



Keeping it in the Family

RUTH RICHTER-HOLDEN FIRST FLEW IN LOCKHEED ELECTRA 12A NC18137 AS A SMALL CHILD WITH HER FATHER. TODAY SHE OWNS AND FLIES THAT VERY AEROPLANE. SHE RELATES THE INCREDIBLE STORY TO STEVE BRIDGEWATER.

We are all enthusiastic over the aircraft that we fly or own - but Ruth Richter-Holden has a special reason to be proud of NC18137. The Lockheed Electra 12A she has dubbed 'LE' (short for Lockheed Electra but pronounced 'Ellie') was a pivotal aircraft in the history of Trans World Airlines (TWA), the airline co-founded by her father Paul Richter.

By a strange twist of fate she was offered the chance to buy the aeroplane in 2005 and didn't need to think twice. It has since been returned to its late 1940s TWA paint scheme and exhibited at various airshows across the USA, including the 2006 EAA AirVenture show at Oshkosh, Wisconsin in July where it won a coveted 'Bronze Lindy' award. I caught up with Ruth during the

show and she revealed how this stunningly beautiful aeroplane had re-entered her life.

"I'm not quite sure how it happened," she confessed. "What I do know is that it certainly wasn't by the mind or hand of man - it must've been destiny. In fact I'm looking for a statistician, because I think I could've won the lottery easier than I could've found this aeroplane in these circumstances!"

Built in 1937 at Lockheed's Burbank, California, plant, NC18137 was originally delivered to Continental Airlines, but three years later it was sold to Transcontinental and Western Air (later Trans World Airlines). Ruth's father did the initial test flight before purchase and then flew it to TWA headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri. It went on to become TWA's high-



TOP NC18137 was used by TWA for route-proving, VIP transport and high altitude research. (VIA RUTH RICHTER)

ABOVE Ruth Richter, seen here with co-owner Rocky Walters, has a heart-felt emotional attachment to NC18137, and her enthusiasm and devotion are evident. (ALL KEY - STEVE BRIDGEWATER UNLESS STATED)

altitude research lab flown by notable pilot 'Tommy' Tomlinson, although Paul Richter also flew it extensively as an executive transport in the early 1940s. Prior to this young Ruth took to the skies on her father's knee, a memory she treasures to this day. Of the 130 or so Lockheed Electra 12As originally built, fewer than ten survive to this day. "Over the years others have crashed or been abandoned for aircraft with greater beauty or speed, but this one wasn't," said Ruth. "Why did this one survive and come full circle to me? I'd love to know."

WEB PAGE FIND

Ruth has compiled an extensive website (www.paulrichtertwalegend.com) consisting of stories, anecdotes and memorabilia relating to TWA and her father, and it was through the site that she received word that NC18137 still existed.

In early 2005 well-known aircraft restorers and dealers Connie and Ed Bowlin had the aircraft for sale. It was their understanding that it had a history with the airline, so Connie contacted Ruth to try to trace its history.

"I explained what little I knew," Ruth told me, "mainly that it was used for high altitude research for around a year when it was owned by TWA. Then, halfway through the conversation, I stopped and told Connie that I couldn't help her sell this aeroplane - I had to buy it myself!"

Ruth is a PPL and has around 1,500hrs logged - mostly in Piper PA-28 Warriors. She readily admits that she was not looking to buy an aeroplane.

"The thought never even occurred to me," she told me, "but I just knew I had to have this one. Not only was it a piece of TWA history, it was an aircraft that had a direct and provable link to my father, and better still I could recall flying in this very machine with him."

She told Connie she would call her back in a few hours after she'd had a think about what to do. "I think she thought I was out of my mind, and to be honest I did, too," Ruth laughed. "But three hours later I called her back and told her I simply had to buy the aeroplane."

"I knew it was the right decision, but I still lay awake all night thinking about what I had just done. I had piles of my father's papers around the house at



ABOVE The two large 450hp Pratt & Whitney R-985 radial engines are not the most economical of powerplants and typically they burn between 165 and 190lbs of fuel per hour... each!

