



ART IN THE FIRST PERSON

# Flying My Father's War

AN AUTHOR CONNECTS WITH HER SUBJECT | BY NEDDA THOMAS



Nedda Thomas

Above: Ned Thomas, aviation cadet, with the first plane he flew and soloed, the Stearman PT-17 bi-plane

*What I need to know is how to steer the airplane.*

*Also how to take off under jungle conditions, navigate a narrow thread of skyway above the earth's highest summits as the enemy wreaks havoc with the radio signals, then descend into a lantern-lit landscape and land along a jolting airstrip of dirt and rock. All in a non-pressurized, Depression-tech rattletrap, the C-46 "Flying Coffin." To fly the treacherous Himalayas, the "Hump," and not succumb to a crash, vertigo, oxygen deprivation, hellish turbulence or any of the tribes of cannibals lurking on the periphery.*

**T**raining for a suicide mission?

No, my father, Ned Thomas, was a World War II Hump pilot, and I'm writing his story.

What did I know about this "forgotten war?" Little more than that he'd flown there nearly seventy years ago and had scarcely spoken of it since. Nor did I set out to be a military historian. I'd bought a derelict house and was making it habitable. Every morning at my door

stood a white-haired gentleman—late 80s, toolbox in hand, ready to help.

As in a military mission, a writer has to define her mission. Mine was straightforward. Wanting my father to take it easy, I determined to settle him amid the sawdust and paint buckets and pry out the bygone story of a young man who aspired to fly and met a harsh challenge. I had little idea of how far this was going, but I'd interviewed enough people to know I had a brave and inspiring man, a compelling subject, in a world beyond imagination—and I had to learn it fast, along with the chessboard of theaters in the Orient, the aircraft flown there, the art of flying itself.

The worst pilot fatality rates of World War II, I learned, happened over the Hump. Under conditions unprecedented for flight, men took primitive aircraft from upper India, high over the roof of the world, and down into Asia, providing the sole lifeline whereby China's nationalists tied down two million Japanese troops who otherwise would have been in the Pacific

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killing Americans. By war’s end, the Hump had become the prototype for airlifts in Berlin, Korea and elsewhere, but it remained the most challenging and ranked by far the highest in terms of cost of human life. Like others of the Greatest Generation, my father saw nothing special in his service; indeed, by such thinking does history die. I shall not forget the day he headed for the shredder with a bundle of papers. Then something (divine intervention?) stopped him.

“I was going to toss this stuff,” he said. “You wouldn’t want it, would you?”

