



Above: One of the peripatetic chessmen hand-carved by an American civilian captured by the Japanese on Wake Island shows the owner's initials, W H C.



William Howard Chittenden, a Marine veteran and former prisoner of the Japanese, sits beside his returned chess pieces, which he had last seen in 1943 when he packed them in a tea tin while in the Kiangwan, China, prison camp.



The Case of the Peripatetic Chessmen

Story by William Howard Chittenden · Photos by Forrest Salter

This mystery begins just before World War II on Wake Island, a speck of land in the vastness of the central Pacific Ocean. Wake Island, in those days of fall 1941, was a beehive of activity for 800 civilian craftsmen and 400 United States Marines engaged in fortifying this militarily strategic mountain peak. Laborers, hired by the Morrison-Knutson construction company of Boise, Idaho, were feverishly engaged in building airplane landing strips, deep-draft docks for large ships, and various other support facilities.

Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Wake was assaulted by Japanese naval forces in what was possibly the first engagement of American and enemy forces of WW II. The Marines and civilians decisively defeated the Japanese. Several days later, Wake was attacked a second time by overwhelming force. That time the valiant Americans surrendered the island on 24 Dec. 1941. Those skilled workers and 400 Marines became prisoners of war and were shipped to their first prison camp in Woo Sung, China. It was there that the mystery of the peripatetic chessmen began to emerge.

Prisoner living quarters in the Woo Sung camp originally had been Chinese military barracks. Wake Island Marines occupied one building, and Wake civilians filled two. Embassy guard Marines from North China (203) had one barrack, as did 100 British prisoners from Hong Kong. The Governor-General of Hong Kong, Sir Mark Young, was one of our fellow prisoners.

Woo Sung prison camp was considered by the Japanese to be a "model" camp. There were periodic inspections and assistance by the Shanghai unit of the Red Cross. "Assistance" included improving food rations and providing library books and some sports equipment. The Japanese occasionally issued inferior cigarettes which soon became "money" used in trade within the camp. Word that one of the Wake civilians was carving and selling chess sets went through the prison population. The standard price was 20 packs of cigarettes. I, a nonsmoker, acquired the "standard price" and purchased a set of these peripatetic chessmen in winter 1942.

Time moved along, and in early August 1943, 500 prisoners were transferred to Japan for forced labor in its war effort. That was in direct violation of the 1927 Geneva Convention regarding treatment of prisoners of war.

Several of the North China Marines, including me, were a part of the 500. We sailed for Japan on 20 Aug. After a voyage across the China Sea and through the Japanese Inland Sea, the huge freighter arrived at Kobe on 24 Aug.

Prior to departure from the Kiangwan prison camp (we had moved from Woo Sung in December 1942), I decided the chessmen's security would be better served if they were not carried to the unknown of Japan. Ergo, my next move was to contact a longtime friend, Sergeant Vic Ciarrachi. He agreed to take the chessmen stored in a tin tea can and hold them, if possible, until we could meet again after liberation.

In November 1945, we did meet again in Springfield, Ill., where Vic updated the story of the peripatetic chessmen. After the 500 prisoners were taken from the camp in 1943, the rest remained in the Kiangwan camp until spring 1945. They were transported by rail to North China and Korea and then by ship to the Japanese island of Hokkaido, where they were assigned to work in the coal mines.

Divided into groups, they became separated and sent to different prison camps in the general area north of Sapporo. In preparation of that move, Vic carefully had packed the chessmen in a crate of garden tools which also made its way to Hokkaido, but not to Vic's camp at Utashinai #3 coal camp. The crate containing the chessmen went to nearby (perhaps two miles away) Akahira #2 coal camp where Platoon Sergeant Thomas R. Carpenter was assigned. Vic never saw the chessmen again.

President Harry S. Truman ordered the use of the two atom bombs and ended the war, thereby saving the lives of all American and British prisoners. That action also saved several hundreds of thousands of lives, both American and Japanese because an invasion of Japan was no longer necessary.

Formal terms ending WW II were signed on 2 Sept. 1945, aboard USS *Missouri*



William Howard Chittenden, left, shows the well-traveled tea tin (left and inset) containing his peripatetic chessmen to neighbor Toney Terreo.

(BB-63) at rest in Tokyo Bay. A great liberation operation of war prisoners then began in the Pacific theater. Joyfully celebrating its new found liberty, the chess set made the big move across the ocean to the Land of the Free in the company of PltSgt Carpenter.

Of the 203 North China Marines captured on Pearl Harbor Day, 90 remained in the Corps. PltSgt Tom Carpenter, who joined the Marines in 1932 and was honorably discharged as a warrant officer in 1957, was one of the 90 who reenlisted. When Carpenter returned to the States, the travels of the brave little chessmen continued in their original tin tea box.

The chessmen's first home in America was San Diego, where they were stored with other WW II memorabilia for two years. Their next move was in 1947 to Encinitas, Calif., about 20 miles south of Camp Pendleton, the famous Marine Corps base situated at the Pacific Ocean. In 1949, Carpenter was assigned to duty at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., and the chess set went cross-country to add even greater travel mileage. The next move occurred in 1951 when they returned to Encinitas. Carpenter was discharged from the Marine Corps six years later in 1957.

In 1962, Tom and the chess set moved to the town of Quartz Hill, Calif., where

the chessmen rested in Tom's den with his medals from rifle competitions and other keepsakes. In September 1983, at the age of 73, Thomas R. Carpenter died in Lancaster, Calif. Once again it was time for the chess set to travel, that time to Tom's sister, Eleanor Talmadge, in Beaufort, S.C. The chessmen remained in South Carolina until her death in 2011 when they were passed to Peter Carpenter, a Marine veteran and Tom's son, in Payson, Ariz.

Soon after arriving in Arizona in early 2012, the perceptive Peter observed the barely legible "W H C" on the lid of the old tea box in which the chessmen always traveled. On further inspection, the same initials faintly appeared through the dust and grime on several of their underbases. Peter was galvanized into action.

He contacted the North China Marines' computer website, created and maintained by John Powers of Wittenburg, Wis. Carpenter asked how to contact the person who might match the mysterious W H C. He was advised to telephone William Howard Chittenden in Wheaton, Ill., to see if I could help resolve the matter. The phone conversation between Pete and me quickly confirmed the final destination for the peripatetic chessmen.



For nearly 70 years, from 1943 to 2012, I wondered about the fate of the chessmen. That question has been answered now ... mystery solved ... case closed.

Editor's note: William Howard "Chick" Chittenden was a corporal in the Marine Detachment, American Embassy, Peking, at the time of his capture. At war's end and his release as a POW, he held the grade of platoon sergeant.

There were three detachments of Marines—Peking (Peiping), Tientsin and Chinwangtao—in China at the beginning of the war, a total of 203 Marines captured. Mr. Chittenden reports that at 93, he is one of five remaining. His book, "From China Marine to Jap POW: My 1,364 Day Journey Through Hell," originally was published in 1996 and still can be found via the Internet. He asked that Leatherneck highlight his gratitude to Peter Carpenter, whose Marine determination pushed him to find W H C.

