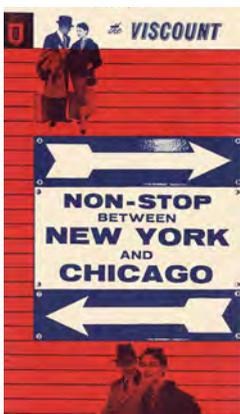
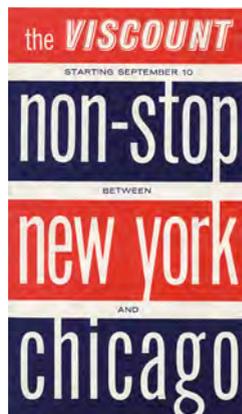
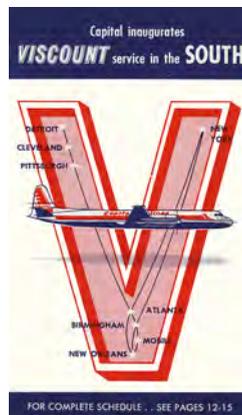
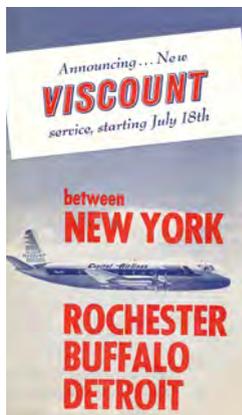


THE VISCOUNT COMES TO AMERICA PART ONE

Capital AIRLINES

DAVID H. STRINGER introduces a new three-part series detailing the trio of American operators — Capital, Continental and Northeast — who saw the early potential of the world's first turboprop airliner and took the bold decision to "buy British" at a time when the USA led the world in airliner design



The Viscount entered service with Capital Airlines in July 1955, supplementing the company's fleet of Douglas DC-3s, DC-4s and elderly Lockheed Constellations. At a stroke, Capital became the standard-setter for airlines in the USA, having acquired a cutting-edge aircraft type that had the flexibility to operate profitably over a varied network.

ONE OF THE "grande dames" of Washington DC hotels, The Mayflower has hosted politicians, celebrities and the movers and shakers of business and industry for more than a century. On the evening of March 29, 1957, James H. "Slim" Carmichael was guest of honour at the Washington Dinner of the Newcomen Society in North America, held in The Mayflower's Grand Ballroom. Carmichael, President of Washington-based Capital Airlines, delivered an address to the assembled members of the corporate history organisation. The title of his presentation was "A Distinguished Briton in American Skies! The Viscounts".

Capital was the first of the American airlines to operate a turboprop-powered aircraft — the British-designed and -built Vickers Viscount, which it had introduced to its passengers in June 1955. By the time Carmichael gave his speech at The Mayflower, the company was employing 57 examples of the type on routes throughout the eastern USA. As a result of the lavish media campaign introducing Capital's new aircraft to the American public, the whistling jet-prop from England was firmly associated with Carmichael's airline and vice-versa.

In the spring of 1957 the advent of the true jet age for commercial airlines was still a year and a half in the future, when Pan American and BOAC would launch Boeing 707 and de Havilland Comet 4 services respectively, in October 1958. The initial foray into commercial turbojet service with the Comet I had been suspended in 1954 after a series of accidents had revealed the need to incorporate substantial design changes. Consequently, for almost two years before his presentation to the Newcomen Society, Carmichael's Capital had been a step ahead of every other airline in the USA in its choice of flight equipment.

Capital Airlines was the result of a 1936 merger

between Pennsylvania Airlines and Central Airlines. The merged company was known as Pennsylvania Central Airlines (PCA) until after the Second World War, when the name of the outfit was changed to Capital Airlines.

The President of PCA was C. Bedell Monro, formerly the chief executive of Pennsylvania Airlines. During the war he had committed some of the company's resources to the study of constructing seadromes — airports on floating islands in the Atlantic Ocean, located at 800-mile (1,300km) intervals, south of the "great circle" route that stretches from the USA to Europe via Newfoundland, Iceland or Greenland to Scandinavia or the UK. These airport islands were to accommodate PCA's aircraft flying trans-oceanic services after the war. By 1946, however, Douglas DC-4s and Lockheed Constellations were making regular transatlantic flights, refuelling at airports comfortably situated on terra firma. It was a moot point for Monro's company anyway, as the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) denied all of PCA's applications for international routes.

CAPITAL INTO BUSINESS

With America's post-war economy facing bright prospects, Monro's newly-minted Capital Airlines ordered 50 twin-piston-engined 36-passenger Martin 2-0-2s to serve the company's network of short- and medium-haul routes, which extended south to Birmingham, Alabama, west to Chicago, Illinois, and north to Sault Ste Marie, Michigan, serving many cities in between. After the initial post-war boom, traffic subsided to normal levels and, like many other airlines, Capital found itself in financial trouble. Systemwide load factors dropped from 82 per cent in 1945 to 54 per cent in 1947. The order for the Martins was cancelled, as was a proposed merger with Boston-based Northeast Airlines.