



Veteran & Vintage

by Luigi Vallero

Constellation Consternation

“In Nantes, France, a group of passionate aviation enthusiasts has been dedicating much time and effort to save a classic propliner from the scrapyard. But more recently the selfless work of these men and women has been thwarted by the heavy and unfathomable hand of bureaucracy.”

ALAIN RABILLER

The object of their labor of love is a Lockheed 1049G Super Constellation (F-BGNJ; MSN 4519), which was delivered to Air France in November 1953. After serving as a front-line airliner on Air France routes to far corners of the world, the Super Connie was relegated to less glamorous duties with the arrival of the Boeing 707. When a proposed sale to Spanish charter company TAE (Trabajos Aereos y Enlaces) fell through, in 1967 the airplane—re-registered F-BRAD—passed to Air Fret and was used on the legendary Biafran airlift. Later, in the colors of French charter operator Catair (Compagnie d’Affrètement et de Transport Aérien), the Connie operated tourist and football fan charters around Europe until 1973. The following year, it was retired at Nantes Atlantique (Château Bougon) Airport (IATA: NTE/ICAO: LFRS).

Raymond Gaborit—a local aviation and Harley-Davidson enthusiast—bought the airframe for use as an attraction for airport visitors and schoolchildren, parking it in front of the passenger terminal.

The airplane was subjected to two attempts by its owner to transform it into a restaurant. First by painting it in Lockheed house colors, and then in pseudo Air France trim. Although not well executed, these efforts were instrumental in maintaining the airframe in good condition, the thick paint layers helping to preserve the aluminum skin from often inclement Atlantic weather conditions.

In 1997 the local chamber of commerce, which manages the airport, bought the aircraft, both to save it from being scrapped and with the aim of recovering space for car parking lots. Thus the Connie was moved to a new location adjacent to the Airbus factory.

The next two years were not good for ‘November Juliet’. Because it was in a semi-abandoned state the elements took a toll on the structure. Fortunately, however, Nantes boasts a long aeronautical tradition and volunteers, drawn from different walks of life but with a common passion for saving the Connie, set up Amicale du Super Constellation (Friends of the Super Constellation). Today this devoted band of 40 men and women is part of the L’Aéroscope, which coordinates the activities of another four local groups with the aim of promoting and nurturing the history of aviation in Brittany [Bretagne]. By 2000 the chamber of commerce, the airplane’s owner, gave the green light to the ‘Amicale’ to proceed.

First, it was necessary to completely remove the layers of thick paint accumulated over the years to restore the airframe to its original ‘out-of-the-factory’ bare metal condition. Accordingly, between 2001 and 2003, a considerable amount of time and effort was expended using a high-pressure hot water jet system before the aircraft could be protected with a primer coating.

Meanwhile, to ensure that the volunteers’ efforts were not going to waste, a wise decision was made to



At Bordeaux in 1960 in service with Air France.



Restoration of the Connie began in 2001, and by February 2003 a coat of protective primer had been applied. Good progress was made once the aircraft was under cover.



ALAIN RABILLER

F-BGNJ upon rollout at Nantes in April 2007.

classify the aircraft as an historical monument. Thanks to Dominique Blanchard, who on July 31, 2001, brought the case with the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication forward by a few months, official support was forthcoming for the restoration project.

At the same time, restoration of the cabin was proceeding apace. By 2003 the 'Super G' was ready for repainting in its original livery. However, the first attempt did not fare well, weather once again proving a major obstacle.

Fortunately, a solution was available across the main Nantes runway, the site of the World War II-era airfield. Already proposed as the future location for an open air museum, Aéroscope de Château Bougon, two hangars would provide ideal shelter for the Super Connie during its restoration processes.

Although this airfield area is managed by the Armée de l'Air (French Air Force), a permit to occupy it—albeit on a temporary basis subject to annual renewal—was obtained from the DGAC (Direction Générale de l'Aviation Civile). Finally, on the night of May 1, 2004, taking advantage of the operational curfew at NTE, November Juliet was transferred to the new location. A few more months then elapsed before one of the two hangars was ready for occupancy, but by June 2006 all was in place.

