

Reconsidering The Budd RB-1

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When I decided to get to the bottom of the story about the Budd RB-1 Conestoga, I was hoping to nail it to the wall. After all, with my father, Marine Corps and Naval aviator, Lt. Col. “Des Canavan” as a test pilot on the project, it was a bit personal. I remember balking at Hayden Hamilton’s suggestion that we re-entitle “*The Story of the Budd RB-1 Conestoga*” to “*A Story...*” Of course, he was right. There are many stories. Trying to ascertain the facts sometimes adds to the mystery and one can wonder if the truth will ever be known. As history would have it, there is always more to say about every story. But complications occur when a mythology develops a life of its own and becomes nearly impossible to correct.

“The Story of the Budd RB-1 Conestoga” that I wrote and that AAHS published in the fall of 2013, sparked many discussions. There were only 17 aircraft ever assembled at the Budd Aircraft factory on Red Lion Road in Philadelphia, over a period of about 12 months in 1943-1944. Budd had won a competition in early 1942, just as the militarized DC-3 was entering the Pacific theatre of the war. A new design of a heavy transport by Dr. Michael Watter was radical in both structure and material, as it was to be made from rolled stainless steel that relied on shot-welded metal. The very first static tests demonstrated a weakness when one of the outer wings flew off, up into the air having sheered off all the attaching bolts.¹ Beset with problems both at the plant and during Naval flight testing at NAS Patuxent River, the RB-1 had a short but dramatic history. After completing and achieving NC or NX certification for 17 aircraft at Budd Field, the orders were cancelled and Budd exited the aircraft business.

I’m quite grateful for the readers whose interest and sparked imaginations have helped to create more discussion. If we could put our energies together, maybe we can resolve the pesky conflicts that surround this aircraft. As a caution, I

think it’s only fair to assume that in wartime record keeping may have been held pretty close, though one would hope the records would not be destroyed.

No one has challenged the disposition of the first five aircraft that went to NAS Patuxent River, Md., for testing. Two of the aircraft were “Written Off” after devastating crashes, one on land and one into the Chesapeake Bay. Four other crashes caused the aircraft to receive minor damage. They were repaired and three were eventually sold off to the Flying Tigers Line (NSF) parent company after the Budd contract was cancelled.

Alfred Silano was a young navy midshipman who arrived at Pax River just before the crash of an RB-1 on July 22, 1944. He was sitting on the grass watching the plane come in when he realized it was in trouble... and he was in its path. He was only about 20 years old and was able to skedaddle. But he was alerted to the problems of the RB-1 that would cause him a lingering concern. He has shared his story with me, but I am hoping that he will write it for himself and share it with *AAHS Journal* readers.

Dan Hagedorn, through his work at the National Air and Space Museum, shepherded records for the aircraft that found their way to Latin America and he submitted his additions and corrections for losses in Ecuador at Shell Mera, the Cuban aircraft (msn 013 & ?), as well as the Mexican ones (msn 016 & msn 017) that Flying Tiger Line sold and ferried south of the border early on. I’m grateful for the much later Columbian reference that my father recalled, rekindling fears that that aircraft was trouble.²

Col. Ed Stoltz has made quite a study of the RB-1s. He disagrees with Hagedorn’s Ecuadorian numbering but suffice it to say there were four Budds (msn 006 , 008, 009, 010) that had both BuNo & Civilian Registry and went from Flying Tigers Lines (NSF/FTL) to Shell Mera: Stoltz attached their Ecuadorian Registrations to them believing they were given

IDENTIFICATION OF BUDD RB-1 AIRCRAFT AT ASIATIC SHELL ECUADOR 1945-1946 (Chart by Col. Edwin Stoltz)

Budd No	BuNo	FAA Reg. No.	Ecuador No.	Arrived Shell	Shell No.	Disposition
006	39297	NC45349	HC-SBE	05 Dec 1945	6	Belly Landing / 15 May 1946
008	39299	NC45350	HC-SBF	14 Oct 1945	5	Wing Fatigue / Oct 1946
009	39300	NC45351	HC-SBG	21 Feb 1946	8	Wing Fatigue / Oct 1946
010	39301	NC45352	HC-SBH	29 Dec 1945	7	Wing Fatigue / 26 Aug 1946

numbers before leaving the United States and not upon the sequencing of their arrival in Ecuador. Their loss dates, as best that can be determined, are based on the work of Kavelaars³ After the first crash on May 15, 1946, the decision was made to cannibalize the aircraft to help get others back on line. Irreparable wing fatigue was cited for the problems of the remaining Budds. The “loss” dates were taken from the *AAHS Journal* article by Henk Kavelaars. Vol. 31, No.2, Summer 1986.

