

A Willingness to Serve

An American Navy Captain in the First Sino-Japanese War

By Walter Ko

The first Sino-Japanese War occurred in 1894. In the Chinese Beiyang Fleet there was an American naval officer serving aboard the battleship Chen Yuen. He dedicated ten years of his life in China. He was Philo Norton McGiffin.

Philo was born in December 13 1860 in a military family in Washington, Pennsylvania. His grandfather was an American War of Independence veteran. His father was a Civil War Colonel. He attended US Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland in 1877. He graduated in 1884 as a passed midshipman.

As in the era of limited naval spending, he was not eligible for commission as his score was not high enough among the twelve candidates. He was discharged with a year pay of one thousand dollars and went home looking for a job. From a local newspaper, he saw an opportunity as in the Sino-French War, Viceroy Li Hung Chang would start the Tientsin Naval Academy to recruit officers. Philo determined to try his luck in Imperial China.

In 1885, he made his trip through San Francisco. He visited the Chinese Consulate for information and help. He was given a Chinese name based on his translated last name as Ma Chi Fen.

After arriving Tientsin, he got the news that the war was over. He was desperate as he did not have enough money for a return ticket. He ventured with a letter of recommendation from



Philo Norton McGiffin

the American Consul in Tientsin and with enough courage to visit Viceroy Li on April 13.

The interview went well. However, after knowing that he was a twenty-five year old graduate, Li commented with a Confucius teaching that a person established himself by age thirty. He was too young for important duty and assignment. McGiffin sold himself earnestly with his academic achievement and willingness to serve. Li felt his enthusiasm and academic ability and granted him a qualifying exam, the same procedure as Chinese candidate.

The examiners were satisfied with his score of 60 percent. However, good enough as it was, Li did not have enough confidence to trust a torpedo boat to an American youngster. Nevertheless, he appointed him as a professor at Tientsin Naval Academy. Later in the First Sino-Japanese War, many officers were his students.

Every evening, he hired a scholar to teach him Mandarin, culture, history and philosophy.

He paid special attention to the 1858 unequal Tientsin Treaty (or Treaty of Tientsin) and understood Chinese feelings. He appreciated the friendliness and goodwill of Chinese people towards him. He shared his Chinese experience to Iowa State Register, a newspaper for American readers.

His performance, loyalty, up-right character eventually earned him the trust of Viceroy Li. He was commissioned to map out the coastal line of Korea. In his spare time, he ventured inland to have a firsthand experience with the locals of this tributary state of China so as to understand why Japan was anxious to annex this land.

He was later appointed to lead the team to bring back battleships from England. Li even took his recommendation of establishing a modern Naval Academy in Wei Hai Wei and appointed him as the Dean. He was excited to practice what he learned with earned trust and respect.

In September 17, 1894, Captain McGiffan changed from an academia to a warrior. He was on the Chen Yuen, an armored cruiser, knowing the hostilities against the Japanese forces. Later, he came to know that his Japanese classmate of Annapolis Tasuker Serata on an enemy battleship, the Matsushima was killed by the bombs from his ship. He stressed that to strike first was the step to victory when he

lectured in the class. He wondered why Chinese ships tried to avoid the enemy to protect their ships with a defensive strategy.

The world focused on this modern sea war between China and Japan with iron-clad ships, heavy guns against quick fire. McGiffin wrote down what he witnessed in “Battle of the Yalu” and sent it to Century magazine.

When the Chen Yuen was hit, Captain Lin Tai Tseng was knocked down unconscious.



Battle of the Yalu

McGiffin immediately took over to continue the fight. Three Japanese fleets surrounded his ship, and the Flag ship Ting Yuen of Admiral Ting Ju Chang was hit multiple times and burning. The Chen Yuen rushed to its aid and the Japanese

ship Yoshino joined in the fight engagement. McGiffin ordered his four powerful Krupps canons to fire. The Yoshino was hit and tried to flee. Philo was wounded and bathed in blood which almost glued up his eyes.

He witnessed a fearless shocking suicide sacrifice of Captain Deng Shi Chang ramming against the fleeing Yoshino. McGiffin left with a bandaged head and a blood-stained and tattered uniform. After this battle, Qing Government gave Awards of Bravery to all fighting foreigners including Captain McGiffin.

