

'Get us a Liberator'

David Hastings describes the extraordinary privilege of joining the crew that flew a B-24 across the Atlantic



This year marks the 20th anniversary of the flight of B-24 Liberator 'Diamond Lil' across the Atlantic and around Britain – an event which itself commemorated the 50th anniversary of the first such flight in 1942. I was privileged to be part of the crew for that 1992 flight as I was at the time serving as Governor of the Memorial Trust of the 2nd Air Division USAAF in Norwich, which looks after their unique Memorial Library in the Forum. The Trust was approached by the East Anglian Tourist Board to see if we'd be willing to help with their 'friendly invasion' celebrations in 1992, half a century on from the arrival in Great Britain of the 8th US Army Air Force

We were delighted to assist, but it soon became obvious that unless we had a B-24 Liberator flying in the UK, then the B-17 Flying Fortress would get all the credit, so the Trust Chairman, the late Tom Eaton, instructed me – the only pilot Governor – to find a B-24 and bring it to Britain.

I tried to explain this would not be easy but you don't argue with your Chairman so the work began. It was a huge challenge, and after several trips across the Atlantic and a false start with the Collings Foundation we found that the Confederate Air Force (now the Commemorative Air Force) were willing to help us with their famous Liberator 'Diamond Lil' as long as I

The crew of 'Diamond Lil' at Fort Worth Texas prior to take off. Left to right: David Hughes, Ray Krottinger, Starr Stone, Al Stricklin, Kathy Martin, Henry Brand, Sam Mangrum and kneeling, David Hastings



Right: the author piloting 'Diamond Lil' over the Atlantic. Note 467th shoulder patch

Peter R March



Below: the crew enjoying supper at the Discovery Lodge, Iqualit, Frobisher Bay



Approaching the awesome mountains of Greenland. Not the place for a forced landing



would be part of the crew. My wife thought I was mad at sixty-one to fly a fifty-year-old bomber across the Atlantic but for me it was the chance of a lifetime, especially as I had known the 2nd Air Division and their B-24s as a schoolboy during the war. The planning for the six-week tour was immense, and we had to raise £100,000, but it all worked out in the end and the support we received from the Royal Air Force and the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Strike Command, Air Vice Marshall Sir John Kemball, was tremendous.

Late May 1992 saw me at Meacham Field in Forth Worth, Texas, to meet up with the great American CAF crew, get checked out on the B-24 and become an honorary Colonel in the Confederate Air Force at the beginning of this unique adventure. We had a crew of nine, four pilots, three engineers and two girl scanners, plus a BBC television crew so there was not much spare room. I was proud to be the only AOPA UK pilot in the crew. The huge group of 2nd Air Division USAAF veterans who saw us off on June 1st brought tears to our eyes and reminded us of the tribute we were paying to them with this once-in-a-lifetime flight.

I wonder how many are still alive to celebrate this anniversary?

Our first nightstop was Minneapolis, the home of one of our main sponsors, Northwest Airlines. Here I met my old friend, wartime USAAF pilot Lt Al Dexter of the 389th Bomb Group at Hethel, near Norwich, who with his crew had adopted me as a schoolboy during the war. Also there was his wife Pat, who gave her name to his B-24 'Pugnacious Princess Pat'. The head of the airline asked what we were eating the next day on our flight into the Arctic, and when he saw our tiny lunchboxes he said he would send over a catering truck before we left early next

