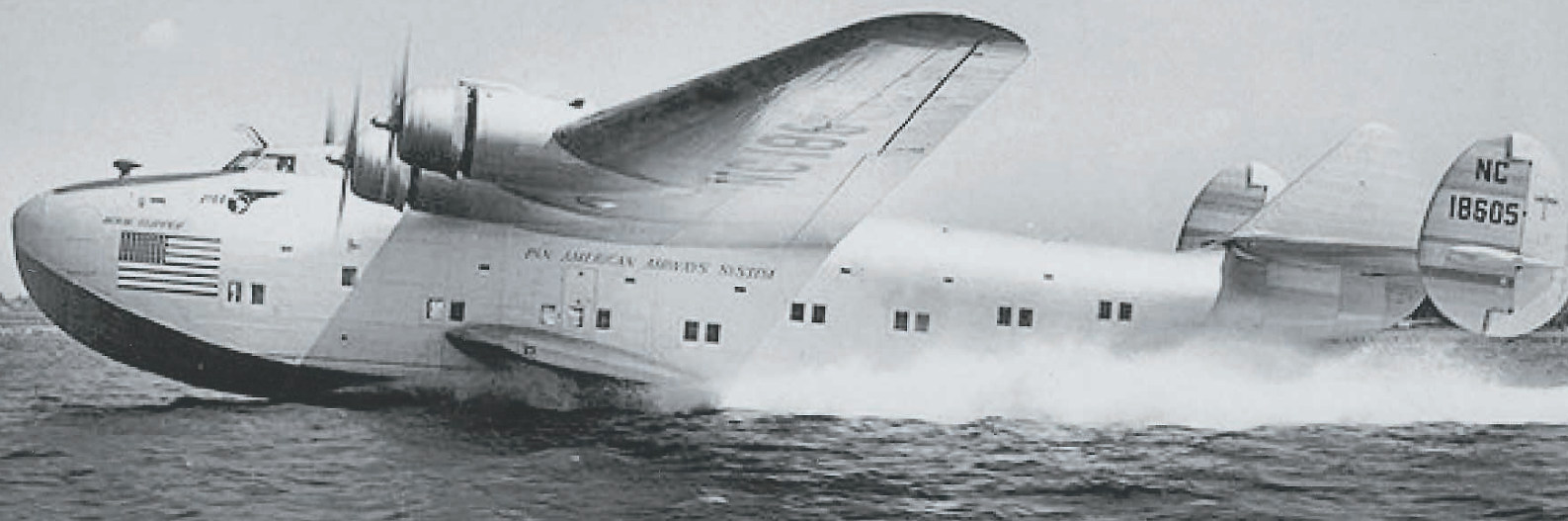


Son of That Mother of All Short Snorters

Once again Dr Kerry Rodgers finds that old soldiers never die but they do sign-off



Pan American Dixie Clipper. The Boeing 314 weighed 40 tons and cost \$550,000 per aircraft. The 14-cylinder double-row Wright Cyclone engines were the first to use 100 octane fuel. The wing and engine assembly are those of the experimental Boeing XB15 4 heavy bomber. Instead of floating stabilizers at the wingtips, sponsons are mounted on the sides of the hull based on a design of Claude Dornier. These contained additional fuel tanks giving a total fuel capacity of 3,525 US gallons (16,000 litres). The three-finned vertical stabilizer was a distinctive feature of the 314. Image courtesy of Rick Comish.

LAST October CAB reported on The Mother of All Short Snorters: that which had once belonged to Harry Hopkins, President Roosevelt's personal envoy, advisor, and confidant during World War II.

Harry's ten bob note carries the signatures of many of the major players from the Allied side of the European theatre of World War II. It also carries the monikers of some other folk one of whom was recently identified as Ray Comish by Linda Williford of Florida.

Linda stumbled over Tom Spark's short snorter web site www.short-snorter.org during a spot of web-surfing. After reading the story of Harry's snorter and checking out the images, she e-mailed Tom: "I can identify one of the unknown signatures on the Harry Hopkins short snorter. D. Ray Comish was my father. He was a Flight Engineer for Pan American Airlines and was part of the crew that flew Roosevelt and his entourage to Casablanca aboard the [Dixie] Clipper."

Since then Linda has been to her safe deposit box and dug out two short snorters and accompanying documentation that had belonged to her dad. She put Tom and myself in touch with her brother, Rick Comish, keeper of the family archives.

Both bills are US one dollar silver certificates. The date on one corresponds with that historic Casablanca trip. The second is dated prior to the entry of America into the war.

The family believes it to be a bill Ray Comish asked notable people to sign

who travelled on the Clipper from time to time.

