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The Venues and Opening Shots

The triumvirate of countries that composed the disdained CBI had much in common. They were all dependent largely on an agrarian economy bolstered by the exploitation of raw materials useful to the industrialized nations. Two of them, India and Burma, were subjects of the British Empire. As World War II dawned, the indigenous people clamored for independence, and rebellion simmered. China, while independent, was racked by internal forces struggling for dominance. Furthermore, the Western countries, along with Japan, had obtained economic and political concessions beyond the control of whatever faction governed.

The military-industrial juggernaut of Imperial Japan coveted China as a great warehouse of substances vital to fuel the economy, as a great bazaar for its goods, and as a buffer against the Soviet Union, where memories of the 1904 war still rankled. The largest entity in CBI, China proper covered 4.27 million square miles (the continental United States at that time was 3 million) and was home to 400 million people (U.S. census figures in 1940 counted 133 million). So large a land naturally encompassed a broad spectrum of climates. The topography ranged from broad river valleys—natural boulevards for military forces—that dominated middle and southeastern China, to high mountains, which marked the colder west and northwest. Seaports such as Shanghai, Tsingtao, Canton, and Amoy served maritime interests. China bordered Burma to the south, India to the southwest, and Japan's fief of Manchuria to the northeast.

Southeast Asia beckoned to the Japanese with shipping hubs such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Burma's Rangoon, along with vast

stores of rubber, oil, ores, and farm products in the Dutch East Indies, the French possession of Indochina (today Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), and the British colonial outposts of Malaya and Burma, and independent Siam (now Thailand). For the Japanese, the problem in Southeast Asia would become that every expansion required more troops, pushing their flag ever farther. Conquest of Indochina and Siam meant a secured military presence in neighboring Burma. That step in turn would bring the Nipponese to the Indian border, inevitably leading to still another confrontation. The Western powers would meet the Japanese most squarely in Burma. U.S. and British ground units saw no service in China, and the combat that intruded into India overflowed from Burma.

Burma (now known as Myanmar), with about 263,000 square miles, was roughly the size of the state of Texas. The population was about 17 million, composed of 10 million Burmese, 4 million Karens, 2 million Shans, and more than 1 million residents of the hill country, who were from ethnic strains known as Nagas, Chins, and Kachins. A sizable minority of noncitizens—Indians and Chinese—worked or plied professions in the cities. While various branches of Christianity deployed missionaries, the prevailing religions were Buddhism and Islam. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Burma had been part of the British Empire, and as World War II neared, a strong independence movement gathered steam.

The best-known cities were Mandalay, which lay in a relatively dry triangle in the interior, and the port of Rangoon. The residents of a typical *ga* or village lived off crops. The five-month monsoon season and the intense tropical sun grew an astonishingly lush flora that in turn nourished a zoological cornucopia of animal and insect life. The latter, unfortunately, also bore a textbook of infectious diseases.

Four rivers flowed mostly north to south, following the elongated shape of the country. During the monsoon season these and smaller streams, known as *chaungs* (often arid ditches during dry periods), turned into swift-moving, even white-water torrents. The mighty Irrawaddy, 1,300 miles long and as many as 3 miles wide at some points, originated in northern Burma near Fort Hertz and traveled through the central portions of the land all the way to Rangoon, on the Gulf of Martaban. The Chindwin, a tributary of the Irrawaddy, approached the border with India. In 1941 both of these waterways were navigable by shallow-draft vessels, and a few bridges enabled vehicles and trains to cross them. The Sittang, between the two, was shorter, and its tidal currents made it difficult for boats and to build bridges. The Salween, the longest of the four, originated in China but was considered unnavigable; the only way to cross it was by ferry.

Burma's abundant stretches of mountains (*bum* in Burmese) mirrored the courses of the rivers and steep hills that also tended to stretch in north-to-south axes. These geological formations tended to completely wall off Burma from its neighbors India, China, and Siam. Siam and Indochina lay to the east, India to the west, and China was north.

