

737: 40 years strong

Continued improvement, innovation has paid off, as order tally tops 7,000

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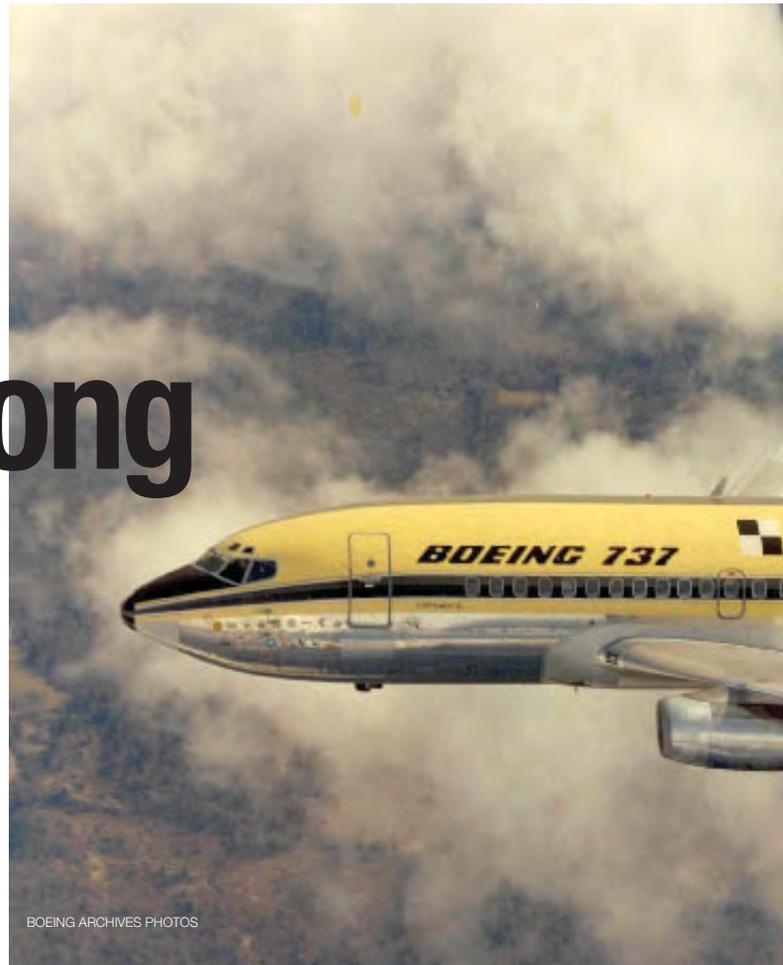
In 1965 the Boeing name was synonymous with big, multien-gine jet airplanes. So when the company announced its new commercial twinjet, the 737, it quickly earned the nickname “the baby Boeing.” While the future market for a small commercial jet looked to have minor promise at the time, no one expected the Baby Boeing would become the jet-age version of the ubiquitous DC-3.

With more than 7,000 orders since then, it’s hard to think of the 737 as anything but a tremendous success. Yet in the beginning, Boeing launched it almost reluctantly with an order from a single customer for just 21 airplanes.

Launching the 737 was one of the most hotly debated decisions in the history of the company, pitting the realities of the business situation against a vision of the future of air travel. It highlighted how consequential and long-reaching the decisions to go forward with a new airplane program can be.

At the time, the 737 was already well behind the competition,

The first of many—the prototype 737-100—lifts off from Boeing Field on its first flight April 9, 1967.



BOEING ARCHIVES PHOTOS

the Douglas DC-9 and the BAC-111. It also was in competition for resources within the company, going up against other competitions and development programs, such as the C-5, the 747, the 727-200 and the largest airplane program in the aerospace industry at that time—the supersonic transport.

In the end, based on the enthusiasm of a single but very loyal customer—Lufthansa—and the confidence of a handful of board members, including Boeing’s most trusted engineer, Ed Wells, the Boeing board voted to go forward with the 737 program.

TOO TALL FOR PLANT 2

The first 737 was the last new airplane to be built at Plant 2 on Boeing Field in Seattle, so it was fitting that the world’s most popular commercial jet would top off a production run that included the B-17 Flying Fortress, the venerable B-52 Stratofortress and the world’s first large swept-wing jet—the XB-47 Stratojet.

