

Ocean Bridge

The History of RAF Ferry Command

Carl Christie. *Ocean Bridge: The History of RAF Ferry Command* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995) 458 pages, \$39.95, ISBN 0-8020-0638-8.

The story of Ferry Command is a fascinating one indeed, especially in the capable hands of Carl Christie. This little known, and certainly little studied, branch of the World War II air services made a solid contribution to the war effort. The ferry service transported, by air, North American-built aircraft to Britain as well as freight and passengers for use on the fields of battle in Europe and the Far East. When it began, in 1940, trans-Atlantic flight was still in its infancy, and the proponents of the ferry service, led by Lord Beaverbrook, had a lot to prove. Christie details this important enterprise from its inception to its conclusion in 1945. Over this time Ferry Command delivered 10,000 much needed aircraft across the oceans for use by the RAF. Also duly noted is the far-reaching contribution made by the ferrying organization to the post-war usage of trans-Atlantic flight in the domestic sphere.

The story of Ferry Command unfolds as a truly international enterprise. Although mainly undertaken by the British, American and Canadian air services, Christie shows how the ferrying operations relied primarily on co-operation between these three countries, but also on countless other allied countries whose resources were utilized to make the huge leaps across the world possible. Britain, America and Canada took responsibility for administration, personnel and training as well as for the development of suitable airfields. The original route crossed the North Atlantic in one leap, delivering Hudsons to Scotland. As the success of the operations were

proven, new routes were Instituted to meet the needs of different airplanes, the theatres to which they were being delivered, and the vagaries of the weather. Within a very short time Ferry Command was crossing the globe, through Bermuda, Greenland, Iceland, South America, Africa, the Middle East and across the Pacific. Christie includes maps which outline the major routes, emphasizing the scope of Ferry Command operations.

Christie provides detailed descriptions of the complexity of the ferrying operation in political terms. Beginning with the reluctance of the Air Ministry to sanction the delivery of planes by air to the jockeying for position by all governments involved, the tale unfolds. Not only official government agencies contributed to the execution of plans for Ferry Command, but also private Interests from Canada, the U.S. and Britain. The South American airfields in particular are shown to have relied heavily on Juan Trippe and his Pan American Airlines, operating on behalf of the United States War Department. The evolution of the ferrying organization through its beginnings as the Canadian Pacific Air Services Department, to the Atlantic Ferry Organization (ATFERO), to Ferry Command and finishing its tenure as No. 45 Group of RAF Transport Command crosses political, civilian and military domains. Meticulous research shows in Christie's ability to sort through the various interests involved. He capably illustrates the complexity of the nature of Ferry Command, and the immense amount of work which went into carrying out the task of trans-global airplane delivery.

By far the most important part of the story of Ferry Command is that of the actual missions, and Christie dedicates a great deal of his book to this end. Christie not only furnishes descriptive records of individual ferrying assignments, but offers detailed character sketches of the individuals who did the job. Wherever possible, he

has included personal anecdotes derived from diaries and letters to add a human dimension to the narrative. This is also where Christie's research skills shine. He does not take anecdotal tales at face value. Instead, he has searched the archives for supporting evidence, which he provides when they exist, and notes when they do not. The story of the first aircraft lost by Ferry Command is greatly enhanced by details supplied by the weather forecaster, the flying control officer, the lone survivor, the flying superintendent and a pilot whose understanding of the technical aspects allowed him to present some theories about the possible causes of the crash, (pp. 62-72) The fact that the Hudson also carried a celebrity, Sir Frederick Banting, who was also killed in the crash, adds to the poignancy of the narrative, and puts a real human face on the historical record. Christie illustrates every type of Ferry Command operation with personal observation, which, when backed up by archival sources, contributes a very full picture of the missions.

Between the political mechanisms which built the organization and the personal recollections of day to day missions, *Ocean Bridge* encompasses all aspects of the ferrying process. Christie includes problems with lack of personnel, and the recruitment methods employed to alleviate these difficulties. Along with manpower shortages Ferry Command encountered a need for a training program which enabled airmen to be able to undertake their assignments in the safest manner possible, as quickly as possible. These new training procedures, and the methods used to implement them is also well covered by the author. Accurate weather predictions proved necessary for the successful completion of trans-oceanic flight, which led to developments in the field of meteorology. Not only are the successes and advancements made by Ferry Command

examined - Christie also acknowledges failures. He devotes an entire chapter to what he calls, "the darker side of the Ferry Command story," (p.245) the sometimes heavy losses of manpower and machinery.

This book provides the definitive account of Ferry Command. Christie has mined a wealth of sources, with the result that few questions are left to be answered. He recognizes the difficulty in assessing the true value of the ferrying operation while making it clear that it had an impact. Well-chosen photographs accompany the narrative, as do detailed maps. Unfortunately, however, the Pacific route map is not included, although this does not detract from the other supporting materials. Christie also intrigues the reader with talk of sabotage, but, aside from dismissing the idea, never expands on the issue. However, very little can be said to detract from the fact that Christie has produced a book which adds a valued chapter to the study of the World War II air services.

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