

Chrysanthemum

By W. Patrick Lang

In April, 1927, China was in chaos. The 1912 revolution against the ancient imperial government had triumphed. It succeeded beyond the dreams of the insurgents. Dr. Sun Yat Sen was their leader in that revolt but he had not been able to create a unified national government to replace the emperor's rule. What had emerged was an increasingly savage struggle between the nationalist forces in the *Kuomintang* Party and the communist faction of that party led by Mao Tse Tung. A further complication was the existence of autonomous warlords. These freebooter generals controlled large private armies. The warlords "game" was to play the Nationalists and Communists against each other while seeking power and wealth. Among them was one Zhang Zuolin, known ironically as the "Christian Warlord."

Nanking, far up the Yangtze River from Shanghai, was the capital of the Republic of China. The Nationalists among the *Kuomintang* had held the city for most of the previous year, but in this spring, Communist forces approached the city and made clear their intention to occupy it.

Adding to the confusion "General" Zhang occupied a quarter of the town while he negotiated with both the Nationalists and the Communists.

The city had many foreign residents. There were large diplomatic and business communities in Nanking. Foreign news organizations were present. Several of these distributed "newsreels" in which Chinese soldiers belonging to the contesting parties declared their desire to kill foreigners and sack the city.

In response, the “Treaty” countries who maintained forces in China assembled a naval force on the river at Nanking to protect their nationals and interests. There were twenty ships with several thousand troops embarked. There were ships from; Britain, France, Japan, the Netherlands and the United States. Most of these countries maintained shallow draft vessels on the Yangtze on a permanent basis. These gunboats were usually less than two hundred feet in length. For this operation the “powers” brought larger vessels to Nanking. There were two light cruisers, eight destroyers and the usual swarm of gunboats.

The assembled force watched for a day as the violence in the city grew to unacceptable levels. Patrols from the ships reported that there were dead civilians throughout the business district and that General Zhang’s men had reached the river bank in a number of places.

At dawn on 26 April, Zhang’s artillery began to fire “ranging” shots at the ships. A shell struck the French destroyer, *Indomitable*, above the waterline and well aft.

The ships then began lowering their boats while the main batteries of the larger ships engaged visible Chinese artillery pieces on the river bank. These were located in parks and other open spaces. Several Chinese guns were hit. They flew into the air like broken toys.

Sitting in his boat, tiller in hand, Quartermaster’s Mate Sean Laine waited for the order to embark his complement of troops for the landing. His principal duty in the gunboat, USS Palos was to steer the ship and to help with her navigation. To qualify him as a “pilot” on the Yangtze the Navy had sent him to a maritime college in Hong Kong. He had served on the river for seven years and knew the Yangtze better than any of the Navy officers on board.

One of Laine’s additional duties in Palos was to act as coxswain of one of the ship’s boats. His boat, a twenty foot, clinker built, “Boston Whaler” with an inboard motor, was

alongside at the ship's "waist." The motor "ticked" over reassuringly. Blue smoke dribbled from it in the morning air. The distinctive exhaust smell was familiar and almost "sweet."

Nanking and the dirty river did not stink more of sewage and refuse than usual.

USS Palos was 165 feet long. Built at Mare's Island, California, she was shipped in pieces across the Pacific and reassembled in Shanghai. Her shallow draft, powerful engines and two three inch guns, fore and aft, gave her admirable characteristics in the service she was designed for. She was a major unit of the Yangtze River Patrol of the US Navy's Asiatic Fleet. Her ship's company was 47 officers and men in strength. She was normally commanded by a lieutenant. Palos never left the river. Her officers' families followed the ship from home port to home port as the "stationing" of the ship changed. The wives rented Chinese houses along the river. The life was adventurous but comfortable. Life was pleasant and highly social in the upper class Chinese and foreign communities in which the officers' families lived. Petty officers like Laine and the sailors of the crew lived for and on their ship and found their recreation and solace in the public houses of the ports. A few had Chinese women and families ashore.

The ship was home ported at Nanking in 1927. Palos's people had many of those they cared for most ashore in the burning city.

Gunfire could be heard across the town.

