

The Flying Tigers



Claire Chennault (*Photo retrieved from www.aviation-history.com*)

The mission of the Flying Tigers (formerly known as the American Volunteer Group) was unusual: They were avaricious skilled men from various services, hired by China to aid in the fight against Japan.

Late in 1941, three months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, a group of young men left San Francisco in several Dutch ships bound for the Far East. They were American pilots from the Army Air Corps, Navy, and Marines, on their way to China, to become part of a flying foreign legion called the American Volunteer Group (AVG). China had been at war with Japan for almost four years, and from the beginning, Japanese war planes had been able to bomb and strafe helpless Chinese cities at will. Finally, in desperation, China asked a retired Air Corps captain, Claire Chennault, to form a Chinese air force. Now in China he had a chance to test his ideas on "Defensive Pursuit" in actual combat, and there is reason to believe that Chennault

himself shot down at least thirty Japanese planes before the AVG arrived. At first, he had no modern planes for his tiny command, but early in 1941 a group of Americans sent him a gift of 100 Curtiss-Wright P-40 Tomahawks.

Men like Bob Neale and David "Tex" Hill came to fly with him. Chennault taught them everything he knew. He showed them the strong points of the P-40, and the weaknesses of the Zero.



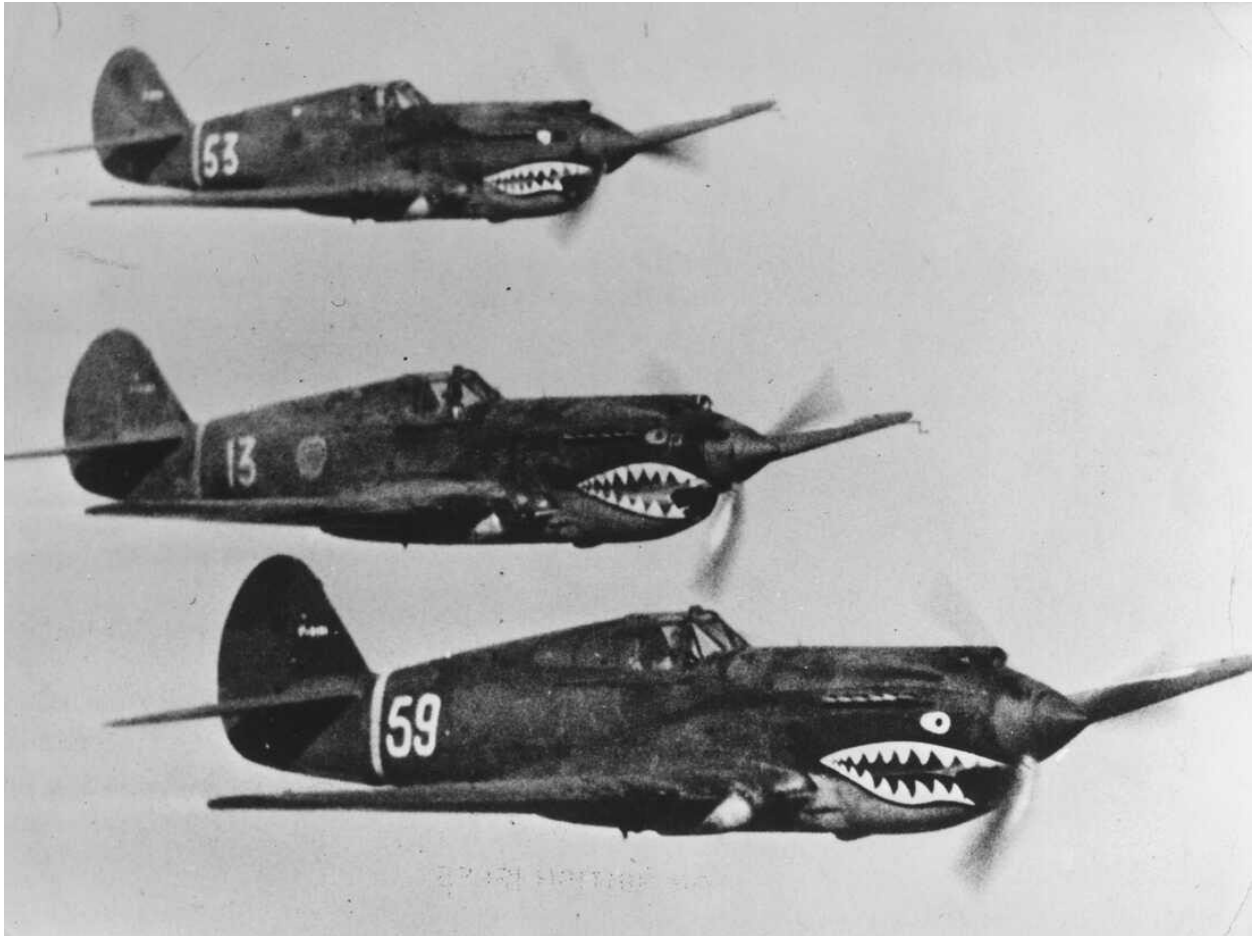
Pilots from the American Volunteer Group sit in front of a P-40 airplane in Kunming, China, on March 27, 1942. The group was notable for its unusual mission: Its members were mercenaries hired by China to fight against Japan. (Photo retrieved from www.npr.org)

On December 19th the Japanese got the surprise of their lives. A group of their bombers were on their way to bomb Kunming Field. They were unaware that Chennault's group, soon to be known as the Flying Tigers, were now trained and ready for combat. Consequently, the Japanese bombers were not escorted by fighters.

