

Prelude to War.

On Duty with the Shanghai
Volunteer Police Force. 1937.

By Best Overend.

Japan made the first move on the conquest of China and the ultimate domination of Asia. She also had in sight French Indo-China, the Dutch East Indies and India. This idea was flaunted by all the Japanese papers in China, let alone those in Japan. Japan wanted to fight then, because a recent tiff with Moscow, over the Amur River, had disclosed for the first time a Russian policy of conciliation - long thought of in these countries as the prerogative of the English. Conciliation is considered a weakness by Oriental people. Suddenly, Japan felt that Russia would not trouble her unduly along that frontier. There might be isolated clashes, yes, but those more in the spirit of sport than of national consequence. Japan wanted to fight then, because she knew that the nations of

the Continent were concerned over the conflict in Spain - the maze of non-intervention pacts and the scrapping between communism and the various forms of fascism. She hoped that the Powers would pass over a small thing near Peiping. Her guess was good. Japan wanted to fight then, because for the second time in the history of her western imperialistic phase there was an integration of forces within her government. The army, the navy, the economists, the politicians and the industrialists had all been drawn together. Under the Premier, Prince Konoye, this was for the glory and protection of Japan and the defence of her Emperor. And Japan wanted to fight then, because she knew damn well that if she didn't, the harder it would be for her to retain any sphere of influence in China.

China sat along her yellow rivers and waited - some four hundred and fifty million people - more patient because of the yoke of the many invader pirates. But her younger bloods were almost hysterical. There were many societies for National Advancement and National Salvation, and there were many National Humiliation Days. China was reputed to maintain the largest standing army in the world, some two and a half million men. Although most of these were unarmed coolies, bugles blew in the school compounds around the cities, children drilled, young men paraded, and the great yellow country was slowly heaving and yeasting into a settled control. If only Japan had left her to rise alone,

a little while longer.

Chiang Kai-Chek - the welder, her 'deliverer' - had been having quite a lot of birthdays. Upon each anniversary, each of these enthusiastic societies presented him with a bomber, or a gun, or a pursuit plane. The boys in China were anxious to try these things out and were restive under the Japanese domination. They were becoming rather cocky. I had been to Japan a couple of times immediately before her decision to dominate China. Perhaps the most striking thing that permeated that lovely and delicate country was a tremendous regimentation. In an altercation with China it was that element which would determine the result. It might have been compared to the relative force of the one million ardent Fascists in Italy being able to dominate and sway the destinies of the forty million other residents. Ardent men will always control the indifferent. And Japan was a country controlled by men; for their ladies are as sweet and simple and affectionate as their country in cherry blossom time.

The 1937 play, "Celestial Fanfare", opened to a capacity house. This was a theatre of war, fascinating, mesmeric on it's audiences. It was also a free and magnificent show, and only a carping critic would complain of the relatively few casualties in the stalls. Shanghai is built along the

banks of the Whangpoo, a river about 200 yards wide. The Bund follows this river, and along this magnificent boulevard are the main buildings of the business area. On this theatrical stage the river takes a sweep almost at right angles at the northern end, opposite the British Consulate. Here the Foochow Creek, crossed by the Garden Bridge, separates the Settlement districts of Hongkew, Wayside, and Yanzepoo from the International Settlement. At the southern end lies the French Concession, and moored opposite the warships of the Outside Powers. From the Garden Bridge, down to the confluence of the Whampoo and the tremendous Yangsee Kiang, the might of the Third Naval Arm of Japan is anchored. This is an almost an unbroken array - an armada of some eighty warships. These block exit and entrance, and protect the rear of the Japanese occupation of Hongkew, Wayside and Yangzepoo. The opposite bank to the Bund, a projecting point of land owing to the sweep of the Whampoo, was the Chinese territory of Pootung. This river front was lined with junks, or ship-building yards. Within, was an area of godowns or river warehouses. Beyond, was countryside, all smelly in the sun. Chinese batteries and machine gun nests scattered Pootung at that time. This was the stage. The fifth most important port of the world.

