

Lockheed L-188 Electra II in Colombia

written by Jaime Escobar | June 23, 2021



Under the direction of Juan Pablo Ortega, president of the airline, there is information that in 1959, AVIANCA the main national airline in the country was evaluating and negotiating with Lockheed Aircraft Corporation the acquisition of 17 L-188 Electra II prop as a result of an ambitious plan to replace their aging all-propeller fleet of Douglas DC-3s, DC-4s and especially the Constellations and Super Constellations.

However, the flag carrier of Colombia was very cautious, examining costs and projections of traffic and did not use this type of aircraft. Instead, they decided to replace their propliners by pure-jet equipment in their international services and later on, in the domestic trunk routes, when the Boeing 720Bs and Boeing 727s were introduced in the early and mid-60s.



Lockheed L-188, HK777, of Aerocondor airlines. (Photo: Author's collection.)

AEROCONDOR or Aerovías Cóndor de Colombia, the second largest airline in the country was flying a mixed fleet of Douglas DC-4s, DC-6s and Curtiss C-46 when in April 1969, the company purchased its first L-188A Electra HK-777 from American Airlines. The acquisition of the Electras marked the change of corporate image by introducing a new logo inspired in the ancestral Tairona culture of the northern coast of Colombia. The second one, HK-774 arrived in November 1969. By January 1971, five ex-American Flagships had been delivered. They were used on the main trunk routes radiating from Bogota to Barranquilla, Cartagena, Medellín and Cali. Later Pereira was added to the domestic network followed by international services to Curazao in the Netherlands Antilles. Electra services begun the following May 1st between Colombia and Miami. The relationship with American Airlines was long lasting and involved training of the crews and maintenance of the aircraft. Later on, when pure jet aircraft were added in the form of Boeing 720-B and 707s, their relationship continued until the end of the airline.



Lockheed L-188, HK774, of Aerocondor airlines. (Photo: Author's collection.)

Two freighters were added in the mid-1970s to cater for the increasing demand in exports as part of the government's general policy to promote foreign trade in the form of freshly cut flowers. HK-774 was converted to cargo configuration by removing the built-in stairs and sealing the windows. AEROCONDOR lost one passenger Electra on the 27th of August 1973 when HK-777 crashed into a mountain (Cerro del Cable) minutes after taking off from Eldorado International Airport in Bogotá on a scheduled flight to Cartagena. the crew and passengers -42 in total- lost their lives in this accident. In 1975 a new freighter HK-1976 "El Exportador" was lost when it slammed on take-off onto a parked Aerocosta DC-6 at Eldorado Airport. Another freighter, HK-1845, was acquired after having been operated for a short period of time with the Colombian cargo airline AEROCOSTA as HK-1809. An operator of a large DC-6 fleet, also leased Electra N126US from MCA Leasing in Miami from November 1976 to March 1977. The fresh flower exports from Colombia needed more capacity and this was the way to offer it. Subsequently two Electras were sold to VARIG in 1976 with the arrival of the first Boeing 720B. HK-775 and HK-1416 became part of the Ponte Aérea fleet on shuttle services between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The three remaining Electras were put on storage and abandoned at their operational base in Barranquilla, after AEROCONDOR ceased all operations in late 1978.



Lockheed L-188, HK1416, of Aerocondor airlines, photographed at Bogotá. (Photo: Author's collection.)

SAM, or Sociedad Aeronáutica de Medellín Consolidada, was reorganized in 1962 as a passenger carrier and by the end of the decade it operated a strong fleet of Douglas DC-4s on domestic services and selected routes to Central America and the Colombian island territory of San Andrés. The carrier began acquiring Lockheed Electras from Eastern Air Lines at the end of 1969 and used them for almost a decade. The first ones to arrive were HK-553 "Júpiter", HK-554 "Mercurio", HK-555 "Neptuno" and HK-557 "Marte". They were followed in 1971 by HK-691 named "Apolo" and HK-692 "Saturno", to complete their "Astro Jet-Props" fleet.



Lockheed L-188, HK554 and nicknamed “Mercurio”, of SAM airlines, photographed in 1974. (Photo: Author’s collection.)

The Electras were put into service on the trunk routes competing alongside with AEROCONDOR. International services were operated on behalf of AVIANCA to Manaus in Brazil with an intermediate stop in Leticia, on the Colombian Amazon region. Services to Central America included Panamá, San José, Managua, San Salvador and Guatemala City from San Andrés on the Caribbean, along with a cargo operation to Miami. At the end of their career, a couple were converted into cargo planes replacing the DC-4s as was HK-555 “Neptuno” operating regular services to the United States. They flew a total of eight of the type until all were sold back to Eastern Air Lines in February and March 1977. They all ended their lives in storage at the Marana desert in Arizona where they were eventually scrapped.



