

BITS & PIECES

Panama's Worst Air Disaster

Friday, September 13, 1935

By Luis R. Celerier, January 2015

The Passengers

It is a typical morning during the rainy season in the Republic of Panama. As the plane is being readied at the airport in Paitilla, Panama City, rain clouds can be seen building up towards the west but no one is concerned as this is not unusual at this time of the year. Also, the plane is a brand new Travel Air with a 450 HP Pratt & Whitney engine and its pilot, Robert O. Marstrand, a Balboa High School graduate of 1928, has over 3000 hours of logged flying time. It is Friday, September 13, 1935, and flying is still a novelty, thus the 7 passengers are in somewhat excited mood exchanging pleasantries as they board the plane of Aerovias Nacionales, S.A., owned by Enrique Malek with headquarters in David, province of Chiriqui, Panama. The passengers are Iban Juan Pino, Mayor of David; Syla Romero and Maria Bartoli, young students; Juan B. Diaz; Berger Dahl, ex-Canal employee; Clarence Campbell and Antonio Joseph, West Indians (8).



Travel Air A-6000 similar to the one Robert Marstrand flew. (Note C)

The Plane

The plane that Robert Marstrand is flying this morning is a new Travel Air A-6000 belonging to Aerovias Nacionales, S.A., founded in July of 1933 by the aviator Enrique Malek (1). This Travel Air model has the following Specifications (15):

Crew: One, Pilot

Passengers: Five

Wing Span: 48 feet, 7 inches

Length: 30 feet, 10 inches

Power Plant: 450 HP Pratt & Whitney "Wasp" (The B-6000 had a 300 HP Curtiss J-6-9)

Empty Weight: 2608 pounds

Gross Weight: 4230 pounds

While the plane is rated for 5 passengers, Marstrand is carrying 7. This, however, is not an unusual arrangement for this type of aircraft, as will be explained later. What happened next was a tragedy of major proportions for the infant airline industry of the Republic. It also affected many people directly and indirectly as will be seen in the following narrative.

The Airport (1, 2)

The National Airport of Paitilla was established in 1930 at Paitilla Point on 87 acres previously owned by the family of Bermudez Aleman. Its elevation could not have been more than 20 to 30 feet above sea level. The original plans called for three runways, but only Runway No. 2 of 900 meters in length (2952 feet), running north to south, was ever built. The only structures at that time consisted of a hangar, a small repair shop and a small office building on the east side of the runway.

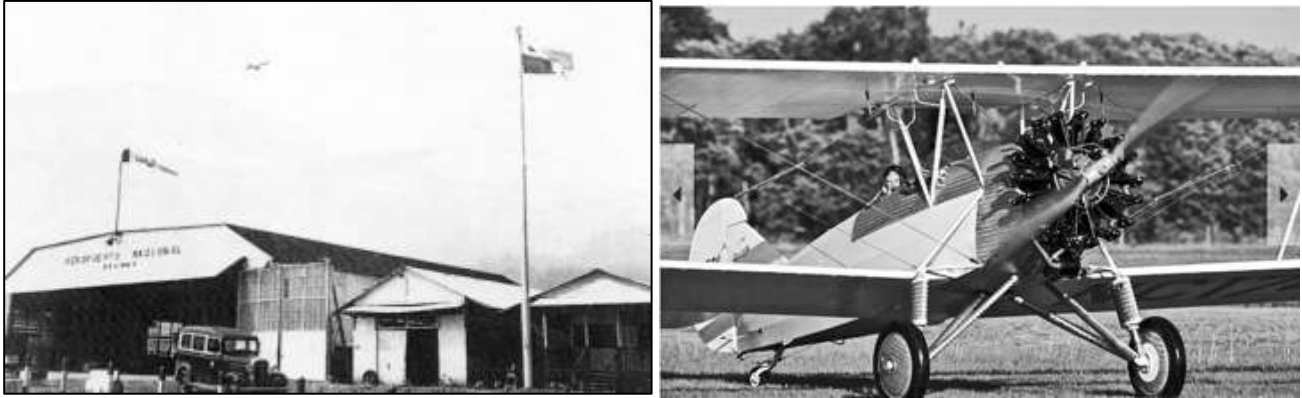
The first airline to use the airport was Pan American Airways with its Ford Tri-Motor planes. A highlight in the history of the airport came on February 6, 1931, when the Prince of Wales of the United Kingdom landed in a PAA Ford Tri-Motor from Colon. Accompanying him was his brother, the Duke of York, who would become King George VI, and whose daughter would follow as Queen Elizabeth II.



