

The innovative, short-lived Boeing 307 Stratoliner

By Bob Ingraham



Innovation

The Boeing 307 Stratoliner took flight for the first time in December, 1938, entering the record books as the first airliner with a pressurized cabin, enabling it to cruise at 20,000 feet above sea level (higher than any airliner had ever flown, and above most weather), providing up to 33 passengers with unprecedented comfort. The Stratoliner was powered with the same engines, tail, wings, and lower fuselage used in Boeing's famous B-17 Flying Fortress bomber.

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Problems

prototype crashed March 1939 during demonstration flight — Dutch roll became unrecoverable, killed 10

Early pressurization systems were complex and unreliable by later standards

Limited range compared to competitors

A commercial failure (and victim of war)

Only 10 aircraft built — 4 for TWA, 3 for Pan American, 3 for Howard Hughes (later sold)

War ended production entirely in 1940

Military requisitioned all civilian Stratoliners for transport duties 1942

Returned to airlines postwar but hopelessly outdated by then

Retired from scheduled service by early 1950s

Outlived commercially by the very aircraft its technology inspired — the Stratocruiser

Legacy

Pressurized cabin technology it pioneered became universal in all subsequent airliners

Direct ancestor of C-97 Stratofreighter and Boeing 377 Stratocruiser