

# INDIA- BURMA




THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS  
OF WORLD WAR II



CMH Pub 72-5

*Cover: Merrill's Marauders move to the front via the Ledo Road.  
(DA photograph)*



# INDIA-BURMA

## 2 APRIL 1942–28 JANUARY 1945

by David W. Hogan

Center of Military History  
United States Army  
Washington, D.C., 2019





# INTRODUCTION

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in human history. However, the three-quarters of a century that separates us from that time has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. Although World War II continues to absorb the interest of military professionals, historians, and surviving veterans, generations of Americans have grown up largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that altered the fabric of the United States and the world.

The conflict still has much to teach us about strategy and tactics, military preparedness and mobilization, joint and combined operations, global coalitions, and leadership. During the next two years, the U.S. Army is participating in the nation's seventy-fifth anniversary commemoration of World War II. As part of that effort, the U.S. Army Center of Military History is reissuing its World War II commemorative campaign series with revised maps, high-resolution images, and new covers, all in a modern ePub format for digital readers. We hope these updated publications will reach a larger audience and help educate more Americans about the war. These works also will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so well and proudly represented what has been called "the Greatest Generation."

From 1941 to 1945, the United States fought on land, on sea, and in the air in several diverse theaters of operations. This campaign study, along with the accompanying suggestions for further reading, will introduce readers to one of the Army's significant military feats from the Second World War. It also recognizes the sacrifices of those who served and of their families. The Army dedicates these commemorative pamphlets to them.

JON T. HOFFMAN  
Chief Historian



# INDIA-BURMA

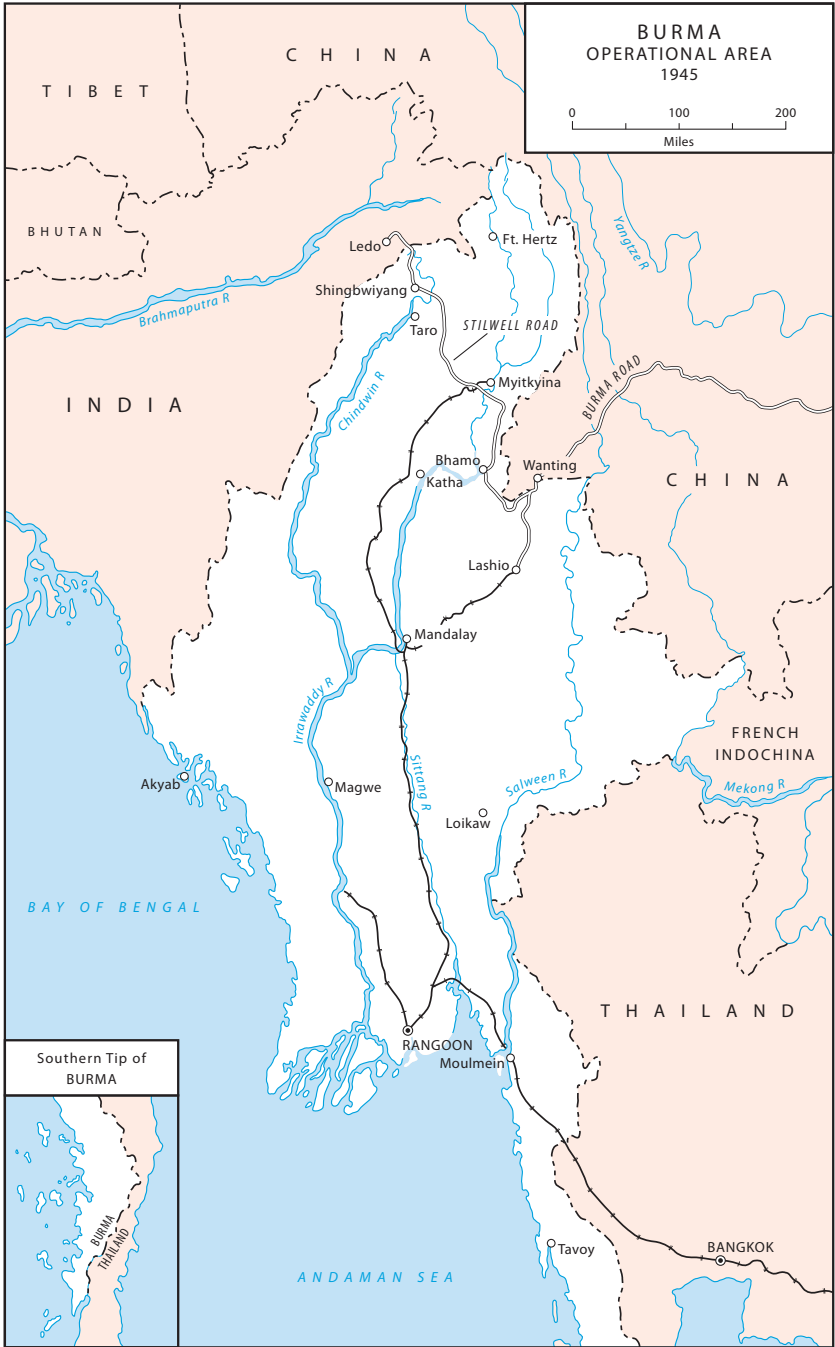
2 APRIL 1942–28 JANUARY 1945

“We got a hell of a beating,” Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell told the crowd of reporters in the Indian capital of New Delhi. It was May 1942, and the American general, who had only recently arrived in the Far East to assume the position of chief of staff to Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek, was chafing at failure in his first command in the field. Following the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor the previous December, the Japanese had won victory after victory, extending their empire from Wake Island in the Pacific to Malaya and Singapore in Southeast Asia. When Stilwell had arrived in the embattled Chinese capital of Chungking in March, the Japanese were already driving into Burma, capturing the capital of Rangoon on 6 March. The American general took command of two Chinese divisions and, in cooperation with the British and Indians, tried to stem the Japanese onslaught. Defeated, he and his staff endured a rugged, 140-mile hike over jungle-covered mountains to India. By occupying Burma, the Japanese had not only gained access to vast resources of teak and rubber, but they had closed the Burma Road, 700 miles of dirt highway that represented China’s last overland link with the outside world. The reopening of an overland route to China would be the major American goal, indeed obsession, in the theater throughout the campaign.

