

THE HALIFAX IN AIRLINE SERVICE



The varied careers of one hundred surplus Halifax transport aircraft by TONY MERTON JONES

Part Two - More early adventurers

In this second part of our history of the commercial career of the Halifax we focus on the operations conducted by several airlines in the months leading up to the start of the famous Berlin Airlift - an operation that would establish the type forever as one of Britain's leading post-war freight haulers. Even before the airlift, the versatile nature of the Halifax had been well exploited during the course of some commercial adventures that would become a part of aviation history, and with loads regularly slung beneath the aircraft's belly and flown half way round the world the Halifax will surely be remembered as one of the great 'heavyweights' of the immediate post-war era. Just one airline remained faithful to the Halifax throughout its commercial career, with the Lancashire Aircraft Corporation employing a large number of aircraft in almost every theatre in which the type was flown during some six years of operations.

LANCASHIRE'S NEW ENTERPRISE

Arch rival to London Aero and Motor Services in the private sector was the Lancashire Aircraft Corporation, which amassed a sizeable fleet of Halifaxes and used them on worldwide charter work. During the latter part of the war the company had thrived on the rebuild and repair of Bristol Beauforts and Beaufighters, and when peace came the organisation was quick to establish itself in the rapidly developing air charter market. The airline's owner was Eric Rylands, while Wing Commander Barry Aikman - formerly Chief Navigation Officer of RAF Transport Command - was appointed director of aviation. Initially five Halifax C.VIII aircraft were acquired in the spring of 1947 comprising G-AIHU, 'HV', 'HW', 'HX' and 'HY', with the aircraft being acquired via Handley Page.

After overhaul the first Halifax to fly was G-AIHV which was test flown on April 9 1947, received her certificate of airworthiness on the next day, and entered Lancashire service on April 16 carrying fruit to London from Bergamo and Valencia. Although the airline's main base was at Squire's Gate Aerodrome, Blackpool, there was little regular work in the north of England to sustain a fleet of Halifax freighters, and consequently a hangar was leased at Bovingdon Airport to support

Halifax operations. This hangar was large enough to accommodate four aircraft, and Wing Commander H.R. Collins was appointed manager of the Bovingdon base. Initially there were no customs facilities available at Bovingdon, and the Halifaxes had to stage via London Airport with their cargoes of fruit inbound from Italy and Spain. By the end of June, four of the Halifaxes had entered Lancashire service and were mainly employed on the lucrative fruit runs from Italy, Spain and the south of France carrying apricots, cherries, tangerines, peaches, greengages and various vegetables. In order to ensure sufficient spares to support this operation, several Halifax B.VI bombers were acquired and stripped of their valuable parts, and with utilisation of some aircraft running at 40 hours per week, the ready supply of serviceable spares was an essential component in Lancashire's success.

Unfortunately one of the Halifaxes was lost on June 5 1947 when G-AIHW swung on landing at Heathrow while inbound from Valencia with a cargo of apricots. Although the cargo was undamaged and no crew members hurt, the Halifax was declared a write-off. Indeed such was the ample supply of these aircraft that the insurance companies were quick to declare them write-offs for even quite minor accidents, and replacements could be acquired for very keen prices - an entry in 'The Aeroplane' for February 7 1947 advertising a pair of Halifax C.VIII freighters for just £2,000 and £2,500 with only eight flying hours accumulated confirms the excellent value of these practically brand new aircraft.

The entry into service of G-AIHU at the end of September 1947 restored the fleet to four aircraft, and in addition to the regular fruit hauling flights, the Halifaxes were in great demand for

HEADING PHOTOGRAPH: "Red Eagle", alias Halifax G-ALEF of Eagle Aviation alongside another of the airline's Halifaxes in between charters.
(The Riding Photograph Collection)

RIGHT: First Halifax to enter Lancashire service was G-AIHV on April 16 1947.
(D.R. Day)



worldwide ad-hoc charter work, a task which they took to with great relish. On July 5 1947 one of the Halifaxes departed from Heathrow carrying a ship's tail shaft weighing 10,920 lb bound for Calcutta, where the S.S. "Photinia" (a 4,000 ton ship owned by the Stag Line) was stranded. Brought from Sunderland to Heathrow by lorry, the tail shaft was loaded aboard the Halifax by the aircraft taxiing over the 16' 10" long shaft and then having it winched into position. By carrying a duplicate flight crew, Lancashire hoped to reach Calcutta in a total time of just 37 hours with refuelling stops at Bari, Lydda, Dhahran and Delhi. Unfortunately, the rather optimistic time schedule slipped somewhat with the Halifax eventually reaching Calcutta on July 8 in a time of 53 hours. Nevertheless this charter proved the value of conveying urgently needed items by air, and the airline was quick to exploit the potential of the Halifax.



