

LATE BREAKFAST

Excerpted from The Golden Age Of Flying by Tex Searle

As the DC-3 descended out of the night sky and settled onto the tarmac at Rochester, New York, the weary crew felt the tires of the DC-3 spin their greeting to the runway. The military charter had been a long haul from San Antonio, Texas with two stops thrown in for fuel. With the amount of time it would take to fly the charter, the company had crewed the DC-3 with two captains. Ed Walker would be the acting #1 captain with Chick Stevens as #2, and Warren Heckman would be serving as copilot. There would be no stew aboard.

They put the DC-3 to roost as quickly as possible to save time for the short lay-over the trip called for. Looking at their watches the hour was 2:00 a.m. The schedule called for a departure that morning at 10:00 with twenty-four GIs bound for Cheyenne, Wyoming. The ground transportation was late arriving to take them to the hotel. The ride was long and would cut into their rest. When checking in at the hotel, the flight deck crew found they would all be billeted in the same room with a partition that had two beds on one side and one on the other. They requested a wake-up call and turned in.

Warren Heckman answered the phone for the wakeup call after only a short rest. He hurriedly showered and shaved to give the two captains on the other side of the partition more time to sleep. When Heckman had finished he woke the other two crew members and asked if they planned on flying that day. Waiting on each other to shave and shower took longer than they had planned and with the long ride to the airport and running late they had to forego breakfast.

Now without breakfast, Captain Ed Walker could turn into a mean biting bear, and he soon did. After the twenty-four military personnel were all aboard and strapped down and the doors were all secured, Captain Ed Walker started the engines without calling for any assistance from the copilot. When they received their routing clearance over the radio it was a different routing than what they had requested. This seemed to upset the temperament of the #1 captain even more. As they taxied to the runway, Captain Chick Stevens, who was occupying the copilot seat, reached for the microphone to request take off clearance. He soon discovered that all was not well, and that all he'd be required to do was to manage the cowl flaps.

Without calling for the check list, Captain Walker proceeded to read the check list to himself and then marked off the necessary items one by one. Keying the mike button he called for take off clearance. After lift off and the gear shocks had extended, the toebrakes were softly applied to halt the spinning rotation of the wheels before they tucked into their wells. The expected call never came for the gear up request. Exercising his captain authority, Walker leaned down and unlatched the gear safety-latch handle pulled it up, and raised the gear handle leaving acting copilot Stevens with few duties to carry out.

The DC-3 skirted Lake Erie as it continued its long 1,450 mile flight to Cheyenne with planned fuel stops at Detroit and North Platt, Nebraska. The mood in the cockpit was dismal with no dialogue between the crew members. Sitting on the jump seat Warren Heckman decided the atmosphere in the cockpit needed changing, and the only way to do this was by grubbing up a few victuals for the #1 captain. But this was a bare-cupboard run, and there was no food service aboard.

Copilot Heckman walked back to the commissary and found a paper plate and cup. He proceeded to rip up scraps of paper into little strips and bunched them into a small pile on a paper plate. He wrote ham and eggs on a note and laid it on the scraps of paper. On another he wrote hot cakes. Then he wrote toast and jelly on paper the size of a slice of bread, and on a paper cup filled with water he scribbled coffee. Carrying the paper plate in one hand and the paper cup in another he returned to the cockpit and tapped Captain Walker on the shoulder and said, "Breakfast is served."

When Captain Chick Stevens who was performing the copilot duties saw what was going on he cringed in his seat—he knew the cork was about to blow and the whole airplane was going to explode. Captain Walker turned to see who was tapping him on the shoulder. Remembering this moment as though it were yesterday, Captain Chick Stevens said, "I couldn't bear to watch what my friend had brought on himself or maybe on both of us. I watched as Captain Walker looked at the paper plate, his neck turned red. He looked up at Heckman and then at the paper plate again. Even the sound of the engines on the Grand 'Ole Lady seemed to shrink to a whisper waiting for the inevitable to happen.

"But it didn't happen! Instead, Ed Walker broke into a grin that Warren and I still remember. The noonday sun lit up the cockpit with bright sunbeams, the engines of the Grand 'Ole Lady returned to their robust sound that all is well, and as I looked at a smiling Warren Heckman and he looked at me, there just wasn't anything we could say. The continuation of that trip was a piece of cake."

Captain Chick Stevens served six years in the Army Air Corps. During WWII he flew the hump in the Curtiss built C-46 Commando. He was also the editor of the popular Frontier Magazine. After 28,000 hours plus, and a thirty year career with Frontier Airlines, his flying career was cut short by a medical disability at the young age of fifty-five years. Captain Stevens resides in Aurora, Colorado. (*His memorial webpage is at http://FAL-1.tripod.com/Chick_Stevens.html*)

Captain Walker served in the U.S. Navy in WWII and flew the R4D/DC-3. He passed away in the late sixties. (*His memorial webpage is at http://FAL-1.tripod.com/Ed_Walker.html*)

Captain Warren Heckman learned to fly in 1939 in the Civilian Pilot Training program at Laramie, Wyoming called the Plains Airways School. It was one of three schools owned by Pic Walker, the late father of Captain Billy Walker. In May of 1950 Captain Heckmen hired on with Monarch Airlines, this was shortly before the merger with Challenger and Arizona Airways. After a career of almost thirty-one years flying the mountain empire and experiencing the growth of Frontier as it spread its wings over the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, Captain Heckman retired from Frontier in December of 1980 as per the FAA mandatory retirement age of 60 years.

Not ready for the rocking chair, Captain Heckman hired on with American Airlines as a ground school and simulator instructor. He continued this course for six and one-half years, then continued on with America West airlines in their training program for another eight years. After being associated with aviation for forty-six years, including 32,000 plus hours spent in the cockpits of a multitude of aircraft, Captain Heckman turned in the key to the cockpit in 1995. He lives in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Many thanks to Tex for his permission to use these great stories.
-Jake Lamkins