

WE took off early that morning, just as the first hint of a tropical day pierced the African gloom south of Angola. It was a day without omen.

Having cleared the ragged row of makalani palms at the southern end of Ondangwa Airport in Ovamboland, the left wing of our old Dakota dipped and we swung to port.

The "Rum Run" — delivery of supplies, to the uninitiated — had never been a favorite chore, especially not when we were required to hug the deck all the way to our destination at an average height of about 50 feet. Sometimes a little lower. Never higher.

Too many C-47s, I knew, had returned to base with holes in their fuselages, usually made by AK-toting SWAPO terrorists intent on claiming the distinction of being the first to have shot down an operational "Dak." In the past they had tried and, from what I gathered, hard! But they hadn't succeeded — yet.

It wasn't the prospect of being shot at that bothered me most; all on board were conscious enough of that possibility. Rather, what worried me was the fact that we would go into at least two extremely short bush strips and take off again — with maximum weight.

One of these primitive airfields — so we had been cautiously advised before we left Ondangwa — had been "blessed" that bright morning with a crosswind of about 20 knots. That was hairy. But supplies were needed and we had to go in.

Our pilot, Major Dries Pienaar, had earlier calculated the load factor carefully while we drank our coffee in the ready room. Even with only 400 gallons of fuel, he told us, we were allowed to lift off with just less than 7,000 pounds of cargo, myself included. Under normal circumstances these margins were reasonable, but with the crosswind. . . It didn't seem to bother the major unduly.

We weren't shot at that day. Nor did we plough into one of the huge camelthorn trees which speckle the horizon of so much of this primeval territory south of Angola where conflict rages. We did, however, contribute substantially to my innate fear of flying, which had been involuntarily nurtured during a quarter century of covering the African news beat, often in aircraft you couldn't sell as scrap in some of the more developed corners of the globe.

Travelling that day over what seemed to me to be about half the distance across Africa — so close to the ground that there were times when you could almost reach out and touch the mopani trees below — was hardly a means of inspiring confidence. Even if Major Dries was the skipper.

Nor were my fears stilled by earlier reports of one of these aging "Gooney Birds" having gone down onto a bush strip a couple of months before: Apparently the runway proved too short for the aircraft and the Dak hit a tree which tore off about a yard of wing tip. Undaunted, the flight engineer responsible for keeping the old bird flying simply trimmed off the rough edges and

SOF AVIATION

GOONEY BIRDS

Venerable C-47s — Third World Mainstay

Text & Photos by Al J. Venter

bound up the splintered tip with masking tape. The plane took off and, contrary to all expectations, completed the assignment.

Having become a latter-day legend in almost every far-flung corner of the world, the Douglas C-47 Dakota — sometimes called "Methuselah with Wings" — is used extensively in support and supply roles by several African air forces in the operational areas adjacent to the Angolan, Mozambican, Zimbabwean and Zambian borders. For years these old craft have ferried men and equipment into some of the remotest postings on God's earth.

In reality, the South African Air Force remains one of the international community's largest C-47 operators, mainly because the United Nations-imposed arms embargo has prevented that country from obtaining more modern military transport planes in quantities which would make it economically feasible.

It has long been argued by those who fly

these machines that the only replacement for a Gooney Bird is another Gooney Bird. The South Africans have proved it. At the present time that country must have several dozen of these craft in operation at the southern tip of Africa. And rumor has it that there are dozens more in Air Force reserve.

That one African nation isn't alone in its fancy. Some European enthusiasts have also entered the scene. Scheduled for inauguration later this year is a regular run between London and North Africa for *aficionados* of "Old Fatso." There has been no shortage of takers for seats, either, even if the price is \$1,000 a head for a package holiday.

Regarded more as a sentimental journey than much else, the trip out will take three days. It will allow old Dak hands a leisurely chance to get thoroughly reacquainted with a member of this elite breed. For many of them, it will be a trip down memory lane.

A few of those old greybeards who take advantage of this new opportunity will recall CBS radio news correspondent Charles Collingwood enthusing on that awesome morning, 6 June 1944: "The sky is darkened with swarms of cargo planes and the roar of their motors is like the thunder of the war gods."

