

DC-3 STORIES

Excerpted from *The Golden Age Of Flying*, a great Frontier Airlines memoir, by Frontier pilot Tex Searle. Reprinted with Tex' very kind permission. Copies available at <http://www.asa2fly.com>

Captain Dick Adair (Wyley) commenced pushing throttles for Frontier in 1949. He began his thirty-two-year career flying the DC-3s over the Rocky Mountain empire and ended it manipulating thrust levers on high-flying jets over the continental U.S., Mexico, and Canada. Captain Adair, better known as Cap Wyley, a name Challenger pilots bestowed upon him in 1949, relates that as a youth his early interest in airplanes kept him busy peddling his bike several miles to the Salt Lake City Airport to watch the aircraft. In August of 1949, Wyley made his first copilot trip for Challenger Airlines.

TWENTY-THREE SICK MARINES

The one plane that drew my attention was the new DC-3. It was love at first sight. In the thirties money was hard to come by, but in 1939 I had put enough money aside to take my first ride in a Piper Cub. From that moment on I was addicted to flying, and I knew it would be my life's work.

On the 28th of July, 1943, I soloed my first airplane in Salt Lake City. Shortly after, I moved to San Diego to continue my schooling and received my commercial and instrument ratings as well as the instructor rating, and continued on to receive the airline transport rating. Before long I was flying for San Diego Sky Freight. They had acquired two C-47s that were converted into DC-3s and they kept busy flying military personnel throughout the U.S.

Flying with ex-military pilots who had not as yet received their civilian instrument tickets, I had to fill out all the flight plans and sign the releases. One time, while flying a charter from Kansas City to Phoenix, Arizona, the Grand 'Ole Lady was churning up the air when, in the vicinity of Winslow, Arizona, we picked up turbulence as we worked our way through a line of thunder storms. The twenty- three Marines aboard were already feeling a little nervous when the plane was suddenly thrown violently onto its back. After this occurrence they all became sick and wanted to surrender to mother earth. From this lesson I always attempted to give a wide path to Mother Nature, can you imagine what twenty-three airsick Marines can do to the interior of a DC-3?

AIRFRAME ICING

I look back with pride to those early years of flying the DC-3 and experiencing the camaraderie of my fellow pilots as we hauled the mail throughout the Rocky Mountains. At that time, no other airplane could have accomplished what the DC-3 was called upon to do. The punishment this airplane endured in the turbulence thrown at her by the unstable air over the Rockies was unbelievable. The many landings were an everyday chore for her. The engines had to endure almost as much time in climb power as they normally would in cruise power, and, yes, they spent a great deal of time grinding out max power. The confidence we had in those engines on black nights over such rugged terrain brought great peace. Not only were the engines steady and sound, but we knew we had the top radial engine mechanics in the business.

While returning to Salt Lake City on one trip, we were over Huntsville, Utah, a small town nestled in the canyons of the Wasatch Range, and we began to accumulate the expected moderate ice. While flying over mountainous terrain in wintertime we endured three things: We expected to accrue heavy ice over the mountains, we couldn't let down to a warmer temperature because of the high terrain, and we couldn't climb higher because we were already there.

Packing a moderate load of ice on the airframe, we arrived over Ogden, Utah and banked left to commence our letdown into the Salt Lake Valley when we felt and heard a terrific chatter on the fuselage above our heads. I looked at Captain Mooney and he looked at me. Then we heard a strange noise, and a red flag appeared indicating our VHF NAV was INOP. We quickly switched from a VOR approach to an ADF approach and continued letting down out of the ice into Salt Lake City.

On the ground an inspection was performed to determine the mystery. Our suspicions were confirmed when the mechanics discovered the VHF NAV antenna had become so heavy and unbalanced from encrusted ice buildup that it had sheared off leaving a gaping hole in the top of the DC-3.

WILD CHICKS

The agents at the Denver station had loaded a half dozen cardboard boxes filled with baby chicks in the forward cargo hold to keep them warm during their transport to Phoenix. Glen Gettman was my copilot, and we had commenced our let down into the Phoenix area when we heard chirping that was becoming louder. Looking down we discovered a brood of baby chicks running around on the deck and under our seats. They had escaped from a damaged box. About this time the steward opened the door to enter, and many of the baby chicks took off down the aisle between the passenger seats. The passengers were good natured about it, and after we landed they helped us gather the chicks and place them back in the box.

WYLEY'S ONE ENGINE STOP

During the early 1950s, I was sweet talking the Grand 'Ole Lady through heavy weather en route to Riverton, Wyoming with a planned stop at Rock Springs. The Rock Springs station reported a moderate snowstorm in progress at the airport. Falling and blowing snow were creating havoc on the runway and visibility was below landing minimums. I let down to 10,000 feet, the minimum en route altitude to Rock Springs. If visibility improved, I would be in a position to execute an immediate approach.

While we were flying over Rock Springs, the latest weather report gave us minimums for landing with a reported six inches of powdered snow on the runway. We flew the instrument approach to runway 25, and after rolling out to the west end of the runway, we reversed course to make the long taxi east to the terminal. The feathery snow was still swirling on the runway from the prop blast and gusty surface winds so I elected to hold a moment until visibility improved.

