

The Story Arc of H. Moon Chen

by Bill Chen

Introduction

My father, H. Moon Chen, better known as Moon Chen, led a colorful and interesting life – he was an aeronautical engineer, commercial airline and military pilot, and airline and aircraft company executive.

Regrettably, I did not spend more time with him in his later years, just listening and hearing more about his life experiences. He did relate to me several interesting incidents and occurrences which I will recount as vignettes, not necessarily in chronological order, but more befitting the sequence of my coverage of his life. Deviating from the norm, I use Moon Chen in covering the professional side, and “my father” when covering the family and personal side. Aside from being a profile on Moon Chen, this article includes some CAT-related family tales and accounts.

As I was growing up, I gradually gained more knowledge and insights on CAT. After my U.S. Army tour in Laos, when I told my father that I had relied heavily on Air America and also used Southern Air Transport -- his response was a smug smile, conveying that – yes, he knew those organizations, their origins, and ownership. He then clarified the relationships of Civil Air Transport Company Limited, Southern Air Transport, Air America, Air Asia Company Limited, and the Pacific Corporation.

Story Arc

Following the approach of “bottom line” upfront, I start with Moon Chen’s story arc, which begins with him receiving a bachelor’s degree in aeronautical engineering in 1932 – in the middle of the Depression -- finding himself not *hireable* as an aeronautical engineer because of the Depression and because aircraft companies were not hiring Orientals, even though he was American-born. But he had a passion for aviation and saved enough money to take flying lessons.

Armed with his commercial pilot’s license, he then went to China in 1936 without an employment contract and got hired to fly for CNAC, China National Aviation Corporation. In 1939, as CNAC aircraft became scarce and

flying opportunities were reduced as a result of the Second Sino-Japanese War, he joined Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company (CAMCO), headed by William Pawley, the Curtiss-Wright Corporation representative in China. CAMCO supported Claire Chennault's American Volunteer Group (AVG) and became the company of record for the AVG pilots and ground crew.

After Pearl Harbor, Moon joined the U.S. Army Air Forces as a lieutenant. Assigned to the 14th Air Force, commanded by Gen. Claire Chennault, he flew the Hump and later was the 14th Air Force's liaison officer to the Chinese Air Force in Chungking.

Post-World War II, he continued working for Gen. Chennault in the airline co-founded by Gen. Chennault and Whiting Willauer -- Civil Air Transport (CAT). Moon left CAT shortly after Gen. Chennault passed away in 1958. Later, he teamed up with Tex Hill, a Flying Tiger ace, as a consultant to Northrop Corporation to help Northrop win the F-5E fighter Republic of China Air Force co-production contract.

Where Moon's story arc started by not being *hireable* by an aircraft company, his story arc was completed when Northrop hired him to be the program director for the F-5E fighter co-production program to establish the first jet aircraft manufacturing in the Far East -- he had come in demand based on his experiences as a commercial and military pilot and his customer relations and management skills as an airline executive.

Early Life and Military Service

My father was born in Columbus, Ohio, on June 19, 1908. Orphaned at age 15, he worked his way through high school and college. He graduated from the University of Michigan in 1932 with a bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering. He attributed three major impacts on his career: (1) his Michigan education; (2) obtaining a pilot's license; and (3) working for Gen. Chennault in World War II and later in CAT.

Moon Chen viewed his Michigan education as beneficial and significant, not so much for the academics but for meeting and learning from his classmates. His learning to fly and obtaining a pilot's license gave him a skill that others did not have and bolstered his confidence during the dark days of the Depression. He attributed his work for Gen. Chennault in the 14th Air

Force and CAT as having a significant impact on his career because of the leadership opportunities given to him.

The 14th Air Force liaison officer to the Chinese Air Force was normally a colonel's position. Because the incumbent colonel did not have a good relationship with the Chinese Air Force leadership, Gen. Chennault selected Moon to replace that colonel, even though he was only a lieutenant, later promoted to captain. Moon expanded his role as liaison officer, not just to the Chinese Air Force, but as the 14th Air Force representative to Chinese government officials and the American Embassy at Chungking. He later served as an Assistant A-4 (logistics) in the 14th Air Force's Chinese American Composite Wing and with Headquarters, U.S. Forces, China. Little did he know that the Chinese and American contemporaries and his wartime relationships developed would serve him well in his post-World War II life working for CAT.



Lt. Moon Chen

Civil Air Transport

Returning to the U.S. in early 1946 upon his discharge from the U.S. Army Air Forces, Moon Chen already knew that he would relocate to Shanghai to join the airline to be co-founded by Gen. Chennault and Whiting Willauer. At the time, my mother, Priscilla, my older brother Bob, and I were living in New York City, so we traveled cross-country to San Francisco to catch an American President Lines ship to Shanghai, arriving in Shanghai in the late summer of 1946. Moon Chen joined CAT in November 1946. Our family grew by one in January 1947 with the birth of my younger brother, Moon, Jr.