BELOW When they collected the aeroplane from Georgia, Ruth had no taildragger time at all and Rocky had just six hours in them!

the time because I was researching his life so I got up and went to read some of them. For some reason I was drawn to an envelope that I hadn't looked in before, and when I opened it I found note cards for a speech he had made to a tiny high-school graduation. One card fell out and it read 'What man can conceive, man can achieve' and that one phrase went through my mind for the rest of the night. If I really wanted to do this, I knew my father was telling me I could do it."

The next morning Ruth went to visit her good friend, neighbour and flying instructor Curt 'Rocky' Walters. "I knocked on his door and asked him what he thought I should do," she continued. "He was so enthusiastic

about the idea that I just knew I had to go ahead and bring LE back into the family. Rocky is now part-owner of the aeroplane with me and we've owned it since June 2005."

FRAUGHT FERRY FLIGHT

Ruth and Rocky went to Georgia to collect the aeroplane and fly it back to its new home at San Luis Obispo Airport, California. "At that time I had never flown a taildragger and Rocky had just six hours in them!" Ruth continued. "That said, he's a great pilot. He did admit that he was worried about flying LE for the first time, but we knew that this was exactly how pilots of my father's generation would've approached the matter - they ▶



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just had to get in and learn to fly it. There were no check pilots in those days, only 'real' pilots of yesteryear. "The flight home was safe but eventful due to three engine failures in Las Vegas! The temperature out of the ramp was 135 degrees and it took us 40 minutes to taxi out to the runway, so by the time we'd got to the runway, tail up and ready to fly the left engine quit.

"In the end we elected to take off at 5am when the air was cooler and everything was OK. However, after a perfect flight to California, two days

later, on a cool coastal morning, Rocky again lost RPM on the left engine so we shut it in a hangar and started to tear it down to find out what was going on. We replaced the carburettors and both engine-driven and electric fuel pumps. Then a fuel line disintegrated in our hands as we removed it so that had to be replaced as well. We don't know which of these items was causing us the problem, but after we reassembled the engine it was fine, and has been ever since."

At this point it is worth pointing out that as gorgeous as it looks LE is not

a restored 'show-plane' but a working aeroplane in stock configuration. "It is merely maintained in semi-original condition with the many modifications it has acquired over the years, but with an emphasis on safety," Ruth explained. "It will never be a perfect aeroplane because I feel that to strip it down and replace all the parts would mean it is no longer the same aeroplane that my father flew. Also, at my age, I don't want to miss a single day's flying in it! "It's a living aeroplane, a flying legend. It's the only original TWA aeroplane still flying from the era, and for me that takes some comprehending - it is a piece of history."

HEROES

Ruth and Rocky take LE to airshows around the US and will also part of the Angel Flight programme. Angel Flight is a US-wide network of organisations that arranges free flights to transport patients and their families in private aircraft to specialised medical treatment facilities. It does the same in the event of national crisis or whenever there is a compelling human need. "It will give us the opportunity to give the incredible joy of being in an aeroplane like this to other people," Ruth told me. "I think you are never too old to

BELOW 'LE' is a working aeroplane rather than a show-plane. The cockpit is a mix of old and new and evidence of how the aircraft has evolved since being constructed in 1937.



stop living your dream, and to make a difference to the lives and dreams of people who are seriously ill is very important to me.

