Diplomats in Fortresses

The 1938 "Good Will Flight" to Argentina

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In 1938, the US Army Air Corps tasked the 2nd Bombardment Group with a goodwill mission to Argentina. Although this little-known event would not take on the significance of similar peacetime missions in the service's history, the multi-stop expedition of the flight of YB-17 heavy bombers demonstrated the broad potential of a singular show of soft power. While it affirmed American airpower to the United States' neighbors, the mission also served to validate the bombers' capabilities and led to innovations in training and flying. For the Airmen involved, the mission tested their physical limits, matured aircraft commanders, and led to the creation of a small cadre of leaders for the impending conflict, setting the foundation for the future US Air Force.

In the years leading up to World War II, American ally Argentina found itself indirectly caught in the grip of events transpiring in Europe. The South American nation's population included more than 500,000 German settlers. The previous Argentinian administration had developed working relationships with *Wehrmacht* military advisers and purchased German military equipment, including the tri-motor Ju-52 transport.[1] American Secretary of State Cordell Hull later expressed his concerns about the growing influence of regional fascist sympathizers, stating that the "danger to the Western Hemisphere was real and imminent" in its "indirect form of propaganda, penetration, organizing political parties, buying some adherents, and blackmailing others."[2]

Following a request from officials at the US State Department to send a flight of bombers to Argentina for the presidential inauguration, Secretary of War Harry H. Woodring refused the mission, citing high operational costs. Yet his deputy, Assistant Secretary Louis A. Johnson, recognized the potential value in the expedition, and unbeknownst to Woodring, he met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who approved the mission.[3]

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1. Richard L. McGaha, "The Politics of Espionage: Nazi Diplomats and Spies in Argentina: 1933–1945" (PhD diss., Ohio University, 2009), 49.
2. Stetson Conn and Byron Fairchild, *The United States Army in World War II, The Western Hemisphere: The Framework of Hemisphere Defense* (Government Printing Office, 1989), 6.
3. DeWitt S. Copp, *A Few Great Captains: The Men and Events That Shaped the Development of U.S. Airpower* (Double Day, 1980), 406.

In early February 1938, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Olds Sr., commander of the 2nd Bombardment Group (2 BG), received orders from Major General Frank M. Andrews, General Headquarters Air Force (GHQAF) commander, to take a half-dozen new YB-17s to the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires and conduct a flyover at incoming President Robert Ortiz' inauguration on 20 February. Ortiz himself distrusted German diplomats and preferred to strengthen relationships with his northern neighbor.[4]

While the State Department proclaimed it to be a friendly gesture—a "public relations" effort to promote American airpower—the mission served multiple purposes.[5] Although it would reach neither the historical nor political significance of other similar peacetime missions from a decade earlier—such as the 1924 around-the-world flight of four Douglas cruisers or the 1926 Pan American goodwill flight through Mexico and Central America—the 1938 flight was more than a perfunctory, ceremonial operation. The flight of six YB-17 bombers reflected the contentious environment within the War Department as the Army Air Corps struggled with its relevance, attempting to develop its strategic bombing capabilities, procure and test new weapons, and compete for resources in a fiscally constrained environment.

At the service level, for the 2 BG commander, the mission was an opportunity to test a revolutionary weapons platform and its crews and prove its worth to skeptics in the War Department. Adding these new planes to the inventory brought Army planners one step closer to fulfilling Brigadier General William "Billy" Mitchell's vision of a long-range, strategic bomber force—a vision formed in the years following World War I.

The mission also required extensive planning, promoting civil-military relations in regions with little to no American military presence. For civilian and uniformed leaders in Washington and Langley Field, Virginia, it was an opportunity to demonstrate American soft power using military hardware, by confirming the United States had the ability to protect its interests in the Western Hemisphere, including the strategically vital Panama Canal Zone (PCZ). In the context of increasing military aggression by Germany and Japan, the mission held an important strategic purpose: "Franklin Roosevelt was sending a message to Berlin and Tokyo: the United States had the most advanced, state-of-the-art bomber in the world with a capacity to fly long distances."[6] Although it occupies a relatively small corner in Air Force history, the Argentine expedition provides insight into how a single airpower mission conveyed multiple messages to a wide-ranging audience.

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4. McGaha, "Espionage," 61.
5. Walter Kozak, *The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay* (Regnery Publishing, 2009), open source, 20, https://archive.org/.
6. Kozak, *Life and Wars*.

