

It's Hard to Keep an Old Soldier Down

The resurrection of *Tico Belle*

BY JIM BUSHA





As I sat comfortably in the belly of *Tico Belle*, a Douglas-built C-47 that had entered military service in 1943, I couldn't help but wonder what the men who had been here before me must have felt sitting inside this same fuselage more than 66 years ago. All of them carried a variety of supplies, weapons, and ammunition that totaled more than half their body weight, slung beneath their parachute packs. Most of them must have wondered about the uncertainty that lay ahead on that dark night of June 5, 1944, as they crossed over the English Channel on their way to occupied France.

An uncontrollable urge came over me as I stood up, just as the hundreds and hundreds of paratroopers had done so many times before inside this same aircraft. I reached up and grasped a hold of the well-worn rusty-



CHRIS MILLER PHOTOS



colored steel cable that ran along the upper half of the fuselage. As I ran my bare hand along the braided steel line, I thought of the brave men who had clipped their parachute harness lines to it, about to jump into ink-black skies over enemy-held territory.

Although we were securely parked on the grass, with the engines silent and the propeller blades standing at attention, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what it must have felt like to fly through flak-filled skies in a slow-moving transport, with cold whistling winds swirling through the interior of the fuselage, nervously waiting for the signal to jump on the eve of D-day.

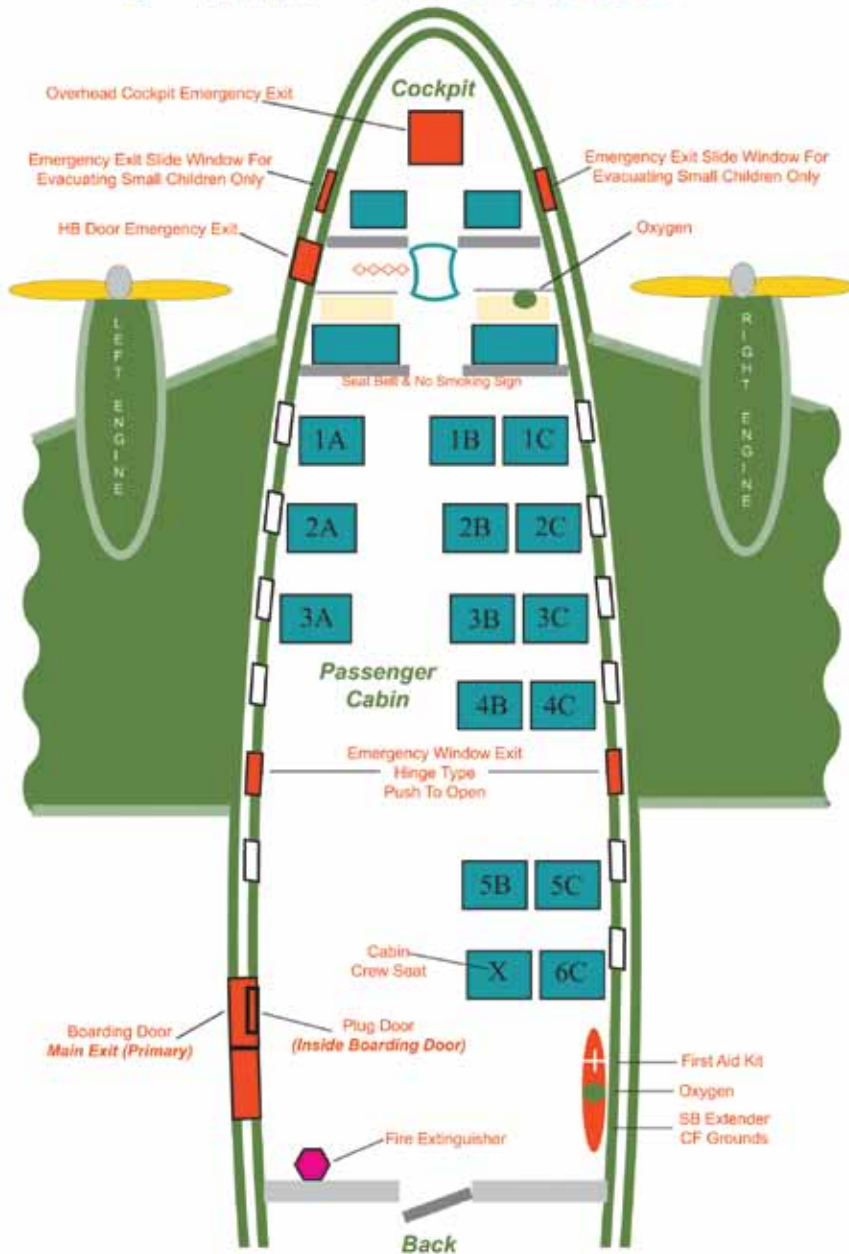
Thankfully, through the efforts of the Valiant Air Command (VAC), you can relive this part of history in Titusville, Florida. Not only has the VAC documented stories from the brave soldiers who were there on that infamous day, but more importantly it has preserved a historic piece of our nation's treasure in the form of a C-47 that was used to transport these men to many of the battlefields over Hitler's "Fortress Europe."

