What follows are two true, anecdotal short stories from the author of this history, each of which relates directly to Colorado Springs.

THE STORIES ARE:

“I Used To Be An Air Force General”

a humorous account of Ger’s departure from Colorado to begin Navy flight training.

and

“Evading Mao and His People’s Liberation Army”

which describes an ironic correlation between his father’s career in the Air Force and his own in the Navy. Encounters with China’s People’s Liberation Army were common to both.
When speaking to military crowds, I like to begin my remarks with a question: “Ever been to a Navy base as an Army or Air Force captain?”

The typical response is a smattering of giggles, nods and knowing smiles as some members of the audience anticipate where my question is leading.

“And,” I continue, “when you called for lodging or transportation and identified yourself as ‘Captain so-and-so,’ could you just hear the sailor on the other end of the line snap to attention?”

Now even those who’d never enjoyed the experience themselves, but had heard their friends tell of it, are smiling. Others look guilty. A few seem worried, as though some sort of overdue military justice might be served upon those foolish enough to fess up.

Until I tell them, “If you ever find yourself in that situation……I say….go for it! If an Army or Air Force captain can be treated as a Navy captain for a day, I say, enjoy the promotion!”

Of course, about now while the audience is accepting this unusual bit of nowhere-in-the-book advice with tentative relish, their unit commander, suddenly petrified by the vision of his being shipped off to Leavenworth for suborning such a blatant violation of the UCMJ, has jumped up, begun waving his arms with vigor and shaking his head NO!!!

To forestall his rushing to the podium with a hook, I pretend not to notice and forge on. “And the reason I say go for it is because, way back when, the Air Force did something even nicer than that for me. Here’s how it happened.”

Back in 1964 when I signed up for naval aviation, the Navy offered a path to commissioning called AVROC—the Aviation Reserve Officer Candidate program—and that’s the one I chose. The AVROC program allowed you to complete Aviation Officer Candidate School in Pensacola, Florida, over the course of two summers while you attended the college of your choice during the regular school year. Once you completed both summers of AOCS and graduated from college, you’d be commissioned an ensign and begin flight training in Pensacola.

By the spring of 1968 I’d finished AOCS and was back at Southern Colorado State College in Pueblo wrapping up the last few credit hours I needed for graduation when a letter from the Navy showed up. It said something like, “Boy, it’s time for you to get your butt over to Olathe, Kansas, get commissioned, then head on down to Pensacola and start learnin’ how to fly.”

Why Olathe? That’s where I’d been processed into the Navy in the first place, and in order for that recruiting district to receive its just reward, its commander was supposed to swear me in.

I arrived at NAS Olathe near Kansas City on a Friday afternoon. My commissioning ceremony was set for 0800 the next morning in the captain’s office. And it was not a group thing—no one else was scheduled to be commissioned that day. Problem was I didn’t even own a uniform, as we’d been required to turn in our AOCS duds at the end of the program.

So I headed straight to the Navy Exchange to buy the only uniform a brand new starving college grad with a wife and two kids could afford, a set of Summer Whites—white short-sleeve shirt, white trousers, white shoes and socks, white belt and a white officer’s combination cap. Oh, and one set of black ensign shoulder boards, each bedecked with the single gold stripe of an ensign and a gold star to indicate eligibility for command at sea, the insignia of a line officer.

Thanks to the Navy Exchange seamstress who agreed to tailor my trou for me while I waited, within an hour I was in a BOQ room with my spiffy new uniform hanging in the closet ready for the big event. That done, I proceeded to the Officers Club for dinner—which would follow a “Commission Eve” celebratory adult beverage or two at Happy Hour.
A few too many, as it turned out, for when eight O’clock Saturday morning rolled around, I was still soundly “abed”, contentedly and obliviously sawing logs. A persistent, angry pounding on my BOQ door sometime later gradually dragged me into a state of semi-consciousness. It was the recruiting district’s Command Master Chief whom the Captain had sent to find me and haul me back to his office. The master chief was not about to return empty handed.

My swearing in was a bit unusual, preceded as it was by a butt-chewing and an unforgettable lecture about timeliness, responsibility and one other thing I can’t recall. Not exactly the way I’d imagined launching my career as a naval aviator.