Receiving the Mission

At age 41, Olds was a seasoned aviator, earning his wings in 1918 and graduating from the Air Corps Tactical School in 1928. As a captain, Olds served as an aide to Mitchell and later as the chief, inspection station, under Andrews at GHQAF. He understood the mission's importance and the training opportunity it offered as well as its aims—"to accomplish a Good Will flight to Buenos Aires, Argentina," to complete "visits of courtesy to the Republics of Argentina, Chile, and Peru," and to "test the mettle of our sleek Flying Fortresses, greyhound of military aviation."[78]

Pilots and aircrews had less than a year of experience with the new YB-17 bomber, the first one having arrived at Langley Field in March 1937. Olds and his crews flew the aircraft relentlessly after its arrival. By January 1938, the men of the 2 BG had traveled 679,000 miles and spent more than 141 hours in the air. The Buenos Aires undertaking, however, marked the longest single goodwill mission for the Army Air Corps and required the crews to continuously operate for unprecedented periods.[9]

The four-engine heavy bomber remained in a testing stage and was not approved by War Department officials for full production. To many senior officers in Washington, the "Flying Fortress"—a term coined by a *Seattle Times* writer—was an expensive and dangerous platform. The Boeing product cost $302,000 per unit, vastly exceeding the costs of contemporary twin-engine bombers such as the B-10B at $72,000 and the B-18 at $105,000.

For aviators such as Andrews and Olds the capabilities provided by the YB-17 were worth the cost. The Boeing system carried a normal 2,500-pound (lb.) payload—maximum payload was 10,400 lb.—more than 2,260 miles with a top speed of 295 miles per hour (mph) while cruising at 217 mph. Its twin-engine contemporary, the Douglas B-18 Bolo, carried 4,000 lb. of bombs up to 1,100 miles with a maximum speed of 167 mph. The Flying Fortress design included an auto-pilot feature and five machine gun mounts for self-defense. The four-engine design provided power that generated the aircraft's speed and ability to carry a larger bombload over greater distances than its contemporaries, including the Japanese Mitsubishi G3M "Nell" or the Luftwaffe's Heinkel 111, both in active combat service in China and Spain, respectively.

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7. Robert Olds, "Our Flight to South America," *Popular Aviation*, August 1938, reprinted by the Vintage Aircraft Association, 19 April 2018, https://eaavintage.org/.

8. "Major General Robert Olds," US Air Force [USAF, website], accessed 29 January 2025, https://www.af.mil/; and Charles A. Ravenstein, *The Organization and Lineage of the United States Air Force*, USAF Warrior Studies (Office of Air Force History, 1986), 6.

9. "Army and Navy: Friendly Fortresses," *Time*, 28 February 1938, https://time.com/.

The speed and armament gave the YB-17 unique defensive capabilities, and the airframe's rugged design allowed crews to operate it at primitive airfields, enabling its strategic reach. The bomber's range also made it useful for coastal anti-ship patrols and shoreline defense, a critical mission during the Army's Interwar era (1919–1939). The YB-17 was the only Army Air Corps aircraft with the capability to reach Hawaiian shores from the continental United States.

The ambitious Argentinian mission would push the men and their machines to their limits. In addition to the normal pre-, mid-, and post-flight crew requirements, the colonel directed his officers to follow an exhaustive social schedule during the multi-stop exercise. Officers including Captain Robert Travis of the 49th Bombardment Squadron—who later commanded the 2 BG during World War II—understood the intense pressure placed on the group: "We knew if a YB[-17] was crashed, we could probably say goodbye to the Nation's bomber program."[10] Even a young officer such as Travis recognized that any major damage to the platform or any fatalities would lead to the capability's eventual elimination.[11]

Planning the Mission

Olds exemplified the timeless, dual nature of a successful unit commander. While he clearly understood the strategic nature of the mission, at the tactical level he used the opportunity to develop individual Soldiers and build cohesion among his aircrews. Olds selected some of his most seasoned pilots and tasked his squadron commanders to command individual planes (table 1). A reporter from the *Air Corps Newsletter* noted these efforts in March 1938, that "every airplane was manned by its regularly assigned crew; and no substitution of 'specially qualified' men were made."[12]

While flying was the officer's primary focus, the mission's complexity required staff and flight planning, including weather assessment, logistical coordination, and other basic unit functions. Olds expected all officers—except for aircraft commanders—to perform their staff duties as they pertained to the mission in addition to their role on the aircraft.

In addition to the commissioned officers—command pilot, co-pilot/engineer, bombardier, and navigator—each crew included two enlisted radio operators and a pair of mechanics. Table 1 illustrates how the group commander delegated non-flying responsibilities to the men in his command.[13] Officers performing piloting duties did not receive additional duty assignments.

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10. Edward Jablonski, *Flying Fortresses: The Illustrated Biography of the B-17s and the Men Who Flew Them* (Doubleday, 1965), 13; and "Brigadier General Robert F. Travis," USAF, accessed 8 January 2025, https://www.af.mil/.

11. Jablonski, *Flying Fortresses*, 13; and "Brigadier General Robert F. Travis."

12. Information Division, Air Corps, "Argentine Flight Proves Excellent State of Training in the GHQ Air Force," *Air Corps Newsletter* XXI, no. 5 (1 March 1938): 4, https://media.defense.gov/.

