

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

EARLE SOPER

Today is September 3rd, 2004. We're at the Hilton Hotel in San Antonio, Texas, to interview Mr. Earle Soper concerning his experiences during World War II. Earle is a member of the China Marines Organization which is having a reunion in San Antonio today. Earle, thank you for taking the time to visit with us today and I'd like to start with a little background of yours. Where you were born, when you were born, your mother and father's name, and any brothers and sisters you had and we'll take it from there.

MR. SOPER: I was born in Beverly, Massachusetts, March 6, 1928. I do not have any brothers and sisters. My folks saw me and said that's enough. I graduated from Beverley High School in 1945 and shortly thereafter enlisted in the marine corps, went down for training in Parris Island. While I was in training Mr. Truman authorized the dropping of the bomb so that I was in Parris Island undergoing recruit training when the war officially ended; however, at the end of the war they were disbanding marines quite rapidly and regularly. At a loss of what to do so they sent most of us people just graduated to areas of naval installations around the country until they collected enough of us then they sent us overseas to relieve the people who had just finished fighting, in my case on Okinawa the 1st Marine Division.

MR. COX: Do you remember what ship you went over on?

MR. SOPER: I went over on the USS STARLIGHT. I think we left San Diego sometime late in December, 1945, and we got to China early in January, 1946. The company I joined had approximately one half of its membership either killed or wounded

on Okinawa. The people who remained were very happy to see us folks because we relieved them and they were able to come back home to the United States. People that graduated the time that I did spent approximately a year in China. In my case I was in a town called Tangku which was on the sea coast at the mouth of the Hi Ho River. Other gentlemen went up the Hi Ho River to a larger city called Tientsin and some even went farther up the river to the very last city in north China called Peking where the headquarters of the 1st Marine Division was located. My time was spent, as I said, in a little town called Tangku which was a rail junction for the trains coming from Peking down to Tangku thus up to the Manchurian border. The time I spent there we generally spent a month at the company headquarters in Tangku on the Hi Ho River and then we would spend a month at an outpost.

MR. COX: What did you do when you were in the headquarters area?

MR. SOPER: In the headquarters area they continued our training and we generally spent guard duty of four hours, either eight to twelve or twelve to four or four to eight every night guarding coal stations because coal was being stolen quite regularly from these locations. We were stationed guarding the facilities of some of the former oil companies from the Royal Dutch Petroleum Company and one of our units was guarding the ammunition depot for the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines which I happened to be part of. At the outpost which stretched from Tangko up to the Manchurian border there were various rivers that came from inland China and emptied into the Yellow Sea. At that time the communists were anxious to take control of these railroad bridges for their own use or destroy them so the nationalists could not use them. The nationalists actually were rather ineffective in their job of protecting these facilities so they employed marines. The

particular outpost we were at there was generally eighteen marines and we would be there for a month. Occasionally the Chinese communists would try to remove us from these locations, and it was our job to discourage those attempts.

MR. COX: Would they do this at night or in the day time and would they be in force or would they be like gorilla tactics?

MR. SOPER: Generally it would be at night and most common tactic was to take over a train be it a freight train or a Chinese Nationalists army train. Probably some miles from the outpost they would put a mine on the tracks and blow the tracks up thus causing the train to stop. They would destroy the nationalist people who were running the train. Relay a track and then come down on the train and as they would go through our outpost they would try to shoot it up. On one occasion that happened when I happened to be there one night. The train came down and went through the outpost and fired a few rounds at us but kept on going.

MR. COX: Now did the marines or the nationalists pursue these trains? They knew it was on a track it's not going anywhere except on that track.

MR. SOPER: Frankly, after it left our area, I can't tell you what happened. I don't know. Occasionally they would cause some civilian casualties along the way when they put a mine in the track. On one occasion I can remember several Chinese men came in with the long poles over their shoulders with a basket on each end and one particular occasion they had children, made you feel uncomfortable thinking about it because these children had been caught in a mine explosion. All we had was a medic with us and all we had available was some sulfa powder to put on the wounds. Fortunately a train came down several hours later, we were able to stop it and put the children on to take them into

Tangku where there was a hospital so they could be treated. This was a real desert area, there were no trees, no vegetation within a 360 degree radius. You could look around and there was absolutely nothing growing and occasionally people would walk down the tracks and they would be very thankful to receive our garbage because they had absolutely no food at all. When we were first there, in addition to the guard duties we had, we were involved in rounding up Japanese troops and civilians who had occupied that section of China since probably 1937. We escorted them down to ships and they were sent back to Japan to be repatriated.

