

THE BI



They did it! From across the Atlantic came no fewer than 15 Douglas DC-3/C-47 variants, to join much of Europe's 'Dak' crop in the most memorable D-Day and Berlin Airlift commemorations seen for many years. From Duxford to Germany and back, we joined members of the D-Day Squadron to participate in these unique events — and to find out more about the incredible stories behind the aeroplanes

WORDS: TONY HARMSWORTH

GULFSTREAM



It's 06.40hrs on 5 June, and Douglas C-47A 42-24064 *Placid Lassie* leads the initial wave of six D-Day Squadron aircraft from Duxford, heading for Cherbourg. It is the first of two Channel crossings this combat veteran will make today, just as it did 75 years ago. Completing the first vic of three 'Daks' in the formation are the Commemorative Air Force's *That's All Brother* from San Marcos, Texas, and C-53 *D-Day Doll* from the CAF's Inland Empire Wing at Riverside, California, each bedecked in their original olive drab and invasion stripe liveries. Behind us, on the starboard side, the early-morning sun glints off the polished skins of the searingly patinated C-47A

43-15731/N24320 *Miss Montana*, flagship of the Museum of Mountain Flying at Missoula, Montana. Just three weeks earlier, and 4,625 miles to the west, this rugged old stager had made its first flight for 18 years.

Originally delivered to the US Army Air Forces the month before D-Day, 43-15731 was to stay Stateside and gained no World War Two combat history, but during the early post-war years it saw heavy use as a 'smoke-jumper', parachuting firefighters into the wilderness areas — where vehicles cannot venture — to combat forest fires.

At about 16.00hrs on 5 August 1949, N24320, being operated by Johnson Flying Service, was scrambled from Hale Field,

Missoula with 16 smoke-jumpers on board to tackle a wildfire that had broken out following lightning strikes in the Gates of the Mountains canyon near Helena, Montana. Most of the jumpers were in their early 20s, the most experienced being 28-year-old D-Day and Arnhem veteran Lt David R. Navon.

The strong bonds between the Montana smoke-jumpers and the US military had begun in June 1940, when Maj William C. Lee visited the first smoke-jumper training school at Seeley Lake Ranger Station, 60 miles north-east of Missoula, to observe instructional methods. After the USA entered the war, Franklin D. Roosevelt authorised Lee to form the first parachute platoon. >

MAIN PICTURE: Three of the D-Day-striped stars of the commemorative events: the Commemorative Air Force's C-47A *That's All Brother*, the Tunison Foundation's C-47A *Placid Lassie*, and Hugo Mathys' C-47. The latter, recently restored by Basler, will be based in the USA for its Swiss owner to fly while over there.

RICHARD PAVER

A glorious civilian-schemed DC-3 trio off the white cliffs. The Legend Airways Foundation's N25641 leads N877MG from the Historic Flight Foundation, and the Museum of Mountain Flying's N24320 *Miss Montana*. RICHARD PAVER



BELOW: The spectacle from atop the Duxford tower of multiple invasion-striped C-47 Skytroopers readying to depart. Nearest is Mission Boston D-Day's C-47 *Virginia Ann*. BEN DUNNELL

BELOW RIGHT: Heading the massed ranks on Duxford's grass, Dakota Norway's LN-WND *Little Egypt* was forced to stay behind after an engine failure. BEN DUNNELL

During the summer of 1942, Lee became the first commanding general of the recently formed 101st Airborne Division, the 'Screaming Eagles'. In September of the following year, Maj Gen Lee was sent to the UK, where he became deeply involved in planning the American airborne landings in Normandy.

With turbulence over Helena National Forest and temperatures hitting 97°F, the flight to the drop zone was especially rough, one smoke-jumper suffering from severe airsickness and failing to drop before riding back to Hale Field and resigning on the spot. The rest of the team parachuted into an open area at the top of Mann Gulch,

but they were scattered widely due to the wild conditions, and their radio was destroyed after its parachute failed to open.

Five years earlier, at 01.51 on 6 June 1944, the C-47s that carried Navon's unit, the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division, began heading for the Cotentin

Peninsula on Mission 'Boston', flying at 500ft over the English Channel to avoid German radar en route to drop zone O, just north-west of

Sainte-Mère-Église. The unit's C-47s didn't suffer the same problems from navigational errors and flak that had afflicted the 101st Airborne the previous hour, which saw many of its paras missing their targets.

The 505th was to achieve the most accurate drop of any American regiment on D-Day, half of the paras dropping on or within a mile of its DZ, and 75 per cent within two miles, enabling them to form up rapidly. Their objective, Sainte-Mère-Église, was captured successfully by 04.30. The 82nd then endured 33 days of combat in the Normandy bocage, with a 46 per cent casualty rate and 5,245 troopers being logged as killed, wounded or missing. In his post-battle report, the commander of the 82nd, Maj Gen Matthew Ridgway — who had jumped with his men — stated, "Thirty-three days of action without relief, without replacements. Every mission accomplished. No ground gained was ever relinquished". In early July, David Navon and his surviving companions returned to the UK to await their next mission.

