

ZK-AWP Powhaitere

The first prototype DC-3 flew, as the Douglas Sleeper Transport on 17 December 1935, the 32nd anniversary of the Wright Brothers' first flight. As a Douglas C-47B-30- DK, ZK-AWP was built in 1945 at Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA, originally as Number 16387, but was renumbered as 33135, when it was discovered several numbers had been duplicated. It still carries both to this day. The Oklahoma City factory had been one constructed to cope with wartime production in 1941, immediately post Pearl Harbour.

With a wing span of 95 feet, an overall length of 64.5 feet and a height of almost 15 feet and powered by two Pratt and Whitney R-1830-92 engines with 1250 bhp each it was ideally suited to military service, operating comfortably into unpaved fields of 1000 metres or sometimes, less, carrying a standard load of three tons and featuring a range of 1200 nautical miles.

With its delivery crew ZK-AWP left its "birthplace" at Oklahoma City, USA on Saturday the 21st of April 1945 - the day the Red Army overran the German High Command in Berlin - and flew to Hamilton, New Zealand. From 13 May 1945 the aircraft became RNZAF Dakota NZ3543 and was assigned to 41 Squadron RNZAF from 21 July of that year, 1945 until 1952.

The aircraft's time in the military was interesting and varied (unfortunately the wartime history was destroyed some years later after the records had been transferred to New Zealand National Airways Corporation - these were deemed of little or no consequence in the early 1950's). However, the following is known; Immediately post-war, the aircraft was engaged in ferrying servicemen home to New Zealand - in this role the RNZAF operated their C-47's as far as Japan - NZ3543 leaving on the first such flight on 24 September 1945 under the command of the inimitable Flt Lt Laurie Bade. This aircraft based for a considerable time in Changi, Singapore. During 1947 the aircraft was involved in repatriating serviceman from Japan and was based in Iwakuni, Japan, where it was photographed, snow-bound! It was reputedly damaged in the Southern Alps in New Zealand while on a supply dropping exercise but after repairs went on to serve in Singapore again on supply missions during the Malayan Emergency with "A" Flight of 41 squadron between 1949/50, where it participated extensively. It appeared in an RNZAF demonstration, doing supply dropping, at the RNZAC Pageant, Taieri, on 21 February 1948, and several photographs exist of this event.

NZ3543 was originally earmarked to remain in the RNZAF, however, sister ship NZ3544 was involved in a take-off accident at Wigram on 14 April 1952 (an aircraft earmarked to join NAC) meant that this aircraft (NZ3543) was instead despatched to NAC as a replacement and as such was retired from the military and entered civilian life as ZK-AWP. The aircraft's logbooks (still all preserved today from "Book I" give this date as the 30 June 1952 when the aircraft was handed over as NZ3543 at Whenuapai to New Zealand National Airways Corporation. The aircraft was subsequently ferried on the 3rd of July 1952 to Paraparaumu and subsequently to Palmerston North where it arrived for conversion to Douglas DC-3C status at NAC's workshops with 3571.55 hours since new recorded in its logbook. It was not however, started on immediately, and the logbook records that on 1 August 1952 the aircraft was placed in storage. Eventually the conversion commenced and the new DC-3C, registered as ZK-AWP was test flown on the 24th of March 1953 at Palmerston North, taking off at 15h55 in the afternoon and landing some 35 minutes later. Evidently there were some issues to resolve, as the aircraft was re-flown on a second test flight two days later for a further one hour, which was evidently satisfactory, and the aircraft immediately entered service on the 2nd of April 1953, clocking up 10 hours and 20 minutes on the first day of service.

In NAC service the aircraft was given the name "Powhaitere" (Powhaitere is the Maori name for sub-species of red-crowned parakeet found on the Kermadec and Chatham islands, the Three Kings islands, the Auckland islands, and on the Chatham islands.) and served in the passenger role. In 1960 AWP and sister aircraft BQK (ex NZ3544, which was since written off by the RNZAF, after its accident referred to above, acquired and eventually rebuilt by NAC in 1957) were partially repainted in orange "day-glow" paint as part of an NAC experiment to make the slower DC-3's more visible pending the introduction of the faster Friendship fleet, then on the horizon. In due course, the "day-glow" paint faded rather dramatically and the decision was taken to fit all the aircraft with rotating beacons instead. On the 21st of January 1961 the Auckland Aero Club staged a farewell show at Mangere, prior to relocating to Ardmore, so that construction of the new Auckland

International Airport could commence - ZK-AWP was called upon to conduct a low level run over the airfield, which, by all accounts, was a stunning and fitting conclusion to NAC's association with the old Mangere Aerodrome.

In response to a new airline in New Zealand, SPANZ, which operated DC-3 "View master" conversions, NAC DC-3's were progressively upgraded with bigger windows, heating and sound-proofing to become "Sky liner" DC-3 conversions (The immediate post-war Spartan style of NAC's interiors was apparently very much in the spotlight when SPANZ with their "luxuriously" appointed "View masters " came onto the scene and NAC was obliged to act). AWP was converted as such and rolled out on 9 May 1963 with the new name "Kaitaia".