There was one Budd, the mysterious “007” (msn 007), that went missing. It was tested at the Budd Plant as BuNo 39298 on July 12, 13, 14, 15, 1944. After more than six hours of testing on an 1830-92 engine, the engine was changed for an 1830-94, re-designated NC41805 and retested for two days on July 27 and 28, 1944.⁴ 007 or BuNo 39298/NC41805/NX41805, then went straight from the factory to the Rubber Development Corp. (RDC). Mr. Hagedorn’s papers (via Kavelaars) deduced that BuNo 39298 (msn 007) “was provided to an Allied government under Lend-Lease or some other form of defense aid. In our book *Air Arsenal North America: Aircraft for the Allies 1938-1945, Purchases and Lend-Lease* (co-authored with Phil Butler... we note on page 163 that BuNo 39298 was in fact registered with the U.S. experimental license NX41805 for trial flights with the Rubber Development Corp. in and out of Belem, Brazil, and thus almost certainly accounts for the absences of a history card for this aircraft.”⁵ The RDC sold the aircraft to Brazilian Airlines (date? & registration?). Documents from Hagedorn stated that this aircraft apparently crashed upon landing in Rio, Brazil, on January 4, 1946, while transporting a football (soccer) team. The report does not explain the extent of injuries.

Col. Stoltz presented a pilot statement that (msn 013) and possibly a second Budd were sold to Cuba Espresso Aero of Havana (CU-P413/ then CU-413) until July 1950 when it became Espresso Aero Interamericano. This registration was canceled Jan-Feb. 1952.

This was about the time when (013) was resold, this time to Trans Air Hawaii. Is it possible to locate the aircraft registry numbers? We learned through Stoltz’s work and photos that (013) suffered a bad landing⁶ at Kona Airport in the early 1950s and was considered irreparable. By early 1957 the wrecked aircraft had become a nuisance, advertisements in the papers called for public bids for the removal of the Conestoga. After



Budd NC41810 finished life as a Ft. Worth, Tex., hamburger/ gas station. (Photo by Charles H. Phillips from the National Archives)

several months Mr. Furtado of the Hawaiian Airline Commission was able to secure a buyer for \$400 in September 1957, who would remove the aircraft⁷. Word of mouth suggested that it became a café but we have no confirmation. Was that a joke?

According to Hagedorn, there are two more Cuban registries to consider: Aerovias Q acquired CU-C493 registry for an RB-1 (Oct.- Dec. 1951) and CU-C497 that went to Columbia in November 1955 as HK-344X (registered to Aero Llano Ltd., delivered in September 1956 and then lost in an in-flight fire in 1957. A second RB-1: HK-345X with a former Cuban registry has been untraced. These may be the two South American RB-1s that got my father thinking that everyone had crashed.

The Mexican Budd (016) did end up being the Pima Air & Space Museum aircraft. But the story from Mr. Hagedorn suggests that (016: XA-DUR and 017: XA-DUQ) initially sold to Aerovias Azteca through the NSF/FTL were transferred to Cuban Registry in early 1951. Each had difficulties, (017-DUQ) in Veracruz and (016) may have been abandoned on its way to Cuba and ended up at Pima.

Now that we are completely befuddled we need to get proper accident reports for the two crashes under the FTL aegis in 1945. Ed Stoltz learned from John L. Davis that Davis saw negatives of the Detroit crash of August 25, 1945, 1:00 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon that resulted in an explosive total loss of the RB-1 to fire. There were no serious injuries. We believed this RB-1 was (msn 015) NC45357. Stoltz’s email with Davis suggested that Davis’ photo showed a different tail number (NC45353). But while we have a number of photos of the crash engulfed in smoking flames, none of the photos show the tail number of the aircraft. So without a photo Davis’ claim remains unconfirmed.

