



Death of a DC-3

An Introduction by Guy Meyer

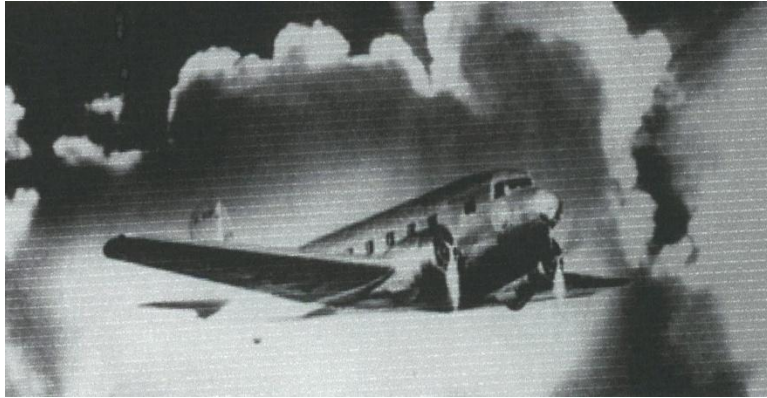
The following short story written by Gary Peak, a Marin County Taxi Cab Driver is based on the historical records found in the local newspaper as well as an interview conducted by Gary in May of 1991, in Gilroy California with the pilot of the aircraft, Charles Stead.

As a young boy growing up in Marin County, Gary had heard about all the airplane crashes that had taken place over the years. Most of them he never forgot. Over the past decade or so, Gary decided to begin to investigate these old stories once again and the results of his research are a fascinating journey.

The intensity of the story was so strong that Gary tells me he felt that he himself was on board. Gary pursued the story with a special attention to uncovering the details and his effort pays off for all who will step into this one of a kind story.

The tragic events that unfolded on the early morning of November 28, 1938 are intense; your emotions may be touched. On entering this story Gary takes you back into American history. It was a different world as we can see Shirley Temple helping load an American Airlines as part of their ad campaign. This is where we have come from; many of our parents were part of those bold times.

You will find that the story is divided into three parts. The Death of the DC-3, The Lighthouse Keeper's Report, and In Search of the DC-3 where Gary, Kevin and myself travel out to Chimney Rock at Point Reyes National Seashore in Northern California. You are advised to follow the full story.



Death of a DC-3

By Gary Peak

The blue light came on over the cockpit door. Quickly, the stewardess got up and went forward. She was petite and pretty. Her blue-gray cap barely reached the tops of the seats on either side.

Captain Charles Stead turned, facing her squarely. His eyes showed strain but not his voice: it was gravelly and reassuring, as always.

“We’re going into the ocean. We’ve picked up a ship’s light. We’re trying to contact her.”

First Officer Jones was peeping into the darkness looking for the ship.

“Tell everybody back there to take it easy,” Stead said. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

Rejoining the passengers, Stewardess Bobby Clay dropped first into the seat beside Mr. Edelstein. Later he was to tell a reporter: “She was as brave as you can imagine....”

“Our pilot Captain Stead is not new to this,” Bobby said. “During the war he landed a plane in the English Channel”. “She could have also added that he had gone from the Army Aviation Corps into stunt flying and that for such a man this landing would pose no problem. “There will be a ship to pick us up,” she said. “Now, if I could help you gentlemen off with your coats and shoes.”

United Airlines Flight 6 had left Seattle nine hours earlier, San Francisco bound. The company had logged 35 million miles on this run without an accident and there was nothing on this evening of November 28, 1938, to suggest the streak might be broken. One of the passengers may have taken the safety record into account before purchasing his ticket. Sydney Shorts, a San Jose Mining Engineer, had promised his family that he would stay out of airplanes, but he had been held up a day in Coeur d'Alene testifying in a lawsuit, another sick-in-bed in Spokane, and to make up for lost time, he had broken his promise. Bobby had noticed how slowly he walked up the ramp, and how he kept massaging one arm, as if to revive the circulation. Soon after he took his seat, he laid his head back and closed his eyes.

