

A View from North China

By Clancy Barlow

I was living in Iowa and enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps when I turned 17 so I could get veteran benefits and go to college. This was at the end of WWII, but I am entitled to the WWII victory medal and service ribbon.

Imagine my story may be a little different in that you are expecting stories dealing with the European theater, while mine involves North China in the mid-1940s.

I was sent to the Tien-tsin area of North China near the Great Wall (which I never got to see at that time, but did over 40 years later).

Our duty in China was to protect U.S. interests such as Standard Oil facilities in the area. This was during the time that the Red Chinese were running Chiang Kai-shek and his government out of China.

It was a dangerous period of time, and we Marines had to go off base in groups or might be attacked.

When we left China, we had to leave on boats from the coast. The Reds let the earlier echelons go to the boats, but as our numbers decreased, we had to fight our way to the coast and our boats.

One afternoon, my partner and I had duty guarding acres of 50-gallon oil drums backed up to a big dike.

We were mentioning how an army of Red Chinese could be amassing on the other side of the dike and we wouldn't see them.

As it was getting dark we heard someone kick one of the drums. Soon we





heard several more from different areas. We both jacked live rounds into our M1 rifles.

We had a small shack that housed a field telephone and my partner wanted to call for reinforcements. I felt that we needed to see something before making the call and started walking among the oil drums with rifle at the ready.

Suddenly the oil drums beside me thumped and I realized it was the drop in temperature making the tops of the oil drums buckle.

I will cite some of the things I found interesting in North China in the 1940s.

It was not uncommon while traveling the roads or small villages to see a woven mat lying on the ground. There

would be a dead body under the mat. If someone was missing a family member, they would look under the mat and even if it wasn't their relative, they would then be responsible for burying the body.

It was winter, very cold, and not uncommon to see a mound (body) above the frozen ground and maybe a hand or foot sticking out of the dirt.

Our base was originally a French cavalry base with a mote around it and only one entrance with a culvert under the road. It was very old and unique with horse feeding mangers made of rock and long barracks connected by an internal hall. A little village was just outside our base.

We could ride a rickshaw around the village and were told to never pay more than 10 cents as we did not want to disrupt their economy.

A house boy would do our laundry, and we paid him 50 cents every two weeks.

Villagers worked in our mess hall and were permitted to take table scraps home. When I worked guard duty at the main gate, I would check their coffee cans of table scraps and find good apples and things under the scraps. I would take it away from them and give the food to two orphans who lived in the culvert under the road.

The orphans were about 8 to 10 years of age and had tattered blankets over both ends of the culvert to help keep the cold out.

One time a couple of us wanted to go to Tien-tsin, which was about 12 or 15

miles away. They had the type of rickshaw that was propelled by bicycle.

About halfway there, a Marine officer in a vehicle stopped to give us a ride the rest of the way. We paid our drivers 10 cents and you should have heard the hollering. The officer went back and talked to them in Chinese and got them quieted.

I have a feeling he also gave them more money.

Tien-tsin was quite an experience. It was a large town, but there were few vehicles. The primary transportation was bicycles, and at night you would see the little lights they all seemed to have hanging under the bike just above the ground, going all over the place like fireflies.

There was one narrow road of food places with little eating stalls covered with canvas on the sides. They were about the size of telephone booths and held only one or two people.

The smell of garlic permeated the air and as you walked along, you could hear the loud burps of people complementing the food.

Young boys would stop us, pull up their sleeves to expose their entire arm covered with wristwatches and try to sell us one. To get rid of them I would show them that I had a watch, and then they would try to buy it from me.

If you had a Parker 51 ink pen, you could barter for almost anything, as they really wanted them for some reason. I think it may have been the gold in the tip.

If we wanted to buy jade, we would dip a wooden matchstick in water and put a drop on the jade. If it stood up like a haystack it was good jade, but if it flattened out it was bad jade.

We would always separate a strand of fabric and put a match to it to see if it was real silk. I still have a ruby ring I bought there for \$10.

I went back to China as one of the first tourist groups to go after they opened for tourism. This was about 40 years after I was there as a Marine, and I wanted to see the changes.

The main difference I could see was that some of the village hut roofs were covered with corrugated metal instead of being thatched.

They worked the fields the same, dressed the same and looked the same.

However, I saw only one woman with the small feet (lotus blossom?), and in the 1940s it was quite common.

I went back to Iowa and finished my senior year of high school and then went to Grinnell College on my G.I. bill.

I only had one year since the Korean War broke out and I was called back in the Marine Corps for that conflict. After I was discharged, I remained in California and spent 21 years on the Los Angeles Police Department.

I have many more memories and experiences.