

War Birds of the Far East

*An American Aviator Who Has Flown for Two Years in China
and Was a Daily Companion of Her Aces of
War Gives a Vivid Picture
of the Military Air Forces of China and Japan
and of Flying Hazards Along
the Yangtse River*

By Birger Johnsen

WE WERE standing near the hangars of the military air-drome at Shanghai. General Chang Hui-chang, commander-in-chief of the air forces of the central Chinese government, had just offered me the command of the finest equipped fighting squadron in the whole Chinese Air Corps, with the rank of a general.

Would I accept?
I was out of a job. And the equipment of that particular squadron was all that I could have asked. It consisted exclusively of the latest Wasp-powered Vought Corsair pursuit fighters, with bomb racks in addition to standard fighting equipment.

But there were other factors to be considered. I was getting tired of China. I had been there two years, had been ill much of that time and was beginning to feel the urge to get somewhere else.

So I shook my head. "No," I told him. But for that one word, spoken less than a year ago, I might today be in China in command of their prize squadron of fighting planes. And I might be worrying my head off about the greatly superior air forces of the Japanese; about the powerful Japanese bombers, whose activities over the Changhai district of Shanghai and the Woosung forts have held the attention of the world in recent weeks; about the possibility, in the event of a general war, that immense formations of Japanese planes might sweep up the Yangtse River, bombing the forts along the way and laying in waste first Nanking and then the new national capital at Loyang, which is 450 miles farther inland.

Perhaps, had I known then that the present trouble was so close at hand, I would have accepted; I don't know.

gone there in the summer of 1929 and the honor of officially opening the first air mail and passenger run in all of China fell upon me. Sun Fu, the son of China's great hero, Sun Yat-sen, and one of the leaders in the recent overthrow of President Chiang Kai-shek, was a passenger on that inaugural flight. So was his wife. From Shanghai we flew up the Yangtse River to Hankow, a distance of about 600 miles, with short intermediate stops at Nanking and Kihkiang.

Landing fields are few and far between in China, and the only ones available at our ports of call were the military airdromes. Thus, for nearly two years, I was an almost constant observer of China's air force, of its equipment, personnel, methods of training, competence and actual mode of carrying on warfare.

There I met General Chang Hui-chang, "the Lindbergh of China," as his countrymen call him, a gifted leader, a deadly bomber—as I saw from personal observation—and a skilled pilot, who has been flying ever since 1915. And there I met General Art Limm, the second in command, and many of the other officers and men of the Chinese Air Corps.

In my association with them we frequently discussed the strength and equipment of Japan's air armada, the advantage which the war birds of Nippon have in numbers, the problems that would face the Japanese Air Corps were they to attempt an air invasion of the interior of China, and similar things. And my daily flights up and down the Yangtse River taught me still more about the problems that would confront any enemy air fleet seeking to reach the interior.

Despatches from Shanghai the other day declared that Chinese soldiers and engineers

livered by China. They were out-of-date models that had been shipped from England in 1920; since then they had lain in the original packing cases. No one would take the responsibility of attempting to put them together.

Such hesitancy is readily understood. They tell a story in China that explains it eloquently. Three planes were to be unpacked and assembled. Each part was plainly marked with a tag indicating where it should go. It seemed a simple enough job, so Chinese mechanics were entrusted with the work. But the assembled planes were queer looking contraptions. The parts of the three different models had been mixed indiscriminately. Carefully an engineer explained what was wrong.

"The tags show exactly how it should be done. Get the tags in the right order," said the engineer, "and everything will be all right."

Half an hour later the Chinese mechanics announced that they had completed the job. The planes themselves had not been touched, but the tags had been untied and shifted to their proper positions.

I don't know whether that story about the 130 twelve-year-old planes is true or not; during the years I was in China I did not hear of that shipment being in the country. But it does represent a fair picture of the condition of China's air force as compared to the ultra modern aviation units of Japan.

Every advantage, so far as equipment, personnel and numbers are concerned, rests with the land of the Mikado. Japan has seven times the airplanes, pilots and ground personnel as Central China. Her pilots are infinitely better trained; she has at least half a dozen well-financed factories capable of turning out military ships fitted with the latest devices of war. Her airdromes and airways compare favorably with those

