



TOGETHER WE *Fly*

VOICES
FROM THE

DC-3



Julie Boatman Filucci

Together We Fly: Voices From the DC-3

by Julie Boatman Filucci

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Doug

He was desperate to get closer to the rope, to the edge of the field, in front of the orderly rows of civilian spectators lined up to see the U.S. Army's latest advancement—or latest folly, depending on how you looked at it. He knew only in his heart that he had to be closer, had to see the Wrights' flying machine firsthand. Out of the pages of that latest issue of *Aviation*, from a black and white photo on a broadsheet to living color in front of him.

They were just testing the air, those times out at the field before, he thought. Now, in front of the crowd of thousands, they'd put the machine through its paces, for real. A true test. If the machine failed, that failure would only grow the sure obstacles ahead—the obstacles in peoples' minds—the biggest ones of all. So many skeptics, still; how many around me now? But I know the Wrights can do it—I've seen it with my own eyes!

The trees at the far end of the field didn't look that tall, but Donald Douglas wondered if they posed an impediment. It still seemed amazing to him that the assemblage of rag and wood he could just make out a hundred yards away would take flight, let alone shoot up in the air with enough purchase to clear their branches. He pushed back the brim of his hat to get a better look, and without thinking, leaned against his mother, who sighed. "Donald, please. You'll see enough, soon enough." She was good to come with him; he'd played hooky before but it was different with your mother as an escort. But she'd encouraged her boys, teaching Doug and his older brother, Harold, the points of sail, and now humoring young Doug's aeronautical dreams.

A man approached the brothers at the machine, said a few words, and then with a nod, went to the engine. *That must be*

Mr. Taylor, priming it up. Sure enough, after looking over the assemblage with its glossy cylindrical tank set high atop the heart of the 25-horsepower motor, he topped it with a little oil from the can, and stepped back with another assent to the brothers. One climbed into the seat and arranged himself, while the other strode out to the left wingtip. Doug thought that was Wilbur flying—*he's the one always tipping his bowler a little more.* Another man approached, carrying two stopwatches around his neck—and from what Doug could see, some apparatus strapped to his leg. He climbed into the seat next to Wilbur. The summer afternoon grew steamy from the rain earlier that day, and Doug shrugged off his coat without taking his eyes off the machine. Yet the man at the controls kept on his suit jacket. *How can he stand it? Guess his mind's on other things.*

The presumed Mr. Taylor stepped out from the engine to the right-hand propeller, and making sober, deliberate eye contact with Wilbur, raised his hands to swing the paddle blade. *One swing! No. Another! No. Again! Well...*then a puff and a cough from the motor made him jump. *Almost!* One more swing, another puff, and a cough, and a cough—and the engine turned over. The people around him cheered, drowning out the motor for a moment. Then in the ensuing lull, he could hear it set up a beat, of sorts. And his heart was pounding along.

The collection of white skirts worn by the women surrounding him swayed just slightly as the air moved languorously around them. White dresses, dark suits, like a line of chess pawns awaiting the first move. Out on the field, the machine rocked a little on its skids, showing the inherent yet undirected energy of a toddler on sugar cookies barely restrained against a mother's unbending stare. Then a tuft of wind picked up, just seemingly as Orville steered the machine more directly into it. And with a throw of the throttle lever, Wilbur commanded the first flight of the day. He kept it near the ground until he gained speed, then entered a gentle climbing turn.

"That's it, old boy!" Doug looked around, not expecting to hear his own words out loud—but the intensity of the moment hit him with a force he couldn't resist.



THE SON OF A BANK CASHIER in Brooklyn, Donald Wills Douglas was born in 1892, and his world was filled with invention and the dynamic changes that those inventions wrought. Douglas was entranced by Navy tradition and legend during his childhood—in fact, he followed his brother Harold to the United States Naval Academy in 1909, where he was nicknamed “Doug” to his brother’s



Naval academy grounds
(Courtesy of Bob Kniff)

“Big Doug.”¹ Here he felt in full force the conflict between his family’s history with the Navy and his love for the sea with his building passion for aviation. He sailed during summers as a child and continued to sail throughout his life, but the water never commanded his life’s work in the way that aviation inevitably would.

