

THE TOUGHEST FLYING IN THE WORLD

These World War II airmen had one of the most dangerous missions of all, piloting unarmed cargo planes over the Hump—the high and treacherous Himalayas

by Richard Rhodes

Cookie Byrd is punching my card. We've just met in the convention center at Harrah's, in Reno. Cookie is the official chaplain of the Hump Pilots Association, and he hands out plastic "chaplain's cards" at all the association's reunions, to remind the guys of World War II days, flew the Hump. "Hump" is GI understatement: the Hump was the Himalayas, and they flew over them to supply Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist Army by air from India after the Japanese occupied eastern China and southeast Asia early in the war. The Humpsters flew unarmed two- and four-engine cargo planes through some of the worst weather in the world. They suffered horrendous attrition, losing more than one thousand men and nearly four hundred planes over four years. Whenever one of them got the blues, panicked, or thought he was going Hump happy from the strain, the flight surgeon or the commander would say something like, "Yeah, sure, go talk to the chaplain, get your card punched. Then get your butt back here."

Punching the cards he hands out is Cookie's standard greeting at Hump reunions. He's a devout Seventh-Day Adventist from Savannah who earns his living as a cookie manufacturer; in the war he was not a chaplain—he was a pilot who flew 166 missions. When he pulls out his chrome-plated punch, everyone grins. Across forty intervening years, no one who flew the Hump has forgotten any of it.

It's the collective memory I'm after. The hundreds of Humpsters at their fortieth reunion in 1985 are a distinguished bunch—doctors and lawyers and colonels, airline pilots, real estate men, engineers, what have you—but their working years are mostly behind them and they'd be the first to tell you that flying the Hump was the high point, no pun intended, of their lives. "A kind of apogee of life experiences," one of them sums up. "You know there's just no way to top it, and the balance of life becomes almost anticlimactic." It happened once in history, on a monumental scale, and because the jet engine has replaced the internal-combustion engine in aircraft and carries its crews high above the weather, it can never happen again. Ordinary commercial jets now fly over the Himalayas in perfect comfort.

Flying the Hump was a rearguard action. Keep China supplied and fighting and we'd have a second front to distract the Japanese while Douglas MacArthur moved the Army and Chester Nimitz the Navy to reconquer the Pacific. Weighed against so vital a mission—to tie down a million or more Japanese troops—a few thousand men and machines were expendable. First priority went to the fuel and cargo delivered—650,000 tons in all—and the pilots paid a heavy toll. Jap Zeros shot them out of the sky; their engines fell off and they parachuted into headhunter country; they smashed into mountains; the violent weather got them. Almost every day they shuttled from the Assam Valley, in what is now northeast India and Bangladesh, across Burma, to bases in western China and back. They came to call the wreckage-strewn ground beneath the route the Aluminum Highway.

They flew C-46s and C-47s—“Dumbos” and “gooney birds,” twin-engine cargo aircraft designed originally in the 1930s as passenger planes, never intended for high-altitude work and therefore inadequately powered and unpressurized. The higher a jet flies the better, but the higher an internal-combustion engine flies the worse. The peaks at the top of the Hump gouged up above sixteen thousand feet, higher than the highest Rockies. What the Hump crews couldn't fly over they flew around or between, engines at full throttle hauling them to maybe eighteen thousand feet on a good day, indicated airspeed when approaching that altitude no better than 120 miles per hour, the airplane hanging on the props.

“Back in the early days we had no air traffic control,” the collective voice explains. “A pilot took off, climbed, and took potluck in the sky. There were no assigned altitudes. You just got the bird up and flew. If you had to hit the gauges, you prayed you were in good with the Lord. We had no radar (what was radar?) and no navigational aids except for radio direction-finding stations at the India-China bases that were turned on only by special coded request. You simply had to cut in close with your navigating.”

That explains a favorite initiation ritual. Pilot is checking out a copilot on instruments on his first flight over the Hump. Nothing visible but murk. “Mark the time and give me twenty seconds!” pilot yells. Green copilot complies. At twenty seconds pilot makes a sharp right turn. “Give me ten seconds!” pilot yells. Copilot does. Sharp left turn, then straight ahead. Pilot waits a beat and remarks casually, “Some of these mountain peaks are hell to get around.”

