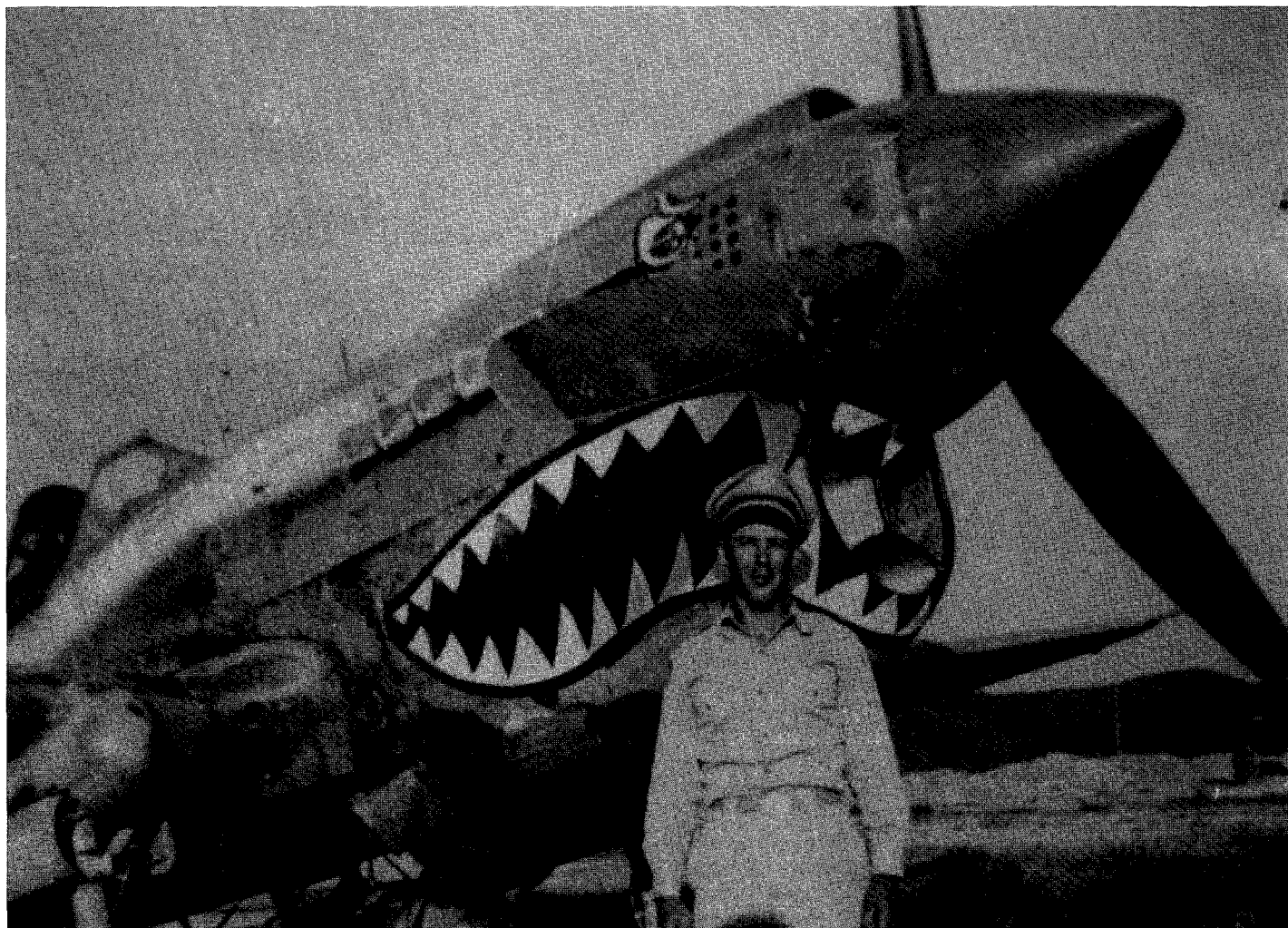




American Hawks for China

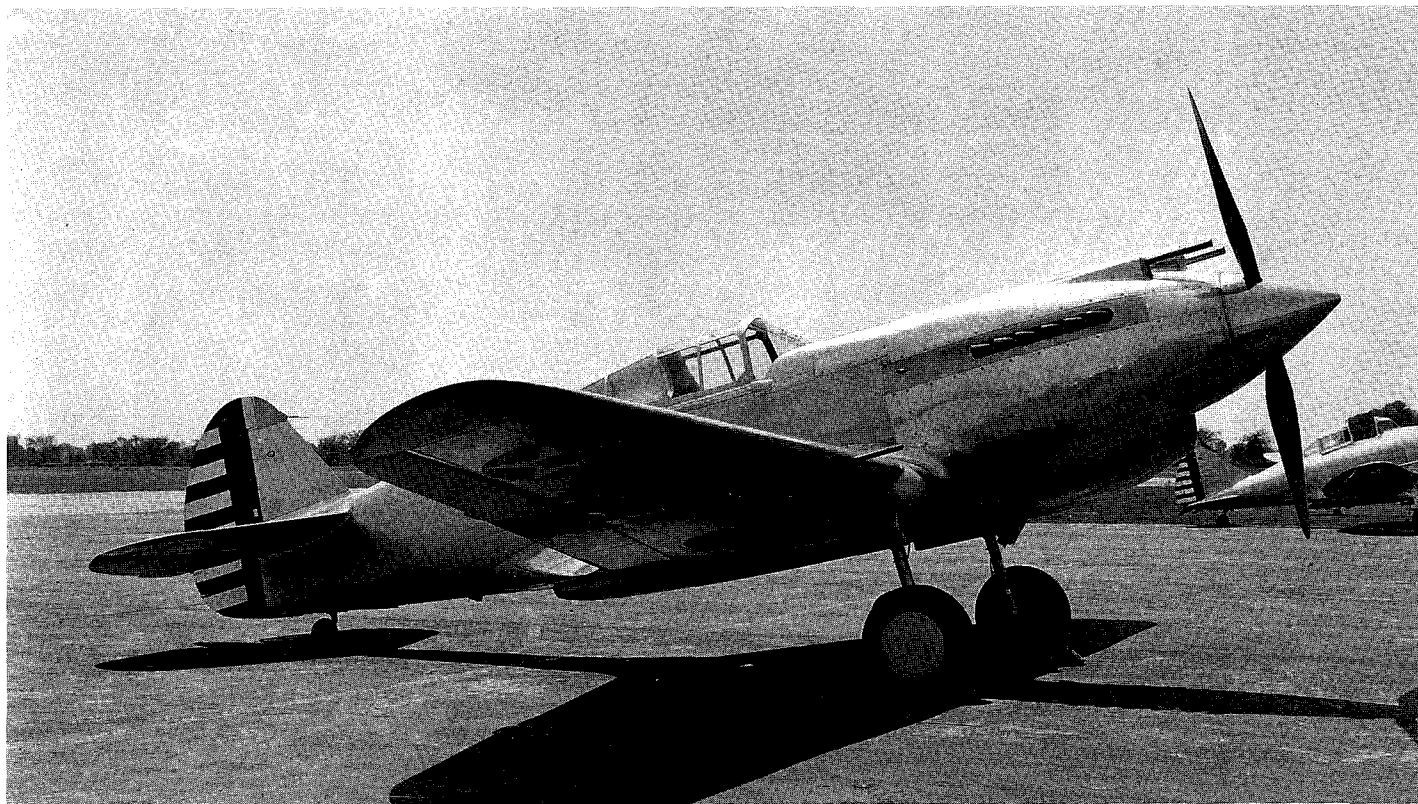
Part II: The Special Air Unit, 1940-1941

by Daniel Ford

CLAIRE CHENNAULT AND GENERAL MAO PANG-CHU came to Washington at the end of October 1940. Working in the apartment of economist Arthur Young, they drew up the details of a "Special Air Unit" to protect Chongqing, support Chinese armies in the field, and take the war to Japan. (They banished Mrs. Young to the next room, but she heard the discussion anyhow. Young and Mao had to speak loudly in deference to the airman, his hearing ruined by years of open-cockpit flying.) In the end, they decided to ask for 350 fighters, 150 twin-engined bombers, 10 transports, and 190 trainers. China would also need gasoline, spare parts, antiaircraft guns, building materials, and 350 American technicians and flight instructors—but no pilots, unless the instructors were to be understood as such. On November 25, Ambassador T.V. Soong presented this shopping list to the committee that allocated U.S. war material.

Warplanes were pouring out of U.S. factories at a prodigious rate—10 a day in the case of the Curtiss-Wright plant in Buffalo. (By contrast, Mitsubishi could build only one A6M Zero fighter per day.) Most would go to the Royal Air Force. In October 1940, the British had 11,000 planes under construction in the United States; in November they ordered 12,000 more; and in December they would ask for another 2,000 planes *per month*. After the RAF came the U.S. military, which was in the happy position of buying small quantities of each design after it had been battle-tested, and after the price was driven down by British orders. Then came such potential allies as Sweden, Greece, and Brazil. But nobody was interested in releasing planes for China. Compared to the epic conflict among the white nations of Europe, the Sino-

An unknown American volunteer was photographed with his P-40 Hawk between missions against the Japanese. (Walter Pentecost Collection)



Japanese War was a sideshow—"yellow man killing yellow man," in the words of *Time* magazine.