We had a nice, modern apartment in Shanghai. Our two years in Shanghai, 1946-1948, went by fast. As an eight-year-old, I remember Gen. Chennault and Anna Chan came for dinner before they were married. After dinner, Gen. Chennault asked for a deck of cards and entertained us with card-throwing into his hat. 48 out of 52 made it into the hat. Many years later, when I mentioned this to Cynthia Chennault, she said that she and her sister, Claire Ann, grew up trained in tossing cards. Shortly after the dinner in Shanghai, Gen. Chennault sent my father to Canton to plan for CAT's relocation to Canton, as the Communists approached Shanghai from the north. My father did not return to Shanghai from that trip to Canton.

The situation had worsened to the point that my father sent word to my mother to pack us up and get on the next CAT flight to Canton. We had to give up all the nice furnishings in the apartment, and we left our new car with our chauffeur after he delivered us to the airport. I remember well the CAT C-46 we flew on to Canton – sitting in bucket seats on the side of the aircraft with the center aisle crammed with cargo on pallets.

We were not the only CAT family who relocated to Canton. In Canton, the Willauer children were with Bob and me in a one-room, all-grade American school at Lingnan University. CAT arranged for a vehicle to transport us to school. Sally Willauer was the oldest, and she had the thankless job of shepherding us to catch the vehicle as we lingered to play at school.

I remember one day, CAT hosted a family day at the Canton airport and offered rides on a CAT Cessna aircraft. Captain Harry Cockrell took Bob and me on a memorable and thrilling first ride in a single-engine plane.

Another happy memory when we were in Canton was receiving a puppy from a litter sired by Joe, Gen. Chennault's dachshund. We named her Josie, short for Josephine. We took her with us when we had to evacuate from Canton in 1949 to Hong Kong, again on a CAT cargo C-46.

Dachshund stories abound within CAT. Some with the same names. With the loss of China's mainland and as the situation in Hong Kong was uncertain, my father thought that my mother and we boys should relocate to the States for schooling. We needed to give Josie away. My father arranged for Josie to be given to the Bigonys, and I remember Capt. Weldon Bigony took Josie away on a leash. Bob was in tears. I was less emotional. Years

later, I learned that the Cockrells also had a dachshund named Josie. Since Joe sired so many litters, there probably were many Josies around.

After my mother, brothers, and I moved to Washington, D.C., Moon Chen remained in Hong Kong for a while and was then reassigned to Tokyo.

An interesting tale of his was babysitting a \$1.25 million check written out for Pan American World Airways (PAA). In November 1949, 12 CNAC and CATC aircraft with their managing directors defected to Peking. Meanwhile, there were 71 CNAC and CATC aircraft at Hong Kong Kai Tak Airport. Gen. Chennault and Whiting Willauer were concerned that if these 71 aircraft got into the hands of the Communists, they could be used to drop paratroopers over Taiwan. The only way to prevent this was to acquire these 71 aircraft and have them under the U.S. registry. Whiting Willauer wrote a promissory note to acquire the aircraft, but the control of the aircraft became a big, extended legal battle involving the UK government, since Hong Kong was under British rule. And, the UK government was one of the first countries to recognize Red China. PAA owned 20% of CNAC. No purchase of CNAC could occur without PAA selling its portion of CNAC.

Although Moon worked for CAT, the Ministry of Communications asked Moon to participate in the negotiations between CNAC and the Ministry. Once there was an agreement on the sale, the Ministry then asked Moon to hand-deliver a check of 1.25 million dollars to PAA in Hong Kong. All of this could have been very routine, except his flight to Hong Kong was diverted to Hainan because of a typhoon. Moon's blood pressure skyrocketed as he had to babysit the check for three days until the weather cleared to continue to Hong Kong. William M. Leary's **Perilous Missions** talks about the settlement amount agreed to by T.V. Soong, the higher-level authority in New York. No mention of Moon Chen's high heart-beating experiences.

In the summer of 1951, after completing my sixth and seventh grades in Washington, D.C., my mother, brothers, and I rejoined my father in Tokyo – it was the period of the U.S. occupation of Japan, and there were plenty of U.S. occupational forces in Japan, meaning there were also schools for dependents.

In August 1951, Collier's magazine published its article entitled: "World's Most Shot-at Air Line." I read that article as an 11-year-old. While

we had evacuated from Shanghai and Canton to evade the Communists, I was not aware of CAT aircraft being harassed by Soviet fighters or details of CAT's airlift and airdrop missions to besieged cities, as written in the article. The article was an eye-opener for me to learn about CAT's hazardous operations, courageous pilots, and the leadership of Gen. Chennault and Whiting Willauer. I had also accompanied my father to Tachikawa Air Force Base numerous times and learned of CAT's airlift support provided to the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War.



