The Emperor's Foreign Bodyguards

Robert Neff

In the late 19th century, political instability in Seoul had increased to the point that the Korean monarch, Emperor Gojong, no longer felt safe, even within the confines of his own palace. He was surrounded by domestic and foreign intrigue — "Japanese spies and threats every way he turned."[1] According to Edward S. (Tex) O'Reilly, a former US soldier, the emperor was desperate to maintain Korea's independence, "but the Koreans were not fighting men; they were aristocrats. [They] were still the old-time, highly civilized, peaceful Orientals, interested in philosophy and poetry and art, and they stood no chance against the Japanese, who had abandoned all that and were going in for Western methods."[2] The emperor realized he needed foreign bodyguards — who could not be corrupted by domestic politics — so, he summoned one of the "princes of the royal family" and sent him to Shanghai, which was considered the best place in the Far East to recruit the rougher type of men needed for potentially dangerous work. O'Reilly recalled:

> If you went into the main streets of Shanghai at that time and called out 'I have a warrant for your arrest' half the white men within hearing would start at the dead run for the back country. There were dozens of men in Shanghai then who had fought on four continents and in half a dozen wars apiece, and who were only looking out for another chance to get busy.[3]

Once the young noble arrived in Shanghai, he immediately visited the Western consulates. The first on his list was the American consulate. Everyone knew that if you were looking for fighting men your best chance of obtaining them was either at the United States consulate or the British consulate. If they couldn't be found there, they couldn't be found anywhere in Shanghai.

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[1] Lowell Thomas and Tex O'Reilly, *Born to Raise Hell* (London, England: Hutchinson & Co., 1939), 117.
[2] Ibid.
[3] "The Emperor's body guard," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois), January 6, 1904, 6.

Figure 1. Edward S. (Tex) O'Reilly / Public Domain

The young prince was directed to the only American bar in Shanghai at the time; its name has been forgotten with the passage of time, but its chief patron and presiding genius, Colonel Fitz Edward Higginson, was immortalized by O'Reilly's accounts. "The colonel had a pair of long, white, waxed moustaches that were enough to strike terror to the soul of any oriental. Besides, he always wore his sword" — a sword that he claimed to have won during the Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861.[4] He was a dyed-in-the-wool Confederate, born in Richmond, Virginia, who supposedly "left America because he would not swear allegiance to the United States." He made his way to China where he was eventually made consul at one of the smaller open ports but due to a change of the administration in the United States, "he handed over his commission to his successor and moved his carpetsack down to Shanghai. One reason why he didn't go any further was because he didn't have the price."[5]

The Korean prince, who was impressed with Higginson's appearance and "awful dignity," immediately hired him to put together a force of 60

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

to 75 men. The colonel had no problem finding men — men with checkered pasts. Hector McAllister was a former captain in an English cavalry regiment with a gambling problem. One night, when Lady Luck refused to give him good cards at the poker table, he ended up losing "a thousand pounds more money than he was able to pay."[6] It is unclear what happened immediately after he was called upon to pay his debt as the only thing he could recall was waking up on the dock at Hong Kong — "wondering how he got there."[7]

Confusingly, there was another man with a similar name, Hector MacDonald, "a little, red-whiskered, fighting Scotch sea captain ... who always spoke with a broad Scotch accent, a burr to every word."[8] He was definitely a character — in fact, he was such a character that he may have been the inspiration for the main character in a series of books known as Captain Kettle.

> He was a little man, about five feet five and weighing around 120, but he was a peppery little fellow who would fight anything or anybody. He had fiery red hair and a Vandyke beard. Every morning he spent an hour or two fussing with that beard, combing and snipping till he had it clipped just so, and he dressed like a fashion plate.[9]

He was truly a ship's captain — complete with his master's certificate — but he was not content to just sail the seas. He had served in a dozen armies, had a stint in South Africa with the Mounted Police and later was one of the handful of police officers in Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. There were few places in the world that MacDonald had not visited.

Frank O'Leary was a scholar turned soldier of fortune. "He was one of the dark Irish — brown eyes, black hair with two white locks in it." He was a quiet and unobtrusive type of person — never raising his voice but somehow managing to stand out in the crowd. He graduated from Dublin University and the Sorbonne and then taught Romance Languages at the University of Cambridge. He apparently enjoyed academia, but he yearned for adventure; thus it was no surprise when he suddenly abandoned his books and "went rambling around the world, and enlisted as a private in the American army."[10] When he completed his term of

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Lowell Thomas and Tex O'Reilly, *Born to Raise Hell*, 49, 115.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 48.

service with Uncle Sam, he made his way to Shanghai in search of new adventures. Perhaps he was friends with a man known only as Jones (apparently he was unwilling to give his true name). This man "had fought in revolutions all over Central and South America and came out to China in an interlude."[11]

All of these men were interesting but their exploits and their legacy paled in comparison to William Young, "a remarkable man [and] always looking for trouble."[12]

> He was not a soldier but a captain of one of the sealing ships that poached in forbidden waters off the Siberian coast. He had been a noted sheriff in the Californian mining camps, and all through the East he was known as the boss of the poaching fleet.
>
> He was partly Scandinavian and looked like a Viking. He stood over six feet, a big-boned man with bright yellow hair, bright blue eyes and a long yellow moustache. Poaching seals in Russian waters was a man-sized job; the sealing fleet ran a gauntlet of Russian, Japanese, and American gunboats in the Arctic, and those sealers were the hardest bunch of men in the world.
>
> Every year they came down to Hakodate in northern Japan to sell their season's catch of pelts, and when they came in the Japanese police backed right out of towns and left it to them. Hakodate was a wild town when the sealers were in; every year there were fights and riots and killings, till Captain Bill Young took hold.
>
> He became the ruler of Hakodate. He was law and order in that town. He made the business deal for all the furs, got the money and divided it. In case of dispute or trouble Captain Bill was judge, and his verdict was accepted. Everybody respected his honesty and his judgment, but if anybody didn't accept his decision Bill Young enforced it." [13]

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[11] "The Emperor's body guard." In 1912, O'Reilly, Jones and another man named O'Keefe were arrested for attempted to transport arms from El Paso to Mexico. One newspaper account referred to "These three men who, it is alleged, attempted to organize a filibuster party to invade the state of Sonora." "Filibusters are in more trouble," *The Tuscon Citizen* (Tuscon, Arizona), September 27, 1912, 3.

