

# The 767-200 “VA004” Italy and Middle East Tour

By Dave Ingebright    rough draft C 5/20/24

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It was a secret I kept to myself, that night in Italy on a Boeing sales tour. It led to my two friends and I being pulled out of a car in the middle of the night and frisked at gunpoint. Italian undercover police had pulled us over with a friend we barely knew. It is one of those astonishing memories when you think back and wonder how did I get into this situation. It was the summer of 1983, I was 31 and a member of the maintenance crew on a European sales tour with a new 767. About two months earlier, I'd heard the #4 flight test plane “VA004” was going to make the first sales venture, a two-week trip around Europe and the Middle East. I wished I was going because so far, I'd had a blast on a few trips to California for testing. There were always elements of fun, excitement, and learning, plus an all-expense paid trip away from home. At the last minute, I was surprised and excited to be included on this trip as an avionics analyst. This 767 was the first plane with digital avionics, LED screens instead of instruments and what they called a “glass cockpit”. It was all new and it still had some bugs.

On the day of the departure, it was a sunny and warm Seattle day as we packed the plane with baggage, tools and spare parts. I looked up and people were getting on board and Boeing Public Relations was having a small press conference at the bottom of the airstairs. The shiny 767 in United Airlines colors stood regally in the background. As I worked my way to the back of the crowd, I realized this was big stuff. Some important Boeing leaders were there along with VP of engineering Ben Cosgrove, VP Dean Thornton and the legendary CEO, TA Wilson. I think this was the first real public showing of this new plane and press people were clamoring for quotes and pictures. As I watched TA and the press and the VPs board the plane, I could feel the level of excitement in showing off this new twin aisle to the world. After the hoopla at the bottom of the stairs, everyone else boarded, found a seat, a final count was made and we got set to go. The plan was to fly the press and Wilson three hours to Boston/Logan and have food and drinks on the way. My preparations meant finding a comfortable window seat out of sight for the long flight.

The 767-test program was a little time worn for me as I'd spent the last two years sitting on one of the test planes being bumped, jolted and half scared during the exhaustive testing both around Seattle and the California high desert. VA004 wasn't like the earlier planes, it was the sixth one off the assembly line, with a shiny new hi-tech interior, totally complete, not the partial, minimal test interiors I'd been used to. As we winged our way east, I got to thinking what an odd mix of patterns this job had turned out to be. I worked for the line maintenance shop but I spent my days assigned to a plane, as part of the flight crew and expected to help with most any problem or question that developed during the flight, working with pilots and engineering people on the test. I even brought coffee or cokes to the flight deck. We joked that we were just 'making holes in the sky' while flying the different tests.

One day my job could be changing out a different set of flight computers in the compartment below the floor, the next day opening up the ceiling to find the source of a funny smell, or on the ramp at some obscure Midwest airport showing the fuel truck guy how to put gas in the new plane. There was usually an extra seat up front where I always tried to be, watching two pilots operate this huge 177,000 Lb. flying machine. I'd spent hundreds of hours sitting in pilot seats, testing the aircraft systems but to see them function in flight, it was huge. Every day there was something new to learn. It was a satisfying mix and I loved the job. These were exciting times at Boeing and landing this promotion to analyst after just three years was an unbelievable stroke of luck.

I'd been hired as a union tech running functional tests, installing wiring changes or preflighting the cockpit electronics on one of the dozen or so planes in test. I really had to be on my toes that first year because this was all new electronics to me. There was another new guy that everyone called "yabut" because they'd explain something to him and he'd say yeah, but... I thought about the time as a teen when the huge Boeing layoffs in 1970 caused a sign to be put up downtown that said "The last person out of Seattle please turn off the lights" and I vowed to give this job 110% so I would never be laid off.

A few months after starting, management sent me to the Renton airport to gain more experience and work on the final testing of electronics on new 737 and 727 jets coming off the assembly lines. I didn't even know how to get to Renton and it was year before I got back home to Boeing Field. Relaxing in my seat, as we flew towards Boston, the last

four years had been a whirlwind of excitement as I went from not knowing much about airplane electronics to being on the frontline, learning the new 767 digital flight systems, helping document the bugs and watching the new systems work in flight.

