

Tasman Empire Airways Limited



Flying Boats at Fergusson—history on our doorstep!

Did you know that Fergusson container terminal and the present Ports of Auckland administration building were constructed on the site of New Zealand's first commercial international airport?

Before containers there were flying boats in our port

Way back in December 1937, a big four-engined Empire class flying boat - the "Centaurus" alighted on the Waitemata harbour after her pioneering, survey flight to New Zealand from England. An estimated 50,000 people, which was just about the whole population of the city, crammed the waterfront vantage points and hills around the city to see the spectacle of her arrival. The potential for international passenger travel and for mail and freight to be carried to all corners of the globe in only a matter of days was being realised. For 20-odd years after that first proving flight, Mechanics Bay and more specifically, the breastwork in front of our present building became an international airport complete with Pan American Airways and TEAL passenger terminals and numerous workshop and maintenance facilities.

I have always wanted to know how it all came to be, and which buildings were where. Let me share some findings with you that I have extracted from various sources and which I hope you too will find interesting.

The origins go even further back to the 1920s when British interests wanted to pioneer a chain of long-distance international air services linking England with the other countries of the Empire. The services started with land-based aircraft flying in small hops between English and then European cities and, like a spider's web, the links gradually fanned out. British aircraft manufacture had fallen behind and mainly consisted of "string-bags" or bi-planes, so there was a bit of catching up to do. New aircraft had to be designed that could not only fly longer distances, but also provide new standards of service, comfort and safety along the way. Many new routes were surveyed and problems like refuelling and supply were gradually resolved. In 1928, for example, a route was established between England and India via the Middle East, and to solve the difficulty of navigating across the trackless desert from what was "Palestine to Baghdad", a furrow several hundred miles long was ploughed in the sand. It did the trick.

By the 1930s, flying boats were seen as the answer to long-haul travel, especially with ocean crossings, and Britain, which had the world's largest fleet of flying boats by this time, began surveying, planning and proving these more far flung and difficult routes. Fast-forward to 1936 and Britain had a winner in the new S23, aluminium-bodied, Empire class flying boat designed and built by Short Bros. in Kent. It was not only a big passenger and freight carrying aircraft, but also fast - in fact faster than anything the Americans could come up with at the time. The Empire air route was gradually being extended and things were getting a lot closer to home when flights from Singapore reached Brisbane. Our turn was next and Imperial Airways of Britain successfully carried out the first mail/survey flight across the Tasman in 1937, when,

as referred to earlier, the flying boat “Centaurus” completed the hop from Sydney to Auckland which was the final leg in her flight from England. She had flown from Southampton Water, to India, Singapore and Sydney, with lots of small stops in between, to finally put down on our harbour at Mechanics Bay on that amazing day. This feat would soon lead to the opening of the longest air route in the world – 14,200 miles from England to Auckland, New Zealand with 11 stops and taking 12 days. Ground-breaking stuff!