The Johnson Flying Service C-47 eventually ended up with McNeeley Charter Service of West Memphis, Arkansas, transporting everything from car parts to chickens. In 2001 it made what seemed like it would be its last landing, arriving at the

Museum of Mountain Flying in Missoula. Bryan Douglass, vice-project chair and logistics director on the *Miss Montana* to Normandy project says, "Eric

Komberec — the son of the museum founder and a BAe 146 fire-bomber pilot — bought a 1944 Stinson Reliant V-77 from an owner in

“Taking the aeroplane back for the D-Day 75th had always been part of their plan”



VIEW FROM THE GROUND...

Georgia in March 2018. He asked me to go along and help him fly it home. The night before we left to return the seller took us to dinner at a small restaurant, where we bumped into warbird pilot Connie Bowlin, a friend of the V-77 vendor. She mentioned the plan to take DC-3s to Normandy for the 75th anniversary in 2019. Eric told her about our museum C-47 and said that maybe we should go with them. Over the next two days, flying the Stinson back to Montana, we talked about it more and when we got home began discussing it with other folks. And that's how it started. The enthusiasm was contagious and it really took off.

"Work to get her flying started in March 2018, and the nose art — replicating that seen on a North American B-25 Mitchell flown by Missoula resident, the late Malcolm W. Enman, during the war — was unveiled during the AOPA event at Missoula on 15 June. After that the props and engines were pulled for overhaul. The project really got going with a vengeance in December, although, with no heating in the hangar, it was hard work for the volunteers. Despite the discomfort, more and more people came to help as the project gained momentum."



Preparations for the unprecedented gathering of DC-3s that became the D-Day Squadron — a part of the non-profit living history and educational group, the Tunison Foundation — had been under way for a couple of years. Tunison board member Ben Smith, who accompanied the foundation's flagship *Placid Lassie* on the trip, says, "After *Lassie* pilots Eric Zipkin and James Lyle came back to Oxford, Connecticut after flying during the D-Day 70th anniversary in France in 2014, taking the aeroplane back for the 75th had always been part of their plan. During 2017 Eric started talking to various aircraft owners to gauge their level of interest and sell them on the idea. The Tunison Foundation was created by James and Eric in April 2017 to operate *Placid Lassie* and other aircraft: from the get-go we were talking about Normandy 2019.

"The first concrete steps were made in 2017 when we started buying domain names — initially as the 75th Squadron, but later as the D-Day Squadron (DDS). During the summer and fall of 2018 we were heavy into planning



Blue Skies Air's 1937-vintage DC-3A N18121 and Dynamic Aviation's post-war USAF-schemed C-47A *Miss Virginia* start to move from their parking spots at Duxford as *Miss Montana* rolls. BEN DUNNELL

IWM Duxford, 4-5 June

One aspect of D-Day it had been hoped to avoid during this year's commemorations was the poor weather. Alas, for the first day of Daks over Duxford, not so. The conditions proved disruptive, strong gusts and squally showers forcing the cancellation of the two mass parachute drops, for which the wind limit was 10kt. But there had still been plenty of 'Dak' flying, with a variety of local training and photo sorties. A highlight of the afternoon was a fine solo by Pete Kynsey in the Aces High C-47A, this machine being joined by *Placid Lassie* and *That's All Brother*, piloted by Eric Zipkin and Doug Rozendaal, for three-ship passes.

A variety of D-Day-themed support was provided in the air across both days. Kevin Hale and Trevor Bailey's post-war Austers represented the wartime artillery spotters, while a pair of Spitfire IXs were flown in an excellent, close routine by Richard Grace in ML407 and Steve Jones aboard MH434. Fleet Air Arm participation was illustrated by Stu Goldspink's display of The Fighter Collection's Wildcat, while Paul Bonhomme in Fighter Aviation Engineering's P-47D Thunderbolt, along with Cliff Spink and John Dodd in the P-51D Mustangs of Shaun Patrick and Robert Tyrrell, depicted USAAF fighter types. The American machines flew in various combinations, a four-ship being featured on Tuesday.

Wednesday dawned far drier and brighter, and with a palpable sense of anticipation in the large audience. The displays opened with something quite astonishing — a US Air Force flyby from six MC-130J Hercules and six CV-22B Ospreys, all operated by the 352nd Special Operations Wing at Mildenhall, in an arrowhead formation. It was an extraordinary start to what was to be a wonderful day, culminating with a stream take-off by the Normandy-bound Dakotas. Long delayed it may have been, first by a change in timing for a VVIP arrival at Caen, then while the

parachutists boarded the aircraft, but the vast majority of the 10,000 or so crowd stayed. In the hands of Andrew Dixon, the Aces High machine was first off; 20 'Dak' departures later, California-based D-Day veteran *Virginia Ann* brought up the rear. The para-dropping aircraft made a dumb-bell turn out to the west, returning for a pass along Duxford's southern boundary. Meanwhile, the rest took off underneath, turning north and tracking east, then south, to join their brethren and head towards the Channel.

