Thai Princess

Thailand’s oldest historic aircraft, an imported Travel Air 2000, is re-enacting a flight to China which it first made 70 years ago. **Mick Shippen** reports from Chiang Mai.

The words emanating from the headset, staccato and wrapped in static, interrupted our conversation — and then the engine’s roar increased, making the pages of my notebook respond with an excited flurry.

“Tango 3, you are clear for take-off. Over.”

Ten minutes earlier Capt Worawut Amnattar had pulled down hard on the propeller and the 70-year-old 90 h.p. Curtiss OX-5 engine had brought Miss Siam spluttering to life. From where I was standing, in the turbulent slipstream, the sleek, well-groomed young lady seemed to be behaving more like a petulant teenager.

“It’s a Travel Air 2000. Actually, she’s the oldest we’ve got”, shouted the captain, struggling to be heard above the din. As if responding to his desire to tell her tale, Miss Siam started to taxi up the runway. The roar became a distant hum and then, as if attached to a nylon thread tugged by the hand of an unseen child, the two-seat biplane lifted tentatively from the airstrip, climbed, and was gone.

We were left standing in the shadow of “Wing 41”, a row of four hangars abutting the terminal of Chiang Mai International Airport in Thailand. Passed by many but noticed by few, the hangars house a fine collection of distinguished and discarded old warbirds that have fallen together for their own safety. Members of the Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Thai Aircraft (FPDTA), known more commonly as “Tango Team”, care for more than 30 aeroplanes.

Recognising that old aircraft in Thailand were becoming an endangered species, the Foundation came into being in 1991 under the guidance of Gp Capt Veerayuth Dimsayasarn, the former husband of HRH Princess Chulabhorn. “He had a strong belief that we should protect the old ‘planes and promote the history of Thai aviation”, said Capt Worawut. “Previous generations of Thais had a great interest in flying. Veerayuth’s idea was to breathe new life into the past and inspire the youngsters of today.”

In 1913 the feet of most Thais were planted firmly in the rice fields. Their heads, however, were turned skyward, their thoughts lost in flights of fancy.

A mere nine years after the Wright brothers’ historic first powered flights in their first Flyer, three Thai officers were despatched to France with orders to master the new art of aviation. Upon their return to Siam several French-built
Breguet biplanes were purchased and, much to the delight of King Rama VII, displays of aerial artistry filled the skies above Bangkok. Such was his pride in the achievements of Thailand’s first pilots that, on January 13, 1914, the King wrote in his diary: “I am delighted that we Thais are not bested by the Westerner; truly we can do whatever they can do.”

The feverish excitement that had gripped Europe during the “glorious year of flying” had reached Asia, and the denizens of Bangkok welcomed the dawning of a new age with open arms. Yet for many years the thrills and spills of early flight remained the preserve of royalty and a select group of pilots (which by 1920 numbered no more than 100). For the majority of His Majesty’s subjects the dream of flying would remain just that. Indeed, the possibility of flight for ordinary people seemed so remote that the phrase “mah ben krung bin”, or “the dog has seen the aeroplane”, was coined to describe something strongly desired but sadly out of reach.

One young man who refused to be grounded was Luen Pongsophon. Not only had he seen the aeroplane, but he was also determined that the wings of desire would soon be his. Propelled by the award of a scholarship by King Rama VII, he went to the USA in 1929 and learned to fly at the University of St Louis. Such were Luen’s piloting skills that he travelled from state to state with a team of fellow pilots, giving breathtaking aerial displays. Three years later he returned to Thailand with his very own Travel Air 2000. At the time it was the only privately-owned aeroplane in the country, but his ownership did not always bring Luen the freedom and excitement he had enjoyed in the USA. The young bird had his wings clipped right from the start. Captain
Worawut explained: “Back in the 1930s, every time Luen wished to fly he had to seek permission from the Royal Thai Air Force. More often than not the request was refused. Eventually he decided to try and prove his worth as a pilot and adventurer. He asked the King’s permission to undertake a flight to China. It was granted.”

On June 22, 1932, Luen Pongsophon set out. Stops were made in Hanoi, Hong Kong, Macau and Shantou in south-east China. On returning to Thailand Luen, who expected a rapturous welcome, was quickly brought down to earth when he found that only his close family were waiting for him. “Despite his achievement, Luen still found himself fighting a losing battle to get airborne in Thailand”, Worawut added. “In the end he gave up out of frustration and abandoned his ‘plane. After his death his wife gave Miss Siam to Tango Team, but it was in a pitiful condition, having stood unused [in the Army Aviation Museum at Lopburi] for so many years.”

Considered a real classic of the late 1920s, and with Clyde Cessna and Walter Beech involved in its design and production, the Travel Air 2000 was, and still is, held in high regard. When production ceased in 1930 more than 1,500 had been built, and many survivors have been restored in recent years. True to the aims of the FPOTA, Tango Team embarked on an ambitious restoration project that was to take more than three years to complete. “It required an almost total rebuild. The only thing of real use was the engine”, Worawut explained.

With care and a great deal of hard work Miss Siam was returned to its former glory. It regularly takes to the skies of Chiang Mai, the pilot donning a cloth cap and goggles in true 1930s style. As the 70-year old biplane trundles up the runway of Chiang Mai’s airport, passing the biggest and best airliners from around the world, it is evident how far aviation has come.

To observers such as myself, however, it is the little two-seater that quickens the heart and grabs all the attention. Tango Team has been so inspired by the project, and feels such affection for the Travel Air, that the group is currently working on two replicas. “The intention is to re-enact the flight of Luen in celebration of his original journey, and to ‘dof our caps’ to Thailand’s first pilots”, said Capt Worawut.

Even today this is an ambitious project, requiring a good deal of planning, but the flight was due to take place in September this year. As Miss Siam landed and taxied back towards the hangars of Wing 411 I was overcome with nostalgia and the desire to go with them. It was, however, just wishful thinking: “Mai hen krueng bai!”