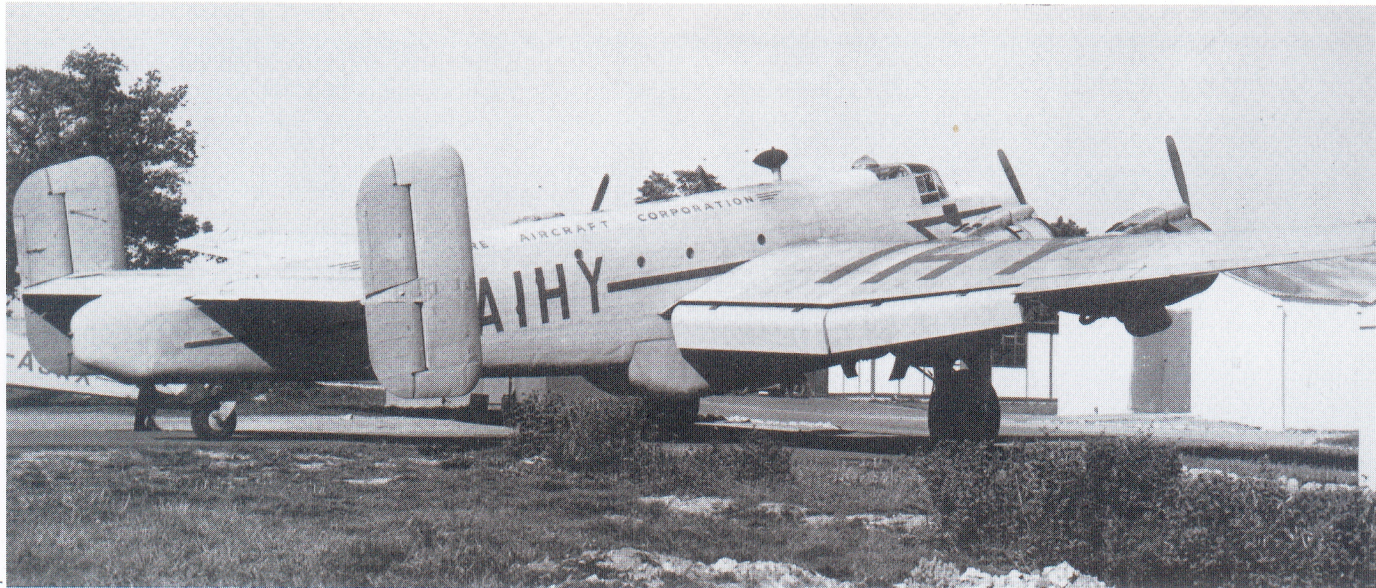
Remains of Lancashire Halifax G-AIHW after her landing accident at Heathrow on June 5 1947. (The Riding Photograph Collection)

Such publicity clearly convinced the shipping world of the viability of the Halifax as a high speed freighter, as on October 1 another Halifax left Bovingdon bound for Singapore with a 5.5 ton propeller shaft strapped beneath its belly destined for the "Lake Chilco", a 7,165 ton steamship. Commanded by Lancashire's Chief Pilot, Captain W.I. Lashbrook, the Halifax reached its destination in four days at a cost to the charterer of just £6,000 - the stricken ship was accumulating harbour charges at the rate of £300 per day, thereby necessitating the use of air cargo.

One of the most exciting of all assignments undertaken by Lancashire during these pioneering days took place on September 12 when at 1955 that evening a specially converted Halifax departed from Liverpool bound for New York via Prestwick, Iceland and Gander, with 20 merchant seamen on board. It was the first of a series of charters flown on behalf of the U.S. Maritime Board conveying crews of American ships home to the United States. This first charter was commanded by Captain A.R. Kimmins, and the aircraft's conversion to passenger configuration was accomplished in only eight days, with six passengers being accommodated in the area normally reserved as a crew rest-bay, while the remaining 14 were seated in the main fuselage. A rapid turn round was achieved at New York and the aircraft arrived home on September 15 in time to carry another 20 seamen to New York just two days later.

Lancashire Aircraft Corporation Halifax C.VIII G-AIHY entered service in June 1947 named 'Air Explorer'.

(The Riding Photograph Collection)



Other work for the Lancashire Halifaxes, and for those of LAMS, included the operation of several flights from London carrying cargo for BEA - up to six services weekly were flown to Athens together with a once weekly flight to Milan. The fruit hauling work began to tail off in the autumn although daily flights from Valencia carrying tangerines continued in operation until December. A BOAC assignment saw a Halifax chartered to carry general cargo from London to Sydney on November 14, while on November 25 Halifaxes flew cargoes of electrodes to Lydda for the Iraq Petroleum Company and foreign currency to Vienna. Passenger charters were now regularly undertaken with one Halifax conveying twenty passengers from London to Johannesburg on November 7. Seventeen passengers were flown from London to Marseilles on November 29, while a party of 19 Italian passengers was flown from London to Geneva on December 1.

