

For thirty seven years the writing of the Robert Short story has been on the author's list. After the decision to do the story for the *JOURNAL* of AAHS, it took six months to track down the family. By the greatest luck we learned of a 142 page manuscript on file with the Washington State Historical Society. The authorship is anonymous. The writing presents a jig-saw puzzle with many significant pieces missing. However, of greatest value are scores of letters Robert wrote home, letters from his acquaintances, newspaper articles, and a multitude of testimonials. Despite the manuscript's shortcomings, it is nevertheless a broad and valid compendium for relating the making of a hero.

Photographs, except Boeing Model 218, courtesy of Mr. Edmond Short.

Along a five mile avenue of sorrow stretching from the Moore Memorial Church in Shanghai to Jungjoo Airdrome, a funeral procession moved bearing the body of Colonel Robert Short, American. The date was April 25, 1932. Two months previously, on Washington's birthday, the 27-year-old pilot, had heroically given his life to China in a one-sided air battle against the Japanese. As the cortege made its way slowly down the old Tibet Road, tens of thousand Chinese stood in silent tribute. Following the hearse were forty-five cars laden with floral pieces, and some three hundred cars carrying the greats of China, including T.V. Soong, Minister. At graveside four thousand Chinese, in mixtures of Oriental and Occidental dress paid final respects. It was the largest and most impressive funeral ever accorded a foreigner in China.

Robert McCawley Short was given a state funeral, made a national hero of China and posthumously awarded a Colonel's commission, because on that fateful day of February 22, something burned deep inside him, an idealism, an urge to fight — and die, if necessary, for the under-dog.

From early boyhood Robert Short lived by his own individualistic code of conduct. In a way of characterization he was headstrong, not swayed by conventionality. He followed examples of clean living and religious teachings. Although he had an insatiable urge for boyish pranks that he never outgrew, on the other hand he had a most profound sense of compassion. It was this deep-seated compassion and impetuosity, that contributed to his death. In a way he was an idealistic All-American boy.

In 1855 the Pierce County (Washington) court house was erected at Steilacoom, serving that purpose until Tacoma

ROBERT SHORT:

The Making of a Hero

By MARTIN COLE

outdistanced Steilacoom as a city and claimed the county seat. The historical old court building became in turn a church on Sunday and a school during the week. Eventually, it became a hotel for trappers and hunters, and finally a residence. Here on 4 October 1904 a boy was born and named Robert McCawley Short.

When Robert was nine years old, the Short family moved to Tacoma. Shortly thereafter the mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Short, was widowed and left with three small children. With the later death of their sister, the brothers Robert and Edmond were brought closer together, to live a sort of Tom Sawyer-Huck Finn life on Puget Sound.

As Robert advanced through grammar school he became an early bread winner, first a carrier of *The Tacoma Times*, building his route from fifteen to fifty-five customers, and then as a messenger boy at Todd Shipyards. His strong ties with his mother and his sense of responsibility were manifested on Christmas Day, 1919 when he presented her with a receipted doctor bill for one hundred and fifty dollars.

In high school, despite his rebel ways and outlandish pranks, Robert was liked by his teachers. Mr. H.F. Hunt, the principal gave a vivid word picture that put the boy in sharp focus.¹

"I came to know Robert Short during his school days at Stadium High. Because of some of his rather outstanding character traits, and because of his reactions to school regulations and school traditions I perhaps knew him better than I knew the average graduate.

"Always cheerful and kindly by nature, he would fight for his friends or for anyone whom he thought the 'under-dog' without a moment's hesitation, and with no

Primary training at March Field was given in the Consolidated PT-1. Short's brief notation on the reverse side of this snapshot stated "1st solo.



As the cadets had progressed to PT-3's, a competitive meet was held to test the judgment, co-ordination, and ability to fly. The eight man team coached by Lieutenant Timberlake won. (l. to r.)

George Kinzie, Haxton, Colorado;
Lewis R. Parker, Los Angeles, California;
H.L. Grills, Molesus, Tennessee;
Robert M. Short, Aberdeen, Washington;
Albert Boyd, New Port, North Carolina;
W.F. Phillippi, Boise, Idaho;
Jack Zimmerman, Fremont, Ohio; and
Robert Clarke, Boston, Massachusetts.



thought of the consequences. He had many qualities of leadership. He had courage; he was brave even to rashness; sometimes daring even to foolishness.

