

The Hankow Mission An Infamous Episode in Hankow

By Richard Vernon Hill, Ret.
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Prologue:

In late May of 2013, I was preparing to attend “The 4th Chang-Lin Tien International Forum” which was to be held in Wuhan, June 19-20. A friend of mine gave me a book, titled “My War with Imperial Japan” written by Maj. Richard Vernon Hill, Ret., and a 2-inch ring-binder of reproduced supporting documents and testimonies.

What caught my attention was Chapter 24, named “The Hankow Mission 1945”. It narrated a gruesome episode in my hometown executed by the Japanese Imperial Army.

I was born and lived in Hankow in my youth, which is the commercial district of Wuhan, Hupeh Province, China. These infamous places and “parade” route, where the inhuman and atrocious acts committed by the Japanese military on U.S. prisoners of war, was about minutes away from my home.

The story pained me and I felt violated deeply.

By reporting in our magazine, we try to remember their sufferings and honor the memories of those men. We should not forget them!

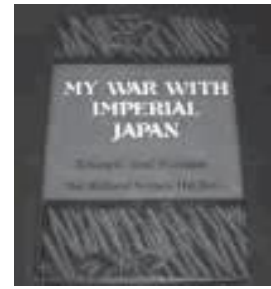
Chapter 24 The Hankow Mission - 1945

My orders for this mission were in General Wedemeyer’s brief radio message, but how the mission was to be carried out was entirely up to me. The orders did not say how to get to Hankow or how one American soldier was to enter the Japanese military stronghold if he got there. While it was necessary to walk into East China, I was going to have to walk out as well. I estimated it would take at ten days to travel some two hundred miles overland from where I was if I could get through enemy areas...

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My investigation of the torture and killing of the

three American prisoners of war in Hankow on 16 and 17 December 1944 covered nearly two months in time and provided eighty-five pages of evidence for the Allied War Crimes Commission. The three were crew members on a B-29 bomber forced down near Enchang, Hupeh, about fifty miles northwest of Hankow, on 21 November 1944 while returning from a Tokyo raid. They were captured and taken to Hankow and placed in the custody of the Japanese Gendarmerie.



Japanese in Hankow identified them as:

- First Lieutenant Schauer, Copilot
- First Lieutenant Brown, Navigator
- Sgt. James E Forbes, Radioman

