THE FLYING ORTNER BROTHERS

BY TOM D.FRIEDMAN  
  
 EDITOR’s NOTE : Unfortunately , in the last issue our printers had a digital glitch while printing the concluding portion of Part One of “The Flying Ortner Brothers.” The story is correct to the end of page 50 is messed up. Commonly, with our magazines now being composed on computers, digital files and proofs for a new issue can leave Challenge in perfect condition and they can be expected to print that way. However, and for whatever reason, digital problems can occur and that is what happened to this story. We have started Part Two with the last paragraph on page 49 of the April issue which will, hopefully, put the story straight!

The year of 1961 was not entirely limited to “calls and hauls” of automobile parts. The Ortner Air Service’s reputation for getting the job done caught the attention of the biggest paying client of them all — the United States Government. The contract secured by the Ortners entailed hauling heavy construction vehicles, machinery, and spare parts to the US Air Force’s “Dew Line”(Distant Early Warning) project that was being built in conjunction with the Canadian government. The Dew Line was conceived, and initiated in 1954 by the Eisenhower administration for the construction of a sophisticated radar network to track any possible threat of attack by the Sovier Union. The network covered thousands of square miles of the most unforgiving terrain and temperatures.   
 The Ortner Air Service’s first destination for the US Government was Barter Island, Alaska, located on the northern coast. Barter Island is actually not an island, but is more like a sand spit that is totally isolated by water at certain times of the year. Aircraft landing were limited from May to September. The Ortner Air Service fit well into Us military plans for hauling vital cargo to Barter Island, even though the USAF had vast resources available in larger capacity cargo planes. However, the Ortner aircraft could get into strips which the USAF could not. Expedient resupply of crucial spare parts was a top priority for resupply of crucial spare parts was a top priority for the Dew Line project. Construction equipment had to be running continuously, 24 hours a day, and could not be shut down due to winter temperature lows of minus 90 degrees. If equipment was shut down, it could not be restarted, thus construction equipment and parts wore out constantly.  
 The Dew Line air freight hauls were the only trips planned in advance by the Ortners and their employees, because long range flight route had to be prements. The flight route had to be prepared with provisions for enough fuel, onboard supplies, and personal flight gear to protect the crew from the dangerous cold. The crew donned WWII surplus leather and fleece-lined flight jackets, pants, and boots. The Dew Line flights had to be orchestrated for safety and success, down to the most minute detail which included adding a shotgun to the flight gear inventory.

After departing Wakeman, the crew would fly to their first top of Northway, Alaska, and then to Whitehorse, Yukon, as their jump off point to Barter Island. After a night approach to Barter Island the cargo was off loaded and the crew would be billeted in the civilian construction crew barracks for a much-needed rest as the strain of the long high-altitude flight of nothing but boredom, engine noise, and cold more than took their toll. A restful sleep aboard the C-46 was impossible in those conditions. A rickety Army surplus cot crammed among the crates was the only form of relief. The Ortner Air Service made a total of only two flights to Barter Island for the US government.  
 While the Ortners were compensated for their services, they also made a significant, but obscure, contribution to national security as their two Dew Line flights helped keep the maintenance of the massive project on schedule. One Dew Line flight had an unusual detail that could not be ignored and had to be adhered to otherwise certain death would result. The US military conducted a huge air combat exercise that encompassed the entire North American airspace. The exercise, “Operation Sky Shield,” stipulated that all civilian air traffic was to be grounded for a two-hour period so the exercise could be conducted. It must have been quite a spectacular sight as the military practiced live aerial combat scenarios involving fighter interceptions, live missile attacks at drone targets, and ground to air missile attacks. It was vitally important during the Ortner’s Dew Line haul that they landed well in advance of the starting time of Operation Sky Shield. The crew landed at Ketchikan, Alaska, 20 minutes before the mandatory grounding. There, they waited until the mock battle concluded and then continued to Barter Island. The Ortner Air Service would again make themselves available for another important government contract not long after the two Barter Islandhauls.

Thanksgiving Day, 23 November 1963, was hardly a holiday. President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. The mood for American citizenry and its government was somber and, of course, confusion and panic were epidemic. Thanksgiving was even more unusual for the Ortner brothers as well as for Tom Sawyer. The government needed Ortner Air Service’s hard flying and solid work ethic again, but this time during a period of crisis proportions. The service was needed to fly to the east coast to pick up a load of communications equipment for the “LBJ Project” — a quickly implemented plan conceived by the new president which coordinated by the new president which coordinated the establishment of an organized chain of command through electronics for government officials and high-ranking military officers to communicate with President Johnson who was flown to his ranch near Austin, Texas. It was his ranch near Austin, Texas. It was Johnson’s plan to coordinate the nation’s fairs from that location until the chaos created by the assassination subsided.

