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AMERICAN ANGELS:
FORMING THE LAFAYETTE ESCADRILLE, RAF EAGLES, AND FLYING TIGERS

by

Benjamin S. Robins

A THESIS

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AMERICAN ANGELS:
FORMING THE LAFAYETTE ESCADRILLE, RAF EAGLES, AND FLYING TIGERS

Benjamin S. Robins, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2000

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While the United States initially abstained from battle in the Twentieth Century's two greatest conflicts, the Lafayette Escadrille, Royal Air Force (RAF) Eagle Squadrons, and Flying Tigers served as all-American volunteer fighter units in foreign air forces. During World War I the Escadrille flew with the French and in World War II the Eagles signed on with the British while the Tigers fought alongside the Chinese. Their similarities, however, were only superficial, demonstrated particularly during their formation periods.

Foreign need, bureaucratic resistance, and unit support highlighted the groups' efforts to gain foreign or American approval. The Lafayette Escadrille initially experienced French resistance but later flourished because of a political need. The Eagles quickly received approval from the British, encountered American reservations, and grew from both military and political necessity. The Flying Tigers organized for pure military necessity and were completely supported by the U.S. government.

The recruiting process differed in support, method, and volunteers' motivations and qualifications. Publicity informed men of the Escadrille, and volunteers crossed the Atlantic predominately motivated by romantic idealism. Word of mouth carried the RAF recruiting drive and pilots desiring to fly Spitfire and Hurricane fighters flocked to the call. Hired Government recruiters enlisted the Tigers, and the trip to China was an

opportunistic adventure to fulfill a military career, fly fighters, earn money, or see an “enchanted land.” While the Escadrille and Eagles were selective and completely incorporated into foreign air forces, the Tigers enlisted whoever would join and were civilian soldiers of fortune.

Finally, the background of the men and the level of support affected the training process. The Escadrille flyers were predominantly college educated, upper-class individuals who entered a complete aviation training program in France. The Eagles were experienced pilots, mostly from blue-collar backgrounds, and underwent an intermediate “refresher” training program before entering advanced fighter training. The Flying Tigers were all former military aviators and directly entered advanced training, although many have never flown a fighter.

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Introduction

Ever since the dawn of air combat, the fighter pilot has held a unique position in the annals of warfare. This bold figure, who often fights against an individual opponent, harks to the imagination of ancient Roman gladiators and medieval knights of Arthurian legend. He has developed his own ethos, has been enshrined by popular mythology, and become the subject of hero-worship. As a result, library shelves overflow with countless tales and historical records of these gallant, flying warriors.¹

Three fighter units in particular have captured the imagination and romanticism of air combat: the Lafayette Escadrille, the Royal Air Force (RAF) Eagle Squadrons, and the Flying Tigers. Separated by different times and different theaters of combat, these organizations hold the common distinction as all-American volunteer units serving in foreign air forces. The Lafayette Escadrille flew with the French in World War I. The Eagles signed on with the British during World War II. The Flying Tigers, officially known as the American Volunteer Group (AVG), also flew in the Second World War but alongside the Chinese. Adding to the mystique of their fighter pilot heritage, these men volunteered and fought while the United States remained neutral.

The purpose of this thesis is to compare and contrast the formation of the Lafayette Escadrille, the RAF Eagle Squadrons, and the Flying Tigers. Though researched and documented individually, historians have neglected a comparative analysis of the units' organization. Since the Eagles and Tigers appear as natural successors to the Lafayette Escadrille, popular narratives often note the traditions and

¹ Philip Kaplan, *Fighter Pilot: A History and Celebration* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1999), 7.

experiences shared between the three units. All three consisted of eager men who joined a foreign air force while their home nation remained neutral. They each generated vast amounts of press, compiled distinguished combat records, and eventually transferred to the U.S. Army.² Contrary to these common themes, however, the units are only superficially similar, with vastly different paths of formation, make-up, and organization.

American neutrality proved a difficult and trying issue as each unit endeavored to serve a foreign power. When World War I erupted in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson issued the customary order keeping the United States out of battle, but exceeded the traditional declaration and asked the American public to remain impartial “in thought as well as in deed.” More importantly, a law from 1907 declared that any American wishing to enlist in a foreign armed service “shall be deemed to have expatriated himself when he has been naturalized in any foreign state in conformity with its laws, or when he takes an oath of allegiance to any foreign state.” The volunteer would lose American citizenship.³

International accords also complicated the matter. Article 6 (Chapter I, Convention V) of the 1907 Hague Convention expressly permitted “persons...to offer their services to one of the belligerents,” but forming an entire group, such as an American squadron, encountered problems. Opposing belligerents could argue that an American unit directly violated Article 4 of the same chapter and convention, which prohibited recruiting “corps of combatants” in a neutral country. Moreover, a

² Philip D. Caine, *American Pilots in the RAF: The WWII Eagle Squadrons* (Washington: Brassey's, 1993), 20.

³ Robert D. Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy Since 1900*, 4th Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 63; Philip M. Flammer, “Primus Inter Pares: A History of the Lafayette Escadrille” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1963), 7.

belligerent's active encouragement of American volunteers could potentially have an adverse effect on American public opinion.⁴

During the inter-war years, the United States passed a series of Neutrality Acts to insure American citizens could not interfere in future wars and potentially drag the nation into it. The acts prohibited everything Congress believed had led the United States into the First World War. Passed between 1935 and 1939 they banned giving loans and credits to belligerents, the shipment of arms or munitions to them, the arming of American merchant ships, and travel by American citizens into war zones. A Presidential Proclamation, aimed specifically at individuals, strengthened American resolve to stay out of World War II. It prohibited any recruiting within the United States or its territory for service in a foreign military. The President further forbid using a U.S. passport to reach a foreign country for enlistment or travel anywhere on a belligerent ship.⁵

Despite Wilson's plea for inaction in World War I and the Government's passage of the Neutrality Acts before World War II, Americans could not help from rushing overseas. Prior to the Lafayette Escadrille, many bold adventurers joined the French Foreign Legion. The famed corps furnished a loophole to the citizenship clause by not requiring a formal oath beyond a promise to obey orders, but how would France justify a specifically designated all-American squadron?⁶

During the Second World War, the British also used foreign men preceding American help. Members of the British Commonwealth (Australia, New Zealand,

⁴ Flammer, "Primus," 21-22.

⁵ William L. O'Neill, *A Democracy at War: America's Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 15; "Provisions of American Law RE Services of Americans in Foreign Military Forces," Memorandum, 29 January 1941 (Martha Byrd Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections), 1-2.

⁶ Edward Jablonski, *Warriors With Wings: The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1966), 24.

Canada, and South Africa) manned RAF fighter command to defend the Mother country, and Czechs, Poles, and French joined the British to fight against an enemy that had conquered their nations.⁷ Contrary to the precedent set by these Commonwealth and Allied pilots, an all-American volunteer unit differed due to neutrality.

Like the British, the Chinese enlisted foreign pilots prior to American volunteers. Soviet units fought as part of the Chinese Air Force beginning in Fall 1937, and a year later, the Chinese tried building a mercenary air force, luring pilots from around the globe with promises of large rewards for downing Japanese aircraft. Unlike the American Volunteer Group, however, these foreign aviators never encountered the neutrality problem—the Soviets “were willing to help anybody who was fighting and weakening Japan,” and the mercenaries, like the French Foreign Legion, did not represent a sovereign nation.⁸

With the neutrality issue serving as an underlying theme throughout this study, the thesis will compare the all-American volunteer units during their pre-combat periods. Chapter one will examine the bureaucratic obstacles each group encountered on the road to gaining American and foreign diplomatic approval. Each unit received differing amounts of resistance, but ultimately, political or military necessity influenced diplomats at home and abroad to approve a particular unit’s formation. In addition, chapter one will discuss who supplied the basic support for the volunteers during and after approval.

Chapter two details the recruiting process and the major role that diplomacy and neutrality played in it. Recruiting problems, both home and abroad, demanded a complex drive for volunteers, one that would take advantage of the various motivations that

⁷ Caine, 5.

impelled men to “sign up.” Much like the previous chapter, various groups both in the United States and overseas supported the recruiting effort.

Chapter three examines the training period and the backgrounds of the men that joined each unit. As the final stage before combat, each volunteer entered a training program to gain proficiency in fighters and learn the art of air warfare. From the beginning, the programs catered to the types of men who joined the different units, the obstacles that the men encountered during training, and the level of support each unit received from their foreign employer and the United States.

Once fully trained and equipped, the all-American volunteer units initiated combat operations. Taken up as “darlings of the press” and beloved by the people they served, the units became an indistinguishable sign of help from the greatest nation not actively participating in combat. In essence, the three units acted like guardian angels, swooping in to assist the needy and provide an encouraging sign of hope.

⁸ Claire Lee Chennault, *Way of a Fighter: The Memoirs of Claire Lee Chennault, Major General, USA (Ret.)*, edited by Robert Hotz. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1949), 61-70.

Chapter One: Gaining Approval

...they shall mount up with wings as eagles
-Isaiah 40:31

Before they could “mount up” and serve a foreign nation, each unit had to navigate a maze of diplomatic and administrative obstacles that impeded the organizers’ efforts to transform an idea into a realization. A foreign power’s political and military need played a large role in determining how quickly the belligerent, or the United States, accepted the volunteers. Once approved, the volunteer units confronted questions of funding, staffing, and equipping. During this approval process, both the host nation and the United States provided different amounts of resistance and backing to the three Angel units.

Lafayette Escadrille

Credit for first mention of Americans flying for France properly belongs to William Thaw II of Pittsburgh, although aviation writers have long credited Norman Prince of Prides Crossing, Massachusetts, with the honor. Thaw originally offered his services as an aviator to France, but when the nation refused, he instead enlisted in the Foreign Legion as a common soldier. While serving with the Second Regiment of the Foreign Legion, Thaw declared that “One day a lot of us will be flying up there...it’ll be a bunch of Americans.” Thaw, however, only mentioned his idea to friends and minor French officials.¹

¹ Flammer, “Primus,” 11-14; Paul A. Rockwell, interview by Northeastern Chapter “Cross & Cockade” Society, Asheville, NC: Approx. 1962, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Montgomery, AL, 2.

Meanwhile, shortly after Thaw's brief mention of a volunteer squadron, another American came up with the same idea—Norman Prince, who hoped to offer his services to France as soon as he perfected his flying skills. While learning to fly at Burgess Flying School, Marblehead, Massachusetts, Prince discussed the idea with Frazier Curtis, a friend from Boston, who had recently returned from England after an unsuccessful attempt to fly with the Royal Naval Air Service. Like Prince, Curtis hoped to perfect his flying at Marblehead and again volunteer his services.²

Prince set sail for France in January 1915 and worked to enlist the aid of several Americans residing in Paris. Robert Chandler, a prominent member of the American colony in Paris and a man with connections in the U.S. Embassy, agreed to help. He also gained strong support from two Frenchmen, Jacques and Paul de Lesseps, both popular aviators and members of the Paris Air Guard. Through the de Lesseps and Chandler, Prince met with minor officials of the French War Department, but the French remained non-committal and the idea floundered. In early February, the men, now joined by Frazier Curtis, offered their services through a letter addressed to Monsieur Millerand, the Minister of War. Again, they were denied.³

Three reasons dominated French resistance to the Escadrille's formation. First, they did not need any more pilots since only a limited number of planes existed and the air service never lacked applicants. Second, French authorities feared a German spy network and gave preference to volunteers who were known, who had military training, and a reliable national status. The French particularly viewed Americans with suspicion due to an unfortunate earlier experience. In September 1914, the French Consul General

² Flammer, "Primus," 14; James Norman Hall and Charles Bernard Nordhoff, *The Lafayette Flying Corps*, vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920), 4.

in New York accepted F.C. Hild, a prewar exhibition flyer in the United States, as an aviator. After a very brief training period with the French Air Corps, he deserted and returned to the United States, where he gave interviews criticizing the French Air Corps. Worse, French intelligence authorities saw Hill in Washington with Germany's military attaché and feared the aviator had sold secrets to the Germans.⁴

Finally, the neutrality of the United States entered into the initial rejection of the proposed all-American squadron. Despite its neutrality, the U.S. did little to prohibit American volunteers to the French Foreign Legion. Myron T. Herrick, the U.S. Ambassador to France from the Taft administration, was an avid Francophile who never discouraged would-be Legionnaires and even assisted in the organization of several pro-French relief groups. The State Department itself held a vague, liberal view of the 1907 Law that threatened repeal of a volunteer's American citizenship, but officials were glad to learn that the legionnaire oath "to serve from this day with honor and fidelity for the duration of the war" did not constitute a permanent political allegiance. Legionnaires were safe, but Americans serving directly under the regular French Army could pose a problem. When William G. Sharp replaced Herrick as Ambassador in November 1914, the issue of American volunteers and the duties of neutrals ceased until the idea of an all-American flying squadron surfaced.⁵

Aside from the Prince's effort in Paris, William Thaw actively petitioned to leave the Foreign Legion and fight with the Air Service. Joined by two other American Legionnaires, Bert Hall and James Bach, Thaw met Lieutenant Felix Brocard, the senior

³ Flammer, "Primus," 16; Hall and Nordhoff, v1, 4.

⁴ Georges Thenault, *The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille: Told By Its Commander Captain Georges Thenault*, translated by Walter Duranty (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1990), 3; Arch Whitehouse, *Legion of the Lafayette* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962), 15; Rockwell, 3.

pilot in a nearby fighter squadron, in October 1914. Soon to be an important official in the *Bureau du Sous-Secrétaire d'Etat de l'Aéronautique*, Brocard liked their enthusiasm so much that he put in for their transfers, and the three men joined the Air Service by January 1915.⁶

The acceptance of Thaw, Bach, and Hall, along with French-Americans Gervais Raoul Lufbery and Didier Masson, represented an important landmark in the formation of an all-American squadron. Their excellent performance in the Foreign Legion helped overcome the horrid memory of F.C. Hild. Moreover, their initiative "opened the door," thereby creating an invaluable precedent. The French now proved willing to circumvent the law forbidding foreigners to serve outside the Foreign Legion, assigning men to the Legion and then hurriedly detaching them for duty with the air service. In addition, the war had taken its toll on the Air Service, which now needed qualified men. In this regard, the organization reached its second milestone in late February and early March 1915 when Frazier Curtis and Norman Prince enlisted in French aviation.⁷

Despite this success, bureaucratic resistance still burdened Prince's idea for an entire squadron of Americans. Finally he caught a break. Robert Bliss, the First Secretary of the American Embassy in Paris, introduced Prince to Jarousse de Sillac, an undersecretary of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Understanding an American squadron could provide a valuable political boon, Monsieur de Sillac promised complete support.⁸ On 20 February 1915, de Sillac sent a letter to his friend Colonel Paul Bouttieaux, of the Ministry of War:

⁵ Flammer, "Primus," 8-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

I beg to transmit to you herewith attached the names of six young men, citizens of the United States of America, who desire to enlist in the French aviation—and offer which was not accepted by the Minister of War. Permit me to call your attention to this matter, insisting upon its great interest. It appears to me that there might be great advantage in the creation of an American Squadron. The United States would be proud of the fact that certain of her young men, acting as did Lafayette, have come to fight for France and civilization. The resulting sentiment of enthusiasm could have but one effect: to turn the Americans in the direction of the Allies...If you approve these considerations I am confident that it will be possible to accept these young men and to authorize their enlistment in such a manner that they may be grouped under the direction of a French chief.⁹

M. de Sillac alluded to Americans Prince, Curtis, Thaw, Hall, Bach, and now another potential recruit, Elliot Cowdin.

With de Sillac the Americans gained an ally in the War Department who assumed a personal responsibility for the volunteers' integrity and good faith. Slowly, other French supporters joined the ranks, including Georges Leygues, one of the country's most powerful politicians. The French reversed their earlier stand against Americans entering directly into aviation largely because of support by such men as de Sillac and Leygues.¹⁰

The organization effort now took two directions—de Sillac and other French officials using their positions and influences, and Thaw, Prince, and Curtis agitating from their respective squadrons and training schools. Curtis' luck, however, did not last. He experienced a series of aerial training accidents and the Air Service medically retired the young man. He now spent much of his leisure time searching for volunteers. While making a canvas of men at Neuilly in early July, he learned of Dr. Edmund L. Gros. The organizer of the American Ambulance Corps, a volunteer organization composed of young Americans serving as ambulance drivers and hospital attendants, Gros

⁹ Hall and Nordhoff, v1, 6.

¹⁰ Flammer, "Primus," 34-35.

coincidentally dreamed of forming an American volunteer squadron. As a respected member of the American colony with a thorough knowledge of French language and customs, the Doctor would fit perfectly into Prince's network. Curtis introduced Gros to de Sillac and left the two men to interview the French authorities, arouse the interest of prominent Americans, and keep the project moving forward.¹¹

Gros and de Sillac ultimately created the Franco-American Committee.

