

## 23<sup>rd</sup> FIGHTER GROUP



### MISSION

#### LINEAGE

23<sup>rd</sup> Pursuit Group (Interceptor) established, 17 Dec 1941  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group, 15 May 1942  
Activated, 4 Jul 1942  
Inactivated, 5 Jan 1946  
Activated, 10 Oct 1946  
Inactivated, 24 Sep 1949  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Interceptor Group, 19 Dec 1950  
Activated, 12 Jan 1951  
Inactivated, 6 Feb 1952  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group (Air Defense), 20 Jun 1955  
Activated, 18 Aug 1955  
Inactivated, 1 Jul 1959  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Tactical Fighter Group, 31 Jul 1985  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Operations Group and activated, 1 Jun 1992  
Inactivated, 1 Apr 1997  
Redesignated 23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group, 26 Sep 2006  
Activated, 1 Oct 2006

#### STATIONS

Kunming, China, 4 Jul 1942  
Kweilin, China, Sep 1943  
Liuchow, China, 8 Sep 1944

Luilang, China, 14 Sep 1944  
Liuchow, China, Aug 1945  
Hanchow, China, 10 Oct-12 Dec 1945  
Ft Lewis, WA, 3-5 Jan 1946  
Northwest Field (later, Northwest Guam AFB), Guam, 10 Oct 1946-3 Apr 1949  
Howard AFB, Canal Zone, 25 Apr-24 Sep 1949  
Presque Isle AFB, ME, 12 Jan 1951-6 Feb 1952  
Presque Isle AFB, ME, 18 Aug 1955-1 Jul 1959  
Pope AFB, NC, 1 Jun 1992-1 Apr 1997  
Pope AFB, NC, 1 Oct 2006

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

Tenth Air Force, China Air Task Force, 4 Jul 1942  
Fourteenth Air Force, 10 Mar 1943-5 Jan 1946  
20<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, 10 Oct 1946  
23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Wing, 16 Aug 1948-24 Sep 1949  
23<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Interceptor Wing, 12 Jan 1951-6 Feb 1952  
4711<sup>th</sup> Air Defense Wing, 18 Aug 1955  
32<sup>nd</sup> Air Division (Defense), 1 Mar 1956  
Bangor Air Defense Sector, 1 Aug 1958-1 Jul 1959  
23<sup>rd</sup> Wing, 1 Jun 1992-1 Apr 1997  
23<sup>rd</sup> Wing, 1 Oct 2006

### **WEAPON SYSTEMS**

P-40, 1942-1944  
P-51, 1943-1945  
F-47, 1946-1949  
F-80, 1949  
F-86, 1951-1952  
F-89, 1955-1959  
A-10, 1992-1997  
C-130, 1992-1997  
F-16, 1992-1996

### **COMMANDERS**

Col Robert L. Scott Jr., 4 Jul 1942  
LTC Bruce K. Holloway, 9 Jan 1943  
LTC Norval C. Bonawitz, 16 Sep 1943  
Col David L. Hill, 4 Nov 1943  
LTC Philip C. Loofbourrow, 15 Oct 1944  
Col Edward F. Rector, 12 Dec 1944-Dec 1945  
Col Lester S. Harris, 10 Oct 1946  
Maj Leonard S. Dysinger, 1 Nov 1947  
LTC Hadley V. Saehlenou, Nov 1947-unkn

Col Louis R. Hughes Jr., 1 Sep 1948-unkn  
Unkn, Jan-Jul 1951  
Col Norval K. Heath, Jul 1951-6 Feb 1952  
Col Frank Q. O'Connor, 1955  
LTC Frank J. Keller, Dec 1955  
Unkn, 1956-1959  
Col Charles M. Thrash, 1 Jun 1992  
Col Frederick D. Van Valkenburg, 30 Jun 1994  
Col Bobby J. Wilkes, 12 Jul 1996-31 Mar 1997  
Col Henry J. Santicola, 1 Oct 2006  
Col Michael S. O'Dowd, 27 Jul 2007

## **HONORS**

### **Service Streamers**

None

### **Campaign Streamers**

World War II  
India-Burma  
China Defensive  
China Offensive  
Western Pacific

### **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

None

### **Decorations**

Distinguished Unit Citation  
Hunan Province, China, 17-25 Jun 1944

Air Force Outstanding Unit Award  
31 May 1995-31 Mar 1997

### **EMBLEM**

Azure, over a bolt of lightning, in pale, or, a Flying Tiger proper, tongue red, winged argent; all outlines black; a diminutive border silver-grey. (Approved 24 Jan 1957)

### **MOTTO**

### **NICKNAME**

### **OPERATIONS**

The 23 Fighter Group initially owed its planes, several of its pilots, and its nickname to Claire Chennault's American Volunteer Group, (AVG) "The Flying Tigers."

