

Life & Times of Dinner Key



Aviation Cadets at Dinner Key (Courtesy: History Miami)

Gateway to the Americas:

The story of modern Miami is intertwined with visions of the city's potential as a link to places far away.

Once upon a time, Miami itself was a place far away. One wag said: "If you own both Miami and Hell, live in Hell, and rent out Miami." But not everyone was as inclined to dismiss the place.

Industrialist Henry Flagler, a Standard Oil partner of John D. Rockefeller's, saw potential in connecting Southern Florida with points north, south, and east. He

pushed his Florida East Coast Railroad down the Florida peninsula just before the turn of the 20th century.

The first train entered Miami on April 13, 1896 - the tangible beginning of transportation links that would fuel Miami's future. Fifteen years after the first train, Miami saw its first plane - a Wright Brothers' exposition flight in 1911. The next year, aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss opened a flying school. Miami was an excellent location for aviation - plenty of nice weather, and not a mountain in sight.

With the coming of World War I, a sandy bit of dry land in Biscayne Bay known as Dinner Key became a focal point for naval aviation. Miamians regarded the small island - or key in the local parlance - as a nice place for a picnic, hence the name. The US Navy thought it would be a great place for a Naval Air Station. With some dredging and engineering, the island was converted to a peninsula, with room for hangars, shops, barracks and other accouterments necessary to the job of training aviators and mechanics.



Naval Air Station Dinner Key, 1918 (Courtesy: HistoryMiami)

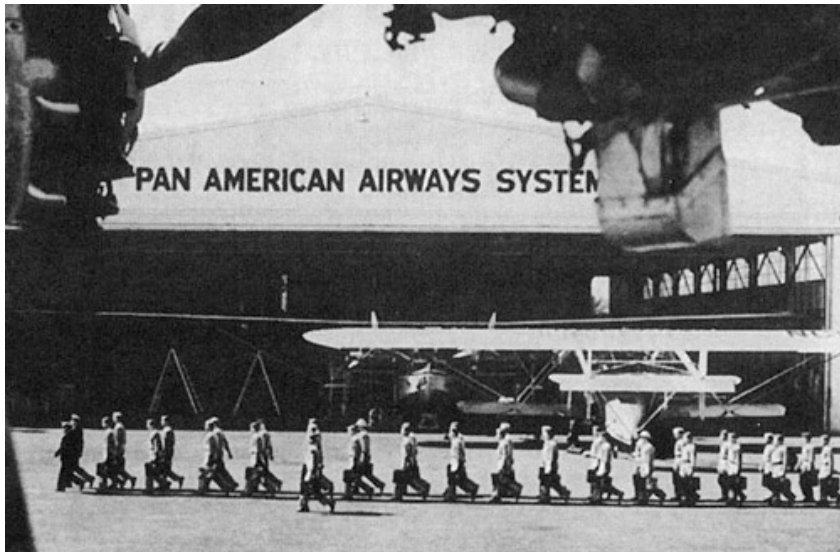


One of the those who came to Dinner Key was young Juan Trippe, who had left college to join the Navy to help fight the war. It must have been a pleasant billet, but Dinner Key's role as a military base ended with the war. At that time, the city of Coconut Grove was home to some very well-to-do and influential Americans, and they were more than happy to bid farewell to the Navy's noisy and disruptive aircraft operations - in fact, they successfully petitioned the Navy to have the Naval Air Station closed at war's end.

Naval cadet JT Trippe (PAHF)

It wasn't long before Prohibition began. Some of the Navy's planes and other aviation assets were sold off to enterprising locals, helping

to support a Southern Florida aviation boom. Liquor still flowed freely in the Bahamas and Cuba - short trips via airplane. Both entrepreneurial Floridians and deprived drinkers discovered a great reason to fly. In the 1920's, it was one of very few ways to hope for a return on an investment in aviation. Aeromarine



Navigation class at Dinner Key around 1941 (PAHF)

Airways, which flew to Cuba from Key West was one such operation. One of their pilots was Edwin Musick, who was destined to play a big part in the future of aviation.

As for Dinner Key, the devastating hurricane that struck Miami in September 1926 had wiped out the remnants of the abandoned naval air station.