Air travel was nothing new to the other passengers. Philip Haut, middle-aged and nice-looking, was president of the Pacific Bridge Company which had built piers and decks for the Golden Gate Bridge.

He was returning now from Tacoma, where he had supervised the construction of a bridge across the Narrows. Two years later his Narrows Bridge was to collapse into wind-whipped Puget Sound. But tonight no premonitions troubled him. He dropped sound asleep soon after boarding, as did the third passenger, Ivan Heflebower. A partner in Leland M. Kaiser bond firm on Powell Street in San Francisco, Mr. Heflebower, thirty-three years of age, was prosperous-looking in a Brooks Brothers suit.

At Portland the fourth passenger boarded, Isadora Edelstein. A big man with heavy brows and powerful shoulders, he took his seat and looked restlessly around. After the take off for Medford, he allied the stewardess and invited her to sit beside him. He said he was due in Los Angeles at 5:30 a.m. His family would be waiting to see him off on the last leg of his trip to Hawaii. What he did not say was that he was a convicted burglar and safe-cracker, sentenced to life in prison, and that he had just been released by Governor Martin of Washington, on the condition that he get out of the United States at once. He'd drawn \$2000 out of the bank in Seattle, placing half in his luggage, and then carrying the rest in his wallet.

Mr. Edelstein was the only passenger much concerned when the plane was held up for a weather report briefing at Medford. It was nearing midnight; a light rain glistened on the landing strip. Bobby crosses it to the weather room where she found Stead reading a radiogram from the Oakland dispatcher. The radiogram suggested holding Flight 6 over until high winds off the coast subsided.

“Edelstein’s not going to like that.” Stead muttered dryly. He got dispatcher Tom Van Screven on the phone, and together they went over a sheaf of Weather Reports. Finally Flight 6 was cleared for take-off. It came at 12:03 a.m. Two wide sweeps over Medford brought the DC-3 to 12,000 feet. Then it headed south.

At 4:09 a.m. Flight 6 radioed Oakland’s dispatcher. Tom Van Screven:

“I should be over Oakland. I am dropping down to see what is below. Have 60 gallons of gas, reduced throttle. There is something wrong with this course.”

There surely was. There had been something wrong ever since the Medford take off. Winds had come howling at them out of the east. Ice and static had been heavy. But the real trouble had been radio interference. Normally a plane finds its way through the dark by tuning its radio to one range station after another located at intervals along the flight path. Tonight one range was drowning out the other. Red Bluff was coming in as strong as Portland, Mount Shasta as strong as Sacramento. Without guidance or at least guidance that could be deciphered, the plane had slipped out of its normal pattern and drifted over the Pacific Ocean!

It was now that Point Reyes short wave radios began to tune in on Captain Stead’s conversation with Oakland. At 4:10 a.m. they heard him say he was on the northeast leg of the Oakland range, at 4:16 a.m. he figured he was on the northwest leg. At 4:30 a.m. he tried to get a bearing on Sacramento and couldn’t. At 4:57 a.m. he did.”I am almost on course,” he said after picking up the Oakland range.

“Okay,” Oakland replied. “What is your altitude, and do you see any lights?”

Stead said, “About 1,800 and no lights.”

At 5:30a.m. Oakland asked for a gas check.

“I have about 20 gallons. Now see lights straight ahead.”

“Get as near to the lights as you can.”

Portland broke in at 5:11a.m. “We estimate his position 8 miles from Point Reyes.”

Oakland at 5:18 am. : “You will find a sandy beach on the east side of Drake’s inlet. Follow the shore and there is a big wide beach there.”

