

Gunboat Diplomacy on the Yangtze

By Richard K. Kolb, VFW, April 1991

Between the world wars, duty in exotic China captured the nation's popular imagination, yet service there was punctuated by international incidents that often placed U.S. Marines and sailors in harm's way.

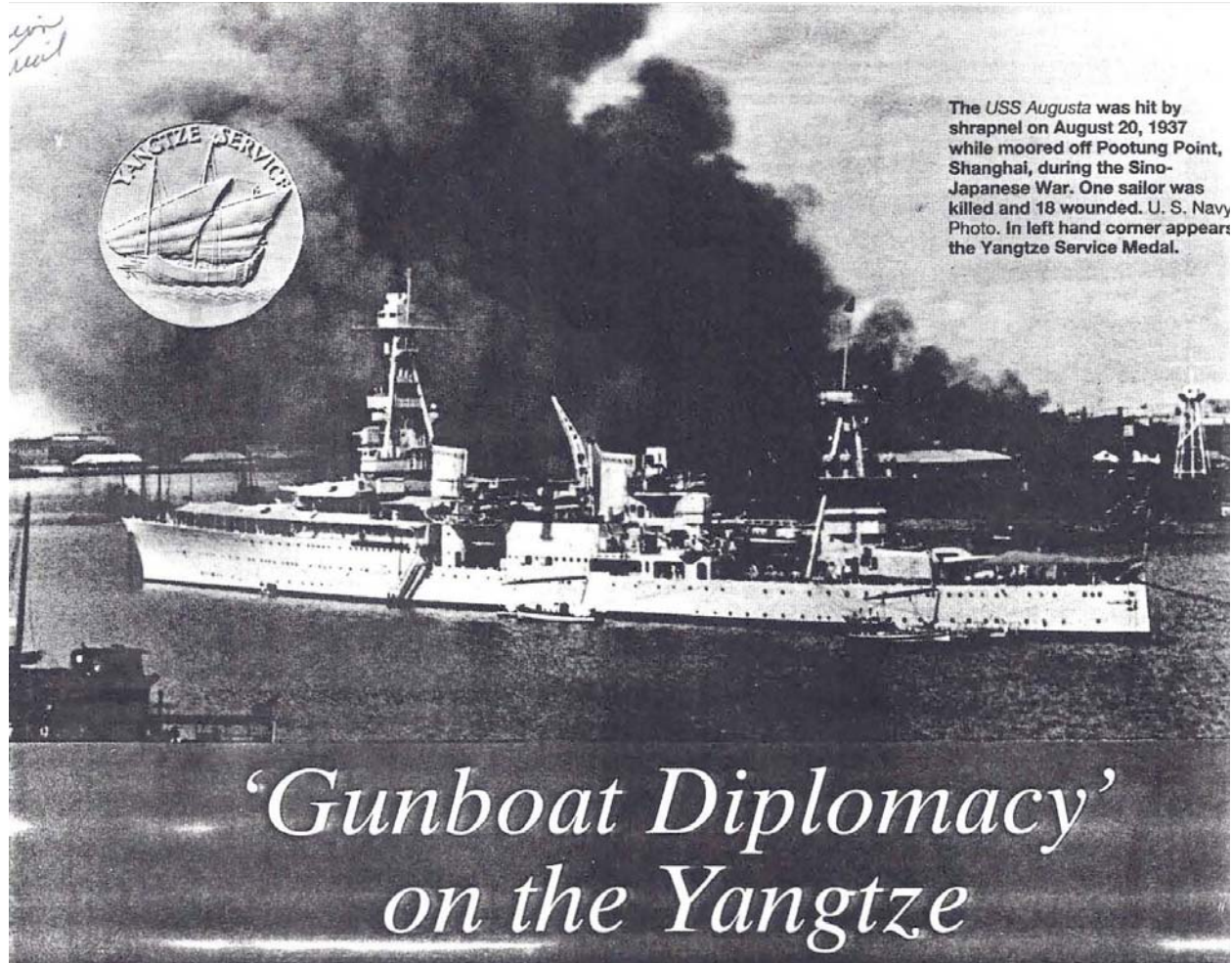


Figure 1 - The *USS August* was hit by shrapnel on August 20, 1937 while moored off Pootung Point, Shanghai, during the Sino-Japanese War. One sailor was killed and 18 wounded. U.S. Navy Photo. In left hand corner appears the Yangtze Service Medal.

