

# Chinese-American Ace

After surviving a horrific cockpit fire, Art Chin continued serving in defense of his ancestral homeland

In his later years, acquaintances said it was difficult to tell Art Chin's age; most of his face had been burned away in a fiery shootdown, and the scar tissue covering it was smoother than his natural skin would have been. He had once been movie star handsome, but now his only recognizable original features were his eyes. Despite all he'd been through—frustrations, crashes, defeats, his first wife dying in his arms—his eyes had kept their twinkle. And after all Chin had suffered, he campaigned for war bonds, posing for photos with his pipe jutting at a jaunty angle. When he was well enough he went back to flying, this time over the Himalayas, on a route dubbed the "Aluminum Trail" because of the hundreds of airplane wrecks that marked its course.

Arthur Tien Chin (Chin Shui-Tin) became an eight-victory ace during a combat career that ended two years before his country officially entered World War II. Born on October 23, 1913, he grew up in Portland, Ore. In the early 1930s, he and a number of other promising young Chinese-American students entered flight training at the Al Greenwood flying school in Portland, supported by the local Chinese community. The Japanese were on the march in Asia at the time, and Japan's annexation of Manchuria in 1932 confirmed the suspicions of many about its designs on China.

Determined to save their ancestral homeland and buoyed by the best wishes of their neighbors and friends, Chin and 11 other young Chinese Americans set forth in 1933 to volunteer to fly for China. When they arrived, the official Chinese air force was not interested in their services. However, Art and some of his colleagues were able to sign on with the largest and best equipped of the regional air forces, the Canton Air Corps, under de facto warlord Chen Chidang. Ultimately this served as a kind of back-



Art Chin (right) poses with a squadron mate next to a new Polikarpov I-152 in 1938.

door induction when, in the summer of 1936, the entire Canton Air Corps defected to the central government.

Chin and four other pilots were selected for advanced fighter training, ironically in Germany with the nascent Luftwaffe. That may seem odd in light of the WWII German-Italian-Japanese Axis, but during the 1930s China was a major arms purchaser from Germany and relied on the Germans and Italians, among others, for advice and training in many military specialties. The course

was conducted at the historic Lager Lechfeld airfield in Bavaria, at that time used by the Bavarian Aircraft Works.

Starting out as a warrant probationary pilot (for \$10 a month), Chin became an instructor, squadron commander and finally deputy group commander, rising to the rank of major. He scored his first kill, a Mitsubishi G3M bomber, on August 16, 1937, while flying a Curtiss Hawk III with the 28th Pursuit Squadron, 5th Pursuit Group. In the next two years he transitioned to the

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Gloster Gladiator Mk. I and the Polikarpov I-152 (or I-15bis). Six of his eight victories came in the Gladiator, and although he appears to have checked out in the I-152, he never claimed a kill while flying one.

One of Chin's better-known dogfights occurred on August 3, 1938, when he engaged three Mitsubishi A5M Type 96 fighters. According to Claire Chennault (later of Flying Tigers fame, but at that time an adviser to the Chinese air force) in his memoir *Way of a Fighter*, Chin "deliberately rammed the Jap leader as he came in for the kill. Both planes burst into flame but Art hit the silk safely....He was wounded and slightly burned, yet when we found him he was directing the salvage of the precious machine guns from his wrecked plane." Chin reportedly presented one to Chennault, asking, "Sir, can I have another plane for my machine gun?"

Art's combat career ended in dramatic fashion on December 27, 1939. By then with the 32nd Pursuit Squadron, he led a mixed formation consisting of an I-152 and another Gladiator escorting three Russian-flown Tupolev SB bombers on a raid against the Japanese army near the Kunlun Pass. During a savage fight in which the planes of his flight fell one by one, Chin claimed two A5Ms shot down and the shared destruction of a third, but his Gladiator was hit in the fuel tank and caught fire. Although he managed to nurse his flying inferno back over Chinese lines and bailed out, he was terribly burned.

While recovering, Art went to stay in a small house at Liuchow Airfield, nursed by his wife, Eva. Only two days after his return, the airfield came under attack by Japanese bombers. Eva took their two little boys to the air-raid shelter first, then went back for Chin, who was virtually immobilized, with bandages covering his face, hands and arms. They could hear the explosions coming closer and closer. Finally, knowing it was too late to run, Eva threw herself on top of Art and was killed when an explosion destroyed the house. In an interview for *The Oregonian* newspaper years later, he said simply, "I held her dead body to mine until help came."

Chin and his children were evacuated to Hong Kong. During seven operations over two years, doctors tried to repair the damage to his face and hands. In the chaos following the Japanese attack on December 8, 1941, Art (still swathed in bandages) got out of his

hospital bed, tracked down his boys and escaped to friendly territory. Suitable medical facilities were not available in China, so Chennault authorized U.S. air transportation back to the States for Chin. In New York he underwent a series of operations over 20 months, leaving him heavily scarred but reasonably whole.

Art Chin had clearly done his bit, and no one could have blamed him if he had decided to rest on his laurels and hide his scarred face from the world. But that wasn't his style. He spoke on radio programs and at war bond rallies, including New York's "Gung Ho" rally, sponsored by the Chinese-American community and attended by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia.

When Chin returned to flying, it was with the China National Aviation Corporation (CNAC), an airline run jointly by the Chinese government and Pan American Airways. From March to August 1945, he flew supplies over the "Hump" route through the Himalayas between India and China. As Lt. Gen. William Tunner, a former commander of the U.S. Army Air Forces portion of the airlift, later wrote in *Over the Hump*, "Flying the Hump was considered as hazardous as flying a combat mission over Germany."

By the end of the war, when Art stayed on in China to fly with CNAC, he was a fully qualified airline captain. In 1949 he returned to Portland, where he apparently sought work as a pilot. He landed a job with the postal service, working there until retirement in 1980. According to coworker John Johnson, Chin worked swing shifts in a letter-sorting section of the Portland post office. He remembers Art as friendly, sociable and still fond of flirting with women.

Official recognition at last came in 1995, when the U.S. Air Force awarded Chin the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal for his Hump flights. The Sino-American Aviation Heritage Foundation also named its Aviation Achievement Award for him.

Chin died on September 7, 1997, less than a month before he was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the American Airpower Heritage Museum in Midland, Texas. On March 5, 2008, Congress approved legislation to name a post office in Beaverton, Ore., the Major Arthur Chin Post Office Building, honoring an American whose bravery and achievements were overlooked for far too long. †

**Chin with his wife Eva, who was killed while trying to protect him from Japanese bombers during his convalescence from burns he suffered in late 1939.**



**Chin stands between two China National Aviation Corporation colleagues.**



**At New York's "Gung Ho" war bond rally, Chin recounts one of his aerial battles.**



**A comic strip depicts Chin in his favorite fighter, the Gloster Gladiator.**