

## George Mattern – South Pacific Island Airways - SPIA

In 1984, as Director of Maintenance of two Part 135 airlines (Seagull Air Hawaii & Rainbow Islands Cargo) I made routine visits to the FAA Flight Standards District Office (FSDO) in Honolulu. While reviewing some documents with the FAA support staff, I looked up to see George Mattern in the back of the office. I yelled out his name and he looked up with a smile and came over to share in a proper reunion of two friends. I hadn't seen George for a few years.

George Mattern was a very highly respected FAA Inspector from the FAA's Southern Region in Atlanta. I had the pleasure of working with George at Antilles Air Boats on his numerous visits over the years.

On this day, George was sent to Honolulu from the east coast to assist with an accident investigation of South Pacific Island Airways (SPIA) DHC-6 Twin Otter crash on the island of Tau in American Samoa on July 21, 1984.

George and I made plans for dinner in Waikiki, so we could catch up on the past few years. That evening we talked about the events of Antilles Air Boats of past years, we shared both of our work efforts and my past two years in Honolulu. The conversation turned to his present investigation of South Pacific Island Airways. He talked about the many deficiencies and asked if I could be available to assist SPIA with corrective action. No doubt, I felt kind of honored that George thought of me as one that could help SPIA. Years earlier I was on the receiving end of serious investigations of airline deficiencies. I learned a lot from George (as well as from Charles Freehling / AAB) and he knew I was ready to share my knowledge and experience.

After further discussion, I told George I would be willing to help. He stated he would be meeting with George Wray, President of SPIA, the following day and would offer his suggestion of my assisting.

George Mattern traveled south to Pago Pago for his investigation and within a few days returned to Honolulu and back to Atlanta. Some weeks went by and I never heard from SPIA regarding my possible employment to assist with deficiencies.

Shortly thereafter, I got a call from an aviation colleague (Pierre Michel) about possible employment with SPIA as a flight engineer on their Boeing 707's. They were looking to put licensed A&P mechanics in the FE position to assist with aircraft mechanicals at remote locations. They would assist with all training. This offer had absolutely nothing to do with George Mattern's suggestion.

I met with Felix Smith, the Director of Operations for an interview and shortly there after I became one of SPIA newest flight engineers in training. Within a couple of months, after a good amount of studying and American Airlines B707 simulator training, I met all requirements and was added to the flight schedule.

It seemed like only a matter of weeks when SPIA lost a mail contract to Guam which mandated some cutbacks. Being a junior FE, I was the first to go. They believed that taking me off the flight schedule would only be for a short time, so I requested to work in the Maintenance Department until I was recalled. The following day I reported to the Director of Maintenance.

Upon my arrival, I met with John Condon, Director of Maintenance regarding my work assignment. SPIA operated the FAA Part 121 / B707 operations in Honolulu as well as the FAA Part 135 DHC-6 Twin Otter operations out of both Pago Pago and Guam. John was telling me of their preparations with FAA hearings regarding fines and penalties from previous FAA inspections associated with an accident in July of 1984. He shared his frustration with the satellite operations.

I asked several questions as well as offered suggestions and solutions to reduce the fines and penalties. John was interested in my assistance in this area.

One area SPIA (Twin Otter ops) was deficient in was their recordkeeping. When aircraft maintenance was performed, they may or may not record that work. When components were changed the proper serviceable tag may or may not be forwarded for records. Time controlled components were not accurately recorded. During the FAA accident inspection, it was found that serial numbered components on the aircraft had no serviceable tags.

I set up a special status board and work area in the Honolulu maintenance office. I asked that all records be transferred from Pago Pago to Honolulu. I asked Faasegi Caldwell, maintenance assistant in Pago Pago to send me every YELLOW serviceable tag she could find from the shop, stockroom, hangar. Look under every work bench, desk, shelf etc. They were boxed up and put on the next 707 flight back to HNL.

With the list of serial numbered components found on the aircraft in question I started to work backwards and reconstructed a work record. I couldn't correct the lack of proper corrective action documentation entries, but I could answer the serviceability of the parts on the aircraft. I contacted the individual overhaul facilities and requested duplicate certification/serviceable tags as required. Working around the clock due to the FAA hearings I was able to reduce the number of violations and fines directed to SPIA.

