



THE MILITARY LUSCOMBE AIRPLANES UC-90R & UC-90

by James B. Zazas

Two Luscombe Airplane Corporation Model 8 airplanes became bona-fide United States Army Air Forces aircraft during World War II. These Luscombe airplanes, produced at the company's West Trenton, New Jersey factory, were designated the UC-90A and UC-90 by the United States Army Air Force.

The UC-90A was a prewar-built, Lycoming 0-145 powered (65 hp) 1940 Luscombe 8B-2, manufacturer's serial number 1653. The airplane possessed Civil Aeronautics Authority registration NC2891 before it was sold to new owners in Panama and was re-registered RX-24.

On August 14, 1942, the airplane was procured from civilian owners and was held in the Panama Air Depot on November 7, 1942. During this interval, the airplane was designated the UC-90A and was given USAAF serial number 42-79549.

On December 4, 1942, the aircraft crashed eight miles east of AP0838, Canal Zone, during an emergency forced landing. The pilot was Lt. Col. Sylvan D. Hand. No injuries were reported.

The airplane was repaired and re-

turned to service. From March 31, 1945, this airplane's final assignment was with the 350th Base Headquarters and Air Base Squadron at Rio Hato, Republic of Panama. On October 8, 1945, the UC-90A, having survived the war with a total of 70.5 hours, was dropped from the USAAF inventory by transfer to the Foreign Liquidation Commission for disposal.

The airplane was then sold to civilian owners, starting with a Jose Maria Arias, in Panama and was registered as RX-44E on July 10, 1946. In 1952, when all Panamanian aircraft registrations were changed from an "RX" prefix to a "HP" prefix, this airplane's registration was changed to HP-44E, at which time it was owned by a Walter Sanchez. In February 1954, the airplane went to Costa Rica and was registered as TI-254 to the Sociedad Estudiantil Unida.

According to statements by native Costa Rica pilots, the airplane crashed into a hillside in 1962, the wreckage was recovered and, in turn, became a piece of children's playground equipment at a tourist center near San Jose, Costa Rica. A few years later, the airplane was purchased by a local scrap merchant. A popular local legend states the hulk was

cut up and was fabricated into spoons, knives and forks.

Forward, left quarter view of the Luscombe UC-90, 42-79550. This photograph was taken at Albrook Field, Canal Zone, in February 1945 by then 1st Lt. O.C. Griffith, USAAF. At the time, Lt. Griffith was assigned to the 91st Photo Mapping Squadron which had been operating in South America. While waiting for repairs to be made to one of the squadron's F-10 airplanes at the Panama Air Depot, Albrook Field, Lt. Griffith had the opportunity to fly the UC-90 on several occasions between November 1944 and February 1945. (Photo by Col. O.C. Griffith, USAF [Ret.]; Lender, James B. Zazas)

cut up and was fabricated into spoons, knives and forks.

Colorful as this story is, TI-254 did not appear on the January 1957 or June 1958 Costa Rican civil registry and, therefore, must be presumed canceled prior to January 1, 1957.

A second Luscombe airplane utilized by the United States Army Air Force was designated the UC-90. This particular airplane was a prewar-built, Continental Aircraft Engines A-65 powered (65 hp), 1941 Luscombe 8A-2 "Silvaire Master," manufacturer's serial number 1809.

Though this airplane was issued registration number NC39043 with the Civil Aeronautics Authority, it most likely never wore this number. The airplane was exported on Export Certifi-



Rear, left quarter view of the Luscombe UC-90, 42-79550. (Photo by Col. O.C. Griffith, USAF [Ret.]; Lender, James B. Zazas)

cate of Airworthiness E-7476 on September 26, 1941, and was flown from West Trenton, New Jersey, to Panama by Naron H. Lee, on leave from the USAAC, whereupon it was reregistered as RX-25.¹

According to Dan Hagedorn, Air and Space Museum Archives Division, the airplane was "operated by Captain Marcos A. Gelebert, who had the largely honorary title of 'Chief Training Officer of the Panamanian Air Corps' and is frequently attributed (as in *Jane's* for 1941-42) to being operated by 'the Panama Air Corps,' although the registered operator was listed as the Gelebert-owned Transportes Aereos Gelebert S.A."²

The airplane was procured from civilian owners on August 14, 1942, and was held in the Panama Air Depot on September 7, 1942. During the interim the airplane was designated the UC-90 and was given the USAAF serial number 42-79550.

On December 26, 1945, the UC-90, having survived the war with a total of 182.9 hours, was dropped from the USAAF inventory by transfer to the Foreign Liquidation Commission for disposal.

