

Given an often chequered career, it is incredible that de Havilland Mosquito FBVI PZ474 should even have survived, let alone that it is flying again — but flying again it is

# THE ONE THAT ALMOST GOT AWAY...

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY:  
GAVIN CONROY



Steve Hinton flying Rod Lewis's utterly glorious Mosquito FBVI, PZ474, near Ardmore on 16 January.



**ABOVE:** Cut in half behind the wing, the derelict Mosquito made an increasingly sorry sight at Whiteman Air Park as the 1970s progressed.

VIA WARREN DENHOLM

No wonder a crowd gathered at Ardmore, New Zealand, on 13 January to see Rod Lewis's DH Mosquito FBVI PZ474 taking to the air in the hands of Steve Hinton and Warren Denholm. Quite apart from the fact that it represents the latest magnificent 'Mossie' restoration to be completed, there was a good deal of added excitement among those of New Zealand descent, because PZ474 served with the Royal New Zealand Air Force before being put on the civilian register as ZK-BCV.

PZ474 was built at de Havilland's Hatfield plant in early 1945. It was allocated to No 19 Maintenance Unit on 19 April that year before going to No 132 Operational Training Unit at East Fortune, Scotland. This was a Coastal Command OTU for long-range fighter and anti-shipping strike crews bound not just for the Mosquito but also the Bristol Beaufighter. With the war over, '474 ended up with another maintenance unit during 1946, but a different air arm now entered the story.

The RNZAF had shown considerable interest in the capabilities of the Mosquito, and it placed an order for 90 of the type to be delivered to New Zealand. These were not new aircraft but overhauled RAF examples. It took some 18 months to get them all to their new

home, only for time to have marched on. By now the type was showing its age. PZ474 was one of the last to leave Britain, arriving at RNZAF Base Ohakea on 5 April 1948 in the hands of an RAF/RNZAF crew. It was allocated to No 75 Squadron as NZ2384, but is not believed to have been flown actively. Not long afterwards it flew to an outdoor storage facility in Taieri, where it awaited the axe.



During 1952 two Americans, Richard Loomis and Lewis Leach, arrived on the scene. Their objective was to buy four Mosquitos and fly them to the USA for potential contract work there. The aircraft were purchased from the New Zealand Aircraft Stores Board in 1953 by Aircraft Supplies NZ, based at Milson airfield in Palmerston North and owned by Harry Rolfe. This company was given the task of bringing the aircraft back to airworthy standard for export. They built a hangar at Milson that could accommodate one complete Mosquito, and there they intended to perform the wood repairs on each airframe prior to flying them to the USA. Each machine was ferried from Taieri to Milson by Bob Scott.

It was found that, of the six aircraft purchased by Rolfe, four could be

Still carrying its long-range drop tanks, installed prior to the ferry flight from New Zealand, Mosquito N9909F sat for many years at Whiteman Air Park, California. Its former New Zealand civil registration ZK-BCV is visible on the rear fuselage.

VIA MARSHALL WAINWRIGHT



Fast forward to mid-October 2016, and PZ474's wing and fuselage, newly completed by Glyn Powell, were able to be mated.



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PZ474's original Merlin 25s, overhauled by Vintage V-12s at Tehachapi, California, fitted to the airframe in September 2018.



“ Reports have suggested that the Mosquito was used by the CIA in North America ”



bought back to airworthy status with quite a bit of work. NZ2384 was one of them. It was a huge job for a small team to return the aeroplane to flying condition, but, fortuitously, Harry's son Bill Rolfe was serving in the RNZAF as an engineer and had some knowledge of the Mosquito. Time was tight to get the first aircraft off to the USA, so Bill spoke to his CO and was given two weeks of special leave to help make it ready.

NZ2384 was registered ZK-BCV on 2 September 1953. As it was now on the New Zealand civil register, it had to comply with the local civil aviation rules. When inspector Fred O'Leary got to look over ZK-BCV he came up with a long list of work that needed to be done before the aircraft would be given a certificate of airworthiness. This did not impress the captain for the ferry flight to



the States, Elgen Long. He was so outraged by the requirements that he asked to borrow a car, drove to the American embassy and placed the aircraft on the US register, so ZK-BCV was now N9909F. That took care of the matter, as the Mosquito was no longer under New Zealand jurisdiction. O'Leary turned up the next day to check on progress, and was told in no uncertain terms that he was to stay away from it from now on.

Part of the work being done involved having a 400-gallon fuel tank installed in the bomb bay. This was made by an engineer in Feilding, not far from Palmerston North. Access to the filler cap was through the top of the canopy, which was awkward to say the least, but the extra range was appreciated. Long-range wing tanks were installed as well.

