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Belgrade man leads charge to send WWII plane to Normandy

BY DENNIS GAUB
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Bob Arnold enjoys telling a riddle to someone he meets who shares his interest in World War II history.

"My dad was a D-Day pilot," the personable Bozeman man begins.

"He flew the only aircraft in World War II that had no engine. He was a glider pilot."

Arnold came to last weekend's Belgrade Fall Festival and entered a 1955 Chevrolet Nomad, in the car show that was part of the annual event. His presence on the lawn at Lewis and Clark Park, however, arose for reasons that went beyond displaying the vintage car with a chance of winning show honors.

Arnold, an antique business owner, belongs to a project that is raising



Courtesy

Bob Arnold's father, a glider pilot who ferried paratroopers to the beaches at Normandy, is standing, far left, in this 1944 photo. Bob is leading the local charge to raise money to send the C-47 to Normandy next June – the Miss Montana project

money and awareness for a project that will link the Treasure State to observance of the 75th anniversary of D-Day, the U.S. and British-led invasion of Normandy. The largest seaborne invasion in history, Operation Overlord – its code name was Operation Neptune – started on June 6, 1944. The operation took several weeks to achieve its goal of establishing an Allied foothold in France. That

success led, in turn, to the liberation of France and, in the spring of 1945, to the defeat of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany.

Last Saturday, Arnold tied the past to the present. Pointing to a picture of an airplane attached to the front bumper of his Nomad, he said, talking about his father, "This is the

type of aircraft that towed him across (the English Channel) on D-Day and dropped him on Normandy.”

The plane he referred to was a C-47, and it's the focus of a project taken on by the Museum of Mountain Flying at the Missoula airport. Project organizers will send a restored C-47 from Missoula to the East Coast and then to Europe in time for the commemoration ceremony on June 6, 2019.

The plane, a historic Johnson Flying Services C-47, has been dubbed "Miss Montana" and will bring that nickname to Normandy. Officially, the C-47 was labeled N24320. She was one of four C-47s, the military version of Douglas DC-3s, that Missoula's Bob Johnson bought as military surplus after the war to use his business, Johnson Flying. Johnson used three of the planes, including N24320, until the company was sold in 1974, according to a June 10, 2018, article by Missoulian reporter Kim Briggeman.

"Miss Montana" rolled off the assembly line in 1944 – too late to participate in D-Day, and World War II was over before she could be deployed overseas. Yet, in Montana circles at least, she may be the most famous C-47 of all. That's because she was the plane that flew 12 smokejumpers from Hale Field in Missoula to their deaths in the Mann Gulch fire north of Helena in 1949, a tragedy that Norman MacLean wrote about in his book, "Young Men and Fire."

A large placard on the passenger side of Arnold's car gave passersby a summary of the Miss Montana project.

"We're raising money, which I'm out here to do, to get this thing ready to fly to Normandy next year. They'll the northern route out of Connecticut up to Greenland and Iceland and down to England.

"They're going to reenact D-Day, and they've got jumpers lined up, signed up, ready to jump," he said.

The use of C-47s and other planes as part of living history won't end with the D-Day commemoration. Arnold said the German government has offered to pay for any groups that want to fly planes in reenactment of a major event that occurred a few years after Germany, Italy and Japan surrendered: the June 26, 1948-September 12, 1949 Berlin airlift. After the Soviet Union blocked Western Allies' access by rail, road and canal to sectors of Berlin under Western control, air crews from the U.S., Great Britain, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa flew more than 200,000 sorties in one year. They delivered almost 9,000 tons of fuel, food and other necessities to West Berliners, and the USSR ultimately canceled the blockade.



Bob Arnold, left, leans against his mid 1950's Chevy Nomad at the Belgrade Fall Festival car show Saturday.

Dennis Gaub

The airlift occurred after Arnold's father, also named Bob, left the Army Air Force. The senior Arnold, who was from Beatrice, Neb., was married when he enlisted. He volunteered for the glider program and became a member of the 9th Air Force's Troop Carrier Command, among about 6,000 glider pilots known as glider airborne infantry.

The senior Arnold, now deceased, flew a Waco CG-4A glider towed by a C-47 towards battle front lines. The planes and gliders were connected by a one-inch thick nylon tow rope that was 300 feet long.

"They grouped over the English Channel, flew across the channel, and the gliders were cut loose just over the coast of Normandy," Bob Arnold said about his father's missions.

American gliders had a pilot and co-pilot and could carry 13 passengers. They had the advantage over paratroopers of silent insertion into battle areas of infantry and could deliver equipment such as anti-tank guns or even jeeps and light tanks.

Glider crews led a dangerous life, captured in a quote Arnold attributed to Gen. William Westmoreland. "No engine, no parachute, no second chance," said Westmoreland, a World War II veteran and later commander of U.S. forces in the Vietnam War.

Pilots of the gliders flew with the best aerial maps available then. "They knew ideally where they were supposed to land but ideally didn't always happen," Arnold said.

Glider crews were supposed to get where they could

regroup and catch a ride back to England because gliders and trained pilots were short in number.

After the defeat of Germany in May 1945, the Air Force put Arnold's father and other glider pilots in C-47s, "in either the right or left seat. They flew troops down to the French Riviera for R&R (rest and recreation), thinking these troops were going to go home and go to the Pacific."

The thinking was that experienced troops from Europe would participate in the impending invasion of Japan, which fought on after V-E Day. That didn't happen because the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forcing Japanese emperor Hirohito to overrule his military and accept unconditional surrender.

Now a civilian, Arnold's father returned to Nebraska, "grabbed" his mother and the two drove to Missoula. The senior Arnold enrolled in forestry school at then-Montana State University in January 1946, and the Arnolds' son was born in Missoula that July.

Arnold said that when his father received his degree in 1949, "somebody knew he had had some seat time in a C-47, so they said come out to the airport" to discuss a job flying one of the surplus planes Johnson had purchased.

"My dad took a check ride (in a C-47). They offered him a job. He went home and talked to my mom. He turned the down job down but he went on to become deputy state forester in Montana and he never flew again," Arnold said.