

# A Night To Remember

A famous Douglas C-47 Skytrain at Coventry is being restored to fly, and will eventually return to Membury, its wartime base. **Steve Beebee** spoke to proud owner Charlie Walker

“I was sat in the office last year when I got a phone call from a producer at North One Television. They said they were looking to make a programme with Guy Martin about the big D-Day 75th anniversary, focusing on someone that’s restoring a C-47. Did I want my aircraft to be the subject of that? You bet I did!”

Charlie Walker, owner of Douglas C-47A Skytrain 42-100521 *Night Fright*, is remembering a conversation that brought his restoration project – a labour of love in the truest sense – into the public eye. The resulting documentary, *Guy Martin’s D-Day Landing*, was broadcast on Channel 4 last June and featured the engineer and broadcaster enthusiastically getting his hands dirty at Coventry Airport, where the storied Skytrain is being returned to flight.

In the end it didn’t matter that *Night Fright* wasn’t ready to participate in last year’s commemorations. The footage was enough to illustrate the strength of passion that will soon return the C-47 to its natural environment, the sky, and to its wartime home of Membury in Wiltshire. It was from here that the 79th Troop Carrier Squadron machine took off to drop US paratroopers over northern France on D-Day, and to here that it returned riddled



with bullet holes after a second mission, this time towing gliders. *Night Fright* went on to fly in virtually every major Skytrain campaign of World War Two – see the panel for more on its remarkable history.

Nobody involved in the *Night Fright* C-47 Restoration Project is in any doubt – it is absolutely imperative that the aircraft must fly. So significant is its history and so determined is its owner that any other outcome would be disappointing and, in any case, the point of no return has long since passed.

“The idea was to acquire a C-47 that flew from Membury, which is where my family hails from and where our business, Walker Logistics Ltd is based,” explains Charlie. “With the help of some local historians, Tom Woodhouse and Roger Day, we actually



created a spreadsheet showing every single Skytrain that operated with the 436th Troop Carrier Group from there. We narrowed down the list and eventually found *Night Fright*.”

After a long post-war career, the well-travelled machine



TOP Douglas C-47A Skytrain 42-100521 ‘Night Fright’ is taking shape at Coventry. ALL KEY-JAMIE EWAN UNLESS NOTED

ABOVE LEFT Rapid progress is being made on the C-47’s cockpit.

ABOVE Charlie Walker with ‘Night Fright’ on January 31.



LEFT After it is completed at Coventry, the Skytrain will be based at Membury.

ended up in a scrapyards in Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, USA, which is where Charlie and his father discovered it in 2012. It had been listed on eBay for a while, but luckily had no bidders. Following a survey of the airframe, carried out by Florida-based Frank and Glen Moss, the Walkers purchased it for a reasonable price. “We then found out about its history, which was truly amazing,” marvels Charlie. “It just kept getting better and better. We then made contact with the families of the wartime crew and got hold of old photos and lots of official documentation.”

## Back to Blighty

Typical of the rugged DC-3 ‘breed’, 42-100521 survived a



long and hard 'life' – but there was no guarantee that it could ever be made airworthy again. Charlie's goal was to establish a living tribute to the frequently overlooked 9th Air Force Troop Carrier Command, focusing on Membury's essential contribution to the war effort. He toyed with the idea of rebuilding it to static display status and erecting it on a pole – but the lure of a flying machine, a 'living, breathing' salute to aircrew and soldiers, was too much to resist.

Indeed, Charlie and his team are to be congratulated on stoically continuing in the



face of obstacles that would have led many to abandon the dream – or at least look for an alternative. The initial plan was to restore the aircraft in the US, and then fly it back to Wiltshire. This didn't come to fruition, so a team led by type expert Clive Edwards was dispatched to the States to dismantle the

TOP Inside the aircraft, looking towards the cockpit.

ABOVE In March 1963, 'Night Fright' re-entered military service with the French Navy where she joined Escadrille 56S as '18984'. VIA CHARLIE WALKER

RIGHT The team has three zero-timed Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp engines in hand.



## Night Fright A potted history

It's impossible to detail the extraordinary service of Douglas C-47A Skytrain *Night Fright* in so small a space. What follows is a greatly abridged account of a long and varied career. See the project's excellent website for a more fulsome version: [www.night-fright.com](http://www.night-fright.com)

Built at Long Beach, California in October 1943 and allocated the serial 42-100521, the aircraft was assigned to the 436th Troop Carrier Group's 79th Troop Carrier Squadron. It was flown by 1st Lt William K Watson throughout its time in the European theatre. After a short stay at Bottesford in Nottinghamshire it moved to Station 466 (Membury, Wiltshire) on March 3, 1944.

