

CAP'N TOMMY AND THE WALL OF DEATH

SEEKING TO MAKE A POST-WAR LIVING, THIS AVIATOR DEvised
A RATHER PRECARIOUS AIRSHOW ACT
BY MICHAEL O'LEARY AND DOUG FISHER

Captain Tommy smashing through the "Wall of Death" during the "Flying Tigers Airshow" at Scranton-Wilkes Barre Airport in Pennsylvania on 20 September 1948. Walker's crew would set up two telephone poles and then very lightly attach strips of wood and paper between the poles. Slowing the Stearman down as much as possible, he would aim for the center of the wall. Upon impact, the telephone poles would do lots of damage to the Stearman's outer wing panels but he was able to set the aircraft down on its main gear. It is said that a crowd of 20,000 witnessed the stunt while also noting that this was the 16th time Tommy had flown through the Wall of Death.

Sometimes it is difficult to define the questions and reasons that drive us as individuals. Perhaps the most imposing of these is, "Why do we do what we do?" I was certainly considering that question after Contributing Editor Doug Fisher supplied the photo that leads off this short article about a time period that has been long-forgotten.

With the end of the Second World War, airshows in the United States enjoyed a huge resurgence in popularity. These events gave the general public a reason to get out and about while also enjoying a thrilling variety of aerial exhibitions. For returning veterans — especially those that served in the aerial arms of the Army, Navy, and Marines — airshows allowed them to take friends and families to an event to show them "this is what we did."

After the war, there were many civilian performers trying to eke a living or supplement their incomes by coming up with a variety of aerial acts. Examining these different performers, we found one of the most interesting to be Captain Tommy Walker of "The Flying Tigers."

"Cap'n Tommy," as he was known, had come up with an act he called "The Wall of Death." Basically, Tommy would sell his services to airshow promoters and this service would involve constructing an extremely flimsy "wall" in the middle of the airfield. A crew would bang together the wall, which was built with very light construction so it would instantly come apart when impacted by an aircraft. The airshow announcer would build the act up with a great deal of corn-ball dialogue, usually stressing how Cap'n Tommy was one of the "four original Flying Tigers."

We must remember that during this time period, most of the public was well aware of Gen. Chennault's American Volunteer Group. The AVG and its daring pilots were constantly in the news for their exploits against the Japanese and even though the life span of the AVG was quite short, their feats caught the attention of the American audience. This was aided by the appearance in late 1942 of the low-budget film *Flying Tigers* starring John Wayne. From almost every aspect, this was a terrible movie but it