

# Flying Tigers

## American Volunteer Group



[Curtiss Tomahawk fighter plane](#) of the American Volunteer Group, painted with the shark-face emblem and the [12-point sun roundel](#) of the [Chinese Air Force](#). The plane was essentially identical to the [USAAF's P-40B](#).

<b>Active</b>	<a href="#">20 December 1941</a> – <a href="#">14 July 1942</a>
<b>Country</b>	<a href="#">Republic of China</a>
<b>Allegiance</b>	<a href="#">Volunteers</a>
<b>Branch</b>	<a href="#">Air force</a>
<b>Type</b>	<a href="#">Fighter group</a>
<b>Size</b>	3 <a href="#">squadrons</a> ; Approx. 90 aircraft
<b>Nickname</b>	“The Flying Tigers”

## Commanders

<b>Notable commanders</b>	<a href="#">Claire Chennault</a> <a href="#">Merian C. Cooper</a>
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The **Flying Tigers** was the nickname of the **American Volunteer Group** (AVG), a group of [United States Army Air Forces](#) (USAAF), [United States Navy](#) (USN), and [United States Marine Corps](#) (USMC) pilots and ground crew, recruited under a secret [Presidential](#) sanction by [Claire Chennault](#), that formed a [fighter](#) group with three [squadrons](#) that trained in [China](#) and defended the [Burma supply line](#) to China prior to the [American](#) entry into [World War II](#) to fight against [Japanese](#) forces.

The AVG did not see combat until [December 20, 1941](#), twelve days after [Pearl Harbor](#). The Flying Tigers achieved notable success against the forces of Japan during the lowest period of the war for American forces, and gave hope to Americans that they would eventually succeed against the Japanese. The Flying Tigers were credited for destroying almost 300 aircraft with a loss of only twelve of their own in combat. The AVG was disbanded in July 1942, to be replaced by U.S. Army units beginning with the [23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group](#), which was later absorbed into the [U.S. 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force](#) with General Chennault as the commander. The shark-faced fighters remain among the most recognizable of any individual combat unit of WWII, and they demonstrated innovative tactical

victories when the news in the USA were filled with little more than stories of defeat after defeat at the hands of the Japanese forces at the start of WWII.

## History



The Flying Tigers

The AVG was largely the creation of [Claire Chennault](#), a retired [U.S. Army Air Corps](#) captain who had become [military aviation](#) advisor to [Chinese Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek](#) in the [Sino-Japanese War](#). (On occasion Chennault may have piloted a plane himself, though stories that he was a combat ace are probably apocryphal.) Due to poor fighter aircraft supplied by Russia, results were not impressive, and when Russian air units were withdrawn from China in 1940, Chiang asked for American squadrons to replace them as well as permission to recruit US pilots to fly them. Since the US was not at war, this could not happen openly, but it received favorable assistance and approval from President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) himself.

The resultant clandestine operation was organized in large part by [Lauchlin Currie](#), a young economist in the White House, and by Roosevelt intimate [Thomas G. Corcoran](#). (Currie's assistant was [John King Fairbank](#), who later became America's preeminent Asian scholar.) The AVG financing was handled by China Defense Supplies, which was primarily Tommy Corcoran's creation, with funding provided by the U.S. government; purchases were then made by the Chinese under the "Cash and Carry" provision of the [Neutrality Act of 1939](#).



☐ A "[blood chit](#)" issued to the American Volunteer Group (**Flying Tigers**) pilots. The Chinese characters read: "This foreign person has come to China to help in the war effort. Soldiers and civilians, one and all, should rescue, protect, and provide him medical care." (R.E. Baldwin Collection)

## AVG Recruiting

Chennault spent the winter of 1940–1941 in Washington, helping to negotiate the purchase of 100 [Curtiss P-40](#) fighters. He also supervised the recruiting of 100 pilots—40 from the [Army Air Corps](#) and 60 from the [Navy](#) and [Marine Corps](#)—and about 200 ground crewmen. (Ten more army flight instructors were hired as check pilots for Chinese cadets, and a few of these would ultimately join the AVG's combat squadrons.)

