

END OF AN ERA

The curtain falls on Provincetown-Boston Airline after nearly forty years

An historic and rather sad event passed into the annals of aviation history on the night of September 7 1988 when the almost legendary name of Provincetown-Boston Airline, better known as PBA, ceased to exist. At 2235 that evening, their highest houred and best loved DC-3, N136PB, landed at Barnstable Municipal Airport, Hyannis, on the airline's final scheduled flight - EA2863. With the passing of PBA, the final regular scheduled DC-3 passenger service in the United States also came to an end, and all ten DC-3s have now been withdrawn and parked at Hyannis awaiting sale by auction.

AN INTERNATIONAL OPERATOR?

During the fifties and sixties the name PBA rose to prominence amongst the giants of North American air transport. But it all started from very humble beginnings way back in 1949 when the appropriately named Provincetown-Boston Airline opened a summer only scheduled service linking Provincetown Municipal Airport with the large Logan Airport serving Boston. Founded by John C. van Arsdale, PBA had originally commenced operations as a fixed base operator and flying school at Marston Mills in 1946, and at Provincetown in 1948 under the name of Cape Cod Flying Service. The name Provincetown-Boston Airline was adopted on November 30 1949 when the airline opened its scheduled service to Boston. Initially, a two-seat Cessna 140 was used, but as traffic grew this was supplemented with twin-engined Cessna T-50 Bobcats and those beautifully elegant Lockheed 10 Electras.



A fatal accident during 1949 cost five lives, and on July 8 1953 one of the airline's Stinson Voyagers crashed into the sea just two miles from the shore at Provincetown with the loss of two lives, but nevertheless the summer only schedule became well established and attracted a regular and enthusiastic clientele.

The service from Provincetown to Boston only spanned 45 miles, but crossed the expanse of water named Cape Cod Bay. Ironically, because of this water crossing, the airline ran into certification problems for its service as it flew outside the three mile "territorial" limit, and the route was, therefore, designated to be an international service! Van Arsdale, however, has not convinced by Washington's seemingly ridiculous ruling, and the arrival of a Provincetown-Boston Airline Cessna Bobcat at Logan Airport soon became an everyday occurrence throughout the summer months.

WORLD'S FIRST SHUTTLE SERVICE?

During the lean winter months, PBA undertook charter work to ensure some form of utilisation for its aircraft. Van Arsdale even chartered his aircraft to the young John F. Kennedy during the fifties to fly him around Cape Cod during three congressional campaigns.

In a 1957 edition of the 'ABC World Airways Guide', nestling comfortably between the massive transcontinental schedules of Northwest Airlines and the extensive local services of Ozark Airlines, can be found the delightfully simple timetable for Provincetown-Boston Airline. At that time the company was providing a several times daily service between the two points with Electra and Bobcat aircraft. At the height of the 1958 season, four round trips daily were scheduled during the week, but a note in the timetable reads that - "On Friday afternoons Shuttle Flights are operated from Boston to Provincetown from 1600 to 1930. All passengers will be accommodated during this period in order of appearance with planes departing as soon as full. Passengers with reservations for Shuttle Flights will have preference over passengers without reservations, but all passengers checking in during this period will be accommodated." At

HEADING PHOTO: Immaculate DC-3 N137PB undergoes the customary walk-round check at Miami on October 24 1985. (Stuart Howe) LEFT: DC-3 N38PB joined PBA's expanding fleet in September 1975.



Many thousands of miles away from her normal habitat, PBA's Lockheed 10 Electra N38BB at Anchorage, surrounded by oil drums, snow and the formidable range of Chugach mountains in the background. (Peter Keating)

this time the single air fare for the route was a modest \$7.80, while a return ticket could be purchased for \$14.80.

No doubt extra flights were also laid on in the opposite direction on Monday mornings in order to cope with the demands of the local business community, and in those days thirty years ago the little Cessna Bobcats and slightly larger Lockheed 10 would bring passengers to Boston to connect with the American Airlines DC-6 service to Buffalo, Chicago and Los Angeles, or perhaps even the Trans World Airlines Constellation schedule to New York, Dayton, Chicago and Los Angeles. But whatever the flight, during the summer months there would be a connecting flight to Provincetown courtesy of a PBA aircraft. Lean winter months prompted van Arsdale to seek alternative employment for his otherwise under used fleet, and on January 1 1960 he bought out the Florida based Naples Airlines from its founder and proprietor Joseph L. Brown. This company, founded in 1955 as Naples Air Service, was based at Naples and flew a Cessna 195, a Lockheed 10 and a Beech 18 on a scheduled service



Former American Airlines DC-3 N31PB wearing Naples Airlines titles and PBA tail logo.

