

Operation Wildhorn

RAF Dakota Special Operations Landing in Enemy-Occupied Poland

Many of the wartime roles played by C-47 Dakotas are well known. However, the top-secret missions flown by 267 Squadron in 1944 (officially known as Operation Wildhorn), landing deep in enemy-occupied Poland to support the Armia Krajowa (AK) – the Polish Home Army – are a less familiar use of this extraordinary aircraft.



The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight's Douglas Dakota was painted in the markings of 267 Squadron for several display seasons. **Luigino Caliaro**

OPERATION WILDHORN

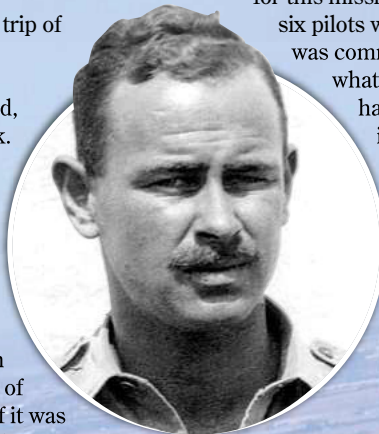
At 5.32pm on Saturday, April 15, 1944, a lone RAF C-47 Dakota – FD919 of 267 Squadron – lumbered off the runway at Brindisi, an airfield on the ‘heel’ of Southern Italy, and rumbled into the darkening sky. As ever, the Dakota was completely unarmed and for this operation it had been specially modified with the fitment of eight additional long-range fuel tanks in its interior, giving it a theoretical flight time of some 18 hours.

FD919’s pilot and captain, Flight Lieutenant Edward ‘Ted’ Harrod, was a very experienced RAF aviator who had originally enlisted as an aircraft apprentice, aged 16, in 1932. He had spent the early part of the war as a flying instructor in Southern Rhodesia, and he had been flying Dakotas operationally with 267 Squadron since 1943.

Although the ‘Dak’ was relatively slow and unarmed, Ted had developed a real ‘soft spot’ for the aircraft; he had great confidence in it and was comfortable at the controls. He had flown many Special Duties sorties

in the ‘Dak’, dropping supplies and special operatives by parachute to partisans behind enemy lines in Italy and Yugoslavia. Despite all his experience, Harrod had never attempted anything like the epic flight he was now embarking on, the outcome of which was, to say the least, uncertain.

This was to be a round trip of some 1600 miles, with a landing deep in enemy territory on a farmer’s field, nearly all flown in the dark. The selected landing field had originally been identified as suitable for aircraft in 1939 and was used briefly by the Polish Air Force before the German invasion of Poland. The field was then returned to its former use of growing crops; now half of it was sown to clover and half to beetroot.



As fields go, this one was relatively large, but sloped gently uphill towards the south and east. From the adjacent road at the north end of the field it was hard to see what was happening at the other end of it, which was obviously a good thing for these sort of nefarious activities. Harrod had volunteered for this mission and been selected, from the six pilots who did so, to fly it. Now he was committed to undertake it, whatever the outcome. He may well have wondered if he would make it back.

Sitting alongside Harrod in the right-hand seat of the Dakota’s cockpit was a second pilot who had ▶

Flight Lieutenant Edward ‘Ted’ Harrod was captain of the first Operation Wildhorn mission.

via Clive Rowley





The crew of a 267 Squadron C-47 on an airfield in Italy with another aircraft burning in the background. **Crown Copyright**



Flight Lieutenant Edward 'Ted' Harrod DFC seen later in his career as a squadron leader. **Crown Copyright**

been specially chosen for this operation. Flight Lieutenant Boleslaw Korpowski of the Polish Air Force normally flew Handley-Page Halifaxes with 1586 Polish Flight based at Brindisi. Korpowski was an experienced Special Duties pilot and, of course, a Polish speaker, who earlier in the war had been shot down over France and made a successful 'home run'.

He had flown many missions over Poland in the 1586 Flight Halifaxes, dropping supplies and agents to the resistance movements in his homeland, but his experience on the Dakota was very limited. The four-engine Halifaxes and Liberators used for missions from Italy in support of the resistance fighters in occupied territories were fine for dropping supplies and personnel by parachute, but lacked the ability to conduct drop-off and pick-up operations.

What was needed for this operation was an aircraft with the necessary range to fly to Poland and back with a worthwhile payload, completing the round trip in the hours of darkness and, most importantly, one that could land and take-off on a relatively short, unprepared strip. As was so often the case with air transport problems during the Second World War, the answer, was the ubiquitous C-47 Dakota.