For the landing, USS Palos had 150 souls aboard. In addition to the ship's company, there were 100 Japanese marines of the "Imperial Special Naval Landing Force."

The combined flotilla had embarked a variety of troops at Shanghai. National identity was not a major factor in deciding which troops each ship would transport in the expedition. There were a lot of soldiers to carry and the ships varied a great deal in capacity. A lot of

“mixing and matching” to make them all fit had been necessary. There was also the problem of the draft of the larger vessels. Some of them could not “stand in” close to the river bank for the landing.

Palos’ Japanese marine contingent looked formidable as they stood in ranks, waiting to disembark. The enlisted marines were almost all Koreans. Their Japanese officers, in contrast, were all from the home islands of Japan.

Laine looked up at them from the tiller of his boat. He had two US sailors as crew.

The Japanese in return looked down at him from the American warship. The marines were noticeably taller than their officers. Dressed in dark green and loaded down with equipment, they looked fearsome.

Laine would land a ten man squad on the river bank. These marines were a small fraction of the force to be landed. Some of their comrades would go ashore in other boats from Palos, and some from other ships. In the landing force there would also be US Marines, British infantry from Hong Kong, French *Infanterie de la Marine* and some nationalist Chinese from Chiang Kai Shek’s army.

A signal flag “broke” at the yardarm on HMS Mantis, the flotilla flagship.

The loudspeaker system on Palos came to life. “Land the landing force. Troops will disembark. Boats will assemble at the line of departure. Good luck.” The ship’s three inch guns then opened fire against the stretch of river bank that her boats would assault. The noise was deafening but reassuring.

The marines climbed down the netting into the boats. Their rifles were slung across their backs but they managed to avoid being tangled in anything.

Laine was grateful for that. He was uncertain about these strange Asian soldiers and wanted to deliver them to the shore without any unnecessary complications.

The marines were led by a stocky Korean sergeant who came aft to sit next to the coxswain.

They nodded at each other, each hoping for some sign of mutual confidence.

Sean Laine ran away from home in the Dakotas in 1916. An oppressive father was the motivating force behind the "escape." Sixteen years old, he made his way to Milwaukee where he enlisted in the Canadian Army. He served in Flanders in the Canadian Black Watch and he reckoned that he could tell a competent infantry sergeant when he saw one. This one looked like a fat little man with three "stripes."

Oh, well, Laine thought, Soon I will know, very soon.

The river bank was 300 yards away. There were fires burning in the two and three story brick buildings "inland" from the waterfront... The capital of the Republic of China smoldered under a cold, grey blanket of cloud that obscured the sun. The oily water looked silvery grey in the light from an overcast sky.

The six boats from Palos went to join twenty more from other ships. They lined up on an imaginary line in the water. They made a long, shaky line facing the shore. A British boat with a sub-lieutenant on board established the right of the line.

The ships' guns continued to fire at the shore.

Smoke would be nice, the old soldier Laine thought.

The British officer blew his whistle and the line of boats accelerated toward the “beach.”

Other groups of boats could be seen to port and starboard. They were all headed for the riverbank.

Laine sat on his little “U” shaped seat and held the hickory tiller. He liked small boats. He had always liked them, even when there were only North Dakota rivers in his life. He hoped desperately that the motor wouldn’t quit in the middle of all this...

The Chinese were having a good time shooting at the boats. Bullets hummed in the air and splashed in the water. One struck the boat somewhere forward. One of the marines was hit and cried out in unintelligible words.

Laine and his human cargo were a hundred feet from shore when the boat was struck by a shell from what he later thought was a small artillery piece.

As he recalled the event in later years, “One minute I was steering for the bank and thinking about “idling” the engine while “they” got off my boat, and the next minute I was standing in brown water up to my chest with no sign of the boat except for some sinking wreckage.”

The Japanese marines were wading toward the shore and from instinct Laine waded with them.

When the water was knee deep he realized that he was holding the broken off tiller in his right hand.

The “beach” was gravel and two feet wide. There was a low “seawall. It was four feet high and made of brick.

Laine remembered that someone's lawn was beyond the "seawall." He threw the tiller away and looked around.

The Korean sergeant floated near the water's edge. His rifle was still slung across his body.

