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MEMORIAL DAY 2011: As a young man in China in World War II, John Yee served with the Flying Tigers. But his adopted country has denied him veteran’s status.



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WWII Chinese translator denied U.S. veterans status but says record speaks for itself

By Sara Burnett
The Denver Post

Posted: 05/29/2011 01:00:00 AM MDT

Updated: 05/29/2011 01:51:00 PM MDT

John Yee was just 19 when the Japanese began attacking his hometown of Kunming, China, almost 70 years ago.

The air-raid sirens would sound and the people would run for cover, defenseless against what happened next. Bombs exploded upon impact, littering the streets with bodies and body parts. With no electricity, the night skies filled only with the sound of weeping.

By then, Japanese forces had rolled through much of China, and the outmatched Chinese military seemed unable to stop them.

But half a world away, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration had authorized a secret unit that would change the course of the war in Asia. Soon, Yee would find himself working as a translator to Claire Lee Chennault and the American Volunteer Group, the aviation legends who became famously known as the Flying Tigers.

Now an American citizen and a retired high

school history teacher living in Aurora, Yee is one of the last men alive today to have served with Chennault and the original Flying Tigers.

His unique spot in history — a member of the Chinese air force who served with a secret American unit, then traveled to the United States and was allowed to stay for fear of reprisals in Communist China — means he has never been officially recognized as a veteran by the country he served and has called home for more than 65 years.

At 89, Yee is unbothered by what the government says he is or isn't. He has made a remarkable life for himself here in America — a life that never would have been, if not for a critical, clandestine maneuver set in motion months before the United States had entered World War II.

Roosevelt OKs secret outfit

With Japan's brutal occupation spreading across China in the late 1930s, the leader of China hired Chennault, a retired U.S. Army Air Corps captain, to serve as an adviser to the Chinese air force.

In their World War I-era planes, the Chinese were heavily



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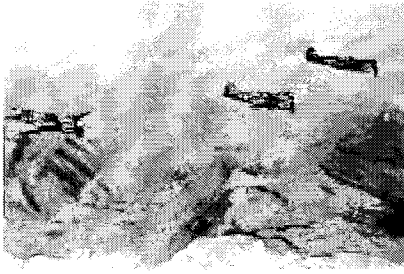
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Flying Tigers hunt for Japanese planes above mountains in China in 1945. The pilots flew their P-40s under unorthodox "dive-and-zoom" rules that were designed to increase their firepower and protection. (Associated Press file)

outmatched by Japanese military aviation. If China was going to stop the Japanese from bombing its cities at will, Chennault needed new planes and the pilots trained to fly them.

Chennault traveled to the U.S., where Roosevelt recognized the danger of China falling to Japan and agreed to help.

Word went out to U.S. military bases that pilots willing to volunteer would be handsomely rewarded and could have their posts back when they returned. So as not to rouse suspicion, as the men shipped off to Burma for training in the summer of 1941, they carried passports with false names that stated they were missionaries and doctors.

In Kunming, John Yee — then a student at Southwest Union University — heard the military was looking for translators. Having seen his country, and now his city, falling to the Japanese, he didn't hesitate to join.

Chennault, who had also secured planes intended for the British, began studying and strategizing. The P-40 fighters the Americans would be flying were slow but with good diving

speed, he knew. The Japanese Zeros were lighter and faster, but not well-constructed.

Chennault created hard-and-fast rules for his fliers: Never engage in a dogfight; fly in pairs to increase firepower and protection; and fly high, then dive and shoot.

Yee worked mostly in flight control, listening to messages radioed in from farmers across the countryside who spotted Japanese planes, then plotting them on a

grid to determine in which direction the fighters were flying and how soon they would arrive.

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In 1944, John Yee traveled to the U.S. to train members of the Chinese air force. A year later, the war ended. When it came time for Yee to return to China, he petitioned for a reprieve, and in 1952, became a U.S. citizen. A request in 1991 for veterans status was denied. (Mahala Gaylord, The Denver Post)

On Dec. 20, 1941 — just two weeks after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor — 10 Japanese bombers left Hanoi, in what was then French Indochina, headed for Kunming, unaware of what awaited them.