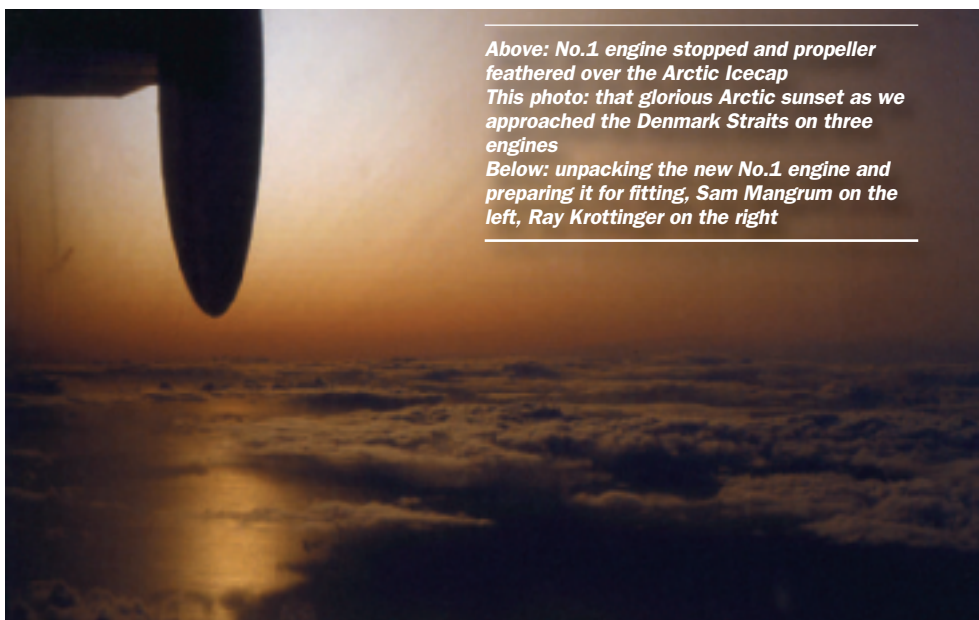
morning. Our departure certainly caused a stir among the many airline passengers as they saw a wartime B-24 taxi past them. We made our first max weight take-off at 58,000 lbs with a full fuel load of 3,000 gallons and crossing over Lake Superior I had to endure the standard CAF joke on new pilots, with the engineers all running aft to upset the trim. Then we entered the stunning scenery of the Arctic which was certainly new for me, before we finally landed at the tiny airport of Iqaluit on Frobisher Bay after nine hours of flying. After a comfortable night at a very expensive airport hotel and an even more expensive two-hour warm-up in a heated hangar for Diamond Lil we were off again early next day with another max weight takeoff for the most challenging part of our 4,500 mile journey, the crossing of the Greenland ice cap. A Canadian air traffic controller summed it up so well when he said goodbye with: "Okay, you guys are on your own now".

Our position reports were passed on via airliners flying high above us, and at one point I was in full flow about us being a US Liberator bomber coming back to England when Ray Krottinger reminded me that I was talking to a Lufthansa 747.

The mountains of Greenland were absolutely stunning from 9,000 feet but then suddenly our enjoyment was shattered when we noticed that our No 1 engine was shedding oil, which meant we had to shut it down and feather the propeller. Next we had to make a decision: do we turn around and fight the headwinds all the way back to Iqaluit or continue on three engines for another five hours and land at the NATO base at Keflavik in Iceland. We decided that the safest bet was to carry on, although I'm not sure that the BBC crew we had on board felt the same way. En route we enjoyed more of the superb Northwest Airlines lunch boxes and coffee, as well as a beautiful Arctic sunset, before in the late evening we were cleared to descend for a landing at Keflavik, and were greeted by an army of television crews and radio reporters after a very exciting day.

The US Navy were superb and Diamond Lil was soon towed into the warm Orion Squadron hangar where we found that the problem with our No 1 engine was major, and a replacement engine would have to be flown out. We worked through the night, helped by the US Navy, and it was embarrassing to discover that I was the only pilot who was not also a qualified engineer. But within three days the new engine was on and checked, and we were ready to start on the Atlantic crossing, escorted by an RAF Nimrod from 120 Squadron at Kinloss.

