

ONE MARINE'S WAR

A Combat Interpreter's Quest for Humanity in the Pacific

Author: Gerald A. Meehl

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The Pacific War, from 1941 to 1945, was notable for the savagery of its combat. Determined not to dishonour their military code, in which surrender had no place, Japanese soldiers usually fought to the death — often bringing it about in suicidal charges. American troops, unsettled by the fanaticism of their enemy and such tactics, showed little compunction in killing their adversaries.

For one small group within the vast US military, however, saving enemy lives was an imperative. Live prisoners of war offered the opportunity to secure valuable operational intelligence. Obtaining this intelligence required, of course, an ability to communicate with the enemy, and in recognition of this the US authorities had wasted no time after the outbreak of war in developing Japanese language programmes to produce Japanese-speaking officers. That developed by the US Navy was initially based at Berkeley, near San Francisco, but eventually shifted to Boulder, Colorado.

One of the men who went through the course at Colorado was Bob Sheeks, who had spent the first thirteen years of his life in Shanghai, where his father had a job in an international company, who was studying at Harvard University when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and who was recruited into the language programme largely on the basis that he was taking a Chinese class. Working fourteen hours a day, six days a week, Sheeks survived a course that aimed to have the pupils reading, speaking and writing Japanese in little over a year.

After graduating, and being commissioned in the US Marines, Sheeks left for the combat zone in early 1943. His initial destination was New Zealand, where the unit to which he was assigned, the 2nd Marine Division, was recovering from its Guadalcanal ordeal. Sheeks found New Zealand uninviting — it was cold and wet the whole time he was there — but enjoyed his stay, not least because of two women, one of whom (a young Women's Army Auxiliary Corps soldier based at Fort Dorset that he met at a 'Tea Dance') 'rescued him from propriety'. After a few months he proceeded to Noumea. His tasks included interrogating Japanese survivors of the submarine I-17, which (though not mentioned) was sunk by the New Zealand warship HMNZS *Tui* between New Caledonia and Espiritu Santo on 19 August 1943.

Sheeks's first combat experience took place at Tarawa Atoll in the Gilbert Islands, which the 2nd Marine Division attacked on 1 November 1943. This operation was notable for the number of casualties suffered because landing boats grounded short of the beach, forcing marines to wade ashore under heavy fire. A New Zealander, Major Frank Holland, who had lived more than a decade on the atoll and who was a liaison officer with the division, had warned that the tide would be too low at the time of the projected landing for the boats to get ashore. The American commander ignored this advice, with tragic consequences. This incident finds no place in this account of Sheeks's expe-

rience, however; it is suggested, to the contrary, that the tragedy arose from mistaken advice of several people with local experience that the water would be sufficiently deep.

That American commanders were sometimes less than sensible when confronted with facts is confirmed by Sheeks's own experience. He went ashore early in the invasion, or at least to the end of the pier, and was given an incomprehensible order by his commander to capture a prisoner — at a time when marines were tied down on the edge of the beach. Sheeks made a futile — and dangerous — attempt to get to the beach to carry out the order but eventually reported back that there was no possibility.

Sheeks would take part in two more landings — at Saipan and Tinian. His activities in these later landings reflected a changing attitude towards his enemy. In Shanghai as a boy he had witnessed the Japanese onslaught against the Chinese in the city — the Shanghai Incident of 1932 — and this had imbued him with a hatred of the Japanese military and an intense desire to become a marine (because of his admiration of a US Marine regiment that was stationed in the city). His experiences as a Japanese language officer, however, challenged his youthful assumptions as to Japanese culture, and he began to feel a 'profound empathy' as he encountered Japanese civilians and soldiers.

Sheeks's own humanity combined with recognition of the desirability of saving the lives of cornered Japanese soldiers led him to seek ways of encouraging them to 'come out' (as opposed to the culturally problematic 'surrender'). In his view, borne out by subsequent events, not all of them would fight to the death if they were given alternatives, especially a viable means of laying down their arms. While in Hawaii after Tarawa, he devised a mobile loudspeaker system mounted on a jeep for use in the next invasion. He was also instrumental in the preparation of a leaflet urging surrender to be dropped over Japanese lines.

On Saipan Sheeks took big risks at times in seeking to persuade Japanese to surrender. Not all were amenable to his urgings, however, and he witnessed many horrific sights as desperate Japanese threw themselves from cliffs rather than submit. But there were also surprising incidents, including one where a surrendered Japanese soldier went back into a cave and destroyed his former comrades after they refused to surrender. Sheeks would be decorated for his efforts during the Saipan operations.

