

## 23<sup>rd</sup> FIGHTER GROUP



### LINEAGE

23<sup>rd</sup> Pursuit Group (Interceptor) established, 17 Dec 1941  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group, 15 May 1942  
Activated, 4 Jul 1942  
Inactivated, 5 Jan 1946  
Activated, 10 Oct 1946  
Inactivated, 24 Sep 1949  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Interceptor Group, 19 Dec 1950  
Activated, 12 Jan 1951  
Inactivated, 6 Feb 1952  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group (Air Defense), 20 Jun 1955  
Activated, 18 Aug 1955  
Inactivated, 1 Jul 1959  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Tactical Fighter Group, 31 Jul 1985  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Operations Group and activated, 1 Jun 1992  
Inactivated, 1 Apr 1997  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group, 26 Sep 2006  
Activated, 1 Oct 2006

### STATIONS

Kunming, China, 4 Jul 1942  
Kweilin, China, c. Sep 1943  
Liuchow, China, 8 Sep 1944  
Luiliang, China, 14 Sep 1944  
Liuchow, China, Aug 1945  
Hanchow, China, c. 10 Oct-12 Dec 1945  
Ft Lewis, WA, 3-5 Jan 1946  
Northwest Field (later, Northwest Guam AFB), Guam, 10 Oct 1946-3 Apr 1949  
Howard AFB, Canal Zone, 25 Apr-24 Sep 1949

Presque Isle AFB, ME, 12 Jan 1951-6 Feb 1952  
Presque Isle AFB, ME, 18 Aug 1955-1 Jul 1959  
Pope AFB, NC, 1 Jun 1992-1 Apr 1997  
Pope AFB, NC, 1 Oct 2006

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

Tenth Air Force, China Air Task Force, 4 Jul 1942  
Fourteenth Air Force, 10 Mar 1943-5 Jan 1946  
20<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, 10 Oct 1946  
23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing, 16 Aug 1948-24 Sep 1949  
23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Interceptor Wing, 12 Jan 1951-6 Feb 1952  
4711<sup>th</sup> Air Defense Wing, 18 Aug 1955  
32<sup>nd</sup> Air Division (Defense), 1 Mar 1956  
Bangor Air Defense Sector, 1 Aug 1958-1 Jul 1959  
23<sup>rd</sup> Wing, 1 Jun 1992-1 Apr 1997  
23<sup>rd</sup> Wing, 1 Oct 2006

### **ATTACHMENTS**

### **WEAPON SYSTEMS**

P-40, 1942-1944  
P-51, 1943-1945  
F-47, 1946-1949  
F-80, 1949  
F-86, 1951-1952  
F-89, 1955-1959  
A-10, 1992-1997  
C-130, 1992-1997  
F-16, 1992-1996

### **COMMANDERS**

Col Robert L. Scott Jr., 4 Jul 1942  
LTC Bruce K. Holloway, 9 Jan 1943  
LTC Norval C. Bonawitz, 16 Sep 1943  
Col David L. Hill, 4 Nov 1943  
LTC Philip C. Loofbourrow, 15 Oct 1944  
Col Edward F. Rector, 12 Dec 1944-c. Dec 1945  
Col Lester S. Harris, 10 Oct 1946  
Maj Leonard S. Dysinger, 1 Nov 1947  
LTC Hadley V. Saehlenou, Nov 1947-unkn  
Col Louis R. Hughes Jr., 1 Sep 1948-unkn  
Unkn, Jan-Jul 1951  
Col Norval K. Heath, c. Jul 1951-6 Feb 1952  
Col Frank Q. O'Connor, 1955  
LTC Frank J. Keller, Dec 1955  
Unkn, 1956-1959

Col Charles M. Thrash, 1 Jun 1992  
Col Frederick D. Van Valkenburg, 30 Jun 1994  
Col Bobby J. Wilkes, 12 Jul 1996-31 Mar 1997  
Col Henry J. Santicola, 1 Oct 2006

Col Michael S. O'Dowd, 27 Jul 2007

## **HONORS**

### **Service Streamers**

None

### **Campaign Streamers**

World War II

India-Burma

China Defensive

China Offensive

Western Pacific

### **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

None

### **Decorations**

Distinguished Unit Citation

Hunan Province, China, 17-25 Jun 1944

Air Force Outstanding Unit Award

31 May 1995-31 Mar 1997

### **EMBLEM**

Group will use the wing emblem with group designation in the scroll.

