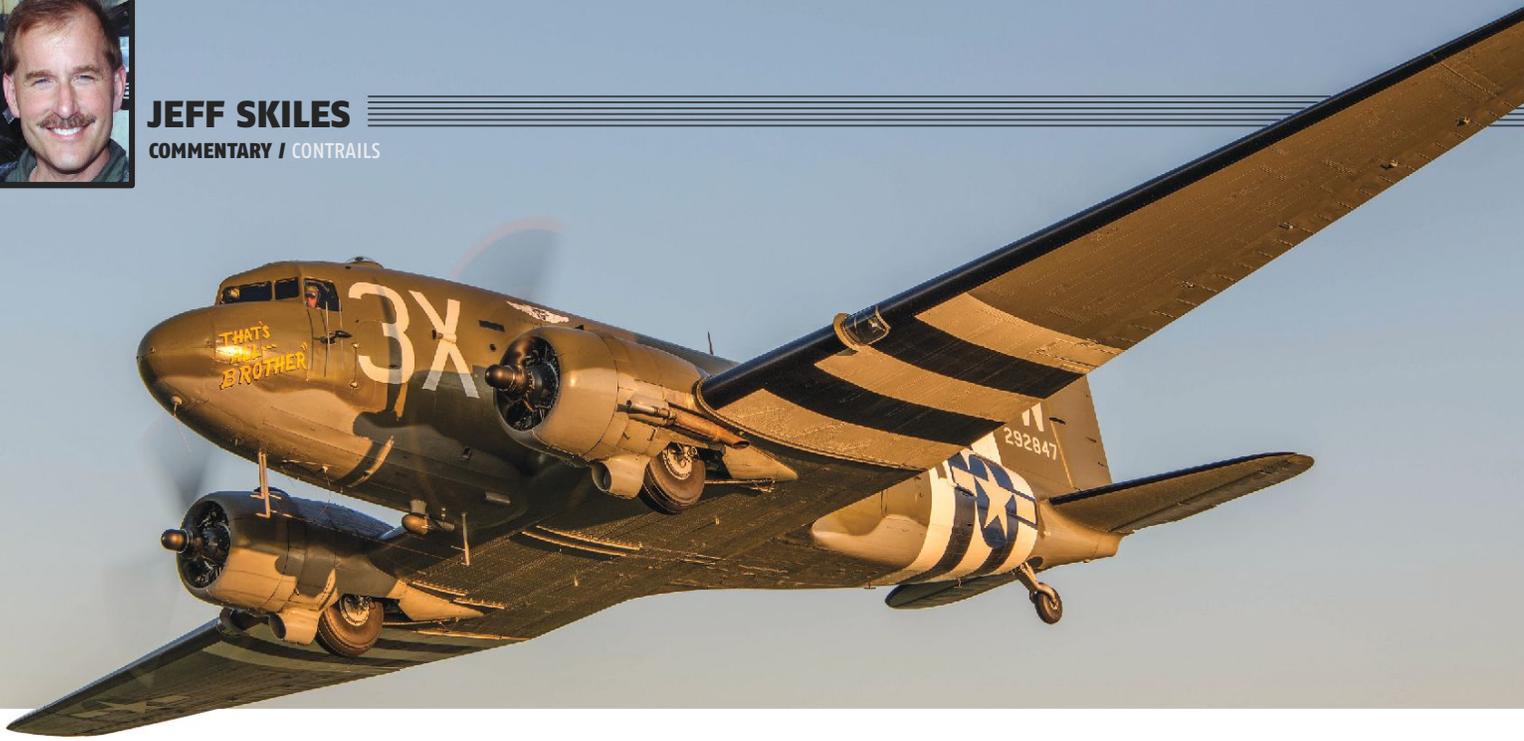




JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



That's All, Brother

A historic aircraft flies again

BY JEFF SKILES

JUNE 6, 1944

THE ENGLISH COAST DISAPPEARS beneath the wings of the C-47 Skytrain. The broad English Channel lies ahead. Lt. Col. John Donalson from the deep southern part of Alabama is in command of the airplane on this momentous day — the beginning of the Allied powers' assault on the continent of Europe. The day of Operation Overlord has come. In the ensuing hours the greatest army ever assembled will establish a beachhead on the sparsely populated shores of Normandy, France — a beachhead that will grow into a march across Europe to bring the Axis powers to heel.

In the cabin of the C-47, U.S. Army paratroopers in full combat gear sit sideways on hard aluminum seats nervously checking their equipment. Outside, the wind rushing past the darkened windows provides little comfort as the soldiers hasten toward their destiny. Their airborne transport, with the unusual name *That's All, Brother*, plods through the skies. As they look into each other's eyes they know that some in their number may not survive to see the next dawn.

TIP OF THE SPEAR

That's All, Brother is the lead airplane; behind its tail is an armada of C-47s all soldiering forth in similar fashion carrying more young men. Each C-47 contains a "stick," 15-18 men of the 101st or 82nd Airborne divisions. The aircraft fly in three-ship formations. Three such three-ship formations — nine aircraft in total — make a formation called a vee of vees. These nine-ship flights are in turn organized into larger groups called serials, containing 36, 45, or 54 aircraft. Within the serial, each flight follows the next separated by 1,000 feet. The plan calls for each serial to be spaced over the Normandy drop zones at six-minute intervals. Thirteen thousand paratroopers are ready to rain down from the skies and secure their assignments in this massive attack against German forces.