13. 2 BG, "Plan for 2 BG," 1–2.

Table 1. Task organization chart of 2nd Bombardment Group February 1938 flight to Argentina[14]

Grp A/C Num	A/C Num	Crew Size	Sqdn	Pilot	Co-Pilot	Additional Duty (Co-Pilot)
10	36-155	9	HQ	Olds, Robert, Lt Col*	McReynolds, Edwin R., Maj	S4/Engineering
51	36-156	8	20th	Meloy, Vincent J., Maj†	Harvey, Alvin L., Capt	N/A
52	36-159	8	20th	Harding, Neil B., Capt	Gibbs, David R., 1st Lt	S2 (Intelligence)
80	36-151	8	49th	Haynes, Caleb V., Maj†	Mosley, Thomas L., 1st Lt	Asst. S4/Eng
82	36-158	8	49th	Smith, Archibald Y., Capt	Cousland, Cornelius, Capt	S1/Finance
61	36-153	8	96th	George, Harold L., Maj†	Alkire, Darr H., Capt	N/A
Total Personnel		49				
Other officers with additional duties: Capt Robert B. Williams (S3 [Operations], HQ Sqdn, A/C 10); 1st Lt Curtis LeMay (Asst. S3 [Operations] 49 BS, A/C 80); 1st Lt Edwin L. Tucker (Communications, HQ Sqdn, A/C 10); 1st Lt Richard S. Freeman (Mess and Billeting, 49 BS, A/C 82), and 1st Lt Torgils G. Wold (Metro Service, 20 BS, A/C 51)						
Key: * Group commander † Squadron commander						

14. 2nd Bombardment Group (2 BG), "Plan for 2nd Bombardment Group Flight to Buenos Aires, Argentina and Return, February 11, 1938" ["Plan for 2 BG"], 1–2, 2 BG History Supporting Documents, 1938, Air Force Historical Research Agency [AFHRA], Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

The group commander used the opportunity to test individual stamina. For example, he assigned individual navigators to three ships and pairs of navigators to each of the others. Olds was curious about the effects of sleep deprivation and how it affected the navigator's job, which required use of multiple instruments, precise calculations, and great attention to detail to help determine the aircraft's course and location.

Olds also established standard procedures for the flight, including a pre-flight checklist, written on a 6 x 8-inch card for each crew member. He hoped that this method would help avoid the tragic oversight that had resulted in the deadly crash of the Boeing Model 299 during a demonstration flight in October 1935.[15] Other standing orders noted that his "flagship" plane—emblazoned with the number 10—would be the first to take off and land, the exception being another aircraft in distress that needed to land first. Planes would take off at three-to-four-minute intervals to create about 10 miles between the aircraft when aloft. Each aircrew received the responsibility for navigating to the assigned destination. Olds directed his ship personnel to radio airfield departures, hourly position reports, and any changes of course. Once 25 to 30 miles from the destination, the armada would converge and fly into the airport as a group.[16]

Navigation planners relied on a variety of maps including ones found in *National Geographic* magazine and specialized versions published by the Navy Department's hydrographic office that contained information on the coastlines. The 2 BG's flights to and from Buenos Aires also required considerable civilian support. The massive nature of the mission, covering more than 11,000 miles and two continents—including areas with no American military presence—required an extensive logistical network beyond the contemporary capabilities of the Army Air Corps. Personnel and support from Pan-American Grace Airways, known as Panagra, provided additional data on Central and South American locations. Panagra, which offered flights between the North and South American continents including the Panama Canal Zone, staffed and operated airfields complete with the logistical capabilities required to maintain flight operations and regional communication platforms. Olds and his staff also coordinated with other regional civilian aviation companies to furnish such critical capabilities.

