

FDR and Mao: Gung Ho in World War II

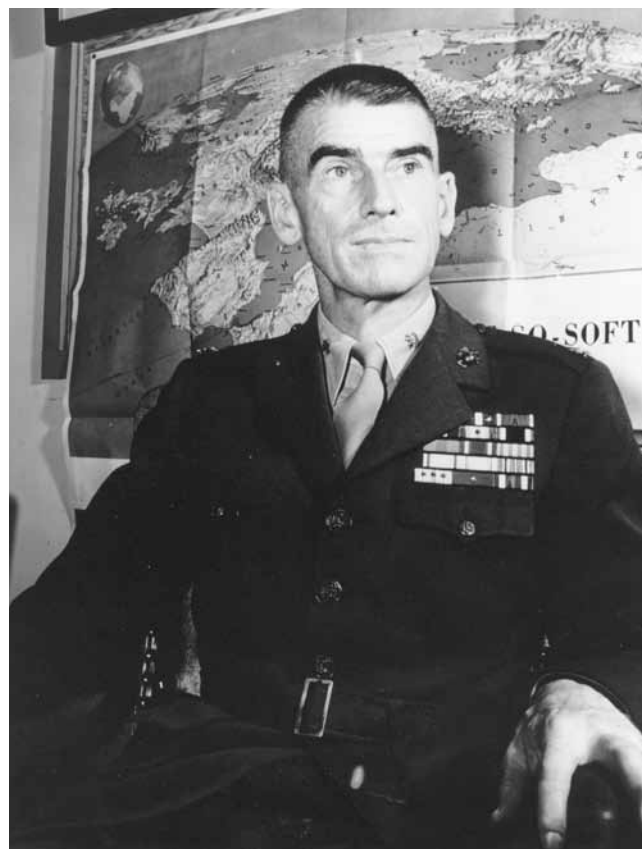
by William Jones

Sept. 4—Few people realize today that in addition to the U.S. wartime collaboration with the Republic of China during World War II against Japan, President Franklin Roosevelt also established collaboration with the military forces of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which was operating independently in northern China. Following Roosevelt's death, that cooperation broke down, as President Harry Truman's extreme anti-communism led to full U.S. support to the nationalist forces under Gen. Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT). Had that cooperation continued, the relationship could well have resulted in the avoidance of decades of isolation and open hostility between the United States and the People's Republic of China following the CPC victory over the KMT in the civil war in 1949.

President Roosevelt always expressed great interest in China and in the Far East. In speeches, he would often refer to his maternal grandfather, Warren Delano Jr., who had been involved in the China trade. Japan's invasion and occupation of Manchuria beginning in 1931 caused him great concern as he began his presidency in 1933. Anxious to prevent an open war between the U.S. and Japan, he nevertheless was keenly interested in staving off the type of naked aggression then being conducted by Japan.

A Mission to China on Behalf of FDR

Roosevelt was also highly critical—and largely skeptical—of much of the information he was getting from his State Department on the issue of China during the 1930s. Japan's takeover of Manchuria in 1932 was a total breach of the Nine-Power Treaty it had signed in 1922, of which the U.S. was a party. China was in no position at the time to resist these incursions and was hoping to negotiate a settlement which would preclude further annexation by Japan. When the Communist Party consolidated their position in northern China in 1935, in Yen-an, Shaanxi Province, they immediately began to conduct operations against the Japa-



USMC

Brig. Gen. Evans Fordyce Carlson

nese, who were preparing new moves from occupied Manchuria into the rest of China. The CPC had limited military resources, so were forced to conduct hit-and-run guerrilla operations against Japanese lines and movements. Their operations were not well known since the official government news outlets regarded the Communist forces simply as bandits. But rumors were spreading that there was resistance to Japanese incursions coming from the Communist forces, and many young Chinese travelled to Yen-an to join in the resistance.