The pilots who volunteered were discharged from the American armed services, to fly and fight as [mercenaries](#) for the [Republic of China Air Force](#).<sup>[1]</sup> They were officially employees of a [private military contractor](#), the [Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company](#), which employed them for "training and instruction", and which paid them \$600 a month for pilot officer (USAAF monthly pay in 1942, including flight and overseas pay, was \$247), \$675 a month for flight leader (such as [Gregory "Pappy" Boyington](#)) (USAAF \$347), and \$750 for Squadron leader (USAAF \$445), though no pilot was recruited at this level.<sup>[2]</sup> They were orally promised an additional \$500 for each enemy aircraft shot down, a promise that was later confirmed by [Madame Chiang Kai-shek](#), who also extended it to aircraft destroyed on the ground, but which obviously the U.S. services did not extend to their pilots.

Although sometimes referred to as a [mercenary](#) unit, the AVG had government funding and approval to recruit military pilots in the United States. Most histories of the Flying Tigers say that on [April 15, 1941](#) President Roosevelt signed a "secret [executive order](#)" authorising servicemen on active duty to resign from the U.S. military in order to sign up for the AVG. However, Flying Tigers historian Daniel Ford could find no evidence that such an order was ever published, and he argued that "a wink and a nod" was more the president's style.<sup>[3]</sup> Whether the order existed, the AVG was organized and in part directed out of the White House until the unit was disbanded.

## Formation of the AVG and the Chennault fighter doctrine

The 1st American Volunteer Group (AVG) was formed with plans for a follow-on bomber group and second fighter group that were aborted after the [Pearl Harbor](#) attack. During the summer and fall of 1941, 300 men posing as tourists and carrying passports that identified them as civilians boarded boats for Burma. They were initially based at a British airfield in Toungoo for their training while their aircraft were assembled and test flown. Chennault set up a schoolhouse type situation which was made all the more necessary because many pilots had "*lied about their flying experience, claiming pursuit experience when they had flown only bombers and sometimes much less powerful airplanes*"<sup>[1]</sup>. They called Chennault "the Old Man" due to his much older age and leathery exterior obtained from years flying open cockpit pursuit planes in the Army Air Corps.

Chennault preached a radically different approach to air combat based on his study of Japanese tactics and equipment, his observation of the tactics used by Russian pilots in China, and comparison of the relative strengths and weaknesses of his aircraft and pilots. Chennault's fighter doctrine dictated that pilots take on enemy aircraft in teams rather than alone from an altitude advantage, since their aircraft were neither as maneuverable nor as numerous as the Japanese fighters they would encounter. He prohibited his pilots from entering into a turning fight with the nimble Japanese fighters, telling them to execute a diving or slashing attack and continue to dive away with superior speed to set up for another attack. This was contrary to what most of the students had learned in the states as well as the local [Royal Air Force](#) (RAF) pilots in Burma thought; it had been used successfully, however, by Russian units serving with the Chinese Air Force.

Chennault had left the Army Air Corps as a brilliant teacher and aviator due to his outspoken ideas on potential of the pursuit fighter, which ran against the powerful bomber advocates. When Chennault

was recruited by the Chinese, he continued to be a leading advocate and theorist of fighter doctrine. He worked hard to create an ingenious early warning network of spotters that would give his fighters enough time to take off and climb to a superior altitude where this tactic could be executed. Many AVG pilots were inexperienced, and a few quit at the first opportunity. In addition, fighter planes were slow in coming. Real average strength of the AVG was never more than 62 combat-ready pilots and fighters. However, Chennault made a virtue out of these disadvantages, shifting inept pilots to staff jobs and always ensuring that he had a squadron or two in reserve.

## [\[edit\]](#) The Curtis P-40

Chennault managed to obtain the [Curtis P-40](#) that was in production for the British and Americans. The AVG fighters were taken off a Curtiss assembly line building Tomahawk IIB models for the Royal Air Force in North Africa. However, there is evidence that Curtiss-Wright used older assemblies in the aircraft sold to China, making them essentially the same as the U.S. Army's earlier P-40B model. (The major difference was that the P-40B/Tomahawk IIA had an exterior fuel-tank membrane, while the IIB had an interior membrane, believed by the RAF to be more effective at sealing fuel-tank leaks.) The planes were purchased without "government-furnished equipment" such as reflector gunsights, radios, and wing guns; the lack of these items caused continual difficulties for the AVG in Burma and China. It was actually an upgraded version of the popular [P-36](#) Hawk with an in-line engine. The P-40's good qualities included pilot armor, [self-sealing fuel tanks](#), sturdy construction, heavy armament (two 50-cal. and four 30-cal. machine guns), and a faster diving speed than most Japanese planes; used to advantage in accordance with Chennault's tactics as they would reach a higher altitude and then pounce upon Japanese planes. General Chennault was a masterful combat teacher and he taught his men unorthodox tactics which took advantage of the P-40's good qualities. Spare parts were almost impossible to obtain, though the AVG did receive 50 replacement P-40E fighters directly from USAAF stocks toward the end of its combat tour.

