

AN AMAZING PLANE

Now the DC3 has been grounded by EU health and safety rules

'It groaned, it protested, it rattled, it ran hot, it ran cold, it ran rough, it staggered along on hot days and scared you half to death.

'Its wings flexed and twisted in a horrifying manner, it sank back to earth with a great sigh of relief. But it flew and it flew and it flew.'

This is the memorable description by Captain Len Morgan, a former pilot with Braniff Airways, of the unique challenge of flying a Douglas DC-3.

It's carried more passengers than any plane in history, but - Now the DC-3 has been grounded by EU health and safety rules.

The DC-3 served in World War II, Korea and Vietnam, and was a favourite among pilots!

For more than 70 years, the aircraft known through a variety of nicknames --- the Doug, the Dizzy, Old Methuselah, the Gooney Bird, the Grand Old Lady --- but which to most of us is simply the Dakota --- has been the workhorse of the skies.

With its distinctive nose-up profile when on the ground and extraordinary capabilities in the air, it transformed passenger travel, and served in just about every military conflict from World War II onwards.

Now the Douglas DC-3 --- the most successful plane ever made, which first took to the skies just over 30 years after the



Wright Brothers' historic first flight --- is to carry passengers in Britain for the last time.

Romeo Alpha and Papa Yankee, the last two passenger-carrying Dakotas in the UK, are being forced into retirement because of --- yes, you've guessed it --- health & safety rules.

Their owner, Coventry-based Air Atlantique, has reluctantly decided it would be too expensive to fit the required emergency- escape slides and weather-radar systems required by new European rules for their 65-year-old planes, which served with the RAF during the war.

Mike Collett, the company's chairman, says: "We're very saddened."

The end of the passenger-carrying British Dakotas is a sad chapter in the story of the most remarkable aircraft ever built, surpassing all others in length of service, dependability and achievement.

It has been a luxury airliner, transport plane, bomber, fighter and flying hospital, and introduced millions of people to the concept of air travel.

It has flown more miles, broken more records, carried more passengers and cargo, accumulated more flying time and performed more 'impossible' feats than any other plane in history, even in these days of super-jumbos that can circle the world non-stop.

Indeed, at one point, 90 percent of the world's air traffic was operated by DC-3s.

More than 10,500 DC-3s have been built since the prototype was rolled out to astonished onlookers at Douglas's Santa Monica factory in 1935.

With its eagle beak, large square windows and sleek metal fuselage, it was luxurious beyond belief, in contrast to the

wood-and-canvas bone shakers of the day, where passengers had to huddle under blankets against the cold.

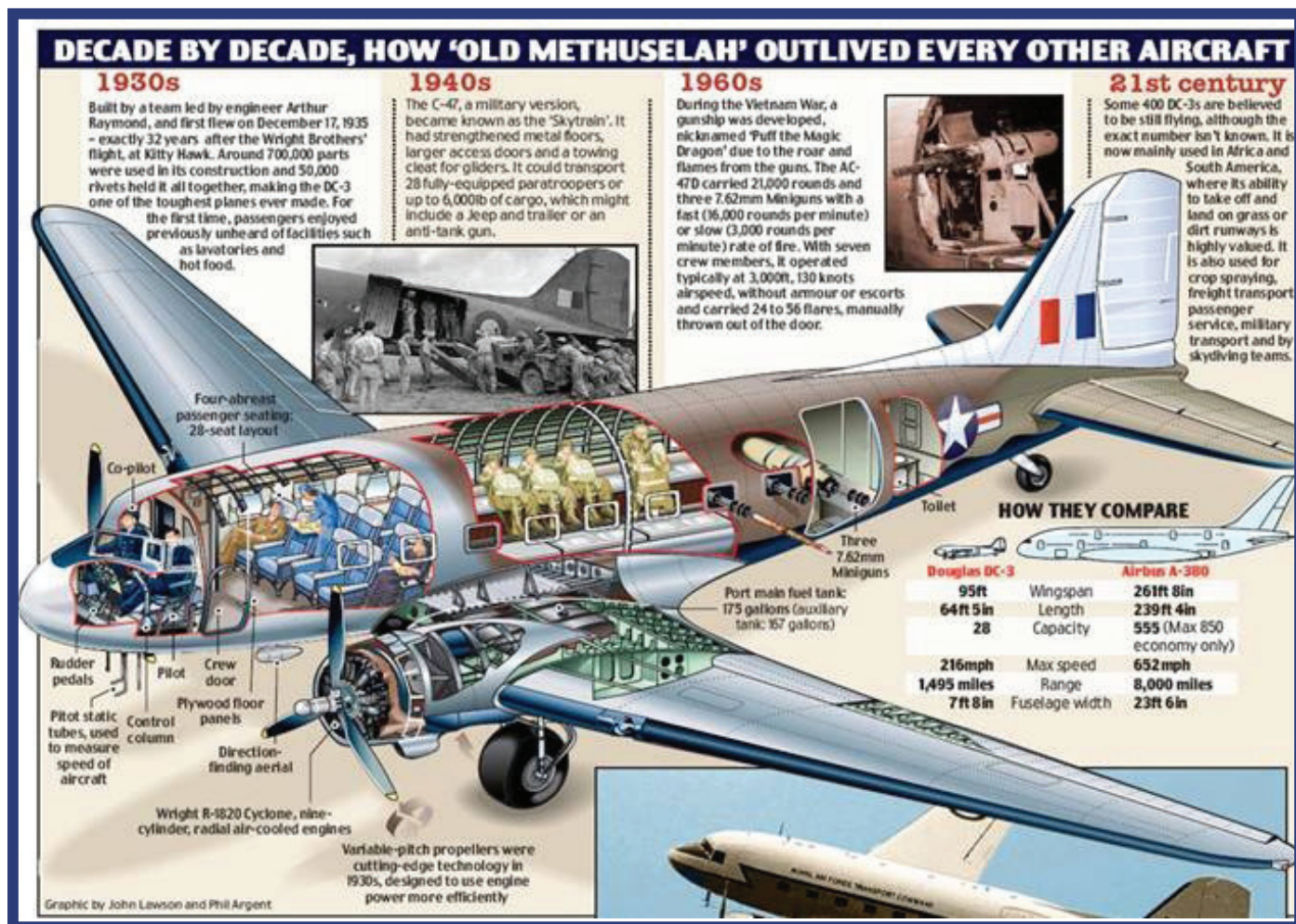
Even in the 1930s, the early Dakotas had many of the comforts we take for granted today, like on-board loos and a galley that could prepare hot food.

