

Captain George L. Sims

Captain George Sims, now retired and living in Phoenix, Arizona, had many experiences flying during his career. He has reached back in time to the day he and Captain Rich stoked boilers on DC-3s.

Flying the Gooney Bird was a privilege. When I think back to all the aircraft I've flown, the Grand 'Ole Lady stands above them all. You really flew that airplane; it was a completely hand flown airplane. 'Needle, ball, and airspeed;' at least that's what they used to holler all the time. You usually wound up going down faster than you went up. I remember one incident in the winter of 1948 when I was flying for Challenger Airlines on the run from Salt Lake City to Denver, Colorado; Bob Rich was my copilot.

Challenger was expanding her routes, and, needing more equipment, had leased a DC-3 from Continental Air Lines. It was a nice airplane. It had a good heating system: one of the old flash-type boilers that was located in the exhaust stack of the right-hand engine and a steam radiator located under the floor of the cargo compartment at the forward section of the airplane. It had all the necessary valves and ducts plumbed throughout the aircraft for steam heating that not only heated the interior of the aircraft, but also furnished needed heat to the windshield for the prevention of ice accumulation.

In cold weather operations, it was extremely important that the cold air nose valve in the ventilating system never be opened wide enough to cause the steam pressure to drop below 5 lbs. With the pressure below 5 lbs. there was a good chance of a system freeze up. Altitude also affected the steam pressure: the higher we flew, the less density the air, causing lower steam pressure. On the ground with the right engine shut down, we had to follow certain guide lines to prevent a freeze up by draining the system. It was only as good as the pilot operating it, so besides being pilots we were also steam boiler operators.

After passing over Cheyenne, we started planning for the Adcock Low Frequency Range approach into Denver. The weather report was a 500 foot ceiling with freezing temperatures on the ground. The maintenance people had demanded, "Be damn sure you turn the heat off before landing, so as not to have a boiler freeze up on the ground." In the vicinity of Greeley, Colorado, I thought about the boiler and asked Bob Rich to please turn it off. He promptly did.

Letting down in preparation for landing, I'm sure that I acted too soon in shutting the boiler down. The windshield iced over and it was like someone had pulled down the blinds. We proceeded to pull up and cleared the area. Bob and I looked at each other and said "to hell with it." We cranked the boiler back into operation and got it double hot for the next approach which turned out OK. It did not freeze after landing. Nice airplane.

Author's note (The weight and balance of a C-47 (DC-3) was only as good as the cargo-master, or the person in charge of loading. Many times during the early years of WWII the C-47 was called upon to operate in and out of dirt or gravel strips that often were moisture sodden. Often over grossed as much as 5,000 pounds, and the weight and balance nowhere near the in-limits, the antics of the C-47 struggling to become airborne reminded one of the huge Pacific island seabirds called the Gooney Bird. The name has become a part of the DC-3 legacy).

There are many stories of the Gooney Bird's lifting capacity. Originally the DC-3 was designed as a twenty-one passenger aircraft. In WWII the C-47 was helping in carrying out the evacuation of Burma, and among her seventy-four passengers was Lt. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle who was returning from his bombing raid over Tokyo. In Vietnam, the C-47 has been credited with carrying over 100 refugees, many who were children, crammed into her interior.

In addition to the 10,000 plus DC-3s constructed in the USA, it is estimated there were another 2,000 plus built in Russia under license as the Lisunow Li-2, and a further 500 odd in Japan known as 'Tabby' by the Allies in the Pacific theatre of operations.

(EXCERPTED FROM "THE GOLDEN YEARS OF FLYING" By Old Frontier Airlines Captain Tex Searle with his kind permission and his publisher, Aviation Supplies & Academics (copyright 2009). His grand memoir is for sale at Amazon.com and ASA2fly.com)