

**Sixty years ago,
Flying Tiger David
Hill was a hero. He
still is.**



Tex

By Walter J. Boyne

LAST December, retired Brig. Gen. David L. “Tex” Hill was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for a heroic action he carried out some 60 years earlier, back in the dark early years of World War II in the Pacific. Due to political considerations having nothing to do with Tex personally, his exploits were not properly recognized at the time.

No fewer than four of Tex’s proposed nominations for the Distinguished Service Cross were disapproved because of a long-standing dispute between, on the one hand, Brig. Gen. Clayton L. Bissell and Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell, and, on the other hand, Tex’s beloved boss, the great warrior Claire L. Chennault. Bissell and Stilwell felt that Chennault was a maverick who used his connection with Generalissimo Chiang

Kai-shek to get his way with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Tex got caught in the middle as Bissell and Stilwell were turning down Chennault's recommendations. No awards came his way.

Tex accepted the belated decoration with his characteristic modesty, very grateful to his longtime friend O.R. Crawford, who had labored on his behalf for its award. Crawford, an Air Force Association national director emeritus, flies a Curtiss P-40 decorated in Tex's markings at air shows. He enlisted the help of Tex's friends, including Congressman Randy Cunningham (R-Calif.). On May 25, Tex formally received his DSC at a ceremony in San Antonio. Retired Gen. Henry Viccellio Jr., who presented the award, told a crowd of nearly 300 that good guys do win in the end.

In approving the award, the Air Force records correction board cited an action on Oct. 25, 1942, when Tex, desperately ill with malaria, led nine P-40 Warhawks of the 23rd Fighter Group as escort for 12 B-24 bombers in a raid on Japanese-held Hong Kong. After spotting 24 Japanese fighters poised to attack the bombers, Hill rolled his P-40—No. 48—on its back and dived to shoot down one of the enemy fighters closest to the bombers. Then he and his squadron mates repeatedly attacked the remaining Japanese fighters, driving them off with heavy losses. All the bombers returned, with only one suffering any damage.

At 87, Tex retains the characteris-



Life magazine ran several photos of Hill—including this one—as part of a March 1942 feature on the American Volunteer Group in Burma.

tics that made him a leading ace and brilliant unit commander for Chennault's immortal American Volunteer Group, the original Flying Tigers. He is still as tall and lean as a Texas cowboy, with a quick wit and an upbeat remark for everything. His memory is phenomenal—he can whip through a foot-high stack of photographs from 60 years of flying and call off where and when the photo was taken, along with the name of everyone shown.

Ready To Go

With every photo comes an anecdote or two. In listening to his sharp

recounting of events, you get the very real sense that if his country needed him to climb back into a P-40 and go into combat once again, he would do it and do it well.

As Tex approaches his ninth decade, he conveys a profound sense of well being, one that he attributes to his beloved wife, Mazie. Tex also gives credit for much of his success to the teachings of his parents, who were missionaries in Korea. Tex was born at Kwangju, Korea, on July 13, 1915, the youngest of four children. The family returned to the United States when Tex was 15 months old, spending time in Virginia and Kentucky before moving on to San Antonio in 1921.

It was in that Texas city that his father, Pierre Bernard Hill, combined two unlikely careers. As a minister, he succeeded in building up the First Presbyterian Church so rapidly that he had to establish five satellite churches around San Antonio to handle the congregation. He then began a weekly radio program that he conducted for 37 years, one of the longest running radio shows in history. And from 1925 on, the elder Hill also functioned as chaplain to the Texas Rangers. Photos show him to be truly tall in the saddle, the very picture of a gun-slinging captain in the fabled mounted law enforcement unit. As a special favor, Tex will proudly bring out the engraved Colt .45 revolver Reverend Hill carried for 25 years.

"P.B." Hill spent lots of time with



A 1991 reunion of the 23rd Fighter Group—which traces its roots to the Flying Tigers—included, from left, Joe Brown, Robert Scott, and Tex Hill (in blue shirt).

Tex and his two brothers, Sam and John, taking them camping and teaching them to hunt. Tex's sister, Martha, was spared the long hunting trips where Tex learned to shoot, a skill that helped him to win 18 victories in aerial combat. His father gave him his basic moral outlook and the sense of independence that has served him well in war and peace, and it was from P.B. Hill that Tex acquired the singleness of purpose that permitted him to carry on in combat despite being ill with dysentery and malaria.

