

AU/ACSC/0609K/97-03

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE 1<sup>ST</sup> AIR COMMANDO  
GROUP OPERATIONS IN THE CBI THEATER AUGUST 1943  
TO MAY 1944

A Research Paper

Presented To

The Research Department

Air Command and Staff College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements of ACSC

by

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March 1997

## Report Documentation Page

<b>Report Date</b> 01MAR1997	<b>Report Type</b> N/A	<b>Dates Covered (from... to)</b> -
<b>Title and Subtitle</b> Historical Analysis of the 1st Air Commando Group Operations in the CBI Theater August 1943 to May 1944	<b>Contract Number</b>	
	<b>Grant Number</b>	
	<b>Program Element Number</b>	
<b>Author(s)</b> Torres, John J.	<b>Project Number</b>	
	<b>Task Number</b>	
	<b>Work Unit Number</b>	
<b>Performing Organization Name(s) and Address(es)</b> Air Command and Staff College Maxwell AFB, AL 36112	<b>Performing Organization Report Number</b>	
<b>Sponsoring/Monitoring Agency Name(s) and Address(es)</b>	<b>Sponsor/Monitor's Acronym(s)</b>	
	<b>Sponsor/Monitor's Report Number(s)</b>	
<b>Distribution/Availability Statement</b> Approved for public release, distribution unlimited		
<b>Supplementary Notes</b>		
<b>Abstract</b>		
<b>Subject Terms</b>		
<b>Report Classification</b> unclassified	<b>Classification of this page</b> unclassified	
<b>Classification of Abstract</b> unclassified	<b>Limitation of Abstract</b> UU	
<b>Number of Pages</b> 57		

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## *Preface*

This project was very special to me since it involved learning about my “roots” as a US Air Force Special Operations airman. I feel that it is important to learn about the formative nature of one’s own business in order to better understand current philosophies, doctrine, and operations. This kind of insight could prove very valuable especially in today’s environment. I believe that the world today is in a state of flux. Since the end of the cold war, it has become very difficult to identify potential threats to our national security. Additionally, the nature of conflicts in which the US military finds itself has changed. As a result, US military doctrine has been forced to undergo revision in order to adapt and prepare for these and future crises. One doctrinal change has been the apparent shift towards more forces trained in special operations-type methodologies. This is the same track our special operations forefathers took when they organized the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group. They got it right then; are we just now learning their lessons?

This project was made possible by the guidance and assistance received from my research advisor. Dr. Muller’s expert tutelage focused me on the subject matter and put me in the right direction when hunting for resources. I would also like to thank the personnel at the Air Force Historical Research Agency for their assistance in locating the documents on which this project is based. Finally, I would like to thank my wife for her patience and endurance for the time I neglected tending to her needs in order to focus on the needs of this project.

### *Abstract*

This paper conducts an analysis of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group (ACG) and its operations in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater from August 1943 to May 1944. History lends credence to the fact that this small unorthodox group of airmen, envisioned from the simple idea of “what if” and fashioned in a mere few months time into a cohesive and viable fighting force, breathed life into the stagnant Allied effort of removing the Japanese from the China-Burma-India theater. The question is, how? How could such a small unit, which was forced upon the traditional military structure in the CBI theater, accomplish the seemingly impossible where others before had failed?

The author maintains that the success of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group was the result of key factors which when combined formed a “magic elixir” boosting the ailing Allied effort in this theater. Those key factors were strong leadership, efficient organization including the hiring of the “right” people, unit training, joint training to promote teamwork, and, tactics and innovation.

This analysis gathered supporting information from primary source documents stored at the USAF Historical Research Agency (USAFHRA) as well as utilizing secondary sources for background information. This paper looks at the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group from August 1943 through May 1944. It begins with a discussion of the events which gave rise to the need for the Air Commandos. Following is a discussion of the organization of the unit, deployment, preparations in-theater, and Operation THURSDAY

—the aerial invasion of Burma. Analysis of the reasons for success follows next. Finally, the paper closes with final thoughts on the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group and lessons learned.

The unit was broken apart following its successes through May 1944, never to fight again as an independent cohesive organization. The author surmises that the key ingredients to the “magic elixir” success of this fighting force were no longer present. Without those key factors, the unit was not to be. If it could be narrowed down to a single factor, the underlying key to the success of the Air Commandos was the effective leadership of individuals like General H. H. Arnold, Colonel Philip Cochran, Colonel John Alison, British Brigadier General Orde C. Wingate, and British Admiral Mountbatten. The strength of character and conviction of these individuals enabled an unorthodox organization to be superimposed on an orthodox system and make it work. Finally, many of the ways in which the military operates today—emphasis on joint doctrine, the establishment of US Special Operations Command, and the like—find their roots in the organization and operations of the First Air Commandos. The military was deaf to the Air Commando “lessons learned” for many years. It is ironic that the services have come full circle and now endorse many of their procedures in formalized doctrine.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group was born out of a simple need. That need was to support via light airplanes the evacuation and resupply requirements of British Brigadier General Orde C. Wingate and his Long Range Patrol (LRP) groups, or Chindits, as they were affectionately called.<sup>1</sup> Wingate's Chindits had previously attempted in 1943 to slow the Japanese "steamroller" as it made its way across Southeast Asia conquering all in its path. The Chindits had some successes, but their total efforts were thwarted due to lack of ample support made more difficult by the terrain and other circumstances. A second attempt would be successful, according to Wingate, if he was provided the necessary men, equipment, and support. Under current Allied leadership in Southeast Asia, though, he believed the required support for his second attempt was not forthcoming. Therefore, Wingate's only hope for a renewed effort came when he sold his ideas to his superiors in England, who in turn enlisted the support of the Americans.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of the First Air Commando Group was sired by General of the Army "Hap" Arnold and given life through the imaginations of Col. Philip D. Cochran and Col. John R. Alison. With a focus on the might and flexibility of airpower, they created a unique self-contained organization which employed airpower in a unique manner. Carrying the lethal firepower of both bombers and fighters combined with the logistical tentacles of a gamut



of transports, gliders, and light aircraft, this organization would reach deep behind enemy lines to do battle.

By landing ground forces well into the enemy's rear, for the first time in US history, airpower spearheaded and provided the backbone of an invasion. It was on the moonlit night of 5 March 1944 that this concept was successfully proven when Air Commando gliders landed a small contingent of specially trained soldiers 200 miles behind the Japanese defenses along the Indo-Burmese border on an obscure grass field they called Broadway. After these special soldiers secured this "beachhead" on the Japanese back porch, over 11,000 more specially trained troops were flown in over the course of the next few days. This single operation and the others which followed in the next month breathed life into this stagnant theater and for the first time gave the allies their chance for victory.

This is the story of how they got there. This is the story of why they were successful.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brigadier Wingate Memorandum to Chiefs of Staff Committee, Quebec Conference, 10 August 1943, pg. 3. From USAF Collection at USAFHRA. The term "Chindit" was used to describe a mythological beast which was half-lion and half-griffin. This lion-griffin beast was portrayed as a statue which guarded Burmese pagodas, and symbolized to General Wingate the unique cooperation required between ground and air forces. This name was given to Wingate's 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade in 1943. (Rolo, Charles J. *Wingate's Raiders*. London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1944, pg. 19.)

<sup>2</sup> Van Wagner. *The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group Any Place, Any Time, Any Where*, Military History Series 86-1. Air Command and Staff College. Maxwell AFB, AL, 1986, pp.18-26.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Background**

To set the stage for the creation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group, it is important to first understand the factors influencing the need for such an organization. These factors were the Japanese intentions in Burma, the British strategy for defense of Burma, and the British failure at stemming the Japanese advance.

#### **Japanese Intentions**

Japan was on a quest to expand its empire in Southeast Asia, and Burma was key to fulfilling this desire. Burma in and of itself could act as a wedge, a springboard, and a shield in support of Japanese operations. As a wedge, Burma's deep mountains created a natural barrier to conclusively seal off China and starve her into submission. If the flow of munitions, equipment, and provisions could be stopped, Japanese conquest of China would be ensured. But Japanese thirst did not stop there. Greater conquests lay ahead in India. With Burma secured, a natural springboard was created from which to launch operations into India. The prize in India may have been even greater than the prize in China itself, for India offered a burgeoning industrial capability in steel and iron, arms and munitions, and chemical industries.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in line with the Japanese grand strategic vision, the conquest of Burma and India would bring the Nippon empire one step closer to

linking up with a planned German push into Persia. “Burma was the way to people, industry, and a possible strategic union; indeed the very idea of Burma brought a gleam of covetousness to the eyes of the Japanese generals.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, Japanese-occupied Burma would act like a shield to protect the rest of its Far Eastern empire from any Allied infringement. The new Japanese possessions of the Philippines, French Indochina, Thailand, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies would be well distanced from Allied encroachment with Burma under her control.<sup>3</sup>

### **British Strategy and Failures**

The British defensive scheme which the Japanese had to overcome was comprised of three factors:

1. The impact of Burma’s rugged geography,
2. The effect of Burmese climatic conditions, and
3. The preparedness of Burma’s defense.<sup>4</sup>

Individually these factors would pose no problem for the Japanese war machine, but collectively, the British thought they had a viable defensive strategy.

First, the Burmese topography greatly limited operations into the country mainly to north-south traversing utilizing the meager road, railway, and waterway systems. Additionally, such topographical conditions offered numerous chokepoints - the confluence of the rivers, roads, and railroads—which created the defensive strength of Burma. The British naturally felt an aggressor could be held at bay by a relatively small force taking advantage of the natural terrain and contours of the land.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the British felt they had another inherent advantage, the Burmese monsoon season. This recurring seasonal phenomenon lasted from mid-May to late October of each year.

