

## Close, Very Close – A C47 Story

Every pilot, sooner or later, looks the Grim Reaper in the eye. For some unaccountable reason, he and I have had more than our share of eyeball to eyeball confrontations, at least by my reckoning.

One of our more memorable trysts occurred while I was flying with a fighter squadron of the Wisconsin Air National Guard at Milwaukee. A C-47 squatted there, out of commission for lack of parts, AOCIP it was called, and had been in that status for some time. Mechanics were forever taking components off of it to keep other aircraft flyable so it became a sort of supply depot with wings. Finally, Sy, the Base Commander put his foot down - no more cannibalizing and all needed parts on requisition. When it was finally pronounced fit to fly, it had been a Hangar Queen for the better part of two years. Sy was going to fly the engineering test hop and I, as the Squadron C.O., was going to be the copilot. I prided myself on being a fighter pilot then and was not on the best of terms with any aircraft with more than one engine but I figured it would take no great amount of talent to manage the gear and flaps.

We gave it a real good walk-around inspection before firing up and then took it out to the longest runway at General Mitchell Field. At that time it was the North - South and was fully 7,000 feet long. We made a couple of high-speed taxi runs down the runway with the tail up and everything seemed O.K. While taxiing back, Sy moved the wheel full travel left and right and full forward and aft and got the correct response from the control surfaces. He looked over at me and said, "We're going this time."

I nodded my acknowledgment and advised the tower. He cleared us into position and then for take off. As soon as we were lined up, Sy went up to full power, holding it with the brakes as long as he could and then we started our take off roll. As soon as we were up, I raised the gear, trailed the cowl flaps, and was looking out the window on my side at the number two engine when I thought I heard a gurgling half shout. When I looked over at Sy, I was startled to see him with both hands on the wheel, holding it in a death grip, pulling so hard that the veins in his neck stood out.

He was yelling, "Help me. Help me."

He hadn't dared to let go of the wheel to pull the throttles back, so we were accelerating at an alarming rate, for a C-47, at 10 feet of altitude. I grabbed my wheel and pulled with all the strength that I could muster but the two of us together weren't getting that nose up at all and in that instant, I knew we were going in and that I would be killed. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sy make a lightening movement with his right hand, hitting the elevator trim wheel forward, the wrong way, increasing the nose down condition. Then he did it again, and as the pressure lessened, again, six or seven times in quick succession and it was all over and we were climbing.

The elevator trim tab cables had been hooked up backwards, so that the nose up trim, which was normally rolled in, for take off was actually nose down. It went unnoticed at low air speeds and the nose down condition developed so rapidly as we gained speed after take off that before Sy could figure out what was happening,

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he had moved the trim wheel farther back still, and we were in deep trouble. We made a huge, shallow pattern and he did not touch the elevator trim wheel again. After landing and parking, Sy unbuckled without a word and went to look for the Line Chief and the Inspector who had signed off the airplane. I climbed down onto the ramp and just walked around for a few minutes, opening and closing my fists to loosen my arm muscles and wiping the sweat from my face. It wasn't very warm outdoors.

"Well, anyway, I dodged you one more time, you old bastard," I thought.