

Flying The Hump in WWII With Lt. Wyllys Smith

Sheri Gray called the other day and announced that she had discovered a newspaper article that had appeared in *The Winsted Citizen* in 1945. It turned out to be a letter sent by Colebrook resident Wyllys Winter Smith, son of Colebrook's first selectman Wyllys P. Smith, who was a pilot flying supplies into China from India and Burma during the Japanese occupation of coastal China. As if it wasn't hard enough to dodge Japanese attacks, the route lay directly over the Himalayan Mountains, which as you know are the world's highest.

The materials supplied by the British and American forces were crucial for the survival of Free China, already battered by the Japanese Imperial Forces since 1937. The southwestern Chinese city of Kunming was the terminus of the Burma/Ledo Roads and also contained a large airfield. It seems a statistical long shot that so many Winsted area military personnel served in this area during the Second World War, but the photo album of Colebrook's Floyd "Buster" Hart, an Army engineer who helped build the Ledo Road from Burma to Kunming, contains the names of several Winsted area men. This letter, penned by Wyllys Smith, (who was known to his friends by his middle name of Winter), recounts an adventure that befell him on one of the flights over "The Hump", and I feel that it is important that his story be retold every generation or so. As it is, during the past 62 years, the majority of readers have probably never heard of this exciting episode in history, nor do they know of Lt. Winter Smith. It is interesting that he apologizes more than once for lacking the ability to write well.

This letter was written to the *Citizen* editor Ted Vaill on April 19, 1945 and published the following month.

"Dear Tee Vee: In over five years of military service I've never said or written a thing to the home-town paper, and for two good reasons. In the first place, I can't write well enough, and secondly, I never had any experiences worth writing about, but now I guess I have.

As it happens, I'm now stationed in India, in the Assam Valley, and am flying the oft-mentioned Hump to China, having been transferred here a few months back, after spending seven months in North Africa in my present tour of overseas duty. At that time I was flying cargo to India, and now I'm on the Far East end of the line and believe me, there's a vast difference! I never realized how rugged the face of old Mother Earth could be, nor the terrific weather that could over-hang it, but now I do.

A month or two back, I was checked out as first pilot on this run, after having had a couple dozen relatively uneventful trips across as co-pilot, learning the terrain and the grim possibilities of the weather en route, and became rather complacent about the whole thing, outside of being scared into humble respect for the terrain on the few clear days I'd been able to see it, comfortably cruising a safe distance above it. I couldn't realize straight up and down mountains, with snow at their tops, and dense jungle down their sides and across the small valley floors between would ever be more than panorama passing safely beneath me, but I was in for a big surprise. A none too gentle surprise, and one I'll always remember.

One night about 8 o'clock, I took off from India on or about my fourth or fifth trip as first pilot on another routine Hump crossing, and found myself battling icing conditions a good two-thirds of the way. The plane picked up a great amount of ice – on

the props and wings – so much I couldn't get it above the icing level, being unable to shake it, and also being unable to go below it, for the mountain peaks were right there waiting for me – that close! Somehow or other, the old Commando carried the load, barely staggering along fast enough to hang in the air, and after what seemed a million tense minutes, finally got into the clear over China, where the ice gradually dissipated along with all my fears for getting there. I'd not dared turning back at any time for fear the plane would stall out in the process, carrying all that ice, and besides I'd only have to go back through what I'd just come, barely above the mountain tops. The crew and myself drew long breaths of relief once we'd landed, and the radio operator almost left his hide when he learned how close we'd come! He's been kept in the dark 'til then, while paying attention to his duties on board, which had kept him plenty busy, the radio reception having been so poor in that weather. It all seemed an omen later, for much more was yet to come.

We took off, confident of an easy return, knowing that returning with no load, we'd easily be able to climb above bad weather in the clear over China, and so it was. At about 20,000 feet we were topping and dodging everything with "George" (the auto-pilot) doing a noble job! Then came time to let down through the icy overcast, some 20 minutes from our home base. Down into the soup we went, all set up to take care of the icing we knew we'd encounter until getting below the 5,000 foot thick overcast. Being empty, with plenty of gas, and close to home, it looked as though we were all set, but in the middle of the soup, at 2 o'clock in the morning, both engines quit dead. Over the side went the co-pilot and radio operator, and for a few hectic moments I tried to get one engine going at least, but run it wouldn't, and scared silly, about 1,000 feet above the last range of low mountains, out I scrambled, diving out into a black and rainy night, with the unknown (to me) jungle somewhere below. A very hollow feeling, need I add, and my first jump!

Due to my having a jacket on at the time, which I hadn't when trying on my 'chute, I could only fasten the chest straps and one leg strap, but who was I to worry about one strap at that time, though I knew it was bad enough with all straps fastened!

Well, when the 'chute popped, up slid the half-fastened harness and the chest strap buckle clipped me in the teeth and chipped one, cutting my lips just a little, and bewildering me all the more. The one leg strap was so tight it had put my leg to sleep, but it didn't seem to matter too much, as I was then below the overcast and watching the plane I'd left whine down into the hillside, half breaking my heart when it exploded and burned. The fire looked so large I was afraid for a moment I'd be landing in it, but I drifted down (for what seemed hours!) and a bit to one side, lighting in a tree a quarter of a mile from it, as I learned the next day.

I never knew my descent was over until I felt a couple of wet leaves slapping me in my face, for you remember, it was a black night, and the fire of the plane had already burned out, leaving me hanging in total darkness – in the rain."

We will continue next week.