The Flight of the Santa Maria, or From Rome to Roosevelt Lake But Not Back Again: The Chief of Staff, Italian Air Force Visits the Southwest

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Above: The Santa Maria on Lake Medina, Texas, with a fighter escort from Kelly Field overhead.

Below: The Isotta-Fraschini motors of the Santa Maria.
As Italian nationalism reached a fanatical peak during the late 1920s and early 1930s, Benito Mussolini planned to create a vast, worldwide patriotic network of Italian colonial organizations sympathetic to their former homeland. In line with Il Duce's desires, the Italian government in 1925 approved a plan proposed by Commodore Francesco de Pinedo, Chief of Staff, Italian Air Force, to fly the South Atlantic to South America, thence through the United States and back to Rome.

Early in 1926, work began on the plane which would carry the heroic flyer on his journey. The seaplane was an S-55 Italian bomber modified in its large dual pontoon configuration with two 500 horsepower Isotta-Fraschini motors mounted in a tandem position on top of the huge single wing. The cockpits were situated in each pontoon with the pilot and copilot in one pontoon and the two mechanics in the other. The plane was capable of holding 580 gallons of fuel, and could be modified to carry more if the mechanics' compartment were eliminated.1

Francesco de Pinedo closely supervised the building of the craft, christened the Santa Maria in memory of the flagship of Christopher Columbus. Since the beginning of Mussolini's government, de Pinedo had been a vital force in the development of Italian aviation. During the Great War he was a pilot in the Italian Army. When Mussolini gained control in 1922, and with the help of the Italian Government, he was able to give greater recognition to Italian aviation within the armed forces.
Much of de Pinedo's fame was attained in 1925. During that year he recorded the longest flight in aviation history. His trip covered thirty-four thousand miles and included stops in Greece, Persia, India, Australia, Korea, and Japan. After his successful air voyage he was presented the "Civis Romanus," an award revived from ancient times by Mussolini. His aeronautical experience prompted Mussolini to appoint him Chief of Staff of the Italian Air Force. De Pinedo was a man of slight stature who traditionally wore golf knickers while flying. He was thirty-seven years old when he began his trip to the Western Hemisphere. Accompanying him on his epic voyage were Captain Carlo del Prete as copilot, and Mario Zacchetti and Sergeant Degl'innocenti as the ship's mechanics. Degl'innocenti was on the ship until Baloma, Portuguese Guinea, where he was forced to remain behind to lighten the load.

The flight plan covered a distance of 30,000 miles and included four continents: Africa, South America, North America and Europe. De Pinedo explained the purpose of his flight at a news conference in New Orleans, at the halfway mark of his voyage: The journey was to "... demonstrate the development of aviation in Italy, and for experimental purposes." The experiments included the use of the South Atlantic for commercial aviation because as de Pinedo remarked, "... the flight could demonstrate what improvements are necessary for the full development of commercial aviation." De Pinedo planned his flight in three stages. The first stage covered a distance of 7,500 miles and included crossing the Southern Atlantic near Port Natal, Brazil. The second stage was to begin at Buenos Aires and terminate in New York, a distance of 16,750 miles. The final stage was slated to begin in Newfoundland and end in Rome, covering 5,125 miles.

De Pinedo bid Mussolini farewell on January 19, 1927, and left for Cogliari, Sardinia to prepare for his journey. After waiting for good flying weather, he began his trip in the Santa Maria on February 13, 1927. His departure was kept secret because of the Italian aviator's superstitions concerning newspaper notoriety. The year before, he had been given wide publicity on a trip which
subsequently failed. For that reason, he decided to leave quietly. On Monday, March 28th, the *Santa Maria* docked in Havana. The flyers had experienced numerous problems during their month-and-a-half air voyage across the South Atlantic and through South America. A pontoon received damage in the Atlantic crossing and the *Santa Maria*’s engines had to be overhauled in Buenos Aires. The voyagers were lost over the Amazon for two days, but were able finally to land at Guajira Miren, Brazil. The *Santa Maria* was the first airship to cross the lower Amazon and despite accidents and errancies, only the seventh to cross the Atlantic. De Pinedo and his crew continued confidently on their journey.

