

The Evacuation of Burma by I. Wayne Eveland

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I Wayne Eveland
Captain, Pan Am Africa

On December 4, 1941, Wayne Eveland was one of a group of new-hire Pan Am pilots that left Washington, DC, to fly the Pan Am - Africa routes from Accra to Cairo. They were soon onboard a Boeing 307 bound for San Juan, which would connect with a flying boat to cross the Atlantic to Africa. Within months he was among the Pan Am/Africa pilots thousands of miles further east, flying the notorious Hump between India and China for the 10th Air Force.

Flying the Hump

For my co-pilot, Leo E. Viens, and myself, the China-Burma-India story began with a simple announcement on the pilots' Bulletin Board at Accra stating that the Tenth Air Force in India was asking for volunteers for temporary duty assignments that might include service in an active war sector. No details were mentioned.

Leo agreed this would give us a chance to see something of India and the Far East, and I signed us up.

We left Accra on the 9th of April 1942 and finally arrived at Dinjan, India, in the northeast extremity of India, on the 17th. We learned many facts the bulletin board had failed to mention.

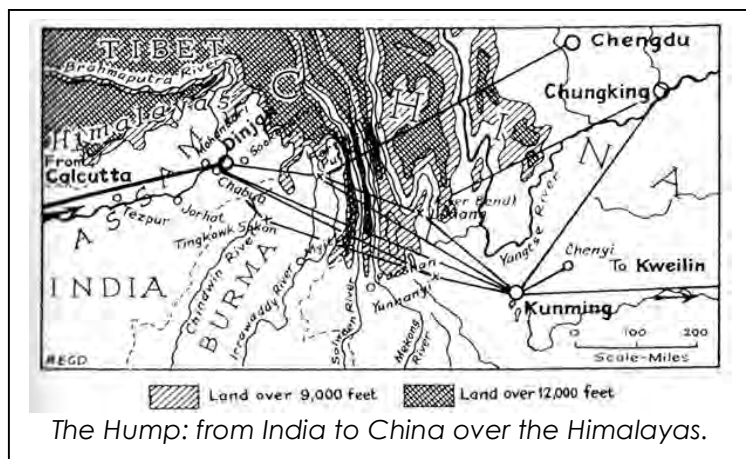
The Japanese had taken the seaport cities of China and Burma and were marching north [through Burma] against light resistance to isolate China by cutting the Burma Road. Sick and wounded soldiers, as well as thousands of refugees, were fleeing north in hope of air evacuation to India before the Japanese overtook



Capt. Eveland, 2nd from right, departing Charleston, SC; Dec 5, 1941

them. In April and May, less than one dozen PAA-Africa crews, less than a half dozen each of Army Air and CNAC crews, and a dozen or less RAF crews, saved many thousands of soldiers and refugees from death or imprisonment in Burma.

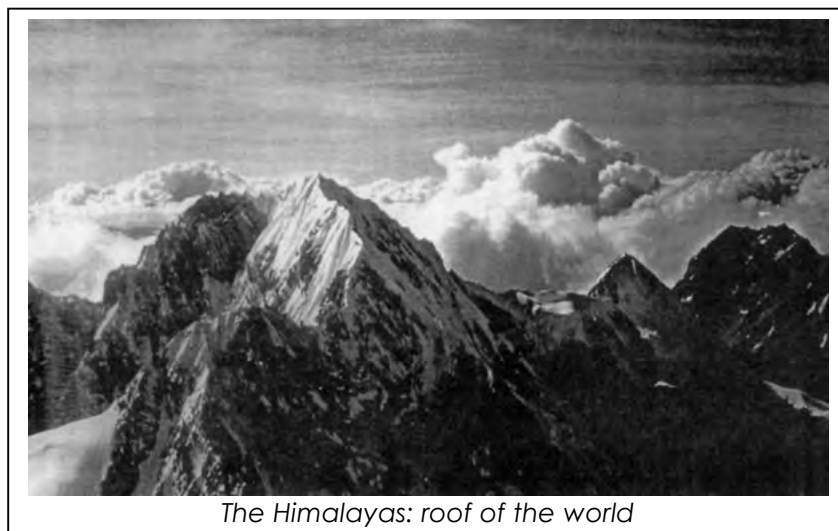
The aircraft were unarmed. Every flight was overloaded. The aerial maps were often in error. There was no oxygen, although altitudes of 19,000 feet were common in storms over some of the most rugged mountains on earth. Radio aids were non-existent, yet let-downs were usually to airfields in deep valleys. Few if any aircraft were equipped with de-icing equipment, though ice was common.



