



## **One Marine's War: A Combat Interpreter's Quest for Humanity in the Pacific**

By Gerald A. Meehl, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, (2012)

Review by Colonel Curt Marsh, USMCR (Ret)

Gerald Meehl delivers a compelling story of Robert Sheeks who served in World War II as a Japanese language interpreter. The primary title "One Marine's War" is pointed in that each person's experiences in war are unique to him. I must admit though that the subtitle "A Combat Interpreter's Quest for Humanity in the Pacific" made me a little leery of what I was about to read since it implies something other than a normal story of combat. With trepidation I was prepared for an anti-war or apologist subtheme similar to what I found in James Bradley's books, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Fly Boys*. But fortunately this was not the case with this book. Accordingly, it is well worth reading and provides a perspective of combat in the Pacific that helpfully expands the narrative beyond the combat stories most of us are familiar with. We also get a few snapshot views of such memorable Marine leaders as Colonels "Red" Mike Edson and David Shoup. The book starts out with the story of how the author met Robert Sheeks purely by happenstance on a trip to Borneo in 1979. He was clearly impressed by Sheeks and after they spent some time together he persuaded Sheeks share his life story, and in particular his unique experiences as a Marine officer in the Pacific.

Robert Sheeks was born and raised in Shanghai as the son of an American businessman. He learned to speak and read the Chinese language as a boy with local tutors. As a youth he observed the Japanese incursion into China and their occupation of areas around Shanghai. He saw firsthand the brutality of the Japanese military against the Chinese people and came to hate all Japanese. During this period the 4th Marines in Shanghai provided some stability and protection to the international community. In 1935 his family sailed back to the West Coast of the United States where he finished High School. He convinced his parents to let him join the Marine Corps Reserve and he hoped to eventually fight the Japanese to avenge the atrocities he saw. In 1940 he was accepted to attend college at Harvard University. The attack on Pearl Harbor occurred during his sophomore year and along with his peers he prepared to be mobilized for war. Only a month later in January he was approached by Commander Hindmarsh of the U.S. Navy (and a Harvard Ph.D.) to join the Navy to become a Japanese Interpreter. I found this revealing in how quickly the U.S. military started to mobilize the vast spectrum of capabilities necessary in defeating Japan. Promised a commission, Sheeks agreed to the program if he could still join the Marines.

The Japanese language school was initially set up at UC Berkley with several Nisei, or Japanese-American citizen, instructors. This interesting collection of students included some boyhood friends from Shanghai, several sons of missionaries to Japan and some other odd geniuses with Far East experience. The school eventually had to move to Boulder, Colorado so that the Nisei instructors could avoid internment. This intensive program took about a year to complete. After working so closely with the team of dedicated Nisei instructors, Sheeks learned a great appreciation for the Japanese culture and to reserve his hatred for the Japanese military rather than the people.

His first combat operation was with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division serving in the "D-2" Division Intelligence section in the assault on Tarawa. Memorably, he rode with 2<sup>nd</sup> Div CG, General Hermle and his staff in an amtrack to the end of the single pier following a message from the beach stating "Issue in doubt." With much confusion about the assault, the General ordered Sheeks to go ashore and "see if you can get a prisoner and find out what's going on." He later supported LtCol

Shoup who provided the real combat leadership on Tarawa. The only enemy survivors were severely injured Japanese soldiers or Korean laborers who were of no military value. The Japanese soldiers on Tarawa did their best to kill or be killed, and the Marines did their best to kill them. It was evident that surrender was not an option for the Japanese. This was a point of frustration for Sheeks although he did accomplish a lot of work translating documents and documenting the defensive structures on Tarawa.

During the refitting period in Hawaii Sheeks focused on the problem of how to get Japanese soldiers to honorably surrender. Part of the problem was that they didn't know how to surrender and he also needed a way to communicate with them. He created several pamphlets to be dropped from the artillery spotter planes and he fitted out a jeep with a speaker and generator. Both items became invaluable in the following assault on Saipan. His primary job on Saipan turned out to be talking Japanese soldiers and civilians into coming out from hiding in caves. He had many successes but others refused requiring Marines to blast them out. Sheeks viewed his mission as combat support to avoid casualties by his fellow Marines and also one of humanity to the Japanese survivors. Despite the documented incidents of the Japanese killing themselves, many did come out resulting in a significant number of lives being saved. He continued this mission with the assault on Tinian. In the end over 15,000 Japanese civilians and other non-combatants came out of hiding and were held in an internment camp until the end of the war. Overall the book is well written and the narrative flows well. There is an excellent bibliography and a set of notes for each chapter which illustrates the quality and depth of research done by the author. The only obvious error I found was in reference to MajGen Thomas Watson who was the Commanding General of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division at Saipan and personally awarded Sheeks with his Bronze Star. Sheeks meets him in Washington after returning from overseas and the author wrongly indicates that Gen Watson was the Commandant of the Marine Corps, while he was probably just assigned to HQMC. Other than this one error "One Marine's War" provides a compelling and well documented account of Robert Sheeks' unique experiences in the Pacific as a Marine officer and is a worthy complement to other books of personal accounts of the war.

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