

https://dspace.org/

Investigations of a credible report by a US Marine on the missing Peking Fossils.

Berger, L.R.; Liu, W.; Wu, X.

2012-03

Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf)

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/21435

Berger, L.R., Liu, W. and Wu, X. 2012. Investigations of a credible report by a US Marine on the missing Peking Fossils. South African Journal of Science 108 (3/4): 1122.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Investigation of a credible report by a US Marine on the location of the missing Peking Man fossils

Authors:
Lee R. Berger[1]
Wu Liu[2]
Xiujie Wu[2]

Affiliations:
[1]Institute for Human Evolution, PalaeoSciences Centre, School of GeoSciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

[2]Institute for Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology, Beijing, China

Correspondence to:
Lee Berger

Email:
Lee.Berger@wits.ac.za

Postal address:
Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, South Africa

How to cite this article:
Berger LR, Liu W, Wu X. Investigation of a credible report by a US Marine on the location of the missing Peking Man fossils. S Afr J Sci. 2012;108(3/4), Art. #1122, 3 pages. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v108i3/4.1122

© 2012. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The loss of the important Peking Man fossils in 1941, of which only the casts remain, is well documented.[1,2,3,4] Just before the formal entrance of the USA into World War II, two large wooden footlockers were turned over to the US Military for safe transport to the American Museum of Natural History in New York.[3,4] These two crates purportedly held the most important of the Zhoukoudian fossils and artefacts, including the fragmentary remains of 40 individual hominins.[4]

Numerous eyewitness accounts suggest that the crates had been placed on a US Marine vehicle for removal to the Marine barracks in Peking, for eventual safe transport to the USA.[3,4] It was apparently intended that the crates and the fossils be transported to the USA aboard the cargo ship the SS *President Harrison*, from the port of Qinhaungdao, near the Marine base of Camp Holcomb. Apparently the fossils were to travel from the Marine barracks in Peking, via rail to the port, where they would be placed upon the cargo ship. But the *President Harrison* encountered Japanese warships as war broke out, ran aground and never reached Qinhaungdao.[2,3,4] The exact disposition of the crates containing the fossils has since not been established. After their exit through the gates of the Peking Union Medical College – the last reliable sighting – the fossils simply vanished.[4]

Despite numerous attempts to locate the wooden footlockers and the fossils they contained, no verifiable sign of the fossils, or the crates that contained them, has yet been recorded. Rumours of their whereabouts range from their having been sunk in a Japanese or US vessel, or buried by soldiers near the Peking Union Medical College, to their having been ground up for traditional medicine, or transported to Japan or the USA.[1,2,3,4] Nonetheless, various significant attempts have been made to locate these fossils – attempts which have included offers of substantial rewards for their return by both the US and the Chinese governments. The loss of the Peking Man fossils is arguably the greatest palaeoanthropology mystery, second only to the Piltdown forgery.

On 12 April 2010, one of us received initial correspondence from a Mr Paul Bowen, the son of a former US Marine, Richard M. Bowen, whom had been stationed in both Tiensten and Chinwangtao (today known as Qinhaungdao) in China after the end of World War II. Richard Bowen had been a corporal attached to the First Pioneer Battalion of the First Marine Division in Tientsin, and was one of the last soldiers out of China during the 1947 movement of the Communist Chinese in Northern China and subsequent evacuation of foreign military personnel.

The critical aspect of the initial email from Paul Bowen (2010, personal communication to L.R.B., April 12) read as follows:

> My father was a Marine in China after WWII and he thinks he discovered bones of the missing Peking Man at a Marine base in China in 1947. He knows where these are buried there having dug them up and reburied them while under siege in Chinwangtao. I showed him the site from Google earth and it appears untouched. They may still be there buried in the boxes …

In further correspondence from Paul Bowen (2010, personal communication, April 15), he recounted events which led to his father believing that he had dug up one of the footlockers or boxes containing the remains of the missing Peking Man fossils. In the spring of 1947, Richard Bowen volunteered to be a rear guard in the retreat from Peking and found himself on the front line in the Nationalist–Communist Civil War at Chinwangtao.

> Day after day the war there was getting hotter and closer. Peitaiho, south of us, was mostly overrun. … The city of Chinwangtao was now under siege by the Communist 8th Route Army with Nationalist gun-boats shelling them over our camp. One day a group of them asked us to surrender, saying that they had 250,000 men. To prove the point, that night thousands of fires were lit by them on the adjacent hills and high ground. It looked like Christmas time. From that time on we started digging fox holes at night and napping during the day. I had a 30 caliber machine gun and our lieutenant would, from time

> to time, change our crossfire. In this nightly digging process we dug a lot of holes. In one of them we found a box that was full of bones. At night it gave us a little scare and we filled in that hole and dug another. Shortly after this we evacuated the area, went back to Tientsin, and then back to the United States with the First Marine Division colors.

