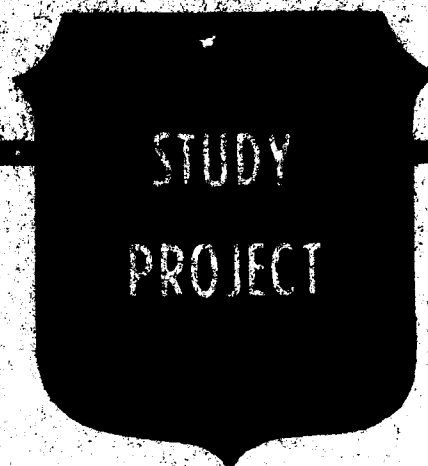


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**BURMA CAMPAIGNS:
BATTLES OVER LINES OF COMMUNICATION**

BY

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BURMA CAMPAIGNS: BATTLES OVER LINES OF COMMUNICATION

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

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On 19 January 1942, two Japanese divisions invaded Burma and within five months defeated a numerically superior Allied Army. The Japanese conquest of Burma completely isolated China from lend-lease equipment support provided to it via the Burma Road. Over the course of the next three years, Allied forces engaged in ground campaigns designed to reestablish this land communications link with China. This is a description of the Allied campaigns in Burma and the importance that secure supply lines played in each of those campaigns. Information was gathered by historical review of a variety of reference materials. The lessons of Burma related to the campaigns launched there can be applied today in that country and in similar areas of operation around the world.

INTRODUCTION

In January 1942, two well led, equipped and trained Japanese divisions attacked into Burma from Thailand. The British forces defending Burma were quickly and decisively defeated at the battle of the Sittang Bridge. By early March, the Japanese captured Rangoon, the capital and major port city of the country. Its loss cut off the only remaining line of communication over which reinforcements and supplies entered Burma.¹

As the British retreated, they were reinforced by nine Chinese divisions of 6000 men each. These divisions, considered to be some of the best in the Chinese Nationalist Army, lacked adequate artillery and leadership.²

Despite these added forces, the British and Chinese coalition under the command of Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell was unsuccessful in stopping a numerically inferior Japanese Fifteenth Army. Supported by air and reinforced by two divisions brought into Burma after the fall of Singapore in February 1942, the Fifteenth Army quickly gained the advantage.³

Just three months later, the Japanese forced the shattered and humiliated Allied Army to retreat to defensive positions along the India-Burma border. General Stilwell and two of his Chinese divisions were forced to walk out of Burma as well. Stilwell shared in the British embarrassment as his remarks to the news media shortly after entering India reflect: "We got the hell kicked out of us. It was humiliating as hell. We ought to find out why it happened and return."⁴

BACKGROUND

Strategically, the Japanese conquest of Burma was part of a much larger plan that involved the isolation of the Chinese forces fighting against them in China. This isolation was designed to prohibit the flow of lend-lease material to China from the outside world, primarily the United States.⁵

To accomplish this, the Japanese had occupied all of the east coast of China as well as Indochina and Thailand prior to their attack at Pearl Harbor. Similarly, supplies entering China from the North had been stopped when the Germans attacked Russia. With the conquest of Burma, the Japanese had completed their isolation of China from the outside world.⁶

Burma was also significant to the Japanese on a much larger scale. It provided the linchpin for the Japanese defensive line that extended from eastern China through Indochina and Burma down the Malayan Peninsula, through the East Indies and on out into the Pacific Ocean.⁷

The British viewed the defense of Burma as secondary to that of India's. The German aggression in Europe, North Africa and especially the Middle East led the British to believe instead, that an attack through Afghanistan into India was the most likely scenario. Likewise, the British felt that a Japanese attack on Burma from Thailand was virtually impossible due to the lack of east-west roads and the rugged terrain along that border.⁸

Consequently, Burma was considered to be a natural buffer between India and the invading Japanese Army making its way through Indochina. Resources that could have been used for the defense of Burma were therefore shifted to the defense of India. Improvements were made to the road and rail networks along the Afghanistan-Indian border. This was done at the expense of improvements to Burma's border with India.⁹

Although roads and railways existed in northeastern India, they were primitive and primarily used by the tea and jute industry to transport crops to Calcutta. Moving military supplies and units over them in support of the British Army would be slow and very difficult. For example, the railway system was broad-gauged track and ran from Calcutta 235 miles north to Parbatipur. For half this distance only a single track existed. At Parbatipur coolies unloaded the trains and transferred their cargo to another train that ran on the meter-gauged track 220 miles up the Brahmaputra Valley to the ferry at Pandu. Here the railcars were pushed onto the ferry and were transported across the Brahmaputra River where the ferry was unloaded of the railcars and train. Reassembled on the other side, the train continued its trip one hundred miles to Dimapur where it was again unloaded and its cargo moved over land to the waiting British forces now defending the India-Burma border.¹⁰

The Japanese conquest of Burma then, not only isolated China, but placed the defense of India and the support of the retreating British Army at risk. This was the precarious position in which the British Army found itself in May 1942. Over the

course of the next three years, the British and Japanese would engage in battle in tropical jungle and hills and employ air power on an unprecedented scale. Each would come to understand the importance of secure lines of communication.

