



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

The Flying Tigers

The Roaring '20s in the United States gave us jazz, speakeasies, flappers, Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney, the Model A, Red Grange, radio broadcasting, Gertrude Ederle swimming the English Channel, and Lucky Lindy soloing the Atlantic. The same decade in Japan saw the rise of militarists and the formulation of a plot by Japanese generals to topple the civilian government. Useful to the militarists was the Kwantung army, Japan's army of occupation in southern Manchuria. The army precipitated several incidents in Manchuria in hopes of forcing the Japanese government's hand. One of the incidents finally bore fruit.



Militarists and Murderous Occupation

On September 18, 1931, the Kwantung army claimed that Chinese soldiers had tried to bomb a South Manchurian Railway train. Using what became known as the Manchurian incident as an excuse, the Kwantung army moved swiftly to capture the city of Mukden, followed by the occupation of all of Manchuria. By 1932, Japan had turned Manchuria into the puppet state of Manchukuo. A Chinese figurehead was made emperor of Manchukuo, but all key positions in the government were held by Japanese, and behind these civilians was the Kwantung army.

The few civilian leaders in the Tokyo government who tried to curb the army could count on being assassinated. This included Japanese prime ministers, two of whom fell to assassins.

The League of Nations dispatched a committee to Manchuria to conduct an investigation. In October 1932, the committee recommended Japanese troops be withdrawn, the state of Manchukuo be dismantled, and Chinese sovereignty be restored. However, even as colonialism was falling out of favor in the West, Japan was embracing its own militant version. When the general body of the League of Nations accepted the committee's recommendation, the Japanese delegation walked out of the league chamber. In March 1933, Japan formally withdrew from the League of Nations.

Japan now poured technicians and capital into Manchuria, exploiting its vast resources to develop an industrial base for Japanese aggression in China. During 1933, the Japanese pushed south from Manchuria into northern China. This new aggression led to the establishment of a demilitarized zone between Peking and the Great Wall. Diplomatic protests against Japanese aggression proved worthless. In 1934, Japan declared that it would allow no interference in its China policy and that any attempt by China to acquire technical or military assistance from a foreign power would bring a swift response from Tokyo.

The success the Kwantung army enjoyed strengthened the militarists back home in Japan. In February 1936, the Imperial Way, a radical faction of young Japanese army officers, was so emboldened that it



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

attempted a coup d'état. Several Japanese leaders were assassinated, and for three days the rebels held much of downtown Tokyo. The rebellion was crushed only when senior officers refused to support it. These officers were part of what was termed the Control faction, which shared the foreign policy goals of the young fanatics in the Imperial Way, but had far less-radical plans for internal reform.

The militarists again forced the government's hand by precipitating the so-called China incident. Japanese troops had been stationed in and around Peking ever since a multi-national expeditionary force, which included Europeans and Americans, suppressed the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 and forced China to sign the Boxer Protocol. Under the protocol, certain foreign powers, including Japan, were allowed to occupy key points near Peking "for the maintenance of open communications between the capital and the sea."

On July 7, 1937, at the Marco Polo Bridge in Peking, Japanese troops, after a few rounds had whizzed past them, opened fire on a nearby unit of Chinese soldiers. To this day a debate rages over who fired those first shots. Many believe they came from agents of the Japanese militarists. Others argue they came from Chinese communists. No matter, the Japanese used the China incident as a pretext for a general invasion of China.

Following the China incident, nearly all Chinese regional military and political groups rallied to support the Nationalist (anti-communist) government under Chiang Kai-shek in Nanking. The Chinese communists, who had urged a united front against Japan since 1935, pledged their support and put their armies nominally under the command of the Nationalist government. Nonetheless, China was ill prepared to stop the Japanese onslaught. City after city fell to the invaders: Peiping and Tientsin in July, and Nanking in December, forcing Chiang Kai-shek to move the Nationalist government to Hankow.

