



## Season 6, Episode 4: China Marine Jacket

Gwen Wright: Our first story tries to connect an unusual item of clothing to a tense moment in United States Marine Corps history. In the 1930's, Shanghai, China, is the Paris of the Pacific – Dazzling. International. Raucous. But the cosmopolitan playground is also on the brink of disaster, threatened by the country's own civil war and Japan's desire to occupy China. Caught in the crossfire is a small U.S. military force stationed in Shanghai – the 4th Marines – who must protect American interests without causing an international crisis. Now, Richard Teresi of Santa Monica, California has an elegantly embroidered jacket that may have belonged to one of these famed "China Marines"!

Richard: I received it as a birthday gift from my son. And I'm especially interested in the 4th Marines, because they're such a famous regiment.

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright. I'm at Richard's house to see the jacket for myself.

Richard: That's it.

Gwen: It's magnificent.

Richard: Thank you

Gwen: How did you come to acquire this?

Richard: Well my son had purchased it on eBay, and he and I were both in the Marines and we are sort of are interested in Marine Corps things.

Gwen: How did you know that this jacket was connected to the Marines?

Richard: Well on the back, it has 4th Marines and they were the regiment in Shanghai for many, many years.

Gwen: It's these details that make Richard wonder what happened to the jacket's owner. As war clouds gathered, the China Marines evacuated Shanghai for the Philippines, where they then suffered defeat and brutal imprisonment at the hands of the Japanese.

Richard: They wound up being captured on Corregidor and they were prisoners of war and some were killed.

Gwen: So tell me exactly what you would like to find out about this jacket?



Richard: Well I would like to find out who MWD was.

Gwen: Oh that's right, here are the initials.

Richard: What happened to him? You know, he was here at this period but did he stay longer, did he survive the war?

Gwen: Well I'll see what I can find out about this fellow and the history of this jacket. Is it okay if I sit here for a few minutes and look it more closely?

Richard: Yes you may, you certainly may.

Gwen: Now I am looking first to see if there is any sign of a label but I don't see anything, a way of knowing when and where it was made and perhaps by whom. So this lapel coming down very low would mean it was a smoking jacket. A very fashionable item of clothing for gentlemen in the 1920s and 30s. These symbols could help decipher the jacket's story. But by and large there's no information, there are only little clues. "Shanghai". The 4th Marines had been sent to China in 1927 to guard American business interests. In Shanghai they protected an area within the international settlement, where foreigners conducted trade free from Chinese laws and taxation. Guardians of the peace, the Marines lived like kings – their comforts plentiful, and their authority unchallenged. The international settlement was in essence a colony ruled by foreign powers from Europe and the United States. Japan's own colonial ambitions in Asia made the vibrant port of Shanghai irresistible. But even after their army invaded China in 1937, taking most of Shanghai, the Japanese dared not break international law by entering the protected settlement. This gives us an idea of the power that the United States and Europe had over Shanghai. Conditions grew more and more tense. In the fall of 1941, the Marines evacuated Shanghai for the Philippines where they suffered the first ever surrender by a Marine regiment – and a long, brutal imprisonment by their Japanese captors. The dates on the jacket indicate our Marine may have been assigned to Shanghai during some of these events.

Gwen: You must be Angela.

Angela: I am. You must be Gwen.

Gwen: That's right.



Gwen: Angela Sheng teaches Chinese Art History at McMaster University, where she's an expert in Chinese textiles. Take a look and tell me what you see here, does that make sense to you that this would then have been made in Shanghai?

Angela: Well yes I would think so the stitch work is entirely Chinese-like.

Gwen: Angela thinks the jacket's designer was using images to tell a story about a Marine's life overseas. This Chinese boat, or sampan, most likely represents his journey to Shanghai. And the woman in the rickshaw may symbolize the steamier side of Shanghai's entertainment.

Angela: We wonder if U.S. Marines will be encountering ladies on the street.

Gwen: Oh that would have been my thought looking at this, that someone is bringing this woman to the concession for someone's pleasure.

Angela: Entertainment yeah.