A gunfire engagement between the two forces always brought a nervous crowd to the streets entering the Bund.

The boulevard was then closed to the public for their own sake. My office, a seat in the stalls on the second floor of a Japanese Bank building, had a grand view of the show. It was next door, but two, to the Palace and Cathay Hotels partially demolished by bombing with an enormous loss of life. Things usually opened with a spatter of machine guns from the Pootung shore. The bullets, rattling along the gunboats and warships, reached the wharves and Japanese buildings in Hongkew. You could see but little of the preliminaries. The Japanese ships lying along the wharf, opposite the Japanese Consulate building, soon spotted the position of the machine gun nest. With no warning there were suddenly enormous blinding flashes, and ear splitting sharp BANGS. This marked naval guns in action. They were firing at point blank range, about 250 yards. Fire, fury and destruction reigned for fifteen minutes, with the other destroyers and cruisers opening fire on the same spot from their close order downstream. Flashes marked, so to speak, the spots before the sound came. It seemed a miracle that the warships of America, Britain and France were not hit. Quickly, the flimsy buildings climbed in smoke and flame. It spread widely, sending gigantic volumes of smoke into the blue morning sky. With the slackening of fire, two Japanese patrol boats, with men crouched clearly behind the armoured machine gun deck emplacements, crept up under cover of the derelict ships tied off Pootung. Cautiously they began to investigate. The only sound was

the roar of the fires. Suddenly, the shore machine guns, from what seemed like the middle of the fire, opened up again, but this time on the Japanese patrol boat. These sounded absurd after the large calibre naval guns. To the battleships they were as annoying as mosquitoes, well deserving the heavy hand. So, the enormous barrage, at point blank range, commenced again. Like bursting pomegranates, the larger more robust brick buildings behind broke open and burst into flame. Their precious contents now destroyed, it seemed impossible for anything to survive.

The first comic touch in this play was provided by the Japanese holding a high water tank. Standing amidst the flames, it was first hit near the top and then at the bottom, as though they were determined to empty the thing. Later, a different sort of sound impinged upon the observer's ear. The Chinese had apparently brought up a big gun, or battery, within half a mile of the river. Because this was carried out overnight the Japanese spotter planes had missed it. The gun began by shelling the Japanese warships, the spouts and explosions wandering casually over the water. Some actually came close to their target. Then, at this juncture, a new actor walked on stage. A large Japanese transport ship came into view round the bend of the river. It was travelling at full speed. She seemed surprised at her reception, and dropped anchor with

superlative coolness between the Japanese consulate and the one warship firing most rounds into Pootung. Because this point of the river was wider than the rest, most ships went there to turn. The transport proceeded to swing as quickly as I have ever seen ten thousand tons swing upon one anchor. Being under temporary cover from this craft, the Chinese machine guns started up again, with the shells landing really very close to the ship. But innocent as the transport ship appeared, no sooner had she turned she dropped ports fore and aft and opened up with large quickfirers. This further intensified the tremendous rolling thunder. She seemed hit lower down as she rested against the wharf.

With this screen removed the Japanese war vessels poured forth broadside after broadside, and the glass in the office window perceptibly hummed between the rattles. The Chinese shells climbed higher and higher until they found the Japanese Consulate building. The Chinese observer must have been in direct contact with his gunners, because they stayed there and began pounding the building. Great gouts and curtains of brick dust burst from the four storey walls, and up from the red tiled roof, as the shells fell and exploded. Here, for it was a Play you must remember, the comic waddled in. A tiny Blue Funnel tugboat, bearing a full cargo of sailors, together with coolies and minor baggage, was up for the day from the outlying ships. In

common with the other English river boats, age and smoke made her flag entirely indistinguishable. But she steamed quite slowly and stolidly between the combatants, apparently blowing her whistle in the admonitory manner of a reproving old lady. I say apparently, because there were jets of white steam at her funnel. Naturally, the noise was drowned. Only could a hard boiled British skipper of the China coast do that and get away with it. Together with the other impertinence of the Chinese guns, this seemed incredible to the Japanese. Under the very muzzles of her naval guns was a Chinese battery precariously, if not efficiently, damaging their huge Consulate Building and their main wharf. Then the spoilsports, the planes, came over. The show had already lasted for two hours. Flying low, they dive bombed in an effort to locate the Chinese. To no avail, these people had already packed up under their bamboos for the day. They had no desire to disclose their position.

