

# Flying with Ghosts, Over the Beaches of Normandy On the 75th Anniversary of D-Day



Jon Goldenbaum

*Placid Lassie and That's All Brother re-enacting the paratrooper drop on Normandy during the 75 D-Day Celebration.  
(Photo from Gilles Auliard)*

## June 6, 1944

Shortly before midnight on June 5, 1944, Col. Willis Mitchell and his copilot 1st Lt. Bailey Smith, manned up C-47 number 43-30647 in a cold, windy, drizzle at their base at Barkston Heath in England. On that night 43-30647 was to serve as the lead ship in *Mission Boston*, leading the entire 82nd Airborne Division in the second wave of the airborne assault on Normandy. As commander of the 61st Troop Carrier Group, Colonel Mitchell would fly 43-30647 as the *Mission Boston* lead aircraft. Behind him would follow 72 more C-47s carrying 1,250 paratroopers.

Number 43-30647 was a new C-47, recently assigned to the Group and normally flown by Capt. Bob Shoemaker of Yankton, North Dakota. Shortly after getting the aircraft, Shoemaker named 43-30647 *Virginia Ann* after his wife. On this night, however, Col. Mitchell wisely commandeered Shoemaker's brand new aircraft.

After a takeoff in a nasty crosswind in pitch black conditions, *Mission Boston* slowly formed up for their four-hour trip to destiny. The weather was terrible and Colonel Mitchell chose to stay below a 1,500-foot overcast, dodging rain showers all the way.

## June 6, 2019

Exactly 75 years later, American Airlines Capt. Tim Manzo and I manned up the very same *Virginia Ann*, now fully restored and freshly painted in the exact livery of 43-30647 as she wore on D-Day. She looked precisely like her pictures from 1944, olive drab paint, invasion stripes, a buzz number of X5 on the fuselage denoting the 59th Troop Carrier Squadron, and an exact replica of the nose art of *Virginia Ann* as painted for Captain Shoemaker in 1944.

Some years ago, my friend Barry Fait had found *Virginia Ann* as a clapped out DC-3 flying charter flights in the southern United States. When Barry discovered the true history of the aircraft, he bought her, intent on preserving her and sharing her significant place in history. As a DC-3 instructor, I had the pleasure of teaching Barry to fly his airplane, and as I coached him through his DC-3 type rating, we became good friends. Over the years Barry completely rebuilt the old girl to a reliable, sweet flying airplane.

For this 75th anniversary of D-Day, 15 restored American C-47s and DC-3s including *Virginia Ann* were flown to Europe to join in a week of parachute drops and fly-bys over the historic drop zones and invasion beaches of Normandy. The

American aircraft followed the historic Blue Spruce ferry route exactly as flown by young delivery pilots in WWII: Goose Bay, Labrador, Narsarsuaq, Greenland, Reykjavik, Iceland, and Prestwick, Scotland. These 15 American aircraft became known as the D-Day Squadron. Along with *Virginia Ann*, I was also privileged to fly another squadron aircraft, the *Flabob Express*, a veteran of WWII service with the RAF. Restoring and preparing aircraft over seven decades old was a huge undertaking; but without fail, all participants realized that this was probably the last chance to gather such a number of aging aircraft to cross the Atlantic to celebrate D-Day.

On the actual anniversary date of June 6, the plan was to have as many aircraft as possible form into a mass formation to overfly the American Cemetery at Omaha Beach for the international ceremony attended by U.S. President Donald Trump and President Macron of France. Given the nature of the fly-by, crews selected for the fly-by were required to be certified in formation flying as well as pre-screened by the U.S. Secret Service, thus many aircraft could not participate.

At 6 a.m., Tim and I along with 12 other crews reported to a guarded hangar at Carpinquet. President Trump was due to land in *Air Force One* mid-morning. The Secret Service checked us in, then locked us down and kept us off the flight line and away from the Presidential arrivals. We spent several cold hours restricted to the hangar wishing someone had thought to provide hot coffee or breakfast. Finally, *Air Force One* arrived (we missed it in the hangar), and the Presidential party was transferred to helicopters for delivery to the Cemetery. When they were off we were released to go to our airplanes. Soon after, we started engines, took off and formed upon C-47 *Placid Lassie* flown by Eric Zipkin, our most capable D-Day Squadron leader.

