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Morris Barnett Depass

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MORRIS BARNETT DEPASS

ORAL HISTORY ABSTRACT

BORN: October 20, 1895, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

EARLY LIFE: education; receives orders from U.S. Army for China, 1923.

CHINA EXPERIENCES: organizes language school for U. S. Army officers; gathers information for military intelligence regarding warlords prior to the Japanese war; response to White Russians in China; impressions of missionaries, foreign businesspeople and Chiang Kai-shek; memorable American military figures in China; rescue of lost American servicemen during WWII.

INTERVIEWER: Helen Dahlin

DATE: 12-7-76

PLACE: New Orleans, Louisiana

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INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: Mr. DePass, could we begin by your telling when and where you were born?

DePASS: I was born October 20, 1895, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

I: What is your educational background?

DePASS: I had eight years of grammar school education, four years of high school education, and a year and half credit in the School of Medicine in Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

I: Did you have military experience before China?

DePASS: Prior to going to China, I was on duty at the Infantry School, Fort Benning, Georgia; a graduate of the basic class and then an instructor in the company officers' class. Actually, prior to the outbreak of World War I, I was principal of the high school in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. As the war clouds gathered, I volunteered to go to officer's training camp in Arkansas. I was the youngest man in my class and did not get a commission but held over for training at the next class. I went to Camp Stanley, Texas, where I graduated with a grade of first lieutenant rather than a second, which I would have gotten out of the first camp.

Upon completion of the officer's training duty, I was assigned to the 19th Infantry at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and was detailed to a company on duty outside of Houston--a little town called Freeport, Texas. As new divisions were formed, these regular army troops with which I was then on duty formed cadres for a division, the 90th Division at Camp Travis, Texas, which was then outside of San Antonio.

In time, with the call for troops, it was necessary to create another division and this was the division to which I was assigned. When the division was ready for duty overseas, it was en route for Vladivostok, Siberia. But flu broke out at that time, and the division was turned around before I got outside of the United States. We returned back to Camp Travis and as the war developed and eventually peace was signed, I was assigned to a regular army regiment on duty in Texas once again.

From there, eventually I was ordered from Fort Sam Houston to Camp Benning, Georgia, as a student in the basic class. Upon completion of my duties as an infantry officer in the basic training, I was assigned as an instructor to the basic class. In 1923, about sometime in July, I suppose, I received orders to go to Tientsin, China, troop duty with the 15th Infantry stationed at that time. I had asked to go to China, but it was such a plum for a low-ranking officer, I was surprised when I got assigned there.

My colleagues looked upon with some amount of envy and jealousy because China was known for the good life. There were servants and pay went a lot farther, so it really was considered a plum.

I: What training did you receive to specifically prepare you for China?

DePASS: No training at all for duty in China, except that I was supposed to have a superior efficiency report ready in the army. I only had one week's notice and so my orders were issued on very short notice and so there was hardly time to pack.

I: Did you receive any after you arrived in China?

DePASS: After I arrived, I undertook to study Chinese on my own and made such quick progress that the commanding general of the American Forces in China at that time decided that all officers would be required to study a certain amount of Chinese. I was appointed as the officer in charge of that school, which was located in Tientsin, in North China.

I: What kind of language training were you able to offer?

DePASS: I think the quality of the preparation was very good in that it gave a basic knowledge of Chinese in a period of about three or four months. At that time, officers who took the course were able to tell the time of day, ask the price of commodities, ask the names of different weapons with which we were then armed.

After four years of duty in Tientsin, I was sent to Peking, China, to study Chinese in the China Language School for one year. After one year of that study, we then organized a language school of our own in Peking and had good teachers and made much more progress than if we had stayed with the other language school. So I had eight years of duty in China at one stretch which was highly unusual.

I: Before arriving, what was your impression of your role and responsibilities in China?

DePASS: Well, my impression of my role was to make a favorable impression of the people of China and the foreign residents of Tientsin and Peking. I felt that the longer I stayed, the better and more prepared I was to live in China on my Chinese.

I: What were the specific objectives of the U.S. military in China during the 1920s and '30s?

DePASS: Our primary purpose was to work with troops of other foreign signatories to the Boxer Treaty after the Boxer Rebellion, to keep the railway open between Peking, China, and Chinuangtao, a seaport of North China. This was to enable foreigners to be evacuated by rail if the repetition of the Boxer Incident should occur. A small force was stationed at Tongshan, about 85 miles from Tientsin, to guard the railroad. To this extent, our objectives were fulfilled, and I think we were doing all that we should be and could be doing.

