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The Salween Campaign, China, May 1944 -
Jan 1945, by Colonel G. B. Coverdale, FA.
Command and Staff College. 1946-47.

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School of Combined Arms

Regular Course

1946-1947

The Salween Campaign, China.

May 1944 to January 1945

Type of Operation Described: Two Chinese Army Groups in the Attack. 9

Colonel G. B. Coverdale, Field Artillery.

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Map: AAA Aeronautical Chart, China 1:1,000,000. Lake ERH Sheet.

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Note: Some of this Monograph is the result of my personal experiences in
China,part of which were in the Salween Campaign.

SALWEEN CAMPAIGN

May 1944 to January 1945

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this monograph is to cover the operations of two Chinese Army Groups in the SALWEEN offensive during the period May, 1944 to January, 1945.

In order to provide a common understanding and a sufficient orientation for this discussion, I intend to introduce you to the China Theater, with its terrain and army, before going into the details of the campaign. As a matter of fact the China theater was at that time part of the China-Burma-India Theater.

I flew the "Hump" in January 1943 in a China National Airways C-47, starting at Calcutta, India and landing at Kunning, China. At that time the Japanese had control of most of Burma and that part of Western China up to the Salween River (Refer to chart). By controlling that area they had cut off all land routes into China as they also had the East coast of China in their possession.

In 1941 and a short period in 1942, our government had furnished the Chinese a sizeable amount of equipment via the "back door," or Burma Road, route. The traffic over the road wasn't great but it was supposed to furnish the desperate Chinese Army the absolute minimum equipment with which they could continue their resistance against the Japanese.

The shipment that I was with was composed of some three hundred officers who were to act as liaison officers with the Chinese Army in China for the campaign to re-open the Burma Road, at that time scheduled to start in March, 1943. As the Chinese Army wasn't ready to launch the campaign, mostly from lack of equipment, it was postponed and General Stilwell started a school system to help equip and train the Chinese troops in preparation for the offensive. Just to give you one example of the shortage of equipment as we know it; each of the Chinese field armies had only one artillery battalion. The equipment was antiquated and in a poor state of maintenance and repair. Most of the artillery pieces were of French, German, Russian and Japanese World War I stock and except for a few German 150-mm gun-howitzers practically all of it was of 75-mm caliber.

The school system was started at Kunning with an Artillery school to train officers, cadres and then the artillery battalions themselves, and an Infantry school to train officers and a few non-commissioned officers only. As I was in

the Artillery school I know most of the difficulties that we had, some of the principal ones being; the small tonnage allowed for pack howitzers and ammunition, transportation to get the Chinese to the school, suitable animals for the battalions, and, perhaps the most surprising, a place to actually build the school and conduct the training. One by one these difficulties were overcome and the school system started to produce results in April, 1943.

By early 1944 the school system had graduated several classes and about six battalions of Chinese artillery had been equipped and trained. The tonnage coming in to China by air at that time was only about 6000 tons per month and the majority of it went to the Fourteenth Air Force. A land route into China was believed to be absolutely necessary to finish equipping and training the thirty to thirty six divisions that had been agreed upon.

The dire need of the Chinese for equipment dictated that the Salween offensive start at the earliest possible moment in order to re-open the Burma Road. So, even though everyone knew that it would be a tremendous task for the poorly equipped Chinese forces, the 11th. of May, 1944 was agreed upon as the starting date for the Chinese armies to make the assault across the Salween River.

Geographical Features

The terrain on which this campaign was fought was difficult and varied. It has been said many times that it was the most difficult battle area in the world because it was the highest and toughest country that present civilizations have fought over. Those who fought in Italy may resent that statement and I have no desire to make a contest out of it, however I will attempt to give you a brief picture of this battle-front.

In the first place the combat area was part of the famous "Hump" and extended for 170 miles, 130 of it along the Salween River. (Refer to chart). Secondly, the Burma Road almosts bisects the front and rises to elevations of nearly 8000 feet in the mountain passes. The Burma Road is at best a secondary road as we know roads in this country and it has a terrific maintenance factor due to the frequent mountain slides.