Tex found that his rigorous but loving upbringing had given him a natural affinity for service life, and he enjoyed attending a series of military schools. He graduated from the San Antonio Academy in 1928 and the McCallie School in Chattanooga, Tenn., in 1934. There, he picked up the nickname "Tex" as he won letters in football and basketball and became middleweight boxing champion of Tennessee. Hill went to Texas A&M and Austin College, from which he graduated in 1938, determined to have a career in military aviation.

Turned Down by Army

For reasons he never learned, Tex was turned down for flying training with the Army Air Corps, so he entered the US Navy and won his wings of gold in 1939.

While in the Navy at Pensacola,

Fla., Tex started out well in Class 121-C with a good-natured instructor, Lt. Don Frasier. Then Frasier went on extended leave, and Tex was given a grouchy instructor who disliked his manner. After a few miserable hours at cross-purposes, he put Tex up for a check ride. Tex failed the check and the one that followed it. Tex Hill was on his way out of the Navy, and the United States was about to lose a great ace. However, Frasier heard of the situation and returned from leave to intervene. A few hours with Frasier gave

Tex the confidence he needed, and he never had another problem.

Upon graduation, he was sent to USS *Saratoga* to fly the TBD-1 Devastator torpedo airplane, and then later, he went to USS *Ranger* to fly SB2U Vindicator dive-bombers. Ironically, the dive-bombing training he received would prove invaluable with the Flying Tigers; it enabled him to halt, almost single-handedly, a Japanese ground offensive.

Tex actually "went to war" with the Navy, flying neutrality patrol missions from both the *Ranger* and



Hill is flanked by Charles Bond and Edward Rector. Bond was vice squadron leader in the Flying Tigers' No. 1 Squadron. Rector was vice squadron leader in Hill's No. 2 Squadron and had flown with him from Ranger and Yorktown.



The Flying Tigers endured austere conditions. The caption for this photo of a P-40 at an airfield in China said these Warhawks "climbed off the muddy fields at 100 roaring, bumpy miles per hour."

USS *Yorktown*. The young aviator loved the Navy but could not resist the siren call of retired Navy Cmdr. Rutledge Irvine who was recruiting pilots to join a new and mysterious organization—the American Volunteer Group. The AVG had the covert backing of President Roosevelt, and its mission was to defend the Burma Road from the threat of Japanese aircraft. In a single package, Irvine offered to Tex some adventure, fighters to fly, a long-sought return to the Far East, and unbelievably high pay (\$600 a month for wingmen, more for flight and squadron leaders—about three times his Navy pay). Unofficially, a \$500 bonus was promised for every Japanese aircraft shot down.

The deal was irresistible, even when the downside was revealed. If you are shot down and captured,

he was told, you are on your own, for the United States would deny all knowledge of the AVG's existence.

Much against their CO's wishes, Hill and six *Ranger* shipmates signed. At the time, the *Ranger* was the only US carrier really ready to go to war. Of this group, two would be killed in early action. John Armstrong died in a midair accident. Bert Christman, an artist who drew the popular "Scorchy Smith" cartoon strip, was murdered in his parachute harness after bailing out Jan. 23, 1942. The remaining five enrollees from the *Ranger* together would account for at least 36 aerial victories.

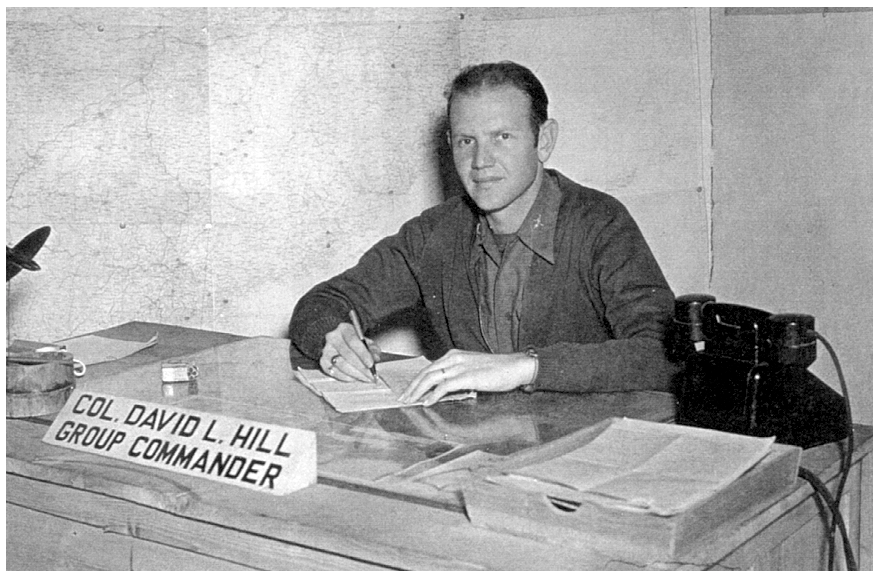
The trip from the *Ranger* to Rangoon, Burma, took several months. Many of the new AVG volunteers had grown almost mutinous from the boredom, but Tex enjoyed every minute of the trip, keeping up morale with his infectious smile and practical jokes. All the boredom vanished when the group reached Toungoo, some 170 miles from Rangoon, and met for the first time the charismatic Col. Claire Chennault, their new commander. It was clear to Tex that they were in luck; Chennault obviously knew what he was talking about. That certainty would never change for the rest of Tex's life. Today, his belief in Chennault's wisdom and tactical genius is as strong as ever.