So, when Captain Evans Carlson, the second-in-command in Roosevelt's Marine detail at Warm

Springs, Georgia (where FDR spent time to treat his polio), came to him in 1937, and told him he was again being sent to China, Roosevelt had an idea. Carlson was no stranger to China, having served there in the 1920s, when he had been encouraged by his commander, Admiral Mark Bristol, to take a deeper look at China, to try to understand the people and its culture. Carlson took this advice to heart. In Warm Springs, Carlson would often talk to the President about his experiences in China, and the President was an eager listener.

Roosevelt took Captain Carlson aside before he returned to China, asking him to write occasionally to let him know how he was doing and what was happening there: "I suspect there's going to be a great deal going on this summer in China. I'd like to hear what you have to say about it." He also asked Carlson to keep the correspondence a secret.

When Carlson landed in Shanghai for his second tour at the end of 1937, he ran right into the Japanese invasion. He took careful notes on the combat situation in Shanghai to the extent he was able. Carlson also met Edgar Snow in Shanghai, who had recently come back from the Communist Party headquarters in Yen-an, conveying the first reports of the Communist forces in the region. Snow told Carlson of his experiences there, and his discussions with CPC Chairman Mao Zedong, Vice Chairman Zhou Enlai, and other Communist Party leaders. He even gave Carlson a manuscript copy of his soon-to-be-published book *Red Star Over China*. Carlson read it carefully, and listened to Snow's reports, but could not fully believe Snow's glowing account, and wanted to see for himself. To do so he needed permission from his own command and from the Chinese authorities. And as it turned out, the situation was such that this was now a possibility.

In 1937 some of the regional warlords who generally sided with the KMT government were anxious to fight the Japanese invaders. They kidnapped Chiang Kai-shek, forcing him to promise that he would heed the call by the CPC to unite the country in a fight with Japan. CPC Vice Chairman Zhou Enlai intervened to arrange Chiang's release, and the CPC and the KMT agreed to collaboration in the war against the Japanese. As a result, Carlson was able to receive permission from Chiang to visit the Communist Party's headquarters in Yen-an.

The Eighth Route Army

In addition to visiting Yen-an and meeting with the CPC leaders, Carlson also deployed with the Eighth Route Army, created that year as the CPC's official military force (and in 1947 renamed the People's Liberation Army, PLA). He had met Zhu De, the CPC military commander, whom he grew very fond of, and had requested that he be allowed to go along with his forces on their operations. Zhu was opposed to it, concerned about repercussions if Carlson were injured or killed. But Carlson was insistent and said that if anything happened to him, he, Carlson, would bear the full responsibility.

Carlson was conveying these experiences to President Roosevelt through his letters, which were addressed to Marguerite "Missy" LeHand, the President's personal secretary. In a letter dated December 24, 1938, Carlson wrote:

From my brief observations here, I believe that these people are honest and straightforward in thought and action. I believe that they are essentially unselfish, individually, and that particularly are they self-effacing as a group in their endeavor to maintain a national United Front against Japanese aggression. They are intelligent. They have a grasp of world affairs which I have found in no other group in China. They are reasonable and they are open minded in their consideration of new ideas. You can talk and act with them as much as you would talk and act with Occidentals. The knowledge of these facts is very essential to us in our future relations with China.

He also studied the Communist forces' methods of combat, their pedagogy, and their relations with the troops under their command. He visited the military training school at Yen-an and had extensive discussions with Chairman Mao. He wrote to President Roosevelt:

The Eighth Route Army has developed and perfected a pattern of resistance to invasion, which, if extended to the other sections of China would effectively smother the Japanese penetration by throttling the lines of communication, making it impossible for their troops to obtain adequate food and munitions, and protracting the war.

This process would give the Central Government ample time to train a formidable army with which to strike the Japanese main force and destroy it.

The ‘Gung Ho’ Spirit

Most importantly, Carlson was enthusiastic about the CPC spirit of “working together”—“gong he” in Chinese, or what was called in English, the “gung-ho” spirit. There was a clear sense of camaraderie and community between officers and men, he said, which helped create a strong spirit of individual responsibility and a strong sense of loyalty, which Carlson hadn’t experienced elsewhere, even within his own Marine units.