The 100 P-40 aircraft were crated and sent to Burma on third-country freighters during the spring of 1941. At Rangoon, they were unloaded and then assembled and test-flown by personnel of [Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company](#) (CAMCO) before being delivered to the AVG training unit at Toungoo. One crate was dropped into the water and a wing assembly was ruined by salt-water immersion, so CAMCO was able to deliver only 99 Tomahawks before war broke out. (Many of those were destroyed in training accidents.) The 100th fuselage was trucked to a CAMCO plant in Loiving, China, and later made whole with parts from damaged airplanes.

AVG fighter planes were painted with a large shark face on the front of the plane. This was done after pilots saw a photograph of RAF 112 Squadron in North Africa sporting a fierce shark mouth, which in turn had adopted the shark motif from German pilots flying Messerschmitt Bf-110 fighters in Crete. About the same time, the AVG was dubbed "The Flying Tigers" by their Washington support group, called China Defense Supplies.

## Combat history

The port of Rangoon in Burma and the [Burma Road](#) leading from there to China were of crucial importance for the Republic of China, as the eastern regions of China were under Japanese occupation so virtually all of the foreign [matériel](#) destined for the armed forces of the Republic arrived via that port. By November 1941, when the pilots were trained and most of the P-40s had arrived in Asia, the Flying Tigers were divided into three squadrons: 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron ("Adam & Eves"); 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron ("Panda Bears") and 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron ("Hell's Angels").<sup>[1]</sup> They were assigned to opposite ends of the Burma Road to protect this vital line of communications. Two squadrons were based at

[Kunming](#) in China and a third at [Mingaladon](#) near Rangoon. When the United States officially entered the war, the AVG had 82 pilots and 79 planes, though not all were combat-ready.

## First Combat

The AVG had their first combat on [December 20, 1941](#), when aircraft of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> squadrons intercepted 10 unescorted [Kawasaki Ki-48](#) "Lily" bombers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Hikotai raiding Kunming. Three of the Japanese bombers were shot down near Kunming and a fourth was damaged so severely that it crashed before returning to its airfield at Hanoi. No P-40s were lost through enemy action, and the bombers jettisoned their loads before reaching their target. Furthermore, the Japanese discontinued their raids on Kunming while the AVG was based there.

## Defense of Rangoon

At this time, the focus of Japan's offensive efforts in the AVG's coverage area was southern Burma. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron — 18 planes strong — defended [Rangoon](#) from [December 23-25](#). On December 23, [Mitsubishi Ki-21](#) "Sally" heavy bombers of the 60<sup>th</sup>, 62<sup>nd</sup> and 98<sup>th</sup> Sentais, along with single-engined [Mitsubishi Ki-30](#) "Ann" attack bombers of the 31<sup>st</sup> Sentai, sortied against Rangoon. They were escorted by [Nakajima Ki-27](#) "Nate" fighters of the 77<sup>th</sup> Sentai. The JAAF formation was intercepted by the AVG and RAF [Brewster Buffalos](#) of 67 Squadron. Eight Ki-21s were shot down for the loss of three AVG P-40s. The 60<sup>th</sup> Sentai was particularly hard hit — it lost five out of the fifteen bombers it had dispatched. But Rangoon and Mingaladon airfield were successfully bombed, with the city suffering more than a thousand dead. Two Buffalos and two P-40s were destroyed on the ground, and one P-40 crashed when it attempted to land on a bomb-damaged runway.

On December 25, the JAAF returned, reinforced by Ki-21s of the 12<sup>th</sup> Sentai and [Nakajima Ki-43](#) "Oscars" of the 64<sup>th</sup> Sentai. A total of 63 bombers escorted by 25 fighters were committed. These were intercepted by 12 P-40s of the AVG's 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron and 15 Buffalos of 67 Squadron. 10 Japanese aircraft were lost in the resulting battle: Two Ki-43s, Four Ki-27s and Four Ki-21s. The Allies lost five Buffalos and three P-40s. Mingaladon airfield was once again damaged — eight Buffalos were destroyed on the ground.