The Dakota's crew was completed by Australian Pilot Officer John Wells (navigator) and Pilot Officer Noel Wilcock (wireless operator). The crew had been on standby for this special top-secret operation since mid-March. They had been given the go-ahead to

fly the mission on several occasions, only for the trip to be cancelled at the last minute.

Several times they had even been airborne en route before being recalled because of adverse weather or ground conditions at the landing site in Poland. The stress and anxiety of the waiting and false starts may well have made them feel glad that they were finally on their way.

On board the Dakota, down the back, were two special passengers – Polish couriers – Captain Narcyz Lopianowski (codename Sarna) and Lieutenant Tadeusz Kostuch, plus bags of dispatches, US dollars and fake ID books for the AK. These passengers and the bags needed to be delivered to the AK at the landing site and several, even more important, passengers were to be picked up.

The Dakota crossed the Dalmation coast at 10,000ft and set course to a pre-planned pin-point on the River Danube. Up to now the flight had been uneventful and the flying weather conditions quite good. However, after crossing the Danube and setting course for the River Vistula, the weather over the Carpathian Mountains deteriorated. The aircraft flew in and out of cloud most of the way, the crew having to rely entirely on 'Dead Reckoning' navigation.

The navigator and the wireless operator worked feverishly during this time, using the only means of navigation left in cloud – radio fixes from enemy radio stations. As they passed the Budapest area, searchlights scanned the night sky and some flak was

encountered. The weather cleared slightly after crossing the Carpathians, enabling the navigator to get an 'astro' navigation fix on the stars. This showed a higher ground speed than was expected, altering the Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA) at the Vistula. A gradual descent was started, which was planned so that the aircraft would arrive over the Vistula River at 2000ft.

Exactly on the revised ETA and at 2000ft, the aircraft overflew the pin-point on the Vistula River. From here a course was set for the target – the landing ground – navigating visually and flying a track virtually parallel to the course of the river. It was very dark and no lights or contours of the ground were visible.

Forty seconds before the ETA at the target, the pilot put the Dakota into a series of slight 'S' turns to the right and left; at the same time the downward identification light was used to flash the agreed code letter in Morse code. Almost immediately a light was flashed back from the ground with the corresponding code letter.

The aircraft did a slow circuit of the point where the light had been seen, while the Polish Resistance fighters on the ground lit the double row of hurricane lamps that they had laid out to mark the landing zone, squared off at one end by red lights and at the other end by green lights.

The Dakota crew did not know it, but two days earlier the area around their landing site



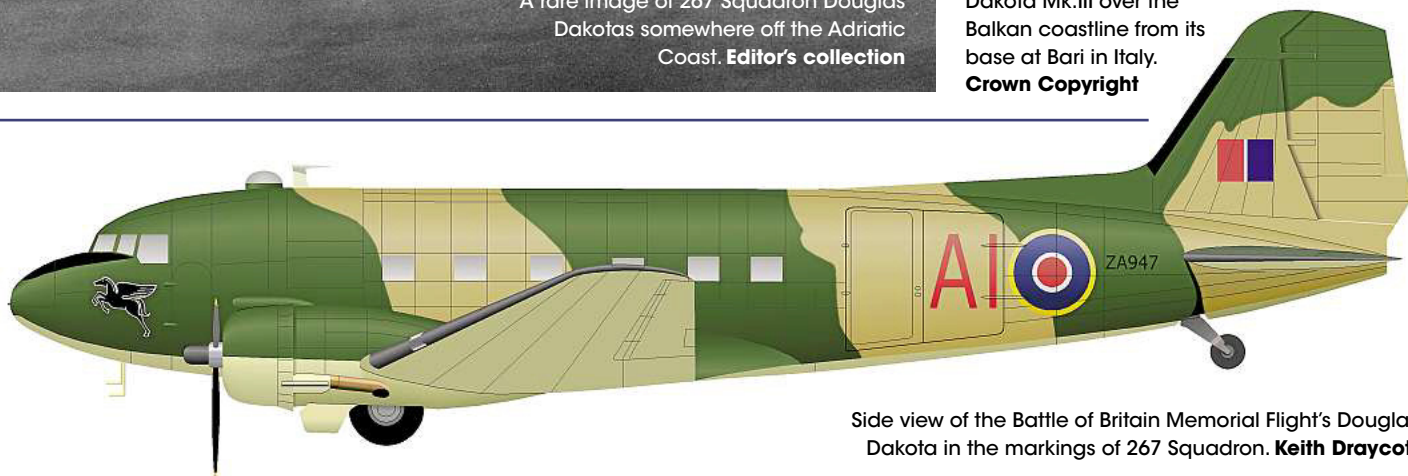
Douglas Dakotas of 267 Squadron seen at Bari in Italy in 1944. **Crown Copyright**



