

Military Dakota Still Fully Alive

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Officers of the Hellenic Airforce really nourish a curiosity in their airplane inventory! On Thessaloniki Mikra they still fly with the C-47 Skytrain. Officially the C-47 is tasked for target dragging above Tanagra which actually also happens. Besides this some of the C-47's provide officers a build up of their flying hours. And this of course is, many will agree a marvellous way to build up your flying hours. Which pilot does not want to fly the airplane which was described by General Dwight D. Eisenhower as one of the four planes that won World War 2.

Lucky dogs

We spoke to one of the happy few while walking on the platform of Mikra, listening to his enthusiastic comments about the Dakota, and talking about this airplane wakens a special feeling. According the officer; this is real flying, you feel entirely in your element. You start, and wit a speed of 50-60 English miles/hr you push the old-fashioned controlstick forward to lift the tail-wheel and with 100 miles/hr you pull it back and you are flying ! It's a mix between a Bonanza and a Phantom he explains. Just pay attention as it comes to the little tail wheel, for this a special technique is required here. We looked at him, with our staring not understanding eyes, because for this you have to be a pilot to understand and be able to place this 'feeling'. It's a good thing that there is space within the Hellenic Airforce to keep this living legend alive for the time being, so pilots can feel the skill of real flying by hand between all the digitalised stuff. Isn't it a fine thing, in between flying F-16's

Small history

Originally The DC-3 Dakota was the 'motherplane', an airliner of which the military version was developed by Douglas later on. Some countries modified the plane themselves for their own special applications. Transport of troops and cargo was it's main task, some of them were modified to transport wounded in particular. Therefor the plane really had it's glory-days when it fulfilled a need for the Allies in times of World War II, and even some years after this period. We all know the variants with the white-black color sceme on wings and fuselage during the retaking of France, the 'Invasion version', to be well recognized by the allies.

What many people don't know is that there were a lot of other types of the C-47, to mention a few: The RC-47A/D (Recce & ELINT), the SC-47A (Search and Rescue) the VC-47A/D equipped as a VIP version, next a 'Gunship' version, a High-Altitude version, an Antarctic version, a Medevac version (18 stretchers and a medic crew of three) and even a glider version without engines was tested as well as a XC-47C version on floats for landing on the water! Though most of us will not have seen one of these special versions. In total some 94 countries had the C-47 Skytrain or 'Dakota' in service and this was not a particular privilege of the (Western)European countries. The plane was also in use in countries like Ethiopia, Uganda, Soviet Union,

Iran, Thailand, Zaire, Libya, Ecuador and Guatemala. 'Known from pole to pole' and this proves that we deal here with a very multi-purpose and very reliable plane, usable in all parts of the world under very changing and difficult circumstances from extremely cold to very warm.

Different names

To explain different names; the DC-3 was the civil variant of which later on the military variant C-47 'Skytrain' was developed and in the British and Commonwealth service the C-47 took the name Dakota from the acronym DACoTA from Douglas Aircraft Company Transport Aircraft while the U.S. Navy adopted the designation R4D 'Skytrooper'. But more names were given to this legendary plane. As some nicknames we also know 'Biscuit Bomber', 'Gooney Bird' (in European theatre), 'Dumbo' (SAR version), 'Bullshit Bomber' (scattering leaflets over Vietnam), 'Puff the Magic Dragon' or 'Spooky' (gunship), 'Dizzy tree', 'Duck', and 'Vomit Comet' by times of the invasion on Normandy. As 'Cab' we know the airplane as the by NATO given codename for the Lisunov Li-2 or PS-84 which was built under licence in Russia. Little known is that the Japanese Mitsui company also produced under licence agreement the C-47 as Showa L2D with nickname 'Tabbys' in the preliminary period to the war. At December 17th 1935 the Dakota was 'Air Baptised' as C-47, not aware of the fact that a living legend was born.

Most striking differences of the C-47 compared to the civil version were the reinforced fuselage, and cabin floors that were able to carry the heavy cargo. It also had increased doors in the back of the fuselage to be able to load large cargo, even Jeeps and small trucks, and besides paratroopers, cargo could also be dropped out of the flying plane. The C-47 had more powerful engines of course (1200 horsepower Pratt & Whitney) which made it possible to tow up to two para-gliders. Late versions were known in the USAF as C-53 and C-117. Besides 2000 Li-2's and 485 L2D's some 10.692 examples were produced in the United States.

C-47 in Hellenic service

Although some other countries in Europe, like Spain or Finland used the C-47 for a long time, no other country held the type in service for so long like Greece. The Hellenic Air Force received a large number (80 +) of RAF Dakota's but also some previous U.S. examples under the MDAP agreement between 1947-1950. This indicates over 60 years of service, more than 70 years after the first flight and more than 40 years after some air forces retired their Dakota's. They served for a long time at Sedes Air base, near Mikra. For Greece the C-47D was not only important for Greece territory but had also a vital contribution in Hellenic participation in the Korean War. Thousand trapped and wounded U.S. marines were evacuated out of dangerous area (abandoned enemy airfield) under different circumstances. Split of major allied troops and in a desperate situation the men were rescued by Dakota's of

the Greeks while close combat was going on in the nearest hills. Even the last fighting soldiers were taken in a last round. Greek military were awarded by the US president later on for these heroic actions. Today, while being in a modest position in the Military of Greece, the history is far from that and with this knowledge it must be mighty to have an example skilled in your fingers as a pilot.

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