

History of the "BATAAN," Lockheed C-121A Constellation, 48-613, c/n 2605

Lockheed C-121A Constellation, 48-613, c/n 2605, was one of 10 Model L-749A Constellations ordered by the U.S. Air Force in 1948, and it was initially fitted with 44 seats and delivered to the MATS at Westover AFB, Mass., in early 1949. It was assigned to fly passenger missions to Europe via the North Atlantic route. It was selected in 1950 to be converted to VIP configuration at the Middletown AMA, Pennsylvania. On July 30, 1950, it went to Lockheed Aircraft Corp. at Burbank, Calif., and became the first C-121 to be fitted with AVQ-10 Weather Avoidance Radar. It was also fitted with modified TR3350-75 engines with short "jet stacks" exhausts. From Burbank it was sent to Tokyo, Japan as a VC-121A. Once there, it served as the personal transport of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (S.C.A.P.). Gen. MacArthur named it "BATAAN," to honor the American prisoners of war in the Philippines who endured the notorious death march. As his flying command post, BATAAN provided the general with an aerial view of Korean operations, including the Inchon landings. The BATAAN was used to fly Gen. MacArthur to Wake Island in 1950 for his only meeting with President Harry S. Truman. While there, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal. Later, on April 16, 1951, he would fly to Andrews AFB, Md., on the BATAAN, and be relieved of his command by President Truman.

The aircraft continued in VIP service for Gen. Mathew B. Ridgeway, the U.S. commander in Korea. Afterwards, it was assigned to HQ Pacific Air Command at Hickham AFB, Hawaii. During its service in the Pacific, it transported such luminaries as Generals Mark W. Clark, Curtiss E. LeMay, John E. Hull, Maxwell D. Taylor, Lyman L. Lemnitzer, I. D. White, James F. Collins, and Edwin A. Walker, and South Korean President Syngman Rhee. Newly elected President Dwight D. Eisenhower also used the BATAAN for a few days during his inspection tour of Korea, as did Vice President Richard M. Nixon. The BATAAN flew a mercy mission in the Philippines before being declared surplus near the end of 1965. The modified engines and exhaust stacks were removed and it was now listed as a C-121A again. It arrived at the MACDC, Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., on January 18, 1966. It remained in storage until it was selected for use by the Goddard Space Flight Center in June 1966. It was used in support of the Apollo Moon Program until budget cuts forced Goddard to terminate the BATAAN on January 1, 1970. To keep from sending it back to MASDC, a search of museums that might be interested in the aircraft began. The Philippine government was interested, but did not want to pay for the cost of flying it to Manila. After reviewing several proposals, the U.S. Army Aviation Museum at Ft. Rucker, Alabama was selected to take the BATAAN for display. It was flown from Friendship Airport to Guthrie Field, Alabama on March 9, 1970, by two ex-Air Force Colonels, Melvin "Mel" Schmidt and William "Bill Morgan", along with Flight Engineer Carol "Bud" Weddington. Squeezing the BATAAN into a 2,200 ft. landing strip was accomplished without incident, and the NASA representative, Francis Glynn made the official presentation of the aircraft to Maj. Gen. Delk M. Oden, Ft. Rucker's Commandant of the Army Aviation School.

It would seem to be a happy ending for the BATAAN, but in 1992 a new curator for the museum decided that it did not fit into his overall plans, and prepared to scrap it. Planes of Fame owner Ed Maloney in Chino, Calif., was notified of the BATAAN's plight, and contacted the Ft. Rucker Aviation Museum's curator to inquire if it would be available for the Planes of Fame Museum. He obtained an affirmative answer, and began to arrange for preparing the BATAAN for flight, and a trip to California. Planes of Fame mechanics arrived at Ft. Rucker in October 1992, and began work on the aircraft, expecting to spend about five

weeks to get it to ferry status. This was a bit optimistic, and it actually ended up taking nine months. Besides the Planes of Fame mechanics, dozens of local volunteers, and members of the U.S. Army Warrant Officer Class 93-06 performed much of the necessary work. One engine change, along with overhaul of the propellers, replacement of lines and hoses, and overhaul of virtually every internal system finally had the BATAAN ready for a ferry flight on June 23, 1993. After sitting on display for 23 years, there was still one last hurdle to overcome. A number of trees had grown along the route from the museum to the runway, and had to be topped to allow the aircraft to taxi pass. Once on the runway, a detailed check of all systems showed it was ready to fly. As a precaution, the fencing at the far end of the runway had been removed to provide every possible margin of safety for the takeoff. Once the throttles were advanced, the BATAAN roared down the runway and smoothly lifted off to the cheers of a large contingent of Ft. Rucker personnel. After leaving Ft. Rucker, the Constellation was flown to Dothan, Alabama, where Pemco Aeroplex, Inc. stripped off the old NASA paint, and returned the original markings and colors of an earlier era. In May 1994, it was flown to Addison, Tex., where Foster-Edwards Aircraft Company reproduced the original VIP interior. None of the original equipment could be found, so the entire interior, lavatories, stainless steel galley, seats, chairs, tables, and floor tiles, had to be reproduced from old photos and drawings.

The last leg of the journey to Chino, Calif., occurred on December 6, 1994. In 1995, the museum staff decided to move the BATAAN to their auxiliary facility at the Grand Canyon/Valle Airport, Ariz. Plans to fly the aircraft in the air show circuit have been shelved for the immediate future. So for now, the BATAAN has found a good home and honorable retirement in the dry desert air.

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Article written by Robert "Bob" Burns, Ret. NASA Test Coordinator/Simulations Director.