Paitilla National Airport looking towards the Bay of Panama (1), The Prince of Wales, center, lighting a cigarette under the wing of the Pan American Ford Tri-Motor at Paitilla (14).

By mid-1931, the young Panamanian pilots Ricardo Arias, Marcos A. Gelabert, Julio Estrada, Nicanor Obarrio, Rodolfo Estripeaut and Eustacio Chichaco were flying out of Paitilla. That same year, the Government of Panama authorized the purchase of 4 airplanes for the National Air Service in order to begin regular Air Mail Service within the country. On October 24 the first of those planes, a Keystone-Loening K-84 "Commuter" amphibian, arrived at Paitilla piloted by Captain C.K. Travis, the American aviator the Government of Panama had contracted to establish the Air Mail Service. This aircraft was named "*3 de Noviembre*" for the date of Panama's independence from Colombia. This same plane would make history in November of that year with the first inter-province airmail flight in western Panama. In less than a month, two Curtiss-Wright Travel Air CW-14 "Osprey" biplanes purchased by the government would arrive at the airport. Named the "*Constitucion*" and the "*Republica*", these planes could be armed with bomb racks, a fixed .30 cal. forward firing machine gun and a .30 cal. flexible machine gun in the rear seat. They became part of the Air Mail Service with the interior of

Panama until the end of 1932 when, because of the Depression, this service was terminated. No other information is available to me about the mail planes. The two "Ospreys" could have ended up in Bolivia with other "Osprey" aircraft in the Gran Chaco War which eventually led to the successful prosecution of Curtiss-Wright for supplying military type aircraft for war purposes in violation of the U.S. arms embargo to Bolivia.



L-R: The Hangar, Gelabert's repair shop and Airport Office building (1). The armed Travel Air "Osprey" (1).

Paitilla Airport continued to grow and by January 1935 the facility was serving a flying school called Academia Nacional de Aviacion, owned by Marcos Gelabert and Alquilio Vallarino, and an airline named Aerovias Nacionales S. A. (ANSA) founded by Enrique Malek 1933. Aerovias Nacionales provided daily flights to and from Panama and David with a stop at Aguadulce. Shortly afterward Pan American, complaining of inadequate conditions at Paitilla, "temporarily" moved its operations to Albrook Field (Note A) in the Panama Canal Zone; however, they never returned their operations to Paitilla. On March of 1935, Marcos Gelabert established Transporte Aereo Gelabert (TAG) in competition with ANSA (10).

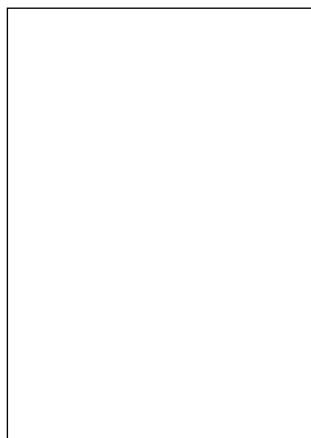
This, then, was the airport from which Robert O. Marstrand initiated his fateful flight on Friday, September 13, 1935.

The Pilot - Robert O. Marstrand

Robert O. Marstrand was the son of Otto T. and Evelyn Marstrand. According to Ancestry.com (3), Otto was a Dane born on the island of St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, on August 14, 1878. He appears to have arrived at New York City in 1889. By the early 1900s we find him at Louisville, Kentucky, working as a freight clerk for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad and also serving as a Private in Company "C" of the First Regiment of Infantry of the Kentucky State Guard (3). By 1907 he had moved to Panama and was listed as a clerk in the Isthmian Canal Commission working on the Atlantic side of the Canal at Gatun, Canal Zone, with a yearly salary of \$1200. Sometime during this period he married Evelyn Vrooman Tinkey of Brooklyn, New York. By 1921 he was appointed Chief of the Property and Requisition Bureau moving to Morgan Avenue in Balboa on the Pacific entrance to the Canal. Otto retired in 1937 (3).

