

unsung hero

Captain Moon Chin

By Phillip Chin



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This is the story of Captain Moon Chin. He is a real unknown and unsung American Hero, someone who has been “missing in history” for many decades. Moon Chin is an exceptional person, a Chinese American immigrant who broke the mold during the Great Depression and became a pioneer in aviation history. His life story is the story of a very special American.

Learning to Fly

Sometimes it’s hard to remember just how old Moon Chin is. To put his 95 years and birth in 1913 into perspective you have to think of all the history surrounding his life. The Chinese Republic of Sun Yat-sen was created in 1911, two years before he was born. The Titanic sank a year before. World War I started the year after. All that is hard to remember when you sit with him and he complains about Windows Vista and debates the merits of buying a Mac over a PC.

Moon came to America from Taishan, China in 1922 when he was 9 years old. He makes it clear though that he wasn’t a “paper son,” one of those Chinese who memorized enough family and Chinese village facts to fake being the child of a US citizen. Moon was the son of a citizen father (however oddly that citizenship was obtained after the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake) and was an American by birth.

It was the first time in his life Moon had seen so many cars and ships. More importantly it was the first time he’d seen airplanes. As he sat looking out the window of the Seattle

immigration station he was fascinated by Boeing planes from their nearby factory performing test flights over Puget Sound. Aviation was just starting its transition from the realm of rank amateurs and crazies into a respected profession. The US air mail service that did so much to make the profession respectable to ordinary Americans was just four years old in 1922.

The thrilling solo flight of Charles Lindberg over the Atlantic in 1927 was Moon's decisive push into flying. Fortunately for Moon's ambitions the Curtis-Wright Company took advantage of the booming interest in aviation and opened a flight mechanic and pilot institute in Baltimore, Maryland where Moon and his family lived running the family restaurant.

It was a long struggle to get his father's permission to attend. Finally a cousin convinced him to let his son fly with the argument, "He want to kill himself, let him go!" Moon must have been unusually persuasive though because he also convinced his father to pay for the aviation lessons. Solo lessons, where a student learned by himself, cost \$15 each. Lessons with the help of an instructor cost \$20 or \$21. Those were very expensive lessons in those days. Moon ended up being the only one to complete the course. Some dropped out because of the cost but many also found the hard and dirty reality of aviation too much for them when compared to their romantic images of it.

There were no government certification requirements for aircraft mechanics either. This amateurishness was part of what made early aviation so dangerous. Moon was one of the few that went through the professional flight mechanic and pilot's training programs sponsored by Curtis-Wright, which was one of America's top aviation companies at the time. He received a limited commercial pilot's license in 1932 and worked briefly for Curtis-Wright but opportunities to get ahead were limited. The Great Depression was already putting Americans out of work by the millions and many potential employers had trouble believing that Chinese

Americans could understand English let alone fly an airplane or service them. Employment prospects even for college-educated Chinese Americans were poor. Moon, like many Chinese Americans, ended up going to China looking for work.

China and CNAC

Moon Chin arrived in Shanghai in the bitterly cold winter of January 1933. He stayed for a week with an uncle before moving to a youth hostel while looking for work but lost because he didn't speak the Shanghai dialect.

Moon finally found company that he could understand and a job through a group of Chinese American pilots in Shanghai, trained in private flying schools in the United States with donations from fellow Chinese Americans, and hopeful about joining the Nationalist Air Force to fight against Japanese aggression. It was one of the pilots from this group of Chinese Americans that provided Moon Chin with a contact that got him a job with China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC) in March 1933, initially as a mechanic.

China had no money to build Western-style airports and little of the industrial infrastructure to build much of anything else. To get around these limitations seaplanes were used that could take-off and land from the water to connect the coastal cities. Compacted dirt fields served as runways in other cities. With few educated or even self-educated mechanics available, it was oftentimes up to pilots to carry out their own plane repairs. Moon obviously had an advantage with his dual professional certifications as a pilot and mechanic. He knew what to do and survived when other pilots died through poor maintenance or the inability to repair in-flight mechanical emergencies. Only the most adventurous pilots from around the world took on assignments under such primitive conditions.