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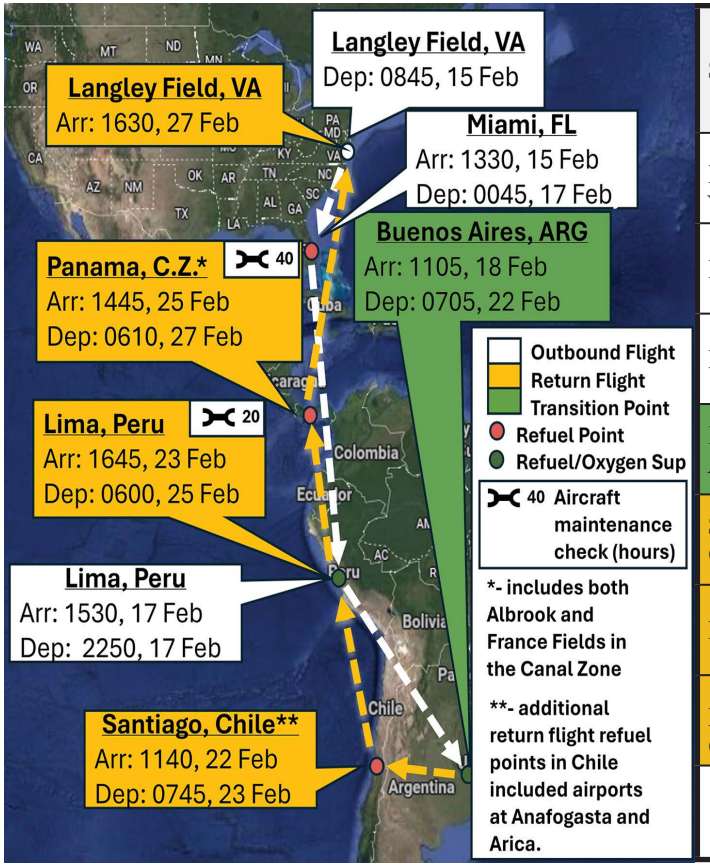
15. Irving Brinton Holley Jr., *Buying Aircraft: Materiel Procurement of the Army Air Forces*, United States Army in World War II Special Studies (US Army Center of Military History, 1964), 142; and Maurer Maurer, *Aviation in the U. S. Army, 1919–1939* (Office of Air Force History, 1987), 354.

16. 2 BG, "Good Will Flight to South America and Return, March 10, 1938" ["Good Will Flight"], 2 BG History Supporting Documents, 1938, 11, AFHRA.



Start	Dest.	Distance (miles)	Flt Time (Hr: Min)	Avg Speed (mph)
Langley Field, VA	Miami, FL	814	5:45	N/A
Miami, FL	Lima, Peru	2,644	14:35	195.5
Lima, Peru	Buenos Aires, ARG	2,278	12:15	186
Buenos Aires, ARG	Santiago, Chile	810	4:35	175
Santiago, Chile	Lima, Peru	1,575	9:00	175
Lima, Peru	Albrook Field, C.Z.	1,556	8:45	178
France Field, C.Z.	Langley Field, VA	1,975	10:20	191
Total		**11,562**	**65:25**	**183.4**

Figure 1. Flight plan information for 2nd Bombardment Group Argentina flight[17]

17. "Pan American-Grace Airways Panagra, Timeline: 1928–1949," Braniff International Airways [website], accessed 6 February 2025, https://www.braniffinternational.com/.

The mission required an extensive air and ground radio network, incorporating military and civilian capabilities. Group communications officer 1st Lieutenant Edwin Tucker created or integrated three networks. An air-to-air version enabled communication between the aircraft commanders and crews. For military air-to-ground, operators from the 2 BG contacted Army stations at Langley Field, Miami International Airport, and airfields in the PCZ. For communications in South America, the aviators relied on a series of 19 communication stations operated by Panagra and Panair do Brasil, or Panair. These private companies had the only interconnected aviation radio systems in South America. Non-military transmission locations proved critical due to the lack of American military or civilian infrastructure in the region. The extensive communications network required for the mission exemplified US military and regional civilian cooperation and helped strengthen diplomatic bonds between the hemispheric neighbors.[18]

Mission Execution

The mission would begin with a short hop from Langley to Miami, Florida. The flight complement would rest there, then ready their aircraft for the flight to Lima, Peru. After a two-day stay, the formation would head for Buenos Aires. Following a few days in the city, the fleet would depart and fly over the high elevations of the Andes Mountains to Santiago, Chile, where they would overnight. The flight path would then take the group north back to Lima and then to the PCZ with stops at two airfields, Albrook and then France Field, where ground personnel would prepare the flight for its final leg back to Langley. The plan identified 25 contingency fields throughout South America for emergency landings due to mechanical or medical issues.[19]

Figure 1 provides an overview of the roundtrip mission to Buenos Aires, including the mileage and flight hours. It also includes refueling stops, oxygen resupply, and aircraft maintenance locations. What the diagram does not show is the varying weather patterns that aircrews had to contend with, especially in the equatorial areas.

On Tuesday morning, 15 February 1938, Olds initiated the expedition by angling the nose of the No. 10 Flying Fortress off the runway at Langley Field. The six-ship flight reached their first stop, Miami International Airport, that afternoon. The stop began what became a regular routine for air and ground crews—post-operations checks, fuel and oil replenishment, flight planning, and if time permitted, rest.

