Barney Rosset: The “Publisher-hero” As Combat Photographer in China.
Interview by Bob Bergin, Alexandria, VA (bbergin99@gmail.com).

Poet Allen Ginsberg called Barney (Barnet Lee) Rosset (b. 1922) a “publisher-hero.” As owner of Grove Press, Rosset put into print authors no one else would; he also published such notable Beat Generation writers as Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and William Burroughs. He introduced American readers to Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Kenzaburo Oe, and many others.

Rosset is perhaps best known for defending freedom of expression and pushing the limits of censorship in America. He fought and won landmark legal battles to publish uncensored versions of D.H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover and Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer.

Less well known is that Rosset was an Army photographer in the China-Burma-India theater during World War II. In December 1944, he documented the Chinese Army during a major Japanese offensive and was later sent to film the expected Japanese surrender in Shanghai. A special exhibition of his photographs from this period was held in New York in 2002.

Rosset discussed his time in the U.S. Army and his work as a photographer in China with Bob Bergin in New York City in June 2010. Bergin, a former U.S. Foreign Service officer, writes on the history of aviation in Southeast Asia and China, the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), and military operations in the China-Burma-India WWII theater.

Bergin: When you got into the military, were you drafted or did you volunteer?
Rosset: I volunteered. It was well into 1942. I wanted to get into the Marine Corps. I don’t think I appreciated it then, but the Commandant of one of the biggest Marine bases—Quantico, I think—took me around, gave me a tour of the base.
Bergin: How did that come about?
Rosset: Somehow through my father. He was urging me to join the Marines, and he knew all kinds of people. As soon as I left the Marine base that day, I went back to Chicago and at the Railroad Station I enlisted in the Marines. But after they tested my eyes, they didn’t take me. I was not able to get into the Marines, and I couldn’t get into the Air Force. Only the Army would take me. They would take anybody then—if you could walk to get there.

Bergin: Where were you assigned?

Rosset: I was sent to Oregon with the 96th Infantry Division, and after a while my situation started to seem ridiculous. The infantry involved a lot of walking, and I had terrible feet. Day-to-day, my life was not very stimulating. There were good people there. The officers in my Division were college people, but 15 percent of the enlisted men in my outfit couldn’t read or write.

We started a group—it was voluntary and outside of the regular hours—where I taught reading and writing. The men could not even sign their name to get paid. And these were intelligent people. I taught them and, in turn, they helped me. They were good at doing physical things—like taking a gun apart and putting it back together. That was very hard for me. And they had never played football. I formed a football team in my company, and we played the officers. The officers really appreciated that; they had nobody to play against.

Bergin: How long were you with the infantry?

Rosset: About a year. The Army finally thought it was better if I did something else too. I made my way into officer training. I went into the Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Virginia, the Quartermaster school, one of the last officers’ schools still open. They were already shutting them all down.

But our training was basically infantry. I never learned anything about the Quartermasters, except driving trucks. I was licensed to drive any kind of truck, which was handy. By then I had heard about photography. That was in the Signal Corps. I figured that would be perfect for me—out in the open, not too military, pretty much your own boss.

Bergin: Did you already have an interest in photography?

Rosset: Before the war I had an interest in filmmaking. My best friend in high school, Haskell Wexler, and I talked about making a film together. He went on to become a great filmmaker. I went to the University of California [UCLA] to study filmmaking. They had advertised a film course, but they hadn’t started it yet. But I did meet people there who would later become very involved with the film industry.

Bergin: You wanted to get into photography, but the Army doesn’t usually give you what you want.

Rosset: I got a letter from the head of the Signal Corps that named me to the photography school in New York.

Bergin: How did you manage that?

Rosset: I told my father. He had become a very good friend of Jimmy Roosevelt, who was himself a Marine and ended up in the South Pacific. It was not easy to get into the film school. It was here in New York, and it had these great directors—like John Ford—but he was not there. It was run by some very Hollywood types. I lived in a hotel on Lexington Avenue. The training lasted two months.

Bergin: Were they teaching you advanced stuff?

Rosset: It was all very basic. Coney Island, with all its different rides, was the best training ground. We would go there and to places like the Coca-Cola bottling plant and shoot little films. Then they would screen them.

