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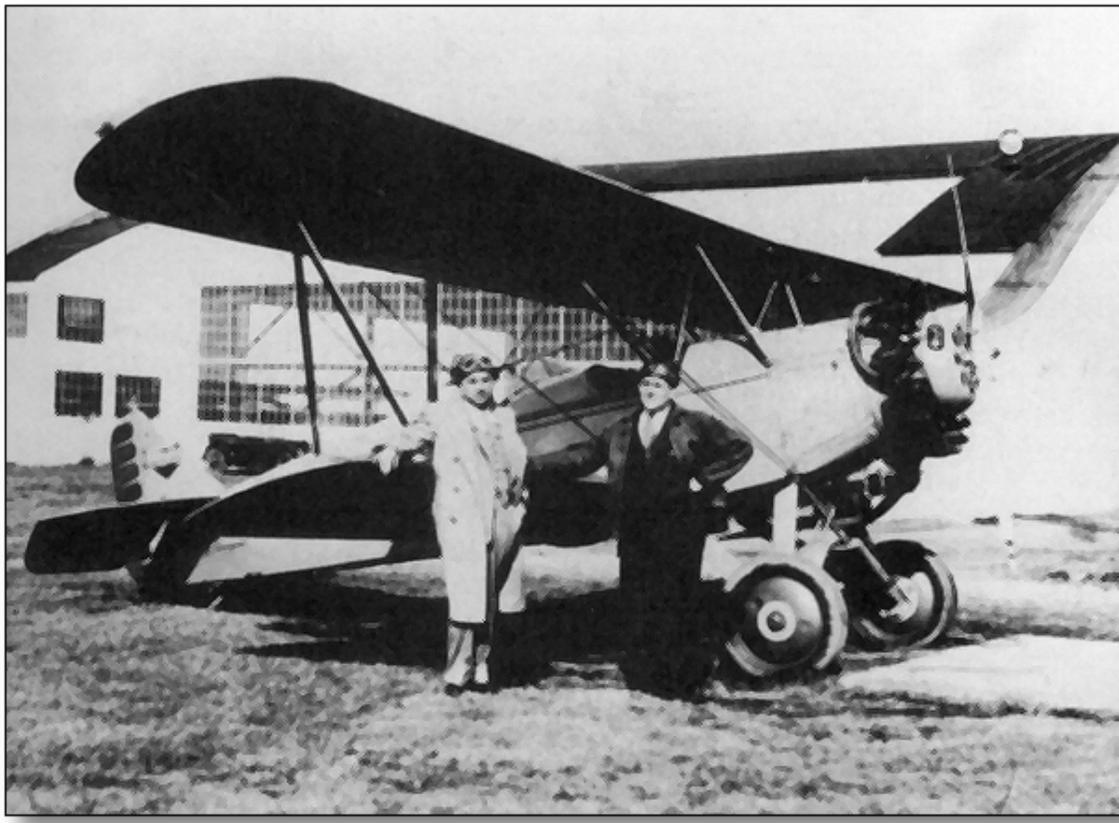
THE BIRTH OF NATIONAL AIRLINES: THE ST. PETERSBURG YEARS, 1934-1939

by Thomas Reilly

Florida has been a breeding ground for commercial aviation ever since Colonel John H. Sherburne proposed the use of balloons during the Second Seminole War in 1840. The redoubtable Lincoln Beachey was the first man to fly a heavier-than-air aircraft in Florida when he made a five-minute flight at Orlando's Orange County Fair in February 1910. Four years later the world's first scheduled, passenger airline was inaugurated when on January 1, 1914, Antony Habersack Jannus piloted a two-passenger Benoist flying boat twenty-three miles across Tampa Bay from St. Petersburg to Tampa. The St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line lasted only three months, but it carried over 1,200 passengers and logged 8,000 air miles.¹

Twenty years later, another airline went into service in St. Petersburg. On October 15, 1934, National Airlines System began operating from St. Petersburg's Albert Whitted Air Field. The company's first route covered a distance of 142 miles from St. Petersburg to Daytona Beach with stops at Tampa, Lakeland and Orlando. Three days after National's first flight, the company's founder – George T. (Ted) Baker of Chicago – was asked why he had decided on St. Petersburg as his headquarters. Baker said, "I didn't establish headquarters here simply by chance, but I did come here after months of careful map study had convinced me that St. Petersburg was one of the best transcontinental airports in the entire United States."² That statement was a fine example of early public relations, but it was not reality. Baker had settled in St. Petersburg because he had successfully bid on three air mail routes, one of which was Air Mail Route number 31 from St. Petersburg to Daytona Beach. The two others were from Cleveland, Ohio, to Nashville, Tennessee, and the Chicago-Twin Cities-Pembina route. St. Petersburg's Albert Whitted Field was little more than a cow pasture with a runway composed of sod and ground-up clam shells. When it rained, the field became a sea of mud.³

