

Chennault and Stilwell

The war in China was already five years old when Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell got there in March 1942 as the US military representative to the Chinese government and chief of staff to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.

China had been fighting alone since 1937. Japan held all of eastern China and the entire Chinese coastline. After Nanking fell to the invaders, Chiang

moved his capital inland to Chungking in 1938. When Stilwell arrived, the Japanese were advancing through Burma and threatening to cut off the Burma Road, China's last lifeline to the outside.

Stilwell brought no US forces with him other than a small staff. Nevertheless, he expected Chiang to be a passive figurehead while he, Stilwell, decided

on Chinese strategy and commanded the Chinese army.

Another prominent officer from the United States was there ahead of him: Claire L. Chennault, already gaining fame as commander of the American Volunteer Group, popularly called the "Flying Tigers." Chennault was liked and respected by the Chinese. He was destined to be Stilwell's great rival and adversary.

In December 1941 and early 1942, the Flying Tigers were the only American military force in China, although they were not part of the US Army. They

They disagreed completely on strategy and objectives in China. They also despised each other.

were also the only force anywhere that had beaten the Japanese. They were highly regarded by Chiang, but not by the US Army and most emphatically not by Stilwell.

Stilwell, on the other hand, was the friend and protégé of Gen. George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army. Stilwell wanted total control of the Chinese army, and he wanted to use it in Burma, which became an obsession with him. He had no interest in Chiang's policies or concerns or in the defense of eastern China.

Chiang's Nationalist government had been recognized by the US since 1928, but in Stilwell's view, it was one of two competing political factions in China. Stilwell actually liked the other

Left: Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault at a Fourteenth Air Force base in China in July 1943. Under Chennault's command, Fourteenth Air Force continued the traditions and successes of the American Volunteer Group. Right: Lt. Gen. Joseph Stilwell and an aide in Burma in December 1943.



USAF photo

Stilwell

By John T. Correll

faction—Mao Zedong and the Communists—better.

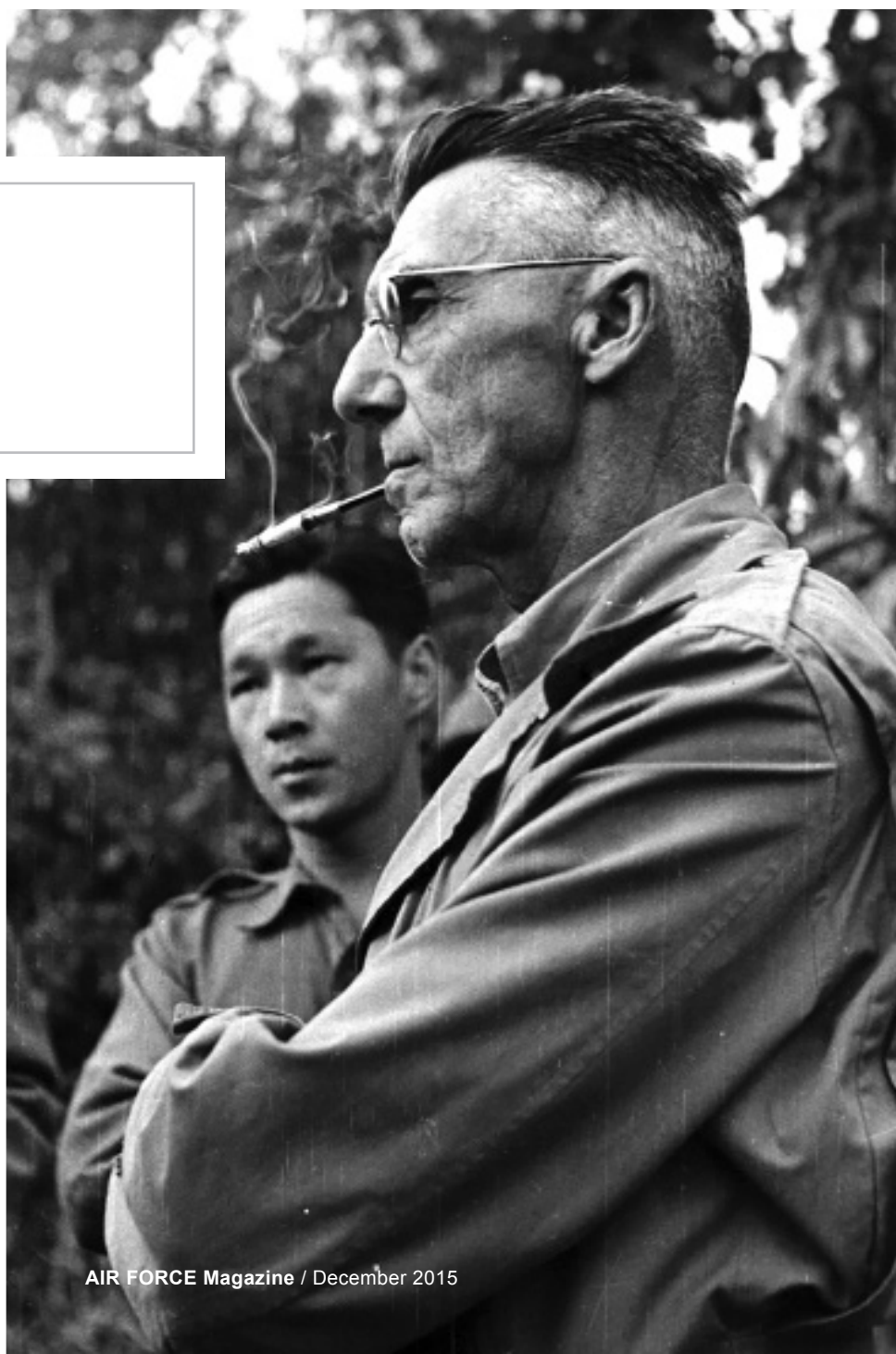
Stilwell was known for good reason as “Vinegar Joe,” so named by junior Army officers who experienced the acerbic temperament for which he was noted.

