

WAR HERO

VON B. WHITMER

WORLD WAR II

It has been said that Von joined up with the military as he was upset after his parents broke up his marriage. He joined the Army Air Corp, now Air Force, as a telegrapher in World War II. According to Rex Whitmer, Jr. “He flew the Burma Hump from India to China” where they were dropping supplies to the Chinese.

“The Hump” was the nickname Allied pilots gave the airlift operation that crossed the Himalayan foothills into China. It was the Army Air Force’s most dangerous airlift route, but it was the only way to supply Chinese forces fighting Japan — and things weren’t going well for China.

World War II began in 1937 for Chiang Ki-Shek’s nationalist China. By the time the United States began running supplies to the Chinese forces fighting Japan, the Western part of the country was firmly controlled by the invading Japanese. The Japanese also controlled Burma, on India’s Eastern border, cutting off the last land route to the Chinese. Aid would have to come by air and American planes would have to come from the West — over the “Roof of the World.”

Beyond the inefficiency of flying The Hump, it was incredibly dangerous. More than 1,000 men and 600 planes were lost over the 530-mile stretch of rugged terrain, and that’s a very conservative estimate. It was dubbed the “Skyway to Hell” and the “Aluminum Trail”

for the number of planes that didn’t make it.

Extreme weather took down more U.S. pilots than the Japanese. Pilots were issued fleece-lined jackets, boots, and gloves to keep their extremities from freezing during the flight. Lack of oxygen could cause pilots to veer off-course and into an almost certain death. C-46 cargo planes did not glide, their heavy engines causing an almost immediate dive. Once out of fuel, crews would have to bail out with minimal protection, cold weather gear, and nine rounds of a .45-caliber pistol. Debbie, his daughter, said her dad rarely talked about the war but she recalls him mentioning that he had to hide out in a tree once to avoid a Japanese patrol. The Japanese stepped over the log he was hiding in. Like many Vets, he didn’t want to talk about the war.

Von was very brave to be willing to fly The Hump.

One time his home teacher brought a man from Burma or India. Debbie doesn’t know who he was but the crazy thing is that her dad spoke the language with him, Burmese or Indian. She had no idea he knew another language. When she asked him about it, he laughed. This is the first time she saw him laugh. He said, “All the family knew I could speak another language.” She also saw him laugh out loud when he was watching an episode of ‘All in the Family.’

