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Transocean Air Lines

In recent articles we have looked at the operations of some of the scheduled carriers which flew through Shannon during the post war years and the 1950s. There were also many charter airlines using Shannon during this period and chief among them was Transocean Airlines. This company was founded in 1946 and continued in operation until 1960. Being a charter carrier we have no schedule or timetable to examine, nor did Transocean feature very much in the newspapers. This article is mostly based on the Shanwick records and such other information as we could gather. Transocean veterans have a website at www.talooa.org, well worth a look.

Transocean was one of many charter outfits formed after the war by former military aviators, using surplus military equipment, which was available at affordable prices. Most of these failed in the years that followed but Transocean under the able and charismatic leadership of its founder Orvis Nelson did not. The airline was based at Oakland, California and established a large operation over the Pacific, as well as over the Atlantic. Headquarters of its Europe-Atlantic Division was at Windsor Locks, Bradley Field, Connecticut. As well as its airline activities, it became a diversified conglomerate with interests in many businesses. It established a large aircraft overhaul facility at Oakland, and an, aircraft ferrying business. It was also instrumental in founding and supporting many other airlines, in the Philippines and Middle East.

Its operations throughout its fourteen years of existence were on a huge scale. There were, for example, no less than 74 Douglas DC-4s registered to Transocean. Its downfall came when it purchased 14 former BOAC Stratocruisers and attempted to put most of them into service. No other charter airline dared take such a risk with these expensive-to-operate and maintenance-intensive aircraft. Transocean gave it a try, but the aircraft were a heavy drain on the company's finances and ultimately led to its bankruptcy.

As Transocean had large numbers of aircraft flying through Shannon, an office was opened there, with administrative and maintenance staff. Station Manager was a Mr. Fred Gash. As well as its own aircraft, Transocean Air Lines also became agents for many other airlines flying through Shannon including Trans Caribbean, US Overseas Airlines, Capitol, Airwork and Peninsular Air Transport. Usually this worked well, and Transocean were highly regarded as handling agents, although the Shanwick diary of 17th December 1956 shows what could occasionally go wrong. On that day US Overseas Airline DC-4 N90434 was flying from Munich to Shannon and then onwards to the United States. It transmitted its estimated time of arrival to the Transocean office, with its request for catering for the transatlantic sector. The captain became irate on arriving at Shannon to find that nothing had been done about his order as there had been nobody in the Transocean office to deal with it!

Transocean Air Lines was also known as TALOA and its flights were abbreviated TAL. Most of the aircraft coming through Shannon on Transocean's own flights were DC-4s, on both passenger and freight charters. As mentioned above, Transocean was heavily involved in supporting other airlines in the Middle East, and aircraft on delivery to and coming back from these airlines also used Shannon. Most of this fascinating historical data has been lost in the mists of time, but we set out here what has survived, looked at by aircraft type:

Boeing B-17:

Transocean Air Lines had a client by the name of Colonel Andres Soriano of the Philippines, reputedly one of the richest men in the world, and for him they acquired a B-17 which they modified to executive configuration and operated on his behalf. The B-17 was N68269 which was registered to Transocean in February 1947 and operated until it was sold in October 1949. Mostly this aircraft was used for travel between San Francisco and Manila and around the United States, but it was used for one around-the-world flight, which brought it through Shannon. Routing was San Francisco (Oakland)-Honolulu-Wake Island-Guam-Manila-Bangkok-New Delhi-Karachi-Cairo-Rome-Bordeaux-Paris-Bordeaux-Shannon-Keflavik-Gander-New York-Oakland.

Curtiss C-46:

Transocean was requested in 1949 to assist in the start up of an airline for French Somaliland, to be known as Air Djibouti. At that stage, war surplus C-46s were available for lease from the US Government for the exceptional value of \$300 a month each, so Transocean took six aircraft on lease for various projects. These were registered to Transocean as N68963/4/5/6/7 and 8, and two were allocated to the Air Djibouti operation and painted in full Air Djibouti colour schemes, retaining the American registrations.