One Marine's War's author, Gerald Meehl, first met Sheeks by accident in Sabah in 1979 and became intrigued by his story. He has produced a very readable and interesting account of one unusual marine's war that highlights the relatively obscure efforts of the naval and marine personnel who were trained as Japanese language officers during the war. As such, it provides a useful supplement to American historian Roger Dingman's excellent history of the Navy's effort, *Deciphering the Rising Sun: Navy and Marine Corps Codebreakers*,



A COMBAT INTERPRETER'S
QUEST FOR HUMANITY IN THE PACIFIC

Translators, and Interpreters in the Pacific War, published by the same press in 2010.

IAN MCGIBBON

WHAT IF LATIN AMERICA RULED THE WORLD? **How the South will Take the North into the 22nd Century**

Author: Oscar Guardiola-Rivera

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The 11 September 2010 issue of *The Economist* had a thoroughly readable and revealing report on Latin America. Its theme was that 'something remarkable is happening' in the continent. After some decades of indifferent effort, real economic growth was now averaging over 5 per cent per annum and was coupled with low inflation. Equally significant, this serious economic progress was proceeding hand in hand with measurable social advances. Better democratic processes were bedding-in. More pragmatic but soundly based policies had enabled the region to cope with the recent global recession better than most. It was time for other regions, not least the neighbours to the immediate north, and the multinationals to take more notice of the quite dramatic changes underway.

This book also appeared first in 2010. Its dominant theme is not wholly concordant but not dissimilar to that of *The Economist* report. The argument put is that the region, or much of it, was better able to withstand the rigours of the recent recessions because the modern generation of Latin American leaders have resisted the superficial appeal of neo-liberalism and the discredited purist recipes of the free trade economists. The region has become more resilient and has found its own path forward. In the process this has involved pioneering innovative new development policies underpinned by novel, socially-conscious concepts. The author argues that there are lessons here for other regions that are faring less well in their struggle with globalisation in its most unfettered forms.

Primarily this new Latin American thinking has addressed questions around what the author calls 'the most important issue of our time': the right to social ownership of a common good rather than private ownership held in place only by accumulated masses of private debt (the latter being what noted economist Joseph Stiglitz has termed the 'dark underbelly of the previous decade's financial boom'). This was the progressive path along which a successful South America could guide its economically stagnant northern neighbours into the next century, assisted in the case of the United States by the fact that the Latino diaspora has become its second-largest ethnic group.

Guardiola-Rivera is proud of the region's recent economic and social accomplishments and excited by its potential. But the book is not a starry-eyed, triumphal account. The analysis does not disguise that there have been periods in the past, even late in the last century, when Latin America has seemed about to achieve significant political advances and sustainable growth only to disappoint. As *The Economist* report was care-

ful to point out and Guardiola-Rivera readily concedes, much of the current reform movement is undeniably 'work in progress'. There is no room for complacency. Yes, productivity has risen but at a modest rate of increase. Poverty has diminished and income distribution is better, but inequality is still a big issue. The region's profile remains tainted by pervasive crime and violence.

Notwithstanding all that, the impression left is that the author has witnessed many good things happening in the past few years and is resolutely positive about the direction in which his region is headed. In his engaging and very quotable terms, this is a region that no longer specialises in losing, as it had since the days of early European exploitation. He asserts with some degree of passion that the transformation now taking place belies the popular image of Latin America held elsewhere: that it is an arena that plays host only to extravagant beauty, exuberant music, mesmerising football, drug cartels, frequent coups, fiscal profligacy, and guerrilla warfare.

To leave another impression would be remiss: that the book is likely to appeal only to the finely tuned focus of a limited audience of economists, financiers, and development experts. It offers as much to the general reader wanting to be informed beyond the headlines as to the specialist with a career interest in this particular region. There is some coverage of every country, and acknowledgement of the contributions of those who shaped the region from the Aztecs through Bolivar, revolutionaries Che Guevara and Emiliano Zapata, Charles Flint (a Wall Street financier and adventurer in Brazil), Francisco de Miranda (Venezuelan abolitionist), to Raúl Prebisch (Argentine development economist), and others.

There are three main parts to the book. The first covers the Amerindian era up to and including the arrival and impacts of the Portuguese and Spanish conquerors and later European settlers. In the approach that indigenous peoples took to defence and management of 'the commons', Guardiola-Rivera finds early traces of the socially-driven policies proving to have some success today.

Part two takes the Latin American experience from around 1815 to 1970, through the post-slavery and dependency period to the turbulent but brave new world of independent nations and republics. The final part carries the story to the present, recording the pervasive but now diminishing US regional influence, noting 'rising Asia's' new presence as a substantial trade partner, concentrating on factors that led to the global financial crises, and explaining Latin America's seemingly successful search in the very recent past for home-grown solutions. An epilogue looks at the promise of new regional architecture, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (2010), where the emphasis is on independence and equality and from which, pointedly, the United States is excluded. A full bibliography and extensive notes complete a worthy addition to our knowledge of a region unarguably moving closer to centre-stage in the global theatre.

BRIAN LYNCH

