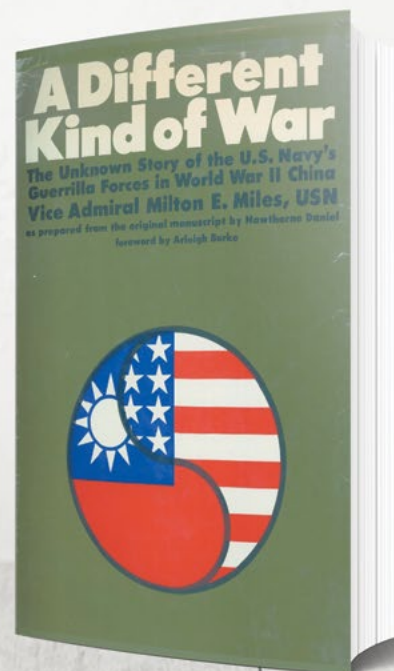


A Different Kind of War

The Unknown Story of the U.S. Navy's Guerrilla Forces in World War II China



Milton E. Miles, Doubleday, New York, 1967, 629 pages

Maj. Cody Chick, U.S. Army

Most people would be surprised that the United States raised an army in China during World War II; that relationship was overshadowed by the 1944 D-Day landing in Northern France and island-hopping in the Pacific. In the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan on 7 December 1941, Japanese forces had operational momentum as the U.S. military struggled to get a strong footing in the Far East theater. It was at this time that the U.S. Navy identified a military information gap that could significantly hurt impending operations to come—a lack of weather stations. Forecasting weather was critical to military planning. Japanese forces knew how to use weather forecasting to their advantage by screening their movements, because most of the weather formations moved from west to east across China, Japan, and then the Pacific Ocean. Seeing the need to track daily and weekly forecasts ahead of Japan by establishing weather stations in China, the U.S. Navy sent Capt. Milton E. Miles on a mission that would ultimately disrupt Japanese operations and

serve as one of the foundational units for U.S. conduct of irregular warfare.

Miles served as an ensign in China with the Asiatic fleet from 1923 to 1927 and again from 1934 to 1939, where he became fluent in Mandarin and endeared himself to the Chinese people he worked with. As the Navy began shifting forces within the Pacific following the Pearl Harbor attack, Adm. Ernest King selected Miles to establish weather stations along the Chinese coast. Also, he was to use a small number of U.S. service members for training Chinese guerrillas to conduct intelligence collection and maritime interdiction operations. Initially serving as a “naval observer” to accomplish this mission, Miles created the Sino-American Cooperative Organization (SACO) along with Dai Li, the director of the Nationalist Chinese Bureau of Investigation and Statistics. The organization would be codified by agreement between U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Republic of China’s President Chiang Kai-shek to support large-scale combat operations throughout the China-Burma-India theater. Miles remained the SACO

deputy director, second to Dai from its creation to its disestablishment, giving him the insight to write one of the most comprehensive accounts of a unique organization steeped in guerrilla warfare.

In *A Different Kind of War: The Unknown Story of the U.S. Navy's Guerrilla Forces in World War II China*, the retired vice admiral recounts his experience from the initial days of World War II to setting up SACO, fighting the Japanese, and to the end of the war at Tokyo Bay.¹ Miles's record of SACO reveals valuable lessons that remain applicable today regarding unconventional warfare and organizational friction among military branches. His detailed memoir recounts three important areas to understand: (1) the development of SACO and its contributions to the Pacific theater, (2) the numerous mission command issues between the services and Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in supporting joint operations, and (3) the guerrilla mindset necessary for unconventional warfare leaders.

Initially focused on intelligence, SACO established weather stations along the Chinese coast for the dual purpose of radio interception and reporting Japanese aircraft and ship movements, later bringing former members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to train select law enforcement and criminal investigation skills. As SACO grew, it established twelve inland camps that were used to train Chinese guerrillas in sabotage, raids, aerial and ship recognition, radio interception, and even the rescue of downed pilots. It would grow to approximately 2,500 U.S. service members with ninety-seven thousand guerrillas who destroyed two hundred bridges, eighty-four locomotives, and 141 ships and boats.² Miles also reported twenty-three thousand Japanese troops killed in their operations, an estimate that would be increased by postwar SACO historians to seventy-one thousand.³ Within a few years of its inception, SACO mounted a significant guerrilla war-

fare campaign against the occupying Japanese forces and forced Japan to split their scarce forces between China and the rest of the Pacific theater, dedicating over a million soldiers to China at one point in time.⁴

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When reading through Miles's memoir, it is possible to feel the frustration he dealt with coordinating among the services. Within the Pacific theater, the Army, Navy, and the OSS each wanted to lead the efforts on intelligence collection. In an effort to get his foot in the door of China and control operations there, OSS Chief William Donovan selected Miles as the OSS director in China in addition to his responsibilities for the Navy. Likewise, the Army repeatedly challenged the Navy's jurisdiction and would place their own requirements on SACO. Unfortunately, SACO can be counted as a case study for the negative effects that interservice rivalry and fighting for control had in impeding their operations. Personalities, like those of Gen. Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell and "Wild Bill" Donovan, and the ever-present bureaucratic fight for resources weighed on SACO and its role within the theater.

