

Airways®

Safety Lessons for Passengers

A Global Review of Commercial Flight

JANUARY 2013

Hollywood's Flights of Fantasy



Chicago Rockford International Airport

Virgin Atlantic Airways

TWA's Longest Day

Flying the Fokker 100

Issue n° 203

USA/Canada \$5.99

\$5.99US \$5.99CAN



www.airwaysmag.com

Filming Hollywood's Flights of Fantasy

by Christine Negroni

When the movie Flight, starring Denzel Washington, is over you might wonder, 'Just how many airplanes did it take to make that picture-perfect airliner crash?' The answer is three: McDonnell Douglas MD-80s salvaged from Delta Air Lines, American Airlines, and the former Continental Airlines. I know this because I have talked to the man who helped make it happen.



The Pinnacles National Monument, California, was the spectacular setting for the crash scene in The Event television series of 2010, whose 'star' was a former Varig Boeing 767-200ER (N805MT/PP-VNR) supplied by Scroggins Aviation.



PHOTOS: SCROGGINS AVIATION

Doug Scroggins on set in Atlanta, Georgia, for the crash scene of Flight. The nose being 'buried' is from a Delta MD-88 (N901DL), and the remainder of the structure is from an American Airlines MD-82 (N442AA). Wooden winglets have been added, one of which is supported by a reach-fork. The engine cowlings are off an ex-FedEx Boeing 727.



The MD-80(s) transformed as SouthJetAir's 'NC1983MC'.

If a movie is about airplanes, there are only a few specialists who can take a Hollywood producer's flight of fantasy and make it look real. Recently, *Airways* spoke to three of them. Here are their stories.

Doug Scroggins

In his younger days Doug Scroggins, of Scroggins Aviation of Las Vegas, Nevada, was a member of the camera operators' union and a producer of television documentaries and films. He went on to build his business as a commercial airplane parts source, dismantler, and salvage recovery operation (*Airways*, June 2006, November 2005 & 2004, March 2002, and *Reviews*, May 2005), and by this curious path wound up on the rapid dial of many Hollywood directors.



For *Flight* studio work using the lead cast and extras, Scroggins Aviation supplied the fuselage of a former Continental MD-82 (N16807) which was attached to an airbridge fabricated out of wood. One fuselage section was placed in a rotisserie frame for the inverted scene. The cockpit was updated with 'glass' displays.

"If they want a complete airliner or a wreck, I'm the one they call," Scroggins tells me after filming finished on the just-released *Flight*. But he is also experienced in putting airplanes back together, as evidenced by his work on the television shows *The Event*, *Pan Am*, *Californication*, and *House of Lies*.

For *Pan Am*, the short-lived ABC show that recalled the glory days of aviation, Scroggins was assigned to find, modify, and ship a Boeing 707 to a sound stage in New York. Understanding the special challenges of filming in the tight quarters of a flightdeck, Scroggins made his customized 707 hinge open from the front, giving the camera a full-face view of the pilots. He says he told the *Pan Am* producers, "We can cut this thing into sections, pie-cut it. We can do that and still make sure it functionally works."

As it turned out, slicing the cockpit wasn't as difficult as finding a 707 to work on. Scroggins had to improvise, so—cue the sound track, this is a Hollywood secret—the cockpit in the television show is actually that of a former Delta Air Lines 727.

"We had to gut it to get it down to a bare shell. We had to change out the instrument panels, throttle



PHOTOS: SCROGGINS AVIATION

quadrant, breaker panels, and the flight engineer station,” Scroggins reveals. “I had to break up three other cockpit sections to make one.”

For all its complex details, the *Pan Am* cockpit was one of his smaller jobs. Doug has had to saw airplanes, ship airplanes, and, in the case of the aircraft in *Flight*, production had to fashion a giant steel device to rotate the fuselage like a rotisserie chicken so that when Denzel Washington’s character Captain Whip Whitaker flies his airplane upside down to counter an elevator malfunction, we can see what that does to the passengers.

“There’s no doubt, the actors really *were* rolled over

upside down,” Scroggins emphasizes. “Your blood goes to your head. Your hair stands on end. The intent was to give them that feeling that they’re physically in a roll. The cockpit was flipped too,” he adds.

An alert aviation aficionado will notice that Capt Whitaker’s MD-80 is sporting some uncharacteristic winglets. Don’t blame Scroggins; while he fashioned them out of wood and installed them, the idea was the filmmaker’s and, in fact, it adds a menacing touch when the wing slices through a church steeple in the crash scene. “The director is a pilot himself,” Scroggins said of Robert Zemeckis. “He had a vision for what he wanted.”

The logistics of some of Scroggins’s assignments could be the subject of their own feature film, as over the last decade he has given new life to airplanes relegated to the boneyard. In the movie *Oblivion*, coming to theaters in April 2013, actor Tom Cruise discovers a time traveller who has fallen to earth in a pod. The vehicle looks like a spaceship, but in what may come as a surprise to a lot of people in Toulouse, it is in fact an Airbus A320.

“I sold them on the Airbus fuselage idea and they loved it,” Scroggins says of the plan to slice two 8½ft (2.6m) sections of fuselage and work with it to create the pod. “It looks like a major spacecraft,” he adds.



The '707' cockpit in the *Pan Am* television show was fashioned from that of a former Delta 727 (N510DA). The ABC series ran for only 14 episodes.



