

FEATURE

15 AS hosts WW II C-47 aviators

By Lt. Col. Ed Memi
437 AW Public Affairs

Charleston aircrew members got a unique lesson on the virtues of the Douglas C-47 Skytrain and the success of airlift in World War II when former members of the 15th Troop Carrier Squadron visited the base Oct. 22-25.

The 15th Airlift Squadron hosted 22 former members of the 15 TCS, who were in Charleston as part of their annual reunion.

The 15 TCS participated in many of the major battle campaigns during World War II and moved from place-to-place in Europe, with most of their time spent in England.

During their visit to the base, the group toured the C-17, flew in the Boeing C-17 simulators, saw the enlisted dormitories and had lunch at the base dining facility. The group held a banquet at the Charleston Club with many of the base's leaders.

They also took some time to pose for a photo with 15 AS members in front of the base C-47 static display. There are 125 members in the 15 TCS Association, but most say this will be their next-to-last reunion since many are in their 70s and 80s and their ranks are diminishing.

Keith Larson, former president of the 15 TCS association, organized reunions for about 33 years and served in the 15 TCS as an enlisted scheduler for 28 months. Most of the 15 TCS members were trained in Lubbock, Texas. After being alerted to go overseas while at Pope Field, N.C., the 15 TCS was sent to Africa, Sicily, England, and France.

"The 15 TCS moved from country to country depending on which invasion was occurring at the time," said Larson.

The squadron was formally

deactivated in 1945.

"I think the tour has been great," said former C-47 navigator Capt. Ed Dawidczyk from Long Island, N.Y. "We flew into Normandy, Sicily and had a variety of supply routes that we supported as part of the 15 TCS," he said. "In those days, up to 24 planes were assigned to the squadron, and there were a total of four squadrons in a group."

Dawidczyk said this was his first visit to the base and upon seeing the C-17 for the first time; he described it as being huge when compared to a C-47.

Former Capt. Richard H. Boehning, 88, from Mills Spring, N.C., served with the 15 TCS from Sept. 1944 until late 1945. He flew C-47s mostly in Europe. "We did a lot of supply into Bastogne," said Boehning. "We were one of the first elements to relieve Bastogne from the air. (Bastogne was a critical road center in Belgium that was essential in the Battle of the Bulge, which was the last German offensive of World War II. It was launched at the end of 1944 in an attempt to divide the British and American forces and retake the seaport of Antwerp, in Belgium.) We dropped a smattering of supplies.

"We did pretty good in our airdrops and would sometimes drop items right on the button. I can't say the same for our gliders, because you never knew where they would end up. The ground was their drop zone," he joked.

The C-47 was often used to tow one or two gliders at a time into combat. "On the tow ropes for a double tow, one nylon rope was about 80 feet and the other was about 120 feet," said Boehning. "If you had a double tow in rough weather, the different length ropes would keep them from tangling up. The C-47s would drag these ropes

after releasing the gliders over the drop zone and would release the ropes from the tail end of the aircraft once at a drop zone near their home base."

The CG-4A was the most widely used U.S. troop/cargo glider of WW II. The CG-4A was constructed of fabric-covered wood and metal and was crewed by a pilot and co-pilot. It could carry a jeep, a quarter-ton truck or a 75mm howitzer loaded through the upward-hinged nose section. Upon landing, the aircraft was considered expendable.

Fred Freeman, 78, from Dallas, Texas, arrived at the 15 TCS in July 1944. "I got in on the Holland invasions, and we dropped the British soldiers where the movie 'A Bridge Too Far' was based upon. We came over about 100 miles of enemy territory, where the flak was mostly above or below our heads. We flew in at about 1,500 feet and came out of the drop zone flying about 500 feet, and then climbed to about 3,000 to 5,000 feet. The flak was all below us, but it sure sounded like it was a lot closer. It sure cracked and popped like there was a lot of damage being done to the aircraft, but we rarely had damage."

Both Freeman and Boehning are modest about transport pilots being recognized for their contributions.

"Those guys in the mighty Eight Air Force are still tooting their horns," said Boehning. "That's okay, it's justified since they lost a powerful amount of people -- a lot more than troop carrier command. But, we were the true workhorses! Gen. Dwight Eisenhower said there were five essential things that won the war, and the only aircraft that he mentioned in those five things was the C-47."

Few aircraft are as well known or were so widely used for so long as the C-47 or "Gooney Bird" as it was affectionately nicknamed. The aircraft was adapted from the DC-3 commercial airliner, which appeared in 1936. The first C-47s were ordered in 1940, and by the end of WW II, 9,348 had been procured for Army Air Force use. They carried personnel and cargo, and in a combat role, towed troop-carrying gliders and dropped paratroopers into enemy territory. The C-47 was often used to ferry wounded service members back to the hospitals. It could carry 33,000 lbs. loaded, had a cruising speed of 175 mph,



C-47s lined-up during the Berlin Airlift.

Air Force photo

a range of 1,513 miles and a service ceiling of 24,450 ft.

One of the more unusual stories was when the Navy mistakenly shot down two C-47s from the 15 TCS. "We crashed into the sea and a British Navy ship picked us up," said Joe Yuhasz, a C-47 crew chief on board the C-47 that was shot down. "We shot up a flare because the pilot was shot up badly and the co-pilot's head was injured. We started getting tracers shot over our heads when we did that and the Navy must have thought we were shooting at them, so we stopped doing that. The Navy shot down about 36 transport aircraft by mistake during World War II. I have a soft spot in my heart for the British because they saved us."

Former 1st Lt. Dick Home, 80, who now lives in Pasadena, Calif., was a C-47 pilot who also flew B-25s and fondly remembers his time in the 15 TCS. "I flew over the icecap down to England and that was where I joined the 15 TCS in 1944. My most interesting mission was an airdrop of paratroopers over the Rhine River, which gave us a strong foothold over the Rhine River. (The first stage for all of the Allied armies was to reach the Rhine River.) The sky was full of gliders."

"We used to call it a 'stick' and each person would put their hand on the back of one another as they prepared to jump from the C-47s," said Home. "They would shout 'Geronimo' as they would run out of the aircraft as one single continuous stick. The paratroopers for the British had these big coveralls, and they looked like cupie dolls and all their gear was underneath these coveralls. They could hardly walk and would just fall out of the aircraft. I'll never forget that image of them going out the C-47."

Home also flew in the Berlin Airlift and left active duty in 1950 and eventually retired as a lieutenant colonel from the reserve. This was his fourth reunion. "I love getting together and seeing some of these people I haven't seen for 45 years. It is great reminiscing. I don't know why, but I've got a million stories. Your mind tends to forget the tough times and remembers only the good times."



Photo by Lt. Col. Ed Memi

Maj. Ed Schmidt, chief of flight safety, gives former flying crew chief and pilot Sam Steed, 15th Troop Carrier Squadron, an orientation of the C-17 cockpit.