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RELEASE DATE:
24-Sep-2009

Booked for Travel

Edited by Horace Sutton

The Nine Lives of CAT—1

IT WAS A DAY LIKE MANY another day for the upstart airline that was known as CAT—more formally named CNRRA (Chinese National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) Air Transport—that in this year of 1948 was carrying more cargo by air than any airline had ever hauled before.

Captain Robert Rousselot, of Joplin, Missouri, late of the Marine Corps, lost an engine on his C-46 aircraft over the mountains of central China and he ordered his crew to kick the cargo out of the door. Cartwheeling end over end went bale after bale of Chinese currency worth at the time the equivalent of U.S. \$4,000,000 (inflation being what it was in China, one wag said later the money probably depreciated 30 per cent before

it hit the ground). Very little of the money ever was recovered.

Captain Felix Smith, of Mijwaukee, Wisconsin, nosed his C-46 upward from the Hungjao airport in Shanghai and headed for Kunming in Southwest China carrying medicines and relief supplies. He would bring back a load of wolfram. He would also bring back a few bullet holes in the starboard wing. The "agrarian reformers"—Mao Tse-tung's determined band of Communists—already were restless.

Stuart E. Dew, of Hamburg, Arkansas, pushed his C-47 toward Lanchow in northwest China, where it was so cold his engines froze solid. Things were a hell of a lot better, he mused, when he was flying for the General. Before he joined CAT, Stu Dew had been the personal pilot for General George Catlett Marshall as America's top military figure quested the length and breadth of China in a pathetic search for a formula for peace.

Of such almost routine incidents—for CAT—were the makings of one of the most colorful, romantic, and in some respects mysterious airlines in the history of aviation. In CAT's nearly twenty-two-year history lie enough plots and situations, replete with "dragon ladies" and international intrigue, to keep a TV series stocked with material for several generations. But today the outfit founded by General Claire Chennault and once called "the world's most shot-at airline" is in the process of closing down its international passenger operations in the Far East. It will continue, however, to offer its ancient, but immaculately maintained, C-46 domestic service on its headquarters island of Taiwan.

Many an old Far East hand—some whose lives are actually owed to a timely CAT mercy evacuation flight, sometimes with Communist troops at the other end of the runway—will suffer a twinge at the company's decision. CAT had one of the highest percentage rates of repeat passengers in the airline business, old-time passengers who liked the service offered by the Chinese stewardesses in ecru-linen (summer) or smoky-gray (winter), slit-skirted *chi pao* (*chiong sam* in south China) uniforms and never tired of repeating with a chuckle, "Man, fly CAT and the best leg of your journey will be on one of the stewardesses."

The end for CAT came on the drizzly, slightly foggy night of February 16 of this year when the airline's "Mandarin Jet," a Boeing 727 leased from Southern Air Transport, picked its way through

murk from Hong Kong for a landing at Taipei's Sung Shan (pine mountain) airport only 12 miles and two minutes away. Suddenly out of nowhere, trees and buildings loomed. It was too late. The 727 crashed and burst into flames. Twenty-one persons, including the wife of the pilot at the controls and the wife of an assistant vice president of CAT, were killed. Miraculously, forty-two survived, several of whom calmly got in taxis and drove into Taipei—one to the airport to meet mystified friends he knew would be waiting. It was only the second crash of scheduled services in CAT's history; it also was CAT's only jet, which many found difficult to believe in the light of CAT's vigorous, full-color advertising campaigns and the schedules flown by the company.

The crash wrote touch-down for CAT, but the Chinese calligraphy had been on the wall ever since CAT's first crash on June 20, 1964, near Taichung in central Taiwan—a highly suspicious crash of a C-46 domestic airliner that claimed the lives of fifty-seven persons, including that of perhaps the richest man in Asia, Dato Loke Wan Tho—the Malaysian movie magnate—and several of his starlets from his Cathay Studios. The full story of this crash has yet to be unraveled; what is known has not been told because it has been kept under official and perhaps officious wraps. There has never been, for instance, an official airing of the part played by two apparently demented military men aboard who had stolen two radar identification manuals (about the size of a mail-order catalog) in the Pescadores Islands, holloved them out with a razor blade so each would hold a .45 caliber pistol. The manuals and one pistol were found, but fire and perhaps inadequate investigation marred the evidence. It was never definitely determined if the weapon had been fired.