Three days later I was in Colorado Springs, my family’s home since the (unrelated I assure you) advent of Prohibition in 1919. I donned my three-day-old Summer White uniform, replete with my three-day-old ensign shoulder boards, and, with my first set of permanent change of station orders in hand, drove over to Ent Air Force Base (former home of NORAD, today the U.S. Olympic Training Center) to arrange the movement of my household goods from Pueblo to Pensacola. The transportation office where that would happen was situated in a large wooden building that resembled a warehouse.

Immediately inside the designated entrance there was a customer service counter with four empty stools standing in front of it for customers like me. I straddled one, laid my three-day-old white officers combination cap on the counter and handed my orders to the civilian lady sitting at her desk on the other side. She began efficiently typing up the necessary forms, asking me the occasional question along the way. Clearly, she was a pro at her job.

After a while I noticed that eight or ten Air Force enlisted folks were huddled at the back of the room, collectively flipping back and forth through some great big manual. Every minute or so, they would pause and swivel their faces in my direction. Then they’d all shrug their shoulders, turn back to their book and resume flipping through it willy-nilly.

Finally, a young female airman emerged from the huddle and sidled toward me, her face twisted in utter confusion, one eye closed and the other squinting at my left shoulder board.

“Scyewz me, Sar,” she said, “what rank are yew?”

“Why, I’m an ensign,” I said proudly. A few days before I wouldn’t have been able to say that.

“Uh...is that like a...gen’ral?”

After a moment’s hesitation, I smiled and said, “Same thing.”

“Okay then,” the airman said, sounding quite relieved. “Thank yew, Sar.” She turned and rejoined her office mates, a satisfied I-told-you-so expression on her face.

The civilian lady typing my household goods paperwork tried to hold back, but finally lost it and laughed herself nearly out of her chair.

So there you have it. I’d been commissioned for only three days and the Air Force had made me a general—an instant promotion of six ranks from O-1 to O-7.

And I think to myself, “Say, this Navy gig is gonna be a piece o’ cake. At this rate, in another couple of weeks I’ll be able to retire!”

-- ### --
Evading Mao and His People’s Liberation Army
by
G.H. Spaulding, CAPT, USN (Ret)

The following true story is dedicated to those who have fled from or suffered at the hands of brutal tyrants like Mao Tse-tung, Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Benito Mussolini and Kim Il-Sung, men who consolidated their power by means of murder, intimidation and the suffocation of the liberty and dignity of their fellow citizens.

I’d been on the job as the United States Naval Attaché to Egypt for only three months in July of 1991 when something arrived in my office that would mark, not the beginning of a story, but the resumption of one that for my family and me had begun some five decades earlier.

It was an invitation to a diplomatic reception about three weeks hence at the Cairo Embassy of the People’s Republic of China. Its raison d’être—to celebrate the 64th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army of Mao Tse-tung.

While the American Ambassador and every other diplomat in our embassy, then the largest U.S. mission in the world, had received the same invitation, I was the only one “permitted” to accept it.

Our State Department had decreed that the United States was to send only one representative to this event, held annually at Chinese diplomatic posts around the world. The policy also stipulated that no American civilian official, not even the Ambassador, could go. It had to be one of our three military attachés: Army, Navy or Air Force.

I drew the short straw.
When our armored Mercedes pulled to a stop outside the black and gold iron gate of the Chinese Embassy’s entrance, red-jacketed Egyptian doormen in white gloves held the rear doors open for my wife Karen and me. Stepping out of the vehicle, we were blinded by the lights of still and video cameras from a horde of Chinese photographers who swarmed in around us. They moved with us through the gate, photographing our every step and virtually escorting us to the receiving line inside. The Chinese seemed ecstatic that any American diplomat had come to their celebration and, clearly, they were determined to record our presence for posterity—or more likely for their propaganda grist mills. Their enthusiasm was matched by my disgust that the duty had fallen to us, but I did my diplomatic best to not let it show.

Their reaction to our arrival reminded me of a red-carpet Hollywood premier at Grauman’s Chinese Theater, which opened in 1927—ironically, the very year the People’s Liberation Army came into existence in China. But approaching the receiving line in Cairo that night under the relentless glare of the photographers’ powerful lights, my mind flashed back to a different place and time and the events leading to my first encounter with the PLA.

