

AIR AMERICA: LOCKHEED L-1049H SUPER CONSTELLATION

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Types of missions flown:

Probably as early as 1961, Air America intended to buy a L-1049, for already about 1961, Air America pilots “Doc” Johnson and Bill Welk as well as Air America Flight Engineer Bill Lively had been sent to the States for training on the Lockheed Super Constellation, but after a familiarization flight and a few days of ground school in Miami, the program was abruptly stopped and the group was sent to the Lockheed plant in Marietta, GA, for check out in the C-130.¹ Nevertheless, L-1049H N6922C was nominally bought from Flying Tigers for \$ 472,850 and immediately dry leased for five years to Lockheed Aircraft Corp., Burbank, CA, where it was delivered on 16 July 63.² The Lease Agreement dated 30 June 63 notes that “LOCKHEED will pay AIR AMERICA Two Hundred Twenty-Two Thousand Eight Hundred Forty-Eight Dollars (\$ 222,848.00) as rental for use of the Aircraft and Spare Parts during the term hereof which rental is payable in four equal installments of Fifty Five Thousand Seven Hundred Twelve Dollars (\$55,712.00) on September 30, 1963, December 31, 1963, March 31, 1964 and June 30, 1964.”³ Until the aircraft was sold in 1969, most of Air America’s Status of aircraft reports note that it was constantly dry leased to Lockheed and based at Burbank, CA.⁴

Its main purpose was to support a secret technical program jointly run by the CIA and Lockheed: the Lockheed A-12 reconnaissance aircraft, also known as the “Oxcart” Project. As Peter W. Merlin notes: “Actually, during that time period N6922C was one of three Constellation type aircraft that transported passengers and cargo from Burbank and Las Vegas to the Area 51 test site in Nevada to support the CIA's Projects OXCART. According to Kelly Johnson's "History of the OXCART Program" (Report SP-1362, dated 1 July 1968), on 30 November 1960 Lockheed sold the prototype L-1649A Starliner/Constellation (N60968, re-registered in 1963 as N1102) to the CIA for \$305,000, including \$37,000 to put it into condition for use as a shuttle to transport personnel and cargo to Area 51. Later the

¹ E-mail dated 14 November 2001, kindly sent to the author sent by Bill Lively. On 17 January 61, “Doc” Johnson flew Lockheed’s L-1649A Starliner prototype N1649 out of Burbank on a 3.9 hour training flight (Page from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 19 February 2013).

² The Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air America Inc of 9 July 1963 (in: UTD/CIA/B7F2) note the following on p.3: “Pursuant to the authority granted by the Executive Committee at its May 14, 1963 meeting, the Company signed an agreement for the purchase of a Lockheed Constellation 1049H aircraft (Registration Mark N6922C) and a stock of spare parts from Flying Tigers for \$ 472,850. The Company has also negotiated and signed an agreement whereunder Lockheed Aircraft Corporation will dry lease the aircraft and rotatable spares from Air America for five years with Air America reserving the right to utilize the aircraft from time to time under terms mutually agreeable to the parties. Delivery of the aircraft from Flying Tigers to Air America and from Air America to Lockheed is scheduled for July 16, 1963.” The Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee of Air America Inc of 14 May 1963 (in: UTD/CIA/B7F2) had argued that “an arrangement could be made whereby the conditional vendee or lessee would permit the Company to utilize the aircraft for an occasional charter thereby adding a new capability to the Company’s fleet.” Probably, these “occasional charters” were to be deliveries of arms or some other sort of support for political coups in Latin America or elsewhere.

³ Lease Agreement dated 30 June 63 between Lockheed and Air America, in: UTD/Bisson/B5, microfilm reel 4.