A rare image of 267 Squadron Douglas Dakotas somewhere off the Adriatic Coast. Editor's collection



A 267 Squadron Douglas Dakota Mk.III over the Balkan coastline from its base at Bari in Italy. Crown Copyright



Side view of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight's Douglas Dakota in the markings of 267 Squadron. Keith Draycott

had been flooded with German troops. The Polish fighters of the AK had been forced to set up a protective perimeter around the selected landing field and had fought for 40 hours and lost 42 men to keep the site secure. This was definitely not a safe area.

The briefed procedure was for the aircraft to land over the green lights between the two lines of hurricane lamps. Due to the short landing distance available in the field, it was essential to land at the minimum safe speed. Ted Harrod lined his aircraft up on the lights for a normal approach with the Dakota's landing lights on, planning to be over the green lights at zero feet. After crossing the green lights, the aircraft did not decelerate as expected in the landing flare, but continued to travel very fast towards the red lights at the other end of the landing strip.

Buildings loomed up in the beams of the landing lights, and Harrod was forced to apply full power and go around.

Something seemed to be radically wrong, but as time was precious he came in on the second approach on the point of stalling, in a tail down position. This time the aircraft landed a little heavily just past the green lights but still continued at a disconcertingly fast speed towards the red lights at the other end of the field. Harsh braking, assisted by the excessively muddy nature of the field, brought the Dakota to a halt only 25 yards from a big barn on the edge of the field.

"HE HAD BARELY 800 YARDS OF EXCEEDINGLY BAD, PLOUGHED, BOGGY LAND WITH A ROW OF TREES AT THE END OF IT WHICH CUT SLIGHTLY ACROSS HIS PATH OF TAKE-OFF."

The standard drill was then to turn around and taxi back to the green lights where the ground party should be waiting. Taxiing had to be done with the greatest care and with plenty of power on, to avoid the aircraft sinking into the mud. On arrival at the green lights it transpired that the ground party had decided at the last moment among themselves to change the arrangement and wait by the red lights so as to save time loading and unloading, with the intention that the aircraft could then simply swing round into the wind and take-off from that position.

They had therefore purposely put the green lights at the up-wind end of the landing strip so that the aircraft could take off into wind after landing, overlooking the need for the aircraft to both land and take-off into wind. This was why the landing had been so 'hairy' – it had been a downwind landing. The aircraft was taxied back to the position where it had originally stopped after landing and a large party of Polish partisans was encountered, emerging from the adjoining farm buildings.

A quick interchange of passengers was made without stopping the engines or wasting any time exchanging greetings. It took between six and 10 minutes to complete the exchange and to board the returning passengers, who included General Stanislaw Tatar, the Deputy Chief of the AK, with four other high value Polish personnel, both military and political,

who were returning to brief the Polish Government-in-Exile in UK on the situation in Poland and the resistance operations.

As soon as the aircraft doors were closed Harrod turned the aircraft approximately in to wind with some difficulty due to the boggy ground. He lined up parallel with the row of Hurricane lamps and then came the most crucial part of the whole flight. He knew that in front of him he had barely 800 yards (730m) of exceedingly bad, ploughed, boggy land with a row of trees at the end of it which cut slightly across his path of take-off.

He admitted later, quite frankly, that he never expected to be able to take the aircraft off successfully. Reaching this remote spot and landing successfully had been an exercise in its own right – getting out of here again was to be a further test of skill and courage.

Harrod switched his landing lights on, opened the throttles to full boost and waited for what he thought would be the inevitable crash to follow. It seemed an incredibly long time before the aircraft started moving forward and slowly gathered speed. The co-pilot held the throttles wide open while the captain struggled to keep the aircraft straight with rudder and aileron as the Dakota rolled from side to side in and out of holes and ploughed furrows.