### June 6, 1944

*Virginia Ann* and the other 72 *Mission Boston* aircraft arrived at the coast of Normandy at 2:28 a.m. Unfortunately, low clouds covered the land, visual and radar markers dropped earlier by pathfinder aircraft were useless, and the drop zones inland from Utah Beach were socked in. Colonel Mitchell and crew did their best, navigating by dead reckoning using whatever they could see in the infrequent breaks in the clouds. There was no doubt that they were in the correct general area, the ground fire coming up through the clouds was intense. Finally Colonel Mitchell turned the green drop light on and the paratroopers jumped into the flak-filled night. Seconds after the drop a German round shattered the cockpit of *Virginia Ann*, hitting Colonel Mitchell in the hand. In his memoirs, he described his wound as painful and bloody, but he continued on. Of the 14 paratroopers who jumped from *Virginia Ann*, three jumped to their death; it was a tough night. *Virginia Ann* limped back to England, landing safely as the sun rose at Barkston Heath. In the days following, she continued fighting, eventually serving in most of the remaining campaigns of WWII with the 59th Squadron of the 61st Troop Carrier Group.

### June 6, 2019

After our formation completed a 13-ship streaming takeoff,

Tim and I joined the formation as number four; our job was to lead the second Vic (three aircraft in a V formation). The Vic ahead of us was led by boss man Eric Zipkin in *Placid Lassie*. This first Vic included two aircraft as historic as our own *Virginia Ann*. *D-Day Doll* and *That's All Brother* also flew on June 6, 1944. In fact *That's All Brother* was the very first aircraft of the whole assault, leading the first pathfinder mission over the drop zones. *That's All Brother* was rescued from a scrap yard when her history was discovered, then lovingly restored by the Commemorative Air Force exactly to her WWII configuration. So on this day in 2019, she flew the invasion beaches once more, also in the first formation of the commemorative fly-by.

Unlike 75 years earlier, it was a beautiful summer day, blue skies, light winds, unlimited visibility. Eric led us in a wide sweeping right turn as all 13 aircraft joined into our "Vics in trail" formation. Soon we headed north, directly for Utah Beach. As we crossed the coast, I was amazed to see that the beach was packed with spectators, period military vehicles, and even restored landing craft making their way to the shore. Every road leading to the historic beaches was filled with lines of buses, many parked a mile or more away with lines of people making their way to the site. Eric checked us in with an Air Force Joint Tactical Control Party (JTAC) set up on the cemetery who cleared us into the restricted area set up for the event. This restricted airspace covered the whole area of the historic beaches: Utah, Omaha, Juno, Sword and Gold. We noticed several warships off shore, no doubt ready to defend the Presidential restricted air space from intruders. When we reached the shore line of Utah Beach, Eric turned us to an easterly heading that took us over Omaha Beach. When we reached Pont du Hoc we entered a left hand holding pattern that carried us over the water, about five miles off shore. Pointe du Hoc was the site that Col. Earl Rudder and his Provisional Ranger Group stormed, using ladders, grappling hooks and ropes to climb the 100-foot cliff. At the top of the cliff was a huge German artillery battery that had to be taken out to protect the landings. Now 75 years later Pointe du Hoc is a memorial. Bomb craters are still evident among the ruined German gun emplacements; I was fascinated to look down from 1,000 feet as we flew over this historic battleground.

For an hour and a half we flew in this historic holding pattern between Pointe du Hoc and Utah Beach. On our overwater leg we relaxed the formation, but as we turned over the beaches again we tightened up to give the crowds below a look at our historic flight. At 15-minute intervals the JTAC gave us updates on how the ceremony was going with revised time over targets for our fly-over. When we flew the easterly leg over Utah, Omaha and Pointe du Hoc, the crowds on the beaches were astounding. As we passed overhead you could see their upturned faces and their waving arms. I could only imagine what we sounded like as we thundered 1,000 feet over their heads, they must have been as moved by the event as we were.

Tim and I shared flying duties and when not flying my mind wandered. For the first time it struck me that Tim was sitting in the exact seat that Colonel Mitchell occupied and I was in Lieutenant Smith's. Our hands touched the same

controls they used, and that 75 years later, we were flying over the beaches that had forever etched their bravery in history. I wondered if perhaps some minute traces of the blood from Colonel Mitchell's wound remained in the deep recesses of the throttle quadrant. Like most of the brave men of the allied invasion, Mitchell and Smith were long dead, but eerily I could feel their presence. Months earlier, when asked about how it felt to fly *Virginia Ann*, owner Barry Fait said, "It's like flying with ghosts." And today, over the beaches, I agreed.

