

## American Volunteer Group: Claire L. Chennault and the Flying Tigers

*Historynet*

*Ronald V. Regan*



The handful of American mercenaries who scorched earth and sky in defense of China were officially known as the American Volunteer Group (AVG), but, of course, are best remembered as the 'Flying Tigers'-the English translation of Fei Hou. The nickname was bestowed by the grateful Chinese after the American pilots attacked a large number of Japanese fighters over Kunming on December 20, 1941. In just seven months of intense aerial combat, the AVG earned a lasting niche in aviation history, reportedly destroying nearly 300 Japanese aircraft for the loss of only 69 planes.

Equally famous is their brilliant and controversial commander, Claire L. Chennault, whose genius for leadership in the face of overwhelming odds made him a hero in the United States as well as in China. Chennault was a unique individual who could inspire great accomplishments from all those who served under him. In creating his legendary group of airmen-composed of former U.S. Navy, Marine and Army Air Corps pilots who quietly entered China posing as artists and missionaries-Chennault established his own version of an ideal mercenary band. To him it was clear that paid soldiers could play a vital role in aerial combat, and in his attempts to sell his sometimes radical ideas to military officials he frequently quoted lines from 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries,' his favorite A.E. Houseman poem:  
These, in the day when heaven was falling, The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling,

Took their wages and are dead.  
Their shoulders held the sky suspended:  
They stood and earth's foundations stay.  
What God abandoned these defended  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

The battle for China officially began in 1931, when a resource-depleted Japan took advantage of an opportunity to invade Manchuria. Torn by many years of civil war and battles between warlords, the Chinese found it beyond their power to halt the Japanese aggression, which escalated in the following years. The world's three great powers-the United States, Britain and France-tried to influence the Japanese through diplomatic dialogue, efforts that had little effect on Japan and largely failed to muster any interest from other nations. The carnage continued as the Japanese swept nearly unopposed across the fertile agricultural plains of eastern China. Peking and Shanghai quickly succumbed during ruthless attacks on strategic military targets and civilian population centers.

The story of the Flying Tigers also began in the early 1930s, when Captain Claire Lee Chennault formed and led the U.S. Army Air Corps' precision flying team in performances across the United States. Chennault, who was born in 1890 and grew up in Louisiana, had tried unsuccessfully to become a pilot during World War I. The war ended before he had his wings, but he spent the postwar years honing his skills as an aerobatic flier and working on aerial maneuvers, especially the use of three-plane teams. Virtuoso teamwork was the highlight of the Army's flying team. Calling themselves 'Three Men on a Flying Trapeze,' Chennault, joined by Staff Sgts Billy McDonald and J.H. Williams, flew Boeing P-12 biplanes. The peppy little aircraft were equipped with 450-hp engines and could achieve a top speed of 194 mph.



***Sgt. W.C. "Billy" McDonald, Capt. Claire Chennault and Sgt. J.H. "Luke" Williamson, the 'Three Men on a Flying Trapeze.'***

At each performance site, the three-man team would zoom in, land and taxi to a stop, then line up wingtip to wingtip before the waiting crowd. The two outside pilots, McDonald and Williams, would clamber out of their aircraft, each carrying a 20-foot length of rope. Displaying great dramatic flair, the two would proceed to tie one end of the rope to his own plane's wing braces and the other end to Chennault's left or right wing braces. Then they hopped back into their cockpits, waved to the crowd and took off once more.

The team members, literally linked together by the two thick ropes, performed a number of slow, lazy loops above the fascinated crowds. Their most spectacular stunt, however, was a complete 360-degree roll maneuver. Chennault's plane performed a synchronized tight roll while the two outside craft had to gyrate and perform an up-and-around maneuver, being very careful not to tear off the wing braces of Chennault's plane. It was an absolutely breathtaking display.

