

WW2 IN THE PACIFIC



GREAT BATTLES FOR BOYS

JOE GIORELLO
WITH
SIBELLA GIORELLO

WWII in the Pacific

Great Battles for Boys
EXCERPT

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with
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Great Battles World War II in the Pacific

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Excerpt Edition

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This book is dedicated to Danny Giorello, my dad, who served with the US Army's 15th Air Force, Roger Connor, my father-in-law, who served with the US Navy during the Japanese Occupation, and Jimmy Giorello, my uncle, who served in the US Army Infantry in Europe.

You guys are my heroes.

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WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Many people assume that because the Allies won World War II, the battles were easy victories.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Japan was an aggressive and ruthless enemy. Its forces were willing to kill as many people as necessary in order to achieve world domination. Japanese forces were also more numerous and, in many cases, better trained than their Allied counterparts.

During World War II, the Allies were the clear underdogs.

But brave soldiers and courageous leaders changed the course of history.

Maybe you've heard the saying, "Freedom isn't free." Do you wonder what that means? It's saying freedom often comes at a great cost, bought with the blood of warriors and patriots.

As you read about these battles, I hope you'll come to understand that phrase. And I hope that you will honor those sacrifices and appreciate the freedoms we have gained from them.

Let's explore the largest theater of World War II, where some of the most devastating naval and land battles of all time were fought, and history was made.

THE FLYING TIGERS

December 1941 – July 1942



3rd Squadron Hell's Angels Flying Tigers over China, photographed in 1942 by AVG pilot Robert T. Smith.

MOST PEOPLE THINK that America joined World War II only after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

Technically, that's true.

But before Japan bombed Hawaii, some daring American pilots were already shooting Japanese planes out of the sky.

These men were called the Flying Tigers.

For many years before World War II broke out in 1939, Japan and China were at war with each other. Sometimes Japan and China also fought the Soviet Union. These Sino-Japanese wars, as they were called, reached boiling point in 1937, when Japan claimed that China fired on its soldiers without due cause. To this

day, nobody knows for sure if that claim was true. But Japan used it as an excuse to invade China.

And did they ever invade.

Swift and brutal, the Japanese Imperial Army took over China's busiest port, Shanghai, along with several major cities. Japanese soldiers showed no mercy to the Chinese people, their relentless violence most devastatingly illustrated in the capture of Nanking—China's capital at the time. The city was burned, and the Japanese committed unspeakable atrocities on thousands of Chinese civilians. How many victims were there? Nobody could ever give an accurate number because the Japanese soldiers destroyed all the records, hoping to avoid war crime convictions.

The invasion was so bad that China pleaded for help. It had a military, headed by General Chiang Kai-Shek. But the Chinese soldiers were no match for the fierce Japanese forces.

So China asked the United States to help.

Actually, they asked one particular American—Colonel Claire Lee Chennault.



Colonel Claire Chennault in his office at Kunming, China, 1942.

Chennault was an aviator who had worked in China for several years. Just as the Japanese invaded, he was getting ready to retire. But the wife of General Kai-Shek went to him, begging Chennault to build a Chinese air force.

Chennault liked the idea. He thought that, left unchecked, the Japanese would defeat the Chinese forces and the war might spread to America. He presented a plan to US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The only problem was that America wasn't formally at war. So the president couldn't give his official approval. And getting Congress's approval would be difficult—wars require a lot of money and sacrifice, including the sacrifice of human lives.

A secret plan was made. The president gave Chennault permission to form something called the American Volunteer Group or AVG.

Chennault handpicked about eighty pilots from the US Navy, Army, and Marines. These men then had to resign from active military duty and become mercenaries or "hired guns." They agreed to be part of this covert—secret—operation that wasn't formally recognized by their own government. It was risky.

But some inexperienced pilots wanted to join the AVG so badly that they lied about their flying experience!

One reason they lied was because the AVG paid good money.

During the 1930s, the Great Depression had crippled the American economy. More than 25 percent of Americans didn't have jobs. A pilot joining Chennault's AVG would be paid \$600 a month, which is about \$10,000 in today's dollars! And if a pilot shot down a Japanese plane, he was promised another \$500—per plane.

