Learning Cantonese in 1945

I took the Navy Officer Qualification test in the Spring of 1943, and was allowed to complete my degree program (in three years and one summer), entering the Naval Midshipmen’s School at Notre Dame in September 1943. I was commissioned in January 1944, and was selected to teach navigation, remaining there for two more classes.

I volunteered for submarine duty but was turned down because of my height (6’4”). I don’t remember exactly how I was selected for the Oriental Language program, but know that I was sought rather than my doing the seeking. We were told that it was expected that bases would be needed in south China before we could invade Japan, and we would be assigned to the military government expected in China.

I was in the Cantonese program, which required eighteen month training. There were nine students in my group (Mr. Surr’s (chairman), Wong, Leung, and Yip) We had an hour with each of the instructors each day, several hours of homework, ate meals together, and had an hour test each Saturday with each instructor. We expected to learn to read and write, and to understand the oral language and be able to speak it. The written language was identical throughout China, but posed problems in terms of the basic 212 characters from which all other characters were composed. Usually two characters were needed to express the meaning of one word in English, and a great deal depended on context. LITERAL translation was often very unusual and funny, whether moving from English to Chinese or vice versa.

Cantonese has nine tones, in relation to Mandarin (the national language) with four tones. The tones were essential in understanding the spoken language. For instance, “mahn fahn” with one pronunciation means “evening meal”, and with another means “horse manure”. The making of the characters in relation to tone had been done by British missionaries for foreigners to learn Cantonese. Our native born instructors, however, had learned to speak their language from infancy, and had never been taught to do so. They would say the word to themselves and attempt to determine what the tone should be. On the Saturday tests we were expected to indicate the tone of each character, and we really needed not only to remember the character and its pronunciation but also which instructor had given us the tone.

One interesting anecdote. One of the instructors, Mr. Leung, was from Gwong Sai Province, west of Canton, and was somewhat short and fat (as is true of some persons in south China), while another instructor, Mr. Yip, was originally from Manchuria (and tall and slim) but had lived in south China for many years. Mr. Leung once said to us, “If Mr. Yip gives you the tone of a word come to me and I will tell you whether it is correct or not. Because, you see, Cantonese is not really Mr. Yip’s first language, and you see that long neck that he has; you never can trust a person with a long neck.” We, of course, did not tell Mr. Yip what Mr. Leung had said.

We learned that prejudice may extend beyond race or religion. (to be cont’d.)

Charles L. Latimer
OLS 12/44/8/45

[Ed. Note: Lincoln described Phil Sheridan as having “not enough neck to hang him by.” “Phil must have been very trustworthy.”]

Lossea: Wayne Suttles
Looking for USN & USMC Intell. KIA and WIA Names

Doug Brower and his wife are looking for the names USMC and US Navy intelligence officers and enlisted who were KIA or WIA in World War II, Korea and Vietnam in order to complete web-based honor rolls and displays. They are also working on a POW/MIA Hall of Valor. He knows about Gerald Holton, the戈erge Tourist, and Ray Lutfy’s combat injury.

Robert E. Brandson
JLS 1944, (1922-2004)

Robert “Bob” Ellis Brandson died on May 19, 2004, following a lengthy illness. A longer obituary will follow.

Pineau Family Gift

I am writing to you on behalf of my brother, Anthony A. Pineau and my sisters, Suzanne Pineau and Antoinette Pineau. We are finally concluding the affairs and closing the estate of our mother, Maxine Pineau, who passed away more than two years ago.

We made a few choices about charitable contributions we wanted to make in honor of our mother and father. Our first, and easiest, choice was this gift to the US Navy Japanese/Oriental Language School Archival Project. We so enjoy reading our copies of The Interpreter. The names that appear there, on letters to you and in stories of the JLS, are names that floated through our childhoods and through the recollections Dad shared with us throughout his life.

Learning the Japanese language was seminal for our father. Through all the rest of his life’s work, he managed never to stray far from his love of the language, the people, their country, history and culture. We are so pleased that his papers found a home in Boulder, and began a collection from which others can learn. In addition, Boulder was the nearly-magical first home of the young and newly-married Maxine and Roger Pineau, the place where their life together began. Please accept this donation in memory of our parents.

I am also enclosing a packet of papers. It appears to be all of Dad’s famous/infamous weekend exams. It was our understanding that the students took these tests every Friday and their continued presence at the Japanese Language School was contingent on their performance, under pressure, every week. I was so happy to find this small treasure among my mother’s many stored cartons, and to note that Dad was, in this endeavor as in so many others, for the most part, “very good.”

Julie Pineau Hubbard

So What!

“We cannot kindle when we will
The fire that in our heart resides;
The spirit bloweth and is still
In mystery our soul resides;
But tasks in hours of insight willed
May be through hours of gloom
Balanced.”

Wide awake, between the hours of darkness and light, I lie in this my 86th year, reviewing my life, seeking answer to a question. One might think the likeliest source for justification or argument to present at the bar would be those belonging to my 63 years of teaching in college and university, or my 63 years of marriage and family. But no. My mind settles upon myself alone in the terror of late spring and summer, 1945.

More than a year before that time I had been taken from my preparation toward Harvard’s doctorate in English Philology (requisite courses, reading exams in Latin, German, and French, oral, and thesis) as a Naval Agent and started on my way to the Japanese Language School at the University of Colorado despite the fact that I had been classified 4-F in the draft because of a heart murmur and we had been handed a card to show exemption from any military service. “No matter,” encouraged Commander Hindmarsh as he signed me up for the program in Japanese. Overnight in the Boston B.O.Q., I became a Yeoman 2nd Class; a day or two later, I was bound for Denver out of New York City. (to be cont’d)

Robert D. Thornton
JLS 1944

[Ed. Note: Professor Thornton just finished this and sent it to us on the 7th of May 2004. I regret the delay.]

Reprise on Navy Wife

A note, "A Navy Wife, III" by Addie Busch mentioned the susceptibility of language students designated "Special Agents" to being drafted. I arrived in Boulder to enter the Japanese Program, about one month shy of my eighteenth birthday, with the title of "Naval Agent", bracing to a seventeen year old even though the pay after room and board was deducted netted out to that of an apprentice seaman. On my eighteenth birthday, the Navy - perhaps mindful of the problems Ms. Busch mentioned - shipped me to Denver recruiting center to be enlisted as an Apprentice Seaman with orders to return directly to Boulder. I was promised promotion to Yeoman 2nd Class if I survived Book Two; that promotion never happened but that is another tale. Our classmates were recently minted ensigns or jg’s who had the advantage of OTS to learn the niceties of Navy etiquette such as when to salute, a benefit my brief passage through Denver never provided. At least, however, my transformation from "Naval Agent" to Apprentice Seaman kept me out of the clutches of the Army.

John F. Magee
OLS 1945

JLO’s on the Missouri

Professor Roger Dingman (USC) needs to find anyone who has knowledge if there were USN or USMC JLOs (names) on the USS Missouri during the surrender ceremony. He has read the funny account by Lionel Casson of the 10 JLOs who were shipped from JICPOA at breakneck speed to that battleship, only to be sent away for their want of "whites". Any information?

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