

CHIEF PILOT SCOTT KELLER

Captain McChrystal's notes refer to a newspaper article during WWII telling of a forced landing by an Army Troop Carrier C-471DC-3 in Immigration Canyon just east of Salt Lake City. McChrystal explained that there is a pretty fair sized rock pile, called the Wasatch Mountains, along the eastern borders of the city. As the C-47 climbed over the canyon loaded with troops, both engines suddenly lost power and quit, caused by a malfunction in the C-47s antiquated cross-feed system and a broken line. Unable to make a restart, the pilot desperately searched the rock pile for a suitable landing area to set the beleaguered C-47 down in. The only apparent flat spot was a reservoir.

But a water landing didn't appeal to the pilot so he picked out a postage-stamp sized pasture, the only other spot available, and dead stuck his ship successfully into the small pasture. The newspaper account said one man suffered a broken leg when he jumped from the aircraft into the pasture. The others walked away. The plane had to be dismantled and trucked out of the pasture. The crew's commanding officer flew up from San Antonio to investigate the incident. After taking one look at the C-47 in the pasture and shaking his head, he commented, "Only a dumb second lieutenant could put that airplane in a pasture that small and walk away from it.

After the war, that second lieutenant turned out to be Captain Scott Keller, Frontier Airline's future chief pilot for the Salt Lake City domicile. Captain Keller served many years as flight manager and then transferred to Denver to serve as a vice president.

Frontier Airlines claims it was the first to fly a known stretched aircraft. It was none other than "the Grand 'Ole Lady" aircraft number 376. This all came about in the early days of Challenger Airlines (predecessor to Frontier). Chief pilot Scott Keller and senior pilot Bill McChrystal, two of the lines original pilots, were checking out the latest C-47/DC-3 they had taken delivery on.

The chief suddenly became very excited and exclaimed that he had flown this very DC-3 when it had been assigned to the Troop Carrier Command. Captain McChrystal asked him how he would know that? The chief replied, "Because of the serial number, and, besides it's stretched from the gliders loaded with troops I towed over the channel." Aircraft 376 was actually six inches longer than the rest of the fleet. So Frontier Airlines had the distinction of flying a stretched aircraft long before those prodigies came up with the idea.

Of special interest, this same aircraft had followed the chief around the world. Keller flew aircraft 19542 (376) while stationed at the 308th Troop Carrier Squadron at George Field, Illinois in 1943. Later he was assigned to the 61st Troop Carrier Command attached to the 9th Air Force in England. Waiting for him upon his arrival was aircraft 19542, a pleasant surprise. This was the same aircraft that Keller and McChrystal were inspecting, only now it was designated aircraft N53376. Frontier Airlines kept 376 in service for 23 years with the name Sunliner Wyoming. After 376 was retired from Frontier, it ended up serving with Air Manila in the Philippines, only to meet a sad fate. While parked on the ramp, it was destroyed by a typhoon in 1970.

As a youth, the dreams and desires of Captain Keller was to fly. With the approach of WWII while attending college he joined the aviation cadet program in 1941. He won his wings and was commissioned in 1942 at Ellington Airfield, Houston, Texas. Retiring from the airlines because of the age sixty requirement, Captain Keller continued flying corporate jets and still does. Now known as the ancient pelican, Keller resides near the shore of beautiful Flathead Lake in Lakeside, Montana.

-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.