"By God, we got one of 'em"

Alerted to the Japanese approach, the American Volunteer Group fighters flew high into the sky and waited. As the enemy planes approached Kunming, the P-40s began diving and firing.

From the ground, Yee saw one Japanese plane fall, then another and another. Soon the Japanese retreated, but in the end, only one of the 10 planes escaped.

A newspaper reporter later wrote that the P-40s were "like tigers flying through the sky." Someone approached Chennault with the name, and the "Flying Tigers" were born.

Yee, who had once found his neighbor's entire family dead in his garden from the Japanese

bombs, said that day's victory brought a much-needed sense of hope to his country.

"For the first time in the history of the war, the Japanese had been shot down," Yee recalled. "That put some joy into the Chinese — by God, we got one of 'em."

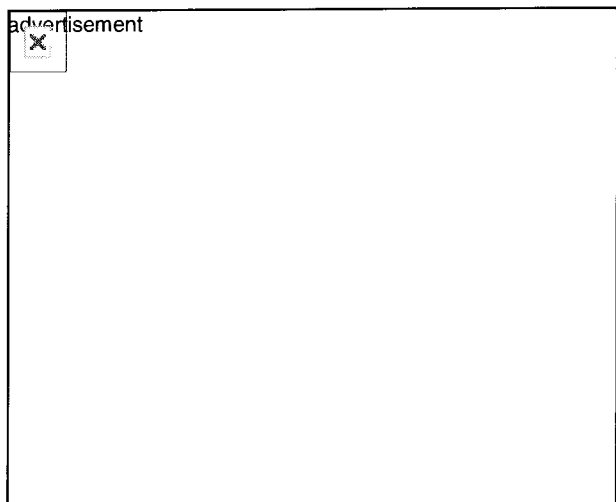
As the fighting continued, Chennault's men set a new record for aerial combat victories. Walt Disney himself designed a logo for the Flying Tigers — a "V" for Victory, with a winged tiger in the middle.

Before the American Volunteer Group, or AVG, disbanded July 4, 1942, every member received a pin with the famed logo. John Yee was among them.

U.S. citizenship granted

Yee continued to work as a translator when the U.S. military replaced the AVG. In 1944, he traveled to the United States to help train the Chinese air force.

A year later, the war came to an end. When it came time for Yee to return to China, he petitioned for a reprieve. By then the Communists had begun taking over China, and Yee believed anyone with connections to the



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United States would be killed.

Several officers, including Chennault, wrote letters in support of Yee's immigration application. In 1952, he became a U.S. citizen. After earning a degree in history from the University of Denver, he started teaching in 1956.

In 1991, the Department of Defense announced that anyone who helped defeat the Japanese through service in the AVG was eligible to apply for veterans status.

Yee's request was denied, however, because while he has letters from Chennault and other officers, his Flying Tigers pin and other proof of his service, the Air Force determined Yee was missing key paperwork — namely, documentation that he was employed by the same company that paid the Americans or an honorable discharge from the AVG.

Yee's situation makes it unclear whether such documents exist, either here or in China. Even U. S. Sen. Mark Udall's office — which contacted the Air Force on Yee's behalf — has been unable to find them.

The denial means that while he helped the AVG turn back the Japanese, attended AVG reunions for years and once served as president of the Colorado chapter of the China Burma India Veterans Association, Yee has never collected veterans benefits, isn't eligible for Department of Veterans Affairs health care, and won't receive military honors when he dies.

Now resigned to his situation, Yee insists that when he looks back on his life, it's not the recognition that matters.

In 1980, Yee was integral in getting Kunming named Denver's eighth sister city. Over the years, he traveled to Kunming with groups of teachers and even then-Mayor Wellington Webb. He taught thousands of students over his career,

and earlier this month, the National Association of Asian American Professionals, Colorado honored him with its lifetime achievement award.

"I think what I've done speaks for itself," Yee says.

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