

CHAPTER 1

Baptism by Fire

The kind old doctor laid down his stethoscope and looked at us with compassion. "To China! Going to China? China will be blown off the map before you get there!"

He'd been reading the papers, this doctor who gave Jerald and me our physicals as we made ready to sail for mission service in China late in the summer of 1939. Japan had indeed been doing some bombing. She had invaded China months before and had already conquered Shanghai and part of the coast.

In spite of the warning, we went to China.

Now, a year later-the interval had been spent studying language in Shanghai-we sailed aboard a small coastal vessel, the Hanna, bound for Wenchow. From Wenchow we would go overland to Changsha, Hunan, to take up our first assignment. The thrill of it! The real thing at last! We were on our way.

The Japanese had blockaded ports along the coast of China to prevent supplies from getting to the interior. Warships and smaller gunboats patrolled the waters or hid among the islands awaiting their prey. The few cargo ships which ran the blockade got to shore and out again only by sneaking through at night-in great danger of being sunk.

With us on the Hanna in our missionary group were seven Americans and two Chinese, also going interior. The two youngest were Doyle and Paulene Barnett, newlyweds whose experience paralleled ours so closely that it amused us. They received their call in the spring, married in June, sailed in July, and traveled on the M.S. Tatuta Maru. They arrived in Shanghai exactly one year and two days after we did.

Paulene was a delicate girl with blue eyes and fair curls framing her pretty face. I looked at her, wondering how long she could endure life in this war-torn country. "So young to leave her home folks!" I thought.

Doyle was a husky fellow with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. As the Hanna sailed down the river toward the sea that evening, he and Paulene sat on one bunk and Jerald and I across from them on the other in the small cabin assigned to Paulene and me. Miss Delia Rice, the Bible instructor in our group, stepped in to join us, and Pastor E.

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H. James, a veteran missionary, stood in the doorway. While we compared notes, the subject of our ages came up and Doyle glanced sideways at Paulene. "She's twenty years old today!"

"Today!" Miss Rice's eyes widened. "Happy birthday to you," she sang, and we all joined in: "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Polly; happy birthday to you!"

Tears welled up in Paulene's eyes, tears which betrayed how she felt-starting out on this journey into the unknown-thousands of miles from home and the dear ones who had always shared this special day with her.

We were sailing with the understanding that our ship had a special permit from the admiral of the Japanese navy in Shanghai to enter the port of Wenchow. But partway down the river between Shanghai and the ocean we learned that the captain had been unable to obtain such a permit. Obviously he planned to run the blockade.

Later, in the lounge, one of our fellow passengers increased our feeling of uneasiness. "About two months ago I came out of these ports on a ship similar to this one," he began.

We gathered closer to hear the man's story. "The crew hung heavy quilts all along the outside of the ship to cover the decks. These quilts were fastened at the top, with the bottom left swinging free to protect us from machine-gun fire. By hanging loosely to flap in the breeze they'd catch the bullets."

In my mind I could picture a large riverboat chugging through the waves all covered with patchwork quilts flapping in the breeze. If conditions had not been so hair-raising, it would have been funny.

"When we left port that night," the man continued, "the captain gave strict orders for a complete blackout; no one on board could even light a cigarette. Our ship sneaked out in the dark, but before we got clear out to sea the moon came out. How we hated that moon! A gunboat sighted us and turned its searchlight straight on us. Then they opened up everything they had on us, and I thought that was the end for sure!"

"Did you get hit?" someone interrupted.

"Well, for half an hour shells splashed around us and bullets whizzed, but with full steam ahead we managed to get behind an island and from there we escaped to Shanghai."

For a few seconds we were silent, thinking troubled thoughts.

"Other boats have come down here," the man said, "but they've been turned back with all their cargo still on. Three boats were turned

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back just recently, and this Hanna was one of them. And do you know what the captain's done? He's added our cargo to what was already on board; and here we are starting out again!"

We went to our bunks with sober thoughts and put our lives into the care of the One who promised, "Lo, I am with you alway."

About midnight the ship began to roll and toss, and we knew that we had crossed the bar out into the great deep. At intervals throughout the night I awakened with a horrible thought, "What if a warship opens fire and sinks us away out here in the dark!"

At four-thirty a shattering crash awakened us. Terrified passengers were greatly relieved to find that the noise was only a case of empty beer bottles falling to the deck.

Sunday morning the sun shone on a calm sea. Jerald played the accordion, Paulene played her clarinet, and the rest of us sang. Other missionaries on board joined in, and the whole world seemed at peace.