Chennault had his hands full. He had around 300 men who joined. He had to ship everything—all of the pilots, crew, and supplies—to Burma, a country that was friendly to America which also shared a border with China. Then Chennault set up headquarters in a schoolhouse.



AVG pilots and crew working on their planes in Burma.

Even if they didn't lie about their flying experience, the AVG pilots still had a lot to learn.

"I gave the pilots a lesson in the geography of Asia that they all needed badly..." Chennault said. "I taught them all I knew about the Japanese. Day after day there were lectures from my notebooks, filled during the previous four years of combat. All of the bitter experience from Nanking to Chunking was poured out in those lectures. Captured Japanese flying and staff manuals, translated into English by the Chinese, served as textbooks. From these manuals the American pilots learned more about Japanese tactics than any single Japanese pilot ever knew."

The Americans were flying P-40 planes, which were much faster than the Japanese planes, but the Japanese planes were more maneuverable. So Chennault needed to teach his pilots some lifesaving tactics. For instance, pilots should "dive and zoom" on the enemy. They were to fly head-on, firing guns. When the enemy retreated, the pilots were taught to follow them and harass the pilot far beyond the combat area.

It was nothing like what these pilots had learned back in the United States.

But Chennault knew that the Japanese plane—called the Nate, or Ki-27—didn't have armor plating. And their fuel tanks weren't self-sealing. One bullet could blow up the whole aircraft.

And you know what? Chennault's methods worked. Many years later, a British recovery team dredged the water where the Japanese pilots flew back to base after confronting the AVG. The recovery team found more than sixty Japanese planes, all shot down by the Flying Tigers.

Since it was a secret operation, Chennault only had about fifty operational airplanes. But he fooled the Japanese into thinking there were huge numbers of P-40s. One trick was to constantly change the P-40s' paint colors and tail numbers. Chennault did this so often that the Japanese decided there were about 500 AVG planes! To keep up the deception, Chennault's fighter squadrons were taught to attack in groups of three—one plane right, one center, and one left—so that the enemy would think it was a huge fleet.

After suffering for decades under Japanese oppression, the Chinese people celebrated these fierce American pilots. They nicknamed them "Tigers." One pilot decided to paint the nose of his P-40 so it looked like a Tiger shark. Then other pilots did the same thing. When an American reporter came to see these wild mercenaries fighting for China, he added to the nickname, calling them "Flying Tigers."

The name stuck.

Radar systems were a brand-new invention at the time—too new for the Flying Tigers. But the pilots had a different early warning system—the Chinese people.

Every time a Japanese plane took off to attack the AVG, the Chinese lookouts would run from one village to another, searching for a radio, telephone, or telegraph wire to alert the Americans.

These early signals prevented Japan from having any element of surprise against the Flying Tigers. Chennault later called this unusual alarm system a “vast spider net.”

Also, if an American pilot crashed or was forced to bail out of his plane, he had something called a “blood chit” to save his life. The blood chit was a cloth emblem, written in Chinese, sewn into the pilot’s uniform. It read: “This person has come to China to help in the war effort. Soldiers and civilians, one and all, should rescue and protect him.”

Years after World War II, a reporter interviewed AVG pilot R.T. Smith. He asked him what it was like being a Flying Tiger. Smith talked about the rough living conditions.

“Did you ever regret joining the AVG?” asked the reporter.



Blood chit for a Flying Tiger.

“Only on those occasions when I was being shot at,” Smith said.

Although eight Flying Tigers lost their lives during the secret mission, the AVG inflicted bigger losses on the Japanese. Almost 300 Japanese planes were destroyed, while about 1,500 Japanese aviation personnel were wounded or killed.

Then, in December 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor—an act that caused the United States to bring these daring pilots back into its military.

On July 4, 1942, the AVG was disbanded.

The Tiger pilots were sent into other units, continuing to fight the Japanese—and now the Germans—in World War II.

WHO FOUGHT?

THE FORMATION OF the Flying Tigers sounds like a real success story, doesn't it?