Despite these modest beginnings, Baker immediately sought to extend the St. Petersburg-to-Daytona Beach route by adding Jacksonville. This was initially disapproved by the superintendent of the air mail division of the U. S. Post Office, who ruled that extension of the line would "practically parallel" a line already in existence. At Daytona Beach, the mail carried by National Airlines had to be transferred to north- and south-bound flights operated by Eastern Air Lines. Never dissuaded by governmental pronouncements that would limit his company's growth, Baker announced on October 18, 1934, that regular service would begin between St. Petersburg and Jacksonville within three weeks.⁴ Just prior to his inaugural flight on October 15, Baker had already promised that "as quickly as we prove our ability to maintain our schedule, I plan to apply for additional routes which will expand our service. And, as our contracts are extended, we will purchase larger aircraft from funds already on hand."⁵ Baker was a visionary and saw a need for airline shuttle service long before the well known Eastern or Delta shuttles. In November, Baker talked about hourly service between St. Petersburg and Tampa, planning to use Tampa's Davis Island Field which was under construction and just about completed. The proposed ten-minute shuttle service across Tampa Bay never came about, but it provides an example of Baker's far-sightedness.



George T. Baker (right) and E. J. Kershaw, one of National Airline's first pilots, posing with a Rutler "Blackhawk."

Eastern Air Lines was indirectly responsible for National's entrance into Jacksonville. After a utility company had strung either telephone or electric wires at the end of the Daytona Beach Municipal Airport and failed to inform Eastern Air Lines, an Eastern Air Lines DC-2 aircraft ran into the newly installed wires at night and crashed. The airport was temporarily shut down while repairs took place. Eastern immediately contacted the United States Post Office Department and requested a suspension of service at Daytona Beach, which was granted. The disruption of service at Daytona Beach was a potential financial disaster for National, as well as the expeditious handling of mail from St. Petersburg and Tampa. Baker realized this and protested, stating that National should at least receive temporary authority to carry mail and passengers to Jacksonville to connect with Eastern's north and south service. Baker argued that by not allowing National to fly the mail from Daytona Beach to Jacksonville, St. Petersburg and Tampa would suffer a major economic hardship. Eddie Rickenbacker, the owner of Eastern, protested in vain, and National was awarded temporary operating authority into Jacksonville. At first, National had no office at the Jacksonville Municipal Airport. The company's part-time employee was George McColeman, nicknamed "Sweetpea." McColeman wore dirty, white coveralls emblazoned with the legend "Jacksonville Municipal Airport" in red letters on the back. He met the aircraft, refueled it and did minor maintenance. He also sold tickets, collected fares and handed the money over to the pilots. During the negotiations with the Post Office and the besting of Rickenbacker by Baker, the relationship between the two airline executives worsened. It is

claimed that Rickenbacker stated that Baker and the people at National were nothing but pirates. Instead of taking Rickenbacker's epithet as an insult, Baker wore it as a compliment. Days later, National's aircraft were sporting a new logo – "The Buccaneer Route."

The Post Office Department finally approved National's temporary award of St. Petersburg-to-Jacksonville service. Beginning November 19, 1934, flights departed each afternoon from St. Petersburg at 3 p.m. with stops at Tampa, Lakeland, Orlando and Daytona Beach. After the 6 p.m. arrival in Jacksonville, the mail was transferred to an Eastern Air Lines' flight destined for Newark, New Jersey, where it arrived at 3:40 a.m. the next day. The return flight from Jacksonville departed at 5 a.m. and arrived in St. Petersburg at 8:15 a.m. The speed of the new air mail service between New York and St. Petersburg was quickly realized when an unofficial record of less than ten hours was set. John Green of New York mailed a letter late on Tuesday, November 20. The letter left Newark Airport on an Eastern Air Lines flight at 10:40 that evening and arrived in Jacksonville at 4:17 the next morning. The mail was transferred to National's flight at 5 o'clock and arrived in St. Petersburg at 8:15 a.m. With the new route came government inspection of National's equipment by a transport inspector from the U.S. Department of Commerce, who spent a week at Albert Whitted Field, ensuring that National's equipment was airworthy.⁶

By the end of December, Baker had petitioned the Department of Commerce for authorization to begin a schedule of two planes a day between St. Petersburg and Jacksonville. He argued that the expansion of service was necessary because of the increased demand. Each trip was now averaging one hundred pounds of mail compared to an average of only thirty to forty pounds during the start-up period. Baker had proposed a night flight out of St. Petersburg, but the idea had not met with acceptance because the Department of Commerce considered Albert Whitted Field unfit for night flying. The airport lacked adequate lighting, its runways were too short and a large blimp hangar on the field was considered a hazard. Nevertheless, Baker pressed forward in hopes that the government would reconsider. Anticipating a change of thought, National Airlines tested a ten-passenger trimotor Stinson airplane between Jacksonville and St. Petersburg. In an uncharacteristic display of goodwill, Eastern Air Lines loaned National one of its Stinsons on February 15, 1935, for the round-trip test flight from Jacksonville to St. Petersburg.

