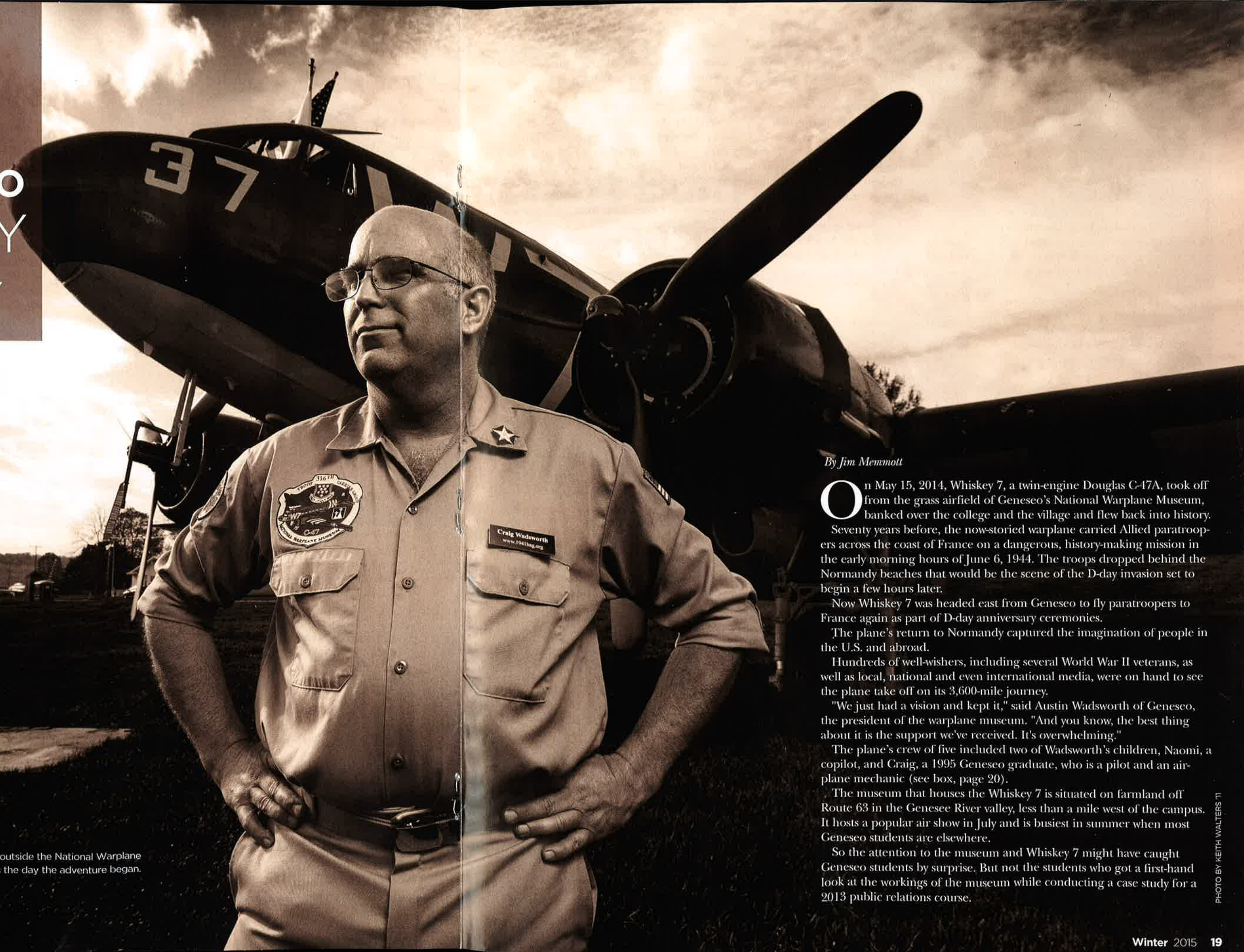


RETURN to NORMANDY

Geneseo aviators fly Whiskey 7
on a mission to the past



Craig Wadsworth '95 and Whiskey 7 outside the National Warplane Museum near the Geneseo campus the day the adventure began.

By Jim Memmott

On May 15, 2014, Whiskey 7, a twin-engine Douglas C-47A, took off from the grass airfield of Geneseo's National Warplane Museum, banked over the college and the village and flew back into history.

Seventy years before, the now-storied warplane carried Allied paratroopers across the coast of France on a dangerous, history-making mission in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944. The troops dropped behind the Normandy beaches that would be the scene of the D-day invasion set to begin a few hours later.

Now Whiskey 7 was headed east from Geneseo to fly paratroopers to France again as part of D-day anniversary ceremonies.

The plane's return to Normandy captured the imagination of people in the U.S. and abroad.

Hundreds of well-wishers, including several World War II veterans, as well as local, national and even international media, were on hand to see the plane take off on its 3,600-mile journey.

