

WWII HEROISM

‘TEX’ HILL CASTS A GIANT SHADOW

His Flying Tigers scored big, early wins over the Japanese

FROM EXPRESS-NEWS ARCHIVES

Retired Air National Guard Brig. Gen. David Lee “Tex” Hill, the renowned leader of the Flying Tigers, was a “genuine American hero.”

The Flying Tigers, made up of volunteers, first tangled with Japanese pilots about two weeks after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor. They had flown as U.S. military aviators until being secretly recruited to fight as mercenaries over China.

Hill was “a giant figure in heroic aviation,” said T.R. Fehrenbach, author of “This Kind of War,” a history of the Korean conflict. “We don’t have heroes in aviation anymore. We don’t have people who fly by the seat of their pants in rickety airplanes. They go up in great machines that do much of the work.”

After Hill’s death in 2007, then-Gov. Rick Perry called Hill a “genuine American hero and a Texan of the highest caliber.”

Hill became a Texan after moving with his family to San Antonio in 1921 when his father, the Rev. Pierre Bernard Hill, was offered the post of pastor at First Presbyterian Church. “Tex” Hill graduated from San Antonio Academy in 1928.

The Flying Tigers “were



Staff file photo

the only air units of the Allies, British, Dutch or Americans who came out ahead against the Japanese air force on almost every occasion they met,” said Daniel Ford, author of “Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and His American Volunteers, 1941-1942.”

“He’s been a role model for a whole lot of fighter pilots,” said famed flier Chuck Yeager, a retired Air Force one-star general. “He was in the right place and the right time.”

In a few years, Hill logged more than 3,500 hours in the air, including 150 combat missions over Burma, Indochina and China.



Bob Owen / Staff file photo

He was a Navy dive-bomber and torpedo plane pilot when recruited in early 1941 to join Claire Chennault’s First American Volunteer Group.

Because America wasn’t

yet at war and the mission to keep China and the Burma Road safe from Japanese attack was covert, the volunteers had to resign their commissions and sign a contract with Cen-

tral Aircraft Manufacturing Co. in China. Flying a single-engine Curtiss P-40 Warhawk fighter, Hill recorded his first aerial victory on Jan. 3, 1942, by shooting down two Japanese fighters over their base in Thailand. Hill served as flight

leader and then squadron leader of the 2nd Squadron, the Panda Bears, until the Flying Tigers were disbanded in July 1942. In seven months with the squadron, the young Texan shot down a dozen enemy planes.

In late 1942, Hill returned to the United States and was given command of the Proving Ground Group at Eglin Field in Florida’s Panhandle.

Hill returned to China in October 1943 to lead the 23rd Fighter Group. Before he returned to the United States, he scored six more aerial victories, becoming a triple ace with 18.25 confirmed kills. Home again in 1944, he was named to command the 412th Fighter Group, the U.S. Army Air Forces’ first operational jet fighter group.

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A longer version of this report by Sig Christenson and Carmina Danini ran Oct. 12, 2007.