None of the pilots stuck it out longer than Moon Chin but Chinese pilots were still discriminated against by white-run airlines, even

in China. They had to serve as co-pilots under white captains and made less money than their white counterparts despite any additional training and experience they had. Chinese Americans couldn't escape discrimination in the 1930s no matter where they went. Moon was certified as a fully qualified pilot by 1936 but was still stuck as a copilot. Ironically it was World War II that opened up his opportunities.

Moon Chin's Interesting Day

One day in April 1942, Moon Chin was told by CNAC to fly from Calcutta, India to Chongqing. It was another of those mysterious missions that he wasn't told the purpose of or where his final destination would be. On arrival at 8AM he was told to wait for a VIP. At 9AM he was surprised to see the arrival of a large crowd of Chinese and Americans, among them he recognized the American Ambassador to China, Clarence E. Gauss. To his surprise he recognized the other American standing with the ambassador, someone he hadn't seen since 1933. Ambassador Gauss told Moon to take special care of this man on the flight. CNAC controllers directed him fly the American to Calcutta, with a refueling stop in Kunming, then a stopover in Myitkyina in Northern Burma. There he was to evacuate some CNAC personnel and equipment before the Japanese overran the town.

Moon's mystery guest wore a battered US Army officer's cap, leather flight jacket, and khaki military pants that had been torn in a dozen places. He was dirty and stank horribly. On his



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jacket was a patch that read, "Major James A. Doolittle U.S.A."

Moon had first met Jimmy Doolittle in 1933 when the world-renowned stunt flyer had come to Shanghai on behalf of the Curtis-Wright Company to demonstrate their planes for sale in China. The planes had been shipped over in crates and Moon and other Chinese

pilots and mechanics had spent an entire evening assembling the planes together with Doolittle. The next day Doolittle put on a dazzling acrobatic display for the aircrews that ended with him buzzing the airfield horizontally, one wingtip just feet from the ground, both arms extended outside the cockpit and waving. From what he remembered of Doolittle's evening activities in 1933 and the condition of his clothes, Moon concluded that Doolittle had gotten drunk and been rolled into a ditch somewhere. In fact, Doolittle had been rolled into a ditch of sorts.

His guest was actually a lieutenant colonel. Because of the fast training that he and his men had done there had been no time to change the identification patch on his jacket to reflect his promotion. He'd been assigned to carry out a daring plan, dreamed up in the dark days right after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had crippled the Pacific Fleet and brought America into World War II. Using land-based B-25 bombers flying off the deck of the aircraft carrier, Hornet, he was assigned the task of bombing Tokyo. Flying land-based bombers off the short deck of an aircraft carrier had never been done before and it was felt that only someone

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The plan had been to land on Chinese airfields after the raid but because the Hornet had been spotted by a Japanese fishing boat and possibly lost the element of surprise, the bombers had to take-off without having enough fuel to make it all the way. They took the Japanese capital completely by surprise then scattered in different directions. Most of the bombers ended up crashing in occupied China, the crews bailing out when the bombers ran out of fuel. The Japanese launched a furious effort to capture the airmen, a search that is estimated to have caused over 250,000 Chinese civilian deaths, but only captured eight out of the eighty American airmen. All of those captured were tortured and mistreated and three were executed after a show trial.

Doolittle himself had parachuted near Quzhou in coastal Zhejiang Province and landed in a flooded rice field fertilized with human waste. He and his crew then spent days being smuggled out of Japanese held territory by Chinese guerillas with the help of the American missionary, John Birch. This arrival and journey explained his pungent odor and the sad condition of his tattered clothes. Once they reached Chongqing he'd been ordered to report to Washington DC as soon as possible to present his report about the Tokyo raid. None of this had been reported in the news yet for security reasons so Moon was completely unaware of Doolittle's importance.

