

# Watching the Clock at Panalpina



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BY DANA COWART CRISSON

Four clocks hang prominently on the wall inside the Huntsville, Ala., office of Panalpina USA Domestic Freight Service. The first clock shows Huntsville time; the second, the time in Glasgow, Scotland; the third, Luxembourg; and the last clock is designated “Zulu.”

Although visitors often ask if that particular clock refers to the time in an area of Africa, the clock actually represents an area of vital importance to the business. The world is divided into 24 time zones, with each zone identified by a letter of the alphabet.

Time is of the essence at Panalpina, one of the world’s leading providers of intercontinental airfreight services. With a global network and state-of-the-art information technology systems, the company provides precisely timed, internationally integrated door-to-door shipping services tailored precisely to its clients’ individual needs. “We specialize in just-in-time delivery, and focus on large freight rather than

small parcels,” says James Beck, manager of USA-to-Europe Flight Operations in the Huntsville office.

The company, which is based in Basel, Switzerland, chose the name Panalpina because it means “pan across the alps,” the main route taken in its earlier days. The establishment of the Panalpina holding company in 1954 triggered a phase of international expansion that has made the company one of the world’s leading transport and logistics groups. Today, Panalpina operates 480 offices in 75 countries with over 12,300 employees.

The Huntsville office, a 100,000-square-foot air cargo terminal and adjoining administrative offices, benefits from a convenient location adjacent to the Huntsville International Airport. When the office originally opened in 1990, it offered clients one scheduled flight a week out of Huntsville to Luxembourg. Now, they operate 10 to 12 regularly scheduled flights a week, and can schedule additional flights on a per-request basis. “We ship everything from flowers to automobiles,” says Beck. “The princi-

pal industries we serve are automotive, pharmaceutical, technological [computers] and oil and industrial. Any shape or size of cargo that can be fork lifted can be shipped. We even have local crane operators on call, if needed, to lift oversized cargo.”

A neon saxophone with the words “Dixie Jet” adorns the front of the main building, an illustration of the personal touch that is a vital part of the success of this worldwide company. “Dixie Jet is the nickname given to the Huntsville/Prestwick-Glasgow/Luxembourg route, the primary scheduled flight from the Huntsville location. Back when the flight first started, we said it flew from the ‘Heart of Dixie’ to the ‘Heart of Europe,’ so we named it ‘Dixie Jet,’” he explains. “‘The African Star,’ the nickname for another of Huntsville’s main gateways,



**Panalpina (above unloading in Huntsville) operates 10 to 12 regularly scheduled flights a week, and can schedule additional flights on a per-request basis, shipping everything from flowers to automobiles. A 100,000-square-foot air cargo terminal (inset photo) and adjoining administrative offices, benefit from a convenient location adjacent to the Huntsville International Airport. Photos by Doug Brewster.**

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travels the route from Luxembourg/West Africa/Huntsville.” In August 2004, Panalpina added twice-weekly freighter flights from Hong Kong to Huntsville, the first and only service to the Southeast USA from China.

Panalpina has continually expanded its Dixie Jet services in North America over the years. Instrumental to this expansion is a system called Air Sea Broker, or ASB-Air, that was started by company Chairman Gerhard Fisher in the 1970s. ASB-Air is Panalpina’s in-house airfreight system that provides time-specific and traditional air freight services. ASB-Air flight operations are supported by a sub-structure and ground network connecting all major commercial and industrial centers. Thanks to ASB-Air, Panalpina is able to offer its clients the most advanced Boeing 747 freighters available each and every day of operation.

According to Beck, on any given day cargo is transported into the Huntsville facility from locations all over the country. Forty employees working in rotating shifts help to staff the 24-hour operation. The enormous warehouse is

divided into two groups, with imports on the right and exports on the left. Prior to arrival in Huntsville, each company sends a detailed manifest so once the airplane has landed, the cargo can quickly be unloaded and dispersed.

