

# The Flying Tiger

by Phil Rice

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On a visit to see my mom at an assisted living facility in Sevierville, Tennessee in early 2008, I noticed a man motoring down the hallway in an electric wheelchair. He was wearing a ball cap with the words “Flying Tigers” across the front. Pausing and pointing at the hat, I asked if he was a member of that elite group. He smiled and nodded yes. A woman’s voice called from further up the hallway. “Glen? Are you coming or not?” I looked up to see a petite lady who smiled pleasantly when she realized why her husband had stopped. And thus began my friendship with Mrs. Lucille and Lt. Col. Glen D. Hesler, USAF (Ret.).

The Colonel. That’s how I addressed him. It fits, and he earned it. As with most veterans, Glen Hesler did not spend much time in civilian life regaling his family with stories from the war, or in his case, wars. But when he found himself with time on his hands after retiring from his position as an FAA Flight Examiner, he did write a book about it. *The Heart of the Tiger* is his memoir, complete with this wonderful subtitle: *Tales of Peril by a U.S. Air Force pilot as a Flying Tiger in China during WWII (P-40 & P-51), Korea (B-25 & T-29), the Cold War (B-47), and Vietnam (C-130 & B-52)*. The book is primarily filled with the memories of an aviator rather than those of a combat veteran. Exact details of flying machines and flights are in abundance, and the author’s passion for airplanes is apparent throughout. He is an aviator, a flyer, a pilot.

Glen Hesler grew up in Hutchinson, Kansas, a stock All-American boy with an interest in cars, girls, and sports. He was an intelligent student with an aptitude for college, but the winds of war blowing across the landscape of his high school graduation in 1940 discouraged the pursuit of academics, so he went to work building grain silos around his home state. While serving in this capacity he met and fell in love with Lucille Morris. He was sharing a Coke with Lucy at a drugstore lunch counter when the news of Pearl Harbor interrupted their romantic sips. Suddenly they were living accelerated lives. Marriage, induction, then overseas. For the Colonel, overseas meant Chihkiang, China, where he was assigned to the 5th Fighter Group of the 14th Air Force, commanded by General Claire Lee Chenault—the leader of the famed Flying Tigers.



“American Beauty,” a painting by Alan Phillips, depicts a P-51 Mustang similar to the one Glen Hesler flew as a member of the Flying Tigers in China

On another visit to see Mom I stopped by the Heslers’ to say hello, as had become my custom. On this occasion Mrs. Hesler was alone in their apartment and explained that Glen had been hospitalized for a bout with pneumonia and then had been sent to a nursing home in nearby Pigeon Forge. She was distressed and frustrated by the forced separation. As it happened I had been to that very nursing home the day before to visit Andrell Henry, another friend from the assisted living facility. Andrell, a retired magician, looked just liked Albert Einstein. He was a true performer who could entertain a room just by making faces. The Colonel loved to look at him and laugh.

After a bit of searching at the nursing home, I found the Colonel; he had just returned from a doctor’s appointment and was sitting in a regular wheelchair in the hallway in front of the nurses’ station. The electric model was no longer an option. He didn’t look too happy with his situation but when he recognized me he smiled. I sat beside him in a chair along the wall. I suspect he wasn’t especially gabby when he was younger, and at this stage he preferred to listen and only speak when necessary or prodded. So I talked. He wasn’t wearing his hat, and I asked him, using the Marine lingo I had picked up from my friend Dave Easton, “Where’s your cover, Colonel?” He shook his head in the negative, so I stepped down the hall to his room and found his Flying Tiger hat hanging on the wall. I brought it to him and placed it on his head. He smiled and said a sincere thank you.

Seeing me sitting next to him, one of the attendants came over and talked baby-talk to him. I know she meant well and I don’t begrudge her the difficult job she has undertaken. To her he was Glen, the Alzheimer’s patient from room 129B. To me he was Lt. Col. Hesler, USAF (Ret.), one of the finest military pilots in aviation history. She admonished him for not eating his lunch earlier, then looked at me and said, “We just haven’t been able to get him to eat today.” Upon learning that I wasn’t family, she stepped away to let us visit.

