

Appendix C:

A Brief History of the Flying Tigers

(American Volunteer Group - Chinese Air Force with recollections, and comments, by General Claire Lee Chennault)

In April 1937, Claire L. Chennault, then a captain in the United States Army Air Corps, retired from active duty and accepted an offer from Madame Chiang Kai-shek for a three month mission to China to make a confidential survey of the Chinese Air Force. At that time, China and Japan were on the verge of war and the fledgling Chinese Air Force was beset by internal problems and torn between American and Italian influence.

Madame Chiang Kai-shek took over leadership of the Aeronautical Commission in order to reorganize the Chinese Air Force. This was the beginning of Chennault's stay in China, which did not terminate until 1945 at the close of World War II. Chennault's combat and other experiences between 1937 and 1941 in China are another story, but it was these experiences together with the knowledge he attained of combat tactics and the operations of Japanese Air Force over China that laid the groundwork for the organization of the American Volunteer Group in 1941.

The official status of Claire L. Chennault in China prior to 1942 was always a subject of speculation. Chennault himself states that he was a civilian advisor to the Secretary of the Commission for Aeronautical Affairs, first Madame Chiang and later T.V. Soong. Until he returned to active duty with the United States Army in the spring of 1942, four months after Pearl Harbor, he had no legal status as a belligerent and held no rank other than retired captain in the United States Army. Even while he commanded the American Volunteer Group in combat, his official job was adviser to the Central Bank of China, and his passport listed his occupation as a farmer.

In the summer of 1938, Chennault went to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province in Western China, to forge, at the request of Madame Chiang, a new Chinese Air Force from an American mold.

SELF IMPOSED EXILE

It was during these years of self-imposed exile in the Chinese hinterland, that Chennault laid the foundation for the unique American air operations that featured the final three years of the Japanese war in China. In addition to his solid relations with Chinese of both high and low estate, these operations were based on clusters

of strategically located airfields and an air-raid warning system that covered Free China. Without those three solid supports, American air power could hardly have functioned in China.

"All over Free China these human ant heaps rose to turn mud, rocks, lime and sweat into 5,000 foot runways to nest planes not yet built in Los Angeles and Buffalo factories*"

AIR-RAID WARNING

Describing the Chinese air-raid warning net, Chennault states:

"The Chinese air-raid warning system was a vast spider net of people, radios, telephones, and telegraph lines that covered all of Free China accessible to enemy aircraft. In addition to continuous intelligence of enemy attacks, the net served to locate and guide lost friendly planes, direct aid to friendly pilots who had crashed or bailed out, and helped guide our technical intelligence experts to wrecks of crashed enemy aircraft."

"Most efficient sector of the net was developed in Yunnan as a dire necessity. It was the Yunnan net that was a key to the early A.V.G. successes and the defense of Chinese terminals on this side of the Hump against fantastic numerical odds."*

Early in 1939, the Japanese began their tremendous effort to break the back of Chinese resistance by sustained bombing of every major population center in Free China. It was the virtually unopposed and continuous bombing of the major centers of Free China by Japanese Air Force that directly led to the organization of the American Volunteer Group. In the fall of 1940, the Generalissimo instructed Chennault to go to the United States for the purpose of obtaining American planes and American pilots to end the Japanese bombing.

Chennault's original plans called for the injection of a rejuvenated Chinese Air Force spearheaded by American volunteers to upset the Pacific stalemate.

ATTACK SUPPLY LINES

Concerning the proposed American Volunteer Group, Chennault states:

"My plan proposed to throw a small but well-equipped air force into China. Japan, Like England, floated her lifeblood on the sea and could be defeated more easily by slashing her salty arties than by stabbing for her heart. Air bases in Free China

could put all of the vital Japanese supply lines and advanced staging areas under attack.

