

# SABENA'S LYSANDER

*This rare World War Two clandestine aircraft is flying once again, thanks to an intensive restoration effort by Sabena's Old Timers*

**BY JOHN P. BAERT**

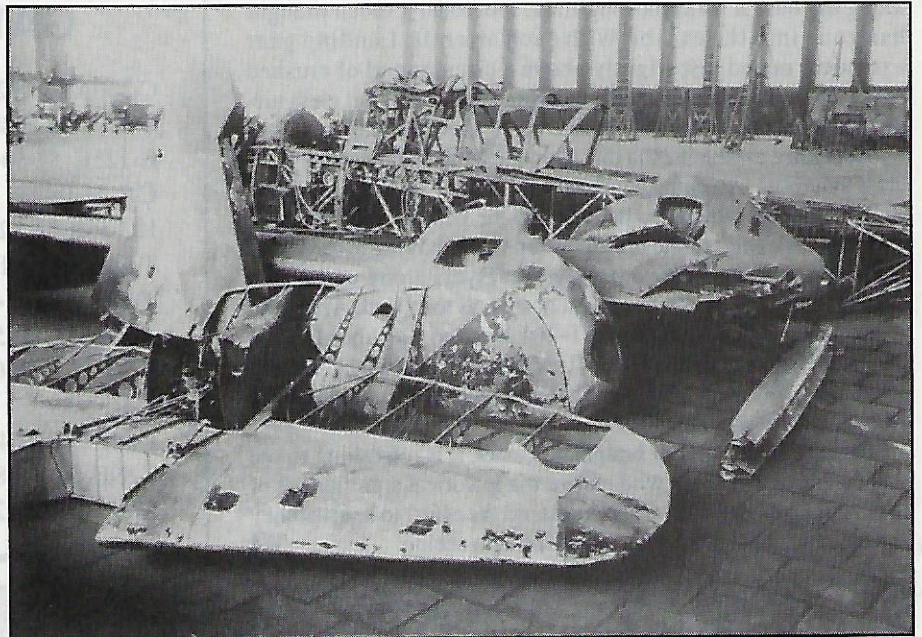
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN P. BAERT

**O**n the night of 17 November 1943, pilot Robin Hooper carried two Belgian secret agents aboard his Royal Air Force Westland Lysander coded "D for Dog." Willy de Quin (alias Sexton) and Rene Dubois (alias Rayon) were assigned to a mission deep in German-occupied territory. The Lysander had left the RAF base at Tangmere in southern England for the night flight to drop off its two passengers in a meadow near Niort, France.

The area that had been chosen by the French Resistance was covered with fog on the night of the mission. In spite of some light *flak*, the Lysander arrived safely over its objective but had to land a bit farther away — near Chatellerault. Hooper put the Lysander down as gently as possible, but the field was soft and the aircraft tires soon became bogged down in mud. After various attempts to free "D for Dog," a decision was made and, against his better wishes, Hooper set fire to his "Lizzie" so that it would not fall into enemy hands.

The next morning, the Germans discovered the smoldering remains of the Lysander and got bogged down in the mud themselves, while villagers watched silently. Hooper hid in several locations and eventually managed to make his way back to England after some harrowing adventures. The two secret agents were able to fulfill their mission and provide needed information for the Allies.

Lysander pilots have many stories such as the one above to relate, because



The remains of the Lysander are received by the Sabena Old Timers during October 1982.

their aircraft made espionage history by either rescuing secret agents or dropping them off in the heart of night-shrouded enemy territory. During November 1939, a Lysander achieved the unique distinction of shooting down a *Luftwaffe* He 111 bomber. In June 1940, while British troops were fighting in France, Lysanders would fly in needed supplies by night for the Brits as they tried to rally their forces against the overwhelming *blitzkrieg*.