At 5:19 a.m. Stead saw another light, apparently a ship. Oakland said it would ask the ship to stand by. (Later it was to be identified as the lumber schooner Lumberton.) A long distance call was placed to the lighthouse, another to the Coast Guard in Drake's Bay. At 5:20 a.m. Captain Stead dropped a couple of flares. What he saw ahead sickened him. "Shore ahead too rough for landing," he radioed. He swung the plane out to sea again, and pushed the button that turned on the blue light that brought Bobby Clay forward.

It was 5:25 a.m. when the DC-3 landed wheels up on the ocean. Dawn was beginning to pink in the black sky that had been an enemy all night long. The tail hit first, then the fuselage pancake down. In the cabin the passengers were aware of a slight bump.

Stead entered the cabin and in a business-like voice, thanked everybody for remaining calm but emphasized there was little danger. The shore was less than a mile off, a ship was nearby, and the Coast Guard had been alerted.

"I think," he said, "we would all be better off on top."

Stead flung open the hatch over the pilot's seat, and with Mr. Edelstein's help pushed the passengers up through it. All was in shirtsleeves, their shoes off. Mr. Edelstein, after making sure of his wallet in his pants pocket, clambered up next-to-last. Captain Stead handed up some blankets, and then wriggled through the opening.

The ocean was calm, and the plane lolled on it like a sea gull. Mr. Edelstein, despite his promise to Bobby Clay, joined Captain Stead on one of the wings. Bobby found herself on the other with Mr. Shorts and Mr. Haut. On the tail was Mr. Helflebower and first officer Jones. Wrapped in their blankets they looked like football players temporarily benched. One of us yelled out "If Weissmuller could only see us now!" and nervous laughter made the rounds.

All hung onto a radio antenna wire strung from the tail to the cockpit. Captain Stead kept looking around for a boat, anxiously watching the Headlands, which rose steep and ugly as the plane drifted shoreward. Mr. Shorts said he had a confession to make. "I can't swim, but don't worry about me. I'll make out somehow." The stewardess caught sight of his arm. One didn't have to be a register nurse-who she was-to see how pitifully his stroke had cut him down.

“Don’t worry,” she flashed him a smile, “we’ll stay by you.”

But the aircraft entered the surf and began lurching wildly. In the gathering day light one could see the saw-toothed rocks just below the surface. The fuselage smashed into one of them, the tail snapped off, and first Officer Jones and Mr. Heflebower were thrown into the water. Another rock and three more slid into the ocean—the stewardess, Mr. Shorts, and Mr. Haut. Then the antenna wire broke, and Captain Stead and Mr. Edelstein followed them. Their blankets floated around them like great amorphous fish.

Bobby Clay and Mr. Haut made it to shore first, a wave pushing them onto a rock. But suddenly a wing of the plane swung crazily towards them in the undertow, and to avoid being hit, they slid back into the sea.

Mr. Shorts struggled helplessly in the icy water with no one to help him. Mr. Heflebower, in spite of his youth, was no more a match for the ocean than sick Mr. Shorts.

The two powerful men, Edelstein and Stead, made it to the rocky strand. The ex-convict remembered later imploring God’s help as he struggled ashore. He tore his knee on a rock, and fell, groaning. Stead paced the strand, eyes sweeping the water for signs of Lloyd Jones, Bobby, and the others. Why had the Coast Guard not shown up? And what about the ship not stopping? The fuselage of his DC-3, shorn of its wings, drifted in, looking more like a huge beetle than an airplane. The plane swung around in the undertow and came to rest a few feet from him. Suddenly, the captain’s heart gave way inside of him. The passenger compartment, the carpet in the aisle, the seat cushions, and the mail bag were all dry. The morning newspapers were to make much of what they called “the sheer irony” of it. Had the pilot not ordered everyone out onto the plane, all would have had stepped ashore unscathed.

November 30, 1938

The Coast Guard Patrol Marin Shore, hoping Bodies Wash in.

