

## An Army Doctor in 1945 China

(by Diana Walstad, March 9, 2015)

My father, who was a medical doctor, kept a human skull in his office while I was growing up. The story was that he had found it in China "during the War." I sometimes wondered what in the world was my father doing there? After all, China wasn't an obvious World War II setting like Iwo Jima, the beaches of Normandy, Britain, etc.

The answer was in his "War Diaries," which I recently opened and transcribed. Now, I can tell the story of why my father was in China and how he got the skull.

In May of 1945, Lt. Paul Walstad was a 30-year-old Medic in the U.S. Army caring for soldiers at a convalescent hospital in Butner, North Carolina. "The majority were trench foot cases for those who served in the European theater." Chances were that Paul might have spent the rest of World War II in North Carolina. He probably would not have objected, for he was enjoying married life with his new bride Marge. For example, they read poetry to each other in the public library and caught glowworms and fireflies on spring-time walks in the countryside. Marge had recently discovered that she was pregnant.



**Paul and Marge (1945)**

Paul married Marjorie Jane Vandenberg on January 24, 1945.

### CBI- the Neglected Theater

However, Paul's commanding officer (Colonel Shepcock) was lobbying in Washington, D.C. to move his unit overseas, possibly to the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater, where medical attention was sorely needed. The CBI theater was at the bottom of the U.S. War Department's priority list, especially after the U.S. decided not to use air bases in China for bombing the Japanese homeland. Moreover, bringing supplies into China required a treacherous and expensive flight over the world's highest mountains. Ammunition and aviation fuel took precedence over medical supplies.

The situation began to improve in January 1945 with the opening of a land route (the Stilwell Road) between eastern India and southwestern China. (To make this happen, American and Chinese armies under General Stilwell had fought ferociously against the Japanese in northern Burma.). Now, truck convoys could bring badly needed medical supplies and personnel to the approximately 33,000 U.S. troops stationed in China [1].

America's limited support of China's Nationalist army in its brutal fight against Japanese invaders was not a wasted effort. Towards the end of World War II, Japan had a total of about 4.8 million soldiers, with 2 million defending Japan, 1.8 million trying to conquer China, and 1 million facing the Americans [2]. China had become a sinkhole for Japanese troops, just as Russia had been one for German soldiers. Every Japanese soldier bogged down in the Chinese quagmire was one less combatant that Americans had to confront on Okinawa. (One shudders to imagine what American casualties would have been like if U.S. Marines had had to face the full might of the Japanese army.)

## Army Medicine in China

The U.S. military provided medical care for its soldiers. It recognized that—if nothing else—it was critical for troop morale and battle efficacy. In contrast, the Chinese army provided virtually nothing for its soldiers. Conscripted by force, the supply of peasant soldiers appeared to be unlimited, such that their lives had little value. Thus, a Chinese army on the march left a wake of exhausted and dying soldiers behind. "Derelict soldiers, too starved or ill to keep up with their units and too far from home to find succor, could be seen along the roads hunched over their begging bowls in silent misery [3]." Losses of soldiers due to malnutrition and disease sometimes reached 40% per year. A division of 7,000 might require 3,000 new recruits annually [4].

Chinese soldiers were easily exploited for profit by their commanders. The Chinese government paid each commander a lump sum based on the number of men under his command. As long as a soldier's death went unreported, the more soldiers who died, the greater a commander's income. Plus, a dead warrior requires no rice [5].

In June 1945, American officials described [6] horrific conditions at a Chinese military depot near Kunming. The facility was intended for Chinese "replacement troops." One hundred per cent of the men were suffering from malnutrition, tuberculosis and other diseases, but no medical care was provided. The seriously sick had to cook for themselves in kitchens which were immediately adjacent to latrines. One blanket sufficed for three men. The dead were lying—sometimes for several days—next to the barely living.

Wounded soldiers that reached hospitals were little better off than those who died on the battlefield or on long marches. Red Cross observers compared Chinese army hospitals to German extermination camps at Buchenwald and in Poland [7]. Hospitalized Chinese patients were allowed to spit wherever they pleased and urinate just outside the door [8].

