

# **National Museum of the Pacific War**

## **Center for Pacific War Studies**

**Fredericksburg, Texas**

**Interview with**

**Robert J. Gill  
United States Marines**

**National Museum of the Pacific War  
Fredericksburg, Texas  
Interview with Robert Gill**

This is Cork Morris and today is September 3, 2004. I'm interviewing Mr. Robert Gill at the Hilton Hotel in San Antonio, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Morris: Thank you for being here. Where were you born, where are you from?

Mr. Gill: Thank you for the opportunity. I was born in 1928 in a coal mining town in Pennsylvania called \_\_\_\_\_. And it was during the war and it was at that time I decided I wanted to go away from home. Things were very difficult and I tried to go in the Merchant Marines but wasn't old enough but then I was able at seventeen to enlist in the United States Marines Corps. I joined in June and in July I was in boot camp. While we were in boot camp the atomic bomb was dropped. That was an amazing thing to everybody but us because we didn't learn about it until later. When you're on Paris Island you hear what the drill instructor tells you and you don't hear much more. One of the things that was very instructive was that all of the drill instructors were people who had spent their time in the Pacific. And with the atomic bomb dropped, all it meant to them was that they were going to get out. What it meant to us was that we were going overseas. The people who were over there and had done all the fighting were over there and had to come home. My trip took me initially to Japan and we were there with the occupation and then I went from Japan to China as an engineer and went to Tinsin, China, where I was on transfer and assigned to a post up north called Padajo Beach which is about fifty miles from the Great Wall. The Great Wall goes down to the sea at a place called Sanhiguam. The port, just south of Sanhiguam, is Chinwanpow and Chinwanpow was a very busy port for coal which was mined up in northern China. That was one of the things that was very essential because when the coal came down to the port a good deal of it traveled by rail from Chinwanpow to Chinsun and it was a lifeline for power so it was a very vulnerable route. It was our job as engineers to keep the equipment running. One of our jobs was to ride on these coal trains and see that they were safely taken to Chinsun. It was very vulnerable at the bridges. There were bandits, Communist soldiers and the Nationalist Army was there also. We had troops there anywhere from a dozen to perhaps thirty.

Mr. Morris: Did all these troops ride on the trains?

Mr. Gill: Yes. Obviously the Communists would have liked to disrupt them and the bandits were doing it to steal the coal. The Nationalists were protecting the railroad as we were but they were very occupied fighting the Communists so we were the dedicated force protecting the coal mines.

Mr. Morris: Who owned the coal mines?

Mr. Gill: They were called the Kaimai Coal Mines and I believe they were owned the British, Dutch, and Belgians. The railroad was also owned by international interests. I'm sure that the Chinese had some interests in it but they were principally owned by international companies. It was a difficult job because they were open box cars and they built shelters on them as they could. It meant that it was a little bit perilous, it was uncomfortable.

Mr. Morris: As engineers, did you maintain the bridges?

Mr. Gill: Couldn't maintain the bridges but maintained the facilities there, for example, my responsibility was, we called it running the water pumps. I had to go down at times to fix pumps on distillation units and there were others who would go down and take care of refrigeration and electricity. We were engineers. We lived in quarters that were formerly a Japanese hospital. Since then, I haven't been one of them but we've had a good number of people who have taken a trip back to China. But I did not. After I spent my time there, I came back to the United States and was stationed in Washington D. C. at headquarters for the Marine Corps and was offered an opportunity to go to college. At that time, I had joined at seventeen, so I'd never graduated from high school so I had to take an excellent program called G.E. D. and with that I was able to go to Georgetown University and finished there in five years. The usual was four years but it took me five. I was a veteran and after I got out I was hired by AT&T and I was located around the U.S., Arizona, Colorado, West Virginia, and in Colorado Springs I had a partial responsibility for the telephone facilities for NORAD. That was very interesting. I did get called back into the Korean War and at that time I was made a senior ROTC and as a result did not have to go. I was discharged from the Marine Corps and qualified for an Army commission, after qualifying in ROTC, but I didn't go to Korea after all. My life since then has been a blessing and I think the Marine Corps turned me around. I was a kid with ambition and when I got in I met people who worked very very hard and I tried to mimic them.

Mr. Morris: You got to China in 1946? By then had all the Japanese troops been repatriated?

Mr. Gill: Just about finished. They had begun repatriation in October of 1945 and the largest Marine unit was the Sixth Marine and they came in October. The First Marine Division was part of where I came in. Fragments of it were there but then they became the First Marine Division. and the Second Marine Division went home. Some of the troops that were in China were not just new troops such as myself but there were people who had fought and then gone home and had to come back. They were career people. Some of them who were in China were in China before the war and they were marvelous people.

