

A First Air Force One Story. Buying the airplane.

Written April, 2015 by Karl Stoltzfus

First Air Force One and the rest is history.

In the fall of 2014 there was a story written in the Warbirds International Magazine about the Lockheed Constellation Columbine II the First Air Force One languishing in the desert in Marana, Arizona and that it needed to be moved by 2017 or it would be cut up as scrap. My first thought was this is a very important piece of American history that really does need to be preserved and my second one was that I did not want to watch someone drinking a beer and wonder if the can came from the aluminum on that airplane. My interest-hobby for over 50 years has been the study of history so you can imagine this airplane really peaked my interest. I read the article about the airplane and sort of forgot about it but it would not stay dismissed. I then had a discussion with my grandson, Gabriel, who was 8 years old at the time. He is my aviation partner when it comes to old airplanes. Together we have bought my father's first crop duster, which was a 1929 Travel Air 4000, from the grandsons of the person my father originally sold it to in 1952. Subsequently we bought a Cub and Stearman. If I need permission to buy an airplane I just go to him and we work it out.

A few words about this plane:

It is a large four engine airliner built in 1948 for the US Air Force as a C121A. Its four Curtiss Wright 18 cylinder piston engines produce a total of 10,000 HP. Designed by Kelly Johnson of Lockheed Skunk Works fame, it is considered to be the most beautiful iconic airliner of the 40 – 50's.

In November of 1952, this airplane flew President Elect Dwight D. Eisenhower to South Korea in his fulfillment of a campaign promise to seek a speedy settlement to the Korean War.

Eisenhower was partial to the Lockheed aircraft. This was the second of his three Lockheed Constellation Columbine aircraft. It served as his presidential aircraft from January 1953 to November 1954 and in subsequent years when Columbine III was down for maintenance. It carried many notables including Queen Elizabeth, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, French Prime Minister Rene Mayer, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Vice President Richard Nixon and perhaps most importantly Mamie Eisenhower. Eisenhower flew approximately 63,844 miles aboard this aircraft.

Let's talk a moment about history.

One constant in history is that men – yes, men are defined in one of two ways. There are those who create conflict and there are those that foster peace. That is particularly true on the world stage. President Eisenhower, perhaps more than any man in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, understood the ravages of war. By the time he became President, he had made every attempt to promote peace worldwide. In early December of 1953, he met in Bermuda with the Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers of Great Britain and France, including Winston Churchill, where they met to

discuss world peace. While in Bermuda, he received an invitation from Secretary General Hammarskjold to address the United Nations. On the 3.35 minute flight to New York aboard Columbine II, President Eisenhower finished writing what became known as the “Atoms for Peace” speech that he was to deliver at the UN that afternoon. I would encourage you to read the speech.

Okay – back to buying the airplane.

After we decided to inquire about it, I called the Marana Regional Airport manager, Steve Miller and he graciously gave me Tim Crowley’s contact information. Turns out Tim is Mel Christler’s grandson and an air traffic controller. His unofficial title was gate keeper. You had to go thru him to get to the owners Harry Oliver and Lockie Christler. I convinced him of Dynamics potential to put the airplane back together and he gave me Harry and Lockie’s contact information. I quickly learned that Harry, Lockie and Tim all had genuine interest in not just selling the airplane but seeing it being available to the American public for a long time into the future. They had flown it on some tours in the 90’s and greatly appreciated its historical value. As we needed their knowledge and expertise and help to get the airplane flying this was of utmost importance. We had concluded the project was probably not doable without their support and this is certainly proving to be true.

In order to determine the basic condition of the airplane I asked my twin brother Ken to do an initial inspection of the airplane. Ken is a writer, pilot and is very knowledgeable about aircraft maintenance and I implicitly trusted his judgment. On November 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, Ken spent two days doing a preliminary inspection. I only wanted an objective assessment of the airplanes condition and Ken gave it to me. The airplane had very little corrosion which was extremely important. It also would need a lot of work to ferry it. He did not encourage or discourage us to buy it. Just said it was a very large project.

At that time we put together a plan with Harry and Lockie to inspect the airplane. Some months went by during this time and I was quietly hoping someone else would step up to the table and buy it.

