



IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

2121 S. State Avenue Ames, Iowa 50010 (515) 292-0140

October 11, 1989

*Waller
on Charlie
Urban*

Dr. Reginald H. Farrar
132 Gifford Avenue
Jersey City, New Jersey 07304

RE: Just Beyond the Firelight by R. J. Waller

Dear Dr. Farrar:

We are pleased to grant you permission to reprint the chapter titled "The Boy from the Burma Camp" to be included in your newsletter published by the CNAC Association. Since you are distributing it gratis to approximately 300 members, we will waive any fees.

We appreciate that you will recommend our book to your membership and ask that you use the following credit line adjacent to the material:

Reprinted by permission from Just Beyond the Firelight: Essays and Stories by R. J. Waller (c) 1988 by Iowa State University Press, Ames, Ia. 50010.

Sincerely,

Sherry Johnson
Assistant to the Director

SLJ:me

I have read most of the book and do recommend it.

Editor

Iowa State University Press has many titles on aviation, now and the past and many on technical aspects of flying.

Write for a catalog.

Robert James Waller
3011 Winter Ridge Rd.
Cedar Falls, IA 50613
319-277-1488
SS #: 483-50-0292

3895 words

Copyright 1988 Robert James Waller

THE BOY FROM THE BURMA HUMP

by

Robert James Waller

In his apartment in Calcutta, there was a grand piano. He wore khaki then, walked the bazaars and tapped away at the piano or played lawn tennis during his leaves from upcountry. After a week or two, he was ready when the call came for the return to Dinjan.

He carried only a small suitcase for the journey, his "laundry" as he called it, and looked forward to getting back to the jungle and the mountains, away from the sterile and crumbling world of the British raj. His flight left Calcutta, climbing northeast over the Khasi Hills toward Assam, the secluded province that curls off main India and lies snuggled up on the left shoulder of Burma, just short of the Himalayan rise.

At Dinjan, he and the other pilots slept and took their meals in a large bungalow on the fringe of a tea plantation. Well before dawn, he was awakened by the hand of a servant boy. Now he stands drinking thick Indian tea on the veranda, looking out toward the jungle where leopards sometimes go.

An open four-wheel drive command car arrives, and he rides through the heavy night toward an airfield five miles away. Time is important now, in this early morning of 1943. Since losing an airplane to Japanese fighters over the Ft. Hertz Valley, the pilots cross there only in darkness or bad weather when the fighters are grounded. He signs the cargo manifest, checks the weather report, and walks out to the plane.

Like delicate crystal, our liberties sometimes juggle in the hands of young men. Boys, really. Climbing to the top of the arch at the front of their lives, some of them flew into Asian darkness, across primitive spaces of the mind and the land, and came to terms with ancient fears the rest of us keep imperfectly at bay.

There was Steve Kusak. And poker-playing Roy Farrell from Texas. Saxaphonist Al Mah, Einar "Micky" Mickelson, Jimmy Scoff, Casey Boyd, Hockswinder, Thorwaldson, Rosbert,

Maupin, and the rest.

And there is Capt. Charlie Uban. Khaki shorts, no shirt, leather boots, tan pilot's cap over wavy blond hair, gloves for tightening the throttle lock. He waits in the darkness of northeast India for his clearance from air traffic control in nearby Chabua. There are perhaps a dozen planes out there in the night, some of them flying with only 500 feet of vertical separation.

Captain Charlie Uban. Twenty-two years old, 5'9", 141 pounds. Born in a room over the bank in Thompson, Iowa, when airplanes were still a curiosity and the long Atlantic haul was only a dream to Lindbergh.

Chabua gives him his slot, and he powers his C-47 down the blacktop through the jungle night, riding like the hood ornament on a diesel truck, with 5000 pounds of small arms ammunition behind him in the cargo bay. He concentrates on the sound of the twin Pratt and Whitney engines working hard at 2700 RPMs, ignoring the chatter in his earphones.

The plane, with its payload plus 800 gallons of gasoline, is two tons over its recommended gross flying weight of 24,000 pounds. Gently then, Charlie Uban eases back on the yoke, pulls the nose up, and climbs, not like an arrow, but rather in the way a great heron beats its way upward from a green backwater.

It gets dicey about here. If an engine fails, he does not yet have enough air speed for rudder control. And he's lost his runway, so there is no chance of chopping the takeoff. But he gains altitude, turns southeast from Dinjan, and flies toward that cordillera of the southern Himalayas called the Burma Hump.