Consisting of M. de Sillac as President, Dr. Gros Vice-President, and Mr. Frederick Allen of Philadelphia, this committee now directed all the Escadrille's formation efforts into a single, cohesive drive.¹² The Committee planned its attack and approached France's Minister of War, Etienne Millerand, who was reluctant to lend his approval, fearing a violation of international law and the usurpation of America's guarded neutrality. To alleviate the Minister of War's misgivings, de Sillac arranged a luncheon on 8 July 1915 between former U.S. Ambassador Robert Bacon and Leon Bourgeois, France's Minister of State, and General Auguste Hirschauer, head of French aviation, at the Paris residence of French Senator Gaston Menier. At this luncheon the Franco-American Committee persuaded the French of the feasibility and the benefits of an American squadron, to be known as the *Escadrille Americaine*. In addition, Bacon and the French officials reached the conclusion that no international law prevented Americans from enlisting in the foreign army as long as their recruitment had not taken place in the United States.¹³

Although General Hirschauer agreed to give orders for the formation of the squadron under the command of a French captain, summer and autumn passed with no

¹¹ Flammer, "Primus," 35; Dennis Gordon, *Lafayette Escadrille Pilot Biographies* (Missoula, MT: The Doughboy Historical Society, 1991), 1; Hall and Nordhoff, v1, 10.

¹² Hall and Nordhoff, v1, 10.

¹³ Gordon, 1; Hall and Nordhoff, v1, 11.

definite steps toward the grouping of American on the Front. The negotiators only exchanged polite notes, formal requests, and dignified responses. In the meantime, the few American airmen trained at the Front and quickly acquired a reputation as an "elite group". Even the French Minister of Foreign Affairs recognized the Americans "as aviators of great merit." During this time of bureaucratic backlog, the volunteers were gradually softening the French attitude toward the *Escadrille Americaine*. Still, the French remained concerned about the neutrality issue, taking great care to incorporate Americans into the Legion before detaching them for duty with the Air Service.¹⁴

With the idea progressing, Prince, Thaw, and Cowdin, already in training with the French Air Service, took Christmas Leave to the United States. The neutrality issue again reared its head. George Vereck, editor of the strongly pro-German newspaper *The Fatherland*, telegraphed Secretary of State Robert Lansing demanding the internment of the men. German Ambassador Johann von Bernstorff also lodged a complaint with the Secretary. Before the Government could take any official action, the three men left the country. During their stay, however, the American press sympathetically documented their plight and aroused public support for the young pilots. Upon their return to France, the Americans suddenly found the French bureaucracy more accepting of an American unit.¹⁵

In February the military named a new Director of Aeronautics, Colonel Henri Regnier. Fearing their plan would get lost in the bureaucratic turnover, the Franco-American Committee quickly won the new Director to their cause. Finally on 14 March

¹⁴ Hall and Nordhoff, v1, 12; Whitehouse, 23; Flammer, "Primus," 38-42.

¹⁵ Edward Jablonski, *Warriors With Wings: The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1966), 39; Flammer, "Primus," 44; Edwin C. Parsons, *I Flew With the Lafayette Escadrille* (Indianapolis: E.C. Seale & Company, Inc., 1937), 13.

1916, Regnier wrote to the eager Americans that "General Headquarters has just replied, informing me that an American squadron will be organized." Shortly thereafter the French assembled the pilots at Le Pessis-Belleville, the great aviation depot a short distance north of Paris. On 16 April 1916, the *Escadrille Americaine*, officially the N-124, initiated active duty at the Front.¹⁶

The diplomatic maneuvering, however, was not quite finished. The Germans protested, and at the request of the U.S. Secretary of State, the squadron changed its name to *Escadrille de Volontaires*. Dr. Gros, however, felt this name did not fully encompass the unit's spirit, and suggested a new name. At the issued instructions of France's Minister of War, the volunteers adopted their official title as *L'Escadrille Lafayette*, referring to the Marquis de Lafayette who fought with the American colonists against the British during the Revolutionary War.¹⁷

Immediately the organizers of the Escadrille appointed a committee of prominent American businessmen, most of them wealthy patients of Dr. Gros, to obtain the funds to pay for the pilots' monthly allowances and the cash prizes that accompanied awards for valor and the downing of enemy aircraft. The list of wealthy donors included William K. Vanderbilt and J. Pierpont Morgan, Jr., as well as Norman Prince and William Thaw's fathers.¹⁸

While the military factor cannot be ignored, political motivation may have been decisive in French authorization of the squadron. Politically, if a number of Americans volunteered for the French, it would convince the neutral world of France's honorable aims in the conflict. Hopefully any success these American volunteers encountered

¹⁶ Hall and Nordhoff, v1, 12-14.

¹⁷ Gordon, 2; Whitehouse, 15.

would also be emphasized in the U.S. press and attract the United States to join the Allies. Assigned to *avion de chasse*, the pursuit branch of the Air Service, the Lafayette Escadrille would now become part of the most glamorous and publicized aspect of military aviation—fighters.¹⁹

RAF Eagle Squadrons

By the Second World War, the fighter had become the most romantic image of air combat. For Great Britain's struggle, only the gallant pilots flying the Spitfires and Hurricanes separated the nation from decimation or possible invasion by the Germans. But the Battle of Britain severely depleted the resources of RAF Fighter Command. In addition to aircraft losses, 515 fighter pilots were killed and another 358 wounded. The British Government continued its call for pilots from the Commonwealth and other friendly nations to help fill the RAF's ranks. Though neutral, the United States appeared as a potentially large resource for future RAF pilots, but America's strict neutrality impeded access to these aviators.²⁰

Colonel Charles Sweeney, an American soldier of fortune living in France, initially conceived the idea of capitalizing on potential pilots from the U.S. at the start of World War II. As France appeared destined for war in 1939, Sweeney searched for an effective way to respond to the crisis his adopted homeland faced. He received approval

¹⁸ Gordon, 2.

¹⁹ Flammer, "Primus," 46; Whitehouse, 3.

²⁰ Caine, 19.

from General Paul Armengaud, former chief of the French Air Force, to form an American flying unit. It would be a "Lafayette Escadrille of 1940."²¹

With the Neutrality Acts in place, the FBI kept close surveillance of Sweeny's activities in the United States. According to Chesley Peterson, one of the first RAF volunteers who later rose to Major General in the U.S. Air Force, "the Neutrality Acts forbade American involvement, even on an individual basis...you couldn't get over legally, you had to do it illegally." Despite the restrictions, Sweeny secretly recruited thirty-two American pilots and began shipping the volunteers in contingents. Unfortunately, before all the recruits could cross the Atlantic, France fell to Germany on 22 June. During the crisis, four volunteers were killed, nine became German prisoners, and six traveled to England for service with the RAF.²²

Sweeny's "new Lafayette Escadrille" never materialized, and as a result, the Colonel reduced his recruiting effort and gradually ceased to be an active force in obtaining American pilots for duty in Europe. Nonetheless, Sweeny did keep recruiting long enough after the fall of France to send a number of American pilots to England, where they were met by his nephew, also named Charles, and eventually formed the core of the first all-American RAF Squadron. The Colonel holds the distinction as co-founder, providing initial awareness of the group in the press, and building an extensive recruiting network and contacts others used to bring pilots to Canada and England.²³

The actual founder of the Eagle Squadrons was the younger Charles Sweeny, nephew of Colonel Charles Sweeny. When war broke out in Europe, young Charles and

²¹ Caine, 22-24; *Michigan Times Herald*, 31 May 1940 "Americans Form A New Lafayette Escadrille To War."

his brother Robert became convinced that U.S. help was essential to defeating Germany, and both became dedicated to gaining that help any way they could. In 1939 Charles organized the First Motorized Squadron, a home guard unit composed of Americans living in London. Charles decided, however, that real help meant pilots, and they could recruit Americans to add to the growing number of foreign pilots already serving the British.²⁴

Before implementing his plan, Sweeny first had to gain permission from the British Air ministry. In June 1940 he contacted Lord Beaverbrook, then Minister of Production, with his idea for the squadron. Interested, Beaverbrook suggested that Sweeny talk to his good friend, Brendan Bracken, personal assistant to Winston Churchill. Intrigued by the idea, the Prime Minister asked Sweeny to put his thoughts on paper. On 27 June 1940 Charles wrote to Sir Hugh Seeley, member of the Air Ministry, urging that an American Air Defense Corps be formed "as an adjunct to my American Mechanized Defense Corps." He added that a considerable number of experienced pilots had already been interviewed and approved, and were readily available for the proposed Air Defense Corps. Ten thousand American volunteers with flying experience could be recruited if the pilots could keep their citizenship and the effort received adequate financial backing.²⁵

Summoned to brief his proposal to the Air Council, Sweeny quickly won British approval. On 2 July 1940 the Air Council authorized creation of an American volunteer unit. Secretary of State for Air Harold Balfour, who cast the lone dissenting voice, feared

²² Caine, 25; Major General Chesley G. Peterson, interview by Roger D. Launius, 19 August 1985, Hill AFB, UT, USAF Oral History Collection, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 1; Vern Haugland, *The Eagle Squadrons: Yanks in the RAF 1940-1942* (New York: Ziff-Davis Flying Books, 1979), 12.

²³ Caine, 26-27.

Sweeny's work would interfere with his own effort to recruit pilots in the United States to work as instructors at Canadian flying schools. He later consented when the Air Ministry assured him that all volunteers could choose whether to train in Canada or join the American air defense unit in England.²⁶

After the British approved the plan, Sweeny questioned how to finance the recruiting effort and sustain the flyers until they became members of the RAF. Because of the American neutrality acts, the new recruits would have to be transported to Canada before they could enlist, and then be provided for until they could be put aboard a ship for England. The Sweenys provided initial funds. Robert contributed about \$40,000, while his father put up an undisclosed amount. A good friend of Robert's, Barbara Hutton, commonly known as the Countess Reventlow and heir to the Woolworth fortune, also gave \$15,000, while Charles donated an undisclosed amount. In all, they raised about \$100,000, an adequate sum to sustain the effort in first-class style.²⁷

The U.S. Neutrality Acts made it essential not only that the entire operation be conducted quietly but also that the young men recruited be routed through Canada to avoid legal penalties. British Secretary of State for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, made the official announcement of the unit's formation on 8 October 1940. Designated the No. 71, the squadron organized at Church Fenton, near the little beer-brewing town of Tadcaster, Yorkshire, with three American pilots from the 609 Squadron, each having 50 hours in

²⁴ Ibid., 28-29.

²⁵ Caine, 30-31; Haugland, 13.

²⁶ Caine, 31.

²⁷ Ibid., 32-33.

Spitfires. Named the Eagles after the insignia on their American passports, the group would grow to three full combat squadrons.²⁸

Flying Tigers

Like the British, the Chinese needed help with their air service. When the Japanese invaded China in 1937, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, leader of the Nationalist Chinese, ordered the Chinese Air Force (CAF), an organization in its embryonic stages, to engage the well-equipped, well trained Japanese Army and Naval Air Forces. The CAF, however, was woefully unprepared, and the Japanese pilots laid waste to the Chinese cities with little or no opposition.²⁹

To lead the effort in strengthening the air force, Chiang enlisted the aid of Claire L. Chennault, formerly the chief of United States Army Air Corps (USAAC) fighter training and an unorthodox expert in aerial warfare. He retired from the U.S. military in 1937 and, with the special permission of the State Department, signed on as the Chief Advisor to the CAF Central Aviation School. The Bank of China served as Chennault's official employer, a technicality necessary to avoid an overt violation of American neutrality status. In addition the arrangement linked the airman to the wider circle of the Chinese Nationalist family of politics—Soong Tze-wen (T.V. Soong), Madame Chiang's brother, ran the bank.³⁰

²⁸ Caine, 33; 4th Tactical Fighter Wing, "Historical Chronology," 12 December 1978, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2; Peterson, 1985, 2.

²⁹ "Chinese Air Force American Volunteer Group (CAFAVG)" (Martha Byrd Collection, USAFA Special Collections), 1; Jasper J. Harrington, interview by LtCol. Ward Boyce, 28 March 1981, Montgomery, AL, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 15.

³⁰ "Terms of Agreement Between Major C.L. Chennault and the Chinese Government," 27 May 1937 (Martha Byrd Collection, USAFA Special Collections), 1; Michael Schaller, "American Air Strategy in China, 1939-1941: The Origins of Clandestine Air Warfare." *American Quarterly*, vol. XXVIII (Spring 1976): 6.

Chennault encountered problems from the beginning. An independent survey by U.S. Marine Captain J.M. McHugh in May 1938 stated that the CAF was an immature organization with a state of efficiency "far below what might reasonably have been expected." The blame belonged to General Chou Chih-jou, an army commander and trusted favorite of Chiang, whom the Generalissimo picked to head the aviation program. Chou, however, compiled a record for "inaction and general stupidity." With disorganization and inaction, China bought planes from everyone who would sell them and consequently lacked standardization of equipment and no interchangeability for spare parts. The disorganized air force was no match for the Japanese, and as a result, suffered extensive personnel and equipment attrition.³¹

With the Japanese in command and blockading the coast, the sole remaining access to the outside world was via the Burma Road, 2,100 miles of primitive thoroughfare that snaked over 10,000 foot mountains and into miles-deep gorges to link Chungking with Rangoon. The Japanese now attacked both the road and its key transshipping center at Kunming. To make matters worse, the Russians were withdrawing their aid, the people's morale had plummeted, the economy was ready to collapse, and the Communists were exploiting the crisis.³² The Chinese needed more than just a few advisors.

In June 1940 Chiang sent T.V. Soong, now China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, to the United States on a mission to extract concrete aid. A Harvard graduate and shrewd financier, the Chinese diplomat received a warm welcome by the Americans. On July 9,

³¹ Captain J.M. McHugh, USMC, "Status of the Chinese Air Force," Report No. 5-38, 6 May 1938 (Martha Byrd Collection, USAFA Special Collections), 6-7; "CAFAVG," Byrd Collection, 1.

³² Martha Byrd, *Chennault: Giving Wings to the Tiger* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 107.

Soong met with Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, asking the U.S. to lend \$140 million to stabilize China's currency, improve the Burma Road, and buy military supplies, including 300 fighter planes and 100 light bombers.³³ Despite his plea, Soong encountered strong American isolationism and a nation acting under neutrality laws. The United States operated the "cash and carry" program, allowing belligerents to purchase military equipment, but this material was in short supply and the British received any arms spared from the U.S. build-up. Furthermore, China had no funds to purchase the material or the required security for loans.³⁴

Not to be dissuaded, Soong cabled Chiang notifying him that "it would assist in convincing authorities here if program transmitted were supported by Colonel Chennault." Chiang summoned Chennault and General Mao P'ang-chu, Director of the CAF Operations Division, to Chungking in October 1940. After discussing various ways in which to cope with the untenable situation, Chiang decided that Chennault would return to the U.S. with plans to form a volunteer force composed of American airplanes, pilots, and ground personnel. When initially asked, Chennault was pessimistic due to the neutrality laws, the backlog in aircraft factories, the commitment to the British, and the push within in U.S. armed services to prepare. Nevertheless, Chennault, along with General Mow, departed China to meet with Soong.³⁵

The volunteer air force scheme was really not a new idea in China. Soviet Air Force squadrons fought over Shanghai and Nanking in the fall of 1937. By early 1938, Russia had dispatched seven fighter squadrons and five light bomber squadrons to their

³³ Chennault, *Fighter*, 91; Byrd, 105; Daniel Ford, *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and the American Volunteer Group* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 39.

³⁴ Byrd, 106.

southern neighbor, but later recalled these forces when war in Europe appeared eminent in 1939. Even before the Soviet withdrawal, Soong was reluctant to rely entirely on Russian support and contemplated recruiting a larger foreign legion. Hoping to attract mercenary pilots from around the globe, the Chinese government offered \$500 a month salary and \$1000 for each Japanese plane shot down. At Madame Chiang's request, Chennault organized four Frenchman, a Dutchman, three Americans, a German, and six Chinese bomber pilots into the 14th Volunteer Squadron. The foreigners, however, lacked discipline, gave little allegiance to China, and headquartered on Dump Street, a thoroughfare in Hankow inhabited by barkeepers, opium peddlers, prostitutes, and foreign spies. Eventually the Chinese airmen rebelled at working with the foreigners, and the mercenaries themselves objected to their assignments, so China disbanded the unit in March 1938 and looked for alternative ideas.³⁶

Chennault had speculated aloud, during the battles over Nanking, what a well-trained, well-equipped, well-led force of American pilots could accomplish. In 1938 he and William D. Pawley, President of Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company (CAMCO), a supplier and maintenance organization for the CAF, worked on the idea of an all-American volunteer force. In 1939, Dr. H.H. Kung, the Minister of Finance and Madame Chiang's brother-in-law, suggested to Pawley that he launch a campaign in the United States to recruit American pilots and organize a group patterned after the famous Lafayette Escadrille. With the assistance of CAMCO Vice-President Bruce Leighton, a retired U.S. Navy officer, Pawley lobbied in Washington to request Chinese aid. In January 1940, Leighton discussed the project with Navy authorities, highlighting

³⁵ Byrd, 106-107; Ron Heiferman, *Flying Tigers: Chennault in China* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), 17; Harrington, 15.

