



Sexy Sue . . . she's a Temptress . . .



Graham A Robson



Well, who wouldn't be tempted by such good looks and physique ? I too was tempted to make the journey to the far corner of the United States, at the very generous invitation of Peter Hambling, proud owner of "Sexy Sue".

My love of the Douglas Invader and, in particular its later incarnation as the last word in corporate air travel, lead me to making contact with Peter to re-acquaint myself with this particular example, last seen in northern Minnesota with a wing missing, looking sorry for herself.

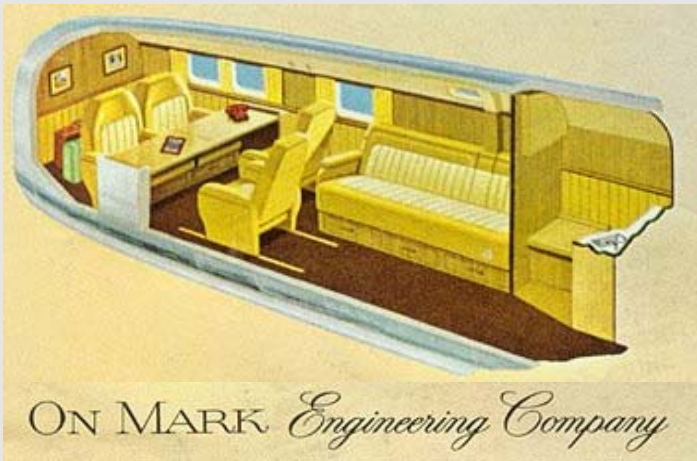
Peter, upon his first introduction to Sue... in his own words "succumbed to temptation much too easily" and has been in love ever since. A childhood growing up in Yoxford, Suffolk, once the 'back yard' of the USAAF's 8th and 9th Air Forces during World War Two and a father who was an RAF pilot, before flying for British Airways and Royal Brunei Airlines, obviously helped mould the young Peter Hambling's interest in aviation. The family later moved to

Seattle, one of the cradles of aviation in the USA, where Peter gained his PPL at the tender age of 16 years. He went on to study Aeronautical Engineering before moving into other areas, which later lead him into various specialties that brought him, in 1991, to start a company called Digital Control Incorporated, with business partner John Mercer. In all this time, he never lost his interest in flying, though an Invader was a long way from his thoughts then.



As with many of the marque that went on to a life in the civilian corporate world, Peter's aircraft had survived the mass war surplus scrappings because she'd been built too late for combat, her late-coming and factory-fresh status ensuring her survival. The fifth airframe from the USAAF's 'block-40' production batch from Douglas's Tulsa, Oklahoma plant in May 1945, she was given the military serial number of 44-35562 and flown from the production line directly to one of the War Asset Administration's huge storage sites awaiting a potential buyer. In the mid-1950s, the Van Nuys, California based On-Mark Engineering Company was proving most successful, amongst a number of lesser effective rivals, in their civilianisation of war surplus Invaders. Through a series of quite drastic modifications, numerous examples of the former medium bomber were transformed into the epitome of corporate luxury travel, through a virtual re-manufacture of their airframes. The most important change made by On-Mark to the military model was their radical replacement of the original rear wing spar, changing out the previous carry-through section

with a wholly new circumferential beam, often called a 'ring-spar', which, at a stroke, opened up the previously restricted rear cabin that was the gunner's position in military service, into something that could offer the platform for a very comfortable and, ultimately, very desirable executive airplane, the Marketeer.



From this came the company's absolute development of the marque, the On-Mark Marksman, with an altogether higher specification including an even more radically re-designed fuselage. This included pressurisation with flat panel DC-7 flight-deck glazing incorporated into a wholly re-configured fuselage that replaced the original roof structure from flight-deck back to the fin to provide a full stand-up passenger cabin with continuous headroom of about 6ft. Indeed, such was On-Mark's expertise with Invader modifications that they were awarded the exclusive license from Douglas Aircraft for the production of spare parts for, and specialised in the over-hauling components of, A-26 aircraft for various operators.

This included a special contract for the US military, for conversion of 40 Douglas A-26 Invaders to On-Mark B-26K Counter Invaders, for operation by the CIA in numerous covert actions in the early 1960s and later by the USAF in Vietnam .

Like many glamorous gals over the years, 'Sue' had a 'nose job' to further her career, one of her many cosmetic procedures for life in the civilian world and an easy give-away to her lineage. The extended nose conferred not just a sleeker look but also boosted the baggage storage space, improved the aerodynamics slightly and offered a suitable location for the optional weather-radar. On



