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The OSS in Korea: Operation Eagle

by Bill Streifer

“At the time I was in charge of the cryptography section in Kunming HQ and I got to see all high level radio traffic for all of China...I was very well informed about what was going on everywhere in China. When Eagle got chased out of Korea we all laughed and said that Col. Bird had fouled up again.”

Dr. John W. Brunner

BLACKLIST was General Douglas MacArthur's basic outline plan for the occupation of Japan once hostilities during WWII had ended. It called for the disarmament and demobilization of enemy forces, the establishment of a military government, the preservation of law and order, and the apprehension of Japanese war criminals. It also called for the recovery, relief and repatriation of Allied prisoners of war and civilian internees “without delay.”¹ By war's end, thirty-two thousand, four-hundred men remained interned in POW camps in Japan and Korea² (which had been under Japanese control since 1910). The American public, however, was unaware of the neglect, maltreatment and abuse the prisoners had suffered at the hands of the Japanese. Nor were they aware that thirty percent of American POWs had already died in captivity.³ And yet, according to a February 1945 article in the *New York Times*, the “Japanese are not invariably cruel to their prisoners.”⁴

Although POW rescue work was the purview of the War Department, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) - “America's first intelligence agency”⁵ and the forerunner of the CIA - was invited to join the effort, providing cover for intelligence operations in those areas. In January 1945, U.S. Secretary of State Edward Stettinius informed the director of the OSS, General William J. Donovan, of the State Department's effort to learn what was happening to American prisoners inside Japanese POW and internment camps.⁶ In March, Colonel Heppner, the Chief of the OSS in China under General Wedemeyer, ordered the establishment of a new OSS field unit to be based in Hsian, northern China. One thousand miles west of Keijo (now Seoul), Korea, Hsian became the most important base for penetration into north and northeastern China as well as Manchuria and Korea, Japan's so called “inner zone.” The following day, Major Gustov Kraus, who was asked to head the new base, left for Hsian with forty-six OSS agents.⁷ Each OSS “mercy mission” had a different area of operation, and each was named for a bird: Magpie, Duck, Flamingo, Cardinal, Sparrow, Quail, Pigeon, and Raven.⁸

The area of operation for the Eagle mission - named for the bird that symbolized America - was Keijo (now Seoul), the future capital of South Korea. Operation Eagle was conducted in accordance with an agreement reached in October 1944 between the OSS and Korean General Lee Bum-suk of the Korean Restoration Army.⁹ On April 1, 1945, a meeting was held between Capt. Clyde B. Sargent (later the OSS Eagle field commander) and General Lee Bum-suk at a small Tientsin (also known as Tianjin) restaurant in Chungking, China. The bulk of the conversation concerned the “reciprocal advantages” of Korean-American occupation in the war against Japan. Sargent, who had expressed his hope that such cooperation would have the support of all Korean leaders and groups, was invited to visit a Korean colony - twelve kilometers north of Chungking - along with a delegation from the Korean Provisional Government in exile. At that meeting, Sargent met President Kim Ku, Chairman of the Korean Provisional Government.¹⁰ According to Capt. Sargent's aide-mémoire:

President Kim entered the room, dressed in an attractive, plain Chinese gown, for which he apologized on excuse that he had not been well and was resting. In spite of his 70 years, which he showed completely in both appearance and manner, he bore himself with dignity and composure tempered by modesty and gentleness that seemed incompatible with the patriotic assassin and terrorist of 25 years ago.¹¹

The interview consisted largely of “mild indulgences by both sides in exchange of conversational courtesies.”¹² President Kim expressed his appreciation for American interest and his intention to cooperate fully by making Korean personnel available, including the thirty-seven Korean men who recently arrived from Fuyang in Anhui Province¹³, nearly 600 miles north-northeast of Chungking. Sargent then emphasized the value to both the Allies in general and Koreans in particular that can result from Korean-American cooperation. Sargent later said he was “greatly impressed” by the soldiers from Anhwei, calling them “intelligent, alert, and keen.” Many of the men, Sargent was told, were college graduates and spoke very passable English.¹⁴ Later, Sargent suggested to General Lee Bum-suk that the entire group participate in the training program of the Eagle Project.¹⁵ The men were later assigned to either the intelligence squad or the communication squad and trained by OSS officers to perform a number of skills including map reading, wireless communications, intelligence-gathering, intelligence communications, special skills for guerilla activities, explosives, scaling cliffs, and marksmanship.¹⁶

