

Memoirs of a Pilot *by Theodore C.P. Chang*

Permission granted by Lena Why for this extract from her father's Memoirs

Early Life

I was born into a middle-class family. Both of my parents returned to China in 1923, after studying in the United States. My father held the rank of major general and served as the Secretary General of War Area Service Corporation (WASC) in charge of four provinces, namely Kiangsi, Chekiang, Hunan, and Fukien.

I grew up fascinated by planes and flying and aspired to be a pilot. When I was ten years old, I had my shirt pocket embroidered with "CAF" (Chinese Air Force), and on my pillow case was the flying eagle of the CAF. I also collected many photos and models of aircraft...

In 1941 my father was transferred from Kiangsi to Kunming which was the headquarters of WASC...While going to school in Kunming, I never forgot my dream of flying and being a pilot. At the time, General Chennault's "Flying Tigers" won a big victory over Kunming. On December 20, 1941, ten mid-size twin-engine Japanese bombers took off from Hanoi in Vietnam and headed all the way to Kunming. Chennault immediately ordered twelve P-40 planes to engage them. The Flying Tigers shot down and damaged all of them. The good news spread around the world...

Within a short period of seven months, the Flying Tigers shot down 296 Japanese bombers and combat aircraft...The Flying Tigers were disbanded in mid-1942 and merged with the 14th Air Force commanded by General Chennault...

Chinese Air Force

In 1943, upon graduation from high school, I could not wait to apply to the Chinese Air Force Academy's 18th class of cadets...I received three months training at Wujaba airfield in Kunming...Upon completion of the three months military training, qualified trainees went to India for flight training. We flew on C-47 transport planes provided by the American Army...Our route from Kunming to India took us over the Hump.

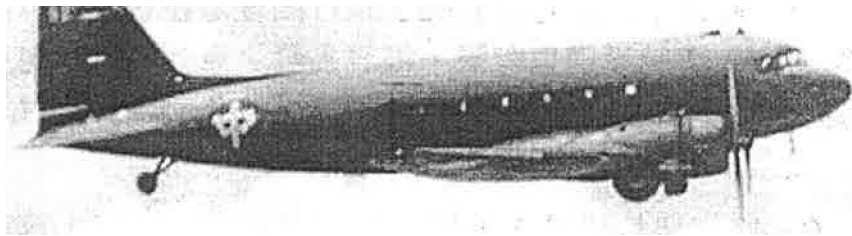
Flight training was given in small groups, with four students and an instructor in each group. It was interesting that when we got on planes for the first time, the instructors told us to take off our heavy boots and put on sneakers and set our feet on each of the rudder pedals to get the feel of flying. Normally after 7 or 8 hours of flight training, we were allowed to fly solo...

Not long after flight training ended, I heard that my father was seriously ill...Of course I wanted to go to him but the Air Force had spent a lot of money training me and would not simply let me go for a visit...This dilemma was solved by a good friend of my father's who was the Director, Air Force Hospital...Director Gong arranged for me to be discharged from the Air Force for medical reasons and I went to be with my father in Kunming. My Air Force career was over as soon as it began.

China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC)

My father's physical condition improved gradually after I returned to China, but I missed flying very much. It happened that CNAC was in great need of copilots and I got an offer easily. I never dreamed that I would be flying for 25 years after that...

All CNAC pilots flew C-47 twin-engine transport aircraft. The cargo route was from Kunming to Dinjan, India and back. A one-way trip took about three hours. We had to fly both day and night as long as the weather permitted. It was extremely dangerous to fly in the winter.



CNAC C-47 Transport Aircraft

C-47 transport planes were usually operated by a three-man team consisting of a pilot, co-pilot, and radio operator. ADF (Automatic Direction Finder) was the only automatic guiding equipment. However, the equipment

did not work in stormy or snow weather. The higher we flew, the stronger the wind. At the time, we did not know much about the jet stream and we relied on VFR (Visual flying Regulations) when the weather was good.

Not even six months after I joined CNAC, the Chinese Air Force protested to them that the Air Force spent too much money and time training pilots, many of whom went to work for CNAC...As a result, several new employees at CNAC, including me, were asked to leave our current positions and not come back unless we had special permission from the Air Force.

As for me, I again had to use my father's contacts. My father was a close friend with the commander-in-chief of the Air Force General Chow Chih Reo. He issued a certificate for me stating that I had completed my obligation in the Air Force...So I was reinstated to my position at CNAC.

During three years of flying, I flew more than 300 trips. Although every mission was difficult, I was eager to go. Maybe I was too young to be scared. It is said that at the time there was a plane taking off from Kunming every eleven minutes.

In 1947, CNAC hired a new Chief Pilot, and there were some changes in staffing. Some American pilots and Chinese pilots were let go and I was one of them.