During this season, rainfalls varied from about 45 inches in the dry zone of North Central Burma, 80 inches in the hills, 100 inches in the Irrawaddy Delta, up to 200 inches in the area of Rangoon.<sup>6</sup> In short, military operations were limited to the dry season, for during the monsoon season, troops would find themselves mired in ankle deep muddy quagmires with greatly decreased operational mobility. The British figured if they could keep the Japanese advance at bay long enough with a relatively small defensive holding force, the monsoon season would finish the job. Finally, the British thought they would have ample time to prepare a viable country defense which was non-existent at the close of 1941. The Japanese advance would have to overcome the regional alliance structure of India, Thailand, Indochina, and Singapore first before Burma lay naked for the taking.<sup>7</sup> The alliance would give the British the time they needed, if needed, for defense preparations.

In short, the British defense plan failed. The straightforward Japanese offensive plan, on the other hand, swiftly overcame the Burmese defenders and sent them reeling and scampering out of country in a disorganized frenzy. First, they attacked the weakest link in the defense plan, the regional alliance structure. Next, they established air superiority over Burma, and finally, they raced against the oncoming monsoon season to remove the Allied forces permanently from the area. In December 1941, the Nippon juggernaut rolled through Thailand after only eight hours of fighting.<sup>8</sup> Singapore fell next on 15 February 1942 after only 70 days of fighting, and finally, by mid-May 1942, the Japanese had complete control of Burma. Additionally, she had cut the overland road to China, fortified her land conquests to the east of Burma, and now began planning for her next phase into India.<sup>9</sup>

## **Analysis of British Failure**

Sun Tzu had said, “if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.”<sup>10</sup> In short the British failure in Burma can directly be attributed to their lack of understanding of their enemy. The Japanese resolve for conquest of South East Asia should have been readily apparent after the successful attacks on Pearl Harbor and the conquest of China. The British underestimated this resolve. Further, the British defense plan was flawed in its assumptions and design. It hinged on a frail regional alliance structure which was greatly exacerbated by the obvious lack of cooperation and coordination amongst the Chinese forces under General Chiang Kai Shek. In its design, the plan did evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the geographic and climatic conditions of the country, but failed in the analysis when assuming the Japanese would draw the same conclusions. This “mirror imaging” attitude led the British Commanders to conclude in error that the Japanese forces would be road, rail, or river-bound as were the British coalition forces. Instead, the Nippon forces realized the advantage of the bush. By dividing their forces into small groups, they moved through the jungle bypassing British troop movements and getting behind British lines. Further, some of the British forces were improperly trained for the environment in which they were fighting. British MGen William J. Slim’s command had been trained for mechanized desert warfare rather than jungle warfare. Finally, the allied forces shared no significant aerial support. The Japanese dominated the skies over Burma.<sup>11</sup>

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Moraes, F. R. and Stimson, Robert. *Introduction to India*. London: Oxford University Press, 1946, pp. 52-59.

## Notes

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Van Wagner, pg. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Van Wagner, pg. 4.

<sup>4</sup> British Information Service. *Victory in Burma*. New York: British Government, 1945. 168.7097-13, in Ronald F. Kennedy Collection, USAFHRA, pp. 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Burma's geography resembles that of a waterfall. All of its natural elements parallel each other and run from north to south including the mountains, rivers, valleys, central plains, roads, and even railroads. As a result, travel in these two cardinal directions is relatively easy, but travel east and west is slow, somewhat trying, if not impossible in many places. This difficulty is greatly enhanced by an inadequate east-west road structure snaking through sudden and irregular mountains. Moreover, these mountains isolate one valley from another and are covered in heavy jungle canopy. Further, hidden underneath this canopy were malaria-carrying mosquitoes, leeches, and an abundance of diseases (Mende, Tibor. *South-east Asia between Two Worlds*. London: Turnstile Press, 1955, pg. 141). Finally, Burma possesses two major and three smaller river systems. The largest is the Irrawaddy which flows swiftly down the center of the country and is joined from the northwest by the mammoth Chindwin, the next largest river in size. Together with the smaller rivers, these two rivers form over 15,000 miles of navigable waterways flowing to the near geographic center of the country (Burma Research Society. *Burma Facts and Figures*. London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1946, pg. 28). Given the nature of Burma's geography, it was easy to see how the British would conclude an enemy would have to channel their invasion in accordance with the confluence of the land.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Burma Research Society, pg. 5.

<sup>7</sup> British Air Ministry. *Operations in Burma, 15 Dec 1941 - 20 May 1942*. 512.952, in the USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pp. 1667-1668.

<sup>8</sup> Bateson, Charles. *The War With Japan; A Concise History*. Hong Kong: Michigan State University Press, 1968, pp.114-116.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114-116.

<sup>10</sup> Chaliand, *The Art of War in World History*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, pg. 225.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Van Wagner, pg. 9.

## Chapter 3

### Alternatives

*We got a hell of a beating . We got run out of Burma and it's humiliating as hell. I think we ought to find out what caused it and go back and retake it.*

—LtGen Joseph W. Stilwell<sup>1</sup>

In order to stem the Japanese advance and take back Burma, the Allied forces had to beat the Japanese at their own game. The successful accomplishment of such an undertaking necessitated a bold and unprecedented plan. This plan had to overcome the shortcomings of the theater including poor logistics (due to the CBI theater's low priority), improper training, inappropriate tactics, and lack of sufficient air support.

#### Wingate's Incomplete Solution

Then Colonel Orde C. Wingate, a former artillery officer, arrived in India during the ignominious retreat of British forces from Burma. He immediately began studying the training and tactics of the Japanese, the religion and culture of both Burma and Japan, and the topography and climate of Burma. Wingate discovered that the combination of Burmese topography and Japanese perimeter defense could not be assaulted head on; however, the long and thin Japanese logistics lines leading to the rear were prime targets. He theorized that small highly mobile long-range-penetration (LRP) groups trained in

unorthodox jungle and guerrilla-type warfare, utilizing hit-and-run tactics, could harass the Japanese deep behind their forward lines. For obvious reasons, these troops would need continual aerial resupply, and, since they traveled light, aerial firepower would be their main source of artillery. To be effective, these units needed to synchronize their operations with a larger main Allied expedition. Successful LRP operations would create widespread confusion and uncertainty behind the Japanese forward areas, hopefully leading to the progressive misdirection and weakening of the Japanese main forces.<sup>2</sup> The main Allied offensive would then be poised to finish the job.

The theater command endorsed the Wingate plan and began coordinating with the Chinese forces who were tasked to lead the main offensive. As the date to commence the operation drew nearer, however, it became apparent that the primary prerequisite of a coordinated main offensive would not be forthcoming—Chiang Kai Shek withdrew his pledge of forces. Wingate was distraught but unbeaten. Regardless, he requested and received permission to employ the Chindits in order to test his plan.<sup>3</sup>

Operation LONGCLOTH was launched in February 1943 with Wingate and his columns slowly marching forward from Imphal, Burma, with pack mules and bullock carts carrying their supplies. The expedition continued until early June and was hailed as an overall success, for it proved many of the LRP concepts. First, it demonstrated that a small force could wreak major havoc out of proportion with its size. As an example, Chindit raids successfully blew up over 75 sections of railroad with little loss of personnel.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, their surprise and mobility confused the Japanese for nearly two months.



But the expedition failed in many other key areas. First, the LRP units were supposed to harass the Japanese while they were busy dealing with a larger allied force. Since this was not the case, the Japanese were able to concentrate all of their forces against the Chindits. Second, the LRP groups required responsive aerial resupply, especially for evacuation of the wounded. When this was not forthcoming, the morale of the troops was greatly reduced, especially for those wounded who were left behind when the Chindits were forced to evacuate on-foot back to India.<sup>5</sup> Further, successful air support of ground operations required local air superiority. This was not forthcoming because the Japanese dominated the skies. Finally, air strikes against identified enemy ground targets fell well short of being sufficient in quantity and responsiveness to meet the needs of the ground units.<sup>6</sup>

The Wingate expedition aroused great interest with Prime Minister Winston Churchill who was looking for a fresh plan of attack in Burma and an innovative commander to lead the operation. Churchill called Wingate to London for discussions and subsequently had Wingate accompany him to the QUADRANT conference in Quebec, Canada, in August of 1943. There, Wingate was able to sell his plan for renewed Burma operations to President Roosevelt.<sup>7</sup> Wingate's plan called for the formation of six LRP groups to disrupt Japanese communications and rear installations in Burma during the forthcoming 1943-44 dry season. Additionally, RAF Air Liaisons attached to these groups would direct fighters and bombers to targets undetectable by air.<sup>8</sup> Three of the groups would be held in reserve while the other three engaged in combat for 12 weeks before relief.<sup>9</sup> Once again, these LRP operations had to be an essential part of a larger main offensive in order to successfully eradicate the enemy from Burma. Roosevelt was pleased with the plan, for he

too was looking for a way to breath new life into operations in the CBI theater. He subsequently assigned General Henry “Hap” Arnold to confer with General Wingate to provide the necessary assistance.

### **Hap Arnold’s Solution**

Wingate’s proposal included a request for various air forces. The plan called for 12 to 20 C-47 Skytrains for airdrop operations, an allotment of one bomber squadron per LRP group for close air support and strategic bombing, and a light transport plane force to help evacuate wounded men from the field. These light aircraft needed to be capable of landing and taking off in restricted spaces.<sup>10</sup> The British could provide the bombers, but American assistance was needed with the light planes and the C-47s.

