

Naval War College Review

Volume 46
Number 1 *Winter*

Article 22

1993

Hostage on the Yangtze: Britain, China, and the Amethyst Crisis of 1949

Roger Dingman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Dingman, Roger (1993) "Hostage on the Yangtze: Britain, China, and the Amethyst Crisis of 1949," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 46 : No. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol46/iss1/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

and Rogers to the United States shortly after MacArthur took command of the occupation of Japan.

Both volumes, which are actually memoirs rather than history, have similar assets and liabilities. However, *The Bitter Years* is a more poignantly moving and vivid narrative because of the tragic breakup of the two generals' friendship and Rogers' admiration for both men. Although the book is dedicated to Sutherland, Rogers is brutally frank about the chief of staff's arrogance and the extramarital affair that caused him to fall out of favor with MacArthur.

Rogers' account of Sutherland's love affair with an Australian socialite (whom he had commissioned as a WAC captain and who accompanied him from Australia to the Philippines) is most interesting, but takes up more space than it actually warrants. Rogers does discuss operations such as Operation Cartwheel, Netherlands-New Guinea, the Philippines, and Borneo, but the student of the Southwest Pacific war will wish that more attention was allotted to these.

Nevertheless, what Rogers has produced is an intimate insider's view of "GHQ" that rivals General Robert L. Eichelberger's *Dear Miss Em* as a most revealing, entertaining glimpse of the glories and follies of the senior American commanders of the conflict in the Southwest Pacific.

D. CLAYTON JAMES
Virginia Military Institute

Murfett, Malcolm H. *Hostage on the Yangtze: Britain, China, and the Amethyst Crisis of 1949*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991. 313pp. \$34.95

Rare indeed is history that is at once colorful, instructive, and relevant to the present. This work, by a leading modern British naval historian, is just such a history.

It focuses on a hundred days of crisis on the Yangtze River. On 20 April 1949, just when communist forces were about to cross the river and complete their conquest of China, British officials sent HMS *Amethyst* upriver from Shanghai to relieve HMS *Consort*, an embassy guardship at Nanking. Communist shore batteries shelled both ships, and British gunners returned fire, killing more men than they themselves lost. *Amethyst* ran aground and *Consort* fled downriver. An attempt to rescue *Amethyst* the next day ended in failure and brought death to still more Britons. Weeks of resupply efforts and negotiations for the release of *Amethyst* and its crew ensued, but when the *Amethyst's* captain sensed that only abject capitulation to communist demands might free his ship, he plotted escape. Under cover of darkness on 30 July *Amethyst* blasted its way downriver to safety at Shanghai. Returning home, the ship and its crew were welcomed as heroes who had defended their nation's honor in the best tradition of the Royal Navy.

Malcolm Murfett has taken these facts and fashioned an adventure story that has everything (save sex) that

might be found in a novel or television drama. Violence is followed by death. Disease and hunger stalk the trapped crew. Distant officials debate what to do but prove feckless in negotiating with cunning communists. In the end there are daring triumphs, the captives are freed, and their nation rejoices.

Murfett has taken advantage of British official records and private papers and has interviewed survivors to create this richly detailed drama that no reader will want to leave until the final act has ended. This work also offers an objective lesson about naval professionalism. *Amethyst's* crew endured the unendurable. Wounded and suffering in the torrid Chinese summer, they survived a plague of rats and a plethora of disappointments over failed efforts to secure their release. Yet there are no complaints. Lieutenant Commander John Kerans, who had been dogged by a penchant for too much wine and too many women, is transformed by adversity to become a compassionate, tough-minded, and clever hero. Drawing on both his store of navigational knowledge and his understanding of his superiors' mindset (unable to communicate with them), he correctly calculates that escape is the only hope. That subsequently he would go on to a distinguished career in naval intelligence and then to a seat in parliament is hardly surprising.

Murfett's account is relevant to the management of hostage crises today. He implies that such situations grow as much out of distant officials' ignorance as local revolutionaries'

errors. For example, sending the *Amethyst* into an area that the communists and nationalists were contesting was a "curiously benighted and . . . grossly irresponsible" decision. The author suggests that *sangfroid* is the essential quality for resolving such affairs. The British ambassador had the wisdom to set aside protocol and the courage to presume (with little supporting evidence) that it was a lack of discipline among the communists rather than evil intent which caused the attack; this helped to get negotiations underway. Murfett also asserts that a government's handling of domestic politics in such situations is more important than its negotiating tactics. The British government never lost sight of its larger goal of preserving good trade and diplomatic relations with China while it sought freedom for the *Amethyst*.

Despite many strengths this work is not without its flaws. Murfett is curiously loath to reveal much history of the ships or the central characters, except in his footnotes and biographical appendices. Also, his exclusively Anglo-Chinese focus may obscure an important American element in this story: the *Amethyst* affair took place while the communists were holding another hostage, Angus Ward, the American consul-general in Mukden. It is hard to believe that either *Amethyst's* captors or those who sought to free the ship were unaware of this grim fact. The author may also have overemphasized the value of rationality in crisis management by suggesting that Britain would have

done well to admit error and pay China an indemnity to free *Amethyst*. It is a sad fact of international life that revolutionaries are so inflamed with passion for their cause that they cannot see reason and act upon its dictates.

These points aside, *Hostage on the Yangtze* deserves to carry on its dust jacket the word that tops the British lexicon of praise: Splendid!

ROGER DINGMAN
University of Southern California

Toland, John. *In Mortal Combat: Korea, 1950-53*. New York: William Morrow, 1991. 624pp. \$25

At the conclusion of World War II, the United States underwent wholesale demobilization of its armed forces. President Truman, in opposition to the senior military and James Forrestal, drastically cut defense budgets from 1947 to 1950. At the same time, the U.S. was struggling in the early days of the containment policy with several major political and economic problems, such as the rebuilding of Europe and Japan as well as the perceived threat of communism in Eastern Europe and China.

The Korean War and its aftermath became a landmark event in reshaping the direction of U.S. political and military strategy for the coming decades. It claims many firsts: the first real test of resolve to contain the spread of communism; the first "limited" war of the modern era; the first war with a backdrop of nuclear weapons; a surrogate war (for the

USSR); a United Nations coalition war; and an undeclared foreign war.

It also focused the thinking of U.S. political and military leaders about the use of force and war and the size and composition of the military. How do you conduct limited war in an alliance structure? What are the risks and gains of expanding a war? How do you define victory in a limited war? These are questions that had been asked before by theorists, but the Korean War gave them a new reality.

John Toland's splendid new popular history presents a rich panorama from the points of view of many of its heroes, villains, and survivors. Not only the first major armed conflict between communism and the West, Korea also pitted protagonists on the same side against each other: U.S. general versus U.S. general (Walker versus Almond, for example); U.S. military against U.S. press, foreshadowing things to come; and, in certainly the greatest public drama, the U.S. hero-general Douglas MacArthur against his commander in chief, Harry Truman.

There are errors enough in this book to satisfy the pickiest assistant professor of history, but Toland has presented a magnificent look at the Korean War from many vantage points and experiences. At the same time, *In Mortal Combat* upholds comprehensiveness and offers us plain good writing, with occasional wit and humor. Eighth Army commander Walton Walker's private hero was General George Patton, under whom he had served in World War II.