I also made suggestions on better systems to monitor maintenance and record keeping. John asked me to go to Pago Pago and initiate positive changes. I told him that if I truly was going to make a difference, I needed the authority to direct maintenance staff. I was given the title of Superintendent of Maintenance in charge of both Part 135 maintenance bases (Pago Pago and Guam).

The DHC-6 Twin Otter operation was not the only issue with SPIA. The Part 121 Boeing 707 operations were also caught up in George Wray's business methods.

SPIA took on international charter work when the opportunity presented itself. The periodic charters to transport Fiji troops from Fiji to the Middle East became problematic. The soldiers were being dispatched for a UN peace keeping role. The first charter in 1984 was from Fiji to Honolulu then on to the mainland for a fuel stop before crossing the Atlantic to drop off the troops in Amsterdam.

SPIA already flew regular schedule flights north out off Honolulu to Vancouver and Anchorage. So, some great minds decided that flying from Honolulu to Amsterdam going north over the pole with a stop in Anchorage would save a whole bunch of money.

SPIA B707's was equipped with Omega navigation but like many systems of the time it didn't work so well over the pole. So, all flight crews were scheduled for "Grid Navigation Course" A method of navigation using a grid overlay for direction reference (I was still flying as an FE and joined in the training but was reassigned to Maintenance before these flights). No doubt, a lot can be riding on a clear understanding and implementation of this procedure. The second charter to Amsterdam and the first to go over the pole went well. The second not so good. The pilot was a seasoned 707 driver. He was part of the test flight crew at Boeing for this aircraft with many hours in the many years to follow. The co-pilot was younger and less seasoned but qualified none the less. The co-pilot was happy to have such a seasoned flyer as they approached the areas of navigational concerns. The pilot was happy to have the younger pilot because he just completed his "Grid Navigation Course" and was surely ready to take on this task. This discussion did not take place before the flight out of Honolulu, nor did it take place out off Anchorage. Needless to say, grid navigation didn't go so well this day.

The Norwegian F-16 fighters that were dispatched to divert the SPIA 707 did so 50 miles from Soviet airspace and proximity to the Kola Peninsula, a major Soviet military base. Timing is everything.

The local FAA Flight Standards District Office (FSDO) in Honolulu enjoying their morning paper saw the Associated Press article about the aircraft diverted from Soviet airspace. They immediately came over to SPIA to say wtf! SPIA had absolutely no authority to fly these charters. No "Operations Specifications" to go beyond their approved scheduled routes and certainly not without approved navigation equipment.

This along with other violation moved the FAA to pull the Part 121 certification. SPIA was grounded. Most employees were laid off, but a handful were kept on (myself included) to regain the certificates.

About that time George Wray had an accident and became paralyzed. Initially from the neck down but later regained mobility except for his legs. With George temporarily out of the picture our group was able to work (around the clock) with the FAA to regain the certificate without interference. We had success and were flying once again. As George re-entered the leadership role we started heading in the wrong direction once again. Hush Kits was the next snafu and back on the ground once again.

SPIA was a good airline with wonderful people. Money certainly was the root of most of the issues. George Wray started SPIA, he was the energy behind it. It was his vision and a great vision it was, but many times the lawyer in him wanted to argue a case rather than work out the problem. Arguing the Federal Aviation Regulations with the FAA, arguing about how he will pay for that part or uplift of fuel.

After many months of employment with SPIA and getting to know George Wray, it was interesting to look back at the events on how I became one of the individuals to make the necessary changes. George Wray did not like the FAA. He had an adversarial relationship. I think back to George Mattern suggesting to George Wray that there is this guy that could help. It would have been better if he said "Whatever you do, DON'T hire this guy" I would have been called the following day. I eventually came in another door, down a long hallway through a maze and came out the other end to be the guy that helped make a difference.

When looking back at that time, I was only at SPIA about a year and a half or so. It may have seemed longer because of the 16-hour days, seven days a week. Running to the bank with your pay check (if you got a check) to ensure you got the cash, but despite all that...I look back at the adventure of South Pacific Island Airways and was glad to be part of it.

During the final months at SPIA, I did a Part 135 certification for Hemmeter Corporation's flight department (Hemmeter Aviation) and upon completion was asked to join their team. Yeah TEAM!

More SPIA stories later. Do you have a SPIA story?