A western, coastal sliver of Burma, the Arakan, along the Bay of Bengal, was almost totally shut off from interior Burma by mountains and the Irrawaddy. It was best reachable by boats from India or Rangoon. Not until the Japanese showed up did anyone realize that a determined military could push through overland. For that matter, there were few decent roads throughout the entire country.

The territory of India spread over a landmass slightly smaller than the continental United States at that time. As in Burma, India's 300 million people also splintered into a number of ethnic divisions and religions. The Hindus, with their caste system, created an additional divisive factor. The struggle for independence, led by Mohandas K. Gandhi, roiled the political and civil scene far more than in Burma. The India brought into World War II by its colonial master was something less than a willing partner. In fact, as in Burma, there were those who openly sided with the Japanese and even fought against the British forces. For the most part, the legions of soldiers drawn from various parts of India (Pakistan would not separate from India until independence in 1947 and Bangladesh was even farther up the historical timeline) remained loyal and fought for the crown not only in CBI but also in various other theaters.

In World War II the most important area of India was the province of Assam, which bordered northwestern Burma. An area marked by hills and mountains, it culminated in the towering Himalayas, the fabled "Hump" over which flew aircraft bound for China. The hot, moist climate of Assam favored tea plantations and fauna ranging from elephants and tigers to wee moles, as well as pestiferous insects loaded with tropical illnesses.

The Generalissimo and the First Americans

In CBI, World War II began in China, a country also beset by internecine strife. The contest for control of China pitted the Nationalist forces under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, a hardened survivor of years of brutal internal bloodshed, and the equally determined and blowtorch-tested Communists. Hanging around like jackals were a galaxy of freebooting Chinese generals who acted like warlords hoping to preserve their private fiefs.

Western sympathy for China and antipathy toward Japan, an ally of the United States and Britain during World War I, dated back to September 1931, when the Japanese staged an incident near Mukden, Manchuria, and subsequently assumed control over Manchuria. Fewer than six months later, a Japanese expeditionary force sought to capture Shanghai, but the resistance of Chinese troops and the displeasure of world opinion forced the Nipponese to abandon the project.

During the following years, while Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuo-mintang Party solidified their leadership and unified China in spite of opposition from the country's Communists, the Japanese nibbled away at their nearby neighbor. In 1937, with the militarist and expansionist elements of Japan in the ascendancy, that nation's armed forces began a full-scale but undeclared war against China. In response, the factions within China declared an internal truce and vowed to present a united front against the aggressor.

Chiang Kai-shek's soldiers—many, ironically, trained by Japan's World War II partners Germany and Italy—mounted some resistance, but they were overmatched. They committed basic errors in strategy and tactics, failed to appreciate the need for intelligence, had little understanding of how to deploy supporting weapons, and lacked enough vehicles or firepower. The contribution of their fledgling air force was negligible.

The invaders captured major cities, including the capital of Nanking, from where news of massacres and terrible atrocities inflamed world antagonism toward the conquerors. Savage behavior aside, Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands, who possessed colonies in the region, and the United States—like them, having vast economic interests in the Far East—naturally regarded the extension of Japan's reach with alarm.

There had long been a highly visible American presence in China. Aside from the commercial interests, a substantial number of U.S. citizens inhabited the International Settlement in Shanghai, and China was a regular port of call for the U.S. Navy. As the government of Chiang Kai-shek skirmished with the Communist movement led by Mao Tse-tung, bickered with warlords, and faced Japanese aggressiveness, the figure of the U.S. military attaché at the embassy grew in importance and political stature.

In 1934, Colonel Joseph Stilwell received an appointment to that post from President Franklin D. Roosevelt's secretary of state, Cordell Hull. As a precocious adolescent, Stilwell had graduated from Yonkers High School, in New York's Westchester County, at sixteen, but a year later, as a postgraduate student, he engineered a series of pranks—smearing Limburger cheese over desks, roughing up the prin-



Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell, an old China hand, lived up to his nickname of “Vinegar Joe” with his caustic comments on the Chinese leadership, his British allies, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt. (U.S. National Archives)

cial, and stealing ice cream tubs and cakes. Nevertheless, his father, a lawyer and physician, secured him an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, Class of 1904.

