

AMERICAN WAS FIRST

TO CELEBRATE THE 90th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DOUGLAS DC-3, AIR CLASSICS WILL BE RUNNING A SERIES OF ARTICLES THROUGHOUT 2026 THAT WILL HIGHLIGHT THE CAREER OF THIS REMARKABLE AIRCRAFT. TO START, WE OFFER A PICTORIAL SERIES ON EARLY AMERICAN AIRLINES DC-3 OPERATIONS. AMERICAN WAS THE LAUNCH CUSTOMER FOR THE AIRCRAFT THAT CHANGED THE WORLD
BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

To introduce the new DST/DC-3 series aircraft to the general public, American Airlines did a number of promotional photo shoots. Perhaps the most interesting is this view of DST Flagship Skysleeper NC16006 taking off behind a charging stage coach. The advertising copy with the photograph is rather interesting: "SPEED, SPEED, SPEED. Ever changing, ever faster, faster down through the ages. The pace of history has been marked by speed until today the chief exponents of the ever-increasing tempo of life are the giant modern Flagships of American Airlines, which span the continent daily loaded with passengers, freight, and mail." American ordered the DC-2 in 1934 to replace the uneconomical Curtiss Condor biplanes. The management quickly realized the importance of the DC-2 but knew that a larger version would bring more profit. The airline would operate over 90 DC-3s and some of these would be taken over by the military after America entered WWII so the airline acquired more from different sources. The DST (standing for Douglas Sleeper Transport) was aimed at capturing the transcontinental market by offering a service from New York to Los Angeles that would allow passengers to sleep during the night on cleverly concealed bunks. This became quite popular but it became obvious that more seats could be added by replacing bunks and this led to further profit. Oddly, Donald Douglas was not overly thrilled about an expanded DC-2 and American CEO C.R. Smith engaged Douglas in a marathon long-distance call to convince him about the expanded version. Douglas became convinced when Smith said American would immediately order 20 of the aircraft. DST NC16006 went into service as Flagship *Huntington* but in 1942, it was taken over by the USAAF as C-49E 42-56095. It was returned to American in 1944 and sold after the war, going through a number of civilian owners before being destroyed while operating as PP-SLL in a crash in Brazil on 4 August 1963.



American's C.R. Smith immediately recognized that the DC-2 was the aircraft with which airlines could make money but he also knew its 14 seats could be greatly expanded. Photographed at Clover Field, DC-2 NC14274 is seen prior to delivery. Airlines would also quickly realize that such minimal markings were not easily recognized by the general public and further aircraft would carry much larger names and logos. Delivered on 4 November 1934, the DC-2 would be destroyed in a crash at Goodwin, Arkansas, on 14 January 1936 when the low-flying airliner hit trees in a swamp and crashed killing all 17 aboard.



Jack Northrop played an important role in designing the DC-2/DC-3 center section and this unit would give the aircraft its great strength and long life.



With the addition of the rapidly expanding DST/DC-3 fleet, American also expanded its ground operations including a shop to overhaul the propellers.