

WITH THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, THE UNITED STATES SURGED FORWARD IN THE WORLD OF COMMERCIAL AVIATION. AMONG THE MANY NEW HIGH-PERFORMANCE AIRCRAFT WAS THE BOEING 377. INITIALLY, IT APPEARED TO BE A WORLD-BEATER BUT THE OPERATIONAL SITUATION WOULD SOON GO VERY VERY WRONG

BY NICHOLAS A. VERONICO

The ultimate in post-war commercial air travel was Boeing's double-deck Model 377 Stratocruiser. Tracing its roots back to the Boeing B-29, the 377 featured a double-lobe fuselage and four 28-cylinder Pratt & Whitney R-4360 radial

engines. Inside, passengers enjoyed the best meals, sleeping berths, powder rooms, and a lower-level lounge. There was even a honeymoon suite at the rear of the plane!

The Stratocruiser set the standard of luxury in air travel in the late 1940s and

the decade of the 1950s, and the Model 377 bridged the gap between the small, cramped, noisy airliners of the late 1930s until the jet age came with the introduction of the Boeing 707 in 1958.

Most major carriers flew the 377 in the 1950s — American Overseas

DISASTERS WAITING TO HAPPEN?

Airways, BOAC, Northwest, Pan Am, United — and when they converted to turboprops or jets, non-scheduled carriers like Transocean Air Lines, *Línea Internacional Aérea* (Ecuador), and *Rutas Aéreas Nacionales SA* (Venezuela) operated the surplus Stratocruisers.

Although the majority of Boeing's Stratocruisers each flew more than 28,000-hours during their careers, the type had a number of high profile incidents and accidents that have left a scar on the aircraft's service record.

Of the 56 Stratocruisers built, ten aircraft were lost taking 135 souls in the process.

Aside from pilot error, the R-4360 was a cantankerous engine and the Hamilton Standard propellers were temperamental, suffering from unpredictable material failure. The engines and propellers were the apex of piston airliner technology, but both contributed to the Stratocruiser hull loss count.

In addition to those souls killed in the hull losses, two lives were lost in connection with Stratocruiser main cabin door incidents, both involving Pan Am aircraft. On 11 February 1950, while

flying over Long Island, New York, the main cabin door of N1031V *Clipper Mayflower*, opened in flight. The pressure differential blew a cabin steward overboard with fatal results. Two-years later, near Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, N1030V *Clipper Southern Cross*' main cabin door also opened in flight. Prior to departure, the ground crew and purser checked that *Southern Cross*' door was secure, yet a cockpit warning light indicated differently. The flight engineer checked the door and found the handle to be within 25-degrees of the locked position, and visually inspected to see that the locking pins and pressure lock were in position. After the inspection, the flight engineer reported to the captain that the door was secure. Having climbed to 12,000-feet 18-minutes after takeoff, at 23°30'S Latitude 43°40'W Longitude, the main cabin door popped open and the pressure differential blew a female passenger — from Seat 33, closest to the door, overboard. Both N1030V and N1031V returned to service and flew lengthy careers with Pan Am.

N31230 UNITED'S MAINLINER OAHU

United was the first carrier to lose a Stratocruiser. The crash occurred during a routine training flight on 12 September 1951, during an approach to the San Francisco Airport. Flying as call sign *United Trainer 7030*, N31230 (msn 15970) was under the command of 46-year-old Capt. Frederick S. Angstadt, flight manager for United's Los Angeles base, who was being given his semi-annual instrument flight check.

Angstadt joined the airline in September 1932 and had accumulated 17,384-hours of which 572 were in Stratocruisers. During the 90-day period prior to the crash, Angstadt had flown 76.5-hours.

Captain Hugh C. Worthington, 46, assistant flight manager for San Francisco-Oakland operations, was a 16,390-hour pilot was riding as copilot and check airman. Flight Engineer Charles K. Brogden, 47, was the third and final crewmember on the flight. Brogden joined United in December 1939, and transitioned to the 377 on 3 July 1950. In the 14-months since his



Passengers loaded and everything buttoned up, Northwest B.377 N74602 *Stratoliner Minneapolis-St. Paul* prepares for a night departure across the Atlantic. With its deluxe seating and lower floor lounge, the Stratoliner was the ultimate in transpacific/transatlantic aerial travel.