After its losses in the December 23-25 battles, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron was relieved by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron "Panda Bears", which carried out a series of raids on JAAF airbases in Thailand. The Japanese had moved aircraft to Malaya to finish off Singapore, and its remaining aircraft in the area (the 77<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> Sentais) launched fighter sweeps and counter raids on the Allied airfields at Mingaladon.

On January 12, the Japanese launched their [Burma Campaign](#). Significantly outnumbered, the AVG was gradually reduced through attrition, but often extracted a disproportionate toll of their attackers. On January 24, six Ki-21s of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sentai escorted by Ki-27s attacked Mingaladon — all the Ki-21s were shot down by the AVG and RAF defenders. On January 28, a fighter sweep of 37 Ki-27s were engaged by 16 AVG P-40s and two RAF fighters. Three "Nates" were shot down for the loss of two P-40s. The next day, another sweep of 20 Ki-27s of the 70<sup>th</sup> Sentai was met by 10 Allied fighters (Eight P-40s and two Hurricanes). Four were shot down for the loss of no Allied aircraft.

But despite these minor victories and Chennault's reinforcement of the "Panda Bears" with pilots from the "Adam and Eves", by mid-February only 10 P-40s were still operational at Mingaladon. Commonwealth troops retreated before the Japanese onslaught, and the AVG was pressed into the ground attack role to support them. One unfortunate result of these missions was a prolonged air attack on a suspected Japanese column on February 21 that turned out to consist of Commonwealth troops. More than 100 Allied lives were lost in this [friendly fire](#) incident. On February 27, after hearing

that the RAF was retreating and pulling out its radar equipment, the AVG withdrew to bases in northern Burma.

It's estimated that while defending Rangoon, the AVG destroyed 50 Japanese aircraft while losing 20 P-40s. 10 AVG pilots were either killed or listed as missing. This was a very credible performance, especially when considering that the AVG was outnumbered and faced experienced and fully-trained Japanese pilots. The main disadvantage of JAAF fighter pilots of this period was the near-obsolence of their predominant fighter type in the theater, the Ki-27. While possessing maneuverability that was superior to the P-40, its armament and performance was inferior. In fact, its cruising speed was less than that of the Ki-21 bombers it was intended to escort. Despite popular belief that even the pilots shared, the AVG never engaged [Mitsubishi A6M](#) "Zeroes" during its history. The "Zero-type" fighters they engaged were actually JAAF Ki-43 "Oscars", which looked similar and were even more maneuverable.

## **Magwe**

After Rangoon was lost to the Japanese at the end of February, the AVG relocated to Magwe, a small British airfield more than 300 miles north of Rangoon. Chennault started moving elements of the now reconstituted 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron to Magwe as reinforcement to his worn down 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> squadrons. Aircraft attrition became so high that at this point individual squadron distinctions became meaningless, and all three squadrons had elements based there, along with a number of RAF aircraft. In total the Allies had 38 aircraft, including eight P-40s and 15 [Hawker Hurricanes](#). Opposing them were 271 Japanese aircraft, including 115 fighters. Although the AVG and the RAF scored some successes against the JAAF, Magwe was continuously bombed, including a very heavy raid on March 21 by 151 bombers and fighters. On March 23 with only four aircraft left, the AVG was forced to relocate to Loiwing, just across the Chinese border.

## **Loiwing**

Reinforced both by new P-40E "Kittyhawks" and repaired aircraft from the AVG's excellent maintenance group, 12 P-40s were based at Loiwing on April 8. Despite the long retreats, their losses and incessant air combat, the AVG still retained their abilities. That day 12 [Nakajima Ki-43](#) Hayabusa "Oscars" from the 64<sup>th</sup> Sentai raided the base. In the ensuing series of dogfights, four Oscars were downed in exchange for one P-40E destroyed on the ground. During this period, Chinese and American commanders pressured Chennault to order his pilots to undertake so-called "Morale Missions". These were ground attack missions that were intended to raise the morale of hard-pressed Chinese soldiers by showing they were getting air support. The AVG's pilots seethed with resentment at these dangerous missions (which some considered useless), a feeling which culminated in the so-called "Pilot's Revolt" of mid-April. Chennault suppressed the "Revolt" and ordered the ground attack missions continued. But despite their efforts, the Allied situation in Burma continued to deteriorate. On April 29 the AVG was ordered to evacuate Loiwing and relocate to Baoshan in China.