His copilot and radio operator are both Chinese. In the next four hours, they will cross three of the great river valleys of the world: the Irrawaddy, the Salween, and the Mekong. In the place where India, Tibet, Burma, and Yunnan province of China all come together, the mountain ranges lining these rivers constitute the Hump.

This is the world of the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC--pronounced "SEE-knock"). Jointly owned by China and Pan American Airways, CNAC flies as a private carrier under nominal military control of the U.S. Air Transport Command. In the flesh, CNAC is a strange collection of civilian pilots from the U.S., Australia, China, Great Britain, Canada, and Denmark.

They are soldiers of fortune, some of the best hired guns in the world at pushing early and elemental cargo planes where the planes don't want to go and where most pilots won't take them. As one observer put it: "All were motivated by a thirst for either money or adventure or both,

and it was impossible to gain much of the first without acquiring a considerable amount of the latter."

Some were members of Claire Chennault's dashing American Volunteer Group--the "Flying Tigers"--mustered out of various branches of the U.S. military in 1941 to fly P-40 fighter planes with tiger teeth painted on the air coolers in defense of China. When the AVG was disbanded, 16 of the remaining 21 Tigers decided to throw in with CNAC.

Dinjan is the penultimate stop, the last caravanserai, on the World War II lend-lease column stretching from the United States to Kunming, China. Along sea and air routes to Calcutta, and then by rail to Dinjan, moves virtually everything needed to keep China in the war, including perfume and jewelry for Madame Chaing Kai-shek.

Japan controls the China coast and large slices of the interior. Until the spring of 1942, lend-lease supplies were shipped to Rangoon, freighted by rail up to Lashio, and moved from there by truck over the Burma Road to China.

Then, Vinegar Joe Stilwell's armies, sabotaged by British disinterest in Burma and by the indecisive, factionalized, and corrupt government of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, were driven north. With the Japanese owning Rangoon, the railhead at Lashio, and portions of the Road, China was closed to the outside by both land and

water. So it fell to the pilots to ferry materiel from Dinjan to Kunming. To fly the Hump.

As he reaches higher altitudes, Charlie pulls on a shirt, chino pants, woolen coveralls, and a leather flight jacket. Going through 10,000 feet he switches over to oxygen. At 14,000 feet, he needs more power in the thin air and shifts the superchargers to high. Above the Hump now.

In summer, the monsoons force him to fly on instruments much of the time. With winter come southern winds reaching velocities of 100-150 miles per hour, and he crabs the plane 30 degrees off course just to counter the drift. Spring and fall bring unpredictable winds, frequent and violent thunderstorms, and severe icing conditions.

He will fly over long stretches where there is no radio contact with the ground, up there on his own, blowing around in the mountains without radar. "You had good weather information on your point of origin and your destination, and that was about it," he remembers. The primary instrument in use will be Charlie Uban's skills and instincts.

The winds push unwary or confused pilots north into the higher peaks where planes regularly plow into the mountain sides. And there are other problems. Ground radio signals used to locate runways in rough weather have a

tendency to bounce from the mountains. Even skilled and alert pilots mistakenly follow the echos into cliffs.

Electrical equipment deteriorates from rapid changes between the cold of high altitudes and the tropical climate of Dinjan. Parts are in short supply, navigational aids faulty or non-existent. But maintenance wizards do what they can to keep the planes rolling.

Pilots fly themselves into fatigue, sometimes making two round trips across the Hump in one day. Still they go, their efficiency and competence shaming the regular army pilots in the Air Transport Command. CNAC, with creative, flexible management and more experienced pilots, becomes the measure of performance for the entire ATC.

General Stilwell wrote in 1943: "The Air Transport Command record to date is pretty sad. CNAC has made them look like a bunch of amateurs." Edward V. Rickenbacker, chief of Eastern Airlines and America's ace fighter pilot in World War I, studies the situation, discounts all of the army's problems with airports, parts, and maintenance, and simply concludes that CNAC has better pilots.

Charlie Uban is paid \$800 a month for the first 60 hours of flying. He gets about \$7 per hour, in Indian rupees, for the next 10 hours. For anything over 70 hours, he is on "gold," \$20 per hour in American money.

A 100-hour month earns him roughly \$9,000 in 1987 terms. The rare melding of technical competence, practiced skill, good judgment, and courage always pays top dollar, anywhere. The CNAC pilots chronicle their exploits by making up song verses using the melody to the "Wabash Cannonball:"

Oh the mountains they are rugged
So the army boys all say.
The army gets the medals,
But see-knack gets the pay...