A whole new era of aircraft technology was just being unlocked. This job as an in-flight analyst/technician was a lucky career break and there were only like twenty of us in the whole company. It was incredible, taking off in the morning, having a free box lunch and landing just before quitting time. It was thrilling flying every day but I knew I was out of my league sitting behind pilots that probably flew the first jets. But there was a feeling of mutual respect and shared destiny to fly the test and get home safely. I could feel a silent bond between everyone on the test flight.

There wasn't much the pilots and test engineers didn't know about the plane but I was familiar with the finer details, things that could keep us out of trouble and help with the development. Cheap insurance and a set of tools was probably the only reason I was along. Looking around the plane and seated for takeoff I noted a couple of flight attendants borrowed from United and in the forward zone, 10 or 12 industry press people, 5-6 Boeing sales, TA and two vice presidents. A first-class dinner was served to all and everyone got comfortable as we headed east. "T" walked around to all us Boeing employees seated on the plane and said "Hi-Thanks" and then he did a couple of press conferences standing between the rows, talking about the plane the and the unbelievable simultaneous 757/767 FAA certification programs.



**Boeing CEO T Wilson gives an interview enroute to Boston Logan.  
Behind T is Jim Boynton, Director of Public Relations and Advertising and myself**

I watched T's in-flight briefings from the sidelines with great interest and later saw a picture published of me in the Boeing News standing in the background of a briefing holding a big cocktail. Most of the people got off at Logan and it was dark as we pointed the 767's nose towards Europe. There was an air of excitement and expectation circulating through the mostly empty seats, probably sixty of us on a 250-seat plane. Sitting in the back with the maintenance crew, everyone was delighted and felt privileged to be getting out of Seattle and going to Europe for two summer weeks. All of us knew there was going to be some work and a whole lot of adventure ahead. We were in the final months of a three-year test program where the first five 767s were in test, each one concentrating on a piece of the certification: brakes, performance, engines, aerodynamics, entertainment. But Boeing needed to do a ton more flying to satisfy an FAA requirement called function and reliability. We called it F&R.



**Boeing CEO TA Wilson giving an interview on the flight from Boeing Field to Boston Logan**

High up, it was decided to do a sales tour, show the airplane to some airlines and rack up some credits for F&R at the same time. Boeing must have been courting the Italian flag airline, Alitalia because we flew directly to Torino Italy from Boston and parked on the ramp of Alenia, a supplier of some wing parts for 767s. The shop guys unloaded the bags, closed up the plane and there was a private bus waiting to take us to our hotel. I noted a Panavia Tornado fighter parked next to us; it was the European equivalent of the swing-wing F-111. As was normal practice, an assigned engineering crew of three or four were along maintain the engineering side of the plane and a maintenance crew of ten. We were self-contained with a cargo hold full of tools and spare parts.



**VA004 on the Ramp at Torino**

We got checked in and a few of us decided to meet up at the pool on the roof. Now, this place was off the beaten track. Nobody in the hotel spoke English and that was fine, we were just a little surprised. It had a roof pool and a patio that were perfect but with the arrival of a dozen men looking around, the few women sunning themselves in European topless fashion began to look uncomfortable. We quietly departed for the lounge downstairs. The next day the plane began a whirlwind tour of a few of the major Alitalia hubs in Italy.

Each day a new city, Bologna, Venice, Rome. We'd hold an "open house" at the airport and the public and airline people were invited to tour the plane. Guys from the crew



were situated throughout the cabin and answered questions, watched as security and gave out Boeing stickers. We stood around and chatted with the local airport guys too. Airport people would come out of the woodwork driving baggage carts and ramp vehicles to see the new plane and visit, say HI, peer in the wheel wells and then ask questions about this cool new plane. If there was time, one of us would give a quick tour to anyone who was interested. We always had some Boeing hats to give out and they soon became a trading commodity. Some bartering was done but mostly we had enough hats for those we thought deserved one. A Boeing hat was something everyone wanted. It was funny, they never got old anywhere in the world. I didn't know it then but I was to encounter this kind of excitement on new plane tours during the whole future of my career – and with new planes not even yet on the drawing board.