The AVG was largely the creation of Claire L. Chennault, a retired U.S. Army Air Corps officer who had worked in China since August 1937, first as military aviation advisor to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in the early months of the Sino-Japanese War, then as director of a Chinese Air Force flight school centered in Kunming. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union supplied fighter and bomber squadrons to China, but these units were mostly withdrawn by the summer of 1940. Chiang then asked for American combat aircraft and pilots, sending Chennault to Washington as advisor to China's ambassador and Chiang's brother-in-law, T. V. Soong.

Since the U.S. was not at war, the "Special Air Unit" could not be organized overtly, but the request was approved by President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself. The resulting clandestine operation was organized in large part by Lauchlin Currie and Thomas G. Corcoran. Financing was handled by China Defense Supplies – primarily Tommy Corcoran's creation – with money loaned by the U.S. government. Purchases were then made by the Chinese under the "Cash and Carry" provision of the Neutrality Act of 1939.

Chennault spent the winter of 1940–1941 in Washington, supervising the purchase of 100 Curtiss P-40 fighters diverted from a Royal Air Force order and the recruiting of 100 pilots and some 200 ground crew and administrative personnel that would constitute the 1st AVG. He also laid the groundwork for a follow-on bomber group and a second fighter group, though these would be aborted after the Pearl Harbor attack.

Of the pilots, 60 came from the Navy and Marine Corps and 40 from the Army Air Corps. One army pilot was refused a passport because he had earlier flown as a mercenary in Spain, so only 99 would actually sail for Asia. Ten more army flight instructors were hired as check pilots for Chinese cadets, and several of these would ultimately join the AVG's combat squadrons. The volunteers were discharged from the armed services, to be employed for "training and instruction" by a private military contractor, the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company, which paid them \$600 a month for pilot officer, \$675 a month for flight leader, \$750 for squadron leader, and about \$250 for a skilled ground crewman, far more than they had been earning. The pilots were also orally promised a bounty of \$500 for each enemy aircraft shot down.

During the summer and fall 1941, some 300 men carrying civilian passports boarded ships destined for Burma. They were initially based at a British airfield in Toungoo for training while their aircraft were assembled and test flown. Chennault set up a schoolhouse that was made necessary because many pilots had lied about their flying experience, claiming pursuit experience when they had flown only bombers and sometimes much less powerful airplanes.

The 100 P-40 aircraft were crated and sent to Burma on third country freighters during spring 1941. At Rangoon, they were unloaded, assembled and test flown by personnel of Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company (CAMCO) before being delivered to the AVG training unit at Toungoo. One crate was dropped into the water and a wing assembly was ruined by salt water immersion, so CAMCO was able to deliver only 99 Tomahawks before war broke out. The 100th

fuselage was trucked to a CAMCO plant in Loiwing, China, and later made whole with parts from damaged aircraft. Shortages in equipment with spare parts almost impossible to obtain in Burma along with the slow introduction of replacement fighter aircraft were continual impediments although the AVG did receive 50 replacement P-40E fighters from USAAF stocks toward the end of its combat tour.

AVG fighter aircraft were painted with a large shark face on the front of the aircraft. This was done after pilots saw a photograph of No. 112 Squadron RAF in North Africa sporting a fierce shark mouth, which in turn had adopted the shark motif from German pilots flying Messerschmitt Bf-110 fighters in Crete.

