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Essay 2: History of the Flying Tigers

During the 1940's, there were many influential groups fighting against Germany and Japan. One group in particular helped change the course of history not only for the United States, but many Eastern Countries involved in World War II. The Flying Tigers was a special aviation unit, a division of the United States Air Corp, which defended and maintained Allied territories.

Most of these young men came from small towns and farms from across America. The 69th squadron had 350 men who started out from Kelly Field in San Antonio, Texas in late 1944. Their mission was to aid China in air support and supplies to keep them in the war.

The 69th included maintenance and supply officers, sheet metal, bomb site and gun site mechanics as well as welders, aviation mechanics and other specialists. They left Kelly Field on February 16th, 1945 headed for California. On February 28th, they boarded a ship that carried 10,000 troops destined for Melbourne, Australia. Many of the troops on the vessel suffered from sea sickness while encountering rough waters and storms. They arrived in Melbourne on March 14th and two days later they sailed to India. When they arrived in Bombay, they boarded a train to yet another stop, Calcutta. From here they took an exhausting 1800 mile trip over land to Kunming, China. This perilous journey took thirty days at sometimes speeds of only 4 miles per hour. Dangerous conditions that lined parts of the roadways caused life threatening situations for the troops. The troops arrived in Kunming at the end of May. Once there, they supported the 14th Air Force, US Army Air Corp in its mission to drive the Japanese out of China. They helped supply the troops behind enemy lines and most importantly they helped keep the crucial Burma Road operational.

The Flying Tigers, which were stationed in areas around China, aided in the fight against the Japanese. The fighting during this time was presumed victorious for the Allies. The Japanese suffered

great losses because of the Flying Tigers. This success gained respect from US citizens as well as the other Allied powers and contributed to the shift in the war. Many thanked the pilots that were able to defeat the Japanese air men, but it takes a lot more than pilots to run a successful operation. My great-grandfather held one of those positions.

My great-grandfather was a part of the repair division. Sgt. Ronald Rhodes, also known as Dusty, was part of the maintenance team which was needed to keep the base in China and the Burma Road running efficiently. Clearing the runway, working on the aircrafts, and securing the important Burma Road were a few jobs that his crew needed to complete. On one particular occasion, my great-grandfather was met with the task of clearing a P-51 which crashed on the runway during take-off. The P-51 had caused a lot of debris and hindered the safety of the crew and other planes flying in and out of the base. When Sgt. Rhodes asked to shut down the runway, the officer in charge declined and allowed continuous air travel saying that it was safe. While the crew was clearing the airstrip, a B-25 was preparing for take-off. As it progressed down the airstrip, my great-grandfather recognized it was not climbing in altitude and immediately hit the ground. As the plane tried to gain altitude, it passed too closely to a cart with a Chinese driver. At this time Rhodes saw "red dust, just a cloud of it". Next he saw the severed head of the Chinese worker that was previously driving the cart. Rhodes then demanded that the officer in charge close the runway until all maintenance was completed.

When the war came to an end in August 1945, the 69th turned their attention to closing America's involvement in interior China. They flew out some of the aircrafts and destroyed everything else. They did this because they did not want anything of value left from which the Communist troops could to gain knowledge. It was assumed that the Communists would take over immediately after the United States pulled out of China. After the war the 69th DRS was disbanded. Some continued to serve in Shanghai, while most went home. These men performed their duties to the best of their ability and achieved their mission. As Jack Higbee said "We didn't screw up, we helped maintain this base and we helped win the war". The Chinese people still honor the efforts of the 14 Air Force and the 69th DRS. Were it not for the

support of these groups, China might have not have been able to overcome the Japanese and history would tell a different story.

I had the privilege of knowing my great-grandfather who passed away in 2008. He was very proud of his service in the 69th DRS, and took great pride in going to as many of the annual reunions as possible in different cities. His last reunion was in Washington D.C. in May of 2008 and he really enjoyed it.

He always looked forward to being with his friends of the 69th DRS. There was a special bond between these men who served together in this group. I came to know the names of Mel Levitt, Jack Higbee, Marty Oxenberg, and Carlos Medina to name a few. How this group remained in contact with each other for 60 plus years is astonishing. The friendship forged by a world war stayed throughout their lives. I am sure they saw each other just as they each were when they were young soldiers. The world today should have great admiration and gratitude for these young fighters. The Flying Tigers has a unique history as a strong, determined group. I am very proud that my great-grandfather was a member of this prestigious organization, and I am also looking forward to attending the same college where he prepared to serve in this war.

Work Cited

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