War-torn China during the "Roaring '20s" and depression-ridden '30s was an exciting place to most Americans. Far away and mysterious, the Celestial Empire was brought to America vicariously through stories by writers such as Marine Capt. John W. Thomason, Jr., forever linking China with the nation's military.

Perpetually convulsed by civil war, this ancient land, which was dissected by foreign powers, was constantly the target of outside intervention. Though the isolationist U.S. generally refrained from fighting, it was, on occasion, inexorably drawn into the warfare. Warlords made China - from the Yangtze River Valley to Manchuria - a battleground for their armies.

Bandits were always plying their trade, and the Nationalists and Communists battled for control of the country across its entire face. The most explosive element added to this mix was the Imperial Japanese Army, determined to direct the destiny of all of East Asia. At various times, all these factions threatened the safety of U.S. citizens in China.

More than 10,000 Americans resided there, many running the 350 firms based in China by the late '30s. Others served in the diplomatic corps or carried out missionary work. Much of the commerce centered in Shanghai on the coast, the most important foreign enclave in the 5,500 mile-long Yangtze River Valley.

Symbols of the U.S. Presence

To protect U.S. interests, the Yangtze Patrol Force (Yang Pat, for short) was officially created in 1921. (In fact, the Navy had been patrolling the river ever since 1854.) This flotilla of shallow-draft gunboats was based in Shanghai. The U.S. Navy's Asiatic Fleet, which was headquartered in the Philippines, stationed 13 vessels in Chinese waters and patrolled inland waters with the seven-to-nine-gunboat force.

As Adm. Robert E. Coontz (future VFW Commander-in-Chief), then chief of naval operations, wrote: "The Yangtze Patrol guards our interests for 1,700 miles up the river, right into the heart of China."

Approximately 1,800 sailors manned the fleet's ships and another 500 served aboard gunboats. Marine detachments commonly rode shotgun on the craft. And seamen formed armed guards aboard merchant ships that sailed interior waterways. During the two decades before U.S. entry into WWII, Marines from the states were dispatched on several occasions to reinforce garrisons caught in various crises.

Besides these seaborne servicemen, the Army was represented by the 15th Infantry Regiment in North China at Tientsin. In its quarter century in China, the 900-man unit never traded bullets or lives with a foe, but was a steady symbol in the midst of the ebb and flow of constant warfare. As Lt. Col. George C. Marshall, who spent three years there, put it: "We are either just out of near trouble with the Chinese or trouble is hovering near us."

Trouble, for sure, was never in short supply. U.S. forces found themselves in danger of being engulfed by violence during three separate time periods: 1926-27, 1930-32 and 1937-38. Both Chinese and Japanese troops created incidents entangling neutral American forces.

Galvanized to Action

In mid-1926, Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek ordered his armies to probe the Yangtze Valley, galvanizing the Asiatic Fleet into action. On Sept. 6, Hankow was the first major city to fall: a U.S.

landing party went ashore that same day. Two destroyers had joined the gunboat flotilla of seven, and armed guards were placed aboard U.S.-flag vessels, some of which had received sniper fire.

Throughout September, in fact, U.S. warships were fired on by Chinese shore batteries. The USS Pigeon, for example, was struck over 100 times and suffered three casualties. It returned fire - some 2,300 rounds. Exclaimed an executive officer: "What a relief! What a feeling after days of passive submission to indiscriminate firing."