The main evacuation point was Myitkyina, Burma, at the northern end of a rail line, about 250 miles north of Mandalay. Each day more and more wounded and refugees crowded the airstrip; toward the end it was pandemonium. PAA captains gave first priority to stretcher cases, wounded, women and children. Often Burmese ladies would say all the children in their charge were their own. We knew they probably included children of sisters, brothers, in-laws, and whatever, but how could we tell? We piled them on board. When the seats were filled we kept stacking them aboard sitting and standing. Before takeoff we crowded

everyone forward to get the weight forward. We filled the baggage areas behind the pilots with people. We could not save them all, but we saved thousands.

One pilot, Captain Hubbard, flying on instruments in a heavy rainstorm, was disoriented by lack of radio aids and almost out of gasoline and made a successful forced landing in a rice paddy. After unloading ammunition at LioWing, China, I was bombed on 28 April and the tail assembly was blown away. When emergency repairs were completed, the plane was loaded with 40 or 50 sick, wounded, and refugees who were delivered safely to India. On another occasion Leo and I made a successful mercy flight from Myitkyina to India with 74 passengers plus a crew of two, a total of 76. We believed this to be a world record for a DC-3 designed for only 26 passengers. The overloading punishable by court-martial in peace time was justified by humanitarian concerns in a wartime emergency.



Japanese bombers and fighters often entered the area where we were picking up wounded and refugees, but they did not worry PAA pilots nearly as much as the abominable weather. Mountain peaks jutted into the clouds where rescue planes usually were on instruments. I am sure the dangerous mountains and terrible weather protected us more from Japanese interceptors than a fighter escort could.



April, 1942: Capt. Eveland (in hat, at right) at Dinjan after a refugee flight.

The greatest worry for most pilots was how to find the airport without radio assistance. Although a few of our airports had radios, they seldom were turned on, because Japanese planes could "home" on them. Dinjan was in a deep valley surrounded by mountains. Returning there on instruments, not knowing whether he had a headwind or a tailwind, with only "time and distance"

calculations to rely

on, the pilot began his let-down when he HOPED he was above the ridge into the valley. If he assumed a headwind but had a tailwind he would overfly the base and hit the ridge beyond. If he assumed a tailwind but had a headwind, he would undershoot and hit the closer ridge. Gauging the minute to start the let-down was playing "Russian roulette".

The next morning PAA crews were in their aircraft at Dinjan waiting for the takeoff signal. Leo Viens and I were supposed to be the first out. Meanwhile, two British DC-3s took off for Myitkyina. Finally operations canceled our mission. Later we learned that Dallas Sherman, who led the PAA pilots assigned to the 10th Air Force, had insisted that the Air Force send its only P-40 to determine whether the Japanese had taken over the Myitkyina airfield during the night, before he would release PAA crews to fly there. Meanwhile a radio report came back from Myitkyina that the two British aircraft had landed but had been destroyed by Japanese fighters, and that the Japanese now controlled the airfield.

In all, the airlift evacuated 3,564 women, children, and wounded soldiers from Burma. When Burma fell, the Hump route became the only access to China. Thanks to Dallas Sherman, Leo Vein and I are still around to recount these facts.

This story originally appeared in "The Clipper", the newsletter of The Pan Am Historical Foundation.