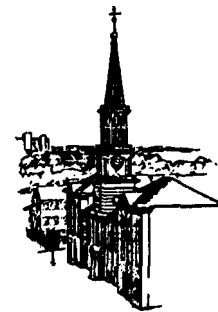


# Historic Alexandria Quarterly

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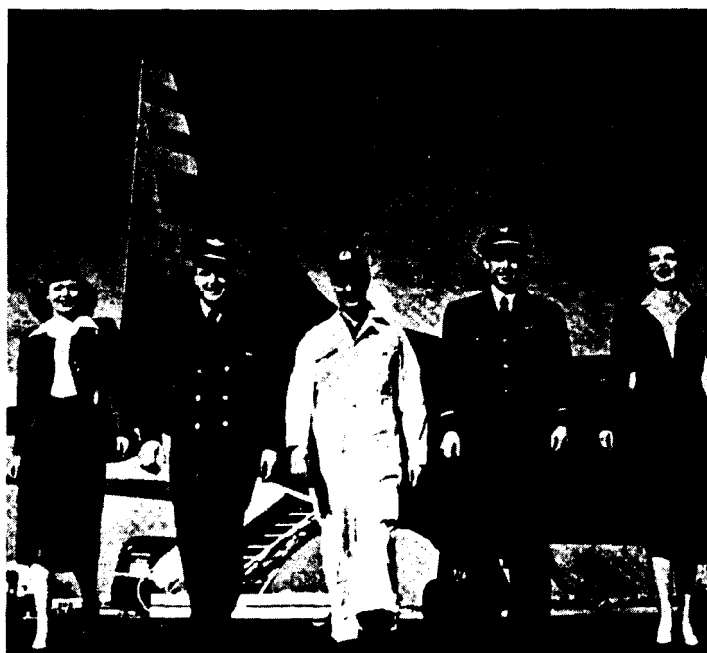
Winter 1997 Volume 2, No. 4

## FLYING THE CAPITAL WAY

By

Kristin B. Lloyd

01997, The City of Alexandria, Virginia



This promotional photograph features Capital employees based at National Airport. From left to right: Hostess Shirley Davidson, Captain Ralph Sewell, Lead Mechanic Steve Szalma, Operations Agent Richard Hogshead and Reservations Agent Sarah Brown.

(Courtesy of *L.B. Boyd*)

When National Airport opened near Alexandria in 1941, Capital Airlines, then known as Pennsylvania Central Airlines, made its headquarters there. The airline became an important local source of employment, and it quickly gained a special place in the hearts of Alexandrians. Although Capital's corporate identity ended when it merged with United Airlines in 1961, the carrier had a lasting influence on air transportation. Capital Airlines was a symbol of the romance of flight and it

reinforced the notion that progress in post-World War II America was unlimited.

Capital's story illuminates the ideas, attitudes and technological innovations of its time, and paints a portrait of the people who built the airline. Many Alexandrians played key roles in the development of Capital and continue its legacy today.

**This issue of the Historic Alexandria Quarterly is sponsored by  
Mr. and Mrs. Oscar P. Ryder**

When the airline that became Capital was started, aviation was still in its infancy and its business potential was **unknown**. The first commercial use of airplanes was for transporting mail. Toward the end of World War I, on May 15, 1918, the first official airmail route was inaugurated between Washington, DC. and New York City. It was an experimental route, using U.S. Army pilots. After a year, the effort was deemed a success and the United States became the **first** country to have scheduled airmail service.

Not quite a decade later, Clifford A. Ball, a McKeesport, Pennsylvania automobile dealer, founded the airline that would eventually evolve into Capital Airlines. Ball had controlling interest in Bettis Field, an airport near McKeesport, and had acquired seven Waco 9 biplanes as a reimbursement for unpaid storage charges. The Waco 9s were constructed of **all-cotton** fabric, spruce wood and piano wire, with a single engine and two tiny open cockpits.

With this fleet,

Ball started Clifford Ball, Inc. and secured Contract Airmail Route 11, between Pittsburgh and Cleveland, from the Post Office Department. The airline made its

first flight on April 27, 1927, a few weeks before Charles Lindbergh's historic flight from New York to Paris.

