

Memories of a Flying Tiger: Colonel "Tex" Hill

I met him on a flight from Indianapolis to San Antonio. Tall, lanky, and affable; he was what is termed "a long drink of water." He was a man who spoke in a frank, open manner and seemed to enjoy discourse with a lady who loved to fly. When asked about a recently published book on the famed 'Flying Tigers' by my traveling companion, an aeronautics instructor, his speech grew rather heated. "He wasn't even one of us!" came the scornful response. That "US" held a ring of respect as well as disdain.

He was Colonel David Lee (Tex) Hill, the last survivor of five pilots who, when the American Volunteer Group (AVG), better known as the 'Flying Tigers', disbanded in July 1942, Hill elected to stay with General Claire Lee Chennault in China. He became leader of the 75th Fighter Squadron in the newly formed China Air Task Force (CATF) and a legend in the CBI (China-Burma-India) Theater of Operations. Later, "Tex" Hill assumed command of the 23rd Fighter Group, taking over from Colonel Robert Scott of *God is My Co-Pilot* fame when he was recalled to the U.S. Through it all, the young aviator never lost his pleasant, easy-going manner.

As I studied his lined features, I could see traces of that eager, young flyer, all agog at the prospect of meeting an enemy in aerial combat. The eyes still burned with a passionate fire as I struggled to recall what I knew of him. Born in Korea in 1915 to missionary parents, his father, Reverend P. B. Hill was forced to return to the United States when his health began to fail. The family moved to Texas where Hill's father became Chaplain to the Texas Rangers in the 1920's. Growing up in a state still pervasive with aspects of frontier life, the boy was imbued with a love for adventure and an indomitable spirit. Hill's youthful fascination with airplanes was apparent, listening to him relate how his "beautiful sister was courted by young aviators from Kelly Field, Texas with their flight jackets and helmet flaps hanging down over their ears". I couldn't resist a smile at the plight of an older sister sitting with her beau on a summer evening while being plagued by the bane of older sisters; an ever present, inquisitive little brother with a thirst for information. The youngster's growing passion for aviation was such that Hill risked a paddling when he took his collection money for church and, along with a boyhood friend, paid a flyer to take them for one turn around a nearby airfield as he gleefully recounted the incident while admitting his good fortune at not getting caught.

The boy built a series of flying models and dreamed. Those dreams began to take shape after Hill graduated from Austin College in Sherman, Texas. He enlisted in the Navy as a Seaman 2nd Class and proceeded to Opalaca, Florida for flight training. He showed aptitude in aircraft and, after a year as a Flying Cadet in Pensacola, was commissioned an Ensign. His first assignment was piloting dive bombers off the USS *Saratoga*. Shortly afterwards, he was reassigned to a squadron of torpedo bombers on the USS *Ranger*. *Ranger*, the only U.S. carrier in the Atlantic, was ordered to undertake a series of so-called "Neutrality Patrols," scanning the ocean for German U-boats. Their orders were to radio any sightings back to the carrier who duly transmitted the information to the British Royal Navy. Armed conflict seemed imminent. Hill's answer to my inquiry on whether he realized the US was being inexorably drawn into war was a simple; "there were lots of rumors." His next assignment was a stint on the USS *Yorktown* where he participated in Fleet Problem #21; an exercise designed to simulate the defense of U.S. forces against an invasion by a foreign military power. When the news first filtered in that Pearl

Harbor had been attacked by the Japanese, Hill recalled commenting to the radio operator; “I hope Fleet Problem 21 worked.” After a moment, he added that, of course, it had failed.

His parents’ stories of the Korea had filled him with a desire to see the Orient for himself. Hill confided that he had even attempted to get onto the USS Houston which was then stationed in the Philippines. It struck me that this man had led a charmed existence. Of the four ships he either served on or whose service he tried to enter, only the Ranger survived the first year of war. Both the carriers Yorktown and Saratoga were sunk in naval battles with the Japanese while the cruiser, Houston, had been lost in the Sunda Straits off Java where she perished with most of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet in Japan’s movement south to capture the East Indies.

Hill's wish to see the Orient was finally granted when, along with his friend Ed Rector, he was recruited from the U.S. Navy to join an elite group of American volunteers to fight for the Chinese Air Force in their war against the Japanese. They were christened the American Volunteer Group (AVG); later to become known as the ‘Flying Tigers’. This special operations unit was created through a secret executive order under the Roosevelt administration in the hope of acquiring combat experience while aiding the Chinese. The volunteers were placed under a year’s contract to CAMCO (Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company) and paid by the Chinese government from Lend-Lease funds. Hill stated flatly that joining up, for his part, wasn’t patriotism but a desire for adventure and to fly in actual combat. Another consideration was money. Naval officers monthly pay was less than \$200 per month and to be offered three times that amount was nearly unheard of. A new Squadron leader made an incredible \$750 dollars per month. If their AVG salaries were, for the time, high so was the threat of death, which hung over them like a ghostly spectre.

