

NO COWARDS FLY THE HUMP IN STEARMANS

INTRODUCTION

The Bomber Command Museum of Canada was introduced to the aviation career of Ronald E. Watts by Tim Johnston, an aviation historian who had come to know the family personally and was aware of W/C Watts' involvement with the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in southern Alberta during World War II.

Through Tim, the museum had discussions with W/C Watts' daughter who has placed her father's aviation memorabilia in the museum's archives. The collection includes his remarkable story that he titled, "No Cowards Fly the Hump in Stearmans." During this adventure, he led eighty-four Stearmans across the Burma Hump.

Following service with the BCATP at Pearce and De Winton, Alberta and Swift Current, Saskatchewan, W/C Watts returned to England. Following a few weeks leave, he was posted to an RAF station in Lincolnshire until his final posting of the war came through. This was a return to Lahore, India as liaison officer to the Chinese Nationalist Air Force which was training their pilots in India.

The Allied air forces were supporting and participating in the training of pilots for the Chinese Air Force, which had suffered heavily at the hands of the Japanese Air Force and Navy. By a remarkable coincidence, the Chinese Air Force had acquired, under the American's Lend-Lease program, a number of Boeing Stearmans, at least some of which were the very Boeing Stearman aircraft that had served in Canada during 1942, many of them at Pearce and at De Winton while Ron was the commanding officer.

When the war in Europe ended, the Chinese asked Ron if he would arrange to have their eighty-four Stearmans stationed at Lahore flown to China so that they could continue training their pilots for the war against the Communists.



Ron Watts

It would be a very hazardous trip of more than 4000 kilometres and no route had ever been charted through the 20,000 foot high mountains that form the Burmese “Hump” –the southeastern end of the Himalayan Mountain Range. The open cockpit Stearman aircraft lacked an oxygen system so it was not possible to simply fly them over the mountain range. Ron would have to find a way through the high passes. The RAF made it clear that it wanted nothing to do with the flight which, in the opinion of Ron’s headquarters, was “foolhardy.”

“All in all,” Ron wrote later, “the picture wasn’t very jolly but the whole scheme was just fantastic enough to capture the imagination of a very bored wing commander, buried in paperwork.”

In “No Cowards Fly the Hump in Stearmans”, Ron tells of the remarkable adventure he led. Upon its successful conclusion, he was awarded the prestigious “Order of the Cloud and Banner” by the grateful Chinese. Louis Mountbatten and U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower received similar medals.

NO COWARDS FLY THE HUMP IN STEARMANS

AS TOLD BY W/C RON WATTS (Ret'd)
to Erik Watt

[Erik Watt was a reporter with the Lethbridge Herald]

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A Stearman being serviced by RAF personnel at Lahore, India



Stearmans and Chinese pilots at Lahore, India

Outside my office window, two kites were enjoying a raucous breakfast at the expense of someone's defunct dog. By looking past the pretty tableau, I could see the Lahore Aerodrome, burnt brown by the September sun, and the wire perimeter fence. Past the fence, the Punjab plain stretched featurelessly to the horizon, shimmering in the heat.

Inside my office was a fan, busily blasting torrents of super-heated air down from the ceiling. Sitting at a desk immediately below the fan, suffering from the aftermath of sand fly fever, boasting a hangover of magnificent proportions and covered in prickly heat, was me.

There had been a party the night before. About all that was keeping me alive was the knowledge that within fifteen minutes the postman was due and as soon as I had dealt with the mail, I could stagger back to my quarters, where an ice-cold bottle of beer and a shower might ease my sufferings a trifle.

I tottered to a window, straining to pick out the cloud of dust which would herald the coming of the mail. There was none. I turned the fan off, to see if motionless hot air was any cooler than churned-up hot air, knowing through bitter past experience that it was not and that I'd flip the switch back on again in another five minutes.

In the midst of my misery, a Chinese staff car pulled up on the tarmac outside, closely followed by two more.

In twelve months as Royal Air Force liaison officer to the Chinese Nationalist Air Force, I'd come to know quite a bit about Chinese protocol.

The Chinese never did official business singly. Minor matters took one car and four people and more serious affairs two cars and six or eight people. Three cars could only mean something most important so, on this day in late September 1945, I shucked of my lethargy as the visitors streamed into my office, headed by Colonel Liu, commandant of the Chinese station at Lahore.

Colonel Liu and the members of his party were all formality. They saluted, bowed and shook hands as though none of them had seen me for years, instead of only a few hours previously in the colonel's bungalow, where I had consumed the whiskey which was making life agony at this stage.

For once, Colonel Liu wasted no time in getting to the point of his mission. “Wing Commander Watts,” he said, “I want you to arrange for a flight to Kunming of all the Chinese aircraft on this station.”

Or, in other words, take 85 single-engine aircraft, none of them capable of flying higher than 14,000 feet and all of them the worse for three or four years of wear and tear as training planes, from India over the 19,000-foot Burmese “Hump” into China. Something no one else had even as much as dreamed of up to then – or tried since.

It took a little while for Colonel Liu’s request to sink in.

I’d been over the hump several times in transport aircraft, but only at night –the Japanese had a habit of shooting up people who tried it by day during the war. About the country itself, I knew nothing except that its topography was a pilot’s nightmare and that it had taken a terrible toll of aircraft when it was the wartime ferry route between China and India.

One thing was immediately obvious; the U.S.-made Stearman trainers Colonel Liu wanted me to fly to China could never get over the Hump. They would have to go through it – passes and one ridge rising above 14,000 feet could wash out the whole effort.

There were a hundred questions in my mind, but they would have to wait until I’d had a chance to look into the whole thing carefully. “Why do the aircraft have to be flown to China?” I asked.

“Now that the war is over, we will no longer be able to train our pilots in India,” Colonel Liu replied. “So, we must have our training planes in China. China has no shipping. You British and Americans need all your ships for the repatriation of your own troops. The only way, then, that we can get these planes into China, is to fly them there.”

I was pretty dubious. “Do you think light aircraft like the Stearmans could make it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” said Colonel Liu. “Such a flight has not been attempted before, but I think that if enough gasoline dumps could be arranged to cope with the limited range of the aircraft, it might be possible. I would like you to look into this and let me know what can be done.

“This is of vital importance,” he added. “The war with Japan is over, but we still have the Communists to deal with.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said, “but quite frankly, it looks hopeless.”

When Colonel Liu and his troupe had left, I hauled out my maps. It was clear from Lahore to Calcutta on the Bay of Bengal, there were aerodromes to spare. All I would have to find out about that leg of the flight was if the fields I would have to use stocked the particular type of gasoline required for the Stearmans.

From Calcutta onwards, such maps as I had could not help me. I knew the rough location of several airfields but I also knew they were being closed down as rapidly as possible and that it was most unlikely any of them would have the 80-octane fuel I would need.

On the question of fuel and maps, I could do nothing until I had a chance to check with Headquarters -India, in New Delhi.

The men I would have to depend on if the mission was undertaken would all be instructors, not the world’s best instructors by any stretch of the imagination, but trained fliers just the same. The planes, however, were another matter.

They were by no means new. Open-cockpit biplanes, the Boeing Stearmans were powered by 180-h.p. Continental engines. Built originally as primary trainers for the U.S. Air Force, they had been loaned to the Royal Air Force under the terms of Lend-Lease and ferried to Canada where they were to be used under The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, training students from the Allied nations. Many of them had been used at the Royal Canadian Air Force station at De Winton, Alberta, which I had commanded in 1942 and 1943, but the Canadian winter had proven too much for their open cockpits. The planes had been returned to the United States and from there were shipped to India, for the use of the Chinese.

The Stearman’s instrument panel was a study in austerity. There were two engine instruments, an oil pressure gauge and an r.p.m. indicator, and three for navigation –an altimeter, airspeed indicator and compass. A liberal sprinkling of empty holes in the instrument panel suggested someone had once considered installing blind flying instruments, but had changed his mind at the last minute. There were no gyro compasses and no radios.

The planes had a theoretical range of 255 miles, in still air, but anything over 200 miles was simply testing Providence. Cruising speed ranged between 80 and 85 m.p.h. and top speed

was 90.

