

of age. I was told that he had around 15 to 20,000 flying hours. Not just flying hours in various aircraft, but listen to this, his flying-time was mostly in this one VIP aircraft. Naturally he treated it with reverence. He may have been married to it. The passengers included: General McElroy and his wife, 6 or 7 Chinese officers and their wives and my aide, Capt. Gene Taft and his wife Frances. My secretary,

Ingrid Gilliland, was also on board. Taroko Gorge is Taiwan's equivalent of our Grand Canyon. A magnificent sight, but in 1964 access was difficult. The flight over the ocean down the east coast of the Island was pleasant and uneventful. Some broken and scattered clouds at 8000 feet. The east coast of Taiwan is a mountainous and - undeveloped terrain. We landed at Hualien, an airstrip along the ocean a few miles from Taroko Gorge. We were met by

a number of jeeps and proceeded quite a distance up the gorge over a dirt road cut into the side of the gorge through over a hundred tunnels. We were stopped by frequent rock slides which work crews were constantly clearing. This was a bit of an experience itself, inasmuch as the area was still quite primitive.

The return flight up the coast was uneventful with increasing cloud cover as we neared the Northern end of the Island. That is, it was uneventful until the pilot turned West toward Taipei. We were immediately in heavy cloud cover, unable to see the ground nor even the wing tips.

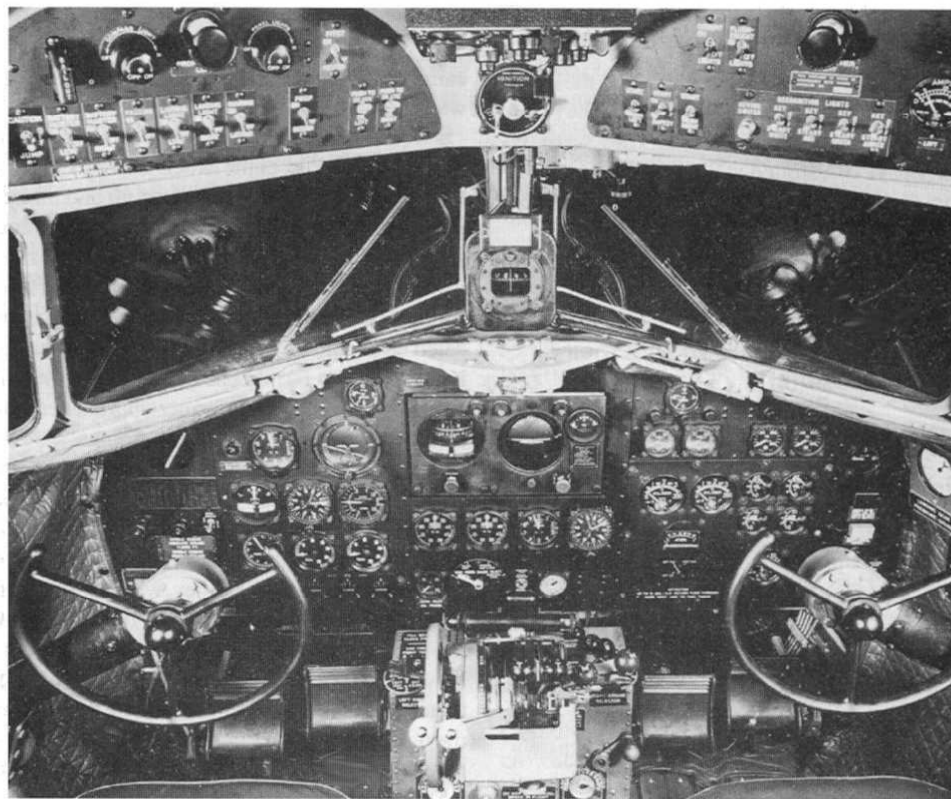
Suddenly, there was a tremendous crash-throwing everyone violently forward in their seat belts. It had to be a mid air collision. There was a sickening feeling as the plane rotated violently toward a vertical attitude. The engines roared wide open and the propellers screamed in their highest pitch. The plane was out of control. I heard some screams from behind me. Probably from people thinking as I was that there was little chance for survival in a transport plane that was involved in a mid air collision, in the clouds, and out of control.

The plane stalled. Whoever heard of a transport plane stall-

ing? Every plane that I had ever stalled had flipped over on a wing and began spinning. Not this C-47. It shuddered and slid back on its tail. The nose dropped. The gyros had tumbled and the only thing left for the pilot was needle, ball, airspeed and altimeter. Primitive at best-but in dense clouds and out of control. As the nose fell, air speed picked up. This heart stopping cycle of stall and back slide

repeated more than half a dozen times while the pilot fought for control.

Miraculously, through these repeated cycles, we managed to gain enough altitude to break out on top of the clouds. Looking out of the window I could now see that the mid air collision was not with another aircraft, but was with a mountain. There was 8 to 10 feet of the left wing missing clear down to the ailerons. The clue to the collision was large chunks of scrub brush and grass stuck in



*Cockpit of the DC- 3/C-47 series aircraft. One of the easiest planes to fly, hands off it would fly by itself (Douglas Photo)*

portions of the sheared areas of the wing .

The pilot proceeded around the Northern end of the island and made the standard Taipei approach to the East following the beacons up the Domsue River. This is what he should have done in the first place. We landed at a high air speed to compensate for loss of airlift from the missing portion of the wing. As we disembarked, I noticed one of the crewmen carrying one of the hostesses over his shoulder. The excitement had been too much for her. Any other time this would have been amusing,

As we were leaving the Base, I saw a group of senior Chinese officers interrogating the pilot. I thought I saw one of the officers giving that well known symbol a finger drawn across his throat. I never saw that pilot again. I have often wondered what became of him. Perhaps I really never wanted to know.

Gene Taft completed a distinguished Air Force career in Viet Nam and elsewhere. He is a retired Colonel and he and Frances live in San Antonio. We get together often and now and then, one or the other of us will say; "I've been thinking about that flight to Taroko Gorge." Maybe flying into the side of a mountain is an incident you never forget.