



FLYING THE HUMP

Memories of an Air War

Otha C. Spencer

Yat-sen. Willis R. Peck, the U.S. consul general at Nanking, described the air show in an official memo to the U.S. secretary of state:

The show was a Chinese triumph. Pilots were Chinese cadets, of the military aviation school at Hangchow. They . . . flew like seasoned birdmen. There were slips, to be sure—one element of the pursuit squadron missed its signals and passed the reviewing stand ten minutes late; the star aerobat locked his brakes on landing and came within a hair's breadth of somersaulting; the parachute jumper miscalculated the wind, overflew the field by two miles, but . . . in view of its pioneer character, it was indeed remarkable. . . .

Every participating ship was American made and practically every pilot was American trained. . . . the program was a genuine success.²¹

After Colonel Jouett and his instructors left, China had pilots, but few planes.²² The U.S. Congress was afraid to offer help to China for fear of antagonizing the Japanese.

Sensing the danger that China faced, Madame Chiang continued to be concerned about the sorry state of the Chinese Air Force. Without foreign help, China lacked the technology and the skill to keep her fighters and bombers in the air. Madame Chiang naturally looked to the United States, the country of her youth and her education, for help. She understood the American mind and knew how to manipulate the United States to her advantage.

How Madame Chiang came to be in charge of the Chinese Air Force is a unique story of nepotism. In late 1936, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was taken hostage by Chinese rebels in Sian, in northern China, and was about to be executed. Madame Chiang went to Sian, "ready to die with her husband," according to the ambassador in China. Complex diplomatic maneuvering by China's top civilian leaders and Chinese Communist leaders saved Chiang. He was released, although he suffered for months from injuries received during his imprisonment.²³

Chiang's confidence in his wife was demonstrated while he was still in prison, when he publicly quoted from the thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah: "Jehovah hath created a new thing in the earth: A woman shall encompass [protect] a man."²⁴

Because of his poor health, the generalissimo put his wife in charge of the Chinese Air Force. She promised that she would build an organization capable of an effective defense against the Japanese. Although her military experience was limited, her sincerity was convincing. Thus Madame Chiang Kai-shek became the first woman in charge of a national air force.

In apparent desperation, Madame Chiang hired former U.S. Air Force stunt fliers William C. "Billy" McDonald, John C. "Luke" Williamson, Sebie Smith, and Rolfe Watson to help train pilots. These men recommended Claire Lee Chennault as a person who could put Madame Chiang's air force into shape for war.

Chennault was well known in China. A visiting Chinese delegation had seen his air show in Miami in 1936. Peter Mow, leader of the delegation, was impressed with Chennault's skill and suggested that China could use someone of his talents. However, Chennault, still on active duty with the U.S. Army Air Corps, refused the offer. But the Army retired him for disabilities on 30 April 1937.

Chennault was then invited again to China in May 1937, on a secret mission. His assignment was to find out why the Chinese Air Force was such a failure. Chennault studied the situation and made a frank but negative assessment of the Chinese Air Force. The generalissimo was impressed with his honesty and offered him the job of creating an air force to fight the Japanese. Chennault returned to the United States before making a decision, but then returned to China in July to accept a three-month \$1,000-per-month contract. He stayed for eight years and became one of the most brilliant air defense tacticians of World War II.

Call it fate, coincidence, or just an extreme example of bad timing, but Japanese planes struck the capital city of Peiping in late July while Chennault was there. Acting in this emergency, he rallied Madame Chiang's novice air force. Under his assumed command, the poorly prepared Chinese pilots flew heroic missions, but few came back alive.²⁵

To build an air force, Chennault resorted to desperate measures. He advertised for volunteers to join his "Fourteenth Volunteer Bombardment Squadron." Malcolm Rosholt, author of *Flight in the China Airspace* and a newspaperman in China when these events were taking place, describes Chennault's new air squadron as a loosely organized group of volunteer pilots from all parts of the world. Most of the volunteers were misfits and drifters who left almost as quickly as they came. The Fourteenth was deactivated 22 March 1938.²⁶

The Japanese were too strong and their military momentum was too great. In spite of Chennault's skill and the determination of the Chinese airmen, by October of 1937 the Chinese Air Force was almost completely destroyed. The United States had not yet committed itself to support the Chinese. In desperation, China turned to Russia.²⁷

Concerned that Japan might invade Soviet territory, the Russians

pared fighting the Japanese in Burma to going into the water to fight a shark.