The ruggedness of the sector makes it sparsely populated and there are only two towns of any size in the area... TENGCHUNG and LUNGLING. (Chart)

The weather during the summer months hampers operations due to heavy rains, swollen rivers, and quick changes in temperatures due to the altitude. The monsoon season in this area is not as severe as in Burma, but it brings the same mud and drenches troops and equipment for days at a time. Protection for the rice, almost the only item on the ration, was practically impossible and it was a fairly common sight to see piles of mildewed rice awaiting to be transported by coolie carry to the troops. The fact that it was mildewed mattered little as it had to be eaten anyway since there was no replacement, and, as a matter of fact there never was enough. From time to time during this presentation I will refer to the weather and its effect on the operations of the troops in the field and their supply.

Many of you think of this section of the world as semi-tropical but I can assure you that I have never been as cold in my life as on certain cold and wet nights in late Fall in Yunnan Province. The temperatures are similiar to what you can imagine southern Tennessee would be if the mountains there rose to elevations of eight thousand feet and you were on maneuvers in them in the winter time.

The Salween Campaign, May 1944 to January 1945.

Strategic purpose of the campaign:-To drive the Japanese out of Western Yunnan Province and to re-open the Burma Road in South-West China.

The offensive was launched from the East bank of the Salween River and was co-ordinated with the Chinese-American offensive in Northern Burma which was to attack and seize MYITKYINA and then drive the Japs to the South and clear the Burma side of the "Road." The "Ledo Road" was being built from Assam as closely behind the fighting troops as possible with the intention of linking up with the old Burma Road and creating a land supply route without waiting for the entire Burma campaign to be completed.

Forces involved:-The Chinese Expeditionary Force (C.E.F.) was composed of two Army Groups of two Armies each plus elements of the Fifth and Eighth Armies and the 93rd. Division.

The Japs had their 56th. Division in the area with elements of one other division and for service troops they had impressed into service many Burmese laborers.

At this point it is well to explain the Chinese Army organization so I will do^{so} as clearly as I can. In the first place, the command set-up is quite a bit different from ours in that practically all decisions as to policy or employment of the major forces are made on the highest level and leave little to the judgement of the field commanders. During the war these decisions were made at Chungking. Secondly, each commander on down the line considers that he is almost the owner of the troops and equipment under his control. An interesting side light is that in the Chinese army a company commander can make the decision as to shooting one of his soldiers but it takes the decision of the field army commander to shoot a horse or mule in the same company.

A Chinese field army is roughly the size of our reinforced division if it is up to strength and the soldiers are physically fit for fighting. These two conditions are rarely met so we can consider the fighting power of the Chinese field army as somewhat less than our division. In this campaign there were four complete field armies, elements of two more and one extra division. I believe that the total figure, including all the service troops, was roughly 150,000 men and officers.

The Chinese troops engaged in the Salween campaign were all trained under the instruction of, but not the command of, the Y-Force operations staff. In Northern Burma the situation was somewhat different in that Gen. Stilwell had control of all the higher echelon tactical decisions for the employment of the Chinese forces in the Burma campaign.

The Y-Force was an American unit designed to advise, assist, and in many instances supply the Chinese Expeditionary Force (C.E.F.) that was to launch the Salween offensive. The Y-Force had a complete staff in Kunming and an advanced staff at Paoshan. (Chart) The advanced staff worked with and parallel to the staff of General Wei-Li-Huang who commanded the C.E.F. Under the Y-Force were the American Liason officers with each level of command down to the infantry regiments and the artillery battalions. In the artillery battalions, for instance, there were four officers and, if they were available, six enlisted men in the liason team. The senior artillery officer in the team advised the Chinese battalion commander and in most cases was able to more or less dictate the tactics that were used. The other three officers were right with the battery commanders and as far as directing the artillery fire was concerned were a tremendous influence. The American communication net was the only reliable one and served both Americans and Chinese well throughout the campaign. The liason groups had to use the utmost tact in making their suggestions to the Chinese commanders but the system worked surprisingly well.