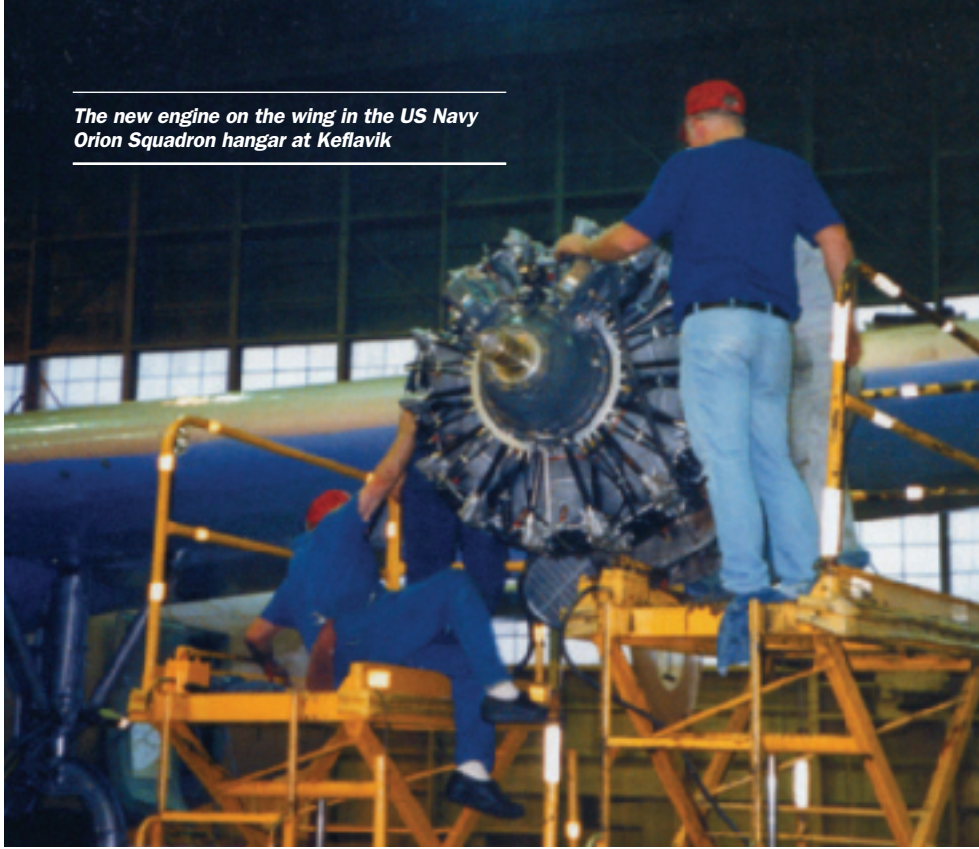
The sun shone as the base turned out in force to see us depart with our Nimrod escort close up to starboard. Halfway across a second Nimrod joined us, with



*Above: No.1 engine stopped and propeller feathered over the Arctic Icecap
This photo: that glorious Arctic sunset as we approached the Denmark Straits on three engines
Below: unpacking the new No.1 engine and preparing it for fitting, Sam Mangrum on the left, Ray Krottinger on the right*



The new engine on the wing in the US Navy Orion Squadron hangar at Keflavik



home to Norfolk as a tribute to the bravery, sacrifice and friendship of the 2nd Air Division USAAF. Northwest Airlines had also flown over my wartime pilot Lt Al Dexter and his wife Pat, and if you'd told him in 1944 that I would be a pilot, fly a B-24 across the Atlantic and then fly with him again in 1992 he would have laughed at you, and so would I.

So many people wanted to see over Diamond Lil including youngsters who just wanted to touch a B-24 that a tired crew stayed on until it was dark before we all retired to the Norwich Sport Village with our duty done.

During her six week stay in the UK we flew twice at low level over all the old fourteen bases of the 2nd Air Division as well as attending the major air shows before Diamond Lil returned home to Fort Worth. It seems barely believable that 20 years have passed since this never-to-be-repeated, never-to-be-forgotten flight. ■



Left: the Nimrod and Liberator crews at the US Navy flight briefing for the Atlantic crossing

Top: the wonderful sight of the 120 Squadron Nimrod escort as he closes up to starboard
Below: the historic formation as 'Diamond Lil' arrived back home at Norwich International Airport. It was indeed 'welcome Home Yank'
Bottom: in formation with with a P47 at the Boscombe Down International Air Tattoo



the world's press on board, and they asked him to get closer in for their photographs, which was impressive to say the least. We were still enjoying the Northwest snacks. Finally after five hours the coast of Scotland came into view and we did a low-level formation flypast over Kinloss to thank the Squadron before landing. It was amazing to think that if our Liberator, AM927, had not had a landing accident on her delivery flight she would have flown and fought with the Squadron

in 1941 – another unique link. We were greeted by a piper and cleared customs before taking off for the final three-hour leg to Norwich. Over Lincolnshire on a perfect evening the final gift from AVM Sir John Kemball appeared in the form of three Jaguars from RAF Coltishall which climbed up to formate on each wing and the tail to relive the famous painting 'Welcome Home, Yank' which the 2nd Air Division USAAF had presented to the Royal Air Force several years before. Landing at Norwich Airport after a formation fly-past we were amazed to see huge crowds waiting to greet us, and we were deeply touched by their welcome and that of the Trust Chairman, Tom Eaton. We could barely believe we'd achieved the dream of bringing a B-24





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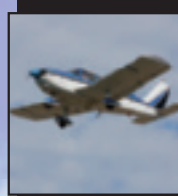
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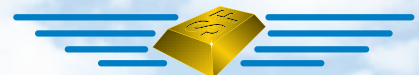
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