

The Douglas DC-3 / C-47 in Costa Rican Military Service

written by Dan Hagedorn and Mario Overall | October 12, 2021



The military use of the Douglas DC-3 and C-47 variants in Costa Rica is surrounded by mystery and presents quite a challenge for the aero-historian. Both the government and the rebels flew the aircraft during a revolt that took place in 1948, not only as transports, but also as improvised bombers, and it would not be bold to say that the role they played influenced considerably the turn of events. Despite their importance, the official narrative has reduced their participation to a mere footnote; there are virtually no records of their identities and we only have a vague idea of their provenance. Hence, what follows is perhaps the most honest attempt to shed some light into the military utilization of the Douglas twin series in that Central American nation.

At the time of the outbreak of the 1948 revolution, the Costa Rican Army did not have an air arm, only a unit called División Aérea (Air Division), intended for airfield security rather than flight operations. Its ten officers were based at San José Airport supplemented by four others deployed at the airfields at Alajuela, Cartago and Heredia. Of these men, at least one received training as either a pilot or engineering officer during the Second World War. Therefore, when the first news of the revolt reached San José on 12 March, the government rushed to issue a decree to essentially impress every airworthy aircraft in the country for possible military service. These included three LACSA airlines DC-3s, another C-47 owned by Transportes Aéreos Nacionales -TAN, two Boeing 247Ds owned by Aerovías Occidentales (AVO) and virtually all the flyable, privately owned aircraft, including at least one AT-6 and a BT-13. The decree also called for all private and commercial pilots, as well as aviation mechanics, to be drafted as part of a newly formed 'air force'. In addition, a handful of foreign aviators, among them the North Americans Jerry Delarm and Clarence Martin, and the Canadian Sherman 'Snark' Wilson, volunteered their services to the government. In fact, Wilson was immediately appointed as the commanding officer of the air unit, with the rank of colonel.

Since all aircraft requisitioned by the government were civilian, the first order of business was to provide them with some sort of offensive capability. Delarm related that the DC-3s were converted to makeshift 'attack-bombers', with .50 calibre machine guns installed on their cabin windows and another in a hole cut on the side of the toilet compartment. For the bombing role, the mechanics, led by a Spaniard named Julio López Masegosa, made some bombs out of oxygen cylinders and milk cans filled with dynamite, as well as nuts and bolts. According to Delarm, upon a signal from the pilot, a match string fuse would be lit with a cigar, then the 'bomb' would be slid out the cargo hatch of the aircraft by two men. In the case of the AT-6 and BT-13, a 'gunner' armed with a handheld machine gun, flew in the back cockpit of the aircraft that -invariably - were used for escorting the DC-3s.

The first combat sortie of a loyalist DC-3 was launched during the early morning of 13 March, when one of the aircraft, piloted by Sherman Wilson, bombed the rebel troops that had blocked the Inter-American highway at La Sierra. This attack, which consisted of four bomb runs over the enemy positions, was made in support of the renowned Unidad Móvil (Mobile Unit), comprised of the only US-trained troops of the Costa Rican Army. Even though the air bombardment was far from accurate, it was good enough to allow the troops of the Unidad to break the blockade and force a retreat of the rebels. Incredibly, once the highway was freed, the Army troops did not continue their advance, electing to regroup 5 or 6km from La Sierra. In that way, the Army missed an excellent opportunity to launch an assault on San Isidro and capture the rebel's logistics centre, which at that time was poorly defended.

Two days later, on 15 March, two DC-3s were launched in two separate missions. The first was aimed at stopping the rebels' retreat from Santa María de Dota after being defeated by the Army. During this mission, a DC-3 armed with a pair of .50 calibre machine guns established a circular pattern over Figueres' troops and strafed them for no less than an hour, managing to disperse them. The other aircraft, also armed with machine guns, supported the Army troops that launched an assault on La Lucha, which at that time had been abandoned by the rebels.

On that same day, three anonymous Nicaragua C-47s - with their registrations and titles covered by splotches of black paint¹ - arrived in San José as part of unsolicited assistance provided by President Anastasio Somoza. It turns out that the Nicaraguan dictator had been informed that among Figueres' men there were Nicaraguan exiles who were planning to launch an invasion of Nicaragua once Figueres had seized power. Thus, he did not hesitate in getting involved, even though President Picado had begged him not to do so. In fact, by then Nicaraguan Guardia Nacional troops had already crossed the border and were marching towards the town of Los Chiles, in the Alajuela province, with the intention of setting up a forward operating base from where they could launch attacks against the rebels' northern front.

Unable to get rid of the Nicaraguan C-47s, the Costa Rican government decided to hide their presence by covering the markings of all its DC-3s, thus introducing a great deal of confusion about their registrations and the operations in which they participated. In any case, during the following days the three loyalist DC-3s conducted several attacks against the rebels, always with mixed results, while the Nicaraguan C-47s were utilised for evacuating casualties and move troops around the country. By the end of March, a seventh aircraft, a TACA DC-3 carrying Salvadoran registration YS-34, was requisitioned by the government and promptly impressed into service. This aircraft was also employed in combat duties, undergoing the 'attack-bomber' conversion described above.

On 10 April, after the rebels had moved their aircraft to Altamira in preparation for the airborne assault on Port Limón, the government launched all its aircraft in search of them. As noted in the previous section, a pair of loyalist DC-3s, escorted by a solitary AT-6, located two of the rebel DC-3s at the Altamira airfield and attempted to destroy them. During the attack one of the loyalist DC-3 was hit by ground fire and crashed shortly after, killing all on board. Flying this aircraft was Sherman Wilson, while his co-pilot was a TACA mechanic named Alejo Poveda. Riding as gunners/bombers were Arquímedes Álvarez, Antonio Carmona, Alfredo Chamorro, Jorge Suárez, Ramón Muñóz, Juan Montero and Víctor Chacón.