To understand how National Airlines System became an air mail carrier, it is necessary to look back at what had happened to American aviation in 1934. In February, President Franklin Roosevelt canceled all existing civilian air mail contracts. Roosevelt and Postmaster James A. Farley believed such drastic action was imperative because of charges that Walter Folger Brown, the previous postmaster, had engaged in collusion with large airlines, a few of which had allegedly gained unfair advantages. There were also charges of government overpayments to air mail contractors. At the time President Roosevelt revoked all air mail contracts, there were 27,062 air mail miles in the system. On February 19, 1934, the United States Army Air Corps began flying the mail over a reduced system of only 11,106 route miles. Military pilots shortly proved that they were not up to the task. Within one week, five air corps pilots had died in crashes, and six others were injured. By the time the United States government went back to the civilian system of contract air mail, twelve air corps pilots had died, and there were sixty-six forced landings. On March 30, the Post Office Department solicited bids on new air mail contracts, and the unsuccessful experiment by the Army Air Corps was replaced by a new

contract air mail system by May 31, 1934. Thirty-two new routes were granted, and the one awarded to National Airlines System was the shortest in mileage, but not in importance, at least not for the citizens of the west coast of Florida. When the civilian air mail routes had been suspended by Roosevelt in February, a route out of St. Petersburg had not been replaced by military fliers. Inauguration of the route by Baker once again provided air mail service to St. Petersburg and Tampa after an eight-month interruption. On October 9, St. Petersburg's postmaster announced the resumption of air mail service. With the flights scheduled to depart St. Petersburg at 7:08 a.m., air mail letters had to be at the post office no later than 6:45 a.m. Mail leaving St. Petersburg at 7:08 a.m. arrived the same day in Charleston at 1:04 p.m., in Washington at 6:24 p.m. and in New York at 8:30 p.m. By contrast, the Atlantic Coast Line's railroad connection between St. Petersburg and New York took twenty-eight hours.⁷

Ted Baker's flying background in Chicago was unusual, but it served him well in Florida. During the early 1930s, while Prohibition was still the law of the land, his National Air Taxi System had done a thriving business in Chicago, transporting thirsty customers to Canada, where alcohol was legal, available and inexpensive. The repeal of the Volstead Act led to a sharp decline in Baker's fortune, and he looked elsewhere for new opportunities for his small fleet of three aircraft, which included two second-hand Ryan monoplanes each capable of carrying four or five passengers. The Ryan aircraft, powered by a 450-horsepower Wasp engine, was similar to the *Spirit of St. Louis* used by Charles Lindbergh in his solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. Baker also owned a Butler Blackhawk biplane, but it was unsuitable for passenger service and was sold before he moved his operation to St. Petersburg.⁸

Following receipt of the United States government's contract air mail route, National Airlines had a great deal to accomplish before it could commence service from St. Petersburg to Daytona Beach. Charlie Banks and Horton Hale ferried one of the tiny Ryan monoplanes south from Chicago, and Ted Baker and Russell Mossman flew the other Ryan airplane to St. Petersburg. While making a refueling stop at Ocala, Banks and Hale picked up a young woman hitchhiker. When they arrived in St. Petersburg, they circled Albert Whitted Field but did not land. They saw the coast guard installation adjacent to the field and believed it to be a military field, so they proceeded to the old Grand Central Terminal at Weedon Island and landed. Then they were informed that the field they had overflowed was, in fact, Albert Whitted. Mossman had only recently been hired by Baker, not only because of his flying skills, but also because he was owner of an inventory of spare parts. Once the aircraft were in St. Petersburg, Baker's small crew went to work, overhauling engines and getting ready for business. Fuselages were repainted, and the company formerly known as National Air Taxi System became National Airlines System. The fuselages were painted dark blue, and the wings were a vivid red. Baker set up his corporate headquarters in the St. Petersburg Times Building. At Albert Whitted Field, National had a shop and a small office. National's original employee roster encompassed three pilots, two stenographers and an expert mechanic.⁹

On the morning of October 15, 1934, airplane number seven was rolled out of the hangar. It was about to begin the 142-mile trip from St. Petersburg to Daytona Beach. Pete Hubert, a jack-of-all-trades, filled the Ryan with 105 gallons of gas and seven gallons of oil.¹⁰ Hubert, Baker and the others shared the ground chores equally. All did everything and anything necessary to get the flight off. One man served several functions – “mechanic, cleaner, ramp



National Airline's original fleet of three Ryan airplanes parked at St. Petersburg's Albert Whitted Airport in 1934.

agent, cargo agent, baggage man, gas and oil man, weather observer and any other jobs.”¹¹ Safety precautions were minimal. The single engine was checked; the propeller was turned through by hand. The pilot received his weather report, and then checked the runway for cows. It was comparable to an aerial Pony Express. Since the United States mail was being carried, pilots were required to carry firearms. Air traffic control amounted to little more than visually checking the skies for other airplanes. Radio equipment was rudimentary and useless for anything but short distances, so the low-frequency transmitter and receiver could only be used within a sixty-mile range of the St. Petersburg headquarters. Moreover, radio transmissions were full of static, especially in the summer. A month after National initiated service, Baker had the Postal Telegraph Company install Teletype machines at each city served to keep in touch with weather reports along the entire route of the system. Later, they used the Teletype to track passenger reservations. Russell Mossman piloted the first trip to Daytona Beach. Ted Baker, Horton Hale and G.Q. Caldwell, a federal air line inspector for the Department of Commerce, accompanied Mossman on the round-trip. Mossman remained in St. Petersburg for less than two weeks, and then he sold his inventory of spare parts to Baker and left town.