The story of Chennault and the AVG is well-known (see, for example, "Flying Tiger, Hidden Dragon," March 2002, p. 70), but it is difficult to understand the profound effect of Chennault's personality until you hear Tex Hill describe the man and his methods.

Outnumbered

Chennault drilled his ideas about combat into the heads of his volunteers with 60 hours of extemporaneous lectures that kept them on the edge of their seats—even in the hot Burmese fall of 1941. Unsmiling, his craggy face totally intent on the class, Chennault laid it on the line. They were outnumbered, the Curtiss P-40B was not a particularly good fighter, and they were short on parts.

In contrast, Japanese airmen had much more maneuverable fighters, plenty of bombers, and a well-organized supply train. Japanese pilots,



After the Flying Tigers were deactivated, Hill stayed on with Claire Chennault and accepted a commission as a major. When this photo was taken, circa 1943–44, Hill was commanding the 23rd FG at Kweilin, China.

moreover, were nothing like the Stateside stereotype of eyeglass-wearing incompetents. They were, in fact, highly trained professionals, already tested in combat against both China and the Soviet Union. Chennault did observe, however, that while the Japanese were superb in executing a preplanned mission, they lacked initiative when someone seriously disrupted their plans.

The good news was that, with Chennault's tactics, the AVG had the combat edge. Under his tutelage the AVG would use the P-40's strong points against the weak points of the enemy; this was asymmetric warfare, 1941 style.

The P-40s were to fight in two-ship formations, a clear forerunner of the more famous Thach Weave developed by the Navy. Chennault pointed out that the P-40 was fast, rugged, and had good firepower. The AVG would use these advantages and minimize the P-40's weaknesses by *never* engaging in a turning dogfight with the enemy. Instead, the P-40 would attack from above, dive toward the enemy formation, open fire, then dive on through the formation, using the speed gained to climb back to altitude for another attack.

Chennault's description: "Dive, squirt, pass, run."

In those cases in which the P-40 did wind up in a head-on pass at the enemy, the P-40 still had the advantage, for its Allison engine and ar-

mor protected the AVG pilot to a far greater degree than the engines and almost nonexistent armor of the Japanese fighters protected Japan's airmen.

These tactics might have lacked the glamour that always has been imputed to World War I dogfights, but the AVG used them to run up a 15-to-1 favorable kill ratio.

In his lectures, Chennault emphasized that the 99 aircraft on hand were precious, because they were not going to be replaced anytime soon. The 99 aircraft were soon reduced via attrition, and there grew in the young Tex Hill an admiration for the ground crews who serviced the remaining airplanes and kept them going without tools, making parts when no replacements were available and always having just enough aircraft on the line to meet the threat. Tex recalls that sometimes there were only four aircraft available to fly and that the AVG never put more than 16 in the air at a time.

Heart and Soul

To this day, Tex Hill will argue forcefully that the heart and soul of the Flying Tiger organization was its complement of crew chiefs, mechanics, armament personnel, radio men, and others who never received the fame of the pilots but without whom the operation would have failed in its first weeks. With a big laugh he asks, "How would you like to have Gerhard Neumann for a crew

chief?" Known as "Herman the German" in the AVG, Neumann went on to become a famous designer of jet engines, including the J79, one of the first engines with fully interchangeable modules. The crew chiefs were also undeniably brave. Tex recalls that when the P-40s were moved to auxiliary airfields, the crew chiefs often went with them—in the baggage compartment.

