

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE PACIFIC WAR

***Nimitz Education and Research Center
Fredericksburg, Texas***

***Interview with Robert H. N. Ho
Childhood In China During WWII***

Interview With Robert H. N. HO

This is Helen McDonnell. Today is January 28th, 2008. Dr. Tom Hatfield is interviewing Robert H. N. Ho. The interview is taking place in the Board Room of Fredericksburg, Texas. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, Archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Historical Commission, for the preservation of historical information related to this site.

Mr. Hatfield: It's a pleasure to be here and to meet with you, Mr. Ho. We have some rudimentary information to extract from you to begin, it's just for the record. Where were you born, and when?

Mr. Ho: I was born in Hong Kong. October 22nd, 1932. So I'm an old man.

Mr. Hatfield: Well, you and I are almost contemporaries. I'm a little younger than you are, but I remember when I first became conscious of China. I used to wonder what little boys were doing in China at that time. So, after all these years I meet a little boy, one who was a little boy there at the time.

So, you would have been born in 1932. Did you live in Hong Kong then?

Mr. Ho: Yes.

Mr. Hatfield: Until when?

Mr. Ho: Until, well, the war started on December the eighth in Hong Kong, 1941. And at that time I was on my way to school, that morning, and I was living on the Victoria side of Hong Kong. And the planes came in in big numbers, maybe twenty, thirty planes. On the Kowloon side across the harbor. And because their first objectives are two-fold. The first is to bomb all the so-called airports, and the second one is to bomb the huge gasoline drums along that area, to disable any fuel, supply of fuel.

And, it was scary. At first I thought it was some sort of a practice, because previous to that day there were many air raid sirens and so on to train the population to meet the war. So I thought it was just another practice. But it turned out to be the first wave.

So, I witnessed all that on the Hong Kong side, because we lived in the mid-level of Hong Kong, in other words, I don't know whether you've been to Hong Kong, but mid-level, and _____??? tall buildings of course, in those days, so you can see clearly the planes coming in, and I was scared. I was nine years old, and I went home. On Christmas Eve, it was a short war, and Hong Kong

surrendered. And we were apprehensive because my father was attached to the Nationalist Army, at that time he was a major general, and they were hunting for him, looking for him. And of course, luckily he wasn't in Hong Kong. It's just my mother, my sister, and myself. And so, they were looking for us. We had to change our identity and so on, and hid from house to house, relatives houses, and finally ended up in a temple.

And then, at the same time, what happened was that the Japanese found that they couldn't feed the population. The rice supply was low, food supply was low. Food wasn't coming in from China anymore, so they were kind of scared, because the army that occupied Hong Kong, they were going to move to some other theatre to fight, so the remaining army that was in Hong Kong feared that they couldn't control the population in case there's no more food. So they encouraged people to leave, which is (chuckles), which is very interesting. They announced to the population that anybody wants to get out of Hong Kong, please do so. Just get out of Hong Kong.

So we took a boat, a Japanese boat, about two months after they surrendered, to a place called Chiang Khong, which is that time a French colony, near Viet Nam, Indochina in those days it was called.

Mr. Hatfield: Can you spell that?

Mr. Ho: Chiang Khong, I don't know. But I can point it out on the map for you. Very near Indochina. It's a French colony, at that time. So, we went there. But the trip that took us from our temple to the boat was sort of a scary thing because we, although we changed our identities, but our photo was still more or less the same. Of course we shaved our hair and tried to hide our face, but as I was telling some other people that, you know, war is a very strange thing. We got out of there, but the help of those people who were helping the Japanese, they set up a Chinese government to run Hong Kong.

Mr. Hatfield: A puppet government.

Mr. Ho: That's right. And the puppet people should have turned us in to the Japanese, but instead they helped us to get out to the boat. And this is very interesting, because to this day, I think what happened was that my family, my grandparents, probably had helped them sometime during their livelihood, and they appreciated that, so they helped us to get on board. Even going through these check points, they took us in and say "Follow me," and then we went on board. So that was interesting.

And then from then on of course we were in free China. So you asked a question, it's a long answer.

Mr. Hatfield: No, that's a wonderful answer. Were you able to continue to attend school when you went to Chang Kong?

Mr. Ho: No. Perhaps I should answer your question with a supplementary thing.

Mr. Hatfield: We're genuinely interested in your schooling.

