

Newsday

# Llife



# Soaring success

IN 1939, PORT WASHINGTON'S PLACE IN AVIATION HISTORY TOOK OFF **E2**

JOHN MCCOY

**NewYork-Presbyterian** Queens

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## In this issue

**E2** Many know of Long Island's claim to being the cradle of aviation, but fewer know of Port Washington's role — which we share in this week's cover story.

In Act 2, meet Long Islanders who have found respite from the pandemic by playing more tennis, more often.

Meanwhile, today's Faith calendar lists both in-person and virtual events, and the Senior calendar continues to offer virtual events in which you can engage online.

This issue does not include the regular explore! Top 10 and Community Calendar; the Veterans calendar; or the Town Agenda and Police Beat. As we practice social distancing, many events and activities have been canceled.

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# History in plane sight

**Manhasset Bay** witnessed the first trans-Atlantic commercial flights to Europe using **flying boats**

**BY JOHN HANC**  
 Special to Newsday

**O**n a midsummer Sunday morning in Manhasset Bay, it seems all Long Island is afloat.

Yachts, ketches, skiffs, sailboats, cabin cruisers, even a kayak — its occupant windmilling fearlessly through the wake of the larger vessels — festoon the expanse of the bay.

A crowd in Port Washington views Pan Am's Dixie Clipper on June 28, 1939, as the plane prepares to depart on the first commercial trans-Atlantic passenger flight.

■ Video: [newsday.com/LLife](https://newsday.com/LLife)



Pan Am's B-314 Yankee Clipper flies over Long Island in 1940. Its first trans-Atlantic flight took mail.



**ON THE COVER.** John McCoy's painting of the Dixie Clipper landing in Marseille, France, after the first commercial trans-Atlantic passenger flight in 1939.

At the Port Washington dock, former Town of North Hempstead historian Howard Kroplick and his friend and research assistant, Art Kleiner, step gingerly onto the deck of a water taxi.

They are looking for the traces of the moment when the traditional craft that have plied the bay for centuries yielded to another kind of boat, when this North Shore community's nexus of air and water put it in

the crosshairs of history. It was here, in the late 1930s, that the world's first commercial trans-Atlantic airline flights alighted from what today might seem an unusual runway — the shimmering waters of Manhasset Bay.

For a brief period, Boeing 314s, the world's largest planes before the age of the jumbo jet, regularly rattled the windows in Port Washington as their four, 1,600-hp engines powered the gigantic craft on their journey to Europe. They were fulfilling the long-held ambition of being able to fly passenger planes 3,000 miles across the North Atlantic — a feat referred to in aviation circles of the era as “the Great Water Jump.”

“I’m obsessed by it,” laughed

Kroplick, who admits he knew little about the history of the Port Washington “flying boats,” as they were called, until March, when he got a phone call from a woman in Pennsylvania who said she had some 700 photographs of these and other planes from the period. Her grandfather, William Beutenmuller, had been an aircraft mechanic on Long Island in the 1930s and had photographed many of the airplanes he’d worked on. His granddaughter, Jennifer Huff-Robinson, recognizing their historical value, reached out to Kroplick, whose articles about local aviation history she had seen on his blog about the Motor Parkway and the Vanderbilt Cup Races, another of his passions.

**Pan Am Capt. R.O.D. Sullivan, second from left, with colleagues about 1940. He piloted the first commercial trans-Atlantic passenger flight.**

“She asked me, ‘would you be interested in seeing them?’” Kroplick said. “I couldn’t say ‘yes’ fast enough.” (President of the Roslyn Landmark Society, Kroplick wrote an illustrated history, “North Hempstead,” published in 2014 by Arcadia Press as part of its Images of America series.)

The 702 black-and-white images — which are being archived by the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Garden

See COVER STORY on E4

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PANAMORG

PAN AMERICAN WORLD AIRWAYS

newsday.com

NEWSDAY, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2020

# Launching a new era

The B-314 Atlantic Clipper anchored in Port Washington, photographed by William Beutenmuller, who was an aircraft mechanic on Long Island in the 1930s.



