Forgotten history revealed
The grandson of a man involved in relief efforts after China's worst flood

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Shanghai Star
page08 2006-9-7

"In the end, the story became not one about a horrible disaster and death, but rather one of a remarkable recovery of life - renewing itself against all odds."

An American family myth of the greatest flood and levee breaks of the 20th century was restored to Chinese history on August 26, 75 years after the disaster occurred, with the dedication of a new stone memorial along the dikes of China's ancient Grand Canal.

The 1931 China flood is known as the century's greatest flood; over 140,000 people drowned, another 3.7 million died of starvation and disease in the following nine months, and more than 70,000 square miles of land were flooded. Even though it is acknowledged as the most deadly and widespread flood of the 20th century, and it includes some of the earliest and most dangerous aerial flood relief performed by none other than Charles and Anne Lindbergh, it is a story that history had nearly forgotten.

Gaoyou, a small city 125 miles northwest of Shanghai, was the site of the single worst levee disaster and resulting loss of life. The crucial Grand Canal levees gave way when a typhoon combined with record breaking summer monsoons to produce the "perfect storm", conditions that no levee could withstand.

Eight weeks of record rain had already swollen the Yangtze and Huai rivers to historic highs...
when in a situation remarkably similar to Hurricane Katrina, a fierce typhoon walloped the region, blowing away the poorly maintained dikes.

At Gaoyou, six levee breaks dumped an entire lake onto the city, drowning thousands in their sleep in the early morning. Gaoyou Lake rests 20 feet above Gaoyou city immediately to the west and is retained only by the earthen dikes of the Grand Canal.

Throughout China, more than 1,000 levees ruptured and nearly 50 million people were affected.

A new stone memorial has now been erected to restore the lost legacy and to honour five heroes who provided extraordinary flood relief service to the millions of starving homeless.

The five previously unrecognized heroes are famed American aviators Charles and Anne Lindbergh, Presbyterian missionary Lyt Harnsberger, Chinese General Wang Shuxiang (the lead project engineer), and Buddhist hermit monk Lin, who funded the 1932 reconstruction project with the US$200,000 he raised by selling all his property, including his home.

Gaoyou city government conducted a ceremony at 9:30 am on August 26, the 75th anniversary, to the day, of the Grand Canal levee breaks.

The 1931 flood story lived in the memory of our American family and through three generations until we carried the story back to Gaoyou to honour my recently deceased father, Hutch Harnsberger, who shared a dream with his brother Jim to recover the lost history and return it to their birthplace in China.

Two sons of the heroes who led the reconstruction, Wang Zhenzhi and Dr James P. Harnsberger, both in their 80s, were present and reunited for the very first time in recognition of their respective fathers' great service and friendship.

James Harnsberger, 84, said: "I remember the Gaoyou dikes vividly. We sailed over the 10,000 square mile inland sea on our houseboat and saw many of the dead floating on the way. General Wang and my father, Lyt, became the best of friends and together they led this enormous dike project, working without pay. They produced the finest reconstruction in all of China and were known as saviors of Jiangsu. The lost legacy of this forgotten flood and these heroes will forever be remembered now in this stone monument along the banks of the Grand Canal."

The August 26 ceremony included donations from the Harnsbergers for the memorial, and the Lindbergh family, which provided plum trees to be planted in memory of Charles and Anne Lindbergh's pioneering aerial disaster relief at the site.

The Lindberghs arrived in China on September 19, 1931, at the end of their historic "North to the Orient" trans-polar flight from New York to Asia. They arrived in Nanjing less than one month after the flood hit, and they immediately volunteered to help.

The Lindberghs' single engine Lockheed Sirius was specially outfitted with pontoons for water landings and extra fuel tanks, giving it the ability to fly 2,000 miles nonstop.
Theirs was the only airplane in China capable of circumnavigating the entire flooded area without refueling, and the Lindberghs proceeded to conduct aerial surveys for the Chinese government.

Their aerial photographs of the Gaoyou levee breaks were rediscovered in the United States last year and are now on display in the Gaoyou Flood Museum, which opened in December 2005.

Reeve Lindbergh, the daughter of Charles and Anne, wrote a letter of dedication that was read at the memorial event, and she also donated a first-edition of Anne Lindbergh's best selling book, "North to the Orient," with both Charles and Anne's signatures in it.

The truth is that the great flood story had always been a "larger than life" legend in the Harnsberger home, about a mythical, nearly Biblical flood - a tale our father always told.

A great disaster story it was, like 1,000 Katrinas - the Yangtze alone had flooded an area 900 miles long and 40 miles wide. For 70 years the story remained a mystical keystone in our family's oral traditions, for it told of the greatest achievement in our grandfather Lyt's life in helping others, one which went unrecognized until now. It was my father's dream to see the story restored to China but he died before this could be fully realized.

The memorial stone tablet is now planted in the good earth of Pearl Buck's China, along with my father's ashes, in honour of and tribute to my father's own great life of service to others.

Gaoyou Vice-Mayor Ni Wencai, who just finished publishing a book about the rediscovery of this legendary flood, said: "The story of this terrible disaster and these remarkable heroes had been completely forgotten in China and in Gaoyou as well. Not until Hutch and Jim Harnsberger and his family came back to Gaoyou, did we really know much about it, because there were no records of any Americans ever having been part of this reconstruction project."

"When Steve Harnsberger showed up with these incredible 1931 aerial photographs of Gaoyou Lake pouring through ruptured levees, which were taken by Charles Lindbergh as wife Anne flew their plane, I knew we had rediscovered a treasure, an incredible piece of our history. It was something we simply had to share with the people of Jiangsu, so we created the 1931 Flood Museum and this Monument. This story will never be forgotten again."

We fulfilled my father's unrealized dream as we reconnected the broken bridges to the past and renewed relationships between American and Chinese friends. In the end, the story became not one about a horrible disaster and death, but rather one of a remarkable recovery of life - renewing itself against all odds.

This story is about how these people rose up together in response to an overwhelming tragedy; in fact, the worst natural disaster on record. Through great personal sacrifice, compassion, and a struggle to persevere, the rebuilding of the Grand Canal dikes was achieved under budget, and money was actually refunded to the charity established for the project, something which had never previously happened.
Ultimately, the project was recognized by the Chinese Government as one of the finest and most important reconstruction projects in China. This work was a product of the history of friendship between Americans and Chinese. What began as our family mythology is now permanently depicted in stone, carved upon this new monument and placed upon these same dikes, a concrete symbol of the long-term friendship between the Chinese and American people.