

Ralph O'Neill's Magic Carpet: The Once and Future Commodore

By Doug Miller

It was cold and snowy in Washington DC in February 1928 when 32-year-old Ralph O'Neill made the rounds in pursuit of a dream. The burly outspoken westerner was visiting foreign embassies and U.S. government offices to promote support for a new international airline to link North and South America.



Ralph O'Neill (1)

He had begun his working life as a mining engineer in Arizona, but when World War One erupted, he enlisted in the Army and learned to fly, and was one of America's first fighter pilot aces. After the war, he became a technical consultant to the Mexican government and helped them build up their new air force. By 1926, O'Neill was back in the U.S., and thinking about his next mission. After interim stints as an Army Reserve pilot, and at Wright Aeronautical in New Jersey, he set about in search of more entrepreneurial and exciting pursuits.

South America seemed to beckon, especially as regards the potential for aviation. The interior of the continent was for the most part undeveloped, except for the Atlantic littoral, where major population centers were strung out about every three hundred miles, all the way from Venezuela's northern coast down to Buenos Aires in Argentina. The east coast of South America was home to the vast majority of the continent's people and the lion's share of financial resources. O'Neill figured that he could wangle contacts – and contracts - with various South American governments if he were in the position of representing an American aircraft manufacturer and selling their planes. While doing that, he imagined he might lay the groundwork for an intercontinental airline. Things went slowly, until Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight lit the fuse for an explosion of interest in commercial aviation. After knocking on a number of doors without success, Ralph suddenly found that Boeing Aircraft was very interested in his plan. He headed out to Seattle to seal the deal.



Boeing 204: Nearly fatal (2)

Boeing was interested in having O'Neill represent their successful fighter and mail plane models, but they hadn't done very well at developing a flying boat. In fact, the prototype they had created was so un-airworthy that it crashed during a test flight – with O'Neill onboard. The event nearly proved fatal. When he left Seattle to head back east, O'Neill knew he still had a large question mark in his planning for an air service – he needed a flying boat



Rear Admiral William A. Moffett (3)

Back in Washington DC, through his connections with Gen. Mason Patrick, the head of the Army Air Service, O'Neill gained introductions to the secretaries of Army and State, but perhaps more important to this story, he met Admiral William Moffett, who headed up the U.S. Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics – the first to do so.

Without doubt, William Moffett was a visionary when it came to developing aviation, and not only as regards potential military applications. *The Bureau News*, (the "in-house" newsletter distributed by Moffett's naval division) noted about the new XPY-1: *This is the first large flying boat directly convertible into a commercial type transport.*

It has a compartment 60 feet long which will hold 32 passengers. Admiral Moffett understood that both military and commercial aviation would develop in parallel, and stood in a symbiotic relationship.

Moffett had been pushing development of a new flying boat, the XPY-1, by the Consolidated Aircraft Company, then headquartered in Buffalo in what had been the Curtiss Aircraft Company's factory. In a nod to Moffett, the design was nicknamed the "Admiral", and the eponymous officer suggested that the plane offered great promise for an air service in South America.

O'Neill recounted Moffett's description of the Admiral in his book, *A Dream of Eagles* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston; 1973)

"It's a big baby. One hundred-foot wingspread with bracing to outrigger pontoons above the water line, a sixty-five-foot hull, open cockpit – in our

version she'll mount a gun turret for defense. What should interest you, though, is the indicated useful load of sixty-five hundred pounds. On the short three-hundred-mile jumps you mentioned you could fly a payload of about four thousand pounds. There's nothing to equal this boat today"



Consolidated XPY-1: "The Admiral" (4)

O'Neill was intrigued. The plane was the brainchild of Consolidated Aircraft's chief designer Isaac M. (Mac) Laddon, who had joined the company in 1927 after working with Army, but he'd also designed flying boats. The Navy wanted to spur the development of more modern designs for patrol aircraft, and, Consolidated cinched the design contract a few days after O'Neill's visit with Moffett to build a prototype for the XPY-1 - what would become, in civilian use, the *Commodore*.