## Strategic Setting

The objective of restoring a land route to China originated in part in hard strategic considerations, specifically the need to keep China in the war to tie down Japanese troops and serve as a base for future operations against the Japanese home islands. But it also reflected an idealistic American view of China as a great power, capable of a major contribution, and the romantic image held by many Americans of China’s heroic struggle against superior Japanese equipment and arms. For nearly three years the United States would thus push for a major effort to break the Japanese blockade, forward large quantities of lend-lease materials, and train the fledgling Chinese Army and Air Force.

The Americans soon found the situation to be much more complex than they had anticipated. Far from heroic, China’s government and army were riddled with inefficiency and graft. Although personally honest, Chiang Kai-shek preferred to leave the defeat of Japan to





the other Allies and husband his resources for a postwar showdown with his mortal enemies, the Communists. The British, for their part, cherished few illusions about China's war-making potential. They were more concerned about the defense of India and restoration of control over their former colonies, including Burma, and they complained that the Americans could see no purpose for the theater "except to cover General Stilwell's supply route." British imperial designs, in turn, met with suspicion among Americans, who had little enthusiasm for a war to restore the British Empire.

Aside from the trials of coalition politics, the Allies would face one of the most inhospitable areas for military operations in the world. For the Americans the theater not only covered a vast area, but it was also at the end of a 12,000-mile supply line. The area where the Allies would campaign was characterized by extremely rugged terrain with few roads and other communications, conditions which would favor the defense and reduce the Allies' advantage in numbers. Northern and central Burma, where they would conduct the bulk of their operations, had steep, densely wooded mountain ranges cut by streams. The Allies would need to scale precipitous ranges along the border to reach one of Burma's three great river valleys—the Chindwin, the Irrawaddy, or the Salween—in order to move south into the heart of Burma. They could also expect their advance to be slowed by the monsoon, near-constant rains which could last from two to three months, anytime after April. Leeches, flies, ticks, and other insects, along with such diseases as malaria, dysentery, and typhus, added to a soldier's miseries.

## Operations

The recovery of Burma would be the constant preoccupation of the American theater commander, one of the war's most controversial figures. "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell had served in China during the interwar years, knew the country, and could speak its language fluently, but sloppiness as an administrator and planner, along with a sharp tongue, ill suited him for his largely diplomatic responsibilities. He blamed British defeatism and Chinese incompetence for the loss of Burma and made snide comments on other Allied leaders, notably Chiang Kai-shek, to whom he referred in his diary as "Peanut." On the other hand, if Stilwell seemed overworked at times, it was understandable, given the sheer number of positions he held. He simultaneously served as chief of Chiang's joint Allied staff, President Roosevelt's personal representative to the Chinese leader, administrator of Lend-Lease, and commanding officer



*Flying the Hump, Moonlight, CBI by Tom Lea. Pilots flying this treacherous route kept Allied supply lines open. (Army Art Collection)*

of the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater of Operations, which he established on 22 June.

With headquarters at Chungking, a branch office in New Delhi, and a primary mission to supply China, the CBI theater was largely logistical in nature. Cargoes entered the theater at Karachi, and once the threat from Japanese air power lifted, at Calcutta, India. They then proceeded by railroad, road, and ferry to Assam, the Indian province closest to the Burma border. Theater communications suffered from the fact that the British had designed the defenses of India to meet an attack from the western approaches, leaving the transportation network in the east less well developed. Not only were lines of communications unusually long—Assam was an incredible 67-day journey by rail from Calcutta—but they also were congested and inefficient, plagued by differing railroad gauges, slow construction, and differing national attitudes on allocation of resources. The situation improved somewhat in November 1943 when the Allies reached an agreement for 4,600 American railroad workers to help operate key sections of the lines. Once the goods reached Assam, rickety transport planes had to fly them over the Himalayas to China. Pilots flying this route, called the “Hump,” had to contend with poor



weather, 15,000-foot mountain peaks, and enemy fighter planes operating from a base at Myitkyina.

Two major American units operated under the CBI theater. The first American troops to arrive in the theater—air force personnel from Java—got to Karachi in March 1942. They formed the nucleus for the India Air Task Force, later the Tenth Air Force, which processed and trained crews for combat and transport activities. From bases in Assam, it also supervised and protected supply flights over the Hump and prepared to support Allied ground efforts with close air support and operations against Japanese communications and supply installations in Burma. At the same time, the Services of Supply, commanded by Brig. Gen. Raymond K. Wheeler, established supply services in India, accumulating vast quantities of lend-lease material for the Chinese, and supported the Tenth Air Force and Stilwell's nascent Chinese Army.

Calcutta was the headquarters both for numerous supply and service commands supporting air operations against Burma and for engineer and other construction units. To most foreign observers Calcutta seemed overcrowded and full of hungry refugees, drug addicts, and prostitutes. Amid these squalid conditions, American soldiers lived like kings. Their living quarters seemed luxurious to the British and Indians; even the lowest ranking U.S. private could afford to hire servants. American officers dined at fashionable restaurants, where they introduced their hosts to the dill pickle, while their troops introduced their Indian bearers to another American institution: baseball.

Far northeast of Calcutta, along the Indo-Burma border, American engineers in late 1942 began to construct a road meant to restore China's land communications with the outside world. It was the Americans, more than any of the other Allies, who wanted to open the road to China, and they pushed the enterprise the hardest. Taking over the project from the British in October 1942, they began construction from Ledo in December with the goal of arriving at the Burmese city of Shingbwiayang, 103 miles from Ledo, by 20 June 1943. Progress momentarily stopped 43 miles from Ledo because of supply shortages and the diversion of equipment to other tasks, especially airfield construction, but the project revived once the monsoon season ended. By then, the engineers had a new chief, Maj. Gen. Lewis A. Pick, leading the more irreverent among them to dub their road "Pick's Pike." The project represented a tremendous task, through extremely rugged terrain, but by the end of October 1943 the irrepressible Pick and his men had pushed the construction to the 82-mile mark.

Screening the advance of the Ledo Road into Burma were the guerrillas and civilian agents who made up one of the war's most unusual units, Detachment 101 of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services. The twenty original members of Detachment 101 had arrived in the theater in June 1942 under a vague directive to gather intelligence and conduct guerrilla warfare under Stilwell's command. After conferring with the unit's leader—Maj. Carl Rifler—Stilwell directed the detachment to conduct operations in Burma. The detachment recruited personnel among Anglo-Burmese soldiers and refugees in India, trained them at an old British tea plantation in Assam, and then sent them behind Japanese lines in Burma to gather intelligence, blow up bridges, call in air strikes, and rescue downed Allied fliers. Other parties infiltrated the enemy front to contact prospective guerrillas, notably the fierce Kachins. In December 1943 Stilwell directed Detachment 101 to increase its strength to 3,000 guerrillas.