He referred to Chiang as “Peanut” and made no effort to conceal his contempt. He insisted that China do

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A Chinese soldier guards a line of American P-40 fighters at an airfield in China. In early 1942, Chennault's AVG Flying Tigers was the only force in Asia to beat the Japanese in combat.



whatever was best for the overall war effort (as defined by Stilwell) with the long-range consequences for China being a secondary consideration.

In Stilwell's opinion, airpower could do no more than “knock down a few Jap planes.” He told Chennault—whose Flying Tigers had become US Fourteenth Air Force—that “it's the men in the trenches that will win this war,” to which Chennault shot back: “Goddammit, Stilwell, there aren't any men in the trenches.”

Stilwell cultivated news reporters who celebrated him as an earthy, salty, battle-smart combat leader. He could also count on backing and protection from Marshall, but in the end, it wasn't enough.

Things went from bad to worse until Stilwell's inevitable recall in October 1944. Before long, Chennault was recalled as well.

Stilwell remained a cult figure, owing much to an admiring press and more recently to Barbara Tuchman's laudatory *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*, published in 1971. Chennault's contributions get minimal recognition and are often actively disparaged.

On balance, as Lt. Col. Gordon K. Pickler wrote in *Air University Review* in 1972, “If one were to single out a military figure as representative of ‘the American experience in China,’

Claire Chennault more than Joseph Stilwell would be that individual.”

CHIANG AND CHENNAULT

China had been a republic since the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1912, but political consolidation was elusive. It was not until 1926-28 that Chiang, the new leader of the Nationalist or Kuomintang party, unified enough of the country to gain diplomatic recognition from the United States and others.

Chiang's grasp was not secure. Regional warlords had a great deal of independence and followed interests of their own. The most serious opposition was Mao's Communist

army in its stronghold at Yen-an where it was held in check by a blocking force of Chiang's best troops.

Chiang was fighting two wars at once, against both the Japanese invaders and the internal challengers in a continuing civil war. He had tried without much success to build an air force, employing a string of ineffective foreign advisors and mercenaries.

In 1937, Chiang hired Chennault, a former Army Air Corps captain, to do a three-month survey of the Chinese air force. Chennault would stay in China, one way or another, for more than eight years.

Chennault was a misfit in the close-knit Air Corps, an outspoken advocate of pursuit aviation in a force committed to the bomber. Passed over for promotion, he retired, ostensibly because of hearing loss caused by flying in open cockpits, to take the job in China.

In 1940, Chennault organized the American Volunteer Group, recruiting 100 pilots from the United States to fly 100 P-40B fighter aircraft, purchased by special authorization from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Air Corps was opposed but could not block the project.

The P-40 was supposedly obsolete, but the AVG pilots, coached by Chennault, outflow and outfought the Japanese. The Flying Tigers nickname first appeared in press notices in the United States. They blunted the advance of the Japanese in eastern China and rose to greater fame in their defense of the British colony of Burma in 1942. They were enormously popular with the Chinese but were regarded by Army Air Corps regulars as hotshots and mercenaries.