PLAN OF OPERATIONS- The plan for the opening of the Salween campaign involved six separate and co-ordinated attacks across the Salween River.

FORCE "A"....To cross the river at MENGKU FERRY, drive west through MAMIEN PASS to the SHWELI River and then South through CHIAOTOU to KAITOU. In the early days of the campaign part of this force was shifted north to help the guerillas in the HPIMAW area.

FORCE "B"....To cross the river at MENGTA FERRY, drive west through TATANGTZU and the pass to CHIANGTSO and on to WATIEN on the SHWELI. These two forces, which were the main effort, would then be ready to drive south on TENGCHUNG.

FORCE "C"....To cross the river in the HWEI JEN Bridge area and drive through to LAOCHAI. It would then be in position for a westward drive on TENGCHUNG.

FORCE "D"....To cross the river at TAHAI FERRY and drive through PING-KA and HSIANG to LUNGLING.

FORCE "E"....To cross the river South of TAHAI FERRY and drive through PING-KA and HSIANG to MANGSHIH. These two forces ,the secondary effort,were aimed at cutting the Burma Road.

FORCE "F"....To start at some distance East of the Salween River,drive back the Japs who had crossed the river,and then take KUNLONG. Thence this force would be in position to operate along the road to HSENWI.

On May 9,1944 one battalion from each Army of the four Armies in position for the assault crossed the Salween River and were in position on the west bank to protect the operations of the main bodies.These advance battalions were mainly American trained Chinese infantry and engineers.

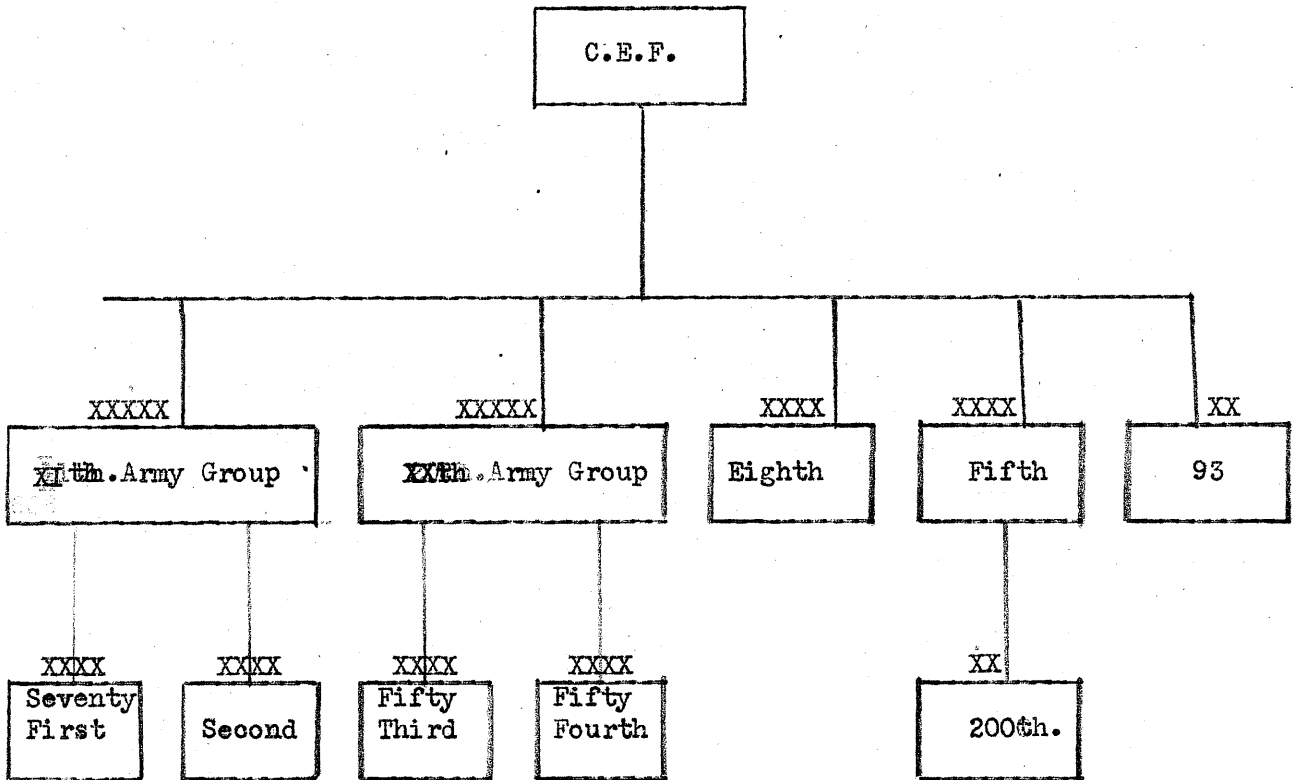
The crossings of the main bodies began on the night of ~~the~~ 10-11,May and with clouds obscuring the moon the Japs were caught by surprise and offered little resistance to the first crossings. The Chinese crossed in pneumatic rubber boats furnished by the Americans,in wooden boats,on bamboo rafts,and ~~an~~ homemade rafts supported by empty gasoline drums. River crossings had been practiced ~~+~~ earlier on the MEKONG River,to the east of the Salween.

