



# FLIGHT-WATCH



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## THE MUSEUM OF AVIATION AT WARNER ROBBINS AIR FORCE BASE – A VIRTUAL SHRINE TO THE FLYING TIGERS

Recently, I had occasion to fly to Macon, borrow a car and visit the Museum of Aviation at Warner Robbins Air Force Base. Because Brigadier General Robert L. Scott has served on the Board of Directors of the Museum, I knew the Museum had a very strong influence in relation to the activities of the American Volunteer Group (“AVG”) [more commonly known as the Flying Tigers], General Claire Chennault, and the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force. On a number of occasions I

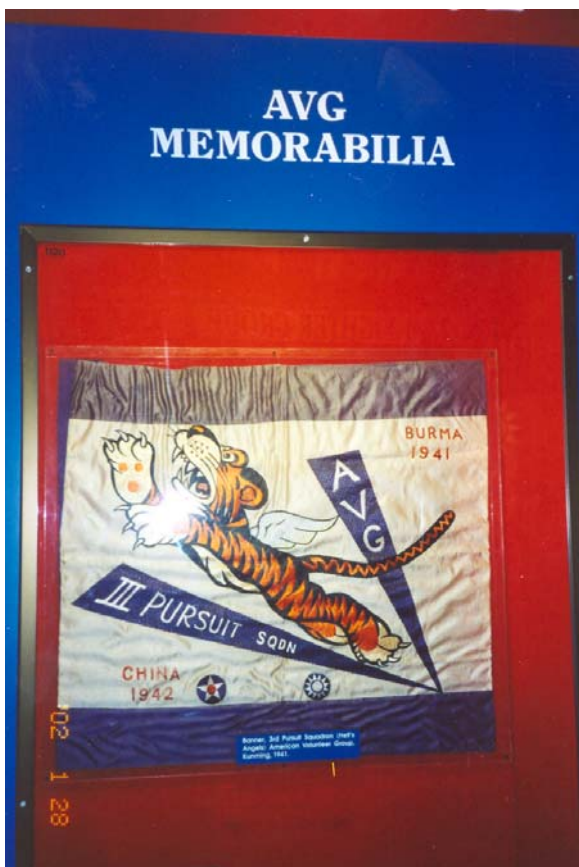


have visited the Museum and viewed the artifacts on the first floor. These artifacts are quite remarkable, including Claire Chennault’s logbook, flare pistol and desk nameplate, as well as a granite bust of Chennault. There is a diorama of Chennault giving a briefing to his pilots and a larger-than-life photograph of the pilots racing to their P-40 fighter planes. There is also a P-40 Kittyhawk in the colors of Robert L. Scott’s mount, “Old Exterminator.”

One of the squadron banners of the American Volunteer Group is displayed, along with the flag of the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force. The photographs and memorabilia on display are very unique. The displays are very attractive and very interesting.

What I did not know was about the treasure housed on the third floor. There is a

### American Volunteer Group Banner on Display at the Museum of Aviation at Warner Robbins Air Force Base





virtual shrine to the American Volunteer Group on the third floor of the main building of the museum. This red, white and blue display captioned “The American Volunteer Group” features oil paintings commissioned by William Pawley and done by renowned artist Raymond P. R. Neilson. For those of you not familiar with Mr. Pawley, he was the President of Intercontinent Corporation, which was the parent corporation of the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company (“CAMCO”). Pawley was in China when the Sino-Japanese War erupted in 1937. Pawley spent his own funds to have the Curtiss-Wright CW-21 fighter plane developed that would be a fast-climbing interceptor that, hopefully, would stave off the hordes of Japanese airplanes. While the CW-21 fighter plane was not an amazing success, William Pawley was very successful in his efforts to bring about the formation of a guerrilla air force in China.

One of William Pawley’s confederates was a retired Navy Lieutenant Commander named Bruce Leighton. A Naval Academy graduate, Leighton served as a pilot in the Middle East, and he served under the command of Kelly Turner, who would

one day rise to prominence and to the rank of admiral in the United States Navy. It was Leighton who approached Major Rodney Boone in the Office of Naval Intelligence, Far Eastern Section, on January 17, 1940, and proposed the formation of an American “guerrilla air corps.” Leighton’s idea was to have the United States Government guarantee loans by the Import-Export Bank to the Republic of China. The funds from these loans would be employed to finance a guerrilla air force in

China consisting of American fighters, American bombers and American pilots. Leighton’s idea was to develop a guerilla air corps as a “commercial venture” without any direct ties to the United States government.