Stilwell (front) leads 115 people out of Burma into India over rugged mountain trails in May 1942. The group included soldiers and civilians, Stilwell's staff, a public relations officer, and a correspondent for Time and Life magazines. He made no provisions for the Chinese troops left in Burma and sent no message to China's Nationalist leader Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. He earned praise for his grit, but was out of touch for 20 days.

THE DISJOINTED CBI

The United States was not ready to send forces to Asia in 1941, but wanted to keep China in the war and to tie down the Japanese invasion forces so they could not be redeployed elsewhere.

The so-called China-Burma-India Theater was not an actual Allied combat theater. It was an administrative designation, used mostly by the United States. The British had their own commands in Burma and India, and Chiang was supreme commander of the China theater.

Marshall picked Stilwell—one of the few people who ever called Marshall by his first name—to fill a dual role as commander of US forces in the CBI and as advisor to Chiang. Stilwell had served in China between the wars and he spoke and wrote the language. Unfortunately, the mission called for tact and diplomacy, of which he had none.

Chennault was accepted back into the Army Air Forces as a colonel but he was not the senior airman in the theater. That job went to Clayton L. Bissell, who had been a confidante of Billy Mitchell and who clashed with Chennault when they were instructors at the Air Corps Tactical School.

Chennault was promoted to brigadier general April 22, 1942, but Bissell was promoted a day sooner on April 21, ensuring him seniority.

Stilwell had only as much control over the Chinese army as Chiang would give him. The defensive front in eastern China held little interest for him. He focused immediately on the more active fight in Burma, where six Chinese divisions and the Flying Tigers were already engaged along with the British.

The British commitment to Burma was lukewarm. Their main interest was protecting India, crown jewel of the British empire. They would not expend great resources to defend Burma. Postwar recapture of the colony would be soon enough, and that should be done by imperial forces, not by the Chinese neighbors.

Stilwell, his determination undiminished, plunged in fully. He went to Burma in March 1942 and took charge personally. With some reluctance, Chiang gave him command of the Chinese forces which were, Stilwell complained, insufficiently aggressive.

WALKOUT FROM BURMA

By May, the Japanese were advancing rapidly and closing in on Stilwell's line of retreat. Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, chief of the Army Air Forces, sent an airplane to bring Stilwell out, but he refused to get aboard. He insisted instead on walking out of Burma, 140 miles over rough country to India, in what became the most famous episode in the Stilwell legend.

Stilwell radioed Marshall that he was going, then destroyed the radio as too burdensome to carry. He did not send Chiang a message of any kind nor did he make any provision for the Chinese troops.

For 20 days, Stilwell, 59, led 115 people over rugged mountain trails to Imphal in eastern India. It was a mixed group of soldiers and civilians, including a team of Burmese nurses and Stilwell's staff. Among the marchers were Capt. Fred Eldridge, the public relations officer, and Jack Belden, correspondent for *Time* and *Life* magazines.

The walkout was immortalized in the Aug. 10 issue of *Life*, illustrated with Eldridge photos showing Stilwell in his old campaign hat and leggings, leading the group through the jungle and cleaning his Tommy gun during a break.

Some of the Chinese troops made their way back to China and others went to India. The praises rolled in for Stilwell, but Chennault did not see it that way.

"If Stilwell had been a company, battalion, or regimental commander, whose primary responsibility was for the troops in his immediate command, his walkout would certainly have been commendable," Chennault said. "But for a man with the tremendous burden of the ranking American officer in Asia and chief of staff of the Chinese Republic, it was a startling exhibition of his ignorance or disregard for these larger responsibilities."

Stilwell vowed to return to Burma, which thereafter received nearly all of his strategic attention.

The Flying Tigers were to be merged into the Army Air Forces but it was not an easy union. Bissell's view was,

"Many of the AVG pilots are [a] wild, undisciplined lot unsuitable for command of squadrons at present. They fight well but are probably overrated."

Perhaps so, but the Flying Tigers had beaten the Japanese regularly. The AAF needed them but was unwilling to make any concessions for their service so far. Promotions for them would be slim—even though promotions were generous for Stilwell's staff—and there would be no furloughs before they returned to combat. They could join the AAF as reservists, not regulars.

