



Flying history

What is it about the sight and sounds of a Douglas DC-3 that universally evokes such nostalgia? Is it the distinctive wheeze of its 14-cylinder Pratt & Whitney radial engines as they first strain to turn those giant three-blade propellers? Is it the familiar puff of white smoke from behind the cowl as the engine signals it's about to come alive? Or perhaps it's simply our innermost desire to return to the glory days of aviation. ■ This same desire was strong enough to bring together a group of pilots in late July with an offer to fly a DC-3 from Prescott, Arizona, to Oshkosh for EAA AirVenture 2000. ■ Ten pilots of all ages, experience levels, and diverse occupations and backgrounds made the trip. Some were friends. There were two father-and-

*Oshkosh-bound
in a DC-3*

BY PATRICK MATHEWS



son teams. But most were strangers brought together by their common desire to fly across the country in history's most enduring airplane and to fulfill a lifelong dream to see and experience Oshkosh.

Our captain and chief pilot was Prescott aviator Billy Friedman, a young man with an unusual passion for nostalgic aviation. Unlike his contemporaries, most of whom follow the secure, measured career paths of a traditional commercial pilot, he has chosen to devote his time to the care of warbirds and perfecting his love of formation flying in them. It was his kindness and entrepreneurship that brought our group of enthusiasts together.

Aboard were Jim Gombold, a Boeing 777 captain for American Airlines, and his son Steve. Steve is a recent graduate of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Also along was Mike Liversidge, now retired after 37 years as an air traffic controller, with time in New York Center and assorted FAA jobs in the West. Liversidge still loves all aspects of aviation, and in his spare time he can be seen piloting his Cessna 150 in the clear skies above northern Arizona. Then there was Dick West, a retired orthopedic surgeon from Seattle. West recently moved to Prescott's higher and drier altitudes and now utilizes his precision touch in the construction of his own homebuilt. He says he'll fly it to Oshkosh when it's



Our group posed with the DC-3 immediately before our departure from Prescott, Arizona (top). Billy Friedman, in the left seat, confers with the airplane's owner, Dane O'Brien (above).

eventually finished, but adds reluctantly that he'll only do so if he feels the finished product can stand up to the scrutiny of that tough crowd.

Also along was Jeff Duncan. Duncan is a flight instructor at Embry-Riddle who had thoughtfully invited his dad to share the experience. Our next generation of aviators is in good hands if Duncan is any example. He acted as our navigator and supervised the en route

refueling and ramp work. A more dedicated individual would be hard to find on any excursion.

Douglas Aircraft in Long Beach, California, built our aircraft, N53ST, and delivered the C-47A, in paratrooper configuration, to the Army Air Corps on April 19, 1943. It became an instant workhorse initially assigned to the 12th Air Force in the Mediterranean theater of operations in North Africa, seeing



We stopped and performed some light maintenance on the Gooney Bird in Hays, Kansas (top).
Air-to-air photography captured the bird in flight near Nebraska (above).

action during Operation Torch. Then when the D-Day invasion of Normandy came, the airplane delivered paratroopers behind enemy lines. It returned home in September 1945 and was sold as surplus by the War Assets Corporation in February 1946. But fate had other plans for N53ST. Soon it was carrying passengers for American Air Express and Delta Air Lines. With the postwar economic boom and prosperity at home, more and more people were flying. Now designated as a DC-3, the aircraft was a reliable, quick, and comfortable way to travel. By 1952, Hoover Vacuum Company was looking for executive transportation and N53ST was converted again. By 1980 its flying days appeared to be over when it was bought for the Ada Aircraft Museum in Oklahoma. But in 1985 it proudly took to the air once more in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the DC-3 by flying from Long Beach to Amsterdam, Holland.