The first aircraft to be delivered may have come through Shannon on its delivery flight, but the second one definitely did, in mid winter 1949, and is documented as routing from Bradley Field to Goose Bay (where it was delayed for some days for an engine change)-Thule, Greenland-Shannon-Rome-Asmara, where Air Djibouti was based. The company continued in business until 1952, when it was closed down due to operating rights difficulties. C-46 N68964 was noted passing through Shannon in late 1952 in full Air Djibouti colour scheme. It was subsequently returned off lease by Transocean to the US Government and sold by them elsewhere.

When Air Djibouti was closed down, Transocean transferred its business to Air Jordan, another company it supported, and supplied this company with C-46s N68966 and N68967. On 29th August 1953 N68966 is recorded in the Shanwick Diaries as departing Shannon for Keflavik on its way back home, and it too was then returned off lease back to the US government. Interestingly, it was later sold to Capitol Airways who flew it for many years, including on Lufthansa freight schedules around Europe. On its way home from that deployment in November 1966 it was wrecked on take off from Keflavik, the wreck lingering on the dump at Keflavik for many years.

Martin 202

The Shanwick diaries on 4th July 1951 record Martin 202 N93041 of Transocean en route from Keflavik to Shannon, estimated time of arrival 0441, morse radio call WHLTH. It was flown on that occasion by the airline's founder Orvis Nelson and was en route to the Middle East for an inspection of Transocean's operations there, including Air Djibouti. This aircraft had been purchased by Transocean from Northwest, and was later operated by Transocean on behalf of Japan Airlines.

Douglas DC-4

Transocean built up a formidable DC-4 fleet in the early post war years, which was used on services over the Pacific, to Central and South American and across the Atlantic to Europe and the Middle East. A major source of business in the post war years in Europe was flying emigrants from the Old World to the New and Transocean was heavily involved. The first mention of Transocean in the newspapers is for 12th August 1947 when one of its DC-4s came through Shannon carrying 40 emigrants to Canada, but had to turn back thirty minutes after departure due to an electrical fault and divert to Prestwick, as Shannon was then fog bound. By October 1947 Transocean had 14 DC-4s engaged in emigrant flights.

In March 1949 Orvis Nelson commanded a Transocean DC-4 which undertook a round-the-world flight, routing Oakland-Bradley Field-Gander-Shannon-Frankfurt-Rome-Damascus-Karachi-Calcutta-Hong Kong-Okinawa-Tokyo-Guam-Wake Island-Honolulu-Oakland.

Emigrant flights continued into 1949, including the transport of large numbers of Italians emigrating to Venezuela. One of these flights, on 14th August 1949, ended in tragedy. The DC-4 N79998 (morse radio call KHHZU) with 49 passengers on board had departed from Rome en route to Shannon, intending to fly onwards to Gander and then Caracas. Due to poor navigation technique and some bad luck, the flight ended up off course and flew out over the Atlantic, not realizing that it had flown past Shannon. When the error was eventually realized, the DC-4 turned back towards Shannon but ran out of fuel and came down in the Atlantic a few miles off the Clare coast. Although most were rescued, sadly a few of the passengers perished.

Morse communication was in use at that time, as voice would not be widely used until 1952. The Shanwick diaries record a Transocean DC-4 WHJHU Shannon to Keflavik on 17th August 1949 and WHJGY Shannon to Paris on 20th August '49, which was carrying the remains of those passengers who had lost their lives in the crash off the Irish coast. KHVQJ was another Transocean DC-4 on 25th August 1949, from Shannon to Copenhagen, although it is identified as N79994.

Saudi Arabian was one of the airlines which Transocean assisted during the 1950s, including supplying five DC-4s to the airline. The former Transocean aircraft were painted and overhauled at Oakland before being flown to Saudi Arabia on delivery through Shannon. Clearance was given for the five aircraft to pass through Shannon between 12 June and 20 July 1952, the aircraft in question being HZAAF, G, H and I and SA-R-4, which was for operation on behalf of the Saudi Royal Family and even had a throne installed for the use of King Ibn Saud. It was used by the king to travel between his winter palace at Riyadh and his summer palace at Taif, five hundred miles away. Following disposal by Saudi years later, this became 00-FAI of Fairey Freight and was an occasional visitor to Dublin hauling meat, somewhat of a comedown from its royal duties. Another Transocean DC-4 noted passing through Shannon during 1952 on the company's own flights was N226A, which years later would become EI-AOR of Aer Turas.

