

# The First US Naval Attaché to Korea

***George Foulk, HUMINT Pioneer***

**Col. John F. Prout, USA (Ret.)**

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Most studies of the history of American intelligence hardly give military and naval attachés passing notice. The usual treatment provides the basic information that the United States began sending attachés out in the late 1880s but little more. Authors tend to dismiss the first American attachés as wealthy officers more interested in the social aspects of diplomatic life than in collecting military information.

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Early in the 19th century, European nations began posting military and naval officers to their diplomatic establishments abroad. By the middle of the century, most legations included at least one military or naval attaché. These officers performed a number of protocol functions, but everyone knew that their primary mission was to obtain intelligence concerning the military forces of the countries in which they served.

The United States had sent a number of officers abroad throughout the 19th century to obtain military information, but these had been trips of short duration. In 1877, three army officers were sent to Europe to collect information relating to the Russo-Turkish War. They were assigned to three US legations and were designated as “military attachés” But, at the

conclusion of the war, less than two years after their assignment, all three returned to the United States. Three years later, the US Navy established a naval attaché position in London. The experiences of these officers do not foreshadow the unique experiences in 1883 of the first naval attaché to Korea, who had the distinction not only of being the first military representative to serve in Korea but also of being one of the first American diplomats there.

## **Establishing Relations**

American relations with Korea got off to a rocky start. Following the opening of Japan by Admiral Perry in 1855, American commerce sought to open more markets in Asia. The Civil War forced a hiatus in new diplomatic overtures; as soon as it ended, however, the efforts were renewed. Korea resisted these efforts. Several American attempts to establish trade relations with Korea had failed. One had resulted in a brief military campaign that left five Korean forts destroyed and more than 350 Koreans dead but failed to yield even a treaty for the humane treatment of shipwrecked American sailors.

Finally, in 1882, a naval officer, Commodore William Shufeldt, successfully negotiated a comprehensive bilateral treaty with the “Hermit Kingdom.” The treaty initiated trade relations and called for an exchange of legations. Korea sent a special delegation to the United States to deliver a signed copy of the treaty to the American government. This delegation also desired to observe American life. At the request of the State Department, the navy provided two junior officers who would act as escorts for the delegation's visit to Washington, New York, and Boston. One was Ensign George Foulk.



George Foulk as a midshipman at the US Naval Academy.

Foulk had begun his naval career at the US Naval Academy, where he graduated third in his class in 1876. Following graduation, he traveled to Japan, where he joined the US Asiatic Squadron. He served six years in Asia, where he apparently taught himself Japanese and some Chinese.[1]

Foulk used his knowledge of the region to full advantage with the Korean delegation. His age also helped him as the delegation was composed of Korean nobles who were about as young as he was. Foulk and his charges remained together for three months visiting military, political, cultural, and agricultural sites.

At the end of the visit, President Chester Arthur authorized three of the diplomats to sail back to Korea in a newly refitted American warship that was preparing for service in the Pacific. The president also designated Foulk as escort officer for the Korean delegation during the voyage. Before the ship sailed in December 1883, the president expanded Foulk's duties and appointed him as naval attaché to Korea.

## **A Challenging Assignment**

Foulk was only the third US naval attaché. What made his position unique, however, was the fact that Korea had no naval forces of any kind. Clearly, he was not expected to provide information on Korean naval activities. Instead, he was directed to explore the Korean peninsula, to provide encyclopedic information on a country about which nothing was known, to advise the Korean court on naval and military matters, and to report on possible commercial opportunities. He was to report through the US minister in Seoul to the secretary of navy and to the newly established Office of Naval Intelligence.

Foulk and the three Korean diplomats lived together in close quarters for five months while the ship sailed through European waters and Suez to Asia. The young naval officer used this opportunity to enhance personal relationships with the Korean officials and to learn their language. By the time the ship arrived in the harbor of Chemul'po (the modern city of Incheon), Foulk had developed a considerable capability to converse in Korean, and he had also developed a deep understanding of the political

intrigues of the Korean court.

When Foulk arrived at the US legation, US Minister Lucius Foote was the only other official American in Seoul. The Department of State had only authorized a position for a minister plenipotentiary/envoy extraordinaire. The legation was allowed only one other employee, a locally hired translator.

