



Military History of a **PENN CENTRAL DC-3**

by Roger F. Besecker

DOUGLAS DC-3 NC21784, Douglas s/n (c/n) 2172 entered service with Pennsylvania Central Airlines in December 1939. It was assigned Fleet Number 217 and named *Rocky Mount*. As Europe plunged into war the United States Government made plans for military use of the nation's airlines DC-3s. As it turned out some DC-3s were taken from airline orders while still on the production line, some already in airline service were "drafted" and others were leased. Number 2172 was leased by the USAAF April 1942.

NC21784 was the first Capital (formerly Pennsylvania Central) DC-3 I saw after being employed as a radio operator with Capital at Detroit Willow Run Airport. Our radio room had a great view of the Capital ramp area and on my second day of work I took my "Brownie" box camera to work. Number 2172 was the first, and as it turned out, the last Capital DC-3 I photo-

graphed. The LAAS¹ series of books on the DC-3 noted 2172 as a C-49H but no USAAF serial number was given. Had the author had access to the FAA files and the 1946 Fleet Listing of PCA² the book would probably have noted that 2172 was indeed a USAAF C-49H, had been camouflaged, converted for cargo use and flown with its c/n as an AAF s/n.

Mr. Noah Arnold, a retired PCA and Capital mechanic, was a member of the flight crew on the leased PCA DC-3s. These were operated by the Military Transport Division of the USAAF. Mr. Arnold gave me a 1946 PCA Fleet Listing which portrayed 2172 as a C-49H with the s/n 39-2172. This list also showed c/n 2170 as "C-49K 39-2170." Military service use of these two DC-3s is confirmed in the FAA files. Mr. Arnold also confirmed that these aircraft were flown by PCA crews, and were just as described in the various

Douglas DC-3 NC21784, Fleet No. 217, named Rocky Mount at Willow Run Airport. Ypsilanti, Michigan, spring 1948. (Roger F. Besecker)

correspondence in the FAA files for these DC-3s. The monumental DC-3 book by Air Britain makes no mention of military use of these DC-3s.³

First mention in 2172's file of military usage is a letter, dated April 23, 1942. This transmittal was from PCA to the CAA Certification and Records Section and accompanied the Air Worthiness Certificates of three PCA DC-3s, NC21784, NC21788 and NC21790. The letter states, "These certificates have been removed and are being returned to you inasmuch as these aircraft have been recently reassigned for use as military aircraft converted to cargo transportation. These aircraft are now operating with military workings, identification and camouflaged and are identified by their respective serial

numbers.” Very interesting indeed.

A Department of Commerce status change report dated 5-5-42 stated, under the reason for cancellation, “Aircraft leased to U.S. Government and operated under military designation.” A letter from the Army Air Forces HQ, Washington, D.C., dated 17 May 1944, states as follows: “It is intended to return to your commercial operation the following DC-3 type aircraft:

C-49H, Manufacturer No. 2172, former NC21784

C-49H AC 42-107422, former NC21790
Aircraft C-49H, manufacturer No. 2172 (leased plane) will be released to you on or about April 19, 1944.” NC21790 was a “drafted” DC-3.

The last letter, concerning 2172 and military service, was dated June 12, 1944, and is from the Chief of the CAA Air Carrier Branch to PCA. Pertinent items:

1. Douglas DC-3 G-102A.
2. NC21784, serial no. 2172.
3. Total Aircraft Time 12,618 hours.
4. Leased to Army as of 4-30-42.
5. Returned to Scheduled Air carrier operation 6-6-44.
6. Total time in military operation—7578 hrs, 24 mins. This is approximately an average of 10 hours per day

Douglas C-49H 42-38328, a “drafted” DC-3. NC33678 became PCA/Capital No. 227C Morgantown.
(Douglas courtesy Harry Gann)

while in military operation.

7. The condition of the aircraft at the time of return to scheduled air carrier use is considered satisfactory and equivalent to other PCA airline aircraft.

9. (condensed) A complete conversion from cargo to passenger operation, some repairs necessary. Skin was replaced in proximity of the door due to hard service use during cargo operations.

The preceding sums up NC21784’s military life. Later on it served with United Airlines, after the takeover of Capital, and eventually crashed in Latin America.³ I only have a partial file⁴ on NC21782 (2170), but a PCA fleet listing dated 6-27-46 shows it as C-49K 39-2170. It may still be in existence. NC21788 file shows it as also leased to the government. NC21788 had suffered major damage in a crash at Detroit, Michigan City Airport March 2, 1942. It suffered major damage but was repaired. A final entry in its FAA file shows it too going into military use. NC21788 was destroyed 5-5-44 in a midair collision at West Palm Beach, Florida. It had a PCA pilot and an AAF copilot. It was never rebuilt. PCA obtained a second NC21788 from government stocks. This was c/n 4110, listed as a used C-50B, and PCA paid \$50,437.87 for the aircraft.

With conflicting information on some of the early DC-3s it’s easy to see

why confusion exists among several of the reference sources. To sum it up, there were other officially designated C-49Hs other than the 19 listed in most sources. The record on NC21788 should show it as repaired after the 1942 crash and destroyed in Florida while in AAF Military Transport Division service. The U.S. scheduled airlines were hard-pressed during the Second World War, having to survive on about half their original fleets of DC-3s. It would be a major and possibly expensive project for some historian to ascertain just which of the airline DC-3s were leased and just which designations and serial numbers they carried while in government service.

