

MEDIA RELEASE

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The plane that enabled safe and affordable passenger travel touches down in New Zealand as part of its journey to circumnavigate the globe

One of the most important aircraft ever built has touched down in New Zealand - not as a museum piece, but as a living, flying reminder of the moment air travel changed forever.

The *Spirit of Douglas*, a lovingly conserved 1942 Douglas DC-3, arrived in Auckland as part of an extraordinary round-the-world journey honouring the first ever circumnavigation of the globe by an aircraft. That feat was completed by three Douglas World Cruisers in 1924. Its arrival marks a moment of national pride and connection, bringing home an aircraft that helped shape modern aviation and New Zealand's own story in the skies.

The DC-3 transformed flying from an unreliable, uncomfortable novelty into a safe, accessible and commercially viable way to travel. For the first time, airlines could turn a profit carrying passengers alone. Journeys that once took days became hours, and flying became something people could trust - and even enjoy.

The aircraft is owned by businessman and aviation enthusiast Mark Stewart, who acquired the DC-3 in 2023 after a lifetime passion for flying, travel and exploration.

"This aircraft isn't just an icon - it's a turning point in human history," Stewart said. "The DC-3 changed how people, goods and ideas moved around the world. Bringing *Spirit of Douglas* to New Zealand is about sharing that story, and recognising the ingenuity, courage and craftsmanship behind it."

"This project is also about keeping the spirit of Donald Douglas alive," he said. "He believed deeply in integrity, craftsmanship and responsibility - and his famous line, '*my word is my bond*', still resonates today. That philosophy runs right through this aircraft and the way it's been cared for. We see ourselves as custodians, not owners - responsible for protecting its legacy and passing it on."

Built in California in 1942, the aircraft served in the China–Burma–India theatre during World War II before going on to a long civilian career across Asia and the United States. It was built at a moment when aviation - and society - was being reshaped. At the height of DC-3 production during the war, nearly half of the Douglas Aircraft workforce were women, stepping into skilled manufacturing roles as men went to the front. They riveted, assembled and tested aircraft that would carry troops, supplies and hope across the world, producing a DC-3 every 35 minutes.

Their contribution makes the DC-3 not only a landmark of aviation history, but a powerful symbol of social change - representing a generation of women whose skill, precision and resilience helped redefine what was possible, both in the air and on the ground.

The aircraft even has Hollywood pedigree. Registered as N8336C, it appeared in the 1994 film *Richie Rich* - played by then child star Macaulay Culkin - underscoring the DC-3's enduring place in popular culture as well as aviation history.

Maintained by an international team of specialists, the *Spirit of Douglas* remains one of the most beautifully preserved and actively flying DC-3s in the world. Today, its mission is preservation, education and storytelling - using flight itself to bring history to life and inspire future generations.

Now more than three-quarters of the way through its round-the-world journey, the *Spirit of Douglas* is honouring the legacy of aviation pioneer Donald Douglas. By the time it arrived in New Zealand, the aircraft will have flown through 19 countries across five continents - a remarkable feat for a beautifully conserved 84-year-old aircraft.

Its arrival in New Zealand carries particular meaning. New Zealand is the aircraft's spiritual home - owned by Kiwis and finished in a distinctive teal livery in tribute to TEAL Airways, whose aircraft helped open New Zealand to the world and laid the foundations for modern air travel across the Pacific.

The aircraft will be based in New Zealand for several months, with plans to travel it around the country - giving communities the rare opportunity to see, hear and experience a living piece of aviation history up close.

The DC-3 also holds a special place in New Zealand's aviation story. Through National Airways Corporation (NAC), it became the backbone of the country's early domestic fleet, connecting cities and regional towns at a time when road and rail links were limited.

From the late 1940s through to the 1970s, it carried New Zealanders across the country - reliably, safely and often into places no other aircraft could reach. The last NAC DC-3 did not retire until 1974 - long after jets had taken over elsewhere - because nothing handled New Zealand's small grass airfields quite like this aircraft. For nearly three decades, it was not just a plane, but a lifeline.

Geoffrey Thomas, aviation commentator and author who has written a book featuring the *Spirit of Douglas*, said the aircraft's visit offers a rare chance to connect with the origins of modern flight. "I fell in love with the DC-3 on my first trip to New Zealand when I was 16," Thomas said. "It's a remarkable aircraft. Even today, you can see the DC-3's influence in modern aviation design. It helped make passenger air travel safe, reliable and affordable — and you can still see and hear why."

Following its arrival, the *Spirit of Douglas* will appear at Warbirds Over Wanaka, before making further stops across New Zealand. Its journey – including many challenging legs - is being documented as part of an ongoing storytelling project and feature length documentary being shot by an award-winning filmmaker.

"I want to inspire the next generation of aviation development," Stewart said. "Keeping the DC-3's heritage alive, sharing knowledge, and reminding people - especially young people - that the things we now take for granted were once bold, improbable dreams."