"This strategic concept of China as a platform of air attack on Japan offered little attraction of the military planners of 1941. It was not until the Trident Conference of 1943 that I found any appreciation of my strategy or any support for the plans to implement it. This support came from two civilians, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and was offered against the strong advise of their military advisers."*

Unfortunately, the only salvage out of all Chennault's plans and efforts during 1940-41 was the First (and only) American Volunteer Group of fighter pilots and fighter planes. In discussing the genesis of the American Volunteer Group, Chennault states:

"Methods of implementing the fighter-group plan developed faster than I expected. It became evident during the winter that China had a small but powerful circle of friends in the White House and Cabinet. Dr. Lauchlin Currie was sent to China as President Roosevelt's special adviser and returned a strong backer of increased aid to China in general and my air plans in particular. Another trusted adviser of the President-Thomas Corcoran-did yeoman service in pushing the American Volunteer Group project when the pressure against it was strongest."

WRIGHT PROPOSITION

"Planes were a tough problem. China had been a long-time, profitable customer for Curtiss-Wright, so my old friend, Burdette Wright, Curtiss Vice-President, came up with a proposition. They had six assembly lines turning out P-40's for the British, who had taken over a French order after the fall of France. If the British would waive their priority on 100 P-40B's then rolling off one line, Curtiss would add a seventh assembly line and make 100 later-model P-40's for the British. The British were glad to exchange the P-40B for a model more suitable for combat.

"The P-40B was not equipped with a gun sight, bomb rack, or provisions for attaching auxiliary fuel tanks to the wing or belly. Much of our effort during training and combat was devoted to makeshift attempts to remedy these deficiencies. The combat record of the First American Volunteer Group in China is even more remarkable because its pilots were aiming their guns through a crude, homemade, ring-and-post gun sight instead of the more accurate optical sights used by the Air Corps and the Royal Air Force.

"Personnel proved a tougher nut to crack. The military were violently opposed to the whole idea of American volunteers in China. Lauchlin Currie and I went to see General Arnold in April of 1941. He was 100% opposed to the project.

"In the Navy, Rear Admiral Jack Towers, then Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics and later Commander of the Navy's Pacific Air Forces also viewed the A.V.G. as a threat to his expansion program. . .

". . . It took direct personal intervention from President Roosevelt to pry the pilots and ground crews from the Army and Navy. On April 15, 1941, an unpublished executive order went out under his signature, authorizing reserve officer and enlisted men to resign from the Army Air Corps, Naval, and Marine air services for the purpose of joining the American Volunteer Group in China.

"Orders went out to all military airfields, signed by Secretary Knox and General Arnold, authorizing bearers of certain letters freedom of the post, including permission to talk with all personnel . . .

SALARIES OUTLINED

". . . Their offer was a one-year contract with CAMCO (Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company) to 'manufacture, repair, and operate aircraft at salaries ranging from \$250 to \$750 a month. Traveling expenses, 30 days leave with pay, quarters, and \$30 additional for rations were specified. They would be subject to summary dismissal by written notice for insubordination, habitual use of drugs or alcohol, illness not incurred in line of duty, malingering, and revealing confidential information. Before the end of the A.V.G., I had to dismiss at least one man for every cause except revealing confidential information. A system of fines was initiated for minor offences.

"There was not mention in the contract of a \$500-bonus for every Japanese plane destroyed. Volunteers were told simply that there was a rumor that the Chinese government would pay \$500 for each confirmed Jap plane. They could take the rumor for what it was worth. It turned out to be worth exactly \$500 per plane. Although initially the five-hundred-dollar-bonus was paid for confirmed planes destroyed in air combat only, the bonus was soon applied to planes destroyed on the ground - if they could be confirmed."*

The first contingent (of pilots) of the American Volunteer Group left San Francisco on July 10, 1941, aboard the Dutch ship Jaegersfontaine. Just before leaving, Chennault received confirmation of Presidential approval for the second American

Volunteer Group of bombers with a schedule of 100 pilots and 181 gunners and radiomen to arrive in China by November 1941, and an equal number to follow in January 1942.

Upon returning to the Orient in the summer of 1941, Chennault arranged with the British for the use of the Royal Air Force Keydaw airdrome at Toungoo, Burma. Arrangements were made by the Chinese with the British for the assembly and test flying by the A.V.G. of its P-40's. The A.V.G. P-40's were assembled at Rangoon, and all radios, oxygen equipment, and armament were installed by A.V.G. group mechanics at Toungoo.