General Arnold saw in this plan more than just a simple request for light airplanes. He determined that here was an opportunity to increase the combat role of his Air Force, and in so doing, show the true capabilities of air power. He too wanted to re-energize the CBI theater, for he felt “the previous campaigns had sapped the will of the British ground troops.”<sup>11</sup> Being an airpower enthusiast in his own right, Arnold decided that what Wingate needed was an new air organization with a new way of thinking, which cut across parochial lines and was solely dedicated to providing the necessary support for his operations.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group**

Arnold quickly got to work following the Quebec conference. His first order of business was to locate and hire the right leader(s) to organize and run the proposed outfit. Arnold knew the success of this unit depended on his selection of a commander who was

“aggressive, imaginative, and endowed with organizational talent of a high order.”<sup>12</sup> His choice had to share a similar vision and understanding of airpower and what it could bring to the fight if properly employed. Arnold found the characteristics of his new commander in two men, LtCol Philip G. Cochran and LtCol John R. Alison. Both were distinguished fighter pilots. Cochran had shown remarkable leadership while serving as an airman in North Africa, and, Alison had fought brilliantly in China as a member of the Flying Tigers under US Army Major General Claire L. Chennault. The individual charisma and complementary abilities of each of these two officers, as illustrated by their colorful careers, so impressed Arnold, he selected both for the job. Cochran became the commander and Alison his deputy. Then he gave the men their marching orders and sent them off to begin organizing the unit.<sup>13</sup>

They immediately set up shop in a Washington DC hotel and ambitiously began organizing. Their immediate task was to select the right men to help them. So as not to plan in a void, Cochran was sent to England to confer with General Wingate. Wingate explained in detail all of his requirements, and, in return, Cochran assured Wingate that his new Air Commando organization would support the Chindits with any type of aircraft the British Brigadier wanted. Upon his return to Washington, Cochran passed along Wingate’s concerns to Alison, especially the timetable for planned operations to begin in mid-February 1944 and be completed by mid-May 1944 before the next Burmese monsoon season. The original plans from the Quebec conference had called for a supporting air force of light planes to aid General Wingate in the supply (and resupply) of his troops and the evacuation of his wounded for a period of about six months. In their visionary minds, Cochran and Alison would provide that type support and more. They

saw the USAAF actually spearheading General Wingate's entire operation. Individually and collectively, both concluded that a totally new organization was needed to accomplish this unprecedented goal.<sup>14</sup>

Cutting across parochial lines, this organization needed to be a fully integrated and self-contained fighting unit, able to accomplish the entire mission, not just one part of it. Therefore, their organization would be comprised of gliders, transports, fighters, as well as the light planes as specified by Arnold. Both Cochran and Allison independently thought of using gliders in the operation. Cochran saw the gliders as a means to fly in heavy artillery for Wingate's forces into areas of the jungle inaccessible to larger type transports. Alison, meanwhile, because of his past flying experience in the CBI theater, saw the gliders as a means to transport Wingate's men into Burma and move them around in the jungle. Having flown over the country on many occasions, he was aware of the difficulties of trying to move large forces around in such dense and inhospitable terrain. The transports would provide the aerial resupply and towing of the gliders. Both men proposed the use of fighters to provide Wingate's force with more protection—Alison had remembered on his last tour in-theater that this area was short of fighters. Finally, Cochran had suggested including bombers to round out the force; however, he had been informed by General Wingate that the Royal Air Force promised to provide that capability.<sup>15</sup>

In the span of less than three weeks, the proposal for the new unit was forwarded to Arnold who passed the recommendations for men and equipment to General Marshall on 13 September 1943. Marshall approved the air unit including 87 officers, 436 enlisted men, and the following aircraft:<sup>16</sup>

13 C-47 transports

12 C-64 transports

100 CG-4 gliders (later increased to 150)

6 YR-4 helicopters (later reduced to 4)

30 P-47 fighters (later changed to P-51s)

In this same memo, Arnold outlined the purpose of this unit to be four-fold:<sup>17</sup>

- a. To facilitate the forward movement of the Wingate columns.
- b. To facilitate the supply and evacuation of the columns.
- c. To provide a small air covering and striking force.
- d. To acquire air experience under the conditions expected to be encountered.

Dubbed Project 9 at this time for security reasons, the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group was born. The next task was to hire the right people, organize, equip, train, and move to the theater before the end of the year. To accomplish such an undertaking, they first enlisted the aide of a trusted personality at the Pentagon who had been a former squash partner of Cochran's to act as administrative assistant (to handle the paperwork).<sup>18</sup> The remainder of the force were all volunteers selected for their eagerness to fight, their ability to maximize the equipment at their disposal, and in short, their expertise. Cochran and Alison attempted to obtain specialists to head the various sections in the unit, but gave consideration to both personality as well as technical ability. Additionally, if at all possible, the section leaders were selected from officers with previous combat duty. Bottom line, they hired people they knew and trusted to be section leaders.<sup>19</sup>

Cochran, Alison, and the section leaders flew to bases all over the country to locate the right volunteers to fill the rest of the unit. Their sales pitch for recruits was quite

simple: A new unit was being formed to go on a mysterious overseas venture which promised lots of excitement, hard work, and combat action. Moreover, this unit would be streamlined to the absolute minimum; therefore, recruits had to be the best and brightest experts in their field, and must be willing to go above and beyond to complete a mission which would last for a period of approximately 6 months. The response to their recruiting campaign was overwhelming. As men were selected, they in turn recommended other men whom they had served with and trusted.<sup>20</sup> In fact, commanders at many bases dreaded the arrival of the Air Commando leaders for it meant that they might be losing some their best men.<sup>21</sup>

With the clout of the General of the Army, in the span of less than a month, Cochran and Alison had the majority of their force gathered together at Goldsboro, North Carolina, training and developing the required skills for their theater of operations. Timing for their operation became even more critical when in late October, they received new orders moving up their arrival time in-theater by almost a month.<sup>22</sup> To facilitate the unit's movement, Cochran and a nucleus of the group left for India 28 October, with the rest of the men and equipment to follow by 1 December.<sup>23</sup>

By mid-November 1943, seventy-five percent of the unit had arrived in India. A temporary headquarters was set up at Malir Airfield near Karachi. Here unit personnel began their indoctrination and ground training. Their days started early with physical training before breakfast followed by lecture periods on a variety of subjects including jungle terrain, health care in tropical climates, communications procedures, weapons and pyrotechnics familiarization, and intelligence briefings from British Intelligence officers.<sup>24</sup>

Equipment, supplies, and aircraft began arriving at both Karachi and Calcutta. All of the Project 9 aircraft were sent to Karachi with the exception of the gliders which were sent to Calcutta. The glider section personnel established an assembly area at Barrackpore Field, a British air base near Calcutta. Due to the lack of sufficient enlisted personnel in-theater for support operations, all unit members, both officers and enlisted alike, assisted in assembly and build-up operations. Additionally, with the confusion and inadequacies in the logistics system in-theater, supplies were oftentimes misdirected to other locations. Project 9 personnel were dispatched all over India, hunting down and reacquiring their unit stockage.<sup>25</sup> In general, they were successful in their endeavors, and the unit began to take shape.<sup>26</sup>

While the battle to physically establish the unit was taking place, Colonels Cochran and Alison were fighting another battle of their own, “the Battle of Delhi”. This was a battle of ideas. Project 9 had the misfortune of not being included in any considered plan of operations for the theater due to the secrecy surrounding the organization as well as the lack of understanding of the unit’s role and capabilities. Thanks to the high priority placed on the project from its inception and the smooth salesmanship tactics of Colonel Cochran, the unit was able to get moving forward in the face of inertia and opposition—a natural occurrence when a plan is outside the ordered sphere of traditional military operations. It would prove to be a constant uphill battle, though, to retain the unit’s identity until it reached the front lines and proved its worth in combat.<sup>27</sup>

The tempo of activities accelerated for this young organization, now dubbed the 5318 Provisional Air Unit.<sup>28</sup> Operations were moved to the two British forward bases of Hailakandi and Lalaghat in January 1944. The fighters, bombers, light planes, and the

headquarters were located at Hailakandi while the transports and gliders set up shop at Lalaghat. During the period of 1 January to 30 January, all sections participated in grueling unit training exercises to smooth out all the rough edges. Moreover, joint exercises and capabilities demonstrations were initiated with General Wingate's Special Forces. Before Wingate could trust Cochran's outfit, he had to know and understand their capabilities and the extent of their commitment to his forces. The 5318<sup>th</sup> went right to work demonstrating an array of tactics they specifically developed to support Wingate's forces operating in the difficult Burmese terrain. These tactics included glider tow and pick-up operations, aerial resupply and evacuation from austere locations, and, close air support and bombing—both P-51s and B-25s performed these operations.<sup>29</sup> (See Appendix A for more detailed information on Air Commando tactics and innovation.)

