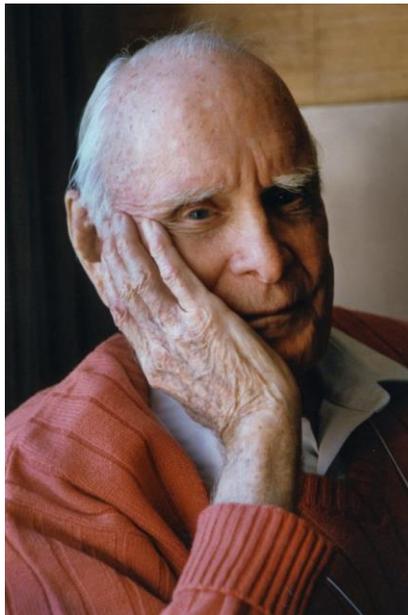


**Felix Turney Smith** was born on March 19, 1918, in Fort Smith, Ark to Frederick Smith, an English-born high school music teacher, and Marie Antoinette Turney, an immigrant from Ukraine when it was part of Imperial Russia.

Felix became a centenarian this year. One hundred years is almost two lifetimes for the average human being, and rare, and Felix attained this milestone living a harrowing lifestyle where death waited for no one and dancing with the devil was a daily occurrence. There was an element of luck in the draw, but skill and daring played a part as well, and Felix lived a lifestyle that few even read about, and fewer still experience. When most were trying to get out of harm's way, Felix was volunteering to get in.

The 1918 Spanish flu could have quickly ended his life, but he remained unscathed. Five years later he and his family moved to Wisconsin. His father was a musician and taught the art. But try as he might, and to his father's chagrin, music was not in his repertoire. Back then Americans never left their feet. He was a wandering star. The sea at long last, and yearning for flying that took him to places few had ever seen; the names of which are often unpronounceable to most westerners. Felix sailed to European ports learning celestial navigation and mastering the sextant, and then on to Asia. Along the way, he took flying lessons. At the ripe old age of twenty-three, Felix was in Manila when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The Japanese presence in the Philippines was not healthy for Americans, and he sailed south to Australia.



Felix had already been turned down by the Army Air Corps before the war was declared because he wore glasses and the Australian Air Force turned him down also. But when America entered the conflict, restrictions were lifted, and there was a slight chance he could realize an earnest desire to become a military pilot.

While waiting, and Felix didn't like waiting, he saw an ad that China National Aviation Corporation was looking for pilots and they were sanctioned by the United States Government to fly supplies over the Himalayas.

Felix applied and was accepted. It was temporary, or so he thought. He would never become a China hand, he quipped.

Rudyard Kipling said, "Asia is not going to be civilized after the methods of the West. There is too much Asia, and she is too old." But Kipling never met Felix, and no one can describe China and flying piston engine aircraft over the Himalayan Hump better than he, and he did it magnificently in his book *China Pilot*. There, also, he observed first-hand human cruelty, avarice, and treachery at its worst, and it haunted him continuously. It is unimaginable how any aviator could operate in mountainous terrain with no discernable visibility with nothing but a wet compass and an auto direction finder that pointed to lightning in clouds as often as a weak radio station. Couple that with mean-spirited airport commanders who turned off the beacons unless bribed, unmercifully knowing planes would crash without them and a recipe for disaster was cooked and ready. And Felix and his fellow aviation pioneers did not do it just once. They flew this way month after month and year after year, and none of them could explain why they stayed. Perhaps it was because there was a barely perceptible thread of decency and kindness interwoven in the fabric, and there was hope for a better tomorrow. You just had to understand the difference in thinking between an Asian and a Westerner, and not everybody could. Felix marveled at the sheer beauty of the country with its mountain peaks, forested valleys, and crystal-clear lakes, but it was the rural people and the simple man who garnered his attention.

He wrote, "There wasn't a coolie who wouldn't escape his cruel station, given the opportunity, and I abhorred the labor that killed half of them prematurely, but I stood in awe of them because they toiled with an acceptance and cheerfulness that was inexplicable. Harsh as their life was, they maintained a capacity to love the world."

It was the human cruelty that he found most objectionable, but the sacrifices made by those who cared touched his heart. He wrote this epitaph for his book, and these two lines epitomize the depth of his soul.

"For whom there were no bugler's taps or names inscribed in stone. Their bones rest in alien ground unwet by tears."

Felix didn't tolerate arrogance and proud people, and if he looked up to anyone, it was General Claire Chennault.

He wrote, "Severe as he looked, he had warmth in his expression and handshake, and a matter-of-fact, no pretense mien that put me at ease instantly, as if he were a fellow pilot. In spite of his casualness, I sensed I was in the presence of greatness. I looked integrity in the face and understood for the first time, charisma."

There was no turning back now, and without realizing it, he became the China hand he said he wouldn't, and during his thirty-year career in Asia, he flew ten different

aircraft and logged more than eight million miles. CAT, Inc. was name changed to Air America in 1959, but Civil Air Transport remained with forty percent ownership. Felix wore two hats flying piston engine aircraft for Air America one day and the Convair 880 for CAT the next. He was number one on Air America's seniority list until he retired in 1968. Felix went to work for Japan Airlines and in 1978 accepted a position in Hawaii as Director of Operations for South Pacific Island Airways.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for a Westerner to describe the lure of the Orient. The smells, food, people, and cultures are part of it, but that's just for tourists, and it's the intangible that eludes most observers. You need a purpose and hope that what you are doing makes a difference. You will always have regrets if you live long enough, but the experiences are forever indelible on your mind, and the ghosts of the past often visit later.

"Back in the practical West, years away from Alice in Wonderland's topsy-turvy domain, I hold memories fleetingly by their tails, wondering if these strange things really happened. The looking glass reveals only an aging face. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, the past is confirmed by echoes. They seem like music. I awaken suddenly with the sounds still ringing in my ears. Chants that ease bitter labor. Choral harmonies of Yangtze River traffickers. Exotic melodies of noodle sellers' flutes. Rustling sails of high-decked junks. Toots of laughter from Earthquake Magoon. The arresting silence when an engine, thundering like a kettle drum, fails on takeoff. The bass-drum of Hong Kong's noonday gun."

The poignant and evocative words Felix wrote so beautifully that echo in the minds of many who cannot place their thoughts on paper are chronicled forever in his book, and the world owes him a massive debt of gratitude.

There is a degree of satisfaction from the sacrifices made by CAT employees, and Felix was there from the beginning. The crowning achievement was the development of Free China in Taiwan. Unlike Laos and Vietnam, where victory was won militarily and lost by the politicians, Taiwan was the only country known who repaid the aid funds from the United States. As Felix stated, "Eventually, the personal freedom and prosperity of Free China became a testament to democracy." Felix didn't get married until he was fifty-two. A late bloomer, he said, and that was forty-eight years ago. He lived quietly in rural Wisconsin with his wife Junco and passed away three days before the CAT reunion scheduled to commemorate his century-old life. Rest in peace old friend. You will be missed.