

AIR MOBILITY *Classics*

Air Mobility Classics is a recurring feature contributed by Lt Col Douglas H. Lloyd, USAF Ret.

Continuing last issues theme, our subject this time is another obscure airlifter that should appeal to our “nautically-inclined” brethren. For you Air Force types who just cast a quick glance at the photo and said to yourselves “what’s so special about an old Convair T-29/C-131,” take a closer look. That nose profile doesn’t look quite right, and do those engine nacelle contours seem off? Your confusion is certainly understandable, especially when you consider that both aircraft were built to fulfill the same role, and that their builders made similar design choices that resulted in virtually identical-looking aircraft.

In the immediate post-WWII era, aircraft manufacturers anticipated a need for a new generation of passenger aircraft to replace the military surplus aircraft that equipped most airlines. Two companies, Convair and Martin, determined independently that a twin-engine airliner seating around 40 passengers would meet the needs of domestic carriers most efficiently. Martin was first in the air with their Model 2-0-2, followed just months later by the Convair 240. Unfortunately for Martin, their design had a serious structural weakness in the wing that resulted in a fatal crash shortly after its introduction into service. Martin acted to strengthen the wings and replace the engines, creating the 2-0-2A, but the delays incurred caused nearly all the airlines to cancel their orders. Only 43 2-0-2s and 2-0-2As were delivered to customers. Meanwhile, Convair had steadily upgraded the 240 to the 340 series, which was establishing a reputation for reliability and efficiency. Martin tried to catch up by introducing the Model 4-0-4 in the early 1950s. Besides structural improvements, it had pressurization (the 2-0-2 was unpressurized). But Martin had missed the boat...the airline industry had clearly shown its preference for the Convair design. Some 4-0-4 orders were forthcoming (Eastern Airlines ordered 60 and TWA 40), but ultimately only 103 were produced.

The last two 4-0-4s off the production line (c/n 14290 and c/n 14291) were two ordered by the United States Coast Guard as logistics support aircraft. Delivered in October 1952, they received the naval-style designation RM-1 (R indicating a transport, M being the manufacturers code for the Martin Company, 1 indicating the 1st model). Before delivery the decision was made to configure them as VIP aircraft, and they were redesignated RM-1Z (the Z suf-

fix indicated an executive configuration in the Navy system). Given USCG serials 1282 and 1283, both were stationed at Washington National Airport where they served as executive transports for the USCG Commandant, the Secretary of Treasury, and later, the Secretary of Transportation. Fitted with rear air stairs and luxurious accommodations for a mere 12 people, the aircraft were popular with crew and passengers alike. In September 1962 they were redesignated VC-3A under the new joint service designation system. Despite their plush appointments and comfortable ride, the relatively sedate cruise speeds provided by the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 reciprocating engines had the Coast Guard looking for more modern replacement aircraft by 1969. USCG 1282 was retired and transferred to the US Navy on 23 May 1969 and received USN Bureau No. 158202. USCG 1283 followed on 8 July 1969, becoming Bureau No. 158203. Both received USN markings and were stationed at Naval Air Station Anacostia, Washington DC. Apparently the Navy had no use for the grand old ladies either, as Bu.No. 158203 was withdrawn from use just three months later and sent to the Military Aircraft Storage and Disposition Center (MASDC). Bu.No. 158202 was briefly returned to the Coast Guard in November 1969, but was back in Navy hands on 31 December 1969 until transferred to MASDC on 1 January 1971. This was not quite the end of the line for the VC-3As, however.

Both the aircraft left the boneyard in 1972 when they were transferred to an educational institution called School of The Ozarks, most probably for use as instructional airframes for an aviation program. Bu.No. 158202 received civil registration N13415 and was used by the school until October 1974, when it was placed in storage. Acquired by Lisle Aircraft Inc., N13415 was made airworthy and probably used for charter operations until it crashed off Punta Fija, Venezuela on 18 November 1978. Bu.No. 158203, which became N13416, was also placed in storage by the school in 1974. On 30 October 1978 it was registered to Royal Regency Inc. That registration was cancelled on 9 July 1981.

Today, a pair of sleek Grumman C-37As (Gulfstream Vs) provide transport for the USCG Commandant and the Secretary of Homeland Defense. Although they do it faster, its doubtful they do it with quite the style that the venerable old Martins did. ■

MARTIN RM/VC-3