The cargo is scanned for the identifying bar code, and then it is taken to the proper area of the warehouse where it is arranged in lanes and labeled with the names of the next destination. Before the cargo is

shipped out, it is placed on pallets, covered with a net, wrapped in plastic to keep out the elements and rolled outside the warehouse to be checked at the weighing station. Sophisticated tracking software is used to track incoming and outgoing flights through every step of the journey.

Many industry outsiders were surprised that Panalpina chose Huntsville as the location for one of its major operations, incorrectly assuming that the international company would want to affiliate with a much larger, more well known airport, such as Hartsfield in Atlanta. In reality, Huntsville International Airport was perfectly suited to meet Panalpina’s needs, so that airport was added to the short list of other seemingly unlikely sites in North America that have successfully attracted air-freight services, stealing some of the thunder from the world’s more familiar gateways.

“The downturn of the passenger industry has made the cargo business even more valuable for airports,” says Cindy Maloney, public relations manager at the Huntsville International Airport. “One reason Panalpina executives were attracted to our airport, instead of the larger facility in Atlanta,



James Beck is manager of Panalpina’s USA-to-Europe Flight Operations in Huntsville.

was because Atlanta had such a high volume of passenger service that their freight traffic always had to wait. Panalpina didn't find that to be the case here in Huntsville.

"The length of our runways was another important factor in their decision, since the company needs longer runways to maximize payload. Our east runway is 10,000 feet long, and we recently completed a \$31 million extension to our west runway, which now measures 12,600 feet. Now, their airplanes are able to take off fully

loaded and fully fueled, where they simply wouldn't be able to do that at an airport with a shorter runway. At our airport, an airplane can land, taxi to the warehouse, unload incoming freight, refuel, load outgoing freight, and take off in two hours. Very few airports can offer that kind of service. Why, in some airports, a plane can be circling, just trying to land, for the same two hours."

"The new runway, now one of the longest in the South and second only to Miami, has been very helpful to

our business," agrees Beck. "The runway is just one more advantage of our Huntsville location. This area is uncongested, offered the proper infrastructure for our business, is strategically located for ease in overnight transfer for all our major industrial groups, and it also offers room for future expansion. It is no wonder that Chris Schmid, Panalpina's vice president, says the Huntsville facility is his very favorite location. Huntsville has proven a winner for Panalpina as well as for our customers."

## International air cargo a major focus for Huntsville

If you are unfamiliar with the terms "aerotropolis," and "intermodal," you are not alone. An aerotropolis is defined as an airport area that resembles a small city, with surrounding hotels, shops, distribution centers and industrial and office parks.

Intermodal refers to a facility where clients utilize more than one means of transportation. Rick Tucker, executive director of the Port of Huntsville, which includes the Jetplex Industrial Park, the Sheraton Four Points Hotel, the International Intermodal Center and nearby office parks, used both terms in a recent article in *The*

*Huntsville Times*, where he is quoted as saying its facility is well on the way to reaching aerotropolis status.

Huntsville International Airport ranks at No. 110 in size out of 400 airports in the United States, and its intermodal center is No. 60 in size, an impressive fact for a city the size of Huntsville.

International air cargo is one of the major focus areas for the Huntsville International Airport, as it continues to attract a larger volume of business as a cargo airport than a passenger airport. Port of Huntsville leaders are working to

assemble a transportation system that will support the economic activity in the city, which in turn will help position the city for future growth and development opportunities.

Panalpina Freight Service is a vital part of this operation. "Having Panalpina in Huntsville not only benefits us, but their services provide benefits for the entire area. For example, we lengthened our new runway specifically to accommodate their freight travel, but it also enables us to be more pro-active in our future approach to attracting other businesses. We don't have to say, 'If you

come, we will build it;' we can say, 'We have already built it — it is ready for use now.' That is just one example of how the Chamber of Commerce of Huntsville/Madison County is able to cite Panalpina's international success when they are in the process of recruiting new business to our city," says Maloney.

"Panalpina has been a great partner to work with over the last 14 years, and we are looking forward to many more successful years with them in the future." ■