The Japanese army entered Nanking on December 13, 1937, and immediately began a month-long orgy of looting, burning, raping, torturing, and murdering, known as the Rape of Nanking. According to one witness, men, women, and children were "hunted like rabbits; everyone seen to move was shot." Even the Japan-friendly Germans in an official report condemned the Japanese soldiers as "bestial machinery."

About one-third of Nanking was gutted by fire. More than 20,000 Chinese male civilians of military age were marched out of the city and massacred by bayoneting or machine-gun fire. Some 20,000 or more young Chinese women and girls were raped, then murdered and mutilated. Thousands upon thousands of older Chinese were stripped of all their belongings and then killed. By the end of January 1938 at least 100,000, perhaps as many as 300,000, Chinese civilians had been slaughtered.

Although foreign nationals and their property were supposed to be safe from Japanese attack, American missionaries and their families were killed and missionary churches, hospitals, schools, and colleges were bombed, despite flag markings on the roofs of the buildings. The Japanese were determined to destroy all American influence in China.

The Japanese called such killing and destruction "accidents." The accidents were so frequent and deadly that one American cynically remarked that the most dangerous place to be in a Japanese air raid was an American mission. On December 12, 1937, the day before Nanking fell, Japan seemingly went too far when Japanese pilots from the carrier *Kaga* bombed and sank the American gunboat *Panay*, which was patrolling the waters of the Yangtze River.



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

American Response

The Tokyo government called the bombing an accident, apologized, and offered to pay an indemnity. The United States knew better. A Japanese message sent to its fleet had been intercepted and decoded by U.S. naval intelligence. From the message it was clear that the attack on *Panay* had been deliberately planned by an officer on the carrier *Kaga*. Nonetheless, the Japanese apology was officially accepted in Washington, and the incident was considered closed. Privately, President Franklin Roosevelt was outraged by the sinking of *Panay* and began exploring possible actions against Japan, including a naval blockade.

Meanwhile, Americans seemed willing to forget the incident. In a Gallup poll conducted during the second week of January 1938, 70 percent of the Americans interviewed favored a complete withdrawal from China: gunboats, Marines, missionaries, medical personnel — the works.

During 1938, the Japanese took Hankow and then Canton, forcing Chiang Kai-shek to move his government far inland to Chungking.

Also in 1938, and again in 1939, the Japanese fought full-scale battles with the Russians along the border of Manchukuo. However, in April 1941, Japan and the Soviet Union signed a neutrality pact.

In 1939, the Japanese captured Shanghai. For decades Shanghai had been an international city, home to thousands of Americans and Europeans. Shanghai even had a small but strong Jewish community created by Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia. Japan now made life miserable for the residents of Shanghai.

In response to the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, President Roosevelt contemplated the imposition of economic sanctions on Japan. His first step came on July 26, 1939, when he denounced the existing trade treaty, dating back to 1911, the United States had with Japan. The action received almost unanimous approval in the United States.

Americans certainly did not want war with Japan, though. Most Americans thought if 450 million Chinese cannot defend themselves against 75 million Japanese, then who are we to get involved. Nor did public opinion change after the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939. Gallup polls consistently demonstrated that more than 70 percent of Americans were opposed to U.S. involvement in either Asia or Europe.

Nonetheless, America did aid China by sending supplies to Chiang Kai-shek over the Burma Road. Since the Japanese were occupying the seacoast of China, it had become necessary to build supply routes from the interior of China to the outside world. The most important of these undertakings was the construction of the 681-mile-long Burma Road, which twisted through mountains and jungles from Kunming in China to Lashio in Burma. The Burma Road was completed in 1939 and, after October 1940, was the only route open to the sea. Other than the Burma Road, all supplies to Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Chinese had to be flown “over the hump,” as the flight from India over the Himalayan Mountains was called.

During the summer of 1940, Japan wrested permission from the Vichy government of France to build airfields in Indochina, then a French colonial possession, including what is today Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The United States responded to the Japanese move into Indochina by granting a small loan to the Chinese Nationalists and by placing an embargo on some exports to Japan. Embargoed goods



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

included various strategic materials, in particular scrap iron.

