CHINA'S AMERICAN ACE

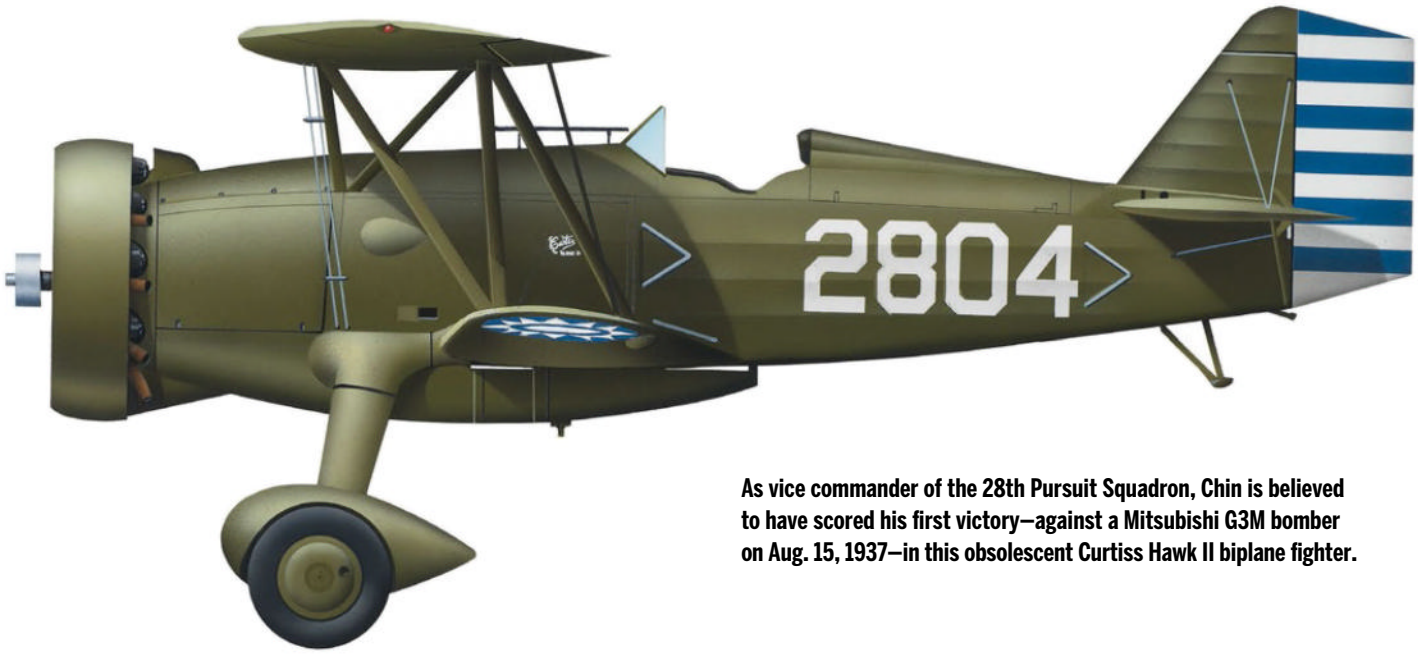
Compelled by his ancestry to enter the air war over China, Art Chin fought the Japanese with uncommon courage and at great personal sacrifice By Ron Soodalter

Aug. 3, 1938. Round after round from three Japanese Mitsubishi A5M fighters' 7.7mm machine guns slammed into the lone Chinese biplane. The aircraft—a British-built Gloster Gladiator—was taking a terrific beating. The attackers had shot away wires bracing the biplane's wings, compromising its ability to maneuver, and the fuselage had been irreparably damaged. The only thing keeping its lone pilot from being shot to pieces was a single steel plate—a remnant from a wrecked Russian fighter—that his ground crew had installed behind the seat just the night before.

Flames suddenly erupted from the Gladiator's engine, the slipstream whipping fiery tendrils back over the cockpit. Unless the pilot bailed out immediately, he faced agony and almost certain death. His guns out of ammunition, the man instead flew his ruined aircraft directly into one of his attackers,

COURTESY JOHN GONG

Born in the USA: Art Chin poses in uniform soon after scoring his first “kill” for China in 1937.



