



2009.02.01

Daniel Ford, *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and His American Volunteers, 1941-1942*. Rev. ed. Washington, DC: Harper Collins/Smithsonian Books, 2007. Pp. xv, 384. ISBN 978-0-06-124655-5.

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First published in 1991 under a slightly different title,<sup>1</sup> the present, updated edition of *Flying Tigers* incorporates new materials that became available since the book's first publication. In his preface, Daniel Ford also mentions making corrections to errors and "amends for earlier sins of omission and commission." In addition, footnotes are eliminated in favor of a list of published and unpublished sources, including interviews, which each chapter is based on.<sup>2</sup> These changes make for smoother reading while providing the necessary precise information in a worthwhile addition to the literature on World War II.

The American Volunteer Group (AVG), popularly known as the Flying Tigers, was the creation of Claire Lee Chennault (1893–1958). Both enjoyed a legendary reputation in China for heroic deeds and contributions during its war of resistance against Japan. World War II began in Asia when Japan attacked China on 7 July 1937 in the Marco Polo Bridge or Lukouchiao Incident. For four years, China fought alone, with only the Soviet Union providing aid between 1937 and the end of 1939, in the form of loans of \$250 million (with which China purchased equipment and supplies from the USSR), 1,000 planes, and 2,500 pilots and military advisors. Fearful of Japan's ambitions to control the vast territories of Soviet Asia and its Axis partner Adolf Hitler's imperial designs in Europe, Soviet leader Josef Stalin offered China a non-aggression pact (August 1937) that included an aid package. Stalin reasoned that Japan's preoccupation with Chinese resistance would make it less likely to attack the Soviet Union. However, after the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939, he reduced and then ended aid to China.

France's surrender to Germany in 1940 gave Japan control of French Indochina and cut China's vital railway link to Vietnam. Bases in Indochina facilitated air strikes against Free China. Japan also gained control of the planes and facilities of the French colonial air force in Indochina in its war against China. The Chinese air force, woefully deficient in planes and experienced personnel, could muster little opposition. Thus the Japanese air force dominated the skies over China and bombed its cities at will. Fearing to offend Japan, Great Britain shut down China's remaining access to the outside world by closing the Burma Road.

Ford chronicles the formation and remarkable combat record of the AVG in Burma and China during 1941–2. It was organized and led by Claire Chennault of Louisiana, a

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<sup>1</sup> *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and the American Volunteer Group*; this edition went through seven printings by 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Those interested in the precise sources of quotations, a bibliography of references, and detailed chapter notes may consult an available website <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0905.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0905.htm)>.

noted aerobatic pilot and advocate of air power in warfare. Chennault had joined the U.S. Army in 1917 and trained as a pilot, though he saw no action in World War I. He specialized in aerial combat tactics and opposed the officially endorsed theories about the role of air power in modern warfare. These differences with his superiors and medical problems (partial deafness from flying-related injuries and chronic bronchitis from heavy smoking) led to his early retirement from the Army Air Corps in 1937 with the rank of major. He was immediately invited to advise the Chinese government on improving its infant air force. On 3 June 1937, he was introduced to the wife of Chiang Kai-shek, China's leader and head of its National Aviation Corps. This was the beginning of a successful relationship that ended only with Chennault's death. According to Madame Chiang's biographer: "Chennault was circumspect and loyal to his Chinese employers, exercising patience and tact ... [while] Mayling [Madame Chiang] was his direct channel to Chiang Kai-shek. She made certain his concerns were brought to the Generalissimo and to the right people in Washington."<sup>3</sup>

China's desperate straits in 1940 and the widening war waged by the Axis led to a secret agreement with the then neutral United States for a covert operation, which was finally acknowledged by the U.S. government in 1991. The agreement authorized Chennault to recruit pilots, mechanics, and other support personnel, and to purchase combat aircraft on behalf of the Chinese government. It was funded by a U.S. government loan that China would repay with exports of tung oil and other resources. All recruits were volunteers, mostly junior officers and enlisted men of the U.S. military. Pilots were offered a salary of \$600 per month and the rank of first lieutenant; specially qualified men were offered \$675 per month and the rank of captain in the Chinese air force. Five hundred dollar bonuses were authorized for each enemy plane shot down. These were large sums at the time, greatly exceeding salaries earned by comparable ranking officers in the U.S. military services.