FDR was equally effusive over Carlson’s reports. Roosevelt’s Interior Secretary, Harold Ickes, relates in his diary a story of a private dinner with the President in March 1938:

As is usual when the President is present, the conversation covered a wide range. He talks freely when he is with a group of intimates. The subject of China came up and the President told me of a letter that he had received from an American observer who is with the Eighth Route Army, which is one of the communist armies. This man is a captain of Marines. The letter had to be gotten out of China by a missionary. The letter said that this army showed the best training and the highest morale of any army that the writer had ever seen. The Red armies pay for their food, do not rape the women; they carry school teachers with their troops and a troupe of actors to keep them entertained. Breaking up into small units of from two to five hundred men, these Chinese troops will slip through a break in the Japanese line at night, get well behind that



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Lt. Col. Evans Carlson aboard the USS Nautilus, after the Makin Island Raid of August 17, 1942.

line, lay over for a day hidden in some Chinese village, and then the next night fall upon some detachment of Japanese, blow up a bridge or smash a transport train. Then they will slip away into the darkness and again make their way back to their own lines the next night. [*The Secret Diary of Harold Ickes*, Vol. II, p. 327.]

The President was excited by this news. Although the United States was not yet at war with Japan, he expected it soon would be.

When Carlson returned to Hankow (the center of the Kuomintang government at that time), he tried to tell people about his experiences and persuade the military authorities to implement some of the lessons he had learned in

Yenan. But, he claimed, they all turned a deaf ear to his pleas, including Gen. Chiang Kai-shek. Soon, Marine authorities began to crack down on Carlson’s freedom to speak of his experiences, despite the fact that, officially, the KMT was in a united front with the CPC.

But Carlson felt that he had to speak out to inform the American people about what he had learned was taking place in China, and his belief that the United States would soon be facing a war with Japan. In order to do so, he felt he had to resign his commission in the Marine Corps so he could speak freely, which he proceeded to do. Returning to the U.S. in 1939, he began writing and speaking on the topic of China. In 1940 he published several books, including one, *The Twin Stars of China*, with pictures of Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek on the cover. In his book on the Chinese army, *The Chinese Army: Its Organization and Military Efficiency*, he gave a thorough evaluation of the various units of the KMT Army, some of which he greatly admired, as well as of the CPC’s Eighth Route Army, underlining the superior morale of the latter.

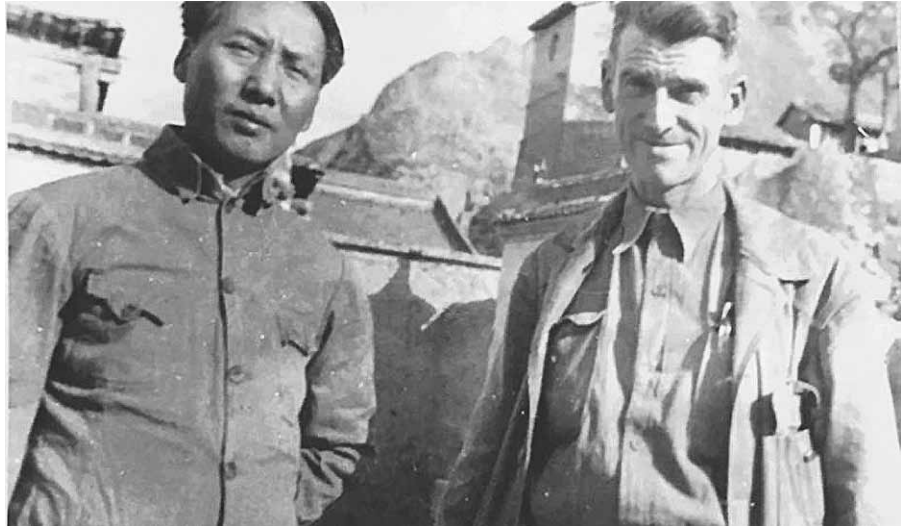
The Marine Raiders

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Carlson reenlisted in the Marines. He asked, however, for permission to organize a special Marine unit called the Marine Raiders, which he might organize on the principles of the Chinese guerrilla units—the “gung ho” principle. He was permitted to do so, and the President’s son, James Roosevelt, rushed to become Carlson’s Executive Officer. Carlson utilized the “gong he” principle as his organizing principle, and “gung-ho” as the unit’s motto of

cohesion. More egalitarian than normal Marine units, he created a strong sense of loyalty among his men. (Political cartoonist Bill Mauldin would later comment, “There were only two brass hats whom ordinary GIs respected: Dwight Eisenhower and Evans Carlson.”)