From there *Night Fright* flew paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division to their drop zone near Saint-Germain-de-Varreville during the early hours of D-Day. A second mission followed, this time towing gliders. The Skytrain sustained around 100 hits and took four days to repair. Its next major mission was Operation Dragoon – the invasion of southern France – in which it again towed gliders.

During Operation Market Garden, the costly bid to seize strategic bridges in Holland, *Night Fright* dropped more paratroopers and was subsequently involved in numerous resupply and medevac sorties. With the Battle of the Bulge raging, it flew several sorties during Operation Repulse – the aerial resupply of troops defending Bastogne. During the final major allied airborne offensive of the war, 1945's Operation Varsity (see *Silent Wings Over the Rhine* in April's issue), Watson and his crew once more towed gliders to the combat zone.

*Night Fright* began its journey back to the US on July 10, 1945. Initially joining the US civil register as NC65384, it flew for several operators and was procured for further military use in 1963 by the French Navy. Returning to the US in 1985, it ended its flying days as a freighter.



The original 'Night Fright' crew prior to departing the US. Left to right: 1st Lt William Watson (pilot), 2nd Lt Frank Bibas (co-pilot), TSgt Owen Voss (crew chief), and SSgt Robert McKnight (radio operator), with Hap the Cocker Spaniel. The crew's four-legged friend flew on many missions and survived the war. VIA CHARLIE WALKER



As a mark of respect, images of the wartime crew are kept on display within the aircraft.

**“He advised me to scrap *Night Fright* and look for another example. It might seem crazy, but I still wasn't put off”**

airframe, crate it and transport it home. The news that came back wasn't good. Clive phoned Charlie and his tone was grave. “He seriously advised me to scrap *Night Fright* and look for another example,” Charlie recalls, with a rueful smile. “It might seem crazy, but I still wasn't put off. I just had

to go ahead, to finish what we started. It's about the aircraft's history, its links to Membury, and our determination to tell that story.”

Another, smaller, obstacle was proving to doubters that this machine genuinely was *Night Fright*. Among much other evidence, the team

was able to compare the position of bullet holes in the airframe with original wartime photographs. It's now certain that this is the real 42-100521, a veteran of every major World War Two campaign involving the type. “That's why we've gone to such lengths with this restoration,” adds Charlie. “It's not just to fly it, but to make it as authentic as possible, and packaging it with that incredible history.”



Restoring the hydraulics panel involved fabricating new tubes while every filter, valve and accumulator was stripped, inspected and refurbished.

it's ready," says Charlie. "I'd previously been spending large sums of money per month to have it done for last June, and we had around 15 people working on it full-time. When we discussed the situation, it was apparent that we couldn't tell exactly how long it would take to finish, so with that in mind we decided to ease back slightly.

"We've separated the schedule into sections – things like structural work and systems, fuel, hydraulics, electrics, and then there's all the original detailing and painting to do. We've broken it down into bite-sized chunks and we're managing those on a monthly basis, but slightly reducing the overall input.

To this end, Charlie is working with Neil Jones – a serving sergeant in the RAF, part of the C-17 Delivery Team and a leading authority on troop-carrying C-47s and World War Two gliders. Neil has taken on – and almost completed – the Herculean task of acquiring period parts, returning all sections to 1944 spec, starting with the cockpit. He has sourced all original radio and navigation gear, first aid kits and many other items, most of which are currently in storage, waiting to be fitted.

"Another C-47 came up for sale on Facebook in Canada," says Charlie. "We purchased it in order to strip it for spares. We spent a week in temperatures of around -30° removing things like paratrooper benches, bulkheads, the cockpit floor and first aid brackets. It was certainly an adventure. It helped enormously, but we've been to the ends of the earth to source parts – as well as Canada we've acquired bits and pieces from the US, Bolivia, on eBay and via social media. That's been a full-time job for Neil, and it's more than 99% there now. He's done

unbelievably well, and we literally couldn't have done it without him."

