



# Howard Hughes

## & the **CONSTELLATION** *A strange affair*

Howard Hughes's many exploits in aviation are well-known, but there was one type with which the famous multi-millionaire had an enduring, if at times characteristically eccentric, relationship — Lockheed's supremely elegant Constellation. **PETER J. MARSON** details the Connies acquired by Hughes for his own use as successive variants became available

**N**UMEROUS BOOKS and articles have been written on the life of Howard Robard Hughes Jr, some purporting to be biographical, others dealing with aspects of his chequered career and sad demise. This article attempts to trace his involvement with the Lockheed Constellation series of aircraft and is based on documentary evidence from Lockheed records and personal correspondence with people who worked for and with him over the years.

### HUGHES & TWA

Hughes became interested in Transcontinental & Western Air (TWA) in 1939, when he began purchasing blocks of the company's stock. In October 1944, by which time he owned \$5,505,000 of the airline's stock, he gained permission from the USA's Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) to acquire control of the airline.

In May 1939 Hughes opened discussions with the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation (LAC) at Burbank, California, regarding the purchase of the precursor design of the Constellation, the Lockheed Model 44 Excalibur. The following month, together with Jack Frye, President of TWA, Hughes asked Lockheed to develop a transcontinental airliner based on four Wright R-2600 Twin Cyclone engines and with a gross weight of 52,000lb–55,000lb (23,600kg–25,000kg),

to operate non-stop from New York to Los Angeles with 20 passengers in berths or 36 seats, at a cruising speed of around 300 m.p.h. (480km/h) with a payload of 6,000lb (2,700kg).

Lockheed studies, however, showed that this was impossible to achieve with Twin Cyclones and suggested a new development based on four Wright GR-3350 twin-row 18-cylinder supercharged engines and a gross weight of 68,000–70,000lb (31,000–32,000kg), known as Lockheed Design Drawing #250000. This was presented to Hughes and Frye in the third week of June 1939 by Robert E. Gross, Hall L. Hibbard and Clarence "Kelly" Johnson of Lockheed.

Hughes and Frye accepted the new design, the former insisting that it be kept totally secret and referred to as the "Excalibur A". An Airline Equipment Agreement was duly signed on July 10, 1939, for nine aircraft. Despite Hughes's efforts at secrecy, by early 1940 the new design had been leaked to Pan American Airways (PAA). As the latter's network did not conflict at the time with that of TWA, Hughes agreed that PAA should join the project, with the domestic TWA aircraft designated as Model 049s and PAA's international examples as Model 149s.

On June 11, 1940, TWA raised its order for the type to 30 aircraft after PAA ordered 20 aircraft, and then raised it again to 40 on June 25, 1940, after PAA raised its order to 40 aircraft.

After the USA entered World War Two in

OPPOSITE PAGE Howard Hughes (left) and TWA President Jack Frye descend the makeshift steps built by TWA personnel at Washington DC after the pair had flown Lockheed 049 Constellation c/n 1962, allocated registration NC38936 (although it was never applied), from California to the capital in record time on April 17, 1944. VIA JON PROCTOR