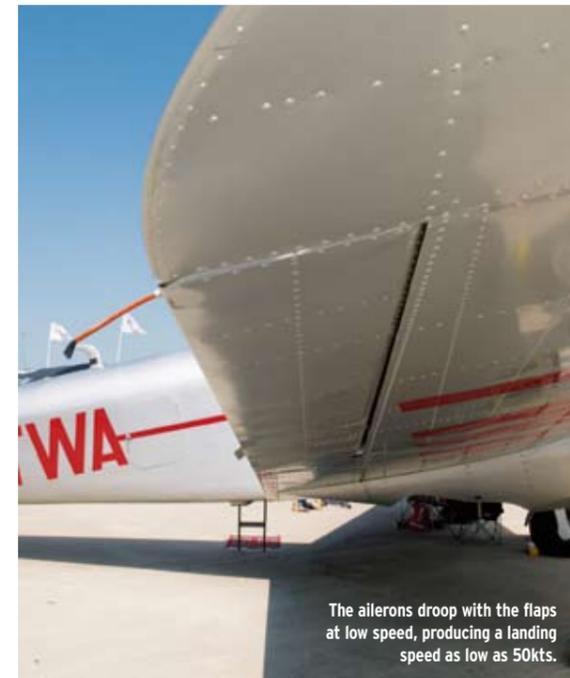
"I'm also concerned that young people today have no heroes, and that is one reason we take the aeroplane to airshows. This machine is a story of real heroes and it needs to be told and shared as widely as possible. From the designers Bob Gross and Clarence 'Kelly' Johnson to the pilots who flew the aircraft there are so many stories to tell. Bob was a legend at Lockheed for more than 40 years, a gentleman whom everybody loved working with." Much of the design work on the Lockheed Electra 12A was performed by a student assistant called Clarence 'Kelly' Johnson. He suggested two changes to the design, altering the single tail to double fins (later to become a Lockheed trademark), and deleting the large wing fillets. Kelly Johnson went on to join Lockheed as a regular employee, ultimately leading the top secret Skunk Works division in developing advanced aircraft such as the SR-71 Blackbird.

"When the US Mail contract was taken away in 1934 my father had already placed a contact with Douglas for a fleet of airliners," explained Ruth. "He spoke to Donald Douglas and told him that he was prepared to honour the contract - even though TWA would have to lay off staff - on the condition that Douglas employed every member of staff that lost their job at the airline. It was a different world back then - people did honourable things and earned respect. I think it is heroes like these people that our children lack today."

LIFELONG PASSION

Although flying had been in her blood from an early age it was not until later in life that Ruth finally took the plunge and began taking flying lessons. "When I was younger something always got in the way of flying - be it work or family - but I always knew I wanted to be a pilot like my dad," she admitted. "I eventually achieved that 18 years ago, but having waited so patiently to reach that stage point I then decided I simply had to do it there and then. I walked into my local flying school, where I met Rocky for the first time. I explained that I wanted to learn to fly and he tried to make an appointment for me to take my first lesson. 'No, no,' I insisted. 'I have to start NOW!'"

"I flew every day that I could and finally got my PPL, and then went on to get my instrument rating. I've been addicted ever since."



The ailerons droop with the flaps at low speed, producing a landing speed as low as 50kts.

TOP The Lockheed 12 was the first all-electric aeroplane and has a landing light that retracts into the wing. "It can also be used as an effective air brake," Rocky jokes.

TOP RIGHT The aeroplane has been restored to the colours it wore while flying with TWA in the 1940s.

ABOVE RIGHT The landing gear on the Lockheed Electra range of aircraft has a history of failures and 'LE' has had four undercarriage collapses in its life. The over-centre brace has to be set to a small tolerance and the gear also needs to be extended, with a certain amount of airspeed flowing over it to ensure that it locks into place.



Today she has around 1,500hrs logged. "I don't have a great history as a flyer," she told modestly, "but I have a great history of love of flying - even more so now that LE is in my life."

"I've gone from a small child immersed in a world of aeroplanes to becoming a pilot myself. Some expected it would happen sooner than it did, but I'm glad I've got to be where I am today. Back when I was a child I thought all kids flew in aeroplanes: it was the norm for me. At times I would fly the DST [Douglas Sleeper Transport - the forerunner of the DC-3 Dakota] with my father between Kansas City to Los Angeles. Off to the airport in my pyjamas, tucked up in a berth for the night flight, and sometimes sitting on my dad's knee on the flight deck."

Ruth grew up with the airline pioneers. "My 'Uncle Jack' and 'Uncle Walt' were TWA co-founders Jack Frye and Walter Hamilton, and 'Uncle Tommy' was high altitude test pilot Tommy Tomlinson. I sat next to 'Uncle Howard' [aviation legend Howard Hughes] at Thanksgiving dinner. He was famous for not being good around children, but I was 'tolerated.' It's only now that

I look back on those times and realise what historic times they were - by keeping LE in the air, it's my part in keeping that history alive. Also, on a personal level, I'm still that little kid when I fly this aeroplane. The engines start and I get shivers down my spine."

