

TESTING THE B-58 HUSTLER



In 1957, the first two YB-58As were sent to Kirtland AFB in New Mexico for test drops of the weapons pods at the Holloman AFB range adjacent to the U.S. Army's White Sands Missile Range. For these tests, the two-component pods (TCPs) were painted in a two-tone paint pattern for easier assessment of movie film that was shot of the drops. The first supersonic drop was made from an altitude of 40,000 feet on 30 September. (Convair via Author's collection)

The first B-58 prototype (tail number 55-0660) was completed at Fort Worth in August 1956 and formally rolled out on 4 September. By this time, a prototype of the General Electric J79 engine was also ready, so the J57 was never used as an interim powerplant. The first run-up of the installed engines took place at the beginning of October, and taxi tests began at the end of the month.

The maiden flight of the first B-58 took place on 11 November 1956, with veteran Convair test pilot Beryl Arthur Erickson at the controls. Erickson had begun his career with Consolidated Vultee delivering PBV Catalina flying boats from San Diego to the Far East. He was later the principal test pilot on the B-24 program, and in August 1946, he was the first pilot to fly Convair's six-engine B-36 intercontinental strategic bomber. He went on to log 7,000 hours in B-36s of various types, including three flights of more than 10,000 miles.

Convair systems specialist John McEachern and flight-test engineer Charles Harrison flew in the bombardier-navigator and defensive systems operator stations on the debut mission.

"Everything went smoothly," Erickson recalled in a 1992 conversation with Eric Hehs, the managing editor of Lockheed

Martin's Code One magazine. "There was no tension or confusion. We were absolutely confident when we climbed into the plane. As soon as we were latched in and the hatch was closed, we started the engines in rapid order and notified the tower that we were coming out. We had free access to the runway. We didn't have to ask for takeoff approval. We taxied north toward Lake Worth, with our F-102 chase aircraft following. We turned around, as did the chase aircraft—then told the chase aircraft to take off. Moments later, we set our engines to takeoff power and took off smoothly with the chase coming in trail position behind us."

The engines were fully operative on the first flight, including the afterburners, but they were not used. As Erickson later observed, the weight of the aircraft without its weapons pod was so little that the afterburner was unnecessary. Continuing to fly without the weapons pod, aircraft 55-0660 went supersonic for the first and second times in two separate flights conducted on 30 December, achieving a maximum speed of Mach 1.31 at 35,000 feet.

Because of its intended high-speed capabilities, people at Convair had been referring to the B-58 unofficially as "a real hustler"



The XB-58 made its debut in 1956, rolling out of the Fort Worth factory on 4 September. Convair test pilot Beryl Arthur Erickson made the aircraft's historic first flight on 11 November 1956. (Convair via Author's collection)