The time taken to reach the last light seemed an eternity and the aircraft was still ploughing through the mud at a speed verging on the stall. As the trees loomed up in the beams of the landing lights, Harrod literally hauled the aircraft off the ground and it was still in a semi-stalled situation hanging on its props when he had to make a slight turn to the right to avoid crashing into the trees. He later said ►



Douglas Dakotas of 267 Squadron on an airfield in the Balkans with members of the partisan forces they were supplying. **Crown Copyright**



The large rear cargo door was one of the reasons for selecting the Dakota for Operation Wildhorn. **Julian Humphries**

that he could not explain how he managed to get away with this take-off and freely admitted that after he had reached a safe altitude of 5000ft, the crew shook hands all around.

After the excitement of their landing and take-off in enemy territory, the flight back to Brindisi was less eventful. No trouble was experienced except for some more flak and searchlights from the outskirts of Budapest, against which evasive action was taken. As they crossed over the relative safety of the Adriatic, the captain broke two cardinal rules of flying and allowed the crew to pass round a cigarette and a bottle of clandestine Scotch in celebration.

Dawn broke when the aircraft was about 50 miles inland from the Yugoslav coast. The aircraft touched down at Brindisi airfield at 3.45am, where a large reception of Polish and RAF officers met the aircraft. They had been airborne for just over 10 hours and had spent 15 minutes on the ground in Poland.

Representations were made to allow the same crew to complete the last stage of the flight by allowing them to go to the UK with their Polish passengers. This was approved and on the morning of April 19, 1944, the same crew, with a different co-pilot and an additional navigator, took off in a Dakota from Brindisi for a nonstop flight to Gibraltar and then, the next day, on to England to

deliver their valuable human cargo to London. This completed the last stage of what might be considered the most epic flight of the war in an unarmed aircraft.

Great credit was rightly heaped on the crew by the Officer Commanding 267 Squadron – Wing Commander E W Whittaker – for their courage and determination in successfully completing a mission of the greatest importance and hazard. The weather conditions during the operation had not been the best. The visibility was bad and only by flying below the haze was it possible to identify pin-points. As a navigational exercise alone, he reported, the crew had put up a superb effort in finding a beetroot field nearly 800 miles inside enemy occupied territory at night in poor visibility.

On Wednesday, April 26, 1944, at a specially convened investiture, Flight Lieutenant Ted Harrod was decorated with the Silver Cross and created a member of the Military Order, *Virtuti Militari*, by the Polish Commander in Chief, General Kazimierz Sosnkowski. He was also awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. It is a sad fact, though, that military intelligence subsequently reported that the operation had cost up to 75 Polish partisan lives due to German reprisals. (Ted Harrod died in 1968).



OPERATION WILDHORN II

Having proven that such a mission was possible, a second Operation Wildhorn sortie was flown some six weeks later. On this occasion, the captain was Flight Lieutenant Jim O'Donovan and his co-pilot, again drawn from 1586 Flight, was Pilot Officer Jacek 'Jack' Blocki. The Dakota took off in moonlight on the night of May 29, escorted, as was the first Wildhorn sortie, for part of the way by a pair of B-24 Liberators of No 1586 Polish Special Duty Flight.

On board the Dakota as passengers were two senior Polish officers, Lieutenant General Tadeusz Kossakowski, a specialist in armoured warfare, and Lieutenant Colonel Romauld Bielski, a sabotage expert, plus military stores, to be delivered to a disused German landing strip at Zaborów near Tarnów.

With pre-arranged identification codes and the standard flare path planned, the landing ground measured just 330 yards (300m) by 1100 yards (1000m) and could only be approached from the north-west. The pilots' briefing indicated that the only hazard was a deep ditch on the edge of the field by some woods. The Dakota landed without incident and within six minutes had taken off with three passengers on the manifest: Group Captain Roman Rudkowski (chief of air intelligence of the AK), Major Zbigniew Leliwa and Jan Domanski of the Peasants Party. The return flight was uneventful and the mission was deemed to be a great success.

OPERATION WILDHORN III

The third and final Dakota mission to land in enemy-occupied Poland – Operation Wildhorn III – was perhaps the most dramatic and extraordinary of them all. It was even more vital to the overall war effort and was the mission that came closest to failure.

The badge of 267 Squadron was a Pegasus in flight, as seen on the nose of the Battle of Britain memorial Flight's Dakota. **Julian Humphries**



The short field landing capability and tough undercarriage of the Dakota allowed the three flights to Poland to succeed, especially the last. **Dale Featherby**

On May 20, 1944, a German V2 rocket on a test firing landed in the marshes close to the bank of the River Bug near the village of Sarnaki, some 80 miles east of Warsaw, and failed to explode. The V2 was discovered by members of the Polish AK before the Germans found it and they hid it in the marshes before subsequently recovering it and transporting it in horse-drawn carts to hide it in a barn.