This was a spectacle of sight and sound that is unlikely ever to be repeated. It was a privilege to be there, and judging by the applause that followed, everyone else present felt much the same way. *John Dunnell*



Despite the leaden skies at Duxford on 4 June, re-enactors provided some fine photo-opportunities. ADAM BULL



ABOVE: Aces High's C-47A, 42-100884/N147DC, leads *Placid Lassie* and C-53 42-68830/N45366 *D-Day Doll* out over the Channel on 5 June.

ALLIE DUNNINGTON

ABOVE RIGHT: With *Placid Lassie* in the lead, the 13-ship formation passes over the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer during official commemorations on 6 June itself.

PETER HODGKINS

the logistics and working with the other aircrews. They all had to pay for their share of the Narsarsuaq Airport, Greenland, fuel pre-buy by December 2018. Starting that month, Eric started a series of operational calls with the other crews to move planning forward."

Although *Miss Montana* didn't fly in combat with the military, plenty of the other 23 examples of the type — 15 of them from the USA — that gathered at Duxford did. The combined fleet boasted aircraft with Normandy, Arnhem, Bastogne, 'the Hump' (China, Burma, India) and Berlin Airlift honours. In fact, there is no museum in the world that contains as many combat veterans as the D-Day commemorative armada. Including those that operated

independently in Normandy, it took in five more aircraft that were flown straight to France from their bases, bringing the grand total up to 28.



And has there ever been as broad a cross-section of DC-3/C-47, et al, variants assembled in one place? Not a chance. Coming from Oakland, California was ex-pat Briton Richard Martin's C-41A, 40-070/N341A, the second military example built. Ordered by the US Army Air Corps in 1938 and delivered in September 1939, it was one of two aircraft requisitioned by Maj Gen Henry 'Hap' Arnold, chief of the air corps, who had originally been taught to fly by the Wright brothers. Based at Bolling

Field, Washington DC as a part of the 1st Staff Squadron, it carried many VIPs, military command staff and high-ranking officials including Franklin D. Roosevelt's two Secretaries of War, Harry Hines Woodring and Henry L. Stimson.

Even older than the C-41 was N18121, a DC-3A built in October 1937 and operated by Blue Skies Air. It was flown to the UK from Aurora, Oregon by another ex-pat Brit, Paul Bazeley. The 119th DC-3 built and the seventh for Eastern Air Lines, it was signed over to Eastern by the vice-president of the carrier, World War One ace Capt Eddie Rickenbacker, at the Douglas plant on 20 December 1937. In May of this year it gained the distinction of becoming the oldest aircraft ever

NORMANDY VETERANS ON PARADE



ABOVE: William Ness of the 12th (Yorkshire) Parachute Battalion, who left RAF Keevil in a Short Stirling late on 5 June 1944. After dropping at Ranville, the young Geordie was wounded on 9 June during the attack on Longueval village, and evacuated back to the UK. He is seen here with William Galbraith, a 101st Airborne veteran who was mis-dropped close to Saint-Côme-du-Mont on D-Day. ANGELA TAIT

ABOVE RIGHT: 6th Airborne Division veteran Ken Lang, who landed on drop zone N at Ranville on 6 June 1944, with his grandson, Alex Roberts, a para re-enactor at Sannerville after the evening jump on 5 June. ALEX ROBERTS

Drop zone 'K', Sannerville, 5 June

At Sannerville, east of Caen, expectations were high among the thousands of spectators lined up along local roads and through farmers' fields, the sound of voices coming from much of Europe and North America. By 10.00 at Duxford, take-off had been postponed to 15.10hrs BST. Plans in Normandy were not altered, and at 15.00 local, following a solo display by Spitfire Vb AB910, members of the British Army's 16 Air Assault Brigade leapt from the BBMF Dakota. The lead RAF Hercules then started seeding the sky with jumpers, while others emerged from the second, a large 'RAF 100' on its tail, their round parachutes contrasting with the more pointed, jellyfish-like 'chutes the French used. An Armée de l'Air Transall C-160R and CASA CN235 followed, all continuing in a racetrack pattern for several more circuits and drops.

When they had gone, I chatted to a French woman about what we had seen, pontificating in my best French about the difference between the RAF and Armée de l'Air aeroplanes and parachutes. Once finished, I received a sympathetic smile while she informed me her son had been a para for 15 years. In case of any doubt, she opened her jacket and revealed her French parachute brigade T-shirt. Exit stout party, stage left...