By 1937, Chennault had served 20 years in the U.S. Army Air Corps. Partially deaf from many years of open-cockpit flying, he retired and the aerobatics team was disbanded. But in the audience at their last performance was a spectator who would have an important role in Chennault's next career, Chinese air force General Mao Pang -tso China's Nationalist leader Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, needed a talented, experienced aviator to lead and organize his country's struggling air force, which was attempting to help Chinese ground troops stop the invading swarms of Imperial Japanese soldiers ravaging China by land, sea and air. Chennault accepted the challenge and the rank of colonel in the Chinese Nationalist air force.

In the following months, he worked hard to organize and educate the eager young Chinese pilots who wanted to join in the defense of their country. But due to political pressure and a lack of planes, he was forced to send many of the flight cadets back to the United States to complete their training.

Between 1937 and 1941 the Chinese military establishment was made up of many regional military elements, considered the personal armies of powerful and wealthy land barons. This situation led to bickering over leadership, disorganization in planning and ineffective distribution of scarce resources. In the midst of all this chaos, Chiang sent Chennault back to the United States in early 1941 to lobby President Franklin D. Roosevelt to support a clandestine foreign aid program to China.

As it happened, Roosevelt was already looking for a way to aid China in her struggle against the Japanese. With the president's tacit approval and help from Madame Chiang Kai-shek's brother, TV Soong, who lived in Washington, D.C., Chennault was authorized to return to China with 100 Curtiss P-40B fighters that had originally been intended for Britain.

Just as important to China's future, President Roosevelt drafted and signed a secret executive order allowing for the recruitment of U.S. military aviators and ground personnel for the American Volunteer Group. The actual recruiting was done through a subsidiary of International Aviation, known as Central Aircraft Manufacturing Corporation (CAMCO). A band of recruiters, including some retired U.S. Navy commanders, combed Army, Navy and Marine bases looking for volunteers with a sense of adventure and some aviation experience. In exchange for signing a one-year contract, they were told that when their time was up they could go back to their old ranks.

In mid-1941, some six months prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, most military pilots were receiving \$260 a month-not a bad paycheck for the time. The AVG pay scale for pilots was \$750 a month for a qualified squadron leader, \$675 for a flight leader and \$600 a month for a wingman. Ground crewmen, depending on their specialty, received from \$150 to \$350 a month. There was also a \$500 bonus promised for every confirmed Japanese aircraft that was shot down or destroyed. But according to some AVG pilots, Generalissimo Chiang was a bit slow in signing those bonus checks for the confirmed kills.

Most of the American volunteers who sailed for the Far East in the summer and fall of 1941 were young and relatively inexperienced. Altogether, 87 pilots and some 300 ground support personnel joined Chennault at a training base in Burma, where they familiarized themselves with the P-40B and began exhaustive tactical instruction.

When Chennault had accepted the 100 P-40s from the Curtiss Wright factory, the only place to load them on board a ship was at a New York City pier. As the first crated fuselage was being hoisted aboard the ship, the cable snapped and the fuselage complete with engine, radios and all cockpit gauges-fell into the Hudson River. The crate was recovered, but the engine and gauges were waterlogged and determined a loss. Now there were only 99 planes left. After the men, equipment and P-40s reached the assembly area, Chennault divided the aircraft into three AVG squadrons. The 1st Squadron was designated 'Adam and Eve,' with fuselage numbers from 1 to 33. The 2nd Squadron was named 'Panda Bears' and was assigned aircraft numbers 34 to 66. The 3rd Squadron, called 'Hell's Angels,' received airplanes numbered 67 to 99.

The British Royal Air Force shared its meager facilities at the Kyedaw training field, near Toungoo, Burma, some 170 miles north of Rangoon, with the AVG men. Training continued apace, but due to Allison engine thrust bearing failures in the P-40s, as well as mishaps resulting from pilot error and many losses due to 'Murphy's Law,' the number of operational aircraft ready for combat duty by December 1941 was down to some 55 airplanes.

