



The final resting place of Dakota Number 6813, neck deep in the trees. In its distinctive Red Cross livery the old aircraft crash-landed in savannah woodland some 5 kms beyond the end of the Harare International airport runway, south-east of Zimbabwe's capital city.

Picture provided by Tony Thomas. © Tony Thomas.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF DAKOTA

No: 6813

The Dakota was the great troop-carrying workhorse of World War Two, and it is synonymous with the invasion of Europe and the famous paratroop actions at places like Arnhem during Operation Market Garden. After the War, of the twelve thousand plus Dakota's built, many were reconfigured for civilian use and became popular passenger and cargo transport aircraft that operated very successfully around the world for more than another half century.

One of these was Dakota number 6813.



The unmarked Dakota 6813 seen in its Rhodesian registration VP-YSY while parked in Johannesburg in early April 1962. In this image the distinctive squared tail and the big double-cargo doors of the C-47A variant can be clearly appreciated.

Picture generously provided by The Peter Keating Collection © A Flying History Ltd.

This particular aircraft, which was a C-47A-1-DK Skytrain model, rolled off the Douglas production line in Oklahoma City towards the end of 1942. It was allocated the serial number 42-92213 and was part of a large delivery to the United States Army Air Force. However, it didn't remain in the US for long and it was almost immediately ferried over to Great Britain where it joined the Royal Air Force fleet. There it was given the serial number FL581. While Britain was desperate to build up their Dakota squadrons in anticipation of the invasion of mainland Europe, they had many other pressing obligations, one of which was to the South African's who were a pivotal ally at the time.

Over the course of the Second World War eighty-three DC-3 and C-47 Dakotas were transferred from Britain to South Africa. The twelfth of these particular aircraft was FL581 which was flown down to South Africa in a formation of three aeroplanes which arrived there in mid-



The remarkable range of tail branding and paint scheme variations applied to Dakota 6813 (registered as ZS-DJK) during its long career with the Aircraft Operating Company of South Africa between 1954 and 1960 and then again from 1972 to 1986.

I would like to acknowledge the Dakota Association of South Africa and the photographers Will Blunt, Chris Tanners and Werner Fischdick for these images.

December 1943. On December 16th all three aircraft were given new South African Air Force (SAAF) serial numbers. FL581 became Dakota number 6813.¹

The aircraft served the rest of World War Two with the South African Air Force, plus almost another ten years. On April 12th 1954 it was decommissioned and sold off to a civilian air charter firm based out of Johannesburg by the name of Aircraft Operating Company. There it was given the civilian registration ZS-DJK. The Aircraft Operation Company (or 'AOC' as they were known) chartered the aircraft to an organisation called WENELA. WENELA was the acronym for the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association and a big part of their role was the shuttling of migrant labourers from neighbouring countries in and out of Johannesburg's rich

¹ Joe Baugher's USAF Aircraft Serial Number list.



A remarkable portrait of Dakota 6813, in its Aircraft Operating Company (OAC) livery spotted at Grand Central airfield between Johannesburg and Pretoria in August 1973. This was during 6813's second tenure with OAC. According to the photographer who took this image, "the combination of Agfa CT18 colour transparency film and the very red lateritic soil result in the hue of this image" which gives it a surreal, almost painted quality.

Picture generously provided by Stephen Aubury. © Stephen Aubury.

gold mines. One of the main destinations that this aircraft flew to during its time with WENELA was Francistown in northern Bechuanaland (now Botswana).

After six years flying for WENELA, in November 1960 the aircraft was sold to a Rhodesian operator and re-registered there as VP-YSY. Based out of Salisbury the Dakota was used primarily for regional freight doing regular cargo charters to South Africa and all around central Africa. By the early 1970's this reliable old workhorse was sold back to the South African Aircraft Operating Company and in 1976 it was integrated into their new Aerial Surveying division called Aerial Surveys Limited that operated out of Lanseria airport. In late 1980 Aerial Surveys won a large contract in Botswana. To handle the work they needed a couple of locally based aircraft so in November they relocated Dakota 6813 to Botswana where it was registered as A2-ADB.²

² *The DC-3 / Dakota Historical Society.*



ESTE AVIÃO É DA CRUZ VERMELHA, RESPEITA-O.

