

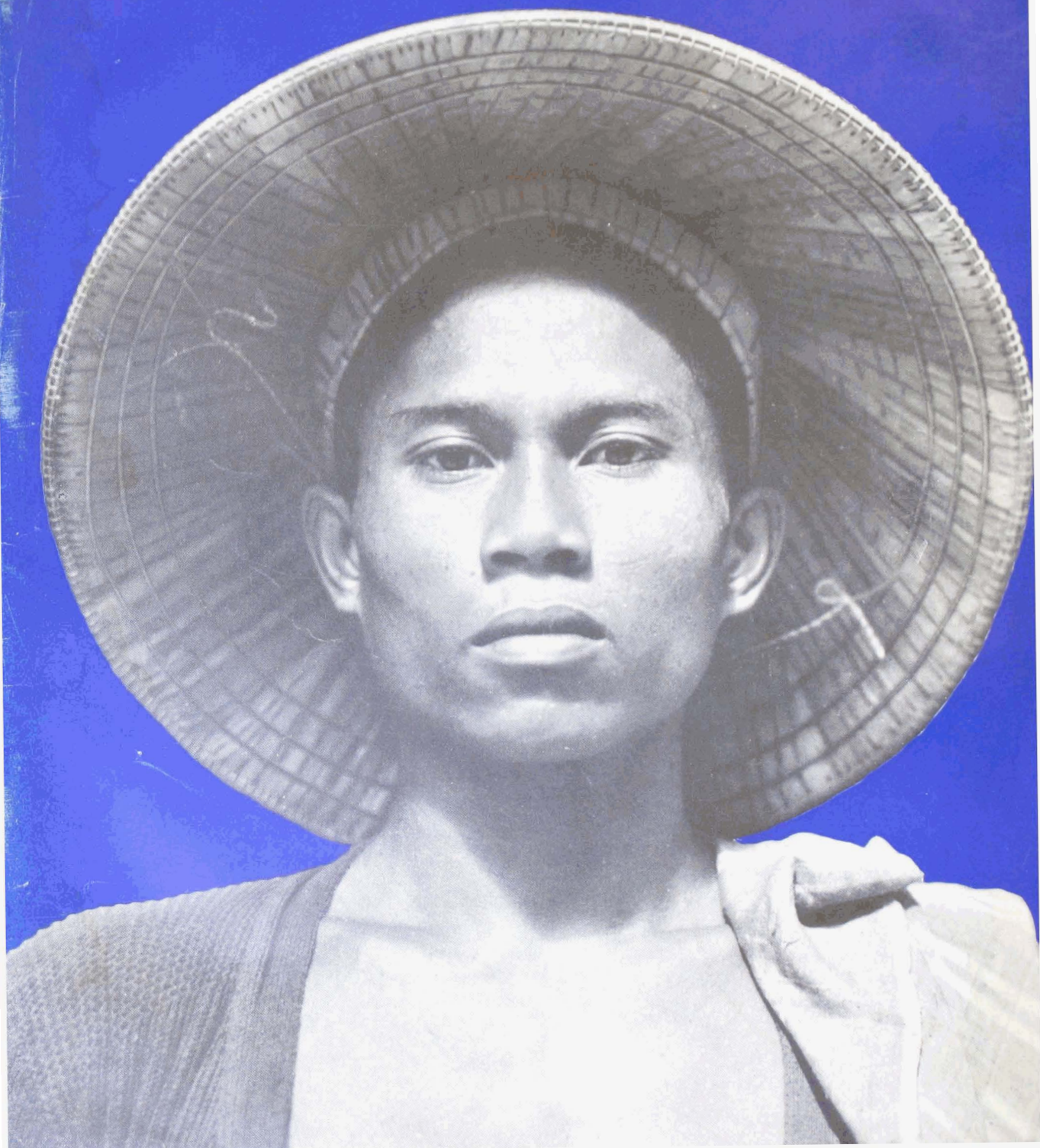
# ASIA

**IF AMERICA  
ENTERS THE WAR**

DECISIONS THAT MUST BE MADE  
AS SEEN FROM THE FAR EAST

**BY EDGAR SNOW**

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# A TIBETAN HUNT

By **ROBERT B. EKVALL** A sudden sound like thunder drumming in my ears woke me, and I turned quickly on my saddle pillow. Hundreds of hooves, large and small, were thudding on the frozen ground in the cattle pens and lanes outside. Within the sod hut it was still dark, except for the light from the ghostly blue flames of the cow-chip fire, but the long smoke hole in the roof showed faintly gray and, since the horses, sheep and cattle were hurrying to pasture, I knew it must be broad daylight outside.