On November 28 one of the freighter Halifaxes flew the first of several charters from Lille to Liverpool carrying six tons of French cloth destined for a clothing manufacturer in Leeds. Altogether 120 tons were to be transported from Lille, but on December 5 Halifax G-AIHU was destroyed and its crew of four killed when it struck a mountain in North Wales while en-route from Lille to Liverpool in poor weather conditions with another consignment of cloth aboard. This tragedy no doubt reminded many of the dangers of flying these wartime aircraft, but business continued as usual and on December 11 Halifax G-AIHY became the first British commercial aircraft to land at Budapest since the end of the war when it arrived there with 6.5 tons of plastic cloth on board. Six days later a Halifax departed from the UK with a cargo of general merchandise destined for Baghdad and Damascus. The pre-Christmas period was a lucrative time for the Halifax fleet, with flights carrying glace fruit from both Nice and Marseilles being flown on December 12 and 15 respectively.

No doubt inspired by the success of its trans-Atlantic seamen's charters, Lancashire decided to convert one of its Halifaxes to a long-range passenger aircraft with the installation of two extra 360-gallon fuel tanks together with a modified entrance door. But still cargo work predominated, with textile flights between Lille and Liverpool continuing well into 1948. Two cargo charters to Berlin on January 19 and 20 provided a little variety, while on February 1 Captain Lashbrook piloted a Halifax carrying a 19 foot long ship's crankshaft weighing three tons slung beneath the aircraft's belly from Belfast to Malta. On March 2 a cargo of refrigerator pipes, some measuring 20 feet in length, was flown to Baghdad on behalf of the Iraq Brewery Company. Six tons of mining machinery was flown to Damascus and Kirkuk aboard a Lancashire Halifax on March 24, while the return trip was flown via Nicosia and Malta carrying 11 passengers and one ton of cargo. Another long range assignment saw a Halifax carrying six tons of freight from Brussels to Saigon on April 6. By early May the Halifaxes were once again hauling fruit to Bovingdon from Spain, France and Italy, with cherries being flown from Orange daily, and other fruit originating at Verona, Naples, Bergamo and Valencia.

In order to keep pace with the level of work, Lancashire placed three more Halifaxes into service for the 1948 season - G-AJZY and G-AJZZ entered service in March and July respectively following overhaul by Handley Page, while G-AKEC, having been ferried from

Gatwick to Radlett on August 22 1947, entered service with Lancashire following the award of her C of A on February 4 1948. The addition of these aircraft doubled Lancashire's operational Halifax fleet to six aircraft for the summer of 1948. With the sad demise of London Aero and Motor Services during the spring of 1948, Lancashire now emerged as the only real long-range competitor to challenge the supremacy of Skyways and their fleet of DC-4s, Yorks and Lancastrians.

SMALLER CHARTER CONTENDERS

Although the Lancashire Aircraft Corporation and London Aero and Motor Services became the major British operators of the Halifax, several other smaller companies sprang up spawning small fleets of these versatile war surplus transports. During 1947 British American Air Services, Bond Air Services and World Air Freight all acquired Halifax C.VIII aircraft and launched freight charter operations in the London area.

Originally founded in April 1935 at Heston Aerodrome, British American Air Services had flown a variety of light aircraft on passenger and freight charters until the suspension of operations in 1939 after the outbreak of war. When flying resumed in January 1946, the airline was quick to re-establish itself amongst the ranks of Britain's leading charter companies and in March undertook responsibility for the operation of a Halton on behalf of the Maharajah Gaekwar of Baroda. Registered G-AGZP this former RAF VIP Halifax C.VIII (PP336) was overhauled by Handley Page at Radlett and given the designation Halton 2. Test flown on March 18 1946, she was awarded her C of A two days later and shortly afterwards departed from England bound for India under the command of Squadron Leader E.A. Hood and a crew chosen from British American Air Services (BAAS). The Maharajah then flew to England aboard the aircraft and over the next twelve months regularly commuted between England and India aboard this most luxurious of executive transports. Sold to Alpha Airways of South Africa as ZS-BTA in April 1947, the aircraft underwent overhaul at Thame with Airtech before delivery.

After the sale of G-AGZP, BAAS established its own Halifax operation during the summer of 1947 after the airline's take-over by Chartair in May of the same year. Freight charter operations from White Waltham and Gatwick with a pair of Bristol Freighters gave way to more ambitious work with a fleet of Halifax freighters supplied by Airtech at Thame - a maintenance company founded on February 14 1947 by Chartair with a large investment made in surplus government equipment mainly associated with types including the Halifax, Dakota, Rapide and Oxford. Thus Airtech assumed responsibility for the maintenance of BAAS' Halifaxes, and although these operations are reported to have begun in May 1947 with three aircraft, it appears that BAAS did not actually receive its first aircraft until October when C.VIII G-AJPP received her C of A on October 15 after overhaul at Thame by Airtech. The introduction into service of this aircraft coincided with the transfer of operations to Bovingdon, and from here G-AJPP undertook a series of flights carrying fruit from Valencia between November 8 and 20. Altogether some eighteen flights were performed during this period by BAAS, although several were sub-contracted to other carriers. Fog

disrupted operations at the end of November with G-AJPP only being able to carry 6.5 tons of tangerines from Valencia and 6.5 tons of Austrian currency from Vienna during the last week of November. December began on a more encouraging note with the Halifax hauling a load of ship's spares to Oran, with the return journey to Bovingdon seeing the uplift of a full load of fruit at Algiers. A cargo of glace fruit was flown from Nice to Bovingdon just before Christmas, and on January 10 6.5 tons of silk was flown to Berlin.