TEAL takes flight

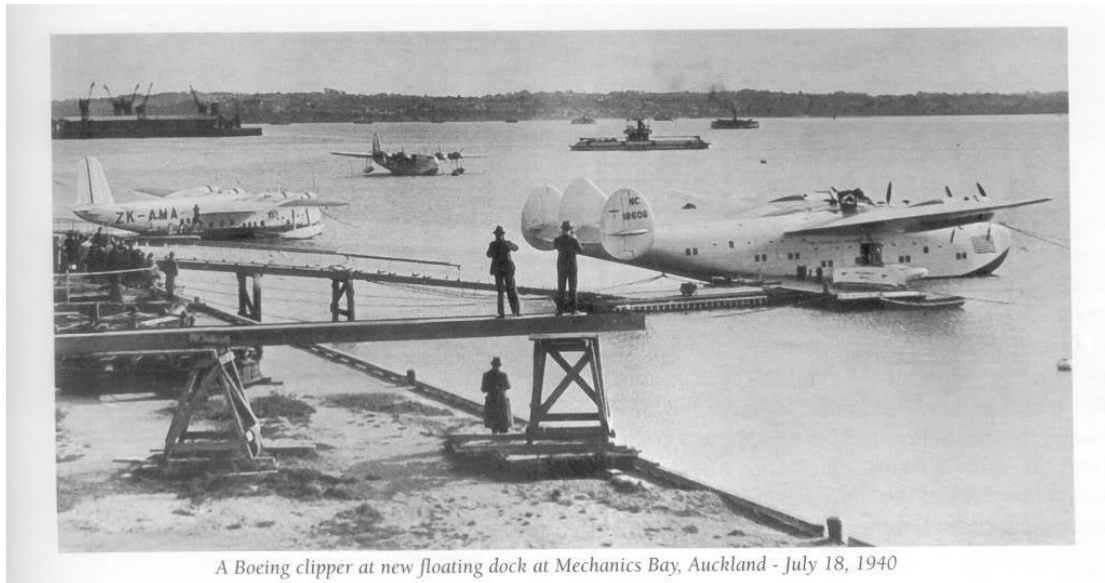
It was time to start carrying fare-paying passengers, mail and freight and this led to the establishment of “TEAL” [Tasman Empire Airways Ltd], the forerunner of Air New Zealand. The company was jointly owned by Union Airways [Union Steamship Co.] of NZ, BOAC of England and Qantas of Australia with subsidies from all three governments and they bought two Empire class flying boats of their own. They commenced the trans-Tasman part of the international service with ZK-AMA “Aotearoa” which was the first of the planes to make the journey. At two thirty in the afternoon on 28 August 1939, she finally came in to view from the north and circled over the Waitemata after her marathon delivery flight from England and her nine hour hop from Sydney, she was greeted by thousands of Aucklanders jamming the city and harbour viewing points, straining to get a glimpse of her as she came in for her landing. She gently touched down with a long plume of spray from her hull and the thrilling sound of her four Bristol Perseus engines could be heard right around the harbour. Pushed in to the background for the moment were all the fears of an impending war, and her arrival represented the dream of all New Zealanders at the time, that one day they would be linked in regular air transport with the rest of the world. This really was an historic occasion.



That particular aircraft, as a matter of interest, was winched over Tamaki Drive at Mission Bay when its flying days were over in the late 1940s and was parked on the corner of Patterson Street as a tourist attraction and tea rooms with a mini golf course around it for a couple of years until it began to look a little tatty and it was finally sold for scrap. Can you imagine a huge aircraft like that with an 114ft wingspan sitting on the grass there where a Thai restaurant and the Reef Bar now resides? I suppose after completing so many salty trans-Tasman flights during its working life, it was only fitting that its final resting place should have a view of the sea.

TEAL continued to provide this trans-Tasman link-up with the international service right through the war years - even though domestic aviation had been curtailed.

TEAL however, weren't the only players in the market. Pan American Airways were also trying to gain some influence in the Pacific. They had been trying to get access to the lucrative trans-Atlantic route from the United States to Europe but were unsuccessful, so they set about forging a route across the Pacific Ocean to Asia and the south Pacific – a much longer and more difficult task to accomplish. They finally succeeded and by 1936 were flying passengers and mail from San Francisco to Manila in the Philippines via the islands of Hawaii [19hrs], Midway, Wake, and Guam. They then set their sights on establishing routes to New Zealand and the south Pacific but owing to most Pacific Islands being British or French territory they had very few viable options for bases. In 1938, however, they were able to pioneer a route stopping at Kingman Reef, 1100 miles south of Honolulu, then to Pago Pago in Samoa and finally to arrive in Auckland at Mechanics Bay. Two more proving flights took place before the first scheduled airmail flight from Auckland to Hawaii in January 1938. On the return flight however, disaster was to strike. A mid-air explosion occurred when attempting to dump fuel after an engine oil leak off Samoa and all 7 crew aboard died. Pan Am flights were not resumed until January 1939 and this time Pan Am rolled out their biggest and best for the resumption of the Pacific flights – the new Boeing B-314s, known, like their predecessors, as the "Pan Am Clippers". They were big four-engine, three-tail fin beasts and were in fact, the world's largest commercial aircraft until the arrival of the 747 jumbos – 30yrs later. They were a feat of aeronautical luxury with seating for 74 day passengers or sleeping quarters for 36. There was even a honeymoon suite in the tail of the plane and separate dressing rooms for men and women. Fresh food was prepared in the galley by the chef and the meals were served on linen tablecloths in a dining room which resembled a fine restaurant. Mainly the preserve of the wealthy and businesspeople and occasionally film stars, the clippers became a regular sight in our harbour. Pan Am did not have permission to fly to Australia at the time so our TEAL flying boats would provide the link across to Sydney. After Pearl Harbour in Dec 1941, flights from America ceased, so a short but fascinating period of American flying boat history in our harbour came to an end.