Early menus included wild-rice pancakes with blueberry syrup, served on bone china with silver service.

For the first time, passengers were able to stand- up and walk-around while the plane was airborne.

But the design had one vital feature, ordered by pioneering aviator Charles Lindbergh, who was a director of TWA, which placed the first order for the plane.

The DC-3 should always, Lindbergh directed, be able to fly on one- engine.



Pilots have always loved it, not just because of its rugged reliability but because, with no computers on board, it is the epitome of 'flying by the seat- of- the- pants'.

One aviator memorably described the Dakota as a 'collection of parts flying in loose formation', and most reckon they can land it pretty well on a postage stamp.

Captain Len Morgan says: 'The Dakota could lift virtually any load strapped to its back and carry it anywhere and in any weather safely.'

It is the very human scale of the plane that has so endeared it to successive generations. With no pressurization in the cabin, it flies low and slow.

And unlike modern jets, it's still possible to see the world go by from the cabin of a Dakota. (The name, incidentally, is an acronym for Douglas Aircraft Company Transport Aircraft.)

As a former Pan Am stewardess puts it: "From the windows, you seldom look upon a flat, hazy, distant surface to the world.

"Instead, you see the features of the earth --- curves of mountains, colours of lakes, cars moving on roads, ocean waves crashing on shores, and cloud formations as a sea of popcorn and powder puffs.'

But it is for heroic feats in military service that the legendary plane is most distinguished.

It played a major role in the invasion of Sicily, the D-Day landings, the Berlin Airlift, and the Korean & Vietnam wars, performing astonishing feats along the way.

When General Eisenhower was asked what he believed were the foundation stones for America's success in World War II, he named the bulldozer, the jeep, the half-ton truck, and the Dakota.

When the Burma Road was captured by the Japanese, and the only way to send supplies into China was over the mountains at 19,000 ft, the Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek said: 'Give me 50 DC-3s, and the Japs can have the Burma Road.'

In 1945, a Dakota broke the world record for a flight with an engine out of action, travelling for 1,100 miles from Pearl Harbor to San Diego, with just one- propeller working.

Another in RNZAF service lost a wing after colliding mid-air with a Lockheed bomber. Defying all the rules of aerodynamics, and with only a stub remaining, the plane landed, literally, on a wing and a prayer at Whenuapai Airbase.

Once, a Dakota pilot carrying paratroops across the Channel to France heard an enormous bang.

He went aft to find that half the plane had been blown away, including part of the rudder. With engines still turning, he managed to skim the wave-tops before finally making it to safety.

Another wartime Dakota was rammed by a Japanese fighter that fell to earth, while the American crew returned home in their severely damaged --- but still airborne --- plane, and were given the distinction of 'downing an enemy aircraft'.

Another DC-3 was peppered with 3,000 bullets in the wings and fuselage by Japanese fighters. It made it back to base, was repaired with canvas patches and glue, and then sent back into the air.

During the evacuation of Saigon in 1975, a Dakota crew managed to cram aboard 98 Vietnamese orphans, although the plane was supposed to carry no more than 30 passengers. In addition to its rugged military service, it was the DC-3 which transformed commercial -passenger flying in the post-war years.