In a clandestine effort to aid China, the American government supported the formation of a group of American fighter pilots who would volunteer their services to Chiang Kai-shek. Officially known as the American Volunteer Group or AVG, the outfit became popularly known as the Flying Tigers.

The Flying Tigers were the creation of Texas-born and Louisiana-reared Claire Chennault, an outspoken proponent of fighter aircraft, an innovator of air combat tactics, and a daring pilot. In 1937, after serving 20 years in the U.S. Army, nearly all of it in the Air Corps, he retired and became an aviation advisor to Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Chinese government and the director of the Chinese Air Force (CAF) flight school in Kunming. Although Chennault worked wonders with the CAF, the Japanese had far superior forces, and by 1940, Chennault and Chiang Kai-shek asked the United States for pilots and planes. Since such direct aid was prohibited by the Neutrality Act of 1939, a secret operation was launched through the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company (CAMCO) of New York.

For several years, CAMCO had not only built aircraft in China but had also provided instructors for the Chinese Air Force. Now CAMCO would hire U.S. military pilots to fly for the American Volunteer Group. The U.S. government quietly allowed pilots to resign their commissions to join the AVG and then rejoin the U.S. military at a later date with no loss of rank or seniority. The incentive to do so was money, \$600 a month for pilots, \$675 for flight leaders, \$750 for squadron commanders, and an additional \$500 for every Japanese plane shot down — substantial sums in the early 1940s and far more than any pilot could earn in the U.S. military. Recruitment began during the spring of 1941, and by June a hundred pilots had been chosen. They were told to rendezvous at the Belmont Hotel in San Francisco during July and, in different groups, boarded passenger-carrying freighters operated by the Dutch-owned Java Pacific Lines during July and August. The pilots assumed various aliases and traveled as merchants, doctors, teachers, and even missionaries.

One of the putative missionaries was the alcoholic and brawling Marine aviator Greg Boyington, later known as Pappy. He took pleasure in the incongruity of his false identity until he learned there was a group of real missionaries aboard. Suspecting Boyington was not what he purported to be, one of the missionaries asked him to deliver the Sunday sermon. When Boyington declined, the missionary's suspicions were confirmed. The same missionary delivered the sermon and, said Boyington, "he seemed to direct the entire sermon at me and at the group I represented. His point was how horrible it was for people to fight for money."

If Boyington and his fellow pilots couldn't fool a group of missionaries, then they couldn't begin to fool Japanese spies, who were everywhere, including in the hotels and on the docks of San Francisco. Japan was able to track not only the pilots but also the planes they would fly, which were shipped disassembled in cargo containers.

Putting Pilots Through Their Paces

The plane the Tigers would fly was the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk. The particular P-40 used by the Flying Tigers was the P-40B, powered by a 1,040-hp, liquid-cooled, V-12 Allison engine. The plane had a maximum speed of 350 mph and a ceiling of 32,000 feet. Firepower came from four .50-caliber Browning machine guns. The plane had armor plating for the pilot and self-sealing fuel tanks, and was able to absorb an amazing number of hits. The armor and the four .50-caliber machine guns made it a



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

relatively heavy fighter — the P-40B weighed 7,600 lbs., wet and loaded — which hurt its climb rate and maneuverability. However, it could dive like a screaming eagle.

The Japanese fighter the P-40 would face most often was the Mitsubishi A6M Zero. There were many models of the Zero, but they were all light, fast, and maneuverable. The Zero weighed only 5,900 lbs., wet and loaded, making it much lighter than the American fighters it faced. The Zero was armed with two .30-caliber machine guns and two 20mm (.79-caliber) cannons. The Zero had a maximum speed of 340 mph and a ceiling of 34,000 feet. It could out-climb and out-turn the P-40. However, the Zero was thin-skinned, lacked armor and self-sealing fuel tanks, and tended to burst into flames when hit. The Zero was referred to as a ZEKE in the identification code of the U.S. military.