The stewardess, thinking this was a one-engine stop and that we had arrived at the terminal, released the airstair door and let the several passengers deplane. With help from an on-board passenger, she pulled the airstair door back up and latched it to prevent the swirling snow from entering the aircraft. When I saw the door warning light come on, I crawled out of the seat and proceeded to the cabin to investigate. As I stepped into the cabin, I observed the airstair was closed and the passengers were all seated, so I returned to the cockpit. The warning light had gone out indicating the airstair door was safely closed. With the runway visibility picking up, we proceeded to make the long taxi to the terminal where I intended to investigate the door warning problem.

The stewardess, thinking the Rock Springs agent hadn't had time to board the weight manifest, immediately rushed to the cockpit to inform me the manifest was not on board. I asked, "What manifest? We haven't even arrived at the terminal yet." The DC-3 returned to the far west boundary of the airport where we located the bewildered passengers all huddled together in the wind-driven snow. After the passengers were explained for the second time, they were safely transported to the Rock Springs Terminal. Most airlines charge passengers for an additional stop, but not this time.

WYLEY'S BUSHY RED TAIL

I remember receiving an unexpected trophy from one flight. We had just touched down at Casper, Wyoming, when a red fox darted into the DC-3s path. The company radio informed me we had assassinated a red fox. I mentioned I would sure like to have that red tail. On my return flight they presented me with the red tail and I tied it to my jeep antenna. The bushy red tail was quite a conversation piece.

Captain Wyley reminds us of foxes, deer, antelope, coyotes, and sage hens whose sad fate it was to become entangled in the propellers of a swift moving aircraft on the runway. These incidents seldom occurred, but when they did, it usually happened at night when about all the crews could make out were the eyes of these darting victims as they reflected the glare of the landing lights. It was a desperate feeling as there was little the crews could do to avoid these sickening tragedies at the remote airports.

ICE COVERED RAMPS

Captain Wyley says that every time he flew into Wyoming in the winter time he expected to meet a cold front pushing through the state accompanied by high gusty winds.

At Cheyenne in the winter time, we had to take extra precautionary measures to prevent the DC-3 from being blown sideways off the ice covered ramp. The passengers were warned that when walking on the ice covered ramp and leaning into the gusty wind, should it suddenly die they were in danger of pitching forward on their face, or something else if the wind was to their backs.

One Wyoming resident told me of a rooster in the Southpass area that had leaned down to peep into a beer bottle and found itself imprisoned in the bottle from the force of the wind. To back me up on these tales, Chief Pilot Scott Keller remembers

flying over Sherman Hill to Laramie and he couldn't keep up with the westbound cars and trucks on the old Lincoln highway because of the high westerly winds.

MY BROTHER

Something pleasant happened to me a long time ago that I won't forget. While flying my trip from Albuquerque, New Mexico to El Paso, Texas with a stop at Alamogordo, New Mexico I was eastbound about thirty miles out of Albuquerque enjoying the landscape from 2,000 feet. On the company frequency, I heard a voice call, "Hey Wyley!" I thought it might be the station calling. I asked, "Who is this?" The voice answered, "It's your brother Mark." What a nice surprise. I asked him his location. He answered, "I'm inbound from the east following Highway 66 into Albuquerque about forty-five miles out." He was on one of his first trips flying captain on a DC-3 for Continental Airlines. A couple of minutes later we spotted each other, and we flashed our landing lights in recognition. He said, "I never thought I'd see the day we would cross paths in DC-3s in the middle of nowhere." We opened our sliding side windows and waved as we passed. I had taught Mark to fly years ago, and it was a great experience to see my younger brother flying as a new captain. He went on to fly the Pacific when Continental had the MATs contract for flying the military and also served as the chief pilot in Los Angeles.

WYLEY'S MISSED TRIP

While the DC-3 was still parked at the Kansas City Airport ramp, I slipped aboard and into the cockpit without drawing the stewardess's attention. When the copilot came aboard he advised the stewardess that I hadn't made my appearance yet, and if I was not aboard when they buttoned up to let him know. She handed the copilot the manifest and assured him she would watch for the captain. A short time later the airstair door was closed and latched, and the stewardess's attention was drawn to the passengers.

We taxied out to the runway, and after the checklist was completed we took off. A short time later, after departing the traffic area, I slipped out of my seat and entered the forward cargo hold. The copilot then summoned the stewardess to the cockpit and asked her where the captain was. Panic-stricken, she explained that she had forgotten when she became occupied with the passengers. The copilot, looking concerned, suggested they continue on to Omaha and not say anything about their problem to the passengers. He would try to bluff this out somehow so they wouldn't be in trouble.

After the stewardess's departure from the cockpit, I stepped from the cargo hold and returned to my duties in the cockpit. Upon our arrival at Omaha, the station agents, who were in on the hoax, hurried and pushed the conveyor up to the hamburger door that was located just aft of the cockpit abeam the large propellers, and I hurried down the conveyor. When the agent dropped the airstairs, the stewardess looked out. She became flustered when she saw me at the foot of the airstairs wiping my brow and looking exhausted. When I boarded the aircraft I complained to the aghast stewardess: "I never had to run so fast in my life, thanks to you."

The above story has been widely circulated down through the generations and retold many times, but it happened to Wyley. Now in his retirement years, Captain Wyley resides in Colorado and reminisces about the golden years of flying.