

WWII transport pilot Buddy Majors dies at 91

- TIM STANLEY World Staff Writer
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Buddy Majors and the other pilots called it "the Hump." But that was typical flyboy irony.

To just about everybody else, the Himalaya mountain chain of central Asia - the world's tallest - was the "Roof of the World."

Majors first began flying over it in 1943.

A pilot with the Chinese National Aviation Corp. during World War II, he and other company pilots took part in a U.S. Army airlift operation that would last through the war's end in 1945.

Transporting cargo and personnel over the mountains to aid America's Chinese allies in their fight against Japan, they faced conditions as formidable as pilots faced in any of the war's theaters.

Soaring over colossal 15,000-foot-tall peaks, often buffeted by winds up to 100 mph and with ice building up on the planes, many of them crashed in the mountains.

But Majors would make it through.

For the more than two years that he "flew the Hump," he posted some impressive numbers, completing 190 round trips while racking up more than 1,500 flight hours.

David Preston "Buddy" Majors of Broken Arrow, who would also serve in the Navy before becoming a successful businessman in New Orleans, died Nov. 5. He was 91.

A private family service was held Friday under direction of Floral Haven Funeral Home.

From India, where the Allied bases were, it was several hundred miles across the Himalayas to China - about four or five hours by air, depending on the weather.

The China National Aviation Corp., a joint venture of Pan American and the Chinese government, worked closely with the Army Air Corps during the airlift.

"When Buddy was flying the Hump, he said it was nothing for them to lose four planes in a day," Majors' wife, Sue Majors, said. "He lost a lot of good friends."

Majors managed to survive despite the daunting odds. But not without crashing at least once.

One of his favorite stories was about the time he was piloting American intelligence operations chief Carl Eifler on a secret mission when they went down in Burma behind enemy lines.

Coming through with only minor injuries, the pair were forced to make their way to safety on foot.

Eifler developed a great interest in his young sidekick, and in a letter to his superiors, described Majors as a skilled pilot who was up to the challenges. He said Majors took the crash hard.

"It was the first time that he had crashed a plane, and a plane to him is like the first-born to the average newly-wed bride," Eifler wrote in the letter, which is preserved in the National Archives.

"He swore that if it was the last thing he ever did he would make up for it some way."

Majors did just that, showing his mettle by sticking with the veteran intelligence man as they hiked through mountains and jungle to make their way out of occupied Burma.

In 1945, Majors left CNAC to accept a commission from the Navy, where he became a lieutenant.

The men who flew with CNAC during the war were later granted veteran status.

After his Navy service, Majors settled in New Orleans where he became a champion amateur golfer and for many years ran his own tool company. He retired to Broken Arrow with his wife 20 years ago.

A Texas native, Majors had learned to fly at the University of Houston. After becoming an instructor, he taught at Corsicana Army Air Base before joining CNAC.

He never lost his love for flying.

Recently, friends in Tulsa arranged a special ride for him in a fighter jet at Jones Airport.

"He was very excited, but his doctor told him no, not unless his health improved. So he was grounded," his wife said.

Although disappointed, Majors did agree to come to the airport and speak to a group of other older pilots.

"He enjoyed that," his wife added. "He always enjoyed talking about his service. He was very proud of it and all the things he did and places he went."

Majors' survivors include his wife of 25 years, Sue Majors; a sister, Frances Ferguson; two daughters; a son; and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.