

Throughout the 1930s, American airmen fought the Imperial Japanese Army in China.

Before the Flying Tigers

By Robert E. van Patten

FULLY 10 years before the advent of Claire Chennault's Flying Tigers, American pilots and airplanes were involved in an air war over China. What was to become the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 actually began with a Japanese incursion in Manchuria in 1931. This conflict festered for the next six years. In that period, pilots from the US, Britain, France, Italy, Russia, and probably Germany took part in battles in the skies over China.

With the exception of the Italian and Russian contingents, which were officially sanctioned by their governments, the pilots who trained the Chinese and who fought for them were adventurers, soldiers of fortune, and out-of-work military professionals. Most of them were Americans. Many historians consider this hit-or-miss, bloody little air war to be a backwater of events. Yet the battles fought by these early warriors laid the groundwork for a massive air war over China, Southeast Asia, the Mariana Islands, and the Japanese homeland.

The fighting history of US-built aircraft in combat inside China actually extends back to 1930, when American-produced light bombers were used in action against two northern warlords. In 1931, 20 light bombing-observation airplanes were ordered from Douglas. These are believed to have been the Type O2MC-4, large two-place, radial-engined biplanes, which were used as trainers at the Nanking flying school.

The invasion of Manchuria by Imperial Japanese Army units in September 1931 added impetus to the strengthening of the Chinese Air Force, not least because the Japanese attack put an end to a civil war between factions based in Nanking and Canton. The factions included all of the loose-cannon independent warlords except for a holdout in Fukien province.

The First Casualty

The first American aviator to die in combat against the Japanese, Robert Short, was killed Feb. 22, 1932. Short, a native of Tacoma, Wash., had been hired by the L.E. Gale Co. to fly and sell Boeing fighters in China. Relatively little is known about Short beyond the fact that he was an ex-Air Corps pilot



Artwork by Guy Aceto, Art Director



Two Japanese bombers scatter as Robert Short, in his Boeing fighter, goes after them. Short was among the first American pilots who fought for and trained the Chinese in the decade before World War II.



By the mid-1930s, Curtiss Hawks had become the primary fighters used by the Chinese Air Force. Both American and Chinese pilots took Hawk IIs into combat against nimble Japanese fighters like the Mitsubishi A5M4 Claude.

seeking work. Described variously as a stunt and endurance pilot and as a soldier of fortune, he once said in a newspaper interview that he would be happy to die in his fighter.

Short had no official Chinese mandate to engage in air combat. However, he flew his Boeing Model 218 with loaded guns. Then, in mid-February 1932, he actually used them on a formation of Japanese Nakajima A1N2s flying off the carrier *Hosho*. Short damaged one of the Japanese aircraft and then disengaged. On the day of his death, Short was ferrying his Boeing from Shanghai to Nanking when, in the vicinity of Soochow, he encountered a group of Mitsubishi B1M two-seaters from the Japanese aircraft carrier *Kaga* (later to be part of the Pearl Harbor attack force). He attacked one of the Japanese aircraft, killing its gunner, but was trapped by the escorting A1N2s and shot down by Japanese pilot Yoshiro Sakemago. After his death, Short was so venerated by the Chinese people that the government erected a monument to him at the entrance to the Hungjao aerodrome in Shanghai.

Some idea of the limited capabilities of the CAF during this period can be gained from one observer who noted that, in 1931, there were only five Chinese pilots competent to fly all types of aircraft and another 20 capable of flying trainers. By 1934, there were about 200 native Chinese military pilots, but training standards were not high, and there is no reliable

information on how many of them had actually soloed.

In January 1932, the war brewing between China and Japan generated the so-called Shanghai Incident. It began as a Japanese reaction to a Chinese boycott of Japanese goods, a reaction that led to two months of hot combat. Japanese troops assaulted the Chinese 19th Route Army near Shanghai, and it was during this period that Short was shot down and killed.

The Chinese Air Force fared badly, despite its use of some 200 US, British, French, Russian, and Italian aircraft in battle. By the time the Shanghai Truce was signed, the Nanking government had finally become sufficiently alarmed about the shortcomings of Chinese airpower that it moved to establish a new and modern flying school utilizing American know-how.

