

Duxford D-Day Magic

Neil Wilson experiences the thrill of the 75th D-Day celebrations

As a lifelong aviation enthusiast, I was aware of the Daks Over Normandy commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings for some time. Our Strut, the Wessex Strut at Henstridge in Somerset, is twinned with EAA Chapter 1 in Flabob, California, a liaison that came about through meeting Jon Goldenbaum. Jon is an overseas LAA member and president of Chapter 1, as well as being the owner of Consolidated Coverings, which produces poly fiber at their facility on Flabob Airfield. Jon has been quite a regular visitor to the annual LAA Rally, helping Aircraft Coverings demonstrate the poly fiber products.

Jon and a fellow Chapter member Barry Fait were planning on bringing two Dakotas over as part of the flight of C47s and DC3s intending to take part in Daks over Normandy, so this naturally presented myself and fellow strutters, Vic Southan, Bill Morley and Graham Howard with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to support them and be a small part of this incredible event.

I had arranged to meet Jon at Duxford on Monday 3 June, and having established that he was on site, we agreed to meet at 3.30pm after he and others had completed a practice formation and run across the airfield at parachute drooping height.

In the meantime we walked along the flight line fence to photograph and watch the various goings-on in preparation for practice flights and the mass formation flight to Normandy on 5 June, passing over Le Havre and the historic UK Drop Zone at Ranville, where

Top right The mural on the bulkhead of *Virginia Ann*, the paratroopers who were dropped in to secure defences prior to the start of the seaborne invasion.

Below right The two aircraft that formed on us in our vic – *Betsy's Biscuit Bomber* nearest, and *The Duchess of Dakota*.

Below From left, Vic Southan, Jon Goldenbaum, Neil Wilson and Bill Morley alongside *The Flabob Express*, Neil having presented Jon with a Wessex Strut polo shirt.

paratroopers using round military parachutes, would jump in honour of the troops who did likewise in 1944. The Dakotas would then proceed to a landing at Caen-Carpiquet Airport.

The aerodrome was not very busy public wise, in fact considering it was an all ticket day, as would be the main event days on Tuesday and Wednesday, it was a very relaxed affair. The usual P-51 Mustang and Harvards were flying, as was Richard Grace in the superb Hawker Sea Fury.

We met Jon at the appointed time and went out to the flight line to see *The Flabob Express*, their well-known Flabob based DC-3. Looking very smart in its white and red colour scheme, it did seem strange to recall that the previous time I had seen it was at Flabob, four years earlier. And now, even at 75 years plus of age, it had travelled via the old North Atlantic ferry routes to join us at Duxford. We went inside and sat in the nice comfy seats of the cockpit. *The Express* as it is known, had flown some very notable people in the war – it is said that Winston Churchill used the aeroplane, and Field Marshall Montgomery certainly did.

Wessex Strut

I was wearing my red Flabob polo shirt – if I couldn't wear it today when could I? As a gesture of our link between LAA Strut and EAA Chapter, I presented Jon with a Wessex Strut polo shirt that he agreed to frame and put on the wall in their clubhouse.

After our flight line tour, which included an inspection of a very high interior spec'd DC-3 called *Spirit of Benova*, we walked back to the control tower area and left Jon to attend a briefing regarding a 15-ship formation practice that was due to start around 6.30pm. This was to be a dummy run for the formation flypast that was planned for the D-Day celebrations.

He said he would ask the owner if we could take a ride, and if so, he would text me. Thankfully for us the answer was yes, so Jon suggested that we met at the tower at 1750.

We got there early to make sure we didn't miss such a fantastic opportunity, and Jon rang again to say, "Everything has been moved forward 10 minutes, can you be there at 17.40?" I replied, "Are you kidding, we've been here and not moved since 17.00!"

We took a minibus to the aircraft, this time to the other Flabob-based aeroplane, *Virginia Ann*. This we were told was the lead aircraft for the 82nd





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Airborne US Parachute Division on D-Day, and also participated in other airborne assaults after the invasion – a very historic machine.

We were to be the fourth aeroplane to take off and to be the lead aircraft in the second vic of three. Sitting and filming by the open door as it started up was exhilarating, seeing the prop reluctantly start to turn and then fire up successfully with a waft of blue smoke. We taxied out, took off and headed Westwards before turning towards Cambridge, as one of the locations we were due to overfly was the US Forces cemetery at Maddingley.

As we climbed to about 1,500ft, two Dakota's formed up on either side, *Betsy's Biscuit Bomber* and *The Duchess of Dakota*. I have been fortunate to do quite a bit of formation flying, whilst taking pictures for LAA flight tests, but seeing a Dakota on either wing, their green camouflage schemes with invasion stripes, was something else: the noise, the smell, and the vibration of the engines and fuselage all added to this most memorable experience.

We could see the other vic of three in front of us when we took turns to visit the cockpit. As Jon is an ex-USAF pilot on F-5 and F-111's, he was giving our pilot, in the left-hand seat, help and advice. While airborne there were four Harvards buzzing over and

Below 'Our' aircraft for the trip was *Virginia Ann*, a D-Day veteran with the 82nd Airborne US Parachute Division.

Bottom It must be a very long time since so many Dakotas have gathered at Duxford. What a sight!

around us, giving photographers the opportunity to photograph the formation. Inside the aeroplane on the main bulkhead leading into the cockpit was a mural of airborne troops sitting waiting for their turn to jump, a nice touch to the décor and history of this aeroplane. I couldn't help but wonder what they must have been thinking.

We routed via the old RAF base at Bassingbourne and I took lots of pictures and video. As ever, all good things come to an end, and we came around to land. A stream landing was safely achieved, in the end totalling 14 aeroplanes, as one had a technical issue prior to take-off.

Thus ended one of the most exciting and greatest flights I have ever been privileged to be part of. We took yet more pictures and thanked our hosts for letting us experience their historic machine.

Over the next few days, having watched the television footage of the D-Day events and seeing the veterans tell their stories, I better understood the enormity of the events that took place in Normandy 75 years ago, I think the expression 'honoured to have flown in *Virginia Ann*' is certainly an understatement.

Thank you to Jon and the whole team for letting us share this wonderful opportunity. ■

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