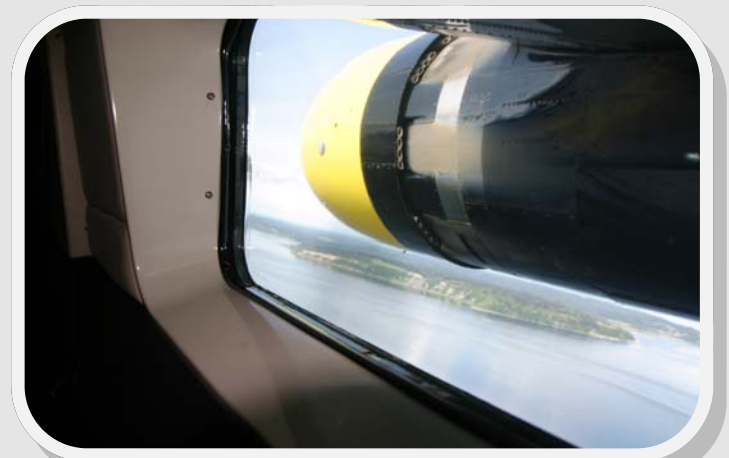
-Mark spared no expense in turning what was once a military tool of war into a fast, comfortable and efficient boardroom asset for many of America's 'blue-chip' companies, the company boasted an enviable client list indeed. Customer aircraft, mostly from stocks of military surplus airframes, were flown into Van-Nuys, California and entered On-Mark's production line housed on the NW corner of the airport. Here they underwent a virtual re-manufacture, stripped down to bare components and re-built to the specific requirements of the particular client. All military equipment, if not already

done so by the owner, was removed by On-Mark and the airframe was tidied up with various external streamlining. Power plant options included up-rated engines, from the standard 2,000hp R-2800 units right to the 2,500hp rated R-2800 CB-16 variants with fully reversible, broad chord propellers, which could boost cruising speed from 274KTAS to an impressive 318KTAS, putting the airplane well ahead of its near rivals in the corporate world, such as Beech 18s and DC-3s. Fuel capacity was also increased, by the addition of 165 US Gallon (625 litre) wing-tip tanks, offering a useful range of 2,600 miles.

'Sexy Sue', always spoken of in the 'first person', is now well known to many in and around the Seattle area. She resides in a cosy and well-appointed hangar in the south-eastern corner of Renton Airport and is not at all shy about showing herself, that everyone knows when she's out and about playing ! Sue is, quite possibly, the finest example of On-Mark's exquisite corporate aircraft still flying today. The external clues are there to betray Sue's former corporate life and, hidden beneath her quasi-military exterior, is the embodiment of art-deco corporate travel, with an un-believably luxurious cabin and sumptuous flight deck area.



Entry into this flying palace came via a hydraulically operated integral air-stair on the starboard side, incorporating one of the cabin windows. It was the high-specification interior fit of the Marketeer that transformed the modified Invader, with numerous seating arrangement options in the newly opened up cabin space provided for by the renewed rear wing spar. Extra cabin glazing was installed, with large panoramic panes on both sides of the rear cabin as well as a smaller, eye level window on each side and, at lower level on the starboard side, another pair of smaller panoramic windows that allowed an unusual view below the wing in flight, from the sideways facing couch.



Certain finishing touches could be added to the Marketeer customer's specification, such as conference tables, reading lights, air-vents and drinks cabinet. Whilst this all made for a very comfortable passenger cabin, it was, by today's standards, slightly cramped and access to the flight-deck required crawling below the forward wing spar and, even though furnished with plush deep-pile carpeting, was still not the most convenient or courteous way to move between flight-deck and rear cabin. Needless to say, heavy sound-proofing was also added as, even in the cruise, engine noise from the pair of huge 18 cylinder radials was difficult to mask.

Proud owner, Peter, an experienced single engine pilot, hadn't set out to become an A-26 owner and admits that a long-time love of the Invader was his weakness that caused the purchase. Though he does confess that his impulsive acquisition was not nearly as difficult to explain to his dear wife Lorrie, as was the raunchy artwork displayed proudly on the nose ! The aircraft had recently undergone a thorough restoration and refurbishment by then owner Calvin Burgess, at his restoration shop Vintage Aircraft LLC., Guthrie, Oklahoma. According to Peter, once he'd decided to dip his toe in the water of the A-26 owners' pool, he was directed towards Burgess's lovely example by mutual friend and A-26 expert Matt Jackson, who had organised for the aircraft to be flown to New Mexico from its Guthrie, Oklahoma base for Peter to see and familiarise himself with.



The owner, though not sure he was really committed to selling the aircraft, had had it posted for sale for some time and was already in negotiation with one of its previous owners, who was actually close to concluding a deal to re-acquire the aircraft when Peter purchased it. In Peter's words "as soon as I saw it I fell in love and made an offer

right off the bat”. Over the following few days, under Matt’s careful tutelage, Peter began his first steps into ‘warbird’ ownership and the huge learning curve in transitioning to such a complex, powerful, and demanding aircraft, as is the Invader, from his other aircraft, a Cessna 206, began.

