

TOM SMITH

Flying Tigers



American Volunteer Group reunites at Fantasy of Flight

STORY BY KIM ROSENLOF
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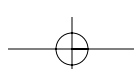
In September 1941, months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor propelled the United States into World War II, 300 young American men and women secretly trained in the jungle near Rangoon, Burma, as the American Volunteer Group (AVG), charged with the defense of the Burma Road into China. Collectively signing a one-year contract, this group of pilots, aircraft mechanics, propeller specialists, doctors, nurses, clerks, and even a chaplain was created by secret order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt to help the Chinese government defend their cities from the invad-

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KIM ROSENLOF

Eighteen AVG personnel joined moderator Frank Boring in a public presentation during the reunion.





David "Tex" Hill sat out of the action during the raid on Mesoht, Thailand, in which Charlie Mott was shot down, but he went on to become one of the most famous AVG pilots, becoming a triple ace by the end of World War II.

KIM ROSENLOF PHOTOS



Charlie Mott survived his days as a prisoner of war to return to the U.S. Navy, where he retired as a captain in 1963.



Ken Jernstedt talks about the December 23, 1941, battle, the AVG's first real taste of combat.

ing Japanese, although this fact wasn't made public until a July 4, 1991, ceremony honoring the AVG. Until then, the public generally knew the AVG by its nickname, the Flying Tigers, as a mercenary force of Americans in service of the Chinese government.

AVG History

Led by military aviator and strategist Claire Chennault, the Flying Tigers fought in the skies of China

and Burma to protect the Burma Road, used by the United States as its only supply route for delivering war materiel into China. Using nearly obsolete Curtiss P-40B Tomahawks provided by the U.S. government, the Flying Tigers achieved an impressive record against the enemy in their approximately nine months of duty, shooting down 286 Japanese planes at a cost of only 12 AVG pilots killed or missing in action. This record is even more impressive when one realizes that the AVG operated with a mere 100 planes, a total of 75 pilots, and no steady supply of either pilot replacements or spare parts!

In July 1942, with the United States fully engaged in war with the Japanese, the AVG was disbanded and its personnel given the oppor-

tunity to rejoin the American military under the 14th Air Force. Some, like their leader Chennault, chose to rejoin the military, while others took their leave and returned to the United States.

Reunion Time!

More than 60 years after the AVG was disbanded, 18 members of the unit gathered together one last time at Kermit Weeks' Fantasy of Flight in Polk City, Florida, on April 14, 2004. Rumored to be the last Flying Tigers reunion as the participants are all well into their 80s, the 2004 reunion was made bittersweet for the AVG personnel who attended as all who were able received flights in Kermit's newly restored TP-40N (see "Tomahawk!" on page 27). Jerry and Elaine Yagen from Virginia-based restoration firm The Fighter Factory also brought their recently completed P-40 Kittyhawk to the reunion, painted in Flying Tigers colors, although a subsequent mechanical problem kept the plane on static display during the actual reunion.

A crowd of approximately 250 people attended the AVG's public session moderated by Frank Boring, a filmmaker born in Taiwan and producer of the documentary *The Story of the Flying Tigers* by Fei Hu Films. The 18 pilots and ground personnel, including one female, who attended the reunion participated in the public session and shared stories and remarks relating to their short but turbulent time with the AVG.

December 1941

The AVG was split into three squadrons, with two based at Kunming, China, by mid-December 1941, and one in Rangoon, Burma, about 170 miles from Kunming. It was the Rangoon squadron that first cut its teeth in combat with the Japanese near Christmastime 1941.

Kenneth Jernstadt, a Marine Corps pilot flying with the AVG at Rangoon, talked about the December 23, 1941, aerial battle. "Right



Jerry Yagen flew his recently restored P-40 Kittyhawk painted in Flying Tigers colors to the AVG reunion.

PAUL BOWEN

after Pearl Harbor, Chennault put the third squadron in Rangoon. I guess he thought we were in better shape than the rest of them, and he anticipated that the first attack would be there. That particular day I happened to be on the wing of Neil Martin, who I considered to be one of the finest athletes in the group," Kenneth said. "We took off on what we thought was a raid warning and gained altitude as fast as we could. Around 15,000 feet we saw two formations of Japanese bombers coming in. I was on Neil's wing, and so we made the first pass.

"I don't know exactly what happened, but it's my contention that they shot him on the pass. As he went down, his airplane pulled up right in front of that bomber formation, and then spun off and hit down below. Then it was my turn, and on the second pass I made, I was lucky enough to hit one bomber. I was close enough that the airplane practically blew up in my face. Of course that was my first victory, which I was pretty proud of, but the fact that we had lost someone whom I considered to be one of the finest pilots in the squadron made me feel pretty bad."

