

# Lost and found

True identity—and value—of a 70-year-old B-17 wind-tunnel model hidden for decades is revealed after an accident nearly destroyed it

By Mike Lombardi

Most historical records and artifacts find their way into the safe-keeping of the Boeing Historical Archives, but there are instances where important pieces of Boeing history are nearly lost.

Consider what happened to a rare and valuable artifact from the early days of the B-17 program.

A few years back, a large wood and metal model of a Flying Fortress was discovered stored in a Boeing warehouse. It had been painted to roughly match the standard olive drab and medium-gray camouflage used on B-17s in the first part of World War II. It was not a remarkable paint job, but it did do a good job of camouflaging the model's true identity.

It was decided that the model may have some historical value and that it should be shipped to the Boeing Archives for further examination and storage. But the model never made it.

In some unfortunate mishap, the model was damaged. And it was mistakenly shipped to the Museum of Flight in Seattle.

The museum subsequently contacted Boeing Historical Services about a container received from Boeing with the remains of a large wood and metal model of a B-17. The damaged model appeared

beyond salvage. Even though some of the parts had been reduced to unrecognizable splinters, it was easy to determine by the paint that this was the same model from the Boeing warehouse.

Closer examination of the damaged model led to a startling discovery: Some of the broken parts had very distinct letter and number markings on their inside surfaces that matched those used by the Boeing Aerodynamics Laboratory in its early days to identify Boeing wind-tunnel models.

Further research on the numbers confirmed that the model was indeed the original B-17E/F wind-tunnel model first tested in November 1940 and used by Boeing during World War II to test modifications to the legendary bomber. The model also had slots in the outboard wings, which were not a feature of the B-17 but rather a modification applied to the Model 307 Stratoliner—a clue that this model had also been used in the important role of testing improvements to the Stratoliner wing.

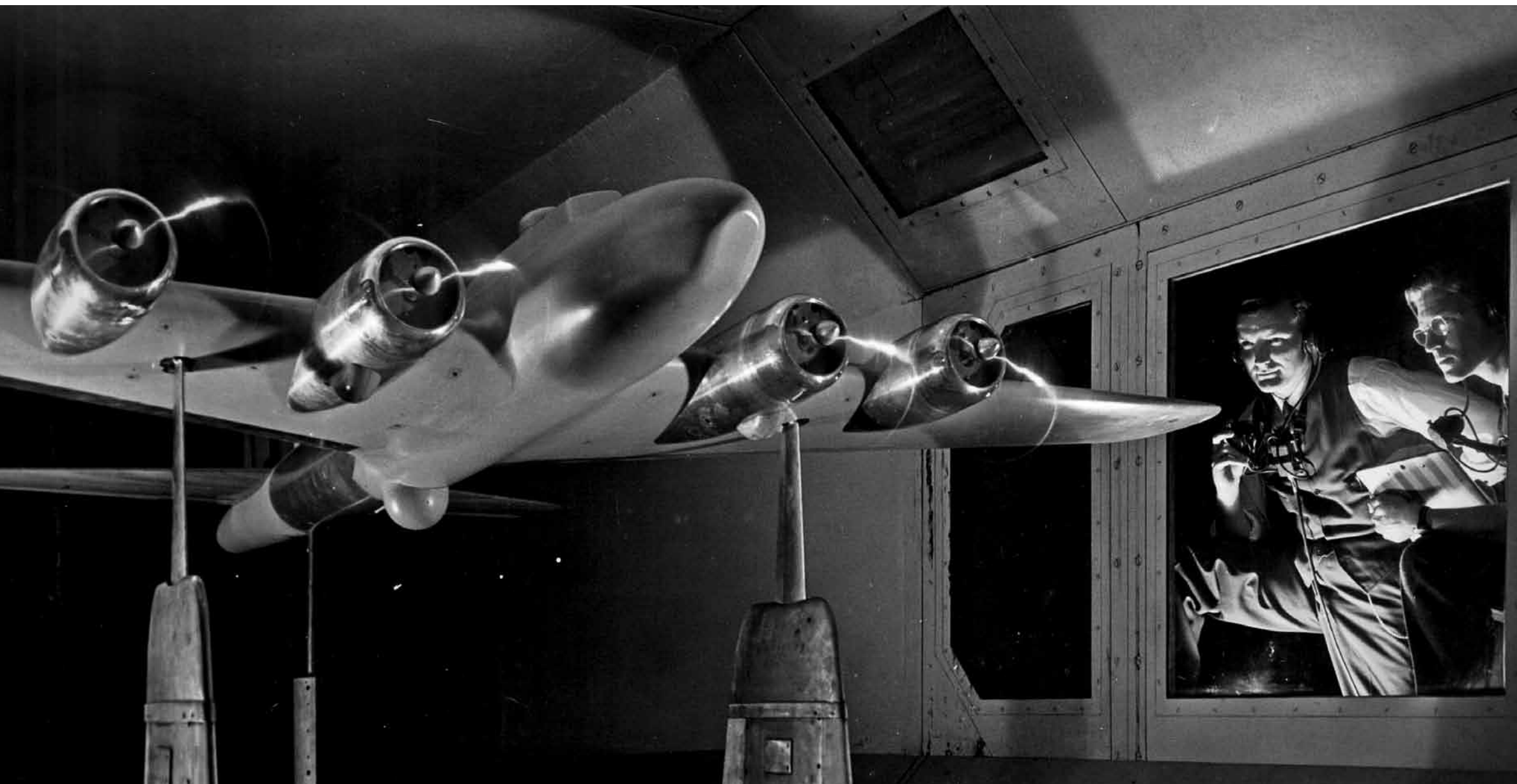
With the discovery that this was a rare artifact, a number of skilled artisans came to the rescue to help restore the model to its original condition.

Leading the effort was Herb Phelan, currently the crew chief on the Museum of Flight's B-17F. He organized a team of volunteers that included B-17 combat veterans Hank Henrickson, former pilot, Ralph McLaren, former top gunner, and Art Heino, former tail gunner. Help was also enlisted from the Boeing wind-tunnel model shop and the Operations group for the Aero Lab including Steve Cameron, Bob Kay, Bruce Kimball, Charlie Maddock, Mike Thoe, Steve Beatty and Kody Wilkes.

During a four-year restoration, wooden parts were glued, filled, sanded and varnished, metal and brass parts were smoothed and polished, and the electric motors were repaired. The restored model will soon be on loan to the Museum of Flight, where it will be displayed as part of the Boeing story in the historic Red Barn. ■

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*Guidance concerning the proper handling of historic items can be found in Boeing policy PRO-2062 or by contacting Boeing Historical Services. The donation of any historical artifact to an entity outside Boeing requires approval from the corporate historian.*



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**PHOTOS: (Left)** In this March 1944 photo, Boeing engineers Verl Nelson (left) and Bob Withington observe a test of the B-17 model in the then-new Boeing wind tunnel at Plant 2 in Seattle. **BOEING ARCHIVES (Above)** The restored wind-tunnel model. **HERB PHELAN**