

A TYPICAL DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SOUTHERN AIRWAYS MARTIN 404

Raymond Brown

I hopped a Texas International Convair 600 from Houston to New Orleans (MSY). I would join Frank and the Southern Airways Martin 404 during day #3 of a 4-day workweek. Memphis-based Jacob and his crew were on a 4 days on / 3 days off cycle. Checking in with the Southern ops agent at MSY, the employee found it borderline lunacy that I would be taking a 6-stop “ancient airliner” flight to Memphis when a 1-stop DC-9 left at about the same time. I sheepishly explained that getting to MEM was not the real objective – it was to spend a day with a noble metal beast and an aircrew I liked. He smiled a little bit and murmured that I was too young to go off the deep end over old airplanes. I found from the station sign-in log that I was the only non-SO jumpseat rider on a 404 in over a year!

I linked up with Frank and first officer Skip Wilbur. First, we went to the employee cafeteria because on this day of the week they served very good red beans and rice. An hour later, we walked out to the ramp where N147S was still making metallic cool down ticks from her inbound trip. This particular Martin, serial number 14161 and ship #107, was a favorite of mine. A really good-looking airplane. At this point in time, SO was down to 11 Martins flying the line. DC-9-10s and -30s were rapidly replacing them. Southern management did not embrace the 580, 600, YS-11 or FH-227 turboprops. They elected to transition from the piston 404 into pure jets. The decision was made to take good care of the Martinliners as long as they could. (N147S would stay in the fleet until the very end in 1978).

We were about to embark on a real odyssey. This trip epitomizes the local service point-to-point “hit all the stations you can” approach to air commerce. It wears everyone out but it’s an adventure to watch the air and ground crews interact. Air Traffic Control, or the lack of it at tiny stations, was a part of this journey, also. Southern crews did this routinely every day. You really need to pull out a map of Mississippi to fully appreciate this world-class zigzag across the state. All the intermediate stops in this sequence would be in Mississippi. The route was: MSY to Hattiesburg (HBG)-Laurel (LUL)-Natchez (HEZ)-Jackson (JAN)-Greenwood (GWO)-Oxford (UOX) and finally Memphis. The flight number was SO836. We left New Orleans at 2:55 p.m. and were scheduled to arrive Memphis at 7:40 p.m. Four hours and forty-five minutes of noise, thumps, landing gear cycles, scratchy radio frequencies, bad coffee and patience. You see, patience is the supreme attribute when piloting recip airliners on daylong outings. Southern taught their crews well. Many young pilots flying for third level carriers who would later fly these 404s couldn’t tolerate the airplanes. They never learned the patience required and the non-abusive touch to steer old iron around a route system.

Hattiesburg and Laurel were small airports, as one would expect. No control towers, limited runway length and tiny shoebox terminals. These towns were only 30 miles apart yet SO served them both. HBG and several other small cities on our run today would not enjoy airline service when Southern finally pulled out. Air Traffic Control clearances for the next leg were issued just before we flew the final approach, so ATC could hear us and vice-versa. ATC gave a “void if not off” time to our flight. We said goodbye to the Air Traffic Control Center and landed. I only remember two or three people who got on and off. The pilots constantly looked at their watches while on the ground at these two mini-stations. Missing the assigned release window literally meant the station manager would have to phone the Center or relay through ARINC radio and obtain a new release time for the waiting Martin.

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The 100-mile run westbound to Natchez was a Deep South sightseeing pleasure. River bottom farmland gave way to wooded rolling hills and then a descent to the HEZ airport right near the wide Mississippi River. Natchez was a quaint, old south, riverboat town with an airport terminal that looked like a columned antebellum mansion.

I enjoyed helping Frank and Skip whenever I could. One task I came in handy for was to open the forward cargo door. The jumpseat mounted in the entryway to the cockpit, between the pilots and about three feet behind them. Frank would look out his side window and if he saw a tug heading for the #1 engine he would call out "coming forward". I would untangle myself from the miniature seat, remove the escape slide activation bar and open the left front cargo door. In the Martinliner, a freight area separates the pilots from the passengers. The time at the gate averaged ten minutes at the outlying stations.