Mr. Ho: Okay. All right. From Chiang Khong, our destination wasn't Chiang Khong, our destination was Luchow in Kwangsi Province. Why? Because my father was stationed there and so we had to walk from Chiang Khong to Luchow, and it's approximately, maybe, a hundred, a hundred and fifty, kilometers. Of course, we would walk many days to get there. We had rented or hired some people to carry our bags and we had rented or hired a sedan chair to share, the three of us, my mother, my sister, and myself. And we would rotate to get on that sedan chair. But my sister was very young, she was six years younger than I am, so she was only three years old, so she got to ride piggy back on that sedan chair all the time while my mother and I would shift, take turns, to ride in that chair, and that way we walked all the way to Luchow. That's a long, long walk. Especially if it's raining, because it's a muddy road, it's very hard to get traction.

And then, along the way there were gangs that would ask for money or in kind, or take away some of our belongings. So by the time we got to Luchow we haven't got too much, too many things left.

Mr. Hatfield: Now, when you left Hong Kong, you had property, both real property and money, presumably in the bank, or in the family. What happened to those possessions? The real money and the—

Mr. Ho: We had no money because the banks closed, all the banks in Hong Kong, closed the first day of the war. So, we didn't know the attack was coming so even though on that same day, because they came in in the morning and the troops were coming in from the north and the planes were bombing, the banks closed. So we had no way to get money. We had no way to go to our safe deposit box to get any valuables. And we only were left with the money in our possession, and my mother had some jewelry with her that was not in the safe deposit box, and we survived with that for the entire whole war, plus my father's salary from the army, which was a pittance.

And we sold her jewelry, one by one, and some, we had some what they called gold bars, but not in this size, but what we called "tails," about this size. We sold them and we raised our vegetables and we raised some chickens and ducks, so we lived on vegetables, we lived on eggs, and occasionally we slaughtered a duck or a chicken. That's about it.

But the most thing that was inside you, that looking from hindsight, we know the war lasted four years, but during the war we had no idea when this is gonna end. It could be ten years, fifteen years, or whatever. So the anxiety in the family, the little nest eggs that we have, you know, my parents were quite worried.

Mr. Hatfield: When you went to Luchow, and there you joined your father.

Mr. Ho: That's right.

Mr. Hatfield: And Luchow is part of free China.

Mr. Ho: Oh yeah. At that time. Eventually it fell to the Japanese, but at that time, yeah.

Mr. Hatfield: Let me go back for just a moment. When you saw the Japanese planes in the air on December the eighth, where did they come from? From land bases?

Mr. Ho: From the north.

Mr. Hatfield: From the north.

Mr. Ho: See, the British made a disaster determination. They thought the Japanese would come with the Navy. Same mistake they made at Singapore. They thought they would come from the sea. They came from Malaya, or Malaysia now, it was called Malaya. They came down the Malaya Peninsula. In Hong Kong, the same way. They conquered Shanghai, they conquered the whole, the entire coastal area of China, and they came marching in from what is now Quanzhou, at tha time it was called Canton. They just came down, you know, came across the border and from the north all the way to the Kowloon Peninsula and then to the Victoria.

So the guns of the British were facing the sea (chuckles). They came, they came from the north.

Mr. Hatfield: They're a maritime nation, they'd think about the sea rather than the land. So,

in Luchow you joined your father, and your father is, was on the staff of Chiang Kai-shek?

Mr. Ho: Yes, yes. I mean, that's the supreme commander, but he was under another general, Chiang Wei-kuo who had the Fourth Army in that entire area, and he served under him.

Mr. Hatfield: Why don't we just continue to talk through this, that is, to go chronologically as to where you were during the war and if you were separated from your parents, from either one. Just tell us about that and I think to go chronologically, would help us to reconstruct this story.

Mr. Ho: Well, chronologically if I start from Hong Kong, I just told you that, and I landed in Free China. And then from Luchow I went to school there for a few months. See, my father was in charge of logistics, that's his specialty. He was in charge of shipping ammunition, and fuel, and food, to the Army.

Mr. Hatfield: I know that he, I found his record from the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff School in 1933 and 1934.

Mr. Ho: That's right. And I was with him then in Fort Leavenworth. So he, that was his job, to supply the 4th Army. But then, Luchow got a little tight, the Japanese were coming, and so after about six, seven months of school, I had to stop going to school. Because we were thinking of moving. So we moved to an area just outside of Luchow temporarily to, you know, see how the war was going. But in those days the Japanese were bombing Luchow already, and mostly at night, and pretty soon the Japanese were around machine gun area and we were still there. We could hear the machine guns, they were coming.

