

John Richard “Dick” Rossi: CAT’s First C-46 Captain

(April 19, 1915 – April 17, 2008) *by Lydia Rossi*

All I can say is: “Joe Rosbert -- thank you and thank you over again” for your “*The Pictorial History of Civil Air Transport.*” In writing this article, I knew Dick only worked for CAT for a very short period of time. I knew no details, other than it was to help Gen. Chennault during a critical period of need. I was most surprised to learn that Joe Rosbert’s *Pictorial History* actually included a write-up by Dick on his role in CAT’s early history. For me, this write-up is a treasure, which I will recount here.

In the second half of 1946, Dick received an urgent call from Gen. Chennault asking him to leave immediately for Honolulu – 17 surplus C-46s had been located at Wheeler Field on Oahu. Arrangements were made for their purchase, along with spare parts, supplies, and other essential supplies to keep them flying. Chennault had been approved to operate an airline, CNRRA (China National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) Air Transport, to distribute UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation) relief supplies in China. “Get there as soon as you can,” The General instructed. “And, spend as much money as you can as fast as you can!”

Towards the end of February 1947, three planes were ready for flight and took off on the long trip across the Pacific to the Far East. The first CAT C-46 arrived in Shanghai on March 2, 1947, with Dick Rossi as Captain, accompanied by Joe Rosbert and Bob Conrath!

Dick Rossi and Joe Rosbert both were in the American Volunteer Group (AVG) – the Flying Tigers under Gen. Chennault, and both flew for CNAC (China National Aviation Corporation) after the AVG days. To promptly respond to Gen. Chennault’s request to get those C-46s probably was a natural response, but it was not without complications: (1) Dick had to tell the General that he had just been hired by Moon Chin, head of CATC (Central Air Transport Corporation), the second largest airline in China behind CNAC; (2) at the time he was the Operations Officer and Chief Pilot for GCAC (Great China Aviation Corporation). Thus, Dick arranged with Moon Chin to delay

his employment with CATC. Dick also resigned from GCAC while GCAC was having problems with airline certification and landing rights. That situation, however, turned out to benefit CAT, because Dick got the General's promise to hire four military pilots hired by GCAC: Weldon Bigony, Bill Hobbs, Lew Burrridge, and Var Green – and that's how CAT got those pilots.

Reflecting on the above, we can safely say that Dick Rossi probably set a record of working for airlines in China -- CNAC, GCAC, CAT, and CATC.

John Richard "Dick" Rossi was born on April 19, 1915, in Placeville, California. Schooled in San Francisco, he attended the University of California at Berkeley. He entered the Navy for flight training in the fall of 1939. Upon receiving his wings and commission in 1940, he was assigned as a Flight Instructor at Pensacola, Florida.

Dick resigned his Navy commission in 1941 to join the AVG under the command of Claire Chennault. He arrived in Rangoon on November 12, 1941, and underwent a training program in P-40 aircraft in Toungoo, Burma. He was a member of the AVG's First Pursuit Squadron. He engaged in his first combat over Burma in January 1942. He attained Ace status with a confirmed 6-1/4 victories in air-to-air combat.



When the AVG was disbanded in 1942, Dick joined CNAC, flying supplies from India to China. By the time the war was over, he had flown 735 trips across the Hump.



CNAC C-46 in Tihwa, Gobi Desert, Dick Rossi with Chinese Pilots, December 1947

After the war, as a founder of the Flying Tiger Airline, Dick returned to California, where he flew as a captain for 25 years, logging a lifetime of over 25,000 flying hours. He served as president of the AVG – Flying Tigers Association for sixty years and is a member of the American Fighter Aces Association.