

Unusual Coves and Fading Memories #1.

“China Sandy”

By Geoff Walker

Looking back over a sea-going life and the many experiences encountered, one is often reminded of strange encounters. So, it was for me as a young officer during the mid-1960s when my ship was in the Port of Singapore.

This turned out to be a memorable visit to Singapore because one evening whilst ashore, paying my usual call at the Cellar Bar, to check out the famous job vacancy notice board, I came across an unusually interesting character. Being relatively early in the evening the premises was not so crowded, so I sat at the Bar.

The fellow sitting next to me on a stool at the bar, introduced himself in a casual sort of way. He was a slightly rotund American with drawling accent, thinning sandy colored hair, piercing blue eyes, sun-tanned complexion and at a guess in his mid to late 40s. He went by the name of Sandy Stimson and was allegedly an old China hand having spent many years as a nomad wandering throughout the Far East, in particular Indo China and the Philippines. I assumed a veteran of the Korean war, never having had the desire to return home, having become enamored by the ways of the Orient.

According to him, his home was wherever he was at any given time, being of no fixed abode, although he alleged to have originally heralded from Amarillo, Texas. He was a flashy cove and was conspicuous by his bespoke Khaki outfit and the solid gold Rolex watch and heavy gold ID bracelet he wore on his wrists.

A first impression left one feeling he appeared a shady, complex cove and was surely a person adorned by many faces. Sandy claimed to be working as a flight Captain flying C-46s and C-47s for some nondescript airline operating out of Taiwan and was in Singapore on recreational leave. We sat, slowly drinking beer for a while during which time he drifted into a litany of stories and yarns of his past flying experiences. Initially I took this with a pinch of salt, considering it to be just bar talk; until he dropped a few names that were known to me from within Hong Kong's aviation circles, which made me take a little more notice. After about an hour of entertaining and engrossing conversation, with him doing most of the talking, he departed and went on his way, not before insisting on paying for our drinks, pulling out an overly large wad of dollars from his trouser pocket in the process, obviously intended to impress. Rather a lot of money to be carrying around, but in keeping with the image the man projected, I pondered to myself!

Once he had vacated the premises, I quizzed the barman as to who he really was, because he most certainly came across as a truly colorful character. The bar tender informed me that Sandy regularly visited the bar when in Singapore, and he had overheard him being referred to as “China Sandy” by some of his closer acquaintances that had visited the pub with him on earlier occasions. He was supposedly based somewhere in Indo China at the time and was undoubtedly the aviator's equivalent to a sailor with a girl in every port; totally adventurous, a romantic with wonderful charisma and gift of the gab; one of those types that easily retain attention and remain fixed in your memory.

The barman pointed me to a spot on the wall upon which was posted numerous photos. Sure enough, there was a few of “China Sandy” with his C-46, together with a small group of several other dubious looking characters sporting shoulder holsters. The aircraft they were standing next to, had the emblem “China Sandy”, adorning the side, below the cockpit windows. All the photographs looked as if they had been taken in the same location, a remote airstrip somewhere, with a mountainous backdrop. There were various other transport aircraft in the scene and about half a dozen different photographs, of a similar theme. I never did find out what actual airline he worked for but as the Indo-China conflict was rapidly developing, in retrospect one could be excused for suspecting that somehow he may have been linked with clandestine activities in Vietnam or Laos, perhaps flying freight and supplies, who knows?

Our paths did not cross again but for some inexplicable reason the image of this guy remains with me, fresh in my mind as if I only met him yesterday. Perhaps this is because he was so deliberately evasive about most things when questioned. I often wonder what happened to him because although giving the impression of being a “China Bum” I believe he was well read, and somewhat more intelligent than he cared to divulge. Certainly not of the Buckeroo ilk. I am sure there was considerably more to this mysterious character than initially met the eye and his country bumpkin façade may have just been little more than a cover for other main-stream activities. One thing is certain, it must have been a well-paying occupation for him, going by his costly and flamboyant golden trinkets and large bundle of cash.

I had become to know the Cellar Bar staff quite well over the years, since I always made it a point to visit the premises (mainly to check out the jobs notice board), as it was one of my favorite watering holes, during visits to Singapore. I always inquired if “China Sandy” had been around, but it would appear the time of my encounter had been his last visit. The photographs remained posted for some years but on my last visit to the establishment in the late 1960s, I noticed they had been removed, together with a variety of other long-standing images. Goodbye Sandy, and sadly, goodbye Cellar Bar as it is no more. I miss the steak and Chips!



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USAF C46 and C47 transport aircraft parked at some remote location, presumably in Asia. The same type of aircraft allegedly flown by “China Sandy”, my man of mystery.

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