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BA chief blames French for killing off Concorde

By Ben Webster, Transport Correspondent

BRITISH AIRWAYS was forced into retiring Concorde because Air France and Airbus, the French-based manufacturer, refused to continue supporting it, the airline's chairman said.

Lord Marshall of Knightsbridge said that BA would have been keen to continue operating the plane beyond the end of October if the French had been prepared to share the burden of extra maintenance costs.

BA originally said the decision to retire Concorde had been taken jointly, but Lord Marshall told The Times: "Concorde can't keep flying unless the manufacturer is willing to go on producing the parts.

"Airbus said they were not willing to support Concorde beyond the end of October. We might well have considered continuing if they hadn't.

"It would have made it much more difficult for Airbus if Air France and BA had presented a united front in supporting the continuation of scheduled services."

Lord Marshall said that Airbus had been determined to redeploy the staff who supported Concorde to more profitable production lines. Airbus told BA that it would have to spend £40 million on maintenance over the next two to five years to keep Concorde flying.

Air France said that the decision had been taken "in close conjunction with Airbus".

BA was selling just under half its seats before the retirement was announced. Air France was filling barely a fifth of the seats on its five Concorde, and had suffered the stigma of having lost 113 passengers and crew in the crash in Paris in July 2000.

Jock Lowe, BA's former chief pilot and commercial manager of Concorde in the late 1990s, said that Air France had always been less interested in maintaining Concorde flights. "They never made as much money as BA on Concorde. They failed to upgrade the product in the way BA has over the years."

BA spent £14 million on refitting the interiors of their aircraft while they were grounded after the Air France crash.

Mr Lowe said that BA should have invoked the terms of the 1962 treaty on Concorde signed by Britain and France, which obliged them to continue supporting the aircraft even if one wanted to withdraw. BA could make a profit from Concorde for several more years if it promoted it properly. "The massive demand for tickets since the retirement was announced proves how popular Concorde continues to be."

BA sold all 1,000 discount tickets on the day they went on sale and is now preparing another promotion for the plane's final six months. Air France's Concorde service is now at least 70 per cent full.

Mr Lowe said that he supported Virgin Atlantic's attempt to take over BA Concorde services. "They would need a huge amount of expertise but there is a pool of recently retired engineers who would be very willing to help. Virgin has the marketing flair needed to make it work."

Sir Richard Branson, the Virgin chairman, said: "Concorde was built with taxpayers' money and handed over to BA and Air France for virtually nothing. BA is only acting as custodian of those planes for the British people."