While T.V. Soong made the rounds in Washington, Chiang Kai-shek played the tough cop from Chongqing, warning President Roosevelt that the Japanese were setting up a rival government in Nanjing under a renegade named Wang Ching-wei. With his puppet army holding eastern China, Japan would be able to drive south and seize the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). The Pacific was not *that* much of a sideshow. Roosevelt sent an aide to see the clever and useful Thomas Corcoran at 1511 K Street, four blocks from the White House.

Corcoran happily performed the favor that was asked of him: "to check with my friends on Capitol Hill . . . and predict the reaction . . . if the president sent modest aid to China just to forestall Chiang's surrender." He also interviewed Claire Chennault, apparently at the president's request. "If he had left in the first 10 minutes," Corcoran mused, "I would have written him off as a fanatic." But in their one-hour talk, the aviator convinced the fixer. Corcoran told the president that Chennault was just the man to take charge of China's clandestine air force. "Roosevelt sent back orders for me to take Chennault around town and introduce him to . . . influential men who could keep their mouths shut"—General George Marshall among them.

On December 12, Chennault briefed the Army chief of staff about the Japanese fighter that had destroyed 57 Chinese interceptors in August. Marshall duly warned the Secretary of State about this "new fast pursuit plane [that] has grounded all the Chinese Air Force," and he passed the word to U.S. Army commanders in Hawaii and the Philippines. They ignored the warning. If Chennault was to be believed, then the Mitsubishi A6M Zero was better than

anything in the U.S. inventory—but that could not be. Everyone knew that the Japanese only built inferior copies of Western machines.

CHINA COULD NEVER EXPORT ENOUGH RAW MATERIALS to pay for the supplies it wanted. A cash infusion was necessary, so Henry Morgenthau called his staff together on November 29. "The president just called me," he said—a man whose feet had been held to the fire. "He is worried about China and he is evidently worried about something going on between Wang and Chiang, and he wants me to make a . . . loan of \$50 million to the Chinese in the next 24 hours." Sure enough, T.V. Soong turned up next day, blinking benignly through his round lenses: the nice cop. "Well now," Morgenthau began, "let me ask you, how much money have you in mind?"

"General Chiang asked for between \$200 million and \$300 million, that is what he asked for."

