

Flames to

by John R. Dobson



My training as a cadet in the U.S. Air Force and consequent experience flying P-38s with the Ninth Air Force in Europe during World War II saved my life more than once. Flying 53 combat missions over Germany certainly improved my flying expertise but more than improving my competence in maneuvering an airplane, the military experience gave me confidence that I could handle emergency situations and still remain calm enough to think through to a safe landing in any locale. This was never more evident than when I found myself flying as a civilian after the war in a DC-3 for a cargo carrier.

On June 12, 1948, I was flying an Eagle Air Freight DC-3 with a load of flowers on board. Our destination was Dallas, Texas with a fuel stop at Tucson or El Paso. The night held perfect weather but it was a pitch black, moonless night. At about 3 a.m., I was laying down in the aisle on some blankets we brought to rest on. This was normal procedure for non-skeds at that time when we were required to fly continuously for two or three days at a stretch.

All of a sudden as I lay there, all warm and dreaming a pleasant dream (surely of my wife), my sleep was interrupted by a frightening “Dobbie! Dobbie!” I leaped up into the left seat feeling very much aware that something was terribly wrong. There was a bright glow in the cockpit and my copilot was still screaming only this time he yelled “Fire! Fire!” Looking out the left window, I saw that the engine was a complete fire ball with flames extending out to the tail feathers.

I went through the emergency procedures: shutting the engine down and pulling the fire bottle. But there were no results. The fire was still burning furiously. Anyone flying during that period will remember the old Airways System that spaced emergency fields a couple hundred miles apart with

rotating beacons. I knew that Red Rock Auxiliary field was nearby so I dumped the aircraft over and headed for Red Rock. I, of course, picked up speed and the fire began to look like a blow torch. Not wanting to tear off the wing, I started to slow up by pulling back on the wheel. Suddenly, the controls, both rudder and elevator, forcefully kicked out of my hands and the aircraft went into a very violent maneuver. I felt in my bones that the wing had come off.

The cockpit filled with smoke, I couldn’t breath or see. Knowing that if I just sat there, I would be a goner when we hit the ground, I decided to leave the aircraft and hoped to land on the roof of a house and fall through to mattress or perhaps to a big tree which would cushion my fall. But when I got my head and arms out of the window, I saw the wing. Miraculously, it was still there but minus an engine. Since I hadn’t been able to feather the prop, I assumed the oil lines had burned out which made the rotating prop tear the engine off as the engine mounts heated up and weakened.

Reaching back into the cockpit, I moved the wheel and the aircraft responded. With my head outside the cockpit, I leveled the wings and started pulling out of the spiral. As suddenly as it had accumulated, the smoke in the cockpit cleared. I pulled myself back into the aircraft and headed to Tucson instead of Red Rock. I could see the highway between Phoenix and Tucson off to the left so I flew over to the highway and started following it.

By then, my altitude was below 5000 feet and there were hills around, some as high as four or five thousand feet. As I leveled off over the highway heading for Tucson, I approached the very small town of Eloy, Arizona and realized with a jolt that I wasn’t going to get over it. I was descending faster than I hoped. From today’s vantage point, it is obvious to see why; under the stress of that moment, I assumed my DC-3 aircraft was invincible.

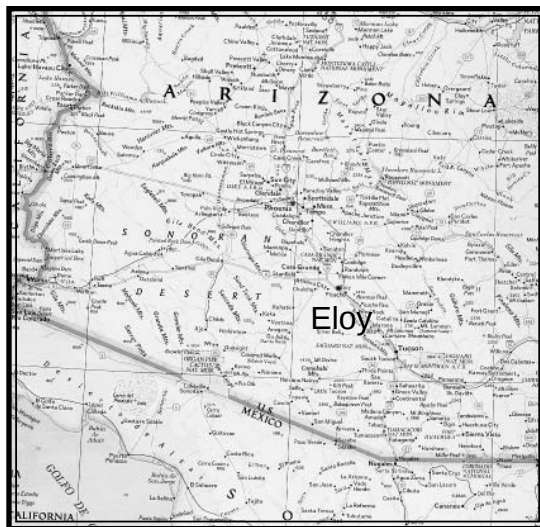
To understand flying conditions in 1948 and particularly those of Eagle Air Freight, requires a bit of explanation. It was

standard procedure to fly overloaded with both freight and fuel! That night was no exception. Added into the equation was the big gap in the wing where the left engine had once been and still worse, the gear was down. On a DC-3, the landing gear was held up by hydraulic pressure and when that was lost, down came the gear. It all added up to an impossible load for the right engine to keep aloft. But down below was the little town of Eloy.