"Are you awake?" asked Slab-face Rin-chen's daughter as she came in and fanned the fire, making the blue flames leap far up into the curtain of smoke. "Was your sleeping place comfortable?"

Quickly she picked my bowl from the bowls set in a row on the edge of the ash-pit and, filling it with tea, presented it to me—my early tea. Then I arose, bearing my bedding with me—for I had slept wrapped in my Tibetan sheepskin coat. I had only to put on my boots and draw the girdle closely around my hips and I was dressed. Rin-chen's daughter was already on her way out, with a tiny dipper of water in her hand, and I followed.

Through the winter dust haze the sun seemed enormous as it rested on the edge of the level skyline; and in the level rays of that sun the plain was alive with herds of horses, cattle, and sheep, all moving away from the cluster of sod huts interspersed with cattle pens which was the winter encampment of Slab-face Rin-chen of Bu. Though it was still early in November, the air was bitterly cold and the wind that was just beginning to stir with the rising of the sun blew about my ears. Yet I had come from the dark warmth of the hut that I might by Tibetan standards start the day aright. Washing one's hands and face was a strangely perfunctory ritual—a thin trickle of cold water from the tiny dipper caught in cupped hands and distributed over a limited area of the face, making a most superficial impression on the accumulated soot, grease and butter fat. But again and again when

I have been minded to skip the tantalizing gesture until I could get a basin of water later in the day, I have been marched into the bitter wind by my host or hostess, or maybe one of the daughters of the tent, and I have never had the hardihood to incur the reputation of being dirty by refusing to go.

Rin-chen approached as I finished wiping my face with a Tibetan towel—the end of my girdle—and followed me back into the warm sod hut, where we sat down to breakfast. And, as I fished yak hairs out of the butter floating on my tea and greased my face with some of that same butter—thus finishing a Tibetan toilet—he outlined the plans for the day.

I had made the ride from Lhamo to Bu because Slab-face Rin-chen had sent word that gazelle were both fat and plentiful since the tribe had newly come back to the winter encampments, and I should come and shoot some. Now, with his sharp face eager and intent, he told where gazelle had been seen in large flocks and discoursed on the pleasure of hunting.

"How many gazelle will your horse carry?" he questioned somewhat challengingly; so I countered with the story of how Ngon-cha had once carried me and four gazelle back to camp. "Then I'll take two bags for the meat, and it doesn't so much matter that I don't have my rifle any more. I had to sell that; so all depends on your gun today. That is all right—you have plenty of ammunition and I can do the cutting up of the game." The two saddlebags—woven of mixed wool and yak hair—were stiff with grime of grease and blood, and I was a bit taken aback to have the success or failure of the hunt resting precariously on my 250-3000 and my willingness to scatter ammunition over the open steppe. So I suggested that all the game we got could very well be carried whole, tied on our horses. But Rin-chen's answer was both emphatic and somewhat cryptic. "Not by the Body of the Buddha! We don't wish to share what we shoot with every one we meet. You just take your bowl; the kettle and kettle stuff I will look after."

Into one side of the saddlebag he packed a plentiful supply of the best sort of fuel—dried sheep manure—and in the other half he placed the bellows, kettle, butter box, cheese bag, *tsamba* bag, a sheep-stomach full of some sort of liquid, and finally he coiled a yard or so of sausage around his hand and then stuffed it in somewhere between the butter box and cheese bag. That was notice to me to finish my tea-drinking; and some one outside, calling, “Rin-chen, Rin-chen, are you going today?” seemed to hurry him in his preparations.

