An Interview with Mr. John E. Lee



Birth date: June 25, 1925

Birthplace: New York City, USA

Interviewed on: October 31, 2007

Interviewed by: Rita Lin (Lin Min) via Telephone Interview

Notes taken by: Rita Lin

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Background Information

I was born in New York, NY on June 25, 1925. I am an American Chinese. My father was from Hong Kong and my mother was from Trinidad. My parents took me to Hong Kong as a child and I spent about 10 years there. I have one younger brother and one younger sister. I am the eldest of the three.

My flying career started soon after graduation from high school and the equivalent of two years college. I enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corp as an aviation cadet in January 1944. I graduated with the class of 45-E on August 4, 1945 at Douglas Army Air Base, Arizona. I was commissioned as a lieutenant and remained at Douglas AAB, AZ. During that time WWII was ending and I was transferred to the Training Command as a flight instructor on the Billy Mitchell B-25's to train Chinese Air Force Cadets, West Point cadets and foreign student pilots under the lend-lease program. This position ended in November 1946.

Working with Central Air Transport Corporation (CATC) in Shanghai

At the end of 1946, I was discharged from the US Air Force and I went to Shanghai, China to join a Chinese airline company, Central Air Transport Corporation (CATC). At first the Chinese Civil Aviation Administration (CCAA) rejected my application for an Airline Transport rating because I was under age. Their requirement was 23 and I was still 21. To circumvent this, the company reapplied on my 22nd birthday, stating that I was 23 under the Chinese Lunar Calendar and in June 1947, the CCAA granted the ATR #29 making me the youngest Captain in China.

My boss was Mr. Moon Chin who had established CATC in 1946. My flight routes were from Shanghai to Chunking, to Beijing and other parts of China. When the Chinese Communist invaded Northern China in 1948, we flew the Beijing-Mukden shuttle evacuating wounded soldiers. Our flights also involved airdrops to Tai-Yuan, supporting Marshal Yen Si-shan with flights from Nanking and Shanghai. As the Nationalist Government was losing ground, the only places left for CATC to fly were from Canton to Chungking, Chengtu, Kumming and Luchow. At that time there were three air transport companies in Shanghai, CATC, the China National Air Corporation (CNAC) and the Civil Air Transport (CAT). When the Communists entered Shanghai, CATC and CNAC evacuated to Hong Kong and CAT moved to Canton. We resigned in October 1949 when CATC and CNAC defected to the Communists and CAT moved to Taiwan.

As a Partner with Fooshing Airline in Taiwan

In January 1951, I became a partner of Fooshing Airline established by Mr. Moon Chin, based in Taipei. We purchased two PBYs (Catalina Flying Boats) from Air France in New York and we flew the planes across the Pacific to Taipei. Contracts were pending from both the USA and Chinese governments to operate flights into mainland Communist China. Unfortunately, with all the red tapes and long delays from the authorities, it was necessary for me to give up this venture.

As a Pilot for Trans World Airlines in Saudi Arabia

In September 1951, I was employed by TWA for their contract to the Saudi Arabian Airline (SAA) which was based in Jedda, Saudi Arabia. The job involved flying DC-3/4's, Bristol-170's and Convair 340's to Africa, India, Middle East and Europe. Being an American born Chinese, the Saudis' did not realize that there were non-white American pilots. It took the U.S. Ambassador Wadsworth to explain to King Abdul Aziz ibn Rahman Al Saud about equal opportunity and democracy. The King called me the "Funny Looking American." After five years of very primitive living in the desert, I resigned in November 1956.

As a Pilot for Air America (US Government) in Thailand

In 1950 during the Korean War, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) purchased the Civil Air Transport (CAT). There were three companies involved, CAT, Air America (AAM) and Southern Air Transport (SAT) in Japan. All three were under the jurisdiction of the CIA. At a later date CAT became AAM and all covert operations were under the CIA. I was offered a contract in February 1957 to work for Air America as a captain flying C-47's and C-46's out of Bangkok for the Thai government with missions for border patrol and training of paratroopers. The flights

were under the Program Evaluation Office (PEO), United States Overseas Mission (USOM) and other South East Asia (SEA) supply contract. I had this position for 6-7 years.

As an Instructor for the C-123 Project, Chinese Air Force 34th Squadron in Taiwan

In 1958 I met Major Hienie Aderholt in Bangkok and we discussed the use of the C-123 Fairchild aircraft for AAM's operations in Laos, thus replacing the C-47's and C-46's which were unable to handle airdrop of heavy equipment. I was sent to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines for transition training for the C-123. I flew the aircraft and focused on its' ability on airdrops. On my return, I submitted my evaluation on its' capable performance and by the end of 1961, the US Air Force agreed to give Air America a number of C-123's for operation in Laos and South East Asia.

Back in 1945 when I was the flight instructor of the Training Command at Enid, Oklahoma, a number of the Chinese pilots were my students. I remember one particularly, he was Colonel Yeh-lin who was one of my student; he was a cadet at that time. He was able to fly the airplane but had difficulty in taxiing the B-25. His instructor was about to fail him, and this meant that he would have to drop out of the program. I was asked to review Yeh-lin's case and after speaking to him, I discovered that he had never learned to drive a car, so I told him that this was the reason why he was unable to taxi the airplane. I was able to get a jeep and taught Yeh-lin

how to drive. So, by knowing how to drive, Yeh-lin was able to relate this to the taxiing of the plane and he eventually passed his flight test. Later Col. Yeh-lin became a National hero. He was killed in a covert mission in a P2V aircraft in 1961.

