The Martin 4-0-4: Famous for their “nose-down” landings

The Martin 4-0-4 was an American pressurized passenger airliner built by the Glenn L. Martin Company. In addition to airline use initially in the United States, it was used by the United States Coast Guard and United States Navy.

The Martin Company of Baltimore, produced this twin engine, forty-passenger, pressurized and air conditioned airliner to replace the war-weary DC-3. It was an improved version of the Martin 2-0-2 and was built in two distinct versions: one for Eastern Airlines and one for Trans World Airlines.

Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, famous WWI Ace and president of Eastern, said that the 4-0-4 was the best airliner available and that Eastern had worked with Martin in making some 260 improvements to the design.

One of the nice features was the “airstair” in the lower tail section for passengers loading and unloading. Also the 4-0-4 had retractable tricycle landing gears and was powered by two Pratt & Whitney radial piston engines.

TWA operated it forty 4-0-4s under the name “Skyliner” on scheduled services in the eastern part of the states beginning in 1950. The last flight was on April 29, 1961. Eastern Airlines operated their 4-0-4s under the name “Silver Falcon.”

In February 2008, the last air-worthy Martin 4-0-4, an ex TWA aircraft, was ferried to the Planes of Fame Museum in Valle, Arizona.

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“Come Fly With Me”
The 4-0-4 was Sinatra’s Swingin’ Pad in the Sky

Nobody could swing like Frank. (If you have to ask Frank, what then you’re just square.) Frank Sinatra’s first private plane was the Martin 4-0-4. Named El Dago, the 4-0-4 was a two-prop workhorse built to seat forty for commercial use but reconfigured to Frank’s princely specifications with hi-fi sound system, electric piano, movie projector, wet bar, and of course, a bedroom. The interior color scheme was primarily orange (Frank’s color) and outfitted with rich wood paneling. Frank’s pad in the sky was topped off with deep pile carpet and tiny twinkling electric stars which dotted the ceiling.

The plane’s name, El Dago, proudly printed along a stripe on the custom livery, had caused a certain amount of controversy. Following the urging of the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans, Frank had the 4-0-4 rechristened as the Christina after his younger daughter.

Once in the 1960s, while performing in Italy, Frank had his Martin 4-0-4 flown over to meet him in Rome. According to biographer George Jacobs,1 El Dago was a slice of home and Frank was getting a little homesick. However, that presents a tiny mystery: The Martin 4-0-4, had a range of only about 1,000 miles. How, then, was the plane transported from Los Angeles to Rome? Most crucially, how did it get across the Atlantic (if not by boat)? Turns out the trip might just have been possible with hops from Gander, Newfoundland, to Nuuk, Greenland, to Reykjavík, Iceland, to Shannon, Ireland—a lot of work, but people were used to jumping through hoops for Frank.

1 George Jacobs, My Life with Frank Sinatra, Harper Collins, p.190