I: General Connors said around this time that, "All foreign garrisons should be withdrawn for, I believe that all things considered, our continued presence is harmful to the interests of the United States." How do you respond to this statement?

DePASS: I think that the continued presence of our troops in China at that time was justified because it was the day of the warlords. The city was frequently threatened by invasion of defeated Chinese troops and I think the troops should have stayed, as they did stay, until World War II came along.

I: What were the objectives of the military intelligence operation at this time and how was information gathered?

DePASS: My initial experience with intelligence gathering related to that information in the Tientsin area. That information was gathered by reports from contacts with civilian American firms out in the countryside where there were no American troops concerned and by visits of the officers to that particular area. We also had discussions with American personnel and Chinese English-speaking personnel on the development of the war situation that surrounded our city of Tientsin.

When I personally went out to gather information, I went as a civilian and communicated to my headquarters through regular

commercial codes. I moved by horseback and I would go out in the country by day and back home at night. The kind of information we were interested in gathering was the units involved, whether they were composed of defeated troops or troops of the more powerful warlords.

As I mentioned, my first assignment was on the outskirts of Tientsin. As one defeated army approached the city, we feared they would go into the city and rob and stir up trouble with foreigners. But since the city was surrounded by defensive measures of all the treaty signatories of the Boxer Incident, I organized tea wagons and rolling kitchens and had signs printed along these roads that the troops were following, telling them to keep on going in this direction until they got to the next village where we would give them tea and subsidy. In other words, we were getting them to bypass Tientsin and were facilitating them out of our area.

I: What experiences were particularly memorable as you were out gathering information?

DePASS: I had so many of them I couldn't tell which was my most memorable one. One was when a defeated force was retiring and they came to a river. The attackers were just about 300 yards on their heels and I wanted a trophy. I offered to buy a Chinese rifle from the defeated troops, and I offered

him 10 dollars in Chinese money, but he said no. Before I could raise the ante anymore, two or three shots spouted around him. He quickly threw down his rifle and pulled off his clothes and gave me his horse and his rifle and swam across the river to safety. I even wound up with the horse.

Later on, I went out for weeks at a time. When I came back, I almost looked like an apparition. I would even come home with a beard which was almost unheard of for a military officer.

I: You mentioned warlords. Did you have dealings with some of them?

DePASS: As an advanced language student, I was speaking Chinese very well and was sent down to a big battle, which was developing in Honan Province with Marshall Feng Yu-hsiang, the Christian general. I called and made contact with his headquarters. Feng was very courteous and let me go through his headquarters to see how it was organized. I studied their supply system and their medical system and their tactics in general. Feng was a very skillful commander, well-versed in handling large units and was the subject of one of my monographs when I was in the advanced class of the infantry school in later years.

I rode up on one of Feng's trains that was in pursuit of the defeated forces and was amazed at the facilities at which his staff functioned.

Also I came back from these missions in the countryside and wrote the first intelligence report on the Chinese Communists in China. I concluded it with the statement to the effect that I felt foreign troops should take a more serious look at the war capabilities of North China. I felt they would eventually grow to be a threat to the government of China, would overthrow the government of China.

I: To go back to a previous question, I recall that you used to tell about sleeping in the countryside in the graveyards rather than in the Chinese inns. Do I recall this correctly?

DePASS: You recall it correctly, but it wasn't on a military mission. It was on a mission for the American Red Cross concerning the famine conditions at this particular time. The Chinese had asked for three million dollars of American help, and I went in and spent about 10 days going through the area. We felt that the famine in the area was not due to famine of nature, but a famine created by the warlords confiscating all the foods. In those times I slept in the burial grounds. The graveyards were peaceful, because no one else would dare to sleep there.

There was only one time that I really felt frightened in China. In one of those remote villages, my presence had gathered quite a crowd. The outer edge did not know what

was happening and someone in the circle said, "Lynch the foreigner." For a few moments I was afraid because of the momentum of mob psychology.

I: Where did you see the hand of Russia operating at this time?

DePASS: I knew very little of the Russian interest in the Chinese troops other than at Feng Yu-hsiang was trained in Russia. I saw nothing that I could point my finger at on what the Russians were doing to stir up trouble. I didn't know what the impact the Communist effort was in the Armed Forces of the Chinese at that time.

I: About what year was this?

DePASS: That was about 1931, I suppose.

I: What did you predict about future relations between China and Russia?