[12] "The Emperor's body guard"; Lowell Thomas and Tex O'Reilly, *Born to Raise Hell*, 115.

[13] Lowell Thomas and Tex O'Reilly, *Born to Raise Hell*, 116.

Colonel Higginson was "too old to get into the Korean trouble" so he appointed Captain Young to serve as the commander of the bodyguard; O'Leary was to serve as his first lieutenant, Allister as his second lieutenant and, surprisingly, Edward S. O'Reilly (who was only 18) to serve as first sergeant. The annual wages were quite impressive: Young received $3,000 while the other three men received about $2,500. The general enlisted men (privates) received between $1000 and $1,200. All wages were paid in American gold dollars which were worth quite a bit more than the standard silver trade dollars used in the ports.

Within a week all preparations were completed and the 60 some men were loaded onto a dilapidated steamship (O'Reilly described it as being condemned) with their "baggage, a clean collar each, and an awful thirst."[14] They soon arrived at Chemulpo and were quickly assembled on the dock — in regular military order.

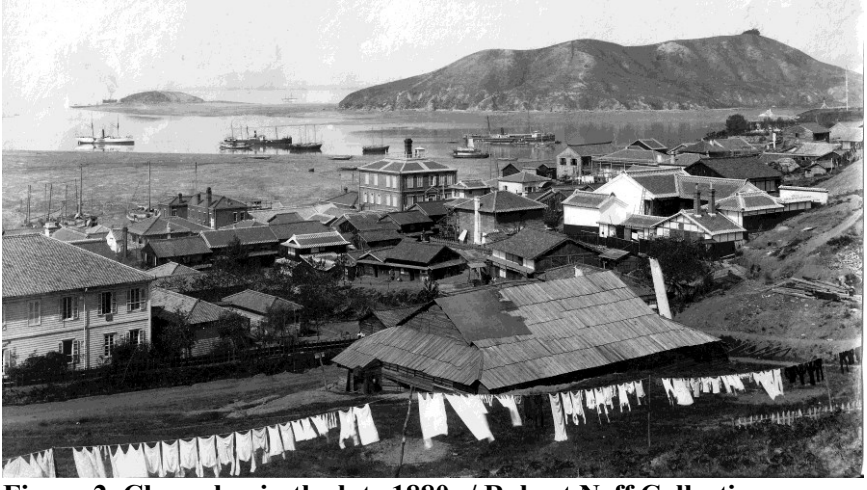

Figure 2. Chemulpo in the late 1880s / Robert Neff Collection

"I am not denying that we are a fearsome looking lot," O'Reilly recalled. "There wasn't a man in the bunch that stood under six feet. The [Korean] prince got off and marched down the front of us, looking somewhat frightened at the sight. I wasn't blaming him."[15]

The men were then loaded into cattle cars and transported on the new

[14] It isn't clear if this steamship was one of the Korean government steamers or one of the coastal steamships that sailed back and forth between China, Korea and Japan. "The Emperor's body guard."

[15] Apparently the sea air did MacDonald good because he seems to have suddenly grown some seven inches on the short journey. "The Emperor's body guard."

railroad to Seoul where they were paraded through the streets. "Seoul trembled at the sight of us, and well it might." As soon as the men arrived at their quarters they put down their bags and immediately went out looking "for fodder and other amusement" — they were, after all, "powerfully thirsty." By midnight, only about half of the men returned to their quarters, the rest of the men "had become entangled with the soldiers attached to the Japanese [legation]." The foreign bodyguard soundly thrashed their Japanese opponents and spent the rest of the night celebrating their victory — returning to their quarters at about noon.

The Japanese minister to Korea was not amused. He declared that he would regard the establishment of the foreign bodyguard as "a distinctly hostile act" by the Korean government and would act accordingly. The Korean emperor, unwilling to offend the Japanese, sent word that the foreign bodyguard was to be disbanded and sent away. Unfortunately for the Korean monarch, the discharged Westerners strongly objected to being fired and resorted to extortion.

> We were all well-armed, and we walked into a hotel near the railway station, a Korean hotel but foreign style and comfortable, and informed the proprietor that we were taking possession in the name of the Emperor. We chased out all the guests and moved in. Then at a ships' chandler's we got everything we needed for a little war, signing chits for our supplies in the Emperor's name. And we notified the Emperor that we reported for duty and were awaiting his orders.[16]

Sympathetically, O'Reilly acknowledged that there was little the Korean emperor could do to help himself or to maintain Korea's independence as the European powers and their representatives were "backing Japan for her coming war with Russia … Korea didn't have a chance." [17] The emperor yielded to the pressure exerted by the foreign community — led by the Japanese — and sent a detachment of Korean police to force the foreign bodyguards from the hotel. Their attempt failed and resulted in the police being disarmed and chased away.

> Then the consuls began coming, one after another. They raved and stormed and told Bill Young we had to get out, but he did not see it that way. We were comfortably settled in the hotel, the

[16] Lowell Thomas and Tex O'Reilly, *Born to Raise Hell*, 117.
[17] Ibid.

> servants were taking fine care of us, and we were signing for everything in the Emperor's name. Everything was run in [a] strict military manner; sentries were posted, guards changed regularly.[18]

To ensure order was maintained, Young had all the hard liquor taken from the small hotel bar and locked up. He informed the men that "there [would] be no drinking here, except beer." Apparently the hotel didn't have enough beer so "a squad went out and commandeered a whole wagonload of beer." Of course the wagon's driver was given "a receipt in due form" and the men had all they wanted to drink.[19] O'Reilly was careful to note that despite all the beer consumed, nobody got drunk.

The foreign consuls were not pleased and two or three of them threatened to land Japanese marines from the warships at Chemulpo and storm the hotel. Young defiantly challenged them to do so, declaring, "We are the Emperor's bodyguard. If Japanese marines land on Korea soil, of course we'll fight them."[20]

It isn't clear if he was bluffing but the men were convinced that no Japanese marines would be landed as there was too much international jealousy and no one wanted to inadvertently trigger the start of the impending Russo-Japanese War. However, it did not keep them from issuing threats. The bodyguards received ultimatums almost daily. These proclamations were subsequently ripped up and Young re-emphasized that, as members of the "Emperor's official bodyguard," they would not desert their post until commanded to do so by the emperor himself.

