

A Flying Tigers Story

By

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This book is for
my daughter Francesca,
my wife Isabel,
and for the real Agnes

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CHAPTER ONE



He awoke with a start and had no idea where he was. He felt wide-awake, but how could he be? He sat up, looked right, but it was so dark he couldn't see a thing. He looked left, pitch black. He wasn't sure if he couldn't see because it was really black or if it was because he was still asleep. He had covers on him so he knew that he was in bed. Think! Think! What did I do yesterday? Did I work? Did I go to school? What did I do? He couldn't remember. Oh, maybe I am dreaming, he thought. Sometimes when he dreamed, especially a scary one, he could control it. It's not scary yet, but it might get that way. He could feel himself tense. So far, no monsters coming out of the blackness and no Mr. Burnside demanding that he take geometry over again. Suddenly, he was very tired. He lay back down, and the floor under his head squeaked. Was that a real squeak or did I dream it, he wondered. He recognized that squeak all right. If this is not a dream, I'm on a pallet on the floor in Manuel's house. He relaxed and didn't feel tired anymore. Either the fog or sleep was lifting. He sat up again and looked to his right, again. Now he could just make out a mound next to him. That would be Manuel. He looked left, and he could just make out that lesser mound which would be Joaquin, and on the other side of him would be Gabino. The two girls would be in the

bedroom at the back of the house. He lay down again. Another squeak. Ah yes, yesterday was Friday and he and Manuel have permission to be absent from high school every Friday in order to work. It had been a hard day yesterday and they had gone to bed dead tired. Tomorrow will be even harder. Saturday was always a busy day, and on top of that, Doyle had said that someone was coming especially to see them. Who knows when we'll get to bed tomorrow night!

He and Manuel had probably slept on this pallet as many times as he had slept in his own bed at his own house. They had been inseparable best friends since the second grade, and they spoke English and Spanish equally well because of it. Manuel Ramos was Mexican-American. His father had insisted that his children learn English and Spanish equally well, and without accent in either language. Manuel had always been a perfect straight A student, handsomely dark with sparkling even white teeth and dancing eyes as black as his hair. He has always been the most popular boy in school, and now he is Student Body President of Citrus Union High School between Azusa and Glendora. The Glendora kids are mostly white and well to do, while most of the Hispanic kids from Azusa are poor. For a Hispanic to be president of the entire student body is something to shout about, but Manuel could always charm your socks off. Joe Williams on the other hand, never liked school much, just got by and seemed to daydream a lot. He was fair, with a shock of blond hair so unruly, it was hard to keep it combed long enough to be considered "well-groomed." He was shorter than Manuel and slimmer. He sunburned easily, tanned poorly and, besides his face and arms, was the color of milk. When they got to high school, Manuel had insisted that Joe join him in advanced Spanish class.

"We already speak Spanish, Manito. You shouldn't take a class just because it's easy," Joe complained.

"But we can't read or write it, Joe, and we need to learn," Manuel argued.

Joe was defiant, "This is the first time we have ever got to choose anything. I'm going to try German." It also turned out to be the first time he enjoyed school, mainly because of Mrs. Yuna - strict, disciplined, and as demanding as a heart attack. She expected the same dedication from her students that she gave them. If you could last in her class, you

would learn to speak the language. Joe lived for German class. In his junior year, Mrs. Yuna convinced him to study Spanish in his last two years so that he could learn to read and write it as Manuel had insisted. Even though she taught German, French, and Spanish, Mrs. Yuna insisted that he study Spanish with Mr. Chico in order to “get another point of view on language learning.” He learned that Spanish speakers from different countries used different vocabulary.

In their last year of high school, Joe discovered English literature in Mr. Marsden’s class. He actually enjoyed reading for the very first time. He was a straight A student in German, Spanish and English Literature, otherwise he was squeaking by to graduation. Manuel, however, was second highest in the senior class and was invited to deliver a speech at graduation. Both boys were happy to be leaving school. College was financially out of the question, even Citrus Junior College.

Joe saw a light go on under the swinging door to the kitchen. That will be Mrs. Ramos. It must be five o’clock. She will be dressed in her threadbare bathrobe with one giant braid down her back. She will get Mr. Ramos’ breakfast before he walks to work. Joe got up and got dressed.

“Buenos días, don Pepe. Cómo amanació?” Mr. Ramos had always called Joe “don Pepe,” even when he was a child. “Sit down, míjolo and eat. I didn’t hear you boys come in last night.”

“Gracias, señor Ramos. It was late. We had a lot of work. Today is going to be even busier, I think.”

Mrs. Ramos brought a steaming mug of Mexican hot chocolate made with sugar, cinnamon and several other spices, the best chocolate he had ever tasted, and a hard roll called bolillo that Joe loved. “Gracias, doña Carmen, muy amable.”

“No hay de que. Eat! I know you are hungry. Manuel is getting up now.”

He tore the roll in two and dunked one part into the steaming froth. Ahhh! It tasted so good. The smell is rich, the taste is rich and is filling. Another taste of roll and another swallow of hot, hot chocolate! It is an early morning ritual and pure Heaven.

“We have not seen each other for while, don Pepe. We haven’t talked. How are your parents?”

“They’re well, sir, thank you. We don’t talk much. They’re usually mad at each other. I had rather be at school or working than at home.”

"I'm sorry, don Pepe. It's hard being married and especially hard with a family. You'll find that out one of these days. And I hope it will be sooner than later." He took a drink of coffee, thought a moment, and then changed to a happier subject. "Are you and Manuel going to St. Francis Parish hall dance tonight? Dance with that pretty Dominguez girl, eh? What's her name?"