Throughout the operations over the Hump, the jungles of Burma, miles below their aircraft, held a special fear for the airmen. To go down was almost certain death—to try to walk out was almost impossible. The dark, silent jungle was so thickly matted with undergrowth, it was impossible to penetrate except on trails cut by natives. And headhunters lived in these jungles.⁵²

In 1941, as the American volunteer fighter squadrons were being organized, a heavy bombardment group was proposed. With the approval of the president and key cabinet members, a plan was conceived to provide the Chinese with B-17 heavy bombers to attack Japanese strongholds in China. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau informed T. V. Soong, who relayed the information to Chungking. The Chinese then officially requested an additional heavy bombardment group. However, because of Chennault's enthusiasm for fighter aircraft, the heavy bombers were never provided.⁵³

Even with the protection of the AVG, it soon became clear that the Burma Road, with its vulnerability to air attack, was not the answer to the China supply problem. The air bridge across the Himalaya needed to be established quickly. William L. Bond, operations manager for CNAC, decided to check on the feasibility of an air route from Kunming to India. He traveled by train to Myitkyina, Burma, and discussed the possibility of construction of an airport at Myitkyina. He was assured by the British that the airfield would be built if an air route could be established.⁵⁴

There were two ways into China by air. One was across the high peaks from Assam to Kunming, and the other across the lower mountains of northern Burma. The Japanese, moving into Burma, made the lower routes impossible.⁵⁵

Bond, with CNAC pilot Hugh Woods, took a DC-3 to look for a route from the air. Bond and Woods flew up the Irrawaddy Valley to Myitkyina, where Woods selected a site for the airfield the British had promised. They flew northward beyond Fort Hertz, the last British outpost in northwest Burma, climbed to fourteen thousand feet, then swung eastward over the Naga Hills to determine the height of the unexplored terrain. "Without landing," Woods recalled, "I proceeded on to Likiang and Tali mountains to establish their exact position and altitudes as our maps were unreliable . . . there had never been an airplane flown over this part of the world before."

Although he did not know it at the time, Woods had flown the first

trip over what was to become known as the Hump. The flight was on 2 November 1940.⁵⁶ Bond reported: "We know the country is high and [the route] can be flown in weather similar to what we had, but if the weather should be much worse . . . it would be extremely dangerous, costly and very nearly impractical."⁵⁷

On 8 May 1941, operations manager Bond presented a lengthy report to T. V. Soong proposing an air route over the Himalaya Mountains. Bond wrote: "The best air freight route would be from Myitkyina in North Burma to airports . . . in the vicinity of Yunnanyi. . . . There are many difficulties . . . the country between . . . is high and rugged and . . . west and north of this route . . . is even worse."⁵⁸

Bond recognized the hazard of bad weather with winds of forty to seventy miles an hour most of the year. In clear weather, flights could be made at altitudes of twelve to fourteen thousand feet. But to the west and north are peaks more than seventeen thousand feet. However, Bond believed that with proper care and training, flights could be made. Actually, bad weather and the high peaks would become safety factors, as the Japanese planes were not likely to go very far in pursuit of Allied planes over the high peaks in bad weather.⁵⁹

Bond recommended a fleet of thirty-five planes with about fifty-six pilots to form the first supply group. He also recommended the use of Douglas DC-3s because of their dependability, low maintenance requirements, and payload. "It would be a mistaken kindness and the height of inefficiency to send to China any varied and numerous types of planes . . . it would simply doom the entire project."⁶⁰

Bond warned that flight operations in China would be difficult. In addition to extreme weather, uncharted mountains, primitive navigational aids, and practically no ground facilities, the operation would be about twelve thousand miles from the source of most of its supplies, in a country under complete blockade. There would be constant enemy ground raids, and Japanese fighters would attack from the air. But, Bond said with complete optimism, "CNAC has shown after nearly four years of such operations, that it can be done successfully."⁶¹

Much of the early exploratory work of finding routes through the Himalaya Mountains was done by Gen. P. T. Mow and Capt. Moon Chin, CNAC pilots. These determined airmen were flying in areas completely uncharted. Captain Moon tells of flying past unknown peaks that were over 33,000 feet (Mount Everest, the world's highest known mountain, is 29,029 feet): "The tops of the peaks were higher into the clouds."⁶²

During the years of flying the Himalayas, many pilots reported see-