

Fearless airman braved the Himalayas to support troops fighting Japan

Initially barred from the RCAF, he ended up joining the Chinese National Air Corp. on a route called 'the graveyard of the air'

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Cedric Mah battled two Second World War foes - racism and the enemy.

Initially denied the right to join the Royal Canadian Air Force because he was of Chinese descent, Mah instead flew more than 300 missions for the Chinese National Air Corp., risking his life to provide support for the famous American Volunteer Group, known as the Flying Tigers.

One of many interesting flights involved jettisoning bags of cash over the Himalayas to avoid crashing into a mountain.

On Aug. 23, 1945, with U.S. Marines on board to guard the money - minted in the U.S. for China's national government - the wings of the C-46 Commando became weighed down with ice and it lost one of its two engines. Instead of bailing out, and ordering his men to follow his lead, Mah fought his way to the cargo hold and kicked out 48 of the 52 bundles of money to lighten the load.

He held back four bundles in case they made a successful crash landing and had to buy their way to freedom or needed the currency as fire starter to keep warm.

"Kind of spendthrift, don't you think?" Mah wrote in a letter. "We traded \$866-million Chinese for a \$300,000 aircraft and our lives. A fair price." The U.S. military investigated thoroughly, but the money was never found.

"Cedric used to joke that he still got a couple of calls a year: Where did you drop the money?" said Tom Hinderks, executive director of the Alberta Aviation Museum.

"The money was essentially thrown into the Himalayan mountains, into the jungles, and after a few months there would have been nothing left."

Mah flew 337 trips over the treacherous Hump of the Himalayas, dubbed the "graveyard of the air" because of treacherous conditions and Japanese fire. He supplied landlocked China with personnel, ammunition, fuel, medicine, food, and much more. On the way out, the planes brought quicksilver, tin, lead, zinc, and hog bristles for western hairbrushes.

Because of his service, the Flying Tigers named him an honorary member, according to Hinderks.

In 1997, Mah was finally officially honoured for his service by the U.S. government, receiving the U.S. Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross. His brother Albert, also a CNAC pilot, was honoured as well.

Mah died of a stroke in Edmonton on April 29 at the age of 88.

Born June 16, 1922, in Prince Rupert, B.C., he was the 8th of 11 children. His parents, Sea Gee and Bon Quen Mah, ran the successful Sunshine Grocery in Prince Rupert.

After his father's death in 1935, the family returned to China, intending to stay only a brief while. But their plans were interrupted in 1937 by the Japanese invasion. Cedric managed to return to Canada two years later, gaining passage on the CPR Empress of Russia, but his mother and sisters were trapped in the war-torn country.

Mah had wanted to be a pilot ever since he was three years old and stopped to watch a low-flying airplane glide past his house. The pilot, he recalled, reached a white-gloved hand from the cockpit and waved at him. The boy's fate was sealed.

Facing discrimination from the Canadian Air Force, which rejected non-Caucasians until 1942, Mah followed Albert to the California Flyers Aviation College in Los Angeles. The training was cut short after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, so he received further training in Arizona and Texas. He returned to Canada in 1942. Finally allowed to work for the RCAF, he became a flight instructor in Winnipeg, training bomb-aimers, photographers and navigators.

But he wanted to fly. Keen for more adventure, he consulted his friend Wilfred (Wop) May, a First World War ace and a pioneering Canadian bush pilot. "Go fly in China," he told Mah. "That country is crying for aviators." In fact, Albert had had the same idea.

In 1944, Mah joined the China National Aviation Corp., becoming part of a group of transport pilots known as the "Humpty Dumpties." They were fearless, and many of them did not return. Mah recalled one flight where a load of lead ingots bounced up and down "like corks on an ocean," tearing holes in the roof.

"Imagine, in the black of night blasting off with a heavily loaded transport and staggering into a void," he wrote in his memoir. "There are mountains to all sides of you rearing to 18,000 feet ... you see nothing, not a single light, just a myriad of stars."

Working as a pilot in China appealed to Mah for family reasons, as well. He and his brother wanted to free their mother and sisters from China. His brother managed to travel through the Japanese line to rescue their 13-year-old sister, smuggling her through the Himalayas to the coast in a coffin.

