

THE BRANIFF PAGES

BRANIFF HISTORY SUMMARY BY BROOKE WATTS

When someone brings up the name Braniff, most people think of brightly painted airplanes or Pucci-clad hostesses, but the name means so much more than that.

The airline actually began in the “not so flashy” town of Oklahoma City. Braniff was started by World War I veteran, and “barnstormer,” Paul R. Braniff. Paul convinced his brother, Tom Braniff, to invest some of the money he had made in insurance into a one-plane airline. This was 1928, and aviation was a novelty to most people. “Paul R. Braniff, Inc” could only carry five passengers between the Midwest towns in Oklahoma. By 1929, the first Braniff had managed to expand into Texas before being bought by the holding company that would eventually become American Airlines.

The Braniff brothers started a second incarnation in 1930. This time, it was simply named Braniff Airways, Inc. With the slogan, “The World’s Fastest Airline,” due to the two multi-colored Lockheed Vegas they flew, the Braniff brothers started on the road of building a “legacy” carrier.

During the thirties, Braniff added the “Electra 10,” the DC-2 and finally the venerable DC-3. After acquiring the DC-2 in 1937 from TWA, Braniff introduced the first “hostesses” who would serve passengers from Chicago in the North to Brownsville, Texas in the South.

Braniff became invaluable during World War II when its aircraft were placed into service by the U.S. "Army Air Corps" flying supplies from the mainland to Panama. (German U-boats were known to prowl the Gulf of Mexico, thus making shipping lanes dangerous around the Panama Canal Zone)

After the War, Braniff moved all of its operations to Dallas Love Field. It expanded into South America in 1948, becoming the first U.S. airline to link the two Americas. As a result, the title "International" was added to Braniff Airways.

Braniff had acquired the fifty-two passenger pressurized Douglas DC-6 (Sleepers) in 1947, which proved perfect for the long flights to Cuba, Panama, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil. The DC-6s had "upper berths" so passengers could slumber in comfort on the overnight flights. Braniff gave these planes the colorful name "El Conquistador" after the early Spanish Conquistadors. Tom Braniff's daughter, Jeanne, designed the murals on the bulkheads that depicted South American scenes.

The South American expansion was completed in 1950, when Eva "Evita" Peron of Argentina granted Braniff landing rights in Buenos Aires. In turn, Evita was granted free travel on Braniff to the U.S., where she shopped for her infamous "couture" collection.

In the 1950's, Braniff focused on domestic growth by acquiring Mid-Continent Airlines. Mid-Continent, like Braniff, had started service in 1928. It's routes reached as far north as North Dakota and as far South as New Orleans. Braniff merged Mid-Continent's employees, routes and fleet of Convair 240s into its own domestic system.

1954 proved a turning point in Braniff history. Tom Braniff, who had led his airline for 24 years, died in a private plane crash over Louisiana. The same year, Paul Braniff, who had left the airline in the 1930s to work for the Army Air-Corps, also died. Tom's energetic Operations Vice-President Charles "Chuck" Beard, who had joined Braniff in 1935, became President and C.E.O in 1954.

One of Chuck's first moves was to bring Braniff into the "jet-age." He ordered ten of Lockheed's "Jet-Power" Electras. He also placed an order for five of Boeing's new "707s," but unlike his competitors at American and Pan Am, he elected to specify Boeing's alternate "-227" Pratt and Whitney pure jet engines. These engines made Braniff's 707s the fastest of the day.

Before the turbo-props and jets were delivered, Braniff was already operating the DC-7C on most long-range flights. These aircraft were dubbed "El Dorado" after the mythical "Lost City of Gold." The DC-7C's were engineered to fly longer and farther than the DC-6 with much less vibration.

During the late Fifties, Braniff built the largest maintenance base in the Southwest at Love Field as well as "The Braniff Tower" at Exchange Park, which would be one of the tallest buildings in Dallas at the time. They also moved into the new Love Field Terminal, which gave Braniff an entire concourse. All of this was completed by 1957-1958.

By 1959, Braniff was flying the new jets and began phasing out the older piston-powered airliners. The new 707-227s were dubbed "El Dorado Super-Jets" and offered "Gold Service" on specific flights. (Gold service included Gold-trimmed First Class seats and gold-plated serving utensils..."Silver Service" was also available on certain flights)

In 1962, Braniff International became the launch customer for the British Aerospace One-Eleven. The small jet was considered perfect by Chuck Beard for Braniff's short routes from Dallas to Amarillo, Houston, Austin, Oklahoma City and Tulsa just to name a few cities. The first One-Eleven was flown from Hurn, England (in Surrey) to Dallas in 1964.

