



Historic Wings: Legendary WWII plane ready to soar over Normandy again

First D-Day plane restored, set for return

By Sara Samora The Herald-Zeitung Mar 21, 2019



A piece of American history sits in the Central Texas sun with a message to Adolf Hitler painted in bright yellow.

What makes this World War II plane — a Douglas C-47 — different from others, is its past.

It was the plane that led over 800 other aircraft for Operation Overlord, the codename for the Allies invasion of Normandy. Written on the plane for all of Europe to see are the words, “That’s All Brother.”

“This was number one,” Ernie Lee, a member of the Central Texas Wing, a unit of the Commemorative Air Force said. “This was the lead aircraft and it was called, ‘That’s All Brother’ as a message to Hitler, like he’s done, he’s finished.”

Entering the Douglas C-47 on a cool afternoon, the temperature inside the plane warms. When touching its ceiling, there is a scalding sensation.

However, when the 75-year-old plane is in the skies, the temperature drops.

“It gets hot in there when it’s just sitting on the ground,” Lee said. “And it’s freezing in there when it’s flying, so there’s never a good time to be on the plane.”

Lee is also a retired Air Force veteran, serving 22 years during the Vietnam era. Locals may know Lee better as the “Bard of the Blanco;” he’s also an award winning poet and novelist.

Lee said he has a new novel coming out soon, and that maybe he’ll be interviewed for it.

“But right now, this,” Lee said as he pointed at the C-47, “is the star.”

Later this year, that star will return to the site of its former glory — Normandy.

Wartime service

According to History.com, the planes carrying paratroopers and glider troops allowed the allies to land behind enemy lines on June 6, 1944, now known as D-Day.

“This is an airplane that was a pathfinder during the invasion,” said Clint Epley, a Navy veteran and member of CTW-CAF. “It was a pathfinder because it had a radar.”

Epley also said “That’s All Brother” carried the first load of troops — specifically the 101st Airborne.

Inside, there are bucket seats and a static line, which troops would hook their parachute cord to, go out the door, and pull the ripcord.

“You couldn’t really sit comfortably,” Epley said. “Each of the paratroopers that were going on this thing had 80 pounds of equipment on them, hence the bucket seat.”

Epley said the paratroopers had a long, uncomfortable flight on their way to Normandy.

“You’ve got so much stuff on you that just getting in a door was a challenge,” Epley said.

Saved by a number

According to FlyingMag.com, TAB was decommissioned, “and switched hands between about a dozen owners.” In 2007, a Wisconsin man named Darrel Massman owned the plane and later sold it to Basler Turbo

Conversions, in Oshkosh, Wisc. From there, the plane was left in a junkyard and waited for its turbine conversion.

“They were stealing parts off of it for other airplanes because they put turbo prop engines on them,” Epley said. “Now turbo props are much more modern engines. It’s basically a jet engine with a propeller and they’re selling them all over the world today.”

What kept TAB from being pulled apart and lost is its tail number: 42-92847.

FlyingMag.com reported that a USAF historian named Matt Scales was researching the pilot who flew TAB, Lt. Col. John M. Donalson, and asked Basler’s president Randy Myers about the serial number, and if the plane was in the company’s inventory.

Lee said they ran the tail number through the computer.

“And lo and behold this is the first airplane that went across Normandy,” Lee said.

FlyingMag.com also reported that a journalist was doing a story about Wittman Regional Airport and its businesses, and reached out to Myers. The reporter took Myers’ word when he said, “There’s probably a better story to be told. It’s the airplane that was the lead plane into Normandy.”

The article was published along with the photos Scales provided, and then Myers started receiving calls about purchasing or donating the historic aircraft from him, FlyingMag.com reported.

A legend reborn

But it was the Commemorative Air Force who got ahold of TAB, and together with Basler, began restoring the plane up in Wisconsin in 2015.

“We got busy trying to help with the restoration and raising money for the restoration,” Lee said.

Donators included Boeing (“a big contributor,” Lee said) and descendants of World War II veterans.

They also did a Kickstarter campaign and raised over \$328,000.

“For a \$100 million plane, that ain’t bad,” Lee said.

When asked about the plane’s worth, Lee said, “I don’t think you could buy it for that. I mean the first plane over Normandy? Ain’t no telling what it would be worth.”

Epley said it took a lot of money, and it took millions to restore the airplane.

“I mean it was junk,” Epley said. “It was just sitting in a field with trees growing up through it, and had no wings, it didn’t have a tail on it. So it was beer cans waiting to happen.”

While TAB was in Wisconsin being worked on, members from CAF-Central Texas Wing unit would travel up state and aid on the restoration.

“The crews we sent up mostly were tasked with taking down all of that glue and insulation that was inside the airplane,” Epley said.

A new mission

CAF had a goal to return the plane to the air, and fly over Normandy in time for the 75th anniversary of D-Day.

Mission accomplished: They got it done in less than three years.

“That’s pretty quick,” Epley said. “A normal restoration, at least for us, would take 10 to 12 years.”

How many man-hours?

“I don’t even want to go there,” Epley said.

The goal however, was not only to restore the plane in flying condition, but to return it to its original look. Thus, CAF depended on old photos to get everything from the color of the painted words to imperfect black and white stripes, even purposely missing a quotation mark of TAB’s logo on the left side.

“So when we repainted the plane, we did exactly the same way, with the look as close as possible to what it looked like the day it made history,” Lee said.

The New York Times reported that TAB made its first flight in years on January 31, 2018. Shortly thereafter, the plane made its way to San Marcos, where the plane permanently resides. But the CTW unit doesn't own it, Epley said. The Commemorative Air Force owns the plane, while they are renting it.

TAB will start its Spring Tour on March 28, first stopping in New Orleans, then Lakeland, Fla., then Birmingham, Atlanta, Dover, then Washington, D.C. From there, it will make its way to Normandy to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of D-Day, where it will once again carry paratroopers who will jump out and land where WW II soldiers once did.

Back home

The plane will return to San Marcos in August, then will have its maintenance done before it will fly and offer rides to visitors.

"You'll have little things that always go wrong," Epley said. "You got a 75-year-old airplane. It needs tender loving care."

Epley and Lee will not be traveling to Normandy for the ceremony, and have yet to ride on That's All Brother.

"But that I will," Epley said. "Trust me I will."

Lee will take his first flight on March 28, and said he's looking forward to it. However, it wouldn't be his first ride on a C-47, since he was in the Air Force and they were used during Vietnam.

And Epley said the C-47 would be around forever.

“They sang, ‘It’s in the Smithsonian, prime location, because it is the beginning of commercial aviation.’”

But the Central Texas Wing has something the Smithsonian does not:
That’s All Brother.

“They don’t have this,” Lee said. “We do. We’re proud of it.”