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Charles Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate: with the OSS in the Far East*.

Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004.

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When Mr. Fenn starts out writing in his first chapter, he states his hope to be “discerning, truthful, interesting, and impartial”. In this, he succeeds. He is also exceptionally entertaining. An excellent wordsmith, Fenn weaves an outstanding memoir of his times in the Far East. Through his eyes we see and experience a neglected theater of operations of World War Two, but one which would set the stage for individuals and actions that would affect American foreign policy for decades.

Charles Fenn was born in England and immigrated to the United States. Leaving school at seventeen, he was employed at several jobs that eventually saw him become a journalist for Friday Magazine, covering the hot spots of the world of the 1930's, from China and Burma to Abyssinia and Djibouti. The demise of Friday Magazine and the onset of WWII resulted in Fenn working for the Associated Press as a stringer reporter, first in Burma , and then in North Africa. After being held up from going to Algeria, Fenn returned to the states to improve his lot. During a chance meeting with Buckminster Fuller, he was sent to interview with the Office of

Strategic Services (hereafter the OSS) in Washington, DC. The OSS was the brainchild of William “Wild Bill” Donovan, a decorated hero of the First World War, a wealthy lawyer and close friend of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

At the direction of the president, Donovan was assembling an intelligence gathering organization. A large part of the base of the OSS were business associates of Donovan’s, however there was a need for individuals with special skills, knowledge and familiarity of various areas of operations, and that is where Mr. Fenn came in. OSS candidates would join a branch of the service (Fenn joined the Marines) and after the completion of training would be given a rank that was felt to be commensurate with their skills (Fenn was given the rank of First Lieutenant). After the completion of Marine training, he is sent to an OSS training camp to learn the specialized skills of his trade. He is introduced to the 5 branches of the OSS, Special Operations (SO), Special Intelligence (SI), Counter-intelligence (X-2), Research and Development (R&D), and Morale Operations (MO).

Sent first to India, Fenn first coordinates with his organization’s British counterpart, the Special Operations Executive (SOE). The SOE arranges for him to meet with the British commander of their Southeast Asia Command, Admiral Mountbatten, a personality he had met previously as a reporter. From here, while waiting for clearance to enter China, he proceeds to OSS Detachment 101 on the Burmese border, to assist in setting up an MO program, and then on to Kunming, China.

In documenting his China adventures, we meet a myriad number of personalities, many of whom Fenn spends the war with. With an excellent eye for detail, and calling upon his war journals, he

shares with us his no holds barred impressions of the places and people that surround him. Some of them famous, such as Claire L. Chennault, commander of the American Volunteer Group (the AVG), or more commonly referred to as the Flying Tigers; is described by Fenn as “a shining example of how to live life to the full, if you are not too weighed down by convention, high principles, and who your friends are,” and further noting, “he not only went to the top, as an Air Force commander, but by skillful maneuvering with Chiang\* and his banking associates was equally successful in postwar commercial aviation (and got out before they collapsed).” We will also meet Ho Chi Minh, as a freedom fighter against the Japanese as well as the French. Fenn arranges for Ho to meet with General Chennault, and his only request of the general is a signed 8X10 glossy. Of the OSS he asks for 6 new .45 caliber pistols and an aircraft ride as close as possible to his area of operations in the south. Later we’ll find out how these minor actions will cement his leadership of the Viet Minh.

Besides these heavy hitters, we meet every day people, first in the OSS and then in Fenn’s subsequent post as a liaison with the Air Ground Aid Service; and in doing so, he does not shy away from describing some of the problems he would run up against. “Major Faxton, fat and fifty had now been put in charge of MO...Hall directed me to hand over to him all my Patpo operations together with my agents. Not one had a good word for their CO although they were too polite to say anything worse than that he was ignorant, inefficient, bad tempered, and prematurely senile.” And Fenn acknowledges that some of his problems are brought on by himself. “Hearing me give one of our recruits a sharp telling off, Bernard commented, Charles you might have given him a chance to explain. It’s one of your foibles that you can’t be bothered to hear people out. It’s as if you can’t tolerate their low intelligence, incoherence, lack of facts, and incomprehension of

the obvious. You always expect one to think as fast as you do and when they don't you get impatient, and then annoyed and finally contemptuous. And naturally people resent your assumption of superiority!"

Fenn tells very entertaining stories and in the end shares some of his observations of the political climate in the Southeast Asian theater, and reflections of some of what occurred later. In the end, this book is very entertaining, written by an individual who was able to meet and work with individuals from all walks of life, differing political convictions and goals, in order to further the defeat of the Japanese. He is colorful, insightful and gritty, but always in an inimitable and genteel manner.

\* Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the National Chinese movement.



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