Early in 1927, the Nationalists launched an offensive against the northern warlords, with Shanghai as the prime objective. Marines were sent from the U.S.; the 4th Regiment sailed afire with the mistaken idea of "keeping the Communists out of Shanghai." Eventually the 3rd Marine Brigade, commanded by Gen. Smedley Butler, fielded the 4th and 6th Marines in defense of the city.

Meanwhile, 160 miles in the interior at Nanking, the Navy had to rescue 52 foreigners besieged at SOCONY (Standard Oil of NY) Hill. An 11-man guard and three Navy signalmen eventually wound up atop the hill. The latter communicated regularly with two vessels on the river. Fireman Third Class Ray D. Plumley, the only U.S. casualty of the so-called "Nanking Incident" was wounded in the back by a Chinese sniper while on his way to this strategic point. Sailors returned fire, killing two of the attacking Chinese.

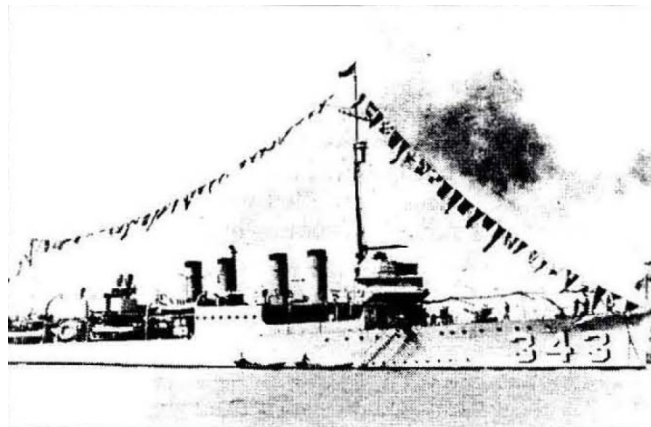


Figure 2 - During the "Nanking Incident" of March 24, 1927, the USS Noa and its crewmembers ashore helped rescue 52 besieged Westerners from Nanking. This was the most spectacular of the Patrol's clashes in China.

Bullets continually whistled by the signalman's platform. Recalled Petty Officer John D. Wilson, "Firing was so bad that the other fellows held a sheet up against the house and I sent my signals in front of it." For their "heroic performance under fire," all three seamen earned the Navy Cross.

Offshore, for the first time, U.S. guns fired at organized Chinese forces along the Yangtze River. In giving the order to fire on March 24, Lt. Commander Roy C. Smith, of the USS Noa, said, "Well, I'll either get court-martialed or a medal out of this." (He got neither.)

Over the next 10 minutes, the Noa's gunners sent 19 flat-nosed, high-explosive projectiles howling from its 4-inch guns. The USS Preston contributed 15 more shells. A British ship fired an additional 76 rounds.

"The headlines - 'U.S. Warships in Action on the Yangtze!' – of late March 1927 were bigger and blacker than any since the *USS Maine* blew up in the harbor at Havana in 1898," wrote author Kemp Tolley.

Rooftop fire from the sailors combined with the ships' shells cleared the area for evacuation. By the time an Anglo-American landing party of 250 men hit the shore, the Chinese were gone. One American civilian, however, was dead and two wounded.

During April and May, 25 sniping attacks against U.S. war and commercial ships were recorded. The *Penguin* sustained three casualties in one such incident. The last assault on a U.S. ship during this period was against the *Truxton* on Oct. 21.

Farther north, at Tientsin, 150,000 Chinese troops closed within a 10-mile radius of the foreign settlement there. Marine aircraft maintained aerial surveillance over Chinese troop movements, tracking retreating armies almost as far north as the Manchurian border. Several were holed by rifle fire - from passing Nationalist armies - as they took off and landed at Hsin Ho. Over one and a half years, the 170 men in the three Marine aircraft squadrons marked up 3,818 sorties in missions over China.

In October, the warlord offensive was finally called off. By the end of 1927, 5,670 U.S. troops were ashore and 44 U.S. warships were sailing Chinese waters. This was the peak of U.S. military strength in China in the two decades before the Pacific war. Most Marines were withdrawn by the end of 1928 and early the next year the 3rd Brigade was disbanded.



