

“America’s First Airline”

In war surplus biplanes, aviation pioneers T. Claude Ryan and B. Franklin Mahoney made history on March 1, 1925. The launch of their Los Angeles--San Diego Air Line, would be America’s first regularly scheduled, daily airline service.

The Ryan Flying Company, based at the airfield of Dutch Flats, north of today’s Marine Corp. Recruit Depot, had been profitable for Claude Ryan. The veteran flyer piloted many of his firm’s charter and sight-seeing excursions. His trips to and from Los Angeles were particularly lucrative. In 1924, friend and future business partner B. F. Mahoney suggested expanding the L.A. run into an airline service with a daily, year-around schedule. Mahoney offered to underwrite expenses for the operation and Ryan would fly the planes.

The gamble seemed worth it. Ryan bought three Standard J-1 planes in Texas for a few hundred dollars each and had the disassembled planes—last used as Army trainers in World War I--shipped to San Diego. Unimpressed by his own purchase, Ryan noted the planes “had no engines and were really just a batch of parts.”

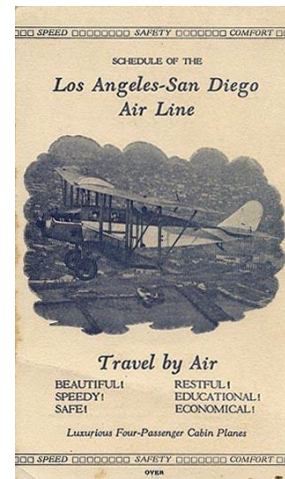
His mechanics added single-engines and quickly put the planes into flying shape. In the forward cockpit they created an enclosed space for four passengers. Side windows provided a view for each traveler. The pilot flew the plane from a rear cockpit left open to the sky. In temperate Southern California, Ryan was unconcerned about his wiper-less windshield: “When it rained I’d just stand up in the cockpit and look over the windshield. At 80 mph and 100 feet of altitude we could get along okay.”

One of Ryan’s biplanes—larger than the other two—boasted a side-by-side rear cockpit that could seat an extra co-pilot or mechanic. This plane, the designated “flagship” of the airline fleet, was christened the *Palomar*, the name of the building at Sixth and Maple where Ryan and Mahoney had apartments. (Three years later, Charles Lindbergh would purportedly bunk at the Palomar Apartments as he supervised the construction of the *Spirit of St. Louis*.)

Ryan decided on a fare of \$22.50 for a round-trip ticket. He had already calculated that amount as the break-even cost for each flight (even with only one passenger). A one-way fare was \$14.50, hotel transportation included.

On Sunday morning, March 1, the airline was ready to debut. Shrewdly, Ryan and Mahoney recruited Hollywood celebrities as their first passengers. Thousands of sightseers and movie fans converged on the airfield at 99th Street and Western Avenue in Los Angeles to see the celebrities and witness the inaugural flight.

Hollywood stars getting ready to embark.



One hour before departure, a dozen movie stars including director Robert Vignola, actress Hedda Hopper, and Cecil B. DeMille star Vera Reynolds, lined up for photographers while police pushed back the crowds.

Airplanes from the U.S. Army and Navy would escort the “huge cabin passenger planes” to San Diego. Thirty minutes before takeoff three military planes swooped over the airfield and “hovered about in the air until the signal to point south was given.”

Departure came at 10:00 a.m. Flying at 1,500 feet—with Claude Ryan piloting one of the celebrity planes himself--the flight south would take ninety minutes. Two Navy carrier pigeons were released as the three Ryan “airliners” took off; one of the pigeons would reach its North Island perch before the planes landed in San Diego.

At the Dutch Flats, a huge crowd was waiting as the six planes--flying in perfect formation—touched down on the dirt landing strip. Cameramen from the San Diego Cinema Corp. cranked film footage of the stars as they disembarked and were greeted by the mayor and members of the Chamber of Commerce “aviation committee.”

Lunch at the U.S. Grant hotel came next, followed by several rounds of congratulatory speeches. The movie stars were given an afternoon tour of the city and then whisked back to the airfield for a return flight to Los Angeles.



The *San Diego Union* praised the new project and predicted it would “set a precedent for civil aircraft development.” The next day the airline began its scheduled service: daily flights between San Diego and Los Angeles, with departures from the north at 9:00 a.m. and returns at 4:00 p.m.

Profits, however, were disappointing. As the novelty of the airline route declined, so did passenger traffic. To boost income, fares were raised to \$17.40 one-way and \$26.50 round trip. But most Ryan revenue continued to come from charter and sightseeing flights.

To stimulate interest, the fledgling airline purchased a larger plane built by Donald Douglas, of future “DC” airliner fame. With a wingspan of 56 feet and a length of 37 feet, the *Cloudster* biplane dwarfed the three Ryan Standards. The open cockpit fuselage was enclosed to accommodate ten passengers in a plush cabin with padded seats, carpeting, overhead dome lights, and ash trays.

But the well-appointed airliner did little to boost profits. Ryan and Mahoney kept their daily schedule as long as they could—sometimes flying empty planes between cities. Eventually, they chose to concentrate on airplane manufacturing. After less than two years of operation, the pioneering Los Angeles—San Diego Air Line closed operations.



T. Claude Ryan in the cockpit of a Standard J-1.

Photographs courtesy of the San Diego Air & Space Museum.

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), pgs. 109-112.

Article originally published as “FIRST REGULAR DAILY AIRLINE SERVICE WAS FROM L.A. TO S.D” by Richard Crawford, in the San Diego *Union-Tribune*, March 10, 2011.