



America's Airplane Cemeteries

End Of The Runway...

Did you ever stop to wonder what happens to airplanes after they go out of service and are grounded, never to fly again? Well, turns out there are companies in the United States that make it their business to ensure that decommissioned airliners receive decent end-of-life treatment. In this article we will catch a glimpse of the aircraft cemeteries where old airplanes are kept once they have been retired from service.

Once cars die, they are towed away and stored in one of the myriad junkyards that dot the American landscape. There they are stripped of all useful parts. In some cases, the remains are crushed or otherwise cut and then sold for scrap metal. The price of scrap metal today is so high that a defunct car can be sold for \$400 on average. In many cases, however, they just sit and rust.

However, what happens to aircraft once they reach the end of the line? Do huge tow trucks come and drag them off to the junkyard?

The fact is that since commercial airplanes are so large, towing them to a junkyard is impractical. The only remaining option is to send them straight to an airline cemetery. Yes, commercial airliners that are no longer in use are sent to special aircraft "graveyards."

Of course, an airplane graveyard is larger than the average junkyard. Some are dozens of acres in size. Just seeing miles of decommissioned airplanes is a rare sight, one that has attracted photographers who make their living finding unusual photos. They will hire a helicopter to make a pass or two over these huge, sprawling wastelands and freeze for posterity an image of the endless rows of huge aircraft lying there lifeless.

One such aircraft cemetery is in St. Augustine, Florida. There are others in the United States many times its size, but this one it is imbued with an overdose of nostalgia. Years



The St. Augustine yard, where a number of airplanes have come to their permanent rest.

Airplanes that flew missions that altered the course of history are now overgrown with weeds.

ago, the field's owner, Charlie White, bought nine airplanes dating from the 1960s and 1970s. He removed whatever parts had value and sold them. White was then left with the worthless, stripped-down husks, which remained on his field. Over the years they became overgrown by weeds and rust.

Resurrection of the Dead

Disclaimer: not all airplanes that arrive at the airline junkyard have been sentenced to death. A percentage will yet rise and return to life.

Airlines suffer from a problem that is not shared by, say, cars. Even when the economy is weak, or on the rare occasion that the American skies are closed to air traffic, people still have to get to work. There will always be a need for a taxi to get someone somewhere. Airlines, however, face periods when flyers are not interested in flying. Where do you send an airplane while it is on an enforced, unpaid vacation? There are no

resorts that cater to 747s. Instead, they are sent to the aircraft junkyard.

Other unemployed airplanes are sometimes given "freelance work." For example, Southwest Airlines decided a year ago to put 88 Boeing 717s that it inherited during its 2011 buyout of AirTran on temporary leave. At the time, Southwest had no need for these airplanes. Nevertheless, they were fairly new and in addition they were cheap to maintain. So Delta Airlines jumped on the bandwagon and decided to lease these surplus aircraft from Southwest.

More often than not, though, the fate of retired airplanes is not so happy. Usually, once an airline company is finished with its aircraft, they are consigned to an ignominious spot at the cemetery. There are a number of cities in the United States that specialize in retired airplanes, whether they are sent for temporary storage or to their final rest. These include Mojave and Victorville in California, and Goodyear and Pinal Airpark in Arizona.

Most of these are located in the vast

deserts of the American southwest where the air is dry and there is minimal precipitation. This is a critical factor for airline companies who are considering returning some of these craft to later service. The lack of humidity means the planes can be stored for long periods of time with minimal risk of rusting and decay. In addition, the desert floor is very hard, providing an ideal surface for maneuvering and storing the aircraft and making costly paving unnecessary.

Of course, when an airline chooses long-term storage for its potentially operational aircraft, they must pay for caretakers to maintain them. Otherwise, even under the best conditions the aircraft will fall into disrepair. The owner of the airplane pays an average of \$3,500 per month to store its aircraft. That may sound like a lot, but it equals just one-tenth the cost of parking an airplane in an airport!

Even graveyards where aircraft are maintained shipshape for future use offer surrealistic images. Seeing so many lumbering giants gathered at a single location is like something from another world. And when you consider that each of those jumbo jets once cost as much as \$100 million, the scene becomes absolutely unreal.

Graveyards that Grow... and Shrink

Another fascinating aspect of this unique phenomenon is that the number of residents at the aircraft graveyard does not remain steady. Like all cemeteries, they may become fuller with time, as more and more airplanes join the ranks of the dearly departed. Unlike other cemeteries, however, airplane graveyards can also see a decline in the number of residents. It all depends on the rise and fall of the air travel industry.

Following World War II, when the military drastically reduced the number of aircraft it needed to maintain, the cemeteries suddenly overflowed with the excess craft. It took many years for all of the surplus WWII airplanes to be sold into consignment or recycled.



View of the St. Augustine aircraft graveyard from above.