A team of Polish engineers and scientists from Warsaw dismantled and logged all the parts – some 25,000 in all – which included a new type of guidance system that had not been seen by the Allies before. An analytical report was produced with diagrams, photos and chemical analysis of the propellant. London first came under attack from V1 flying bombs on June 13, 1944.

The Allies knew that attacks by the V2 rockets would not be long in coming and that they were impossible to defend against. They began to put great pressure upon the Poles to release the information they had uncovered about the fuel and guidance system of the V2 and eventually a Dakota pick-up was arranged with the utmost secrecy.

At 8pm on July 25, 1944, Flight Lieutenant Stanley Culliford (RNZAF) lifted his Dakota V, KG447, off the runway at Brindisi. Culliford was one of 267 Squadron's most experienced Dakota captains and during his operational tour with the squadron he carried out many

resupply missions to partisans in Yugoslavia, France, Poland and Greece.

For this mission the Dakota was stripped of non-essential equipment and was fitted with four long-range fuel tanks, giving it a flight time of about 13 hours. Culliford's co-pilot was Flying Officer Kazimierz Szrajter from 1568 Polish Flight (who was also to act as liaison officer and interpreter with the Polish Resistance), the navigator was Flying Officer Williams and Flight Sergeant Appleby was the wireless operator. The outbound cargo was four passengers and 20 suitcases weighing 970lb. Szrajter, the second pilot, had never flown a Dakota before and his conversion to type consisted of a short cockpit familiarisation and briefing on the instruments, fuel and undercarriage systems from the captain prior to take-off.

Their outbound route took them over the enemy-patrolled Adriatic, across Yugoslavia, up along the Hungarian-Romanian border, through Eastern Czechoslovakia and into Southern Poland. The Dakota was escorted on the first leg to Yugoslavia by a B-24 Liberator of the Polish Special Duties Flight.

The chosen landing site was a small field codenamed Motyl or 'Butterfly', 160 miles south of Warsaw. Coincidentally, the Germans had landed two Fieseler Fi 156 Storch light observation aircraft at Motyl the same day, but left before the Dakota arrived. After a roundabout 600 mile route, the navigator had the aircraft positioned over the landing ground.

The code letter 'O' was flashed to the darkened field and the answering flash of 'N' indicated that it was secured for a landing. Trying to land on the dark airfield with only three small green torch lights as a landing aid (and without the benefit of modern night vision aids) proved tricky and Culliford had to abort his first approach to miss previously unseen trees.

During this abort, the aircraft's landing lights and engine noise alerted the local German garrison. Some soldiers were sent to investigate but the sound of the Polish partisan's Sten guns being cocked in the darkness around them persuaded the Germans that the best course of action was to ignore what was happening and return to their barracks.

Culliford made a successful landing on the second approach and, once the aircraft had come to a halt and been shut down, the unloading and loading of passengers and freight commenced. Although the mission was supposed to be highly secret, the Dakota crew were amazed to see what appeared to be most of the local population on the field, assisting or watching the proceedings.

Within 15 minutes the V2 rocket parts and the five passengers for the return flight were aboard and the engines were restarted. Then things started to go wrong as the Dakota refused to move even with maximum boost applied. The tail lifted off the ground but there was no forward motion. The co-pilot was ►



Douglas Dakotas of 267 Squadron on the airfield at Grottaglie in Southern Italy. **Editor's Collection**

sent to investigate and reported that he did not think they were bogged down. Culliford left the cockpit to check for himself.

He was hampered by the darkness but thought that the wheels had sunk only slightly into the ground, which seemed firm, so he concluded that the problem was caused by seized wheel brakes. The partisans now reported that the Germans were finally starting to take an interest in the noise at the field and that, unless they left at once, the aircraft would have to be abandoned and destroyed.

In view of the urgency of the situation, Culliford borrowed a knife from one of the partisans and severed the hydraulic lines to the wheel brakes in an attempt to free them, but the aircraft still refused to move. The crew knew that destroying the aircraft was fast becoming the only option, but delayed the decision to re-examine the situation.

