THE USAAF IN CHINA, 1946–47

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PRESIDENT NIXON's visit to China and its spectacular TV coverage have dramatically rekindled American interest in things Chinese. Capitalizing on this heightened interest, journalists, scholars, retired foreign service officers, and others with experience in China are offering up a spate of articles and books. Many of the writers are delving into the American government's deep involvement in Chinese affairs during the decade of the forties and are producing a varied abundance of surveys, vivid descriptions of Chinese life, memoirs, and new insights and vignettes concerning American policy toward the Chinese Communists during that era.[1] This literature is arousing a great deal of attention and causing some controversy. For example, a most interesting and well-written article by Barbara W. Tuchman appeared in a recent issue of the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*.[2]

Mrs. Tuchman uses recently declassified material to serve up a speculative essay

about what might have occurred had Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai come to Washington. This hypothetical proposition was prompted by a message in 1945 from an American military representative in Yenan, relaying Mao and Chou's expression of interest in visiting President Roosevelt in order to develop a working relationship with the American government. However, Mrs. Tuchman nimbly refocuses her emphasis: instead of making suppositions about what might have been, she launches into a tirade against Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and Patrick J. Hurley, FDR's personal representative in China in 1944–45. The main sources of her support material seem to be information supplied by Colonel David D. Barrett, Chief of the American Mission to Yenan, and John S. Service, a career State Department officer, neither of whom can be considered an unbiased source because their careers were injured by Hurley's vindictiveness. Her main contention is that Hurley was one of the primary obstacles—if not *the* primary obstacle—in blocking Mao and Chou from having direct parleys with Washington. Accordingly, the U.S. lost the opportunity to preserve viable contacts and establish amicable relations with the Chinese Communist leaders.

Mrs. Tuchman gives the impression that this failure to communicate American friendliness to the Communist leadership represented the end of any serious attempt to have meaningful contacts with them. She overlooks the efforts of General George C. Marshall, President Truman's special envoy, who tried for over a year to bring about a lasting truce—even coalition—between the Chinese Nationalists and Communists (fighting had broken out between them in late July 1946). By the end of 1946 Marshall had quit in disgust, but his departure still did not end all American contacts or friendly gestures toward the Chinese Communists.

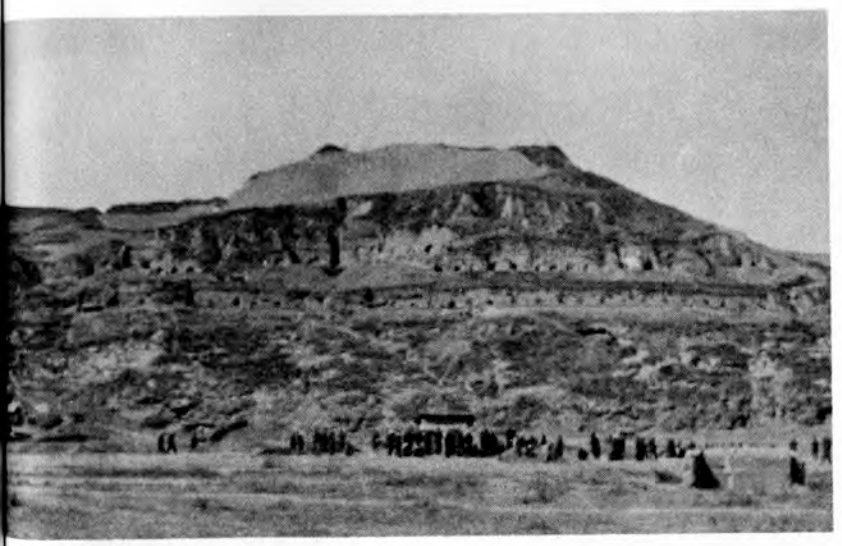
There were additional meetings between Americans and the Chinese Communists, other than the ones highlighted by Mrs. Tuchman's article and Marshall's conciliatory endeavors. Had the Communists desired talks with American officials, channels were open for making the arrangements, and indeed there *were* some contacts. An instance, perhaps one of the last friendly contacts, took place between the Communists and American airmen.