*Lockheed L-188, HK1274 and named "Venus", of SAM airlines, photographed in 1977.
This airplane was involved in a dramatic hijack in May 1973, as noted in the text.
(Photo: Author's collection.)*

HK-1274 "Venus" of SAM was the participant of one of the most nerve-wracking and long hijacking in the annals of Colombian civil aviation history. Early morning on the 30th of May, 1973, while on a routine flight between Cali, Pereira, and Medellín, two young men wearing hoods stormed into the cockpit waving guns and a butcher's knife. They demanded the captain to fly to Havana, Cuba. The crew was clear to explain that they needed to refuel the plane and landed in Medellín, where finally the fuel was supplied. On their way to the island nation, they were forced to land in Aruba where the hijackers demanded \$50.000 in cash. Already in flight, they learned that the Cuban government had refused entry of the aircraft into their airspace and headed back to Aruba, where the Dutch government also refuses landing permission to the plane. The hijackers demanded to fly south. A couple of hours later, the plane landed safely in Guayaquil, Ecuador where it was refueled once again and headed for Lima, Peru. 30 hours had elapsed from the original flight plan and a fresh crew was sent from Bogotá to replace the original tired and anguished crew. A few passengers, women and children were allowed to disembark in Lima. When the fresh crew arrived, the plane headed for Mendoza, Argentina, where the rest of the passengers were released. Then, it made an unexpected short stop in Resistencia, where the hijackers disembarked and vanished into the fields. The plane then flew to Asunción, Paraguay and ended its 60-hour ordeal in Buenos Aires later that day on the 1st of June. The plane was checked, refueled and a fresh crew was sent to ferry it back to Colombia three days later, ending this long ordeal.



Lockheed L-188, HK1809, was a freighter operated by Aerocosta. (Photo: Author's collection.)

In the early nineties, non-scheduled cargo operators acquired two additional Electras: these being HK-3706, registered to APEL, and HK-3716X register to another operator called TRANSAPEL.

A total of seventeen Electras were actually registered in Colombia. Only one survived until 2003, this being HK-3716X, which was stored at Eldorado International airport in Bogotá, undergoing some eventual overhauling work. It was very uncertain that it will ever fly again. Shortly afterwards, it was scrapped. Foreign regular operators of the Lockheed Electra II in Colombia included COPA of Panama, Ecuatoriana de Aviación and SAHSA of Honduras.

Colombian L-188 Electra IIs

Registration	C/N	Prev Id.	Remarks
HK-553	1013	N5509	Delivered to SAM in OCT69. Named "Júpiter." Sold as N5509Y in MAR77.
HK-554	1005	N5501	Delivered to SAM in AUG69. Named "Mercurio." Sold as N5501E in MAR77.
HK-555	1029	N5519	Delivered to SAM in NOV69. Named "Neptuno." Sold as N5519E in FEB77.

Registration	C/N	Prev Id.	Remarks
HK-557	1014	N5510	Delivered to SAM in NOV71. Named "Marte." Sold as N5510L in MAR77.
HK-691	1043	N5527	Delivered to SAM in NOV71. Named "Apolo." Sold as N99583 in MAR77.
HK-692	1053	N5530	Delivered to SAM in NOV70. Named "Saturno." Sold as N5530E in MAR77.
HK-774	1083	N6121A	Delivered to Aerocondor in OCT69. WFU at Barranquilla and broken up.
HK-775	1073	N6119A	Delivered to Aerocondor in SEP69. Sold as PP-VLY in DEC76.
HK-777	1115	N6125A	Delivered to Aerocondor in APR69. WO on 27AUG73 at Cerro El Cable, Bogotá.
HK-1274	1010	N5505	Delivered to SAM in NOV71. Named "Venus." Sold as N5505 in FEB77.
HK-1275	1030	N5520	Delivered to SAM in NOV71. Named "Plutón." Sold in MAR77.
HK-1415	1081	N6120A	Delivered to Aerocondor in JAN71. WFU at Barranquilla and broken up.
HK-1416	1063	N6116A	Delivered to Aerocondor in JAN71. Sold as PP-VLX in NOV76.
HK-1809	1077	N42FM	Delivered to Aerocosta in OCT75. Sold as HK-1845 in MAR76. (See below.)
HK-1845	1077	HK-1809	Acquired by Aerocondor in MAR76. WFU at Barranquilla and broken up.
HK-1976	1087	N7138C	Delivered to Aerocondor in MAY75. Named "El Exportador." WO on 11JUL75 at Eldorado, Bogotá.
HK-3642X	1147	OB-1328	Acquired by LAMA in AUG91. Sold as HK-3706X in FEB92. (See below.)
HK-3706X	1147	HK-3642X	Acquired by APEL in FEB92. Scrapped in MAY00.
HK-3716X	2022	TG-ANP	Acquired by TRANSAPEL in AUG92. To SAVA in 1995. Overhauled in SEP01.

Registration	C/N	Prev Id.	Remarks
N126US	1105		Leased by AEROCOSTA NOV76 to MAR77