The XPY-1 was ready to test fly nine months later, in January 1929. Not to be thwarted by the ice-bound environs of Buffalo, Consolidated's aggressive and savvy chief Reuben Fleet, had the plane crated and shipped in sections down to Anacostia near Washington DC, and her first flights, with Navy brass as witnesses, gave proof that the plane was a winner. Unfortunately for Fleet, the winner for the actual Navy contract to supply production versions of the XPY-1 was competing aircraft manufacturer Glenn Martin's company.



Reuben Fleet in 1918 (5)



NYRBA brochure concept image (6)

Although Fleet lost that battle, he was waging a war on other fronts. That very month, January 1929, he joined with industrialist James Rand to back Ralph O'Neill in his prospective intercontinental airline venture, and soon had orders for fourteen of his innovative flying boats, to fly in NYRBA colors (coral colored wings, and cream colored fuselage, with black showing below the waterline).

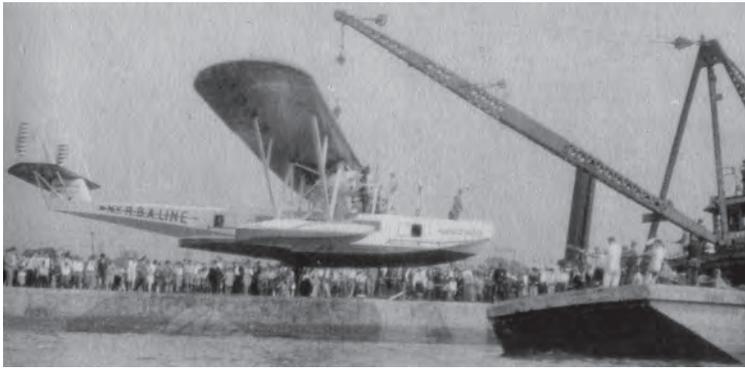
NYRBA's business plan gained a lot from input from the U.S. Navy. O'Neill counted on Admiral Moffett's critical advice about aircraft, but equally important was the list that Moffett provided of former navy flyers to pilot the big planes. This cohort of experienced flying boat pilots would include men who would go on to pioneer intercontinental air transportation.

Humphrey Toomey was one of these. A westerner from Deer Lodge Montana, "Hump" graduated high school just before America got into World War One. He found himself lured by visions of a naval career, and after a couple of years at the College of Montana he secured a place at the U.S. Naval Academy, graduating in 1922.

By 1924, he was on his way to a career in naval aviation, progressively gaining experience as a pilot, but also in engineering and operations. But after seven years of active service, Toomey recognized that his naval career was hardly on a fast track. The peacetime Navy was suffering the effects of a rising tide of isolationism in Congress, intent on downsizing America's military. Hump, through his friendship with another navy man named Bill Grooch, heard about an intriguing new commercial venture to start an airline. He mustered out of active duty after serving for two years as officer in



Commodore assembly line in Buffalo, NY (7)



Launching the first Commodore, 1930 (8)

charge of structure and engineering as well inspection testing at the U.S. Naval Air Station San Diego.

With this background he was a prime candidate for O'Neill's new airline, and along with Grooch, Toomey was quickly recruited to help get NYRBA off the ground. Things at the new airline were moving pretty fast – maybe too fast. A plethora of details needed immediate attention: charts, equipment, local contracts for

logistical support up and down the 8,000-mile route to Buenos Aires. Even a design for uniforms was needed

When Hump arrived at the airline's New York headquarters in August, 1929, he found a great deal of questions to be answered, a desk, and not much else.

He told researcher Wolfgang Langewiesche about it in an interview years afterward:

"I walked into a very large office, it seemed to be a whole floor without partitions. There was only one desk in one corner. Wilson Reynolds was sitting there holding his head in his hands and he looked as though the world was soon going to end, and that was my first impression of what might happen to that airline."

"This was in August of 1929. the stock market was up. Prosperity was sweeping New York, and NYRBA was doing things in a big way."

