Elwyn Herbert Gibbon had a very distinctive career instructing Chinese how to fly. This Collection documents his life in aviation.

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Elwyn H. Gibbon (1911-1942), from Seattle, Washington, enlisted in the National guard in 1927 and joined the Regular Army in 1928 before completing high school. By the age of 21 he passed the entrance exams to Randolf Field as a Flying Cadet at age 21. By his graduation, he had clocked 270 hours of flying time on various aircraft, including a Boeing P-12B, Keystone LB-6, A-3 Falcon, and other aircraft. He did well at Randolph and Kelly Field, and would be stationed in Texas then California where he eventually married Toneita (Toni) Lindeen in 1933.

In 1930, Gibbon’s parents moved to the Philippines to teach and wrote home about the gold rush, so in 1934, Elwyn and Toni moved to Manila where Gibbon had several odd jobs, some of which included flying transport and cargo. On July 1, 1937, what became known as the China Incident marked the Japanese invasion of China and also spurred the Chinese government to hire foreign ex-military airmen as pilots. Gibbon was hired as a member of the Foreign Volunteers of the Chinese Air Force as a bomber pilot and arrived in Hankow late in October 1937.

He was then hired as an instructor by the Commission for Aeronautical Affairs and worked beneath Claire Chennault. After the fall of Nanking, the capital was shifted to Hankow, where Gibbon’s wife would eventually arrive just before Christmas and where Gibbons was likely teaching Chinese recruits how to fly Curtiss Hawk H-75H’s, Vultee V11, as well as Russian models like the Polikarpov I-15bis. Gibbon also saw some few combat sorties during this time. However China disbanded the 14th Volunteer Squadron on March 22, 1938.

Elwyn and Toni left from Hong Kong on April 13 and boarded the Canadian liner the Empress of India, not knowing that stories had been published about Gibbon’s having shot down Japanese planes. The Empress had one stop at Yokohama on the 23rd, where Japanese police detained and eventually jailed Elwyn. Toni wired Elwyn’s brother (a lawyer in Seattle) and eventually American and Candian officials became involved in his case. His release was secured after the Tokyo Court of Appeals on April 26th released him based on his citizen ship with a neutral country, but not before his arrest caused a media firestorm in Washington state.

Afterwards, Gibbon participated in air shows, ran media circuits about his experiences, and operated as a test pilot for TWA and Lockheed. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Gibbon made arrangements with Hap Arnold to see what service he could provide at age 30. His previous experience as a test pilot qualified him as an instructor and test pilot in Karachi, India. As such, on February 19, 1942, after he was released by Lockheed, he took on a 6-month contract Vultee Aircraft Co., and went to Karachi as a test pilot and to familiarize the Chinese Air Force with the P-66 Vanguard. The circumstantial details are unclear, but the last day of his contract on August 19, 1942, during a demonstration, he was killed when his P-66 caught fire and crashed.

Other collections from the 14th Air Force, China-Burma-India Theater, Call #: F-0191, and AVG 14th Volunteer Squadron: Chinese Air Force; 1936-38 [video], Call #: VT-0789

The Personal Papers of Elwyn Herbert Gibbon

SDASM.SC.10053

Scope and Contents
Two boxes (12”x5”x11”) containing correspondence, newspaper articles and clippings, photographs of Karachi (India) and China, printed materials, passports, and numerous miscellaneous items and Chinese language materials.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Vultee P-66 Vanguard
Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945
Curtiss Hawk 75
Curtiss Hawk 2
World War, 1939-1945
United States. Army. Air Corps. Advanced Flying School (Kelly Field, Tex.)
Lockheed Aircraft
Trans World Airways. TWA
China National Aviation Corporation
Gibbon, Elwyn Herbert
Chennault, Claire Lee

Box 01

Folder 01 - Correspondence 1: 1930s
Physical Description: 39 pages of correspondence, in addition to original photocopies.

Folder 02 - Correspondence 2: 1930s
Physical Description: 48 pages of correspondence in addition to photocopies of fragile items.

Folder 03 - Correspondence 3: 1940s & Undated material
Physical Description: 30 pages of correspondence.

Folder 04 - Correspondence 4: 1970s and onward
Physical Description: 47 pages of correspondence.

Folder 05 - Correspondence 5: Fragile
Physical Description: 6 pages of correspondence.

Folder 06 - Communications – Radiograms, Telegrams, etc.
Physical Description: 27 pages of communications.

Folder 07 - Communications – Fragile Radiograms, Telegrams, etc.
Physical Description: 9 pages and photocopies of fragile communication documents.
Folder 08 - Forms, Certificates, Official Documents

Physical Description: Several reports, certificates and official documentation, including but not limited to: check flight reports, Enlistment and Honorable Discharge papers, Question and Answer on Aerial Operations - Sino-Japanese War, permits for international departure from the US, student pilot certificate, Certificate of Graduation from US Army Air Corps, aviation awards and certificates, Hankow Navy YMCA pamphlet and map (Chinese hand writing), immunization and health examination records (Chinese and American), Employment Agreement with Vultee and Industrial Accident Commission of the State of California – regarding Gibbon’s death (photocopy), embarkation coupons, Vultee Aviation documentation including USA application for exports to China and an application to work in “Prohibited or Protected” area – India through Vultee.

Folder 09 - Newspaper Clippings 1

Physical Description: 83 newspaper clippings primarily related to arrest and release of “Seattle Flier” Elwyn Gibbon.

Folder 10 - Newspaper Clippings 2

Physical Description: 74 newspaper clippings primarily related to arrest and release of Elwyn Gibbon by the Japanese.

Box 02

Folder 00 - Items for Transfer to Curatorial

Physical Description: 1. Christmas Greetings painted on shell-card from Harry Stohes. 2. 8 coins Hong Kong currency 3. 1 fabric square with Chinese flag and script, roughly translated: This foreign person has come to China to help in the war effort. Soldiers and civilians, one and all, should rescue, protect, and provide him medical care. Aviation Ministry.”

Folder 11 - Additional Chinese Language Materials

Physical Description: Documents written in Chinese or with a significant amount of Chinese writing, including letters from the Chinese Consul General in Manila.

Folder 12 - Magazines, Booklets, and Articles.

Folder 13 - Miscellaneous

Folder 14 - 09 Photos
Physical Description: 60 Photographs reintegrated to the collection, previously under 09 bio series.

Folder 15 - Photos I
Physical Description: 18 original photos , 5 duplicates, and original photocopies c. 1935-42 depicting people such as General Lancaster, aircraft, Kelly Field, Vought, PT-3, “Hangchow.”

Folder 16 - Photos II
Physical Description: 72 original photos taken c. 1937-1938, depicting various people, Kelly Field, Curtis Pursuit Trainer, schools, Ruth Lewitsky, Army Nurse Corps, Fitzsimmons Hospital in Denver, Randolf Field, China, Nanchang, Hankow, Sian, Curtiss-Wright Central Aircraft Manufacturing, Navy YMCA.