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**The First *Air Force One* Flight:**

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**AN AFRICAN ODYSSEY**

RON MARASCO



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BOEING B-314A PACIFIC CLIPPER DURING WARTIME

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## INTRODUCTION

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During the 1930s, because of limited airport facilities throughout the world, the sea spawned the development of the four engine flying boats. It was a courageous pioneering feat to establish reliable air routes across the Pacific and Atlantic given the aircraft technology at the time. This narrative takes place toward the end of the fabled *Clipper* flying boat era and is an historic account of the operational challenges of early transoceanic travel.

As described in Robert Daley’s *American Saga*, *Juan Trippe and His Pan Am Empire*, during World War II these *Clipper* flying boats “carried priority passengers and cargo. Admirals and generals flew, kings and queens of beleaguered nations flew—such as Wilhelmina of the Netherlands and George of Greece; film stars flew to entertain the troops; hundreds of that newest of American celebrities flew—the war correspondent. Roosevelt himself flew, becoming the first incumbent President ever taken aloft.”

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# THE FIRST *AIR FORCE ONE* FLIGHT

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Franklin Roosevelt's trip to Casablanca in January 1943, was not only the first *Air Force One* flight, but the first time a sitting president had ever flown internationally, and during a dangerous part of World War II, no less. Suffice it to say, transporting the president to Casablanca for the first major Allied Conference was a bold undertaking, and a courageous effort on Roosevelt's part as well, given the overall state of his health.

The specific details of the trip were not widely known until 2011, when, fortunately for history, Peter Leslie published his father's spellbinding memoir in his book entitled "Aviation's Quiet Pioneer John Leslie." John Leslie was an airline engineer and a Naval Reserve officer who accompanied the President in this historic journey. As he notes in the opening of his memoir, it started with a phone call from a friend on active duty who indicated:

*I'd better come down to Washington and discuss certain matters. When I got there, I was told what was afoot, obviously in the utmost secrecy. It was to organize President Roosevelt's trip to Casablanca in two of our big Boeing flying boats.*

This narrative chronicles Leslie's first hand observations of the flight from beginning to end. It's a moving account of the trip's details, a description of the first presidential aircraft, intriguing commentary on the flight crews and the unique genesis of today's famous *Air Force One* call sign.

For a subject that must be shrouded in secrecy for obvious reasons, presidential air travel has received considerable publicity, including illuminating documentaries on the details of the *Air Force One* aircraft and the organizations responsible for supporting the mission.

Today's *Air Force One* is a magnificent VC-25, a military version of the 747-200 that has been totally reengineered from top to bottom. It is "the most celebrated aircraft on earth, with sophisticated flight control capabilities, top secret airborne defense systems that surpass any plane in its class. Its design and extraordinary capability projects the power of the United States President around the world."



The Presidential Airlift Group assigned to the 89th Airlift Wing at Andrews Air Force Base is an elite flight and ground support team that ensures the president flies in the most secure flight operations system in the world. The President travels in a secure bubble of protection, with Air Traffic Control clearing the airways and *Air Force One's* every move tracked by an armada of air and sea support services.

Needless to say, President Roosevelt did not travel to Casablanca in a secure bubble of protection. Far from it, the Casablanca mission was arguably, the riskiest air transportation mission a United States President has ever undertaken.

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## THE AIRLINE

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It may seem surprising that the US Navy assigned this critical flight to a civilian airline, Pan American World Airways. At the time however Pan Am was the logical choice. It had established a distinguished service record bringing far flung destinations from the United States to Europe

and the Far East within reach of world travelers. They were the dominant international airline and from the beginning were in the vanguard of flying boat development. Their engineering staff and Charles Lindbergh had worked with the father of flying boat technology, Igor Sikorsky, as well as Martin in establishing the specifications and technical criteria for the renowned *China Clipper*.

