

Piedmont vets recall startup challenges

February 20, 1948. A DC-3 takes off from Wilmington, NC, and wings its way to Pinehurst, Charlotte, Asheville, Tri-Cities, and Lexington, before terminating at Cincinnati thus completing the inaugural flight for a new airline named Piedmont.

Among those on board are Tom Davis, Piedmont's founder, Bill McGee, superintendent of pursers who now heads the company, and Shell Company executive W.D. Turner, the airline's first revenue passenger. Captain Leon Fox and First Officer "Hoss" Dobbins are at the controls, and the purser is J.B. Simpson.

Bad weather delayed the inaugural flight, which was originally scheduled for February 14. It was a week later before Piedmont's first flight, number 41, departed from ILM at 7:05 a.m., arriving at CVG at 12:24 p.m. The cost of a one-way ticket—\$34.35.

Service was to begin months earlier but a lawsuit by another airline wanting the same routes went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Finally, on January 1, 1948, Piedmont, which had begun in 1940 as a general sales and service operation, received a three-year temporary certificate from the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) and the airline division was born.

Piedmont employed just 360 people that day 40 years ago, and many of them stayed with the airline throughout their careers. What was it like that first day? Following are comments from just a few of the many people who laid the foundation of what is today one of the top airlines in the industry.

"We waited months for the first flight to originate," Captain Leon Fox, who piloted the first flight, said.



Leon Fox in the cockpit of a DC-3 in the late 1940's between TRI and LEX.

"Because of restrictions imposed by the CAA (Civil Aviation Authority, predecessor of the FAA), our operations were under Visual Flight Rules for 90 days. During the late afternoon and evening of February 20 after the flight turned around at CVG with Captain "Pappy" Wilkes at the controls, the weather went very sour. For the next seven days, the Cincinnati Airport operated under instrument conditions which meant we couldn't fly into the airport, and therefore, it was home for the crew for that period. Our crew did finally get back to Wilmington seven days later, stayed overnight, then returned to Cincinnati where we were again exposed to the weather elements, staying another seven days before we were allowed to operate out of that airport.

"What a way to start an airline!"

Like Fox, Captain Jack Tadlock, who retired from Piedmont in 1979, joined the company in 1947 as one of the 12 original pilots. He first flew for Piedmont when the New Bern-Louisville route was added March 6, 1948, and on February 20, was busy training new pilots.

"After we received training, we did a little of everything from unloading boxcars, laying walkways, and tarring roofs, waiting approval to start the airline," he said. "The most outstanding thing about the beginning of service to me was that I was flying captain on a scheduled airline. It was the height of my ambition from as early as I can remember."

Tadlock said that initially, Piedmont did not have enough spare parts to satisfy the CAA, so "we leased a DC-3 from a company in Maryland and flew it to Winston-Salem. That plane was our 'spare parts'."



Jack Brandon at INT during the airline's early years.

While the pilots prepared for their first flights, agents at each of the seven stations were readying for February 20. Jim Neill, who has worked at LEX since 1948 except for a brief year and a half at Louisville, remembers the day well.

"Everyone was waiting for that first flight to go. Bill McGee and I worked the flight together, McGee as a purser and me as an agent. At Lexington, we had a manager and four agents, and all reservations were made on a clipboard filled with yellow-lined sheets. We'd write down names and the times reservations were made, and we could only clear it from station to station. We couldn't afford a 24-hour telex line and didn't have an automatic printer. The only item we had was a phone in the middle of the floor. The furniture arrived later after the airline was a sure thing."

The aircraft had to be refueled at every station because the tanks only held about 600 gallons. The aircraft would freeze up quickly, and agents would have to go out on the wings with a mop and solution to keep the ice down.

"In those days, we had no automatic flight control locks for the elevator or the rudder, but we had hand control locks. We'd pull off the locks and chocks and away the aircraft would go," Neill said. "We also had smudge pots (round pots with a wick) which we had to go out and light for night landings."

Neill is second on the seniority list behind McGee.

Joe Wathen, Louisville's district sales manager and third on the company's seniority list, said he remembers the first day Piedmont flew to Louisville "because it was so exciting. When that old DC-3 came in on March 6, I helped roll up the steps, and McGee, the purser, opened the door. People from other airlines were out watching to see if we did everything right, and we did alright!"

Wathen was hired January 26, 1948, and on February 20, was undergoing training and answering the phone. "If we got 10 calls, it was a busy day," he laughed. Louisville had three agents and a station manager. Wathen applied with Piedmont "on impulse." When the company called to offer him a job, "I took it, just temporarily, because I was waiting for another company

to call me. But I discovered it was fun and the airline got in my blood."

