

# Juan Trippe – The Father of Commercial Aviation

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Juan Trippe was an American airline entrepreneur, a pioneer and the co-founder of Pan American Airways, one of the most famous airlines of the twentieth century. If you are a [flight training student](#) or simply a flying enthusiast, it is good to know about this amazing man.

Juan Trippe was one of the last of a colorful group of innovators, pioneers, and visionaries - including William A. Patterson, Howard Hughes, Jack Frye, Robert F. Six, C.R. Smith, and Eddie Rickenbacker. These were the men who built the airline industry into what it is today.

## Early Years

Juan Trippe was born in New Jersey in 1899. Although some believe he was Cuban, he was actually Northern European in ancestry and his family settled in Maryland in 1664. He got his Cuban name after his mother's Cuban stepfather.

Trippe graduated from Yale University in 1921. After Yale, he worked on Wall Street, but he soon became bored. He started working at New York Airways, an air-taxi service for affluent New Yorkers, and this is where he fell in love with flying. Then Trippe invested in an airline named Colonial Air Transport. He was interested in starting service to the Caribbean so he founded the Aviation Company of the Americas. Based in Florida, the company would soon become Pan American Airways.

## His Years at Pan Am

Trippe and his associates extended Pan Am's network through all of Central and South America in the 1930's. Pan Am purchased a number of ailing or defunct airlines and negotiated with postal officials to win most of the government's airmail contracts to the region. Pan Am was growing fast.

Trippe bought the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC) to provide domestic air service in the Republic of China. Pan Am became the first airline to cross the Pacific Ocean with the famous Clipper flying boats.

Pan Am continued to expand worldwide throughout World War II and was one of the few airlines that was largely unaffected by the war. It soon became the biggest international airline in the world. Trippe served as the Chairman of the Board for all but about two years between the founding of the company and the Second World War.

Trippe is responsible for many innovations in the airline world. He was a firm believer in the idea of air travel for all, and he

is credited for starting tourist or economy class. He recognized the opportunities of jet aircraft and ordered several Boeing 707 and Douglas DC-8 airplanes. Pan Am's first jet flight was in October, 1958 - it was a 707 out of Idlewild International Airport (now JFK) to Paris. The new jets allowed Pan Am to introduce lower fares and fly more passengers.

In 1965, Trippe asked his friend Bill Allen at Boeing to build an airplane much larger than the 707. The result was the Boeing 747, and Pan Am was the first customer. At first, Trippe believed the 747 would only be hauling cargo and would be replaced by faster, supersonic aircraft that were being developed then. The supersonic airliners failed to materialize with the exception of the Concorde and the Tupolev Tu-144 and soon the 747 became the undisputed symbol of international travel. So not only was he the father of commercial aviation, he could be considered the father of the Boeing 747, too.

Trippe gave up presidency of the airline in 1968. He continued to attend meetings of the Board of Directors and maintained an office in the company's Park Avenue office building. He died in 1981 in New York City. Trippe received the Tony Jannus Award for his distinguished contributions to commercial aviation in 1965. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Ronald Reagan in 1985.

Juan Trippe was portrayed by Alec Baldwin in Martin Scorsese's 2004 film, [The Aviator](#).  
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