

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ADMIRAL JERAULD WRIGHT

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INTERVIEW

Subject: Admiral Wright's diplomatic experiences both in the United States Navy and as Ambassador to the Republic of China between 1960 to 1968

Q: Admiral Wright, I wonder if you could give a little of the background of your assignment to England and to General Eisenhower's staff, and your experiences there dealing with the French.

WRIGHT: Well, how far back do you want to go?

Q: Go back wherever you'd like to go. I think, maybe, to get a little flavor how you came to be assigned to such a position.

WRIGHT: First of all, after many years in the Navy, I was assigned to London to be on the staff of Admiral Stark, who was then the Commander in Chief U.S. Naval Forces in England. He had a staff in London at Grosvenor Square. Later, I was assigned to General Eisenhower, who was then planning for Operation Torch.

Q: Torch being the invasion of Northern Africa.

WRIGHT: That's right. His headquarters were in a building called Norfolk House in London. And I was assigned to him as a staff officer to assist in the planning for Operation Torch. As such, I was in intimate contact with Admiral Cunningham of the Royal Navy, who was General Eisenhower's naval commander and later his deputy for Operation Torch.

Q This was Andrew Cunningham?

WRIGHT: Yes, Andrew B. Cunningham. The decision was made -- principally by Mr. Robert Murphy -- to engage in conversations with a group of French officers that he had contacted in Algiers to assist in any way they could the American landing there. Admiral Murphy was consul general in Algiers. He had been consul general at Vichy, and he, as you know, was a very able and fine diplomatic officer. In Algiers, as consul general, he contacted many French officers principally in the Army who were, he presumed, sympathetic to the Allied cause and he had extensive contacts of all those in North Africa whom he considered would be able to assist us in the landing if we made it. Mr. Murphy organized or arranged for the organization of a group of military officers, principally those on Eisenhower's staff, to go to North Africa pre-D-Day by submarine and contact the French officers that Mr. Murphy had considered would be of assistance to us in our landing. The party, made up at the headquarters in London, consisted of General Mark Clark and myself as a naval component, and General Lemnitzer, Colonel Holmes and Colonel Hamlin.

Q That was Julius Holmes, wasn't it?

WRIGHT: Julius Holmes and Hamlin, the logistics officer on Eisenhower's staff.

Q: What was your position on Eisenhower's staff, your particular field of expertise?

WRIGHT: I was a United States naval officer assigned to him to assist in planning all aspects of the Torch operation. And my duty was to General Eisenhower and also to Admiral A.B. Cunningham. I was assigned to this group that Mr. Murphy and General Clark organized with the mission of convincing the French officers in Africa to bring out the French fleet in Toulon, and to assist the Allied cause in the event of our landings.

Accordingly, the five of us embarked at Gibraltar in a British submarine, the HMS Sheraph, commanded by Lieutenant N.L.A. Jewell, and three British commandos, who were assigned to us to do the pick-and-shovel work of handling radio and the call box for landing and guns and ammunition and secret codes and devices which would be useful to us in our landing. We flew by plane from England to Gibraltar and there we met General McFarlane, who was the Barney Fawkes and who was in command of the British submarine squadron operating in the Mediterranean. He introduced us in turn to Lieutenant Jewell, who was the commanding officer of the HMS Sheraph, the submarine that was designated to take us in. We boarded the submarine -- I forget the exact time -- sometime in early October about two weeks before D-Day. We headed towards a place called Cherchel on the coast of North Africa between Oran and Algiers. There the submarine laid off the beach until we got a signal from the house where we were to meet, which was a signal arranged by Mr. [brief interruption]

We arrived on the Cherchel beach and spotted the farmhouse with the tower from which the signal should have been shown. There was no signal shown so we had to lay off the beach for about ten hours waiting for the signal from Murphy that would clear us to land. We finally got the signal from the tower and indicated Murphy was there and was ready to start our consultations with the French. We sent Julius Holmes ashore in the first kayak. A kayak is a folding boat that could be carried on a submarine and launched through the torpedo hatches. We sent Julius Holmes ashore in the first boat with a commando. He contacted Murphy on the beach and sent us back a signal indicating all was clear for the landing. So the rest of us embarked in the remaining three kayaks -- a total of five American officers and three commandos for a total of eight.

Q: As a naval officer, did you Paddle much or were you in command of your kayak? Was everybody paddling the kayak?