Finally, after nearly two weeks, the foreign consuls went to the hotel in a body and bemoaned the impossible situation, declaring Young and his men's actions as piracy. Young responded by reminding the consuls that he and his men had been hired by the Korean government — with a year's contract — and had reported for duty and were awaiting orders. They could not be fired and that everything the men had taken was paid for chits, properly signed in the emperor's name. "That is not piracy," he declared.

The exasperated British consul, grim and white, stood up and issued a final ultimatum that unless the men vacated the hotel and, subsequently, Korea, he would have no choice but to land British troops — he added, he had already received the authority to do this drastic act.

Young "was not a man to back down for the British Empire" and countered:

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

> Well, there is a simple way to settle this question. The Korean government signed a contract with me, guaranteeing every man here a year's wage of twelve hundred dollars. I am responsible to these men for that amount. Now, if the Korean government has that much money, it is going to stand by that contract. That money is going to be paid. When it is paid I'll take these men out by the next boat. Until it is paid we stay right here. And if you want to land British troops […] land them.[21]

The consuls then went away and conferred with one another and the representatives of the Korean government. Within a few days cheques drawn upon the Hong Kong Bank were delivered. Young had won, but there were conditions — the cheques were only payable at the bank's Shanghai branch. The men were aboard the next steamship bound for Shanghai.

This is a wonderful tale narrated in the same manner as the dime novels which were popular during this period. It is based on O'Reilly's accounts with a good deal of artistic license in order to blend them together. While this would normally be an egregious act, it seems justifiable considering O'Reilly's accounts are nothing more than a blend of truth, exaggerations and outright lies. A foreign bodyguard was established in September 1898, but it was very short-lived (less than a month) and O'Reilly was not a member — in fact, during this period, he was in Chicago enlisting in the U.S. Army and only arrived in Asia (the Philippines) in late 1899.

While the relatively unknown events surrounding the Korean emperor's foreign bodyguard are not as exciting and dramatic as O'Reilly made them, they are, nonetheless, interesting and deserve more than just a passing reference in Korean history books.

The real story

In the early months of 1898, the political situation in Seoul was volatile and Russia enjoyed a great deal of influence on the peninsula. Its military officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were engaged in training the Korean military and also acted as an informal bodyguard for the Korean emperor. The Russo-Korean Bank was established which would allow it "to issue notes and mint coins, be entrusted with paying interest on foreign loans the Korean government made with other nations, the

[21] Ibid.

collection of Korean revenue and payment of salaries for Korean officials and to establish branch offices at other ports within the kingdom."[22] Russia also sought to establish a naval coaling station on Deer Island (Yeongdo) at Fusan (Busan). Russia's increasing influence was opposed by many — especially the Independence Club[23] — and there were frequent protests.

Figure 3. Kim Hong-nuik stands in front of the Russian Legation in the distance, sometime prior to 1898. / Robert Neff Collection

There were also assassination attempts. Kim Hong-nuik, arguably, one of the most hated men in Seoul, was the interpreter at the Russian Legation and held various powerful positions in the Korean government. His rise to power and subsequent fall were truly the epitome of Machiavellian politics. On February 22, while returning to the Russian Legation from Deoksu Palace, he was suddenly set upon by three assassins — one armed with a sword — near the British Legation. Kim managed to escape, suffering only minor injuries — but it could have been much worse.[24] Swords were

[22] Robert Neff, "The short-lived Russo-Korean Bank of 1898," *The Korea Times,* March 6, 2022.

[23] The Independence Club was a group of progressive Koreans who sought to bring about reforms in the government. This often brought them into conflict with the monarch and his court.

[24] Robert Neff, "Assassins in Seoul's streets in 1898: Kim Hong-nuik," *The*

not the assassins' only tools; there were several attempts (some successful) made upon Korean politicians using explosives.

Faced with increasingly anti-Russian sentiment, the emperor extracted himself from their influence by dismissing the Russian military instructors, closing the bank and refusing to grant the coaling station in Fusan. It was a bold move that left the Korean monarch in a vulnerable position and opened the way for the Japanese government to exert its own influence.

By summer's end, Seoul smoldered with unrest and Gojong grew wary of his own court and military — afraid he would be overthrown or even killed by one of the factions vying for control. In mid-August, the emperor summoned Clarence Greathouse, his American legal adviser, several times so that they could formulate a plan to establish a foreign bodyguard.

There are no records of these conversations so we are forced to rely upon a third-party source — Elizabeth Greathouse, the adviser's mother, who kept meticulous diaries during her nearly decade-long stay in Korea. Most entries are about weather, her aches and pains, people who visited her and her constant concern for her son, but there are occasional tidbits that provide us with information that can be found nowhere else.

We know from her diary that on August 15, her son went to the palace and had a 'very agreeable" two-hour-long audience — "a business interview" — with Gojong.[25] Upon his return, he informed his mother to start preparing for a trip but did not elaborate as to their destination or when they would leave. On the 20th, he was again summoned to the palace where he had a "very pleasant audience with the Emperor."[26] She said "he seemed to be in good spirits for the time being anyway."[27] I believe the person she was referring to as being in good spirits was her son — he was ill at the time — but it could also have been the emperor, as the trial for a number of Korean officials accused of a coup attempt was ongoing. When Clarence Greathouse (hereafter referred to as Greathouse) returned, he told his mother they would travel to Chemulpo on the morning of the 22nd and sail to China the following day aboard the *Genkai Maru*.

Elizabeth's diary never mentions the reason for their travel. Her entries are complaints of her poor health, the people she met on board the steamer, and a degree of pride in her son for not suffering from seasickness. They arrived in Shanghai on August 26 and rented rooms at the Astor House, "the largest first class hotel in the place but I hear the highest charges, but

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Korea Times, February 19, 2022.

[25] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entry for August 15, 1898*, diary, University of Kentucky, Mary and Clarence Greathouse Papers, 1803-1905.