"We just had a vision and kept it," said Austin Wadsworth of Geneseo, the president of the warplane museum. "And you know, the best thing about it is the support we've received. It's overwhelming."

The plane's crew of five included two of Wadsworth's children, Naomi, a copilot, and Craig, a 1995 Geneseo graduate, who is a pilot and an airplane mechanic (see box, page 20).

The museum that houses the Whiskey 7 is situated on farmland off Route 63 in the Genesee River valley, less than a mile west of the campus. It hosts a popular air show in July and is busiest in summer when most Geneseo students are elsewhere.

So the attention to the museum and Whiskey 7 might have caught Geneseo students by surprise. But not the students who got a first-hand look at the workings of the museum while conducting a case study for a 2013 public relations course.

PHOTO BY KEITH WALTERS '11

What is now the National Warplane Museum started small, very small, in the 1960s. "Basically, it was pilots and guys who like to work on airplanes," says Wadsworth.

The group held its first air show in 1980 on farmland owned by Wadsworth.

"We put up some posters, had 1,000 people by the end of the day," Wadsworth says. "Then we kept buying planes, and our shows couldn't miss. The World War II veterans who were in their fifties and sixties came to see the planes they flew in."

In 1983, the group officially became the National Warplane Museum. In the mid-1990s a disagreement resulted in the moving of the museum, planes and all, to Elmira.

Wadsworth and others eventually formed the 1941 Historical Aircraft Group. They slowly built up a collection of vintage planes and began to put on shows again.

In 2013, the Aircraft Group reacquired its original name.

At that time, Department of Communication students taking the Public Relations Case Problems course taught by Mary Mohan, undertook an in-depth study of the museum.

The students talked with museum volunteers, examined similar institutions and reported back with ideas on how the museum could raise its visibility and expand its audience.

"They showed us how we need to be more closely focused but not restricted in what we do," says Dawn Schaible, the director of planning and government affairs for the museum. "And they gave us good ideas about reaching out to the community."

In Austin Wadsworth's opinion, one of the challenges the museum faces is connecting to young people born decades after the end of World War II. With that in mind, Mohan had each of her students interview someone who lived through the war.

"They were able to develop a greater sense of empathy as they talked about what their parents and grandparents remembered and experienced," says Mohan, who retired from teaching at the end of the fall 2014 semester.

As much as they learned about the museum, the class members could not have predicted the extent to which the Whiskey 7's flight—branded the Return to Normandy—would inspire so much good feeling.

The flight was the culmination of a two-year effort initiated by the late Gary Mitchell, a volunteer at the warplane museum. Mitchell knew that the Whiskey

7, which gets its name from the W7 marking on the plane, had dropped paratroopers into German-occupied France during the invasion of Normandy.

He suggested that it would be fitting to have the plane participate in the 70th anniversary ceremonies on June 6.

Through a wide variety of sources, both corporate and public, volunteers raised more than \$225,000 to cover the expenses of the trip. (Gas alone ate up a big chunk of the money.)

As the day for takeoff approached, the flight was profiled in the New York Times and on television network news programs.

The hundreds of people who came to the museum's grass airfield to see the plane off included a reporter for the French newspaper Le Figaro.

In France, the Whiskey 7 recreated its role in the invasion, dropping paratroopers over Normandy. Everywhere the crew went, it was met with thanks for being there and for America's part in liberating France 70 years ago.

The plane was a celebrity by the time it returned to Geneseo on June 14, Flag Day. It still resides at the museum, a distinguished veteran that, at least for a few days, put Geneseo on the world map.



Always a star at the Geneseo air show, Whiskey 7 grows to life before a flight.

Flying with Whiskey 7

Craig Wadsworth '95 is a history buff. He's also a certified airplane mechanic and a licensed multiengine pilot.

So, given his interests and his credentials, it's no surprise he was one of five crewmembers on the Whiskey 7 for its Return to Normandy flight.

"It was the trip of a lifetime, to be at Normandy, to see veterans, to meet the French people," says Wadsworth, a member of the facilities services staff at the college and the father of John Wadsworth, a freshman.

The Whiskey 7, a slow-but-steady propeller driven troop carrier during the war, hopped its way to France, making several stops along the way.

The cabin of the plane was not heated and the temperature was as low as 28 degrees at times, Wadsworth says. But despite close quarters and frigid conditions, the crew got along. "There were no interpersonal problems," he says. "And it was a gang of Type A people in a very small area. I was encouraged."

In France, when the Whiskey 7 recreated its role in the invasion, dropping paratroopers over Normandy, Wadsworth says the airplane performed beautifully.

Back home, Wadsworth, who served in the U.S. Navy for four years as an aircraft mechanic, continues in his role as volunteer director of maintenance at the museum, overseeing the repairs and restoration of all the planes.

A major in political science at Geneseo, he says the planes at the museum, each of them with a story to tell, are teaching tools.