They got to India by flying new planes out from the States, puddle-jump range and no midair refueling. They flew from West Palm Beach to Puerto Rico, from Puerto Rico to Guyana, from Guyana to Brazil. At Natal, on the easternmost bulge of South America, they stopped to buy calf-length leather boots (out-of-uniform customizing was an Air Force indulgence), to refill their Zippo lighters with aviation gasoline. Then the flight across the ocean to the volcanic cone of Ascension, a perch on the immensity of the South Atlantic; then to Accra and Kano and Khartoum. A few hours in Agra to visit the Taj Mahal, then on to the base—often dirt airstrips, with bamboo bashas for their bunks, places with names like Sylhet, Chabua, Myitkyina (“Mee-chee-naw”), Sookerating (“Sook-er-ting,” “Sook”).

Now they patched the backs of their seal-brown horsehide A-2 flight jackets with inscribed Chinese flags that promised a reward to Chinese who helped them escape from the Japanese if they were downed. (The collective Humpster exhumes his A-2 jacket for the annual reunions; some even fit. Cookie's A-2 looks almost new. “It ought to be in good shape,” he said. “I take it out and rub it with mink oil twice a year.”) A check pilot checked them out, and they were on their own, twenty- and twenty-one-year-olds with twenty-four-year-old commanders. “Bring me men to match my weather” was the Hump motto. That meant, bluntly, you've got to have losses or you're not taking enough risks.

“Okay, Sook tower,” radios the collective voice, “give us the nod and we'll leave the sod.” “Roger,” Sook tower chants back, “the man behind the glass says you can boot it in the ass.” They wear baseball caps with oxygen masks clipped on. They're hauling anything and everything—from ammunition to Kotex,” they claim at the reunion. One pilot's individual flight record—his ticket back to Uncle Sugar, because you had to fly a

specified number of missions to rotate home—speaks for them all. He carried, on 100 missions, in 42 different aircraft: 36 loads of 100-octane gasoline in 55-gallon drums, 18 loads of gasoline pipeline, 2 loads of grenades, 10 loads of mixed ammo, 2 of Jeeps, 1 of trailers, 2 of Chinese soldiers, 2 of trucks, 1 of canned tomatoes, 3 of small arms, 1 of canned beans, 17 of mortar shells, 2 of aircraft engines and parts, 3 of 100-pound demolition bombs. Remember the preponderance of flammables and explosives among these loads.

“Started on takeoff from Sook,” the collective voice warms up. “It was night, instrument weather, dark as hell, full-load. The takeoff roll was smooth and normal. As we broke ground—Wham! Updraft! I mean, boy, did we go up. By the time the tail wheel was retracted, we were passing fifteen hundred feet and climbing at about the same rate per minute.”

They climbed through rain to altitude, approaching the corrugated ranges. Almost always there was weather, the warm, moist monsoons of India rolling up the mountain barricade and the frigid air of central Asia streaming south. “Strong winds, with speeds sometimes exceeding one hundred miles per hour, created mountain waves and vertical sheers that could overturn an aircraft, send it rocketing upward for thousands of feet or plunge it downward into the mountains. According to the season, thunderstorms, torrential rains, hail, sleet, snow, and severe icing held sway.” The average icing level over the Hump varied from ten thousand to twenty thousand feet. The planes flew through it both going up and coming down, and sometimes stayed in it the whole way to China. A test pilot sent out from Uncle Sugar to look into the excess of crashes concluded that carburetor icing was the most common cause of engine failure.