A computer-generated image of Boeing 707s at the Pan Am Terminal at Idlewild/JFK by Stargate Studios. The structure was expanded in 1971 to accommodate 747s and renamed the Pan Am Worldport. Today it is Terminal 3 (Delta), and is scheduled to be completely demolished by 2015.

Sam Nicholson

Without a doubt, making a spaceship from an airplane requires special creativity, but making it fly amid a phalanx of similar aircraft demands computer magic.

In the TV show *Pan Am*, Sam Nicholson's Stargate Studios was responsible for the seemingly impossible: filming the dawning of the jet age in the absence of the central character, the 707, and the setting, New York International Airport (Idlewild, now JFK) of the Sixties. A frequent flyer himself, Nicholson says he enjoyed the challenge of trying to re-create that world with digital special effects.

"I like flying. I like travelling, and I'm glad every once in a while a movie comes along that wants to do it perfectly, historically real," he says of the scenes his company produced for Sony Pictures, the studio behind the show.

Stargate, based in Los Angeles, assembled historic images of the airplanes, airports, and even aerial scenes. With these photographs in the database, technicians were able to create backgrounds that could be integrated into actual filmed sequences. "What we do is computer-generated, it is virtual reality. It looks like a 'plane and it feels like a 'plane but there's nothing there," Nicholson explains. In the television show, which was a misty-eyed, highly-sexualized depiction of life at the top of the airline food chain half a century ago, all of the airport exteriors and the airplanes lined up and waiting for their well-dressed, well-heeled passengers are nothing more than digital creations.



PHOTOS: STARGATE STUDIOS

First and final scenes of Pan Am stewardesses 'boarding' a 707.

"There are ten 707s waiting to take off. That was undoubtedly something where you would have to rely on computer-generated materials to accomplish it. There's no way someone is going to line up ten 707s on a runway, and secondly, there's no other way to do it," Nicholson tells *Airways*.

As a viewer, I found the real magic was the marriage of virtual and actual. On the show, I watched stewardesses and passengers boarding the aircraft, passing the distinctive blue and white livery. *Stargate's* production photos show how that scene was accomplished. The actors are walking on a scaffold the height of the boarding door. There is no airplane. That was added later.

"You can transition from a real 'plane interior and walk out and look at the exterior of a virtual 'plane," Nicholson explains. "There are lots of films about 'planes, but this was unique. We relied more on the computer-generated duplicates than anyone has in the past."

Talaat Captan

In Air Hollywood productions, every passenger looks and acts exactly as they should. At the airport, there are no surprises. This is because air travel here is entirely a studio creation. Over 500 films, commercials, and promotions have been filmed at Air Hollywood (*Airways*, November 2006), presided over by a man whose name is Captan though he is not a pilot.

Talaat Captan offers moviemakers an entire fleet of airplanes: narrow- and wide-body models, eight in all, that with a little doctoring can be made to look like almost anything flying. He has not yet had a request for the Boeing 787 Dreamliner with its larger windows, or the double-deck Airbus A380, but if and when a request comes in, Captan says they will be ready. "It takes an airplane manufacturer 15 years to design an airplane; we can replicate what it looks like in 15 weeks," he confidently claims.

Brad Pitt's character William Lamar (Billy) Beane 'flew' with Air Hollywood for his interview with the Boston Red Sox in the business-of-baseball film *Moneyball*. Ditto for Tom Hanks playing a US congressman in *Charlie Wilson's War*. Then there were *Bridesmaids*, *Red Eye*...the list goes on. "There's so many movies you never think about, people say, 'There's a 'plane in that movie?'" Captan points out.

When *7500* hits cinema screens in 2013, know that practically every scare-filled minute was shot on the Air Hollywood set designed to look like a 747. And when moviemakers buckle their actors into seats on Air Hollywood 'airplanes', they know that the boss knows what they need. In 1998, Captan was writer and producer of his own Hollywood movie *Ground Control*, starring Kiefer Sutherland. It had airplanes, runways, control towers...the works.



"It was the toughest movie I ever produced," Captan recalls. "I didn't realize how difficult it was to get on an airplane, on the tarmac," he said of trying to gain access for the cameras. Convinced the experience had value, he launched Air Hollywood in 2001. If it was hard to film at airports and on airplanes before 9/11, afterwards it was near impossible. "We literally opened six months before September 11," Captan reveals. Now, even the airlines are forgoing their own authentic sets for the simplicity of using Air Hollywood. "They bring their seats and film in our studio. JetBlue, Southwest... we recently wrapped a big project with Virgin," Captan confides to *Airways*.

Air Hollywood houses more than airplanes at its five hangar-size buildings near Burbank Airport in Southern California. Moviemakers will also find all the



accoutrements necessary to reproduce the entire air travel experience, including ticket counters, food service carts, and security scanners. Captan estimates he has \$3 to \$4 million in airline-related props and sets.

Like a good airline executive, Talaat Captan would like to keep those assets working all the time, so his next project is offering classes during studio downtime to help aerophobes conquer their fear of flying. Flying is safe, Captan insists, no matter what we may see in the movies. ➔

(The book Junkyard Jets, a lavish photo essay of the commercial aircraft recycling industry, by Doug Scroggins and Nick Veronico, is available from Airways.)



PHOTOS: AIR HOLLYWOOD

Air Hollywood's cavernous building and prop inventory (opposite) offers a controlled environment for shooting.