

CONSTELLATION

ROD LEWIS, AIR LEGENDS FOUNDATION, AND FIGHTER REBUILDERS
RETURN AN AMERICAN ICON TO THE SKY

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WITH JOE SCHEIL AND RALPH M. PETERSEN

Do you believe in ghosts?

Sometimes, I do. We Irish have a certain affinity with ghoulies, beasties, and things that go bump in the night.

It was an unusually cool June day inside the large hangar that housed the Air Legends Foundation Constellation. The gang that had been working inside the fuselage in preparation for the aircraft's first post-restoration flight had gathered under the number one engine and were in deep discussion.

I took this opportunity to get into the pilot's seat of USAF 48-613 and place my left hand on the yoke and right on the four throttles. This was much the way Lockheed test pilot Joe Towle had done when he and his flight test crew had settled into the cockpit

prior to the Constellation's first test flight back in 1948.

Towle was a consummate professional,

well-regarded by other Lockheed test pilots like Tony LeVier and Milo Burcham. He had participated in a lot of P-38 Lightning test flying, including extreme high-altitude work, as well as being the principal pilot for the XP-58 Chain Lightning, a "growth" variant of the P-38 that pretty much turned out to be a flop.

Joe had become an active participant in the Constellation program and he was well-aware of the importance of the C-121A to the continuation of Constellation development as well as to the very survival of Lockheed itself.

So, as I sat in the left seat, I could almost feel the presence of that Lockheed flight crew as they went through their final checks before starting the Wright R-3350s. I let my mind wander a bit and tried to place myself back to November 1948 when the skies over Burbank were clear of smog and the future was what one would make of it.

Here is something to

think about: When 48-613 rolled out of the factory at Burbank, the United States of America had 7% of the world's population, 42% of the world's income, produced 57% of the world's steel, pumped 62% of the world's oil, and built 80% of the world's automobiles. The USA also owned three-quarters of the world's gold while per-capita income was almost double the incomes in the next most well-off nations. Americans consumed 50% more calories per day than most people in Western Europe and this gave a high standard of health. Not bad for a nation that had fought its way out of the Great Depression and went on to win the greatest war in history.

USAF 48-613 had been pulled clear of the production hangar, awaiting its first flight. Inside that dark hangar, the remaining C-121As were being completed — their shark-like fuselages gleaming silver in the soft light. Once again, I could imagine Howard Hughes, a person so critical to the Constellation's development, walking through that hangar on one of his midnight visits. Being so inquisitive, Hughes may have even prowled through the unfinished fuselage of 48-613. Yet another ghost to add to the mix.

This 75-year-old aircraft was

Successful first taxi test completed, the crew stands on the wing of the Connie. Left to right: Jeff Whitesell, Steve Hinton, Stew Dawson, and Rod Lewis.

being brought back to life by the talented crew from Fighter Rebuilders as well as a host of other suppliers to become the star jewel of the Air Legends Foundation. The restoration of this flying machine was a unique undertaking and perhaps one that we will never see again.

On that early morning at Burbank, with all four engines running, Joe Towle took the active, advanced the throttles, and after a surprisingly short takeoff run, Constellation 48-613 felt the air under its wings for the first time and began its climb to the north and the test area where the crew would put it through its initial paces.

CREATING THE CONSTELLATION

Lockheed made a big gamble when they decided to move forward with the creation of the Constellation and part of that gamble was the attachment to the brilliant but mercurial Howard Hughes. Lockheed engineers had come up with numerous ideas on basically taking what had been learned with the Models 10/12/14/18, increasing the size, and adding four



engines. Outside the scope of this article, the development went through many, many changes and that is when Hughes entered the picture. Owing to his controlling interest in TWA, Hughes carried a lot of weight.

However,

Howard was not easy to work with. Hall Hibbard was head of Lockheed's design department and Kelly Johnson was his assistant. Robert Gross was the company president and all were shaken when Douglas launched its new DC-4 that could easily be turned into the military C-54 variant. Hibbard would later comment, "Our perspective had yet to catch up to our actual size in the marketplace. We were tripping over our own ingrained niche mentality and had failed to seize the opportunity inherent in the creation of a modern airliner in military guise. The introduction of the DC-4 and its conversion to the C-54 roiled out collective ambition, to say the least."

Hughes, of course, had been intently watching all developments. Hibbard had a hard time dealing with Hughes and that is when Willis Hawkins was brought in. Hawkins would be

VC-121A 48-613/N422NA near Chino Airport during its seventh test flight on 4 July. Since this was taken, the aircraft has flown to Aurora, Oregon, and back. At that location, it had a partial interior installed by Aerometal. That company is making the complete interior, which will be installed after AirVenture 2023 in a process that should take several months.