Mrs. Ramos brought his breakfast, scrambled eggs cooked with onions, green and red bell peppers, hot green chile sauce, and steaming flour tortillas. "Her name is Ana Cecilia and it's none of your business, viejo." she said to Mr. Ramos.

He laughed, "Oh, yes, Ana Cecilia. A favorite, I hear. Cuidado, mi'jo. Be careful! Those pretty Mexican girls will either break your heart or marry you."

"Cállate!" Mrs. Ramos hissed at her husband. "Don't pay any attention, mi'jo. Eat!" And she returned to the kitchen.

Joe tore a tortilla, picked up his fork and began to eat.

"Ay, don Pepe, you still haven't learned to eat with the tortilla."

"No, señor Ramos, I cannot master that. Qué desayuno más rico, doña Carmen!"

"So, don Pepe, you are going to graduate now, eh? You and Manuel are what we call in Mexico 'bachilleres'. High School graduates. They command respect."

Manuel came into the kitchen, said hello, kissed his mother on the cheek and sat down to his hot chocolate and roll.

"What do you think to do now, boys?" asked Mr. Ramos. "What about your future?"

The boys looked at each other. Joe was cleaning his plate with the last of his tortilla. "Well, sir, it doesn't look like we have much of a future. The Germans have smashed Poland, taken most of Europe and sent the entire British Army back to England with its tail between its legs. The Japanese are taking China and everyone seems to agree that world war is coming here too."

Manuel said, "Doyle keeps telling us to join the Army Air Corps just as soon as we graduate."

Joe continued, "He says that if we join now, we can get a lot of training before war comes. The better trained we are, the better our chances for survival. He says we are going to have to fight this war. Better the air corps than the infantry."

Mr. Ramos sounded weary, "Ah yes, the war. What do your parents say about that, Joe?"

Mrs. Ramos brought Manuel's breakfast and took Joe's plate away, then served him coffee with cinnamon. She refilled her husband's cup.

"They are against me going into the military. They don't even like it that I learned to fly. I try to discuss it with them, but they just shout me down. They are very unhappy together."

"Pues, I have to get to work. It's late." He rose, put on his jacket, grabbed his lunch pail, kissed his wife, and patted the boys' heads. "I guess war is coming, but I tell you this: the hardest thing in the world is to bury one of your children. That's why they don't want to talk about it, don Pepe." He left the house.

Mrs. Ramos brought Manuel's coffee and took his plate away.

"It's about time for us to be going too, Manito," Joe urged.

"Wear your scarves, mi'jos, it's cold this morning."

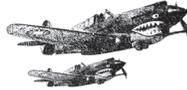
"It'll be warm later, it's May," Manuel countered.

"This is pneumonia weather. Cold mornings and evenings, hot in the middle of the day. It costs less to prevent sickness than to cure it. Wear your scarves!"

"Sí, mamá," they replied as they left the table to go to work.

The boys rode their bicycles everywhere – to work, to school, to do errands and just for fun. They both got their bikes for Christmas in the fourth grade. They both knew that this would be the one and only bicycle they would ever have, and they had better take care of it. Together they sought out Henry, a well-known character around town about fifty years old with a mental age of ten. He delivered papers on his bicycle, did odd jobs, and ran errands for people. Henry taught the boys how to take their bikes apart, clean them, oil them, and reassemble them. As a result, their bikes were always in fine working order despite being old and well used. Last year, Joe talked about getting a motorcycle. His mother had said absolutely not. Doyle said that their bikes kept them in great physical shape. But the real reason Joe finally didn't buy one was because Manuel said that under no circumstances would he ever climb on a motorcycle.

CHAPTER TWO



When the boys were in the eighth grade at Lee School, Joe went to work at J.C. Penny. That winter, it rained so hard for so long that Azusa Avenue flooded. Many businesses lost most or all their merchandise including J.C. Penny who decided to abandon the building and build another, bigger store at Citrus and Alost, across from a corn field. Joe helped in the move, but they did not invite him to return when it opened for business. He and Manuel smudged the citrus groves that winter, cleaned the irrigation canals in the spring and picked the fruit in the summer. Early one Saturday morning of their freshman year at Citrus High School, Joe got on his bicycle and started riding west on Highway 66 looking for work. He stopped at business after business, but there was no work. He crossed the San Gabriel River into Duarte and then he crossed Mountain Avenue into Monrovia all the time asking for work. At the corner of Huntington Drive and Shamrock Avenue he stopped at the Monrovia airport. He rode down a slight embankment and into an open sided brick building which had been used to repair motors, but now was an open space used for everything except repairing motors. He parked his bike and walked into the office. A man with flaming red hair with his back to Joe was doing something in a file cabinet.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?" He turned around and took a step toward Joe. He walked with a limp and his green eyes were as intense as a solar eclipse.

Joe opened his mouth....

"Well let me guess" he said, "you would like a job."

"Yes, sir, I would. I used to work for J.C. Penney in Azusa. I kept the place clean, priced the stock..."

"It's hard work here, son," the man interrupted. "I've had several high school boys here, but they don't last. Try some place else." The man turned away.

"Please, sir," Joe insisted, "give me a task and I'll do it. If it's not good enough, you don't have to pay me. If it is, give me a job, sir."

The man gave a huge sigh of resignation. "See that space out there where you came in?" He spoke with his back to Joe. "We used to fix airplane engines there. Clean it. Go outside and see Swede," he gestured to the right with his head, "he'll give you cleaning materials."

