



Back at San Francisco International Airport, the DC-3 was ready to receive new cargo

The DC-3 Flies Again

Sky Queen's Comeback

By Jack Viets

Her big radial engines throb with a faithful, unfeminine bellow, and she is still steady and beautifully stable in the air.

Once she was the queen of the skies, the ultimate in air transport the world over, the plane that brought the dream of commercial aviation and reliable air travel to reality.

Now, 38 years after one of her breed flew, in December, 1935, the Douglas DC-3 is a rare bird in the nation that conceived and produced nearly 11,000 of the famous planes.

But here in the Bay Area, the grand old lady of aviation is making a comeback — competing against the sleek jets that whine effortlessly over her head thousands of feet above, and hundreds of miles an hour faster.

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Just after midnight every night of the work week, one of the solid survivors of the propeller age taxis out from Air Cargo Building 3 at San Francisco International Airport to turn in still another satisfying night's work.

Her barn-like fuselage — stripped of seats and all the amenities of air travel in the pre-jet age, even insulation — is crammed with freight, much of it far too bulky to fit into a jet's belly.

Now, she is N100 ZZ. In her glory years she was the personal aircraft of the commanding officer of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

"She's a helluva clean airplane for a 1945 machine," notes one of her pilots, Ron Werner, during his pre-flight walk around.

Minutes later, the DC-3 is cleared for takeoff for her nightly run to Los Angeles.

Pete Firth of San Francisco, flying the left seat tonight, eases her throttle levers to takeoff power. Werner's beefy hand is right behind his on the throttle quadrant — to make sure vibration doesn't cause the throttles to creep back.

The old DC-3 roars to life. She charges down the runway. Her tail comes up. She reaches flying speed and Firth pulls her nose up.

She's airborne and climbing.

Departure control radios a course vector for "Douglas one zero zero zoom zoom."

The voice of a Western airlines jet pilot somewhere above abruptly asks:

"What was his call sign?"

"One zero zero zoom zoom, a DC-3," the depar-



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"Be kind to old ladies," says Werner, and you can almost hear the laughter above the engine noise in the cockpit.

Then it's on to Los Angeles across seas of darkness and the islands of light that mark the cities along the 300-mile flight.

The old DC-3 cruises along at a steady 160 miles an hour, and lands at Los Angeles International in two hours.

"She's slow," notes Firth, "but she always gets there."

Then Firth and Werner, aided by a fork lift operator, unload the 5000-pound cargo they helped load in San Francisco — and then load on more than 3000 pounds of cargo for the return trip.

By daybreak, they are descending off the Bayshore freeway for a landing at San Francisco International.

"One zero zero zoom zoom, you're a good bird," grins Werner.

Then it's time to unload — again.

But the president of the DC-3 commuter freight airline, Glen Hiersoux, his Army field jacket already dampened by the early morning drizzle, is there to help.

Glen, his brother, Arne, and Werner started the line as an off shoot of their Zoom Zoom Air, Inc., a flying service and flight school, based at Oakland International Airport.

All three formerly flew French bread to Los Angeles in small Beechcraft D-18s for Arabesco, a now defunct carrier that was the nation's first black-owned airline.

They saw an opening for a bigger prop plane — ideally a DC-3 — in the jet-dominated San Francisco-Los Angeles air freight mar-

airlines and their jets couldn't handle, or just were not bothering with.

Their San Francisco-Los Angeles-San Francisco night service has been in operation five weeks now, and each week their loads are getting heavier.

The DC-3, they contend,

Jets have to fly high to cruise efficiently, and on a short stage like the San Francisco-L.A. run they've hardly reached an efficient cruising altitude before they have to descend for a landing.