With Duxford departures badly delayed, but no commentary at Sannerville to tell anybody, Aero Legends' D-Day veteran C-47A *Drag-em-oot* suddenly came from the west and proceeded to disgorge more parachutists in multiple runs. They were operating separately in Normandy, so were a welcome warm-up. The 'main act' at this time was still somewhere mid-Channel.

The Sannerville crowd began to thin as the rest of us settled in for our own 'Longest Day'. The flotilla took some two hours to arrive, having spent time tracking around to the north, while a Beech 99 and a Cessna 208 Caravan criss-crossed the site. This was nevertheless enough to draw back large



David Price and Paul Culshaw, members of the Pathfinder Group UK, leaving the DZ at Sannerville.



With the coloured smoke from the Red Devils' and Golden Knights' jumps still hanging in the air, dozens of round canopy parachutists fill the Sannerville skies. DR ANDREAS ZEITLER

numbers, swelling the crowds to the same size as when things had first started. The Beech and Cessna were carrying the Parachute Regiment's Red Devils and the US Army Golden Knights, around 24 men appearing with no warning from amid the clouds, including two tandem-jumping with nonagenarian D-Day veterans: Harry Read, a signalman with the 6th Airborne Division, and Jock Hutton, who had dropped with 13 Para near Pegasus Bridge.

At last, the deep drone of multiple radials heralded the arrival of the nine para-dropping Dakotas. The first parachutists appeared from the left-hand door of the lead C-47A at 19.15, marking the sky with seemingly endless skeins of men hanging below their olive round 'chutes. Fifteen minutes and several passes later, the aircraft turned westbound for Carpiquet airport, where the rest of the contingent from Duxford had already landed. The show was over, and within half an hour the cars caught in jams around the drop zone were being pounded by heavy rain. The drop had happened just in time. It was a profoundly moving occasion, and well worth waiting for.

The experience of one of those who dropped was memorably captured on a helmet camera. Two sticks of parachutists

inside a C-47 hitch up to the wire before jumping, the last a cameraman finding his webbing tangled as he falls, requiring careful unravelling before he descends sedately towards the drop zone. Rolling over on landing, he sits up to be confronted by three small French children asking him who he is, and where he is from. His French is not good enough to understand or answer them, but the three are left with a memory of their own 'man who fell to earth', which one can only hope they will hold to the end of their days.

David Halford



Para re-enactors leap from the Aero Legends C-47A, 42-100882/N473DC *Drag-em-oot*, over Sannerville on 5 June.



TOP: A sight witnessed at several airfields in the Berlin area on 16 June, and one which is unlikely ever to be repeated. This 'Dak' flypast was over Schönefeld airport in the south-east of the city. Wherever they went, cries of 'Rosinenbomber' — 'raisin bombers', a local nickname for aircraft that flew on the airlift — were to be heard.

SEBASTIAN JANSIK

ABOVE: Eric Zipkin, the inspirational lead pilot for the D-Day Squadron, briefs the crews at Wiesbaden.

TONY HARMSWORTH

ABOVE RIGHT: C-47A N47E *Miss Virginia* was one of five Daks to participate in the candy drop during the Wiesbaden show on 10 June.

GERHARD PLOMITZER

to fly the Atlantic, at nearly 82 years of age.

Appropriately, a greater proportion of the 15-strong American contingent came from California than any other state, Donald Wills Douglas Sr having formed the Douglas Aircraft Company in Santa Monica during 1921. From Riverside's Flabob Airport we had *Flabob Express*, which joined No 24 Squadron, RAF at Hendon in the spring of 1943 as FD879, and flew, it is said, Winston Churchill before being transferred to India in July 1943 where it became Gen Claude Auchinleck's personal aeroplane *Orion*. While starting up at Duxford for the flight to Caen during the afternoon of 5 June, a carburettor problem manifested itself in one of *Flabob Express'* Pratt & Whitney R-1830 engines and it had to shut down. Fortunately, the lead aircraft for the D-Day Squadron trip, *Placid Lassie* was carrying some spares, including carbs, generators and cylinders, so a light aeroplane was despatched across to France to pick up a spare carb, and N103NA rejoined the fleet at Caen on 8 June.

Another former officers' 'barge', the Dakota Norway C-53D LN-WND, hit trouble before heading to Normandy. This machine operated post-D-Day in France as a VIP transport for Gen Ralph Royce, deputy commander of the Allied Expeditionary Air Forces. A loss of oil pressure during a local flight at Duxford on 4 June led to a precautionary landing, after which it became clear that the number two engine had let go. Sadly, the aircraft subsequently missed all the commemorative events. Royce was among the first generals to arrive in France: pictures exist showing him consulting with engineers on the beaches during D+1.