Chennault divided the AVG into three squadrons. No. 1 Squadron became the "Adam and Eves," a play on the idea of the "first pursuit." No. 2 Squadron was the "Panda Bears," while No. 3 became the "Hell's Angels" after Howard Hughes's epic World War I aviation film. With about 800 hours of flying time, Tex had the flying skills necessary to start out as a flight leader in the Panda Bears. Converting to the long-nosed P-40 had not been difficult. Tex compared it to the Devastator and the Vindicator and found that it was wonderfully maneuverable.

Japan Advances

With the attack on Pearl Harbor, Imperial Japan began its military rampage across the Pacific. Members of the AVG, like the rest of the world, were startled by its ferocity. Chennault realized immediately that the AVG was likely to be a Japanese target, and he initiated protective patrols. Ten days later, the 1st and 2nd squadrons were sent to Kunming, China, while the 3rd squadron was

detached to Rangoon to assist British forces there. Great mobility would prove to be an AVG strength as the forces moved from one auxiliary base to the next.

The AVG pilots found the facilities at Kunming to be considerably more comfortable than those they had left behind in Burma. More importantly, Chennault's foresight had provided the AVG with another advantage, primitive in the extreme, but almost as effective as radar. Most of the Chinese villages, even the smallest, had access to either a telegraph or a telephone. Observers in these villages would report the sight or sounds of aircraft. They would call in to the field where a squadron was located, noting "loud noises" (usually meaning bombers) or just "noise" (usually fighters). If they actually saw aircraft, they would report numbers and direction. At the squadron, there would be a map of the area with the field in the center of a series of concentric rings, each 31 miles apart and extending out to 186 miles. As the calls came in, flags would be placed on the map. Three or four calls would clearly indicate the direction and airspeed of the attacking force. When the enemy reached the 93-mile ring, the P-40s would launch with time to climb to their best altitude—18,000 feet.

The system had other uses, including reporting of the weather. If a pilot became lost, he could call Chennault and describe the terrain

over which he was flying. Chennault could usually tell him where he was. Alternatively, if he found a village, he would fire his guns; there would be a prompt report from the local Chinese ground station, and the pilot would then get a heading for home.

First Blood

Well-drilled on Chennault's concepts of air combat, the AVG went into air-to-air combat for the first time Dec. 20, 1941. An incoming Japanese raid was handled roughly by the AVG, which shot down four out of 10 of the attacking Kawasaki Ki-48 "Lily" bombers. Some sources claim another five crashed on their return flight.

It is impossible to convey today just how good this news sounded to the people of the United States, which was still reeling from a succession of defeats after Pearl Harbor. Here, at last, was an arena in which the Americans were defeating the seemingly unbeatable Japanese. An account of the battle in the Dec. 29, 1941, issue of *Time* magazine bestowed the immortal name "Flying Tigers" on Chennault's fighters.

Tex's reactions to the victory were thoroughly mixed. He was delighted for the unit but miserable that he had not been able to take part, and he was absolutely desolate at the news that his close friend Ed Rector was missing. Fortunately, Rector had been able to make a precautionary landing at an auxiliary field and soon reported back for duty.

Tex scored his first aerial victories on his first combat mission, which took place Jan. 3, 1942. Led by No. 2 Squadron leader Jack Newkirk and flying on Jim Howard's wing, Tex strafed Tak airfield at Raheng, Thailand. It is fascinating to watch him recall the incident, eyes flashing, neck swiveling as if to make sure no one's on his tail, hands constantly moving, pushing the throttle forward or "flying formation," one hand behind the other, swooping in for the kill.

"We went in string," Tex said. "The first thing I knew was that there were more than three of us in that pattern. Then this guy came in between me and Jim Howard and got on his tail. I pulled up behind him; I was so damn excited I didn't even



Hill climbs into the cockpit of a well-used P-51. Though beaten up, the Mustangs had the range lacking in the P-40s. They bore the distinctive shark teeth markings of the Flying Tigers.

think about looking at those damn gun sights. Just flew right up on his tail and hosed the tracers on to him. He just flat blew up.”

As he spoke the word “hosed,” Tex made a circle with his two big hands and extended it forward, clearly recalling the line of fire smashing into the enemy aircraft.