A good student, Stilwell, in his diary, railed against the hazing and regimentation of plebe (freshman) life, collecting demerits because of his disdain for regulations. Stilwell never donned the persona of a spit-and-polish disciplinarian. However, he demonstrated an aptitude for languages; performed creditably in other classes; and enthusiastically engaged in football, track, and basketball, a sport he allegedly introduced to the academy.

When he graduated in 1904, one year after Douglas MacArthur, Stilwell elected the infantry and traveled to the Philippines to help suppress the last vestiges of the “insurrection.” In line with the USMA’s policy of using graduates as academic instructors, Stilwell then taught English, French, and Spanish, plus tactics. He spent his leaves traveling in Europe and South America. In 1911, detailed to the 12th Infantry Regiment, he visited China for the first time.

Fate brought him to Shanghai, where he embarked on a seventeen-day odyssey as an eyewitness to the turmoil caused by the overthrow of

the Manchu Dynasty. Soldiers, bandits, villagers, and refugees driven from their homes by the conflict fought using everything from rifles and muskets to hoes, pitchforks, and staves. Gangs sacked and plundered towns in scattered orgies of terror and killing. Stilwell traveled about, soaking up a firsthand view of incredibly crowded slums with narrow streets or alleys; coolie labor; sewage-stuffed canals; opium smokers and bejeweled but slatternly prostitutes; shrines and pagodas; pirate traffic on the inland waters; and, more ominously, rivers strewn with corpses. He also became infected with his lifelong aversion to the British. While he admired their drill sergeants, saying, “their commands, appearance, and results beat our average officer 500 percent,” he characterized the English officers as “a mess. . . . Untidy, grouchy, sloppy, fooling around with canes, a bad example for the men.” Their traditional swagger stick became a symbol to him of all that was wrong with the British military.

The United States, like other industrialized nations, had imposed its commercial desires upon China in the forms of business concessions, bank loans, extraterritorial rights in the courts, and settlements immune to local control. American diplomats, however, had gained the country some goodwill by using the compensation money owed for the ill-fated Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1900 to educate Chinese students in the States.

None of that meant anything to Stilwell when the United States entered World War I. In 1917 he had been assigned to an overseas infantry division. His knowledge of French soon elevated him to the staff of General John J. Pershing, commander of the U.S. Expeditionary Force, as an intelligence officer. A brief tour with the British 58th Division, during which he prowled trenches, dugouts, and observation posts, only confirmed his Anglophobia. “These English are beyond me—most of them so very pleasant and some of them so damn snotty . . . too goddamned indifferent and high and mighty to bother about an American officer.” (This Stilwell observation, along with many others from his early career, comes from Barbara Tuchman’s *Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911–1945*.)

While he came under artillery fire and observed at close hand death and destruction, he never commanded any troops in the field. After the Armistice and a brief tour as an occupation soldier, Stilwell returned to the United States, soured by the spectacle of politicians and generals bickering over the peace terms. He arranged for an assignment to China as an adjunct to the military attaché.

With his wife, he took up residence in Peiping (later named Peking and still later Beijing), where he immersed himself in a study of the host nation’s military forces, including the warlords. As an agent of

the military attaché, he traveled widely in the Far East, touring Manchuria, Siberia, Korea, and even Japan. Certainly aware of the grim life of the poor of the cities and the peasants of the countryside, Stilwell became enamored of the finer aspects of Chinese culture and the people who manifested them.

He added the Japanese to another of his dislikes. In Siberia, invaded by the Nipponese after the Bolshevik Revolution, he found the Japanese dilatory in carrying out the mandate for them to evacuate. Stilwell snarled, "The arrogant little bastards were . . . all over town this A.M. in American cars, posting M.P.s and sticking out their guts. . . . They need a kick in the slats in the worst way. They have systematically bothered and annoyed Americans about passports . . . and seem to go out of their way to make people despise and hate them." While visiting Japan he angrily observed the residents treating foreigners as inferiors. He compared them with the Teutons, "pale imitations of the Germans without the latter's brains and ability. Patriotic, well organized, brave, artistic, swellheaded [sic], and stupid." Underestimation of Japanese intelligence and ability would cost Stilwell in the future, but in this regard he was hardly alone.