“So the food’s not too tasty, huh?” I asked. He didn’t respond. “At least they didn’t try to feed you puppy,” I added, and he laughed out loud. It was like a private joke, and it felt good to have evoked laughter at such a time. As I sat there trying to make conversation with a man who didn’t want to talk, I looked at his surroundings and marveled at how different it must all be, different from the time he was genuinely offered puppy to eat, different from the time he spent thirty-three days deep in Japanese territory after being shot down. For those thirty-three days he was trying to stay alive, trying to get home—nothing else. He didn’t eat then, either.

For me, being in that nursing home was a reminder that the previous few months had been a time of great change and growth as I struggled to deal with my mother’s physical and mental decline in addition to life’s other trials. I’d been marked by events that carried me to the brink of despair, and I had survived. And if I am so scarred by such ordinary events, what did the thirty-three days behind enemy lines do to the Colonel? Being confined to sweltering rat-infested holes by day, moving through war-torn China at night, being led and protected by Chinese guerrillas who were motivated more by self-preservation than by compassion. And, as powerful as that saga is in his story, in some ways it’s just the beginning of an impressive record of service. This man would fly combat missions in Vietnam, twenty-five years later.

Running out of things to say as we sat in the nursing home hallway, I suddenly remembered Andrell. I asked the Colonel if he would like to visit his friend, and he smiled and said yes. I told the attendant at the nurses’ station that I was taking Colonel Hesler to the other side of the building, but she seemed unclear as to why I was giving her such information. So down the hall we went. My right arm was in a sling from recent surgery, and my speed was not up to the Colonel’s standards, but he graciously accepted my apology for moving so slowly.

I located Andrell’s room and wheeled the Colonel up to his bedside. Both men brightened with recognition. The Colonel extended his hand through the rail of Andrell’s bed, who weakly reached out and clasped it. “I’m glad to see you,” Andrell said. The Colonel smiled and nodded in reply. I walked around to the other side of the bed. The two men kept their hands clasped. Occasionally one would give a visible squeeze, and the other would return it. Both nodded off during this time, a testament to their medication, but neither released his grip. No words were exchanged. I have no idea how long this communion lasted. When an attendant came in to check on Andrell, the spell was broken, and they released their handshake. Knowing that eventually someone would be looking for the Colonel, I reluctantly wheeled him back toward his own room. I knew I had witnessed something deep, something profound—something that I felt but didn’t understand.

As a high school athlete, Glen Hesler won the State Wrestling Championship in the 145-lb class. He would later defeat the former Oklahoman state champion for the base 155-lb championship at Fort Francis E. Warren. Considering the base consisted of 22,000 young men in peak condition, that’s an impressive trophy (the actual trophy was a coveted 3-day pass). His service career is filled with citations and acknowledgements of various times

that the Colonel finished first or was at the top of his class in various endeavors. He just didn't like to lose.

I've heard it said that the typical American attitude toward military conflicts of the past quarter of a century resembles a crowd at a football game with the public cheering on the team from the bleachers, or more accurately, from the other side of their television sets. There is lots of "pep" and team spirit, as long as their team is comfortably trouncing the opponent, but there is no real investment in the contest or the outcome. Colonel Hesler was a competitor when he flew the first P-51 Mustang into the Chinese-Burma Theatre of operations in 1943, and he lived the investment. His wife Lucille understood the investment, too, perhaps even better than her husband. She had every reason to expect the worst, and the waiting for news must have been interminable. During World War II, there were no questions or doubts about the sacrifice. You crawl and claw your way if necessary, sleeping in hidey-holes by day and limping or being carried across foreign terrain by night.

As a young lieutenant, Glen Hesler of the Flying Tigers led a mission that resulted in the annihilation of an estimated 900 Japanese soldiers. He records the details in his memoir with neither pride nor apology, and he acknowledges the sadness he has carried with him every day since that mission. There is no honor in killing, but there is honor in performing your duty in such a manner that others are afforded the opportunity to live in love and peace. History teaches us that there will always be those who strive to deny such blessings, but it also teaches us that there are those, such as Glen Hesler, who will offer themselves as a living, and if need be, dying, buttress against such destructive forces.

