

Claire Lee Chennault

Face of the Flying Tigers

Claire Lee Chennault was a man of humble beginnings. Trained as a teacher, he said in later years that he had been a teacher his whole life. Married twice, he had two separate families; one American and one Amer-Asian. His American family had eight children and his Chinese family two.

Chennault petitioned League City Lodge No. 1053 for the mysteries while he was stationed at Ellington Airfield near Houston. He was initiated as an Entered Apprentice on June 6, 1921, passed to the degree of Fellow Craft October 6, 1921, then requested dispensation from League City Lodge to learn the Fellow Craft work from an El Paso lodge (where he was then stationed). Subsequent to this, during a assignment to Hawaii, Brother Chennault was raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason on Monday, May 24, 1926 in a courtesy degree conferred by Schofield Lodge No. 443, Territory of Hawaii for League City Lodge.¹ He later said he was unable to really become active until he went to the Orient. He took his Scottish Rite Degrees in China in 1948 [32°, KCCH, Orient of China at Shanghai (in exile)] and was a member of Islam Shrine Temple of San Francisco.

Claire Lee Chennault was born in Cleburne, Texas on September 6, 1890. His family moved to rural Louisiana when he was 5 years old. Claire attended Louisiana State Normal College from 1909-1911, where he enrolled in ROTC. He completed his education at Northwest State in 1912 and taught school in Louisiana for several years. Chennault joined the Army in 1917 and received a reserve commission. He completed flight training in 1919. The next several years found Chennault learning the finer points of pursuit² aviation.



During these years, He was stationed at various airfields, including Ellington Field. Conventional aviation wisdom of the day held that bomber aircraft would fly to the enemy country and “carpet bomb” military targets with such force and accuracy that nothing but light “mop up” operations would be needed. The role of the pursuits in preventing the bombers reaching their intended targets was played down. After all, the bombers had defensive armaments to repel pursuits.

Chennault did not buy into the conventional theory. He had learned the underlying message that Voss, Udet, von Richtofen, and others had known and used to their advantage in the “Great War.” He recognized that pursuits could well prevent the bombers from ever reaching their targets, and further, that trained, disciplined pilots flying pursuits could engage their counterparts and defeat them by using the strengths of their own aircraft to their advantage. In short, he had taken to heart the advice to “know thy enemy.”

Sadly, his superiors saw only a young, headstrong pilot bucking the system, and he was treated accordingly. He went unrecognized as a visionary and while he rose to command a pursuit squadron, he was not promoted with the bomber advocates.



Chennault (second from right) stands in front of P-12 pursuits with squadron mates

The open cockpit aircraft of the day plus heavy cigarette smoking combined to seal his fate with the Army Air Corps. In 1937, after 20 years flying service, Chennault was medically retired as a Captain because of severe hearing loss and chronic bronchitis.

But he had another card to play... Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai Shek of China were trying to build an air force to resist Japan's aggression against an unprepared China. The Chinese had let the Italians design and implement their air force, and the results were disastrous. In 1937, Chennault accepted a contract to come to China for a 3-month evaluation of the Chinese air force with an option to extend the contract. It was the start of a long and rewarding relationship.

Chennault found the condition of the Chinese air force was horrible. The Italians, intending to make the Chinese feel they were rapidly building an air force, carried obsolete and destroyed aircraft as functional, inflating the number of airworthy planes far beyond reality.

In the last years before open hostilities broke out in Europe, the records indicated the Chinese Air Force consisted of almost 3000 planes and an equal number of pilots. Chennault was aghast to learn that of these 3000 planes, only 91 were airworthy, and that while all the pilots could land and take off adequately, none had been trained in air combat tactics

The three-month evaluation period elapsed, as Chennault continued to work with the pilots to design a "modern" air defense with integrated intelligence and communications. Air bases were designed, runways laid out, and maintenance facilities built. Chennault and his tactics were beginning to produce positive results, and the Chinese kills slowly climbed. No longer were Japanese planes able to bomb and strafe with impunity. Chennault often watched the aerial battles from his personal Curtis Hawk 75, and while he never claimed a single aerial victory in China, his plane often returned to base with bullet holes. Given his disposition and competitive spirit, it seems likely that he engaged the Japanese on several occasions.

Throughout 1938, Chennault helped the Chinese slow the Japanese advance by continually nibbling away at their air armada. The Chinese at this time were flying a mixture of mostly obsolete pursuits far inferior to Chennault's "personal" Hawk 75. Yet they continued to get kills.

Chennault flew to the US briefly at Christmas of 1939, returning to China in early February, 1940. Japanese bombing attacks there continued, and by October 1940 the French had allowed the Japanese to use airfields in French Indochina against the Chinese. In December, 1940 “the Gimo” asked Chennault if he thought the US would provide 500 American pilots and planes to be used against the Japanese. Chennault told him that 500 planes and pilots would be hard to secure because of the US’ commitments to Europe, but that he believed that securing some quantities of slightly obsolete fighters and bombers would be possible, and that these would be significantly better than what the Chinese had at the time. Soon, “the Gimo” dispatched Chennault to the US to secure what planes and pilots he could.