On Tuesday the 29th, de Pinedo departed from Havana and reached New Orleans six hours and fifteen minutes later. His visit to Louisiana included conferences with many Army Air Corps officers despite a State Department request that military officers avoid courtesies to the Italian flyers. In New Orleans, de Pinedo altered his schedule and added Galveston to his route. Early Friday morning, April 1st, a crowd gathered at the Industrial Canal docks to witness his departure. They were disappointed, however, because the flyer failed to appear. Later, the news media was told that one member of de Pinedo’s crew was ill. The flyers did not depart from New Orleans until Saturday, April 2nd. They flew to Galveston and then to San Antonio, where the *Santa Maria* was met by five United States army fighter aircraft sent by Brigadier General F. P. Lahm, the commander of the Air Force training center at Kelly Field. De Pinedo was escorted to Lake Medina, thirty miles from San Antonio where the pilot landed the hydroplane. At a ceremonial dinner that evening, de Pinedo stated that he would not attempt to return across the Atlantic nonstop. Those close to the Italian pilot had believed earlier that he might attempt to win the $25,000 Orteig Prize, which was to be awarded to the first aviator to fly from New York to Paris. Lindbergh succeeded in 1929.

Early Sunday morning, the Italians failed in their attempts to take off from Lake Medina. General Lahm had anticipated little trouble getting the hydroplane off the lake because the U.S.
Army's Pan-American clippers rose from the same lake with 6,500 pounds of fuel. The Santa Maria carried 580 gallons which weighed only 4,500 pounds. The Army machines were biplanes, however, which achieved more lift, while the monoplane Santa Maria needed a longer run.

The Santa Maria's failure to lift off from Lake Medina caused great anxiety among the people expecting the plane at Elephant Butte Lake near Hot Springs, New Mexico. At seven that morning the officials at Lake Medina had telephoned Elephant Butte that de Pinedo had taken off. At seven-thirty that morning there was a power failure at Lake Medina and the telephone connections were not restored until two-thirty in the afternoon. The crowd at Hot Springs was not aware until then that the Santa Maria had not been able to take off and there was fear that the ship was lost.

Hot Springs had been a crowded town since Friday, April 1st. The small hamlet, which traditionally eked out its existence as a mineral bath center, was on that weekend a crowded carnival, as nearly 5,000 people swarmed over the area. Most of the visitors slept in cars or tents because the two hotels and rooming houses could accommodate only 300 people. The large crowds and de Pinedo's delay in San Antonio prompted the Hot Springs sheriff, Billy Kendall, to hire ten extra deputies to help control the crowds.

Leo Smith, the Hot Springs mayor, planned a reception for the flyers. Seven men asked to be on the government launch that would bring the pilot off the lake: Mayor Smith; Councilmen James W. Knox, Sam Matson, and J. S. Heffernan; Italian Vice Consul Frank Fracarolli; the superintendent of Elephant Butte Dam, George Shannow; and the dam's engineer, R. M. Lawson.

Early on Monday, the Santa Maria lifted off from Lake Medina. The ship carried only three hundred gallons of fuel, which Kelly Field aviators believed was enough to reach Hot Springs. The hydroplane was towed nine miles up the lake and turned into the wind; even so, the plane traveled nearly three miles before it could break from the water. The flight from San Antonio to Hot Springs was the most dangerous leg of the trip because the sea-
plane had to travel seven hundred miles overland with scant fuel before it could reach sufficient water for landing. The high altitude and steep mountains also caused concern for de Pinedo, and the aviator remarked in Hot Springs that he was lost for a time above the desolate country. The red, white and green wings of the Santa Maria were finally seen over El Paso at two-thirty in the afternoon. At three-forty the airship was sighted over Elephant Butte. An Albuquerque Journal reporter emotionally described the ship's descent onto the lake:

Out of a turquoise sky into the ancient pueblo country the roaring thunder bird of Commander Francesco de Pinedo descended Monday afternoon to a resting place on the calm waters of Elephant Butte Dam.

