

THE OL' SWITCHEROO

Captain Dave Rampton

While visiting with one of our newly hired copilots, who introduced himself as Dave Rampton, he told me how he acquired his multi-engine-time flying copilot on a C-46 known as the Commando. They flew cargo between the large Hill Field Air Force Base in Ogden, Utah and the west coast. He said he enjoyed flying with all the different captains, that they let him do a large part of the flying. Now and then one of them would pull a throttle back to simulate a single engine and let him go through the single engine procedures. This experience helped him learn the procedures and gave him a feel for how the airplane handled on one engine.

On this one particular flight, I drew the captain that all the copilots had warned me about. He was about five feet seven inches tall, and would hit the scales at 270 pounds. His belly hung over the front of his seat, and he always had to bring his own seat belt extender so he could buckle up. They warned me if the day ever came that we had a stiff wind down the runway while landing, that I was going to buy the farm. "The trouble," they said, "begins when he starts the flare to level off above the runway, he has to suck in his gut to make room for the control yoke to come back. To accomplish this he has to hold his breath until he has the aircraft on the runway.

"Now if you are unfortunate enough to have a strong head wind, by the time he gets it all flared out he is going to run out of breath and let 'er go. His belly is going to push that yoke forward, and the aircraft is going to nose over. It's just as well you buy the farm. How would you explain an accident of this nature on the report?"

Flying a load of cargo out of Hill we were westbound direct to McClellan Air Base in California, with the directional gyro showing our heading as 270 degrees. The captain was riding shotgun while I did the flying. We had just flown over Reno, Nevada and were coming up on the Sierras. I asked the captain to relieve me at the controls, while I went back to the relief station and did the same. He said, "Take your time son, and while your back there check the cargo restrainers."

After I had completed my business, I returned to the cockpit and strapped myself in. The captain advised, "You got her son." Looking out the windshield at the Nevada landscape moving below was always a prime time event for me. Slowly it dawned on me that something out of the ordinary was happening. "What is that city we're approaching? There isn't supposed to be a city there. The Sierras are supposed to be where that city is located. Who moved the Sierras? I glanced down at my directional gyro, it read 270 degrees, assuring me we were still on a westerly heading. I didn't dare reveal to the captain that I was confused. At the same time I was feeling nauseated, and it's not a pleasing sight when you up-chuck all over the cockpit.

Feeling nauseated, I hurriedly released my belt, and pointed at the controls to indicate to the captain that he was to take over again. He looked abashed, as I headed aft, but I didn't have time to explain. Feeling much relieved I returned to my seat. Hardly daring to look out the windshield, I pilfered a peek.

Holy biscuits and gravy, we're over the Sierras. What's amiss here! "Where's that city? Looking at my directional gyro, it still read 270 degrees. My stomach was commencing to churn again.

The captain looked at me, and then questioned, "Son, are you all right?" "I'm better than I was, but there is something depraved with the Nevada landscape." Then he started to laugh, and at the same time he got the hiccups. I didn't see anything funny, especially with my captain braying like a jackass. I had to undo my seat belt and bring him a cup of water before he could get himself under control.

With tears streaming down his cheeks, and his belly heaving like ocean swells, he said, "I gotta tell ya' son, you've been had with the old directional gyro switcheroo. "While you were in the cabin, I slowly banked the aircraft around to an easterly heading that had us headed back to Reno. Of course the gyro is now reading 90 degrees, so

twisting the knob I reset it to read an erroneous 270 degrees, our supposed course to McClellan. With your eyes showing you one thing, and your inclination telling you another, your not the first one to get a queasy stomach. When you went aft the second time, I gently banked to our original course and reset the gyro to our proper heading of 270 degrees.

Dave said, "The captains belly oscillated all the way over the Sierras, but this didn't bother me. What worried me was waiting for a wind velocity report from the McClellan Air Base."

What's with the Captain

Captain Rampton reminisces about another time when he was flying copilot on DC-3s out of Salt Lake City for Frontier:

There was a captain who enjoyed sliding his side window open enough to cause a suction of air from the cockpit to gush out the open side window. Then he would let his necktie stiffly wave out the window, and call for the stewardess. 'When she stepped into the cockpit, his face would be going through all kinds of contortions while his arms flailed the air to gave the impression the necktie was choking him.

This time, however, when the new stew stepped into the cockpit and the captain was going through his routine, the stew asked: "What's with the captain?" Unbeknown to the captain, the clip-on tie he'd worn that day had disappeared over the high Uinta Mountains.