American interest in preventing Japanese control of China and how the project could be accomplished with an effective air force. Leighton visualized CAMCO handling the force under commercial contract, with no direct U.S. government participation. They would only need official cooperation to secure loans, acquire planes, and form a nucleus of American pilots. The plan received no takers.³⁷

Despite China's previous non-committal efforts and the U.S. military's previous refusal to CAMCO, Chennault and Soong, assisted by General Mao and China's financial advisor Arthur Young, set to work on the aviation proposal. On 25 November 1940, the men presented their idea to the President's Liaison Committee, the civilian agency coordinating foreign arms purchases in the U.S. The proposal asked for 350 fighters and 150 bombers with pilots and spare crews, 150 basic trainers, 10 transports, 20 percent spare parts, and material to build 14 major fields and 122 landing strips, plus ammunition and ordnance for one year. With this aid, Chennault could build a well-equipped air force to take back China. He reasoned that Japan depended on the sea and could be defeated easily by cutting its transport lanes. Air bases in Free China could attack all vital Japanese supply lines and advanced staging areas, smashing a Japanese southern offensive before it left ports and staging areas.³⁸

Both Chennault's plan and the Delegation's proposal received little attention from the U.S. government. The Liaison Committee was not impressed. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson was not thrilled about the Chinese request or the mounting enthusiasm for dropping bombs on Japan. Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall saw little in

³⁶ Chennault, *Fighter*, 61-71; Byrd, 84-86; Ford, 29; McHugh, 4.

³⁷ "CAFAVG," Byrd Collection, 2; Byrd, 106-107.

³⁸ Heiferman, 17; Robert Moody Smith, *With Chennault in China: A Flying Tiger's Diary* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military/Aviation History, 1997), 11; Chennault, *Fighter*, 96.

Chennault's ideas, and concerned himself with the monumental task of building up the U.S. military. Nevertheless, Chennault believed in air power and its strategy. He based his plans on four years of study and personal observation of the devastating effects of Japanese air power on the Chinese. He realized that a group of volunteers could rejuvenate the CAF and would serve their own country as well as China by acquiring combat experience and testing American planes and tactics. Germany and Russia did the same in Spanish Civil war, and hundreds of Americans slipped across the Canadian border to join the British.³⁹ China appeared desperate and needed help quickly.

The China delegation stepped up its efforts and turned to Soong's influential friends in the White House. Chennault, the military and technical expert, and Soong, the political and gracious diplomat, wooed the powerful who were sympathetic to the Chinese plight—Henry Morgenthau, Frank Knox, Thomas Corcoran, Lauchlin Currie, and Joseph Alsop. Primarily through the effort of these men, Chennault and Soong had an audience with President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) and his staff advisors.⁴⁰

The possibility of operating American planes and American pilots captivated Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau. Previously encouraged by Chiang, he explored the idea, and by November 30, was primed when Soong gave him a four-page memo. Prepared by Chennault, the memo argued for a 500 plane air force, staffed with personnel from American and British training centers, to operate in conjunction with the Chinese army or separately. Morgenthau thought 500 planes nearly impossible, but suggested a few long-range bombers with crews to bomb Japan.⁴¹

³⁹ Byrd, 111; Harrington, 16; Chennault, *Fighter*, 92.

⁴⁰ Harrington, 18.

⁴¹ Byrd, 109-110.

When Morgenthau mentioned the bomber idea to the conservative Secretary of State Cordell Hull, he too enthusiastically backed the plan. Indeed, a month before Chennault reached the United States, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox wrote a memo to Hull suggesting the project, possibly forwarding the idea from his earlier discussion with CAMCO's Pawley and Leighton. Knox, a well-informed man and acutely aware of the burden the Navy would bear in a Pacific War, weighed the issues and concluded air support for China was wise.⁴²

Thomas Corcoran, a lawyer and lobbyist, served on FDR's "kitchen cabinet" of informal advisors. The China delegation asked him to hold private conversations with congressional leaders to see how they felt about de facto military aid to China. He concluded that there would be no opposition. The President then released Corcoran from his White House assignment to help Soong with the effort. According to Chennault, Thomas Corcoran "did yeoman service in pushing the AVG project when pressure against it was strongest."⁴³

Soong also cultivated a friendship with Dr. Lauchlin Currie, an administrative assistant to the President and an economist who was "shrewd, scholarly, and adept at pushing projects through DC." FDR sent Currie to China as a special adviser. He returned a strong backer of increased aid to the embattled nation in general and the air plans in particular. The last man, Joseph Alsop, published a newspaper column each week in seventy-four newspapers, and because he and Eleanor Roosevelt were cousins, enjoyed personal access to the White House.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 110-111.

⁴³ Ford, 39; Byrd, 113; Chennault, *Fighter*, 99.

⁴⁴ Chennault, *Fighter*, 99; Ford, 39.

Through these influential friends, the backers of the American volunteer force presented the idea to the President on 19 December 1940. He gave verbal consent and left Currie, Marshall, and Knox to handle the specifics. Knox in turn authorized Pawley and CAMCO to proceed with the recruiting effort.⁴⁵

During the approval process, acquiring the aircraft served as the “greatest obstacle to the plan.” Chennault visited aircraft plants and equipment manufacturers around the country, hoping to find one glimmer of hope. His journey was fruitless until he traveled to the Curtiss-Wright factory in Buffalo. Since China had been a long-time profitable customer for the company, Burdette Wright, Vice-President, offered a proposition. Curtiss-Wright, currently producing P-40 fighter aircraft for the British, could add another assembly line and produce 300 more P-40s by summer. If the British waived priority for their current crop of 100 fighters, they would get 300 later versions in June, July, and August. Soong and Morgenthau persuaded Britain to accept the Curtiss swap. To pay for the aircraft, Soong utilized Roosevelt’s lend-lease program and acquired \$150 million in loans.⁴⁶

The sale of the aircraft turned problematic when William Pawley produced a contract that called for him to receive a commission on all planes sold by Curtiss-Wright to China. He threatened to place an injunction against the shipment unless he received the payment, but Curtiss-Wright refused to pay, alleging Pawley did not participate in the sale. The futile negotiations stretched through several months until Curtiss-Wright threatened to sell the aircraft back to the RAF. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau finally called a conference on 1 April 1941 to settle the dispute. After

⁴⁵ Byrd, 110-117.

tedious talks, the group compromised. Instead of the full commission, Pawley would receive half, and in return, CAMCO would assemble, test fly, and service the P-40s during training and operations.⁴⁷

Although the organizers settled the P-40 deal, the War Department still held reservations over utilizing China as a base for American bombers. General Marshall wanted any available bombers to go to Britain, and Secretary of War Stimson thought the bombing scheme was "half-baked." The two men eventually persuaded Knox and Morgenthau to rethink the effort and rely only on the Curtiss fighters. Ultimately the Chinese and American governments would task the AVG to defend the Burma Road and its main base, Kunming. The unit would continue to guard the supply route while the Chinese expanded their logistical position and strengthened their land forces with heavy equipment. Once fortified, the Chinese military would initiate an offensive.⁴⁸

Despite the American support, the United States was still officially neutral. The government turned to T.V. Soong and Pawley for the clandestine set-up. Previously Soong had operated as an official Chinese purchasing agent dealing through the Chinese-owned Universal Trading Corporation, which used American credits that were extended to China from December 1938 through December 1940, to buy supplies in the U.S. In response to expanded aid, Soong created a new corporation in early 1941. China Defense Supplies (CDS) supplanted Universal Trading and became China's designated Lend-

⁴⁶ Claire Chennault, Letter to Dr. George Paxton, 15 January 1945 (Martha Byrd Collection, USAFA Special Collections), 1; Chennault, *Fighter*, 98-100; Smith, *With Chennault*, 12.

⁴⁷ Chennault, *Fighter*, 100-101.

⁴⁸ Ford, 49; *The History and Status of the First American Volunteer Group*, 19 October 1941 (Martha Byrd Collection, USAFA Special Collections), 10.

Lease agent in April 1941. CDS would be a discreet means of converting economic support into military aid.⁴⁹

China Defense Supplies comprised American government officials, former Chinese missionaries, and American businessmen with connections to the China trade. Soong dipped into Treasury Department, White House, and other Federal agencies to put together a staff whose requests might influence Washington and American industry. The roster included FDR's cousin Frederick T. Delano, head; William Brennan, congressional liaison; Quinn Shaughnessy, a marine officer and lawyer; William Youngman, released from the Federal Power Commission at FDR's suggestion to be general counsel and courier to Chiang; and Whiting Willauer, a Princeton and Harvard man with a reserve commission in naval intelligence, to serve as America's liaison in China. Hoping to shape a heroic image of the AVG, these men thought the unit should have a distinctive emblem, and after several suggestions, Soong settled on the tiger. As the most ferocious animal alive, the tiger would become "super-colossal" when endowed with wings, and the Flying Tigers would become an apt name that matched the famed shark's teeth painted on the nose of each P-40.⁵⁰

Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company, the large corporation that owned an assembly plant in China at Loiwing and offices in New York, Hong Kong, and Rangoon, would recruit the men and help maintain the P-40s. Chinese Finance Minister H.H. Kung and William Pawley jointly owned CAMCO, and their operating funds came from CDS, which originated as U.S. Lend-Lease aid. CAMCO would pay for their recruited employees through a special revolving fund set up in the Bank of China, and would also

⁴⁹ Schaller, 12; Byrd, 113.

⁵⁰ Schaller, 12; Byrd, 120-136.

furnish “technical assistance in the maintenance, overhauling, and repair of aircraft and service of engines” in addition to the “receiving, transportation, unboxing, assembly, and storage of new planes and parts.”⁵¹

The stage was set. Palwey and CAMCO would handle the administration and logistics, China Defense Supplies would diplomatically maneuver and keep American supplies coming, and Chennault would lead the fight and work with Chiang. Known as the 1st American Volunteer Group, it would be a military unit financed, equipped, and staffed by the neutral United States but fighting under the Chinese flag. The organizers ceased to look upon this as an “American” operation, and miraculously transformed it into a “Chinese” affair. The planes, crews, funds, and planning would lose “official” or American status upon touching Chinese soil. Not only could the Volunteer Group help the Chinese, but also the U.S. military could appraise American personnel and equipment under actual combat conditions.⁵²

Comparison

When Colonel Sweeny initially created an American volunteer unit for France in 1940, he dreamt of a unit modeled after the Lafayette Escadrille. H.H. King, China’s Finance Minister in World War II, also knew of the famous volunteers and envisioned a re-creation in China. Though the ideas were similar, the units differed in three critical ways: need, resistance to formation, and backing.

Americans desiring to fly for France proposed the idea of the Lafayette Escadrille; the idea did not originate near government circles. When Prince and his influential

⁵¹ Schaller, 13; Robert Smith, *With Chennault*, 15; “Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company Contract, AVG,” 15 April 1941 (Martha Byrd Collection, USAFA Special Collections), 2-3.

comrades initially talked to the French, the nation did not need any more pilots. Throughout late 1915 and into early 1916, word spread of the American fliers in Europe, especially after the Christmas Leave incident. The French realized that the political value of such an organization could be tremendous, and as a result, the Lafayette Escadrille grew out of political necessity, not military requirements.

The RAF Eagle Squadrons, too, grew from some political necessity. The British knew that the United States must enter the war in order for their nation to be truly safe. Young men slipping to Canada, bound for the RAF, made impressive news and to the dismay of the United States, pulled the Americans closer to war. Unlike the Escadrille, however, the Eagles were also formed for a military need. The Battle of Britain had stripped the Empire of its experienced pilots, so the British looked to the United States for veteran replacements.

The Flying Tigers, contrary to the Lafayette Escadrille and the Eagles, originated solely for military need. The Japanese had virtually annihilated a disorganized and poor Chinese Air Force. They had blockaded the country and threatened the Burma Road, China's only link to the outside world. Ultimately the Tigers headed to Asia, not to bomb Japan as envisioned by Chennault, but to protect the vital supply route and keep China alive.

Due to an insufficient need, the upper-echelon of the French government resisted organization of the Lafayette Escadrille. In addition to the saturated flying network, the French feared spies and already cast a suspicious eye on Americans due to F.C. Hild. The organizers campaigned over a year to gain approval for their squadron of Americans. The effort required a two-pronged approach—Norman Prince and his fellow aviators

⁵² Harrington, 18; Schaller, 11.

demonstrating the value of Americans at the Front and the Franco-American Committee lobbying in Paris, throwing dinner parties, and repeatedly pleading to the military and foreign ministry. The United States neither resisted nor encouraged the formation of the group. The State Department was simply happy to know the Americans would not take an oath of allegiance to France. The Department did listen to German objections to the pilots, and even asked the group to change its name, but never stopped any men from going overseas, including Prince and his fellow pilots during Christmas leave.

Unlike the French, the British rapidly approved the Eagles' formation because they recognized the need, both political and military. After only one memorandum and one briefing, young Charles Sweeny convinced the British of the group's value. Also contrary to the Escadrille, the United States remained more hesitant toward this group. The President signed the proclamation barring individuals from being recruited or enlisting in the United States, traveling overseas to enlist, or using a passport to enlist. Even the FBI kept abreast of Colonel Sweeny's efforts, forcing the Colonel to operate in secrecy. In the next chapter on recruiting, this issue becomes even more readily apparent.

The Flying Tigers, however, received little resistance from the United States, and the idea originated from the upper echelons of the foreign nation it would serve, China. What little resistance the idea received concerned mostly the type of mission and aircraft, and, as demonstrated in the next chapter, recruiting. Acquisition of the Curtiss-Wright P-40s solved many of the problems, and the American Volunteer Group settled on the fighter mission of protecting the Burma Road. Initially declined in late November by the President's Liaison Committee, the China delegation received verbal approval in late December by FDR. Although forwarding the idea to Roosevelt required the help of a few

key men in Washington, the President liked the idea and told his staff to work out the details.

Funding for the Flying Tigers also received American support. The United States would not only provide the pilots, but would also supply the ground crews, aircraft, and operating expenses. China Defense Supplies would covertly obtain funds through Lend-Lease, and CAMCO would funnel that money to its "private" employees in Asia, a group they covertly recruited, and maintain the logistical support in theater. Unlike the Tigers, the United States did not fund or equip the Escadrille and Eagles, which relied on private donations for start-up and then complete incorporation into a foreign air service for operation. While everything about the Tigers signified American involvement and support, only the aviators were American in the Lafayette Escadrille and the RAF Eagle Squadrons.

Chapter 2: Recruiting

Fortune favors the bold.
-Virgil, *Aeneid X*

Upon receiving approval, each Angel unit undertook the arduous process of recruiting their initial cadre of volunteer airman. Despite this authorization, diplomatic pressures, both foreign and domestic, still taxed their recruiting efforts. More importantly, the three groups utilized different methods and different standards to staff their organizations with qualified men. As the volunteers flocked to the call of service, to engage in a conflict in which their home nation abstained, these bold men carried with them motivations as varied as the recruiting efforts themselves.

Lafayette Escadrille

As noted in the previous chapter, France made voluntary service simple by not requiring Americans to swear an oath of allegiance or renounce their American citizenship in order to serve. These first volunteers, barred from directly enlisting as pilots, joined the French Foreign Legion as second-class soldiers. Once in the Legion, they tried every method possible to receive a transfer and could always look to M. de Sillac and Dr. Gros, the founders of the Franco-American Committee, for any help in pushing each individual case. One volunteer noted that Dr. Gros “was extremely amiable...it needed a big effort and plenty of influence to get out of the Legion. That was our chief obstacle, but thanks to Dr. Gros and M. de Sillac, it was overcome.” Even after transfer, the government kept the Americans’ Legion identities on all official papers

and dossiers.¹ The French reasoned that, diplomatically, this was the best way legally to utilize their foreign pilots.

Despite the few Americans' success in transferring, the Franco-American Committee worried that future volunteers would get trapped in the Legion or resort back to infantryman status. The organizers already envisioned an extensive recruiting drive of mailing brochures to prominent American sporting clubs, universities, and individuals, encouraging Americans to fly for France.² For this effort to succeed, they needed a guarantee that all American volunteers fighting for France would do so in the air, not on the ground.

To alleviate the possibility of American infantrymen, the President of the Committee, M. de Sillac, used his political persuasiveness and wrote to M. Rene Besnard, Sub-Secretary of State for Military Aeronautics on 1 December 1915 with their plea.

Allow me to ask you, therefore, if it would be possible to give the Americans who desire to enlist the following assurance:

1. That every care will be taken to settle definitely at Paris their medical fitness for flying.
2. That if, once enlisted, they show inaptitude for flying, it be made possible to release them.
3. That they be treated, in so far as possible, with courtesy inspired by their generosity in offering their lives in the service of France.³

The Secretary replied on 25 December 1915 guaranteeing the fliers that "in case of proven ineptitude for service," either the Franco-American Committee or military authorities can demand the "engagement be rescinded." Once accepted into the aviation corps, the men received official letters with this guarantee inscribed.⁴

¹ Michael Neiberg, "The Lafayette Escadrille: An American Bridge to Global War," USAF Academy, CO, 1999, 6; Thenault, 3; Hall and Nordhoff, v2, 6; Reginald Sinclair, interview by USAF Oral History Committee, 21 February 1969, USAF Academy, CO, USAF Oral History Program, USAFA, 5.

² Flammer, "Primus," 41.

³ Hall and Nordhoff, v1, 12.

⁴ Hall and Nordhoff, v2, 12.

