

## Reflections: Still Flying After All These Years

By Robert A. Searles

Carl Alber, former Grumman test pilot, still shakes his head when he recalls the Gulfstream I's first flight on August 14, 1958. With several thousand spectators assembled at Bethpage, New York to witness the aerial debut of Grumman's newest civil aircraft, he and Fred Rowley, head of flight test, took the first production model G-I up for what was expected to be a relatively short, uneventful trip around the patch.

The flight was short, but uneventful it was not. Right after takeoff, Alber and Rowley were unable to get the gear up. They circled the field to gain altitude while they troubleshot the problem. However, just as the G-I started to turn, the entire electrical system blew, leaving only the warning lights illuminated. Obviously, it was time to return to the field. But as Rowley and Alber began their downwind leg, one engine quit. Not daring to adjust the flaps or the power on the remaining powerplant, they carefully continued around the pattern and touched down — just as the second engine stopped. The flight lasted three and a half minutes.

As it turned out, the gear hadn't retracted because an inspector had pulled the air bottle on the nosewheel and failed to reset it, forcing the landing gear to stay down and locked. Because the complete electrical failure had shut down all four of the G-I's fuel boost pumps, resulting in the loss of power in both Rolls-Royce Dart powerplants, Alber never complained much about the inspector's oversight.

After that inauspicious beginning, the G-I, which was certificated 30 years ago last month, went on to become one of the most reliable and durable business aircraft ever. Just two days after its abbreviated first flight, the No. 1 G-I was in the air again. The twin-turboprop that is regarded by many as the first airplane designed specifically for corporate flying was certificated less than a year later.

The first production aircraft — N701G — still serves Grumman today, having logged over 10,000 hours in a variety of roles. After doing most of the certification flight testing, the No. 1 G-I remained instrumented for over two years in order to gain FAA approval of different types of equipment, including several autopilots.

N701G later was fitted with a 62-inch by 84-inch rear cargo door to prove its versatility for military missions. Grumman sold one G-I to the U.S. Coast Guard in 1963 for VIP transport and nine to the U.S. Navy in 1966 for use as a flying classroom for A-6 Intruder bombardier/navigation.

In 1961, a 24-seat interior was installed in N701G (which originally was certificated for 19 seats) to demonstrate the G-I's suitability for commuter (then called "local service") operations. In fact, Grumman leased N701G to Air South in 1973 for use on the carrier's Atlanta-Brunswick, Georgia route. Although Gulfstreams eventually were operated by a number of air carriers, the G-I basically was a business aircraft, and N701G spent much of its time in the early 1960s demonstrating its virtues to corporate operators.

Perhaps N701G's toughest assignment was supporting development of Grumman's Lunar Module (LM), the vehicle that landed the first astronauts on the moon. N701G often would ferry the Lunar Module ascent engine to and from a Bell test facility located in Buffalo or transport people and equipment to the Johnson Space Center in Houston. The G-I was on standby 24 hours a day, seven days a week throughout the LM program, said Ted Faller, Grumman's flight department manager, and, he added, "it was not unusual to receive a phone call at one or two -in the morning to fly to Florida. It could have been only a bag of O-rings that had to be delivered, but we needed to support the Apollo [space program] effort."

N701G also was used to support the F-14 fighter program and other major Grumman projects over the years, as well as to fly critically ill Grumman employees to medical clinics around the country. Today, N701G, which has been utilized as a corporate shuttle ever since it has been in the Grumman flight department, flies regularly to Albany, New York; Boston; Washington, D.C.; Norfolk, Virginia; and Ohio's Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

But Grumman isn't the only major corporation still flying the Gulfstream I. Nearly a dozen original G-I owners currently are operating Gulfstream I's, including one flight department that has been flying its Grumman twin-turboprop for nearly 30 years. And another flight department believes that the G-I will be around a while longer: The operator recently had Atlantic Aviation install an EFIS in its aircraft.

Like Grumman, many companies are using their G-I's in high-frequency operations. Coming Glass, which has been flying the aircraft since 1972, currently has two G-I's in its fleet, one of which has amassed over 20,000 hours. One of those Gulfstreams-which Corning Glass' chief of maintenance Doug Kirchbaum describes as "a workhorse with fantastic reliability"-is flying 575 hours a year, shuttling employees between New York City and the company's headquarters in Elmira, New York six days a week. Although G-I parts are becoming harder to come by, Corning Glass plans to operate its Gulfstreams for another four or five years at least, said Kirchbaum.

Part of the G-I's longevity can be attributed to its heavy-duty construction. World War II naval aviators nicknamed the manufacturer "the Grumman Ironworks" for its durable aircraft, and the G-I has carried on that tradition, as the Pillsbury flight department found out over an uncontrolled field in Florida. The company's Gulfstream suffered a midair collision with an Aeronca but managed to keep flying — despite a hole in the side of the fuselage that was large enough to walk through.

CEOs, celebrities and world leaders including Dwight Eisenhower, the British royal family, Arthur Godfrey, Jimmy Swaggart and Walt Disney have flown on G-I's. And the list of original corporate operators is a veritable "Who's Who" of the Fortune 500. In addition, the G-I has served the FAA, NASA, the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard and Army Corps of Engineers. The G-I has performed Arctic survey work, airways calibration duties in Europe and has ferried volunteer medical teams into the heart of Africa. Given the G-I's reliability, versatility and durability, it's little wonder that Grumman predicted when it introduced the twin-turboprop that the G-I is "expected to have a service life of at least 25 years." B/CA