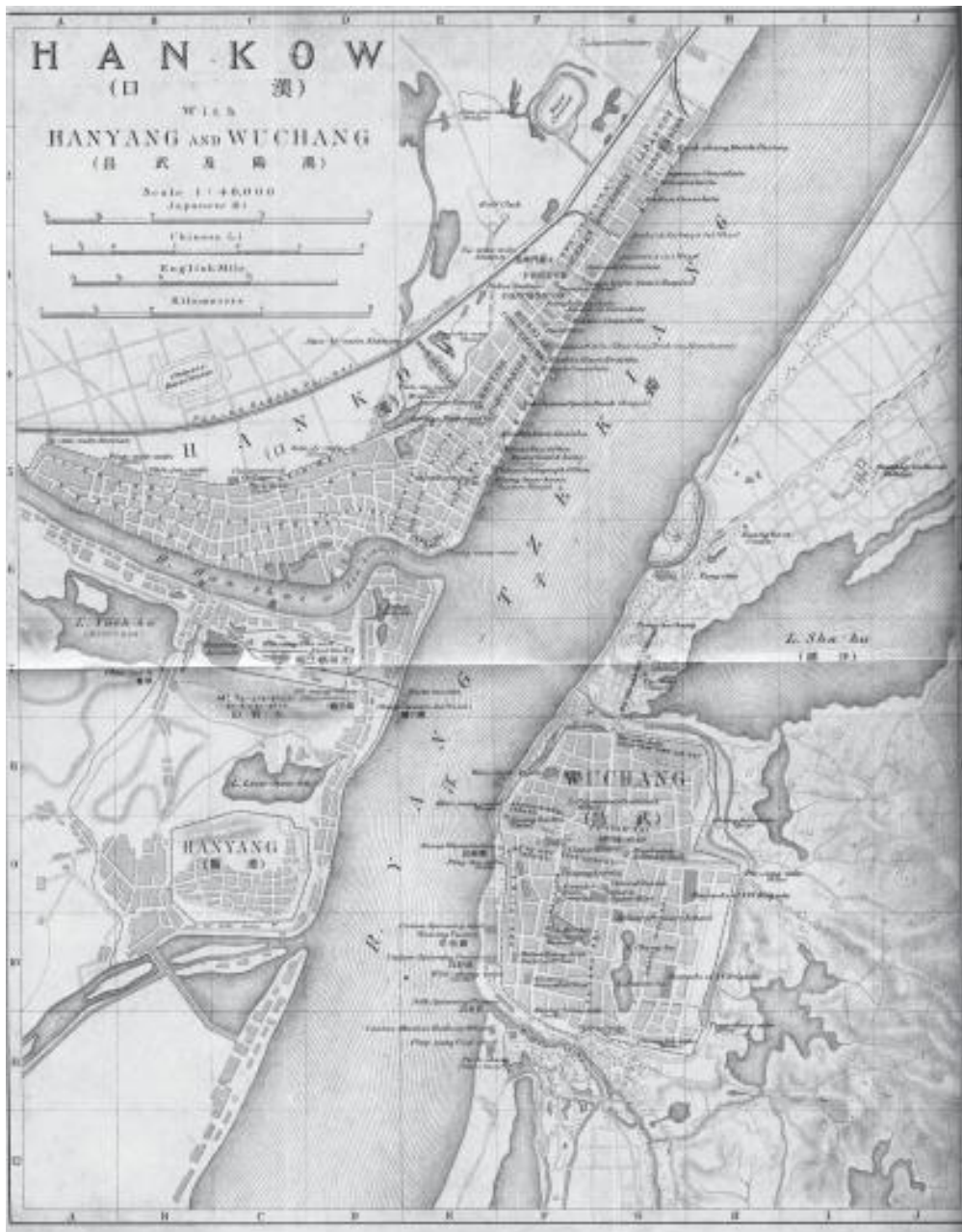
U.S. Army report of March 1946 identified them as:

- 2d Lt. Lester White, Engineer
- Sgt. James E Forbes, Radioman
- Sgt. Henry W. Wheaton, Gunner

My investigation in Hankow involved witnesses, participants, Japanese files and reports, principals, and informants.

During the afternoon of 16 December 1944 the Americans were made to parade several miles on the streets for about four hours. The parade started from the Chinese “Model Youth Corps” located in the former Kwang Hwa Middle School on Han Ching Road, the border street between the French Concession and SAD #1 (ex-German Concession). They were taken through the French Concession, SAS #2 (ex-Russian Concession) and to SAD #3 (ex-British Concession). They wore only thin shirts and pants.

It was a very cold winter day. Their hands were tied behind them. As they walked, they were beaten repeatedly by Japanese dressed in coolie clothes but with their army boots on and some in full army uniform. Chinese were urged to participate. When they reached a bombed-out place, the Americans were stopped and given a lecture. The brutality continued by hitting with sticks, iron bars, and rocks and spitting on them. They were escorted by about a dozen Japanese soldiers with bayoneted rifles who also hit them with rifle butts. Their faces were swollen and bleeding and disfigured by lacerations. They stag-



gered along, as they were forced to stay on their feet. Many Chinese and Japanese lined the streets, watching this display of cruelty. At first Chinese police attempted to stop the beatings, but were prevented from intervening by the Japanese Gendarmerie. Witnesses said the Americans were between the ages of twenty and twenty-five.

After 1700, they were put on a Japanese truck and taken back to the Model Youth Corps in SAD #1. The justification given by the Japanese for the parade is summed up as follows:

1. In December 1944 the Chinese and Japanese were extremely nervous over frequent air raids by the American air force.
2. The Chinese Model Youth Corps was agitating

the public at that time and wanted to use the American POWs for propaganda purposes.