Civil Air Transport (CAT)

Civil War Duty

After being let go, a number of us, myself included joined Claire Chennault's China National Relief and Rehabilitation (CNRRA) Air Transport (later renamed Civil Air Transport)...

When I applied for this job, the Chief Pilot Frank Hughes asked me about my flying experience and the types of planes I had flown. I told them I had more than 1,000 hours of C-47 and C-46 flying experience. I was exactly what they were looking for. He immediately asked me to fly a round trip to Peiping the next morning as a "Check-ride." All things went well and I was hired.



CNRRA Air Transport C-47

In 1948 our mission was to transport cotton yarn from Tsingtao to Taiyuan. There were cotton mills, iron and steel plants in Taiyuan. Things went smoothly in the beginning and we took off and landed quite a few times each day. Gradually, the communist army entered the suburbs of Taiyuan and they fired their anti-aircraft guns regularly. We could not land at Taiyuan Airport anymore and had to resort to air drop supplies. Our average flying altitude was 8,000 feet above the range of their anti-aircraft artillery. Nonetheless, each time a shell exploded close to my plane, the wings would wobble which to say the least was nerve wracking.

We also participated in the Hsupang air drop resupply mission. We also evacuated 100,000 refugees from Mukden and transported numerous relief materials, weapons, grain, etc. Although Chennault's company was newly established, it made important contributions to the government.

On October 23, 1949, I flew from Tsingtao to Mukden. It was a sunny day. As I got close to Port Arthur two Soviet Union fighter planes dove toward my aircraft. It was a harrowing incident, since we had no idea what they would do to us. Luckily they did not fire at us. I took out my camera and took several pictures of the fighter planes and asked the radio operator to send a message to headquarters in Shanghai about the incident. We soon received instructions to fly back to Shanghai after landing in Mukden. I guessed since Port Arthur was a Russian naval base, they might have thought that we were spying on them. When we landed in Shanghai, all the managers were waiting for us and they took the film to be developed.

It turned out that the photos were very clear. Next morning both the Chinese and English newspapers published them...The Chinese government also used these photos during the negotiations with the Soviet Union protesting against fighter planes attacking civilian airlines.

On November 9, 1949 when the business of CNAC, CATC (Central Aircraft Transport Company), and CAT in Hong Kong was plummeting, some of the pilots from CNAC and CATC flew 12 planes including C-47s, C-46s, and one Convair 440 aircraft to Peiping to defect to the communist party. We called this event "A betrayal," As a result, CAT became the only civilian airline recognized by the Nationalist government...Chennault was able to take possession of the 71 planes at Hong Kong, planes that originally belonged to CNAC and CATC....

CAT was a cover for the CIA in collecting intelligence information in Asia...We also flew to mainland China to drop intelligence personnel and supplies. We used to take off in the evening from Taoyuan Air Base....We usually entered mainland China by flying low along the surface of the sea and then climbed up 8,000 feet. At the time, the communist army did not have high-altitude anti-aircraft guns or fighter planes. Therefore, we were relatively safe. Chinese pilots were paid a bonus of \$40 for each trip. I am not sure how much American pilots were paid. Gradually, the communist army acquired fighter planes and high altitude anti-aircraft guns, so we stopped flying into the mainland...

In 1955 CAT promoted the first Chinese co-pilot, Benguee Lin to be a pilot. Benguee Lin was an excellent pilot. He graduated from the 24th class of the Chinese Air Force Academy. His late father had been a general in the Air Force. His wife was the goddaughter of Tiger Wang, the commander-in-chief of the Air Force...He was responsible for flying around-the-island of Taiwan...Unfortunately, on June 20th, 1964, the plane he flew, a C-46, flight #908, descended rapidly shortly after taking off from Shuinan Airport at Taichung. The plane crashed near Sanjiao Village and caught fire. All passengers and crew died.

Investigation of the crash brought out unexpected findings. It involved lead investigators to look closer at two Chinese naval officers' involvement with the crash. One of the two officers was a lieutenant, who

was on a 24 hour leave. He had no luggage with him but he was carrying two thick textbooks on the subject of radar.

After the accident, officers from both the Chinese Air Force and the American Air Force came to the crash site to collect evidence. First, they found two empty textbook binders which had a compartment to hide a hand gun...The investigation's findings indicated that that after the plane took off, the two Chinese naval officers entered the cockpit, held the guns on the pilots, forcing them to reroute the plane to mainland China. The pilot and co-pilot resisted and fought violently with the hijackers (naval officers). Both the pilot and co-pilot were killed during the struggle and subsequently, the plane crashed and caught fire. They were excellent pilots, loyal, and good friends of mine.

