
A Ride With Morgan

by
Maurice R Commanday

This is a story of the pilot (Morgan) known for the fact he was flying the plane that went down with Major Glenn Miller when their single engine Norseman D-64 crashed into the English Channel December 15, 1944 as reported in Torretta Flyer No # 19, page 26.

I took a break from winning the war single-handed and headed for London on leave. I was a twenty-four year old captain running the machine shop at the 8th AF Depot No 11, Warton, Lancashire.

In the late summer or early fall of 1943, I hopped a ride in an aircraft that brought me to my former base, at Honington. It was a posh pre-war RAF station in East Anglia which had been turned over to the Ninth Air Depot Group; the outfit in which I had gone overseas the year before. It became kind of home-away-from-home for me and I greatly enjoyed visiting those I had left behind for my assignment at Warton.

It was my intention to travel on to London via the LNER railway that rattled into Liverpool Street Station at the snail-like smoky pace of England's wartime trains, but some kind soul suggested that I get a ride with the courier aircraft that would be heading my way. That is how I got to ride with Morgan.

Morgan was a flight Officer, One of a few "Galvanized Sergeants" who fell into this rare category of lightweight pilots. Not trained for combat roles, they were assigned flying duties to those assigned to Service Pilots, Morgan's job was to fly a small transport aircraft between the bases of the command that had been established over the expanding Eighth Air Force's Strategic Air Depots. Carrying personnel, critical supplies, and making whiskey-fetching forays into the wilds of Scotland is what he did. For this purpose, a lend-lease vehicle, an Avro Anson, had been pressed into service.

Now the RAF refers to its aircraft as "kites". Anyone that's puzzled over this

euphemism need only encounter an Anson to understand the basis for that. Powered by two Armstrong-Siddeley radials it was capable of a fairish cargo for its size and weight. But a kite must surely have had its way with one of its female ancestors!

I was in class "A" uniform. Three enlisted men were aboard as well as a crate of significant size and unknown weight. Someone had managed to foul the interior of the aircraft with the bronze pigment contents of a sea marker so I was invited to take the relatively clean right hand seat which I gratefully accepted. The enlisted men were in fatigues and took up spots where they could on the floor around the crate.

We took off uneventfully from Honington's grass field and headed southwest for Hendon. At Morgan's invitation, I took the wheel and drove the Anson over and around the barrage balloons; a welcome activity; rare in the life of an un-rated engineering officer, Hendon came into view.

Hendon was London's oldest aerodrome having been established even before WW 1. It was rather small in size and completely surrounded by urbanity. Around its western edge arced a high railway embankment complete with telegraph lines which provided an interesting hurdle on our approach to the runway in use.

Now the Anson was equipped with a retractable landing gear of the old school. Nothing fancy! A release lever and a hand crank which Morgan's "crew chief", a Staff Sergeant, wound down as we completed our approach. When we touched down I heard Morgan mutter an oath. He opened the throttles to go 'round again. We seemed to

be traveling pretty fast on that short runway. Sergeant cranked up the gear promptly and we had a tour of the vicinity.

The next go at the runway was better. We touched down much closer to its beginning, nearer to the railway embankment, but not close enough. Again the curse and opened throttles and re-cranked gear. By this time, in my front row seat, I had the distinct impression that maybe our center of gravity, affected by the crate's unknown mass, was not in an ideal location, Never mind, Morgan swore he'd get the damn thing in!

I must say he made a masterful approach the third time slipping the craft past the embankment touching down at the very edge of the runway. I was too busy looking ahead to consult an airspeed indicator as we tore along! With Morgan pumping the Dunlap brake lever on the control wheel, I do remember looking at the air-brake gauge and consoling myself between prayers that the receiver was at normal pressure and the brake bladders in the wheels were getting what they needed; but we were really rolling hell bent for election!

From the corner of my eye I noted the RAF "meat wagon" was already en-route on a convergent path. We took the entire runway, crossed the perimeter track and rolled across a plot of grass. At some point a wag back in the cabin, suggested putting it in the garage across the street. Finally we came to a halt with our starboard airscrew just five feet short of a very solid, well-entrenched street lamp.

I didn't notice the garage across the street, but there was an Underground station in plain view. Anxious to avoid any embarrassing contact with the RAF folks, I thanked one and all and promptly disappeared down the tube station entrance. I thus became one of very few travellers who have been delivered to a subway stop by air.

Two years ago, at a reunion of the First S.A.D. Association, I learned that about a year after my ride with him, Flying Officer Morgan, still on courier assignment, went down in the Channel with Major Glenn Miller. Maurice R Commanday of Palos Verdes, CA contributed to this story.