

Remembering Diamond Lil's greatest flight

Two decades after a wartime bomber's epic trans-Atlantic flight into Norwich, a new book tells the full story behind Diamond Lil's most remarkable mission. **Steve Snelling** spoke to author and co-pilot David Hastings.

It was a moment of high drama in a time-warp adventure destined to make history. David Hastings leaps 20 years to the flight deck of Diamond Lil and the instant he realised an aeronautical act of remembrance had taken an unexpected and altogether unwelcome twist.

The rising temperature in one of the engines was the first clue. But it was when he went aft that he saw the full extent of the trouble: a tell-tale trail of leaking oil streaking back from the port wing's number one engine to spatter against the tail-fin.

It wasn't exactly a 'Houston, we've got a problem' moment, but the potential for disaster in a wartime vintage bomber, 9,000ft above the Arctic icecap and five hours from the nearest airfield was something that could not be ignored.

"We straightaway shut down the engine and feathered the propeller," he recalled. "And then, we had to a decision to make. We were roughly halfway between Iqaluit in the far north of Canada, where we'd taken off from, and the NATO base at Keflavik in Iceland. We could turnaround and go back, flying into a headwind, or press on with three engines.

"I think the television crew with us would have been happy to go back, but we talked it through and decided to go on. The only question then was what to do if we lost a second engine and then another. First thing would have been to start ditching kit, but after that it would have meant a forced landing on the icecap.

"We discussed whether our clothing was going to be warm enough, whether we had enough food, how long it take people to reach us and all of that was with the proviso that we actually survived the crash landing..."

David shrugs his shoulders at the memory of it all. Two decades on, it is almost as though he is still trying to make sense of it all, still trying to comprehend an extraordinary experience in a flight filled with unforgettable incidents.

"Truth is, I still can't believe it happened," says David, now 80 and finally 'grounded' after a lifetime devoted to business, public service and a passion for all things aeronautical. At his Salhouse home, a painting of a shot-up B24 being escorted back to England is an apt backdrop as the former display pilot who once piloted a light aircraft coast to coast



Historic flight: David Hastings in his garden wearing his crew jacket from the famous flight.

across America sifts through a jumble of memories to his greatest aviation adventure of all.

"When I think back on it, it's amazing it all came together and really happened. To think, a mere British PPL - someone with an ordinary private pilot's licence, not commercial mark you, just ordinary - flying a B24 across the Atlantic. That's really something."

But what was a remarkable personal milestone was also an unparalleled commemoration undertaken by the 2nd Air Division Memorial Trust to salute the sacrifice of 7,000 young Americans who died flying out of East Anglian bases during the second world war.

The fantastic odyssey of the Diamond Lil made headlines around the world, caught the imagination of thousands of people on both sides of the Atlantic and drew hordes of people to Norwich airport one late spring evening for an emotional landfall that stirred a kaleidoscope of memories of the days when mighty, four-engine B24 Liberators filled the skies over Norfolk.

Now, 20 years on, David has celebrated that incredible moment and a unique contribution to an enduring association by re-living the episode in a book that chronicles an historic flight like no other.

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Candid, entertaining and inspiring, The Diamond 'Lil' Homecoming tells the story behind the 4,500 mile mission and takes readers right into the cockpit of the desert pink-washed Liberator as it rolled back the years on a flight of remembrance that nearly didn't get off the ground at all.

It all began, somewhat incongruously, in the summer of 1991 with an East Anglian Tourist Board initiative designed to mark the following year's 50th anniversary of the start of a 'friendly invasion' by thousands of US servicemen who poured into the region during the second world war.

The 2nd Air Division Memorial Trust was asked to help and David, as a governor, was despatched with the late Berry Savory, of Muckleburgh Collection fame, to a meeting in London, where it became clear that the part played by Norfolk-based Liberator crews was liable to be overshadowed by their Flying Fortress counterparts. The reason was simple enough: whereas there was a Flying Fortress available for air shows in Britain, there was no B24.

Chairman of the trust governors, Tom Eaton listened to David's tale of woe and came up with the simple solution. "He said, 'right, David, find a B24 and bring it to Britain'. I was staggered. I said, 'Tom, that isn't quite so easy as it sounds. There are only three B24s left flying in the world and they're all in America and one of them is so corroded I wouldn't fly it.' But he was adamant and that was that."

David set to work immediately and, by the autumn, it appeared he'd pulled it off. He had sealed a £100,000 deal to have a restored B24 from the Collings Foundation flown to the UK. Planning for the summer's shows was under way when, in December, he received a call from Robert Collings. Having looked at the route across the Arctic and Atlantic, they'd decided to cancel.

"I couldn't believe it," recalls David. "The veterans in America, the trust here in England and all the sponsors were heartbroken."

That left just one last hope: the Confederate Air Force's Liberator AM927, better known as Diamond Lil. The 18th of more than 18,000 wartime B24s built, Lil was originally intended for the French Air Force before being re-allocated to the Royal Air Force. But she never made it. A landing accident on her delivery flight resulted in her conversion to the inglorious role of transport aircraft.

David had contacts with the CAF from a previous visit in the early 1980s. And after a quick call he was put in touch with Al Stricklin and Ray Krottinger at Lil's Fort Worth base. "They asked for a couple of days to think it over," says David, "and they came back with a 'yes'. They felt as strongly as we did that a B24 had to come to Britain to mark such an important anniversary. But there was a snag.

"They said, 'we only have three pilots and we need four for the trip.

If you're willing to come out and be one of the crew we'll do it.' So, I said 'you're on!'"

A smile creases his face at the memory. Even now he cannot conceal his glee at the moment he learned he'd have the chance to fly an aircraft he'd first seen as a schoolboy flying out of Horsham St Faith in 1943.