## **Baoshan**

Like the AVG's other bases, Baoshan was repeatedly bombed. Still, the AVG scored against their JAAF tormenters, bringing down four "Nates" of the 11<sup>th</sup> Sentai and two "Anns" on May 5. By May 4, the successful Japanese Burma offensive was winding down, except for mopping up actions. One of these was an attempt by a regiment of the Japanese 56<sup>th</sup> division to drive for Kunming, an effort that was stopped by the Chinese army operating with strong air support from the AVG. Despite being on the defensive, the AVG continued to harass the JAAF with raids on their Vietnamese bases.

## Last Combats

With the Burma campaign over, Chennault redeployed his squadrons to provide air protection for China. The [Doolittle Raid](#) had prompted the Japanese to launch an offensive to seize AVG air bases that could be used as launching points for attacks on the Japanese homeland. By June 1, personnel that would form the nucleus of the new USAAF 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group (the AVG's replacement) were beginning to trickle into the theater. Some of the last missions the AVG flew were defending Guilin against raids conducted by JAAF Nates, Lilies and new [Kawasaki Ki-45 Toryu](#) "Nick" heavy fighters. The AVG's last combat was defending Hengyang on the day it was disbanded, [July 4](#). In this final action, four Ki-27s were shot down for no loss.

## Assessment of the AVG

The AVG was officially credited with 297 enemy aircraft destroyed, including 229 in the air, based on the Chennault papers, combat reports, and CAMCO records.<sup>[4]</sup> Another researcher interviewed Japanese veterans that were engaged with the AVG and came up with a much lower number of victories (115) based on Japanese accounts.<sup>[5]</sup>



Flight leader and fighter ace [Robert "R.T." Smith](#) stands next to his P-40 fighter at [Kunming, China](#). The "Flying Tiger" insignia was created by the [Walt Disney](#) Company.

Fourteen pilots were killed in action, captured, or disappeared on combat missions; two died of wounds sustained in bombing raids; and six were killed in accidents during the Flying Tigers' existence as a combat force. Even when using the lower figure of Japanese aircraft downed, the AVG's impressive kill ratio was superior to that achieved by contemporary Allied air groups in Malaya, the Philippines and elsewhere. This ratio is all the more remarkable since the AVG was outnumbered by enemy fighters in almost all its engagements. While it's true that the AVG's P-40s were superior to the Ki-27 "Nates" they fought, the AVG's kill ratio against modern Ki-43s "Oscars" was still in their favor. In his excellent book, *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and His American Volunteers, 1941-1942*, Daniel Ford attributes the AVG's success to morale and group esprit. He notes that its pilots were "triple volunteers" who had volunteered for service with the US military, the AVG, and brutal fighting in Burma. The result was a corps of experienced and skilled volunteer pilots who wanted to fight.

## Notable AVG Personalities

One of the more famous pilots was [Gregory "Pappy" Boyington](#), who was discharged from the AVG in April 1942 and returned to active duty with the US Marine Corps. He went on to command the successful ["Black Sheep" Squadron](#) in the [Solomon Islands](#), an outfit with many similarities to the Flying Tigers, and was one of two AVG veterans (the other being James Howard of the USAAF) to be awarded the Medal of Honor. Other notable AVG veterans were [David Lee "Tex" Hill](#), later commander of the USAAF 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group; [Charles Older](#), who postwar earned a law degree, became a California Superior Court judge, and presided at the murder trial of [Charles Manson](#); and [Kenneth Jernstedt](#), long-time Oregon legislator and mayor of his home town of Hood River. Robert Prescott founded the [Flying Tiger Airline](#) along with other AVG pilots: Dick Rossi, Robert Raine, Joe Rosbert, Tom Haywood, Robert "Duke" Hedman, Link Laughlin, Cliff Groh, Bus Loane, and Robert Bartling.

## 2nd AVG

In November of 1941, CAMCO hired 82 pilots and 359 technicians for the 2nd AVG. They were to have been equipped with [Lockheed Hudson](#) and [Douglas DB-7](#) Boston light bombers waiting for them in Burbank, California. The plan had been for the Hudsons to fly to their destination, while the Bostons were to be sent on ships. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the pilots and their planes were re-inducted into the U.S. Army. Earlier, however, on [November 21](#), a number of technicians and pilots had already left for Burma aboard the ships *Noordam* and *Bloemfontein*. By the time of the attack, they were already out to sea in the Pacific. Rather than being called back to Pearl Harbor the ships were diverted to Australia, where they arrived sometime toward the end of December. In Australia, they were inducted into the U.S. Army. Some went on to serve in the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force, and some went home.

