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How the DC-3 Revolutionized Air Travel

Before the legendary aircraft took flight, it took 25 hours to fly from New York to Los Angeles

In late 1938, the revolutionary DC-3 plane departed Newark Airport for Glendale, California. (Nigel Cox)

By Kathleen Burke
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On an early evening in late 1938, a gleaming American Airlines DC-3 departed Newark Airport, bound for Glendale, California. The takeoff, wrote a *Fortune* magazine reporter aboard to record the still-novel experience of cross-country air travel, was effortless. “Halfway along the runway,” he recounted, “she left the ground so smoothly that none of the first fliers in the cabin realized what had happened until they saw the whole field rushing away behind them and the factory lights winking through the Jersey murk ahead.”

By the time the flight crossed over Virginia, passengers had already polished off a dinner of soup, lamb chops, vegetables, salad, ice cream and coffee. After a refueling stop in Nashville, the DC-3 continued west. Beyond Dallas, the journalist added, “visibility was limited only by the far horizons of the curving earth.” Despite head winds, the plane arrived on schedule at 8:50 a.m. Total time was 18 hours 40 minutes, including several ground stops.

In 1934, the year before the introduction of the DC-3, a flight from New York to Los Angeles was a grueling ordeal, typically requiring 25 hours, more than one airline, at least two changes of planes and as many as 15 stops or so. Now, a single plane could cross the country, usually stopping only three times to refuel.

Today, a legendary DC-3 hangs suspended in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. The plane, says F. Robert van der Linden, the museum's curator of aeronautics, “is widely considered to be the first airliner capable of making money just by carrying passengers.”

Built by Douglas Aircraft, founded in 1921, the DC-3 incorporated breakthroughs developed at Douglas and Boeing—super-charged 1,200-horsepower twin engines, cantilevered metal wings, retractable landing gear.

But the plane's primary—and romantic—accomplishment, says Henry M. Holden, author of *The Legacy of the DC-3*, is that it captured America's imagination. The journey became the destination. And with good reason: Passengers aboard the plane entered a cosseted world inconceivable to today's beleaguered air traveler. "Once airborne," Holden says, "passengers were offered cocktails, followed by entrée choices such as sirloin steak or Long Island duckling, served on Syracuse China with Reed & Barton silverware. At cruising altitude, the captain on occasion would have strolled the aisle and chatted with passengers, who were called 'visitors' or 'guests.'" Recall, too, Holden adds, that "transcontinental sleeper flights featured curtained berths with goose-down comforters and feather mattresses. Breakfast choices might have been pancakes with blueberry syrup and julienne-of-ham omelettes."

In that heady pre-World War II era when the nation began dreaming of air travel, the runaway appeal of the DC-3, whether fitted with berths or only with seats (like the museums' plane), convinced Americans to take to the skies in record numbers. In 1940, more than two million Americans made trips by air; cost per mile for the consumer decreased from 5.7 cents in 1935 to .05 cents. (Round-trip, coast-to-coast flights were a pricey $300, the equivalent of $4,918 today, but business customers in particular flocked to take advantage of the time saving.)

No less iconic a figure than Orville Wright became a booster. In the late 1930s, when TWA opened a route to Dayton, Ohio, the 65-year-old Wright was on hand to witness the arrival of the DC-3 at his hometown airport. "They tell me that [the plane] is so sound-proof that the passengers can talk to each other without shouting," Wright told reporter Douglas Ingells that day. "This is a wonderful improvement. Noise is something that we always knew would have to be eliminated in order to get people to fly. Somehow it is associated with fear." Wright had only praise for the plane bringing flight to the masses. "They've built everything possible into this machine," he said, "to make it a safe and stable vehicle of the air."

Wright, however, declined an offer to be taken up for a spin in the DC-3 that day. He didn't give a reason. Perhaps he simply thought that the plane belonged to the next generation of pilots. Those fliers, of course, would soon take the DC-3 to war as the C-47, modified for cargo and troop transport. On D-Day, paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines were ferried to France aboard the C-47.

Certainly, everyone who flew the DC-3—which would stop production in 1945 as the next generation of passenger planes came on line—was devoted to the plane for its reliability, even in icing conditions or turbulence. (Today, at least 400 DC-3s are still flying, mainly on cargo runs, all around the world.) "The sheer strength of the DC-3 is what sets it apart," says Holden. "And it is a forgiving plane, incredibly forgiving of pilot error. At times, you could almost say, she flew herself."

About Kathleen Burke

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