While Claire Chennault gets the credit for leading the American Volunteer Group in combat and devising tactics that would confound and defeat the Japanese, the groundwork laid by Lieutenant Commander Bruce Leighton has been somewhat overlooked by historians.

William Pawley was President of both Intercontinent Corporation and CAMCO, and Leighton was a Vice President of both companies. CAMCO had an aircraft factory in Loiwing in southwestern (Yunnan Province) China, just north of the Chinese border with Burma. Leighton had essentially pitched the idea of a “turn key” operation to the United States Navy for the organization of a guerrilla air corps in China using CAMCO’s facility in Loiwing as the foundation for this plan.

Twenty-seven members of the American Volunteer Group were killed in action. William Pawley, as a tribute to these noble men, commissioned Neilson to do twenty-seven oil paintings of these gallant warriors. The twenty-seven paintings were initially unveiled in a memorial function held at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. in 1945. Initially, they were exhibited there for some time, as well as at other locations. Eventually, the paintings were acquired by the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University for its Museum of Aviation and later purchased by former World War Two hump pilot, Captain Dudley Whitman. Captain Whitman was a friend of the Pawley family, and he donated the twenty-seven oil paintings to the Museum of Aviation at Warner Robbins Air Force Base.

It is true there is a display at the Na-

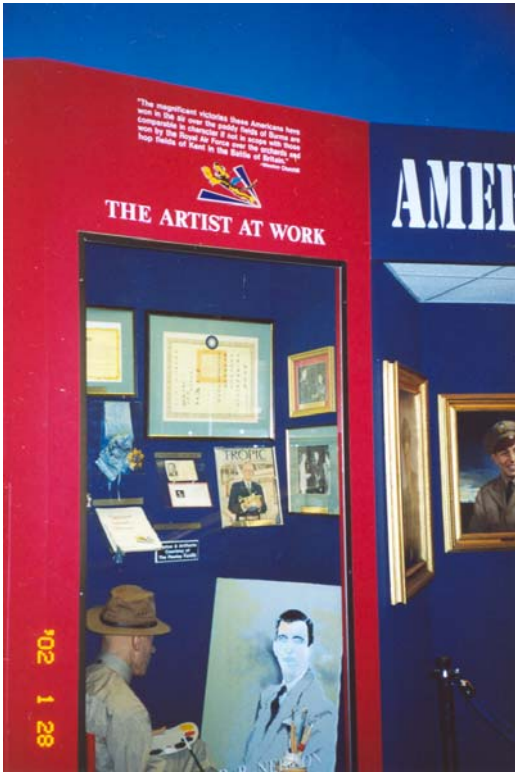


tional Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola, Florida, which serves as a tribute to the memory of those who served in the American Volunteer Group. There are other museums around the country which pay tribute to the AVG/Flying Tigers. However, no other museum in America has the twenty-seven oil paintings commissioned by William Pawley honoring the twenty-seven warriors who died in combat in the service of China while members of the American Volunteer Group.

There is also on display a large painting of Mr. Pawley, together with some of Mr. Pawley's artifacts, including awards issued to him by the Republic of China, a written commendation from the Chinese government, and a number of photographs of Mr. Pawley with Chiang Kai-shek, Madame Chiang, and President Harry Truman. In fact, in addition to the twenty-seven paintings of the AVG heroes commissioned by Pawley, Pawley also had Neilson do a painting of President Truman.

There is not enough room to display all twenty-seven paintings of the AVG heroes at one time. At the time I visited the museum, oil paintings of the following AVG members were on display: (1) John Van Kuren (Scarsdale Jack) Newkirk, Second Squadron Leader; (2) Robert Laing Little, Flight Leader; (3) Thomas Arnold Jones, Vice-Squadron Leader; (4) Burton Littleton Hooker, Jr., Parachute Rigger; (5) Louis (Cokey) Hoffman, Flight Leader; (6) Henry George Gilbert, Wingman; (7) Maax Curtis Hammer, Wingman; (8) Ben Crum Foshee, Wingman; (9) John Edward Fauth, Crew Chief; and (10) Robert James (Sandy) Sandell, First Squadron Leader.

### Portrait of William Pawley



**Artifacts relative to William Pawley**



**Flight Jackets**

The Museum of Aviation in Warner Robins, Georgia, has on display a very moving and attractive shrine honoring the members of the American Volunteer Group who gave their lives in the service of China.



**Claire Chennault and pilots with banner of the China Air Task Force**

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