

THE UKRAINE-BUILT ANTONOV AN-124 “BEHEMOTH”®

by Dan Pemble, McDonnell Douglas/Boeing Field Service Representative (retired September 2009) – June 30, 2020

From the south-facing pool-deck of my Kissimmee, Florida home, I have been accustomed to seeing an almost-endless daily array of airplanes as they pass overhead during their final approach and landing at Orlando’s International Airport (KMCO). However, as we all know, due to the world-wide COVID-19 saga, for many months airplane and airline activity has been greatly diminished! In fact, some days there has not been a single airplane flying over my house; an unusual exception to this for about the entire month of June 2020 has been the almost-weekly sighting of the massive Ukraine-built Antonov AN-124 flying directly overhead on its approach to KMCO! Seeing this has brought back some memories of mine as I will discuss further in this article, which I hope will be of some interest to you.

During February of 1992 through February of 1994, I was the McDonnell Douglas Support Services (MDSS) on-site representative in Stockholm, Sweden. My primary responsibility was to support Scandinavian Airlines System’s (SAS) sister company SCANAIR’s MD-80 and DC-10 airplane operations. I also offered supplemental support to SAS’s MD-80 operations, although their primary MDSS support was based in Oslo. One of the privileges afforded me by Stockholm’s Arlanda Airport (ARN/ESSA) authorities was permission to drive my Company vehicle inside the secured areas of the airport at any time I wished.

Getting to the point, at some time during my stay in Stockholm, an AN-124 airplane arrived with a load of helicopter kits to be delivered in Sweden. I have no memory at all about the model of these helicopters nor where they were manufactured. My main interest was to “get up close and personal” while walking around the AN-124 to closely inspect its exterior and I had the opportunity to do just that. There is no denying that this airplane is extremely impressive in its size, as you can see in the following photo.



As seen in the photo, this airplane has 5 main landing gear assemblies on each side with 2 tires on each gear for a total of ten main landing gear assemblies with 20 total tires. There are 2 each nose landing gear assemblies each with 2 tires. Like other “heavy lifter” cargo airplanes, the AN-124’s nose landing gear will “kneel down” to afford access for front loading once the nose section of the fuselage is raised up.

At the time I first saw the AN-124 in Stockholm, I had accumulated 23 years of service as a McDonnell Douglas employee, including 14 years in Field Service. Given these years and my experiences at several airlines, I had acquired a wealth of knowledge about “Douglas’s engineering design philosophies, tolerances, and allowances as applied to both newly-manufactured and in-service airplanes. Obviously our driving Company mission was/is to uphold the fact that Douglas-Long Beach-built airplanes are some of the most robust, reliable and safest on the planet! Well, given this engrained mindset, perhaps I was “hyper-critical” of what I saw during my brief walk-a-round of the AN-124; perhaps not? But, here are just a few of what I consider to be some discrepancies that I noted:

- Many of the exterior skin panels (which I assumed were aluminum) were affixed with steel fasteners with heads that were “rusty”. I see 2 problems here; 1/ the steel fasteners have no corrosion/rust resistance; wrong alloy! 2/ Dissimilar metals touching each other (steel and aluminum in this case) result in “galvanic corrosion” over time; not a good thing!

- Various hydraulic leaks around the main and nose gears (probably to be expected)

- Engine Nose Cowl “lip skins” (the shiny ring around the front of each engine): these appeared to have been “beaten into shape” with a ballpeen hammer and were basically full of dents! In my experience, usually most dents found in the engine inlet lip skin were deemed to be “out-of-limits” and needed to be repaired prior to further flight! The reason for this is that such dents can cause “turbulent air” to enter the engines resulting in damage to the engines!

Some may say that the issues I have cited about the AN-124 are insignificant; maybe so, because this behemoth of an airplane “keeps trucking on” and continues to carry out-sized cargo to many world-wide destinations. In fact I have no knowledge at all of the actual day-to-day technical issues being seen with this airplane, but it is indeed an impressive airplane and I look forward to seeing it again overhead on its approaches to KMCO – just to keep my past memories alive!

For more info about this remarkable airplane, please see the following Wikipedia site:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonov_An-124_Ruslan

