

Robert O. Wilson: Eyewitness of Nanking 1937-38



Dr. Robert Wilson was an American physician, born in Nanking, China in 1906, the son of Methodist missionaries. Wilson graduated from Princeton University and received his M.D. from Harvard Medical School in 1929. He was appointed to the staff of the University of Nanking Hospital in 1935, arriving in 1936. Along with Minnie Vautrin and John Rabe, he was instrumental in establishing the Nanking Safety Zone. During the Nanking Massacre, Dr. Wilson was the only surgeon remaining in the city. Wilson's diary/letters to his family describe the incredibly heavy load of medical work carried out by him with the help of his colleague Dr. C. S. Trimmer and a few nurses, one of whom was the 67-year-old American, Iva Hynds. Not until April 1938 did Wilson and his staff get some relief. In early June, 1938, Wilson was able to leave Nanking for a furlough in Shanghai. Dr. Wilson testified at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) about the atrocities he had witnessed during the Nanking Massacre.

Sources: *Study Guide For Teachers: Iris Chang—The Rape Of Nanking* by Toronto ALPHA
American Missionary Eyewitnesses to the Nanking Massacre, 1937-1938 published by Yale Divinity
School Library, p.7

Letter of Dr. Robert O. Wilson to His Family Describing Events of December 15-18, 1937

University Hospital
Nanking, China

Dear Family,

You will have to pardon the unceremonious ending of the last installment. When I got home this noon I found that Smith and Steele were leaving for Shanghai on a Japanese destroyer. I had just time to rush upstairs and jam the pages into an envelope which I addressed while they were starting the car. Page 35 is the carbon copy because I couldn't find the original. I didn't even have time to sign my name.

It would be interesting to see what are in the headlines of your papers. We received confirmation today of the sinking of the *U.S.S. Panay* on which all of us were supposed to be, by Japanese bombing. You undoubtedly have fuller information than we have. Our story says that an Italian newspaper correspondent and an American captain of one of the Socony river steamers **were** killed and a number wounded including Hall Paxton. The group were taken directly to Shanghai by the *U.S.S. Oahu* so that we have not seen any of them.

The hospital gets busier every day. We are about up to our normal capacity as far as patients go. There were about thirty admissions today and no discharges. We can't discharge any patients because they have no place to go. About ten of the hundred and fifty cases are medical and obstetrical and the rest are surgical. Neither of our Chinese doctors have the ability to care for them except under careful supervision so that keeps me humping. Yesterday I wrote that I had eleven operations. Today I had ten operations in addition to seeing the patients on the ward. I got up early and made ward rounds on one ward before coming home to breakfast. After breakfast I spent the morning seeing the other wards and then started operating after lunch.

The first case was a policeman who had had a bomb injury to his forearm shattering the radius and severing about three-fourths of the muscles. He had had a tourniquet on for about seven hours and any attempt to stop the hemorrhage would have completely shut off the remainder of the circulation to the hand. There was nothing to do but an amputation. The next case was a poor fellow who had a large piece of metal enter his cheek and break off a portion of the lower jaw. The metal was extracted as well as several teeth imbedded in the broken off portion of the jaw. Then came a series of cases under the fluoroscope with Trim's assistance. One

fellow had a piece of shrapnel in his parotid gland, it having severed his facial nerve. Another had a bullet in his side. It had entered his epigastrium and gone straight through his stomach. He vomited a large quantity of blood and then felt better. His condition is excellent and I don't believe I will have to do a laparotomy on him at all. I got the bullet out of the side without difficulty. Another case had his foot blown off four days ago. He was very toxic and I did open flap amputation of his lower leg. Another case was that of a barber bayoneted by Jap soldiers. The bayonet had cut the back of his neck severing all the muscles right down to the spinal canal, through the interspinous ligaments. He was in shock and will probably die. He is the only survivor of the eight in the shop, the rest having all been killed.

The slaughter of civilians is appalling. I could go on for pages telling of cases of rape and brutality almost beyond belief. Two bayoneted cases are the only survivors of seven street cleaners who were sitting in their headquarters when Japanese soldiers came in and without warning or reason killed five or six of their number and wounded the two that found their way to the hospital. I wonder when it will stop and we will be able to catch up with ourselves again.