“Once in a while a thundercloud rolls up,” the collective voice goes on, “and we plow right through. At first a series of short hard jars, then suddenly you feel like something is pushing you through the floor.” A pilot recalls: “The wind howled and the rain poured; the ferocious strength of this storm was simply unbelievable. It grabbed us from every direction at once. The instrument panel was shaking so violently that I could hardly read it at all; however, a glance at the altimeter showed that we were going to be spit out of the top. That was just the thing, I thought, if this old tub would just hold together. Soon we were out of the top and at twenty-seven thousand feet, but now I knew we were faced with the ultimate downdrafts and more turbulence. Sure enough, the altimeter began to unwind and we began dropping at two thousand feet per minute. I put on full props, full engine power, but I couldn’t stop the descent. My only hope now was that my path through the storm would put us into the valley before we crashed into a mountain. The navigator couldn’t get a thing out of his radios because of the electrical smash. All we had left was the flight log and God.”

Suspend them there. Many invoked the Deity in emergencies, turning to God the Troubleshooter when the engines quit: “I asked God what was wrong with the plane and what I could do, and I received the answer to pump the gas wobble pump.” When fired on by a Zero, one pilot encountered Jesus the Comforting Hallucination: “I saw straight ahead, and a little higher than us, what appeared to be an oval opening in which stood the Lord Jesus Christ, facing us, clad in a white robe, His hair falling neatly upon His shoulders. His right arm was outstretched toward us, palm up, and He spoke two words: ‘Tear not.’ Then He faded from view. What makes this all the more remarkable

to me is that at the time I was not a member of any church.”

When the enemy appeared, our men might hide in a cloud. “I could see the red ball on his wing, and I did a wingover to the right, slammed everything to the fire wall, and went hell-bent for a buildup. We bumped around inside that cumulus for about twenty minutes before taking a peek out the top. ‘Well, does anybody see the son-of-a-bitch?’” As it turned out, it was a Photo Tojo, as unarmed as they. They were more likely to encounter Japanese fighters early in the war; toward the end, the Japanese used their remaining aircraft for home defense and in the Pacific.

There were nights when St. Elmo’s fire danced on the windshield and lit up the arcs of the spinning props. “One night when we were getting an extra lot of it, I kept noticing something tickling my left ear. I’d reach up and rub it. Finally the crew chief clued me in. St. Elmo’s fire was jumping from the window frame to my ear. When I turned to look, the damned stuff jumped to my nose. Odd stuff.” In certain cloud formations the charged raindrops struck the windshield in tiny bursts of light.

Worse was ball lightning: “A blue fireball bounced across the flight deck and scared the livin’ b’jesus out of us.” Or hail the size of grapefruit, “thundering against the wings and fuselage like cannonballs.”

On clearer nights they learned that a bright aircraft light approaching them from the west was usually Venus. They saw flocks of geese migrating high above them at twenty-five thousand feet. “I can remember more than one occasion flying at night,” says a pilot, “noting the copilot, flight engineer, and radio operator sleeping, and then dozing off momentarily myself.” Nearer terra firma a buzzard could explode through the windshield, knock out pilot and copilot, and leave the enlisted crew to save the plane. Sometimes they succeeded.

“Flying the Hump consisted of frequent alternation between abject boredom and stark terror,” the collective voice concurs. “All of us eventually came to the same conclusion. If it is not your time to go, you will not go. If it is your time to go, nothing can be done to avert it.” Such is the protective metaphysics of twenty-year-olds. They tipped their oxygen masks aside to have a smoke at seventeen thousand feet, with gasoline sloshing in the gutters. If it blew, it blew.

When engines failed or fuel ran out in the middle of nowhere, they jumped. “I trimmed the plane with a very special, precise concern, then got out of the seat, and cinched my chute. The crew had abandoned their oxygen masks to dump the cargo, and everyone was groggy. The exertion and lack of oxygen made them look like zombies. The crew chief pulled the emergency lever and dropped the rear door, and the cold, misty air rushed into the ship through the large and moonlit opening with nothing beyond firmer to jump on than a fleecy bed of milkish clouds. I ran until I ran out of solid stuff to run on.”

A hundred, two hundred men running out the rear ends of airplanes into thin air, on different days and nights, in different years. They tell each other not different stories, but the same story with slight variations: “As soon as I saw the tail go by, I pulled the rip cord and the chute opened. I didn’t have time to put the plane on autopilot, but it was trimmed pretty well for level flight. I could see its running lights, and as I watched, it made a 180-degree turn and headed back for us. I thought it was going to hit me, but it

turned again, hit a mountain, blew up, and burned.”