While in the US, Chennault met with officials at Wright Aircraft who were then producing P-40B pursuits for the British. Wright Aircraft had an intriguing proposal. If the British would waive their priority delivery of 100 P-40B aircraft of the current production run, Wright would substitute 100 later model P-40s as soon as possible. The British were delighted to accept. Chennault had his planes!

Roosevelt gave verbal orders that civilian recruiters could look for pilots and various ground crewmen on US bases for personnel to work for the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company (CAMCO) of China. CAMCO would assemble, test, maintain, and repair aircraft and train various technicians and personnel to operate them at salaries of between \$250 and \$750 per month, with an unsubstantiated rumor that a bounty of \$500 would be paid for each Japanese plane destroyed (the rumor turned out to be true).

It goes without saying that the base commanders were incensed to learn the civilians were there to steal their most experienced pilots, but they had no say in the matter. Two groups of recruits had left the US by ship by early July, including over 100 pilots and ground crew. Chennault himself left San Francisco on July 8 on the China Clipper, a 4-engine flying boat. Aboard the Clipper, Chennault recorded in his diary “For the first time in my battle against the Japanese... I had everything I needed to defeat them.”

The US consul in Rangoon reported on July 18, 1941 that 68 planes had arrived. Thirty-two had been equipped with general aviation radios and roughly half with machine guns. On July 28, the first 30 airmen arrived.

In August, as the technicians at CAMCO worked to make his planes serviceable and to cobble together crude home made ring and post gun sights for them (the P-40B had no provision for gun sights), Chennault began training his pilots on everything from Chinese geography to Japanese aerial tactics. The pilots also learned about the Chinese air raid alarm system that worked much like the Australian coastwatcher network in the South Pacific. And they learned about the strengths and weaknesses of the P-40 and those of their enemy. Most important, they learned how to turn these to their advantage.



The AVG consisted of three squadrons: the “Adam and Eves,” the “Panda Bears.” and the “Hells Angels,” All were equipped with Curtis P-40B aircraft, rugged descendants of the Curtis Hawk radial engine planes of the early 1930s. Sleek fuselages and liquid cooled engines reduced drag and increased speed, giving these planes a top speed of 340 mph, a 60 mph edge over the Japanese Ki27, its main opponent. There were tradeoffs, of course. The P-40 could not turn with the Ki27 at low speed, but the P-40 had better armament and could absorb more punishment. It could also outrun the Japanese planes, and out dive them. Chennault trained the AVG to use the strengths to their advantage and minimize their weaknesses.

The famous “blood chit” that was sewn on the back of the AVG jackets encouraging all Chinese to aid the bearer in any way possible.

The AVG pilots were still training when Pearl Harbor was attacked. They first met the Japanese in combat on December 20, 1941, and between then and the end of December they represented China well. In just the last 11 days of 1941, the AVG shot down 75 planes while losing only 2 pilots and 6 aircraft.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor, of course, everything changed. The United States was thrust into the War. Victory after victory belonged to the Japanese.

In early 1942, Chennault's AVG was one of the few bright spots in a sea of losses to the Japanese. In January 1942, the AVG took the war to the Japanese with strafing attacks on Japanese air bases. But the Japanese advanced, and in March, 1942 Rangoon fell.³

AVG planes were in such short supply that pilots regularly repainted plane numbers and other aircraft markings (like propeller spinners) to fool the Japanese into believing they fought against a much larger force. The ruse worked, as one enemy broadcast swore that Japan would sweep the "200 planes (of the AVG) from the sky." The AVG at the time had 31 flyable planes.

Chennault described the AVG combat experience thusly: "Although the AVG was blooded over China, it was the air battles over Rangoon that stamped the hallmark on its fame as the Flying Tigers. ...its strength varied between twenty and five serviceable P-40's. This tiny force met a total of a thousand-odd Japanese aircraft over Burma and Thailand. In 31 encounters, they destroyed 217 enemy planes and probably destroyed {another} 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."⁴



A shark-nosed P-40B of the AVG

The origin of the name “Flying Tigers” is uncertain. Before he left Louisiana in July of 1941 to return to China, Chennault asked friends to mail him any clippings they found about the AVG. Soon he was deluged with clippings. He and his men were astonished to find themselves becoming famous as the “Flying Tigers.” Chennault himself stated, “How the term Flying Tigers was derived from the shark-nosed P-40’s I will never know.” The AVG had copied the shark’s teeth on the planes’ noses from illustrations in the *India Illustrated Weekly* of an RAF squadron in Libya. The Flying Tigers had no group insignia until Walt Disney’s cartoonists designed the now-famous winged tiger flying through a large victory “Vee” toward the end of their operation.

