

"Little Amy" - Air Marshall Islands' DC-8

By Dave Glover
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In the early 1990s, *Air Marshall Islands*, or "AMI", leased and operated a unique DC-8-62. Now, Dave Glover, who worked with this classic combi jetliner, tells the story and shows the pictures of one of the most unique and far-reaching jets ever in air service...

In 1986, the Marshall Islands, after almost four decades under the administration of the U.S. as part of the UN Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, gained its independence, with Majuro as the capital. It comprises two island chains of 30 atolls and no less than 1,152 islands. Bikini and Enewetak are former U.S. nuclear test sites, and Kwajalein, the famous World War II battleground, is now used as a U.S. missile test range. The total area of the Islands is about the size of Washington, D.C. with a population of approximately 71,000. Its highest point is a mere 30 feet, and lies half way between Hawaii and Papua New Guinea. If you're flying from Honolulu, it'll take approximately 5 hours 15 minutes by jet...



Air Marshall Islands was born in 1980 through the leadership of then-President Amata Kabua with 2 small Nomad aircraft. Later, 2 Dornier 228s replaced the 2 Nomads and a Hawker Siddeley 748 provided service to Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Fiji.

In the late '80s, Air Marshall Islands found it needed a larger, faster aircraft with more cargo space, and one that could reach the mainland U.S. or similar destinations with 11-hour non-stop capabilities, initially to carry fresh tuna to the world's markets. A DC-8-62 combi aircraft with a freight cargo door was selected from Aerolease and International Air leases, in Miami, Florida. The original configuration was 5 pallet positions for freight with each pallet capable of holding 800 cubic feet and 8500 pounds, and approximately 100 passenger seats. The final configuration - in 1995 - was 9 pallets for freight and 52 seats for passengers due to the increase in freight and mail demand between Honolulu, Majuro, and Kwajalein.





This aircraft opened a new lifeline to and from the Marshalls with its huge cargo capacity for cars, trucks, mail, large diesel turbines, building materials, and Majuro's famous fresh blue fin tuna (some fish sold in Tokyo for as much as \$50,000 each). The tuna boxes weighed well over 400 pounds each and were 6 feet long. They were flown to Honolulu and transferred to Northwest Airlines bound for Tokyo. In 1995, that aircraft brought enough fish to Northwest to make Air Marshall Islands its number 1 interline carrier; sometimes bringing in 40,000 pounds on a single trip.

In 1992, "Little Amy", a name taken from the abbreviated 3 letter code *AMI*, performed part of a never-before completed and historic Guinness Book of Records trip for the internationally famous cyclist Emilio Scotto. Emilio started his round-the-world jaunt in 1985 in Argentina with his "Black Princess" Honda 1100 Gold Wing. He showed up in my office and explained what he was attempting to do and wondered if we could help him with the next leg of his Pacific journey. Again Little Amy was the only and natural choice, and sure proud to carry Emilio and "The Black Princess" from Honolulu to Majuro on his way west. When Emilio arrived in Honolulu, he had 8 years of constant travel to 142 countries, traveled 291,000 miles using 10,000 gallons of fuel, 140 gallons of oil, replaced 61 tires, gone through 7 passports with 64 pages each, taken 5000 photos and spent \$300,000. He still had 72 countries and approximately 140,000 miles yet to be traveled. The website "EmilioScotto.com" tells the rest of the story. An article published in the July 1993 issue of *Motorcylismo* recounts Little Amy's part in this epic journey.

Undaunted in its search for new destinations, Little Amy undertook a weekly charter for the Republic of Kiribati to Christmas Island (Kiritimati)(CXI). Christmas Island has 3 towns worthy of mention; Poland, London, and Banana, where the airport is. During World War II it was used as a transient point for the U.S. due to its strategic location in the Pacific. It is directly south of Honolulu approximately 1350 miles, or 3 hours jet flight time. The U.S. built concrete runways, one of which is still in use today of approximately 6900 feet, and 2 underground aviation fuel tanks of 50,000 gallon-capacity each. The airport is daylight-op.s-only due to a lack of instrument approaches and landings.



On one trip, we had an unusual freight shipment of about 20 straw hand brooms, which we didn't give much thought at the time, even though there was some kidding going on as to what they were going to be used for. The next week right after landing, as the thrust reversers were engaged, we were suddenly blinded by a dusty blast... we couldn't have seen our hands in front of our faces. It was like we were in a dust bowl. Needless to say, there were moments of panic from passengers and sweaty palms from the flight crew. But we were on the ground, still on the runway being led by the dust bowl. Upon blocking in and inquiring what the heck was going on, we soon found that the previous week's shipment of brooms were to hand sweep the runway and fill the multitude of cracks with what I guessed to be crushed coral.



