

# BESIEGED

MISSIONARY SOLDIERS FOR CHRIST  
TRAPPED IN CHINA'S CIVIL WAR

*A Firsthand Account of the Siege of Sianfu  
and the Nanking Outrage*

STEPHEN HALL

Cover and book design by Stephen Hall, [www.stephenhalldesign.com](http://www.stephenhalldesign.com)

The cover photograph illustrates a typical artillery unit in the army that surrounded and besieged the city of Sianfu in 1926. The photographer is unknown {PD-US-expired}.

The Chinese characters on the cover are translated as “God is love” (1 John 4:8), in red on the right and, on the left, “For those who love God, all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28), in black.

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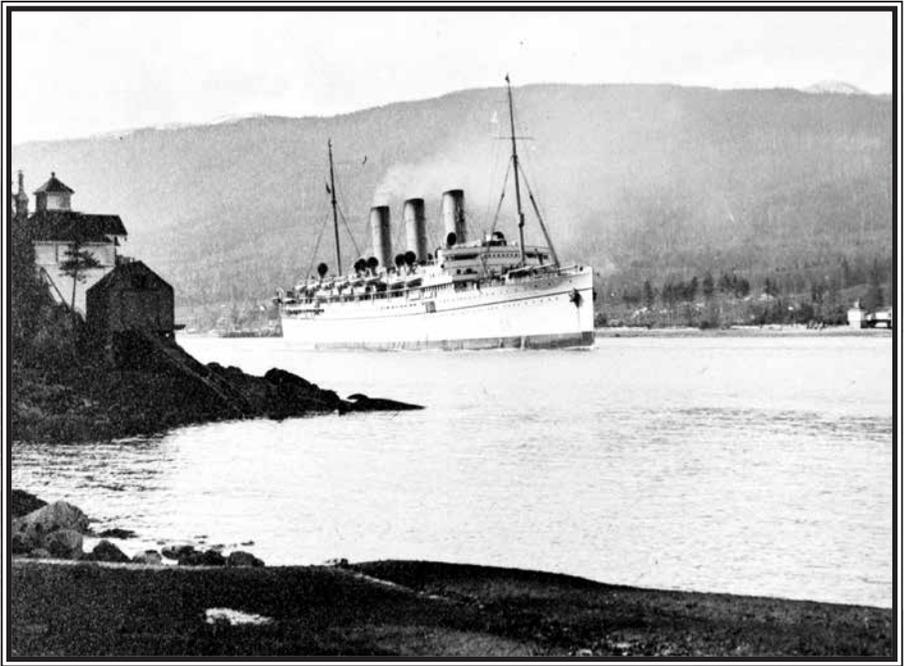
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“POOR PAT WAS SICKER  
THAN A KENTUCKY BLUETICK COONHOUND  
ON SUNDAY MORNING.”  
—*Mary Wallace (Gramma)*



*The Empress of Asia left Vancouver, Canada, through the narrow estuary for its long journey to Shanghai on China's southern coast. Although seasickness kept my grandfather miserable and in bed the whole voyage, the rest of the family enjoyed the experience.*

## CHAPTER 1

**PASSAGE TO CHINA**

WHAT AN ADVENTURE LAY AHEAD FOR THE FAMILY—a 3,000-mile journey across America by train to Vancouver, Canada; a 6,000-mile sea voyage across the Pacific Ocean to Shanghai on the southern coast of China; and onward inland 1,400 miles north to Sianfu (now Xi'an) by train, river boat, oxcart, and foot. In total, a trip of more than 10,000 miles—almost halfway around the world in twenty-four days.

Papa and his family arrived at the Louisville and Nashville train station in Bowling Green early in the morning on April 4, 1924. Spring was in bloom across Kentucky. Sunshine, blue skies, and flowering dogwoods cheered them on as they boarded the dark blue and gray train.

Although they were country people, travel by train was nothing new to them. Still, this would be their longest journey ever—crossing the width of America. In contrast, the idea of crossing the vast Pacific Ocean by ship to another continent was both exciting and disquieting. Their desire to bring the Word of Jesus to others was honorable and fulfilling, and yes, emotionally thrilling. Still, the strange, far-distant world that lay ahead was scary, and at the same time, wonderful in its strangeness.

As it happened, they were not alone on this mission. Another family was on the same road to China. Late in the second day, after

several station stops, Papa noticed a family sitting across the aisle. Whenever he looked in their direction at the passing scenery, the man seemed to be looking back. The thought came to him that maybe the Lord had brought these two families together to accompany each other on the journey. After all, the disciples traveled in pairs on their journey for Jesus. “And He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two” (Mark 6:7, NKJV).

As usual, Papa had lots of reading material with him. He dug out his copy of the latest *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* magazine and opened it, as if to read, allowing the man to see the cover. Right away, the man was up and out of his seat and introducing himself.

“Hello, I’m Doctor Coffin, Doctor Day D. Coffin. You folks must be Adventists. We are, too.”

