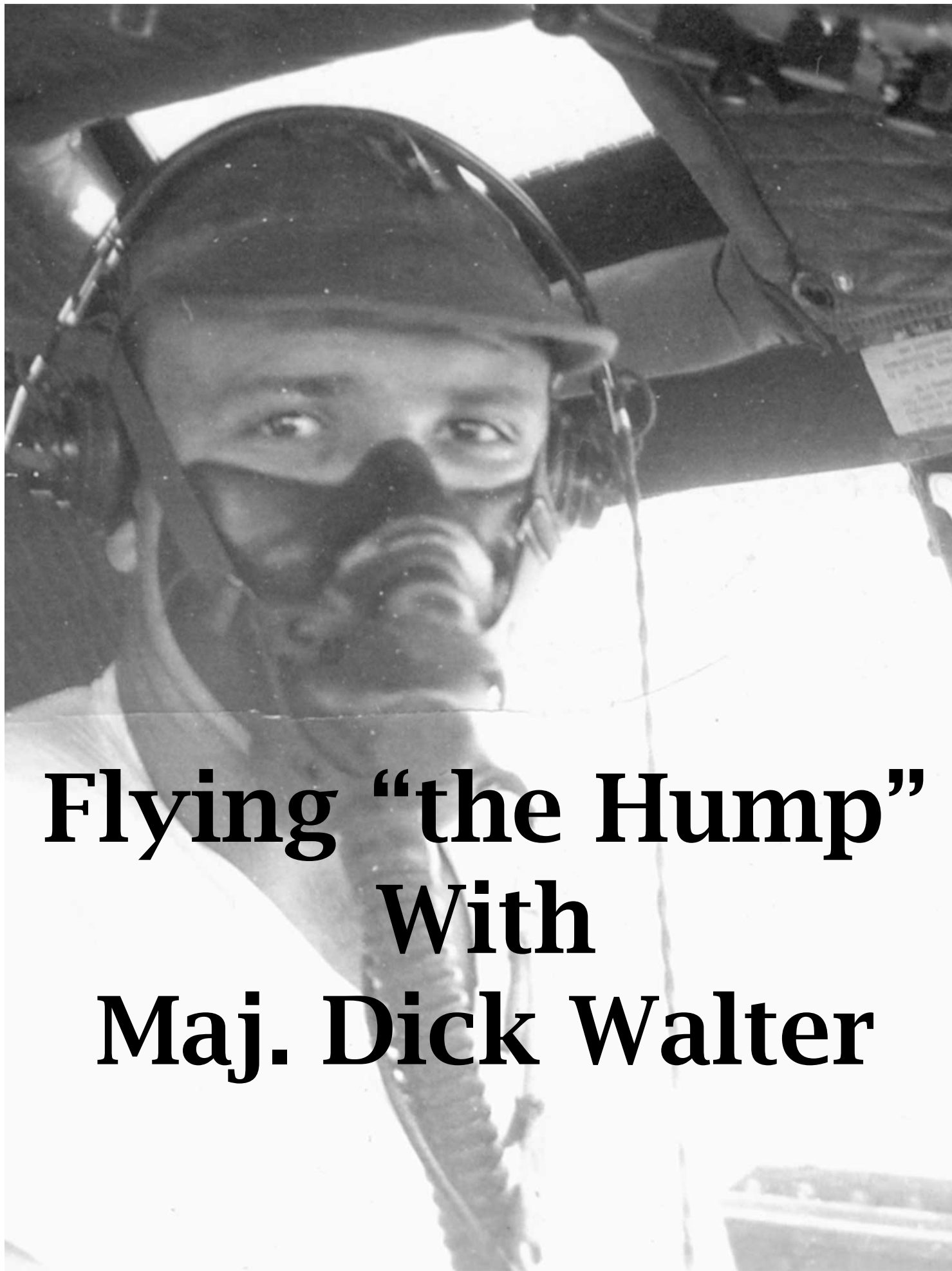




**Flying “the Hump”
With
Maj. Dick Walter**

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Another Story of the Greatest Generation