"What will you take?"

"Well, we are not choosers, Mr. Secretary."

"But as to take care of the immediate situation. . . ."

"I should imagine \$100 million," Soong said.

Morgenthau asked who else knew about this request, equal to more than a billion of today's depreciated dollars. No fool, Soong had already forwarded a memo to the White House. "Well now," Morgenthau sighed, "was there any time factor in there?"

"It is very urgent," Soong said, "because of the Japanese recognition of Wang Ching-wei."

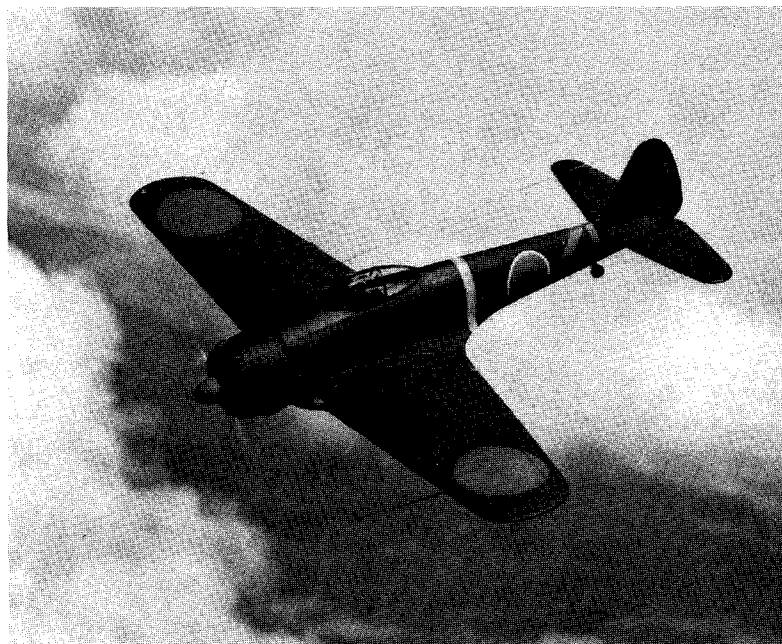
Don't forget the tough cop: Chiang Kai-shek might come to terms with Japan if the United States tried to bargain him down. Realizing that he reached the bottom line, Morgenthau asked: "What would you call a minimum that might be

Curtiss P-40 on the tarmac at Selfridge Field. (Seversky P-35 in the background.) The Army Air Corps bought 200 of these planes in 1939; hundreds more were ordered by the French and taken over by the British after the fall of France. Called *Tomahawks* by the RAF, they were mostly used as trainers while Curtiss built an improved model with pilot armor, self-sealing fuel tanks, and two more wing guns.

(AAC Photo from Author's Collection)

Zero! No, this Japanese fighter with its clean lines and retractable landing gear was actually the Nakajima Ki-43—the *Hayabusa* or *Falcon*. Because they had been given recognition sketches of the Navy fighter, Chennault's pilots naturally reported that they were meeting "O types" over Burma. The *Hayabusa* was actually more maneuverable than a *Zero*, but was armed only with two machine guns and had a fatal weakness where the wing was attached to the fuselage.

(NASM, USAF Photo Collection)



helpful?"

"I should say \$100 million," Soong repeated.

"Okay," Morgenthau said.

So it was settled, except for where to get the planes. Morgenthau learned that Curtiss had contracted to deliver 630 liquid-cooled H81 fighters for the Royal Air Force before March 1941, when it would switch to the more powerful H82. The company had parts to build more H81s, and it wanted to do so to use up the inventory and keep its plant running at capacity. China's needs could be met by extending the production run, Morgenthau thought. But he did not mention this possibility to Soong when they met on Sunday, December 8. Instead they talked bombers:

After lunch at the White House, T.V. Soong was with me going back in the car and . . . I said that I had read General Chiang Kai-shek's memorandum [about the "Special Air Unit"]. I said, "Well, his asking for 500 planes is like asking for 500 stars." I then said that we might get him planes by 1942, but what did he think of the idea of some long-range bombers with the understanding that they were to be used to bomb Tokyo and other Japanese cities? Well, to say he was enthusiastic is putting it mildly.

Within a week, Soong came back with a higher bid. What China really needed was that marvel of American engineering, the four-engined Boeing B-17, so jealously guarded that even the British had not been able to get their hands on it. Chiang Kai-shek pressed the matter in a December 16 telegram to Roosevelt: "I am most anxious to acquire as many of your latest *Flying Fortresses* as you could spare . . . complemented by a proportionate number of pursuits and medium bombers." Thus armed, he promised to recapture East China, prevent a Japanese attack on Singapore, and bomb Japan.

On December 19, Roosevelt discussed the request with Morgenthau, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Navy secretary Frank Knox, and Army secretary Henry Stimson. (Mrs. Stimson called this inner circle the "Plus Four.") Soong had given Morgenthau a map of 136 Chinese airfields, one of them 600 miles from Sasebo Navy base. Roosevelt was impressed but wanted more details, and he knew just who should provide them. "This Colonel Chennault," Morgenthau said to Soong next day, "where is he?"

"He is here now in Washington," Soong assured him.

Morgenthau then broached a subject that had been off

limits until now: "I said, and I hope you will back me up, that if they could get [pilots] who knew how to fly these four-engine bombers, that China would be glad to pay them up to \$1,000 a month in United States dollars. Was that too high?"

"No," said Soong. "Not at all." It was American money, after all.