On February 17 1895, Japanese military captured Wei Hai Wei, the powerful modern Beiyang Fleet from the Self-Strengthening Movement was completely destroyed Viceroy Li could not be spared for the blame. Empress Dowager Tzu-hsi was proud to celebrate her



McGiffin as Superintendent of the Chinese Naval College,
at the age of thirty-two.

Philo Norton McGiffin came to China to try his luck and Li Hung Chang recognized his talent and gave him the opportunity to develop his potentials to fulfill his navy dream.

sixtieth birthday which took the naval budget for building the Summer Palace prior to the plea to update navy.

Sensing that foreigners were to be the scrape goats, and with a five thousand dollars reward offered by the Japanese for his head, McGiffin smuggled out of China in an American cargo ship where he got medical attention along the way.

One day when he was in bed resting, a young handsome American gentleman came in, introducing himself as Colonel William Sims. It turned out they both came from the State of Pennsylvania and graduates of Annapolis. He just returned from Port Arthur heading back for the States. McGiffin was eager to hope his naval experience in China could be considered as service credit to qualify him for American naval commission.

By May, he came home after in China for ten years. Western Powers paid special attention to this modern naval war and its influence. The Treaty of Shimonoseki was victor's justice. Might was right. The western media concluded that Japanese navy was modern, well trained and brave to win while the Chinese navy was antiquated, with impotent leadership, and in low morale.

For this unfair bias criticism, McGiffin went around to defend himself and his Chinese comrades in arm for much deserved dignity and justice with his eye witness account. He demanded the respect from everyone without further insults to the injuries. His fighting spirit in China and America was admirable. As he suffered defeat and injuries in his head and body, people lost interest in his comments and regarded it as a made-up story.

He was extremely troubled when Kuang-hsu Emperor punished a loyal Admiral Ting Ju Chang with a royal edit even after his death. The Admiral's ship was running out of food and ammunition but he refused to surrender, He committed suicide on February 11 1895.

Following in Admiral Ting's footsteps, two years later on February 11 1897, McGiffin killed himself in New York City Post Graduate Hospital with his own revolver. He released himself from the physical pain but his spirit had gone back to the Chinese Fleet, ready to fight! He left a note, "my heart belongs to China and the Beiyang Fleet"!

He was proud to be a fighter in the Chinese Navy when he was alive. After he died, he wore the full Chinese navy uniform for his eternal march. Covering his casket was the Yellow Dragon Flag of the Beiyang Fleet he brought back from his ship. He came to China to try his luck and Li Hung Chang recognized his talent and gave him the opportunity to develop his potentials to fulfill his navy dream.

His tombstone reads:

Philo Norton McGiffin

Dec 13, 1860-Feb 11, 1897
Commander of the Chinese Battleship, Chen Yuen
At the Battle of the Yalu
September 17, 1894
A Broken and a contrite heart
O, God, Thou wilt not despise.
His father added the following:
"This Tablet Is Erected In Tender Memory
Of A Brave Man Who Loved His Own
But Gave his Life For An Alien Flag".

State University. Mr. Ko is a board member of this magazine.

After WW II, McGiffin's alumni brought back his personal materials from Japanese Naval Department captured from the battleship Chen Yuen, including a coastal map of Qing Dynasty. In 1947, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission installed a historical marker outside the Washington county Courthouse. The marker reads:

CAPTAIN PHILO McGIFFIN, born December 13, 1860 on this site. Graduate of U.S. Naval Academy. Went to China in 1885. Built up and trained its Navy. September 17 1894 it fought the Japanese to a draw in a naval battle at Yalu River. McGiffin died in 1897 from his injuries.

Recently, the Hong Kong Maritime Museum got in auction McGiffin's personal belongings including his uniform jacket from the Battle of Yalu, sword and porcelain collection.

This is my essay of one hundred twenty years commemoration of the First Sino-Japanese War for my respect to a brave, loyal, devoted China defender, American Captain Philo Norton McGiffin serving in the Beiyang Fleet. I salute you, beloved comrade, with an offer of wine and a toast—rest in peace.

References:

Yankee of the Yalu: Philo Norton McGiffin, American Captain in the Chinese Navy, 1885-1895 E. P. Dutton; First Edition (1968)

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