

JACK WADDELL STORIES

One of the finest of corporate pilots I had the privilege of getting to know very well over a lot of years was Jack Waddell, who was Chief Pilot for Potash Company of America. They had their offices in Carlsbad, NM, and Jack had a DC-3 there at the Carlsbad Airport. His copilot/mechanic was Guy Lowder. They made a great team. Jack was a transport pilot in the Air Corps in WW II, and **later flew for Frontier Airlines out of Denver**. When he changed jobs and became the company pilot for PCA, they bought a brand new Beechcraft D-18S Twin-Beech, which was the Queen of the Skies in those days. As the company grew through the '50's, they moved up to the DC-3 and eventually to a 4 engine turbo-prop, the Vickers "Viscount" which was being flown by Capitol Airlines out of Washington DC. This gave PCA a thoroughly modern aircraft—at that time—to travel to their plants across the U.S. and Canada. The heavy maintenance was done for them by Continental Airlines at their base in Denver. Continental was operating Viscounts at that time and had a fine service facility at Stapleton Airport in their hangar,

One day I flew into Denver from Moab, UT, where I was based at that time. Jack was in Combs having coffee with "the usual suspects," the pilots who were based there. I had a cup of coffee with him and he asked me to go to lunch after he checked on the Viscount's progress at Continental's hangar. He needed to find out if the inspection was coming along as scheduled. We went over to the hangar to his airplane and he conferred with the lead mechanic. Jack needed to leave the next morning to get home to get the big guys in the top echelon of the company and leave for New York City. They said it would be ready for the test flight by late afternoon. About then Jack looked up, grabbed my arm, pulled me down the aisle to the hangar wall and stopped in front of a man and woman. They were nicely—but casually—dressed and certainly not working in this shop.

Jack pushed me up in front and said "Bob, I want you to meet one of my buddies who flies for Charley Steen over in Moab. This is John Sparks. John, meet Bob Six, the president of Continental and his wife, better known as Ethel Merman." I said hello, shook hands, then said "Miss Merman, I've seen you in several movies and always enjoyed them, but I wish I could have seen "South Pacific" on Broadway!" She said "Kid, that was a heck of a long time ago and I'm just glad to be in the airline business now. That show business is a tough way to make a living." Mr. Six laughed and said "Who you kidding, Hon, you know you love every minute of it,"

She threw her arm around his neck and said "Well, I guess it wasn't that bad, but as soon as I do this next TV show, I'm hanging it up for good." Bob Six smiled at Jack and me and said "That's what she said before the last four TV shows." I saw Ethel on TV sometime after this meeting, and she nearly blew the tube out of the set. What a voice!

It turned out that the Viscount was ready for the test flight at 6:30 PM just after dark. It had started to lightly snow, with high ceilings, so there was no problem in doing the flight. The problem was Guy Lowder, the copilot, couldn't be found so Jack dragged me into the airplane and he and I flew a 45 minute ride in light snow. Jack knew the airplane so well that all I had to do was read the checklist, pull the gear and flaps, talk on the radio, put the gear and flaps down and watch him handle this 64,500 pound, 4 engine Airliner like it was a kiddy car in his front driveway. The head mechanic rode the jump seat and made all the notes for the write off in the log books. I basically just went along for the ride. This was what I wanted to do in my career, only with something a little smaller and a few less engines to have to keep up with!

I stayed in contact with Jack for a lot more years—nearly thirty of them. We were both flying out of Denver the last years of our careers. Then we retired. Jack fell off a ladder in his garage about ten years ago* and took off on his last flight plan. I have a feeling that when I do show up at the pilot's coffee shop up (or down) there, Waddell will be sitting there with all my other old friends. I can just see him telling them, "See, I told you Sparks wasn't late, he was just lost in the holding pattern again."

**The book was written in 2012 so this confirms that Jack died in 2002 and is the B. J. Jack Waddell posted at FindAGrave.com who died in Aurora, CO, a suburb of Denver.*

-Excerpted from THE LAST FLIGHT PLAN: Destination Uncertain by John L. Sparks, published by iUniverse, Jun 1, 2012.