I was the amateur; the other students were all professionals, with some link to photography, either still or motion pictures. I liked the school, but I couldn’t get along too well. Most of the instructors had already been in the war, and as a reward were given their jobs. I had never seen people so lackadaisical, and I just could not get along with them. Maybe because of that I was the first one to get a job and get shipped out.
Bergin: You went to China, but it was via India, wasn’t it?

Rosset: India was where they sent officers to wait until they needed to replace someone. I started in New Delhi and went from the Imperial Hotel there to a camp outside Calcutta that barely had tents. Hyenas would invade at night and steal our food. It was not a happy place, but we could go into Calcutta—and that was very exciting, much better than Delhi. There were bad parts of the city, and people kept getting arrested for going there. It was sort of dangerous.

There were big buildings, the homes of Indian Rajas that were deserted and turned into brothels. One of them was especially fancy, and I got to know a girl there. She had her own suite—and a British lady who dressed her. It was fascinating. I went there in the daytime—nobody else had thought of that. Why wait till night when everyone is busy. I would go in the daytime, take her to a movie—which nobody else did—and all the British women were agog—some American officer taking out a prostitute in the middle of the day! But I did.

Bergin: Were you pleased to get your orders to China?

Rosset: I really wanted to go to China. I was enamored of [Gen. Joseph Warren] Stilwell, who was thrown out two weeks before I got there. And I had been very impressed when I read Edgar Snow’s *Red Star over China* [1937], but I knew that Mao and Chou En Lai were way up in Manchuria.

Bergin: Did you have a sense of what you would find there?

Rosset: A lot of our perceptions about China at the time were shaped by American press coverage of Madame Chiang Kai-shek. She was very popular in the U.S. I admired her. It seemed that she and her family members were helping General Chiang to run the country while it was at war. We had no sense of the problems there, or of the corruption.

I got into China by flying over the Hump. It was toward the end of December 1944, and, as we landed at Kunming, we were attacked. The Japanese attacked the airfield by following American planes into the landing pattern. On Christmas Day I found myself going to Kweiyang, about 300 miles from Kunming. I was given a small truck and a driver. I named the truck “Foto-Moto.” It carried equipment I needed to set up a field photo lab.

Bergin: You came to Kweiyang from Kunming in the west, but Kweiyang was surrounded by the Japanese on the other three sides.

Rosset: The outskirts of Kweiyang is where the Japanese offensive stopped.1 It was as far as they would go, although nobody knew that at the time. I got there and was given a place to stay in an old Inn. I settled in and tried to figure out how to put together a photo lab.

Bergin: I understand there were a number of American officers in Kweiyang. What were they doing there?

Rosset: I don’t know. You got the feeling that they must have done something wrong to be sent there. They were high ranking: one general and a half dozen colonels. I never understood what they were doing there.

Bergin: What was life in the city like?

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1. The Japanese Ichi-go offensive from April to December 1944 was intended to capture airbases in eastern China to neutralize U.S. Fourteenth Air Force attacks against the Japanese Army in China and eliminate the threat of B-29 raids from China against Japan’s home islands. [B.B.]
Rosset: There were a lot of refugees. We had a social club that had Chinese—very important Chinese from Hong Kong—who had walked about six hundred miles to get there. They were urbane, educated, and had no other place to go. I had no ideas where they went at night. There were also young Chinese women, upper middle-class ladies from Hong Kong. And Chinese-American soldiers—from Chicago—who were getting in line to marry. Where else could these guys meet upper-class Chinese women?

I became friendly with the Chinese-Americans. They needed photographs for their marriage licenses, and wedding photographs. And I did it. We also had Japanese-American soldiers who were intelligence operatives. They worked with radios and so on, and they were very important. But they couldn’t let the Chinese know they were Japanese; they were afraid that the Chinese would kill them.

Bergin: You met an American who was an OSS officer.

Rosset: That was Meredith “Muddy” Rhule. He was from Springfield, Illinois, where he had been a cop. His ambition in life was to be the sheriff of Springfield, which was quite a big job. He had also been a professional wrestler, was strong as an ox, and was an unbelievable deadly shot with a gun. He had a very strong streak of morality—you couldn’t go out with girls you weren’t married to—and he led a unit of OSS people.

