

First Strike

Long before the United States entered the war, an American aviator hatched a brazen scheme—which President Roosevelt authorized—to preemptively attack Japan

By Duane Schultz



Claire Chennault wanted to bomb Japan.

Using B-17 bombers flying from Chinese airfields, he planned to drop incendiaries on Japanese cities, whose buildings were constructed largely of wood and paper, to spread terror and chaos among the people and destroy the industrial centers of the Japanese Empire.

On the surface, there was nothing unusual about Chennault's plan. Every air force general in the Pacific wanted to bomb Japan. But Chennault was not an air force general when he advanced his proposal. He was not even in the air force. The 47-year-old former fighter pilot had been forced to retire as a captain three years before because of his fiery temper, insubordination, and unorthodox ideas. He was now a civilian in the pay of a foreign power: a \$15,000-a-year consultant to the nation of China, with the rank of colonel in the Chinese air force.

There was one other little problem with Chennault's plan:

when he recommended the bombing mission against Japan, the United States was not at war with that country. The date was October 1940, more than a year before Japanese planes attacked American forces at Pearl Harbor. Chennault's plan to launch an air strike against a nation with which the United States had peaceful diplomatic relations was to be carried out by contract employees—American servicemen released from the army and navy and paid by the U.S. government through private companies. The American pilots and crew would fly American planes that would be painted with Chinese insignia.

What made the plan more striking was that the highest officials in the U.S. government, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt, approved it. On July 23, 1941, five months before Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt secretly authorized these air strikes. They were set to begin in November, only a few weeks before the date that would live in infamy.



Late in the war, the American firebombing of Japan leveled cities such as Osaka (left, on June 7, 1945). Claire Chennault proposed doing the same thing before the war began.

The basic idea behind the plan was to prop up Chiang Kai-shek, head of the Chinese Nationalist government, with enough money, materiel, and men so that he could serve as the United States' surrogate to stop the menace of Japan's military from reaching American shores. Better to fight them over there than in the streets of American cities, it was argued, which was surely what would happen if Japan was allowed to succeed in its planned conquest of China.

From China, President Roosevelt and most of his advisers believed that the Japanese would surely go on to invade the rest of the Pacific, including American possessions. And after that? What would keep them from the coast of California? Fleet Admiral William Leahy, chief of naval operations, echoed the thinking of many U.S. government officials when he said China's battle against Japan was nothing less than a defense of all of Western civilization.

And at least initially, Claire Chennault's goal in 1940 seemed to be a straightforward one. He was determined to save China from Japan by using the weapon he knew more about than most other people did: American air power. He was a powerful and persuasive advocate for his belief, and his nature made him determined to succeed. "I had an insatiable urge to win,"

Chennault later wrote, describing his childhood in Louisiana, where he went to a rural one-room school and spent most of his time hunting and fishing. "I constantly strove to be the first in anything I undertook. I simply had to run faster, jump farther, swim faster, dive deeper, catch the longest string of fish, shoot better, make the best grades in all of my classes, do the most work on the farm, and read more books than any of my contemporaries."

Not only did he always have to win, he also had to be right. There would be no compromise. "He couldn't get along with anybody above him unless they absolutely agreed with him," recalled General Bruce K. Holloway, who flew



Chennault (far left) was a colonel in the Chinese air force in the early 1940s and a former flier in the U.S. Army Air Corps.



Lobbyist Tommy ‘the Cork’ Corcoran said President Franklin D. Roosevelt told him in October 1940 to ‘take Chennault around town and introduce him to influential men who could keep their mouths shut.’



T. V. Soong, Madame Chiang Kai-shek’s wealthy brother, led the private campaign to aid China, and presented Chennault’s plan to U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. on November 30, 1940.



Morgenthau embraced the plan, and agreed that a small investment could bring huge rewards. He spoke to the president a week later, and wrote in his diary that FDR had said ‘it would be a nice thing if the Chinese could bomb Japan.’



Economist Lauchlin Currie, an envoy to China for FDR, revived the plan in 1941. Morgenthau complained, ‘I don’t know half the time whether he is working for the president or T. V. Soong.’ Currie, an advocate for China, was on the payroll of both.

for Chennault later in the war. “If his superiors did not agree with him, then they were simply wrong as far as he was concerned.”