The organizers continued their diplomatic maneuvering and established a recruiting group in the United States. They interviewed young men, shipped them to France, and assured the volunteers a salary higher than the French Air Service received. The group actively recruited from April 1917 until July 1917, when France quit receiving Americans in the air service at the request of the U.S. government.⁵ By then an active participant in the war, the American military needed its own sons to fight and fly.

Due to limited billets, the Escadrille selected their volunteers very carefully, and as a result, some men lied about their flying experience to get in or attain Legion transfers, later causing problems in training. Dr. Gros personally examined each candidate "medically and morally." If successful, governmental officials escorted the recruit to the *Bureau de Recrutement* at the *Hotel de Invalides*, the French Foreign Legion headquarters. Here the recruit signed his engagement in "the very place where in 1792 the Parisians had come to volunteer when the country had been declared in danger and their National Assembly issued its call to arms."⁶

Word of mouth served as an excellent tool for attaining recruits. While sailing to France aboard the *Rochambeau*, Norman Prince met other young Americans on their way to the embattled country and exuberantly talked about his idea of forming an all-American flying unit. These men, already on their way to serve in the Foreign Legion or American Ambulance Corps, became intrigued. French pilots told other would-be Legionnaires how they "saw towns, villages, networks of trenches, columns of troops

⁵ Rockwell, 16-17.

⁶ Neiberg, 4; Charles Dolan, interview by Philip M. Flammer and Henry L. Fabiani, 15 August 1968, USAF Academy, USAF Oral History Program, USAFA, 6; Thenault, 2.

moving up ribbons of road—all in the pattern of a Turkish rug,” instantly filling the young Americans with desires to fly.⁷

The most productive Escadrille recruiting, however, evolved from publicity. During the famed Christmas Leave episode, German Ambassador Johann von Bernstorff accosted William Thaw while the young man received a haircut in New York City, accusing the flier of violating neutrality. The incident proved a tremendous boon to Thaw’s recruiting efforts as it thrust the Escadrille into American newspapers overnight. Escadrille member Edward Parsons wrote that Thaw, Prince, and Cowdin “couldn’t realize what demigods they had become to the American public. Much against their wills, from the moment of their arrival they were lionized and kept constantly in the public eye. They made a grand copy for a nation athirst for first-hand knowledge of the war” and created a tremendous enthusiasm and real sympathy for France. Attaining world fame and appearing in American newspapers day after day, the Lafayette Escadrille inspired young Americans to volunteer and risk their lives for a nation they hardly knew. The press followed the men intently, and from that time forward American public opinion regarded the pilots with pride as the nucleus of an American army in France.⁸

Ultimately, thirty-eight pilots and four French officers served in the Lafayette Escadrille, with twelve to fifteen pilots serving at any one time. Activated in 16 April 1916, the unit stood down 21 December 1917, and the French released all but two of the volunteers to serve with the young, inexperienced American Air Service. They flew at every sector of the Front and logged more than three thousand combat sorties. The

⁷ Jablonski, 30; James Norman Hall, *High Adventure: A Narrative of Air Fighting in France* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929), 4.

gallant pilots gained forty confirmed victories, and as many as one-hundred unconfirmed downings versus losing eight men in combat, two dead from accident, and five wounded, two so severely that they had to be retired from service. Three volunteers became prisoners of war, with one escaping.⁹

Despite their small number, however, historical journalists have repeatedly mistaken the Escadrille as a large unit because the Franco-American Committee ultimately recruited two hundred and nine men to fly for France. Since a French fighter squadron consisted of no more than fifteen pilots, the small Escadrille could not possibly accept all the Americans volunteering for service. To compensate for this mass flow of recruits, the military assigned the men to the *Groupes de Combat*, the regular French combat forces, and spread the volunteers throughout sixty-six pursuit and twenty-seven observation and bombardment squadrons. Known as the Lafayette Flying Corps, it would furnish the replacements for the Escadrille with Dr. Gros, de Sillac, and Vanderbilt choosing the candidates.¹⁰ Paul Rockwell, one of the original members of the Escadrille, makes one important distinction between the Escadrille and the rest of the members of the Flying Corps—that of motivation.

Some very splendid young men went into the later group, but the fact remains that if they had stayed in the United States and had not gone to France and volunteered, they would have been drafted into the U.S. Army. In other words, they had to fight. They had to get in the war because their country was at war, and they were able-bodied and brave young men. The pilots of the Lafayette Escadrille, all of whom volunteered while the U.S. was neutral and against the wishes of their own government, were volunteers in the purest sense of the word. They were fighting a war which was not their own. It was not the war of their

⁸ Neiberg, 7; Parsons, 15; Rockwell, 16; Thenault, 13.

⁹ Rockwell, 16; Gordon, 2; Philip M. Flammer, "The Myth of the Lafayette Escadrille," *Aerospace Historian* (March 1975): 23.

¹⁰ Gordon, 2; Rockwell, 16; Nancy Nichols, *Letters Home From the Lafayette Flying Corps* (San Francisco: J.D. Huff and Company, 1993), 152; Juliette A. Hennessy, "The Lafayette Escadrille: Past and Present," *The Air Power Historian* vol. IV, no. 3 (July 1957): 151-154; Sinclair, 3.

country. Those who came after April 1917 were in a war which it was their duty to fight.¹¹

Edwin Parsons noted that none of these early volunteers “had any real idea of what we were getting into. We had hold of the bear’s tail and no one to help us let go.” He even believed that most of the members would have welcomed an opportunity to bow out gracefully. Before sailing for France, many of the volunteers knew little about the unit, the possibility of enlistment, and the nature of the requirements for service. Their knowledge, up to the time of sailing, had been confined to brief references in the press.¹²

So why did these young men sail for France? What motivated them to fly for a country that was not their native land? For the most part, the motivations can be broken down into four key areas: Idealism, adventure, aviation’s mystique, and trench warfare.

Idealism lured most of the men into the war, and idealism led so many to fight for so long. They wished to defend liberty, “which France incarnated and protected.” Most had been bonded to France through heritage or pre-war experience. Victor Chapman’s “heart flamed with anger over the invasion of Belgium, and he felt it his high duty to fight for the Allies.” The two brothers Paul Ayers and Kiffin Rockwell became distressed at the world situation and believed that France’s effort was “the cause of humanity, the most noble of all causes.” Paul eventually was the first American in the Escadrille to bring down an enemy plane.¹³

These men wanted to “make the world safe for democracy.” They were young and believed in the rhetoric. One flyer commented that “you cannot realize what it means to know that I am doing the most I can do. I did not feel right in driving an ambulance.”

¹¹ Rockwell, 17.

¹² Parsons, 8; Hall, *High Adventure*, 5.

These men flew because mostly they had firm convictions about right and wrong combined with the moral courage to match. They saw the war as a crusade, a fight to the finish between good and evil, in which they would be moral eunuchs if they did not play a part.¹⁴

Adventure played an extremely important role in motivating these men to fight. James Hall noted that “adventure was all before us. Our hearts were light and our hopes high.” The Escadrille’s commander noticed that the adventurous nature of the game appealed to every one who shared the American instinct for helping the weak against the strong, and in this case France appeared as the weak. According to Parsons, a “virulent disease known as ‘the unconquering pioneering spirit of our hardy forefathers’” led some to “stick their noses into something where we had no real business.”¹⁵

These men contained a volunteer sprit for adventure that appeared even before the French accepted them into aviation. For instance, while serving in the Foreign Legion, the French demanded reinforcements on 15 September 1914 to fill gaps in the ranks and strengthen old Legionnaires. The first choice fell to those who had previous service in any army. Demonstrating their unbridled spirit for adventure, the Americans came forward with long stories of imaginary campaigns in Mexico or South America. Curiosity and a desire to bear witness to and partake in the greatest cataclysmic event in history may have led to their volunteer sprit.¹⁶

The idea of flying, too, mesmerized most of the volunteers. Before entering training, a couple of recruits received their first glimpse of a fighter.

¹³ Flammer, “Primus,” viii & 3; Thenault, viii; Gordon, 3; Theodore Roosevelt, “Lafayettes of the Air: Young Americans Who Are Flying for France,” *Collier's*, 29 July 1916, 16; Rockwell, 1.

¹⁴ Sinclair, 33; Hall and Nordhoff, v2, 10; Flammer, “Myth,” 23.

¹⁵ Hall, *High Adventure*, 7; Thenault, 1; Parsons, 8.

We saw a strange, new avion,--a biplane, small, trim, with a body like a fish. To see it in flight was to be convinced for all time that man has mastered the air, and has outdone the birds in their own element. Never was swallow more consciously joyous in swift flight, never eagle so bold to take heights or so quick to reach them.¹⁷

With the aircraft less than eleven years old, visionaries like H.G. Wells and Jules Vern penned romantic notions of mile high battles. Warfare in the air was novel and contained unlimited possibilities for initiative and service to France. It allowed them to “to give unselfishly of themselves for what they considered to be a righteous cause.”¹⁸

Aviation also rose in glamour directly proportional to the growing slaughter on the ground. The life of the foot-soldier held the greatest risk, a monotonous and wearisome existence, and the glory was hidden and limited. Flying offered a glamorous, almost regal alternative to trench warfare, where pilots became “the anointed royalty” of the French Army. One volunteer even mentioned that “the glory is well worth the loss. I’d rather die as an aviator over the enemy’s lines than find a nameless shallow grave in the infantry.” Daily the sight of rickety old planes staggering overhead stirred their imaginations. When one American heard that he had finally been accepted into French aviation, he wrote home saying “My happiness at that news I can’t describe. It seemed all like a dream—too good and sudden to be true; but it was, my dear mother, and my long, hard service in the Legion came to an end the next day.”¹⁹

Public understanding of the Escadrille blurred after the war. An overabundance of “ringers,” men who claimed membership in the squadron but never associated with it, distorted the squadron’s image and motivations. The ringers exploited the name, and in

¹⁶ Thenault, 4; Gordon, 3.

¹⁷ Hall, *High Adventure*, 10.

¹⁸ Whitehouse, xi; James McConnell, “Flying for France With the American Escadrille at Verdun,” *World’s Work* (November 1916): 44; Neiberg, 11.

failing to live up to the standards of the genuine members, badly corrupted the Escadrille's image.²⁰

Devotion to duty and self-sacrifice did not become the heart of the legend of the Lafayette Escadrille, at least in American eyes. Lafayette pilots often and openly deplored the irresponsible journalism that "makes us killers" and "misses the point entirely." These men could plainly see the future image of themselves taking shape and the "spirit of the squadron," as they called it, was not part of it. Instead they were emerging as steel-eyed, agents of destruction who enjoyed the staccato music of machine-gun fire and took sardonic pleasure in giving and taking death. When the war ended, they were recognized less and appreciated less for the idealism that led them to fight for a cause not directly tied to personal interest. More and more their motives were suspect and the contradiction between this suspicion and their actions was explained away by blaming the motives on "unbalanced temperaments" and "fanaticism." They were applauded, but as adventurers, mercenaries, or as Frederick Oughton, author of *The Aces* called them "American privateers."²¹

The squadron's survivors immediately set to work to unmask the phonies and preserve their unit's glorious image. By 1931, they had informed the French government of four thousand ringers who hoped to identify with the small fraternity. They reclaimed their heritage as the "precursors of that mighty awaking of the West," before the United States chipped in with all its resources.²² These men, through idealistic and romantic notions, signed up to bear witness and take part in the greatest event of their time.

¹⁹ Flammer, "Primus," 11; Thenault, 3; Neiberg, 6; Hall and Nordhoff, v2, 5-7; Parson, 11.

²⁰ Flammer, "Myth," 24-25.

²¹ Ibid., 24.

²² Gordon, 2; Thenault, xiv.

RAF Eagle Squadrons

The men that signed up to be Eagles in the next great event operated with the British until their transfer to the U.S. Army Air Force in September 1942. The organization and formation of one squadron is all Charles Sweeny anticipated. The surprising growth from the initial squadron resulted from an entirely unforeseen change in both the system for recruiting RAF pilots in the U.S. and the environment in which the recruiters worked.²³

As European tensions rose in 1939, the British foresaw the need for many pilots, but realized they could not possibly train all the flyers in England. In late 1939, the island nation turned to the dominions, particularly Canada, to train pilots and aircrews. Known as the Empire Training Scheme (ETS), the plan would force the Commonwealth countries initially to train pilots and aircrews and then send the airmen to the United Kingdom for an advanced program. The trainees would become members of the RAF but identified as contingents from their particular dominion. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and eventually South Africa and Rhodesia agreed to the training scheme. Operating throughout World War II, the ETS trained pilots for the United Kingdom and each Commonwealth nation.²⁴

A training program of this magnitude required many experienced pilots to serve as instructors. Canada looked to its southern neighbor, the United States, and specifically to Clayton Knight, an American aviation artist, for assistance. The day after England and France declared war on Germany, Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) Air Vice Marshal Billy Bishop called Knight, who at the time was covering the National Air Races in

²³ 4th Tactical Fighter Wing, 7; Caine, 34-35.

²⁴ Caine, 39.

Cleveland. Bishop asked his old friend to put together an organization to supply instructors to Canada in case the war in Europe expanded. The Air Vice Marshal wanted Knight to form an official organization that could screen applicants and direct them into the proper area of service before they traveled across the border.²⁵

In essence, the British asked Knight to recruit as many Americans as possible to serve as civilian instructors for the Empire's largest training program. The American artist, who held a great admiration for the Lafayette Escadrille, accepted Bishop's offer. For administrative aid, Knight called on Homer Smith, heir and administrator of the Canadian Imperial Oil Company fortune. The two traveled across the United States examining the flying business, determining the number of potential instructors, and learning how to hire available instructors. Figuring that one-fourth of all unemployed pilots lived in California, the men obtained three-hundred dossiers of interested American pilots and built a corps of influential people who they could call upon if need be. Following this successful trip, Knight showed the list to top British air officials and, astounded at the possibility, the British authorized the birth of the Clayton Knight Committee.²⁶

The Clayton Knight Committee operated from April 1940 until October 1942. Before its disbandment, Knight's organization would process 50,000 American applications and approve 6700 men for duty with either the RAF or RCAF. It would be responsible for enrolling more than ten percent of American RCAF recruits and more than eighty percent of those who became Eagles. Whereas the original recruiting effort by Colonel Sweeny only drew twenty-five pilots and twenty-five reserves for one

²⁵ Haugland, 14; Caine, 38.

²⁶ Caine, 37-40.

squadron, Knight looked for hundreds, eventually thousands, to man an entire training organization. Still other Americans simply joined the British or Canadian armed forces by themselves, hoping to find an open flying billet.²⁷

Because of need, the British Air Ministry increased demands on the Empire Training Scheme and looked to the U.S. for facilities as well as pilots. By Fall 1940 this decision made the Knight Committee the principle agent for channeling American pilots into the RAF. Knight and Sweeny served as the only two organizations recruiting fighter pilots for the RAF, but Knight worked marginally within the law while Sweeny and his men stayed under cover, actually violating neutrality legislation. The Colonel's first recruits even resorted to sneaking out of the country and using code words and secret safe houses. In one case, the FBI intercepted a few volunteers heading to Toronto and gave them tickets to return home. Reade Tilley, an Eagle who volunteered without assistance from Sweeny or Clayton Knight, understood the difficulty getting past American authorities. He "borrowed civilian clothes and a suitcase of Fuller brushes" to pose as a salesman to get across the border.²⁸

Knight realized that to conduct a recruiting drive with any magnitude and success, he needed to solve America's strict neutrality. Early on, the FBI advised Knight it had no objections to his efforts as long as his organization did not actually solicit pilots. The solution was not to advertise or recruit but simply provide a center to advise volunteers and to facilitate their training and journey to Canada or England.²⁹

²⁷ Caine, 38-47; Haugland, 12; William R. Dunn, interview by Joe Guilmartin, 2 November 1973, USAF Academy, USAF Oral History Program, USAFA, 6.

²⁸ Caine, 47; Major General Chesley G. Peterson, interview by Frederick D. Claypool, 19 June 1983, Seymour Johnson AFB, NC, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 3; Reade F. Tilley, interview by Frederick D. Claypool, 15 August 1985, Seymour Johnson AFB, NC, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2.

²⁹ Haugland, 16; Caine, 41.

Despite FBI approval, the Justice Department investigated the entire Knight system in July 1940 but found no basis for any legal charges and did not act against the group. In August, Pierepont Moffatt of the American Embassy in Canada wrote the State Department complaining of illegal recruiting by both Sweeny and Knight. In that same month, the Committee changed its name to the Canadian Aviation Bureau. The name change, again, prompted a request from the State Department for an FBI investigation. The group still did not "solicit" or "recruit" men for the Canadian Air Force, but rather performed the function of an information bureau, giving interviews and generally assisting any young men who might be interested to ascertain if they met the requirements as employees of the Canadian Air Force. The RAF, the Canadian government, and donations from private individuals financed the operation.³⁰

Neither the State nor Justice Department tried to curtail the Committee's activities. Major General Chesley Peterson, one of the first Eagles, thought the "government just turned a blind eye."³¹ The issue of citizenship particularly blurred after the fall of France.

