

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

The Flying Tigers

Originally appeared December 20, 2021

KEY WORDS: Flying Tigers American Volunteer Group Claire Chennault China

World War II started long before the United States got involved after Pearl Harbor. France had fallen, England had been gravely threatened, and Japan was on the march in China. The Chinese government sought help against the aerial assault on their cities, and offered a lot of money to pilots and support personnel. Retired Major Claire Chennault took up the challenge, and formed the American Volunteer Group. They were chronically understaffed and undersupplied, but Chennault's leadership and their fighting prowess would prove successful. Their first combat was 80 years ago on this December 20, when they shot down four bombers attacking their base.

The AVG then became famous as "The Flying Tigers."

Pre-Pearl Harbor Situation

Aviation, including military aviation, got a big boost in WWI. Aircraft were used as scouts, reconnaissance balloon killers, fighters of other aircraft, and bombers. Aeronautical engineering was in its infancy, and although growth was rapid, airframe design and construction, engine power versus weight, and armament limited the utility of the larger aircraft, and pretty much precluded tactical ground support.

International commercial and military issues remained very important in the 20s and 30s. Everyone was trying to assimilate the lessons of the past war, and some nations were looking to maintain, or even increase, their economic interests abroad. Some nations had colonies or other economic zones in Asia from well before WWI, and one island nation, bereft of resources needed to support a modern economy and military, looked to expand its influence.

China was the focus of a lot of covetous attention. They had abundant natural resources, at least in some parts of the country, and were a huge potential market for goods. Several countries had a military presence, there to protect economic interests. But Japan wanted territory.

China covers a large geographic area, and in the inter-War years, China's infrastructure, especially at the national level, was extremely primitive. The national government was weak, and a number of warlords were more interested in extracting money than fighting for the country.

A number of incidents in the late 1930s rightfully made China extremely fearful of Japan and their aggressive intentions. Chinese leaders were especially aware of the potential danger they faced from the skies; their air force was vastly inferior to that of Japan. If that weren't bad enough, the government of Chiang Kai-Shek also had an internal insurgency problem. They desperately needed outside capital and military assistance.

Claire L. Chennault

Claire Lee Chennault was born on September 6, 1893, in Commerce, Texas and spent his early years in Louisiana. He finished high school early, then spent two years at LSU, where he was a member of the ROTC. He married, and spent two years as the principal of a local school. When WWI broke out, he enlisted in the precursor to OCS, graduated, and entered the Aviation Division of the Army Signal Corps. He completed flight training during the War but did not see action.

He continued his service in pursuit aircraft through the growth of the ASC and transition into the Air Corps. He piloting must have been excellent, because he became the Chief of Pursuit Section at the Air Corps Tactical School in the 1930s.

Excellent, indeed. He led his unit's aerobatic team (think Thunderbirds flying biplanes) and then was an instructor at Maxwell Field, in spite of having some health problems that made flying more difficult for him.

Most of the AAF brass were becoming progressively bomber-oriented, and they did not believe that the more advanced bombers then on the drawing boards could be stopped, or even caught, by smaller "fighter" planes. The "bombers will always get through" maxim affected the U.S. pre-War deployment, especially in the Far East, but was never true, as many dead aviators in the coming years would attest, if they could.

Chennault disagreed vigorously.

Chennault, while being an excellent pilot, had one fault that would affect his career. He did not "play well with others," especially those whose views on aviation he felt were less accurate than his (which was pretty much most everyone). His unhappiness peaked when he was passed over for a promotion he felt he deserved.

Chennault resigned, separating from service on April 30, 1937.

The Chinese government, desperate for help with military aviation, knew it did not know enough to know what it needed. But they knew that best chance to keep Japanese bombers from hitting their cities was with pursuit fighter planes. And they knew that the now-available Major Chennault was an expert in such matters. He was recruited to come to China, review the present status of Chinese military air, and report his assessment to Soong Mei-ling, Chiang Kai-Shek's wife (aka "Madame Chiang"). He was on a three-month, \$3000 contract, very big bucks in those days.

Japan and China had a number of military skirmishes in the early-mid 1930s, culminating at the Marco Polo Bridge on July 7, 1937, regarded by many as the actual start of what would become

WWII. Japan invaded resource-rich Manchuria on September 18. Chennault's advice and help become progressively important, and he ended up as Chiang's primary military advisor for aviation and the head of a CAF flight school in Kunming.