**Lew Burridge and aide Moon Chen
(Collier's magazine)**

I attended the eighth grade at the Tokyo American School and stayed on for the ninth and tenth grades there when the name of the school changed to the American School in Japan. For the ninth and tenth grades, my brother and I were by ourselves in Tokyo, as my father had been reassigned in 1952 to become the Director of Traffic and Sales at the CAT headquarters in Taipei. We did not accompany our parents and younger brother to Taipei because the Taipei American School did not yet have a high school program.

The Korean War was good for CAT in terms of the utilization of aircraft and bringing in revenue from the airlift operations, which enabled the build-up of CAT's commercial operations with the establishment of passenger routes linking Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei, Hong Kong, Manila, and Bangkok. Moon Chen's management focus in CAT was on commercial operations, i.e., sales and service.



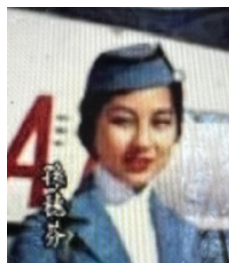
**Dr. Wang Wen-san with Moon Chen, 1947
1952**



CAT's DC-4 Inaugural Flight,

Interestingly, in a book written in Chinese by Anna Chennault, she listed attributes of various CAT employees. Her words on Moon Chen were: 最努力發展業務的是陳熊文.. (改進空中服務, 除用空中少爺外再添用空中小姐) -- translated as -- “The person who works the hardest to develop the business is Moon Chen (Improvement in-flight services by adding stewardesses in addition to stewards).”

In the summer of 1955, I had just finished my junior year of prep school in New York and was visiting my parents in Taipei. One Sunday afternoon, this young, pretty 17-year-old girl came to our house to meet with my father. I was naturally curious and asked my mother who she was. She said – oh, that’s Nora Sun, granddaughter of Sun Yat-sen – she came to meet with Dad before her official CAT interview. Nora Sun would go on to be CAT’s youngest stewardess, and she later married Capt. Connie Seigrist.



Nora Sun

In his meeting with Nora Sun, Moon Chen told her that on July 7, 1937, he flew over the Marco Polo Bridge outside of Peking and radioed in the Japanese Army attack that started the Second Sino-Japanese War. He was flying the CNAC Shanghai to Peking route and landed at the Peking airport. He then delivered the mail to the Peking Post Office. By the time he wanted to head back to the airport, the Japanese had set up roadblocks. The postmaster put him in the back of a mail truck and loaded the truck with mailbags. At roadblocks to the airport, the Japanese troops would stab their bayonets into the mailbags. Fortunately, he was hidden in the back of the truck, surrounded by mailbags. Once he got to the airport, he rounded up his crew and took off. As he was taxiing down the runway to take off, Japanese troops in a truck were firing at the aircraft. The aircraft successfully took off and returned to Shanghai. Later, when the Chinese minister overseeing aviation heard about this pilot saving the CNAC aircraft, he summoned my father to Nanking to express his thanks and gratitude. That minister was Nora Sun's father, Sun Fo.

Gen. Chennault passed away on July 27, 1958. It was fortuitous that Madame Chiang Kai-shek was able to see Gen. Chennault at his New Orleans hospital before he passed away and also attend his funeral at Arlington Cemetery. Now, how did that happen? Madame Chiang Kai-shek was already in the U.S. to receive an honorary degree from the University of Michigan on July 10, 1958. And, it was Moon Chen, a Michigan 1932 alumnus, who helped facilitate Michigan's granting of the honorary degree to Madame Chiang Kai-shek. When Madame Chiang heard of Gen. Chennault's condition, she immediately went to see Gen. Chennault in New Orleans.

Moon and Priscilla Chen were at Gen. Chennault's memorial service and burial, along with other Flying Tigers and 14th Air Force veterans. Also in attendance was Whiting Willauer and the Chinese Ambassador to the United States, the Honorable Hollington Tong, whom Moon Chen got to know during World War II when Hollington Tong was the vice minister of information in Chungking. Hollington Tong knew CAT well, as his son, CAT co-pilot Eddie S.L. Tong, was killed in northeastern Laos in November 1960.

My father shared with me an interesting story concerning Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek. Flying VIPs within the China-Burma-India theater, Moon Chen once had Generalissimo and Madame Chiang as passengers. While in flight, he saw a Japanese fighter approaching. He

immediately put his aircraft into an evasive dive and stayed at a low altitude before returning to normal altitude. Moon's VIP passengers arrived at their destination, a bit shaken, but without any tragic consequences.