In spite of the early hour, nearly 200 people turned out in Tampa to witness the arrival and departure of National's first flight. Celebrants included Tampa's mayor, postmaster and Congressman. The opening of the new air mail route also represented improved service for the southwest communities of Sarasota, Manatee and Bradenton because an automobile carried their

mail north to Tampa for connection with National's service. As much as people welcomed the new service, many residents complained about the flights being too early in the morning.

Following the inaugural round-trip flight, Baker reported that his airline had made all of the stops on time and that it had connected with Eastern Air Lines at Daytona Beach without any problems. The first day's total cargo was 140 pounds of mail. Ninety pounds had been carried from St. Petersburg to Daytona Beach, and fifty pounds was unloaded for the return trip from Daytona Beach to St. Petersburg.¹²

National Airlines System operated initially without carrying any passengers. According to one story, on the sixth day of the service, which was a Saturday, a young woman showed up at the hangar, needing to travel to Daytona Beach. Baker wrote a ticket and handed it to his first passenger. She took the ticket and gave Baker a hundred dollar bill, but he did not have change for the fare of \$10.60. The flight was delayed, and a newly hired employee, Dave Amos, was ordered into St. Petersburg to break the hundred dollar bill. However, banks were closed, and none of the city's merchants had change. Baker had his employee fly with the passenger to Daytona Beach with orders not to return until he got the bill changed and collected the fare. Amos returned Monday, with the fare. This story may be nothing more than fiction, because there are claims that National did not even inaugurate its first passenger service to Daytona Beach until December 1934, and this definitely seems to be the case. The *Tampa Morning Tribune* reported at the time of National's first flight that passengers would not be carried during the first thirty days of operation in accordance with government regulations. (It had earlier been reported that passenger service would not commence until November 1.) Baker originally did little advertising other than by word of mouth. The first print advertisement appeared in local St. Petersburg newspapers on February 27, 1935, and it was nothing more than a one-by-two-inch insert on page three stating, "Passengers-Mail-Express, National Air Line System, Municipal Airport – Phone 42-775." After six months of operation, National had carried only 193 passengers.¹³

Baker and his small crew struggled to keep the airline flying. Frequently, they had to pool their meager personal resources to buy fuel for the next flight. Baker barnstormed over the city of St. Petersburg to earn extra money. Dave Amos of St. Petersburg recalled, "To earn money in those days when passengers were few and far between, we'd barnstorm on Sundays. We'd set one of the Ryans aside and get rolls of tickets from a theater supply house, and we'd sell tickets for a couple of dollars apiece to take people up. We'd just circle around the city and the bay and get 'em back as quick as possible so we could sell more tickets. We did all right until Clarence Chamberlain came along and tore out the inside of his plane so he could carry a whole bunch at once, and he took people up for 75 cents."¹⁴

Mail was the fledgling airline's lifeblood. An air-mail, special-delivery stamp was a guarantee from the United States government that any letter carrying such a stamp was to be rushed through on the fastest schedule possible in the mail routings of the nation. National Airlines quickly proved that it was more than capable of fulfilling the government's guarantee. On Friday, October 19, 1934, Mrs. Allan Burke of St. Petersburg received a letter at one p.m. that had been mailed from New York City at noon the previous day.¹⁵

Only six months after the airline's inauguration, Baker's original declaration that St. Petersburg offered "one of the best transcontinental airports in the entire United States" had given way to threats to abandon the city. In a letter to Carleton F. Sharpe, city manager of St. Petersburg, Baker wrote: "The department of commerce is insisting that my company be given adequate hangar space for the proper maintenance of our equipment. The department also insists that runways be lengthened and floodlights must be installed for night flying. If the city does not comply with the requests, my company will be compelled to move to Tampa." In the same letter, Baker also alluded to the possibility of a move to Jacksonville.¹⁶ Baker's concerns were legitimate. The runways were too short, unpaved and narrow. The large blimp hangar also presented a very real navigational concern, but the biggest problem was the lack of airport lighting which precluded National from night flying. This probably explained why one-third to one-half of all air mail letters directed into and out of St. Petersburg were being transported by train instead of air.

One year following the inauguration of National's first flight at St. Petersburg, Baker found himself at odds with the United States Postmaster, the Department of Commerce and the city of St. Petersburg. In September 1935, five months after Baker had received an increase in mail rates, Postmaster General Farley ordered an investigation of the rates on Baker's line, complaining that they were too high. Then the Department of Commerce threatened to take air mail service away from St. Petersburg because Baker had been ordered to begin night flights but could not comply because Albert Whitted Field was unlighted and too small. Although the city of St. Petersburg agreed that the airport needed lighting and runway expansion, it wanted federal money to do the work. Before Baker departed for a trip to Washington to meet with commerce officials, he blasted the city's leaders. "Personally I am through talking, but if the city is more interested in putting dresses on statuary and in closing the beer parlors at 9 o'clock than in keeping the air line here – well that's a question for its own decision," declared Baker. The owner of National Airlines managed to fend off both government agencies, but his love affair with the city of St. Petersburg was fast coming to an end.