Colorado Springs, Colorado, 50 years before. My dad George grew up on the Spaulding farm just east of Peterson Field, which shared runways with Colorado Springs Municipal Airport. Only a two-lane country road separated the farm from Pete Field, as it was known then.

With two years of college under his belt Pop left the farm in 1940 to begin flight training as an Army Air Corps cadet, earning his pilot wings and commission as a 2nd Lieutenant at Kelly Field, San Antonio, Texas, in July 1941. His first act as an officer was to buy a new car, a 1941 Chevy coupe. His second was to race home to Colorado Springs in his sporty new Chevy and marry his fiancé Ila, who had just graduated from high school.

While riding around somewhat more casually after their Saturday night church wedding, Ila said to him, “Now that we’re married, we can go further, you know.” So, he drove all the way to Castle Rock.

But there was no time for a real honeymoon. Pop had urgent orders to Langley Field, VA, to fly B-18s, which were about to be traded in for brand new Martin B-26 Marauders. No sooner had his unit, the 33rd Bomb Squadron, completed its transition to B-26s than the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States went to war. The 33rd Squadron went to Muroc Lake, CA, then on to a primitive base at Antill Plains near Townsville, Australia. From there its crews conducted long unescorted bombing missions against targets north of New Guinea.

Pop was flying with debilitating pain in his back, the result of a crash landing during his last two weeks of flight training in San Antonio. He’d experienced the dreaded engine failure on takeoff in a single-engine plane, in this case the AT-6 Texan. With his commission, wings and marriage all only days away, he downplayed the injury when examined by the flight surgeon after the crash. But, exacerbated by a case of Dengue (AKA “Breakbone”) Fever, it caught up with him in Australia. He was ordered to a military hospital in Melbourne for X-Rays, the results of which sent him back to the States for treatment. He would never fly again.

To make matters worse, on his crew’s first mission without him, their Marauder was shot down. There were no survivors.

Pop was a captain with a wife and two children when the war ended in 1945 and the inevitable reduction in force (RIF) made him a civilian once again. He built a home for his family near Prospect Lake in Colorado Springs. But when his father needed help harvesting his crops in 1947, Pop rented out the home he’d just built and all of us moved out to the farm.
Once the crops were in, he told his father, “Pop, I’ve come to realize I hate farming. You need to sell the farm and move into town. I’m going back into the Air Force.”

Meanwhile, the Air Force, inundated with requests from those wanting to re-enter military service, had informed him it had all the officers it needed. He was welcome to come back in as a staff sergeant.

“Beats farming,” he said. “I’ll take it.”

He was temporarily assigned right next door at Pete Field Base Operations awaiting permanent orders. They were not long in coming. Off he went to Nanking, China, where the United States was allied with the Kuomintang Nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek against a Communist insurgency by Mao Tse-tung and his People’s Liberation Army. The civil war had begun in 1929, subsided somewhat during Japanese occupation, but had since resumed and was now reaching critical mass. Not only was Mao winning, he was on the verge of routing Chiang and taking full control of the country. Nevertheless, this would be an “accompanied” tour; we’d be joining Pop in about eight months, after he’d secured quarters for us in Nanking.

When the time came and we’d received all of our shots, Mom, my three-year-old brother Jon and I (all of four), accompanied by an aunt to help with the driving, hit the road to San Francisco. In mid-October 1948, we reported to the San Francisco Port of Embarkation at Fort Mason, boarded the US Army Transport General E.T. Collins and shoved off for Shanghai, China, by way of Yokohama, Japan, and Pusan, Korea.

Unbeknownst to us, nine months earlier in January 1948, American Ambassador to China John Leighton Stuart had warned Americans throughout the country to leave quietly while the airports remained open. Stuart, who was born in China, had served as a missionary there and founded a world class university in Peking, was being targeted by Mao himself by means of a wicked propaganda campaign that branded him a criminal and would soon force him to flee the country.

When we docked in Shanghai, Pop was waiting for us on the pier, having come 170 miles by train from Nanking. He had bad news. The political-military situation had grown so tenuous for the Nationalists that an evacuation of American dependents from China was underway. We’d have to return to the States aboard the Collins, which was scheduled to depart in three days.

