

"Con-Air" in 1/6 San Diego Union Tribune [news article]

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Subject: "Con-Air" in 1/6 San Diego Union Tribune [news article]

A correspondent passed this 1/6 article on to us. He adds:

"The article in the hard-copy paper has a couple of pictures to go with the story (no pix on-line). One picture shows the shoulder patch on the aircrew uniforms, another shows prisoners lined up about to board a Convair 580. The paint job on the plane looked like INS or maybe US Marshals Service, it was a green stripe with an eagle forward of the door."

From http://www.uniontrib.com/uniontrib/mon/news/news_1n6conair.html
(Password required)

The article is relevant here because of recent discussion of Con-Air flights using the "Janet" company name.

You won't need a reservation on this airline -- no matter how many travelers flood the airport.

Don't worry about traffic or parking. Shuttles are provided. And the price is right -- you fly for free.

But think carefully before you step aboard. This is ConAir, and all the passengers are federal prisoners.

"We don't serve mixed drinks," said Thomas Little, chief of air operations for the program, officially titled the Justice Prisoner and Alien Transportation System, or J-Pats.

Call it ConAir and Little knows what you mean. It's the name the air transport system has picked up inside the U.S. Marshals Service, which flies a fleet of 13 airplanes on regular routes across the country every day.

During the past year, the prisoner airline spent \$24 million moving more than 100,000 federal inmates -- including 12,000 from San Diego -- to and from trials, prisons and medical centers nationwide.

The inmates fly mostly on 727s and DC-9s. But the airline, which has merged with the air wing of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, also operates Convair 580s, a Lear jet and a number of smaller aircraft.

Among the most infamous of its recent travelers were Unabomber suspect Theodore Kaczynski and the men accused in the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, Terry Nichols and Timothy McVeigh.

Nichols and McVeigh were transported in the dead of night in an operation much akin to a clandestine military operation, Little said. He did not want to go into details but mentioned that a decoy plane was among the ploys used to guard against possible attempts by supporters to free the suspects.

Federal officials have always been circumspect about the fine points of prisoner movement. But ConAir soon could gain a higher public profile with the planned release in June of a movie by the same name.

In the Disney film, Nicolas Cage plays a hapless prisoner who wanders into a hijack plot aboard a Marshals Service plane carrying a group of high-security inmates.

The Hollywood marshals rough up some of the prisoners, and the plane crashes, leaving the real Marshals Service frowning on the silver screen's invention, said Kristine Marcy, a top official in charge of detentions.

"We don't beat up our prisoners, and our planes certainly don't crash," Marcy

said on a recent trip to San Diego, where she was trying to find more jail space for federal prisoners.

The space problem here is acute because of the high number of border arrests. So, San Diego is a regular stop on ConAir's West Coast air route, with 12 flights per week scheduled into Lindbergh Field.

Prisoners -- mostly people being held for entering the country with false documents -- are flown from San Diego to Las Vegas, where they are housed in the city jail. They are flown back a few days later for deportation hearings.

Without the air transportation system, Operation Gatekeeper, the federal border crackdown, would not have been possible, said Mark Reed, San Diego's district director for the INS.

Before ConAir was called in last July, Reed said, the INS was spending hours on the road busing hundreds of prisoners to Las Vegas, the closest jail space available.

Kim Porter, who coordinates INS air transportation in San Diego, estimated that 12,000 inmates have flown from here to Las Vegas and back aboard federal planes.

"If the planes stopped flying for just one day, a monkey wrench would be thrown into the whole system," Porter said.

Because of the San Diego jail space problem, there was no holiday break here for ConAir. While flights in other parts of the country were cut back during the Christmas season, San Diego continued its rigorous schedule of two flights every weekday and one each Saturday and Sunday.

Marcy said the air transportation system inspires a high level of commitment in its personnel.

"People are always willing to be on standby or to work overtime," she said, noting that the planes are not always used for prisoner transport.

After a hurricane flattened parts of the Virgin Islands last year, the prisoner transportation system flew in some of the first reinforcements to help establish law and order, she said.

After the Oklahoma City bombing, the airline flew evidence to the FBI crime laboratory in Washington, D.C., she said.

With planes crisscrossing the country, traveling through multiple time zones and even venturing around the globe, scheduling and tracking have gone high-tech. It's all accomplished from a scheduling center in Kansas City, Mo., referred to as the "travel agency" for ConAir. It handles up to 500 electronic requests for flights each day, federal officials say.

Flight tracking begins an hour before the first plane takes off. Throughout the day, employees monitor the movements of every plane until the last craft is safely on the ground.

On board, a crew of deputy U.S. marshals, aviation enforcement officers and contract guards keeps order in the rear of the plane. Passengers are loaded under high security at a remote area of an airport. Seat assignments are not optional.

Inside, the planes have been slightly rearranged from their previous commercial seating to allow guards a better view of the entire plane, officials say. The special seating tends to allow for more leg room -- but only for the guards, they add.

The planes fly out of a hub in Oklahoma City, the center of the country, making large loops east and west, dropping off and picking up passengers as they land at 40 major cities.

The planes also loop along separate West Coast and East Coast circuits.

But why is it necessary to move an average of 400 prisoners every day?

Bed space is the driving factor," said Little, a former INS pilot who coordinates the day-to-day operations of the merged airline.

He said jail cells, which generally are rented by the Marshals Service to hold federal prisoners until they are sentenced to a long-term facility, can cost up to \$100 a night on the East Coast, while in Texas or Louisiana the cost of a cell might run as low as \$35 a night.

"You make up the cost of moving a prisoner pretty quickly at that rate," Little

said.

He said other reasons for moving prisoners include the need to separate gang members or suspects testifying against each other.

ConAir also moves inmates for the federal Bureau of Prisons, which may want to transfer someone from a high-to low-security facility.

Higher-security prison space is most expensive, Little explained, so prison authorities like to quickly move people who do not need the extra supervision.

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