China had few planes and pilots, but they did have a well-developed communications network in the hinterlands, and some friends in Washington. The pace of Japanese air attacks was increasing, and after a devastating bombing of Chengdu and Changquin, Chiang sent Chennault to DC as an advisor to the China ambassador, with the mission to acquire military aviation support. The Army and Navy were struggling to gear up production and supply lines for planes and their supporting infrastructure, the last thing they wanted was a guy with unconventional views siphoning off resources they needed.

President Roosevelt did not agree with his military chiefs, and OK'd Chennault's request for funding. Curtiss Aircraft Company had the contract to produce the P-40 Warhawk fighter, and they had the capacity to add a fifth production line. One-hundred P-40Bs earmarked for Britain would be diverted to China, replaced by 100 later models that would come off the new line.

Planes were difficult enough to procure, but pilots and ground crew were even tougher, especially because the U.S. was not officially at War. The Chinese didn't have many aviation personnel, but they did have a lot of money to spend on defense, and with Chennault's help, they recruited a cadre of about 100 men and 250 ground people. Most had prior military experience, but were eager for the high wages paid for going overseas.

The new mercenaries and some of their gear was transported to the Far East on Dutch commercial vessels. They were to be known as the "American Volunteer Group."

The American Volunteer Group – the Flying Tigers

Chennault, now called "Colonel" by his Chinese employers, did a masterful job taking the many mercenaries that answered the call and turning them into a viable military force. Their primary problem was two-fold, there were too few people involved, and they were at the end of a long supply line.

The AVG team was divided into three squadrons: the first was the "Adam and Eve" squadron (the first pursuit – get it?), the second was the "Panda Bears," and the third was the "Hell's Angels" (not after the not-yet-extant motorcycle guys but the WWI aviation movie). The first two were initially stationed at Kunming in order to protect the end of the Burma Road, a vital ground supply route, and the third went to help defend Rangoon.

The AVG was far along in its preparations for combat when Pearl Harbor happened. Everyone became very wary of attacks after that, but not much developed over the next two weeks.

The Japanese mounted a bombing raid against the Kunming airfield on **December 20, 1941**, flying out of Hanoi with 10 unescorted Ki-48 bombers, codename "Lily." The Chinese communication net worked well, and the AVG managed to scramble two squadrons to counter the raid. They tore into the bombers, forcing them to jettison their bombs away from the target. Three bombers were shot down outright, and at least one other ditched before making

base. The AVG lost only one plane to a crash landing; the pilot was unhurt and the plane was parted out. The Japanese became believers in fighter support for bombing missions.

The AVG's P-40s weren't the first to sport the shark's mouth paint around their engine air intake, but they helped make that look famous. They picked up the cool nickname, the ***Flying Tigers***, and a Disney illustrator created their distinctive branding. We were fighting back!

Subsequent air combat almost always had the AVG at a large numerical disadvantage, but the tactics Chennault espoused proved quite effective. The AVG consistently shot down many more planes than they lost, even when one takes into account that AVG pilots, paid a large bounty for each victory, might have exaggerated more than usual. They really beat up on the first-generation fighters they faced, code name "Nick," but they had a bit tougher time with the more advanced fighter, code name "Oscar."

Japanese fighting philosophy favored the extremely-skilled fighter in solo combat, and they approached their fighter plane design the same way. Maneuverability was their idea of the most important fighter trait, and they traded-off firepower and pilot/fuel protection to achieve it. The Oscar was the only WWII fighter light enough to pull a "Double Immelmann" turn (start from level flight, pull a half-loop, then a half-roll, followed immediately by another half-loop). Allied pilots thinking they could outmaneuver such an airplane were quickly proved wrong, and we would have lost many others if the Oscar had stronger weapons.

Chennault was already an outspoken advocate for pursuit aircraft, and his experiences in China proved to himself that he was right.

There were a number of British fighter pilots in Chennault's area. Many had combat experience with fighting the Luftwaffe, where dogfighting was more on even terms. Few were stubborn enough (or long-lived enough) to stay with their mistaken view on how best to fight the Oscar.