There is considerable confusion about the circumstances of this crash. According to witnesses, after being hit by machine gun fire at Altamira, the DC-3 turned around and headed towards the south, probably trying to return to San José. However, after a couple of minutes, the aircraft lost altitude and slammed against a hill near the small village of Palmira. People who saw the aircraft shortly before the crash state that fire was visible through the cabin windows, as well as smoke spilling from the cargo hatch. This is consistent with rebel accounts that mention a small explosion inside the aircraft after being hit. On the other hand, in some rebel literature it is mentioned that Wilson was hit by bullets that killed him instantly, and with no one onboard who could fly the aircraft, it continued its flight until striking high terrain. A third version, told by Robert Darmsted, the owner of an aircraft repair company in San José, states that he saw Wilson drinking whisky at a cantina near the airport, shortly before departing for the mission. In Darmsted's opinion, Wilson must have been very drunk due to the whisky and the altitude when the aircraft reached Altamira, and that would explain why he bombed the rebels so low and then crashed when trying to return to his base. Last, but not least, the government's official version, published in La Tribuna newspaper the next day, says that the aircraft crashed due to bad weather. The press release does not even mention that the aircraft was involved in a combat mission.

Regarding the identity of Wilson's aircraft, there is also considerable confusion. The US Ambassador to Costa Rica, in a note to the Department of State dated 11 April, reports it as 'a LACSA DC-3' that crashed on a 'Bombing mission, killing Wilson, a Canadian pilot, and several others'. This affirmation clearly conflicts with LACSA's fleet history, since the only two aircraft that the government requisitioned from that airline were returned once the civil war was over. Another unconfirmed source states that the aircraft belonged to the small airline Empresa Nacional de Transportes Aéreos (ENTA) but this company had been absorbed by TACA de Costa Rica almost nine years earlier. Lastly, it has been mentioned that this aircraft was in fact the C-47 that the government requisitioned from TAN airlines, which makes much more sense, but would be almost impossible to prove since that company's fleet history is full of holes at best!

The three surviving aircraft, all LACSA assets as shown in the accompanying table, following the signature of a 'peace pact' on 19 April that amounted to the complete surrender of the Government forces to the revolutionary group, were then used to transport high officials and supporters of the deposed government to Managua, Nicaragua, on 24 April – initially aboard two of the DC-3s – a third having been forced to land somewhere in Nicaraguan territory, probably with additional refugees aboard. All three were promptly impounded by the Nicaraguans and became bargaining chips in a complex legal and diplomatic squabble that persisted, incredibly, until July 1951, when they were eventually returned to LACSA control. As noted in Chapter 16, the adventures of these three aircraft continued, however, and they did not sit idle at Managua!



According to the rebel's narrative, the airplane shown in this photograph is one of the C-47s that were captured at San Isidro del General on March 12. However, she doesn't seem to be painted in the color scheme applied to the TACA aircraft. Of interest is that its registration has been covered with black paint.

What follows is what is known so far about the Costa Rican government-controlled DC-3/C-47 fleet during the civil war.

Reg.	Prev. ID	Built As	MSN	Notes
TI-17	NC34925	DC-3A-345	4957	Transferred from Pan American to LACSA in 1946. Requisitioned by the government on 12 Mar 48 and converted to 'attack-bomber'. Impounded in Nicaragua 24 Apr 48 and became either GN 53, 54 or 55. Returned to LACSA control July 1951. Sold to Aerovías Brasil as PP-AXW in November 1951. Re-registered as PP-NBJ. Sold to Argentine Air Force in 1962 as T-37.
TI-18	41-18381 NC51182	C-47-DL	4419	Transferred from Pan American to LACSA in 1946. Requisitioned by the government on 12 Mar 48 and converted to 'attack-bomber'. Impounded in Nicaragua 24 Apr 48 and became either GN 53, 54 or 55. Returned to LACSA July 1951. Sold to Aerovías Brasil as PP-AXV in Nov 51. Re-registered as PP-NBK on 5 May 53 with Aeronorte. To PP-ABE in Feb 58 with Suprimentos Aeronáuticos do Brasil. To N6893C on 12 Aug 58 with Stewart Davis. To XA-NAA in Sep 59 with Aerolíneas Vega. Noted derelict at Oaxaca, MX, in 1976.
TI-108	41-38699 NC66147 C-60 C-407	C-47-DL	6158	Acquired by TAN from Vías Aéreas Colombianas in Feb 47. Requisitioned by the government on 12 Mar 48 and converted to 'attack-bomber'. Most likely to be the aircraft that crashed at Palmira on 10 Apr 48 after bombing the rebels in Altamira.
YS-34	42-92279 FL635 YS-34 C-209	C-47A-15-DK	12062	Transferred from TACA Airlines to TACA de Costa Rica in May 47. Requisitioned by the government on 28 March and converted to 'attack-bomber'. Almost certainly the third government aircraft impounded in Nicaragua 24 Apr 48. Became either GN 53, 54 or 55 - probably the latter. (See chapter 16.)

This is an excerpt of chapter 7 of the book "Douglas DC-3/C-47 in Latin American Military Service" by Dan Hagedorn and Mario Overall. You can get your copy from [Amazon](#) or if you are in Europe, you can get it from [Crécy's online store](#).