

General Joseph W. Stilwell and China
Part 1: 1883-1920
By Philip Chin

Joseph Warren Stilwell is regarded as one of the two most honored American generals in the People's Republic of China. The other general was Claire Chennault, the general in charge of the Flying Tigers, the brave Americans of the American Volunteer Group that fought in the skies against the Japanese on behalf of China. A museum to Stilwell's memory is located in his former house was dedicated to his memory in Chongqing in 1994 run by the city municipal government. William J. Perry, then Secretary of Defense of the United States, visited China in 1994 specifically to attend the dedication ceremonies for the museum. Perry's airplane became the first American plane to land in Chongqing since the communist victory in 1949.

Stilwell was born in Florida in 1883 but grew up in Yonkers, New York. His family was an old one in America, dating back to long before the American Revolution. He was a very athletic young man with high spirits who got into trouble often. To instill discipline in him, his family secured a place for him at the West Point Military Academy, one of the main training sources for officers in the United States Army. Stilwell got into the Academy, much to his surprise, since he'd done poorly on the math examination. This came at the just at the turn of the century in 1900. He became a football star there and also distinguished himself in other sports as well, he credited himself with managing the first West Point basketball team in 1902-1903. Key to his future Army career was that he also excelled in foreign languages. His skills were such in foreign languages that he later invited back to spend several years teaching the subject at West Point after his graduation in 1904.

Joe Stilwell traveled extensively on Army business in his early career. The Army sent him first as an infantry officer to the Philippines in 1904 where stayed there through 1906, seeing combat against Filipino guerillas in the dying days of the Philippine-American War. He was sent as a military attaché and observer to Belize and Guatemala in 1907; Mexico in 1908; Honduras, El Salvador, Belize, and Guatemala in 1909 (complaining bitterly about the United Fruit Company ship he was forced to travel on as well as mosquitoes and bedbugs.) In 1911, he traveled to the Philippines, Japan, and then, at the end of the year, to China. China was then in the midst of the Xinhai Revolution that would see the declaration of the Republic of China at the start of 1912. In all these countries he acted as the Army's man on the ground, gathering information that the Army was interested in using his language skills. His diary entries show a keen eye for roads, bridges, and terrain, precisely what the Army would have instructed him to take note of. In some cases, he was asked to determine the intentions of foreign military leaders by talking to them or their troops.

Stilwell kept a voluminous set of diaries wherever he went, writing down interesting observations, comments, and drawings as he went. He was fascinated by much of what he saw around the world, writing long passages on the history of the countries he visited, drawing a picture of a waterwheel he saw in China as well as a detailed diagram showing how bamboo ropes were constructed, he also drew caricatures of many of the people he saw. As he became familiar with a language he interjected occasional words from the countries he traveled through in his diaries, this included

Tagalog, Japanese, Spanish, and French which he'd particularly excelled in at West Point. Later in his life, the diaries become filled with Chinese characters as so much that time was spent living in China.

The diaries are also filled with racist words that wouldn't be used today. Stilwell was definitely a product of his times. African Americans are always referred to as "coons" and "niggers," Japanese as "Japs," Chinese as "chinks" or "chinos," Latin Americans as "greasers." Most of the entries seem to lack any intent to denigrate for the most part. In 1907, he expressed particular contempt for the people of Guatemala. After a long passage of denunciations, he announced that Guatemalans are all going to hell, "and if not, then I don't want to go to heaven unless I can have a private stall." He expressed constant complaints about almost everyone he meets, white, black, brown, yellow, it doesn't seem to matter. On a trip that took him to Missouri in 1909, he commented on a stay at what was presumably a whites-only hotel that the, "Clerk at desk took my money & chucked it on counter – finally consented to pitch it into the safe. I pulled it out again to-night. All that these people do down here seems to be done in a most shiftless, unbusinesslike, put-off, don't care way. No records of issue of tools, no list of property. Stuff lying around rusting etc." By contrast, on his visit to Japan in 1911, he wrote quite mildly about a Japanese man who performed his business in what may very well have been a blatant show of contempt for the white visitors, "Modest Jap who stopped right in front of us at temple & unlimbered & let fly. Whole works on exhibition." On the same trip he observed, "If the Japs size us up by the tourists that flock here, we certainly must come through small. There are more chromos, mistakes, muts, & pie-faced Americans here than you can dodge. As well as Europeans, of course, but the Americans loom up worst."