We couldn't get out by train. Roads were damaged, no more buses getting out of the city. We couldn't go by train because everybody was packing the train, on top of the roof and underneath the carriage. And in front, those who couldn't get on, they'd lie on the track in front so the train couldn't move. If they moved, they'd kill everybody on the track. So that was a dead end.

For a day or two we were very anxious. We didn't know how to get out of the city. We thought we're just gonna be marooned there. What we didn't know was that my father had already gone to Kunming. He flew out of Luchow, he was already in Kunming. Because for a period of time we lost contact with him because he was with the troops and left my mother and myself and my sister in Luchow in this new development. So, we didn't know where he was, but it turned out that

he was in Kunming. And he was in Kunming but, you you know, he knew a lot of Americans, Chenault he knew, so he found out from the 14th Air Force that there was an empty plane going to Luchow, to destroy some of the documents there. He asked Chenault, he says "The empty plane is gonna come back to Kunming empty. Could we sort of hitchhike on that one?"

It turned out, it was a B25, which is a twin plane, and the three of us went on board that thing (laughs), and we flew to Luchow just as the Japanese was marching in the city, and it was a tight call. And so we went to Kunming.

Kunming, of course, remained free the rest of the war, and you asked me what I did, and I went to school there. To the end of the war.

Mr. Hatfield: You were in Kunming, then, until the end of the war.

Mr. Ho: And then they dropped the bomb and the whole show was over, and from there we went to a place called Nanning by plane. From there, Nanning, we took a boat down the East River all the way to Canton. We stayed in Canton for a little while because it was unsafe to go back to Hong Kong because the British hadn't arrived back and the Chinese Nationalist Army was keeping order there, including my father, was needing the Nationalist Army to keep order in Hong Kong. But there were many gangs there looting, there was a period that there was not enough control, a lot of looting and so on, so my father thought it was unsafe for us to go right back to Hong Kong, so we lived in Canton for a few months, and then eventually to Macao.

We stayed in Macao because my grandfather was there and he had a house there, so we stayed in Macao and I went to school there for one semester, and then eventually went back to Hong Kong. And, that's it.

Mr. Hatfield: Now, Macao was a Portuguese territory—

Mr. Ho: It was supposed to be neutral.

Mr. Hatfield: Yeah.

Mr. Ho: And the Japanese didn't go in there, although they, the big muscles, they can feel there, but they never got in there.

Mr. Hatfield: You mentioned your grandfather. Did he stay in Macao during, he had a home there, so he stayed there while the Japanese were in Hong Kong?

Mr. Ho: Yeah. Well, my grandfather, I have to tell you this story. Eighty-some relatives of ours were all caught in Hong Kong when the Japanese came. Reason being, all our relatives from the rest of the world congregated in Hong Kong to celebrate my grandfather's and my grandmother's seventy-fifth wedding anniversary.

Mr. Hatfield: *(Laughs)*

Mr. Ho: And, except my father. My father did not appear and my grandfather was livid. The reason being that my father was working with the British Intelligence in Free China and they knew exactly the day, to the day, when the Japanese would invade Hong Kong. But they couldn't tell anybody. Not even my mother or anybody. So he was just no show, he didn't come. We didn't know why. My grandfather was angry because, big thing, and then he didn't show up. So we were all caught there, in Hong Kong, eighty of us, and of course the relatives were living in various hotels. But then when the war started, they all came back to my grandfather's place.

However, now, why was my grandfather in Macao? All right, the celebration and the invasion, they were three days apart. After the celebration, three more days before the Japanese invaded Hong Kong. During those three days, my grandfather, unbeknown to us or anybody, and he never told us, he took a boat to Macao. So he left Hong Kong before the invasion. He alone went to Macao, because he had a house there. And so, during the war, he was not in Hong Kong and he already left. Now why? I suspect somebody told him to leave. I don't know who.

So that's why after the war he was still in Macao, and we lived with him, and I went to school for one semester there. And then I came back to Hong Kong with my sister on his boat. The British took a boat to Macao to welcome him back to Hong Kong and we got lucky to get on that boat. Went back to Hong Kong under the companion of Admiral Harcourt, the first commander of Hong Kong after the war. He took us back to Hong Kong.

Mr. Hatfield: Well, a little more about your grandfather. When he left Hong Kong during that three day period, what about his possessions? His money, safety deposit boxes, he left everything—

Mr. Ho: Same as us. Except he had some money in Macao. Except, Macao at that time was a gambling city just like today, but in a very small scale. And the head of the largest gambling house, by the name of Ko, K-O, and he was a well known

man in Macao obviously, controlling the casino, and even the Macao government had to give way to his things. He lent my grandfather money.