Within the Korean court, Foulk found two powerful factions, one influenced by China, the other by Japan. Both nations maintained large diplomatic establishments in Seoul that included contingents of soldiers. The Japanese viewed Korea's increased contact with the outside world as a way to increase their influence. Korea could look to Japan's decades of trade with the West and gain useful experience. The Chinese, on the other hand, sought to keep Korea dependent on China. Both Korean factions viewed the treaty with the United States as serving their needs.

Foulk sought to stay in touch with the Koreans he had met in the United States, but he also began developing new contacts within the Korean government. By September 1884, his list of contacts was well-established.

In September, he left Seoul for a lengthy exploration of the countryside. His contacts in the government had obtained permission for him to visit military sites outside the city. Leaving Seoul by sedan chair, he traveled more than 200 miles carried on the shoulders of Korean coolies. He observed the military facilities and fortifications that were built to protect the capital and even gained insight into the strategy that the Koreans would use in the event of invasion. But he also obtained information on varied aspects of life in Korea in the 1880s.

As the first occidental visitor to many of these areas, he caused a stir wherever he went. On one occasion, he described not being able to sleep because a parade of Koreans walked past his bed in hope of catching a glimpse of the strange-looking foreigner. Despite his aggravation at being the center of attention almost everywhere he went, Foulk managed to engage in conversation Koreans from all walks of life. When he returned to Seoul, he wrote a lengthy report describing the geography, the roads, the military situation, the social customs, and the commercial procedures of the people inhabiting the interior of the peninsula. He also observed that he had detected a sense of dissatisfaction among the common people with constant Chinese meddling in Korean affairs.

# Political Unrest

In December 1884, Foulk again left Seoul on a long trip that would have taken him across the peninsula to the east and then back to Seoul along the coast. While he was out of the city, plotters attempted to unseat the royal family in a coup. The conspirators struck their first blow at an official dinner attended by the international community, including Minister Foote and his wife. While the guests were distracted by commotion out in the street, one of Foulk's contacts and a member of the royal family, Min Yong Ik, was struck down and nearly killed. Riots, mob violence, and chaos continued for several days in the Korean capital. A marauding mob even ransacked Foulk's home.

In the face of this unrest, Foote moved to protect American citizens and property. He ordered all Americans to leave Seoul and travel to the larger foreign enclave at Chemul'po, and he requested the navy to send a ship in case an evacuation became necessary. He also requested a contingent of Marines to guard and protect the legation property in Seoul. Next, Foote asked Korean authorities to send soldiers out of the city to locate Ensign Foulk and bring him safely back to the city. The royal guard found Foulk unharmed several miles outside of Seoul and escorted him back. His home looted, Foulk discovered that the uprising had left him with little more than the clothes on his back.

Foote's official dispatch back to the State Department provided details of the incidents of December. He noted that through the efforts of his wife, several hundred Japanese were given shelter on the grounds of the US legation. He described the brutal deaths of suspected conspirators, including one case in which three men were publicly dismembered and left to rot in the streets for days. While Foote's report painted a gruesome picture of the events, he offered no insight into the causes of the coup. For this, he relied on an appended report from the naval attaché.

Soon after returning to the city, Foulk had prepared a comprehensive commentary on the political situation in Korea. In it, he described the role of the royal family, identified powerful groups and the principal figures in the Korean court, and explained their political leanings.

Foulk noted that the Min family held power in Korea, but that it was firmly wedded to the policies of the Chinese. The coup had been staged to

eliminate the Min and break the power of the Chinese. The failure of the coup would move the royal family more into the camp of the Chinese and would expand the power of the Chinese minister in Korea, Yuan Shi-kai, whom Foulk described as a powerful and dangerous figure. Foulk's report was viewed as so important that the Department of State decided to include the text in its annual official publication of key diplomatic traffic, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* for the year 1885. This decision would later prove embarrassing for the United States and for the young officer.

## **Foulk in Charge**

Soon after the uprising, Minister Foote abruptly left Korea on a leave of absence. Earlier in the year, Congress had decided to downgrade the position in Seoul from minister plenipotentiary to minister resident. Financially, this would have meant nothing to Foote, as he would have continued at his old salary, but he used this issue as grounds for his resignation. The State Department was unprepared for his announcement. As a matter of fact, the department was unaware that he had departed Korea until well after he was gone. Though Foote cited protocol and political reasons for his resignation, Foulk described his motives less charitably in a private letter to relatives. He maintained that the minister was fearful for his well-being after the coup attempt and the bloody reprisals that followed. Whatever the reasons, Foote left, and, as he marched out the door, he appointed Foulk as the chargé d'affaires ad interim. So Foulk, the destitute navy ensign, became the official representative of the United States in Seoul.