By Mike Jones

Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published: February 2019

One of the great joys of flying is the amazing people you meet. A number of years ago, I shook hands with Chuck Yeager in a bar at Oshkosh. Unpretentious and friendly, Harrison Ford and I briefly spoke in a parking lot at the Oshkosh Hilton a few years later. I’ve flown loops and spins with Admiral Bill Finagin, heard eye-popping stories from Thunderbird pilot Ron Maness, learned about secretive “Misty” missions from F-100 pilot John Boles, and met more flyers than I can count hanging merely around the Commemorative Air Force. But of all the flyers I have met, my favorite is Major Dick Walter, U.S. Air Force (Ret.). He’s not famous, but his story certainly is.

Slow Boat to China

Richard (“Dick”) Walters was born in upstate New York. He grew up with the clouds of a second world war dimming a bright future. While attending Cornell, he was activated into the Army Air Force and was accepted into flying school.

Accustomed to frigid winters, Dick was thrilled that his basic military training was in sunny Miami Beach, marching up and down Collins Avenue.

That was followed by an equally wonderful summer at engineering school in Meadville, PA. He soloed after just seven hours of flight training started in Yukon, OK. This was followed by advanced training in Garden City, KS and multi-engine training in Pampa, TX, a town so rural that the main street still had hitching racks for horses. Finally, after 18 months of training, he received his orders to India.



A snapshot of Dick Walter, flying left seat in a C-47 as he and his crew flew in the thin, cold air of the Himalayas. Notice he is wearing a tee shirt. Initially, Dick casually wore sneakers and tee shirts because the odds were so bad he figured he would never survive the war. As the months went on, he began to think he might make it and began wearing sturdier boots and even his flack jacket.

Just before Thanksgiving 1994, Dick joined 6,000 other soldiers on a troop ship for a month-long trip to Melbourne, Australia. Officers, like Dick, had relatively spacious quarters and ate in a wardroom. Enlisted men slept in racks ten bunks tall and ate in a mess hall in the bowels of the ship. "I read more paperback books on that trip than in the whole rest of my life," Dick laughs.

The ship sailed briskly at 17 knots but zig-zagged constantly to avoid submarines. Near Australia the ship was joined by British Navy escorts. No one was allowed off the ship in Melbourne, and after a day and half of replenishment they moved on towards India. "You could smell Bombay (now Mumbai) long before you could see it," he remembers.

He left Bombay on a luxurious train with private compartments and leather seats but near Calcutta they changed to a narrow-gauge mountain train. Here he first met other people joining his squadron. As they headed northeast the grades were so steep the train could not climb the hills. Everyone was ordered off and they walked while the locomotive struggled to make the hills.