### **EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE**

### **MOTTO**

### **NICKNAME**

### **OPERATIONS**

The 23d Fighter Group initially owed its planes, several of its pilots, and its nickname to Claire Chennault's American Volunteer Group, "The Flying Tigers." Upon activation, the 23d began using the shark-nosed P-40s made famous by its predecessor. The group provided air defense for the Chinese terminus of the Hump route from India; conducted a campaign against Japanese aircraft, both in the air and on the ground, strafed and bombed Japanese forces, installations, and transportation; escorted bombers, and flew reconnaissance missions. It intercepted Japanese planes attempting to bomb Allied airfields; attacked Japanese airdromes; strafed and bombed river craft, troop concentrations, supply depots, and railroads; and protected bombers that

attacked Hong Kong, Canton, Shanghai, and other targets. Its area of operations extended beyond China to Burma, French Indochina, and Formosa. The "Flying Tigers" operated against the Japanese during the enemy's drive toward Chansha and Chungking in May 1943 and supported Chinese forces during the Japanese offensive in the Tungting Hu region in Nov 1943. Despite bad weather and heavy flak, the group received a DUC for actions it took in the effort to halt a Japanese force that pushed down the Hsiang Valley in Jun 1944 by repeatedly striking boats, trucks, aircraft, troops, and other objectives. During the following spring, the group helped stop a Japanese offensive, then proceeded to bomb and strafe retreating enemy columns. In Oct 1946, the 23d activated on Guam and was assigned to the Far East Air Forces, where it flew training, interception, and island defense missions, until its move to the Panama Canal Zone in Apr 1949 to provide jet transitional training if RF-80s for the Caribbean Air Command. From 1951-1952 and 1955-1959, served as part of the Air Defense Command flying air defense missions over northeastern United States. Activated as the 23d Operations Group, under the composite-type 23d Wing in 1992, the group flew A-10s, C-130s, and F-16s. Provided airlift and close air support to the U. S. Army's XVIII Airborne Corps until 1997 when the 23d Wing was redesignated 23d Fighter Group and assumed new responsibilities. In Oct 2006 when the 23d Fighter Group returned to wing status, the 23d Operations Group again was redesignated to a fighter group and assumed the mission at Pope AFB.

Flying Tigers was the popular name of the 1st American Volunteer Group (AVG) of the Chinese Air Force in 1941-1942. Arguably, the group was a private military contractor, and for that reason the volunteers have sometimes been called mercenaries. They were mostly former United States Army (USAAF), Navy (USN), and Marine Corps (USMC) pilots and ground crew, recruited under Presidential sanction and commanded by Claire Lee Chennault. The group consisted of three fighter squadrons with about 20 aircraft each. It trained in Burma before the American entry into World War II with the mission of defending China against Japanese forces.

The Tigers' shark-faced fighters remain among the most recognizable of any individual combat aircraft of World War II, and they demonstrated innovative tactical victories when the news in the U.S. was filled with little more than stories of defeat at the hands of the Japanese forces.

The group first saw combat on 20 December 1941, 12 days after Pearl Harbor (local time). It achieved notable success during the lowest period of the war for U.S. and Allied Forces, giving hope to Americans that they would eventually succeed against the Japanese. The Tigers were paid combat bonuses for destroying nearly 300 enemy aircraft while losing only 14 pilots on combat missions. In July 1942, the AVG was replaced by the U.S. Army 23rd Fighter Group, which was later absorbed into the U.S. 14th Air Force with General Chennault as commander. The 23rd FG went on to achieve similar combat success, while retaining the nose art and nickname of the volunteer unit.

