
The Round Tablette

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Welcome to the second March session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World

War II History Round Table. Tonight's speakers are Al Lathrop, an historian of the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater, Ted Farmer an historian on China, and John McLaughlin, author of *General Alfred C. Wedemeyer*, along with veterans of the theater who will discuss the harsh conditions and bitter fighting in China.

China was always a peculiar mix of myth and reality in the American psyche and American history. Its vast population made it a prime target for the fledgling United States, not only in economics as a market but also in religious zeal for the conversion of souls. If US merchants and missionaries could just sell their wares, be it shirts, widgets or Jesus Christ, American citizens would be monetarily and spiritually wealthy beyond belief.

China was the place where the idea of the "Open Door" was born; the notion that the United States should be able to trade with any country in the world no matter what another colonial power said. Missionaries should have unhindered access. (Prominent American families engaged in missionary activities in China. Henry Luce, founding editor of *TIME* and *LIFE* magazines was born in China to missionary parents. President Franklin Roosevelt's mother's family the Delano's had business interests in China.) The reality proved much more difficult, since the vast majority of Chinese could not afford American products and were not interested in Christianity. China's place in World War II would continue the tradition between myth and reality.

Often forgotten is the fact that the Second World War—known as The Great Pacific War—began in China in 1937 at the Marco Polo Bridge on the outskirts of Beijing. The Chinese government responded by ordering a full military mobilization; the Japanese then claimed it was Chinese aggression that started the "Second Sino-Japanese War." The Japanese army began an offensive along China's vast coastline that was commonly marked by the killing of surrendered Chinese military personnel. By December 1937, the Japanese took the city of Nanking and proceeded to rape and slaughter 250,000 civilians and POWs.

That same month the Japanese Navy attacked Britain's *HMS Ladybird* and sank the American gunboat *USS Panay* in the Yangtze River. Responding to this act of war, President Roosevelt calling for a "quarantine of aggression." He also asked American industrialists to curtail trade with Japan.

China was never more than a peripheral theater for the Allies. At the end of the longest supply lines in the world – even longer than the lend lease supply lines through Persia to the Soviet Union, action in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater was not decisive in defeating the Japanese. Worse, the geopolitical make-up of the country worked against its being decisive.

A republican revolution, led by Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, took place in 1911, overthrowing the Manchu Dynasty. Sun was elected President and remained in power until his death in 1925, when his protégé, Chiang Kai-Shek, took over and ruled the nationalists throughout the war. The Communists, led by Mao Tse-Tung, did not accept Chiang's leadership and began civil war. Once the Second Sino-Japanese War started, both Chinese parties fought the Japanese, though often with less enthusiasm then they fought each other. Their efforts were not coordinated, and both sides kept their primary goal in mind: who would rule China.

The Sino-Japanese War went badly for the Chinese, though they did better than the Japanese expected, slowing the conquest. In 1940, President Roosevelt authorized Gen. Claire Chennault to recruit American military personnel to form the "American Volunteer Group" to provide Chiang with an effective air arm. Lend-Lease was authorized by Congress in March of 1941 and extended to China in April.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor, aid to the Chinese was increased, until the Japanese seized Burma and forced the closing of the "Burma Road," the single overland supply route into China. The Americans began an airlift of critical supplies "over the Hump" of the Himalaya Mountains.

Once the Sino-Japanese War became part of the Great Pacific War, China became a theater within the larger global conflict called World War II. The Allies created the CBI Theater under Adm. Lord Louis Mountbatten to oversee operations in these remote areas. To coordinate Chinese efforts within the larger cause, Roosevelt send Lt. Gen. Joseph Stilwell to China to be Deputy Allied Commander and also the chief of staff of the Chinese Army, Chiang's second in command. Stilwell, spoke fluent Chinese and had served previously in the country.

Chinese corruption was endemic, and Chiang diverted American funds from fighting the Japanese to fund his part of the Chinese civil war. This was one of many ongoing points of friction between the Americans and Chinese.

Chiang engaged in diplomatic blackmail against the United States, threatening to drop out of the war if he did not continue to receive additional funds. He used Madam Chiang's connections (the "China Lobby") to good effect, playing on American sympathy for the

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Chinese.

Yet another point of friction was “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell’s intense dislike for both Chiang and his wife, American-educated Soong May-ling. Stilwell also disliked Chennault; the feelings were mutual. Chennault believed in the ability of airpower to win the war in China, while Stilwell understood the essence of the Chinese military situation – an agrarian society with a peasant army. Chiang logically sided with the enemy of his enemy.

Generally speaking, the Chinese high command disliked Stilwell, who was too much the soldier and not a Mandarin. He also understood the Chinese and their culture too well. For example, the Japanese put a price on Stilwell's head. When a Chinese general would not attack as planned, Stilwell would show up on the battlefield as if baiting the Japanese - a question of face. He would not go away until the general attacked as ordered.

Generalissimo Chiang was unable to discuss Chinese military matters at the first Cairo Conference, and could not tell the British whether his forces would be able to help retake Burma. Stilwell knew the answers (NO). Chiang also continued his campaign against Stilwell, who was eventually recalled to the United States in October 1944. He was replaced by **Major General** Albert C. Wedemeyer. Wedemeyer did not speak Chinese and Chiang found him easier to manipulate.

With the surrender of the Japanese, Chiang did get his war with Mao’s communists, a war that proved fatal for the Nationalist cause in 1949. The myths of a strong democratic China and of America's special relationship with China came head to head with “objective reality” of the real strength of the Communist forces and the peasant revolution.

Further Readings:

Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937 - 1945* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2013).

Maochun Yu, ed. *The Dragon's War: Allied Operations and the Fate of China, 1937-1947* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013).

Maochun Yu, *OSS in China* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

John McLaughlin, *General Albert C.*

Wedemeyer: America's Unsung Strategist in World War II (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2013).

Jack Samson, *The Flying Tiger: The True Story of General Claire Chennault and the US 14th Air Force in China*, (Augusta, GA: Lyons Press, 2011).

Jonathan Fenby, *Chiang Kai-Shek: China's Generalissimo and the Nation He Lost* (Jackson, TN: DaCapo Press, 2009).

Announcements:

Civil War Symposium Apr. 5, 2014 – Historic Ft. Snelling Visitors Center - info@tccwrt.com - 612-823-4009

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table -

May 20, 2014 – H. L. Hunley - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Apr. 28,

2014 – Conspiracies & Murder: Lincoln- 715-386-1268 – rossandhaines@comcast.net

Rochester WWII History Round Table –507-280-9970; www.wv2roundtable-rochester.org

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050, <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Air Show - Eden Prairie - July 19-20, 2014; <http://www.airexpo-mn.org/> - 952-746-6100

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org 651-455-6942

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523

Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN, 320-564-6644,

<http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Round Table Schedule 2014

10 Apr. Rabaul and the SW Pacific

8 May Landing on Omaha Beach

10-27 May Tour of Normandy

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Chiang and his wife, Soong May-ling, with Joseph Stilwell in Burma (1942)