**Boarding the plane at one of the stops. Top of stairs, Test Operations Manager Steve Brown  
Shop Mechanic Walt Summers, Sales Guy, 767 Project Pilot Tom Edmonds.**

At the conclusion of each open house, we'd take the local Alitalia airline officials, a few of their friends and local dignitaries up for a flight around the area. Alitalia pilots were permitted to fly the plane and the flight attendants would learn to operate the latest galleys, heat up some fancy snacks and serve champagne to all. It was great fun and all we saw were people excited to experience this new plane.

At the end of the day, the maintenance crew would congregate at the rooftop pool and soak up the final hours of the balmy summer evening. There was a volleyball net and someone found a volleyball and we started having rousing games of pool volleyball every night. It was great fun, the trouble was, we were four stories up and a couple of times, when the ball was spiked, it went over the edge of the roof all the way to the sidewalk below. We would all run over to the railing and look down at the street below. Somebody would run down and get it. One time this happened and as we all looked over the edge of the roof, a passerby tried to kick the ball all the way back up to us-he nearly made it! Italy was in the world cup football playoffs that week and the whole country was going insane about it. A few days later, Italy won and the whole town went nuts. I was awakened by the noise and looked out my window to see cars honking and people hanging out windows screaming and yelling most of the night.

For some reason I had been allotted a rental car in my travel papers so I went and rented a small Fiat after work. Two friends on the crew, Vic Mertel and John Overby and I decided to drive up into the nearby Italian alps on the weekend and do some exploring. About an hour into the trip, we ran into a police roadblock. The national police were actively searching for members of a terrorist group called The Red Brigade. They were a Marxist-Leninist armed organization which was operating as a far-left terrorist group based in Italy. Responsible for numerous recent violent incidents they were at large in the area and actively being pursued. Later we stopped for coffee and it was the first time I'd ever seen the tiny little cups of strong Italian espresso. Arriving in Chamonix on the Italian/Swiss border, we found there was a tramway that ran to near the top of 15,000' Mount Blanc. It looked like fun and we said why not. It was a spectacular trip to the top and we walked around a bit, had a bite to eat on the patio outside an ice cave. The view was stunning, I loved that we made it to the highest peak in the Europe.





**Dave and John Overby at the top of Mt Blanc**

On the way home, Vic got this idea he wanted to go to Monte Carlo. Nobody was interested in the three-hour drive from Torino but it must have been one of Vic's dreams because he borrowed my car the next night and was gone until early the following morning. Not sure what he did but he was happy and glad he went. The next day, at the morning meeting we were updated that the plane was going to make a side trip to Kuwait. Since I didn't have a visa, I was told to stay in Torino and await the return. I thought what a great little free Italian vacation on the clock. I helped the plane depart and went downtown to try and buy a newspaper in English, as I hadn't seen any news for a week. Traffic was horrible and when I was cut off by a fast mover, I shook my fist at him like I'd seen people do. I immediately knew it was the wrong because he then followed me on my bumper for several miles and it scared the daylights out of me.

Decided that was not a very smart thing to do. Maybe the same as flipping somebody off! Spent my days walking around the area, swimming in the pool and enjoying the time off. I ordered a ham sandwich and a glass of wine for lunch every afternoon, the only things I could read on the menu.

I was sitting next to the pool while eating lunch one day, and met this guy, Ray. He was solidly built, Italian about my age, medium height with short black hair and a quick smile. It appeared he was part of a rotary club meeting or something and we got to talking. I told him what I was doing there and saw him the next day and we had a good conversation and had some things in common, became friends. He spoke good English and we had some rousing talks about world events. Ray suggested that when my friends got back, he'd take us out and show us the town. That sounded like a fine idea to me. The next afternoon I struck up a conversation with one of the girls sitting by the pool and was starting to get to know her and by the time the plane flew over on return, I was holding her hand. It was a very pleasant three days.