He became a great pilot and an outstanding leader—as long as his superiors left him alone to command his outfit in his own way. But he was never a good subordinate. Throughout his air corps career, in which he tried, unsuccessfully, to rally support for the importance of fighter aircraft over bombers, his superiors found him abrasive, contentious, belligerent, and combative. George C. Marshall, chief of staff of the prewar army, believed Chennault was totally unfit for command; so did Henry “Hap” Arnold, chief of the Army Air Corps.

On top of that, Chennault was not a West Point man, not a member of that club. The Washington establishment insider and later Chennault aide Joseph Alsop commented that “nothing was more snobbish than those prewar army bases, and Chennault had no social graces himself.” His sometimes-coarse demeanor was not a good fit with the more polished bearing of the military academy-trained officers. No wonder he remained a captain after 20 years of service.

But in October 1940, after three years in China dealing with an ill-equipped and poorly trained Chinese air force, Chennault was back in Washington to ask for money—a lot of money—as well as pilots and planes for a mission to attack a friendly country. This time, however, he had the support of some powerful friends: the so-called China Lobby. They succeeded in taking Chennault’s plan directly to the highest levels of government.

The private campaign to aid China was led by T. V. Soong, the brother of the Wellesley-educated Madame Chiang Kai-shek, and one of the world’s richest men. Educated at Harvard, well connected, and accepted in Washington’s highest social and political circles, Soong wielded enormous influence. He was the first person Chennault called on when he arrived in the nation’s capital that October. Soong introduced him to Joseph Alsop, then a reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune*, whose columns were syndicated to more than 70 newspapers nationwide. Alsop was a regular in the Georgetown dinner circuit and a distant relative of the Roosevelt family.

Alsop introduced Chennault to another of Soong’s circle: Tommy Corcoran, an affable attorney who today would be called a lobbyist; in the 1940s Corcoran was known as a “fixer.” Corcoran had been Roosevelt’s speechwriter, confidant, and a chief architect of much of the president’s New Deal legislation, including the social security program. The president called him Tommy the Cork because of his irrepressible personality; there was no holding him down. Roosevelt’s son Elliott said about Corcoran that “apart from my father, Tom was the single most influential individual in the country.”

Corcoran recalled that Roosevelt had told him, shortly after Chennault arrived in Washington in 1940, to “take Chennault around town and introduce him to influential men who could keep their mouths shut.” He formed a personal and business relationship with Chennault that would continue after the war. “Chennault and I were in this China racket,” Corcoran recalled. “It was the great adventure of my life.”

Later that year, Corcoran established a company called China Defense Supplies; Roosevelt supplied the name. It was designed to replace a Chinese company that had been handling the millions of dollars involved in providing aid to China. Corcoran’s brother was named president, T. V. Soong became chairman of the board, and Roosevelt’s uncle was one of the directors. The Chinese company’s secretary, Whiting Willauer, who had been Corcoran’s brother’s roommate at Exeter, Princeton, and Harvard Law School, worked there as well. He would later become Chennault’s partner in a postwar airline he organized in China. These incestuous financial arrangements proved highly beneficial to all involved.

Another company was then chartered to hire the pilots, crew, and maintenance personnel who would assemble the aircraft and fly Chennault’s missions in China. This outfit, the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Corporation (CAMCO), had been set up in 1933 to sell planes to China, and was jointly owned by China’s finance minister, H. H. Kung—also Madame Chiang’s brother-in-law—and William Pawley, an aviation entrepreneur. Pawley was already involved with China Defense Supplies, which provided CAMCO’s operating funds. Those funds, of course, came from the millions of dollars in loans the United States made to China.

For the well-connected, then, there would be considerable financial gain in preparing for America’s protective reaction strike against Japan.

On November 30, 1940, T. V. Soong presented Chennault’s plan to U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr., who had just approved, at Roosevelt’s insistence, a \$100 million loan to China (see “FDR’s China Syndrome,” page 59). Morgenthau was enthusiastic about Chennault’s plan to firebomb Japanese cities. He agreed that it was a small investment that could bring huge rewards. He spoke with the president a week later and wrote in his diary that Roosevelt had said that “it would be a nice thing if the Chinese would bomb Japan.”

