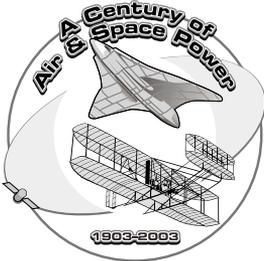


The C-54 Skymaster

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The C-54 Skymaster was the first transoceanic four-engine transport to see service with the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF). It originated with the prototype of the Douglas DC-4 commercial design of 1939, which was adapted for military use. The plane first flew in February 1942 under the designation C-54, before introduction of the civilian version.

Eventually, the USAAF and, later, the United States Air Force (USAF) would take delivery of some 1,164 of these aircraft in seven different variants, produced from 1942 to 1947. The Navy version was called the R5D.

The Skymaster was nearly 94 feet long and just over 27 feet high, with a wingspan of 117 feet, six inches. Powered by four Pratt and Whitney engines of 1,290 to 1,450 horsepower, depending on the model, the C-54 could cruise at about 240 mph with a maximum speed of 275 mph. Ceiling varied from 22,000 to 30,000 feet (in later models). As a long-haul transport, the C-54 had a range of 3,900 miles and a useful carrying capacity of 28,000 pounds of cargo or 49 personnel, in addition to a crew of six—nearly twice the load of the USAAF's primary tactical transport, the C-47.

Although overshadowed in the popular imagination by the more numerous C-47s, the Skymasters did yeoman's service in World War II and Korea. A specially made variant was the first purpose-built presidential airplane, dubbed the *Sacred Cow*. President Franklin Roosevelt made one



trip in it, to the Yalta Conference in February 1945. His successor, Harry Truman, used the plane extensively; in fact, Truman was aboard the *Sacred Cow* when he signed the National Defense Act of 1947, which, among other things, authorized the establishment of the USAF as a separate service.

Perhaps the C-54's finest hour occurred during the Berlin airlift. After the Soviets cut off the city from surface means of supply, a massive air-transport effort kept Berlin alive. C-54s first entered the scene in November 1948. Every Skymaster in the USAF inventory was pressed into service, and by January 1949 they had greatly improved the situation by helping to increase the supplies lifted into Berlin from 3,000 to 5,500 tons per day.

The C-54 Skymaster and its civilian counterpart, the DC-4, served as transitional aircraft to the post-World War II standard of four-engine, high-tonnage intercontinental transports.



To Learn More . . .

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