COVER STORY from E2

City and should be up for viewing on its website in 2021 — led him into a deep dive of a surprisingly forgotten chapter of Long Island history.

“This is literally where commercial aviation began,” he said.

## ‘AN AMAZING PERIOD’

Many Long Islanders are familiar with the area’s oft-stated claim as the cradle of aviation, but few realize just what a dominant force that industry had become in the decade before World War II. “Long Island was the center of the aviation world,” said Josh Stoff, the Cradle’s curator. “The industry was the No. 1 employer on Long Island, we had the biggest and best airports, every famous aviator was here. It was just an amazing period.”

Although Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight in 1927 from Roosevelt Field had proved that it was possible to fly a plane across the Atlantic, and the Germans had succeeded in dirigibles, it would take seaplanes to really close the gap between continents. The flying boats carried more fuel than land-based airplanes, and water provided longer takeoff and landing areas than airports of the time.

Driving the effort was a man obsessed with making the Great Water Jump: Juan Trippe, the founder of Pan American Airways.

“For Trippe, getting to Europe across the Atlantic by plane in one hop was the ambition he’d had for more than a decade,” said historian Alexander Rose, author of “Empires of the Sky” (Random House), a recently published history of the Golden Age of Aviation. “His entire life, and the entire Pan Am corporation at the time, was devoted to bridging the Atlantic.”

Even as Pan American, founded in 1927, had established other milestones in the nascent passenger airline industry, regularly scheduled flights across the Atlantic were still the main goal. Trippe, said Rose, “had already conquered South America and already crossed the Pacific with his passenger planes. But that was never good enough for him.”

Jennifer Huff-Robinson, of Hanover, Pennsylvania, has given photos that belonged her grandfather William Beutenmuller to the Cradle of Aviation Museum. Beutenmuller was an aircraft mechanic on Long Island in the 1930s. His collection includes some 700 images.



SOPH ROBINSON



Aircraft mechanic William Beutenmuller, shown at the Port Washington Seaplane Base while he worked on Long Island.

The Boeing 314 Yankee Clipper arrives at Port Washington in 1939.



CRADLE OF AVIATION MUSEUM

Trippe knew that Long Island — where he himself had operated a small sightseeing air service before starting Pan Am — was a perfect launchpad for the new seaplanes he intended to have built. After all, Stoff pointed out, aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss had been flying early versions of such planes out of Port Washington since before World War I. The area was a hub for the flying boats, whose fuselages functioned like a ship's hull in the water, keeping the craft buoyant.

#### MOVE TO MANHASSET BAY

While waiting for construction of a larger, permanent facility in an area of Queens known as North Beach, Trippe needed a new base to launch his boats skyward. Just a few miles east, Port Washington and Manhasset Bay — with a surface area of 2,725 acres — was an obvious locale.

“They needed a flat, mile-long surface to take off from,” explained Stoff. “They got it there.”

In 1934, Pan Am bought the Port Washington Seaplane Base, in the Manhasset Isle neighborhood and already one of the larger “water flying” facilities in the country, from American Aeronautical Corp., an early seaplane manufacturer.

“Hangar storage facilities are available at the base for ships from the smallest size up to the Sikorsky four motor amphibions,” read an article at the time in *Aero Digest* magazine describing the bustling bayfront facility. “And there is well-lighted factory space up to 20,000 square feet. Water flying instruction and ships for charter are among operations carried on.”

Trippe had bigger ideas than giving flying lessons. He commissioned a new class of seaplanes from Boeing: The whale-shaped, 106-foot-long 314s — called Clippers after the 19th century sailing ships known for their speed — had a wingspan of more than 150 feet and a nose that resembled a modern 747. For added balance, there were special “sponsons”: waterline-level stabilizers protruding from the fuselage (in photographs they resemble a second pair of stubby wings under the main ones) that doubled as gangways for passengers.