Otto and Evelyn had two children: Robert, born at the old Colon Hospital on December 19, 1911 and Lillian born in 1913. In 1954, Otto wrote from his retirement home at Arlington, Virginia, to the editor of The Panama Canal Review in regards to the old Colon Hospital:

"Pardon if an old mossback of the good old days . . . comments on an article in The Review . . . Unless my memory fails me, my first-born, Robert Marstrand, was born in Colon Hospital in 1911 and my second, Lillian, in 1913. The ward in question was at the entrance of the hospital grounds and was on stilts built over the water. I do know that the old maternity ward over the water was subject to invasion by huge water rats and some of them ran across the beds. The boy, my first-born, was the aviator that flew the first flight of the establishment of the Air Mail of the Republic of Panama to the interior and return. He crashed with his passengers to the interior on Friday, September 13, 1935; he was not yet 24 years of age and had a record of 3000 flying hours and two trips from the U.S. to Panama, the last one solo. The Zone honored him in final and his record is without blemish. I feel that I should so record his record." Otto T. Marstrand (3).



When the Marstrand family moved to the Pacific side and Morgan Avenue in Balboa, Robert made friends with five boys about the same age who also lived on that street. They called themselves "The Morgan Avenue Gang". The other four boys were brothers Joe and Charles "Tuck" Hummer as well as brothers Earl and Elmer Orr. They lived next door to each other, attended both grammar and high school together and were constant companions (7).



The Travel Air Trainer E-4000 in which Robert learned to fly.

From an early age, Robert showed a passion for flying. Graduating from Balboa High School in 1928, he began taking flying lessons from the newly-formed Isthmian Airways, Inc., founded by Ralph E. Sexton (4), under the tutelage of Captain Miller. The plane they used was a Travel Air Trainer E-4000, a biplane on floats with two open cockpits. Following this training phase, Robert went on to get his

Limited Commercial Pilot's License in the United States at the Curtiss-Wright School at Valley Stream, Long Island, in January 1931. Returning home after that schooling we find him boarding the SS *Cristobal* again in June of that same year in order to attend the Dallas Aviation School in Dallas, Texas, and get his Full Transport Pilot's License. Once licensed, he returned to Panama and was hired by Captain C.E. Travis to fly the government planes for the newly established Air Mail Service of the Republic.

About Robert's pursuit of a flying career, his father once wrote: *"To his credit, all expenses connected with this field were finally met in full from his own funds. Out of funds earned by himself he proved his ability to solo, then on condition that it would be his personal obligation did he allow his States training to be started. On its completion, his only object was to meet his contract in full and this he accomplished."* (7).

On November 28, 1931, he and the Panamanian pilot Marcos Gelabert made history by piloting the Panamanian government-owned Keystone-Loening amphibian K-84 *"Commuter"*, christened **"3 de Noviembre"**, that carried the First Panama Inter-Province Air Mail. Leaving Paitilla Airport that morning, Robert flew the outgoing route landing at Taboga, La Chorrera, Bejuco, Anton, Penonome, Aguadulce, Santiago, Puerto Armuelles and David. Making the return flight the next day, November 29 (2), Marcos flew the return route. Marstrand continued flying for the Air Mail Service until the Panamanian Government shut down operations at the end of 1932.



The **"3 de Noviembre"** amphibian (14) and the First Flight Airmail cover signed by R. Marstrand, Pilot (2).



The amphibian and letter addressed to H.W. Hodge, c/o Pilot Marstrand signed by Marcos Gelabert, Pilot. Hodge was Postmaster at Pedro Miguel and obviously wanted a souvenir (2)

At the beginning of 1933 and the rush tourist trade, Isthmian Airways hired Robert as a relief pilot and he would stay with that airline in that capacity until the end of 1934. Isthmian Airways was the same company that had taught Marstrand to fly. While working for Isthmian, in 1933, he made a flight from

New Orleans to Panama ferrying a Travel Air single engine cabin plane for Aerovias Nacionales S.A. Finally, joining that company full time in 1935 as Chief Pilot, Robert sailed from Cristobal to New York on the SS *Virginia* in March of that same year to pick up a Stinson Tri-Motor passenger plane from American Airlines in Chicago, flying it solo to Panama for Aerovias Nacionales. (3)(7).

