

Robert P. Chase, Civil Air Transport Director of Flight Operations

collective reminiscences of Beverley and Peter Chase

Our father, **Robert (“Bob”) Prins Chase**, joined Civil Air Transport as Chief of Flight Operations in 1961, and worked with CAT and its extended family of Air America, Air Asia, Southern Air Transport and Far Eastern Air Transport until the dissolution of their parent, Pacific Corporation, shortly after the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975.

Chase came to CAT after a 21-year career with the U.S. Navy, which he joined in the summer of 1941, knowing the United States would soon be at war. Born in Humboldt County, California, in 1920, he told us he fell in love with flying while seeing the planes being used on the Del Monte farms where he worked during the summer in his teens. He leapt at the chance to join the flying club at San Jose State University (one sometimes wonders if he went there because it had a flying club), and became accomplished enough that when he joined the Navy, they took him on as a pilot trainer, in Corpus Christie and Pensacola, for the first two years of the war. (He married his high school senior year sweetheart, Margaret (Maggie), in secret while he was in cadet school at Corpus Christie; they had a formal wedding that the Navy could recognize a few months later.)

He became the leader of a squadron of carrier-based torpedo bombers in 1942 and continued in this role through the end of the war with Japan, serving in the Midway, Leyte, and other Pacific theater campaigns.

Dad earned the Distinguished Flying Cross in part for his role following a double kamikaze strike on the tower of the USS Suwannee in the Leyte campaign, which killed the captain and the first officer of the carrier; as the squadron commander and third in command of the ship, he had to lead it back to safe harbor in California, reportedly using the stars as his guide.

Following the war, Bob was twice called on to serve in Japan, first as part of the occupation during the late 1940s and then during the Korean War in the early 1950s, when he again commanded a squadron of fighter-bombers flying off the USS Boxer. According to family lore, he refused to lead his squadron in an attack on a North Korean position marked as a

hospital, an act of conscience which would have been so in accord with the man we knew...but one which reportedly stymied his chance to be promoted to Captain.

So he left the Navy after 21 years with the rank of Commander and sought other missions, a search that led him to the Central Intelligence Agency and then to CAT in Taiwan ... although we didn't know the CIA part until many years later. (Another family lore note: as some of his 1950s Navy work had been on radars and shore defenses, he was offered a lucrative contract with Raytheon when he retired; he chose to stay in public service with the Agency instead.)

Bob moved to Taipei in the summer of 1961, a few months ahead of the family. His initial title was Chief of Flight Operations (CFO), with his office at Songshan Airport; he later became Director of Flight Operations based more out of the CAT and then Air America buildings on Chung Shan Beilu, although as far as we could tell his work remained the same: caring for the crew and the airplanes of CAT (and the others), whatever they might be doing – “normal” passenger and cargo traffic by day, “unusual” (and unmarked) work in unauthorized territories by night.

This care for the crew (and the planes) of the airlines dominated our father's work. He worked long hours (we thought that was natural), but his work came home most strongly to us on those horrible nights when something happened to a plane and its people, and he had to leave quickly for the airport and/or office.

We have, of course, many other memories of Bob and his time with CAT. Above all, we could never, ever get on a CAT flight out of Taipei without listening with chagrin as the pilot told the passengers: “I'm sorry, our flight is delayed a few minutes while we await a passenger” ... inevitably our father, who would stride onto the plane a few minutes after scheduled departure as he “had” to talk to someone in the office at the airport. And the numerous times we were brought into the cockpit by the pilots we all knew. And in Peter's case, also going to the office at the airport to see the whiteboard showing with magnets where the planes were, and once even riding in a simulator that was there.

We have many other memories closely associated with our time with CAT (et al). Our houses in Hill Side Village, above the Police Circle (just

below Felix Smith's house), and in Shih Pai. Taipei American School (where Bev attended grade 4 to graduation, and Peter attended kindergarten to graduation). The Grand Hotel. Our close friendships with such CAT families as the Dews, Bevans, Bradburns, Hicks, Bigonys, Kellys, and so many others. His love of cars, in particular his 1956 MG TF-1500. (He and Hugh Grundy and a few others also partnered to own a racing MG in Macau, if we recall correctly.) Our walks with Dad and the dogs through the hills surrounding our houses. (Dad took long walks virtually every night, in part to de-stress.) Taiwan as a whole, and all its wonders.

Bob and Maggie Chase left Taiwan for Vietnam in the summer of 1973, when Peter went to the States for university (Bev having left three years previously). CAT was by then gone, taken by the tragic crash of Flight 19 in February 1968. Bob and Maggie left Vietnam in December 1974, when it was obvious how the war would end, moving to Seattle, where we – the kids -- then lived, after our time at the University of Washington. Dad invested his lump-sum retirement payment in a small neighborhood security service (Citizens Security Services Association, CSSA), and then had to face the ignominy of the firm's bankruptcy after his "partner" absconded with the funds.

Searching for a new beginning, he returned to his aviator roots, regaining his license as a pilot in an almost unheard of nine months, courtesy of remaining GI benefits, which evaporated directly after he succeeded in getting his Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) license in 1977. He taught flying out of Regal Air at Paine Field in Everett, Washington, for nearly 20 years (including after the death of Maggie in August 1995) before various physical problems began weighing on him and making it clear he could fly no longer.

Robert P. Chase, who had recently dealt with back surgery and heart fibrillation, died on November 21, 2001, in Seattle, Washington, from digestive complications following a Thanksgiving dinner with the two of us, Bev and Peter.