Those of you flying the airways over Arizona during that period will remember how the little towns stood out from the surrounding blackness with their small ring of lights. Eloy was recognizable as a reverse "C" with the highway on the left. I didn't dare land on the highway where trucks rolled and which the railway paralleled; I had to avoid the "C" string of lights, so I chose the blacked-out section which lay in between. As I turned in, I first hit the top of some trees, then I took off part of a roof on a building housing 23 migrant workers. Next, I took the tree in front of the building, then the power lines that carried all of Eloy's power. This caused a total black-out of the entire town.

But I lucked out and managed a nice, smooth landing. The gear was hanging down but not locked in place because it lacked hydraulic power, still as it slowly retracted and without a jolt, the aircraft came to a smooth halt veering less than 90 degrees on the stubble field 'runway.' I just sat there wondering what the hell had happened. Fifteen minutes before, I was warm, cozy, dreaming of finer things and now I was sitting there with a voice screaming at me. It was the copilot yelling again, "Fire! Dobbie, Fire!"

He was yelling because the gap in the left wing had a residue



Crash site of Eagle Airlines DC-3 on June 12, 1948.

of fire remaining from a split oil tank and this had set the stubble field on fire. I jumped out of the seat and made a run for it totally forgetting that I was still without shoes. The stones in the field reminded me in a hurry that I was shoeless. But as I looked back at the aircraft, I could see that the flames were barely alive. I remembered that my new suitcase was still aboard, the one my wife had just given me for my birthday, and I ran across that stony stubble field again. There were boxes of orchids in front of the suitcase so I threw them out, grabbed that damn suitcase and ran across the field again. This time I stood by and watched.

Only minutes went by before the local sheriff and the fire department arrived. I was hoping they would put out the small flames running along the edge of the field and save the airplane. The fire captain asked how much fuel was on board and when I told him there was about 400 gallons, he replied that his crew was not trained in fighting fuel fires. He wouldn't let anyone go near the plane. I pleaded with him, even told him that I could go out there and pee on those little flames and put them out, but he refused.

As the stubble field continued to burn, it eventually heated up the fuel tanks which in turn exploded leaving nothing but the 'tail feathers,' the horizontal and vertical stabilizers. The rudder and elevator had been damaged previously during the descent.

I have never recalled the sheriff's name but he took good care of me and the copilot. He had been a Texas Ranger at one time and bore the authority of his recent past and present position very well. One of his first acts was to take me into town to



Eagle Airlines DC-3 (c/n 79042) crash site, June 12, 1948, Eloy, Arizona – flown by John R. Dobson. (All photos from author's collection)

get some shoes. He called the owner of the only shoe store in town, woke him out of a sound sleep at three in the morning, and insisted that he open his store to sell me a pair of shoes. Next, he roused the local motel owner out of bed to give us motel rooms for the night.

The next morning after breakfast and after I had a talk with Eagle Airlines in Burbank, the sheriff drove me out to the site of the crash. We took pictures of the burned-out hulk of what was once a flyable DC-3. Nothing much remained other than the tail. I found out that no one was injured in the migrant workers' house which lost its roof as I crashed to a landing. I was most grateful for that. I was even able to amend in a small way by handing out orchid corsages to the local ladies as they drove by on their way to church that Sunday morning.

Then, the sheriff took me to the jail house while I awaited transportation back to Burbank. That was when I got to see in action the one guy who Hollywood could have used as a stand-in to John Wayne. To illustrate, the sheriff and I were sitting out on the porch of the jail house right on the state highway which ran through the middle of town, when a large truck roared by doing about 50mph, well over the posted speed limit. The sheriff just sat there a bit while he muttered something about those gol darn California truckers. He then sauntered out to his old Willys Knight sedan and drove off.

About an hour later he drove back, got out, went into the jail passing me by without a word. Two or three minutes later the passenger side of the Willys Knight opened and the trucker gets out holding a bloody handkerchief to his head. He staggered into the jail and I heard some slamming of metal doors then the sheriff came out and sat down. And he never said a word. I waited and waited, still there was no word. Finally, I had to ask, "What happened sheriff?"

"He got smart with me," the sheriff said, "so I hit him with my pistol."