The coolies started moving long before the fighting started. Fearing another Chapei, the exodus from the Chinese city to the Foreign Settlement continued for weeks. It was amusing in one way. When our pioneers asked for territory in their own right, that piece of mud, Shanghai, was presented as a sort of superior Celestial joke. Now it was to this piece of mud that the Celestial looked for protection. The average Chinese probably

appreciated the humour as much as anyone. In the offices there was excitement amongst the Chinese. Crudely printed Broadsheets, in red and black, sold hourly for one cent - about a sixth of a penny - and kept them informed of the progress in the North. At every street corner great bursts of 'red devil' crackers mingled with the booming of really big bungers. They put tremendous heart into the population. They also served to spread the news of minor victories. It was a form of wireless, spreading at 1100 feet a second, that is to say the speed of sound. As soon as one corner - usually a newspaper office - commenced with a large one tossed from the editorial window, the next took it up, and so the infernal refrain travelled in to the heart of the country. The amount of gunpowder so joyously expended must have been considerable. And this much at least may be said; it is the only manner in which that material may be used with the fullest of spiritual proprieties. It seemed really great fun, and quite the proper way to run a war.

In Shanghai the situation became increasingly grave. It was a moot point whether, in event of local hostilities, there would be a physical boundary between the fighting areas and the International Settlement. Japan used quite a portion of this latter territory as a war base during the trouble of 1932, and it became increasingly evident she would use it in considerably greater proportions in 1937. It was unreasonable, therefore, to expect the Chinese armed

forces not to treat the area as a target. That China exercised this courtesy in 1932 was beside the point. Chinese shells had to land on Chinese soil, so why not the Foreign Concessions? They didn't expect much help from foreigners anyway.

For three weeks the stream of refugees from Chapei became a river. Before your eyes, two million people on the move. They headed up river, up creek, up canal, as well as into the International Settlement. Tugs pulled or guided through the massed junks. These were lines of floating carriages stuffed with refugees on shelves at twenty four inch vertical centres. There were no decks as we know them. A stream of rickshaws formed the more usual mode of transport, all piled high with pots and pans and plaited grass baskets bursting with the most intimate of family possessions. Out through the interstices of these masses appeared the twinkling legs of the runner, the worried face of the women, the very elderly, and the subdued refined face of the infant at breast. The word 'coolie' has as its origin, KU, meaning heavy, and LI meaning distance. This coolie invasion to the interior was natural. The coastal towns would naturally feel the force of the efficient Japanese bombers first. If it was possible to get far enough inland, by the time the conquering people pushed their sphere of influence to the refuge, they might well be content to conciliate. If there was conscious

reasoning, this was the cause of the exodus.

Have you ever seen a deserted city? Use a time machine and come to Hongkew that night. See the trucks loading outside every shop taking away the stock. The tenants will leave soon after. I got back to my flat just in time to receive a phone call from Bim's special political branch. Ringing from the deserted Union, his "squad-double" told me of the invasion of the bar by two Nippon marines. I rang Lai - and I was damn lucky to find him - to tell him to keep clear, to wipe off his losses and to stick around where he was. They left within the hour. I went down with Bim, secure in his presence. It was funny to see the bar deserted. Two kittens climbed over the beer barrels and fooled with the ice. The children cried as they left them. We watched, for an hour or so, from the two foot wide verandah on the first floor, while I tried to pick up Lai again by telephone. The automatic exchange reported it out of order, but we all knew what that meant. Alex, complete in uniform and tin hat, had left before everybody else. 'Shanghai Volunteer Corps (S.V.C.) directed to report for duty in 30 minutes'. After, Bim and I went down North Szechuan Road together and stood at the boundary in the middle of a crowd of Chinese, police and S.V.C. People watched the deserted and dark roadway. Keeping in the shadows, for fear of snipers, the Japanese marines