Gwen: But this woman may represent more than a passing relationship. Angela says this peacock is actually a male-female hybrid of a peacock and a phoenix.

Angela: From the Chinese point of view you couldn't get more special in terms of a symbol that will glorify your status as the key player of the event of the day.

Gwen: The story being told through symbols may also be visible in the quality of the work.

Angela: I can surmise from the care and the design that the relationship between the intended and the person making was extremely important to the person making it and certainly the person making it wanted to privilege the American Marine status.

Gwen: Well now I need to find out more about the Marines and their side of the story. I'm traveling to Redondo Beach, California to meet a former China Marine. Excuse me sir are you Don Versaw?

Don: I am.

Gwen: Don Versaw played French Horn in the Marine band. He, too, was stationed in Shanghai with the 4th Marines.



Don: Life in Shanghai was a very exciting thing for Marine assignment, particularly for a young boy that had not long been off the farm in Nebraska.

Gwen: With a currency exchange rate of about 20 to 1, even a private could live well. Many filled trunks with silk, ivory and other treasures to send home. But Don arrived in Shanghai in 1940, when hostile Japanese troops were already stationed nearby, eying the oasis of the international settlement.

Don: The Japanese wanted to take over the entire international settlement. And so they would create minor acts of terrorism, like they threw a grenade in the business next to our 4th Marines club.

Gwen: Only two weeks before Pearl Harbor, the Marines evacuated Shanghai. Thousands of Chinese lined the streets. Many of the American soldiers left behind friends and loved ones they would never see again.

Don: A lot of people were quite attached. Some had been there for years. I had a very good friend there, a lady that I left some things to sell, because naturally we are all concerned about what would happen to them.

Gwen: After the withdrawal, Shanghai's international settlement fell quickly, and its residents endured almost four years of brutal Japanese occupation. Don never learned what happened to his friend. I tell Don about my investigation, and my hunch that our Marine had his own personal connection with someone in Shanghai.

Gwen: Had you seen anything like this?

Don: Oh yes, beautiful example of the smoking jackets that were made in the city. This is more elaborate than any I think I have ever seen, or recollect.

Gwen: But other Marines had something like this made?

Don: That was always probably the prize item to get and have made and bring home.

Gwen: While many a Marine commissioned a personalized souvenir, Don says this one stands out. It was originally a dark blue Marine jacket.

Gwen: Did you by chance know someone who had the initials MWD?

Don: No, I'm sure I didn't.



Gwen: Don left Shanghai in 1941 for the Philippines, where he and 11,000 American servicemen were captured. Don spent 42 punishing months in Japanese prisoner of war camps.

Don: That's when the battle really began. Because our battle was with disease, and malnutrition and anxiety.

Gwen: The American P.O.W's suffered terribly at the hands of their Japanese captors. But where does "MWD" fit into the wartime saga of the 4th Marines? I'm traveling to Quantico Virginia, home of Marine Corps University, and the Marine archive, to meet archivist Mike Miller. How can I find out the identity of MWD?

Mike: Well the clues are there with the jacket, we have the 4th Marines logo on the back, we know that it was 37 thru 39, and we have Shanghai, which confirms that he was there so what we need to do is check the Marine Corp muster rolls for those periods and run those initials against those Marines.

Gwen: A muster roll is a monthly list of Marines serving around the world, which in the 1930's was about 18,000 including the 1,000 men stationed in Shanghai.

Mike: Here we have the 4th Marines in Shanghai.

Gwen: Ok.

Mike: It breaks down every unit.

Gwen: So first look for people whose last name is "D". There was some there, let's go back to a few of those, okay.... Davis, W. it takes us awhile – but eventually, we find something. Wait a minute – look at this, 15. Dowhan, Michael, W. J.

Mike: We have been through this, different years, 37'–39', he is the only one that seems to match.

Gwen: Now that we have a name, Mike is going to help me search through copies of the Marine magazines "Walla Walla" and "Leatherneck" to see what we can learn about Michael Dowhan. We find a few mentions, including his boot camp graduation photo.

Mike: This is the platoon photograph before he went to China. He is in this photograph somewhere.