Plunging into the clouds: “Instantaneous transition, from extreme urgency, commotion, and interaction with the crew, to silence, isolation, and suspended animation, engulfed in dense fog with no visual reference or sense of motion. It was not unlike what I imagined the experience of dying would be.”

A fifteen-minute fall from seventeen thousand feet: “The whole jungle rushed up and I went crashing through. The breaking branches, twigs, and bamboo made an awful racket. As I touched the side of the mountain, I was sprung upward. The parachute had canopied over the treetops, and the recoil of the trees lifted me before I could strike the ground with any force. My weight brought me back down. A more gentle landing I could hardly have hoped for.” That was one outcome. Another was: “I pulled the rip cord and hit the ground almost immediately after the chute had opened.” Or, “I hit the ground so hard that the impact tore the soles almost entirely off both shoes.” Those who found themselves hanging in a tree in the middle of the night were wise to stay put until dawn. Sometimes the trees grew sideways from a mountain, a sheer drop.

A jungle kit came with the parachute rig—pocket knife, ration of chocolate, fatigue hat, GI leggings, mosquito head net, gloves, silk map of Burma and parts of China, compass, box of .45 bird-shot shells, box of fish-hooks and line, signaling mirror, bottle of iodine, packet of sulfa powder, whetstone, box of quinine tablets, morphine, phrase booklet, folding machete, silk American flag. Humpsters also always carried a canteen full of water and their standard-issue .45 automatic when they flew.

In two weeks or two months they walked out. They walked out on broken ankles and were carried out with broken backs. Search and Rescue was meanwhile indefatigable. When it tracked them—they flashed mirrors, spread their parachutes over bushes, built fires—SAR dropped supplies and directed rescue parties. One SAR pilot who had flown 130 trips over the Hump parachuted down and hacked out a landing strip by hand to rescue an injured pilot. Doctors jumped to minister to the severely injured, the ultimate house call.

A tiger stalked one flier during his walkout, following him on the opposite side of a stream for two days. When he stopped, the tiger would stop. Downed fliers shot fish and tried to shoot deer. Elephants sometimes blocked their way. They worked always downstream, hoping the rivers that the streams fed supported settlements.

The locals helped them. “We were passed from village to village, with bearers from each village taking us to the next. Our guide usually had a bouquet of flowers waiting for us at each village, in the room where we would spend the night.” And fleas and bedbugs too. They ate fermented corn mush in one place, balls of warm rice in another. Eventually the locals delivered them to a British garrison or a waiting jeep. “With five of us in and on the Jeep, we reached the village of Ta-li and went directly to the house of the British district officer stationed there. There to greet us stood an exquisite vision straight from ‘Terry and the Pirates,’ the officer’s Chinese wife. Who would have expected such elegance, stunning beauty, and culture in this remote mountain area?” The Dragon Lady fed them a banquet at 3:00 A.M. Recuperated—one man’s broken back took six months to heal—they returned to flying the Hump. “Occasionally, I would spot the wreckage of our ship and emotionally experience that bailout and ordeal.”

Getting down was as dangerous as getting up and getting over. My own cousin Melba's husband, Harry Bayne, who stayed on after the war and retired from the Air Force a brigadier general, remembers one Hump night as the worst night of his life. We reunited at the reunion. I hadn't seen him in years. He had hardly aged—bold black eyebrows, salt-and-pepper hair, fighting trim. Over the Hump he flew a bigger aircraft introduced later in the war, a four-engine tanker adapted from the B-24 Liberator. "The worst time that I guess any of us had," he told me, "was during the first week of January, 1945. Somewhere around sixty to seventy-five airplanes were lost in one night. The weather was so bad they almost aborted the mission, but the theater commander said go ahead, so everybody went. I had the long haul up to Chengtu, which that night with the winds that we had took us about eight hours; normally it would be around four or five. We got over there, and the base was closed in, and there were people screaming 'Mayday! Mayday!' on every channel. Everybody was panicked because they couldn't get in, they were running out of fuel, the controllers couldn't get you down because there were airplanes at all the designated altitudes, and finally the tower operator said, 'Everybody descend five hundred feet.' Well, when I heard that I said, 'I'm getting out of here,' because otherwise I was going to get killed. And I took off out of the pattern and headed south to go back to Kunming, which was an hour and a half south.