Boring added an anecdote from his documentary to Kenneth's story. "One of the amazing things

about making a documentary film is that while you're doing oral histories of the individuals, you come up with a few surprises," said Boring. "After that first battle, when Kenny came down, and Lonsonsky looked over the shots and number of bullets in the airplane, he was pretty proud that his pilot had gotten into battle. Kenny wasn't as pleased about that as Lonsonsky was, but that's the way crew chiefs and pilots work."

Boring also mentioned a warning by the infamous radio personality "Tokyo Rose" that occurred after the December 23 battle. "The 23rd battle...was the first time [the Japanese] had really encountered any type of opposition. Tokyo Rose came on the radio and said that the Japanese had been in combat with these renegade, outlaw Americans, and on the 25th they were going to drop [the Americans] some Christmas presents. True to their word, they did, and the Christmas battle became legendary."

Recounting other AVG pilots' words, Boring described the Christmas battle as "a scene out of hell. There were airplanes blowing up in front of them, wings falling off—just an amazing melee of activity. And this was really when the world learned about the Flying Tigers, be-

cause film crews came out from Britain and the United States, and Movietone, the CNN of its day, broadcast these all over the world."

More Rangoon Stories

The AVG routinely fought on odds of five to 15 Japanese fighters and bombers against one Flying Tiger pilot. Boring recounted a quote by AVG pilot Joe Rosbert: "First they came with bombers, and we shot those down. Then they came with bombers and fighter escorts, and we shot those down. Then they started coming with just the fighters, trying to find some way to defeat the AVG, but they couldn't. The AVG never lost a battle in the air."

AVG armorer Chuck Baisden described the terror of seeing the enemy planes from the ground for the first time in Rangoon. "I wasn't one of the ones doing the shooting, but I got shot at," Chuck told the crowd. "We were all outside the barracks on that day (December 23). We heard a 'rumm, rumm, rumm,' and we looked up and saw these little specks in the air, flying in formation of threes. Somebody started counting, three, six, nine, 12, 15...they're not ours! [Frank Boring inserted later, "We don't have that many!"] So we all start

jumping into holes. The bombs started coming down onto the field, and they all seemed to be aimed at me. I really wondered if I was going to survive that, but I did."

The battle of Rangoon lasted several months. After the Christmastime attacks by the Japanese, Chennault sent members of the first squadron based in Kunming to reinforce the Rangoon-based squadron. Dick Rossi was one of eight AVG pilots sent from China to Burma on January 12. The plan was to fly from Kunming to the AVG's training base in Toungoo, Burma, rest overnight, then complete the flight to Rangoon the next day. Things didn't happen quite as planned for Dick.

"I'd like to correct the notion that we didn't have any showers in Rangoon," Dick Rossi began when directed to tell his story. "We did have showers, but they came from the clouds." Once the laughter died down, Dick launched his story. "Bob Neal had the map. The rest of us just had a piece of mimeographed paper that said there were these two rivers that end at the high mountain and [that's where] you turn . . . The entire rest of the flight was 10 minutes ahead of me [because of a mechanical failure on one P-40 that caused Dick to quickly land and jump into another P-40 shortly after the flight took off]. I had no contact with them, and we didn't know anything about the jet stream, and after a while I'm getting low on fuel, and I need to land. I do a 360 to look where to land, and out the window there's an airport right below me. Only upon final approach I realized it could be a Japanese field, which, fortunately it wasn't.

"I landed and saw an operations shack, so I taxied back there, and there was a British lieutenant who had just shown up, and I was the first airplane to land on him. I asked if he had aviation fuel, and he said yes, but we'll need to pour it through a chamois because there's still sediment in it. It took

me over an hour to get refueled. Someone came out with a bottle of scotch, and we polished that off while we were waiting, and I said, I'm trying to get to Toungoo, where is it? He had this map and said, 'It's only 100 miles over the hill, you could have coasted it!'

"I finally got [to Toungoo], and our other people had been delayed at Lashio, and they thought I was the one who got lost. When I was on the field at Toungoo, they had a receiver, but their transmitter was

out. So we knew [the flight] had been delayed, and I figured I'd just wait until they came down, and they're sure to buzz this old field that we'd all been based at. I went out there and waited, but you can't sit very long in the P-40 because it overheats, so when my Prestone started heating up, I just took off...I was just getting out of my plane at Rangoon when they all come flying up. They had all thought I was long gone—they had already started dividing my stuff!"