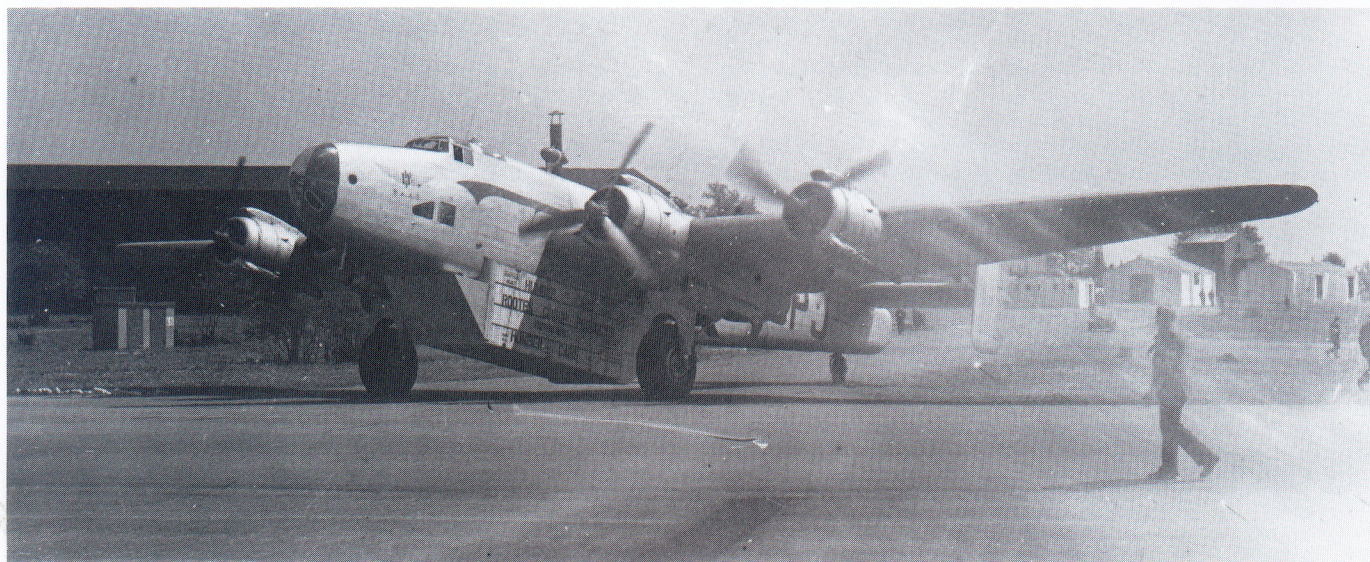
Such was the buoyant level of work that early in 1948 the fleet was expanded from one to four Halifaxes - two aircraft, G-AKAD and G-AKGN, were overhauled by Airtech, while the third (G-AKBB) was prepared by Handley Page at Radlett, test flown on February 2, and eventually entered BAAS service on April 16. First of this trio to enter service, however, was G-AKAD which received her C of A on March 1, and during March she joined G-AJPP hauling cargo between Liverpool and Berlin. In addition the aircraft also flew several Hercules aero engines to Paris, with each aircraft carrying three units slung beneath their bellies.

Halifax G-AJPP was damaged on the ground at Zagreb on April 13, but this did not prevent her from flying a 6.5 ton load of fresh carp to Bovingdon on the next day. The fish were packed in ordinary boxes lightly sprinkled with ice as the aircraft did not fly at an altitude sufficient to keep the cargo frosted. A charter to Madrid was conducted by a Halifax on April 18, which returned via Avignon to uplift a consignment of strawberries. By this stage, three Halifaxes were in service following the introduction of G-AKBB, and the airline became heavily committed to the carriage of fruit between Spain and the UK. All three aircraft were contracted to haul apricots from Albacete, near Madrid, on behalf of a Spanish exporter, Senor Cabarro Yelo. With most outbound flights being made empty, Senor Yelo saw an opportunity for an economic way to take delivery of his new Humber Hawk and on May 7 a BAAS Halifax (G-AJPP) departed from Bovingdon under the command of the airline's chief pilot, Captain R. Hood, with a crate slung beneath the aircraft in which was safely contained Senor Yelo's new Humber motor car. The crate had a ground clearance of just eight inches, while some neat fairings designed by Airtech were installed forward and aft of the crate in order to maximise the inherently poor aerodynamics of a large wooden crate. Taking off some 6,000 lb below her maximum weight, the ungainly Halifax completed her journey to Madrid at a cruising speed some 12 knots lower than normal.