Bill Rolfe was able to fly with Lewis Leach on a test flight to measure fuel burn rates for the trip to the USA. He thus became the last Kiwi to fly in this Mosquito until Warren Denholm did so during January 2019's test flights. In fact, Bill was most likely the last New Zealander to get airborne in the type until KA114 took to the air in 2012.



With Elgen Long and Lewis Leach at the controls, N9909F departed from Milson in March 1955. It went via Auckland to Fiji, and on to Honolulu, Hawaii using only dead-reckoning navigation. Despite a reported in-flight fire that was put out by the crew, the aircraft made it to the USA, but the other three never got a chance to follow. The plan was for Long and Leach to return to

New Zealand and fly them out one at a time, but once news broke that a former RNZAF aircraft had been flown out of New Zealand to another country and more were to follow, the government imposed a ban on exporting former military types in case they were to be put into foreign military use. Although they were being ferried to a country which was an ally, there was no information to suggest that they would not then be flown on to another country and used in combat. As a result, the remaining three Mosquitos were scrapped.

Once in the USA, N9909F was to be flown by a company called Trans World and used for an upcoming contract which included geographic surveys of northern California and Nevada. It was duly fitted out with the necessary camera gear, but its sister ship, N9919F, reportedly did ➤

**ABOVE:**  
PZ474 over a rather different maritime environment from those the Coastal Command aircraft it represents operated in during wartime.

**ABOVE LEFT:**  
A delighted team, including pilot Steve Hinton and Avspecs boss Warren Denholm, following the maiden flight on 13 January.

**LEFT:**  
It is planned that the aircraft will be flown with the newly fabricated rocket rails in place once it gets to the USA.

the flying. This aircraft was an ex-RAF Mosquito B35, formerly serial VR801.

Trans World was in trouble financially. In order to keep the other aircraft flying, N9909F was sold to the Insurance Finance Corporation (IFC) in 1956 and leased back to Trans World, but again not much is known of its flying activity.

“When he and Steve Hinton landed, Rod Lewis said he loved flying in the Mosquito, that the workmanship was amazing, and that he can't wait to get it home and fly it himself”

Unknown to IFC, N9909F had run up substantial sums in rent and other bills as a result of sitting at Whiteman Air Park in Los Angeles. Once these were paid by IFC the Mosquito was repossessed from Trans World. N9919F, meanwhile, met an unusual fate in July 1957 when it ended up being crashed in order to cash in on the insurance, causing the death of

the pilot (see 'Murder by Mosquito', *Aeroplane* March 2008).



Reports have often suggested that N9909F was used by the Central Intelligence Agency in North America, but no real proof has come to light. Some people in New Zealand suggested it was to be employed by the CIA even before it left for the States. Perhaps the reason Elgen Long was able to get the aircraft moved on to the American register overnight was due to a connection with the CIA, and the so-called photography work that it was supposed to be employed on was the original intention for the aircraft. Remember, it is thought that N9919F, rather than N9909F, performed the photographic/survey tasks. There is little doubt that N9909F did some flying in the USA, so what was it doing? It has even been rumoured that it was used to shoot down drug-smuggling aircraft, but this seems unlikely as no images from the time show the 'Mossie' with any weaponry.

Despite being purchased by California Air Charters in 1958, just over a year later N9909F was back

at Whiteman Air Park under the ownership of Marvin E. Whiteman and gradually rotting away. The registration was cancelled in 1970. Well-known warbird collector Ed Maloney looked to put a deal together for PZ474, and the airframe was cut in half behind the wing for transportation, but the sale was never finalised. The airframe was sold to James R. Merizan, who had the idea of bringing it back to static display status, but this never happened. By now the remains were in storage at Chino, and in 2012 photos surfaced that appeared to show them in a very bad condition.

The real possibility of saving PZ474 came along in 2014 when the project was purchased by Warren Denholm of Avspecs on behalf of Rod Lewis from Lewis Air Legends. Rod has had several aircraft restored by Avspecs including his Spitfire V, P-40C Tomahawk and DH Rapide. Having seen KA114 being bought back to life by the company, he had a real interest in a Mosquito.

Some parts from PZ474 had gone missing when it was parked, derelict, at Whiteman Air Park. With the help of Matt Jackson and Simon Brown

Finished in the special coastal duties scheme A of extra dark sea grey upper surfaces and sky undersides, No 235 Squadron Mosquito FBVI HR118/3-W was flown from Portreath by Fg Offs Noel Russell and Tom Armstrong to escort frigates on 18 July 1944. TOM ARMSTRONG

# MOSQUITO SUMMER

As recalled by Rod Lewis's example, No 235 Squadron flew the Mosquito successfully as part of the Portreath Wing through the momentous summer of 1944 **WORDS:** DAVID NICHOLAS



The extra dark sea grey over sky scheme, together with D-Day invasion stripes, makes PZ474 an especially distinctive example of the modern airworthy Mosquito breed.