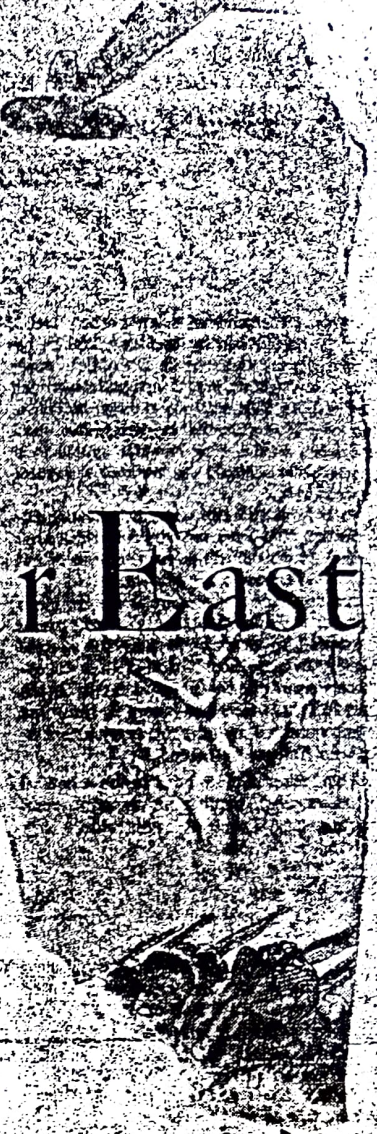
handful of planes, and many of them are obsolete. Her pilots are more or less individualists, and are poorly trained; during my months in China I did not see a single flight in close formation. She has but six or seven airdromes, all more or less poorly equipped. In all China there is not one airplane factory that can compare with the poorest of those in Japan.

The advantages seem overwhelmingly in favor of Japan, and yet should China declare war on Japan tomorrow, the Nipponese would think twice before sending their fleet and army transports and their aircraft carriers and immensely superior force of planes up the Yangtse River toward the interior of China at this time of the year—a move which Japan almost certainly would want to make should China declare war.

The Japanese would not hesitate on account of the numerous fortifications that are strung at strategic points on both sides of the river all the way up to Chungking, 1,200 miles inland. And some of these forts are nothing to laugh at—witness the troubles the Japanese have had with the Woosung fortifications.

No, the Japanese would be afraid of the tiny little Chinese air force. For, although the Chinese don't have numbers or equipment on their side, they do have allies which, at this time of the year, are even more powerful. First, they have the elements—the fogs, the prevailing winds and the depth of water in the Yangtse River. Second, they have the topography of the country. Third, they have the backwardness of the Chinese nation.

China is probably thanking her lucky Confucius right now that she has been a slow, non-progressive nation, and has not built any modern overland transportation routes into her rich interior. Beyond Nanking there are no railroads which the Jap-



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FAR HORIZONS is the Life Story
of Birger Johnsen -
By: Henry Wysham Lanier

Birger Johnsen based his OX5 Canadian Curtiss "Canuck" at Brea, which he acquired from the Angel Motor Company of Los Angeles for a reported cost of \$2,800.00.

We pulled the wings off and moved it into the garage to do some service work on the motor and plane. After it was repaired, I went with Birger on a Barnstorming trip to Palm Springs where we landed on the north edge of town along the road and would take off on the oiled highway.

The first night we were invited to the home of Mr. Gray, a Palm Springs pioneer. Mr. Gray's son and his wife, Katie, were visiting from Portland, Oregon. Mr. Gray's son had a dance band and Katie was his soloist. The young Mr. Gray was interested in flying and later purchased a Curtiss Jenny. One summer he operated at Newport Beach off a street that ended at the bay. Later it was reported that Katie was killed in a flying accident.

From Palm Springs we went to El Centro for a few days where my sister and her husband had a ranch. On the flight back to Brea, we stopped in Palm Springs for gas. Leaving Palm Springs for Brea, we had to fly up San Gorgana Pass. Head winds were so strong that we had to spend the night again at Palm Springs, leaving the next morning at daylight before the winds got so strong in the pass.

{ In my research I found the two attached articles on Birger Johnsen }
{ at the Library of the Air Space Museum, Washington, D. C. - DCM }

JOHNSON, BIRGER

BIRTH AND DEATH - Born in Ofoten, Norway, Nov. 12, 1893.

EDUCATION - Graduated from Skieusfjordeus Mekaniske Fagskole at Porsgrund.

EXPERIENCE & ACTIVITIES

In 1914 he came to United States, and went to work as aeronautical engineer and draftsman with Walter Phipps, New York for a year, later was with Bosch Magneto Company, Springfield, Mass., as Magneto expert and research engineer. He enlisted in the U.S. Air Service during war as a Magneto expert, later transferring to the Engineering Dept. as engineering officer. After the war he was assistant to the chief electrical engineer of the State of California at Sacramento.

Later, he resigned on account of illness.

In 1919 he bought a plane and for years he was in business for himself instructing and giving exhibition flights through California, Oregon, Nevada and Arizona. In 1927 he was senior pilot on mail and passenger run between Tampico and Mexico City for Cia Mexicana de Aviacion S.A. Tampico, Mexico (now Pan American Airways). In 1928 he was with Travel Air Manufacturing Company, Wichita, Kans., testing and ferrying, also in charge of Hutchinson School of Aviation, Hutchinson, Kans.

In 1929 he was with China Airways, Shanghai, China as senior mail and passenger pilot on the run up the Yangtze Kiang River from Shanghai to Hankow, China. Last year he was senior pilot for the N.Y.R.B.A. lines in South America on regular mail and passenger runs. His total time is approximately 5,800 hours.

MARRIED

RESIDENCE

SOURCE: Aero Digest,
April 1931
p.64, V.18, #4