While China in 1945 had the outward trappings of a highly sophisticated society, it was stuck in the Middle Ages in terms of medicine, education, and public health. Despite horrendous and recurring disease epidemics, most Chinese did not understand the role of sanitation in preventing diseases. Military commanders often dispensed with delousing new recruits, even though the procedure was mandatory and helped control the spread of louse-borne diseases (e.g., relapsing fever). They didn't seem to grasp the reason for digging latrines or boiling water to prevent the spread of diseases like cholera, dysentery, and typhoid fever [9]. Preventive medicine in China consisted of patients pinning paper money to their sleeves in the belief that evil spirits did not disturb the wealthy [10].

U.S. commanders made heroic efforts to bring modern medicine not just to their own troops but to the Chinese army. General Joseph Stilwell established a number of training centers in southern China—starting with one in Kunming in April 1943—to teach the rudiments of military medicine to hundreds of Chinese medical officers. General Robert Williams attempted to assign a doctor, enlisted medic, and veterinarian to each Chinese division. He set aside a small number of American portable field and surgical hospitals for the Chinese Army. The portables not only saved lives on the battlefield but enhanced the morale of Chinese soldiers "who now saw (possibly for the first time) evidence both of a commitment and an ability to save their lives if they were wounded [11]."

However, Americans suspected that—once they departed—their ideas of modern medicine might not be self-sustaining. For example, Chinese officials declared the vitamin pills that Americans had left for patients at the Kunming Depot to be "poisonous" [6]. China seemed unwilling and/or unable to accept modern medicine. "China possessed an elaborate pre-modern theory of medicine, as intricate as the humoral theory that had prevailed for thousands of years in the West and as deeply embedded in the culture.[12]."

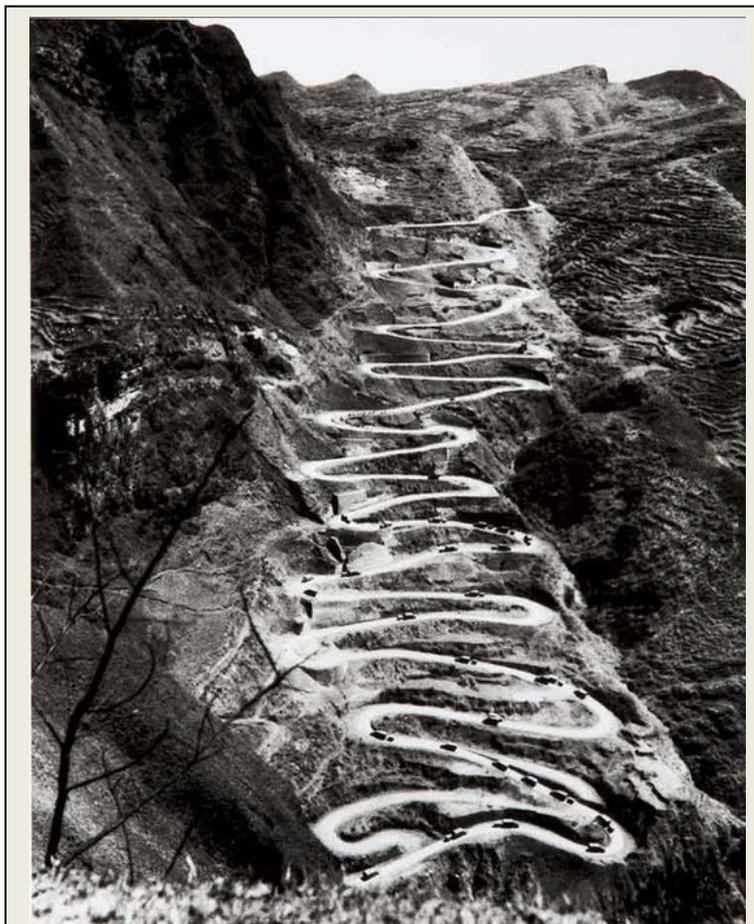
## Paul Heads Overseas

On June 9, Paul flew out of La Guardia, New York on a C-54 with sealed orders. When he read the orders, Paul discovered that he was going to India, but it turned out that China was his ultimate destination. Getting there was by no means straight-forward, requiring multiple flights and over a month of travel. After leaving New York, Paul flew in—and out of—Newfoundland (Canada), Santa Maria (Azores), Casablanca (Morocco), Tripoli (Libya), Cairo (Egypt), Abadan (Iran), Karachi (now in Pakistan), New Delhi (India), Calcutta (India), Tezgaon (India), Shamsheerager (India), and Myitkyina (Burma). Finally (June 29), a "bucket seat C-47" took Paul from Myitkyina to Bhamo, a small city in northern Burma where he joined up with the 96<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion. (*See map on page 10 for the location of Bhamo and other key areas in our story.*)