WRIGHT: We went ashore in kayaks. A kayak is a folding boat. It's a framework put together by banded joints and a kind of skin pulled over the banded joints, and it forms a kind of a kayak like is used in northern Greenland waters. Clark and the head commando, whose name was Jumbo, embarked in the first kayak but Jim was kind of a clumsy fellow, and he stepped on the gunnel of the kayak and broke it. So Clark came back to the submarine and embarked me with him to paddle him ashore. So Clark and I embarked in the Folbot kayak and paddled ashore, landing dry-shod because the water was so completely smooth. We went in dry-shod in these kayaks and there was Robert Murphy and our French friends, the owner of the farmhouse arranged to conceal us in an empty wine cellar. In the meantime, the French, who had been consulting with us, got going so fast that you could hardly see their coattails going out of doors --going back to Algiers.

But the owner of the farmhouse stuck with us and ushered us into this empty wine cellar and he and Murphy, searched for the missing pants and the missing money and the missing papers, but Bob Murphy replied after about two days none of it had been found. So the presumption was the boat had been sunk.

It was decided on that first day that one of the missions of our conversation with the French was to determine the identity of a French general who would be able to command the French forces and assist us in the landing. General Mast, who headed up our meeting, who had been chief of staff to General Giraud, recommended that we get General Giraud off the coast of France and nominate him to Command the French forces.

Well, through our clandestine radios with the French Underground, when we got back to the headquarters, we contacted the people in France who were in touch with General Giraud, and he agreed to come out. He had then escaped from prison and he agreed to come out if we could assign an American submarine to bring him out. I'm getting ahead of the story I guess.

Q: No, this is excellent.

WRIGHT: But there wasn't an American submarine within six weeks of Southern France, so that was quite impossible. So General Eisenhower arranged to use an ill Jewell. The skipper of the submarine said "Those mines never go off anyhow so let's just go in and take a chance." We went in on the surface at nighttime, went into the harbor and lay there for about two hours waiting for a response to our identification signal that had been pre-arranged. Well, finally, we got the signal that the general was on the beach waiting to come out, and he embarked in a French fishing smack and came on aboard the submarine with himself, his son, his chief of staff and his bodyguard -- four of them. And we embarked in the submarine in the harbor and the first thing he asked was who was I. And I said I was an American naval officer in command of the submarine.

He asked "What kind of a submarine is this?"

"It's a French submarine, but I'm in command." I emphasized. Well, that seemed to satisfy the old boy so we shoved off. We departed from Isle de Fosquettes and headed towards Gibraltar.

When we got outside the harbor, we tried to report our activities but the transformer that converts the electricity of the submarine to a usable voltage that can be used on the radio had burned out so we had no way of communicating with Gibraltar. Poor old Ike at Gibraltar and Cunningham wrote us off the books as the unfortunate loss of one of their submarines. British and mostly American (sic) and he'd been designated by the Prime Minister and the President to command the operation, and he wasn't going to abdicate that command to anybody not even a French general no matter who he was.

Giraud insisted he was French, they were landing on French soil and he a Frenchman must command. "I have the plans for the operation here in my briefcase." He had a briefcase stuffed with papers.

It became a question of the immovable object and the irresistible force clashing in this Goddamned hole in a rock. It lasted just long enough to be settled with the agreement that Giraud could command the French forces and he, Eisenhower, would command all the rest. Well, the French forces consisted of two broken-down airplanes; that was all the French had there at Gibraltar. So he took command of those; that's all he had.

So that's the end of the story. We hung out on Gibraltar for about a day. A convoy was going through the Straits at that time. Then later on, we flew in and landed in Algiers on O-Plus-one following the landing. Eisenhower sent Clark and Julius Holmes and me and, I think one other, I believe simultaneously with the landing to go to Algiers. There we learned Darlan had been taken.

Q: Admiral Darlan.

WRIGHT: Yes. Admiral Darlan. He was on an inspection trip of the French forces in North Africa when we landed, and he had been caught on the shore of North Africa. So he was the head mogul of all the French military forces everywhere in all the world. In addition to admiral, he was Minister of Defense and had been sent down to Africa to inspect the French military forces in North Africa to ensure that they were prepared to resist any invasion that took place. And he was down there to inspect the forces and arrange for the change of command and so on.

So we met with him. He was the arch-criminal in all of France, the one most hated by all Americans because of his sympathies with Vichy and his command of all of the French naval forces which are in resistance to us. The question came of who would command, who would be responsible for the surrender of the French forces. We demanded that he direct the surrender or the cease-fire of all the French forces. (sic) Murphy and Clark and Darlan as to who would be the one to administer the North African Government to head up the government and the armed forces and the postage service and transportation and so on. Our candidate was Giraud and the opposition's candidate was Darlan. Darlan had all the ability.

Q: Darlan had taken over.

WRIGHT: Mark Clark and Murphy together agreed that Darlan had the skills and the prestige and the ability to run the country. Giraud was a soldier and nothing more. I was with Clark when he consulted with Giraud and said, "Who will you have as your staff and your cabinet if we put you in command?"

