

BY WESTERN TO NORMANDY

RECREATING HISTORY, THE D-DAY SQUADRON SET OUT FROM THE USA FOR FRANCE TO HONOR THE 80th ANNIVERSARY OF THE INVASION. ALSO, THE AUTHOR HAD A CHANCE FOR AN INCREDIBLE FATHER/SON AVIATION EXPERIENCE

BY TIM SAVAGE



Vintage Western baggage label utilizing the stylized Indian.

Gathering the Gooney Birds at Oxford, Connecticut.

It was the 70th Anniversary of the invasion of Europe — D-Day — and we were standing on some of America's most hallowed ground, the National American Cemetery on the bluffs overlooking Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. My twelve-year-old son Job and I were on our first trip overseas together on a "D-Day to the Rhine" escorted tour. As I looked across the field of over 9000 graves, we heard the unmistakable rumble of radial engines in the distance. Shortly, a Douglas C-47 appeared along the coast heading towards Pont Du Hoc. I looked down at Job and commented on how amazing it would be to fly over the beaches in a C-47 and he nodded in agreement. At the time I was on a hiatus from Warbird aviation trying to rebuild my companies

after some bad business decisions and the impacts of the great recession... so it was just a fleeting thought. I later learned the C-47 we spotted was from the United States and was piloted by my good friend from my T-6 formation days — Skipper Hyle from the National Warplane Museum in Geneseo, New York.

Over the next three years, Job and I made several trips to Europe on aviation or military history adventures and the idea of taking a C-47 to Europe didn't die. Then, the D-Day Squadron announced their 2019 75th Anniversary trip. Having reentered the Warbird scene with the purchase of our A-26 Invader and TBM Avenger since that first trip to Normandy, I had fleeting thoughts of buying a DC-3/C-47 or attaching

ourselves to another crew by providing financial support but the timing was not right and business commitments prevented me from seriously entertaining the idea. Nevertheless, Job and I made the trip to England and France to see the mass formation of transports and the commemorative drops. In the back of my mind, I thought the dream of ever doing this was over as I figured the 75th commemoration was the end of the organized DC-3/C-47 trips across the Atlantic.

I was wrong. In 2022, Eric Zipkin announced that he was organizing another D-Day Squadron to cross the Atlantic for the 80th anniversary of D-Day. I had sold my company and now had the time to dedicate to making this happen. The only

problem was finding a suitable airplane, and there was a distinct lack of aircraft for sale. One finally came onto the market in November 2022, and I traveled to look at it. Ultimately, it didn't work out and I already felt we were a little behind the eight-ball so I just pushed the idea to the back of my mind. After all, I had enough on my plate with a bunch of new airplanes in the collection, right? At Oshkosh 2023 I learned that an airplane that had made the trip in 2019 was going to hit the market. I spoke to the broker and told him I would buy it. I felt like we might be able to still get it ready in time... but as it turned out that airplane was held up on court proceedings and in the end was destined to be for a year. Back to the drawing board.

While these years had passed by, Job was well on his way to becoming an accomplished aviator. In the middle of the

Covid shutdowns, he decided he wanted to learn to fly. He knocked out his private pilot and tailwheel endorsement by the fall of 2020 and decided he wanted to pursue a rotorcraft career. By the spring of 2022, he had his helicopter CFI/CFII under his belt and started working as a helicopter instructor. He decided that he didn't really want to provide primary helicopter instruction and began to focus on fixed wing... rapidly getting all of his ratings and began transitioning through our Warbirds from the L-2 to the L-19 to the T-6. In March 2023, the Reno Air Race Association announced that September would be the end of air racing at the Nevada site.

This was a huge disappointment for many fans, no less so than for Job who had visions of racing there at some point as we had attended the last few years with

our T-6 Pace Pilot friends Rick Siegfried and Rob Sanderson. For Job, the race to Reno was on beginning that March. He had about 30 hours in the T-6 but knew he needed many more — plus a formation card — in order to race. He began exercising the T-6 whenever he wasn't providing instruction, obtained his formation credentials in May, and flew from Florida to Reno in June to participate in the Pylon Racing Seminar. Duly checked out for racing he spent the summer doing tailwheel instruction and a few unique Warbird ferry opportunities.

All of this background information will be helpful later in the story, but it brings us to the T-6 pits at Reno when Mark Clark stopped by with information on a DC-3 he was just listing for sale. The availability of the airplane and the fact that my son was now in a position to actually fly it with me

The former Western Air Lines DC-3 on its way to Normandy.