In 1962, the pilots of the 34th Squadron from the Republic of China (ROC) were given transition training on the C-123's by the US Air Force instructors at Pope Air Force Base. These flight instructors were not aware that these pilots were going on special covert missions, and therefore they were only given the basic training which was very limited. The Chinese pilots returned to Taipei soon after their training. In May 1963, one of the C-123 crashed on a training flight in a valley near Pintung, claiming 12 crewmembers on board. After the crash, the C-123 program was grounded. Later in 1963, the US Navy Auxiliary Communication Center (NACC) requested a C-123 project, specially designed to train pilots in Taiwan to operate out of Saigon. The instructor pilots of NACC were only familiar with the P2V's but not with the C-123's so it was necessary for NACC to search for a special instructor for this C-123 project. Because of my past experience in training Chinese Air Force pilots and my flying experience with the C-123's for Air America, I was assigned to head this project, and be the flight instructor and liaison officer between NACC and the ROC Air Force.

When I went to Taiwan, the government did not want to register me as a foreign resident. The ROC government said that I was Chinese and had to be registered as a local Chinese. This meant that I could be drafted into the ROC arm forces. I objected to this request and informed them that I would resign after I have completed my assignment.

Prior to the start of flight training of the 34th Squadron, I encountered a problem with the military protocol. All high ranking officers were Aircraft Commanders (captains) and the lieutenants were copilots. However, some of the Aircraft Commanders did not meet the qualification of their status. A situation like this would present a safety problem, that is, rank versus knowledge. It was necessary for me to seek help from someone in authority so I went to see General Yi Fu-en of the Chinese Air Force and discuss my plan with him. I proposed that for the training program, there would be no ranking and everyone would start at the level of a pilot and everyone should meet the qualifying standard. Should any of the pilots fail the flight check, they would be downgraded to a copilot. Gen. Yi gave his approval to my suggestion.

My concept in the training of pilots, especially those on military covert missions is as follows: Safety is the utmost priority. The pilot should have full knowledge of his aircraft and he should know its' maximum performance; he should have full confidence in his ability to act in the event of emergencies and abnormal situations. With this, his crew members would always put their trust in him. Another safety measure is to implement cross-

training among the more important crew members, such as the engineers and navigators. This requires team work and cooperation, and with the knowledge that they can perform in case of any emergencies is of great importance to any mission.

I had about 15 students, not all of them passed the flight test. I upgraded the ones who passed the flight check and downgraded the ones who failed it. In doing so, no lives were lost leading to successful missions.

After I trained the pilots of the 34th Squadron in Hsinchu, they went on missions doing airdrops at nights in North Vietnam; I accompanied them two or three times a year, but only between Saigon and Da Nang. I am glad to say that I did not lose any pilots that I had trained. Since this work was classified under the CIA, no recognition was given to me by the US military or the Republic of China government. I was not permitted to have any records, personal or otherwise on my work or on my stay in Taiwan. This is now unclassified.

Life in Taiwan

While I was an instructor for the C-123's in Taiwan, I lived in the NACC's compound for six months in Yangmingshan, Taipei. As the training was done at the Hsinchu Air Force Base, the only means of transport from the Base to Taipei was a C-47 which I had to pilot, since the

Navy was unfamiliar with this plane. This became the commuter plane for all who resided in Taipei and worked at Hsinchu. The C-47 also served as a utility plane for carrying spare parts. Although I spent about a year and a half in Yangmingshan, I was not free to visit my friends or to see much of Taipei since my job was classified.

My Career as a Pilot

In September 1964, after the successful completion of the C-123 project with the 34th Squadron, I was transferred to Tachikawa Air Base, Japan to fly C-46, DC-4 and DC-65 for AAM and Southern Air Transport (SAT) with special flights to Korea, the inter-island of Japan at Okinawa, Taipei, Philippines and South East Asia.

In 1967, I took a mandatory six months leave from SAT. I signed on with Internord Airlines of Copenhagen, Denmark as a temporary captain flying DC-7B's on charter flights. They needed summer time captains and I was able to work with them for four months flying around Europe, mainly to Spain. It was an enjoyable business man's vacation and an experience flying with the Scandinavians.

In 1968, there was a cut back of pilots at AAM and SAT. Many were signing on with Japan Air Line (JAL) and I was one of them. However, my application was rejected by the Japanese because they felt that an American-Chinese piloting their planes would be an embarrassment to their company.

Needless to say I was very disappointed with their decision. I had also applied to China Airlines but I was again rejected for the same reason.

Before the end of my flying career, I had one desire and that was to fly a jet plane. SAT was willing to give me the jet training, provided that I relinquish my DC-6 captain's position and accept a B727 co-pilot status. This I did, and in March 1970, Trans International (TIA), later named Transamerica Airlines offered me a captain's position on their B727. I accepted the position and in doing so, I concluded my 14.5 years with CAT/AAM/SAT. I worked with TIA flying the B727's and DC8's on worldwide charters and military airlift command (MAC) flights until the age of 60 when the rule of mandatory retirement caught up with me on June 25 1985. I have logged over 35,000 accident and violation-free hours of flying and I enjoyed every minute of it.

I had a lifetime of experience being a pilot, flying many different types of planes in different countries and over all kinds of terrain, whether the jobs were military missions or International charter flights. Flying is "in my blood" and it always offers me a challenge when I take off, regardless of the type of weather or the situation at the time. There is always a feeling of great satisfaction whenever I have successfully completed a mission or a safe charter flight. I love flying and miss it since retiring, so much that in order to satisfy my yen, I have set up a computer simulator so that I can fly to different cities and land in the big airports everyday.