

BIOGRAPHY OF ADM. MILES WRITTEN AND READ BY SON CHARLES ("C-GOING") MILES AT SACO PLAQUE DEDICATION

Dedication of the SACO commemorative plaque
Admiral Nimitz Museum, Fredericksburg, Texas
Comments by Dr. Charles Miles, May 11, 2001.

In September, 1945, sick with malaria, exhaustion, dengue fever, and possibly typhoid, Mary Miles entered Shanghai. He had no clothes except some kakhi shorts and shirts on which to pin the stars befitting his new promotion to Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy. He also was the senior Chinese officer present in that port city, a Lt. General in the Chinese army. He and General Tai Li were the co-directors of SACO – Sino-American Cooperative Organization – which consisted of about 3,500 U.S. personnel, a sizeable Chinese army, one junk and one launch. He later insisted that his first flagship had been a Chinese junk on the Sinan River in Chekiang Province about 90 miles upstream from the seaport of Hangchow. At that time, he and a handful of Chinese were surrounded by about 7,000 Japanese.

All of you SACO personnel worked for my father, some of you met him, but few of you knew much about him. Today, I thought you might be interested in the early history of the man himself.

My father was born Milton Edward Robbins on April 6, 1900 in Jerome, Arizona. His 17-year-old mother was riding a horse to the grocery store and was attacked by a mountain lion. He was born almost two months premature and was ten months old before he became strong enough to hold up his head, which was too large for his body.

There is a strong Indian belief, adopted by many in the old west, that a child takes on the characteristics of whatever frightens

the pregnant mother. Had this been true, perhaps you would have called yourselves the SACO Cougars.

Part of the time he lived in Jerome. In the mornings his uncles would watch him and remark "Milton, you put your stockings on the wrong foot again." They were the knee-high types and a real chore for a small boy to put on. One night he set the sock with a hole in it opposite the foot from which it had come off and the next morning that joke was finished. The family had hauled in, on the back of a mule, a piano for his mother. Unfortunately this, as well as their house, was washed away in a flash flood. Young Milton lost one of his shoes to the water as he and an uncle scrambled up the hillside.

And they lived at his grandfather's ranch in Yaeger Canyon, just off the road to Prescott. A fond memory of his childhood was sneaking into the small, stone, spring-cooled milk house with a bowl and spoon and skimming off the curds, which he ate with sugar. On July 4, 1905 Milton was sitting on the roof of a shed with a straw hat full of fireworks in his lap. Somehow he dropped the lighted punk into the hat. When his family returned from the fireworks display in Jerome, they discovered that not only had he lost his new hat but their house and a second piano as well.

His father then took wife and son to California in search of an easier life. They followed the oil boom from Rialto to Bakersfield and on to Fresno, where, in 1908, the father was shot and killed in a bar-room brawl. A cousin told me it may have been the only one that he did not start.

Milton had returned to Arizona for several summers. When he was about six years old, he built a small range-rider's log cabin with a hand-cut shake roof. His only help was a piece of fatback which he used to grease his ax as well as his pan for cooking flapjacks each morning. He ran horses along Oak Creek, near Sedona, and south to Montezuma's Castle. His grandfather began to build for him a small herd of cattle and some horses and later registered for him a cattle brand – a *J bar C* on the left flank

and an *M bar* on the jaw. He did his best to protect his grandson from a life of poverty in the Navy.

His widowed mother sought work as a cook-manager in the lumber camps around Puget Sound. In 1910 she married Corporal George Miles who adopted Milton because it simplified the pay records. One of George's duties was mining the Juan de Fuca Straits against enemy invasion. He treated Milton as a recruit – speak only when spoken to and at meals sit up straight on the edge of the chair.

Milton delivered papers in Fort Ward and later Port Townsend, where early each morning he rowed out to meet a passing ferry and retrieved his bundles of papers as they were thrown into Puget Sound. Milton's free time was spent with his dog in the woods near Fort Worden. He built a cabin and fed himself by hunting ducks and fishing for salmon.

In 1913, he graduated from Lincoln (grammar) School in Port Townsend as the designated class poet and then left home for Seattle, where he worked his way through Broadway High School. He found employment in the town library, local theaters, and the orchards. One summer was spent on a logging crew as water boy and ax sharpener.

Sons of military personnel were eligible to take the Presidential examinations for an appointment to Annapolis and Milton applied. The war started on his 17th birthday and he immediately joined the Navy. He was sworn in April 10th. The letter directing him to take the exams on the 17th reached him too late.

His first sea duty was on the cruiser *Saratoga* as an Apprentice Seaman. In the Gulf of Tehuantepec they captured the German vessel *Sierra*, carrying radio supplies and operators. A party of Marines was dispatched ashore to seize a hidden wireless station. This was his introduction to the spy business.

Late one night in the winter of 1917 he was stationed over the rudder of a motor launch in order to keep the stern clear of debris. The craft was breaking through ice floes in the Hudson River.

During one lurch, he fell overboard unnoticed, skidded across the ice, and sank into the river. He swam to a mooring line of an interned German ship and climbed aboard. Luckily that line did not go through the hawse-hole but over the rail. The caretaker warmed him in the engine room and next morning rowed him to the nearby Jersey shore. He walked a long way to the ferry, begged money for the trip across the river and walked to his ship. His executive officer was quite disgruntled because of the added work of undoing the papers relating to Milton's death as well as his War Risk Insurance.

While crossing the Atlantic, there was a disastrous fire onboard and most of the advanced enlisted rates and officers were killed. The new men had to fill the void and Milton became a Bosun – his first spot promotion.

In 1918 he was in Queenstown, England, where he crammed for, and twice took, the exams for the Naval Academy. The ship carrying the first set had been torpedoed by the Germans. He graduated in the class of '22, having been known by the nicknames *Salty*, *Milo*, *Shakespeare*, as well as, *Mary*.

His first sea duty as an officer was aboard the USS *Huron* at Chefoo (now Yantai), China. The executive officer had a sign at his door showing "mouldy" and "cheery" and Mary wrote "so far I've only seen 'mouldy' showing." The Captain called Mary to supervise the changing of the codes and ordered him to dispose of the outdated ones. Mary wrapped them in heavy paper and mailed them to Washington. When they arrived, he learned that they should have been destroyed in front of witnesses or hand delivered to Washington. A letter of caution was placed in his file. He said that it was the first official recognition of his activity as an officer.

During the 1920's and 30's, the scuttlebutt was that those posted to the Far East were not, perhaps, of the best quality officer material. However, in the late 1940's my father and Admiral Arleigh Burke determined that, by their informal count, all of the current Admirals in the U.S. Navy had seen China service.

You members of SACO were instrumental in shortening World War II. Your duties included coast-watching for military targets, weather reports for the Pacific campaign, and sabotage of the Japanese on the mainland. Had not the war been terminated by the dropping of the atomic bombs, and some of you witnessed the glows, the next step would have been to invade China. In preparation, you had surveyed 80 percent of the possible landing sites. These surveys included detailed photographs of the surface and, in most cases, profiles at 100-foot intervals showing the bottom conditions and underwater defenses.

The plaque being presented today remembers SACO, which was a ship that sailed in uncharted waters and accomplished much. 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.

My father was more than satisfied with the performances of each and every one of you, the crew of SACO, and with your achievements. He said much on the matter and two of his words bear repeating:

“Well done.”