The brick walls and the cement floor were a grimy, oily, dirty mess and Joe only cleaned one-half of one wall by five o'clock. The man asked him if he had a friend who could work as hard as he had to finish the job. "Mind you, if you speak more'n ten words to each other all day, you're fired. You come here to work."

"Yes sir! Thank you, sir!"

Joe took Manuel back with him early the next morning and together they cleaned both walls and most of the floor. Doyle O'Brien, a World War I veteran ace combat pilot, hired them to work Thursday and Friday afternoons and all day Saturday and Sunday. They kept the place spic and span as well as washed and waxed the airplanes. When they turned sixteen years old, Doyle asked them if they wanted to learn to fly. Joe jumped at the chance but Manuel only agreed to keep Joe company.

"Come in Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons, and we'll start ground school" he had said. Joe learned to fly and navigate quickly, as did Manuel. This past year, the boys had started flying passengers around the San Gabriel Basin and sightseers over the Sierra Madre mountains.

Saturday was just as busy as they knew it would be. Manuel flew a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers photographer over the mountains from Chantry Flats in Arcadia to San Dimas Canyon in order to

photograph the work already begun, and the work still to be done in order to control flooding. He said that some day there would be a series of dams, canals and drains so that it would never again flood. But there was a war coming and who knew when all this construction would begin. Manuel thought, "It rains fifteen minutes and Peck Road is flooded. That won't change in my lifetime."

Joe had readied twelve private planes and filed flight plans for their owners who flew on weekends. Manuel arrived back at two, but it was half past three before the man who had come especially to meet them finally arrived. They boys were sitting at a picnic table in the same breezeway they had cleaned their first day of work.

Doyle limped toward them with his arm casually thrown over the neck of a tall man walking ramrod straight. They were laughing, at ease with each other as old friends are. The man's face betrayed his character. Manuel thought his face was made of worn out leather with sharply cut features - a jutting jaw, lips pressed into a tight thin line, his fierce eyes as black as his wiry hair. Joe's impression was that his face was chiseled out of granite, heavily lined cheeks tanned to mahogany. This man was used to command, and he was used to having his way. Joe felt comfortable with him.

"Manuel, Joe, I want you to meet my good friend, Colonel Claire Chennault, retired from the Army Air Corps and now commander of the entire Chinese Air Force."

The boys stood up and shook hands with the man in turn. "I am Manuel Ramos. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Chennault."

"Joe Williams, Mr. Chennault. Pleased to meet you. Doyle said that an old friend was coming especially to see us, but we had no idea you were such an important person."

"Sit down, Claire, I'll get us some real coffee," Doyle said and went to the office.

Manuel said, "Are you sure you want Doyle's Coffee? It may have been made last Wednesday." They all laughed.

Chennault countered, "He's going to bring Café Royale, that's what he means by 'real coffee'."

"What's Café Royale, sir?" Joe asked and looked at Manuel who shrugged.

"It's supposed to be coffee with a shot of whiskey, but I suspect

Doyle's going to bring whiskey with a shot of coffee. The only time Doyle will touch liquor is in coffee and on a special occasion with friends. I understand you boys are outstanding pilots."

Joe blushed bright red. Manuel mumbled, "We're pilots, sir. Doyle taught us. We try to be good."

"Doyle also said that he's been telling you to join the military as soon as you graduate."

Joe answered, "Boy, he sure has. He says that over and over."

Manuel continued, "He says that war is coming anyway and it's a good idea to get as much training and experience as fighter pilots before this country gets into a war."

Doyle walked up with a tray with four mugs, two with whiskey, and a coffee pot. He poured coffee all around. "And it was sound advice too. Until now, that is," Doyle offered and raised his cup. "Let's have a toast, men. May we all be together again after the war, safe and sound." They raised their mugs, clinked them and drank. Doyle put on his heavy Irish accent, "Ahhhh! The water of life! It's what the Irish call whiskey in their native Gaelic."

Chennault offered, "The coffee's fresh and the whiskey's Irish, boys" he offered his cup in a toast and drank again.

Manuel said, "Doyle, you said your advice was good, until now. Why only until now?"

"Because," Doyle answered, "Claire has a better offer."

Chennault spoke, "Boys, do you know what's happening in the world? Germany has gone through Europe like a dose of salts. They're ready to invade England. Only the British Air Force stands in the way. But the real threat to us comes from the Orient. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and China in 1937. China is just too big for Japan to take as quickly as Germany took Europe. Our mutual friend, Billy Mitchell, warned this country years ago that the threat to us is Japan. He even said how the Japanese were going to attack us, and still nobody pays attention. After I retired, the Chinese government hired me to build up their Air Force — which means hire and train American pilots, buy new American warplanes and they gave me the money to do it."

Doyle added, "His mission, boys, is nothing less than saving China with American air power."

"I am in this country searching for the very best, most experienced

military pilots I can find to take back to China with me and begin building an effective air force against the Japanese before she captures all the Pacific including us. I have bought Curtis P-40 fighter planes that can knock their planes out of the air. I am hiring pilots, mechanics, armorers, nurses and even a doctor or two if I can find any who will go to China with me. And gentlemen, I am offering you a job as pilots to fly with me. The contract is for twelve months."

The boys sat with their mouths open. This man inspired confidence. Both boys wanted to be a part of his program. But to be combat pilots...

Manuel spoke first. "But Mr. Chennault, we're not military pilots. We haven't even seen a pursuit plane up close. How can we be a part of your plan?"