Two raider units were organized, including one headed by Evans Carlson himself. In an August 17-18, 1942 mission on Makin Island, a Pacific Ocean atoll near the Marshall Islands, Carlson’s Raiders were able to destroy the large Japanese encampment, rendering it useless for the Japanese. This was the first major victory for American ground forces in the Pacific after Pearl Harbor, and the Raiders returned to a hero’s welcome. In 1943, a movie was made about Carlson’s Raiders, titled *Gung Ho*, with Carlson advising, probably bringing the term to the American public for the first time. Carlson and his Raiders would later conduct behind-the-lines operations on Guadalcanal during that 6-month bloody battle in the Solomon Islands, which helped secure the victory for the U.S. forces.

When the U.S. first entered the war in 1941, Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall had deployed General Joseph Stilwell to China to advise and to help train the forces of the KMT. Stilwell, who was no stranger to China, had also been in touch with Carlson on an earlier China mission. While much of the battle with Japan was being conducted by the KMT national forces along the Yangtze Valley and in the south, northern China, where the CPC was centered, was also considered an area of strategic importance. During Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle’s bombing raid on Tokyo, April 18, 1942,



Evans Carlson with Mao Zedong in Yanan.

many fliers whose planes were not able to return to an American base had to bail out over northern China. Numerous pilots were rescued by the Communist guerillas or by villagers sympathetic to them. And, in any future invasion of Japan, northern China was being considered as a possible point of departure.

By 1943, Roosevelt was interested in getting more information about the situation in the north, and Gen. Stilwell and his State Department aide, John Paton Davies, were eager to have a U.S. mission sent to the Communist headquarters in the north. But Chiang Kai-Shek was absolutely opposed to sending any military assistance to the Communists in the north.

Nevertheless, Roosevelt was insistent, and finally, in February 1943, he sent Chiang a message that he found the lack of direct information coming out of northern China and Manchuria, where the Japanese had most of their forces, unacceptable, and that he therefore wanted to send an American military mission to the area. Chiang indicated that he would permit such a mission but only in the areas where the National Army was still in control, i.e., not the communist-controlled areas.

Gen. Stilwell and U.S. Ambassador Clarence Gauss nevertheless felt that a military/political detachment should be sent to Communist Party headquarters in Yanan, arguing that their forces could assist military air operations by organizing evasion and rescue missions in guerilla and occupied territory. Observers could also study the role of communist guerillas in ground operations. And most importantly, they could provide information on the relations between

the communists and the government, as well as the relations between the communists and the Russians.

The 'Dixie Mission'

Finally in July 1944, Chiang relented, granting permission for a small American military/OSS (Office of Strategic Services, the U.S. wartime intelligence agency) contingent to be sent, called the United States Army Observer Group, labeled the "Dixie Mission" by the State Department's Davies, as the Communists, like the Confederates, were also in rebellion against the lawful government. The Dixie Mission would vary in size, usually about 20 or more people from different parts of the U.S. military as well as from the OSS. Relations were very warm until the end of the war, when the divisions between the KMT and the CPC came to a head. At that point, the U.S. mission, which had never provided the Communist forces with any military equipment, became more of an intelligence operation to investigate Communist strengths in a possible conflict with the KMT. Nonetheless, the mission lasted until March 1947.

