

# The Propeller Saw Job

*This is a story of an airline incident that happened in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on September 25, 1939, one pilot's solution to the problem, and his determination to complete his flight.*

I was operating a one-man, one-airplane operation in southwestern Colorado, but wasn't earning near enough to eat. So I took a job with a new firm just starting up in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I was the charter pilot, instructor, mechanic, bookkeeper, janitor, and whatever else needed to be done.

The airline had been in business for four or five years. Its office was in one corner of the hanger. The pilots would taxi off the runway, and stop in front of the office to load and unload passengers and mail.

On September 24, a Sunday, a dedication ceremony was given for a newly completed W.P.A. project, which consisted of paving the main runway, building a hanger, and building a new taxiway from the runway around in front of the hanger and back to the runway. The event went well. We hopped a few passengers and gave a little air show. Political speeches were also given.

The city workers had built a platform out of heavy bridge timbers from which the local politicians had made their speeches and made themselves visible to the crowd of spectators. The platform, about 2 feet high and 8 feet square, was placed in front of the hanger in the middle of the taxiway. The organizers fully intended to move it once the event was over. But the following morning when I came to work, there it sat in the middle of the taxiway in front of the hangar with no flag or marker.

My first thought was that that sure could cause a pilot some embarrassment if he didn't know about it. I went through the airline office and mentioned this to the agent. He commented that the platform was too heavy; the city workers would get more help tomorrow and come back for it.

I went back to the shop area and went to work servicing three planes. There was always plenty to do. After some time had passed, I looked out the window and noticed there was a very active, squall line approaching from the west. It looked as if it would hit the airport dead center. I checked the clock. The southbound airliner would arrive soon. It was a Lockheed 12 with a full load of six passengers.

I stepped back inside and asked the airline agent the location of the incoming plane. I pointed out that there was a squall line moving in. He answered that the pilot was about five minutes out, and that the pilot had his eye on the squall line. He was going to try and get in and out before it hit. He wasn't going to shut the engines down. No passengers were getting off or on; all we needed to do was exchange the mail sacks.

I thought, 'this operation should be worth watching.' The airliner landed and taxied to its parking area. When the pilot parked, the left engine was directly in line with the platform. I thought the pilot must have seen it when he taxied in, and that he intended to make a sharp right turn and proceed out to the runway on the same strip he came in on. The hanger doors were cracked open so that I could stand to the side of the ramp and observe the whole operation. The mail sacks were exchanged, the plane door was shut and the plane was waved away in short order.

The pilot started his taxi forward. 'He's got to turn pretty soon,' I thought. But, I saw that he was not going to turn and that he was not going to stop. I hurried out of the hangar door and signaled him to stop, to cut the engines.

But, the pilot only looked at me with a curious expression on his face that seemed to ask, 'who is that guy and what does he want?' Then he slowly ran into the ramp and the plane stopped immediately. The damage was minimal—propeller damage only. There was about three or four inches curled up on each blade tip. The passengers were unloaded, the plane was pushed back into the parking area, and the squall line blew through.

I returned to my work in the shop. Soon, the pilot came in and stood beside me, drinking coffee and squinting at my work. We engaged in small talk about the events of the day. Eventually, he asked, "Have you got a step ladder I can use?"

"Sure," I said.

Then, "You wouldn't have a hacksaw, would you?"

"Why, yes, I do."

Then he asked, "Would you give me a hand?"

Response: "I'll hold the ladder for you."

I had some idea what was going to happen. We went out to the airplane and set up the ladder. The pilot measured from the hub to the damaged part of each blade and sawed the tips off, about three or four inches. He then started the engine, gave it a thorough runup, loaded the passengers, and took off. Next stop—ABQ (Albuquerque Municipal Airport)

There the trip cancelled. The airplane was pushed into the hangar, and the doors were locked. I was later told that sometime during the night, someone had removed the propeller. It had simply vanished. I guess the C.A.A is still searching for it. That and the culprit who removed it.

A month or so later, I received a letter from the airline president. He understood that I was a witness to the events that day and wanted my version of them. I thought that maybe the airline was going to give the pilot a bad time. I answered the letter with one of my own, three pages long, explaining the events that day: the platform, why it was there and not removed, the squall line, how I ran out of the hangar door and tried to flag the plane down, and the damage that was done. I made no mention of the propeller blades being sawed off. I stated that I could have possibly distracted the pilot at the last minute causing him not to be able to stop in time. I never heard any more from the airline president.

Soon afterward, though, I received a letter from the C.A.B. wanting the same information. I gave it some thought. I was leaving the area for a new job in a couple of days. I tore up the letter and threw it away. I moved and forgot about the entire incident.

That is until two years later. I was working for a flight school in the Bay Area, California, when Pearl Harbor took place. All flying on the West Coast stopped. The company I worked for transferred the flight school to Cheyenne, Wyoming. I was getting antsy and thought I should be contributing more to the war effort. So I went down to Denver and arranged an interview with the airline president - the same

president who was involved in the Santa Fe incident. The interview went well. He accepted my application and said I would be called when there was an opening.

Just as I was leaving, he said, "I would like to have you meet our chief pilot." He took me to the chief pilot's office and introduced me to the fellow who sawed the propeller blades off a couple of years earlier. The chief

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While the chief pilot was showing me around the airline facilities, he said, "You sure look familiar. Were you ever around New Mexico?"

"Yeah. A little now and then."

"Did you ever spend any time around ABQ?"

"Yeah, some."

After a while, he asked, "Where is it we've met?"

I may as well tell him, I thought. "Do you remember the platform in front of the hangar in Santa Fe?"

"How did you find out about that?" he asked.

"I was the guy standing in the hangar door. That was my hacksaw. You owe me a new blade."

"Damn," he said. "I almost got in a lot trouble over that."

The subject was dropped. Never mentioned again. I never went to work for that airline. Another one called me first.

I had the chief pilot on board one of my trips three or four years later. He was on his way to San Diego to look a Convairs. His airline was purchasing them. In later years, he became vice president of operations. The airline is still in business. He retired, an old airline employee.

I can't help but laugh when I think of him and recall his "solution" to the damaged propeller. But the memory is tinged with some sadness as he "went west" in 1999. (going west is an old aviator term for dying,)

*By Captain Dick Young, Western Airlines, Retired and has flown final flight west.*

