

MYSTERY OF THE VANISHED CAPTAIN



Today, the Yangtze River Gorges are popular tourist sites. In Capt. Miclo's time, they were dangerous byways with everything from river bandits to marauding Chinese river boats.

Joseph Miclo was one of those rare men who became a legend in his own time. But unlike most other sea-faring men who attained that larger-than-life status for their deeds on earth, Miclo achieved that distinction both as a real live hero and as a ghost from the great beyond. The strange story could happen only on that most unusual of all waterways — the Yangtze River in China

BY GRETCHEN GROVER

One of the most difficult waterways in the world because of both its harsh geographical setting and the incessant hostility of bandits and warlords along its banks, the upper Yangtze River had only grudgingly yielded the use of its waters to merchant shipping at the turn of the 20th Century. The river had been open to foreign ships since the mid-19th Century, when the so-called "unequal treaties" internationalized this waterway, but the upper river was not conquered until shipbuilders were able to achieve the right combination of shallow draft and power to overcome the rapids, which could sometimes run as fast as 14 knots. Technical improvements come slowly; before World War I, only a handful of steamers had operated between Ichang and Chungking in the famous gorges of the Yangtze.

In 1918, Joseph Miclo went to work for Standard Oil of New York as the captain of the 135-foot river tug *Mei Tan*. Only the previous

year, this vessel had become the first American merchant ship to operate through the gorges to Chungking, the treaty port which was almost 1400 miles from the sea.

Although new to China, Miclo was already an experienced mariner in the Far East, albeit one whose past was clouded with a bit of mystery. He had apparently served for twelve years aboard ships of the government of the Philippines, a government that made use of American officers as a part of the trusteeship arrangement which the United States had with the island nation after the Spanish-American War. Miclo claimed he had served in a number of the ships of the nation, including the *Samar*, *Balabao*, *Basilan*, *Mindanao*, *Scout*, *Bungao*, *Rover*, and *Ranger*. However, these are all ships that are difficult to trace in standard lists, so it is not easy to verify the facts of his early career. At the time he left government service, he reportedly was the commodore of the revenue fleet in the Philippines, commanding the

cutter *Bustamante*.

Whether his departure from government service was an amicable one is not clear, but Miclo was known to bristle easily when things were not going the way he wanted. Although he had stayed in government service for twelve years, and later would be with Standard Oil for ten years and still later with Yangtze Rapid Steamship Company for three years, he was not the type of person who could be regarded as a classic example of a solid company man. Indeed, legends rarely are.

Briefly, in 1918, he was captain of the steamer *Yazoo*, a former German ship which had been chartered by the Philippine government after she had been seized by the US Shipping Board as a prize of war. Under Miclo's command, the 290-foot, 1500-ton *Yazoo* rescued part of the crew of the Siamese naval transport *Yiam Samud*, another ex-German ship. This 390-foot, 4700-ton ship had grounded on the steep and rocky Tungsha Island on

the China coast. For Miclo's heroism in this rescue, the King of Siam awarded the captain the Fourth Order of the Crown of Siam.

Consequently, when Joe Miclo came to the Yangtze, he was already something of a hero. It was not long after he went to work for Standard Oil that he became a hero once again in this challenging new environment. In September 1920, the captain of the 165-foot Navy gunboat *Palos* asked Miclo to accompany his ship down the river from Chungking to Ichang with the *Mei Tan* because the gunboat had been experiencing problems with her feed pumps. Normally, the gunboats were on the river to protect merchant ships, but in the case of these two ships the roles had once



Sailors view USS *Palos* at the Yangtze River port of Hankow in 1924.



As captain of SS *Mei Chuen* in 1926, Joseph Miclo was photographed in the center with Adm. C.S. Williams, C-in-C US Asiatic Fleet, on his left and R/Adm. H.H. Hough, Commander Yangtze Patrol on his right.

before been reversed. Then, in 1917, after the *Palos* had been holed on a rock and was taking on lots of water, the tug had brought the gunboat downriver lashed alongside with her pumps keeping the other vessel afloat. Now, once again, the *Mei Tan*, even though she had a barge made fast to her starboard side, would shepherd the ailing gunboat downriver while making her regular trip back to Ichang for another load of kerosene.

On the ensuing trip, the fears of the gunboat captain proved well founded. As the *Palos* entered a long, swift reach of the river, the pumps gave up completely, and the ship lost all power. She careened downriver, canting across the current at an angle, with only very limited steering capability remaining as her crew stood by helplessly in their life

jackets, anticipating the worst. Out ahead, Miclo heard the signal from the siren of the *Palos* and looked back, recognizing immediately that the gunboat was in serious trouble. Without a radio, he knew that it would be difficult to tell the gunboat what he was doing, but he quickly took the first in a series of gutsy actions that would eventually save the *Palos*.

In a remarkable display of seamanship, he checked the way of his vessel and turned his tug and barge around in the narrow confines of the river channel. Working his way upriver against the current, he closed the gap between the two ships quickly. Heading straight for the gunboat, he waited until the last moment before spinning the tug and tow around to catch the *Palos* on the

open port side of the *Mei Tan*.

As the captain of the gunboat later described the impact, "At the moment when her rush seemed certain to cut us in two, he swung her sharp right. Lines flew back and forth between the vessels as their sides came together with the crash of smashing stanchions. There was a terrific jerk as the *Mei Tan* picked us up in her powerful surge. One line snapped, but the others held. Then, as the *Mei Tan*, *Palos*, and the barge swung out into the stream, we felt a violent shuddering aft as our stern scraped over the outposts of the reef. So close as that was our escape."

But the three vessels were not yet out of trouble. Knowing that the river below would be extremely difficult to navigate with this bulky tow, Miclo decided to go upriver to the nearest port of Wanhsien to reach safety with the gunboat. To go in that direction, he then began his third midriver turn, this time with dead weight on each side of the *Mei Tan*, which projected a total beam of 66 feet, wider than most ocean freighters of that era. Again, with superb shiphandling, Miclo worked the ships around, and headed upriver.

By the end of the day, Miclo succeeded in delivering the *Palos* to a relatively safe anchorage at Wanhsien, a port about halfway between Ichang and Chungking, well above the gorges. There, the Navy crew began to work feverishly to repair the pumps. When the pumps appeared to be operable once more, the two captains agreed to resume the passage, at least as far as Kweifu at the head of