Bissell set the tone when he gathered the AVG at Kunming and threatened, "For any of you who don't join the Army, I can guarantee that your draft boards will be waiting for you when you step down a gangplank onto United States soil."

Only a few AVG pilots and ground personnel joined the China Air Task Force when it was formed in July 1942, although many of them extended their stay for a few weeks to help defend China through a critical period.

The CATF, commanded by Chennault, became US Fourteenth Air Force in March 1943. Chennault was promoted to major general March 14, but Bissell was promoted March 13, keeping his day of seniority.

Both Chiang and Chennault struggled constantly for more supplies, which were tightly controlled by Stilwell. Bissell wrote a negative efficiency report on Chennault, saying that he did not "render generous and willing support to plans of his superiors." Stilwell supported Bissell enthusiastically until Bissell was recalled in August 1943 at Chiang's request.

STILWELL'S INVECTIVE

Stilwell's dealings with Chiang were seldom tempered by any respect due Chiang as the head of state of an Allied nation. He regarded Chiang and the Nationalists as corrupt and repressive and said so, often in places where he knew word would get back to Chiang.

In his letters and papers, published after the war, Stilwell routinely referred to Chiang as "Peanut" and described him as "a grasping, bigoted, ungrateful little rattlesnake."

Lord Louis Mountbatten, chief of the British Southeast Asia command, was "Glamour Boy."

Elsewhere, Stilwell called the wheelchair-bound President Roosevelt "Rubberlegs."

Over time, Stilwell's criticism of Chiang came to be accepted by the War Department as authoritative. Less credence was given to reports from Chennault, who got along well with Chiang.

In 1943, Stilwell and Chennault were called to Washington for consultation and met with Roosevelt, who asked for their evaluations of Chiang. "He's a vacillating, tricky, undependable old scoundrel who never keeps his word," Stilwell said. Chennault disagreed, saying, "He has never broken a commitment or promise made to me."

Roosevelt liked Chennault and had him to the White House for three private meetings before he went back to China. FDR, apparently suspicious of the information he had been getting, invited Chennault to write to him directly, outside military channels.

"During the next 18 months, I wrote half-a-dozen personal letters to the President fulfilling this request and received personal notes of encouragement from him," Chennault said.

This direct access infuriated not only Stilwell but also Marshall and Arnold.

THE CHINA HANDS AND MAO

By contrast to his disdain for Chiang, Stilwell liked Mao and the Communists—or “the so-called Communists,” as he described them in his journal. His views were reinforced by several advisors lent to him by the US Embassy, notably John Paton Davies Jr. and John S. Service.

These advisors would later become famous as the State Department “China Hands” during the “Who Lost China?” political melodramas of the 1950s, but during World War II they were shuttling back and forth to Yen-an and filing favorable reports.



National Archives photo

Above: *The animosity between Stilwell (r), Chiang, and Madame Chiang had not yet reached its ultimate depth when this photo was taken in 1942. Facing page: Chennault in front of a Flying Tiger P-40 in Kunming, China, in November 1944, after Stilwell's recall from the theater. Chennault would soon be recalled as well.*

According to Davies, the Communists were mainly “agrarian reformers” and were “liberal, democratic, and soundly nationalistic.” The China Hands saw Mao as committed to the defeat of the Japanese. In fact, Mao’s secret instruction to his followers was, “Our fixed policy should be 70 percent expansion, 20 percent dealing with the Kuomintang, and 10 percent resisting Japan.”

Part of the legend was that Chiang would not fight and that the Communists suffered an undue share of the losses. Stilwell wrote that Chiang’s military effort between 1938 and 1944 was “practically zero.” In fact, the Nationalists fought thousands of battles and minor engagements and lost almost 600,000 men. Mao’s right-hand man, Chou En-lai, acknowledged that in the intense first three years of the war, the Communists had taken only three percent of the casualties.

US emissaries, visiting Yen-an despite Chiang’s disapproval, repeatedly sought to broker a partnership in which Chiang would remove his blocking force and the Communists would join in a unified Chinese effort against the Japanese. It did not happen because Mao’s price was representation in a coalition government, to which Chiang would not agree.

Stilwell never changed in his esteem for the Communists. In 1946, six months before his death, he took note of developments in China and wrote, “It makes me itch to throw down my shovel and get over there and shoulder a rifle with Chu Teh,” the senior Communist military commander.

STILWELL RECALLED

At the Cairo Conference in November 1943, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Chiang agreed on a new offensive in Burma, supported by a major British landing in the south. However, the British, rethinking the plan in view of requirements in Europe, canceled the landing.

