



Sport Aviation

The Spirit of Aviation | www.eaa.org Vol. 63 No. 3 | March 2011



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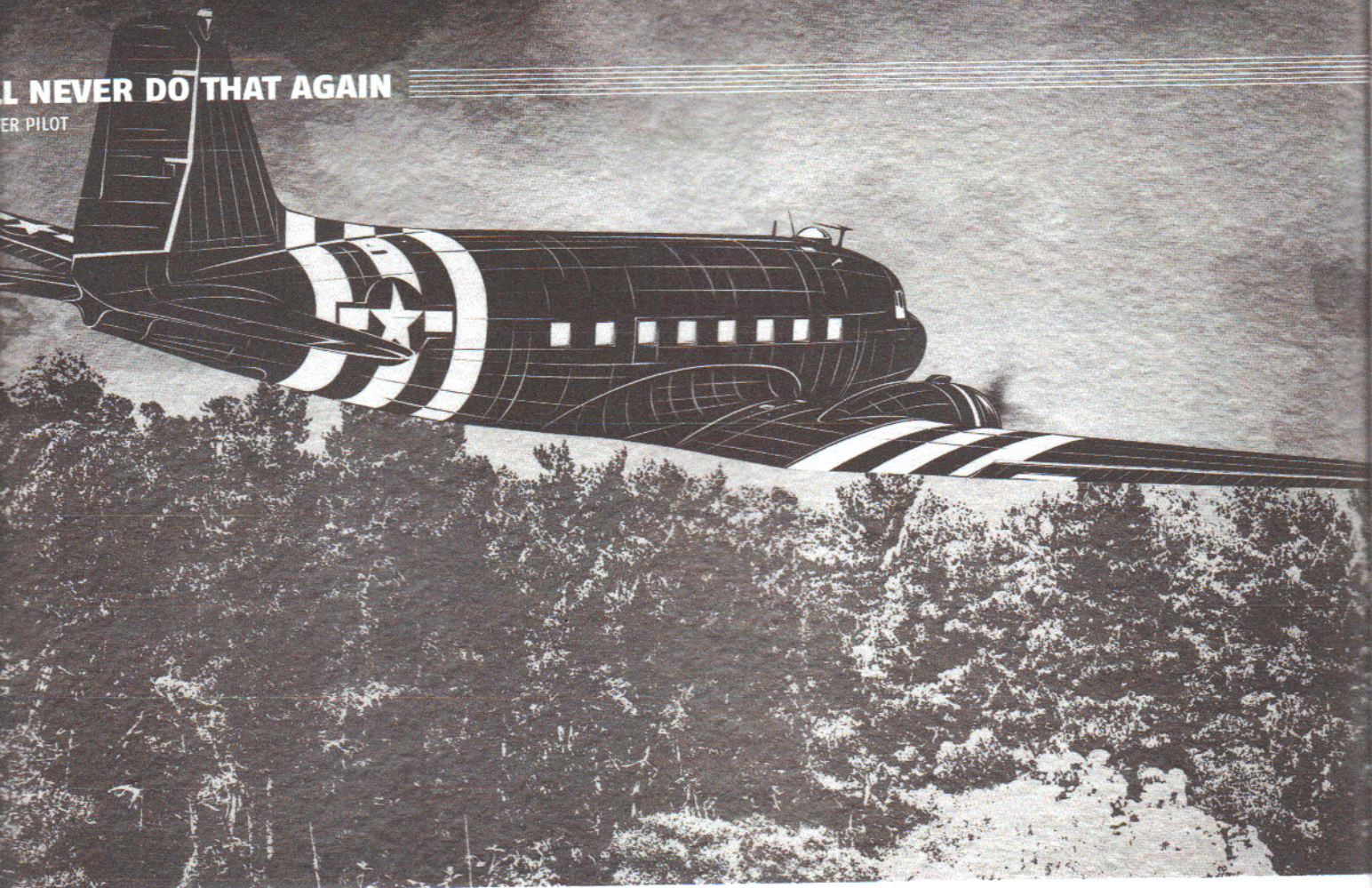
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Almost Catastrophic

Gooney flying in 1947

BY RETIRED USAF LT. COL. ROBERT H. DRUMM, EAA 30946

IN 1947, THE U.S. AIR FORCE was a new kid on the block. Those of us already in the military had a choice of staying with the Army or joining the newly created Air Force. Those of us who chose the Air Force, after the exuberance of newness wore off, found an organization in the midst of congressional budget cutting that created a serious shortage of aircraft replacement parts. But, I'm getting ahead of my story.