MR. COX: What were the Japanese soldiers' feelings at this time? Were they happy to go home or did they believe you that the war was over? Do you remember?

MR. SOPER: Yes, they were happy to see us. They were happy the war was over but they were happier to see us because when they surrendered there was a lot of animosity between the Japanese and the Chinese. The Chinese had been severely mistreated by these people and they would in an instant kill them if they could get a hold of them. We were their protector and they would not leave our care. They were very happy to see us, happy to get home, and I believe they were happy the war was over. They were occupation troops rather than combat troops so they had different feelings than the people who were involved in the island campaign, I believe.

MR. COX: What did you think of the Chinese overall, while you were there, as a people?

MR. SOPER: As a people you could feel a lot of sympathy for them because of the way they had been treated. For the most part, they were very happy to see us and they treated us very well. They had some unfortunate circumstances and that was the way life for

them had been for ten years or better in some cases. There were the people who were looking to make a good deal or steal something. The Chinese Nationalist troops I felt sorry for them; most of them did not want to be in the army. Most of the officers that we saw or became involved with were from the upper level of Chinese society. They abused their own people as much as anybody else. I might not have had as much respect for them as I did the Chinese people. We went back to China in 1989 with a group and we were treated as if we were royalty. All the older people had remembered the marines being there and they were very thankful we had been there. Most of my time in China was either riding as train guard in addition to being at the outpost and stationed at Tangku with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. We were train guards because occasionally the communists might be laying in waiting and would ambush the trains. That happened once on a train from Tientsin to Peking. They succeeded in killing a few marines. It was not a very pleasant experience.

MR. COX: A couple of questions that arose in my mind. What type of weapon did you handle and did you kill any of the Chinese communists?

MR. SOPER: Marine Rifle Company in addition to the three rifle platoons, there was a mortar section and a machine gun platoon. I happened to be a mortar man. The only times I fired at anybody was with a mortar and I couldn't see who I was shooting at. I sometimes shot at something but I never saw anything. I never saw anybody up very close so I was one of the fortunate people.

MR. COX: They were close enough, weren't they?

MR. SOPER: I would say as a seventeen-year old kid when I got over there I had the wits scared out of me. So it's not that interesting, really, but it's basically what I was involved in.

MR. COX: As I told you, I've learned something here that I didn't know. A couple of things I didn't know, I didn't know that the United States sent in marines to assist the nationals and that's what you were doing.

MR. SOPER: Technically, we were not there to assist the nationalists we were to keep the two sides apart. And the railroads actually the one from Tangku up toward the Manchurian border was to Ching Wan Tao and a few other cities towns up that way. I suspect once you left populated areas the Chinese nationalists controlled the railroad probably on either side about a half mile because we were there. Outside that half a mile area was controlled by the Chinese communists.

MR. COX: Did they seem to have most of the civilian population behind them, or was it hard to tell?

MR. SOPER: We went on two trips around the countryside summer of '46. The communists captured several marines at an outpost two or three bridges up the line. We were walking through the countryside trying to retrieve them. I suspect that most of the peasants stayed with the communists. The communists treated the peasants in the villages, in my opinion, more humanely than did the nationalists. I think it made some of us young fellows feel unhappy in the Port of Tangku. Several times while we were there, large blue LSTs would come in with the unro sign, United Nations Relief Organization. They brought in food for the population, supposedly, but as soon as the ship docked the Chinese nationalists troops would come down with trucks unload all the material and

disappear. From what we saw, the common person never saw it which didn't make us feel very sympathetic towards the nationalists.

MR. COX: How long did you stay over there?

