

BREITLING DC-3

WORLD TOUR

AFTER DECADES OF SERVICE, A UNIQUE OPERATION HAS COME TO AN END/BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Aviation is a small world. The world of veteran and vintage aircraft is even smaller. So, it was no surprise that when the Breitling DC-3 landed at Van Nuys Airport there should be a few folks that we knew. And there were. Captain of the veteran Gooney was none other than Francisco Agullo and the last time we had flown together was when he was trying to get the Lockheed Constellation known as the Camarillo Connie out of Camarillo, California, and on its way to Switzerland. Just as we were joining up with the climbing Connie, all the triple-tail queen's radios decided to die — and that was just the start of the problems. And then there was copilot Paul Bazeley of Aerometal International in

Oregon, and we had last seen each other when we spent some quality cockpit time in a DC-3 at the big gathering held in Illinois a few years back where we discussed the properties of vintage metal in equally vintage aircraft. Last, but certainly not least, was Katsuhiko Tokunaga. The last time Katsu and I had gotten together was for a frantic few hours of telephone conversations to make sure that the photo mission for the de Havilland Mosquito (see *Air Classics* November 2015) was going to happen. Personally, I view Katsu as the best international aviation photographer — he is quiet, unassuming and his work is more than magnificent. Breitling is a class outfit and it showed in the group of professionals they had undertaking a very difficult mission.

The whole point of such a difficult endeavor is to promote the company's products — and Breitling was doing just that since the DC-3 was carrying a 500-piece Navitimer Limited Edition. Also, the Grand Old Lady of the Skies was celebrating her 77th birthday during the trip, which was blocked out from March through September of this year. I was soon hauled aboard the DC-3 to be shown all the usual bells and whistles for this particular aircraft so this is a good time to look at the history of the DC-3 that now carries the Swiss registration HB-IRJ. Built as an actual DC-3 (not a C-47 converted after the war to DC-3 status), the transport was ordered by American Airlines as DC-3-277B c/n 2204 NC25658 *Cleveland* and delivered out of Santa Monica on 12 March 1940.

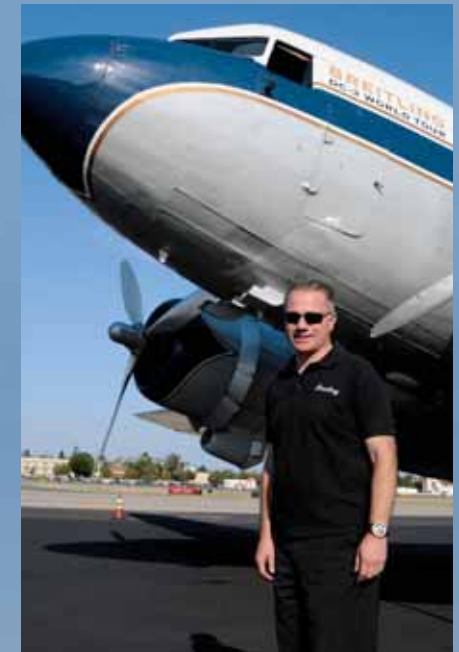


Breitling had made connections with the FBO Signature West for the DC-3 to park and host the VIP event. Now, I usually do not put such comments in our articles but I must say I found these folks to be extremely unpleasant. While I was standing on the ramp (and wearing a business suit) one of the Signature flunkies came running out and, pointing at the ground, exclaimed "What are you going to do about THAT?" The THAT referred to some drops of oil coming from the R-1830s. Then I decided to take this picture (and a few others) when a female flunky came zipping out of the doors, waving her arms, and bellowing "No photos! No photos! Our customers do not like that." So, dear readers — what to do? If the chance ever comes where you will have to stop at Van Nuys to utilize an FBO, then don't use this one — go across the runway and use Clay Lacy Aviation, they even have a DC-3 parked in one of their hangars.

Its service with American was going to be relatively brief since the plane was acquired by the US Army Air Force under a lease program on 4 April 1942 and the lease extended to 1 April 1944, when it appears to have gone back into USAAF service. Records are relatively basic and it appears the Gooney stayed with the Army until 24 February 1949 when it was purchased by Trans-Texas Airways. Based out of Houston, Texas, the airline had started DC-3 operations in October 1947.



They flew Gooney Birds until 1969, a year after their name had changed to Texas International and, over the years, they had operated 27 Goonies. The aircraft was sold to Tradewinds in San Antonio, Texas, on 4 February 1969 but they only kept the Gooney until 16 December 1971 when it was sold to Provincetown-Boston Airlines and the registration was changed to N34BP. The airline was taken over by Eastern Express in 1987 (it is rather amazing that DC-3s were flying this popular and busy shuttle service this "late in the day"). From August 1988 to June 1990, the aircraft



Captain Francisco Agullo has come to know just about every square inch of the Gooney Bird and his enthusiasm for the DC-3 is boundless.

was noted engineless at Hyannis, Massachusetts but in July 1992, it was purchased by Champlain Enterprises of New York and went through a complete restoration program in 1995, emerging as N922CA *Priscilla*. Francisco and partners purchased the DC-3 from Champlain in November 2008. "I had been doing a lot of looking," explained Francisco, "and was extremely lucky to find this aircraft. The DC-3 was very clean and Champlain had done first-rate work on the restoration program. We wanted to get the DC-3 to Switzerland, set up some sort of rides program, and just have fun with her." They got the DC-3 to Switzerland in May 2009 and it is now operated under the umbrella of the Super Constellation Flyers Association. Today, the aircraft is fully licensed IFR and can carry passengers for hire. The Swiss government had gotten to know Francisco's high-quality work through the Swiss-registered Super Constellation.



The DC-3 out over Topanga Canyon with the Pacific and Malibu in the background.