdo Base. And there was a beard judging competition with the girls as judges. Into this competition I was persuaded to enter. We all expected that the prizes would at least be kisses from the girls but it was left to them to decide and they said that the winners could escort them back to the airstrip. It was cold outside, around -30 degrees C. For myself, my magnetometers beckoned, and I had to return home for the 12-hour proper change on the recorders."

After providing an international news event, the Pan Am crew re-boarded the big Boeing (along with the reporters and VIP's) and flew off to warmer places, leaving what must have been some incongruous memories among the all-male base personnel, as well as an iconic moment for artist John McCoy to immortalize.

***Read an interview with [Captain Ralph Savory](#) who joined the flight to McMurdo Sound in Honolulu, Courtesy of University of Alaska, Fairbanks.**

TEXT of a newspaper article describing the flight:

"Antarctica Is 60 Hours Away

by Franklin Johnson

Central Press Association Correspondent

San Francisco, Oct 14, 1957:

Antarctica, the nethermost part of the globe, is hardly more than 60 hours away from almost any point in the U.S.

This latest earth-shrinking exercise was done by the first commercial flight to the "bottom of the world," which took off from here at 10:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning and arrived two days later in 15 degrees-below-zero temperature on a 6,000-foot ice runway at the United States naval air facility at McMurdo Sound, only 850 miles from the South Pole.

You cannot yet buy a routine ticket for such a trip, but the 37 passengers of the epochal first flight who assembled here from "points east" and included civilian technicians along with officers and men of the Antarctic Mobile Construction Battalion Sea Bees demonstrated what may become the world's most adventuresome flightway.

It was all part of the International Geophysical Year, and Pan American Airways diverted one of its two-level stratocruisers and a crack crew from its Alaska run to make the 9,700-mile flight one of the most routine "firsts" in aviation history.

It is not known when another such flight will be booked, but the stratocruiser now plies the routes between here and Hawaii, so that it could be scheduled on it at virtually a moment's notice. The same type of plane has been flying routinely to the Orient for years, and now is on one of the regular Chicago-New York runs.

The passengers on such a flight are made dizzy by the huge area covered and the calendar complications introduced by crossing the international date line the "wrong way," making it seem as though you arrive a day later than actually and return a day early.

Four fueling stops were made en route. The pioneer flight was in Honolulu by supertime, and at Canton Island in mid-Pacific shortly after midnight.

By breakfast time on the day after departure they put

down at Nandi in the Fiji Islands, although a whole day had been "lost" by crossing the dateline.

When it was time for their second supper out, the giant plane was landing at Christchurch, New Zealand, and preparations were in full swing to service the ship for its final leg of the 2,374 miles to McMurdo, nine and one-half flying hours away.

Four sets of crews pilot the craft on such a schedule, and on the final hitch Pan Am assigned two men with years of experience flying in Arctic conditions: Capt. Ralph Savory of Seattle, chief pilot for the airline in Alaska, who was in command, and Capt. Donald L. McLennan, who piloted Clippers throughout Alaska during the war and made a number of landings on snow-packed runways at Point barrow, second in command.

Stewardesses Pat Hepinstall of Holyoke Colo., and Ruth Kelly, Houston Tex., were the first women ever to fly into Antarctica and an amazing and delightful sight to the 83 men at McMurdo who hadn't seen a woman in six to 18 months. They broke a record by being closer to the South Pole than any women in history before, including some Soviet women who landed earlier in Antarctica by boat.

After only four hours the big twin-level craft was in the air again, stewardesses and all, but to the men staffing seven IGY posts, the Antarctica of Scott and Amundsen had lost much of its remoteness. Home is now only hours away, not by special aircraft but via routine commercial airliners.

IGY officials point out, however, that the relative novelty of this first commercial flight to Antarctica accentuates the differences between the "top" and the "bottom" of the world insofar as being opened up to the outside world is concerned, because already regular commercial flights have been crisscrossing the North Pole on schedule for several years.