Into Africa

D. Ray Comish was Assistant Chief Flight Engineer of Pan-Am's Atlantic Division. When he reported for work late



FDR and Winston Churchill surrounded by media at Casablanca. Image Library of Congress.



Front and back of Ray Comish's Casablanca Short Snorter. Signatures identified to date on face are: **Franklin D. Roosevelt** (President of the United States), **Harry Hopkins** (FDR's personal envoy and advisor), **Greg H. Spaman** (Secret Service), **Chas. W. Fredericks** (Secret Service), **Arthur S. Prettyman** (Steward), **John McCrae** (Captain US Navy and Military Aide to FDR), **Ross McIntyre** (Admiral US Navy and Personal Physician to FDR), **Arthur C. Black** (Photographer), **E. R. Hipsley** (Secret Service), **William D. Leahy** (Fleet Admiral and Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy), **Gladys Gayle** (Actress; what she doing there? Ed.), **Leon Henderson** (Office of Price Administration). On the back the Urdu signature reads **Allen George Shamas** (or Shaman). Image courtesy Linda Williford.



President Roosevelt with Major General George S. Patton, Jr, awarding the Congressional Medal of Honor to Brigadier General William H. Wilbur in the presence of General George C. Marshall at Casablanca. Image Library of Congress.

in January 1943, he found he was scheduled for an unusual Atlantic crossing. The passengers included Franklin Delano Roosevelt along with an assorted cast. The President was off for a top secret meeting with Prime Minister Winston Churchill in darkest Africa.

The flight scored many firsts to which Ray's snorter bears witness. Up to that point, no serving US president had flown as the Secret Service had decreed air travel far too unsafe. No serving president had visited Africa, let alone crossed the Atlantic by any means during wartime and not since Lincoln had the Commander-in-Chief visited troops in the battlefield as FDR would do during his stay.

By early 1943 the US had been in the war just over a year. Following Hopkins' London conference, the Allies had launched Operation Torch in November 1942. The Axis forces were on the back foot throughout North Africa. The question was what to do next. Casablanca was where it would all be thrashed out.

Roosevelt and Churchill were to forge a close friendship as a result of the war, despite their having gotten off on the wrong foot in WWI. At a London dinner in 1918 Roosevelt recalled Churchill had, "acted like a stinker." He was, "one of the few men in public life who was rude to me." Come WWII and all was forgiven. Long before Casablanca Churchill had made numerous trips to the US and even spent Christmas 1941 at the White House, post-Pearl Harbor.

The 17,000 miles round-trip would not prove easy for the 60-year-old president, confined by polio to a wheelchair since 1921. He had not flown since 1932 but was determined to go, particularly when his personal physician, Admiral Ross T. McIntyre gave him the thumbs up. And air travel was the only realistic option with German submarines stalking the Atlantic.

Next stop Bathurst

Two Boeing-314 flying boats, chartered by the navy from Pan American for wartime duty, were assigned to the task. These were the largest commercial aircraft of their day, able to carry 40 overnight passengers. They had a range of 3,500 miles.

One was Ray Comish's plane the *Dixie Clipper*. It had inaugurated the first regular passenger service across the Atlantic in June 1939. Initially, at least, this was the plane designated to carry the president and his personal staff, including Admiral McIntyre and Harry Hopkins. The pilot was navy reserve Lieutenant Howard Cone, Master of Ocean Flying, the highest commercial pilot rating. Other members

CREW	TRIP NO.	DISCOUNT	DATE	FROM	TO	LEFT DOCK	T.O.	LAND	ARRIVE DOCK	TOT. AIR.	TOT. DOCK	TOT. TRIP	TOT. MONTH
(ROOSEVELT PRESIDENTIAL TRIP)													
A. MC CONE	5170N		1-18-43	NBA	MIA	2144	2155	0541	0605	746	816		
HUGHES	NCOS		1-11-43	MIA	SPA	0957	1019	2023	2029	1004	1032		
STEEN			1-12-43	SPA	BEL	1004	1015	1827	1846	814	842		
COMISH			1-23-43	BEL	HST	2122	2139	1619	1626	1840	1704		
MOORE			1-17-43	HST	HST	TAXI					20		
WILSON			1-20-43	HST	HST	TAXI					28		
GARCIA			1-24-43	HST	FSL	1000	1013	1441	1454	428	454		
J.C. LESLIE			1-25-43	FSL	FEL	TEST				109	146		
ROOSEVELT			1-27-43	FEL	HST	1209	1218	1626	1636	408	426		
LEAHY W.D. AD.			1-28-43	HST	NAT	2307	2330	1035	1035	1103	1145		
MCINTYRE W.S. AD.			1-29-43	HST	SPA	0537	0551	2147	2153	1236	1214		
HOPKINS W.D.						2333	TAXI	U.S.N.	0017		44	9256	
MC CREA W.D. CAPE			1-30-43	SPA	MIA	1100	1111	2025	2042	924	942	JAN	74:26
FOX G.A. LT			2-1-43	MIA	NBA	0507	0537	1232	1317	653	810		
FREDERICKS W.S. SS.													
BLACK A.C. (MOTO)													
F.D.R. BIRTHDAY													
PAMAN G.A. SS.													
WISLEY E.H. SS.													
WETZMAN A. SS.													
WILSON	NCOS		1-27-43	MIA	NBA					130	220		