Having been demobbed from the Air Force in the late 1940s, like so many other surplus Invaders, Sexy Sue’s original history is rather obscure. Following conversion by On-Mark to Marketeer specification in 1961, she was first registered to the Texas Gas Transmission Corporation of Owensboro, Kentucky, with the appropriate markings of N707TG, with whom she was operated all across the USA until sold in 1966. Over the following 3 years, through various registration changes to N7079S and N9176Z she was eventually purchased by uranium exploration company Natrona Service Inc. and re-registered yet again, this time as N7079G, the number she still wears today, operating with Natrona for almost 20 years. In August 1989 she moved to South Daytona Beach, Florida and a new owner. Warbird collector Conrad Yelvington flew her for the next three years before offering the aircraft for sale. Ironically, ‘79G must have made quite an impression on Yelvington, as it was he who was gazumped by Peter’s impulsive purchase of it from Burgess in 2009. ‘79G then took a step into the lime-light when sold by Yelvington to flamboyant aviatrix Lady Barbel Abela.

In partnership with flying partner Len Perry, Abela had entered into the first round-the-world air race and was searching for a suitable mount, preferably with a ‘warbird’ background. Original plans for a Beech C-45 Expeditor were soon shelved as unsuitable without airframe modifications, when the corporate Marketeer for sale in Florida was discovered. She and Perry flew out to view her and, soon realising that the aircraft was both suitable, as far as range and performance, comfortable thanks to the corporate interior and of suitable ‘pedigree’, being a wartime bomber, the Marketeer was purchased and ferried to Brownsville, Texas in preparation for the race. Inspections soon revealed a number of defects, corrosion and, more worrying, evidence of a crack in the main wing spar. The expensive and time consuming repairs, together with a full re-spray into pseudo-military markings, boasting a suitable nose-art of ‘Bar-Belle Bomber’ left Abela and Perry too late to enter the race, however they did cover the latter part of the course and, in doing so, achieved a number of Speed over Distance records sanctioned and verified with the National Aeronautic Association. Following the world records Perry then ferried the aircraft to the USA to attend the 1992 EAA Oshkosh event from where he flew to Minnesota to take part in an airshow at Holman Field, downtown Minneapolis on August 9th. During a steeply banked turn over the field, towards the end of a display with a number of B-25 Mitchells, Perry reported hearing a loud ‘bang’ and the airframe juddered, which brought about a swift landing and quick confirmation that the wing spar had cracked once more. This failure of the wing spar had been an ‘Achilles heel’ for the Invader’s later life, hard manoeuvring at speed or high operating weights exerting the wing to greater stresses.



Sadly, the damage to ‘Bar-Belle Bomber’ was outside the normal wing-spar repair option for the Invader and she remained grounded at Holman for the next six years whilst repair options were investigated and work carried out. During this time of open storage, mostly with the port wing removed, ownership changed to the Combat Air Museum, of Lafayette, Louisiana, but in January 1998 local warbird collector Wally Fisk acquired the aircraft for his Polar Aviation Museum, part of his Amjet Aircraft Corporation at nearby Anoka County Airport, Minnesota. Fisk’s museum enterprise was wound up in 2000 and the

collection of rare and valuable aircraft disposed of, which included the, now repaired, ‘Bar-Belle Bomber’. Enter, Mr Calvin Burgess, proprietor of a number of business ventures including Vintage Aircraft LLC. Burgess had the aircraft flown to his restoration workshop in Guthrie, Oklahoma and there began the wonderful restoration, inside and out, of what would become “Sexy Sue”, named after his wife, although, history does not record whether the nose art to accompany the name is a faithful representation !



Since acquiring “Sexy Sue” in 2009, Peter has not been shy about putting her in the air and, it is very likely that N7079G is one of the most frequently flown Invaders in the world. Hardly a week goes by without her taking to the sky, mostly for pleasure, “ ..I'm the proud, and lucky!, owner of N7079G. We've owned her for 2 years now and fly her all the time, often two or three times each week, all over the Western United States with frequent cross country trips like she loves to do. Recently, we went to Missoula, Montana with 8 souls and 2 dogs on board.” Getting used to such a powerful airplane is on-going for Peter and his conversion to and confidence with his beautiful distraction is the responsibility of Co-Pilot and Crew Chief Brad Meeuwse, a young man with, quite possibly, the best job in the world ! Brad’s face lights up when describing his role. “I’ve known Peter for a number of years, being responsible for maintaining and often flying his Cessna 206, both on conventional undercarriage and now, as it is, on floats, so Peter thought of having me look after and fly the A-26 was the natural thing.” Brad quickly began collecting anything and everything that he could to establish a support programme for the aircraft, which now includes a healthy spare parts stockpile, as well as trying to establish connections with other Invader owners. In reality, under Brad’s custodianship, at Aero-Dyne Aviation in Renton, Sue’s every wish is catered for.



Peter has ambitious forthcoming plans for Sue, with hopes of taking time off in the coming year to fly her around the world. “Nothing is concrete yet, but we’d like to fly her, over a number of stages, right around the world, however, certain legs will require some form of support or sponsorship, through the more restrictive airspace and complex local requirements of certain parts of the world, notably the middle-East.” One can easily understand that a former American Air Force bomber, emblazoned with the distinctive military Star and Bar insignia might cause certain frictions, however, Peter chuckles “it is not her military markings that will be the concern, but the big breasted, naked lady displayed on the nose !”.



We await further news and look forward to, hopefully, seeing Sue passing through the UK on her extended vacation sometime in the near future.