Gratitude has never alone as the strongest trait in the Oriental character, except perhaps within the family system itself. If the Nationalist Government of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek owed CAT gratitude for helping forestall the inevitable Communist onslaught and for aiding the development of the Taiwan refuge, it did nothing to show it in the days that followed the 1964 crash. An unprecedented campaign of abuse against CAT was mounted in the press; members of the various Yuans (legislatures, so to speak) cried for blood. In an obviously high-level plot, CAT's head office was raided and records were seized, resulting in what amounted to the doubling of income tax bills for CAT employees (the added amount was paid by the company).

The owners—and there is some doubt in some minds about just who they may be—decided at that time to get out of

the international passenger business. But how to do it was the question. The Government harassed from the *yin* side and refused to let go from the *yang*. It wouldn't at that time agree, in other words, that CAT should go out of the international passenger-carrying business. CAT had to go along because it had to have the approval, or at a minimum, the cooperation, of the Chinese Government to protect the much larger parts of the complex of which the scheduled airline was only the tail, and a very bobbed one at that.

The reasons for the "jump-on-'em-when-they're-down" reaction are not all buried in Oriental mystique. American management was resented. Even though CAT was billed as a Chinese-owned airline, and even though it was listed as the designated carrier of the Republic of China, it was, by corporate legerdemain, practically and effectively, an American-operated airline. And the American management, to be charitable, did not at all times operate with the velvet ton-sils and patience that orders the way of life in this part of the world.

Every developing nation, it has been said, wants two things it probably shouldn't have while it is developing: a steel mill and an airline. Nationalist China resisted the steel mill, but not the airline. With a group of retired air force officers as the nucleus, the Government gave its blessing to the founding of China Airlines (CAL) in 1955 and made ready to push it to the fore if CAT ever stumbled. If, in the eyes of the Chinese, guided by the mass communication media, CAT stumbled in 1964, then it must have been felt that with the February 16 jet crash the airline wobbled over the cliff.

There were, indeed, from the public's viewpoint, some aspects deserving of headlines. The pilot actually flying the aircraft was Hugh Hicks, fifty, of Hannibal, Ohio, the assistant chief pilot of CAT. He had been checked out in the 727 at Seattle, Washington; he had been to Hong Kong with his wife, Gloria, on a holiday. When the craft was airborne, he asked the pilot in command, Stuart Dew, the same captain who air-chauffeured General Marshall about China, if he could get some time in at the controls. Dew, forty-five, is a quiet, pipe-smoking, slightly built man; easy to get along with, it might be said. He agreed. But he moved, not to the co-pilot's righthand seat held by a Chinese flyer at the time of the crash, but to the "jump seat" behind the flight controls.

As assistant chief pilot, Hicks, a sandy-and curly-haired pipe-smoker who taught flying in Indonesia in the early Fifties, lived basically a desk-bound life with little chance for actual flying. One of the last statements transcribed from the flight recorder was the Arkansas

drawl of Dew saying: "Aren't you a little low, Hugh?"

Both of them were injured, painfully but not seriously, and they have been put on trial on charges of negligence, malfeasance of duties, and related misdeeds. Dew, as the pilot in command, faces imprisonment of five years if convicted; Hicks, two. Those supposedly privy to Chinese voices have said the pilots will be convicted but given suspended sentences with probation which would require them to remain on Taiwan for the duration of their stay of confinement.

The International Airline Pilots Association and other pilots' groups are watching the case with considerable apprehension. There is a possibility the IAPA may boycott Taipei if the pilots are convicted. The charges themselves are unprecedented. So far as is known, no commercial pilot anywhere has ever been prosecuted on criminal charges following a crash.

Against this background and with, it is understood, a difficult-to-measure amount of encouragement from the United States Government, China Airlines has more and more elbowed CAT out of the international flying picture. Last year it inaugurated 727 services to Tokyo and Hong Kong, then took over CAT's routes from Taipei to Manila and

Taipei to Seoul—two lucrative routes. It got a second 727, and talks about operating five in the not-too-long a time, including routes to Hawaii and the U.S. mainland.

The former air force generals and colonels now running CAL, headed by former general Ben Y. F. Chow, are a tough, hard-nosed, unforgiving lot. If they have anything to say about it, CAT won't be forgiven for what are considered to be slights to the greatness of China. They feel CAT deliberately refused to expand services because of capital risks involved. It's a point that could be debated with equal eloquence from either side. —ARNOLD DIBBLE.

(This is the first of two articles.)

Arnold Dibble is the former public relations director of CAT. He now is on the staff of United Press International in Tokyo.