Following a day in the "Sunshine State," just after midnight the planes departed for the longest segment of the mission, more than 2,640 miles in a single hop. The segment tested the aircrew rest plans, which Olds had established during pre-trip planning, calculating that an aircrew could fly a maximum of 10 hours before needing a break. The bombardier (assistant navigator) served as the officer relief in a three-hour rotation system. He switched out with—in order of precedence—the navigator, co-pilot (engineer), and the aircraft

18. 2 BG, "Enclosure 2: Communications Plan," 1, in "Plan for 2 BG."
19. 2 BG, "Fields South of Panama," 1–2, 2 BG History Supporting Documents, 1938, AFHRA.

commander (pilot). The group commander expected navigators without assistants to work as much as physically possible. [20]

Reports of severe weather between Central and South Americas forced the fleet to increase altitude and divert westward out to sea. Olds' ordered his aircrews to employ their ships' oxygen as their adjusted altitude averaged around 17,000 feet. More than 14 hours later, after regaining their original course, the YB-17 group arrived in Lima. A few hours before approach, Plane No. 51, piloted by Major Vincent J. Meloy, encountered problems with a propeller governor, which created a severe aircraft vibration. Yet despite this, Meloy was able to bring the aircraft into the Panagra field with the rest of the fleet.[21]

At the first international stop in the flight, host nation representatives greeted the weary flyers. Following standard ground operations, including receiving more than 13,100 gallons of fuel, the aviators readied their birds for liftoff in seven hours. Olds directed the crew of A/C No. 51 to remain in Lima, repair the defective engine governor, and then rejoin the others in Buenos Aires. Since the YB-17 remained in a pre-production status, repair parts were not widely available, forcing aircrews to stock their bombers with available replacement components and create an organic maintenance capability.[22]

Navigators kept the pilots on the 2,278-mile southwestern course that took the bombers through a pass in the Andean Mountain Range enroute to El Palomar Airfield in Buenos Aires. Shortly after 1100 hours, 18 February, the fleet began landing.

The new aircraft posed their own unique challenges to the operators. Major Harold George, flying A/C No. 61, received priority authorization to land due to a problem with one of the engine's exhaust collector rings. He brought the aircraft in at 1130, followed by Olds and the others. In the meantime, Meloy and his crew departed Lima that morning after replacing the governor. The 2 BG's arrival in Argentina became the first in a series of stops that merged military with formal diplomatic functions.[23]

The aviators were met by American officials—including the US ambassador to Argentina Alexander Weddell—and members of the Argentinian government. Unlike at Lima, however, limousine drivers chauffeured the officers to the Alvear Hotel in Buenos Aires while the enlisted crew members remained at the barracks on El Palomar Airfield. Although an integrated group when aloft, the group commander preferred to maintain the customary separation between officers and enlisted men in his billeting plan. Olds' standing orders required an enlisted crew member to remain onboard the parked aircraft at each stop "to cope with any unforeseen circumstances [such] as fire," except for the PCZ airfields.[24]

In the early evening of 18 February, a limousine containing Weddell picked up the group commander and took him directly to Ortiz' residence. In his role as an unofficial uniformed diplomat, Olds presented the Argentinian leader a letter from Roosevelt in

20. "Good Will Flight," 12, 33.
21. Olds, "Our Flight"; and "Good Will Flight," 2.
22. "Good Will Flight," 3.
23. "Good Will Flight," 3.
24. "Good Will Flight," 7.

which the US president expressed his hope that the United States and Argentina would "continue to cooperate efficaciously and wholeheartedly for the preservation of peace" as well as "his earnest desire in the furtherance of a constructive and fruitful policy of inter-American cooperation."[25] The combination of the note from the American commander in chief and the presence of modern, long-range strategic bombers clearly indicated US support for Ortiz and his stand against fascism.

This stop marked the transition of the Army pilots, navigators, and bombardiers to diplomats, manifesting in the change of their duty uniforms from olive drab green flight gear to white service caps, dress coats adorned with gold aviator's wings, and black pants. The aircrew found their post-operation itineraries filled with receptions at the Argentinian officers' club and American and British embassies, an afternoon at the horse races, and other social events.[26]

Ground crews from the 2 BG tracked A/C 51's flight and recommended an auxiliary airfield to the ship commander due to the worsening weather. The situation was emblematic of Olds' leadership in that it ensured support for his aviators and crews but at the same time allowed them to mature through navigating difficult situations. On Friday afternoon, Meloy and A/C 51 safely landed at El Palomar Airdrome despite a driving rainstorm.

On Sunday, the four-engine fleet took to the skies flying over Buenos Aires during the inauguration festivities. As planned, American bombers successfully celebrated Ortiz' presidency as an affirmation of democratic rule, acting as "the bearers" of Roosevelt's message of peace.[27] The event, described by *The New York Times* as a "colorful ceremony amid widespread popular acclaim," highlighted Argentina's status as a friend and ally of the United States.[28]

On the next day, President's Day, crews prepared for the return trip north. At El Palomar ground personnel loaded gas and oil into the six aircraft for the flight's next leg, and Panagra staff replenished the fleet's oxygen supplies.[29] Olds then led his YB-17 formation westward in an 810-mile flight to Santiago, Chile, minus one aircraft. When moving across a concrete ramp in Buenos Aires, the wheel on the right landing gear of A/C No. 82, piloted by Captain Archibald "Archie" Smith fell through an unsupported manhole cover.

