

# 'L-Birds' back to Normandy

From all over Europe they came to northern France — despite the weather, this gathering of wartime liaison aircraft was unprecedented, and emotional

**WORDS:** XAVIER MÉAL

During the D-Day commemorations, the incredible armada of American and European C-47s took centre stage in the skies of Normandy. Well, numerous they may have been, but not as numerous as the 'L-Birds' that French pilot and collector Isabelle Bazin succeeded in gathering at St André de l'Eure, about 45 miles south of Rouen. On the very airfield that housed the Bf 109s of II./JG 2 'Richthofen' during the summer of 1940, the L-Birds back to Normandy event assembled a grand total of 47 World War Two liaison and observation aeroplanes — the biggest such gathering in Europe for many decades. It was quite a feat, even if close to 100 had originally expressed an interest in attending.

Quite inevitably, 36 of the 47 aircraft were Piper L-4s, a good number being authentic D-Day veterans. One such was Isabelle Bazin's own L-4H, serial 43-30036. In 1944 it was flying not with the US Army, like most of its brethren, but with the 9th Air Force's 12th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, whose colours and codes it still wears today. But also present on the grass of St André de l'Eure were an Aeronca L-3 Defender, three Stinson L-5 Sentinels, a very rare Piper L-14, a Fairchild 24, two Auster Vs, a Bücker Jungmann, a Bücker

Bestmann and a DH Tiger Moth. A third of the participants had flown across from Britain, another third came from France, and the rest variously made the trip from Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark and Norway. It took Per Anders Johnsen and his L-4J 16 hours and 13 legs to reach Normandy from Kjeller, Norway — a good reason to be offered free beers by the international community of 'Grasshoppers'.

Camaraderie was the trademark of this truly exceptional meeting, which offered many opportunities for the pilots to enjoy unexpected and wonderful encounters. Such was the case for the youngest of them all, 21-year-old Joseph Fayolle. He became acquainted with Reginald McComish, 82 years old, a retired British military pilot who had flown across the Channel at the controls of 43-1923, one of just two L-3 Defenders flying in Europe. Fayolle learned that a single L-3 had indeed taken part in the battle of Normandy — according to the story, shipped by mistake with a batch of L-4s and L-5s. This is proved by a picture published in the 25 June 1944 edition of the daily *Detroit Free Press*, the caption indicating it was flying medical supplies to the advancing front-line regiments.

Everything seemed perfect at St André de l'Eure for the beginning ➤





A beautiful duo of invasion-striped L-4s over the characteristic Normandy bocage, D-EJIZ — Meaux-based despite its German registration — leading event organiser Isabelle Bazin's F-AYZA.

XAVIER MÉAL

**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:**

Before leaving for Madrid, a trip of some eight hours, the Spanish-based Cubs were able to fly along the D-Day landing beaches.

JOSÉ LUIS OLÍAS

No fewer than 21 'L-Birds' — actually, 20 plus interlocking Bestmann, in the form of Heliopolis Gomhouria G-TPWX — arrayed on St André de l'Eure's grass.

P-E LANGENFELD

A six-Cub formation mounted by the Danish and Norwegian visitors.

P-E LANGENFELD

Perhaps the rarest attendee was the Fundación Infante de Orleans' Piper L-14 EC-AAP, this being a liaison version of the J-5 Cub Cruiser dubbed the Army Cruiser.

P-E LANGENFELD

The Fundación Infante de Orleans sent three aircraft from Cuatro Vientos.

L-4s EC-AJY and EC-GQE took a trip over the sections of Mulberry harbour at Arromanches.

JOSÉ LUIS OLÍAS

The calm before the storm, literally, at St André de l'Eure. The charming aerodrome provided delightful surroundings in which to view the 'L-Birds', such as L-4 D-EJIZ.

DR ANDREAS ZEITLER

The Danes were out in force. Cubs OY-AFG *D-Day Doll*, OY-ECV *Mistress* and OY-ECS *Lucky Strike* displayed some impressive nose art.

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Two of the three Stinson L-5s in attendance were I-MEMA from Voghera, Italy, and the Grenchen, Switzerland-based HB-TRY.

DR ANDREAS ZEITLER

of the commemorative week, until a severe weather warning called for extreme caution. A storm named *Miguel* was to sweep through the entire west of France on Friday 8 June, with winds peaking at 100km/h. It was enough to generate much anxiety among the pilots of these fragile light aeroplanes. But, within two hours, the incredibly energetic Isabelle Bazin was able to find shelter for all of the 'L-Birds'. Arranged as if part of some intricate puzzle, half of them were pushed into a large hangar at St André de l'Eure, left empty because of a legal dispute. The remainder were flown to airfields in Normandy, but also to Chartres and locations north-west of Paris, where hangarage had been offered by Bazin's extensive network of contacts.

**“All remained eager to pay the tribute they had travelled so far for, and found a way to fly over the landing beaches”**

The aftermath of this impromptu scattering of the fleet caused the flying programme the French aviatrix had spent months organising to be consigned to the dustbin. A mass commemorative flight along the D-Day beaches was planned for 7 June, the cherry on the cake for all the 'L-Bird' crews. Instead, everybody ensured their treasured charges were out of harm's way. After *Miguel* had done its worst, it took a couple of hours to regroup the next day, but all remained eager to pay the tribute they had travelled so far for, and found a way to fly over the beaches.

Once everyone had regathered at St André de l'Eure, L-Birds back to Normandy was treated to an overflight by the Patrouille de France, with red, white and blue smoke on. The inside story is that some of the pilots in the French Air Force jet display team fly Piper Cubs regularly, and knew about the event. It was another fitting salute to the men who flew in these incredible and essential 'L-Birds' during the liberation of Normandy.