Two nights ago [December 16] I was here in the same spot writing a page of this epistle and when to put it with the rest I couldn't find it. I hope the Japanese haven't located. Today mark sixth day [December 18, 1937] of the modern Dante's Inferno, written in huge letters with blood and rape. Murder by the wholesale and rape by the thousands of cases. There seems to be no stop to the ferocity, lust and sadism of the brutes. At first I tried to be pleasant to them to avoid arousing their ire but the smile has gradually worn off and my stare is fully as cool and fishy as theirs.

Tonight as I came back from supper to stay here for the night I found three soldiers had ransacked the place. Miss Hynds had accompanied them to the back gate. Two of them arrived and the other had disappeared. He must be hiding somewhere around the place. I motioned others outside stating in no uncertain terms that this was a *Beikoku Byoyen*. How do you like that? The two that were there allowed themselves to be led out. They had taken Miss Hynd's watch and several other watches and fountain pens as well.

Let me recount some instances occurring in the last two days. Last night the house of one of the Chinese staff members of the university was broken into and two of the women, his relatives, were raped. Two girls, about 16, were raped to death in one of the refugee camps. In the University Middle School where there are 8,000 people the Japs came in ten times last night, over the wall, stole food, clothing, and raped until they were satisfied. They bayoneted one little boy, killing him, and I spent an hour and a half this morning patching up another little boy who had five bayonet wounds including one that penetrated his stomach, a portion of omentum was outside the abdomen. I think he will live.

I just took time out because the third soldier had been found. He was on the fourth floor of the nurses' dormitory where there were fifteen nurses. They were scared within an inch of their lives. I don't know how much he had done before I arrived but he didn't do anything afterwards. He had a watch or two and was starting off with one of the girl's cameras. I motioned for him to give it back to her and to my surprise he obeyed. I then accompanied him to the front door and bid him a fond farewell. Unfortunately he didn't get the swift kick that I mentally aimed at him. One of the earlier ones was toying around with a rather formidable looking pistol which I'm thankful he didn't use.

One man I treated today had three bullet holes. He is the sole survivor of a group of eighty including an eleven-year-old boy who were led out of two buildings within the so-called Safety Zone and taken into the hills west of Tibet Road and there slaughtered. He came to after they had left and found the other seventy-nine dead about him. His three bullet wounds are not serious. To do the Japanese justice there were in the eighty a few ex-soldiers.

One girl I have is a half-wit with some sort of birth injury, I believe. She didn't have any more sense than to claw at a Japanese soldier who was taking away her only bedding. Her reward was a bayonet thrust that cut half the muscles of one side of her neck. Another girl of seventeen has a terrific gash in the neck and is the only

survivor of her family the rest of whom were finished off. She was employed by the International Export Company.

As I left the hospital for supper after finishing my rounds on the 150 cases now under my care the full moon was rising over Purple Mountain and was indescribably beautiful and yet it looked down on a Nanking that was more desolate than it has been since the Tai Ping Rebellion [when the rebels occupied Nanking in the middle of the nineteenth century]. Nine-tenths of the city are totally deserted by Chinese and contain only roving bands of plundering Japanese. The remaining tenth contains almost two hundred thousand terrified citizens.

Last night Mills, Smythe, and Fitch went over in Fitch's car to escort Mills to Ginling to sleep. Minnie Vautrin holds the fort there with several thousand women. When they got to the front gate they were held up by a patrol of Japanese soldiers under the command of a pugnacious, impudent lieutenant. He lined the men on one side and Miss Vautrin, Mrs. Chen and Mrs. Twinem on the other side. He snatched the hats off the men and ordered everyone off the place including the women. Fitch told him he didn't have a place for them to stay but he insisted. They just got into the car when he ordered them back again and again harangued them for some minutes finally sending the men back where they came from. Later we learned that while this was going on some Japanese soldiers had climbed over the wall and helped themselves to sixteen women.

The population faces famine in the near future and there is no provision for winter's fuel. It is not a pleasant winter that we look forward to. It is too bad that the newspaper reporters left on the day they did instead of two days or so later when they could have been more detailed in their reports of the Reign of Terror.

Another interruption to usher two Japanese soldiers off the premises. As I probably won't get much sleep tonight I had better turn in, dressed, right away to get what I can.

Note: Underlines are added by the editor

Source: *American Missionary Eyewitnesses to the Nanking Massacre, 1937-1938* published by Yale Divinity School Library. P.15-18