The day after Christmas 1884, Foulk presented himself to the Korean Foreign Ministry. He reported that he was welcomed there, but he also revealed that rumors abounded concerning the hasty departure of the American minister. Some Koreans whispered in court that Foote had departed suddenly because he had engineered the coup or had at least supported it. Foulk worked diligently in his first days to dispel these rumors.

The young officer found himself in a difficult position. He had no training as an attaché or as a foreign service officer. Yet, despite no money, no

possessions, and no diplomatic skills, he was thrust into the intrigues of the Korean court. He determined to make the best of his situation.

Foulk soon discovered that his new position, coupled with his skill in the language, increased his access to valuable information. Many high-ranking Korean officials were inclined to meet with him both officially and privately. In a short time, Foulk increased the number of Korean officials whom he could call confidants. On occasion, even the king of Korea was one of his contacts.

As Foulk continued to develop his sources of information, his intelligence reporting improved. He was able to report not only what Korea's plans were in relation to the United States but also toward other nations. During Foulk's tenure, other Western nations negotiated treaties with Korea. Foulk's contacts provided him copies of the treaties before they went into effect.

## **Financial Problems**

To perform his diplomatic duties, the young naval officer realized that he would need money. Minister Foote had taken the legation's funds with him in 1884, leaving Foulk with no official monies to operate the legation. The young ensign had no independent means, and any personal funds he might have had disappeared in the looting of his home in December 1884. He recognized the need for a constant flow of cash if he were to continue the effort of maintaining an image of a strong America in Korean eyes.

As a first step toward improving his financial situation, Foulk petitioned for a diplomatic supplement to his navy salary. It was customary for a chargé to receive a supplement while he acted as the chief of a legation. But Foulk presented a unique case since he was not part of the State Department. The department researched the question and eventually agreed Foulk was entitled to the supplement. But bureaucratic confusion kept him from ever drawing this pay.

Beyond personal remuneration, he also sought authorization to expend legation funds. The department eventually allowed him to use these funds; however, by the time he had bundled up his bills, and shipped them to Washington in mid-1885, the congressional appropriation had expired.

Payment was deferred until the new session of Congress in the fall of 1885.

Faced with little support from the government, Foulk developed his own ways of financing his activities. He bought stamps from the Korean post office and sent them home to relatives, who sold them to philatelists in New York and sent him the money. On occasion, he bought pearls, sold them at home, and used the profits to fund the legation.

## **Requesting Reassignment**

Foulk labored for more than a year as chargé. The shortage of funds hampered his efforts to move effectively on the diplomatic circuit but not his ability to gain the confidence of the Koreans. The Korean king was so taken with Foulk's professionalism that he offered him a position in his cabinet as special military adviser, a paying position that Foulk refused.

Foulk continued to provide encyclopedic information on Korea through his trips to the interior. His lengthy reports and maps provided much of the early information that the United States had about Korea. In his diplomatic role, he continued to press the US government to follow through on some of the items it had promised, including the sale of arms and the provision of advisers, teachers, and domesticated animals.

Throughout this time, Foulk asked the Department of State to relieve him of duty as chargé. He begged to return to his job as naval attaché. He complained that the pressures of his position coupled with his lack of adequate clothing and such were seriously impairing his health. In one particularly petulant dispatch, Foulk accused the Department of State of not even seeking a new minister. In the responding letter, Foulk learned that a new US minister was en route.

Foulk immediately prepared for a leave of absence, which would commence as soon as the new minister arrived. His elation was short-lived, however, as the new minister was an alcoholic. Less than two weeks into Foulk's leave, the Department of State tracked him down in Japan and ordered him back to Korea as chargé. On returning to Seoul, Foulk found the American community in an uproar and the Chinese legation nearly ready to call for an invasion.