[26] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entries for August 20 and 21, 1898.*

[27] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entry for August 21, 1898.*

I have not asked my son as he says I have nothing to do with that."[28]

Figure 4. King Gojong (later Emperor Gwangmu) in early 1884 / Robert Neff Collection

We do not know how Greathouse went about recruiting men but we can assume — judging from his mother's diary — that he used his personal connections with diplomats and naval officers. John Goodnow, Thomas Roberts Jernigan and G. H. Eichelberger, the consul general, ex-consul general and marshal (respectively) of the U.S. consulate in Shanghai, often visited Greathouse's room.[29] In addition to them, Pavel Andreevich Dmitrevskii, the Russian consul general, was also a frequent visitor.[30]

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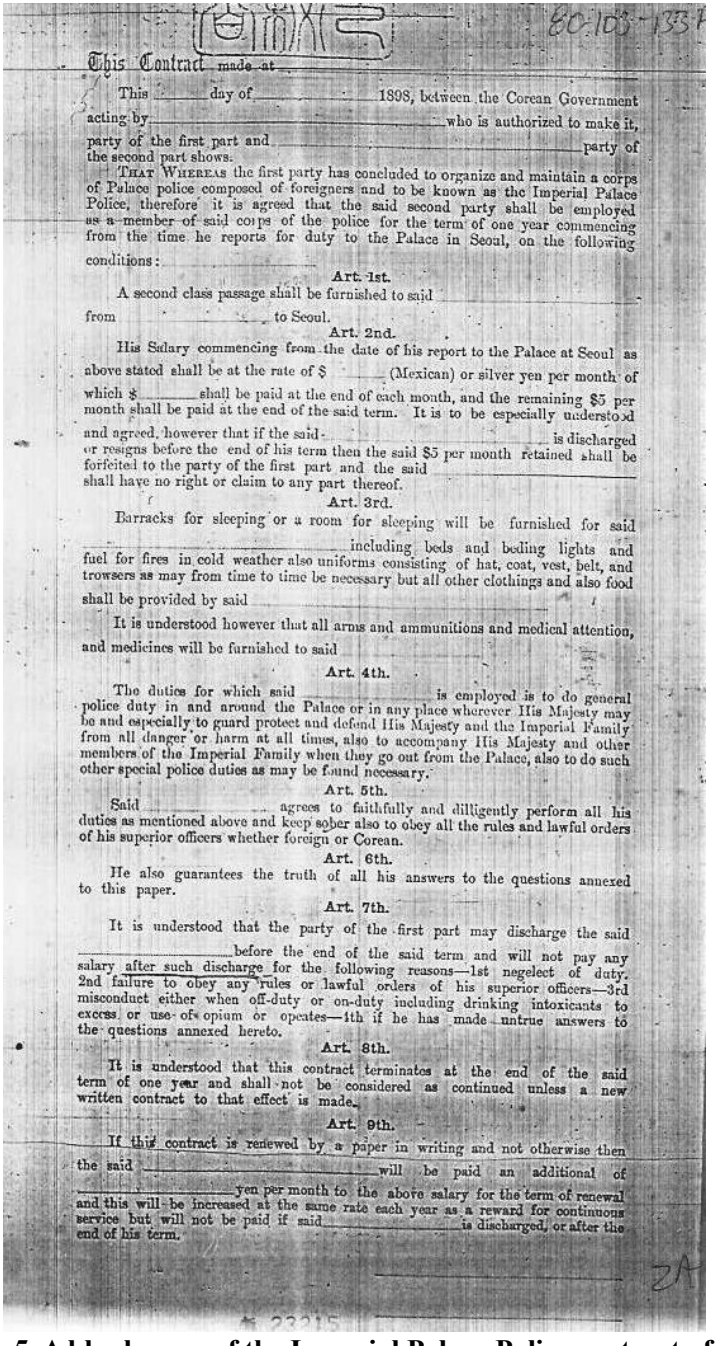
[28] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entry for August 26, 1898.*

[29] John Goodnow (1858-1907) was consul general at Shanghai from 1897 to 1905 when he was forced to resign for alleged misconduct including intimidation and breaking and entering into a fellow US citizen's residence. Thomas Roberts Jernigan (1847-1920) was U.S. consul in Kobe, Japan, from 1885 to 1889 and he probably corresponded often with Greathouse who was consul general at Yokohama during this same period. Jernigan was later consul general at Shanghai from 1893 to 1897 and continued to live in that port serving as chairman of the Shanghai International Settlement and working for Standard Oil. Almost nothing is known about Eichelberger except he was marshal for a couple of years.

[30] Pavel Andreevich Dmitrevskii (1850-99) and his wife were frequent visitors to the Greathouse residence in the early 1890s when Dmitrevskii served in the Russian Legation in Seoul.



This Contract made at _____

This _____ day of _____ 1898, between the Corean Government acting by _____ who is authorized to make it, party of the first part and _____ party of the second part shows:

That Whereas the first party has concluded to organize and maintain a corps of Palace police composed of foreigners and to be known as the Imperial Palace Police, therefore it is agreed that the said second party shall be employed as a member of said corps of the police for the term of one year commencing from the time he reports for duty to the Palace in Seoul, on the following conditions:

Art. 1st.

A second class passage shall be furnished to said _____ from _____ to Seoul.

Art. 2nd.

His Salary commencing from the date of his report to the Palace at Seoul as above stated shall be at the rate of $ _____ (Mexican) or silver yen per month of which $ _____ shall be paid at the end of each month, and the remaining $5 per month shall be paid at the end of the said term. It is to be especially understood and agreed, however that if the said _____ is discharged or resigns before the end of his term then the said $5 per month retained shall be forfeited to the party of the first part and the said _____ shall have no right or claim to any part thereof.

Art. 3rd.

Barracks for sleeping or a room for sleeping will be furnished for said _____ including beds and beding lights and fuel for fires in cold weather also uniforms consisting of hat, coat, vest, belt, and trowsers as may from time to time be necessary but all other clothings and also food shall be provided by said _____

It is understood however that all arms and ammunitions and medical attention, and medicines will be furnished to said _____

Art. 4th.

The duties for which said _____ is employed is to do general police duty in and around the Palace or in any place wherever His Majesty may be and especially to guard protect and defend His Majesty and the Imperial Family from all danger or harm at all times, also to accompany His Majesty and other members of the Imperial Family when they go out from the Palace, also to do such other special police duties as may be found necessary.

Art. 5th.

Said _____ agrees to faithfully and dilligently perform all his duties as mentioned above and keep sober also to obey all the rules and lawful orders of his superior officers whether foreign or Corean.

Art. 6th.

He also guarantees the truth of all his answers to the questions annexed to this paper.

