

# Wide WINDOWS Open

**Raf Jah** flew between the paradise islands of Pemba and Zanzibar in the Indian Ocean on one of the world's few scheduled passenger Douglas DC-3 services.



The aircraft lined up on the end of the runway. The pilot was making sure that every inch of Pemba's 5,000ft (1,524m) runway was available to him. "Pemba, this is Five Hotel Delta Alpha Kilo. Twenty six souls on board, destination Zanzibar, flight level two five." "Alpha Kilo, Pemba Tower, confirmed Zanzibar, flight level two five." The balding pilot turned to his bald co-pilot and said: "full brakes". "Full brakes," the co-pilot confirmed. >>

Flying with the windows open. The view from just behind the Captain.

Captain Tony Baxter eased the throttles forward and the twin Pratt & Whitney Wasps spluttered and growled. He glanced at the oil pressure gauges, waited some seconds and, seemingly satisfied nodded at the young First Officer (FO).

"Release brakes," he commanded. "Release brakes," confirmed FO Richard Savic in his lilting Canadian accent.

With a very gentle ground roll, the aircraft bounced and wobbled forward. The Wasps spluttered more and Baxter's knuckles were white on the throttles with his hand clamped on the pitch levers. At least 2,000ft of runway later the needle on the airspeed indicator touched 50 knots. The large spongy tyres made Pemba's concrete seem soft and smooth. The tail lifted off and the airspeed gradually started to climb.

The 'bird' lumbered towards the right-hand half of the runway. Savic seemed to be battling with the controls, constantly pulling and coaxing the aircraft into some form of straight line. At 70kts the tail swung to port, the nose to starboard and the aircraft lifted gently off the ground.

Baxter's eyes constantly flicked over the gauges, while his right hand stayed firmly on the throttles. Savic skilfully brought the aircraft ever so slowly into a climb. The two men were flying, but in a sideways crab fashion.



The aircraft seemed to stop in the air and the cockpit filled with the acrid smell of burnt oil. But the halt was deceptive, some trees flashed below the cockpit window at just under a hundred miles an hour. The windows were open, and the breeze soon snatched away the smell of oil.

The author leaned forward and looked out of the open window.....Hang on, open window? "Looking out of the open side window?" There had to be something wrong here. Airliners don't fly with open windows and they certainly are not supposed to fly sideways! But there was no mistaking

this. I was definitely looking forward and down on the last thousand feet or so of Pemba's runway.

This was no ordinary airliner, this aircraft was 5H-DAK, Tanzania's only serviceable Douglas DC-3 Dakota. It was (barely) airborne on its daily run from Pemba to Dar es Salaam via Zanzibar. Captain Baxter had invited me to sit in the cockpit for my first flight in this type. The aircraft wings rolled gently from side to side as we made slow progress over the trees of Pemba. While FO Savic looked relaxed, he was constantly making adjustments to the controls. Baxter used the radio

On the ground at Zanzibar after a memorable flight across from Pemba Island.



and helped trim the aircraft. To my untrained eye, it looked like these two were actually having to do some flying, as there was none of the computer inputting of a 'glass cockpit' Airbus or Cessna Caravan. Indeed the only glass on this cockpit was half open to let the breeze in!

In my earphones I could hear Captain Baxter on the radio. He was talking to the incoming Zanair Caravan, which was planning to land at Pemba and had been heavily delayed by the arrival of His Excellency the Aga Khan. Captain Baxter wanted to make sure that the Caravan knew where we were.

"Scotty is that you?" he transmitted. "Aye - inbound from Zanzibar."

"We are at about two thousand five and the coast is coming up, so we should not interfere with your planned descent."

## Aircraft History

### C-47A-30-DL 5H-DAK c/n 9581

The aircraft was delivered to the USAAF as 42-23719 on May 22, 1945 and transferred to the Reconstruction Finance Corporation at the end of hostilities. It was then sold as NC47573 to General Airways Inc of Portland, Oregon. In the USA, it had a number of owners including North American Aviation of Los Angeles and the Elbee Company before being sold to construction firm Grinair in 1971 and flown to South Africa. Since then it has operated for Sandriver Safari, United Air Services, Air Services Botswana (as A2-ACH), Wonderair and Springbok Classic Air. During 2009, it was sold to new Tanzanian regional operator Indigo Aviation and was ferried to Dar es Salaam and named Wave Dance. The first service with Indigo took place on June 22, 2009.

With a 'phut', the radio then died. While Baxter connected to a second set, Captain Graham Hamilton came back asking where we were. "Delta Alpha Kilo is your radio not working?"

"Ja, our number two just packed up," replied Baxter in his smooth, unflappable South African brogue. "Anyway, we have the coast coming up, so we should not interfere with your descent."

"Aye, no problem there Tony."

In a suitable gap in the conversation, I asked Captain Baxter to pass my regards to Captain Hamilton - who was a friend of mine. Never missing an opportunity to indulge in some friendly ribbing Baxter called up the Caravan. "Ja, we've got some of your passengers on board today. A chap called Raf. He's flying with us, seeing as you were so late. Anyway, Raf says hello." >>



**THIS WAS NO ORDINARY AIRLINER, THIS AIRCRAFT WAS 5H-DAK, TANZANIA'S ONLY SERVICEABLE DOUGLAS DC-3 DAKOTA**

"Aye, the diver, say hello back," came the weary voice. "But I cannot stop to see him, I'm off to Arusha next."  
 "So you having fun today?" chuckled Baxter.  
 "Yes, you could say that," Hamilton paused, "about as much fun as a funeral!"