A Boeing clipper at new floating dock at Mechanics Bay, Auckland - July 18, 1940

One of the big Boeing clippers in front of our breastwork at Mechanics Bay. She had hull sponsons at the waterline for stability rather than floats and struts under her wings like the English aircraft.

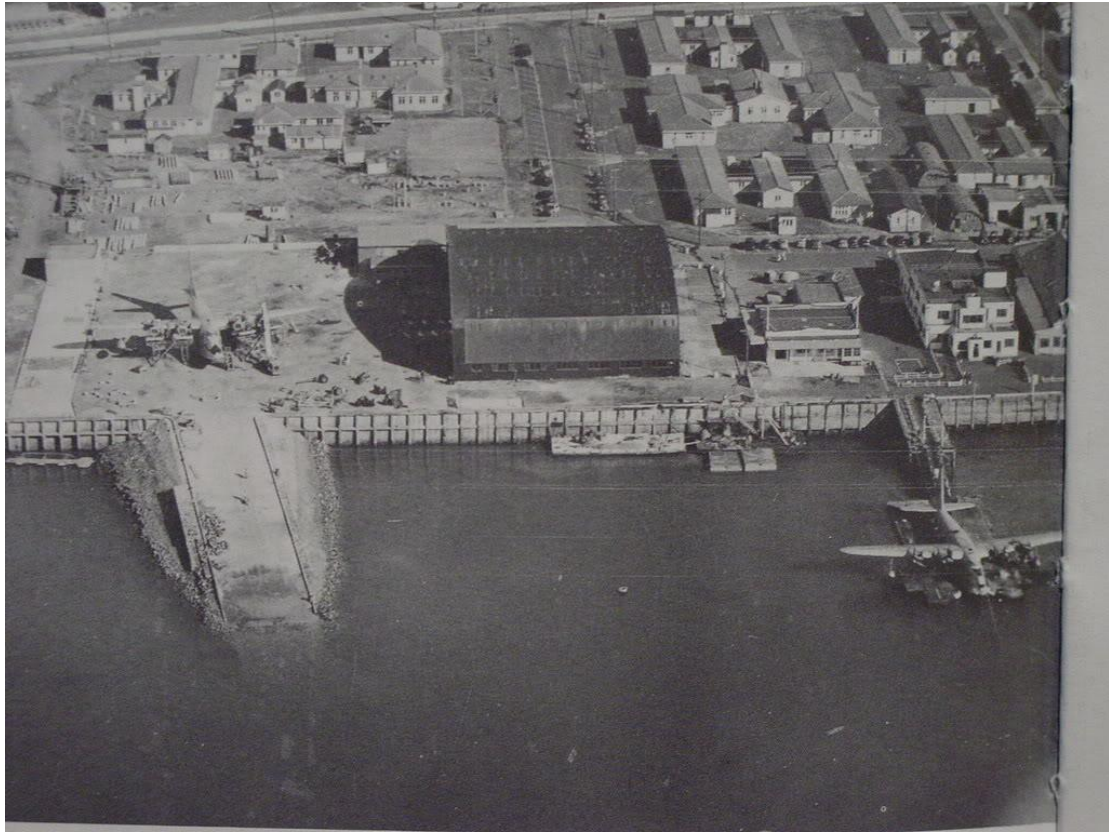


The photo above was taken in 1940 and shows a Pan Am clipper with its distinctive three-tail fins, in front of the small Pan Am passenger terminal and a TEAL Empire class plane outside the TEAL terminal building. The large white-roofed building to the right is the main workshops and storeroom. Note the top of the wings painted in air-sea rescue orange in case they had to put down in the sea.



A larger view of the same photo showing the extent of reclamation that had taken place then. Affco building to the right, vehicular ferry terminal this side of it - Jellicoe and Freyberg wharves yet to be constructed. Notice the boatsheds on Quay St.

During the war years, the RNZAF had also established a significant presence on our patch with the area known as the No.1 Port Depot. All aircrew and RNZAF personnel and equipment passed through this depot and up until about 1960, the transit barrack buildings were still standing where our current car park and "C" grid are, before being demolished or transferred to MOTAT where many still are being used to this day. Mechanics Bay's flying boat base must have been a very busy place at the start of the war with TEAL and Pan Am operating civilian flights and the air force operating its depot. TEAL also had a large hangar which was positioned just to the left and front of our present administration building and the hangar doors faced east towards the tide deflector or as it is now - the access road to the "A" and "B" grids. This hangar still exists and is now an indoor rock climbing facility in Morrin Road.