Origin of the Flying Tigers

Chennault in his Kunming office, May 1942. He wears a US Army brigadier general's star on his left shoulder but Chinese insignia otherwise.

The AVG was largely the creation of Claire L. Chennault, a retired U.S. Army Air Corps officer who had worked in China since August 1937, first as military aviation advisor to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in the early months of the Sino-Japanese War, then as director of a Chinese Air Force flight school centered in Kunming. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union supplied fighter and bomber squadrons to China, but these units were mostly withdrawn by the summer of 1940. Chiang then asked for American combat aircraft and pilots, sending Chennault to Washington as advisor to China's ambassador (and Chiang's brother-in-law), T. V. Soong.

Since the U.S. was not at war, the "Special Air Unit" could not be organized overtly, but the request was approved by President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself. The resulting 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.) Financing was handled by China Defense Supplies – primarily Tommy Corcoran's creation – with money loaned by the U.S. government. Purchases were then made by the Chinese under the "Cash and Carry" provision of the Neutrality Act of 1939.

Chennault spent the winter of 1940–1941 in Washington, supervising the purchase of 100 Curtiss P-40 fighters (diverted from a Royal Air Force order) and the recruiting of 100 pilots and some 200 ground crew and administrative personnel that would constitute the 1st AVG. He also laid the groundwork for a follow-on bomber group and a second fighter group, though these would be aborted after the Pearl Harbor attack.

#### 1st American Volunteer Group

Of the pilots, 60 came from the Navy and Marine Corps and 40 from the Army Air Corps. (One army pilot was refused a passport because he had earlier flown as a mercenary in Spain, so only 99 would actually sail for Asia. Ten more army flight instructors were hired as check pilots for Chinese cadets, and several of these would ultimately join the AVG's combat squadrons.) The volunteers were discharged from the armed services, to be employed for "training and instruction" by a private military contractor, the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company, which paid them \$600 a month for pilot officer, \$675 a month for flight leader, \$750 for squadron leader (no pilot was recruited at this level), and about \$250 for a skilled ground crewman, far more than they had been earning. (\$675 translates \$9,768 in 2009 dollars, and at the time sufficed to buy a new Ford automobile. The pilots were also orally promised a bounty of \$500 for each enemy aircraft shot down.

Although sometimes considered a mercenary unit, the AVG was closely associated with the U.S. military. Most histories of the Flying Tigers say that on 15 April 1941, President Roosevelt signed a "secret executive order" authorizing servicemen on active duty to resign in order to join the AVG. However, Flying Tigers historian Daniel Ford could find no evidence that such an order ever existed, and he argued that "a wink and a nod" was more the president's style. In any event, the AVG was organized and in part directed out of the White House, and by the spring of 1942 had effectively been brought into the U.S. Army chain of command.

During the summer and fall 1941, some 300 men carrying civilian passports boarded ships destined for Burma. They were initially based at a British airfield in Toungoo for training while their aircraft were assembled and test flown. Chennault set up a schoolhouse that was made 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." They called Chennault "the Old Man" due to his much older age and leathery exterior obtained from years flying open cockpit pursuit aircraft in the Army Air Corps. Most believed that he had flown as a fighter pilot in China, although stories that he was a combat ace are probably apocryphal.

The AVG was created by an executive order of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. He did not speak English, however, and Chennault never learned to speak Chinese. As a result, all communications between the two men were routed through May-ling Soong, or "Madame Chiang" as she was known to Americans, and she was designated the group's "honorary commander."

#### Chennault fighter doctrine

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 Soviet pilots in China, and his judgment of the strengths and weaknesses of his own aircraft and pilots. The actual average strength of the AVG was never more than 62 combat-ready pilots and fighters. Although he faced serious obstacles since many AVG pilots were inexperienced and a few quit at the first opportunity, however, Chennault made a virtue out of these disadvantages, shifting unsuitable pilots to staff jobs and always ensuring that he had a squadron or two in reserve.

