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HONORING THE TIGERS

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A MEMORIAL TO THE AMERICAN VOLUNTEER GROUP

On 11 November 2003, a memorial honoring the American Volunteer Group (AVG) Flying Tigers was dedicated in the city of Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. The dedication ceremony was attended by representatives from the AVG Flying Tigers Association, the American and British embassies, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF), and the Free Thai Movement. Hosting the event was the Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Thai Aircraft, a group dedicated to preserving Thailand's aviation heritage.

The memorial is a simple marble obelisk with inscriptions on each of its four sides. The front states simply: "In memory of American Volunteer Group (AVG) Flying Tigers and Free Thais." Below the English words, the statement is repeated in Thai script. An inscription on the side honors AVG Commander Claire Lee Chennault and three AVG pilots: Squadron Leader Jack Van Kuren, killed in north Thailand on 24 March 1942; Flight Leader Charles Mott and William McGarry, who were both held as POWs by the Japanese in Thailand.

The ceremony was simple and dignified. A color guard composed of USAF and RTAF airmen posted the colors. Pastor Bates of the Chiang Mai Community Church gave an address that spoke eloquently of service to country and put the AVG Flying Tigers into an historical context.

AVG pilot and Chiang Mai Raider Maj. Gen. Charles Bond described the 24 March 1942 AVG raid on the Japanese air base at Chiang Mai. Haze and darkness made it impossible to make out landmarks until Bond spotted Doi Suthep, the mountain that stands like a sentinel over the airfield. Bond had overflowed Chiang Mai before and now took the lead as the six AVG P-40s dove down to strafe the Japanese aircraft parked wingtip-to-wingtip on the ramp. The P-40s were so low that Bond could see Japanese pilots ducking their heads as they ran toward their fighters. Bond made a second and a third pass, then a fourth one as anti-

aircraft fire grew more intense. he noted that one P-40 went down; its pilot imprisoned by the Japanese but he would be rescued by the Free Thai. Listeners commented how moved they were by Maj. Gen. Bond's remarks and how his vivid description of the raid made them feel they were part of the action. An RTAF officer said that listening to Bond as RTAF OV-IO Broncos passed overhead gave him a bad case of goose bumps.

Wreaths were laid by Darryl Johnson, US Ambassador to Thailand, and Maj. Gen. Bond, and by the senior Free Thai representative, Prince Bhisatej Rajani. Also in attendance were US Deputy Assistant secretary of State Matthew Daley, former members of the Free Thai movement, and WWII veterans from Britain and the USA. The AVG Flying Tigers pilots attending were Charles Bond, Dick Rossi, Bob Layher, and Peter Wright.

The idea for the memorial began when AVG members and their families visited north Thailand in November 1994 to view the wreckage of William "Black Mac" McGarry's Curtiss P-40. The plane had crashed on the 24 March 1942 Chiang Mai raid. Japanese anti-aircraft fire was intense, but the six AVG Tomahawks that carried out the raid were credited with destroying 1 S Japanese aircraft on the ground. It was a significant victory at that early stage of the war when the Japanese seemed invincible and the Allies were seeing little but defeat in Asia.

While making a final strafing pass over the Chiang Mai field, McGarry's P-40 was struck by ground fire. McGarry tried to guide his damaged aircraft back to safety in Burma, but was unable to clear a ridge. he rolled the P-40 over, dropped out and parachuted into a jungle clearing. The aircraft crashed nearby. Its wreckage lay undisturbed in the dense jungle until it was discovered almost 50 years later by hill tribe hunters. In 1992, with the help of an RTAF helicopter, the Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Thai Aircraft moved the wreckage to the RTAF base at Chiang Mai, the same airfield the AVG attacked in March 1942.

During their 1994 visit to north Thailand, the AVG group also traveled to Lamphun, about 15 miles south of Chiang Mai, where John Van Kuren "Scarsdale Jack" Newkirk crashed on that same day in March 1942. Leader of the AVG's second Squadron "Panda Bears," Newkirk had been in the thick of the action during the early months of the war when the AVG fought alongside the Royal Air Force in defense of Burma. At the time of his death, Newkirk was one of America's leading aces, credited with 10.5 victories over Japanese aircraft. he was among the first Americans decorated by the British when he received the Distinguished Flying Cross a month before his death.