The China lobby met at Morgenthau's house on Saturday evening. The Treasury secretary put his questions to Soong, who bucked them to General Mao, who passed them to Chennault. In this roundabout fashion, they decided that Army Air Corps crews would fly the B-17s to the Philippines, where the pilots and bombardiers would be released from active duty and paid \$1,000 a month to operate them in China. Each plane would have five American mechanics, while the Chinese provided gunners and radio operators. Then Morgenthau suggested that the B-17s carry incendiary bombs, "inasmuch as the Japanese cities were all made of just wood and paper." A good idea, Chennault agreed. Incendiaries being lighter than high explosives, the B-17s would be able to carry more gasoline and penetrate deeper into Japanese airspace.

Let there be no doubt of what they were planning: that U.S. planes and U.S. pilots, wearing Chinese insignia, were to set Japan on fire. That they got no further was due to Henry Stimson. The B-17 scheme was "half-baked," the Army secretary decided, so he asked Knox and Morgenthau to his home on Sunday "to get some mature brains into it." The brains were General Marshall's, and the civilians immediately capitulated to his cool logic. (Marshall did not want to send *any* planes to China, but he was unwilling to buck the president on this matter.)

By Monday, only the *Tomahawks* were still on the table. That meeting was held at the State Department and included the Plus Four, Marshall, and Admiral Harold Stark for the Navy. Morgenthau announced that Curtiss could build 300 extra fighters in the spring of 1941, and how should they be spread around? Like boys choosing sides in a baseball game, the great men haggled:



Cigarette break at Wu Chia Ba. From left, a CAF liaison officer, executive officer Harvey Greenlaw, communications officer John Williams, and Chennault, all wearing Chinese insignia. Greenlaw was a West Pointer who ended up on the shores of China as an aircraft salesman, while Williams left the U.S. Army in 1939 to teach radio to Chinese cadets. (Flying Tigers Assoc.)

Squadron Leader Arvid Olson in the cockpit of his *Tomahawk* at Kyedaw airfield late in 1941. The *Tomahawk* has been painted in full AVG regalia, and has both the Curtiss-supplied ring sight and a homemade optical sight inside the windscreen. Olson's 1st Squadron had wing guns equipped with 7.9mm Colts built for the Asian market, while other squadrons had .303-cal. Brownings. (NASM)

Secretary Hull suggested that [the planes] be divided 150 to China, 120 to South America, and 30 for the Greeks. General Marshall said that he had a list of the various South American countries [and their needs]. Secretary Knox stated that 150 would have to go to the British. To which Secretary Stimson added that the war was in Europe and the Far East, not in South America; therefore the planes would go to the British and the Chinese. . . .

[I]t was resolved that the [planes] should be divided equally between the British and the Chinese. [But] if the British gave up current deliveries to the Chinese, then the British should receive planes on a two-for-one basis. In other words, the British would give up to the Chinese 50 in January, 25 in February, and 25 in March, making a total of 100, but she would get back 300 later in the spring, giving her a net gain of 200.

The British had already agreed to buy the planes, so Roosevelt was able to approve the deal that same afternoon, December 23. Morgenthau met with the British that evening to decide where the "GFE"—government-furnished equipment—was to come from. They agreed that the engines would be diverted from another British order, that the U.S. would provide .50-cal. nose guns for half the planes, and that the RAF would install British gunsights, radios, and .303-cal. wing guns when the *Tomahawks* reached North Africa. (Like the rest of the nose guns, much of this stuff could be cannibalized from planes no longer fit for combat.) Unfortunately, neither Morgenthau nor the British raised the question of "GFE" for the 100 planes going to China.

CHENNAULT WENT TO BUFFALO AFTER CHRISTMAS. This may have been his first view of the H81, though he knew the basic airframe as well as his face in the mirror: it was the H75 *Mohawk* he had flown in China. No sooner had the U.S. Army adopted the radial-engined Curtiss fighter as the P-36 than it was outclassed by warplanes coming on line in Europe, the Messerschmitt Bf-109 in Germany and the Hawker *Hurricane* in Britain. The Army asked Curtiss to beef up its plane, which chief designer

Donovan Berlin did by replacing its Pratt & Whitney engine with a liquid-cooled Allison V-1710 built by General Motors. The horsepower was the same, but the Allison's in-line design allowed Berlin to give the fighter a streamlined nose, greatly increasing its speed. At the same time, its appearance changed radically. Where the P-36 led off with the stubby, no-nonsense look typical of air-cooled fighters, the P-40 was slender as a fish, its lines broken only by an air scoop beneath the propeller cone.

Chennault did not like liquid-cooled engines, for a single bullet could pierce the Prestone system, let the coolant run out, and disable the aircraft. But he liked other features of the Curtiss fighter. The original P-40—*Tomahawk*, in British service—boasted two .50-cal. machine guns in its nose and two .30-cal. machine guns in the wings, but the RAF had since called for two more machine guns, a bullet-resistant windshield, armorplate for the pilot, and wraparound membrane for the fuel tanks. This was the *Tomahawk* II or P-40B. By the time Chennault visited Buffalo, the wraparound membrane had been replaced by an inside lining, which did a better job of sealing the tanks. This was the *Tomahawk* IIB, which the U.S. Army would adopt in the spring of 1941 as the P-40C.

The 100 airframes cost \$4.5 million. The bill was paid by Universal Trading Corporation, though this quasi-government agency was supposed to deal only in non-military goods. General Mao then returned to China, leaving Chennault to work out the details of acquiring the *Tomahawks* and finding the "GFE." He did not leave much of a paper trail, but in January 1941 he drafted a proposal to hire 100 pilots and 150 ground crewmen.