Stilwell, in 1923, brought his growing family home and attended first the infantry course at Fort Benning and then, in 1925 and 1926, attended the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Among his classmates was a 1915 West Pointer, Dwight D. Eisenhower. By 1926, Stilwell, now a major, had returned to China as a battalion commander in the 15th Infantry Regiment, stationed in Tientsin. To his dismay, the regiment hewed to customs that were anathema to Stilwell. The rules prescribed that officers when in uniform and not under arms would carry the abhorred swagger stick or a riding crop.

During this tour by Stilwell, the conflict for power between Chiang Kai-shek and other claimants to leadership, including the Communists, raged throughout China, with outsiders caught in between. Nationalist troops attacked foreigners, beating, shooting, killing some, looting the homes and businesses of others. Dispatched on a mission to scout the strength of rival elements, Stilwell endured the indignities of capture by a rabble in arms, threats to murder him, and a daring escape from his tormentors. Personnel changes shifted Stilwell to the post of acting chief of staff for the commanding general of U.S. forces in China. His boss, General Joseph Castner, insisted on forced marches that entailed covering 35 miles in 10 hours. Stilwell, a firm believer in exercise—he was an enthusiastic handball and tennis player—never faltered, and later, as a much older man, his endurance would stand him in good stead.

As an analyst of the Chinese struggles, Stilwell, in 1928, described Chiang as a man who might unify the county, and if he did, it would be through “resources he can find within himself.” He tempered his praise for the Nationalist leader’s progress as victories over unresistant troops. When Stilwell sailed home in 1929, he had, unlike many of his contemporaries, developed a fine sense of the difference between Chinese attitudes and those of the West.

By happy circumstance for his future, when he had first reported to Tientsin, Major Stilwell’s immediate superior with the 15th was the executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel George C. Marshall. Although the association lasted less than a year, they hit it off sufficiently for Marshall to inscribe his junior in his memory book as a worthy officer. On Stilwell’s return to the States he checked in at the Fort Benning Infantry School, now commanded by Marshall. When Marshall ascended to the post of army chief of staff on September 1, 1939, the opening day of World War II, Stilwell had a friend in the highest place. Assigned to instruct in tactics at the Infantry School, Stilwell lectured on the enormous value set on “face.” Ironically, he would frequently disregard his own strictures about preserving the dignity of the individual during his CBI campaigns with Chiang and his relationships with other powerful figures.

Promoted to full colonel, Stilwell renewed his Chinese adventures, coming to Peiping in 1935 as the military attaché. With his rank and position he enjoyed the company of the best-educated and most artful of Chinese culture while avoiding the sterile social circles. He did not shirk his duty to gather intelligence for the War Department in Washington. As in his past tours, he traveled widely. From what he observed of the Chinese army, in the face of the increasing belligerence of Japan, Stilwell deprecated Chiang’s military preparations. “No evidence of planned defense against further Japanese encroachment. No troop increase or even thought of it. No drilling or maneuvering. He [Chiang] can have no intention of doing a thing or else he is utterly ignorant of what it means to get ready for a fight with a first-class power.”

Enter Claire Chennault

Although the political situation prevented overt support, in 1936, sub-rosa efforts to bolster China’s military strength began. At the Pan-American Air Show in Miami, General Mow Pang-tsu of the Chinese air force gaped at a trio of U.S. Army Air Corps pilots who performed

a dazzling series of stunts. On a yacht owned by William Pawley, an entrepreneur selling American aircraft to China, Mow met with the three fliers, Sergeants John H. "Luke" Williamson and Billy McDonald, and Captain Claire Chennault. Mow tendered an offer for them to come to his country to teach their skills. The two noncoms, unable to obtain commissions because they had never attended college and therefore at a dead end in their careers, accepted. Chennault hesitated. With a wife and eight children, he worried about giving up the security of the air corps. But after Williamson and McDonald departed, Chennault's health deteriorated to the point where a flight surgeon restricted his cockpit duties. His future military prospects bleak, Chennault grabbed a second opportunity in China. A letter from the Chinese government asked if Chennault would conduct a three-month survey of their air force at a salary of \$1,000 a month plus expenses, a car, driver, interpreter, and the right to fly any plane on hand.