Morgenthau had scheduled a meeting with Secretary of State Cordell Hull, but before Morgenthau could raise the issue of bombing Japan, Hull beat him to it. “What we have got to do, Henry,” he said, “is to get 500 American planes to...fly over Japan just once. That will teach them a lesson. If we could only find some way to have them drop some bombs on Tokyo.”

Apparently the China Lobby had gotten to Hull before Morgenthau did.

On December 18, Morgenthau made a formal presentation of Chennault’s plan to Roosevelt and his cabinet, including Hull, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox. Morgenthau spread out a map Chennault had prepared showing the locations of 136 airfields he had constructed for the long-range B-17s he planned to use for the bombing raids.

The president said he was delighted with the plan. The next day, Soong and Chennault described to Morgenthau how the bombers could attack not only Tokyo, but also Osaka, Kobe, and Nagasaki. As historian Daniel Ford recounts in *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and His American Volunteers, 1941–1942*, Morgenthau asked Soong if the Chinese government would be willing to pay the bomber pilots \$1,000 a month.

“Was that too high?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” Soong replied.

“Money was no object,” Ford adds, “since—like the planes and pilots—it would come from the United States.”

But then one man did stop it, at least for a time. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall had opposed the idea from the beginning. Marshall told Stimson that the United States did not have enough bombers or trained flight crews to spare for China. To give them away would weaken American preparedness and ability to assist England. The British were holding out against the Germans, and needed all the aircraft the United States could send them.

Marshall also pointed out what should have been obvious to everyone: When the Japanese found out they were being bombed by planes piloted by Americans, as they surely would, they would have certain provocation for attacking American bases in the Pacific at a time when the United States was unprepared for war. In addition, Marshall opposed any plan that involved operations outside the normal chain of command, where they would not be subject to military control. In short, Marshall told Stimson that Chennault’s plan was too costly, too dangerous, and too unorthodox.

Stimson was easily persuaded by Marshall’s arguments. He had already become troubled by T. V. Soong’s freewheeling style, and Marshall’s words settled the matter for him. At a meeting attended by Stimson, Hull, Morgenthau, Knox, Marshall, and Admiral Harold Stark, the chief of naval operations, it was agreed that no bombers would be sent to China.

However, they agreed that some military aid had to be given to China to contain the Japanese threat. And so, as a consolation to the Chinese, they authorized 100 P-40 fighter aircraft to be flown by American pilots released from the army and navy, who would be employed and paid by CAMCO. The P-40s could

be used only for defensive purposes because they did not have sufficient range to reach Japan.

Claire Chennault now had his air force, his independent operation, and the chance to carry out his war in his own way. Roosevelt approved the plan on December 23, 1940, and the American Volunteer Group, which was to become famous as the Flying Tigers, was born.

While Chennault was working in the Washington, D.C., offices of China Defense Supplies at 1601 V Street Northwest, ordering equipment for his new air force—everything from bullets to steak and eggs to shaving cream, trucks, and paper clips—his plan to bomb Japan was being revived by an aide to Roosevelt, 38-year-old Lauchlin Currie. Currie was a Canadian-born economist with a Harvard PhD, who had developed a keen interest in China; in the spring of 1941, Roosevelt sent him there as a special envoy.

Currie became such a strong advocate for greater aid to

Chiang Kai-shek that Morgenthau complained to his staff, “The trouble with Mr. Currie is, I don’t know half the time whether he is working for the president or T. V. Soong, because half the time he is on one payroll and the rest of the time he is on the other.”

Roosevelt began to pay more attention to Currie’s views than to Morgenthau’s, and Currie was increasingly influenced by Chiang Kai-shek, Soong, and Chennault, all of whom kept up the pressure to revive the plan to bomb Japan. In March 1941, Currie leaked the details of the plan to Joseph Alsop in the hope of building support. Alsop revealed it in his newspaper column, noting that the planes would “drop incendiary bombs on Japan’s concentrated, almost undefended, paper and matchwood industrial areas.” So much for secrecy.

