

GENERAL AVIATION NEWS

\$2.95 • SEPTEMBER 23, 2011
63RD YEAR. NO. 18



Time Machine

David Marco's Lockheed 12A

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A flying time machine

David Marco's Lockheed 12A exemplifies the Golden Age

By MEG GODLEWSKI

"Have you seen that beautiful twin?"

This phrase was repeated numerous times at this summer's AirVenture and you can be sure the airplane in question belonged to David Marco of Atlantic Beach, Fla.

Marco's Lockheed 12A occupied a place of honor off ConocoPhillips Square next to the ConocoPhillips display tent. The airplane, also known as the Electra Junior, was surrounded by yellow caution tape to keep people from touching it and marring the polished silver surface, but that didn't keep visitors from circling it in admiration, snapping photos from every angle.

But why was it next to ConocoPhillips?

"Because Phillips Petroleum Co. bought the Lockheed new from the factory in 1938," Marco explained. "It was the corporate airplane of its day."

Marco bought the airplane in 2009. He'd been looking for what he describes as a Golden Age of Aviation transport aircraft for several years.

"There are the Beeches and the Lockheeds," he said with a boyish smile, "and I kept coming back to the Lockheed. I am kind of an aviation romantic. I love the art deco era of aviation and the Lockheed 12 is the epitome of that in my mind."

The Electra Junior is one of the rarer twin-engine transports because of its relatively short production run. Approximately 125 were built from 1936 until the

start of World War II in 1941. Although designed ostensibly to be an airliner, the Electra Junior was especially popular among oil companies that were trying to gain a foothold in the relatively young world of aviation.

One of these companies was Phillips Petroleum. Phillips established an aviation department in 1926, and by the 1930s was a leader in the aviation fuel industry, having designed the first aviation refueling trucks and developing a new, lighter, more efficient aviation fuel that powered the first flight between the continental United States and Hawaii.

Phillips flew the Electra Junior as an executive transport until the outbreak of World War II when Uncle Sam requisitioned the twin for the war effort. After the war it came back to Phillips and was flown for many more years until replaced by a more modern airplane.

The Electra Junior has a reputation for speed. The 12A, which sports a pair of 450-hp Pratt & Whitney R-985 Wasp Junior SB radial engines, is capable of cruise flight of 200 mph, which makes it one of the fastest twins on the market to this day.

Another Lockheed owner, Les Whittlesly, whose Lockheed 12A won Grand Champion Antique at Oshkosh in 2006, introduced Marco to the airplane.

"He kind of got me interested and excited about Lockheed 12s," Marco recalled.

Marco is not a novice in the world of aviation. His father was a pilot and the family often took trips by air. The younger Marco noted his first few hours were logged when he was in his mother's belly. He made his first solo at 14 in a glider. Today, the 50-something pilot has logged more than 13,000 hours. Despite his pas-

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David Marco

Cover photo by John Slemp



Photos by Garth Hannum

Owner David Marco poses proudly with his Lockheed 12A at this summer's AirVenture, where the plane was featured prominently outside the ConocoPhillips exhibit. Marco, a self-described lover of the Golden Age of aviation, spent several years looking for the perfect transport category aircraft to add to his collection.

sion for aviation, he never saw himself becoming an airline pilot. "I am in the eye business," he said, noting that his father was too. "My dad invented what is now the Acuvue contact lens. I make the exam room equipment you see in eye doctors' offices."

His business interests have given him the resources to feed his aviation passion and he has, wholeheartedly. He owns a stable of aircraft that he picked with great care.

"I have the greatest fighter in the world, the P-51 Mustang; I have the greatest bush plane in the world, the Beaver; and for this era of vintage transport airplane, I thought the Lockheed 12 exemplified that better than anything else."

During AirVenture, Marco spent much of his time in the ConocoPhillips tent answering questions about his airplane. The most common question was: "Is that the



Photo by John Slemp





Marco's Lockheed 12A spent several years as a company airplane. The interior restoration uses period correct materials right down to the wood and the weave of the cloth. The cockpit is also vintage, down to the faces of the instruments and the type-face used for the placards. The seats are untanned leather.

airplane from the Earhart movie?"

"I tell them it was not," he chuckled. "There was a Lockheed 12 that was used in the movie, but Earhart actually flew a Lockheed 10, the Electra."

The next most common question had to deal with the restoration of the airplane. You don't just go out to the airport and find a show-quality rare airplane like the Lockheed Electra Junior with a FOR SALE sign on it. Very often the airplanes you find are money pits with wings and the restoration is neither quick nor inexpensive.

"When I looked for one I found that you simply can't afford to totally restore one because they are too big and too complex and too difficult metal wise," said Marco, shaking his head.

When he found this one, "it was immaculate on the inside. The ribs and the spars were all in good shape. It had always been in the midwest or desert and it was in a museum at one time, so it was in good condition. (The previous owner) Kent Blankenburg did a nice job of maintaining it in a dry climate."

Because the airframe was in good shape, Marco was able to focus his restoration efforts on the aircraft systems.

"We completely revamped the fuel system, we overhauled every motor on the airplane, we completely rewired it, but kept the original 12-volt system," Marco explained. "We still have the generators. We kept it as much a 1930s airplane as we possibly could. We spent two years and 10,600 hours restoring it to the 1930s. We went from the nose cone all the way back to the tail. Everything was completely gutted, the gear came out, the wings came off, everything was taken apart so it could be rebuilt."

Part of that process meant taking out some items that had been added post-1930.

"It was more like a 1950s or 1960s airplane when we brought it home," Marco remembered. "We took the 1950s and '60s antennas out and put the 1930s antennae back in, so it's a 1930s airplane again."

Finding the parts for the restoration meant making contact with Lockheed aficionados on the aircraft restoration cir-



cuit, and often using old parts as patterns to make new ones.

"It's a challenge because Lockheed didn't build too many of these airplanes," said Marco, "but there is a saying, 'if it was made by man, it can be made by man again,' but it is not that easy. There are some parts that are really hard to find, such as 12-volt motors. You can find lots of 24-volt motors, but not 12. We almost switched to 24-volt motors because the 12s were so hard to find, but finally we found them and we found people to overhaul them, just like we found people to overhaul the 1930s instruments."

The interior of the airplane takes your breath away. The seats are untanned leather. There is a hat rack, complete with a vintage copy of "Life" magazine and a fedora, as if waiting for a businessman to

return from a meeting. The fabric headliner is a raised weave popular in the 1930s in a dignified shade of tan. A pillow in one of the seats carries the vintage Lockheed logo done in embroidery. Even the knobs in the cockpit are aged to look vintage. The placards are done in Art Deco font.

"The best we can tell is that this is the exact interior — the same fabrics, the same wood, same untanned leathers, the same type face on the placards, as when it was used as an executive transport," Marco noted with pride. "We made sure to use scalloped knobs and lacquered wood. The cabinet guy asked if we wanted the cabin to look like a Gulfstream and we said no, we wanted it to look like a 1930s airplane, so he just used the lacquered wood. There is no polyurethane on this airplane."

The exterior is highly polished aluminum with green trim.

When asked how the airplane maintains the shine Marco jokes, "We use robots! No, really we use Nuvite finish. It lasts for a good long time."

Marco was very pleased to be working with ConocoPhillips during AirVenture. He noted that he called them to tell them he had this restored airplane.

"Within five minutes they called me back and had ideas about showing it off at AirVenture!" he crowed.

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