

A SURVEY OF LOCKHEED ORION HISTORY

by

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The Lockheed Orion, last in a series of remarkable aircraft developed from the Vega design, ranks as one of America's most superior aircraft. As such it justly deserves the attention of the American aircraft historian. The first Orion was built in 1931 and the last in 1934; there were a total of thirty-six produced. In this brief sketch I plan to discuss one particular Orion in detail as an example of the type of information that I feel should be compiled for each of these aircraft. As a stimulus and an aid to others who may be able to throw light on some of the more obscure Orions, a table of model designations, and a list of the entire production, are given below. Supplemental information that readers may have available is sincerely solicited via the letters to the editor column.

One of the most famous Orions, and also one of the most long lived, was the Detroit News ship, NC-799W. It was Lockheed serial number 208, manufactured in 1934 under CAA Memo 2-488 dated 11 September 1934, as was designated Orion 9-D2. The engine was a Wasp SLD1 of 550 hp. The aircraft was specially built by Lockheed to meet the requirements of the Detroit News, a pioneer in the use of aircraft to gather news. The ship had facilities for news broadcasting over station WWJ, owned by the Detroit News, as well as for aerial photography and reporting. One camera was carried under the left wing in a pod and was controlled by the pilot. The camera was aimed by pointing the nose of the ship at the object to be photographed, and a gunsight was provided to facilitate this. The aircraft was a five place ship having accommodations for three passengers seats and a desk for reporter or radio operator at the compact broadcasting station, as well as the pilot. Aptly named the "Early Bird", the ship was licensed by the Federal Communications Commission for voice and code operations. The plane's pilot was Mr. James V. Piersol who also helped in its design. It was felt that the wood with linen covering construction of the Orion was preferable to metal as it minimized camera vibration and background noises detrimental to broadcasting. The top speed of the "Early Bird" was slightly under 200 m.p.h. The Detroit News traded in their Vega 5-C (NC-32M, serial number 102) to the Lockheed Corporation in 1934 to buy the new Orion. It was in service from 1934 to 1938, though was not sold until 1941. The Detroit News reports that the purchaser was Mr. A. Knapp, but as he undoubtedly owned it less than a year, his name does not appear in the CAA registry.

The next encounter we have with number 208 is after it was acquired by the U.S. Army Air Forces in 1942. It was designated UC-85 and given the Air Force serial number 42-62601. The sight of this hardy thoroughbred in full military trim must have been an intriguing sight to the knowledgeable few who observed it in Southern California during World War II. It was nicknamed "Scuttle Butt" and was based at March Field, California, though it was often seen on the apron in front of Paul Mantz's hangar at Lockheed Air Terminal. Presumably Col. Mantz, certainly no stranger to Orions, had use of this ship.

In 1946 the one and only UC-85 was sold to Mr. F. H. Stewart of Los Angeles. It was relicensed as a civilian aircraft, reverting again to its old NC-799W. Though reports of the final end of this veteran are contradictory it seems that the aircraft was at one time belly landed. Then in approximately 1949 while landing at Central Airport, Los Angeles, the brakes failed and the ship struck a light pole breaking a wing. The owner could not afford to repair the ship and it was therefore burned.

On the photo page will be found illustrations of number 208 in the trim of the Detroit News and the U.S. Army Air Forces. The photo of the "Early Bird" is by courtesy of Gordon S. Williams, that of the UC-85 by the Lockheed A/c Corp.

Table 1. Lockheed Model 9 Orion Model Designations

<u>ATC</u>	<u>MODEL</u>	<u>ENGINE</u>	<u>REMARKS</u>
421 6May31	Orion 9	R& W Wasp SC (450)	7PCIM
462 25Feb32	Orion 9-B	Wright Cyclone R-1820-E (575)	5PCIM
508 22May33	Orion 9-E	R&W Wasp SC-1 (450)	1-6PCIM
512 19Jul33	Orion 9-F	Wright Cyclone R-1820-F2 (645)	5PCIM
514 31Aug33	Orion 9-D	R&W Wasp SLD1 (550)	1-5PCIM
557 8Oct34	Orion 9-F1	Wright Cyclone SR-1820-F2 (650)	5PCIM
2-367 17Jan31	Orion 9	R&W Wasp (450)	3-5PCIM, c/n 174, -988Y
2-397 16Jan32	Orion 9-A Special	R&W Wasp SC (450)	5PCIM, c/n 187, NC-12229
2-416 11Jul32	Orion 9-C Special	Wright Cyclone SR-1820-F2 (650)	5PCIM, c/n 180, NR-12222
2-464 1Dec33	Orion 9-D1	R&W Wasp SLD1 (550)	5-6-7PCIM, c/n 204, NR-232Y
2-488 11Sep34	Orion 9-D2	R&W Wasp SLD1 (550)	5PCIM, c/n 208, NC-799W (UC-85).

