
cally. Locating a B-24 was somewhat improbable, but finding the wherewithal to ferry one more than 11,000 miles was highly improbable.

The Tucson Air Museum had \$1,000 in its treasury; the twenty members of the 9428th could scare up another \$200; and members of the Air Force Association, old B-24 drivers, ex-employees of the Convair Modification Center operated at Tucson International Airport during the war, and various other B-24 aficionados might be able to round up another few hundred—far short of the \$10-12,000 such a flight might cost.

“Mission Improbable”

Letters to members of the 7th Bomb Group Association, India-based during the War, brought in several hundred, and appeals in aviation publications increased the take by several hundred more, but India was still a long way off.

Then, just in time for Christmas 1968, a letter to the President of Shell Oil Co. was finally shuffled to the desk of a new vice president, who, coincidentally, had flown the big birds during the War. The offer of a Shell credit card to cover all fuel, a truly magnanimous gesture, made “Mission Improbable” not only possible, but probable as well.

Through an article in the Air Force Times, a volunteer crew of Regular Air Force personnel was assembled. To make the “Mission” more interesting, a very accomplished fighter pilot with more than 5,000 hours, none in B-24s and none in any other 4-engine aircraft, was chosen as pilot.

Lt. Colonel LeRoy W. Svendsen, Legislative Liaison Officer to the House of Representatives, then chose as his copilot Major James A. Boggs, Flight Test Officer of the 4453rd Combat Crew Training Wing, Davis-Monthan AFB, another superb fighter pilot with no 4-fan time, but with a yen to fly anything with wings. (Since returning to Tucson, Major Boggs has been unfortunate enough to get thirty minutes or so in the only B-29 ‘Superfort still flying.

All-Volunteer Crew

Svendsen and Boggs had flown together in Southeast Asia and in the Air Commandos at Hurlburt AFB, so they made an ideal team.

To add a little more spice to the adventure, Captain N. B. Loadholt III, a navigator on C-141s out of Travis who had never navigated without sophisticated electronic equipment since finishing navigation school, was chosen to operate the astro compass, sextant, and drift meter common to World War II. Staff Sergeant Joseph E. Hansen, England AFB, Louisiana was chosen as radio operator even though he hadn’t flown as a crew member for twelve years.

To round out the crew and to add a measure of experience, Master Sergeant Robert K. Kent, also of Travis, was picked by Colonel Svendsen as flight engineer. It had been 24 years since Kent had accumulated 250 hours in 24s, but since the War he had been a flight engineer on B-29, C- 54, C-118, C-121, C-124, and C-141 aircraft and he was eager to relearn the systems on the 24.

Long before the completion of “Mission Improbable,” it was said of Kent that, “he was the best mother a B-24 ever had.”

Help From All Around

Shell’s offer seemed to stimulate the flow of green stuff to Tucson: Pratt & Whitney, the manufacturers of the four R-1830-43 engines, put a nice sum in the pot; General Dynamics/Fort Worth, formerly Convair, who had completed this particular craft on 7 September 1944, made a contribution; Honeywell, Inc., had built the turbo supercharger regulators and were confident enough of the serviceability of their units to sweeten the kitty.

And more than 500 individuals thought enough of the B- 24 to send in sums ranging from 50 cents to \$100. One wag from the 7th Bomb Group Association sent a charm bracelet of Indian pennies. We wonder if he was really with us!

Pledges of services worth thousands of dollars were received from both Pan American Airways and Trans World Airlines, which promised to provide maintenance and communications support, plus operations handling, at their landing points all along the route.

By the middle of February 1969, the sum in hand had reached \$6,500 and the decision was made to leap off for India. Only at the last minute was it realized that we were importing an instrument of war (tired as it may have been) and therefore needed an import license.

An FAA registration number was needed, as were an FCC license and a ferry permit. But luck was with us, and N7866 was assigned to the aircraft just a few days before departure of the crew on the 17th of March. The import license and the certificate of registration arrived on the 18th and departed with the writer on the 19th.

Transition At Poona

A warm and cordial reception by the officers of No. 6 Squadron, Maritime Reconnaissance, Indian Air Force, Poona on the 22nd was followed on the 24th by our first view of the craft we had come halfway around the globe to collect. On the morning of the 25th, a fine crew of IAF personnel, headed by Squadron Leader Marwa, a colorful Sikh with beard and turban, commenced the transition training of our crew.

After two days of intensive ground school and in- flight training, the crew was considered ready for a trial navigation flight into Bombay. Accordingly, on the 28th, the two crews and the writer flew into Bombay airport where the Trans World Airlines’ FAA certificated Indian mechanic kindly inspected the old craft and certified its airworthiness.

On the morning of the 28th, with a colorful ceremony, the Liberator was handed over by S/Ldr. Marwa to Col. Svendsen and the long journey to Tucson began. We were all touched by the pride with which the Indians presented the aircraft to us, but we couldn’t fail to notice their mixed emotions.

These same crewmen had flown this aircraft for almost 20 years and seeing the old bird fly away was very much like losing a member of one’s family. We all felt a deep sense of gratitude toward our Indian hosts, who had provided us with the best of treatment, and we also felt a great respect for their proficiency as pilots and crewmen. Anxious as we were to get home, we were sorry to have to bid farewell to those fine airmen.