

Friends Journal

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Issue

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Troop Carrier's C-109 Tanker

by
Monroe D. Zartman

When WWII's Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower reminisced about the war, he was reputed to have said, "The two key pieces of equipment deployed by the victorious Allied Forces were the "Jeep" and the C-47 transport plane. Troop Carrier aircrews would probably agree. Their "Gooney Birds" (Douglas C-47 "Skytrain") were stalwart, dependable, rugged, forgiving, and often times overloaded. They continue even today to provide safe, economical airlift services around the globe as we approach the millennium. Trained as fighter, bomber, or reconnaissance pilots, many men coming out of flight school were, at first, somewhat disappointed to be assigned to Troop Carrier units. They were caught in the massive buildup of the cargo hauling, passenger transporting, paratrooper dropping, glider towing forces. Soon, however, one learned that the Douglas C-47 was the greatest, most versatile workhorse to cruise the "wild blue yonder." The legendary "Gooneybird" war stories, logged indelibly during the sixty years since the plane first took to the skies, need not be repeated here. Conversely, one Troop Carrier aircraft rarely seen or heard about was the Consolidated C-109, bulk av-gas refueler, used principally as an emergency source for front line tactical fighter bases coping with shortages of fuel.

The 310th Squadron of the 315th Troop Carrier Group received a nice holiday gift in December of 1944. The gift was a shiny, big, and heavy (unwrapped and unpainted) Consolidated B-24 "Liberator" bomber. The four-

engine aircraft came off the factory line, was converted into a bulk fuel tanker, and was then renamed the C-109. The weather officer and Santa Claus cooperated that white Christmas season. When received, it sat there brand new, glistening in about two inches of new, wet snow. It was our latest "toy!" Each squadron received one. They were dropped off by a ferry crew from the ZI (USA). B-24 bomber crews based nearby were detailed to "check us out."

This Army Air Corps mobile "gasoline station" delivered where beckoned, ..."cash or charge" The price was always the same... orders...which came in the form of an 8" x 11" chit that said, "You go!" and was signed by the brass. On just one flight, the C-109 could pump somewhere around 3,000 gallons of fuel, but the crew didn't do windscreens, didn't check dip-sticks, and didn't control the key to the nearest "john." Fumes reminded you that it was not a C-47 nor a C-46. If a crewmember

who smoked showed up, we took his matches away. If he was "high-tech," we took is Zippo away! Some crews did, in fact, smoke cigars. Either way, the group never lost a C-109.

If you crewed one of those gas buggies, you must recall having felt like "Lucky Lindy" enroute to Paris in 1927. You are surrounded by those extra fuel tanks. There were fuel cells crammed into the nose section, the main fuselage, the bomb bays, and the wings, including "Tokyo tip cells" that gave the Davis wing an extra dimension of flap. No gun turrets marred the streamlining, and no armor plate gave it additional weight. The only thing between you and any projectiles, was thin aluminum.

Once you crossed the channel (post D-Day), your mood was a toss-up. It was like being strapped to one of Werner von Braun's V-2 rockets or riding a big Chinese firecracker. Maybe (assuming NASA had been in business) feeling like a

The C-109, a Consolidated B-24 converted to a tanker. (Photo: Zartman)



replacement for the chimps that preceded the original seven astronauts. There were dangers. For example, if a reveller was celebrating Allied successes by firing his gun in the air, you could be a factor in an unsolved puzzle. It would be unsolved because all the pieces would be missing. Of course, when young and "hot" as we were (nobody was "cool" in those days), you just didn't project your mind much beyond the scene on which you focused in the windscreen. War is the madness of mankind!

When the destination field loomed ahead, your odds improved greatly. Now, you had at least a sixty/forty chance that you would not blow the nose wheel tire when slamming the tanker onto a noisy, undulating, slippery-when-wet PSP (Pierced Steel Planking) runway. These runways seemed always just short enough to require heavy braking if the heavily loaded three-wheeler was to be kept out of the overrun (often a quagmire). In the 310th, we always carried an extra nose wheel assembly.

I never buzzed the tower in the C-109. I didn't want the tower op-

erators aiming their Aldis gun in the direction of my "fuel wagon." An Aldis gun is a rifle shaped light used by control tower personnel to signal low flying aircraft. Albert Einstein had already reported that light was "heavy" and not unlike a stream of tiny bullets. I guess I was being phobic, but why take a chance?

This new late concept for dispensing bulk gas probably saved more than a few aircrew types from single, even double hernias. Two full "Jerry" cans, one in each hand, felt like two 100 pound sacks of cement after the first few trips to load or unload the "Goonies." My now sagging shoulders remind me that a normal load was around 125 cans. Oddly, the best in-flight GI coffee I ever tasted was aboard C-47s loaded with "Jerry cans" of fuel. It was brewed carefully...very carefully. Remember those little open flame stoves?

Trickle-down "Emergency" messages like, "We need gas...fast!" probably started with Ike's deputies. At the end of the trickle, sometimes, was a troop carrier Ops hut which on occasion answered, "310th Squadron... 'Hamby's Rough-Riders'."

Strangely, another of the thrills when strapped to a C-109 took place on the ground at Spanhoe Airbase in the British Isles, midlands. We would taxi through the 310th assigned parking area. This happened frequently when "shooting" landings. Shortly after passing the maintenance hangar located near the end of runway 14/32, the peripheral taxiway made a 90 degree left turn and headed downhill to the hollow in the wooded area where the 310th hardstands lined each side of the taxiway. The hill bottomed out on about a 75 degree right turn, heading toward runway 08/26. With all four Pratt & Whitneys in full idle, and braking intermittently, those huge Curtiss electric fans still breezed you through the turn fast enough that the crew-chiefs and radio operators who saw you coming always found something to do at the back of the hardstand.

The fuel-chain to the war zone depended primarily on ocean tankers, railroads, and truck tankers. The job got done, but on occasion General Patton's tanks or some frontline tactical planes took on the enemy burning fuel from a troop carrier C-109 tanker. ☸

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1998 Calendar In Next Issue

Our Friends are doing a much better job of notifying the membership office of address changes. The return rate on the Spring '97 Journal was down to about 140 as compared to over 200 for the previous issue. Keep up the good work! It saves us dollars and insures that you receive your Journal on time.

We need to emphasize that the next mailing will take place around 15 October and will include your 1998 Museum calendar along with the Fall '97 Journal. If you do not receive this mailing, we must be notified by 30 November in order to reconcile the problem and remail your package. We need to re-emphasize that Third Class Bulk Mail will not be "held" or forwarded unless you so indicate by endorsement to your post office. If your address is going to change, we need to receive the correction at least 30 days prior to the mailing to insure delivery of your Journal and calendar. We will be unable to fill requests for replacement calendars due to inaccurate addresses since we will only procure enough calendars to satisfy our current membership requirements. This is all due to the ongoing effort to keep our membership rates at the current level. If you have any questions, please contact the Friends Membership Office at (937) 258-1225. Thank you for your support.

** Colonel... you made the 50th USAF Anniversary Issue of the Journal!*