naval aircraft

T-44

By Harold Andrews

Among active duty Naval Aviators who went through the multi-engine advanced training "pipeline," only the oldest and youngest, received their training in twin-engine Beech trainers. From WW II through the mid-fifties, the SNB (later C-45) served this role. Replaced by S2Fs (later S-2s), these early twin-Beech's are better remembered in their utility role by most pilots still on board today.

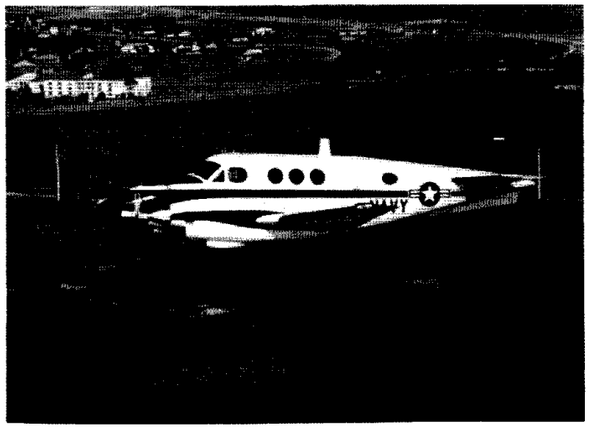
Over the years, the remaining twin-Beech C-45s were gradually retired from their many utility duties. At the Beech Aircraft Company, meanwhile, the Beech 18 series continued in production, with regular improvements in design and equipment. At the same time, Beech's line of lighter, piston-engined twins continued to advance towards larger and more capable aircraft to meet the needs of the business aircraft market. Elsewhere, the small turboshaft engine received more and more attention, resulting in new turbine engines suitable for small helicopter and business aircraft use. In the early sixties, Beech put these two thrusts together, resulting in a flight-test installation of Pratt and Whitney/Canada PT-6 engines in a modified *Queen Air* and the announcement of the turboprop-powered and pressurized *King Air* in 1963.

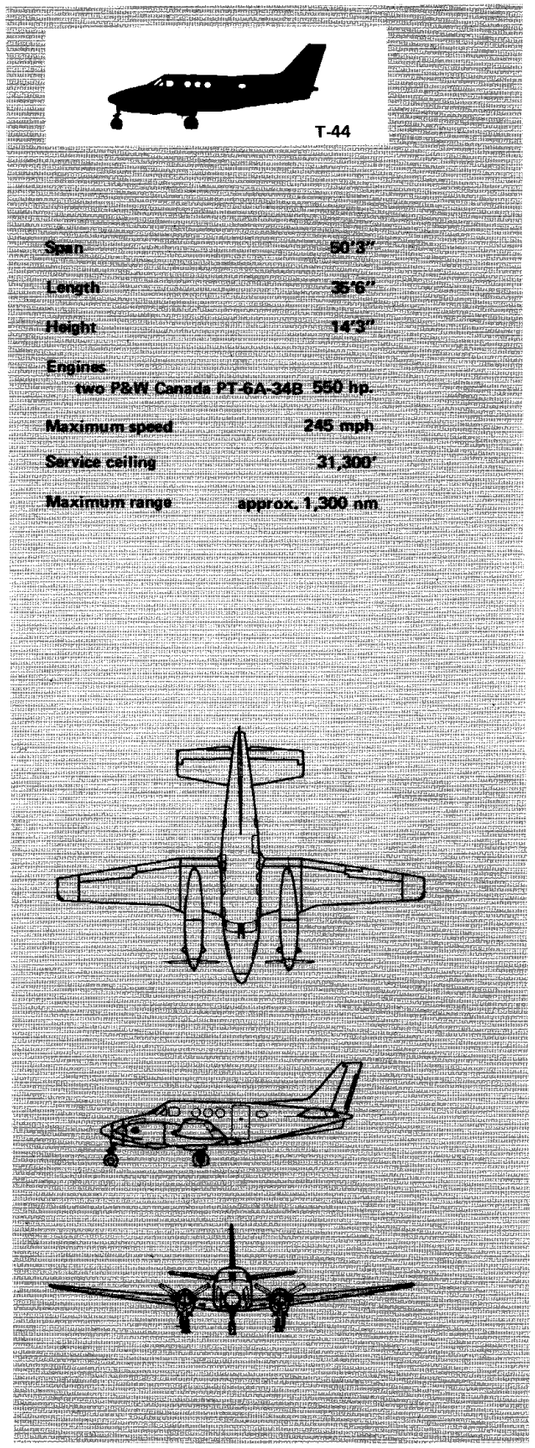
The new addition to Beech's line of business aircraft first flew in January 1964; certification followed in April and the *King Air* was on its way to commercial success. Military use followed. The Army procured unpressurized versions as the U-21A, while the Air Force acquired one as the UC-6A for its special mission operations. Five years later with a larger version *(King Air 100)* introduced, production of the Beech 18 finally ended.

Many of the Navy's piston engine aircraft were gradually being replaced by turbine-powered types. S-2s had long been out of production and by the mid-seventies, the TS-2As were both old and tired, as well as inadequate for training pilots for T-56 powered P-3s, C-130s and E-2s, to say nothing of the turbofan-powered S-3s. Clearly a new turboprop trainer was needed for the multi-engined advanced training pipeline.

With several FAA-certified twin turboprop aircraft available, the decision was made to competitively select one of these as the VTAMX training aircraft to meet the Navy's requirements. As with all customers for these commercial aircraft, the Navy would indicate its needs for communications and navigation avionics and other equipment details. In 1976 the competition was held, Beech being the winner with its G90 *King Air* proposal. The aircraft were to be delivered complete with P&W/Canada PT-6A turboprop engines, and all support was to be provided commercially by Beech under the contract.

Since 1977, 61 T-44As have been delivered, all going to VT-21 and VT-31 at NAS Corpus Christi, Texas. Contractor flight demonstrations and NATC service suitability tests were performed with four of the first airplanes delivered before they joined the others at Corpus Christi. With Navy's *King Airs* expected to enjoy a long service life in their training role, Beech milti-engined trained Naval Aviators will once again become the norm.





Span	50'3"
Length	35'6"
Height	14'3"
Engines	
two P&W Canada PT-6A-34B	550 hp.
Maximum speed	245 mph
Service ceiling	31,300'
Maximum range	approx. 1,300 nm