*Army bulldozers constructing the Ledo Road cut a path through a hillside in the Indian jungle. (DA photograph)*

As American logisticians established facilities and began to pour ever-increasing quantities of supplies into India, as American airmen dodged mountain peaks and enemy fighters on their way to China, and as American engineers cleared the trace of the Ledo Road over the mountains into North Burma, Stilwell was planning for a ground offensive into the region. In late summer he had established a training camp at Ramgarh, where the three Chinese divisions in India endured six weeks of basic training, including considerable instruction in weapons and jungle warfare. The American commander firmly believed that Chinese soldiers, properly trained, could match any in the world, but the Ramgarh instructors still had to overcome the language barrier, the indifference of the Chinese to time, and the problems of “face” involved in training Chinese officers and enlisted men in the same group. Meanwhile, Stilwell won the approval of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff for an offensive in 1943 by his three divisions from India into Burma, while thirty Chinese divisions in China’s Yunnan Province attacked westward. Chiang Kai-shek received the plan with considerable reserve, still anxious to husband his resources. Nevertheless, he approved the concept as long as the British promised to join in the offensive.



The British showed no such inclination. Demands from Indian dissidents that the British “quit India” and demonstrations, riots, and sabotage in the colony during 1942 distracted British authorities from devoting much thought to the invasion of Burma. By early October the British were also arguing that supply problems, the monsoon, the state of the troops, and the lack of naval and air power justified their opposition to the projected spring offensive. Faced with this British rejection of the plan, Chiang withdrew his commitment to the campaign. The Chinese leader then turned to a plan proposed by Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault, the American air commander in China, to annihilate Japan’s air force and level Japanese industries with a bombing program based in China. Air power appealed to both Chiang and President Franklin D. Roosevelt as a means to achieve a quick, cheap success against Japan, despite warnings that Japanese troops in China would likely seize the vulnerable airfields if the bombing began to have any effect.

For all Roosevelt’s enthusiasm for Chennault’s ideas, most American strategists in early 1943 continued to back an offensive into Burma as soon as possible. The Joint Chiefs of Staff supported such an advance, and at Casablanca in January 1943 they managed to persuade the reluctant British to agree to a campaign, code-named ANAKIM, to retake Burma in late 1943. Once again the planned offensive encountered delays. Hampered by distances, terrain, and weather, the necessary buildup of supplies lagged behind anticipated schedules. The Chinese, on their part, moved slowly to assemble their divisions (“Y Force”) in Yunnan Province, and the troops that did arrive lacked equipment, suffered from disease, and were led by corrupt, incompetent commanders and staff. The British, never enthusiastic about the plan, now proposed that the Allies bypass Burma altogether and move on Sumatra in the Indonesian archipelago, a key step in the route back to their old imperial strongpoint of Singapore. The Americans did not accept an attack on Sumatra. In fact at this time they were emphasizing the buildup for Chennault’s bombing offensive more than ground operations. In the meantime, training continued at Ramgarh, transports continued to fly over the Hump, planes of the Tenth Air Force raided targets in Burma, and engineers extended the Ledo Road ever farther into Burma.

Disgruntled Americans, cynical about British willingness to fight, found some hope in early 1943 when a mixed “brigade” of British, Burmese, and Gurkhas conducted a daring, three-month raid into Burma. Maj. Gen. Orde Wingate, an eccentric but magnetic and innovative British officer, had organized this brigade of raiders, known as the





*Brig. Gen. Frank D. Merrill (far left) watches troops cross into Burma on the Ledo Road. (DA photograph)*

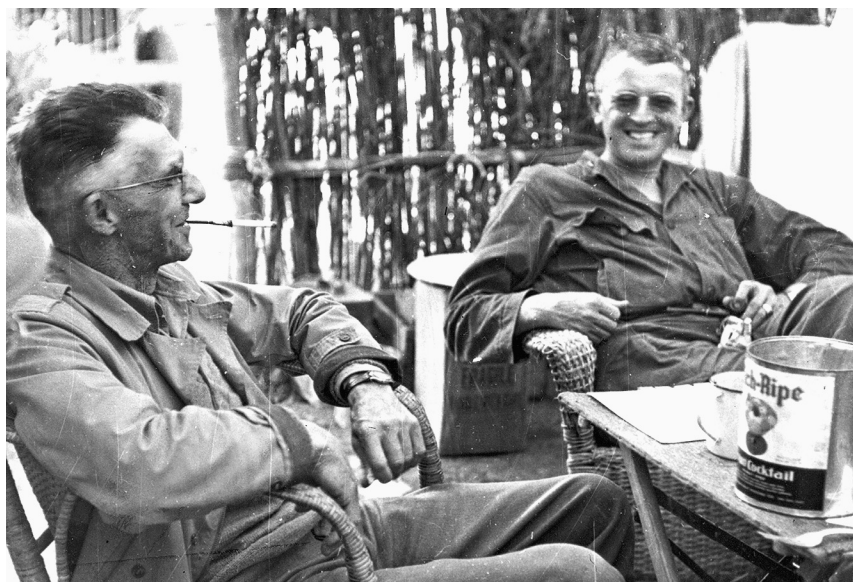
“Chindits,” to infiltrate by foot through Japanese lines in Burma and conduct hit-and-run attacks against the exposed railroads and bridges so essential to Japanese communications. He was supposed to conduct his first raid in support of the Allies’ spring 1943 offensive, but when support for that operation collapsed, Wingate argued that he should proceed anyway to forestall Japanese designs and test his theories of long-range penetration. In February 1943 his Chindits slipped through enemy lines for three months of raids, relying on airdrops for supply. Only about two-thirds of the force returned to India, and many of these were so debilitated that they could no longer serve in combat. Just how much damage the raid caused to Japanese communications became a matter of heated debate, but it did demonstrate the ability of the Allies to operate in the jungle on equal terms with the Japanese.

Wingate’s exploits so impressed Winston Churchill that the British Prime Minister summoned this “man of genius and audacity” to the Quebec Conference in August 1943. At Quebec, the Allies finally agreed to launch an offensive into Burma in early 1944. While the Chinese Y Force advanced from Yunnan into eastern Burma and the British IV Corps drove east into Burma from Manipur State, Stilwell’s

Chinese-American force would attack southeast from the Shingbwiayang area toward Myitkyina. Capture of that key North Burma city and its airfield would remove the threat of enemy fighter planes to transports flying the Hump and also enable the Allies to connect the advancing Ledo Road into the transportation network of North Burma. A new Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) under British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten would provide overall control to the offensive. After listening to Wingate's impassioned arguments on the benefits of Chindit-style long-range penetration groups, the Allied leaders also agreed to expand the number of such groups to support the advance, and the Americans agreed to supply their own long-range penetration force.