Easily converted to a passenger plane, it introduced the idea of affordable air travel to a world which had previously seen it as exclusively for the rich. Flights across America could be completed in about 15 hours (with three stops for refuelling), compared with the previous reliance on short hops in commuter aircraft during the day and train- travel overnight.

It made the world a smaller place, gave people the opportunity for the first time to see previously inaccessible destinations, and became a romantic symbol of travel. The DC-3's record has not always been perfect.

After the war, military-surplus Dakotas were cheap, often poorly maintained, and pushed to the limit by their owners. Accidents were frequent.

One of the most tragic happened in 1962, when Zulu Bravo, a Channel Airways flight from Jersey, slammed into a hillside on the Isle of Wight in thick fog. All three crew and nine of the 14 passengers died, but the accident changed the course of aviation history. The local radar, incredibly, had been switched off because it was a Sunday.

The national air safety rules were changed to ensure it never happened again.

'The DC-3 was, and is, unique,' wrote the novelist and aviation writer Ernest Gann, 'since no other flying machine has cruised every sky known to mankind, been so admired, cherished, glamorized, known the touch of so many pilots and sparked so many tributes.

"It was without question the most successful aircraft ever built, and even in this jet-age, it seems likely that the surviving DC-3s may fly about their business forever." This may be no exaggeration. Next month, Romeo Alpha and Papa Yankee begin a farewell tour of Britain 's airports before carrying their final passengers at the International Air Tattoo at RAF Fairford on July 16. But after their retirement, there will still be Dakotas flying in the farthest corners of the world, kept going with love, dedication and sheer ingenuity.

Nearly three-quarters of a century after they first entered service, it's still possible to get a Dakota ride somewhere in the world.

I recently took a DC-3 into the heart of the Venezuelan jungle --- to the "Lost World" made famous in the novel by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It is one of the most remote regions on the planet --- where the venerable old planes have long been used because they can be manoeuvred like birds in the wild terrain.

It's a scary experience being strapped into a torn canvas chair, raked back at an alarming angle (walking along the aisle of a stationary Dakota is like climbing a steep hill) as you wait for take-off.

The engines spew smoke and oil as they shudder into life with what DC-3 fans describe as 'music', but to me sounded like the hammering of a thousand pneumatic-drills. But soon you are skimming the legendary flat-topped mountains protruding from the jungle below, purring over wild rivers and the Angel Falls , the world's highest rapids. Suddenly the ancient plane drops like a stone to a tiny landing strip just visible in the trees.

The pilot dodges bits of dismantled DC-3 engines scattered on the ground and avoids a stray dog as he touches down with scarcely a bump. How did he do it without air traffic control and the minimum of navigational aids? "C'est facile --- it's easy," he shrugged.

Today, many DC-3s live-on throughout the world as crop-sprayers, surveillance patrols, air freighters in forgotten African states, and even luxury executive transports.

One, owned by a Houston lumber company, had mink-covered door- knobs, while another belonging to a Texas rancher had sofas and reclining chairs upholstered with the skins of unborn calves. In Jaipur, India, a Dakota is licensed for flying wedding ceremonies.

Even when they have ended their aerial lives, old Dakotas have become mobile homes, hamburger stands and hen houses. One even serves as a football team changing room.

Clark Gable's private DC-3, which once ferried chums such as John and Bobby Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra and Ronald Reagan, is in a theme park in San Marino . But don't assume it won't run again. Some of the oldest hulks have been put back in the skies.

The ancient piston-engines are replaced by modern turboprops, and many a pilot of a modern jet has been astonished to find a Dakota alongside him on the climb away from the runway.

So what is the enduring secret of the DC-3? David Egerton, professor of the history of science and technology at Imperial College , London , says we should rid our minds of the idea that the most recent inventions are always the best. 'The very fact that the DC-3 is still around and performing a useful role in the world is a powerful reminder that the latest and most expensive technology is not always the one that changes history,' he says.

It's long been an aviation axiom that 'the only replacement for the DC-3 is another DC-3'.

So it's fortunate that at least one seems likely to be around for a very long time to come.

In 1946, a DC-3 on a flight from Vienna to Pisa crashed into the top of the Rosenlauri Glacier in the Swiss Alps. The aircraft was not damaged and all the passengers were rescued, but it quickly began to disappear as a blinding snowstorm raged. Swiss engineers have calculated that it will take 600 years for it to slide- down inside the glacier and emerge at the bottom.

The most asinine ruling ever dreamed up by a nightmare bureaucracy!!! I especially appreciate the part requiring "escape slides". On it's belly, you can step down from the aircraft floor to the ground.

And the article left out the tale of the "DC-2-and-a-Half". After being shot-up by Japanese fighters, the damaged wing of a DC-3 was replaced with one from a DC-2. It was then loaded up with refugees, and flown to safety.