The sleekest of all the DC-3s gathered for the event, the Arizona-based C-53 N8336C *Spirit of Benovia*, also had a high-roller in its logbook. Although modified in the mid-1950s with an AiResearch Maximizer speed kit, including fully closing undercarriage doors, spinners, clipped wings and a luxurious interior, in late December 1942 it had been delivered to the

1st Troop Carrier Squadron, 10th Air Force, seeing ops in the China-Burma-India theatre. It flew over the eastern end of the Himalayas — 'the Hump' — resupplying the Chinese war effort led by Chiang Kai-Shek and US units based in China. After the war it was acquired by Gen Claire Chennault of 'Flying Tigers' fame for his Civil Air Transport company, which later morphed into the CIA's Air America. Chiang is one of the passengers recorded as having flown on the aeroplane, which was to become the personal aircraft of Warren L. Basler from 1993 until his death in March 1997. At Oshkosh, the company founded by Basler still modifies old DC-3s to Basler BT-67 turbine configuration, with a lengthened fuselage. Jeff Coffman, the pilot of *Spirit of Benovia* says, "To increase the max gross weight from 30,000lb up to 38,000 for the BT-67, the only modifications to each wing are two 0.5in-thick, 4in-wide, 18in-long doublers on the flange that holds the outer wing panel on. That says a lot about how they got the design so right."

Despite the amazing achievement of getting so many 75-plus-year-old



aircraft safely to Duxford, and a successful commemoration there despite the weather, problems were to emerge. The Daks over Normandy (DoN) show at Caen-Carpiquet imploded, the event director Peter Braun being taken ill, while DoN's chief pilot, Andrew Dixon, had resigned. Many of those who had gone to Carpiquet were left sorely disappointed by what they experienced there.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man. Ben Smith, secretary of the board and historian for the Tunison Foundation

explains, "Eric Zipkin, as the president of a successful Part 135 operation, knows that the keys to successful air operations are logistics, planning and flexibility". Forty-seven-year-old anglophile and Land Rover enthusiast Zipkin is founder and president of Tradewind Aviation, a regional airline with bases in the Caribbean, Texas and the New York City area. "Eric was

the US representative to DoN", said Smith, "and was part of their high-level planning sessions". Nearer the event there was a need to make new arrangements with some of the jump teams. "Eric stepped in and had the D-Day Squadron contract directly with these teams — with full knowledge by DoN and knowledge by the jump teams that DoN was the primary mission — to provide them

with lift. Once at Duxford, Eric was supposed to step back and be part of the team."

Smith continued, "Starting in January, Eric had fortnightly

operations calls with the aircraft teams to provide information and answer questions. He pushed that every aircraft have pilots with FAST [Formation and Safety Team] cards so that they are certified in formation flight and use the same language. He hired D-Day Squadron staff to run logistics, survival gear, fuel, weather briefings, and government regulations. After the aircraft arrived

at Oxford, Connecticut in May for the week of training, Eric ran daily practice formation flights, each with a formal written operation brief. When issues came up he immediately started resolving them."

And when there were major issues with the DoN event, Smith recalled, "It seemed likely that the other crews were going to pull out and go home. That was the low point of the trip. Eric stepped up, assumed command, and ensured that the operation continued. When the other crews head that Eric was in command, they all said, 'we're in'. That was the high. That was the moment that we really became the squadron."

Centrepiece of the French part of the trip was a formation flight of 14 aircraft over the American cemetery behind Omaha Beach on 6 June. Smith says, "Eric led a practice cemetery flight from Duxford on 3 June to get the timing right. Everything is done professionally. All of this built trust among crews that were getting to know each other."



"When Eric leads a flight he communicates everything on the inter-plane frequency. 'Dakota lead, turning right... now'. 'Dakota Flight ending turn... now'. 'Dakota Flight, we are now on 120.775 for ATC'. He demands professional radio check-ins. 'Dakota Flight Alpha lead, check in'. Then all you hear on the radio is, 'Alpha 2', 'Alpha 3', 'Bravo lead', 'Bravo 2'... Just like one hears when you fly with the Blue Angels or Thunderbirds."

William Mnich, one of the pilots of the Seattle-based Historic Flight Foundation DC-3 N877MG says, "After the cemetery flypast, Caen Airport was frozen for Air Force One and President Trump. We couldn't go back to land, and someone said we should go and have a look at Pegasus Bridge. So, we went over there and did a flyby along one side. Then someone called up that they hadn't seen the bridge properly, so we went back and overflew it at 500ft. Pure serendipity". Mnich continued, "Flying these sort of missions, with random, unpredictable throttle movements to stay in formation, and taxiing and holding in line with large numbers of aircraft does tend to mess up the fuel calculations."

Fortunately, on the German leg of the trip, fuel sponsorship was provided by Air Total, the fleet leaving Caen for the US

LEFT TOP TO BOTTOM:
A hero's welcome for the remarkable Col Gail Halvorsen, now 98 years old, at Wiesbaden on 10 June. The Lucius D. Clay Kaserne, as the US Army base there is known, is named after the commander-in-chief of US forces in Europe from 1947-49, who masterminded the Berlin Airlift. Halvorsen has been having a busy year of commemorations: during May he was in Berlin itself for events there, talking in German on the local television news.