Finally, in February 1944, pre-invasion operations started against the Japanese in Burma. The purpose and design of these operations were to “cripple the enemy's supply and communication effort and to make such raids as would tend to make the enemy believe that all our effort was being expended in support of IV Corps.”<sup>30</sup> This deception campaign was necessary in order to soften up the Japanese and throw them off from the Allies' true purpose. The fighters and bombers ranged deep into Burma hitting bridges, warehouses, locomotives, and Japanese communication lines. The fighters and bombers also began conducting reconnaissance and photo missions, locating potential landing zones for the invasion force and identifying enemy targets for future bombing operations. The transports and gliders continued to hone their skills and prepare for the D-day invasion.<sup>31</sup> The flying Sergeants and their light planes were called into action to evacuate sick and wounded men from the front lines.<sup>32</sup> Between 10 February and 6 March alone, they flew



more than 700 wounded men from the battle area back to safe harbor where they could receive treatment.<sup>33</sup>

## **Operation THURSDAY**

THURSDAY was the code name given to the planned aerial invasion of Burma by General Wingate. The battle plan called for Air Commando C-47 transports to tow heavy gliders carrying portions of the 77 and 111 Brigades of Wingate's 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Division to selected areas behind the Japanese lines in northwest Burma.<sup>34</sup> Upon landing, the first troops in would establish a perimeter guard while airborne engineers equipped with bulldozers, scrapers, and other engineering equipment, built a landing strip suitable for C-47 size aircraft. Once complete, C-47s from the Troop Carrier Command would bring in the rest of the forces, anti-aircraft guns, and other field equipment. The field would be protected from overhead by fighter cover while the follow-on transports were landing and taking off. Once all forces had been inserted, the field would be used as a forwarding resupply area for the LRPs. Additionally, the fighters could use the field as a forward base for deeper offensive operations and as a divert base for bad weather.<sup>35</sup>

Cooperating with the Air Commandos and the Chindits in this project were the following other British and American forces: the 14<sup>th</sup> British Army, under the command of Lt. Gen. W. J. Slim; the Troop Carrier Command of Eastern Air Force Command, under the command of Brig. Gen. William D. Old; and, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tactical Air Force, also of Eastern Air Force Command, under the direction of Air Marshall Sir John Baldwin. All would have to work together in a cooperative effort in order for THURSDAY to be successful.<sup>36</sup>

The day of 5 March was set as D-day. General Wingate had selected two sites for insertion of his forces, Broadway and Piccadilly, named after the streets bearing the same names in the US and Calcutta, respectively - in keeping with the spirit of the joint US-British effort. Half the force would be inserted at each field. The weather proved suitable and Air Marshall Baldwin gave the go-ahead to commence operations. The first takeoff was scheduled for 1740 hours, just before dusk. On a hunch, Cochran ordered a last minute photo reconnaissance of the two fields to ascertain their condition. Fifteen minutes prior to first launch, Cochran's worst fears were imagined. The photos showed Piccadilly hopelessly obstructed. Large tree trunks had been scattered over all parts of the field. It was completely unusable. Broadway, on the other hand, still remained clear. The question now was whether or not the operation had been compromised by the Japanese. A discussion ensued; however, in the end, the decision was made to launch all planes to Broadway. Cochran quickly gathered up the crews briefed to fly to Piccadilly and explained the new plan opening with, "Say fellers, we've got a better place to go to."<sup>37</sup>

The first C-47 with two heavily laden gliders in-tow took off at 1812 hours. Others followed in five and ten minute intervals until twenty-six transports in double tow were airborne from the field at Lalaghat. This first wave encountered trouble early on as they began their airborne trek to Broadway 200 miles behind enemy lines. The first problem was the difficulty all aircraft were having making the climb to altitude, indicative of very overweight gliders in-tow. Second, passing over the mountains, many gliders began surging and their tow ropes snapped. Ten gliders were forced on their own due to this cause. However, as if part of the actual plan, some of the gliders inadvertently landed in enemy territory near Japanese enclaves, creating the illusion that the Allies were attacking

on multiple fronts. “The tactical advantage that must have resulted from the enemy being confused and bewildered at the idea of striking forces at ten different places in his rear was tremendous and gave impetus to the operation’s success.”<sup>38</sup>

The first tow plane arrived over Broadway just before midnight and cut loose its two gliders. They both landed on the pitch black grassy surface of Broadway without incident. Colonel Alison piloted the second glider. All personnel quickly fanned out to secure the area and set up airfield operations. Shortly after, the next gliders began landing. Only then was it discovered that the surface of the field was not as smooth as it had first appeared. In fact, there were many logs hidden in the tall grass and deep log trenches lacing the field. Alison’s worst nightmare was then realized. As gliders were touching down, their undercarriages were being ripped off immobilizing them in-place. The gliders that followed crashed into the preceding gliders. Alison and the airfield crew frantically ran all over the field reconfiguring the field lights in order to bring in the gliders in the best possible fashion, trying to minimize the ensuing chaos. In the meantime, the radio crew worked feverishly assembling the radio to call back and tell Cochran to dispatch no further aircraft. But the call came late. The second wave was already airborne. Luckily, all but one of the transports was recalled. Of the one that made it over Broadway, its glider made the landing miraculously without incident.

The field looked like a war zone in the morning. Aircraft wreckage was strewn everywhere; however, the Airborne Engineers, their bulldozers, and all other able bodies expediently went to work filling in trenches and smoothing the surface to prepare Broadway for follow-on transport operations. What on the surface had appeared as a catastrophic failure instead became a successful mission when the first of the follow-on C-

47s landed on a newly completed 3000 x 500 foot runway a mere 24 hours after the first glider had touched down the previous night. In total, of 54 gliders dispatched that night and not recalled, 37 landed at Broadway. Eight landed west of the Chindwin River in friendly territory, while nine landed on the east side in enemy territory. Only thirty men were killed and thirty three injured in the first night's operations. Almost all gliders had been damaged or destroyed. However, no enemy action had been encountered; and, 539 men, 29,972 pounds of equipment including three bulldozers and airfield lighting apparatus, and three pack mules had been successfully inserted behind Japanese lines.<sup>39</sup>

In order to relieve congestion at Broadway, another field was identified and brought into operation twenty miles to the southeast. On the night of 6 March, in a repeat of the previous night's tactics, 12 gliders in single tow were flown to Chowringhee—named for Calcutta's main street. Eleven gliders made successful landings with 183 personnel and 2,400 pounds of stores. Once again, the Airborne Engineers diligently went to work preparing the field for follow-on transport operations.<sup>40</sup> By the night of 7 March, Troop Carrier Command C-47s were landing and departing from Chowringhee. By D + 5 days, all of Wingate's forces had been airlifted into Burma via Broadway and Chowringhee.<sup>41</sup> The brigades split up into 26 columns of 400 men each and moved out for ground operations. They would continue to be supported from the air while in-country.<sup>42</sup>

The Air Commando glider section completed a total of 14 aerial insertion missions by the time the monsoon season arrived in mid-May 1944. By and large, the brunt of their contribution was completed in the first weeks of the whole operation. A lot of fighting remained, though, and, from then on the majority of Air Commando operations became day-to-day support of the Wingate expedition. The fighters and bombers provided close

air support, while the light planes conducted evacuation and resupply. In concert with 3<sup>rd</sup> Tactical Air Command, the fighters and bombers made additional contributions in the form of deep bombing and strafing missions of enemy airfields, aircraft, locomotives, warehouses, communications lines, and the like.

The Air Commandos completed their last combat operation on 20 May 1944. By this time, it was apparent to all that the Air Commandos were exhausted. After all, they had operated long hours under the intense strain of combat for the last three months without a break. The oncoming monsoon season brought with it a welcome break and a much needed rest. With the exception of the light plane force, all Air Commando operations were transferred to the rear. The light plane force was relocated to another area to continue support operations of ground forces in-theater.<sup>43</sup>

In the end, given the short amount of time of actual combat operations, the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group achieved an impressive record. The light planes were the most impressive. Estimates of total combat sorties vary from 5,000 to 8,000 (exact figures are not available), with number of casualties evacuated exceeding 2,000, and zero aircraft losses due to enemy shootdown. The fighters and bombers destroyed 90 aircraft in the air or on the ground with a loss of only six of their own.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the gliders, in conjunction with Troop Carrier Command transports inserted behind enemy lines over 12,000 fighting troops, 2,000 mules, and all their equipment.<sup>45</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, Van Wagner, pg. 11.

<sup>2</sup> AC/AS, Plans. 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Force and Combat Cargo Groups organization and redeployment correspondence and memoranda, 1943-45, pg. 1. 145.81-170, in USAF Collection, USAFHRA.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Van Wagner, pg. 20.

## Notes

<sup>4</sup> Chinnery. *Any Time Any Place*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1994, pp. 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> King. *The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group of World War II: An Historical Perspective*. Air University. Air Command and Staff College. Research study, pg. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Brigadier Wingate Memorandum to Chiefs of Staff Committee, pg. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Brigadier Wingate Memorandum to Chiefs of Staff Committee, pg. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Brigadier Wingate Memorandum to Chiefs of Staff Committee, pg. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Van Wagner, pg. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, H. H. "The Aerial Invasion of Burma," *The National Geographic Magazine*, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 2, August 1944, pg. 129.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 130.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, King, pg. 26.

<sup>15</sup> This promise was later rescinded by the RAF. As a result, the Air Commandos had to procure 12 B-25s after reaching India. (Message from Stratemyer to Arnold, 7 January 1944. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, in the USAF Collection, USAFHRA; Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, History of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group, September 1943 - August 1945. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pg. 3; Memorandum from Alison to Arnold, 21 January 1944, "History, Status and Immediate Requirements of First Air Commando Force," pg. 2.)

<sup>16</sup> Memorandum from Arnold to Marshall, 13 September 1943. Subject: Air Task Force Wingate, pg. 2. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas, Lowell. *Back to Mandalay*. New York: The Greystone Press, 1951, pg. 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, King, pg.29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pg. 1.

