

By Ian Thompson

of the Daily Republic

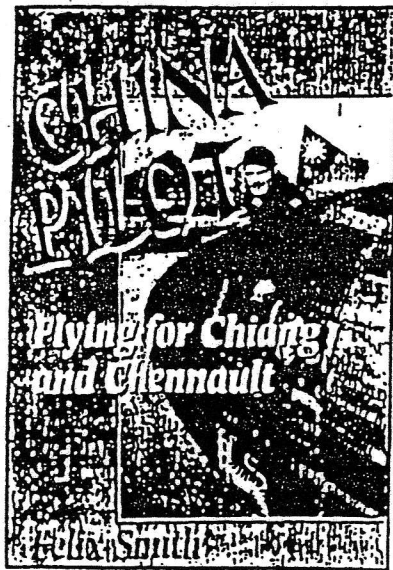
"China Pilot: Flying for Chiang and Chennault" by Felix Smith. Brassey's. \$24.95.

Reading about author Felix Smith's adventures flying in China reminded me of the hundreds of Steve Canyon newspaper comic strips I read and loved when I was a kid in the 1960s.

While the adventures of Canyon, a fictional Air Force officer, are fantasy, Smith's experiences are not only real, but just as exciting and his cast of characters just as colorful.

Smith spent three decades flying C-47 and C-119 transport aircraft in the Orient from the Chinese Civil War in the late 1940s, through the French Indochina War, Korean War and the CIA's secret war in Laos, to the Vietnam War in the 1970s.

Smith regularly rubbed elbows with warlords, missionaries, mercenaries, peasants and exiled Russian nobility fly-



ing for Civil Air Transport, the airline co-owned by Claire Chennault, the legendary former leader of the Flying Tigers.

His skill with the pen conveys all this very well.

Flying in and out of ancient walled cities frequently besieged by the Red Chinese, CAT quickly got the reputation as "the world's most shot-at airline."

Airlift pilots at Travis Air

Force Base will get a kick out of this because Smith's book is proof flying a transport plane to exotic places is pretty damned interesting.

Smith denied he is a historian or a scholar, but his first-person memoir gave me a better understanding of the Cold War in the Far East than many other books I read.

## BOOKS

## Pilot navigated through Chinese history

■ **China Pilot: Flying for Chiang and Chennault.** By Felix Smith. Brassey's. 309 pages. \$24.94.

BY ERNST-ULRICH FRANZEN  
of the Journal Sentinel staff

In the autumn of 1945, with the Second World War just ended and a Distinguished Flying Cross on his uniform, Felix Smith could have come home like millions of servicemen and women.

Wisconsin Central Airlines was hiring pilots, and he might have landed a job flying between Milwaukee and other Midwestern cities, staying out of harm's way:

Instead, with a brutal civil war brewing in China, he chose to join Civil Air Transport, the Chinese-based airline co-founded by Gen. Claire Chennault, and become a soldier of the Cold War.

Smith, a Milwaukee native, had spent World War II flying supplies to China from India over the Hump, otherwise known as the Himalayas, the tallest peaks in the world.

After the war, Smith flew 8 million miles for CAT in another struggle against a new enemy. He stayed in Asia for 25 years, about a quarter of a century longer than he originally intended.

He flew refugees out of besieged Chinese cities and soldiers into them. He flew medicine and supplies to remote Chinese villages and tin and tungsten ore out of mining areas. He flew through storms and over battlefields.

His destinations included Kunming, Mukden, Seoul and Saigon, and his clients included the Chinese Nationalists, France and the CIA.

Smith, retired now and living in Wisconsin and Hawaii, has

chosen to tell his story in "China Pilot," an entertaining and intelligent look at his postwar years in East Asia.

His first-hand account of CAT, the airline that spawned the legendary CIA airline, Air America of Vietnam fame, is honest, entertaining and informative. (He denies, by the way, that Air America trafficked in drugs to make money for the CIA).

He writes clearly, and has the ability to convey the facts of Chinese history and the Cold War in East Asia, as well as the tragic, cruel, heroic and poignant lives of the people who lived out those facts.

The book is peopled with colorful, fascinating characters — from Earthquake Magoon to the "Russian princess" Natasha to Chennault himself.

