

Cargo plane never famous, but vital to the WWII effort

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Curtiss' C-46 Command cargo plane never gained the fame of the smaller and more numerous C-47, but it could carry more cargo or soldiers and carry them faster and farther.



Because of its ability to carry more weight and its better performance at higher altitudes, C-46s were picked to fly the dangerous air route over the Himalayas, beginning in May 1943. That was the only route open for the United States to supply China in its fight against Japanese forces.

The C-46 stemmed from a 1930s design for a passenger plane that could carry more passengers than Douglas' DC-3 (which would become the U.S. Army Air Forces' C-47). The military was also interested.

Ordered in July 1940, the first C-46 was delivered to the military in the summer of 1942.

Powered by two 2,000-horsepower engines, the C-46 could carry 38 to 50 troops, or up to five tons of cargo, even light planes, according to the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Ohio, which has a C-46D on display.

The plane could cruise at 170 mph and fly up to 2,500 miles at altitudes up to 27,500 feet.

During World War II, the Army Air Forces accepted 3,144 C-46s, compared to more than 9,000 C-47s, the museum said. The C-46 also saw action during the Korean War, and stayed in service until the 1960s.