In its first full year, National Airlines System carried only 500 passengers and earned less than \$5,000 in revenues. Financially, the airline struggled. At the end of 1934, the company's assets were only \$16,000, with less than \$900 in cash. The original air mail contract guaranteed the equivalent of 300 pounds of mail at seventeen cents per pound, for a government subsidy of \$51 a day. Money was so tight that National had trouble paying its bills. During the early days of the operation, when Gulf Oil Corporation delivered fifty gallons of oil to the hangar at St. Petersburg, it informed Baker that National was on a C.O.D. basis. Baker always blamed Eddie Rickenbacker of Eastern Air Lines for Gulf Oil's actions, but in reality, the decision was probably due to the fact that National had little money and was very slow in paying its bills.¹⁷

Operationally, the going was not much smoother. Horton Hale landed one of the Ryans on the back of a cow near Orlando. The next day, Ed Kershaw, in the other Ryan, lost part of a propeller blade near Daytona Beach and was forced to make an emergency landing on St. Augustine Beach. Three days' subsidy was lost while the aircraft was repaired. Charlie Banks and Dave Amos traveled by car from St. Petersburg to St. Augustine to find that what they thought would be a quick and easy repair turned out to be a major overhaul. A motor mount was twisted and the engine had shaken loose. In addition, fabric on the trailing edge of the wing

needed repair. To Dave Amos went the job of sleeping on St. Augustine Beach with the disabled Ryan. Banks travelled to Daytona Beach, where the company's only spare engine was located. The Ryan was towed from the beach to the highway, and the nearest gas station was used as an impromptu repair station. Once the new motor was hung on the Ryan, the aircraft was still not considered airworthy because National had a rule that a new engine needed to run for ten hours on the ground and then operated for two additional hours in the air before it could carry passengers. Shortly after the plane resumed service, Kershaw took off from St. Petersburg with two male passengers who got into a fist fight. Kershaw landed in a field near Orlando and pushed the men out of the monoplane. On the ground, the fight continued, and one of the men shoved the other into the aircraft, driving him through the fabric-covered fuselage. Flights again had to be temporarily cancelled.¹⁸

Horton Hale, National's chief pilot, made front-page headlines when he reported sighting a sea monster in the Atlantic Ocean. Flying along the coast at an altitude of 500 feet about fifteen miles south of St. Augustine, Hale sighted the monster, which he described as "black and as large as an ordinary elephant." Hale decreased altitude and circled for a better view. He claimed that the animal was frightened by the aircraft's engine and swam 500 feet off shore, never to be sighted again.¹⁹

Erwin J. Kershaw, who had worked for Ted Baker's Chicago-based National Air Taxi System, complained about the weather in Florida. Recalling the early days in Florida, Kershaw later declared: "There was a spirit of adventure then. One engine, no navigational aids, grass runways. And weather – weather you couldn't fly over; weather you couldn't fly around because the distance was too great. So, you either flew real low under it, or barged through it and prayed. But usually you just waited. We took a lot of delays in those days."²⁰

By the second year of operation, Baker and his employees found themselves with more demand for service than they had capacity. The increased demand was a blessing, but brought problems. The two Ryan monoplanes no longer provided enough capacity. In addition, National's limited success also threatened to breed competition. Baker was worried about possible competition by St. Petersburg-based Gulf Airlines, which existed only on paper, but it was owned by Jerome A. Waterman, an executive with the Maas Brothers department store. Waterman had also sought the run from St. Petersburg to Daytona Beach, bidding twenty cents a mile to Baker's seventeen cents. Another possible competitor was Eastern Air Lines, which had previously operated the route.

Because of the increased demand and the threat of competition, Baker realized that he needed to replace the two Ryan aircraft. Even in the fledgling days of the airline industry, advanced technology was at hand to solve the problem. In this case, the remedy took the form of two eight-passenger Stinson SM-6000 trimotor airplanes that became part of the fleet in 1935. National lacked its own financial resources, so Baker was forced to borrow money from Harry Parker, owner of the Flash-Tric Sign Company in Chicago. Baker used these funds to buy two second-hand Stinsons. The first was purchased from Licon Airways headquartered in New York, and Baker went there in late March and personally flew the aircraft to St. Petersburg. The flight took ten hours, with refueling stops at Washington, Richmond, Raleigh, Charleston and Jacksonville. On the flight Baker was accompanied by his wife's sister and Albert E. Theis,



George “Ted” Baker (second from right) shown with National's first flight attendant, Charlotte Georgia, next to a 10-passenger Stinson aircraft.

owner of Licon Airways. Within a week, Horton Hale and E.J. Kershaw were examined by a Department of Commerce inspector and found fit to fly the Stinson. The other Stinson came from Western Airlines.²¹

