

TV crew captures history of local WWII hero

By Pamela E. Walck Savannah, GA Morning News
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Charles "Chuck" Baisden sits in the den-turned-TV-studio-set of his Wilmington Island home and prepares for another journey back in time.

A journey of six decades, to be precise.

Back to those days just before America became involved in World War II.

Back when he was part of the American Volunteer Group - more commonly known as the Flying Tigers.

Back when Kittyhawks soared over the skies of China, India and Burma.

At 88, Baisden is among the last 19 of the original 300 American pilots and crewmen who flew with the unit.

"As of yesterday, there were 19 of us," he said Thursday morning. "I haven't checked today."

An arm's distance away, Simone Wright chats in her native tongue with a Chinese Channel Television crew as they prep for another round of filming.

It will be the second taping that morning, and the retired Air Force master sergeant is the center of attention.

It's almost 11 a.m., and they have to finish the interviews at Baisden's home in time to pack their equipment into their rental minivan and

trek across the Peach State, with the aid of a GPS system, to Columbus.

Another World War II veteran awaits them there.

From Columbus, the four-person crew will head to Texas, where veterans in San Antonio and Dallas will be interviewed, followed by others in Louisiana and Maryland.

The crew is set to return to China on Oct. 13.

Each stop along the way, the cameras will record the oral histories of American fighter pilots and crew members as part of a documentary film called "Oral Histories" that's scheduled to debut on Chinese television next year.

"We're interviewing 200 people," said Wright, who serves as the television crew's translator.

"The series will run on TV."

Wright is well-versed in the topic. She was married to Peter Wright, one of the Flying Tigers' original pilots. He died last year, but before doing so, he asked his wife for a favor. "He asked me to do something good for America and China," she said. "There are so many World War II museums and information, but also many misunderstandings or inaccurate information."

Especially about the Flying Tigers. Especially about America's role in China.

Zhang Jun, a reporter and writer in charge of the program for CCTV, said - assisted with translations by Wright - that 60 years later, Chinese schoolchildren still talk about the Americans who volunteered to defend their country from Japanese fighter planes in the tumultuous early 1940s. "They know about it, but everyone wants to learn more," Zhang said.

It wasn't until the 1980s, when China started opening up to the Western world, he said, that its people began to want to know more about the American men who volunteered to defend their land. "They really wanted to hear the other side of the story," he said.

The Oral History Project not only seeks to capture the stories of the men who were there - Americans and Chinese - but also seeks to establish a database of raw information for the

television's library archives. Wright compared the effort to that of The History Channel or Discovery Channel in America.

For Baisden's part, it's taking a jaunt down memory lane. He's aided by a scrapbook filled with original photos, fliers and documents about his Flying Tigers days.

"I was one of the more fortunate ones," he said during a break in taping. "It never really bothered me, but I didn't see the kinds of things the guys on the ground forces saw. A lot of those guys came back and didn't want to talk."

But he is also quick to point out that war isn't easy. "I used to have bad dreams after the war," Baisden said. "It was always the same dream. Someone was shooting at me. It was a Japanese (fighter pilot) shooting at me.

"But I don't have that dream anymore."



Chuck Baisden and Simone Wright, with Willa Baisden in background.