Yet, to my relief, when we finally battled clear of the encampment dogs we were alone. Here and there far out on the steppe wavering shreds of smoke marked the setting of the herdsman’s fires on the outer fringe of the grazing cattle. Gazelle were nearer to the encampment than those herds, and again and again patches of yellow and white flitted across our course. But Rin-chen kept steadily on, evidently intending that our hunting should be beyond where the herds grazed.

Suddenly he pulled his horse up short and was shouting and waving his arms above his head. The noise of other shouting broke in upon my thoughts. About one hundred yards away the smoke of a camp fire climbed straight above the steppe and men were scattering away from it. I could see two men stooped under hobbled horses, pulling the hobbles loose. Others seemed for a moment in motion and then still, and gun muzzles gleamed at us from the grass of the steppe. My rifle continued to rest on the saddlebow where it had been, but my hands went up as I began to shout what Rin-chen had been shouting: “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot! We’re from Bu—the Gar-ma encampment—Rin-chen, Rin-chen,” to which I added as my own personal contribution, “His guest, his guest.”

There were some questions hurled at us, but Rin-chen had been recognized; so we turned slightly off the trail to approach the fire while the fireside group reassembled. The two men under the horses fumbled hurriedly to rehobble them. One of the other three—having been sitting by the fire with his sheepskin coat wrapped loosely about him, the girdle untied to facilitate his own particular hunting in its long fleece—was innocent of clothing except for his boots; for he had left his coat by the fire as he jumped to position behind a hummock. He now shivered comically and leaped for his coat while the other two waited with their rifles in their hands, still a bit peevish because of their own panic.

“Rin-chen, don’t you know enough to give clear warning—when we are so fearful of a Golok

raid that we have scouts out every day to protect the herds? Some from your own encampment are the scouts for today. By the Books you scared us and nearly were shot. What are you doing anyway?”

To the announcement of our intention to hunt gazelle they gave a gleeful yell and announced that they would go with us and drive the game. Did the *peh-ling* have a good rifle? They knew where the gazelle were like this—and they wiggled their fingers to indicate numbers. In shorter time than it takes to tell, they were all on horseback. Rather ruefully I thought, “This is more like a Tibetan hunt—we should scare every gazelle within miles.”

But it was a wonderful day for riding, and we moved at a quick trot across the steppe, our spirits rising with our rate of progress. While the herdsmen were still arguing over where the most gazelle would be found, off toward the eastern hills, along the trail of the Shar-wa tea caravans, we sighted three men riding toward Bu. They must have seen us at the same time; for they stopped to look as we too paused to make out who they were. After my announcement that the binoculars showed three horsemen—two guns and a spear—leading a pack mule, a babel of argument broke out among the men of Bu.

The gazelle could wait. Here was something that promised greater diversion than any gazelle. Too many strangers wandered near the Bu encampments with evil intent. That was how the Goloks had made trouble. We should ride up and capture these men. If they were innocent travelers, they could be set free later. Why were they traveling in Bu territory without a Bu-wa guide and escort? Leading a mule suggested that they were valley people—the steppe people would have a horse. “By the Twelve Volumes of the Sacred Books,” finished the one who had recently been coatless, “too many of these valley people prowl around and steal our sheep at night. If they are thieves, we’ll capture them, and if they aren’t we’ll give them a good scare anyway since we are four rifles. What fun! Come on!”

There was no stopping them. Keeping my rifle on my back to signify *my* peaceful intentions, I nevertheless rode with the rest of them across the plain toward the strangers, who naturally first tried to run and then, seeing that we moved much faster than they, hindered as they were by the pack mule, stood their ground, holding their weapons with a sort of unwilling readiness that well revealed their panicky fear. Even as I protested to my companions, the quick



tattoo changed to the smoother rhythm of the gallop and we pounded across the steppe.