With the arrival of the Stinsons, National also hired its first flight attendant, Charlotte Georgia. She had worked behind the cosmetics counter at the Woolworth store in St. Petersburg's Snell Building at the corner of 4th Street and Central Avenue. The first uniform she wore at National Airlines was made at home by her and her mother. The eight-passenger trimotor Stinsons were fragile machines and their center of gravity was sensitive. Georgia recalled, “When I walked from one end of the plane to the other, the pilot had to adjust the stabilizer. We didn't serve any food, didn't have restrooms. I used to tell passengers where we were, pass out cigarettes, gum, magazines.” Aircraft were not pressurized, which wrought havoc on passengers' ears, so one of the most important duties of the flight attendant was passing around a small, black leather box full of Chiclets to aid in relieving ear pressure during flight. At the time, a typical advertisement for an airline “hostess” read, “Registered nurses, age 21 to 26, height 5 feet 2 inches to 5 feet 5 inches, weight 100 to 125 pounds.” For passing out chewing gum and enduring ear aches, a flight attendant earned from \$100 to \$125 a month, plus four dollars a day as an expense allowance.²²

National Airlines quickly established an enviable record of reliability. In April 1935, the company held the distinction of being the only domestic airline to complete 100 percent of its scheduled flights. Unlike the other thirty-one air-mail routes in the country, it was seldom necessary to cancel or delay flights on National's Florida route, except during the hurricane season. On September 5 and 6, 1935, National was forced to shut its operation down because of a major hurricane, which produced Florida's lowest barometric reading to date when it fell to 26.98 inches. For those two days, the mail went to Jacksonville by train.²³

The first Stinson departed for Jacksonville on April 8, 1935, with Horton Hale and Erwin Kershaw sharing the controls. The six passengers included Ted Baker and Department of Commerce inspectors G.Q. Caldwell and Jerome Annis. The daily flights originated in Jacksonville at 6:30 a.m. and arrived in St. Petersburg at 9 a.m. The return flight departed St. Petersburg at 4:45 p.m. and arrived in Jacksonville at 7:15 p.m. Intermediate stops were at Tampa, Lakeland, Orlando and Daytona Beach. The one-way fare from St. Petersburg to Jacksonville was \$16.68 and a round trip cost \$30.30. Seven-day, round-trip excursion fares were available for a daily rate of \$20.02.²⁴

In 1936, Ted Baker gave a report on the status of his airline. It read more like a travelogue than an operational report.

While our route is one of the shortest in the country, being 262 miles long, it is over some interesting terrain. Leaving Jacksonville, we fly down the beach of the Atlantic Ocean to Daytona Beach. From Daytona Beach we fly overland to Orlando, crossing numerous swamps, forests, and lakes. From Lakeland to Orlando, the air traveler is impressed with the number and symmetry of the citrus groves below. From Lakeland to Tampa we fly over some of the largest phosphate mines, as well as over Plant City, which is known as the Strawberry City. Tampa is, as you know, the Cigar City of the country, as well as an important seaport. At this city they are building a beautiful new airport which is nearly completed on Davis Island within a mile and a half of the post office. From Tampa we fly over beautiful Tampa Bay, the rendezvous of pirates in earlier days, to St. Petersburg, with its downtown airport. Our passenger and express business in 1936 has increased from three to four hundred percent over 1935. Our mail poundage has more than doubled, and we look for additional big increases during the coming winter season, at which time we contemplate operating new all metal multi-engine planes.²⁵

Baker never hesitated to exaggerate. In 1936, National carried 1,613 passengers compared to 887 in 1935, for an 82 percent increase. His 1936 mail was 10,658 pounds, compared to 7,075 pounds in 1935, for a 50 percent increase. National was still very small, when compared to Eastern Air Lines' 1935 totals of 87,389 passengers and 727,960 pounds of mail.²⁶

However, National continued to grow. In 1937, after several attempts, National Airlines System merged with Jerome Waterman's Gulf Airlines. On July 8, 1937, the company was incorporated under the laws of the state of Florida as Gulf National Airlines. Ted Baker soon dropped Gulf from the name, and the company became known as National Airlines. The merger had little impact on Baker, other than to eliminate a possible competitor and add Waterman to National's board of directors. The *St. Petersburg Times* reported that the new name was National Airlines Florida System.²⁷

In January 1937, routes were extended from St. Petersburg and Tampa to Miami with stops at Sarasota and Fort Myers. On January 5, round-trip service was inaugurated between St.



One of National's Lockheed L-10 "Electras," bearing the slogan, "The Buccaneer Route."

Petersburg and Miami. At first, the service operated only on Tuesday and Friday, but on February 1, it became daily. Ten-passenger Stinsons were used on the flights, which departed St. Petersburg at 10 a.m. and arrived in Miami at 11:59 a.m. National's flights connected with Pan American's service leaving for Havana, Cuba, at 1 p.m. Return flights left Miami at 3 p.m. and arrived in St. Petersburg at 4:59 p.m. The inaugural service did not get off to a smooth start. With St. Petersburg's mayor and postmaster on hand and the ceremonies concluded, the Stinson taxied out toward the end of the runway. The pilot ran the engines up and checked all three engines for magneto drops. Everything was perfect, but as the pilot pulled onto the runway, the tire on the right landing gear blew. The aircraft tilted onto its right side, and passengers were forced to deplane. Sitting on the end of the runway, the aircraft was jacked up, and the damaged tire and wheel removed. The tire seemed frozen to the wheel, and workers were forced to saw through the tire to remove it. Two hours later, the inaugural St. Petersburg-to-Miami flight was on its way. The one-way air fare from St. Petersburg to Tampa was \$1.50, to Daytona Beach \$9.90 and to Miami \$14.70. By October 15, 1937, only three years after the airline's inauguration, Baker claimed that the combined annual mileage of all the company's flights had reached more than one million miles.²⁸

The year 1937 was difficult for National, at least from the standpoint of carrying passengers. Demand continued strong, but the company's passenger revenues fell because of a price-cutting war precipitated by several of Florida's unsubsidized airlines. During this period, Florida

Airlines served the Jacksonville, Tampa and Sarasota markets with Ford AT Tri-Motor aircraft, affectionately called the "Tin Goose." Air mail carriers were regulated, but any airline was free to carry passengers and charge whatever the local market would bear.