Once on the ground in Bhamo, Paul was confronted with a bombed-out city amidst the Burmese jungle. When a band of wild elephants entered a village not too far away, "the natives drove the animals out by beating on their kettles and drums." Bhamo had been virtually flattened by American bombing to drive the Japanese out. The native Burmese, who had scattered into the hills or fled to India during the original 1942 Japanese invasion, had begun to return and rebuild. Paul attended movies shown outdoors in a huge cavern, the "Bomb Crater Theater." He shared a tent with another lieutenant who had salvaged a refrigerator that the Japanese had left behind. At the medical dispensary, Paul incised abscesses and boils. He methodically listed and acquired the medical supplies he would take with him into China.

## Stilwell Road to China

Early on July 12, Paul set off for China riding in a truck convoy on the Stilwell road, an unpaved road laboriously carved out of mountain and jungle.<sup>1</sup> Slow moving and lots of heavy pulling. The average speed was only 1-2 miles an hour. The rough ride prompted many drivers to complain of having their kidneys "pounded to jelly." The road hugged the mountains and followed their contours, averaging one bridge every three miles. After 98 miles of rough going, the convoy stopped for the night at a transient camp near Namhkam, Burma, not far from the Chinese border.



**Stilwell Road (1945)** Photo shows a U.S. Truck Convoy climbing up the famous "21 Curves" in China.

{Photo: Arthur Rothstein}

<sup>1</sup> The Stilwell Road opened for business in Jan 1945. During the month of July 1945—around the time of my father's trip—75 convoys with 4,745 vehicles and 5,900 short tons of cargo made their way into China [13].

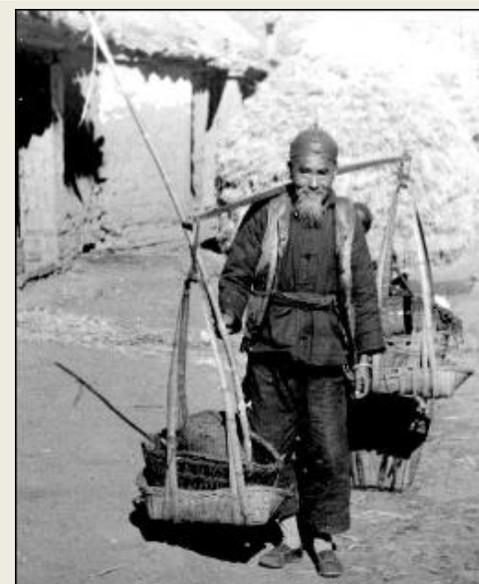
The next day (July 13) as the convoy entered China, Paul marveled at the beautiful mountain scenery. The convoy traveled over 4,000-foot passes through Himalayan mountains 7,000 to 9,000 feet high. At lower elevations, he would have passed through jungles of bamboo and teakwood, gradually transitioning to evergreens and pine trees as the trucks climbed ever higher.

In the valleys were the towns and farms- rice paddies, banana groves, and fields of hemp. Houses were made from mud bricks and had thatched roofs. Paul noted that the "natives were eager beggars." Many had goiters. The roads were thronged with peasants on their way to market, loaded with baskets suspended on a long pole slung across their shoulders.

One truck driver gave his impression of the people in this remote, "hillbilly region" of southwestern China:

