

PROPLINER HAVEN

THIS SOUTH AFRICAN AIRFIELD HOUSES ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST SIGNIFICANT COLLECTIONS OF VINTAGE PROPELLER-DRIVEN TRANSPORT AIRCRAFT

BY RALPH M. PETERSEN



Sometimes when bad things take place, they result in good things appearing. My wife and I were on an around-the-world cruise last year when the Suez Canal was essentially shut down due to the ongoing Middle East conflict. This resulted in a diversion around Africa with a number of visits to South African ports, which presented an opportunity to visit the "Propliner Haven" located at Rand Airport.

We departed the ship in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, flew to Johannesburg, and then continued onwards by car to Rand Airport, which is located in the nearby suburb of Germiston. I had previously contacted retired South African Airways (SAA) Captain "Flippie" Vermeulen and we stayed overnight at his aviation-themed Dakota Lodge, which is located on the airport. The lodge is a great place for any aviation enthusiast and is just a short distance away from the Harvard Cafe, which offers up a full array of meals. The obvious reason for the visit was to attend

the South African Airways Museum and check out the other Propliners located on the airport.

The Dakota Lodge is an attraction in itself with many aviation artifacts on display. The original 1930s-era SAA hangar is attached to the lodge and was full of interesting aircraft, including SAA Museum DC-3 ZS-BXF along with Springbok Classic Air DC-3 ZS-KEX and Beech E18S ZS-OIJ. Springbok Classic Air is part of the Springbok Group of Companies, which is owned by Capt. Vermeulen and was created out of his love of vintage aviation that began when he undertook the conversion training to a DC-3 at age 19. While ZS-KEX hasn't flown for 30+ years and was disassembled, ZS-OIJ is airworthy and is flown regularly to airshows. Built in 1959, it is the last airworthy example in southern Africa and was featured in the 2008 film *Amelia* and is still in the colors it wore during the filming.

One might ask why Rand Airport is home to so many vintage Propliners and

the answer lies in the fact that it is home to Springbok Classic Air, Phoebus Apollo Aviation, and the SAA Museum. All of these organizations operated Propliners in the past and, unlike many other airports around the world, there has been no effort to "clean up" the field. As I began researching material for this article, it became obvious that Capt. Vermeulen has been a key player in the preservation of these aircraft. If not for him, most of the Propliners, including those at the museum, would have not survived into the 21st Century. Unfortunately, with the shutdown of SkyClass Aviation DC-3 and DC-4 operations in late 2017, other than Beech ZS-OIJ, none of the airport's Propliners are flying.

While Capt. Vermeulen was out of town during our visit, he had arranged for brothers Tim and Caleb Homan to give us an airside tour of the airport the next morning. Our first stop was a short distance from the Dakota Lodge where Flying Dutchman Foundation DC-4 ZS-AUA and SAA Museum DC-4 ZS-BMH

Lebombo were parked in a grass field. During the short walk to the DC-4s, we passed Fokker F-27-500RF D2-ESN, which appeared complete and in decent condition despite being stored at the airport for years.

ZS-AUA was a forlorn sight parked in the grass, having been stripped of all paint and missing two engines along with its flight controls and other bits and pieces. Currently owned by the Flying Dutchman Foundation, it was delivered to SAA in March 1946 as ZS-AUA *Tafelberg*. Sold to the South African Air Force (SAAF) as 6901 in January 1966, it was leased back to SAA from 1968 to 1970 as ZS-AUA before finally being retired by the SAAF and sold to Aero Air as ZS-NUR in August 1995 (many of the surviving Propliners have a direct SAA/SAAF connection). It was acquired by the Dutch Dakota Association (DDA) a few months later and carried the South African registration until December 1996, when it was reregistered PH-DDS. Painted in 1950s-era KLM colors, it was a frequent visitor to European airshows until new rules and regulations imposed by the Dutch government made its operation by DDA untenable. The DC-4 was leased to Springbok Flying Safaris in January 2001, with the *proviso* that it be operated in Europe through 2003. Reregistered ZS-AUA in November 2002, it remained in basic KLM colors with its "The Flying Dutchman" fuselage titles being replaced with "The Flying Springbok" in September 2003.

Flown to South Africa after the 2003 European airshow season, the DC-4 was operated on sightseeing flights by Springbok and later while on lease to Rovos Air and SkyClass Aviation. Airworthy at least through 2008, ZS-AUA was retired and moved to the SAA Museum Airpark in December 2010, where it remained until sold to the Flying Dutchman Foundation in December 2013. Founded by four members of DDA, the foundation planned on making the DC-4 airworthy by 2017 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of KLM's first Amsterdam to New York flight in 1947. The #1 and #3 Pratt & Whitney R-2000 engines along with instruments and flight controls were removed for overhaul and are reportedly stored in a nearby hangar.



Flippie Vermeulen putting on a spirited display with the modified Beech E18S ZS-OIJ, now the only remaining round-engine flyer at Rand Airport. (Timothy Homan)

The Fokker F-27 has now become somewhat of a rarity and this example appears to be in good condition although it has not flown in some time.

Although painted in vintage KLM colors as late as 2015, the aircraft has been stripped to bare metal and the project has been dormant for some time.

DC-4 ZS-BMH *Lebombo* is owned by the SAA Museum and was the last DC-4 off the Douglas Santa Monica production line in 1947. It's painted in 1950s-era blue and white SAA colors and still retains a 50-passenger interior. Along with DC-4 ZS-AUB *Outeniqua*, which is on display on the airport at the SAA Museum Airpark, it operated passenger tourist charters until late 2017. Rather than discussing the history of each museum aircraft, I believe it would be more useful to examine some aircraft histories in conjunction with the history of the SAA Museum.

SOUTH AFRICAN AIRWAYS MUSEUM

While not founded until 1986, the SAA Museum can trace its roots back to 1972 when the South African Railways Museum acquired Lockheed L-18-08 Lodestar ZS-ASN *Andries Pretorius*. With the exception of wartime service, ZS-ASN was operated by SAA from 1939 to 18 March 1955, when it made its final flight with the airline. The railways museum didn't have the facilities to accommodate the aircraft and donated it to SAA in 1973.

The second aircraft added to the airline's collection was de Havilland Dove ZS-BCC *Katberg* which was rescued from an English boneyard in 1978, transported to South Africa, and restored at the SAA Apprentice School for static display.



The Junkers Ju 52/3m was another popular flyer before its grounding.

Freddy Laker's ATL-98 was created to haul outsize cargo, cars, and passengers. Based on the C-54 airframe, 21 such aircraft were converted and this is the last example. The Carvail was photographed near the end of its operational life.