3. The Japanese wanted to capitalize on their success in shooting down a B-29, an American superbomber.

Around midnight 16 December 1944, the American POWs were taken to the Japanese crematory at 4 Chao Chia Chi'iao adjoining the Jardine Estate on the north side of the Hankow Race Club, about two and a half miles northeast of the city. The Japanese built the crematory in March 1939 to cremate their dead, which was their custom. The Chinese, however, followed their custom of earth burial.

Between fifteen and twenty Japanese soldiers with Gardarmierie armbands and three with swords in black uniforms of the Japanese consular police were at the crema-

tory. The POWs were taken into the large entry room of the crematory and sat on a bench. From there they were taken out to the porch and yard in front of the building, where they were beaten for another half-hour with their hands tied behind them. Three pools of blood marked the spot of their last torture. They were then strangled with a rope. It was approximately 0100 17 December. Two bodies were carried on wooden slabs to the rear furnace room and pushed into furnace No. 1. The tallest POW was still alive and taken by two Japanese to furnace No.2. A Chinese employee on the premises believed he was put into the fire chamber before he died.

Later in the morning, after the furnaces had cooled, and time to remove the cremains (ashes), a

jing bao (air raid) alarm sounded causing the Japanese to leave for shelter. The crematory had previously been hit by American bombs. The Japanese had instructed two Chinese employees, Chang Chia-yun and Sung Wen-ching, to throw the ashes in a pond behind the crematory. During the absence of the Japanese, they buried the ashes instead in a shallow grave and placed a board over them before covering with dirt, then marked the spot with a stake. The site was approximately 175 feet (150 paces) west of the crematory and 10 feet from the fence. The one-hour bombing raid gave the employees time to preserve the ashes. They removed twice the normal amount of ashes from furnace No. 1, which contained two bodies, compared with furnace No. 2. Furnace No. 3 was out of order. The Japanese never cremated more than one of their remains at a time. The employees later planted a tree over the burial site. Subsequently, the Japanese cut the tree down and put up a small shed, which further preserved the location. A medal belt buckle was among the ashes.

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My last duty in Hankow was to round up those who were accused of torturing and murdering the three American airmen on 16 and 17 December 1944 and take them for prosecution. My investigation uncovered those responsible. It was then a matter of positive identification of those I had not personally confronted, taking them into custody, escorting them to the Hankow airfield, and safely delivering them to U.S. military police in Shanghai.

I picked up the following Japanese in Hankow and took them to Shanghai on 22 October 1945. Nine were of the Japanese Imperial Army and one a civilian employee of the Imperial Government of Japan:

- Col. Satoru Matsuura, staff officer,
Sixth Area Army headquarters
- Col. Kameji Fukumoto, chief,
Hankow Gendarmerie Headquarters,

Thirty-fourth Army

- Major Sadatsuku (Sakaji) Sakai, in charge of the Information Bureau, Gendarmerie headquarters, Hankow
- Capt. Keisuke Kosaka, Criminal Section, Gendarmerie headquarters, Hankow
- Warrant Officer Tsutomu Fujii* Gendarmerie, Hankow
- Sgt. Maj. Minoru Hisamatsu *
- Sgt. Kiochi Masuda *
- Lance Corp. Yosaburo Shirakawa*
- Superior Pvt. Shoji (Masaharu) Nishikawa *
- Mr. Takumi Kato, employee, in charge Model Youth Corps, Hankow

* Present at crematory



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Gen. Maosaburo Okabe, commander of the Japanese Sixth Area Army, was ill in bed and not arrested with the others. At first, General Okabe claimed he was not in Hankow at the time, but later admitted the Japanese sponsored “Model Youth Corps” were the perpetrators and that the Japanese army was responsible. Participating Japanese held that it was the Chinese who beat the Americans along the parade route. Witnesses, however, said the “Chinese” were Japanese dressed as Chinese civilians.

General Okabe promised a thorough investigation of their own. My investigation, however, revealed that the officer who was put in charge of their investigation, Col. Satoru Matsuura, was himself one of those held responsible for the crime, with whom I was in close contact during my investigation.

