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"They Also Serve"

MIAMI WAS CROSSROADS CITY
OF THE AIR DURING WORLD WAR II

By WAYNE BEVIS

It’s a long way from Ascension Island to Asuncion, Paraguay, but Caracas and Curacao are next-door neighbors, by air. Just don’t confuse Pernambuco and Paramaribo!

They funneled through war-time Miami from these and a thousand other exotic places, touching down at Dinner Key seaplane base or 36th Street Airport and taking off again for Washington, Detroit, or Hometown, U.S.A. Men, women and children; governors, generals and G.I.s; monarchs and missionaries; war-weary flyers and world-weary floozies. Some intent on great or tragic missions, others
trying to bribe or browbeat their way on sordid errands.

As an airline employee handling international transfers, I was in the fascinating, exasperating thick of it all. Half of Captain Eddie's "Great Silver Fleet" and much of Eastern's manpower was serving Uncle Sam, but a little “plus” in age and a slight "minus" in physical rating put me among those who kept the wheels - and props - turning at home. Add some business experience and a knowledge of languages, top it off with a concentrated course in airlines procedures, and you have a passable passenger service representative.

Miami, now an established crossroads city of the air age, was feeling the first full impact of it in 1943. The plush hotels and golf courses of Miami Beach had been taken over by officer candidates' schools, and a detachment from the Russian Navy busily familiarized themselves with lend-lease vessels, among other things. (They were our allies then, remember?)

Military Air Transport pilots pushed their burdened planes to the limit, ferrying precious supplies or key personnel to remote bases and returning from each trip a little grayer and more haggard. The fat twin-engined "Commandos" clawed the soft Miami air night after night, struggling for altitude as we groundlings held our breath and "pushed".

Aviation dominated our lives, and an omnipotent priority system ruled aviation. Carefully administered, too, in spite of all the stories you heard. When orders came through to clear so many seats - perhaps all 21 on a DC-3 - for priority passengers, we had little time or tendency to quibble about it. Off came the non-priority bookings, the newest ones first. Notifying these unfortunates was one of the least--sought-after of airlines chores.

BEVIS VS. DEMPSEY?
When he was program chairman for the Lions Club about 1940, Wayne Bevis promised to "get in the ring" with World's Heavyweight Champion Jack Dempsey. Sure enough, this photograph documents that historic action.
'PRIORITY’ MEANT JUST THAT

Diplomats or officials traveling on priorities, accompanied by wives and sundry relatives without those precious priorities, created some highly explosive situations. The threat of international incidents arose many a time when Senora this or Madame that could not proceed with her distinguished consort. Some families were too genuinely devoted to take separate planes; others seemed to be united only in the unholy bonds of acrimony.

It was permissible to have no more seats on the airplane, or no more train reservations to offer, but patience and resourcefulness must be inexhaustible. We knew every bus and train schedule, every hotel and rooming house, every trick of the trade by the time that winter ended.

It wasn’t all grim, though. The definitions of priorities, for example, showed the wonderful American talent for the lighter touch. The lowest or "DD" class were inevitably "dirty dogs", and you worked through certain less printable categories of "CC" and "BB" priorities to the "AAs" or "awful awfuls". These were the diplomatic couriers and top officials who could "bump" anyone and frequently did.

POOR ORDINARY CIVILIANS

It worked this way. Ordinary civilian passengers might lose their reservations to suppliers traveling "DD") on government
business, who in turn had to yield to pilots returning to base by commercial air ("BB"). Even these lordly indispensables had to wait sometimes when the awful awfuls" were on the wing.

The night shift had its gayer moments, too. When the milling crowds had finally been dispatched, by plane or train or back to their hotels to await another try, the lobby was sure to echo with some sly whimsy on the PA system. One of our counter agents - a good-looking, good-natured girl called "Breezy", was a favorite target for waggish airmen who wanted her to page "Pilot Roger Wilco", or to inquire if there was a Sperry Gyro Pilot in the terminal.