As vice commander of the 28th Pursuit Squadron, Chin is believed to have scored his first victory—against a Mitsubishi G3M bomber on Aug. 15, 1937—in this obsolescent Curtiss Hawk II biplane fighter.

ripping the tail from the enemy fighter. Only then, as both doomed planes spun wildly toward the earth, did the biplane pilot—a young man from Oregon—leap from the cockpit.

Americans in the early 1930s had a lot on their minds. The country was in the throes of the Great Depression, a fiscal disaster that had ruined countless lives and sparked widespread social upheaval. One thing most people *didn't* have on their minds was another international conflict. *The* World War had ended more than a dozen years earlier, and America would not find itself enmeshed in another global cataclysm until the beginning of the next decade.

In Portland, Ore., however, the minds of a dozen or so Chinese-American high school boys were very much focused on a specific, faraway war. Their parents' homeland was under attack—the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria was the most recent instance of Tokyo's continued aggression in the region—and the young men felt compelled to help defend it. They planned to travel to China, where some would earn glory in battle, while others would perish. One of those young men would achieve ace status in the Chinese Nationalist air force, win every air combat medal that nation could award and—at great personal cost—become America's first World War II–era ace.

The teenager turned combat pilot's name was spelled and pronounced differently in Mandarin, Cantonese and other Chinese dialects—and sometimes in English—but his birth certificate identified him as Arthur Chin. He was born in Portland on Oct. 23, 1913, to a father of Chinese descent and a Peruvian mother, and grew into a trim, doe-eyed youth with delicately handsome features. In 1931, while studying aircraft maintenance at Portland's Benson Polytechnic High School, Chin was one of a handful of Chinese-American students tapped for flying lessons under the tutelage of pioneering aviator Al Greenwood, an opportunity that would change the course of their lives.

Members of Portland's Chinese-American community footed the bill for training, their motives based less on altruism than on China's pressing need for fighter pilots. Hampering that nation's efforts to combat the Japanese were its clashing political factions and lack of adequate military resources—notably an acute shortage of combat pilots. Wanting in on the fight as soon as possible, Chin and his fellow trainees dropped out of school after earning their pilots' licenses and sailed for Canton.

Soon after arriving in China, Art Chin was given the rank of probationary warrant officer in the Cantonese air force. He and his colleagues trained under American instructors, learning the essentials of pursuit, bombardment and reconnaissance while flying a variety of largely outmoded aircraft. By 1936 Chin was a second lieutenant, and he and other promising pilots were sent to Bavaria to undergo advanced aerial gunnery training with the *Luftwaffe*, Nazi Germany's rapidly expanding air force. After six months of intense hands-on instruction, Chin returned to Canton, where he was promoted to first lieutenant and named a flight leader and instructor. By that point Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government had absorbed the Cantonese military, and Chin was an officer in the Republic of China Air Force.

In June 1937 Chin took over as vice commander of the 5th Pursuit Group's 28th Pursuit Squadron. One of the American officers with whom he worked was Colonel Claire Lee Chennault, who arrived in China that year to serve as Chiang's chief advisor on military aviation. Chennault would later win international renown as commander of the American Volunteer Group—the famed "Flying Tigers"—and would play a significant role in Chin's future.

IMAGE FROM OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES #126 ACES OF THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA AIR FORCE, BY RAYMOND CHELING © OSPREY PUBLISHING, LTD; OPPOSITE: COURTESY JOHN GONG (2)

Up till then Chin had spent most of his five years in China in training. Everything changed on July 7, 1937. On that day Japan invaded China in earnest, commencing what has come to be known in the West as the Second Sino-Japanese War, or in China as the War of Resistance Against Japan.

Though it had aggressively trained volunteers such as Chin and fellow pilots and built aviation factories in Shanghai and other cities, the Chinese Nationalist air force was woefully ill-equipped to confront Japan's aerial might. Further, China's desperate need to acquire sufficient aircraft and equipment made the country susceptible to financial and technological exploitation. Aviation "advisers" from Italy, Germany, England and eventually Russia took full advantage of that vulnerability to sell China a grab bag of their respective nations' airplanes, many of which were in various stages of obsolescence.