There were over a thousand of these aircraft in the air en route to Hitler's Europe. In

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TOP: South African Air Force flies several dozen of these aging DC-3 Dakotas operationally and internally. Cape Town makes a picturesque background.

ABOVE: Paratroops onboard a Dak prepare for a jump. Gooney Bird remains one of the favorite aircraft used by skydivers.

RIGHT CENTER: Looking out from a Dak gunship from Rhodesian war period. These were used on numerous occasions to counter menace from the ground against fixed-wing aircraft.

the first 50 hours of the European invasion they ferried across more than 20,000 airborne troops and every item of their equipment.

For the Gooneys, it was certainly a fine and momentous hour. Many of the planes that took part in that airlift are still flying. One of them, until recently bedecked in the colors of the Rhodesian Air Force, took part in the aborted paratroop drop on the Dutch city of Arnhem. I am told it is still flying.

The Dakota had its origins in an uncertain period before World War II.

The first Douglas Commercial — the DC-1 — was a controversial product of a small amount of money and a tiny rented

room behind a Los Angeles barber shop. It never got beyond the prototype.

Its successor was designed in 1934 but was found by its backers to be seriously underpowered. Nevertheless, its potential was spotted by the head of a large airline company, William Littlewood of American Airlines. He proposed that the Dak should be adapted for commercial service.

The successor design was made wider and fitted with bigger engines. The first DC-3 — with the serial number DST14988 — made its maiden flight seven days before Christmas 1935. Six months later, a non-stop service between Chicago and New York had been inaugurated, complete with sleepers and meal service en route.

World War II put this reliable old lady with few vices into uniform.

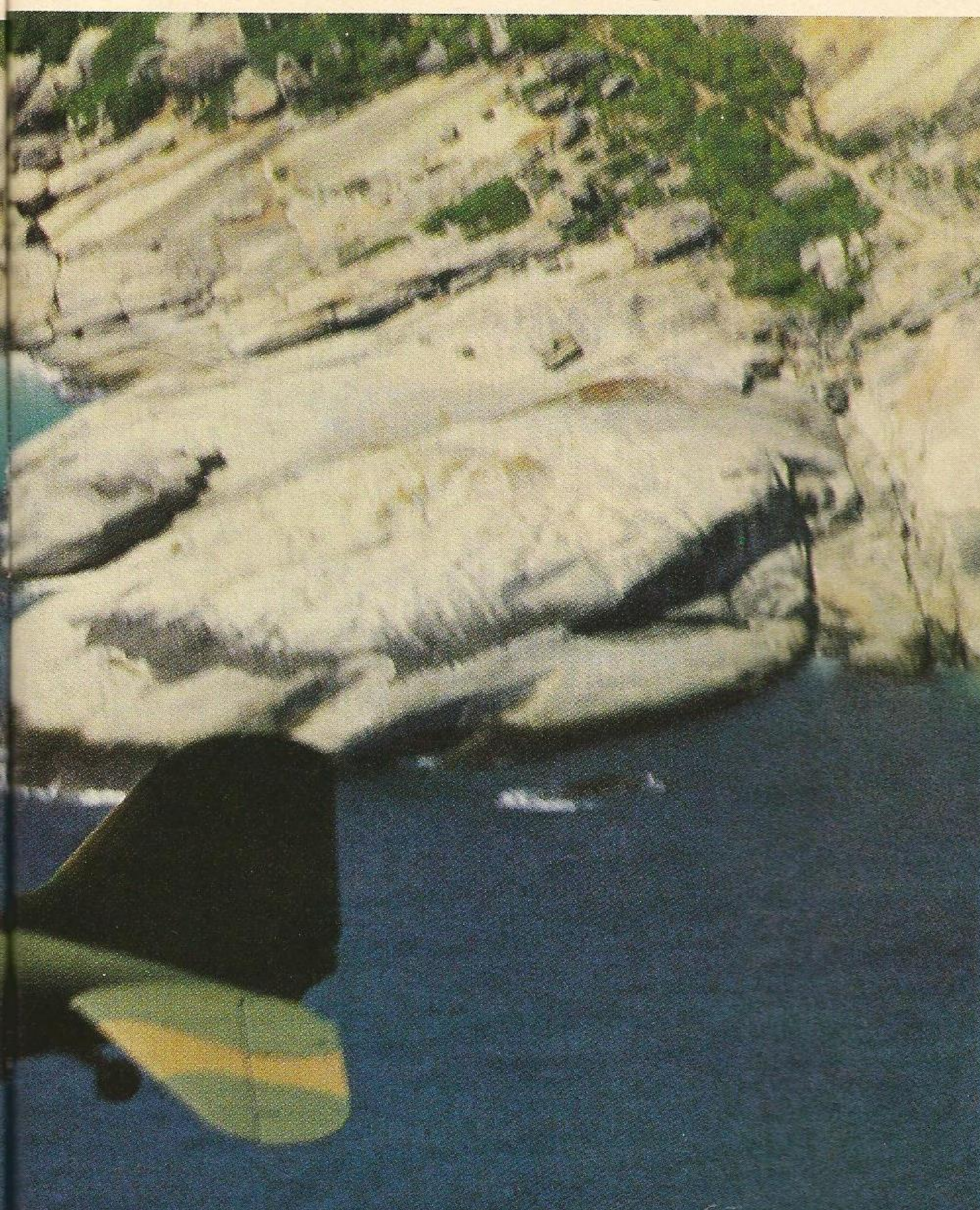
In the past half century, tens of thousands of these aircraft have been built. So many, in fact, that though they were adopted by most civilian airlines of the world after hostilities ceased, Douglas was never again obliged to open production lines. There were enough spares around internationally to cope with demand.