At dawn the Jap resistance became more active and some fire was placed on the crossing Chinese. The crossing at Tahai Ferry was completed by noon on 11, May and by noon Force "D" was more than 6 miles toward PINGKA.

Crossings were resumed at dark on 11 May in another cloudy and overcast night. Force "C" completed its crossing in the HWEI JEN Bridge area during the early evening. Forces "A" and "B" completed theirs by midnight and Force "E" began its crossing south of the TAHAI FERRY at dawn 12 May.

What little opposition that was put up by the Japs was beaten down by the troops on the west bank and by heavy fire from the east bank..The only casualty of the crossing operation ^{occurred with} ~~was~~ the overturning of one boat on the morning of 11 May when one of the 17 Chinese soldiers was drowned.

CHINESE EXPEDITIONARY FORCE (C.E.F.)



Commanders:

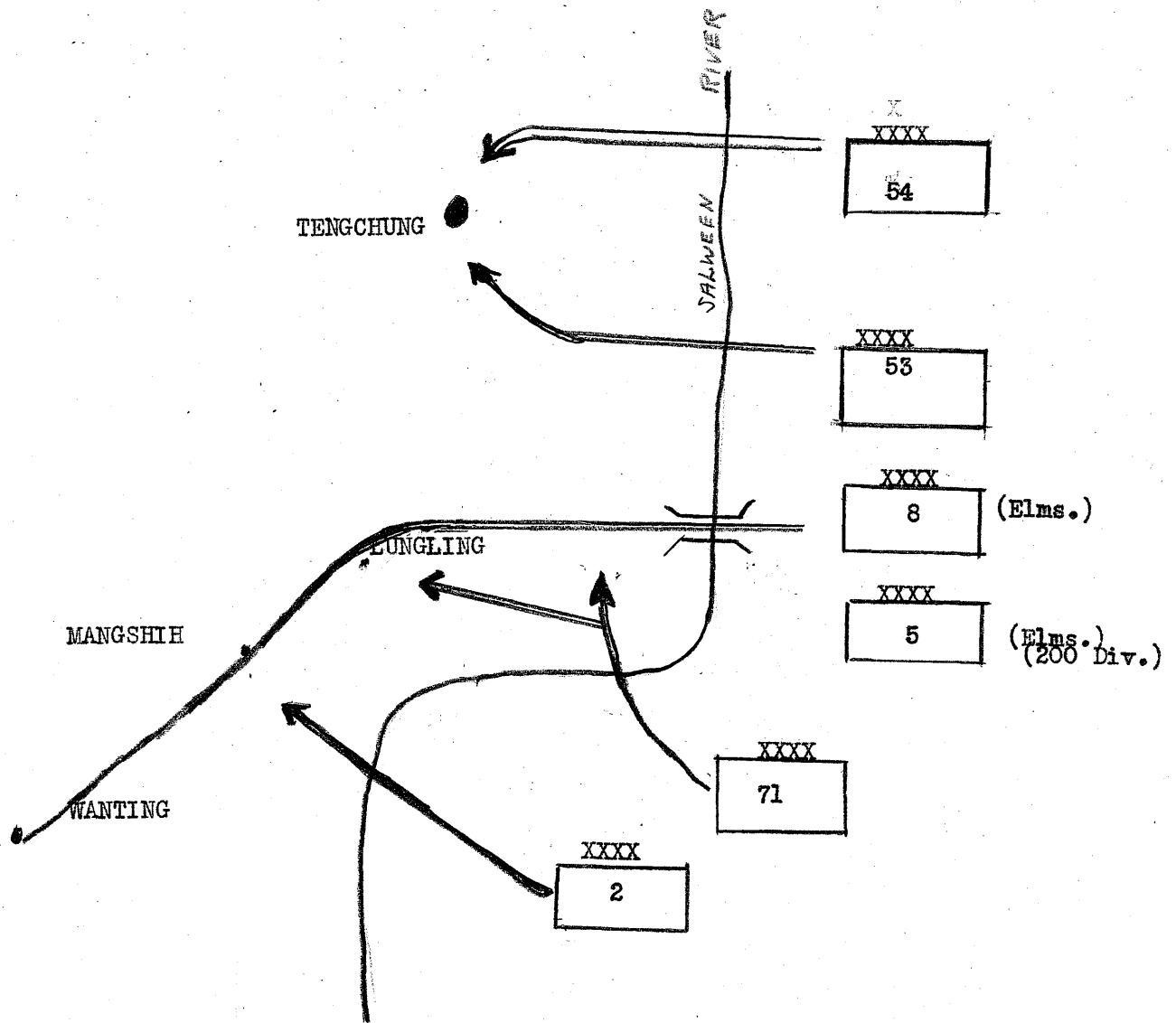
Chinese Expeditionary Force, General Wei Li Huang.

XIth. Army Group General Sung Hsi Lien.

XXth. Army Group General Huo K'uei Chang.

Headquarters of the Chinese Expeditionary Force remained at PAOSHAN through-out the Salween Campaign. The Army Group Headquarters moved forward as the Campaign progressed.

The first objectives of the Chinese armies and the forces involved are shown in the following sketch:



Note: This information will be given to the students from the wall chart. Slide No. 4-1104 in the C and S C files has the above information for anyone interested. Also in the files is Slide No. 4-1103 showing the C.E.F. organization. I did not use these slides because of the short time allowed for the presentation and the difficulties involved in shifting the wall chart back and forth to show slides. The sketch above is schematic only and is not to scale.

The first objectives were the two Japanese strongholds of TENGCHUNG and LUNGLING. Tengchung was the center of Jap strength in Southwest China and its defenses were built up strongly in the two years of occupation. Although it wasn't on the Burma Road its position was such that it controlled a large area and was vital to the Japs if their position was to be held. Lungling, the largest Burma Road town west of the Salween River, was the base that the Japs used to supply their garrisons at Tengchung and the defense points along the river.

The fighting all along the front was quite severe due to the numerous centers of resistance that the Japs had established. The front was fluid and the fighting limited to areas rather than lines. The Japs held on to the centers

of resistance even though in some cases the Chinese had them practically surrounded. Similarly the Chinese were able to engage these centers with part of their forces while advancing to their objectives further on.

At the end of the first week the favorable weather that had given the Chinese forces the advantage began to turn for the worse and the rains started which slowed down the operations. Casualties during the week were heavy but the Chinese brought up replacements rapidly and continued the offensive. The mountain terrain made supply difficult and at some points there were critical shortages of food and ammunition. Air support and air supply by the Fourteenth Air Force was the deciding factor time after time and as a matter of fact the entire operation could have quite easily failed without the splendid support they gave.