C-47 #591

"The story of our veteran aircraft, tail number 42-100591, begins when it first saw life in 1942," said retired Col. Terry Yon, public relations officer for the VAC. "Built by the Douglas Aircraft Company of Long Beach, California, our C-47 was given the USAAF [United States Army Air Forces] serial number of 42-100591." It was accepted by the USAAF on November 6, 1943, and was eventually sent to England, where it was assigned to the 9th Air Force, 9th Troop Carrier Command, 437th Troop Carrier Group (TCG), 84th Troop Carrier Squadron.

The Douglas C-47 Skytrain was one of the most significant weapons of World War II. In fact, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, Allied supreme commander, listed it as one of the top four along with the atomic weapon, the jeep, and the bazooka. The C-47 that was purchased by the USAAF was the military version of the civilian DC-3 airliner. The personnel door on

C-47A "TICO BELLE"



the left side of the fuselage was made much larger to accommodate cargo loading. The main cargo door opened as a clamshell door, allowing larger vehicles like jeeps with trailers or a 37-mm anti-tank gun to be loaded inside the fuselage.

Many of the C-47s had their tail cone removed and were fitted with a glider-towing hook to facilitate the towing of troop-carrying gliders like the Waco CG-4 used during the D-day invasion. As a supply plane, the C-47

could carry more than 6,000 pounds of cargo with a full fuel load. As a troop transport, it carried 28 soldiers in full combat gear. As a medical transport, it could carry 14 stretcher patients and three nurses. The C-47 was produced in greater quantities than any other World War II Army transport, and it continued to serve in both Korea and Vietnam with the U.S. military.

The VAC's C-47, like so many of its cousins, was painted in the standard olive-drab paint scheme that it

Restorers of Tico Belle

The following is a list of volunteers who participated in the repair and restoration of the C-47 Tico Belle (N3239T), belonging to the Valiant Air Command Warbird Museum.

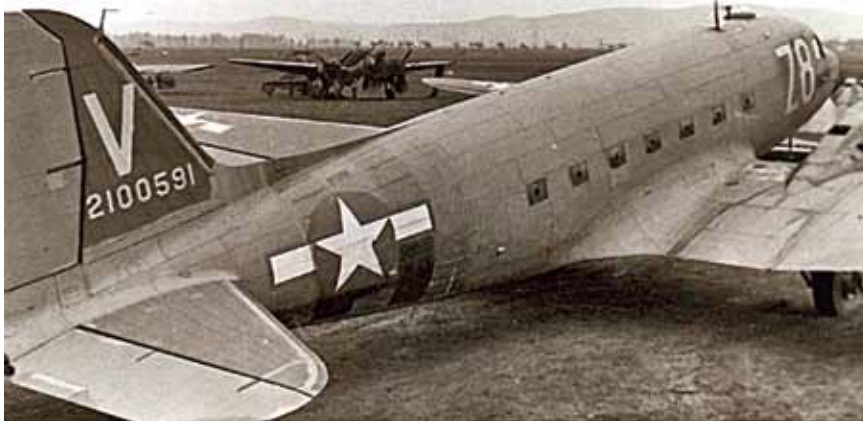
Lester Badger
 Phil Bettencourt
 Bob Bixby ("Doc")
 James Bond
 Chuck Chokanis
 Mark Christen, A&P
 Ron Dixon
 Jack Dorrell
 Josh Eiting
 Serge English
 Tom Etter
 Ivan Gomez, A&P
 Dick Hart, A&P
 Tom Hay, A&P
 Dr. Leo Kerwin, A&P-IA, director that procured our C-47s (three total) from the Royal Danish air force
 Paul Lincoln
 Norm Lindsay, A&P
 Don Lockler
 Mike McCann
 John McCoy
 Harry McNamara
 Al McQueen, A&P-IA
 Lloyd Morris, VAC commander
 Bob Munsey
 Ron O'Conner, A&P
 Jim Owens
 Pete Peterson, A&P
 Tom Phillips
 Sam Randolph, A&P
 Tom Reilly, A&P-IA
 Don Riggle
 Jim Towe