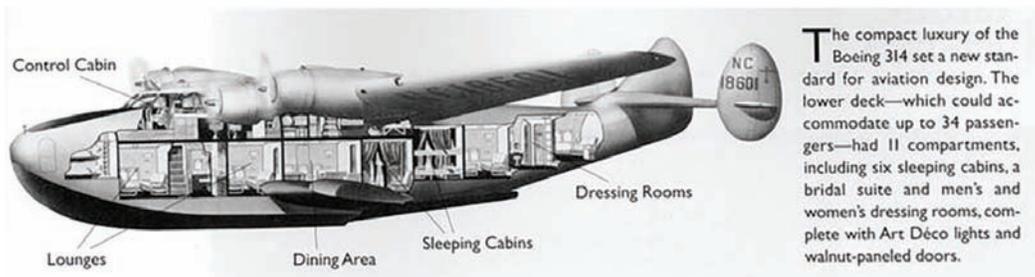
Pan Am and its legendary chairman, Juan Trippe had enjoyed a long and close relationship with the Navy and Army Air Corps and they worked together throughout the interwar Years. The Air Forces' Air Transport Command had used Pan Am's routes throughout the war. From the beginning of the conflict Pan Am's pilots and navigators had garnered extensive experience flying the Boeing 314 *Clipper* flying boat across the South Atlantic from Brazil to Liberia, Africa, transporting military cargo to supply the Allied forces in North Africa.

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## THE AIRCRAFT

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The Boeing 314 *Clipper*, built exclusively for Pan Am, was hailed as the greatest prewar commercial aircraft and was the only flying boat large enough to span the Pacific and Atlantic routes, with a sufficient payload. It was the largest long-range aircraft of its time, consisting of a double deck fuselage with wings large enough to accommodate a cat walk for the engineer to inspect the rear of the engines in flight. The pilot and copilot were supported by a navigator, radio operator and flight engineer, operating from their work stations on a well-lighted flight deck, nineteen feet long and ten feet wide. The interior cabin was expansive and the epitome of luxury, configured with spacious seating, private staterooms and sleeping accommodations for the comfort of passengers who had to spend many hours aloft.





BOEING B-314 *Atlantic Clipper*, CAPTAIN HAROLD GRAY AT THE CONTROLS 1939



*B-314 flight deck*



**BOEING B-314 BERTHS**

Throughout the 1930s Pan Am's determination to span the Atlantic and Pacific kept the airline operation in an almost constant state of flux. It was constantly pursuing new aircraft models with more range, developing procedures to cope with weather and sea condition forecasting for long range flights, and providing maintenance and logistics support in remote areas throughout the world. The thrust to forge these uncharted oceanic routes and new destinations utilizing evolving aircraft models with improved technology was an extraordinary operating challenge.