## Transition into USAAF

The success of the AVG led to negotiations in the spring of 1942 to induct the unit into the USAAF with Chennault as the commander. Chennault was reinstated into the USAAF as a colonel and immediately promoted to brigadier general as commander of tactical U.S. Army Air Forces units in China, (initially designated the "China Air Task Force" and later redesignated the [14<sup>th</sup> Air Force](#)), while continuing to command the AVG by virtue of his position in the [Chinese Air Force](#). On [July 4, 1942](#), the AVG was replaced by the 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group. Not all of the AVG pilots decided to remain with the unit as a result of the strong arm tactics by the USAAF general sent to negotiate with them. However, five pilots accepted commissions in China including "Tex" Hill, one of Chennault's most loyal devotees, with others remaining for a two-week transition period. (U.S. airmen and the press continued to use the "Flying Tiger" name to refer to USAAF units in China to the end of the war, and the name continues to be applied to certain air force and army aviation squadrons.) Most AVG pilots became transport pilots in China, went back to America into civilian jobs, or rejoined the military services and fought elsewhere in the war.

One of the pilots drawn to the success of the AVG was [Robert Lee Scott, Jr.](#) who was flying supplies into Kunming over [the Hump](#) from India. He convinced Chennault to loan him a P-40 which he began flying as a one man air force to protect the supply route. His aggressiveness and success led to Chennault recruiting him as commander of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group. Scott brought recognition to his exploits and the Flying Tigers with his best selling book [God is My Co-pilot](#) that was also made into a popular movie.

## Recognition of the AVG



Just before their 50th reunion in 1992, the AVG veterans were retroactively recognized as members of the U.S. military services during the seven months the group was in combat against the Japanese. The AVG was then awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for "professionalism, dedication to duty, and extraordinary heroism." In 1996, the U.S. Air Force awarded the pilots the Distinguished Flying Cross and the ground crew were all awarded the Bronze Star.

33 AVG personnel received the Nationalist Chinese Order of the Cloud Banner, and many AVG pilots received the Nationalist Chinese Air Force Medal.

## AVG Aces

As with all air forces, there was overclaiming by the AVG due to the confusion and speed of air combat. For example, in the big Christmas Day battle over Rangoon, AVG and RAF pilots claimed 28 Japanese aircraft while 10 were actually lost. In the same combat, Japanese Army Air Force pilots and gunners claimed 36 Allied aircraft while eight were actually shot down. It would only be after the war that true combat losses could be determined by comparing the after action and loss reports of the combatants.

Nineteen pilots were credited by the AVG with five or more air-to-air victories<sup>[6]</sup>:

- [Robert Neale](#): 13 victories
- [David Lee Hill](#): 10.25 victories
- [George Burgard](#): 10 victories
- [Robert Little](#): 10 victories
- [Charles Older](#): 10 victories
- [Robert T. Smith](#): 8.9 victories
- [William McGarry](#): 8 victories
- [Charles Bond](#): 7 victories
- [Frank Lawlor](#): 7 victories
- [John Newkirk](#): 7 victories
- [Robert Hedman](#): 6 victories
- [C. Joseph Rosbert](#): 6 victories
- [J. Richard Rossi](#): 6 victories
- [Robert Prescott](#): 5.5 victories
- [Percy Bartelt](#): 5 victories
- [William Bartling](#): 5 victories
- [Edmund Overend](#): 5 victories
- [Robert Sandell](#): 5 victories
- [Robert H. Smith](#): 5 victories

## Legacy

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[Unverifiable](#) material may be [challenged and removed](#). (tagged since **November 2006**)

Many in China have not forgotten the Flying Tigers. Many model aircraft bear the slogan "Ding Hao", which means "very good" or "hot stuff" in Chinese, and there are pictures and movies of Chinese making a thumbs up gesture at American pilots. Some Chinese fathers who lived from the period told their sons that it was actually the American pilots who picked up the Chinese gesture for "you are

number one", and people from China today can confirm the meaning of this gesture. This gesture appeared about the same time as the AVG deployment.