Speaking of the combat training routines of the A.V.G. at Toungoo, Chennault states:

"Our Toungoo routine began at 6:00 a.m. with a lecture in a teakwood classroom near the field, where I held forth with black-board, maps, and mimeographed textbooks. All my life I have been a teacher, ranging from the one-room schools of rural Louisiana to director of one of the largest Air Corps flying schools, but I believe that the best teaching of my career was done in that teakwood shack at Toungoo, where the assortment of American volunteers turned into the world-famous Flying Tigers, whose aerial combat record has never been equaled by a group of comparable size.

GEOGRAPHY LESSONS

"Every pilot who arrived before September 15 got seventy-two hours of lectures in addition to sixty hours of specialized flying. I gave the pilots a lesson in the geography of Asia that they all needed badly, told them something of the war in China, and how the Chinese air-raid warning-net worked.

"I taught them all I knew about the Japanese. Day after day, there were lectures from my notebooks, filled during the previous four years of combat. All of the bitter experience from Nanking to Chunking was poured out in those lectures. Captured Japanese flying and staff manuals, translated into English by the Chinese, served as textbooks. From these manuals the American pilots learned more about Japanese tactics than any single Japanese pilot ever knew."*

In describing the results of such combat training, Chennault says:

"Later there was ample opportunity for comparison. The A.V.G. and R.A.F. fought side by side over Rangoon with comparable numbers, equipment, and courage

against the same odds. The R.A.F. barely broke even against the Japanese, while the Americans rolled up a 15 to 1 score. In February 1942, the Japanese threw heavy raids against Rangoon and Port Darwin, Australia, in the same week. Over Rangoon five A.V.G. pilots in P-40's shot down 17 out of 70 enemy raiders without loss. Over Darwin, 11 out of 12 U.S. Army Forces P-40's were shot down by a similar Japanese force. A few weeks later a crack R.A.F. Spitfire squadron was rushed to Australia from Europe and lost 17 out of 27 pilots over Darwin in two raids. The Spitfire was far superior to the P-40 as a combat plane. It was simply a matter of tactics. The R.A.F. pilots were trained in methods that were excellent against German and Italian equipment but suicide against the acrobatic Japs. The only American squadron in China that the Japanese ever liked to fight was a P-38 squadron that had fought in North Africa and refused to change its tactics against the Japanese.

"During the first year of the war the A.V.G. tactics were spread throughout the Army and Navy by intelligence reports and returned A.V.G. veterans. At least one Navy Commander in the Pacific and an Air Force colonel with the Fifth Air Force in Australia were later decorated for "inventing" what were originally the A.V.G. tactics."*

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, an agreement was worked out between the Chinese and the British whereby one squadron of the A.V.G. would assist the R.A.F. in the defense of Rangoon with the other two squadrons to be stationed at Kunming, the China end of the Burma Road, where there was an adequate warning net and dispersal fields.

FIRST COMBAT

The Third A.V.G. squadron moved to Rangoon on December 12, 1941, to join the R.A.F. in the defense of Rangoon. The First and Second squadrons flew from Toungoo to Kunming on the afternoon of the 18th. The first combat for the A.V.G. occurred over southern Yunnan Province on December 20, 1941. In their first combat, a combination of the First and Second Squadrons shot down nine out of ten Japanese bombers with a loss of one A.V.G. aircraft. The second engagement brought the Third Squadron onto action over Rangoon on December 23, with the R.A.F. flying beside the Tigers. The total haul of Japs was six bombers and four fighters. The R.A.F. lost five planes and pilots and the A.V.G. lost four planes and two pilots.

Then, on Christmas Day, two waves totaling 80 Jap bombers and 48 fighters hit Rangoon. The A.V.G. knocked down 23 of them, the biggest victory of the war, with six more Jap planes believed shot down over the Gulf of Martaban. The A.V.G. suffered not the loss of a single plane.