Not everyone can do it. They arrive as experienced flyers and are trained for the Hump by riding as copilots, committing the terrain to memory, absorbing the mercurial techniques of high-mountain flying, and practicing let-downs in bad weather. There is no time for coddling. Those who can't move into a captain's seat in a few months are discharged. Charlie Uban got his command in three weeks.

One veteran pilot makes a single round trip as copilot, is terrified, and asks to be sent home by boat. Others will hang on, but are so intimidated by the Hump that they develop neuroses about it and become ill. Or, bent by their fears, they make critical mistakes where there is room for none. The Hump, rising out there in the darkness and the rain, is malevolence crowned.

Was Charlie Uban afraid? He thinks about the question for a moment, a long moment, and grins, "I'd say respectful

rather than fearful."

Fear and magic sometimes danced together in northern Burma. A Chinese pilot was flying a new plane from Dinjan to Kunming. Over the middle of the Hump, the temperature gauge for one of the engines began climbing. The instructions were clear: "Feather the engine at 265 centigrade." Panic arrived at 250 degrees.

With a full load, a C-47 would fly at only 6,500 feet on one engine. So the choices were three. Feather the engine and descend to an altitude that is not high enough to get through the mountains. Or, let the temperature escalate and burn up the engine. Or, bail out in the high mountains. Three alternatives. Each with the same outcome.

But, the manual had been written by Western minds. Therefore, and not surprisingly, the range of options was unnecessarily constrained. As the gauge hit 265, the pilot broke the glass covering the gauge and simply twisted the dial backwards to a reasonable level. Unable to get at the sender, he chose to throttle the messenger. There is some ancient rule at work here--if you can't repair the problem, at least you can improve your state of mind.

At Kunming, the gauge was diagnosed as faulty. The engine was just fine. Remember Kipling's famous epitaph? "Here lies a fool who tried to hustle the East." The C-47,

like a lot of others, tried and failed. If a crew goes down in the Hump region, no search party is sent. The territory is wild and rugged, settled sparsely by aboriginal tribes or occupied by the Japanese. The snow accumulates in places to a depth of several hundred feet, and a crashed plane just disappears, absorbed by the snow.

The pilots suffer through it and gather strength from one another, talking quietly when a plane is overdue and cataloging the optimistic possibilities. After a few weeks, the missing pilot's clothing is parceled out among the others, and his personal effects are sent home.

Charles L. Sharp, Jr., operations manager for CNAC, is a realist. Roosevelt demands that China be supplied. There is not enough time for proper training. The weather is wretched, equipment humbled by the task, and the planes, which are cargo versions of the venerable DC-3s, always fly above the standard gross weight.

So lives are going to be taken. Sharp accepts that. Still, he grieves for the pilots who vanish out there in the snow or thunder into foggy mountains during let-downs in China or blow up on the approach to Dinjan, and he worries about those who keep on flying.

Small samples from his logs in CNAC's war years intone a litany to risk and a chant of regret.

Waller - 11
"Burma Hump"

Aircraft No.	Captain	Date	Location	Crew
53	Fox	3/11/43	Hump	Lost
49	Welch	3/13/43	Hump	Lost
48	Anglin	8/11/43	Hump	Lost
72	Schroeder	10/13/43	Shot Down	Lost
59	Privensal	11/19/43	Kunming; let-down	Lost
63	Charville	11/19/43	Kunming; let-down	Lost

Between April 1942, when Hump operations started, and September 1945 at the end of the war, CNAC pilots will fly the Hump more than 20,000 times. They carry 50,000 tons of cargo into China and bring 25,000 tons back out. Twenty-five crews are lost. The consensus remains among those who understand flying that, given the conditions under which CNAC operated, the pilots were one of the most skilled groups ever assembled, the losses remarkably small.

Today Charlie Uban is freighting ammunition. Sometimes he carries 55-gallon barrels of high octane gasoline, a cargo he prefers not to haul. Or he might be loaded with aircraft parts or medical supplies or brass fittings. Occasionally he moves Chinese bank notes printed in San Francisco and being forwarded to deal with China's sprinting inflation.

On his way back from Kunming, he will be dragging tin or wood or hog bristles, or mercury or silk or refined tungsten ore. Now and then he has a cargo of Chinese soldiers going to India for training. They are cold and airsick for most of the trip.

As Stilwell begins his 1944 push back down into the jungles of Burma, Charlie will haul bagged rice that is booted out of the cargo doors at low altitudes to construction crews following the armies. The crews are building a new land route, the Ledo Road, from India across northern Burma to China.

Conditions are seldom good enough for daydreaming. Most of the time he concentrates on his gauges and listens to the engines, "...envisioning midadventures and figuring out what to do about them ahead of time."

