

Bonanza + Pacific + West Coast = Air West = Hughes Airwest

Airlines: Evolution from Local Service to Global

by Joe Weber

Over the years many small local service or regional carriers, (local service carriers have evolved into regionals) have come and gone, hardly noticed. And their contributions to our great air transportation system have not received the proper recognition that they deserve.

Our giant, transcontinental and global carriers of today would not, in most cases, exist if it were not for those unsung “feeders” who were responsible for filling the seats of the majors (“Big Boys”) at the country’s large International airports.

Just how important to the major carriers were those, commuters, feeders, local service or regionals or whatever else you want to call them, who have come and gone and that a lot of us can’t even remember?

Well, they sure must have left some sort of indelible impression on the “Big Boys,” since they all now have their own “Feeders,” under the guise of “Express” and other feeder name connotations such as American Eagle, Continental Express, Delta Connection, Northwest Airlink, and United Express, just to name a few.

These local service carriers of yesteryear flew a variety of aircraft. The carriers in our local service equation for this article, mainly flew DC-3s, Martin 202/404s, F-27 *Friendships*, DC-9s and 727s.

When Bonanza, Pacific, and West Coast merged in 1968, they formed Air West.

Then later became Hughes Air West and then Republic. Now they are all part of the Northwest Airlines family.

On February 23, 1968, the CAB approved the merger of Bonanza Air Lines, Inc. and West Coast Airlines, Inc. into

Pacific Air Lines, Inc, which in turn changed its name to Air West, Inc. The routes and schedules were combined July 1, 1963.

BONANZA AIRLINES—Bonanza began operations as a non-scheduled, charter carrier and flight school with a single engine Cessna, flying out of Las Vegas in 1945. It commenced intrastate service in Nevada, in August 1946.

Certified on June 15, 1949, the local service carrier launched scheduled DC-3 operations on a Reno-Phoenix route.

The following year, 1950, Bonanza’s network was pushed outward to Las Vegas. Service was maintained throughout the decade with frequencies extended to Torrance and Apple Valley. Several more DC-3s were acquired in 1956.

In 1958, the Bonanza fleet comprised ten DC-3s. In March of 1959, two brand-new Fairchild F-27A *Friendships* (under license of Fokker) were delivered in Jan/Feb and began service. Bonanza called them “Silver Darts.” No doubt derived from their engines being Rolls-Royce *Darts*. A third F-27A arrived in August 1959 as did a fourth in September and a fifth in October, 1959.

With the retirement of the carrier’s last DC-3, Bonanza, on Nov. 1, 1960, became the first “All Turbine-Powered” airline in the Western Hemisphere, with its Jet-Prop Fairchild F-27s.

The CAB approved Bonanza in 1961, to take over the lucrative non-stop LAX-LAS route previously flown by Western Airlines, United Air Lines and TWA. Another F-27A was delivered to BAL in June of 1961. The carrier’s eighth *Friendship* came in May 1962.

In 1964, the Bonanza fleet included 13 aircraft. Orders were also



Bonanza Douglas DC-3, N493 as it appeared in the late 50s. (Photo from the Harry Gann collection)



Top: Bonanza Air Lines Douglas DC-3, N492, c/n 1553, on landing approach into Los Angeles on December 27, 1959. (Photo from the Hufford collection)

Above : Fairchild F-27A, N145L, Silver Dart, over Hoover Dam, Nevada in the early 60s. (Bonanza Air Lines photo from the collection of Walt Bohl)

Above right: DC-9-14, N945L, msn 45728, f/n 14 of Bonanza, circa 1969. (Douglas photo from the collection of Walt Bohl)

placed for two additional F-27As and three DC-9-11s.

The CAB, in February 1964, granted Bonanza authority to initiate SNA-LAS service. An application was also made for non-stop LAS-Grand Canyon flights. By 1965, the fleet consisted of 14 F-27As. The first BAL DC-9-11 was delivered late in the year.

Although Bonanza Airlines had the fewest number of aircraft of any local service carriers, it owned the most turboprops.

In March and April respectively, the carrier had two turbulence incidents, encountered by their F-27As over Prescott, AZ, and Julian, CA.

Nonstop SNA-LAS service was inaugurated in April 1965. With an average of 150.3 miles, Bonanza's stages were the longest in its classification.

In December 1965, BAL moved to a new \$3 million Admin/Maint. facility in Phoenix.