Chennault was destined to work in tandem with Stilwell, but his background was almost totally different. Born in 1890, Chennault, a Louisiana native, attended LSU and then the state's teachers' college, where he flashed an independent spirit, a resistance to conformity, and a willingness to rely on his fists when necessary to get across his point.

Married at twenty-one, he lurched from job to job until the United States declared war on Germany in 1917. Chennault enlisted and after his three months at Officers' Candidate School pinned on a second lieutenant's gold bars. At the newly created Kelly Field in Texas, Chennault persuaded instructors there to teach him, unofficially, how to fly. He piled up 80 hours in the air before the war ended and then wangled entry to the aviation cadet program. He had barely graduated before the army began to trim its ranks, and in 1920 he became a farmer.

Chennault wrote to his father, "I have tasted of the air and I cannot get it out of my craw." Fortunately for him, within a few months the army, having established the air corps as a separate branch, recruited pilots with commissions as regulars rather than as reserves. He embarked on a course in fighter tactics taught by veterans of France. He quickly displayed an aptitude for the craft, although he soon began to devise his own maneuvers.

However, the air corps, to the dismay of Chennault, had begun to turn away from fighter aircraft in favor of bombers. Theorists such as the American general Billy Mitchell and his Italian counterpart Giulio Douhet vigorously promulgated the virtues of heavy bombers that would fly so high and so fast that no one could intercept them as they carried out raids that would devastate any enemy. While Mitchell



Claire Chennault, scorned by the U.S. Army Air Corps, signed on with the Chinese to direct that nation's air force and created the American Volunteer Group or Flying Tigers. (Photograph from U.S. National Archives)

retired in disgrace for his intemperate propagandizing of his viewpoint, the approach won the approval of both the Americans and the British.

Chennault and some colleagues doggedly insisted that fighters still had a role, that they could battle the bigger aircraft as well as one another. He innovated and refined tactics, rejected the traditional one-on-one dogfight, and abandoned the standard V formation in favor of two- or four-ship formations in which the pilots worked together to destroy the enemy.

Outspoken and combative, Chennault convinced few superiors with his arguments and irritated enough of them to damage his reputation. He criticized 1932 maneuvers directed by Lieutenant Colonel Henry "Hap" Arnold, already an ascendant star in the air corps. Chennault would later claim that an outburst criticizing another top officer cost him an opportunity to attend the Command and General Staff School, a prerequisite for advancement to the upper echelons.

A 1933 paper he authored, "The Role of Defensive Pursuit," converted none of his adversaries and languished in the dustbins of theory.

A prophet without honor in his home country, the retired officer with the permanent rank of captain sailed for China in 1937. He brought his hard-drinking, highly competitive, blunt-spoken persona to a country where face and delicate diplomacy often governed decisions. While Chennault knew how to exploit his dashing image of the aviator—silk scarf; crushed air corps cap; angular, leathery face; and muscular physique—it hardly seemed that the man who arrived in Shanghai at the end of May fitted the job.

The rough-hewn American met the head of the Chinese air force, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, at the French Concession in Nanking rather than the U.S. turf in the International Settlement there to avoid Japanese spies or a squabble over American neutrality. At birth named Mei Ling and one of three daughters from the powerful Soong family, one sister had been the wife of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the political and revolutionary leader who founded the Republic of China in 1912. Mei Ling's brother T. V. Soong was a powerhouse figure in banking and geopolitical circles. When the slightly built forty-one-year-old madame in a light print dress entered the room, Chennault did not realize who she was until his escort, another former air corps pilot and businessman, Roy Holbrook, said, "Madame Chiang, may I present Colonel Chennault."