<sup>21</sup> An amusing incident which illustrates the fear created in the minds of many unit commanders by the Air Commando recruiting campaign was when Captain Jacob B. Sartz, second-in-command of the C-47 section, was flying to various Training Command fields looking for pilots and crews for his section. During his trip, after already interviewing and "stealing" some valuable personnel from several commands, Sartz landed at another Training Command field. Having barely parked his aircraft, Sartz was immediately notified that the field's commanding officer desired Sartz to take his aircraft and depart immediately and that no prospective pilots were to be interviewed by him or anyone else. (Unit History: 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group. History of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group, September 1943 - August 1945. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pg. 1.)

<sup>22</sup> Chronological History of Project 9 (Cochran), 17 August 1943 - 19 May 1944. 145-81-170, in the USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pg. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pg. 2.

## Notes

<sup>24</sup> JICA/CBI Report 1449, 1 April 1944, Appendix B, pg. 7; Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pg. 2.

<sup>25</sup>The CBI theater was notoriously short on supplies, due to its perceived lack of importance in the “big picture” scheme of the second world war. It was not unusual for needed equipment and supplies to be misdirected from one unit only to show up in another unit with the same requirement.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pg. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Memorandum for General Giles, April 10, 1944. Subject: Summary of Operations of First Air Commando Group, pg. 1. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA; Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pg. 3.

<sup>28</sup>Name change from Project 9 to 5318 Provisional Air Unit took place just prior to the close of the year, 1943. (Unit History of the First Air Commando Force. History of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group, September 1943 - August 1945. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pg. 3.)

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pp. 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pg. 4.

<sup>31</sup>The first glider mission was actually undertaken the end of February when a single glider loaded with 13 special British troops landed on the east side of the Chindwin River on a secret reconnaissance mission. The mission was a success even though the glider was damaged and several personnel were slightly injured. (Sciutti. “The First Air Commando Group August 1943-May 1944.” *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*. Vol. 13, No. 2, Fall 1968, pg. 181.)

<sup>32</sup>Since light planes for evacuation and resupply were the only support originally requested, it is important to understand the significance of this support, that is, the impact on ground operations, and the difficulty and danger associated with each flight. Quoting from the official records of the Light Airplane Section:

The job of these men and planes was to evacuate the wounded men who could not often raise hope to exist. The flights commenced at a base 10 miles from the unstable “front line” and took our men to little strips cut out of the jungle where the enemy mortar shells *gently* lobbed over their heads and exploded in bursts of fury all around them. Putting their ships down in these so called strips, they were met by men who were slapping the Japs back to their ancestors. With the prop still ticking over, a man with a smile on his face and his guts blown out was tucked in the rear seat of the plane or in the stretcher if necessary and flown a short distance at tree top level [in broad daylight, oftentimes with no air cover] to the base where they could be taken in transports to rear hospitals. British Tommies, West Africans, and Gurka troops were evacuated from this battle area and as they were delivered to the doctors and nurses, they humbly thanked the American lads who had saved their lives. The Column Commanders and Advanced Party leaders noted and remarked to some of our boys about *the increased inspiration and higher morale since they knew the “Doodle Bugs” from the states were handling their men* [italics added]. They knew they would not be left to die if wounded but carried out in a short

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time to a hospital. (Unit History of the First Air Commando Force. History of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group, September 1943-August 1945. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pg. 4.)

<sup>33</sup> “Airborne Invasion of Burma Resulted from Quebec Conference.” War Department Press Release 1:00 PM, EWT, Monday April 24, 1944, pg. 4. USAF Collection, USAFHRA; Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, Pg. 4.

<sup>34</sup> General Wingate would task the Air Commandos to fly in certain areas of Burma, locate, and photograph potential landing sites. He would review the photos and then personally select the sites he felt best suited his needs. (“Airborne Invasion of Burma Resulted from Quebec Conference.” War Department Press Release 1:00 PM, EWT, Monday April 24, 1944, pg. 5.)

<sup>35</sup> First Air Commando Force Invasion of Burma. Extracts and summaries from JICA/CBI Report No. 1448, pg. 2. A-CMDO-1-SU-RE, in the USAF Collection, USAFHRA; Arnold, “The Aerial Invasion of Burma,” pp. 131-132.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, First Air Commando Force Invasion of Burma, pg. 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, King, pg. 119.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pg. 8.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, First Air Commando Force Invasion of Burma, pp. 3-4; Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pp. 7-8; “Airborne Invasion of Burma Resulted from Quebec Conference,” pp. 6-9.

<sup>40</sup> As with all Air Commandos, the Airborne Engineers displayed exemplary dedication to duty and perseverance in the conduct of their operations. The build up of Chouwinghee was illustrative of their efforts. Initially, the airfield preparation was made more difficult by the loss of the only bulldozer delivered for it was loaded in the only glider which crashed. Another was flown over from Broadway with driver. “Fatty, the dozer driver, who had been operating his machine for 42 hours, finally collapsed while his machine continued to roll on and he was pulled off safely.” (Unit History of the First Air Commando Force. History of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group, September 1943 - August 1945. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pg. 9.)

<sup>41</sup> Chouwinghee was evacuated on 10 March for it had served its purpose. Broadway was reinforced as a stronghold and remained the Allies main forward resupply and staging area. As a side note, the Japanese finally located Chouwinghee on 12 March. They delivered a bombing and strafing attack on abandoned gliders. (Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pp. 10-11.)

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, First Air Commando Force Invasion of Burma, pp. 4.

<sup>43</sup> JICA/CBI Report No. 3137, 30 May 1944, pp.4-6.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, JICA/CBI Report No. 3137, pg. 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, Memorandum for General Giles, April 10, 1944, pg. 3.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Analysis: Keys to Success**

The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group did successfully prove its worth with Operation THURSDAY. There are a variety of reasons which contributed to this success. These reasons are effective leadership, efficient organization, realistic unit training, joint training, and, tactics and innovation.

#### **Leadership**

To begin, can a single leader in an organization truly determine the ultimate success of that organization? Maybe, if that one leader is effective in his job and focused on the assigned mission. In turn, that person must be supported from above by effective senior leaders who provide backing for that same mission. Finally, this single leader must be supported from below with the right people focused on accomplishing the mission. As difficult as it may be to obtain a synergistic effect from these various players, that was exactly the case in the organization of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group.

Five key personalities at various leadership levels were instrumental in the ultimate success of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group. The first was General Wingate, who as commander of the Chindits, launched the bold and daring LRP operation which captured the hearts of the British leaders and American President. His was the original requirement

which was doable if the right kind of help was forthcoming. His request for support from the Americans was timely, for both President Roosevelt and General Arnold were looking for an “in” to the CBI theater. Having been afforded the support, Wingate used his persuasiveness and determination to keep all players focused on the mission even in the face of opposition and doubt amongst the theater staff. He was respected by all, for he could articulate himself eloquently at the strategic level to garner support, yet was right there in the midst of the action at the tactical level leading his troops.<sup>1</sup>

The second key personality was Hap Arnold who, as commanding general of the US Army Air Forces, provided the necessary senior leadership in Washington DC to facilitate initial organization of the unit. Additionally, from the time the Air Commandos completed organization to the time they employed in-theater, General Arnold ensured the Air Commandos were given necessary support, remained intact as a single unit, and remained committed to the mission for which they were originally tasked. Through continuous written correspondence—even before the unit deployed—with General Stratemeyer (Commanding General USAAF India-Burma) and Admiral Mountbatten (Supreme Allied Commander - South East Asia Command), General Arnold passed along his guidance for use of Cochran and Alison’s forces.<sup>2</sup>

The third and fourth key individuals were the two leaders of the Air Commandos, Colonels Cochran and Alison. As previously mentioned, they too shared Arnold’s vision of airpower and were able to make it come to life. Proof of their abilities was apparent in the smooth and fastidious manner in which they stood up the Air Commandos. In just mere months they turned a fledgling unit with unproven abilities into a finely tuned and highly respected combat force. Measures of success of their leadership were seen in the

selling of the Air Commando concept of operations to SEAC<sup>3</sup>, the close working relationship with the Chindits, and the results of Operation THURSDAY. The attitude of the men who served under them best summarizes the strength of Cochran's and Alison's leadership: "If Phil or John says we do it, then, by God, we do it!"<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the fourth key individual was British Admiral Lord Mountbatten. As Supreme Commander of the South East Asia Command, he threw his weight behind the Air Commando efforts, allowing them to operate unhampered in the manner they saw best to support Wingate's Chindits.<sup>5</sup>

## **Organization**

"To hell with the paperwork, go out and fight,"<sup>6</sup> Hap Arnold had said to Colonels Cochran and Alison as his parting instructions for the organization of an air unit to support General Wingate. These words actually constituted a personal whim on Arnold's part, for he knew that systematic organization was necessary in modern war. He also knew the two colonels could effectively organize the Air Commandos if given wide latitude.

Analysis of the organization of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group revealed the following: First, Arnold hired the right leaders to sire the Air Commandos. This was by far the most critical step and the single determinant of the organization's future. Second, Cochran and Alison hired skilled individuals whom they knew and trusted to fill the key leadership positions of the various sections. Third, the two Air Commando leaders relied on the judgment and salesmanship skills of their section leaders in the recruiting of the best and brightest to man the unit. Fourth, the section leaders, in turn, recruited highly skilled

people whom they formerly knew and trusted, who, in turn, did the same thing. Finally, all persons hired into the organization were enthusiastic volunteers. They all wanted to be there regardless of the limited information provided as to their true mission.

In short, the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group was comprised of a tailored, absolutely “mission essential”, elite group of individuals. They were selected for their individual talents and expertise, and their ability and willingness to do what it took to get the job done.<sup>7</sup> Many applied, few were chosen.