On August 1st, the Hsian and Chungking field units in Manchuria were redesignated the OSS Central and South Base Commands, and an OSS Northeastern Command was activated. Then - effective August 16th - the three Base Commands were deactivated and re-activated as the Hsian, Chungking and Korean Base Command under Major Robert B. Moore, Major Gustav J. Kraus, and Lieutenant-Colonel Willis H. Bird, respectively.¹⁷

The sudden end of WWII on August 15th, caught the OSS by surprise. In a message from Heppner to Donovan, “Although we have been caught with our pants down, we will do our best to pull them up in time.” So Wedemeyer immediately issued a “comprehensive directive” to various special agencies under his control to locate and evacuate POWs.¹⁸ Upon receipt of news that President Truman had accepted the unconditional surrender of Japan, Operation Eagle departed Hsian on August 16th at 4:30am for Keijo aboard a C-47 cargo plane. Colonel Willis Bird of Lansdowne, Pennsylvania, Deputy Chief of the OSS in China, was in command. In addition to nineteen Americans and three Koreans, Bird also invited Harry R. Lieberman, chief news editor of the Office of War Information (OWI) - China Branch, and a photographer. According to Prof. Maochun Yu, the author of *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War*, “Bird ever publicly conscious and eager to gain fame by ‘liberating’ Korea single-handedly, added a Mr. Lieberman - an OWI writer - to the Eagle mission in violation of Heppner’s specific orders.”¹⁹

Without knowing what kind of reception they would receive upon their arrival, the OSS team was armed with revolvers, tommy-guns and some hand grenades, “just in case trouble developed.”²⁰ En route, the plane’s radio was used to receive late news flashes. As their plane approached the Shandong Peninsula - due west of the Korean Peninsula - a radio report spoke of fighting in many areas, attacks on American aircraft carriers by Japanese kamikaze planes²¹, and that the Emperor of Japan’s inability to enforce his own cease-fire order.²² After a conference with his staff and air crew, Bird ordered the pilot to return to base. While the C-47 was undergoing repairs overnight, a wing tip was accidentally damaged. In need of further repair, and unable to obtain replacement parts in Hsian, the crew left early the following morning for Chungking to obtain a replacement aircraft.²³ And at 5:45am on August 18th, Operation Eagle departed Hsian airport for Korea in excellent flying weather.

At 9:15am, as the C-47 approached within 500 miles of Keijo, the plane’s radio operator, First Lieutenant Meredith I. Price, attempted to establish contact with the Japanese. Colonel Bird and Captain Ryong C. Hahm, Bird’s Korean-American translator, began broadcasting a series of messages to announce their arrival: “American Military Mission calling airfield in Keijo, Korea... Our only mission is to provide aid and comfort to Allied prisoners of war in Korea. Will you give us landing instructions?” At 11:40am, just as the C-47 crossed the Yellow Sea, the Japanese replied, “We are expecting you. We guarantee you safe landing.”²⁴ As they approached the airfield, the Eagle mission saw “factory

smokestacks and buildings unmolested by the bombs that devastated industrial facilities in Japan.”²⁵ At 11:56am, the C-47 landed and the plane was met by Lieutenant-General Yoshio Kotsuki (Commander-in-Chief of Japanese forces in Korea), his Chief of Staff, Major General Junjiro Ihara (the commander of the airfield), and a company of 50,000 Japanese troops.²⁶ Lieberman later wrote:

The Japanese at Keijo still seemed to be in the war business on a big scale and there was little to suggest that they were part of a surrendering army...On the field, platoons and machine-gun companies marched back and forth, with Japanese sergeants barking their orders. There were 50 planes, including about 20 zeroes, parked on the field, with flight patrols taking off and landing regularly. Japanese enlisted men in and about the hangers stared at the Americans with immobile expressions. In front of one barracks, a white-shirted officer was practicing executioner sweeps with his long samurai sword.²⁷