William Pawley apparently saw that memo. As Curtiss representative in China, Pawley expected to receive a 10 percent commission on the *Tomahawks*, and he hoped to add to his take by assembling them in Asia. Who else could do the job? All aid to China now entered through Rangoon, Burma, where his brother Edward had just leased a plot of land next to Mingaladon airport. Ninety Chinese mechanics and some American foremen had come down from the CAMCO factory at Loiwing, China, and were now assembling a batch of training planes that had been abandoned in Rangoon by Harvey Greenlaw. (The Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company was owned by the Chinese government but controlled by the Pawleys through a holding company called Intercontinent.) This operation could easily be expanded to handle the China-bound *Tomahawks*, and on



February 18 Bill Pawley cabled his brother:

Negotiating extensive training program requiring employment by CAMCO of approximately . . . 100 pilots 150 technical including mechanics clerks radio operators doctors nurses. . . . One hundred P-40s purchased 35 being shipped immediately balance soon. Intercontinent [has] signed contract covering assembly and flight test Rangoon.

More likely, Pawley was simply trying to catch up with Chennault.

Though Curtiss gave them a new model number—H81-A3—the China-bound *Tomahawks* were taken at random from the line and were identical in every respect to the H81-A2s going to North Africa. As a result, their topsides were painted in RAF desert camouflage—alternating bands of tan and green, popularly called “sand and spinach”—and the undersides were painted pale blue. A fuselage and engine went into one crate; wings, tail, and propeller into another. Railway flatcars took them to Weehawken, New Jersey, where they were loaded into the hold of a Norwegian freighter. The first shipment sailed on February 19, bound for the South Atlantic, the tip of Africa, the Indian Ocean, and thus to Rangoon—a three-month voyage.

Meanwhile, Morgenthau learned that his obligations would not end with the shipment of the planes. On February 21, his telephone rang and Tommy Corcoran’s voice came on the line: “Soong has asked . . . me to represent him in some things.” Corcoran explained that “this is not a trading business, this has to do with things after you get the planes,” so he wanted to establish a private company under his personal control, instead of bureaucrats “who might not play ball.”

“Well, all those things are true, Tom,” Morgenthau replied, “but you don’t know what the nature of it is?”

“Well, may I talk on this line?”

“Yes, you can.”

“What Soong wants me to do is to help him recruit pilots.

What he really wants me to do is to go over and wrangle for him with the Army and the Navy to have them practically order certain men to enlist in the Chinese Air Force.”

The new company was China Defense Supplies, located in the Chinese Embassy and staffed by youngsters from the Ivy League network, including Tommy Corcoran’s brother David and an intelligence operative named Whiting Willauer, who had roomed with another brother at Exeter, Princeton, and Harvard Law. “By design I took no title,” Tommy Corcoran said, “and only earned a modest \$5,000 fee for putting the company together.”

LAUCLIN CURRIE, THE WHITE HOUSE AIDE CHARGED with expediting the Special Air Unit, leaked word of the plan to Joseph Alsop, who obligingly boosted it in his newspaper column. “With this comparative handful of [planes],” Alsop explained, “the Chinese think they could knock spots out of the Japanese invaders.” He specifically noted that the planes would “drop incendiary bombs on Japan’s concentrated, almost undefended paper and matchwood industrial areas.”

But who would fly them? Even with Currie in the room, a clear sign of White House interest, General H.H. (“Hap”) Arnold and Admiral John Towers refused to release their pilots for service in China. Tommy Corcoran had better luck behind the scenes. One Harvard man to another, he sent the president a copy of A.E. Houseman’s poem about mercenaries who “saved the sum of things for pay.” As Corcoran recalled: “If Roosevelt was troubled by the soiled label that Chennault’s irregulars might wear, he was moved by the poem’s wisdom. It bolstered his determination to act as forcefully as political constraints allowed.” Roosevelt told Corcoran to talk to Frank Knox and Henry Stimson. The civilian secretaries were quicker to realize how the wind was blowing: Knox wrote a letter permitting China’s recruiters to visit



Whoops! A Curtiss Hawk does a nose-stand—date, place and reason unknown. (Walter Pentecost Collection)

The 3rd Pursuit Squadron, AVG, posed for their group photo somewhere in China. (Walter Pentecost Collection)

Navy bases, and Stimson agreed to provide the same courtesy at Army airfields.

At the Colt factory in Hartford, Connecticut, Morgenthau's scouts found 132 machine guns chambered for the 7.92mm cartridge commonly used in Asia. Universal Trading Corp. bought them, and after some arm-twisting the British agreed to release 68 .303-cal. Brownings, enabling the Chinese to arm half their *Tomahawks*. Universal also bought 100 RCA 7-H radios meant for civilian sports planes, paid General Motors for 150 Allison (those installed at Buffalo plus 50 spares), and reimbursed the U.S. Army for 100 .50-cal. nose guns. With ammunition, the "GFE" doubled the price of the fighters to \$9.3 million.

The guns reached Weehawken in time to accompany the March shipment of *Tomahawks*. But Bill Pawley threatened to stop them unless he received his commission from Curtiss-Wright. On April 1, Morgenthau called the principals to his office and knocked heads together; in the end, Pawley settled for \$250,000 and the contract to assemble the planes in Burma, and the Chinese agreed to pay the tab. On April 15, CAMCO/Intercontinent was duly hired to organize three *Tomahawk* squadrons, described as follows:

The [Chinese] Government intends to establish three advanced instruction and training units, each . . . equipped substantially as follows: 18 American active trainers plus 50 percent reserves, plus necessary complement of ground transport, field repair equipment, night landing floodlights, portable radio communication sets, clerical equipment, etc. The operation of these units in China shall be under the immediate direction of an American supervisor.

Meanwhile, Chennault and Currie located 144 steel-and-wood Vultee *Vanguard* fighters (later designated P-66) that had been ordered by Sweden. The U.S. Government had canceled the contract, and the British had agreed to buy the *Vanguards*, for fear they would fall into German hands. Reassigning them to the Special Air Unit would save Britain money while costing China nothing, since the deal could be handled under the new Lend-Lease program. Next, the Army

let the China lobby know that Republic Aviation also had some fighters available. This was the firm that had risen from the ashes of the bankrupt Seversky company. Republic had updated the Seversky P-35 as its P-43 *Lancer*, which soon would become the P-47 *Thunderbolt*; meanwhile, the company wanted to build 125 *Lancers* for anyone who would take them. Who but China?