Art. 7th.

It is understood that the party of the first part may discharge the said _____ before the end of the said term and will not pay any salary after such discharge for the following reasons—1st negelect of duty. 2nd failure to obey any rules or lawful orders of his superior officers—3rd misconduct either when off-duty or on-duty including drinking intoxicants to excess or use of opium or opeates—4th if he has made untrue answers to the questions annexed hereto.

Art. 8th.

It is understood that this contract terminates at the end of the said term of one year and shall not be considered as continued unless a new written contract to that effect is made.

Art. 9th.

If this contract is renewed by a paper in writing and not otherwise then the said _____ will be paid an additional of _____ yen per month to the above salary for the term of renewal and this will be increased at the same rate each year as a reward for continuous service but will not be paid if said _____ is discharged, or after the end of his term.

Figure 5. A blank copy of the Imperial Palace Police contract of 1898. The original is at Kyujanggak at Seoul National University.

On September 5, 30 men each signed a one-year contract with the Korean government to serve in the Imperial Palace Police and each confirmed he was "not given to the use of 'opium or opiates,' that he had no disease, [and] was not 'intemperate' in the use of liquors, etc."[31] According to the contract, each man would receive $70 (silver Mexican trade dollars) per month for general police duty in and around the palace and was expected to "especially guard, protect and defend His Majesty and the Imperial Family from all danger or harm at all times."[32]

Over the next couple of days, Greathouse and his men were kept busy preparing to move to Seoul. Part of this preparation involved helping some members of the Imperial Palace Police (the Foreign Bodyguard) to satisfy their debts they owed to their boarding houses.[33]

On the afternoon of September 9, the *Sagami Maru* departed Shanghai. On board were the Greathouses and 30 bodyguards.[34] Judging from Elizabeth's diary, it was not an easy journey due to the weather and all were relieved when the ship arrived at Chemulpo in the early morning of September 14.[35] It was here that they would transfer to one of the small river steamships and sail up the Han River to the river port of Yongsan.

While waiting for the river steamship (it was due to depart later that night), Greathouse learned that an assassination attempt had been made upon the emperor through the use of poison in his coffee. Fortunately for the emperor, he had not consumed any of his coffee but the crown prince and a senior eunuch were not as fortunate, having indulged in the drink, they quickly became deathly ill and there was some speculation they would not recover.[36] This probably reassured Greathouse of the need for

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[31] "The Emperor of Korea's Bodyguard," *The Independent*, September 20, 1898, 2.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entry for September 8, 1898.*

[34] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entry for September 13, 1898.* The list of passengers bound for Chemulpo published in the newspaper were Greathouse, his mother, Emile Martel (a 24-year-old Frenchman who taught at the Korean government school in Seoul), Chang Bong-whan (a Korean official who had accompanied Greathouse to China) and the following men who were members of the bodyguard: A. Le Prince, Ewing, McLees, C. Young, Brown, Wm. Young, Day, Roose, Greenwood, Thibaut, Spencer, Braun, Anderson, and Caughell. It isn't clear why the other members of the bodyguard were not listed on the manifest. At Chefoo, China, where the ship made a short stop, Ferdinand H. Morsel, a German merchant in Chemulpo, joined the passenger list. *North China Herald*, September 12, 1898, 508.

[35] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entries for September 9-13, 1898.*

[36] Robert Neff, "Lowell Thomas and Tex O'Reilly, 19th century Korea" (Two parts), *The Korea Times*, September 8 and 9, 2018.

this bodyguard and he likely anticipated his arrival in Seoul the following morning would be greeted with relief. He was wrong.

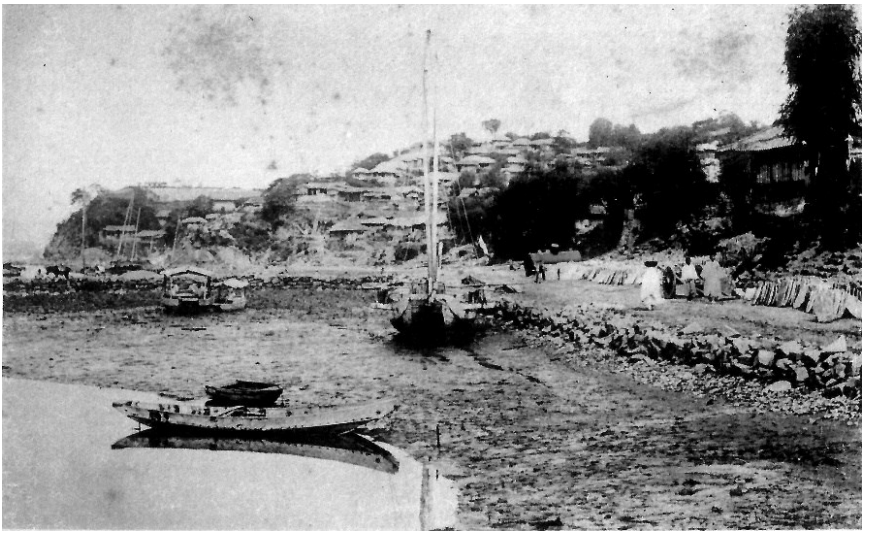

Figure 6. Yongsan in the late 19th century / Robert Neff Collection

According to one unidentified member of the bodyguard:

> As soon as we landed we could easily see we were unpopular. The Emperor had been poisoned the day previous to our arrival, and but for that fact we should have marched straight into the palace and taken up our quarters. As it was the Independent Club were in power, and we could do nothing. We were told, however, that we were to go into the palace the next day.[37]

The men were marched to the Bijno Hotel, which was located across from Deoksu Palace and was the only Western-style hotel in Seoul at the time. The promise that they would be given quarters in the palace was never honored as their presence had created quite a stir.

While waiting for a decision to be made as to their fate, they were taken to the various legations in Seoul and introduced to the diplomatic staff. Greathouse personally took the five British bodyguards to their charge d'affaires and declared the men were "fit to grace any lady's parlor."[38]

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[37] "News of China and Japan," *The Victoria Daily Times* (Victoria, British Columbia), November 22, 1898, 2.

