Development of Transpacific Airmail Routes by the Naval Air Transport Service

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Abstract

The proposed paper will document the development by the U.S. Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) of transpacific and coastal Alaska transport routes, and accompanying airmail service, during WW-II. The evolution of transport routes will be placed in the context of prosecution of the war. Route maps will be included along with representative examples of airmail carried on each route.

Subject Importance

Prompt delivery of mail was considered critical to maintain the morale of personnel serving overseas during WW-II, and carriage of airmail by the transport services was given high priority. The large number of personnel serving in the Pacific theater combined with the granting of the 6-cents per ½ ounce airmail rate led to huge increases in demand, with airmail volumes far surpassing pre-war levels.

Importance of the Publication

The topic of WW-II transpacific airmail has been only incompletely documented. Naval covers are plentiful, and the history of the NATS is well documented, but the routes and their evolution are not well known. The proposed paper will be based in large part on unpublished, detailed yearly summaries of NATS wartime transpacific operations. It will be the first to tell the complete story of the Navy’s efforts to carry transpacific airmail.

Background

Immediately after the entry of the United States into WW-II, both the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy organized air transport services to carry critical war materials and personnel, and airmail, in the Pacific theater of operations.

The Naval Air Transport Service (NATS) was authorized two days after the Pearl Harbor attack. NATS contracted with Pan American Airways to provide services in the Pacific and to help train Navy transport personnel. NATS incorporated several of Pan Am’s former aircraft and personnel into their network. NATS conducted a survey from Hawaii to Australia in August-September 1942 and began regular scheduled services from the U.S. west coast to the south Pacific at the end of the year. NATS used seaplanes primarily, including converted navy patrol bombers for long-range flights.

NATS transport routes in large measure paralleled those used by the Army’s Air Transport Command (ATC), which used only landplanes. The initial South Pacific routes of both services followed to a large extent Pan Am’s pre-war FAM-19 route. NATS supported
marine and naval fleet actions in the central, south and southwest Pacific, as well as naval construction personnel working to build airfields and supporting facilities on islands throughout the Pacific.

NATS interfaced with the Marines’ South Pacific Combat Air Transport Command (SCAT), which provided transport and airmail service to forward areas (initially Guadalcanal), and increasingly with the ATC. As the war progressed, the fighting moved northwards from the southwest to the central Pacific, and as the result NATS routes shifted accordingly, with the Royal New Zealand Air Force replacing some of the NATS south Pacific routes by war’s end.