[Thumbs up](#) remains a common signal among U.S. and other combat pilots. The blood chit on the back of leather flying jacket complete with Chinese writing and flag is still a common fashion statement even to those who have never heard of the Flying Tigers. Toy and hobby stores still stock model and toys of shark-mouthed Tomahawks, some with the [Chinese Nationalist](#) insignia. One 1960s magazine even featured a Flying Tiger shooting peas in a food magazine.

The Special Duties Unit of the Hong Kong Police is nicknamed the Flying Tigers after the AVG.

After World War II, ten ex-Flying Tigers pilots formed a cargo airline named [Flying Tiger Line](#), after the AVG. Flying Tiger Line operated for forty years, and was the largest cargo airline in the world for some time. It was eventually purchased by [Federal Express](#).

In the [Starlancer](#) computer game, the protagonist's unit, the 45th Volunteers, is christened "The Flying Tigers" halfway through the single player campaign, in direct reference to the World War II unit.

The 401st FW of ROCAF was once named "Flying Tigers" Group since its predecessor, the 5th FG was once a part of Claire Chennault's Chinese American Composite Wing.

The former barracks of the Flying Tigers in [Yunnan](#) is now home to the official state-run factory for Chinese [Go equipment](#), and is the only factory in the world producing the centuries-old material [Yunzi](#) for export.

One of the ten Basic Training squadrons at the [United States Air Force Academy](#) is called the Flying Tigers, also in direct reference to the AVG.

The Franco-Belgian comic strip [Buck Danny](#) revives the Flying Tigers twice in the spirit as the original FT were created, even with short history blurbs referencing to the original FT. {Les Tigres Volants (The Flying Tigers), Le Retour des Tigres Volants (The Return of the Flying Tigers), Les Tigres Volants à la rescousse (The Flying Tigers to the Rescue), Tigres Volants contre Pirates (Flying Tigers versus Pirates)}

## Memorials

The [National Museum of the United States Air Force](#) in [Dayton, Ohio](#) has an extensive display dedicated to the AVG. The museum's wall and glass cases contain a description of the AVG's history as well as many artifacts, including an [A-2 jacket](#) worn by an AVG pilot while flying in China, and the Flying Tigers banner presented to the AAF by the Chinese government during WWII. The museum's P-40E is displayed nearby.

The [National Museum of Naval Aviation](#) in [Pensacola, Florida](#) also features a prominent Flying Tiger display reflecting the fact that so many Navy and Marine Corps aviators were part of the AVG.

The AVG monument in the [National Museum of the United States Air Force](#) Memorial Garden is one of the largest and most recognizable monuments in the garden. It features a large marble sculpture of a [pagoda](#) crowned with a brass model of a P-40. Below the airplane are three balls representing the three balls hoisted upon a pole used to alert the AVG of an incoming Japanese air attack. On the [pagoda](#)'s sides are etched the emblems of the AVG and 14th AF. Below are eight etchings of the many aircraft operated by the AAF in the [China](#). On the sides of the memorial's base are four

etchings of [paddy fields](#), the [Himalayan Mountains](#), and scenes of daily life in [China](#) during the war. The monument stands nearly 14 feet tall and was dedicated by the Flying Tigers of the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force Association on July 10, [1992](#).

A memorial to the AVG and the 14<sup>th</sup> AF is located at [Vandenberg Air Force Base](#) in [California](#). It depicts a P-40 in AVG markings with a bronze plaque describing the history of the AVG, and Vandenberg's role as headquarters for the 14<sup>th</sup> AF.

A memorial to the AVG in Chiang Mai, [Thailand](#) was dedicated on November 11, [2003](#). The [marble obelisk](#) is inscribed on all four sides with dedications to Chennault and three AVG pilots, Squadron Leader Jack Van Kuren Newkirk, who was killed in North [Thailand](#) on March 24, [1942](#), as well as Flight Leader Charles Mott and wingman William McGarry, who were shot down and became Japanese [POWs](#) in Thailand.

In Taiwan, Madame Chiang Kai-Shek requested a statue of Claire Lee Chennault in the New Park of Taipei to commemorate this wartime friend of ROC after his death. Today, the statue is relocated at Hualian AFB of the ROCAF. the 401st Fighters Wing, originally the 5th Fighters Group stationed there had a deep connection with Chennault's CACW during WWII!

