

## **Tales from Tasmania – front line story**

### **Reporting from Taiwan & China's military & propaganda wars**

by Bob Young

Some time ago when relations between Communist China and Taiwan were less cordial than they are today, the tiny island of Quemoy was Taiwan's front line in both military and propaganda wars between it and Mainland China.

Through contacts in Hong Kong, I was one of the few journalists to be given an official invitation by the Chiang Kai-shek government in Taiwan to visit. Quemoy at the time was still an off-limits military base in a state of emergency with Mainland China.

In 1949, Communists under Mao Tse-tung consolidated their grip on the country. Deposed president Chiang Kai-shek led one million of his followers to Taiwan. Quemoy was one of the islands occupied by Chiang Kai-shek's forces, but claimed by the Chinese Communists.

Chiang fortified the island as a base and provoked China on two occasions by moving large numbers of troops to the islands. As an ally to Taiwan, the US responded on both occasions in support of Chiang's provocations with military actions, including nuclear threats.

The island was returned to the civilian government in the mid-1990s. Direct travel between Mainland China and Quemoy was opened in 2001, and there has been extensive tourism development on the island.

Quemoy has experienced an economic boom as business people locate there to take advantage of easier access to the vast markets of the People's Republic of China.

A 5.4 km (3.4 mile) bridge connecting Quemoy with Mainland China is planned to be completed by June 2016.

All this a far cry from the days I visited when Quemoy was still being used by Taiwan as a base for military and ideological warfare against Mainland China.

After a few days of hospitality in the capital, Taipei, I was told my trip to Quemoy was on for the next day. I would be picked up and taken to Taipei's military airport for the 4am flight out.

### **The long, low way around**

The Dakota C47 Chinese Air Force flight would first fly down the length of Taiwan where it would pick up a fighter escort for the flight to Quemoy. Protected by the fighter jets our flight dropped down to near zero altitude, skimming the ocean waves and keeping us off Mainland Chinese radar.

It was quite something looking out of a noisy droning C47 and seeing white caps just below, then looking straight out at our constantly circling fighter aircraft. My military escort was fast asleep, as was some of the crew (apart from the pilots, thankfully). All this was routine to them.

We landed at Quemoy without incident. I was met by the second of my two official military escorts. We were bundled into a waiting jeep and after a brief tour of parts of the island we were driven into a tunnel and deep into a self-contained underground military compound and briefing room.

### **Loudspeakers & gold bars**

During the tour – which was one of many to follow - I was shown huge concrete-surrounded loudspeakers that blared propaganda messages into Mainland China at an ear-splitting shriek. At the same time, we heard Mainland China's propaganda messages beaming back at us.

There were many ingenious ways both sides delivered their propaganda. Inventiveness was the order of the day as all this took place pre internet, photoshopping, mobile phones etc.

One way we watched involved helium-filled balloons packed full of propaganda messages. We drove to a site and watched the balloons being readied for take-off. The un-manned balloons would release their messages over villages in China, urging people to defect and offering a range of gold bars depending on what they brought with them – one gold bar for a defection, two bars for a rifle and all the way up to a good cache of gold for flying a fighter plane in. At least two planes did arrive during the campaign with the pilots claiming their gold.

I imagine the approach into Quemoy would have been a nervous time for both the defecting pilot and the Taiwanese armed forces on Quemoy.

### **Gentlemanly bombing**

Later in the briefing room, I was told war activities had calmed down, and by “gentleman's agreement” the Mainland and Quemoy only bombarded each other with live shells on alternate days, and more often than not shells were filled with propaganda leaflets. Despite that there were often heavy casualties on both sides.

Quite a change from the first Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1955 when the Peoples Liberation Army launched heavy artillery attacks on Quemoy after the US lifted its blockade of Taiwan. During 1954, Chiang moved 58,000 troops to Quemoy. In September 1954, the Communists began an artillery bombardment of Quemoy, and in November, PLA planes bombed the islands.

I had several hours of lectures and demonstrations over several days on the role of the Taiwanese armed forces on Quemoy. All this while touring underground installations – almost all military facilities were located in fortified underground bunkers - and being driven around to see huge slogans painted on hillsides for the benefit of Mainlanders with binoculars.

From deep in the fortified bunkers, a radio station broadcast to Mainland China. Banks of equipment were aimed to jam Mainland Chinese frequencies being used to try and reach Taiwanese audiences.

In another part of the underground fort, army intelligence officers were discussing their latest observations of military and civilian movements on the Mainland and analyzing for Taipei what it all meant.

The effectiveness of the Mainland's propaganda was closely studied and discredited wherever possible.

## **Recruiting fish**

One afternoon Taiwanese navy divers returned to base with catches of live fish which they placed in holding tanks. Soft-laminated cards bearing a picture of General Chiang Kai-shek and a list of payments that would be made to defectors were gently pushed down the mouths of fishes and into their stomachs.

Those that survived were destined for a naval operation and release on a moonless night off the coast of Mainland China. Local villagers who caught them found the propaganda message when gutting the fish.

Of course there were more conventional operations, but these were clearly not up for discussion. I knew the Taiwanese Air Force, probably with the help of Air America, the-then flying wing of the CIA, made many reconnaissance missions over China. As with all classified operations, these were not the subject of on-the-record conversations.

After four days on the island, it was time to leave. Our C47 had developed mechanical problems so we hitched a ride back to Taipei on a military hospital evacuation flight.

As we rolled down the runway in a lumbering Hercules, my escort told me that once we started our take-off we were committed as there was not enough runway to abort if something went wrong. And oh yes we had a ring of mountains around us that we needed to clear.

Not music to the ears of this very nervous flyer. Suddenly the old C47 low-level flight with the fighter escort didn't seem too bad. Thanks to the skill of the Taiwanese air force pilots, there were no incidents as we flew back to Taipei under radar.

## **Chefs & connoisseurs**

Today Quemoy is recognized as a national park and is a popular weekend tourist destination for Taiwanese. It is known for its quiet villages, old-style architecture, and beaches.

One unforeseen result from the extensive shelling by the Mainland is that Quemoy has become world-famous for its artillery shell knives. Local artisans make high-quality knives out of the artillery shells and these are keenly sought after by chefs and connoisseurs.

Few islands could have had a more chequered history, and I was glad to have seen some of it first-hand, especially at a particularly unique time in its history.

*(Some facts and data have been collected from Wikipedia and Global Security. org).*

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