



Reflected in the water on the apron at Paine Field, N877MG is an immaculate example of the DC-3. **James Polivka**

# A Dakota's Tale

## The story of N877MG

**Historic Flight Foundation at Paine Field operates an immaculately restored C-47B now resplendent in 1949 Pan American World Airways colours. The story behind this aircraft is a fascinating one, making this particular Dakota an incredibly rare example of the breed. Liz Matzelle, a volunteer with the foundation, tells the tale.**

In July 1944, C-47B serial number 20806 departed the Douglas factory at Long Beach en route to Miami, Florida, the first leg of its round the world journey to war. Waiting for it in Miami was Captain Peter Goutiere of the China National Aviation Corporation. Pete was a former Pan Africa DC-3 copilot, having trained with Pan Am early in the war. He travelled to Africa in secret to ferry P-40s across the North African desert. When the P-40s never materialized, he and his fellow pilots found what employment they could. Pete was given a hot tip to talk to the China National Aviation Corporation the next time he was in Calcutta.

CNAC, a joint venture between Pan American and the Chinese Nationalist

government, was a civilian airline but its primary mission in the middle of the war was to fly the 'Hump'. This route over the Himalayan Mountains posed some of the most dangerous and challenging flying ever attempted. The US Army Air Corps considered 100 'Hump' flights to be a full tour of duty, but CNAC couldn't afford to send home perfectly good pilots. Instead, it paid them well, gave them regular time off in Calcutta, and promised the occasional vacation back to the US.

Losses were high, but the money was good, and adventurous young men like Pete found their way to CNAC and kept it flying. Captain Goutiere had many 'Hump' flights behind him when his total flying hours (including Pan Africa service) earned him an

R&R trip back to the States. But these trips weren't just for the flight crews to take a break; each time a crew went back to the US, it would return in a brand new aircraft.

With the world at war, ferrying an unarmed cargo plane from the United States to India was no small task. After picking up 20806 in Miami, Pete and his crew flew across the Caribbean and along the coast of South America, to Natal, Brazil. From there they crossed the Atlantic with a Pan American navigator on board, guided by sextant and short-range radio to reach Ascension Island. After refueling on Ascension they continued into Africa; very familiar territory for Captain Goutiere, Accra to Maiduguri, onward to Khartoum, then Aden to Karachi before the final leg to Calcutta.



China National Aviation Corporation Captain Jim Dalby caught this picture of a CNAC C-47 high above the clouds. **Jim Dalby via CNAC.org**

After 14 days and a total of 87 flight hours, Pete Goutiere delivered 20806 to CNAC's maintenance base in Calcutta. Here it would be repainted in CNAC markings and the tail number changed from 43-16340 to simply 100, signifying that this was the 100th aircraft to enter service with CNAC. While this was happening Pete went back to flying the 'Hump'. He recalls the special connection he felt to that aircraft whenever he flew it. Number 100 was 'his' C-47.

Many other airmen also had the opportunity to fly Number 100. One such pilot was Captain Sam Belieff, a veteran 'Hump' pilot with thousands of hours of flying experience. On landing after yet another trip over the Himalayas, Number 100 strayed off the runway and caught a main wheel in the mud. The ship nosed over and came to a stop with its tail sticking in the air. The flight crew exited through the emergency hatch in the cockpit.

After a quick survey confirmed no one was hurt and the aircraft wasn't about to catch fire, the crew posed for a friendly photo in front of their 'wrecked' C-47. Captain Belieff kept a copy of the photo and wrote a caption in the past tense, implying the aircraft was a total loss and would never fly again. However, he

told the true story to his grandson before passing away: Number 100 was repaired and flying again the very next day, despite two mangled engines and propellers and of course some sheet metal damage to the nose.

Postwar, CNAC Number 100 was spared the scrapyards that awaited most 'Hump' veteran C-47s. China National Aviation Corporation provided the first scheduled commercial service throughout China as the country recovered from more than a decade of Japanese occupation. The peace didn't last long however. The Communists had become stronger during the Japanese occupation and embarked on what they felt was the true battle, that for control of all of China.

Soon, CNAC aircraft were evacuating wounded soldiers and VIPs from cities under fire once again. It would take years for the Communists to prevail, and in the meantime parts of China were at peace. Old Number 100 was given a shiny new postwar paint job, a new identity, first XT-T-20 and then later XT-119, and a high capacity, 32 seat, passenger interior. It was dubbed the 'Air Bus' and flew from Canton to Hong Kong and back, four or five times a day. When the Communists finally prevailed, the Nationalist government fled to Taiwan and CNAC



Conditions at some CNAC airfields were rudimentary. Captain Gifford Bull captured this image of C-47B Number 100 being refuelled by hand. **Gifford Bull via CNAC.org**

evacuated all of its aircraft and personnel to the British colony of Hong Kong.

