

Jack the Pilot

Jack's mother, Norma, was for many years the Society Editor of the Ft. Lauderdale News, and she had a regular column entitled The Palm Leaf Fan in which she wrote about events in town ranging from group activities such as bridge parties and dances to details about someone's grandchildren who had come to visit from up North. But in her column from September 19, 1938, the following appeared:

Jack Prescott has been mourning the loss of his original gas model, "John Thomas," that annoying red and yellow streak which refused to start in the air meet here but which performed magnificently when no officials were near—so magnificently that it was last seen heading toward Pompano. He has worked all summer on "Polka Dot" which won the Sunday contest for monitored jobs. His motor having "gone with the wind" and John Thomas, John Day's motor was utilized, and a sweet combination it proved to be.

She was writing about a model airplane show in which Jack had participated shortly before his 16th birthday. In a conversation with his brother, Mack, many years later, I learned that the "John Thomas" plane was later recovered when members of the Seminole tribe brought it to the Prescott house one day. It had run out of gas in the Everglades, and Jack had fortuitously written his address on the plane.

This incident is the first documented evidence of Jack's fascination with aircraft and with flying, but certainly not the last. Just over a year later, at the age of 17, he became the youngest pilot in Ft. Lauderdale, and then the fun really began. He described to me how he would practice snap rolls while flying down the beach at an altitude of 50 feet. He also told of flying planes *under* the drawbridges that span the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway by tilting the wings so that the plane was at an angle. "It used to scare the bridge tender half to death," said Jack.

In the picture below, Jack and another student are posing in front of the plane in which they are about to have a flying lesson at Thompson Aviation in Ft. Lauderdale.



At 17, Jack Prescott (right) became the youngest pilot in Ft. Lauderdale.

By 1943, Jack was 21 and the United States was involved in WWII. Jack volunteered and was accepted into the Civil Air Patrol flying out of Lantana airbase near West Palm Beach. These pilots were looking for Nazi submarines in single-engine trainers each with a 500-pound bomb strapped to the bottom. The pilot pictured with Jack in the picture below was Bob Mosely, whose brother Zack drew the well-known comic strip "Smilin' Jack," in which Dad claimed to have occasionally appeared as a minor character. In 2005, Bob Mosely sent me the photo along with some stories about Jack the Pilot that I had not previously heard. In one of them, they had some tense moments when their engine quit about five miles offshore, but Jack was able to get it started again. In the picture, the relatively small design of the planes is evident, and it is a wonder that a 500-pound bomb could be carried at all.

In 1946, Jack received a letter of commendation from President Truman for his work in this important civilian operation, but that was just the start of his wartime flying.