The American force which emerged, the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) known as GALAHAD, proved a far cry from the elite unit which the Army's leaders had envisioned. In the South and Southwest Pacific, the Caribbean, and the United States, the call for jungle-tested volunteers for a hazardous mission produced a collection of adventurers, small-town Midwesterners, southern farm boys, a few Native and Japanese-Americans, and a number of disciplinary cases that commanders were only too happy to unload. As the volunteers assembled in San Francisco, one officer remarked, "We've got the misfits of half the divisions in the country." After arriving in Bombay, India, on 31 October, GALAHAD trained in long-range penetration tactics under Wingate's supervision and soon earned a reputation as an unruly outfit. A British officer, who had been invited to GALAHAD's camp for a quiet Christmas evening, noted men wildly firing their guns into the air in celebration and remarked, "I can't help wondering what it's like when you are not having a quiet occasion." Although GALAHAD presented some disciplinary problems, Stilwell and his staff were overjoyed to obtain some American combat troops, and Stilwell managed to wrest control of the unit from the angry Wingate. To command GALAHAD, he selected one of his intimates, Brig. Gen. Frank D. Merrill, leading correspondents to dub the unit "Merrill's Marauders."

By the time GALAHAD reached the front in February 1944, Stilwell had already started his Chinese divisions into Burma. He had received word of Chiang's decision to cancel the offensive into eastern Burma but was determined to continue regardless of Y Force's plans. Taking command in the field on 21 December, he sent his Chinese troops southeast into the Hukawng Valley of northern Burma. The Chinese received a major boost in morale when a battalion of their 114th Regiment, with artillery support, drove the Japanese from a series of pillboxes and relieved a pocket of trapped troops at Yupbang Ga. Although a small



*Generals Stilwell (left) and Merrill. (DA photograph)*

victory, it made the Chinese believe that they could meet the enemy on equal terms. Despite this new confidence, the advance proceeded slowly, due to heavy seasonal rains and Chiang's tendency to bypass Stilwell and direct his officers not to risk their men unduly. Using wide envelopments to outflank the Japanese defenses, the Chinese pushed to the line of the Tanai Hka, about sixty miles into the Hukawng Valley, by late February.

With GALAHAD's arrival on the scene, Stilwell continued to press the advance. He ordered his two Chinese divisions to keep pressure on the Japanese front and sent the Marauders on a wide march around the Japanese right to cut the enemy's communications. Once again, the Chinese advanced at a snail's pace, heeding Chiang's orders to conserve strength. Noting the glacial pace of the Chinese, Lt. Gen. Shinichi Tanaka, commander of the *Japanese 18th Division*, decided to leave a force to block the Chinese and destroy the threat to his rear.

The Marauders were living up to their image in Stilwell's headquarters as a modern-day version of Stonewall Jackson's foot cavalry. To reach the Japanese lines of communications, they needed to make their way through jungle-choked terrain cut by frequent streams and crossed by only a few trails. When the advance began on 24 February,

the intelligence and reconnaissance platoons of GALAHAD's three battalions took the lead, carefully probing ahead in single file on the narrow footpaths through the dense foliage, examining footprints, stopping frequently to watch and listen, cautiously approaching each bend in the trail. Occasionally, they clashed with Japanese patrols. Near the village of Lanem Ga, a burst of fire from a Japanese machine gun claimed the life of Pvt. Robert W. Landis, the lead scout of the 2d Battalion's intelligence and reconnaissance platoon and the first Marauder to die in combat. On 3 March the Marauders reached the Japanese line of retreat and established a pair of roadblocks, the 3d Battalion at the little Kachin village of Walawbum, the 2d farther northwest near Kumnyan Ga, and the 1st in reserve. Digging in, they waited for the enemy's response.

The Japanese did not take long to act. At Walawbum, the *56th Regiment* struck the positions of the Orange Combat Team of the 3d Battalion on 4 March and 6 March. The emphasis on marksmanship in GALAHAD's training now paid dividends as the Americans, aided by heavy mortars firing from their rear and by two heavy machine guns, littered the fields with Japanese dead. On the day of the 6th, the Japanese launched a banzai attack, but the frenzied enthusiasm of the assault again proved no match for American firepower. To the north the 2d Battalion came under severe pressure, repulsing six attacks in one day, before Merrill withdrew them. In all, the Marauders killed about 800 enemy soldiers at a cost of 200 of their own men. As pleased as they were with such a performance, Stilwell and Merrill were anxious to keep down GALAHAD's losses, particularly given its status as the only available American combat unit. They relieved the Marauders with a Chinese regiment on 7 March. By that time, Tanaka had decided to withdraw south along a hastily built bypass of the American roadblocks to a strong position on the Jambu Bum, a range of low hills at the southern end of the Hukawng Valley.

In his plan for the campaign, Stilwell had hoped to reach the Jambu Bum before monsoon rains forced suspension of active operations. His divisions were practically the only Allied force making progress in the campaign. Not only had Chiang postponed Y Force's advance, but the British, far from moving into Burma, were trying to hold against a major Japanese offensive into India. This Japanese advance, which began on 8 March, threatened both the British Army in Assam and Stilwell's supply line to India. For the moment Stilwell could still proceed, but he would have to keep a close watch on developments to the southwest. He accordingly laid plans for the Chinese to continue their advance on the *18th Division's* front, while GALAHAD would split into two parts, again