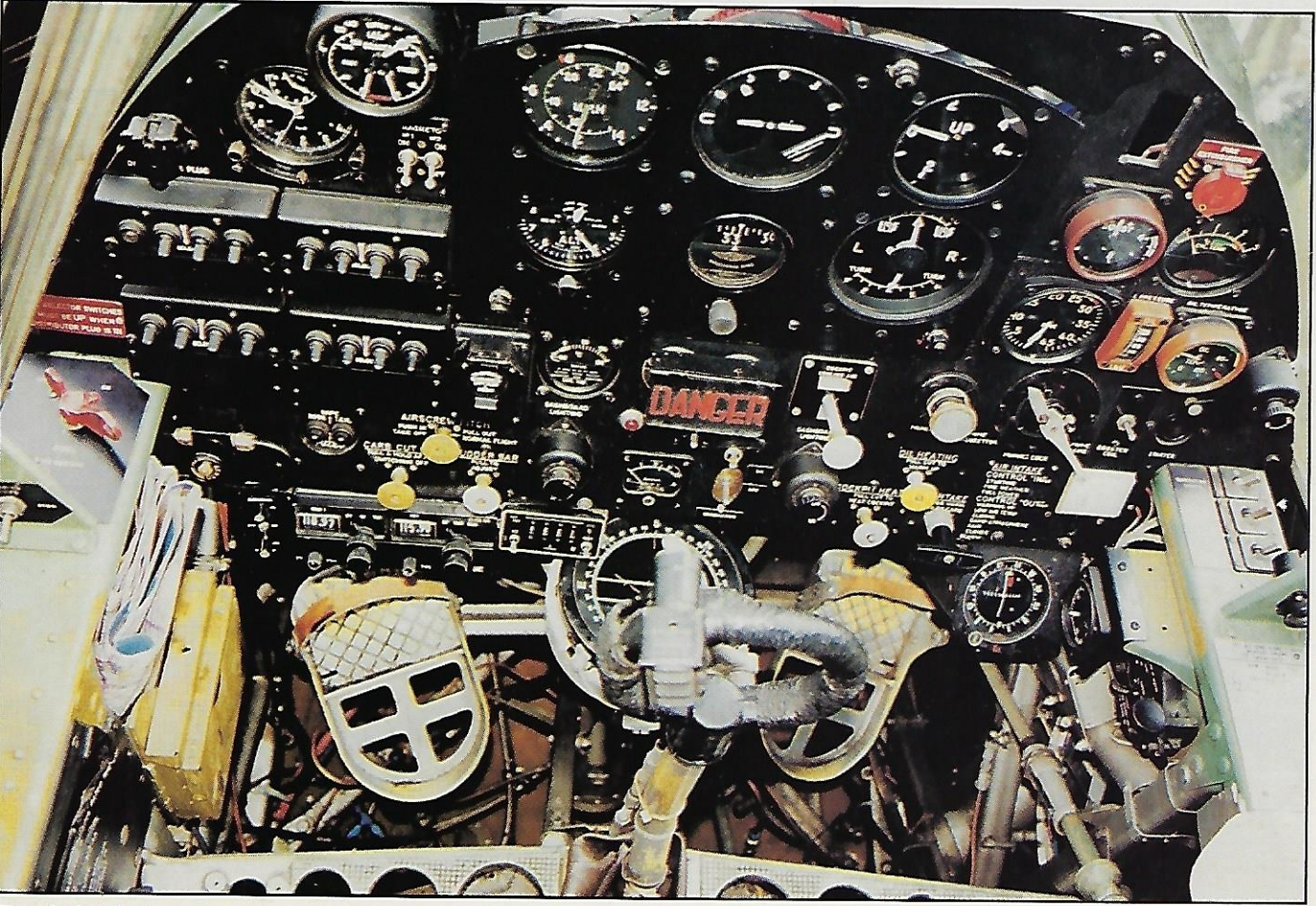
The Lysander was originally designed and built to ensure liaison with ground troops but the plane would change vocations shortly after the Battle of Britain.

The Lysander could take off and land in short distances on unprepared fields. The high wing spanned 50 feet and allowed the Lysander to land at very low speeds. The rotund fuselage could carry up to four people even though it had been designed for just a pilot and navigator-gunner.

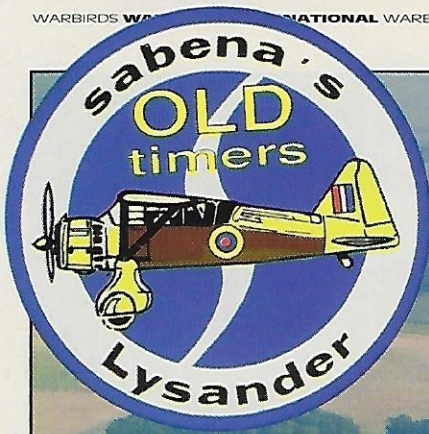
Westland went on to build 1425 Lysanders while a further 225 were built under license in Canada. Canada's National Steel Car Co. built 75 Mk. IIs (c/n 416 to 490) while 150 more were constructed by the Victory Aircraft Co. (c/n 2305 to 2454), the company that also built the Lancaster Mk. X.



The vintage Warbird over St.-Andre-de-l'Eure, Normandy.



The Lizzie's instrument panel. Note the straps on the rudder pedals to keep the pilot's feet firmly in place.