### **Unit Training**

To be successful in combat, the organization had to train like it was going to fight, and train often enough to make it proficient at the task assigned. Training of Air Commando personnel began at Goldsboro, North Carolina. Conventional overseas deployment training was disregarded for more focused and specialized training based on the theater of operations, the environment, and the mission. To adapt to the conditions of the theater, jungle warfare principles were taught and physical training was emphasized. Conventional field garment was discarded in exchange for Marine combat boots and paratroopers outfits—with many pockets to hold first aid equipment, hand grenades, ammo, and food. All personnel were issued weapons including the latest collapsible carbines—a weapon specifically designed for paratroopers. All sections’ personnel were trained for ground combat in the jungle. There was a distinct chance they might have to fight alongside the very same troops whom they flew in or resupplied—this was especially applicable to the glider pilots. Each and every man had to become thoroughly familiar

with the equipment he would be operating or maintaining. Pilot training was immediately started for all pilots, especially the glider pilots.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the short timetable which the unit was on to deploy to theater, stateside training was cut short.<sup>9</sup> Therefore it was imperative to resume training soon after arrival and setup in-theater. That is exactly what the unit personnel did. As previously mentioned, in between their other duties of setting up the organization, they continued their indoctrination training focusing on jungle training and physical training. For the aircrews, flights were conducted for reconnaissance and to get to know the lay of the land from the air.

### **Joint Training**

But more important than unit training maneuvers were joint training maneuvers. Cochran had promised Wingate the air commandos would supply any and all needed support. If he was to fulfill his promise, Cochran's organization would have to gain the trust and confidence of the British Brigadier and his forces<sup>10</sup>—he had previously gained approval from SEAC for his plan of support. The first thing that Cochran did for Wingate was to grow his organization to include twelve B-25H bombers. The reason? Around 5 January 1994, the RAF had balked at providing bombers to General Wingate's forces for close air support, stating that there were problems with VHF air-to-ground communications (incompatible radios), and that they had too many commitments elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Cochran viewed the RAF's reluctance as his advantage, for the attachment of B-25s was part of his original plan to provide total support.<sup>12</sup>

Next, the Air Commandos began conducting joint training exercises and drills with the Chindits to help cement the bond between the two units. The first such drill was conducted during the daytime on 8 January. It involved a 20 glider operation carrying 400 of Wingate's troops into a mud field in Lalitpur. Included in the air lift was one glider carrying three mules as insisted upon by Wingate himself - this was to test the ability to carry animals in aircraft. Although four of the gliders did not make it, over 300 men and all three mules were inserted without injury, and the operation was hailed a complete success. To further re-enforce their capabilities, the Air Commandos had all of the gliders "snatched" out of the field by the C-47s. General Wingate was so impressed with the operation, he decided to ride out on one of the gliders. Just prior to being lifted into the air, Wingate leaned out of the glider and yelled to one of his officers on the ground, "Go tell the RAF that I have not only seen it done but that I am doing it too."<sup>13</sup>

Having proven the basic concept of the glider borne assault during the day, Cochran and his men arranged to repeat the maneuvers for Admiral Mountbatten, only this time under the cloak of darkness. Having won the confidence of the user, General Wingate, it was time to win the approval of the Supreme Commander. He needed to be convinced that gliders could air transport part of one LRP brigade into Burma at night.<sup>14</sup> This time all but two of the gliders successfully landed in the mud field at Lalitpur. And once again all gliders were "snatched" out by their C-47 towplanes. Admiral Mountbatten was definitely impressed. In a memo from Alison to Arnold, Alison remarks that Mountbatten's exact comment on the exercise was "Jesus Christ."<sup>15</sup> In sum, these joint exercises helped to establish a cohesive working relationship between the Air Commandos and the Chindits, proved basic concepts and reinforced capability. Additionally, these

maneuvers reinforced in Wingate's mind a plan he had been developing for his LRP units. His plan had called for his LRPs to be transported, supplied, and wholly supported by Cochran's air forces. The mature plan which became Operation THURSDAY gave Wingate that and more.

The First Air Commandos continued to demonstrate capability and work in joint training drills with the Chindits up until actual employment. Additionally, living by the special operations creed of "Any Place, Any time, Anywhere,"<sup>16</sup> Cochran's men provided Wingate's forces the support they needed, when they needed it, and where they needed all throughout their operations in the CBI theater.

### **Tactics and Innovation**

As previously mentioned, one of the main reasons for the miserable British failure in 1942 was improperly trained forces utilizing inappropriate tactics for the environment and the adversary. In 1943, Wingate had retrained the British forces and incorporated new tactics suited for the theater of operations. His success fell short due to lack of follow-through on the part of the main Allied effort. To not repeat these mistakes, through their own study of the terrain and the enemy, the Air Commandos and the Chindits jointly developed a battle plan which pitted their strengths against the Japanese weaknesses and utilized the Burmese topography to their advantage, as the Japanese had previously done in 1942. Additionally, their plan overcame the numerous shortcomings of the CBI theater, such as lack of sufficient logistical support and lax integration of forces. Working closely with Wingate's forces, the Air Commandos developed unique tactics and innovations which they tested during many of their joint exercises. Those that worked

were incorporated into their operations; those that failed were discarded. Referring to Appendix A, what is important to remember is these airmen adapted themselves, their equipment, and their tactics to the environment in which they were forced to operate to defeat a formidable enemy at his own game. The Japanese had employed unorthodox tactics and were previously successful; the Air Commandos followed in suit and were subsequently more successful. No idea was considered too radical if it worked (safely) and satisfied a requirement. It must be pointed out, though, that these tactics and innovations were specific to the CBI theater and may not have been applicable in other theaters or to other operations. Still, they are no less significant.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>General Wingate was killed on the night of 24 March 1944 in an unfortunate accident when the B-25 in which he was riding crashed in the Chin Hills. He had just completed an inspection of his forward troop positions and was enroute to his headquarters when the fatal accident occurred. Unfortunately, his death came in the midst of the most complicated operation ever attempted in-theater. The loss of General Wingate robbed the airborne invasion of Burma of a dynamic and colorful leader. (King. *The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group of World War II: An Historical Perspective*. Air University. Air Command and Staff College. Research study, pg. 119.)

<sup>2</sup>This was no easy task. First, the Air Commando unit was superimposed on an already established traditional military structure in which it did not fit, and allowed to operate autonomously. Second, it was given a very high priority for logistics: In spite of the numerous theater logistical shortcomings, this unit was provided with most of the supplies and equipment it needed when it needed, at times bumping others for the latest and best equipment. As a result, in a theater that was notoriously short of most everything, the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group appeared as a cash cow, ripe for milking. Finally, many in-theater commanders saw a chance to grow their own organizations with selected parts of the Air Commandos. They felt there was no need to create a new organization when all the existing ones really needed were more resources. Then they could do the job. (King. *The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group of World War II: An Historical Perspective*. Air University. Air Command and Staff College. Research study, pg. 58.) For examples of correspondence between Arnold, Mountbatten, and Stratemeyer, see the following in the USAF Collection at the USAFHRA under GP-A-CMDO-1-HI: Memo from Arnold to Marshall, 13 September 43, Subject - Air Task Force Wingate; Memo from Arnold to Stratemeyer, 18 September 43, 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Force; Letter from Mountbatten to Arnold, 16 January 1944, stating the Cochran crew was to be used “solely



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to support the log-range penetration operations for which they are now being trained”; Letter from Stratemeyer to Arnold, 22 February 44. Answers 31 January 44 Arnold memo. States that the Air Commandos will be used for support of Wingate’s LRP forces.)

<sup>3</sup>Col. Alison wrote the following in a memorandum for General Giles on 10 April 1944:

When Colonel Cochran arrived in the theater the general plan for Wingate’s operation was to march into Burma initially three long-range penetration brigades. One to cross the Chindwin River from the west, one to march down from the North and a third to be flown to China and marched across the Salween to spearhead a Chinese advance. This unit would have to be moved by air to China, then resupplied by air from Chinese bases. [USA] General Stilwell [Deputy Supreme Commander of SEAC] said that because of air lift limitations this would be impossible and the whole plan of offensive operations in Burma for this season were in danger of being abandoned. Colonel Cochran arrived at this meeting where [British] General Auchinleck [Commander-in-Chief in India], General Stilwell, [USAAF] General Chennault [Commander, 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force], Admiral Mountbatten and General Stratemeyer’s representative were present. At this time no one in the theater, not even Admiral Mountbatten or General Wingate, knew what the First Air Commando Group intended to do for Wingate’s operation. Colonel Cochran was called upon to explain why he had been sent into the theater and at this meeting he explained to the Chiefs of Staff that it was not necessary to fly the third brigade to China, that the brigade should be streamlined and that the First Air Commando Force would move this brigade into the heart of Burma from bases in India. He was asked if this was possible and if it would be possible for the First Air Commando Force to move the brigade to the job in two weeks time. He stated that the First Air Commandos would do the job in one week or less. At this meeting Admiral Mountbatten made the statement, “Boy, you are the first ray of sunshine we have seen in this theater for some time.” It should be noted to the credit of the United States Army Air Forces that Colonel Cochran’s clear thinking and his ability to explain and to sell a new and daring idea changed the entire strategy in this theater and made possible a definite plan for offensive action in Burma in 1944. (Memorandum for General Giles. Subject: Summary of Operations of First Air Commando Group, 10 April 1944, pg. 2. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAFHRA.)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Arnold, “The Aerial Invasion of Burma,” pg.131.