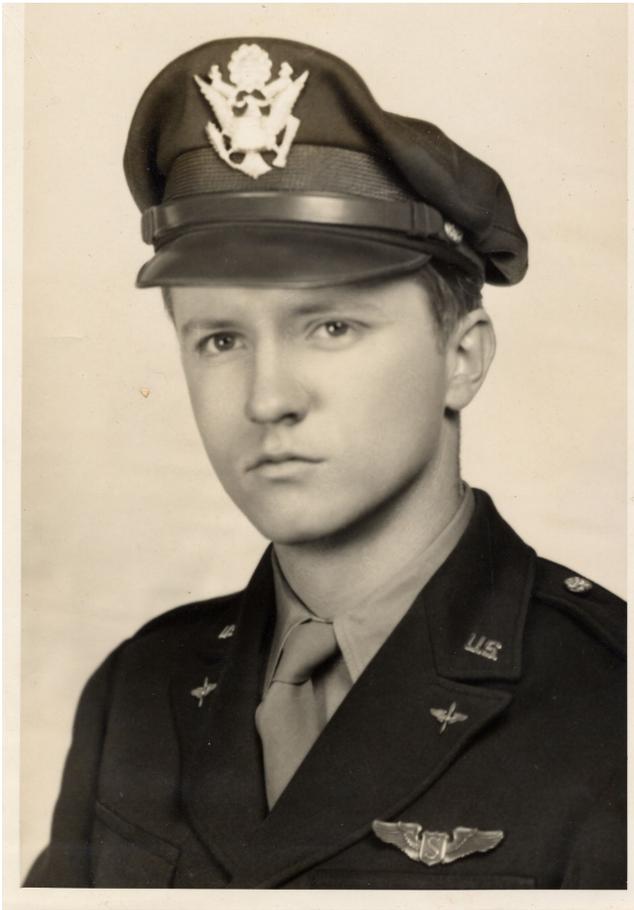


Lieutenants Jack Prescott and Bob Mosely, Civil Air Patrol, 1943

USAAC Service 1944-1945

In 1944, Jack enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps and began ferrying newly-built P-51 Mustang fighter planes from one coast to the other. This continued until September 3, when an incident caused him to be transferred to another, more dangerous duty. As he told the story, he had a girl friend in Charlottesville, Virginia whose house he would fly over, and the number of towels laid out on the roof would tell him whether or not she was available for the weekend. On September 3, however, he saw no towels at all, so he flew down quite a bit lower (100 feet) to get a closer look. This was how somebody got the number on his plane, and the next month he found himself in India. The truth of this story is documented in one of the pages from his logbook printed below. The Charlottesville flight took place on 9/3, and the very next entry is his first flight from India to China on 10/13.

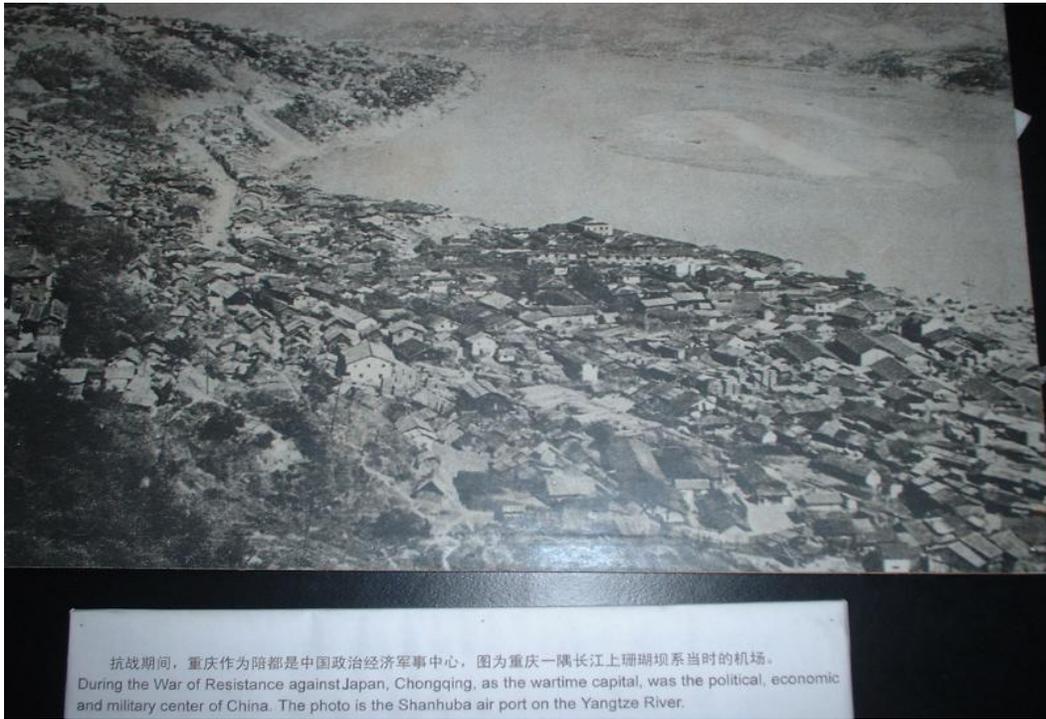
It was in this way that Jack became a “hump” flier—one of the pilots who flew C-47 transport planes from India to China over the Himalaya mountains, and the October 13 flight was the first of 83 missions through May of 1945. Jack told many stories about this time in his life—searching desperately for an airfield while running low on fuel, witnessing an injury to a Chinese worker hit by a plane on the runway, after which his co-workers laughed and applauded because they perceived that he was going to die and go to a better place. What Jack wrote about most frequently in the logbook comments, though, was the lack of a cockpit heater in many of the flights, which made the high-altitude flights seriously cold operations. His feet remained very sensitive to cold for the rest of his life.



Captain Jack Prescott, United States Army Air Corps

In 2005, I travelled to Chongqing, China to adopt my daughter, Lily, and had the opportunity to see one of the airfields where Jack landed during the war. General Joseph Stilwell's headquarters is preserved as a museum there, and the local residents still remember the contributions made by the American pilots who are referred to as "fei hu dui" or Flying Tigers, after Claire Chennault's corps of volunteer who flew those missions earlier in the war. The pictures below are from the museum's collection and show the airfield in the middle of the river along with the kinds of planes involved in this massive operation.

