

Chinese Americans in World War II

Before the war, the Chinese were mainly looked down upon by American society. They kept to themselves but were often treated as second class citizens. But when the war broke out, Chinese Americans, namely those in Chinatown, LA and San Francisco immediately rallied and supported the war effort immensely. They collected tons of scrap metal and resources. They raised \$18,000 in donations for the Red Cross and bought about \$30,000 in war bonds in the year 1942 alone. That was not the end of what they did to help “Fight for the Motherland”, but suddenly in American society, the Chinese went from being looked as the “sick man of Asia” to “valued ally” during the wartime.

During these years, about 29,000 Americans of Chinese ancestry were living in Hawaii, and 78,000 were living on the mainland of America. By the end of World War II, about 13,000 Chinese Americans were serving in the army. A quarter of those forces served in the air force as part of the infamous Flying Tigers in the 14th Air Force. This all began in 1940 when Major General Claire L. Chennault, who had been training the China Air Force, came back to Washington in hopes of recruiting volunteer troops to help defend China from Japan. As a result and by a secret executive order from President Roosevelt, the American Volunteer Group (AVG), later known as The Flying Tigers, was formed. Chennault had recruited 100 pilots and 200 support personnel. He also acquired 100 P-40's and their training was based in Burma. In 1941, December 12, The Flying Tigers took flight as their first mission was the defense of Rangoon. The AVG, before it was absorbed into the 14th Air Force, compiled one of the greatest war records in history. Chennault himself states in a summary of that year,

“The group that the military experts predicted would not last three weeks in combat had fought for seven months over Burma, China, Thailand, and French Indo-China, destroying 299 Japanese planes with another 153 probably destroyed. All of this with a loss of 12 P-40's in combat...”

These missions greatly impacted the war and what was more amazing was the 100 P-40's that were received were ill-equipped unlike the later models. These did not carry gun-sights, bomb racks, or auxiliary fuel tanks, so the troops were unbelievably shooting down enemy aircraft with makeshift sights. Once Chennault had his foothold in China, it was time to call in reinforcements.

Chennault requested to the U.S. government a Chinese American group of soldiers to further liaison relationships between his American troops and the Chinese troops. Fortunately around the same time, Lieutenant Sing Y. Lee just received permission to begin drafting Chinese Americans to help fight for the war. After receiving training at Patterfield, Ohio, the 14th Air Force was officially activated March 10, 1943. Within the 14th AF, the 14th Air Service Group (ASG) had two groups made up of solely Chinese Americans: the 987th Signal Company and the 407th Air Squadron. When the reinforcements got to Burma, they spread out. The 14th ASG was deployed to China in January, 1944. The 987th Signal Company maintained and coordinated communications between the Chinese forces and the American forces, making them a powerful fighting force. The 987th Signal Company also guided many lost pilots and coordinated many SOOaerial operations across Free China.

In October 1943, the Chinese American Composite Wing (CACW) was formed as a joint-unit between the US Army Air Force and the China Air Force and was assigned to the 14th AF. They were led by Chennault. The plan was to have an American commander assisted Chinese officers to help direct and coordinate joint operations and tactics between the two Air Forces. One of the challenges of the 14th Air Force was known as “Flying the Hump”. As Japanese blocked and destroyed land trade routes between Burma and China, the Air Force had to airlift supplies over the Himalayas through treacherous weather and huge mountain ranges. This became known as “Flying the Hump.”

The aircraft assigned to the CACW were late model P-40 Warhawks and B-25 “Mitchell” medium bombers. In 1944, P-51 Mustangs were assigned to the Chinese American Composite Wing’s pilots. The CACW’s bombardment squadrons were one of the most flown in the world. They did 92 missions within a 4 month period and had about 3 missions every 4 or so days. One squadron sunk 36 Japanese ships, a total of about 101,626 tons. In another instance, 1943 the bomb squadron attacked the largest Japanese air base in Formosa. They shot down 14 planes and destroyed another 50 on the ground without losing a single allied aircraft. The Chinese and Americans worked really well together as a fighting force and could not be stopped. According to Chennault, as a force they showed good combat discipline and were very effective in both air combat and bombing. The U.S. Army Corps credited the 14th Air Force with the destruction of 2,315 Japanese aircraft, 356 bridges, 1,225 locomotives, and 712 railroad cars.

This war helped to end discrimination against the Chinese Americans. They were shown as heroes when the war veterans finally returned home. Their patriotism proved their loyalty and value to all of America. One reason that some Chinese Americans entered the war was naturalization to acquire American citizenship, which they got when they returned. Another event that happened was the passing of the War Brides Act of 1945 allowing some Chinese to finally bring their wives, who were stuck in China, over to the U.S. Chinese Americans played their part in World War II and came back home as heroes. Some even made the ultimate sacrifice overseas protecting China and the U.S. We thank all of them—and every veteran who participated in the war for their service and sacrifice.

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