Korean War

During the Korean War CAT needed a few Chinese pilots stationed at Japan's Tachikawa U.S. Air Force Base. Eight of us volunteered to be stationed there. At that time airport facilities and radar navigation equipment at the base were not complete, so it was difficult to fly during the winter...Once on a snowy day, our flight was carrying some military family members. Before taking off, the plane was already covered with thick snow, which would significantly affect take off. As copilot I suggested that we call for the deicing truck. The pilot disagreed. I was bold enough to insist, and after some argument he reluctantly called for the deicing truck. Even today, whenever he sees me at the reunion parties, he will thank me for my good advice referring to that flight.

Shortly after the Korean War was over, we eight Chinese pilots at Tachikawa Air Force Base moved our families to Japan. When my wife and my three children first arrived in Japan, my youngest son was still in her arms...It was most difficult for our wives since they did not speak any Japanese...Twenty years later upon leaving Japan all of them had become quire fluent in Japanese.

We flew scheduled passenger and cargo fights. We flew to almost every airport in Japan and south Korea. We also flew to Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Saipan, Guam and etc.

During the years from 1950 to 1960. We were assigned a regularly scheduled flight with a serial number FLT-22. This mission required three pilots at the beginning and I was one of them. As a result, I flew almost every day. We usually took off at 7:00 a.m. and would not be back until 7:00 p.m. If the pilot happened to be one of my buddies, he would let me pilot the plane...

All eight Chinese pilots stationed at Tachikawa base lived somewhere between Tokyo and Tachikawa and we often got together. On those occasions our wives would make Chinese dumplings and Za Jiang noodles with meat sauce. Through the years, our kids got along well and we became a big family. After a few drinks we always started to talk about our flying experiences. For instance, in windy and snowy weather, we co-pilots needed to climb up on the wing of the plane to check if the fuel quantity matched what was indicated on our instrument gauges. Occasionally, we would slip down off the wing. We learned how to handle this situation gradually. Whenever we slipped, we would sit down and slide along the wing and drop 10 feet to the ground.

Vietnam and Laos War

November 30th, 1960 was a memorable day. That morning all the C-46 planes at Tachikawa were ordered to fly to Bangkok, Thailand. The day before taking off we were instructed not to bring our uniforms with us. Instead, we were to bring enough summer clothes for a couple of months...

Contracted to the CIA, we were based in Vientiane, Laos to transport soldiers, weapons and rice throughout Laos...

Vientiane was extremely hot and the living conditions were poor. 10 people were crammed into one bedroom with only one bathroom available to all of us...There were no paved runways at the airports. In addition there was blowing dust caused by planes taking off and landing almost constantly and also occasional sand storms natural to that locale. We heard the American pilots had better living conditions but we all had to suffer the dust, sand and heat.

Every flying mission took about two hours. But when we got back we needed to reload supplies immediately and do some air drops with no time for lunch...

Sometime later, the company recruited a batch of pilots from the States who took over the missions in Vietnam. As a result, we were transferred back to Tachikawa and resumed our normal lives.

Mandarin Jet Experience

In 1965 we learned that all the Chinese pilots were to be transferred to Vietnam to help with the war effort, and Tachikawa was to become a base for American pilots only...The transfers included two positions for the first 4-engine jet to fly in the Far East, the Mandarin Jet, a Convair 880. It was to be the first commercial flagship jet which carried only passengers and would be based in Taipei, Taiwan.

The body of the plane was painted a golden color and further distinguished by dragons on each side of the nose. Its interior was as plush as a palace. The stewardesses wore black traditional cheongsams. All in all it was a unique plane especially in those days. It was the jewel of aviation in the Far East and greatly admired where ever it flew...



When given the opportunity to become a pilot for the “Mandarin Jet,” I immediately accepted the position.



Author in front of Convair 880

Six American pilots and seven Chinese copilots were designated to fly on the Mandarin Jet. Since we seven were trained as flight engineers as well as copilots we filled that position from time to time in order to help the company cut costs...

The Mandarin Jet spent more time in the air than on the ground. It flew around the clock stopping only for one or two hours at each stop. Fortunately, I was assigned a schedule that allowed me to spend Monday night at home in Tokyo. We would fly out of Taipei with stops in Okinawa and Osaka before landing in Tokyo. The next morning I would be off again in the Mandarin Jet toward Taipei.

In 1968, the company sold the 4-engine Mandarin Jet to Cathay Pacific in Hong Kong. Then the company bought four Boeing 727 three-engine jets. Three jets were for Air America and one for Civil Air Transport. The one belonging to CAT was decorated in the same golden color and with dragons on its nose. It was named the Mandarin Jet as well...During the transition period, we flew the normal schedule with a

Convair 880 and simultaneously took classes to prepare for flight training on the Boeing 727.