After the introductions, both families—the Coffins and the Wallaces—revealed that they were on their way to mission assignments in China. Coffin, his wife, and his four-year-old son, Gail, from Baltimore, were going to Nanning, the capital of Kwangsi Province (now Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region), in South China to head up the work in the Nanning Hospital-Dispensary. Papa, Gramma, and the girls were going 1,122 miles in the opposite direction to Sianfu in North Central China. There Papa would serve as the Shensi Province Mission secretary and treasurer as well as supervisor of the native colporteur work.



AFTER FOUR DAYS of train travel, they reached Vancouver, Canada, where both families would board the *Empress of Asia* for the Pacific crossing to China. The ship was part of a fleet of luxury liners owned and operated by Canadian Pacific Steamships. Their Atlantic and Pacific passenger liners were always British-flagged and largely British-manned. Each liner was named in the same way as

the *Empress of Asia*, such as *Empress of France*, *Empress of India*, *Empress of Britain*, etc.

These were impressive, comfortable, and safe ships—true luxury liners of their era. A company advertisement described sailing on the *Empress of Asia* this way:

Just to sail with a great white *Empress* [all the ships were painted white] while she makes her Orient voyage is one of the rarest thrills in luxurious travel. From Vancouver and Victoria, you'll visit lovely Hawaii or go direct to Yokohama in 10 record days . . . then on to Kobe, Nagasaki, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Manila.

The *Empress* is your hotel in port when you see the Orient this fascinating "cruise way." The entire trip, Manila and return, takes but little more than six weeks with 15 days ashore at fascinating ports of call.

The ship was described as having fourteen spacious public rooms, three promenade decks, a palatial domed dining salon seating 437 people, an electric elevator, a gymnasium, a ballroom, the famous Canadian Pacific cuisine and service throughout, and written in bold letters, "Seasickness almost eliminated."

Papa, however, would beg to differ. His seasickness kept him miserable and in bed the whole voyage. On the other hand, Gramma, the girls, and the Coffins ate every meal in the "palatial domed dining salon" without incident.

Gramma said of the voyage, "It was good—cold, but with good sunshine, and the water was a bit choppy. Poor Pat was sicker than a Kentucky bluetick coonhound on Sunday morning."

The ship set sail from Vancouver on April 10, 1924, with 175 First Class passengers and 200 Steerage passengers. With an overall length of 592 feet and gross tonnage of 16,090 tons, the *Empress of*

*Asia* was tiny compared to today's luxury liners. By comparison, the Royal Caribbean's *Symphony of the Seas* (launched in 2017) carries 5,518 passengers and 2,200 crew members, is 1,188 feet long, and weighs 228,000 tons.

The *Empress* made landfall ten days later at Yokohama, Japan. Hotels, restaurants, and shops were just a few minutes' ride from the pier by pulled jinrikishas (rickshaws). With a little sweet-talk, Papa was persuaded to leave his bed of misery and accompany Gramma and the kids into town—terra firma at last! Once on land, Papa became his usual, fun-loving self. But what a culture shock for a Kentucky country boy and family.

Before leaving home, he had prepared for country life in North China. As was Papa's way of learning, he read copiously about the local culture and history, dress and customs, health, and food. Although to him Japan seemed culturally similar to China,

on later meeting the Chinese he experienced profound differences. The Japanese were generally quiet, polite, and reserved. In contrast, the Chinese were more open and straightforward in expressing their opinions and feelings—even in public.

The *Empress* made two other Japanese ports-of-call south of Yokohama—Kobe and Nagasaki. The family was again able to go ashore and experience the Japanese culture and, most happily, the food.



*Gail Coffin, left, at sea with Juanita, center;  
and my mother, Jean.*

Gramma told me, “Pat really enjoyed the Japanese people. Their culture seemed to be one of deference and respect. Even their food was prepared and presented with respect and meticulous care. The vegetarian dishes were like an art form—too pretty to eat.”



LEAVING NAGASAKI, the ship took less than two days to cross the East China Sea and make landfall at Shanghai on April 25.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, the coastal sea was calm. Papa was encouraged to go above deck with the family to view the approach to the harbor.

“ ‘Impressive’ was all that he could say. He just kept repeating the word ‘impressive,’ ” said Gramma.

My mother, then just two and a half, said, “Big!”

To say that they were awestruck by the cityscape would be a colossal understatement. There certainly wasn’t anything like this in Kentucky. And never having been to New York City, they didn’t think there was anything like this in all the United States.

The Coffins had come up on deck as well. At Shanghai, the families would say their goodbyes and part company. The Wallaces would debark here to make their way inland to Sianfu. The Coffins would remain on board the ship and sail to the next port of call, Hong Kong. There, they would disembark and cross over to Macao by ferry and travel about five days up the Xijiang River by freighter to Wuchow (now Wuzhou) and then on to Nanning via riverboat.<sup>2</sup>

They were sorry to leave each other’s company but thanked the Lord for bringing them together to share the journey. At the railing, as the *Empress of Asia* sailed up the wide Huangpu River and entered the port of Shanghai, they prayed together for the Lord’s protection and for His guiding hand in the work the families were about to begin.



Map drawn by Peter Hermes Furian, 2015, and modified by Stephen Hall, 2020.