News reports said that the RB-1 was transporting furniture for five families from Detroit to California. The aircraft had been loaded and was only about 1000 ft in the air when the tower spotted flames bursting out of the right engine. Full of fuel and with wheels retracted, the experienced FTL pilots made a belly landing safely distant from nearby homes, not in a cemetery as the Flying Tiger lore has said. Firefighters put out the conflagration, but the cargo was a total loss. Fortunately for the crew only one man was slightly injured.

If Mr. Davis is correct, that would mean that the photo of the Grants, N.M., crash might have been misidentified. Shortly after refueling near Albuquerque, (msn 011, NC45353) around



Trans Air Hawaii Budd RB-1, msn 013, abandoned at Kona Airport sometime in the early 1950s. (AAHS photoarchives, AAHS-D003472)



LEFT: Google Earth view of the Grants Pass, N.M. crash site helps show how a few feet one-way-or-the-other can influence the outcome of a flight. It also helps support Steve Owens questioning of the FTL photo of the accident scene showing a farmhouse in the background. An unlikely location for a farmhouse. RIGHT: A view from the top of the ridge looking down into the valley along the power line trail. (Both images from Steve Owens)

11:45 p.m. on November 7, 1945, the Conestoga failed to clear the mesa – a distance of only 250 ft.– during a snowstorm. Both the pilot and the copilot died and the flight engineer suffered bruising. Did a fire engulf the aircraft? The image identified as the New Mexico crash appears to have been on fire. (For some reason the injuries the survivor sustained were stated as light though he was in the hospital from Wednesday until Sunday). According to the news report, the CAA investigated the crash but “the official left Monday for his headquarters.” Ed Stoltz’s inquiries concerning the tail numbers to both the New Mexico and Michigan State Police and have gone unanswered.

An added complication is that Steve Owen from Grants, N.M., explained his concern that the photo that the Flying Tigers Line provided as the crash site for the Grants, N.M., crash does not show appropriate vegetation and there is no farmhouse behind the site as shown in the FTL photo. While the crash was near the beacon it was on the edge of a mesa. Somehow the survivor walked to safety. Mr. Owen was preparing a display for their aviation heritage museum. We were hoping to resolve some of these questions.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank David Leidel for the use of his historic photos, his father’s Flight Log and other Budd RB-1 material that made these inquiries possible. And to thank his mother for her remarkable memories.

That Col. Ed Stoltz, USAF, has pursued so many leads for so many years shows amazing dedication. I am very grateful to him for setting the record straight. Steve Owen and his Grants, N.M., aviation heritage museum members have kept the flame burning on a sad historic accident of an aircraft that haunts us, providing more questions than answers. I want to also thank Dan Hagedorn for his dogged pursuit of accuracy, which I think everyone shares. I am only sorry that when I wanted to do a story about my father’s experience flight testing the Budd, I

didn’t really know where the story would go. I wasn’t aware of Mr. Hagedorn’s extensive expertise of aircraft in Latin America. I’m glad to know now.

Last minute and most welcome photos came from Rick Ghormley who contributed images of the ground crew and the Budd RB-1 aircraft owned by the Flying Tiger Line. We passed these along to the Flying Tiger Line organization for their history.

Endnotes

- 1 Watter, Dr. Michael. “The Budd RB-1”. *AAHS Journal*, Spring 1967. p. 57.
- 2 Dan Hagedorn. “Letter to the Editor,” *AAHS Journal*, Vol. 59, No.1, Spring 1914. pp.73-74
- 3 Henk Kavelaars. Article on Aircraft at Shell Mera, *AAHS Journal*, Vol.31, No.2, Summer 1986. P.103.
- 4 Herman H. Leidel. *Pilot’s Log of Herman H. Leidel*, July 1944.
- 5 Hagedorn, Dan. “Email of June 15, 2007, to Edwin Stoltz”. Response to Inquiry regarding RB-1: BuNo:39298 (msn 007), NC41805, NX41805. Archives Research Team Leader and Adjunct Curator, Latin American Aviation, Archives Division. National Air and Space Museum.
- 6 Note: Ed Stoltz found a pilot’s report online dated June 11, 2001, that told the story of an inter-island trip that resulted in the Budd running off the runway. Photos indicate a listing right landing gear.
- 7 Minutes of Hawaii Aeronautics Commission: February 28, 1957, August 24, 1957, & September 28, 1957. Honolulu, Hawaii.