In order to meet the increased demand and to service the company's newly expanded route system, National purchased a ten-passenger Lockheed Electra 10 A aircraft. The low-wing, twin-engine aircraft was capable of a maximum speed of 185 miles an hour. The Lockheed Electra shared the distinction of being the airline's first all-metal airplane and the first it had ever purchased that was not second-hand. The Electra service was inaugurated in September 1937 with Florida's Seminole Indians participating in the ceremonies. This was also the first aircraft in National's fleet to require a copilot. National eventually purchased a total of four Lockheed L-10 Electras. Two were ordered directly from Lockheed, and two used airplanes were purchased from other airlines. With the new aircraft came a need for further professionalism. Baker became uniform conscious, so street clothes would no longer do for his crews. National's employees began wearing dark blue serge suits, blue shirts and neckties. Hats also became part of the National Airlines System uniform.

In early 1938 the United States Congress approved the Civil Aeronautics Act, which was signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on June 23. The law provided a number of protections that were important not only to National Airlines, but also for every other air carrier. Most importantly, "Grandfather Rights" provided permanent route certification for airlines already in existence. As part of the act, the Civil Aeronautics Authority (later the Civil Aeronautics Board) was established. In the future, any airline wishing to operate a route, whether passenger or mail, needed route certification from the new agency. Shortly after adoption of the law, Baker petitioned the Civil Aeronautics Authority for authorization to provide service from Daytona Beach and Jacksonville on a permanent basis, but approval was not immediately forthcoming.

In 1938, National underwent a further route expansion and entered the interstate market by receiving air mail route number 39 between Jacksonville and New Orleans. The new 531-mile service was inaugurated on November 1. The first flight carried mail, company officials and employees. The service held great significance for the cities served on the route because it was the first time in history that mail was flown directly between Jacksonville and New Orleans. The company did not receive government authorization to carry passengers over the route until December 21. The trip was definitely not nonstop. The flight departed Jacksonville at 3:15 p.m. and arrived in New Orleans at 6:35 a.m. the next day, but it linked northeast Florida to the west with stops at Valdosta, Georgia; Tallahassee, Marianna, Panama City and Pensacola, Florida; Mobile, Alabama; and Gulfport, Mississippi. Thus, the company served five states. As welcome as the Jacksonville-to-New Orleans service was, it presented problems for Baker. The Post Office later revoked National's temporary route authority between Daytona Beach and Jacksonville, so National was then forced to operate two unconnected routes. Route 31 served Daytona Beach to Miami (via Orlando, Lakeland, Tampa, St. Petersburg, Sarasota and Ft. Myers). The company's route 39 provided service between Jacksonville and New Orleans. In January 1939, Baker met with the Civil Aeronautics Authority to request authority to expand the Daytona Beach-Miami route into Jacksonville. The action would have combined Baker's two individual air mail routes. Government approval was slow in coming, and Baker did not receive

authority to do so until March 1940. This was the first route case ever heard by the newly formed Civil Aeronautics Authority.²⁹

In the fall of 1939, National Airlines abandoned its St. Petersburg office on the second floor of the St. Petersburg Times Building. A small, rundown house on the Jacksonville Municipal Airport became Ted Baker's headquarters. From an operations standpoint the move made sense. Jacksonville was the airline's hub with flights going south and west. Baker also believed, and rightly so, that St. Petersburg and its officials had not taken much interest in air mail, passenger travel, or his airline. In the five years since the company's birth, the cities of Tampa, Jacksonville and Miami had actively pursued Baker. St. Petersburg's leaders never saw fit to do so.³⁰

In its subsequent years, National Airlines scored many firsts. On February 14, 1946, using a Douglas DC-4, National inaugurated the first non-stop service between New York and Miami. Equipped with an up-to-date, four-engine fleet, National turned its attention to marketing in 1950. The company became the first airline to introduce low coach fares between the Northeast and Florida and was the first to provide Florida package vacations, which were instrumental in changing Florida's economy. These programs started a trend which extended the state's traditionally short winter season and helped turn Florida into a year-round vacation destination. In 1958, National became the first airline to offer pure jet service in the United States, when it inaugurated Boeing-707 service between Miami and New York. The 707's had cruising speeds approximately twice that of the most advanced propeller airplanes and made the New York-to-Miami trip in only 142 minutes with 111 passengers.³¹

Lewis B. Maytag, Jr., head of the Maytag washing machine empire and the onetime president of Frontier Airlines, purchased a controlling interest in National Airlines in April 1962. He became chief executive officer. George Baker remained as chairman of the board, but soon resigned that post. Maytag then became chairman of the board. Baker did not live to enjoy the profits of the sale of National Airlines. While vacationing in Europe in 1963, he died of a heart attack.