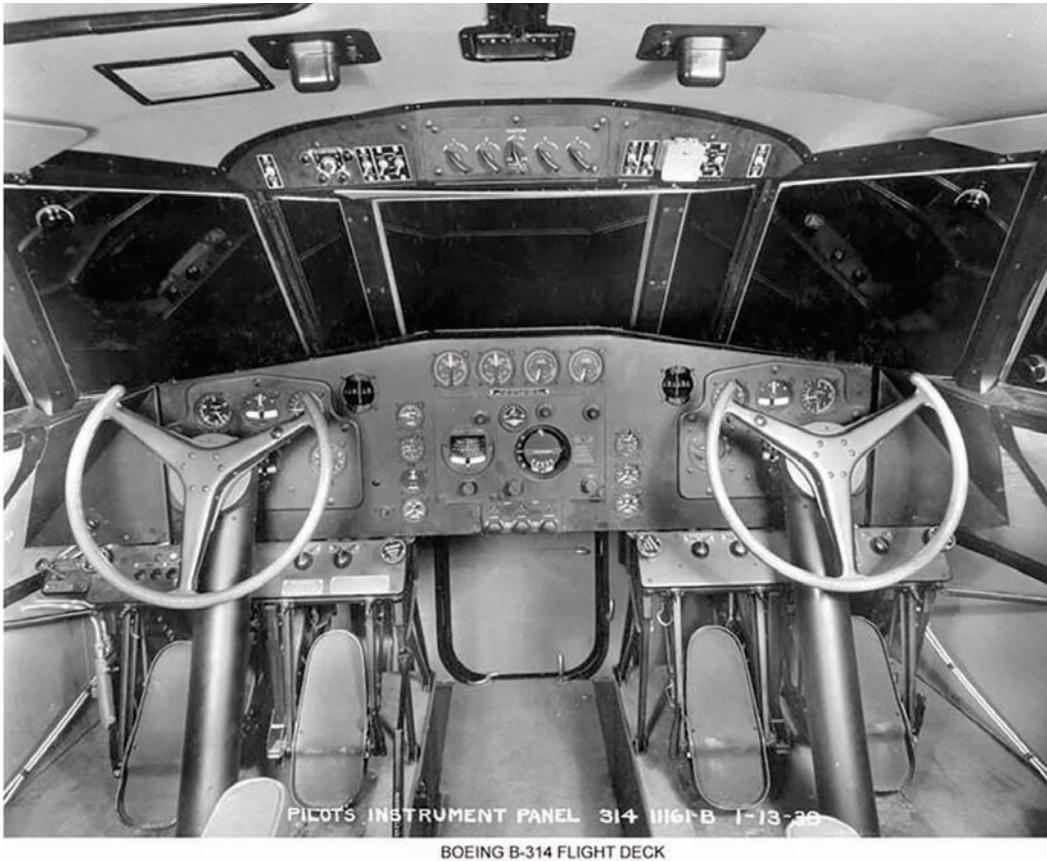
The artist Ian Marshal's well researched, beautifully illustrated book *Flying Boats - The J - Class Yachts of Aviation* describes the incredible challenges facing maintenance, ground support people and most especially the flight crews during this ground breaking period of history. All of these issues were terribly complicated by the Flying Boat operating environment---the Sea. And it was risky. Pan Am's Chief Pilot, Captain Ed Musick and his crew were lost during an air turn-back to Pago Pago during a South Pacific survey flight in January 1938. Many of these survey flights were in essence exploratory flights since no one had ever flown these routes before in similar aircraft.

When recounting *Clipper* flying boat history, a key point to consider is there were not many airplanes flying at any given time. Sikorsky built only ten S-42, four engine flying boats, which was the precursor to the 314. Martin built three M-130 aircraft, one of which was the famous *China Clipper*. Boeing delivered a total of twelve 314s of which Pan Am had nine. During the first two years of the 314 operation there were only six active aircraft. There being few airplanes, only a small number of people were involved in the entire Flying Boat day-to-day operation. There were literally only a handful of Captains in the world.

Once underway from their home base the flight crews were essentially on their own, in total command of all major operational decisions because the technical and logistical support in these far flung destinations was minimal. As the trips were long and the layovers often lengthy, these ingenious airmen took on an almost god-like status. Trippe recognized the lofty status of a Flying Boat captain and gave them the official title of Master of Ocean Flying Boats. And 'Masters' they were. As Robert Gandt noted in his fast moving book *Skygods: The Fall of Pan Am:*"

*Like commanders of ships at sea, the Masters of Ocean Flying Boats were a law unto themselves. While under way they exercised absolute authority over their aircraft and all occupants. And with such authority went, inevitably, arrogance.*

While the Boeing 314 brought tremendous improvement in Flying Boat range and payload, it incorporated 1937 technology and, thus, every operating system was 'mechanical.'



The President's aircraft, the Dixie Clipper had been delivered in April 1939. As noted in Robert Daly's respected history, *An American Saga, Juan Trippe and His Pan Am Empire*, the 314 experienced major development problems and, especially during the early operation required exceptional pilot skills and techniques, as noted in the Wiki encyclopedia:

*Equally critical to the 314's success was the proficiency of its Pan Am flight crews. Before coming aboard, all Pan Am captains as well as first and second officers had thousands of hours of flight time in other seaplanes and flying boats. Rigorous training in dead reckoning, timed turns, judging drift from sea current, astral navigation, and radio navigation.*

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# THE MISSION

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John Leslie, Pan Am's Atlantic Division Manager and a war time Naval Reserve officer was given the responsibility of coordinating the Casablanca mission between the Navy and Pan Am. A Princeton graduate, Leslie also held an aeronautical engineering degree from MIT. He had begun his career in engineering with Pan Am in 1929. Throughout the 1930s he had worked closely with Ed Musick, Pan Am's legendary Chief Pilot, developing cruise control techniques for long range transoceanic flights for all of the early Flying Boats.