Chennault dispatched several Tigers to intercept over the field, and also sent fifteen more to catch the bombers on their way back home. The trap worked. Only four Japanese planes escaped. After that, Zero fighters always accompanied the bombers, but it made no difference; Chennault had taught his Tigers well. On Christmas Day, the Japanese sent over one hundred fighters and bombers. The Hell's Angels Squadron, all eighteen of them, clawed at the massive enemy formation and destroyed thirty-three.

The Flying Tigers didn't lose a plane.

Until it was absorbed into the Army on July 4, 1942, the American Volunteer Group set a matchless record. Officially destroying 299 enemy planes, while losing only 8 of their own pilots in combat. There is little doubt that easily twice this many Japanese aircraft were shot down.



Members of the American Volunteer Group flew Curtiss P-40 planes, pictured. By performing certain maneuvers, they were able to exploit some weaknesses in the Japanese aircraft.

Three Lions/Getty Image (Photo retrieved from www.npr.org)

A Proud Tradition Continues

July 4th was the date set for the AVG pilots to transfer into the regular Army Air Corps. They were all to become members of the 23rd Fighter Group. It was soon obvious, however, that most of the veterans of the Flying Tigers wanted either to go home, or to rejoin their original branch of the service. Boyington, for instance, reenlisted in the Marine Corps. A few, like Tex Hill, stayed on. Luckily many pilots agreed to remain for a brief time, to help the new Army fighter commander, Colonel Robert L. Scott, Jr., to get the 23rd in shape.

When Colonel Scott led his fighters into combat for the first time on July 4th, the Japanese did not know that the experienced AVG fliers were still with him. The Zero pilots were all set to teach the new, inexperienced Americans a lesson. Instead, it was the same old story. Within minutes, thirteen Zeros fell from the skies, victims of the hot guns of the P-40s.

Scott's biggest day in combat came on October 23, 1942. With six other P-40s, he was escorting B-25 bombers raiding important shipyards in Victoria Harbor, Hong Kong.

Before Colonel Scott was sent back to the States in January of 1943, he had been officially credited with shooting down thirteen Japanese planes.

Major John Alison was one of the new Army pilots to report for duty in the 23rd Fighter Group. In late July of 1942 he was sent to Hengyang Field, where Tex Hill was then commanding officer.

The first action Alison experienced was a Japanese bombing attack at night. It made him mad and frustrated to be stuck on the ground just because of the dark. Then suddenly he had an idea. Why not take off anyway as soon as the Chinese warning net said a raid was coming, and be waiting overhead for the Japanese? He was sure he could find the bombers by looking for the bright exhaust flames from their motors.



Pilots of the Flying Tigers run for their Curtiss P-40 fighters as an air raid warning sounds at an unknown airbase in China on Nov. 2, 1943. The AVG was integrated into the U.S. military in 1942 as part of the 23d Fighter Group, which continued to use the name Flying Tigers. (Photo retrieved from www.npr.org)

On July 29th, Alison, Baumler and several other pilots who liked the idea, one by one they roared off down the unlighted field, and then climbed into the blackness overhead.

When Alison began his attack on the bombers, he discovered he was silhouetted between the moon and the Japanese. Therefore, he presented a clear target himself. Though he felt his P-40 rock with explosions from the bombers' guns, he pressed his attack. His instrument panel was smashed, but now he could see that his own machine guns were ripping into the dark shape in front of him. Suddenly there was an explosion. He had hit the bomber's wing tank.

Alison couldn't get back to Hengyang. His engine quit and he crash-landed in the Siang River. The next day, he discovered that Ajax Baumler had shot down still another bomber. That made a total of four enemy ships downed in the first night operation, and no P-40s were lost, because Alison's ship was pulled out of the river by the Chinese and flown again.

When Bob Scott left the outfit, he handed over command to Colonel Bruce Holloway. Holloway, like Scott, turned out to be not only a good fighter but an excellent leader as well.

By the end of the war, Chennault's Fourteenth Air Force had destroyed 2,355 Japanese planes in the air and on the ground. Only 127 American planes were lost in aerial combat. It was a record unequalled in any other theater of war. (The Aviation History On-Line Museum, 2020)

There is no clear recollection of where the name "Flying Tigers" originated. Nonetheless, it was mentioned one week after their first battle by Time magazine. They said "Flying Tigers swooped, let the Japanese have it." More publicity was gained through the development of the group's logo. T.V. Soong had worked earlier with Chennault in D.C. to gather the planes and also helped get The Walt Disney Company to draw the unit's logo of a Bengal Tiger jumping through a V signaling "victory". Further, a movie titled "Flying Tigers" featured John Wayne playing a role founded on Claire Chennault.

In present day, one can find numerous plaques, memorials and museum displays devoted to the Flying Tigers in the U.S., China, Taiwan and Thailand. Also, the Jobe's Flying Tiger Historical Organization enabled the construction of The Flying Tiger Heritage Park in the southern Chinese city of Guilin, which was inaugurated in 2015. Frank Losonsky was the last member of the original American Volunteer Group. He passed away in February of 2020. (Doubek, 2021)

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