

XVIII. IN KHAKI UNIFORM

My next stop after leaving Tsunyi was Chungking, the site of the refugeeing government of the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek. There I signed up to work for the Chinese government and military, for I had no other work to do.

There in Chungking G. W. Strother, who did not enter military work as I did, began a Baptist worship service in a borrowed church building in the city. Refugee missionaries helped him, and so did those of us who entered temporary military service.

Dr. J. B. Hipps and Miss Lorene Tilford also helped with this emerging Baptist group. The bulk of their efforts were with the (Baptist) University of Shanghai which was refugeeing in Chungking: Hipps teaching and advising and Tilford teaching English and assisting an active Baptist Student Fellowship. Both had been with the university while it was in Shanghai. The university enrolled 1,933 students during the five years it was in Chungking. The School of Commerce was the main division of the university while refugeeing there.

And so I began working with the generalissimo, wearing the American army officer's uniform, equivalent to the rank of a colonel; but using the Chinese insignia on my cap and shoulders; supported financially by the Chinese military, but the money that supported the Chinese military operations was largely from

America. In khaki uniform I looked like a sort of hybrid somebody working for the Chinese army and government combined.

It was the last year of World War II. There were a dozen American civilians in that liaison group. Several casualties occurred among us but vehicular casualties: overturning, crashing, and other mishaps. My work brought me into close contact with Chinese brass, connecting them with American military personnel. Of the conflict between the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and General Stillwell, and other flaring up problems and frictions, I was aware. Our group trained young Chinese to work as interpreters for the American armed forces, particularly the Air Force, and to promote goodwill.

My work threw me into close contact with the Generalissimo -- in his home with him and Madame Chiang, in his offices, and on military parades and reviews. I came to appreciate him. He and I had the same birthday, October 31, though he was nineteen years my senior.

I was intending to see the Chiangs a few weeks ago while passing through Taiwan; but he died before I got there. So I couldn't see him and didn't bother to call on Madame Chiang, thinking that a visit might stir memories that would bring sadness to her.

When the war ended my liaison work was finished. But I stayed on three months in order to complete a few jobs already begun, flying from one city to another.

On one flight I visited Tsingtao on a unique unfinished

chore. In flight from Chungking to Tsingtao I stopped three days in Shanghai. Among my personal luggage was a twenty-three pound package wrapped in brown paper, and I always kept my eyes on that object while the coolies carried my belongings. Other than the Generalissimo, I was the only person who knew what was in that package.

The water in the Whangpoo river was deathly still the morning I took flight from Shanghai for the last lap of the journey. The pilots, one American and one Chinese, made several futile attempts before they could get the amphibious plane off the water. The lift-off was finally accomplished by the help of motor boats that stirred up leaping waves.

Above Tsingtao the plane circled, tilted and gave me a bird's eye view of the beautiful city which I had not seen for five years; then, like an awkward bird, it skidded abreast the blue waters of the harbor -- waters with flocks of wingless naval boats from lands afar.

By motor launch and ricksha I made my way to the guest house of the mayor of the city, Li Hsien-liang. And there I delivered to Mayor Li the package and its accompanying letter. I had brought fifty million dollars (Chinese national currency), an appropriation from China's War Area Service Corps for the entertainment of the United States service personnel in Tsingtao.

For two weeks I was a guest of Mayor Li and had an hour's conference with him daily. It was in response to the mayor's

telegram to Chungking and upon the request of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek that I flew to Tsingtao.

I feasted with the mayor almost every day, sitting with other guests at a round table. As many as thirty courses were served in some of those feasts. I could take only a few bites from each dish or suffer the consequences of high food pressure. About midway of the feast the fish - the super dish - would appear on a platter at the center of the table. There Mr. Fish, cooked brown from stem to stern and resting life-like, seemed to be scanning the room in dread of crafty fishermen with bated hooks. Then the mayor would stand, lift his chopsticks ceremoniously and serve portions of fish to the more honored guest.

My turn came the second day of feasting. The mayor lifted out the fish's eye and put it in my rice bowl. For a moment there was silent suspense, awaiting my part of the drama. I bowed to the mayor and then to my fellow guests, put my chopsticks to work and lifted the prized morsel from my bowl. Between my teeth it squelched like a green grape, but across my taste buds it smacked like a seedless olive embalmed with oriental spices.

