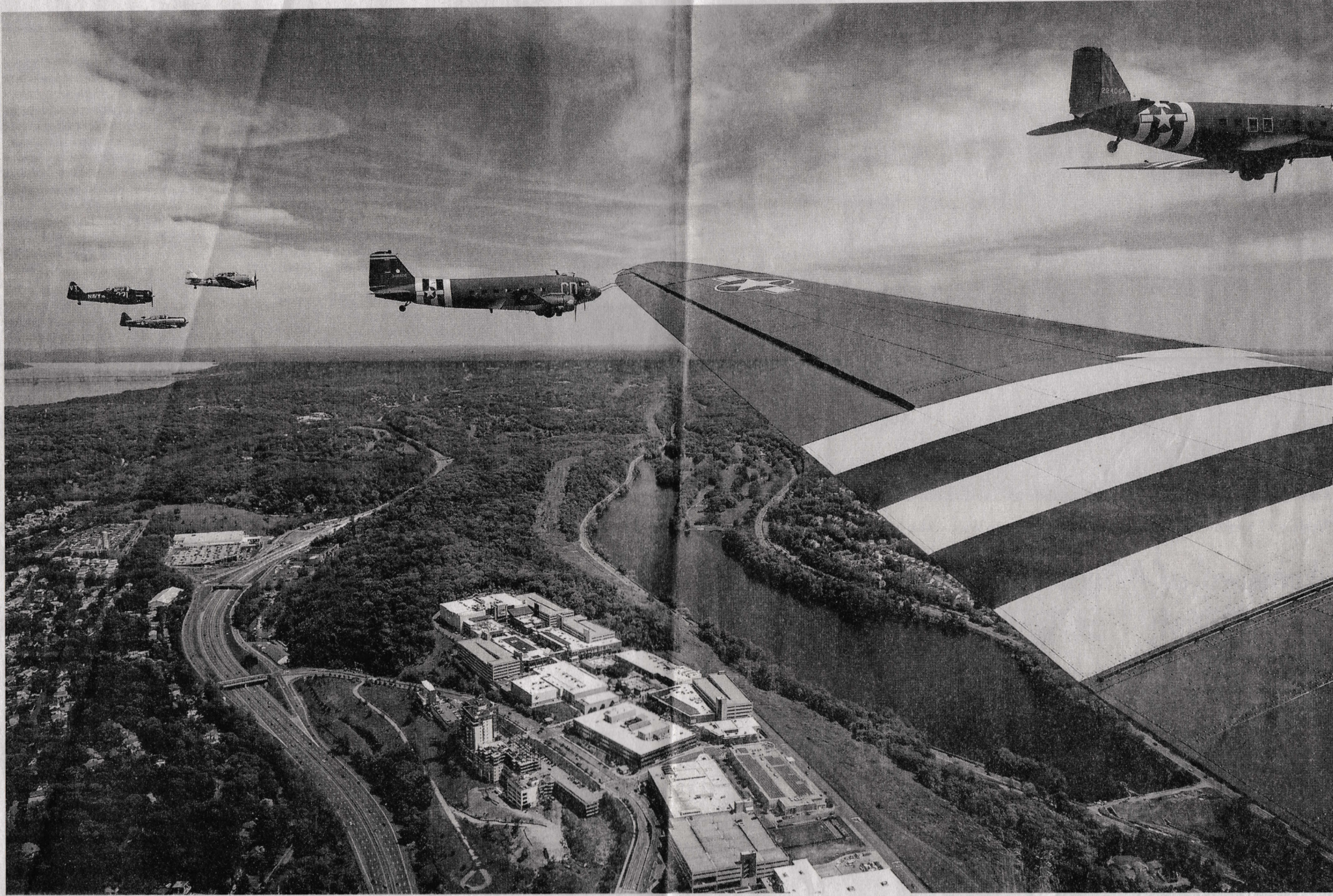


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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MONICA JORGE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
The view from aboard a C-47 as it flew from Manhattan to Connecticut on Saturday. The squadron of World War II airplanes took part in a practice run before a weeklong journey to France.

75 Years After D-Day, Taking Flight Once More

By CHRISTINE NEGRONI

OXFORD, Conn. — Dave Hamilton's most notable flight was 75 years ago, when he was 21 years old.

It was just after midnight on D-Day, and he was carrying 18 Allied paratroopers to the area behind Omaha Beach. The sky was full of planes that night as the young pilot encountered gunfire and nearly collided with a church before making his way back to England.

"I didn't know a lot and boy, I learned in a hurry, I can tell you that," said Mr. Hamilton, who grew up in Tuxedo, N.Y.

Mr. Hamilton — now 96 years old and living in Prescott, Ariz. — was back in a World War II troop carrier on Saturday, this time flying as a passenger in a formation flight over New York City with more than a dozen warbirds. The planes roared down the Hudson River and around the Statue of Liberty before returning for the night to Waterbury-Oxford Airport in Connecticut.

