

# Rugged, dependable YS-11 Retires from Piedmont duty

The last ones sit on the ramp, looking rather out of place near the 737s and 727s as they taxi by. It was just a few years ago that the YS-11 was the mainstay of the fleet, perfect for Piedmont's system. But deregulation changed all that, and now the remaining YS-11s are on the market, awaiting new homes.

Back in the mid-1960's, Piedmont began looking for a new plane to replace the Martin 404s. The airline needed a plane that would operate safely in and out of small, mountainous airports.

In those days, Piedmont provided service to places like Danville, Va., Beckley, W.Va., London-Corbin, Ky., and Hot Springs, Va. In many of these places, the runways were not long enough for pure jets.

During that same time, the YS-11 made its first flight outside Japan in hopes of attracting buyers. One stop was made so Piedmont officials could look at the aircraft. Numerous design changes were required, but soon Piedmont signed a \$22.5 million contract to buy 10 YS-11s and an option for 10 more. Eventually, a total of 21 YS-11s joined the fleet.

The YS-11 design was just what Piedmont needed.

### the showcase

"Piedmont was the showcase for the YS-11," said Kuniaki Tsuruta, then a representative for Nihon

Aeroplane Manufacturing Company, the Japanese corporation which coordinated the design and manufacture of the propjet. Tsuruta himself participated in the design and manufacturing of the wing.

"Piedmont was the first airline in the United States to purchase the YS-11," Tsuruta said. "That decision changed my whole life."

Tsuruta thought he would stay only two years in the United States when his company sent him to act as liaison with Piedmont as well as other airlines. But in 1974 when Nihon called him back to Japan, he wasn't sure he really wanted to go.

"Two of my three children, born in the United States, could not even speak Japanese," Tsuruta said. "My wife cooks delicious Japanese food, but the kids won't eat it."

"My daughter received one of the best available educations in this country and wants to return what she owes to the country. So now she works at Emory University with patients suffering from blood cancer," he said.

"My 17-year-old son has received football scholarships from a couple of colleges, and all my children are very American. It would have been very difficult to go back to the old culture."

So Tsuruta decided to accept Piedmont's job offer and is now



Ted Restel (left), manager of YS-11 training, and Kuntaki Tsuruta, director operations

cost, both based in INT, in cockpit of one of the last YS-11s.

director-operations cost for the airline.

### met needs

"The YS-11 has been a good airplane and I enjoyed flying it," said Pilot Ted Restel, manager of YS-11 training.

"It did what it was designed to do — carry out heavy loads from mountainous airports with short runways, and in all kinds of weather."

Restel joined Piedmont in 1974 as a first officer on the YS-11. He moved to the 727 three years later, then in early 1980, became a captain on the propjet and later, an instructor. He taught not only Piedmont pilots but pilots from other airlines which have contracted with Piedmont for training.

"It has been a very rugged airplane, and its design for short takeoff and landing was exactly

what we needed," Restel said.

"No other plane could carry as many passengers and could get in and out of the small airports as well as the YS-11. It has done a very good job for Piedmont."

### butt of jokes

During its 14 years of service, the YS-11 has been the butt of many jokes.

The aircraft has been called affectionately — and sometimes not so affectionately — Rice Rocket, Weed Eater, and Yokohama Mama, to name a few.

Comedian Mark Russell once announced a new Piedmont flight to Peking "with intermediate stops at Rocky Mount, Raleigh/Durham, Salisbury, Asheville, and Knoxville."

In an editorial marking the aircraft's retirement, the *Wilmington Star-News* said, "Piedmont without props is like sausage without hominy. Spots without hushpuppies. Tea without ice. It's downright un-Southern. But it's just another improvement we'll have to get used to. After today, Piedmont will be propless."



T.H. Davis, chairman of the board and chief executive officer, was on hand when the last flight set down at Smith Reynolds Airport, INT, March 14. Crew members on historic flight 927 are (l to r): First Officer Tom Jellar, Captain Tom Sharpe, and flight attendants Chris Baird and Phyllis Pope, all based in Winston-Salem.