There wasn't time to say anything to Doolittle since Moon had to take advantage of the temporary absence of Japanese fighters and bombers to get away from Chongqing as soon as possible. He quickly brought the DC-3 off the ground and flew towards Kunming. Halfway there they were warned by radio of Japanese fighter activity in the area so Moon quickly landed on a dusty country road and camouflaged the plane as best he could. The passengers and crew took shelter in the ditches. Doolittle came

over and got into the same ditch to talk to Moon. He didn't remember Moon Chin after so many years and was obviously surprised that he had been recognized. He wanted to know how Moon proposed to takeoff again. In its present orientation the plane was pointed with the wind towards a mountainside, an obviously suicidal takeoff run. Moon assured him that they'd turn the plane around for takeoff. "What about the telephone wire?" Doolittle asked. "Oh, we'll take it with us to Kunming," Moon assured him with a smile. He got a dubious look from Doolittle who said, "I hope you know what the hell you're doing."

After refueling in Kunming, Moon got a note from Doolittle delivered to him by the radio operator. It read, "In Chongqing this morning American ambassador told me that the Japs were certain to be in Mich'na before nightfall. Doolittle." Moon sent back reassurance that he was sure that CNAC wouldn't send him to an airfield if it was already Japanese controlled. When they arrived at the airfield he saw two CNAC planes taking off and a large crowd of people walking away from the airfield. Reassured by the sight Moon landed the plane. The crowd, which had been moving off, suddenly rushed back onto the airfield. It turned out that the last CNAC personnel and equipment had already been evacuated on the planes he'd seen taking off. Myitkyina was just about to fall to the Japanese after all. The refugees hoping to catch the last plane out had been moving away when this last plane arrived. Now they were more than eager to leave.

It was a pure madhouse on board as more and more people forced their way in, waving money and jewels and screaming to be let on board. The plane, which had been designed for four crewmembers and twenty one passengers soon filled up. More and more people crammed themselves aboard even though the crew was refusing to take their valuables. When fifty people were aboard Doolittle yelled at Moon, "I hope you know what you're doing!" Moon yelled back, "There's a war going on over here. You do

lots of things you wouldn't do at home when you have to!" When the hatch was finally shut there were sixty passengers on board and Doolittle was heard saying, "I think I would rather have gone back the way I came!"

When they finally landed in Calcutta, being met by an astonished American consul general, eight additional unplanned passengers tumbled out of the exterior rear mail compartment. The plane that had been designed to carry twenty five people had flown an unbelievable seventy two.

Jimmy Doolittle returned to Washington and was greeted as a national hero. He was promoted directly from Lieutenant Colonel to Brigadier General, skipping the rank of full Colonel. He was also awarded the Medal of Honor by President Roosevelt, "For conspicuous leadership above and beyond the call of duty, involving personal valor and intrepidity at an extreme hazard to life. With the apparent certainty of being forced to land in enemy territory or to perish at sea, Lt. Col. Doolittle personally led a squadron of Army bombers, manned by volunteer crews, in a highly destructive raid on the Japanese mainland."

Although post-war analysis of the raid showed that little damage had been caused in Tokyo the mission provided a major boost to American morale at a time when America was losing battles everywhere across the Pacific. It also frightened the Japanese into diverting some naval and air units away from the battlefronts to defend the Japanese home islands. Moon didn't find out the significance of what Doolittle had done until the day after when the newspaper announced the Doolittle Raid over Tokyo. To him it had just been a normal day in the office.

The Story Afterwards

In 2005, Moon Chin was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal by the United States Air Force for his World War II service. These are extremely rare medals for a civilian to win. He was also recognized for having performed military service for the United States

from 1941 to 1945 that made him eligible for veteran's benefits and access to Veteran's Administration hospitals despite always being a civilian. Thankfully Moon has never had any need to utilize those services so far.

Moon has gained increasing recognition for being a pioneer and legend of aviation. His oral history has been documented by the San Francisco Airport Commission Aviation Library and Louis A. Turpen Aviation Museum. He has also been regularly invited by the Chinese government to attend reunions arranged to honor those that served in the Flying Tigers or supported them by making transport trips over the Himalayas, "The Hump." Doing their own bit to keep memories alive, the CNAC Association, a group of CNAC vets and their progeny, hold their annual reunion at Moon's house every year. They come from all over the world to attend.

Despite all this attention given to his adventurous past Moon still seems set on looking more towards what happens tomorrow rather than reflecting too deeply upon the past. He's still debating the merits of a Mac over a PC with people and discussing hardware issues with a computer engineer in India. From open air cockpits to the digital age it continues to be a fascinating even if occasionally frustrating journey.