doubled across the road. The blockhouses were manned and the whole district was infested with Japanese specials, with armlets and clubs, operating in groups. We walked for two hours in the dark Chinese roadways. Always there were Japanese marines in full war kit waiting with horizontal fixed bayonets. You got off the footpath to pass. Back at the Garden Bridge were two armoured cars and the S.V.C. On the way we called at the Union - evacuated completely of course - so we selected one leather dice box as souvenir. Bim and I cleaned out the remaining whisky. Everything else went within an hour of leaving, stripped except for oddments in bottles. It was blown to glory in the morning.

At twelve midnight, the alleged zero hour, we were at the North Szechuan Road boundary, just inside the gates sitting on shop stallboards. Nothing happened except squads of Japanese marines running across the roadway, official cars coming through without lights, and police on motorcycles shouting orders. There were no Chinese troops visible of course. Trucks of marines were passing. This fighting business, we decided, was a serious affair. Although Tokyo naturally took strong exception, the shooting affray at the Hungao aerodrome that same evening was simply explained. An officer and driver, both in Japanese uniform, and in an official car, were driving to

the Chinese aerodrome. Any other foreign resident in Shanghai would never have dreamt of doing it, even in daylight. It was a colossal effrontery, or a conscious attempt to see what would happen on a Settlement Road. Or had they been selected for the honour of being the match for the tinder? As the Japanese premier said: "Japan has been known to be victimised".

Twenty eight Japanese warships came into Shanghai that last day. A display of strength is most often followed by duress. From them, a constant stream of fully armed and equipped marines streamed. They took the place of the refugees, and with them came load after load of ammunition and military supplies, machine guns, lumber, parts of bridges and pontoons. They took the place of the household furniture removed by the refugees. It appeared that the campaign had already been arranged.

The Shanghai newspapers were down to a skeleton owing to a lack of gas to run the machines. But what you didn't read and hear you saw and smelt. After the bombing of Bloody Saturday August the 12th, the bodies stank along Racecourse Road for three days. Some were in open cheap pine coffins without lids, some in shining and curved black ones with lids, and others just piled in filthy heaps of stench. The hundreds of bodies were white blanched, bellies were distended, and they make odd noises - sighing sometimes,

sometimes a throaty rattle - most were naked and all stank like common meat gone bad. Even the Chinese, walking past and milling round in curiosity, held their hands to their nose. When an odour is apparent and unpleasant to a Chinese it is some odour. Fluid crept out from each corpse, or pile of fragments, as they began to fall apart. The explosions had blown the clothes off, leaving scraps tied round the hands and feet or neck, but more often than not there was nothing. There was a rickshaw coolie eighty yards away from a hole in the road in the French Concession. He was dead without a mark and naked as he was born.

At the corner of the Bund that day the street was a shambles. Outside the Palace and Cathay Hotels, in Nanking Road, slabs of human liver were wiped across the pavement. The indignity of this sort of death. Some were only scraps, or not even that. A foreign girl's dress hung from the parapet eight floors up. There was nothing in it. A motor car was burnt out as clean as a whistle. It rested, seemingly untouched, on its rims. The thing at the wheel was a skeleton with attenuated flesh; wool skeins draped around the bone cinders. It still grasped the wheel. A closer inspection showed holes in the burnt car's body from bullets or fragments. The upholstery had incinerated leaving only the spiral springs. This happened in a hot second or so. It was a Lincoln Zephyr.

