

Chennault and the Flying Tigers

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The very name Flying Tigers has become linked with adventure and romance, with images of clean-cut young American adventurers traveling through ancient far-off lands. Organized as a final expedient to provide desperately needed air defense for the Republic of China, the American Volunteer Group, the Tigers' official name, was in existence for little over one year. It was in fact a mercenary organization made up of American military pilots who were paid by the Republic of China and received a bonus for every enemy plane they shot down.

However, meeting and beating overwhelming odds against a foe who had up to that time seemed unstoppable made them heroes not only to China, but the world. Their victories became a symbol of individual human skill and courage against a nation which seemed dedicated to reducing human beings to carefully programmed machines.

The history of this almost unique military unit is linked to the life of its organizing genius, Brigadier General Claire Lee Chennault.

Born on September 6, 1893, in Commerce, Texas, Chennault was sent by his father, a cotton farmer, to study agriculture at Louisiana State University. However, after a year, Chennault left to obtain a teaching certificate from the State Normal School of Natchitochess in 1910. On December 25, 1911, he married Nell Thompson. They eventually had eight children. He supported his family as a teacher and was principal of a Texas high school in 1917 when American entered World War I.

Long interested in learning to fly, Chennault sought flight training but was rejected, and after Officer Training Camp was commissioned as a first lieutenant in the Infantry Reserve. Shortly thereafter he transferred to the aviation section of the Signal Reserve Corps and learned to fly in San Antonio, Texas. He finally received his fighter pilot rating in 1919, but never went overseas and received an honorable discharge in 1920.

After a few months as a farmer he re-enlisted and on September 24, 1920, was commissioned as a first lieutenant in the Army Air Corps. He served at several bases including Wheeler Field in Hawaii. From 1930 to 1937 he was at the Air Corps Tactical School, first as a student then an instructor.

While at the Flight School he wrote a textbook, *The Role of Defensive Pursuit*, and organized an aerial acrobatic team to represent the Army Air Corps.

Chennault's textbook was controversial since he insisted large high altitude bombers needed dependable fighter escorts. Standard doctrine stated waves of high flying bombers properly armed and armored would be able to protect themselves.

Captain Chennault argued and pestered the Army Air Corps for the development of faster better armed pursuit aircraft. His often tactless behavior made him unpopular in the military hierarchy.

However, he became famous as head of the aerobatics team. He and Lieutenants H.S. Hanseler and W.C. McDonald became best known as the "Three Men

on a Flying Trapeze". The trick which gave them their name was to tie all three planes together with a long rope, take off, perform a series of stunts, and land still tied together. Undoubtedly, Chennault's ability to judge the capacities of aircraft and compare their strengths developed here.

By 1937 Chennault was partly deaf from flying open cockpit planes, and suffering from chronic bronchial trouble. He achieved the rank of major, but his opinion bucking the military establishment had made him numerous enemies.

In April he retired and settled with his family in Waterproof, Louisiana. One cannot help wondering what would have happened if his theories on team combat tactics, air supply systems, and para-troops had been adopted before the next war forced them on us.

His retirement didn't last long, however. His companions from the aerobatics team had gone to China to organize an aviation school sponsored by Madame Chiang Kai Chek. By July, Chennault had followed his itchy feet to China where he was appointed air advisor.

It quickly became obvious this involved the creation of an air force almost from scratch, while actively engaged in a war. He had less than one hundred combat planes. The last systematic training program seemed to have been run by Italian officers in the early thirties, a gesture of friendship to Chang Kai Chek from Mussolini. When Italy began to draw closer to Japan, they withdrew and took with them the only aerial maps of the area.

Major, soon to be General, Chennault seems to have completely ignored the slackness and corruption of the Nationalist Party and side-stepped the internal bickering politics of the Nationalist - Communist alliance. He moved his forces back from the battle lines while he began building small functional airports throughout central China. Then the American commander created an air raid warning system which U.S. Army observers ranked "the world's best...Chinese headquarters are warned of raids while Japanese bombers are still warming up at their base." Lacking radar, the system was based on numerous spotters equipped with radios in Japanese occupied territories.

Once Chennault completed training his new pilots in team tactics, he led them personally into combat in Shanghai, Nanking, and Chungking, reducing the slaughter caused by the Japanese indiscriminate mass bombing.

