

Flying legend

The DC-3's speed and range helped make air travel popular *By Pat McGinnis*

Not far from the glitz of Beverly Hills and Hollywood, the airplane that would become a legend had an understated debut.

Unlike today's first-flight media events, no film crew or even a photographer was on hand to record the moment when the Douglas Skysleeper Transport, soon to be known throughout the aviation world as the DC-3, took off for the first time from Clover Field in Santa Monica, Calif.

American Airlines had convinced Douglas to develop the plane, and two of the airline's executives, Bill Littlewood, vice president of engineering, and Melvin D. Miller, sales manager, were on the field to witness the first flight, along with the flight-test crew.

They could not have imagined that what happened on the Santa Monica runway that day would change aviation history. It was Dec. 17, 1935—32 years to the day that Wilbur and Orville Wright flipped a coin to see which one would make the first powered airplane flight on a wind-swept beach at Kitty Hawk, N.C.

It's been 75 years since the Douglas plane climbed for the first time into the Southern California sky a few miles from Hollywood. Many DC-3s are still flying.

As a commercial passenger plane, the DC-3 was one of the most successful ever developed. At a time when airlines needed government air mail subsidies to stay in business, the DC-3 made it possible for airlines to carry only passengers and turn a profit. It opened up air travel to a huge segment of the world's population.

Military versions were used extensively during World War II and were known by many names, including Gooney Bird, Skytrain, Skytrooper and Dakota. After the war, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who would later be elected president of the United States, credited the plane as being vital to winning the war.

More than 10,000 of the commercial and military transports were built.

That first one was known as the Douglas Sleeper Transport and was delivered to American Airlines in June 1936. It could be fitted as a sleeper for 14 overnight passengers, or 28 passengers



PHOTOS: (Below) The American Airlines Flagship Rochester is shown in flight. **(Insets, from left)** The luxurious interior of an American Airlines Douglas Skysleeper Transport, which had seven upper and seven lower sleeping berths; the original DC-3 day plane interior; a C-47, the military version of the DC-3, off the coast of Malibu, Calif.; more than 10,000 C-47s rolled off the wartime production lines at a peak rate of two per hour. **BOEING ARCHIVES**





for shorter daytime flight. The first standard version of the DC-3, which could carry 21 passengers, was delivered to American two months later.

With the DC-3, American Airlines got the plane it wanted, one that could fly nonstop from Chicago to New York with more room for passengers but with the performance of the DC-2.

It all started with a \$335.50 long-distance phone call from Chicago to Santa Monica.

American Airlines President C.R. Smith placed the call to Donald W. Douglas Sr. in late 1934 to discuss a larger, faster, "wide body" version of the DC-2. Douglas was doing very well selling the DC-2 and was not that interested. But during that two-hour phone conversation, the American Airlines president convinced Douglas to pursue a design study. Douglas agreed that if his engineers told him it was feasible, he would do it.

Even though his airline was low on cash, Smith guaranteed that American would order up to 20 planes with options for 20 more. At \$100,000 each, it was a potential \$4 million deal.

American sent Littlewood, its engineering president, west to meet with the Douglas design team. Meanwhile, Smith went east to secure a loan with the Reconstruction Finance Corp. for \$4.5 million.

A plane Douglas initially did not want to build, with money American Airlines did not have, was born.

United Airlines, which was under the direction of Bill Boeing until 1934, was the second customer for the DC-3.

In all, 455 commercial DC-3s were built for the airlines. But more than 10,000 were produced as C-47 military transports during World War II. For many soldiers, the C-47—known as the R4D in U.S. Navy service and as the Dakota in service with the Royal Air Force and other Commonwealth air forces—was the first airplane they ever flew in. The C-47 was flown by every branch of the U.S. military and all the major allies. It delivered supplies during the 1948 Berlin Air Lift and saw action during the Korean and Vietnam wars.

In 1960, Douglas spoke of the DC-3 and its future. "More than 10,000 of these transports were built, and they represent a 25-year time span of service," he said. "It is safe to predict that a few of these hardy veterans will be flying 25 years from today."

The enduring and venerable DC-3 has exceeded his expectations by 25 years ... and counting. ■

patricia.m.mcginis@boeing.com

PHOTOS: (Far left) The American Airlines Flagship Bristol rolls out of the Douglas hangar in Santa Monica, Calif. **(Insets, from top)** DC-3 creators, from left, Arthur E. Raymond, John "Lee" Atwood, George Strompl, W.B. Oswald, James "Dutch" Kindelberger, Donald W. Douglas, E.F. Burton, F.R. Collbohm and J.O. Moxness; a DC-3 inside the Douglas Santa Monica hangar; the 2,000th C-47 built at the Long Beach, Calif., plant, with some of the "Rosie the Riveters" who helped build it. **BOEING ARCHIVES**