A five-page document by command of Lieutenant General Wedemeyer, Headquarters United States Forces, China Theater, Shanghai, dated 3 April, 1946, shows the charges, findings, and sentencing of the ten Japanese prisoners I picked up in Hankow on 22 October 1945 and took to Shanghai for prosecution

of war crimes. This document was reproduced for me by the National Archives, Washington, D.C. The trials were held in Shanghai in January and February 1946 by the military commission appointed by the U.S. Theater commander. Those prisoners were charged as follows:

CHARGE: That on or about 16 December 1944 at Hankow, China, all of the Japanese Imperial Army and employees of the Imperial Government of Japan, a nation then at war with the United States of America and its allies, acting jointly, did, willfully and unlawfully commit cruel, inhuman and brutal atrocities against certain American Prisoners of War, in violation of the Laws and Customs of War. Specification No. 1: Acting jointly and in pursuance of a common intent, did willfully and unlawfully, mistreat and torture three American Prisoners of War, whose true names are unknown, held captive by the Japanese Armed Forces, by parading them publicly through the city streets of Hankow, China, and did commit and suffer to be committed brutal and atrocious beatings and assaults upon them, and did cause them to be exposed to the insults and curiosity of the public. Specification No. 2: Did brutally torture and execute without cause or trial three American Prisoners of War, by striking them with fists, clubs and strangling them with rope until dead.

They all pleaded not guilty to all charges. The findings and sentences by the trial court were adjudged on 28 February 1946 as follows:

- Col. Kameji Fukumoto, Confined for life
- Maj. Sadatsuku Sakai, Confined for twenty years
- Capt. Keisuke Kosaka, Confined for three years
- W. Officer Tsutomu Fujii, Death by hanging
- Sgt. Maj. Minonru Hisamatsu, Confined for 15 years
- Sgt. Kiochi Masuda, Death by hanging
- L. Corp. Yosaburo Shirakawa, Death by hanging
- Sup. Pvt. Shoji Nishikawa, Confined for fifteen years
- Takumi Kato, employee, Confined for two years

Col. Satoru Matsuura is not listed on any records

in connection with these trials. He may have died before the trial, as he appeared frail when I took him to Shanghai 22 October 1945.

Others who had been transferred out of Wuhan were rounded up and charged in this American POW crime committed in Hankow on 16 December 1944. They were all of the Japanese Imperial Army and employees of the Imperial Government of Japan. They also pleaded not guilty to all foregoing charges. Their trials resulted in the following findings and sentences:

- Maj. Gen. Masataka Kaburagi[^], Death by hanging
 - Sgt. Maj. Shozo Masui, Death by hanging
 - Sgt. Hisayoshi Yamaguchi, Confined for fifteen years
 - Sgt. Kokichi Tsukada, Confined for twelve years
 - Sgt. Yoshiyuki Takeuchi, Confined for twelve years
 - Sgt. Junichi Fujii, Confined for twelve years
 - L. Corp. Masaru Mizuta, Confined for 18 months
 - Ryoichi Manabe, employee, Confined for three years
 - Shohei Hamada, employee, Not guilty, all charges
- [^]Former chief of staff, Japanese Thirty-fourth Army, Hankow, accused of ordering death march through city.

The death sentences adjudged against Masataka Kaburagi, Tsutomu Fujii, Shozo Masui, Kiochi Masuda, and Yosaburo Shirakawa were carried out at the War Road Jail at Shanghai between 20 and 27 April 1946 under the supervision of the theater provost marshal, United States Forces, China Theater.

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Major Richard Hill, Ret., was born in Puyallup, Washington. When Japan invaded China, he served four years in Shanghai Volunteer Corps. He has served in the ROTC and later worked as a staff officer for the Central Intelligence Agency.

On August 1945, Maj. Hill received an urgent radio message from Gen. Albert C. Wedermeyer, commanding general of the U.S. Forces, China Theater, to go to Hankow. The Hankow Mission was to secure the safe turnover of all Allied prisoners of war and civilian internees in the Hankow area. This was in anticipation of Japan's surrender.