The small palmetto-hopping airline that was founded in St. Petersburg in 1934 continued its growth until 1980 when it merged with Pan American World Airways. The merger was intended to provide a domestic feed to Pan American's international network. It was hoped that the combination of National's domestic routes and Pan American's global system would bring greater benefits than either airline could provide alone. On January 7, 1980, Pan American's president told a roomful of reporters that, "This is a merger of equals, each with unique skills and strengths. We welcome National people as equals."³²

Born in the depths of the Great Depression in St. Petersburg, National Airlines climbed steadily throughout its forty-six year history. From its start as an air mail contractor in Florida, National grew to an international air network of 29,000 route miles serving forty-one cities in twelve states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Great Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland.³³ In National's first year of operation, less than five hundred passengers were carried. In its final year of service, nearly seven million passengers flew on National's airplanes. Baker's small airline had been put together with assets valued at less than \$20,000. The company's balance sheet at the end of 1979 showed assets of approximately \$500

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A 1946 ad for National's New York-to-Havana service, which included a stop in Tampa.

million. In 1934, Ted Baker and his six employees struggled to keep two small airplanes flying. When National Airlines merged with Pan American, National's fleet of fifty-six aircraft was supported by nearly 8,000 employees, few of whom probably had any idea that the giant international carrier had begun as an air mail company in St. Petersburg.

¹ Michael G. Schine, "Ballooning in the Second Seminole War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 55 (April 1971), 480-82; William C. Lazarus, *Wings in the Sun: The Annals of Aviation in Florida* (Orlando, Florida: Tyn Cobb's Florida Press, 1951), 16; *St. Petersburg Daily Times*, January 1, 1914; Antony H. Jannus, "Benoist Airline Operation at St. Petersburg," *Aero and Hydro* (April 25, 1914), 41.

² *St. Petersburg Times*, October 19, 1934.

³ R.E.G. Davies, *Airlines of the United States Since 1914* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1932), 169; *Aviation*, 33 (May 1934), 136.

⁴ *St. Petersburg Times*, October 12, 19, 1934.

⁵ *St. Petersburg Independent*, October 20, 1975.

⁶ *St. Petersburg Times*, November 22, 1934.

⁷ Donald B. Holmes, *Air Mail: An Illustrated History 1793-1981* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1981), 162; *St. Petersburg Times*, October 15, 1934.

⁸ George W. Cearley, Jr., *National Airline of the Stars: An Illustrated History* (Dallas: George W. Cearley, Jr., 1985), 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ National Airlines System Flight Clearance Form, October 15, 1934, in possession of author.

¹¹ *National Airlines Star Reporter*, 14, (1959), 4.

¹² *St. Petersburg Times*, October 16, 1934.

¹³ *St. Petersburg Times*, October 11, 1970; National Airlines System Timetable and Fare Sheet, April 28, 1935; Brad Williams, *The Anatomy of an Airline* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970); 29; *St. Petersburg Times*, February 27, 1936, October 15, 1937; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 10, 16, 1934.

¹⁴ *National Now*, 35 (September 1978), 14.

¹⁵ *St. Petersburg Times*, October 19, 1934.

¹⁶ George T. Baker to Carleton F. Sharpe, April 28, 1935, in possession of author.

¹⁷ *National Airlines Star Reporter*, 14 (1959), 4; National Airlines System Balance Sheet at December 31, 1934, in possession of author.

¹⁸ Williams, *Anatomy of an Airline*, 51.

¹⁹ *St. Petersburg Times*, November 23, 1934.

²⁰ *National Reporter*, 20 (October 1964), 15.

²¹ Williams, *Anatomy of an Airline*, 31.

²² *St. Petersburg Times*, October 13, 1973.

²³ *Ibid.*, September 7, 1935.

²⁴ National Airlines System Timetable and Fare Sheet, April 28, 1935, in possession of author.

²⁵ Cearley, *National Airline of the Stars*, 8.

²⁶ *Aviation*, 35 (April 1936), 68; *ibid.*, 36, (April 1937), 77.

²⁷ *St. Petersburg Times*, July 4, 1936.

²⁸ *National Airlines Star Reporter* 14 (1959), 4; National Airlines Schedule, August 15, 1937, in possession of author; *St. Petersburg Times*, October 15, 1937.

²⁹ *St. Petersburg Times*, November 2, 1938; National Airlines Miami-Daytona Beach Timetable, Effective August 1, 1939, and National Airlines Jacksonville-New Orleans Timetable, Effective February 1, 1939, in possession of author.

³⁰ Williams, *Anatomy of an Airline*, 57.

³¹ Fact Book National Airlines (September 15, 1967), 24; National Airlines' Annual Reports for 1953, 1958, and 1974; *Pan Am Clipper*, 6 (January-February 1980), 8.

³² *Pan Am Clipper*, 6 (January-February 1980), 1.

³³ National Airlines' Annual Report for 1979.