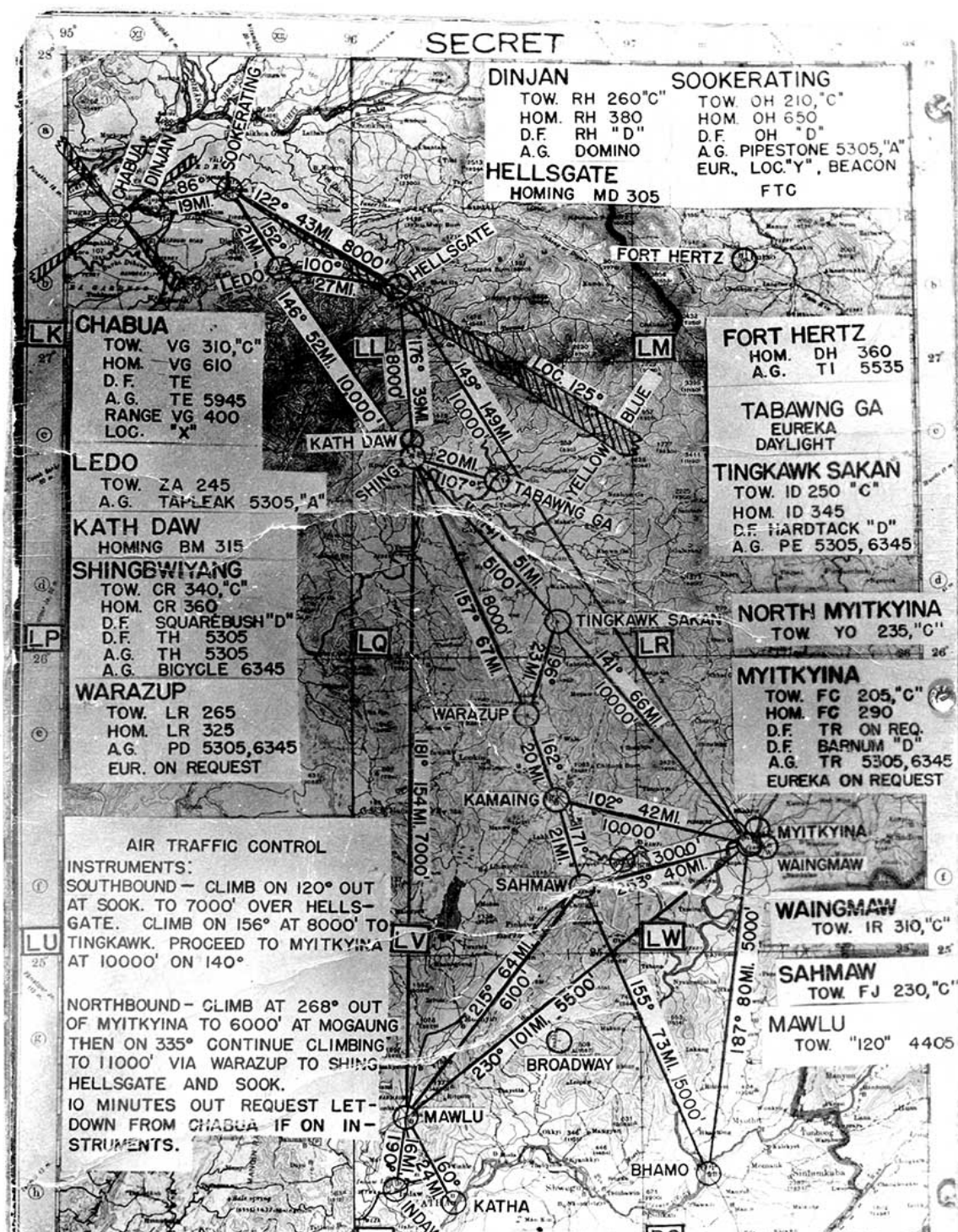
The railroad ended at the sacred Brahmaputra River. There was no bridge across the river so the soldiers hired bearers to carry their bags down the embankment. Barges took them across the river and more bearers carried their bags out of the ravine to another train. This was an ancient rolling slum, with ragged seats, no lights, and holes in the floor for sanitation. Lurching along in the dark, Dick realized it was New Year's Eve. He opened a bottle of scotch he had brought all the way from the U.S., and the flyers welcomed the New Year in style.

Dick's destination was Ledo, the heart of the China, Burma and India Theater. The Japanese controlled the rails and roads — this was "Bridge over the River Kwai" territory — so the only way to move supplies was by air. That was Dick's job.

Treacherous Flying

Dick flew from a base called Sookerating, outside of Ledo. It was built on the grounds of a tea plantation and mud was everywhere dust wasn't. The mess hall was the tea-planter's old bungalow made of woven bamboo. They slept in thatched-roof shacks. At night they used their .45 caliber pistols to shoot the rats running amongst the rafters. The only solid structure in the

entire place was the runway, and the noise of planes filled the daylight hours. Quickly Dick was scheduled for his first flight in a C-47.



This is a photo of one of the navigational charts Dick Walter used in his flights over India, Burma, and China. Notice the instructions to "Climb to 7,000' over Hells-Gate" — His base lost sixteen airplanes and sixty crew members in one day at Hell's Gate when high winds confounded their dead-reckoning.