Flying in Panama in those days, with its rather primitive fields, offered many challenges as shown in this passage from ANNALS OF THE MISSOURI BOTANICAL GARDENS in 1935:

"Air travel [in Panama], however convenient, has its drawbacks for the botanist. Many miles of vegetation covered wilderness is given an exasperatingly distant enchantment. And should he be a timid soul, the wilderness becomes forbidding indeed if a precipitant descent is contemplated. In 1935 Woodson and Seibert, together with Dr. George W. Martin, had a taste of such interest when the landing gear of their plane was wrecked at the very moment of take-off, on an improvised landing field at Llanos del Volcan, in Chiriqui. Safe landing at the time was made by the skill of [pilot] Robert Marstrand. . . " (6)

By September 1935, Robert Marstrand, at age 23, was one of the leading pilots in Panama with some 3,000 hours of flying time and a total of 413 round trips between Panama and David (7) and many other flights around the Isthmus, Central America and the United States.

The Crash

Around mid-morning of a stormy and foggy day, two men near the town of Bejuco, tending their little plots of land on the slopes of El Cerro de La Trinidad, were startled by the loud and close sound of an airplane engine. Looking up, they witnessed what they thought was an airplane attempting to land on the thick jungle. Instead, it slammed into the densely wooded side of the mountain disintegrating as it struck the ground. Unknowingly, they had just witnessed the worst air disaster in the history of Panamanian aviation to date. Robert Marstrand and his seven passengers, including the two young schoolgirls who had so frivolously boarded the plane 20 minutes before, had plummeted into the "Bajos del Lloron" side of the mountain. The plane was practically buried beneath up-torn earth and underbrush at the foot of the mountain (9)(10)(11).





Cerro de La Trinidad as seen from the Central Highway and the jungle terrain of the area.

The two men moved quickly to the site and, coming upon the gruesome site, realized that there were no survivors. They walked five hours to the nearest town of Bejuco, bringing word of the accident to the local authorities. Using the crude telephone system of the time, word was relayed to the Capital as expediently as possible.

The Search Party And Crash Site

As soon as news of the crash reached the capital, plans for reaching the crash site were set in motion. There was no lack of volunteers and late that afternoon a large number has assembled at Bejuco where a small airfield was located. Manuel Pino, Chief of the National Police, whose brother Juan was a victim of the crash, took charge and selected 11 men to accompany him on the mournful trip to Cerro de La Trinidad. The group included the two farmers, who acted as guides, Elmer Orr, J.L. "Bugs" Reese, Jr., W.F. Bartholomew and five others. Leaving Bejuco at 11:30 that night, they began their dangerous march in the dark through the jungle. They arrived at the site around 5:00 in the morning of Saturday, September 14, to find a spectacle of total devastation. The plane had struck the side of the mountain with such force that members of the search party described it as being. . . *"a mangled mass of twisted, broken steel, scattered over the mountain side against which it crashed. The human cargo was scattered in all directions, some bodies as mere fragments lodged among the branches of nearby trees. Pilot Marstrand's body was the best preserved of all. One of the passengers struck the earth with such force that he was virtually driven into the ground, all that was to be seen of him above the ground being an arm"* (18). Chuck Hummer, son of Tuck Hummer, was very young at the time but recalls "being told about the gory scene upon their arrival at the site." (7). There is no doubt that Elmer Orr, who arrived at the site as part of the original search party, used those words to describe the scene.