But now and then in clear weather he thinks about other things. He thinks about his girl, Emma Jo, back in Iowa and calculates the days left before he gets his three-month leave in the States. And he remembers Charles Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927. He was six years old at that time, but somehow understood the magnitude of Lindbergh's achievement even then. That's what brought him here.

His family moved to Waterloo, Iowa, where he grew up building model airplanes and reading magazine articles about the new world of flight. At 15, he bicycled out to the old Canfield Airport and used \$2 from his Des Moines Register paper route to purchase his first airplane ride on a Ford Trimotor.

Bouncing around in a single-engine Taylorcraft, Charlie Uban learned to fly at Iowa State Teachers College in 1940 as part of the federally-sponsored Civilian Pilot Training program. At Iowa State College in Ames he studied engineering and passed the secondary stage of the CPT program. He learned cross-country techniques at a school in Des Moines, taught flying for a while in Aberdeen, South Dakota, and was trained as a copilot for Northwest Airlines in Minneapolis, where he picked up his instrument skills.

When Pan Am wrangled a contract for supplying the Far East, he went to work for them and flew as a copilot in four-engine DC-4s and C-87s, hauling cargo and passengers down the Caribbean to Brazil and from there to Accra on the coast of West Africa. In Accra, the cargo was off-loaded onto smaller planes for the flight over the desert and across Asia to Calcutta.

In the summer of 1943 he was riding copilot alongside Capt. Wesley Gray with a load earmarked for the Generalissimo himself. In Accra, they were ordered not to offload, but rather to continue on across Africa and Asia to Dinjan, pick up a Hump pilot to guide them through the mountains, and take the cargo through to Chungking.

On the way, Charlie bumped into a few CNAC pilots and talked with one of them at length. Since Pan Am owned 20

percent of CNAC, he applied for a transfer, and by the fall of 1943 he was flying the Hump.

The C-47 settles down on the runway at Kunming. It's 9 AM. Charlie will spend the day at a hostel near the airfield. He will nap, play cards, and talk with other pilots. In late afternoon, he takes off for the westward flight back to Dinjan. Tomorrow he will fly the same route once again. Often he will make one-and-a-half, or even two, round trips in a single day.

Charlie Uban made 524 flights over the Hump in two years and knows of only one CNAC pilot who claims more wartime crossings. After the war, CNAC moved its operations to Shanghai. Charlie went along, flying all over the orient--north to Muckden in China, west to Calcutta, and south to Manilla.

Things got messy though. Four planes crashed in one day in Shanghai due to weather and radio interference from commercial stations operating at illegally high power levels. The Chinese communists had begun firing on the CNAC planes, and there was dissension among the pilots over the way operations were being run.

Charlie had enough and came home to finish his mechanical engineering degree at Iowa State. He graduated in 1949 and entered the family oil business in Waterloo. In

1964, and again in 1968, he was elected to the Iowa Legislature as a state representative.

The CNAC Alumni Association meetings are important to him. Friends come by. "I see Kusak and Norman there. It's an occasional refurbishing, a touching again...all the time, throughout the decades."

The old pilots talk about airplanes and mountains. Some flew for commercial airlines after the war or opened restaurants or farmed. Others, they say, smuggled gold through Asia and flew contraband in South America. There is a bond of forever among them. They bellied up against death, saw it all, and delivered the goods.

Any regrets about getting out of flying? Some. But Charlie Uban has looked backward, looked forward from there, and is comfortable with his choices. Yet he has a recurring dream in the nights of his life, even now. In the dream, he is flying low toward obstacles, trees and mountains and such, and there is never enough room to pass between them. He wonders about the dreams.

And, I wonder what is there in the ordinary affairs of life to rival flying the Hump at twenty-two? Can the adrenalin ever flow that swift again? Can there ever be another sound as pure to the soul as the landing gear coming down at Kunming or a sight like that of Everest and

Kanchenjunga to the northwest on a clear day as you come in to Dinjan?

Most of us think of life as a long upward sweep to some modest glory in our middle years. But, if you have battled the great whale in your early times, what can ever compare? Maybe Hannibal or Lindbergh or the foot soldier at Normandy or even Orson Welles also has suffered these proportions.

On the other hand, maybe none of this is important. Maybe it is enough to have done it and to live a life on the memories of having done it-- of having swept upward from a thousand blacktop runways into the jungle nights on your way to China.

Others will do it again, but not in that place, in that way. The Hump, as a presence, has disappeared. It was a concoction of the times and the available technology. In a jet airplane, at 40,000 feet, the Hump no longer exists.