Another view of the flying boat base taken in the late 1940s. Above the ramp, behind the wet apron to the left is where our present administration building stands. The large black building is the TEAL hangar and the RNZAF Sunderland on the hard appears to be under maintenance.

TEAL engineers carried out most work on their flying boats including engine overhauls at Mechanics Bay with large stores, workshops and administration buildings but hull repairs were done at the big seaplane hangar at Hobsonville. Ironically, with the arrival of the RNZAF Sunderland's in 1944, the Air Force maintenance was done at Mechanics Bay.

The other major buildings on our site around that time were the TEAL passenger terminal which appears to have doubled as the NZ Civil Aviation building and NZ meteorological office. This was situated on the breastwork about where the 700s current reefer area is today and adjacent to it on the eastern side was the Pan Am passenger terminal which looks very tiny in the old photographs.



The Pan Am passenger terminal to the left with U.S. flag and TEAL next door with observation tower and twin flag poles. Workshops in the background.

The other building of some note in photos of the 1940s to 1950s is the “engine test-cell”. It was situated further west, about where the 730s are now. This had huge “turrets” at each end of the building which were, in fact, air inlet and exhaust openings to keep the engines breathing during testing. I’m thinking of our Parnell neighbours now and the noise not only from that test facility but also the thundering crescendo from each of the four engines of the TEAL or Pan Am flying boats as they fired up and commenced their surprisingly short take-off runs up or down the harbour in front of us. It must have been something! The constant chuffing of steam trains in the railway yards and the occasional ship’s horn blast would have been mild by comparison.



“Aotearoa” on display at Mission Bay - late 1940s.



A photo from around 1950 showing the engine test building with its turrets each end.

Getting back to the trans-Tasman air link with the world, TEAL flights to and from Sydney were becoming so popular that by 1944, they were operating three return flights a week. By war's end, TEAL was owned solely by the New Zealand and Australian governments. More aircraft were acquired but these four "Sandringham" or "Tasman" class planes as they were known, were converted military Sunderlands and although they shortened the Sydney to Auckland route to about seven hours, and flights became daily, they were subject to engine cooling problems and were underpowered, so in 1949, TEAL bought four Solent Mark IVs from the Short Bros. factory in Belfast. It was a great choice, even though the government was the main driving force in opting for flying boats rather than the TEAL management- preferred option of land-based planes like the Douglas DC-4.

The Solents, with their four Bristol Hercules engines each putting out 2040hp, not only offered a luxurious form of travel but were also the most powerful and reliable of their type – and they were the final and best development of the Short flying boats. With their introduction, the trans-Tasman flight time was further slashed to a mere five and a half hours and passenger numbers continued to grow.

Pacific Island hopping on the Coral Route

Although successful for TEAL, the pendulum was starting to swing back to land aircraft with their increased range and speed coupled with a world-wide network of airfields. There was, however, one saving grace for the TEAL flying boats and that was the famous "Coral Route" which saw the Solents continue flying from Mechanics Bay and around the Pacific Islands right up until 1960. Flying boats were essential to the route because although most islands had reasonable runways from war-time construction, Tahiti, the strategic destination - did not.

The Coral Route itself was actually pioneered during the war by RNZAF Sunderlands doing surveys, patrol and reconnaissance. At first, it was intended to be just a mail service but the concept of a scheduled air service with flying boats linking islands

scattered over thousands of miles on the South Seas - silver craft putting down softly in tropical lagoons - was just too appealing. Initially, it was flown by National Airways Corporation (NAC) using Sandringhams, but the route was passed over to TEAL in 1950 and the Solents introduced. The Coral Route was often called the "Orient Express of the air" and became one of the most glamorous and most luxurious air passenger routes in the world. This epic trail was truly the stuff of post-war legend, with flying boats darting back and forth between yesterday and tomorrow across the date line; traversing 4,700 miles of ocean between Auckland, Fiji, Samoa, the Cook Islands and Tahiti, and later, Tonga. Human fascination for flight was at an all-time high in the 1940s and 1950s. The world seemed enormous, fragile, and newly reborn after the war and flying was a wonder. It began as a monthly service, then fortnightly after just six months and due to its popularity, additional Solents were added to the fleet. They carried about 45 passengers on twin decks and like the Pan Am clippers before them, the surroundings were more like high-class restaurants complete with silver service, linen table cloths, 'powder rooms' a saloon bar and lounge areas on the lower deck and meals were cooked to order. The flights were the domain of the wealthy as the 30 pound ticket price was six times the average weekly wage at that time and there was only one class – first class! The Solents ambled along unpressurised at about 400 kilometres per hour and flew no higher than 3000 metres and often down to a minimum of 61 metres if there were coral atolls, sharks or whales to have a look at.