DePASS: Well, I was armed with the knowledge that Sun Yat-sen, the father of the Chinese revolution, peaceful revolution, was spurned in his request for aid from the United States by our government at that time, so he appealed to the Russians for help. And help was forthcoming from the Russians. Had we given help to Sun Yat-sen I am sure that Communism in China would eventually have been smothered by the Nationalist government.

Since the White Russians were there, I felt that I should study Russian because another such opportunity might not arise again. So I learned Russian on my own initiative.

I: What about the White Russians?

DePASS: I was very sympathetic towards the White Russians in China because they were refugees from their own country. They had **moved** overland with great loss of life to get into Manchuria and down into the North China. The Chinese received them graciously, I would say.

In the '20s and '30s, Washington's response was to support the warlord who looked like he had the best chance of succeeding so that the area would be pacified and then our businesses and schools could be developed to teach technology and language to the Chinese who had not yet been exposed to it.

I: Were there any other countries that you know of that gave asylum at that time to White Russians?

DePASS: China was the only country. They couldn't get out to the west; they had to come out overland to the east. One of my Russian teachers told me that at times at the end of the day's march, they would inspect the casualties to find out those who were too weak to go any farther. They reached such a stage

where children who were not going to make it had to be killed by smashing their heads with rocks because they had to hold on to the ammunition that they had. There was such a scarcity of ammunition and they needed it to defend themselves against pursuit and for the procurement of game on which they could live.

But once they got to China, their fate was considerably better than the life they had led in Russia. They became successful in business and restaurants. I think they led far better lives as refugees from Russia in China than they would have had they remained in Russia.

I: What was your assessment of the Chinese military situation when you were in China?

DePASS: There was very little unification of the armed forces. The troops in each province were considered for the defense of that particular province rather than of national organization to defend the nation as a whole. I did form a very high respect for the capability of the Chinese soldier. He was a man of great stamina and could exist on very little food. As long as you could feed him and give him something with which to fight, he was the best soldier material of which I have any knowledge. I consider him better material than were a lot of the Japanese or the Germans.

I: What about your own lifestyle in town, when you were not in the countryside?

DePASS: I lived very well because I was doing something I wanted to do--studying Chinese and Russian. The foreign community in which I lived were socially well-organized, so I lived very well.

I: How did most military personnel respond to the ordinary Chinese?

DePASS: I think that the foreign military, other than some Americans, looked down on the Chinese, as poor defenders of their nation. There was a degree of contempt.

I: Did their attitude extend also to Chinese military personnel?

DePASS: Probably it did because I don't think the average Westerner got as close to the Chinese as I did or any student of Chinese language did. The Chinese military had schools such as we had, sent their officers to our schools to be trained or to Japan or to France, and I had a very high regard for their capabilities. They were bright, had very good memories. In time, when they came back from their foreign education, they made use of what they had gotten abroad by organizing schools to train the lower ranks of the armies.

I: How did the ordinary Chinese respond to you as a military officer?

DePASS: The Chinese responded to me very courteously. In fact, many of them didn't know I was a military officer because we wore civilian clothes. While studying the language, we wore civilian clothes because it was much easier to establish rapport. We could go out and practice our Chinese much more readily. There is a lot of symbolism in a military uniform. With the Chinese military officers I had a very cordial relationship.

Foreigners, especially those who got away from the large cities, were trying to improve their knowledge of the Chinese. You take companies like the British-American Tobacco Company and the Standard Oil Company who had branch offices out in the country. Standard Oil sold their gasoline by cupfuls than by five-gallon tanks out in the countryside. Some of these businessmen first went to language training school just like we went to ours, but they specialized on business and economic needs of the country, whereas we specialized on military needs in the language we received.

I: What were your impressions of the missionary enterprise? Any personal encounters?

DePASS: I saw a lot of the missionary effort in China because on my travels into the interior I either stopped at an American businessman's home or the home of an American missionary. A

lot of people criticize the missionary effort in China because they think that the missionaries thought the Chinese themselves were not intellectually developed.

TAPE ONE-SIDE TWO

I had considerable encounters with the missionary effort of all denominations because I went into the various sections of the country. At language school our course was divided into three-month periods. I completed my examinations in two and a half months and then I took a half a month off. I would put a pack on my back and then go on into the interior to prove that I could live off the Chinese I had been studying up to date. It was then I grasped the pet plan of the missionary in China. He was aware of the lack of the understanding of what was being preached, so the missionary felt that he must first develop schools to teach the Chinese English, to teach them how to follow sanitation and how to improve production of crops, to show them that the white man's efforts were better than they had been living on for the past two or three hundred years.

