

OLD HAWG

NEW TRICKS

Sitting neglected in the California desert, the B-29 Superfortress that had been named *It's Hawg Wild* didn't look like it was going anywhere. But, 40 years ago, the weather-beaten bomber flew across the Atlantic to its new home at IWM Duxford. We talked to one of the crew about a true warbird epic **WORDS:** BEN DUNNELL



“You flying that all the way, Skip?” “Yep, all the way.”
The air traffic controller at Tucson International

Airport could have been forgiven for asking. The Boeing B-29 Superfortress in which Skip Cregier had just taken off didn't exactly look fit to fly across the Atlantic. Its colours and markings faded, the airframe much-repaired and a trail of blue smoke emanating from its number three engine, the heavy bomber betrayed all the signs of being fresh from the 'boneyard'. The first trans-continental leg westbound across the United States appeared as if it might be a stretch. Yet, several weeks later, that same B-29 touched down at Duxford, its final resting place with the Imperial War Museum. Aboard what Cregier called “a great big old piece of junk”, he and his crew had made it.

That was 40 years ago this March. But the story goes back a little further. When the IWM wanted to acquire a Superfortress, both to recall the type's role in World War Two and its use by the post-war RAF as the Washington, there were few possible sources. The US Navy was one. Its Naval Weapons Center at China Lake, California, had already been the source of several B-29s acquired by organisations in the States. Many of the surplus bombers — in the region of 70 — had ended up on a range there, destined to see out their days as targets for bombs and missiles. Some were destroyed, but others had been saved prior to the IWM's interest.

During 1978 Naval Air Systems Command donated to the museum a B-29A, serial 44-61748, which by then had been sitting inactive for 22 years. A degree of damage and deterioration was inevitable, but the dry desert air had otherwise kept it well-preserved. Certainly this machine, which had been named *It's Hawg Wild* during its Korean War service with the US Air Force, seemed to be the best candidate.

How to get it from California to Cambridgeshire? The IWM's Department of Exhibits and Firearms had the task of working that out. A surface journey, by road and sea, was one option. Air freight was another. Both, obviously, would require the airframe to be dismantled. But once the IWM discovered in December 1978 that a ferry flight was not only achievable but considerably cheaper, it jumped at the chance. And when it came

to getting the B-29 ready, one man stood out from the other candidates. Jack Kern and his company Aero Services had just the right credentials. The Tucson, Arizona-based firm specialised in such work, and had already got a B-29 flying from the China Lake 'boneyard': 44-62070 for the Confederate Air Force back in 1971.

Kern assembled a team. Several members of his family joined in, among them his wife Millie and son JR. Commercial pilot, instructor and examiner Skip Cregier may never have flown a Superfortress before, but time on big, multi-engine aircraft such as Douglas DC-6s stood him in good stead as captain. He would be joined by Don Davis as co-pilot. Henry Zappia, a licenced airframe and powerplant mechanic, was to be crew chief. Bob Weinhardt worked for the Naval Weapons Center as an electronics technician in the Explosives Technology Branch of the Ordnance Systems Department, and had been involved in preparing the B-29s as targets. Together, they and others began to bring this one back to life.

Overseeing the whole project was Geoff Bottomley, then IWM Duxford's chief engineer, who made repeated trips to China Lake. “Weather conditions on the desert were not helpful”, reported the unit newspaper, the *NWC Rocketeer*. “Strong winds and dust storms made it necessary to remove an estimated 1,500lb of sand from the

interior of the aircraft”. And there were more fundamental problems.

The control lines needed reconnecting, and the control surfaces the application of fresh fabric. Many cockpit instruments and switches had gone missing and required replacement. It was necessary to equip the undercarriage with an entirely new set of tyres, and to make good the broken nose glazing. Weinhardt set about rebuilding the auxiliary generator. Late on in the process, corrosion was discovered in the outer portion of the port wing, and it too was replaced. “Through the hot summer

months”, the *Rocketeer* said, “the work went on in the barren, shadeless aircraft scrapyard, where contractor employees and Bottomley wrestled with the many and varied

problems that had to be overcome in order to obtain flight certification.”

Where items on 44-61748 were too far gone, there was at least a ready source of alternatives ripe for cannibalisation. Other redundant B-29 airframes in the China Lake target scrapyard were plundered to some extent, yielding such important items as the forward upper and tail turrets. It all required close liaison between the IWM, Aero Services and the US Navy, this the responsibility of Don Hart, logistics support manager in the NWC Aircraft Department.

The aim had been to deliver the Superfortress to Duxford during 1979. In the event, this did not prove possible, but — registered in the

“It was necessary to remove an estimated 1,500lb of sand from the interior”

OPPOSITE PAGE: Showing the replacement outer port wing section, the refurbished B-29A turns onto base leg for Tucson International Airport after a local check flight in advance of the trans-Atlantic journey.