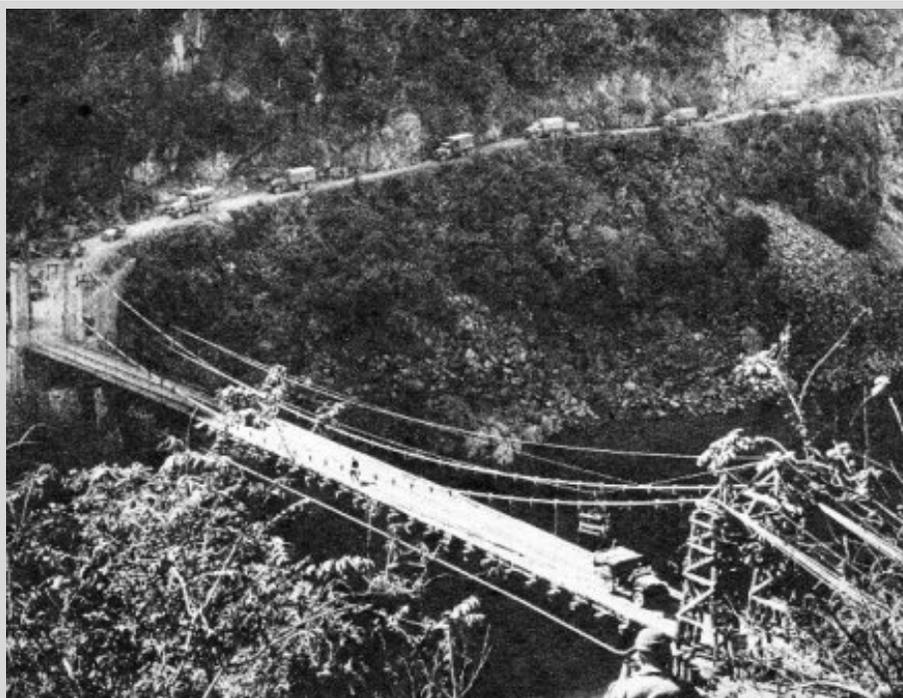
Every time you go into a valley and come into a village, the people would be carrying large bags of charcoal. Everybody would have elephantiasis<sup>2</sup> or some skin disease and a limp limb. In the next village, everyone's teeth would be black and rotting off. You go into the next village and everybody's teeth would be red and their eyes burnt from chewing a lot of betel nuts. You could always smell the sweet scent of opium burning [15].

As the convoy continued through the Himalayan "foothills," it would have crossed the formidable Salween River Gorge where the elevation dropped from 7,400 to 2,500 feet in less than a horizontal mile. The drivers would have traversed 35 hair-pin turns as they headed for the bridge, which from above looked like a "foot plank across a brook."



**China 1945** Man carries his wares, balanced on a long pole.

{Photo: Frank Vierling [14]}



**Salween River Crossing** was the worst stretch on the Stilwell Road, already considered a driver's nightmare.

{Photo Source [16]}

<sup>2</sup> Elephantiasis (or "lymphatic filariasis") is a mosquito-transmitted disease caused by roundworms. After developing in the human body, the adult worms migrate to the lymph vessels. With a severe infestation, the worm mass can physically block normal lymph drainage and cause hideous bodily swellings, especially of the lower extremities.

On July 14, the Americans arrived at the ancient, walled city of Paoshan. They camped outside the city in—according to Paul—"a sea of mud." Here, though, was a repair station for tending to the abused trucks, and a field hospital for U.S. soldiers. Paul provided minor first-aid and sent one fellow to the hospital for possible gonorrhea. He provided emergency treatment for a possible case of angina pectoris (heart disease), and was awakened late at night to care for a soldier's head wound

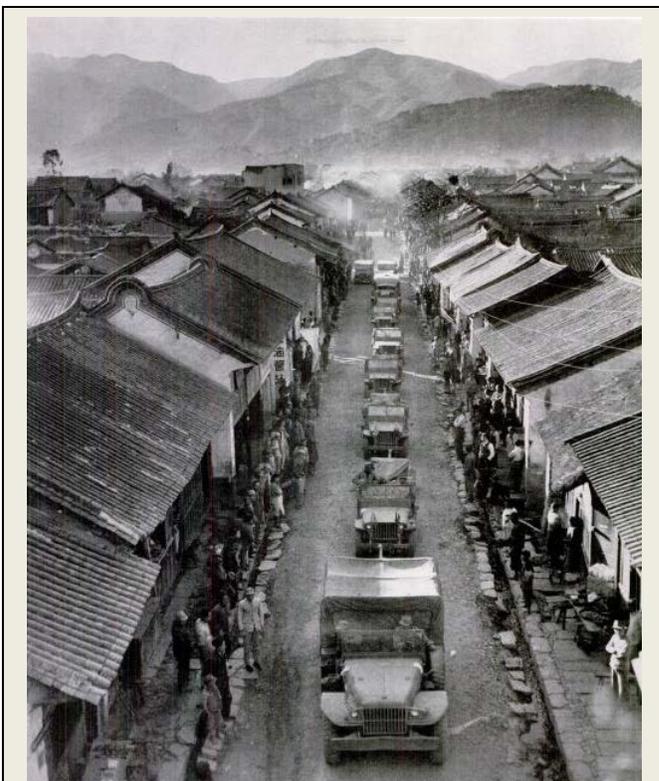
The convoy left Paoshan on July 16 and continued its journey. "The trucks spent all day climbing higher and higher." Paul bought eggs from the natives and fried them at the noon stop to supplement his K-rations, which he considered "very inedible." The convoy managed to make only 86 miles for the day, stopping for the night at a transient camp with a shower, which Paul used to wash off the day's dust and grime.

