



Lucky Lady II

By Bruce D. Callander

On July 25, 1909, Louis Bleriot took off from a field in France, flew his flimsy monoplane northward for half an hour, and landed near Dover Castle in England. The flight—at the time, daring beyond belief—caused a sensation in Britain.

Forty years later, Capt. James G. Gallagher and a 13-man crew took off from Carswell AFB, Texas, in a B-50 bomber named *Lucky Lady II*. Four days later—50 years ago this month—they landed back at Carswell. This achievement, the first nonstop flight around the world, also stirred the public imagination.

Neither event involved a major breakthrough in technology, but each was significant for other reasons.

Bleriot's flight lasted a mere 37 minutes. In several demonstration flights in France during the previous year, Wilbur Wright had stayed aloft much longer. What caught the public's imagination was that Bleriot had actually *crossed* the English Channel. This narrow waterway separating England and Europe had not been traversed this dramatically since the invasion of William the Conqueror in 1066.

"Britain's impregnability has passed away," warned a London newspaper. "Airpower will become as vital as sea power."

Similarly, *Lucky Lady II* was not the first airplane to circumnavigate the Earth. That feat had been accomplished 25 years earlier by two

Fifty years ago this month, a production-model B-50 with a regular crew made the first nonstop flight around the world.



Air Service biplanes dubbed the “Douglas World Cruisers.” In fact, *Chicago* and *New Orleans* had flown a route almost 3,000 miles longer than that covered by the *Lady*, and they logged almost four times as much air time.

Nor was *Lucky Lady*’s 94 hours, one minute aloft a record for flight duration. Twenty years earlier, a Fokker C-2 named *Question Mark* had stayed airborne for more than 150 hours. In that case, Maj. Carl A. Spaatz and his crew did all their flying in circles over southern California, but, in the process, they pioneered the refueling techniques that would make it possible for *Lucky Lady II* to circle the globe nonstop.

Timing Was Everything

What made the flight of *Lucky Lady II* more than just another record-setting event was its timing. Like the achievement of Bleriot’s little airplane, the big B-50 flight demonstrated that distance and geographical barriers no longer offered sanctuary from airpower.

Consider the political climate of the late 1940s. World War II was over, but the Cold War was just beginning. The Soviet Union had blocked land access to Berlin and Allied airplanes were struggling to keep the city supplied by air through the Berlin Airlift. Meanwhile, the Soviets were rebuilding their forces and tightening their grip over most of Eastern Europe.

The war had demonstrated the effectiveness of strategic bombing, but the US had scrapped much of its wartime air armada and demobilized most of its troops. It still had substantial numbers of the B-29s, the airplanes that had pounded Japan into final submission, and it was stepping up deliveries of an advanced Superfortress, the B-50.

For the moment, at least, Washington still also held a monopoly on nuclear weapons. However it still was years away from developing an intercontinental ballistic missile delivery system, and, although the long range B-36 bomber was in development, much of the world remained beyond the unrefueled range of any US-based aircraft then in quantity production.

Needed, air leaders decided, were some dramatic demonstration flights to convince the Soviets that the US still could mount a credible attack with on-hand forces and that the USSR was not invulnerable. Such demonstrations also would help the Air Force at home. Less than two years old, the new service still was struggling for public recognition and still competing with the Navy for a share of the strategic mission.

No one realized the importance of imagery better than Air Force Gen. Curtis E. LeMay. He had taken over Strategic Air Command in October 1948 and begun to reorganize and rebuild it. Early on, he realized it was important to showcase SAC's capabilities, both to discourage Soviet aggression and to win the support of a war-weary US public reluctant to spend heavily on peacetime forces.

Just months before LeMay had taken command, SAC had sent three B-29s on a world flight, but it had not been the unqualified success the Air Force had hoped for. One of the bombers crashed. The other two, *Gas Gobbler* under Lt. Col. R.W. Kline and *Lucky Lady* under 1st Lt. Arthur M. Neal, completed the trip in less than 104 hours but a commercial airliner already had done it faster.

LeMay's Demonstrations

In late 1949, LeMay launched a series of demonstration nonstop flights from Texas to Hawaii and back. One B-50 on the runs dropped a dummy bomb in the harbor on Dec. 7, the anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was refueled in midair by a B-29 modified into a tanker. If a B-50 could fly that far by refueling en route, it followed that it could reach any point on Earth the same way. To prove it, the Air Force began planning a nonstop flight around the world.

Refueling during a four-day mission would be the main challenge. State-of-the-art fuel transfer still had not advanced far beyond that which had kept *Question Mark* aloft for six days in 1929. Called a drogue system, it involved one airplane's letting out a cable which the other grabbed and brought on board. A hose attached to the cable then was reeled in and connected at one end to the tanker's system and at the other to the receiver's tank. Gravity did the rest.

With radar still unreliable, this process was best accomplished in daylight. This meant scheduling four hookups, spaced about equally along the route so the B-50 could reach each of them in the morning hours. Accord-

ingly, SAC dispatched the tankers to existing US bases at Lajes Field in the Azores, Dhahran Field in Saudi Arabia, Clark Field in the Philippines, and Rogers Field in Hawaii.

Picked as the primary aircraft for the mission was a B-50 dubbed *Global Queen*. Selected as a backup aircraft was a second bomber bearing the tail #B-5046010. It was called *Lucky Lady II*.

The *Queen* took off from Carswell on schedule and flew eastward. It crossed most of the Atlantic before engine troubles forced the pilot to abort the mission and land in the Azores. *Lucky Lady II*, the understudy now in a position to become the star, took off from Carswell in a low overcast on the next morning, Feb. 26, 1949.