DON HART COLLECTION VIA GARY VERVER

BELOW: The Californian desert climate preserved the Superfortress well, but years of storage had taken their toll, not least on the fabric-covered control surfaces.

HENRY J. RAMEY COLLECTION VIA TAI GH RAMEY





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The crew for the B-29's departure from China Lake: from left to right, Skip Cregier, Don Davis, Jack and Millie Kern, Bob Weinhardt, JR Kern, Henry Zappia and Dino Kern. Behind them is another of the China Lake Superfortresses, named *Fee-Nix*. IWM VIA GARY VERVER

Repairs being made to the nose, where damage had been done to the glazing. IWM VIA GARY VERVER

Nearly ready to go, 44-61748 sits between two of China Lake's resident Sabre target drones, QF-86F serial 55-5017 (left) and QF-86H 53-1409. US NAVY VIA GARY VERVER

The heavy bomber was propped up on jacks to allow new tyres to be fitted. IWM VIA GARY VERVER

UK as G-BHDK — it was able to fly out to Tucson, where Kern's team would make final preparations. "The standard procedure at China Lake was that they were granted permission for one take-off, but no landing", recalls Taigh Ramey, who later joined the trans-Atlantic flight. "They would tell you they didn't care if you made a smoking hole somewhere — you will do it outside the fence of this base."

On 16 November 1979, the odd last-minute snag having been fixed, the B-29 lifted off from runway 21 at China Lake's Armitage Field. Skip Cregier duly ferried it the 500 or so miles south-east to Tucson, experiencing no significant problems. There Aero Services carried on fitting out the interior, notably in terms of installing communications and navigation equipment. Not everything worked out, though. Kern's efforts to obtain an inertial navigation system and repair the flux-gate compass proved to be in vain. But another means of getting the bomber to its destination presented itself.



The late Dr Henry J. Ramey was a highly distinguished professor of petroleum engineering at Stanford University. He had served during wartime as an Army Air Forces B-29 navigator in the southern Pacific theatre. Come 1979, his teenage son Taigh was deeply interested in aviation. "I was a volunteer at the Pima Air Museum at Tucson", Taigh recalls, "working on their B-29. The director of restoration there, a guy named Bob Johnson, had heard about the [IWM] B-29 project and put Geoff Bottomley in touch with me. We were talking to him about it, and of course expressed an interest in flying along on the airplane. He said there were a lot of crew already on the aircraft, and it didn't look like we were going to be able to do that.

"But then my dad arranged for Geoff and myself and some other people to go and see the Hughes 'Spruce Goose' when it was still secretly stashed away down in Long Beach, not open at all to the public. We got a personal tour from the manager there, and Geoff was so appreciative of that that he offered for my dad and I to fly on the aircraft. He recommended that we don't go past the east coast of the United States because he wasn't sure the airplane was going to make it all the way, and he didn't want to

have to deal with my mother should it go down...

"We walked into the trailer at Jack Kern's company, and we were standing there when Skip Cregier asked Jack if he'd found a navigator. My dad overheard the conversation and said, 'Well, I'm a navigator — I could help you out.' Skip asked if he had his own sextant, just off the cuff. My dad said, 'Yes, as a matter of fact I do.' He had his original sextant and astro-compass from World War Two. He became the navigator, and we started setting up the navigation station in the aircraft. We got a light going, the table all set up, an astro compass mount and various things. We had World War Two electric flying suits that we wired up, because we knew it was going to be cold."

Indeed it was. Making the trip in the early part of the year brought with it that extra risk factor. "It was kind of crazy", Taigh Ramey reflects. "They were hoping to delay it until the summer, but the Imperial War Museum insisted that it go

immediately because it had taken too long already. I was 16 years old at the time and knew of some of the hazards, but I was not just oblivious but didn't care, because I was going to fly in a B-29."

The journey began on 16 February 1980. Its first leg went from Tucson to Flint, Michigan, home city of co-pilot Don Davis. As Ramey says, "The airplane had been flown a few times around the Tucson area, but hadn't really stretched its legs. We discovered [on arrival in Flint] that the number three engine had burned 75 gallons out of its 85-gallon oil tank. That became a big limiting factor for the trip, because they really wanted to fly across the Atlantic in one hop, but due to the limited oil range — not the fuel range — we had to do it in multiple hops."