“This all happened in less than a minute,” he continued, “because, simultaneously, this guy came down in an overhead pass on me. I pulled up, and there was another guy coming head on. I shot him down, but his bullets stuck in my prop, and I had to throttle back to keep the engine from jumping out of the airframe.”

Dodging 33 Bullets

When he landed, Tex counted a total of 33 bullet holes in his aircraft. In both of his kills, he had been up against nimble Type 97 fighters. Later in the war, Hill had the opportunity to cram himself into the undersized cockpit of a captured Japanese aircraft and fly it. He still marvels at its simple systems, from its throttle that worked in reverse to American practice to its almost unbelievable maneuverability. Later in his career, he also got to fly a Ki-43 “Oscar,” making a dead-stick landing with it at Bakersfield, Calif.

On Jan. 23, 1942, Tex got into another fight. He and Frank “Whitey” Lawlor were all that stood between a formation of 24 Japanese attackers



Hill led this low-level strike on the airfield at Shinchiku, Formosa, on Thanksgiving 1943. Note the bombers lined up, many of them on fire. The raid left 43 enemy airplanes burning on the ground, 15 shot down in the air.

and Burma’s Mingaladon airfield, where AVG and Royal Air Force aircraft were being serviced. With repeated dive and zoom attacks, Hill and Lawlor broke up the Japanese formation, Tex scoring two kills and getting a series of 20 mm hits in his right wing in the process. Lawlor also got two kills.

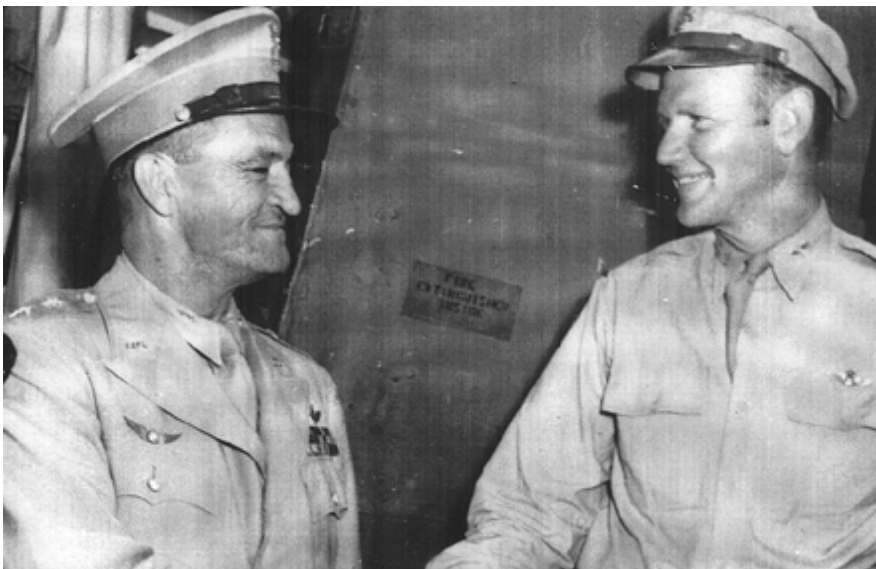
Just three weeks after he had entered combat, Tex Hill was an ace, with victories over five fighters and one bomber.

Meantime, Newkirk had a premonition that he would not survive the war. He wrote a letter recommend-

ing to Chennault that, in the event of his death, he should name Tex Hill to succeed him. When Newkirk was killed on a strafing attack March 24, 1942, Tex took over leadership of the squadron. He was a natural at command.

He had already convincingly demonstrated his leadership skills, in the air and on the ground, and was as popular with the troops on the line as he was with his squadron mates. Tex’s natural affability made things easier for people operating under the tough conditions of combat, for he exuded the same easygoing informality that had irritated the Navy instructor in Pensacola. Perhaps more important, everyone knew that his genial exterior concealed a tough interior, a fighter devoted to the destruction of the enemy. His pilots knew that Tex Hill would never assign to them a mission that he himself could not do, just as his ground crews knew that he would never ask them to work harder or longer hours than he did. Most of all, they knew he never lied. If Tex said it, it was so.