VA004 returned from Kuwait with not much to talk about and the plan was to leave for an overnight in Tel Aviv the next morning. I spoke to two friends from the crew, Jerry Lambe and Vic Mertel, and told them of Ray's offer. They were good with it and I connected with Ray. We were looking forward to a fun evening. He picked us up late afternoon and we went downtown. He ordered an outstanding meal for us at a neighborhood restaurant. The food was exceptional. When we got ready to leave, we realized that we were paying for everything. We searched our pockets and paid the bill leaving a little surprised. As we left, I looked back and every square inch of the table was filled with empty glasses, he'd ordered every kind of wine and liqueur for he and us to taste. Vic was starting to become tipsy from all the tastings and we had to help him along. As we got into Ray's car, he announced we were now going to a nightclub. We drove to another part of town and we arrived at a glitzy-looking club on a side street that looked to be overflowing. There were ten or so people waiting to in line to get in and the bouncer said "no more" waving his arms at us.

Ray turned to me and said "no problem, wait here" and he had a quick word with the bouncer, went inside for a minute and then quickly motioned for us to follow him on in. We all looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. Inside was a disco of the type that John Travolta had made popular in the US a few years earlier. It was decorated in a

pleasing modern hip style. The lighting was dim and the walls were covered with large fabric-covered geometric squares colored in green, black, orange and lit with hidden black lights in the ceiling. People were dancing everywhere; it was a comfortable space but we felt a little out of place. Scattered around were square modular couches in complementary colors. The sound system was top notch and I could feel the bass notes through my shoes. One of the songs they played was Steve Miller's "Abracadabra". Every time I hear that song, I think of that night in the Italian disco. I kept an eye on Ray through the crowd and soon my friends were signaling to me it was time to go. It was getting late, really late and by this time all of us were impaired.

We left and the place was still jammed, and it was at least 3AM. As we drove back to the hotel, Ray started driving really erratically, running red lights on the empty streets and taking corners fast. We all felt unsafe. I asked him "what the heck are you doing" but he just looked straight ahead with his brows furrowed. The next thing I knew, there were red lights and a siren behind us. Ray pulled over and two guys in tees and blue jeans opened our doors and pulled us all out of the car. I noticed revolvers stuck in their belts as we were lined up along the trunk. They flashed badges and wanted our IDs. I had my passport, but my two friends were unable to produce anything but Washington State drivers' licenses. The cops looked at those and said what's this? My friends gave lopsided grins and tried to explain their ID from a state in the US.

There was a bunch of Italian talk and tongue lashing. We were put in the back of a police car. I think Ray got a ticket. Somehow, we were sent on our way but it was a scary, dangerous confrontation for all of us. I was just happy to get back to the hotel safe. After about two hours of sleep, we were checking out of the hotel and ready for the next leg of the trip: Tel Aviv. I dragged my dog-tired self onto the two-hour flight still thinking about last night. Landing at Ben Gurion airport, I had never seen so many El-Al liveried planes in one place.



**VP Dean Thornton at top of stairs in Tel Aviv, Test Ops Manager Steve Brown and VP Engineering 747/767 Ben Cosgrove.**

As we closed up VA004, the sales guys and the VPs went off to a big meeting and the maintenance crew put the plane to bed and headed to our hotel via private bus as usual. Arrived at the Hilton and I hadn't really seen the layout of the city or the location of our hotel. When I got to my room and opened the curtains, there was a staggering view of the blue Mediterranean Sea all spread out in front of me. I couldn't believe it. I had no idea we were right on the water.





In Tel Aviv earlier this month, Dean Thornton, Boeing Commercial Airplane Company vice president and general manager of the 767 Division, spoke to representatives of El Al Israel Airlines and the press during a stopover on the

767's 15-day tour to Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. El Al, which has four of the big twinjets on order, has operated Boeing aircraft since 1961. —photo by Ken DeJarlais

## Thornton: more takeoff weight, longer fuselage in 767's future

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are interested in a stretched 767, Thornton said.

"The next derivation might be a freighter, with the existing fuselage but a still higher gross takeoff weight."