US ARMY

Perhaps the most distinctive machine involved was DC-3A N8336C *Spirit of Benovia*, with its AirResearch Maximizer performance kit.

RICHARD PAVER



ABOVE:
The crew of *Miss Montana* at Erfurt: from left to right, Bryan Douglass, Randy Schonemann, Eric Komberec and Nico Von Pronay, with mechanic Crystal Schonemann in the cockpit.

TONY HARMSWORTH

BELOW:
Four of the D-Day Squadron aeroplanes went on to Venice after leaving Germany, among them the gorgeous C-41A. LUIGINO CALIARO

Army base at Wiesbaden near Frankfurt on 9 June. The following day, a public holiday in Germany, between 45-50,000 people turned up to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the Berlin Airlift. They could visit the aeroplanes lined up on the apron and see a very special guest, 98-year-old Col Gail Halvorsen, who famously began dropping sweets on parachutes made out of handkerchiefs to the children of Berlin from his Douglas C-54 in July 1948.

On 14 June the travelling circus decamped to the German Army helicopter base at Fassberg, Lower Saxony, where the fleet of 20 C-47/DC-3s was joined for another open day by the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight's Dakota III ZA947 *Kwicherbichen*. It had last been seen overflying Pegasus Bridge on 6 June with a Spitfire, and now provided a welcome set of roundels among the bevy of stars and bars.

Planning the Berlin element involved some short-notice teamwork. Ben Smith says that Eric Zipkin "directly reached out to the Berlin organisers and started extracting information. Other aircrews donated qualified staff

personnel and he delegated to them to pull in all of the information and generate briefings."

It had been hoped that the tour would culminate with another candy drop in Berlin, and possibly a landing at Tempelhof. Although the airport closed in 2008, and is now a public park, the runways are still in place. Smith explains, "It is my understanding that the Berlin city government was unwilling to grant the permits for us to land at Tempelhof. As a last-minute attempt Eric spoke with the US ambassador

to Germany, who personally called Angela Merkel's office, but the request was denied."

But permission was received for several

low formation passes by the 14 remaining aircraft at airfields in and around Berlin. First came Stendal at 400ft, followed by Tempelhof at 500ft, Tegel, where the aircraft were cleared for a low approach at 250ft, and Gatow — now, of course, home to a branch of the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr — which was also flown over at 250ft, as was Schönefeld. Finally there was Schönehangen at 350ft and Leipzig-Halle, down to 230ft. Several aircraft then split from the formation, with

That's All Brother and *D-Day Doll* heading off to the Paris Air Show, and the two aircraft owned by Hugo Mathys, the Swissair-liveried DC-3 N431HM and C-47 N150D, restoration of which was recently completed at the Basler facility in Oshkosh, going to his base at Grenchen, Switzerland.

The rest of the fleet proceeded to Erfurt-Weimar Airport in central Germany, from where they departed to go their separate ways on the morning of 17 June. *Miss Montana* made for Duxford, pilot Nico Von Pronay flying low in tribute over a Berlin Airlift C-54 crash site at Herold before setting course. It arrived back at Missoula on 24 June to a rapturous welcome, having flown 15,479 statute miles in 115 hours on its epic journey.



At the end of the trip, Sherman Smoot, famous for racing souped-up Yak-11s at Reno and one of the pilots of the Templeton, California-based C-47B 43-48608/N47SJ *Betsy's Biscuit Bomber* said, "Looking at the lines of graves at Omaha reminded me of my mother, who used to tell me when I was young how many friends she lost overseas during the war". *D-Day Doll* pilot Steve Rose added, "It is only when you are out meeting people on a trip like this that you get the individual stories,





the things you hadn't heard before. I had an uncle that I never knew. He was based at Tibenham on B-24s with the 703rd Bomb Squadron, which was commanded by James Stewart. On a flight to pick up a relief crew, his B-24 just blew up, 50 miles from Duxford. There were 24 souls on board. We have been so busy on this trip, but when we get some down-time, all this will sink in, and we'll start to realise what we, as a team, have accomplished."

Two months after returning to Britain in July 1944 following the fighting in Normandy, David Navon made his second combat jump on 17 September over Nijmegen Bridge during Operation 'Market Garden'. Fighting off German counter-attacks, the 82nd Airborne captured its objectives between Grave and Nijmegen, but the 23-year-old second lieutenant's luck was beginning to run out, and after being wounded he was invalided back to the UK. Following recuperation and promotion to first lieutenant, he was posted to Berlin as part of the army of occupation. There he stayed until leaving the US Army in March 1946.