Chennault recalled, "It was the Generalissimo's wife, looking twenty years younger than I had expected and speaking English in a rich Southern drawl [as did he]. This was an encounter from which I never recovered. To this day I remain completely captivated." He wrote in his diary, "Granted interview by Her Excellency, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, who will hereafter be 'The Princess' to me."

His infatuation with her lay not just with her physical allure. At this interview she listened intently to his ideas on the role of an air force, according him a respect for his theories that the authorities in the United States never granted. She asked him to survey the existing Chinese air force's personnel and facilities and deliver a report in three months. Chennault discovered the Chinese pilots barely able to do more than get the country's hodgepodge of obsolete military aircraft off the ground and then back to earth.

In the midst of Chennault's research came a confrontation at the Marco Polo Bridge, about ten miles from Peiping. Having already advanced into China on the pretext of protecting the puppet state of Manchukuo, formerly Manchuria, Japanese troops in 1937 were deployed at the western end of the span. The Japanese claimed a missing soldier was inside a small Chinese village and demanded the right to cross the border and find him. When the local Kuomintang garrison commander rejected the request, Japanese artillery shelled

the village. At dawn on July 8, infantry and tanks marched over the Marco Polo Bridge to attack the Chinese forces, signaling the start of the war that would eventually envelop CBI.

Chennault immediately offered to serve in whatever capacity Chiang Kai-shek preferred. Chennault could not resist an opportunity to put into practice his concepts for aerial warfare. In the company of General Mow, the Chinese air force's uniformed commander, Chennault met with the generalissimo and his wife. When Chiang asked Mow how many planes were combat-ready, he said ninety-one, although the official records listed some five hundred. "Chiang turned turkey red," wrote Chennault in his memoirs, "and I thought he was going to explode. He strode up and down the terrace, loosing long strings of sibilant Chinese that seemed to hiss, coil, and strike like a snake. Madame stopped translating. Color drained from Mow's face as he stood stiffly at attention, his eyes fixed straight ahead." Madame Chiang whispered to Chennault that her husband was talking about executing Mow. However, Chennault confirmed Mow's figures, and at the urging of madame began to expound on his findings, the wretched state of the air force, and his prescriptions to correct the situation. The blunt facts presented to Chiang converted him into a believer. He spared Mow, and Chennault assumed the task of molding an air force that could battle the Japanese.

Just about a month after the incident at the Marco Polo Bridge, shells from Japanese warships in the Whangpoo River began to crash down on Shanghai, killing and maiming hundreds if not thousands of civilians. The barrages were in support of Japanese troops advancing on the city. At the request of Madame Chiang, Chennault organized a bombing strike against the naval vessels in the Whangpoo.

The raids were an unmitigated disaster. The poorly schooled flight crews did not adjust their drops to a change from their training altitudes and airspeeds. The explosions missed the targets and killed perhaps thirty-five hundred civilians. Chennault, in a Hawk 75 monoplane, had flown from Nanking to observe the action. Amid the smoke from fires and the rain squalls he zoomed low to check out a large naval vessel. As he came over the ship he saw a Union Jack painted on the deck and the winking lights of gunfire from its turrets. He pulled away quickly, but not before the gunners punched some holes in his wing and fuselage.

While Chennault wrestled with building an air force, Stilwell, in Peiping, now occupied by the Japanese, met with the conquerors, and in his typically irascible fashion did little to conceal his animosity toward the "arrogant little bastards." He railed at the leaders of China as "oily politicians . . . treacherous quitters, selfish, conscienceless,

unprincipled crooks.” Asked by the War Department about the ability to resist, he answered, “Not until they lose their inherent distaste for offensive combat.” He dismissed the commanders of the Chinese soldiers. “The educated Chinese is astounded to be told that the Chinese officer is no good,” and gloomily estimated it would require two generations to create effective military leadership. On the other hand, he believed that a strong army could be established because of the basic potential of soldiers if properly trained under good leadership.

