

## WELLING'S WING

by Captains Ronald J Rosenhahn & Billy Walker

In the past 60 years many stories have been told about the epoch DC-3. Some may have been exaggerated, but most relating to the reliability and durability of this famous aircraft were factual. The following many faceted story not only represents an era of flight that has long since faded into the annals of aviation history, it is also depicts the amazing character and charisma of the DC-3 aircraft developed by Douglas Aircraft Company. It specifically focuses on a particular DC-3, its history and eventual demise in a crash that took place on December 21, 1967.



DC-3 N65276 was built in 1943, and used as a troop transport for the eighth Air Force. When World War II ended, the aircraft was sold at auction and eventually through various owners, found its way to Summit Airlines in Salt Lake City, Utah. Summit changed its name to Challenger

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Airlines in 1950. Challenger would later join with two other airlines to become the original Frontier Airlines.

The navigational aids available and used in air carrier operations during the 1950s, was very limited. Warning equipment, such as ground avoidance and terrain obstacle clearance equipment did not exist. Some weather radar did exist, but mainly in equipment flown by the larger trunk carriers.

### **The first of three accidents**

It was during this period that N65276, operating under the Challenger banner, was involved in the first of three accidents.

Due to an in flight emergency, involving a passenger suffering from an epileptic seizure, Challenger's aircraft N65276 returned to Salt Lake City airport. Blizzard weather conditions prevailed, requiring the pilot's, Capt. Bill McChrystal and Co-pilot E.P. Lietz to make an IFR approach to the field. The subsequent landing ended with the aircraft skidding off the end of the runway on to a highway striking an automobile. The vehicles occupants only suffered minor injuries, but the aircraft was damaged extensively. Repairs were made and the DC-3 was returned to service.

Captain Bill McChrystal held the distinction of accumulating a total of 17,111 hours during his airline career in the old "Gooney Bird." Co-pilot EP Lietz had flown C-46's over the Hump during WWII.

### **Accident Number Two**

The second accident involving N65276 occurred on what should have been a normal routine flight from Prescott, Arizona to Phoenix, The DC-3, now operated by Frontier Airlines was involved in one of the most incredible accidents

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to have ever taken place in commercial aviation, it struck a mountain, and ironically there were no injuries. After making contact with cumulus granite southeast of Prescott, the flight somehow managed to continue its flight to Phoenix Sky Harbor airport. The battered aircraft landed safely, and the passengers and crew walked away without a scratch. A description of the incident, and recovery efforts to retrieve a twelve-foot section of the left wing that remained on the mountain for forty-eight years, follows.

On April 21, 1957, at 1321 hours, a DC-3 N65276, operating as Frontier Airlines flight 7 departed Prescott, Arizona enroute to Phoenix under visual flight rules (VFR). Piloting the aircraft were Capt. Dale Welling and First Officer Bert Wrasse. On board the flight were twenty-one passengers and a single flight attendant (stewardess). As the flight proceeded southbound toward Phoenix the weather deteriorated to a point where the flight could no longer remain clear of clouds and maintain VFR. Captain Welling requested and received an instrument flight rules (IFR) clearance to proceed to Phoenix via Knob intersection thence to the Phoenix omni range, maintain 7000 feet. The crew never acknowledged receiving the clearance. It is suspected that the reason there was no response is that this was the precise moment that flight 7 struck the west ridge of a mountain at the 4500' level southeast of Prescott shearing off twelve feet of the left wing and six feet of the left aileron. After declaring an emergency, flight 7 landed safely at Phoenix Sky Harbor airport without further incident. There was no injury to the passengers or crew.

The damaged wing was subsequently removed from the aircraft and a replacement installed. Barry Goldwater, who always looked for a good photo-op, noticed that no photos had been taken of the damaged wing. So, the mechanics were instructed to remove the new wing and re-install the damaged one for photos. When completed the good wing was reattached.

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Both Captain Dale Welling and First Officer Bert Wrasse are now deceased. The crew and passengers with Barry Goldwater.