Heavy rains and bad weather in general began the week of 27 May and lasted well into June. In contrast to the weeks before, air support and air drop were impossible, the Salween was swollen, and the transportation of men and supplies became even more difficult than before. On 10 June the weather improved slightly and supply operations were continued.

The Japs during the bad weather had brought up re-inforcements but the Chinese still had the initiative. In the Burma Road sector, a fresh Chinese force had made a sustained drive that took it to Lungling, so for the time being, at least, one of the two main objectives was taken.

MAMIEN PASS to the north held against the Chinese, but the Japs were growing weaker. The XXth. Army Group finally captured Mamien Pass on 12 June; the Japs falling back to the Shweli River valley with the Chinese in pursuit, the Japs taking up a defensive position in WATIEN. Chinese forces drove the Japs out of Watien on 20 June and by 22nd June, after 40 days of fighting, were only 10 miles from Tengchung. Tengchung had been heavily bombed by the Fourteenth Air Force but you must remember that the bombings in this campaign were very tiny as compared to those in Europe.

In the other sectors the Chinese had met with successes at some places and reverses at others. The 2nd. Army in the Pingka sector launched a drive on the Japs in the Lungling area from the south and east. On 10 June they had thrown road blocks across the Burma Road both north and south of MANGSHIH, the town to the southwest of Lungling. The task of the Chinese at this point was a double one: In the first place, they had to mop up the Jap centers of resistance in their

rear in order to move supplies, and secondly, to hold Lungling against the inevitable Jap counter-attacks. Once they could finish their mopping up operations, the Chinese could establish a continuous line across the Burma Road from PINGKA on the south to a point northeast of TENGCHUNG.

One Jap strong point gave the Chinese forces a great amount of trouble and the Japs resisted fanatically. This was the town or village of SUNGSHAN that overlooked the Burma Road Bridge across the Salween and effectively closed the Road to the Chinese. On 28 June the first Jap planes to appear in the campaign dropped supplies to the Japs in the beleaguered Sungshan garrison. I am getting a bit ahead of my narrative but feel that it is important to do so as this one Jap strongpoint was the principal blocking point to the entire operation. On 1 July the job of taking the final Jap position on Sungshan was given to a task force especially rehearsed for the operation. This force stormed the strong Jap pill boxes with flamethrowers and demolitions on 4 July but the Japs held fast and then counterattacked, throwing the Chinese back and re-gaining most of their lost ground. The Chinese losses were terrific, mostly because their leaders insisted upon sending small unit after small unit instead of storming the position from all sides at once in a coordinated attack. In late July and August the Chinese under the guidance of American engineers dug a long tunnel under the remaining Jap strongpoints and with a huge charge of powder literally blew the Japs off the map. On 7 September the Burma Road was open to traffic and assisted greatly in the supply of the forward troops.

Now to go back and catch up on the other sectors that I have temporarily neglected while presenting the SUNGSHAN operation. As I mentioned before, the Chinese XIth. Army Group had taken LUNGLING on 10 June. The Japs turned reinforcements toward Lungling and as the Chinese were having difficulty with their supply system, they withdrew (to the great disappointment of the American Liaison officers) to positions north-east, east and southeast of the city. Also the 2nd. Army in the Mangshih area was having trouble holding their road blocks and withdrew to the hills overlooking that city. So with the end of the campaign almost in sight the Chinese had to go on the defensive and reorganize and re-equip, meanwhile holding off Jap counter-attacks. On 21 June the Japs launched an attack using light tanks and a see-saw battle occurred until 10 July when the 71st. Army reinforced by the 290th. Div. from the 5th. Army was again in position on the hills

overlooking Lungling. It was during this period that the Japs first used their combat aircraft against the Chinese troops. Up to 6 July the bad weather plus the activities of the Fourteenth Air Force had kept them out of the skies. The Lungling-Mangshih area was to remain static for some months to come so I will carry through on the other sectors until the time for the final offensive.

In the Pinka area the Japs held the village but were surrounded by the Chinese forces.