His job was to take a squad of Chinese and go out along the Japanese line and steal back or destroy all the stuff that the Chinese army had sold to the Japanese. I went with him. He had trouble getting vehicles. I had my truck—which I never let go of—and so I drove him.

He introduced me to another guy, also a naval officer, and the three of us became friends. This guy was with naval intelligence. He had his own building and about ten people. He was a free-wheeling spirit, liked to go out and have a good time, while Rhule was very tight. Rhule would set up exercises. I have photos of Rhule running track, and going for runs in the mountains. We went with him, and the Chinese peasant women thought we were the finest thing they had ever seen—and they would run along with us.

Bergin: Was Rhule doing this to train his Chinese teams?

Rosset: Rhule was in very good physical condition, and he wanted all his guys to be like that. And they were, including some young Americans with him. They were all very disciplined, very tough, but very good.

Bergin: What it was like when you went out with him and his Chinese teams?

Rosset: We went well-armed. I drove my truck most of the time, although I never knew how we would get to where we were going. We always had a Chinese guide. We stayed in secluded areas in the woods. There wasn’t much in the way of towns where we went, no hotels. What we would do was to circle around, go way out, way beyond where we knew the Japanese were, and then come back around from their rear. They were not expecting us there. They had no enemies there that they knew of. And we didn’t want to run into them. We were always very afraid of getting into a fire fight.

Bergin: How big were the Chinese teams?

Rosset: Maybe half a dozen. They always had their own leader. Sometimes we would leave them somewhere, and meet them later. Most of the time we stayed together.

I hardly ever understood what I was doing. There were Chinese officers who appeared from nowhere while we were in enemy territory. I have photographs of them—I never knew who they were, or what they did. Some spoke English, but I couldn’t talk with them. It was all very strange then.

Bergin: Did it seem that Rhule knew what was going on?
Rosset: Rhule always understood what was going on. He kept everything together by the sheer force of his personal magnetism. Things always seemed very disorganized. China was like that. I remember one day, our army suddenly decided to get people to learn how to parachute out of a plane. It was the strangest thing. And they would pay you extra money to do it. Our naval intelligence friend got to be the star pupil because they paid. I figured the hell with the pay, I didn’t want to do it.

Bergin: What were you doing when you weren’t running around with Rhule?

Rosset: Once an American officer came from Washington, D.C. I don’t think he was a doctor, although he should have been. He was to examine—physically—the Chinese soldier, and I was recruited to go with him as his photographer. I had one other guy, and we took a jeep. The guy from Washington had a jeep, and three or four other people. We set off on a road and I was supposed to follow him. There was only one trail going somewhere. How can you get lost? I told the guy that all I ask is one thing: If you ever get off of that trail, leave a sign so we’ll know. But then he didn’t do it. He did exactly what I told him not to do.

I had to stop at a fuel dump to get gasoline to put into my jeep. The U.S. Army brought in thousands and thousands of gallons of gasoline, all by plane from India. What an expensive operation that must have been. And then the Chinese stole it. I drove into the fuel dump and got a hose, and ran it from the big tank—and it was water. I thought maybe, if you put the hose down to the bottom, there would be real gasoline and there was. It took me hours to get it out. I had the feeling the Chinese were probably fooling the Americans by taking half and leaving half. I found it was endemic.

By the time I got the gasoline out that guy was long gone. But I had told him—if you go off the road leave a sign. He went off it and didn’t leave anything. I just kept going and going and going. Then we come around a turn in the wilderness, and a Chinese guy stops us. He’s in an American uniform; he was an OSS guy. He went berserk when he saw us. “Do you know what you’re doing?” he yelled. “The Japanese are a quarter mile up the road.” If it had not been for him being there, we would have driven right into the Japanese and gotten captured or killed. And that happened more than once, and that guy never apologized.