The relevant page from Flight Engineer Comish's Log Book. Image courtesy Linda Williford.

of the delegation travelled aboard the second 314, the *American Clipper*. First scheduled stop was Trinidad.

Hopkins later recalled the President being thrilled to be making the trip and, "acted like a sixteen year old." Admiral McIntyre fretted however. In the unpressurized plane, cruising at 9,000 feet, the president occasionally turned pale.

On the morning of 12 January they left Trinidad and headed along the South American coast and across the equator to Belm, Brazil. There they refuelled before taking off for Bathurst, Gambia, a 2,100 mile, 19 hour flight.

At Bathurst the cruiser USS *Memphis* was waiting and here Roosevelt spent the night. In the morning an army C-54 transport took him and his party on to Casablanca. Less than an hour after his arrival the conference began over a candlelit dinner.

Here's looking at you, kid

In the event the conference was an undoubted success. At the final Casablanca press session on January 24 Roosevelt announced that the Allies would seek the "unconditional surrender" of Germany and Japan. It is for this that

Casablanca January 1943 is perhaps best remembered.

Post conference Roosevelt enjoyed a drive up the coast on 21 January with General Patton. North of Rabat, the president reviewed thousands of American troops who had expected to see General Mark Clark but instead got "the Old Man, himself." Two days later Roosevelt and Churchill relaxed together, watching the sun set over the Atlas Mountains at Marrakech.

On 27 January Roosevelt returned to Gambia and boarded the *Dixie Clipper* for the return home during which he celebrated his birthday. Afterwards the crew of both planes remained closed-mouth. All Engineer Comish would allow was, "It was a fine trip."

Richard W. Vinal Jr, son of the pilot of the accompanying *American Clipper*, is another correspondent of Tom Sparks. Richard's father told him that for security reasons every time they stopped to re-fuel, FDR was transferred from one Clipper to the other via a wicker chair suspended from a small crane. This information is absent from official and unofficial histories consulted by your author. These give the impression that FDR was with the *Dixie* all the way. The only change of planes of which the Comish family are aware is the switch from the B-314 to the C-54 in Gambia. Military buffs may be able to shed some light on this matter.

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Assistant Chief Flight Engineer, Pan American, D. Ray Comish. Image courtesy Rick Comish.

D. RAYMOND COMISH

D. Raymond Comish was born on 23 October 1908 in Lime Ridge, Pennsylvania and grew up in Florida's Everglades. On leaving home he took up work at the Miami Country Club making custom golf clubs.

One day a Ford tri-motor plane landed on the Miami course and Ray introduced himself to its pilot, Captain O.M. Goodsel, who was looking for a flight mechanic. Ray offered his services and subsequently signed on. The two barnstormed from town to town throughout the eastern US with Ray learning to fly. His first logged flight as mechanic was with Ford tri-motor passenger aircraft on 4 June 1933. His first logged flight as co-pilot came on 22 November 1934 in a J6 Ford tri-motor.

In Erie, Pennsylvania, Ray met young Betty Baker who became his wife. They were to be blessed with four children.

The barnstorming continued until Ray signed up with Pan American Airways on 13 June 1936 as a mechanic. His first flight with Pan American was January in 1938 as flight engineer on a Sikorsky S-42 flying boat. He later transitioned to Boeing B-314 clippers. In the early days of Pan American he flew the north Atlantic charting future passenger flight routes. It was not uncommon for in-bound flights to land miles out at sea and taxi to harbour terminals due to fog or other foul weather. Fortunately, this did not prove to be the case when the *Dixie Clipper* flew FDR.

With the post-war demise of flying boats, Ray converted to Lockheed Constellations, then Boeing B-377 Stratocruisers, and, finally, Boeing B-707 jets. He retired on 31 January 1964 after 28 years with Pan American Airways where he had clocked up 25,684 flight hours and 7,207,360 air miles.

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