Ball's airline employed three pilots, with one pilot also serving as a mechanic. Of course, it was essential for the public to use airmail if the airline was going to be a viable business

venture. Helen Stinner, Ball's secretary and bookkeeper, set about educating potential customers. She would ~~visit~~ the McKeesport, Youngstown and Pittsburgh post offices and set up a portable booth displaying colorful advertising. Stinner would chat with postal patrons and explain how, by using airmail, they could send letters anywhere in the country for just ten cents an ounce. Her efforts were successful. Ball's fledgling air service carried almost ten tons by the end of 1927. In just two years, this amount increased to 91 ½ tons. Americans were beginning to rely on air transportation.'

Transporting mail by airplane was a practical source of income. The first airplane passengers were pursuing adventure more than a means of conveyance — and they added excess weight. Although the thrill-seekers were not as **profitable** as mailbags, Clifford Ball and other aviation pioneers recognized

the potential of air travel. Ball's airline first carried passengers on April 28, 1928 in newly acquired Fairchild F C-2 monoplanes which accommodated four passengers as well as mail.



One of Clifford Ball's Waco 9 airplanes.

(Courtesy of L. B. Boyd)

In August of 1929, the airline began the first scheduled passenger service into **Washington** from the **west**.<sup>2</sup> This route from Cleveland to Washington was called "The Path of the Eagle." It was a transportation **experience** unparalleled at the time. The passengers embarking on this journey had a **spectacular bird's-eye** view of scenic

mountains, woods and farmland. The trip took just three **hours**.<sup>3</sup>

By 1930, Clifford Ball sold his financial interest in the airline and its name changed to Pennsylvania Airlines (PAL). A turning point came for PAL when the airmail system was reorganized in 1934. In that year, the Post Office added Detroit to the Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Washington route and awarded new contracts. PAL lost the route it had pioneered to the newly formed Central Airlines.

PAL and Central became fierce competitors flying the same route between Detroit and Washington. Both airlines claimed to have the fastest equipment and the lowest fares and each would blame the other for not adhering to schedules as published. When their arrival and departure times were similar, the first to arrive at an airport would quickly board all the passengers and take off — leaving few or none for the competing flight. In an effort to gain publicity, Central hired the **first** woman commercial pilot, Helen Richey. More than a novelty just because she was a woman pilot, Richey was highly qualified. She had set endurance records and was a well-known racing and stunt pilot. Unfortunately, Richey was kept so busy with various publicity duties that she got few opportunities to fly. After a few months, she resigned.’

The competition between PAL and Central ultimately led to growth. Neither airline could make a profit, so they merged, beginning consolidated operations on November 1, 1936. The newly formed Pennsylvania-Central Airlines, or PCA, had its headquarters at the Allegheny County Airport outside of Pittsburgh. The carrier initially served Washington, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, Lansing, Grand Rapids, Muskegon and Milwaukee, using Stinson and Boeing 247 equipment. The older of these aircraft were phased out in 1937, and ten-passenger Boeing 247Ds were acquired which allowed service to be extended from Pittsburgh to Charleston,

West Virginia and between Washington and Buffalo with stops at Baltimore. Harrisburg, Williamsport and Flint were added to the Detroit-Milwaukee route.

The mail service begun by Clifford Ball had come a long way in ten years and so had aviation. In 1938, Congress passed the Civil Aeronautics Act providing for the development of an air transportation regulatory system which would serve the needs of commerce, national defense, and the postal system. That same year PCA added several destinations including Norfolk and Chicago. Service was also inaugurated from Detroit to Sault Ste. Marie with stops in Flint and Saginaw. By the end of **1938, 85,000** passengers had flown with PCA.

In late 1939, the airline began to purchase Douglas DC-3s to handle their longer routes and increased passenger traffic. The director of operations, James H. “Slim” Carmichael, went to Santa Monica, California to pilot the first of the new DC-3 fleet from the Douglas Aircraft factory to Pittsburgh. Carrying 95% of all U.S. airline traffic in 1938, the twenty-one passenger twin-engine Douglas DC-3 was an extremely popular airplane. During World War II, many civilian DC-3s served in a number of military capacities along with the over 10,000 military versions of the plane built for the war effort. Most returned to commercial use afterwards. Today, hundreds of the venerable DC-3s are still in service worldwide.