For his efforts in this part of the war effort, Jack was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross, and I carry that with me along with his pilot wings when I play taps every year on Veteran's Day. Sometimes, if I listen closely, I can hear his voice speaking to me as I play, and I remember the sacrifices he and many others made.



The airfield is on a big sandbar in the Yangtze River (upper right). This picture is from the Stilwell Museum in Chongqing.



These are the C-47 transports the Hump fliers used.

| MO | DAY | FROM | TO | MAKE AND MODEL OF AIRCRAFT | MAKE OF ENGINE | H. P. | CERTIFICATE NUMBER | DURATION HRS. | MIN. | |
|-----------|-----|-----------------|----------------------|----------------------------|----------------|-------|--------------------|---------------|------|----|
| 8 | 24 | DPZ | LOCAL | LINK | | | | 2 | 20 | |
| 8 | 24 | DPZ | LOCAL | B-17 | 4 WRIGHT | 1200 | 491 | 2 | 30 | |
| 8 | 25 | DPZ | COOLEDGE, ARIZ. | PS1 | MERCURY | 1650 | 724 | 1 | 30 | |
| 8 | 26 | COOLEDGE | MIDLAND, TEX. | " | " | " | " | 2 | 25 | |
| 8 | 30 | MIDLAND | DALLAS, TEX. | " | " | " | " | 1 | 20 | |
| 8 | 31 | DALLAS | DALLAS | " | " | " | " | 1 | 00 | |
| 9 | 1 | DALLAS | MONROE, LA. | " | " | " | " | 1 | 10 | |
| 9 | 2 | MONROE | SELMA, ALA. | " | " | " | " | 1 | 15 | |
| 9 | 2 | SELMA | GREENSBORO, N.C. | " | " | " | " | 2 | 15 | |
| 9 | 3 | GREENSBORO | NEWARK | " | " | " | " | 2 | 10 | |
| 10 | 13 | MOHANBARI-INDIA | YUNNAN, CHINA + RET. | C-46 | 2 P+W | 2000 | 640 | 5 | 30 | |
| 10 | 15 | " | " | " | " | " | 644 | 5 | 10 | |
| 10 | 18 | MOHANBARI, IND. | CHENG TU, CHINA | " | " | " | 791 | 4 | 55 | |
| 10 | 19 | CHENG TU, CHINA | CHENYI, CHINA | " | " | " | " | 2 | 20 | |
| 10 | 19 | CHENYI, CHINA | MOHANBARI, INDIA | " | " | " | " | 3 | 50 | |
| 10 | 25 | MOHANBARI | CHENG TU + RET. | C-46 | " | " | 714 | 10 | 10 | |
| YEAR 1944 | | | | | | | | TOTALS | 2250 | 10 |

| INSTRUCTION RS. | MIN. | INSTRUMENT HRS. | MIN. | NIGHT HRS. | MIN. | CLASS P | CLASS TWIN + 4 ENG. | CLASS ARMY | REMARKS | PILOT SIGNATURE |
|----------------------|------|-----------------|------|------------|------|---------|---------------------|------------|---|-----------------|
| 114 | 40 | 88 | 25 | 49 | 15 | 84.00 | 68.30 | 266.55 | LINK | |
| | | 1 | 00 | | | | | | INSTRUMENT RATING CHECK | |
| | | 2 | 20 | | | | 2.20 | 2.20 | LAST ST TRIP | |
| | | | | | | 1.30 | | 1.30 | PS1 | |
| | | | | | | 2.25 | | 2.25 | CALLED MARINE | |
| | | | | | | 1.20 | | 1.20 | RETURN DALLAS - MOTOR PRACTICALLY RUIT - | |
| | | | | | | 1.00 | | 1.00 | SAW TED GORE AT SELMAN FLD. | |
| | | | | | | 1.10 | | 1.10 | STOPPED CRAIG FLD. TO SEE MAX | |
| | | | | | | 1.15 | | 1.15 | - NOT THERE - HOME ON LEAVE | |
| | | | | | | 2.15 | | 2.15 | CAUGHT UP TO FITCH AGAIN | |
| | | | | | | 2.10 | | 2.10 | BUZZED CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA. WITH ME WITH FITCH + DELIVERED LAST ST TO NEA | |
| | | 1 | 00 | | | 5.30 | 5.30 | 5.30 | FIRST INDIA-CHINA TRIP - NICE WEATHER | |
| | | | | 2 | 20 | 5.10 | 5.10 | 5.10 | 2ND HUMP TRIP | " |
| | | | | | | 4.55 | 4.55 | 4.55 | LONG TRIP TO GAS 8-29'S | |
| | | | | 2 | 20 | 2.20 | 2.20 | 2.20 | RET. TRIP (RAN INTO LUNDQUIST) | |
| | | | | 3 | 50 | 3.50 | 3.50 | 3.50 | COLD AS HELL - ESPECIALLY MY FEET | |
| | | | | 1 | 00 | 10.10 | 10.10 | 10.10 | CHENG TU #7 GOT SICK ON EGGS | |
| 114 | 40 | 92 | 45 | 58 | 45 | 97.05 | 95.45 | 314.15 | CERTIFIED BY J. [Signature] | |
| HUMP - 31.55 6 TRIPS | | | | | | | | | | |

