

The background of the page features a large, semi-transparent VFW seal. The seal is a Maltese cross with a central eagle and the text "VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES".

VFW Post 12074

Brief History of

Squadron Leader John “Scarsdale Jack” Newkirk

28 June 2021



A Brief History of Scarsdale Jack Newkirk

John Van Kuren Newkirk, known as “Scarsdale Jack,” was a fighter pilot for the world-famous Flying Tigers. Born on 15 October 1913 in New York, he joined the Navy in 1938, earned his wings in 1939, and was assigned to the USS Yorktown at Pearl Harbor. In June of 1941, World War II was in full swing in Europe and China, yet America was still neutral. As a new Navy aviator, Newkirk was barred by regulations from getting married. When approached by a retired Navy commander about flying for the newly formed American Volunteer Group—later to become known as the Flying Tigers—Newkirk signed a one-year contract for a salary of \$600 per month, resigned his U.S. Navy commission, and married his fiancée.¹

As it looked like the U.S. might soon be at war with Japan, the West Point Military History states... “American Planners recognized the advantage of having China’s manpower and geographic position in friendly hands. As a neutral country, the U.S. could only extend financial loans to Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government.”² The history continues to explain the overall situation in Southeast Asia at the time:

“In September 1940, Japan became a member of the Axis and forced the Vichy Government, into granting her the right to occupy northern Indochina. This left the Burma Road as China’s only remaining transportation link to the western powers.

The passage of the Lend-Lease Act on March 31, 1941 placed the United States in a better position to support China. The Chinese lend-lease program provided for equipping 30 Chinese divisions, establishing a 500-plane air force and maintaining a line of communications to China.



Newkirk (Left) and others in a publicity shot

The most immediate help came from the ‘Flying Tigers’ or The American Volunteer Group was a civilian organization (AVG). The United States agreed to supply, maintain and operate the American Volunteer Group requested by Chiang in October 1940. Colonel Clair Chennault, an American citizen who had become a Colonel in the Chinese Air Force after his retirement from the Army Air Corps in 1938, was commander of the AVG. By the summer of 1941, 101 American pilots arrived in China under a one-year contract; one hundred [obsolete] P-40s were obtained from the British. The AVG was part of the Chinese Air Force until the United States entered the war.”³

Newkirk was part of the Greatest Generation - “When love of country was almost greater than love of family or anything else.”⁴ Along with thousands of others, he volunteered for service in the coming conflict.

¹ Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Newkirk Accessed December 2020

² The West Point Military History Series, The Second World War Asia and the Pacific. Thomas E. Griess, Editor, pages. 207-209

³ Ibid

⁴ Bogle p.11

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Newkirk was the squadron leader of the 2nd Squadron “Panda Bears” in Burma. The Panda Bears shared the air defense of Rangoon with two British squadrons. In January 1942, Newkirk and three of his pilots flew into Japanese-occupied Thailand and attacked an enemy airfield in Tak, about 170 miles south of Chiang Mai City. Newkirk is credited with shooting down three enemy fighters protecting the field while his men destroyed aircraft on the ground. Military historian C. Douglas Sterner suggests this may have been the first planned American offensive mission of World War II.⁵ Newkirk shot down three more enemy fighters in separate engagements later in January 1942. His aircraft was shot up on the third engagement forcing an emergency landing.

The Smithsonian History of Aviation Series about the flying Tigers provides the following account of the Newkirk’s historic mission:

“After the Japanese raid on Magwe, Burma, that destroyed 20 American Volunteer Group and British squadron airplanes, Chennault ordered a counterstrike on the Japanese airbases at Chiang Mai and Lamphun. For the mission, he selected ten of his best at Kunming. They include six Adam & Eves – Bob Neale, Greg Boyington, Charlie Bond, Mac McGarry, Ed Rector, and Bill Bartling – who would fly to Chiang Mai and strafe the Japanese Air Force headquarters in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, four Panda Bears – Jack Newkirk, Whitely Lawlor, Hang Geselbracht, and Buster Keeton – would attack Lamphun to the South.”⁶

They flew two hours from Wu Chia Ba to Loiwing, where they landed “on a runway carved out of a hillside.”⁷ The following evening they flew to Namsang, Burma to stay overnight and stage for their dawn raid. Future movie star Buster Keeton wrote in his diary, “our mission which to my way of thinking is the most dangerous undertaking the A.V.G. has done, going 120 miles into enemy territory where if you have to force-land and the Japs don’t get you the jungle will.”⁸ These men knew no search or rescue was coming if they were shot down.



