

**FAST CLIP**

One of a dozen Boeing-built Model 314 Pacific Clippers flies over the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

PHOTO: BOEING ARCHIVES

# Long Way Home



Flying west to go east, flying boat survives onset of war and sets flight record

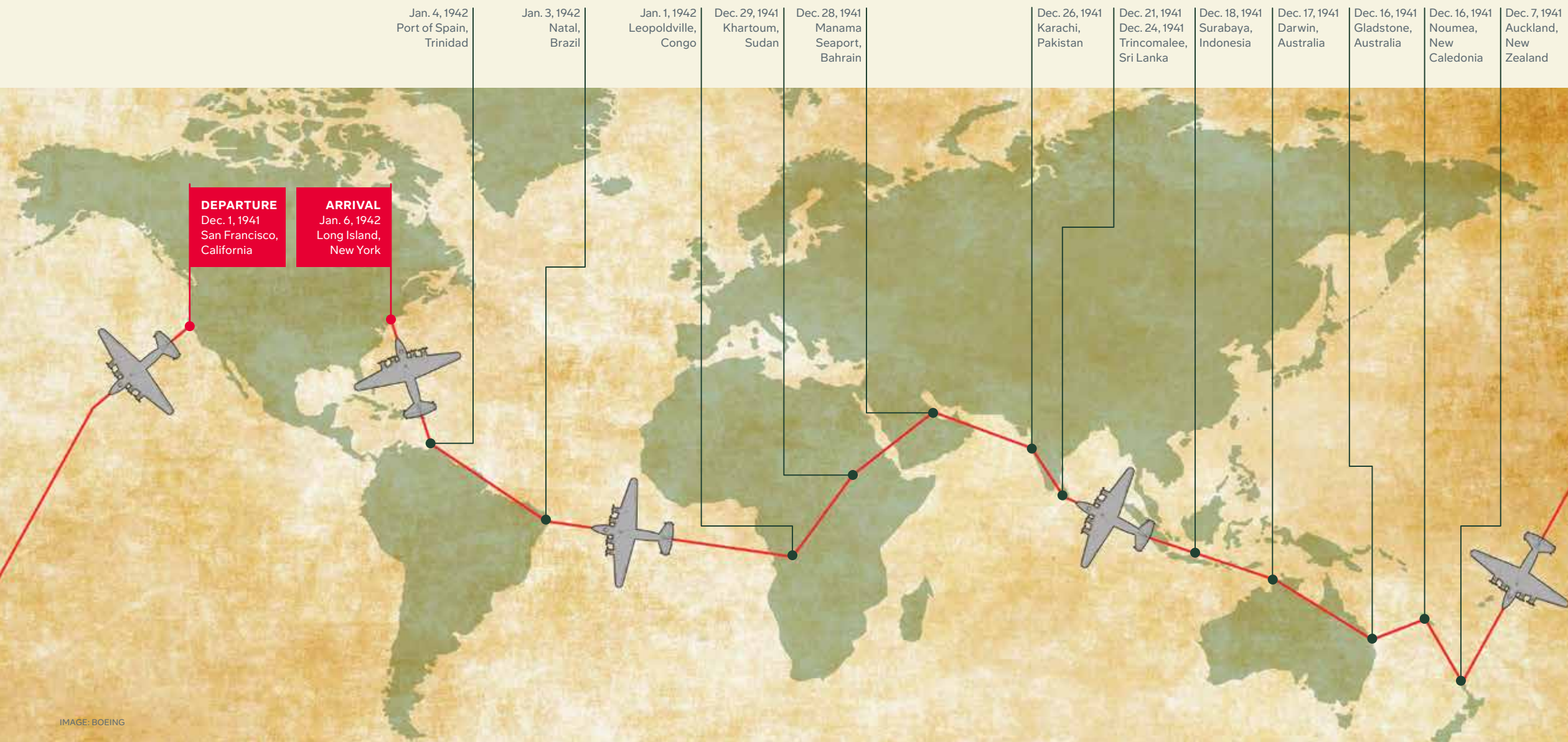
BY KEVIN KELLY, BOEING WRITER

On Dec. 7, 1941, Pan American Airways had three Pacific Clippers in flight over the Pacific Ocean when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred.

One of the flying boats had just two hours left on its five-stop, weeklong flight from San Francisco to Auckland, New Zealand, when radio operator John Poindexter received news of the attack. Fearing an assault on Pan Am facilities in the Pacific region, Poindexter passed the message to the plane's captain, Robert Ford.



