

## PanAmusings: A Stop in Rio

Captain Ed Spellacy writes about *A Stop in Rio*, in his series, *PanAmusings*.



Approach to Rio de Janeiro's Dumont Airport (Wikimedia Commons)

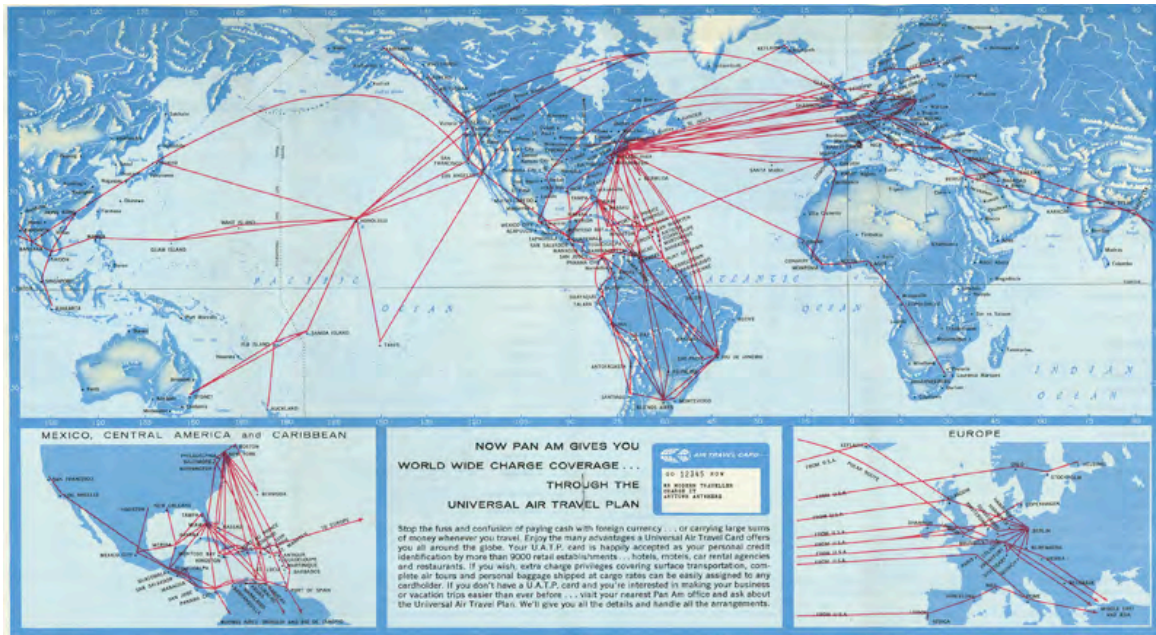
The roots of Pan Am grew in the central and South America area. Pan Am was a pioneer in all of South America. Juan Trippe wanted to expand his Central American routes to the West Coast of South America, the shortest way to Buenos Aires from New York. This expansion dream ran into the W. R. Grace company, a powerful conglomerate whose power from Panama to Santiago exceeded that of many of the countries that were in its sphere of influence. Trippe eventually made a deal with W. R. Grace and formed PANAGRA, Pan American Grace Airlines in 1929. This airline existed until the mid 60's when the US Government forced both companies to sell their interests. This established Branniff on the West Coast of South America.

The East Coast of South America was another problem, while the West Coast was the shortest route; the East Coast would be the most lucrative. An existing airline had been formed in 1929. The name of this airline was the New York, Rio and Buenos Aires Airline. This airline had substantial financial backing. While carrying passengers at that

time was portrayed as being exciting and romantic it did not pay the bills, but airmail contracts at \$2.00 per pound helped a lot. Trippe launched a takeover bid based on the knowledge that while the founder of the NYRBA Airline had the air mail contracts with the South American countries involved, he had the contract with the US government. By September of 1930, Pan Am controlled the East Coast of South America.

I flew more trips from New York to Rio's Galeo airport than any other destination in the world, the flying was productive, the layover was nice, and the time zone changes were minimal. The bad news was that the flight down and back both departed the respective airports at 10 PM local time and flew all night, it was about a 9 hour and 30 minute flight

I was operating flight 202 from Rio to New York the night of October 2, 1987 the aircraft was N711PA a Boeing 747-100 series aircraft. Mountains surround the airport at Rio, if you remember all of those beautiful pictures you have seen of Rio this fact is quite evident. Because of this, departure SIDS (standard instrument departures) must be followed exactly if you wish to continue in the aviation field. We anticipated no problems on this departure although it was a hot night; our takeoff gross weight of 660000 pounds was well below the 734000-pound performance limit on this aircraft.



***Pan Am Routes, 1964 (Pan Am Historical Foundation)***

One thing I always did before starting my takeoff roll was to review mentally the aborted takeoff procedure as well as the engine failure procedure. The abort procedure was BRAKES, throttles and reverse; the speed brakes should activate automatically. Brakes stop the aircraft, all the rest helps but the brakes do all the work. This night the procedure was to come in handy. As we passed through 120 knots

(138 MPH) the lower cargo fire warning light came on accompanied by a very loud bell. The bell and the light really get your attention, especially when it is dark outside.

This is not the time to troubleshoot the problem, the aircraft is covering over 200 feet per second and accelerating, the only choice is to abort the takeoff, hopefully stopping on the runway. We managed to stop and actually clear the runway before the last turnoff. The normal lower cargo fire procedure was to fire the first large Halon bottle and then wait one hour before using the last smaller bottle. I remember the two engineers discussing this procedure and telling them to use everything we had.

The warning light was still on as we taxied down the parallel taxiway, despite having told the tower we had a fire, no fire trucks were in evidence. I asked one of the engineers to go into the passenger cabin and check the floor for heat and the cabin for any evidence of smoke. We continued to taxi back to the terminal and hopefully the fire trucks. As you taxi a heavy aircraft the heat builds up in the tires and wheel assemblies, and the brakes were now red hot from absorbing 1.5 million foot pounds of kinetic energy.

We parked away from the terminal with still no fire equipment in sight; our maintenance supervisor shoved a Halon bottle through a pressure relief door in the lower cargo compartment and let it go. As it turned out the warning was the result of a shorted wire.

However, the collateral damage was heavy. Maintenance had to replace both Halon bottles in the lower cargo compartment, and of the sixteen main gear tires, five had melted the thermal fuse plugs in the wheel assemblies. These plugs did exactly what they are supposed to do, keep the tires from exploding. We eventually departed successfully for New York some 4 hours later.

Before we left I had a long conversation with our dispatcher at Rio, and filed a formal complaint about the fire protection at the airport, we could have lost an airplane. It turned out that neither the dispatcher nor the tower could get through to the fire station as the personnel were talking on the telephones to either family or girlfriends.

Some months later I got an official document from the Brazilian equivalent of the FAA, the report said we never declared an emergency. That was true, but on the tape, we said we were on fire at least 6 times. I guess that does not constitute an emergency in Brazil. I do not think there is a procedure for declaring an emergency on the ground.



*Captain Ed Spellacy started with Pan Am in 1964 as a relief pilot/navigator, rising through the ranks to pilot 747's, while keeping his keen powers of observation on the job the whole time. We're privileged to share some of his writings, a series he's called PanAmusings.*

*Ed Spellacy*