Finally, Currie got a British agreement to release 33 Douglas A-20 *Bostons* and 33 Lockheed A-28 *Hudsons* from its orders in the United States. Altogether, China would have "a respectable air force, judged by Far Eastern standards, which should be sufficient to (a) protect strategic points, (b) permit local Army offensive action, (c) permit the bombing of Japanese air bases and supply dumps in China and Indochina . . . and (d) permit occasional incendiary bombing of Japan." In his memo to the president, Currie went on to say:

Ships comprised in the above program would all be flown by American reserve officers and maintained by American technicians and mechanics. They would be under the command of an American reserve officer, Captain Chennault, directly under Chiang Kai-shek.

CAMCO's chief recruiter was Richard Aldworth, who turned out to be bedridden that spring, so others did the legwork. As it happened, a flight of *Zeros* had strafed the CAF training field at Yunnan-yi toward the end of 1940, prompting its American check pilot to sail for home. This was C.B. "Skip" Adair. Chennault signed him on as principal Army recruiter, while Rutledge Irvine of Intercontinent looked for Navy pilots. In almost every case, the job they offered was pilot-officer, paying \$600 a month and described as the equivalent of Army 1st Lieutenant. An exceptionally qualified pilot might be hired as flight leader, paying \$650 a month and ranking with Captain. There was also the rank of squadron leader, paying \$700 and equivalent to Major, but nobody was recruited as such.

Even pilot-officer (later changed to wingman) was a heady offer. Most of the pilots approached by CAMCO were serving at the lowest commissioned level—2nd Lieutenant in the Army of Marines, Ensign in the Navy—and one was a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy, which still had enlisted pilots. Signing up with CAMCO thus meant instant promotion and a salary double or triple what he was earning in U.S. service. Some mention was also made of a \$500 bounty for each Japanese plane shot down, but in such vague terms that few volunteers put any faith in it.

CAMCO signed up 100 combat pilots but only 99 sailed for Asia. (Missing from the final roster was Lieutenant Albert Baumler, credited with shooting down four German and Italian planes in the Spanish Civil War; he signed up but was refused a passport because he had violated earlier travel documents by flying for a foreign government.) Reflecting Commander Irvine's early start, and perhaps the more enthusiastic



support of Secretary Knox, 59 of the successful volunteers were Navy men, and seven more came from the Marines, while the Army supplied only 33. Like the agreement between T.V. Soong and Bill Pawley, the contract they signed was a masterpiece of circumlocution:

WHEREAS, the Employer . . . operates an aircraft manufacturing, operating and repair business in China, and

WHEREAS, the Employer desires to employ the Employee in connection with its business and said Employee desires to enter into such employment,

NOW THEREFORE . . . The Employer agrees to employ the Employee to render such services and perform such duties as the Employer may direct and the Employee agrees to enter the service of the Employer who, in consideration of the Employee's faithfully and diligently performing said duties and rendering said services, will pay to the Employee a salary of _____ dollars United States currency.

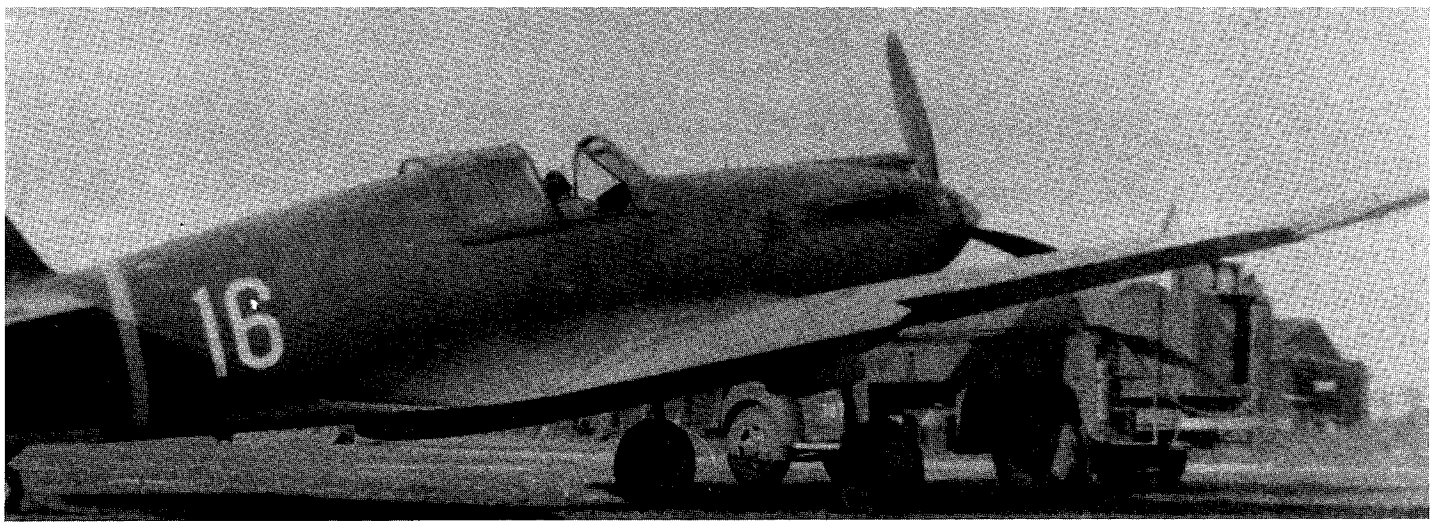
CAMCO would provide his passport, trainfare to California, food and lodging while there, \$100 in walking-around money, a ship to Asia, and \$500 for return transportation at the end of his tour, which would last one year "unless sooner terminated as hereinafter provided." If he were disabled or killed, CAMCO promised to pay six months' salary to him or his heirs, but there was no provision for what would happen if he were taken prisoner—a significant omission, as it turned out. Nor was there any provision for him to quit, though he could be fired for insubordination, malingering, revealing confidential information, drug or alcohol abuse, or "illness or other disability incurred not in line of duty and as a result of Employee's own misconduct"—i.e., venereal disease.