With some reluctance, Chiang authorized Stilwell’s use of troops based in southwestern China as well as those who had remained in India since the walkout. They would fight in Burma under American command in cooperation with the British and a US commando force known as “Merrill’s Marauders.”

About the time the offensive in Burma began in early 1944, though, the Japanese struck with Operation Ichi-go, a major effort to capture Allied airfields in eastern China and establish an overland supply route from Korea to Indochina.

Stilwell did not want to divert any resources to eastern China and used his control of Lend Lease supplies to compel Chiang to follow Stilwell’s priorities. Once again, China had to rely on Chennault’s air forces for its main support.

Stilwell was critical of the effort, of course, but after the war, Lt. Gen. Hiroshi Takahashi, chief of Japanese forces in central Asia, said, “I judge the operations of the Fourteenth Air Force to have constituted between 60 and 75 percent of our effective opposition in China. Without the air force, we could have gone anywhere we wished.”

Stilwell rejected any suggestion to lessen the focus on Burma. He wanted the Nationalist and Communist armies

to be combined in common cause against the Japanese and all of them placed under Stilwell's command.

In July 1944, Roosevelt signed what amounted to an ultimatum, drafted by Marshall, telling Chiang that Stilwell had been promoted to four-star rank and urging that he be given command of the Chinese armies. It also said that if Chiang did not reinforce the Burma campaign, "you must be prepared to accept the consequences," which were not stated.

Boxed, Chiang had no choice but to accept a US commander of his armies—but it would not be Stilwell. Chiang wanted Stilwell removed. Marshall protested as best he could, but Stilwell's string had finally run out. He was recalled in October 1944 and replaced by Maj. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer.

Stilwell departed within 48 hours. He would not remain a single extra day to see Wedemeyer settled in, much less help him, nor did he leave so much as a scrap of paper to help with the transition.

On Stilwell's desk, Wedemeyer found numerous recommendations for battle awards and decorations from Fourteenth Air Force. Many had laid there for months without attention. Wedemeyer approved them immediately.

"As the weeks passed, I began to understand that the Nationalist government of China, far from being reluctant to fight as pictured by Stilwell and some of his friends among American correspondents, had shown amazing tenacity and endurance in resisting Japan," Wedemeyer wrote later.

In January 1945, the Allies finally reopened the land supply route into China as the first convoy rolled over the Ledo-Burma Road, 1,100 miles from India to Chungking. It no longer mattered much. The airlift across the hump of the Himalayas brought in seven times as much cargo per month as the trucks did.

Wedemeyer told Chennault that he was under orders from Marshall to "ease" him out. In July 1945, a message from Arnold advised Chennault to "take advantage of the retirement privileges now available" before he was "reduced and put back on the retired list" at his permanent rank.

Chennault was relieved of command July 6 and retired Oct. 31.

LEGENDS AND PERSPECTIVES

Some of the accusations against Chiang are valid. His Nationalist party was riddled with corruption. Chiang himself was a heavy-handed dictator and tolerant of cronies who were often crooked or incompetent.

Yet Chiang also held China for the Allies and tied down more than a million Japanese troops. He had little help, except from the AVG and Fourteenth Air Force. He fought and took casualties, which Mao seldom did.

Mao and the Communists turned out not to be agrarian reformers after all. Their People's Republic of China, established in 1949, set new records for oppression and misrule. Deaths from executions and famine in the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution are estimated in the tens of millions.

As for Chennault, he was undeniably headstrong and insubordinate, and he circumvented the chain of command

with regularity. To his credit, though, he was sincerely interested in the long-term security of China. Many Americans were not.

Chennault got results. Stilwell did not. Almost everything Chennault attempted, both with the AVG and Fourteenth Air Force, worked. Stilwell's mission failed in every respect. Chennault sometimes promised more than he could deliver, but he was hardly alone in that.

Arnold sided with Marshall against Chennault but even so, he recognized the extraordinary effectiveness of the AVG and Fourteenth Air Force under Chennault's command. The



USAF photo

AVG stopped the Japanese assault in China in 1941 and was the best of the Allied forces in Burma in the spring of 1942.

Chennault achieved strong results against Japanese shipping and infrastructure in 1943 to 1944. His operations may have been the difference in holding China in 1944, tied up an abundance of Japanese forces, and inflicted great damage and casualties on the enemy.

Any number of commanders with more resources and more support accomplished less than that. ✪

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