American aviation representative William D. Pawley was no exception, having sold China on the Curtiss Hawk. An outmoded biplane, the Hawk was armed with just two wing-mounted machine guns and had a maximum air speed barely above 200 mph. Yet at the beginning of the war Hawk IIs and IIIs were the Chinese air force's main pursuit fighters, a role for which they would prove decidedly inadequate.

On Aug. 15, 1937, the 28th Pursuit Squadron was deployed to the airfield in Chuyung (Jurong), east of Nanking, where it joined the 17th PS, each unit comprising 10 aircraft. Early the next morning six Japanese Mitsubishi G3M bombers raided the airfield, catching the Chinese unawares. Just four 17th PS planes managed to get airborne, joined by two of the 28th's Hawk IIs, one piloted by Art Chin.

After dropping their ordnance, the Japanese bombers turned for home and picked up speed. Chin struggled to keep up in his slower Hawk, yet he managed to put some 58 rounds into one of the G3Ms, holing its fuel tanks, wounding a crewman and forcing it to make what the Japanese recorded as an "unscheduled landing." To boost morale the Chinese officially scored it as Chin's first kill, though during the chase the young aviator's little biplane almost became a statistic, taking more than 100 hits, two to its engine. Chin, by then a consummate pilot, was able to coax his smoking, coughing ship down to a rough, nose-down landing at a secondary airstrip.

Though Chin managed to score his second kill—another G3M—on September 27, the Chinese fighter planes were constantly outgunned, outperformed and outnumbered by the Japanese. By late 1937 the Hawk IIs were all but gone, with Chinese factory workers laboring desperately to patch together a dozen or so replacements from the parts of downed planes. That fall China sought to stem the rapidly mounting losses by ordering 36 Gloster Gladiator Mk I fighters from Britain and on delivery assigned them to the 17th, 28th and 29th squadrons. The Gladiators were bi-

Top: Chin and wife Eva Wu enjoy a rare day out. She would later give her life to save his. Right: By 1939 Chin had been promoted to major and made deputy commander of 3rd Pursuit Group, based in Lanzhou.

Out of ammunition, his plane badly shot up and progressively losing control, it was then he decided to take one of the enemy with him

planes—the last to be used by the Royal Air Force—armed with Vickers machine guns and able to achieve speeds upward of 250 mph. According to one respected British officer and test pilot of the era, the type was "undoubtedly one of the greatest biplane fighters ever built." Unfortunately, China's Gladiators would be flying against the new breed of monoplane fighters, which were faster, more maneuverable and better armed. It was an uneven contest from the start.

Regardless, the Chinese pilots coaxed the best possible performance from their Gladiators. Chin shot down a Nakajima E8N reconnaissance seaplane in late May 1938 and his third G3M bomber just a few weeks later. He was also credited with damaging another bomber. These victories and his obvious leadership skills earned him promotion to captain and command of the 28th Squadron.

On the evening of August 2 Chin's mechanics installed the steel plate behind his seat—as it turned out, a timely modification. The next morning, responding to a report of nearly 50 Japanese bombers and fighter escorts inbound toward Hankou, the Chinese put an equal number of fighters in the air. Thirty-three of the aircraft were slow, antiquated Russian models. The remainder comprised 11 Gladiators and seven Hawk IIIs, an improved version of the earlier Hawk II. Chin commanded seven of the Gladiators. To escort its bombers, the Japanese had selected the deadly new Mitsubishi A5M, the world's first carrier-based monoplane fighter and the direct predecessor of the A6M (better known by its Japanese nickname *Reisen*, or "Zero Fighter").

According to one estimate, Chin's group of seven Gladiators was set upon by more than 30 A5Ms. Chin himself came under attack by a number of the enemy fighters. Out of ammunition, his plane badly shot up and progressively losing control, it was then he decided to take one of the enemy with him. Claire Chennault recalled the action in his autobiography, *Way of a Fighter*:

> *In a fight against heavy odds…[Chin] was trapped by four Jap fighters. Unable to escape the deadly loop attack, he deliberately rammed the Jap leader as he came in for the kill. Both planes burst into flames, but Art hit the silk safely. The three remaining Japs kept him busy slipping his chute as they fired many bursts at him on the way down.*

Chin landed safely in a field. "He was wounded and slightly burned," wrote Chennault, "yet when we found him, he was directing the salvage of the precious machine guns from his wrecked plane. With a grin he held up one of the guns and turned to me: 'Sir, can I have another airplane for my machine gun?'"

