

THE BEGINNINGS AND OPERATIONS OF SACO

The SINO-AMERICAN SPECIAL TECHNICAL COOPERATION AGREEMENT was approved by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and President Franklin Roosevelt and then signed in Washington April 15th 1943. Article III of the AGREEMENT, quoted below in its entirety, codified the formal names for the operation.

For facilitating the progress of the work, the United States Government is willing to cooperate with China, and to supply all materials gratis on the basis of friendship. Therefore, in the United States the name is "Friendship"; the English name in China is, "Sino-American Cooperative Organization", and the abbreviation in English is S A C O, which is pronounced similar to the American word, "SOCKO", with the significance of powerful or sudden attack.

General Tai Li was the director of SACO and CAPT Miles, the deputy director. Each held veto power over all decisions but neither ever used it. Whatever difference the two encountered always was resolved by discussion and reason.

By the time SACO became an official organization, it had been operational for 10 months and six days. Its origins predate the start of WWII.

In 1939 LCDR Milton E. "Mary" Miles finished his second tour of duty in the China theater. The Miles family – including wife and three sons – had lived under Japanese occupation and chose to return to the U.S. by way of the unfinished Burma Road. The China coast was controlled by the Japanese and Miles wished to assess first hand how supplies might be moved in and out of China as the war worsened. For the next year his wife gave talks, illustrated with slides, about the trip in particular and China in general. The wife of a Chinese assistant military attaché attended one of these presentations and she informed her husband that the Mileses seemed to understand China. Unknown by most, even those in his own embassy, this particular attaché, Maj. (Chinese Army) Hsiao Sin-ju, was the very trusted agent of Gen. Tai Li, who in turn was the most trusted "lieutenant" of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the recognized leader of China. The Chinese government had been searching for help in defeating the Japanese in their war that had began in earnest on July 7, 1937 with the bombing of the Marco Polo Bridge in Peking (now Beijing).



General Tai Li (on left) and CAPT Miles at Happy Valley during Christmas, 1942 (Miles, undated, v 1, p 91).

The next billet for LCDR Miles was the Interior Control Board in Washington where the talk during informal kaffeeklatsches often turned to the concept of collecting intelligence and weather data in Japanese-held China. Frequent attendees of these kaffeeklatsches included CAPT Willis A. “Ching” Lee, later to become the Assistant Chief of Staff to the Commander-in-Chief, U. S. Fleet. Major Hsiao also dropped in for coffee and the discussions turned to the idea of sending American observers to China. By the time that the newly promoted CDR Miles departed the USA, April 5, 1942, the Chinese were convinced that he could work effectively with them.

Admiral Ernest J. King (Chief of Naval Operations and Commander-in-Chief, U. S. Fleet) had given CDR Miles the following secret order:

“You are to go to China, and set up some bases as soon as you can. The main idea is to prepare the China coast in any way you can for U.S. Navy landings in three or four years. In the meantime, do whatever you can to help the Navy and to heckle the Japanese.” (Miles, 1967, p 18)

Commander Miles arrived in China on May 4, 1942 and began to explore the prospects of establishing a joint Chinese-American project to be called, somewhat hopefully, “Project Friendship.”

Three weeks later, on the 26th of May, CDR Miles left Chungking for an eight-week inspection trip of the coastal area. General Tai arranged the tour but other obligations delayed his joining the group until it reached Pucheng, Fukien (now Fujian) Province, 120 miles west of the port of Wenchow (now Wenzhou). For three days Pucheng was bombed seven times by the Japanese, who apparently had received intelligence that important people were visiting. During the early morning air raid on the 9th of June 1942, while hiding in a rice paddy on the outskirts of town, Gen. Tai told CDR Miles:

“The United States wants many things in China—weather reports from the north and west to guide your planes and ships at sea—information about Japanese intentions and operations—mines in our channels and harbors—ship watchers on our coast—and radio stations to send this information.

