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50 YEARS OF TRANSATLANTIC KLM FLIGHTS

On December 15 of this year, it will be 50 years ago that the first KLM flight across the Atlantic Ocean was flown with a three-engined Fokker F-XVIII. Seven days, nineteen hours and twenty minutes later the PH-AIS "Snip" landed with a crew of four and 106 kg of mail at the airport of Curacao. Once again one goal of KLM's early years had become fact.

The plans

By 1921, two years after KLM had been founded, the company's management considered building up an independent air network in the Caribbean. Air connections in this group of islands could be of optimal advantage.

Twelve years passed by before a new study indicated the Fokker F-XVIII, then operated by KLM, as the aircraft to carry out the plans. Immediately preparations began, in which in a later stage it was even decided to allow the Fokker F-XVIII to make the air crossing to the West to gain the experience needed for a possible air connection between Holland, the Netherlands Antilles and Surinam.

The preparations

The crew of the selected Fokker F-XVIII PH-AIS "Snip", headed by Captain Hondong, concentrated on the many problems which the flight would entail. It was decided to make the final landing on the eastern side of the Atlantic Ocean at the Cape Verde Islands where, in connection with various test flights over this portion of the ocean by the French, an airfield had been built. KLM wanted to fly non-stop to Paramaribo from there.

Wireless operator Van der Molen got help in solving his communication problems from the Royal Navy and the Merchant Marine.

The submarine "K-XVIII" and the SS Stuyvesant, both en route to South America, would be choosing a course which coincided with the westerly flying "Snip", so that they would be assured of radio contact above the enormous stretch of water.

The "Snip's" interior had to undergo a metamorphosis. The Fokker F-XVIII had a flying range of approximately 1000 kilometers, which had to be increased by 250% in order to reach Paramaribo from the Cape Verde Islands. In the cabin, which had already been made as empty as possible, the windowpanes were replaced by linen to save weight before eight extra fuel tanks and an extra oil tank were installed.

These tanks had a capacity of 3500 liters of fuel and 180 liters of oil, which again brought up questions about the allowable take-off weight of the F-XVIII, which was not supposed to exceed 7850 kg. Test flights did prove, however, that the F-XVIII was much stronger than originally calculated and so the Department of Civil Aviation granted permission to take off with a weight of 10,000 kg in total.

Since this was the first KLM ocean flight, the instruments on board were expanded. Co-pilot Van Balkom and wireless operator Van der Molen got a sextant for the navigation and communication, plus a chronometer and a dual radio set.

The flight was used to get 26,251 pieces of mail, weighing 106 kg together, to addresses in Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles in a record time.

The flight of the "Snip"

The weather on December 14, 1934, was its usual obstructive self. In the pouring rain the "Snip" stood waiting for departure at Schiphol at night, watched by thousands of aviation enthusiasts.

Captain Hondong, co-pilot Van Balkom, wireless operator Van der Molen and flight engineer Stolk began the first KLM flight over a great distance in a westerly direction in that dark, wet morning hour of December 15, 1934.

The first 985 kilometers to Marseilles became a changing duel with cutting rains and ice-formation on the wings and windows. Eight hours after departing from Schiphol, the Snip landed at the marshy airfield of Marseille.

There they ate breakfast and departed refreshed one hour later in a southerly direction to Tangier. Very soon the Pyrenees saw to a repeat of the weather conditions the "Snip" had had to endure on the first stretch. Via the radio a message was received that the airfield in Tangier could not be used because of the downpours. The alternative, Casablanca, was in exactly the same condition, so that Hondong was forced to opt for a landing in Spain. First choice was Malaga, where gusts of 120 kph made landing impossible. Finally the "Snip" was able to touch down at Alicante where the aircraft was checked and where the crew enjoyed a well-earned night of rest.

The following day the weather situation turned out to have improved a bit. In

Casablanca the crew was enthusiastically received.

