

'Ordinary person' did extraordinary things

TODAY IS THE DAY ...

Jack Barlow

FEW foreigners were as intimately familiar with the workings of Communist China as New Zealander Rewi Alley, who died on this day in 1987 of heart failure at the age of 90.

Alley, born in Canterbury in 1897, enjoyed a position of privilege within the ruling Communist regime that was, for foreigners, unprecedented.

Growing up in the small, mid-Canterbury town of Springfield, Alley was an average student. In 1916, he travelled to France to fight in World War I, being injured twice before receiving the Military Medal for bravery.

It wasn't until he returned to New Zealand after the war, however, that he began to show signs of being something other than ordinary.

After a failed stint at farming, Alley decided to make some big changes: after reading reports in the press of clashes in China between the warring Communist and the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (under control of the famous general Chiang Kai-shek) groups, he decided to, as he put it bluntly, "take a look at their revolution".

Arriving in China in 1927, Alley became exposed very quickly to the extreme poverty, sickness and violence that plagued the country then. He became involved quickly, working in small villages to help locals, and by 1932 he was working with the League of Nations (the forerunner of the United Nations) to help with civil projects in the province of Wuhan.

He rose to prominence during World War II, organising groups of small, self-supporting co-operatives that gave employment to workers while resisting the invading Japanese. He named them "Gung Ho" - introducing the term into the English language.

Alley continued to set up schools and educate rural and urban Chinese, and by 1953 he was ensconced in Beijing, a favourite of the Communist regime, speaking on its behalf at peace meetings and, especially, at the World Peace Council. He was one of the few Communist Party members able to travel freely around the world at the time.

Of course, for a figure so intimately involved with such a controlling regime, Alley is, in some quarters, a controversial figure.



Rewi Alley: Viewed as one of New Zealand's most impressive, and humane, exports. As a favourite of the Communist regime, he was one of the few party members able to travel freely around the world in the 1950s.

Photo: ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY REF:1/2-036405-F

Anne-Marie Brady, a political scientist at Canterbury University, criticised his denial of the famines that swept China in the 1950s and 60s, accusing him of being "intimately involved in China's international propaganda efforts to suppress information about the man-made catastrophe which was unfolding in China".

Despite this, he is viewed as one of New Zealand's most impressive, and humane, exports.

In typical Kiwi fashion, however, this is not how he saw himself. "Don't believe printed matter about me," he wrote to his family. I am a very ordinary person."

Gung Ho pioneer: Rewi Alley and his family picnicking with friends in 1929. Alley organised groups of small, self-supporting co-operatives, naming them "Gung Ho". Photo: ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY REF: PA1-Q-662-06-4