The trucks left camp early on July 17 with less climbing. "Women do much of the work in rice paddies and carry heavy bundles of wood on their backs. Women with bound feet common. Appear to be walking on amputated stumps." The countryside must have been one of great poverty—despite its magnificent natural setting. Another medical doctor [17] that traveled the same route, described what he saw:

The country we are now in is more beautiful mile by mile. Wonderful mountains on all sides with terraced valleys below and very pretty mountain streams. All trees are evergreen here and it is one of the nicest forests that I have seen. In this part of China the people are extremely poor—exist and that is all. I would estimate that 90% of adults and 25 to 50% of children have goiters. I have seen thousands and thousands of goiters just driving along the road. Many goiters are as large as 3 or 4 grapefruit. Along with this are hundreds of typical cretins (thyroid dwarfs).<sup>3</sup>

The convoy made 135 miles before stopping near the Yunnani Air Base for a couple days. From his tent quarters, Paul reported, "Chinese employed in the mess here. Very unsanitary. Sick call tonight—colds, skin diseases. Sutured a lacerated palm tonight under very unsanitary conditions." He and other officers sat down in a Chinese restaurant to a "real meal" of Swiss steak, fried eggs, potatoes, and coffee. "Food quite good. Table linens very dirty."

On July 19, Paul performed his usual sick duties before the convoy left Yunnani at 07:00. The riding was rough and his back began to ache, a common ailment reported by those riding one of the world's roughest roads.



**Paoshan (1945)** U.S. trucks pass through this ancient city (elevation 5,502 feet). Before the War, the city was almost never visited by white men.

{Photo from *Life Magazine* (3/12/1945)}

<sup>3</sup> Goiters, cretins, and mental retardation are all symptoms of hypothyroidism due to iodine deficiency. Because this area of China was so far inland, the people did not have automatic access to the natural iodine in sea water and marine fish. They also must not have realized that goiters were preventable.

The next day (July 20) as the trucks continued their journey, Paul noted that, "All along the road, natives begged for personal articles and food. We discarded much of our K-rations which they eagerly took."

As evening fell, they finally reached the 96<sup>th</sup> Battalion Headquarters, which was about 10 miles outside the city of Kunming (Yunnan Province).<sup>4</sup> It had taken the convoy 8 days to travel 707 miles [18]. Paul found a nearby hostel where he could take—what must have been—a much-needed shower before retiring to his tent.

### Kunming, China

Paul's diary entry of July 21 reads, "Reported to headquarters and took care of personal details. 40 letters. 20 from Marge. Happiest day since overseas. Read and reread for hours. Wrote 22 page letter to Marge. What a blessing to be able to have mail!"

Paul moved into a tent with a dental officer. His medical work consisted of treating the usual upper respiratory infections, skin diseases, eye infections, and G.I. upsets. He gave a lecture on sex hygiene to the enlisted men.

Paul's patients were mainly U.S. soldiers, but he had some contact with Chinese soldiers. On July 26, he was awakened at 02:30 to treat severely wounded Chinese soldiers. He gave shock treatment and then sent them to



**Donkeys** carrying wood charcoal pass along a road outside Kunming. Most likely, the charcoal would be used as fuel for cooking.  
{Photo: Dr. Clinton C. Millett[19]}



#### Kunming, China (Feb 5, 1945)

The city celebrates the arrival of the first U.S. convoy into China along the Stilwell Road.

Situated on a 7,000 ft high plateau, the city had 90,000 people during the 1930s. By 1945, war refugees had swelled the population to untold numbers.