It was decided to leave in the evening for Porto Praia in the Cape Verde Islands. This stretch, which was more than 2600 kilometers, was longer than the three previous stages together, which was a good dress rehearsal for the "Snip" and crew on the eve of their great Atlantic jump.

The 12-hour long flight went extremely smoothly and after the long trip, the three days of rest in Porto Praia were a welcome reward.

The Atlantic Ocean

The evening of December 19, 1934, had set in. Weather was good, the crew felt fit and the "Snip" was in optimal technical condition.

At exactly 7.15 in the evening, the wheels of the "Snip" left the ground and course was set for Paramaribo.

After a half hour of flying, wireless operator Van der Molen reported a defective radio, which was quickly repaired. The agreed contact between F-XVIII and K-XVIII was excellent.

More than five hours later, the radio stopped working again. In the meantime, Hondong had noticed that the fuel pressure was dropping. The weather was getting worse.

After a few hours, all difficulties, except for the weather, had been overcome. Via contact with the SS Stuyvesant and the crew's own calculations made with difficulty, the "Snip" remained on course.

The northeast tradewinds caused rain and electrical storms. The heavy cloud formations made it practically impossible to determine their position with the sextant.

The goal reached

At exactly 10.23 on the morning of December 20th, the men perceived the coastline of South America.

The "Snip" set course for Zanderij Airport in Paramaribo and landed at precisely 12.45 at the airport of Surinam, renamed by the press as "Sniphol".

The journey was still not complete. The "Snip" still had to fly another 1700 kilometers to arrive at Willemstad in Curacao. Two days of rest were enough to set off for Curacao.

The "Snip" flew over Paramaribo just one more time to then set course to the west along the coast.

At the Venezuelan airport in La Guaira, the Dutch crew was welcomed in pouring rain. The "Snip" continued further over the last bit of water, and there in a sun-drenched, rippleless Caribbean Ocean lay Curacao.

It was December 22, 1934, 7.00 in the evening, when the "Snip" landed at Hato Airfield.

The trip had taken seven days, nineteen hours and twenty minutes. The flying time was 54 hours and 27 minutes, and the aircraft had flown 10,488 kilometers.

The crew was knighted in the Order of Oranje Nassau and the government of Venezuela bestowed the Order of Simon Bolivar "El Liberador" on them. Two days after the much acclaimed arrival, the Christmas mail for Bonaire and Aruba was flown over. In January 1935 the "Snip", now rebuilt as a normal passenger aircraft, was introduced as the first aircraft on in a new KLM network in and around the Netherlands Antilles. KLM's former West-Indies Division was the precursor of today's ALM Antillean Airlines.

The sequel

KLM's Caribbean network developed prosperously. The number of destinations increased, just as the fleet was regularly updated. On August 1, 1964, ALM Antillean Airlines, which had been set up by the Antillean government, took over the services of KLM's West-Indies Division.

In the meantime, airlines had started operating transatlantic flights following the Second World War. In May 1946 KLM was the first European airline to open a scheduled service between the European continent and the United States. On June 6, 1946, the service to New York was extended to Curacao. Traveling time by Douglas DC-4 took 37 hours, the flying time 31 hours.

Now, 50 years after the pioneer flight of the "Snip", KLM flies more than 40 times a week in both directions over the Atlantic Ocean, in the summer even more than 50 times a week. Eight of these weekly services have final destinations in Central or South America. These Central and South Atlantic services still partly follow the old route of the "Snip", though flights go considerably faster and fewer intermediate landings are made. Traveling time from Amsterdam to Curacao via Lisbon and Port of Spain now takes 13 hours and 55 minutes by Douglas DC-10. Flying time is 11 hours and 50 minutes.

Photo caption: The crew of the "Snip": from left to right, Wireless Operator S. van der Molen, Pilot J.J. Hondong, Co-pilot J.J. van Balkom and Flight Engineer L.D. Stolk.

Amstelveen, December 12, 1984

AMS/DR/PO/ans