Others built them, too. The Russians constructed more than 2,000 under license with American aid and called them the Lisunov Li-2. So did the Japanese; they built almost 500 which flew under the emblem of the



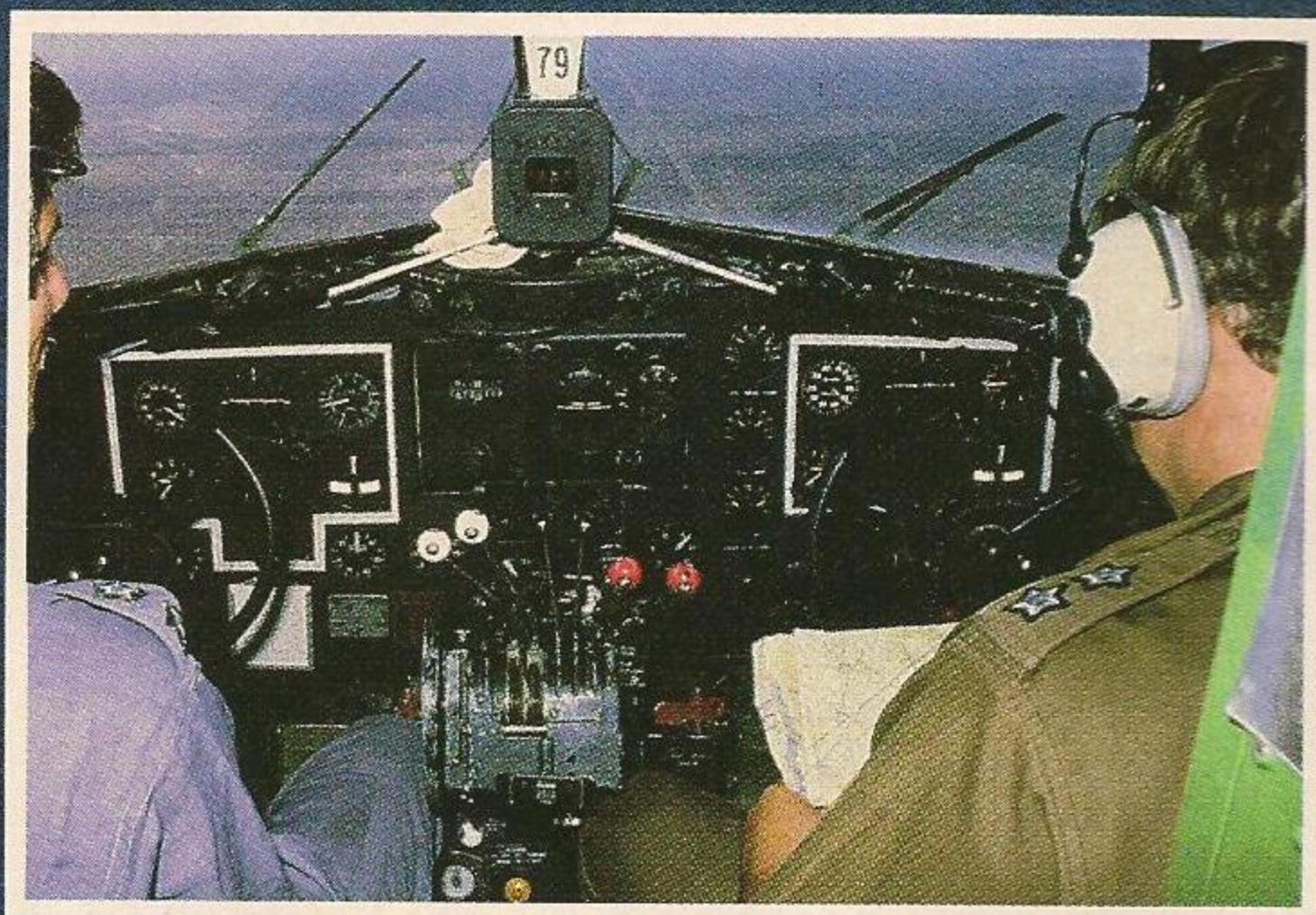
ABOVE: When a Dakota's engine won't start on its own power, you wind it up and pull it into activity with a tractor. This procedure, photographed at Ondangwa Airport, was a daily occurrence with one of the recalcitrant old girls.