Mr. Hatfield: Oh, loaned him money.

Mr. Ho: Money, yeah.

Mr. Hatfield: Loaned him money until the war was ended.

Mr. Ho: That's right, that's right. So I was comfortable.

Mr. Hatfield: Was your grandfather able to return to Hong Kong during the war, or did he stay away?

Mr. Ho: The Japanese wanted him to be back in Hong Kong under the puppet government because he was somebody in Hong Kong, and if he joins the government, everybody would respect him, but he never did. He pleaded that he was in ill health, that he couldn't travel, so he stayed in Macao.

Mr. Hatfield: Let's go back to those almost four years you were in Kunming. Is that right?

Mr. Ho: Yeah, about three, about three years.

Mr. Hatfield: What's your strongest memory from being in Kunming?

Mr. Ho: Well, I was a boarder in a school and I had difficulty in the language, because they speak Yunnan language, which is a local language, instead of Mandarin. And they taught in Yunnan dialect, so I had a real hard time as a student at first to know what was going on, because I couldn't understand it. But, when you are young, it's easy to catch on, so after awhile I spoke Yunnan dialect, and stayed in school. So that is a fond memory of mine.

Another one, which is a really amusing story, is that the governor of Yunnan is called Lung Yun (sp?) and he's got a son a few classes above me. I was in primary school and he was in secondary school, and he had a gun with him. In school. And he's showing off his gun all the time. So I was in the same dormitory room with him, it's a room of fourteen people, and I had a bed there, and he had a bed. He was (*chuckles*), one day he was shining a gun on his bed, on the edge of the bed, and that thing misfired. And I was next to him in the

other bed, and the bullet hit my bed, you know, didn't hit me, but that was another memory of mine.

Mr. Hatfield: A memorable one.

Mr. Ho: *(Laughs)* And then of course, nobody dares to discipline him because he was the son of the governor. He was the only one that had a moped. This is the war, you know, I mean, you walk. But he's got a moped.

Mr. Hatfield: So you were in a boarding school in Kunming, and your mother and father were in the area also?

Mr. Ho: No. My father was stationed in Chungking. He was at that time head of—First of all, the 4th Army disintegrated because they fought the Japanese and lost the battle. So he went to Chungking to see where they can, that was the war time capital, Chungking, and he thought he could get another job there. But it turned out that his supporters were also in the dog house. So he couldn't get a job except a superficial title. So he was in Chungking for about two years, looking for a job, couldn't find anything. But he lived in Chungking with my mother, and I was in school, and my sister was in Chungking as well. So I was the only one left in Kunming in school as a boarder.

However, when Stilwell couldn't get along with Chiang Kai-shek, they brought in a guy called Wedemeyer, and Wedemeyer it so happened was the teacher when my father was at the Command and Staff School in Fort Leavenworth. So Wedemeyer came in and said to the Generalissimo, he said, "I need a Chinese Army officer to be my link between the Chinese Army and the rest of the Chinese government, and the U.S. people, and I know one, called Ho Shai Lai. I'd like to have him to be my liaison officer." And the Generalissimo's office said "Who the hell is Ho Shai Lai," so they looked around, looked around, because he was not in favor, he was in the dog house.

Finally they found my father, and they say "Hey, Wedemeyer wants you to be the liaison man," so he was, all of a sudden he became pretty important.

(Laughs)

Mr. Hatfield: What a wonderful coincidence. Wedemeyer having taught your father at the Command and General Staff School. He goes to China and sees Stilwell—

Mr. Ho: Yeah. So then, so the third year, two years in the dog house, the third year he was alive again, and so he served Wedemeyer as the link man until the end of

the war. And Wedemeyer kept up contacting him. In fact, Wedemeyer gave me a watch when he visited us in Hong Kong with his wife, and they lived in, as you know, he retired in Maryland and my father and my mother went back to stay with them several times, in their house, and of course now he's passed away.

Mr. Hatfield: I'm a student in a, of Wedemeyer.

Mr. Ho: Oh, really!

Mr. Hatfield: He had went to the German General Staff School in Berlin. He had learned, he knew German as a child . He's an important person.

Mr. Ho: Yeah. Very, very, in the China Theater he was fondly remembered. They respected him a lot.