The Flying Tigers scramble to their planes

⁵ Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Newkirk Accessed December 2020

⁶ Smithsonian History of Aviation Series Flying Tigers; Claire Chennault and the American Volunteer Group, Danial Ford c. 1956

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

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Taking off at 0545 on 24 March 1942, Newkirk led a mission into occupied Chiang Mai Province. Newkirk's flight of four aircraft piloted by Whitey Lawlor, Hank Geselbracht, and Buster Keeton, "set off for Thailand without waiting for the form-up over Namsang."⁹

The Smithsonian history continues:

"They flew on instruments until they reached Chiang Mai at about 7 A.M., by which time they could make out objects on the ground below them, but not off to the sides. By the same token, they could not be seen from the ground which was the logic behind the timing of the raid.

Newkirk tarried long enough to strafe the Chiang Mai railroad station - an astonishing breach of discipline, like poking a stick into a hornet's nest before his friends came along. Flying on, he found Lamphun but saw only a row of buildings that might have been warehouses or barracks. He laced them with incendiary bullets. So did Hank Geselbracht and Whitey Lawlor, but Buster Keeton decided to save his ammunition for a better target. Newkirk then scouted some auxiliary fields, but they were empty. At the third and largest field, the Panda Bears strafed more buildings, after which Newkirk turned north with the apparent intention of joining the Adam & Eves at Chiang Mai.

In his combat report, Geselbracht told what happened next: The next target we dove on were two vehicles on the road south of [Chiang Mai]. Newkirk dove and fired and as he cleared the target I began to fire. I saw a flash of flames beyond the target and looked for Newkirk after my run. I realized he had crashed causing the flash. I pulled up and continued to the north on the way home."¹⁰

Newkirk's aircraft crashed in a ball of flames, and he was killed instantly close to Lamphun. It was believed at the time that Newkirk's plane was hit by ground fire. Still, later investigations, including discussions with eyewitnesses, raised the possibility that Newkirk may have inadvertently hit a tree.

"Keeton also saw the explosion, and like Geselbracht, did not at first understand its cause. 'As I pulled up to the right,' he wrote in his diary, 'I noticed a large flame of fire burst up on that field to the right of me. The fire spread along the field for 100 or 150 yards. Thinking Jack and Gesel had set fire to some oil dumps and not seeing anything to shoot at I proceed to follow Lawlor.'

Newkirk was one of the immortals, the 'Scarsdale Jack' of many upbeat dispatches from Rangoon. He died in a fire ball that skittered and bounce and smeared itself along the ground - a napalm canister with a man inside. Then the Allison engine broke loose and rolled 300 yards farther. Whitey Lawlor identified the vehicle upon which Newkirk had been firing, and which probably shot him down, as a Japanese armored car."¹¹

⁹ Smithsonian History of Aviation Series Flying Tigers; Claire Chennault and the American Volunteer Group, Danial Ford c. 1956

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

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Meanwhile, the Adam's and Eves made several passes over the Airfield at Chiang Mai, catching many Japanese aircraft on the ground lined up wingtip to wingtip.

“Starved as they had recently been for good news from Burma, American newspapers hailed the Chiang Mai raid as a magnificent victory while playing down the disaster of Magwe. Even the *New York Times* gave the Adam & Eves top billing next morning spread across four columns: U.S. FLIERS IN BURMA SMASH 40 PLANES...

The *Times* gave special attention to Jack Newkirk, whose portrait (in navy uniform) accompanied the story. Newkirk was described as a Tom Sawyerish lad who had impaled a sheriff with an arrow, and who has received his Eagle Scout badge from Admiral Richard Byrd, the Antarctic explorer. In Burma, the story continued, the British had awarded him the Distinguished Service Order for destroying twenty-five enemy aircraft (Actually, the decoration was the Distinguished Flying Cross. Newkirk's score stood at ten and one-half planes-and some AVG pilots doubted those.)

In the end, Chennault settled on 15 planes destroyed as a reasonable tally for the Adam & Evers at Chiang Mai. The credit was shared by the six pilots taking part, including the top cover...