But it didn't start out that way. Some pilots quit after only twenty-four hours in Burma. Others didn't even know how to fly a plane. One pilot crashed three different planes—in one week.

Frustrated, Chennault wrote a letter to the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company. It was a private business overseeing the AVG since the US government wasn't officially involved. He wrote:

“In telling the A.V.G. story to pilots who may think of volunteering, nothing should be omitted... The A.V.G. will be called upon to combat Japanese pursuits; to fly at night; and to undertake offensive missions when planes suitable for this purpose are sent out to us. These points should be clearly explained.

“Then, after the timid have been weeded out, the incompetents should also be rejected. I am willing to give a certain amount of transition training to new pilots, but we are not equipped to give a complete refresh course. It is too much to expect that men familiar only with four-engine flying boats can be transformed into pursuit experts overnight...

“Let me repeat, much money and much irreplaceable equipment has already been wasted, the A.V.G.’s combat efficiency seriously lowered, by the employment policy that has been followed. I am aware that this policy makes it far easier to fill the employment quotas. But I prefer to have the employment quotas partly unfilled, than to receive pilots hired on the principle of ‘Come one, come all.’ ”

You can read all of Chennault’s letter here:

www.warbirdforum.com/camco.htm

BOOKS

Flying Tigers by Paul Szuscikiewicz

Claire Chennault: Flying Tiger by Earle Rice

INTERNET

LIFE magazine featured the Flying Tigers in a 1942 issue. The following link will take you directly to that story, which has many excellent photos of the Flying Tigers and their planes. However, be aware that at that time, Americans used disparaging language to describe their Japanese enemy. www.cbi-theater.com/flyingtigers/flying_tigers.html

MOVIES

Flying Tigers. A 1942 black-and-white movie starring John Wayne with exciting aerial dogfights.

The Sky’s the Limit. A 1943 musical comedy starring Fred Astaire, who plays a Flying Tigers pilot on leave.

God is My Co-Pilot. A 1945 film based on the autobiography of Robert Lee Scott Jr., who served with the Flying Tigers and the United States Army Air Forces in China and Burma during World War II.

Hers to Hold. A 1943 American musical comedy that tells the story of former Flying Tiger Bill Morley and his love interest, Penny Craig.

PEARL HARBOR

December 7, 1941



The USS *Arizona* burning in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7, 1941.

DECEMBER 7, 1941 was a normal Sunday. Across America, families gathered for breakfast, got ready for church, and listened to their radios playing in the background.

Christmas was just weeks away.

But suddenly an announcer broke into the regular radio program. He said that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor.

Pearl Harbor?

People looked at each other.

Where's Pearl Harbor?

In 1941, Hawaii wasn't even a state. It was only a very distant US territory. But after that fateful December day, everyone knew about the place named Pearl Harbor.

People struggled to understand why the Japanese had attacked American soil. During World War I, Japan was an American ally—a friend—that fought on the side of the US, Great Britain, France, and Italy.

However, Japan had just declared itself America's enemy.

What had changed?

After World War I, Japan tumbled into a terrible economic depression. Military leaders seized control of the Japanese government. These leaders told people they would make things better. Then Japan brutally attacked China and took over its major ports. (Remember, this was why the Flying Tigers were in Burma.) But the invasion of China wasn't enough for Japan's new leaders. They wanted even more power, especially the aggressive Minister of War, General Hideki Tojo.

Tojo believed that Japan was a country superior to all others. Most Japanese citizens agreed with him. For centuries, Japanese culture taught its people to believe they were a special race, destined to rule over all the people in Asia. (In Germany, Adolf Hitler used a similar sense of superiority to lead his countrymen into World War II.)

But there was another reason behind Japan's aggression. Japan is a narrow string of islands in the Pacific Ocean. In the years leading up to the war, it contained millions of people who needed food and other supplies. Japan imported most of its food and supplies from other countries. But when Japan invaded China, the United States stopped sending raw materials to them. This embargo was supposed to persuade Japan to leave China alone. But the embargo made Japan's economic problems even worse, so Tojo tried to conquer more territory.

In 1939, Japan attacked the Soviet Union. It didn't win that conflict, but the following year, Japan's leaders signed something called the Pact of Steel. This agreement with Germany and Italy made Japan a member of the Axis alliance. These three countries banded together for power.