[38] Rodney Gilbert, "Forty-four Years in China," *The Far Eastern Review*,

John Newell Jordan, the British charge d'affaires at the time, would later recall the British members of the bodyguard were "handsome young men, arrayed in frock coats, and all the appurtenances of fashion" and were "persons of education and previous good repute, who for one reason or another had turned soldiers of fortune or gentlemen rovers."[39] According to him, they certainly looked and acted fit for polite society.

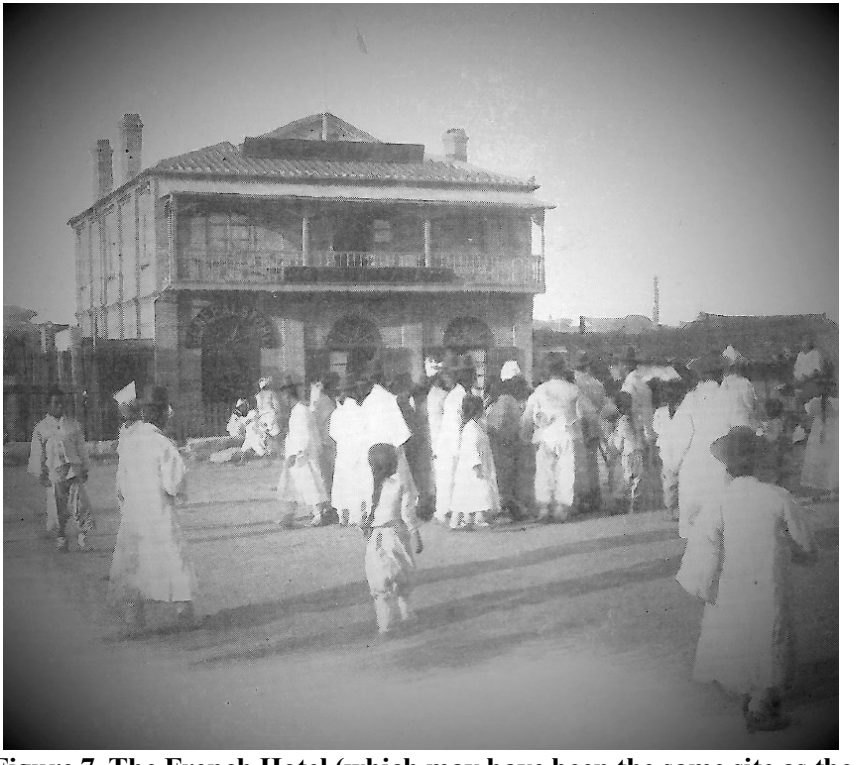

Figure 7. The French Hotel (which may have been the same site as the Bjino Hotel) in 1900 / Robert Neff Collection

However, the passage of time and nostalgia colored Jordan's memories of the bodyguard rather kindly but his diplomatic dispatches gave his true opinion. "The men, who form a motley collection, drawn mostly from the seafaring class, are composed of nine Americans, nine British, five Germans, five French, and two Russians…"[40] It was perhaps from his

March 1920, 135-136.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Mr. Jordan to the Marquess of Salisbury, No. 95, Seoul, September 16, 1898, "Further Correspondence Respecting the Affairs of Corea," Part XI, Confidential

telegraphs to his own government that *The London and China Telegraph* was inspired to christen them the Beachcomber Brigade.[41]

Horace N. Allen, the American minister to Korea, was very vocal about his views of the foreign bodyguards. In a report to the Secretary of State, he described them as "such men as might be expected to be found in a foreign port, willing to engage in some novel enterprise, even though the pay might be small as in this case."[42] He expressed his opposition to the establishment of this bodyguard because "these men in the absence of proper control, will surely be a danger to the peace of the city, and as they are only amenable to their own Consular authorities."[43] He added that his diplomatic contemporaries — the other Western representatives — anticipated trouble with the men and were annoyed with Greathouse for this venture. Concerned that he would be blamed, Allen denied any responsibility or prior knowledge of the enterprise:

> His [Korean] Majesty seems to consider his position so unsafe that he recently commissioned one of the American advisers, Mr. C. R. Greathouse, to proceed to Shanghai and secure for him a guard of thirty foreigners…. I knew nothing of this project till Mr. Greathouse was well on his way. No one outside the palace seems to have known of it. Once before when the employment of a lot of Americans for such a purpose was proposed, I opposed it strongly on the grounds that the presence of such a body of unorganized, undisciplined and uncontrolled men would be a grave source of danger, and I could not allow my countrymen to be introduced for such purpose without protest. The matter was given up, but in this case I was intentionally kept uninformed of the measure.[44]

The editorials in the domestic and foreign newspapers clearly indicated

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(7165), Printed for the use of the Foreign Office, July 1899, 147-148. According to unidentified newspapers in New York and Chicago, up to ten of the men were Black; they and their white counterparts "were selected with great care and have records of daring men." "Local Items," *The Independent*, September 17, 1898, 3; "The New Palace Guard in Korea," *The Japan Weekly Mail*, September 24, 1898, 309; "Letter from Washington," *The Independent*, November 17, 1898, 3.

41 "Korea," *The London and China Telegraph*, November 8, 1898, 1031.

42 H.N. Allen to Secretary of State, No. 145, September 17, 1898, included in *Korean-American Relations*, Vol. 3, ed. Scott S. Burnett (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 50-51.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

displeasure with the foreign bodyguard. The *Japan Weekly Mail* denounced it as "the most ill-advised step yet taken in that curiously and badly administered little empire" and suggested that "the engagement of a band of aliens to protect [the emperor's] palace and his person against his own subjects would at once obtain for him a large measure of unpopularity."[45] It further added: "The spectacle of such a sovereign protected by a body-guard of foreign mercenaries is considerably more shocking than was his flight to the sanctuary of the Russian Legation, and if his people do not soon protest very vigorously against this new state of affairs, we shall be much surprised."[46]

The people did protest. According to *The Independent* — a newspaper published in Seoul by the Independence Club — on September 17, delegations were sent to the various government officials demanding to know why this foreign bodyguard was needed. "The Ministers, one and all, answered that they had not known a thing about the Guard, until the arrival of the thirty Europeans; that they did not approve of the plan and that they would do their utmost to prevent the employment of the Guard."[47] Their claims of having no knowledge of the foreign bodyguards until their arrival contradicts Allen's claim that it was known to the palace officials.

The following afternoon, the Independence Club held a protest in front of the Foreign Office demanding the foreign bodyguard to be dismissed.