As a result, they had mission schools for the children, and for the orphans, to show the Chinese how we cared for all life in China. The missionaries were great lovers of children

and by having schools where we could help bring up the child whose daddy had been killed in an accident and help the family to take care of the child, they were trying to set an example.

I think that the criticism directed against the missionary at that time was unjust, but I am also convinced that the majority of those who were so-called "converted" by any one of the religions were really "rice bowl Christians." They embraced this new Christianity so that they, themselves, would get more out of it for their own physical needs.

I: What were your impressions of the various business communities?

DePASS: The business was very competitive. The Americans got most of it in our effort to develop the railways and highways. We built the big locomotives and the freight cars to run over the lines as the railways were extended, and competition was very, very keen between Germany and America. The Americans, I think, got most of the business simply because we had more money to spend and Germany hadn't yet fully recovered from World War I.

I: How about the British?

DePASS: Their main interest was in the sale of tobacco and in the organization of a tax loan system or customs whereby the Chinese would get tariffs. But the British would place the officers. It made it possible for the Chinese to get considerably more money through their customs than if it hadn't been run by the British and/or the Americans.

I: What were your contacts with Chiang Kai-shek and your impressions of his leadership?

DePASS: Oh, very good. He was trying to smother the growing threat of Communism and he was trying to develop a unified country for its own defense.

During World War II, I was Chief of Staff of the Chinese Combat Command. Then, after World War II, I was one of a group of four officers headed by a brigadier general to develop a re-organized Department of Defense for the Chinese. As the mission developed, which was known as the Magic Military Project Group in China, we undertook to prepare papers and pamphlets and instructional books on the materials which we were presenting to them orally so they could take books home and study them. We had schools developed for the various speciality arms, and worked on the development of a consolidated air force.

On one occasion I represented Chiang Kai-shek in a mission to the then Communist headquarters in Northwest China to try to induce the chairman of the Chinese Communist party, Mao Tse-tung, to release political prisoners and to let the minister of foreign affairs, Chou En-lai, come down to Chungking to study the use of the Communist forces against the Japanese in conjunction with the other Nationalist troops on the Mainland of China.

At that time in Chungking I was the military attache for China and in very close liaison with the Chinese intelligence service with whom I made daily contact. I was at the office of the Chinese Communists once a day for a period of several months to get information on the Japanese troops that were deployed on the Chinese Mainland.

By the word we got from Chinese intelligence on the Japanese forces on the Mainland of China, we made it possible for the harrassment of those forces and for the bombarding of their supply lines by General Chennault's Flying Tigers. Through these measures we were able to pin those 21 divisions down which were sorely needed in the warfare in the Pacific.

I: Towards the end of the war, what were your thoughts on Chiang's future?

DePASS: Until President Roosevelt died, I thought that we would eventually defeat the Chinese Communists on the China Mainland. But after the war ended, we discontinued our aid policy to the Chinese Nationalist armies, and they were like sitting ducks when it came to fighting the Communists in their own land.

I: What were your impressions of people like Stilwell, Gaus, Chennault? Do you think Stilwell was over-critical of Chiang?

DePASS: Stilwell wanted to have complete control of all the Chinese Armed Forces and Chiang wanted the promised aid to him continued, which Stilwell countered unless he (Stilwell) could have complete command! I personally think we should have increased our aid to Chiang even at the expense of sending U.S. ground troops to develop bases on the China Mainland to repel the Japanese invasion.

I had known General Stilwell for many years as a junior officer and had a great respect for his leadership; however, I would only have to rely on heresay to pass on any judgment of his feud between the Generalissimo and himself.

Mr. Clarence Gauss was then the American ambassador to China and I had daily contact with him and had the greatest regards for his understanding of the political situation in China. Mr. Gauss, I feel, reported factually and correctly the problems which the Communists were posing for the continued existence of the Nationalist troops. When it became known that General Stilwell was to be relieved and replaced by General Wedemeyer, Mr. Gauss advised me that if Stilwell was relieved he would resign as minister to China, which he did.

General Chennault, through his Flying Tigers, was almost a god in the Chinese eyes. They recognized that the airplane was the only thing preventing them from being overrun by the Japanese invasion of the Yangtze River.

I: What has been your response to the People's Republic of China?

DePASS: Because of the fact that our aid to Nationalist China was discounted after World War II and the Chinese Reds received all of the ex-Japanese industry in Manchuria, it made it very easy for the Reds to run over all of the China Mainland.