And then, as I turned around to go back, I fell through a bridge. I photographed it, the truck wedged, and we couldn’t get it out. A Chinese unit came along. The guys took a tow rope, and jumped in the water and pulled the truck out. And then they wanted to feed us. They were gentlemen. They had boiling water—with hot peppers in it—that’s all they had. It was like they wanted to have a party. And I thought I had to drink that, at least try, or it would be an insult. It tasted…. There’s no word for it. Their officer in charge was a good guy, a good soldier. I ran into him afterwards. The Chinese troops were all right, but their organization was disappointing. It was a big problem. The Americans had a lot of contempt for the Chinese leadership, and rightfully.

Bergin: You often photographed Chinese troops, sometimes in combat or right afterwards. How did you find them then?

Rosset: The Chinese troops acquitted themselves very well. They were brave, although they were unfed and poorly equipped. All the American equipment we sent them was being saved to fight the communists. I remember what looked like a German tank from World War I, and they were still using it. And they had these little artillery pieces, again from WWI. That annoyed me very much, but what was I going to do? I took a lot of photographs.
I never heard a wounded Chinese cry out, or complain. Once I found a truckload of Chinese civilians with open wounds. I knew of an American aid station and took them there, but the Americans wouldn't let them in. I felt terrible. I had to go on and leave them sitting there and bleeding. Chinese civilians were always very stoic. Sometime I thought it was because they knew their situation was hopeless.

Bergin: The Japanese had halted their advance and started pulling back to the east, with the Chinese in pursuit. You were covering the Japanese retreat when you met with the famous Time correspondent Teddy [Theodore H.] White. How did that come about?

Rosset: We had heard about a team of two American officers and three Chinese officers who had come to observe the war and disappeared. Teddy White heard about it and came to do a story.

I was standing on the side of the road when a jeep with a couple of Americans pulled up. It was Teddy White, but I didn't recognize him. I said, “Did you hear—Teddy White is coming here?” And he said: “I am Teddy White.”

He had a photographer with him, and we went together to try to find the missing Americans. They stayed with us about a week, then Teddy said he had better go back and type up his stories. I was quite impressed with him. I had read his books; I was the only person there who knew how important he was. But he was not very friendly, and finally I just hung around with his photographer.

After Teddy left, we reached the most forward of the Chinese troops, the last friendly people before the Japanese. They told us that the team with the Americans had passed through there. They had been told to stop, but they went on. They must have been killed or captured. The Chinese wisely had not chased after them—but we did.

We drove on down the road, and came to a place that looked suspicious, where something had happened. We left the jeeps on the road and went on foot. I still did not like to walk too much, so I stayed near the jeeps, and looked around there. And that's where I found two corpses lying in water in a ditch—and then another in a little pond nearby. They were bloated beyond recognition. We knew there were about five people involved, and decided that two of the bodies were Americans, and one was Chinese. I took photos and sent the film to Kunming. We never heard another word.

Later we did hear more about it, and it turned out we were wrong. The American colonel in charge escaped. The other American, a captain, was later found dead. It was a story I did not believe. They had been captured together, and at night were kept tied up in a tent. The ranking guy managed to free himself, but—as the story went—he could not spare the time to free his companion. That was something we couldn't understand.

Bergin: The Japanese were falling back to the city of Liuchow. On the way there you had a particularly close encounter with the Japanese.

Rosset: I think that at the end we got within about three hundred feet of the Japanese. When we started I could already see them clearly. We were with the Chinese on the side of one hill, and the Japanese were on the side of another, with a valley between us. The Chinese didn't seem inclined to move ahead, so I thought that if we—my driver and I—started walking toward them, maybe the Chinese would follow. They didn't.

We walked down our hill into the valley. There was vegetation at the bottom, like bamboo, and a railroad track ran through it. The railway was on an embankment that we could use as cover. But we went over the embankment, and there the Japanese could have picked us off. Bullets were fired over our heads. We got into the grass, and then realized we didn't have any guns. We didn't even have our shirts on. It was a hot day and we didn't want to carry anything we didn't need. The Japanese could have strolled over and shot us with a pistol. We knew if we went back the way we came, the Japanese would see us. So we crawled all the way up the valley—terrified—until we thought we had gone far enough.

Bergin: And this was near the city of Liuchow?