Currie developed a formal proposal to provide Chennault with as many bombers as the War Department said it could spare—an initial force of 66 twin-engine Lockheed Hudson bombers and single-engine Douglas DB-7s, the export version

First Strike...And Then?

What if Claire Chennault’s plan to bomb Japan before it attacked the United States had been carried out? Three historians weigh in on the possible consequences:

“If Chennault’s bombers

attacked Japanese cities, the U.S. fleet would be on wartime footing, making a Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor impossible. Japanese ground forces would still invade Malaya, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies, provoking a naval battle as the U.S. Navy steamed to relieve beleaguered Allied garrisons. The Imperial Japanese Navy was well prepared for such a decisive deep-water surface engagement, and the U.S. Navy, operating far from its bases, might well have faced crippling losses in its encounters with the strong, experienced force.”

—**Edward J. Drea** is the author of *Japan’s Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945*.

“The first of two fighter groups

Chennault sought for China, which became famous as the Flying Tigers, trickled into Burma in the summer and fall of 1941 but did not see combat until 12 days *after* Pearl Harbor went up in flames. It’s absurd to think that a bomber group could have been whipped together any faster.

Considering the losses to and ineffectiveness of American bomber forces in December 1941 and those that did manage to raid Japan in April 1942 and June 1944, it was probably a mercy for the crews that we didn’t attack first.”

—**Daniel Ford** is the author of *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and His American Volunteers, 1941–1942*.

“Horrible stories and images

of savage Japanese bombing across China from 1937 had tilted American public sympathies overwhelmingly to the Chinese. Even those fiercely

opposed to American entry into the war in Europe frequently advocated vigorous measures to aid China. Thus, Chennault’s scheme to bomb Japanese cities with American produced and piloted aircraft would have enjoyed widespread public approval in the United States. Intercepted Japanese diplomatic messages disclosed that Japan deeply feared such a threat.

But the program faced severe practical obstacles—bases, fuel, limited aircraft production, and priority for British and Soviet needs—that very likely would have precluded its execution. Thus, the question as to whether a preemptive bombing of Japan might have offered justification for the Japanese strike in December 1941 would be moot.”

—**Richard B. Frank** is the author of *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*, and is at work on a three-volume series on the Pacific War.



of the A-20 bomber—to be used for raids against Japanese cities. Named *Joint Board Paper 355*, Currie's proposal was submitted to the Joint Army-Navy Board of the War Department on May 28, 1941. He wanted the plan to be fully operational in five months—by October 31—so that the first bombing raids could be launched by November.

He argued that bombing Japan would keep the Japanese military from attacking Singapore, the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines. Further, when the bombing force reached its full 150-plane strength, it could cripple Japanese war production. And those impressive goals could all be achieved without any direct involvement of the American government.

Currie's revival of Chennault's original idea could not have come at a more propitious time. The fortunes of war were rapidly changing; the situation in the Far East was deteriorating. Germany invaded Russia in June of 1941, which freed Japan of any concern about an attack from that direction. (Russia had been keeping 30 divisions and 2,800 aircraft on its border with Japanese-occupied Manchuria.) Having broken the Japanese diplomatic code, American intelligence officials knew that

The famous Flying Tigers, American volunteer pilots who flew American P-40 fighters in China (here on May 28, 1942), were the one part of Chennault's plan to aid China to see the light of day. The unit was disbanded on July 4, 1942.

Japan planned to move to the south, against the British and the Dutch. They had to be stopped.

Throughout the month of July, a fierce debate raged over whether to respond to the threat of Japanese aggression by placing an embargo on the sale of oil to Japan. America's military leaders opposed such a move, certain that it would leave Japan no choice but to go to war with the United States. Japan produced no oil of its own and had on hand no more than a 12-month supply to run its economy and war machine.

President Roosevelt agreed with this idea for a time, telling Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles on July 18 that an oil embargo would “mean war in the Pacific.” And while most high government officials agreed, some thought war could be a desirable outcome. Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes wrote to the president that an oil embargo “would make it not only

When Roosevelt died in April 1945, Claire Chennault lost his most important ally. 'It was clearly time to go,' Chennault said on leaving China.

possible but easy to get into this war in an effective way.”