He was an outstanding engineer who, over his 50-year career with Pan Am held various key executive positions. Leslie was truly a man for all seasons. A compassionate manager who related via personal experience with every work discipline.

The mission was accomplished in total secrecy with only a few people within Pan Am knowing about the assignment. Leslie had not even told Trippe. It's hard to fathom that for such a crucial mission, Leslie had made no special preparations for either the aircraft or Flight Crews:

*I was determined that I should not make a 'special selection' to fly the President of the United States, this on the grounds that all my captains were fully qualified for that purpose. It happened that the captains next in line were Howard Cone and Richard Vinal, both graduate aeronautical engineers. In sequence, Cone was to pilot the President's plane and Vinal the second plane on which most of the rest of us would ride for the entire journey.*

*I left New York without anyone else knowing. We flew the two ships to Miami and tied them up at opposite sides of the Pan Am Terminal at Dinner Key, where the passenger list and the other ships papers were being prepared.*

*I recall the cold blue fluorescent light, the atmosphere heavy*

*with cigarette smoke, and Captain Cone coming up to look at the passenger list. He began to speculate out loud as to who that could be, such as Jesse Jones of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Not until he walked down to his aircraft to see the preparations made for boarding the President did he realize what his assignment was.*

Until Leslie saw the President boarding, he had never realized the severity of Roosevelt's paralysis, which would add to everyone's concern for his safety and comfort. It was necessary to use a special ramp in order to comfortably carry him into the passenger cabin.

In January 1943, the war in the European theatre of operations was a dangerous environment both in the air and in the surrounding waters. Therefore, in view of both the war activity and the vagaries of Europe's winter weather, a prudent decision was made to route the flight across the South Atlantic to West Africa. The flight was planned from Miami to Port of Spain, Trinidad for an overnight. Then from Port of Spain to Belem, Brazil, to refuel and a night takeoff to begin the trip across the South Atlantic.

Pan Am had experience flying the route, yet each crossing was a challenge requiring skilled celestial navigation, which utilized the moon, sun and stars to establish the aircraft position along the route. Moreover, both the South American departure and the West Africa arrival points were, from an operational point of view, inhospitable.

Upon arrival Bathurst, British Gambia, they landed alongside the cruiser USS Memphis at the mouth of the Gambia River. Before boarding the ship the President was given a tour of the harbor:

*I will always remember the picture of the President's boat coming alongside the USS Memphis and its being hoisted aboard in the setting sun. Like the Navy man he was, the President, sitting in the stern of his open boat, turned toward the US flag at the stern of the Memphis and placed his white Panama hat over his breast as he came over the side. This was not done for press photographers; there were none!*

*In this very remote quarter of the earth, at a fearsomely dangerous*

*phase of the World War, bearing the lonely burden of defending his country against Hitler and Japan, there he was saluting the flag of his country in the time-honored fashion of the United States Navy.*

The President continued his journey from Bathurst to Casablanca in a Douglas C-54 piloted by Otis Bryan of TWA. The Casablanca Conference was the first of the great Allied mid-war conferences attended by Roosevelt, Churchill, their military chiefs of staff, and the French leader Charles de Gaulle. Russia's Josef Stalin did not take part because the Nazis' were dangerously close to capturing Stalingrad. The Conference planned the invasion of Europe and the Mediterranean Campaign with the plan to invade Sicily.

As reported by the U.S. Department of State Historian, "On the final day of the Conference, President Roosevelt announced that he and Churchill had decided that the only way to ensure postwar peace was to adopt a policy of *Unconditional Surrender*. The president clearly stated, however, that the policy of *Unconditional Surrender* did not entail the destruction of the populations of the Axis powers but rather, the destruction of the philosophies in those countries which are based on conquest and the subjugation of other people."