The flight plan for the LBJ Project required the Ortner crew to depart Wakeman for Newark, New Jersey, and pick up the radio components and then proceed to Dallas where the vital cargo was off loaded and trucked to President Johnson’s ”Texas White House.” This freight contract was of the highest priority to the government, but to the Ortner brothers and Tom Sawyer it was all in a day’s work — just another haul.

By 1969, it became evident that still larger capacity aircraft were needed to bolster the hard-working fleet of airplanes. Andy and Dean’s realization of this fact couldn’t have been more timely since many US airlines were beginning to phasing out the majority of their 1950s four-engined propliners in favor of jets. The Ortner brothers would purchase four Douglas DC-7s in 1969. By 1971, that number would grow to seven — not including a lone DC-6 which had a significant history. DC-6B construction number 42866, registered N37501, was the first operational DC-6B off the Douglas assembly line. The aircraft was delivered to United Airlines as Mainliner Bonneville on 24 November 1946.

The purchase of the Douglas aircraft, coupled with the existing Curtiss C-46s, would make Ortner one of the larger nonscheduled operators. Andy and Dean’s company was now at its zenith. Regardless of all the cargo aircraft at their disposal, and aside from all the auto part hauls, the Dew Line, and the LBJ project, the Ortner brothers had many more hauls of a unique nature, with a diverse variety of cargo — from hives of honey bees flown to northwest Canada, to denim cloth that had to be flown to Puerto Rico to make trousers and then flown back to the United States, to race horses, to the unbelievable quantity of 30000 live turkey chicks.

The turkey chick flight is noteworthy due to its success of the perishable cargo being delivered, and to the modification of the C-46, to satisfy another paying customer. The Ortners were hired to haul customer. The Ortners were hired to haul the turkey chicks from New England to the Nelson Rockefeller ranch in Arkansas. With a little foresight and first-class jury-rigging, Ortner chief mechanic Tom Sawyer designed a temporary ventilation system by cutting inlets into the fuselage of the C-46 for ducting fresh air in and expelling hot air out, as the live poultry generated high body heat. The turkey chicks were loaded aboard 30 minutes prior to departure. In flight, the crew watched the turkey chicks for the duration while regulating the air flow via the ad hoc ventilation system. Being originally farm boys, the flight crew knew if the turkey chicks were cold, as they would huddle together. If they were too warm, they would spread their wings. On arrival at the Rockefeller ranch it was found that under ten of the turkey chicks had died. The contractor must have been ecstatic.

In contrast to the rest of Wakeman, the Ortner Air Service was a large venture for its game. To give perspective to the size of the operation, mention must be made concerning the roster of mechanics on the payroll from 1970 to 1972. There were 34 active employees, not counting the Ortner brothers. The mechanics were split in two shifts of 17 men, with the airport running on a 24-hour basis. Much of the work was performed outdoors in all weather conditions. The additional mechanics were added after all of the Douglas aircraft joined the inventory. It should be noted that maintenance was supervised by the Ortners with a good deal of the work involving physical modifications to the interior of many of the planes to suit the need for what ever cargo was being flown. However, the majority of the work involved basic to major engine repair, and replacement of airframe components.

The Ortner Air Service even managed to alleviate the pressure from their competition! Zantop Air Transport, based in Detroit, had a scheduled air freight service. When they had a full hauling itinerary, with no aircraft available to handle the overflow, they would contact the Ortners. The arrangement proved to be mutually beneficial to both companies.

Spur of the moment hauling contracts, daily administration , paper work, aircraft repair , and maintenance — these were the daily details that could not be ignored to run a successful, profitable business. Andy and Dean also found the motivation to plan, coordinate, and promote airshows within Ohio and its neighboring states. Making money was a factor in doing the air shows, but with the pressure of daily business operations “blowing off steam” was probably the real motive. The idea of doing an airshow came from Dean and the first airshow was held in September of 1963 at the air service headquarters. With prior promotion of the scheduled event using just posters and flyers, it was becoming questionable by late morning if any spectators were going to show up. Eventually they did, and in overwhelming numbers. The spectators seemed to converge on the airport all at once with the entry charge being $1 a head per car load. The gate keepers resorted to putting the proceeds in cardboard boxes. By performance time, there were over 5000 people in attendance and they got lots of entertainment with the sow lasting until dark. The stars of the routines out of instinct and intimate knowledge of each other’s flying capabilities. Some routines were smoke trail formation flying, aerobatics, and “paper cutting” (flying through unraveling rolls of airborne toilet tissue to see how many times the pilot could cut it with his propeller). A number of acts were performed close to the ground using Taylorcrafts of Piper Cubs, such as flour sack bombing. Another low-altitude act, the car-to-plane transfer, proved to be so hazardous of a show were the aircraft themselves with the headliner being Dean Ortner’s WWII P-51D Mustang. But, the majority of the aerial stunts were done by the North American T-6. The airshow routines were delightful and filled with adrenaline charged suspense.