His doctrine called for pilots to take on enemy aircraft in teams from an altitude advantage, since their aircraft were not as maneuverable or 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 to dive away to set up for another attack. This "dive-and-zoom" technique was contrary to what the men had learned in U.S. service as well as what the Royal Air Force (RAF) pilots in Burma had been taught; it had been used successfully, however, by Russian units serving with the Chinese Air Force.

Contributing to Chennault's success in China was the country's warning net, "a vast spiderweb of people, radios, telephones, and telegraph lines" that provided information about enemy attacks, directed interceptors against them, located and guided lost planes, directed aid to pilots who had crashed or bailed out, and directed intelligence experts to wrecks of enemy aircraft

#### Curtiss P-40

Curtiss P-40 fighter aircraft of the Flying Tigers, with their iconic shark face and the 12-point sun of the Chinese Air Force.

AVG fighter aircraft came from a Curtiss assembly line producing Tomahawk IIB models for the Royal Air Force in North Africa. The Tomahawk IIB was similar to the U.S. Army's earlier P-40B model, and there is some evidence that Curtiss actually used leftover components from that model in building the fighters intended for China. The fighters 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.

The 100 P-40 aircraft were crated and sent to Burma on third country freighters during spring 1941. At Rangoon, they were unloaded, 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 Loiwing, China, and later made whole with parts from damaged aircraft. Shortages in equipment with spare parts almost impossible to obtain in Burma along with the slow introduction of replacement fighter aircraft were continual impediments although the AVG did receive 50 replacement P-40E fighters from USAAF stocks toward the end of its combat tour.

AVG fighter aircraft were painted with a large shark face on the front of the aircraft. This was done after pilots saw a photograph of No. 112 Squadron RAF 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. (The nose-art is variously credited to Charles Bond and Erik Shilling.) About the same time, the AVG was dubbed "The Flying Tigers" by its Washington support group, called China Defense Supplies. 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 higher diving speed than most Japanese aircraft – qualities that could be used to advantage in accordance with Chennault's combat tactics. Chennault created an early warning network of spotters that would give his fighters time to take off and climb to a superior altitude where this tactic could be executed.

#### 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: 1st Squadron ("Adam & Eves"); 2nd Squadron ("Panda Bears") and 3rd Squadron ("Hell's Angels"). 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 Airport near Rangoon. When the United States officially entered the war, the AVG had 82 pilots and 79 aircraft, although not all were combat-ready.

The AVG had its first combat on 20 December 1941, when aircraft of the 1st and 2nd squadrons intercepted 10 unescorted Kawasaki Ki-48 "Lily" bombers of the 21st 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

A "blood chit" issued to the American Volunteer Group Flying Tigers. 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)

At this time, the focus of Japan's offensive efforts in the AVG's coverage area was southern Burma. The 3rd Squadron — 18 aircraft strong — defended Rangoon from 23 December–25 December. On 23 December, Mitsubishi Ki-21 "Sally" heavy bombers of the 60th, 62nd and 98th Sentais, along with single-engined Mitsubishi Ki-30 "Ann" attack bombers of the 31st Sentai, sortied against Rangoon. They were escorted by Nakajima Ki-27 "Nate" fighters of the 77th Sentai. The Imperial Japanese Army Air Force (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 60th Sentai was particularly hard hit — it lost five out of the 15 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 25 December, the JAAF returned, reinforced by Ki-21s of the 12th Sentai and Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabuses of the 64th Sentai. Hayabusa, Japanese for "Peregrine Falcon", was code named "Oscar" by Allied pilots. A total of 63 bombers escorted by 25 fighters were committed. These were intercepted by 12 P-40s of the AVG's 3rd Squadron and 15 Buffalos of 67 Squadron. Ten 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, and eight Buffalos were destroyed on the ground.

After its losses in the 23-25 December battles, the 3rd Squadron was relieved by the 2nd 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 77th, 31st and 62nd Sentais) launched fighter sweeps and counter raids on the Allied airfields at Mingaladon.