It was warm, lazy weather. During the afternoon, while the others played games or sat on deck to read, I curled up on my bunk for a nap. At a quarter to five a terrific explosion awakened me. The ship's whistle pleaded for mercy, the engines stopped, and the anchor tumbled down with its heavy chains shuddering the ship from stem to stern.

"Get to the bottom of the ship!" Pastor Longway, another veteran among us, shouted.

Pandemonium broke loose. People ran pell-mell past our cabin door, and we joined them, stumbling down the stairs to a lower deck, hoping to escape bursting shells. Another loud explosion rocked the ship. The whole ocean and all the islands nearby seemed to vibrate. A sickening sound hung in the air like the whine of a siren, and my heart pounded as I crouched low with Paulene and Doyle and Jerald behind boxes in the baggage room, expecting the ship to be blown to bits any minute.

Other passengers saw the shells land in the water about 300 yards away. The warship shooting them was about four miles distant, and as soon as we dropped anchor it came steaming out from behind an island and signaled, "Follow me. You are under arrest!"

As our ship cautiously approached the warship, signals ordered us to drop anchor alongside for the night in the sheltered sea behind the island. The following day, after inspecting us, the Japanese permitted our ship to proceed southward. That puzzled us. But each night another warship appeared from nowhere and dropped anchor beside

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us. There we sat, meekly looking into the dark throats of big guns turned straight on us from fore and aft of the warship.

On the third evening we found ourselves sailing directly toward a long, gray shadow which turned out to be a sleek destroyer. A sixty-foot launch was anchored beside it. From the destroyer came the signal, "Stop immediately!"

Once more we looked into the barrels of two big guns. What an uncomfortable feeling! Later, the launch chugged over to us with a delegation of officers who conferred with our captain for over an hour. The destroyer turned a huge searchlight on us, so powerful that it seemed as bright as the sun. The light sparkled blue-white over the waves between the destroyer and our little ship.

Some of us stood out on deck to watch the thrilling sight. A sailor jumped on top of the launch's cabin in the dazzling light, faced the destroyer, and briskly waved two small flags.

"Well, look at that!" I exclaimed. "I wonder what he's signaling."

From the shore another searchlight swept the sea and sky.

The following day an airplane carrier, a cruiser, and three more patrol boats entered the harbor. Some of us saw the dark periscope of a submarine break the waves. By evening the fleet had passed judgment on us and commanded us to turn around immediately and go back to Shanghai without stopping, "Or else-!"

A month later we tried again on a Japanese ship, this time with permission to enter Wenchow.

This time Doyle and Paulene stayed behind to study language with some other young couples soon to arrive from the States.

Cecil and Nora Guild had just returned to China following their first furlough and joined our group on the trip to Wenchow. They had trunks and boxes of precious supplies, bought after seven years of finding out what missionaries need overseas. Miss Rice also accompanied us.

The second day at sunset, our ship stopped beside a small craft which was to take us upriver. We forty-three foreigners, mostly missionaries, with our 172 pieces of hand baggage were given space on its deck under a flat awning, the baggage stacked in the center and we sitting on and around it.

As we glided along on the smooth water under the evening sky we sang, "Day is dying in the west." It sounded so beautiful and meant so much to us in that setting! Some of us made beds on the hard deck in

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the three-foot space between the pile of baggage and the rail, but we didn't sleep.

The "permission" to enter Wenchow did not save us from a night of horror. Three times destroyers stopped us, and the last time, at midnight, they opened fire. Midnight-with guns blasting at close range! We popped our hands over our ears, closed our eyes tight, and flattened out on the damp boards beside the baggage, waiting in terror for the next explosion.

About two a.m. the destroyer gave us permission to proceed upstream, and so we chugged slowly on in the darkness-running the gauntlet of death. We hardly dared whisper. Two or three times foolish passengers turned on flashlights-only a flicker-to hunt for something they needed in the pile of baggage. "Douse those lights!" someone hissed.

An hour later, without warning, the whistle blew and blew. I clung to the deck expecting another warship to open fire on us. Soon all kinds of dark forms began to walk past us on deck. "Smugglers!" someone whispered. "Be careful, these fellows are the same as pirates. Watch your baggage!"

Six or seven sampans waited alongside. After a long time they left, and we were informed that we would stay there until morning. So we lay down on the hard boards, exhausted, and finally went to sleep.

A deck hand shouting at some passing fishing boats awakened me. The eastern sky slowly lighted with a glorious pink. That sunrise was the most welcome sight we had seen in our lives.

Now we were in "Free China." We were on the other side of the line!