There were two more important factors to consider. Should we have to get up to the maximum ceiling of 14,000 feet, it would use up a lot of fuel and drastically reduce the aircraft's range. And, in seeking out a low-level route I couldn't go far out of my way for the same reason. If we did make the flight, we'd either get through or pile up in the mountains.

All in all, the picture wasn't very jolly, but the whole scheme was just fantastic enough to capture the imagination of a very bored wing commander, buried in paperwork. Right there and then I decided to make the try if I could get permission.

Air Commodore Bartholomew, the British air attaché in Chungking, was my immediate boss. Before I went to RAF Headquarters in New Delhi, I sent him a message in which I asked permission to tackle the flight. His reply came back a few days later, a communiqué in which he said the plan had his blessing, provided I thought the venture reasonably sound and "Headquarters -India" raised no objections. This, I thought at the time, passed the buck very nicely and was in keeping with the highest traditions of the diplomatic service.

Next day I flew to Delhi and RAF Headquarters, situated in New Delhi which lies outside the old walled city. There, I started in with the office boy and worked my way up to the higher ranks. It was a long and wearying day. As I had expected, everyone to whom I spoke flatly rejected the scheme as preposterous, and not even to be considered.

Several of the officers I talked to had made the flight over the Hump in Daks -U.S. Air Force Dakotas as we called the DC-3 transport during the war, or Avro Yorks -the four-engined British transport version of the Lancaster bomber.

"You know," one of them said thoughtfully, "the minimum safe height over the Hump is 21,000 feet. Even in a York, with four engines, it can be damned unpleasant. What chance do you think you'll stand in a light aircraft with a ceiling of thirteen or fourteen thousand?"

My reply was that I had gone into the matter to the best of my capabilities and considered, provided certain conditions could

be fulfilled, the flight could be made. If I hadn't thought it possible, I added, I wouldn't have bothered making the trip to New Delhi because it would have been simply wasting my time as well as his.

It was hard going. The lads at headquarters who had won their "Orders of the British Empire" awards now only wanted to get their discharges, and those who had been unlucky in the draw had no interest in such an obscure matter as the final dispersal of the Chinese Air Force. But I finally reached the air commodore level and found a chap with some imagination who was, at least, ready to listen to what I had to say. He was the Air Staff Officer, and he heard me out.

When I'd finished, he said that if the RAF did help - "And, mind you, I'm making no promises" - it would only be as far as Imphal, near the Burmese border, a little over halfway. "Bearing that in mind, and assuming the Chinese can provide for you from Imphal onwards, what help will you need from us?" he asked.

This was the first encouragement I'd received. "The main thing I'll need will be an airfield between Calcutta and Imphal," I said, "two if we hit bad weather. Our stops should be spaced not more than 225 miles apart." That was about maximum range for our aircraft. "If the ground to be covered is higher than 10,000 feet, the fields will have to be not more than 200 miles apart. Also, I'll need stocks of 80 or 82 octane gasoline at all stopping points between Lahore and Imphal, although I'm prepared to take a little 90 octane if necessary."

He thought that over. "You're a complete bloody fool, Watts," he said, finally, "but if the scheme doesn't look too crazy after I've examined it more fully - without the help of an enthusiastic idiot - I'm prepared to help."

The air commodore wasted no time. Within a week, I had received word from New Delhi that I could organize the flight on the following lines:

1. Headquarters, India, would arrange all refuelling points from Lahore to Imphal, also the night stopping points over that part of the route.

2. The Chinese government would be responsible for similar arrangements from Imphal to final destination, Kunming.

3. The flight must be completed over the RAF part of the route before the end of the third week in December, as after that date the airfields in Burma would be closed down.

4. The RAF would give no maintenance assistance along the route.

5. The RAF “accepts no responsibility for the success or failure of the flight, which, in the opinion of this headquarters, is foolhardy.”

In other words, I could go ahead. But the whole scheme was strictly my headache.

Except for the, “third-week-in-December” deadline, I was well satisfied with the RAF answer to my request.

The next step was to fly back to New Delhi to find out which fields had been selected for the flight and to get hold of all the maps on which I could lay my hands.

My request for ninety sets of maps covering the area from Lahore to Kunming caused a lot of amusement when I went to see the command map officer at headquarters. He did, though, give me all he had, a dozen sets, and those only covering the territory as far as Imphal. It looked as if maps, or the lack of them, was going to be a major problem and one I hadn’t considered.

“Try the Americans,” the map officer suggested, “but I doubt you’ll find ninety sets of maps of that route exist in one place in all India.”

He was right. The maps we eventually used were dated 1905. That was before I was even born.

I went over the route with the map officer, as far as Imphal. It seemed to be all right, but I couldn’t get a word out of him regarding conditions of airfields past Imphal itself. I think he could have given me some information on the Imphal-Kunming leg, but had been well briefed on the amount of help he was allowed to extend.

The RAF was making it clear it wanted nothing to do with the flight which, as far as the air force was concerned, was a purely Chinese affair.

Armed with my so-called maps, I went back to Lahore again. Colonel Liu, in the meantime, had gone to China and I set to work with his second-in-command, Lieutenant-Colonel Chen, to lay out the flight plan. He promised to locate the other maps I’d need and

to make the necessary arrangements for the flight east from Imphal. However, he said, this would have to be done through Chungking.

Two days after our talk, Colonel Chen breezed into my office with a happy grin on his face. "Everything is ready," he declared.

The arrangements had all been completed so quickly that I began to entertain grave doubts about them. Normally, it took at least two days to get a message through to Chungking, and a reply in less than five days was considered rapid. There was not much I could do, however, except to take his word for it that the Chinese had, indeed, laid on all that would be required on that portion of the route. I did so with the mental reservation that if he was speaking the truth, the flight arrangements constituted the finest piece of Chinese organizational work I had ever encountered and probably the best since the original dynasty.

While we worked out the paper details, we would have considerable time in which to give the route at least a preliminary scouting. I had just the man for the job, Major George Ling, a fine pilot, a good fellow and one of the few Chinese on the station who spoke English. He had trained in the States.

The "Hump" lay between Paoshan, our first stop in China and Imphal. If we could conquer that leg of the flight, I could see nothing else to bar our way.

There were two possible routes. The first, from Imphal northeast 220 miles to the Burmese base of Myitkyina, then southeast about 100 miles to Paoshan, looked like the best bet. The other, southeast 210 miles from Imphal to Bhamo, in Burma, meant an initial leg of slightly less -an important consideration in view of our limited range, but a slightly longer flight over the Hump itself into Paoshan, 125 miles at least, even if we could find a route which would take us northeast in a more-or-less straight line.

I knew there was a good airfield at Myitkyina. It was one of the stops on the Chinese National Airways route to India and I had been there myself on occasion, but I knew nothing about the ground from there on. This was not much help, but on the other hand, I knew absolutely nothing about the Bhamo route. Myitkyina seemed the logical choice.

George agreed. "I could take one of the Stearmans and try it out," he said. "I'll take it easy and keep in touch as much as possible."

He took off the next day. I walked down to the aircraft to see him off and we stood around chatting as the mechanics gave his plane a last going-over. "Don't try to be a hero," I warned him, "If it gets sticky, turn back and have a look at the Bhamo route."

George gave me a grin and then stuck out his hand. "You worry too much," he said. "After all, I am the best pilot in the Chinese Air Force, even you have to admit that!"

He climbed up into the Stearman's cockpit as the mechanics stepped back and removed the wheel chocks. "Buy you a beer in Kunming!" he yelled as the engine caught.

I watched him take off, then wandered back to my paper-strewn office.

It seemed a cruel and unusual reward for my labours that George should be making his flight while I, who had taken on the job to escape the swivel-chair routine of my regular duties should wind up, as usual, ensconced behind the overflowing "in" and "out" baskets on my desk.

By the end of November, all the arrangements for the flight had been completed. I had received assurances from all the RAF stations at which we would land that they were ready for us and the Chinese swore that gasoline would be available at Myitkyina or Bhamo, whichever field we decided to use, Paoshan, and one other intermediate point between Paoshan and Kunming.