But there was something else wrong. Pop looked ill, so pale and thin Mom had trouble recognizing him. Even so, he’d booked us into the nearby New Asia Hotel for the time being, and that’s where we went, the four of us in one pedicab and our luggage in another.
During dinner in the hotel dining room, Pop was having trouble swallowing. When he tried to swallow soup, it dribbled out of his nose. Mom had learned aboard ship about a makeshift American military hospital in Shanghai, and she insisted on taking Pop there the next morning.

“You have polio,” the doctor said. “I’m admitting you right now, even though we have nothing here for treating polio—just aspirin and tomato juice. We’ll put you on a med-evac flight as soon as we’re able to get a plane in here.”

Of course, aspirin and tomato juice didn’t work. Within two days, the entire left side of Pop’s body was paralyzed. Mom refused to leave China with his condition worsening and his departure date uncertain. Meanwhile, Pop told his doctor that he wouldn’t leave before we did.

The Collins sailed without us. So did the next ship, the last one scheduled to depart Shanghai. Mao had the city surrounded and cut off. The only way out was by air.

Mom was allowed to visit Pop in the hospital, but my brother and I were not. We stayed with a kimono-clad Chinese “sitter” in the hotel, taking great pleasure in creating diversions, then escaping from our room and running willy-nilly through the hotel. The Chinese elevator boys would happily aid us in frustrating the exasperated sitter. Constricted as she was in her tight kimono, the poor woman just couldn’t run as fast as we could, so we didn’t need much help, but the elevator boys delighted in holding the door open for us and closing it in her face after we’d scrambled inside.

She wasn’t the only one who was exasperated. At meals in the hotel restaurant, the Chinese waiters would accept orders only from the eldest male in the family. And with Pop in the hospital, our family’s eldest male was four-year-old me. I wanted French Toast every meal, and no matter how strenuously Mom protested, French Toast is what I ordered and French Toast is what they delivered. Drove Mom crazy.

But she was more exasperated by our overall circumstances. We’d been told we were on some sort of waiting list for a flight out, but no one could even guess when our turn might come. The other dependents who’d arrived with us on the Collins were long gone. And in another few days Pop would be gone too. A med-evac flight was due then. Contrary to his wishes because we were still there, he would be littered onto it and flown to a military hospital somewhere in the States.

Once or twice a day, we’d take a walk, but never more than a few blocks from the New Asia Hotel. That was far enough to observe the extent to which fear and chaos had infiltrated the city. The anxiety was contagious and you could sense the Communists on Shanghai’s doorstep.

Kuomintang soldiers were executing looters and suspected Communists in the Shanghai streets.

While my brother Jon and I were too young to comprehend any of this or to be worried by it, we could tell Mom was. Finally she took matters into her own hands. She went looking for the
dependent evacuation coordinator—and found him, an accomplishment in itself! When she informed the harried man she’d been exposed to polio and had two young sons in tow, he said, “My God! In that case, we’re holding reservations on tomorrow morning’s flight for the President of the United States, and I don’t think he’ll be using them. They’re yours!”

Early the next morning, two Army jeeps transported the three of us and our luggage from the New Asia Hotel to the Shanghai airport and directly to the boarding ladder of a Military Air Transport Service C-54 Skymaster. Within minutes we were airborne over the East China Sea. We subsequently learned that Pop’s med-evac flight left two days later.

Farewell, Shanghai; Ciao, Mao!

While we had evaded the PLA and were safely out of China, our saga was not yet over.

We flew to Okinawa, then island-hopped to Honolulu by way of Guam, Kwajalein Atoll and Johnston Atoll. Our timing was perfect, as we arrived in Hawaii in time to enjoy Thanksgiving dinner at Hickam AFB. We ate at a long white-draped table, on which alternate place settings included a cigar or a pack of Wrigley’s doublemint gum.

Fully sated, we left Pearl Harbor that night aboard a U.S. Navy Mars JRM Flying Boat, and 16 hours later settled smoothly on the water in San Francisco Bay, an E-Ticket ride for a four-year-old with a window seat. Thus, we returned to the bay from which we’d sailed to China on the Gen E.T. Collins some seven weeks before.

Our Mars aircraft, similar to but bigger and faster than the recently retired Pan Am Pacific Clipper with twice its payload, water taxied into the flying boat lagoon at Naval Air Station Alameda. We disembarked at the end of a pier that, to me, seemed a mile long, and walked the length of it to a waiting bus. After reclaiming the family car, which never had been shipped, we drove home to Colorado Springs.