The following were also major contributors but have gone west.

Gordon Briggs, sheet metal worker of the highest caliber
 Irv Bubeck, A&P, longtime guiding IA, and great friend
 Dick Fields, A&P, part of the original crew ferrying N3239T from Denmark to Florida and dedicated worker
 Mike McDonough, primary crew chief and historian for the *Tico Belle*
 Dick Webber, longtime friend, always ready to help with any task
 Ralph Zegal, welder of our ground support equipment

Thank you to one and all!

Robert E. James
 Maintenance Officer
 Valiant Air Command Warbird Museum



COURTESY TERRY YON

Actual war time shot of C-47 #591.

currently wears along with the black and white “zebra stripes” it wore during the D-day invasion.

“Our C-47 took up residence at RAF [Royal Air Force Station] Ramsbury and ultimately participated in some of the fiercest battles of World War II,” said Terry. These included such notable events like the Normandy invasion in June of 1944. In September it saw action during the airborne attack on Holland as part of the Market Garden Operations. It continued to soldier on by hauling supplies to France and Belgium and evacuating wounded to England during the particularly hectic period known as the Battle of the Bulge. In February 1945 the group moved to an advanced landing ground in France and eventually participated in Operation Varsity—towing infantry troops in two gliders at a time. These missions were extremely important, as the soldiers on the ground were able to capture bridges over the Rhine River, allowing a stream of Allied troops to pour into Germany. By Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day) in early May 1945, #591 was still earning its keep by evacuating prisoners of war and displaced people to relocation centers. By November 1945 the group returned to the United States, with many military airplanes either sold or scrapped. Thankfully #591 was placed into storage and was returned to full duty, participating in the Berlin Airlift from June 1948 to May 1949.

By 1950 the Norwegian air force took delivery of #591 as part of the lend-lease

program. In 1956 it was transferred to the Royal Danish air force before being acquired by the VAC in 1982. The VAC lovingly cares for #591 and named its C-47 *Tico Belle* after the Titusville-Cocoa Airport where it is based.

“We flew *Tico Belle* to many, many air shows,” said Terry. Unfortunately in 2001, after returning from an air show the landing gear collapsed upon landing in severe wind conditions. The damage was quite extensive, which included the destruction of both landing gears along with damage to both engines, propellers, wings, and fuselage. “We didn’t know if our volunteer organization was up to the task of such an exhausting and expensive undertaking,” Terry said. “It was quickly decided that because of #591’s history, battle heritage, and the untold stories it carried inside its fuselage, we owed it to #591 so that future generations could realize and understand the sacrifices that were made for our freedoms.”

The Restoration of #591

As the VAC’s maintenance officer at the time, Robert “Bob” James was tasked with a huge decision. “Do we scrap it, or do we keep trying to get it airworthy?” he said. Bob was no stranger to aviation or to the C-47 and knew all about its history. Bob’s father, Joseph, was part of the famous barnstorming era and was a member of the Gates Flying Circus. Bob flew with his father a lot growing up and eventually took his first DC-3 ride on a Pan Am flight from

Miami. Enamored with the DC-3, Bob followed the aviation footsteps left by his father and wound up earning his airline transport rating. Back in 1982 Bob was up to his elbows in C-47s as the VAC acquired three of them, including #591. Through his tenure with the VAC, Bob has worn many different hats, including maintenance officer, transportation officer, operations officer, commander, and back to maintenance officer. And at 72 years young, Bob has seen a lot in his life when it comes to damaged airplanes. But nothing prepared him when his eyes took a walk over *Tico Belle* back in 2001.