Mr. Hatfield: What, let's talk about Chiang Kai-shek. The Chiang Kai-shek government. Who do you think that the Generalissimo thought was the greater enemy. Was it the Chinese Communists, was it the provincial warlords, or was it the Japanese? He has all of those, all the conflicts, with those three groups.

Mr. Ho: It was a difficult time. As you know, in 1937 the Japanese started to invade China, and the warlord up there is for Zhang Zuolin, and Zhang Zuolin was murdered by the Japanese while he was riding on the train. they set a bomb and it killed him. And his empire, the Manchurian, his little turf, was passed on to his son who was called the Young Marshal. So the Young Marshal was not really ready to take on the part of being the warlord. However, he commanded Manchuria, which is the richest part of China, a lot of stuff under the ground, or everything, and industry.

So it goes back. My father, meanwhile, was finished his schooling at Woolwich in the UK, which is a mandatory academy. Now it's called _____???, at that time it's Woolwich. And he went back to China looking for a job as a young officer, and my grandfather was a friend of Zhang Zuolin, who died, and wrote a letter to the Young Marshal recommending my father, so my father joined the Young Marshal. At first as his aide, and later on was assigned to be the officer in charge of the radio room, and you can appreciate that's the highly, most secretive thing that, you know, the telephone and the radio..

Mr. Hatfield: Code, enciphering and deciphering.

Mr. Ho: That's right. The code was with my father. So, now, okay, going back to Generalissimo. The Japanese were coming down in Manchuria and the Young Marshal was no match and then the other warlords all around China, so the Generalissimo had, as you rightly pointed out, fight the Japanese, talked to the warlords, and especially, and then the Communists, Mao Tse-tung. So what he did was that, gave them credit for getting all the warlords together to fight the Japanese, and they signed a pact, including the Young Marshal, to fight the Japanese.

But, the Young Marshal was sort of an idealistic young man. He said, "Why don't you settle with the Communists first, and then have the Communists join in and fight the Japanese?" And he did. He talked to Mao Tse-tung several times and Chou En-lai several times, but didn't get anywhere. They both had their interests. So then he turned around and fought the Japanese with the Communists exposing him in the west.

But the Communists also fought the Japanese on their own. And, at the same time, trying to gain more territory while Chiang was moving around and they would eat into his territory and so on and so forth, to expand their base. So the Communists was fighting the Japanese so that they can claim, proclaim to the world that "Oh, we are fighting the Japanese." But at the same time, in the back, they are beating Chiang.

So anyway, the war ended. the Americans helped a great deal. The war ended and then, that's when I think Chiang Kai-shek government was not active enough on reconstruction. They are a tired bunch, and they are a corrupt bunch, and they, I mean, the whole economy fell to pieces, and the Communists took advantage of that and besides, they're well trained, they're very hungry, they're disciplined, and they certainly have no corruption.

So, you know, the end of the story. Gradually they just took over the entire China. But then of course now they've been in power since 'forty-nine and they can, corruption (*laughs*)—that's another story of course.

Mr. Hatfield: I want to come back to 1949 in a few minutes, but I want to go back to the war period. Why do you think that the Generalissimo and General Stilwell couldn't get along? What's the problem there?

Mr. Ho: I think basically it's an ego problem. I mean, they both were rather egoistic people, and of course, Stilwell wanted the Generalissimo to do a number of policy changes, and the Generalissimo felt that to comply, he's losing his

control of his group, of his army, and so on. And refused to give in. To the end there, they're not talking to each other and there's complete collapse of cooperation and Stilwell thinks Chiang Kai-shek was garbage.

Mr. Hatfield: He called him the Peanut.

Mr. Ho: Yeah. *(Chuckles)* And then Chiang refused to talk to him and Stilwell remained more or less in Burma, and anyway. And then Washington knew about this and thought, he's just no good. So they took Wedemeyer and Wedemeyer got along very well with the Generalissimo. I think it's a clash of personality, ego. I think it's ego. And also demands that the Generalissimo thought was unreasonable and also nervous that if he relinquished those controls, he would be in trouble.

That's how much—this is of course, I didn't know that, I was a young kid then, but in retrospect, reading the history, I think basically that's what happened.

Mr. Hatfield: But you, of course you were just a child, but you have all this rich background so that when you have studied it and thought about it over the years, your conclusions, I think, are very useful and very interesting.

Mr. Ho: There are so many interesting things during the war. I can tell you a few anecdotes if you, and totally unrelated to what you asked me. *(Laughs)*

Mr. Hatfield: Well, we may get to that. Let me, related also, to the Generalissimo . . .

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