

FREEMASONRY NEEDS ITS HEROES

By

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General Claire Lee Chennault – 32 degree KCCH – had the courage and the compassion of his Masonic convictions. His life and leadership showed he knew how to lead men to be winners in the game of life.

Chaire Lee Chennault was born September 6, 1890, at Commerce, Texas. He would grow up in Northeast Louisiana. He would die in New Orleans on July 27, 1958.

At age 19, he became the first principal of the Central High School, a six-room schoolhouse in the Central Community in Franklin Parish at a salary of \$100.00 a month. He was also the school's football coach and discipline authority. Each afternoon to maintain a good physical condition, after football practice, he trotted to Delhi, LA 12 miles or to Winnsboro, LA 15 miles. He had formerly taught at Start Elementary School for one year. Inside the school he was Mr. Chennault. Outside the school, with the boys and girls, he was "Claire Lee."

He selected the players who would be on the football team and began practice. Before the first ball was kicked, they were given this order; "When you walk out on that field, you are going to learn to play football in order to win games. Remember that!" The training the boys received that year and the spirit instilled in them to win carried them through four victorious years on the gridiron, with an undefeated record. The two triumphs they still talk about were the games played against Vicksburg, Mississippi and Monroe, LA. Claire Lee not only coached the football team; he played on it regularly. After the games, he danced with the girls. In 1911 on Christmas Eve he married Miss Nell Thompson. Claire Lee attended Louisiana State University for three years, but decided to complete his education at Northwestern State University at Natchitoches, LA.

He was commissioned a first lieutenant of the infantry in the U.S. Army at the age of 27. He promptly transferred to the aviation section of the Signal Corps. He wanted to be a pilot.

He took his Blue Lodge Degrees in League City Lodge No. 1053 in League City, Texas. He was initiated on June 6, 1921, passed on October 6, 1921, and raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason, May 24, 1926.

In the 1930's he developed a reputation as a "Premier Pursuit Pilot." He retired from the U.S. Army in 1937 to become a military advisor to Chiang Kai-shek in China. He had been sent to Air Corps Tactical School. His ideas concerning Pursuit Plane employment evolved from a great deal of personal experience, but the Air Corps was in the process of making a decisive shift in favor of prolonged bombardment of strategic targets from the air at high altitudes.

In China he formed “The Flying Tigers,” which became known officially as “The American Volunteer Group.” He recruited-selected the pilots. They flew the P-40 pursuit plane with eyes and shark’s teeth painted on the nose. In January 1938, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt alarmed by Japanese aggression spoke to Congress. He requested \$25 million for China, froze Japanese assets (finances) in the U.S. and proposed a joint American-British blockade of Japan. In 1939 FED approved a covert air war in China under the command of Claire Lee Chennault. He authorized 100 American pilots (Mercenaries) and planes (The Curtis-40 War Hawk Fighter) and \$50 million for The Chinese Effort. This support of Chennault set the teeth on edge of General Jolting Joe Stillwell. Claire Lee Chennault’s abrasive personality would create many difficulties between him and his superior officers.

The P-40 was not as powerful as the Japanese Zero, which amazingly gave it a turning advantage. It could make a tighter circle than the Zero, which brought the Zero under its guns. In the short period of eight months (December 1941 through July 1942), the American Voluntary Group scored 288 kills with a loss of only 23 American pilots.

Chennault’s unorthodox tactics gave the American pilots a staggering advantage. He wrote a letter to the Army Air Corps detailing his tactics for other pilots flying the P-40. Because of personality conflicts, his important tactical information was never disseminated. At times he could be gruff, stubborn, iconoclastic, gentle, or cultured. In 1942 The Flying Tigers became a part of the Fourteenth Air Force. Chennault kept them flying. Supplies, food, guns, parts, tires, and ammunition had to be brought across the Pacific and flown in or flown over from India and Burma, over the Himalayan Mountains.

During the decade after the war Chennault organized the Chinese Air Transport Company which worked closely with the American Central Intelligence Agency. Eventually this became known as “Air America.”

On June 27, 1948, Claire Lee Chennault took the Scottish Rite Degrees. He received the 14th in Yangtze, China, Lodge of Perfection; the 18th degree in Shanghai, China, Chapter of Rose Croix; the 30th degree in Cathay, China, Council of Kadosh; and the 32nd degree in the Orient of China Consistory. The Shanghai Bodies went into exile in the Philippines Islands at Manila.

On October 31, 1957, while living in Manila, Claire Lee Chennault was nominated to receive the Investiture of the Knight Commander of the Court of Honor. A silver coin bearing his visage was minted. The honor was conferred in the Scottish Rite Bodies in the Philippines in Manila. He was a member of Islam Shrine Temple of San Francisco, California.

In 1946 he married a Chinese “Anna,” who wrote two books about him- “A Thousand Springs” and “Chennault And The Flying Tigers.” His papers are at Stanford University. His memoirs are titled “The Way of a Fighter” by G.P. Putman. The American Press idolized him. When John Wayne portrayed him in a movie, he passed from history to mythology. Ultimately, he was raised to the rank of Major General –Three Stars. He died of lung cancer on July 27, 1958 at the age of 68.

Yes, Free Masonry needs its Masonic heroes. Claire Lee Chennault was such a man. He was fighting for freedom for four years before most Americans were ready to get involved in the war in the Pacific. Claire Lee Chennault – A Mason's Mason. He is buried in the National Cemetery at Arlington, Virginia.

SOURCES:

History of Central High School.

Brother James Roy Walters a graduate of Central High School, 1948.

National Archives.

West Monroe High School, Junior R.O.T.C. West Monroe, Louisiana.

Brother Billy Carter, Instructor-Past Master Graham Surghnor Lodge No. 383, Monroe, LA.

William Chennault, PM Graham Surghnor lodge No. 383, Monroe, Louisiana.

Mrs. Joan K. Sansbury, Librarian & Curator – House of the Temple, Washington, D.C.