By lunchtime all five bombers were on the ground in Santiago. Once more American and host nation officials rolled out the diplomatic welcome mat to the travelers. Argentinian ground crews used railroad jacks to free Smith's aircraft following a three-hour ordeal. He

25. Special to *The New York Times*, "Roosevelt Urges Amity in Americas," *The New York Times*, 22 February 1938, https://www.nytimes.com/.

26. "Good Will Flight."

27. Special to *The New York Times*, "Roosevelt."

28. John W. White, "Ortiz Inaugurated amid Wide Acclaim by the Argentines," *The New York Times*, 21 February 1938, https://www.nytimes.com/.

29. "Good Will Flight."

landed A/C No. 82 later and rejoined his fellow officers at their hotel lodging; the enlisted Soldiers stayed at a separate hotel nearby.[30]

On the 23rd, Flagship No. 10 lifted off from the airport in Santiago and proceeded on a northward course that parallelled the Chilean Coast and ended in Lima. Once again, the flight was short by one aircraft. Aircraft 82 had a broken starter on one of its engines. Olds directed Smith to fly to Arica—almost two-thirds of the way between Santiago and Lima—and remain there overnight after completing repairs since the Lima airport did not have night operations capabilities.[31] Smith landed in Arica, and he and his men quartered in civilian billets there. Meanwhile, by late afternoon that same day, the five-ship flight had touched down in Lima. Olds had his crews conduct 20-hour checks prior to the flight's return legs. The officers and enlisted checked into separate hotels for their overnight stay.

At noon on the 24th, Smith brought No. 82 into Lima. Olds' original plan was to depart that morning, but he shifted the timeline 24-hours to the next morning to allow Smith to rejoin the flight, to give his personnel more rest time, and to "pay the customary calls of courtesy" to senior Peruvian officials. Following the maintenance checks and filling the fuel and oil tanks, the YB-17s departed at 0600, 25 February.[32]

The group headed on a 1,556-mile flight to Albrook Field in the PCZ. The aircraft arrived in the American possession just after 1500. After they landed, the PCZ Governor Clarence S. Ridley and American officers greeted the crews as they deplaned. The commissioned personnel stayed with their permanent party counterparts and the enlisted men rested at the airfield barracks.

On the morning of the 26th, the heavy bombers departed Albrook for France Field, located more than 30 miles away on the northern side of the isthmus.[33] Once there, Olds directed his aircrews to perform 40-hour maintenance services. Ground crews once more topped off the fuel tanks and oil for the final 1,975-mile push to Virginia.[34]

Aircraft No. 10 ascended into the early morning Panamanian sky at 0610 on Sunday, 27 February. During the journey, including the final "leg" to Virginia, Olds directed his navigators to employ dead reckoning to ensure the aircraft remained on course. In this complex technique, the navigator combined multiple variables such as time, air speed, distance, and direction, and then incorporated adjustments for velocity and windspeed to estimate "the time to arrive at each checkpoint and the destination." The bombers regrouped over Norfolk Naval Station and began landing on Langley Airfield, where Andrews waited to greet them on the tarmac.[35]

30. "Good Will Flight," 8, 35.
31. "Good Will Flight," 4.
32. "Good Will Flight," 8, 17.
33. "Good Will Flight," 5, 7, 12.
34. "Good Will Flight," 5, 12, 17.
35. "Good Will Flight," 5.

In less than two remarkable weeks, aviators and aircrews from the 2 BG flew more than 65 hours in the air, covering more than 11,560 miles. All aircraft returned undamaged—although there was one mishap and multiple engine issues—with no injuries incurred during the mission.

The mission provided an example of a successful military and civilian venture. The lack of US aviation support and communication infrastructure in South America created a reliance on host nation businesses to provide airfield and logistical support, including fuel, oil, oxygen, communication stations, and life support facilities that ensured the safe passage of Olds' fleet.