With the PCA keystone logo and “Pennsylvania Central” painted on each side in burgundy, the airline’s signature color, PCA offered more amenities with the DC-3. Indeed, food service became sophisticated enough to warrant the creation of a new passenger service department. In 1940, the carrier’s **first** flight attendants were hired to serve on the DC-3s. These “hostesses” of the air served meals (complete with sterling silver knives, forks and spoons) and distributed magazines and **PCA’s** burgundy-colored wool blankets to passengers. A decade after the purchase of its first **DC-3s**, Capital Airlines had a

fleet of twenty-two. An updated version, the Super DC-3, went into service in 1950. These carried 31 passengers and cruised at 253 mph.

In 1941, PCA moved its headquarters to the new Washington National Airport. With the airline growing rapidly, more space was needed for operations. The same year new service was offered to Birmingham with stops at Clarksburg, Morgantown, Tri-Cities, Knoxville and Chattanooga.

Pennsylvania-Central, American and Eastern were the three original airlines serving National Airport. The nation's capital had badly needed a new airport. The privately-owned Washington-Hoover Airport, located near the present site of the Pentagon, was gravely inadequate. Among its many problems were runways that were still sod when other airports had long since paved their runways, and landing obstacles. Pilots making their approach had to avoid power lines and smoke stacks. Another serious obstacle was the busy street which

bisected the field so that guards had to be posted to stop traffic during takeoffs and landings. There were other airports nearby, such as Beacon Hill Airport and Hybla Valley Airport, both located along U.S. Route 1 south of Alexandria, but they served small aircraft.

As World War II approached, the federal government recognized that modern aviation facilities were essential for national defense. It was President Franklin D. Roosevelt who took the initiative, ensuring that a state-of-the-art facility was built which could also serve as a model for designing airports in the future. The site chosen for the airport was Gravelly Point, just north of Alexandria. Construction began in 1938 and the Main Terminal and Hangar Number 1 were completed in 1941. On June 16 of that year, National opened for business with President Roosevelt in attendance to see the first official landing. A year after opening, National was the second busiest airport in the country. In 1955, when Capital inaugurated its Viscount turboprop service, National Airport



The PCA National Airport ticket counter, 1941.  
*(Photograph by Frank Delano, courtesy of the Library of Congress)*

was the site of the first commercial flight of a jet-powered aircraft in the United States.

The airport's terminal and hangars were designed to suit the needs of PCA, American and Eastern; they had been consulted throughout the building process. The construction of the South Hangar Line, Hangars 1 through 6, was largely based on PCA's decision to move its administrative offices, as well as all maintenance and servicing facilities, to the new airport. Hangar Numbers 2-6 were under construction when the airport opened. Upon the line's completion, it formed one of the largest groups of hangars in the country. PCA's facilities were in Hangars 2, 3 and 4. Later, they also shared Hangar 5 with Northwest Airlines. The PCA offices were on the second floor, running the entire length of the street side of 2, 3 and 4. This corridor was soon nicknamed "mahogany row" — it was here one found the offices of the president, the other executive offices and the **boardroom**.<sup>6</sup> Operation offices, classrooms and additional facilities were on the second and third floor of four wings which branched off at right angles between the hangars. The logo for PCA, formed by a circle surrounding a keystone, was inlaid in the terrazzo floor in the lobby area of Hangar 3. The logo's outline is still there today, although at some point the PCA initials in the keystone were removed and the shape was filled with cement.<sup>7</sup>

During the Second World War, PCA contributed significantly to the country's defense efforts. It was the first commercial airline to operate cargo routes for the government after the United States entered the war.\* PCA's Military Transport Division flew cargo and military officers to points all over North America. Special missions included delivering supplies to Alaska and the Aleutian Islands where soldiers halted a Japanese advance on the U.S. mainland. Another PCA division trained navigators, radio operators, and transport pilots for the armed services. Maintenance departments performed repairs on military aircraft in PCA

facilities at National Airport. By 1943, military operations were double that of the commercial division. Women's contributions were an essential element of PCA's wartime efforts. With the shortage of men on the home front, women for the first time worked as radio operators or in airplane maintenance and performed these duties ably. Former flight dispatcher George Paul recalls that many of the women continued in their positions after the war.<sup>9</sup>