Wearing the colours of PBA's associate Naples Airlines, Martin 4-0-4 N40424 rests at Miami on August 31 1977. (Dennis Goodwin via Peter Keating)



linking Naples with Miami. At a stroke van Arsdale had found alternative employment for his fleet during the winter months by sending the PBA fleet south to the sunshine of Florida and services were soon opened from Naples to Fort Myers and Marco Island. Thus, during the summer months PBA's fleet was used on the PBA link between Provincetown and Boston, while during the winter they flew on the Naples Airlines services in Florida. The move south generally took place during September, while the return to Provincetown occurred in April, and it was this single shift of staff and aircraft that probably contributed most to PBA's early success.

THE DAKOTA TAKES OVER

Even following the take-over of Naples Airlines, PBA continued to operate its services with a fleet of Cessna Bobcat and Lockheed 10 aircraft. However, several single-engined modern American light aircraft and even three Piper Apaches were acquired before the rapid expansion of the early seventies saw the introduction of a large fleet of DC-3s. Initially, PBA acquired two C-53 Dakotas in February 1968 to replace the veteran Lockheed 10s. A third DC-3 was bought in March 1970, and over the next decade the network flourished and the PBA fleet grew to no less than a dozen Dakotas. All these aircraft were early production models, including ten that had originally been delivered new off the production line to some of North America's most famous carriers, including American Airlines, Eastern, Northwest, Braniff and United.

As the fleet grew with the addition, on average, of one Dakota each year, so the route network expanded with a Naples to Tampa service being introduced in 1968 and a Punta Gorda to Tampa route in 1977. In 1979 the airline carried some 220,000 passengers on its services, and following the handover of the airline to van Arsdale's two sons - Peter and John Jnr. in 1980, PBA grew very rapidly, carrying no less than 1.3 million passengers in the first nine months of 1984 alone, and becoming the largest regional commuter airline in the United States in the process. This gigantic leap in the airline's turnover was achieved thanks to the acquisition of a fleet of NAMC YS-11 and Martin 4-0-4 aircraft, but van Arsdale Snr. felt that his sons had "too brashly expanded what was a cosy and profitable regional service".

Airways by PBA, including their five strong fleet of Martin 4-0-4 airliners. Another smaller carrier, Dolphin Airlines flying Bandeirantes, was also acquired in January 1984. But generally 1984 was a very disturbing year for PBA, and a fatal accident near Boston in June was followed by a passenger being killed in September when another aircraft crashed following the taking on of the wrong type of fuel at Naples. The take-over of Marco Island Airways occurred on October 5, but after a four month long investigation into PBA's activities, the FAA found several deficiencies in the airline's pilot training, safety and maintenance violations. As a result of this



Familiar sight at Miami as PBA Martin 4-0-4 N40425 comes (Peter Keating) in to land.



Delightful shot of a Marco Airways Martin 4-0-4 just (Peter J. Bish) seconds before touchdown.

unfavourable report, early in November 1984 the FAA revoked PBA's operating authority and the airline was grounded on November 10. However, PBA appealed against this decision and resumed operations initially with its twin-Cessna aircraft on November 25. At this stage, PBA employed 1,600 people, possessed a total of 104 aircraft ranging in size from nine-seat Cessna 402s to 58-seat YS-11s, and flew more than five hundred sectors each day.

Very soon the other aircraft were returned to service, but within days of the grounding order being lifted disaster overtook PBA once again. On December 6 1984, a Bandeirante en-route from Jacksonville to Tampa on flight schedule 839 crashed into woods shortly after taking off, killing all thirteen passengers and crew. Within two days, PBA's passenger loads had plummeted by a half, and with the airline's worried bankers becoming increasingly agitated at the airline's desperate situation, PBA filed for bankruptcy on March 13 1985.

Initially, operations continued although the fleet was reduced in size following the sale of a number of aircraft, and eventually the ailing carrier was taken over by the now defunct People Express, who paid \$30 million for PBA. Then in 1986 Bar Harbor bought out PBA, as a result of which it became a part of the giant Texas Air Corporation. The decision was soon taken to replace the ten strong DC-3 fleet with "sleek new turboprop" aircraft, and PBA's run as one of North America's best love'd classic aircraft operators had come to an end.