But the month of May saw the loss of one of the airline's Halifaxes with G-AKAD being lost after only ten weeks of operations. Having suffered damage in a ground collision at Bovingdon on May 8, G-AKAD was quickly returned to service only to be lost altogether on May 17 at Rennes after her undercarriage failed during the landing thereby causing her to make a belly landing. Inbound from Madrid with another cargo of fruit on board, the crew escaped serious injury but the aircraft was declared a write-off. A marathon round trip carrying general cargo from Bovingdon to Casablanca, Dakar and Algiers was performed by a BAAS Halifax early in May, but the bulk of the airline's work centred upon the Madrid to Bovingdon fruit trade with up to twelve

Although the negative has suffered rather from the ravages of time, the atmosphere of Bovingdon Aerodrome shortly after the end of the war with Halifax G-AJPP departing on May 7 1948 with Senor Cabarro Yelo's new Humber Hawk car slung beneath her belly in a wooden crate more than makes up for any loss in quality.

(Flight 12889)



Bond Air Services took delivery of their first Halifax G-AIOI on January 17 1947, thereby becoming one of the first charter companies to fly the type commercially.
(MAP)

flights weekly being operated over this route. Two cargoes of silk were flown to Berlin aboard Halifaxes on June 15 and 18, while on the latter date another Halifax flew gramophone records to Berlin. Six and a half tons of oil drilling equipment were flown to Kirkuk from Bovingdon on behalf of the Iraq Petroleum Company on June 19. This latter assignment saw the Halifax also carrying a number of stowable Rumbold passenger seats, which were then used to carry personnel employed by the oil company, and by the time that the aircraft returned to Bovingdon on July 1 she had covered some 9,600 miles carrying personnel, general cargo, baggage, drilling machinery and mining equipment.

The fruit flights continued in operation throughout the summer, and occasionally the airline was able to derive welcome revenue on the outbound sectors. On July 11 a five ton load of penicillin and a collection of valuable paintings was flown to Madrid, with the art treasures safely stowed in the aircraft's pannier. Apart from the flights to Albacete, other fruit charters saw the Halifaxes hauling apricots from Carmoli, Spain, on July 12 and 13, and greengages from Le Bourget on July 13 and 14. Towards the end of the season, Halifax C.VIII G-AKGN entered service after the award of her C of A on August 25, and this followed the loss of G-AJPJ which crashed near Tel Aviv on July 21 after she had been hired by the Israeli Air Force to carry a cargo of ammunition from the UK to Israel. She had been ferried from Thame to White Waltham on July 19 and had departed early on the following day bound for Palestine. Unfortunately she failed to complete the mission after running out of fuel and being unable to complete an emergency landing in the dark near Tel Aviv.

Thus by the end of August 1948, BAAS' fleet stood at two aircraft - G-AKBB and G-AKGN - with the airline on the brink of a whole new adventure. Both the Northern Ireland milk airlift and the more famous Berlin Airlift would dominate the airline's subsequent operations, and details of these will be featured in a subsequent instalment.

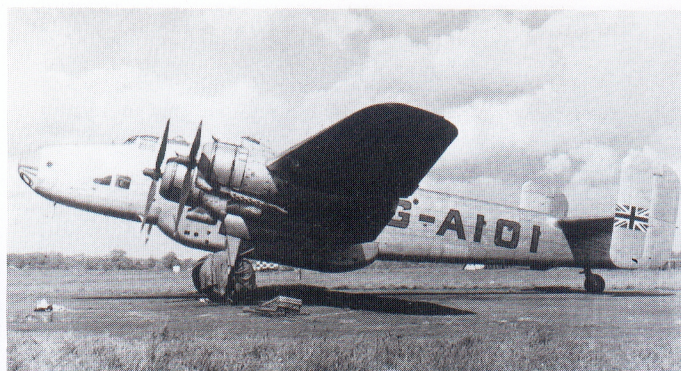
FRUIT, CHEESE AND EVEN FISH!

Bond Air Services' main claim to fame was certainly its participation on the Berlin Airlift, but the airline had already enjoyed success with the Halifax long before the Russians blockaded the German city. Gatwick based Bond Air Services took delivery of its first Halifax C.VIII on January 17 1947 when G-AIOI was flown from Manchester to Gatwick after overhaul by C.L. Air Surveys. The aircraft entered service during March and was mainly engaged in the carriage of fruit from France and Spain to Gatwick, although she was also used to carry Camembert cheese to Gatwick from Caen and for various ad-hoc assignments. A second Halifax C.VIII, G-AIOH, was delivered to Bond after the award of its C of A on May 15 1947. However, this aircraft survived only a brief period of airline service before she was seriously damaged landing at Barcelona whilst inbound from Gatwick on May 30 1947. For the remainder of the summer the surviving Halifax was kept busy hauling fruit from Spain and France, and late in the season another Halifax joined the fleet following the take-over of Bond by Messrs R.D.P. Gilmore and Robert A. Treen.

