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Steel Mill Approach at Provo

A widespread storm system covered the mountain states. Kettler, who was pulling gear for Captain Sam Grande at that time, relates they departed Albuquerque at a late hour for Salt Lake City with scheduled stops at Farmington, New Mexico and Grand Junction, Colorado.

We had planned to take on extra fuel at Farmington in view of the weather conditions at Grand Junction. Our present fuel load would only sustain us to Grand Junction with enough alternate fuel on board to continue to Vernal, Utah, plus an hour reserve.

As we approached Farmington, we were advised the airport was below minimums with snow and sleet. Grand Junction weather was still holding so we continued on. When in range of Junction we were advised that snow and sleet had obscured the southeast portion of the airport, and within a matter of minutes the airport would be entirely obscured.

The strong surface wind was still holding out of the northwest which prevented us from shooting an ILS (instrument landing system). Unable to land straight in on runway 11 because of the strong tailwind, and with the lowering clouds preventing us from making a circling approach to land into the wind, we had no choice but to bypass Junction. Fuel was now becoming a critical factor. We had feeble hopes of trying for Vernal, Utah, but we were informed the whole Uintah Basin was reported socked in. With reluctance we continued on with only enough fuel to reach Salt Lake City—with no reserves.

Almost an hour later, flying over the Spanish Fork H-marker located forty-nine miles southeast of Salt Lake, we contacted dispatch at the Salt Lake airport. Our expectation took a further down-turn when we were informed the visibility at Salt Lake City was now zero in fog. With fuel gauges registering zero on all three tanks there were decisions to be made. An emergency would be declared and if we could make it to Salt Lake, we would attempt a blind landing on the runway.

Continuing on to intercept the airway leading into Salt Lake, I yelled, "Sam! I can see the Provo steel mill directly below and also the north boundary of the Provo airport."

Provo had no instrument landing facilities, so I advised dispatch we were going to make a steel mill approach into Provo. Sam made a nice spiraling descent through the large hole caused by heat from the steel mill. We could barely make out the threshold of runway 13

with the remainder obscured in fog. Sam banked the DC-3 around until we were on final for the runway, and after flying the last portion of the approach in scud, he planted the old girl onto the mist shrouded runway.

It took twenty minutes taxiing in the fog before we could locate the ramp at the fixed base operations. It was past midnight and the office was deserted. Off to one side the little terminal still remained from when Challenger once served Provo. Luckily, Sam still carried a key. Inside we found the old company radio and called dispatch at Salt Lake, and informed Mitchell that Fat and Omar had safely landed.”

THE RELUCTANT PHANTOM

Captain Bob Rich remembers a time in the late 1940s when he was pulling gear for Captain Sam Grande and they were flying into Kemmerer, Wyoming, a centralized location for the coal strip mines, oil and gas fields, and large fossil beds. Absaroka Ridge bordered the community to the west and north with elevations up to 8,000 feet. With no navigational facility, airline crews would take bearings off the old Fort Bridger range station to find their way in inclement weather. The airport with its high elevation of almost 7300 feet would at most times suffer from strong westerly winds. Inasmuch as the airport was an open grass area, the crews would just aim into the wind and plant the DC-3 onto the grass.

As Captain Rich tells it, “A small wooden structure served as the terminal building. Our curiosity was aroused as to why this small building always had a log chain tethered to it. Then the day came when Fat and Skinhead (Captain Grande and Bob) landed in a strong westerly and taxied to our customary parking, only to find the terminal building had absconded. The answer as to the log chain soon manifested itself as we watched a large truck dragging the reluctant building back through the stiff wind to its proper location.”