"I had no clearance, so I kept broadcasting every so often and dropped down to a half-altitude, 21,500, which is what you were supposed to do in an emergency. So I flew that back to Kunming, and they were closed in too. I was about to run out of gas. There were guys bailing out. You'd hear them hollering over the radio. I took up the heading for Yunnanyi then. I told them I was proceeding to Yunnanyi, and I never got a call back. But I was lucky. At about twenty-five thousand feet I happened to look down and, suddenly, saw the base right in front of me, and I just took that airplane and turned it right over on its back.

"I pulled enough Gs to about tear the wings off, because if I didn't get in that hole, I was done. The radios were out. I just went in, and when I landed, it was so mobbed that there were airplanes backed up on the runway. Believe me, when I got out of that airplane—I've seen these people kissing the ground—I kissed the ground. I've probably put in eight thousand hours flying since then—I had about twenty-three hundred back then—but the Hump was the toughest flying in the world."

It made them a little crazy. "Whether at work or at play," one summarizes, "maximum manifold pressure and rpm was law." They jeeped out at night to the garbage dumps to hunt the packs of jackals that fed there. Rats roamed their thatch-and-bamboo bashas. "A replacement came in and thought we were pulling his leg about the rats. The very first night, he woke us with a bloodcurdling scream. There was a rat, sitting on his stomach, nibbling on his little finger." The blast of a .45 booming through the thin basha walls at night meant someone was shooting at a rat skittering across a rafter.

"We had a little officers' club," Harry remembers. "Guys who could play the piano were in demand. Obviously there was a lot of drinking going on. The rule was twelve hours from bottle to throttle. When you'd come back from the Hump, you'd go to the flight surgeon's office, and they'd check you and give you a shot of Old Methuselah or something. A shot of whiskey and a glass of water, and then you'd hit the sack."

In places where even the rain fell hot through the miasma, they concocted schemes to

cool the ration beer. "We tried hanging it out of the airplane windows on a wire," the collective voice resumes. "This method was not satisfactory. Someone tried packing the beer in an empty metal tub, covering it with sand, and then soaking the entire thing with gasoline. The gas was supposed to evaporate during the flight and, in turn, chill the brew. This didn't work too well either."

A sergeant who understood at least the rudiments of heat transfer built a real refrigeration system. He stretched radiator hoses from a gun port into the fuselage and through a cooling coil set in a twenty-gallon water can. "From there another radiator hose exited the can and made its way out into the open through the opposite gun port. Next, the bottled warm brew was put in the can around the coil." Sergeant and pilot then took the plane up to ten thousand feet and spent an hour expensively circling. "When they landed, their secret was out, and about twenty-five of their buddies met them at the flight strip. It was the first cold beer they had tasted for a long time, and the three cases were consumed on the spot." When staff headquarters heard about the project, it banned unauthorized flights. Back to warm beer.

The food was terrible. "The mess hall offered a choice of SOS or Spam," grouses the collective Humpster, "with dehydrated eggs and potatoes, battery acid (canned grapefruit juice), and coffee." SOS meant chipped beef in cream gravy over toast. "The little dark spots in the bread, bought locally, were gnats caught up during the kneading. New arrivals could be observed carefully picking them out, but old-timers left them in, insisting that the gnats gave the bread a distinctive, nutty flavor. At Tinsukia the village bakers kneaded dough under their sweating armpits. This gave their bread an even better character."

Bottles of Atabrine tablets stood on every mess-hall table, a standard World War II antimalarial that happens also to be a dye. Taken daily it gave the skin a jaundiced tint and turned freckles green.