Eating is China's favorite indoor sport. The most common form of morning greeting is, "Have you eaten your rice?" The daily food of the masses is simple and meager, but feasts are elaborate and enormous. In Japanese-held China I heard the statement that a man is in his happiest state if he eats Chinese food, lives in an American house, and has a Japanese wife.

That statement at least exalts Chinese food to its proper place. Dishes by the hundreds have grown out of China's fine art of cooking. Some dishes are nation-wide, some provincial, and others are found in particular cities.

Soybean sauce and ginger are perhaps the most commonly used seasonings for Chinese food. Infinite variety and delightful surprises lead a nation-wide parade of food flavors. For example, in the gamut of sweet and sour are fine flavor blends which, even when discerned by tongue, cannot be described by pen. Contrasting combinations, as pork and lotus buds, bring palatable delight. Mushrooms, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, bean sprouts, lotus roots -- all these resolve the Orient into tastable form and bring a distinctive civilization right onto your plate. Vegetable compounds in perfect resemblance to pigs roasted whole are served on platters at porkless Mohammedan restaurants. Before my eyes and in my mouth it seemed like real pork. Some of the most sumptuous and expensive dishes are shark fins and bird nests.

Next to eating directly with the hand, the chopsticks method is the simplest. These little sticks are extensions of the fingers. Chinese children learn to use chopsticks as readily as American children learn to use spoons. And when eating soup or broth from a bowl, the user of the sticks has an easy way: tilting the bowl to the lips, raking the food in and enjoying the gulping sound.

Now, let us return for a comment on the fish-eye experience.

I seem to see a possible parallel with the experience of Jesus and his disciples on the evening of the betrayal. Could it be that the giving of the "sop" to Judas was a token of honor and respect toward the betrayer-to-be?

While a guest of the mayor I participated in an unusual military event -- Japan's surrender of arms. The Japanese had surrendered two months earlier -- in far southwest China -- but in Tsingtao it was a formal laying down of weapons. The affair had been rehearsed in advance. The whole landscape was full of people that day. Visitors from many countries witnessed the event. I was one of many on the high stage, the platform about as big as the floor space of this room. It was an impressive sight -- the Japanese officers bringing orderly their swords and rifles and placing them down in long rows. Each battalion brought its own token weapons and laid them down. I was given two rifles and two of the samurai swords.

I have many lasting memories and not a few mementos from that year's activities in China, especially of the final event in Tsingtao which formally ended the fighting.

Of the twelve men in the Liaison Group, eleven were missionaries; and five of them were Baptists. One was a Swedish Baptist and another a Northern (American) Baptist. The three Southern Baptists were Charley L. Culpepper, Sr., John Abernathy, and myself. Abernathy devoted much of his off-duty time to Christian ministry among the Chinese military personnel. He baptized 30 soldiers in the Chia Ling river in Chungking.

The main task of Culpepper and Abernathy was, like my own, the training of Chinese young men to serve as interpreters among the American Armed Forces in China. Drilling in English conversation claimed much of our time.

SPAIN: That was quite an experience.

NICHOLS: Yes, quite a different dimension in my missionary career. I was given, along with the others in my group, the Cloud-Banner Decoration, the third highest in the nation. Only a few of these decorations have been given to foreigners. We were also given a big wall scroll that tells of merit achievement and a certificate so big that the generalissimo's stamp spreads four inches square.

That brings me to late 1945. I sailed homeward aboard a U.S. Navy transport and landed in Portland, Oregon; arriving in December, just in time to have Christmas at home with my family.

I had reached the end of a period of my varied and wide-spread missionary ministry, the last year of which was quite unusual for a missionary preacher.

SPAIN: Yes, I'm sure there are other questions I want to ask you about, if we might next time go back and talk about them some more.

NICHOLS: And then when you visit us in our Waco home, you may want to see these scrolls and various other mementos from distant lands and yesteryears.

SPAIN: Yes.

NICHOLS I think seeing things is a part of the whole story. Seeing is believing. That's true about culture as well as nearly anything you could mention.

XIX. WHATS, WHYS, WHOS

SPAIN: Let me thank you first of all, Dr. Nichols, for coming for another interview. At the end of our last interview, we had discussed your work with the Chinese Nationalist government. You had left the employ of the Foreign Mission Board and were working as interpreter and liaison with the Chinese government?

NICHOLS: Yes, working temporarily, during the last year of World War II.