At that point, the Dakota rumbled over the palm fronds and out across the blue waters of Panza Lagoon. The coast come up and passed slowly underneath the cockpit. It was a majestic sight. The 'Dak' rolled and wallowed low over the water. I went back to the windows by the wing and looked back at Pemba disappearing. It was a privilege to see the area this low and this slow. Normally light aircraft fly as high as possible overwater, but the power of the Dakota and the brevity of the flight precluded sharp climbs and descents. I was not too bothered. The DC-3 holds the record for the longest single-engine, over-water flight in the world. In the 1940s a US Navy DC-3 lost an engine just over the halfway point from Pearl Harbour to San Diego. The crew spent 11 hours in the air on one engine. The 35-minutes low flying over the Pemba channel was nothing to worry about - after all, both engines were working!

Prior to crossing the Zanzibar coast inbound, I was invited again to the cockpit, and watched the crew fly the approach. Lagoons appeared along with the tourist hotels and then we were descending with Stone Town on our right. This conurbation is a world heritage site, made up of ancient limestone buildings. A 'must see' for

Just proving that the DC-3 does not fly very fast. Don't try this on a jet!



The venerable DC-3 does not have the electronic throttles of modern airliners.



Douglas DC-3 5H-DAK is one of the only Dakotas still flying scheduled passenger services.



Groundcrew checking the engines and propellers at Pemba prior to the flight.

**THE AUTHOR LEANED FORWARD AND LOOKED OUT OF THE OPEN WINDOW..... HANG ON, OPEN WINDOW?**

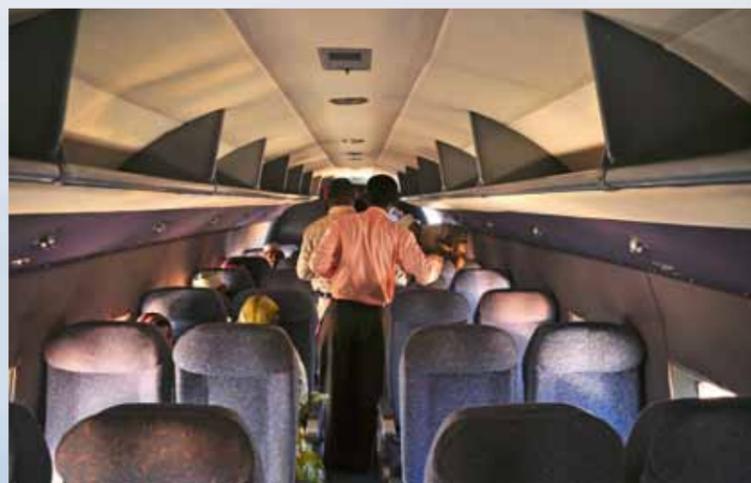
tourists from around the world. I was again listening in to the ATC transmissions. Zanzibar was quite busy. Caravans, Boeing 737s and Cessna 404s were all jabbering away to the tower. One pilot even asked the name of an island north of the runway, as his probably 'exclusive' client wanted to know. While Savic eased us into the circuit, Baxter eased us into the communications stream.

"Zanzibar Tower, this is Delta Alpha Kilo..." and he went on. We were directed towards the southerly runway and the crew went through their pre-landing procedures. The aircraft may have been ancient, and the methods of lowering the undercarriage and flaps archaic, but the professionalism of the two pilots was quite obvious. Then, as we were about to line up, another pilot came over the net.

"Zanzibar, we are on short finals," said the Tanzanian pilot.

"Alpha Kilo make a turn," said Zanzibar Tower. Savic let Baxter do the talking and took the DC-3 into a lazy bank to starboard. The DC-3 was so slow, that we did not need to circle, we just turned to the right and then left, >>

The words on the side of the engines say it all!



Despite its age the aircraft features standard airline seats, but there is a distinct lack of in-flight entertainment screens.

**"PEMBA TOWER, THIS IS FIVE HOTEL DELTA ALPHA KILO. TWENTY SIX SOULS ON BOARD, DESTINATION ZANZIBAR, FLIGHT LEVEL TWO FIVE."**



and managed to achieve the correct separation this way.

The Caravan that had caused the conflict came into view a good while later, made his approach and landed.

"Hmm, seems his finals weren't as short as he said," murmured Baxter into the intercom.

We eventually lined up for our own finals. The crosswind pushed us sideways, and Savic, seemingly expertly, coaxed and pushed and shoved the Dak down towards the tarmac. Like our Pemba take-off, we were approaching sideways.

"Do you want me to do it?" Asked Captain Baxter. Savic was sweating now, in spite of both cockpit windows being wide open. "No thanks," he replied coolly, but was earning his money now.

Baxter appeared nonplussed, but made constant adjustments, and quietly assisted Savic in everything that needed doing. The FO had two hands locked onto the wheel and was working hard. He got the Dak over the tarmac and Baxter dropped the final stage of flaps. The same soft squidgy tyres kissed the tarmac, Baxter pulled back the throttles and with some gentle brakes applied we were down and in Zanzibar. Savic's efforts had been well rewarded, the landing was perfect.

I thanked the crew, and climbed down the aisle to the door. My first flight on a Dakota had been quite something, but what stays with me are the wide open windows..... **7:11/1**



Flying at low level does result in wonderful scenic views.

'Real' pilots don't need ground handlers!

Indigo Aviation is the operator of the aircraft.  
(All photos author)