The search party spent some 4 hours at the site searching for body parts and trying to identify their findings. Having completed their gruesome task, Comandante Pino decided to take back Marstrand's body, bury those they could identify, who were Berger Dahl, Sylva Romero, Juan B. Diaz, Maria Bartoli, Clarence Campbell and Antonio Joseph. The body of Juan Pino was not recognizable among the rest of the body parts which could not be identify. These parts were buried in a common unmarked grave. The

group then turned to the gruesome business of collecting all other human remains imbedded in trees and in plane parts and decided to burn them as it being impractical to bury. As they watched the debris of human, plane and tree parts burn, the group "*stood by in silent tribute to those who had been killed*" (18). At 9:00 AM, the search party started for Bejuco carrying Marstrand's body carefully wrapped in canvas and places on the back of a mule. Arriving at Bejuco airfield by 3:00 PM, they placed the body in one of Malek's Aerovias Nacionales airplanes. It was then flown back to the city by pilots Enrique Malek and Julio Estrada accompanied by Robert Redding. Marstrand's father Otto had sent word to please fly his boy home saying, "*He went away in a plane and I want him back in a plane.*"

Robert's body was cremated at Gorgas Hospital followed by private funeral service at 3:00 PM Sunday, September 15, in the Gorgas Hospital Mortuary Chapel. The next day, Monday, September 16, at 4:30 PM, a well-attended Memorial Service was held at the Union Church at Balboa. As the services were being conducted, a number of army airplanes flew in formation overhead in significant tribute to young Marstrand. One ship was missing from the formation (7). Following the service, the ashes of the young aviator were interred at Corozal Cemetery. On May 2, 1983, his younger sister Lillian had his remains removed from Corozal and relocated to the Greenwood Memorial Park in San Diego, California, so he could rest next to his parents (12).



Corozal Cemetery in the Panama Canal Zone and Marstrand's headstone at Greenwood Memorial Park in San Diego, California (3).

Other Participants In The Search

"Throughout the morning of Saturday, September 14, four pursuit planes from Albrook Field flew along the trail of the search party and were ready to lend assistance if needed. These planes were sent as a gesture of sympathy and respect by Lt. Col. W.T. Phillips, commander Albrook Field." (18). The planes had also been scouting Friday afternoon after the news of the crash were known, but they were never able to see the site from the air because of the dense jungle.

Several other young men, friends of Robert Marstrand, also went to Bejuco on Friday to aid with the search and helped by manning telephone connection with the capital Friday and Saturday. They also went up the trail Saturday afternoon to meet the exhausted search party as they returned helping to carry the body of Robert O. Marstrand to Bejuco. Among these were Dale Boggs, R.E. Minnix, William A. Stevenson and William B. Boggs (18).

What Could Have Caused The Crash

Those who have flown in the rainy season in Panama can understand the forces in one of those downpours. Here are two narratives pertaining to such storms:

"... the unit Commander, Captain Boland, was being flown from France Field [on the Atlantic side] to Balboa [on the Pacific] by Lt. R.C. Blessley in a DH-4 when they became lost in one of the early afternoon deluges that are a daily occurrence in Panama. Circling aimlessly amongst the torrential downpour, they finally cleared the storm and returned to France Field (Note B), to find that the paint and the dope had been completely stripped from the leading edges of the aircraft's wings and empennage, while the fabric covering on the prop had been completely stripped clean." (16)

"Aviators Estrada and Malek were of the opinion that the crash was caused by an air pocket near where the plane was wrecked. The Travel Air Wasp was the latest addition to the company of which Estrada and Malek are partners. Both voiced the opinion that Marstrand must have been unexpectedly caught in a strong downward current of air while groping his way through the heavy cloud banks that topped the mountain there" (18)

It is quite possible that Marstrand found himself in one of the above, if not worse, circumstances.

I had raised the question of possible overweight because the Travel Air A-6000 was advertised as a five-passenger plane with one pilot and Marstrand was carrying seven passengers. But Will Nebesky, a pilot for over 30 years and is a licensed instructor who has owned several planes and flown in Alaska, states *"that the particular plane Robert Marstrand was flying was a workhorse in Alaska and was used there a lot. It landed and took off easily using less than perfect landing strips and at various altitudes without difficulties as it was designed for such purposes and had a large engine. Unless overloaded with freight, seven passengers instead of five would not have been a problem" (3)*. Now, the plane could have been overloaded with freight, but I doubt that an experienced and conscientious pilot as Marstrand would have taken off with an overloaded aircraft.

So the actual cause, or causes, of the crash will remain forever locked within the jungle of El Cerro de La Trinidad.