Not surprisingly, rural folks did not object to the Martin. Remember, this was a large airplane for a 40-seater. Stand up headroom and stretch out legroom gave the passenger some real amenities. Small market passengers were happy to have this air service. This customer acceptance of aircraft type was severely strained when SO later replaced the remaining big 404s with tiny, skinny, no lavatory Metroliners. Sometimes, older is better.

The leg up to Jackson was a quick 70-miles at low altitude. JAN was a nice airport: longer runway, control tower with radar approach control, multiple gates, brick terminal and DC-9 service. Southern was running five DC-9s and four Martins through JAN each day. Delta was there, too. This was our only fuel stop, a luxurious 17-minute stay. It was the only time we left the cockpit. I made a quick dash into operations and gulped down a bologna sandwich that had probably been in my bag too long.

On to Greenwood. I rode in the passenger compartment on this leg, in the last row of seats. I just wanted to re-experience the sights and sounds from that vantage point. Mentally fading, I don't remember anything about this leg except for the tail section sashaying back and forth on the crosswind final approach. Another zip-zip and we were gone.

A 60-mile dash north to Oxford-University Airport does stay in my mind. Frank briefed me that SO had a Martin crash at UOX in 1969 (N251S) and that it was the most difficult runway on the system. Runway 9-27 was 4700 feet, which is somewhat adequate for the 404 but the east end of the runway dropped off in a sheer cliff. Tall trees loomed, a sprinkling of radio towers just east of the field and a narrow runway spell "heads up" or else. The real time to worry at this airport was midsummer with lower wing lift and hot engines gasping for horsepower. Oxford is the home of the University of Mississippi and is author John Grisham country. Lining up on runway 27 for final approach, staring at the cliff, the runway looked like an aircraft carrier.

The sun was about half -down when we roared out over the drop-off with the tall trees trying to tickle our belly. We were Memphis bound. N147S had performed flawlessly, the weather had been nearly clear and we were on schedule. When Center switched us over to MEM Approach Control we were

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quickly shocked back into the world of hub air traffic. Rapid-fire transmissions zapped through our headsets. In over four hours of flying, we had not even seen another airliner until now. We kept our speed up on final to keep pace with the jets, then threw everything out to slow down and land. Frank steered toward the terminal in the gradual darkness, the landing lights looking very cool as they shown through the propellers. We taxied to the gates with no jetways. The R-2800 engines growled softly, their work done until an early morning run to Tupelo. N147S had performed 14 take-offs and landings today. Mechanics swarmed over our machine. It is a lasting tribute to these Southern A&P mechanics that kept the Martins flying as long as they did.

Tomorrow, the three of us would head south in another 404 (N258S) and retrace the same exact route back to New Orleans. My aluminum friend, N147S, would head east on a three-stopper to Atlanta. I would say good-bye, and then Frank and Skip would fly the Martin back to MEM and three days off. This was a wonderful discovering time in my life but also melancholy. Southern Airways was the last of the large airlines still operating recip transports. In three blinks the 404s would be gone.

N147S was sold by Southern Airways in March 1978. It was immediately operated by Florida Airlines and later Southern International during 1981 in full Air Florida Commuter colors and titles. That airline failed in 1982 and the airplane found its way to Oakland, CA in November. Painted in Air Marianas colors and titles, it was fitted with long range fuel tanks for a ferry flight to Saipan in the Pacific Ocean, which it successfully made! The aircraft apparently operated there for several years and just wore out. An aviation enthusiast reported seeing it as a stripped down, graffiti covered derelict at Isley Field, Saipan in 1996. He verified by seeing the data plate.

This is rather long but if you want a taste of what airline flying was like back in my days with Southern Airways, this will show you what we did on a daily basis. We flew our Martin 404's up & down many times under conditions that would be considered crazy today, many takeoff's, many landings, many instrument approach's using just ADF, loved every minute, the old prop radial aircraft were a real challenge to fly, each one had it's on personality. so sit back and enjoy what airline flying was like in the radial Martin 404 day's