



Great nephew of Flying Tiger's founder starts Air Force career at Moody

by Airman 1st Class Spencer Gallier
23rd Wing Public Affairs

11/10/2008 - **MOODY AIR FORCE BASE, Ga.** -- This year's Flying Tigers Association Reunion took a special turn, when it was discovered that the great nephew of Lt. Gen. Claire Lee Chennault, who helped form the Flying Tigers, is stationed here.

Airman 1st Class William Chennault, 41st Helicopter Maintenance Unit crew chief, has known his whole life he was related to the famed general, although he kept his secret relatively quiet.

"I've always been humble in that respect," said Airman Chennault. "If someone brings him up, then I'll tell them that I'm a relative, but most of the time I just like to keep it quiet."

When General Chennault separated from service in 1937, he went on to form the 1st American Volunteer Group known as the Flying Tigers, who flew the P-40 War Hawk fighter plane.

The Tigers were comprised of three squadrons of U.S. Navy, Marine and Army Air Forces trained pilots who defended the Burma Road supply lines and many other strategic locations in Southeast Asia and Western China.

The volunteers who flew with the 1st AVG chose to discharge from active duty to fly as civilians for their country.

As a civilian volunteer group, the pilots flew with none of the military benefits or life insurance that comes along with being active duty.

The Flying Tigers were officially incorporated into the then United States Army Air Forces as the 23rd Fighter Group in 1942 with General Chennault going back to active duty as a colonel, later being promoted to brigadier and then major general.

General Chennault was finally promoted to lieutenant general one day before his death, and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

More than 60 years after the general founded the Flying Tigers, his great nephew was stationed here.

Airman Chennault has been asked several times about his heritage since he received his first set of active duty orders.

"Occasionally I'll be in uniform at the dining facility or gas station and people will ask me if I am related to him," he added. "It really is amazing that I started off my career stationed at the 23rd Wing Flying Tigers."

When his grandparents first heard that William (Airman Chennault) was going to be a part of the Flying Tigers, they began to tell him stories about his Great Uncle.

"My grandfather used to visit General Chennault's brother in Texas," said Airman Chennault.

"I remember my grandparents telling me that my great-grand uncle helped form the Flying Tigers," he added. "When I joined the Air Force I had no idea that the unit still existed."

Now that I've followed in my family's footsteps, I wish I would have learned a little bit more about World War I and my family's place in it, said Airman Chennault.

He was given that opportunity during this year's Flying Tigers reunion.

"This has really been a great honor," said Airman Chennault. "Getting to know all these people, who knew,



MOODY AIR FORCE BASE, Ga. -- Airman 1st Class William Chennault, 723rd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, is a descendant of Lt. General Claire Lee Chennault who founded the Flying Tigers. General Chennault's Flying Tigers, which started as a volunteer group, began training in August 1941 and fought the Japanese for six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Brittany Barker)

worked for and flew with my great uncle, it's really been something special.

Throughout my time spent with the men who helped build the Flying Tigers this past week, I've heard stories about my great uncle's strong square jaw or his no-nonsense attitude, said Airman Chennault.

Retired Maj. Harvey Elling, who flew a P-40 during World War II, remembered one night when General Chennault confronted him during a social event

He came up to me and asked me how much I had been drinking, and then he told me his pilots always need to be ready to go at a moment's notice, said Mr. Elling. That was just the kind of man he was.

For Airman Chennault, it was the stories about his great uncle that made the event what it was.

"It's really just been a great experience," said Airman Chennault. "I loved hearing all the stories about my uncle, and I really just can't wait to pass them on to my children.