The senior leadership of CNAC were members of the Nationalist government, but many of the employees and ground crew were Communist partisans. Hong Kong itself hadn't yet decided whether to recognize the new Communist government of China; and if it did, what it would mean for the airline's assets now sitting on the tarmac at Kai Tak Airport. Most of the aircraft sheltered there were dismantled for long-term storage while these issues were settled. Just over a dozen of the aircraft were still in airworthy condition, including XT-119.

After months of uncertainty in Hong Kong, separated from their families, many CNAC employees boarded the airworthy aircraft and flew them back to China, effectively defecting. CNAC XT-119 was one of the few airworthy aircraft to remain at Kai Tak. After the first defections, the Nationalist government grew nervous that the remaining airworthy aircraft may return to China as well, so it sent secret agents to Hong Kong with orders to sabotage and disable those that remained flyable.

Small timed explosives were placed in the wings and tails of the seven remaining airworthy aircraft, including XT-119. The damage this did to the right engine nacelle was severe. In response, ground crewmen loyal to the Communists began to stand ▶



Postwar, the China National Aviation Corporation flew some of the first scheduled commercial services throughout China. Here, CNAC DC-3s undergo maintenance at Lughwa in the late 1940s. **The Michiels Family via Greg Crouch**



A colorized version of Captain Sam Belieff and his crew posing with Number 100 after its noseover accident. The aircraft was flying again the next day. **Sam Belieff**





The scene at Kai Tak just before the Communist takeover of China. CNAC aircraft mingle with those of Cathay Pacific and other airlines. **Editor's Collection**



Grand Central Aircraft Manufacturing at Glendale fitted this luxury VIP interior with seating for 12. **James Polivka**



The much modified Number 100 was re-registered N800J and served with Johnson & Johnson as its executive transport for six years. Note the DC-4 nose and main undercarriage doors. **T Waddington Collection**

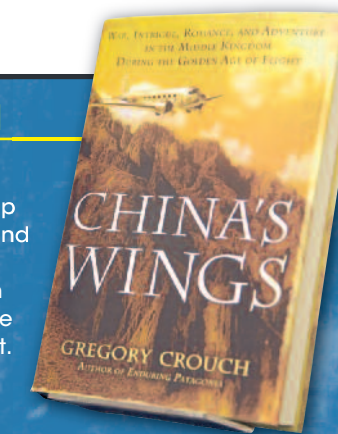


A delighted John Sessions, HFF founder and DC-3 pilot, in the cockpit of N877MG. **Jeremy Dwyer-Lindgren**

## FURTHER READING AND INFORMATION

If you want to read more about China National Aviation Corporation, visit [www.cnac.org](http://www.cnac.org) or pick up a copy of *China's Wings: War, Intrigue, Romance and Adventure in the Middle Kingdom during the Golden Age of Flight* by Gregory Crouch. This is an excellent book that tells the little known story of the amazing exploits of CNAC, its aircrews and aircraft.

To learn more about Historic Flight Foundation, visit [www.historicflight.org](http://www.historicflight.org) or for more information about their DC-3, email [visitorservices@historicflight.org](mailto:visitorservices@historicflight.org)



China's Wings by Gregory Crouch



John Sessions, founder of Historic Flight Foundation, discusses the restoration of N877MG at Sealand Aviation. **Sealand Aviation**

guard over their aircraft. The authorities in Hong Kong grew nervous as well, and surrounded the CNAC crews and aircraft with police.

In court, things were going well for the Communists. The first question was whether the assets of CNAC belonged to the Nationalist government, regardless of its location, or whether they belonged to whatever government was recognized as the legal authority in China. The judges consistently agreed that China National Aviation Corporation was a partnership between the current government of China, whoever that may be, and Pan Am.

Then the question became who was recognized as the legitimate government of China. Many nations had not yet made up their minds on the issue, but Hong Kong was leaning towards support of the Communists. It couldn't afford to anger such a powerful neighbour. At the time, only international pressure from the US was postponing their decision.

The US State Department learned the vital importance of aerial cargo capacity during the Second World War and was determined to keep the new Communist government from gaining the 70+ disputed CNAC aircraft.

Through contacts with the CIA, Claire L Chennault of the Flying Tigers formed a new US-based airline called Civil Air Transport. He then purchased all of the disputed aircraft from the Chinese Nationalist government in exile and tried to register them in the US.

This proved a bit of a quandary as the Nationalist government couldn't provide Chennault with a list of aircraft serial numbers to have them registered with the Civil Aeronautics Authority. In response, Chennault hired a CNAC ground crew member to sneak aboard the aircraft at Kai Tak and write down the numbers. When the crewman came to XT-119, he recorded the manufacturer line number instead of the serial number; thus 20806 became officially 4193.