On further investigation it was found that the wheels had sunk deeper than originally thought so the engines were shut down, a spade was quickly found and each wheel was dug out. The passengers were reloaded and the engines started again. Using maximum boost the aircraft slewed slightly to starboard and then stopped. The crew now prepared to destroy the aircraft and the wireless operator tore up his code book and placed it in a position where, when set alight, it would aid the destruction of the aircraft.

With the urgency of the mission still foremost in their minds, the crew persuaded the Poles to spend a further 30 minutes digging out the main wheels and this time, when the engines were run up, the Dakota came free. Having no brakes, Culliford taxied the aircraft in circles looking for the partisans'



On June 5, 2008, the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight's Dakota flew over the beetroot field in Matczyn where Ted Harrod and his crew had made their landing in enemy-occupied territory, 64 years before. **Crown Copyright**



The Douglas Dakota of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight resplendent in 267 Squadron markings. **Crown Copyright**

torches, which, it had been planned, would provide a flare path for the take-off, but the Poles had taken up defensive positions around the airfield and there were no lights to be seen.

Using his landing lights as a guide, Culliford lined the aircraft up on a rough heading towards a green light at the far end of the airfield. As the aircraft started its take-off run, it swung violently port towards a stone wall but Culliford was able to correct this and set off towards the green light. Ploughing through soft earth, the Dakota eventually staggered into the air just above stalling speed, only just clearing a ditch at the end of the field. They had been on the ground in occupied Poland for one hour and five minutes.

Once airborne, the undercarriage could not be raised because of the severed hydraulic

lines. Fuel and time limitations meant that they could not fly the distance back to Italy with the undercarriage down, so water from 'all available sources', including the emergency rations, was poured into the hydraulic reservoir to provide sufficient pressure to raise the wheels using the emergency hand pump.

Because of the delays on the ground, a more direct route back was needed to avoid German-occupied territories by daylight. This course took them close to areas infested by German night fighters. However, while several night fighters were spotted, none attacked the lone Dakota and they cleared the Yugoslavian coast before sun-up.

The adventure was not over yet because, on arrival at Brindisi, a strong crosswind made landing on the single runway without wheel brakes inadvisable. Fortunately a second runway, still under construction, was well positioned for the wind direction.

The undercarriage was lowered using the emergency gravity system and the flaps were pumped down, using the remaining water in the hydraulic system. A successful landing was made on the unfinished second runway at 5.50am hours, nine hours and 50 minutes after they had taken off from Brindisi.

The V2 parts were sent on to London, arriving on July 28. With other material already obtained, the parts and accompanying information gave the Allies valuable intelligence on the V2 rocket programme.

Culliford was awarded the DSO in 1944 for "numerous operations against the enemy, in the course of which he invariably displayed the utmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty". His navigator and wireless operator on this remarkable mission were awarded the DFC and DFM respectively. The Poles made Culliford a member of the *Virtuti Militari*.

Stanley Culliford survived the war and in 1968 he was awarded the Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta, a Polish resistance medal.

He returned to Poland three times after the war; on his last visit in 1989, the Poles had erected a memorial at the site of his July 1944 landing, as a tribute to his dedication to the task that night. Stanley Culliford died in 2001.

These special operations by RAF C-47 Dakotas to conduct drop-off and pick-up missions deep in enemy-occupied territory were extraordinary and completely remarkable on several levels. What other aircraft was there at that time which had the range, could carry the required load and which could land and take-off on short unprepared strips in the dark?

The incredible C-47 Dakota was the only aircraft that had all of these attributes and it proved it with the success of these special highly secret and extremely demanding operations. The aircraft, though, are just machines and it was the extraordinary courage, daring and skills of the pilots and crews who volunteered for these missions which ensured their success. In the modern world, where additional technology and night vision aids make such tasks more credible, these feats of operational flying are on a par with anything that might be attempted today; the fact that they were conducted without the benefit of such technological enhancements makes them almost incredible.

Footnote: On June 5, 2008, the Royal Air Force Battle of Britain Memorial Flight flew its Dakota ZA947 (painted in the colours of a 267 Squadron aircraft) over the beetroot field in Matczyn where Ted Harrod and his crew had made their landing in enemy-occupied territory, 64 years before. Fourteen members of the Harrod family were present, together with representatives of the RAF, the Polish Air Force, local government, the AK, the British Government and the Polish regional government, as well as local and international press. ■ *Words: Clive Rowley*



Squadron Leader Edward 'Ted' Harrod DFC photographed in 1946. **via Clive Rowley**