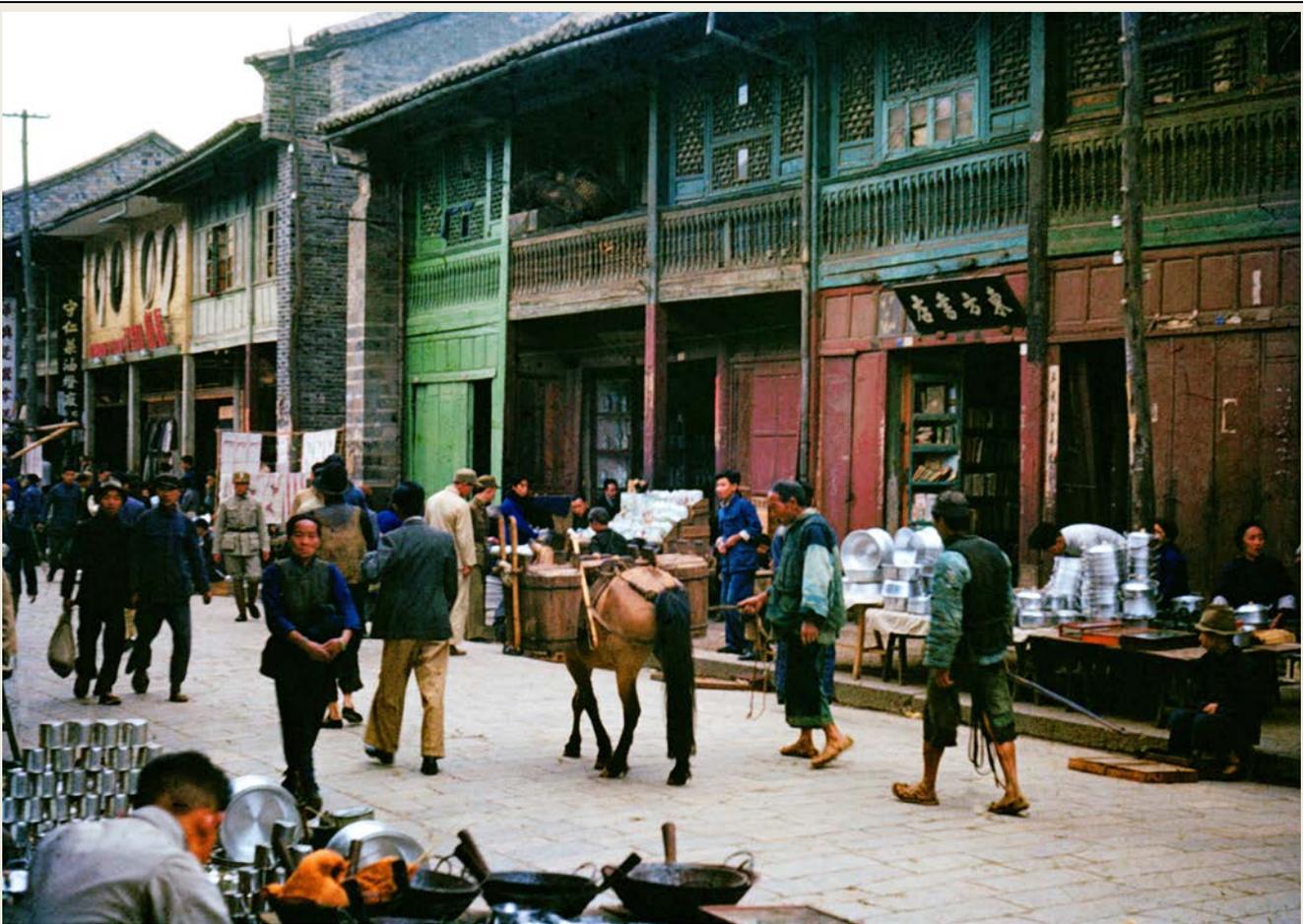
{Photo Source: <http://www.ccthere.com/article/2236778>}

<sup>4</sup> Kunming had the 172<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital, the 95<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital, the Yunnan Hospital (supported by U.S. churches), the Tung Lu Medical School, the Yunnan Army Medical College, and a private lab that produced vaccines for U.S. troops in China.

a hospital in Kunming. In the coming weeks, Paul treated other Chinese soldiers with various problems—gasoline burns, a badly injured hand, and leg ulcers.