> The reasons for this popular opposition to the Guard were declared to be (1) that there is no need for a foreign guard in the Palace; (2) that its presence would excite feelings of jealousy and resentment in the rank and file of the Korean soldiery; (3) that the measure would alienate the loyal populace from the cause of the Imperial family; (4) that the presence of a foreign guard might give rise to international complications with certain Powers; (5) that a force composed of five different nationals with exterritorial rights, might prove an element which the Korean government would find itself utterly incapable of managing; and (6) that the whole scheme it adopted would be a disgrace to the Court which cannot trust its own people, to the Government which can not protect its own Palace; and to the whole nation which entrusts the safety of its own Sovereign to the care of a band of Foreigners over whom no Korean, the

[45] "The New Palace Guard in Korea."
[46] Ibid.
[47] "Editorial — No Foreign Guard," *The Independent*, September 20, 1898, 2.

Emperor not excepted, can exercise any disciplinary control.[48]

Pak Che-soon, the acting minister for foreign affairs, swore he would "sooner resign than sign the contract engaging the foreign guard."[49] On the night of the 19th, Pak proudly informed the Independence Club "that the Ministers of State had decided in the Council not to engage the Foreign Guard."[50]

Our unidentified bodyguard regarded the Independence Club and its acts as nefarious and self-serving:

> General Greathouse did his utmost to gain an audience with the Emperor, but the Independent Club frustrated his every attempt. His majesty was kept a close prisoner; no one could see him. The members of this club, who really ruled the country, and do just what they please, are composed for the most part of ex-officials. Soon after our arrival about a thousand members of the club held a midnight meeting, at which it was decided that we were not to be the royal bodyguard. They said that they could look after their own sovereign without our assistance — they had their own soldiers.
>
> The club would not believe that our only object was to guard the Emperor's life; they had an idea that we had something else up our sleeve.
>
> They rightly feared that if we were present they would not be able to obtain the Emperor's signature just how and when they wanted it, in the usual persuasive but rather uncomfortable manner, viz., by standing over His Majesty with a drawn sword.[51]

He also suggested that the Japanese were involved. "The emperor's

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Pak Che-soon (박제순, 朴濟淳) was born in Yongin, Gyeonggi Province, on December 7, 1858 and died in Seoul on June 20, 1916. His career was one mixed with Machiavellian politics and shame. He was one of the signers of the Eulsa Treaty of 1905 in which Korea was made a protectorate of Japan. Shortly afterwards, he was made prime minister — a position he held twice — and during this period he also signed the Japan-Korea Treaty on August 22, 1910, in which Korea was annexed by Japan. Up until his death, he held several positions within the Japanese government. He is now remembered in Korean history as one of the Five Eulsa Traitors.

[50] "Local Items," *The Independent*, September 22, 1898, 3.

[51] "News of China and Japan."

successor arrived from Japan, and expected to start business at once, but the old emperor positively refused to die." The poisoned coffee proved to be non-fatal because an inadequate amount of arsenic had been used and in the subsequent days "24 people, including a little girl, were implicated in the poisoning of His Majesty."[52] Kim Hong-nuik was later discovered to have orchestrated the poisoning and paid for it with his own life.[53]

While our unknown narrator did not mention the Russians, the *Japan Weekly Mail* felt obliged to point out that earlier in the year the Korean government had sarcastically thanked the former Russian representative for his country's assistance. In just the space of three or four months, Russia had taught Korea "how to take care of herself single-handed" and, because of this, Korea was now able "to be its own protector." With this in mind, the present Russian representative blandly "asked the Korean government whether its method of protecting itself was to organize a palace guard of foreigners."[54] Unfortunately, the newspaper failed to provide the Korean government's answer — if there was one.

Along with the emperor's slow recovery and the strong opposition by the Russian and Japanese representatives, as well as the Independence Club, the bodyguards were convinced they would never see the inside of the palace. According to Jordan:

> They proceeded to paint the Korean capital red, and celebrated their arrival in a fashion which was absolutely unprecedented, even in a town which had entertained a Russian bodyguard. Day and night for three weeks the city reverberated with their festivities, and General Clarence Greathouse was driven nearly to distraction, trying to round them up and refit them for the parlors of Seoul.[55]

Apparently the *Japan Weekly Mail*'s editor was quite pleased to print: "Of course the company of castaways picked up in the highways and byways of Shanghai to guard the Imperial Personage of Korea, has already created a 'situation' in the little capital. We all expected as much."[56] He may have been referring to the men's drinking and carousing but I suspect it was more about the political storm their presence had caused.

Elizabeth Greathouse's diary entries, while not able to disprove

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Robert Neff, "September 11, coffee and Russia in 19th century Korea."
[54] "The New Palace Guard in Korea."
[55] Rodney Gilbert, "Forty-four Years in China."
[56] "The New Palace Guard in Korea."

Jordan's recollections, seem to paint some of the men who visited her in a positive light. She described Brown as being "very much pleased with the visits and likes Seoul."[57] Day was another frequent visitor and spent a lot of time with her son. Judging from circumstantial evidence, William Young was the leader of the bodyguards and was also a frequent visitor. The latter two's frequent visits were most likely connected to the contract negotiations.

On September 22, Elizabeth noted that "All the 30 men have come this morning to call on my son, had a number of chairs sent to his office now and he talked with them a long time."[58] She was not privy to their discussions but according to our unidentified bodyguard:

> We were first offered our expenses and three months' pay. We wouldn't look at the offer, but held out for a full year's pay, in which we were supported by General Greathouse. Our demands were granted, and each of us is now richer by $840.[59]

In O'Reilly's fictional account of events, the men were all paid with bank cheques that could only be drawn upon the bank in Shanghai. It seemed somewhat plausible but Elizabeth's diary entry for September 25 indicates otherwise:

> My son and Mr. Day only got home tonight when they found the money for the man had got in and Mr. Day & [Clarence Greathouse's Korean assistant] slept in the room where the packages of money were deposited, and now the General at a late hour has gone to bed.[60]

Once the men received their money, they all departed on the 27th for Chemulpo and then most of them boarded the *Chow Chow Foo* — a steamship chartered by the Korean government — and departed for Shanghai.[61] The men had the option of remaining in Korea and working for the Korean government in other capacities but would have forfeited their twelve months' severance pay. Apparently William Young contemplated accepting a position as marshal for the American Legation (a jailor was needed for the trial surrounding the murder of George Lake)