By that time, three of the volunteers had died in training accidents. But those who were left were ready for action, inspired by the endless energy and creativity of their instructor as well as by the new paint jobs on their aircraft-a wide-open shark's mouth, complemented by evil-looking eyes.

After the surprise Sunday morning attack by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, the AVG men and their rugged P-40s swung into action in earnest. Beginning on December 8, Chennault's men attacked ground targets and engaged enemy aircraft throughout the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater of Operations. Their mission was to protect the Burma Road, a vital 600-mile-long supply line that ran through rugged terrain between Lashio and Kunming. Putting their team tactics to the test day after day over cities and hamlets with tongue-twisting names such as Lungling, Poashan, Kunming, Kweilin, Yunanyi and Chanyi, they racked up impressive victories over Japanese forces.

Their deeds quickly assumed legendary proportions in the American press as well as in other nations. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, not a man for idle praise, cabled the governor of Burma in 1942: 'The victories of these Americans over the rice paddies of Burma are comparable in character, if not in scope, with those won by the Royal Air Force over the hop fields of Kent in the Battle of Britain.'



***The American Volunteer Group wrote their chapter in aviation history in a mere seven months.***

Former AVG member John M. Williams, who was a friend of Chennault's, later recalled his own experiences in the days when the Americans were developing an early warning system, known as the Jing Bow (or Bao), in China: 'I helped Chennault organize a unique air raid warning network. No, not radar, but a communications matrix that stretched across the entire face of Yunan province [which is considerably larger than the state of Texas].

'We had about 165 radios of all types and manufacture. They all worked fine. Some were even battery operated. The batteries, known as A, B1, B2 and C types, were hard to come by. They provided the necessary voltage/amperage rating for electronic vacuum tubes and circuit

functions. Each battery was about the size of a man's wallet. It took all three types of batteries to run one of those radios.

'Anyway, we distributed all the radios to our most trusted friends. Most of our select radios were military type field phones. They were connected to our plotting center at the Kunming AVG Headquarters by miles and miles of two-strand military communications wire. These remote outposts were secret. Thus the aircraft identification net was formed.

'However, that military two-strand communications wire was being cut and stolen almost every night. The net was ineffective. We caught 21 of these wire cutting thieves ... over a period of time ... and executed them all. Yet the wire was still being stolen.

'Finally, I went to the governor of Yunan province and explained my problem. He said not to worry, he would take care of the matter. A few mornings later the governor called me, and I went with him and my interpreter, P.Y. Que, to a nearby hamlet. As we got closer to the village, I noticed that there was a man hung by the neck, swaying from a pole at the village entrance. The governor had this wire thief hanged in front of the entire population of the thief's village.

'I was told that this was a matter of `Chinese face.' The thief's family lost face for 100 years. The village lost face for 50 years. You know, from that day on ... we never lost another inch of wire!'

Maintaining communications was just one of many problems encountered by the AVG members. Gasoline and spare parts were premium commodities and had to be flown in over 'the Hump'-the airlift route over the Himalayas from Assam, India, to Kunming-for AVG use. The unwritten law was to make do with what you had on hand, or do without. The unpredictable Chinese weather was another factor that frequently halted AVG offensive missions.

Donald Whelpley, who served as the AVG's chief meteorologist, helped John Williams to set up a weather forecasting system as well as the Jing Bow. 'I joined the AVG in July 1941,' he recalled 'At that time my duty assignment was Navy meteorologist to Patrol Squadron 54, Naval Air Station, Norfolk, Va.

'When the Navy finally realized that I was serious about resigning my commission to join Chennault in China, they released me for a one-year tour with the AVG. Little did any of us realize what we had gotten ourselves into!

'John would send me around Yunan province to various secret AVG airfields to help our radiomen set up a crude radio network for our air raid warning system. I also helped construct other clandestine emergency airfields and installed our weather forecasting equipment.

