



OLD DAKS NEVER DIE, THEY JUST FADE AWAY....

By Henry Holden

US ARMY General Douglas McArthur, in his appearance before the United States Congress on his retirement in 1952 said: "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away." Sadly, that is what is happening to the beloved DC-3 Dakota.

Like McArthur, the Dakota was a war hero, not just in World War II, but in Korea, and again in Vietnam. McArthur was 72 when he was forced to retire. The DAKoTA (an acronym for Douglas Aircraft Company Transport Aircraft), is pushing 79 and her fate is much the same, she is slowly fading away. The powers that be

in the EU are grounding the Dakota for what they call "health and safety rules."

G-AMRA affectionately known as Romeo Alpha and G-AMPY also known as Papa Yankee, the last two passenger-carrying Dakotas in the UK, are being forced into retirement.

Romeo Alpha arrived in the UK in 1944, but was never assigned to overseas combat duty. In 1948 the aircraft played its part in supplying the people of Berlin with food, fuel and aid after the Soviet Union blockaded access to the city. G-AMRA later flew with 238 Sqn and 46

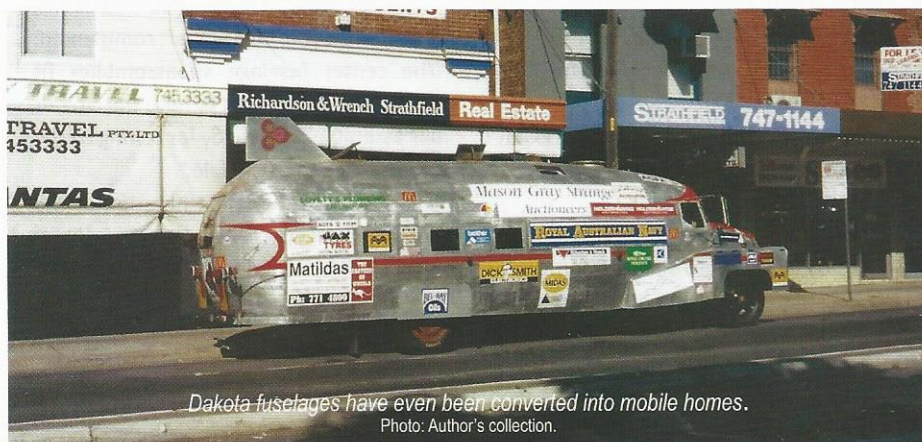
Sqn RAF before being retired in 1949, and joining British United Airways, and British Island Airways. In October 1981, the plane was sold to the Air Atlantique Group.

The 70-year-old "DAK" G-AMPY, also known as Papa Yankee (or sometimes Gampy), also arrived in 1944, and was a stalwart of Liverpool airline, Starways, in the 1950s and early 1960s. Its duties included scheduled services to London, Glasgow, Newquay and to Santander, in northern Spain, and on Britain's first package tours for Cathedral Tours.

But Papa Yankee also has a darker claim to fame. Léon (Léo) Valentin, the famous French Birdman, tragically fell to his death from the aircraft as he attempted one of his non-parachute jumps at the Whitmonday air show in Liverpool, in 1956.

Coventry-based Air Atlantique, has decided it would be too expensive to retrofit the required emergency escape slides and weather-radar systems required by new European rules for the 70-year-old Dakotas.

The DC-3's first flight was on December 17, 1935. Less than a year later, the DC-3 helped American Airlines show its first profit in years, \$4 590. By 1937, its earnings were up more



Dakota fuselages have even been converted into mobile homes.

Photo: Author's collection.

than \$1 400 000, with a 22% increase in revenue passengers. The DC-3 enabled the airlines to fly passengers only and show a profit. By 1939, 90% of the airlines in the US and most airlines in Europe were flying DC-3s.

A major reason for this was speed. Coast-to-coast air travel on American Airlines' new DST sleeper service began on September 18, 1936. American's DC-3 "Flagship Mercury Service" reduced coast-to-coast time to 15 hours westbound and 19,5 hours eastbound. That same trip in 1934 took 25 hours, 55 minutes with one change of airline, two changes of aircraft and 15 stops.

The DC-3 allowed the airlines to fly from New York City to Chicago nonstop in less than four hours, instead of the 12-hour train ride.

Just as the DC-3 influenced civilian aviation in the mid- and late 1930s, the military version, the C-47/Dakota would do the same in the early 1940s.

WORLD WAR II

Douglas delivered the first C-47/Dakota on December 23, 1941. It would have a strong influence on the outcome of the war and, because of its numbers, later in civilian livery.

