

Everything about the B-24 was big—  
including the production run.

# The Grand Old Liberator

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**O**N Armed Forces Day 1989, hundreds lined up in the scorching north Texas heat at Carswell AFB. They were awaiting a turn to look inside the Confederate Air Force's *Diamond Lil*, one of only three flyable B-24 Liberators or variants still in existence.

For some, it was an emotional moment. One visitor, a former inmate of a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp during World War II, was especially moved. "He hadn't seen a Liberator since the war," explained CAF member David Liebenson. "When it was his turn to climb aboard, he couldn't help but cry."

Such scenes were common at the festivities, held in May, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the B-24 bomber, one of the most famous airplanes of all time. More than 5,000 people flocked to Fort Worth for the first phase of Liberator-related reunions. Part two of the bomber bash will take place September 20-24 in San Diego, Calif.

Bob Vickers, national chairman of the celebration, described the event as a tribute not only to the aircraft but also to the more than 1,000,000 men and women who

built, supported, or flew B-24s in the war years.

The prototype XB-24, developed by Consolidated Aircraft Corp., made its first flight from Lindbergh Field, San Diego, Calif., on December 29, 1939. Soon thousands of workers were building the bomber at plants across the nation—at Consolidated in California and Texas, North American Aviation in Texas, Ford Motor Co. in Michigan, and Douglas Aircraft Co. in Oklahoma.

Between 1942 and 1945, some 3,000 standard B-24s and variants rolled off the mile-long assembly line at Consolidated's Fort Worth plant, which is now the Fort Worth Division of General Dynamics. Peak production saw deliveries of 175 aircraft per month.

Today, however, only a handful remain. CAF pilot David Hughes, working with copilot Harold Smith and flight engineer Sam Manganson, flew *Diamond Lil* to Fort Worth from its home in Harlingen, Tex. An LB-30B, *Diamond Lil* was among a number of B-24As that were to be diverted from the Army Air Corps to the Royal Air Force. The plane never made it to England.

*Diamond Lil* was converted to transport use and served as an executive plane during the war.

### Those Special Engines

Among participants at the anniversary event was Fort Worth AFA Chapter official Bob Copley. Although he has flown many different bombers, the B-24 is still his favor-

more than 4,000 enemy aircraft during World War II.

It was the B-24's range—up to 3,200 miles—that helped the US and its allies extend their reach around the globe and perform a multitude of critical missions. It had a maximum takeoff weight of 65,000 pounds and could carry more than 8,000 pounds of bombs.



Confederate Air Force's *Diamond Lil*, one of only three B-24s still flying, cruises over Fort Worth, Tex., with one of its newest cousins, an F-16C. Some 3,000 standard Liberators and variants were built by Consolidated Aircraft Corp., later General Dynamics, which produces the *Fighting Falcon* today.

ite. What made it so special? "Engines!" says Mr. Copley. "Every man you ask will say the same thing."

The Liberator came equipped with four Pratt & Whitney R-1830 radial engines, each generating 1,200 horsepower. The aircraft boasted a top speed of 300 miles per hour and a cruising speed of about 200 mph.

Retired USAF Maj. Gen. Ramsay D. Potts, former Eighth Air Force bomb group commander and one of five panelists at a special B-24 symposium, maintained that the B-17 was a better high-altitude bomber. Even so, he noted, "it took better pilots to fly the B-24."

Everything about the bomber was big—especially its production run. More than 18,000 B-24s—a greater number than any other warplane in US history—were produced for the war effort.

According to General Dynamics, B-24s flew 312,734 sorties, dropped 634,831 tons of bombs, and downed

Lt. Gen. Carl R. Smith, Assistant Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, pointed out that B-24 operations "stretched from the US to Europe and North Africa, across the China-Burma-India 'hump' to the Pacific theater and Alaska.

"Liberators attacked ground targets of every kind. They sank surface ships, hunted and destroyed submarines, flew airlift missions, and rotated ferry crews between Europe and the States." B-24s carried out missions ranging from fuelhauling to weather flights and naval reconnaissance.

### Raids on Ploesti

Among the most famous B-24 missions being recalled in Fort Worth were two raids on enemy oil refineries located at Ploesti, Romania.

The first attack, carried out in June 1942 by thirteen US Liberators, paralleled Gen. Jimmy Doolittle's B-25 bomber raid on Tokyo two months earlier. "Just as

his B-25s were the first American bombers to strike Japan," noted General Smith, "so were the Liberators the first American heavy bombers to attack a European target."

In the second raid on Ploesti, 177 B-24s from two Ninth Air Force B-24 groups and three groups on loan from Eighth Air Force flew out of the Libyan desert on August 1, 1943. It was the first large-scale, low-level strike by heavy bombers against a well-defended target. Despite a disrupted plan of attack, the raid was essential to this country, recalls Medal of Honor recipient Gen. Leon W. Johnson, USAF (Ret.), who commanded the 44th Bomb Group in that raid.

Nearly fifty B-24 reunion groups took part in the anniversary activities in Texas. The participants included two Navy contingents. (The Navy flew B-24s for antisubmarine patrol and other maritime duties. The Navy called its B-24s PB4Ys.) Among the highlights was a memorial tribute, including a special flyby of *Diamond Lil* and *Delectable Doris* (a privately owned B-24J).

One popular exhibit was a fully operating B-24 nose turret, presented by E. R. "Pony" Maples of Nashville, Tenn. Mr. Maples said that the most interesting person who visited his exhibit was an elderly woman who, with no guidance whatsoever, got into the turret, fired it up, and ran it perfectly. When she was eighteen years old, she explained, her husband, a bomb group commander, sneaked her on several flights at night and taught her how to operate the equipment.

Another exhibitor at Fort Worth, Bob Collings, has been restoring a B-24J with the help of General Dynamics, a major corporate sponsor, and other history buffs. The newly restored bomber, dubbed the *All American*, rolled out in July and began to prepare for a first flight. It becomes the third still-flying Liberator in the world.

Capt. Dave Martin, a B-52 pilot with the 9th Bomb Squadron at Carswell, examined the interior of *Delectable Doris* while it was on display at the base. After he had ducked along the narrow catwalk in the bomb bay and examined the cockpit controls, Captain Martin said that he was simply "in awe." ■