While the various acts and events were planned in advance, there were no actual rehearsals. The pilots just went up and did the show, improvising where they could. They coordinated stunt that it was eventually dropped from the show for fear the rope ladder would become entangled with the moving car, thus pulling the aircraft and the stunt man on the ladder into the ground, with catastrophic results. Another act that drew big laughs almost 40 years ago, although quite humorous in its nature, would be deemed as offensive by today’s politically correct standards. The drunk flying farmer act was a perennial favorite among the audience with the pilot flying in a reckless and erratic manner. So much for the humor four decades ago, but it was innocent at that time. Airplane rides were offered in the Waco UPF-7 with Tom Sawyer at the controls for one dollar per person. No signing of waivers, no attorneys, or liabilities involved — life was much less complicated than it is today.

As the years progressed, so did the Ortner reputation for quality airshow entertainment. The Dean Ortner Airshow branched out through Indiana and Pennsylvania. Dean’s airshow also attracted complementary acts, attractions, and celebrities such as Geraldine (Jerrie) Mock who set a record for women’s aviation by flying solo around the world in her Cessna 180 Spirit of Columbus. Over the journey, Mock set seven world records. She also captured a speed record for a light single-engined aircraft in 1965.

Dean Ortner’s airshow maintained a following with airshow fans by keeping the shows fresh with new routines while refining old ones. Dean even managed to purchase a Goodyear FG-1D Corsair (BuNo 92014/N1978M) and used it to headline the show on a number of occasions. Dean eventually traded the FG-1 to the US Marine Corps Museum for a Vought F4U-7 Corsair (BuNo 137714/N33714) as the Goodyear variant was high on the museum’s wish list.

The arrival of the 1970s also brought tragedy for the Ortner family and their business. In 1973, Dean was killed while performing an aerial stunt at a show in Shelby, Ohio. He was at the controls of a T-6 when crashed during a low-altitude maneuver. With his brother now gone Andy ran the company alone The year 1973 also brought the Arab oil embargo and US energy crisis. This dilemma caught the United States totally unprepared for the turmoil of a disrupted supply of petroleum. Whatever petroleum that existed was at a premium price. The energy crisis paralyzed much of the US economy and hit the aviation industry with devastating results. Many independent air freight services could not keep their fuel thirsty aircraft operating at a profit. Many Ortner air freight contemporaries would not survive.

Despite the economic adversity, Ortner Air Service managed to survive, but only through prudent downsizing and cutting overhead. The Ortner “niche” of unscheduled air freighting kept them in business after much of the competition had perished. Andy fell back on the fleet of Beech 18s more often, as they proved to be more cost affective to operate and he only resorted to using the larger aircraft when necessary. Smaller contracts meant smaller income and many larger aircraft languished in disrepair. The struggle for the business’s survival would become status quo into 1976, only coming to an end after Andy crashed to his death on final approach during a haul to Memphis, Tennessee. An investigation of the Beech 18 wreckage revealed the cause was due to major fabric loss on the tail surfaces.

With both principals of the business now gone the company was dissolved and the assets, chiefly the aircraft, were either cut up for scrap or sold intact. The airport lay dormant and deteriorating until 1981, when it was purchased by its current owner.

As for the surviving aircraft that did not see the cutter’s acetylene torch most, overtime, found ignominious endings. The majority of the surviving DC-7s were sold and operated with other corporate owners across the United States, being bought and sold many times before finally resting in typical derelict condition in South America. However, one DC-7, c/n 44924, was purchased by aircraft collector Walter Soplata of Newbury, Ohio, in 1982, while DC-7 c/n 45207 claimed its final resting place in Bombay, India. The honor of having the most unusual ending of any Ortner aircraft is bestowed upon DC-7 c/n 45203 which was shot down by a missile while on a locust spraying mission in the Western Sahara Desert during 1988. DC-7 c/n 44921 is in use with TBM.

As to the fate of the Curtiss C-46s, they followed an almost identical route as the DC7-s. Luckily two examples did manage to be restored to their WWII splendor by the Confederate (now Commemorative) Air Force, these C-46 aircraft are serial numbers 44-78774, and 44-78663. The Ortner Air Service was truly an end to American “grass roots” aviation .

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