

Oldest Airline?

It's 'Pappy' Chalk's With 200,000 Flights and No Injuries, No Lost Planes

By BARNEY SEIBERT
UPI Writer

MIAMI — Okay, nostalgia buffs, what's the world's oldest airline? Avianca? Pan Am? Air France? Wrong. It's Chalk's.

Chalk's International Airline may be about as familiar to the average American air traveler as comedian Bob Newhart's "Grace L. Ferguson Airline and Storm Door Company."

BUT SINCE 1919, the airline that Albert Burns "Pappy" Chalk founded has been shuttling passengers back and forth through the Bermuda Triangle between Miami and the Bahamas. It has never had a fatal accident. It has never lost a plane.

Chalk's has made more than 200,000 flights without injury to a passenger. It has never owned a plane with a cruising speed faster than 150 miles an hour, but its customers find that on a portal-to-portal basis they make the trip from Miami to Nassau 30 minutes faster than the fastest jet on the run.

It is one of three U.S. airlines which fly only amphibian planes, and the only one of the three which uses them only on international flights.

AIRLINES FOUNDED in the era when Pappy Chalk began operating either grew into today's corporate giants or disappeared. Chalk's did neither. Why?

Because, said Chalk's present general manager, former National Airlines pilot Walter Shinn, "Pappy didn't want to get any bigger. It was the proudest boast of his airline that "all of our planes are paid for."

Chalk's flights are basically the same as they were on that day in 1919 when Pappy Chalk "came home from World War I, flew an amphibian to Miami, and set up a table and an umbrella at the foot of Flagler Street."

ITS FIVE GRUMMAN MALLARD twin engine amphibians swoop like giant swans on leisurely, 1,000 foot altitude flights from Biscayne Bay, between Miami and Miami Beach, to Bimini, Cat Cay and Nassau in the Bahamas.

Pappy sold his airline 12 years ago to Dean Franklin, who now operates an aircraft parts business specializing in Grumman amphibians — Chalk's buys most of its parts from Franklin. Franklin sold the airline to Edward F. Dixon, a former Pennsylvania construction magnate, who sold it to its present owners, Resorts International, operators of the Paradise Island Casino and three resort hotels on that island, and two hotels at Atlantic City, N.J.

But Pappy, now 88, still takes an interest in the airline, sends down daily soup and sandwich snacks to his old air crews, and has a stepson who works for the line.

THE STATE TOOK away his driver's license last year because of his age, but he still holds a pilot's license, numbered 708. He made his last flight in 1975, concluding a 64-year career as a pilot, during which he had 30,000 hours in the air.

Pappy learned to fly in 1911 at Paducah, Ky., where he owned a small auto repair business. Barnstorming pilot Tony Jannus landed his French-built Benoist amphibian in the Ohio river for repairs. Pappy did the repair work but Jannus had no money to pay for it and so he offered to teach Pappy to fly. A photo of Pappy's solo flight is on the wall of the Chalk's Miami terminal on Watson Island, partially housed in a coral rock structure Pappy built himself.

Pappy was a flying Marine in World War I. In World War II, he expanded his plane fleet to 12 and operated a flying school, teaching Navy pilots to fly amphibians.

WHEN MOST World War I pilots were thinking in terms of barnstorming in the peacetime world, Pappy, who'd had his fill of barnstorming before he joined the Marines, began thinking of an airline. He had briefly operated an amphibian flight service between Tampa and St. Petersburg.

He brought a war surplus float-equipped Dehaviland DH4 to Miami early in 1919 and learned, while taking a charter flight to the Bahamas, just how isolated from the mainland the islands were. In July of that year he began scheduled airline flights, about three months before Avianca began its scheduled operations.

A short time later he switched to a Fairchild float plane and later a Waco float plane, before moving on to Grumman amphibians.

PAPPY FLEW HUNDREDS of celebrities to Bahamas vacations and fishing trips. Ernest Hemingway was a friend. So was Howard Hughes. He once got \$150 for a charter to Havana to fly a Cuban president into exile. His airline was the subject of a silent movie with Ben Lyon and Bebe Daniels. Chalk's planes also were props for a television series filmed at Miami several years ago.

Once he flew a live 150-pound loggerhead turtle from Bimini to Miami. "I didn't mind, but some of the passengers were somewhat alarmed," he said.

When the 1926 hurricane hit Miami, Pappy was enroute home from Nassau in a plane with a maximum speed of 120 miles an hour. He covered the nearly 200 miles in less than an hour. "We had quite a tail wind," Pappy said.

HE LANDED AT hurricane-ravaged Miami and immediately began making rescue flights to the Florida Keys, isolated by the storm.

What will happen to Chalk's International Airline when its 30-year-old Grumman amphibians wear out?

"Well, we hear the Navy is beginning to sell some surplus Albatross air rescue planes. They're bigger," Shinn

said. "But with the present economics of the airline industry, we probably need bigger planes."



'Pappy' Chalk Has Flown the Bermuda Triangle for 64 Years