The Flying Tigers Memorial is located in the village of [Zhijiang](#), [Hunan Province](#), [China](#) and is the only museum in the world dedicated exclusively to the Flying Tigers. Zhijiang had formerly been one of Chennault's headquarters for the 14<sup>th</sup> AF. The memorial originally opened in 2003 in the former headquarters building. In 2005 the memorial was completely rebuilt, with displays incorporating many of the artifacts obtained from the AVG veterans who had attended the first dedication. The memorial reopened in September, [2005](#), with several AVG pilots and their families again present at the dedication. The new memorial building is a beautiful steel and marble structure, with wide sweeping steps leading up to a platform with columns holding up the memorial's sweeping roof. Inside is the replica [G-1 jacket](#) AVG pilot Richard "Dick" Rossi had donated at the first dedication. On the memorial's back wall, etched in black marble, are the names of all members of the Flying Tigers (AVG, 75<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force) who died in [China](#). 8"x10" photos of most AVG Flying Tigers pilots and administrators are displayed throughout the museum, as well as blown-up illuminated paintings of AVG scenes by artists John Shaw and Roy Grinnell. On one wall a 1/4 scale model of the nose of a P-40 protrudes with its propellers spinning and engine puffing smoke, while below a diorama depicts the village of Zhijiang being attacked by Japanese bombers.

As an important airbase of the Flying Tigers in South China, the city of Kunming and its people will never forget the sacrifices of those young American pilots. In 2005 the city of Kunming held a ceremony memorializing the history of the Flying-Tigers in China. A lot of pilots of that time or their generation came to Kunming to commemorate that period in history.

## **Flying Tigers wrecks**

Two P-40 wrecks exist that are believed to be aircraft operating with the Flying Tigers at the time they were lost.

- The wreckage of a P-40E with CAF engine serial number P-8115 is currently on display at Chiang Mai Air Force Base in [Thailand](#). The aircraft is believed to be the P-40 flown by William "Mac" McGarry when he was hit by anti-aircraft fire while flying over Chang Mai on March 24, [1942](#). The aircraft crashed into the [rain forest](#) in northern [Thailand](#). William McGarry was captured and interrogated, and would spend the rest of the war in a Thai prison. The wreck was discovered in northern Thailand in [1991](#), and consists of the P-40E's Allison engine,

Hamilton Standard propeller, as well as various parts of the airframe. Today the wreckage is displayed on the floor of a building on the Air Force Base in much the same condition and arrangement as it was found.

- The wreck of an AVG P-40E is believed to still remain in [Lake Dianchi](#) (Lake Kunming). The airplane is believed to be P-40E No. 68, which had 10 kills during its 8 months in China, and was piloted by John Blackburn when it crashed into the lake while on a gunnery training flight on April 28, [1942](#), killing the pilot. His body was quickly recovered from the aircraft, which was submerged in 20 feet of water, and the P-40E was allowed to remain on the bottom of the lake. In 1997 a joint U.S.-Chinese group was formed to locate the airplane and possibly raise and restore it. Called the Sino-American Aviation Heritage Foundation, in March 1998 they contacted the China Expedition Association about conducting the recovery operation. Over 300 aircraft are believed to have crashed into Lake Dianchi (including a second AVG P-40E) so locating the aircraft has proven very difficult. In 2003 an aircraft believed to be the P-40E No. 68 was found embedded in 9 feet of bottom silt. An effort was made in September, [2005](#) to raise the aircraft, but the recovery has continued to be plagued with difficulties and the aircraft remains deep under the lake bottom. Since the aircraft was complete and relatively undamaged when John Blackburn's body was removed from it in April, [1942](#), it is hoped that the aircraft will be in good condition and capable of being restored, possibly to flying condition.

## See also

- [Eagle Squadron](#)—American volunteers in the RAF during World War II
- [Kościuszko Squadron](#)—American volunteers fighting for Poland in the [Polish-Soviet War](#) (1919-1921).
- [Lafayette Escadrille](#)—American volunteers in the French Air Service during World War I
- [Second Sino-Japanese War](#)
- [History of the Republic of China](#)
- [Military of the Republic of China](#)
- [Chiang Kai-shek](#)
- [Madame Chiang Kai-shek](#)
- [Kuomintang](#)
- [Zhejiang-Jiangxi Campaign](#)
- [Soviet Volunteer Group](#)
- [Curtis P-40 Warhawk](#)

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- [Flying Tigers Association veterans' group](#)
- [The "Flying Tiger" insignia](#)