

Taxi Drivers of the SKY

by
Selby Calkins

YOU think firemen and doctors turn out in a hurry at all hours of the day and night? You think Coast Guardsmen are called upon to go places, and go fast, upon the shortest notice?

Their's is a monotonous existence compared with that of those engaged in the modern oddest of odd jobs—operating an aerial charter service.

Throughout the United States there's a new business on wings. It is the business of flying special charter trips—anywhere, any time—and it has become one of the outstanding developments of modern aviation. Dick Merrill and Jack Lambie have just returned from one such trip—a flight from New York to London and return to bring back first pictures of the Coronation.

Here was a flight that a decade ago would have made aviation history, as Lindbergh did when he flew the same route except that he went on to Le Bourget. In 1937 it was practically a routine flight for the workaday purpose of bringing the American newspaper-reading public pictures of the greatest historical pageant of the age by the speediest known method of transportation.

Logically enough, as Southern California has developed into the nation's outstanding aviation center in so many other respects, it has also developed the speediest and most efficient general charter service.

Go to any major airport near Los Angeles, for instance, and announce that you wish to fly to Alaska, Panama, Mexico City, New York, or practically anywhere else and some



This is Bob Blair, transport pilot No. 716. Many an urgent flight—or elopement—has sailed into the skies with Blair behind the controls of his trim new Stinson. Blair is the man who taught Ruth Chatterton to fly.

young man will casually guide you to a plane, climb in with you and you'll be on your way.

It has become as simple as that.

There is, in the Los Angeles area, a group of charter operators who pride themselves on providing what they believe is the fastest, safest aerial taxi service in the world.

Here's the roster:

At Union Air Terminal, Burbank: Lewis Air Service, operated by Joe Lewis, a pioneer pre-war and former airline pilot with two decades of flying behind him, now operating seven airplanes in a charter, aerial ambulance and student instruction business.

United Air Services, Ltd., operated by Paul Mantz, another pioneer pilot, famous motion picture flyer and technical adviser to Amelia Earhart in her history-making exploits.

At Grand Central Air Terminal, Glendale: Grand Central Flying Service, operated by Joe Plosser with a combined charter service and one of the outstanding aviation instruction schools in the United States.

At Los Angeles Municipal Airport: Bob Blair, for many years an outstand-

ing exponent of the "ready any time to go anywhere" policy but in recent weeks gradually withdrawing to fill a position with the Stinson sales organization. At Clover Field, Santa Monica: Howard H. Batt, who has been flying since the early days of aviation development and who finds time to head the Association of Motion Picture Pilots as well as a speedy charter service and the distributorship of two makes of sports planes.

None of these men is the romantic conception of the daring pilot, steely-eyed and with a grand fearless disregard for his life. They are almost humorously opposite to this conception. Each one is a business man first, a conservative flyer who places safety of his passengers and equipment above all else, a pilot who spends much time and money keeping abreast with the latest developments in the aviation industry and in maintaining his own and his employes' skill and efficiency at the highest possible level.

Their future is bound up with the progress of aviation toward higher and still higher standards of safety. They keep themselves and the pilots they employ keyed up to expertness in their



Probably the most famed of California's aerial cab drivers is Paul Mantz. He achieved a good bit of fame when Amelia Earhart selected him as her technical adviser. But his every-day business is charter flying.



If, when you are in California, you suddenly have to get to Walla Walla or Steamboat Springs in a hurry, give Joe Flosser a buzz. Just give him time to get his maps and ship ready. That's the charter pilot's life.

craft. They equal airline standards and in many instances excel those standards in flight ability, navigation and radio training. Their planes are all equipped with two-way radio.

"It is just good business practice—we're selling transportation," they agree matter-of-factly.

Who charters airplanes? Let the sky-taxi chauffeurs tell you.

"People in a hurry, and to whom hours mean money," says Howard Batt. "I flew Sen. William G. McAdoo to New York one day, then to Washington and back to Los Angeles the next. The charter cost him more than \$800 but he made his own schedule and the speed was worth the money to him.