In July 1932, the Chinese flying school saw the arrival of its first American military instructor pilots. They were led by John H. Jouett, who had been separated from the Army Air Corps as a consequence of budget cutbacks. China accorded Jouett the rank of colonel. He arrived in the company of other involuntarily retired pilots, all of whom retained their reserve ranks. Each recruit was cautioned to keep his contract with the CAF secret, part of a vain attempt to keep Japan from figuring out what was going on. The cadre was fleshed out with mechanics, riggers,

armorers, and engineers who either traveled to China with Jouett or were recruited by him after he arrived. About 30 American pilots were in China at this time (see box, p. 76).

Randolph of the Orient

Jouett immediately set about the task of turning the CAF flying school at Shien Chiao into an Asian Randolph Field, establishing an immediate program to upgrade the physical plant of the base. He insisted that all instruction be in the English language and used training aids, tech orders, and manuals he had brought with him from the US. The American instructors were pleased to discover that most of their CAF cadets were motivated and intelligent, and Jouett's flying school soon produced graduates and Instructor Pilots. This was a welcome change from earlier training efforts in which pilot candidates were selected on the basis of family status and connections.

Jouett annually cranked out graduating classes of 100 Chinese cadets until the contract expired in 1935 and he returned to America. The pace of work was nothing if not brisk. The notes kept by one American IP noted that he commonly logged 100 hours a month of flying instruction.

Life at the school was not easy. It suffered serious manpower losses due to injuries compounded by incompetent medical care. In that primitive and unsanitary environment, seemingly insignificant wounds could become terribly infected. Jouett had to be circumspect in his comments about the incompetence of local doctors, as this would cause immense political problems. Another problem was that the Chinese ground support and flying personnel were not as safety conscious as the American instructors would have liked.

The main flying school never came under Japanese air attack, but it was once thought to be seriously threatened by the aircraft of the forces loyal to the rebel Fukien warlord. The intelligence warning turned out to be false, but only after the German-trained Chinese anti-aircraft gun crews had a field day with their new Bofors automatic cannons. Fortunately they did not hit any of the friendly aircraft they had mistaken for marauding Fukien airplanes.

Chinese politicians and military

leaders sometimes gave Americans “confidential assignments,” some of which strayed far from military tasks for which the pilots had been hired. Mostly, these did not violate the Neutrality Act and did not, therefore, raise legal dangers in the US. So strong was isolationist sentiment in the US at the time that any pilot caught engaging in an act of war on behalf of the Kuomintang (or any belligerent) would have been stripped of his citizenship. As the military situation in the Far East deteriorated, however, provisions of the Neutrality Act were far less stringently enforced. In April 1941 President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order permitting military pilots to fly and fight abroad for up to one year.

Sailing to Byzantium

The Americans had to cope with Chinese politics that were truly Byzantine. Take, for example, the experience of American pilot Thomas Taylor toward the end of his time in China. While flying money, destined to pay Chinese troops, from a bank in Hankow to one in Chungking, he had been approached on three occasions with a request to load the Condor with bombs and other ordnance to resupply Nationalist forces fighting the Communists they had cornered in Yunnan. Taylor said that, because of the Neutrality Act, he consistently refused. Finally, during a face-to-face meeting he had insisted upon, Madame Chiang Kai-shek pleaded,



In 1938, both an American group of volunteers and a Soviet contingent were stationed in Hankow. Soviet aircraft in China included Tupolev bombers and Polikarpov fighters. The Japanese Army had captured this one in Manchuria.

Taylor said, stating that the Communists would surely behead the American missionaries trapped in the area unless he flew bombs and ammunition to the CAF units there. Taylor, knowing that Communist troops had decapitated other missionaries, gave in.

Taylor was not the only American mercenary pilot who encountered Madame Chiang. In 1938, Cornelius Burmood showed up in China with two Beechcraft Staggerwing D17Rs, intending to sell them to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek as VIP transports. Burmood said Madame Chiang

had soon convinced him to serve as her personal pilot, but the American found himself hauling top Chinese officers through thick flak in every battle zone in China.

In the 1930s, China became the arena of a fierce competition to sell fighter aircraft to the CAF. The primary contestants were Italy and the US. The Italian candidate was the Fiat C.R.32, a fast, sturdy, and handsome product of the mind of Celestino Rosatelli. The other was the Curtiss Hawk, a proven design which, in the hands of Jimmy Doolittle as corporate demonstration pilot, decisively won the competition in May of 1933.

Doolittle resigned from the Army Air Corps in early 1930, establishing a reputation as a top acrobatic pilot, racing pilot, and consulting aeronautical engineer. The demonstration he put on with the Hawk at a show in Shanghai featured an acrobatic display that included an outside loop performed at such low altitude that even experienced pilots observed with terror. This display had both the newspapers and the CAF agog. From that time on, Hawks were the primary fighter series used by the CAF.

