The Most Exciting Hour of My Life

By James Richman

The most exciting hour of my life? I think it was the time I traded places on an airplane with a Chinese mule. Other incidents have been more dangerous; other escapes have been closer: but not one has been more exciting.

I had been transferred from Kunming, China, to Loping, two hundred miles distant where a fighter group held a landing strip in a narrow mountain valley. Since the most practical and most pleasant way to make the trip would be to fly, I arranged for a seat on a Combat Cargo plane.

Upon arrival at the Operations Office, I found that a mistake had been made. The line crew had loaded a shipment of mules on the plane which my group had been scheduled to ride. The Operations Officer explained that such a mistake was logical, since the less dependable planes were used for such cargo so that nothing would be lost if the crew had to bail out and let the plane crash. He concluded that since no other plane would be available for days, there was nothing to do except unload the mules and give the space to mere people.

The exchange of passengers was quickly effected. In a matter of minutes my plane was poised at the end of the runway, straining at the brakes while the pilot gunned the engines to test their power. To my untrained ears, the sound of the exhausts was a symphony of pure might, but my companion shattered my confidence by mentioning in an offhand manner that the left engine was missing out. He promptly leaned back against our baggage and closed his eyes in what I imagined to be blissful sleep. I promptly inched forward to the edge of my bucket seat and began munching fingernails.

The pilot seemed satisfied with the engines, a fact in which I placed great faith, and he eased the throttle forward. The plane roared down the runway gathering speed rather slowly and had gone only a few hundred yards when the left engine began sputtering in a manner obvious even to me. The pilot had plenty of runway before him in which to stop, but he was using it up greedily, and in a matter of seconds he had passed the point beyond which there is no choice. It was take-off or else.

At the end of the runway was a field of gasoline storage tanks situated on a gentle hill, so the “or else” alternative was grim. As the last inch of runway disappeared beneath the plane, the pilot
retracted the landing gear and we were airborne. The ship went into a gentle climb carefully calculated by the pilot to clear both the gasoline tanks and the hill. We passed so close to the big steel containers that every detail was clearly visible, and the people working in the area were seen scurrying to cover to avoid our crash.

The take-off was successful. I relaxed a little, for I was sure that after such a narrow escape the pilot would circle the field and land for repairs. I knew it would be impossible to cross the mountains along the route. But the plane continued its straight course and gentle climb, and the left engine continued its popping and sputtering. I estimated the altitude as best I could, and when I thought we had enough height to render it practical, I cuddled up to my 'chute.

The first quarter hour of the flight was relatively uneventful aside from the continued fickleness of one power plant. I alternated between moods of cautious optimism and unrestrained pessimism. My blood pressure undoubtedly rose and fell as we struck successive updrafts and downdrafts. In my excitement I realized that a bail-out was not only possible at our altitude, but also probable in view of our delicate situation. Through my mind in their proper sequence ran bail-out procedure, landing procedure, escape procedure, and survival procedure. I intended to be prepared.

We approached our major obstacle, a mountain range nine thousand feet high, three thousand feet higher than the field at Kunming. Everyone aboard knew it was impossible to gain three thousand feet on one engine, and everyone anticipated the obvious sacrifice, the jettisoning of our baggage to lighten the plane. The pilot was flying parallel to the range, and at times he had to bank the plane away from the mountains in order to follow the contour of the valley. I looked upward to see the peaks.

It soon became apparent that the pilot was seeking a pass through which to fly. He swept up and down the valleys, here slipping over a low place in the range, there flying between the sheer walls of a clearly-defined pass, always working his way eastward. My companion nodded, yawned, and dozed in complete indifference.

Our estimated flight time ran out. We had flown many miles more than a direct route necessitated. I began to look for an airfield. Suddenly it was below us, a flat valley, little wider than the hundreds of others I had seen, but with that unmistakeable red clay wound which was the landing strip. We landed uneventfully and unloaded hastily. I complimented the pilot on his skill and judgment, and asked if he intended to stay until his plane was repaired. He answered, "Oh no, it's been that way for weeks. I'll go on back to Kunming."

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I sought out my companion to help him with the baggage and found him climbing from the plane. He exhibited no evidence of excitement or tension as he carefully stepped off the last step of the landing ladder. He deliberately planted both feet firmly on the ground, heaved a great sigh of relief, and before I could speak to him, fainted dead away.

Requiem
By Alan Markun

All shall go down
All shall go under
All shall forget.

Will not next year's spring remain a-bloom?
And shall not the tawny leaves
defy those autumn winds?
Nay, not so, they shall all go down
They shall all go under
They shall all forget.
Breathe brief moment
while we yet exist.
For the darkness shall cast
all asunder,
And the madness of crazy time
twist all into a myth.
Yea, we shall all go down
We shall all go under
We shall all forget.