“I have fifty thousand good men, . . . if my men could be armed and trained, they could not only protect your operations but could work for China, too.” (Miles, 1967, p 51)

The General then made possibly the most unusual offer in the history of the U.S. military:

“Would your country allow you to accept a commission as general in the Chinese Army, so that we could operate these men together?”

(Miles, 1967, p 52)

Commander Miles replied “O.K.” and the General offered his hand in his acceptance. It should be noted that the simple act of shaking hands was a foreign concept to most Chinese in those days.

The Generalissimo, during discussions concerning the enhanced plans for this project “suggested” the necessity for a formal agreement defining the requirements and the obligations of each country. In addition to waging war against the Japanese, for about four months Gen. Tai and CDR Miles composed the formal agreement; repeatedly translating it into English, checking it, and translating it into Chinese with a different interpreter and checking it again. The working part of the contract

contained only 1,662 words within the 27 Articles. General Tai and CDR Miles stored their copy of the approved SINO-AMERICAN SPECIAL TECHNICAL COOPERATION AGREEMENT in a safe in Chungking for the duration of the war; the two men never referred to the written AGREEMENT again.

General Tai was the head of the Secret Service in China. He was fiercely loyal to and completely trusted by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. U.S. intelligence summaries gave a dire picture of Gen. Tai as being a man who distrusted all foreigners, was an assassin, murdered his own mother at least twice, and worse. It is a matter of record that Gen. Tai died on March 17, 1946 and his mother, Lao Tai Tai, died nearly three years later in January 1949. A lesser-known fact is that Miles regularly wrote her with “news” of Gen. Tai and she never learned of her son’s passing. General Tai Li proved to be trustworthy, resourceful, and loyal to his men – Chinese and American – as well as to his country.

Early in 1942 Gen. Tai formulated a Chinese name – *Mei Lo-ssu* – for CDR Miles. The Mei is the winter plum blossom, China’s national flower, which blooms in the dead of winter against all adversity. This name was very meaningful and showed that Gen. Tai saw in Miles hope for China and the potential of victory during the bleak winter of Japanese occupation.

Throughout the war, Miles was not only an officer in the U.S. Navy – initially a Commander he was promoted to Captain in June (the notice reached him in November) 1942, then Commodore on March 22, 1944, and “spot” promoted to Rear Admiral on August 13, 1945 – but also a Lieutenant General in the Chinese Army. In addition, Miles was a Director or Coordinator for the fledgling Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S.) in the Far East until December 5, 1943.

Working together within China were about 2,500 SACO American servicemen (of whom 95 percent were Navy, 3 percent Marine, and 2 percent Coast Guard), 97,000 organized Chinese guerrillas, 26,000 pirates in two rival groups, and some lone-wolf saboteurs. As well, thousands of Chinese policemen throughout occupied China owed their allegiance to Gen. Tai and supplied both intelligence and assistance to SACO. Some of the Americans who walked the seemingly endless berms around the flooded rice fields declared that they had joined a Rice Paddy Navy.

The SACO command center was Happy Valley, eight miles west northwest of Chungking. It also was a training camp. Two- and three-man teams spread throughout China not only to measure and report the local weather but also to occupy coast watcher observation posts that were dangerously close to Japanese troops. These men often had to move after each use of their radio in order to avoid capture. Communication within this broad network was achieved by numerous runners, the occasional homing pigeon, and 600 hand cranked radios.

Starting in September 1944 and for the duration of the war, “SACO’s U. S. Navy Weather Central furnished four daily broadcasts to the Fleet, including: (1) Synoptic weather reports from Free and Occupied China; (2) Pilot balloon and raysonde reports from selected stations; (3) Analysis of weather over continental Asia and the Western Pacific; and (4) Forecasts for various areas of the Western Pacific Ocean.” (Miles, 1967, p 297)

Intelligence and guerrilla operations extended from the northern Suiyuan (now Neimongol) Province (Inner Mongolia) in the Gobi Desert southward into Indochina and Siam, and from Tibet in the west to Shanghai in the east. In May 1944 the Americans joined the Chinese troops in active combat. There had been reluctance on the part of the Chinese commanders to include the foreigners but the joint activity yielded excellent battle results and the inclusion was adopted throughout SACO. By War's end there were 18 SACO training camps in China, Burma, and India. Medical treatment was provided for all on a first-come-first-serve basis at all camps as well as at the front-line hospital, called Pact Doc, which also trained Chinese medical corpsmen who accompanied the troops in battle.