Around the same time, while on a leave in China, Cedric spotted another sister walking along the road in a crush of refugees, wrapped in a Hudson's Bay blanket that he had sent her from Canada a couple of years before. The entire Mah family were reunited in Canada at the war's end.

On another assignment, Mah flew halfway up a mountain to purchase 10,000 Tibetan horses slated for a military mission on the French Indochina coast. He picked up Tibetan Chieftan So-Long Busong, his guide and interpreter. Mah described this man as arriving on a shaggy pony, wearing felted Tibetan boots and a furry cap with a red tassel, and smelling like a billy goat.

Mah continued flying in China until the Nationalist government surrendered. He flew the last flight out of Shanghai before it fell to the Communists in May, 1949.

Mah's career careened sharply in another direction at this point and landed him on an entirely new landscape. He returned to Vancouver in 1950 and went into business with another brother, Alex. The two men opened the Paladium Recreation Centre on Hastings Street, offering an eight-lane bowling alley, a barbershop, coffee shop, and magazine stand.

Mah continued flying part time as a bush pilot for small airlines in B.C., Yukon and the Northwest Territories. In 1955, he flew C-46s for the Pacific Western Airlines out of Yellowknife and Hay River, NWT, on DEW line operations, as well as counting muskox, polar bears and other wildlife for the federal government's game surveys.

He flew crews for the Geological Survey of Canada, mapping out Kluane National Park in Yukon and fighting fires in Northern B.C., flying a Beaver float plane with two 65-gallon tanks attached.

"We'd skim across the lake and the probes, like straws bent forward, would scoop up the water," he wrote.

He sold the Vancouver business in the mid-1960s and moved to Edmonton, satisfying his life-long ambition to work full time as a bush pilot.

"We used to fly scientists from Ward Hunt Island, east to Greenland. Then passing Ellesmere Island we'd fly to the northern tip of Baffin Island and Lancaster Sound, chasing the Northwest Passage through the Prince of Wales Strait all the way to Tuktoyaktuk," he wrote.

"A mountain in the Coast Range was named Mount Ced Mah," said his daughter Cheryl Watson, "recognizing him for outstanding service transporting and supplying a government survey party under difficult flying conditions."

In 1967, Mah was flying geologist Pat Parker on a mineral-claim-staking job in NWT when the Cessna floatplane hit an Arctic storm. He managed a safe landing, but a chunk of the aircraft's tail lodged beneath a hefty ridge of snow on a lake near Cambridge Bay, Nunavut (formerly NWT). A massive air search ensued.

The two men survived 10 gruelling days on Arctic char and pan-fried ptarmigan, cooked on a portable Primus stove pumped with aviation fuel. In the rescue party, much to his surprise, was his brother. They hadn't set eyes on each other in more than a decade.

In 1972, Mah married Ruth Gronland in Edmonton and adopted her two-year-old daughter, Cheryll. Their son, Jonathan, was born a few years later. The family spent a year living in Inuvik, NWT, while Mah worked for the Reindeer Air Service, flying fuel runs for the town of Normal Wells. He slowed down his Arctic escapades at this point and worked his way down the coast, finding himself back full-circle in Prince Rupert in 1980.

Mah and Gronland divorced in 1984 and he signed on as a pilot at a tourist lodge located in Great Bear Lake, NWT, flying folks above the clouds and inking his memoirs during his days off.

"It was fun, just flying," he wrote. "No more rolling barrels of fuel onto bobbing ramps into Beavers on floats. No more loading and unloading blood-soaked caribou or heavy steel rods."

He climbed into his last cockpit at the age of 65.

For the past two decades Mah had been a tour guide and raconteur at the Alberta Aviation Museum, mesmerizing small crowds while leaning up against the spine of a DC-3 and letting the stories fly. "Guys like Ced are the real history," said Hinderks. "And the artifacts? They're just tools. It's the Cedric Mahs that made the history."

Mah leaves his children Cheryll Watson and Jonathon Mah, his granddaughter Tatum Watson, sisters Lily Yaung and Bernice Leong, brother Alex and nine nieces and nephews.