Chennault based his pilot training around a clear view, derived from personal observation, of the strength and weaknesses of each aircraft involved. The Oscar could out-turn anything in the sky and climb at an amazing rate, but the P-40 was faster in level flight and a dive, was more heavily-gunned, had armor around the pilot, and had self-sealing fuel tanks. The AVG pilots were trained to fight as teams of two, rather than solo combat, and to use hit-and-run tactics. These tactics would be more-generally adopted later in the War, but they were one of the primary reasons the AVG had such a successful record.

The quality of the AVG was no match for the size of the Japanese effort in coastal China, and they were driven westward by Japanese ground advances. They put up a good defense, especially at the Salween Gorge, but Burma was lost, along with much of the Chinese coast.

The Doolittle Raid was launched during this period, and its planes were lost over eastern China. Japanese reprisals against the Chinese people who helped Doolittle and others escape capture was severe. A measure of the bad blood between Chennault and the Navy can be derived from the fact that Chennault was never informed of the raid in advance, even though planners knew it would adversely affect AVG operations.

The War was getting too big for outfits like the AVG; the unit was slated to be merged with the AAF. Chennault had been brought back into service as a Colonel, then promoted almost immediately to Brigadier General commanding all USSAF units in China, and the China Air Task Force, which morphed into the Fourteenth Air Force.

The feud between General Stilwell and Chiang Kai-Shek came to a head in 1944, when Chiang demanded his replacement. Old enemies of Chennault assumed he had put Chiang up to Stilwell's removal, and used that as a pretext to replace him at the 14th and force his retirement. On his way home, he made a farewell visit to Chung-king, where he was met by huge throngs of cheering Chinese, who regarded him as a national hero. Chennault retired from service on October 31, 1945, as a two-star general.

The AVG itself was replaced by the 23rd Fighter Group on July 4, 1942. Because they were officially volunteers, the AVG pilots and ground crew could be encouraged to enlist into the 23rd, but they could say "no." Many did, and only five AVG pilots stayed on in China after the AVG was abandoned. Some AVG pilots stayed in the Far East, flying supplies "over the Hump" (aka the Himalayas; very dangerous duty). Others went back to civilian jobs in the U.S., and others flew combat in either the Pacific or European Theaters.

The AVG was in operation about seven months. During that time, their official score is 229 air combat victories, with another 68 destroyed on the ground. Fourteen AVG pilots were KIA/MIA, two died in bombing attacks on their base, and six were killed in training and other accidents.

Many AVG pilots had successes in the War after their time in China. Pappy commanded the "Black Sheep" squadron and was one of two AVG alums to earn the Medal of Honor (the other was James H. Howard, for an extremely aggressive defense of B-17s over Germany in January, 1944 – see more about him [here](#)). "Tex" Hill commanded the AAF's 23rd Fighter Group, and one, Harry Bolster, was killed in flight test in 1944. Nineteen pilots made "Ace" status while in the AVG.

Post-WWII Tigers

Many AVG members had an interesting career after WWII. Several continued piloting aircraft, and a few entered politics or other government work. One was a long-time member of the Oregon state government, and another, Charles Older, became a California Superior Court Judge. He presided over the murder trial of Charles Manson and his 'Family.'

Pappy, with his book, movie, and TV show is perhaps the best-known single pilot, but the Flying Tigers lived on after the War as a commercial transport company.

The Flying Tiger Line was founded by AVG veteran Robert W. Prescott, a Flying Tiger Ace, and a number of other AVG pilots and ground personnel. They began flying cargo on a contract basis and enjoyed successful expansion in the late 1940s, especially when they were asked to ferry troops and supplies during the post-War occupation of Japan. In 1949, the Flying Tiger Line was authorized by the CAB to be the first regularly-scheduled cargo airline in the U.S. Not only did

they haul cargo, they also had a lucrative military charter business during the Cold War into the Vietnam era, including some hush-hush work with Air America.

Cargo Air is a tough business, especially after de-regulation, and the Flying Tiger Line management had to diversify. They transported “special” cargos and moved into other businesses, including the now-defunct Hungry Tiger restaurant chain that specialized in fresh lobster from Maine and even a record company, Happy Tiger Records. Nothing worked out for long, and the Flying Tiger Line was bought by Federal Express in 1988.

There are some interesting connections with Happy Tiger Records; see the Didja Know section (in the website version of A+StW).

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Flying Tiger Line: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Tiger_Line

Happy Tiger Records: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_Tiger_Records

Last Edited on 19 December 2021

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