Perhaps some AAHS member can supply photographs of these wartime-leased DC-3s showing them as described herein. □

NOTES

1. London Amateur Aviation Society, Volume 1, DC-3 Production c/n 1954-5000. Published May 1968, Stan Wilkinson, editor. Page 27.
2. Pennsylvania Central Airlines, DWG 2125 by G. Stanley and dated 6-27-46, titled “Current Aircraft.” Manual title unknown.
3. The Douglas DC-3 and its predecessors, J M G Gradidge, an Air Britain Publication, Kent, England. 1984.
4. Federal Aviation Administration files on DC-3s, NC21 782, NC21 784, NC21 788 (numbers 1 and 2) and NC21790. Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
5. As an adjunct to the Capital/PCA DC-3 information, PCA Drawing 1160, dated 6-27-46, G. Stanley shows Douglas DC-4/C-54 c/n 3050 as being obtained by PCA and used as engine test stand for training, c/n 3050 was never registered or flown by PCA.





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Douglas DC-3 N1690 c/n 2180. Formerly Braniff Airways NC21774 and USAAF C-49H 42-68688. Now owned and being restored by the Allied Air Force, Queen City Airport, Allentown, Pennsylvania. (Photo June 1986 by Roger F. Besecker)

Type	Mfg. s/n	Mfg. Date	AAC s/n	Type	CCN	Civ. Reg. No.	In Sv.	Capital Names
DC-3	2169	1 1-22-39				NC 21781		Harbor Springs
DC-3	21 70	11-27-39	AC-39-2170	(C-49K)	6605	NC 21782	4-14-44	Traverse City
DC-3	21 71	11-30-39				NC 21783		Bay City
DC-3	2172	12-2-39	AC-39-2172	(C-49H)	6615	NC 21784	6-5-44	Rocky Mount
DC-3	2173	12-6-39				NC 21785		Virginia Beach
DC-3	2189	5-23-40	AC-42-107422	(C-49H)	6618	NC 21790	6-15-44	Lansing
DC-3	2256	9-21-40				NC 25691		Sault St. Marie
DC-3	2272	2-20-41	AC-42-38330	(C-49H)	5916	NC 25694	2-16-45	Grand Rapids
DC-3	4081	3-10-41	AC-42-5661 7	(C-49E)	661 7/5901	NC 25695	7-17-44	Huntsville
DC-3	4082	3-12-41				NC 25696		Williamsport
DC-3	4099	4-1 1-41	AC-42-38329	(C-49H)	5906	NC 25689	8-3-44	Hickory
DC-3	41 10	6-30-41	AC-41-7704	(C-50B)	5915	NC 21788	12-28-44	Clarksburg
DC-3	4121	6-7-41	AC-41-7679	(C-50)	5945	NC 12919	5-26-45	Saginaw
DC-3	4132	3-17-41	AC-42-56626	(C-49)	6621	NC 33677	7-1-44	Elizabeth City
DC-3	4133	7-26-41	AC-42-38328	(C-49H)	6635/5907	NC 33678	9-6-44	Bristol
DC-3	4820	10-15-41	AC-41-20050	(C-53B)	5918	NC 49553	3-8-45	Coming
DC-3	4886	2-26-42	AC-41-20116	(C-53)	5929	NC 18620	3-30-45	Greensboro
DC-3	6260	12-22-42	AC-43-1984	(C-49J)	5960	NC 44993	10-25-45	Cheboygan
DC-3	6324	1-20-43	AC-43-2012	(C-49K)	5956	NC 45373	8-20-45	Kingsport
DC-3	7320	7-8-42	AC-42-47378	(C-53)	5940	NC 19917	6-28-45	Ashville
DC-3	7347	8-31-42	AC-42-15552	(C-53B)	5928	NC 19915	4-30-45	Elmira
DC-3	11757	7-6-43	AC-42-68830	(C-53D)	5970	NC 45366	11-20-45	Hendersonville
DC-3	11776	7-27-43	AC-42-68849	(C-53D)	5962	NC 45379	12-15-45	Raleigh-Durham
DC-3	11778	7-29-43	AC-42-68851	(C-53D)	5965	NC 45338	1-9-46	Winston-Salem
C-47A	19448	1-13-44	AC-42-100985	(C-47A)		NC 88835	2-9-46	Pilot Training (cargo)
DC-3A	19202	12-2-43	AC-42-100739	(C-47A)		NC 65276		Newark
DC-3A	9914		AC-42-24052	(C-47A)		NC 65282		NEA
DC-3A	18984		AC-42-100521	(C-47A)		NC 65384		NEA
DC-3A	20542	6-15-44	AC-43-16076	(C-47A)		NC 65385		Saginaw
DC-3A	13803	4-23-43	AC-43-30652	(C-47A)		NC 65135	Pellston	
DC-3A	19402			(C-47A)		NC 65390		NEA
C-47A	13633	6-26-44	AC-42-93693	(C-47A)		NC 53668		Cargo Carrying
	2168	Crashed MTD, Macon, Ga. 5-20-43				NC 21786		Washington, D.C.
	2187	Crashed MTD, W. Palm Beach 5-5-44				NC 21788		Muskegon
	2188	Crashed CCD, Lovettsville 8-31-40				NC 21789		Erie
	2262	Crashed CCD, Morgantown 4-14-45				NC 25692		Flint
	4131	Crashed CCD, Birmingham, 1-5-46				NC 21786		Washington, D.C.
Aircraft with Another Operator:								
	2266	Braniff (DC-3)				NC 25693		Buffalo
	2267	Delta (DC-3)				NC 25694		Grand Rapids
	4130	Sold to England (DC-3)				NC33675		Baltimore
	12695	Sold to U.S. Airlines Inc. (Florida) (C-47A)				NC 88834		
	2186	Sold to Caribbean Atlantic Airlines 4-29-46 (DC-3)				NC 21787		