

DOWN IN THE DESERT

THE LOSS OF THE ONLY C-121A
CONSTELLATION TURNED INTO A
CIVILIAN AIRLINER
BY HOWARD CARTER



As seen in this profile art work by Simon Glancey, the Ethiopian Airlines markings carried by C-121A 48-616 were some of the more elaborate and attractive applied to a Constellation.

It's new paint gleaming in the sun, Constellation ET-T-35 (the Ethiopian civil registration) had reached 10,500 feet during its climb-out from Khartoum International Aerodrome in the Republic of Sudan. Operating as "Flight ET 3," the trip had started at Athens, Greece, on 9 July 1957 and was proceeding to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as a final destination. Carrying 14 passengers and six crewmembers, there was plenty of room for the few passengers in the spacious fuselage on the brilliant morning of 10 July.

At Khartoum, the Constellation had been fully serviced and the flight engineer checked fuel and oil levels. He ordered 500 gallons added to the main tanks, making for a total of 1650 gallons of av gas. Oil was topped off to 35 gallons per engine. Both of these were sufficient for the flight to Addis Ababa.

The flight engineer was responsible

for checking the weight of the Constellation and he calculated the takeoff weight would be 81,101 pounds. The max weight authorized by the airline for the flight between Khartoum and Addis Ababa was 91,800 pounds. This was considerably lower than the normal max gross takeoff weight of 107,000 pounds and was because of the limitations on landing weight at Addis Ababa Airport, which was a rather primitive facility. Weather conditions were completely favorable for the flight.

All four R-3350s were running perfectly and the flight had just been cleared to climb to 17,500 feet. As he adjusted his throttles to continue the climb, fire warning lights lit up the flight engineer's panel. He immediately isolated the problem as a fire in zones 2 and 3 of the left main landing gear nacelle. Noting this information, the captain ordered the flight engineer to feather the #2 engine, depressurize the cabin, pull the fire bottles, and to hand the captain his smoke mask.

Number two was shut down and the Curtiss-Electric prop feathered but the flight engineer told the captain he wanted to go back into the cabin to make a visual

examination of the wing and nacelle before activating the fire control system in that area. At that point, a stewardess opened the cockpit door and informed the crew that a passenger had seen smoke coming from the wing area.

Gertrude Whitney and her husband Charles, an engineer, were returning from a trip that had taken him to Jordan to inspect problems on a company project. She would later write, "This luxurious plane, the most comfortable we had ever flown in, had been bought by the Ethiopian government for luxurious travel in the hope of opening up their country to tourists. The hostess was serving cool drinks" and the atmosphere in the cabin was relaxed as the flight engineer came out to look at the wing and the engines.

Carefully examining both wings and the four nacelles, he could see no trace of smoke nor fire and he talked to the passenger who had seen a few brief puffs of smoke come out from under the wing, in line with #2 engine. While chatting to

passengers, the flight engineer then saw a sudden stream of smoke come out from under the wing, followed by the first explosion. He rushed back to the cockpit.

"All of a sudden, the plane circled hard to the right and we found ourselves returning north," recalled Mrs. Whitney. "There was a slight feeling of uneasiness, but no real worry. The hostess came through the plane and said, 'Fasten seat belts. We are returning because one motor is out; but we still have three, so we are all right.' Her voice was grim although she smiled."

The flight engineer had just grasped the back of his seat and, without sitting down, reached over to the panel and

pulled the handle of the fire suppression system. This set off a bank of three bottles located in the #2 nacelle. Before he could sit down and strap back in, there was a second explosion and the fire lights came on as the shrill fire bell began ringing. The captain had already executed a hard right turn while the radio operator began to transmit that there was an emergency and they were returning to Khartoum.

"Suddenly things began to happen — an explosion and a shudder, and our uneasiness grew to real concern," said Gertrude. "We looked out and saw a motor in flames. 'This is it,' we thought, and strangely enough, fright dulled the senses and the next few minutes passed in

a flash, without feeling, thought or pain, only prayer. As our minds began to work again the thought was, 'Let the flames do their work fast.' The idea of death had been accepted. No one spoke. To accept the prospect of a scorching death was not so easy."

In the cockpit, things were moving rapidly. The radio operator was transmitting takeoff time from Khartoum and estimated arrival time at Addis Ababa while the copilot was advising Khartoum Control Tower on VHF of the aircraft's return to Khartoum due to fire warning signals on #2. While transmitting, the radio operator

Photographs of C-121A 48-616 in USAF service are not exactly common. This shot shows the aircraft in MATS markings at an unknown location.



AUTHOR'S NOTE: After reading the excellent article on Rod Lewis' magnificent Constellation in the September Issue, I took note of Joe Schell's sidebar on the short run of C-121A Constellations. I was intrigued by the article stating how these ten aircraft were instrumental in saving what would become one of the world's most revered airliners and how that order provided the necessary funding for Lockheed to keep going. The aircraft that drew my particular interest was USAF 48-616. Why, you might ask? Well, if you have read any of my previous articles in *Air Classics*, then you know I am always attracted to the odd and unusual in aviation. To me, this plane posed a mystery. Why would a C-121A be pulled from active service in 1957, reconfigured, painted in the markings of Ethiopian Airlines, have crew from TWA assigned to

the aircraft, and then given as an apparent gift to the Emperor Haile Selassie? I visited the *Air Classics* office and spent a number of hours going through the photo files. Photos on this aircraft are limited at best — both in military service and during its brief airline operation. Facts behind the transfer are also shrouded in the mists of time. I did find the ICAO accident report but perhaps equally importantly was an obscure article written by passenger Gertrude S. Whitney. Combining the facts and figures from the two pieces gives us a look at the short civilian life of 48-616 and how the TWA crew performed professionally and heroically under dire circumstances. Unfortunately, the crew names remain unknown since they are not mentioned in either document.