SPAIN: Let me ask you a question or two. Before you went back to China, what were your impressions concerning the Nationalist government. Now we have heard and read in our history books that one reason for the fall of Nationalist China was corruption in the government. Would you care to comment on that?

NICHOLS: Well, there was inefficiency and corruption. I was in a position to know both the good points and the failures of the government, which we call the Kuomintang. I saw both sides. But most of those feelings of inefficiency and those bitter accusations of all sorts came from the Communist group who were using propaganda to overthrow the government; and that was their most effective weapon in the overthrow.

I saw also there was a wide gap between the ruling class and the common people. And I knew that the government was

employing too many relatives and close friends of Chiang Kai-shek. I had serious questions about the use of money.

On the other hand, I saw their good points: their ideal program set out on a five-year basis for the renewal of China's lifestyle and for advancing into industrial development programs and the stabilizing of currency. They had it in their minds; but, you see, there was only a short time between the surrender of the Japanese and the seizure by the Communists. There was less than three years in which to achieve their goals.

SPAIN: Were you aware that Chiang Kai-shek personally or other officials were afraid of the Communists at the time you were there? Were they aware that the country might fall to the Communists? Did they talk about it?

NICHOLS: Yes, there was fear, for they knew -- and I knew -- that the Communists had not wasted any ammunition shooting at the Japanese but had saved it all to dispose of the Nationalist government leaders when the Japanese regime should collapse. And I knew from close range what was going on. How soon it would take place I didn't know, but I knew that the Communist regime was undermining the Chinese government with a propaganda barrage both underground and aboveground.

Now I must add here that personally I came to appreciate very much Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang. I think the American government made a serious mistake in trying to press the Kumintang into a sort of nonresistance policy

toward the advancing Communists. And while America was applying all this pressure, the Communists were inching closer and closer to the final conquest of all the territory of China.

The Communists, during the Japanese war, took a great portion of Chinese territory in the far northwest, the area where most of the Communists leaders had taken refuge during the war. All they needed to do when the Japanese surrendered was to thrust in and gather up the ammunition and fighting equipment the enemy had been using and to keep on adding slices of China's territory.

SPAIN: So while the Nationalist government was exhausting itself fighting the Japanese, the Communists were actually strengthening themselves.

NICHOLS: That's exactly it.

SPAIN: Before we leave this phase of your life, let me ask about your personal relationship with Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek and your evaluation of them as individuals, Christians and leaders.

NICHOLS: I was in a position to know these top Chinese leaders and their policies quite well. I came to appreciate them and their high ideals and dreams for upbuilding their country; and I came to regard them as genuine, earnest Christians. I have great admiration for both of them.

By the way, when I came back last summer from Macao, after a year and a half in that part of the world, I was expecting to stop in and visit Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. But he died a

few weeks before I reached Taiwan, so I didn't have the visit; nor did I stop and greet Madame Chiang. I wanted especially to reassure them of my high esteem and appreciation and to recount the friendship which I enjoyed with them in their home, his office, and on social and political occasions in Chungking.

SPAIN: The Communists, now that they have taken over, have revolutionized China and brought about many, many changes. Would you care to comment on this?

NICHOLS: Well, there have been definite advances in the larger cities like Canton and Shanghai, and Peking and Tientsin -- new airports, better paved roads, more modern-style buildings. To what extent these improvements have taken place in the villages and the outlying areas is not yet known. And what progress would have been achieved if the Kuomintang had continued to rule the country, there is no way of knowing.

SPAIN: After the war was over in August 1945, did you come directly to America?

NICHOLS: Well, I stayed three months after the war ended and came back to America in December of 1945.

SPAIN: How did you come back -- what means of conveyance?

NICHOLS: I came back in an American Navy ship which was transporting GIs. I was still wearing a GI uniform with the insignia of the Chinese army.

SPAIN: Now back again to your military service.

NICHOLS: I took that work with the consent of the American government and of the Foreign Mission Board. When I began that

work I came automatically off the salary from the board and was supported meagerly by the Chinese government, which in turn, received most of its war funds from America.

SPAIN: Now you left China and came back to the States, what did you do then?

NICHOLS: I did the customary furloughing -- speaking here and there and yonder, in churches and schools and elsewhere. And that took the best part of a year.

SPAIN: Were you then considered on furlough as a missionary during that year of furloughing?

NICHOLS: Yes, I came back under the support of the board when I came out of China and was on furloughing status.