LEGENDARY LOCKHEED

Sitting in 'Aeroshell Square' at Oshkosh, amidst all the other stars of the show, 'LE' was never short of admirers during the week-long visit. The aeroplane looks beautiful in its authentic silver and red TWA colour scheme and has that certain panache only evoked by aircraft from the Art Deco period. However, according to Ruth and Rocky, the aircraft flies as good as it looks.

"It's a dream to fly," Ruth said with a smile. "I have flown it a lot over the last year, mainly thanks to Rocky's excellent instruction. I absolutely love it. It's much easier to fly than the PA-28 Warrior once it's in the air - it's just trickier to take off and land. Because the cockpit sits so high above the ground I find it difficult to get used to the landing attitude.

"The interesting thing is that there

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are only brakes for the person in the left-hand seat," Rocky interjected, "so whoever is on the left is in command. That said, the brakes are not very good anyway!

"When we bought the aeroplane, Ed Bowlin said to us: 'There's good news and bad news about this aeroplane. The bad news... there are effectively no brakes. The good news... there are effectively no brakes! This makes it much harder to accidentally ground loop the aeroplane!'"

The landing gear on the Lockheed Electra range of aircraft has a history of failures and 'LE' has experienced four undercarriage collapses in her life - although none since she has been in the care of Ruth and Rocky. "The over-centre brace has to be set to a small tolerance - it's very critical," Rocky explained. "It can't be any more than 1/4in over-braced or 1/2in under-braced. The gear also needs to be extended, with a certain amount of airspeed flowing over it to ensure that it locks into place. If it doesn't lock down properly, it might land OK but it can collapse during the taxi phase. It's never happened to us, but I understand it's a very graceful (but

expensive) thing to watch!"

Normally technological developments in aviation are made in wartime, but this aeroplane evolved during the relative peace of the 1930s - that said, though, it had some revolutionary new technology incorporated in its design. For instance, it was the first all-electric aeroplane, featuring a landing light that retracts into the wing.

When it was first produced, Lockheed boasted that the Electra could fly at 200kts but nowadays Ruth and Rocky plan for 160kts, showing due respect to a machine of 'latter years'. For such a slippery and aerodynamic machine, the aircraft will slow up surprisingly well. Rocky says he tends to slow to 80kts over the fence but it is happy down to 60kts in the flare without the worry of stalling. This is mainly because of the large and powerful flaps and drooping



ABOVE The only difference from the original TWA paint scheme is the aircraft's red nose. It was already on 'LE' when Ruth acquired her and she thought it looked "kinda neat". (Via RUTH RICHTER)

LEFT Despite its modern looks, small details such as the navigation lights exude Art Deco styling and give away its 1930s design.

ailerons - real innovations in 1937 when the type was introduced. "I actually left the flaps down accidentally during one of my take-offs," Rocky revealed. "It only ran along the ground for about 100-150 yards before going straight up like a helicopter! It's amazing and makes for an impressive short take-off. The aeroplane is so docile and forgiving, though - even after making a stupid mistake like that - it didn't turn around and bite me. I would like to say that it is a very difficult aeroplane to fly, and only very skilled pilots should attempt to fly it... but I can't! It really is one of the sweetest, nicest aeroplanes I've ever flown. If you can find a Lockheed 12 you should buy it - it's one of the best aeroplanes you'll ever fly... if you can afford the fuel!"

Needless to say, the two large 450hp Pratt & Whitney R-985 radial engines are not the most economical of powerplants and typically they burn between 165 and 190lit of fuel per hour... each! That said, oil burn is not excessive, and although Rocky could not give a precise figure he did reveal that they had burnt just six quarts between California and Wisconsin on the way to the show.

But for Ruth the expense of flying a machine the size and relative complexity of LE pales into insignificance when she thinks about the history she is preserving. "The minute I saw this aeroplane in Georgia in 2005, and sat in the right-hand seat just before we bought it, I could feel it - I just knew that was where I had sat when I flew in the aeroplane in 1940s," she said with a wistful look. "Today LE represents the spirit of TWA. NC18137 belongs to all TWAers... I'm only the guardian. TWA was my family and a great heritage. I'm awed, amazed, elated and excited. I'm living proof that you are never too old to live your dream." ■

