

## Dakota - the Immortal " Grand Old Lady "



*Early Dakota*



*'Air Indiana'*

As a boy, I had heard people use the word 'Dakota' for any object that is considered worthless, e.g., an old truck, car or a van. This sobriquet baffled me, especially because I knew that my father, who worked at the Overhaul Division of HAL, greatly cherished his copy of a photograph of a Dakota airplane at Bangalore airport that brought the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi.

My father worked with many Dakotas and once travelled as far as Jorhat in Assam to restore a damaged Dakota. He always told me that it was a nice airplane and had even bought me a reasonably good replica of Dakota made out of sheet metal.

I developed a strange love and admiration towards this aircraft and, as I grew up, I realized that the popular perception of the Dakota being "junk" was almost akin to sacrilege! This wonderful "Grand Old Lady" which adorned the skies of this globe for more than 65 years deserves far greater respect.

DC-3, Dakota, Gooney Bird, Sky Train, C-47, Dak, Gallant R4D all refer to the first ever commercially viable transport aircraft of the world that emerged from the Douglas Company in the year 1935. While the airlines called it a DC-3, USAAF called it C-47 and Sky Train, for the navy it was R4D and for the Tommy it was a Gooney Bird. The RAF called it 'Dakota'. Talk to an airman who was with a Dakota and he would swear by it and say that it is probably the most wonderful aircraft ever built.

The passion for Dakota is very strong; one pilot comments " It is the aerial equivalent of a tall ship. Its old engines need a lot more gentle treatment than newer planes. But the sound that the DC-3 makes is real music. Jets just make noise".



I fully agree, Let alone jets, even the turbo,props are no match for a Dak. I have seen Dakotas taking off - it is like an angel gently rising into the sky. Compared to this, the Avro HS-748, which is with IAF, appears to be struggling to takeoff. Somehow the sound is not "right". Dakotas are

Dakotas. They hum softly into your ears!

Out of over 13,000 plus Dakota aircraft built over a span of 15 years, nearly a 1000 have still survived and get airborne over the world. Many of these old ladies are used to ferry cargo in obscure areas, as antique airplanes for joy rides and occasionally show up in air shows, bringing a loving glitter in the eyes of those who love the airplane.

If one goes through the history of this great lady, she has served in many unique roles. Apart from being a great transporter of her era, she has participated in some unique and memorable events. In July 1948, when the Russians cut off the land route between Berlin and Western Europe, six RAF Dakotas started daily flights to Berlin with food and other supplies. Back here in India, in September 1948, the Royal Indian Air Force's Transport Squadron created a new world record of flying Dakotas at heights of 24000 ft, nearly 8000 ft above its safe cruise altitude, while participating in Kashmir operations.

During the war in the China-Burma-Indian sector, a Dakota flying refugees from a combat area took off with 73 people and landed with 74; a baby was born *en route*, giving the aircraft a 228% load. "Mysore"- the Dakota owned by the Maharaja of Mysore, late H.E.Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar served as a VVIP aircraft crisscrossing India with Sardar Patel during the early days after independence.



Another lover of Dakota recites ---

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"While nations fell and men retire, and jets go obsolete,  
The gooney bird flies on and on at eleven thousand feet.  
No matter what they do to her, Gooney bird still flies!"

"One crippled bird was fitted out, with one wing half the size.  
She hunched her shoulders & then took off  
One wing askew, and yet, she flew.... the DC-2½"

"She has her faults, but after all  
Who's perfect in every sphere?  
Her heating system is a gem and we love her for her gear."

"Of course, the windshield leaks a bit  
When rain comes pouring down ..  
She will keep you warm, but in a storm,  
It's possible you'll drown."

"They patch her up with masking tape,  
With paper clips and strings,  
And she still flies, she never dies, Methuselah with wings!"

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