Having had the airplane's original color scheme carefully replicated in every detail, exterior work on the Super G was almost complete on April 14, 2007. Only the light blue and white trim lines were still missing from the cheatline—and the three rudders removed in preparation for application of new skin—when the sleek propliner emerged from the hangar nearly as resplendent and complete as the day it was rolled out of its Burbank birthplace. Inside the fuselage, the flightdeck had also been refurbished, with the original radio still working.

Two days later, the aircraft was 'officially' unveiled to the public on the occasion of the presentation of the first EMBRAER 190 to Air France's subsidiary airline Régional. The Super Connie was towed to the main apron, where it stole the show from the regional jet, before returning to the front of the hangar where it had been repainted. On that auspicious day the propliner was visited by Jean-Cyril Spinetta, then CEO of Air France. The airline had already indicated that if a suitable permanent location was found for the Super Connie, with good viewing potential for the public, Air France would sponsor the construction of a light structure to shelter the airplane.

For a few months thereafter things seemed to be looking up for the 'Super G'. The dedicated volunteers remained determined to return the



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Members of the Amicale du Super Constellation with one of the three rudders.

airplane to its original splendour, their next planned move being to restore the interior to luxurious ‘Le Parisien Spécial’ standard.

As often happens, however, not everything went to plan. The temporary approval that was expected by August 2007 did not materialize, preventing Amicale members from being reunited with the aircraft. Apparently the authorization was not renewed because of doubts about the area where the Super Connie is located, in company with a Nord Aviation 2501 Noratlas transport and other historic aircraft. As a military installation during the war, the storage location is not deemed safe—but why those concerns were not expressed earlier has not been satisfactorily explained.

After spending considerable amounts of their own money, and years of effort, Amicale members started to see their dream turning into a nightmare. Worse still, the airplane (along with its historic companions) is no longer accessible.

Today, two years after that inexplicable bureaucratic decision, and despite intense lobbying of authorities at the highest level by friends of the Amicale, the impasse continues. Meanwhile, the Connie, deprived of care, is again deteriorating.

Undeterred, the Amicale group continues to meet every Saturday morning at association headquarters in Bouguenais, outside Nantes Airport, to discuss all possible means of rescuing the Super Connie from its current plight. Restoration continues on the few parts still in their possession, including the three rudders.

Fortunately, the airplane’s classification as a historical monument should preclude a one-way trip to the scrapyard, a fate that awaits the other vintage aircraft stored at Nantes. Nevertheless, the uncertainty and the continuing restriction of access is not helpful.

While in many other parts of the world the preservation of such aeronautical relics is a high priority, it is disappointing, even bewildering, to note that in France—a country rich in aviation heritage—there is indifference and obstruction toward the restoration of an airplane indelibly linked with the nation’s golden age of intercontinental air travel. ➔

Anyone wishing to sign the petition to save the Nantes Super Connie is invited to register at <http://fbgnj.free.fr/index.php>.

(Airways thanks Pierre ‘Pappy’ Biron, Claude Roulaud, and all other members of Amicale du Super Constellation, Nantes, for their friendship, enthusiastic hospitality, and tireless work—against all odds—in preserving this piece of aeronautical history.)



PIERRE BIRON



JACQUES GUILLEM COLLECTION



CHRISTIAN VOLPATI VIA JACQUES GUILLEM

Lockheed 1049G Super Constellation MSN 4519

- November 4, 1953** delivered to Air France as Model 1049C, F-BGNJ
- November 15, 1953** entered service with Air France
- January 1956** converted to 1049G standard
- November 30, 1963** retired and stored at Paris-Orly (total flight time 24,281hr)
- September 1966** painted for TAE as EC-BEN, not taken up
- August 1967** sold to Gesto Finance, Panamá
- September 5, 1968** sold to Air Fret, F-BRAD
- December 31, 1969** registered to Catair, F-BRAD
- May 24, 1973** re-registered to Air Fret, F-BRAD
- 1974** withdrawn from use & stored at NTE