The YB-17's range ensured that even without local airfields and support the bomber had the ability to reach northern South American countries including Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela through use of PCZ bases. Olds made radio addresses in Lima, Buenos Aires, and Santiago as part of the mission's strategic messaging campaign. The plane and the commander of A/C 10 caught the attention of foreign officers, including representatives from the British Royal Air Force (RAF). RAF Air Attaché Air Commodore T. E. B. Howard remarked that the YB-17 "looks most impressive and gives one an interesting idea of what may be expected in the future." The commodore was also "impressed with the demonstrations of flying in various formations by the B-17 bombers under Colonel Olds' leadership."[36]

The flight left its mark on local citizens as well, signaling the extent of American airpower. In Lima, for example, *The New York Times* reported that "the airport and surrounding lawns were packed with onlookers as the giant bombers descended from the skies." The crew was greeted with much pomp and fanfare, while the event was lauded as "the first time the Peruvian public had been able to see aircraft the size of the B17 bombers."[37] A reporter from the Peruvian newspaper *El Comercio* praised "the technical knowledge of North American aviation and the skill of its pilots."[38]

Senior American military and government officials also commended the United States for the mission's success, noting how it served as "proof of the definite value of long-range bombers for national defense."[39] For example, Chief of Staff of the US Army (CSA) General Malin Craig hailed Olds' mission as "a demonstration of speed, range, and navigational accuracy unexcelled by any military planes in the world." The CSA later escorted Olds to the White House for a personal audience with Roosevelt.[40]

For leading the expedition, Olds received the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Mackay Trophy. The 1912 award recognized "the most meritorious flight of the year by

36. Copp, *Captains*, 391.

37. Special cable, "Lima Crowds Hail 'Flying Fortresses,'" *The New York Times*, 18 February 1938.

38. Associated Press, "U.S. Flyers Reach Buenos Aires After Perfect Hop over Andes," *The Evening Star*, 18 February 1938, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/.

39. Scottie L. Zamzow, "Ambassador of American Airpower" (master's thesis, Air University, 2008), 45.

40. Associated Press, "U.S. Flyers"; and Zamzow, "Ambassador," 44.

an Air Force person, persons, or organization."[41] At the awards ceremony, the secretary of war and Army officials honored the 2 BG as a whole: "All 49 men were saluted for their high degree of skill in pilotage and navigation in accomplishing the 10,000-mile [*sic*] mission."[42] On a broader scale, the Air Force would later deem the 2 BG mission to be one of the "great expeditions of the first generation of human flight."[43]

Aircraft Design

In addition to its sociopolitical impacts, the Argentinian expedition provided valuable feedback on the YB-17 as a strategic weapon. Olds' notes on the machine included his assessment of interior design—particularly the navigator's area—the engines and durability, and 72-hour repair kits, which contained 113 different line items of parts and an additional 217 "D. P. stock" items for self-sustainment.[44]

Olds' main concerns for the navigator's duties were cabin size and the observation hatch. The work area for these specialists contained a chair, a desk, and a bunk area that permitted navigator teams to rest. Yet it lacked storage for instruments, and the desk was too small for the charts. Its location along a central gangway also meant periodic interruption from transiting crew members. The YB-17's design also included an observation hatch that prevented the navigators from making low observations behind or in front of the plane. When opened during flight, the hatch caused unsecure documents to fly out of the cabin. Finally, the design of the gun blister, which navigators used to take readings, prevented the observer from viewing a "body low on the horizon," while the poor-quality glass caused refraction errors. To address these issues, Olds recommended a larger desk, storage, and work areas for the navigator and a better designed hatch with "ground plate glass to permit accurate observations."[45]

Although three of the aircraft encountered engine issues, Olds concluded that the "engines, and accessories withstood admirably, a grueling test conducted at remote distances from normal sources of supply and maintenance."[46] He also noted that the durable YB-17 could operate from the same remote airfields as its smaller rival, the twin-engine B-18, needing only two-feet of "top crust . . . over an unstable base influenced by tidal action."[47]

While Olds confirmed that the 72-hour part kits and additional repair items proved adequate for the two-week mission, a bit of luck factored into the aircraft returning as a

41. "Good Will Flight," 12; and "Clarence H. Mackay Trophy," National Air and Space Museum, accessed 6 February 2025, https://airandspace.si.edu/.

42. *The Air Force Story: Chapter VI, Prelude to War, 1937–1939* (Department of the Air Force, 1953), https://archive.org/.

43. *Air Force Story*.

44. 2 BG, "Kit: Airplane Engineering 72-Hour Maintenance and Supplies," n.d., 1-4; and "Airplane Type YB-17," n.d., 1-8.

45. "Good Will Flight," 39.

46. "Good Will Flight," 36.

47. "Good Will Flight," 33.

collective unit. In his after-action report, he noted the flight's inability to bring large items such as jacks and spare tires. If an aircraft required such items, "the airplane concerned would have remained in South America until the arrival of supplies from the U.S. by boat."[48] Overall, he praised the efforts by the military and civilian ground crews to keep the aircraft flying. Such collective efforts portended the strong partnerships that would help win the global conflict set to begin in less than two years.