Thornton said the likelihood of a trijet derivation of the 767 is remote. "You'd pay for it — by redesign to a certain extent and by engine development."

Also, Thornton said, the 767 has grown in capability since the time it was considered as part of a family that might eventually include a trijet.

"That improved capability has eaten

riage of computer-aided design and computer-aided manufacturing."

"The 767 is really the first program in which Boeing has used CAD/CAM to any degree," he said. "In the future, there will be a better marriage of CAD and CAM — the untouched-by-human-hands approach."

"We now have, for example, our spar assembly tool, which is digital and has a robotics flavor to it, and our floor drilling machinery. There'll be a gradual expansion of that."

Thornton based his estimate of a 20-year 767 program life on the "essen-

mercial jet."

"We are going to take a 767 to the Farnborough air show on Sept. 3. This will be the second airplane for Delta, with General Electric engines. We will do some demonstration flying there."

The 767 on the just-completed tour, powered by Pratt & Whitney engines, will go into service with United Airlines. It was the seventh off the assembly line and the first to be converted to a two-crew-member flight deck. The Farnborough airplane is the 12th off the assembly line.

While the Pratt & Whitney-powered

convert.

"That was 10 months before certification, and we had to turn the whole airplane upside down."

"We're going to convert 29 airplanes, for seven customers, with engines from two different manufacturers and meet a schedule established four years ago."

"I'm damn proud of the people that are doing that."

"You know," Thornton said, "it's unbelievable how rapidly the time has gone — four years' worth of it, since United Airlines selected the 767 on July 14, 1978."

## From Boeing News: VP Dean Thornton makes a presentation on the 767 during one of the stops.

Unpacked my swimsuit, grabbed a tiny bottle from the minibar and headed downstairs and out for a swim. I quickly realized that this beach was segregated. There was a wall right down to the water, men on one side and women on the other. The water felt great and as I was floating on my back, I thought about the events of the night before, we could have all easily ended up in jail. The following morning, we flew west to Algiers Algeria and whatever arrangements had been made fell through because all I could see out the window were men in jeeps bristling with automatic rifles. It was a little unsettling. There was some kind of hurried meeting at the door and we turned around and departed for Oslo Norway. It was a nice flight up the West coast of Europe and I could identify most of the geography, it was an amazing view from seven miles up. Arrived in Oslo for an overnight on the last leg of our trip.

As usual, we did some maintenance and closed up the plane. Sales and a VP went off to a meeting and we got on our bus to the hotel. By this time everyone knew everyone else on the plane as we'd spent nearly two weeks together. For some reason, this night we were all at the same quaint hotel in downtown Oslo. It would be our last night on the road. I tried to reach my Norwegian cousin Arne but was unable to find him in the telephone book, even with some help from the concierge. After dinner, Jerry Lambe and I decided to hit the top floor lounge where we ran into the one remaining VP on the trip, Deane Thornton. He invited us over to his table and we all sat down and chatted about the trip and the fine 767 airplane. It was pretty cool to sit with Deane who was likable, easy to talk to, charismatic and I could tell he knew the airplane business.

It was a relaxed atmosphere leaning back at the end of the trip in the dimly lighted lounge. I started a conversation with our waitress who was a tall, blue-eyed, very cute Scandinavian blonde. The more we talked, the more we both realized we had an instant unusual connection. She said her name was Kristin. I invited her up to my room after she got off. She knocked on my door, very late, and we continued our conversation. It was so remarkable; we both felt a real organic connection of some kind. This was a bond so significant that we both knew we couldn't walk away. She wrote down her address, I wrote down mine. The next morning the crew, VP Thornton and sales boarded the plane and we flew home to Seattle.

As I sat in my corner in the back of the plane, I leaned back, stretched out my legs and watched the sun as it tracked us winging westward through the left windows. It had been quite a trip. From the top of the highest mountain in Europe to the back of a police car. From floating on my back in the Mediterranean to maybe falling in love. Kristin and I corresponded for about six months. I was smitten and asked her to come to Seattle. She said she couldn't. I understood.