By the first week in July 1945, COMO Miles had successfully achieved the objective of his secret orders from Adm. King “. . . to prepare the China coast . . .” SACO had surveyed 80 percent of the possible landing sites with detailed photographs of the surface and, in most cases, profiles at 100-foot intervals showing the bottom conditions and underwater defenses. And SACO not only watched, and denied safe harbor to, Japanese shipping along the 600 miles stretch between Swatow (now Shantou) and Hangchow (now Hangzhou) but controlled 200 miles of that Chinese coastline as well as three seaports – Changchow (now Zhangzhou), major parts of the harbor at Amoy (now Xiamen), and Foochow (now Fuzhou) along with its airfield.

As for Adm. King's order “. . . to heckle the Japanese”, the direct actions by SACO had yielded the following results:

Japanese killed – 31,345, wounded – 12,969, captured – 349
Ships sunk – 141
Locomotives destroyed – 84
Bridges destroyed – 209

“As a result of the operation the count of dead enemy noses according to U.S. Navy figures totals 71,000. The total cost to the U.S. taxpayer was 18 million dollars.” (Miles, 1964, p 151). The group successfully rescued 76 downed aviators.

Two and a half Japanese were killed for every U.S. weapon placed in Navy-trained guerrilla hands; that was a higher enemy per gun ratio than achieved by the U.S. Marines. All this was accomplished despite being limited, for various reasons, to never more than 150 tons of supplies over the Hump each month.

The SACO casualty rate was noteworthy. Of the 2,873 members worldwide – including one (female)Wave, one French naval officer, and one French army officer – only three were captured and only five were killed; however none of these died while on active duty in China during wartime. Unknown to most of the Americans was that each was “watched over” – in general not guarded by armed sentries – by an unknown Chinese who believed that the loss of his charge would be a great dishonor to his own family and ancestors.

The last military review of SACO was held February 1946 at Suchow (now Xuzhou), 50 miles west of Shanghai. General Tai and CAPT Beyerly, chief of staff under RADM Miles, took the review of the 97,000 Chinese SACO troops. General Tai died in an airplane crash the next month. “A patriot,

a man of his word, a real friend to U.S., Tai Li died with no honors from this country.” (Miles, undated, p 162)

The American portion of SACO, U.S. Naval Group China, was dissolved September 30, 1946.

On March 26, 1947, CAPT Miles went to Nanking to attend Gen. Tai Li’s State funeral. He planted two Mei Hua trees at the tomb and visited Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek who declared:

“. . . I [Miles] was always ‘Mei Shen Shung’ to them [the Chinese].

I was pleased, for ‘Shen Shung’ may be somewhat inadequately translated as ‘Honorable Mister’—a term that the generalissimo always used in connection with Tai Li—Tai Shen Shung.” (Miles, 1967, p 583)

The Americans lived and worked with the Chinese under cultural conditions previously unknown to each. They became dedicated brothers in arms despite limited knowledge of each other’s language. When asked what he had done in China, a SACO veteran usually has replied “nothing” but the group contributed significantly to the defeat of the Japanese invaders.

Necessarily, most of the activities of SACO had to be kept secret during the war. To the citizens of the United States the Asian campaign seemed minor compared the war elsewhere; most never heard of SACO. However these men and their deeds continue to be revered in China and studied in the tenth-grade history books in Taiwan.

Milton E. “Mary” Miles was in essence the captain of SACO, a ship that sailed in uncharted waters. A truth within the Navy is that the success of a ship's mission depends upon the strength, hard work, and capability of the crew. Up to the day of his death – March 25, 1961 – Miles was more than satisfied with the performances and achievements of each and every one of his men, the crew of SACO. His two most often used words to describe their actions bear repeating:

“Well done.”

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