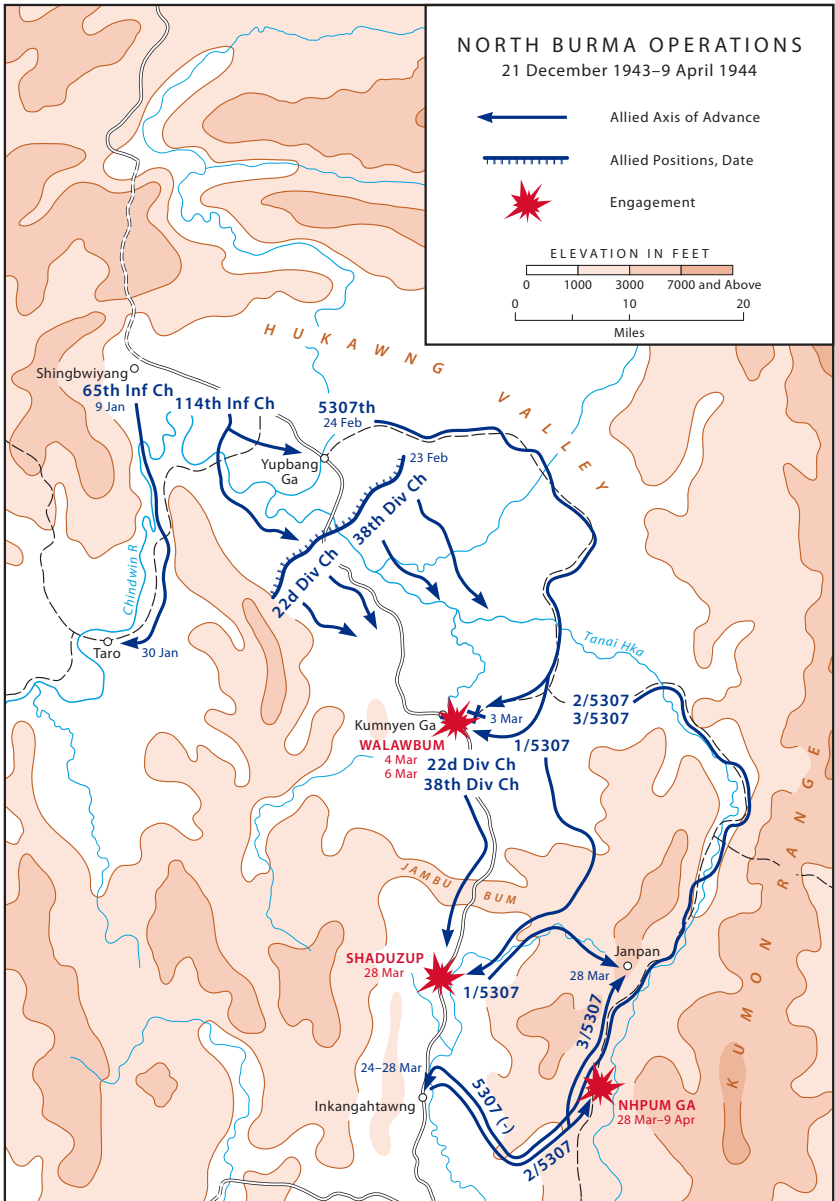




*Marauders rest during a break along a jungle trail near Nhpum Ga.  
(DA photograph)*

envelop the Japanese right flank, and cut Japanese communications in two different places.

In this flanking movement, GALAHAD had to march through some of the most difficult terrain of the campaign. The Marauders needed to climb out of the Hukawng Valley onto the hills to the east and then move south through territory in which only the extremely steep, narrow valley of the Tanai offered an avenue of approach. Fortunately, the Marauders in their march unexpectedly encountered the Kachin guerrillas, who served as guides, screened the advance, and even provided elephants as cargo bearers. On the right the 1st Battalion hacked a path through twenty miles of bamboo forests and streams, crossing one river fifty-six times. Early on the morning of 28 March the battalion surprised an enemy camp at Shaduzup and established a roadblock. To the south Col. Charles N. Hunter, Merrill's second in command, led the 2d and 3d Battalions up the Tanai and through ridge lines to take up a position near Inkawngatawng. They had hardly arrived when they received orders to retrace their steps and take up blocking positions. A captured enemy sketch told Stilwell that a strong Japanese force was advancing on the Allied left to outflank the attackers. To head off the Japanese, the



3d Battalion occupied Janpan and the 2d Battalion took up positions at Nhpum Ga.



At Nhpum Ga the 2d Battalion withstood eleven days of shelling and heavy attacks from three Japanese battalions which surrounded the position. The 2d's perimeter, 400 by 250 yards on top of a 2,800-foot saddle of high ground, dominated the surrounding terrain, but it offered few amenities to battalion members. The Japanese captured the only water hole, necessitating airdrops of water into the position. The stench from rotting mule carcasses and unburied excrement, according to one soldier, "would have been utterly unbearable if there had been any alternative to bearing it." Yet, somehow, the 2d managed to hold. Its Japanese-American soldiers frequently crept into no-man's-land at night, eavesdropping on Japanese conversations to discover the enemy's intentions. Meanwhile, the rest of GALAHAD rushed to the rescue. The 1st Battalion, leaving its position at Shaduzup to the Chinese, hastened to the aid of the 2d, and Merrill, though evacuated with a heart attack, arranged the drop of a pair of pack howitzers to the relief forces. Aided by this artillery fire, the 1st and 3d Battalions finally broke through and relieved the 2d on 9 April.

The march to Shaduzup and Inkawngatawng and the siege of Nhpum Ga had cost the Marauders 59 dead, 314 wounded, and 379 evacuated for wounds or illness. Of the original 3,000 men, only 1,400 were left, and those 1,400 were approaching a state of collapse. The Marauders anticipated a lengthy rest, but Stilwell had other ideas. The CBI chief received assurances from the British in April that the situation to the south was under control, but he was under pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to seize Myitkyina as soon as possible. Thus in late April, as the Marauders read their mail, received new issues of clothing, relaxed from their labors, and looked forward to the long rest in the rear which they believed they had earned, "a grotesque rumor began to be heard, passed along in deprecating tones, pretty much as a joke." The rumor proved true. Stilwell was forming a task force of the Marauders, two Chinese regiments, and some Kachin guerrillas to carry out a quick overland march to seize the airfield at Myitkyina. The American commander recognized the poor condition of GALAHAD, but he believed he had no alternative. He promised Merrill that he would evacuate GALAHAD without delay "if everything worked out as expected."