1965 would mark the most radical change to Braniff in its combined history. Troy Post and GreatAmerica Corporation bought Braniff and put Harding Lawrence in charge. Charles Beard was forced to retire after 30 years of loyal service. Contrary to most history books, Braniff had a 95% jet fleet, and was in a positive financial position with a cash surplus when Lawrence came in. The prevailing view (up until recently) was that Braniff was a "backwater regional carrier with outdated equipment" before its perceived "heyday." Nothing could be more opposite from the truth.

After Harding Lawrence took over, he began to formulate the "look" that most people equate with the carrier to this day. Lawrence had brought along Mary Wells (who had worked with him at Continental Airlines for the Jack Tinker Ad agency), and asked her to bring in "new talent" to redo Braniff's "image."

The agency Mary worked for, Jack Tinker and Partners, brought in noted "Folk Artist" and Herman Miller designer Alexander Girard to create new paint schemes and new icons for the airline. Girard not only ended up creating the seven eventual plane colors, but also created 17,000 designed items for the carrier including 56 different Herman Miller fabrics used for seat fabric and Braniff's club lounge design.

Next, Tinker hired Italian fashion designer Emilio Pucci, who was famous for his colorful prints, to design an entire complex hostess wardrobe. This became the famous “airstrip” in which Braniff Hostesses would remove parts of the wardrobe during the flight. The idea behind Pucci’s hostess wardrobe was that “a businessman should be able to look at a pretty girl.” Pucci also designed the uniforms for the flight crew and ground personnel.

Fashion magazines and business magazines alike covered the radical design changes created in 1965-1966. This resulted in a temporary spike in load factors for 1966.

However, by 1969, the traveling public had grown bored with the colorful planes and pizzazz. Braniff, probably unintentionally, had started to neglect customer service in favor of “style over substance.”

In 1970, Chicago ad firm Clinton E. Frank was hired to turn this around. They proposed a return to an emphasis on customer service. For a brief five-year period, Braniff reversed course, becoming a bit more conservative. They focused on making their “bread and butter,” the business traveler, happy with “You’ll like Flying Braniff Style.”

In the mid-seventies, Lawrence was sold on the idea of hiring “modern abstract artist” Alexander Calder to paint a DC-8-62 as a “flying canvas.” Calder’s final design, named “Flying Colors” was a success, and thus the “Flying Colors” moniker was added to the domestic Boeing 727 fleet. By now, Braniff was flying only four designs of “two-toned” aircraft designed by the design firm of Harper & George.

Calder would paint a second aircraft for Braniff in 1975 for the U.S. Bi-Centennial. A Boeing 727 named “Flying Colors of the United States” was unveiled at Braniff’s Maintenance Base at Love Field. It was Calder’s interpretation of the U.S. flag as it waves, thus it was painted in flowing red, white and blue colors.

1978, and de-regulation, would eventually become Braniff's (and its management at the time) Achilles' heel. Lawrence applied for every route he could (thinking that de-regulation might be repealed).

Braniff inaugurated service from Dallas/Fort Worth International (Braniff had moved to this new airport from Love Field in 1974) to London (a route that Chuck Beard had been working on in the early 60s). The daily 747 service, using Braniff's first 747 delivered in 1970, was very popular. However, after de-regulation, Braniff expanded into four more European gateways, and quickly leased 747s to provide the service. It also expanded into Asia in 1979 with a small fleet of Boeing 747SPs. At the same time, Braniff had increased its domestic service by 100%. There was a scramble to hire people to man these new planes and routes.

Braniff also began the first (and only) U.S. Concorde service from D/FW. Using both the entire fleet of Air France and British Airways, Braniff offered Concorde service daily to Washington, D.C. with supersonic service to London or Paris. (British Airways and Air France took over on the trans-Atlantic leg of the flight.)

By 1980, the over-expansion was beginning to take its toll. Concorde service was cancelled in the spring, and Harding Lawrence (considered a visionary in 1965) was politely asked to leave by Braniff's Board of Directors.

Over the next two years, Braniff would cancel its European service (except London), its Asian service and most of the non-profit domestic routes. Former Southwest President, Howard Putnam, was brought in the fall of 1981 to try and "save" the ailing carrier, but by that time, Braniff had too much debt.

On a cold and rainy May 12, 1982 in North Texas, Braniff recalled its colorful fleet to D/FW and shut down its operations after fifty-four years of history. Braniff became the very first victim of de-regulation (Pan American and Eastern would soon follow).

Braniff was briefly resurrected in 1984 using thirty 727s (a fraction of its former fleet). Braniff, Inc. lasted five years until it was sold to some dubious characters that once again grounded the carrier after taking as much money as they could get.

Today, Braniff International is remembered for its colorful history in American and World Aviation. Tom Braniff was honored in 2003 as one of the “One Hundred Stars of Aerospace” by Aviation Week and Space Technology at the Paris Air Show.