Flagship of the line, pride of the fleet, the Loening amphibian launched CNAC into China's skies. On October 21, 1929, Birger Johnson and Ernest M. "Allie" Allison inaugurated service on the line, then known as China Airways. Johnson flew from Shanghai to Hankow, Allie commanded the east-bound flight.

Veteran CNAC pilot Frank Havelick remembers that the plane's 525hp Pratt & Whitney Hornet engine was so huge that it obstructed the pilot's view of the river. In order to avoid the sampans, junks, freighters, passenger ships, gunboats and yachts that piled in the Whangpoo, Loening captains had to takeoff and land standing on the rudder pedals, gripping the throttle and the wheel with their hands and peering between the cylinders. Once aloft, pilot and copilot sat side-by-side in the open cockpit above the cabin.

For check-out on the Loenings, Allie, a Yangtze yachtsman, required that all prospective pilots navigate the Whangpoo River in a ten-foot dinghy equipped only with a mainsail, jib and rudder. He felt if they could sail with the wind from the airport down to the main Shanghai business district on the Bund, avoiding the traffic and navigating the currents, then turn and come all the way back, they could handle the bulky amphib on water.

In order to secure a Loening to its mooring buoy the copilot lay down on the wing, clutching in his hand a long pole attached to a hook. As the Loening approached the buoy, he grabbed the marksman's ring and held tight while the pilot cut the engine; then together they pulled the airplane to the floating anchorages and tied it down for the night.

The six passengers the Loenings carried along the Yangtze route experienced something less than the last word in comfort. Pan Am's China representative, Harold Bady, wrote of the Loening, "On takeoff, the water used to pour in around the "noom"; and in the air such was the ventilation in those cabins that you had to tie your hat on." For soundproofing the passengers were given cotton to cork up their ears.

Caroline Service, wife of foreign service officer John S. Service, remembers that on a flight from Changking to Hankow one of the plane doors was tied shut with a string.

George Bell, an old China hand who worked for Standard Oil, recalls: "We were forever having to rescue those Loenings from the Yangtze. When taking off in rough weather, the rudder holding the engine would give way causing the propeller to cut through the pontoons."

Forced to land in a rice paddy near Nanking, one Loening was lifted back to the river by well over 100 coolies. The men stretched bamboo poles under the plane then hoisted them onto poles slung across their shoulders. Singing as they went, they pushed, slid and carried the plane to the banks of the Yangtze nearly two miles away.

Although Loenings may not have been beautiful by today's standards — Allie said one Chinese passenger thought the Loening looked like a steamboat — the amphibians provided safe and reliable transportation for the new airline company. In seven years of service only one fatal accident involving a Loening occurred, that was when pilot Paul Baez clipped the mast of a junk on takeoff.

The Loenings were the ideal planes for the Yangtze route. When the air got rough or the fog closed in, they merely sat down on the river, careening along on the water until it proved smoother aloft; then off they flew, continuing their scenic route down the Yangtze Gorge by air.

Nancy Allison Wright