Stilwell’s dire predictions proved accurate. The Japanese quickly attacked Nanking. There Claire Chennault underwent his baptism in the terrors of an air raid, forced to sprint for the shelter of a dugout. As Japanese soldiers secured the ground around the Whangpoo, the Imperial Navy moved in aircraft carriers, from which planes could strike at vital areas. Aware of the Chinese limitations in both pilots and aircraft, Chennault, in one of his first acts, developed an early-warning system. He created a network of spotters who would transmit by telephone their observations of approaching aircraft. Armed with that information, the Chinese interceptors could take off and climb to an altitude that would allow them to dive on the marauders. Aided by Billy McDonald and Luke Williamson, Chennault instituted a crash course in tactics for his fighter pilots, teaching them how to work as a team and even how to exploit the beams of anti-aircraft searchlights that would blind a Japanese pilot if he looked down into them. When the first bombers arrived after dark over Nanking, the Chinese pilots shot down seven of thirteen, and the enemy abandoned night missions against that city.

Initially, the Chinese scored well. The Japanese sent their bombers off without fighter escort. In three raids on Nanking, the Japanese lost fifty-four planes and crews, nearly half of the attacking force. As Chennault’s pupils demonstrated the fallacy of the enemy strategy, the Japanese started to accompany their raiders with the high-performance predecessors of the renowned Zero, launched from the flattops at Shanghai. The prospects for resisting against the imperial air arm declined rapidly.

Historians who have researched the period, and Chennault biographers, have speculated on how much combat flying he did. While Madame Chiang told him not to engage in combat, he wrote in a 1951 letter to the widow of armaments expert Rolfe Watson, “In addition to training Chinese gunners and armament mechanics, he [Watson] kept the guns of my personal plane in the finest condition. My guns never failed to fire when I needed them.” Chennault’s wife, Anna, whom he married after World War II, insisted that he shot down at least forty Japanese planes. Biographer Jack Samson argued,

“Given Chennault’s nature—volatile, quick-tempered, and fearless—it is difficult to believe he didn’t fire back when fired upon. And with his experience as an acrobatic stunt pilot in air corps fighters planes, it is equally hard to believe he did not engage in combat against the Japanese fighters.”

Jimmy Thach, a navy pilot who devoured the materials on Japanese aircraft that Chennault had furnished the War Department and who developed effective tactics for his carrier-based colleagues, believed that only one who had actually engaged the Japanese in combat could have been so authoritative. On the other hand, American mechanic Sebbie Smith told author Duane Schultz in *The Maverick War*, “I don’t think he ever shot down any planes.” Smith noted that only once did he find a bullet hole in Chennault’s plane, most unlikely for anyone who tangled with as many as forty enemy aircraft. Chennault never claimed such feats.

The Chinese government retreated to Hankow, 400 miles up the Yangtze River from Nanking, and Stilwell reached Hankow in December 1937. While he was in residence, Japanese bombers, in spite of conspicuous American flags on the decks, strafed, bombed, and sank the gunboat USS *Panay*. The Japanese subsequently apologized, but the incident further worsened relations between Tokyo and Washington. Photographs and newspaper stories of atrocities committed by the Japanese—the rape of Nanking, with hapless civilians used for bayonet practice, the historic picture of a sobbing Chinese baby sitting in the ruins of the Shanghai railroad station, tales of the misery visited upon city dwellers by the bombers—inflamed American opinion. Stilwell joined in a successful effort to persuade President Roosevelt to authorize a loan to China to develop military defense.

With Chinese-born pilots in very short supply, Chennault began attempts to recruit foreign pilots for military purposes. Actually, one source was already on hand. Early in 1937, the Soviet Union agreed to supply Chiang planes and instructors in return for raw materials. The Soviets stationed complete squadrons in China with their own ground crews and command staff as well as accomplished pilots. The latter, theoretically on hand only to teach, flew combat missions between 1937 and 1939.

