Chennault and His Flying Tigers

“The first time Winston Churchill ever saw Chennault was in May 1943 in Washington, D.C., at the conference to be known as Trident. He must have been impressed, for he sent his aide over to ask some American reporters who he was. All this happened in front of President Roosevelt. The aide came back and told him it was Chennault of China. “What a face!” Churchill exclaimed. “What a face! Thank God he’s on our side!”

More than sixty years ago, General Claire L. Chennault and his famous Flying Tigers volunteered to support the Chinese people against Japan. Their heroic achievements, intertwined with romantic stories of General Chennault and his widow, Anna Chennault, have become legends in Chinese history. At the same time, General Chennault and his Tigers have written the most splendid and magnificent chapter in the history annals of Chinese-American military cooperation.

Adored to the point of idolatry, “Flying Tigers” was the popular name of the first American Volunteer Group (AVG) of the Chinese Air Force in 1941-1942. It was recruited under Presidential Roosevelt’s sanction and commanded by Claire L. Chennault. Flying Tigers AVG was a group of talented, bright and energetic young men who were committed to the American cause of winning WWII. These well-trained, heroic American aviators had successfully defeated the Japanese until its 1945 surrender and gained world-wide recognitions and honors to be remembered ever since.
The exciting story of this legendary fighting force that wore American uniforms but Chinese insignia is told in Robert Lee Scott’s memoir, *Flying Tiger: Chennault of China*. As a Brigadier General in the United States Air Force during WWII, Scott was assigned to the Flying Tigers by Claire Chennault, obtained the use of P-40, and began flying missions with the Flying Tigers. He recalled in his memoir, “The ‘Tigers’ were a group of strange, wild men who plunged into China in 1941, painted the noses of their battered P-40s into the grinning mouths of sharks, and blazed a trail of glory across the China sky.” These Tigers were well-paid, with high salaries from the Chinese government ranging from $600 for a pilot to $750 for a squadron commander. The group consisted of three fighter squadrons with about twenty aircraft each. It was previously trained in Burma before the American entry into WWII with the mission of defending China against Japanese forces.

The origin of the name “Flying Tigers” was quite entertaining. People lived in hinterland of China had never seen sharks before; as a matter of fact, the shark-nosed P-40s were misinterpreted as “Fei Hou” (Tigers that fly) - a name that stuck with them forever afterwards. On top of that, the “Flying Tiger” insignia was created by Walt Disney Company: a winged tiger flying through a large V for victory. This distinguished group has become a part of air history, with victories and accomplishments under General Chennault’s leadership.

Chennault had come a long way to establish the Flying Tigers. After learning how to fly in WWI, Chennault remained in the service after it became the Air Corps in 1926, and became Chief of Pursuit Section at Air Corps Tactical School in the 1930s. As a flying instructor in school, Chennault’s strategy and concepts to the use of air power often clashed with the orthodox and standardized teachings of the military schools of his time.
Considered an aberrant rebel, Chennault preached his doctrine,” Reduced to simple terms it was: first, detection; second, interception; and third, destruction.” Poor health and fierce disputes with military officials led Chennault’s resignation from the service on April 30th 1937.

Prior to Chennault’s resignation, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese government had heard about his talent and leadership. It is also the time when China and Japan were on the verge of war. In A Thousand Springs, Anna Chennault spent three pages detailing Madame Chiang Kai-shek’s foundation of the Chinese Air Force and her earnest request that Chennault join the Chinese to defend Japan. Anna wrote:

“Nothing much had been accomplished by the Spring of 1937 except that the brilliant and determined Madame Chiang Kai-shek had personally taken on the task of eliminating the graft and finding a way of building an effective air force.”

Chennault had a secret conversation with Madame Chiang in spring that year, when he expressed his admiration of her elegance and beauty. A few days after, Chennault was asked whether he would accept a three-month contract to make a confidential inspection of the fledgling Chinese Air Force: “salary $1,000 per month and expenses, plus air and motor transportation, an interpreter, and permission to test-fly any plane in the Chinese Air Force.” General Chennault made a quick response. On April 30th, 1937, Captain Chennault retired from the Army. On the following day he was on his way from Louisiana to San Francisco, bound for China, where he started his three month mission to make a confidential survey of the Chinese Air Force.

Although successfully persuaded to take on the job of training and organizing the Chinese Air Force, Chennault was hugely dismayed when he saw the shabby Chinese Air Force in Kunming. Chennault determined to persuade the United States to sell more than a hundred fighter planes to China as well as recruiting volunteering pilots to enter the
battlefield. Chennault portrayed the frustration he first saw the Chinese Air Force in Kunming:

“Although I was generally well prepared for most of the combat facing me, I still shudder when I think of the host of unexpected problems that suddenly confronted me: pilots who refused to bail out of crippled planes because returning without their plane meant losing face—I couldn’t convince them their lives were more important than their face; building runways without engineers or machinery; headquarters that took two das to write air-combat orders, with each copy laboriously hand printed with brush and ink; teaching artillery-men who had never shot a duck to lead a moving target in the air.” 8

Chennault realized he could waste no time to take action. He spent the winter of 1940–1941 in Washington, canvassed the Congress and persuaded President Roosevelt to purchase 100 Curtiss P-40 fighters and some 200 ground crew and administrative personnel that would constitute the first AVG.