MISSION ALBANY

That's All, Brother is the lead aircraft of Mission Albany, the airborne assault of Operation Neptune, which in turn is the initial invasion plan for Overlord. The lumbering C-47s joined up into serials aim for the southern tip of the Isle of Portland, a point code-named "Flatbush." There they descend to 500 feet above the water to evade German radar and head southwest, away from the Normandy coast; Brittany is dead ahead.

Once over the English Channel, all aircraft extinguish their navigation lights. Ahead, a boat with a Eureka beacon, code-named Hoboken, sits stationary 57 miles out in the English Channel acting as a marker. The Eureka is a radar transponder communicating with a Rebecca radio in the lead aircraft. These Eureka units will also be deployed by special paratroop units — pathfinders — who will parachute in shortly before the main force to mark the drop zones.

Overflying Hoboken, the aerial armada of aircraft turns left 90 degrees and points toward the southeast. They fly between the German-held Channel Islands of Guernsey and Alderney and then make their final course alteration turning a further 45 degrees to approach the French coast from the west.

THE SCREAMING EAGLES

Onboard *That's All, Brother* are paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division, the Screaming Eagles. The 101st numbers almost 7,000 troops scattered among 400 C-47 Skytrains separated into 10 different serials. Their primary mission is to block the approaches to Utah beach and protect the amphibious landings, to capture four causeway exits from the beach, and to establish crossings over the Douve River at Carentan.

THE DROP

Onboard the C-47s, the paratroopers prepare for the low-altitude drop. Passing over the French coast, they come under rifle and anti-aircraft fire from the ground as they approach the drop zones. There is an unforecast deck of clouds as they make landfall over France, but it will thin to broken clouds over the Normandy drop zones. Ground fog obscures some of the drop zones as the paratroopers prepare to jump from an altitude of 700 feet. The drop zones are not marked adequately for a variety of reasons.

The first wave — Mission Albany — begins shortly after midnight on June 6, as the first paratroopers begin their jumps. Over the next 24 hours, they are embroiled in intense fighting supporting the more than 150,000 American, Canadian, and British Allied soldiers who land on the beaches of Normandy.

***That's All, Brother* is flown and maintained by the Central Texas Wing of the CAF in San Marcos, Texas, where you, too, can experience this historic aircraft.**

JULY 21, 2018

Seventy-four years after the D-Day invasion, Col. Tom Travis of the Commemorative Air Force briefs a group of assembled passengers, each excited, each eager to climb up the stairs of *That's All, Brother* and take their positions where brave soldiers sat before them. Today, no one will be asked to jump at low altitude over the fields of Normandy, but rather they will experience a ride over southern Wisconsin in, perhaps, the most notable C-47 to participate in the European conflict.

The flight engineer asks everyone to fasten their seatbelts, and we obediently sit on the aluminum benches along the walls of the C-47. We sit sideways, facing each other, and admire the pristine interior of this aircraft. This C-47 couldn't possibly have been this nice when it left the factory during World War II.

Thick smoke billows past the windows as the newly overhauled 1,200-hp Pratt & Whitney R-1830 radials cough and sputter to life. The airplane rocks back and forth under their power as the C-47 taxis to the runway. Alternating invasion stripes — three white stripes and two black — mark the wings. Prior to D-Day, these stripes were hastily painted to denote friendly aircraft from those of the enemy. They were 18 inches wide for single-engine aircraft, 2 feet wide for multiengine, and often sloppily applied with no attempt to mask the surfaces for a clean line.



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SEVENTY-FOUR YEARS IN THE AIR

That's All, Brother yaws back and forth as Tom works the rudder on the takeoff roll, but the C-47 smooths out once the wheels leave the ground. The passengers can get up and roam around the cabin, peering out the square windows with integral gun ports, taking their turn standing between the radio racks talking to the pilots in the cockpit, and just imagining what it must have been like to contemplate a night jump at 700 feet above the ground.

We make practice jump runs over the Brodhead Pietenpol Fly-In, only 8 miles distant, and the small hamlet of New Glarus. A half-hour later, we make our landing and deplane for pictures after having experienced a part of history.

MISSION ELMIRA

That's All, Brother flew two missions on D-Day, returning to tow a glider carrying men of the 82nd Airborne Division on Mission Elmira on the evening of June 6. The C-47 continued in military service serving in Operation Market Garden and Operation Varsity, as well as the relief of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. Like many aircraft that served in the war, it was sold to the civilian market in 1945, where it might have been lost forever but for the dogged interest by an aviation historian and the wherewithal of the Commemorative Air Force. *That's All, Brother* is flown and maintained by the Central Texas Wing of the CAF in San Marcos, Texas, where you, too, can experience this historic aircraft. **EAA**

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an airline pilot who also flies the B-29 *FIFI* for the Commemorative Air Force and owns a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.

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