The port of Rangoon in Burma and the Burma Road leading from there to China were of crucial importance for the Republic of China, as the eastern regions of China were under Japanese occupation so virtually all of the foreign matériel destined for the armed forces of the Republic arrived via that port. By November 1941, when the pilots were trained and most of the P-40s had arrived in Asia, the Flying Tigers were divided into three squadrons: 1st Squadron ("Adam & Eves"); 2nd Squadron ("Panda Bears") and 3rd Squadron ("Hell's Angels"). They were assigned to opposite ends of the Burma Road to protect this vital line of communications. Two squadrons were based at Kunming in China and a third at Mingaladon Airport near Rangoon. When the United States officially entered the war, the AVG had 82 pilots and 79 aircraft, although not all were combat-ready.

The AVG had its first combat on 20 December 1941, when aircraft of the 1st and 2nd squadrons intercepted 10 unescorted Kawasaki Ki-48 "Lily" bombers of the 21st Hikotai raiding Kunming. Three of the Japanese bombers were shot down near Kunming and a fourth was damaged so severely that it crashed before returning to its airfield at Hanoi. No P-40s were lost through enemy action, and the bombers jettisoned their loads before reaching their target. Furthermore, the Japanese discontinued their raids on Kunming while the AVG was based there.

The group provided air defense for the Chinese terminus of the Hump route from India; conducted a campaign against Japanese aircraft, both in the air and on the ground, strafed and bombed Japanese forces, installations, and transportation; escorted bombers, and flew reconnaissance missions. It intercepted Japanese planes attempting to bomb Allied airfields; attacked Japanese airdromes; strafed and bombed river craft, troop concentrations, supply depots, and railroads; and protected bombers that attacked Hong Kong, Canton, Shanghai, and other targets. Its area of operations extended beyond China to Burma, French Indochina, and Formosa. The "Flying Tigers" operated against the Japanese during the enemy's drive toward Chansha and Chungking in May 1943 and supported Chinese forces during the Japanese offensive in the Tungting Hu region in Nov 1943. Despite bad weather and heavy flak, the group received a DUC for actions it took in the effort to halt a Japanese force that pushed down the Hsiang Valley in Jun 1944 by repeatedly striking boats, trucks, aircraft, troops, and other objectives. During the following spring, the group helped stop a Japanese offensive, then proceeded to bomb and strafe retreating enemy columns.

The AVG was officially credited with 297 enemy aircraft destroyed, including 229 in the air. Fourteen AVG pilots were killed in action, captured, or disappeared on combat missions. Two died of wounds sustained in bombing raids, and six were killed in accidents during the Flying Tigers' existence as a combat force.

The success of the AVG led to negotiations in spring 1942 to induct it into the USAAF. Chennault was reinstated as a colonel and immediately promoted to brigadier general commanding U.S. Army air units in China (initially designated China Air Task Force and later the 14th Air Force), while continuing to command the AVG by virtue of his position in the Chinese Air Force. On 4 July 1942, the AVG was replaced by the 23rd Fighter Group. Most AVG pilots refused to remain with the unit as a result of the strong arm tactics by the USAAF general sent to negotiate with them. Five pilots accepted commissions in China including "Tex" Hill, one of Chennault's most loyal devotees, with others remaining for a two-week transition period. (U.S. airmen and the press continued to use the "Flying Tiger" name to refer to USAAF units in China to the end of the war, and the name continues to be applied to certain air force and army aviation squadrons.) Most AVG pilots became transport pilots in China, went back to America into civilian jobs, or rejoined the military services and fought elsewhere in the war.

In Oct 1946, the 23 Fighter Group activated on Guam and was assigned to the Far East Air Forces, where it flew training, interception, and island defense missions, until its move to the Panama Canal Zone in Apr 1949 to provide jet transitional training in RF-80s for the Caribbean Air Command.

From 1951-1952 and 1955-1959, served as part of the Air Defense Command flying air defense missions over northeastern United States.

Activated as the 23 Operations Group, under the composite-type 23 Wing in 1992, the group flew A-10s, C-130s, and F-16s.

Provided airlift and close air support to the U. S. Army's XVIII Airborne Corps until 1997 when the 23 Wing was redesignated 23 Fighter Group and assumed new responsibilities.

In Oct 2006, 23 Operations Group again was redesignated to a fighter group and assumed the mission at Pope AFB, NC. Trained to provide close air support for ground forces, 2006.

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Air Force Order of Battle

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#### Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.

The Institute of Heraldry. U.S. Army. Fort Belvoir, VA.

Air Force News. Air Force Public Affairs Agency.

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