FLASHBACK FRIDAY: 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DOUGLAS DC-3

News / Events / Festivals

This week marked the 80th anniversary of the first flight of the Douglas DC-3, considered to be the first airliner capable of turning a profit by transporting passengers alone.

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DC-3

The Design work of the DC-3 began in 1934, upon request of C.R. Smith, president of American Airlines, who wanted a longer DC-2 that would carry more passengers, and another with railroad-type sleeping berths, to carry overnight passengers.

The first DC-3 rolled out of the production line as the Douglas Sleeper Transport (DST), and at the time it was considered the height of luxury. Fourteen plush seats in four main compartments could be folded in pairs to form seven berths, while seven more folded down from the cabin ceiling. The plane could accommodate 14 overnight passengers or 28 for shorter daytime flights. American Airlines took delivery of its first DC-3 in 1936, followed two months later by the first standard 21-seat DC-3.

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American Airlines 1936 Schedule. The carrier had just introduced the legendary DC-3 and

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DST in service on its Southern Transcontinental route. (Chris Sloan Collection)

In November 1936, United Airlines became the second DC-3 customer. The DC-2 had proved more economical than the Model 247, and United assumed the DC-3 would continue that lead. Initial orders from American and United were soon followed by orders from more than 30 other airlines in the next two years, who also placed orders for the Sleeper and 21-Seat versions.

The DC-3 revolutionized air transport thanks to its comfort and reliability, making passenger air transport profitable for airlines. American's C.R. Smith said the DC-3 was the first airplane that could turn a profit just by hauling passengers, without relying on government subsidies or in mail and cargo transport. By 1939, more than 90 percent of US airline passengers were flying on DC-2s and DC-3s.

During the Second World War, the US Air Force took over the DC-3 model and renamed as C-47. Over 10,000 aircraft were built (including Britihsh and Russian licensed versions) and deployed in all theaters, under a wide arrange of missions, and played an essential role in transporting troops during the European Invasion, known as the "D" Day in 1944.

As war ended, the DC-3 would continue its career as many of these aircraft were available for a low price. Airlines were formed and the DC-3 helped, again, to develop air transport networks in the following decades. Even during the Golden Jet Era, the DC-3 played a role by flying in locations in which the jets couldn't.

However, as years passed, the number of DC-3 in service has reduced considerably. Today, there are still a handful flying. Particularly, Colombia is one of the countries in which the DC-3 stills going strong, mostly based in Villavicencio, where a special ceremony was held to commemorate the 80th anniversary of this legendary aircraft.

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