Giraud said, "I'll use Darlan's staff and cabinet." Well that didn't sit very good with either Murphy or Clark. If you're going to use Darlan's staff and cabinet, the best thing to do

would be to put Darlan in charge, who had the leadership of the staff and the cabinet that had the ability. So they did, and all hell busted loose in England and America when this news broke that they had put Darlan in command. But he never asked my advice on the subject with good reason.

Q: Did you talk to the Chinese military, particularly the naval men on Taiwan?

WRIGHT: Not on that subject because they were oriented toward Chiang Kai-shek, and they weren't interested in talking to me about it' naturally. But we set up a Joint Chinese-American committee to review the situation and discuss plans and reach an opinion as to whether or not it was possible. I was actively involved in that committee.

Q: What were your relations like with Chiang Kai-shek? Did you have much to do with him or was he aloof?

WRIGHT: No. He was very agreeable and very conscious of his close ties with Americans. Of course, his wife Madame Chiang Kai-shek, was practically an American citizen. She was very influential with the old man and, I think, advised him on all his relations with the United States. She was a powerful influence in everything he said and did in connection with his relationship to the United States.

Q: At the time that you were there, what was the relationship of China to the United States?

WRIGHT: Which China?

Q: I'm speaking of the Republic of China.

WRIGHT: They were very good. We had a very fine aid program of both military aid and economic aid, and I had been there a year when it was apparent that they would be self-sustaining economically. So we shut off all economic aid to them and continued military aid principally in the field of technical equipment and aircraft and so on.

Q: Was there any difficulty in shutting off this other aid?

WRIGHT: No. They took it very agreeably. We said. "You're now capable of sustaining yourself economically. You've got tremendous economic potential. It's growing rapidly with the leadership you brought over from mainland China and we think that you don't need this economic aid any longer." So we shut it off at the end of my first year there.

Q: How effective was Chiang Kai-shek's government? Obviously it was effective economically but on the island of Taiwan was it?

WRIGHT: When he came over from mainland China, he brought with him a great many skillful Chinese--doctors, engineers, industrialists, people that were the cream of the crop

of China as he knew it on China. So when he came, he brought all those men with him and they were the men that headed up the activities of his government. One of the men, the most influential, was Chen Chen. Chen Chen was vice president. Chen Chen had the job of setting up an agrarian program, a program whereby the unilateral ownership of land would be distributed amongst the Chinese, the Nationalists, themselves. And he did a very superior job. He commandeered all the land, he allocated it to the Chinese proper owners and he paid them for it by means of stock in the expanding industry. So the Chinese landowners were very happy to get paid in stock in all the industries--shipbuilding industry, electronic industry. All the industries had rapidly risen. Nationalist China was largely owned by the men who had owned land and who had been paid for shares in this industrial development and paid them for their land. So they were very happy about it and the landowners were happy about being compensated and it was a very agreeable and successful operation. Many countries sent delegations to Taiwan to find out how it had been set up and how it worked. Chen Chen was the vice president who did it. Unfortunately he died in my second year as ambassador. But the program that he established has continued.

Q: Had this worked well also with the native-born Taiwanese, as opposed to the Nationalist Chinese who came over?

WRIGHT: Well, the native-born Chinese were the owners of the land principally.

Q: You mean the ones who were born in . . .

WRIGHT: The owners of the land benefitted by the tremendous increase in development. Then, of course, the men who Chiang Kai-shek brought over were all deeply involved in it. He brought over almost a million soldiers when they came over. And they all participated in the government and the industry, labor and so on. The whole country benefitted by the Awned--what do you call it?

Q: Reform, I guess you would call it. Land redistribution.

WRIGHT: Yes. The Awned redistribution programs. And there is some opposition, of course, between the native Taiwanese who after all only Chinese had been sent over here 200 or 300 years ago to populate the island, and they were the native Taiwanese. The Japanese handled them like slaves. The Japanese, of course, did a marvelous job in organizing the railroad and the shipbuilding industry and the economics of the place but then they pulled out. As soon as they were defeated, they pulled out, and the reins were taken over by these mainland entrepreneurs that Chiang Kai-shek brought with him.

Q: What sort of instructions were you getting from Washington at the time? Did you have any rather specific instructions other than keep an eye on the invasion of what to do?

WRIGHT: There was only one crisis that developed, and the French were the intermediaries in this matter. De Gaulle had become Prime Minister of France, and he had

tremendous respect for Chiang Kai-shek. He sent a general over to Taiwan to call on Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, extended de Gaulle's very high personal regard for the general emphasizing that the regard was for him only, not for his government and not for his activities on the island. The inference was clear that he didn't want to have any diplomatic relations with the government although he did admire Chiang Kai-shek personally.