Most men who signed up were in their twenties, drawn by the chance for adventure, money, or an opportunity to serve in a war that then seemed inevitable. Since the operation was clandestine, they traveled to Rangoon in British Burma under the pretense of various assumed occupations. For example, the main contingent of thirty-seven pilots, eighty-four ground crew and clerks, and two nurses who set sail from San Francisco had passports listing such occupations as "hardware clerk," "radio announcer," "acrobat," and "rancher." Chennault's job description was "executive" (57). The recruits' equipment, chiefly aircraft rejected by the British, included the Brewster Buffalo, Curtiss H-75, Curtiss P-40B (Tomahawk), Curtiss P-40E, and Douglas DC-3; these were dismantled, crated, and shipped to Rangoon, where they were reassembled. Chennault's "distinguishing characteristic was to grab what lay at hand and work a miracle with it" (56).

Chennault shuttled between Rangoon and Kunming in Yunnan, a Chinese province near the Burmese border, where he trained the pilots in combat techniques and oversaw the building of primitive air strips from crushed rocks, hostels, and other facilities. He organized his pilots and airplanes into three squadrons named Adam and Eves, Panda Bears, and Hell's Angels. The AVG acquired its own trademark name: impressed with the ferocious sharks painted on British squadrons' airplanes in North Africa, Chennault's men

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Li Tyson, *Madame Chiang Kai-shek: China's Eternal First Lady* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 2006) 135.

began to experiment with similar insignias. They first tried a flying dragon, then settled on a tiger. A request was sent to Hollywood, and, in October 1941, “two Disney employees ... sketched a darling Bengal cat with wasp-like wings and extended claws, leaping from a V-for-Victory sign” (107). Thus the most famous insignia in World War II was born.

The Flying Tigers flew into their first action from their unfinished base in Kunming and drew blood repelling Japanese air attacks from Vietnam, shooting down enemy planes to the great acclaim of the hitherto defenseless Chinese citizens. On 7 December 1941, the Japanese Air Force simultaneously attacked the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and in the U.S.-controlled Philippines, as well as British possessions in Asia—Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, and Burma. The event that brought the United States into World War II caught some of the men and equipment of the AVG en route to Burma in the Pacific. Since there was now no need for pretense, the ship was diverted to Australia and the men inducted into the U.S. Army. The United States and Britain declared war against Japan; China and Japan formally declared war against each other; and the United States and China declared war against Germany and Italy.

The Allied powers established a China-India-Burma theater of war and Chiang Kai-shek became supreme commander of the China theater. Colonel Joseph Stilwell, of the U.S. Army, was promoted to lieutenant general and sent to the Chinese wartime capital Chongqing as commander of U.S. forces in China and chief of staff to Chiang. Stilwell was the protégé of Chief of Staff and later U.S. Secretary of War, General George Marshall, a relationship that dated to the early 1920s when both men served in China. (During that first stint in China, Stilwell had picked up some “barracks Chinese.”) His appointment was a colossal mistake. Even people who admired Stilwell as an excellent soldier agreed that he was lacking both in temperament and requisite diplomatic skills. Marshall’s unbending loyalty to his protégé severely damaged U.S.-China relations. President Roosevelt finally recalled Stilwell in October 1944, but irreparable harm had already been done.

Both Chennault and Stilwell had strong opinions and stubborn personalities; they were nicknamed Old Leatherneck and Vinegar Joe, respectively. Although Chennault knew no Chinese, he got along well with Chinese leaders and his men were heroes to the Chinese people. Madame Chiang called them “American Knights of the Air.” Stilwell, on the other hand, alienated and disliked nearly everyone—Chinese, Britons, and most American leaders, except Marshall. Moreover, Stilwell and Chennault advocated different strategies in warfare: the former was a proponent of land warfare, the latter of air war. Personality conflicts between U.S. military leaders degenerated to pettiness. For example, Stilwell recommended the promotion of Clayton Bissell, a junior and rival of Chennault, to Brigadier General and theater air commander one day ahead of Chennault’s promotion to the same rank, so that Bissell would always outrank Chennault.