Post-war, David Navon studied forestry at the University of California, Berkeley, but he hadn't got the parachuting habit out of his system, and after graduating joined the US Forest Service as a smoke-jumper. So it was that at about 05.45 on 5 August 1949, having gathered up their scattered equipment from the somewhat messy drop, the team of 15 smoke-jumpers approached the flames in Mann Gulch, along the upper Missouri River, just as the high winds coming off the river caused the fire to rapidly expand, cutting off their escape route and forcing them up the north side of

a hill. During the next 10 minutes, this 'blow-up' of the fire engulfed 3,000 acres, claiming the lives of 13 firefighters, including 12 of the smoke-jumpers. The fire would continue for five more days before being brought under control. David Navon, having survived two of the Second World War's deadliest campaigns, must have the sad honour of being the last World War Two paratrooper to die going into action after jumping from a C-47.

The Normandy and Berlin commemorative flights were seen in person by millions of people, with tens of millions more witnessing on TV occasions that will be the last time appreciable numbers of veterans of these world-changing events can be honoured. But the legacy of the D-Day Squadron will, it is to be hoped, play a significant part in keeping the Normandy memories alive after the final veterans have passed on.



ABOVE: *Miss Montana's* return to the air in time to join the D-Day Squadron was a splendid feat of restoration.

RICHARD PAVER

ABOVE LEFT: 505th Infantry Regiment paratrooper David R. Navon, a D-Day and 'Market Garden' veteran who went on to fly in C-47 N24320 as a smoke-jumper in August 1949. US ARMY

THE DAKOTA FLEET

Aircraft at Duxford:

C-47A N147DC	Aces High
C-47A N74589 <i>Placid Lassie</i>	Tunison Foundation
C-47A N47TB <i>That's All Brother</i>	Commemorative Air Force Central Texas Wing
C-47 N150D	Hugo Mathys
DC-3A (C-53) N8336C <i>Spirit of Benovia</i>	Joe Anderson and Mary Dewane
C-53 N45366 <i>D-Day Doll</i>	Commemorative Air Force Inland Empire Wing
DC-3C (C-47) N25641	JB Air Services/Legend Airways Foundation
C-47A N62CC <i>Virginia Ann</i>	Mission Boston D-Day LLC
C-47B N47SJ <i>Betsy's Biscuit Bomber</i>	Gooney Bird Group
C-47A N103NA <i>Flabob Express</i>	Flabob Aviation Associates
DC-3C (C-47B) N877MG	Historic Flight Foundation
C-47A N47E <i>Miss Virginia</i>	Dynamic Aviation
C-41A N341A	Golden Age Air Tours
DC-3A (C-47A) N24320 <i>Miss Montana</i>	Museum of Mountain Flying
DC-3C (C-47B) N33611 <i>Clipper Tabitha May</i>	PMDG Flight Operations
DC-3A N18121	Blue Skies Air
C-47A OY-BPB	DC-3 Vennerne/Foreningen for Flyvende Museumsfly
DC-3C (C-53C) OH-LCH	Airveteran
C-47B F-AZOX	Chalair/Un Dakota sur la Normandie
Lisunov Li-2 HA-LIX <i>Kármán Todor</i>	Goldtimer Foundation
DC-3C (C-53) LN-WND <i>Little Egypt</i>	Dakota Norway
DC-3C (C-47A) SE-CFP <i>Fridtjof Viking</i>	Flygande Veteraner
DC-3C (C-47A) N431HM	Hugo Mathys/Classic Formation

Operated pleasure flights at Caen:

DC-3C (C-47A) PH-PBA <i>Princess Amalia</i>	DDA Classic Airlines
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Operated separately for different portions of commemorations:

Dakota III ZA947 <i>Kwicherbichen</i>	RAF Battle of Britain Memorial Flight
C-47A N473DC <i>Drag-em-oot</i>	Aero Legends
C-47B G-ANAF	Aero Legends/Heritage Air Services
DC-3C F-AZTE	France DC-3

Notes: N103NA went unserviceable at Duxford; flew to Caen 8 June. LN-WND went unserviceable at Duxford; still there at time of writing. ZA947 joined main D-Day Squadron fleet for Fassberg event.

'L-Birds' back to Normandy

From all over Europe they came to northern France — despite the weather, this gathering of wartime liaison aircraft was unprecedented, and emotional

WORDS: XAVIER MÉAL

During the D-Day commemorations, the incredible armada of American and European C-47s took centre stage in the skies of Normandy. Well, numerous they may have been, but not as numerous as the 'L-Birds' that French pilot and collector Isabelle Bazin succeeded in gathering at St André de l'Eure, about 45 miles south of Rouen. On the very airfield that housed the Bf 109s of II./JG 2 'Richthofen' during the summer of 1940, the L-Birds back to Normandy event assembled a grand total of 47 World War Two liaison and observation aeroplanes — the biggest such gathering in Europe for many decades. It was quite a feat, even if close to 100 had originally expressed an interest in attending.