His most offensive comments are reserved for the "limies," as he referred to the British. Stilwell was a very old-fashioned Republican, both politically and with the small "r" ideals of those who traditionally hated the British Empire and all it stood for. A diary entry from 1935 includes a long diatribe against the British, indicative of the strong feelings he had against them that would cause problems when he had to work with the British during World War II.

The British – smugly complacent about their own superiority. They have such "healthy" interests – like riding horses. All other people's interests are stupid, or "unhealthy," or queer. (If they are different, they must be queer.) They make such a noise about it, too. "Just imagine – he doesn't dress for dinner. Why a Britisher dresses for dinner even in Uganda." It's supposed to maintain the prestige of the Superior Man, & shows his superiority concretely. As a matter of fact, it's the only way he has to differentiate himself -- & it's the cheapest way imaginable. Anybody can go & buy clothes. The limies have this unquenchable urge to impress this superiority on everybody at every opportunity. They can't realize that it makes an impression on the shallowest minds, & that anyone with any brains at all can see through them. It exposes them to the inevitable assumption that they feel it necessary to make a great noise to maintain the notice & attention of others. This pose is adopted by all kinds of limies, including the little snots of neither education nor breeding who couldn't qualify for office boy in an American firm. It is the substitute of natural dignity that few Americans are hypocritical enough to adopt. Those who do are the lowest of the low – just imitations of imitations.

Stilwell arrival in China in December 1911, just two months after the Wuchang Uprising that started on October 10th, which precipitated the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty. Signs of the revolution appeared in many small ways that Stilwell noted in his diary. The first thing he saw was while sailing up the Pearl River near Whampoa (now called Haungpu) were two Chinese gunboats flying a new flag, "Reb. flag on two river gunboats – red ground, black star in center,

white stars at points of black star, white balls between.” This is an accurate description of the “Iron Blood 18-star flag” that served as the first flag of the revolution that would later become the first official flag of the Republic of China Army. The Chinese men walking around in public had all cut off their queues, the hairstyle the recently overthrown Qing Dynasty had forced all Chinese men to wear. This made for a remarkable sight for both whites and Chinese who’d never seen anything different in their lifetime before. Stilwell remarked, “Queer appearances of chinks, most of whom have just cut off their queues.” Later on he says, “Queer varieties of hair-cuts & top-knots now that the queues are off.” (Stilwell meant queer in the traditional meaning of strange, not in the modern sense of homosexual.) He observed Manchu coats reserved for the Imperial family and high-ranking Qing Dynasty officials being sold in the marketplace in Guangzhou at bargain prices as merchants hurriedly tried to get rid of them before the market fell out entirely or possibly before they got into trouble with the new government’s officials.

Stilwell was less impressed with the revolutionaries that he met. As a professional soldier he’d been taught to value discipline and a smart and uniform appearance. These virtues, he observed, were lacking among the revolutionaries, along with a proper appreciation about how to safely handle firearms, “The Rebs were a motley gang; some looked like good hombres, but most of them were pirates for fair. At one temple they made no objection about showing their guns. At the north gate, where they were all cut-throats, I showed them I was a reb by my red tie & blue shirt & that quite tickled them. All bowed & said good by. These fellows had an attempt at a uniform with pale blue blouse & trousers, red trimmings, khaki strap puttees & “brigand” wrappings. In the city they were in all sorts of shirts, trousers, hats, & shoes. Many had new ammunition belts & plenty of cartridges. Some of them standing around pistol in hand, finger on trigger! Guns mostly imitation Mansers Chinese made.” (Stilwell most likely meant the Mauser C96, a German developed semi-automatic pistol that was manufactured in unauthorized versions in China.)