The greatest influx of American-made aircraft into the CAF came as a result of a 1936 fund drive in celebration of the 50th birthday of Chiang. The fund drive raised almost \$1 million; it was used, in part, to acquire 10 Boeing P-26As



Even Jimmy Doolittle went to China in the 1930s. His work as a corporate demonstration pilot took him to a Shanghai airshow, where his acrobatic display in a Curtiss Hawk convinced the Chinese to buy the fighter for its air force.

based at Nanking. These aircraft were divided into two squadrons and were flown by a mix of Chinese and mercenary pilots. The P-26s scored a success Aug. 20, 1937, when they shot down six bombers attacking Nanking. The Chinese career of the “Peashooters” was brief. By the end of 1937, they had suffered fatally from a lack of spare parts and were all out of service.

Then, on July 7, 1937, the Sino-Japanese War began in earnest. The two Asian giants had grappled for years in virtually continuous small-scale engagements. Now, they embarked on a path of mortal combat, commencing a conflict that was not to end until 1945, after a world war that brought the total defeat of Imperial Japan. Shortly after the official outbreak of hostilities, press reports in China heralded the arrival of more than 100 hotshot American pilots and creation of the 14th Volunteer Bombardment Squadron.

Chennault Arrives

Two months earlier, Claire L. Chennault had appeared in China as an aviation advisor to the Kuomintang. The US Army Air Corps had grounded him because of damaged hearing, bronchitis, and low blood pressure. Chennault had a reputation as a brilliant air combat tactician, as well as an outstanding acrobatic pilot. Never one to suffer fools in silence, Chennault had antagonized high-ranking Air Corps leaders—to the extent that they shuffled him out of the way by putting him in command of the Air Corps acrobatic exhibition team.



Claire Chennault (center) arrived in China in 1937 as an aviation advisor. He later organized the 14th VBS and the Flying Tigers. This 1942 photo shows him with Col. Robert Scott Jr. (left) and Brig. Gen. Clayton Bissell at Kunming.

In early 1937, however, an American friend, then serving in China, relayed to Chennault an offer from Madame Chiang to join the anti-Japanese effort. Chennault was more than ready for an opportunity such as this and arrived in China at the end of May 1937. He stayed for eight years. He first served as aviation advisor (and de-facto air chief of staff) to the Kuomintang in the period 1937–41. During that time, he organized the 14th Volunteer Bombardment Squadron and, in 1941–42, the famed Flying Tigers. He finished out his tour in China as commanding general of the US Fourteenth Air Force.

Organized under Chennault’s leadership in the autumn of 1937, the 14th VBS (which some sources refer to as

the International Air Squadron) was the first predominantly American volunteer combat group in China. Chennault’s pilot roster never numbered more than a dozen, even counting the odd French adventurer who occasionally would show up. The hard core of the 14th VBS pilot cadre consisted of James W.M. Allison, a veteran of fighter operations in the Spanish Civil War, Billy MacDonald, Luke Williamson, and George Weigle all of whom were handpicked by Chennault. Most of the rest who scrambled to join up in the 14th were not of the same high caliber.

The 14th VBS was stationed at Hankow in 1938 at the same time as a large Soviet contingent. The Soviet commitment in China consisted of twin-engined Tupolev SB-2 bombers and Polikarpov I-15 biplane and I-16 monoplane fighters. Following the demise of the 14th VBS, this Soviet force, amounting to over 120 aircraft, played a large role in air combat over China until they were withdrawn to deal with Japanese incursions along the Mongolian border and the outbreak of hostilities in Europe.

The combat history of the 14th is described only in pilot diaries. One surviving account records that the 14th was in heavy action during the winter of 1938. On Feb. 27, 1938, Vultee and Northrop bombers attacked Japanese troops and convoys in the vicinity of Loyang on the Yellow River. After bomb release, the

Among the American Pilots in China, 1932–40

James W.M. Allison
Art Chen
Claire L. Chennault
Jimmy Doolittle
E.D. Dorsey
Cecil Folmar
Franklyn G. Gay
Elwyn H. Gibbon
Harvey Greenlaw
L. Roy Holbrook
John H. Jouett
W.C. “Foxy” Kent
M.R. Knight
William C. MacDonald

Christopher Mathewson
John May
George E.A. Reinburg
Harry T. Rowland
Ronald L. Sansbury
John Schweitzer
Vincent Schmidt
Ellis D. Shannon
Robert Short
Sterling Tatum
Thomas Taylor
John “Luke” Williamson
George H. Weigle
Lyman Woelpel

formation's gunners administered a heavy strafing to troop concentrations near boats drawn up on the shore, apparently in preparation for a river crossing.

