

'Goony bird' still flying

By Ed Lion

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ABOARD "OLD '36," over Massachusetts — The trusty DC-3 lumbered off the ground, evoking images of a bygone time when pilots flew by the seat of their pants, mechanics were nicknamed "Sparky" and air travel meant adventure and romance.

As a gleaming jet streaked from a nearby runway, the pilot gunned the engines to a deafening roar and pulled back the old-style throttle on "Old '36" — believed to have the most time in the air of any commercial plane on Earth.

"It's terrific — I expected to see Ingrid Bergman leaving Humphrey Bogart on the runway," said Ilene Jacobs, 27, a Washington attorney onboard the short Boston-to-Cape Cod hop aboard PBA airlines' "Old '36".

"Old '36" — short for its registration number N136PB — has racked up the equivalent of an extraordinary 10 years' flying time, a commercial record.

Monday, the plane — one of the last of a dying breed of a classic aircraft that revolutionized flight — marked its 45th birthday.

Back when it rolled off the



UPI photo

Pilot Larry Keyes, right, and copilot Vinny McLaughlin, with "Old '36" in the background.

Douglas Aircraft Co. assembly line, Franklin D. Roosevelt was president, Hitler had yet to plunge the world into war and the Bogart-Bergman film "Casablanca," which would forever link the DC-3 with romance, was still five years in the future.

"The plane has character — it's in a class all its own," said pilot Larry Keyes, 29, as he sat at the throttle of "Old '36," shouting above the engine roar.

"I'm lucky because there's not too many guys my age

who can get to fly these planes. Sometimes I'm flying along and I wonder who was sitting in the same seat in 1937," he said.

The plane, owned by the family-held PBA regional airline that serves some 15 cities mostly in Massachusetts and Florida with a fleet of 57 aircraft — including a dozen DC-3s — has been stripped and refitted many times. But it still conjures up flying's era of adventure.

The pilot often must use

high at 45



hand signals to communicate with the co-pilot because of noise. On an autumn flight, the unpressurized cabin chills without a heater. The steady vibration ensures that the 32 passengers know they are flying.

"It sometimes seems more like a boiler room than a cockpit," said Keyes, cruising the DC-3 at 160 mph and an altitude of 2,000 feet for the flight.

"Old '36" has notched in the area of 85,800 hours flying time — in excess of 900 hours more than the previous record holder, a DC-3 now housed at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich.

The plane has had 10 title owners in the 45 years, spending most of the time as a commercial carrier. For two years ending in 1944, it served the government as a military transport within the continental United States.

"This plane is really something," said PBA chairman John Van Arsdale Jr., 38, who with his brother runs the airline started by their father in the late 1940s on the Provincetown-Boston route, "flying 20 feet over the whitecaps while mom kept the books."

The DC-3's sterling quality was that it was built to last.

"It revolutionized commercial air in the late '30s — it was a quantum aviation leap just like the development of the jet. Before that you didn't have too many commercial airlines" because planes were simply too flimsy, he said.

The DC-3s, which went out of regular production in the mid 1940s, were built extra-sturdy with a 65-foot fuselage and a 95-foot wingspan.

"There was no precise measuring at the time to figure out stress as such so they just built them strong," said Van Arsdale, himself a pilot. "I heard one story that a steamroller was once hoisted on a wing to test it.

"And these planes turned out to be used for everything. They served regular commercial routes and they were outfitted as sleepers for coast-to-coast flights. They were nicknamed 'goony birds,' but I don't know why."

Its snout nose and wobbly roll might explain the nickname.

Van Arsdale said the military version of the plane — the C-47 — was called the Dakota. They were used to

drop paratroopers over the beaches of Normandy during World War II, carry supplies "over the hump" to China and tow troop-laden gliders.

"The military requisitioned the DC-3s during World War II and used them as transport planes as well," Van Arsdale said. "They even used the C-47 in the Vietnam War. It was outfitted with a giant rotating gun on the fuselage and it got the nickname 'Puff the Magic Dragon.'"

Van Arsdale said an estimated 11,000 DC-3s and C-47s were produced. He estimated that perhaps there are 500 still in some form of service worldwide, possibly as many as 100 in the United States.

PBA began buying its DC-3 fleet in 1968. "Old '36" was purchased in 1974 from a Texas airplane broker who had kept it exposed and unserviced in a field for several years, Van Arsdale said.

"We paid \$16,000 for it but it was in total disrepair — it blew two engines between Texas and New Orleans," he recalled. "The plane was given new engines and a complete overhaul at a cost of about \$140,000."