TO REMEDY SUCH MATTERS AS THAT LAST, CAMCO hired an Army flight surgeon, Thomas Gentry, who in turn recruited two more doctors, a dentist, and three nurses. Then there were the line chiefs, mechanics, armorers, radiomen, propeller specialists, parachute riggers, photographers, weathermen, clerks, and orderlies—all the technical skills needed to keep planes and pilots in the air. The Army Air Corps assigned more than 1,000 ground personnel to a fighter group, but CAMCO's quota was 200, and only 186

sailed for Asia. Most were Army men, who were paid \$300 a month, or about three times what a buck sergeant earned in 1941.

Nobody was willing to release staff officers, however. Even more than pilots, these uniformed bureaucrats were needed to preside over the great expansion ahead. Skip Adair agreed to become Chennault's supply officer when his recruiting chores were done. Then somebody at the State Department suggested he look up Paul Frillmann, a Lutheran missionary who had played left field for him on July 4, 1938, and who was now living in Chicago. Frillmann flew to Washington, reported to Chennault at the Chinese embassy, and was forthwith appointed chaplain and officer in charge of recreation, physical training, and liaison with the local populace. That settled, Chennault sat him down to make a list of everything needed by 300 Americans in China for two years, omitting what could be purchased locally. Frillmann did so, ordered the stuff from Washington wholesalers, and returned to Chicago that same night, bewildered and a bit resentful at the way Chennault had wrung him out and sent him on his way. Indeed, he was a paradigm of the Chennault technique, whose distinguishing characteristic was to grab what lay at hand and to work a miracle with it. "He was a genius," mused Joe Alsop, who himself would become a staff officer for Chennault, "at doing things with string and chewing gum."

In June, the first contingent of technicians reported to the youngest Pawley brother, Eugene, in Los Angeles. Paul Frillmann chaperoned them on *President Pierce*, her name painted over and her staterooms crammed with reinforcements for the Philippines. The senior Army officer was annoyed by the former enlisted men who had been given cots in the first-class lounge; he wanted them to drill with his troops, to stand for inspection, to snap to attention when he passed by. "Go away, soldier," they growled at him. "We're free men." In Honolulu, they tried to smuggle women aboard. In Singapore, they whistled at British customs officials in their tropical shorts. Quartered in the Raffles Hotel, they played golf in their rooms. One man dunked the secretary of the English Club in the swimming pool. There was also a bogus beauty



Somewhere in China one of the American Hawks is being fueled up and readied for another mission against the enemy.

(Walter Pentecost Collection)

contest, for which prizes were promised but none awarded. "Drove the Limeys wild down there," one of them fondly recalled. "Bunch of crazy Americans, bringing all the native girls into the Class A dining room and drinking all their gin and tonic and everything." Somebody was indiscreet enough to leak their assignment to a reporter, who filed this dispatch on July 9:

Thirty United States airplane mechanics and maintenance men arrived here today from New York, and will go to Rangoon next week en route to [China], where they will aid the Chinese Air Force. It was understood that a number of American planes of various types already had arrived at Rangoon and that more were en route there.

The main contingent—34 pilots and 86 technicians—meanwhile gathered in San Francisco. They wore civilian clothes, and their passports described them as hardware clerk, radio announcer, acrobat, rancher. . . . Chennault's passport identified him as "executive"—close enough in the circumstances. He reached San Francisco on July 7, the fourth anniversary of the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. He paid a courtesy call on the Chinese consul, inspected the quarters on the Java Pacific liner *Jagersfontein*, and conferred at the Mark Hopkins with Captain Aldworth and Major Gentry. (Among other concerns, they were dubious about sending two women nurses on a ship full of lusty males. The nurses prevailed, but were given an above-decks cabin to keep them out of harm's way.) Then he boarded the Pan Am *Clipper* for the overnight flight to Honolulu. It was a glorious moment for him—a flight instructor no longer but the almost certain commander of the 1st American Volunteer Group, as the fighter force had come to be called.

The pilots and technicians sailed next morning, July 8, which was foggy and cold. Charles Mott, formerly a dive-bomber pilot on *Saratoga*, had been put in charge of the contingent. At 26, he was older than most of the pilots and (in violation of Navy regulations) a married man. "When I left my darling wife at ten [a.m.]," he wrote in his diary after *Jagersfontein* motored under the Golden Gate bridge, "I was trying to be casual . . . but just about managed to do it without breaking down. Words can't tell of the void this parting has left in me." At sea, Mott did his best to keep discipline, policing the below-decks crap game, offering a bridge tourna-

ment as an alternative, and leading religious services each Sunday in the ship's dining room.

After Honolulu, *Jagersfontein* was joined by the cruisers *Salt Lake City* and *Northampton*. The escort was the work of Lauchlin Currie, who feared that Japan might arrange to have the airmen kidnapped. The Navy squirmed a bit, urging that they be distributed among several ships if Currie were concerned for their safety, but gave in when he explained that they were already at sea. The warships escorted *Jagersfontein* as she swung south of the equator to avoid the Marshall and Caroline Islands—former German colonies seized by the Japanese during World War I. Off Australia, they were replaced by *Java*, a Dutch cruiser, which escorted the liner through the Dutch East Indies to Singapore. She docked on August 11, all her brandy drunk, along with 5,000 bottles of Coca-Cola.