The two men also collaborated with the production team behind the Channel 4 documentary, and not just on scenes involving their own aeroplane. "It was like having a second job for several months – but great fun and I would do it all again," smiles Charlie. "I am sure *Night Fright* benefited from the publicity. Guy Martin came here on a number of occasions and was fantastic. It was hands-on, he really got involved and worked with us on various aspects; it wasn't just staged for the cameras."

### Steady progress

Restoration work at Coventry, which is being led by Ben Cox and his team from Heritage Air Services, began in earnest around three years ago, after an aircraft destined for the Indian Air Force's Vintage Squadron was rolled out. Having not completed *Night Fright* in time for last year's anniversary, the team had a rethink and decided to relax the pace a little.

"We opted to take our time and get it ready for whenever

"It has actually turned out to be a much bigger project than I ever could have imagined. If you were to ask me if I'd do it all over again, the answer would probably be no. However, the devotion to this project grows ever stronger and there is no doubt that we will now see it through to its conclusion."

The biggest challenge has undoubtedly been dealing with corrosion. Although virtually inevitable on a 77-year-old aircraft, the true extent of the issue wasn't realised until Clive delivered his report from the US. On arrival at Coventry, the team conducted a thorough inspection of the fuselage, centre section and tail, and spent upwards of six months addressing the corrosion

found throughout. "I'd never seen anything like it," Charlie reflects. "People often ask why it's taking so long, but it's because you can't predict what lies ahead and often you have to strip parts out, replace and rebuild. It all amounts to a significant period of time."

Along with a new set of propellers, the project has three zero-timed Pratt & Whitney Twin Wasp engines in hand. Two were overhauled by Global Radial Engines in Oklahoma, with Anderson Aeromotive of Idaho taking care of the third. Around 95

percent of the structural work is complete – an inspection of the wings will follow. "Right now, we're looking at things like the horizontal tailplane and other items such as the brackets that World War Two radio equipment would have sat on," notes Charlie. "Then we'll get the fuel and oil tanks installed. We could have started on the wings already and made it look more complete, but we're just trying to go about it in a logical order. The hydraulics are virtually done and currently the one big unknown is the electrics."



The aircraft arriving at Coventry in 2016. VIA CHARLIE WALKER

**"This aircraft is a veteran of every major World War Two campaign involving the type"**

Wartime pilots 2nd Lt James Hardt and 1st Lt William Watson flew 'Night Fright' through every airborne campaign in the European theatre. VIA CHARLIE WALKER



### Flying memorial

Sadly, there are now no living links to *Night Fright's* wartime past, but Charlie did have the opportunity to speak to two of the aircrew by Skype prior to their passing. He remains in regular contact with the men's families – several who have visited the project have been clearly moved by the experience. "Keeping those connections alive is a huge part of what we're doing," he nods.

Unsurprisingly he is reluctant to speculate on a final completion date for the project but explains that with enough personnel involved it could fly in as little as six months. Next spring, he reveals, is a more realistic target.



ABOVE The project has sourced an extensive cache of wartime equipment which will be installed in due course.

ABOVE RIGHT Among the parts due to be fitted are sets of original paratrooper benches.

LEFT With the lower access panels removed, the flying control linkages and cables can be seen.

"If I went back to putting 15 guys on it, it'd fly this summer, no question," he considers. "I doubt we'll do that, because I do of course have to manage the cash flow on an ongoing basis. Also, that plan does come with complications – if you get that many people working on a project at once, they can get on top of each other. It's easier to manage with fewer people. We don't have sponsors; it's

being funded purely from our family business, although we have had some very generous donations, including from Indestructible Paint, which has kindly supplied all of the paint for free."

The next venture is an important one: to build a suitable hangar at Membury. *Night Fright's* history is intertwined with that of the airfield and it's vital to Charlie that both machine and location are commemorated. The C-47 team will look to have discussions with other organisations and clubs based at the airfield to potentially facilitate access and benefits for all. They're also set to create a small museum at the site – free to visit and curated by



Charlie, Neil, Tom, Roger and other local individuals.

"We'll be able to use the aircraft as the showpiece and hopefully attract people to the museum and educate them about the area's wartime past. Most people don't even know what Troop Carrier Command was, or that there were five important airfields within the area. Neil and I have already established an education programme, and we're going around local schools giving presentations."

Charlie's passion to honour the memory of those who flew, and especially flew in Skytrains, shines as brightly as his love for the aircraft itself. "Of course it's about the machine, but it's also about history and our heritage. It's about trying to pass this along to future generations." **FP**