It languished again for a few years back at the Ada museum before fate once again intervened. This time it was rescued by a Colorado-based owner, Dane O'Brien, who lovingly restored the aircraft to the superb condition it is in today. O'Brien was at the controls as we climbed out of Prescott's Ernest A. Love Field and set a course of 053 degrees on a beautiful cool Arizona morning. O'Brien and his father, Clifford, had purchased the DC-3 to serve their business and to enjoy on their frequent fishing trips to Baja and to the secluded lakes of eastern Canada.

Our journey to Oshkosh would take us eight hours of flying and we'd travel 1,265 nautical miles. Along the way we'd all get a chance to fly in the right seat and to experience just how much of a handful this airplane was to maneuver. It soon gave us all a new appreciation for the pilots of that era and of the physical demands required to operate the Gooney Bird.

After his turn at the controls, Gombold said, "While I love the romance and nostalgia of flying the DC-3, I would never do this today. This is hard work! Flying down here in weather, dodging thunderstorms, and struggling to keep those big engines tuned—no thanks. Give me the 777 any day."

Soon we were leaving the high country of northern New Mexico. The forests and mountains gave way to the plains. We had planned our first stop in Hays, Kansas, and they were expecting us.

If you've got it, flaunt it. So we made a

couple of low approaches over the field and soon were lined up for Runway 15. There was a brisk southwesterly wind gusting to 25 knots, but the Dakota took it in her stride, and we soon rolled to a stop at Eagle Aviation.

Albert and Priscilla Hunt own the FBO. Their family goes back several generations in Hays. Priscilla's 82-year-old dad, Mark Pfeifer, who saw action in the Pacific, sat in the shade of an open hangar and kept our group entertained with his own brand of humor and rural hospitality. Soon the word was out, and a number

of the locals came by to see this rare sight—a DC-3 in desert camouflage sitting on the ramp in flat, corn-green western Kansas. For a few old pilots, this chance happening provoked memories of years long past. So in a salute to them and our new friends in Hays, we made a sweeping 270-degree turn after take-off and said our good-byes from our low departure. Below, they waved and watched as we headed toward the northeast. Next stop Grinnell, Iowa.

Pleased with the results of our barnstorming in Hays, we decided that we

should announce our arrival at Grinnell in the same way. The low approach had the same effect. This time the friendly folks at this small quintessential Iowa airport had prepared a barbecue. With the airplane parked on their little ramp, almost obscured by the tall surrounding corn, we ate local bratwurst and hamburgers while the locals looked at the aircraft in wonder. Darrell White, a kindly white-haired gentleman and owner of Grinnell Aviation, said, "We normally pump this much gas a day, but never into one airplane." He then picked up his three-year-old granddaughter, Rumer, and took her on board for a personalized tour of the DC-3. Meanwhile, local lawyer and airplane enthusiast Rick Bierman rushed to his hangar and now had positioned his red Piper J-5 Cub in front of the Gooney Bird for photographs.

Reluctantly, we said our good-byes and promised to stop again on the return trip. White, Bierman, little Rumer, and their friends waved as we taxied out. Their smiling faces and handsome white Akita dog were clearly visible below as we flew over the airport and turned north for Oshkosh.

Not far to go, now.

Below us the country changed again. At 3,500 feet, orderly farms and fields, meandering rivers, and neat Norman Rockwell towns made a spectacular sight in the soft late-afternoon sunlight.

Soon the Mississippi River, not so mighty here, peacefully slipped beneath us. We had crossed into Wisconsin.

Now, in anticipation of our arrival into Oshkosh, there was a flurry of activity. Approaching from the southwest we were to use the warbird arrival procedure. These were our instructions: "First, find the lake, then look for the town of Fond Du Lac. Descend to 2,800 feet; overfly Fond Du Lac. Now direct to the island that sits right off the western shore of Lake Winnabago. There it is! OK, now give them a call at Wittman Regional."

"Douglas DC-3, cleared to land, Runway 27."

Too high! Nothing left to do but slip it in. The crowd loved it.

We had arrived at Oshkosh. And we had arrived in style.

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