The Italian colony from Albuquerque had been represented by over 200 people on Sunday, but only twenty-five stayed to greet the plane on Monday. Nevertheless, the small group of Italian-Americans that remained gave the Commander an enthusiastic welcome. Those on the government launch that had gone to tow the Santa Maria into the dock saluted their intrepid heroes with a shower of carnations in a burst of patriotic fervor.

As the pilots stepped onto shore, Marinello Cinelli, an officer in the Italian Army during the First World War and holder of the Crois Belguene and other medals of valor, greeted them. He leaped to a rock, lifted his arms in a fascist salute and cried "Viva de Pinedo!" The Italian delegation to the man burst into cries of "Viva!" and gave the salute.

Before leaving the next morning, the flyer gave the Albuquerque Italian community a souvenir of his visit, an extra propeller from the Santa Maria. De Pinedo was again unable to depart on schedule. The seaplane could not become airborne. Finally at one-fifteen that afternoon, the flyers deposited their seven hundred pounds of luggage on shore and the plane was able to rise off the lake. The intensive morning trials and the high altitude caused the engines to overheat, and after traveling only twenty-five miles the big seabird was forced to return to Elephant Butte.
De Pinedo left Elephant Butte again early Wednesday morning, April 6th, after motorboats churned the water around the airship to help separate it from the lake. The flight from Elephant Butte to Roosevelt Lake, although potentially hazardous, was easily accomplished. The Santa Maria landed on the Arizona lake before noon. At Roosevelt Lake, as in Hot Springs and every other settlement the Santa Maria had visited, a crowd of people came to see the great hydroplane that daringly ventured over the desolate and dry terrain, far from its safe aquatic habitat. The ship was docked near shore and de Pinedo received greetings from Roland L. Still, manager of the Apache Lodge at Roosevelt Lake, and Steve Faletti and John Cocaletto, Italian immigrants living in Globe, Arizona.\textsuperscript{23} Because the Santa Maria was an unusual ship, many people rowed out to get a closer look at the seaplane during refueling.

After lunch, del Prete and Zacchetti returned to direct the refueling, while de Pinedo accompanied Still on a tour and photography session at the reservoir buildings.\textsuperscript{24} Moments after de Pinedo had left Still and started to make his way to the dock, the Santa Maria burst into flames.\textsuperscript{25} Still rushed fire extinguishers from Apache Lodge and powerhouse, and for a moment it seemed that the frantic efforts of del Prete, Zacchetti and a large number of workers would succeed in saving the hydroplane. However, a manhole on the port side used as an entrance to de Pinedo's cabin was open. Once the draft from the porthole struck the flames, the entire cabin exploded into a mass of fire. Del Prete dived off the ship into the water and Zacchetti jumped onto the floating dock. Still and others kept the growing crowds back, since there was fear that the newly filled gasoline tanks would explode. Within two minutes the great ship that had traveled halfway around the world plunged to the bottom of the lake.\textsuperscript{26}

Immediately an investigation began. The first clues were found that evening, when James Gibson, son of W. P. Gibson of Miami, Arizona, revealed that he was on the boat from which a youth had thrown a lighted match igniting fumes and gasoline near the Santa Maria. The Gibson boy did not know the "stranger." He
testified that the youths had been quarreling over a cigarette and during the argument, "... the other boy threw the match away." Early the next day a reporter from the Arizona Republican questioned seventeen-year-old John Thomason of Phoenix. The youth, a boat tender at Canyon Lake, Arizona, admitted that he was the one who had thrown the match into the fuel-covered lake.