Its final assignment had been with the Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Sixth Air Force at Albrook Field, Canal Zone.

The airplane was sold to Actividades

Aereas S.A. in Panama and was reregistered on July 10, 1946, as RX-54. The airplane was damaged beyond economical repair on October 18, 1947, at an unknown location (probably Paitilla Point Airport, Panama) in a landing accident.

Interestingly, official Panama DGAC records listed the type as a "KC-90"! No "HP" registration existed for this airplane because it was scrapped by 1952, following its accident, when all Panamanian airplane registration prefixes changed from "RX" to "HP."

The UC-90, a Luscombe "Silvaire Master," possessed some features not common to most Luscombe Model 8 series airplanes then in production. Though the airframe was identical in construction, dimensions, weights and performance to Luscombe 8A-2 and 8B-2 airplanes, the UC-90 had the following standard equipment: dual ignition, twin mufflers, parking brake, formed "Vinilyte" windshield (in lieu of the then-standard, three-piece windshield) and other items.³

Furthermore, the UC-90 had a seven-hole instrument panel (three top, four bottom) arrangement with space for two glove compartments or radios. When delivered new, this airplane was equipped with a full set of instruments for blind flying instruction and included a gyro compass and a Sperry artificial horizon. Electrical power was provided by a 12-volt battery supplemented by a wind-driven electric generator.

Additionally, the UC-90 utilized a balanced trim tab system, a feature

used rarely on prewar-built Luscombe 8A and not at all on Luscombe 8B airplanes. However, very few (if any) Luscombe 8C and all Luscombe 8D airplanes incorporated this trim tab system.

Incidentally, this trim system became a standard feature on postwar-built Luscombe series Model 8 airplanes.⁴

Finally, whereas the Luscombe 8D had two 11.5-gallon auxiliary fuel tanks installed, one tank in each wing root—and no fuselage fuel tank—the UC-90 had one such tank or a smaller, 4.5-gallon Timm tank installed adjacent to the left wing root. Additionally, the UC-90 possessed the standard, 14-gallon fuselage fuel tank common to the Luscombe 8A and 8B series.

Both the UC-90A and UC-90 possessed military markings. Yet, due to the lack of UC-90A photographic or documented evidence, very little is known regarding the style and placement of markings on this particular airplane.

The UC-90, on the other hand, possessed a 20-inch white and blue national insignia on each side of the bare metal fuselage. Slightly larger national insignia were employed on the silver-doped upper left wing and lower right wing surfaces.

Black, four-inch single-stroke, gothic vertical lettered serial numbers were painted on the airplane's vertical stabilizer and rudder assembly. No hyphen separated the first digit from all the digits to the right of it.

The Technical Data Block was paint-

ed on the left side just forward of the cabin door post bulkhead. Other stenciled military markings were located immediately forward and aft of the cabin bulkheads.

Uniquely, the UC-90 carried the nickname 'Junior.' This sobriquet was applied on the left engine cowl door just below the cowl hinge.

Contrary to popular belief, the UC-90A and UC-90 were never truly "evaluated" by the USAAF, then pressed into service. Instead, considering the paranoia that gripped this part of the world at this time, and the fact all civilian air operations were suspended by the Commander, Panama Canal Department, in early 1942, the UC-90A and UC-90 were part of a small group of privately owned airplanes in Panama that were "impressed" into military service prior to the start of World War II. The owners of these airplanes were offered compensation for their airplanes shortly after the original ground-ing order.

These airplanes, an unusual collection of Luscombe, Funk, Taylorcraft, Stinson, Cessna, Piper and Hamilton aircraft, were employed as "hack" airplanes and fulfilled a necessary liaison aircraft requirement for the area. Thus, these airplanes were used as courier or communications airplanes between the widely spaced auxiliary airfields throughout the Isthmus, including Albrook Field and Howard Field. Additionally, many of these same airplanes were used to maintain basic pilot pro-

ficiency.