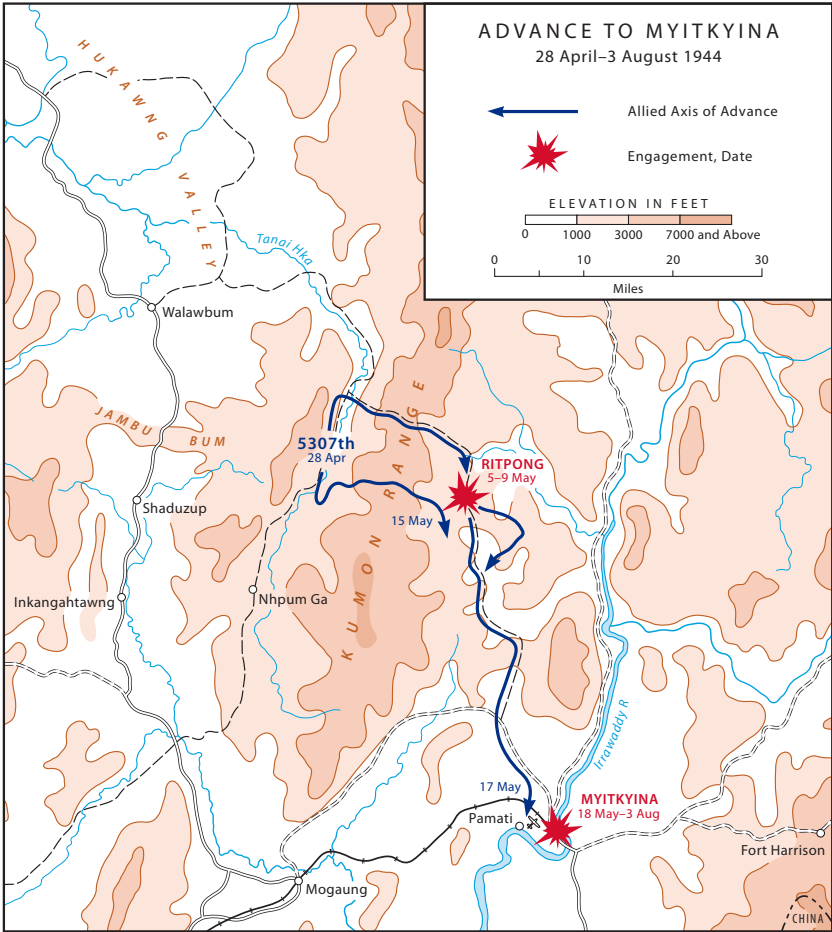
Stilwell's promise sustained the Marauders through the grueling 65-mile march over the 6,000-foot Kumon range to Myitkyina. Despite the efforts of an advance party of Kachins and coolies, the trail followed by the task force proved treacherous to negotiate. Mud transformed sections of the path into slides, and in places the Marauders had to cut steps out of the ground for their supply mules to obtain a foothold.



*A 75-mm. pack howitzer supports GALAHAD's siege operations at Myitkyina.  
(DA photograph)*

Even so, a number of mules lost their footing and fell to their death. The smothering heat and humidity, the rugged terrain, and disease caused some Marauders to drop out of formation along the way. On 6 May advance patrols clashed with the Japanese garrison at Ritpong, leading GALAHAD's commanders to worry that their task had been compromised. Nevertheless, the Marauders pressed on, finally reaching the vicinity of the airfield on 16 May.

Despite the concerns of the commanders, the attack on the airfield on the morning of 17 May caught the Japanese completely by surprise. While GALAHAD's 3d Battalion feinted toward the northern end of the defenses and the 1st Battalion seized the Irrawaddy ferry terminal at Pamati on the right flank, a Chinese regiment overran the airstrip and probed toward Myitkyina itself. Lacking accurate intelligence on the defenders, this initial attack on the city fell into confusion and was easily repulsed. Nevertheless, exultation reigned at Stilwell's headquarters when word arrived of the capture of the airfield. The general made arrangements to fly in Chinese reinforcements and, exuberant over his success despite British skepticism, he wrote in his diary, "WILL THIS BURN UP THE LIMEYS!"



The jubilation over the capture of the airfield soon dissolved in the gloom of a siege. Houses and railroad cars around the city and roads that rose twelve feet above flooded rice paddies provided natural fortifications for the defenders, who may actually have outnumbered their besiegers. Fortunately for the Allies, the Japanese grossly overestimated the strength of their opponents and stayed on the defensive. To fill gaps in the Allied line, Stilwell and his staff scrambled to find whatever troops they could. Swallowing his pride, Stilwell requested help from the British 36th Division, only to be informed that no troops would be available for another two months at the earliest. Engineers and GALAHAD

replacements went into the line, frequently without sufficient infantry training. The arrival of the monsoon and the lack of heavy weapons further slowed the operation. A series of attacks made little headway against the defenses, and by 2 June, the Allies had resigned themselves to a lengthy investment.

One Marauder later referred to the siege at Myitkyina as “our little Gallipoli.” Such static warfare, with its emphasis on fortifications and heavy weapons, ill suited a light infantry unit like GALAHAD, which needed relief in any case. Some Marauders cut holes in the seat of their pants so that their dysentery would not interrupt the firing of their weapons. On the 2d Battalion’s front, soldiers fell asleep in their trenches from sheer exhaustion. Yet Stilwell was pressing worn units of other nationalities onto the front at Myitkyina as well, and even using the Chindits as line infantry. He could not relieve the only American combat troops in the theater without raising cries of favoritism. Thus GALAHAD fought on, with predictable results. By 25 May the Marauders were losing 75 to 100 men daily to malaria, dysentery, and scrub typhus. Merrill himself was evacuated after a second heart attack. Morale plummeted even further when desperate staff officers, trying to hold down the rate of evacuation, pressed into service sick or wounded troops who could still walk. Such episodes, along with the broken promises of relief, confirmed GALAHAD’s sense that it was the maltreated stepchild of higher headquarters. The resulting crisis in morale later created a nasty scandal in the United States.

Only a few of the original Marauders remained when Myitkyina finally fell in August. Bit by bit, the Allies, ever improving in combat experience and close air support, had tightened their grip on the Japanese defensive perimeter. By 17 June, GALAHAD had reached the Irrawaddy River north of Myitkyina, cutting off the enemy from supplies and reinforcement from that direction. Mogaung, a key rail center southwest of Myitkyina, fell to the Chinese and Chindits on 27 June, ending any threat to the siege from that direction. With the capture of Mogaung, Myitkyina’s fate was sealed. Sensing the doom of the city, the defenders evacuated their wounded on rafts, many of which were ambushed by Kachins as they drifted down the Irrawaddy. On 3 August the Chinese attacked, sending a raiding party to infiltrate enemy lines and create havoc in the rear while the 50th Division made the main assault. The Japanese soon gave way, and by late afternoon the Chinese had secured the city. Stilwell had his victory, but at a heavy price. The campaign had cost the Chinese about 4,200 casualties, and the Americans lost 2,200.

