

The Takoradi Route – by David Gray

In the spring of 1941 the air lane to the British Forces in the Middle East through the Mediterranean was cut by the Germans just as effectively as the sea route. There was however an alternative to sending planes all the way round the tip of Africa by ship from Britain and the United States. In 1936, British civilian airmen had pioneered an air route westward from Khartoum, in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 2,250 miles across the continent to Lagos in Nigeria on the Atlantic coast of Africa. A year later the service was extended to Accra and Takoradi in the Gold Coast.

A few small airfields had been cut out of the jungles or laid out on the desert at spots hundreds of miles from civilisation. When the Mediterranean air lane to the Middle East was severed, the British had been able to establish an air transport service from Britain to Gibraltar and then skirting the west coast of Africa to the Gold Coast. Service on the long over water route from Britain was maintained by three large flying boats which Pan American Airways had released and the British bought for cash. From the Gold Coast to Egypt, a limited service was maintained across Africa by Land-based transports.

Over the African route, British pilots in 1941 were flying fighter planes brought by ship from Britain to Takoradi, where an assembly plant equipped to assemble 200 planes a month had been built by the British. The route saved many weeks over the time consumed on the Red Sea run around the Cape of Good Hope, but in the spring of 1941, it was still a primitive affair. Many planes were cracked up and lost on the way. The landing fields were little better than emergency affairs, and most of the runways were too short even for medium bombers.

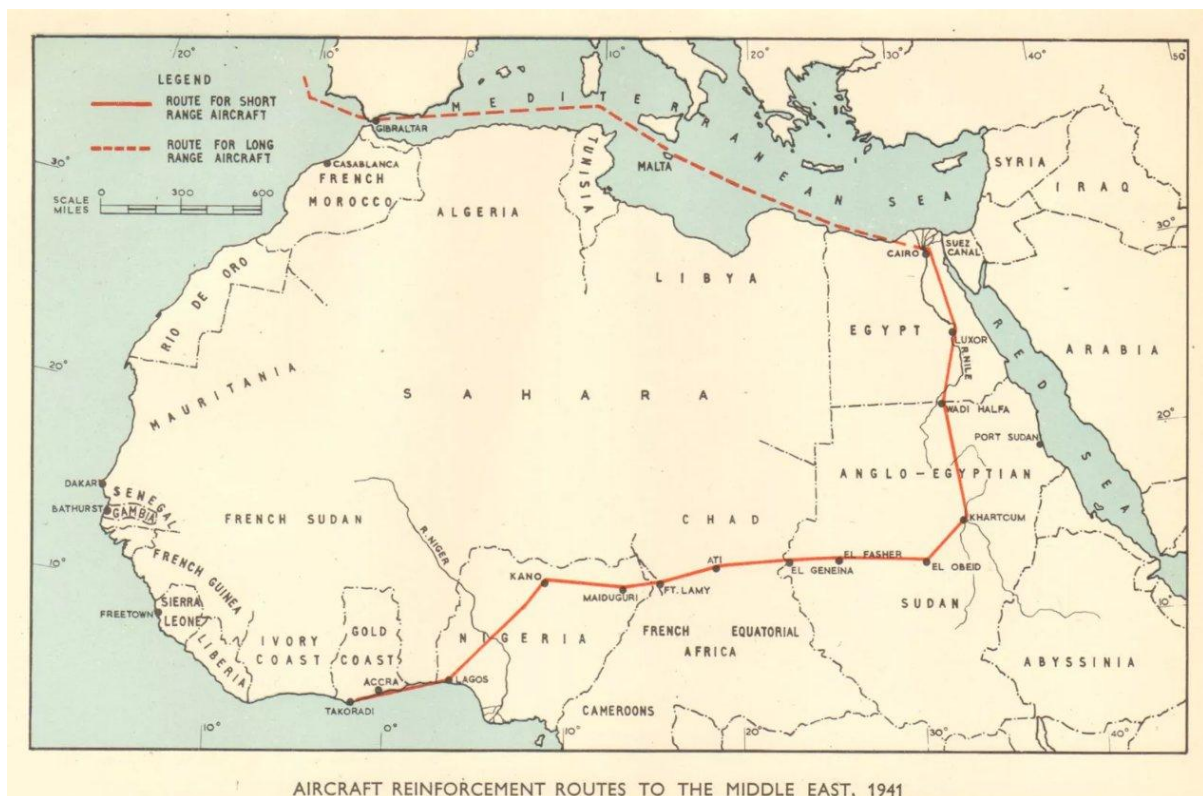
The only way to get more planes to Egypt in a hurry was to make the Trans-African route into a really effective air lane capable of taking not only more fighters but bombers as well, and to establish an air lane across the South Atlantic so that bombers could be flown all the way from the United States. From Miami the route would run to Brazil by way of British and American airfields in the West Indies. From Natal on the bulge of Brazil there was a 1,800-mile over-water hop to Takoradi, where the South Atlantic route would join the Trans-African route.