The 28th brought another heavy enemy attack - 20 bombers and 25 fighters. The A.V.G. got 10 of them with no losses.

The next day, the 29th, the Japs threw 40 bombers and 20 fighters against the Tigers who scored 18 kills with a loss of only a single aircraft.

Now it was the day of New Year's Eve, but it dawned with no letup in the Jap assault. 80 planes crowding the skies over Rangoon. The Tigers shot down 15 without the loss of a single aircraft.

In 11 days of fighting, the A.V.G. had officially knocked 75 enemy aircraft out of the skies with an undetermined number of probable kills such as the losses the Japs suffered over the Gulf of Martaban. The A.V.G. losses were two pilots and six aircraft.

Early in January, the Rangoon defense was reinforced by eight planes from the First Squadron and the A.V.G. began their first strafing of the war. Hitting the Jap air base in Thailand, they wiped out a dozen planes on the ground. On January 13, the remainder of the First Squadron joined the other A.V.G. forces at Rangoon and there followed a series of raids on Jap air bases. Ten days later, January 23, after a series of engagements over Kunming and Rangoon, the Japes attacked Rangoon in force again, 72 planes appearing there and the A.V.G. got 21 of them with the loss of only one American pilot. Air battles continued over Rangoon until it finally fell to enemy ground forces at the end of February. During this time, in one strafing raid in Thailand, the A.V.G. knocked out upwards of 60 enemy aircraft on the ground, the biggest ground victory of the war. But advancing Jap ground forces slowly drove the A.V.G. to bases at Magwe in Burma and eventually into the interior of China.

There, the Tigers continued to carry out their final missions, supporting the Chinese ground forces on both eastern and western fronts as well as defending Chinese cities against attacks by the Japanese Air Force.

Concerning the A.V.G. combat statistics, Chennault says:

"Although, the A.V.G. was blooded over China, it was the air battles over Rangoon that stamped the hallmark on its fame as the Flying Tigers. The cold statistics for the 10 weeks the A.V.G. served at Rangoon show its strength varied between twenty and five serviceable P-40's. This tiny force met a total of a thousand-odd Japanese aircraft over Southern Burma and Thailand. In 31 encounters, they destroyed 217 enemy planes and probably destroyed 43. Our losses in combat were four pilots killed in the air, one killed while strafing and one taken prisoner. Sixteen P-40's were destroyed. During the same period, the R.A.F., fighting side by side with the A.V.G., destroyed 74 enemy planes, probably destroyed 33, with a loss of 22 Buffaloes and Hurricanes.

"Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, added his eloquence to these statistics, cabling the Governor of Burma, 'The victories of these Americans over the rice paddies of Burma are comparable in character, if not in scope, with those won by the R.A.F. over the hop fields of Kent in the Battle of Britain.'

"Air Vice Marshal D.F. Stephenson who replaced Manning in January 1942, noted that while the ratio of British to German planes in the battle of Britain and been one to four, the ratio of Anglo-American fighters to Japanese planes over Rangoon was one to from four to 14"*

GENESIS OF FLYING TIGERS

In describing the genesis of the name "Flying Tigers" and the group's insignia, Chennault says:

"Before I left the United States in the summer of 1941, I asked a few friends in Louisiana to watch the newspapers and send me any clippings about the A.V.G. Now I was being swamped with clippings from stateside newspapers, and my men were astonished to find themselves world famous as the Flying Tigers. The insignia we made famous was by no means original with the A.V.G. Our pilots copied the shark-tooth design on their P-40's noses from a colored illustration in the India Illustrated Weekly depicting an R.A.F. squadron in the Libyan Desert with shark-nose P-40's. Even before that the German Air Force painted shark's teeth on some of its Messerschmitt 210 fighters. With the pointed nose of a liquid cooled engine it was an apt and fearsome design. How the term Flying Tigers was derived from the shark-nosed P-40's I never will know. At any rate we were somewhat surprised to find ourselves billed under that name. It was not until just before the A.V.G. was disbanded that we had any kind of group insignia. At the

request of the China Defense Supplies in Washington, the Walt Disney organization in Hollywood designed our insignia consisting of a winged tiger flying through a large V for victory."*

After the fall of Rangoon, the sluggish match between the Japanese Air Force and the A.V.G.-R.A.F., combination continued over Northern Burma. The Japanese now had an estimated 14 air regiments spaced in Southern Burma and Thailand with a strength of between 400 to 500 planes. This compared with about 30 serviceable fighters and a dozen Blenheim bombers of the Allied force.