The fall of Myitkyina represented the greatest victory of Stilwell's career, but within three months he had returned to the United States following a final quarrel with Chiang. Y Force had finally crossed the Salween into Burma in May, but any hope of a rapid Chinese advance toward Myitkyina soon evaporated when a Japanese counterattack drove Y Force back toward the frontier. China's fortunes grew even darker in August when a Japanese offensive in east China threatened Chennault's air bases. Chiang wanted to withdraw Y Force from Burma, but when Stilwell notified Washington of Chiang's plans President Roosevelt, who had lost patience with the Chinese leader, warned that he expected Chiang to place Stilwell in command of all forces in China, strengthen Y Force, and press the Salween offensive. A petulant Chiang assumed that Stilwell had instigated this humiliating dispatch and demanded his recall. On 27 October 1944, Stilwell left the theater for the United States. His old domain was split into two parts. Maj. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer became Chiang's new chief of staff and chief of the China theater; Lt. Gen. Daniel I. Sultan, an engineer officer and Stilwell's CBI deputy, took over the India-Burma theater.

By late October 1944 it was clear that final Allied victory in Burma was only a matter of time. In June and July the British had decisively defeated the invading *Japanese Fifteenth Army* at Imphal, removing the threat to India and opening the way for a British counteroffensive into Burma. After Imphal the British IV and XXXIII Corps pushed to the Chindwin River, while the XV Corps prepared to advance down the Burmese coast. General Sultan could now call on one British and five Chinese divisions, as well as a new long-range penetration group known as the "Mars Task Force." This brigade-size unit consisted of the 475th Infantry, containing the survivors of GALAHAD, and the recently dismounted 124th Cavalry of the Texas National Guard. The Allies possessed nearly complete command of the air. CBI's logistics apparatus was well established, and the leading bulldozer on the Ledo Road had pushed to within eighty miles of the road from Myitkyina south to Bhamo. From that point the engineers needed only to improve existing routes to the old Burma Road, fifty miles south of Bhamo. Myitkyina had grown into a massive supply center with an expanded airfield and a pipeline. Sensing victory, the Allies planned to continue their advance in two phases, first to Bhamo and Katha, then to the Burma Road and Lashio.

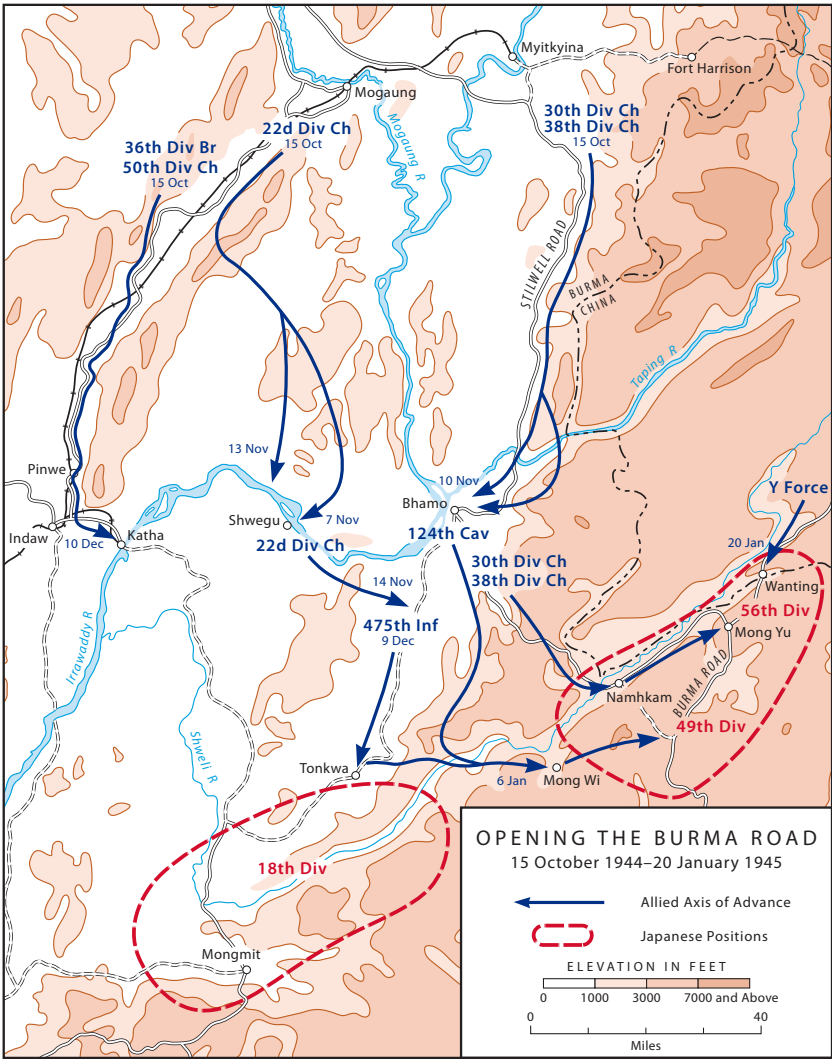
The offensive resumed on 15 October. While the main British force to the southwest completed its push to the Chindwin, Sultan advanced three divisions toward the Katha-Bhamo line. To the west the British 36th Division, after overcoming stubborn Japanese resistance at the railway

center of Pinwe, encountered no opposition until its occupation of Katha on 10 December. In the center the Chinese 22d Division likewise encountered little initial opposition, occupying its objective of Shwegu without incident on 7 November. South of Shwegu the 22d ran into advance elements of the *18th Division* near Tonkwa on 8 December. Since the 22d Division was scheduled to leave the front for China, the 475th Infantry replaced the Chinese and held its ground against repeated assaults until the Japanese withdrew. Meanwhile, the Chinese 38th Division on the left flank had skillfully used flanking movements to drive the Japanese on its front into Bhamo. After a delaying action the Japanese evacuated Bhamo on 15 December and withdrew south toward Lashio.

Reaching the Burma Road now lay within the grasp of the Allied forces. The next phase of the campaign would involve a larger role for the Mars Task Force. General Sultan wanted to send the force up the line of the Shweli River to threaten the Burma Road and the rear of Japanese forces opposing the advance of the Chinese 38th and 30th Divisions from Bhamo. But the 124th Cavalry, many of whose troopers still wore the old high-top cavalry boots, first had to make the killing hike from Myitkyina south through the rugged mountains to the Shweli. Making their way along narrow paths which took them from deep valleys to peaks above the clouds, the men of the 124th finally reunited with the 475th at the small village of Mong Wi in early January 1945. From there the Mars Task Force moved east to drive the enemy from the hills overlooking the Burma Road. Bringing up artillery and mortars, the Americans opened fire on the highway and sent patrols to lay mines and ambush convoys. After the experience with GALAHAD, however, Sultan and the force's commander, Brig. Gen. John P. Willey, were anxious not to risk the unit's destruction by leaving it in an exposed position astride the road.