THOSE UNFORTUNATE VIOLATIONS

November 10 1984 was a bleak day indeed in the history of PBA as not only did the FAA cancel the airline's air carrier operating certificate, but it also withdrew the pilot's licence of PBA's president, John van Arsdale Jnr.

Many charges were laid at the door of PBA, and although some might be considered minor, there were a number of incidents that were rather spectacular. Most significant of these was the occasion on which van Arsdale himself forced a company pilot to fly a YS-11 from Jacksonville to Naples when he was not rated on the type, and with van Arsdale in the right hand seat acting as co-pilot when he, also, had not checked out on the type. This particular charter began in Hyannis carrying a party of tourists to Naples aboard one of PBA's Martin 4-0-4s. Some forty minutes after take-off, while en-route to a refuelling stop at Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the aircraft suffered an hydraulic failure. This meant that the Martinliner would have to land without any flaps, nosewheel steering and only emergency braking would be available. Also, the crew would have to lower the undercarriage manually. Van Arsdale Jnr., in command for this leg, elected to divert to Jacksonville, where PBA had established a maintenance base. This decision the FAA later questioned in view of the poor mechanical state of the aircraft, but the Martinliner safely reached Jacksonville, where she was subsequently grounded pending

PBA officially took over Marco Island Airways and its fleet of five Martin 4-0-4s on October 5 1984.



Famous aircraft from a very famous line - PBA's DC-3 N136PB is the world's highest houred commercial airliner, and has carried airline passengers almost continuously during her fifty one years of flying. (Peter Keating)

repairs. The passengers were then transferred to a PBA YS-11, and van Arsdale Jnr then asked his first officer on the Martinliner, Mike Connolly, to fly the YS-11 with him to Naples. If he had not agreed then it was proposed that van Arsdale would fly the YS-11 single-handed, and in view of this impractical idea coupled with Connolly's fear that he might lose his job, agreement was reached that Connolly would captain the aircraft with van Arsdale as first officer, although neither pilots was type



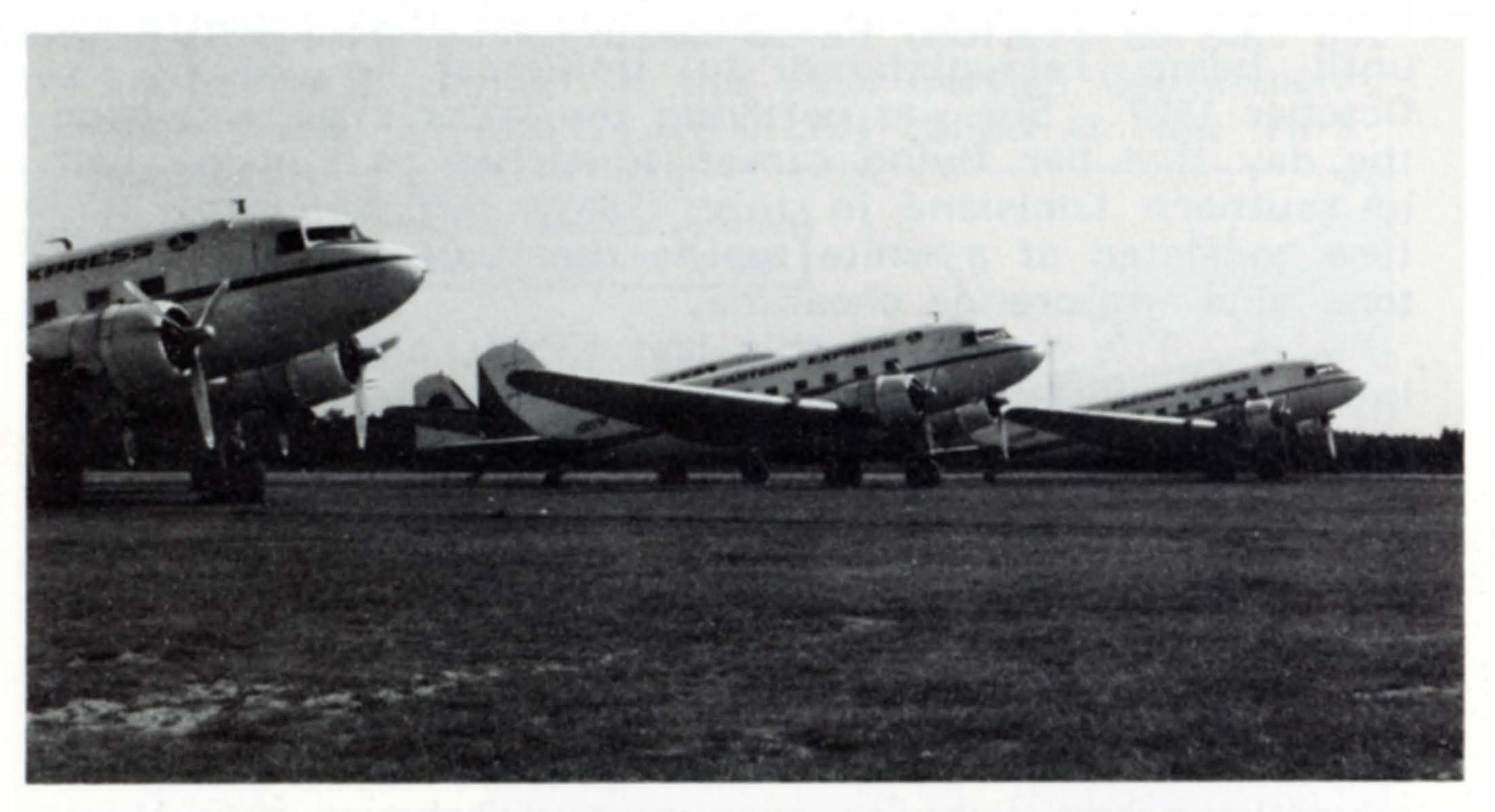
PBA's Martin 4-0-4 N40413 at rest during November 1983.