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[57] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entry for September 18, 1898.*
[58] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entry for September 22, 1898*.
[59] "News of China and Japan."
[60] Mary Elizabeth Greathouse, *Entry for September 25, 1898.*
[61] *The Korea Repository* Vol. 5, September 1898, 356.

but for some unexplained reason — perhaps funding — he did not accept the position. [62]

"When we left [Chemulpo] the emperor was still a prisoner," claimed the unidentified bodyguard. "Poor wretch, he wants looking after."[63]

While many were pleased the foreign bodyguard was gone, criticism of the scheme continued for some time. *The Independent* lamented "$25,200.00 gone!" [64] Jordan remarked that although the amount of money spent to resolve the issue was high, "their riddance [was] considered cheap at any price."[65] The *Japan Weekly Mail* could not resist a final barb:

> We are sorry that the crisis should have come so precipitately, for it must have proved very interesting to observe what kind of training and organization Mr. Greathouse would adopt with his Shanghai recruits in order to qualify them for preventing the Emperor's cooks from putting poison into the Imperial coffee.[66]

So what became of the foreign bodyguards when they left Korea? It appears, judging from newspaper accounts — although the veracity cannot be determined — that they immediately sought employment in a similar manner with the Chinese.

> Early this morning (Tuesday) a United States Consular officer, with 30 armed members of the recently discharged Korean bodyguard, invaded the Foreign Bureau, with the intention of rescuing Huang, former Chinese Consul at Singapore, and lately Minister Designate of China to Japan, who was arrested on Monday by order of the Empress Dowager in connection with the reform movement. Huang, however, refused to go, and the party retired crestfallen.[67]

From this point, the men fade into history, their full names lost with the passage of time. Except one. William H. Young became an American hero.

Born in Vermont in 1848, Young went through life as a warrior — first

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[62] Ibid.
[63] "News of China and Japan."
[64] "Local Items," *The Independent*, September 29, 1898, 3.
[65] Rodney Gilbert, "Forty-four Years in China."
[66] "The New Palace Guard in Korea."
[67] *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 12, 1898, 6; "Refused to be rescued," *The Dunn County News* (Menomonie, Wisconsin), October 14, 1898, 3.

as a scout in Montana and the Dakotas during the Great Sioux War of 1876 and later as a soldier of fortune. He quickly gained a reputation and was highly regarded by those who knew of his military exploits. After being dismissed from the Korean government's service, he made his way to the Philippines in early 1899 to "help out the boys" — referring to the American forces engaged in the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902.

General Henry Ware Lawton, who had heard of Young's exploits during the Great Sioux War, hired him on the spot and made him chief scout. Young chose 25 scouts — all from different units including the 1st North Dakota Volunteers, 2nd Oregon Volunteers and 4th U.S. Cavalry — and molded them into an effective reconnaissance unit that not only effectively supported Lawton's Northern Campaign but also captured the American public's attention with their daringness. This daringness proved to be his undoing. On May 15, 1899, Young died from gunshot wounds received in a small battle for a bridge near San Isidro.[68]

As for Edward S. (Tex) O'Reilly, he, too, went on to become famous for his (literally) unbelievable exploits. Unfortunately, many of his exploits are questionable – likely either exaggerated or fabricated. Born in Dennison, Texas, on August 15, 1880, he was determined to wander the world. He lied about his age and enlisted in the army on September 13, 1898, beginning a long career of adventure and conflict. According to his own accounts, he was involved in the Spanish-American War, the Philippine insurrection, the Boxer Rebellion in China, revolts in Venezuela, the Mexican Revolution and war in Morocco. He served as a private in the U.S. Army, an English teacher in Japan, a police sergeant in Shanghai's International Settlement, the first sergeant in the Korean Foreign Bodyguard, and an officer in the Spanish Foreign Legion. As the years passed, his exploits grew. According to his obituary, he served under eight flags including the previously mentioned places as well as Honduras and Nicaragua and joined the French Foreign Legion in 1924.

Professor Robert Bickers of Bristol University, who researches and writes about foreigners in China (especially those serving in the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs Service), noted O'Reilly's account of his service in China as a policeman was filled with "much of the predictable stuff of salacious exposes and popular fictions of the coast, but also has a ring of truth to some of it." Bickers confesses that although he cannot find any evidence to support O'Reilly's claims, "there seems to be no reason to doubt he was for some short time a Shanghai policeman, despite his

[68] Robert Neff, "William H. Young and the emperor's bodyguard," *The Korea Times,* September 13, 2011.

reputation as a spinner of tall, tall tales."[69]

While Bickers is willing to give O'Reilly the benefit of doubt, I can with near certainty declare he never served in Korea nor met William Young. His account of service in Korea was likely gleaned from newspaper articles and the tall tales of soldiers and drifters who claimed to have first-hand knowledge of the events. My brief examination of O'Reilly's books and articles reveal inconsistencies in dates and names — even within the same chapter — and I am reasonably sure other readers will find even more egregious misrepresentations in other chapters.

O'Reilly was a master storyteller able to skillfully blend facts with fantasy to create compelling narratives. He even wrote a script for a silent movie in 1927 titled "Shanghai Bound." Unfortunately no copies of either the movie or the script exists but one can imagine it was filled with adventure.

On December 8, 1946, "the fightingest adventurer" who had been "engaged in more bloody warfare than any other man in this [the United States] or any other country" died in a veterans' hospital in Sunmount, New York.[70] No longer would his "libelous outburst to the effect that the Irish are the greatest fighters in the world" bring smiles or condemnation from those around him.[71] While his movie has been lost, his legacy lives on as we, his readers, try to separate fact from fiction.

I would like to thank Diane Nars for her invaluable assistance and for providing me with scans of O'Reilly's book.

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[69] Robert Bickers, "Tex O'Reilly, Shanghai Policeman," *Robert Bickers*, January 29, 2013, https://robertbickers.net/2013/01/29/tex-oreilly-shanghai-policeman.

[70] "Tex O'Reilly, 66, Dies; Fought under 8 Flags," *The Morning News* (Wilmington, Delaware), December 9, 1946, 13.

[71] Stephen M. O'Keefe, "A Crimson Tale," *The Morning Post* (Camden, New Jersey), August 29, 1936, 10.