After a night stop, it was off to Maine, but this wasn't without its difficulties. The undercarriage wouldn't retract fully, yet the aircraft carried on to a freezing Loring AFB, then home of the



It's Hawg Wild on reinstallation into IWM Duxford's revamped American Air Museum in late 2015. DAVID WHITWORTH

IT'S HAWG WILD: A POTTED HISTORY

25 May 1945	Having been built at Boeing's Renton, Washington, plant, 44-61748 is accepted into Army Air Forces service; delivered to Birmingham, Alabama, the following day
June 1945	Allocated to 421st Base Unit, 4th Air Force, at Muroc, California; not destined to reach Pacific theatre before Japanese surrender
November 1945	Into storage at Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona; then briefly at Luke AFB, Arizona
March 1952	First operational assignment, to 371st Bomb Squadron, 307th Bomb Wing at Kadena AB, Okinawa; flew in combat during Korean War, named <i>It's Hawg Wild</i>
October 1954	Back to storage at Davis-Monthan
March-July 1955	Converted at Nashville, Tennessee, and Tinker AFB, Oklahoma, to TB-29A configuration
July 1955	To Air Defense Command's 4750th Air Defense Wing (Weapons) at Yuma, Arizona
November 1956	Retired to become US Navy range target at China Lake
February-March 1980	Delivery flight to Imperial War Museum Duxford, UK; on static display there ever since, restored to Korean War colours and configuration, and now in American Air Museum



ABOVE: Dr Henry J. Ramey (left), who passed away in 1993, and his son Taigh with the aircraft on the Tucson tarmac. HENRY J. RAMEY COLLECTION VIA TAIGH RAMEY

BELOW: Lifting off from China Lake's Armitage Field on 16 November 1979.

US NAVY VIA GARY VERVER



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: The final low pass over Duxford. On the B-29's nose were the emblems of Strategic Air Command and the 43rd Bomb Wing at Loring AFB, where a stop had been made en route; otherwise, the only markings visible were those left over from the aircraft's Korean War USAF service. Civil registration G-BHDK was allocated for the ferry flight only, and cancelled in 1984; this was, unsurprisingly, the sole Superfortress ever to appear on the G register.

ADRIAN M. BALCH COLLECTION

All the crew members had a go at the controls during the trip to Britain, among them Henry Ramey, who had navigated B-29s in wartime.

HENRY J. RAMEY COLLECTION VIA TAIGH RAMEY

On the apron at a damp Keflavik, Iceland, the final stop before reaching British soil.

HENRY J. RAMEY COLLECTION VIA TAIGH RAMEY

After the last landing, the wording painted on the blank over the tail gun position says it all.

DENIS J. CALVERT



B-52G-equipped 42nd Bomb Wing. It provided hangarage large enough for Superfortress to park nose-to-nose with Stratofortress. While there, base personnel 'zapped' the B-29 with the wing's emblem and that of Strategic Air Command.

"We stayed there a week to try and fix the oil leaks, reduce our oil consumption and prep the airplane," Ramey remembers. "Early on in the trip the rest of the crew discovered how bloody cold it was. They frankly weren't prepared. I went off to get salvage clothing and cold-weather gear at the base. They were kind enough to let us go through their scrap clothing that had been turned in. We also got a Herman Nelson heater, a ground heater that was used to pre-heat aircraft engines, and put that in the bomb bay. We plumbed that into the ducting system in the aircraft, and it worked really well. For the trip from Loring over to Gander, Newfoundland, we were in pretty good shape.

"It was the coolest thing to see my dad do what he did in World War Two, using his original astro compass and A-10A sextant. He used a modern Hewlett Packard programmable hand calculator for some of the computations of things, but otherwise it was pencil and paper and paper charts. We were flying together, trying to get

our private pilot's licences, so he'd done some basic navigation and he was teaching me a lot of those basic skills. I was able to put the astro compass up in the astrodome and take fixes for him. I consider my dad the last true B-29 navigator.

"We didn't really have any navigation gear in the aircraft — the VOR [VHF omni-directional range] radios that were installed were only good for line-of-sight and had very limited range. Even the flux-gate compass wasn't the best compass in the world, because it was a World War Two system. We tried to get some other radio navigation but never could, so my dad really was the sole source for that trip.



"We had got the original intercom system working in the airplane. There were amplifiers in the front and the rear which I hooked together, so all the crew would plug into the jack-boxes. That's how we would communicate back and forth, via microphones and headsets."

Between Gander and Sondrestrom, Greenland, troubles were to come. "That first over-water leg was kind of the roughest. At Gander they didn't want to let us go because we didn't have an HF radio for long-range communication, to check in and do position reports. I

guess the crew were battling back and forth, trying to get permission to go without that. They finally did, but by the time we got that it was pretty late in the day, and it was a seven-hour flight. It ended up that we were going to be landing in the dark, when we really wanted to go day VFR only.

"An hour-and-a-half into the flight the Herman Nelson heater flamed out and stopped working. A spark plug had stripped out of it. I remember Henry Zappia getting into the bomb bay, trying to get it to go. I was holding the pressure door closed, my gloves fell down from the tunnel up above and knocked over a can of Dr Pepper, which fell over and froze on the floor almost immediately. He was unable to get the heater going.