Nonetheless, the sandy spit, now in private hands, still beckoned to aviators, and in

1929, a new airline arrived at Miami to start a fledgling intercontinental air service. The brainchild of former fighter ace Ralph O'Neill, the New York, Rio, and Buenos Aires Line (or NYRBA) bought a fleet of twin-engine Consolidated Commodore seaplanes to ply an air route down South America's east coast. Dinner Key was chosen as the jumping off place. With the cooperation of Miami's city officials, the property was obtained by the exercise of eminent domain, and a thirty-year lease drawn up. By February of 1930, the marine air base at Dinner Key was operating.

It made sense to service the flying boats with a floating facility, as it provided a practical way to board the "boats" without regard to tidal action. NYRBA had commissioned the construction of a large two-story houseboat to serve as terminal in Havana, and it was towed from there to Miami. It might have been practical, but the houseboat lacked the grandeur that a grand vision demanded. During its short life as an operational airline, NYRBA never got past the practical

stage at Dinner Key. The grand vision for Dinner Key would come with the site's next airline tenant.

Pan American Airways was already serving some of the routes served by NYRBA. Starting in late 1927 with a solitary route between Key West and Havana, the airline was flying Fokker Trimotor aircraft. In January 1929, the terminus was moved north to Miami, using a new land airport a few miles north of Dinner Key. By the following year, Pan Am's routes had expanded rapidly, and connected points around the Caribbean, and had reached the northern littoral of South America. In a partnership with the powerful W.R. Grace Company, Pan Am created Panagra, which flew the length of South America's west coast. But the plans of Pan Am's visionary leader Juan Trippe demanded even greater scope - and one of the key items on the agenda was absorbing NYRBA's route structure down the populous east coast of South America.

The ensuing dramatic struggle between the two airlines was fought out in the august halls of official Washington, as well as unpleasant confrontations at remote Amazon re-fueling stops. But the cataclysmic stock market crash in October 1929 and ensuing economic collapse was the most telling blow against NYRBA, which lost the support of its investors and was absorbed by Pan Am in the summer of 1930.

Along with a group of first-rate airline personnel and a fleet of state-of-the-art aircraft, Pan Am acquired use of Dinner Key from NYRBA. Starting in February 1931, Pan Am began the improvement of the operational facilities: dredging a longer and wider channel for aircraft operations, enlarging the footprint of the base with new land dredged from Biscayne Bay, and construction of new hangars. The site at Dinner Key had superb potential to handle Pan Am's growing fleet of seaplanes.

Inherited from NYRBA was a fleet of 14 Consolidated Commodores. They could carry 22 people for stretches of 800 miles or more between re-fueling stops, but it was only a harbinger of other even more impressive aircraft to come. In 1931 Pan Am took delivery on three Sikorsky S-40's. They were the first aircraft Pan Am called "Clippers" - a homage to the great sailing ships of the 19th century. The four-engine flying boat was a magnificent transport - luxurious and larger than any other production aircraft of its time, but only an interim step towards more modern aircraft.

That would be a new fleet of Sikorsky S-42's - an evolutionary step in aircraft design. With those

