

First Flights

In addition to being Zodiac Aerospace's vice-president of Product Marketing, Thomas Lee holds dozens of aviation patents – and a world record.

AS TOLD BY THOMAS LEE TO HOWARD SLUTSKEN
ILLUSTRATION BY FELIPE VARGAS

I'm a total AvGeek, and I happen to hold a unique record: I've flown on more inaugural airline flights of the "first of type" of a new commercial aircraft than anyone else in the world.

This isn't a record that I originally set out to claim; it's thanks to good fortune, good timing and good planning that I was on board the first-ever Boeing 747 and 787 Dreamliner, Airbus A350 and A380, and Bombardier C Series flights.

I've had a passion for flight since I was a kid, when my father would take me to Westchester County Airport, where I would stand on the railroad ties and watch the airplanes take off. My father ran a global manufacturing company that designed Christmas and Valentine's Day decorations. He would travel around the world for work, and I would join him, catching the travel bug at a very young age.

I was just 17 years old when I flew on the first Boeing 747 flight, with Pan American World Airways from New York City to London. Back then, of course, frequent flyer programs hadn't been created yet, but the airlines knew who their best customers were, and my father was one of Pan Am's.

That's how he was able to get our family on that first flight on January 21, 1970.

The flight was scheduled to depart at 7 p.m. and all the media was there, ready to record everything. We boarded the aircraft: The men were dressed in ties and jackets, and the ladies in formal dresses.

The 747 had reached almost full takeoff speed when a flame came out of one of its engines and a loud explosion could be heard from inside the aircraft. The pilot jammed on the brakes, screeching us to a halt. "There has been an issue with one of the engines and we have to return to the terminal to be checked," he said over the loudspeaker.

It wasn't long before we were told that there was a second 747, a backup, that had only been delivered the day before. It was sitting in a hangar, though, and hadn't been prepped for the flight. In the meantime, Pan Am took us to an Italian restaurant in New Jersey, where we ate and drank as we waited.

The second aircraft was eventually prepared, and we were bussed back to JFK. However, 30 people were now refusing to get on the airplane, and the media jumped on the rest of us, marking the first of many interviews that I would do.

I had "747" buttons all the way up and down my tie, making me the perfect target for reporters. A film crew shoved a microphone in my face and asked, "Young man, do you know how to swim?"

"Yes, I do, but that's not going to happen," I answered. After all, I was a fearless teenager, but it did put the thought in my mind. So when that airplane started rolling down the runway the second time, I was a little nervous. But once we were in the air, it was a wonderful flight.

Due to the relatively short period of time Pan Am had to prepare the second airplane, not all of the catering equipment was transferred over, so the cabin crew set up a buffet in the galley. We lined up in one aisle, went through the galley and picked up the food, then went back down the other aisle to our seats. That's right: The very first 747 flight had a buffet on board.

It was an early, rainy morning when we landed in London. We came down the stairs onto the tarmac and walked around the airplane to look at the phenomenal 747 we had just flown on. Every passenger was given a personalized certificate commemorating the flight, and I had mine framed. >

Fast-forward 37 years, and flight was no longer just a passion for me – it was a career. I was working at Zodiac Aerospace, developing a lot of different technologies, including the in-flight trash compactor, which Singapore Airlines (SIA) was an important customer of. Our company also built the waste and water systems for SIA's new A380 aircraft.

One day, I told some of the airline people I was working with that I had been on the inaugural flight of the 747, and that made its way up the management chain, and a close high school friend who happened to attend Harvard Business School with the chairman of SIA put in a special request as well. That's how I ended up being invited on the first A380 flight, from Singapore to Sydney, almost four decades after flying on the 747.

The airline had asked me to bring along my Pan Am 747 first-flight certificate. They reframed it overnight, adding the certificate for the A380. The airline's CEO

presented it to me during the inaugural flight, in front of the media.

Getting on board one of these flights isn't easy. It's something that many aviation enthusiasts fight for, sometimes through a seat auction or by somehow scoring an invitation. We are a small group of "First Flighters," and I know them all.

My most recent inaugural was in July 2016 for SWISS' C Series aircraft, for which Zodiac developed and built the interior. I was presented with a personalized certificate and a model of the airplane. I didn't know this at the time, but I was the only one to get a certificate.

Next on my list are the Irkut MC-21 for Aeroflot and the Comac C919 possibly flown by Air China. And although it wasn't a first flight, a few months ago my wife and I were on United Airlines' last 747 flight, 47 years after Pan Am's inaugural one. Of course, I had to bring the framed certificates along. ■

Thomas Lee's Inaugural Flights

BOEING 747
January 21, 1970
Pan American World Airways
New York to London

AIRBUS A380
October 25, 2007
Singapore Airlines
Singapore to Sydney

BOEING 787
October 26, 2011
All Nippon Airways
Tokyo to Hong Kong

AIRBUS A350
January 15, 2015
Qatar Airways
Doha to Frankfurt

BOMBARDIER C SERIES
July 15, 2016
SWISS
Zurich to Paris