"The P-51 was such a beauty just sitting on the ramp," Lt. Colonel Hesler writes in *The Heart of the Tiger*, "that even today most old pilots are younger just looking at it," and I believe him. One afternoon I brought an aging, sepia-toned photograph of an unidentified P-51 Mustang to the Colonel. I found him vigorously pedaling an exercise bicycle, a caregiver standing by his side encouraging him. He stopped pedaling when he saw me. I handed him the present, and he smiled and boyishly exclaimed, "The P-51 Mustang!"

"I just want to thank you for what you and your buddies did over there. You saved thousands of American lives," I said, adding a handshake and a slap on the shoulder. I felt a tinge of discomfort with my patriotic choice of adjective—the effects of their efforts extend well beyond nationalistic boundaries—but I let it stand. He looked at the photo, then looked at me.

"I appreciate you saying that," he said.

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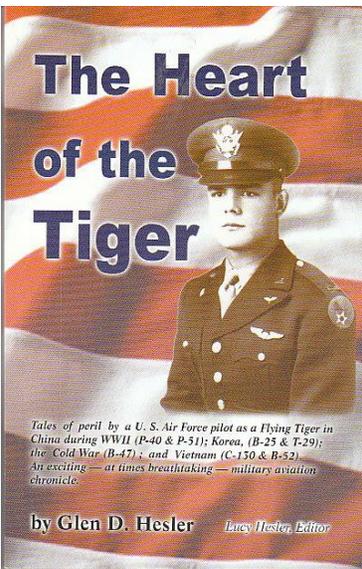
**Postscript: The Flying Tigress**

When Glen Hesler left the States to fly his P-51 Mustang in China as a member of the Flying Tigers, he left his wife Lucille to wait for his return. She did more than wait of course--she too served her country in a civilian capacity, but she also waited. Lt. Hesler's plane was named Lucille, too, but that plane is not hanging in a museum today because it was shot down by the Japanese. For 30 days the young pilot survived on the ground in enemy territory. Lucille did not know what was going on, but she did know that the regular flow of letters had stopped. By the time she was finally notified that her husband was MIA (missing in action), he was already in a Florida hospital. Mrs. Hesler waited during the Korean War and Vietnam, too. In fact, she waited every time her husband slipped into a cockpit. After all, many pilots have died during peacetime. But she waited and she served and she welcomed him home again each time.

When I met Lucille she was 89 years old and living in a retirement home with Colonel Hesler. She would be laid to rest in Arlington Cemetery the following year, once again waiting for her husband. Mrs. Hesler enjoyed discussing her time as the wife of a pilot, but she also enjoyed telling me about her brother and other family members who, like herself, were devoted to education. She rightly placed these educators on an equal plain for hero-worship as her husband.

As a young 70-year old Lucille decided to try her hand at flying. Her teacher was an aviator of impeccable skill and remarkable experience—Glen Hesler. As in many cases where a gifted expert is imparting knowledge to a novice, his patience was perhaps not as deep as it could have been. Following one lesson in which she felt especially chastened for her ineptitude, when they got home she handed the Colonel a needle and thread and a piece of clothing in need of repair, saying in effect, "fix that Mr. Know-it-all!" He got the message and tempered his attitude thereafter, and she indeed learned to pilot an aircraft—at seventy.

The story of Glen Hesler, pilot and hero, is inseparable from the story of Lucille Hesler. One afternoon I was sitting at a table in the dining room with the Heslers and a couple of visitors. One of the visitors was talking about how the Colonel was a hero. As all real heroes are prone to do, he scoffed at the suggestion. I asked him if he knew any heroes, expecting him to relate a tale of fallen comrades. He seemed to consider the question, then nodded toward his wife. Like her husband, she did not accept the cloak, but they both wore it well.



# The Heart of the Tiger

*Tales of peril by a U. S. Air Force pilot as a Flying Tiger in China during WWII (P-40 & P-51); Korea, (B-25 & T-29); the Cold War (B-47); and Vietnam (C-130 & B-52). An exciting — at times breathtaking — military aviation chronicle.*

**by Glen D. Hesler** *Lucy Hesler, Editor*