MR. SOPER: I came home by the end of 1946. We were sort of intermediary to relieve the people who had fought on Okinawa for the 1st Division until they got regular four-year term marines in there. So I came home at the end of '46 and I got out at the beginning of '47, and returned to my normal life.

MR. COX: Well, how were the living conditions while you were over there? Did you have good food?

MR. SOPER: We had C rations and on some of the train trips we were gone two or three days. We went from Tangku to Peking we might be two-days up or three days up and spend a day in Peking and come back. They would give us the new rations called Ten of One Rations but they were excellent. They were really, really good.

MR. COX: Speaking of Ten and One, what was your favorite thing out of Ten and One, do you remember?

MR. SOPER: To tell you the truth, I don't. In the C rations I liked some of the bacon and cheese mixed together.

MR. COX: Well, they used to have, correct me if I'm wrong, cigarettes in the ten and one rations.

MR. SOPER: Yes, they did. At the time I didn't smoke. So we had cigarettes in the ten and one rations, you're correct. Actually we were issued cigarettes once in awhile, a little pack of three or four, I guess it was, or you could buy a pack. At that time you could buy a pack for a nickel. I used to give my ration card away 'cause I did not smoke. On one

of the train trips to Peking they were hauling six-by sixes with canvas roof tops and at night we would sleep with the train moving in the canvas roof tops.

MR. COX: Like a ham?

MR. SOPER: Like a ham. For a kid who was seventeen it was quite an adventure really.

MR. COX: How were your living accommodations when you were in a permanent camp?

MR. SOPER: Company actually we had some cots there and living conditions were good.

MR. COX: Were they tents?

MR. SOPER: I was in a wooden building that was separated from the rifle platoons.

They were in Quonset huts and we had small wooden buildings. At the outpost we lived in two Quonset huts on one side of the bridge and we ate in one of them and slept in the other one. There were only eighteen people. On the other side of the bridge was a small Japanese pillbox. One fellow would stay there from four to eight and switch from eight to twelve and another one from twelve to four. I'm sorry, eight to twelve, twelve to four, four to eight through the night. So everyone stood guard duty on one of those sections every single night. In the winter of '45, '46, it was awfully cold in north China so a fellow would go with his fur jacket on and all the other clothes he could get on, walk across that bridge in the middle of the night carrying a bag of coal. In the center of the little pillbox it might have been, I don't recall, maybe ten feet in diameter inside, maybe eight feet. We had a coal fire going on the ground so when you relieved the person there you'd take your bag of coal and every once in awhile you'd throw a couple of pieces of coal and keep it going and keep warm. You were all alone on the other side of that river

and you sat there on the deck opposite the opening with your weapon pointed at the opening. You'd do that every single night for a month.

MR. COX: It was kind of scary, wasn't it?

MR. SOPER: In the Quonset hut they had cots. We would put our shelter half on top of the cot, we'd go to bed in the winter with our fur jackets on all dressed and we had two blankets on top of us and our poncho on top of that. For heat there was one pot-bellied stove and we loaded it with coal at night and by the morning the coal would be burned down. It would be just as cold inside as outside. It was a little bit chilly you might say.

MR. COX: How did you take a bath up there in the winter time?

MR. SOPER: You know I don't really recall taking a bath in the winter. I know in the summer we were there a large, large wooden frame building built out of two by fours and on top of that frame rested a couple of 55-gallon drums with a piece of pipe that came down with something that resembled a shower head. And to take a shower, if the train was coming down the tracks you'd see it a long way out. Our machine gun fired a few rounds in front of the train and the train would pull up and stop. We would have the engineer of the train and the fireman take hot water out of his boiler and carry it and put in our fifty-five gallon drum which they would willingly do. Then we would all have a hot shower. Sometimes it rained so heavily in the summer months it was also warm, you could walk under the eave of the building and let the water run off the building. There was one old Japanese masonry building there, stay under the eave of the building and as the water ran off the building and you soaped yourself up and the rain water would wash you off. Young kids don't mind the stuff, they bitch about it but they don't mind it.

MR. COX: Yes, yes.