Except for modifications required for the trip, the *Lady* was an off-the-shelf B-50, complete with armaments. She carried a normal crew, manned two deep in most positions. Gallagher was the aircraft commander and Neal, who had commanded the original *Lucky Lady* on her world flight, was second pilot. Capt. James H. Morris was copilot.

The crew included two navigators, Capt. Glenn E. Hacker and 1st Lt. Earl L. Rigor, and two radar operators, 1st Lt. Ronald B. Bonner and 1st Lt. William F. Caffrey. Capt. David B. Parmalee, who had been on one of the earlier flights to Hawaii, was project officer for this flight and flew as chief flight engineer. Flight engineers were TSgt. Virgil L. Young and SSgt. Robert G. Davis. Radio operators were TSgt. Burgess C. Cantrell and SSgt. Robert R. McLeroy. Gunners were TSgt. Melvin G. Davis and SSgt. Donald G. Traugh Jr. All except for Parmalee were with the 63d Bomb Squadron, 43d Bomb Group.

Unblushing Promotion

While the flight was an unblushing attempt to promote USAF and SAC, the Air Force took pains to keep it secret while it was in progress. The ground crews who modified the bombers and tankers were not told about the mission. Nor did USAF inform the news media, which later protested the service's unwarranted secrecy.

To preserve the illusion that the flight was nothing out of the ordinary, the Air Force worked out an elaborate system for filing dummy flight plans. The *Lady* was to switch tail numbers



Lucky Lady II's crew, home from the first nonstop around-the-world flight, receive congratulations from a host of USAF officials, including Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington, shaking hands with aircraft commander Capt. James Gallagher.

with a tanker at each refueling point to give the impression that it was going only a short distance. The Air Force wanted to be able to publicize a spectacular success, not have to explain a costly failure.

The first refueling began over the Azores the morning after takeoff. It took two hours, during which time the bomber and the tanker remained linked and had to maintain a tight formation. It was tiring work.

Later that day, the *Lady* flew past Gibraltar and across the Sahara Desert. The next morning, it made its second refueling over Saudi Arabia. This time, the transfer was complicated by turbulence as the airplanes moved through a line of thunderstorms. The operation went off without incident, but, as the B-50's log noted, the crew members were beginning to show signs of fatigue.

Heavy weather over the Philippines made the third refueling difficult as well and the operation had other problems. First, a chain on the hose reel broke and had to be repaired. Then, a tanker returning to Clark let down too soon and crashed, killing all aboard.

Here, too, the effort to disguise the nature of the flight almost failed. One of the tankers out of Clark had filed a flight plan for Honolulu, intending to switch tail numbers so the *Lady* could fly that leg undetected. When a sharp-eyed operations officer at Clark realized the distance was beyond the range of the B-29, however, he tried to recall the airplane. He was talked out of it and the Air Force's cover story remained intact.

Bad weather followed the crew to Hawaii and beyond. The fourth refueling was complicated again by mechanical problems, and crew fatigue aboard the *Lady* had increased. Still, the B-50 continued to perform well and the end of their ordeal was in sight.

The crew saw their fourth sunrise over El Paso, Texas, and at 9:22 a.m. on March 2, the *Lady* circled Carswell and landed. On hand to greet her were not only LeMay but Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington, Chief of Staff Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, and a number of other dignitaries. And, when it had become clear that the mission was going to succeed, the media had been alerted, so the welcoming group included reporters and photographers.



A B-29 refuels Lucky Lady II during a training mission for the B-50's historic flight. On the actual around-the-world journey, the Superfortress was refueled four times using the drogue system.

Each crew member was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for the mission. Together, they later received the MacKay Trophy, given annually for the most meritorious flight of the year by an Air Force member, members, or organization. The first MacKay had gone to 2d Lt. Henry H. Arnold for a 30-mile flight in 1912, and later winners had included Capt. Edward V. Rickenbacker, Lt. Jimmy Doolittle, and LeMay himself. Appropriately, the crews of the two Douglas airplanes that had circled the Earth in 1924 also had received the MacKay.

Among other things, the B-50's flight showed that, while aerial refueling was practical, something more efficient than the drogue system was needed. It spurred development of the flying boom and faster transfer systems.

The Main Point

The more important result, however, was to demonstrate that the Air Force's land-based bombers could reach any spot on Earth. The significance of that fact was not lost on the media. The Associated Press noted that potential

enemies "may reason that no single one of their cities, should war come, would be safe."

The message was underscored less than eight years later when three SAC B-52s retraced the route of *Lucky Lady II* in less than half the time, making a simulated bomb run en route.

It was not until 1986, however, that an ultralight airplane named *Voyager* circled the Earth nonstop without refueling. Flown by Richard G. Rutan and Jeana L. Yeager, it was made of plastic and paper and carried more than five times its own weight in fuel. That trip took nine days and, by then, astronauts were circling the Earth in 90 minutes and several had circumnavigated the moon.

Today, the flight of *Lucky Lady II* is ancient history. Its commander retired from the Air Force as a colonel. SAC itself disappeared in an Air Force reorganization. The *Lady* herself was all but destroyed in an accident not long after the world flight. Her fuselage was salvaged and toured for a time as a recruiting exhibit before going on display at an air museum in Chino, Calif. ■

Bruce D. Callander, a regular contributor to Air Force Magazine, served tours of active duty during World War II and the Korean War. In 1952, he joined Air Force Times, serving as editor from 1972 to 1986. His most recent story for Air Force Magazine, "How Compensation Got Complicated," appeared in the January 1999 issue.