After verifying the identity of Richard Bowen and the legitimacy of the events as described, we began to investigate whether this story, as recounted, was plausible and whether the possibility of further investigation was feasible, with the obvious goal of recovering the footlocker, or at least identifying the possible location of the footlocker. Persistent rumours often repeated in studies of the whereabouts of the missing fossils include two Swiss officers seeing the footlockers unloaded in Chinwangtao into a 'warehouse' and, a detailed account of two US Marines – Sergeants Snider and Jackson – moving the fossils by rail in wooden footlockers to Camp Holcomb on 04 December 1941.[1,2,3,4] In fact, the most credible accounts have them destined for, or arriving at Camp Holcomb. Thus it is highly plausible that the fossils made it as far as Chinwangtao and a logical point of unloading from a Peking military train would be the rail end at Camp Holcomb. We obtained two maps of the camp, dated 1931 and 1939.[5] Richard Bowen was able to place the position of the stone barracks where the incident took place on both maps.

It therefore seemed possible to us that the footlockers had indeed made their way safely from the Medical College, to the Marine barracks in Peking and then by train to the rail end at Camp Holcomb, but not in time to be loaded on a ship to evacuate (human life likely taking priority in what must have been a chaotic evacuation from China as war broke out across the Pacific). It is also possible that in the chaos that must have been underway at this evacuation point, the officer in charge of the fossils might have chosen to bury them near one of the few permanent structures in the camp (potentially the brick enlisted men's barracks described by Richard Bowen) for later retrieval – only no one survived the war to recount the location.

In November 2010, we visited Qinhaungdao to attempt to locate the exact position where the incident occurred. We established the former location of Camp Holcomb, but it was disappointingly close to highly developed areas of the docks. A locally recognised expert on the harbour, Mr Wang Qingpu, whom had written the official history of the port for the Chinese government,[6] was contacted. Mr Wang had been a child at the time of the US occupation of Camp Holcomb after the war. Remarkably, Mr Wang not only remembered the US Marines as friendly to him, but also recognised the image of the stone barracks described by Richard Bowen, and believed he could locate them.

After visiting the area identified by Mr Wang, it became clear that the region was indeed heavily industrialised and few original structures remained. The area where Mr Wang remembered the stone barracks to be was presently occupied by warehouses (at location N39 55 00, E119 34 47.8), but there was encouragingly some clear land in the area. It became clear that the development in the area had occurred only in the late 1970s. We were able to locate three World War II era landmarks visible on the original maps: the rail bridge crossing the Tang Ho River (Figure 1a), the island figured on the later map in the Tang Ho River, and the camp rifle range butts. These identifications allowed us to make a series of triangulated measurements on the two pre-war maps.

Every triangulated measurement came within 200 m of where Mr Wang remembered the stone barracks to be.