MR. SOPER: When we went to the outpost each individual would carry his own goodies. There was food out there, naturally, but a fellow might carry a couple cases of coke or couple of cases of toddy which was some kind of a chocolate drink. We had a very large box someone had made prior to my being there. It had two sides, inside and outside and a liner which was filled with sand about six inches of sand all the way around and that was our refrigerator. Sometimes we could get to a Chinese village and get some ice and we'd fill the thing with ice and all our drinks and that's how we kept them cool.

MR. COX: What was the closest village when you were on outpost?

MR. SOPER: I really can't say that I remember. It was a long, long, long way out such that you couldn't see it. There were abandoned shops somewhere near us, sometimes some people would get in there and take a few shots at us. That place was deserted. I don't really recall, I can't honestly recall any of our guys going to get ice. They might have got ice off the trains, I don't remember, I really can't say. I know you could scan the horizon and see absolutely nothing.

MR. COX: Did you have much interaction with the Chinese populous around?

MR. SOPER: In Tangku we did. We were at the mouth of the Hi Ho River and we were quite a ways, probably two or three miles, from the center of town and we'd go on liberty occasionally. We got to know some of the Chinese people. Most of us had it very easy because when we were at the compound they'd allow Chinese boys to come in, maybe teenage boys, and we'd have them clean our rooms. We might pay them fifty cents a week or fifty every two weeks, something like that, not very much money. I know for the mortar section we had two boys called Pete and Tweet Tweet. They would come in and sweep our floor and maybe do our laundry for us occasionally. That was quite nice.

Other than that there was no great mingling with the Chinese. I understand some of the people up in the Peking area and Tientsin area and the large cities made very close relationships with some of the families up there. We unfortunately didn't spend any time there other than taking a train up and spending an overnight and coming back on another train. I've heard some of the people in the large cities made some lasting relationships with some of the Chinese people.

MR. COX: What did you do in your off time especially when you were out on outpost?

MR. SOPER: Tell lies and stories about how great we were, a lot of reading. I used to take a correspondence course. I used to read, play cards, tell lies about how great we were that was probably about it. Actually the outpost was in a real confined area so there's no room for a basketball court or baseball court or anything like that. I just recall reading, playing cards, plus sleeping 'cause you were up every night.

MR. COX: Did you happen to lose any friends?

MR. SOPER: Two fellows wandered off and you could see the Chinese coming toward them but you didn't know whether they were communists or nationalists. They caught up with one of them and the other fellow kept trying to get back to us. By the time we got to them the first fellow that got picked up was dead.

MR. COX: But you were in harms way while you were on duty, weren't you?

MR. SOPER: Everybody who's in the service is in harms way when they are on duty.

We're not unique.

MR. COX: That's true.

MR. SOPER: We're not unique. Compared somewhat to the situation in Afghanistan and Iraq where the marines and soldiers are, you don't really know who's a friend and who isn't a friend.

MR. COX: You guys were faced with the same thing with the Chinese base.

MR. SOPER: Somewhat really, probably a lot more dangerous in Iraq than it probably was with us. So I really had nothing unique to say.

MR. COX: Being out there protecting these bridges that was quite unique and as I said you were definitely in harms way. There were guys trying to kill you.

MR. SOPER: People wished we weren't there, put it that way.

MR. COX: Is there anything else you would like to add?

MR. SOPER: Other than being a former marine I'm very prejudiced and I couldn't have been with a better bunch of people. Marines have a tradition of watching each others backs and when marines have a problem they can always have other marines help them out. So that's the relationship of all former marines.

MR. COX: That's definitely true. That's one thing I regret about the air force, we don't have that.

MR. SOPER: Well, come in to these reunions. I don't know we're unique, but as a group of marines I think we are unique. Other groups have strong bonds with each other but I think all marines have a bond with other marines. I remember on one occasion going to a reunion. A navy vet said, "I wish our fellows stuck together like you guys do." I had no unique experience compared to a lot of people.

MR. COX: Well, more unique than mine.

MR. SOPER: Thank you very much.

MR. COX: Well, I certainly thank you for your service to our country.

MR. SOPER: Thank you for your service to our country. Yours was just as important as mine.

Edited copy typed March 10, 2010, by Eunice Gary.