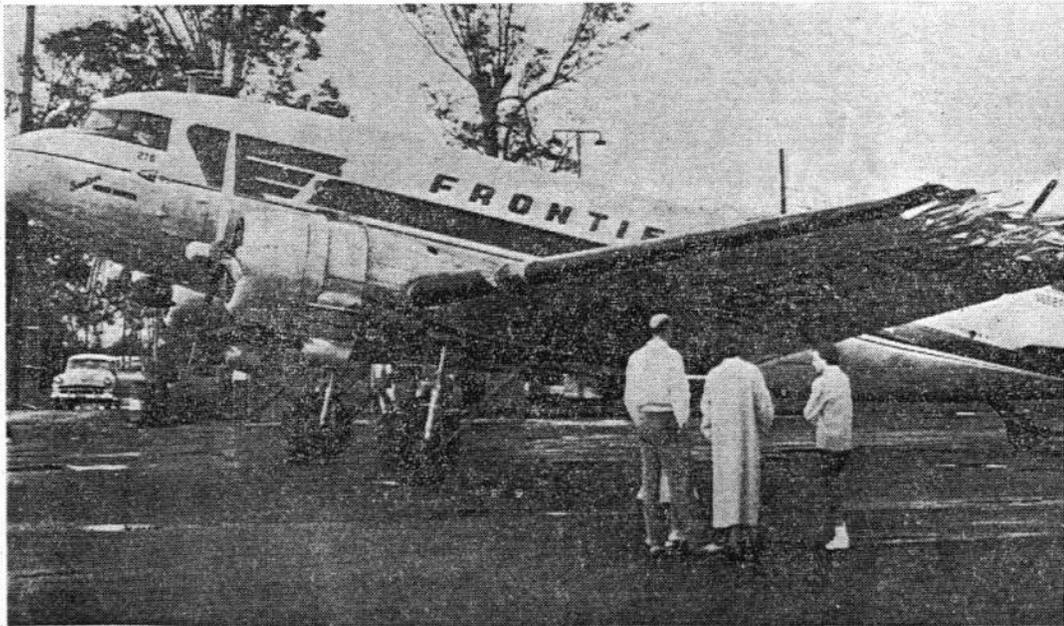
This incident went into the history books serving as testament to the strength and durability of the DC-3 aircraft. Many feel it was the greatest passenger airliner ever built. Over the year's artist conceptions of the collision with the mountain appeared on the cover of famous magazines. Many historical books, written on the DC-3 contain the story of this incident.

### **Recovering the Wing**

The section of wing that separated from the aircraft remained on the mountain in a very remote area undisturbed, for nearly forty-eight years. In June of 2004,

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former Frontier Airlines Captain's Billy Walker and Ron Rosenhahn, who at the time was an aviation safety inspector supervisor with the FAA in Scottsdale, Arizona, were having a discussion with retired America West Captain Larry Perkins. At this time Perkins was also an aviation safety inspector with the FAA. The discussion centered on Welling's Wing and to determine the feasibility of locating the resting place of the old wing section, recovering it and placing it in a museum to honor all pilots who flew the DC-3.



It got its start with Rosenhahn and Perkins studying old charts and sorting out information as to where the sheared off wing section might be located. Recollections of former Frontier pilots based in the Phoenix domicile at the time of the incident provided useful information. Coordinates were developed from these descriptions and entered into a GPS. The search dragged on, with days turning into weeks; weeks into months, but the location of the wing continued to elude us. It was like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

Larry Perkins and his wife Peggy, an aviatrix in her own right, were the first to begin searching for the missing section of wing in their own personal aircraft. As they made

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several hundred turns around the mountain looking for the wing it seemed impossible that anyone would be able to find it. Next Rosenhahn joined Perkins in the search, still no wing. Other FAA inspectors became intrigued with the project and joined in on the search effort, still nothing.

### **Then Came a Break.**

FAA inspector Mike Halloran decided to conduct a search of the rugged area on foot. Suddenly, while randomly gazing through his binoculars, he saw a glint of what he thought was the sun shining on metal high up on the mountain.

FAA inspector Dave Baron joined in the search helping with mapping, chart plotting and GPS programming. Dave also volunteered to help with the recovery efforts if the wing was ever found.

Still another clue showed up when Former Frontier Captain E. P. Lietz, sent in a description indicating where he thought the wing was located. When the aircraft impacted the mountain he theorized that the wing bounced over the top and down the other side. Could it be we were looking on the right mountain but the wrong side?