"buzzed" Charlottesville, Virginia

January 26-March 7, 1945

P-97.05 H.-46

| INSTRUCTION HRS. | INSTRUMENT | | NIGHT | | CLASS HUMP | CLASS TWIN | CLASS ARMY | REMARKS | PILOT SIGNATURE |
|---------------------|------------|------|-------|------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------|---|
| | MIN. | HRS. | MIN. | HRS. | | | | | |
| 141 | 50 | 109 | 45 | 177 | 00 | 326.30 | 390.20 | 608.50 | |
| 7 | 25 | | | | 50 | 7.25 | 7.25 | 7.25 | CHECK OUT C-47 TO CHENGKONG HOPE I CAN GET SOME JADE |
| | | | 50 | | | 7.50 | 7.50 | 7.50 | RQ QUITE A BIT OF ICE CLIMBING UP |
| | | | 40 | 5 | 10 | 10.45 | 10.45 | 10.45 | ICE AGAIN CLIMBING UP OVER FC |
| | | | 30 | | | 7.00 | 7.00 | 7.00 | INST. DEPARTURE - GOOD C.P. |
| | | 2 | 00 | 7 | 35 | 9.15 | 9.15 | 9.15 | RE-CHECK AND INST. CHECK ^{WITH} HEATER |
| | | 3 | 40 | 5 | 25 | 11.10 | 11.10 | 11.10 | FIRST REAL GAUGES - 100 MEAN REAL ^{NO HEATER - WHAT?} NO HEATER - WHAT? |
| | | 1 | 00 | | 10 | 7.10 | 7.10 | 7.10 | GOOD CO. PILOT - MAYS ^{DAY + NIGHT} |
| | | | 2 | 40 | | 6.00 | 6.00 | 6.00 | SHIP WITH HEATER - HOORAY? |
| | | | 3 | 15 | | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | HIT A DUCK - ^{LEFT THE SHIP} IN ^{TURNING} |
| | | | 50 | 3 | 15 | 7.35 | 7.35 | 7.35 | ANOTHER TRIP WITHOUT A HEATER |
| | | | | 20 | | .20 | .20 | .20 | FIRST TURN AROUND - HIGH OIL TEMPERATURES |
| | | | | | | 8.00 | 8.00 | 8.00 | NO HEATER AGAIN - DAMMIT |
| | | 1 | 10 | 2 | 40 | 6.50 | 6.50 | 6.50 | GOOD HEATER - BOY DO I LOVE 'EM |
| | | | | | | 6.55 | 6.55 | 6.55 | LAST TRIP FEB. - HUNTING CAMP TOMORROW |
| | | | | 5 | 20 | 7.20 | 7.20 | 7.20 | BACK FROM CAMP AT THE 'OLE GRIND |
| | | | | 6 | 50 | 6.50 | 6.50 | 6.50 | DEIBTOWSKI AS C.P. GOOD TRIP |
| 149 | 15 | 120 | 25 | 220 | 10 | 440.55 | 504.45 | 723.15 | CERTIFIED BY <i>John Prescott</i> |