With George's Stearman gone, there were now 84 aircraft left on the station. I finally decided to split them into seven flights of twelve planes each. We would leave at 24-hour intervals and, as leader, I would have the doubtful privilege of heading the first flight. Each flight would be scheduled to complete the trip in six days.

Our map collection had been gradually built up. There weren't enough for a complete set for each pilot; it worked out to two sets for each three pilots. From what I had seen of some of the Chinese aviators, though, maps weren't going to be of much assistance, anyway

December 3 was set as the date of the departure and the week before that was spent in getting the aircraft ready. I had been allotted the commandant's Stearman, for which I was extremely grateful. It had not led quite as hard a life as the others.

The RAF, in a burst of generosity, offered to give my aircraft a good overhaul before we set out, an offer I would have been only too happy to accept. I took it up with the Chinese engineer officer and he looked most offended, so much as I would have liked to, I didn't press the point. The Chinese are touchy about losing face.

On the Wednesday before take-off, Colonel Chen came to see me and asked to have one of the refuelling points changed. He wanted us to land at the American base at Ondle. I blew my top over the last-minute switch in plans, but Chen was insistent. "We have lots of spare parts there," he said, "and we want to give the planes a good minor checkup before the hard part of the trip."

I had to phone Delhi and, as I feared, the people there were none too happy about the change. They agreed finally, though, and the Chinese seemed to be most appreciative.

In the meantime, there was another decision to be made. George Ling had been making steady progress eastward, encountering no difficulties according to the reports we had received from the stations at which he had landed. He had arrived in Myitkyina on schedule, stopped to refuel and then headed out again. Since then, there had been no word from him -and a week had passed.

It was quite possible that bad weather or the need for repairs had grounded him at Paoshan. In the latter case, we would find him waiting there when we arrived, but in the meantime we could not count on his having reached there safely. There was no radio communication with Paoshan, and little likelihood that we would get any word of him before we took off if he were, indeed, there.

The only other answer was that he had gone down somewhere between Myitkyina and Paoshan, or between Paoshan and Kunming, and as the days had gone by without word from him, the gnawing uncertainty had grown. Now I must decide whether the rest of us would follow George by way of Myitkyina, or presuming he had made Paoshan at least, or take the unknown route south through Bhamo.

There really wasn't much choice. If George had made it all right, I'd find him at Paoshan or Kunming. If he hadn't, I couldn't risk the lives of the crews of 84 aircraft by trying to follow his route in the hope of being able to help should we locate his missing plane.

I felt pretty sick as I turned to Colonel Chen, standing beside

me in the office and waiting for my verdict.

“We’ll fly by way of Bhano,” I said.

Not until the Sunday before take-off did I get a chance to make my own arrangements. Knowing the aircraft would be loaded to capacity, I cut my personal gear to a minimum, leaving room for a good first aid kit and a pistol in case of trouble. We would wear flying suits, because it would be cool enough where we were going, and I confined my packing to one good uniform, a spare shirt and a couple of extra sweaters.

There were some heated arguments in the mess as to the final disposal of my personal effects. Lahore had no Monday papers, a Sunday edition being published instead, and it would of course be that particular Sunday that the Civil and Military Gazette chose to publish the official American air losses in flying the Hump route during the war. It was a really horrible figure.

I made the best of the ribbing, although if I was presented with one copy of the Gazette I received a dozen. Since it might well turn out to be my last I enjoyed my noonday meal to the full. It turned out to be a pretty wet luncheon.

That evening I went over the final plans again. The previous day, I had brought the Chinese staff pilots in for a briefing and had tried to pound into their skulls that the most important part of the flight was that they must try to keep to the schedule, but not get ahead of it.

I had worked out a system for keeping check on the progress of each flight. A supply of forms was printed and copies sent ahead to each stopping-point along the route. When a flight took off, the flight commander would receive a form from the duty pilot at the station which would state that so many aircraft from such-and-such a flight had left “A” for “B”. On his arrival at “B”, the flight commander would hand in the form there and the duty pilot at “B” would have only to count the number of aircraft which had landed to make sure none had been lost on the way. The process was to be repeated at each station.

This precaution was extremely necessary, as none of the pilots spoke English except one, Joe Lee, who would serve as interpreter on the trip. I was afraid that if some such scheme were

not maintained, lame ducks would be dropping out of the sky all over the place, with nobody any the wiser.

There were two last-minute items of interest to myself. Colonel Chen informed me that the Chinese had chosen Tsuyung as the intermediate stopping point between Paoshan and Kunming. And headquarters at Delhi phoned to say that George Ling had been given up for lost.

The Civil and Military Gazette had compiled its list a few hours too early. The figures were out by two; one aircraft and one awfully nice chap who'd buy no more beers for anyone.

We took off at 8 a.m. on Monday, December 3, just one hour late, which wasn't too bad as the Chinese reckoned time. The whole station turned out to see us leave and the station's Chinese brass band made the morning hideous with their versions of the Blue Bells of Scotland, Bonnie Dundee, and assorted other Scottish national airs.

It was a beautiful day, bright and warm with only light winds, as I climbed into the front cockpit of my Stearman. My passenger, one of the mechanics was already strapped into his seat. I waved a few final farewells, revved up the engine and headed out for the runway on the first lap of the flight to Kunming, the other eleven aircraft of the flight following my own.

We got off without incident and then took up a loose "V" formation of four groups of three aircraft each, my own aircraft heading the first group, the second group flying just astern and to port, the third astern and to the left of the second and the fourth group astern and to my right.

In this type of formation, every pilot could watch another aircraft, a necessary matter since there were but two sets maps for each three planes and we had no radio communication. In case one of us went down in the jungle, the pilot watching that particular aircraft, at least, would know where it happened.

Every other plane carried one of the Chinese mechanics; the aircraft without passengers were crammed with baggage.

Our first halt was at Ambala, 170 miles southeast of Lahore. The flying control officer was waiting on the tarmac with the refuelling arrangement all ready and in less than half an hour we

were in the air again and on course for Delhi.

At Delhi, where both British and American aircraft were stationed, we ran into the first hitch in a day full of hitches. When I taxied onto the tarmac there was no sign of Burma Shell, the company supposedly in charge of fuelling arrangements and the RAF duty pilot in the control tower dismissed the whole problem with a shrug. "I instructed the Americans to deal with your refuelling," he said.

I was in no mood to argue, and shoved a copy of the instructions he had received under his nose. From them, it was plain it was his job. He had simply tried to push the chore off on the Americans who, quite rightly, would have nothing to do with it. He absorbed a pretty fair blast before he got busy hunting up our fuel.

When the Shell people did arrive, they had only a hand pump and it took an hour and a half to fill the tanks. Due to the late start from Lahore and the added delay at Delhi, we took off for Agra very much behind schedule.

Agra was 120 miles from Delhi, the same distance as from Delhi to Ambala, and there was more trouble waiting there.

I landed on the runway and was directed onto the grass at the side, to find myself taxiing over ditches a foot deep and expecting the undercarriage to collapse any minute. The RAF officer in charge said the field was controlled by the Americans, who had refused permission for our aircraft to be taxied onto the aprons.

This was getting damned aggravating, and I wasted more time in locating the American flying control officer. It turned out however, that he was trying to be helpful. He'd thought the Stearmans were equipped with tailskids, instead of taxi wheels, and was afraid the skids would have been broken if the aircraft had been taxied on the concrete.

We straightened that out for the benefit of the six other flights which were to follow, but we were another hour behind before we could get off the ground for Cawnpore, another 152 miles, on the last leg of the day.

Although we were well behind schedule, I couldn't resist taking my flight over the Taj Mahal. I'd seen the Taj from the ground and, like all tourists, by moonlight, but I had never seen it before from the air. It looked glorious in the setting sun, the minarets a beautiful rosy-pink. We circled above the Taj for five minutes until the same sun which was gilding its minarets warned me that we

had better be off for Cawnpore if we were to arrive before dark. We landed there at dusk, with 562 miles of our trip behind us.

