



The Golden Years **OF FLYING**

→ *As We Remember*

FRONTIER AIRLINES 1946 - 1986

CAPTAIN TEX SEARLE

*The Golden Years of Flying — As We Remember
Frontier Airlines 1946 – 1986*
by Captain Tex Searle

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Looking Back

In my twilight years I find that I am spending more time sitting in my favorite lounge chair on the patio watching the grass grow. But it is autumn now; the leaves are falling, the grass is not growing, and my attention is turned elsewhere. The sky is clear and I watch the undulating contrails of fast-flying jets, controlled by computers and automatic pilots, as they speed to predetermined destinations. The smoky sky makes a spectacular sunset and as stars begin to appear, I see the contrails fade, replaced by the flashing lights of aircraft proceeding in many directions to satisfy the requirements of a mobile society.

On some evenings, when a gentle rainshower has dispelled the smog and the skies have cleared, I see the reflected lights from satellites as they race across the heavens high above the blinking lights of transport aircraft. I wonder if they are manned or unmanned. Are they friends or foes? Are they from this world or another planet just checking to see if we are behaving properly; or do they have some other more somber motive? Against this backdrop I fondly acknowledge that my life has been consumed with the transportation of persons and things, and with flying aircraft of many shapes and characteristics.

As I reminisce back to those early years, it seems incredible, like a wistful dream. Did it really happen? They say that in a man's lifetime, he has to grasp the big opportunity when it presents itself. I was fortunate that a large part of my flying career involved the DC-3 (Douglas commercial number three) while she was still the mainstay for many airlines. They are the years I remember best, and it is because of the DC-3. Many pilots over the years have expressed their affection for the Grand Ol' Lady; it's almost as if she had a soul. When asked if they would do it over again, the consensus seemed to be you give me back fifty years and I'd spring at the opportunity. This says a lot and

confirms the crews' affirmation: We were very close. The camaraderie is something you have to experience. The close association of Frontier Airlines DC-3 crews is not easy to explain, but it was there, and like the sound of the old recip, those memorable times from a prior era will always be etched in memory.



Over the years in my association with many of the old recip (piston engine driving a propeller) pilots, I became enraptured with the early flying experiences of these former seat-of-the-pants aviators who are such a grand part of aviation history, some whose careers began long before WWII. They flew many types of aircraft powered by the recip. They flew the old Jennys and Curtiss Pushers. They flew the big recips in WWII that powered bombers and famous fighters in the air wars over Europe and the Pacific. In a manner reminiscent of knights of old, they did battle one on one. A time in history that will never happen again. Many were highly decorated. Many were in the twilight of their careers when the jet age began to replace the recip. Yet, these prominent old pilots whose privilege it was to have flown the DC-3, without fail still speak of her with gentle affection and closeness that only they can understand. She returned their affection by giving the crews a feeling of camaraderie among themselves. The sands of time will never dim this memory. No other airplane has been endowed with such widespread feelings of devotion and remembrances by her crews.

In its early history, Frontier Airlines was unique in that it was the only airline expressly serving the Rocky Mountain empire. The name Frontier Airlines was appropriate in that it opened up a vast area never before served by scheduled airline service. Flying into the heart of the Rockies with little or no navigation aids, and weather that changed hourly, Frontier pilots mastered the art of mountain flying while serving small communities that lay in deep valleys with dirt and graveled landing strips that left no room for error. After landing, only the left engine was shut down for the purpose of convenience and saving time. MPX (mail, passengers, and express) were quickly exchanged, and after the loaded cargo and passengers were safely secured, the doors were closed and the left engine restarted. Climbing into the thin air to squeeze through high mountain passes, the

DC-3s would disappear like specks in the sky, continuing on to other scheduled rendezvous.

It seems to be true that when a man reaches his senior years, he can remember events of the distant past better than he can remember what happened yesterday. I can vividly recall lying on my dad's large stacks of hay as a youth, waiting for one of the old tri-motors to appear in the sky or to see the beautiful Western Air Express Douglas M-2 biplane on its run between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City. I remember the time a DH-4 biplane was forced down at the old Sand Hill strip in Delta, Utah. I skipped school and ran four miles to see this marvel that defied the laws of gravity, only to have it take off in a cloud of dust as I breathlessly watched from a distance. At the age of 12 I had the opportunity to approach and touch my first DC-3.

I remember a Barnstormer giving rides at the Sand Hill strip and going into debt to take my first airplane ride in a Travel Air 6000. I remember how small everything looked, how slow we seemed to travel over familiar landmarks, how noisy it was, the feeling of awe I cherished. I had found my lifelong dream.

At the age of 15 my prayers were answered. Carter and Woodhouse, a flying team, were at the old strip to give flying instructions in a Taylor Craft. I sold a steer, and with a craving lust I headed for the strip and struck a deal. After two blissful hours of cross-controlling and steering a roller coaster ride through the heavens while striving to hold straight and level flight, the deal quickly collapsed when my mother discovered one of her progeny had sold his four-legged asset and was living his dream. Once again I was back on the haystack.

The Golden Years of Flying — As We Remember

FRONTIER AIRLINES 1946 - 1986 BY CAPTAIN TEX SEARLE



DC-3 Pilots Share Their Tales of a Remarkable Era in Flight

Here is the legacy of an earlier day in aviation history: flying the Rocky Mountain region, the Frontier Airline pilots achieved the best safety record in civil aviation—a record based on the most stringent measure of the number of takeoffs and landings while flying in extreme conditions. Frontier Airlines (not to be confused with the company currently using the Frontier name) flew from 1946 to 1986. In her early days, crews hand-flew DC-3s over the high Rockies, in and out of small airports hidden deep in mountain canyons, with approaches often referred to as “black holes” due to their almost ominous darkness and lack of reliable visual references. Relating their first-hand experience of flying through “tornado alley” without radar, flying in canyons of sodden clouds while lightning displays an explosion of highlighted pageantry throughout the heavens, the pilot storytellers in *The Golden Years of Flying* invite you into the cockpit for a lighter dimension, too—you will surely enjoy the hijinks and hangar tales of their shared experiences.

As a retired FAL captain himself, the author points out that “flying the DC-3 was just about the best thing that could happen to a man.”

“...Stories of a remarkable airplane and the people who had the privilege of sharing experiences during this exhilarating chapter of commercial aviation.”

—Captain Jack Schade, FAL retired



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