Rosset: Liuchow was very close. The Fourteenth Air Force had a big airbase there, the biggest in the world at one point. When the Japanese retreated from the city they burned it down. I was up on a mountain, and from there I could see the city burning. At the same time I could hear San Francisco radio saying that Liu-
chow had been recaptured by the Chinese. But here I was—with the Chinese—still well outside the city. It was eerie.

We met up with an air force team, two guys with a jeep. If a pilot screwed up, they put him in a jeep and sent him out to be a spotter. It was a really tough job. You had to go right where the Japanese were, then bring our planes down on them. So now we had two jeeps, and the Chinese army behind us. We headed for Liuchow, but the Chinese didn't follow.

We got to the airfield, which seemed deserted. It was surrounded by barbed wire, which we cut through, and then we drove out on the runways. There were miles and miles of runways, and there were all these holes dug in them. We didn't know it, but we did exactly what the Japanese expected us to do: We went and looked in the holes—and there was nothing there. It was like the Japanese didn't finish what they set out to do.

We radioed back that everything was okay, and the engineer corps sent in a little plane. An engineer colonel got off and took one look at these holes and went berserk. The holes were empty, but they were all rimmed with explosives. It was a miracle that we had set nothing off.

The engineers brought in more people and gave a class on how to deactivate these Japanese traps. One went off while they were teaching, and killed thirty or forty people. That happened right next to us. It blew up my jeep. The army later sent me a bill for it—one jeep, 640 dollars.

*Bergin:* What was the city of Liuchow like when you got there?

*Rosset:* The Japanese had destroyed the city as they left. They shot people in the street—and they shot children. They destroyed all the bridges leading into the city. To get to it we had to cross over the river by boat, maybe six or eight of us. As we got close, we could see people on the river bank cheering. We felt as if we had done something. The town had been deserted and then suddenly there were people. They came out of nowhere, mobs of them. They came out of the bushes; some by boat. I got photos of all that.

*Bergin:* It all sounds unlike the war in Europe or anywhere else.

*Rosset:* Teddy White wrote some of the best description of the war in China that I've ever read. In one place he describes a small unit just like the one I had. Everything was totally disorganized. There was no war—but underneath it all there was a war—a different kind of war.

Teddy didn't use those terms, but he really got the essence of it. It was not a war, but it was. There were many strange people involved; one guy doing this, one guy that. They're all in the war, and they can't leave. When I hear "war," I think of the Marines on Iwo Jima. That's war—and that wasn't what was happening in China. In China you had to go looking for the war. Sometimes people never found it, and when they did, it was almost accidental.

One day we heard about a battle. I got my weapons carrier and took one guy, and we went looking for it. It was winter. It was cold, and there was snow. It was a mountainous place. We came to the top of a hill, and I remember it was all ice. And then suddenly, I fell asleep, just like that. The guy with me couldn't believe it. He thought I got so scared, that I blacked out.

The truck slid down the hill. At the bottom it ran into a telephone pole and snapped it in half, but that stopped it. I got out and walked about three or four hundred feet from the truck and took photographs of it stuck in the snow. That's a funny way to find a war, but we found it right down that road.
The Japanese were retreating through the area. You saw my photograph of the Chinese soldier with the machine gun. I sat all day by that machine gun. I thought that guy knew more about what he was doing than anybody else. He was using the gun, and the Japanese were sending in fighter planes with a couple of little bombs. They would come in and dive, but they could drop only their few little bombs that didn’t have that much effect.

The Chinese troops were quite incredible. They didn’t have any gasoline, so they used charcoal to run their vehicles. A guy would stand on the running board and stoke the fire. Their trucks turned over a lot. They called them sunfish. They crashed and flipped over.

Bergin: What did you do once the Chinese secured Liuchow?

Rosset: I took my exposed film back to Kunming. I made a quick visit to Kweiyang, and as the war was ending, I was sent to Shanghai—although I was not sure why.

We landed in Shanghai at what was a Japanese airfield. The Japanese were still running the place. There were four or five of us Americans. We got in the back of a pickup truck with a Japanese driver. It was raining, and as we drove into the city, we started seeing more people on the streets. It dawned on us gradually that they were looking at us. By the time we got to the hotel, there were a lot of people on the sidewalks, cheering us, like we had conquered the city.