After three weeks, Boyington and the other recruits landed at British-held Rangoon in Burma. They then headed north to Toungoo, a remote airstrip in a jungle clearing. For two months the AVG pilots trained at the strip. The weather was miserable and accidents were frequent. The pilots grumbled and several quit; three died in crashes. Spirits were lifted when Erik Shilling, a former Army test pilot, got the idea of painting a shark's mouth on the P-40. A German squadron operating in the Mediterranean had first used the shark's mouth on their Messerschmitts. When Shilling chalked out the mouth on the P-40, though, it looked far better than anything seen before, as if plane and design had been made for each other. Once paint was applied, the pilots were thrilled. "Looks mean as hell," declared Robert T. Smith, who would knock nine Japanese planes out of the sky. By the end of November the pilots were divided into three squadrons, the 1st: Adam & Eves; the 2nd: Panda Bears; and the 3rd: Hell's Angels. They would be stationed at both Kunming in China and Mingaladon airfield near Rangoon.

In the training at Toungoo, Chennault had his pilots study a Japanese flying and tactics manual because, said Chennault, the Japanese are highly disciplined and fly by the book. They are well trained and brave, he emphasized, but predictable. Chennault told the Tigers they would use the Japanese discipline and their failure to improvise as a weapon against them.

Chennault also developed tactics that would take advantage of the differences between the P-40 and the Zero. He taught his pilots to fight vertically rather than horizontally. Stay out of turning combat with the Zero, said Chennault. Climb high and dive out of the sun. Take advantage of the P-40's superior ability to dive. Fire in short bursts and do not break off until the last possible moment. Chennault also had his pilots fly in pairs to insure mutual support during dogfights.

Chennault put the Flying Tigers through rigorous training, both in the sky and in the classroom. At the same time, ground crews were honing their skills. By December 1941, Chennault reckoned his boys were ready for combat. Their principal mission was defense of the Burma Road. Supplies would be unloaded at Rangoon and shipped by rail to Lashio. From there on it was the dirt of the Burma Road, or mud when the monsoon arrived, all the way to Kunming. The Japanese were determined to close the road and strangle an exhausted China.

The 1st and 2nd squadrons were stationed at Kunming. Chennault would have preferred that all three squadrons be stationed at Kunming, but British pressure forced the Flying Tiger commander to station the 3rd squadron at Rangoon to aid the Royal Air Force (RAF). The pilots of the 3rd squadron were given quarters in the homes of British colonials who had been evacuated. Some of the accommodations were posh. Said Flying Tiger Bill Rossi, "I was staying at the home of a Scotsman, Bill Tweedy, and when he was evacuated he left all his clothes. I had quite a wardrobe for a while. We sort of took over



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

the servants and just lived there until we left. Tweedy said that when we were ready to leave we should shoot his dog and burn the house, because he didn't want them to fall into Japanese hands. Well, we couldn't shoot that dog, and we didn't burn down the house either."

Rangoon also had a few nightclubs, such as the Silver Grill, where the more adventurous and hard-drinking Flying Tigers would be found at night. Although Chennault frowned on drinking, Boyington and some others spent most evenings pounding drinks at one or another of the clubs. Recalled Ed Rector, "Quite often, we would party all night until the lorry would come at dawn to take us back to our planes." Rector said he wound up in the Flying Tigers because he had been fascinated with the Far East since reading Rudyard Kipling, and he thought America would never get into the war. "I had read everything that Kipling wrote twice over and that part of the world fascinated me. I was one of those naive people who thought we would never go to war."

Flying and Fighting

As it turned out, the Flying Tigers didn't engage the enemy for the first time until December 20, 1941, 12 days after the United States had declared war on Japan. Ten Japanese bombers, intent on bombing the airfield at Kunming, were intercepted by the Flying Tigers. Three of the bombers were sent burning and smoking into the ground and the other seven were badly damaged. Six of the seven crashed on their way home to Hanoi, which the Japanese were then occupying. Only one bomber safely returned to base. The Flying Tigers did not lose a plane.