On 12 January, the Japanese launched their Burma Campaign. Significantly outnumbered, the AVG was gradually reduced through attrition, but often exacted a disproportionate toll of their attackers. On 24 January, six Ki-21s of the 14th Sentai escorted by Ki-27s attacked Mingaladon. All the Ki-21s were shot down by the AVG and RAF defenders. On 28 January, a fighter sweep of 37 Ki-27s was 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 70th Sentai was met by 10 Allied fighters (eight P-40s and two Hawker Hurricanes). Four were shot down for the loss of no Allied aircraft.



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 21 February that turned out to consist of Commonwealth troops. More than 100 Allied lives were lost in this friendly fire incident. On 27 February, after hearing that the RAF was retreating and pulling out its radar equipment, the AVG withdrew to bases in northern Burma.

It is estimated that while defending Rangoon, the AVG destroyed 50 Japanese aircraft while losing 20 P-40s. Ten AVG pilots were either killed or listed as missing--a very credible performance, 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-obsolescence of their predominant fighter type in the theater, the Ki-27. Though more maneuverable than the P-40, its armament and performance was inferior. Lightly constructed and armed, it could not withstand frontal attacks nor could it out-dive most allied fighters such as the P-40; if it attempted to, it often came apart in the air. In fact, its cruising speed was less than that of the Ki-21 bombers it was intended to escort.

#### Retreat into China

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 3rd Squadron to Magwe as reinforcement to his worn down 1st and 2nd 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 21 March by 151 bombers and fighters. On 23 March with only four aircraft left, the AVG was forced to relocate to Loiwing, just across the Chinese border.

The Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabusa was a single-engined land-based fighter used by the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force in World War 2

Reinforced by new P-40E "Kittyhawks" and by repaired aircraft from the AVG's excellent maintenance group, 12 P-40s were based at Loiwing on 8 April. Despite the long retreats, their losses and incessant air combat, the AVG still retained their abilities. That day, 12 Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabusas from the 64th Sentai raided the base. In the ensuing series of dogfights, four Ki-43s 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 overflights and ground attacks 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 to continue. But despite their efforts, the Allied

situation in Burma continued to deteriorate. On 29 April the AVG was ordered to evacuate Loiwing and relocate to Baoshan in China.

Like the AVG's other bases, Baoshan was repeatedly bombed by the Japanese Army Air Force. Still, the AVG scored against their JAAF tormentors, bringing down four "Nates" on 5 May of the 11th Sentai and two "Anns". By 4 May, 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 56th 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.

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 1 June, personnel that would form the nucleus of the new USAAF 23rd 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 by JAAF Nates, Lilys and new Kawasaki Ki-45 Toryu "Nick" heavy fighters. The AVG's last combat was over Hengyang on the day it was disbanded, 4 July. In this final action, four Ki-27s were shot down for no loss.

### Assessment of the AVG

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.

The AVG was officially credited with 297 enemy aircraft destroyed, including 229 in the air. As often happens, however, a researcher who surveyed Japanese accounts concluded that the number was much lower: 115. Fourteen AVG 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 using the lower figure of Japanese aircraft downed, the AVG's kill ratio was superior to that of contemporary Allied air groups in Malaya, the Philippines, and elsewhere. The AVG's success is all the more remarkable since they were outnumbered by Japanese fighters in almost all their engagements. The AVG's P-40s were arguably superior to the JAAF's Ki-27s, but the group's kill ratio against modern Ki-43s was still in its favor. In *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 U.S. military, the AVG, and brutal fighting in Burma. The result was a corps of experienced and skilled volunteer pilots who wanted to fight.

During their service with the Nationalist Chinese air force, 33 AVG pilots and three ground crew received the Order of the Cloud and Banner, and many AVG pilots received the Chinese Air Force Medal. Each AVG ace and double ace was awarded the Five Star or Ten Star Wing Medal.

### Notable AVG members

Gregory "Pappy" Boyington was discharged from the AVG in April 1942 and returned to active duty with the U.S. 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 H. Howard of the USAAF) to be awarded the Medal of Honor.

David Lee "Tex" Hill, later commander of the USAAF 23rd Fighter Group.

