



The King Air and

Who would have ever thought that the King Air would not only be surviving, but rather thriving in this “jet age” of 2007? Back in the tough times of the early- to mid-80s, I distinctly recall everyone thought the King Air’s days were numbered. The Starship was coming out, the King Air was considered “old technology” and Citations were coming on strong. One by one, other twin turbo-prop manufacturers were dropping out of the business.

Many, including some in Beechcraft management, thought that the King Air would not see the next decade.

Flash forward to today and the King Air is alive and well with line rates continuing to be increased and four new models introduced in the last two years. So what is it about the King Air that has kept it going strong for over forty years? Was it a “survival of the fittest” or were there other factors that made it such an enduring design?



Natural Selection

by Randy Groom

Ten Reasons Why the King Air Remains KING

I can come up with ten solid reasons why the King Air powered through the tough times and continues so strongly today.

1 Looks

Perhaps surprising to be at the top of the list, but there is no denying the emotional impact of the King Air's commanding presence on a ramp. The aircraft simply stands up taller than other turboprops (and Citations) and looks stately and rugged at the

same time. The big "T" tail on the 200 series towered over the arch rival Conquest by nearly two feet. Many times I experienced both prospects and owners just gazing fondly back at a King Air before leaving the airport. And I always felt lucky if a diminutive competitive turboprop was sitting next to it when they did.

2 Comfort

It's about the total environment created by the cabin, and the King Air consistently shines over its competitors. The large cabin cross section and length, ▶



The King Air is known for its versatility and ruggedness allowing it to operate in hostile environments and also making it a constant with the military.

The C90GTi is one of the latest in the King Air evolution, keeping it current with state-of-the-art technology while also providing all the characteristics that make it the best selling turboprop in history.

the private lavatory, the seats and cabinetry, all make for a comfortable corporate office. The “trench” down the center aisle gives the King Air an extra edge in headroom for the trip through the cabin. Customers also laud its superior sound and vibration levels, particularly when compared against the Garrett-powered competitors.

3 Quality/Reliability

These two go hand-in-hand to create an aircraft that is world renown for day-in-day-out dispatch readiness. Beech built its brand around quality, and the reputation and goodwill gained from that has created literally thousands of repeat buyers. Truthfully, it was the quality reputation that attracted me to come to work for Beech 27 years ago.

4 Dealers/Customer Support

Over the decades, Beech built a dealer organization that was financially solid and second-to-none in the industry. When times got tough in the early 80s, the Beech dealers and the company hung together and were in the best position to “weather the storm.” This became an undeniable competitive advantage over the other turboprops. Customers benefited from this customer support stability and kept coming back for more.

5 Demise of the Competition

The twin turboprop was too crowded in the 70s and 80s and Beech clearly profited when competitors started falling out, one-by-one. The mid 80s were the toughest with Mitsubishi and Aero Commander ceasing production in 1985 and Cessna giving up on the Conquests in 1986. Fairchild kept building the Merlins up until 1987 and Piper hung on to the big Cheyennes up until 1991, albeit with very low production levels. All of those competitors had strong merits on their own right but ultimately buyers vote for the best value with their pocketbook and Beech won the vote.

6 Evolution

No twin turboprop ever was produced with so many variations. My count shows 24 different King Air models being produced since they were introduced in 1964 (excluding Special Mission aircraft). This has a number of benefits for Beech and its customers. It has created numerous price and capability categories for customers to choose from and it keeps the product line fresh and interesting. Furthermore, Beech financially benefits from utilizing common tooling and engineering in building the aircraft.

7 Versatility/Ruggedness

There is a reason why Beech has sold so many military versions of the King Air. The aircraft has consistently demonstrated it can take a lot of punishment operating in hostile environments including deserts, jungles, and rough, short unimproved strips. That's why the Royal Flying Doctors in Australia operate over 30 King Airs in the Outback. Perhaps it's a bit analogous to the SUV owners in the U.S. ... not everyone needs to operate in such an environment, but it's always comforting to know the airplane is tough enough if called to do so.

8 Image

The King Air fit in well with the Beechcraft prestigious image and mystique. Some may call it a "snob" factor, but customers are always very proud to comment to their friends at the country club that they own a King Air. In selling the airplane, it is always smart to stay away from negative selling against the competition and I always did my best to do that. But I couldn't help but chuckle when someone would refer to a competitive turboprop as a "K-Mart King Air."

9 Handling Characteristics

Beech has always been known for building airplanes that handle like a dream and the King Air delivers on that promise superbly. Roll and pitch forces are well harmonized and very pleasant and predictable. Customers transitioning up from a Bonanza or Baron find the airplanes surprisingly similar. I sold a few used

Piper Cheyennes in my day and must admit – in my opinion, they did not handle nearly as nicely as a King Air (I'm trying to stay professional here).

10 Powerplant Choice

The joining of the Pratt & Whitney PT6 series and the King Air is a marriage made in heaven. The PT6 series evolved into many different variants, a number of them specifically for applications on the King Air. Customers love the rugged design of the free turbine along with its lower sound and vibration levels. I've talked to a lot of very satisfied operators of Garrett (now Honeywell) 331 turboprop engines, but they never had the breadth of customer enthusiasm as was



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The King Air's large and comfortable cabin consistently shines over its competitors.

The King Air's commanding presence on the ramp can't be denied. It's stately, rugged and stands taller than other turboprops and Citations.



the case for the PT6. And, of course, Beech had their foray into the 331 powerplant with the B100 King Air. There were 137 of these models built between 1976 and 1981, but it became a narrow niche airplane that ultimately was tough to sell. It's interesting to note that it is the PT6 series that is today's powerplant of choice for the single engine turboprops as well.

There is no question that the King Air had some great competitors along the way and their products had many merits, and in some cases would be superior to a King Air in a specific category. Ultimately, however, it is the *total* value proposition of a product that

counts the most, and in the case of the King Air, allowed it to win the "turboprop wars" and to remain a strong competitor today.

So the next logical question is just how long will the King Air be around? Hawker Beechcraft management seems focused on further refinement of this great product. That commitment combined with a steady stream of new and repeat customers make me very bullish on its longevity. So my vote is ... say, another 40 years. **KA**



About the Author: Randy Groom is the former President of Beechcraft and the former President of Global Customer Support for Raytheon Aircraft. During his tenure at Beechcraft, he was responsible for a renewed focus on the King Air products, including the development of the C90GT, C90GTi, and the B200GT program. Prior to that, he was the Senior Vice President of Piedmont Hartzorne Aviation, the nation's largest Beechcraft dealer. Randy has spent the last 27 years selling to and supporting Beechcraft customers around the world.