Figure 3 - China's enormous Yangtze River Valley was the center of Western commerce. Protecting U.S. interests at Shanghai and elsewhere embroiled U.S. military personnel in several "incidents."

Japan Enters the Fray

For the Yangtze Patrol, 1930 was an active period. In mid-year off Changsha, the *USS Palos* was peppered with 100 bullet holes by Communist gunners, wounding one sailor. It replied with 67 rounds from its 3-inch guns and 2,000 rounds of .30 caliber ammo. On the 4th of July, the *USS Guam* was hit 40 times near Yochow; Chinese troops killed one American. Later on, the *Guam* silenced Communist shore guns in another engagement.

Matters took a turn for the worse when Tokyo, long envious of the Chinese land mass, finally manufactured an excuse to invade the empire. On Sept. 18, 1931, the Japanese attacked near Mukden, launching their conquest of Manchuria. In late January 1932, when the Chinese Communist 19th Route Army moved near Shanghai, the Imperial Army attacked that city. Japanese carrier-based planes dropped 3D-lb. bombs over the densely populated suburb of Chapei in the first wholesale air attack on civilian targets in history: 72,000 Chinese were killed.

The 4th Marines held the middle sector of the settlement, with its front lines on Soochow Creek. To reinforce them, the U.S. Army's 31st Infantry Regiment (1,056 men-strong) was rushed from the Philippines by February 5. The "Polar Bears" joined the "Devil Dogs" in the sandbagged machine gun nests along the creek.



Figure 4 - U.S. Marine Corps' 28th Company at Ichang Road Fire Station, Marines and "Polar Bears" of the 31st Infantry defended the International Settlement in Shanghai along the sandbagged Soochow Creek in 1932 when fighting erupted between Chinese and Japanese.

Stray shells fell into the American sector during the course of the battle, and soldiers and Marines were exposed to fire from both warring sides. But fighting ended March 3 without U.S. casualties. When the 31st left Shanghai July 1, after five months' duty, its individual members were authorized to wear the Navy's Yangtze Service Medal.

Over the next five years, Japan consolidated its gains in Manchuria in anticipation of conquering all of China. That opportunity was created July 7, 1937, with the "Marco Polo Bridge Incident."

Japanese troops attacked the Peking suburb of Wanping, thrusting across the bridge spanning the Hun River. This triggered the full-scale Sino-Japanese War, which some historians consider the start of WWII.

Amidst the confusion, the Chinese mistakenly opened fire on a squad of Marines in Peking, wounding one Leatherneck. Tokyo's juggernaut rolled over everything in its way, including American hospitals, churches and schools.

Once again the International Settlement in Shanghai became the focus of fighting. Marines of the 4th and 6th Regiments, 2nd Brigade, fully manned perimeter defenses, including 58 fortified positions. A combination of misguided aerial bombings, errant anti-aircraft shells and a cholera epidemic claimed thousands of Chinese lives. Only three Marines, however, were slightly wounded by stray bullets.

On the river, as the fighting raged, the *USS Augusta* was under fire nearly every day. On Aug. 20, the *Augusta* was hit by a one-pounder shrapnel shell. "Freddy Falgout and I were playing Acey-Deucey on a mess bench when we heard the familiar drone of two high-powered fighting planes and the preliminary range-finding spitting and coughing of .30 caliber machine guns directly above us," remembers fellow crewmember Charles R. Simms.

"There they were, a Chink and a Jap going to it hammer and tongs not a thousand feet above us." Suddenly, he wrote, "where Falgout had been there was now a ... battered and ripped seaman with 19 holes in him ... " Eighteen other sailors were wounded. (Post 3665 in Raceland, La., was later named in Falgout's honor.)

Shanghai finally fell after a 92-day battle in which 300,000 casualties were sustained, two-thirds of them Chinese civilians.