The Flying Tigers at Rangoon got into their first action on December 23 when they engaged 54 Japanese bombers and 20 fighters. The pilots of the 3rd squadron shot down nine bombers and one fighter, but lost two planes and two pilots themselves. Two days later the Flying Tigers did even better. They had 12 P-40s waiting at altitude when a Japanese formation of 60 bombers and 30 fighters approached Rangoon. The Tigers shot down 15 bombers and nine fighters without losing a plane themselves. "It was like shooting ducks," exclaimed squadron leader Arvid Olson.

In the 10 weeks that the Flying Tigers served in Rangoon they never had more than 20 aircraft operational and sometimes as few as five. This small force intercepted more than 1,000 enemy aircraft over Burma in 31 different engagements and shot down 217 Japanese planes, confirmed, and another 43, probable. During the same period, the Hell's Angels of the 3rd squadron lost four pilots and 16 planes. Winston Churchill compared their defense of Rangoon with the RAF's defense of London. Said Churchill: "The victories [the Flying Tigers] have won may well prove comparable ... with the Battle of Britain."

Nonetheless, the situation in Rangoon became untenable by late February 1942. With the fall of Singapore in mid-February, the Japanese were able to release several air units to join the attack on Rangoon. Some 200 planes a day pounded Rangoon from the air, while the Japanese army moved overland. During the final days of Allied-occupied Rangoon, the 3rd squadron had only nine P-40s operational. On February 25, 166 Japanese planes attacked. The Flying Tigers shot down 24 of them. The Tigers had but six planes operational the next day when they met 200 of the enemy, yet they shot down 18 of them. Thus, in two days a handful of Flying Tigers intercepted 366 enemy planes and destroyed 43 of them, while suffering no losses themselves. Wrote one of the 3rd squadron Hell's Angels: "Has there ever been anything done like this before in aviation history? I do not think so."



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

During the spring of 1942, the Flying Tigers, operating out of Kunming and bases in Burma, continued to hit the Japanese with telling effect. However, the AVG was in desperate need of spare parts and planes to replace those lost. The Tigers received only a fraction of what they needed: 20 new P-40s and 2,000 lbs. of parts. The new P-40s were the latest model, though, the P-40E. The P-40E featured a more powerful Allison engine than the P-40B, 1,150 hp compared with 1,040, and was armed with six .50 caliber machine guns instead of four.

The Flying Tigers fought their last air battle on the Fourth of July 1942 and destroyed eight Japanese bombers. With that parting salvo, the American Volunteer Group was disbanded. Those pilots and ground crew who wanted to stay in China joined the U.S. Army's China Air Task Force, which was absorbed by the U.S. Army's 14th Air Force in March 1943.

The Tigers' Tracks

In a little more than six months of combat, the Flying Tigers shot down a confirmed 296 Japanese planes. Another 153 enemy planes were listed as probable kills. In strafing and bombing Japanese airfields the Flying Tigers destroyed some 200 Japanese planes. Although badly outnumbered in nearly every engagement, the Tigers lost only 16 of their pilots to enemy actions. The second leading ace of the Flying Tigers, David "Tex" Hill, said, "We have a record that is second to none." Tex Hill himself shot down a confirmed 11 Japanese planes and shared credit for a 12th. Hill went on to shoot down another six Japanese planes as a member of the 14th Air Force.

Tied as the third leading ace among the Flying Tigers was Chuck Older, who was credited with 10½ victories. Older got another eight kills as a member of the 14th Air Force. Following the war, Older became a lawyer and was eventually appointed to the California Superior Court bench by Governor Ronald Reagan. It was Judge Charles Older who presided over the trial of the infamous Charlie Manson.

One of those tied with Older was William Doyle McGarry. Before the war as a student at Loyola University, he was known for his artistic talent and ebullient personality. Both would serve him well with the Flying Tigers. It was McGarry who designed the Adam & Eve insignia for the 1st squadron. Late in March 1942, he was shot down by ground fire and imprisoned by the Japanese in Bangkok. Through three years of hell, he kept his spirits up, though, and with the help of Siamese and the OSS (forerunner of the CIA), he was taken out of the prison in a coffin after "dying in captivity." Back in the United States and with the war ended, he attended Loyola Law School and became a practicing attorney.

