

An Old China Hand's Airplane & His Book - Smith
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During our China Mainland days we often saw an olive drab C-47, which was brightened with the flaming cross logo of the Lutheran World Mission. Its name was Saint Paul. The Saint Paul's original pilot, Dick Rossi, claimed he answered control towers, "Amen, Brother", instead of "Roger". When he joined GCAC I flew Saint Paul; and when I joined CAT, Bill Dudding became the missionary pilot.

A radio telegrapher's key on an arm of the right seat belonged to the copilot, radio operator, flight engineer, loadmaster and mechanic. This crewman with five hats was Max Springweiler. Max impressed us with his gracious manners and modesty. We never knew he had been decorated with China's Order in Silver for his exploits in the Sino-Japanese War. In the spring of 1939 Max was the flight engineer of Eurasia's scheduled passenger flight from Hanoi. When it crossed Yunan's border it was jumped by three bombers of Japan's Imperial Air Force. Captain Herr Rathje dodged into a cloudbank above a hill. His circling dissipated the clouds and the airline was struck by machine gun bullets. Capt. Rathje believed a controlled crash was prudent even though the hill sloped at an angle of 50 degrees and the elevation was 5000'. Everyone emerged from the damaged plane unhurt except for the captain who suffered a broken arm and leg. They hid behind rocks for half an hour while warplanes circled and dropped bombs, the closest exploding about 300 yards from the crashed plane. Max repaired the plane and induced some Chinese Villagers to shovel and hoe a makeshift runway and the plane was saved.

During our flights it became apparent that Max was known and respected everywhere in China and SEA. I caught vague hints of other adventures and realized that Max was a legendary Old China Hand. Try as I did, I couldn't unlock his tales. Max's innate dignity made him reticent. He focused on tasks at hand, working methodically and thoroughly, tempering these qualities with gentle humor.

Saint Paul's missionary flights ended in late 1949 when China's mainland fell to the Reds. In lieu of salary, the crew received the Saint Paul. Months later the Korean War began and CAT found itself under the aegis of the USAF 315th Combat Cargo Squadron. Short of planes, CAT leased the Saint Paul. As a bonus CAT offered jobs to the owners. Mechanic Otto Hoefft elected to return to Germany where he established a long range trucking company. Max became CAT's manager of long-range charters; and Bill Dudding became CAT's newest pilot. Dudding's job was short lived. He became an object lesson about admitting passengers to the cockpit. It happened on his first flight from Korea to Itazuki in western Japan. On that fateful day Capt. Dudding invited his passenger, the USAF Contract officer to the flight deck and seated him comfortably in the jump seat. His quest became uneasy after Dudding claimed, "I own this airplane." The last straw occurred during his approach to Itazuki. Blue sky, visibility unlimited, but Dudding was new to Itazuki, he knew its reputation for radio towers, hills, rain and fog. Instead of making an easy straight-in approach he performed its complicated instrument approach procedure so he'd have a mental image of the place when bad weather socked it in. The Officer wasn't a pilot; he was an attorney, blind to the intricacies of instrument maneuvers. In his official complaint he testified that the captain claimed he owned the airliner he was flying; and then he got lost even though the airport stuck out clearly in the sunshine.

Whitey Willauer, a pilot himself understood why new-hires practiced Itazuki's instrument approach; and he knew only too well that Dudding owned a large piece of the airplane.

Nevertheless he sacrificed Dudding to protect CAT's hard-won AF contract; the company's only bread and butter.

A few years ago I visited Max & Ruth one more time. The house had the luxury of an indoor swimming pool which Max called, "The pool the Saint Paul built." A perfect example of the fickle world of aviation, I thought. All of us had looked upon the missionary flying as a stopgap job until something stable came along. But the missionaries provided more security than CNAC, CAT, PanAm or many other corporate jobs in America. Profits from the lease of Saint Paul and its subsequent sale provided its three crewmen with healthy retirement equity. Max's health was failing. He showed me the finishing touches to his autobiography, intended to be a legacy for his daughters and grand children. Max died soon after he completed his life's story. "Max Springweiler: Pioneer Aviator in China". (The Book is available from Dr. Larry Sall and all proceeds go towards the CAT/AAM Archives.)

Books about Air America's antecedents give perspective to Air America. They pinpoint our unique place in the continuing drama of aviation history.