When he was in school at Annapolis, he had a chance to see the Wright brothers demonstrate their 1909 Flyer at Fort Myer, in northern Virginia. The Wrights were performing the required trials for a contract with the United States Army—to secure it they had to prove the machine could maintain an average airspeed of 40 mph during trials, with a bonus (\$2,500) to the base payment (\$25,000) for each mph that the machine exceeded this average speed—and a penalty for each mph below the benchmark. Other requirements included those involving portability and endurance (one hour aloft with an observer).

He went to view one of the acceptance flights with his mother on July 30, 1909, a day when the Wrights had commissioned an enterprising man by the name of Thomas Edison to film the events there.² (Edison’s son would become a friend of Douglas’ during his college years, and he would later turn down an offer to work for Edison in favor of pursuing a career in aviation.) The day marked the final trial, the time trial, and it was a great success—the Wrights bested the baseline speed by more than 2 mph, secur-



1909 Flyer
(Courtesy of the
Library of Congress)

ing a \$30,000 payment. Don was 17 years old; all of the excitement undoubtedly impressed the young man.

Earlier that summer, he had seen Glenn Curtiss fly one of his airplanes, the Golden Flier, from Morris Park Race Track on Long Island with his father during a meet hosted by the Aeronautical Society of New York—just as the Wrights and Curtiss became embroiled in a bitter fight over patent infringement. The competitive fire that fueled the aviation industry burned hot in these early years, and that spirit would drive Douglas through his career to develop, time and again, the airplane that would best his competitors—and exceed his customers' expectations.

1. "Sky Master: The Story of Donald Douglas," by Frank Cunningham
2. "Donald W. Douglas: A Heart With Wings," by Wilbur H. Morrison

About the Author

JULIE BOATMAN FILUCCI has devoted her career to the aviation industry. At Jeppesen Sanderson, she contributed to the *Guided Flight Discovery* pilot training system and flight instructor renewal courses as a technical writer and editor. At the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, she lead the “Catch-A-Cardinal” sweepstakes aircraft restoration project and flew and reported on a wide variety of classic and new aircraft as technical editor for *AOPA Pilot* magazine. She currently works for Cessna Aircraft Company as the manager of the Cessna Pilot Center flight school affiliate network. She holds a flight instructor certificate and an airline transport pilot certificate with a Douglas DC-3 type rating. She’s on the board of directors for Dress For Success Wichita, and volunteers for Women in Aviation International. She and her husband live in an airport community outside of Wichita, Kansas, with their canine children.



The author with Douglas' "scrapbook."

TOGETHER WE *Fly* VOICES FROM THE DC-3

Julie Boatman Filucci

When Donald Douglas accepted the challenge of creating a new airliner, the DC-3, his team fostered the growth of an airplane that would jumpstart an industry. But without the efforts of countless others that followed, as pilots, engineers, flight attendants, mechanics, ground crew—and the all-important passengers—the DC-3 would have faded into the annals of history long ago.

But today, 75 years after her first flight, the DC-3 graces the skies of the 21st century. Crowds still gather to watch a DC-3 land, technicians revel in the sound of her rumbling radial engines, cargo haulers appreciate her ability to stretch to meet impossible demands, and, yes, pilots still dream of flying the greatest airplane ever built.

These voices come together in *Together We Fly: Voices From the DC-3*. From the newly minted pilot flying the line in the late 1930s to the hostesses who cared for passengers on those pioneering flights; from the engineers who designed her to the women who riveted her together so she could go to war; from the folks for whom the DC-3 meant a first airline trip to the children awestruck and inspired to fly after seeing her today—this book takes you into their hearts.

JULIE BOATMAN FILUCCI has devoted her career to the aviation industry, first at Jeppesen Sanderson, as a technical writer and editor, and then at the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, as technical editor for *AOPA Pilot* magazine. She works for the Cessna Aircraft Company and holds a flight instructor certificate and an airline transport pilot certificate with a Douglas DC-3 type rating.



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7005 132nd Place SE
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