Charles Older postwar earned a law degree, became a California Superior Court judge, and presided at the murder trial of Charles Manson.

Kenneth Jernstedt was a long-time Oregon legislator and mayor of his home town of Hood River.

Robert Prescott founded Flying Tiger Line as a cargo carrier, along with other AVG pilots.

Allen "Bert" Christman, killed at Rangoon in January 1942, had earlier scripted and drawn the Scorchy Smith and Sandman comic strips.

Journalist Joseph Alsop served as Chennault's "staff secretary" while the AVG trained at Rangoon; he was interned at Hong Kong on Christmas Day 1941.

### 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:

Robert Neale: 13 victories

David Lee "Tex" 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

## Transition to the USAAF

The success of the AVG led to negotiations in spring 1942 to induct it into the USAAF. Chennault was reinstated as a colonel and immediately promoted to brigadier general commanding U.S. Army air units in China (initially designated China Air Task Force and later the 14th Air Force), while continuing to command the AVG by virtue of his position in the Chinese Air Force. On 4 July 1942, the AVG was replaced by the 23rd Fighter Group. Most AVG pilots refused 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 flew to protect the supply route; his aggressiveness led to Chennault's recruiting him as commander of the 23rd 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.

*Operations: The 23 Fighter Group initially owed its planes, several of its pilots, and its nickname to Claire Chennault's American Volunteer Group, "The Flying Tigers." Upon activation, the group used the shark-nosed P-40s made famous by its predecessor. The group provided air defense for the Chinese terminus of the Hump route from India; conducted a campaign against Japanese aircraft, both in the air and on the ground, strafed and bombed Japanese forces, installations, and transportation; escorted bombers, and flew reconnaissance missions. It intercepted Japanese planes attempting to bomb Allied airfields; attacked Japanese airdromes; strafed and bombed river craft, troop concentrations, supply depots, and railroads; and protected bombers that attacked Hong Kong, Canton, Shanghai, and other targets. Its area of operations extended beyond China to Burma, French Indochina, and Formosa. The "Flying Tigers" operated against the Japanese during the enemy's drive toward Chansha and Chungking in May 1943 and supported Chinese forces during the Japanese offensive in the Tungting Hu region in Nov 1943. Despite bad weather and heavy flak, the group received a DUC for actions it took in the effort to halt a Japanese force that pushed down the Hsiang Valley in Jun 1944 by repeatedly striking boats, trucks, aircraft, troops, and other objectives. During the following spring, the group helped stop a Japanese offensive, then proceeded to bomb and strafe retreating enemy columns. In Oct 1946, the 23 Fighter Group activated on Guam and was assigned to the Far East Air Forces, where it flew training,*

*interception, and island defense missions, until its move to the Panama Canal Zone in Apr 1949 to provide jet transitional training in RF-80s for the Caribbean Air Command. From 1951-1952 and 1955-1959, served as part of the Air Defense Command flying air defense missions over northeastern United States. Activated as the 23 Operations Group, under the composite-type 23 Wing in 1992, the group flew A-10s, C-130s, and F-16s. Provided airlift and close air support to the U. S. Army's XVIII Airborne Corps until 1997 when the 23 Wing was redesignated 23 Fighter Group and assumed new responsibilities. In Oct 2006 when the 23 Fighter Group returned to wing status, the 23 Operations Group again was redesignated to a fighter group and assumed the mission at Pope AFB, NC. Trained to provide close air support for ground forces, 2006-.*

*Emblem: Azure, over a bolt of lightning, in pale, or, a Flying Tiger proper, tongue red, winged argent; all outlines black; a diminutive border silver-grey. (Approved 24 Jan 1957.) Group will use the wing emblem with group designation in the scroll. Emblem should be updated in accordance with AFI 84-105.*

*1. UNIT CITATION: Under the provisions of War Department Circular No. 333, dated 22 December 1943, the following named unit is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy:*

