

The China Clipper

The *China Clipper* (NC14716) was the first of three Martin M-130 four-engine flying boats built for Pan American Airways and was used to inaugurate the first commercial transpacific airmail service from San Francisco to Manila in November 1935. Built at a cost of \$417,000 by the Glenn L. Martin Company in Baltimore, Maryland, it was delivered to Pan Am on October 9, 1935. It was one of the largest airplanes of its time.

On November 22, 1935, it took off from Alameda, California in an attempt to deliver the first airmail cargo across the Pacific Ocean. Although its inaugural flight plan called for the *China Clipper* to fly over the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge (still under construction at the time), upon take-off the pilot realized the plane would not clear the structure, and was forced to fly narrowly under instead. On November 29, the airplane reached its destination, Manila, after traveling via Honolulu, Midway Island, Wake Island, and Guam, and delivered over 110,000 pieces of mail. The inauguration of ocean airmail service and commercial air flight across the Pacific was a significant event for both California and the world. Its departure point is California Historical Landmark #968 and can be found in the Naval Air Station at Alameda.

During World War II, the *China Clipper* was painted olive drab with a large American flag painted below the cockpit. The *China Clipper* was referred to as "Sweet Sixteen" by Pan American personnel. The "Sixteen" is a reference to the aircraft's registration number NC14716.

The *China Clipper* remained in Pan Am service until January 8, 1945, when it was destroyed in a crash in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Flight 161 had started at Miami bound for Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo, making its first stop to refuel at Puerto Rico before flying on to Port-of-Spain. After one missed approach, on the second approach to land it came down too low and hit the water at a high speed and nose-down a mile-and-a-quarter short of its intended landing area. The impact broke the hull in two which quickly flooded and sank. Twenty-three passengers and crew were killed; there were seven survivors including Captain C.A. Goyette, Pilot-in-Command, and Captain L.W. Cramer, First Officer

Both the United States and Philippine Islands issued stamps for Air Mail carried on the first flights in each direction of PAA's Transpacific "China Clipper" service between San Francisco, CA, and Manila, PI. (November 22 – December 6, 1935).

First National Pictures released the movie *China Clipper* in 1936. It told a thinly disguised bio of the life of Juan Trippe during the founding of PanAm. The film made use of much documentary footage of the actual airplane, as well as aerial photography.

