

# Dooley is Down!

by Rand K Peck

'The four engines were purring a heavy song. There was not even a rough magneto. The compass course was the same—hadn't varied a degree. Frank was seeing to that. Good boy, Frank [Dooley thought]. He'd make a good captain some day. But the wind, the damn wind. What was it doing? Where was it coming from—for certain? Yet it would be impossible to miss the continent of North America and fly this course. And Chapel Inlet? Why in hell couldn't the range be heard? Dooley flipped off the landing lights'.—

*Island in the Sky,*

by Ernest K Gann (1944)

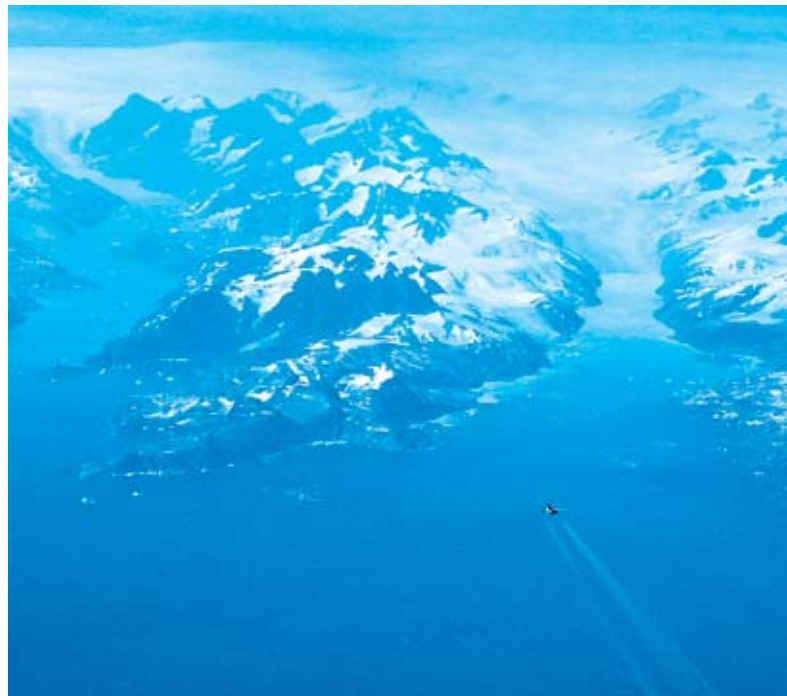
High over the east coast of Greenland, at 65°N, 39°W, a dense cloud mass influenced by a strong northwesterly upper airflow dissipates and reveals the most wondrous sight of my long flying career. Unlike Captain Dooley's four Pratt & Whitney R-2000s, my two Pratt & Whitney PW2037 turbofans sing far from my ears. But not from my thoughts.

Stretched out below, far beyond my horizons, there is rugged, blue-and-white solitude of seemingly infinite proportions. Tall coastal mountains, massive continental ice sheets, and an endless stream of jagged icebergs—broken ice rubble, really, that litters the far North Atlantic. Travelling at 80% of the speed of sound, the view is brief, but breathtaking nonetheless. I've summoned my cabin crew forward to share this visual delight, and watch their awestruck reactions. It's easy to understand how Dooley, or anyone for that matter, could have become lost out here in search of Blueie West-1 or Blueie East-2—remote ice-covered airstrips hidden at the end of formidable fiords.

Cruising at FL350 (35,000ft), enjoying coffee, a hot crew meal, and this magnificent vista, I'm standing on the shoulders of airline pilots who pioneered this route before me in 1942, as part of the hastily formed Air Transport Command. Today, from the comfort and security of my modern 'glass cockpit', pilots like Gann, Anderson, Lord, and Mudge—to name only a few—would probably revel in what lay below. But in heavily laden Douglas C-47s (DC-3s) or C-54s (DC-4s), continually shedding ice from their propellers, transporting desperately needed supplies to a war-ravaged Europe, this was risky flying.

Ernie Gann's character Dooley, who relied on celestial navigation, faint signals from distant, sporadic commercial radio stations, dead-reckoning and incomplete weather reports to momentarily fix his position over the globe, never experienced a relaxing moment aloft. Dubhe, Arcturus, and Sirius—the brightest stars over Greenland when visible through cloud layers—played a vital rôle in navigation through this vastness. Today though, with ADIRS (Air Data Inertial Reference System), FMCs (Flight Management Computers), LNAV (Lateral Navigation), satellite communications with faraway dispatchers, and reliable jet engines, I can safely enjoy this breathtaking panorama beneath my wings.

But not all has changed in this spectacular yet hostile northern oceanic environment just south of the Arctic Circle. Like Dooley, however, I have concerns lurking in the dark recesses of my brain, masked from others. Matters that few captains voice but reflect upon often. In our modern, save-every-dollar, ETOPS (Extended Range Operations) world, engine failures—though rare—require procedures that I hope never to practice. Navigating to a far-flung alternate airport that I've never seen, as many as four hours distant on one engine at midnight over the North Atlantic, is a less-than-pleasant proposition. So even though we've travelled far from Capt Dooley and his courageous contemporaries, some things—like the human thought process—simply never change. ➔



ALL PHOTOS: RAND PECK

*All photos were taken from the comfort of the cockpit of a Boeing 757-251 (W), just 1.5° south of the Arctic Circle in the Northern Temperate Zone, en route from Düsseldorf, Germany, to Detroit, Michigan.*