When the Chinese planes suddenly appeared in the cloud rift that afternoon, the three visible looked as wicked as a set of sliding snakes and as beautiful and as efficient as three sharks. The bombs fell away in a set of four. Slow at first falling, they quickly formed a parabolic arc until they vanished in the enormous cloud of dust and flame that marked the Palace and Cathay Hotels. The dust came over the flat roof of the Police headquarters where we were watching, billiard cues in hand. It filled our eyes and nostrils. We finished our game before we went down to see the damage. We were very close; almost as close as the ones that morning. As always, they were preceded by an enormous barrage of Japanese anti-aircraft shells, a chattering series of roars. Staccato marked the bursting of shrapnel over the area raked. The bangs and puffs of black smoke emanated from the Japanese, the white from the Chinese. All rained bits of shrapnel and shining bullets along the roof tops. Those bombs struck near the Japanese flagship, Idzuma, tied up near the Soochow Creek. The first one went off before I knew what was to be expected. The enormous explosion, flame and shattering roar, mushroomed along the river front. I had to hold in horror the window sill to keep myself upright. The others walked steadily and slowly across the river and only sent up great gouts of water and fragments of sampans. The remaining river sampans were round the pieces of wreckage within a few minutes. It was probable that less time was wasted

looking for human fragments than was spent in collecting the more valuable pieces of wood. Certainly the Whangpoo was very quickly swept clean and its yellow tide slid slowly upstream without a mark. It was after that afternoon affair that I hurriedly evacuated my flat, carrying my own bags across the Garden Bridge and past the deserted British Consulate. By then, bombs had fallen on both sides of my place and it was rumoured that another attack was expected that night. They came within an hour.

The thing seemed too close to say who was right and who was wrong. Only was it essential in Shanghai minds for the war to stop or move along a little. At night, on curfew duty, I observed the Chinese streets were strangely quiet. The moon came up over the scene of drunken houses and narrow winding streets polished of traffic; and each change of breeze brought a different stink from the Soochow, or from the back alleys. All of them were Chinese and unpleasant. But for them you would have thought you were on a stage set. After a while you didn't notice, and when you left China you probably asked what the strange smell was before you realised that it was just fresh air.

It was dangerous to sit down against a shop shuttered to the footpath because the fleas hopped along the stone entrance step. There were millions in the rice shops, clambering all over the bins. The narrow gutters were also

within their range. The traffic islands were safest, because there you could see the cockroaches slide quickly across the surface of the bitumen. Although they avoided you, you could shove or stamp them away. In any case, you shouldn't have been sitting down. From the narrow overhanging Gardens of Babylon, which were the verandahs cantilevering out in odd Chinese curves and manners, people peered over at you. If they saw you watching they ducked down. You were the foreign member with a party of five Chinese police; and you yawned most of the night unless you were near a Settlement boundary. There the courageous looters came over the bridges half doped with opium. The Chinese police rushed, stripped them and searched them. They almost always had an enormous bunch of rusty keys and some opium wrapped in a piece of grease-proof paper. Inside their bundles were the scraps and miscellany of household objects which looters take. After you had collected four or five, they were taken to the Station with a short rope around their arms. One looter was tied to each Chinese policeman. They carried the spoils as evidence and the whole moonlit caravan was escorted by a foreigner to ensure that there might be no collusion. At the station they were kicked into the cells and you were instructed to shoot next time and not to bother bringing them in. In any case, they were handed over to the Chinese authorities outside the Settlement for summary execution in the morning.