American General of the Army, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II, said the four pieces of equipment among the most vital to Allied success in Africa and Europe were the bulldozer, the Jeep, the 2½ ton truck, and the Douglas C-47.

According to McDonnell Douglas records, there were 10 632 airframes built. No civilian transport before or since has been built in such numbers. The total military versions of the C-47 and variants was 10 291. This figure does not include remanufactured airframes such as the Super DC-3. Japan built 487 DC-3s, and according to one reliable source, 6 157 Russian Li-2s were manufactured, bringing the grand total to at least 17 276 airframes.

HOW THE LEGEND GREW

During the WWII, the Dakota made its bones. At times, the C-47s performed extraordinary feats. In a two week period, twelve C-47s flew 19 bulldozers, 32 Jeeps, graders, scrapers, camp equipment, arms and a crew of engineers into the New Guinea jungles to build an airfield.

Many incredible tales came out of the war. One was about a C-47 called, "Whistling Willie," an ordinary Dakota, like thousands of others flying in the China-Burma Theatre. One day it was caught on the ground during a Japanese air raid, and punctured with more than 1 000 bullet holes.

The Chinese patched up the holes using canvas from tents, and glue. Since the engines

This South African Air Force Dakota had most of its "tail feathers" destroyed when it was hit by a ground-to-air missile while en route from Pretoria to northern South-West Africa (now Namibia) in the mid-1970s. It landed safely and no one on board was injured.



were undamaged, the pilot decided to fly the plane to safe ground in India.

En route they ran into a storm that washed away most of the patches. As the patches peeled away a shrill whistle developed, later described by natives on the ground along the plane's route as the shriek of a thousand banshees. When the plane landed, the base commander asked the pilot. "Why did you bother radioing? We heard you coming 50 miles away," he said.

The DC-3 has been known to do some impossible feats. Built for 21 passengers, one routinely carried 40 in the Philippines. On flights from Australia to New Guinea, Qantas rigged its DC-3s with slings and carried 50.

Another DC-3 carried 76 people out of war-torn China, including 21 fully equipped Chinese soldiers, 15 women, 22 children, 15 Chinese civilians, the pilot, copilot, and Colonel Jimmy Doolittle, who was returning from the raid over Japan.

They removed the seats, and the passengers sat on each other's lap, or stood in the aisle. Doolittle remarked to the pilot that, if he had known he was crazy enough to take off with so many people he would have walked home. In later years Doolittle recalled, "I wasn't worried about the number of people on board, I worried about running out of gas."

On March 23, 1975, the DC-3 broke its own record, again. A Continental Air Services DC-3 flew from Ku Lat, Vietnam, to Saigon, with 98 orphan children, five attendants, and three aircrew, a total of 106 people.

ALIASES

All of the amazing feats recorded here, and for the hundreds experienced by crew members and not recorded, the Dakota earned more than 30 aliases: Americans called it the "Gooney Bird," "Dumbo," "Charlie 47," "Skytrain," and "Skytrooper."

The British called it the "Dakota" and the "DAK." The RCAF called one squadron of Dakotas, "The Flying Elephants." The Russians called it the "Li-2." NATO gave the Russian Li-2, the code name, "CAB."

Civilian pilots called it the "Three," "Old Methuselah," "The Flying Vagrant," and the "Dizzy Three." In Vietnam, it earned the sobriquets "Puff the Magic Dragon," "Puff," "Spooky," and "The Dragon Ship."

POST WAR DAKOTAS

After the war, the Dakota went back into civilian use with the major airlines. Hundreds were sold as surplus by the US Government. Eager to reduce its inventory, it sold surplus C-47s sometimes for as little as \$1 500.

Britain supplied India with food, and grain to aid its post-war recovery. "I had seen the DAK taxi," said a Dakota pilot, "and take off quite normally. It surprised me to see it back twenty minutes later. I Jeoped over to the dispersal to find the pilot complaining that the "bloody aeroplane won't climb above 4 000 feet." I poked my head inside expecting to find the normal load of 6 000 pounds of grain, two layers deep. To my surprise, I found someone had loaded a double load. The DAK had grain loaded four layers deep. We had been flying a normal gross weight of 31 000 pounds. This bloke had taken off at 37 000 pounds, and landed at not much less."