(Dennis Goodwin via Peter Keating)

rated on the YS-11.

Although this incident was an isolated event in PBA's operations, another former PBA pilot complained to the FAA in September 1984 that the airline's pilots were expected to fly whatever the weather conditions, and that the airline even offered more money to pilots who managed to land at airports when the weather was below company minima. This particular pilot quoted several incidents including one where he had to fly to Key West in a DC-3 through a hurricane. Although all other airline companies had cancelled their flights to Key West that day, PBA's DC-3 got through, although the captain reported that it needed both pilots to keep the aircraft on the ground while they were taxying!

There were several other minor violations investigated by the FAA, including some where the old DC-3s had exceeded permitted hours between scheduled









Showing off her unique ventral airstairs, Martin 4-0-4 N40407 adorned in PBA livery. (MAP)

maintenance checks, but the times involved were relatively small, and normally would not have excessively worried the FAA. But this investigation cast an evil spotlight upon PBA, and 1984 was undoubtedly the year of the company's downfall.

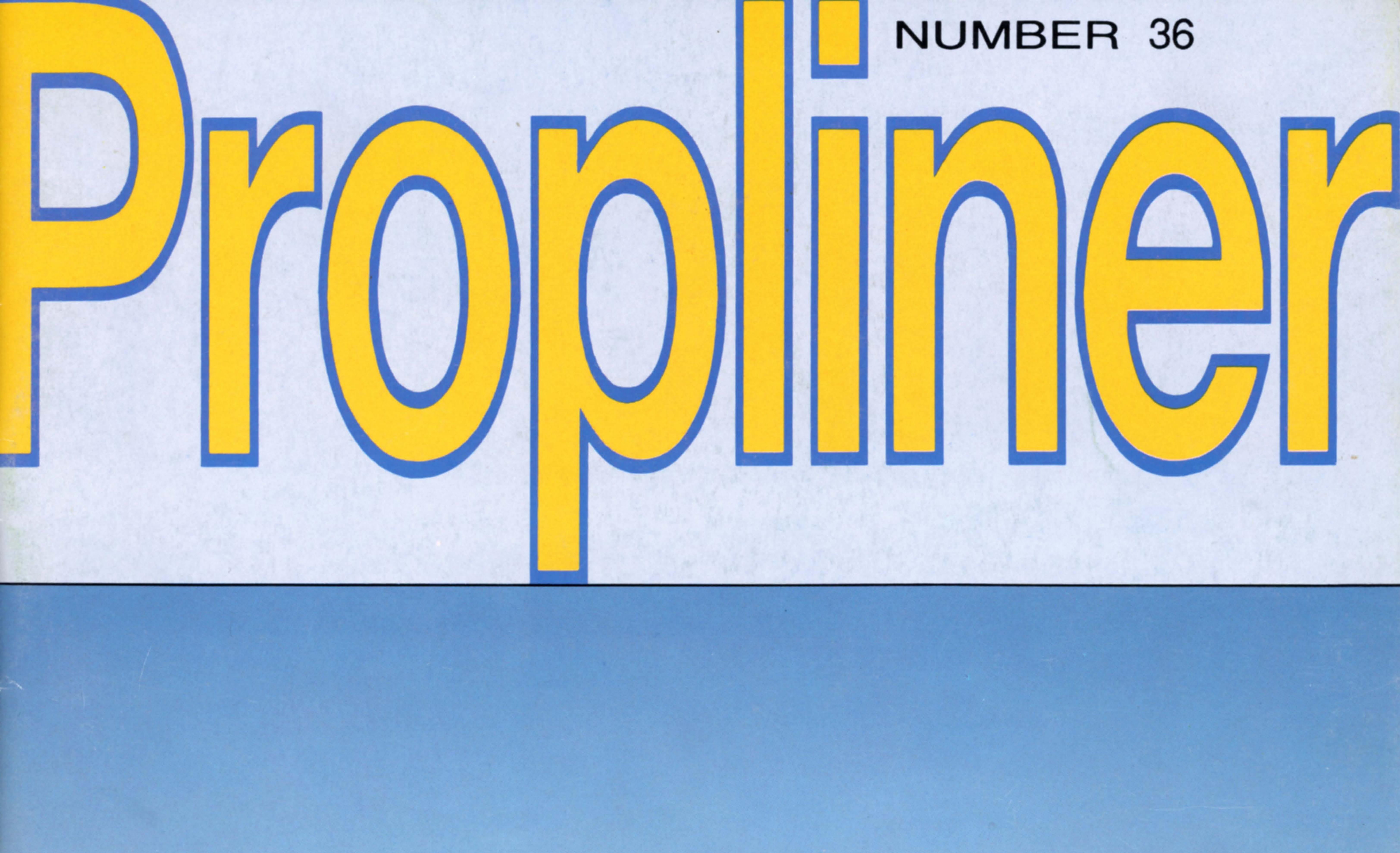
GOOD OLD THIRTY SIX PAPA BRAVO

For some twenty years the Dakotas formed the backbone of PBA's fleet. During the summer months the Dakotas flew schedules from Provincetown to Boston, while throughout the winter these aircraft earned their keep ferrying tourists and businessmen between Fort Myers, Naples, Key West, Tampa and Miami. By 1984 scheduled passenger services linked Boston with Hyannis, Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, New Bedford and, of course, Provincetown. With the take over by Bar Harbor in 1986 the route structure was varied, and by the time of their withdrawal in September 1988, many of the Dakotas were flying in the smart blue and white livery