Two Flying Tigers would later be awarded the Medal of Honor: Jimmy Howard, while commanding the 356th Fighter Squadron in the skies over Europe, and Pappy Boyington, while commanding VMF 214, the Black Sheep squadron in the Pacific.

Most of the pilots of the AVG considered their service in Burma and China the adventure of a lifetime. When asked if he ever regretted joining the AVG, Robert T. Smith, who had nine kills to his credit, replied wryly, "Only on those occasions when I was being shot at."

Determined to stay in China and continue the air war against the Japanese, Claire Chennault accepted a commission as a colonel in the U.S. Army on April 15, 1942, and a week later was promoted to brigadier general in command of the China Air Task Force. He would be promoted to major general and made commander of the 14th Air Force in March 1943.



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

As he had in commanding the AVG, Chennault desperately needed good intelligence. What he wanted most was an American who spoke fluent Chinese, was well traveled in China, and was dedicated to fighting the Japanese. He heard about such a man from Col. Jimmy Doolittle, who on April 18, 1942, led B-25 Mitchell bombers off the carrier *Hornet* and bombed Tokyo. Doolittle crash-landed in China and made his way through Japanese forces aided by Chinese and an American missionary named John Birch.

Born in India to American missionary parents and reared in Georgia, Birch graduated from Mercer College in 1939. He then took an additional year of study at a Baptist Bible institute in Texas. In 1940, he went to China as a missionary. Following Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, he began thinking of a way to serve the U.S. Army in China. The aid he rendered to Doolittle and his crew won him praise from the colonel and an introduction to Claire Chennault. Highly impressed by the young American, Chennault commissioned him a 2nd lieutenant with duty as a field intelligence officer.

Birch served in this capacity to the end of the war, organizing an intelligence network and performing derring-do that earned him promotions to 1st lieutenant and captain and several decorations, including the Legion of Merit, pinned on him by Chennault himself. On August 25, 1945, nearly two weeks after Japan surrendered, Captain Birch was shot and then bayoneted, not by Japanese soldiers but by Chinese communists. Robert Welch, the founder of The John Birch Society, called his murder the beginning of our war with communism.

Chennault remained in command of the 14th Air Force to the end of the war. Having survived many controversies, but not without making powerful enemies, he retired as a major general in October 1945. Shortly before he died in 1958, he was given an honorary promotion to lieutenant general. To this day, the Republic of China continues to honor Chennault. The Republic even erected a statue of Chennault in downtown Taipei, the only monument to a foreigner in Taiwan.

In 1992, when all the secrecy surrounding the Flying Tigers was long in the past, they were recognized as members of the U.S. military during their aerial combat against the Japanese from December 1941 to July 1942. The AVG received a Presidential Unit Citation. Four years later the U.S. Air Force awarded all the pilots the Distinguished Flying Cross and ground crewmen the Bronze Star. The United States was a bit late to the party: Fifty years earlier, many of the Flying Tigers had been decorated by China and three of them — Charlie Bond, Tex Hill, and Ed Rector — were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross from Great Britain for their heroics in defending Rangoon.



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on October 10, 2016

Published in the October 10, 2016 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 32, No. 19

Subscribe to the New American

Get exclusive digital access to the most informative, non-partisan truthful news source for patriotic Americans!

Discover a refreshing blend of time-honored values, principles and insightful perspectives within the pages of "The New American" magazine. Delve into a world where tradition is the foundation, and exploration knows no bounds.

From politics and finance to foreign affairs, environment, culture, and technology, we bring you an unparalleled array of topics that matter most.



[Subscribe](#)

What's Included?

- 24 Issues Per Year
- Optional Print Edition
- Digital Edition Access
- Exclusive Subscriber Content
- Audio provided for all articles
- Unlimited access to past issues
- Coming Soon! Ad FREE
- 60-Day money back guarantee!
- Cancel anytime.