Tex Hill notched seven more victories before the Flying Tigers were officially deactivated July 4, 1942, but some of his air-to-ground activity was even more remarkable than his air-to-air work. On May 7, 1942, Tex led four former Navy shipmates in newly arrived P-40Es in a dive-bombing attack to block a Japanese advance along the Burma Road into China. Carrying 570-pound Russian



Chennault and Hill exchange greetings in New Orleans. Hill retains his respect for Chennault, who trained the American volunteer pilots well in tactics that capitalized on the strengths of their aircraft.



Former AFA Board Chairman and National President O.R. Crawford flies this P-40N painted in the markings of Tex Hill's Flying Tiger Warhawk. One of the few P-40s still flying, it wows the crowds, as does Tex himself.

bombs provided by China, Tex's flight dive-bombed the route from the Salween gorge all the way to the bridge across the Salween River. The big Russian bombs caused the road to collapse, trapping the Japanese armor and troops. Then, over the next four days, the AVG continuously strafed the bottled-up force. It was a unique airpower victory, one described by Claire Chennault as "staving off China's collapse on the Salween."

Finest Hour

Tex Hill's finest hour was yet to come. Despite his long service in the heat of battle, and disregarding the fact that he was ill with malaria, Tex was among the five officers who elected to stay on with Chennault when the AVG was deactivated. He could have returned to the United States without prejudice, regained his health, and then returned to combat in another theater. Instead, Tex accepted a commission as a major and was given command of the 75th Fighter Squadron, part of the 23rd Fighter Group.

Tex trained the 75th as he led it on one difficult mission after another. These included long-range raids on Hankow, China, and Hong Kong. His knowledge of the territory allowed him to carry out night missions, flying underneath the overcast, just skimming the surface of the rivers as they led him directly to Japanese targets.

Tex Hill finally returned to the United States on Dec. 5, 1942, after 18 months in combat. He was given command of the Proving Ground Group at Eglin Field, Fla., where his combat experience was used to evaluate fighters. He fully recovered from his health problems, and soon he answered Chennault's call to duty once again, returning to China in October 1943 to command the 23rd Fighter Group.

Tex would run up six more victories with the 23rd and lead bombing forays in which he sank two and perhaps three Japanese ships. He is proudest of the raid he led on Formosa, striking at Japanese territory for the first time since the Doolittle raid of April 18, 1942. Tex commanded the mission on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 25, 1943, in one of the "new" P-51As that the 23rd had acquired. Actually the badly beaten-up Mustangs were almost worn out, but they had the range the P-40s lacked.

In this mission, Tex led a formation of eight Mustangs, eight P-38s, and 14 B-25s low across the strait of Formosa. Hill recalls it as a mission in which life or death depended totally on surprise. If they got to the airfield at Shinchiku without being

detected, they would succeed; if the Japanese were warned by radar or picket ship, the chances were great that no aircraft would make it back to China.

After a long flight—the final 100 miles of it flown no more than 100 feet off the deck—the raiders did achieve surprise, in part because Tex had diverted one P-38 to dispatch an intruding Japanese transport aircraft. Once they reached the target airfield, Tex sent the remaining P-38s against a group of landing bombers while the B-25s pulled up to 1,000 feet to drop their parafrags. He led the Mustangs down to strafe, whipping up at the end of a pass to shoot down a Japanese Zero.

After another attack, the American fighters followed the B-25s back to China. Behind them they left the smoking ruins of an airfield, with 43 Japanese bombers burned on the ground and another 15 enemy aircraft shot out of the air. This was warfare the way Tex liked to fight it—hurting the enemy badly and not losing any of his own troops.

Tex returned to the United States again in November 1944, to command the 412th Fighter Group, the US Army Air Forces' first jet group. He left active duty in 1946 and returned home to his family and to ranching. Soon, however, he was appointed to be the youngest one-star general in the history of the Texas National Guard, commanding the 58th Fighter Wing.

In recent years he has spent a great deal of time at air shows, where he draws crowds that admire him and the beautiful P-40N painted in his AVG colors. He spends much of his effort in educating the young and, of course, is in demand at every gathering of aces. Still as sharp as an 18-victory ace had to be, Tex has retained his affable manner but is still more than able to render sharp opinions on the past and the future. Beneath that friendly exterior beats the heart of a warrior, still vitally concerned about his country and still serving it to the very best of his considerable ability. ■

Walter J. Boyne, former director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., is a retired Air Force colonel and author. He has written more than 400 articles about aviation topics and 29 books, the most recent of which is The Best of Wings. His latest article for Air Force Magazine, "Fifty Years of the B-52," appeared in the December 2001 issue.