In 1941, General Tojo became Prime Minister of Japan. He convinced Japan's royal leader, Emperor Hirohito, that Japan should attack the United States. Tojo said that if Japan didn't show some real muscle, the world would always treat Japan like a third-class country. So, Japan planned its attack on the United States at the same time as Japanese and American diplomats were discussing peace terms.

American naval commanders in Hawaii had heard rumors that Japan might attack. But the Navy was told to ignore the warnings. The War Department in Washington, DC was convinced the diplomatic talks with Japan were genuine, and that Japan was interested in peace. They also said that Japan's military was already overextended and couldn't fight another war.

On December 7, 1941, another message was sent to Washington. It said that Japan was going to attack Pearl Harbor—*today!*

With our modern computers, cell phones, and "instant messaging," it's hard to understand how that message didn't immediately reach Hawaii. But back then, sending a message halfway around the world required hours, sometimes even entire days, to reach its destination.

When the message finally did reach the commander in charge of the Army and Air Corps in Hawaii, Pearl Harbor was already in flames.

Here's how the attack unfolded.

Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, was another sunny day on Oahu Island. But the first sign of trouble came at 6:30 a.m. A military spotter saw a Japanese midget submarine operating near

the entrance to Pearl Harbor. The midget sub was sunk, and an early warning signal was dispatched.

But the warning was ignored.

Minutes later, the island's radar station signaled that a fleet of planes was approaching from about fifty miles away. This information was sent to the Army. A commander passed the news to the Navy. And the naval officer assumed these planes were a fleet of American B-17 bombers, expected to arrive at Pearl Harbor that same day.

Minutes later, about 200 enemy planes swooped over Pearl Harbor.

Torpedo bombers.

Dive bombers.

Fighter planes.

There were so many planes that they blocked the sun.

Bypassing Pearl Harbor's battleships, the planes headed straight for a nearby airfield. Unfortunately, the US military was more worried about sabotage than any attack from the air, so it had bunched all its planes together on the airfield, to keep them safe. But that "safeguard" gave the Japanese an easy target.

The Japanese destroyed half of the American planes within minutes.

The enemy then headed for the harbor's "Battleship Row." They dropped torpedoes on the USS *Helena*, *Utah*, and *Raleigh*. More Japanese planes flew in from the east, attacking the USS *California*, *Nevada*, *Oklahoma*, and *West Virginia*. One armor-piercing bomb penetrated the forward ammunition magazine of the USS *Arizona*. The ship exploded. That's the explosion seen in the picture at the top of this chapter.

With Pearl Harbor in ruins, the Japanese planes flew away. One pilot telegraphed a message to command: "Tora, Tora, Tora!"

Literally, the phrase translates as "Tiger, Tiger, Tiger!" or Japanese code for "Surprise attack achieved!"

Only the attack wasn't over.

Another 170 Japanese planes arrived in a second wave. They targeted the ships damaged from the first attack, the battleship *Pennsylvania*, and three destroyers that were in dry dock.

Photo # NH 97398 USS West Virginia sunk and burning at Pearl Harbor, 7 Dec. 1941



Before the morning was over, twenty ships were sunk or ruined. Almost 200 planes were destroyed, while another 159 were damaged. Most of them never even left the ground.

In less than two hours, Japan wiped out America's naval force in the Pacific. But human casualties were even higher. The bombing of Pearl Harbor killed about 2,500 Americans, including sixty-eight civilians. The explosion on the USS *Arizona* killed 1,177 crewmen—the highest number of deaths that day on any ship.

And yet, when the smoke cleared, the military saw some good fortune.

Admiral Husband Kimmel had already dispatched every single aircraft carrier to various duties, including delivering fighter planes to the islands named Wake and Midway. That meant all the aircraft carriers survived.

And the Japanese made a serious strategic error. Despite all the planning behind the attack, Japanese bombs didn't hit any fuel

storage tanks, maintenance areas, or submarines. Most of America's destroyer ships survived, too.

These oversights turned out to be significant.