One unconfirmed report credits the general with downing forty Japanese planes between 1937 and 1939 which would have made him America's top scoring ace, if he had been an American flyer.

Other less probable legends have emerged from this period. One story has Chennault pulling an automatic pistol on a Chinese infantry commander who refused to attack a Japanese artillery battery which was firing on a Chinese air field. Another story has the American advisor and the Chinese Commander-in-Chief Chang Kai Chek traveling in a

supply plane together and barely winning a pitched battle with two Ninja who had stowed away.

By 1940, after three years of testing his theories of fighter tactics, he was convinced that a properly trained professional air force could cause such damage as to prevent a Japanese invasion of the South Pacific.

The real problem, as Chennault saw it, was where to get such a force. The only possible source of men and machines with the war raging in Europe was the U.S.

The climate for aid to China was generally favorable in Washington. Japan's blatant aggression in China had offended much of the civilized world, and her long range goals seemed to threaten America's holdings in the Philippines. Chennault's suggestion of an air unit flown and maintained by Americans offered a chance to keep Japan occupied in a long expensive war on the Asian mainland.

However, the United States was involved in rearming itself while equipping the hard pressed British and selling to several other countries. Despite the constant efforts of men like I.V. Soong, Chinese foreign minister, only a few bombers and fighters were available piecemeal. Then, at the end of 1940, the export license to Sweden for one hundred P-40 Curtiss Warhawks was revoked. Promising Great Britain, who had an earlier claim to any unallotted planes, a shipment of the next generation of war planes, America sent the Warhawks to China. However, on their arrival General Chennault was forced to place half in the repair shop to supply spare parts for the others. Worse, there was still a shortage of mechanics and pilots.

As the climate between the U.S. and Japan worsened, on April 15, 1941, President Roosevelt signed an unpublicized executive order which allowed members of the Army, Navy, and Marine Air Wings to join Chennault's American Volunteer Group. Chennault toured dozens of American air bases offering young men tired of training for war, a chance for adventure and a \$600 a month salary, plus \$500 for every plane they shot down.

Establishing a training base 150 miles north of Rangoon, Burma, Chennault began intensive training six hours a day drill in his buddy system of flying. A later innovation added, when possible, a third plane which would wait above the others and would dive into the battle when they had the enemy fully engaged.

Chennault also had access to Japanese training manuals and experience against all of the Japanese fighters. An analysis of their primary opponent, the Mitsubishi A6M2 Reisen, commonly called the Zero, proved it superior in all but two or three categories.

The Zero was maneuverable and could climb faster than the Warhawk. However, the Curtiss P-40 had better armor and was faster on level flight and when diving. The Zero carried two machine guns and a 20mm cannon, while the American ship had four machine guns.

Chennault had his pilots concentrate on climb-

ing over the Japanese bomber waves and attacking in dives, always going after the bombers and refusing to engage in conventional dog fighting.

By November 1941 Chennault had ready two squads of eighteen men each and a partial squadron of eight. Oddly, they did not begin operations against the Japanese until thirteen days after Pearl Harbor and America's entry into the war. Still part of the Chinese Air Force, they were assigned to protect Rangoon, the primary port for supplying China alongside the badly out-numbered RAF.

On December 24th, twenty-one Japanese bombers attacked Rangoon, not only hoping to damage the docks, but terrify the workers out of the city and disrupt shipping. One eighteen man squad intercepted and shot down nine bombers. On December 25th, seventy Japanese bombers attacked, but once again their fighter escorts went exactly by the book and followed the bombers. They were not able to stop the attacking fighters on the first pass.

Exact figures are impossible to obtain for the next few weeks. The Tigers were paid \$500 a plane and only claimed certain kills. On more than one occasion, however, Japanese propaganda broadcasts complaining of the Tigers' 'bandit-like tactics' reported more of their planes being shot down than the Tigers and RAF claimed together.

The American Volunteer Group was known for their total lack of spit and polish and the absence of normal military protocol. But their Tiger motif planes, originally decorated to look like sharks, became world famous, thanks to journalists looking for some victory story to report.

For sixty days they did, without a doubt, help keep the Burma Road from Rangoon to eastern China by protecting the docks and bridges. It is impossible to estimate how many tons of supplies reached China because of the Tigers before Rangoon fell to Japanese troops.