The ramming of the A5M brought Art Chin's total of aerial victories to five and a half, making him the first American to achieve ace status in action against Japanese forces. And he reached that milestone more than three years before the attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II.

But as Chennault later noted, Chin's talents as a combat aviator were not confined to fighters—he was also an exceptional bomber pilot. Although trained in pursuit tactics, he and his comrades were occasionally assigned ground-attack missions. "When our strategy called for a bombing," Chin later recalled, "we had no bombers." Instead, they had ground crews secure 100-pound bombs to the wings of lightweight wood-and-fabric Douglas two-seater trainers. Then, under cover of darkness, they would fly high, shut off their engines, glide over the targets and drop their bombs. They'd continue gliding until beyond the range of the enemy sound detectors, praying their engines would start again. "Sometimes they wouldn't start up, of course," Chin recalled. "So sometimes we wouldn't come back."

As the air war dragged on, living conditions for the Chinese aviators took a nosedive. With the Japanese targeting their airfields and factories, they kept on the move, foraging for food and ranging about for places to sleep. As one period chronicler wrote: "There were no doctors, no nurses, no medical kits, no sanitation, no recreation and, for months and years on end, no furloughs. It was war at its grimmest and dreariest, a losing war without even the wine of hope or the solid food of frequent victories."

Chinese Aces 1937–45

The Republic of China Air Force purportedly awarded pilots Star Medals for each confirmed aerial victory, but the policy was inconsistent in practice. For example, John Wong was credited with six kills but only received four stars, while ace of aces Liu Chi-sheng got nine.

Chu Chia-hsun 5

Chow Chi-kai 5

Loh Ying-teh 5⅓

An illustration by Y.M. Liang depicts Chin's bailout after he crashed his Gloster Gladiator into a Mitsubishi A5M on Aug. 3, 1938. Chin, wounded and slightly burned, chuted to safety.

MING-LIANG/COURTESY JOHN GONG

Attrition rates were staggering. Downed planes became increasingly harder to replace, as did parts, fuel, ammunition and men. The odds against a pilot returning from a mission unscathed grew increasingly higher as the months passed. Chin himself had been wounded and shot down three times since the fighting began, walking away each time. Finally, however, the odds caught up with him.

By December 1938 Chin had increased his victory total to eight and a half, earned promotion to major and become deputy commander of the 3rd Pursuit Group. At that point most of the original 50 Gladiators had been destroyed or damaged beyond repair. So between August and December 1939 Chin and two other pilots waged a small-scale guerrilla campaign, harassing the Japanese in three of the remaining planes.

Two days after Christmas the pilots were assigned to escort a flight of three Soviet SB-2 bombers in support of the pivotal Battle of Kunlun Pass in Guangxi province. As the flight approached the target zone, the Chinese escorts fended off attack by at least 15 Japanese fighters. After seeing the bombers through their mission, the three Chinese fighters then fought a desperate but doomed rearguard action. The Japanese quickly shot down one of Chin's wingmen and strafed and wounded the other.

As Chin maneuvered to cover his wounded comrade, a Japanese bullet struck his Gladiator's fuel tank, sparking an explosion that engulfed the biplane—and its pilot—in flames. His face and hands on fire, Chin managed to steer over friendly territory, then turned the plane on its side and slid out of the cabin, pulling the ripcord as he fell. Though the pilot's chute remained miraculously functional and opened perfectly, the Japanese pilots took turns trying to finish what they'd started. "They tried to shoot me all the way down to the jungle," Chin later told an interviewer. "I could hear the bullets whizzing past me." To evade the enemy fire he tugged the parachute's risers to skew it from side to side. The maneuver succeeded, but it also sped his descent and fanned the flames still licking over him. Slapping furiously at his flight suit, he managed to claw off his burning helmet and boots.