H.-61

April 21-May 27, 1945

P-97.05 H.-74

| INSTRUCTION HRS. | INSTRUMENT | | NIGHT | | CLASS HUMP | CLASS TWIN | CLASS ARMY | REMARKS | PILOT SIGNATURE | |
|---------------------|------------|------|-------|------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------|---|--|
| | MIN. | HRS. | MIN. | HRS. | | | | | | |
| 159 | 05 | 130 | 25 | 262 | 15 | 546.10 | 610.00 | 828.50 | | |
| | | | X | 00 | 2 | 30 | 9.35 | 9.35 | 9.35 | HAD 2 HOURS OF THE ROUGHEST WEATHER I HAVE EVER SEEN |
| | | | | 35 | 7 | 05 | 7.05 | 7.05 | 7.05 | GOOD TRIP - NICE MOONLIGHT ONE |
| | | | | 35 | 5 | 50 | 7.25 | 7.25 | 7.25 | A DAMN COLD TRIP HOME ^{22000 AND} NO HEATERS |
| | | | | | 6 | 45 | 7.45 | 7.45 | 7.45 | BEAUTIFUL MOONLIGHT TRIP |
| | | 1 | 00 | 3 | 40 | 7.45 | 7.45 | 7.45 | SMALL TRIP - WONDERFUL HEATER | |
| | | 2 | 00 | 3 | 00 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 3.00 | NIGHT INSTRUMENT TRANSITION | |
| | | 5 | 15 | 5 | 00 | 9.15 | 9.15 | 9.15 | BAD TRIP - NEARLY GOT RUN OVER BY A B-24 - WHEW! | |
| | | 6 | 15 | 4 | 00 | 8.00 | 8.00 | 8.00 | PLENTY OF ROUGH WEATHER THIS TIME TOO | |
| | | 2 | 00 | 2 | 35 | 8.05 | 8.05 | 8.05 | AN HOUR + A HALF OF VERY ROUGH GAUGES | |
| | | | | 2 | 25 | 8.45 | 8.45 | 8.45 | BEAUTIFUL TRIP - MANUM NO GAUGES? | |
| | | 2 | 00 | 7 | 00 | 7.00 | 7.00 | 7.00 | GOOD TRIP - ^{SORT A} COLD TRIP ^{NO} DARN HEATER | |
| | | | | | | .15 | .15 | .15 | TURN AROUND - GAS CAP LEAK | |
| | | 1 | 00 | | 15 | 7.30 | 7.30 | 7.30 | GOOD DAY TRIP | |
| | | 4 | 00 | 2 | 00 | 7.25 | 7.25 | 7.25 | FIRST TRIP FROM CHABUA | |
| | | 2 | 30 | | 30 | 7.20 | 7.20 | 7.20 | TIRED AS HELL - SAT IN DISPERSED 7 HOURS WAITING BEFORE THIS FLIGHT | |
| | | 3 | 00 | | | 7.05 | 7.05 | 7.05 | LAST TRIP - I HOPE - | |
| 162 | 05 | 167 | 35 | 314 | 5 | 0659.25 | 723.15 | 941.45 | CERTIFIED BY <i>John Prescott</i> | |

When Jack married my mother, Carol, in 1958, he owned and operated a laundry. He had flown for some commercial transport airlines after the war, but he didn't like the cold places he sometimes had to fly into (Goose Bay, Labrador). It is likely, too, that his manic-depressive illness was intensified by his wartime experiences, and this made it difficult for him to establish a career in any sustained way. Still, flying remained a passion for him, and he became obsessed with the idea of delivering bundles of folded laundry to his customers by helicopter. This idea did not come to fruition, but a friend gave him a watch inscribed on the back to "Jack Prescott's Helicopter Laundry Service" which he had for many years.

His efforts to make a pilot out of me were also unsuccessful—I suffered from airsickness in small planes, but I was able to assist him on one memorable flight. Jack's mother, Norma, passed away on December 1, 1976, during my senior year in high school. After the memorial service, he and I drove out to Executive Airport where Dad had arranged to borrow a Cessna 150 from Red Aircraft in order to scatter the ashes from the air. We flew east until we were about a mile off the coast, into the Atlantic and just parallel with the giant Seagrape trees of Birch State Park.. He then told me to take the bag of my grandma's ashes and dump them out the window. What I had not considered was effect of the airspeed combined with the limited opening capability of the window, and the resulting wind tunnel blew some of the ashes straight back into the plane and onto my face. It was like Ash Wednesday on steroids. Plan B was for me to take the wheel while Dad carefully held the bag outside the window of the plane, then turned it upside down. This was far more successful, and Norma Prescott Powell became part of Ft. Lauderdale beach. After we landed, I returned to school, and secretly wore my grandmother as a badge of honor for the rest of the day.

Jack's pilot license was not renewed when he was 65 years old because he could not tell the examiner how to weight and balance a Cessna 150. The Alzheimer's that would control much of the rest of his life was already having an effect, and it was something of a relief to Carol that he was no longer allowed to fly. He had flown for 50 years and logged over 20,000 hours in the air, and had clearly realized his dream of flight.