



CONVAIRS TO THE RESCUE

**VINTAGE
PROPLINERS
OFFER RELIEF
DURING THE
PUERTO RICO
DISASTER**

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Following in Hurricane *Irma's* footsteps, Hurricane *Maria* made landfall in Puerto Rico during the early morning hours of 20 September 2017 as a Category 4 storm packing sustained winds of 155-mph. *Maria* was the most powerful storm to hit the island in almost 90-years and caused massive flooding and severe damage to the island's infrastructure, homes and businesses. Almost 100% of the island was without power in the wake of the storm, with officials predicting that it would be six-months before power was fully restored. In addition, more than 50% of the island's residents were without safe drinking water and communications were severely hampered by the destruction of most of the cell phone towers.

The island was in desperate need of help and, while relief supplies began arriving within days, distribution was hampered by roads blocked by flooding and debris along with a critical shortage of truck drivers. Supplies arriving by ship and air were piling up at San Juan's port and international airport, unable to reach the residents that so desperately needed them.

Miami Lakes based Conquest Air Cargo operates three former military Convair C-131 aircraft throughout the Caribbean and it turned out that the Convairs were an ideal aircraft to provide fast and efficient delivery of critical supplies to Puerto Rico and other islands affected by Hurricanes *Maria* and *Irma*.

The Convairs are operated under FAR Part 135, which restricts loads to 7500-pounds and skeptics had scoffed at the idea that these aircraft could be operated profitably when Conquest introduced them a few years ago. Conquest owners had faith in the Convairs and they have proven to be very successful on daily scheduled Bahamas flights and perfect for the Puerto Rican relief flights.

While larger jet freighters operate under FAR Part 121 and can carry much larger payloads, they can only operate into Puerto Rico's larger airports such as San Juan International, which already had a backlog of undelivered cargo. Carrying a payload of 7500-pounds, the Convairs were able to fly non-stop from Opa-Locka Airport to San Juan's Fernando Luis Ribas Dominicci/Isla Grande Executive Airport. The airport is San Juan's original commercial airport and, with its short 5539-ft runway, is unable to accommodate the larger jet aircraft.

Avoiding the bottleneck at San Juan International, Conquest was able to offer customers point-to-point service, where cargo would arrive at Opa-Locka Airport, be loaded onto one of the Convairs and be



Loaded with 7500-lbs of relief supplies, CV-340 N345GS runs up its R-2800s a few minutes prior to departure. The Convair last served as a mosquito sprayer. (RMP)

Conquest Air Cargo's four CV-340 freighters on the ramp at Opa-Locka. The aircraft were a perfect fit for the relief flights to Puerto Rico because they were capable of making the flights non-stop and could avoid the bottleneck at San Juan International by flying into the city's smaller airfield. (RMP)



Relief supplies were rapidly loaded into the Conquest Convairs. (RMP)

Despite our near diversion to SJU, a box truck showed up shortly after our arrival at Dominicci Airport and unloading the cargo began. (RMP)

While many of the instruments remain from the Convair's Navy days, the com and nav radios have been modernized and a state-of-the-art GPS added. (RPM)



in the customer's possession in as little as six-hours. As expected, this was very attractive to a wide variety of customers and Conquest has been flying as many as three relief flights a day to Puerto Rico, with occasional flights to other hurricane affected islands such as Dominica and the US Virgin Islands.

On Monday 2 October, I flew on Conquest Air Cargo C-131F/CV340 N345GS from Opa-Locka to Fernando Luis Ribas Dominicci Airport. The aircraft was carrying 7500-pounds of relief supplies with a flight crew consisting of Capt. Eduardo Blanco, First Office Christopher Russell, and Flight Mechanic Richard Gomez. After departing Opa-Locka's Runway 9L, we climbed at 500-fpm to a cruising altitude of 9000-ft. Once reaching altitude, the Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines were fine tuned to 2000-rpm and 30-in MP, giving us a ground speed of about 175-kts.

The flight to San Juan took a bit over five-hours and we were almost diverted to San Juan International Airport due to a serious accident that was blocking the runway at our destination. A Cessna 182D that was landing had flipped over, killing the pilot and seriously injuring the passenger. The airport is home to the Puerto Rican Army National Guard and we heard that rotor wash from either a helicopter or V-22 Osprey was a factor in the crash.

Fortunately, at the last moment, Dominicci Airport opened and we were able to proceed to our original destination.



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