"Robert was popular; he was well liked by students and teachers, though his tendency to throw himself into action on the instant and think about it afterward was a frequent source of conference so far as teachers were concerned."

Somehow Short was always at the proper place at the proper time to help right a wrong, to help someone in distress, to take a definite stand against smoking and drink. and on the negative side, to play a leading role that led to his expulsion. During the suspension Robert worked as an electrician's helper. When he was notified he might return to classes if he brought letters of reference, he acted with characteristic aplomb. He journeyed to the state capitol and sought an audience with the Honorable Louis Hart, Governor of Washington, and by his winning smile and infectious personality obtained a letter of recommendation, complete with state seal.

Perhaps it was dissatisfaction with school, or impatience. or to help his mother, Robert took a civil service examination for work in Tacoma's engineering department, and finished third among twenty applicants, unaware that the city's policy prohibited the hiring of minors. And so the school years passed; there were athletic awards, romances that blossomed and faded these aside from lively goings on. At graduation time he left a permanent record of prankishness. by appearing on the extreme left and right sides of a panoramic group photo of the senior class.

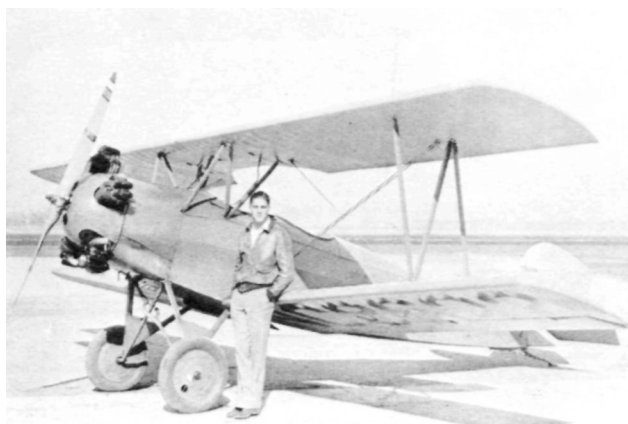
Thanks to the civil service exam taken during the sophomore year, Robert now eighteen, was hired for survey-crew work on the construction of Tacoma's Cushman Dam. When his job ended, five months later, he continued in several others, mostly in construction, and while college for the moment was out of reach due to the necessity of helping out at home, he nevertheless sought self-improvement in night classes and correspondence courses. A year or so later while working for The Grays Harbor Railway and Power Company in the accounting department, he was urged by a friend to try for U.S. Army's Flying Cadet

training. The idea appealed to him. so with twenty-eight other candidates he took written and physical examinations at Vancouver Barracks and was one of three selected. At March Field, Riverside, California, he was sworn in with the class of March 1st, 1928.

Following the dismissal after the swearing in, two hundred and forty five cadets received their first initiation into the new life: they were ordered to run around a field track. It was a hot day, and the inexperience of standing at attention had gotten the best of one youth. Robert, noticing the pallor on the young man's face, whispered that he would run in his place. This he did following his own run. an incident observed by the officer-in-charge, who barked at him, "Short, if you're so anxious to run. keep right on running." He did for a mile and half at a brisk pace.

On March 14th Robert wrote home. "I have spent about forty-five minutes in dual practice in the air in the last three days. It was fun." Shortly afterward he acquired a new instructor who told him, "Short, you seem to grasp what it is all about." It was the first reassuring words he had received yet in training.

While associated with Los Angeles Flying Flying Service, Short flew this Fleet Model 2 with 100 hp Kinner K-5 engine from Mines Field.



In the next few weeks the training was accelerated, both in ground school and in flying. "Up to Friday, April 20, I have had fifteen hours and fifty minutes in the air, and I am practicing X0 degree banks, right and left spins, wingovers, chandelle's, besides landing and takeoffs . . . When I first arrived I did not think that I would finish, but think now that I have a pretty even chance to carry on."

