

'THE PLANE THAT CHANGED THE WORLD' ON 'NOVA'

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Published: December 17, 1985

"THE PLANE THAT CHANGED THE WORLD" is a nice piece of work.

Watch it if your heart leaps at the sight of old airplanes, or even if you think of them as more than obsolescent machinery. The particular plane is the DC-3, which had its first test flight 50 years ago today. The "Nova" episode will be seen on Channel 13 at 9 o'clock tonight.

Until the DC-3, airline travel was an indulgence for the rich, and even few of them chose to try it. The fledgling airline industry was going broke. How could it attract enough passengers? Tri-motor planes couldn't quite do it. They were noisy and uncomfortable, and when Knute Rockne died in the crash of T.W.A Fokker, it gave tri-motors an even worse reputation than they already had.

Still, there was something comforting about the idea of three motors. If nothing else, the pilots liked them. Enter then Donald Douglas, who, 10 months after he signed the contract to do it, built a DC-1. Even with one of its two engines out, it could still fly over the Rockies.

The DC-1, however, held only 12 passengers. Mr. Douglas stretched out the fuselage, added two seats, and built the DC-2. T.W.A. bought 25. At 175 miles an hour, making only three stops, it could cross the continent in 18 hours. Shirley Temple was a passenger.

And then, of course, came the grandest plane of all, even if Mr. Douglas had to be coaxed into building it. The daytime version of the DC-3 carried 21 passengers; the sleeper variation made up into 14 berths at night. We get some wonderful old film here, most of it suggesting that air travel was a lot more fun than it is, say, on the Eastern shuttle today.

The program also presents some authentic airline pioneers, among them three former stewardesses, who were also required to be registered nurses. Glamorous as airline travel was in those days, they say, the hot meals were always the same: fried chicken, mashed potatoes and peas.

"The Plane That Changed the World" - ably produced, directed and written by Marty Ostrow - takes the DC-3 through World War II, when, slightly modified, it was known as the C-47. Mr. Ostrow might have expanded this part a little more. The DC-3, after all, was probably the only plane in the war that was flown by all the major combatants. The Russians and the Japanese had begun building them under license before the war began, and the Germans operated a fleet they captured in Europe.

Still, you can't have everything, and we do see some of the 1,000 or so DC-3's that are still flying, even though the last one was built in 1946. Meanwhile, mindful that it is a production for "Nova," a science series, "The Plane That Changed the World" also gives us a short, and entirely painless, course in aerodynamics. This is an imaginative hour of television.