Table 2. A Summary of the Orion Production

<u>Factory Serial</u>	<u>REGISTRATION(S)</u>	<u>MODEL</u>	<u>OWNERS AND REMARKS</u>
168	NC-960Y	9	Mfg 3-31, Bowen Air Lines, Ft. Worth, Texas
169	NC-964Y	9	Mfg 4-31, C.G. Peterson, Bowen Air Lines
172	NC-975Y/X-BAHQ	9-D	Mfg -31, N.Y. & Western Air Express Corp (#104), San Luis Mining Co., Mexico.
173	NC-984Y	9-D	Mfg -31, N.Y. & Western Air Express Corp (#105), Phillips Petroleum Co., Oklahoma.
174	NC-988Y	9	Mfg -31, Asa G. Chandler Jr., Atlanta, Ga, H.C. Lippiatt, Los Angeles, Currier's Tablets, Hollywood, Mexican Aviation Co.

Table 2 Continued:

175	NC-991Y	9	Mfg -31, Asa G. Chandler, Continental Airways.
177	NC-12220	9	Mfg -31, Continental Airways Inc, Chicago.
178	NC-12221	9	Mfg -31, Ludington Lines. Crashed 5 Nov 31 $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from Central Airport, Camden, N.J.
180	NR-12222	9-C	Mfg -31, Shell Oil (the Shell "Lightning" flown by J. Doolittle), Paul Mantz (Used in Bendix, flights to Mexico etc, movie work), Barnsdall Oil Co., Henry Rollers, Calif. At present dismantled in hangar at Del Mar, California.
181	NC-12223	9	Mfg 9-31, Varney Speed Lanes, San Francisco Bay Airdrome, Alameda, Calif. Crashed at Hayward, Calif., 25 March 1933, destroyed.
182	NC-12224	9	Mfg 9-31, Varney Speed Lanes (Note that Varney ships later went to Lineas Aereas Occidentales, Mexico, but registrations are unknown).
183	NC-12225/F-AQAS	9	Mfg 9-31, Varney, C.A. Collins, Palm Springs, Calif.
184	NC-12226	9	Mfg 10-31, Varney Speed Lanes.
185	NC-12227/F-AQAV	9	Mfg 10-31, Varney, Aero Transport Corp., Grand Central Airport, Glendale, Calif.
186	NC-12228	9	Mfg 10-31, Varney Speed Lanes.
187	X-12229	9	Peter R. Beasely and Title Insurance Co (Receivers for Detroit Aircraft Corp.), Hal Roach. Named the "Spirit of Fun", crashed Victoria Falls airport, Rhodesia, Africa, 17 Nov 1932 killing J.B. Dickson pilot. Was on round the world flight carrying Arthur Loew and Joseph Rothal.
189	12231/CH-167/HB-LAH	9-B	Mfg -31, Swissair, Zurich. Sold Sept 1935.
190	12232/CH-168/HB-LAJ	9-B	Mfg -31, Swissair, Zurich. Sold Sept 1935.
192	12277	9	Mfg -33, Transcontinental & Western Airlines Kansas City, Missouri.
193	NC-12278	9-E Spec	Mfg 5-33, T.W.A., Robert Blair, Mines Field, California, for charter business.
195	NR-12283	9-E Spec	Mfg 5-33, T.W.A. (#258), Charles Babb, Wiley Post and Will Rogers. Crashed 15 Aug 1935 at Walakpi, Alaska, killing Post & Rogers.
196	NC-12284	9-F	Mfg -33, Dr. J.R. Brinkley, G.A. MacDonald, Milford, Kansas, and Del Rio, Texas, to Lockheed Company.
197	NC-12285	9-D	Mfg 7-33, American Airlines, Chicago, Ill.
198	NC-12286	9-D	Mfg 7-33, American Airlines. Destroyed in crash, Sunbright, Tenn, 22 Dec 1934.
199	NC-12287	9-D	Mfg 8-33, American Airlines
200	NC-229Y	9-D	Mfg -33, American Airlines
201	NC-230Y	9-D	Mfg -33, American Airlines; Blue Bird Air Service, Chicago; Wyoming Air Service, Caspar, Wyoming; Continental Airlines; Star Airlines, Fairbanks, Alaska; Alaska Airlines, Anchorage (1946).