On August 9, Paul recorded in his diary, "News by radio. Russia declared war on Japan. New bomb being used by U.S. contains uranium- devastating effect."<sup>5</sup> Finally, on August 15, Paul received the news that all Americans—and Chinese—had been waiting for. Japan had agreed to an unconditional surrender. World War II was over!

Meanwhile, Paul's life in Kunming went on. On a rainy day (September 23), Paul may have been practicing with his carbine out in the countryside when he found a "well-preserved skull in an abandoned coffin box on the ground with skeletal remains." (Aha, the skull.) When he visited the city, he took his firearm with him, as trouble was brewing with "Chinese elements." The arrival of the 988<sup>th</sup> Signal Battalion, which apparently had not had an M.D. since activation, needed a doctor. Paul began to immunize the soldiers against cholera, typhus, and typhoid fever.



Street in Kunming, China (1945)

{Photo: Dr. Clinton C. Millett [19]}

<sup>5</sup> On August 6 and 7, the U.S. unleashed its two atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 8, Russia declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria, territory in northeastern China that was then under Japan's control. One historian [20] theorizes that Russia's entry into the war prompted Japan's rapid surrender to the U.S.- "Russian atrocities in Manchuria gave the Japanese a taste of things to come should Russian troops reach the home islands." That is, the Japanese preferred an American—over a Russian—occupation.

As the rainy days continued, Paul bricked the floor in his tent and built a walkway above the mud between his tent and the medical dispensary. He worked on improving the dispensary, painted the insides, took sick calls, and inoculated soldiers. He checked showers to insure that the water was properly chlorinated. He practiced shooting his carbine out in the hills. Paul and other officers played softball and volley ball against the enlisted men, with the officers frequently losing. He submitted the names of medics for promotion. On Sept. 9, Paul received a 5-point combat star for being in combat territory in Burma.

He climbed over 2,000 feet to visit the famous West Mountain with its Buddhist and Taoist temples overlooking the city. On one visit to Kunming, he saw giant Pagodas "about 29 stories high," and coolies rope-towing boats along the city's many canals. At an orphanage, he picked up a custom-order he had earlier placed for Marge. "Pink silk kimono embroidered with blue dragons and slippers to match- \$50 + \$6. Beautiful." He visited the Yunnan Agricultural College and talked to one of its professors.

Paul spent many hours at a Red Cross building for meals, writing letters, and reading. He was impressed by *Psychology in Living*. The book may have inspired him to explore the neurotic anxieties of one of his patients. After injecting the soldier with sodium pentothal, Paul tried to uncover events in the man's subconscious mind. Four days later, Paul noted that his troubled patient was "improving rapidly."

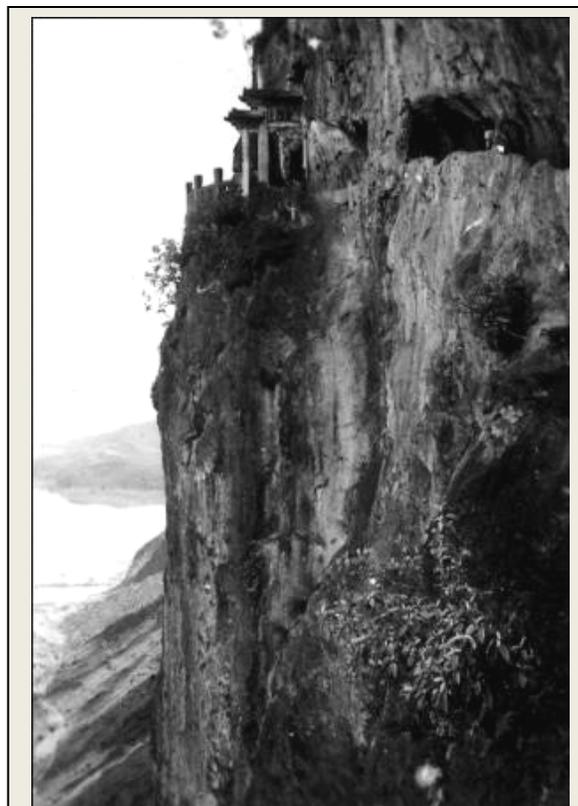
On Sept. 24, he saw another soldier who had—while on guard duty—beaten a Chinese boy. After diagnosing the fellow as a psychopath with paranoid tendencies, Paul took him to a neuropsychiatric doctor at the 172<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital, believing that "the recalcitrant fellow" would eventually be discharged from the army.