"I'll train you. I look for military pilots because I know they can fly well. I don't have time to teach flying. Doyle assures me that you guys are really good pilots. I trust his judgment."

Doyle added, "He's the best tactician in the world, boys. He has observed Japanese pilot training - IN JAPAN! He knows their tactics and I assure you that he knows how to beat them."

"I will make you combat pilots worthy of the title and I'll teach you how to beat the Japanese in aerial combat."

Doyle continued, "By the time we get into this war, you guys will already be experienced combat veterans. You will be doing what I have already suggested, but Claire pays better than the Air Corps."

"Six hundred dollars a month. If you wish, a portion will be deposited in your bank account here, and the rest paid to you in China," Chennault explained. "The Chinese government has added a bonus of five hundred dollars for every Japanese plane shot down."

Doyle commented, "Good wages, don't you think, for a couple of guys right out of high school? If you should get killed over there, your parents will get six month's pay all at once. You have to think of that, too."

The boys' eyes popped open and their mouths dropped in disbelief. (At least they didn't drool.) Could they really earn that much money? Joe spoke to Manuel barely above a whisper, "China, Mano! Podemos conocer China! Qué te parece?"

Manuel said, "I don't even have a bank account."

Joe asked, "Sir, are we going to be like those guys who went to Spain to fight?"

"No, you won't," Doyle answered. "Those guys formed the Abraham Lincoln Brigade on their own and fought along side the Communists. Our government seems to be more afraid of the Communists than the Germans and the Japanese together. Claire's group has the blessing of the State Department and Franklin Roosevelt himself."

Chennault added, "The U.S. government is also giving us money and planes and their blessing for this endeavor."

"How will we get there, sir?" Manuel asked.

"Good question," replied Chennault. "A ship leaves from San Pedro on May twenty-fifth and will reach Rangoon, Burma twenty five days later, where we'll pick up our fighter planes and fly to China."

"We go to Burma first, sir?" Joe asked then stood up and recited,

"Come you back, you British soldier.
Come you back to Mandalay,
Where the flying fishes play,
And the dawn comes up like thunder,
Out of China 'cross the bay."

Chennault clapped loudly and said, "Bravo! You know Kipling."

"And love him. A lot of his works are about Burma."

"Indeed they are. Well, gentlemen, the ship leaves May twenty-fifth. I must go to March Field tomorrow. I would appreciate an answer by Tuesday if you want to join us. I'll leave two P-40 manuals for you to study before you arrive in Burma."

Everyone stood up and shook hands. Manuel asked, "What is the name of this group, sir?"

"The American Volunteer Group, AVG for short," Chennault answered.

They left the same way they came, Doyle's arm slung easily over Chennault's neck laughing and limping to his friend's car, painted Army brown with a white star on each of the two doors. The boys stayed an hour more talking excitedly with each other and then with Doyle. The time flew faster than they had ever known it to pass.

Doyle said, "Boys, this is an opportunity of a lifetime. Don't let it pass you by. It's your future. Some opportunities only happen once. Just think, your first job and you'll be flying with the best this country has to offer. It's a time to hone your professional skills and to become men. Don't come in until Monday. Do some thinking. Goodnight, men."

They rode home single file with Manuel in the lead as usual, each with his own thoughts. As they turned south on Virginia Avenue from Foothill, Manuel turned around and yelled, "Come to my house and let's talk to my Dad."

Mr. Ramos had a scar that ran from below his right ear forward toward his Adam's apple. When Manuel and Joe were children, they used to ask him about it. He always stopped whatever he was doing to tell them a very long, complicated story how he got it. And each time he told a different story. The best stories were on rainy days when they ate sweet tamales and drank hot chocolate. His stories could fill an entire afternoon. Joe didn't know why he remembered that now on his way to Manuel's house at Fourth and Angelino. It was six o'clock. They had rarely come home so late.

The family had already finished supper. Only Mrs. Ramos was still sitting at the table finishing her coffee while the girls did the dishes. The boys burst into the house like a locomotive. They both spoke at once telling, asking, commenting and startling everyone so that no one understood anything. Mrs. Ramos threw up her hands and went into the kitchen to fix food for the boys. Mr. Ramos made the boys quiet down, wash up, sit at the table and eat their dinner. Mrs. Ramos sat down at the table with the rest of the family to learn the news. The boys ate, talked and coughed all at the same time. The other children and Mrs. Ramos began to laugh believing that it must be a funny story to cause this much excitement. Mr. Ramos ordered the boys to take turns. They tried, but they were so excited they both talked at once, then one talked, then the other, then they interrupted each other until Mr. Ramos made them shut up completely and he asked each boy questions until he finally seemed to have the events of the day in some order so that he could understand why they were so excited. Mrs. Ramos stopped laughing when she understood what the boys were saying. They wanted to go to China? And go to war? She got the other children up and doing jobs in other rooms. This kind of talk was not for young ears. Not yet anyway.

Mr. Ramos let the boys wind down. He poured them coffee and filled a cup for himself. He called to his wife for her to be part of this discussion. As the boys sipped their coffee with the sweet taste of cinnamon, he took a sip and asked, "Manuelito, what exactly excites you about this offer?"

"Well, Papá," he answered, "I guess it's the money. Just think what you can do with six hundred dollars a month! You can add the extra rooms to the house that you wanted. You can give Diana a real quinceñera with a Mass and everything which you couldn't for Isabel."

"Don Pepe, what attracts you most about this offer?" he asked Joe in turn.

