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The belly
freighter

Could two decks of belly cargo be the future for freighter conversions? CLIFF DUKE AND ANDY COUPLAND of LCF Conversions put their case to Peter Conway

CLiff duke, chief executive of LCF Conversions, says the future of passenger aircraft used for cargo is "up for grabs"

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Airline chiefs are being persuaded to look at freighter in a different way – to see them not as providing extra mainstream lift, but as supplemental belly capacity.

That is in essence the pitch that the Erika Group is making with its new LCF Conversions programme – LCF standing for Low Cost Freighter. The idea – as has been well publicised in the past year – is to create freighters by installing lifts between lower and maindeck on retired passenger planes, and thus produce a full-cargo aircraft with no additional work or cost.

Cargo would be loaded through the existing lower deck doors, and there would be no need to strengthen the maindeck frames. LCF reckon it can be done for as little as US$6.5m on an A340 or $7.5m for a B777, and take six weeks, or half the time of a normal widebody conversion.

"It’s a different way of looking at freighter," says experienced cargo professional Coupland. "They could be used by airlines who have philosophically decided not to have freighters, but want a way to make extra money on belly cargo."

Despite the objections, one is tempted to ask if there isn’t something in the Erika Group’s proposal. After all, the Belly Planes Group is putting the same concept to airlines in similar vein.

"It’s a different way of looking at freighter," says Coupland. "Why buy a B747-8F or a B777F, when our solution is available at a fraction of the cost? In future you won’t get cheap conversions." A B777 conversion, it says, will cost about US$6.5m and five weeks.

"We’re not just sitting back and waiting for the right people to knock on our doors," says Duke. "We’re going directly to them and selling them on the idea, and we’ve had some strong reactions. Rivals say it can’t be done, but we say it’s a good idea."

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Duke, who has experience of selling both the Antonov and B747s, says, "If we have one thing we’ve learnt from our 20 years in business, it is the need to be adaptable. We have the capability to make changes, whether that is to adapt our freighter or our airline’s freighter."

"I’ve been in the airline business 20 years, and I’ve seen changes everywhere. The industry has had to adapt to changes and I think we’ve done that. If we can’t adapt, we’ll go out of business. We are prepared to change the rules as we go along."

Co-publisher Andy Coupland is the Operating Economics Consultant for LCF Conversions, putting out its pro-

duce a full cargo conversion without any need to cut a maindeck structural for pass-

enger aircraft. But there are already signs that this will be at least US$15mn. The next venture company called PSF Conversions and focusing on the B777-200, but has yet to sign up any launch customers due to high feedstock prices. Duke and Coupland do not deny the potential market for these products, but say they will only appeal to operators that can get the lift at the right time of a normal widebody conversion. This is normally not true. Dutch Conversions is available for as little as US$9mn per unit and the plane is being rapidly retired from passenger fleets, as in theory everything looks rosy for this programme.

The big question, however, is whether airlines will be convinced of the cost and time of转换 cargo in the future. LCF is confident that the programme will be a success, but others are sceptical.

Duke reckons 50 to 70 per cent of freight is currently carried in the belly. The use of belly pallets through the LCF conversion, he says, offers an extension of belly capacity.

It has already completed a mass clearance of the B777-200. Duke says that “despite having to pay US$6.5m or US$7.5m for a B777, it can be done for as little as US$6.5m on an A340 or US$7.5m for a B777, and take six weeks.”

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