The Lysander's camouflage blends in well with the French countryside.



Airframe of Lysander Mk. III RCAF s/n 2442 beginning to take shape.



Lysander OO-SOT coded MA\*D prepares for takeoff from a French airfield.

## WESTLAND LYSANDER Mk. III SPECIFICATIONS

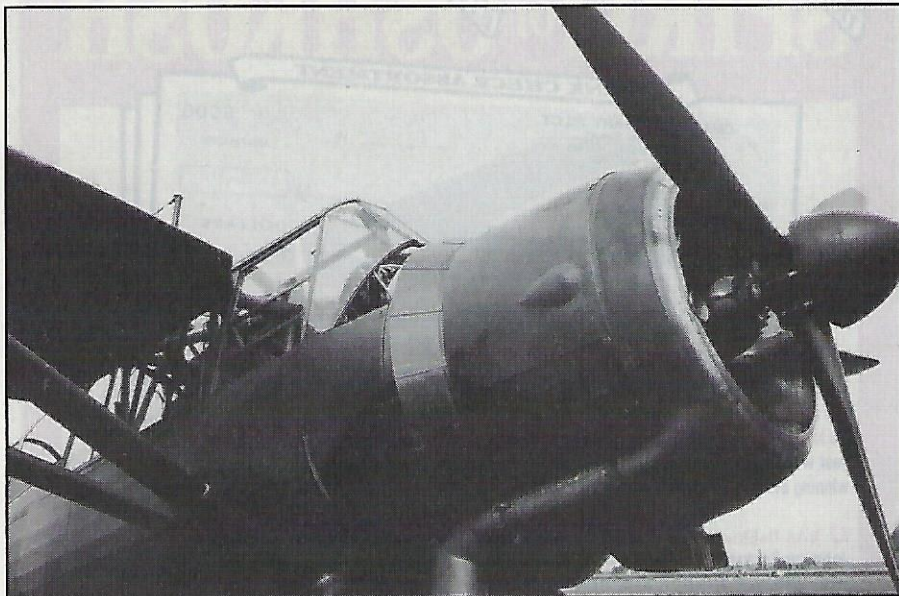
Span	50 ft
Length	30 ft 6 in
Height	11 ft 6 in
Wing Area	260 sq ft
Empty Weight	4263 lb
Loaded Weight	6112 lb
Max Speed	214 mph @ 10,000 ft
Range	Eight hours
Ceiling	26,000 ft
Powerplant	Bristol Mercury XX or XXX of 870 hp

The subject of our article was constructed by Victory during 1942. However, numerous identification plates were found during the restoration and, apparently, components from other Lysanders had been added to the main airframe. For example, an identification plate on the cowling carries the serial 2441, a plate on the landing gear is for aircraft 2360, while a plate in the cockpit identifies the machine as 2442. The restorers found metal panels with remains of yellow and black paint, indicating the craft had been used as a target tug — probably with No. 3 Bomb and Gunnery School at RCAF Portage La Prairie, Manitoba.

The Lysander was fitted with two forward firing .303 machine guns with 500 rounds per weapon while a .303 Lewis or Vickers gun was mounted in the rear cockpit on a swivel mount. The Lysander could also carry two 250-lb bombs under the wing and sixteen 20-lb bombs on an odd appearing rack under the fuselage. By the time the Mk. III arrived, the craft was fitted with extra fuel tanks and a steel ladder permanently fixed to the left side of the fuselage — allowing fast ingress and egress of special agents.

The Westland Lysander prototype, RAF serial K6127, made its first flight from Yeovil, England, on 15 June 1936. The first RAF squadron to equip with the type was No. 16 at Old Sarum. In September 1939, the Lysander went to France with the British Expeditionary Force, flying with Nos. 2, 4, 13, and 26 Squadrons. The Lysander flew with honor throughout the war and, today, approximately 14 airframes survive in various states of repair.

At the end of the war, a farmer in Hartney, Manitoba, purchased a surplus Lizzie for \$150 with the intent of getting the craft airworthy. However, the plane was put in a shed and spent 25 years being



Close-up of the Mercury XX radial. Note the huge exhaust pipes.

so they formed a group named the Sabena Old Timers (SOT).