of Eastern Express, in whose livery the remainder of the Bar Harbor fleet carried. These Dakotas remained plying regularly between Provincetown, Boston, Hyannis, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. To the very end, this unique fleet was hard worked, with the Hyannis to Boston route being flown up to twelve times daily in each direction, while the airline's original route connecting Provincetown with Boston was flown six times daily.

Pride of the Dakota fleet was the legendary 1937-vintage DC-3 N136PB, which was originally delivered to Eastern Airlines as NC18121 in October 1937. Purchased by PBA in January 1974, this DC-3 was not the oldest of its type in the fleet, with N43PB being originally delivered to United Airlines three months earlier. But N136PB was the highest houred passenger aircraft still flying in the world. By 1982, this aircraft had amassed the formidable total of 86,000 flying hours, and when her Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp radials were shut down on the evening of September 7 at Hyannis, her log books revealed a grand total of 91,367 flying hours.

It is understood that Bar Harbor, a subsidiary of the giant Texas Air Corporation, intends to auction the fleet of ten DC-3s. Hopefully, many of these aircraft will soon be flying again, although perhaps some may even find their way to museums in view of the thousands of wonderful hours of aviation history that they have created.

UPPER LEFT: Sad scene at Hyannis Airport on September 12 with no less than five DC-3s visible in this picture alone lined up awaiting an early decision on their fate. (Carol Smith via Roger Kunert) LEFT: Final livery worn by the DC-3s was the blue and white colour scheme of Eastern Express. Sadly the aircraft survived this transition to their new role for only a matter of months before being pensioned off. (Dave Richardson)





The International review of piston-engined and turboprop transport aircraft