



George Dijeau sits behind the controls of a DC-4 during one of his stints as a commercial pilot.

# 14,000 hours and counting: 95-year-old pilot still flying

By Donna Melton

“That’s when I said my little prayer, ‘God help me.’ All four of us got out without a scratch,” he said.

Dijeau and the crew drifted five miles away from the sinking plane, floating more than six hours before being rescued.

**C**ivil Air Patrol Col. George Dijeau appreciates the valor of C.B. Sullenburger, the US Airways pilot who heroically ditched his Airbus 320 in the Hudson River, saving all 155 passengers and crew.

“I’d like to shake his hand,” Dijeau said. Just like Sully Sullenburger, Dijeau kept his cool during a crash landing on water.

An engine fire forced Dijeau to land a DC-4 in the Pacific on his way from Oakland, Calif., to Honolulu.

It was 3:30 the morning of March 27, 1953, as Dijeau sailed the California Eastern cargo jet through three layers of clouds at a near stall, waiting to feel the first wave hit the tail of the plane so he could lower the nose. Two engines were out on the right side, and he was descending at 100 feet a minute.

## PILOT PUTS ON THE CAP UNIFORM AGAIN

That’s just one of many stories the Fremont, Calif., man can recall from his 14,000 hours in the air. At 94, he passed his physical to maintain his FAA license. He regularly takes his wife, Harriet, and another pilot friend to Napa Valley for lunch in a Cessna 172.

Dijeau is also active with Amelia Earhart Senior Squadron 188 at Oakland International Airport, where he was honored last year with



This is a copy of one of Dijeau’s first Civil Air Patrol identification cards.

his eagle insignia, making him a full colonel.

“It sure feels good to be back in the CAP uniform,” he said.

It was some 74 years ago that Dijeau, a 21-year-old journeyman electrician, and his first wife paid for a plane ride to see the Treasure Island Fair Grounds from the air.

“I got the bug then, and the next week we started flying,” he said. He got his private license in 1939.

He was president of the Civil Air Reserve, meeting in a hotel in Alameda, Calif., when he learned about the new Civil Air Patrol and joined.

Just before the Pearl Harbor bombing, Dijeau trained at Bishop, Calif., for his commercial and instructor license. When the Army Air Forces came looking for pilots, he was ready. During the war, his wife worked at Alameda Naval Air Station as a crane operator while he continued his training at King City, Calif. A back injury suffered while teaching cadets to perform slow rolls earned him a medical discharge from active duty.

Unable to fly for the Army Air Forces, he continued training for additional ratings. In Fort Worth, Texas, a classmate got him involved in the Corpus Christi CAP squadron, where he was hired to give pilots instrument training.

## HE SCANNED THE SEAS FOR GERMAN SUBS

For an extra \$8-a-day incentive, Dijeau flew a CAP single-engine plane with a 25-pound bomb over the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico looking for German submarines.

“I never had to drop one,” he said.

His squadron transferred to San Jose, Calif., where he flew a few more missions before receiving an honorable discharge from CAP in 1944 so he could work for Western Airlines. He flew for about a year before he was asked to resign to make room for aviators returning from the European front at the end of the war.

After just a few weeks back at work as an electrician, he was offered a pilot’s job at Trans Ocean Airlines.

Dijeau flew when he could and worked as an electrician the rest of the time. Even after retirement, he

couldn’t keep his feet on the ground, though now he just takes to the air for fun.

“You can take the man out of aviation, but you can’t take the aviation out of the man,” he said.

## STILL FLYING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

Dijeau surprises people when they learn he still flies at 95. He doesn’t understand their shock, since he also drives a 36-foot motor home on his road trips with Harriet.

The newlyweds, who had been friends for 40 years, joined the Amelia Earhart Senior Squadron together in 2008.



Maj. Juan Tinnirello



George and Harriet Dijeau belong to Amelia Earhart Senior Squadron 188.

Retired Air Force Maj. Keith Raley remembers meeting Dijeau in the parking lot of the squadron’s headquarters and speaks reverently about the senior member’s contributions.

“Mr. Dijeau was not just a CAP pilot, but a CAP instructor pilot,” he said. “If not for his contribution in training and qualifying CAP pilots during the early

days of 1942, there may not have been a viable and successful Coastal Patrol capability in the Gulf of Mexico and Texas Coast.”

Raley said Dijeau’s dedication and loyalty to Civil Air Patrol is

timeless. “Those who have a strong public service spirit have it all their lives, no matter what age,” he said.

Maj. Juan Tinnirello met Dijeau at a squadron meeting.

“The biggest impact George made on me is his willingness to continue serving CAP in whatever way he can,” Tinnirello said. “He is an exemplary model for the cadets and the senior members as well.” ▲

Photo by Maj. Juan Tinnirello, California Wing