Sometimes they nearly got away with things of value. If they had been able to break into a store, perhaps this was rice; sometimes it was a box of silvery paper stuff that is burnt for the propitiation of spirits; and sometimes just candlesticks or a broken metal clock. That they were half-crazed there was no doubt, for how else could they summon up the courage necessary to risk the constant sniping of both Japanese and Chinese marksmen, and the almost sure police detection over the bridges. Silently, the odd bullet came over the bridges into the Settlement. You could only hear the 'pi-i-i-ing' as they passed you, before they smacked into some building along the road. The remarkable thing about these people was their apparent stoicism. They seldom gave voluble explanations when caught and they almost always resigned peaceably. They were beggars with nothing to lose. They had been caught in the act and what else. To eat they had to do something. And if paid, they would naturally carry poison or germs into the Settlement to drop into the tea urns of the shops, into the water troughs of the rickshaw coolies or the public water supplies. If they tried it during the day, they were sometimes caught by the crowd. The remains, after the mob had finished with the alleged culprit, were difficult to remove from the footpath. The police usually got there within a minute or so, but it was always far too late. Perhaps half the time it was a genuine poisoner who got caught. Half the time it was some poor unfortunate who gave

offence to some passerby. The dreaded shout had the crowd about in a second or so, a mob of two thousand forms before you can turn your back. Other unfortunates, who looked like Japanese, had a similar fate if they ventured out of doors. Here the shout was 'Japanese eyes'. As often as not, the victim would be a Chinese against whom someone had a grudge. Unless the police arrived, this was an opportunity to eliminate them without danger to yourself.

The first night of curfew duty found one of these 'poisoners' standing against a wall. Because our party proceeded very slowly along the deserted streets - we had at least eight hours to fill - the sharp eyes of the Chinese policeman saw the fellow drop a piece of paper rolled into a ball. He stood quite still and waited. Under interrogation, and the flat slaps from the Chinese police, he pretended to be dumb. He was stripped and searched and found to be carrying several packets of whitish powder. It was only after two or three suspects had been found that it was suggested that they should be made to eat the powder. The beating proceeded slowly and methodically. It left practically no mark. Finally he talked, the paper that had been dropped contained an address and a telephone number in Hongkew. It was damning. He said that he was paid sixteen dollars a month for the work. It was with difficulty that the Chinese were prevailed upon to take him to the Station rather than execute summary justice on the street. During the half hour

that the interrogation lasted many heads peered out. Two policemen searched the shop outside which he was standing. A tremendously serious pantomime was made over pretending to shoot the traitor. Mausers were ostensibly loaded - although they were already crammed with cartridges - the man was forced to kneel while cold muzzles were forced into the back of his neck and into his ribs. His composure could have been nothing but a drugged one.

It was brutal, it was, unashamedly, horrible. But it was, to the Chinese and to every other person living in the Settlement, treason. He was endangering the lives of the people that crowded into Shanghai. Inside the Station the treatment was the same, only more direct. Later that night, at four in the morning, we slept for half an hour on the floor of a large bank building on Peking Road. The janitor had let us in the back. Stretched out, it was remarkably comfortable on the linoleum after seven hours on the slow beat without a break. Inside the metallic knocking of the machine guns was not so apparent. At night, when all is still within a city crammed with people, these guns have a beautiful and mad rhythm. Sometimes, when they were red hot or incendiary, you could see the shells passing over the Settlement. With terrible swiftness, the short matt-red streak was immediately followed by a flash that lit the entirely clear sky. It is easy to light a cloudy sky, but to

light a clear one you need a large gun. In five or six seconds there was the explosion that gave the shell its flash and its shuddering whistle. It had already broken and killed and had passed. An elementary knowledge of acoustics told you how near you were. It was just across the Whangpoo in Pootung.

The introduction of queuing was always considered an unwarranted interference by the Chinese pushing for their rice. Yet, if this was not strictly enforced, the crowd very quickly became unmanageable and there was always trouble. The five Chinese policemen patrolled in the front of the rice shop armed with .38 colt automatics, the foreigner with a .45 colt automatic. The .45 was preferred because of what is known in police circles as the 'stopping power'. With the .38, the bullet passed through the man. It did not necessarily stop him or bring him down. With the .45, in addition to nearly breaking the arm of the firer, the enormous bullet would, even if it only struck the arm of a looter, spin him around and around and throw him to the ground. It would also probably render the victim unconscious by concussion. In a hostile crowd this made him manageable.

