

FULFILLING A DREAM

CAPTAIN RONALD CHIN WON

The First Asian American Commercial Pilot for Pan Am

By Dr. Raymond Douglas Chong (Zhang Weiming)

Ronald Chin Won is a pioneer aviator who, against all odds, overcame racism to become an aircraft mechanic for Pan American World Airways (1939-1948), a commercial pilot for Pan Am (1955-1985) and a military pilot for the United States Air Force (1950-1980). As a trailblazer in the Chinese American community, he served in three wars and became both an accomplished military and commercial aviator. He was the first Asian American commercial pilot for Pan Am, first as propeller pilot and later as a jet pilot.



Circa 1990

Ronald was born on May 20, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. His father Jok Chin was a successful merchant from Toishan in Cathay (China) with various businesses including the famous King Fong Café in downtown Omaha.

In 1928, Jok moved his family from Omaha to San Francisco so that his children would grow up knowing Chinese culture and language. But when Jok went bankrupt in the Great Depression, the family lived in poverty and chronic hunger. Ronald was often bullied by neighborhood kids. With his boxing skills, Ronald protected himself and his friends in the Chinese community.

Growing up during the 'Golden Age of Flight', Ronald aspired to be an aviator. While in high school in 1939, he worked after classes as an aircraft mechanic's helper for Pan Am, at its Treasure Island terminal. He worked on the flying boats, including the iconic China Clipper.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Ronald left high school to quickly enlist with the U.S. Naval Reserve, moved by a deep sense of patriotism.

There the Navy recruiter asked of him, "Are you willing to be a messman, cook, or steward?" Ronald responded with, "No, I'm trained. I have experience."

The recruiter reluctantly assigned him to be a machinist mate. He was given the rank of seaman second class (private with one stripe), with the specialty of an aviation machinist. Due to the urgency of the

war, there was not enough time to put him through boot camp. Instead he was sent to a training center in Sacramento for three months to learn aircraft maintenance, mechanics, electronics, and advanced riveting techniques.

Upon completing his training, Ronald was initially assigned to Treasure Island Station to work on the M-130 and B-314 Clippers, the larger PB2Y Coronados, and the Martin PBM Mariners, which were produced by Glen L. Martin Company. He worked with a crew of skilled Chinese American aviation mechanics, led by crew chief Lee Leong.

As a machinist mate, he initially serviced Navy seaplanes at Naval Air Station Treasure Island. He later served at Naval Air Station Honolulu. And finally served at Naval Air Station Mills Field in California where he was discharged in 1946.

By 1943, Ronald held the Aircraft and Power Plant Mechanic licenses, issued by the Civil Aviation Board (currently the Federal Aviation Administration). Special facilities and equipment used on M-130s and B-314s included beaching ramps, winches, cradles with wheels, towing tractors, and areas for the washdown of seawater from aircraft, which were performed by the line service department.

Later that year, Ronald was transported overseas aboard the troop ship USS Matsonia to Naval Air Station Honolulu to repair PBMs and PB2Y3s. While the USS Matsonia was sailing to Hawaii, the U.S. Navy learned that she was being followed



The eleven men of the all-Chinese American crew of aircraft mechanics on Treasure Island Station in front of the "China Clipper" in 1943.

by a Japanese submarine. Fortunately, no torpedo was fired upon her. Ronald stayed in Hawaii until 1944, where he worked on the same aircraft, performing routine maintenance and battle damage repairs. After receiving an honorable discharge from the Navy in 1946, he returned to high school to receive his diploma.

While still in high school, he returned to Pan Am at Mills Field to work on the DC-4 and the DC-6. With a passion to fly, he joined Pan Am's flying club learning to fly a single-engine prop airplane and receiving his pilot's license.

After World War II, the Flying Boats were obsolete and a new generation of aircraft now carried passengers to overseas destinations.

During the Korean War, Ronald joined the United States Air Force, becoming a fighter jet pilot. After the war, Ronald went back to Pan Am seeking a job as

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a commercial pilot; not as an aircraft mechanic. There was only one commercial pilot position offered for a minority applicant. Ronald and a Japanese man applied for that same position. They had to take a written test, and Ronald obtained the highest score ever recorded by Pan Am at that time. Unfortunately, they thought he had cheated, so they sent his score to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to see if it was possible for someone to achieve such a high result. Because his test results were not immediately released, he figured that he had failed. Pan Am soon confirmed that he had achieved the highest score in its history, and he was eventually hired. Racism and reluctance to hire a Chinese pilot was overcome in large part due to the efforts of Captain Sam Peters, who was the chief pilot of the Pan Am Clippers. Captain Peters stated of Ronald, "I want to hire him. I do not care about the union. If the union has something to say, they can see me."

After taking the written exam in 1955, Ronald waited approximately one month before receiving notification from Pan Am

to take a physical examination in order to start flight training on the DC-4. He completed the training syllabus and started flying the line. His first trip was to Honolulu and the Fiji Islands on the Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, known as the 'double bubble'. He also flew the Douglas DC-7. He had to get used to flying propeller-driven machines again. He felt that the one benefit was that it had four jet engines instead of one.

While working at Pan Am, he served in the United States Air Force Reserve. He flew in the Reserve mainly on the weekends. During the Jet Age, Ron was promoted to captain at Pan Am where he flew the Boeing 707 and later the Boeing 747, as well as the Boeing 747-SP aircraft.

The proudest moment of Ronald's career as a commercial pilot with Pan Am was when he landed a Boeing 747 at Kai Tak International Airport with a tropical cyclone warning signal — Stage 9 (Increasing Gale or Storm) in Hong Kong. All flights were diverted to alternate airports except his. Ronald had faith that God would get them there safely. He landed without problems. His was the only jet to

land in Hong Kong that day, earning him a reputation in Hong Kong as the commercial pilot who landed a flight under extremely adverse weather conditions.

During his illustrious career with Pan Am, Ronald would be away from his family in San Francisco between five to eleven days at a time. When he was at home, he served as a colonel in the United States Air Force Reserve, drilling at Hamilton Air Force Base in Novato, California, and then later at McClellan Air Force Base in Sacramento, California.

Ronald stopped flying commercially and retired in 1985 at the age of 60, the FAA mandatory retirement age at that time. His final flight with Pan Am was from San Francisco to Honolulu and Sydney, and from Sydney to Los Angeles. His wife, Marian Louie Won, flew with him in First Class. The company also hired a limousine to pick up Ronald and Marian at the airport. He officially retired on May 20, 1985. Ronald now lives in San Francisco.✈

Dr. Raymond Douglas Chong is a writer, composer and film director. He is also a civil engineer with various transportation certifications.