<sup>5</sup>Alison stated in two separate memos (Memo from Alison to Arnold, 21 Jan 44; Memo from Alison to Giles, 10 Apr 44) that their employment in-theater would not have been possible without the support of Admiral Mountbatten. Mountbatten provided strong assistance to keep the unit intact and on-track. Alison related the following concerning Mountbatten’s feelings about the Air Commandos in relation to the RAF:

After witnessing combined operations, Admiral Mountbatten, at a staff meeting, strongly took to task the R.A.F. for the attitude which they had taken

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and explained to them that he had seen maneuvers between a ground and an air unit which were successful and which had demonstrated to him that there were people in the theater who not only wanted to but were going to fight the war. (Memo from Alison to Arnold, 21 January 44, "History, Status, and Immediate Requirements for First Air Commando Force.")

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Arnold, "The Aerial Invasion of Burma," pg.130.

<sup>7</sup> There are numerous examples of the men in the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group "going above and beyond" to get the job done. The *Unit History of the First Air Commando Force* cites the following examples: After the arrival in-theater of the first contingent of Project 9 forces, "there were not enough enlisted men to perform their jobs in the time allotted so the officers worked side by side with their men, assembling gliders, helping on the fighters, the C-64s, etc." (pg. 2) Due to the inability to obtain all officer pilots, Flying Sergeants were used to fly all the light planes. They assembled, tested, flew in combat, and maintained all their own aircraft and equipment. When the first contingent arrived at the forward bases at Hailakandi and Lalaghat, once again the number of personnel was limited, and there existed no service unit to aid in establishing base operations. "Everyone, regardless of rank, pitched in and unloaded supplies, gasoline, and bombs. Roads were built and the thousand and one details of opening a new camp were pounced on by all" (pg. 4). A general mess facility was set up to be used by officers and enlisted alike. Finally, to keep up with the operations tempo of the battle once started, everyone shared responsibilities for continuing sortie launches. "Considerable credit should be given to the fighter and bomber pilots too as there were many days when they had to assist in unloading gasoline and bombs from the railroad siding and help their crews gas and bomb the ships before a mission could be run" (pg. 6). Many more examples exist, these are just a few. In sum, there appeared to be a blurring of traditional roles, responsibilities, and rank structure between the officer and enlisted force. Not to be implied as a subversion of the military system, this type of operation was required if not imperative to mission success in this theater. There are numerous examples of the men in the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group "going above and beyond" to get the job done. The *Unit History of the First Air Commando Force* cites the following examples: After the arrival in-theater of the first contingent of Project 9 forces, "there were not enough enlisted men to perform their jobs in the time allotted so the officers worked side by side with their men, assembling gliders, helping on the fighters, the C-64s, etc." (pg. 2) Due to the inability to obtain all officer pilots, Flying Sergeants were used to fly all the light planes. They assembled, tested, flew in combat, and maintained all their own aircraft and equipment. When the first contingent arrived at the forward bases at Hailakandi and Lalaghat, once again the number of personnel was limited, and there existed no service unit to aid in establishing base operations. "Everyone, regardless of rank, pitched in and unloaded supplies, gasoline, and bombs. Roads were built and the thousand and one details of opening a new camp were pounced on by all" (pg. 4). A general mess facility was set up to be used by officers and enlisted alike. Finally, to keep up with the operations tempo of the battle once started, everyone shared responsibilities for continuing sortie launches. "Considerable credit should be given to the fighter and bomber pilots too

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Van Wagner, pg. 45.

<sup>9</sup>The timetable for the unit’s deployment to India was moved up due to the revised deadline for all LRP support forces to close to theater. The original date of 25 December was initially changed to 15 December, then finally changed to 1 December. (*Chronological Summary of Project 9.*) This loss of almost a month to the Project 9 team equated to limited time for organization and therefore loss of sufficient training time. The majority of the training had to be accomplished in-theater. (Memorandum from Alison to Arnold, 21 January 1944.)

<sup>10</sup>General Wingate was very bitter at this time (January 1944) due to what he saw as a “watering down” of his operations and lack of support once again, as was the case in the previous year. He was not yet convinced Cochran’s outfit was actually dedicated to his operations.

<sup>11</sup> Message from Stratemeyer to Arnold, 7 January 1944. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, in the USAF Collection, USAFHRA; Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, History of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group, September 1943 - August 1945. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pg. 3; Memorandum from Alison to Arnold, 21 January 1944, “History, Status and Immediate Requirements of First Air Commando Force,” pg. 2.

<sup>12</sup>At the end of January 1944, Cochran would grow the Air Commandos on final time to include the 900<sup>th</sup> Airborne Engineer Aviation Company, the unit he’d been promised the previous autumn. He now had the “total package.” (Memorandum, Brigadier General S. C. Godfrey to Stratemeyer, “Glider Borne Engineers, A New Technique of Building Airfields Behind Enemy Lines,” 28 March 1944.)

<sup>13</sup> Unit History of the First Air Commando Force, pg. 3.

<sup>14</sup>This night exercise would be the only full scale dress rehearsal for Operation THURSDAY. For security reasons, large scale maneuvers were not held after all the units forward deployed to Assam. (King. *The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group of World War II: An Historical Perspective.* Air University. Air Command and Staff College Research Study, pg. 79.)

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum from Alison to Arnold, 21 January 1944. “History, Status, and Immediate Requirements for First Air Commando Force,” pg. 1.

<sup>16</sup>On 15 February 1944, during a double tow glider operation, a mishap occurred which killed four British and three American troops. This incident had the potential to put a damper on operations. The British unit commander diffused the situation when he sent a note to Cochran saying, “Please be assured that we will go with your boys any place, any time, anywhere.” This phrase was symbolic of the level of trust and degree of teamwork achieved by the two organizations, and was adopted by the Air Commandos as their creed.

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(Van Wagner. *1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group Any Place, Any Time, Any Where*, Military History Series 86-1. Air Command and Staff College. Maxwell AFB, AL, 1986, pp. 52-53.)

## Chapter 5

### Final Thoughts

By the time Operation THURSDAY activities ceased in May 1944, the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group had accomplished all the original objectives as set forth by General Arnold in September 1943. Moreover, they had truly established a (U.S.) new and successful form of warfare—total airborne invasion. Most significant, though, the Air Commandos had succeeded where the British had failed in 1942 and 1943. First, they studied the enemy to learn his strengths and weaknesses. Further, they studied and oriented themselves with their environment. These two actions alone led to the formulation of new tactics and procedures which were incorporated into improved and tailored training. Then they went a step further. As previously discussed, Wingate had failed in 1943 due to the cancellation of a main Allied offensive and lack of sufficient air support. To correct this, American support had been levied in the form of an air organization solely dedicated to the needs of Wingate's forces. The result was a truly integrated combined arms team. This joint team trained together, fostering mutual respect and trust. This joint team fought together, performing more efficiently and effectively in combat. Alison commented that the "total package" support provided to the Wingate force was "probably one of the best examples in history of the close cooperation which can be obtained between ground and air operating against an enemy."<sup>1</sup>

Also noteworthy, the aerial invasion of Burma proved that there was “more than one way to skin a cat”, meaning that Wingate’s plan was just one feasible method of entering Burma—it showed what was possible. Additionally, it proved the ability of so many coalition players to work in unison with one another. A War Department Press Release noted “the fact that the invasion was conducted successfully in the face of many uncertainties, without a single directing commander, testifies to the degree of cooperation achieved by the British and American forces taking part.”<sup>2</sup>

The Air Commando–Wingate operation was not without its critics. Many senior leaders felt that it was an unqualified success. General Stratemeyer expressed this view when he wrote to Arnold in June 1944 stating that the Air Commandos had definitely opened the eyes of the world to capabilities of a new kind of warfare. The operation was brilliantly conceived and executed, but in the end was not worth it.<sup>3</sup> Reading between the lines, the author surmises that Stratemeyer disagreed with the operation because it did not follow traditional military organization and employment. If given enough resources, he too could have determined the best method to accomplish the mission, without outside interference. Had this been the case, the British should have shared more previous successes. Instead, they shared continual failures. These failures were the result of thinking stuck in traditionalism, mired in parochialism, and therefore averse to revolutionary ideas. It had taken the strength and conviction of such visionaries as Wingate, Arnold, Cochran, and Alison to enlighten the theater to alternative methods of warfighting.

But, in the end, this enlightenment was short-lived. THURSDAY operations had ceased in May 1944. The Air Commando forces were relocated to the rear to rest, retrain,

and regroup for the next dry season. Cochran and Alison and select others had been called back to Washington to organize follow-on Air Commando organizations. With their physical presence gone from the theater, however, the tide of opposition grew strong. Without the driving personalities of Wingate, Cochran, and Alison, the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group would never operate again as an independent entity. Subsequently, its sections were “farmed out” to other organizations. Operational control smoothly and quietly reverted back to the usual chain-of-command structure. The Air Commandos did perform superbly in subsequent operations with their new organizations. However, they never shared the same degree of success as experienced during Operation THURSDAY.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group was officially disbanded on 8 October 1948.<sup>4</sup>

There are many lessons learned from Air Commando operations during this period:

1. Know your enemy as you know yourself. It seems this lesson of Sun Tzu is forever forgotten by military planners when sizing up an adversary.
2. Forces must train like they will fight, and train often. Combat force effectiveness hinges on the degree of cooperation and interoperability of the forces involved. If organizations are to fight in a joint manner, they must train in a joint manner. The degree of mutual trust and respect gained will be apparent on the battlefield.
3. The military needs to nurture, promote, and formally establish a body of critical thinkers and visionaries who analyze force employment and determine alternatives. We must not be afraid to think outside the bounds of traditional military thought for solutions. We must not get stuck in dogma.
4. Sufficiently tailored forces should be employed to accomplish the specified mission and not extended into other mission areas just to satisfy availability.