*Remember,
things don't always go
according to plan!*



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Tales of Two Charlies

"Buzzing the field turned out to be a little pastime for the AVG pilots," Boring said in his introduction of another well-known AVG pilot. "Charlie Bond has been known to buzz the Taj Mahal; at one point in a raid the Japanese caught them by surprise and everybody dived into the slip trench except Charlie. He had made it into [a P-40], went up and shot down a couple of aircraft, and he was so proud of himself that he started into a victory roll, but what he didn't know was that there were two Japanese fighters on his tail. And Doc Rich [Richard Buxton], who was on the ground, saw this, and if you can believe this, I'm not making this up, Doc Rich grabs his 45, and he's running out on the field shooting at those Japanese aircraft, but that was the second time that Charlie got shot down."

Although burned badly, Charlie survived that downing and went on to eventually become a major general in the U.S. Air Force, commanding the 12th Air Force before retiring in 1968.

In addition to defending Rangoon and the Burma Road, the AVG participated in raids on Japanese airfields, swooping in, strafing, and then "beating feet" for home. On one of these raids, a dispute arose between pilots David "Tex" Hill and Charlie Mott.

"Any profession has its good days and bad days," Mott said. "This was a particularly bad day. The third squadron had done a wonderful job at stopping the Japanese at Rangoon. And we in the second squadron were sent down to take over. The Japs had learned their lesson; they would come in, make a feint, try to get us airborne, and attack us while fueling, but it didn't work. But they were just about unrestricted in their tactics of night attack. We had no close control radar, and were vulnerable. We tried to station aircraft at two, four, and six thousand feet over the target, which we knew was

the [Rangoon] airfield, but we were never able to pick up anything, except one night we did see the signal to drop bomb. The Jap used the sig-

Charlie [Bond] was so proud of himself that he started into a victory roll, but what he didn't know was that there were two Japanese fighters on his tail . . .

AVG and Its Shark's Mouth

By Tom Smith, WB #9370

The AVG made the "shark's mouth" nose art famous, but they were not the first to use this marking. In fact, these markings were quite common early on in World War I.

Several stories abound about how the AVG came up with the shark mouth art as its unit logo. One story claims that the design came from the first Tomahawk-equipped Royal Air Force (RAF) Desert Air Force squadron that used the shark tooth insignia on its P-40 engine cowling. However, according to Eriksen E. Shilling, one of the first U.S. Army Air Corps pilots to sign up with the AVG, Shilling had "found a photo in a British magazine of a Messerschmitt 110 with a shark face on it. I took the photo and marked out the design on the nose of a P-40 with chalk to see how it would look, and then showed it to Chennault. The new marking idea was claimed as the group marking."

According to the story, all of the AVG's P-40s had the shark mouth painted on them after Shilling had worked his magic with his chalk. Although other stories abound, Shilling was there, so his word is hard to dispute.

nal that the tail gunner of the lead plane would fire his guns, and they'd all drop simultaneously.

"Anyhow, we got pretty aggressive. I happened to be running the outfit as operations officer one day, and we got a report that an [enemy] airfield at Mesoht [Thailand] near the border of Burma and China was now operational and had airplanes in the surrounding jungle. I had never been on a raid before, and I set up a flight and put it on the board. We were operating out of a tent alongside the runway. Tex Hill came up to me and said 'I ought to take this flight.' I said, 'Tex, why?' He said, 'Because I've been there before.' I turned him down and said, 'No, Tex, I'm going to take it.' Well, I'll never argue with Tex Hill again.

"We took off on a perfect day at noon; we were trying to catch them [eating], and we were quite successful. Even the Japanese admitted that they lost six planes. I was exhilarated and got too enthusiastic. I went around looking for planes stuck in the camouflage, and I was just coming down, opening fire on one I spotted when I got hit with something big, because the engine quit. I bailed out too low and wound up as a POW [prisoner of war]. Eventually after my wounds healed I was transferred to the River Kwai railroad bit, and Alec Guinness and I had a hell of a time building that bridge."

Boring added to Charlie Mott's story: "What Charlie is not saying is that when he fell out, landed in a tree dangling in his parachute, eventually fell out, and shattered his leg, the Japanese captured him and didn't even treat him, basically put him into prison, and Charlie had to set his own broken leg. Soon afterward he was transferred to what was made famous by the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and risked his life on a number of occasions stealing various things from the Japanese to keep people alive. Charlie is one of the most remarkable men I've ever met in my life." 