On January 10, 1968, the company handed the Convair 880 over to Cathay Pacific Airlines in Hong Kong...Unfortunately on the evening of February 16th 1968, the Mandarin Jet crashed at Linkao, Taipei. Earlier that evening the chief pilot, another copilot, and I flew from Taipei to Hong Kong, all systems were working well at that time. Our company deputy chief of operations was coming back from a company vacation with his wife. He suggested to the chief pilot that he would like to fly the plane back to Taipei. He did have a license and he out ranked the chief pilot even though he did not have enough experience handling B-727. The chief pilot should have either allowed him to take the copilot's or pilot's seat while he himself took the alternate seat. Either way, the chief pilot would have been in a position to immediately take control of the plane should there be a problem. But he was over confident in the deputy director's flying skills and he sat behind him and started to pay more attention to my flight engineer's duties which he was more interested in learning.

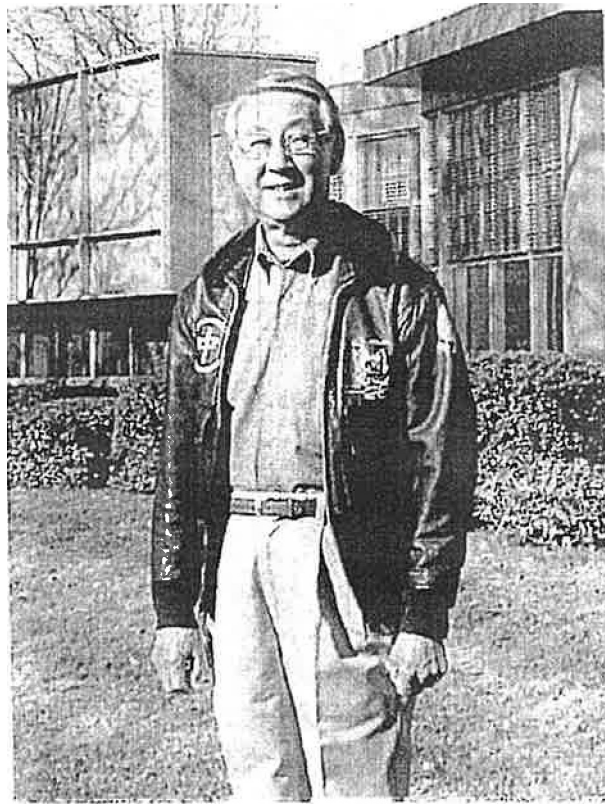
All went well until we began to approach Taipei. The weather report alerted us to the fact that it was drizzling at Songsan Airport. The clouds were very low and visibility was extremely poor. We would be forced to making an instrument approach. As we flew above Linkao, the chief pilot saw that the MDA (Minimum Decision Altitude) light was flashing red. He yelled, "We are too low, accelerate!" But a jet takes several seconds to respond to acceleration...Our landing gear was deployed and suddenly we felt the tug as it crashed through the roof of a house...and the next moment the plane smashed on to the earth in a sickening belly dive. The impact of the crash was so horrific, it fractured the plane's body into three parts. Flames erupted immediately.

Sadly, of the fifty passengers aboard, twenty-one of them were killed...Of the four of us in the cabin, I was the least injured. I was cut badly under my right eye when my head smacked into the instrument panel...

Of course, the crash of the Mandarin jet was huge news. All the newspapers in Taipei featured stories about the accident for days. The Taiwan Civil Aviation Administration sued the pilots for negligence of duty...The Chinese licenses of the two American pilots were revoked. All

four of us were not allowed to leave Taiwan...I networked a little and finally was able to leave Taiwan. My return to Japan marked the beginning of a new adventure and new challenges as I gathered my family and moved to America.

On Father's day of 1996, my wife presented me with a very special and expensive gift. For \$700.00 an hour I flew along with a US Air Force fighter pilot, aboard a French combat trainer plane provided by Air Combat USA. Just sitting in the cockpit was a thrill after not flying for 25 years. This would not be a real mission but it would involve real flying maneuvers for we were to intercept and "shoot down" another combat trainer plane...It was as close to a real "dog fight" as it could be without the threat of death. This was the last time I flew an aircraft.



**Author in Flight Jacket with Hump Badge,
Insignia of CNAC and CAT, and
Air America Flying Badge**

Editor's Note: C.P. Chang and his family moved to the States in 1969 and eventually settled in San Leandro, CA. He enjoyed his get-togethers with his flying buddies for a meal and conversation around flying days. Also, he was hooked on the 49ers and had a big collection of 49er memorabilia.. He is survived by a daughter - Lena Why, sons - Frank and William Chang, two granddaughters - four grandsons, six great grandchildren.