How World War II Contributed to the Golden Decade of the Aquarium Hobby, the 1950s

by Alan Mark Fletcher

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This DC-3 has flown millions of fish. Looks like Atkinson Field, British Guiana. From Alan M. Fletcher.

First of all, it is important to point out that WWII was all-consuming for Americans, in a way that had not been seen before and will never be seen again. Every aspect of our lives was in some way directed toward the war effort. We were told what we could eat (food rationing), where we could travel (fuel rationing), what we could say, and what we could wear; and we willingly complied. We gave up most of our civil rights, confident that they would be returned to us after the war. My father, who was a Presbyterian minister, and in poor health, went to work in a New Jersey defense factory. My mother worked as a secretary in a government office. My older brother enlisted in the Navy halfway through his college education and served as a quartermaster (steers the ship) on a small gunboat that went in with the landing troops to provide cover fire, in several of the later Pacific invasions. As a teenager I was a warden, trained to search for enemy planes (which never came!) and to watch at night for homes that might be violating the blackout regulations. I was in ninth grade on Dec. 7, 1941. The Pearl Harbor attack took place on a Sunday. On Monday morning the junior high principal called us all into the school auditorium to hear President Roosevelt give his famous "Day of Infamy" speech, live.

We were only a typical family. Everyone worked in some way to win the war. Even members of pacifist religious groups went to work in hospitals and other essential non-military services.

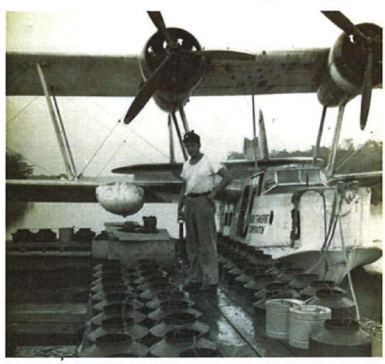
Just this morning I received a query from Steve Hinshaw, in Alaska, asking why the cover of his 1942 copy of **Exotic Aquarium Fishes** looks so different from the other editions. It was the war. Everyone had to make do with what they were able to get their hands on—even printers. I suspect that those wartime Exotics might be worth more than others.

Al Klee has correctly pointed out that the aquarium hobby and industry benefited mightily from the U.S. economic boom that followed the war. People had money to indulge in hobbies, and entrepreneurs had the confidence to take a gamble on new products. We even had sufficient wealth that we were able to fund the rebuilding of our former enemies, and the other European and Asian nations that had been devastated by the war. Even the Green Revolution of the 1960s and '70s, which made food available to poor countries all around the world, grew out of that post-

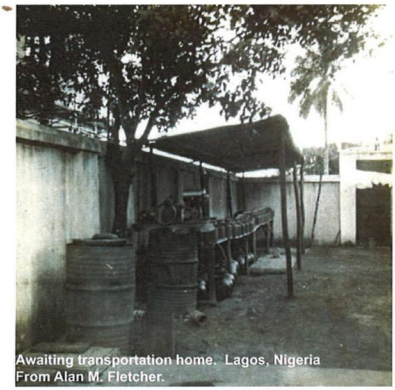
Fred Cochu and his pilot, Captain Doc Moor, one of several great pilots employed by Paramount. From Alan M. Fletcher.

war prosperity. Some cynics have called it geopolitics and U.S. hegemony, but I believe it was American generosity, pure and simple.

The aquarium hobby benefited from the war before it ever became worldwide, however. Many Germans came to the U.S. in the 1930s because they did not like what was happening in their country, and many of them, being Jewish, feared for their lives. The aquarium hobby will owe an eternal debt to some of them, and in particular to Hugo Schnelle and Fred Cochu, brothers-in-law (photo opposite)



Paramount's PBY amphibious plane on Yarina Cocha. To take off the plane had to run the length of the lake to get up on the step, then spin around 180 degrees and race in the other direction to get up in the air. A frightening experience! Photo by Alan M. Fletcher.



Awaiting transportation home. Lagos, Nigeria
From Alan M. Fletcher.

who left Aquarium Hamburg and founded Paramount Aquarium in New York City. Paramount had a virtual monopoly on fish imports to the U. S. during the 1950s.

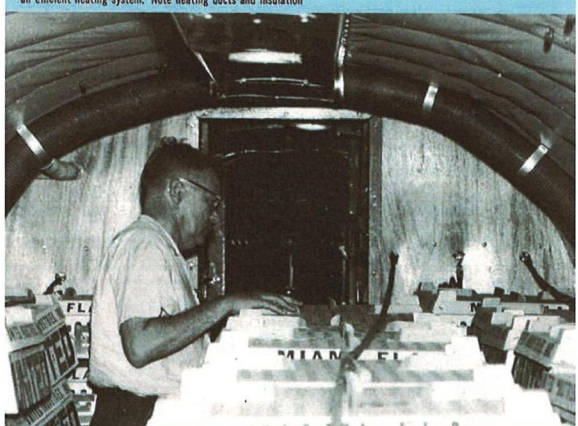
WWII was the first big war in which aircraft played a dominant role. Even the first unpaved airstrips in remote places like Leticia, Colombia were built for security reasons. But most important, ultimately,

Hugo Schnelle (left) and Fred Cochu, Partners in Paramount Aquarium. Cochu was married to Schnelle's sister.
From Alan M. Fletcher.

for the aquarium trade, there was a huge demand for all kinds of aircraft built in America, but needed for the war effort in Europe and Asia. Thousands of aircraft were ferried from the U. S. to the war theaters. Thousands of Army Air Force pilots did nothing but fly new planes across the oceans. They delivered their planes to where they were needed, and then hitched a ride back to the U.S. to transport another airplane.