In March 1947 the U.S. Army Air Forces used its aircraft and crews to evacuate Chinese Communist officials, their staffs, and their families from Nanking and other Nationalist cities to the Communist capital of Yenan in Shensi province.[3] The airlift was prompted by termination of Communist-Nationalist discussions that had been held mainly in Nanking. Having no transportation of their own, the Communists were faced with having to trek the 600 miles through Nationalist territory before reaching a sanctuary in the north. Because of the distance and the danger of "bandits" or *agents provocateurs* waylaying them, the Communists requested transportation from their compound in the city to the Nanking airport, where they could board American aircraft. The Air Force, by providing the means of safe passage across hundreds of miles of Nationalist-held territory, probably saved the lives of most of the Communist group, the most notable among them being the present Premier of the Chinese People's Republic, Chou En-lai.

The American aircraft and crews that carried out this evacuation belonged to the Air Force section of the Army Advisory Group in China. The Air Division, as it was called, had been established in early 1946. It was headquartered in Nanking, comprised of about 250 officers and men, and commanded by Brigadier General John P. McConnell (later to become USAF Chief of Staff). This activity was designated Operation Catfish and occupied the Air Division's staff and facilities in early March 1947.

The operation began on the morning of March 9. The Communists and their families, with their luggage, arrived at Tai Chiao Chan Airfield, Nanking, aboard American trucks. The lower-ranking functionaries boarded C-47 transports, while Chou En-lai and the more

Chinese Communists prepare to board a USAAF C-47 at Tai Chiao Chan Airfield, Nanking, after breakdown of Communist–Nationalist discussions in March of 1947.



Six hundred miles away at Yenan, the caves (actually tunnels) in the hills bordering the landing strip served as offices and homes for Chinese Communist leaders.

On completion of the evacuation, perhaps the last friendly association of our Air Force and Chinese Communists for a quarter century, Chou En-lai had coffee at Yenan with USAAF officers.

Operation Catfish complete, some of the American airmen who flew the Nanking to Yenan circuit posed beside a C-54 involved. . . . Four days after the goodwill operation, Chinese Communists had dug deep trenches at intervals across the Yenan airstrip, rendering it unusable by friend and foe alike.

important delegates were flown to Yenan in the more comfortable C-54. General McConnell, who had earlier landed a C-54 carrying Mao Tse-tung to Yenan, briefed his crews that the Communists had laid out an airfield in a canyon along a Yellow River tributary, which their austere capital overlooked. A sheer wall at the end of the runway ruled out the likelihood of a successful go-around in case of an emergency.[4] Since there were no navigational aids at the field, the Americans had earlier flown in a specially equipped C-47 containing complete radio facilities—including a homing station, air-ground communications, and an instrument approach system. The American pilots completed the passenger shuttle in one day without mishap. The Communists seemed extremely appreciative and hosted the American airmen with coffee and sandwiches before they took off for the return flight to Nanking.

Just after our planes were airborne, the Communists surprised the Americans, who

were circling to gain altitude, by blowing up portions of the runway, thus making it impossible for planes to return for an emergency landing. In retrospect, this gesture indicated quite dramatically that the Communists wanted to end all contacts and future parleys. Within a week, their troops had dug deep trenches—possibly to conserve explosives—across the remainder of the strip, so as to render it totally useless.

THIS gesture of goodwill by American airmen in 1947 was probably the last friendly meeting between the Chinese Communists and members of the U.S. Air Force for almost a quarter of a century. Despite the time lapse, mainland China's indefatigable Premier would probably recall this instance of friendliness and perhaps might even consider that the Air Force on that day had saved his life.

Air Command and Staff College

Notes

1. Two such books are John Paton Davies, Jr., *Dragon by the Tail* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970) and Seymour Topping, *Journey Between Two Chinas* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
2. "If Mao Had Come to Washington: An Essay in Alternatives," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 51 (October 1972), pp. 44-64.
3. The description of the evacuation and the accompanying photos were taken from "History of Air Division, Army Advisory Group, March 1947," 861.01, Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.
4. Interview with General John P. McConnell, former Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C., 9 February 1971.