While the Department looks with disfavor upon service of American citizens in any military unit in any way connected with a foreign army, American citizens who while outside of the United States join a military unit as part of a foreign army or under orders of an officer of such an army do not in doing so violate the laws of the U.S. nor are they required to obtain permission to join such unit from any official of this Government. However, if an oath of allegiance to a foreign country is required, American citizenship would be lost under Section 2, Act March 2, 1907. While serving in such military unit citizens could not look for protection by the US against legitimate consequences of their conduct.³²

³⁰ Caine, 42-48.

³¹ Peterson, 1983, 4.

³² Caine, 91.

The British solved the problem by having the volunteers simply swear to obey orders of their commanders without swearing allegiance to the King, much like the Lafayette Escadrille.³³

Before enacting the limited oath, however, a few of the early Eagles did swear allegiance to the Crown, thus expatriating themselves. General Carroll McColpin, a member of that first group, lost his citizenship, did not know it, and did not get it back until after he retired from a long career in the U.S. Air Force. Moreover, McColpin encountered an additional diplomatic problem. Before heading to Canada for training, the U.S. military drafted him. He quickly slipped across the border and the United States listed him as a draft dodger until 1942.³⁴

America's military build-up served as another obstacle to Knight's efforts and the artist understood he had to gain tacit approval from the U.S. military. General Henry "Hap" Arnold, commander of the USAAC, and Admiral Jack Towers, commander of naval aviation, agreed to Knight's efforts as long as he did not attempt to divert men from the American build-up. Knight assured the military that he would not lure away pilots already in service or solicit badly needed airplane mechanics. He noted that there would be little likelihood anyway that the U.S. and Canada would be competing for the same men—the Canadians accepted fliers with 20/40 vision correctable to 20/20 with glasses, whereas the U.S. insisted upon 20/20 uncorrected. Canadian rules governing age limits and marital status were also more liberal. The USAAC, resorting to high wash-out rates to keep trainees manageable, did allow Knight to attract former cadets. General Arnold, impressed by the strange situation, commented that "according to the rules I'm working

³³ Ibid., 42.

under, if a flying cadet gets fractious, goes in for low stunt flying, gets drunk even once, or we discover he's married, we've got to wash him out. If I was fighting a war, they're the kind I would want to keep. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of our washouts look you up."³⁵

To find these volunteers, Homer Smith believed the Committee should run a first-class operation. The organization headquartered in a suite of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City and hired an accounting and administration system complete with secretaries. The staff included Harold Fowler, a British World War One ace, and banker-businessman Pierpont Hamilton, nephew of J. Pierpont Morgan. Coincidentally, Hamilton's uncle helped finance the Lafayette Escadrille. Men volunteered and came to New York in larger numbers than anticipated. The Committee eventually expanded into California, and by the end of 1940 it had offices in New York, Memphis, Cleveland, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, Dallas, San Antonio, and Oakland.³⁶

The tremendous response resulted from the Committee's various methods of recruiting. Initially, the group sent letters notifying all the pilots on Knight's list of an "opportunity" to enter the Canadian forces. The group then developed advertising teams and utilized newspapers and aviation magazines. The RAF even placed an information booth outside the gate at Maxwell Field to catch those who washed out of aviation cadet training. Word of mouth, however, served as the most effective form of advertising. When the Eagle project initially began, Colonel Sweeny operated solely by word of mouth and recruited at large aviation centers. The Knight Committee preferred to spread

³⁴ General Carroll W. McColpin, interview by Philip D. Caine, 8 September 1987, Novato, CA, Caine Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections, 12-15.

³⁵ Caine, 30 & 40-41; Haugland, 15-16.

³⁶ Caine, 40-45; Haugland, 16.

the word through key people and on bulletin boards at local airports, where young college student enrolled in the Civilian Pilots Training Program and current pilots received the information.³⁷

The Clayton Knight Committee required volunteers to produce a high school diploma (or equivalent) and birth certificate. They had to be between 20 and 45 years old, and if under 21 needed the consent of a parent or guardian. He had to have flown a minimum of 300 hours, hold a license, and be current in two-seat aircraft. Many Eagles, whether recruited by Knight, Sweeny, or the RAF directly, doctored their flying log-books to indicate more hours. William Dunn, already serving in the British military, did not have the required flying experience when the British asked for in-service volunteers. During the paperwork, his "pencil slipped a little bit" and he wrote the wrong hours.³⁸

If the Knight Committee accepted the applicants, it gave the pilot a one-hour interview and detailed the expected duties and enlistment conditions. The head of each operation and the people who led the interviews were as much as possible men who flew in World War One. Early applicants followed procedures almost as secret as the Sweeny candidates. For example, the interviewers told those interested to come to the hotel without reporting to the reception desk, knock on a suite's door, and enter only after providing proper identification. After the interview, the Committee tasked the Hooper Holmes Agency of New York, a private investigation firm, to prepare a confidential report on the individual. From application to acceptance spanned three to eight weeks, and with a plethora of applications, the Committee selected only the best individuals.

³⁷ Caine, 43 & 51; Morris Fessler, interview by Philip D. Caine, 15 October 1988, San Diego, CA, Caine Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections, 3; Royce C. Wilkinson, interview by Philip D. Caine, 22 March 1988, Sheppy, Kent, Minster, England, Caine Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections, 29;

When the men arrived in Canada, the Committee provided them with accommodations, meals, and spending money while also accomplishing a flight check and paperwork.³⁹

What motivated these men to travel across the border, train, and fight a war not their own? Many knew the mythology of the Lafayette Escadrille and famous World War One aces. Don Young recalled that “when I got to the age where I could read I was crazy about World War One stories.” They also knew the current tales of the gallant RAF fighter pilots who repelled the Germans during the Battle of Britain. Newspaper and radio carried Churchill’s famous and moving tribute to these pilots declaring that “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”⁴⁰

The common denominator for all the American RAF volunteers, however, was the opportunity to fly two great airplanes—the Hurricane and the Spitfire. To pilots all across the United States these two machines represented the best aviation had to offer—fast, deadly, and beautiful. Dan Young had “read flying magazines that showed the 1938 Spitfire” and thought “if I could just fly one of those things.” Carroll McColpin had the chance to go to China and earn a large salary as a Flying Tiger but “thought they didn’t have any airplanes; they weren’t doing a damn thing....I went over there (to England) because they had the equipment and they were in trouble.” The Clayton Knight Committee informed the recruits they would not “get rich doing this,” because the British

Peterson, 1985, 1; Bill Geiger, interview by Philip D. Caine, 3 September 1987, Pasadena, CA, Caine Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections, 2.

³⁸ Caine, 43; Dunn, 12.

³⁹ Caine, 33-45; Haugland, 22.

⁴⁰ McColpin, 1987, 64; Don Young, interview by Philip D. Caine, 14 October 1988, San Diego, CA, Caine Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections, 1; Caine, 15; James C. Humes, *The Wit and Wisdom of Winston Churchill: A Treasury of More Than 1000 Quotations and Anecdotes* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 123.

only paid \$89 a month. They were going to England to fly fighters for the RAF Eagle Squadrons.⁴¹

In addition to the fighter motivation, the Battle of Britain convinced many young men that the United States would soon enter the war. More than half of those who joined the Eagles cited that this belief led to their decision. They really did not care about losing their citizenship because “all the guys knew that we were going to be at war and we should have been already... it’s necessary and we will straighten the rest of it out later.” Bill Geiger thought from the beginning they would end up flying for the U.S. Army Air Corps, and he would benefit from combat experience before he joined the American forces.⁴²

Many of the Eagles originally wanted to serve in the USAAC, but the high wash-out rate and the requirement for two years of college and perfect eyesight kept many experienced pilots out of the flying service. While training as an Air Corps cadet, Snuffy Smith lost three weeks training after visiting his mother who underwent emergency surgery, and as a result, the Army kicked him out. Bill Geiger wanted to fly for the U.S. military, but he “fiddled around” with his grades to the point where he required tutoring to get into Randolph Field before the war. Before committing to a higher mathematics and chemistry program, he heard about the RAF opportunity.⁴³

Some of the men sympathized for the British cause and were interested in stopping the Germans. Others, however, saw the opportunity as a great flying adventure that had the side-impact of helping the British. Dr. George Carpenter noted that he was

⁴¹ Caine, 5 & 15; Young, 2; McColpin, 1987, 1; Geiger, 10.

⁴² McColpin, 1987, 19 & 58; Caine, 16; Geiger, 14.

⁴³ Caine, 30; Snuffy Smith, interview by Philip D. Caine, 13 October 1988, San Diego, CA, Caine Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections, 6; Geiger, 2.

“excited about being in an Eagle Squadron...excited about being in a combat zone...and eager to go.”⁴⁴ Many did not realize what they were getting into; they just wanted to fly Hurricanes and Spitfires, this being the prime motivation to serve with the RAF and adopt a war not their own.

Flying Tigers

As the Chinese delegation of Claire Chennault, T.V. Soong, and various American bureaucrats slowly convinced the U.S. government to clandestinely adopt the war in China, it encountered the same two obstacles that plagued the Clayton Knight Committee—the military’s reluctance to provide men and recruiting within a manner “legally consistent” with neutrality legislation.⁴⁵

The U.S. military violently opposed the American Volunteer Group, with Marshall refusing to make U.S. servicemen into mercenaries. When Chennault proposed the plan to Hap Arnold in April 1941, the General totally resisted the idea, declaring that he could not spare any individuals, and Colonel Myron Wood, Chief of Air Corps Personnel, echoed Arnold’s sentiments. Naval Aviation also viewed the AVG as a threat to its expansion. Chennault tried to convince these men that they would receive a large return in tactics, intelligence, and equipment evaluation from only a small investment in personnel, just as the Russians in China and the Germans and Italians in Spain. Ultimately Lauchlin Currie, FDR’s administrative assistant and Soong’s friend, received the support of President Roosevelt and the diplomat persuaded the services to relent. The Navy agreed that its flyers could resign without prejudice and return to the Navy after

⁴⁴ Fessler, 2; Young, 4; Dr. George Carpenter, interview by Philip D. Caine, 3 March 1994, Paris, TN, Caine Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections, 12.

their volunteer contract finished, and Acting Deputy Chief of Staff George Brett, although still reluctant to release the men, ordered the same for the War Department.⁴⁶

As for the neutrality issue, the government considered amending the laws, but later abandoned the idea due to time constraints. It adopted the next best option—send a group of individuals under civilian status. President Roosevelt authorized reserve officers and enlisted men to resign from the Army Air Corps and the Naval and Marine Air Services to join the AVG. The men would wait until they arrived overseas to sign official papers, thereby not violating their status as American citizens or risk violating any other neutrality legislation.⁴⁷

Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company (CAMCO), the private company run by William D. Pawley and already operating in China, would recruit and pay the men, providing a believable front. CAMCO drew up a vague and very diplomatic contract to recruit the men and keep the project secret. It intended to establish three “advanced instruction and training units” in China under the immediate direction of an American “supervisor.” The supervisor would inform CAMCO as to the “standard of qualifications of the American personnel to be employed” and the company would then administer the hiring. Chennault requested CAMCO to recruit pilots from 23 to 28 years old, with at least three years of fighter experience, preferably in the Curtiss-Wright P-40.⁴⁸

According to the contract, CAMCO would pay the volunteers from a “special revolving fund.” The company offered \$600 per month for a wingman, \$750 for a squadron commander, and \$300-450 for mechanics. Though not mentioned in the

⁴⁵ Heiferman, 22.

⁴⁶ Chennault, *Fighter*, 101; Byrd, 117.

⁴⁷ Byrd, 116; Chennault, *Fighter*, 102; Robert M. Smith, interview by Frank Rounds Jr., 28 July 1962, Ojai, CA, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 6.

contract, Chennault received approval from Soong to offer a \$500 bonus to pilots for each confirmed Japanese plane downed. In addition, CAMCO offered traveling expenses, thirty days paid leave, quarters, and \$30 additional for rations. In return, the individual would be “subject to summary dismissal by written notice for insubordination, habitual drug or alcohol use, illness not incurred in the line of duty, malingering, and revealing confidential information.”⁴⁹

To head the recruiting staff, CAMCO hired Colonel Richard Aldworth, a retired Army pilot. Aldworth suffered from previous crash injuries, so C.B. “Skip” Adair, a former army pilot who instructed in China and would later become the AVG’s supply officer, supervised much of the recruiting effort. Three other men rounded out the staff: retired U.S. Navy Commander Rutledge Irvine, Army pilot Captain Harry C. Clairborne, and CAMCO’s Senton L. Brown. Together, they blitzed military bases around the country—Quantico for the Marines; Norfolk, San Diego, Pensacola, and Jacksonville for the Navy; and Bolling, Selfridge, McDill, March, Mitchel, Langley, Hamilton, Eglin, Craig, Maxwell, Barksdale, and Randolph Fields for the Army.⁵⁰

Before the group initiated its recruiting effort, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox and General Arnold issued orders to all military fields authorizing freedom of the post for the CAMCO employees, including permission to talk with all personnel. Despite the guarantee, the bases did not always welcome the intrusion. Field commanders, astonished when multi-clad recruiters appeared, became enraged upon learning the purpose of the visit was to lure men out of the service. The commanding general at

⁴⁸ Chennault, *Fighter*, 102 & 111; “CAMCO Contract,” 1.

⁴⁹ “CAMCO Contract,” 1; Byrd, 117; Chennault, *Fighter*, 103.

⁵⁰ Robert B. Hotz, *With General Chennault: The Story of the Flying Tigers* (Washington: Zenger Publishing Co., Inc., 1943), 96; Chennault, *Fighter*, 102.

Quantico exclaimed to his volunteers “they spent thousands of dollars training you boys as fighter pilots. You’re qualified in gunnery, dive bombing, carriers, and now you want to leave!”⁵¹

In many cases, the recruiters gave disgruntled commanders a Washington number to call and confirm the information. Quietly, the path mysteriously cleared and military personnel approved the resignation “for convenience of the Government.” Bob Neale “was out of the Navy in 24 hours... everything taken care of.” He noted that “the red tape was just wiped out” and “the powers behind this thing were tremendous,” although he had no idea who backed the effort. The volunteers only received information about their duties and the basic mission to defend the Burma Road.⁵²

We knew we were going to fight, but as to exactly when, where, how, and so forth, we didn’t know very much. We knew Chennault would be commander, I knew nothing about him, except that he had been in China for some time. I knew him by reputation, a reputation among the older pilots for his acrobatic team.⁵³

After his sketchy briefing, Robert Prescott still remained unconvinced, until he wired CAMCO for \$500 in travel money and the funds arrived immediately.⁵⁴

In addition to pilots, CAMCO recruited a full complement of ground personnel—a half-dozen line chiefs, 100 mechanics, 30 armorers, 30 radio specialists and repairmen, 5 mess sergeants, 4 propeller specialists, 6 parachute riggers, 3 photographers, finance paymasters, meteorologists, operations and intelligence clerks, auto mechanics, medical orderlies, 3 flight surgeons, a dentist, and 2 nurses. Chennault tried to pull six trained staff officers from the Air Corps, but General Arnold would not release one. So

⁵¹ Chennault, *Fighter*, 102; Charles Older, interview by Frank Rounds Jr., August 1962, Ojai, CA, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2.

⁵² Byrd, 118; Harrington, 6; Robert H. Neale, interview by Frank Rounds Jr., 21 August 1962, Ojai, CA, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 4; Neale, 5.

⁵³ Older, 3.

Chennault chose men not in the armed forces or already in China, like Colonel John Williams who had previously left the Air Corps and worked as the radio instructor for the CAF Cadet School.⁵⁵

Gradually the recruiters worked from base to base and the opportunity quickly spread by word of mouth. The press even revealed this strange effort, but the State, War, and Navy Department denied involvement. Despite the tedious recruiting process, not enough qualified men were available to meet Chennault's standards, so the recruiters simply enlisted anybody they could get. After the volunteers received their honorable discharges, the government issued them passports with phony occupations, ready for the trip overseas to fight an enemy with which they were not at war.⁵⁶

Opportunity served as prime motivating factor for these volunteers. Robert Neale, a member of the U.S. Navy Reserve, wanted to make the Navy his career. As a Reservist, however, if the individual did not achieve a regular commission after four years in the fleet, the career ended. He had already applied for the permanent commission, but the Navy only offered a few and turned him down. By signing on with the AVG for a one-year contract, the pilots could return to the service and their AVG time would count for longevity, promotion purposes, and achieving a regular commission.⁵⁷

Charles Bond, an Army Air Corps pilot, also wanted to secure a regular commission, but like others, viewed the assignment as an opportunity to fly fighters. The

⁵⁴ Robert W. Prescott, interview by Franks Rounds Jr., 21 August 1962, Ojai, CA, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2.

⁵⁵ Hotz, 97; John M. Williams, interview by Philip S. Meilinger, 23 July 1979, USAF Academy, CO, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 9.

⁵⁶ Mat Corcundole, interview by Frank Rounds Jr., 21 August 1962, Ojai, CA, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 1; Byrd, 118; Ford, 6; Williams, 30; Prescott, 5.