Until now, most Americans were reluctant to get involved in World War II. In Europe, the war had been raging for several years. But after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans wanted retribution.

On December 8, President Roosevelt and Congress declared war on Japan.

Roosevelt called December 7 "a day that will live in infamy."

During the next six months, Japanese military forces would sweep across Asia, invading or attacking Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Burma, the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, Java, Borneo, Sumatra, New Guinea, the Solomon and Gilbert Islands, Wake, Guam, and the Aleutian Islands of Alaska.

The Japanese seemed to be unstoppable.

WHO FOUGHT?



ON THE MORNING of December 7, 1941, Doris "Dorrie" Miller was collecting laundry on the USS *West Virginia* when an alarm sounded. Miller headed for his midship battle station at an anti-aircraft battery magazine.

But a Japanese torpedo had already wrecked the gun.

So Miller ran on deck.

A former boxing champion, and one of the few black Americans in the Navy, Miller was ordered to carry wounded sailors to safety. But later, another officer ordered him to the bridge—the ship’s command center—because the captain was badly wounded. After taking care of the captain, Miller manned a 50-caliber Browning anti-aircraft machine gun. Though he hadn’t been trained to operate the powerful gun, Miller made good use of it.

Japanese planes dropped two armor-piercing bombs through the battleship’s deck, and launched five 18-inch aircraft torpedoes into the *West Virginia’s* port side. The ship was already flooding. But Miller kept firing at the enemy until he ran out of ammunition. He downed as many as six Japanese planes before the *West Virginia’s* crew was ordered to abandon ship.

The *West Virginia* sank to the bottom of the harbor.

Of the 1,541 sailors onboard, 130 were killed and fifty-two were wounded.

For his actions, Miller received the Navy Cross. Admiral Chester Nimitz, the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, personally presented the medal to Miller.

Nimitz said:

“This marks the first time in this conflict that such high tribute has been made in the Pacific Fleet to a member of his race and I’m sure that the future will see others similarly honored for brave acts.”

Miller later served on several ships throughout World War II.

He was aboard an American escort carrier on November 24, 1942, when a Japanese submarine fired a single torpedo. The bomb detonated in the ship’s magazine, sinking the vessel.

Dorrie Miller was listed among the 646 American sailors who died on that ship.

BOOKS

The Attack on Pearl Harbor: An Interactive History Adventure by Allison Lassieur. Part of the popular “You Choose History” series, this book is based on actual people and events surrounding Pearl Harbor but readers can choose which path to take, and different outcomes result.

A Boy at War: A Novel of Pearl Harbor by Harry Mazer. A page-turner told from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old boy who witnesses the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Remember Pearl Harbor: Japanese and American Survivors Tell Their Stories by Thomas B. Allen. Published by National Geographic, this book offers a brief, but compelling, overview of what it was like to have witnessed, participated in, and lived through the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Includes first-person accounts from both American and Japanese survivors.

Pearl Harbor: The U.S. Enters World War II by Steve Dougherty. A good introduction on how the attack on Pearl Harbor impacted the rest of World War II.

Attack on Pearl Harbor: The True Story of the Day America Entered World War II by Shelley Tanaka and David Craig. Drawn from the memories of American and Japanese sailors, civilians, and airmen, this book combines first-person accounts with photographs, maps, and artwork to recreate the tragic day.

INTERNET

The US Navy maintains several websites dedicated to Pearl Harbor’s history. You can find first-person survivor stories, photos, and maps that show where the aircraft carriers were on December 7, 1941 on this site: www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1941/pearl-harbor.html

Be sure to read President Roosevelt’s speech, given the day after Pearl Harbor was attacked. People often quote his line about “a day that will live in infamy.”

www.loc.gov/resource/afc1986022.afc1986022_ms2201/?st=text

The website EyeWitness to History offers still more information about this attack: www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/pearl.htm

MOVIES

In Harm's Way. A 1965 epic war film that offers a realistic picture of the American Navy and its officers from the night of December 6, 1941, through the first year of the US involvement in World War II.

Tora, Tora, Tora! A 1970 film that dramatizes the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Has been praised for its accuracy and attention to detail.

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