"Several things were going on. The gyro instruments work on a vacuum, and as we were getting later into the flight and the sun was going down there was no outside reference, so they were basically flying on instruments. But the moisture from our breath had clogged up the air filter for the vacuum instruments behind the co-pilot's instrument panel, and it was also starting to frost over the glass on the inside. The co-pilot was flying on instruments when his gyro tumbled. He was following the tumbling gyro and I was standing in the back, holding onto the top



LEFT: Skip Cregier faces the media at Mildenhall. The 32-year-old pilot and businessman had flown since childhood and gained his commercial licence aged just 17. He lost his life in a Cessna 421 crash in Tucson not a fortnight after completing the trans-Atlantic B-29 flight.

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turret well, getting light on my feet as he was pushing and doing negative g in the airplane. Skip jumped back into his seat and flew partial-panel, flying on instruments between the pilot's and co-pilot's panels while we figured out the problem.

"We'd taken a World War Two spotlight that was used to signal from airplane to airplane, a little trigger-type thing with a sort of headlamp on it, and taped the trigger closed so the light was on continuously. We took that and put it behind the instrument panel to warm up the air filter and the instrument piping and thaw it out so the gyros kept working.

"Coming in at night, there's not much of a missed approach going into [Sondrestrom], so Skip had to do his first night landing in a B-29 up in Greenland in incredibly cold conditions. He did a heck of a job. But the flight engineer [Jack Kern] and his son both had ruptured eardrums, there was some frostbite going on and everybody was huddled in the back. Ambulances met the aircraft. It was quite an epic flight — the scariest part of the whole trip. My dad, Skip, Henry Zappia and I put the airplane away in a hangar. Skip turned to my dad and said, 'You know, you're one hell of a tough old B-29 navigator.' Dad had nailed the navigation that got us there, especially at night. He was doing

his job when it counted, for sure". The last time Henry had navigated a B-29, incidentally, was in 1946.

"It was so cold there in Greenland", Taigh Ramey continues. "You weren't allowed to go outside by yourself. We ended up going off to get more cold-weather gear, and we fixed our Herman Nelson heater and got that running again. We were able to leave not long after and get out of there. When we got to Iceland" — specifically, Keflavik — "there was volcanic ash blowing onto the runway but, boy, it felt warm compared to Greenland.

"The winds were bad and the weather was iffy, so we were there for a little while. That's when my dad and I decided it was probably time to go home. We weren't sure how long we were going to be stuck in Iceland, and dad had appointments. He felt comfortable turning over navigation to Skip and everybody else because it was a straightforward leg... it's pretty easy to find England from there. We hitched a ride on an RAF VC10 back to Canada, and took commercial airlines from there."

The B-29, meanwhile, flew from Keflavik to Mildenhall on 1 March. Duxford's runway had by now been shortened by the building of the M11 motorway, so the crew felt

it necessary to stop at the nearby USAF base. "As I understand it", says Ramey, "they unloaded all the extra gear and equipment and people and everything else, and lightened the airplane up as much as possible for that one short hop."

Back then, Duxford wasn't open year-round, but the IWM made an exception for 2 March and the crowds turned out in force. Still more took up position on the M11 earthworks. They were well rewarded that afternoon, Cregier making a low pass before landing. He touched down with the B-29's port wing literally over the heads of Henry Zappia and Tucson-based KGUN-TV reporter Sharon Kha, both standing right at the southern edge of Duxford's runway to capture the arrival. Kha, who was dating Cregier, had been one of the 12 crew on board for the trans-Atlantic flight.

And so it ended. Shutting down west of the control tower, the Superfortress's four Wright R-3350 engines — its original powerplants, which had also survived the years at China Lake in working order — fell silent for the last time. For they and a tired airframe to have completed this 6,500-mile epic was a tremendous feat, no doubt about it. In all likelihood, it had become the last B-29 to cross the ocean.

The crew stayed overnight in the Red Lion at Whittlesford, long a haunt of Duxford-based pilots in the airfield's operational days. As recorded in *Duxford Aviation News*, the Duxford Aviation Society's publication, "Skip was particularly interested in the hotel's associations with his compatriots of the 78th Fighter Group over a generation ago". The next day, they set off for home, by airliner this time. More comfortable, if less adventurous.

Occasional reunions would follow, but Skip Cregier was not around to join them. On 14 March 1980, he took a Cessna 421B on a post-maintenance flight, performing circuits at Tucson's Ryan Field. It went out of control, crashed and burst into flames, killing Cregier and a young mechanic. The investigation showed that the elevator balance weights had not been fitted. "It was pretty tragic", says Taigh Ramey, "the story of Skip surviving this amazing trip in a dilapidated old World War Two bomber across the North Atlantic in February and then to come home and die almost in his backyard in a modern Cessna..."