When the President returned from Casablanca, the departure from Africa to Natal, Brazil was planned from Fisherman's Lake, Liberia, where the waters were protected, better lit and controlled. For whatever reasons the Fisherman's Lake departure location was abruptly changed to a midnight departure from the Gambia River at Bathurst. The 700 mile (1,130 km) long Gambia River flows westward through Gambia to the Atlantic Ocean, so there was a high probability of considerable debris afloat in the river. Leslie was deeply concerned and had he been in a position to do so, would have advised against a night operation. As he indicated:

*I had utterly no way of reaching anybody to advise against this procedure but it made me very anxious indeed to think of using that big Gambia River at night. We could have no patrolled area, no adequate lighting, no protection against either driftwood or native boats.*

*Captain Vinal and I decided that we would go down the river first*

*and if there were obstructions we would take the brunt. Then if we got off safely the President's plane would follow close behind us. I stationed myself in the top of the wing at the navigator's astrodome for the take-off, watching anxiously over the tail of our ship for the running lights that would indicate the following plane was safely in the air. My relief when I saw them was unlimited. (Leslie inserted here in handwriting 'As I write this I wonder whether we used any running lights at all or whether we blacked out even for the take off.')*

Leslie had a penchant for not over dramatizing his many early Flying Boat experiences, but the Gambia River takeoff was truly a white knuckle, high drama event. His son Peter recalled him once saying, very privately:

*I'm sitting in the navigation bubble of Clipper Two leading the way down an inky black river in the dark of night, hoping we make it into the air, and staring aft to see if Clipper One successfully follows. If they hit something in the river I may be responsible for the death of the President of the United States."*

The Gambia River night take-off was not typically a routine take-off, yet it vividly captured the *Clipper* Flying Boat era, which was fraught with numerous non-routine flight operations. The popular images of passengers flying in luxuriously appointed *Clippers* to exotic destinations across the world was in stark contrast to the operational realities the Flying Boats presented. In our age of the iPhone, Google and totally automated aircraft cockpits, it's difficult to comprehend what these aviation pioneers endured, flying long oceanic routes in the late 1930s and during the Casablanca trip.

After leveling off at cruise altitude, the South Atlantic westbound crossing from Gambia to Natal, Brazil was long and arduous: hours of loud engine noise---albeit comforting to hear---cruising at a low altitude through weather, not over it; utilizing a sextant to celestially navigate toward Natal; many hours without any radio voice communications, and the landing in then desolate Natal. Then the 1500 mile trip north to Trinidad and Miami.

Another consideration about the mission of flying a sitting president for the first time in history had to be the overall emotion of the crew. They

were laboring under the heavy responsibility of safely transporting the President on a perilous 5500 mile (8,850 km) journey, during war time. The President's physical condition was another concern. Apart from his severe paralysis, his overall health was poor, although it had not been widely publicized. Any incident requiring an emergency evacuation of the aircraft would have been tenuous at best. The crew's adrenaline had to be running high.

On a lighter note, Roosevelt's birthday occurred on the last leg of the trip home, from Trinidad to Miami. It was perfect timing and a cause to celebrate not only a birthday but a successful trip. In Pan Am's inimitable First Class service manner, the crew had prepared a sumptuous birthday dinner. Leslie writes:

*Preparing for the final day's flight from Trinidad to Miami, on the President's birthday, we got a nice birthday cake for him and 'dressed' the aircraft with signal pennants which read 'Happy Birthday Chief.'*



BOEING B-314 DINNER SERVICE

Then Leslie offered this moving airborne birthday toast to the President:

*“Passengers and crew of Clipper No. 2 request to inform the President that they will drink to his health and happiness at 1620GMT, wishing him many happy returns of his birthday. That our Commander-in-Chief should for the first time be celebrating his birthday in the vast freedom of the sky seems to us symbolic of the new day for which we are all fighting with one mind and heart.”*



President Franklin Roosevelt celebrating his 61st birthday, January 30, 1943, aboard Boeing B-314 *Dixie Clipper*, en route home after the historic wartime conference with Prime Minister Churchill at Casablanca. From left, Admiral William D. Leahy, his physician, Harry Hopkins, his assistant, and PAA Captain Howard Cone. This was the first time a U.S. President had flown while in office.