Architecturally, China was like the southwest. They, the houses, were made of adobe and in the country so they were only one story high. It was a rural area and they lacked essential roads so that was one of our jobs was to build roads. If one traveled to Tinsin, it was more citified but Beijing had many many historical buildings and Tinsin not as much. One of the things in China that often times wasn't recognized was that there was an international community in the city and not of immigrants but of people who worked for government and big business. The largest non-Chinese group were White Russians. They would have been people who fled the revolution in Russia and sought China. They were a very versatile group, they had great survival skills. They'd lived under the Chinese and then the Japanese. When they escaped Russia, they were great survivalists and great business people.

Mr. Morris: Had the Japanese kept up the infrastructure? I mean was China beaten down?

Mr. Gill: I can't speak for that because I was in the rural area but Russia came into the war just before the atomic bomb and they had free reign coming in from the north. There was a town called Muctan, an industrial town in the north. I guess it was in Manchuria but was part of China. They came in and took all the manufacturing equipment out. The Japanese, most of the occupation was in the south in Shainghai and Hong Kong but they certainly did kill many. I don't believe there were any great battles with the Japanese and Chinese, in those cities, that would have left a great deal of destruction. It did look desolate. It was the people who suffered more than the architecture. They were put upon and it was in Nanking where they were heavily bombed.

Mr. Morris: I assume that the civil war was going on while the Japanese were occupying?

Mr. Gill: Only towards the end. Japan became a common enemy to Mao's troops and China so they had a common enemy in Japan. There wasn't as much of the fighting going on during the Japanese occupation as there was afterwards. As the Japanese troops left, there would either be Chinese troops or Mao's troops would come in and take it over. I can remember "binghow" was *good* and "boohow" was *bad*. When we sent vehicles up and we would have somebody riding shotgun and if you were going into a village and were going to be there for a while and if the villagers said "dinghow" you knew that it was the Communists who had occupied the village and if they said "boohow", we knew it was very bad.

It was very cold in the winter. When the snow came, it was a powdery snow and it penetrated. When we established a head outside there was plywood on the bottom and \_\_\_\_\_ on the top. When the snow came in, it would be covered with snow. We had parkas and everything. It made it difficult working outside.

Mr. Morris: When you engineers come was it a whole battalion?

Mr. Gill: Allow me to tell you, in the place of Pettihow, it was a company of engineers and in that crew we would have had a crew of carpenters, a crew of electricians and we were servicing rather than establishing and we did have heavy equipment because we were all the time, we were working to restore the roads to go over a river, at that time without water in it but when the flood did come, they could cross. We were doing everything we could to establish it and finally were successful but the traffic was principally our own. We exited that part of China in 1947 and in 1949 we exited the whole area. If you were to look at a map that would include the peninsula of Korea I would have been up above the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and north of there was the port of Chinwontow and it was the northern most ice free port and the principal exporter was coal. One of the battles was between the Communists and us and one of the Marines was killed. It was a battle for equipment and coal. They didn't have a lot of trucks or ammunition. So that would be what they were fighting for. One of the things you would have to guard against was that the equipment was stolen or stripped. In one of the cases you weren't fighting against an uniformed group.

Mr. Morris: Were they warlords?

Mr. Gill: Yes, I guess and they would have been called and if they weren't warlords they certainly were high ranking in that province. That happened and when those things happened we would go on alert. There was one incident where they had captured seven Marines at one of those bridges. But they were returned weeks later. From what I gathered it was the Communists who had taken them and had made them witness a show of strength. They came back and said what they'd seen. We did have a visit by General Marshall prior to that. He rode around China. I think what he was saying was "look we're not going to fight and die" when it looks as though Mao is in a position to take over. It was not until 1949 until we left. When the Japanese moved out to be repatriated, Mao's or the Nationalists took over. These are things I've learned since. I wasn't politically motivated at the time but have learned since. I think the thing that young people such as myself learned when going into China was that things were so primitive. We weren't geared to that. I don't know. We were in a rural place and the buildings were adobe and it was primitive. The diet was impossible because it was hard to keep livestock because they didn't have feed. There was no refrigeration and food would just be hanging out. At times you could see the Chinese army up on the Great Wall and the quartermaster would have large kettles and have their food in it. There were animals which looked like burros and he would be an officer. When we unloaded mules they often used them as food. The internationalists' principal job before the war was spying on the Japanese. There were signs of war before 1941. Many Marines had served in China before the war.

*Interference in tape from outside noise.*

The Marine Corps has been the greatest thing that happened to me. I turned me around. It served me well.

Transcriber: Susan F. Wilson  
Fredericksburg, Texas  
Date: October 22, 2009  
Tape: 1202