Well, the question came what to do about the Chinese representation in Paris. We in the United States wanted to keep that Nationalist embassy going in Paris and it was obvious in my mind that you couldn't keep an embassy going in Paris of a government of which the head of the French Government was hostile. Somehow or other the administration in Washington wanted to keep that embassy open and alive in Paris, and I didn't think it was practical to do it to maintain a Nationalist embassy there in opposition to the head of the French state. So there was kind of an impasse there between me and the United States Government for awhile, and they compromised by sending an emissary over who was a great friend of Chiang Kai-shek to convince him to leave the embassy there. So he came over and negotiated with Chiang Kai-shek, who agreed to keep the embassy there, but five days after this fellow went back to Paris, he pulled the embassy out completely and left a blank between France and Nationalist China. That's the only problem that I had as ambassador. The rest of the time it was clear sailing.

Q: Coming from the Navy, how did you find the staff of the embassy? Did it support you well? Or did you have problems with this? Was it a different type of work?

WRIGHT: No. I had no problems whatsoever. They were a fine bunch of level fellows, and they all pulled together and were a great outfit. The diplomatic representative and commercial fellow, political advisor, all of them were damn good. They worked willingly with me and carried out all of my ideas as best they could. We had the sympathetic consideration of the government. Of course, any ambassador to a government which is a dictatorship and controls the press and the labor unions, his job is pretty easy. So there wasn't any complications as far as I was concerned. There were no anti-American riots -- no nothing. Everything was rosy. The press was sympathetic and everybody was fine.

Q: By the time you were ambassador, did you have much to do with them? It was quite a strong political lobby at one point.

WRIGHT: The political lobby was mostly against Chiang Kai-shek because he was a dictator. You've got to face it -- he came over and took charge and brought his army with him and he ran the country. He was a dictator. He had a damn good government; he did well with their economy. But they could have conquered Formosa, Taiwan, easily if they had wanted to, but they didn't want to do it. They didn't want to put the military effort into it, I suppose. Ad they felt they could probably get themselves into control of the island by just some such way as President Nixon suggested.

Q: By "mutual" agreement.

WRIGHT: Yes. And I think they're still working on it. They're just envious as hell of the terrific success of the Nationalist economy. They've got everything in there that we have given them and taught them how to do' that they know how to do themselves. The Chinese are a very ambitious and able people. They took the economy of that island and it's up now on a level with -- not quite the level of Japan, but the same idea. The economy is booming in both technical and commercial fields, and the Communists are jealous as hell and they want to get their meat hooks on it. They're determined to do it, hell or high water. There's been no evidence of it recently, I don't think, but the Chinese Communists are desperately anxious to absorb Taiwan for that reason -- due to their economy, due to their technical activities and so on -- and bring to Communist China the technical skills that Taiwan has developed.

When I was out there. I went down to the center of the island and (sic) a bunch of mugs from British fabric. British woolens. And I said "How come you're putting British Woolens in here when they're all made in Taiwan?"

"Oh," they said, "that's the way our customers like it." And most of that wool in Hong Kong was used by Hong Kong tailors that make suits for Americans! (Laughs)

Q: I probably have several suits made of Taiwanese wool. (Laughs) Admiral, what gave you your greatest satisfaction while you were ambassador to the Republic of China?

WRIGHT: That's a difficult question to answer. I had a very cordial relationship with Chiang Kai-shek and the Madame and all of his government. A very friendly relationship with all of them. There was mutual admiration, I think, for the whole team. I left there with the feeling that I had a friend there, and they appreciated my understanding of their problems. That's all I can say about it. But I think I had a successful administration while I was there.

Q: I've talked to some Foreign Service officers who served with you, who have the greatest appreciation for the work you did. Ralph Clough.

WRIGHT: Ralph Clough was my deputy.

Q: Yes. and others.

WRIGHT: Have you seen him lately?

Q: I talked to him on the telephone. He's over at SAIS--School of Advanced International Studies here in Washington.

WRIGHT: He's a very able fellow.

Q: What was your greatest frustration, something you would like to have done that didn't get done while you were in Taipei?

WRIGHT: They did speak English, of course. There was no language problem. I didn't know a bit of Chinese. ... and then he was United States representative in the United Nations. So I've been closely identified with the State Department.

Q: Starting with Robert Murphy.

WRIGHT: Robert Murphy, I knew very well. He's my idol as far as the State Department is concerned.

Q: Admiral, I have taken a great deal of your time. I really appreciate this. This has been very, very interesting.

WRIGHT: I'm glad you have.

End of interview