When completed, the B-314s would represent a big step forward in aircraft technology. But, much to the Pan Am president's frustration, it would take him a few years to get off the ground. To land in a European nation, Trippe needed a part-

See COVER STORY on E6

## FLIGHTS OF FANCY



BETTY S. TRIPPE

The Dixie Clipper aimed to emulate the comforts of traveling on a luxurious ocean liner.

What was it like to be a passenger on a Boeing 314 flying boat — the colossal craft that made the first trans-Atlantic passenger flights from Port Washington to Europe?

“Very luxurious,” said Howard Kroplick, the local historian who has been studying the short-lived but significant “Flying Boat” era in Port Washington. “They wanted to have the equivalent ambience of an ocean liner.”

According to a history of the B-314s on Boeing's website, passengers enjoyed the comforts of dressing rooms and a dining salon, as well as spacious seats that converted into sleeping bunks. Gourmet meals were served from its galley by white-gloved waiters.

In a nation just emerging from the Great Depression, only the elite could afford the \$750 round-trip ticket (that's about \$14,000 today). Among the 22 individuals on the passenger manifest for the first flight from Port Washington, in June 1939, was Roslyn native Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney. Heir to the fortunes of two of America's wealthiest families and an early Pan Am investor, he was also a movie producer who had recently helped finance a Civil War epic with producer



BETTY S. TRIPPE

Juan Trippe was Pan Am's founder and president.

David O. Selznick that would open at the end of that year. The film was called “Gone With the Wind.”

While they didn't have in-flight entertainment as we know it on the Dixie Clipper, no one was making jokes about airplane food, either. And even the pilots smoked — at least according to a 1996 memoir by Pan Am founder Juan Trippe's wife, Betty, who also flew on that inaugural flight (read an excerpt from her memoir on the Pan Am Historical Foundation's website at [panam.org/explorations/681-1st-transatlantic-passenger-flight](http://panam.org/explorations/681-1st-transatlantic-passenger-flight)).

“At dinner . . . everyone was in high spirits and we enjoyed gay and interesting conversation. The tables

were set high with white tablecloths. The dinner was delicious and beautifully served. Some contrasted this trip with the days of sailing ships which took two or three months to cross the ocean . . . yet we were crossing in twenty-four hours. Captain Sullivan came down from the control room to smoke a cigarette and visit with the passengers. He was a grand person and inspired real confidence by his cool, cheerful manner. Everything seemed so routine and matter-of-fact that we almost lost sight of the fact that this was the first airplane flight to carry passengers to Europe.”

The presence of another passenger who boarded the flight in Port Washington that day in June 1939 hints at why the Flying Boat-passenger era was short-lived: Col. William Donovan, later the head of the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner to the modern CIA. Donovan, according to PanAm.org, was heading to Europe on the fastest available means to assess firsthand the rapidly deteriorating situation in Europe for President Franklin Roosevelt. Barely two months after the Dixie Clipper's historic flight to Europe, Hitler invaded Poland.

— JOHN HANC

Pan Am's Yankee Clipper sits on its beaching cradle in Port Washington, circa 1940, as the big flying boat awaits launching.



WALTER CHRISTENSEN

# Ambition becomes a reality

COVER STORY from E4

ner on the other side of the Atlantic. He found one in Imperial Air, the precursor to British Airways. “The deal was that the two airlines would march in lockstep,” Rose said. “They would develop the necessary planes and infrastructure in tandem, and when done they would launch simultaneously. Trippe would go east, Imperial would go west.”

But while development of the Boeing 314 was proceeding apace, Imperial's aeronautical efforts crawled along at horse-and-buggy clip. “British technology was years behind,” Rose said. “It was driving Trippe mad, because he couldn't launch a trans-Atlantic flight until they could.”

## AT LAST, FLIGHTS BEGIN

Finally, in mid-1937, the first so-called “route-proving” flights began with flying boats manufactured by Sikorsky. Two itineraries across the Atlantic would eventually be plotted, with a northern route that, after stops in Canada's Maritime Provinces, went to Foyne, on the Shannon River Estuary in Ireland, and Southampton, England. The southern course made stops in the Azores; Lisbon, Portugal; and finally, the port city of Marseille in France.