Quite inevitably, 36 of the 47 aircraft were Piper L-4s, a good number being authentic D-Day veterans. One such was Isabelle Bazin's own L-4H, serial 43-30036. In 1944 it was flying not with the US Army, like most of its brethren, but with the 9th Air Force's 12th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, whose colours and codes it still wears today. But also present on the grass of St André de l'Eure were an Aeronca L-3 Defender, three Stinson L-5 Sentinels, a very rare Piper L-14, a Fairchild 24, two Auster Vs, a Bücker Jungmann, a Bücker

Bestmann and a DH Tiger Moth. A third of the participants had flown across from Britain, another third came from France, and the rest variously made the trip from Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark and Norway. It took Per Anders Johnsen and his L-4J 16 hours and 13 legs to reach Normandy from Kjeller, Norway — a good reason to be offered free beers by the international community of 'Grasshoppers'.

Camaraderie was the trademark of this truly exceptional meeting, which offered many opportunities for the pilots to enjoy unexpected and wonderful encounters. Such was the case for the youngest of them all, 21-year-old Joseph Fayolle. He became acquainted with Reginald McComish, 82 years old, a retired British military pilot who had flown across the Channel at the controls of 43-1923, one of just two L-3 Defenders flying in Europe. Fayolle learned that a single L-3 had indeed taken part in the battle of Normandy — according to the story, shipped by mistake with a batch of L-4s and L-5s. This is proved by a picture published in the 25 June 1944 edition of the daily *Detroit Free Press*, the caption indicating it was flying medical supplies to the advancing front-line regiments.

Everything seemed perfect at St André de l'Eure for the beginning ➤





A beautiful duo of invasion-striped L-4s over the characteristic Normandy bocage, D-EJIZ — Meaux-based despite its German registration — leading event organiser Isabelle Bazin's F-AYZA.

XAVIER MÉAL

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:

Before leaving for Madrid, a trip of some eight hours, the Spanish-based Cubs were able to fly along the D-Day landing beaches.

JOSÉ LUIS OLÍAS

No fewer than 21 'L-Birds' — actually, 20 plus interlocking Bestmann, in the form of Heliopolis Gomhouria G-TPWX — arrayed on St André de l'Eure's grass.

P-E LANGENFELD

A six-Cub formation mounted by the Danish and Norwegian visitors.

P-E LANGENFELD

Perhaps the rarest attendee was the Fundación Infante de Orleans' Piper L-14 EC-AAP, this being a liaison version of the J-5 Cub Cruiser dubbed the Army Cruiser.

P-E LANGENFELD

The Fundación Infante de Orleans sent three aircraft from Cuatro Vientos.

L-4s EC-AJY and EC-GQE took a trip over the sections of Mulberry harbour at Arromanches.

JOSÉ LUIS OLÍAS

The calm before the storm, literally, at St André de l'Eure. The charming aerodrome provided delightful surroundings in which to view the 'L-Birds', such as L-4 D-EJIZ, such as L-4 D-EJIZ.

DR ANDREAS ZEITLER

The Danes were out in force. Cubs OY-AFG *D-Day Doll*, OY-ECV *Mistress* and OY-ECS *Lucky Strike* displayed some impressive nose art.

P-E LANGENFELD

Two of the three Stinson L-5s in attendance were I-MEMA from Voghera, Italy, and the Grenchen, Switzerland-based HB-TRY.

DR ANDREAS ZEITLER

of the commemorative week, until a severe weather warning called for extreme caution. A storm named *Miguel* was to sweep through the entire west of France on Friday 8 June, with winds peaking at 100km/h. It was enough to generate much anxiety among the pilots of these fragile light aeroplanes. But, within two hours, the incredibly energetic Isabelle Bazin was able to find shelter for all of the 'L-Birds'. Arranged as if part of some intricate puzzle, half of them were pushed into a large hangar at St André de l'Eure, left empty because of a legal dispute. The remainder were flown to airfields in Normandy, but also to Chartres and locations north-west of Paris, where hangarage had been offered by Bazin's extensive network of contacts.

“All remained eager to pay the tribute they had travelled so far for, and found a way to fly over the landing beaches”

The aftermath of this impromptu scattering of the fleet caused the flying programme the French aviatrix had spent months organising to be consigned to the dustbin. A mass commemorative flight along the D-Day beaches was planned for 7 June, the cherry on the cake for all the 'L-Bird' crews. Instead, everybody ensured their treasured charges were out of harm's way. After *Miguel* had done its worst, it took a couple of hours to regroup the next day, but all remained eager to pay the tribute they had travelled so far for, and found a way to fly over the beaches.

Once everyone had regathered at St André de l'Eure, L-Birds back to Normandy was treated to an overflight by the Patrouille de France, with red, white and blue smoke on. The inside story is that some of the pilots in the French Air Force jet display team fly Piper Cubs regularly, and knew about the event. It was another fitting salute to the men who flew in these incredible and essential 'L-Birds' during the liberation of Normandy.