A promotional postcard produced by the Mozambican Red Cross showing a branded portrait image of Z-WRJ at the start its humanitarian airlift into Mozambique in early November 1988. Original postcard provided by Tony Thomas.

After a hard forty three year career of almost continual flying, in 1986 the aircraft was once again sold. This time to a new Zimbabwean owner called Crest Breeders. Upon its arrival back in Harare the aircraft was given the registration Z-WRJ³ and was immediately put to work for the large agricultural and cattle ranching operation. Unfortunately after the first year or so, Crest realised that they didn't really have enough flying to justify the aircraft and, once again, it was sold off. This time to Executive Air who were based in Harare and who wanted it for a lucrative long-term regional charter.

In neighbouring Mozambique there was a major refugee crisis. The MNR rebels had been attacking most of the larger towns and cities, while in the rural areas a crippling drought was

³ *The Aerial Visuals and Airframe Dossier database.*



*Captain Tony Thomas at the controls of what appears to be an Air Rhodesia Vickers Viscount.
Picture provided by Tony Thomas © Tony Thomas.*

driving people off the land. With three and a half million people in dire need the International Committee of the Red Cross were desperate to sub-lease a couple of Dakota's from Executive Air to fly in humanitarian aid, as well as material and equipment for the anticipated rehabilitation of the most impacted areas. They particularly wanted the hardy transports as they were ideal for the rough rural airstrips they would be needed to fly in and out of.

A lease agreement was signed and in preparation for the intensive flying, Executive Air invested in a major overhaul of the aircraft. This meticulous refit included a pair of completely rebuilt engines imported from the United States. Once Dakota 6813 was ready it was then re-branded with the Red Cross's Portuguese 'Comite Internacional da Cruz Vermelha' livery and a veteran Dakota pilot, Captain Tony Thomas was assigned to the aircraft.



The view of the severed wing stump looking out from the port side emergency exit window.

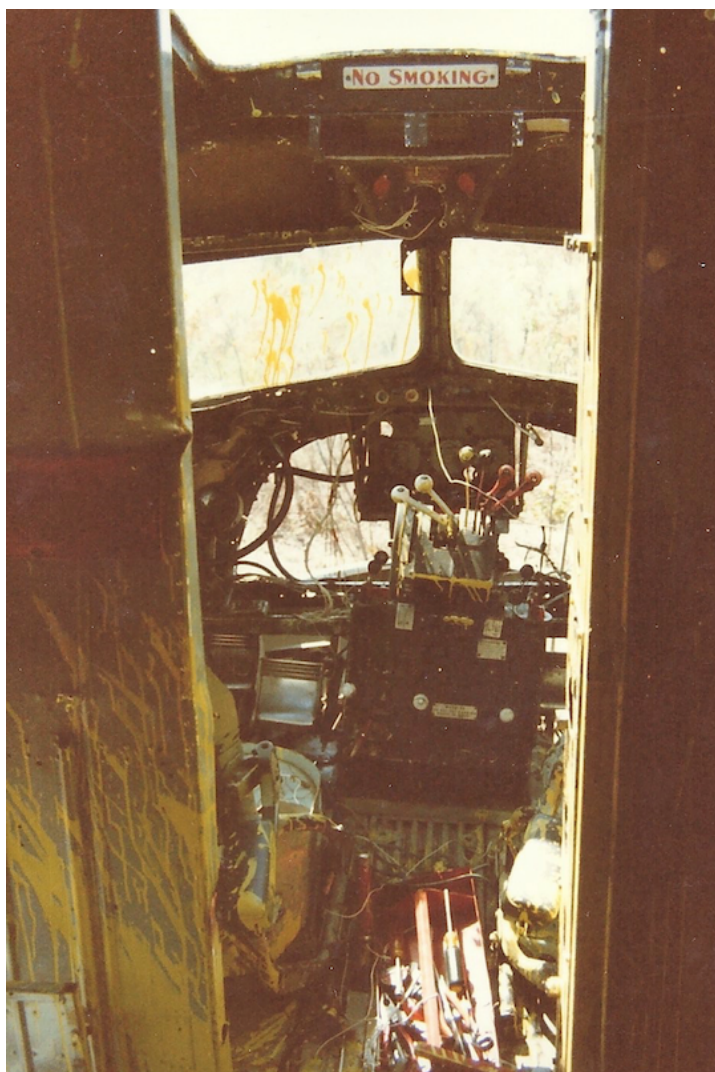
Picture provided by Tony Thomas © Tony Thomas.