The first sergeant's pet monkey drowned in the water tower at Sookerating. They found it when the shower water began to stink. Then there was the time when a crate of football uniforms turned up at Ledo: "The jerseys were hot, but they looked swell with those big white letters. The natives thought we were pretty important for a while." Someone shot a seventeen-foot python and found a whole deer undigested inside. "The most common snake was the small green krait that the natives referred to as the 'ten-step snake,' meaning that you would die before you took ten steps. When you had to go to the outhouse at night, you gave it a second thought." A tiger padded through one crew's tent, pausing to sniff at each bunk; they found the pug marks in the morning. In Calcutta on R&R someone charmed a cobra with a clarinet. Indian entrepreneurs sold the gullible phony rubies cut from jeep taillights.

They ferried the instruments of war back and forth from 1942 to November 1945, petering out after Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an end to things in August. "Twenty-one days shipping home on the USS Gen. LeRoy Eltinge," Harry announces with disgust. Someone waiting his turn in Hankow worked up a stateside guide. "You are about to be sent from this continent," it mocked, "which you have come to know so well, to a strange country across the sea ... the inhabitants of the United States come in two sexes, male and female. ... Chances are that you will like the United States. ... No doubt you will become aware of ice cream sodas, china dishes (to eat from),

automobiles (something like jeeps, but without four-wheel drives), flush toilets, and movies held indoors in big buildings called theaters (not to be confused with the India-Burma or China theaters). It is quite possible that many of you will like America so well that you will decide to settle down there. ...”

And here they are, the survivors, in the ballroom at Harrah’s, forty years out, dancing with the girls they left behind or met along the way, dancing before, during, and after the annual banquet. Harry leading my strawberry-blond cousin, Melba, his wife of forty-three years, slow-dancing to a Glenn Millerstyle big band. At the Hump Pilots Association annual meeting that morning, Cookie Byrd performed an annual duty. “First I’m going to read a verse that a member’s father wrote,” he told the membership. “Says: ‘A fleeing moment is indeed a fleeing moment, for life is made up of a succession of fleeing moments. And too soon and too early comes the time when we stand on the threshold of eternity and there no longer is time.’ At this time I’m going to read those who passed away. I’ll read the names and what bases they were from. We have quite a list here. Last year I read 87 names. Today I think it’s 103.”

Cookie read every name and every base—base that is, not place of birth or death or principal achievement. His voice boomed over the crowd of aging men now uncharacteristically silent. One hundred and three gone, but later the membership chairman announced that two hundred more had joined up in the last year; the Hump Pilots Association’s active and inactive membership exceeds five thousand. A letter read at the meeting from Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer, who was Chiang Kai-shek’s chief of staff, praises their accomplishment, with pardonable hyperbole, as the “foremost and by far the most dangerous, difficult and historic achievement of the entire war. ...”

In 1943 the correspondent Eric Sevareid and twenty-two others on a malfunctioning Hump plane jumped into the Burma jungle, negotiated their safety with up-country headhunters, rendezvoused with a rescue mission, and walked out. Sevareid published an account of the experience after the war that nicely summarizes what the Hump was about. “Now in tiger country,” he noted near the end of his walkout. “Wonderful jungle, waterfalls, ferns in Rousseau style. ...We can glimpse Mokokchung from here, across lovely valley. Tomorrow, easily. Tonight one of the [native] guards said to Private Schrandt: ‘India there’—and pointed west. ‘China there’ —and pointed east. ‘America there’—and pointed up.”

“We didn’t love it,” the collective voice of the Humpsters whispers before it disbands for another year, “but we didn’t hate it, and we can’t forget it. What keeps calling us back to the Hump in our aging minds? Names of comrades, and faces we’ll never see again.”

Richard Rhodes, who has frequently written for this magazine (American Heritage Magazine), is the author, most recently, of Ultimate Powers: A History of the Bomb, to be published next winter by Simon & Schuster. Some of the reminiscences of the “collective memory” in this article are adapted from recollections in The Hump, Volume II, printed privately by the Hump Pilots Association, and John G. Martin’s Through Hell’s Gate to Shanghai, published in 1983 by The Lawhead Press, Inc., of Athens, Ohio.