Stud And Hoss

Captain Rampton still laughs about the time he was based in Billings, Montana flying Frontier's Twin Otters over what the pilots called the high line, others called it the upper US. Frontier originally served this route with DC-3s that flew along the Canadian border through such cities as Havre, Glasgow, Wolf Point and Sidney, Montana.

"The chief pilot at that time was a tall, lanky dude who couldn't remember the names of his troops, so he called everyone either Stud, or Hoss. One night the pilots were out on the town, and one of them suggested they have some fun with the chief. About 1:00 a.m. he called the chief on the phone and when he answered, the pilot doing the calling said: 'Hoss! this is Stud. I am sick and will not be able to fly my trip in the morning.' Then he hung up. The chief, not knowing which Stud or which trip he was talking about, had to show up for the early morning trip to cover it." It seems everyone showed up for all the flights leaving the chief wondering and waiting for the no show.

(The chief pilot was Bob Banta, renowned for many things - including calling everyone Stud, Hoss, Slick and Tiger, among others. His memorial webpage is at http://FAL-1.tripod.com/Bob_Banta.html)

Montana Blizzard

Captain Tex Searle/Captain Dave Rampton

I remember a time Captain Rampton was pulling gear for me. Probably around the year 1963. We were on a layover at Billings, Montana in the dead of winter. The wind was gusting hard and the snow had continued throughout the day. Our trip was to depart that evening at six o'clock for Salt Lake City. At that time it would have been dark for over two hours. Knowing there would be problems at the airport, Rampton and I left early and made our way to the airport in the deep snow. With all hands turning to, we cleared the three-foot drifts from around and beneath the DC-3 so we could taxi. With the snow piling up and the wind getting its second breath, the airport authority had shut down all operations for inbound and outbound passenger flights.

The company needed aircraft 135 for an early departure out of Salt Lake City the following morning. With no passengers, dispatch had cleared our flight to operate as a ferry flight, which, translated, means that with restricted runway visibility you can take off with whatever guts you have the courage to muster, subject to the captains discretion. After engine start we sat in the swirling snow waiting for the temps to climb into the green. The white sheet

of wind blown snow blended into the layered snow and was again starting to drift around the DC-3. The fur coated agent gave the all clear and I saluted in acknowledgment. Rampton picked up the mike and called for taxi clearance. The tower answered with “taxi at will, and cleared for take off at your discretion, there is no traffic tonight.”

Having flown into Billings many times under similar conditions, I felt quite comfortable with the circumstances. We were able to locate the faint glow of the taxi-way lights through the deep snow. As we taxied west, we followed the slight depression of the taxiway. The taxiway lights began to fade in the deep, drifting snow until they disappeared from sight. We continued to follow the slight depression of the taxiway. Rampton strained to locate the north-south runway that crossed our path and would lead us north to intercept runway number nine. Unfamiliar, snow-covered objects just ahead—that turned out to be the airport boundary—indicated we had come to the end of the taxi strip. But what end? ‘When did we cross the north-south runway? Reversing course we followed our own tracks that were fast disappearing in the drifting snow. If we continued on, we would end up back at the terminal . . . if we could still find it.

We knew the north-south runway had to be somewhere ahead of us. In the black of the night we sat there contemplating our next move. With no lights in sight, and the snow swirling over the aircraft, we felt like we were in the middle of the tundra with civilization a thousand miles away. The tower called and asked if we were off the ground? Rampton replied we were still working our way towards runway nine. Their only reply, “Good luck.”

I pivoted the DC-3 slightly left, and the landing lights revealed the protruding tops of windrows from plowed snow, marking the confines of the north-south runway. As we slowly taxied to the north, the wind driven snow snaking directly across our path gave the impression we were sliding sideways at forty miles per hour. Then Rampton yelled, “Tallyho.” At last we could make out the dimly illuminated east-west runway lights. Buried under the snow, they resembled Japanese lanterns.

As I eased off the upwind throttle, and brake, and called for the tailwheel to be unlocked, the strong surface wind pushed the tail of the DC-3 around until we were lined into the wind for an east take off. Everything checked normal on the run up, the tailwheel was locked and the take off check list was completed. I informed Rampton I could barely make out only two runway lights ahead on each side of the runway (runway lights are spaced 200 feet apart). He concurred. He informed the tower we were on the roll. Straining at the bit, the Grand ‘Ole Lady gathered speed between the racing Japanese lanterns and lifted off in fine style into the snowy skies of Montana for another uneventful flight to Salt Lake City.

Dave went on to climb the seniority ladder, and as a captain he flew millions of miles. He has joined the ranks of retired airline pilots and makes his home in Syracuse, Utah.

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*EXCERPTED FROM “THE GOLDEN YEARS OF FLYING”
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