Looking toward the end of World War II, PCA placed orders for fifteen Douglas DC-4s in 1944. The military version of the DC-4 was first flown in 1942 for transporting troops and cargo. Then on January 15, 1946, PCA inaugurated "Super-Plane-of-Tomorrow" service and became the world's first commercial carrier to operate the **DC-4**.<sup>10</sup> This aircraft enabled airlines to significantly reduce their flying times. Accommodating 56-59 passengers and cruising at 240 mph, the four-engine DC-4 improved on the DC-3 in both speed and size, although the cabins were still not pressurized. The DC-4s were used by Capital Airlines right up to the merger with United Airlines in 1961.

PCA officially changed its name to Capital Airlines in 1948, although the new name was already very familiar to the traveling public. In the early 1940s, PCA started painting "PCA-The Capital Airline" on their DC-3 "**Capitaliners**." Realizing that the company's regional name did not represent its expanding route system, the Pennsylvania-Central executives held a contest to rename the airline. The transition to "Capital Airlines," the winning entry suggested by two employees, occurred gradually.<sup>11</sup> The trade name became "Capital Airlines — PCA," and "PCA" was completely dropped in 1947. As the name changed, Capital also adopted its "bird" insignia and the corporate colors of red and white.

Capital Airlines introduced the nation's first coach service in 1948. Air travel, until then,

was a relatively exclusive activity reserved for the well-to-do because of its expense. Capital introduced “Nighthawk” service for fares comparable to railroad travel, in an effort to attract new passengers and generate more revenue. Inaugurated between Chicago and New York, coach service operated at night when planes would have sat unused in their hangars. If passengers were willing to fly at night, with no meals and no frills, they could travel between the two cities paying \$2.30 more than railroad coach, but shaving nearly twelve hours off the trip. In October 1948, *Aviation Week* hailed Capital’s coach service as “the most important development in domestic air transportation since the war.”<sup>12</sup>

Capital’s Nighthawk flights were a huge success and helped get the airline out of debt. Other airlines followed with their own coach services, popularizing air travel by making it accessible to more people than ever before. The impact of Capital’s contribution is evident in today’s coach class, now used by the majority of air travelers, and in the existence of no-frills airlines such as People Express, Inc. **from** the 1980s or today’s Southwest Airlines.

The Capital fleet expanded between 1950 and 1953 with the acquisition of twelve Lockheed “Constellations,” an airplane easily distinguished by its gracefully tapered body and unique triple tail. It offered significant innovations in both air travel efficiency and passenger comfort enabling Capital to compete with other airlines’ Constellations and DC-6s. In 1944, Howard Hughes, who had a controlling interest in the predecessor to TWA, and Jack Frye, TWA’s president, flew a Constellation from Burbank, CA, to Washington, D.C., in a record-breaking seven hours. This achievement proved the viability of non-stop coast-to-coast flights, emphasizing not only speed, but also the safety and reliability of airplane travel. Other forms of transportation, such as buses and trains, were beginning to lose their customers to air travel.<sup>13</sup>

With a cruising speed of 320 mph, and a capacity of 40-60 passengers, the Constellation provided efficiency with a new level of comfort and luxury for Capital’s **passengers**. In addition to pressurized, air-conditioned cabins, the sound-proofed interiors were custom designed in a contemporary style and the seats were roomy. The exclusive “Cloud Club” was the trademark of the Constellation’s luxurious service. Advertisements promised a lounge of chairs, divans, and tables with greenery and a “club-like atmosphere of superb comfort and **refinement**.”<sup>14</sup>

At this time, James H. “Slim” Carmichael was Capital’s president. When he had taken the helm of PCA-The Capital Airline, it was struggling with too many short-haul routes to maintain a cost-effective operation — a situation that would continue to challenge the airlines’ management in the years ahead. It was under Carmichael’s leadership, however, that Capital Airlines became the fifth-largest commercial carrier and introduced some important firsts to the airline industry. Although he died in 1983, Carmichael continues to be honored for his leadership in commercial aviation.”

