

# 'Old 36,' a Vintage DC-3,

*Old airplanes never die, they don't even fade away. At least that's true of this old DC-3, which is still going strong after more than 42 years and 85,000 hours of flying time. 'Old 36' doesn't plan to retire, either.*

By John Platero

**ABOARD THE N136PB (AP)** — The cockpit is small, the instrument panel well worn from years of service. The controls feel a bit heavy to a veteran pilot guiding the 42-year-old DC-3 through slight buffeting caused by heat waves reflected from the Everglades swamp below.

On the other side of the closed cabin door, a dozen or so passengers sit quietly gazing down at the unpopulated area below — passively taking part in aviation history.

"Old 36," as the pilots and employees of Provincetown-Boston Airlines call this vintage plane, has more than 85,000 hours of

flying time. That's more than any other commercial passenger plane operating in the Western world today.

Each time this 30-passenger DC-3 flies, it breaks its own record.

The world's "high time" airliner spends the winters flying between the eight South Florida cities PBA serves out of Naples, Fla., then moves north to join the regional airline's Cape Cod-area operations out of Provincetown, Mass.

Passengers have to stoop slightly as they enter the aircraft.

**STEWARDESS** Ellen Antonacchio walks down the single aisle dividing the double seats on each side, smiles at the travelers and

then takes a seat in back. Her job, admittedly, is an easy one — there's no piped-in music to pass out headphones for, no facility on board for meals or drinks, and, since N136PB isn't pressurized, no emergency breathing equipment for her to explain. No movies, either.

Her chief task is to demonstrate how to buckle seat belts.

"I get a kick out of flying this

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## Sets New Records Every Day

airplane," Antonacchio says. "It doesn't fly high so you can see things on the ground."

Her biggest pleasure comes from passengers who delight in telling her about how they flew DC-3s regularly during the World War II era. "I hear a lot of war stories."

The historical significance is lost on the occasional passenger who expresses concern about the

aging plane's safety.

"How do you think it got to be this old?" responds John Van Arsdale Sr., retired founder of PBA.

The DC-3, produced by then Douglas Aircraft Co. for about 10 years starting in 1936, was a utility passenger-cargo workhorse for the U.S. military during World War II as well as for many airlines of that era, says Ron Davies, Lindbergh professor of aerospace

history at the National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

About 13,500 were built, he says, and "what is not commonly known is that this includes those built in Russia and Japan."

**DAVIS SAYS** that 10,926 DC-3s were U.S.-manufactured, most for

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# 'Old 36' Builds on

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military transport. Only 487 were actually produced in Japan. The Japanese called the plane a L2D2, a navy transport. Veterans of World War II may recall that the Allies' nickname for the Japanese DC-3 was "Tabby."

Production figures from Russia can't be verified, but Davies says it's believed that 2,500 were built in the Soviet Union.

Provincetown-Boston Airlines owns a fleet of 12 DC-3s, nine made for civilian use while three were U.S. Air Force planes later converted for commercial service.

Painted white with red, white and blue stripes down the length of its fuselage, N136PB and its sister ships, though dwarfed by

jet aircraft, stand out at any airport.

Inside, "Old 36" is meticulously clean with two-tone blue furnishings. There's no lavatory, which makes it weigh about 500 pounds less than DC-3s that do.

**SURPRISINGLY**, the passenger cabin is only slightly noisier than more modern aircraft, but much quieter than what the pilot and co-pilot have to endure up forward.

Capt. William H. Lange, a pilot who flies by the book, doesn't get overly sentimental about any airplane now that he's logged about 9,300 hours.

He's in the left seat checking his instruments — altitude 6,500



**VINTAGE CRAFT**—Passengers deplane in Miami from a 42-year-old DC-3 airplane known as "Old 36." —AP Photo.

## Her Flight Record

feet, indicated air speed 135 knots. When he lands, he'll come in "over the fence" at 90 knots.

Lange says that DC-3s can be tricky on takeoff because they have a free tail wheel. A sudden gust of wind can make holding the plane in a straight line difficult until the tail wheel is off the ground.

Lange checks his records and notes his plane has now flown 85,544 hours — 9 years and 279 days of steady flying or more

than 12 million miles.

The old record was 84,875 hours held by a North Central Airlines' DC-3 when it retired May 28, 1975. That plane is now in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich.

Officials aren't sure how many DC-3s are operational, but Davies estimates about 300 are still used in scheduled airline service around the world.

Spare parts are still abundant.