The airline industry in the US and Europe continued to rely on the DC-3 as the backbone of air commerce. Airlines increased their inventories with the war-tested Dakotas

Hundreds more were sold as surplus to entrepreneurs who often formed "fly-by-night" airlines (which led to poor maintenance with often fatal results). Captain Len Morgan, when flying for the airlines said: "We ate our lunch, a box of sandwiches with a small salad and a Dixie cup of milk. We would throw the leftovers out the window."

In Europe the story was much the same. In the British Isles, at least 310 ex-Dakotas from the RAF passed through the hands of almost every airline. Romeo Alpha and Papa Yankee were just two of over a thousand that became the mainstay of both scheduled, non-scheduled and charter companies in Europe for over two decades. British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) was the largest civilian



Photo: Author's collection.

user having 85 in its fleet and British European Airways was a close runner-up with 71.

The Dakota carried the commercial traffic in more than 120 countries, for three decades. West Germany received 87, Greece 104, the French Air Force flew 148, Canada 246, India 142, Cambodia 95, Denmark 16, and Japan 18 (after 1955) and the South African Air Force flew 90.

After retirement from passenger service, it continued to haul freight for another two decades. The DC-3 was so prolific that it was unlikely there is an airport where it has not landed.

The durability of the DC-3 is a phenomena often discussed. Pilots who have flown the DC-3 have said: "You can crash a DC-3, but you can't wear it out." The facts speak to this truth.

A Capital Airlines DC-3 had a mid-air collision over Milwaukee. It lost five feet of one wing and more than four feet of aileron, yet it made a safe landing without any injuries.

In 1957, a Frontier Airlines DC-3 was in the middle of a storm when it suddenly dropped 4 000 feet. Passengers felt a sudden jolt but the plane continued through the storm and landed safely. Once on the ground, the crew discovered the extent of the damage: A 12-foot section of one wing was missing. A search later found the piece of the wing on the side of the mountain it had grazed during the storm.

Eastern Airlines took delivery of NC21728 on April 11, 1939. It logged 51 398 hours over a 13-year period, then Eastern sold it to North Central Airlines for \$35 000. It spent another

31 634 hours in scheduled service (through to April 1965) and logged another 1 843 hours as a VIP aircraft for North Central. North Central's NC21728, "Old 728," logged 84 875 hours before its retirement in May 1975.

During its career, "Old 728" had 136 engine changes, its landing gear was replaced 550 times, and it used over 25 000 spark plugs, to burn eight million gallons of avgas. This DC-3 had taxied more than 100 000 miles and carried 260-million passengers in its 36 years of service.

Although many "old timers" had their share of bumps and bruises, "Old 728" never suffered even a minor mishap. Today, it is sitting quietly at the Henry Ford Museum, in Dearborn, Michigan.

On August 27, 1981, at 4:04 p.m., Provincetown Boston Airlines (PBA) broke North Central's Hobbs record. PBA's N136PB flying as Flight 1940, from Hyannis to Boston, with 18 passengers aboard, reached 84 876 hours.

PBA went out of business in 1988, and the high-time DC-3 took a long rest in a hangar. In August 1993, it had 91 001,4 hours on the airframe. It reappeared in 2010 for the 75th anniversary of its birth, in its original 1937 Eastern Air Lines configuration, livery and original NC18121 c/n 1997. It had 91 400,2 hours. It has flown the equivalent of 52 times to the Moon. Another way to look at it is it has been flying for over 3 808 days, the equivalent of 10,5 years, a record only another Dakota will ever match. Each day it flies it breaks its own

record adding a little more to this insurmountable achievement.

A Delta Air Lines pilot said: "It flew like a leaf, responsive to every mission. It bounced up and down in turbulence, bored through thunderclouds, skidded on snow covered runways, but it did the job. We can't help having a soft spot for them.

"No matter how many trips out, they always came chugging home with you. The newer planes are faster, and have all the latest gadgets on them. I doubt if any will ever be more dependable than the old DC-3."

Back in 1988, this author had the privilege of interviewing Arthur Raymond, Vice President, Engineering, Douglas Aircraft. He said: "People keep asking me if we had any idea this airplane would last fifty years? Of course we didn't! Our biggest decision was the question of designing the fuselage tooling for 25 airplanes or 50. We took a deep breath and we said let's go for 50. Off that tooling we built 300. We made another set of tooling, three plants, and the rest is history.

"We didn't have any idea what was evolving. Looking back, we were right to be conservative. We didn't know we were building a legend."

Romeo Alpha and Papa Yankee are destined to continue building the legend of the DC-3/Dakota, despite what the EU can throw at them.

Escape slides! What next? Land a Dak on its belly and you can step out of the fuselage without any trouble....