

Saving the Last CONVAIR JETLINERS

DOUG SCROGGINS HAS PLANS TO SAVE THESE ICONS OF AMERICAN AVIATION TECHNOLOGY THAT WERE ALSO THE FASTEST NON-SUPERSONIC AIRLINERS

BY RALPH M. PETTERSEN

Parked in a remote corner of the Mojave Air & Space Port boneyard sit two relics from the early days of the jet age. Surrounded by other aeronautical dinosaurs, Convair CV.880 N815AJ (msn 35) and CV.990A

N990AB (msn 2) have been largely forgotten and are in imminent danger of being dismantled and lost forever.

Doug Scroggins, owner of Scroggins Aviation Mockups & Effects, acquired the aircraft in 2000 and for the past year has been attempting to find homes for the two iconic aircraft.

Back in the mid-1950s Convair, along with Douglas and Lockheed, was one of the “Big-Three” producers of commercial airliners. While Boeing was a big-time producer of military aircraft, it was essentially a non-player in the commercial airliner arena, having only produced 56 B.377 Stratocruisers in the post-war era (see article elsewhere in this issue). With Lockheed opting to proceed with the propjet Electra, Convair joined Boeing and Douglas in pursuing the manufacture of a pure jet airliner. Realizing that there probably wasn’t a market for three large long-range jetliners with six-across seating, Convair opted to produce a smaller medium-range airliner that would capitalize on its high-speed performance.

In the long run, the decision proved to be disastrous for Convair, which lost \$425M on the Convair 880/990 program. The CV.990 was the last commercial airliner produced by Convair and the company’s San Diego production plant was shuttered in 1996 after completion of a DC-10 fuselage contract for McDonnell-Douglas.

THE CONVAIR 880

Convair’s original 1955 design had six-across seating but,

as previously stated, the company opted to proceed with a smaller, high performance, medium-range aircraft. While faster than both the Boeing 707 and DC-8, it only had five-across seating, thus resulting in significantly higher per-seat operating costs. Convair pitched the Model 22 Skylark 600 to Howard Hughes in March 1956 as an 80-passenger, 600-mph, medium-range aircraft powered by four General Electric CJ-805 engines. While Hughes originally insisted on the first 40 aircraft going to TWA, he later relented with ten being earmarked for Delta Airlines. TWA and Delta Airlines signed preliminary agreements in June 1956, with the formal contracts being signed in September 1956.

The TWA and Delta contracts stipulated a unit cost of \$3.1M, which was reportedly less than the cost of material to build each aircraft. By this time the aircraft’s name had been changed to “880,” supposedly because it had a top speed of 880-feet-per-second. The final product was a very good-looking 88-seat airliner with an incredibly robust airframe and many advanced features. Convair decided not to build a pro-

TOTYPE, instead using the first four production aircraft for certification testing. The first flight occurred on 27 January 1959 and the certification program proceeded reasonably well with the aircraft’s airworthiness certificate awarded on 1 May 1960.

Delta Airlines had the honor of introducing the type into airline service on 15 May 1960 and went on to operate 17 of them. Eight-months later on 15 December 1961, Northeast Airlines introduced the CV.880 on its Boston-Philadelphia-Miami route using aircraft leased from Convair’s parent company — General Dynamics.

Although TWA was the largest CV.880 operator with 27 aircraft, they were not able to begin flights until 12 January 1961, courtesy of Howard Hughes. Hughes had a controlling interest in TWA and his aerospace company, Hughes Aircraft, would normally purchase aircraft for TWA and then lease them to the airline. Only this time, he hadn’t secured funding for the buy and TWA wasn’t able to take delivery of its aircraft, which was scheduled to start in November 1959. With completed aircraft rolling off the production line and



Sleek and elegant — the Convair 880 is still one of the fastest of all the non-supersonic airliners. Howard Hughes loved speed and the CV.880 exemplified his passion. (Alpha Archive)

Man with a mission — Doug Scroggins with one of the two Convair jetliners that need to be preserved. If you have suggestions on how these American masterpieces can be saved or would like to make a donation, please go to info@ScrogginsAviation.com and use the title “Save The Convair Jets!” (David Wirth)



TWA unable to take delivery, Convair decided to remove partially completed aircraft from the production line and park them outside their San Diego production plant.

When the financing problem was finally resolved, Hughes no longer had a controlling interest in the airline but the damage had already been done to both TWA and Convair. TWA was almost a year late in introducing the jet and Convair was faced with the challenge of completing the unfinished aircraft, which had been stored in the corrosive San Diego climate and were all in various stages of assembly.

The CV.880 was significantly faster than the B.707 and DC-8 and many speed records were broken during its early years in airline service. They were often flown with “the pedal to the metal” and it is unlikely that many of these records will ever be broken in this age of high fuel prices, speed restrictions below 10,000-feet, and economy cruise flight operations.

With the first 40 delivery positions spoken for and the first CV.880 delivered some 18-months behind the Boeing 707, it was difficult to market the aircraft and, in the end, only 65 CV.880s were built. Of that total, 17 were the improved CV.880M model, which included leading edge slats, increased engine thrust, increased fuel capacity, and a lower stall speed. In addition to Delta, Northeast, and TWA, new aircraft were