ABOVE: Camouflaged South African DC-3 Dakota flies above the Atlantic coastline.

BELOW: Aircrew pilots a Dakota over the Kaokoveld desert area.



Rising Sun, though Americans always differentiated between their own Gooney Bird and the Japanese "Tabby."

Vietnam saw a re-emergence of the old girl in a new guise. Fitted with rapid-firing Gatling guns, "Puff the Magic Dragon," at the request of ground forces, routinely pounded away at enemy targets with saturation fire that certainly killed tens of thousands of Viet Cong. There is no doubt that the Dak brought comfort to many an isolated GI outpost in the heart of "Goon" country.

Perhaps the best-remembered story about the old piston-engine freighter also emanated from Asia — but in another war which had taken place a generation earlier, the Japanese war with China.

Early in 1941, a Dakota on a flight between Hong Kong and Chungking on the mainland was forced down in a field on the way into the interior. Repair work went on around the clock, but suddenly the area was strafed by Jap fighters; when it was over, the Dak had been peppered with bullets and one of the wings completely shattered by gunfire.

Time was vital. Having been spotted, it was only a question of waiting for the Japanese to return.

Radioing back to base, the pilot called urgently for spares. Nothing for the DC-3, he was told, but there was a derelict DC-2 wing. It might just work — even though it was a good 10 feet shorter than the original asked for.

The drop was made. The DC-2 wing was carefully bolted to the fuselage, the holes were patched, and the lumbering monster took off on a flight that took it over the mountains to Kiunchuan.

That hybrid aircraft, astonishingly, is officially recorded as a DC-2½ in the record books.

A year later another notable event took place. This time the celebrated Colonel (later General) James Doolittle found himself stranded in China with the Japanese immediately on his heels. For months, he had been bombing Japanese targets with his B-25 Mitchell bombers and, had he been caught, Tokyo certainly would have "rewarded" him appropriately.

Stuck on an airfield with a single operational Dakota — which normally carries 21 passengers — Colonel Doolittle was faced with the problem of getting 74 people away from the imminent threat of internment and possible execution. He compromised.

First, the side arms of all seats on the aircraft were removed. This allowed three adults to sit in a double seat, making space for 28 persons. Another 22 passengers — mostly Indians — then sat in the laps of the seated passengers. Another ten rode in cargo spaces, six in the forward mail compartment and four in the cargo bin. That left 14 others standing in the aisles.

Incredibly, the plane flew. Not very far, but far enough to take the refugees to safety — and for the exploits of another Dakota to attain immortality. ✕