In Italy, the tragedy was initially interpreted as an anti-Fascist plot. The Italian Cabinet demanded revenge against the alleged conspirators who, the Cabinet believed, succeeded in destroying the Santa Maria. Telegraph stations and newspaper offices throughout Italy claimed that the destruction was deliberate. Only Mussolini, it seemed, remained calm. He granted de Pinedo's request for another plane and immediately shipped the Santa Maria II, a sister ship of the destroyed craft, by steamer to New York. To lessen charges of sabotage, United States Assistant Secretary of War Arthur Davidson sent a message to de Pinedo offering his sympathy. The Secretary offered the Italian the use of a U.S. Army airplane to complete his tour of the United States. De Pinedo thanked the secretary for his offer, but declined use of the plane. De Pinedo wrote home to the Italian people that the fire was an accident. The Italian Cabinet became more understanding when Faletti and Cocaletto informed the news media that they saw the two boys quarreling on the boat and watched the match fall into the gasoline-covered water. Mussolini repeated to Henry P. Fletcher, U.S. Ambassador to Rome, that, "... Italy saw no connection between anti-Fascists and the burning of de Pinedo's aircraft."

De Pinedo and del Prete left for San Diego on April 8th. They flew from Phoenix to San Diego in two U.S. navy airplanes. The aircraft piloted by W. S. Hactan, in which del Prete was a passenger, was forced down with engine trouble near San Diego. The plane landed in a muddy field and both men were thrown from the aircraft, though neither was injured. De Pinedo and A. E. Montgomery, his pilot, continued to San Diego without incident. Considering all his misfortunes and those of his crew,
Above: The Santa Maria ablaze on Roosevelt Lake.
Below: Remains of one motor resting on a charred wing section.
it was not surprising that de Pinedo motored to Los Angeles and traveled by train to San Francisco and later to New York, where he met his new Santa Maria for the flight home.

As soon as news of the fire reached Albuquerque, the Italian colony had telegraphed de Pinedo offering its help in recovery operations. They also were interested in obtaining a "relic" for the Italian colony in Albuquerque. From San Diego, de Pinedo telegraphed Still and informed him that he had authorized Italians from Albuquerque to salvage the plane. De Pinedo also gave the colony permission to keep all of the aircraft except the motors. Early on April 10, Still telegraphed the Albuquerque colony:

You had better get man to come to Roosevelt immediately to protect Santa Maria plane as there are numbers of people trying to further destroy it. I expect this is more for souvenirs but need watchman here to protect plane.

On April 12th, representatives of the Italians settled in Albuquerque left for Roosevelt Lake. Ettore Franchini, Peter Vichi and Antonio Domenici left earlier than planned because of Still's telegram. The trio arrived on April 12, but Vichi and Domenici returned to Albuquerque the next day to celebrate Easter.

On April 13th, Franchini hired ten Indians to help in the recovery. The remains of the craft were in thirty feet of water which added to the problems. With only a few hundred feet of rope, three steel hooks and a pulley at the workers' disposal, the recovery took eight days.

In Italy the recovery process held almost as much interest as the flight itself. Newspapers throughout the northern sections of Italy followed the reclamation of the burned ship. In a letter to de Pinedo, who informed the papers, Franchini described the plane after it was salvaged;

... the condition of the motors are poor because the lower part of the motors had been burned. The valve covers are broken and also two carburetors and a radiator are cracked. The propellers are both
burned and broken. I had to separate the motors in order to bring them up because of their heavy weight. We recovered the wings and tail sections which were also badly burned.  

One pontoon was recovered and in it were binoculars, a green box with a medal of Saint Theresa, a small wallet with 20,000 lire, a large watch stopped at 12 o'clock, a pistol, three bottles of Spanish oil, and some tools. The other pontoon was never recovered.

Hidden along the recovered portion of the fuselage were numerous letters that had been written and placed there by the men who built the seaplane. These notes, more than any other articles recovered, excited the Italian press. One Italian newspaper considered the notes "... the soul of the craft." One such note read:

To de Pinedo, with his followers the Imperial Roman Countryland, he takes the Italian wing to the farthest places of the world. We builders of the Santa Maria, indestructably built for the great voyage, in unending faith.