The Soviet airmen collaborated with Chinese pilots, most notably in an engagement near Hankow. Chennault had arranged for the two groups to take off one afternoon, seemingly on their way to another area. Enemy spies noticed the departure, but the fighters sneaked back to Hankow from a different direction. On the following morning, Japanese bombers and fighters approached the city, expecting no

opposition. But forty of the Soviet fighters and another twenty of the Chinese lurked in the skies. The latter struck first, forcing the fighters to engage them and to burn up fuel and ammunition. When the bombers headed for home with a weakened escort, the Red interceptors pounced on them, wiping out a dozen bombers. Chennault's strategy also destroyed all twenty-four of the Japanese fighters. Only two Soviet planes were lost, but eleven homegrown airmen were knocked down, hard losses for an already depleted outfit.

Discouraged and with nowhere to turn, Chennault considered returning home. But when he learned that the League of Nations had condemned the Japanese for the invasion and that the United States and Great Britain were talking of an embargo on vital goods to Japan, he decided to remain in China. Still desperate to build an air force, Chennault enlisted a motley group of individuals—French, German, Dutch, and even American—in the 14th Volunteer Bombardment Squadron or 14th International Volunteer Squadron, stationed in Hankow. Paid \$1,000 a month in Chinese dollars, the salaries amounted to less than a third of that in American money. Most of the newcomers proved more eager than able, and they compounded their deficiencies with a predilection for bordellos and bars. Their formation flying was described by one observer as “ragged as hell” and “plain dangerous to fly with most of [them].”

Through the machinations of William Pawley, the 14th received a batch of thirty single-engine Vultee bombers. Carrying a three-man crew and a heavy bomb load, the slow-moving planes had a range of 2,000 miles. A day came in March 1938 when Chennault scheduled the squadron for an early-morning mission. To steal added sleep time or a few hours for carousing, the 14th gassed and armed the aircraft a day before the raid. At sunset, a flight of Japanese bombers arrived and unloaded on the neatly lined up Vultees. The entire complement went up in fire and smoke. Most likely one or more of the volunteers blabbed about the proposed operation in a whorehouse or saloon. A spy relayed the news to the enemy, who launched the sundown attack. “What was left of the Chinese bombing force,” said Chennault, “vanished in five seconds of flame and dust. With it went the jobs of the International Squadron pilots.”

Japanese forces continued to advance ever deeper into China. Late in 1938 they seized Canton and then Hankow. The government moved to Chungking, deep enough into the heart of China to avoid a thrust by land. The air force, more a paper instrument than a functioning military branch, opened for business in the ancient city of Kunming in southwestern China, fairly close to Indochina and Burma. Pawley,

under the rubric of the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company, an agent for Curtiss-Wright in China, set up facilities to assemble and repair planes at Loiwing, near the border with Burma.

At Kunming, Chennault started to build a flying school. Although he had almost no pilots and few airplanes, he also began construction of a number of all-weather airfields. The one plentiful item in China was hand labor: men, women, and children toted the standard wicker baskets loaded with broken stones to line the airstrips, creating long, hard runways. He expanded the network to warn of air raids. Agents radioed, telephoned, and telegraphed the movements of Japanese planes almost from the moment they took off. However, Chennault remained pitifully short of combat-worthy aircraft. Not only did his flight school graduates lack the ability to fight the well-seasoned enemy, but also the plane shortage denied opportunities to acquire the requisite skills.

While Chennault coped with the deficiencies in China, Stilwell's penchant for doing things his way generated enmity within the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department. He insisted on drafting his own itineraries for his inspections, visiting a Soviet air base, returning to Peiping under the Japanese, and trekking to the front as the invaders approached Hankow. In that city he had met with Madame Chiang, and as with Chennault, she charmed him, eliciting compliments "highly intelligent and sincere." He spent five days at a battalion command post, observing up close the fighting, where he concluded, "The Chinese soldier is excellent material, wasted and betrayed by stupid leadership."

During a trip by Stilwell to Kunming, the two Americans who would be most responsible for their country's efforts in the CBI campaign first met. On the cusp of 1939, Chennault and Stilwell had dinner and a long discussion about the situation. Mutual respect was expressed, but that would dissolve after each assumed genuine command responsibilities. Five months later, discouraged with his professional prospects and the future for China, Stilwell headed home, expecting to put in his retirement papers.