

Flying 'the Hump' (again)

Veterans' war stories make the best history lessons

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AMC public affairs

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We called it simply "the Hump" flight, although its official name was the China-Burma-India Commemorative Mission. But for those who had the opportunity to go, it was really a once-in-a-lifetime face-to-face meeting with history.

Air Mobility Command played a key role in the mission, a 50th anniversary commemoration to honor and thank the veterans of the CBI theater of World War II. The 60th Air Mobility Wing at Travis AFB, California, the 305th AMW at McGuire AFB, New Jersey and the 437th Airlift Wing at Charleston AFB, South Carolina provided operational support with C-17s and KC-10s.

In addition to providing the airlift, AMC's job was to ensure the veterans, who ranged in age from 70 to 83, were comfortable during flight.

Twenty veterans were selected to best represent the military who served in that theater: one representative from each service, including the Coast Guard, transport and fighter pilots, enlisted and officer.

AMC planners pictured the mission as an opportunity to showcase transport capabilities today over those of half a century ago. An example: With a force of eight C-17s flying three sorties each per day, we could have equaled the record cargo airlift of 71,000 tons performed by 350 aircraft in July 1945.

Even the C-17 that airlifted the veterans from Calcutta, India, across the Himalayas to Kunming, China, took a back seat to the veterans, whose war stories were humbling, sometimes unbearably sad, always fascinating.

One of those stories came from retired Army Maj. Gen. John Singlaub, who served with the once secret Organization of Strategic Services. He parachuted into a Japanese prisoner of war camp at the conclusion of the Pacific war, and through sheer American audacity, bluffed the Japanese commander

into surrendering despite Japanese orders to kill the prisoners rather than show how badly they had been treated.

Jane Haynes, a flight nurse assigned to Ledo, India, regularly flew with patients over the towering peaks of the Himalayas in the C-46s and C-47s that

thumbed through their diaries written during their months of isolation from family and home.

Air Force retired Maj. Gen. Eugene Sterling read from his diary about the day he was nearly killed by a passing P-40 which accidentally dropped its bomb load near his aircraft.

Ironically, the pilot of the P-40 turned out to be a fellow veteran on the flight, Air Force retired Maj. Gen. John Alison, a fighter ace. Both were now able to laugh over the near-fatal event.

Another diary, this one of retired Air Force Col. William Ramsey, contradicted the glamorous image of pilots who flew the Hump: among the cargo he carried were 8,000 garbage can lids.

The flight over the Hump this time though was unforgettable for its passengers. The veterans were feted at the U.S. Ambassador's residence in New Delhi, dined as heroes by both the Indians and the Chinese, and mobbed by the press in several locations.

AMC, too, impressed the veterans with a display of "global reach." They received an awe-inspiring view of a KC-10 from the cockpit of a C-17 during a simulated air refueling while flying over the Himalayas. The demonstration was a vivid comparison of how far air transportation has come in 50 years.

Both former and current servicemembers were tired after traveling almost 70 flight hours halfway around the globe, and back again, in 11 days, but not a person on the flight would have second thoughts about doing it again. The veterans can now tell stories about their return to their World War II theater of operations. But the people who got the best of these veterans were those of us who accompanied them on their nostalgic journey, back to where they became eyewitnesses to history.

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World War II veterans and C-17 crewmembers stand in front of the C-17 Globemaster III during a special 50th anniversary mission to commemorate, honor and thank the veterans of the China-Burma-India theater of World War II.

USAF PHOTO

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were the workhorses of the airlift nicknamed the "Hump." Many medical evacuation sorties were flown without doors for faster loading and unloading, and without oxygen, at 20,000 plus altitudes, because the patients had a higher need for oxygen than the medical staff.

Several veterans brought youthful photos of themselves and their comrades-in-arms. A couple searched 50 year-old flight logs for cargos, or