For several days, Paul and all Americans were unable to leave their base camp because of fighting in Kunming. After Japan's defeat, the Chinese ruler Chiang Kai-shek had scores to settle. On Oct. 3, he moved against General Long Yun, a corrupt war lord who had been

**A Fearsome God** guards the gates to his temple on West Mountain (1944).

The soldier in the foreground is a Master Sergeant from the U.S. Army's transmitter station in Kunming.

{Photo: Frank Vierling [14]}



**West Mountain (1944)** with temples carved in the cliffs overlooking Kunming. To reach these lofty heights, worshipers and tourists used tunnel trails along the cliff face.

{Photo: Frank Vierling [14]}



running his own show as governor of this remote province (Yunnan). Paul probably didn't sleep much, because "big guns fired all night." Three days later, General Long was quietly relieved of his position, flown out of Kunming, and replaced. Peace returned to the city and the curfew was lifted.

## Going Home

The U.S. Army began the long process of dismantling a large military base and sending soldiers home. On Oct. 7, the 96<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved out. Paul watched as the "Chinese immediately swarmed over the area, salvaging everything in sight." On Oct 16, four of his fellow Medics moved to a processing center for flying to Shanghai. Most likely, they were on their way home.

The weather turned cold. Paul brought a gas burner into the dispensary. He moved his belongings to new quarters—a British-type tent that was warmer than his U.S. tent. After the military dismantled it, Paul moved into the dispensary. He continued to inoculate, diagnose, and treat soldiers with a variety of ills—amoebic dysentery, chronic prostatitis, syphilis, and malaria. Day after day he moved "ambulance loads" of surplus medical supplies to the Church of Christ mission hospital. When the hospital ran out of room, Paul brought supplies to the YMCA for temporary storage.

Finally on Oct. 29, it was Paul's turn to leave China. At 1:30 a.m., he was flown out of Kunming to land in Kharagpur, India (a U.S. and British military center about 80 miles west of Calcutta). However, there were 170,000 soldiers in the CBI theater [21], and the War Department had only so many ships. It planned to move 44,000 out in November [22]. The rest of the men, which included Paul, would just have to wait. Worsening matters is that his transient status kept him from getting letters from Marge. His wife's expected delivery date for their child was on Nov. 8, but he had heard nothing. On Nov. 29, he inquired at the Red Cross for messages from Marge. No messages.

Paul described his month-long stay in Kharagpur with a desultory, "Little to do. Time passes very slowly." While waiting, he continued treating soldiers, attending religious services and movies, touring Kharagpur, playing volley ball, etc. On Dec. 20, he learned that he would be going home on the USS *General Patrick*. On Christmas Day, Paul had a "very fine" dinner at the Officers Mess and watched the movies, "The Voice of the Whistler" and "Don't Fence Me In." More importantly, he learned that he would be sailing home.

On Dec 28, he boarded the *Patrick* with 18 other officers and about 3,000 enlisted men. "Bunks in tiers of three." The ship slowly traveled about 80 miles downriver from Calcutta before entering the Bay of Bengal. After breakfast on Dec 29, the ship's chaplain delivered Paul a brief Red Cross-transmitted message, "Daughter born Oct. 31. Mother and baby well." On the last day of 1945, the *Patrick* entered the open sea and Paul was soon "watching flying fish" and on his way home.



**Paul and Marge Walstad (1946)** with their infant daughter Diana

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16. Photo downloaded (2015) from: [http://ledoroad.home.comcast.net/~ledoroad/Story\\_firstconvoy.html](http://ledoroad.home.comcast.net/~ledoroad/Story_firstconvoy.html)
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19. Gregg Millett kindly provided the two color photos, which were taken in 1945 by his father Dr. Clinton C. Millett.
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**Kunming, China** is in the center and marked with a red dot. To the left is the starting point (Bhamo, Burma) of Paul's 700 mile convoy trip along the Stilwell Road. Map is from Tuchman [23].