The Lighthouse Keeper's story

‘Can’t Understand Why Ship Didn’t Stop After Plane Dropped Its Flare’

From the Marin Independent Journal Wednesday, November 31, 1938

By HJ Pellagra Point Reyes Lighthouse Keeper

It was my watch below on the light when I heard the planes motors. I knew something must be wrong because he was circling. But I didn’t know what it could be. His motors were sweet and clear. He then swung the plane once over the cliffs lower than the lighthouse beacon. He circled east and dropped a white flare below the lighthouse.

He turned south again and circled towards a freighter that was plowing along southeast. He then dropped another flare. I can’t understand why the freighter didn’t stop.

He circled back his motors still even and flew lower and lower. At last he settled on the water in a perfect landing. It was just like a plane landing on the ground.

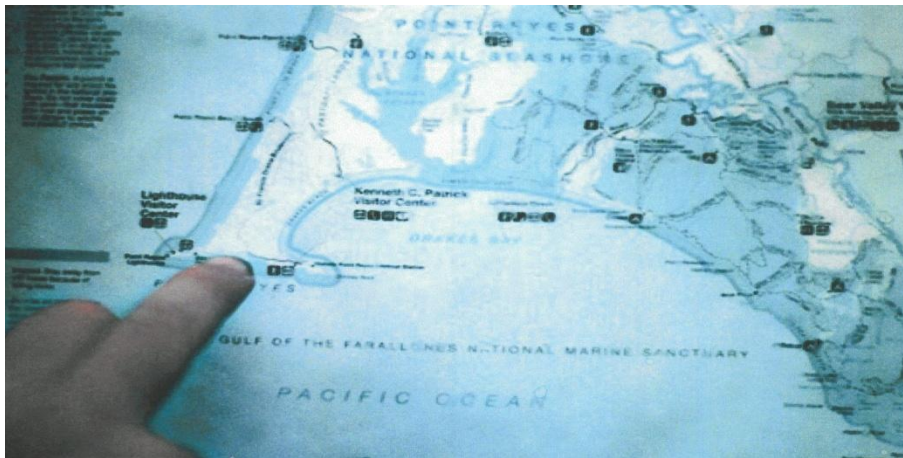
I couldn’t see what happened after that; they were a mile and a quarter away. I then ran to the phone and got the Coast Guard Station and told them what had happened.

**In Search of the DC-3 with Gary Peak, Kevin Peak
and Guy Meyer**

It was a cloudy day in June 2000 when we left San Rafael heading west. We drove out to the shores of Chimney Rock at Point Reyes. We were riding in Gary's classic 1973 Ford F-100 pick-up truck, hoping to see if there were any signs or clues of the DC-3 still there waiting for us.

Gary had heard rumors that the fuselage of the plane had been found submerged close to the shore by abalone divers.

Guy brought his camera, we made it out to the tip of Point Reyes and Gary seemed to have a good idea exactly where we might start the search.



This is the trail that leading out to Chimney Rock.



The coast guards Life Boat Station.



Gary points to where he thinks is the DC-3 beach landing site. Kevin's is not so sure.



The view is from the top of the cliffs looking down where the DC-3 washed ashore.



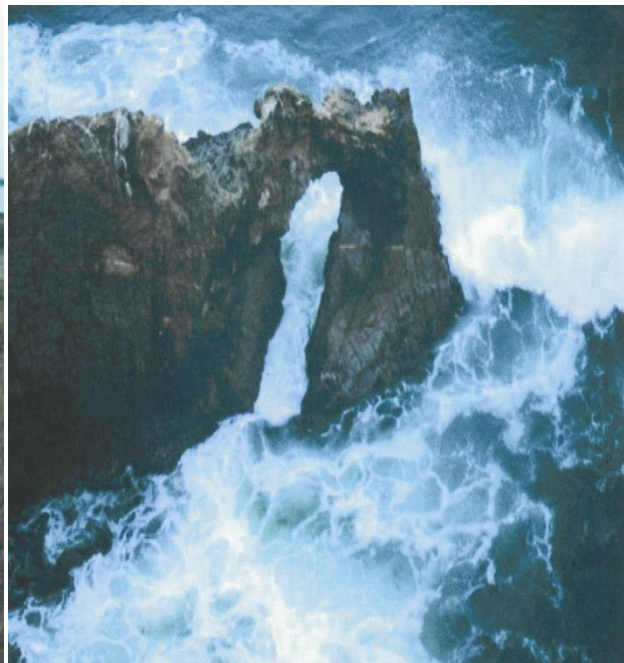
Gary decided to see if he could find a way to get down to the beach. There were no trail and the 170 foot high cliff was a bit of an obstacle.



