

# **At the Dragon's Gate: With the OSS in the Far East**

## ***Intelligence in Recent Public Literature***

Charles Fenn. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004. 227 pages. Photos.

***Reviewed by Troy Sacquety***

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Compared with OSS operations in Europe, those in East Asia have received little attention in published form. This gap in the literature is even truer for China. With a few notable exceptions, such as Maochun Yu's *The OSS in China*<sup>[1]</sup> and *OSS Special Operations in China* by Col. Francis Mills, Robert Mills, and John Brunner,<sup>[2]</sup> the field is nearly wide open and largely unexplored. Thus, any contribution is potentially valuable. *At the Dragon's Gate* is one attempt to add to the literature. On the surface, the author's credentials for supplying a valuable memoir are outstanding: he served in China as a US Marine Corps officer assigned to the OSS from 1943 to 1945, when OSS personnel only began to arrive in China in strength; he was involved in operations with the civilian-controlled Gordon-Bernard-Tan (GBT) network, including work with Ho Chi Minh in French Indochina; and finally, he was assigned to a smaller branch of OSS, Morale Operations (MO), whose job it was to conduct psychological warfare against the Japanese. The book does deliver some valuable insights, but, Fenn strains his credibility when he takes credit for involvement in an operation in which his participation cannot be verified. He also presents himself as a bigger player in China than could possibly have been the case.

The insights the book does provide must be carefully weighed and taken

in context. One such contribution is Fenn's view of OSS command structure and hiring practices. Fenn admits that politically he was left of center, having worked for a communist newspaper before joining OSS. While this alone is not remarkable, it does seem to influence his opinion of OSS leadership. Throughout the book Fenn alludes to the tendency of the elite in the OSS to hire friends of their own social stature and background. In this case, the founder and head of the OSS, Gen. William Donovan—a lawyer—tended to hire people he knew he could work with. In many cases these hires were other lawyers, who in the emergencies of wartime service were given rank commensurate with their civilian pay. In Fenn's opinion—undoubtedly true in some cases—this produced officers of like mindset who often had no familiarity with a foreign area and little idea of what they were doing. Once in the field, these officers brought with them the idea that their rank and privilege established that they knew how to run operations better than junior—but often more experienced—people. The result was wasted time and effort in furthering the scope of OSS operations, a potentially disastrous approach in a resource-starved environment as China.[3]

That Fenn was assigned to the GBT network is also of interest. The network was headed by a Canadian civilian, Laurie Gordon. Gordon and his associates, former employees of Texaco, used their pre-war contacts to develop a civilian intelligence network that supplied information to many Allied groups. Fenn was sent to the GBT network as an OSS representative with the mission of bringing the group under OSS control. According to Fenn, he became an integral member of the organization, even though he did not succeed in his mission. Fenn does provide an interesting view of how this organization was run and of the personalities involved, but his later claims in the book cast doubt on his real role there.

The GBT network started to make contacts with the Viet Minh—under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh—in 1945. Fenn gives the impression that he was central to setting up the OSS relationship with Ho Chi Minh and that they shared a good relationship. That Fenn was enamored of Ho is not in doubt (he wrote a biography of the man),[4] but his claim of centrality to the OSS relationship with Ho is. Fenn says he knew Major Allison Thomas, commanding officer of the DEER mission that worked with Ho Chi Minh. However, in Allison's report he mentioned on 2 June 1945 that GBT reports were sent to a "Lieutenant Fenn in Kunming, whom I didn't know." [5] While this could be an understandable lapse of memory, another of Fenn's inclusions cannot be. Fenn claims to have led one of the immediate OSS post-war "mercy missions" designed to jump into Japanese-controlled

prisoner of war camps for the purpose of informing the Japanese that the war was over and that they were not to harm Allied POWs. Fenn says that he led the mission—called ALBATROSS—to Canton. However, I contacted the acknowledged leader of the mission, who said he had never heard of Fenn. Records of ALBATROSS maintained in the National Archives do not support Fenn’s claim either.

The bottom line is that Fenn’s book is flawed and frustrating. Fenn might have provided valuable insights into OSS operations in China—particularly about the nebulous GBT network—but the apparent falsehoods make detailed research and fact-checking in OSS records a necessity before Fenn’s work can be taken as authoritative.

### **Footnotes:**

[1] Maochun Yu, *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[2] Col. Francis B. Mills, Robert Mills, and Dr. John W. Brunner, *OSS Special Operations in China* (Williamstown, NJ: Phillips Publications, 2002).

[3]A similar line of thought, a reaction of professional against those hired from outside and invested with senior rank, existed in Army intelligence during the war. See Mark Stout, “The Pond: Running Agents for State, War, and the CIA,” *Studies in Intelligence* 48, no. 3 (2004): 69–82.

[4]Charles Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographic Introduction* (New York: Scribner, 1973).

[5]Mills, *OSS Special Operations in China*, 369.

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