Early on we recognized there were three components to making this project a success. First, knowhow and experience, second, people and third, finance. Having the knowhow, experience and right mindset to go a long distance from your base of operations and take on a complicated project and get it ferried is the first requirement. Dynamic Aviation has a lot of experience in that lane. 50 years ago when I was 23 years old, my Dad sent my twin brother Ken and I from Coatesville, Pa to near Phoenix Arizona to put together 5 derelict C47’s he had bought

surplus. They were in terrible shape. We hired two mechanics and we put them together and flew them back to Pa in 2 months. Over the years we picked up rough Beech 18's, King Airs and DC3's and ferried them to our base. In 1996 we bought 124 King Airs from the U.S. Army in Selma Alabama as a single lot. Many of them were in very bad condition and almost all were in some stage of disassembly. In three months with about 15 guys we ferried 122 of them to storage. In the last 6 years we have bought quite a few Dash 8's from various places around the world. Some of them were in very bad shape and it was supposed they would never fly again. Some were in significantly hostile environments and the working conditions were singularly bad. They all were successfully repaired and ferried across hostile countries and big oceans. So yes we had lots of experience in retrieving aircraft that had been parked and in not so good working conditions.

Second is the people. It takes a lot of people collaboratively and hopefully collegially working together to complete a project like this. A key component of being successful on a project like this is to have a clear understanding of what you know technically about the airplane and what you do not know. When you know that you then need to hire people who do know what you do not know. It takes a collaborative team with many talents. It started with Ken who was willing to go inspect the airplane and set subsequently set up a communication link at [www.john2031.com/columbine/html](http://www.john2031.com/columbine/html). As previously mentioned Harry, Lockie, and Tim were not only interested in selling the airplane but had a very keen interest in helping Dynamic be successful in getting the airplane ready to ferry and operate. Brian Miklos, a Dynamic Aviation A&P, IA and project manager has assisted and led some of the past complex retrievals around the world and he agreed to lead the maintenance effort. Tim Coons is one of the most knowledgeable people about the Connie in general and this airplane specifically, is a flight engineer on the Connie and knows the airplane inside and out and is great asset to the team. Billy Packard has joined on weekends as a R3350 engine specialist. He had previously worked for Ray Anderson Airmotive, who has been a great resource on figuring out issues with the engines and doing a fast turn on many parts we need tested or overhauled. About 5 years ago I met Scott Glover from Mt. Pleasant Texas. We were flying our C47's together at the same show. He was flying "Sky King" and I was flying "Miss Virginia". He has a museum called Mid America Flight Museum and I had visited him on several occasions. In December 14 I was at his facility and mentioned to him that I was going to have a go at the Connie. He said he had inspected the aircraft several times but with a bunch of other projects wasn't pursuing it at the moment. He offered to help us any way he could. He has been a great encouragement in many ways including bringing 10 mechanics to Marana in his beautiful Loadstar and Merlin to help get the airplane ferriable. This is truly a team effort.

As mentioned previously, the third component is finance. This a big one. Fortunately Dynamic has been able to sell an airplane and do what is called a tax free exchange to obtain the airplane. Most people know that paying the purchase price for an airplane like this and being able to financially bring it up to operating condition and operating it are two different

things. We have the first part sorted out and feel that with so many people interested in the airplane there will be collaboration to help make it operational.

Then there is the why? That one gets a little hard to define precisely because there are a complexity of reasons. American history is very important and the era of history that this airplane represents is very important. We need to preserve history for ongoing generations and having this airplane available to the public and to understand the values of that time. From Michael and my perspective, this is an airplane that "belongs to the public" and Dynamic Aviation is merely the custodian of the airplane at this point in time. Columbine II is history and on one "owns history".

In regard to buying the airplane. This is where it gets personal, really personal. More personal than I would prefer. But as a historian I believe history should be accurately recorded regardless of how it is later perceived. We flew the company King Air 200 from Bridgewater, Va to Marana on Sunday, March 8, 2015. Very strong headwinds, long flight and very tired. For the first time I saw this historic airplane. Took one walk around the airplane and was singularly overwhelmed by the complexity of the airplane. Got a good case of depression. Why in the world did I ever think of doing this.

Monday morning. A new perspective. Walked around the airplane by myself. As I stood by the nose of this airplane I began to have a very powerful internal voice or vision. It was very simple. It was very repetitive. YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO DO THIS. YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO DO THIS. YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO DO THIS!!! That sort of thing has happened to me infrequently in life. But the message is always very clear and straightforward.

Admittedly, it got a little complex to answer the question "So tell me Karl why did you buy the airplane".

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