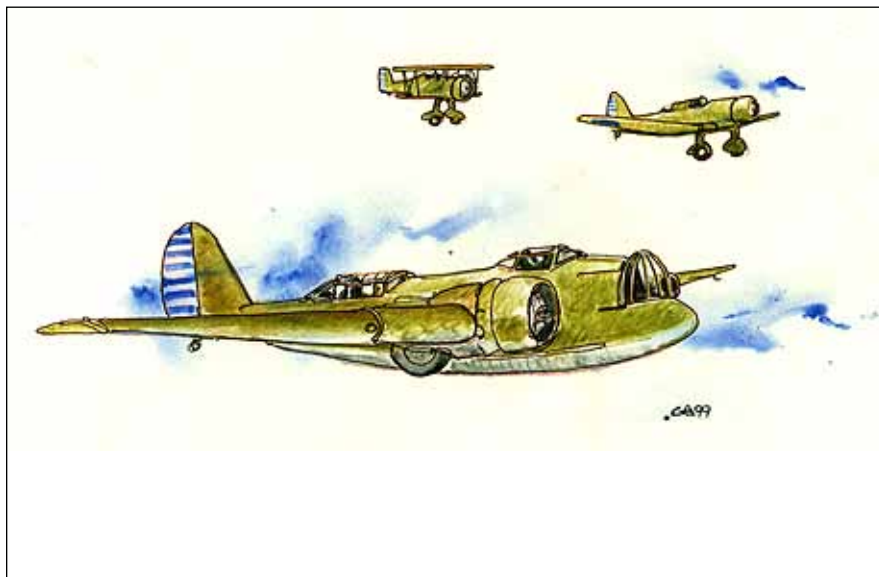
Short, but Sharp

Although the combat history of the 14th was short, it was intense. In the five months the outfit was a formal entity, one pilot recorded that he flew 116 sorties, which included 28 bombing missions and 15 night missions. Most of these missions were to targets in northern China and involved round-trip flying times as high as nine hours. Bombers weren't very fast in those days.

The 14th VBS was disbanded March 22, 1938, and, though it was gone, some of its pilots soldiered on in China. A letter written by Chennault records that, on April 29, 1938, his



The 14th VBS was the first predominantly American volunteer combat group in China. They paved the way for the American Volunteer Group—the Flying Tigers—like (l-r) John Alison, David Hill, Albert Baumler, and Mack Mitchell.



Before it was disbanded in 1938, the 14th VBS put in an intense five months of missions mostly to northern China. Its aircraft ranged from Hawk biplane fighters to Northrop bombers and some export versions (Boeing 139) of the Martin B-10s.

pilots participated with Soviet airplanes and pilots in an action that enticed the Japanese to fall into a trap prepared long in advance. It must have been some fight since eight enemy bombers and 13 fighters went down, accompanied by the loss of nine CAF

fighters. Pilots of two of those nine CAF aircraft bailed out safely and two others made successful forced landings. This "fur ball" included 60 fighters in the Chinese force against 12 bombers and 25 fighters in the Japanese force.

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By the spring of 1941 it was time for the early warriors to pass the torch. The American Volunteer Group later known as the "Flying Tigers" was well on its way, beginning with men like Gregory "Pappy" Boyington and its established ace, A.J. "Ajax" Baumler, who, at the age of 22, had made five kills over Spain.

When America finally entered the war in late 1941, US military officers learned that the CAF had preserved some Chinese territory; such territory served as a sanctuary for at least a few of the Doolittle Raiders after their April 1942 raid on Tokyo. Soon after came the establishment of the China Air Task Force and the disbanding of the Flying Tigers. The Task Force was, in its turn, superseded by Fourteenth Air Force and from that point on, the air war in China accelerated in tempo and scope.

The efforts of these early aviators in China prior to the Flying Tigers helped the Kuomintang hang on long enough, and retain enough territory, to be able to provide the foundation for the major anti-Japan air campaigns of the early and mid-1940s. Without the skill and sacrifice of these obscure pilots, it is probable that there would have been no saga of the airborne supply line over the Hump and the history of the Fourteenth Air Force campaign would have been bloodier and more protracted. ■