Gwen: Ah, so he is one of these men? We then make a major discovery: Dowhan's military discharge records. It seems Michael Dowhan's military service ended in October 1940. He returned to the United States, mercifully escaping the horrors of the Japanese P.O.W. camps. But what became of Dowhan? I'm going to do



a genealogical search to see if I can track him down. Okay I presume he was born sometime in the 1910's to 20's. Here is a social security death index of a Michael W. Dowhan who was born on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1918, that makes sense, and who died on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1997 in Williamstown, Massachusetts. I am trying to get some information about... I contact the Williamstown Public Library, who fax me a copy of Dowhan's obituary. Dowhan did leave the Marines in 1940, but he re-enlisted following Pearl Harbor, once again serving in the pacific...this time in the army. And here we have the next of kin: his wife and a son Michael W. Dowhan Jr of New York. I'm checking an online phone listing to see if Michael Jr still lives there. And there is a name that matches.

Michael Dowhan Jr: Hello there.

Gwen: Hi, you're Michael Dowhan?

Michael Dowhan Jr: Yes, I am.

Gwen: Gwen Wright, nice to meet you.

Michael Dowhan Jr: So nice to meet you. Would you please come in.

Gwen: Thank you. I have something here that I think belonged to your dad during the years he was in the China Marines. So I am eager to show it to you.

Michael Dowhan Jr: If this is what I think it could be, this is going to be really, really good. Oh man I have not seen this in almost ten years, this is terrific.

Gwen: So it did belong to your dad?

Michael Dowhan Jr: It sure did. This is one of his favorite souvenirs from his time in China with the China Marines in Shanghai. Dare I say this Gwen, I wore this in the fourth grade on Halloween night.

Gwen: Michael tells me that after his parents passed away, all of their belongings, including the smoking jacket, were sold at an estate sale.

Michael Dowhan Jr: This is him just coming out of basic training.

Gwen: I've seen but I didn't know which one it was. What did he tell you about Shanghai about the war?



Michael Dowhan Jr: Well, what he talked about was of course working in the International Settlement and he was in Quartermaster Corps.

Gwen: As Quartermaster, Michael Dowhan was in charge of supplying and provisioning the troops. He employed a number of Chinese to translate and negotiate with local vendors. Sergeant Dowhan formed a special bond with one of these Chinese men.

Michael Dowhan Jr: So my father liked this one fellow, he was a really hard worker, very easy to get along with, spoke English extremely well, very westernized and so he said, "that's it you are going to be my next team leader."

Gwen: Michael tells me that this promotion didn't just mean more money; it also elevated his status.

Michael Dowhan Jr: This was an incredible stroke of good luck for the fellow, because here you have got a city with an undeclared war going on up in the northern half of it.

Gwen: So this promotion meant a great deal to the Chinese gentleman who your father singled out.

Michael Dowhan Jr: Absolutely, it really did.

Gwen: What Michael tells me next takes me back to the tense, final years of the Shanghai International Settlement...where I find the answer to Richard's mystery... First of all MWD stands for Michael Walter Dowhan. A young American who joined the Marines and served in Shanghai from 1937 until 1940 and enlisted again and served in the Pacific during the war. And I was able to speak to his son who was also in the military Michael Walter Dowhan, Jr.

Richard: Oh my gosh.

Gwen: He told us lot of stories about how much this jacket meant to his dad.

Richard: Oh wow

Gwen: He said it was one of his prized possessions from these magical years that he has spent in Shanghai.

Gwen: I tell Richard about Michael Dowhan's special regard for one of his Chinese employees. That man's wife understood that Dowhan promoting her husband increased the family's standing.



Michael Dowhan Jr: He decides lets do something nice for Sergeant Dowhan because I know where my husband is going everyday and he is not going to be getting shot at.

Gwen: The man's wife took a Marine dress uniform, dyed it black, and spent weeks turning it into this elegant jacket. Although Dowhan never knew the fate of his Chinese employee and his wife, the jacket remains a human gesture of appreciation, given as the world was tumbling into war.

Richard: Oh my heavens, oh what a story! Unbelievable....that's unbelievable. Makes me proud of being a Marine.