

TRIANGLE'S FORGOTTEN VICTIM

DURING 1948, A NON-SCHEDULED AIRLINE FLIGHT SIMPLY DISAPPEARED IN THE AREA THAT WOULD BECOME KNOWN AS THE "BERMUDA TRIANGLE"

BY HOWARD CARTER

Captain Robert E. Linquist ground-out what was left of his unfiltered Camel cigarette on the Isla Grade Airport ramp as he surveyed the Douglas DC-3C in front of him with a bit of disgust. The date was 27 December 1948, and Linquist knew the ins and outs of the Gooney Bird since he had flown them during the war with the military. Coming out of the service at the end of the conflict,

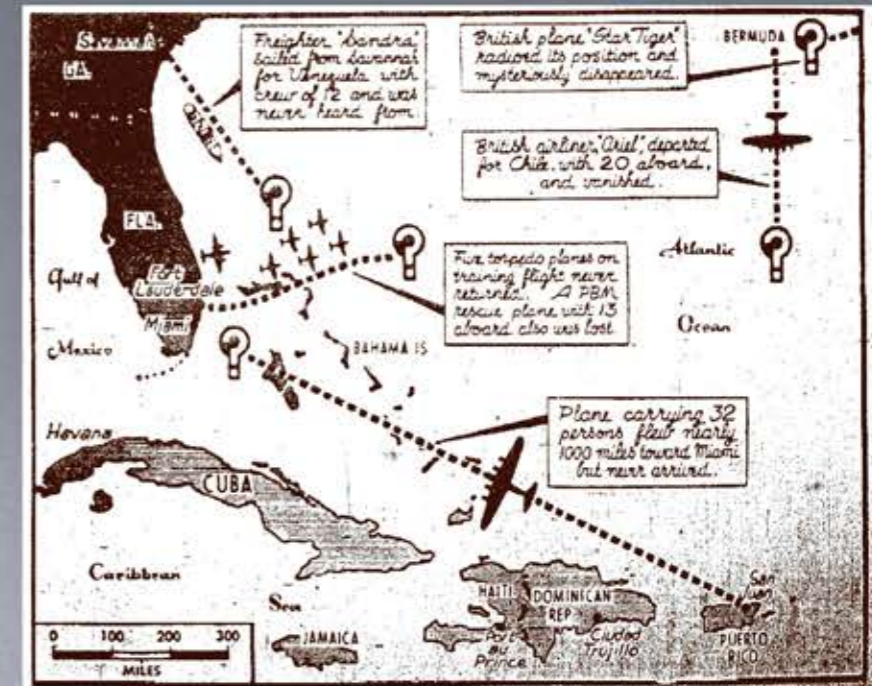
since there were literally thousands of pilots competing for every airline opening. Hoping to eventually get on with an established airline, the 28-year-old pilot was willing to take what he could get in order to keep flying and paying the bills. This meant he was in charge of DC-3C NC16002, which was being operated by Airborne Transport Inc.

Linquist had flown NC16002 a number of times as copilot but this was his first flight for the company as captain. He had flown the San Juan-Miami for other non-skeds before they had gone bust and he also had military flying experience in the area. By going through the paperwork, he had found the plane had originally been built as

a DST (Douglas Sleeper Transport) for American Airlines and was completed on 12 June 1936. With America's entry into WWII, the transport had been taken over by the USAAF and became C-49E 42-

56103. The majority of American's DSTs were impressed by the USAAF as C-49E Skytroopers. Going through the logs, the pilot noted that NC16002 had accumulated some 28,257 hours of flight time and that meant it had been working its entire life. After the war, it had been flown to an RFC/WAA storage field and put up for sale. It was purchased by Karl Knight of Miami Springs, Florida, and converted back to civilian configuration as a DC-3C with increased passenger seating. Linquist knew that Knight, a somewhat shady character, had purchased a number of surplus transports and was making a living by leasing them out to the dozens of new non-scheduled airlines that started after the war to satisfy the new demand for passenger and cargo flights (court records would later indicate that the DC-3C was eventually purchased outright by Airborne).

The DC-3C had been leased to Airborne Transport Inc. of New York and the rather unimaginative name had been painted on the sides of the fuselage. The "non-skeds", as these unregulated airlines were called, usually ran on a shoestring budget. When a problem cropped up with an aircraft, the repair work was done by finding the lowest bidder. However, Linquist knew that the aircraft was airworthy but he was puzzled by the issues he was having with NC16002 as it sat on the Puerto Rican ramp. He had filed an instrument flight plan with the CAA Air Route Traffic Control Center and the Puerto Rican Transportation Authority for his flight to Miami but he was having problems with the batteries on the Gooney Bird.



Newspaper map illustrating various disappearances in what would become known as the "Bermuda Triangle." Flight of NC16002 is shown at center right.

NC16002 had been inspected by a CAA Designated Aircraft Maintenance Inspector on 23 December and found to be in airworthy condition. On 27 December, the plane had a line inspection report and paperwork indicated a generator voltage regulator had been changed. Airborne Transport had given the DC-3C a partial overhaul during November 1948 and at that time two newly overhauled Wright R-1820-G012A engines and Hamilton Standard Hydromatic propellers had been installed (most American DSTs were retrofitted with more powerful Pratt & Whitney radials but for some reason this aircraft was not). Since then, the airliner had flown some 19 hours and this included a round trip between Miami and Teterboro, New

Jersey. During that time, there were no reports of major malfunctions.

Coming into San Juan on the 27th at approximately 7:40 pm after a seven-hour flight from Miami, Capt. Linquist lowered the gear but noted that the landing gear warning lights had come on, indicating the gear was not locked down. However, he was confident the gear was locked but he decided to play it safe and made four touch and goes — perhaps gently "bouncing" the main gear on the runway to make sure it was down and locked. This unusual behavior was seen by the tower and they called out the fire trucks just in case. On the fourth attempt, he landed and taxied to the ramp.



On 17 December 1935, Carl A. Cover, vice president and chief test pilot of Douglas Aircraft Company, gently lifted the first DST, registered NX14988, off the Clover Field runway in Santa Monica. The DST (Douglas Sleeper Transport) was the original variant of the famed DC-3 and was fitted with 14 sleeping berths for passengers on overnight transcontinental journeys. The DST could cross America with just three refueling stops and aviation would never be the same. The sleek, gleaming aluminum shape of the DST would show that America was pulling itself out of the depths of the Great Depression and looking towards the future. The DSTs, with great publicity and fanfare, immediately went into service and made every other airliner obsolete. This created lots of

new business for American among celebrities and the wealthy. As for NC14988, it would fly on until the start of the war when the military impressed American's DSTs into USAAF service. The plane became Skytrooper 42-43619 but it would have a short life. On 15 October 1942, it crashed two miles from its destination at Chicago, Illinois, killing the two-man crew and all seven passengers. In this publicity shot, American DST NC16004 was photographed with Goodyear blimp Enterprise NC16A (taken over by the US Navy in 1942 as L-class blimp L-6) lifting off in the background. Photographs of sistership NC16002, which forms the basis for this article, have been difficult to find.