⁵⁷ Neale, 1; Harrington, 6.

fighter opportunity drew many to China, including Army pilot Robert Smith, who standing over six foot tall, could now bypass the military's requirement that restricted individuals over 5'10" from fighter billets.⁵⁸

Money served as a great motivating factor. Marine 1st Lieutenant Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, who later lead the famous Marine flying unit Black Sheep in the Pacific, was so deeply in debt that the Marine Corps ordered him to prepare a plan to repay his creditors.⁵⁹ Albert Probst, also in debt, figured that shooting down Japanese bombers would be safer and more lucrative than fighting in Europe.

Let's see now, I am making \$210 a month now, and your are going to pay me \$600. I get a free trip to China, and if we go to war with somebody, I won't be on the first string, but the second string. I don't want to have anything to do with them Germans, so I'm going to get over there and help those Chinese.⁶⁰

Finally, some of the Tigers thought the assignment "represented romance with a capital 'R'." John Williams thought China was a strange land, one he had "heard so little and read so much about." The country contained "illusive opportunities to find fame and fortune with the indefinable challenge to prove yourself." Chennault's romantic adventure overflowed with opportunity. Every member of the group loved adventure and none of the volunteers learned to fly just to stay out of the "walking army." Some previously tried volunteering for the Eagle Squadrons, to escape peacetime boredom or gain experience for the coming war, but the military would not release them. After they arrived in Asia, the volunteers often talked and wondered if they would ever be as famous as their British counterparts. Those who did not care to fight, who did not care for adventure and only wanted out of the U.S. military, turned back before they arrived in

⁵⁸ Major General Charles R. Bond, Jr., *A Flying Tiger's Diary* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 20; Ford, 6.

⁵⁹ Bond, 19.

Burma. The remaining volunteers, however, resigned their commissions, left active duty, and worked as civilian members of the Chinese Air Force, becoming true “soldiers of fortune.”⁶¹

Comparison

When the three Angel units engaged in their recruiting efforts, they each highlighted the most unique and important aspect of their organizations—the all-volunteer concept. They needed bold, American men to fulfill their hopes and aspirations, to stabilize an ally’s air force, and help that foreign nation survive a raging conflict. In the process, the units’ recruiting efforts diverged significantly in four ways: support, method, motivations, and qualifications.

As the foundation of the Lafayette Escadrille, the Franco-American Committee provided initial support for the unit’s recruiting efforts. Officially, the French and American governments did not fund the recruiting, but at the same time, did not interfere either. After the Committee received the pilot guarantees, the recruiting effort advanced smoothly.

Contrary to the Escadrille, the British completely financed the Clayton-Knight Committee under the guise of the Empire Training Scheme. The effort appeared even more obvious after the Committee changed its name to the Canadian Aviation Bureau. The name change, among other activities and diplomatic requests, prompted FBI investigations as the United States Government continually kept tabs on the Eagle recruiting effort, turned men back at the border, and in some cases, declared Eagles as

⁶⁰ Ford, 4.

⁶¹ Robert M. Smith, interview 1962, 2; Williams, 31; Doc Richardson and Robert Blyer, interview by Frank Rounds Jr., August 1962, Ojai, CA, USAF Oral History Program, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC,

draft dodgers. Knight himself specifically asked the military and government for authorization, and even then the United States remained hesitant toward the Eagles. Knight acted slightly within the law, but his early counterpart Colonel Sweeny actually broke neutrality legislation and carried out his operation in complete secrecy.

Although initially resisted because of military objection and neutrality legislation, the Flying Tigers recruited with complete American support. The military opened its bases to recruiters, quickly processed resignations "for the convenience of the Government," and provided phony passports for overseas travel. Financed as a clandestine operation through CAMCO, the volunteers signed "employee" contracts and emerged as soldiers of fortune.

Recruiting methods varied as much as support. The Franco-American Committee originally planned a substantial propaganda drive, but newspapers and other media outlets performed the act for them. Publicity raised the nation's awareness and men flocked to France to be the next gallant members of N-124. Reinforced by the romantic draw of flight and the gruesome alternative of life in the trenches, the Committee did not have to actively recruit any individuals. Publicity was not a major hallmark of the Eagle operation, though the organization did publish small advertisements in newspapers and aviation magazines. Clayton Knight and Sweeny preferred to locate their volunteers through word of mouth. The chance to go to England and fly fighters spread rapidly throughout the aviation community, especially in places that operated a Civilian Pilot Training Program. Word of mouth spread some information about the Flying Tigers, but since CAMCO conducted the effort clandestinely and offered little detail, it primarily

Maxwell AFB, AL, 5; Robert M Smith, interview 1962, 16; Corcundole, 3; Robert T. Smith, *Tale of a Tiger* (Van Nuys, CA: Tiger Originals, 1986), 19.

recruited through personal visits to the bases, talking to interested pilots and ground crews individually or in small groups. Any resistance by a commander simply vanished with a phone call to Washington.

All the volunteers loved adventure, otherwise they would not have traveled to another continent to fight in a foreign war. The three units, however, can each be classified with characteristic and distinct motives. Americans in the Lafayette Escadrille felt a romantic idealism spur them to volunteer. They saw the conflict in moral terms, as a battle between good and evil, to serve in the single greatest event in human history. The Eagles, however, volunteered for the fighters—the Spitfires and the Hurricanes. They saw the chance to fulfill a life-long dream and help an embattled nation along the way. The Flying Tigers, contrary to both the Escadrille and Eagles, appear as opportunistic adventurers. With little knowledge of China's plight for survival, they became mercenaries, or soldiers of fortune, because they saw the chance to earn a lot of money, turn a dead career into an upstart path, fly fighters, or witness a romantic and "enchanted" land.

With these motivations the three units received an assorted array of applications. The Lafayette Escadrille and the RAF Eagles, swamped with massive amounts of requests, could choose the best applicants and feel confident they received a quality volunteer. The CAMCO recruiters, however, traveled from base to base, hoping to discover an applicant who met Chennault's standards and also held reserve status. The AVG roster filled slowly and forced the recruiters to enlist whoever volunteered. These differences in qualification and background for all three units played a significant role during the training process.

Chapter 3: Training

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth...
-RCAF Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr., "High Flight"

John Gillespie Magee, Jr., an American citizen born in Shanghai of missionary parents, joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in September 1940 and entered pilot training at age eighteen. Although never an Eagle, the young American would eventually qualify in the Spitfire and see duty over both France and England. On 3 September 1941, Magee conducted a high altitude test flight and, exhilarated, penned a poem to his family, attempting to detail the joy and awe he felt at 30,000 feet. Since then, "High Flight" has become the most famous aviation poem ever written.¹ Magee's words have come to symbolize the freedom of flight, a feeling that many aspiring aviators first encountered in training, including the men of the Lafayette Escadrille, the RAF Eagle Squadrons, and the Flying Tigers. Despite this similarity, once the Angels "slipped the surly bonds of earth," they experienced contrasting training methodologies. The backgrounds of the men recruited and the amount of support each group received, whether American or foreign, would ultimately cause these differences. As the final step in the formation of all-American volunteer organizations, the training period would demonstrate just how different the Angel units really were.

Lafayette Escadrille

Impressed with the Americans' devotion to duty and willingness to die for a foreign cause, the French considered the N-124 an "elite group." Quite possibly the

individual backgrounds and origins of these men enhanced their reputation. Although the Americans in the Escadrille represented all socio-economic backgrounds, only four dwelled in poverty. Of the remaining members, eleven were sons of millionaires, nine came from upper-middle-class homes, and fourteen grew up in average income families. Thirty of the thirty-eight men earned college degrees or had enrolled in institutions of higher learning; twenty-five studied in elite eastern colleges, including nine Harvard graduates. They not only originated from prominent families and elite universities, but during a time when aviation was an expensive sport, nine had some pre-war flying experience with seven as proficient pilots.²

The Lafayette flyers “represented the cream of the country,” but came from all walks of life—adventurers, architects, engineers, reporters, students, playboys, polo-players. Where the typical Allied pilot was twenty-one years old, the Americans averaged twenty-six, with the oldest Lafayette pilot (Edward Hinkle) being forty and the youngest (Edmond Genet) barely twenty. Representing eleven states by birth, twenty-three of the thirty-eight came from the East and three were even born in France. Fourteen members served with a branch of the American Ambulance Corps, eight fought in the trenches, and six volunteered for various other duties prior to joining the Lafayette Escadrille.³

Edward Lyell Fox, one of the many reporters following the Escadrille’s campaign in 1917, typified the volunteers as “Daredevil Americans,” a characteristic stemming from their youth.

¹ Dave English, *Slipping the Surly Bonds: Great Quotations on Flight* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 2. See Appendix A for complete poem.

² Flammer, “Primus,” 55; Gordon, 2-3.

³ Gordon, 3.

You know the type. You have seen them often—making headlong tackles on the football field, diving feet first, spikes flashing, in a wild slide for third base, galloping madly across a polo field, diving from a platform higher than someone else has dared—they are the youth of America and their number is legion.⁴

At the same time, however, Escadrille pilot James Hall noted that “we looked so much the typical American tourists” and “reveled so plainly, to all the world military, our non-military antecedents. We bore the hallmark of fifty years of neutral aloofness.” The Lafayette volunteers, then, fit two models of American youth: the privileged (presumably from the polo field) who answered a call to duty, and the adventurer (presumably from their football or baseball field) whose American “can do” spirit compensated for a lack of formal military education. They came from all walks of life, more rich than poor, more college educated than not. They had “a devil’s brood of grousing, were reckless, undisciplined, irresponsible wildcats, all a trifle screwy, but a loyal crew, ready to fly, drink, or fight at the drop of a hat.” They were truly a “bunch of legionaries.”⁵

Upon joining the Legion, the recruit pledged his fidelity and received the cursory physical examination from a French medical officer. Once past these formalities, the volunteers entered French aviation training, “learning to imitate the birds.” The aspiring pilot made a four-hour train ride to the Dijon Aviation depot to draw his flying gear, which consisted of leather jacket, pants, gloves, goggles, and crash helmet. The government eventually issued “everything from the skin out,” including navigation instruments—compass, altimeter, wrist watch—because the aircraft did not contain their own.⁶

⁴ Edward Lyell Fox, “U.S. Leads in Air-War,” *Illustrated World* 27 (July 1917): 667.

⁵ Hall, *High Adventure*, 8; Neiberg, 9; Parsons, 10; Dolan, 13.

⁶ Hall and Nordhoff, v2, 17; Gordon, 9; Dolan, 7.

With the exception of the earliest Lafayette pilots whose instructional period was rudimentary, the cadets trained for approximately three months to earn their *brevet militaire*, the military pilot's license. A huge undertaking, as many as 800 students trained at a school at any given time. One aspiring aviator commented that his school was "the most interesting place and more enormous than anything one who had not seen it could possibly imagine. The aviation field and hangars literally stretched for miles," and he could not hazard to guess how many machines operated there.⁷

Even more interesting, the trainees flew alone throughout the entire training process. The instructors, older pilots who were either wounded at the Front and were now convalescing or physically and mentally used up from the strain of combat, never flew dual with their students. Their job was to explain pilot instructions, point out mistakes, and order corrections. The cadets crashed so many trainers that the French periodically ran out of airplanes. Despite this peculiar method of instruction and the worn-out aircraft, few fatalities occurred.⁸

Once the Americans began their training, many encountered two additional problems. First, some were handicapped with no knowledge of aircraft or anything mechanical. Bert Hall had never seen an airplane up close, but when the French asked for volunteer pilots, he gladly raised his hand. During the initial flight screener, he boldly climbed into the machine alone and started down the field "zig-zagging like a drunken duck." Hall actually left the ground, but crashed headlong into a hanger wall, leaving the machine in pieces. The young volunteer survived unhurt, and after much verbal admonishment from the instructor, heard the order to begin training immediately.

⁷ Gordon, 9; Hall and Nordhoff, v2, 7.

⁸ Gordon, 9; Sinclair, 20.

Hoping to prevent another such occurrence, the Franco-American Committee sent later recruits to American civilian flight schools for an aptitude test.⁹

The language barrier was the second handicap, and seemed to be the most serious obstacle in the way to success. With a good general knowledge of the language, the volunteers could overcome their mechanical deficiencies, but without it, many saw no way to master the mechanical knowledge required as a foundation for training. The Franco-American Committee provided an interpreter, but he could not be everywhere at once, so the French instructors learned to teach through elaborate gestures. Nevertheless, this forced the Americans to learn much “through actual experience in the air, and at risk to life and limb.” For example, Charles Dolan’s instructor ordered him to perform a simple acrobatic maneuver, but not understanding a word his teacher said, Dolan put himself in a spin. After he returned, his instructor asked him what he did, and Dolan replied “Damned if I know.” At that notion, the Frenchman proclaimed, “Allez, you’re graduated.”¹⁰

The actual training consisted of four schools: basic flight training in a Bleriot, advanced fighter training in Nieuports, aerial gunnery, and finally acrobatics and combat school. After completing the training pipeline, the French assigned the men to the *Groupe des Divisions d’Entrainement* (G.D.E.), the pilot pool and clearing house.

During basic flight training, the young birdmen learned in the Bleriot monoplane. The first stage, known as the “Penguin” class, utilized Bleriot with small engines and clipped wings not longer than five feet. Merely rolling along the ground from 15-30 miles per hour, the odd looking aircraft could not lift off, but taught the student how to

⁹ Hall, *High Adventure*, 6; Thenault, 8; Sinclair, 11.

¹⁰ Hall, *High Adventure*, 6; Gordon, 9-10.

handle the stick, keep horizontal control of the machine, and simply travel in a straight line across the field using the rudder. In addition, the machine contained “skids and every conceivable device to keep from turning over and tying into a knot.”¹¹

After the Penguin class the student entered the “Roller” class and the basic school gave him a regular Bleriot with a little more horsepower. Here the student learned how to keep the tail in the horizontal, straight-and-level position, just like takeoff, but usually resulted in the aircraft hopping down the field. First flight actually occurred in the “Decollet” class, where the aspiring pilot traveled on a straight, marked path rising no higher than eight feet. In the following “Piquet” class, the student gradually gained altitude, learned basic flying maneuvers, practiced in different weather conditions, and began to use his instruments. The trainee eventually learned the art of cross-county flying, often working through terrible weather conditions and getting lost. Following thirty hours in the air, he prepared for the brevet examination.¹²

The pilot license examination consisted of three tests: two *petit voyages* (short voyages) of forty miles, three triangular large voyages, and an altitude test. If the student failed the exam or seriously damaged his machine three times, the French “radiated” the recruit out of *chasse* (fighter) school and assigned him to “double-command” or dual control school, teaching him to fly by aid of an instructor. After completing dual flight training, the air service then assigned the pilot two-seater duty in bomber, artillery spotting, photography, or observation squadrons. If the student passed the brevet exam,

¹¹ Jablonski, 61; Nichols, 153; Sinclair, 13; Dolan, 6.

¹² Hall and Nordhoff, v2, 18 & 27; Gordon, 10.

the French classified the volunteer a corporal (unless he already earned the rank from prior service), doubled his monthly allowance, and gave him a four-day pass to Paris.¹³

When training resumed, the newly minted pilot wore collar wings, corporal's chevrons, and the military aviator wreath-wing insignia. He entered chasse school at Pau, the advanced training for Nieuports, and perfected his skill in piloting their soon-to-be combat machines.¹⁴ It was here that Charles Dolan learned about the "pain de chateau," a process where a pilot would "spot a nice chateau," land there on the weekend, and pull a wire off the aircraft's ignition. He would then report his engine trouble to military authorities and spend the weekend being entertained lavishly by French villagers. After the chasse school, the French sent the pilots to a 2-3 week gunnery course where they learned how to disassemble and reassemble their machine guns and shoot at various targets. In his rush through training, Dolan missed the gunnery school and noted "I don't know who was scared the most—the German or me when I fired a machine gun, because that was the first time I ever fired one."¹⁵

The final aviator school entailed a four-week course in acrobatics and combat tactics. Most accidents and fatalities occurred here because the 110 horsepower Baby Nieuport fighter severely tested the aviators' judgment while he performed bewildering maneuvers. Here the volunteers learned loops, spins, formation flying, Immelman turns, and various other tricks, readying for the day he would face an experienced and dangerous German ace.¹⁶

¹³ Gordon, 10-11.

¹⁴ Whitehouse, 28; Dolan, 8.

¹⁵ Gordon, 11; Dolan, 8.

¹⁶ Gordon, 12; Sinclair, 22.

Upon completion of the final school, the government ordered the chase pilot to the G.D.E., the pilot's pool and clearing station for all aviators destined for the Front. Located thirty mile outside of Pairs, the pilots refined their skills and waited for assignment to a unit.¹⁷ Although ready to fly and fight for France, Edwin Parsons described their peculiar feelings and attitudes.