Although the take-over officially took place on October 22, with Captain Christopher Treen becoming chief pilot, the new owners' involvement with Bond began as early as August when Halifax C.VIII G-AIZO entered service with the airline. This "new" Halifax had originally been bought by Southern Aircraft at Gatwick and had been sold to Union Air Services in January 1947. Captain Christopher Treen and Robert Treen were the founders of this latter company, and following the conversion to civilian status of G-AIZO she entered service with Bond on August 19 when she flew from Gatwick to Iceland via Prestwick on the first stage of a proving flight linking Iceland with Czechoslovakia. Piloted by Captain V. Evans, the Halifax then flew a trial service to Prague to publicise the planned operation of a three times weekly schedule carrying fish outbound from Iceland and returning with loads of manufactured goods.

It seems unlikely that many flights were indeed operated between Iceland and Czechoslovakia, and instead G-AIZO returned to Gatwick and was mainly employed on general charter flights which included the carriage of ships' boiler pipes to Gibraltar, the transport of cheese and cloth to Casablanca, the uplift of over 30 tons of manderines

Bond's Halifax G-AIZO after crashing whilst approaching Bovingdon on May 23 1948.
(The Riding Photograph Collection)



on five flights from Valencia and the operation of some seven flights from Caen to Gatwick carrying over 40 tons of Camembert cheese. The end of January 1948 saw the Halifaxes undertaking cargo charters to both Vienna and Berlin, and the approach of spring once again saw a resurgence in the fruit charter market. However, Bond's participation in this work was curtailed rather seriously on May 23 when G-AIZO was destroyed after her cargo of apricots shifted in flight causing instability aboard the aircraft. At the time 'ZO was en-route from Madrid to Bovingdon, and she crash landed at Studham, near Dunstable, in bad weather. Although the aircraft broke in two, the cargo of apricots was only slightly damaged and the crew escaped serious injury.

Subsequent operations were conducted with Halifax G-AIOI, and when the Berlin Airlift began at the beginning of August 1948, Bond's lone Halifax was the first of the type to participate in this historic event. On August 4 G-AIOI began flying sorties from Wunstorf to Berlin, and although initially contracted for a seven day trial period, the Halifax very soon proved its worth and Bond Air Services was destined to become one of the most important operators to serve on the airlift.

ANOTHER EARLY HALIFAX OPERATOR

Another early pioneer of commercial Halifax operations was World Air Freight. Formed on June 24 1947 as a worldwide freight charter company, the airline's founders comprised Sverre F. Antonisen, Myer Goldner, Louis G. Johnson and George Lyndon. Operations began following the delivery of Halifax C.VIII G-AJNZ 'Trade Wind' to the airline at Thame on November 26 1947. The aircraft was then ferried to the airline's base at Stansted, and one of the first charters undertaken by the fledgling operator was the carriage of ships' spares from Heathrow to Gibraltar on December 24 for the M.V. "Kloevestrand". The New Year began with G-AJNZ carrying 6 tons of fresh carp from Zagreb to London on January 7. Destined for a Jewish festival, the carp arrived with "very little time to spare for the market, after the aircraft had encountered strong and continuous headwinds during its return flight", or so the press of the day reported. Later in January the Halifax flew oil drilling equipment to Rutba in Iraq, and on its return flight staged via Lydda to collect a consignment of general cargo bound for Geneva. Her tramping mission continued with the uplift of further cargo at Geneva destined for Munich and Prague, following which the hard-worked Halifax flew on to Stansted.

A second Halifax, G-AKGZ 'North Wind', was handed over to World Air Freight at Thame on January 28 1948, and on the following day both aircraft were busy flying 13 tons of textiles from Lille to Stansted. During February World Air Freight transferred its operations from Stansted to Bovingdon. The airline was due to operate its first charter from Bovingdon on March 3, but bad weather delayed the departure of the Halifax until the next day when a six ton load of machinery left Bovingdon bound for Damascus aboard G-AKGZ. This





Final Halifax C.VIII built, World Air Freight's G-ACKZ at Thame awaiting delivery in January 1948.

