

American Airlines Stinson
Copyright by
© Captain Carl Jordan
<captcarl@sunline.net>
Feb 23, 1997 - Page 1 of 5
Printed here with permission

Let me start out by saying that my dad learned to fly in 1927. He began to fly with the Army Air Corps Reserve in 1931. He started with American Airlines in 1935, and retired 33 years later in 1968. I learned to fly in 1949. Subsequently did a stint in the US Air Force during the Korean War. Wound-up being a 20-year-old all-weather, jet fighter interceptor pilot. I started with United Airlines (Capital) in 1956, flying co-pilot on the DC-3. I "officially" retired in 1993. (I say "officially" because the Age-60 thing hasn't run its full course yet. "Old" geezers like me are still hopeful that 65 or 70 will eventually be recognized as mandatory retirement age.)

My daughter is a third-generation airline captain (type-rated in A-320 & B-737), and still has a long run ahead of her before bumping into the mandatory retirement age...whatever it might happen to be when she finally gets there. If any of my grand kids (seven of them...for now) decide to get into the airline game, they'll be fourth-generation.

With regard to Stinsons and American Airlines, there are two interesting points. First, when my dad started with American in 1935, he flew Curtiss Condors and STINSON TRIMOTORS. Like the Curtiss Condor, the Stinson Trimotor was a fabric-covered bird, and wasn't covered with "corrugated tin" like the Ford Trimotor. The Ford Trimotor is rather well-known. However, not too many people realize that STINSON also made a trimotor airliner. I'm sure the gang in your club are aware of the Stinson Trimotor, however.

Second, in the late 1930's and early 1940's, American revamped its airline and utilized nothing but DC-3's. I remember Dad telling me that the DC-3 was the "ultimate" airliner. At the time, he couldn't envision that ANYTHING could ever replace that "marvelous" piece of technology. He soon changed his tune...naturally.

Back in those days, all captains had to be "route qualified." They were required to fly a "route check" where they had to fly from each airport to the other along, for instance, American's Chicago to New York route. They would have to do so entirely by visual reference. (No fair using the "dit-dah, dah-dit" radio range!) They would be tested on such things as, "What's the name of THAT town, over there?" "What's the name of THAT lake down there?" "What's the HIGHEST OBSTRUCTION between us and our next destination airport?" "Where's the CLOSEST AVAILABLE AIRPORT right now?" And, stuff like that. When he taught me to fly, Dad made me abide by the same drill. In retrospect, it was all good stuff!

(I can tell you, with some authority, that there are VERY FEW, if any, airline captains today who could pass such a route check. Today, all such matters are taken care of by "whiz-bang" black boxes and electronic wizardry. And, EVERYTHING is operated according to IFR flight rules.)

In addition, those old American Airlines pilots would have to demonstrate their ability to make "dit-dah and dah-dit" range approaches into various airports along the way...even those which weren't served by the airline.

naturally, it wasn't practical for American to remove a DC-3 from line service just so a couple of pilots could fly around over various routes and into various airports, to fill squares on the "route check" form.

So, American bought a STINSON RELIANT which was used for this purpose. Image at right is of the American Stinson Reliant SR-10E, NC21127.



I remember that it was blue. I also remember that it did have that American Airlines, orange "lightning bolt" stripe down the sides of the fuselage, just like their airliners. It also had the orange leading edges painted on the wings, just like the DC-3's. And, like the DC-3's, it had "AA" painted on the top of one wing, and on the bottom of the other. It also had the old, American Airlines eagle on each side of the fuselage. (Not the modern-day, "jet-age" version of same.)

That Reliant got a lot of use. I can remember seeing it, quite often, as it would fly in and out of Chicago Municipal Airport (later to become Chicago MIDWAY Airport.)

Years later, dad bought a Stinson Voyager. He wanted to teach me to fly, and he had two reasons for picking a bird manufactured by Stinson. One was that Stinson had a reputation of building a "rugged" airplane. Dad had witnessed the growth of Stinsons through the years, and, no doubt, knew what he was talking about in this regard. The second reason was the unexpected and added benefit of those built-in slots on each wing. When dad learned that this made the Stinson spin-proof, that sealed the deal.

When I soloed, and also when I got my Private License, my "tickets" were endorsed with a statement which said, "Valid for spin-proof airplanes only." As I recall, that meant I could fly as PIC in either the Stinson or an "Urp-cup" (Ercoupe). These are the only spin-proof airplanes that I can now recall from that era. To get that endorsement removed, I finally went out in an "Air Knocker" (Aeronca) and did some spins.

Anyway, when Dad got that Stinson Voyager (NC 8732-K), he fell into the same trap that most airline pilots fall into when flying light aircraft. We get so used to using our company's call-sign on the radio, that we instinctively do so when flying light airplanes. Instead of saying, "STINSON 32-King" on the radio, he would always inadvertently say, "AMERICAN 32-King."