It was going too far, and I for one would not ride down on three scared men—one over-nervous trigger finger and who could tell what might happen. But Ngon-cha had the snaffle between his teeth, and after my companions began to yell there was no stopping him as our horses flattened out on the last stretch. Three hundred yards—two hundred—I remember thinking that, regardless of appearances, I was glad I was a member of the hunters rather than the hunted—and then two of the men turned to flee. The pack mule shied and, throwing his load, came to a standstill in a tangle of pack ropes, and we had swept around the three, making a ring that bristled inward with rifles, spears and swords.

Stuttering and stammering with panic, three strangers answered the arrogant questioning and challenging of the men of Bu. They told who they were, where they came from, all about their business and at whose tent door they visited when in Bu. They tactfully offered to pay us to escort them to that tent in order that their host owner might identify them. Even to the most suspicious Tibetan mind they were innocent of any evil intent and replete with the proper credentials—peaceful travelers going their way and, by friendship with members of the Bu tribe, entitled to consideration. Anyway they had been greatly scared, and we had made a gallant charge. Abruptly the herdsmen and Rin-chen announced that it was all right. The men could go on. Only they should travel carefully and in no way act suspiciously as they had done by attempting to run away. The men of Bu were somewhat uneasy since the Golok affair.

“Aren’t you the foreigner from Lhamo?” asked one of the men as they dismounted to re-rope the pack mule’s load.

“Oh, yes. I am just riding with the men of Bu; for I am hunting gazelle,” I answered, hoping they were not holding anything against me. But they not only seemed relieved but regarded it quite as a matter of course that the men of Bu should be on the alert and a bit touchy on the subject of strangers. With greetings of the utmost friendliness we parted, and again we ranged the steppe, looking for gazelle.

It was finally decided to organize a drive but, when it came to deciding who would do the shooting, the owner of each rifle begged off, pleading lack of ammunition; so I was posted in a hollow—flattened out behind a clump of dried hay. One of the herdsmen stayed with me to keep me company and, as we lay with our ears

to the ground—the sound of the thudding of tiny hooves being a surer indication that the gazelle were within range than such glimpses as we might get by raising our heads and thereby scaring the sharp-sighted creatures away—he told me about the affair with the Goloks.

Quite some time ago a party of seventeen Goloks traveling on the fringes of the winter grazing range had suddenly attempted to drive off the horseherd of Rin-chen’s encampment. Although there were only three men at that fire, they had good rifles and good horses. So, following hard after the Goloks, they had recovered the horseherd, killing three horses and three men and wounding—others. One of the Goloks—and they were dressed strangely like no tribe Bu had ever known—had lived long enough to tell to what tribe he belonged—Gomang-ts’ang, fifteen days’ ride up the Yellow River—and had died foretelling the sure vengeance of his fellow tribesmen, even though the attack on the horseherd in the first place had been a mistake. They had thought it belonged to Gurdu Lamasery with whom they had a long-standing feud of years.

“We men of Bu are brave sons. We lost only one horse and one of the three herders received a leg wound. But now we all have to be very careful. They say that the Goloks are strangely fierce. They can see at night like wild animals, and they eat their meat without cooking it.”

So interested had we been in the tale that we had forgotten to listen for the drumming of tiny hooves on the frozen steppe, but at this point in the story a sudden, startled “Woof” brought us both to a sitting position. A handsome buck stood not more than twenty feet away from us, his nostrils still quivering from his startled snort. But in another flash he and the drove for which he had been scout and sentinel were streaking away—a changing blur of yellow and white. “Too late—too late,” lamented my companion; for, since the Tibetans always shoot from a rest, they seldom attempt running shots. But I had sat up with my rifle at my shoulder, and in a burst of shots the 250–3000 vindicated itself to my Tibetan friends so that there was enough meat to keep us all busy cutting it up.

The other members of the party joined us and the game was butchered with incredible rapidity, everything being divided into seven equal parts since there were seven of us. Only by the fact that to my share were added the skins was any acknowledgment made that my rifle had done the work. And the acknowledgment was to the rifle, not to the shooter. The mere thrill of shooting was supposed to be enough

reward for him. The skins were for the owner of the rifle in recognition of the use of his ammunition. If I had been using a borrowed gun, the skins would have gone to the owner of the gun; for such is Tibetan hunting custom.

