

Sunday, July 29, 2012

The story of a U.S. Marine who convinced his enemies to live

By **MARK SCHILLING**

***ONE MARINE'S WAR: A Combat Interpreter's Quest for Humanity in the Pacific*, by Gerald A. Meehl. Naval Institute Press, 2012, 246 pp., \$34.95 (hardcover)**

Of war memoirs there is no end, though soldiers of any given war eventually fade away. Also, their memories of a conflict may remain vivid decades later, but repetition can wear certain stories into smooth, shiny pebbles different from the rockier, darker truth. Then there are the warriors who embellish their legends from the beginning, when they aren't making them up out of whole cloth.

So, Gerald A. Meehl's fascinating if over-stuffed memoir of Robert "Bob" Sheeks' experiences as a U.S. Marine Japanese-language officer in the Pacific during World War II is unusual in not only its late arrival, 67 years after its subject's military service ended, but also in its rich detail, as though Meehl, a writer and photographer who has known Sheeks since a chance encounter in North Borneo in 1979, reported his subject's story weeks rather than nearly a lifetime after the fact.

Sheeks, who later had a successful career as a bureaucrat, businessman and Asia consultant, stands out less for his heroics, though he was under fire in the marine invasions of Tarawa, Saipan and Tinian, than for his dedication to saving lives in a conflict that was often without mercy.

Born and raised in prewar Shanghai, where his family lived in lavish style in foreign enclaves, Sheeks nonetheless had a remarkably unsheltered childhood. Following the Japanese invasion of Shanghai in 1932, his American businessman father made something of a pastime of touring recent battlefields with Sheeks and his older brother in tow.

In his own explorations of the lively but dangerous city, Sheeks saw plenty of death — natural and otherwise. These experiences, including a traumatic encounter with the charred and tortured bodies of Chinese servants he knew and liked, hardened and embittered him against the Japanese.

Recruited in his freshman year at Harvard for the Navy's intensive Japanese language program — he then knew some Chinese, but hardly a word of

Japanese — Sheeks not only passed with flying colors, but also encountered ethnic Japanese teachers who made him doubt his youthful prejudices.

Commissioned as a marine lieutenant, Sheeks was first sent to Australia and New Zealand, where he translated captured Japanese documents. He finally saw combat in the 1943 battle of Tarawa, a brutal, bungled battle on a small Pacific atoll whose heavy losses on both sides made him wonder if there weren't better ways to end stubborn Japanese resistance than methodical slaughter, which cost marine lives, or suicide by the Japanese, who had been taught that surrender was a disgrace.

Assigned to duty in Hawaii, Sheeks came up with ideas, such as artfully worded Japanese-language leaflets (with no mention of "surrender") dropped by air and portable loudspeakers to reach holdouts deep in caves, that might now seem obvious but were then innovations yet to be tried in the Pacific theater. Despite the skepticism of fellow marines, Bob was allowed to try his tactics of persuasion in the 1944 invasion of Saipan. With the help of his fellow language officers and the at times grudging support of his superiors, he was able to save thousands of enemy soldiers and civilians. His efforts earned him the Bronze Star, though he was only partly successful, with many of his pleas being met with gunfire or self-immolating explosions.

Meehl tells this story with cliched flourishes ("Her dark hair, now hanging loose and tumbling around her shoulders, was backlit and glowing from the low sun above the ocean horizon") that seem less recalled by his subject than inspired by James Michener novels. Also, he dwells overly long on the prewar, postwar and behind-the-line phases of Sheeks' career, including brief flings with women encountered in his wartime travels. Some of this anecdotal material is humanizing and even amusing, such as Sheeks' dalliance with a gorgeous hula dancer that ended with a death threat from her college professor husband. Much of it, however, is of limited interest beyond the subject's circle of friends, relatives and descendants.

Still, for students of the war in the Pacific, Meehl's account is of definite value, thoroughly illuminating as it does the vital, but often overshadowed work of battlefield interpreters. It is clearly a labor of love, deeply researched and long meditated.

Sheeks, a sprightly octogenarian at the time of its publication, has rightly given it his seal of approval.