General Chennault’s deep conviction that he must use military force to halt Japanese threats to both the United States and China was characterized in *A thousand Springs*:

“It seemed to Claire Chennault that full-scale war between China and Japan was inevitable. For years, Japan had been gnawing at North China and Chennault felt that these relatively small-scale moves were merely preliminary to an all-out Japanese attack.” 9

Working with perseverance, Chennault finally won approval from the U.S. government to hire American pilots to fly U.S. planes for China. His force was officially called the American Volunteer Group, better known as the Flying Tigers.

Early situations in the Chinese theater proved to be really difficult for the Chinese; fortunately, the formation of the Flying Tigers brought the torch of hope to the Chinese people. In *A Thousand Springs*, Anna epitomized her husband as the savior of China:

"During the dark, early days of World War II, when the Imperial Japanese army, navy, and air force were running roughshod over Asia and the Pacific, it seemed that nothing could stop them. Only a small band of American mercenary fliers based in Burma and known as the Flying Tigers, led by a leather-faced fighter named Claire Chennault, seemed able to challenge and defeat the Japanese.“10
Although fighting under tremendous danger and confronted with difficult terrain, Chennault seemed to have assimilated into the Chinese. Anna wrote in her memoir, “My husband was happy to serve China for two reasons: He loved China and the Chinese people. But beyond that, he was convinced, even before he arrived in China in 1937, that by helping China fight the Japanese he was helping his own country.” In addition, his fighting brother, Robert Scott, mentioned, “He had fought side by side with the Chinese; he had enjoyed their confidence.” Moreover, Chennault on 12/18/1941 wrote in his diary, “Guess I am a Chinese. I feel that the fate of China was riding in the P-40 cockpits through the wintery sky over Yunnan.” Other Flying Tigers were greeted everywhere with smiles, upraised thumbs, and the cry of “Ding Hao”, which means “really good” in English. In fact, it is during WWII that China was united for the first time in modern history. More importantly, the military cooperation between China and the United States initiated the long-lasting friendship between the two countries. Its impact can be seen even now.

The Flying Tigers were too good to be defeated. The battle against Japan seemed easy to them. Not merely the bravery of the pilots, but also the maneuverable of the Curtiss-Wright P-40 and the extraordinary dedication of the ground crews which suppressed the Japanese. Their glory and proud can be discovered in the archives of Hoover Institution. These confidential papers housed in the Archives of the Hoover Institution on War, “Revolution and Peace,” were made public in 1983. Titled General Claire Lee Chennault- A Guide to His Papers in the Hoover Institution Archives, the guide unveiled many of the precious documents associated with General Chennault and his Flying Tigers. One of them is Chennault’s letter to Mr. Wendell Willkie, special representative of the president in his capacity as commander in chief of the armed forces.
Willkie in 1942 demanded that Chennault make a report directly to him on military operations in China against Japan. In the reply letter, Chennault answered confidently and persuasively, point by point:

1. Japan can be defeated in China.
2. It can be defeated by an Air Force so small that in other theaters it would be called ridiculous.
3. I am confident that, given real authority in command of such an Air Force, I can cause the collapse of Japan. I believe I can do it in such a manner that the lives of hundreds of thousands of American soldiers and sailors will be saved, and that the cost to our country will be relatively small.

By their daring exploits and determination to resist overwhelming enemy strength, General Chennault and his men earned the gratitude of the people of China and a permanent place on the honor roll of military valor. Before the American Volunteer Group was disbanded on July 4, 1942, The AVG was officially credited with more than 250 enemy fighters destroyed, with only fourteen AVG pilots killed.

The Flying Tigers’ record of success was glorious, with contribution to the Chinese beyond measure. From Dec. 20th, 1941 to July 14th, 1942 when the Tigers disbanded, the group had asserted to have destroyed 299 Japanese aircrafts. In addition, these Flying Tigers claimed to have used only five to twenty P-40 fighters to rout a total of 217 enemy aircrafts. Believe it or not, at least those American pilots had won the hearts of Chinese people and posted a great threat to the Japan Empire.

Before their triumphant return to the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt talked about his perspective on the Flying Tigers in April, 1942:

“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.”
He went on and asserted that the AVG was the soundest investment China ever made.

Moreover, Chennault boasted himself in his letter to Willkie: 14

“As Commander of the A.V.F. and the China Air Task Force, I have never lost an air battle against the Japanese. This tiny fighter force under my Command has destroyed over three hundred Japanese aircraft confirmed and about three hundred more probably destroyed—I believe the total to be about six hundred—with the loss of twelve A.V.G. pilots and four China Air Task Force pilots from enemy action.”