In truth, Chiang Mai was not a victory. The 64th Sentai lost only three Hayabusas that Tuesday morning. Ten fighters were damaged – four of them seriously – but the Japanese mechanics were as industrious as their counterparts in the AVG, and by noon they had eleven planes fit to fly.”¹²



The Cenotaph Memorial to Scarsdale Jack Newkirk and the Flying Tigers, Chiang Mai

Although the mission did not achieve its tactical objectives, it appears to have been a significant psychological victory for a country with very little good news coming from the Asian theater of war.

Newkirk was posthumously awarded the British Distinguished Flying Cross in 1943 and the U.S. Distinguished Flying Cross in 2007. If Newkirk's war-time service had been with the U.S. Military, his credited kills would have qualified him as an Air Ace, and he would have received a Purple Heart Medal.

¹² Smithsonian History of Aviation Series Flying Tigers; Claire Chennault and the American Volunteer Group, Danial Ford c. 1956

Images of Jack Newkirk



The Flying Tigers

Raid on Chiang Mai and Lamphun

March 24 1942

Squadron Leader John ("Scarsdale Jack") Van Kuren Newkirk, AVG 2nd Squadron "Panda Bears". On March 24, 1942, as six Tomahawk P-40s of the AVG 1st (Adam & Eves) squadron was attacking the IJAAF 64th Hayabusa Sentai (Falcon Air Regiment) at Chiang Mai airfield, Jack Newkirk was leading his 2nd squadron (Panda Bears) flight of four Tomahawk P-40s to their designated target at Lamphun. Near the railroad bridge on the Mae Kuang River, Lamphun, Newkirk dove to strafe what appeared to be two Japanese armoured vehicles. In fact, they were ox carts driven by farmers. Newkirk was flying very low to the road and his right wing hit a lame tree just outside the west gate of Wat Phra Yuen. His P-40 crashed into a rice field adjoining the temple, and Newkirk was killed on impact.



AVG 2nd Squadron "Panda Bears" over the Salween River Gorge, China-Burma border, May 26, 1942
Photo by John R. Smith (Courtesy of Brad Smith)



Zip Comics No. 28 August 1942



The wreck of Jack Newkirk's Tomahawk P-40 in front of the Lamphun police station, March 1942

Although Thais normally cremate their dead, the Thai authorities buried his remains in a grave on the edge of the ricefield. At war's end Newkirk's remains were eventually reinterred in his hometown of Scarsdale, New York. By the time of his death Newkirk had achieved "ace" status. In August 1943, the British awarded him posthumously the Distinguished Flying Cross for his role in the defense of Burma. "Scarsdale Jack" Newkirk was turned into a comic book hero in the August 1942 editions of both Wings Comics and Zip Comics.

William ("Black Mac") McGarry, Wingman, AVG 1st Squadron "Adam & Eves" On March 24, 1942, ten Tomahawk P-40s of the AVG 1st and 2nd Pursuit Squadrons attacked the IJAAF 64th Hayabusa Sentai (Falcon Air Regiment) at Chiang Mai airfield. Wingman Bill "Black Mac" McGarry, his Tomahawk damaged by anti aircraft fire, attempts to return to the RAF airfield at Namsang, Burma. His P-40 cannot make it, and he bails out over the jungle at Ban Mok Cham Pae, northwest of Mae Hong Son city, landing safely in a clearing. After a few weeks in the jungle, McGarry is captured by the Thai police, and interned in a compound on the grounds of Thammasat University, Bangkok.



Wingman William "Black Mac" McGarry, AVG 1st Squadron Adam & Eves"



Ed Rector's description "Send the Tiger" by George South
Ed Rector makes a treetop pass and drops McGarry a Hershey bar and a map marking his location

With the help of the Seri (Free) Thai, McGarry escaped on 14 April, 1945. The OSS flew him to Ceylon and he eventually returned to the AVG in Kunming. The wreck of McGarry's P-40 was discovered in 1991. It is located now at the Tango Squadron Museum, RTAF Wing 41, Chiang Mai.



The wreck of McGarry's Tomahawk P-40 No. 69 at Tango Squadron Museum RTAF Wing 41, Chiang Mai

U.S. Consulate Placard Honoring Scarsdale Jack Newkirk and the Flying Tigers.

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