The Plaque (7)

Shortly after the crash, the four remaining members of the Morgan Avenue Gang, brothers Joe and Charles "Tuck" Hummer, as well as brothers Earl and Elmer Orr, made the long trip to the site of the tragic accident with porters and guide to place a plaque and a wreath. A newspaper article, from the files of the University of Florida, Panama Canal Museum Collection (Name of paper and date unknown) described the event as follows:

"Joe and Charles Hummer and Earl and Elmer Orr, of Balboa, who from early school days were the closest friends of the late Robert Marstrand, have designed and constructed a bronze plaque to his memory and will leave Sunday to install it at the site of the recent airplane tragedy.

From the main roadway in the interior, they will proceed on horses to Los Bajos del Lloron del Cerro de La Trinidad, a four or five hour ride, to place the plaque on a natural rock foundation at the site of the crash and cement it in place to insure its permanence.

The plaque is inscribed: 'In Memory of Robert O. Marstrand - December 19, 1911 - September 13, 1935 - M.A.G.' in raised letters with the center-top design of wings and a propeller. It measures 18" x 11-1/2" and is cast in bronze from a pattern, the work of Charles Hummer, the design being the idea of Elmer Orr. The M.A.G. signifies the 'Morgan Avenue Gang' - a childhood 'gang' which was founded by these five boys who lived as neighbors for so many years.

Because of the remoteness of the site, and in order that friends may have an opportunity to see this testimonial, the plaque will be placed at the Balboa Clubhouse, at the request of the Marstrand family, Friday and Saturday. . . ."



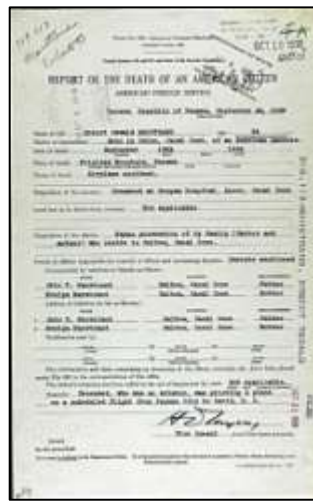
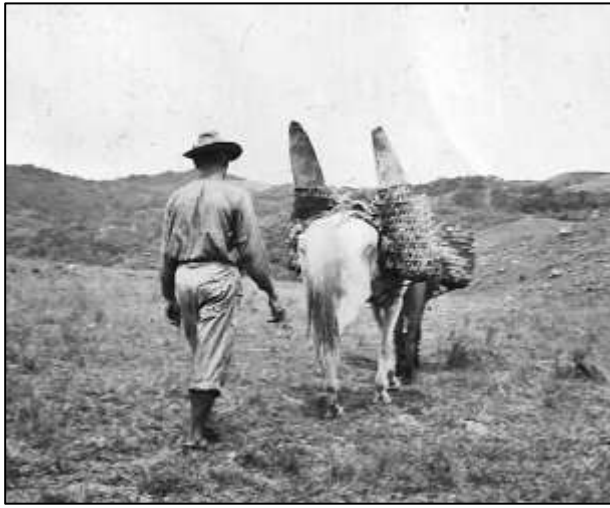
1. Going up to crash site to place plaque and wreath; 2. The "gory scene" at the site; 3. Note plane tire imbedded in tree and wreath placed by the Morgan Avenue Gang on behalf of the Marstrand family (7).



L-R: The graves of the passengers; The Plaque by the Morgan Avenue Gang (7).

In addition to the plaque, the four young men took a metal wreath on behalf of the Marstrand family to be placed at the site of the graves of those that died with Robert as his tribute to his passengers. The wreath included a metal card inscribed as follows:

"In the name of Bob Marstrand, this wreath will be placed by four friends of his early boyhood days by the graves of those who died with him at Los Bajos del Lloron del Cerro de La Trinidad on September 13, 1935. His perfect flying record and his remarkable reserve assure those who knew him that he died at the controls, executing every effort to protect his passengers."



L-R: One of the Plaque party returning with the propeller blades of the plane (7). Robert Oswald Marstrand's Death Certificate (3) and his photo.