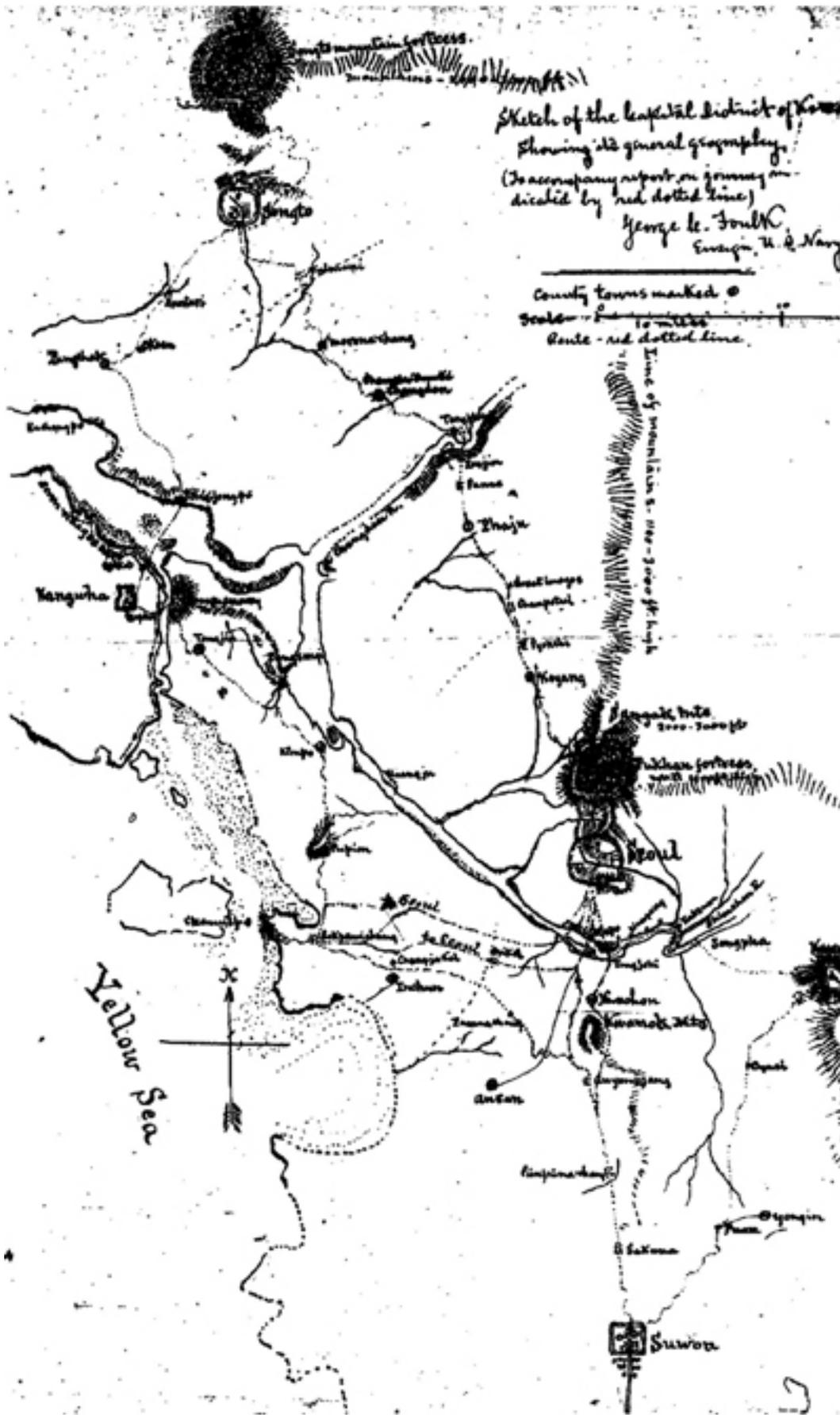
# Tensions and Threats

While Foulk was away, the British consul had mistranslated a newspaper article. The article stated that a Russian ship was in Korean waters; the consul translated it as a Russian fleet. The British consul asked the Chinese minister what information he had regarding the Russian fleet's presence. The Chinese minister, assuming the British had some secret information about the presence of a Russian fleet, flew into a rage. He believed the Koreans had entered into a secret treaty with the Russians and threatened to have 70,000 Chinese soldiers brought to Seoul.

The specter of hostilities caused panic in the American community in Seoul. When the Americans went to their legation, they found the minister drunk and incoherent. The Americans drafted messages, asking for navy ships and US troops, and the intoxicated minister signed them all.

On his return to Seoul, Foulk immediately sized up the situation and began efforts to ease tensions among the international representatives there. He provided the correct translation to the British, had the Koreans reassure the Chinese that there was no secret treaty, and told the Chinese that the single Russian ship was not a threat.