I wasn't about to grill him on the matter, so we just sat there on the porch.

About ten minutes later, an Indian gal from the reservation drove up in an old truck and stopped in front of the jail. She got out and walked up to a spot a couple of yards in front of us then just stood, not saying a word. Her head hung in fear, perhaps, or was it shame? I couldn't tell. The sheriff just sat there not saying a word so finally I looked toward him and said, "Sheriff,

I think this Indian gal wants to talk to you." He gave me a withering look, then turned to the Indian gal and asked, "What do you want, Rebecca?" She replied, "I got the money, sheriff."

They both went inside and I heard more doors clanging and banging then the sheriff returned to sit down again. Soon, a big, six foot American Indian man came out followed by the Indian gal and they both got back into the truck and drove off. I couldn't help myself this time, I had to ask. "Tell me, sheriff, what was that all about?" He told me the story, one I'll never forget.

"That Indian gal saved up the money to post bail for her husband. He was the big buck she followed out of here. I put him in jail for what he did to her. It seems he caught her in the wigwam with another Indian. He beat up the other Indian man, then went after his wife. He stuck a knife in his wife's crotch and cut her up to her belly button."

In shock, I blurted out, "Gol dang, he killed her?"

"Oh, no", said the sheriff, "in fact, that was his wife you just saw who paid his bail. And the Indian driving the truck is the guy he caught her with."

If you ever drive through Eloy, Arizona, watch your speed and obey all signs just in case they've found another Texas Ranger to be their sheriff. Better still, fly high above that little town and all others until you make a safe, three point landing.

At the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) accident hearing, Jim Payton who was the FAA representative, told me this true account of events following the aircraft crash.

When Jim Payton, as part of his job, went to Eloy to investigate the accident, he and the local sheriff, the retired Texas Ranger who helped me, spent a week or two looking for the engine that had burned off. They used horses, a jeep, and a BT-15 which the sheriff owned, but never did find it. They became good friends and after spending the day out in the field, would go into the local bar and have a few drinks before it was time for the sheriff to return home and for Payton to retire to his motel.

One night as they were sitting at the bar, a local came in and told the sheriff that Crazy Joe wanted to see him. The sheriff didn't even turn around, he just said, "Tell the SOB to wait in the sheriff's office and I'll see him there." But the

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DATE	MAKE AND MODEL	CERTIFICATE NUMBER	ENGINE	FROM	TO			Class.	Class.	Hrs.	Min.	Hrs.	Min.	Hrs.	Min.	Hrs.	Min.	Hrs.	Min.	Hrs.	Min.	Hrs.	Min.	Hrs.	Min.	Hrs.	Min.
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5-28-48	"	79042	"	BUR-SFO	SEA-BUR																						
6-20-48	"	79077	"	BUR-MOD	RCL-SFO																						
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6-12-48	DC-3	79042	"	BUR	CRASHED @ Eloy																						
27-6-48	DC-3	57372	"	BUR-SFO	BUR																						

I hereby certify that the foregoing entries are true and correct.

Signed: John R. Dobson Pilot's Signature

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local replied, "You tell him sheriff, here he is!" The sheriff turned around and faced Crazy Joe who held a shotgun trained on him. Crazy Joe pulled the trigger and shot the sheriff in the chest, killing him. Payton, who was sitting right next to the sheriff, didn't get a pellet.

Crazy Joe then walked out in the street, sat down and started crying. He was remorseful and confused for he had been paid to perform this deed by some one who threatened him.

The deputy sheriff arrived on the scene and took him to jail, then called the sheriff's wife. Before doing anything else, the sheriff's wife called the FBI in Phoenix who sent local police and FBI Agents from both Phoenix and Tucson in order to block off the highway.