The passing parade through the airports brought us into contact with every imaginable type and temperament. Notables like H. V. Kaltenborn, who has a warm spot in my heart as the most courteous and considerate passenger I ever handled; and a certain opera singer who objected violently to telling her personal poundage. Explanations that the weights of all passengers and baggage were essential to safe loading of the airplane availed nothing. She finally simmered down enough to permit us to weigh lady and luggage together, and enter a total. Of course, she was hardly out of sight before the baggage had been weighed separately and the amount subtracted from that imposing total.
HERE COMES BOB HOPE

We carefully guarded the identity of Queen (then Princess) Juliana, enroute to Canada to live in wartime exile from her beloved Netherlands. At the other end of the scale were refugees from Hitler's hell on earth, travel-stained and with the marks of tragedy upon them, but hopeful and relieved to tread free soil. And for another contrasting facet, we watched Bob Hope and his troupe bounce through, returning home from a swing around our distant bases.

Land-based planes were beginning to supplant the majestic old flying boats on international runs in those days, but the old Sikorsky amphibians still swooped in to Dinner Key regularly. I well remember a certain airlines representative who met their debarking passengers with the stock phrase "Yo arreglo todo" (I'll straighten out everything). He used it all too often, and sometimes got hauled over the coals in assorted languages when Dinner Key passengers found that he couldn't produce seats on the plane or a suite at a hotel.

One of my most pleasant memories is that of a sirloin steak at midnight with Barclay Acheson, director of the foreign-language editions of Readers Digest. I wished for his cosmopolitan savoir-faire the night I helped a Jewish refugee from Poland through customs, using what German we could muster after giving up the effort in English, Spanish and French. The customs inspectors were more than a little skeptical about the
assortment of llama rugs and Peruvian silver, picked up in South America enroute from Europe, but finally waved the old fellow through amidst an aromatic splutter of Yiddish explanations and thanks.

THE PASSING PARADE

On one memorable day, I was assigned to escort a dashing French mama and her two daughters around Miami while awaiting the departure of their flight. (Monsieur le Papa’ had gone through on his “AA” priority.) My nearly-forgotten French was tough going, but their attempts at English were worse. Have you ever tried to explain an American trailer park to three vivacious Frenchwomen? Or a hot-dog stand? Then, too, there was that Dutch nurse - ruddy and solid as an Edam cheese, and just about as receptive to the idea that she must give up her plane seat because someone else had a priority.

A virile Scotsman in authentic kilts spent a while in the lobby one day, cannily oblivious to the attention he was getting from a pair of girdled and gurgling dowagers. Most picturesque of all were two officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Towering six feet three or four, broad of scarlet shoulder and impressively mustachioed, they were truly spectacular in their gaudy uniforms and decorations. As a final touch, each of them carried a sort of riding crop or baton, which surely concealed some lethal weapon.

Sometimes, even in this type of assignment, you took your work home with you; and my family soon learned to expect the unexpected. There was the stranded Chinese student - a pleasant young man who was held over in Miami enroute to Washington. He spoke English and Spanish in addition to his native tongue, but a dozen languages couldn't have gotten him a room that crowded February night. Even the davenport was occupied in our little apartment, so I took a pillow and a blanket and made him as comfortable as possible in the backseat of my indispensable car.

Next morning we found our guest had departed as unobtrusively as he came into our lives, leaving the blanket neatly folded and topped with a note of thanks in flawless English.

Perhaps my most embarrassing moment came in helping a coffee-colored 'teen-age girl, enroute from Puerto Rico to New York to join relatives after the death of her only remaining parent. Utterly untaught in our language and color distinctions, racked with grief and fear in her separation from all things familiar, she had worn out our star expediter in two hectic days. A seat on the early New York plane had finally been "pulled out of the hat", and I was to see that she got aboard. By the dawn's first light I rose, got out that essential car, and called at one of Miami's hotels (more cosmopolitan than exclusive) where we had found a room for her. As we emerged, complete with bell-hop and baggage, the inevitable happened. An old family friend - a Navy officer - drove by, gave me a feeble wave and a long, searching look.

In retrospect, that winter season was a memorable experience. Time has dulled the image of the swaggering, self-centered ones in that hodgepodge of humanity; the sound of their clamor and boasting. But I shall not forget the tranquil little woman with stars in her eyes, back home between four-year terms at a mission school in equatorial Africa. Better than all the striding generals and scurrying diplomats, she knew whom she served and where her duty lay.