Chin came down in a rice paddy, landing hard on his bare, scorched feet. After peeling off what was left of his flight suit,

John Poon-yeung Wong (left) and Art Chin pose by a Polikarpov I-15bis fighter marked with the Chinese characters for *New York*. Neither ace scored while flying the Soviet fighter.

he snatched up his pistol and hobbled to a nearby village. Residents laid him on a makeshift stretcher fashioned from a ladder, covered him with the remnants of his parachute and carried him to a nearby Chinese army outpost. Chin recognized the commander, with whom he'd had dinner just the night before—but the man couldn't recognize him.

The semiconscious pilot was in terrible pain. He had burns over most of his body. His hands were particularly bad, while his once-handsome face was a charred mask, the skin all but gone along with his eyebrows, eyelids and most of his nose. His eyes were swollen shut, and he was wholly dependent on his rescuers.

The nearest hospital was in Liuchow (Liuzhou), the site of Chin's airfield. Blind and in agony, he made the two-day trip jouncing in the back of an army truck over rough mountain roads. The hospital was not equipped to deal with the young pilot's horrific injuries, and he was told he'd be flown to Hong Kong the next morning. He asked to be taken to his quarters for the night.

Amid the chaos of the previous few years Chin had somehow managed to court and marry an attractive young Chinese woman—Yuet Mei, known in English as Eva Wu—and had fathered two sons, who were now 1 and 2. As he lay moaning on his bed, Eva layered his face and body with damp tea leaves to ease his pain. The following morning, as they prepared for the flight to Hong Kong, sirens warned of an imminent Japanese air raid. In the interest of time Chin ordered his wife to take the children to the bomb shelter and leave him on his bed.

As a string of enemy bombs marched across the airfield, Eva left the children in the shelter and ran to her husband. She had just thrown herself over Chin in an effort to protect him when a bomb exploded yards outside the door. Struck by shrapnel, Eva died instantly, her arms still wrapped protectively around her injured husband.

Chin and his sons ultimately flew to Hong Kong, where the burned pilot underwent a series of painful skin grafts. It soon became clear, however, his best option was to return stateside for treatment. With the help of Claire Chennault and Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Chin scheduled a flight home. He never made the flight, however, for on his day of departure the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and attacked Hong Kong. Officials ultimately smuggled Chin and his sons out of the city in a wagon filled with Chinese corpses, recent victims of Japanese raids.

The following year—after a circuitous odyssey by foot, truck, boat and transport plane—the trio arrived in New York. There, Chin entered Presbyterian Hospital, where