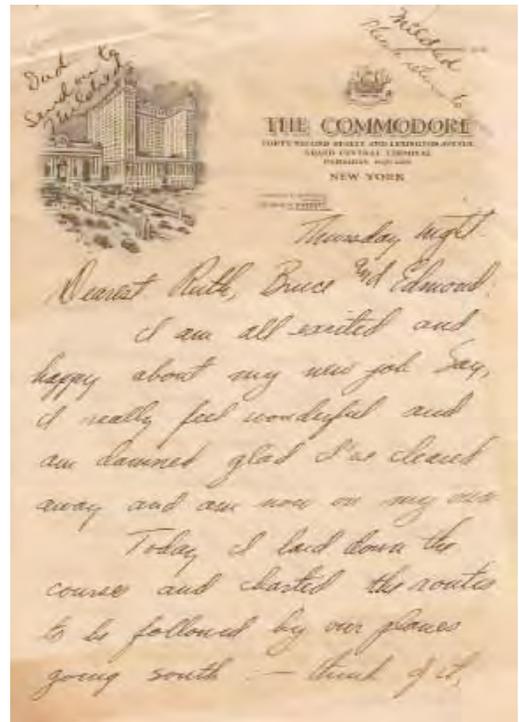
(Interview excerpt courtesy PAHF)

Hump was raring to go. He'd barely settled into his room at New York's Commodore Hotel before he was thinking about what was ahead. He could hardly contain his enthusiasm in a letter he wrote his family the first night in New York:

The Commodore Hotel
New York
Thursday night.

Dear Ruth, Bruce and Edmond:

I am all excited and happy about my new job. Say, I really feel wonderful and am damned glad I've cleared away and am now on my own.



Hump's Letter, Aug. 15, 1929 (9)

Today I laid down the courses and charted the routes to be followed by our planes going south - Think of it, South America will be the great target for the country's industry and capital during the coming years. When I tell you that the big businessmen of this country simply won't permit our airline to fail I'm saying just what is obviously behind every move made by the directors. Money doesn't mean a thing to this organization. I'm getting \$900 per month, guaranteed, minimum. When flying more actively, I'll exceed this.

You'll understand how exciting this must be, to be in contact with tremendously wealthy people and organizations. The company has mail contracts with the Argentine, Uruguay, and today we received the Venezuela contract. I hope to go in the first big Commodore plane over the lines. Either as pilot or second pilot. Will write again soon.

Humphrey

He was going to get his wish. Soon he was going to be piloting a big Consolidated flying boat those thousands of miles down to South America.



Loading and re-fueling off South America, 1931 (10)

It probably didn't matter to Hump that the glamorous picture presented to the public about the long flight wasn't quite the care-free and luxurious adventure the public relations boys were touting. As he noted himself in recollecting the journey: *"Some mileages came up that differed radically from some promotional mileages that the company had put out. It wasn't going to be a seven-day flight with comfortable stop-overs, but a nine-day flight with some pretty early morning awakenings."*

Bob Ford, another pilot who knew the Commodore, reminisced decades later about the experience when he'd flown the big 'boats' for Pan American, with those two big engines pounding away for hours only a couple of feet away from his cockpit seat.

"Well, you weren't as fresh as a daisy by the time you got home, I'll tell you. You were tired . . . you know that noise and vibration are two very fatiguing factors . . . very fatiguing! The old timers, flying those twin-engined Commodores down to Rio de Janeiro out of Miami, they used to sit on an inflatable rubber ring, the vibration was such that it really upset their whole life cycles. Oh man, it would really get you!"

"When we got into Miami in those early days from those trips in that Commodore down to Rio from Miami . . . I was warned on the way back from my first trip by the captain. He said 'Don't discuss anything with your wife, when you get back. Just don't do it - wait till you've been home a couple of days.' Boy, I would soon find out . . . Your nerves were just raw . . . Man! It was extremely fatiguing!"

Interview excerpt courtesy Pelican Films

But that was just part of what was perhaps the most glamorous job in the world.

The Commodore wasn't nearly as tough on the passengers in the back of the plane. And it was the last word in safety - an issue never far from the minds of 1930's air travelers. Just one of the two Pratt and Whitney Hornet engines (an upgrade from the XPY-1's Wasps) could keep the plane aloft – conditions permitting.