By 1945, most of the American advisers who had been on the Dixie Mission, and others who worked in an attempt to bring the CPC and the KMT together, had either been given the "heave-ho," as was Gen. Stilwell at the strong urging of Chiang Kai-shek, or had been demoted, ostracized, and transferred, as were most of the State Department hands who promoted or worked with the Dixie Mission. Many of them, including John Paton Davies and John Service, both from the State Department, would see their careers later ruined under the McCarthy/Truman anti-communist witch hunt due to their attempts to get U.S. military support to the Communists as well as to the KMT. Yet most American advisers on the ground, even those not terribly sympathetic to the CPC, predicted that if the KMT were engaged in a civil war with the CPC, they would probably lose



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and her son Col. James Roosevelt (right) visiting with Evans Carlson at the San Diego Naval Hospital, where he was convalescing from wounds received during the Saipan campaign. July 19, 1944.

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without extensive U.S. military support.

A Great Opportunity Missed

To his dying day, however, Roosevelt was intent on bridging the gap between the two parties. When Roosevelt was visited by Edgar Snow in February 1945, he told Snow that he was on the point of giving direct military assistance to the Communists in the north. Snow asked how FDR could do this since the U.S. only recognized the official KMT government. Snow gives Roosevelt's reply:

"Well, I've been working with two governments there." And, he [Roosevelt] said, throwing his head back decisively, "I intend to go on doing so until we can get them together."

The Communist leaders were also eager to maintain this U.S. connection. In January 1945, a letter was given to Ray Crowley, a member of the Dixie Mission, which was to be presented to the highest level of government in Washington. The letter stated that both Mao (who had never flown on a plane nor ever left China), and Zhou Enlai, were prepared to come to Washington for an exploratory conference, either together or individually, were President Roosevelt prepared to meet

them at the White House “as leaders of a primary Chinese party.”

The letter was delivered to Gen. Albert Wedemeyer, who had replaced Stilwell, and then further to his superior, Maj. Gen. Pat Hurley, who had replaced Clarence Gauss as Ambassador. President Roosevelt had appointed Hurley as his personal representative in China as well as U.S. Ambassador, with the purpose, as he described it, to bring about the unification of China, but under the leadership of the KMT and Chiang Kai-shek. He was also to “keep an eye on European imperialism.”

But Hurley was strongly anti-Communist and considered the letter a personal attempt by the Dixie Mission to go around him, and his rather lame attempts at “mediation” between the KMT and the CPC. He never forwarded the letter to Roosevelt. (The letter was discovered in 1972 after the Nixon visit and published by historian Barbara Tuchman in an issue of *Foreign Affairs*. See Bibliography entry below.) Such an opportunity, however thin its chances, disappeared entirely with the death of Roosevelt in April of that year.

Evans Carlson was also caught up in the growing post-war anti-communist hysteria. Even during the war, the Marine Corps had become somewhat wary of the popular Marine officer. While “gung-ho” had become a staple slogan within the Marine Corps vocabulary, the Corps hierarchy was not amused by the egalitarian nature of Carlson’s organization principles. Some were even mooted the possibility that Carlson, the son of a Congregationalist minister, might be a communist.

Therefore, after his key service in the battle of Guadalcanal in 1942, Carlson, who had twice been awarded the Navy Cross—the Navy’s highest award—was never again given a combat command. He was, however, on the beaches in the bloody battle of Tarawa as an “adviser,” and recommended after that slaughter that the Marines, in their next invasion, at Saipan, land at a difficult and out-of-the-way beach, which he assumed would be lightly defended by the Japanese, which proved to be the case.

After the war Carlson was intent on combating the increasing anti-Communist propaganda which had escalated at the death of Roosevelt and the assumption of power by Harry Truman, but he died of a heart attack in 1947.

With the death of Roosevelt, the world changed overnight. While the Truman Administration did make some effort to bring the two Chinese sides together in a year-long post-war mission by George Marshall, the energy and wisdom that would have been provided by FDR’s personal involvement was sorely lacking. As the talks broke up, and the U.S. continued to back the forces of Chiang Kai-shek with equipment and logistics in the subsequent civil war, the possibilities of establishing relations with the People’s Republic of China and its ruling Communist Party would take another war and nearly three decades.

Shortly after President Richard Nixon’s famous visit to China in 1972, former members of the Dixie Mission were invited to visit China again, which they did, and were warmly welcomed by their Chinese hosts.

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