By early 1939, the 314s were ready. On the afternoon of May 20, a crowd of 1,000 gathered at Pan Am's Port Washington terminal to see the inaugural trans-Atlantic flight of the new flying boat, the Yankee Clipper. Carrying not passen-

gers, but almost a ton of U.S. mail, the leviathan took off from Manhasset Bay, circled over the nearby World's Fair in Flushing — dipping its wings in tribute to the crowds amassed there for what was called “Aviation Day” — then headed east. After about 18 hours, Yankee Clipper arrived in the Azores.

“A dream and hope of many years became a reality early this morning,” gushed *The New York Times* the next day in a Page One story about what it called “the first regularly scheduled airplane flight over the North Atlantic between this country and the Old World.” (A reciprocal, east-to-west mail flight was made by Imperial, which by then was holding up its end of the bargain.)

The fanfare was even greater five weeks later, just before 3 p.m. on June 28, when 22 men and women walked out of the terminal and onto the floating dock to board another B-314, this one called Dixie Clipper, for the first passenger flight.

Port Washington declared a holiday and decorated the streets for the occasion, and the passengers were given a police escort through town. Dressed in blue-and-white uniforms, the 85 members of the Port Washington High School marching band entertained the crowd of 3,000 that had converged at the terminal. “A feeling of amazement and awe was noticeable at the thought that one could now purchase a one-way ticket for \$375, board a plane in Port Washington and less than a

day later, step off in Lisbon, Portugal,” opined the *Times*.

A patrol boat for the nascent Nassau County Police Marine Bureau circled Manhasset Bay near the terminal, keeping boats out of the path of the Clipper as it taxied out.

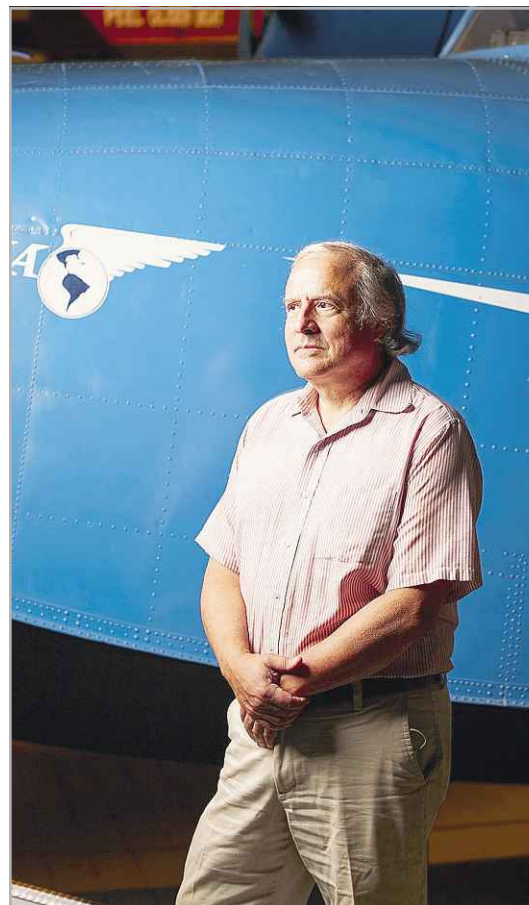
In a brief ceremony before takeoff from Port Washington, the head of the Chamber of Commerce, John J. Floherty, handed the Dixie Clipper's pilot, Capt. R.O.D. Sullivan, a message of greeting to be delivered to the mayors of each of the three European cities where his plane would stop: Horta, in the Azores, Lisbon and Marseilles.

Like those venerable European municipalities, read the message from Port Washington, “this town has its own and ancient history as one of the



An aerial view of the Port Washington Seaplane Base and surrounding Manhasset Bay in 1939.

