

FRENCH WINGS OVER FIVE CONTINENTS

THE STORY OF PART ONE UTA

Transports Aériens Intercontinentaux (TAI) & Union Aéromaritime de Transport (UAT), 1945-62

In a recent letter to *TAH*, reader Bill D'Andrea asked: "How about an article on the two overseas French airlines TAI and UAT, which later merged to become UTA? An obscure and mostly forgotten story maybe, but I'm sure both companies had interesting and exotic histories". Challenge accepted! **MAURICE WICKSTEAD** starts at the beginning . . .

FRANCE EMERGED FROM the Second World War with its communications and transport infrastructure laid waste by a combination of Allied bombing and sabotage by the retreating German armies. Several thousand kilometres of railway track had been torn up, 80 per cent of locomotives and about half of the nation's rolling stock had been destroyed. Likewise, much of the road network had been rendered unusable, with more than 3,500 bridges damaged or destroyed. Furthermore, large swathes of land had been intensively mined and most of the important seaports had been blocked or severely damaged. In these circumstances the rapid restoration of civil air transport was vital, in order to move essential supplies to help feed a nation on the brink of starvation and aid the rapid resumption of industrial and agricultural production.

The newly restored Air France, which restarted operations in October 1945, was tasked with serving the entire French airline network; but,

BELOW *The two French independent airlines that merged in 1962 to become Union de Transports Aériens (UTA) — TAI and UAT — had both established a wide-ranging network of services using fleets of rugged and dependable prop liners, including DC-6B F-BGOB (c/n 43833), seen here at Gatwick in October 1964, which had served with UAT since April 1953.*

MIKE HOOKS

even with the backing of state resources in those early days, it could not be expected to cover every contingency. Thus from May 1946 private companies were permitted to conduct commercial air services, albeit under restrictive conditions.

While the authorities were reluctant to allow competition with the state-owned carrier, there were opportunities for the private sector over regional and secondary routes, especially in the area of on-demand freight. From May 1946 applications to tender were invited, and by the end of 1947 some 52 permits had been issued, of which 39 were operational, with ten specifically licensed for regular services.

While there was no shortage of adventurous entrepreneurs willing to take up the challenge, they faced one immediate difficulty: that of obtaining suitable equipment. Strict exchange controls placed the preferred option — the ubiquitous Douglas C-47, examples of which were readily available at knockdown prices — beyond their reach, since payment was specified in US Dollars. One of the few suitable alternatives available was the AAC.1 Toucan, a licence-built Junkers Ju 52/3m constructed in France by *Ateliers Aéronautiques de Colombes* (formerly Amiot). More than 400 examples were built from early 1945, most going to the military and Air France. But with a unit price of 8m francs it was around six times more expensive than a war-surplus C-47. Another drawback was that the AAC.1 was maintenance-intensive, with a considerably shorter interval between overhauls than its American rival. This made it expensive to operate, with tonne/km costs three times greater than even the Handley Page Halifax, which was also later employed.

Around 40 AAC.1s found their way to the private carriers, but few remained in service for very long and there were numerous accidents; Air France alone lost 15 within the first two years of operation. Beset by these difficulties and receiving no state aid, hardly any of the French start-ups made money and few survived for more than a couple of years. Several managed to keep going through diversification and amalgamation, however, especially in Africa and other French overseas territories, where regulations were less stringent and opportunities more abundant — especially for transporting agricultural produce.

A CHALLENGE TO AIR FRANCE

Starting from small beginnings, two of these in particular — *Transports Aériens Intercontinentaux* (TAI) and *Union Aéromaritime de Transport* (UAT) — contrived to grow, prosper and, over the next 50 years, play a major part in the development of air services to post-war French colonial Africa and beyond. This is their story.