5. The face of war will continue to change. We must be willing to change with it. We must be able to adapt ourselves, our equipment, and our skills to the adversary and the environment. We cannot afford to create a large standing force to handle each individual situation; but we can maintain smaller tailored forces, flexible enough to handle a gamut of situations such as the type faced by the Air Commandos.
6. The importance of strong leadership cannot be overemphasized. It is possibly the single most important determinant of success or failure of an organization or operation.

In summary, this paper analyzed the operations of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group from the fall of 1943 to the late spring of 1944. The historians will continue to argue over the degree of success or failure this organization experienced. What is more important and should be indisputable is the success created by those who envisioned the Air Commandos. In short, the Air Commandos were not merely a branch of the Army Air Force; instead, this organization and everything it stood for embodied a new way of thinking. This new way of thinking had cut across traditional lines allowing success where failure had previously ruled.



## **Appendix A**

### **1st Air Commando Group Tactics and Innovations**

The following paragraphs list some of the most significant tactics and innovations developed by the Air Commandos. Categories include fighters, bombers, gliders and C-47s, light airplanes, air-ground liaison, and helicopter operations. All the information contained in this section is derived from *US Navy Air Combat Information Report No. 1, Observations of Operational Forces in India-Burma, 8 May 1994*, unless otherwise noted.

#### **Fighter Operations**

Fighter operations were diverse in nature including reconnaissance (photo and visual), bomber escorting, combat air patrol, intruder efforts, dropping nickels (dive bombing), and cable cutting. It is these last two missions that deserve expansion in detail.

Perhaps, borrowed from the Germans, the First Air Commando fighters adopted the tactic of dive bombing in P-51s with 500- and 1000-pound bombs<sup>5</sup>, or 325-pound depth charges (for hard targets). They found this tactic a much more accurate method of putting bombs on the hard-to-spot, small, and difficult targets such as an enemy pill box or parked aircraft. While a smaller portion of the total fighter force on one sortie flew top cover, the larger portion would wing over from 8,000 or 9,000 feet (out of the sun if at all possible,

or making use of any cloud cover) and dive down on their target. They would stay locked on their target and not release their salvo until usually between 500 and 1,000 feet. The pilot would then pull the plane out on the deck (at approximately 400 mph) and rendezvous with the rest of the forces.

Cable cutting was another unique innovation developed by the air commandos. This apparatus attached to a P-51 was used to cut Japanese communication lines from the air. A 150-foot length of  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch line was secured to each end of the aircraft's bomb racks. A 3-inch diameter metal ring hung on this line to which was attached 150 to 200-feet of  $\frac{5}{16}$ -inch steel cable. Finally at the lower end of this cable were a series of 3 to 4 weights totaling 12 to 15-pounds. The plane would fly over the top of telephone lines and the weights hanging below like a plumb bob would slice through like a knife. This tactic was not always successful, for sometimes the cable cutting line broke. When this occurred, and the telephone line was still intact, the pilot would fly his aircraft across the lines in the hope of snapping them with a portion of the aircraft.

## **Bomber Operations**

Whereas in the instance above fighters were used as bombers, the air commandos also adapted bombers to be used as fighters (in addition to their traditional bomber role, which was also modified). First, since the B-25s were added only after deployment to the theater, manning for this mission was minimal and had to be taken "out of hide". Therefore, the aircraft were modified to be flown with a minimum crew of five consisting of only one pilot. All planes were equipped with single controls, a navigator-bombardier, top-turret gunner (also aerial engineer), a radio waist gunner, and a tail gunner. Each

aircraft was also outfitted with a 75 mm cannon in the nose for strafing attacks. Departing from standard bombing techniques, all Air Commando bombing missions were flown at low level (1,200 feet and below) depending on the type bomb being dropped. All bombing missions had either fighter or fighter-bomber escorts. The most successful missions involved a coordinated attack of dive bombing P-51s followed immediately by a low level B-25 attack. After the B-25s made their bombing runs they would make subsequent passes over the targets strafing with their 75 mm cannon—a most effective tactic. These type operations were not unusual for this group for the bomber section was lead by ex-fighter pilots who instituted fighter tactics whenever possible into many phases of their bomber operations to increase effectiveness. Additionally, this allowed greater flexibility in their support to Wingate's forces. If bombers were not available for a mission, fighters could be used in the bomber role and vice versa (depending on the nature of the mission). The Chindits were always supported!

### **Light Plane Operations**

Originally the only airplanes requested by General Wingate to support renewed Burma operations, the light planes contributed more than any other single unit to the success of the Chindits. Identified as probably the backbone of the LRP forces, the light planes conducted a variety of missions including sick and wounded evacuation, message pick-ups, courier service, delivery of battle orders, secret dispatches, reconnaissance, medical supply drops, and food supply drops. Unique to the food drops, bomb racks were designed and installed under each wing to permit the carrying of food packs with drop chutes weighing up to 100 pounds each for the L-1, and 75 pounds for the L-5.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps of lesser importance than the evacuation of the wounded but just as significant, the aerial spotting mission developed by the light plane pilots enabled the bombers to destroy some very well hidden important targets. Primarily using the L-5, this early “Forward Air Controller” procedure called for the L-5 to rendezvous with scouts on the ground and thoroughly discuss an identified target. Just before the bombing attack, the L-5 would take off, fly at tree top level over the target and drop smoke bombs. This visual signal guided the aircraft to their targets.

### **Glider Operations**

Glider operations spearheaded the Burma offensive inserting the Allied ground forces well behind enemy lines. The CG-4 gliders were towed behind C-47s equipped with tow kits and snatch gear. It should be pointed out that none of the snatching equipment had been tested prior to trials being conducted in-theater. Additionally, though all the glider pilots received the regular Army Glider training in the US, none had ever flown under the combat conditions they found in the theater including heavy loads (exceeding normal design limitations), difficult terrain, and high altitudes (8 to 10,000 feet). To top it off, all insertion operations were conducted at night with no external visual aids except any ambient light provided by the moon and stars. The glider pilots overcame all of these shortcomings and answered all challenges. They became a viable and highly respected part of the Air Commando team. Success was measured in the total number of missions conducted and the total amount of cargo transported. And, the gliders transported almost everything required by the ground forces to conduct operations including troops and their personal equipment, small bulldozers, graders, tractors, carryalls, jeeps, mules, airfield

lighting, communications equipment, small anti-tank guns, and even rubber boats equipped with outboard motors.<sup>7</sup>

Initial tow operations were double meaning the C-47 pulled two gliders behind it at the same time. Although a proven tactic, it was discarded for the much safer single tow after the initial Operation THURSDAY insertion when it was learned that too many of the double tow ropes were breaking prematurely. The trickiest part of glider operations was the snatch which was performed (also at night) to extricate the glider from the landing zone for subsequent operations. This maneuver involved rigging a line between two pickup poles (with a light attached to the top of each pole) placed on the LZ. The line was looped with the other end attached to the glider tow rope. The glider sat at the beginning of the LZ. Placed parallel to and 125-feet ahead of the pickup poles were two more lights which the two planes use to line up on in order to make an accurate pass. The C-47, trailing a hook apparatus, flew low over the LZ just above and between the two poles and snatched the line. The glider followed behind and was whisked into the air.

### **Ground-Air Liaison**

This procedure, initially proven by the RAF the previous year reaped great rewards for the Air Commandos. An RAF pilot was attached as an Air Liaison Officer (ALO) to each ground force column. He received a request from the column for certain missions to be supported, whether it involved dive bombing, strafing, low level bombing, and the like. The ALO passed the request along through the appropriate channels and the mission was set up. As the air attack unit moved into the target area, they were contacted on the radio by the ALO. He instructs them as to their target and visual signal for identification. The

ALO then notified the ground unit to fire a smoke bomb to the exact position to be hit. The ALO then relayed to the attacking unit the certain bearing towards which they should be looking to see the smoke signal. If all went smoothly, the pilots saw the signal, dropped their bombs, and the identified target was destroyed. And in most cases, this routine was very successfully employed due to the veteran experience of the Air Commando pilots and the ALOs, the proficiency of the ground force units, and the degree of coordination and trust which existed between all three.

## Helicopters

The first operational helicopter made its combat debut with the Air Commando organization. During the latter part of April and first part of May 1944, it was put to work as a search and rescue (SAR) aircraft to rescue wounded men from inaccessible places. The YR-4 would go on to complete 23 evacuation missions before being withdrawn from theater due to excessive engine overheating problems.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, Memorandum for General Giles, April 10, 1944, pg. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, "Airborne Invasion of Burma Resulted from Quebec Conference," pg. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Letter, Stratemyer to Arnold, 25 June 1944, Headquarters Army Air Forces, File 322, V. 3, January 1944 - September 1945, USAFHRA.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, King, pg. 218.

<sup>5</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group became the first USAAF organization flying P-51 Mustangs to utilize the 1000 pound bomb. (Unit History of the First Air Commando Force. History of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group, September 1943 - August 1945. GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, USAF Collection, USAFHRA, pg. 5.)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, King, pg. 40.

<sup>7</sup> In this operation, two CG-4s loaded with rubber boats, outboard motors, and personnel, landed on a sandbar of the Chindwin River thereby enabling 4,000 troops of the 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade to cross the river without delay. (US Navy Air Combat Information Report No. 1, Observations of Operational Forces in India-Burma, 8 May 1944, pg. 17.)

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<sup>8</sup> JICA/CBI Report 3137, "Burma - Final operations of First Air Commando Group in," 30 May 1944, pp. 6-7.

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