He was also less than impressed with the Christian missionaries in China, repeating what he’d overheard someone else say about them, “Knock down fares, act arrogantly, live on fat of land, take 3 or 4 mos. vacation, get rates, & retire young. Talk dollars & land rather than religion. Used to buy 2nd class ticket & bum everything 1st class. Hombre who had a palatial dwelling beside a matchbox church – ‘With the few bricks left from building the House of God, I constructed my humble dwelling!’”

Stilwell was traveling through France and Spain in 1914, again on a military observer mission, when he received word that war had broken out in Europe, “Papers say war between Germany, Russ. & France.” He then traveled to Gibraltar and got into an argument with a fellow traveler where he displayed his anti-imperialist convictions, “More trouble jumping on these people about our military power. Old Mr. Anderson started his stuff about ‘Eng. & U.S. could boss the world’ so I pointed out a few things to him. Inconceivable that men of any mind or experience could think such stuff.”

America’s entered World War I in April 1917, but was extremely unprepared for the ordeal. The Regular United States Army was comparatively tiny compared to the huge armies fighting in Europe. The draftees and volunteers that would make up the bulk of the American forces had only a few months of hasty training before boarding their troop ships for France and even some officers had no experience of what they were doing. Stilwell wrote that on the troop ship to France,

the quartermaster captain on board had never heard of the quartermaster manual. The United States Navy also showed its inexperience. The diary is replete with daily examples of the Navy convoy that he travelled with shooting at unknown targets (making the troops on board very nervous) that may or may not have been German submarines. Significantly, no reports were received of anyone in the convoy actually having had a torpedo shot at them.

Temporary Major Stilwell was assigned as liaison between the American Army and the French and British Armies when he landed in France in January 1918. He was less than impressed with the British unit he joined saying, "...assigned to a bunch who are too god-damned indifferent or high and mighty to bother about doing anything for such a thing as an American officer - - Thompson, the G.S.O.2, has been asked by Hughes about me, & knows exactly what I want & how short my time is, but does not deign to make a move. I have never been introduced to him, or by him to G.S.O.1, or the general. A bully lot of rotters, what." The episode must have only reinforced the negative views he had about the British. He got on much better with the French soldiers he was later assigned to liaise with, calling them, "A fine bunch of lads."

Stilwell later served as a staff officer in intelligence. He wasn't usually in the trenches although German planes regularly bombed the rear area where he was located. Still, he did visit the front lines to see what was going on, interrogate German prisoners, and gather information that he used to help plan American attacks. During those trips he was shot at, gassed, and witnessed the horrible trench warfare going on. The same piece of territory had been fought over for years now so the landscape was riddled with parts and pieces of human bodies that were regularly churned up and added to by the constant artillery fire. The scenes described in Stilwell's diary are gruesome and sickening. Stilwell played a critical role in planning the American St. Mihiel offensive in 1918. For his work he was awarded the high honor of the Distinguished Service Medal, awarded for "exceptionally meritorious service to the Government in a duty of great responsibility in time of war or in connection with military operations against an armed enemy of the United States." The offensive broke the back of the German defenses and forced them back in retreat. Stilwell wrote triumphantly that from July 15th to September 30th, a total of 225,000 Germans had been taken prisoner. On the German side, this period was regarded as probably the darkest period of the war. The armistice ending World War I occurred on November 11, 1918 when Germany called a halt to the fighting.

Colonel Joe Stilwell started 1919 with the American occupation forces in Coblenz, Germany. Within a few short years though, he would again be back in China.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luRi8qY8hil>

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/24/world/asia/chongqing-joseph-stilwell-museum.html?_r=0

Guatemala http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/library/docs/1907_stilwell_diary.pdf

American South http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/library/docs/1909_stilwell_diary.pdf

British attitudes http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/library/docs/1935_37_stilwell_diary.pdf

Japan 1911 http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/library/docs/1911_japan_stilwell_diary.pdf

China 1911 http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/library/docs/1911_china_stilwell_diary.pdf

Start of WWI http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/library/docs/1914_stilwell_diary.pdf

WWI Service http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/library/docs/1918_stilwell_diary.pdf

Distinguished Service Medal criteria

<http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Catalog/Heraldry.aspx?HeraldryId=15240&CategoryId=3&grp=4&menu=Decorations%20and%20Medals&ps=24&p=0>

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