An Italian-American newspaper told its readers;

... the Santa Maria was carrying within its structure a wish for good luck. The fire which destroyed the plane at Roosevelt Dam did not destroy everything. With the salvation of the remains, a secret came to light.

A postscript to the recovery operation occurred on April 12th, when Wesley Farley, a high school student living in Coffee Canyon, found de Pinedo's log book on the lakeshore. The pilot had been upset that the book had not been found earlier, just after his craft was destroyed. The book contained Mussolini's instructions to Italian Consulates throughout the world and official seals of places visited by de Pinedo. The log described official visits made by the flyer, including a message from his premier dated February 8, 1927, his intended date of departure from Rome, and official seals of numerous Italian Consulates at places where the
aviator had landed. The Arizona Bulletin sent the log book on to de Pinedo in San Francisco. On April 20th, the remains of the plane were brought for display and shipment to the Southern Pacific depot at Globe, Arizona. Hundreds of people viewed the wreckage that day, including an old woman who approached Franchini and asked for a small piece of the wing. When he gave it to her, she wept, saying, “I wanted this little piece of my country with me in my grave.” The seaplane was taken to Albuquerque and later the motors were sent to the Italian Embassy in New York to be transported to Rome. The Albuquerque Italian community believed that the motors were to be donated to a museum in Rome. All in all, the recovery adventure had cost the Albuquerqueans a little time and about a thousand dollars.

De Pinedo’s adventures in the Southwest, and the tragic fire that destroyed the Santa Maria, brought to the aviator and Mussolini’s Italy some of the sympathy and recognition Il Duce sought, especially from the Italian immigrant colonies in the area. Cristoforo Colombo Hall in Albuquerque jealously guarded the remains of the Santa Maria for several years, and the members of the club proudly hung the propeller presented to them by de Pinedo in their trophy room. But by 1941, few people remembered the daring flyer and his seaplane. De Pinedo had been forced to resign his post as chief of staff, and he died in 1933 while attempting to take off on another of his transglobal voyages. Mussolini’s Italy had become anathema, and many sons of the Italian immigrants in the Southwest joined the United States armed forces. The propeller of de Pinedo’s plane was removed and stored in a garage, and like the events of 1927 at Elephant Butte and Roosevelt Lake, it was soon forgotten.

NOTES

1. “Motor del Santa Maria,” Corriere Padano (Milan, Italy), April 20, 1927.
13. Hot Springs is now named Truth or Consequences.
23. Telegram from Still to Franchini, Apache Lodge, April 10, 1927, in possession of author.
24. Photographs in possession of author.
29. "Il Resti del Santa Maria N. I., "La Nazione de Firenze (Florence, Italy), July 26, 1927.
31. Telegram from Franchini to de Pinedo, Albuquerque, April 8, 1927, in possession of author.
33. Telegram from de Pinedo to Franchini, San Francisco, April 9, 1927, in possession of author.
34. Telegram from Still to Franchini, Apache Lodge, April 10, 1927, in possession of the author.
36. "Il Drammatico Ricupero del Santa Maria I," *Corriere Padano* (Milan, Italy), September 27, 1927.
37. Letter from Franchini to de Pinedo, Albuquerque, April 23, 1927, in possession of author.
38. Del Prete's medal was given to him by his mother. *Corriere Padano* (Milan, Italy), September 27, 1927.
39. Letter from Franchini to de Pinedo.
40. Note from fuselage of *Santa Maria* signed by Dino D'Antona and dated October 30, 1926, in possession of the author.
42. "Articles From *Santa Maria* Found," *The Evening Tribune* (Albuquerque), April 12, 1927.
43. *Corriere Padano* (Milan, Italy), September 27, 1927.
44. Letter from General of the Italian Consulate to Franchini, New York, June 4, 1927 (Anno V).