Since the United States was at war against Japan, there was no longer need to camouflage the role of the AVG. It was disbanded in July 1942 and men who wished to continue to serve in China were allowed to join the regular U.S. armed forces, while those who wished to return home were allowed to do so. The U.S. air unit operating in China became the Fourteenth Air Force, with Chennault in command. Many who had served under Chennault deeply resented U.S. government regulations and policies regarding the terms and conditions for integrating AVG men into the regular armed forces. They also

faulted Bissell's implementation of U.S. policies, teaching the Chinese laborers at their base in Kunming to greet deplaning Americans with a bow while chanting: "Piss on Bissell"—the title of Chapter 16 of Ford's book.

Air battles were waged daily after Pearl Harbor, as Japanese planes from bases in occupied China, Indochina, and Thailand (nominally neutral but a subject ally of Japan) attacked Allied held territory. Malaya, Singapore, and Hong Kong fell quickly, with the Japanese air force suffering few losses. Things were different in Burma, where the AVG, aided by British and Commonwealth air units, put up a stiff fight, inflicting severe losses and slowing the Japanese advance. For example, on 20 December a squadron of Japanese bombers heading for Kunming from Indochina was met by the Tomahawks of the Flying Tigers. When the battle was over, the Japanese had lost four Lilys (three were shot down and one crashed); seven others were damaged, and fourteen airmen were killed—their largest losses in a single air action since the war began. The cost to the AVG was one Tomahawk lost, with its pilot surviving and making his way back to base, hitching a ride in a Chinese army truck.

Ford devotes many pages to detailed descriptions of air battles, drawing on information from official logbooks and diaries kept by both Japanese and Allied fighters. The on-the-spot accounts are enhanced by memoirs and oral histories. The author has done a remarkable job of closely cross-checking the many sources to corroborate facts. Although the details of the fighting will appeal to readers who are intensely interested in aerial combat, others may find them somewhat wearisome.

As Chennault recorded on 4 July 1942: "At midnight, the AVG passed into history" (330). During almost a year of operations, it lost twenty-two pilots dead, captured, or missing in action—almost one in four men. Eighty-six planes were lost to combat, accident, and abandonment due to Japanese capture of airfields in Burma. The Japanese lost about 400 men and 115 aircraft to the AVG in Burma, China, and Thailand. Ford attributes these significantly higher figures for the Japanese to "morale and élan," adding "it's an especially pleasing irony. Japan went to war knowing that its enemies were larger and richer than it was, but believing it would prevail ... because a man's spirit was more important than the quality of his weapons. Yet Japan's first and most spectacular defeat was at the hands of a few dozen American pilots who embodied that very same spirit" (334).

Ford tells the story of a significant Allied operation at a perilous time during World War II. He skillfully reconstructs vivid pictures of events from the statements of participants recorded immediately after the actions. Many photos and accounts of living conditions and significant events that involved the AVG recreate places and scenes the men (and a few women) experienced, including weddings. I am, however, mystified by the author's omission of Chennault's second marriage, to a young Chinese reporter (Anna Chennault), even though he lists her book, *A Thousand Springs*,<sup>4</sup> among the sources for Chapter I.

After World War II, Chennault and several other AVG men formed the Civil Air Transport for the Chinese Nationalist government, while other veterans from his group launched a successful air freight carrier—Flying Tiger Lines. Claire Chennault was

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<sup>4</sup> Subtitle *The Biography of a Marriage* (NY: Eriksson, 1962).

promoted to lieutenant general shortly before he died in 1958. Anna Chennault translated her husband's book *Way of a Fighter*<sup>5</sup> into Chinese; it was published in Taiwan. She became a well-known Washington hostess and Republican party fundraiser. In the 1970s, she acted as an unofficial emissary between the United States, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of China on Taiwan.

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<sup>5</sup> Subtitle *The Memoirs of Claire Lee Chennault* (NY: Putnam, 1949).