A cooperative Britain then overruled the Hong Kong courts and awarded the remaining aircraft to the Nationalist government in exile, which had legally sold them to Civil Air Transport. Nine years after leaving California to fly the 'Hump', 4193 returned to begin a major overhaul.

Grand Central Aircraft Manufacturing near Glendale, California, spent a year modifying and upgrading the former C-47B. The cramped 32 seat passenger interior was discarded for plush VIP seating for 12. A

stainless steel galley was added, along with a full lavatory and panoramic picture windows on both sides of the fuselage. Grand Central installed the latest in aerodynamic improvements including a retractable tailwheel, clamshell landing gear doors, and a DC-4 nose housing a weather radar. The former C-47B, now more closely resembling a Super DC-3, was sold to Johnson & Johnson as an executive transport aircraft with the registration N800J.

N800J served with Johnson & Johnson for six years before being sold and re-registered as N8009. The aircraft passed through multiple owners, operating primarily in the US as an executive or VIP transport. In 1978 it was purchased by the International Shoe Machine Corporation, whose chief pilot Foster McEdward would enjoy many adventures around the globe with it.

Foster was a former CNAC pilot himself who had flown C-54s across the Pacific after the Second World War, so he recognized the 'Chung' symbol painted under one wing to commemorate its past service. The aircraft at the time had about 7000 flight hours, which Foster McEdward would almost double during his 17 years with ISMC. One memorable trip involved 110 flight hours and 14 days of flying, stretching from New Hampshire to Recife in Brazil, then across to Africa and north to England, then Iceland and back home.

Civilian flying wasn't all smooth sailing. On one Atlantic crossing, Foster and N8009 were climbing out of the Faroe Islands at well over the maximum landing weight when, at 8000 feet, the right engine quit. Foster feathered the propeller but the aircraft couldn't maintain altitude in the thin air, gradually descending towards the sea. At 2000 feet it reached denser air and had burned off enough fuel that the descent stopped, but it remained too heavy to land back at the Faroe Islands.

Foster set course for Iceland, arriving low over the coast and following a road to Reykjavik where he safely landed. A new engine was fitted but failed during a local test flight, delaying further the return to New Hampshire. Another spare engine and several months later, they made it home again.

N8009 parted company with ISMC in 1996, becoming N877MG and returning to duty as a VIP transport and sightseeing aircraft. In 2005 it caught the attention of John Sessions, founder of Historic Flight Foundation. The



Three phases of the history of N877MG, first in wartime camouflage with CNAC as Number 100, then in postwar CNAC markings as XT-119 and finally today with HFF in the Pan American Airways System scheme. **Keith Draycott**

aircraft had the original 1953 executive interior and all of the modifications made by Grand Central Aircraft, but the records of its service prior to being registered in the US were lost. The rumour was that it had flown with Pan American Airways as a Super DC-3, but, because of the extensive modifications and the incorrect serial number and data plate, no one knew for sure.

Historic Flight purchased the aircraft in 2006 and began restoration. The airframe was stripped, the structure examined, the skin inspected and parts replaced where needed. All of the systems on the aircraft were disassembled, inspected, and overhauled. The cockpit was restored to 1949 vintage equipment and controls. The cabin interior was carefully removed, cleaned, and reinstalled. But most importantly, the exterior modifications made by Grand Central were reversed. Gone was the DC-4 nose, gone too were the clamshell landing gear doors and retractable tail-wheel.

Looking like a DC-3 once again, the aircraft received a new paint job in authentic 1949 Pan American World Airways colours. Sealand

Aviation signed off on the completed restoration and N877MG made its first post-restoration flight in November of 2012. After a series of flawless shakedown flights, the aircraft flew south to the home of Historic Flight Foundation at Paine Field. Located just north of Seattle, WA, Paine Field is also the home of Boeing's wide-body manufacturing plant. N877MG now shares the runway with 747s, 767s, 777s, and 787s.

Since joining the collection of Historic Flight, N877MG has been seen winging its way all around the Pacific Northwest,

attending numerous air shows and other community events. Foundation members who choose to sponsor the aircraft have the opportunity to experience early corporate travel first-hand, and whether parked at Historic Flight or attending one of the regional air shows it is always open for tours by the public.

Although little of the aircraft today resembles the C-47B that once flew the 'Hump', it is the only known airworthy CNAC aircraft. Historic Flight has joined with the organization of surviving China National Aviation Corporation crews and their families to document and preserve as much of its amazing history as possible.

■ **Words: Liz Matzelle**



A pair of Douglas legends. HFF's fully restored N877MG in formation with the Museum of Flight's DC-2, NC13711. **Liz Matzelle**



On March 2, 2013, Historic Flight Foundation made the inaugural passenger flight of the newly restored N877MG at Paine Field in Everett, Washington. **Liz Matzelle**