Seemingly oblivious to war, thousands of people milled in the streets. Pigs were driven along and pregnant women passed in rags. In the French Concession, a mother was

stripped and the child forcibly born by the detonation of a bomb. Reports stated that the child was doing well, but that the mother was killed by the explosion. The poorer people - and these were inconceivably poor, for the average Chinese family income is one and a half pence per week - swept up the grains of rice from the filthy footpath in front of the rice shops. Very little fell from the frugal hands of the owner and the Chinese purchaser. One has to have only heard the Chinese national anthem of hawking throats to appreciate the probable condition of the rice mixed with street dust.

The Chinese medical missions deserve tremendous respect, a respect and an honour that they certainly didn't get from the natives. The ambulances rushed past, horns blowing continuously. Open trucks, covered with branches for protection from planes and from the sun, were loaded with the dead and dying. It seemed that the foreigner in the Settlement was left with the care of the Chinese wounded. There was little or no provision for them in the arrangements of the Chinese army in Shanghai. Hospitals were naturally full to overflowing, the steady stream never stopped. Most of the trucks went back piled high with coffins. The Chinese stretcher bearers sat on these talking and laughing as they went about their errand of help.

And all the while the letter writer sat and droned in front

of his tray of writing utensils. The librarian, with his stock of paper covered books, leant against his rack leaning on the wall. The cook shops continued to do their savoury and transient business in the gutters. The Chinese boys and girls crowded along too, watching curiously through their dark eyes. Their heads were more often than not covered with festering sores. The barber, a boy, walked slowly through the crowd with his little stool and basin slung over his back. The street sweet man, always followed by a gang of urchins, sometimes set down his portable counter with its doubtful gambling games for children to risk their pennies for equally doubtful sweets. The pastry cooks kept their sweet-smelling fires crackling under their portable bamboo shelters. The tinsmiths banged and clattered by the side of the roadway with the rickshaw coolies shouting and cursing each other. Lone women burnt joss papers on the footpath in front of the joss shop. Everybody shouted and spat, and the guns were almost deafened by the clamour. But above it all was the steady droning of the planes, and every now and then everybody stopped to watch the anti-aircraft shells bursting overhead. Then there was a rush for the empty shell when it fell on the road freakishly missing the milling peoples. More often than not it hit someone, and then a wailing went up. You had to break up the gathering, perhaps exercising your baton as well as your prerogative to obtain the evidence for the Station. Or do you collect souvenirs too? All the coffin shops were open in Shanghai,

and there was no whisper of a depression amongst their proprietors.

This is an edited extract from **Tramp to Shanghai: a young man's tale before the war**, by Best Overend and Tronn Overend. (available as a free *iBook* from the *iTunes* store.) **Prelude to War: On Duty with the Shanghai Volunteer Policed Force, 1937** was first published in **Quadrant**, Vol. 57(6) June 2013. A companion piece- **Impressions of Shanghai, 1937** - appeared in **Quadrant** Vol.56(11) November 2012.

At the age of twenty seven, Best Overend (1909-1977) was the Third Watch Officer on a Steamer that left Sydney heading for China. There he worked as an Architect for a British firm, Lester, Johnson and Morriss. Towards the end of 1937, when hostilities became too intense, he closed the practice and joined the Shanghai Volunteer Police Force. At the time, the only remaining partner, Mr. Morris, had been on extended leave in England, and a skeleton staff had relocated to his mansion, away from the fighting and bombing near the Bund. When Best Overend arrived back in England in 1938, to work again with the Modernist Architect, Wells Coates, and later Serge Chermayeff and Eric Mendlesohn, he met Morriss and finally rejected his offer of a partnership in the practice. At a salary of one thousand pounds a year, this was a considerable enticement; a Derby Bentley at the time cost around one thousand five hundred pounds. Returning to his practice in Melbourne was the safer prospect. Photos, drawings and illustrations can be viewed in the *iBook*.