IMAGE: BOEING



## FOLLOWING THE STARS

The crew charted a westward course from Auckland to New York using a paper atlas and celestial navigation.

### Directives without directions

On Dec. 1, before departing San Francisco, Ford had received a top-secret letter from Pan Am. If war broke out during the flight, the letter directed Ford to:

- Safely deliver the passengers and cargo.
- Deliver the aircraft to a Pan Am facility in the United States or to the U.S. military.
- Destroy the aircraft if it was in imminent risk of capture or under attack.

Ford, a certified master of flying boats, safely landed the plane in Auckland on Dec. 7, 1941, marking the fifth stop of the trip from San Francisco. There, the crew spent a week at the American embassy, stripping the aircraft of unnecessary items, removing identifying markings as best they could, and loading gas, oil, spare parts and provisions for the 10-person crew.

### No radio, no maps

In Auckland, Ford received orders to fly west from New Zealand to New York. He was to maintain radio silence throughout the flight, and the crew had no maps to guide their long westward route.

Navigator Roderick Brown bought an atlas from a library in New Zealand. His celestial navigation skills and the coordinates from the atlas provided the only data for the flight path.

### Low fuel, food and funds

Late in the evening of Dec. 16, Ford left the harbor at Auckland and flew in blackout conditions to Noumea, New Caledonia, picking up Pan Am staff who were stranded there and taking them to Gladstone, Australia. A local banker gave Ford a \$500 advance to cover food and fuel expenses for the long trip home. That was the only assistance and support the crew received. From there, the Pacific Clipper flew west to Darwin, in Australia's Northern Territory, and on to Surabaya, in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia).

## FLOAT AND FLY

Boeing Model 314, NC18602, the Pacific Clipper, was built to navigate open seaports and calm waters, not rivers.

The next stop was Trincomalee, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), for refueling. Aviation fuel was in short supply, as it was reserved for military use. Flight engineers Swede Roth and Jocko Parish transferred all the remaining aviation fuel to the two main fuselage tanks, then filled the reserve tanks with lower-octane automobile gasoline. Each 5-gallon (19-liter) can of gasoline had to be carried over the wing and emptied into the reserve tanks by hand. The crew would use the aviation fuel for takeoff and to climb to altitude, then use the automobile gasoline while cruising.

### Engine fire

The Clipper departed Trincomalee on Christmas Eve morning. Less than an hour into the flight, the No. 3 Wright Cyclone engine burst into flames due to a broken piston, likely the result of excess heat from the automobile gasoline.

The aircraft returned to Trincomalee, where the crew made all the repairs in a single day. On Dec. 26, the plane was airborne again and headed for Karachi, India (now Pakistan). After making a stop in Bahrain, Ford landed the flying boat on the Nile River in Sudan.



## FOR THE RECORD

The final landing at LaGuardia marked the completion of the 37-day, 18-stop, 31,500-mile (50,694-kilometer) west-to-east flight from San Francisco and New Zealand to New York. The Clipper had flown for nearly 210 hours, crossed the equator four times, flown over five continents and three oceans, and stopped in 12 nations.

### No denying the Nile and the Congo

Clippers were designed to land on calm waters near populous seaports. The narrow banks, swift currents and debris of the Nile River posed dangers to the 84,000-pound (38,102-kilogram) aircraft with its 152-foot (46-meter) wingspan.

But the crew pressed on. Ford reached Leopoldville (now Kinshasa in Congo), docking at a rudimentary aircraft service facility on the Congo River.

After the crew had rested and the plane had been replenished, it was time to face two of the biggest obstacles of the journey home. First, the flying boat had to get in the air quickly to avoid nearby rapids and waterfalls in the Congo River. Next would come the nonstop, 20-hour, 3,583-mile (5,766-kilometer) flight across the Atlantic to Natal, Brazil.

Following that, the crew would stop at Port of Spain, Trinidad, before making the final leg of the flight to New York.

### Unannounced arrival

In the early morning hours of Jan. 6, 1942, the radio operator at LaGuardia Airport received the following message: "Pan Am Pacific Clipper, inbound from Auckland, New Zealand. Due arrive Marine Air Terminal LaGuardia seven minutes."

There was nothing on the day's manifest about this flight, so the unexplained transmission created confusion and concern. The Clipper circled the airport for an hour waiting for permission to land.

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Upon landing, Pan Am transferred the crew to the airline's Atlantic division, prohibiting their return to San Francisco and preventing a full circumnavigation of the globe. Regardless, more than 80 years later, the record still stands as the longest commercial flight by mileage. **IQ**



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Watch a Pacific Clipper  
fly before World War II.