"It's the opportunity to go half way around the world and see Burma and China, sir. We would never get that opportunity otherwise."

"I see. Both of you are looking at this offer as if it were with some company where you go to work, earn big, travel, come home at night and sleep safely in bed. It is not that kind of job! You should be excited about learning to be killers. Excited to be killing Japanese boys exactly like you. Boys who also want to travel, boys who want to grow up! You don't realize that there is a price to pay to get this wonderful salary and all this free travel. The price is to kill. There are consequences to every action that you do and that you do not do. What are the consequences for you if you take this job?"

The house had become dead quiet. Manuel spoke, "Papá. The Japanese are the aggressors. Doyle, Chennault, our teachers, even the newspapers say that sooner or later we will be in this war too."

Joe added quietly, "The war is choosing our generation, sir. We fly so that we don't have to be in the infantry."

"War! War! Maybe war is coming and we can't do anything about it. But war is different for poor people. Poor people have to struggle every day just to survive, war or no war. I fought a war in Mexico. We fought because we didn't have any choice. They took everything away from us — our land, our money, our women and our children. We fought and we suffered and died and not a damned thing changed! I had to run away just so the new federal army wouldn't kill me. Politicians begin wars when they want and they end them when they want. All poor people do is fight, suffer and die." Tears were running down his cheeks. Tears of rage, of frustration, of sorrow. "Don Pepe, your father will tell you the same thing. I don't want to lose my two boys!" He left the room.

Joe finished his coffee in silence and stood up. "I guess I had better go home." He patted Manuel on the back, "Later, Mano." He kissed Mrs. Ramos on the cheek, "Thank you for dinner. Y su preocupación

por mi. I am sorry that I made Mr. Ramos feel so bad." She patted his hand and gave him a sad smile that said, 'I'm sorry we have already lost the both of you.'

While he was riding his bicycle toward home, Joe said aloud to the night, "I don't know how I am going to tell them that I'm going to China," then he shouted into the night, "BUT I AM GOING TO GO!"

CHAPTER THREE



One Saturday just after Joe began high school, he and his Dad were planting fruit trees together in the back yard. They took all day to plant an apricot, a peach, a pomegranate, an avocado tree, and talk together. Dad had confided to Son that he was tired of being an unskilled laborer. He wanted to be a professional. He worked at Monrovia Cemetery in charge of the crematorium and he guided mourners to their gravesite. It was a good job, it was a good company, but it took no skill and only a little training to do it. "Mother is a nurse and soon you will be some kind of professional as well. I want to be a professional too, but I have no idea how to go about it. Got any ideas?"

Joe certainly did have some ideas. "Lots of adults go to Citrus Junior College at night. You can take classes after work."

"Is that right? I didn't know that."

"Go to Citrus after work on Monday. They'll tell you everything you need to know."

"Good idea," his Dad agreed, "but what would I study?"

"Anything you want to. You're a whiz at math. You can even figure in your head. Why don't you study mathematics?"

"Yes, I like math. I have always wanted to learn the slide rule."

"You can do it at Citrus. Why don't you study accounting like your friend Ruth at work?"

Mr. Williams had never thought of that, but suddenly it actually seemed possible. "That's right. I could do that. I'll go to Citrus after work on Monday and find out what I have to do. Thanks, son." The trees got planted that Saturday and Mr. Williams became a part time college student.

Joe didn't get up until after eight. He had felt so ashamed last night that it was hard to get to sleep. He hadn't meant to hurt Mr. Ramos, and now he felt terrible. He looked out one of his two bedroom windows and saw his father weeding the garden and tying up the sweet peas. The garage was empty which meant that his mother was out with the car, probably at work. He quickly got dressed and went into the kitchen. A full pot of coffee was still hot. He poured a cup. The steam carried the beautiful aroma which made him feel a little better. He would have to be careful what he said to his father. He didn't want to make him feel betrayed too. He opened the bread box and took out half a loaf of home made bread. He cut a large slice and covered it thickly with blackberry jam. He didn't feel particularly hungry, but he wanted to postpone telling his Dad that he had decided to go to China. He took a bite, chewed, washed it down with hot coffee, then took a big bite. He hadn't realized just how hungry he was. His Dad was the bread maker of the house. He had been the youngest of four brothers and, because of it, was always left at home to help his mother while father and older brothers worked the farm. As a result, he was an excellent cook. His biscuits melted in your mouth, his milk gravy deliciously thick, and no one could hold a candle to the umpteen ways he could prepare chicken. He washed his hands and mouth, filled two mugs with steaming hot coffee, went out the back door to face the music. He had no idea what to say.

"Oh good," his father said as Joe stepped into the garden. "I'm sure glad you brought coffee. I need a break." He took a long drink. "Or maybe I'm through for today."

"Be through for the day," Joe encouraged.

"I was surprised to see that you hadn't gone to work today. I tried not to make any noise. Doyle give you the day off?"

"Yes, he did."

Mr. Williams studied his son a moment. He is a man already, he thought. Where did the time go? He has a man's message for me, I think, but I don't know if I want to hear it.

"Where's Mom?"

"They called her early this morning to go to work. They have some sort of emergency today."

Joe sighed relief, "Thank goodness for that. I have to talk to you."

"Can we sit in the shade and finish our coffee?" Dad asked.

"We may need the rest of the pot."

"Then you'd better bring it out here. Sounds ominous."

