Original 737 Comes Home to Celebrate 30th Anniversary

The first Boeing 737 will return for a visit to its birthplace at Boeing Field this weekend to celebrate the 30th anniversary of its first flight.

The aircraft will be on display at Seattle's Museum of Flight Saturday, May 3, with public tours of the interior scheduled from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Videos of the 737's development and history will be shown throughout the day. The program is free with Museum admission.

The airplane (serial number 19437) was purchased by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) from Boeing in 1973 and continues to be used by the space agency to conduct weather research.

Recently, retired Boeing test pilots Brien Wygle and Lew Wallick recalled their experiences at the airplane's controls on the historic April 9, 1967 first 737 flight from Boeing Field.

"When we took off, it went very well, very smoothly," recalled Wallick, three decades later. "It was a very pleasant flight and Brien and I were very happy with it. The 737 is a great pilot's airplane. You get in the cockpit and literally strap the airplane on. It's just a part of you."

"Like all first flights, it was a culmination of a lot of work," said Wygle, who will be on hand at the Museum of Flight to recount his experiences. "Bill Allen (then Boeing President) wished us well and saw us off."

In a 2 1/2-hour test flight, Wygle and Wallick checked out the airplane's handling characteristics and maneuverability before declaring that it handled beautifully. The airplane landed at Paine Field in Everett, Wash.

Wygle was instrumental in designing the 737 cockpit, which introduced the concept of a two-person flight crew. After much negotiation, the pilots' union accepted the move.

The airplane went through a rigorous certification schedule ordered by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration. It flew the heavily traveled 'golden triangle' between Boston, New York and Washington, D.C.

Wygle later took the 737 on marketing and sales trips to Asia and South America. Specially equipped 737s capable of landing on grass or gravel airstrips became popular in remote areas.

The airplane was a commercial gamble for Boeing. It was introduced as the company was financing development of the 747 and planning the Supersonic Transport. Both the 737 and 747 were "way over budget," Wygle said. "It was a very worrisome time for Bill Allen and that cast some shadow over the program, but once we got it flying, everyone liked it."

The airlines liked it, too. Today the order book totals more than 3,600 for the world's best-selling passenger jetliner. "It has become a very popular airplane, in part, because it is small, maneuverable, easy to fly and easy to land," Wygle said.

But no one could have projected the success of the 737 program, Wygle and Wallick said. "You thought in the order of maybe a total of 500 to 1,000 airplanes to be sold. That was a lot of airplanes in the '60s," Wallick said.

"We thought it would become a popular airplane, but we never thought it would take over like it has," Wygle said. "It's unbelievable. But it had a very good foundation."

Wygle praised the family of Next-Generation 737s. "They're superb," he said. "They're a great improvement all around."

Wallick, who attended the Next-Generation 737 first flight in February, agreed. "I'm delighted that the 737 still is in production and has a long life ahead of it," he said. "From the very beginning, it's been a great airplane.

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