USS Panay Bombed on Yangtze

Within a month of Shanghai's fall, 30 miles southwest of Nanking, another U.S. ship was hit, this time directly and intentionally. On Dec. 12, the *USS Panay* carried a 55-man crew and 15 civilian evacuees. Painted clearly on her awnings were U.S. flags: "Without warning," wrote Manny T. Koginos in *The Panay Incident*, "a wave of three twin-engine bombers attacked in succession from out of the sun at an altitude of not more than 1,000 feet."



Figure 5 - American gunners aboard the USS Panay return fire at attacking Japanese planes on December 12, 1937, 30 miles southwest of Nanking on the Yangtze River.

The *Panay* was being attacked by 24 fighters and dive bombers of the Japanese 12th and 13th Air Groups. In the devastating onslaught lasting 25 minutes, 20 bombs were dropped on or near the helpless vessel.

American gunners fired until all the ammo was nearly exhausted. Chief Petty Officer "Swede" Mahlmann - "the Pantless Gunner of the Panay" - earned the Navy Cross for manning "three machine guns at different times . . ." while "continuously exposed to heavy bombing and machine gun fire from attacking planes."

Succeeding waves of dive-bombers destroyed or crippled three nearby oil tankers. Sampans taking wounded ashore were bombed and machine-gunned. One and a half hours later two Japanese patrol boats arrived on the scene and machine-gunned the abandoned gunboat - U.S. flags were still visible. Battered by over two dozen direct hits and near misses, the *Panay* rolled over and sank at the lower entrance of Hoshien Channel in 10 fathoms of water. It was the only ship lost to enemy action in the Yangtze Patrol's history and the first to enemy aircraft. In a sense, it was also the first U.S. naval combat loss of WWII.

Seamen Charles Ensimer and Edgar Hulsebus were killed along with an Italian correspondent. Twelve sailors were seriously wounded, another 38 less seriously wounded. Surviving crewmembers endured three days of physical trials in order to bring the dead and wounded out of the swamps. Of the survivors, 23 were recommended for the Navy Cross. Two officers received the Distinguished Service Medal.

News of the sinking electrified the nation. "It is a type of aggression for which statements of deep regrets by smooth-tongued Japanese diplomats are totally inadequate," editorialized the *Washington Post*. "The Tokyo government should understand that our professional pacifists are not representative of American public opinion ..."

End of the China Trail

While the *Panay* was under attack, the Japanese were launching an orgy of killing known in history as the "Rape of Nanking." The Nationalist capital fell on Dec. 12, 1937 subjecting its inhabitants to the worst atrocities yet seen in modern warfare. Over a period of six weeks, more than 200,000 men - one-fourth of them civilians - were immolated, bayoneted or tortured to death. Some 20,000 women were raped.

Col. Joseph W. Stilwell, then U.S. military attaché in Peking, wrote in his diary, simply, "The bastards."

By October 1938, Hankow fell and the Japanese consolidated their positions - at the cost of three million casualties to the Chinese. Large-scale fighting ceased for nearly three years.

America's military presence in China was nearing its end. In early March 1938, the 15th Infantry departed Tientsin after a 26-year stay.

More than three years later, on July 30, 1941, the gunboat *Tutuila* was hit by a bomb dropped by Japanese naval planes near Chung King.

The 4th Marines remained in Shanghai until Nov. 28, 1941, to mount internal security patrols to eject Japanese agitators, break up mobs, guard buildings against terrorist bombings and man perimeter defenses. (Once the war started, 500 Marines were stranded in Peking and Tientsin and imprisoned by the Japanese.)

Two days before Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 5, the Yangtze Patrol was formally discontinued. "The Asiatic Fleet had performed extremely well with limited resources and contradictory guidance," wrote historian Bernard D. Cole, "in carrying out its difficult missions in China."

It had been a stirring two decades in China, and an era that made at least 30,000 overseas veterans, who earned the Yangtze, China and American Defense Service (with foreign clasp for China duty) medals, eligible for the Veterans of Foreign Wars.