CRADLE OF AVIATION MUSEUM



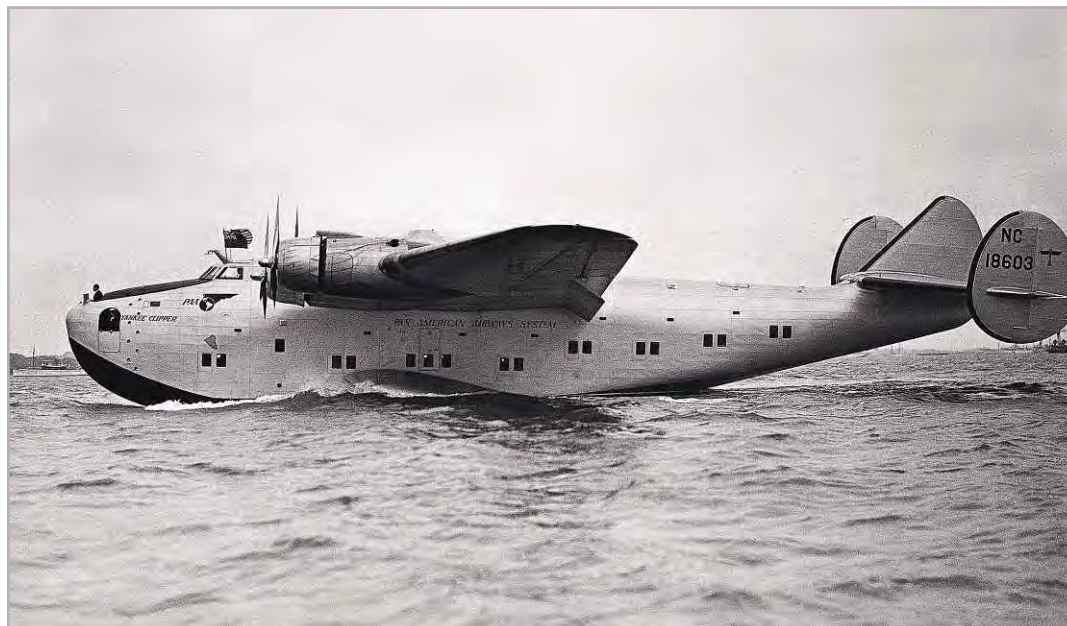
Josh Stoff, museum curator, stands in front of a Grumman Goose built in Bethpage that is part of the Pan Am Exhibit at the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Garden City. Photos of the historical seaplane era are among those that will be added to the exhibit.

YVONNE ALBINOWSKI



Howard Kroplick, president of the Roslyn Landmark Society, says he couldn't wait to see photos of the Port Washington seaplanes.

YVONNE ALBINOWSKI



The Yankee Clipper, carrying special observers, a crew and tons of U.S. mail, arrives in Southampton, England, having taken the northern Atlantic route after leaving Port Washington in June 1939.

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AP

oldest ports of this country. Now both our cities share the honor of being among the newest airports in the world.”

#### A MOMENT IN HISTORY

The distinction would be short-lived. According to Stoff, regular flights to and from Port Washington to Europe continued on a weekly basis through 1939. But less than a year later, in March 1940, the center of

the New York aviation world moved west to Pan Am's new Marine Air Terminal — and the airport that would grow around it, later named in honor of New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia.

While the seaplane facility along Manhasset Bay remained active through World War II and into the 1950s, it was eventually abandoned.

“That's it, right there,” said

Kroplick, pointing between the sails and fluttering flags of pleasure craft on the bay to a horizontal blur of green along the shoreline. From the bay, the area that was once the world's first trans-Atlantic air terminal looks like a sump or a nature preserve, hemmed in between a condo development and a restaurant.

“I'd heard something about it,” said launch operator Kyla

Leis. “But I never knew the whole story.”

“It's amazing,” said Taalib Smith of Mineola, who along with his wife and son were taking a sightseeing tour of the bay. “This area is definitely rich in history.”

While plaques on the town dock and along a nearby walking path pay homage to the historic flights, the terminal area itself is overgrown with

weeds and surrounded by barbed wire. Development of the 10-acre site has been stalled for decades over issues of ground contamination. But drone footage, Kroplick said, reveals that the footprints of the terminal building are still there. At low tide, pilings from the old launch ramp are visible — pointing skyward, a skeletal tribute to the Great Water Jump.