We were far from superman or iron men or any other strange breed of cat. There was no thought of heroism in our minds, and our habits and morals left plenty of latitude for reproach, had anyone cared to make an issue of the matter. We were merely very wild, but very frightened, youngsters, fighting with unfamiliar weapons in a new element.¹⁸

Joining the Lafayette Escadrille one by one, with their newfound training absorbed, the members performed their duty while "leaping to fame and being made heroes overnight."¹⁹

RAF Eagle Squadrons

During the Battle of Britain, aviators around the United States knew well of the heroes in RAF Fighter Command. Those destined to become Eagles signed up through Colonel Sweeny, the Clayton Knight Committee, or directly entered the Canadian or British air services. Ultimately the recruiters enlisted men with a wide array of flying experiences. Contrary to Knight's initial findings, almost none of the men recruited were unemployed. Although more of the candidates flew for a living than worked in any other single occupation, more than 2/3 had jobs that did not involve flying. The largest number worked in blue-collar jobs—skilled or semi-skilled labor, working at whatever job was available during this depression era, and spending much of their pay on flying. Outside

¹⁷ McConnel, 44.

¹⁸ Parsons, 9.

of the blue-collar market, they held various other jobs. From this group, the RAF received "some pretty strong characters."²⁰

Although many of the Eagles had some college education, few were active students at the time they volunteered to join the RAF. Two reasons explained this phenomenon. First, most of the young men who had a college education and wanted to fly could meet the Army's requirements and enlist in the aviation training program. Second, the organizations recruiting for the RAF sought experienced pilots, but during a depression era, many young men could not go to school and pay for flying. For example, Roy Evans "used up all (his) spare change to get in time on bigger engines."²¹

Lacking time to train recruits from the ground up, the British needed experienced pilots before they could send them to Operational Training Units (OTUs) of either Hurricanes or Spitfires. They found these men through the Civilian Pilot Training Program, the British training program in the United States, and the Royal Canadian Air Force Program.

The Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) provided initial flight training for over half the Eagles. Designed to help civilian airport operators who had been hit hard by the depression and also build a cadre of young Americans with aviation knowledge, the CPTP set an initial goal to teach 20,000 college student how to fly. In the process, each would receive 35-50 hours of flying at a local airport while the college or university the trainees attended taught a 72-hour ground school. When President Roosevelt called for 50,000 planes annually from the American aircraft industry, the demand generated a

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Caine, 55-57; McColpin, interview 1987, 7.

²¹ Caine, 56; Roy Evans, interview by Philip D. Caine, 13 October 1988, San Diego, CA, Caine Collection, USAF Academy Special Collections, 3.

greater need for pilots. To compensate, the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) announced an increased training goal of 45,000 students in primary flight school and 9,000 in advanced flight training. As a result, nearly 50,000 applicants signed up by the end of 1940. According to Bill Geiger, "the purpose of the whole thing, was to get a whole lot of kids and then if you needed them, you could draw them in." The initial cadre of volunteers by Sweeny and the Clayton Knight Committee trained in the U.S under the CPTP, and without this program, there probably would not have been a cadre of pilots for Knight to recruit nor airfields at which to train them.²²

The British "refreshed" their American volunteers through a special RAF training program in the United States. Before the war began, the British wanted to train their own pilots in the U.S. using American instructors and airplanes. Because of neutrality, however, the United States only agreed to allow U.S. pilots and aircraft to train RAF pilots in Canada, the idea that ultimately led to the Empire Training Scheme. The intensity of the Battle of Britain and its attrition on RAF pilots led the British in August 1940 to reopen discussion of their original idea. The U.S. finally agreed, although now a shortage of aircraft appeared.²³

Despite the aircraft shortage, the British set up three small schools, owned and operated by civilians who utilized their own planes. Their purpose was to give up to 150 hours of training to American volunteers, most of whom were signed up by Clayton Knight Committee, before being sent to England to advanced training. The British contracted with the Spartan School of Aeronautics in Tulsa, Oklahoma; the Dallas Aviation School, Dallas, Texas; and the Polaris Flight Academy, Glendale, California.

²² Caine, 79-80; Geiger, 4.

²³ Caine, 80.

Each owned by former World War One aviators, the British sent all pilots who signed up for Eagle duty after November 1940 to one of these school, and added the Kern County Airport in Bakersfield, California to the list in early 1941.²⁴

The RAF training program expanded on 5 March 1941 when General Hap Arnold announced that as soon as Congress passed the Lend-Lease Bill, the U.S. Army would offer Britain 260 primary and 285 advanced aircraft to train British pilots in U.S. Army Schools. Known as the "All-through Scheme" for its ability to train British recruits in the United States up to OTU, the Allies adopted the program in April 1941 and called for construction of six new schools. This British system trained several thousand pilots for the RAF, fulfilling the primary mission of getting experienced Americans who had been recruited through Clayton Knight to a standard level of proficiency in order to enter OTU in England.²⁵

The RAF training in the United States contained several significant problems. Most pressing of all, it lacked a standardized syllabus. Contractors who ran the schools each determined the most effective method for training the pilots, and based on their WWI experience, ready the men for combat. When the recruits arrived in England, establishing any common starting point or set curriculum was impossible, thereby making it difficult to assess any standard level of competency upon reaching OTU. The second problem dealt with the quality of instructors. Demand for these men made it difficult to obtain a uniformly excellent staff, and as a result pilots sometimes graduated without fully mastering vital skills. Third, the future RAF pilots did not fly one, standardized aircraft, but flew a variety of machines at each base. Finally, the schools had to house,

²⁴ Ibid., 81.

²⁵ Ibid., 81-82.

feed, clothe, and pay the students, thereby forcing an overload upon the program.

Despite these problems, the quality of pilots arriving in England continually improved.²⁶

The third training program some pilots passed through to gain experience revolved around the Royal Canadian Air Force. Almost 20% of the Eagles served as members of the RCAF when they arrived in England. These men fell into two categories: those who joined the RCAF because they saw this as the only avenue (that is, they did not know of Knight or thought this was easier), or those who simply found themselves in Canada at the beginning of the war and decided to participate.²⁷

The RCAF syllabus differed from the Knight recruits in the U.S. and probably prepared the students better for fighter training in England. The Canadians designed a program complete with military as well as flight training. They utilized a standard syllabus that paralleled the programs operated by other participants in the Empire Training Scheme. Those who wanted to go to pilot training had to first enlist and then apply for flying duty after completing basic training. To be accepted the applicant had to pass numerous physical and aptitude examinations.²⁸

They gave us a little basic military education and a lot of tests to determine whether you were to become a pilot or an observer or a gunner. And, whether you were to be commissioned or become a noncommissioned officer. If you were smart you became a pilot or observer and were cited for commission. I busted all the math tests and wound up as a gunner.²⁹

Reade Tilley eventually earned pilot status, but not before he received special permission from his commander to take a week's leave to study for the test.

²⁶ Ibid., 83-86.

²⁷ Ibid., 87.

²⁸ Ibid., 88.

²⁹ Tilley, 3.

Whether they trained through the CPTP, the British Flight Training System, or the RCAF, all Eagles eventually wound up in England and entered their Operational Training Unit, which established basic proficiency in a specific fighter aircraft, familiarized the pilot with his operational duties, and prepared him for combat in Fighter Command in minimum time. OTU focused on the Spitfire and Hurricane, the very planes that motivated many to join the Eagles, and included as much instrument time as possible, a brief experience in gunnery, formation flying, acrobatics, night flying, and numerous takeoff and landings. Here the real hazards of flying high performance airplanes in a wartime environment emerged. In addition to the transition into a single-seat fighter, varying flight experience, England's weather, and night hazards all complicated the training. Worse, the Spitfires, just like the Lafayette Escadrille aircraft, lacked dual controls.³⁰

Not all the men received equal amounts of OTU time before the British posted them to their fighter squadrons. The military sent most who arrived after mid-1941 to pre-OTU at Bournemouth, where they received military training and familiarization with the RAF flying system before assignment to an OTU. After November 1941, the RAF sent the Americans to advanced flying training (AFT) for three weeks of refresher instruction that included night, instrument, and aerobatics flight before going to OTU. But the early members of the Eagles, including those who arrived through June 1941, were far from adequately trained when they joined their fighter squadrons.³¹

The early inadequacy in training stemmed from two reasons. First, the RAF assumed the recruiting sources ascertained a pilot's skills or assumed a level of flying

³⁰ Caine, 111-115; Wilkinson, 9.

³¹ Caine, 73.

competency based on documented experience, and some men falsified this information. Bill Dunn was one of the Eagles who sneaked into OTU despite his inability to meet requirements.

They had asked for 500 hours flying time, and it should have dawned on me what they meant by that, because they really didn't intend to send me back through elementary flying school for a refresher as I had hoped. No, they were going to push me right into advanced flying...but here I was at Tern Hill, with a Miles Master aircraft, which had 950 horsepower engines and flaps and a retractable undercarriage and adjustable pitch prop, and all the rest of the stuff I had never used before. It sort of scared me at first.³²

The recruiters thought they enlisted men with hundreds of hours, but because of deficient qualifications, losses in OTU reached high levels. The second reason for inadequate fighter training was time. The members of the first Eagle Squadron arrived in England during the Battle of Britain and the RAF needed the volunteers immediately.³³

The majority of the Eagles, however, did not rush through training like the early members, but arrived at their squadron reasonably well qualified for operational duty. Some of the Americans directly entered an Eagle Squadron, while others joined various depleted fighter units and waited to become an Eagle for several months. When the volunteers arrived at their operational squadron, the RAF commanders usually ordered the men through a brief orientation program: an area familiarization flight, a simulated dogfight, and some formation flying. The newly minted Eagle could then be ordered into duty.³⁴

By the summer of 1940, enough Americans flew in the RAF or completed OTU to make Charles Sweeny's all-American squadron a reality. Number 71 Squadron formed in September 1940 with three Americans who each had accumulated 50 hours in

³² Dunn, 13.

³³ McColpin, interview 1987, 11; Caine, 54 & 73-74.

Spitfires. The RAF chose the squadron leader, adjutant, and another pilot officer to command the unit. Ten months would pass before the British ordered the Number 71 into combat, and by that time the second Eagle Squadron, Number 121, would also be operational and Number 133, the third, only a month away.³⁵

Flying Tigers

Over 300 volunteers eventually joined the Flying Tigers, including 110 pilots, 2 women nurses, and 2 women administrative assistants; they came from thirty-nine of the forty-eight states. Only a dozen of the aviators met Chennault's age and P-40 requirements. More than half of the pilots had never flown a fighter, but instead, had trained in Navy torpedo-bombers, four-engine B-17 Flying Fortresses, or various other aircraft. The oldest was Louis Hoffmann, a forty-three year old Navy fighter veteran, and the youngest, a twenty-one year old fresh from Army flying school, was Henry Gilbert. Of the 110 pilots who would begin training for the America Volunteer Group, most originated from the Navy, six came from the Marines, and fewer than half volunteered from the Army. They were truly an eclectic group—good, bad, indifferent; mercenaries and idealists; fighter pilots, instructors, flying boat skipper; veterans and greenhorns. Although men of completely different experiences and backgrounds, they all held the common distinction as military aviators.³⁶

With the initial effort to recruit 100 pilots and 150 mechanics completed in June 1941, CAMCO assembled the men in San Francisco for their voyage across the Pacific to begin P-40 advanced training. The government told them to keep quiet, but Robert

³⁴ Caine, 78 & 125; Carpenter, 14.

³⁵ Caine, 74-78.

Prescott remembers “every bartender from San Francisco to Rangoon knew what was up.” Several contingents eventually left by ship, the largest being the Dutch freighter *Jagersfontaine* that departed on 10 July carrying 150 men. Mixing with the other passengers, the volunteers wore civilian clothes and the ship’s manifest listed them as everything but mercenaries—acrobats, artists, musicians, salesman, teachers, and undertakers. After passing Hawaii, President Roosevelt and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Harold Stark authorized a two-ship U.S. Naval escort for the *Jagersfontaine*.³⁷

According to Chennault’s original plan, the AVG would operate out of Kunming, China, but delays in the aircraft shipment and recruiting effort and the inability of the Chinese to complete the base at Kunming before onset of the rainy season temporarily negated the idea. To compensate, Chennault approached the British and asked permission to utilize the RAF Kyedaw airfield at Toungoo, Burma.³⁸ The new plan seemed ambitious, but the American commander knew he could count on British support. When he first proposed the AVG idea in late 1940, the British Military Attaché in Chungking reasoned that Chennault should be given everything he wanted in order to place the group in a position to win its initial battles.

1. The future of the war in China depended to a degree on an efficient, hard striking Air Force;
2. The Chinese were incapable of operating and administering a modern Air Force;
3. Such a force would therefore have to be an International Air Force under international control; and
4. The future of such a force would depend largely on what success Chennault could produce initially.³⁹

³⁶ Bond, 18; Byrd, 123; Chennault, *Fighter*, 111; Ford, 8; Williams, 30.

³⁷ Heiferman, 25; Prescott, 6; Bond, 21; Byrd, 124.

³⁸ Heiferman, 25.

³⁹ *American Volunteer Group*, Declassified USAF Historical Record, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 2.

Well aware of his superiors' opinions, British Commander in Chief of the Far East, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, obtained permission from the British War Office to make the Kyedaw airfield available.⁴⁰

The kind gesture, however, arrived with stipulations. Already hesitant about anything that appeared supportive of China and fearing the aggressive Japanese, the British agreed to AVG use of the facilities for training but not as a base from which to attack Japan. As soon as the Americans could fly effectively, they would have to move north to China. Chinese Air Force General P.T. Mow, however, argued that since Japan refused officially to admit it waged war against China, the American volunteers could not legally be considered belligerents and were in fact violating no neutrality by operating in Burma. Regardless of Mow's argument, Kunming could better protect the Burma Road, so Chennault agreed to move the three squadrons out of Rangoon as soon as they completed their training and the Chinese finished the 7000-foot runway at the original base.⁴¹

Once the men arrived at Kyedaw, their negotiations with the British increased. RAF Senior Air Officer Group Captain E.R. Manning, an Australian reservist, became disturbed by the advent of this irregular group in his command. He stuck strictly to RAF peacetime regulations and forbid any altering of the barracks without obtaining approval from RAF Headquarters in Rangoon. In one instance, three months passed before he would give approval for the AVG to build a gunnery butt for bore-sighting the P-40

⁴⁰ Byrd, 120.

⁴¹ Bond, 37; Chennault, *Fighter*, 107; Robert M. Smith, *With Chennault in China*, 22.

machine guns. Nevertheless, Chennault noted that “without British help during the prewar period, it would have been impossible to get the AVG into fighting condition.”⁴²

Coupled with the complexities in obtaining a suitable airfield, the Tigers struggled to acquire adequate supplies and push these supplies through an obsolete logistics system. A lack of spare parts served as the unit’s most taxing issue. Gerhard Neumann, one of the AVG ground crew, recalled “major problems with a total lack of simple things like spark plugs and tires” to major items such as propeller blades and engines. Much of the time the ground personnel had to improvise. In one instance, Neumann bought a Chinese bicycle, stripped the spokes from both its wheels, and plugged a radiator oil leakage by inserting these individual spokes into the radiator honeycomb. He later solved a leaking passage with inner tube rubber patches held by metal washers. In addition to hardware, the AVG lacked a bountiful supply of fuel. Decisions as to whether a pilot received extra training and proficiency flights often revolved around the available gasoline supply.⁴³

When fighting began, the ground crews often relieved their hardware shortages by cannibalizing downed aircraft that crashed within 200 miles of their AVG airfields.⁴⁴ Many in the AVG understood the difference between their situation and the situation that their RAF Eagle bothers confronted.

I don’t want to take anything away from the RAF and their defense of Britain; they were mighty courageous pilots. However, upon landing, those pilots were able to get spare parts for the aircraft, and they were able to maintain a better airworthy type machine than we could for our pilots in Burma and China.⁴⁵

⁴² Chennault, *Fighter*, 106-107.

⁴³ Williams, 6; Byrd, 115; Gerhard Neumann, Letter to Martha Byrd, 23 February 1981 (Martha Byrd Collection, USAFA Special Collections), 1-2; Williams, 48.

⁴⁴ Neumann, 1.

⁴⁵ Harrington, 77.

Although their supply situation often reached dangerously low levels, many Tigers believed that Chennault's "extremely strong dedication of purpose, determination, and burning desire to demonstrate to the world the air tactics and theory he had been preaching" are the reasons the AVG initially overcame its supply shortage.⁴⁶

Chennault immediately began his tactics training and P-40 instruction when the first volunteer contingent reached Rangoon on 28 July 1941. Some of the pilots had never been around a P-40 or any other aircraft as fast as the P-40, immediately causing problems in training. Naval Aviator Robert Prescott had only seen a P-40 once in his life, and that occurred when he happened to be ferrying Army trainers through Shreveport, Louisiana while a P-40 sat on the tarmac. In the process of learning how to fly the fighter, Prescott did not receive detailed instruction. His instructor covered the basics, relaying only the location of the throttle, gear handle, flaps, and airspeed indicator. When the novice fighter pilot asked his teacher at what speed to take-off and land, the weary instructor replied, "We're not running any damn air school around here! Do you want to fly the airplane or not?"⁴⁷

The volunteers practiced in the Burma skies for weeks, eventually destroying a dozen P-40s in training. Robert M. Smith lamented that "as soon as you'd get them (P-40s) in shape, regrettably, some of the pilots would crack them up...particularly some of the Navy pilots who had never flown a fighter before." In addition to training accidents, the AVG had already lost one P-40 during shipment when its cargo sling broke and the aircraft plunged into the New York Harbor.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁷ Harrington, 21; Prescott, 9-10.