On 24 March, when the six-plane flight of P-40s led by Bob Neale attacked Chiang Mai, Newkirk led a second element of four P-40s against a Japanese field at Lampany some 40 miles southeast of Chiang Mai. When no Japanese aircraft were found there, Newkirk turned the flight back toward the main action at Chiang Mai. En route, just outside the town of Lamphun, he dove on a ground target, possibly a Japanese armored vehicle. His wingman saw a ball of fire and realized that Newkirk had crashed.

The precise location of Newkirk's crash was not known. In November 1992, after the discovery of McGarry's aircraft and its move to the RTAF base at Chiang Mai was publicized, an unknown man walked up to a gate guard at the base and handed him a shard of aluminum. A note identified it as coming from an American aircraft that had crashed at Lamphan on 24 March 1942.

A two-year investigation by the Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Thai Aircraft followed. Although the man who approached the gate was never found, the search found five witnesses who were children in 1942 when they witnessed Newkirk's crash and burial by the Japanese. During their visit to Lamphan, the Flying Tigers were taken to the sites where Newkirk crashed and had been buried, and then met with the Thai witnesses. Thai provincial authorities erected a memorial to Newkirk and expressed hope that it would one day be made permanent. (Years after the war, Newkirk's grave at Lamphun was located by a US military team and his remains were returned to the US. he was buried on 11 May 1949 in the yard of the Episcopalian Church of St. James the Less in Scarsdale, NY.)

The third pilot honored, Charles Mott, was among the Flying Tigers who visited Thailand in 1994- he was the first AVG pilot to be captured by the Japanese. It was 8 January 1942. The war was just a month old when Mott led four P-40s on one of the AVG's first raids against the Japanese. The target was an airfield at Mae Sot, Thailand, where Japanese aircraft were based. As Mott dove down and roared across the field strafing enemy aircraft, he was hit by ground fire and the Allison engine quit. He pulled his P-40 up to 300 feet and bailed out. His parachute opened almost immediately and then snagged in a tall tree. That probably saved his life, but a fall from the tree seriously injured him. The Japanese put him on a train and sent him to one of their compounds in Bangkok, where he was left to treat his own injuries. When he started to recover and tried to escape, the Japanese transferred him to the infamous POW camp at the River Kwai. He spent the remainder of the war working along the "death railway."

In the years that followed the 1994 AVG visit, Thais involved in the visit spoke of establishing a permanent memorial to Newkirk and the AVG. It was thought that any permanent memorial should be

placed at Chiang Mai, Thailand's second largest city and a popular holiday destination for Thais and foreign visitors. A memorial there would be easily accessible. The location selected for the memorial was the Chiang Mai foreign cemetery - a pleasant, well-located site that in the late 19th century was given by the Thai King in perpetuity to the foreign community.

It is significant that the Free Thai are part of the main inscription on the memorial's face. It was the Free Thai who freed "Black Mac" McGarry from Japanese captivity and assisted his exfiltration from Thailand. They were Thailand's anti-Japanese resistance movement. They operated behind the lines and worked closely with the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS). After Black Mac bailed out, he wandered the jungles for three weeks before being found by Thai police who had to turn him over to the Japanese. He was taken to Bangkok and held in a compound on the banks of the Chao Phya River. When AVG Commander Claire Chennault received a report that McGarry was a POW, re-requested the OSS to find and free him. The OSS turned the problem over to the Free Thai who located and freed the pilot. They took McGarry down the canals and rivers to the Gulf of Siam where the OSS sent two PBY Catalinas to pick him up. In his final weeks on the River Kwai, Charles Mott was also contacted by the Free Thai and guided through the jungle to a small airfield manned by the Free Thai and an OSS team.

A lunch hosted by the American Consul General at his residence, and a dinner at the Chiang Mai RTAF base hosted by the Foundation for the Preservation and Development of Thai Aircraft and RTAF Wing 41, was an opportunity for old allies to meet and talk. Among the officers of the Free Thai present was Piya Chakkapak, who was 18 years old when he joined the Free Thai. His father, also a Free Thai officer, was a government official in charge of all water transport. It was one of his boats that carried Black Mac to freedom. Dick Rossi and Roy Hudson, a young British Army officer in 1942, reviewed an AVG/RAF strafing mission directed at Japanese units marching on Rangoon, that came uncomfortably close to the British position. A Thai gentleman whose family residence stands not far off the Chiang Mai runway spoke of bullet holes found in the rafters during recent renovations - and he was referred to Maj. Gen. Bond.

The AVG memorial at Chiang Mai represents only a small part of the Flying Tigers' story. To all who see it, it will speak of the days when the AVG's shark-nosed P-40s prowled the skies over Thailand, China, and Burma.

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