We went to the Cathay Hotel on the Bund, a beautiful place. The manager was Japanese and we were given suites. I had two enlisted men with me, and they got one suite together. I got one all by myself. I took it over from a Japanese officer, who met me in full dress uniform—with a sword. It was like a dream.

When I first got there, the Japanese were all over the town. I had a bicycle and got to know parts of the city pretty well. There was a nightclub area that I would go to, and to get there I had to go through a Japanese area—which I didn’t understand very well. It was raining one night as I rode through there, and my bicycle went out from under me. I was flat on my back looking up at all these faces with white uniforms. A bunch of Japanese officers stood in a circle around me. I thought it was the end. They weren’t friendly, but they weren’t unfriendly either. It was very eerie.

There were many strange things about Shanghai then. I was living in this wonderful hotel, and next door was a huge gymnasium where American officers were still being held as POWs. Nobody had told the Japanese to let them out. They weren’t being treated badly, and we brought them whiskey until they were finally released.

I was curious about the Russians. The Soviets got into the Asia war very late, but there was a whole breed of Russians who had been involved with China for years. They had a huge fur business. Many had had to flee the Soviet Union, and now they represented the Soviets. The Japanese had brought many of them there—that was the weirdest part of all.

I was invited to a big party at the Soviet Embassy. We were in a big, beautiful room, about forty people, around a table, and everybody had their own little bottle of vodka. Lovely people, beautiful women, mostly Russian-Jews who spoke English as if they were Americans. They started by praising Lenin as a great man, but as the evening went on, they became more and more bitter about the Russians. Here they were, Russians, representing the Soviet Union—and they had no use for Russians. It pissed me off.

There was a large community of German Jews who had fled Germany, and the Japanese had brought many of them to Shanghai. I had a friend who came in a beautiful Japanese ship. She was a law student in Berlin when she got in trouble with the Nazis. Her friends protected her, but told her to get out. Her father had left earlier and gone to Geneva. Her mother was convinced that the Nazis were good people and it
would end when they killed all the bad Jews. That was not an uncommon thing, that belief. Her mother would not leave—and she died there.

My friend did what was also common for a young woman trying to get away—she married a young guy like herself, a Jewish Berliner. He was a musician, and when they got to Shanghai, he played in a jazz band, in a nightclub. It was a weird society.

The Japanese actually treated these German refugees very well. They all lived in a ghetto, but I saw the apartments and it wasn’t bad. There was a curfew that nobody paid attention to. The Japanese had a kind of farcical control over the neighborhood. There were about two Japanese guys in charge of all these people, who played jokes on them. Everybody thought it was pretty funny.

A lot of young women worked in nightclubs—now who in the hell were the customers? It must have been the Japanese. My friend had a boyfriend. Like her, he was a German Jew. He had his own nightclub, and he was very important in the nightclub world—too important. He got into a fight with Japanese officers and they asked him to come down to headquarters. He was never seen again. She was really in love with this guy. I could see it in her eyes, something missing.

There was a game then that was a big thing—jai alai. It was played by Spaniards, from the Basque country. They had been there the whole war. They must have been leftovers from the Spanish Civil War. My friend loved it. We went to this big place where they played. A couple of thousand people were there, but it was not a thing the Japanese went for. And we gambled. It was like going to a horse race.

Shanghai was a strange place then. One day in October 1945, I was instructed to go to the airport for transport back to Kunming. That was the beginning of my return home.

Barney Rosset returned to America intending to become a filmmaker. He produced a documentary called Strange Victory (1948; dir. Leo Hurwitz), which showed that, despite America’s defeat of the Nazis, the battle against racism was being lost at home. In 1951, Rosset bought Grove Press, a small, failed publishing house and built it into “a force that challenged and changed literature and American culture in deep and lasting ways.” In 1957, he founded the Evergreen Review and gave a voice to a

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new generation of writers, who “produced some of the best and most provocative writing of the time.”


—updated 31 Aug 2010