AWP was once again called on to replace a fallen comrade from February 2, 1970 until June 8, 1973 when the aircraft was operated by Polynesian Airlines of Samoa as 5W-FAI. AWP was used as a replacement for fellow DC-3 5W-FAC (ex- ZK-APA), which had sadly been lost in fatal accident at Faleolo, Samoa, en route to Pago Pago with loss of all 32 aboard on 13 January 1970. The aircraft (AWP) is still remembered with some fondness in the Pacific, and caused some excitement when it transited through Nadi, Fiji during December 2013, some forty years later.

Sold to Southern Air Super Ltd on August 3, 1973, ZK-AWP was converted as a top-dresser (Kiwi parlance for Crop-duster). This, for the third time saw AWP positioned as a replacement aircraft, after the sad loss of ZK-AOI in February 1973 near Seddon on the South Island. In July 1975, the aircraft passed ownership to Fieldair Ltd. On the 13th of November the aircraft was badly damaged when a fertiliser loader hopper collapsed onto the aircraft's crown at Gisborne, crushing a substantial portion of it. The aircraft was reasonably fresh off an overhaul, and was thus considered fit for repair. It was temporarily repaired and ferried to Blenheim via Palmerston North, on the 17th of November 1976 for further work. It was held out until another DC-3 was retired, which would yield spares to complete the repair on AWP. This eventuated when ZK-CQA donated parts of its roof "crown" to AWP, enabling the latter to take to the air again on December 21st 1976. The aircraft was used as a top-dresser until May 11, 1985. In this role, considered by many to be its definitive role in New Zealand, it completed some 6722 hours of strenuous flying. After conclusion of its Ag-flying days, it was chosen in 1986 for conversion to freighter for Classic Air Services and then latterly, Fieldair Freight - this being determined between it and ZK-AWO (then both sitting at Palmerston North on "rotten row") by a coin toss (!) - AWP won out and AWO was unceremoniously scrapped. It was the second time that AWP made it off "rotten row"! It operated from Wellington with ZK-AMR and ZK-BBJ under the Fieldair Freight and Speed link titles. Sold to the Alpine Fighter Collection in August 1993, it then spent time with Classic Air at Paraparaumu before passing to Mackley Aviation at Ardmore in December 1995 (Rob Mackley was the son of retired NAC pilot Bill Mackley). Ownership passed to NZ Aerial Mapping at Napier in 1998, and the aircraft was returned to its early 1960's NAC "Sky-liner" paint scheme.

The year 2000 saw AWP placed on the international market after some 46,000 flying hours. It joined the team at Pionair Adventures Ltd in June 2000 on charter work and spent many happy hours flying tours around NZ and Australia. Pionair became the official owners in May 2002. On 19 June 2002 while attempting to take off in deep snow at Mt Cook (Glentanner Station) the aircraft skidded off the runway and was substantially damaged. The incident was filmed by a TVNZ film crew present on the day, and made headline news that night! It was repaired by Fieldair staff on site to enable a ferry flight to Palmerston North where it was permanently repaired and renamed "Lucille".

On the 2nd June 2004, at the request of none other than the Crown Prince of Tonga (later King George V) it left Christchurch equipped with long range fuel tanks and only 7.5 hours later landed at Fua'amotou, Kingdom of Tonga to work with the Shore Line Group "Peau Vava'u", in partnership with Pion-air, along with its sister-ship ZK-AMY. From 21 November 2005, under Tongan ownership it was reregistered as A3-AWP (AMY retained its NZ registration), and they flew domestic routes in the Kingdom of Tonga until 23 October 2006, when AMY returned to NZ (and is now currently owned by Southern DC-3 Trust) and AWP was grounded for a major overhaul. On 16 November 2006 a violent riot broke out in the Tongan capital of Nuku'alofa and widespread areas of the Tongan Capital were destroyed by fire and looters, including AWP's operators, Peau Vava'u head office in the Pacific Royale Hotel. As assets of the Shoreline group were specifically targeted, there were fears that AWP would be destroyed by the angry mob. The aircraft was immediately locked away in its hangar at Fua'motu, and stayed safely thus for the next three years gathering dust and cobwebs.

The mob, luckily, were prevented in reaching the airport and the aircraft remained spared from harm.

The aircraft was purchased later together with the hangar, by Craig Emeny from Air Chathams in New Zealand and major work undertaken to return the aircraft to airworthiness shortly afterward in 2009/10.

Following an initial operational flight check on the 7th of August 2010, the aircraft began flying scheduled passenger services again shortly afterwards, for the wholly owned Air Chathams subsidiary, Chathams Pacific. In this role, the aircraft served the Tongan people reliably and safely until Chathams Pacific voluntarily concluded operations in March 2013. The aircraft covered scheduled routes to the island groups of Ha'apai, Vava'u and the Niua's in this time, flying a busy programme exceeding 100hr a month in the busy season.

The aircraft was then flown "home" to New Zealand in December 2013 via Fiji, New Caledonia and Norfolk Island, arriving at Auckland some 20.1 flying hours later.

The aircraft, now 70 years later, remains in commercial service and a very important part of Kiwi history. It remains today, 2015, the last flying piston engine example of the RNZAF C-47 fleet, the last flying example of the NAC DC-3 fleet, the last flying example of the Fieldair fleet and the only surviving RNZAF World War II veteran aircraft still in front-line service.



ZK-AWP "Powhaitere" circa 1955