The C-47 Skytrain is like nothing the cargo-haulers we see at airports today. Conceived by the Douglas Company in 1935 as the world's first all-metal airliner, the steeply-sloping fuselage drags behind the main gear swooping back to an impossibly tiny tail wheel. Each plane carried 8,000 pounds of fuel and cargo. It had a 95-foot wingspan and two 1,200 horsepower Pratt & Whitney radials.

The slightly larger and much sleeker C-46 Commando was the other heavy-hauler in the region. Built by Curtiss, the sleek Commando had a 108-foot wingspan, used 2,000 hp engines and could carry 16,000 pounds.

Dick remembers his first day, climbing into a C-47. He found it mostly empty except for some lumpy burlap bags of the floor. He climbed up the steeply sloping deck into the cockpit.

"Hey, Captain," he asked, "Do we have to fly to Ledo to get our cargo?"



A C-47 Skytrain in flight. The Douglas C-47 and the C-46 Commando, manufactured by Curtiss-Wright, were the hard-working heavy lifters of the Indo-China theater.

"Nope," the captain said dismissively, "That's what 6,000 pounds of potatoes looks like." As he climbed into his seat, Dick explained he had never been in a C-47 before. The crusty 24-year old captain gave him his instructions: "Your job is simple. Don't touch anything," he said. Dick didn't.



Conditions were rough in the CBI theater, and resourceful ground crews used whatever was available to accomplish the mission. Here an elephant loads a drum of oil on to a plane. Dick recalls most of the spare parts used to repair their planes were scavaged from crashes, and not provided through normal resupply procedures.

Dick quickly learned to handle the heavy aircraft and in 30 days was an aircraft commander. He flew rice, ammunition, pipe, fuel, canned foods, medical supplies, and anything else the soldiers in the jungle needed. He flew mules to Chinese troops in Burma and goats to India Gurkas. He dropped radios and food to OSS special forces who were sabotaging railroads and

blowing up bridges from jungle encampments. Sometimes elephants were used to move heavy cargo into the planes.

But the overloaded planes were never designed to fly in thin mountain air. Dick would spiral upward over the airfields to gain enough altitude to clear the mountains. Clawing at the air, the squadron wound their way through "Hell's Gate," the mountain pass which guarded the only safe route into Burma. With no air traffic control and with as many as six different airfields sending their planes back and forth through Hell's Gate, the risk of mid-air collisions was constant.

Dick flew many "drop missions" into Burma, throwing supplies out of the back of the plane into landing zones marked by the soldiers on the ground. A sergeant in the back of the plane would literally push the supplies out the side door. Delicate supplies were protected with parachutes but bags of rice, half-filled and double-bagged, could be dropped from 300 feet without bursting.

The lumbering C-47 was an inviting target for enemy sharpshooters. Dick recalls one particularly dicey mission. "We were going to resupply Chinese troops that were in contact with some Japanese. Their position was on a hilltop, and a drop zone had been cleared in the valley below them," he remember. "What they didn't tell us was that the hill across the valley was held by the Japanese. As we came down the valley, low and slow and dumping cargo into the LZ, the Japanese troops opened fire down onto us from on the hilltop above us! We got a lot of holes in the wings." More than 700 cargo planes were lost in the CBI theater.

It was a ferociously busy time. Dick flew five round-trips into Burma in one long thirteen-hour day; they only could drop supplies during daylight. Amazingly, the only person in Dick's squadron who did not survive was one drunk captain, who fell out of his jeep and was fatally wounded when the .45 on his hip discharged.



Dick's base at Sookerating was a British tea plantation commandeered for the war. Top photo: All of his squadron's pilots slept in these "officer's quarters" which was a thatched-roof hut made of bamboo. They shot rats in the rafters; in the tall grass they watched for pythons which could be 20 feet long. Bottom photo: This was the "officer's club" in the same building where his team relaxed between missions.

