

With a father who trained as a fighter pilot in World War II and a mother who survived a near fatal bout with depression in the 1950's, Richard Oberacker's outline of *ACE* had obvious resonance when he first shared it with me. That, coupled with nine weeks we spent playing a show in St. Louis in 2003, brought the story to life for the two of us. St. Louis is filled with arches and gateways – some open, some closed – but all implying boundaries between worlds. It was a perfect setting for a show that exists in multiple realities simultaneously.

ACE begins with a desperate call for help. It is amazing the doors and hearts that open when we ask for help. In the fall of 2002, most of my life and work as a freelance classical musician in New York vanished post 9/11. Seeing few other options, I asked a friend for help; subsequently I accepted an offer as concertmaster with the first national tour of Disney's *The Lion King*. My first day on the job, I met the then-Assistant Conductor, Richard Oberacker, who told me of his dream that formed the outline for the story of *ACE*. Suddenly a door was opened for me on a new life and world of endeavor as a writer.

— **Robert Taylor**,
Co-lyricist and Co-librettist



THE FLYING

Flying Tigers was the nickname of the American Volunteer Group (AVG), a civilian fighter unit commanded by Colonel Claire Lee Chennault formed months before Pearl Harbor and that fought for China against Japanese forces in Southeast Asia. The AVG's first fight against the Japanese was December 20, 1941 (approximately three weeks after Pearl Harbor).

Officially they were employees of a private military contractor, the Central Aircraft Manufacturing Company, which employed them for "training and instruction."

In fact, pilots were recruited with tacit White House support from the ranks of the American armed services or reserve officers. Contrary to legend, none were recruited from the ranks of civilian transport pilots or barnstormers. Those pilots

who volunteered were discharged from the American armed services and sent to fly and fight as mercenaries for the Republic of China Air Force.



Pilots were taught to take on enemy aircraft in teams rather than alone, as their aircraft were not as maneuverable or as numerous as

the Japanese fighters. Their P-40 planes' advantages included pilot armor, self-sealing fuel tanks, sturdy construction, heavy armament (two 50- and four 30-caliber machine guns), and a faster diving speed than most Japanese planes. The pilots used these assets to advantage, gaining high altitude and then diving to pounce upon the enemy. Despite their fame, the Flying Tigers' strength averaged only 62 combat-ready pilots and fighter planes. Spare parts were almost impossible to obtain, though the AVG did receive 50 replacement P-40E aircraft toward the end of its combat tour.

AVG fighter planes were painted with a large shark-face on the front of the plane. Tiger pilots had seen photographs of the similarly painted RAF 112 Squadron in North Africa, which in turn had adopted the shark motif from German pilots in Crete.

The Flying Tigers had great success against the forces of Japan during the lowest period of the war for American forces, and gave Americans hope they would eventually succeed against the Japanese. After the dissolution of the AVG in mid-1942, the name was applied to its successor military unit, the 23rd Fighter Group, and more broadly to the China Air Task Force and the U.S. 14th Air Force.

TIGERS . . .



The shark faced fighters were among the most recognizable of any individual combat unit of WWII, and word of their triumphs was celebrated at a time when the news in the USA were filled with stories of victory after victory accomplished by Japanese forces at the start of WWII.

The AVG was officially credited with 297 enemy aircraft destroyed, including 229 in the air, but others calculated that the AVG actually destroyed about 115 enemy aircraft in the air and on the ground. Thirteen pilots were killed in action, captured, or disappeared on combat missions; two were killed in ground accidents, and eight were killed in flying accidents.

Just before their 50th reunion in 1992, the AVG veterans were retroactively recognized as members of the U.S. military services during the seven months the group was in combat against the Japanese. Survivors were made eligible for veterans' benefits on the basis of that service, and were awarded medals for their participation.

PHOTO UPPER LEFT: Flying Tiger pilots

BACKGROUND PHOTO: The St. Louis Gateway Arch was built in October 1965 as a monument honoring St. Louis western pioneers. It opened to the public on July 24, 1967.

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Robert and I wanted to write something that returned to the traditions of the great American musicals of the so-called “Golden Age of Broadway”: shows that had sweep and scope, told uniquely American stories, and spoke to a multi-generational audience. These were shows that were “about” many things, fabrics of many textures and threads.

ACE seeks to use modern musical theatre structure and technique while spinning a tale that harkens back to an era that has in some ways been lost – not just in terms of a period or historical event, but in a feeling and a way of expressing emotion. It also has to reverberate in the minds and hearts of a contemporary audience. It has to be “about” something universal.

ACE was born from my fascination with parenting – one of the most basic human experiences. Even those who have not had children of their own experience it because we experience parenting from the second we are born. It is a fragile and perilous phenomenon. Things can go wrong. Dreams can be shattered. Mistakes can be made. But always, always, there is the opportunity for great things to come.

— **Richard Oberacker**,
Composer, Co-lyricist, Co-librettist

ACE is about transformation. At the core of this musical is a message of forgiveness and the pursuit of making your dreams a reality. The story is of history and families – fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, and sons – and how these families are torn apart and stitched back together by the events of two World Wars, events which defined the nature of their lives.

— Stafford Arima, Director