It had been a long time since I'd spent eight hours on the parachute of an open trainer and my stern was complaining bitterly as I climbed down to meet the RAF flight sergeant who saw us in. I was pretty groggy and not looking forward to the chore of picketing the aircraft down and seeing that the daily inspections were made.

The flight sergeant must have seen how tired I was and offered to look after the routine for me.

"You know you're not supposed to do the DI's on these things," I said. Headquarters, India, had been explicit on that point. All the RAF was going to do was arrange for accommodation and refuelling.

"No one told me that, sir," he answered. "You pack off to bed."

The station mess could supply nothing but Cyprus gin or Cape brandy, so I turned in right after dinner.

The cold drove me out of bed before 6 a.m. The air force had issued me with two blankets, but I could have used a third badly. At breakfast, the Chinese also complained of the cold and said the two blankets each had been lent were not sufficient. I paid little attention to the complaint as I knew each had two blankets of his own, in addition to the two with which he had been issued overnight, and could have been only half as cold as myself.

We left for Allahabad at nine o'clock, another 120-mile leg. My own aircraft and six of the others had landed uneventfully when a spitfire fighter with a burst radiator appeared on the scene. Its pilot, a flight lieutenant, had been sweating it out all the way into the field, expecting his engine to blow up in his face at any moment, and the control tower immediately gave the five remaining Stearmans a red light, to warn them away from the circuit until the crippled fighter could land.

My pilots were magnificent. I turned to see the Spit doing a series of desperate tight turns inside the circuit, trying to find a way in between a flock of Stearmans while the temperature gauge on the instrument panel climbed steadily toward the obliteration mark. Frantic red lights and red flares from the tower could not upset my

men, who landed one after the other in perfect order on the runway while the Spit's pilot, sure he could not last out another circuit, finally brought his kite in on the grass alongside the concrete.

The pilot, after he landed, and the control officer, who held the rank of a pilot officer, both seem annoyed. I was wearing my coverall and there was nothing about my costume to indicate I was a wing commander and outranked them both. Neither did I think it would be fair to mention the fact, so I accepted an extremely well-delivered rocket. The pilot, in particular, called me everything to which he could lay his tongue.

When they had finished with me, I called my little band together and gave them a short lecture on how to arrive at a controlled airport, and also how to depart. Since none of them except Joe Lee could understand what I was saying, I concentrated on giving Joe livid hell in the hope, subsequently justified, that he would pass it on.

I might have saved my breath. On take-off, No. 6 took off against the "red" cutting off a four-engined British Overseas Airways York transport which was coming in.

By the time we had completed the 123-mile hop to Bihta our last stop for the day, I was still smouldering over the Allahabad incident. My temper was not improved when, after landing, Major Chan, the Chinese flight commander, informed me that my men did not wish to remain in Bihta overnight, but instead wanted to push on to Andal, 192 miles southeast.

"Before we do anything else," I told him, I want the pilot of No. 6 aircraft place on charge."

To my complete amazement, Major Chan came up with a stout defence of the pilot involved. "You should arrange for the whole flight to take off together!" he exclaimed. "Our flight should have complete authority at all airfields!"

The idea of aircraft wishing to land having to give way to planes taking off was so original I could only gasp, smile weakly and forget any plans for any disciplinary action.

On the question of continuing on to Andal, however both of us were adamant. I explained over and over that we would have to stay overnight at Bihta, because that was where our accommodation had been arranged. If we did go ahead, it would upset all the work which had gone into preparing the flight route.

Major Chan couldn't see that reasoning. "There is plenty of

daylight left!" he stormed. "Most of the pilots have not seen their homes for eight years, and if we can reach Kunming one day early they are going to do so!"

Joe Lee was perspiring hard, trying to keep up with the torrent of words. "You can tell Major Chan that I spent weeks planning this flight," I told him. "Tell him it's my job to get the flight to Kunming, not to break any records, and that it is also my job to make things as easy as possible for the flights behind us. And you can tell him the planes are his to do what he likes with, and that he can go ahead – but without me, and that I will, in such case, have to inform my headquarters that the Chinese require no further assistance from the RAF."

It was quite the speech and it did the trick. When Joe had finished interpreting what I'd said, Major Chan grudgingly decided to stay and, very sourly told the crews to get the aircraft pegged down. From the looks I got while this was all going on – a good crowd had gathered by now – I decided that dark lanes in China would be good places for me to avoid in the future.

I spoke to Joe later, in the mess. He was a good fellow, but I don't think he was very much impressed with my arguments. But I told him I'd be well satisfied to finish each and every day with twelve aircraft at the place where we were scheduled to be.

So far our flight had been over the endless Punjabi plain, but in the past two days we had arrived in what was to me a completely new India, an India more like the story books, with banana trees growing wild in the mess compound. The burnt plains of the Punjab dotted with hundreds of villages, had given way to a green, jungly country where even the buildings were different.

In Lahore, my bungalow was of brick, with a flat mud roof eighteen inches thick. Here, the buildings, which were called bashans, were made of plaited reeds with thatched, gabled roofs, and there was not a pane of glass anywhere, not even in the mess. Mosquito nets sufficed to keep the bugs and beetles out. I couldn't help but feel the men on the station must have had more faith in the qualities of the locals than I had for Punjabis, who are notoriously light-fingered.

I was surprised to see so many troops on such a small, out-of-the-way station, but I was told they were used on the repair of troop-carrying gliders, hundreds of which were parked around the aerodrome.

The gliders had been sent to India under Lend-Lease and the Americans were prepared to take back all the serviceable ones, and not charge them to the account, said my informant. When the airmen had a bunch serviceable, he added, the Americans sent along a board of officers from Andal. Once the gliders had been passed as airworthy, they were burned and the men would go on to the next batch.

It was a wonderful example of international book-keeping gone mad.

Patna, about 25 air miles east, was the nearest town to Bihta. I tried to get transport into the city, the centre of India's largest commercial rice-growing area, but was told it had been out of bounds for months due to civil riots. It was one of the real hotspots of Indian resistance to British rule and as a result the entire station was permanently confined to camp. They had a very dull life.

My pilots were waiting for me when Wednesday, December 5, dawned and I rose to prepare for the day's flight which would carry us to Andal and from there another 125 miles southeast to Bhangar.

This time the crews were screaming bloody murder over the quarters provided for them. Their accommodation was exactly the same as my own, but the absence of glass in the windows had convinced them they had been quartered in derelict buildings. I had to soothe their ruffled feelings before we could get down to do any flying. In China, I felt, I could expect to find beauty-rest mattresses on every bed, as well as silken sheets, if the comparisons they drew were correct.

The weather was staying perfect and the flight to Andal passed smoothly as the sun dispersed the morning chill.

No sooner had we touched down at Andal than my crews abandoned their aircraft and bolted for the American PX on the station. The mystery of their great push on to Andal the night before, and the reason why our route had been changed to include it as a stop, was cleared up when I saw them coming back to their planes, loaded down with chocolate bars, cigarettes, chewing gum and everything else on which they could lay their hands.

A ground party arrived two days before with spare part for

the aircraft and within a few minutes of our arrival all the Stearmans were being overhauled. The inspections took less than two hours to complete. A magneto, two sets of spark plugs and a tail-wheel assembly, the latter a victim of Agra's foot deep ditches, were changed and then we were heading south east again.

Bhangar hove into view on the horizon an hour and a half later, a welcome sight as it meant the flight to Kunming was half completed. On our arrival I arranged with the C.O. of the station for a truck to take the crews into Calcutta for a last look around. They wanted me to go along with them, but 25 miles each way in a truck did not appeal to my trainer-sore posterior, so I stayed in the mess and helped the C.O. dispose of a bottle of whiskey.

Relaxing in the mess that night my morale was pretty high. Admittedly, the 1,024 miles from Lahore to Bhangar was by far the easiest part of the whole flight but it was half the trip and we had arrived on time and intact.

All there was left to conquer was another thousand-odd miles, with the Hump in the middle.

There was no crew deputation before breakfast Thursday and the Chinese had never been so easy to get along with before. It left me with a horribly uneasy feeling which was well founded when I sat down to eat.

Joe broke the glad tidings.