The handover of several naval and air bases by Brazil along its lengthwise coast would make a decisive contribution to the war effort. This fact had overwhelming importance. The military complex erected in Natal, with the largest airbase ever built outside USA, served as a springboard to launch thousands of aircraft across the South Atlantic bound for Africa, to Egypt through the legendary TAKORADI route, as far as Russia through the Middle East and Iran and even to the Pacific theatre across the jungles in India and Burma. When Task Force 3 began its operations in South Atlantic waters, on March 24th 1941, the bases for the establishment of the US Navy in Brazil had already been set out.

These well conceived blueprints were taken into effect after mutual agreements signed in 1940 and 1941. Back in November 1940, the US Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, drafted a contract with Pan American Airways, the major pioneer of American aviation, through its airport corporation branch, to perform the studies aiming to build and enlarge 55 airports in South America, with special focus on those located on the Brazilian coastline. This task was carried out by the chief of United States Engineering Dept. ADP (Airport Development Program). Brazilian airports were extended along its extensive 2000 mile coastline, ranging from the dense jungle in northern Amapa, bordering the coast eastward to Belem, Igarape Açu, and São Luis, across the northern deserted coast, to Fortaleza, and turning abruptly southwards at Natal to Recife, Maceio, Salvador, Caravelas, Vitoria and Santa Cruz 20 miles south of Rio de Janeiro.

We could say the Takoradi route actually began in the U.S. when American aircraft were ferried across the Caribbean, northern South America, South Atlantic narrows and then Africa. The longest hop was the lonely and perilous flight across the South Atlantic from Natal in north eastern Brazil, where the USAAF built in 1942 the largest airbase outside US territory. American B-25 and B-24 bombers, plus fighters as well as transports made their way to Takoradi, Gold Coast. From that tiny point in Western Africa they leaped to the first staging post Lagos, 380 miles away. From Lagos Nigeria to Kano over dense jungle still in Nigeria 520 miles over equatorial forest. Between Kano and El Geneina already in barren Sudanese desert plains some 960 miles with refuelling stops at Maiduguri in the heart of Africa, El Fasher, El Obeid, on the long way this time facing typical sandstorms of East Central Africa, until reaching Khartoum the Sudanese capital.

The journey then proceeded along the sinuous Nile river 520 miles through strategic refuelling points at Sueir, and stretching out 560 long miles to Wadi Halfa, Luxor and finally after five days over the perilous jungle and thunderstorms of Equatorial Africa, barren and desolate landscapes of the semi deserted southern Sudan, they finally came in sight of the pyramids and Cairo, the outpost of Middle East Command.

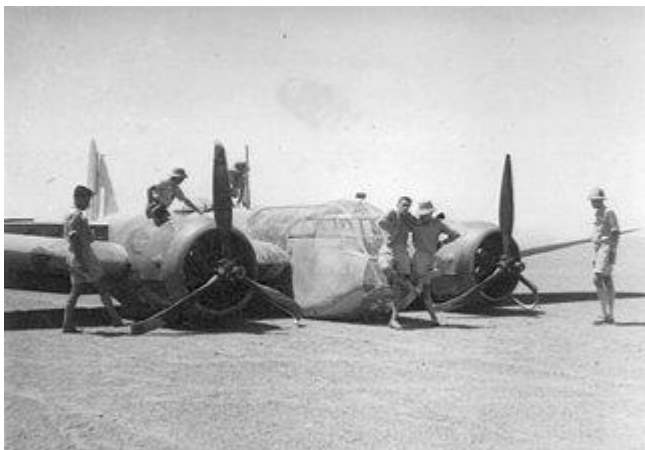


Above: The route from Takoradi in the west of Africa, to Cairo in the east. The long range route through the Mediterranean became virtually unusable due to enemy aircraft attacks.

The Takoradi route was one gigantic ferry flight operation in the WWII. More than 5,000 aircraft of various types were ferried across that route from 1940 to 1943. The British RAF provided a recovery team, a specially skilled group of engineers and technicians to recover crashed aircraft along that route. Tractors and trailers specially designed were precious tools in the hands of the men. Many aircraft crashed in the desert due to running out of fuel or overdue but when they were spotted, the rescue teams were soon despatched and the crew members and plane were saved. Despite the state of these recovered aircraft, they were dismantled and sent back to the RAF maintenance service erected along the route. There the teams worked hard to replace damaged parts and make the aircraft airworthy again. For those too severely damaged, the useful parts were salvaged for re use.



A truck loaded with a damaged Hurricane arrives at a repair base. There the maintenance team will rebuild the aircraft so that it will be able to continue its journey to Egypt.



