

Beauty of the Skies – de Havilland DH 91 Albatross
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Occasionally there appears on the aviation literature scene a book that you didn't know you wanted. This book was one such book as far as I am concerned! To me, the de Havilland DH 91 Albatross airliner is one of the most beautiful shapes ever to grace the skies, with its teardrop-shaped fuselage, long elegant wings and extremely aerodynamically shaped engine nacelles. There have of course been books and numerous articles on this masterful creation of de Havilland, but now what can be described as the definitive work has finally appeared.

The Albatross is not the most well-known of aircraft, being a civil airliner operated briefly before the war and having a very low production run of only seven, all of which had been lost before the end of WWII. But its significance for aviation can hardly be understated in that the production method used to create the plane, i.e. forming wooden shapes over a jig, and sealing the resulting monocoque-sandwich fuselage shell with a synthetic resin, and featuring one-piece plywood-covered wings, was to see use on a much more famous and important WWII aircraft, "The Wooden Wonder", the Mosquito. So, the story of the Mosquito is linked to that of the Albatross and as such this book also fills a part of WWII history, not just civil aviation.

The book is large, in A4-format, totalling some 352 pages all in all, is solidly hardbound and printed on high-quality gloss paper which does justice to all the wonderful photographs and images in the book. And there are certainly a large number of photographs in the book, 460 in all including six very good colour photos. The book also contains scale drawings and profiles, more of which later as well as cutaway drawings in colour by Hubert Cance.

The lay-out of the book is traditional and begins with a history of Imperial Airways and the importance of air mail, outlines the history of the company and then proceeds to deal with the specification, construction and flight testing and use of the mail carrier version of the Albatross. The chapter is full of some technical drawings, loads of construction and detail photos, including detail and interior shots, and various photos of the two aircraft built of this version, including very interesting imagery of mishaps and damages suffered. This is followed by the history of the airliner version detailing its construction, tests and service with Imperial Airways, similarly illustrated with a large number of photos of great quality, again with many detail and interior shots. These chapters make up about half of the book and is followed by a chapter on the Albatrosses at war in which the last part of the history and the demise of each aircraft is detailed. A large number of photographs also accompany this chapter, and I am sure many will find lots of interesting details in the markings and paint schemes applied to the Albatrosses that saw war service. Of particular interest was the section dealing with the arsonist who destroyed one and damaged another of the Albatrosses. Perhaps now the myth of one being destroyed by the Luftwaffe which has circulated on the internet and elsewhere can finally be dispelled?

At the end there is a large appendix section which included such things as technical specifications, reproductions of a large number of weight sheets, scale drawings and profiles by the wonderful Juanita Franzi, information on and illustrations of adverts, a section on cigarette cards illustrating the Albatross, a section on sources used and bibliography and, thankfully, an index.

The photographs published in this book warrant some additional comments. I am led to believe by the author that many, if not most, are previously unpublished. I have certainly not

seen the majority of them before. Most of them have the same source, the British Aerospace Systems Heritage Centre or the British Airways Speedbird Heritage Centre. Virtually everything you'd like to see illustrated here, can be found, including detailed shots of engine installations, the engines themselves, interiors of both versions, construction methods and construction procedures, views of unpainted aircraft and airframe parts, accidents, in-service scenes and so on. Yet, despite the quality of the officially sourced photos and also some photos from private sources, the most interesting images to me personally, were probably two images of rather low quality showing the battered wings and fuselage of Albatross G-AFDL "Fingal" in private ownership outside the new owner's garage, possibly taken after the war as the last remains of this aircraft were chopped up for firewood towards the end of 1946! I find such photos showing the fate of historic aircraft very fascinating and it is good fortune that someone took those two photographs. But in short, anyone interested in this aircraft and modelers especially, will find the photographic content to their liking!

The scale drawings included must also be commented. In short, they are by far the best in existence of the type. Juanita Franzi obviously made a very thorough study of this aircraft as she has picked up on a lot of smaller details, some of which I believe were unknown until her careful eyes discovered them. The scale drawing illustrates both versions from both sides with full top view and partial ventral views. The drawings also include cross sections of the fuselage, dimensional data of the wings and fuselage and empennage and detailed scrap views of the engine nacelles and the engine installation. The majority of the drawings are to 1/144 scaler while the engine detail shots are to 1/72. Naturally, as a modeler, I'd like to see these wonderful scale drawings published in 1/72 scale throughout, but the limitation of the format precludes this, of course. I still hope that the author will consider making the scale drawings available for separate purchase and/or download in 1/72, they deserve that!

I cannot comment much on the profiles as saying they are done by Franzi should be enough! They are simply superb and includes top views of a camouflaged RAF examples as well as an Imperial Airways specimen. The book also contains two very nice illustrations of other aircraft, a DC-3 and a Whitley both serving with BOAC. The DC-3 is also illustrated by a high-quality colour image.

All in all, this is a most impressive book. Everything you'd like to know about the Albatross is here and I cannot recommend it enough to all kinds of aviation enthusiasts, and modelers especially. You cannot seriously build a model of the DH 91 Albatross without referring to this book from now on!

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