"Mary McCormic, the opera star; Tom Storke, Santa Barbara newspaper publisher; Ted Healy, film comedian; and a good many Los Angeles business men are regular charterers. They have found it profitable again and again to charter a plane instead of worrying about transportation schedules."

Bob Blair's answer was much the same. In addition he listed motion picture stars, sportsmen and financiers among those who valued quick trips to

out-of-the-way places more than the cost involved.

"Flights to Ensenada, Palm Springs, Death Valley and other resorts have long since become routine requests during the seasons those playgrounds of the wealthy are open," Blair explained.

"The saving in time more than compensates for the slightly additional expense and the time saved is often even more important when a quick journey is planned to some city off the regular air lanes," he added.

The Lewis Air Service—Joe Lewis and two youthful but highly trained transport pilots in his employ—chalks up thousands of miles of cross-country flying each year in the active charter business Lewis directs.

A stroll along the apron at the Union Air Terminal at any hour of the day or night is liable to bring you alongside a Lewis plane warming up for a flight to far places.

A goodly portion of his traffic is of a type that has brought the short, stocky Lewis more than a little good-natured ribbing from his fellow airmen. They call him "Cupid" and "Love's Little Messenger" and "Honeymoon Joe" and ac-

We had often wondered just what the life of a charter pilot consisted of. Then Mr. Calkins, a Hollywood aviation writer, wrote in to tell us about it. You'll agree that it's a good story.

cuse him jokingly of getting "rates" from scores of Nevada and Arizona ministers and marrying justices.

You've guessed it—elopers have found Lewis and his pilots always ready for those aerial jaunts to nearby Gretna Greens. Mary Astor and Manuel del Campo; James Ellison and Gertrude Durkin; Harry Joe Brown and Sally Eilers; Phillip Karlstein and Dixie Martin; Manly Danforth and Evelyn Hand, and Howard Lang and Vicki Astlett are a few of the prominent motion picture couples that flew to Yuma with Joe Lewis at the airplane controls.

Because of these recent trips and scores of others, Los Angeles newspapers have long since learned to keep a weather eye on the Lewis office whenever there is an elopement in the offing.

Other jaunts, though equally profitable, arouse much less interest in the public eye. They are the aerial ambulance trips Lewis is often called upon to make with his specially designed ambulance plane.

It is equipped with a "flying hospital room" separated from the pilot's compartment. In the ambulance portion of the plane is a regulation hospital

Howard Batt will roll out either his new Beechcraft or his Waco on instant notice.



All the punching this Joe Lewis ever does is on the throttles of his three ships. For his long-haul work Lewis uses a new Stinson. For sport and student work he has a Kinner Sportster. A Stearman does odd jobs.



stretcher-bed, oxygen equipment, medicine cabinet and seats for a doctor and nurse in addition to the patient.

"Rochester, Minnesota — operation — one chance in a thousand—" comes a terse telephone call and the ambulance ship is soon winging its way eastward in a race with death.

"Just missed the San Francisco plane — have an appointment there at noon," gasps a man, brief case in hand, as he runs up to the line of Lewis airplanes. A pilot guides him into a plane, the starter spins and the business man keeps his appointment.

"My wife is on *The Chief* bound for Chicago with all our luggage but I missed the train—where can we catch it?" another harassed traveler demands as he climbs out of a taxi at the airport.

"San Bernardino, Barstow or Needles — we'll catch it," says Lewis and the worried man is on his way.

Three young people approach Lewis, two men and a girl. One of them steps forward.

"My name is ——— ———," he says, drawing a little leather case from his pocket. "Transport Pilot No. ———. My sister and her fiance want to get married and I'd like to rent a plane to take them to Yuma."

A brief discussion of the young man's experience follows, Lewis flies once around the field with him to satisfy himself that his customer is a competent pilot, and the trio is off to Yuma. They'll telegraph Lewis when they arrive and again when they take off again for the return trip, so he'll know when to expect them.