A second DC-9-11 was delivered in January 1966. Bonanza

was the first local service airline to launch DC-9 service—flying the LAX-LAS route on March 1, 1966. Three more DC-9s joined the fleet at year's end.

Enplanements for the year totaled 859,275. Revenues totaled \$18,011,800.

In 1967, the fleet included 17 aircraft: Five DC-9-11s (nicknamed "Fun Jets") and 12 F-27As.

Late in 1967, Bonanza agreed to a three-way merger with Pacific Airlines and West Coast Airlines. The three carriers filed a joint application with the CAB. On April 17, Bonanza, along with Pacific and West Coast Airlines, with CAB approval, merged to form Air West.

PACIFIC AIR LINES—Pacific Air Lines originally started out being called Southwest Airways. It was formed in SFO in 1946. Southwest operated its first flight in 1949.

In April of 1953, it began adding Martin 2-0-2s to its fleet of DC-3s. They were used on the carrier's SFO-San Jose-Monterey/Carmel Paso Robles-Santa Barbara-LAX route. Service was later expanded north to Medford, Oregon, with a nonstop service award in 1958, the same year that Southwest Airways changed its name to Pacific Air Lines.

In 1958, PAL began replacing its Martin 2-0-2s with 4-0-4s. The last scheduled Martin 4-0-4 passenger service was in April 1967.

Pacific's Martin 4-0-4s had a maximum speed of 312 mph, and



Top: Douglas DC-3s of Pacific Air Lines at Oakland, California, circa 1959. (Photo from the Hufford collection)

Above: Martin 4-0-4, N93205, at San Francisco in the late 1950s. (Photo from the Hufford collection)

Above right: West Coast C-47A-DL, s/n 42-23803, N44896 (DC-3), (from the Tim Williams collection)

Right: Pacific Air Lines Fairchild F-27A, N2774R at San Francisco, California May 11, 1965. (Photo from the Hufford collection)

Opposite upper: Air West Fairchild F-27A, N751L, between flights. (Photo from the Walt Bohl collection)

Opposite lower: Douglas DC-9-31, N9330 lifts off from Long Beach, California. (Douglas photo from the Walt Bohl collection)



a cruise speed of 280 mph, with a range of 1080 miles. They had two Pratt/Whitney R-2800-CB16 *Double Wasp* engines that produced 2400 hp.

WEST COAST AIRLINES—West Coast Airlines took to the skies in Seattle in 1946 with a DC-3.

In August 1952, WCA purchased Empire Airlines a “feeder” carrier that was established in April 1944 under the name of Zimmerly Air Transport.

West Coast Airlines operated chiefly in the Pacific Northwest

(California, Oregon and Washington). It operated DC-3s, F-27s and DC-9s.

One of WCAs original pilots, Capt. Pat O’Grady recalled, “It took more skill to grease in a landing with a DC-3 or set it down in a gusty crosswind, than it does to fly a modern jetliner with a tricycle gear. But you are busier in a DC-9! Things happen faster! And on a short runway you have to have it in the slot and plant it on the end of the runway.”

(Capt. O’Grady piloted the first DC-3 into Portland when West Coast Airlines started service Dec. 5, 1946. He has compiled over 27,000 hrs as a WCA pilot and Oregon Air National Guard Commander.)

The “*Grand Old Lady*,” as WCA pilots referred to the DC-3, never scratched a passenger or scared a pilot for West Coast Airlines.

On Sunday, June 30, 1968, DC-3 Number 44587 which made the first flight through Portland for West Coast Air lines, was shut down for the last time, with a total of 22 years of faithful service for WCA.

As Capt. O’Grady recalled, “They had no control towers, no official weather reports and no marker beacons in the early days. The station manager just turned on a rotating beacon to warn all pilots that he had an airliner approaching. Then he stood out on the ramp, microphone in hand and warned the pilots of other traffic.”

(This practice still was standard at Pasco, Wash. as of 1968)

At one time West Coast Airlines was the only carrier authorized to make letdowns on commercial broadcasting stations in the absence of regular radio ranges.

AIR WEST—On April 25, 1968, Air West was incorporated, combining the operations of Bonanza, Pacific & West Coast Airlines. During the latter part of its rather short existence, with service deteriorating, Air West took on the nickname of “Air Worst” with travelers.