Northrop Corporation

In late 1958 or early 1959, Moon Chen left CAT. He remained in Taipei and formed his own import-export company. However, he soon realized that his passion was still in the field of aviation. In 1970, he joined Flying Tiger ace Tex Hill as a consultant to Northrop Corporation in bidding for the coproduction contract to produce one hundred F-5E second-generation supersonic fighter aircraft for the Republic of China Air Force. Northrop later selected Moon to become its program director for the coproduction program.

University of Michigan

Where Moon Chen repeatedly cited the impacts on his life based on his Michigan education, the University of Michigan also recognized and honored his dedication and service. In 1958, he received the Distinguished Alumni Service Award, and in 2017, at the 100th Anniversary of the University of Michigan's Aerospace Engineering Department, the Department designated both my father and me as Distinguished Aerospace Engineering Alumni. I was a little embarrassed when I was asked to give some remarks on my father to the whole reunion audience, but all turned out well. To capture the audience's attention by alluding to the traditional rivalry between Michigan and Ohio State, I started by saying: "My father was born in Columbus, Ohio, so he was a Buckeye by birth. But, he was Michigan all the way, where he and his three sons are all Michigan graduates – *Go Blue!*" That drew a resounding round of applause, and I continued by recounting his story arc.

Moon and Priscilla

The officiant at my parents' wedding in 1937 was Dr. Hu Shih, an eminent diplomat and scholar, who helped establish the vernacular as the official Chinese written language. He was also the Chinese ambassador to the U.S. in 1940 -1941 when Claire Chennault went to Washington, D.C. to get U.S. aid, which resulted in the formation of the American Volunteer Group. At the wedding, Dr. Hu's words were:

“I am deeply honored to officiate at the wedding of my very good friend, Honorable Mr. Chang’s daughter, today. I understand the bridegroom came from the United States, so many thousands of miles across the big Pacific Ocean. He is a trained flyer and an aviation expert. Although China is still young in this field, with Moon’s dedication, China will have a bright future. I was also told that Moon fell in love at first sight, which is indeed very romantic, Heavenly-sent, and Heavenly-matched. I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

Those were kind words, but at that time, Moon Chen had only been in China for about a year and could not be considered an aviation expert. It was not until their twentieth wedding anniversary that my parents were able to see Dr. Hu again. In those twenty years, we could say that Moon Chen realized Dr. Hu’s prescient words at the wedding. Dr. Hu’s words were perhaps even more realized when Moon Chen’s story arc was completed -- his work for Northrop Corporation to establish jet fighter manufacturing capability and deliver the F-5E jet fighters.

Moon and Priscilla survived multiple household moves and relocations during the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, and the Chinese Civil War. Their life in Taipei with CAT was more stable. Priscilla was active in the International Wives Club and Friends of China Club activities. Moon was also a 33rd-degree Mason.



Moon and Priscilla Chen, 1957

Returning to the U.S. for retirement, they initially settled in San Francisco but later spent their golden years in Chevy Chase, Maryland. My mother passed away at age 97, and my father passed away at age 101. I’m thankful that both were present to see me promoted to brigadier general and major general, and they were also present at the change in command ceremony

when I assumed my two-star command as the Commanding General of the U.S. Army Missile Command, Redstone Arsenal, Alabama.

Moon was posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for Chinese American WWII Veterans in 2021. Because his service was under Gen. Chennault, I bequeathed his Congressional Gold Medal to the Chennault Aviation and Military Museum in Monroe, Louisiana, where the Museum has dedicated a special display honoring Chinese Americans who served in the 14th Air Force.

Moon Chen's life was a continuation of a Legacy of Progress for Chinese Americans, as established by his father, who worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad and helped build the Second Transcontinental Railroad from Los Angeles to El Paso, Texas. Moon continued the Legacy of Progress of Chinese Americans by advancing in a field with few Americans of Chinese ancestry -- as a commercial pilot, military pilot, airline executive, and then aircraft company executive.

In my mother's memoir, she best captured my father's own words as a pilot: "The sky is the limit, the sky is my companion," he said, "To be sitting on top of the world and way above the clouds, what a beautiful feeling -- a wonderful feeling of heavenly peace and tranquility."

My cousin May Wong visited my father in early December 2009. He alluded to the surprise visit by my two sons, William and Stephen, during Thanksgiving. In referring to them, he gave May the aviator's "thumbs-up" gesture, meaning A-OK -- and for Chinese, the 👍 gesture means "ding how" -- the very best. By his gesture, he conveyed that everything is A-OK and not to worry about the follow-on generations. In effect, this was his final gesture, as he passed away in peace and tranquility at age 101 on December 7, 2009.