#### ***23RD FIGHTER GROUP***

*The Japanese were sending 70,000 crack ground troops down the Siang River Valley in Hunan Province, China, aiming at the capture of Hengyang, vital communications center and mid-way point in the Japanese strategy to drive an inland corridor across China. A major defense stand by ill-equipped Chinese ground forces was planned at Hengshan, 25 miles north of Hengyang, to attempt to stop the drive. Between 17 June 1944 and 25 June 1944 the 23RD FIGHTER GROUP threw its total effort into the battle. On all but three days during this period the weather was adverse to aerial operations, with an overcast arched over the river valley and resting on the mountains that lined both sides of the valley. Demonstrating extraordinary heroism, the pilots flew nearly half of their missions during this period through this "tunnel" created low above the valley. The valley floor was studded with machine guns, antiaircraft guns and thousands of rifles in the hands of the troops, forcing the pilots to fly through deadly curtains of machine gun and small arms fire. Despite the extreme hazards, the Group's pilots flew 538 sorties, strafing and bombing the enemy spearhead forces. They killed 1,640 troops and destroyed approximately 780 cavalry and pack horses. Striking at the supply lines immediately behind the front, they destroyed 377 small boats and damaged 372 more; sank fifteen large river vessels 100-or-more feet in length and damaged eight. They destroyed 91 motor trucks and damaged 50. They also sank three and damaged two heavily-armed gunboats that the Japanese had rushed into the area to protect their water supply lines. In addition, they wrought extensive destruction among supplies and equipment in the 100 or more compound storage centers they destroyed and damaged. In four encounters with enemy aircraft, the Group's pilots shot down seven enemy planes, probably destroyed seven more and damaged eight, losing none of their own aircraft. This lone, gallant stand by the 23RD FIGHTER GROUP against 70,000 enemy troops, despite adverse weather and even after the*

*Allied ground defense stand at Heng-shan failed to develop, is expressive of an extraordinary heroism, gallantry, determination and esprit de corps in keeping with the highest traditions of the American military service.*

**BY COMMAND OF MAJOR GENERAL STONE:**

**CLAYTON B. CLAASSEN**

**Colonel, G.S.C.**

**Chief of Staff.**

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Air Force Order of Battle

Created: 28 Sep 2010

Updated:

Sources

AFHRA

Unit history. 32<sup>nd</sup> Air Division. 1955.

23rd Fighter Group

has a rich and illustrious  
history that dates back  
to Dec. 17, 1941, just 10 days  
after the Japanese attack on  
Pearl Harbor.

On that date, the Army Air  
Forces established the 23rd Pursuit Group  
(Interceptor) at Langley Field, Va. It was redesignated  
the 23rd Fighter Group in May 1942.

By that time, Claire Chennault had been recalled  
to active duty with the rank of brigadier general and  
placed at the head of the China Air Task Force. The  
23rd, a component of the CATF, was assigned three  
squadrons — the 74th, 75th and 76th.

The group inherited the mission of the disbanded  
American Volunteer Group “Flying Tigers.” Five of  
Chennault’s staff officers, five pilots and 19 ground  
crewmen became members of the 23rd FG. A large  
number, still in civilian status, volunteered to fly  
with the group for two weeks following the disbanding  
of their unit.

Then-Col. Robert L. Scott Jr. was the first commander of the 23rd FG. He would later author the military classic "God Is My Co-Pilot."

In addition to inheriting operational responsibilities from the AVG, the 23rd FG also benefited from the knowledge and experience of the AVG pilots and took on the nickname of the disbanded unit.

Before the 23rd FG returned to the United States in December 1945, it was credited with destroying 621 enemy planes in air combat plus 320 more on the ground; sinking more than 131,000 tons of enemy shipping and damaging another 250,000 tons; and causing an estimated enemy troop loss of more than 20,000.

The Flying Tigers were inactivated after World War II and reactivated and inactivated several times at different locations before being reactivated as the 23rd Wing, part of a composite wing at Pope AFB, N.C., on June 1, 1992.

In response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the 23rd FG landed the first fighter aircraft inside Afghanistan in March 2002. It has been heavily involved in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom ever since. The 23rd moved to Moody in 2007.