Boeing Marks 50th Anniversary of 707 First Flight

Today Boeing [NYSE: BA] marks the 50th anniversary of the first flight of its 707 jetliner, and the point in commercial aviation history when propellers gave way to the jet age and air travel became affordable and available.

On a typically cold and rainy Northwest Friday afternoon Dec. 20, 1957, Boeing's chief of flight test Tex Johnston, his copilot Jim Gannet and flight engineer Tom Layne sat on the drenched runway at Renton Municipal Airport in the first production 707, checked weather reports and waited for the chance to take the new airplane up for its maiden flight.

At 12:30 p.m., the decision was made to go. But as the 707 climbed over the city of Renton, the unpredictable weather immediately closed in around the airliner and forced a landing at nearby Boeing Field after just seven minutes in the air. Later that day, the sky cleared enough for the crew to take the 707 up for a 71-minute flight. This historic day was the culmination of five years of hard work and gut-wrenching decisions. With the 707, Boeing President William Allen and his leadership team had "bet the company" on a vision that the future of commercial aviation was in jets.

The prototype model 367-80 or "Dash 80" led to a revolution in air transportation. Although it never entered commercial service itself, the Dash 80 gave birth to the 707 series of jetliners. Much larger, faster and smoother than the propeller airplanes it was replacing, the Boeing 707 quickly changed the face of international travel.

The first commercial 707s, labeled the 707-120 series, had a larger cabin and other improvements compared to the prototype. Powered by early Pratt & Whitney turbojet engines, these initial 707s had range capability that was barely sufficient to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Boeing soon introduced the long-range 707-320 Intercontinental that in May 1959 flew 5,382 miles nonstop from Seattle to Rome in 11 hours and 6 minutes. A number of variants were developed for special use, including shorter-bodied airplanes and the 720 series, which was lighter and faster with better runway performance.

Pan Am World Airways was the first 707 customer, signing up for 20 Boeing 707-120s in October 1955. In 1962, Pan Am also took delivery of the last 707-120 series airplane. Production of commercial 707s ended in 1978 after 878 had been built. The number rose to more than 1,000 by 1994, when limited production of military variants ended. Most civil 707s left in service today have been converted to freighters, while a number are used as corporate transports. Approximately 130 remain in commercial service.

###

For further information:
Mike Lombardi
Historical Archives
425-865-1781
Liz Verdier
Media Relations
425-237-0977