Laine was armed with a service .45 automatic pistol and nothing else. He crawled out into the river to retrieve the rifle and ammunition. Sitting with his back to the wall, he contemplated the situation.

Two US sailors and nine Japanese marines were on the "beach." All were looking at him, waiting.

Briefings on Palos had been thorough. Laine knew where the "beachhead line" would be inland. This was yet another imaginary line. This one had depicted on the briefing map the localities where the landing force would stop before advancing to finish its work.

Fortunately, Laine knew Nanking well from many happy liberty trips ashore.

Oh, well, he thought, *"why not?"* He crawled along the "beach" giving instructions in a mixture of; hand and arm signals, pidgin Chinese, and a little English. This last was dimly understood by several of the Koreans. With that done, he got them up and over the wall.

He did that by going over the wall first.

A businessman's stucco villa complete with red tile roof was fifty yards away behind a tennis court and driveway.

A dark figure with a rifle fired at them from an upstairs window and was shot by a marine.

They charged across the grass, going around or over the Adirondack chairs and other lawn furniture. They broke down the back door of the house.

Chinese soldiers were running out the front door into the street.

The Koreans caught several of them just outside the house. Screaming and clubbing sounds died away after a minute.

The house was beautifully furnished with European furniture, flocked wallpaper and a marble fireplace in the living room. A marble statue of Kuan Yin stood beside the fireplace.

I might come back for that, Laine thought.

Abandoned in the street was a British made Vickers machine gun on wheels. Next to it was a push-cart loaded with ammunition for the gun. The Chinese must have just entered the house when the marines arrived.

Laine knew this machine gun from World War One. He got it turned around to cover the street that ran away from the front door.

The Japanese also knew this weapon and the squad soon had a potent weapon with which to sweep the street.

Their objective was a half mile "inland."

Laine organized the group into a machine gun team made up of several Japanese and one American sailor. Another group was composed solely of men with rifles, pistols and bayonets. His method was simple, as are all good military plans. The machine gun would fire into the next area they would occupy and then shift its fire to an area above or beyond while the rifle group moved forward. Laine would lead the rifle group.

Three hours later they were on their tiny portion of the "Beachhead Line." This was a diagonal section across an intersection of two streets.

Laine had the men push several motor vehicles into a line across the intersection to make a barrier and shelter. They then built a "nest" for the machine gun by piling up bricks and stones just in front of the vehicles. From there the Vickers could fire up and down the connecting streets as well as at the buildings to the front. He then posted a man on the top floor of the building behind them to watch for movement and to shoot at snipers. Having done all this, he considered his work largely done and sat down with his back to a wheel where he could oversee what the machine gun crew did. He was hungry. He looked in his "muzette bag," and found the sandwiches and fruit that the galley on Palos had issued to the boat crews.

Seeing him eat, the marines produced their field rations of cooked rice, bits of dried fish and various Japanese vegetables.

There was some trading back and forth of rations.

Laine liked the Japanese food better than his own. After eating, he went to find the units on either flank of his blocking position. These were all Japanese marines. He and his two sailors were alone in a vast Asian city with "comrades" who did not comprehend much of what needed to be communicated.

Chinese troops attacked the roadblock several times in the first hours, but each group soon departed, retreating down the streets from which they had come after losing men to the rifles and machine gun.

About four P.M. a lieutenant of the Imperial Japanese Special Naval Landing Force appeared on the scene. He walked into the roadblock coming from the eastern flank

“boundary” unit that Laine had found. The officer wore a dark green uniform with his rank on his collars. He wore white “drill gloves” and carried his sword reversed in his left hand. On his head was the strange little soft peaked cap favored by the Japanese. He was about five foot, five inches tall and quite slender. He looked at the group behind the vehicles and around the machine gun, then up at the roof where the rifle of the marksman could be seen protruding over a low wall. He asked the Japanese marines something and when they pointed at Laine, he approached.

Sean stood to attention.

“Your name?” the Japanese officer asked in English. A volley of Chinese rifle fire buzzed like a swarm of bees over the vehicular obstacles. The lieutenant did not flinch and Sean was careful not to flinch. He knew that in this situation it was necessary to show, as he put it years later, “that I, too, was brave.”