A typical service would leave Mechanics Bay in the morning and fly up to Suva's Laucala Bay in Fiji - a seven and a half hour flight. A line-up of stately black Daimlers, Australian Holdens and war surplus "Jeepneys" were on hand to ferry passengers to the Grand Pacific Hotel, a refined and elegant British Colonial building on the waterfront. Passengers enjoyed afternoon tea, a nap, pink gins and dinner



A TEAL Solent on the Coral Route taking off from Fiji.

Next day, the passengers were flying north east for three hours to Samoa landing on the crystal clear lagoon off what is now Faleolo Airport. This time, they were taken to the legendary Aggie Grey's Hotel at Apia and after being refreshed by another night of dancing and fine food, they were up early for the nine hour flight to Tahiti, the French colony that has lured sailors, artists and writers for centuries. Along the way however, they would alight at the world's most magical transit point - Aitutaki, in the Cook Islands. Here, the giant Solents, with their skilful and experienced pilots would skim down on to the lagoon avoiding the coral heads and judging the tides correctly would drop anchor a short distance from the little island of "Akaiama" and a lighter would then take the passengers to the small wharf where they would walk to the "terminal" for a meal and refreshments while the plane was refuelled. Occasionally, the weather ahead would dictate an overnight stop here and the passengers would be entertained royally with an island feast and hula dancers. Normally, however, it would just be a two to three hour stopover and after rounding up the passengers,

many of whom may have been swimming in the warm waters of the lagoon and marvelling at the fact that were on an uninhabited tropical island, the aircraft would take off and continue its arc across Polynesia to the final destination – Papeete in Tahiti, the spiritual heart of the South Seas, where a garland-strewn, exotic, out-of-this-world welcome would await them. From Tahiti, the next day, the route was reversed until it was homeward bound to Mechanics Bay, Auckland - with memories to last a lifetime.

Although the four Solents on the Auckland to Fiji leg were replaced by land-based DC-6 aircraft in 1954, TEAL retained the Solent “Aranui” for service on the rest of the Coral route until September 1960 which marked the end of the world’s last scheduled international flying boat service. This aircraft, which is the only remaining Solent IV in the world is on display in the MOTAT aircraft hangar at Auckland where it has been carefully restored by members of the original flight crew and enthusiasts.



Promotional poster showcasing the Coral Route.

Flying boats were the pioneer of the passenger airways; they opened up routes around the globe and enabled NZ to stake a claim in the business of international air travel. This legacy lives on through Air New Zealand and the benefits to our little nation and our Pacific Island neighbours have been immense.

Next time you are driving your straddle, working in front of a computer, lashing on a vessel, or doing any of the innumerable tasks on our waterfront, take a moment to think what it must have been like all those years ago – on our “patch”.



The last Solent 1V in the world "Aranui" – restored at MOTAT.



Coral Route baggage label.

P.S: In March 1954, three Douglas DC-6s were transferred to TEAL after the winding up of British Commonwealth Pacific Airways and this sounded the finale for the trans-Tasman flying boat services and the Solents were replaced on both the Tasman and Fiji routes. TEAL moved most of its operations to Whenuapai which became the “new” international airport. There was still plenty of life left in Mechanics Bay though with Tourist Air Travel, later to become Mt Cook Airlines and finally Sea Bee Air, setting up shop there and using the TEAL hangar. They operated Grumman Goose and Widgeon amphibian aircraft and they pioneered non-scheduled services to all parts of the Hauraki Gulf and performed ambulance, charter, freight and scenic flying. Coastguard also had headquarters on this site from 1955 until they moved to the new buildings on the eastern side of the tide deflector in 1969. Sea Bee Air also moved over to the new buildings where the heliport is now for the final years of their operations. I guess, in years to come, when the current POAL administration building gets demolished, the final and only link with our flying boat history will be the local street names “Solent” and “Sunderland”.

Ed Wright.





Peter Lewis collection 2007



NEW ZEALAND



TEAL 

TASMAN EMPIRE AIRWAYS LIMITED

S30 Empire Flying Boat, Mechanics Bay 1940

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