MORE ON LOUIS DE SAN

PAUL BOLDING

Young and keen for adventure, Louis de San was 29 in 1939 when he found himself in Chungking as a Belgian diplomat at the court of the nationalist Chinese government as the Japanese seized more and more of the country.

Through a family connection I met Louis de San in Syria in 1988 where he had retired and where he later died. I have recently acquired a fascinating letter he wrote to a friend from Chungking and some family photographs. In addition, his own recollection of how he set an Asian gliding altitude and duration record in Chungking in 1940 has been published.

The letter describes how he arrived in Hong Kong en route for his new post. ‘I knew absolutely nothing about China. It took me three days to find out what was happening, buy supplies (bed linen, underwear, radio, wines and spirits etc) daily lunches and dinners, packing and repacking my stuff, making a thousand demarches, in short an absolute killer of a regime.’

He took the 900-tonne steamer Canton for Haiphong, a three-day journey. Hanoi he found ‘a small French provincial town replanted in Asia; the Japanese will find it easy to swallow it when it takes their fancy.’ He caught a train to Kunming and waited there for a plane to Chungking. After five days, French fliers got him a place on a flight on a Douglas.

‘A lunar landscape with nowhere to land in case of accident; these poor planes are flying 10 or 12 hours a day!’ he wrote of the trip.

He was immediately put to work by colleagues and the next day was at the French embassy when air raid sirens sounded.

‘In a few seconds, everyone was underground in the shelters with admirable discipline; then the wait with a note of anxiety and mystery... one did not know if one would still be alive minutes later... that lasted half an hour.'
'Finally a heavy rumbling, very high, and we saw a number of Japanese planes, enough to reduce everything to dust ... as usual in V formation ... then over the first houses of the suburbs they reform into a single line and take their time dropping their bombs.

'A terrible to-do. Chinese anti-aircraft crews firing tracer shells, I shooting out of conviction, even though the enemy was at 3,000 metres... instead of filing into the shelter I remained with two reporters from Havas on a high point to be able to see everything.

'We counted 27 Japanese; the characteristic whine of misdirected fire makes us head for the shelter... we see more Japanese pass above us but without dropping anything ... four Chinese planes engage them in combat but without much enthusiasm. One doesn't find much of the heroism here that we have in bucketfuls in similar circumstances. The Chinese is a terrible individualist and doesn't give a damn for the fatherland.'

Emerging later, Louis, a Belgian colleague and the French chargé d'affaires, the two journalists and a Chinese, found part of the city ablaze.

'Fire was effectively burning in the area of the barracks of the seamen from a French gunboat; we had to go and see if we could help them,' wrote Louis de San to his friend.

They walked towards the river, taking two hours through the rambling suburbs of Chungking. He describes the Yangtse as three or four times as wide as the Scheldt at Antwerp, itself a mighty river. 'We managed to borrow a sampan from a European ... we embarked two or three km upstream from where we wanted to cross to because of the strength of the current.'

'When we got the middle of the river, a great Chinese steamer emerged from the darkness without lights, 20 metres away and steaming upstream. We rowers, instead of giving it our best shot, start to throw ourselves into the water. The big ship hits us with full force and extraordinary violence. I dived to avoid the collision but still got a terrible bang on the head.
Half dizzy, I feel myself pass under the big ship, caught in the swirl of its screw, and finally I emerge, carried by the terrible current. I have never felt such intense fear. I felt I was close to death.

Louis clung to an oar and then spotted the sampan some 20 metres away where all but one of his companions were aboard. The remaining man had reached the shore. He notes quaintly that he lost a treasured pen. 'I lost my Parker but kept my life after being but a thread away from losing it,' he wrote.

Japanese bombing continued and Louis concluded he had a 50 per cent chance of surviving. 'Should there be a lightning advance by the Japanese, the worst is to be expected. This will end, no doubt, in a massacre of the Europeans, of the population.'

In his previous post, his first outside Belgium, Louis had been in Berlin, where he had met some of the Nazi leaders later to become notorious. His son Marc says he was impressed by the Nazi regime, though later changed his view.

While in Germany, Louis trained as a glider pilot at Grunau in Silesia, probably in machines launched by an elastic bungee, rather than being towed aloft. Grunau was then part of Germany and easily reached from Louis's post in Berlin and it was perhaps the greatest centre for gliding in Europe. Thousands of the machines were made there, notably in the Schneider factory, and production was supported by the German government. Today Grunau is called Jezów Sudecki and is in Poland.

When his next posting came he had no expectation that he would be able to maintain his interest in the sport in wartime China.

He describes how his secretary one day in 1940 drew his attention to an item in a newspaper saying the Chinese military had acquired two Rhönspber gliders and were to give a public demonstration. The military pilot who flew the first went into a dive from 100 metres for unexplained reasons and was killed.

It seems that Louis did not hesitate when the authorities asked him if he would fly the remaining machine the next day. He says the
date was April 25, 1940, but his contemporary annotation of photographs puts the date as May 24.

Conditions were perfect and there was no sign of the Japanese fighters which he feared could attack his plane - painted in Chinese military colours. Although at one point he lost altitude badly after dismissing his tow, he soon found the thermals and soared to 5,700 feet and stayed aloft for four hours 44 minutes, an Asian record.

He writes: 'I see my embassy, tiny, great water reservoirs, the beginning of the magnificent Yangtse gorges, innumerable rice fields looking like contour lines on a relief map. A splendid landscape in miniature, the kind the Chinese love for their gardens.'

He notes at one point flying over the Tutuila 'where I used to go for a good curry.' This U.S. Yangtse patrol boat with a displacement of 395 tons was marooned at Chungking by the Japanese occupation of areas down-river like Hankow. The USS Tutuila was bombed by the Japanese in July 1941, the first U.S. Navy ship damaged by Axis powers in World War Two. It was decommissioned in January 1942 and handed over to the Chinese in March under Lend-Lease and renamed Mei Yuan. One can imagine that in wartime Chungking, Europeans could be assured of a decent meal aboard a U.S. patrol boat that was more or less a permanent fixture at the quayside.

Pictures show Louis beside the machine with an air force pilot who was possibly the one who towed him up, and a few others nearby. Afterwards, massive crowds have gathered around Louis's plane to celebrate the record-breaking flight. He was justifiably proud of his achievement and maintained his interest in aviation, flying between subsequent diplomatic posts in a succession of small private planes.

Louis de San was transferred to Hong Kong in 1941; on the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, he secured a berth on a freighter which took him and his wife to Ceylon and they passed the war in Africa. Louis de San held various diplomatic posts for Belgium, ending in Damascus in the 1970s. He died in 1995.