In Calcutta, Joe said, General Lin, head of the mission, had told them arrangements for establishing a fuel dump at Bhano were not complete, and it was most unlikely they would be by the time we arrived.

My false optimism of the night before evaporated quickly in the face of that news. Bhano was the first place at which the Chinese were to look after our refuelling and there was every possibility the same situation would apply at all the other Chinese stops along the route. My forebodings back in Lahore, where the speed of the replies to our queries to Chungking had aroused my instant suspicion, now seemed all too real.

Should the gas not reach Bhano before we did, we would be well and truly stuck for we would not have enough of our own fuel left by the time we reached Bhano to either go ahead or turn back.

All I could do was hope.

The 180 mile flight from Bhangar to Agartala, our first stop of the day, proved to be the most difficult leg we had yet encountered.

The route lay over the mouth of the Ganges River, holy to the Hindus but the devil to a navigator. Instead of widening to a mouth as it nears the sea, as any decent river should, the Ganges breaks into dozens of little rivers which in turn split into countless more. My 16-miles-to-the-inch map of this region looked like a piece of Brussels Lace from the pattern they made and it was impossible to read it. I set a compass course and flew on that, figuring I should arrive somewhere that way.

Agartala came into view about two hours and fifteen minutes out of Bhangar, right on schedule, just a greyish-yellow slash in the solid green of the jungle. There was nothing else anywhere near that I could see, not even a single building.

A lone leading aircraftman was in charge of the coolies who carried out our refuelling. He told me the place was to be closed down when the last of the Chinese aircraft had passed through.

I had run off my 16-miles-to-the-inch maps now and had to fall back on the 32-miles-to-the-inch British Army maps which were the best I had been able to find for the flight across the Hump itself. They weren't much help.

Airborne again, we soon found ourselves flying over the foothills which marked the beginning of things to come and climbing steadily until we had reached a height of 10,000 feet. This was only 4,000 feet below our maximum and did nothing to ease my mind regarding the rest of the flight.

My maps indicated seven major ridges. These proved a Godsend, as the charts were otherwise almost useless from a navigational point of view. I could be fairly sure of the distance between ridges, so I navigated by taking my time from the top of the first ridge to the second, and so on over the seven. That way I could work out a rough ground speed and wind direction. Each of the ridges was higher than the one before and we were flying at a good 10,000 feet by the time we crossed over the last and descended on Imphal, about 200 miles from Agartala, where we were to lay over for the night.

Waiting on the tarmac as we taxied in was the C.O. of the station, Wing Commander Banthorpe, who had been one of my pupils when I commanded the refresher school at Lincolnshire in England. The visit turned into a regular family reunion by the time we had reached the officers' mess.

The squadron commander turned out to be a chap who had been one of my students at the RCAF station in De Winton, Alberta. The other junior officers had also served under me, at Swift Current, Saskatchewan during the war.

More rugged terrain than that in which Imphal lay was hardly imaginable. It had been completely surrounded by the Japanese during the fighting, but they had never been able to capture the airstrip, although their army had driven to within four miles of the aerodrome. The density of the jungle, as much as the thousands of troops who held out there had served to keep the Japanese at bay. The Japanese Air Force bombed the field daily during those days but at night it was busy with Allied planes en route to China or Calcutta and the troops laboured constantly to fill in each day's fresh bomb craters in order that the planes due that night might land.

I had been through Imphal several times in that period and had often wondered how it felt to be a soldier hemmed in on all sides, watching lucky blokes like myself climbing back into our planes after refuelling to take off for Calcutta where, in three-quarters of an hour or so, I could be relaxing in a comfortable bar, almost unaware there was a war going on. You had to give those men full credit for sticking.

W/C Banthorpe took me into Imphal on a sight-seeing trip. It was a city of about 95,000, with not much to see, but it struck me as being unusually clean by Indian standards.

I got my first close up of Burmese women there, too. Many of them were quite beautiful but local fashion dictated that there should be no curves and they were all bound up as tight as mummies.

On the way back to the field I told Banthorpe about the trouble I expected at Bhamo, also that Imphal was the last stop at which the RAF would be around to help. Banthorpe, I knew would give me what assistance he could but I didn't want him to get into trouble for doing something he was unaware he shouldn't.

Back at the mess I sat down to the worst meal I have ever

eaten –fried bully beef, tinned spinach and tinned potatoes. Everything they had came out of tins, except eggs, and they got so many eggs on the station they were heartily sick of them.

There was a cool veranda to which we retired after supper and the evening got rather out of hand. They might be eating out of tins, but the base was practically floating in whiskey. Most of it had been left behind by other units in Upper Burma and since it had cost nothing the bar was always free.

There was more whiskey at Imphal than the whole station complement could possibly dispose of before the airfield was closed down, but Imphal's airmen were doing their best to leave as little as possible behind to corrupt the morals of the local citizens.

About nine o'clock, W/C Banthorpe and the squadron commander went into a conference from which they emerged shortly to rejoin me. They had been discussing the coming day, something I had stopped worrying about a good hour before.

The squadron commander was most concerned. "Look here Wingco," he said to Banthorpe. "We just can't let the Old Maestro land at Bhamo and find no gas there, can we?" Banthorpe agreed.

There was a break while the glasses were refilled, then the squadron commander came back to the problem.

"How much gas will you need?" he asked.

I tried to figure it out. "Let's see. Three hours flying at most . . . nearer two . . . Say two and a half. Fifteen gallons an hour, 37 ½ gallons per aircraft, say 40. Twelve aircraft. Forty time 12 is 480, say 500 gallons."

"What the hell will that weigh?"

I had to fall back on a pencil and paper now. "7.7 pounds a gallon, say eight with the drums."

"Four thousands pounds? Nothing for a Dak."

Things moved quickly after that. I had little to do with them but as I sat in my cozy chair I could occasionally pick out some of the goings-on in the background.

". . . Where's the flight sergeant? Orderly officer, go and roust him out . . ."

"Flight, have a drink. Get eight drums of 80-octane loaded up tonight and all the hand pumps you can get a hold of. See that the damn stuff is lashed down well. Also, detail some bods to go to Bhamo tomorrow to refuel the Stearmans. Got that? Right! Have another drink. Let me know when you have fixed . . ."

“ . . . Station master, what about the Hump? Can't let the old Maestro cope with that on his own! How about the Dak that does the refuelling leading him to Paoshan? Can't be much help if he goes down but can at least pinpoint his position . . .”

“ . . . That's an idea. Who's doing the trip?”

“ . . . Freddy, when the “Wingco takes off from Bhamo, hang around and see him over the Hump. Roger? Fine!”

The squadron commander was back. “Maestro, you've got nothing to worry about; we'll get you to China! If not, we'll let your next-of-kin know where the body is, in case they want to collect it!”

I don't know what time I got to bed, but by that time I had certainly grown fond of Imphal. It was a nice feeling to know I had friends, too.

My body arose at 6 a.m. on Friday, December 7, took one look around and collapsed into a chair where it was shortly joined by various faculties which had fought a terrific, but losing battle against the need to awaken.

The weather was clear when I got up but by 7 a.m. a thick fog had materialized and visibility was down to 20 yards. I nourished a faint hope that the day's flight might have to be cancelled, but W/C Banthorpe, at breakfast predicted it would clear by 10 a.m. He was most unfortunately correct.

Once airborne, my personal problems quickly gave way to the more important one of clearing the first range of hills ahead. We had to climb hard to do it. The flight itself was an easy trip but at 11,000 feet the tops of the mountains looked unpleasantly close and I wondered how much higher we would have to go on the next leg.

Halfway across, the Dak flashed by, waggled his wings and was gone. We landed at Bhamo, in Burma now, at 12:40 and found Freddy waiting with the refuelling team standing by.

Major Chan went off to find out about the Chinese gasoline. He returned to say it had not yet arrived, but was expected in three or four days' time. He was very humble about it all.

In the midst of the refuelling, an army staff car drove onto the airstrip and an Indian Army captain got out to invite Freddy and myself to lunch in the mess. A small detachment of Punjabis was

stationed just off the strip, on guard duty, and the captain said conditions were worse than they had ever been during the war.