Sadly, neither the UC-90A nor the UC-90 survive today. Likewise, any Federal Aviation Administration records of these two airplanes have been lost or destroyed. Only a very few photographs, pilots' logbook entries and the official USAAF aircraft history cards attest to the fact these airplanes existed. □

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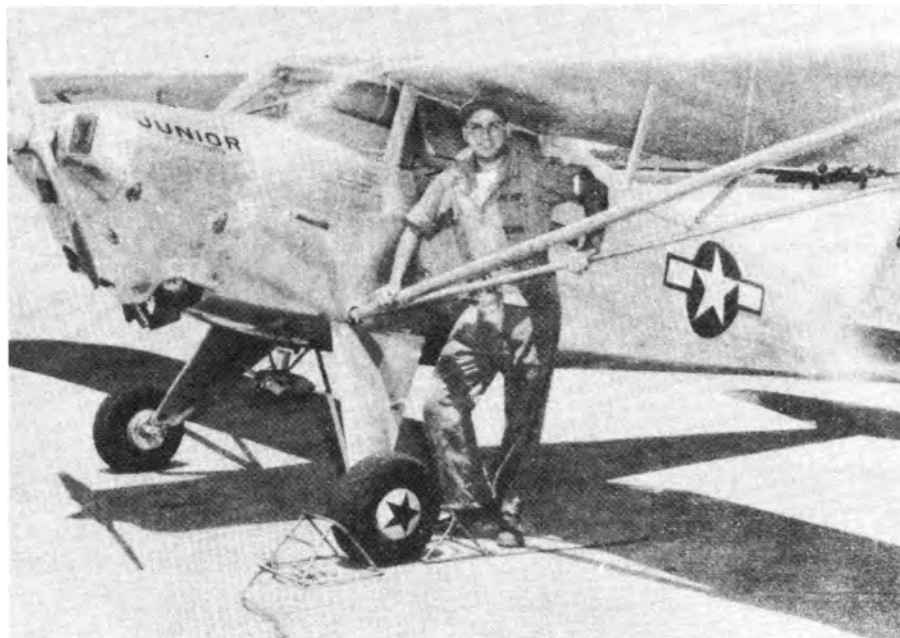
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NOTES

1. Naron H. Lee's flight itinerary from West Trenton, New Jersey, to Panama City was via Brownsville, Texas; thence, Tampico, Vera Cruz, Minatitlan, Tapachula, Guatemala City, San Salvador, Managua, San Jose and David.
2. Interestingly, an *Aero Digest* (November 1941) story, most likely written from a Luscombe Airplane Corporation press release, states the airplane was "to be used for the flight training of Panama police and government officials."
3. The *Silhouette* Master designation was applied only to the certain prewar Continental A-65 powered, Luscombe 8A-2 airplanes. No doubt this "new" designation was a veiled attempt by the company to stimulate model 8A sales.
4. Luscombe Airplane Corporation model 8 series designations were determined by the type of engine installed. The Luscombe 8A was powered by a

Copy of photograph from December 1945 issue of *Caribbean Breeze* showing an unknown airman standing beside the Luscombe UC-90, 42-79550. Noteworthy are the engine cowl grills, an item not shown in the previous photographs.

(Photo courtesy of Robert Taylor; Lender, James B. Zazas)



Continental A-65, the Luscombe 8B was powered by a Lycoming O-145 (65 hp), the Luscombe 8C was powered by a fuel-injector Continental A-75 and the Luscombe 8D—built primarily to satisfy a CPTP trainer requirement—was powered by the fuel injector Continental A-75. Postwar models included the Luscombe 8E, powered by a Continental C-85, and the Luscombe 8F, powered by a Continental C-90.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Zazas was born in Tampa, Florida, in 1955, yet grew up in aviation-rich Indianapolis, Indiana. The model airplanes of his youth soon gave way to Cessnas, Pipers and Stear-mans and four years at DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana, where he graduated in 1977 with a BA degree in Political Science. Con-currently, Jim was commissioned through an AFOTC program at Indiana University and started Undergraduate Pilot Training at Columbus AFB, Mississippi, in February 1978.

Twin-engine jet trainers quickly led to four-engine turboprops, most notably C-130E/H transports. A five-year tour followed at Pope AFB, North Carolina, where he flew Lockheed's rugged and reliable "Herky Bird." Though exciting, even as an Aircraft Commander in Operation Urgent Fury (the Grenada Invasion), Jim departed company with the USAF and joined Piedmont Airlines as a pilot in 1984.

Today, Jim flies a Boeing 767-200ER for USAir and resides in Carthage, North Carolina, with his wife, Karen, and their two children. Though flying "war-birds," restoring antique airplanes and writing for aviation publications are included in his hobbies, Jim enjoys flying his restored 1946 Luscombe 8A most of all.

Currently, Jim is writing an in-depth, definitive history of Luscombe—the men, the airplanes and the companies. Additionally, he is restoring a recent acquisition, the one-off Luscombe "Gull-Wing" or, as it is better known, the Weatherly-Campbell "Colt."

This article is his first contribution to the *Journal*.