Joe looked at his Dad for a long moment before he went to bring the coffee pot. When he returned, they both drained the last swallow from their cups before he refilled them. Still standing Joe said, "You've been using big words like 'ominous' a lot lately. Just the other day you said something like 'your job wasn't in jeopardy'. And then a few days ago I heard you use 'pejorative' and 'calamitous'. Where are you getting all this vocabulary?"

"I'm a college student, remember? Educated people are supposed to use educated language. Okay, son, shoot. What's on your mind?"

Joe didn't know whether to sit, stand or pace. He just began. He reminded his Dad that Doyle had been preaching about going into the Army Air Corps after he graduated. Then, he told about meeting Doyle's friend, Chennault, the man who not only commanded attention, but commanded the entire Chinese Air force. He explained this country's support of China — moral support, financial and materiel support. He explained that Doyle and Chennault had enough confidence in himself and Manuel to offer them jobs that were really reserved for military pilots. He explained the enormous salary and the generous bonus they would be paid. He told about the training with the P-40 fighters, the new tactics he would learn, how he would develop into a good fighter pilot by the time this country finally got into a shooting war. It did take several cups of coffee to say everything he wanted to say. His father sat patiently, listened and said nothing until Joe was finished. He waited a long moment before he spoke. "Tell me, son, why do you want to go so bad?"

"I didn't say I wanted to go so bad," Joe replied defensively.

"Your attitude said it for you. I ask again, why do you want to go so bad?"

"I want to see China and Burma and those places that Kipling wrote about. This may be the only opportunity in my life I will be able to travel half way around the world and get paid doing it.

"Yes, that may be. But you are not going there to be a tourist. You will have little time for sight seeing. Son, you are going over there to learn to kill other pilots. That is what you are going to be doing most of the time until one of them shoots you down and maybe kills you. Have you thought about that? There are consequences to everything you do in this life. When you decide to do one thing, that automatically means that you don't do the other thing, and there are consequences to that decision. You can go to China, but the consequences are that you must put your life in danger while you try to kill others. Why do you want to kill young men like yourself, men you don't even know and that have done you no harm? One of those boys may be talking to his father right now. Understand, son, why you are going there and what you are going to be doing. Don't let the excitement of travel blind you as to why you are going there. All that money is for killing. If you don't kill with skill, someone will kill you. War is serious business, son. Understand that. War is not about making the world safe for democracy, or anything else. War is about death and destruction. You kill and you try to survive. Bodies get horribly mangled in war, and they tend to stay that way. There are soldiers still in veteran hospitals from the first war with mangled bodies that will never heal, and others completely crazy because of war. Maybe a war will come and maybe we'll all have to fight it. Then we have no choice, but war is still killing. You must understand what you are getting into. I can't help you make your decision about going. Mother was upset and angry when she found out that you were flying. Because she was afraid for you. We both know people who have died in plane crashes. Flying is dangerous. I didn't want you to fly either, but I could see how happy you were doing it. I was envious of that feeling. I have never liked anything the way you love flying. That's why I never said anything to you about it. It's a wonderful skill and I have no doubt that you do it well nor do I doubt that you will be a great fighter pilot as well. I hate the possibility that you may die over there in China. I hate that you may go over there not knowing what your job really is." He looked at his coffee cup, drank the last swallow and said, "I guess that's all I have to say."

Joe sat down next to his Dad and said, "Mr. Ramos said that you would say something like that. How did he know?"

"We are adults. We have been children and we have been adolescents. We've gone from feather heads to level heads. And we both have raised boys. We have had experience and we have learned from our experience. What we both want for you boys is for you to live long enough to become mature adults with your own families."

"Dad, I really want to go to China."

"I can see that you do. Tell me, if you don't go to China, would you still join the military?"

"I'm sure I would. Why?"

"You've got to tell your mother."

"Oh, Lord, I don't know how I'm going to do that. Can you do it for me?"

"No, I can't. You must do that yourself."

"Any suggestions how?"

"Well, yes. Explain to her what you are going to do. Don't ask permission. Just tell her that you've made a decision and you are telling her what it is."

"Will that work?"

"No, but you won't have to fight about it. When she starts to talk you out of it, simply tell her that you are leaving in three weeks. You did say the end of May, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. The twenty-fifth."

"All right," said his Dad, "now I guess there are some developments you should know. First, I have been working in the office with Ruth as assistant account part-time, and outside part-time. Last January they hired someone to replace me outside and I have been working as an accountant full time. Ruth convinced me to take all the required classes for the A.A. degree at Citrus. I graduate in June too. I didn't say anything before because I wanted to surprise you. Father and son graduating together."

Joe was enthusiastic. "Dad, that's wonderful! You did just what you wanted to do. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you, son. For the first time I look forward to going to work."

"I guess you can transfer to Fullerton State for your bachelor's degree."

"Yes, I could, but there is more. Now, don't let your mother know that you know any of this. She wanted to tell you after it was all

finished." He looked at the ground, cleared his throat a few times, picked up some pebbles and tossed them aside, changed sitting position and finally spoke again. "Well, you know perfectly well that your mother and I haven't been happy with each other for a long time now. You've been talking about going into the military after graduation. We've decided that after you leave home would be the right time for us to divorce. We just can't imagine living together without you."

Neither man could look at the other. "I'm sorry, Dad, but it should have happened years ago."

"Yes, son, but we couldn't abandon our responsibility to you while you were growing up. We figured that an unhappy, but stable home was better for you than a broken one."

Joe didn't know what to say. He knew what his parents had sacrificed for him. He was glad they could escape from each other now. "What do you plan to do?"

