

Lockheed's 1649A Starliner - Pride of the TWA Hotel



(TWA Photo/Jon Proctor Collection – color restoration by Benoit Vienne)

The beautifully restored airplane that graces the ramp at the TWA Hotel at JFK Airport has a varied and interesting history

By Jon Proctor

It is only fitting that one of Trans World Airlines' iconic "Jetstream" Constellations was chosen as a centerpiece for the new TWA Hotel at Kennedy Airport in New York. Technically the type was designated by its manufacturer as the Model 1649A Starliner, but no one can argue that its triple-tailed lines are unmistakably 'Connie.' The massive, 150-foot wingspan, 27 feet greater than the 1049 series, visually set this variant apart from any other model.

TWA marketed its 1649As with the "Jetstream" moniker as a way of flying high enough to take advantage of prevailing, westerly high-speed winds that could exceed 250 miles per hour. But the name was more likely a disguise to make passengers think they were boarding a jetliner.

By all accounts this unique model never should have been built. Beginning production less than three years before the first 707s entered service, it could hardly be expected to earn a profit for the airlines. Only four bought it: TWA (25, including one for Howard Hughes), Air France (ten), Lufthansa (four) and Linee Aeree Italiane-LAI (four), 43 in all plus the prototype. An order for two 1649As for VARIG was canceled and they were not built

Into Service

TWA Jetstream service began June 1, 1957, on the New York–London–Frankfurt route. Polar flights began that fall, with the westbound London nonstop to San Francisco inaugural consuming a mind-numbing voyage of 23 hours, 19 minutes. It still holds the record for a regularly scheduled landplane flight.



*The inaugural westbound polar flight rests at San Francisco after its record-setting journey.
(Harry Sievers photo)*

When LAI was merged into Alitalia, its four Starliners, already built and awaiting delivery, were purchased by TWA, bringing its fleet total to 29, which brings us to the Pride of the TWA Hotel.

The third LAI-acquired Starliner, registered N8083H – “Eight-Three-Hotel,” began service with TWA in May 1958. Barely two and one-half years later, it was converted to an all-cargo configuration, flying freight until April 1962. Then, along with the second converted Starliner, N7316C – “One-Six-Charlie,” it was leased to Alaska Airlines and later sold to the carrier, for combination freight/passenger work.

From there the Starliner pair began flying to and from the Alaskan North Slope oilfields. But their days were numbered.

Meanwhile, veteran pilot and flying enthusiast Maurice Roundy envisioned rescuing the two airplanes. Owner of aircraft charter company Maine-Coast Airways, Roundy acquired One-Six-Charlie in May 1983. It had been abandoned seven years earlier at Stewart Airport in Newburgh, New York, following an epic 11-day trip, hauling cattle to Paris and return, landing at Stewart on three engines. By then the Starliner’s owner had gone out of business and it was towed to a deserted corner of the airport.



N8083H – “Eight-Three-Hotel” – seen at London-Heathrow in the late 1950s. Although the long nose could accommodate it, the ex-LAI Starliners flew without radar in passenger service. (Peter Keating photo)



One-Six-Charlie sits at Chicago-O'Hare in September 1959, being readied for a nonstop flight to Paris. (Jon Proctor Photo)

After resuscitating One-Six-Charlie in November, Roundy and dedicated mechanic Ray Porter, along with ferry pilot Frank Lang, flew it to the Auburn-Lewiston Airport in Maine on November 9. Little did they know the Starliner would remain there for 36 years.

Second on Maurice Roundy's list was Eight-Three-Hotel. After six years sitting at Kenai, Alaska, and sold at auction for \$150, it flew clandestine operations out of Honduras in 1983. By January 1984 it was parked at San Pedro Sula Airport where Maurice bought the Starliner for an undisclosed price. With help from two aircraft mechanics he restored Eight-Three-Hotel to flying condition. Another Starliner captain completed the crew that brought it home on a ferry flight May 31 and June 1, 1986, to Roundy's domicile at Auburn-Lewiston Airport in Maine.



*Together at Auburn, Maine, Eight-Three-Hotel, foreground, and One-Six-Charlie.
(Phil Brooks Photo)*

Looking for Work

But what to do with these Lockheed treasures? One of Maurice Roundy's initial plans was to use One-Six-Charlie as his office, while another envisioned flying the two airplanes, or even just one of them, to airshows and other events. He completed drawings of Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola markings to help in finding financing for the venture.