Everything seemed to be lining up and pointing to one possible location; Mike Halloran's visual sighting of a glint of metal, former Frontier Captain Ace Aviakan's description of a southeasterly heading from over the old ghost town of Bumble Bee, and finally Captain E. P. Lietz's description of the wing bouncing over the top of the mountain and down the other side.

With all of the information in hand Larry Perkins together with FAA inspector Will Willbanks, a former customs pilot turned FAA inspector, and FAA inspector Gary Martin, a former Master Chief with the United States Air Force proceeded to the search area with Larry doing the flying and

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Will and Gary looking for the wing. On the second turn around the GPS position, Will saw something near some bushes. As Larry turned the aircraft the lost wing appeared at twelve O'clock. Welling's Wing had been found at last.

### **Recovery Begins**

On February 26, 2005, Mike Halloran and Dave Baron attempted to climb up to the top of the mountain on the south face. Due to heavy rains New River was swollen and too deep to cross, forcing Halloran and Baron to attempt the climb from a less favorable vantage point. The terrain was steep, and extremely rough and rugged. This attempt failed.

On March 14, 2005, with New River receding, a second attempt to scale the mountain from a more favorable vantage point was initiated. This time with perseverance and their objective in mind, inspector's Halloran and Baron made it to the top of the mountain and sheared off pieces of the DC-3 wing. The distance covered, was a total of three tenths of a mile from the bottom of the mountain to the top. It took three and a half hours to reach the top.

The wing pieces that had come to rest on the mountaintop almost a half century before were carefully assembled in a common location for a long line pickup by helicopter. On March 30, 2005, Jeff Boatman of Air West Helicopters and Mike Halloran did a long line recovery of the final pieces of Welling's Wing. With Baron and Rosenhahn standing by to load the remainder of the wing pieces aboard Rosenhahn's pickup the helicopter dropped the remaining pieces along side the pickup truck. A six foot section of the left aileron was recovered later and presented to team leader Ron Rosenhahn.

Another significant post recovery incident occurred just weeks after the wing/aileron artifacts were recovered, lightning struck the mountain top where the strewn aircraft

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parts had laid for so many years, everything burned. Preserving history can be very tenuous...

Without the assistance and involvement of several FAA inspectors, from the Scottsdale Flight Standards District Office, who donated their own time and resources in the recovery process, this significant piece of aviation history would not have come to the successful conclusion that it did. Welling's Wing would never have been recovered were it not for Larry Perkins, Will Willbanks, Gary Martin, Mike Halloran, and Dave Baron. Also deserving of special recognition for the wing's recovery is Jeff Boatman of Airwest Helicopters.

On August 16, 2005, the recovered parts of the DC-3 wing were donated to the Pima Air and Space museum in Tucson, Arizona, for future display in the Arizona aviation history building.



The historical significance of this find represents a part of aviation history from an era that has long gone by. For

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those of us who flew the DC-3 for the old Frontier Airlines it represents much more. It represents an era of flight that we lived.

From the time former Frontier Airlines Captains Billy Walker and Ron Rosenhahn had originally discussed the feasibility of finding and recovering Welling's Wing exactly ten months to the day had passed

Old 276 was also referred to as "The Suicidal DC-3" ... and for good reason!

Sadly, N-65276 was lost in a tragic accident on a snowy Denver day when a rudder-lock had been placed on an elevator and not removed prior to take-off. To exacerbate the problem, a 50 gallon drum of paint broke loose and went from the front of the airplane all the way to the rear.

Captain Rocky Crane and F/O Rick Cochran were killed.

Frontier lost 3 crews and one passenger in it's storied 40 year life from 1946 - 1986. Based upon the most stringent measure, that of the number of take-offs and landings, there will likely never be another airline with as safe a record.



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Frontier flew in and out of black holes and mountain valleys in horrible weather flying mostly older aircraft such as DC-3's and Convair's. These old airplanes were using antiquated avionics as well as having NO auto-pilots along with as many as 21 stops in a day.

Frontier flew from coast to coast and from Canada down to Old Mexico, Safely.

Naturally, the Frontier Family was proud of its safety record and yet frustrated with the corporate megalomania that caused its demise after gracing the skies for 40 years.

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