⁴ Aircraft status reports of 7 July 64 (in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1), 8 April 66 (UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1), and 1 May 68 (UTD/Herd/B2) as well as Flight Operations Circular of 15 June 69 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B). The Flight Operations Circular of 15 August 69 (in: UTD/Hickler/B1F1) notes that L-1049 N6922C was “sold and deleted from the Company list”.

company added two L-1049 Super Constellations to the shuttle fleet (one of which was N6922C). Between January 1961 and 12 May 1968, the three aircraft made 11,495 flights, carrying 492,205 passengers and 4,328,073 pounds of cargo. The third aircraft in the fleet is listed as a Model L-1049G but I don't have a registration number or any other data."⁵ This explains why § 6 of the Lease Agreement allows Lockheed to "install in or on said aircraft any engine, propeller assembly, or other part, appliance, equipment, instrument or necessary not owned by Lockheed", provided that these things will be removed again before redelivery to Air America.⁶ Apparently, there was also another purpose: long distance Agency business. Connie Seigrist recalls to have seen it at Washington National, Burbank, Tucson, and Las Vegas: "I never made personal contact with the crew. [...] To me, at the time it was useful by all means for immediate distant political contact needs and or for deep invasion delivery penetrations".⁷ Indeed, § 19 of the Lease Agreement states: "AIR AMERICA shall have the right to utilize the Aircraft from time to time during the term hereof under terms and conditions mutually agreeable to the parties hereto so long as such use does not interfere with LOCKHEED's operation and maintenance of the Aircraft", and § 21 states that the contact persons for whatever aspect of this aircraft were George Doole of Air America and H.L. White of Lockheed.⁸ But the crews apparently did not belong to Air America; as Bill Lively says: "I never heard of any other AAM personnel flying this aircraft".⁹

At least one of the missions flown by that L-1049 has come to light: It was used to support the *coup d'état* organized by the CIA against Bolivia's President Paz Estenssoro in November 64. When, in April 1952, Victor Paz Estenssoro became president of Bolivia by a revolution of the anticapitalist *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario*, he nationalized the tin mines and declared the labor unions supporters of the new *régime*; especially the almighty *Central Obrero Boliviano* labor union was the right arm of the government. These reforms, however, resulted in an economic decline, as did agrarian reforms introduced at a later date. Cuban influence became stronger than ever, and in 1961, a Communist revolution supported by Fidel Castro was crushed. The situation became even more intolerable, when Bolivia left the Organization of American States in 1962, and when, in May 1964, Paz Estenssoro eliminated the political opposition. All arms and ammunition were controlled not by the official Bolivian Army, but by relatives and reliable friends of the president, who commanded the civilian militia as an elite palace guard and in this way controlled the whole state. So, the only thing to do in order to overthrow Paz Estenssoro was to give arms and ammunition to the Bolivian Army. When, in early November 1964, an official joint exercise involving United States and Bolivian army and air force units took place, Air America's L.1049H Super Constellation N6922C (which was not flown by an Air America crew on that occasion) carried arms and ammunition to a remote landing ground in Peru, from where they were flown by CIA-controlled light aircraft to several smaller magazines scattered throughout Bolivia. Armed in this way by the CIA, the Bolivian military headed by General René Barrientos Ortuño was able to run a *coup d'état* against President Paz Estenssoro and to drive him out of the country.¹⁰ One of the first acts initiated by the new President Barrientos Ortuño was, on 6 November 64, to reinstall the old constitution abolished by Paz Estenssoro in 1952. Probably, the Agency L.1049H was also used for flights to South America on other occasions.¹¹

⁵ E-mail dated 28 October 2009 kindly sent by Peter W. Merlin to Paul Oelkrug who forwarded it the author.

⁶ Lease Agreement dated 30 June 63 between Lockheed and Air America, in: UTD/Bisson/B5 microfilm reel 4.

⁷ E-mail dated 28 January 2005, kindly sent to the author by Connie Seigrist.

⁸ Lease Agreement dated 30 June 63 between Lockheed and Air America, in: UTD/Bisson/B5 microfilm reel 4.

⁹ E-mail dated 14 November 2001, kindly sent to the author sent by Bill Lively.

¹⁰ Prouty, *JFK. The CIA, Vietnam, and the plot to assassinate John F. Kennedy*, pp.232-37.

¹¹ Interview with Connie Seigrist, dated 1 June 2006.

