



**WARBIRD
& CLASSIC REPORT**
KEEP 'EM FLYING!
COMPILED BY DOUG FISHER

A MAGNIFICENT ACHIEVEMENT

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY



As Rod Lewis advanced the throttles of his Cessna CJ Citation, I glanced at my watch — 7:32 pm on 20 June 2023. We rapidly accelerated down the Chino runway and, two minutes ahead of us, Rod's Lockheed C-121A Constellation N422NA was climbing out to the west and beginning a gentle left turn, leaving the customary four light trails of smoke from the mighty Wright R-3350 radials.

History was being made.

We were watching the world's only flying Constellation on its first post-restoration flight. A flight that was the result of eight years of extremely

hard work and dedication by Fighter Rebuilders along with a myriad of other companies and concerns, plus the unwavering support and financing from Rod Lewis to recreate an aeronautical masterpiece that rolled out of Lockheed's production hangar over eight decades ago — a time when America was united in fighting a war whose outcome was anything but sure. Brainchild of Howard Hughes and Kelly Johnson, the C-121A was a thing of gleaming silver beauty in a world of Olive Drab camouflage.

"There's Steven," pointed out Rod as Steven Hinton brought the safety chase

P-51D Mustang *Wee Willy II* into tight formation with the Connie. He was keeping an eye on the triple tail classic to make sure everything was working as advertised and constantly moved around the Constellation.

The four R-3350s had been specially rebuilt to zero-time by Mike Nixon's Vintage Radials to create engines that would be free of the problems that plagued early variants. All engines were running just fine as the cockpit crew consisting of captain Stewart Dawson, first officer Steve Hinton ("it's my 44th first flight," said Steve), and flight engineer Jeff Whitesell tested out



A few minutes after takeoff, the Constellation levels out. Aboard the Connie, Jim "JD" Dale was acting as the safety overseer. If JD saw anything that he did not like, then he could call off the flight. John Hinton was also aboard as safety observer — running back and forth in the fuselage to check on the engines and other systems while Stewart Dawson, Steve Hinton, and Jeff Whitesell were in the cockpit. In the back seat of the Mustang, Corey O'Brien, who was intimately involved with the restoration, checked for any abnormalities. "It is an interesting fact," said Joe Scheil who was present for this flight, "that if we add up the aviation experience with those involved in this one photograph then we come up with a figure of 230+ years." (M. O'Leary)