“I was one of the guys who got it certified and flew it for 14 years,” said Bob. “It nearly broke my heart when I saw the *Belle* lying on its belly. The main gears were ripped off, both engines and props were damaged, the nose was pushed up with portions of the control column damaged, and the tailwheel was ripped out as well. Most people would have thrown up their hands in surrender and walked away from it. But we here at the VAC are not like most people!”

After deliberating for about a month, the members of the VAC decided that there was just too much military history to allow the scrapper’s torch to tear the C-47 apart. The VAC took a leap of faith and raised more than \$150,000 in donations. Now it was time to put the *Belle* back together.

“We wound up buying another C-47,” said Bob. “We would use this new airplane as the parts airplane to fix up ours. We thought we could use the center section of the newly purchased C-47, but it became obvious that the configuration had just enough difference that it wouldn’t work. That cost us some extra time and effort, but in time we got it all sorted out. We focused our attention on the wings, flaps, cockpit, engine mounts, gear, and the tail of the airplane. For nine months, we had two A&Ps [airframe and powerplant mechanics] working on the section where the wing intersects the fuselage and all the way back to the tail area. There was an awful lot of effort in the tail area because of the tail wheel being ripped



out during the accident.

"I even got involved, learning from the old-time sheet metal workers as I drilled out old rivets and bucked new ones in the hot Florida summers. We worked for no more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time inside the fuselage, because not only were we overheating and sweating to death, but the racket inside the fuselage was enough to blow your eardrums out! Believe me, there has been many a tear shed along with bloodshed and a little cursing from all of the nicks, cuts, and abrasions we received as we worked for eight years restoring the *Belle*. Every scar that every volunteer carries is a souvenir from all the hard work that was laid out for so many years to see this airplane fly again."

With the *Belle* taking shape and back on its gear, the real ordeal came when it was time to reattach the wings. Bob claims that it took two full days to get one wing attached due to sling issues. The second wing went back on in a matter of hours.

"There was a great learning curve that was developed during that time," said Bob. "But the hardest part was when it came time to stripping the old paint off. We spent three full weeks with seven or eight of us continuously stripping the paint using 1,500 pounds of walnut shells shot through compressed air. You could go maybe an inch or two every few seconds, as we had to wear a helmet with forced breathing air and heavy gloves. Of course, it was always blazing hot!"

With new paint applied, including invasion stripes and battle flags from the various engagements it participated in, the *Belle* was ready to have its

engines installed. With the Pratt and Whitney 1830-92 engines remounted, the VAC was fortunate to have a prop shop in Miami donate a pair of freshly overhauled Hamilton Standard constant-speed propellers. By June 2009, the *Belle* was ready to take to the skies once again.

"It was music to my ears to hear those engines come to life again," said Bob. "It was very emotional for all of us, especially me as I advanced the throttles, seeing 40 knots, then 45, and then slowly lifting the tail up as I coaxed the *Belle* into the air. After several maintenance flights with minimum crew, and satisfied that the airplane was safe to fly, we took all of our mechanics and volunteers up as a show of thanks for all the hard work and

efforts. Unfortunately some of those volunteers had already 'gone west,' as their memories were carried along these flights as well.

"For me the C-47 has such a tremendous history. It was a veritable truck of the air, hauling people, parts, fuel, ammo, and whatever else could be stuffed inside. My hat goes off to all of the engineers and designers of this airplane. I am extremely humbled, given the opportunity to fly this airplane, especially knowing its military history. We here at the VAC are merely custodians as we encourage others to follow in our footsteps so we can pass this torch known as *Tico Belle* onto them while they help secure our nation's history for future generations." ✈

WARBIRDTOONS

by Jean Barbaud

<http://jeanbarbaud.blogspot.com>