Paramount's chief pilot Richard E. "Nick" Nicholas (AOPA 278100) has been flying since 1935
Photos by the author

Paramount makes its aircraft pay by round-trip use. Pilot Nicholas checks a load of day-old chicks flown to British Guiana. Each year the firm flies about 1,000,000 chicks to South America, and brings tropical fish back. To carry delicate living cargo like chicks and tropical fish, an aircraft must have an efficient heating system. Note heating ducts and insulation



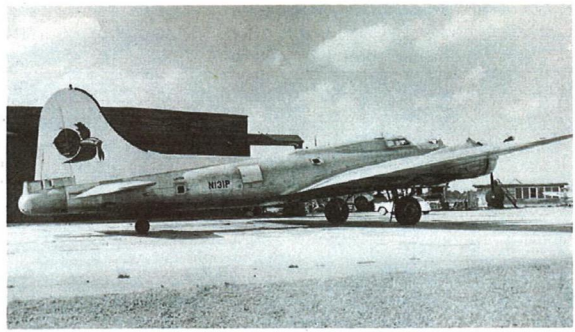
Paramount Aquarium's DC-3 being unloaded at Miami International Airport. When the cartons of fish are sorted, some are immediately sent on to customers by commercial lines; the rest are flown to the Paramount plant at Vero Beach, Fla. This load came from British Guiana and Trinidad

There were two main air routes between Europe and North America. Planes could fly to Newfoundland, to Greenland, to Iceland, and finally to Great Britain. But that route was subject to frequent bad weather, and downed pilots stood no chance of surviving in the bitter cold water. The shortest distance across the Atlantic Ocean is actually from the east coast of Brazil to Senegal, West Africa. That became the main route. To make this passage from the New World to the Old possible, U.S. Navy SeaBees constructed airfields, most of them with concrete runways. They built airbases in Panama, Trinidad, British Guiana, Surinam, near Belem at the eastern hump of Brazil, and northern Venezuela. (A raunchy but very popular WWII song was about the airbase at Point Cumana, Venezuela. It was called "Working for the Yankee Dollah". But enough. You can figure out the rest of it.) Many thousands of aircraft of all types hopped between these bases, finally winding up at the Brazil base, where they took on every drop of fuel they could and went across the Atlantic, nearly on the Equator.

After the war these bases became major transportation sites for Paramount Aquarium and a few fringe exporters/ importers. On my first trip to British Guiana (now Guyana) we stayed in an abandoned military barracks at Atkinson Field, south of Georgetown. On subsequent trips we stayed with Louis Chung, who was the principal collector of Guianese fishes in the 1950s.

It should be noted here that during WWII, Paramount Aquarium had a secret contract with the U.S. government to collect and import electric eels, for use in secret government research. To my knowledge, the nature of that reseach has never been revealed. But the important point is that even during the war Paramount had its own aircraft and was able fly them through any or all of the U.S. bases in South America. When the war ended, they already had a mechanism in place for the transport of all aquarium fishes. No other company had that advantage. I have always wondered how they carried those big metal cans, loaded with high-voltage electric eels. It must have been a great relief to everyone to have been able to shift over to carrying neon tetras!

Spare parts for most former military aircraft were abundant, easily available, and inexpensive. On one trip to Leticia in a DC-3 an engine blew out on landing. A new engine was flown in from Miami in a few days, and it was installed by Paramount's co-pilot, who was also a certified A&E mechanic. We had intended to be home for Easter, but the delay enabled Fred and me to celebrate the Easter holiday with an Indian Baptist congregation. That was a memorable experience.



Paramount Aquarium's converted B-17 bomber. Shortly after Paramount sold this ship, it was lost in Venezuela under mysterious circumstances *Photo by Bob Palmer*

Immediately after the war ended, thousands of new and nearly new airplanes of all kinds were sold off by the government at a fraction of their true value, or scrapped. Paramount Aquarium was able to take advantage of this surfeit of aircraft. During the 1950s they owned a Lockheed Lodestar, a Navy PBY flying boat, A Curtis C-46 cargo plane, a converted Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress bomber, a very fast twin-engine light bomber whose designation I cannot recall, and several Douglas DC-3s (C-47, military). I made at least one trip in most of them. The DC-3s had the best cost ratios of any planes Paramount ever owned. They were slow, but they were real workhorses. Some DC-3s are still in service around the world, after 60 years. I would not be surprised if some were still being used to fly aquarium fishes from remote airstrips in South America and Africa.

Fish cans loaded on plane for Paramount Aquarium (before the days of bags and cartons). From Alan M. Fletcher.

I have previously mentioned how this air travel, combined with tightly sealed inflated plastic bags in styrofoam-lined cartons made it possible to fly millions of staple and new fishes to the U.S. in hours instead of weeks, and they arrived in excellent condition. With such quantities of old and new fishes available, it is no wonder the hobby thrived in the 1950s!

The hobby in the 1950s was also boosted by the GI Bill of Rights, which enabled thousands of veterans to attend colleges and professional schools at little cost. Most of the younger ichthyologists of the 1950s who identified the new fishes, and the engineers, chemists, and business people who brought the innovations to the hobby were educated under the GI Bill.

I know that WWII contributed in more ways than these to the boom in the hobby of the 1950s, but I have written enough. Hopefully, other AHHS* members who are as old as I am will be inspired to add to this WWII thread.

*This story was originally posted on the website of the Aquarium Hobby Historical Society:
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AquariumHobbyHistoricalSociety/

Photos on page 26 are from the October, 1965 issue of **The AOPA Pilot** (Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association).