As Robert's confidence grew, so did his dormant self crop to the surface. He involved himself in a couple capers that would have meant dismissal if caught. First he aided his roommate, Milton Anderson in taking Anderson's Fiancee on a surreptitious airplane flight. Next he arranged for their secret marriage at the Mission Inn, and acted as best man. Fortunately, neither were not caught in these serious breaches of regulations.

Cadet training was in two phases, with advance flying to come at Kelly Field. With the approach of graduation from primary at March Field. Short was faced with a tough decision. There was an immediate need to lift the financial burden at home. His agonizing decision was whether to continue at Kelly, or ask for a discharge. Now that he was in the top five in his class, flying jobs in Los Angeles were practically assured him. After much soul-searching Short sacrificed his Army career. It "seemed the thing to do." Accordingly in November, 1928, he "rode into Los Angeles on a wave of prosperity."

His flying ability and likeable personality opened doors of opportunity. For two years he was a familiar figure at southern California airports. He instructed the 'army way,' did private flying for the wealthy, did a stint of test-piloting for Lockheed, and had the good fortune to be associated with W.B. Kinner, President of Kinner Airplane Motors. Eventually, his hometown beckoned, and Robert returned to Tacoma to be manager of the Pierce County Airport. This was a mistake for Robert's temperament was not a proper foil for the "dread disease of politics," consequently the job lasted only nine months. In the meantime he belatedly received his second lieutenant's commission in the Air Corps Reserve.

It was the kiss of the airport job that set in motion a chain of circumstances that led ultimately to his death, for at this opportune time, in answer to previous correspondence, he received a telegram offering him the airmail run between Shanghai and Hangchow.² The pay was attractive and Short accepted. On February 7, 1931 the steamship PRESIDENT CLEVELAND sailed from Seattle with one Robert Short recorded on the passenger list. But as the ship swung from the dock passengers crowding the rail were

With grief apparent, Mrs. Elizabeth Short and Edmond commit son and brother to immortality, attended by many hundreds of Chinese.



startled by the sight of a young man arriving late and who apparently was very distressed at being left behind. However, when the ship reached Victoria, Canada, the passengers thought they were "seeing things." for there on the dock greeting them was the same young man. It was all part of a prank by the fun loving youth who had taken advantage of a flight to Victoria to pull it off.

In Shanghai Short met sickening disappointment. The Loening amphibians he was to fly were little more than fugitives from the junk pile. He had less than fifty dollars in his pocket, yet he turned down the job when he saw a hull being rebuilt with green lumber. Though a stranger in a strange land, his resourcefulness kept him off "the beach," he picked up odd flying jobs here and there until he was hired by the L.E. Gale Company, who marketed American planes in the Orient.³ In the next year, as a field representative, his work took him to every province of China, as well as to Japan and the Philippines. He became closely acquainted with T.V. Soong, the powerful minister of China, who in turn appointed him an advisor to the Chinese Air Force.

In the year that passed, his letters home revealed more and more a deep-seated nature that was not to be deterred. The empathy for his fellowman, and the code of fair dealing that had characterized him since boyhood, was now playing a significant role. "There arc a few (Americans). maybe one in fifty, who care to understand the Chinese. In my position I feel it heavily. The half dozen American Advisors who preceded me lied and misinformed the Chinese to their own advantage."

The war clouds hovering on the horizon when Short came to China, broke out into an undeclared shooting war between Japanese forces and the Chinese. With prophetic insight he wrote. "Mother, you cannot realize the brutality and the uselessness of it all and what the United States will have to contend with sometime in the years to come. Japan has no bases of supplies and if the world powers allow her to take Manchuria it won't take her ten years to prepare for a world conquest with the United States as the prize."

As the war closed around the International Settlement of Shanghai, a mounting fear persisted that trigger-happy Japanese soldiers might overrun the area and for days there were tense moments. "Just now it is nine p.m., and the big Hong Kong Bank Building clock is striking, and sitting in" my office I can hear the bup-bup-bup of machine gun fire. It isn't steady just occasional."