Carmichael spent his early career barnstorming and stunt flying in the Midwest, then carried airmail for Central Airlines. Soon after Pennsylvania and Central’s merger in 1936, he moved **from** chief pilot to operations manager and became president of PCA in October 1947.

Carmichael pulled PCA out of debt by aggressively reducing costs, drastically cutting payroll and generating new sources of revenue. He successfully attracted new passengers, and the notice of competitors, by offering the nation’s first **air-coach** service. In 1954, he again captured the attention of the aviation world by announcing the purchase of Viscount turboprop airplanes. To provide long-term stability and growth for the airline, Carmichael sought consolidation with other carriers. Unfortunately, these efforts never bore fruit. Amid the company’s financial problems and conflicts over a proposed merger with United, Carmichael resigned as chairman of the

board in 1958.

Today, Carmichael is remembered with affection. He reportedly knew most of the pilots personally and kept an “open door” policy which encouraged the free exchange of **ideas**.<sup>16</sup> The company newsletter, *Capitaliner*, often reported on his visits to stations in the Capital system or participation in employee activities such as softball games at the Alexandria stadium or golf at Belle Haven Country Club. While his aggressive cost-cutting proved how tough he could be, employees remember Slim as a “nice guy” whose personable, informal manner helped create a close-knit company that felt like a family.

During the Korean War, Capital Airlines resumed military activities, carrying an impressive amount of cargo in the Pacific Airlift. The airline also continued to contribute to military efforts by participating in the Civil Air Movement, which flew personnel to bases all over the United States.

On July 20, 1952, a flight crew became participants in a phenomenon characteristic of the post-war era. At 5:55 that Sunday morning, Capital pilot Captain S.C. “Casey” **Pierman** noticed a bluish-white ball in the northern sky while on the ground at National Airport preparing for take-off. Attaching no immediate significance to the incident, he continued to ready his DC-4 for departure. Unknown to **Pierman**, experienced radar operators at National Airport’s Air Route Traffic Control Center had been tracking unidentified objects for several hours. Later, during Pierman’s flight to Detroit, they asked

him to look for the unknown objects. Eight minutes after take-off, near **Herndon**, Virginia, the 17-year Capital Airlines veteran, along with his co-pilot, Charles **Wheaton**, provided the visual confirmation radar operators were seeking.

The sighting of these and numerous other mystery objects over Washington in July, 1952 made front page headlines in *The Washington Daily News*, and *The Washington Post*.<sup>17</sup> The government dispatched jet fighters to investigate sightings on July 26 and 27. Such incidents — multiple sightings of unidentified flying objects (U.F.O.s) in one area for an extended period — are known as “flaps.” At a July 28 news conference, United States Air Force officials suggested the sightings were due to natural phenomena, most likely a temperature inversion in the atmosphere brought on by the unusually warm weather. This flap over the Washington

metropolitan area continued through August 6 when *The Washington Post* reported “Radar Sights ‘Heaviest’ Saucer Fleet Over D.C.”<sup>18</sup>

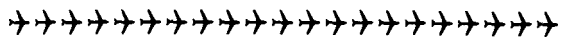
So-called “saucer” sightings were frequent occurrences in the early years of the Cold War. From 1947 (when the term “flying saucer” was coined) through the Washington flap in 1952, hundreds of U.F.O. cases were being investigated by the U. S. Air Force. In a period characterized by emerging technology, weapons development and global tension, **Amer-**

**icans** had a heightened sense of insecurity. Sightings were taken seriously and not just considered tabloid fare. Explanations for these unusual events were often unconvincing, making



The “Capital Bird” insignia was created by industrial designer Karl **Brocken**. It was introduced in 1947 as Pennsylvania Central Airlines, or PCA, was gradually changing its name to Capital Airlines. (Courtesy of L. B. Boyd)

observations and reports by trustworthy sources a critical element in reassuring the public that it was not in any danger.



The June 24, 1955 front page headlines of the *Alexandria Gazette* included: “**Alexandrians** Join Ceremonies Christening Capital Airlines’ New Viscount Passenger Liner.” On June 23, Mayor Marshall J. Beverley and City Manager Ira F. Willard had led a large group of **Alexandrians** to participate in the christening ceremonies for Viscount service held at National Airport’s Hangar 3.

