

An American-Born Ace

Arthur T. Chin, an aviator in the Chinese Air Force during the second Sino-Japanese War, became the first American-born ace in that war. Chin, born in Portland, Oregon, in 1913, was the first of six children born to Chinese-American parents Fon and Eva Wong Chin. Both his paternal and maternal grandparents had immigrated to the United States from China.

After Chinese forces occupied Manchuria in 1932, training pilots for military duty in China became a mission of the Chinese American community. Chinese American aviation schools opened in San Francisco, New York, Portland, Los Angeles, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Boston often under the auspices of the Chinese Aeronautical Association. About two hundred Chinese American men and women trained at these centers and then went to China for aviation careers.



Swan Island Airport, c. 1932. Courtesy, http://www.airfields-freeman.com/OR/Airfields_OR_NW.htm#swan

In 1932, at the age of 18, with an interest in aviation and his Chinese heritage, Arthur Chin applied to a program to train as a pilot for service in the ongoing conflict between Japan and China. Under the program, funded with \$30,000 donated by Chinese businessmen on the U.S. Pacific coast, Allan D. Greenwood, the State of Oregon's aeronautics inspector, taught 34 young Chinese-American men and women to fly at Swan Island Airport in Portland. The students came from all over the continental United States and Hawaii. Before being accepted into the program they had to pledge their lives to Chinese army aviation and to the interests of China.

After finishing his training, Chin, along with most of his classmates traveled to China to join the battle against Japan. At the time, many of the Chinese provinces had their own armies. Chin and most of his classmates joined the Canton Air Corps of Guangdong. In 1936, the Canton Air Corps joined the Chinese national air force. At that time, Chin rescinded his U.S. citizenship and enlisted in the now unified Chinese Army Air Corps. Later that year, because of their exceptional skill, their commander sent Chin and Portland classmate John K. Wong to Germany for advanced training with the Luftwaffe.

Upon returning from China, Chin met and married Eva Wong, the daughter of former Chinese diplomat and government official. They had two sons, Gilbert and Steve. On July 7, 1937, issues between China and Japan escalated into war.

Chin, flying a Mitsubishi G3M2 twin-engine bomber, made his first "kill" in aerial combat on August 16, 1937. His next two kills came while flying a 36 Gladiator Mk. 1. He would go on to down five other Japanese aircraft, some while flying a Russian-made Polikarpov I-15Bis. His



Major Arthur Chin

combat career ended on December 27, 1939. A Japanese gunner hit his plane's fuel tank, and Chin's plane caught fire. Able to parachute to safety, Chin suffered burns to about 80 percent of his body, including his face. This was the third time he had been shot down. For his combat efforts while serving in the Chinese Air Force he attained the rank of major and received the Five Star Medal, 2 Orders of Renaissance and Honour 3rd Class medals, Order of Resplendent Banner with Special Rosette, Medal of Victorious Garrison 2nd Class, Awe-Inspiring Medal 3rd Grade, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign medal, World War II Victory Medal, and the Republic of China World War II Service Medal.

He and his family moved into a house on Liuchow Airfield while he recovered from his burns. When the airbase came under attack, his wife died in a bomb blast. Arthur Chin and his sons evacuated to Hong Kong where he received medical treatment. He returned to the United States in 1942 to undergo additional treatment in a New York hospital. Once able, he supported the U.S. war effort by speaking at rallies and on the radio supporting the war bond effort.

The second Sino-Japanese between Japan and China merged with other conflicts of World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December, 7, 1941, becoming the China-Burma-India Theater. Once well enough to fly again, Chin applied for work with the Chinese National Aviation Corporation (CNAC), an airline owned by the Chinese government and Pan American World Airways, working under contract for the U.S. Army Air Forces to supply U.S. forces in the China-Burma-India Theater. He was officially discharged from the Chinese Air Force on March 1, 1945. He went on CNAC's payroll on March 15, 1945, when he entered the company's training school. He finished training on July 13. With a contract as a co-pilot, Chin reapplied and regained U.S. citizenship on July 21, 1945.

During World War II, CNAC pilots flew the route from India to China across the Himalayas known as "The Hump." Many considered the CNAC cargo pilots, who flew through poor weather conditions, turbulence, and threats of attack by the Japanese, some of the most skilled aviators of the war. Between March 1942 and August 1945, CNAC flew approximately 114,500 tons of material to China. The airline also provided low-level tactical airlift support over enemy territory during the Burma campaign by dropping supplies to Chinese and American ground forces, evacuating Chinese and British troops, and supplying the Ledo Road project with men and equipment.

While stationed in India with CNAC, Chin met and married his second wife, Vivienne Yang, also employed by CNAC. They had one child, Matthew. Chin and his family retired from CNAC shortly after his 1948 marriage. He returned to Portland in 1949 and the following year began working for the U.S. Postal Service in Portland's mail sorting center.

In recognition of CNAC contributions to the war effort, although they were technically civilians, former American CNAC aircrews gained veteran status in 1993. Hence, on February 24, 1995, along with other China National Aviation Corporation personnel, Chin received the Air Medal for meritorious achievement for his flights between March 26, 1945-August 14 1945. On the same date, CNAC personnel also received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Arthur Chin died on September 7, 1997, less than one month before his induction into the American Combat Hall of Fame. In 2008, the U.S. government renamed the Post Office in Beaverton, Oregon, the Major Arthur Chin Post Office Building.