Type	registration / serial	c/n (msn)	date acquired	origin
L.1049H	N6922C	4825	15 July 63	Flying Tigers N6922C; previously with US Overseas

Service history: nominally bought from Flying Tigers for \$ 472,850 and immediately dry leased for 5 years to Lockheed Aircraft Corp., Burbank, CA, del. on 16 July 63; used for an occasional charter only (Minutes ExCom-AAM of 14 May 63 and 9 July 63, in: UTD/CIA/B3F4); officially acquired by Air America only on 31 July 63 (List “Accumulated costs as of 31 December 67”, in: UTD/CIA/B40F4); dry leased to Lockheed Aircraft and based at Burbank, CA, in July 64 (Aircraft status as of 7 July 64, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1); still dry leased to Lockheed Aircraft and based at Burbank, CA, in April and May 66 (Aircraft status as of 8 April 66, in: UTD/Kirkpatrick/B1F1; Aircraft status as of 4 May 66, in: UTD/Hickler/B1F2); given in the F.O.C. of 15 June 69 (in: UTD/Hickler/B8F7B) as still owned and by Air America and leased to Lockheed during the 15-30 June 69 period.

Fate: sold to Lockheed Aircraft Corp., Burbank, CA, in August 69 (noted as sold in the F.O.C. of 15 August 69, in: UTD/Hickler/B1F1); other sources note 26 March 1969 as the date of sale; sold to American Jet Industries on 22 December 70; sold to Pedersen Enterprises Inc, Saint Cloud, MS, on 11 January 71; at that time, the aircraft had a TT of 8517 hours only (e-mail dated 13 November 2004 sent by Stefan A. Bailis to Dr. Erik Carlson, who forwarded it to the author); flew to New Zealand on 19 January 1971 on an abortive attempt to fly to the South Pole; returned to the US on 23 January 1971 and stored; sold to Blue Bell Inc, Greensboro, NC, on 19 October 71, flown in “Wrangler” titles; sold to Crane Aviation as CF-BFN in June 73; sold to Downair Ltd, Richmondville, Ont., in August 73; withdrawn from use and stored at Stephenville, NFL, Canada on 30 September 74; sold to Paramount Petroleum Corp., Miami, on 2 December 78, and delivered to Miami, FL, on 15 December 78; reg. N6922C was restored on 5 February 1979; sold to Air Cargo International, Miami, FL, on 19 March 79 and overhauled at Miami; a photo taken by Stefan A. Bailis at Miami in April 1980 was published in: *Propliner* 63, p.39; another photo of N6922C taken at Miami by Stefan A. Bailis was also published in: *Propliner*, no. 65, p.20; between 28 and 30 May 1980, the left side of the aircraft was painted as “EC-ARN” in full Iberia colors on behalf of the Bank of America who used it to advertise the fact that they had helped to finance Iberia’s purchase of Super Constellations more than two decades earlier



Air Cargo International L-1049H N6922C taken by Stefan A. Bailis at Miami in 1980
(with kind permission from Stefan A. Bailis)

Subsequent history: sold by auction on 24 November 1981 and flown to Sanford, FL, for Express Airways Inc. on 1 December 1981 for storage; sold to United Texas

Petroleum Corp. in August 85, but remained stored at Sanford, FL; sold to Aerolineas Mundo (AMSA), Santo Domingo, in June 1988, named "City of Miami"; ferried to Opa Locka, FL, on 26 July 1988 and rereg. as HI-542CT; was parked at Borinquen, Puerto Rico, on 3 February 92, when it was hit by taxiing DC-4 N74AF (confirmed by Stefan A. Bailis in his e-mail dated 13 Nov. 2004 to Dr. Erik Carlson, who forwarded it to the author); the wing of HI-542CT was damaged, while the DC-4's starboard main under-carriage was torn off (*Aviation Letter*, no. 306, p. 3); written off as damaged beyond repair. A photo of HI-542CT still rotting away at Borinquen taken in the summer of 2000 by Michael S. Prophet was published in: *Propliner*, no. 83, summer 2000, p.11; restoration for static display by the Ramey AFB Historical Association as a MATS C-121C began in April 2003; more recent photos of the aircraft can be found at the websites of the Ramey AFB Historical Association at <http://rameyafb.org/c121.html> and at the website "Lockheed Constellation Survivors" at <http://www.conniesurvivors.com/HI-542CT.htm> .



L-1049H HI-542CT taken at Borinquen on 25 April 2003 by Jose A. Rafols
(with kind permission from Jose A. Rafols)