A crashed Bristol Blenheim awaits the recovery team. Soon to be repaired and sent on its way.



Several RAF aircraft seen in one convoy heading to Cairo where they would be assembled and despatched to the combat area. We can see that these were involved in accidents and damaged during the long journey. The Hurricane nearest the camera has suffered damage to its tail section and panels are missing from the fuselage side and engine area.



One RAF aircraft is seen being un-crated at Takoradi. The aircraft would be assembled and then start out on its perilous journey. Roughly 6,000 aircraft flew across the desert to Cairo, their final destination.



Takoradi aerodrome, where thousands of British planes gathered to undertake the long journey across Central Africa to their bases in Egypt.

In spite of all the challenges, between August 1940 and June 1943, over 4,500 British Blenheims, Hurricanes, and Spitfires were sent by ship, assembled at Takoradi and ferried to the Middle East. Between January 1942 and the end of the operation in October 1944, 2,200 Baltimores, Dakotas, and Hudsons arrived from the United States (via the American base at Natal, Brazil, and a mid-Atlantic stop on Ascension Island), and virtually all of them were ferried in similar fashion.

Without the Takoradi route, it was said even at the time, that Britain could not have achieved the air superiority required in order to successfully fight and win the battle of El Alamein. There were other final destinations via the Takoradi Route, including India, China, Iran and Russia.

Some may be surprised that Iran is mentioned above as a destination for aircraft. Once Lend Lease had been enacted by the Americans there was an all-out effort to supply the Soviet Union with weapons.

There were four routes by which war materials could be transported to Russia, these are set out below:

- **Northern Sea Route (Arctic Convoys):**

This route involved convoys of ships sailing through the Arctic Ocean, delivering supplies to ports in northern Russia, such as Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. This route was the shortest and most direct but also the most dangerous, as it passed by German-occupied Norway.

- **Persian Corridor:**

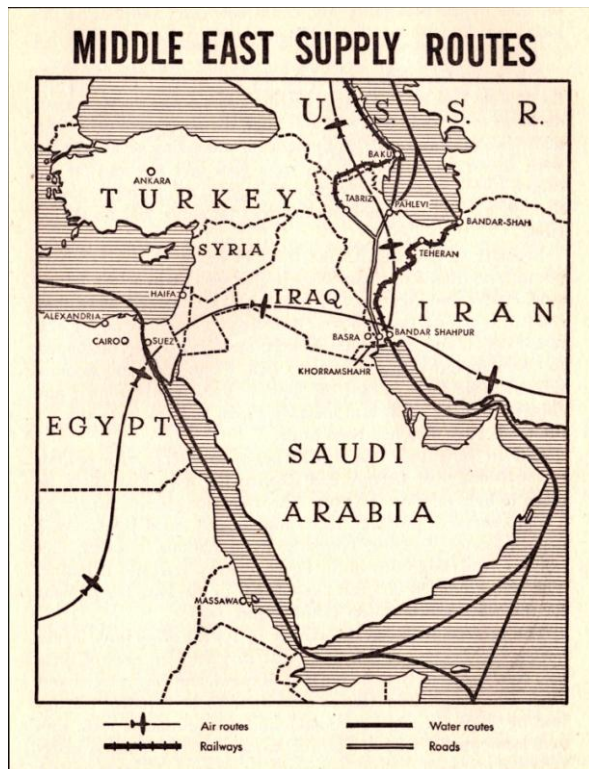
This route extended through Iran and the Caucasus, providing a crucial land and sea route for delivering supplies to the southern part of the Soviet Union. Lend-Lease supplies were transported via air, rail and river, reaching the Volga River and ultimately Stalingrad.

- **ALSIB (Alaska-Siberia) Route:**

This route involved airlifting aircraft from Alaska to Siberia, where Soviet pilots would take over and continue the delivery to the war zone. This route was relatively safe and efficient, with American crews flying the aircraft to Fairbanks, Alaska, before Soviet pilots took over.

- **Pacific Route:**

While not as heavily used as the other routes, the Pacific route also contributed to Lend-Lease deliveries to the Soviet Union, particularly in the Russian Far East. This route involved shipping supplies across the Pacific Ocean and into ports in the Soviet Far East.



As we can see *left*, for many aircraft, the route across Africa continued eastwards from Egypt to Iran, and further to India and beyond. Due to the dangers associated with the Northern Sea Route (Arctic Convoys), the best supply route to Russia was via the Persian Corridor. Ships docked at the Iranian Ports and unloaded their cargoes which were transported north by rail and road through Iran to Russia. Aircraft also followed this route.

Iran was a neutral country when war broke out, but by necessity Britain and Russia needed to be able to transport weapons through this country. The only way to make this happen (Iran refused to allow access), was to invade Iran. That is another story I will be putting on the Research page.