As a 20-year-old first lieutenant in this newly established organization, I found myself in Kimpo, Korea, with the 475th Fighter Wing of the 5th Air Force. I pictured myself becoming a glamorous fighter pilot hero. My first day on the base and a visit to the operations office punctured my balloon. It seems the Air Force had plenty of leftover fighter pilots from World War II, but a critical shortage of multiengine types. Apparently I was one of a handful of multiengine pilots, and the ops officer pointed out the window to a line of war-weary C-47s and a lone C-46. I would be flying these during my tour.

This brings us to a situation that developed at the end of November 1947. Officer clubs in Korea pooled their money and bought alcoholic beverages from a single broker in the United States at a

considerable savings. This broker was to send the entire shipment via surface vessel to arrive in Korea the first week of December, in time for distribution before the Christmas and New Year's parties.

However, the ship with all the cargo sunk off the southern coast of Japan in a typhoon the last week of November. Now, as an outstanding and imaginative commander of a fighter pilot organization, our boss made contact with the commander of Tachikawa Air Force Base in Japan. He made arrangements for one of our C-47s to pick up a planeload of liquor from their officers club.

Ted Percy and I were elected to make the flight. Ted flew left seat to Japan, and I was to fly left seat on the return trip. All

went well during the loading of the aircraft at Tachi. It was a full load. We had to crawl over the cases to reach the cockpit.

It was dusk on a Sunday night, and it started to rain as we took off. The procedure was to fly east out to sea and turn south over a small island. This route was to miss Mount Fuji on our way down the coast. All went well until the sun was on the horizon between the earth and the heavy clouds producing the rain. This was about one hour into the flight.

In the rain and darkness we lost all electrical power. All of a sudden the circuit breaker panel started to smoke, and we noticed a small flame. Pilots who have experience flying at night on instruments with no lights on the panel ask the crew chief to flash the flashlight on the panel to make it glow. Our crew chief did just that and then continued to fight the enlarging fire with the fire extinguisher.

The extinguisher was located behind the pilot seat on the bulkhead. This was a carbon tetrachloride extinguisher. During military training they told us that when you put carbon tetrachloride on a fire you get phosgene gas. This is the same thing the Germans used to gas our ground troops in World War I. With both side windows open in the cockpit, and with the rain coming in, physical life was somewhat bearable. Mental life is something else.

By now Ted had made contact with the Iwakuni Air Force Base (GCA) radar controller who just happened to be a young airman and a recent graduate from radar school. We were trying to get the airplane on the ground as soon as possible, and the radar operator was vectoring us. He asked that we report passing through each 1,000 feet. Just as Ted reported 4,000 feet a loud noise that sounded like "whop-whop" started. The crew chief flashed the light out the window. We were dragging the tail of the Gooney through the tops of pine trees on the side of a Japanese mountain.

When Ted queried the radar operator he replied, "What are you doing there? Those mountain tops are at 6,000 feet." We had already reported at 4,000 feet.

Just as we were breathing a sigh of relief, the whole cockpit lit up with a

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flash that resembled a lightning strike. What happened? An elderly master sergeant was listening to all this banter on the alert shack radio. He went to the center of the field, fired up an old 60-inch searchlight, and pointed it straight up.

We had flown through the light. After we were informed what the light was and its location we used it as a letdown marker. We'd let down at 500 feet per minute, fly through the light, and make a procedure turn. We broke out at about 800 feet. We landed, parked the airplane, and went straight to the bar at the officers club.

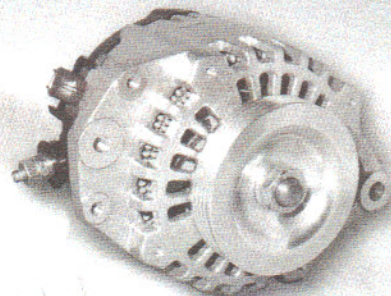
It took about four days to rewire the wings where rainwater had shorted out the war-weary wires. The corroded circuit breaker panel was replaced by one from a cannibalized C-47. When the Iwakuni base commander realized what we had on board he immediately put a 24-hour guard on the cargo. For his kind and generous help a few cases disappeared from the manifest.

We arrived back in Korea a week before Christmas. After midnight mass on Christmas Eve, the club officer, in a moment of generosity, gave each member a free bottle of substandard liquor. Our commander had to take this yucky stuff in order to receive the good stuff from the club in Tachikawa. To this day I can't look at a bottle of Cherry Heering without getting nauseated.

And what were my thoughts while the Gooney was scraping its tail through the tops of the pine trees? To be honest, I was wondering if I broke the airplane really bad, and the investigators found all that liquor, would my mother still receive the \$10,000 from my World War II GI life insurance policy? That kind of money was a fortune in those days. *EAA*

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