The Mars Task Force may not have actually cut the Burma Road, but its threat to the Japanese line of retreat did hasten the enemy's withdrawal and the reopening of the road to China. While Y Force advanced southwest from the Chinese end of the Burma Road toward Wanting, the Chinese 30th and 38th Divisions moved southeast toward Namhkam, where they were to turn northeast and move toward a linkup with the road at Mong Yu. To oppose this drive, the Japanese had deployed the *56th Division* at Wanting, troops of the *49th Division* at Mong Yu, and a detachment at Namhkam, but these units planned to fight only a delaying action before retreating south to join the defense of Mandalay. They withdrew as soon as the Chinese applied pressure. As the Marsmen were establishing their position to the south, the 30th and 38th Divisions





captured Namhkam and drove toward Mong Yu. On 20 January advance patrols of the 38th linked up with those of Y Force outside Mong Yu. Another week proved necessary to clear the trace of any threat from Japanese patrols and artillery fire, but on 28 January the first convoy from Ledo passed through on its way to Kunming, China. In honor of the man who had singlemindedly pursued this goal for so long, the Allies named the route the Stilwell Road.



*Aerial view of the first convoy to go from India to China over the reopened Burma Road. (DA photograph)*

## Analysis

Historians have found it fashionable to characterize the CBI as a forgotten theater, low in the Allied list of priorities. To be sure, the European, Mediterranean, and Pacific theaters all enjoyed greater access to scarce manpower and material than the CBI, which had to cope with an extended line of supply back to the United States. Only a few American combat troops served in China, Burma, or India. Yet one can hardly call the CBI an ignored theater. It occupied a prominent place in Allied councils, as Americans sought an early Allied commitment to reopening China's lifeline so that China could tie down massive numbers of Japanese troops and serve as a base for air, naval, and eventually amphibious operations against the Japanese home islands. The American media, with its romantic fascination with China and the Burma Road, followed the campaigns closely and kept its audience informed on Vinegar Joe Stilwell and Merrill's Marauders. Interest in the theater did drop after early 1944 as estimates of China's military capability declined, but Allied leaders continued to keep a close eye on developments in a region where they still felt they had much at stake.

For the American supply services, their performance in the CBI theater represented one of their finest hours. The tremendous distances, the difficult terrain, the inefficiencies in transport, and the complications of Indian politics presented formidable obstacles to efficient logistics. Nevertheless, by early 1944, American logisticians had developed an efficient supply system whose biggest problem was the time needed to ship material from the United States. The supply services expanded the port capacity of Karachi and Calcutta, enhanced the performance of India's antiquated railroad system through improved maintenance and scheduling, and developed techniques of air supply to support Chinese and American forces in the rugged terrain of North Burma. Despite the skepticism of the British and other observers, American engineers overcame the rugged mountains and rain forests of North Burma to complete the Stilwell Road which, joined to the old Burma Road, reopened the line to China. A tremendous feat of engineering, the Stilwell Road deservedly earned considerable applause.

Stilwell himself has received more mixed reviews. A fine tactician, he maneuvered his Chinese-American forces with considerable skill in the campaign to drive the Japanese from the Hukawng Valley, and he showed commendable boldness in the decision to strike for Myitkyina before the monsoon. In the end the gamble barely paid off, but it did succeed. Stilwell's record indicates that he would have likely performed

quite well as a division commander in Europe, the role that Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall had in mind for him before his appointment to the CBI theater. Unfortunately, most of Stilwell's responsibilities at the CBI emphasized administration and diplomacy, areas for which he possessed much less aptitude than for field command. He had little patience for paperwork, and he lacked the tact to reconcile the differing viewpoints of the nations involved in the CBI. Admittedly, in his three years in the theater, he probably held more concurrent positions than should ever have devolved on one man.

In Stilwell's record, though, perhaps no aspect has stirred greater controversy than his treatment of GALAHAD. After the Myitkyina campaign numerous reports appeared in the American media about a breakdown of morale in the unit. Marauders complained that theater headquarters seemed to view them as expendable, bastard stepchildren, not worthy of medals or promotions. Many also protested that recruiters had told them that GALAHAD would serve for only ninety days of combat before returning to the rear for rest and rehabilitation. It seems clear that Stilwell and his staff could have done more to make the Marauders feel welcome in the theater, whether through decorations or some other means of recognition. Here Stilwell's personality played a key role. As a man who viewed himself as a regular doughboy, he looked with displeasure on individuals who seemed to demand more than their fair share of attention. When Hunter asked Merrill why GALAHAD was not receiving more medals, Merrill replied, "Well, the boss is kind of funny about those things." Yet before criticizing Stilwell too harshly, one should take into consideration the importance he placed on reaching Myitkyina before the monsoon, GALAHAD's status as his one reliable unit, and his inability to relieve that unit while other equally exhausted nationalities continued to fight.

In the end, how valuable were Myitkyina and the Burma Road? The capture of the city and the reopening of the highway certainly made possible a vast expansion of the supply effort for China. By January 1945, however, few American leaders cherished any illusions about a major Chinese contribution to the defeat of Japan. In eight months the Japanese would surrender, but any American hopes that China would become a benign, democratic great power were soon dashed by the victory of the Communists over Chiang's American-equipped army in the Chinese revolution. Thus the reopening of the Burma Road had little effect on the eventual outcome of the war and even less on its aftermath. Nevertheless, as a story of human endurance under some of the worst conditions to face soldiers in wartime, it holds a special place in the annals of World War II and American military history.

## FURTHER READINGS

The three volumes on the China-Burma-India theater in the Army's official history of World War II provide a thorough, detailed narrative of the campaign in Burma. See Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Stilwell's Mission to China* (1953); Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems* (1956); and Romanus and Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in CBI* (1959). Charlton Ogburn, *The Marauders*, 2d ed. (1959), is a moving account of the theater's main American combat unit. For more on the Marauders, see *Merrill's Marauders* (1945), from the American Forces in Action Series, and Charles N. Hunter's bitter memoir *GALAHAD* (1963). See also John H. Randolph, *Marsmen in Burma* (1946), on the Mars Task Force, and William R. Peers and Dean Brellis, *Behind the Burma Road: The Story of America's Most Successful Guerrilla Force* (1963), on OSS Detachment 101. For more on Stilwell, see Barbara Tuchman's readable *Stilwell and the American Experience in China* (1971).

For more information on the U.S. Army in World War II, please visit the U.S. Army Center of Military History Web site ([www.history.army.mil](http://www.history.army.mil)).