Although several of the Japanese officers spoke English, the proceedings were carried out in Japanese with Captain Hahn interpreting. Bird immediately explained the purpose of the mission and requested assistance from the Japanese in accomplishing it:

Bird: I am here at the direction of Lieutenant-General Albert C. Wedemeyer, Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Forces in the China Theater as an initial pre-Allied occupation representative to bring whatever help is needed to Allied prisoners of war to make preliminary arrangements for their future evacuation in accordance with the terms of the peace negotiations.

Ihara: Then you are not here to negotiate a surrender?

Bird: No. Our mission is purely humanitarian, to see that the prisoners are safe and to bring them what immediate help they need.²⁸

Although the Japanese pledged to supply a report with the location of the POW camps, the number of Allied prisoners of war in Korea, and a breakdown by nationality, they later reneged on their promise.²⁹ As the discussions dragged on with “evasive statements by the Japanese,”³⁰ Ihara said his troops had received a “cease fire” order from Tokyo but that he had no authority to let anyone visit the prison camp. “You must wait for orders from our government,” Ihara said. “And you must leave. It is not safe for you here.”³¹ When Bird asked to see the prisoners, the Japanese Airfield Commander’s Chief of Staff assured him that “the prisoners are all safe and well and that we need have no concern for their welfare.”³² The reality, of course, was quite different. The POWs who had survived captivity were generally underfed, suffered from various tropical diseases, deprived of much needed medicines and medical treatment, and suffered abuse and inhumanities at the hands of their Japanese captors and “cruel” Korean guards:

When the U.S. forces under the command of Major General John R. Hodge occupied southern Korea in September 1945, Lieutenant-Colonel Yuzuru Noguchi, the commandant of the Keijo POW camp was arrested and accused of war crimes. Two years later, Noguchi stood before the Eighth Army Military Commission at the Yokohama War Crimes Trials where he received a prison sentence of twenty-two years with hard labor for failing to discharge his duties as commander of all Korea POW camps, by permitting persons under his supervision at camps in Keijo, Konan and Jinsen to beat prisoners, [and for forcing POWs] to work while sick and abusing them in other ways.³³

When Bird asked if the members of the Eagle mission could be temporarily interned pending the formal signing of the surrender, the Japanese refused. Ihara insisted they could not remain in Keijo since they had “no official status,” and the Japanese had no orders or instructions from their government regarding the Eagle mission or their position with respect to prisoners of war. “Then we will need

gasoline to get back to China,” Bird said. Ihara assured the C-47 crew they would provide high octane fuel for their return trip to China where Bird was to wait for “proper instructions from their government.” When Colonel Bird reminded the Japanese liaison officer that swift evacuation of the POWs was covered in the preliminary surrender negotiations, the Japanese brought up two tanks and set up their “trench mortars.”³⁴

While the crew waited for the fuel to arrive, Colonel Shibuda and Major Hideo Uyeda, a 29-year-old “professional soldier” and a graduate of Japan’s military academy, entertained the Americans with bottles of Kirin beer and large amount of sake. According to Lieberman, when Uyeda asked for the name of the American Air Force song, the Americans “let loose with a tumultuous chorus of *Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder* led by Captain John Wagoner, Air Transport Command, as “Uyeda beamed, beating time on the table with his fingers.” As soon as the Americans finished, Uyeda began singing the Japanese Air Force song, *Kubasa* (Fighting Wing). When the fuel failed to arrive, the Americans were permitted to remain at the airfield overnight. The following morning at 3:00am, Bird sent a radio message to General Wedemeyer in Hsian informing him of the new developments. However, he neglected to mention the “beer, sake and Japanese songs”³⁵:

Arrived safely with friendly and helpful attitude from Japanese Command. They state all prisoners of war are safe and well and no need to be concerned due to fact there are as yet no instructions from their government. Our presence embarrassing and they suggest we return China and come back later. We will stay nite and return tomorrow with gasoline they have been kind enough to provide. Would like to return on mission when formal peace is signed.³⁶

