

Bombardier Pulls Plug on Learjet, Cuts 1,600 Jobs

Synonymous with lifestyles of the rich and famous, the Learjet is about to fade into aviation history.

WICHITA, Kansas (AP) — Canada’s Bombardier announced in February that it will stop production of the Learjet later this year to focus on more profitable planes.

That means the elimination of 1,600 jobs in Canada and the United States, another blow to aircraft manufacturing, which has withered in the pandemic.

The iconic jet was among the first private luxury planes. William Lear based his design in part on military jets. The first Learjet flew in 1963, and more than 3,000 had been built since.

“It was sleek and it had almost a fighter-jet pedigree,” said Richard Aboulafia, an aerospace analyst for Teal Group.

“For its time it symbolized personal executive transportation. Besides, Carly Simon put it into a fantastic song — that cemented its place in popular culture.”

Along with being a line in Simon’s 1971 hit, “You’re So Vain,” the jet showed up elsewhere in pop culture, including the hit TV show “Mad Men.” Frank Sinatra let Elvis Presley borrow his Learjet to elope with Priscilla Beaulieu in 1967.

In recent years, production of the plane had slowed to about one a month. Thursday’s decision was foreshadowed in 2015, when Bombardier pulled the plug on an all-new model, the Learjet 85, citing weak demand. Analysts could see the end of the line.

“The only thing the pandemic did was accelerate a sad ending,” Aboulafia said.

Bombardier said it will continue to support the Learjet fleet, and existing jets will fly for many more years.

Most of the projected job losses for Montreal-based Bombardier will occur in Canada, with about 700 planned in Quebec and 100 in Ontario. The company said about 250 jobs will be eliminated in Wichita this year and next year, with another 100 job losses scattered across the rest of the U.S.

CEO Eric Martel said in a statement that job cuts are always difficult, but these reductions are absolutely necessary for us to rebuild our company while we continue to navigate through the pandemic.”

Air travel has plummeted during the COVID-19 outbreak, causing a sharp drop in demand for new planes.

Bombardier said that ending production of the Learjet later this year will let the company focus on its more profitable Challenger and Global aircraft and accelerate the expansion of its services business. ●



*The Learjet 75 Liberty on runway approach.
Source: Bombardier media library at bombardier.com*

The Learjet: The Private Plane That Changed Travel

The following has been adapted from an article by Jonathan Glancey at www.bbc.com.

A high-school dropout named Bill Lear was the mastermind behind an aircraft that flew the world’s wealthiest people, writes Jonathan Glancey.

Based partly on the design of a prototype Swiss fighter, its performance was sensational. It could fly as fast as a transatlantic Boeing 707. Up to 40,000 ft, it could outclimb a US Air Force F-86 Sabre.

Its twin General Electric turbojets were a civilian version of those thrusting the latest Northrop F-5 Freedom Fighter way past the sound barrier. The Learjet 23 was aerobatic, potent and glamorous. For many, it was and remains the definitive business jet.

The Learjet, which had gone from design to production to cult status within a very short time, was the brainchild of Bill Lear, a self-taught inventor and high-school dropout born in Hannibal, Missouri in 1902. In the late 1920s Lear invented the Motorola for the Galvin Manufacturing Company. It was the world’s first successful car radio. He learned to fly, buying his first aircraft, a Canadian Fleet

bi-plane trainer, in 1931 and developed early autopilot systems and radio direction finders for the aircraft industry. These, and other inventions, were to earn him more than \$100 million during World War Two.

Lear also invented the 8-track cassette player, a pollution-free steam turbine engine for cars and buses (sadly, unsuccessful) and was forever dreaming up new ideas. He is best known, though, for the Learjet, a project he initiated when he was nearly 60.

In 1960, he founded the Swiss American Aviation Company at Altenrhein, Switzerland, working with the aircraft engineer Dr. Hans-Luzius Studer and a team of Swiss, German and British engineers on the design of a business jet based on Studer's FFA P-16, a prototype supersonic fighter jet.

However, after prototype P-16s crashed, the Swiss Air Force bought British Hawker Hunters instead. Undeterred, Lear brought that project—his first aircraft was built in Switzerland—and a number of key ideas from Studer, back to the US. He would establish Learjet in 1963 in Wichita, Kansas—the home of Cessna and Beechcraft, two rival aircraft manufacturers.

The man had a certain sense of humour, having named his daughter Shanda (as in Shanda Lear), and he quipped upon being handed an investment bond for \$1.2m by the US government: "Can you think of any place I can steal more engineers?"

That money went fast, but Lear was lucky. The crash of the first Learjet on a test flight in 1964, with a Federal Aviation Authority pilot at the controls, gave Lear the money he needed to push on with the project. The FAA pilot had forgotten to put the flaps down on take-off. The jet lifted to 10 or 20 feet and then fell to earth. No one was injured, but the aircraft was written off, and Lear received an insurance pay-out of \$500,000.

Crashes came to haunt the Learjet. It was a chic, lithe and very fast aircraft and designed to be easy to fly. But, in the world of early business jets, pilot error was rife: within three years of the first sales, 23 out of 104 Learjets crashed, four with fatal results.

Improved pilot training and improved low-speed handling incorporated in the design of the Learjet 24 helped matters, but the 20-series Learjets were involved in too many accidents for anyone's comfort. In January 1977 Frank Sinatra's 82-year-old mother, Dolly, died when the Learjet 24 he had chartered to take her from Palm Springs to Las Vegas for an opening night at Caesar's Palace flew into a blizzard and crashed on Mt San Geronio.

Later series, including today's bigger, quieter and far more efficient composite-bodied Learjets made by Bombardier are inherently safe. ●



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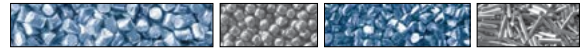


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