HUGHES AIR WEST—In April 1970 the assets of Air West were purchased by the Hughes Air Corp., who then operated the carrier as Hughes Airwest. The predecessor carrier was formed in 1968 by the merger of three pioneer airlines based in the West: Bonanza Airlines (PHX); Pacific Airlines (SFO) and West Coast Airlines (SEA)

Hughes Airwest was headquartered in San Mateo, Calif., and served 59 cities through 44 separate airports. It used San Francisco International Airport as its major base facility. San Mateo was the



home and operational nerve center for the carrier. Around-the-clock operations were directed from this facility. It also housed one of the most modern airline reservation centers in the '70s. Hughes Airwest was the only airline that had a flight attendant training school in the Bay Area.

The “*Top Bananas*” (as the Hughes Airwest DC-9s were nicknamed due to their being painted yellow and looking rather like a banana) fleet consisted of 48 aircraft as of the spring of 1979. They performed nearly 800 arrivals/departures per day. The fleet consisted of Six 727-200s; 31 DC-9-30s; Ten DC-9-10 & -15s and One F-27 Turbo-Prop.

More than 5,000 employees supported the carrier throughout its system. Nearly 700 pilots and 900 flight attendants were based in San Francisco, Las Vegas, Seattle and Phoenix.

Hughes Airwest maintenance center was located at Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix. There, work on the airline’s fleet was carried out by 600 maintenance specialists. Expansion of its 152,000 sq. ft. facility began in 1979 and was to be completed by mid 1980.

The airline reached beyond the confines of its one operation by completing contract work on small executive aircraft and maintenance, technical assistance and training for many foreign carriers.

Hughes Airwest served 48 cities in the U.S., Mexico and Canada. It flew to 41 cities in 12 states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Texas, Utah,



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Washington and Wisconsin). It served five resorts in Mexico and two of the largest cities in Alberta, Canada.

The carrier's service region contained most of the country's vacation destinations – national parks, monuments and recreation areas – winter ski centers – summer and winter sun destinations and Pacific Coast beach resorts.

In 1978, flights were inaugurated to Milwaukee, Des Moines, Denver and Houston's Hobby Airport. These were the first new U.S. Cities to be added to the carrier's route system in over 10 years. Also, in 1978 the airline began non-stop service from SFO and LAX to Alberta. 14 other new nonstops were inaugurated in December 1978, mostly due to the Deregulation Act of that year.

Nearly 6 million passengers established all-time records in every traffic category. The Company reported its seventh consecutive profit.

Fleet range and payload capabilities were boosted through an innovative program of upgrading the engines on the DC-9-30s and increasing the fuel capacity of the 727-200s.

Hughes Airwest's on-time average in the major markets was one of the best, and frequently led the entire airline industry during the era of its operation. Hughes Airwest was swallowed-up through the airline merger-mania period that swept through the 1980s.

In June of 1980, Hughes Airwest was absorbed into Republic Airlines. Republic Airlines came about in July 1979, with the merger of Southern Airways into North Central. The new name was chosen to reflect their transcontinental image and proud heritage. Thus, the name Republic (which derives its strength from its people) was the name of the new carrier. Republic has since been merged in Northwest Airlines.

Bonanza Airlines, Pacific Air Lines and West Coast Airlines along with the interim Air West and finally, Hughes Airwest are just a few of the many local service carriers who have contributed to the air transport system, making it what it is today. They deserve to be recognized and remembered. The support given by our local service carriers of yesteryear was a definite prerequisite in the forming and defining of our present great airlines, and the industry as a whole. To borrow the words of retired Capt. Tex Searle of the original Frontier Airlines: "The greatness of an airline doesn't come from its large size or all its new updated equipment. It's the employees who make the best of what they have and dedicate their hearts and souls to making it work. That's what makes a resplendent airline." □

1. Douglas DC-9-15, N91S, leased from Southern Air Ways by Bonanza, taxiing in at Phoenix, Arizona, on May 22, 1968. (Photo from the Hufford collection)

2. Douglas DC-9-31, N9333, of Air West, at San Francisco in the 1960s. (Photo from the Hufford collection)

3. Boeing 727-200, N7218W of Hughes Air West, circa 1972. (Photo from the Walt Bohl collection)

4. Hughes Air West Douglas DC-9-31, N919RW, circa 1972. (Photo from the Walt Bohl collection)