Airborne luxury: 1930 (11)

As NYRBA's advertising brochure proclaimed:

"From the performance standpoint it may suffice to say that these planes have been found to out-perform every multi-engined plane that has ever flown: their combined weight carrying capacity, speed, ceiling, rate of climb, landing speed, and stability, is well in excess of any other flying craft known to the air. One Hornet engine alone is capable of sustaining the Commodore in full flight, under full load, and the likelihood of both Hornets failing is extremely improbable."

Hump Toomey had a more intimate knowledge of the plane's capability:

*"Single-engine performance? If your gross weight was definitely under the maximum of 17,500 pounds by say 500 pounds, you could just stagger along on one engine at about 200 feet. if it was in good trim and if the engines were putting out power. After the first couple of hours of flight, you usually **could** continue and even climb slowly with only one engine. Reuben Fleet and NYRBA could well be proud of the Commodore. There was never a serious accident or casualties in that operation."*

(Courtesy PAHF)



NYRBA pilot Hump Toomey in Rio (12)

The Commodore wasn't quite a magic carpet, but in 1930 it was about as close as you could get.

When Pan American secured the vital U.S. Postal contract to carry the mail south (which NYRBA failed to do - that's another story), the writing was on the wall for Ralph O'Neill's vision – at least as far as he was concerned. By mid-1930, lacking the U.S. Foreign Airmail contract, NYRBA was hemorrhaging money, and the stock market had crashed too. The airline's backers saw little choice in the matter, and agreed to sell out to Pan American at firesale prices. O'Neill – angry and embittered - left the airline business to return to his first career as a mining engineer, and would go on to a successful career in manufacturing.

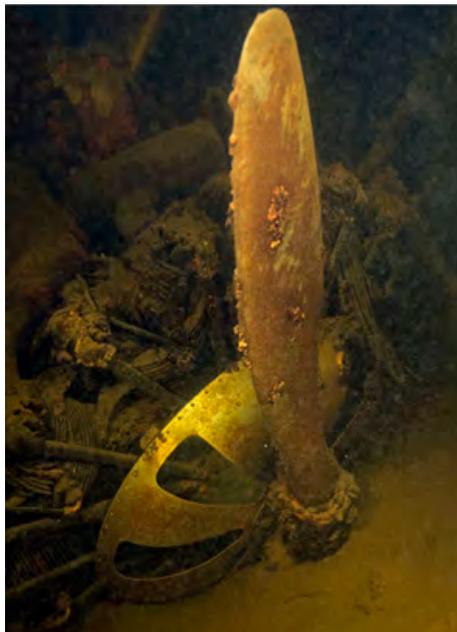
Pan Am absorbed NYRBA, and without doubt the most valuable non-human assets that came with the deal were the fleet of Consolidated Commodores. There would be other larger and faster flying boats to come – Sikorskys, Martins, and Boeings – that would be remembered later as the classic exemplars of the golden age of romantic flying boat travel. But the Commodores set the pace for future developments in the advancement of transport aircraft. The success of the design helped lay the groundwork for Consolidated's continuing pursuit of other increasingly advanced flying boats and other



aircraft, like the famous

PBY's that proved themselves in the years to come.

Back home to Dinner Key (13)



The last Commodore awaits
(Courtesy Toodoggone Productions)

The Commodores would continue flying into the 1940's, eventually relegated to support and training roles. They were thought to be a vanished species – as extinct as dinosaurs, with nothing but fading images to attest to their time in the sky. But their extinction has turned out to be at least a little exaggerated.

Resurrection, from the deep

Far to the north of their ancestral tropical skyways, one Commodore lies half-buried in the mud of a British Columbia lake. She was originally christened the "Porto Rico" when she flew for NYRBA, but by 1942, she had changed hands several times, and was being flown to Alaska for military contract war work. On a re-fueling stop, an unfortunate fuel spill was sparked into flames by a hot engine, and in a matter of minutes, the plane had burned to the waterline, and sank in 100 feet of cold Canadian lake water. And there she lay while the world of aviation evolved into the jet age and beyond, dimly remembered thanks to rumors about sunken payroll treasure.