“There were only Japanese to fight while the war was on,” he sighed. “Now there are Jap deserters, Chinese deserters – a lot of them have Burmese wives – and Burmese out to stir up trouble. You can’t trust anyone.”

The men were living under canvas and were fired on almost every night, he added. It was impossible to defend the place properly with the number of troops available and the casualty list was mounting steadily.

“My men are all disgusted with the peace,” he declared.

Luncheon started off pleasantly enough, but during the meal a signal was brought in to the adjutant. He read it and passed it on to the C.O., an Indian Army Colonel, who in turn passed it to me. The fine plans of the night before blew up in my face before I’d finished reading the first sentence.

A small detachment of the Punjabis had been stationed at an old Japanese Army base about 60 miles north of Bhamo, with orders to demolish it. Either a booby trap set by the Japanese or a helpful local saboteur had speeded up the job by blowing up the camp’s ammunition dump. Several men had been killed, many were injured and eight would have to be evacuated to hospital immediately if they were to live, the message said.

The C.O. suggested nothing but I knew all too well that a regular colonel in the Indian Army loved his troops more than he did his wife, and that he was hoping for help from Freddy’s Dak. I asked Freddy if there was a strip near the camp – there was – and then told him to push off as soon as our refuelling was complete and the doctors and nurses were ready.

W/C Banthorpe and Freddy had already broken the rules well and truly by having the Dak accompany my flight to Bhamo. I didn’t want Freddy to get into any additional trouble, so I scribbled an authorization for the flight and told him to contact Imphal by radio as soon as he was off the ground, to let his squadron commander know what he was doing.

I squandered a few lonely moments watching the Dak disappear on its mercy flight, then turned back to face the next step in the journey, the 125-mile flight to Paoshan. It was 2:30 by this time and we would have to hurry if we were to reach Paoshan before dusk.

I hunted up Joe Lee and Major Chan and asked the major to see that the crews prepared for take-off as soon as possible. Major Chan looked at me in amazement.

'It is only 12:30!' he exclaimed.

We compared watches and I discovered that he had forgotten to put his watch ahead after leaving Lahore. We had been flying steadily eastward for four and a half days, but neither Major Chan nor any of the pilots had realized we had passed through two time zones. All their watches were two hours slow.

"The sun time at Bhamo is likely closer to three than 2:30," I added. "If we don't get off the ground within fifteen minutes, we'll have to spend the night here."

Major Chan hurried away, barking orders, and the Chinese crews came tumbling out to their aircrafts. By a few minutes to three all twelve Stearmans were in the air, clawing for altitude and heading southeast down a long valley which was one of the few topographical features marked on my maps.

Paoshan lay almost due east of Bhamo, but in between the Hump soared to 19,000 feet. The only answer seemed to be to try the valley, that of the Lu Kiang River, indicated on the maps, which should lead us into Paoshan.

On my charts it appeared possible the flight could be accomplished at an altitude of not more than 13,000 feet, but I placed little faith in them. They were based on a survey carried out during the First Burmese War of Eighteen-Something-Or-Other and large areas on them were blank and marked "Unexplored." About half of the rest might just as well have been marked "Unexplored" while the makers were at it; none of the landmarks I looked for were identifiable on the maps.

We were forced to climb steadily through the valley and at the end of an hour were at 14,000 feet and just skimming over the jagged ridges below, the engines labouring in the rarified air. Nowhere in the sea of green beneath my plane was there any sign of life.

From some recess of memory, I recalled Kipling's lines; "What sort of a country, Beetle? Well I'm no giddy word-painter, but you might describe it as a hellish country." It was all of that, indeed, and then some.

I knew that the rolling expanse of jungle, broken every now and then by a jutting mass of rock or another ridge reaching up

towards my aircraft, concealed as deadly a fate for a downed flier as could be found anywhere.

A plane which went down in that lush green hell would probably never be seen by searchers. The trees and dense undergrowth of the jungle would envelop it completely and in a few months only a twisted metal framework, some bones picked clean by the kites and shreds of rotting khaki and fabric would be left to mark the grave of yet another victim of the most savage country in Southeast Asia.

I had plenty of time to think about this as the Stearman droned onwards, fighting to maintain its altitude in the thin mountain air – and to think about George Ling, who might be somewhere below me for all I knew. There was no comfort from my passenger. He spoke no English; I, no Chinese. I doubt if ten words had passed between us on the whole trip and now he sat silently in the rear cockpit, hunched down to protect himself from the bitterly-cold blast of the slipstream. His expression had not changed once on the whole flight either, and from all I could see of his face, he might have been dreaming of the farewell smash in Calcutta, without a worry in the world.

I had been pushing my aircraft as fast as it could go, in hopes of squeezing in a few more minutes of full daylight, but now I had to throttle back in order to allow the rest of the flight to catch up. My own plane, the Lahore commandant's personal aircraft, was in better shape than their student-battered kites and I had, without noticing, left them strung out for quite a distance behind me.

The minutes dragged on. I craned my head desperately in search of the valley which would lead us safely north. There was no sign of it, although if my calculations were correct, we had passed its location on the map several minutes before.

I could recognize nothing from my maps. To the left, a solid wall of mountains stretched up to the still-blue sky, on the right another rocky wall did the same. Ahead I could see still more mountains, towering up to nearly 20,000 feet and sealing the end of the valley up which we flew.

Behind lay Bhamo, and safety. The temptation to turn back was almost overwhelming. And then I realized that even Bhamo no longer offered hope. We had been flying nearly two hours now and our tanks were more than half empty.

The slightest "bump", a fancied skip in the smooth thunder of

the engine, a sweat-distorted glimpse of an instrument panel dial which seemed off – all were enough to kindle a panic. “You can’t lose your head!” I told myself over and over again. And always in the back of the mind were the stories one heard about the Hump. Country in which tough Ghurka troops could make only a mile a day, crawling with the cobras and even deadlier kraits, populated by tigers and a thousand and one varieties of poisonous insects and leeches. Even to survive a crash, for the few who had escaped, had done so through being lucky enough to crash near rivers. On a raft or a log, a man might eventually drift to safety. On foot in the jungle, hacking his way through the underbrush, he might last a week.

On top of all was the fear of the approaching darkness. That would kill as surely as the running out of gasoline.

And then I saw the valley. It cut sharply to northwards and looked hardly wide enough to accommodate twelve aircraft spread out in a wide formation, but it was our only hope. I banked to my left and the others followed.

Within a few minutes the valley had widened to the breadth of the one we had just left and ahead I could see that at fourteen thousand feet we would clear everything. We were over the Hump and we were the first light aircraft ever to do it!

We were in China now. Exactly where, I didn’t know. Nor had I any more than a vague idea where Paoshan lay, but I flew on happy as a sparrow, the sagging fuel gauge indicator all but forgotten.

We were heading almost due north and on our left the sun had nearly disappeared behind the hills. Paoshan, I knew, lay in a basin surrounded by mountains and I was just wondering if I would be able to spot it, and starting to panic again, when I saw the landing strip, nearly 9,000 feet below.

I waggled my wings for the benefit of the other pilots – God only knew what had been going on in their minds for the past three hours! - throttled back, and headed down to the airstrip in a steep spiral glide.

The more height I lost, the darker it became as the last light of the sun was blotted out by the ring of hills. I touched down in the

dark, my ears popping with the sudden change in pressure, and ran to the end of the runway, hotly pursued by the rest of the flight.

Had we left Bhano 10 minutes later than we did, we would never have seen Paoshan. Nor would the Dak have been around to say where we had gone.

The God of aviators had, indeed, been kind.

We had barely drawn our aircraft up at the side of the Paoshan airstrip when we were surrounded by hundreds of the worst-looking cutthroats I had ever seen.

The most wicked-looking of all turned out to be the local commandant. They were all dressed in rags and most of them were barefoot. Their uniforms were identical too, and the only badge of rank I ever discovered was that most of the officers had some kind of footwear, the men, none.

This was my first introduction to China at war, and everywhere I looked I could see poverty and despair. In Chungking the capital, the Chinese tried to put on a show but in an outpost like Paoshan you could see things as they really were.

