

# History

## A Proud History The Story of Aloha Airlines

### Maiden Flight

It was an Aloha Friday, back in the days when that meant something special in the Islands. As the morning sun warmed the air hanging limply over nearby Ke`ehi Lagoon, the freshly painted DC-3 taxied to the end of Runway 4-Right at John Rodgers Field.

Despite being the end of the workweek in Honolulu, it was a quiet day at the city's airport, a complex of concrete runways and cavernous Quonset huts built by the Navy during World War II. The buildings squatting along Lagoon Drive were still painted battleship gray. The war in the Pacific had been over less than a year and the many military installations in Hawai`i remained, despite the departure of most of the troops.

Some of the discharged Pacific war veterans stayed on. On this Friday morning, two of them, ex-Navy pilots Al Olson and Louis Lucas, sat in the cockpit of the DC-3 idling at the end of the Rodgers Field runway. At a signal from the control tower, the plane turned into the wind and gunned its twin Pratt & Whitney engines. The throaty roar scattered the snowy-white terns and boobies foraging by the runway and echoed across Ke`ehi Lagoon toward Diamond Head, which that morning loomed large and clear on the horizon. Nearer by, Aloha Tower plainly marked the site of Honolulu Harbor. It was still the tallest building in the Islands. The date was July 26, 1946. The occasion was the first revenue-paying flight of a brand-new airline called, with a flourish of confidence typical of the times, Trans-Pacific Airlines.

### The People's Airline

Honolulu publisher and TPA founder Ruddy Tongg and his friends had known discrimination all their lives. For years, the best schools, the best jobs and the best opportunities in the Islands had gone to the haole (white) establishment. It took World War II to turn the system on its ear. In 1946, when Tongg and his associates started Trans-Pacific Airways, it was to test the wings not only of a promising business venture, but also of an independence whose time they sensed had come.



1940s



1950s



1960s

Island people weren't treated very well in those days, said Dave Benz, Tongg's business manager. They couldn't get choice jobs in the airline industry or anywhere else. Some of Ruddy's friends said they even had trouble getting airline seats. They figured, why not start our own airline?

But at the time, the banks wouldn't lend money to Asians. Frustrated on many business fronts, local entrepreneurs invented what has become a Hawai'i institution, the investment *hui*, groups of individuals pooling their personal resources. One man who remembered those days clearly was Dr. Hung Wo Ching, an agricultural economist who built a real estate fortune in Hawai'i with the help of a *hui*. Ching was one of the original investors in TPA. In the following decades he would become the person most responsible for the airline's success.

Tongg gave local people a chance, and people began to say that TPA stood for The People's Airline.

If you were an Oriental, most companies wouldn't even consider you for the kind of jobs TPA hired us to do, said Elsie Umaki, who worked in reservations in the early years. Elsie's husband, Roy Umaki, was the first Asian-American pilot hired by TPA or possibly any domestic U.S. airline.

### The Aloha Airline

Sometimes appearing below the name TPA was the legend Tongg and his partners had appended as an afterthought: The Aloha Airline.

Started as a charter carrier, TPA struggled financially and against competition from the well-established Inter-Island Airlines, a subsidiary of Inter-Island Steam Navigation Co. In 1949, TPA's certificate to start scheduled flights came through, although it would be two more years before the fledgling carrier qualified for U.S. mail contracts. By 1951, TPA's rival had changed its name to Hawaiian Airlines; the old Quonset huts on Lagoon Drive had been abandoned for the new Honolulu International Airport; and the upstart airline that was calling itself TPA- Aloha Airlines was benefiting from a recovering Hawai'i economy and looking ahead optimistically to the shimmering hope of increased tourism.

In 1952, TPA-Aloha Airlines carried 175,000 passengers, a 26 percent increase from the year before, and made its first profit: \$36,410.12. The company reported its financial results to the cent.

Thanks to promotions director Richard Dick King, flying TPA-Aloha was an Island-style experience, unlike flying on the Mainland. TPA's flight attendants not only plied passengers with pineapple juice, but also entertainment. I think we had to sing, dance the hula and play the 'ukulele to get a job, said flight attendant Mellie Snyder. When the Big Island's Kilauea Volcano erupted, the company would add flights to tour the



1970s



1980s



1990s



2004

eruption. Panoramic windows five feet wide gave passengers better views and gave King a new name to promote Vistaliners. Another innovation was camera puka openings in the windows through which camera lenses could be thrust.

Early in 1958, Ching became the airline's president and chief executive officer, while Tongg stayed on as chairman. The first thing Ching did was change the airline's name, and the company became simply Aloha Airlines.

### **All-Jet Airline**

After introducing the British-built Vickers Viscount four-engine propjet in 1963 and the all-jet BAC-111 in the mid-60s, Aloha found the new Boeing 737 passenger jet. It was love at first sight.

The advent of transpacific jet service to Hawaii in 1959 brought dramatic growth in tourism arrivals. Throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s Aloha thrived. In 1983, Aloha introduced its frequent flyer program, AlohaPass, which continues to this day with great benefits. By 1999, Aloha had captured the lion's share of the inter-island business and established itself as the leader in inter-island cargo and aviation contract services.

### **Spreading our wings**

Aloha's first transpacific flight to the West Coast on February 14, 2000, linked Hawaii with Oakland in the San Francisco Bay Area. Within a year, Aloha added service to Las Vegas and Orange County in Southern California. We've been growing ever since, offering our special brand of flying.

Today, smart consumers are discovering that Aloha Airlines is one of travel's best-kept secrets. True to its tradition of more than half a century, Aloha continues to offer passengers what they want: comfort, convenience, value, and something more, that friendly Aloha spirit that comes from the Islands, and from the heart.

That's what Aloha is all about.

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