Reliable weather forecasting, as we know it today, simply did not exist in World War II. Many flights involved flying into unexpectedly bad weather. Dick remembers one mission when they flew into the heart of a thunderstorm. "The co-pilot and I were literally standing in our seats," he said, "alternately pulling up on the yoke and then pushing it down, fighting the thunderstorm. We really didn't think the plane would hold together."

Over the Hump

While flying east into Burma was tricky, flying northward over "the hump" into China was dangerous. "Flying blind" in clouds and storms, they were unable to see other planes or the mountains. Using a compass, stop watches and guestimates of the wind, they'd dead-reckon their position and time their turns, hoping to clear the rocks.

Dick explained there were two squadrons at his field, each with 20 planes. They flew on alternate days, resting the crews and maintaining the planes on their non-flying days. On one awful day the other squadron departed northward into the clouds. 16 planes and 60 fliers crashed into the mountains, one after the other, as unforecasted winds threw their dead-reckoning off-kilter.

Dick flew all over China, to Nanking, Shanghai and Kunming. In rural Chikyang, Chinese workers were building the runway by hand. Every morning thousands of Chinese men, women and children would work all day, barefoot, smashing boulders with hammers and smoothing the gravel with human-pulled rollers. Every take-off produced a swarming cloud of dust. Pilots had to wait for the wind to blow the dust away before the next departure.

When flying into Burma and China, each pilot carried silk maps because they were more durable than paper. All flight crews wore special leather jackets. Stitched into the back of the jacket was an American flag and a Chinese flag, and a message in Chinese which read, "This pilot is a friend of the Chinese."



(Top) The landing gear collapsed when Dick landed this C-46 shuttle flight into Calcutta. The plane was promptly repaired and returned to service. (Bottom) Dick flew this C-46 on one of the first missions into China, and was greeted by this crowd.

Bring him to safety and you will be rewarded with rice and gold." Amazingly, 74 years later Dick still fits into this jacket.

Despite all these dangers, Dick only was involved in one crash. Dick and his crew had brought a C-46 back to Dum Dum Airport in Calcutta. When the plane touched down, the left landing gear collapsed and the plane slid sideways across the tarmac.

"It was our squadron commander's favorite airplane, too, so we were in hot water," Dick remembers. "But nobody was hurt and they needed the plane, so they just fixed it and away we went."

The war ended in August 1945 while Dick's squadron was in China. With just eight months on station, Dick accumulated more than 800 flying hours, a Distinguished Flying Cross and three Air Medals. On Christmas 1945 he was demobilized out of the Army. He went on to finish college and enjoy a business career in the New York City area. Dick stayed in the Reserves and in 1956 he was reactivated. He served until 1969, flying C-119 "Flying Boxcars" during the Cuban Missile Crisis and C-124 Globemasters through the Cold War. His last flying missions were in brand-new C-130s. He has stories about all of them.

75 Years Later

Today Dick lives with Joan, his wife of 30+ years, at a country club in central Florida. While his hearing is weak his reflexes are sharp; he flew a perfect ILS in my Cessna. Most evenings, he chauffeurs elderly neighbors to dinner at the clubhouse because they don't like to drive at night anymore. He tried moving to an assisted living facility and quickly moved back to the country club — "too many old people there," he griped.

Dick turns 98 on March 14, 2019. He's outlived two life insurance policies. According to the Veterans Dept., Dick's robust health is a rarity; we're losing 372 World War II veterans every day. Less than 500,000 of the 16 million

Americans who served in World War II are still with us. Some live near you. Find them, thank them, listen to them. They have much to teach us, even after all these years.



Dick Walter and his wife, Joan. Dick flew 86 cargo missions over "The Hump" during World War II. Now 98 years old, a few years ago he flew an hour with me in this restored DC-3; airshow pilot Dan Gryder flew the right seat. Dick said, "The plane felt solid and strong, just like I remember. The controls, the engines and the vibration was all the same. The only thing different was nobody was shooting at us."

Postscript

Dick Walter passed away peacefully in January, 2025, just sixty days short of his 101st birthday. His wife, Joan, preceded him in the summer of 2024. They both will be long remembered and always missed.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He's been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