'Chinese operators didn't need to identify aircraft. They just needed to relay the number of planes sighted, their location and their direction of flight. Back at headquarters in Kunming, John would plot the courses on a wall map. If we didn't have airplanes up in that area of report, well, they had to be Japanese planes on patrol or a bombing mission.

'But if they came toward any of our airfields, Chennault would wait until they got within 50 miles of a base. Then he would order the P-40s up to engage them. Because of our radio alert network, we saved many thousands of gallons of aviation fuel. We didn't have to hunt the enemy; they came to us. The Japs just couldn't figure out how we knew they were coming. It must have driven them crazy!'

Leo J. Schramm, of Cumberland, Pa., served as a crew chief on one particular P-40 with the fuselage number 92. His pilot was Robert 'Duke' Hedman. Looking back over his AVG experiences years later, Schramm recalled the events of one memorable mission on Christmas Day 1941. 'Pearl Harbor happened about two weeks before,' he said. 'We were with the 3rd Squadron, stationed in Rangoon, Burma. We knew the Japanese were going to bomb the city and the roads would be choked with refugees trying to flee the onslaught.'

'When the bombers and fighters came, Duke went up and shot down five Japanese aircraft in one day. He was an ace... in just one day! My pilot! My airplane! You know, that plane was built like a semitruck. It could take a lot of punishment. Not much went wrong with it, either.'

J. Richard 'Dick' Rossi, of Fallbrook, Calif., a past president of the Flying Tigers Association, fondly remembers the day he was recruited into what would later be known as the Flying Tigers: 'I was a young naval aviator stationed at Pensacola, Fla. I recall I cut off all the brass buttons from my uniforms to prevent any association with the U.S. military and turned in my flight gear.'

'A few weeks later, a group of us boarded a ship and sailed from San Francisco. We all had phony American passports.... Our occupations were [listed] as carpenter, sheet metal worker, musician, electrician, stonemason, etc. Heck, you name an occupation and I'm sure someone had it stamped on their passport.'

Rossi had an impressive career with the AVG. 'My combat record showed that I shot down 6.35 confirmed `kills,' and six more probables,' he recalled many years later. 'I stayed on with the AVG throughout the one-year contract time from July 4, 1941, to July 4, 1942, the day we were disbanded officially.'

The aircraft flown by the AVG members, though called P-40s, were primarily Curtiss Hawk 81-A3s, the export version of the P-40. It was slower than some of its peers, including the British Supermarine Spitfire, the German Messerschmitt Me-109 and the Japanese Mitsubishi A6M 'Zero.' It was also heavier and less maneuverable than the Japanese aircraft and could barely function as a fighter above 25,000 feet.

Robert Neale, the Tigers' top ace with 15 1/2 confirmed enemy planes to his credit (and to whom fellow pilots credit at least 25 to 30 more that were declared unconfirmed), sized up his plane this way: 'The P-40 was a wonderful firing platform. However, it had heavy armor plating to protect the pilot, and when fully armed and loaded with aviation gas, it took 20 minutes to climb to 20,000 feet. The P-40 had two .50-caliber machine guns mounted on top of the nose section and two .30-caliber machine guns mounted in each wing. So a pilot had to learn and

play it smart-had to know when to dive, how fast, pick out a target, and when to pull the trigger to engage those six teethrattling machine guns.'



***Claire Chennault goes over details with 3rd Squadron leader Arvid Olsen and 1st squadron's Robert Sandell while a Chinese pilot looks on.***

Chennault had drilled his pilots relentlessly. He insisted upon two-plane teams at all times and made sure his men took advantage of the P-40's redeeming qualities. It was rugged, and it would usually get you back home no matter how badly it was damaged. It also had superior diving ability.

