

## This Day in History... December 20, 1941

# Flying Tigers First Combat

On December 20, 1941, the Flying Tigers engaged in their first battle. The Flying Tigers were the brainchild of Claire L. Chennault, a retired US Army Air Corps officer. Chennault had been working in China as Chiang Kai-shek's military adviser in 1937 when the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out. He then worked as director of the Chinese Air Force flight school in Kunming.

In this role, Chennault trained Chinese Air Force pilots and flew on occasional scouting missions. Up until the summer of 1940, the Soviet Union had provided fighter and bomber squadrons but withdrew them after that time. So that year Chennault returned to the US to request that the US provide pilots and planes to aid in the Chinese cause.

After President Franklin Roosevelt approved Chennault's request in April 1941, he spent several months overseeing the purchase of 100 Curtiss P-40 fighters and recruiting 100 pilots and 200 ground crew and administrative workers. Together, they would become the American Volunteer Group (AVG), nicknamed the Flying Tigers. The pilots consisted of 60 men from the Navy and Marine Corps and 40 from the Army Air Corps. Each one was discharged from their service and hired by a private military contractor, though they would ultimately work closely with the US Army.

Chennault set up a flight school for the pilots in China because it turned out some had lied about their flight experience and needed pursuit training. Chennault also pushed a different approach to air combat based on what he'd seen previously in China. He ordered his pilots to work in teams with an altitude advantage and use a "dive-and-zoom" technique.



*This stamp was part of the 1941: A World at War sheet.*

By November, the pilots were all trained and most of the planes arrived in China. The pilots were divided into three squadrons – 1st Squadron (Adam and Eves), 2nd Squadron (Panda Bears), and 3rd Squadron (Hell's Angels). Their first mission was to protect the Burma Road, a vital supply route for China.

The Flying Tigers first saw combat on December 20, 1941, while protecting the Burma Road. Members of the 1st and 2nd squadrons encountered 10 Japanese bombers near Kunming. They shot down three of them and prevented them from bombing their target. And after that, the Japanese abandoned any further raids on Kunming. Three days later, the 3rd squadron entered combat defending Rangoon. Though the Japanese managed to bomb the city, the Flying Tigers shot down 35 enemy planes.

The Japanese then launched their Burma Campaign in January 1942. The Flying Tigers were largely outnumbered but managed to inflict high casualties on the Japanese. By January 24, the Flying Tigers had shot down 73 Japanese planes, while losing just five of their own. However, as the fighting wore on through February, the Tigers lost a number of planes and were down to just 38 aircraft. Even as their number of aircraft dwindled, the Tigers continued to harass the Japanese and even prevented an advance on Kunming.

By June 1942, members of the new USAAF 23rd Fighter group began to arrive in China to replace the Tigers. The Tigers flew their last mission on July 4, the same day they were disbanded. In all, the Tigers were credited with shooting down 297 enemy aircraft. Fourteen Tigers were killed in action, captured, or disappeared, two died of wounds from bombing raids, and six were killed in accidents. Because they served as part of the Chinese air force, they received Chinese awards – the Order of the Cloud and Banner and the Chinese Air Force Medal. And 50 years after their service, the Tigers were officially recognized as members of the US military and awarded the Presidential Unit Citation and each received a Distinguished Flying Cross.



*This stamp was issued on Chennault's 100th birthday in 1990.*

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