Later that morning, discussions continued with further attempts to remain in Keijo including a demand by Bird to “place our case before Governor-General Abe.” The pressure of the Eagle’s demands brought unpleasant responses from the Japanese. They flatly stated that Abe did not wish to see the Eagle crew, “we had no credentials and therefore no right to be in Keijo, that they had no instructions from their government, and that we would have to leave immediately.” The atmosphere became tense when Bird - once again - asked for an audience with the Japanese generals and to remain in Keijo. At which point, the Eagle mission was issued an unsigned “receipt” to show that they had been in Keijo and that they had presented their credentials to the Japanese. When Bird asked for the receipt to be signed, Uyeda “spouted out a stream of profanity and a stinging reference to ‘inferior persons.’” Shortly afterward, two Japanese tanks were deployed and trench mortars were readied outside the building where the Eagle mission was housed. After the Japanese provided fuel - and with the tanks’³⁷ millimeter cannon and machine guns covering the Americans as they marched back to their plane³⁷ - Colonel Bird and his men departed Keijo at 4:20 that afternoon. According to Captain Patrick Teel, “It’ll just take five minutes to make us all dead ducks.” Flight Officer Edward McGee, the C-47 pilot, later summed up the bazaar sequence of events this way: “If someone had told me two weeks ago I’d be in a set-up like this, I’d have turned him over to the loco ward. It’s a dream, or else it’s the sake...I’m looking forward to seeing those boys again.”³⁸

Since the five hundred gallons of fuel provided was insufficient to return to Hsian, Operation Eagle flew instead to Wei-Hsien, where Operation Duck had already taken place. Upon arrival, messages were sent to the Japanese garrison that occupied the field and to the Chinese commander in the area, a friend of General Lee Bum-suk, Colonel Bird’s Korean advisor. Radio messages were also sent to Hsian to inform them of what had transpired during their mission. While a detail of Chinese troops guarded their plane, Operation Eagle spent the night at the residence of the Chinese commander as his guests. The following day, Japanese Imperial Headquarters sent a message to General MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), explaining why the Japanese had refused to permit the Eagle mission (and others) from meeting with Allied POWs³⁹:

Some officers and men of the Allied forces, without giving a previous notice, came by

airplane to some places under Japanese control for the purpose of making contact with, or giving comfort to, prisoners of war or civilian internees, while the arrangements for the cessation of hostilities have not yet been formally made...Since visits of the Allied officers and men before such arrangements are made, even if notified in advance, are likely to hamper the realization of our desire to effect smoothly and satisfactorily the cessation of hostilities and surrender of arms, we earnestly request you to prevent the reoccurrence of such incidents. We have made those who came to Mukden, Keijo and Hong Kong return to their bases.⁴⁰

Colonel Bird then received instructions from OSS Headquarters to return to Keijo immediately, even if it resulted in temporary internment. Instead, Bird flew to Chungking, China the next day to express his fear that a return to Keijo meant the execution of the Eagle members and crew.⁴¹ When General Wedemeyer later heard Lieberman's report on OWI radio, he became infuriated. He believed that Bird had disgraced the armed forces because his actions – meals, drinks and song - could “easily be construed,” according to Prof. Yu, “as fraternization with the Japanese troops.” He was particularly “disgusted” to hear that Bird had invited Lieberman and a photographer aboard while neglecting to bring along food or medical supplies for the prisoners of war. So Wedemeyer immediately ordered all POW rescue efforts in Korea be “reconstituted and completely divorced from Eagle project,” and Wedemeyer's Chief of Staff recommended sending Bird to the United States to face immediate disciplinary action.⁴² “Panicked by Wedemeyer's rage,” Colonel William P. Davis, the senior-most OSS officer in Chungking, suggested to Heppner that Bird be immediately replaced as the head of Operation Eagle. Heppner complied, instructing Davis to “take whatever steps you deem necessary to keep Bird out of contact with all OSS persons outside OSS and theatre Headquarters.” Heppner then briefed Donovan on developments, urging him “take whatever steps may be necessary to protect the organization [OSS].” The following day, Donovan angrily replied: “Make sure that action [be] taken [against Bird] for violation of your orders. If necessary, send Bird home at once or, in your discretion, prefer charges.”⁴³