A failed attempt to resurface the wreck in the 1960's only added to the mystique of the sunken flying boat. Time didn't dim the ambition to raise her though, and now a new project is underway to retrieve the Commodore, rebuild it, and put it on display at San Diego's Air & Space Museum (which is very appropriate, given that Consolidated Aircraft moved from Buffalo to San Diego not long after building the Commodore fleet).

The cost of the project is steep, but given the fact that it may well be the very last example of a classic American flying boat, who's to say the price is too high. It's certainly fitting that this first big American commercial flying boat may well be the one that will live on in more than just historical records - something that will live on to be beheld and appreciated by people now and on into the future..

To read more about this exciting project, see:

<http://www.commodoreflyingboatrecovery.com/>

Photo Sources:

- (1) O'Neill family
- (2) Boeing Airplane Co.
- (3,4) U.S. Navy
- (5) LoC
- (6) Harry Frantz coll., LoC Ms. Division
- (7) General Dynamics
- (8,14) from *Winged Highway*, by Wm. S. Grooch; Longmans, Green
New York, 1938
- (9,12) Toomey Family archive
- (10) National Geographic Soc.
- (11,13) PAHF



*A great beginning: Acceptance of the first Commodore
(Ralph O'Neill is 3d from right, Reuben Fleet on left) (14)*

The Last Commodore

Recovery Project



The 1920s ushered in the era of the massive “Flying Boats” that opened up passenger travel to parts of the globe only before imagined. Their design was dictated by the lack of land based runways capable of servicing large commercial aircraft. These “Ships of the Sky”, grew to a size never before seen. It was to be the birth of today's modern airline industry.

1929 saw the introduction of the Consolidated Commodore. They were an all metal design with a wingspan of one hundred feet, a range of 1,000 miles and the ability to carry 22 passengers plus a crew of 3. Her finishings were luxurious, with large picture windows, two 8-passenger compartments, two 3-passenger drawing rooms and even a lavatory. They were “state of the art”, the finest, largest transport planes available, years ahead of their time.

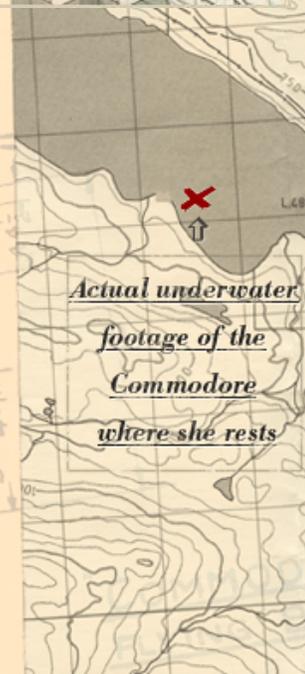
A total of 14 were produced, all purchased by the New York, Rio and Buenos Aires Line, later to be merged with Pan American Airways, who ultimately acquired the aircraft. Pan Am used the Commodores to open up long haul, over ocean routes, with Charles

Lindbergh flying most of the proving flights. All of these historic aircraft were believed to have been lost or scrapped, . . . one exists!

Thought to have sunk in over 600 feet of water after catching fire during a refuelling stop on a remote Northern Lake, the last surviving Commodore was discovered at a depth of only 100 feet in 1963. Fuelled by stories of a cargo of rum, a military payroll and rumours of being scuttled by her crew, Harold Hewlett acquired the salvage rights and attempted to drag the aircraft to shore with small boats. She wouldn't budge. Due to the isolated location, the lack of road access and large equipment, Harold was forced to abandon his attempt to recover the massive Flying Boat. He vowed to return one day and finish the job.

In 1983, Phil Hewlett, Harold's son, flew North to try and positively identify the aircraft by finding a serial number somewhere on the hull. After “grappling” the wing from a small boat, he dove the wreck site and managed to recover a strut from the submerged aircraft. The same cold water, depth and pitch black conditions that had frustrated his father, once again became insurmountable and Phil also had to abandon his efforts. *Find out what happened next...*

*From the depths of a Northern Canadian Lake
to her home at the San Diego Air & Space Museum*



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