"I don't know yet. Probably go to Fullerton State as you said. Your mother wants to go back to school and become a surgical nurse."

"Are you going to sell the house?" Joe asked.

"And split the money, yes. I wanted to give you my half so you could start college instead of going to the army. I'll still do it if you stay home. We could go to Fullerton together. I earn enough now to support both of us."

Joe felt hot tears running down his cheeks and was sure the same was happening to his Dad. Both of them knew that it was a great plan and it was not going to happen. As if on a signal, both men hugged each other and Joe felt as safe now as he used to as a child when his Dad hugged him. They cried in silence holding each other a long time. He had missed these hugs and didn't even know it. He supposed his Dad had too.

Joe went to school Monday morning feeling like Sisyphus pushing his boulder up hill. He first went to see his favorite teacher, Mr. Marsden. He told him the whole story about wanting to go to China, and about his talk with his father. Mr. Marsden also listened patiently. Finally he responded, "That sounds like a very mature decision, Joe. You've thought it through, decided that is what you want to do and made your decision. You Dad is right about the reason for going to China is to kill. War is killing. Just like the theme of *MACBETH* is

murder. You probably will not appreciate your parents' concern about you until you have children of your own. The hardest thing parents ever have to do is bury a child, in your case, their only child. It is also obvious that a war is coming, and a lot of parents will have to bury a lot of children. It's a good idea to get all the training you can before the shooting starts. This opportunity is combining training with practice. Going to China, getting an enormous salary and being in eminent danger is all part of the package. You don't get one without the rest. I respect your decision. It will be a great adventure, Joe. It's time for you to leave home."

Joe gave a great sigh of relief. "I am so happy that you approve of my decision."

"I do indeed," the teacher replied. "Don't sell yourself short, Joe. It's a mature decision. Your parents did a good job teaching you to think for yourself. The problem for them is that you don't think the way they want you to. Every generation has the same problem."

"Thank you, sir. My Dad didn't try to talk me out of it, but he didn't like it either."

"Of course not. You will understand why some day. While we're talking, I'll tell you a secret. As soon as school is out, I am going to join the Navy."

"You are, sir?"

"Yes, I am going into the medical corps and get all the training I can before the shooting starts. I prefer to do something constructive like putting wounded bodies back together."

"Does anyone else know?"

"No, and I wish you would say nothing, please."

"You have my word, sir. May I ask a question?"

"Shoot."

"Well, I'm supposed to leave before I graduate. Can I get my diploma early?"

Mr. Marsden said, "Go see the Vice Principal and tell him what you are planning. He'll arrange for you to get your diploma before you leave. He's a good guy. He's only tough on the troublemakers."

"It has been a real pleasure being in your class this year. I don't like school, but your class has made me want to read. Read everything!"

"Thank you, Joe. It has been a pleasure knowing you. Let's leave

our addresses with the Vice Principal so that we can find each other after the war. I'm sure he'll still be here. O.K?"

"It's a deal, Mr. Marsden."

They shook hands and Joe left feeling lighter and more relaxed than he had since his decision to join Colonel Chennault. It was lunchtime and he was going to see Mrs. Yuna, his German teacher, the very first class, the first subject and the first teacher he ever liked in school. He crossed the patio on his way to her classroom. He saw Ana Cecilia Dominguez. He stopped dead and his heart skipped three beats. Suddenly he hungered to speak with her. She was so beautiful! She never needed make-up. Her clear, dark skin radiated beauty just as it was. She was quick with her dazzling smile, her eyes danced when they looked right at you. Her shiny black hair, straight as truth, reached below her waist. In damp weather, she wore it in braids and became a Mayan princess. No wonder she was so popular! She was talking to only one other girl as Joe boldly walked up and spoke to them both. He asked her if she would walk with him, and they began to walk slowly around the school. His fingers brushed hers. She smiled, but reminded him that they may not do that in public, and especially not at school. He guided them to the shade by the outdoor swimming pool. He swallowed a few times, cleared his throat, squared his shoulders and looked straight into her beautiful doe eyes. "Annie, Manuel and I may go to China before school is out."

She lowered her eyes and spoke barely above a whisper, "Yes, I know, Manuel told me. I am sad that you are going and that you will be in such danger."

"Look, Annie, I never said anything before because we seemed to have all the time in the world to finish school and...and...grow up. But now there isn't any time. What I want to say is...well, ah...Annie, I'm going to be away for a year. Do you think after that time when I come home...could...could you and I ever possibly consider...you know...marriage?"

Her eyes shot up to his, her mouth dropped almost to the ground, she actually paled. Her eyes dropped again. She took his hand and squeezed it and looked into his eyes. "Joe, you are the sweetest person I know. I am proud to know you and to be your friend. My dearest Joe, we can never marry. It is not because I don't like you, and not

because there's someone else because there isn't. It's just because we're not right for each other. We can always be friends, and we can raise our children to be friends too, but I can't marry you, Joe." She brushed her lips against his cheek and ran away just as the bell rang ending lunch time. He stood alone looking after her and feeling...well...strangely free. I knew that was coming, he thought. I wonder how it feels when a girl loves you back! It was a perfectly lovely warm spring day, but not hot yet. Not a cloud in the beautiful blue sky, but Joe didn't notice any of it.