Capital was the toast of the aviation world when it introduced jet power into the American skies.” The Viscount, manufactured by Britain’s Vickers-Armstrongs, Ltd., was the world’s first turboprop airliner and the first jet-powered plane to be widely used for commercial transportation. British European Airways introduced the Viscount into regular service in 1953. It represented a significant improvement in both comfort and speed that would change the public’s perception of air travel.”

With a high-pitched whistle emanating from its engines, the airplane even sounded different. It was powered by four Rolls-Royce turbine propeller engines capable of achieving a maximum cruising speed of 385 miles per hour — a rate unmatched by any airplane powered by piston engines.

The Viscount had enormous 26 x 19 inch, picture windows. Passengers riding in the pressurized cabins experienced a noticeably smoother, quieter flight. The ride reportedly had so little vibration that a coin balanced vertically on a table would stay in place indefinitely. (Passengers were even given tokens the size of a quarter so they could try it for themselves.) With the Viscount, Capital was the first in the U.S. to offer yet another air transportation innovation: the fold-down tray table.” Passengers no longer had to balance food trays supported by pillows on their laps.

The airplane’s interior furnishings were designed for “a feeling of spaciousness and living room comfort” by Charles Butler and Associates. The colors and fabrics were specially named and blended as a salute to the nation’s capital and nearby Virginia, where Capital had its headquarters.<sup>22</sup> For example, the upper portions of the forward and aft bulkheads were Federal Green, while Mall Green was used on the ceiling and under the hat racks. The window drapes were said to be a blend of colors found throughout George Washington’s home. They were a soft pattern of watermelon pink, pale greens and beige tans, with a gold metallic weave, called “Mount Vernon Plaid.” “Monticello” was the watermelon pink fabric with a beige base used for the curtains covering the coat closets. The color of the seats and blankets was known as Potomac Beige. The meal service even included ceramic casserole dishes of a complementary tan.

The British ambassador and the chairman of Vickers-Armstrongs were among the dignitaries, in addition to over 2,300 other guests, who attended Capital’s Viscount christening ceremony. Hangar 3 was decorated for the occasion with flags of U.S. states and territories, the flags of the British Commonwealth, and red and white flowers to emphasize Capital’s colors. **Vice-President Richard M. Nixon** spoke at the event, and Mrs. Nixon had the honor of performing the christening by smashing a bottle of vintage French champagne over the airplane’s nose. The Alexandria contingent met informally with Capital’s president “Slim” Carmichael and City Manager Willard invited Capital Airlines to consider the City its official **home**.<sup>23</sup>

On July 26, the president of the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, ES. Everly, and other area business leaders joined Carmichael at the airport to cut ribbons inaugurating the Viscount’s first American flight, nonstop to Chicago. Capital’s Viscount flights were given impressive names such as *Diplomat*, *Independence*, or *President*. The aircraft met the airline’s need for an economical, high speed plane for its many short routes and for a time, passengers flocked to this



star of the fleet. Capital had ordered an unprecedented sixty Viscounts. Unfortunately, the Viscount's forty-four seat capacity and its design were not as profitable for flying the longer routes the airline was granted later in the decade. Ultimately, Capital was unable to compete with the larger, faster aircraft that competitors put into service all too quickly. This problem, coupled with the debt from the purchase, contributed to the carrier's decline. The Viscounts did demonstrate their worth in the long term. After the merger with United Airlines, Capital's Viscounts proved to be a success on United's short-haul routes and were used through 1969.

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**✈The Capital Airlines Story  
 will be continued in the Spring  
 Historic Alexandria Quarterly**  
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Previous issues of The Historic Alexandria Quarterly:

*The Alexandria Union Station*  
 by Al Cox

*Equally their Due: Female Education in Antebellum Alexandria*  
 by Gloria Seaman Allen

*A Study in Decentralized Living: Parkfairfax, Alexandria, Virginia*  
 by Laura L. Bobeczko

*The Educational Use of the Property at 218 North Columbus Street, Alexandria, Virginia*  
 by Roland M. Frye, Jr.

*John La Mountain and the Alexandria Balloon Ascensions*  
 by Timothy J. Dennée

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