For most of the next year, until the arrival of US Minister Hugh Dinsmore, Foulk remained as chargé and naval attaché in Seoul. He continued to improve Korean-American relations and to enhance his position as a trusted adviser to the Korean court. The Chinese closely observed his increasing influence.



One of Foulk's maps.  
 Map courtesy of author.

# Problems With the Chinese

In early 1887, the Chinese minister in Washington delivered a diplomatic note from Foreign Minister Viceroy Li Hung-chang to the secretary of state alleging that Foulk had plotted with anti-Chinese forces in Korea to launch another coup. The Chinese even suggested that Foulk's life was in danger. Dinsmore, responded that the allegation was preposterous. The Department of State politely ignored the Chinese, but they continued to plot to have Foulk removed.

In 1887, an article attributed to Foulk appeared in a newspaper in Shanghai. According to the official Chinese protest to Minister Dinsmore, the article was insulting to the Chinese and to certain Korean officials. Dinsmore denied that Foulk had written anything for a Shanghai newspaper. As the controversy continued, Dinsmore learned that the Shanghai article was actually an excerpt from Foulk's 1885 report on the coup attempt that had been published in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*.

Dinsmore defended his naval attaché. He argued that if the report caused problems, then the problems were with the United States, which had published the report. All seemed calm for a week or two.

Soon, however, the Korean foreign minister, who was under the thumb of the Chinese, presented Dinsmore with a formal request for Foulk's recall. Outraged, Dinsmore urged the State Department to ignore the request. He added that the Korean king had contacted him privately and stated that he did not want Foulk to leave. The State Department, not wanting to cause a diplomatic incident over the ensign and observing that Foulk had served in Korea for three years, directed the navy to recall him to the Asiatic Squadron.

Dinsmore protested. He wrote of the terrible loss to his diplomatic efforts Foulk's departure would cause. Dinsmore emphasized that Foulk's command of the language was second to none and his ability to read the nuances of Korean expression were extraordinary. He also noted that Foulk's contacts in the Korean court were invaluable in assessing reactions to American policy. But all these protests fell on deaf ears. In

obedience to orders, George Foulk left Korea.

## **Heavy Toll**

In the time he had spent in Seoul, Foulk had developed his own methods of intelligence collection. He used the traditional method of an attaché, observation, to obtain information that had never before been reported. But he also employed his natural abilities and his facility in the Korean language to obtain and report information that would not have been available otherwise. He also had the unique distinction of serving as a diplomat.

But Foulk's service took its toll. He was never paid as a chargé and never recouped the losses from the sacking of his home in 1884. On top of that, the navy did not promote Foulk while he was detailed to the diplomatic service. He was promoted after he returned to the fleet, but the navy refused to backdate the promotion. Finally, Foulk's health suffered from the hard years in Seoul.

Soon after returning to the Asiatic fleet, Foulk resigned his commission. He married a Japanese woman and took a position with an import-export firm in Japan. Subsequently, he quit that position to teach mathematics in a high school in Kobe, Japan. On 2 August 1893, he left home for a short hike in the mountains. He never returned. Searchers found his body three days later. George Foulk was dead at the age of 37.

## **Role Model**

Foulk was typical of the early military intelligence officer. He had no training and little guidance in his intelligence duties. He had to develop his rules on the job. But Foulk's efforts illustrate the desired characteristics of military attachés even in today's world.

Foulk developed a keen understanding of the culture of the country in which he served. The genuine interest he showed in the affairs of Korea

enabled him to provide keen insights in his reporting. He continued to learn Korean until he had developed a mastery of the language. This capability enabled him not only to communicate but also to develop contacts in the Korean government who kept him informed.

Two years after Foulk's departure from Korea, the army and navy began an experimental program of adding military and naval attachés to the staffs of legations abroad on a routine basis. But it appears that those early attachés had no more training than did Foulk. George Foulk was a pioneer attaché and military intelligence officer. He is certainly one of the few military officers who have ever served as diplomats while on active duty. Sadly, his story has been eclipsed by more famous attaché successors.

[1]At the end of his Asiatic service, Foulk and two other navy officers returned to the United States by traveling west overland through Siberia. The officers published their comprehensive observations of that trip in 1883.

**Col. John F. Prout, USA (Ret.)** spent the bulk of his career in HUMINT assignments, including a tour as military attaché to Italy. This article is reprinted from an earlier, classified issue of *Studies in Intelligence*.

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