To help counter Luftwaffe long-range fighters over the Bay of Biscay, the RAF stationed several long-range fighter squadrons of its own at bases in west Cornwall. Among these was the Beaufighter-equipped No 235 Squadron, which had been based at Portreath alongside No 248 Squadron. In early June 1944, under the command of Wg Cdr J. V. Yonge, it was re-equipped with Mosquitos. Along with 248 under Wg Cdr Tony Phillips, which had been flying the DH type since late 1943, it formed the Portreath Wing — the first Mosquito strike wing in Coastal Command.

While 235 was fully equipped with the Mosquito FBVI, 248 had a flight of Mosquito XVIIIIs fitted with the 57mm 'Molins' gun, known as the 'Tsetse', one of which Phillips used to destroy a Ju 88C in March 1944. Yonge's squadron was still converting through the invasion period, though 248 was busy, bringing down a number of German aircraft and being involved in several successful attacks on surfaced U-boats as they tried to reach the Normandy area.

No 235 Squadron became operational with the Mosquito on 16 June, when Sqd Ldr P. K. Barnes flew its first patrol on the type. It ceased flying the Beaufighter on the 22nd. Despite the hiatus caused by re-equipment the squadron still managed to fly 32 operational Mosquito sorties by the end of June. Missions were planned as a wing,

usually comprising around 18 aircraft, and were flown without fighter escort. Six Mosquitos from 235 joined nine from 248 in providing escort for an anti-shiping attack by Beaufighters of Nos 144 and 404 Squadrons from Davidstow Moor on 27 June, though in the event no strike was possible due to the unfavourable positioning of the ships.

Two days later came 235's first successful Mosquito operation as part of the wing. Two-dozen Mosquito VIs and two MkXVIIIIs attacked a convoy made up of a tanker and six escorts, leaving the tanker on fire. The next day, 30 June, 21 Mosquitos again escorted rocket-firing Beaufighters in a strike on four naval vessels off Concarneau on the Brest Peninsula, which resulted in the 530-ton submarine-chaser UJ-1408 being sunk.

As Allied forces pushed deeper into France there was a reduction in German naval activity around the Channel and the Bay of Biscay, but the hazards of anti-shiping attacks were brought home on 4 July when Wg Cdr Tony Phillips, believed to have been in a 'Tsetse', was killed along with his navigator Fg Off R. W. (Bob) Thomson off Finistère in western Brittany. Wg Cdr Bill Size succeeded him as OC No 248 Squadron. A combined sweep on 15 June saw 235 and 248 sinking the 268-ton flak ship *Mars* off Belle-Île-en-Mer, west of St-Nazaire. A day later, Flt Lt Stan Nunn was leading a section on a strike off St-Nazaire when his Mosquito

was hit by flak and he had to return on one engine for a belly landing at Portreath.

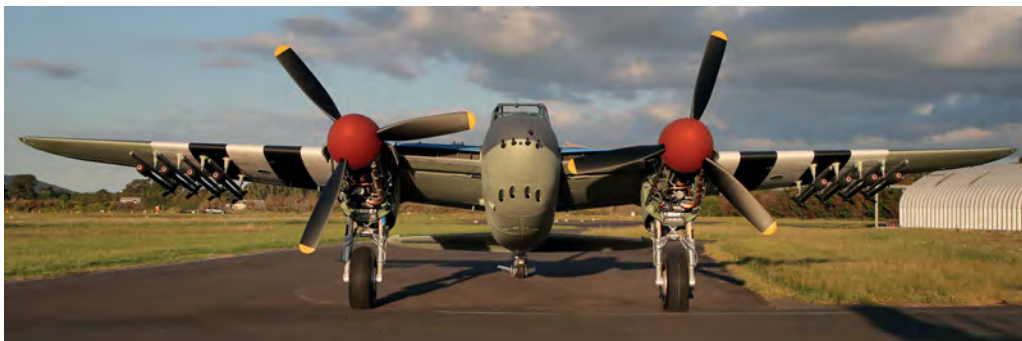
Another shipping escort led by Yonge in HR127/D on 21 June brought a flurry of action. At 13.20hrs the joint patrol encountered a formation of Do 217s, probably from KG 100, carrying Hs 293 anti-ship guided missiles. Yonge immediately led the Mosquitos in to attack, and he combined with Fg Off Green flying 'J' to shoot one down. Fg Off Collins in 'A' and Flt Lt Passey in 'F' of 248 bagged another, ➤



Mosquito FBVI HR137/3-S of No 235 Squadron with two (sadly unidentified) crews at Portreath during the summer of 1944.