Gary is climbing back up the wet and slippery slope.

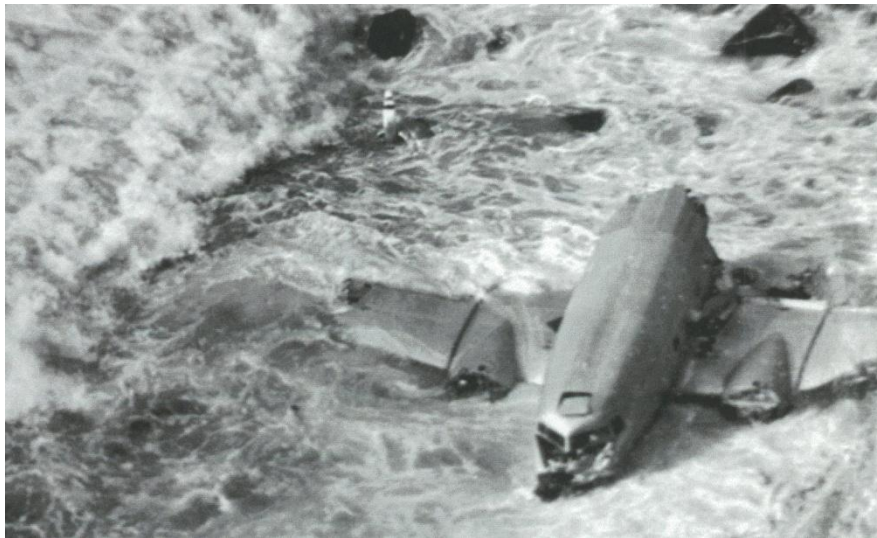


We worked our way out to the south point of Chimney Rock. We are looking down at the fierce rocks that lie at the base of the cliff.



On November 29, 1938 the day the DC-3 drifted to the shores of Chimney Rock at Point Reyes, some photographs were taken by Coast Guardsmen. Special thanks to

Jocelyn Moss the Senior Library Assistant at the California Room at the Marin County Library for allowing us to photograph these 72 years old photographs.



Back in June 2000, I presented this story Death of a DC-3 on Guy Meyer's web site [www. Lifesignphoto.com](http://www.Lifesignphoto.com). The story was aired from June 2000 to October 2004. On December 5, 2002 Guy received an e-mail from Spencer Wessling. The e-mail reads:

Dear Sir,

I was browsing the DC-3 web page and I noticed the article on the DC-3 crash. This took me back. The First Officer or Mate was my cousin and my mother dearest relative. I was only 8 years old at the

time but I can remember the trauma that went through the family. The remains of First Officer Lloyd Jones are buried in Portland Oregon. On pulling up the article with the pictures it brought back many memories and things not to be forgotten.

I have a copy of the Official C.A.B. accident investigation report. I received it from an ex Pan Am mechanic who lives quite near me in Portland Oregon. His sister Bobby was the stewardess on the flight.

I am sending a copy of your article and pictures to F.O. Jones son who lives in California.

Thank you again. Spencer W. Wessling

In closing: I want to thank the following people who have given me the encouragement and great support to complete this story.

John Romer

Captain Charles Stead

Jack Stead

United Airlines

Steve Gough

Guy Meyer

Kevin Peak

Anh Kellogg

Jocelyn Moss

Spencer W. Wessling

END

Copyright 4/21/2010 by Gary Peak