David L. 'Tex' Hill, who was credited with 18 1/4 kills during the war, was one of five AVG pilots who stayed on after their contracts ended and helped train new U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) pilots coming into the 23rd Fighter Group, also known as the China Air Task Force, which replaced the AVG. More than 40 years after the war, Hill recalled his first combat victory:

'It was my first mission over Thailand. We received our briefing, and four of us left Rangoon to strafe an airfield location called Tak. One P-40 developed some sort of engine problem and returned to Rangoon. Three of us went on.

'I was really excited as we neared the target area. It was then that I noticed there were too many of us in formation. Somehow, a Jap Zero swooped in and got on the tail of the P-40 in front of me. I pulled the trigger, fired my machine guns and shot the Zero down.

'Unknown to me, there was another Zero up there with us, but I didn't see him in time. He put 33 bullet holes in my P-40 fuselage before I could break away. Later, during that same mission, another Jap came in straight at me ... head-on! I held the machine-gun trigger down.

We got closer and closer. I thought we were going to collide, but he just blew up in front of me! I never touched a piece of his wreckage, either.'

When the one-year AVG contract was completed on July 4, 1942, the USAAF took over the entire CBI operation. With the stroke of a pen, the AVG became the 23rd Fighter Group. Chennault was recommissioned a brigadier general and stayed on as the group's first commander. The name Flying Tigers was later adopted by the 14th Air Force, but the original Flying Tigers had all served as mercenaries under Chennault.

Unfortunately, the Army brass subsequently used some strong language and tactics in an effort to downplay the AVG's accomplishments in the first half of 1942. Many former AVG members were infuriated by rumors of their flamboyant behavior during their one-year tours. Despite pleading by Chennault, only five former AVG pilots and some 30 ground personnel stayed with him to train the inexperienced aviators who were now coming to Asia to join the fight. Most of the AVG pilots returned to America to rejoin their old military units. Others stayed on in the Far East and piloted Curtiss C-46 Commando and Douglas C-47 'Gooney Bird' cargo planes from India to China over the Hump.

In nearly seven months of relentless combat (December 18, 1941, to July 4, 1942), the AVG men and machines had shot down 296 confirmed enemy planes and 300 more probables. Japan lost 1,500 pilots, bombardiers, navigators and gunners in air combat. The AVG also destroyed 573 bridges, 1,300 riverboats and innumerable road vehicles and killed thousands of Imperial Japanese army soldiers.

The total losses to the AVG were 69 planes and 25 pilots. Two crew chiefs, including mechanic John E. Fauth, were killed during Japanese bombing raids at various airfields. On the day the group was disbanded, there were just 30 wellused P-40s left to fly.

While many former AVG personnel returned to the States and rejoined their former outfits, some went on to serve in the South Pacific or Europe. A few later returned to the CBI Theater as combat pilots. One former AVG crew chief, Don Rodewald, became a pilot and completed his CBI tour as a North American P-51 Mustang jockey.

Major General Chennault retired from the USAAF just a few weeks before the Japanese surrendered in 1945. He was not invited to the Japanese surrender ceremony aboard USS Missouri. Some have speculated that he was deliberately excluded because of his disputatious manner, which chaffed more than a few jealous superior officers. Of course, he was also not a West Point graduate and was not considered to be 'one of the boys.'

After the war, Chennault helped organize the Chinese Nationalist's civil airline, known as the CAT, which distributed relief supplies throughout the country. He died of lung cancer in July 1958, the same month in which he was promoted to lieutenant general by Congress.

But the legend of the American Volunteer Group lives on. Those who are knowledgeable about World War II-and many who are not-have heard stories of the group's incredible victories over the Japanese in a time when it seemed that little else was going right for the Allies in the Pacific. In recent years, historians have questioned some of the AVG records,

including numbers of planes shot down. Today, nearly 60 years after Claire Chennault's improbable group of mercenaries made their mark halfway around the globe from their own country, it's not always easy to distinguish fact from fiction. One thing, however, is certain: The Flying Tigers should never be forgotten.