Shortly afterward, Piedmont offered Wathen a job in sales, and he readily accepted, becoming the first full-time salesperson for the airline.

"I've seen Piedmont grow from nothing to an airline that can challenge all others to the title of 'the finest airline in the country,'" he added. "In Louisville, we're recognized as the finest, and we've worked hard to achieve that reputation."

Jack Brandon, DFW station manager, was an agent in training on February 20, 1948. He was based at INT when Piedmont began service there on March 6. "It was very exciting," he recalled.

Captain Bill Manos, who retired from the company last December, was one of our first pursers.

"I was awaiting my first trip, which took place about two weeks later, when the first flight was flown from Wilmington to Cincinnati on February 20," Manos recollected.

"I watched with interest and pride as dignitaries and other passengers as well as mail were boarded on that first DC-3 flight with Piedmont colors, never dreaming we would fly to such far away places as we do in 1988.

"I remember our station stops in the early days were three minutes long. The pursers would rearrange the rear cargo in flight for the next station to off load, and we would help unload and load at the gate. The first officer would load and unload the forward cargo at the gate while the captain monitored the right engine which was never shut down except to refuel. It was a great operation."

While many were busy out in the field, others were at the home office working long hours preparing for the startup of service.



Thelma Davis records passengers in the space control and reservations department at INT, about 1948.

"I 'watched' the flight from origination to destination to see if the passengers listed really boarded. It was so exciting for everyone, and we were extremely proud," Thelma "Tee" Davis, who retired in 1982 as director-charter and convention sales, reminisced.

"One of the things I remember most was that everyone was willing to work together. There was a feeling of cooperation, caring, and closeness. I think we felt that day that we were on the ground floor of what would one day be a fine airline."

When Davis joined Piedmont in January 1948, the home office was located in an old barracks building which housed about 15 employees who managed dispatch, reservations, communications, and the general offices. Davis, Betty Hunter, who retired in 1984 as supervisor-reservations, and two other people made up the first reservations department.

Walt Rollick, superintendent of avionics maintenance in the company's early years, remembers that "everyone from Mr. Davis on down was feverishly working to get every-

thing ready for the proving run that had to be approved by the CAA before scheduled operations could begin.

"In the communications department, we were not only getting the former Colonial Airlines DC-3s ready with the installation of many pieces of equipment, but in addition, ground communications equipment had to be installed at each one of the stations on the route to be implemented. We were all fighting the time element, and I can recall one day when we had to install the last ground radio station and, because of poor weather, Mr. Davis flew us and the necessary equipment to the site in his twin-engine Cessna. It was snowing heavily, but like the mail, we got through. As I recall, we had some of the white stuff in the cockpit."

Rollick, whose son Walt, Jr., now flies for Piedmont, also edited the *Piedmonitor* in its early years.

"Turby" Turbiville joined Piedmont on February 1, 1948.



Walt Rollick in 1947, before airline service began.

"I joined the organization and was sent to Cincinnati as that was the only station not ready to go," he said. "We couldn't find a space at the airport. Finally, I managed to get a very small 10- x 10-foot room from American with a seven-foot ticket counter.

"The only difficulty in Cincinnati was that the oil company had only furnished us with quart cans of oil and the flight needed seven gallons. So you can see it took some time to put in seven gallons of oil from quart cans, and there was a short delay on the return flight."

Turbiville was vice president-traffic when he retired from Piedmont in 1971.

Betty Hutcheson had been with the company for two years as Tom Davis' secretary when the airline began operation in 1948. She remembers that "things started hopping" once Piedmont received approval to start the airline.

"It was the most exciting time to have been there. After the airline started, the company mushroomed. There's a lot to starting an airline—operations, maintenance, scheduling, flight planning, etc. I couldn't ask for a better experience. It was a fun thing getting it going."

Hutcheson, who started the *Piedmonitor* soon after the airline began, left her job in 1952 when she married Captain H.H. (Hutch) Hutcheson, who flew for Piedmont from 1948 to 1978.

Rollick summed up the feelings of many when he said: "The airline was started by a group of hard-working and dedicated men and women, who not only did their respective jobs, but pitched in after hours and on Saturday to refurbish some old World War II barracks that would become our offices. The 'can-do' attitude that got Piedmont started still prevails today, and I am proud to have been a part of this fine organization."