

POLITICAL observers of the time often commented that Benito Mussolini was somewhat distrustful of Hitler in the immediate pre-war period, to the extent of constructing an 1,851km (1,150-mile) series of fortifications, known as the *Vallo Alpino* (Alpine Wall), across Italy's northern frontier. Nevertheless, having watched events turn towards Germany's favour during 1938–39, Mussolini threw in his lot with Germany and on June 10, 1940, took Italy to war against the Allies.

At the beginning of September that year Italy's airlines were mobilised as part of *Comando Servizi Aerei Speciali* (CSAS) under General Aurelio Liotta, with *Avio Linee Italiane* (ALI), *Ala Littoria SA* (ALSA) and *Linee Aeree Transcontinentali Italiane* (LATI) organised into the *Nucleo Comunicazione* (Communications Group) and their crews transferred to full military status. Even before this, however, on June 5, the South American service had been reduced to one trip per month, and shortly thereafter closed down completely.

A SHRINKING NETWORK

In late 1939, reflecting the worsening situation in Europe, ALSA's network had already begun to shrink, the only remaining foreign destinations being those in Germany, Greece, Spain, the Adriatic and the Mediterranean rim. A temporary timetable issued in March 1940 eliminates Berlin, although Sofia in Bulgaria via Tirana in Albania appears to have been briefly reinstated.

When Italy entered the war, the capacity of ALI and ALSA became largely directed towards military campaigns in the Balkans and Greece. Back in April 1939 ALSA's four examples of the Breda Ba 44 — a much-modified licence-built de Havilland Dragon Rapide — used on domestic Albanian services, had been sequestered by the military for operations surrounding Italy's occupation of the territory. One unusual addition to ALSA's wartime fleet was Douglas DC-3 I-EMOS, which operated the Rome–Tirana service before being exchanged with Germany for various types. Formerly operated by Belgian national airline Sabena as OO-AUH, it had been interned by the Vichy authorities at Oran in Algeria while attempting to reach the Belgian Congo, and was subsequently handed over to the *Regia Aeronautica*.

For a while LATI's entire effort was redirected to providing military support flights to Libya and East Africa, but an impassioned plea by Benito's aviator son, Bruno Mussolini, resulted in the restoration of transoceanic services from June 22, 1940 — although not without handicaps. As well as having to operate on two fronts, LATI lost many of its most experienced crews to the military, and new personnel had to be trained for the long overwater flights, conducted solely by astro-navigation and in complete radio silence. At the same time it was no longer possible to supply overseas and offshore bases regularly by sea. Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties,

Fiat G.212CP I-ELCE of Avio Linee Italiane (ALI) awaits another flight at Zürich-Kloten in Switzerland. Tragically the trimotor was lost in an accident while serving as part of the newly minted ALI-Flotte Riunite on May 4, 1949, when it crashed on approach to Turin in fog, killing the entire Torino FC football team.

LUIGINO CALIARO COLLECTION





ABOVE Breda Ba 44 I-ORIO joined the Ala Littoria fleet in May 1935 and served on the organisation's Albanian routes before being sequestered by the Regia Aeronautica in the spring of 1939. It operated with the latter as part of the 611^a Squadriglia Trasporto of the Comando Aeronautica Albania on liaison and light transport duties in Albania.

after eight months of operation LATI was able to declare a profit of 1.4m lire. The first year's results reported 65 flights completed, carrying 41 tons of freight and mail; the 100th flight took place on December 1, 1940. Tragically, Bruno Mussolini lost his life in August 1941, while testing the new four-engined Piaggio P.108B bomber.

ARGENTINA AND BEYOND

Acclaimed engineer Carlo Pezzani, who had organised Balbo's North Atlantic aerial cruise, took over from Liotta as LATI's new chief and began addressing the deficiencies of its SIAI-Marchetti SM.83 trimotor fleet. He ordered six of the new SM.76 (an SM.75 with Pratt & Whitney engines) with improved payload and performance, but, owing to the exigencies of war, only one example was delivered. Instead, five SM.82 bomber/transports, augmented by at least seven SM.75s and several Fiat G.12s, were obtained to reinforce the fleet and replace the four SM.83s lost in various mishaps.

Even before LATI was established in September 1939, Italy had sought to widen its airline influence even further and had participated in the formation of *Corporación Sudamericana de Servicios Aéreos* to extend services beyond Argentina and feed its South Atlantic services. With a small fleet of Macchi MC.94 flying-boats, flown initially by Italian crews, the first flight was made in February 1939, connecting Buenos Aires with Asunción, the capital of Paraguay.