A Different Kind of War provides valuable insight into the leadership qualities needed for unconventional warfare. In addition to being a Navy officer who trained a guerrilla army, Miles stood out as an unconventional leader in his approach to work with his Chinese hosts and allies. Pulling from his prior experience in China and his ability to speak Mandarin Chinese, Miles firmly believed in working by, with, and through the indigenous population. As he was structuring SACO, he avoided recruiting "Old China Hands," who were former experts who had lived in China but had a colonialist mindset toward the Chinese. He and his subordinates ate, trained, and lived alongside the Chinese in shared training camps. Within the command structure of SACO, Miles even deferred the primary command position to his Chinese counterpart, as they were fighting for their own occupied territory and the United States served in a supporting role. Because of this cooperative mindset, Miles was the only U.S. officer who was accepted by Dai Li, which enabled both countries to work effectively together.

One critique due *A Different Kind of War* is common to the subjective nature of memoirs. Miles maintained a very descriptive account of the entire period but is inherently one-sided. His subjectivity is most evident when he discusses interservice rivalries, seemingly to justify his position, or particularly in the role of law enforcement training for the guerrilla forces. While some of the investigative and counterintelligence tasks complemented future missions and provided a level of

operational security, critics today believe that SACO equipped the Kuomintang with the resources necessary to punish members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the Chinese Civil War.⁵ The political impact of limiting military aid to one particular group is an issue that raises questions still relevant today in terms of legal authorities, ethical practices, and foresight into future conflicts for the host nation. In Afghanistan for the past two decades, or in Ukraine today, these are questions that need to be answered by national-level leadership and managed by military theater commanders. Nonetheless, Miles presents these issues and remains the most authoritative and extensive first-hand source about SACO and irregular warfare in China during World War II.

Overall, World War II Pacific theater enthusiasts and students of unconventional warfare will find Miles's account hard to put down. While some chapters focus on the organizational structure and administration of SACO, Miles also captures readers with his firsthand depictions of leaders like Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, Gen. William Donovan, Adm. Ernest King, Gen. Albert Wedemeyer, Gen. Joe Stillwell, and Gen. Claire Chennault. He includes incredible stories like the rescue of a princess, partnerships with riverine pirates, and attempted assassinations against him. Additionally, he provides a unique perspective on the internal political wrangling between the Kuomintang and CCP before the final years of the Chinese Civil War in 1945. *A Different Kind of War* sheds light on the

use of unconventional warfare with a full inclusion of indigenous forces during large-scale combat operations, which had disproportionate positive effects at little cost to the U.S. Navy in lives and resources. With only 1,500 U.S. service members, SACO conducted operations along the entire seacoast of China, forcing Japan to commit additional forces there. Readers of *Military Review* and *Special Warfare Magazine* would like Miles's memoir because it blends modern Chinese history, irregular warfare, and an appreciation of Kuomintang unconventional warfare in the mid-twentieth century.

The United States and both Chinese governments learned important lessons in their combined efforts against Japan during World War II. The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China have each been involved in U.S. unconventional warfare, and the PRC continued refining its own operations and strategies as it solidified its power on mainland China following Mao Zedong's rise to power. Miles's history of SACO reveals potential pitfalls today in interservice challenges, security cooperation, and the role of unconventional warfare. SACO is an important case for military professionals to examine in light of the great power competition between the PRC and the United States, and the Republic of China's precarious position. ■

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Naval Postgraduate School, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.

Notes

1. Milton E. Miles, *A Different Kind of War: The Unknown Story of the U.S. Navy's Guerrilla Forces in World War II China* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

2. "SACO [Sino-American Cooperative Organization] in China during World War II," Naval History and Heritage Command, 30 October 2017, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/s/saco.html>.

3. Benjamin H. Milligan, *By Water Beneath the Walls: The Rise of the Navy SEALs*, 1st ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 2021), 547n228.

4. Saburō Hayashi and Alvin D. Coox, *Kōgun: The Japanese Army in the Pacific War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 150.

5. Yu Shen, "SACO Re-Examined: Sino-American Intelligence Cooperation during World War II," *Intelligence and National Security* 16, no. 4 (December 2001): 149–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2684520412331306320>.