(The Riding Photograph Collection)

cargo was loaded both within the fuselage and also inside the belly pannier, and the charter was undertaken on behalf of the Middle East Oil Company. Meanwhile, World Air Freight's other Halifax G-AJNZ departed from Bovingdon on March 6 carrying cargo to Bahrein. Such long distance charters became commonplace for this pair of aircraft, and on April 10 World Air Freight began its most memorable journey to date. A steamship named the 'Finnamore Hill' was lying in Rangoon Harbour with a damaged tail-shaft, and World Air Freight was called upon to fly a new tail-shaft to Rangoon to relieve the stricken ship. Consequently, Halifax G-ACKZ commanded by Captain Savage positioned from Bovingdon to Manchester to collect this important cargo. After loading, the aircraft departed for Rome, and having made further refuelling stops at Nicosia, Basra, Karachi and Calcutta, G-ACKZ successfully completed her marathon 6,761 mile journey to Rangoon in a little over three days. The shaft weighed over six tons, was over 17 feet in length and measured one foot three inches in diameter. Secured to a bomb beam by steel straps, the whole unit was winched into position beneath the aircraft's underside.

In company with virtually all other Halifax operators, World Air Freight began flying cargoes of soft fruit daily to Bovingdon from various European airports, with most fruit being flown from Madrid, Valencia, Albacete and Villafranca. Later in the season, the Halifaxes also flew loads of greengages and bilberries to Bovingdon from both Le Bourget and Vichy, while on August 5 a load of plums was conveyed by World Air Freight Halifax from Le Bourget to Dublin. Other regular work during the summer included the transport of many tons of textiles from Milan to Bovingdon aboard the Halifaxes, and although this and the fruit import work tailed off towards the end of the summer, further lucrative work was just around the corner that was to test both the airline and its aircraft to the limits over the forthcoming months.

Halifax G-AJBK only served with Gatwick-based Air Freight for three months prior to her sale in France.

(The Riding Photograph Collection)

BAMBERG'S LITTLE ACORN

One airline name that rose to prominence initially adorning a Halifax was that of Eagle Aviation. Founded by Harold Bamberg on April 14 1948, Eagle Aviation acquired its first aircraft in the shape of a Halifax C.VIII shortly afterwards when G-AJBL was acquired early in May following the take-over of Air Freight by Eagle. Air Freight had owned a pair of Halifax aircraft (G-AJBK and 'BL') which had been used on freight charters from Gatwick and Bovingdon Airports. Halifax G-AJBK had entered Air Freight service in July 1947 and had been mainly engaged in the carriage of fruit from Spain and France to Gatwick. This aircraft was sold to a French company in October 1947 and was replaced in service by G-AJBL which had entered service with Air Freight in mid-September. This latter aircraft had spent a relatively peaceful winter, and was purchased by the newly formed Eagle along with the company's assets at the beginning of May.

Thus with the acquisition of G-AJBL, Eagle Aviation truly came into existence, and on May 9 1948 this aircraft undertook Eagle's first commercial flight when she carried a 6.5 ton consignment of cherries from Verona to Bovingdon. The fruit business proved as lucrative to Eagle as it had done to all other Halifax owners, and Eagle's flagship spent a busy summer hauling cargoes of apricots, bilberries, cherries and strawberries from France, Spain and Italy mainly to Bovingdon. When the summer season ended and the fruit business faded, Eagle was in an excellent position to participate in the Berlin Airlift and the fleet of Halifaxes subsequently blossomed with the addition of extra aircraft.

OTHER EUROPEAN HALIFAX OPERATORS

Abroad the Halifax also proved itself attractive to a number of aspiring operators. In Norway, a small company based at



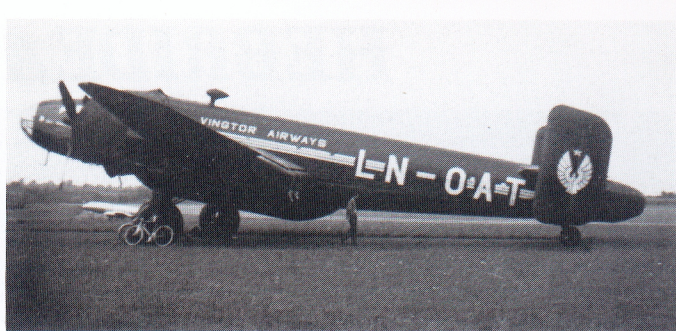
Frustrated export - Halifax C.VIII LN-OAT in full Vingtor Airways livery stored at Radlett. (MAP)

Fornebu Airport, Oslo, named Vingtor Luftveier acquired a pair of Halifax C.VIII aircraft from Handley Page in 1947. Both aircraft (PP328 and PP337) were ferried from store at High Ercall to Radlett in June 1947 for preparation for Vingtor as LN-OAS and 'AT' respectively, and the former was test flown at Radlett on August 8 sporting her new Norwegian marks. However, the airline had run into severe difficulties just three days earlier when their only Catalina (LN-OAR) had crashed whilst landing at Svolvaer while en-route from Oslo to Tromso with two passengers on board. Although no one was killed in the accident, the aircraft sank and the captain's licence was suspended for gross negligence. In addition, Vingtor's operating permit was also withdrawn pending investigation of the running of the company, and this effectively stopped the delivery of the two Halifaxes.