Later, without referring to the Office of Strategic Services or suggesting that the “mercy mission” to Seoul was an intelligence operation, a syndicated story in the American press described Operation Eagle, the failed OSS mission to Korea: “An Allied mercy crew which landed at Keijo, Korea in the midst of 50,000 Japanese soldiers was alternately cursed, threatened, wined and entertained before it took off again with 500 gallons of Japanese gasoline.”⁴⁴

- Bill Streifer

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¹ Outline Plan for BLACKLIST Operations, 3rd Edition, U.S. Army Forces, Pacific, 8 August 1945

² “Camps in Japan Cleared: 32,400 P.O.W. Recovered,” *The Advertiser* (Australia), Sept. 25, 1945, p. 1

³ Clemens, Peter. “Operation Cardinal: OSS in Manchuria,” *Intelligence and National Security*, 13, no. 4 (1998): pp. 71-106

⁴ Axelsson, George. “Anti-White Wave Mounts in Japan,” *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1945, p. 4

⁵ “The Office of Strategic Services: America's First Intelligence Agency,” CIA.gov

⁶ Patti, Archimedes L. A. *Why Viet Nam?: Prelude to America's Albatross*, University of California Press, 1980, p. 270

⁷ Yu, Maochun. *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War*, Yale University Press, 1996.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Zihn, Choi. “Early Korean Immigrants to America: Their Role in the Establishment of the Republic of Korea,” *East Asian Review*, Vol.14, No. 4, Winter 2002, pp. 43-71

¹⁰ Capt. Sargent's aide-mémoires, April 1-3, 1945

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Fuyang, Anhui is spelled “Foo-Yang, Anhwei” in Capt. Sargent’s aide-mémoire.

¹⁴ This information was obtained from an unwanted “ghost image” off Capt. Sargent’s mimeograph machine, not from the aide-mémoire itself.

¹⁵ Capt. Sargent’s aide-mémoires, April 1-3, 1945

¹⁶ “Early Korean Immigrants to America,” pp. 63-64

¹⁷ General Order #6 (1 August 1945), #13 (17 August 1945), and #14 (18 August 1945), OSS, China

¹⁸ OSS in China, p. 231

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 233

²⁰ Henry R. Lieberman, “Japs Bring Up Tanks and Order POW Relief Mission Out of the Country,” OWI Dispatch, 22 August 1945

²¹ “Report on Mission to Korea,” Headquarters, Northeast Field Command, OSS to Commanding Officer, Northeast Field Command, OSS, 3 September 1945

²² OSS in China, p. 233

²³ “Report on Mission to Korea”

²⁴ “Japs Bring Up Tanks and Order POW Relief Mission Out of the Country”

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ At the time, U.S. Army intelligence believed there were “numerous” POW camps in Korea when there were in fact only three: Keijo (Seoul) and Jinsen (Inch’on) in southern Korea, and Konan (Hungnam) in the northeast, one hundred miles from the Soviet border.

³⁰ “Report on Mission to Korea”

³¹ “Japs Bring Up Tanks and Order POW Relief Mission Out of the Country”

³² *ibid.*

³³ Yuzuru Noguchi, Yokohama War Crimes Trials, October 14, 1947, photo and inscription

³⁴ “Japs Bring Up Tanks and Order POW Relief Mission Out of the Country”

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ “Report on Mission to Korea”

³⁷ “Japs Bring Up Tanks and Order POW Relief Mission Out of the Country”

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ “Tokyo’s Messages,” *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 1945, p. 2

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Field Photographer Hobbs, who accompanied Bird to Chungking, developed the film taken during the Eagle mission; the first pictorial records from Korea since the war began; “Report on Mission to Korea”

⁴² OSS in China, pp. 234

⁴³ *ibid.*, pp. 234-235

⁴⁴ “Yank Rescue Team Cursed and Wined by Japs in Korea,” Lafayette Ledger, Oct. 26, 1945, p. 6