There were drawbacks, as well. Living conditions on the field, particularly in Burma, were sparse. Malaria, dengue fever and dysentery ran rampant among the men. Few escaped the ravages and “Tex” Hill was no exception. He developed a bad case of malaria whose recurring bouts continued to plague him for five years. He, like many others in that theater, often suffered with disease so badly that it was sometimes difficult to crawl into his cockpit. And there were other obstacles. The work was demanding and the danger of losing a pilot or plane due to terrain, inexperience, sudden turbulent weather or lack of proper spare parts posed an ever present threat.

These men, dubbed mercenaries in the press, saw their exploits in Burma and China both lionized and sneered at. Hill commented that people seemed to forget even “mercenaries have feelings.” General James Howard, a fellow pilot with the AVG, once compared Tex to a frontier sheriff and his demeanor reflected it. He showed a loyalty to Chennault and the group that was still very much in evidence. Once, when the pilots threatened to resign after being ordered on low level flights across the breaking Chinese and British lines, Hill was one of the leaders who stepped in, stating he would fly the missions he was assigned to and lead the anyone who would follow him. That spirit of loyalty helped to break up the rebellious mood of the other pilots and reestablish order within the AVG.

Chennault, he related, was an easy man to work for. He was a superb tactician and teacher. Hill said the P-40 was a perfect aircraft for Burma and China because of Claire Chennault’s ability to

use it to its maximum potential. If the Brewster Buffalo had performed well in Russia and the Hawker Hurricane helped win the Battle of Britain, the Curtiss P-40 Tomahawk and Kittyhawk outclassed both in China. Yet, even a superior aircraft would not have been enough without Chennault's tactical expertise and insistence that his pilots never engage in dogfighting. He regretfully noted how many American pilots were lost during the early days of the war when attempting to take on the seasoned Japanese pilots flying I97 Nates and Oscars that exhibited a maneuverability he admired.

Hill gained the position of AVG 2nd Squadron (the 'Panda Bears') leader, having been jumped over the heads of two more senior men. His words held a haunted ring when he spoke of his Squadron Leader, "Scarsdale" Jack Newkirk, who wrote a letter before a mission to Chengmai stating he wanted Hill to have the squadron "in case". After confiding he'd had a premonition that he would not return from the next day's mission, Hill urged him not to go if he felt that strongly but Newkirk insisted he had to. The next day Jack Newkirk's Tomahawk was hit by groundfire and "Tex" Hill inherited the 'Panda Bears'.

He was already an ace with eleven and a quarter kills to his credit when he was inducted into the U.S. Army Air Force. Hill participated in the action over the Salween Gap which prevented the Japanese Red Dragon Division from entering the back door to China and forcing that government to surrender. He watched John Petach, a friend whom he encouraged to remain an extra two weeks while the transition from AVG to CATF (China Air Task Force) took place, be brought down by groundfire. Decorated by three governments, "Tex" Hill would saunter into Flight Operations for briefings and startle newly arrived American pilots with his casual demeanor while instructing them with a; "y'all follow me."

I asked why he was willing to stay in China with General Chennault when most of the AVG pilots elected to leave, having been met with a cold reception by the Army Air Force (AAF) Induction Board. Hill replied, candidly, that he would have preferred to return to the Navy. He loved ships and flying off them but added quietly: "Everyone couldn't leave." The Japanese had boasted they would decimate the remaining U.S. Forces in China before the U.S. Army Air Force personnel arrived to take over. It was a distinct possibility. Chennault put forward a personal plea and, along with Hill, a number of other AVG pilots and ground personnel volunteered to remain for two more weeks. Those two weeks made the difference. Loyalty echoed in his voice. The sort of loyalty a Claire Chennault prized and could depend upon. Hill made the well-known statement about the men of the AVG that "...splitting up is like something going out of your life."

As he calmly described incidents of a time when P-40's looped and rolled in the skies over China with tracers zipping past them, his tone throbbed with poignant emotion. Son of a Chaplain of the Texas Rangers, Hill never lost the memory of comradeship and a belief in the purpose that bound these men together. Listening to him speak, a quote from the World War II film, *God is my Co-Pilot* came into my mind:

"Oh, I am not up there above the sky,

but here, right here in your heart.

I am the strength you seek.

Believe....And they believed.”

Colonel David "Tex" Hill believed.

God is My Co-Pilot. Directed by Robert Florey, screenplay by Abem Finkel and Peter Milne, Warner Brothers, 1945.