TOM ARMSTRONG





**ABOVE:** At rest at Ardmore with the dummy Mk3 rocket rails and accompanying projectiles in place.

the team tracked down someone there who had the spinners and side cowlings hanging as decoration in his hangar. They purchased them, loaded them into a container with the rest of the project, and dispatched it to New Zealand for restoration, with the exception of the engines. Warren met up with Jose Flores of Vintage V-12s, who took the Merlin 25s away to be overhauled. Remarkably, these are PZ474's original powerplants, which were installed on the aircraft from new.

Of the three Mosquitos fitted out by Avspecs to date, PZ474 was the most challenging to rebuild, given the number of missing items. Nevertheless, rapid progress was

made. It seemed almost as if a production line had formed in the Avspecs hangar when, on being present for the last test flight of Mosquito TIII TV959 in October 2016, the wing arrived for PZ474. It was soon attached to the fuselage, both having been constructed by Glyn Powell's company Mosquito Aircraft Restorations, located not far from Ardmore. Work on components and the engines had begun well beforehand, so the team was in a great position to advance the Mosquito quickly. Indeed, just over two years later PZ474 was airborne.

Towards the end of 2018 the aircraft was rolled outside wearing its No 235 Squadron, RAF colour

scheme, which had been a well-kept secret. The Avspecs team researched this in depth and, as described in last month's news pages, finished it as a Mosquito that would have flown in the D-Day period. It really does look the part in its colours of extra dark sea grey over sky, and wearing the requisite invasion stripes.



PZ474 flew again at Ardmore on 13 January after more than 75,000 hours of restoration work. Following five flights totalling 2.15 hours, it landed in New Zealand for the final time on 16 January, and should be on a ship heading to the USA by the time these words are read.

Steve Hinton carried out the test flying and had nothing but praise for the team that put this aircraft together. On its last flight in New Zealand, it was photographed air-to-air, and on board with Steve was owner Rod Lewis who had come out to see his new aeroplane. When they landed, Rod said he loved flying in the Mosquito, that the workmanship was amazing, and that he can't wait to get it home and fly it himself. Who can blame him? **A**



**ABOVE:** Flt Lt Stan Nunn brings FBVI LR347/T of No 248 Squadron back from an anti-shipping attack on 16 July, after it had been hit by flak that damaged the fin and required the shut-down of the port engine. He belly-landed successfully at Portreath. STAN NUNN

**ABOVE RIGHT:** An FBVI bears the scars of a mid-air collision at Portreath in late June 1944. STAN NUNN



while a third was claimed as a probable. It is believed that the Germans in fact lost three bombers. A further patrol arrived to continue the escort, and in mid-afternoon they encountered some missile-equipped He 177s. The attack was disrupted, 248's Flt Lt Stan Nunn and Flt Sgt W. W. Scott claiming one probably destroyed.

Matters then quietened down, but the Portreath Wing rounded off July with another success. A No 248 Squadron patrol by Fg Off Yeates with Fg Off Scott and Flt Lt Rollitt with Fg Off Blanchard found a reconnaissance Ju 88H of 3.(F)/123 that they shot down, along with Fw Paul Gruner and his crew.

August proved busier. Between them the two squadrons flew 339 sorties on 35 operations during the month, mainly on Biscay patrols and shipping attacks off the Gironde estuary. A notable success for 235 came on the evening of the 9th when, shortly before dusk, a dozen of its Mosquitos led by Sqn Ldr Barnes — joined by a pair of 248's 'Tsetses' — were engaged in a shipping recce in poor visibility. Initially, little was seen except some light flak, but near the mouth of the Gironde they spotted four Do 217s carrying glider bombs. Barnes promptly led an attack, during which two of the Dorniers were shot down and the other two damaged.

In the same area on the 12th, the wing's Mosquitos sank the minesweepers M-370 and M-4204. They followed this up on the 14th by damaging the 3,370-ton tanker *Schwarzes Meer* off Le Verdon-sur-Mer in an effective wing attack. A week later the squadrons combined to sink the 637-ton minesweeper M-292 in the same vicinity.

The latter attack was just about the swansong for No 235 Squadron's Cornish sojourn. With the lack of trade in the Biscay area, on 6 September it moved north to Banff on the Moray Firth, followed four days later by 248. Another Mosquito legend was about to be born.