Meanwhile, Roundy's third 1649A, the former Lufthansa D-ALAN, in basic Lufthansa colors but without titles, resided at Kermit Weeks' Fantasy of Flight Museum in Polk City, Florida, where it landed for the last time, on October 1, 2001, following several aborted attempts to move it to Maine, dating back to 1988. It remains there today.



*The third Starliner, N974R, now on permanent display in Polk City.
(Jon Proctor Photo)*

A Reprieve

Sadly, none of Roundy's lofty plans came to fruition, but 11 years later, a division of German carrier Lufthansa purchased all three Starliners, at auction for a total of \$745,000, with a plan to restore one of them with the help of cannibalized parts from the other two.

The Lufthansa subsidiary, Deutsche Lufthansa Berlin-Stiftung, took it all a step further in December 2007, announcing plans for construction of a 50,000-square-foot hangar at Auburn-Lewiston Airport to restore the surviving airliner, then fly it to Lufthansa's maintenance and overhaul facility at Hamburg, Germany, for fitting with the original Lufthansa cabin interior and exterior livery.



*One of four Lufthansa Super Stars, seen during the golden age of air travel.
(Lufthansa Archives)*

The hangar opened in November 2008, and upon completion of the restoration project, it was to be handed over to the airport.

Plans were to have the Starliner overhaul completed and ready for its first flight in late 2010 or early 2011, when flight operations would begin. Following flight-test the Starliner would be ferried to Germany.

It was determined that One-Six-Charlie was in better condition for the project, relegating Eight-Three-Hotel to a spares source and template for One-Six Charlie.



*Lufthansa restoration in the Auburn-Lewiston Airport Hangar
(Ralph M Pettersen photo)*

As the restoration process continued, costs grew exponentially. Originally estimated at \$9 million to \$12 million, some claim it approached \$60 million. But the project was no small financial task. Just overhauling six turbo-compound engines and propellers came at a steep price.

The original completion date slipped into 2015. Project managers were replaced and costs were exacerbated when the hangar's fire suppression system accidentally filled with extinguishing foam.

Then in 2018 Lufthansa announced that instead of flying it home to Germany, One-Six-Charlie would be dismantled and surface-transported for completion. A year later, the fuselage, both wings and the tail section were trucked to Portland, Maine and loaded aboard a ship for the voyage to Bremen and storage prior to reassembly. It was a sad ending for a multi-million-dollar restoration project to fly the Starliner.



*One-Six-Charlie being loaded on a ship for transport to Germany.
(via the Internet)*

A Second Lease on Life

Eight-Three-Hotel, while still basically intact, had been scavenged to a great degree. Having survived 33 Maine winters outdoors, many felt that the cutter's torch was its only future.

Enter visionary Tyler Morse, CEO of Morse Development and builder of the TWA Hotel. He wanted one of the airline's vintage propliners to serve as an on-location centerpiece for his project. And Eight-Three-Hotel was available, not only for display but also to serve as a cocktail lounge so visitors could view the airliner inside and out.



*Eight-Three-Hotel, reduced from its former glory, could still be saved,
even if not put back in the air. But it would not be easy ... or cheap.
(Ralph M Pettersen photo)*

Morse approached Atlantic Models/Gogo Aviation and together they began restoration, which Morse would describe as "expensive." At Auburn, replacement tail rudders were fabricated, flooring and windows were installed and the cockpit was fitted with replacement parts, some of which had to be built from scratch. Following completion, the airplane was painted in authentic TWA colors.



*Partially painted, Eight-Three-Hotel receives loving care and attention at Auburn.
(Roger Jarman/Atlantic Models photo)*

A 344-mile ground transport from Maine followed in March 2019, when the Starliner's fuselage passed through New York City, spending time on display in Times Square. It then resided in a temporary hangar at JFK Airport until being lowered by crane onto the tarmac at the hotel in May.



Workers gently attach Eight-Three-Hotel's fuselage to its wings. (MCR photo)



*The Starliner's massive wingspan is evident in this dramatic image.
(Ralph M Pettersen photo)*

Now this most unique airliner has come full circle. During its 60-plus year odyssey Eight-Three-Hotel evolved from carrying TWA passengers to enjoying retirement while entertaining visitors at the TWA Hotel. Tyler Morse must be mighty proud.



*Appropriately nicknamed, **Eight-Three-Hotel** sits proudly at its new home.
(Ralph M Pettersen photo)*