Once the aircraft were picketed down - I made sure our own guards were put on them! - I was escorted to a jeep and driven off at a terrific speed. The town was about ten miles from the airstrip and we stopped three times on the road so the driver could go out and walk ahead to see if the bridge was still there. This precaution was advisable, one of my escort explained, because of the local custom of removing planks for firewood.

Paoshan turned out to be little more than a village with one main road and an inn which looked quite presentable outside but proved to be indescribably filthy once we had entered. The inn could not provide food and the bedding turned out to be thick quilted eiderdowns, heavy with grease and dirt.

The only illumination in the room Joe Lee and I were to share was provided by a pair of saucer-like lamps, about the size one would expect to find in a child's tea set, equipped with a lip in which lay a wick. They gave a far less light than a candle.

After we had washed up, we were taken to the best food shop in the town and enjoyed an excellent meal. The practice I had put in with chopsticks at Lahore proved extremely useful. We were

fed all the local dainties - I was careful not to ask what they were made of - and were well-supplied with wine, which was served in cups about the size of thimbles. It was potent stuff, but quite pleasant. I was surprised that the meal did not end with rice in the typical Chinese manner, and was told that the rice was so scarce that the Paoshan garrison rarely saw it. The poor, our informants said, were on the verge of starvation.

That night was the worst I have ever experienced. As soon as Joe and I had extinguished the lamps in our room, we discovered that we were sharing quarters with thousands of others. The place was alive with bugs. In desperation, we re-lit the lamps, dressed in flying kits, hurling the eiderdowns out the door and lay down on the bare wooden boards of the beds in an effort to get some sleep. Neither of us got much and by 5:30 a.m. we were out in the street, to find most of the rest of the flight there before us.

I told Joe the accommodation did not quite come up to the bashans he had complained about at Baigachi and he agreed, in terms the mission school he had attended in Hong Kong had not included in their curriculum.

We had to wait until eight o'clock for breakfast, so Joe and I walked around in the village to kill time. It was a strange place, as strange to Joe as it was to me. Many of the women we saw had tiny deformed feet, as the result of the old practice of binding their feet while they were infants. This had been illegal for over 40 years but Paoshan was thousands of mile from China's peacetime capital and life there went on much as it had a thousand, or 10,000 years before

I found myself to be the centre of interest and everywhere we wandered, large crowds followed. Joe told me mine was the first white face these people had ever seen.

Breakfast turned out to be much the same as dinner, wine included had I wanted it, and after it was over we drove back to the airfield. The refuelling was in progress and I judged by the position of the gang on the job that it was about half finished. My own aircraft's tank had been filled and I proceeded to give the plane its usual pre-flight inspection.

The gas gauge on a Stearman hangs down from the centre-section of the upper wing and is fixed to the bottom of the upper wing and is fixed to the bottom of the tank. A black rod with a float fitted to the upper end moves up and down in the gauge's glass

tube, the level of the rod showing how much fuel is left in the tank. When the rod reaches the bottom of the tube, the tank is empty.

I glanced at the gauge, saw the black rod was not showing, which meant the tank was full, and was about to check the rest of the instruments when I noticed some sort of globules falling down the tube and settling in the bottom.

Water! Of all the hazards connected with flying, few are worse than moisture in a fuel tank. The slightest bit mixed with the gasoline can mean engine failure.

“Joe! Come here fast!” I yelled.

I tapped the gas tank and the bubbles came faster. They were grey in colour and I could see sediment forming at the bottom of the gauge.

We sprinted down the strip to where the refuelling was working. One glance told the story.

They were filling the aircrafts' tanks from fifty gallon drums, using a large funnel fitted with a chamois. The chamois stops any water which may be in the drum from passing into the tank, but filling up through a chamois is tedious work and the crew, getting bored, had removed the chamois from the funnel and were pouring the gasoline directly into the fuel tanks. That was much faster.

Five of the Stearmans had already been fuelled and the other four were in as bad shape as my own. There was only one thing to do; drain all five tanks, a difficult and slow business which should be a hangar job, since our very lives depended on its being done thoroughly.

It was another two hours before the aircraft were ready to leave and 11 o'clock before I got the flight airborne.

The 8,500-foot climb upwards from the Paoshan strip was a much different task from the spiralling down the night before, but eventually we were on top of the mountains again and setting course for Tsuyung, 130 miles east, the last stopping-place before Kunming.

Flying over country like that which lay below us, a pilot can never relax, but for the first hour everything went smoothly. The other planes were keeping well up with my own, the weather, as it had been on the whole trip, was beautiful and Tsuyung came

steadily nearer as we droned along in the sunshine.

Then water started to appear again in the gas gauge and my comparative peace of mind dissolved into a sick horror at the thought of what could happen. For the second time in 24 hours, it looked as if all the long weeks of planning and the nerve-wracking grind of dodging the peaks, seeking out the unmapped valleys, and nursing our stout little aircraft over the ridges were to be wasted, almost in sight of our final objective.

If our luck held 40 minutes longer, we would be all right. By now we were closer to Tsuyung than Paoshan so I held my course . . . and waited.

At first, only a few more drops of water appeared in the gauge but soon a regular trickle was coming down and a black scum of sediment began to pile up at the bottom. I prayed and I watched. As long as the muck stayed lower in the tank than the outlet to the engine, we'd have a chance. The moment one small drop of the stuff got into the jet, our engine would stop dead.

The water and scum continued to pile up steadily and within a few minutes the black deposit was so thick in the tube it had pushed the rod up to the point where the float was standing clear of the gasoline in the tank. I sat rigid in the cockpit, hardly daring to twitch for fear the slightest shifting about would send the ghastly black mess sloshing into the jet, quaking every time a wing dropped in the fitful air currents above the bleak peaks.

Somehow, we made it. Not until the runway at Tsuyung lay below did I dare take my eyes off the fuel gauge, and then the gravelled strip was rushing up at us. We were bouncing on its surface and, finally, taxiing towards the side of the field.

I closed the throttle and sat where I was, shaking from head to toe for a good couple of minutes before I could muster strength to undo my parachute harness and clamber down to the ground. My silent partner, the Chinese mechanic, stayed right where he was in the rear cockpit, staring pasty-faced at the sludge-filled gas gauge. It was the only time I'd seen him show any emotion on the whole trip, and I knew just how he felt.

My knees still rubbery, I went over to examine the other four planes in whose tanks water had been found that morning. They were all in as bad shape as my own aircraft; how we had reached Tsuyung without one engine failure, at least, I will never know.

I gave instructions for the tanks to be drained again – and

painstakingly! -and while we waited, discussed with Major Chan and Joe all the deaths we would have liked to apply to the commandant at Paoshan. It was the first time since leaving Lahore we had all found something in common.

The rest of the flight was anti-climax. Normally, it might have caused me some concern. The route over which we flew was a jungle mass of broken land and we had to stay close to 10,000 feet most of the way. But having, come through what we had between Bhamo and Tsuyung, I felt absolutely indestructible.

Some more water appeared in the gas gauge in the 1120 miles from Tsuyung to Kunming but I hardly gave it a thought, knowing now what the engine would take. And at five o'clock on Saturday, December 8, 1945, I was leading a triumphant, if wobbly, V of Stearmans down the sky to the runways of Kunming airport, where dozens of senior Chinese officers were waiting to welcome us in.

It had been a good show and I should have felt elated, but for some reason now that it was over, I felt curiously flat and not in the least bit pleased with myself. I think I must have been keyed up much more than I realized. My nerves were playing all kinds of funny tricks now that I knew there would be no trip into the unknown to fly the next day.

I chatted with some of the officers while the aircraft were being unloaded -and in the midst of the conversation discovered that, unknown to myself, I had not only led the first light plane flight over the Hump, but had also been in charge of what must have been the largest mass movement of smuggled goods by air in many a month.

From the tunnel behind my cockpit, two of the mechanics who had made the trip were extracting two radios and a multitude of smaller forbidden goods. Before I could as much as blink, they had moved forward to haul a third radio out from its hiding-place behind the engine bulkhead. The other eleven Stearmans were all discharging similar cargos: a small fortune in contraband was piled on the tarmac when the job was finished.