Whether Roosevelt’s reason was to prevent war, or to find a way to join it, he announced an embargo on July 26. Opinion polls showed that the majority of Americans supported the embargo and were in favor of taking direct action to stop further Japanese plans. (See “First Strike...And Then?,” page 56.)

Roosevelt courted the newspapers and radio networks to make sure that his embargo received attention. He wanted the American people to know that he was taking a firm stand against the Japanese. What he did not reveal, however, was that three days before, on July 23, he had approved Chennault’s plan for a preemptive strike against Japan—to attack them before they could attack us.

General Marshall knew about the plan in all its details but, like any good soldier, he was wise enough not to continue protesting against a plan that had the approval of the president and other high government officials. Other factors intervened, however, as production and shipping bottlenecks delayed the arrival of the bombers. The aircraft industry could not build planes fast enough to meet demands, and most cargo ships were already being used to transport supplies to England, so the November 1941 timetable for the raids had to be postponed. The first group of crewmen for the bombers did not leave California for the long voyage to China until November 21.

They were still at sea on December 7 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Their ships were diverted to Australia. The first shipment of 18 Lockheed Hudson aircraft were still in Burbank, California. That was as close as they would ever get to China.

Claire Chennault’s Flying Tigers saw their first combat two weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. During the following five months—until they were disbanded on July 4, 1942—they earned their fame by shooting down, according to some estimates, close to 300 Japanese planes, with another 150 listed as probably destroyed. Their losses amounted to merely a dozen P-40s shot down in combat.

They were replaced by the 23rd Fighter Group, later absorbed by the Fourteenth Air Force, with Chennault—a newly made

brigadier general—in command. Chennault remained in China until June 8, 1945, a month before the Japanese surrender. When President Roosevelt died in April of that year, Chennault lost his most important ally. General Marshall and General Arnold called for his retirement as soon as possible. “It was clearly time to go,” Chennault said as he left China after eight years of fighting the Japanese. He was angry and embittered about being denied the opportunity to witness the Japanese surrender.

But he was not yet finished with China, nor were those who worked for T. V. Soong’s China Defense Supplies company. With financial backing provided by Fiorello LaGuardia, then director of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, Chennault and Whiting Willauer started Civil Air Transport (CAT), an airline to distribute relief supplies throughout war-ravaged China.

The old team was back in operation. Willauer had been with China Defense Supplies and later served as a Lend-Lease official in China. CAT’s treasurer was James Brenner, once Soong’s personal secretary. Tommy “the Cork” Corcoran was the outfit’s attorney. Under Chennault’s aggressive leadership, and with significant funding from the U.S. government and from the UN relief agency, the new venture became financially successful—at least until 1949, when war broke out between the Chinese Communists and Chiang’s Nationalist regime.

Chennault returned to Washington and, with Soong and Corcoran, lobbied for financial backing for a new Flying Tigers operation to save the Nationalist government. But this time the president, Harry S. Truman, saw no threat or need to divert any more money to China. Chennault’s airline almost went bankrupt, saved only by the Korean War in 1950, when the American government chartered CAT planes to haul cargo and troops.

In the next war, Vietnam, Chennault’s civilian pilots were chartered to fly U.S. Air Force transports to drop supplies to the French troops at Dien Bien Phu. Two pilots were killed, perhaps the first American casualties in that long war. By then, CAT had become essentially an arm of the CIA. In 1950, renamed Air America, Chennault’s outfit played an active combat role throughout the Vietnam Conflict—yet another example of a private contractor augmenting the military in combat. The process continues in Iraq and Afghanistan today, where private contractors supply civilian surrogate soldiers—also known as corporate warriors—by the thousands to provide security for American military personnel and facilities.

What Claire Chennault and the China Lobby started all those years ago, in the days before America’s entry into the Second World War—the use of private contractors in the Flying Tigers to wage war—became not only the stuff of legend, but a continuing and thriving reality in America’s wars today. ★