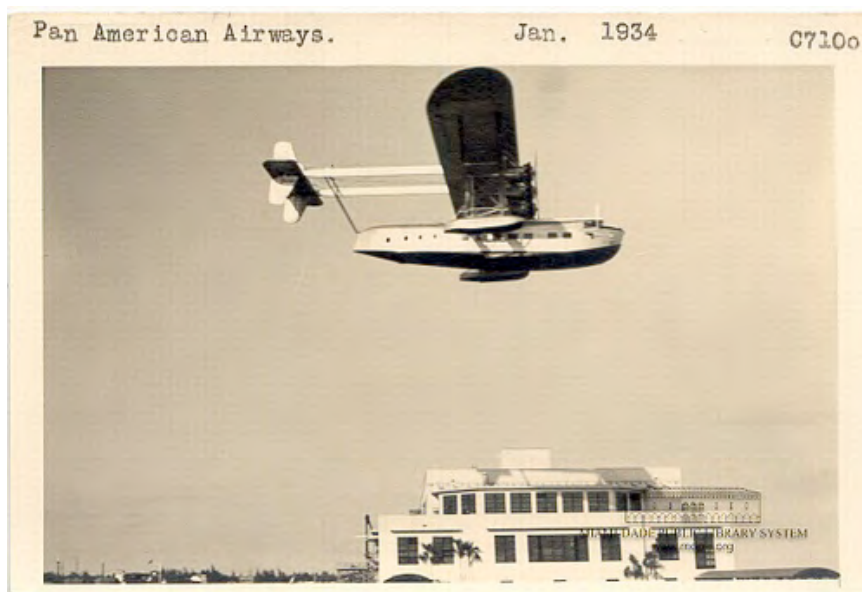


(Right) Nov. 19th, 1931: Hundreds gather to see Charles Lindbergh and the first S-40 (Florida State Archive, Courtesy Arva Moore Parks)

scheduled for delivery the following year, in 1933 Pan American commissioned the design and building of the world's most elaborate marine air terminal at Dinner Key. The basic design was the work of Pan Am Caribbean Division Airport Engineer Fred Gelhaus, who set to work to create a modern, attractive, and efficient terminal. Gelhaus, who in 1928 had developed Pan Am's 36th Street Airport in Miami, collaborated with a firm of New York architects.

It would be the first in the world constructed exclusively for commercial seaplane service - setting a precedent that would be followed in Rio, New York, and San Francisco. The architects, William Delano and Chester Aldrich, both graduates of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, had done very well designing schools and homes in the New York area, as well as some notable public buildings. Dinner Key would be something completely different from their prior efforts.

Dedicated on March 25th, 1934, the \$300,000 building was designed to facilitate the efficient processing and embarkation of passengers and their luggage, along with mail and express, bound for points throughout the Caribbean and South America.



S-40 over Dinner Key (Courtesy Miami-Dade Library)

It proved a Mecca for tourists. Typically 50,000 or more people would visit Dinner Key every year. They would come to view the mammoth 6,500 pound rotating globe, or to dine at what was perhaps Miami's finest restaurant, but mostly they crowded the observation deck to watch the big seaplanes come and go on their graceful way across Biscayne Bay.

Throughout the 1930's, Dinner Key functioned smoothly as Miami's gateway to the Americas. But the

world was drifting towards global war, and logistical demands increased. In 1940, Dinner Key saw 62,716 arrivals - an average of well over 160 per day. With its four gates, the terminal was operating at capacity. In August of that year, the base became home to the Ocean Navigation School. The first class of 47 cadets was graduated in November, and the school was so successful that six months later, after new contracts with the Army, Navy, and the British Royal Air Force, the school was expected to graduate 2,000 aerial navigators - every month.

The romantic era of flying boats was nearing its close. Practical in environments where water provided the only useful runway for big planes, seaplanes were by their nature costly to maintain and aerodynamically limited. A new generation of fast, long-ranged land planes were rapidly outclassing the flying boats. And thanks in great part to Pan American's Airport Development Program there was a rapidly expanding inter-continental network of new airports



with long paved runways to handle the new intercontinental airliners like DC-4's and Constellations.

Pan Am's flying boats stayed in the air throughout World War Two, serving all across the globe, and helping to win the war. In fact, it was the famous China Clipper, regularly flying a route from the Congo to Miami that brought African uranium to the U.S. for the Manhattan Project.

With the war's close, Pan Am entered a new era. Flying boats and marine bases such as Dinner Key became anachronisms. The last flying boat arrived at Dinner Key on August 9, 1945. Pan Am sold off the base in 1946, and the art deco showplace went through some interim uses before being selected as the site of Miami's City Hall. A marina replaced the seaplane ramps, and the big globe in the lobby was given a makeover and sent to a new home at the Miami Science Museum. But Dinner Key's second career has preserved one of the outstanding landmarks of aviation's golden age - one which continues to provide a tangible reminder of a grand vision that helped build a bright future for the city of Miami as the Gateway to the Americas.

Credits: This article was developed by Doug Miller with the assistance of HistoryMiami; Arva Moore Parks; and Julius Grigore.