On the contrary, Daniel Ford, in his novel *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and His American Volunteers, 1941-1942*, argues that there’s discrepancy between Flying Tiger combat claims and the losses actually suffered by Japanese air units in Southeast Asia and southwestern China. His evidence was that the Japanese went to war in Southeast Asia with fewer than 750 planes—with which it had to defeat the Flying Tigers and the Royal Air Force in Burma and China while also fighting Allies from other countries. By doing simple math, Ford concludes that “The Japan Air Force couldn't have lost 1,000 or 1,500 aircraft to the AVG, because it didn't have that many to lose.” 15 Although harshly criticized by some surviving Tigers, plus eighty of the men and women who supported them on the ground, Ford keeps disillusioning his readers.

For instance, Ford asks, “With supermen like these, why did the United States need four years, two atomic bombs, and a Russian invasion to defeat the Empire of the Sun?”

In addition to Ford’s questioning about the significance of the Flying Tigers, Chris Shores in *Bloody Shambles* accuses the Flying Tigers of ”acquiring” victories from their colleagues in the Royal Air Force, in an attempt to obtain more bonus from the Chinese government, because a pilot would have extra 500 dollars each time he shot down a Japanese plane.

It might be true that the claim made by AVG itself that in the short period of seven
months the group had destroyed nearly 300 planes was exaggerated, and perhaps Ford’s estimated 115 planes being destroyed was more accurate. Nevertheless, the AVG had dominated the skies over South China and Burma with stupendous feat. Scott, the old companion of Chennault, argues in defense of the Flying Tigers in his novel:

“There was dough in the proposition, too-good green American dollars deposited to their credit in a New York bank, and that was why some of them were there. But not all of them. For the best of them, and even some of the mediocre ones, would have done the same even if there had been no money. All they wanted was the adventure, and to have a fighter plane to fly, and a man like Chennault to work for and to be their friend as well as their boss. And there was plenty of work to do. For they had come to China at the very darkest hour of that nation.” 16

The Flying Tigers received much more praise than criticism when they disbanded in the summer of 1942. The China Air Task Force of the United States Army Air Forces succeeded and 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.

Besides the cruelty of war, General Chennault’s marriage with Chinese-born Anna symbolized the coalition of China and the United States. They had been married for ten years before Chennault’s death of lung cancer in 1958. Besides, ten years spent in China and a lifetime of experience with air services culminating in the organization of the Flying Tigers enabled General Chennault to analyze the need for American action in China in the form which he has made famous. Chennault had built a bridge between the Chinese and American government to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. The romantic and heroic stories of General Chennault, Anna Chennault, as well as other Flying Tigers mark a watershed event in the complicated yet controversial Sino-American relation.
Ten days before Chennault’s death on July 27, 1958, Congress promoted him to the honorary rank of lieutenant general. It was the final honor bestowed by a grateful nation upon a great soldier and a courageous man. Chennault’s good friend, Scott, describes the dying old man in his book: 17

“They wired him in the hospital news of his third star. He couldn’t talk about this honor, for his throat had long since closed from the malignancy that was killing him. He was fighting for each breath through a tracheotomy incision.”

The U.S. Air Force buried General Chennault in Arlington National Cemetery on July 20, 1958, and they did it with full military honors. Throughout his life, Claire Chennault clung to his courage and his ideals. He never stopped fighting. He has slept since besides John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917-1963) and Mac Arthur (1845-1912). Few men in one short lifetime had made so many enemies, so many more friends, accomplished so much with so little, and understood and loved so well. “Chennault of China”19, named by Anna, has a place in WWII history.

Sixty-four years have passed since the Flying Tigers disbanded in 1942, yet memories about them are still fresh. Chennault and his Tigers brought hope to people of China, defending them against Japan. His achievements are without parallel in air power in World War II. Those arrogant, invincible AVG soldiers who wore high-hell cowboy boots to fly their P-40 have been transformed by the Chinese people into heroes 25. More importantly, Chennault’s appointment as chief advisor from the Chinese government marked a new achievement of the rapport between China and the United States. The mutual affection between Chennault and China had spanned ten years since 1938. Not only because of Pearl Harbor, but the establishment of Chennault’s transcendent Flying Tigers, provided a strong cause for both China and the United States to fight together hand in hand. Without the support of Chennault and his Flying Tigers, the situation now
may be very different. Their stories are significant to the cross-strait issues as well as Sino-American relations. In his memoirs, Chennault quotes the Japanese commander, Lieutenant General Takahashi, on the role of Chinese Air Force, “I judge the operations of the Chinese Air Force to have constituted between 60 per cent and 75 per cent of our effective opposition in China. Without the air force we could have gone anywhere we wished.” 18

**Works Cited**