While the old assembly building at Plant 2 seems cavernous to this day, it still wasn’t tall enough for the 737’s tail, which was attached using a crane in the parking lot. The plane was then rolled down to the Thompson Site, just south of Plant 2 on Boeing Field, where Boeing had set up the first production line for the 737.

At a ceremony inside the Thompson Site on Jan. 17, 1967, the first 737 was introduced to the world. The festivities included a christening by flight attendants representing the 17 airlines that had ordered the new plane.

On April 9, 1967, at 1:15 p.m., Boeing test pilots Brien Wygle and Lew Wallick took off in the first 737 from Boeing Field for a flawless first flight. Wygle said, “When I began to rotate the plane (liftoff from the runway) it felt right in every way.” Throughout the



The drab “house” colors on the prototype 737-100 purposefully avoided the look of airline customer liveries.

ordered 19 737s to serve as the T-43 navigation trainer, and airline customers ordered only 31 others.

However, Boeing sales and marketing employees saw the potential for the plane with smaller airlines in smaller markets, and the order books began to fill with single-digit orders that carried the Baby Boeing through the 1970s and into the '80s. At that time Boeing introduced the 737-300/-400/-500 series, utilizing the latest technology and new high-bypass engines. The improved 737 quickly became the plane of choice for major airlines and low-cost carriers.

In the 1990s, following Bill Boeing’s timeless commandment to always stay at the forefront of technology and adapt new technologies to Boeing products, the latest innovations in avionics and aerodynamics were adapted to the 737. The result: the Next-Generation 737 family was launched with the 737-600/-700/-800/-900 series.

As airline ownership models and business models continue to change, the 737 remains a favorite choice of airlines. Not only has the 737 launched many new airlines, but some of the world’s most successful airlines have built their entire fleet—and their success—with the 737 alone.

Today, looking at the 737, it’s hard to believe that the decision to build such a tremendously successful product was an agonizing one. It highlights one of the greatest risks of the business—that the outcome of a decision to launch a new product is generally not fully realized until long after the decision makers have retired.

The 737 also is a clear reminder of how important it is to remain customer-focused, to keep products innovative by adapting the latest technologies and maintaining the enterprising spirit that enables Boeing to chart the course, find a way, and achieve success over the long run.

The 737 might be Boeing’s baby, but its lessons are huge and its tremendous success a reflection of the pioneering spirit, vision and talent of the people of Boeing. ■

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flight the crew exclaimed that the plane “handles beautifully!”

The first 737 landed at Paine Field in Everett, Wash., to a cheering crowd that included Boeing President William Allen, who told reporters, “We’re going to sell a lot of these airplanes!” And he added prophetically, “I think that when I reach the old men’s home, we still will be selling lots of these airplanes.”

A few weeks later, on May 13, the first production airplane, sporting the livery of Lufthansa, was taken up for its initial flight by Boeing test pilots Lew Wallick and Kit Carson. (Five thousand 737s later, Kit’s son Scott would be leading Boeing Commercial Airplanes.) On Dec. 28, 1967, Lufthansa took delivery of the first production 737, a -100 model, in a ceremony at Boeing Field. The following day United Airlines, the first U.S. customer to order the 737, took delivery of the first 737-200.

The No. 1 737 was a prototype used for flight test and certification and never went into revenue service. In 1974 the plane turned in its drab Boeing house livery of dark green and cream for the sporty white and blue colors of NASA. For the next two decades the plane was based at the NASA Langley Research Center in Virginia and had a career as a flying laboratory. Today the plane is on display at the Museum of Flight in Seattle, surrounded by bigger members of the early Boeing 7-series jet family and parked just a few hundred feet from where it first took to the air 40 years ago.

AVOIDING CANCELLATION

The 737 was almost canceled before it got started and faced cancellation once again in 1971. At that time the 737 was considered a struggling program with considerable developmental costs that were still far from being returned. That year the U.S. Air Force

United Airlines was the first U.S. airline to receive the 737, which also was the first 737-200. The delivery ceremony for this airplane also commemorated United being the carrier to take delivery of Boeing’s first twin-engine commercial plane—the Model 247.