It's been 43 years since Charlie Uban flew the Burma Hump. He talks about those times, late of an April afternoon, while Emma Jo makes supper noises in the kitchen. "I remember the time I realized I was doing an excellent job of flying this tough, tough route, and it just did wonders for my self-esteem." "If you're doing a good job, and somebody knows it and appreciates it, that's about as good as life gets."

His khaki uniform with a CNAC patch on the right shoulder drapes from the back of a chair. He wears a bush jacket from his India days and shuffles through piles of flight maps and logbooks and picture albums on the table in front of him. As he warms to the memories, his voice alternates between the past and the present tense, and he speaks softly, more to himself than anyone else, running a finger gently along his recollections.

"...Fall of '43. Two of 'em crash in Suifu, up the Yangtze River from Chungking. Robertson is still up there in the overcast, sees two puffs of smoke come up through the clouds, decides that's enough of that, and heads back to Dinjan." "One-hundred-twenty-one hours this month." "Here! Hydraulic pump failure, good weather, short of personnel; flying the Hump solo, no copilot, no radio operator."

"Kunming, Dinjan, Kunming, Kunming. That means I had trouble leaving Kunming and had to come back in." "Next day, blower failure and had to return." "Next day, the 14th, rice dropping." "January 6, 1945, Russ Coldron disappears over the Hump." "January 7, 1945, my old friend Fuzzy Ball flew into Tali Mountain...."

His voice trails off to a murmur as he reads. From his kitchen table in Iowa, Charlie Uban is reaching back four decades into the night and the wind and the deep snows of

the southern Himalayas where some of his friends still lie.

I listen not so much to the words themselves, but rather to the sound of his memories. It's something like the drone of a C-47 cruising out there east of Dinjan, above the Burma Hump, in the days when it was pretty clear who was right and who was wrong. Over his shoulder I can see airplanes coming and going at the Waterloo Airport a mile away.

Just outside the window, wood ducks are circling among the trees by a pond, peering through the fog at the end of a rainy afternoon, looking for a place to land. Capt. Charlie Uban watches the lead drake come in through the dusk on his final approach, sees him catch the headwind as he lets down through the haze, and nods his appreciation...from one old pilot to another.

Whether it's Dinjan or Calcutta, Kunming or Shanghai, or a small pond in Iowa, those who live on the wing understand one another. They have been taken aside by Iris, trained by scholars of the twilight. And, while the rest of us plead for guidance and struggle for the trace, old fliers have no need of that, for they know secret things and hear distant ragas that carry them along the great bend of the night toward home.

THE END

FROM THE EDITOR

The Cannonball is a product of what I received from our members. As you may have noted, some consists of clippings from newspapers. I run into one occasionally myself. I was getting a document notarized out on Long Island. I was there once in my life and may have seen one other copy of their newspaper. Idly glancing at a copy on a desk I noted an article about the death of Red Holmes. It was reproduced in the last Cannonball, I can't rely on this method hence this request. Many of our stories have been told but there are still a few left to be recorded. Most of the vignettes are not exciting or even unique. Little stories about what happened refreshes a memory so write me something.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. A description of Flying the Passes
2. Eric Shilling was telling me something once about a return flight across India.
3. George Huang's story also Sharky and maybe Sanby.
4. Although a disaster how about Christmas 1945.
5. Maher has a story of how he and Rengo got out there.
6. Kenehan remembered a lot when I taped him years ago. He must have a couple of stories yet.
7. Who was going to write a story titled "Ali Baba was a Piker, he only had 40 thieves".
8. Kusak should have a story and why don't you come to a reunion.
9. Who remembers Fuzzy Ball and the tiger, etc.
10. No one has written about Z.M. Wong; our Engineer, an Englishman, Fatty Fong or the Tea Planter in Dinjan
11. William Leary must have another story
12. Kooch Behar
13. Quenton Roosevelt
14. I wish Frieda Chen would write about some of the goings on in the business office, names, jobs, anecdotes.
15. Who knew Marge Schaefer?

LIU PU-TAI

I moved to Jersey City January 1, 1950 and gradually became acquainted with the New York area. In Coney Island Nathan's is a tradition and occasionally I would drive over there in the evening for one of the "Famous Nathan's Hot Dogs" and fries.

One summer night approximately 1956 the cook who was frying shrimp looked at me and tentatively asked "Are you a doctor?". I agreed that I was and he told me that he was CNAG and worked in the Motor Pool next door to our infirmary at Dum Dum. I tried to keep in touch but he never responded. Another unbelievable coincidence.