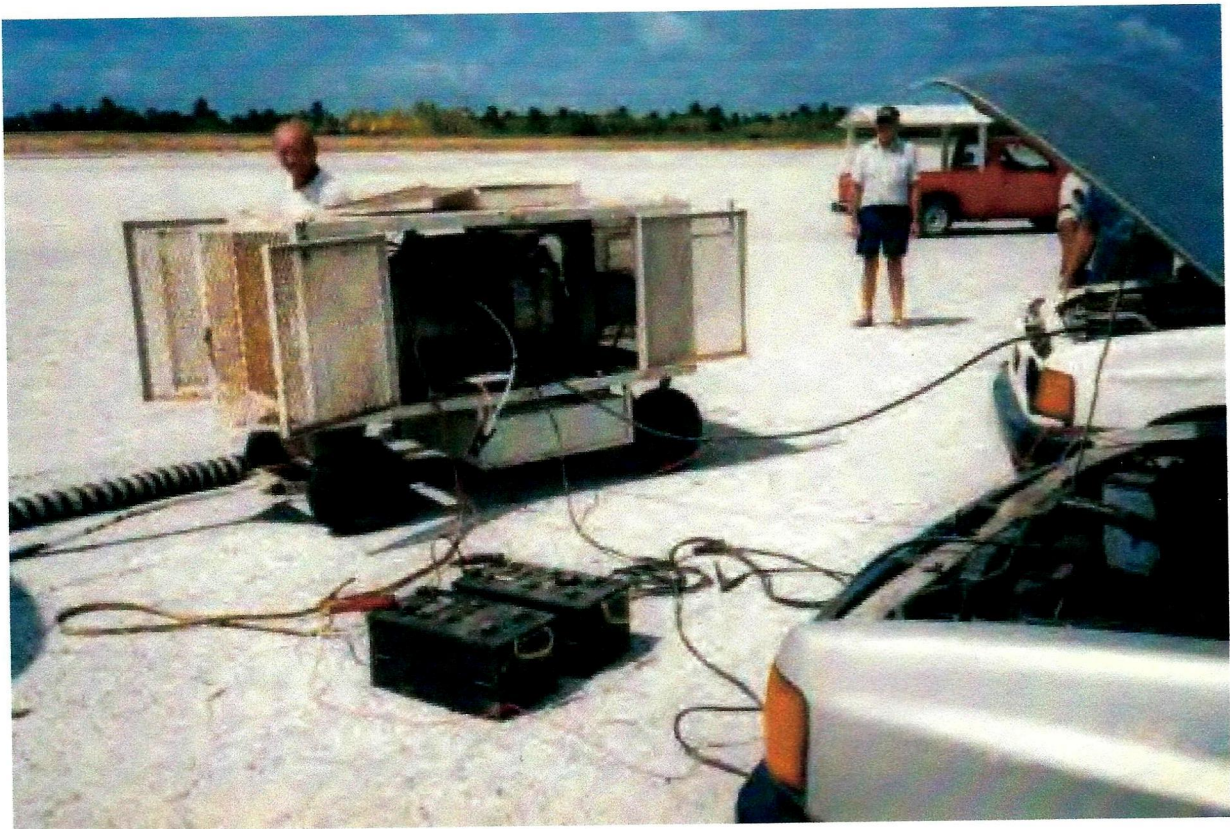
After a few trips we decided to try carrying some vehicles. We gave the cargo door sill height to some folks there and with ingenuity, built a ramp that would be positioned on a flat bed truck that would then back up perpendicular to the aircraft. Getting vehicles and other large, heavy pieces of freight was all, and still is, sheer manpower. The only mechanized piece of equipment they have is a small capacity forklift that didn't quite reach the door sill. The ramp crew were more than a willing bunch and there was never any piece of freight that they couldn't take off, despite the painful working in sandals or bare feet. About 6 to 8 workers would grab the vehicle by the rear bumper, or whatever they could grab onto, and bounce the vehicle 90 degrees and steer the vehicle out the cargo door onto the truck ramp. If we had more than 2 vehicles, then the flatbed would drive away, separate the cab, add to more ramps to the flatbed, and roll the vehicles off. Then they would reverse the procedure to get the additional vehicles and heavy pieces off. And all of that offloading/loading of freight and passengers, processing of paperwork was done within an hour and a half. Now finished, the ground crew was fed lunch from Honolulu catering of sandwiches, milk, water, and juice while sitting on the ramp under the wing of Little Amy. These kinds of operations became a steady diet at CXI. Our combi only let us down one time while we were on the ground at CXI just before departure.