The bad guys of Smith's story are the communists who imprisoned and killed a number of his friends. He doesn't have much good to say about liberal "idealistic" Americans.

But he's no jingoistic, "nuke 'em" type, either. Smith has little patience for any of the politicians who show up in "China Pilot," liberal or conservative, and he understands why the Asians resented colonialism,

both European and American.

His sympathy and focus are with those who paid the ultimate price flying sometimes secret, sometimes not-so-secret missions for their country, and for those Asians caught and often crushed in the struggle between capitalism and communism.

Smith's entertaining look at CAT is a thought-provoking look at the Cold War and its victims. It deserves a wide readership.

*Felix Smith will read from his memoir, "China Pilot," and sign books at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Schwartz Bookshop, 17145 W. Blue Mound Road, Brookfield.*

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AIR & SPACE MAGAZINE  
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# China Pilots



COURTESY FELIX SMITH

From Felix Smith's *China Pilot*: A CAT C-46 flies over a walled village in northern China.

**Sharks Over China: The 23rd Fighter Group in World War II** by Carl Molesworth. Brassey's. 1994. 325 pp., b&w photos. \$24 (hardcover).

**Chennault's Forgotten Warriors: The Saga of the 308th Bomb Group in China** by Carroll V. Glines. Schiffer. 1995. 343 pp., b&w photos. \$29.95 (hardcover).

**China Pilot: Flying for Chiang and Chennault** by Felix Smith. Brassey's. 1995. 309 pp., b&w photos. \$24.95 (hardcover).

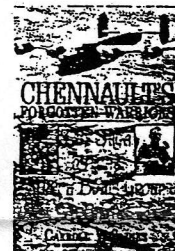
Claire Chennault's legend just keeps on growing. Last year provided a feast for readers who can't get enough of the man who led the Flying Tigers, the 14th Air Force, and the cargo line that became the CIA's Air America.

In *Sharks Over China*, Carl Molesworth tells the story of the Army pilots who



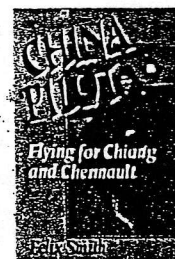
replaced the Tigers in 1942. His book has been out for a while but deserves mention for its meticulous chronicle of the 23rd Fighter Group—the closest thing to a guerrilla air force the world has ever seen.

In addition to P-40 fighters, Chennault had a few Consolidated B-24 Liberators, which hauled their own gasoline and bombs "over the Hump" from India to China. He gave them a theater of operations bigger than that of the entire Eighth Air Force in Europe. Probably because so little has been written about the 308th Bomb Group, Carroll Glines' account, *Chennault's Forgotten Warriors*, isn't really a history but more a collection of yarns, like the chapbooks published by veterans of a campaign.



also ably describes the effects of an economy so weak that precious U.S. dollars were washed and ironed after use, and a government so depraved that it's a wonder it lasted until 1949. Smith makes the reader fume with the CAT pilots stuck in the clouds, hostage to a Chinese Air Force officer who shut down their radio beacon until he got all the cash in the airline's safe.

Smith also evokes the beauty of Asia, and of flight. Here we go to Lanzhou:



"Our shadow, circled by a rainbow, ran along with us until the clouds broke up over mountains, and we saw a valley of the Yellow River and Sian. Another two hours put us within sight of giant waterwheels near a city

of wide streets and rows of poplar trees and an encircling wall that was twenty feet thick and bristled with parapets and watch towers." I haven't enjoyed a trip so much since I was a fifth grader, reading Richard Halliburton instead of my geography.

Exiled to Taiwan after Chiang was defeated, CAT became a subcontractor to the United States' CIA. Among other covert operations, its pilots helped supply French garrisons in Vietnam. Smith flew in those desperate airlifts, along with the likes of James McGovern—"Earthquake Magoon"—an oversized and joyful man, killed the day before the French surrendered Dien Bien Phu and lost their Vietnam war.

*China Pilot* is a wonderful book. It belongs on the shelf of every admirer of Chennault and his unorthodox air forces.