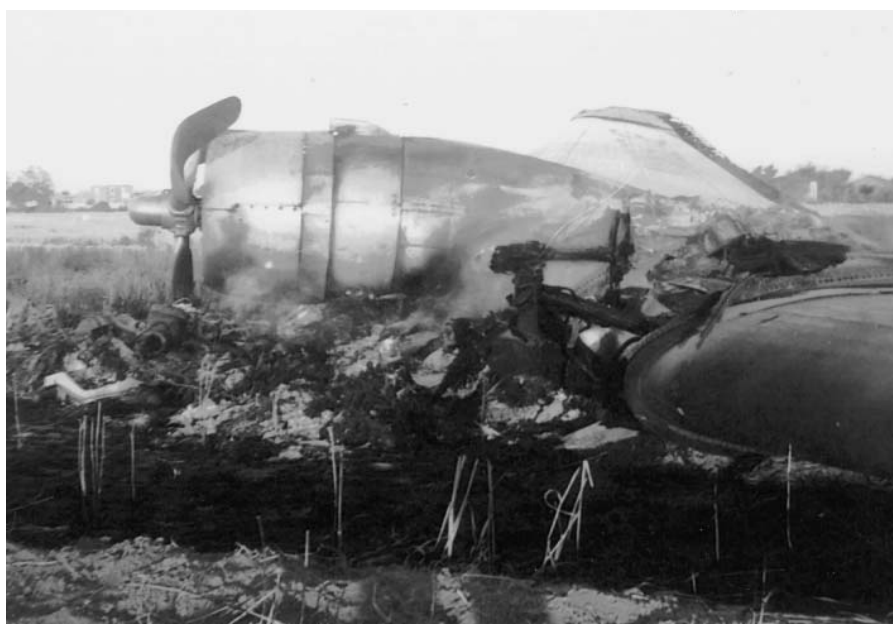
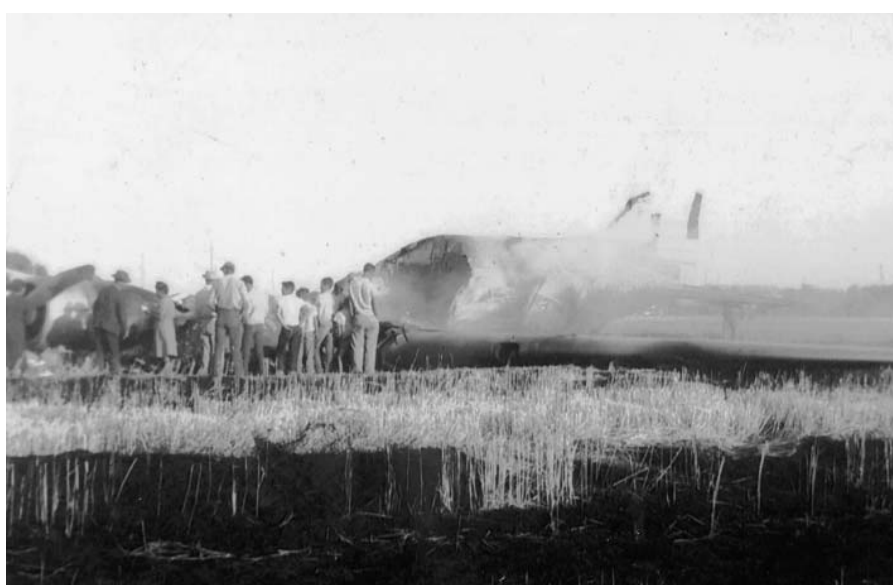
The sheriff's wife had known that her husband had been investigating a stranger in town who had been there for about a year, but never associated with any locals. This man would leave town periodically and then reappear, he never held a job and always had money. And to make the circumstances more suspicious, there was a bank holdup in the region each time this suspect left town. Unfortunately, the stranger found out that the sheriff was about to arrest him so he hired Crazy Joe to shoot the sheriff.

And, although Payton continued his search, he never did find my engine. For all I know, it is still buried in the desert between Eloy and Tucson. As for the outcome of the life of Crazy Joe and the bank robber, you will have to consult the crime annals of the little city of Eloy, Arizona.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John R. Dobson served four years in the USAF, achieving the rank of First Lieutenant. He was attached to the 429th Fighter Squadron, 474th Fighter Group of the Ninth Air Force, and flew 53 combat missions in P-38 aircraft from bases in France, Belgium and Germany. He was awarded the DFC and the Air Medal with silver oak leaf cluster. In addition, the 474th Fighter Group was awarded several citations for distinguished service from the governments of France and Belgium. His civilian flying began in 1947 when he started flying the UC-78 and DC-3 for Eagle Air Freight. He continued his flying career with the Flying Tiger Line, Inc., flying with them for over 32 years in the DC-3, DC-4, DC-6, DC-8, Constellation, 707, CL-44, and the 747. After retiring in 1982, he flew a DC-8 three years for Project Orbis, as a volunteer.



The wreckage of Eagle Airlines DC-3 at Eloy, Arizona, June 12, 1948. (Photos from author's collection)