Stinson 108-1 NC8732K - note wheel "Fenders"

Of course, we usually flew out of uncontrolled grass airports, so this problem didn't come-up very often. (Yes, they were mostly grass, in those days.) The only time we would use the radio would be to fly into Midway (there was no O'Hare Airport back then), or into Bendix Field, in South Bend. Both were stops on American's routes, so whenever Dad got into either of those familiar environments, he would instinctively revert to utilizing the "American" call-sign. (Years later, I would have the same problem and would say

"United" instead of "Cessna," whenever I'd rent a bird from the local FBO. It's a bit embarrassing, at first. But, the guys in the tower quickly catch-on to the fact that they've got an "airline guy" out there. They make allowances, accordingly.)

Dad would then correct himself, and emphasize "STINSON!" in his next transmission. But, as soon as he'd switch over to ground control, he'd revert back to "American" again, albeit only momentarily.

Finally, he gave up. He'd just and call himself "American 32-K" during the entire transition episode at Midway Airport, or wherever.

Most of the time, when we would fly into Midway, he would do so for the purpose of stopping by to "check his mailbox." But, most likely, it was for the purpose of seeing if a pretty stewardess might want to go for a ride in the Stinson. To do so, he'd pull-up to American's hanger, and snuggle-up the Stinson behind or next to whatever birds American might happen to have parked on the ramp.

Seeing this, the guys in the tower thought that maybe the "American" call-sign was legitimate. Then, one of the "old-timers" in the tower remembered the Stinson Reliant that American used to own. So, over the radio, he mentioned the Reliant, and questioned Dad if we might be actually be a new Stinson that American had once again acquired.

To my amazement, Dad replied, "Affirmative."

Then, he said to me, gleefully, "Now they won't bother me anymore about forgetting to say "Stinson" as part of our radio call-sign."

And, he was right, they never did. From then on, we were "American 32-King;" even when I flew solo in-and-out of Midway.

Back then, the Feds didn't have all the dumb rules that they've put into place these days. As a solo pilot, I could fly wherever I wanted. I used to go from Chicago to South Bend, regularly, just to visit my grandparents. What the heck, I couldn't use the family car to do so. Dad wouldn't let me get a driver's license! At age 16, it was okay for me to fly anyplace I wanted, but he wouldn't allow me to drive! "Too many jerks on the road!" he would say.

When I finally did get my driver's license, Dad would occasionally acquiesce, and allow me use the family car. I'd be allowed to do so when he would fly off on one of his two-day trips. We'd drive out to "home base," Rubinkam Airport (a sod airport that's now covered with homes and interstate highways), and spend the morning flying around. Then, I'd fly him over to Midway, so he could get into his DC-6 and "haul the airmail." This would be sometime in late 1949, or early 1950. Then, I'd fly back to Rubinkam and spend the day having fun. That night, I could use the car. Wow!

The next day, I'd drive out to Rubinkam and fly some more. When it was about time for Dad's trip to arrive, I'd fly over to Midway to pick him up.

One day, Dad was flying a DC-6, and we both got to Midway at the same time. The tower assigned me 22-L, and assigned Dad to 22-R. I immediately called-in and said, "Tower, 32-King will take the right one...let American Fourteen (or whatever his flight number was) have the long runway."

The tower said, "Okay, 32-King, you're cleared to land on 22-Right. American Fourteen, you're cleared to land on 22-Left."

Dad answered with, "Thanks, Junior."

I said, "You're welcome, Pop."

The tower said, "My gosh, is that father and son out there??"

Dad said, "Yep! That's my boy!"

The tower said, "Well, how about that!"

Some TWA guy waiting for takeoff in a Connie chirped in and said, "Well, you brought him up properly. He at least knows enough to give the old man the long runway! Now, let's see who can make the best landing!"

Back then, I guess there just weren't that many father-and-son teams who simultaneously flew into Midway Airport. Everyone seemed to be duly impressed.

After landing (I won't say who made the best), the tower just said, "American 32-King, you're cleared to the American hanger line. American Fourteen, you're cleared to the gate."

See, they just KNEW that I was flying an "American Airlines Stinson." They also automatically sent me to the American Airlines hanger.

I don't know if Dad ever set them straight...or not.

Anyway, that's a long-winded way of connecting American Airlines and Stinsons. Just thought you might be interested.

© Carl B. Jordan - Sunny SW Florida
<captcarl@sunline.net>

I am advised to assert my copyright on this story. If you want to print it in your newsletter, you are hereby granted permission to do so. But, it's probably too lengthy. Let me know either way, okay?