Italy's ambition of flying all the way to Buenos Aires (via Porto Alegre in southern Brazil) was finally attained on July 20, 1941, and a bi-weekly service was planned, but it was to be a short-lived achievement. Concerned at hostile activity in its own "backyard", America began putting pressure on Brazil (then neutral) to restrict the Italian operation — with some justification, as LATI's crews had been instructed to report enemy shipping movements back to High Command by wireless. The airline also carried essential minerals, metals and commodities vital to Italy's

BELOW In late December 1941, under pressure from the American government, the Brazilian authorities impounded all LATI aircraft still in the country. They included this SIAI-Marchetti SM.75, probably either I-BUEN or I-BLAN, photographed by American serviceman Louis A. Tyler at Recife in northern Brazil, in 1942. VIA LEIF HELLSTRÖM





ABOVE American photographer Howard Levy took this photograph of SIAI-Marchetti SM.87 — a floatplane version of the SM.75 — I-INNO/MM488 at Brindisi on Christmas Day, 1943, after the Italian armistice. Note that the “L” in “Littoria” on the fuselage legend has been changed to a “V” to make Ala Vittoria, the latter translating as victory!

war effort and even conducted a questionable 7hr flight along Brazil’s east coast, allegedly looking at American military installations and airfields.

Having initially complied by denying LATI fuel supplies, on December 24, 1941 (with the USA now also at war), Brazil rescinded all operating rights, impounding the five aircraft then in the country, including SM.82 I-BOLI on the last flight from Rome, and interning all Italian personnel. The seized aircraft were reportedly compulsorily purchased by the USA. Attempts had been made to head-off the inevitable with the creation of a Brazilian company to operate the South American sectors and re-forming LATI in neutral Portugal, but these efforts were in vain.

During its relatively short life, LATI made 211 South Atlantic crossings, carrying 434 passengers and 198,688kg (438,000lb) of mail and cargo over a total distance of 2,628,074km (1,633,010 miles). It was a remarkable yet often overlooked achievement, invariably conducted under the most difficult conditions, but the cost was high — by the time of the Italian armistice 19 LATI aircraft had been lost and 32 personnel had perished during both civil and military operations.

TO THE ORIENT?

Planning for eventual peace, Italy had aspirations of extending its international reach to South America’s west coast, northwards to Los Angeles and even as far as Tokyo in Japan. The Tokyo route assumed paramount importance for strategic and propaganda purposes, and on June 29, 1942, LATI’s *tenente colonnello* Antonio Moscatelli departed Rome in a modified SM.75RT (RT for Rome—Tokyo) bound for Japan, reached after just four days routeing via the USSR and China for political reasons [see The Rome—Tokyo

Express by Ray Flude and Gregory Alegi in TAH24 — Ed.] Another unusual mission for former LATI crews was a late May 1943 nuisance raid on the former Italian air base at Gura in Eritrea, by then in American hands, using two civilian SM.75s modified to carry ten 100kg (220lb) bombs.

By mid-1943 Italy’s airlines were operating on two fronts: maintaining regular services to “friendly” countries and supporting the military with troop-carrying, supply, leaflet-dropping and courier missions, even carrying emissaries to Lisbon in Portugal to negotiate an armistice in the summer of 1943. But it all came to an end with Italy’s capitulation to the Allies in September 1943. As German forces began withdrawing northwards they seized 78 civil transport aircraft from the airlines, seven of which remained in Italian hands, to maintain services from Milan to Monaco, Berlin, Munich and Vienna. Within Allied-occupied territory many crews joined the *Aviazione Cobelligerante Italiana* (Italian Cobelligerent Air Force), primarily operating in the Balkan theatre. A transport unit, 2° Gruppo volo (No 2 Flying Group) of the 3° Stormo Trasporti (No 3 Transport Wing), employed surviving CANT and SIAI-Marchetti machines, flying missions over friendly territory from Lecce, near Brindisi.

Like the rest of Europe, much of Italy’s transport infrastructure and surface communications had been all but obliterated by the preceding years of conflict, and thus it became a priority to regenerate the country’s air services after the war. Starting in August 1945, the Allied authorities permitted limited essential administrative flights by the military between Rome (Centocelle) and major Italian cities. By September 1946, operating only a few war-weary SIAI-Marchetti and Fiat transport machines — supplemented by a