I: You don't feel the average Chinese is better off today?

DePASS: No, I do not feel the average Chinese is better off today. He is worse off today. The system of communes where families were broken up was an effort of Mao Tse-tung to feed his people out of their home-grown crops and made it practically impossible for the sophistication of industry to support his country. China is still in a situation of importing grain. Then with the Cultural Revolution, Mao sent China back 40 years.

I: What about the future of China and U.S. relations?

DePASS: I think that with the failure of the Cultural Revolution and a failure of the commune system will ultimately rise and destroy Communism in China. Particularly since Mao Tse-tung's death we have definite indications he will be replaced by western-oriented relations in favor of the United States.

I: What do you think the U.S. learned militarily from its involvement in China?

DePASS: One of the things that was learned was that it was very difficult to interfere in the happenings of such a large country. We also learned that the Chinese are as capable as any race in the world to develop modern weapons of warfare and undoubtedly will use them if they feel it is necessary to do so in order to survive. And I also realized and said that the white man was having his day, but I knew that the Oriental's day was coming.

A letter of Mr. DePass' written on April, 1972.

119 West View Drive
Edgewater Estates
Biloxi, Ms. 39531

28 April 1972

Thanks for the card from Italy--and for telling us of the beauty of the English countryside and its well-kept homes and gardens. It reminded me of a most memorable incident of the war in China. When the outlook was very gloomy and it appeared that Chiang would have to retreat further west, I suggested to the War Department that I be allowed to make a land reconnaissance of the foothills of the Himalayas with the idea of selecting a suitable site to which we could move the embassy. I started out with two jeeps, a second Lt. Engs, and a Lt. from my office. It was a beautiful country, but a very hard trip filled with risks of slipping off of a mountain road. We got to one large city, the capital of Hsi Chiang Province. There I called upon the governor. In a conversation he remarked that he knew we would come, sometime, to get the seven airmen who were at Yu Lin. Yu Lin was far from where we were headed, but I said yes.

We got to Yu Lin and there found seven airmen. They had been on a B-29 fuel plane which had gone down on its way back to Calcutta. One, the tail gunner, had been injured in the jump,

but his companions had carried him for several days. They did not know where they were but decided to travel down valleys 'till they might meet some stream. They did and in about four days came to a small village. It was a village of the Lo Los--a tribe of an ancient culture which was really not Chinese.

The villagers took them in and waited till the tail gunner could walk. Then they started out with them into the mountains. Somehow or other, a Chinese magistrate in Yu Lin got word of it. He had it that the Lo Los had 'captured' seven white men and were taking them across the mountains to sell them, as slaves, in a larger Lo Lo village. It so happened that this magistrate, when a young man, had been a guide for Quentin Roosevelt when he had been on a hunting trip to Manchuria for a white (snow) tiger. When Quentin had returned to America, he had given this guide his pistol.

The magistrate went after the Lo Los and got the airmen and brought them to Yu Lin. There was no communications out of Yu Lin except by mail. It was hand carried, by the postman, in a wheel barrow. It took three months to get mail out to the nearest post office, where it was then moved by an old bus to Hsi Chiang. To say that the seven airmen were glad to see us was the understatement of the century.

However, I could only take three of them with us. I took the tail gunner, of course, and the Lt. pilot and the engineer officer of the B-29.

My route was, of course, changed by this incident, so to get back to it I had to go over some other road. We got to a river, its bridge washed out, and that was the end of the trip. However, natives there told us that there were two white missionaries who were in a small village not far from the other side of the bridge and that the wife was sick. So we crawled across the bridge and got to the home of the missionaries. The husband was English; the wife American. They invited us to spend the night. We accepted. During the evening, the husband asked me to come outside and talk. He told me that his wife was going blind and that he would pay me anything if we would take her with us to Chengtu (where our Air Force had a big base and his mission had a headquarters). Chengtu was about a 10-day trip for us. I told him we would take her but, of course, refused any such offer as he had made.

We started out the next morning. After a few hours on the road, the wife expressed her appreciation for what we were doing and then said that she knew she was losing her eyesight. Her one hope and prayer was that she could get to England, where she had never been, just to see the beauty of an English countryside as her husband had spoken of that so often.

We got to Chengtu and took her right to the mission and then we went to the air base. The men had all been reported as lost. The base commander then sent out a rescue team for the four men we had to leave at Yu Lin and in time they were brought back. The description which you wrote about the beauty of England brought back very vividly that fine man and woman who were parted by his love for her and her love for what he had so long missed."

Ruth and Daddy