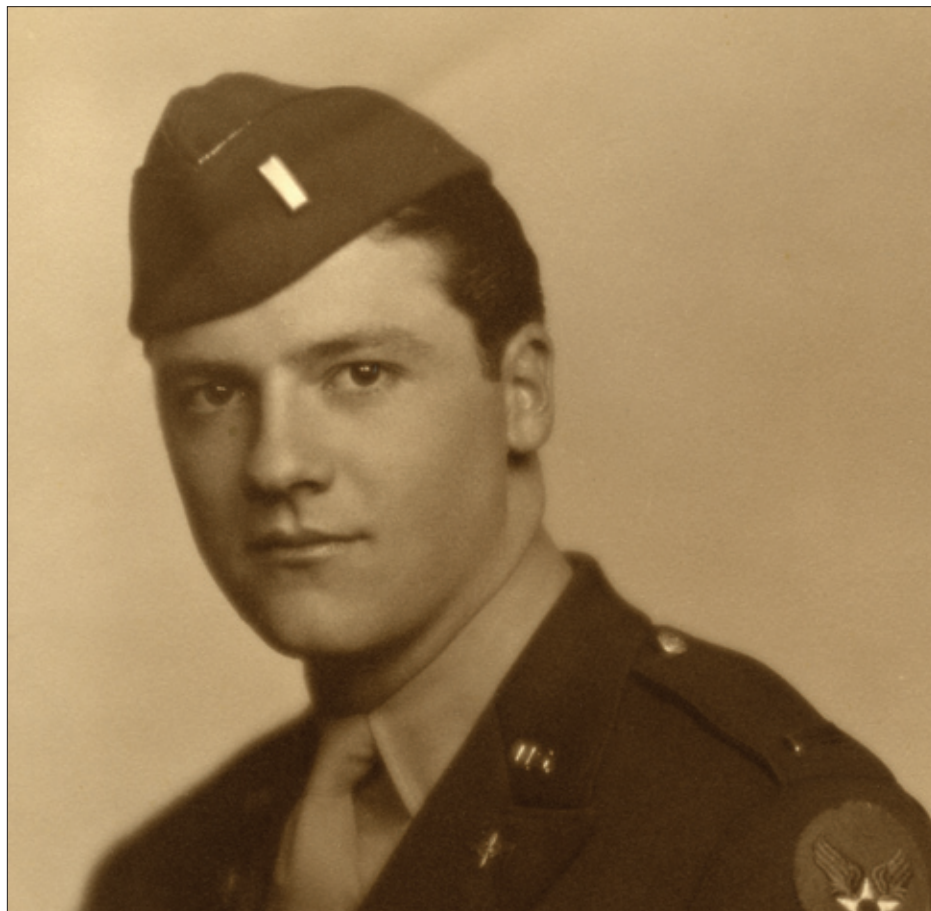
It was his entire military record—from cadet to retirement after leaving the Hague—every post, his awards (including a knighthood), flying hours—and it nearly went to the landfill as confetti.

It took persistence to keep him talking. Then I had to sort a cargo load of data and mold it into a credible narrative. “Aha” moments came as I remembered exceptional people who had visited my parents’ home—veterans, diplomats, even Anna Chennault, widow of General Claire Chennault, commander of the Flying Tigers in China. Chennault himself depended on the Hump lifeline and quarreled famously with General “Vinegar” Joe Stilwell over whose backs the airlift would cover.

History confirmed my father’s memory as a primary source. In the intricate China-India-Burma Theater, his dates were on target. He described a jaunt he took while his plane was being serviced to the ancient Forbidden City of Peking, a place he found eerily empty, and where a month later, Chiang Kai-shek would be mobbed and acclaimed.

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My challenge was to orient readers to military/political events without sounding like a textbook and allow history to speak in synch with a personal life. I was constantly painting new scenery in place only to leave it and hasten on. What was it like to be training as an aviation cadet at mid-war? Having no personal experience, I grew attached to some of the scenes I created. I even got caught up in Chennault’s incessant clashes with American generals. Yet I could not afford to hang around and gawk. I bundled Chennault ungraciously back to the States, then redeployed my father deeper into China, to fly Chiang Kai-shek’s unruly, appalling troops.



*Ned Thomas, second lieutenant and Army Air Force pilot, on the eve of his deployment to the “Hump”*

If anyone wants to know how I learned to “fly” those deathtrap planes, it was by following the man who was my father through his days as cadet, officer, flight instructor and pilot. I spent mind-numbing hours poring over aircraft specs, but it was his firsthand experience with the strengths and glitches of these planes that brought me up to speed.

“If it had a propellor, I probably flew it,” he quips.

*If it had a propellor, I groan, I indisputably rewrote it.*

To make the flying real constituted my greatest challenge as an author. I had to gain fluency to reconstruct cockpit scenes from my father’s narrative. Back to the dials. See what the old bird-doggin’ radio compass tells me. Consider the envelope of an alien, hostile environment. Climb the ‘46 through its paces till I can feel, hear, touch and smell what it is like to manhandle a huge, clumsy aircraft to unheard-of altitudes in murderous conditions.

Our flight school? My living room—amid the shavings, nails and tools. Here I learn to kick the rudder, give it the throttle, move into the climb. To fly the Hump. é