# A well-told yarn

## ■ CHINA PILOT: Flying for Chiang and Chennault

By Felix Smith  
Brassey's, cloth, \$24.95

By Chuck Novak  
Special to the Advertiser

When World War II ended in 1945, Felix Smith, who had been flying the famous "Hump" between India and China, had a choice of being mustered out of the service in Asia or going home to fly around Wisconsin. He chose Asia, but kept reminding himself: "I won't become an Old China Hand . . . I'll give it a year."

He gave it 20 years — and eight million air miles throughout the Far East.

Captain Smith was one of the first pilots for Civil Air Transport — always referred to as CAT — in 1947. War-time Flying Tiger hero Claire Chennault co-founded the carrier to help supply Nationalist President Chiang Kai-Shek's troops battle the Communists on the mainland as well as to help with supplies to distant villages to try and kick-start the post-war economy.

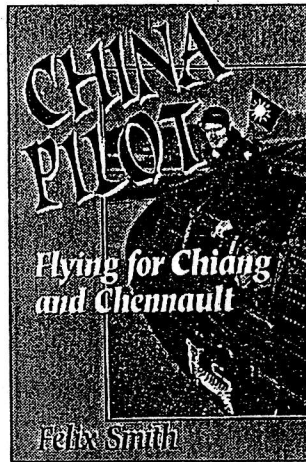
After Mao Tse-Tung's troops captured China, CAT followed Chiang to Taiwan. CAT held contracts with America's Central Intelligence Agency for secret work in the French war in Indochina and this country's war in Laos. It also operated in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

While he was not there at the time, Captain Smith's account of the fall of the French stronghold of Dien Bien Phu is right on the button for graphic ground and air action.

"China Pilot" is packed with thrills. CAT held the distinction of being "the world's most shot-at airline." CAT grew to more than 200 planes and 8,000 employees. From 1947 to 1975, the U.S. supported four Asian airlines: CAT, Air America, Air Asia and Southern Air Transport. Two hundred and forty-two lost their lives in these lines' secret operations.

Following his stint with CAT, Capt. Smith flew overseas routes for Japan Airlines. When he was too old for commercial flying, he became director of operations for South Pacific Island Airways in Honolulu. He finally retired, as he always had planned, to rural Wisconsin, but he and his wife spend part of each year in the Islands.

While he could not invent them, Capt. Smith packs in irresistible characters. First off, there's the rouge pilot James (Earthquake Magoon) McGovern, Smith's best friend who was killed flying in supplies for the French at Dien Bien Phu. Then there is a crackerjack mechanic called Hollywood because he comes to work in a white cashmere sport jacket.



WHAT: Appearances by Felix Smith, author of "China Pilot."

- 3-4 p.m. Jan. 20, Barnes & Noble.
- 11:30-12:30 Jan. 21, Honolulu Book Shops-Ala Moana.
- 11:30-12:30 Jan. 26, Honolulu Book Shops-Downtown.
- Noon-1 p.m. Jan. 27, Border's-Ward Centre.
- 2-3 p.m. Jan. 28, Border's-Waikale.

Snow (Snow White) and Tamara (Mascara) and Tanya (Piana), who got two hundred dollars for a never delivered piano.

No matter how fast the action, Capt. Smith always pauses to admire young women and their tight-fitting clothing.

His loyalties are primarily to his fellow workers — especially Chennault, whom he worshipped — and he offers few political comments about combatants in the wars that swirl about him. "We pilots didn't know much of what happened because we seldom had the luxury of continuity," he writes.

His sometime boss, the CIA, he treats passively, calling it merely "the customer." Only once is he upset at the CIA when one of its officers takes delivery of napalm and flies off to indiscriminately bomb a nearby village. But he says nothing about it at the time.

Flying is at the heart of all the action. Smith is meticulous at the controls, overriding a mechanic's opinion when he believes he needs more fuel because of winds aloft. He relates close scraps that white-knuckle fliers and craggy, 30-year veteran pilots can equally enjoy and understand. There's not a boring or maudlin tale. "China Pilot" is a good read.

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After seven years as a sports reporter for the Los Angeles Examiner, Chuck Novak spent 32 years in United Airlines public relations management. He and wife Shirley reside in