Mrs. Yuna never had class right after lunch. She said no one can teach or learn at that time. One should rest and let the food digest. Joe found her in her room lounging in her oversized swivel chair reading an article in LIFE magazine. He asked her permission in German to join her. With much pleasure, she replied waving him in. Mrs. Yuna was a small woman, maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet, sallow complexion, short brown hair and a superb tennis player. She sat ramrod straight, always spoke to the point and asked pertinent questions. She taught Spanish, French and German, but no one knew how many languages she spoke. She was friendly, hardly ever smiled, firmly believed in keeping her distance, and was the most feared teacher on the faculty, as well as the most respected. You took a language with Mrs. Yuna to learn it, not just to complete a requirement. If you came to class unprepared, she would cloud up and rain all over you — once. If you did it again, you were invited to drop her class. Those who finished her classes, as Joe had taken four years of German with her, found that they could actually speak the language. In German, he reminded her where he worked and what he did. He spoke of the coming war and then brought in Colonel Chennault and his search for pilots to fly against the Japanese, and ended by telling her that he intended to go to China. She paused for a few moments just looking at him.

"Well, Joseph, I only had to correct you ten times. You make fewer and fewer mistakes. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Yuna," Joe said quietly in English.

Suddenly she seemed...old...or maybe just...tired. "I am so sorry that this country once again has eliminated things German from its collective mind. Germany has contributed so much to civilization, to

the arts, to science and technology. They are a creative people. Now, we have to ignore all that again until this terrible war is over, and who knows how many years that will be. Practice German every chance you get, Joseph, but be careful who might be listening. Anti-German sentiment will reach a fever pitch before we get back to normal. I am sorry that you are called to fight this war. Very soon I am afraid, our young men will be conscripted, and it will be a long and terrible war this time." She looked so sad.

"What does 'conscripted' mean?"

"Drafted. The government calls and you have to go to the army, like it or not. Germans came to this country to get away from that very thing, and now their descendants will be drafted and sent back to Europe to fight relatives they don't even know. I think you and Manuel have made a wise decision. I wish you God's speed and I hope you come back safe and sound. It has been a pleasure to know you, Joseph."

They both stood up and shook hands. She gave a rare smile. "It has been my great fortune, Mrs. Yuna, to have you as a teacher and a guide. Goodbye."

Before he could leave today, he had to ask the Vice Principal if he could receive his diploma early. Then it suddenly occurred to him that the decision to go to China had been his alone, and he was watching it change his life....probably.... forever.

Mr. Blake's reputation was that he always had time for you. He also made sure that the school ran smoothly which made him the most feared man in school. His nickname was "Mr. Blankety-blank." The troublemakers hated him because they felt they should be able to do whatever they wanted with impunity. He stood to welcome Joe into his office, offered him one of the two chairs, and he took the other. He listened while Joe explained that he was going to join the American Volunteer Group with Colonel Chennault and go to China at the end of May and could he get his diploma early.

"Joe, that is a mature decision," Mr. Blake observed, "I imagine that your parents don't agree with you going to China and all the rest of it."

"My Dad doesn't like it, but he respects my decision. I haven't told my mother yet."

"I'm sorry that it's your generation that is called on to save the world. War has come again, and this time with a vengeance. We only

hear about it in this country, but the Chinese and Europeans have to live it. Soon our young men will have to fight it. I believe that it was John Ruskin who said that the Tree of Liberty must be watered from time to time with the blood of patriots, or something like that. Do you remember Lyle Granger? I think he was a year ahead of you. He went to the CCC camps. They sent him to Sequoia National Park to build trails and roads. The CCC camps are run in a military manner. They have companies, squads and so on. Every morning they have one hour of calisthenics, one hour of marching and the rest of the day they work like mules. He loved it. Have you ever been to Sequoia?

"No, sir, I've always had to work."

"It is easily the prettiest and wildest place in California and one of the most beautiful places on earth. Well, after a year up there, the boys were sent back here so that another group could take their place. Lyle's entire company joined the Marines together. Isn't that something? The entire group joined together."

"I didn't know that, but I do remember him. His little brother, Ray, told me that he's going to join the Navy."

"Yes, I think I heard that, too. Before it's all over, Joe, millions are liable to have to go." He was quiet for a while, lost in thought. He looked at Joe, "It will be my pleasure to get your diploma for you. You're not the only one getting it early. Some of the Junior College students are going too. It will be no problem adding one more name to the list. It will take about ten days. I'm sorry you have to go, Joe. Your grades haven't set the school on fire, but you're a responsible man, and if you continue your reputation here and follow your dream, I'm sure you'll have a successful life." He stood up and offered Joe his hand. "These twelve years of school have taught you how to learn, Joe, a valuable tool because you will be learning for the rest of your life. Please come back and see me whenever you can." They shook hands and Joe left feeling... well,... different than when he came to school today.

While Joe was riding his bike to Monrovia to go to work, he suddenly felt so alone!

School is supposed to end, not just stop! Is it true that the past is really prologue like Mr. Blake said? I'm out of school and soon I'll be out of work AND I'm leaving home all at the same time! I don't belong anywhere! Is life just beginning now? Well, what the heck did I live

before? Am I an adult now? When did that happen? Well, ding bust it! I'm a man! I'm a good enough pilot to go to China! I'm a high school graduate! But still Ana Cecilia doesn't want anything to do with me! What's the matter? To heck with it! Take me back to Tulsa, I'm too young to marry! Maybe a Burmese girl will tell me -

Come you back you American pilot!
Come you back to Mandalay!
Where the dawn comes up like THUNDER,
Out of China, 'cross the bay!

Adulthood enveloped Joe as black covers night, and China was still in the future – as unknown and as scary as going to the moon.

We hope that you have enjoyed the preview to *A Flying Tigers Story*.

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