A man, his wife and their young son approach. They've never been up and they'd like to take a ride over Hollywood and Los Angeles. Lewis summons a pilot, they all climb into a plane and three more converts to the safety of flying are made, for their plane and pilot operate just as carefully for that short sightseeing trip as if it were off for New York.

Paul Mantz is another who sleeps with a packed bag and full map case beside his bed. He heads the United Air Services, Ltd., and does much of the charter flying himself in addition to stunting for motion pictures, flying newsreel camera planes and working with Miss Earhart.

Two years ago it fell to Paul Mantz to demonstrate that no charter is likely to be refused by Southern California operators. He had just flown a party to San Francisco. When he checked in by telephone from the airport there, his office at Burbank read him a radiogram from a ship in mid-Caribbean.

"DOCKING BALBOA WEDNESDAY NIGHT. ESSENTIAL FLY LOS ANGELES. MEET BOAT BALBOA," it said.

"Radio him that I'll meet the boat," Mantz instructed his secretary.

At two o'clock Monday afternoon he was back in Burbank, where his maps, long-distance traveling bag and another plane were all ready for him. He went to Los Angeles to get clearance papers for the countries south to Panama.

"By 3:30 I had everything set at the

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Mexican consulate," Mantz relates, "and then I discovered that the other Latin-American consulates were closed for the day. Waiting until morning was impossible if I was to get to Balboa on time."

He rechecked his maps and found that the whole 3,600-mile trip could be made with only one stop south of Mexico. Managua, Nicaragua, was about half-way from Mexico to Panama and a necessary fueling stop. He decided upon a gamble, and took off just about dark.

At Nogales, Arizona, he cleared Customs and sailed over Mexico, stopping at Mazatlan, Acapulco and Tapachula. At this last stop he was told that it was impossible to fly further south without the proper papers. His watch showed him it was 5:20 p. m.

"Why, you fellows are working overtime!" Mantz exclaimed. "You should get paid extra for that." He laid several notes on the counter.

After a few moments of pleasantries, during which the notes disappeared, the authorities finally agreed that it was nobody's business what happened to Mantz after he left Mexico. But they did let drop a warning that down in Costa Rica there was a plane armed with a machine gun, set upon breaking up bootleg flying.

"I side-stepped that by going out to sea 12 miles, around not only Costa Rica, but every country for which I did

not have the proper calling cards," Mantz said casually. "All except Managua, of course, where I had to land—but Americans there helped me over that hurdle and things went off beautifully."

Wednesday night, as scheduled, he picked up his passenger at Balboa and Friday evening they were back in Los Angeles.

At Glendale, Joe Plosser's Grand Central Flying Service two-place airplanes fly in and out of the airport from dawn to dark, training scores of pilots in one of the most complete courses offered, but at one side are a couple of big cabin planes—and when they roar off the field it means that Plosser is away on another charter jaunt.

"Few people realize what charter flying really involves," Plosser will tell you. "We have so consistently carried out flights that not many of our patrons consider the problems they involve. In fact, we are called upon to complete flights as speedily and efficiently as the airlines, but all too often without radio beam or beacon guidance.

"Charter flights usually take one off the established airways and night landings on unlighted fields are nothing new, yet the percentage of mishaps is amazingly small," he points out.

"When we are taking our passengers to established airline terminals over marked airways and can fly with the aid of radio

beams our problem is comparatively simple—but more often our charters are to places off the established airways—for the simple reason that a chartered plane is the fastest way to get there," Plosser adds.

Out-of-the-ordinary flights charter pilots now are called upon to make offer further evidence of the air-mindedness that is growing so rapidly in the public consciousness.

In recent months, Joe Lewis has been called upon to use his ambulance ship to bring back to Los Angeles the body of a man killed several hundred miles away in an automobile accident; Paul Mantz has had several aerial funerals, when relatives of the deceased have engaged him for the task of strewing their loved one's ashes over the sea; nearly all the charter operators have been called upon by newspapers to carry their reporters and photographers on rush assignments best covered from the air; and only recently, with the opening of the trout season, one of the operators carried a party of wealthy fishermen to a meadow high in the mountains, left them there for several days, and then went back to return them to civilization.