That was just about it. My mind filled with visions of the filthy cell in which I should have spent my reclining years if any of the

stuff had been found by customs. I allowed my hosts to lead me off to Chinese headquarters for congratulations and the usual ceremonial tea, and then to my room in Kunming's best hotel.

I found the bed, fell on it and was asleep before I landed.

I learned what the trip had cost on Sunday night.

It had been impossible to keep track of the other six flights on the last legs of the flight for once we had left the RAF bases behind there had been no more wireless communication. As far as Imphal, there was not too much to worry about as there were no special hazards in their way and we had been able before leaving to chart accurate courses. From Imphal on, however, I could only hope their luck would be as good as ours.

I woke just before noon on Sunday and while getting cleaned up, began to wonder a little about the other flights' progress. The second flight as not due into Kunming until that afternoon though, and I finally persuaded myself there was not much sense getting into a flap until at least five o'clock. If they had not shown by then, I know I would have a real session of nail-chewing ahead.

Fortunately there was enough to do that afternoon to keep me busy and I had to rush off to a ceremonial dinner being staged in honour of my pilots and myself at the Chinese Air Force headquarters without being able to do more than phone the airfield and discover that Flight Two had all landed safely. They, and the members of my own flight, were already seated when I arrived for the banquet. Then, as I glanced around the banquet hall, I saw eight of Flight Three's crew were present as well.

"How did Flight Three get in?" I asked Joe Lee. They're not due in until tomorrow."

Only then did he tell me that six men and four planes of our 84 had been lost.

Sheer bullheadedness on the part of Flight Three's commander had been responsible, he said. Instead of stopping overnight at Bihta, as he had been ordered, he had led his planes on in an effort to cut a day from the flight. Getting ahead of schedule as his aircraft continued on eastward, he had reached Bhamo late in the afternoon of the fifth day, instead of at noon.

Like the pilots on my own flight, the commander of Flight

Three had forgotten to adjust his watch since leaving Lahore. He took off from Bhamo at nearly four o'clock, thinking he had plenty of time to get into Paosho before dark.

I got the rest of the story from one of the pilots, through Joe. As did the commanders of all the flights which followed, Flight Three's commander had presumed a route had been found through the Hump because none of the aircraft in the two flights ahead of him had turned back. It was highly unlikely that all 24 aircraft would have crashed. The valley we had followed on the southwestern leg between Bhamo and Paoshan was clearly the only route, so he followed it too.

Darkness caught them an hour from Paoshan, after they found the valley which led north. It came on them quickly -there is little or no twilight in the country. The aircraft closed up as tightly as possible, each pilot straining to keep the plane he was to watch in sight, but soon all that could be seen was the glow of the exhausts. When a pilot strayed at all from his proper position, even that dim guide was gone.

One aircraft vanished, and then another. The rest flew blindly on, all formation lost, nothing to mark the bordering granite walls of their valley except, now and then, the vague loom of an outcropping or a faintly-paler patch which showed momentarily, the sky between peaks. To all intents and purposes, most of the pilots were alone. Only three aircraft managed to keep contact with each other although they were all fairly close together. And now the darkness was complete.

Far below them on the Paoshan strip, the men assigned to guard Flight Two's aircraft huddled around the fire which they had built as the cold moved in with the night. It was not a big fire, but in that unrelieved nightmare of blackness it shone like an airport beacon to the terrified pilots above. One by one they spiralled downwards while the guards, hearing their engines, rushed to light other fires to mark the landing strip.

The first plane came in, bouncing crazily as its pilot pulled up at the last minute to avoid a nose-down crash. Then a second and a third. Soon there were eight Stearmans lined up at the side of the field.

For another half hour those on the ground waited. Then they let their fires die out. The four missing aircraft, they knew would have run out of gas some minutes before.

The Hump, not to be appeased by the death of George Ling, had exacted its further tribute. Nor was it ever to reveal the graves of those who had tried and failed.

There were some speeches made that night in Kunming. Some of the Chinese officers got up to congratulate us and Joe Lee made me a very nice speech on behalf of the members of my flight, but the celebrations were a flop and the party broke up early

Those of us who had made it through had too much to think about.

I spent a week in Kunming, a week in which I attended more parties in my honour than I have ever since experienced, and all of it as the guest of the Chinese government. It was a good thing they were paying the bills. Whisky was 30 a bottle (about \$135 in U.S. funds at the rate then in effect) and my hotel bill about the same.

In that week, I saw the rest of the flights land safely. I was to have gone to Chungking, where Chiang Kai Shek was to award me a medal for the flight, but I was in a hurry to get back to Lahore to close down the station and get home myself.

The Chinese obtained a ticket for me on a Chinese National Airways DC-3 to Calcutta. Thanks to some foresight, I had a letter on official stationery, signed by a staff officer in Delhi, which said I was badly needed in India and was to be given the "Highest Priority" as far as return transportation was concerned. Officially, it wasn't worth the paper it was typed on. Major-generals, at best, were being "bumped" from flights all the time to make room for important passengers. The Indian Airways clerks I dealt with, however, were vastly impressed with my bit of paper and it worked like a charm.

We left Kunming about 11 a.m. in a pouring rain, my only companions aboard the flight being a Chinese who was airsick all the way and another who pestered me for cigarettes every ten minutes. The pilot climbed as rapidly as possible to the regulation 21,000 feet for the flight to Myitkyina. At that height it was freezing cold and we passengers, having no oxygen masks, were in a bad way.

I tried keeping warm by walking up and down the cabin. Anyone who has exercised at 21,000 feet will know how many trips

I made and by the time we landed at Myitkyina I was panting and exhausted.

All the way to Myitkyina the ground below was obscured by cloud, much to my disappointment as I had hoped to get a look down on the peaks through which we had flown, looking up. We stopped at Myitkyina only long enough to refuel and reached Calcutta at 5:30 p.m. I waved my magic paper at a Babu clerk in the airport terminal and by 11 p.m. I was aboard an Air Transport Command York, heading for Delhi.

We landed at Allahabad to unload some cargo and at 3:30 a.m. touched down at Delhi's Willington Airport. There I caught the regular daily transport for Lahore at 6:30 a.m.

It was just nine o'clock, 22 hours out of Kunming, when I stepped from the plane at Lahore. That same flight had taken me six days in my Stearman.

I left India in January of 1946 and returned to England. There, one day in May, I found a small package in the mailbox. It had been sent by ordinary mail, not even registered, and inside was a strange medal, a many-pointed affair with a blue-enamelled background on which were superimposed a white cloud and yellow flag. With it was a citation in Chinese which announced that I had been made a member of the Order of the Cloud and Banner.

In 25 years of flying, nineteen of them with the RAF, I've picked up some other honours -the Belgian Medal of Honour, the Dutch Order of Orange Nassau, the British Air Force Cross, and an honorary colonelship in the Czechoslovak Air Force. I think, however, the Order of the Cloud and Banner was the only one I ever earned.

I've been asked many times if I'd make the same flight again, knowing now what it involves, and my answer is always a flat "NO".

The first time, I didn't know what to expect from day to day and at the end of the day I could always tell myself "Well, that wasn't so bad!" Now though, having flown the route and knowing what one piece of bad luck would mean, at best, a decent death and at the worst a nasty one in the jungle, it would be too much to face.

I've often wondered what became of Joe Lee and the other 79 pilots who reached Kunming. Since the Communists took over, I've had no word from them.

This much I know, however. If they were among those who reached Formosa, the Chinese Reds would be well advised to treat them gently.

I had little or no use for my Chinese pilots when we started from Lahore, but when the chips were down, they came through with guts and determination.

No cowards fly the Hump in Stearmans.

* A listing of the historic aircraft held by the Republic of China Air Force Museum on the island of Taiwan includes a Boeing Stearman "Nationalist Trainer." This may have been one of the aircraft that Ron Watts led over The Hump and perhaps even one that he led at Pearce and De Winton.



A line-up of Stearmans in China during the 1940's. These are likely the aircraft that Ron Watts led over The Hump.