In the Tengchung sector the Chinese were only 10 miles from their objective on 22 June and spent the next two weeks consolidating their positions and bringing up their reserves. By 6 July the XXth Army Group had secured the hills surrounding Tengchung and were within a half mile of the masonry walls (30 ft. thick and 90 ft. high) encircling the city. The Fourteenth Air Force was bombing the city with B-25's as often as the weather would allow but there was still much to be done before the strongpoint was ready for assault. The American liason officers with the artillery battalions of the 53rd and 54th Armies did a grand job of directing the fire but the light pack 75-mm howitzer wasn't effective against the masonry walls even at fifty yards range. After heavy shelling and bombing and with the engineers emplacing demolitions along the walls the XXth Army Group took the strongpoint of Tengchung on 14 September.

Then came a long period in which the supplies and equipment were built up and the troops shifted for the final assault to the China-Burma border. Actually there were so few Japs left that it appeared to many of the Americans that the Chinese Armies could make their assault right away and drive the enemy to the border without a great deal of difficulty. There was at this time though a certain amount of political misunderstanding that delayed the issue and finally culminated in the recall of General Stilwell in October.

During the entire campaign the guerrillas were quite active, operating in small parties behind the Jap lines and constantly harassing Jap lines of communications. In some cases the Japanese resorted to wearing Chinese civilian clothing, especially in the communication zone, in order to escape the ambushes of the guerrillas. It really is very difficult to distinguish Chinese

from Japanese when they wear the same type of clothing. As a matter of fact many Chinese soldiers were killed by their own troops because they had a habit of wearing captured Jap clothing especially the Jap helmets as they had so few of their own.

The final drive was launched the first part of November as there was no possible reason to delay it further. The Road had been opened for supply early in September and the Chinese truck regiment, with American help, had been able to solve most of the important supply problems that had hampered the operations for so long. The trucks that the regiment used were those that had been salvaged from the 1941 Burma Road and required all the ingenuity that the Americans and Chinese possessed to keep them running on the rough, steep grades. One of the most urgent reasons for re-opening the Burma Road was to get large numbers of American Lend-Lease trucks that were waiting just a few hundred miles across the mountains in Assem and India.

With the final assault under way the Armies had relatively easy going and took Lungling and Mangshih in rapid order. The Japanese were clever in their retreat and played all the weaknesses of the Chinese to their advantage. Another re-grouping period took place south of Mangshih and then another assault that carried the Chinese forces to the link-up with the Burma forces at WANTING on 20 January, 1945.

The Salween Campaign was over and the much needed Burma Road was open. American engineers with a lot of heavy equipment had been assembled and were ready to start work on the road to get it in shape for the expected traffic to come. The first convoy under the command of Brig. General Lewis Pick started up the Burma Road right after it was cleared and arrived at Kunming 4 Feb., 1945.

In my summary of the Salween Campaign I will consider the first three months as one phase, The capture of TENGCHUNG and the blowing up of the SUNGSHAN Fortress as the second phase, and the assault to the Burma border as the last phase.

In the first phase the Chinese armies successfully crossed the Salween, drove the Japs from their fortified mountain positions, liberated more than 150 populated places, regained more than 10,000 square miles of territory, and besieged the Japanese strongholds of TENGCHUNG, SUNGSHAN, LUNGLING and PINGKA.

In the second phase there are three points that stand out clearly:

1. The Chinese armies were successful in storming the Japanese strong-points of TENGCHUNG and SUNGSHAN.
2. The supply problems that had caused so many delays were in most cases solved by the re-opening of the Burma Road behind the assaulting armies.
3. The morale of the Chinese soldier was raised to a great extent when he proved himself fit for offensive combat by hurling the Japs out of positions that they had prepared during the two years of occupation.

In the last phase the final assault that took the Chinese Army in China all the way to the China-Burma border for the link up with the Chinese forces in Burma was the outstanding point to remember.