⁴⁸ Bond, 39; Robert M. Smith, interview 1962, 14; Chennault, *Fighter*, 101.

Coupled with P-40 familiarization, Chennault instituted a “kindergarten” for every pilot who arrived before 15 September. The classes entailed 72 hours of lecture and 60 hours of tactical training. The pilots would spend their mornings in briefings and the afternoons flying. For this schedule to succeed, Chennault forced the men to wake up early in the morning before the Rangoon heat blazed. Chennault taught everything he learned from his four years in China, initially lecturing on Asian geography and China’s current situation with Japan and finally moving into the tactics that would make the Flying Tigers famous.⁴⁹

Captured Japanese flying and staff manuals, translated into English by the Chinese, served as textbooks for the flyers. From these manuals the American pilots “learned more about Japanese tactics than any single Japanese pilot ever knew.” Chennault taught them the psychology of the Japanese pilots, that they “flew by the book,” and ordered his men to study those books to remain one step ahead of the enemy. They learned how to break up Japanese formations and make them fight in a style comfortable to the Americans. The Japanese could be forced to deviate from their plan, and their rigid air discipline could be used as a powerful weapon against them. He also impressed upon the Americans that the “more experienced Japanese pilots were first-rate, that they were not—as so any Americans supposed when the war broke out—some kind of rinky-dink outfit...these guys had a high degree of skill.”⁵⁰

To counter that skill, Chennault stressed using their strengths against their enemies’ weaknesses. Although the P-40 had limited maneuverability and utilized a vulnerable liquid-cooled engine, the aircraft was stable and could dive at enormous

⁴⁹ Bond, 38; Older, 12; Chennault, *Fighter*, 112.

⁵⁰ Chennault, *Fighter*, 112; Older, 13.

speeds. The Japanese Mitsubishi Zero, although acrobatic, was lightly armored and lightly constructed. With these aircraft characteristics in mind, General Chennault ordered his men to “never dogfight with a Zero.” He trained the Tigers to use the P-40’s higher top speed, faster dive, and superior firepower to stay away from the Zero’s faster climb rate, higher ceiling, and better maneuverability. He also harped on gunnery, to “hit hard, break clean, and get in position for another pass.”⁵¹

Above all, the AVG training stressed teamwork; Chennault specifically condemned heroic, individual action, instead concentrating on the “two-plane formation.” The “Weaver,” the P-40 wingman following immediately behind the plane engaging the enemy, would guard the leader’s tail. Although some of the men had been trained in formation flying before, the two-plane formation was new and allowed the aircraft to operate as a unit or integrated with a larger force.⁵²

When developing his two-plane formation and team concepts, Chennault envisioned men who could learn quickly and get along with others under pressure, but in some instances the officers who helped with recruiting channeled toward the AVG those who did not have good chances for advancement in the U.S. service. Potential troublemakers and misfits resided among them.⁵³ The group’s “high-spirited” nature forced Chennault to depart radically from military tradition.

For rigid military discipline I tried to substitute a measure of simple American democratic principles. Rigid discipline was confined to the air and combat matters. On the ground we tried to live as nearly as possible under the circumstances as a normal American community. Most of the problems of group living were solved by majority rule after discussions in open meetings.

⁵¹ Gayle MacAlister, interview by Frank Rounds Jr., August 1962, Ojai, CA, USAF Oral History Program, AFHRC, Maxwell AFB, AL, 12; Williams, 43; Chennault, *Fighter*, 113.

⁵² Williams, 43; Neale, 22.

⁵³ Claire Chennault, “Military Rules and Regulations.” Memorandum to All Members of the First American Volunteer Group. 31 December 1941. Kunming, Yunnan, China, 1; Byrd, 117.

Everybody was free to gripe and voice his opinions. We met regularly once a week for that purpose and to formulate high policy on how long the bar should remain open, when all lights were to go out, and other weighty matters.⁵⁴

According to Flying Tiger Gayle MacAlister, Chennault's "methods of discipline had to be different because he had people who were working for relatively high wages...his success in discipline was his ability to immediately terminate the employment of any person he decided would not fit into the group." In a December 1941 memorandum to his men, Chennault stressed that their contracts "definitely stated rewards and privileges," but also required faithful performance of assigned duties, and he had been quick to "reward meritorious conduct and attention to duty with promotions in pay and authority." Furthermore, if the men did not like how Chennault ran operations, they could resign—the volunteers did not hold a military commission.⁵⁵

Extreme conditions at Toungoo accompanied Chennault's radical discipline and training methods. The men had to face excessive heat, insects, snakes, bad food, and little rest. Because of these conditions and the absolute prohibition against engaging the Japanese from Toungoo, morale plummeted during training. "Those who couldn't take it, left. Those who couldn't cut it, washed out."⁵⁶

The survivors of Tongoo completed their training and first engaged the Japanese in December 1941. As many as eighteen pilots, however, remained unprepared for combat into March 1942. By the end of their tenure, the Flying Tigers demonstrated their newfound tactics by destroying 297 enemy aircraft and losing only fourteen of their own in combat. The men who served under Chennault note that responsibility for their success lay with their commander. A soft-spoken man, Chennault did not rant, roar, or

⁵⁴ Chennault, *Fighter*, 116.

⁵⁵ MacAlister, 5; Chennault, "Military Rules and Regulations," 1; Prescott, 26.

pound his fists. "He had a quiet determination, and an absolute, unwavering dedication to defeating the Japanese...he had decided that he would let nothing interfere with this determination."⁵⁷

Comparison

Much like Chennault, the Angel pilots held an "unwavering dedication," but initially their determination revolved around a burning desire to fly for an all-American volunteer unit. Whether idealism, fighters, or pure opportunity motivated these men to join, they each undertook an arduous training process to prepare for the rigors of fighter combat. Three aspects, however, delineated the units from one another: the backgrounds of the men who joined, training methodology, and level of support.

The Lafayette Escadrille typically consisted of upper-class, Eastern college educated men who held a variety of occupations ranging from reporter to playboy. They were the idealists who signed up to fly and fight, and for the most part, had never set foot in an aircraft. The RAF Eagles, however, stood at the opposite end of the spectrum. All experienced pilots of varying degrees, the majority of the men who slipped across the Canadian border had little college experience and also worked in blue-collar jobs. As a result, many "strong characters" emerged among this group. Contrary to both the Escadrille and the Eagles, Chennault did not recruit civilians, but reached into the military pilot pool to draw his volunteers. Undisciplined with attitudes as strong as the Eagles, the Flying Tigers originated from all parts of the country and represented a diverse array of backgrounds.

⁵⁶ Williams, 32 & 42.

⁵⁷ Bond, 40; Byrd, 152; Older, 14.

The backgrounds these men brought to their Angel units ultimately forced different training methodologies. Due to limited flying experience, the French volunteers entered a complete aviation training program. Starting with "Penguins" at the basic flying school, these men gradually progressed through primary training to advanced training and ended with acrobatics and combat school. Throughout this journey, a language barrier often complicated instruction and furnished a risk that the other Angel units never encountered.

For the Eagles, the British assumed some level of previous flying experience. Many men already received primary instruction from the Federal Government's Civilian Pilot Training Program, so the U.S. based British Flight Training System, such as the Spartan School of Aeronautics in Tulsa, would serve as a "refresher" or interim course, qualifying the men for advanced Operational Training Units. Casualties in OTU, however, mounted since inexperienced pilots often falsified their flying records and could not handle the high-performance Spitfire or Hurricane.

Unlike the Escadrille or Eagles, Chennault immediately threw his men into advanced P-40 training. Although many men had never flown fighters, the military had trained the pilots, and armed with this knowledge the instructors led a rudimentary program that provided only general instruction. Chennault's in-depth "kindergarten" tactical school formed the basis of their advanced training, becoming one of the most memorable features of AVG indoctrination. The discipline of the AVG would also highlight the uniqueness of the organization. Whereas the Escadrille and Eagles served under military commissions and their foreign commanders held them to strict codes of military conduct, the Flying Tigers only signed contracts. Chennault could fire his men,

or the volunteers could resign. The Tigers were all civilians, and in Bob Neale's opinion, only Chennault's "strong personality" held the group together.⁵⁸

Support problems also characterized the American Volunteer Group. When the group initially landed in Asia, an incomplete airfield at Kunming forced Chennault to negotiate with the British for a training base at Rangoon. The British approved, but not before prohibiting combat operations from their airfield. Upon arrival at Kyedaw, the senior British officer Group Captain E.R. Manning complicated matters by refusing the men freedom to alter the barracks. Despite these diplomatic troubles, supplies served as the most significant support problem. A finite number of aircraft, fuel shortages, and lack of spare parts plagued the Flying Tigers throughout training and into their combat phase. Although the Lafayette Escadrille and RAF Eagle Squadrons never relished in excess supplies, they did receive complete support from the sources that financed their operations, and in some cases, such as General Hap Arnold's "All-through Scheme," the United States fully assisted training programs.

⁵⁸ Neale, 11-21.

Conclusion

During their formation periods, the Angel units experienced vastly different paths of approval, recruiting, and training. Foreign need, bureaucratic resistance, and unit support highlighted the approval process. The idea of the Lafayette Escadrille did not originate near government circles, but from a few eager Americans who envisioned helping an embattled nation. Whereas the United States neither resisted nor encouraged American volunteers overseas in World War One, the French initially opposed the Lafayette Escadrille's formation. Ultimately, the French realized the tremendous political value that the Americans offered, and the organization grew from this political necessity. In the Second World War, the British rapidly approved the Eagles, but the United States remained hesitant over allowing its sons to enter combat. The Eagles also grew from some political necessity, but the lack of fighter pilots (a military need) inspired the British to adopt Americans in the RAF. The Flying Tigers, contrary to both the French and British units, grew solely from a military need to protect the Burma Road. The idea for the American Volunteer Group originated with the Chinese government; the United States not only endorsed it and provided pilots, but also clandestinely supplied the ground crews, aircraft, and operating expenses.

The Angels' recruiting process differed in support, method, and volunteers' motivations and qualifications. Officially, the French and American governments did not fund the Escadrille's recruiting, but left the task to the private Franco-American Committee. To their delight, publicity informed men of the crusade, and predominantly motivated by romantic idealism and morality, volunteers crossed the Atlantic to join the

adventure. In World War II, the British stood behind Eagle recruiting, but the United States again remained hesitant, launched several FBI investigations, and routinely turned away volunteers at the Canadian border. The RAF recruiters preferred locating their volunteers through word of mouth, and all the pilots flocked to the call with dreams of flying Spitfire and Hurricane fighters. Unlike the Escadrille and the Eagles, the United States opened its military bases to the Flying Tiger recruiters and discharged the volunteers "for the convenience of the Government." Motivated by the opportunity to amass a fortune, turn a dead career into an upstart path, fly fighters, or witness an "enchanted land," the military pilots transformed into mercenaries. Although many servicemen saw the American Volunteer Group as a golden opportunity, the roster filled slowly and the recruiters enlisted whoever applied. The Escadrille and the Eagles, however, received a bountiful supply of applicants and the groups remained selective.

Finally, the background of the men that joined and the level of support affected the training process. Escadrille volunteers typically consisted of upper-class, elite college educated men who held a variety of non-flying occupations. Because most lacked flying experience, they underwent a complete aviation program from basic to advanced training. The RAF recruited only civilian pilots, and many of these volunteers worked in blue-collar jobs to supplement their flying. Already aviators, they entered a "refresher," intermediate training course before being sent to advanced instruction in Spitfires and Hurricanes. The Tigers consisted only of military aviators. With a variety of backgrounds and aviation skills, the volunteers resigned their military commissions and immediately entered advanced P-40 training and tactical school. Due to their backgrounds and unique civilian nature, discipline problems crept into the American

Volunteer Group, held together only by Chennault's "strong personality" and unorthodox methods. Also unlike the Escadrille and the Eagles, logistical problems and minimal support plagued the AVG's training period.

Despite their differences in training, recruiting, and approval, the three all-American volunteer units amassed exceptional combat records and eventually transferred their rich heritages to the American military. The Lafayette Escadrille gained forty confirmed victories, and as many as one hundred unconfirmed downings versus losing eight men in combat. Needing experienced combat aviators, the United States inducted the group into the American Air Service and renamed it the 103rd Pursuit Squadron. The Eagles did not set any overall records for numbers of German aircraft destroyed by an RAF squadron, although they did lead Fighter Command in certain months, and they did form the nucleus of the Fourth Fighter Group (of the 8th Air Force), the highest-scoring American unit in the European Theater during World War II. The Tigers destroyed 297 enemy aircraft and lost only fourteen of their own in combat, and the remnants formed the U.S. 14th Air Force under the command of Major General Claire Chennault.¹

Whether serving the United States or a foreign power, the all-American volunteer units distinguished themselves in the annals of air combat and the hearts of the people they protected. According to Stoddard Dewey, a reporter covering the Americans training in France, they were "expected to be like Sandalphon, the angel of glory—in the limitless realms of the air." The American Angels, bold and unwavering in the heavens and in history, succeeded as the disciples of Sandalphon and lived up to their fighter pilot heritage.²

¹ Flammer, "Myth," 23; Caine, 329; Heiferman, 126.

² Stoddard Dewey, "Americans Fly in France," *The Nation* vol. 105, no. 2715 (12 July 1917): 84

APPENDIX

"High Flight"

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
 And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
 Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung
 High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
 My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long, delirious burning blue
 I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew.
 And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
 Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

-RCAF Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

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AMERICAN ANGELS:
FORMING THE LAFAYETTE ESCADRILLE, RAF EAGLES, AND FLYING TIGERS

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While the United States initially abstained from battle in the Twentieth Century's two greatest conflicts, the Lafayette Escadrille, Royal Air Force (RAF) Eagle Squadrons, and Flying Tigers served as all-American volunteer fighter units in foreign air forces. During World War I the Escadrille flew with the French and in World War II the Eagles signed on with the British while the Tigers fought alongside the Chinese. Their similarities, however, were only superficial, demonstrated particularly during their formation periods.

Foreign need, bureaucratic resistance, and unit support highlighted the groups' efforts to gain foreign or American approval. The Lafayette Escadrille initially experienced French resistance but later flourished because of a political need. The Eagles quickly received approval from the British, encountered American reservations, and grew from both military and political necessity. The Flying Tigers organized for pure military necessity and were completely supported by the U.S. government.

The recruiting process differed in support, method, and volunteers' motivations and qualifications. Publicity informed men of the Escadrille, and volunteers crossed the Atlantic predominately motivated by romantic idealism. Word of mouth carried the RAF recruiting drive and pilots desiring to fly Spitfire and Hurricane fighters flocked to the call. Hired Government recruiters enlisted the Tigers, and the trip to China was an

opportunistic adventure to fulfill a military career, fly fighters, earn money, or see an "enchanted land." While the Escadrille and Eagles were selective and completely incorporated into foreign air forces, the Tigers enlisted whoever would join and were civilian soldiers of fortune.

Finally, the background of the men and the level of support affected the training process. The Escadrille flyers were predominantly college educated, upper-class individuals who entered a complete aviation training program in France. The Eagles were experienced pilots, mostly from blue-collar backgrounds, and underwent an intermediate "refresher" training program before entering advanced fighter training. The Flying Tigers were all former military aviators and directly entered advanced training, although many have never flown a fighter.

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AMERICAN ANGELS:
FORMING THE LAFAYETTE ESCADRILLE, RAF EAGLES, AND FLYING TIGERS

Benjamin S. Robins, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2000

Advisor: Peter Maslowski

While the United States initially abstained from battle in the Twentieth Century's two greatest conflicts, the Lafayette Escadrille, Royal Air Force (RAF) Eagle Squadrons, and Flying Tigers served as all-American volunteer fighter units in foreign air forces. During World War I the Escadrille flew with the French and in World War II the Eagles signed on with the British while the Tigers fought alongside the Chinese. Their similarities, however, were only superficial, demonstrated particularly during their formation periods.

Foreign need, bureaucratic resistance, and unit support highlighted the groups' efforts to gain foreign or American approval. The Lafayette Escadrille initially experienced French resistance but later flourished because of a political need. The Eagles quickly received approval from the British, encountered American reservations, and grew from both military and political necessity. The Flying Tigers organized for pure military necessity and were completely supported by the U.S. government.

The recruiting process differed in support, method, and volunteers' motivations and qualifications. Publicity informed men of the Escadrille, and volunteers crossed the Atlantic predominately motivated by romantic idealism. Word of mouth carried the RAF recruiting drive and pilots desiring to fly Spitfire and Hurricane fighters flocked to the call. Hired Government recruiters enlisted the Tigers, and the trip to China was an

opportunistic adventure to fulfill a military career, fly fighters, earn money, or see an “enchanted land.” While the Escadrille and Eagles were selective and completely incorporated into foreign air forces, the Tigers enlisted whoever would join and were civilian soldiers of fortune.

Finally, the background of the men and the level of support affected the training process. The Escadrille flyers were predominantly college educated, upper-class individuals who entered a complete aviation training program in France. The Eagles were experienced pilots, mostly from blue-collar backgrounds, and underwent an intermediate “refresher” training program before entering advanced fighter training. The Flying Tigers were all former military aviators and directly entered advanced training, although many have never flown a fighter.

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