Much like Z-WRJ, Tony had his own long and distinguished career. Although he had flown jets for the national airline, he had piloted C-47's almost since Dakota 6813 had rolled off the production line back at the height of the Second World War. While flying for the Red Cross, Tony had been involved with Bob Geldof and the whole Live Aid 'road-show' through Africa, but his real claim to fame had

occurred in 1984.

At that time Tony was a senior Captain for Air Zimbabwe. One evening just before the start of a long overnight flight from Harare to London Tony learnt that amongst his passengers were two very senior ex-Air Force officers; Air Vice Marshall Hugh Slater and Air Commodore Phillip Pile, both of whom Tony knew and respected from the time he had spent in the Rhodesian Air Force Reserve. The two men were part of a group of six officers who had been illegally detained and tortured on trumped up charges of sabotage. After almost a year in prison and a high profile court case the government had been compelled to release the men. But instead of allowing them to go home they were immediately deported. From the prison they were taken directly to the airport and put on the first plane to the UK. That plane just so happened to be Tony Thomas's.

Knowing about the case and what the men had been through, Tony went onto the aircraft P.A. system and welcomed them onboard as 'VIP passengers.' As he finished the announcement the entire planeload of people burst into spontaneous and sustained applause.



*A view into the shattered cockpit, drenched in yellow paint.
Picture provided by Tony Thomas © Tony Thomas.*

For that principled act of kindness Tony was immediately dismissed by the then Minister of Home Affairs, Herbert Ushewokunze. This made Tony quite a local hero, though his immediate problem was finding a new job. Quite quickly he was employed by Affretair, Jack Malloch's old cargo airline. After a short tenure there flying freight, the business was nationalised so Tony decided to move over to the Red Cross where at least he wouldn't be subject to any further government harassment.

By September 1988 Tony had been working for the Red Cross for a couple of years and had proven himself to be a skilled, fearless pilot who they could count on get his cargos into the most dangerous and challenging destinations.

On Tuesday 20th September 1988 his cargo was a very heavy load of irrigation equipment, pipes, pumps and a large quantity of sealed drums of paint,⁴ along with other construction equipment, sanitation materials and medical supplies, all of which needed to be delivered to the port city of Beira.⁵ The aircraft was carefully loaded at Harare International and the flight plan was submitted. Once the plan was filed, air traffic control cleared the aircraft for take-off and Tony taxied out. With him was his co-pilot Paul Ridley and their Flight Engineer. Lining up at the

⁴ *Personal correspondence with Captain Thomas's son Tony Thomas dated 6 April 2021.*

⁵ *'Relief plane grounded after Epworth crash.' article by Fanwell Sibanda as published in The Herald newspaper, in their 22 September 1988 edition.*



As the aircraft crash-landed the port-side wing struck a tree and was almost completely torn away as shown in this dramatic image. It is interesting to note the open cockpit window in the background which the crew escaped out of moments after the aircraft had come to rest.

Picture provided by Tony Thomas © Tony Thomas.

start of one of the longest civilian runways in the world, they had the airport terminal building on their left, and New Sarum Air Force base on their right. Tony completed his final checks, released the brakes and accelerated down the runway, heading due-east towards Mozambique.

It was late afternoon when the wheels lifted off the tarmac and the Dakota started to climb. All seemed well.

Then, less than thirty seconds into the ascent, one of the newly rebuilt engines unexpectedly failed. It was their number two starboard engine.⁶

Without enough momentum to sustain their flight the aircraft slumped back down towards the ground. The control tower picked up the emergency situation and in seconds issued a crash alarm. The civil aviation fire and rescue team instantly leapt into their vehicles and accelerated away heading as fast as they could after the receding aircraft.

⁶ *The Aviation Safety Network Z-WRJ Accident Report*



One of the rounded elevators from the rear tailplane seen high up in an obstructing tree along the aircraft's path of impact.

Picture provided by Tony Thomas © Tony Thomas.