Later, during a trip to Hethel, he'd been befriended, first by crew chief Pop Gantus and then pilot Al Dexter, and was eventually 'adopted' by the crew of B24 Pugnacious Princess Pat. "Our friendship with the Americans was one of the bright spots of the war. But if anyone had said that 50 years afterwards, I'd be one of the pilots bringing a B24 across the Atlantic - and that I'd be able to fly in a

B24 with my old friend Al Dexter after all those years - I'd have said they must be mad!"

Which is more or less what his wife, Jean, thought about the notion of flying a 50-year-old aircraft at the age of 60, thousands of miles across ice cap and ocean all the way back to Norwich.

But there was no stopping him.



Flightpath worked out, conversion training completed, newly-commissioned Confederate Air Force colonel David Hastings took his place aboard Diamond Lil as the oldest member of a seven-man and two-woman crew led by senior Delta Airlines captain David Hughes.

Flying with them on the northernmost wartime ferry route via Frobisher Bay, Iceland, Kinloss and Prestwick to Norwich were a BBC television crew, radio presenter Simon Bates and two sponsors as passengers. It was as, David puts, "a very full aircraft".

Departure from Fort Worth on June 1 provided the first in a succession of highlights - a "tearful" send-off from veterans of the 2nd US Air Division.

All went smoothly through Minneapolis and on to Canada's Arctic Circle base at Iqaluit. In fact, all went well until June 3 when Diamond was well out over the ice cap, flying in air temperatures of minus 21C.

One moment, they were admiring the wild, beguiling beauty of mountains and glaciers, the next they contemplating an urgent and unscheduled engine replacement while their passengers, including a "white-knuckled" Simon Bates, were being urged to "stay warm and cool!"

"Having made our decision to press on, that was it," recalls David.

"There was so much to do there wasn't really time to worry about what might happen and, to be honest, with such an experienced crew, I never thought for a minute we wouldn't get to Keflavik."

He was right not to worry. The remaining engines gave no trouble and captain David Hughes showed his masterly flying skills. "His landing at Keflavik, on three engines, in the rain, late in the evening, was outstanding," recalls David. "I've never experienced a landing like it. You really didn't know you were down. It was an absolute 'greaser'."

Once down, there followed a frustrating and anxious delay made worse by

A unique event

◆ Twenty years on from her greatest flight, B24 AM927 is still one of the world's few airworthy Liberators. But she has lost her famous name.

◆ Diamond Lil has reverted back to her original transport name, 'Ol' 927', under the aegis of the Commemorative Air Force, formerly the Confederate AF.

◆ Recently, she suffered a nose wheel collapse, but is still an air show favourite.

◆ And the chances of her ever repeating her epic 1992 flight? David Hastings shakes his head. "As far as I know," he says, "we were the first to fly a B24 across the Atlantic since the war. It's never happened since and I don't think it will ever happen again, sad to say."

bureaucracy and a rift between the crew and presenter Simon Bates following a broadcast he made on CNN which they felt had grossly exaggerated the engine incident over the ice cap.

According to David, "some of the crew almost came to blows with him".

The unfortunate affair ended with Bates being flown back to Britain on an RAF Nimrod. The crew were not unhappy to see him go.

They were, however, growing increasingly concerned about problems with getting their spare engine flown out. It should have been at Mildenhall, from where it would have been a relatively simple task to fly it out. But David and the rest of the crew were shocked to learn it was, in fact, still in America, thanks to an over-zealous US air force officer who insisted the paperwork was not in order!

More delay followed until the intervention of senior British and American officers resulted in the engine being sent, 'special delivery', aboard a US air force Starlifter

Unforgettable journey: Main picture, Diamond Lil on the runway at the end of her historic flight; top, David with the rest of the flight crew; above, the Jaguar escort; and above, right David pictured at his Norfolk home today.



transport. The crew, all bar David qualified engineers, worked overtime to fit the new engine and, on June 10, they were on their way again - escorted by a Nimrod and with RAF 'guest' pilot Steve Rennison at the controls.

From there on, the flight consisted of one memorable moment after another; a piped greeting at RAF Kinloss; a low pass over RAF Lossiemouth; an emotion-charged link-up with three RAF Jaguars and a single Tornado over Lincolnshire. And all culminating in that historic Norfolk flight path over the former wartime bases of North Pickenham, Wendling and Attlebridge en route to Norwich, former home of the 458th Bomb Group.

"Norwich was the outstanding moment," recalls David. "It was early evening and we could see the huge crowds below lining the airport which prompted David Hughes at the controls to turn to me and say, 'You didn't tell me we were landing on a car park!'"

The final approach, following a low-level run over Coltishall, ended with the smoothest of touchdowns on runway 09. To thunderous applause, Diamond Lil's 'homecoming' was completed with a slow

procession down the runway, with Union Jack and Stars and Stripes fluttering from the cockpit.

Among the crowds of people waiting to hail their arrival was Al Dexter, the wartime B24 pilot of Hethel days whose friendship had inspired a lifelong love affair with the Liberator.

"To have Al there to share that moment was terrific, absolutely stunning," says David. In his account of the flight, he wrote: "We could not believe that we had achieved our dream in the 50th anniversary year," David wrote.

And, he still can't believe it 20 years on. It feels like a dream, a wonderful dream come true," he smiles. "To fly over the Arctic and the Atlantic in a wartime bomber with such a wonderful crew, lose an engine and limp into Iceland, and then fly on to Norwich was something I'll never forget and something that will never be repeated. It truly was a flight of a lifetime."

The Diamond 'Lil' Homecoming, by Colonel David J Hastings MBE, is published by The Larks Press, priced £8.