



Let's Talk About Puff the Magic Dragon

by Ralph J. Ferrusi

Recently we watched a DVD about the 75th anniversary of D-Day/ Normandy. There was modern-day color footage interspersed with 1944 archival footage. At times there were several restored olive-drab C-47's with invasion stripes taxiing, taking off, and in the air.

At one point one of the C-47 pilots, an older guy, commented that he had “flown across the Atlantic.” FLOWN ACROSS THE ATLANTIC!!! In a 76-year-old twin-engine, relatively small, World War II transport plane??? Ya gotta be kidding me!!! A bit of on-line research confirmed that several C-47’s had indeed flown across the Atlantic for D-Day’s 75th Anniversary.

Over the years I’ve written about “glamorous” World War II fighters and bombers—Mustangs, B-17’s B-24’s, B-25’s, and F-82’s—for Boating on the Hudson and Beyond, mentioning “Kit” Carson’s Nooky Booky IV, “Bud” Anderson’s OLD CROW, John Lander’s Big Beautiful Doll, Johnny Godfrey’s Reggie’s Reply, Don Blakeslee (he did not name his Mustang), and, my off-mentioned Don Gentile’s Shangri La, and Ratsy Preddy’s CRIPES A’ MIGHTY, not to leave out the legendary B-17 Memphis Belle. But, not until now, the Plain Jane C-47.

I’ve always been aware of C-47’s/DC-3’s, but, to put it one way, never had a strong urge to sit in the cockpit of one, or, to actually fly in one. After watching the DVD, I’m curious. How long ago was the C-47/DC-3 developed??? How many were produced??? How many different air forces did they serve in??? How many are still flying???

Hang on to your hats: here comes The Gooney Bird (and, Puff the Magic Dragon...):

If I had to come up with one word to describe the DC-3/C-47, it would be “venerable”. My Webster’s defines venerable as “worthy of respect or reverence... because of great age” and “hallowed by...historic association”.

The C-47 and the DC-3 have always been “joined at the hip”. To tell the C-47’s story, we have to start with the Douglas Aircraft Company’s prototype DST (Douglas Sleeper Transport) that first flew on December 17, 1935, coincidentally on the 32nd anniversary of the Wright Brothers’ flight at Kitty Hawk.

In the early 1930’s United Airlines began service with the Boeing 247, and Boeing peevishly “refused to sell any 247s to other airlines until United’s order for 60 aircraft had been filled.”

So, Transcontinental and Western Airlines (TWA) called Donald Douglas and asked him to come up with a plane that would allow TWA to compete with rival United’s 247.

First came the 1933 DC-1, then the successful—albeit with a too-narrow cabin—1934 DC-2. American Airlines CEO C. R. Smith, after an apparently very long phone call, persuaded Douglas to design a sleeper aircraft to replace American’s Curtiss Condor II biplanes (Yup: biplanes...). Smith sweetened the pie by saying American would buy 20 planes.

It took two years for the DST to morph into the DC-3, and the rest, as the saying goes, became

history. Passengers could now fly eastbound across the U.S.—with the wind—in 15 hours and three refueling stops—instead of several short daytime hops combined with—ya gotta be kidding—overnight train trips!!!

The 14-cylinder Pratt & Whitney R-1830 Twin Wasp radial engine became the engine of choice for the DC-3 and most C-47’s, and was also used by most DC-3s later converted from military service.

The C-47 was developed as a military version of the DC-3, and first flew on December 22, 1941. 10,174 C-47’s were built, and it served in 90 Countries!!! It’s naval designation was R4D. It was a major player at Guadalcanal, the Battle of the Bulge, and flew The Hump, and, after the war, early on “played a major role” in the Berlin Airlift. In Europe, the C-47 and the C-53 Skytrooper, a specialized paratroop variant, towed gliders and dropped paratroopers.

During the July 1943 invasion of Sicily, C-47s dropped 4,381 Allied paratroops, and dropped more than 50,000 paratroopers during the D-Day invasion of Normandy. About 2,000 C-47s were Lend-Leased to the Brits, and were called “Dakotas”.

It flew in Korea and Vietnam, and in the US Air Force until 2008: 67 YEARS!!! Counting its DST/DC-3 time, 73 years: if that ain’t “venerable”, what is???

There were, by my count, 51 production variants of the C-47/R4D. To put this in perspective, consider the Mustang: A, B, C, D, and H... Also consider that one of the C-47 variants, the AC-47 Spooky, aka “Puff the Magic Dragon” was a Vietnam-era GUNSHIP, with three 7.62 mm General Electric miniguns—electric-powered, rotating barrel Gatling-style weapons that could fire up to 6,000 rounds per minute—through openings on the left (pilot’s) side of the aircraft!!! WOW: who needs Intruders and Wart Hogs???

As of this writing, and Wikipedia’s latest info, there are, impressively, 148 airworthy C-47’s, and 214 statically displayed. The Air Mobility Command Museum at Dover, Delaware Air Force Base has C-47A Skytrain “Turf Sport Special”, serial number 42-92841 on display in a hangar. This museum began in 1986 with this C-47 that had been rejected by other museums as “beyond salvage”. It was “immaculately” restored, with D-Day invasion stripes, to when it served with the 61st Troop Carrier Squadron in World War II.

From the museum’s Website: “Its extensive combat history is meticulously documented with photos, artifacts, and memorabilia donated by former crew members...and [it]...was the centerpiece of a reunion in July 1990, that included the D-Day pilot, aerial engineer, and three of the 82nd Airborne Division paratroopers who dropped into St. Mère-Église on 6 June 1944—46 years earlier.”

I wrote about my very interesting visit to the Air Mobility Command museum in the June 2018 issue of Boating on the Hudson and Beyond.

2000 C-47’s flew on D-Day in 1944, and as part of the D-Day 75th-anniversary commemoration in June 2019, 14 American C-47’s flew, including That’s All, Brother; Betsy’s Biscuit Bomber; Miss Montana; Spirit of Benovia; D-Day Doll; Boogie Baby; and N47E Miss Virginia.

Betsy’s Biscuit Bomber, and D-Day Doll: move over CRIPES A’ MIGHTY!!!

Post World War II, the C-47 served in the USAF Strategic Air Command from 1946-1967, and the USAF 6th Special Operations Squadron flew the C-47 until 2008 (!!!). Thousands of surplus C-47s were converted to civilian airline use, some flying until 2012. Many were used as private aircraft.

Several C-47 variations were used in Vietnam, including advanced electronic-warfare variations. C-47’s were used by the 9th Special Operations Squadron to conduct psychological warfare operations over South Vietnam and Laos (!!!).

OK, here’s some nitty-gritty C-47 specs:

Wingspan: 95 feet 6 inches.

Length: 63 feet 9 inches.

Height: 17 feet.

Service Ceiling: 24,000 feet (or, 26,400 feet).

Normal Range: 1,600 miles.

Maximum Range: 3,800 miles!

Weight: 31,000 pounds.

Cruising Speed: 160 mph.

Maximum Speed: 224 mph at 10,000 feet.

Power Plants: Two 1,200 horsepower Pratt & Whitney R-1830 radial engines.

Crew: Three.

Cargo: 6,000 pounds, or 28 airborne troops, or 14 stretcher patients and three attendants.

EC-47s were also operated by the Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Air Forces. And, as mentioned, there was the AC-47 Spooky gunship, aka “Puff the Magic Dragon”, that didn’t exactly “frolic in the autumn mist”...

Long live the Gooney Bird!

Get in touch with Ralph at: rjferrusi@frontiernet.net