Figures, like the Tigers having to do battle at twenty to one odds with enough ammunition for one minute's continuous firing, do not tell the whole story. The Flying Tigers were also the ground crews trained in high speed fueling and working all night to keep the dangerously battered planes in the air. The Tigers were teams of exhausted men in flight jackets and hats arranging the misdirection of supplies to their base. In a sense, the Tigers were the teams of Burmese who worked every day shifting through the rice fields for spare parts from wrecks.

Even with all the incredible truths to tell about the Tigers, the legends begin to grow.

There was the night when, so they say, four pilots were trying to have a quiet drink in a local bar, when a lean elderly Chinese monk came up to one and asked if he could shake his hand. Tired of being lionized (pun intended) they were prepared to politely brush him off. Just then two Burmese bandits, paid and equipped with automatic weapons by the Japanese, burst in hoping to bag a few Tigers. Everyone in the room hit the floor -- everyone but the monk. He went down but turned his

fall into a tight roll and leapt to his feet, planted a spear finger in one bandit's throat and his fist on the other's nose. The remaining three paid assassins burst through the back door a bit late and were met by a very irate crowd of Americans with clubs, beer bottles and a .45 automatic.

In the air, reports exist of a flyer named Hanarah who was trying to reach his air base in a P-40 with the control surfaces shot up. Unable to control the plane properly, he should have bailed out. But Hanarah was flying one-twentieth of the air defenses of Rangoon and so he kept trying to reach the airway.

Six Zeros attacked him, but in a classic Tiger maneuver, an unmarked fighter attacked from above. Two Zeros were shot down, another damaged, and Hanarah was able to reach the air field with half a cup of gas left in his tank.

Hanarah recognized the plane that had saved him and the next day he and the other pilots spoke to the ground crews and native laborers, who passed their message onto the other Burmese. "Do not talk about what you saw yesterday," they were asked. "Sometimes our commander does these things, and if the Japanese knew, they would have a hundred planes waiting for him."

The official history of the Tigers ended in April 1942 when Chennault was recalled to active service in the U.S. Air Corps, and was assigned to operate in China. Only six pilots decided to re-join the Army with him.

For the rest of the war Chennault continued to campaign in Washington and London to make China the main battlefield against Japan and insisted bombing raids from China would stop shipping in the Sea of Japan and destroy the Japanese war industry. He was able to arrange top priority to his forces for those supplies flown into China over the Himalayas, but the inability of the Chinese to protect the air fields stalemated all his plans.

The final accomplishment of the Tigers, however, is still a matter of awe. According to the figures accepted by the U.S. Army Air Corps, in seven months the AVG destroyed 297 planes, and killed 1500 Japanese. They lost eleven pilots in combat and nine in accidents. This score was achieved by a unit which never had more than forty-nine planes, or seventy trained pilots in action at any one time.

How many lives they saved in China and the support they gave to Chinese troops is uncountable. Their lasting fame comes from the air of gallantry they pulled it off with, and the hope they gave in a black moment to the people of America, Britain, and China.

Post Script: I believe Jake Cutter served in the China of a parallel or alternative universe. In his world, General Chennault retired from the Army right after being made a major in 1936. Contacted by Madame Chang Kai Chek while still in America, he went directly to Washington where T.V. Soong and the China Defense Supplies, Inc. were already in position. Approaching Roosevelt, his fame as an instructor and theoretician was suffi-

cient to convince the president of the practicality of an American Volunteer Group.

It would seem from the stories presented in the *Gold Monkey* series, that the United States of Jake's world was more aware of the dangers posed by the Axis powers. The intelligence services of this parallel America are more active with permanent agents, even in a backwater like Boragora. General MacArthur in this world has formed an unofficial alliance with the Huks in the Philippines, rather than underestimating the Japanese as badly as he did in our world. I do not know what kind of

planes were available for the Tigers in this alternative universe, but I suspect from the brief glances we have had of them, they were either Curtiss P-40s or P-36s, maybe P-38s.

At any rate, on this time line in 1937, Jake Cutter and one hundred young Americans led the fight in the air over Chungking and Nanking. They flew supplies to guerrillas in the north and explored the ancient unknown land of Cathay. They became the first line of defense against a foe who was out to reshape the world in their own image. They became individuals who counted.

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