The attention-getting display was a final practice run for owners of the historic aircraft, who left Sunday to fly to Europe together as the "D-Day Squadron."

The Douglas DC-3 aircraft and C-47 Dakota transports are headed on a weeklong, trans-Atlantic flight culminating June 5, when the pilots will meet up with a dozen European Dakotas and together cross the English Channel to Normandy for the ceremony commemorating the June 6, 1944, military landing.

The flight from America, in many ways, is a journey into the past: The planes will stop for fuel in Newfoundland, Greenland, Iceland, Scotland and England, retracing the route used when the planes were brought to the European theater during World War II.

"There have not been this many Dakotas crossing the Atlantic since the war," said Steve Lashley, the director of communications for the D-Day Squadron. "People are going to be able to look up and see something they've never seen before."

Saturday's display was just a fraction of the size of the aerial armada on D-Day, when more than 800 Dakotas and other aircraft filled the sky.

"That's why we're doing this mission, we're bringing history to life," said Andy Maag, who is flying a C-47 named That's All, Brother.

Standing beside one of the restored twin-engine Dakotas at Waterbury-Oxford Airport, Mr. Hamilton was wearing khaki pants, a military cap and an Eisenhower jacket that displayed his many medals. He held a cane that seemed as much for swagger as for support, and he laughed at the suggestion that he was an object of living history, asking, "Am I a symbol?"

His companion, Kay Nehring, told him that, yes, he was — and a celebrity, too.

"It's like showing up with the World War II version of Elvis," Ms. Nehring said of her outings with Mr. Hamilton.

During the war, Mr. Hamilton was trained in England as a pathfinder, a designation for specially trained paratroopers and their pilots. Mr. Hamilton made a few practice jumps before commanding the flight that delivered his fellow pathfinders to the battlefield. His plane, one of the first in France on D-Day, was hit by gunfire.

"They put about 200 holes in my airplane and they didn't break a cable, they didn't hit anybody," he said.

But as he prepared to fly back to England, he said his co-pilot warned him, "You better lift your right wing. You're going to take the steeple off the church of Sainte-Mère-Église."

Members of the D-Day Squadron noted the inexorable loss of veterans like Mr. Hamilton, and the importance of marking the 75th anniversary of the military landing on June 6, 1944.

"This is our last chance to honor the members of the greatest generation while they're with us," Mr. Lashley said. "The 80th will be too late."

The planes in the D-Day Squadron, some of which started as DC-3 airliners that the military converted to troop carriers, are all owned by nonprofit organizations or individuals.

The total cost of the voyage is estimated to be about \$3 million, including fuel costs of about \$2 million, said Eric Zipkin, whose Tunison Foundation owns one of the C-47 planes, the Placid Lassie. A group of people associated with the airplanes are funding the trip, Mr. Zipkin said.

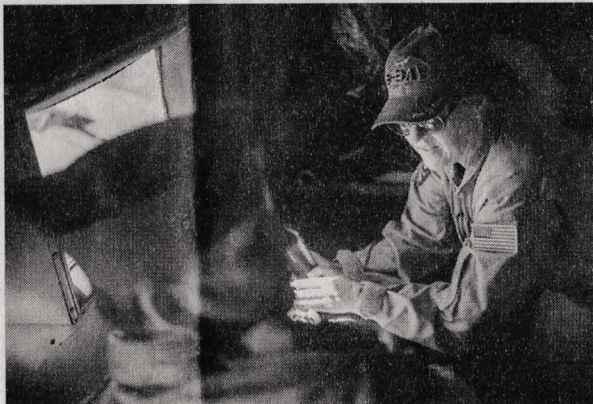
Each of the airplanes departed with extras of everything that could break or need replacement, from tiny gaskets to large tires. Extra time was built into the schedule, too. While most of the plane's flight controls are 1930s-era technology, the latest navigation and communication equipment with its colorful displays peek out amid the circular analog dials on the flight decks. Every airplane is equipped with life rafts and survival suits.

"This is dangerous," said Len Roberto, a member of the board of directors of the Connecticut Air and Space Center. "It is not an easy journey in a 75-year-old airplane."

While the focus is on the veterans and the airplanes they flew, Gregory Crouch, a West Point graduate and the author of "China's Wings," which showcases the use of C-47 and DC-3s during the war, points out that tributes like this are especially important in today's political climate.

"Our modern politics are so divisive. We have a hard time feeling like we've got anything in common with the other side, let alone like we're on the same team," Mr. Crouch said.

"But what a spectacular combined effort World War II was, both domestically and internationally. We built this incredible alliance that fought for the future of civilization. And won."



Dave Hamilton, 96, left, flew Allied paratroopers to Omaha Beach on D-Day. Clockwise from top: A demonstration team at the Waterbury-Oxford Airport; a flight crew working on a C-47 named D-Day Doll; and RozeLyn Beck of the Commemorative Air Force.