Because the DC-8 didn't have an APU (auxiliary power unit), we had to leave number 4 engine running the entire time we were on the ground with the Flight Engineering monitoring the engine's heat etc. One day when we were ready to fire up and go, we couldn't get number 4 engine to cross bleed air necessary to start another engine. Sweat and prayers didn't work after many attempts. There we were, three hours from home base in Honolulu, no air-start unit available, and no aircraft available to bring one down from home base. You can imagine the lingo mixed up in that blue air in the cockpit and on the ground. Lo and behold, someone noticed an old Boeing air-start unit tucked under a lean-to behind fish boxes, straw, miscellaneous boxes, and old crates. And it still rotated when moved by hand. After a period of cleaning dust, straw, grit, and mice nests from the air exhaust port, we put some fresh fuel in and begged for it to start. No go... the internal electric system was rotted and looked like we should have pushed it into the ocean. So, we shut the aircraft down and started making calls to find an air-start and an aircraft to bring it down at all cost. That night we were given rooms and a very welcome barbeque. The next sun up brought new hope; there was an electrical engineer who may be able to help. It turned out to be the Honorable Teiraoi Tetabea of the Kiribati Government. He rallied a couple of pickup trucks, a couple of large capacity batteries, some wire, and a whole lot of know-how to bypass the bad systems in the air-start unit with his "kit of tools" and possibly get that ole Boeing to spring to life again. The air start cranked and cranked. Then, with

some more tinkering and cleaning out of more debris from the unit's air supply system, it was cranked again. Believing they were ready to get it lit off, the air hose was connected to the nose of the aircraft and the next few cranks brought life into that unit with a blast of flames that singed those around it (all that cranking before was filling it with fuel and all it needed was some ignition). We hit the switch for air flow and while not quite what we wanted, it looked promising the more it ran. Freight was loaded, passengers were boarded, the aircraft was closed up and ready to go. The old Boeing held the key to success now. It looked as though we might get a crack at a hot start. It worked. That happy whine was back. The rest of the systems along with a hand start on one engine put Little Amy back to meet her appointed duties; to Honolulu with a turn to Majuro albeit a day late. We later found out that the cost of bringing an air start down was in the neighborhood of \$80,000.

I recall that when we finally got the DC-8 started on Christmas Island after an overnight, the catering for the return trip to Honolulu had gone bad and was thrown away. With the engines now running, I promptly ordered 50 "ham and cheese" sandwiches, simply because it was the quickest thing that the Captain Cook Hotel could put together for us. Twenty minutes later the sandwiches were delivered, but they had interpreted the order as 50 "ham" and 50 "cheese" sandwiches, and I discovered that we actually had 100 sandwiches, 50 ham and 50 cheese. A final smile before we left.





We had another incident later in Honolulu. On departure for Majuro and Kwajalein, we got a call from the tower and state ramp control asking if the crew reported any discrepancy on lift off because they saw some fair size pieces of metal fall off the aircraft. Well, after calling the aircraft back to the ramp, it was plain to see what had happened; an engine cowling had been torn from the aircraft. Fortunately no one or property had been hit. When the crew was asked if they had seen any difference in the aircraft's operation; they did mention that that one engine was running a little cooler than the rest.

In mid 1996, at the request of the Marshallese Government, Little Amy - N799AL - was returned to the Lessors. Never before or after has a jetliner done the things that this particular machine of aviation history did in fulfilling its duties, here in the Marshall Islands - and doing it all with little more than the occasional whimper. The aircraft will long be remembered by all she bared herself to and loved by those who knew her best.



On March 11, 1996 The Senate of the State of Hawaii - Honoring Air Marshall Islands - commended and expressed appreciation to Air Marshall Islands, its management and employees for its strategic marketing support, exemplary services to customers, and other noteworthy contributions over the years to the residents and visitors of the State of Hawaii.



Written by
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Dave Glover started his aviation career with the Flying Tiger Line, in 1962. Since then, he has worked for Airlift International Airways, Permian Airways, Air Marshall Islands, Rich International Airways, and Hawaiian Air Lines. He retired from Hawaiian in 2002 after four decades of aviation work.