Starting in 1954 Transocean received a large contract to fly Rhesus monkeys to the United States where they were used for medical research. These were flown across the Pacific from Manila and also from New Delhi in India through Europe and Shannon and across the Atlantic. In addition Transocean flew general passenger and freight charters over the Atlantic with its DC-4s, including MATS flights with USAF personnel and their dependents. DC-4s noted passing airborne from Shannon at 0103 hours en route to Gander with 76 souls on board.

Another airline supported by Transocean was Iranian, with DC-4 EP-ADK over the ocean on 25th January 1955 en route Gander to Shannon on delivery to Iranair. It appears that this aircraft had to return to Bradley Field for further work as it was again over the ocean from Gander to Shannon less than two months later, on 19th March 1955. On 26th August 1957 N30045 routed from Windsor Locks direct to Shannon, which may also have been a delivery flight, as it became EP-ADZ of Iranair shortly thereafter.

Lufthansa was another airline assisted by Transocean. As well as supplying navigators to the German airline for its Super Constellation aircraft, Transocean also agreed to operate Lufthansa's transatlantic cargo services. Two DC-4s were allocated to this contract, N30042 and N9864F, both of which were painted in full Lufthansa colour scheme but they remained American registered and flown by Transocean crews. Starting in December 1957, flight DLH 040 westbound and DLH 041 eastbound flew across the Atlantic twice weekly, routing Frankfurt-Manchester-Shannon-Gander-New York and return. This operation continued until March 1959 when the DC4s were replaced by Transocean L1049 Super Constellation N 1880, which was also painted in full Lufthansa scheme and delivered New York to Shannon on 5th March 1959. It was in use until November 1959, when the contract was taken over by Flying Tiger Line for a few months until Lufthansa started to operate their own cargo services with two of their own Starliners, which had been converted to freighters.

L749 Constellations

By the late 1950s, the DC-4s had become somewhat antiquated for transatlantic passenger work, so Transocean acquired four Lockheed L749 Constellations in early 1958 for its passenger charters. Mostly these were used on the Atlantic, although the Connie saw some service over the Pacific as well. There is no record of N9812F in the Shanwick diaries, so perhaps it was deployed to the Pacific. The other three, N9813F, N9816F and N9830F, are mentioned frequently throughout 1958 and into 1959, always routing Gander to Shannon and return. These Connies were used on passenger charters to London and Prestwick and also on MATS charters to Frankfurt, via Shannon.

Convair 240

Transocean, through its associate, the Babb Company, acquired two former LAI of Italy Convair 240s, which were registered N9845F and N9846F, and which were supplied to Air Jordan. N9846F is noted in the Shanwick diaries routing Keflavik to Shannon on 11th June 1958.

Douglas DC-3

Although not owned by or registered to Transocean, the company was employed to prepare and deliver a DC-3 to the Thai Government. The aircraft was N200KC, formerly operated by Kimberley Clark as an executive aircraft. It is noted in the Shanwick diaries en route Gander to Shannon on 24th August 1958, ferried by a TALOA crew, headed for Thailand.

Boeing Stratocruisers

Transocean acquired 14 former BOAC Stratocruisers, four of which were put into service over the Atlantic for the summer of 1958. These four were N401 Q, N402Q, N403Q and N404Q. Of these, N404Q operated a New York-Dublin-Gatwick service on 13th June, returning to New York via Shannon the following day. N403Q routed from Prestwick to Shannon on the morning of 31st July 1959. Flights continued until the end of September 1959 with N404Q concluding the programme on 30th September '59 with the operation of a Gatwick-Shannon-New York service. Sadly, the cost of operating then Stratocruisers proved prohibitive and led to the bankruptcy of Transocean in 1960.