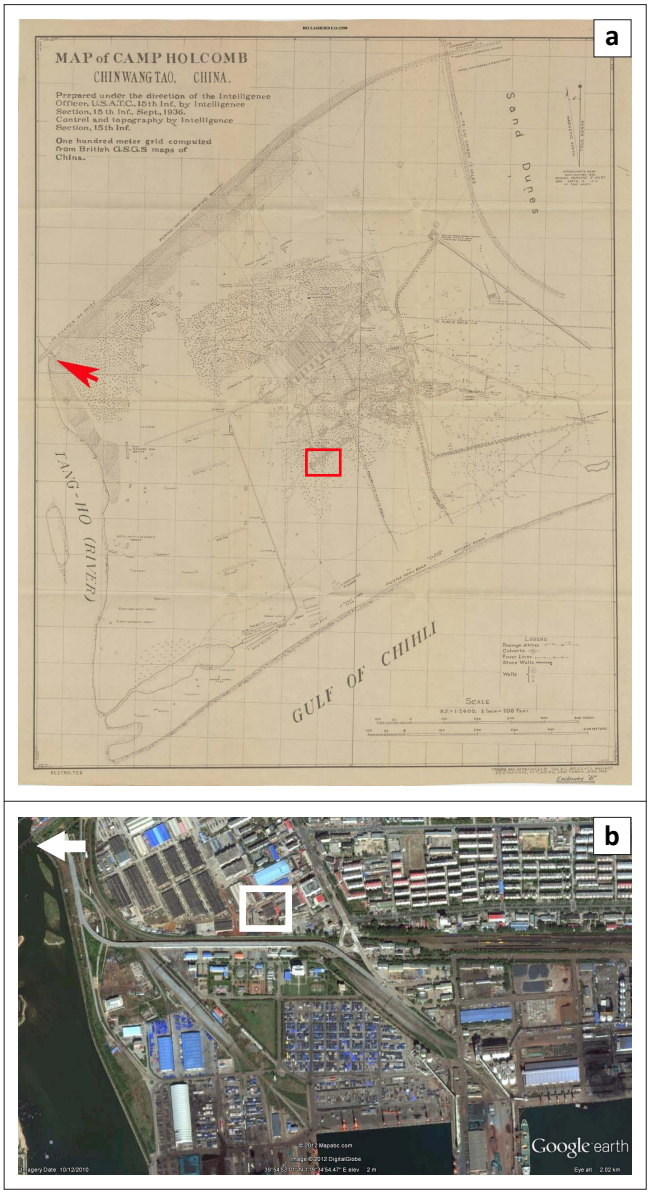


FIGURE 1: (a) 1938 Military map showing the 'best guess' area for the location of the missing Peking Man fossils. The red arrow indicates the position of the rail crossing which is still present today. The red square gives the probable location of the barracks near which the footlocker containing the fossils was buried. This position was informed by the drawings and memory of Richard Bowen as well as the verbal descriptions and on site indications of Mr Wang, who remembered the building in question. (b) Actual area of Camp Holcomb, east of the original railroad position (marked by the white arrow). The clear square marks the approximate position of the enlisted men's barracks described by Richard Bowen and supported by eyewitness accounts of its location. Note the heavily built-up dock areas. The port was substantially extended as late as 1978 and it is likely that this area was only altered substantially at that time. Note the islands situated within the river to the southeast of the rail bridge. It is believed that the third (furthest) island corresponds to the island illustrated in the original military maps of Camp Holcomb.

This proximity gave us some confidence that the area was the same and we made three possible 'best guesses' as to the original position of the stone barracks, all within an approximate 200 m by 200 m area. The best calculated guess was held to be a position of approximately N39 55 04.0, E119 34 39.3 (Figure 1b).

A ground survey of the area over several days proved disappointing. The most probable location had been built over by warehouses and parking lots belonging to the Hebei Provincial Food Export and Import Company. One possible location sits underneath a large warehouse, but the remaining locations all fall under a large parking area and roadway, giving some hope that if the excavation for the foundations of these roads and lots was not too deep, the footlockers may have survived. Unfortunately, the exact location of the stone barracks in question is impossible to determine, so the actual area of potential discovery spans a large area.

One interesting observation is that the 'best guess' area noted above is on a slight rise, approximately 6 m to 10 m above the area described as the position of the old army barracks. This rise fits well with the description by Richard Bowen of the building sitting on a slightly raised area of harder ground, with the footlocker being buried some 50 ft to 100 ft south-west of the building in soft sand. If this raised area is the same one as described, the area of most probable location of the footlocker is under asphalt and not under the foundation of a warehouse. If this is indeed the location, then there is a slim possibility that the footlocker and its contents survived construction in the area. The depth of the road did not seem to exceed more than about 15 cm, underneath which lies beach sand. The other potential area where Mr Wang believed that the building might have been is also under pavement, although a gun emplacement has been built in the centre of the area sometime after 1947. It was not practical on our expedition to consider excavation of the area.

Conclusions

The account by Richard Bowen represents one of the more credible accounts of the possible dispensation of the original Peking Man fossils. The circumstances of the fossils disappearance do not preclude Mr Bowen's account that they found their way to being buried next to the enlisted men's barracks at Camp Holcomb prior to the Japanese occupation of the camp in 1942. Were these the actual fossils? The timing and placement certainly make it a not unlikely possibility that this was one of the original cases. Unfortunately, given the nature of the construction and development in the area where the box would have been reburied by Mr Bowen and his fellow soldier, the likelihood that they were destroyed is high.

There is, however, one small glimmer of hope for the possible recovery of the box – should it have survived the construction in the area. We established that the area in question is due to undergo development in the near future and that 'large buildings' are to be erected on the site. This development of course offers the opportunity that the roads and warehouses will be excavated, and that if the footlocker noted by Richard Bowen has somehow miraculously survived, it or its contents might be uncovered during the course of this excavation. Local authorities of the Cultural Heritage Office have committed to monitor any excavations in the area for remnants of the footlockers or fossils, and it is on this slim chance that the recovery of the bones Richard Bowen observed in 1947 rests.

Acknowledgements

We thank the National Geographic Society, the Ministry of Science and Technology of China (2009DFB20580), the National Research Foundation (South Africa) and the South African Department of Science and Technology for funding. We also thank the United States Government and WWII Graves Registration in Honolulu, Hawaii for invaluable assistance and the Bowen family for their personal interest in and support of the project.

References

1. Janus CG, Basher W. The search for Peking Man. New York: Macmillan; 1975.
2. Lanpo J, Huang W. The story of Peking Man: From archaeology to mystery. Translated by Yin Zhinqui. New York: Oxford University Press; 1990.
3. Boaz NT, Ciochon RL. Dragon Bone Hill: An Ice Age saga of *Homo erectus*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2004.
4. Ciochon RL, Eaves-Johnson KL. The Peking Man mystery – stranger than fiction. In: Taschdjian C. The Peking Man fossils are missing. New York: Felony and Mayhem Press, 2008; p. 311–324.
5. Maps provided by the United States World War II Graves Registration, Honolulu, Hawaii; 2010.
6. Wang Q. Port of Qinhuandao. Qinhuangdao: People Communications Publishing House; 2000.