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The Famous Douglas DC-7: Starting in the late 1930s, there was keen competition in large American aircraft between several well-known builders. At first Douglas Aircraft seemed to have the edge, then it would be Boeing for a while. When the demands of World War II required both military bombers and large cargo planes, the competition intensified. The developing passenger carriers had purchased many Douglas DC-3s, a twin-engine passenger plane that could carry between 22 and 28 passengers. With minor modifications, the Army Air Force called this the C-47. With demand for greater range and increasing loads, Douglas came up with the 4-engine C-54, of which the Air Transport Command had many, including several squadrons that flew out of New Castle Air Base in Delaware for points in Europe and the Middle East. As the commercial airlines had similar demands immediately following the war, a lot more "civilian C-54s" were built and were called DC-4s. Douglas was a major player in the building of large airplanes as World War II concluded. The main plant was in Long Beach, California, with satellite construction locations in Oklahoma and Illinois. During the war alone, Douglas built nearly 30,000 airplanes, about 16% of worldwide production. In the late 1940s, almost every major airline owned DC-4s for its long-distance routes. The competition was from Consolidated Aircraft's Constellation and Boeing's Stratocruiser, which was essentially a B-29 with a 17-passenger underbelly that served as a cocktail lounge. Only a very few of all these planes had pressurized cabins.

A larger and slightly faster version of the DC-4 appeared by the late '40s, and was called a DC-6. With a pressurized cabin, it could fly at higher altitudes and could carry up to 70 passengers. Again, the commercial airlines bought these in great quantity, and they fast succeeded DC-4s for long-distance air travel.

Last week, Bob Wilhelm sent a digital movie of the DC-7, the largest and by far the fastest of this series of airplanes, which was introduced in 1954. One that is still being flown was demonstrated and ably described by two veteran pilots. The huge engines, of which there were four, had an innovative way to use exhaust gases for more power and higher efficiency. As a travel agent in Wilmington, I was invited, along with many other agents, to fly on a brand new DC-7 being promoted by United Air Lines. We took off from Philadelphia International, flew around South Jersey and its beaches, had a good airline meal, and landed back at Philadelphia about 1½ hours later. Many of the foreign carriers, plus United, American, and Delta, ordered DC-7s much faster than they could be built. They carried a pay load of about 85 passengers.

The DC-7s' heyday was brief, however. In 1955, Boeing got back into the commercial airline business full blast with the introduction of its jet-powered 707, with increased air speed of 200 m.p.h. over piston planes, much greater range, and a fuselage that carried 160 passengers. The Atlantic could easily be flown nonstop in about 6 hours! This time, Boeing could not keep up with demand, and planes were backordered for several years. The jet age was here to stay.