After just more than 6 months of action, the AVG was disbanded on July 4, 1942. The tiny group no military expert expected to last a month in combat had survived for seven, and had amassed an enviable kill ratio to boot! Chennault was reenlisted in the Army Air Corps as a Brigadier General.

Their mission was taken on by the newly formed China Air Task Force of the USAAF, commanded by General Chennault. Then in March, 1943, the men and equipment of the AVG were incorporated into the 23d Fighter Group of the 14th Air Force as part of the expanding juggernaut that was the Allied war machine.

General Chennault was promoted Major General and appointed to lead the 14th Air Force. The 14th helped break the back of the Japanese CBI effort by flying 650,000 tons of supplies and materiel to the forward troops “over the hump” by the end of the war. Where there were no nearby airfields, the supplies were either “free dropped” or dropped by parachute. In early 1944, the Japanese overran Chennault’s bases, but by mid 1944, with air superiority firmly established, the Allied forces again controlled the skies.

Overall, the combat record of the AVG was impressive. The AVG began with only 100 pursuit planes. They rarely had as many as 25 operational at any time, yet are credited with shooting down almost 300 Japanese planes with a loss of only 14 pilots in combat. The AVG and the RAF both fought in the skies over Rangoon with comparable sized forces. While the RAF barely broke even in the fray, the Flying Tigers shot down 15 planes per AVG loss.

Just before the war ended, Chennault was forced to retire a second time from the USAAC in October, 1945. He later returned to China, purchased several surplus planes, and started Civil Air Transport, which flew materiel to the Nationalist Chinese in their struggle against Communism. This air service later became Air America (the “secret” CIA air service that moved covert men and supplies around the globe and were the planes that supplied the French at forward bases like Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam.)

After the war, Chennault continued to argue against Communism to the end. General Chennault died of lung cancer on July 27, 1958, a maverick “avenged.” He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

- Written By Sam Whitley, Grand Lodge of Texas History Committee

Endnotes

¹Records of League City Lodge No. 1053, A.F. & A.M.

²In the early years of aviation, the small, swift, armed planes that would later be known as “fighters” were called “pursuits”

³The following is an anecdotal story related to General Chennault.

On May 1, 1943, B-24 Liberator bombers of the 7th Bombardment Group (Heavy) of the USAAC 10th Air Force were assigned to bomb targets in Rangoon, Burma. The bombardier of one of these planes was Lt. H. Ross Garrett.



En route to the target, the bombers were attacked by Japanese fighters. One of the bombers was crippled in the attack, and losing altitude, was seen disappearing into the clouds

Lt. Garrett's sister subsequently received a letter from one of his squadron mates describing the Japanese attack and telling her that he believed that Ross's plane had crashed, but that he believed the crew could have bailed out since the plane was not too badly damaged, and that it should take Lt. Garrett and his crew about a month to reach safety. This of course did not happen. . Though only one of the crew was killed, the survivors were captured five days later by the Japanese. For the next two years, Lt. Garrett was listed as Missing in Action, Presumed Dead.

The pilot of their plane died of the beatings he received during interrogation. As bombardier, Lt. Garrett was likely to have been killed out of hand. He was spared because the crew convinced the Japanese that he was a pilot trainee and not the bombardier. The ruse worked simply because one of the crew had been killed and the crew convinced the Japanese that the dead man was the bombardier. Lt. Garrett later got very sick and was confined in hospital in the POW camp when the Japanese relocated prisoners from the camp. They abandoned the few prisoners sick in hospital and left them without food, medicine, or water. The rest of the prisoners were lead off on the "Burma Death March." Of the abandoned POWs, a number died, but several survived, including Lt. Garrett. The surviving POWs were liberated May 8, 1945.

Why mention this story, you may ask. For several reasons. First, I admit that I am a sucker for interesting trivia. Second, because the 7th Heavy Bombardment Group was engaged in the war literally from the moment the US became involved. When the radar operators at Opana Point detected a large number of Japanese carrier planes approaching Oahu on the morning of December 7, 1941, the officer who acted on the message dismissed the radar sighting as a flight of twelve B-17 aircraft of the 7th Heavy Bombardment Group due to arrive in Oahu that Sunday morning. These 12 bombers arrived during the Japanese attack and two of the 12 were destroyed. The 7th BG was first deployed to Australia, where it flew missions against the Japanese in Indonesia, the Philippines, and New Guinea before evacuating General Douglas McArthur from the Philippines. The 7th was then reassigned to India, and began arriving in Burma in March 1942. Third, because the 10th Air Force gave birth to Chennault's 14th Air Force as the 10th Air Force was relocated, it is thus tied to the Chennault story. And fourth, because Lt. H. Ross Garrett is today a long-standing member of Madisonville Lodge No. 116 and my maternal uncle.

⁴Chennault, *Way of a Fighter*

Sources

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Acknowledgement

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