

How the Cannonball Route got its name

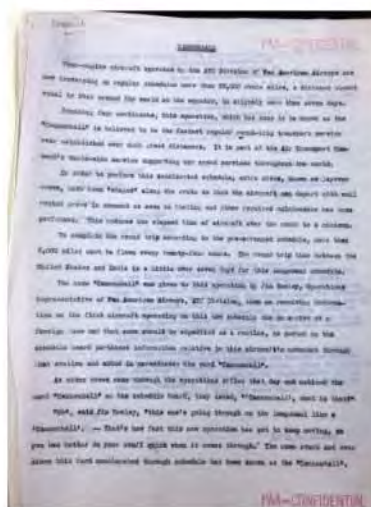
By Ken Lawrence

In the fall of 1942 the United States War Department contracted with Pan American Airways to operate an air transport service flying long-range four-engine Douglas C-54 Skymaster transport airplanes from Miami to Karachi. The new service, which carried passengers, cargo, and mail, eventually extended to Calcutta and over the Himalayan "Hump" to China, the longest, fastest, and most important air transport route in the world.

It was called the Cannonball Route. For more than a year Cannonball operated in secret, but in February 1944 War Department censors relaxed their restrictions and allowed Pan Am's publicists to release information about Cannonball to the news media. In order to prepare a release, Pan Am's vice president Franklin Gledhill requested information on the origin of the name from managers who operated the route.

He got two conflicting reports, which today can be consulted in the Africa-Orient file in the Pan Am archive at the University of Miami Richter Library.

The first is attached to a March 3, 1944, "CANNONBALL" memorandum from Humphrey W. Toomey, manager of Pan American Airways' Africa-Orient Division, to Vice President Franklin Gledhill.



Here is a cropped enlargement of the section in which Toomey wrote that the name originated with Jim Howley, Operations Representative of Pan Am's Air Transport Command Division, in anticipation of "the first flight aircraft operating on this new schedule due to arrive at a foreign destination." That would have been in November 1942.

The name "Cannonball" was given to this operation by Jim Howley, Operations Representative of Pan American Airways, ATC Division, when on receiving information on the first aircraft operating on this new schedule due to arrive at a foreign base and that same should be expedited as a routine, he posted on the schedule board pertinent information relative to this aircraft's movement through that station and added in parentheses the word "Cannonball".

As other crews came through the operations office that day and noticed the word "Cannonball" on the schedule board, they asked, "Cannonball, what is that?"

"Oh", said Jim Howley, "this one's going through on the long-haul like a Cannonball". -- That's how fast this new operation has got to keep moving, so you had better do your stuff quick when it comes through." The name stuck and ever since this fast accelerated through schedule has been known as the "Cannonball".

A later memorandum in the same file proposed a different origin of the name. On April 14, 1944, R. D. Parmley, Pan Am's airport briefer at Natal, sent this memorandum to Pan Am's Africa-Orient operations manager at Miami for submission to Gledhill and the company's public relations director:



Here is a cropped view of the pertinent passage:

An investigation reveals that the title "Cannonball" for our Karachi schedule originated in a telephone conversation between the Operations and Maintenance departments at Natal. When the first P-1k schedule called in its ETA Natal, Mr. Sammons who was on duty in the Operations department relayed the information to the Maintenance office. In the conversation Mr. Sammons and Mr. Tom Stewart, Maintenance Representative, were joking about our first high speed schedule being late. Sammons referred to it as the super-duper and Stewart answering, "You mean that cannonball didn't explode."

Later in making up the schedule for that day Mr. Sammons, needing some designation to distinguish the Karachi service and its crews from the regular shuttle operations, dubbed the crews the "Cannonball Crews". The name caught the imagination of all and the title "Cannonball" spread via the grape-vine and became the popular name not only at Natal but every where.

This one attributed the name to a telephone conversation between managers of the Operations and Maintenance departments at Natal, Brazil. In their conversation, as they joked about the first high speed schedule, one referred to it as "super-duper" and the other answered, "You mean that cannonball didn't explode."

Later that day, needing a name to distinguish the Karachi service and its crews from the regular shuttle operations, the operations manager dubbed the ground staff assigned to these aircraft "Cannonball Crews," a name that stuck and spread.

Regardless of which version is true, and both of them might be, it is clear that the name Cannonball was applied from the beginning of the service.

The file that contained these memoranda also included the March 4, 1944, *New York Daily News* clipping that publicized the Cannonball route for the first time (see image of clippings on following page)..

Additional References: An article titled "Humphrey Wallace Toomey" at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum website states, "During WWII he managed the Military Contract Division of PanAm, known as the 'Cannonball' service, which carried supplies to all theaters of war via Brazil." An obituary for Franklin Gledhill appeared in the January 3, 1975, *New York Times*.

CANNONBALL: BURMA SECRET WEAPON



(NEWS map by Staff Artist Speed)

Map shows route of the Cannonball Express air service supplying Gen. Stilwell's jungle fighters.

Washington, D. C.—Seven days round trip from the U. S. to northern India to rush supplies to Gen. Joseph Stilwell's



Douglas C-54 transport plane.

jungle fighters in Burma. That's the new Cannonball Express record hung up by Pan American Airways operating under contract for the Air Transport Command. The Cannonball has crossed the Atlantic 2,200 times and has logged more than 14,500,000 miles of flying for the

Army since November, 1942. The four-engined craft operate on split-second schedules regardless of weather and make the 24,000-mile round trip in 180 hours. Cannonball picks up tungsten, mica and other high-priority metals for return trip to U. S. Removal of 60 to 100 pounds of paint gives big planes five miles an hour more speed. Five relay crews are used in each direction of round trip. Over 100 crews keep the Cannonball going.