Meanwhile in the cockpit Tony had very little time to find a suitable place to land. Coming up he saw a patch of seemingly uninhabited savannah which he aimed for. Then he saw the power-lines. They were directly ahead and were going to be a deadly hazard. He decided to veer away from them. But that meant having to land amongst the trees. He aimed for the widest gap he could and, with one wing dragging and the nose tilting down, they went in hard...

The aircraft descended into the scrub just over five kilometres from the end of the airport runway which they had taken off from. Bracing themselves all three men onboard knew they were about to die as the aircraft started hitting the trees. Initially it broke through the upper branches of smaller msasa⁷ trees. Then, with greenery flashing past the cockpit

windows, the port wing struck a much larger more sturdy tree.⁸ The tree didn't break, and swung the whole aircraft around, piling it sideways into the ground with a huge reverberating bang.

Ironically, hitting the tree actually saved the crew's lives.

⁷ *Brachystegia spiciformis*, also commonly known as zebrawood.

⁸ 'Crash of a Douglas C-47A-1-DK in Harare' file from the Bureau of Aircraft Accidents Archives.



The front page coverage of the crash in the local Herald newspaper that was published the next morning. You have to wonder about the coincidence of the little ad in the top left hand corner.

By swinging the aircraft around a fraction of a second before impact the heavy cargo's momentum was not aimed right at the cockpit, which would have otherwise crushed them all into the controls.⁹

The aircraft slid to a halt engulfed in a thick cloud of dust and smoke, choking the men and limiting the visibility in the cockpit. As the door behind them was jammed with the jumbled cargo Tony unclipped the side window and slid it open as wide as he possibly could. Just as the airport rescue services arrived the bloodied, shaken men quickly squeezed through the opening and scurried out of the wreckage before there was a fire or any risk of the fuel tanks exploding. Pondering this later, Captain Thomas dryly stated, "that window was damn small, I don't know how we managed to get out of it."¹⁰

According to a policeman who witnessed the crash, "all three people aboard were seriously injured. The pilot sustained head injuries while one of the crew had a broken leg. They were all

⁹ *Recollection of Captain Tony Thomas, as related by his son in personal correspondence dated April 6 2021.*

¹⁰ *Recollection of Captain Tony Thomas, as related by his son in personal correspondence dated April 15 2021.*

immediately taken to hospital,”¹¹ though the truth was that their injuries were remarkably superficial. According to Tony their worst injury was to their dignity as they emerged from the wreckage covered from head to toe in bright yellow paint as all the tins they were carrying had burst open on impact.

The next day Executive Air’s aviation consultant, Graham Keth visited the crash site which was on an undeveloped patch of farmland in the Epworth area. As soon as he saw the wreckage he knew that the aircraft was damaged beyond repair. With little choice he recommended that the company try and salvage as much of the cargo that they could, along with the radios, the engines and any other vital instruments or parts that were still in working order.¹² This stripping of the wreck was started immediately.

Within a few days everything that could be salvaged had been removed. Executive Air then started preparing their insurance claim on the aircraft, pending the findings of the formal commission of inquiry, which was to later deem the cause of the accident as ‘mechanical failure.’

A full forty-five years after its manufacture Dakota 6813’s flying days where finally over.

After the formal salvage, anything else of value that had been left behind at the crash site was stripped by scrap-scavengers. Having picked the bones all that remained was just the scoured fuselage lying amongst the trees.

And there the remains of this grand old aircraft may well still be, slowly rotting away in the shady undergrowth.

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¹¹ ‘Red Cross plane crashes’ article by Fanwell Sibanda as published in *The Herald* newspaper, in their September 21st 1988 edition.

¹² ‘Relief plane grounded after Epworth crash.’ article by Fanwell Sibanda as published in *The Herald* newspaper, in their September 22nd 1988 edition.

Alan Brough has written numerous other aviation articles including:


- The last flight out of Uli.
- Afro-Continental Airways and their old gunrunner.
- FISH AIR and the six different airlines it started.

These aviation histories, along with many other articles can be found on Alan's blog at www.alanbrough.com.


Alan has also recently written Jack Malloch's biography called 'Legend of the African Skies' which can be ordered off Amazon (where it has a full five-star rating) or directly from the publisher at admin@exmontibusmedia.co.za.

JACK MALLOCH

LEGEND OF THE AFRICAN SKIES



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"AN EXCELLENT BIOGRAPHY OF AN EXCEPTIONAL PERSON.
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