Conclusion

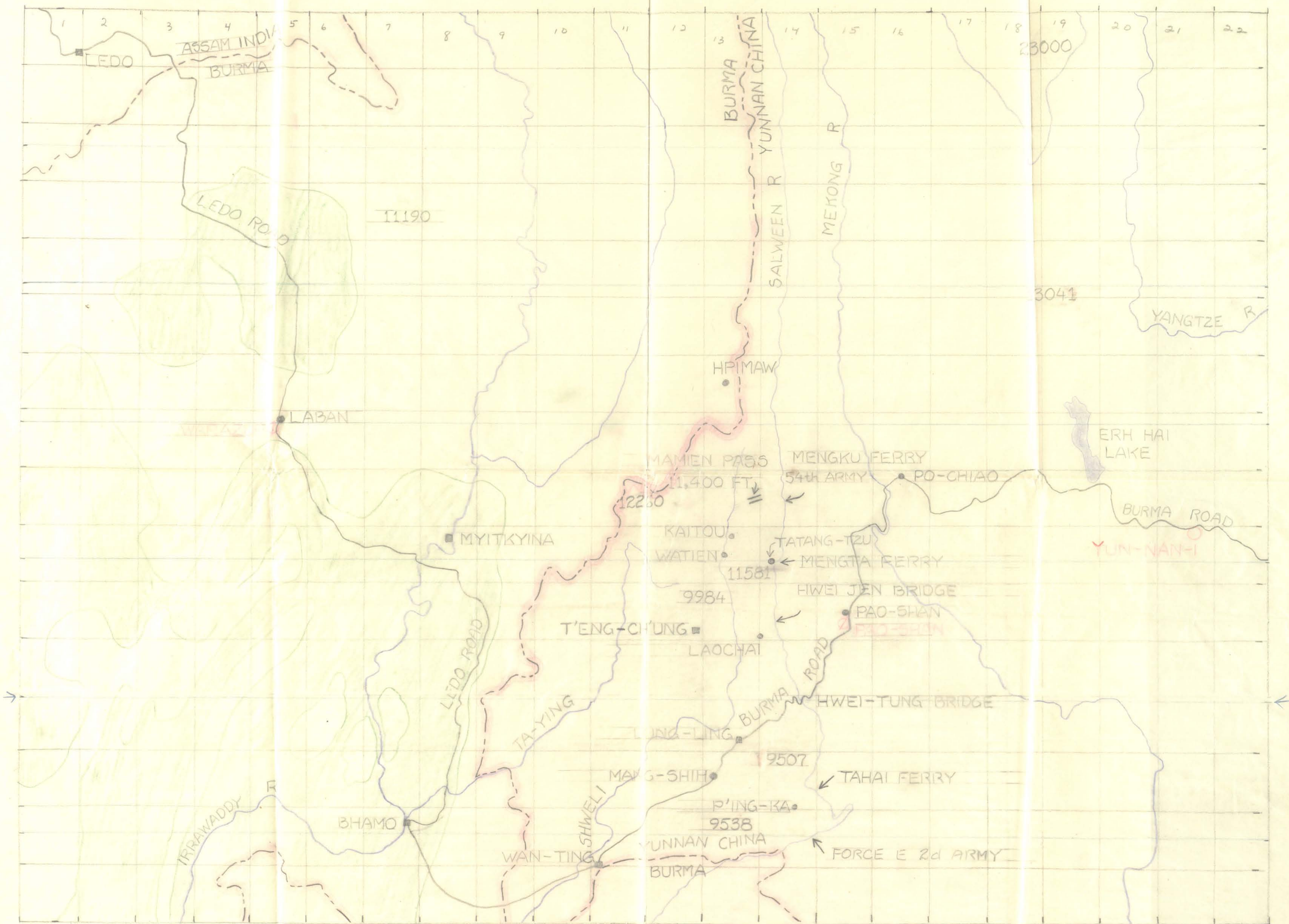
The Chinese proved to the world that they were a big help to the other allied nations and gave definite promise that they would contribute much more when they actually received the equipment that was awaiting them.

The Chinese soldier, though for years a peacefull type, could be favorably compared to the Japanese soldier as far as fighting qualities were concerned when adequately equipped, well fed, and properly led.

Note: As the lessons to be learned are similiar to the above conclusions they have been purposely omitted.

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