All this evidence of the rapid growth of the aerial taxi business brings up in the public mind the cost of airplane charters. There is no secret about the rates. Every operator has his established rate card,

and in most cases they run fairly close together for comparable equipment.

The Lewis Air Service rates furnish excellent examples. A few of the prices, on a four-place Lockheed plane with a cruising range of 900 miles, may be interesting. The rates are all for four passengers and are quoted on a round-trip basis:

Bakersfield, \$40; Ensenada, \$90; Flagstaff, Arizona, \$200; Grand Canyon, Arizona, \$200; Palm Springs, \$50; San Simcon, \$75; Tucson, Arizona, \$185, and Yuma, Arizona, \$125.

Additional costs for night flights, waiting time, stop-overs and special services are always subject to adjustment before a flight is undertaken, especially for charters where the normal fee is more than \$150, the Lewis rate card specifies. This also applies to charters of the ambulance plane, or planes of two or three passengers capacity, or more than four.

An interesting aspect of the charter rates in effect in Southern California is that on comparatively short flights, the cost for four passengers on a round trip basis is only slightly more than regular airline rates; while on longer flights the charter rate is usually considerably less.

For example, four persons traveling to Las Vegas, Nevada, and return by airline would pay \$100.08 as against a charter price of \$125; to San Francisco and return, \$136.44 by airline and \$140 by chartered plane; and to Salt Lake City and return, \$250.22 by airline and \$255 by chartered plane.

Over longer distances, on the same

basis, charter operators claim an advantage over airline fares. The following table, compiled on May 15 on the same four-person, round-trip basis from Los Angeles illustrates the differences:

City	Airline	Charter
Amarillo, Texas	\$407.52	\$375
Chicago, Ill.	756.00	695
Denver, Colo.	482.48	340
El Paso, Texas.	353.52	285
Kansas City, Mo.	601.20	500
Mexico City, Mexico.	792.00	775
New York City.	1079.60	950
Portland, Ore.	389.60	330
Reno, Nev.	219.24	160
Seattle, Wash.	453.08	390

The natural reaction of a layman glancing at this comparison is that the difference in favor of the charter operator is offset by the greater comfort, better navigational aids and higher development of flying ability found on the airlines.

And the charter operators will be the first to enter sweeping denials.

They will show you that their airplanes are every bit as luxurious for their four passengers as the airliners are for their 21; they will prove that the flight training, ability and experience of their pilots and themselves are equal and in many cases superior to the same qualifications of the airline pilots, and they will show you radio and navigational equipment in their planes that duplicates the equipment of the airliners in efficiency.

Some of the charter pilots will tell you that they are themselves former airline pilots, who "quit driving busses to become chauffeurs."

And finally they'll pull out their flight records for the past several years and show a better record for safety, even in proportion to the number of passengers carried, than the airlines!

Perhaps the airlines offer greater speed? Not necessarily, say the charter pilots. Even with slightly slower airplanes, the charter pilot is not bound by schedules and will often complete a direct point-to-point flight in quicker time than an airline passenger could. An example is the Reno-Los Angeles flight. An airline passenger must go to Reno by way of Oakland, where a charter pilot will take a direct course.

"Speed?" asks Howard Batt. "I'll beat any airline schedule!" Batt operates Beechcrafts, with cruising speeds of from 177 to 200 m.p.h., in his charter service. Lockheeds, Stinsons and other modern cabin planes operated by the charter services of Southern California will equal or come close to equaling the speed of huge airliners in actual practice, their pilots point out.

Even this situation is due for change. The airlines are soon to have new and faster schedules and then the charter pilots will need new equipment to keep them offering the same proportionate high standard of service.

The fleets of aerial taxies will increase as the air-mindedness of the public increases. Perhaps before long Mr. and Mrs. Public will be hailing an air taxi as nonchalantly as they now call a land cab, but to go far—and fast.

END

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