Life Support Aloft

In addition to providing feedback on the machines, the expedition gave insights into the human element, including aircrew physiology and life support. Olds noted that the pilots, co-pilots, and navigators reached the limits of their endurance at the 10-hour mark. The expedition leader cautioned that at altitudes between 10,000 and 15,000 feet, "the lack of sleep was a greater detriment to efficiency than the lack of oxygen."[49] He established a 3-hour rotation that incorporated the bombardier/assistant navigator to ensure adequate rest and safe flying. Due to the navigator's complex role, Olds recommended that an assistant navigator was mandatory and that they work in four-hour shifts. Furthermore, he stressed that an aircrew required a minimum of four officers for long missions or risk "decreasing the capabilities of the airplane by 25%."[50] Oxygen supply and the delivery method were also concerns noted by the 2 BG commander. His long-term solution was the incorporation of pressurized cabins to meet the continual need for oxygen when operating at altitudes greater than 10,000 feet.

Olds also expressed concerns with the contemporary bottle and mask system, particularly when used by specialized crew members such as navigators, who required both hands to do calculations, determine locations, and verify courses on a map. The handheld system required the user to hold a tube to their mouth without biting the tube since that would restrict oxygen flow. One crew member tied the tube under their nose with a handkerchief, which was uncomfortable but freed both hands for work. Olds suggested a new system that fit around the user's head and under their nose, thus allowing for the use of both hands.[51] These observations provided critical feedback to senior Air Corps leaders on life support system modifications that increased both the survivability and efficiency of bomber crews during high-altitude operations.

Robert Olds' Legacy

Olds' leadership made a lasting imprint on the officers and men who flew with him—many later destined for senior positions. As the Air Force would note, the 2 BG mission

48. "Good Will Flight," 35.
49. "Good Will Flight," 38.
50. "Good Will Flight," 33.
51. "Good Will Flight."

roster of the goodwill flight pilots "sounds like a roll call of America's World War II air leaders."[52] Crew included 1st Lieutenant Curtis LeMay, who served as a navigator, describing Olds as "pure gold," with an "exuberance and enthusiasm" that kept "a blaze hot in the hearts and minds of his subordinates."[53] George also spoke highly of Olds, stating that he "had a brilliant mind and with it the capability of grasping all the complexities of a situation and making accurate decisions."[54] In addition to LeMay and George, Meloy and Major Caleb Haynes reached flag officer rank. Olds also helped train a new corps of officers for the impending conflict. The other pilots of the six-ship flight—Smith, Captain Neil "Chick" Harding, Major Cornelius Cousland, and Captain Darr Alkire—all went on to attain the rank of colonel and commanded bomber groups in Europe during the Second World War.

By 1943 Olds commanded the Second Air Force, based at Fort George Wright, Washington. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the end of World War II, his intense work habits and dedication likely affecting his health. He medically retired in February 1943 and checked into the hospital at Davis-Monthan Field in Tucson, Arizona. Olds passed away from a heart-related condition two months after being admitted.

Olds' legacy lived on through the men and machines that he served with. The captains and majors he mentored during the Buenos Aires flight now wore eagles and stars on their shoulders, leading armadas of the platform he helped validate, all while doing their part to help bring the world's largest conflict to an eventual, but as of April 1943, undetermined conclusion.[55]

Postscript

The "Good Will Flight" validated the machines as well as the men of the 2nd Bombardment Group. The YB-17s stayed aloft for more than 65 hours and safely carried their personnel more than 11,600 miles, at altitudes exceeding 20,000 feet. The planes encountered some mechanical issues, but nothing catastrophic.

Designers at Boeing made refinements to the plane based on operational reports from the 2 BG. Four months after Olds' expedition, the War Department placed an order for 38 B-17Bs, approving full production of the bomber. The new model included a turbosupercharger on each engine for greater power and reliability, a redesigned nose to improve bombardier functions, and the addition of a dome on the cabin specifically for navigator use. The first B-model flew in June 1939 and established the foundation for the Air Corps' heavy bomber force. By 1940, Air Corps designers introduced the B-8 oxygen mask that stretched around the wearer's head and covered their mouth and nose. The information

52. *Air Force Story*.
53. Curtis E. LeMay, with MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay* (Doubleday, 1965), 132.
54. LeMay, with Kantor, *Mission*, 131.
55. "Olds."

gathered by the 2 BG commander and his aircrews provided critical feedback to senior Air Corps leaders and manufacturers.[56]

In a broad sense, Olds' leadership during the Buenos Aires flight provides an example of maximizing an opportunity. Within the context of a singular peacetime training mission he was able to help enforce regional American policy by "showing the flag," utilizing what many viewed to be an expensive and dangerous weapons platform, while at the same time validating its worth as well as affirming US airpower across the international arena. Perhaps most importantly, he trained and mentored his crews both collectively and individually. Many of these men would come to lead the Army Air Forces to victory during World War II and in the United States Air Force during the Cold War, providing examples for the leaders of the Air Force today. ✈

56. Ray Wagner, *American Combat Planes of the 20th Century: A Comprehensive Reference* (Jack Bacon, 2004).