Conclusion

In my research, I found no indication that the causes of the crash were ever investigated. The fact that they burned part, or all, of the wreckage would indicate that an investigation never took place, thus the causes are left to speculation and the imagination of the reader.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I want to give special thanks to Barbara Baldwin for the extraordinary efforts she made searching for information throughout the internet and providing me with much material.

And, lastly, I am indebted to Charles "Chuck" Hummer, President Emeritus of Friends of the Panama Canal Museum Collection at the University of Florida, who, with his wife Sandy, provided me with letters of information and made the unselfish and outstanding donation of photographs and numerous news articles that appeared at the time of this tragic event. His contributions made this a more complete article.

Thank you!

LRC

SOURCES

1. *Aeropuerto de Paitilla*, by Germinal Sarasqueta, 2010.
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3. Barbara Baldwin research and letters.
4. *Robert Marstrand and Isthmian Airways*, by Alan P. Bentz, 2013.
5. *The Little Airline That Could (Isthmian Airways)*, by Luis R. Celerier, 2012.
6. www.biostor.org/references, submitted by Barbara Baldwin.
7. Charles "Chuck" Hummer, Jr., son of Charles "Tuck" Hummer of the Morgan Avenue Gang, photos, letters clippings.

8. *History - Autoridad Aeronautica Civil de Panama,*
9. *Reading Eagle, PA newspaper, September 15, 1935, submitted by Barbara Baldwin.*
10. *The Pittsburg Press, PA, September 14, 1935, submitted by Barbara Baldwin.*
11. *Milwaukee Sentinel, WI, September 15, 1935, submitted by Barbara Baldwin.*
12. *Panama Canal Zone, Gorgas Hospital Mortuary Records, 1906-1991, submitted by Barbara Baldwin.*
13. *University of Florida, Panama Canal Museum Collection.*
14. *The Airmail History of the Canal Zone & Panama, 1918-1941, by Julius Grigore, Jr., 2011*
15. *Travel Air A-6000, en.wikipedia.org*
16. *Alea Supra Canalem, Wings Over the Canal, The Sixth Air Force, by Dan Hagedorn, 1970' provided by Jack Morton, BHS 51,*
17. *Panama American, Sunday Evening, September 15, 1935, submitted by Chuck Hummer*
18. *Star & Herald, Sunday Morning, September 15, 1935, submitted by Chuck Hummer*

NOTES

(A). *The Air Service organization in the Panama Canal Department had, for some time, been concerned that its sole operational field in the Canal Zone, France Field, was not only vulnerable to potential attackers as well as weather conditions - there being no alternate fields - but that it was also remote from the Pacific entrance to the Canal. As a result, in 1923, a swampy area by Ancon Hill was filled and an airfield established for protecting the Pacific entrance to the Canal. Initially called Balboa Fill Landing Field, it was renamed Albrook Field in 1924 in honor of First Lt. Frank P. Albrook who had died there from injuries received in an aircraft accident on August 12, 1924. He had optioned to extend his tour of duty in Panama just weeks before (16).*

(B). *The first "official" Air Service field in the Panama Canal Zone was established in March 1918 at a swamp near Cristobal called Coco Walk. It soon became known to the men as "Camp Misery". Shortly after the opening of Coco Walk, First Lt. Howard J. France, on April 24, 1918, crashed into Gatun Lake while flying a hydroplane and drowned. He was the first Army pilot killed while on active duty in the Canal Zone, and France field was named in his honor. (16)*

(C). *A Travel Air A-6000 was featured in the 1939 movie "Only Angels Have Wings", a fictional depiction of early airmail service in Peru, South America. It starred Cary Grant and Jean Arthur with a supporting cast of Thomas Mitchell, Rita Hayworth and Richard Barthelmess (15).*

ADDENDUM



L-R: Charles "Tuck" Hummer, father of Chuck Hummer; Location of the plaque at crash site; Elmer Orr (7).



L-R: Enrique Malek in 1939; Cockpit and passenger cabin (looking aft) of Travel Air.



Robert Marstrand

*"...was a dreamer... a youth with mind and heart literally in the clouds...
... he yearned to become an aviator."*

Excerpt from An American Saga, by Robert Daley