Initially, both Vingtor Halifaxes remained in store, but on August 17 1948 LN-OAS was registered to D.S. Elliott as G-AJCG, and again re-registered to a new airline named Peteair Ltd., on August 23. Although officially registered as G-AJCG, she was test flown at Radlett on August 24 as LN-OAS and was then handed over to Peteair as G-AJCG. Peteair had originally been registered as an airline company on April 28 1948 by Bernard Bowen, John A. Harvey and Frank Sweeney. Although the precise operations of the company remain obscure, the aircraft, which was named 'Sky Tramp', was believed to have been abandoned at Lydda by the end of June 1949. Vingtor's second Halifax, meanwhile, LN-OAT remained at Radlett until answering the call to work on the Berlin Airlift by Eagle Aviation. Test flown at Radlett on October 7 1948 as LN-OAT, she received her British C of A as G-ALEF on October 11 and was immediately handed over to Eagle still in her red Vingtor livery and thereby understandably gaining the name 'Red Eagle'.

Most prolific of overseas operators were the three French charter companies who acquired a total of ten Halifax C.VIIIs - Societe Co-operative de Tramping Aerien (SOCOTRA), Societe Auxiliare de Navigation Aerienne (SANA) and Aero-Cargo. Most of these aircraft were initially acquired by a British agent named Anglo-French Distributors Ltd., based at Gatwick who bought the aircraft direct from the RAF and then arranged their export to the operators in France. Although there was considerable movement of aircraft between the three companies, first operations with the type in France were undertaken by SANA who placed F-BCJQ into service following the issue of her C of A on June 23 1947. By the end of the year F-BCJR and 'JT' had also entered service with the airline. Based at Le Bourget, SANA mainly operated freight services between Europe and Africa, with regular flights being made to Algiers, Casablanca, Oran, Tangier and Tunis.

Aero-Cargo, based at Lyons-Bron Airport, had begun operations in September 1946 with a Junkers Ju-52 flown on charters extending as far as the UK and North and West Africa. The airline's Ju-52 was lost on July 14 1947 while en-route from Algiers to Vichy - just two days after the airline had taken delivery of its first Halifax (F-BCJV), which left Gatwick on delivery on July 12. Her C of A was issued on July 21 and the aircraft was placed into service mainly operating between Lyons and Casablanca. Two other Halifaxes, F-BCJS and 'JX', joined the



fleet later in the year, and in October 1947 SOCOTRA joined the ranks of France's Halifax operators when it took delivery of F-BCJZ. This latter company was based at Le Bourget and had unveiled ambitious plans for a large fleet of both Halifax and Breguet 761 freighters operating a network of services radiating from Le Bourget, Marignane and Merignac.

Other activities engaged in by these aircraft included the customary series of summer charters hauling fruit from France to other European airports, notably Gatwick, Bovingdon and Stansted, while the Halifaxes also regularly carried Camembert cheese across the Channel together with loads of textiles from Lille to various British airports. But the trade across the Mediterranean between France and its colonies in north and west Africa provided much of the revenue for these impressive freight haulers. As with the British carriers, there was a regular attrition rate for the type, and the first Halifax to be lost was F-BCJZ which was lost in France as early as December 17 1947. For a few months operations proceeded uneventfully until May 1948 when two aircraft were lost in quick succession. F-BCJX made a heavy landing at Bovingdon and overshot the runway on May 13 when inbound from Lyons, and was written off. A week later, on May 20, F-BCJT was written off at Le Bourget just two days after receiving her C of A. France's first Halifax, F-BCJQ, was lost on July 27 1948, and three days later 'JV' was lost at Casablanca.

Two replacement aircraft for the lost Halifaxes were acquired in the shape of F-BECK, a former BOAC Halton, which was bought in June 1948 and entered service with Aero-Cargo in October; and F-BESE, another Halifax C.VIII, which was bought by SANA in June 1948 and entered service after the issue of her C of A on August 17. SOCOTRA, meanwhile, was placed into the hands of the receivers in August 1948 and all operations were suspended. Halifax F-BCJS was lost at Lyons on December 1 1948 whilst in service with Aero-Cargo. Having taken off from Lyons in fog bound for Casablanca, the Halifax crashed and caught fire shortly after departure and was totally destroyed with the loss of the three crew members. Thus by 1949 only three Halifaxes remained in French airline service - F-BCJR and F-BESE with SANA, and F-BECK with Aero-Cargo. F-BECK was withdrawn from service in mid-1949, F-BESE suffered fire damage on the ground at Blackbushe during 1949 and was abandoned, while F-BCJR was present at Thame by April 1950, her French airline service now concluded.

Halifax C.VIII PP287 at Gatwick sporting French marks over her RAF camouflage awaiting delivery to Aero-Cargo at Lyons in October 1947. She was destroyed in an accident near Lyons on December 1 1948. (The Riding Photograph Collection)