By that time we were far from the herds, and the herders, warning us to carry on with a small heart, returned to their fire while Rin-chen and I rode on. Once I stalked a lonely buck and got a beautiful head, and once we rode hard at right angles to a running herd, coming near enough to the point where they persisted in crossing our course to get some more meat as they passed—though I wasted a good many shots—and then it was more than time for “tea.”

Rin-chen chose a high bluff by a tributary of the Me-ch’u, and all afternoon we feasted royally. The sausage toasted in the embers disappeared by inches till it was all gone, the liquid inside the sheep-stomach turned out to be *zho*—creamy Tibetan dessert—and, in between, we drank tea and later broiled slices of gazelle heart and liver over the fire. Though, as for the broiling, Rin-chen waited until I had assured him it was *my* fire and I would bear the curse of the mountain gods, who, it seems, dislike the smell of broiling meat and are likely to curse the owner, but not necessarily the users, of the fire over which the broiling is done. Our horses had been unsaddled to graze more restfully; so we rode no more that afternoon and it was not until the sun was low that we started home.

As for gazelle, it was only when seven bucks paraded in silhouette that we stopped. It was a long stalk, in which I worked myself, face down, for several hundred yards—hunching along like a new and clumsy variety of tumble-bug—and at the end of the stalk the gazelle for some reason of their own had gone on. But, as I sat in disgust recovering my wind, for some equally inexplicable reason they all came back, traveling in a wide arc—seven big bucks following one another proudly in line and moving at a mincing trot. It was a long shot but, though the thud of the striking bullet was clear and loud, they all broke into a gallop at the same instant. Again I turned away in disgust, but two shouts of gratification spun me around just in time to see the last buck in the line fall.

Rin-chen rode furiously toward me as I walked up to the fallen animal, and from another angle another horseman—the one who had shouted second—lashed his horse unsparingly as he rode toward us. I knew one rider meant no danger and stood looking at the prize head of the buck—the finest horns I had ever seen—until Rin-chen arrived. Feverishly he set

at butchering the carcass but had only half finished when the stranger, having left his blown horse some yards away, staggered up with shouts of loud congratulation and, seizing on one leg, began to help with the skinning. Rin-chen greeted the man most cordially and, when the butchering was done, divided the meat into three piles, giving me at the same time a rather comical look. The sheep herder thanked us for the meat, told us where he had seen some more gazelle and then rode off with a final cheery wave of the hand.

“Your meat is never your own until it is butchered,” grunted Rin-chen. “I hurried but couldn’t cut it up fast enough, and until it is cut up any one who arrives to help in the butchering must have a share. That too is Tibetan custom.” That explained why he had objected to my carrying whole gazelle on my horse.

The sun dropped rapidly, and darkness followed hard on the herds that straggled toward the encampment. Between ourselves and the edge of the horizon where the sun would finally flatten and disappear the small Bu Mtso (Bu Lake) was a sheet of flame, across which wild fowl drove with slanted wings, seeking resting places on the broad fringe of ice that already took up half the lake’s surface. Their cries mingled with lowing of cattle, the peculiar pig-like grunt of the yak and the neighing of mares seeking their colts as herds and riders merged near the encampment. But above all these sounds a sudden burst of conversation behind me caught my attention.

“So you have been out scouting all day for Golok raiders. It was your turn? But how did you do it without a rifle?” Rin-chen’s answer I could not catch—but the voice went on: “Oh, his rifle was good? You shot two saddlebags of meat? That is good—very good to combine scouting and hunting. He must have much ammunition.”

The saddlebags were full of gazelle meat and I had two exceptionally fine heads. There would be great feasting and congratulation in Rin-chen’s hut that night. And yet I was not altogether sure just what I had been doing all day—hunting gazelle, chasing suspicious characters, scouting for Golok raiders or just having a general good time by a camp fire that overlooked all approaches. Maybe all those items entered into having a Tibetan good time, I decided, as the dogs began to bark and threaten at the edge of Rin-chen’s encampment.

*This story is the last of a series of three “Tales from the Tibetan Border,” by Robert B. Ekvall.*