EN ROUTE TO CHONGQING, CHENNAULT SPENT THREE days in Hong Kong, where he recruited Harvey Greenlaw and William Davis, former aircraft salesmen, as staff officers for the 1st AVG. Then, on July 18, he flew up to Chongqing, arriving in the company of 27 Mitsubishi bombers as they made their unopposed runs over the Chinese capital. The planes were new to him: twin-engined G4Ms (later called "Betty" by Allied pilots) with nearly twice the bomb load of the familiar G3M *Nells*. They came and went without any opposition except from antiaircraft guns. Only a handful had been shot down that summer of 1941, and just one *Zero*—but that sufficed to blow the secret of Japan's deadly new fighter. From the wreckage, Chinese intelligence officers drew up a remarkably accurate data sheet for the Mitsubishi A6M, along with a set of recognition sketches. Major James McHugh at the U.S. embassy had already sent this information back to Washington, where like Chennault's description it was carefully distributed and altogether ignored. McHugh also gave a copy to Chennault, so his pilots would know what they were up against.

Wu Chia Ba Airport at Kunming was still being hardened against the monsoon rains, so a training program there would be a risky proposition. The Pawleys had a solution—they always had a solution. Edward persuaded the British to loan him a new RAF airfield in southern Burma, thus putting the training base close to his assembly operation at Mingaladon Airport. At Toungoo, Chennault would be able to train his squadrons without fear of attack, while the Chinese would

not have to make space on the Burma Road for aviation supplies, and the RAF would have transformed a liability into an asset. The British had no immediate use for Kyedaw airfield: their only planes in Burma were the dozen Bristol *Blenheim* bombers of RAF 60th Squadron, which were more conveniently and comfortably accommodated at Mingaladon Airport. By loaning it to the Americans, they would have a fighter group handy in case war broke out in Asia. The British commander apparently discussed this possibility with the Chinese: "There was an understanding," he wrote in 1942, that if Japan attacked British possessions, "part, or the whole, of this American Volunteer Group would be detailed for the defence of Burma."

Toungoo was situated in the broad valley of the Sittang River, 175 miles north of Rangoon. Its main street rumbled day and night with trucks bound for China. To the west lay a maze of narrow, twisting alleys lined with bamboo shops and huts, including a liquor store and a building that purported to be a hotel but in reality was a brothel. Toungoo's most notable building was the sprawling, red-brick railroad station, containing the town's only restaurant. The population was 23,000, mostly ethnic Burmans, but including a few thousand Indians, some half-wild Karen tribesmen, and a few Western missionaries. Lording it over them were a dozen British families who lived on the outskirts of town, and whose menfolk were Army officers or managers for the MacGregor Teak Company. Off hours, they gathered at the Gymkhana Club for golf, tennis, billiards, and Scotch and soda, and at dinner parties given by the wives in strict rotation. The gentlemen wore black ties, and afterward the ladies left them to smoke cigars and discuss world affairs, which they did with unquenchable optimism. Sunday morning, they all met again at St. Luke's, Church of England, which had more headstones in its graveyard than worshippers in its pews.

Six miles north of town—past the hulks of trucks that had broken down on the road to China—past a pagoda guarded by statues of *chintha*, the ferocious seated lion of Burmese mythology—was the side road to Kyedaw airfield. Eastward lay the Karen Hills, a sawtooth mountain wall, blue with haze and marking the Burma-Thailand border. Away from the squalor of Toungoo, the countryside had a wild tropical beauty, with gnarly trees and fantastic flowering shrubs.

The RAF had outfitted Kyedaw with a 4,000-foot asphalt runway, a control tower, hangars, office buildings, and—a mile from the field—barracks built from teak and bamboo according to the architectural fashion of Southeast Asia. That is, they had no interior partitions, and the outside walls were open from waist height to the eaves, with the sunny side sheltered by a veranda. There were no screens, so the occupants slept under mosquito netting, on slat-bottomed cots sternly labeled ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE. Ceiling fans stirred the air if the electric generator was functioning. The roofs were bamboo thatch, and the latrines were open pits with urine buckets on the side, attended by Indian "sweepers."

Chennault inspected Kyedaw on July 26. He was not impressed, but he had no alternative, so he approved Ed Pawley's arrangements. In Washington, meanwhile, Franklin Roosevelt approved the formation of the 2nd AVG, whose mission was to include "the incendiary bombing of Japan."

Poor George Marshall. It was like keeping a cat off the couch: no matter how many times he put the Special Air Unit down, it jumped up again.

BY DECEMBER 1941, NINE MORE SQUADRONS HAD BEEN promised for the Special Air Unit. They included the 1st AVG already in Burma; the 2nd AVG, equipped with Lockheed *Hudsons* and Douglas *Bostons*, whose pilots were already signed up and whose technicians were already at sea; the 3rd AVG, to be equipped with Republic *Lancers*; a Brewster *Buffalo* squadron and a Bristol *Blenheim* squadron from the RAF; and a squadron of Vultee *Vanguards* flown by Chinese pilots. The reinforcements were glimmering on the morning of December 7/8, leaving Chennault to defend Burma and western China with the 60-odd *Tomahawks* and 80-odd pilots then at Kyedaw airfield. History would know them as the Flying Tigers. □

SOURCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Ford spent six years researching and writing the history from which this article was adapted. He traveled to Taiwan to interview CAF veterans, to China to walk the ground in Kunming, and to Burma to visit the places where the "Flying Tigers" trained and fought. In 1989-1990, he was the Verville Fellow at the National Air & Space Museum in Washington, translating Japanese accounts of the air war in China and Southeast Asia. The resulting volume is to be published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in 1991 under the title *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and the American Volunteer Group*.

Ford is the author of three novels, one of which became the Burt Lancaster film *Go Tell the Spartans*, set in the early days of the Vietnam war. He has also written numerous articles and book reviews, including several for *Air & Space* magazine of the Smithsonian Institution.