It was there we learned that Pop had arrived in Hawaii the day after we left. Following a brief stay in the coral pink Tripler Army Hospital, he’d been transferred to Letterman Army Hospital on the Presidio of San Francisco for evaluation and treatment. So right back to San Francisco we went. We took up residence for the next several months in an apartment in the Richmond district, located immediately south of the Presidio and directly across the Bay from Alameda.

In China, Nanking and Shanghai held on for a time, but fell to the Communists in the spring of 1949. A few months later, Mao announced the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Meanwhile, Chang Kai-shek had withdrawn a sizeable number of his Nationalist forces to Formosa with the intention of reconstituting them there for an eventual retaking of the mainland.

Fortunately, Pop overcame his paralysis and recovered from Polio—not entirely by any means, but enough that he was able to complete his Air Force career. When the Korean Conflict began in 1950, he was recalled as a captain, promoted to major and became a squadron commander before retiring in 1962. He would live to the age of 83, Mom to age 86.

**Return now to July 1991** and that reception at the Chinese Embassy in Cairo to celebrate the 64th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army.

The horde of photographers continued videotaping us and snapping our pictures as Karen, in accordance with diplomatic protocol, followed me through the receiving line. Each of us shook hands with the Chinese Ambassador, the major general who served as the PRC’s senior army,
navy and air force attaché in Egypt, a couple of visiting Chinese dignitaries whose names were indecipherable to me, and all of their wives, who smiled politely but spoke no English. Finally, the photographers withdrew to resume their stations outside the gate.

As most embassy summer receptions tend to be, this one would remain outside under the stars. We found the bar, where Chinese soldier-bartenders were struggling to produce libations with which they were completely unfamiliar. The resulting concoctions were at best humorous, in most cases downright awful.

On to the finger-food tables whose offerings were similarly unfamiliar to us and most of the other international guests—notwithstanding the fact that, along with pizza, Chinese is the one of most commonly purveyed food groups on the planet.

After a bit of diplomatic small talk with people we’d just met, we went roaming the embassy grounds to look over the many displays set up for this event.

We strolled under mature African mahogany trees, coming eventually to a series of posters displayed on easels along the inside of a high stuccoed wall that enclosed the grounds. Each poster incorporated an enlarged photo depicting the glory of the People’s Liberation Army. Many featured weapons systems or pieces of military equipment positioned for dramatic effect.

As we moved from one poster to the next, the theme of the exhibition gradually changed from war fighting capabilities to the “human” character of the modern PLA, and the posters’ captions grew increasingly laughable. One in particular caught my attention. It depicted a young female soldier and a very old Chinese woman smiling affectionately at one another. Its caption read:

*The relationship between the People’s Army and the people is like that between the fish and the sea.*

My reaction was instant revulsion. Recalling Shanghai 1948, which the old woman in the poster would have experienced, and reasonably certain how those attacked at Tiananmen Square in 1989, only two years removed, would react to that assertion, I said to Karen, “That’s it! The Chinese may have to put up with this crap, but we don’t! Let’s go!”

And so we did, marching straight out through the gate, intentionally and most undiplomatically skipping the customary departure pleasantries. The horde of photographers, by then lounging inside the compound, spotted us and scrambled to record our early exit, unexpected because not only had ceremonies honoring the PLA not yet concluded, they hadn’t even begun. We also startled our driver, who dashed off to fetch the car while we stood waiting with the Egyptian gatemen and the stunned Chinese photographers.

Outside the embassy gate, we were no longer on Chinese territory. And, just as in 1948, it was a relief to be off it and away from the “glorious” PLA.

No one asked us why we were leaving early. Had anyone done so, I had an answer ready, the most diplomatic, least offensive one I could think of: “No French Toast.”

_GHS_

*Explanatory note:* Obviously, no four-year old could remember the sort of contextual detail described in the Shanghai 1948 portion of the foregoing story. My memories of that whole experience are comprised of a series of surprisingly vivid glimpses, like snapshots or short video clips, with the empty spaces between them filled in over the years by my parents and a great deal of complementary research. That research continues. _ghs_