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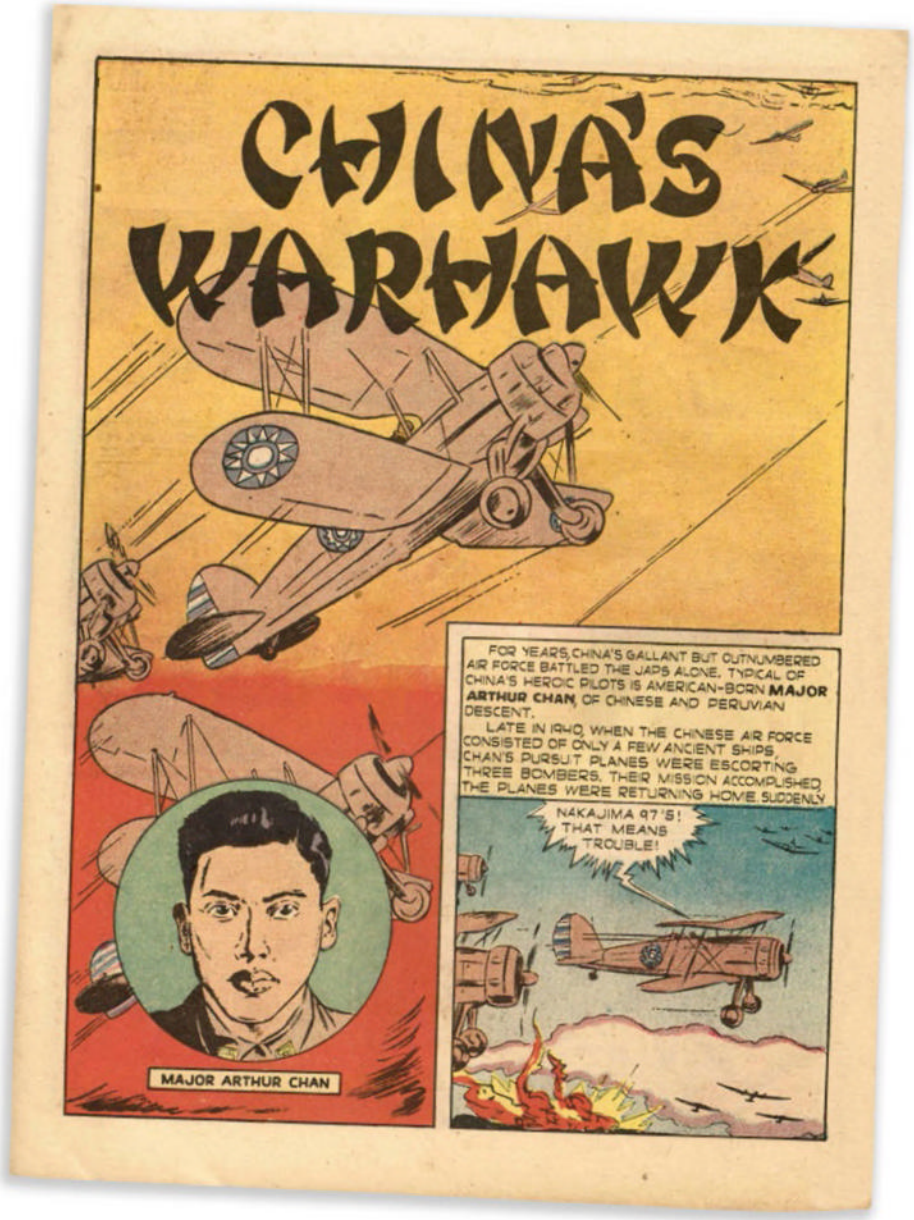

A comic book depicting Chin's aerial exploits erred in a few key details, such as omitting the canopy and wing guns on his Gloster Gladiator and, worse, misspelling his surname.

over the following three years a skilled plastic surgeon remade his fire-ravaged face—though as a friend wrote in 1944 after visiting Chin in the hospital, "This substitute face is not one that his family and friends in his hometown of Portland, Ore., will recognize."

While Chin lay healing, the people of Oregon —with the support of the governor—raised $50,000 and bought the injured pilot his own North American P-51 Mustang with which to continue his war with Japan. Chin had not been medically cleared to fly at that point, so he did his part for the war effort by speaking at war bond rallies and on radio alongside such celebrities as Milton Berle and George Raft.

Once fully recovered, Chin did return to Asia. In March 1945 he was officially discharged from the Republic of China Air Force and promptly joined the U.S. Army Air Forces. Back on flight status, he served out the war transporting vital supplies from India to China over the perilous trans-Himalayan route known as the "Hump." After the Japanese surrender in September 1945 he left the USAAF and flew for the China National Aviation Corp., finally returning to the States in 1950 following the communist takeover of China.

Sadly, the man who had won countless medals fighting the Japanese was unable to find a job with any of the U.S. commercial airlines, apparently due to his disfigurement. Chin took what work he could find, initially digging ditches and then working at the U.S. Post Office in Beaverton, Ore. Modest to a fault, the former airman never shared his wartime experiences with his colleagues, even after belatedly receiving both the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal in 1995.

The dropout turned flying ace went back to earn his high school diploma in 1986, graduating in the same class as his grandson. Art Chin died on Sept. 3, 1997, in his hometown. A month later the Commemorative Air Force posthumously inducted him into its American Combat Airman Hall of Fame. In 2008 Oregon Congressman David Wu of Portland sponsored a bill to rename the Beaverton postal branch the Major Arthur Chin Post Office Building. Congress approved the measure unanimously. **MH**

Ron Soodalter is a regular contributor to Military History. *For further reading he recommends* Aces of the Republic of China Air Force*, by Raymond Cheung, and* Way of a Fighter*, by Claire Lee Chennault.*

After years of painful recovery Chin took part in war bond rallies such as this 1944 event with New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia.

COURTESY JOHN GONG (3)