Leslie never recorded any of the light banter that took place during the President's birthday celebration. Yet it's not hard to visualize the scene. FDR had a larger than life personality, was exceedingly charming and loved Martinis. It was no secret the President looked forward to his favorite hour of the day, cocktail time. It does not take much imagination to envision him smoking a cigarette in his characteristic long cigarette holder, with his infectious smile, toasting the crew and airplane for a marvelous trip.

An interesting aside, reflecting on the President's celebratory birthday mood, martinis and his clandestine international flight to Casablanca, brings to mind the highly acclaimed motion picture "Casablanca," a story of international intrigue during World War II. A major setting in the film is a bar in Casablanca, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman. Bogart plays a character dedicated to "the restoration of idealism and a heroic commitment to cause." The astonishing coincidental connection about the film, is that it made its debut in New York on January 23, 1943, in the middle of the President's Casablanca trip.

For Leslie the euphoria of safely transporting President Roosevelt on his historical first flight was short lived. In a tragic twist of fate, Leslie was involved in an unbelievably sad sequel to his successful Casablanca trip. In a sense it bound him, for the rest of his life, to the same physical challenges that Roosevelt had endured throughout his presidency.

According to his son Peter Leslie, seven years after his Casablanca trip, "John Leslie was stricken with a virulent case of polio, which paralyzed him almost entirely from the neck down. For months he hovered near death in an iron lung."

He ultimately recovered but "returned to work a quadriplegic confined to a wheel chair. He could not eat without a special device, nicknamed 'the worker' which he designed and that Pan Am mechanics manufactured."

Despite his severe disability, he went on to serve Pan Am admirably in crucial executive positions as well as a member of the Board of Directors. He retired to the West Indies and in 1982 died peacefully in the arms of his beloved wife, Jean overlooking the ocean, not far from Trinidad, the first stop on President Roosevelt's Casablanca trip.

In his later years Leslie often talked about the unforgettable Casablanca trip, and of how fortunate he was to have been a part of it. He especially cherished the personal letter of thanks he had received from President Roosevelt:

*Dear Commander Leslie:*

*I want to send you and the crews of Clipper "Number One" and*

*Clipper "Number Two" this personal note to tell you how very much I appreciate your generous contribution to the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis.*

*I want to tell you, too, what a wonderful trip I had and how much I enjoyed it. The arrangements were perfect and I did not have an uncomfortable moment.*

*With my grateful thanks to you for the fine service which you rendered and with every best wish to you all.*

*Very sincerely yours,  
Signed ..... Franklin D. Roosevelt*

John Leslie's son, Peter, noted that his father "framed the letter of thanks he received from the President and mused in later years that a decision he made in a few seconds to call his two planes Clipper One and Clipper Two, rather than their Pan Am names *Dixie Clipper* and *Atlantic Clipper*, entered the American lexicon with a sense of majesty and power as..... *Air Force One*." He recalled the debriefing at which he was asked what call signs he used. He replied:

"I just called them.....*One* and *Two*."

# ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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[www.marshallstudio.net](http://www.marshallstudio.net)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ron Marasco**, former  
Pan Am Vice President  
Maintenance and Engineering,  
Board of Director member,  
Pan Am Historical Foundation  
and author of *The 747: A  
Tumultuous Beginning*.



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## DEDICATION

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*From the New York Times 1982,  
in memory of John Leslie "a pioneer of the technology  
of over-ocean flight. He worked with Lindbergh,  
Sikorsky, Martin and with many others who dedicated their lives  
to challenging the outer boundaries of technology.  
Their goal was to link the world so that passengers and goods  
could be carried ever faster and ever more economically.  
They achieved that goal."*