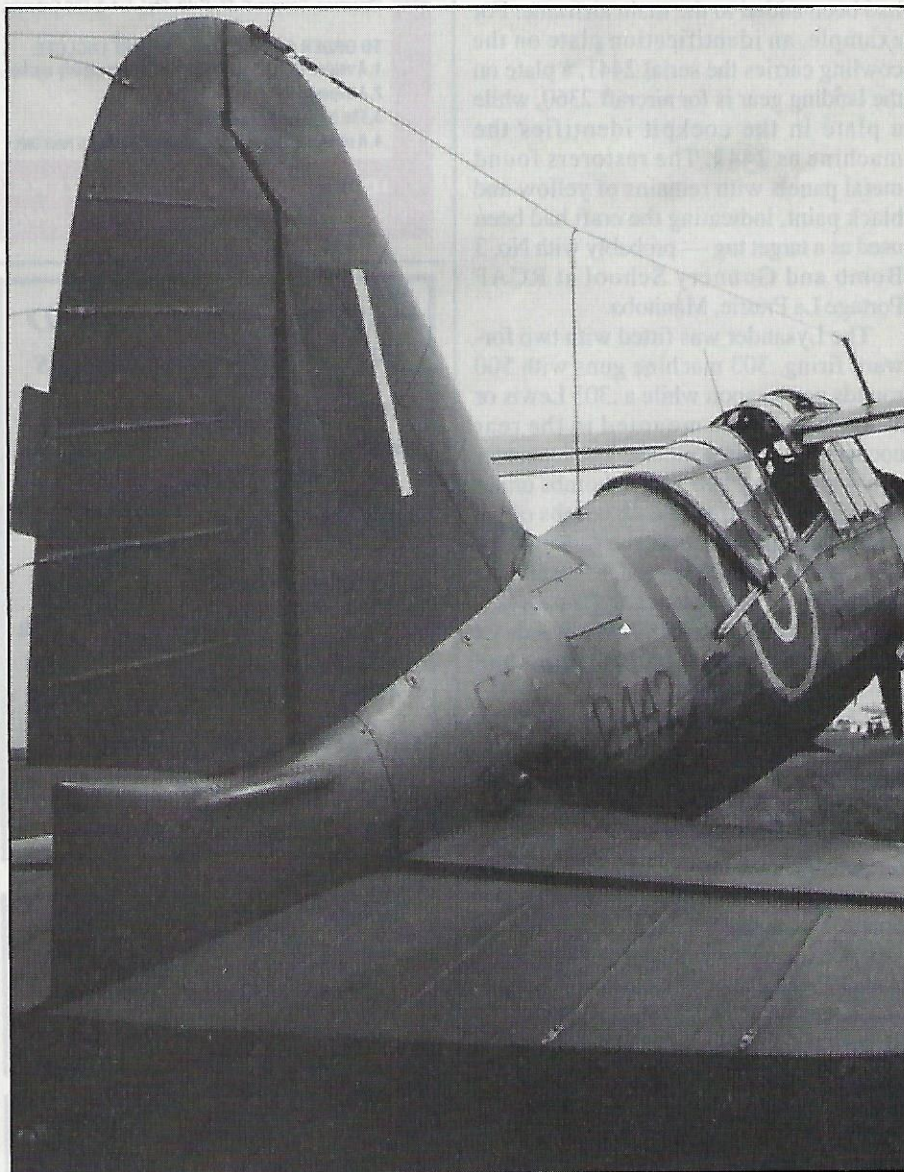
The group decided to restore a vintage aircraft and approached the museum. They were offered the remains of the Lysander! One member stated, "It is not even good for static display!" However, on 24 July 1982, Col. M. Terlinden officially turned over the Lysander to SOT. Sabena donated hangar space and the group began sorting through the pile of pieces to find what was there and what wasn't. The airframe was completely disassembled and in 1983 serious restoration work began. Hundreds of bits and pieces were missing and negotiations began with several different preservation groups including the Canadian Warplane Heritage. With no real funds, all SOT could do was trade but trades were carried out — even as far away as Zaire.



A few SOT members in front of the Lysander's fuselage ladder. Left to right: Pilot Patrick Lamouline, Paul Ryckaerts, Francois Latour, and Andre Van Themsche.

subjected to snow, children, animals, and the vagaries of the Canadian climate. Finally, in 1972, the remains of the Lysander — along with a derelict Bristol Bolingbroke — were traded to the *Musee Royale de l'Armee et d'Histoires Militaires* in Brussels, Belgium, in exchange for some de Havilland Tiger Moths. Due to the poor shape of the Lysander, the airframe was put into storage for nine years.

Due to a changing economy and the addition of new equipment between 1980 and 1982, Sabena Belgian World Airlines was forced into giving a number of employees early retirement. These employees felt that they still had a good many years of aeronautical work in them



The Lysander is a very large craft as can be seen in this view.