Finally we were cleared in for our flyover. I could see the huge cemetery 10 miles away, the entire area was resplendent in red carpet, thousands were seated in neat rows, and those far from the Presidential stage had Jumbotron TV screens to better see the event. As we passed directly over the ceremony, a sea of faces turned to the sky, many stood and saluted.

After we passed, the JTAC explained that we were not to return to Caen Carpinquet airport for another hour to give the Presidential party time to helicopter back to *Air Force One* and depart. Eric asked, "What do you want us to do for an hour?" The JTAC replied, "Whatever you want, you are the only ones allowed in the restricted areas over the beaches, have fun." Ah, a license to steal, a pilots dream! Eric checked to see if we all had enough fuel for an aerial tour; we did, so off we went. The next hour was amazing. We descended to 500 feet and continued our thundering trip over the remaining beaches, Juno, Sword, and Gold. Again, throngs of people waving and saluting for miles and miles and miles. To honor the British 6th Airborne Division, we headed for the Caen Canal and the famous Pegasus Bridge. About the time Colonel Mitchell was dropping the 82nd, six British Horsa Gliders made pinpoint

nighttime landings in tiny fields next to the Pegasus Bridge. Intelligence knew that this critical bridge was wired for demolition. D company, 2nd Airborne Battalion, 6th British Airborne, scrambled out of their gliders in the dark, captured the bridge, disarmed the explosives, and held the bridge and crossing against terrific German resistance. Their heroism was as famous to the British as Pointe du Hoc was to Americans.

The Pegasus Bridge area was completely covered with people. There must have been thousands crammed onto the bridge and surrounding banks of the canal. This was the most demonstrative of all the crowds we flew over; they simply went wild when our 13 C-47s shook the earth beneath their feet.

In over 50 continuous years of flying, this had to be one of the most moving flights I have ever taken. Twenty-six years after D-Day, I went to my own war: Viet Nam. I, too, wore the silver wings of an Air Force pilot, the same wings that Colonel Mitchell and Lieutenant Smith wore. I flew over 600 hours of combat and, like them, suffered through ground fire and flak. Like them, I saw my squadron mates shot out of the sky and mourned their passing. In my seventh decade I realized that there is an unbroken river of American combat aviator veterans, those who came before me and those that will follow. I am humbled to be in that river of valor and to have flown Mitchell and Smith's aircraft and their spirits over Normandy once again. ➔

*"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers, for he that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother"*

*- William Shakespeare.*

## INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

**Manuscripts** can be on a **Thumb Drive, CD or Floppy Disk**. Macintosh or Windows if it has been purged of viruses. A hard copy of the Manuscript with separate Captions, References or Footnotes, Authors Notes, etc., must accompany the CD or Floppy Disk.

• **Manuscripts** may be typed on one side of 8 1/2 x 11-inch paper. Include author's name on first page.

• **Computer printouts** fine, but please NO fancy type fonts, and no second-generation copies! Your copy is scanned by computer to generate type for printing your article. Italics or fancy fonts are not recognized by the scanner program and errors abound. This increases time required to produce the Journal and increases the cost.

• Dot matrix and typewriter of Arial/Helvetica/Geneva fonts read well, but please, ragged right margins for word spacing.

• **Captions**, References, bibliography and author's biography should follow manuscript.

• **Prefer photos** to be glossy but not necessary. Color photos are fine. If you are providing scanned images (we prefer to scan ourselves) they must be highest quality JPEG and at least 300 dpi resolution. For example, an 8"x10" print would be 2400 x 3000 pixels in size. **Please DO NOT provide prints made on ink jet printers - send the digital image.**

• **Adequate captions** should be furnished including credit (original owner/photographer) followed by the lender. Match the caption number with the photo number.

• **Do NOT** attach captions to back of photos—for scanning they must be in manuscript form.

While every effort will be made to safeguard submissions, AAHS assumes no responsibility for the loss of materials. If original photos are of precious nature, it is suggested duplicate prints be furnished.

Journal articles are accepted from AAHS members only except in instances where the editorial staff solicits a journalistic piece of meritorious quality. All articles must have an American flavor. For example, American personnel or planes in foreign service or foreign planes or personnel in U.S. service are acceptable. Not accepted are articles unrelated to America.

A particular subject should not normally be longer than two parts. Exceptions may be made where the subject matter has outstanding merit. Ideal manuscript length for a single insertion is 30 pages, including references, etc. For style and form consult recent Journals.

Please include brief author's biography written in third person, together with author's photo.