In summing up the results of the Burma campaign, Chennault says:

"In his official report on the Burma campaign Air Vice Marshall D.F. Stephenson had this to say of the A.V.G.:

'In the Burma campaign the main brunt of the fighting was borne by the P-40 squadrons of the American Volunteer Group. They were first in the field with pilots well trained, and good fighting equipment. The great majority of enemy aircraft destroyed in Burma fell to their guns. Their gallantry in action won the admiration of both services'."*

JAPANESE OCCUPATION

After the Burma campaign ended with the capture and occupation by the Japanese of that country, the A.V.G. continued its fight against the Japs, first in Western China and then in Eastern China.

The A.V.G. was finally disbanded on July 4, 1942. The group celebrated its final day in the air by knocking down five enemy fighters over Hengyang and escorting U.S. Army Air Forces B-25s to bomb the Japanese air base at Canton. At midnight on July 4, 1942, the American Volunteer Group passed into history. In summarizing that history over the preceding year, Chennault states:

"The group that the military experts predicted would not last three weeks in combat had fought for seven months over Burma, China, Thailand, and French Indo-China, destroying 299 Japanese planes with another 153 probably destroyed. All of this with a loss of 12 P-40's in combat and 61 on the ground, including the 22 burned at Loi-Wing. Four pilots were killed in air combat; six were killed by anti-aircraft fire; three by enemy bombs on the ground; and three were taken prisoner. Ten more died because of flying accidents. Although the Japanese promised on their radio broadcasts to shoot A.V.G. prisoners as bandits, they treated our three

prisoners as well as regular British and American POW's. I took it as an indication of the enemy's genuine respect for our organization.

"Most of the group had been decorated by the Chinese government; 10 pilots had been awarded the British and American distinguished Flying Crosses. My personal awards included the Chinese Cloud Banner and Long Sword of a Commander, the Order of the British Empire, and the U.S. Distinguished Service Medal. The flashing shark's teeth of our P-40's and our trademark as Flying Tigers were world famous.

CHINA'S SOUNDEST INVESTMENT

"The group had whipped the Japanese Air Force in more than 50 air battles without a single defeat. With the R.A.F., it had kept the port of Rangoon and the Burma Road open for 2 1/2 precious months while supplies trickled into China. With less than one-third of its combat strength, it saved China from final collapse on the Salween. Its reputation alone was sufficient to keep Japanese bombers away from Chungking. It freed the cities of East China from years of terror bombing and finally gave both Chinese and American morale an incalculable boost at a time when it was sagging dangerously low. All this cost the Chinese \$8,000,000 - about \$3,000,000 in salaries and personnel expenses and \$5,000,000 for planes and equipment. After the final accounting was made, I wrote Dr. Soong my regrets that expenses had exceeded my original estimates.

"He replied, 'The A.V.G. was the soundest investment China ever made. I am ashamed that you should even consider the cost.'"

PRESIDENT PRAISES GROUP

In April 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote of the American Volunteer Group:

"The outstanding gallantry and conspicuous daring that the American Volunteer Group combined with their unbelievable efficiency is a source of tremendous pride throughout the whole of America. The fact that they have labored under the shortages and difficulties is keenly appreciated . . ."

After the American Volunteer Group was disbanded on July 4, 1942, the China Air Task Force of the United States Army Air Forces, commanded by General Chennault, officially took over air operations in China. In early March 1943, the 14th Air Force was activated under the command of Chennault and replaced the

China Air Task Force. Chennault remained in command of the 14th Air Force until the end of July 1945. General Chennault formally retired from the military for the second time in October 1945.

*Quoted portions from Way of a Fighter by Claire L. Chennault

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