From this vantage point he saw the indiscriminate bombing of Shanghai: saw too. women and children killed. and the utter helplessness of sitting on the sidelines and not being able to do anything about it. was disturbing. The awful sights and frustrations were a contributing nexus to the fast approaching climax, that came with the arrival of a new Boeing Fighter, Model 218.⁴

The plane was uncrated and set up at the Jungjao airport, machine guns were mounted, ammunition belts threaded, and when all was ready, Short took off to make delivery at Nanking. The date was February 18, 1932. During the three hour flight he was reported to have encountered Japanese airplanes and shot one down. Details are lacking, thus it is not known whether Short acted in self-defense or was the aggressor. Newspapers in the United States carried a brief, front-page mention of this aerial victory.

Short remained in Nanking, unfortunately. The city was nearly paralyzed because of the daily threat of Japanese bombers. The train for Shanghai was delayed for several



Boeing Model 218, X-66W, c/n 1260, owned by Boeing and used as prototype test airplane for Army and Navy P-12E and F4B-3 series, with Pratt & Whitney engines. Assigned designation XP-925 with

R-1340D and XP-925A with R-1340E. Used to test new features, including introduction of metal monocoque fuselage to the P-12/F4B line. (Photo — The Boeing Co., 4157B, courtesy of Harl Brackin)

days, and finally it was decided to make a run for it. Accordingly, on the afternoon of February 22, the coaches were loaded with Chinese civilians, including women and children, and a few Americans. With swift efficiency Japanese spies informed their bomber command and fifteen minutes after the train had left, three bombers appeared overhead, supported by three fighters. Short was watching from the airfield at Nanking.

What inner forces motivated Short to give battle to the Japanese are unknown. We can guess that, using as a yardstick a life pattern of acting impetuously for noble causes, he lifted the Boeing off the runway toward the Japanese aircraft.

There are several versions of the air battle, ranging from his shooting down four of the enemy to only one, and there is also the United Press version that does not credit him with any. In the absence of other details, only what appeared in the American newspapers can be offered. In the two minute engagement over Soochow, ". . . in which a single aviator had been pitted against superior odds," residents of the French concession watched "the Boeing plane meet the Japanese trio" (the fighter planes).

"Dipping, wheeling, rolling in wing-overs to avoid the rushes of this three antagonists, Short time and again was on the tail of the enemy, pouring bursts of machine gun bullets into wings and fuselages . . . The watching crowds . . . gasped as they saw a Japanese plane dive on Short's plane as he fought another. There was a burst of smoke - then Short's plane dropped earthward."⁵

The air battle was fought at the extreme low altitude of 2000 feet. A second report stated:

"When Short's plane, which the Chinese had pur-

chased only a week ago, crashed, the Japanese, not knowing Short was an American, thought they had encountered the bravest Chinese, and dipped in salute while the naming airplane was plunging to the ground.

"The Japanese returned safely to their Shanghai base. Pilot Susumu Kotani, credited officially with the victory, was wounded and taken to the Japanese military hospital at Kongkew . . . Kotani died of his injuries."⁶

Robert Short came to China as just another American. In gratitude for his sacrifice the Chinese government honored him with a posthumous Colonel's commission, and a state funeral that was delayed until his mother and brother could be present.

Two years later an impressive monument was erected over his grave. The Chinese went to the New Testament to find adequate words to express their feelings for the American who gave his life in their cause. The inscription on the shaft reads, in Chinese characters "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

REFERENCES:

1. With the exception of two newspaper quotes the story related herewith came from the 142 page unpublished manuscript, "The Life of Robert McCawley Short" in the archives of the Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma, Washington.
2. Letter, Ed Short to Author, 25 Nov. 1969. John Clifford Smith of China National Air Transport hired Robert Short.
3. L.E. Gale Co. was the Orient representative of United Aircraft Corp. which then included Boeing Airplane Co. interests.
4. Bowers, Peter M. *Boeing Aircraft Since 1916*. London: Putnam & Co. Ltd., 1966. Page 159. The *Seattle Times* of 25 Feb. 1932 reported that the Model 218 was turned over to the Aircraft Export Corp. of New York who delivered the airplane direct from Seattle to the L.E. Gale Co.
5. *Seattle Times*, Feb. 23, 1932.
6. Washington (D.C.) *Daily News*, Feb. 23, 1932.