“You brought these men up here from the river?”

“Yes, sir, I did that.”

“How do you know how to do this? You are a sailor.”

“I was a corporal of infantry in the Great War, sir. Your sergeant was killed...”

The lieutenant nodded. His face was a mask. “You will hold this corner?” he asked. “It is the hinge of our position.”

“Yes, sir, I will. “

“We will advance tomorrow morning to clear our zone. We will advance with the other countries. Do you wish to lead these men?”

Sean felt light headed. He knew it would be sensible to say no and return to Palos, still at anchor in the river. "I would be honored," he replied to the offer.

The Japanese officer bowed slightly. "I will see that you are given instructions in English."

He turned to continue down his line.

"Sir?" Laine called after him.

"Yes?"

"May I ask how you speak English this way?"

The lieutenant smiled. "I was born in California. My parents brought me home when I was ten." He walked away.

The Japanese marine battalion fought for a week as part of the combined force. They cleared the central part of the city of all Chinese troops. There was much close fighting amidst the low, European style buildings, telephone poles and markets.

When the city had been secured, Laine was relieved of his small command. To his surprise, he had been given more and more reinforcement from among the marines and sailors of the Japanese ships of the flotilla. At the end he had thirty men and was beginning to learn Japanese from listening to them talk to each other.

Behind his final fighting position, Laine found a bar and bordello called "The White Crane." He used the bar as headquarters and waited there for what might come next. He let the men come into the bar for a beer and a short trip upstairs after counseling each with regard to behavior. There were no complaints.

The saloon keeper, a White Russian, was glad to be protected from the bedlam that had ruled in the streets before allied troops fought their way to his establishment.

After relief, Laine was escorted to the command post of the battalion by the Japanese lieutenant from California.

After an exchange of salutes, the Imperial Navy commander bowed and said, "You are Samurai."

The US Navy awarded Sean Laine the Navy Cross based on Japanese reports of his behavior.

He thought little more of this. He was scheduled to sit for examination for promotion to Chief Petty Officer in his rating. This filled his thoughts and study filled his days.

After six months he sat for the examination aboard the flagship of the Asiatic Fleet. This was the heavy cruiser USS Augusta. She was at anchor at Shanghai, swinging around her "hook" off the International Quarter quays.

The Asiatic Fleet Commander in Chief, Rear Admiral Mark Bristol, summoned him to his flag cabin the day after the examination. "Sit down, Laine," he began. "You are promoted, congratulations, Chief."

This was a great relief. Only a few promotions were available in the small Navy and competition was fierce.

"I have a telegram from US Embassy Tokyo," Bristol said. "We waited to tell you of it until you had taken the test. I am asked to send you up there. The Japanese want to give you a medal." The admiral looked up from the file folder. "Do you have a tailor in Shanghai?"

Laine replied that he did not.

The admiral wrote a name and address on a card.

“Tell him to make you a beautiful chief’s uniform of the best cloth and to send me the bill. The Navy will pay. You are booked on Pan American’s China Clipper on Friday. Luigi will have your clothes ready by then. Don’t forget to take your medals.”

In Tokyo, Laine was lodged in the embassy guest house and was soon escorted by the ambassador and naval attaché to the palace where he was invested with the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Chrysanthemum. The order was received from the hand of the god-emperor himself. An “equerry” of the Imperial Court draped the sash across his upper body and an aide de camp to the emperor pinned on the “star.” Sean bowed to his imperial majesty. The American ambassador and naval attaché were at his side and bowed also. His majesty smiled. Sean Laine from Casselton, North Dakota was from that moment a Japanese “knight.” He wore the ribbon during World War Two until the Japanese wounded him out of the war in 1944.

The order brought with it a monthly stipend that was greater than his US Navy pay. The Imperial Japanese Government paid him the stipend through the Swiss until the government was destroyed. In 1953, after a treaty of peace was signed between Japan and the United States, the payments resumed and continued until Laine’s death in 1970.

The End

This story is based on events in the life of John H. Lang, Chief Warrant Officer, US Navy. He was our uncle.