BURMA

Burma was a British colony of approximately sixteen million people at the onset of World War II (FIG. 1). It was almost 1200 miles long and 575 miles wide and had a total area of 263,000 square miles or about the size of France. Cities, towns and villages were concentrated along the rivers and coast, with Rangoon, the capital and largest city located at the mouth of the Irrawaddy River on the Bay of Bengal. About 500 miles north was the town of Mandalay, a major center for the transportation of goods south to Rangoon.¹¹

Natural barriers limited access to Burma except by sea. The Himalayan Mountains in the North prohibited entry into Burma from that direction. In the East, the Shan Hills with peaks up to 7500 feet ran parallel to the Burma-Thailand border. The 10,000 foot Naga and Chin Hills in the West ran north to south along the India-Burma frontier. These two mountain ranges were passable by foot only. Likewise, the mountains, rivers and climate within Burma were obstacles to military operations. Because of the north-south orientation of these mountains, military forces operating in Burma had to overcome terrain difficulties when moving east to west.¹²

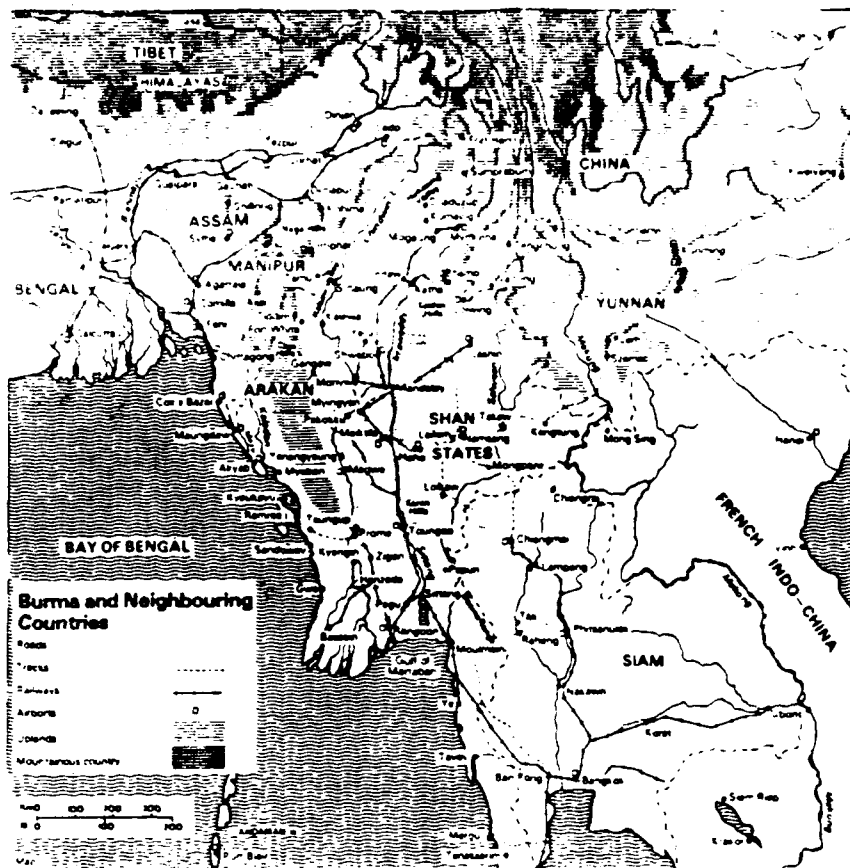


FIG. 1

Source: E.D. Smith. Battle for Burma. Holmes & Meier Publisher, Inc., p. 19.

The rivers, chief among them the Chidwin in the northwest, the Salween in the East and the Irrawaddy and Sittang in central Burma followed north-south courses. All rivers flooded their banks during the wet monsoon season which lasted from June to October. As a result, low-lying areas became impassable swamps in much of the country. The major rivers were navigable in the rainy season and travel on them by small boats and barges was possible.¹³

The main roads and railway lines in Burma followed the line of the rivers and therefore were primarily oriented north-south as well. There were no roads into the country from India and

Thailand suitable for the movement of men, equipment and supplies. Roads, or more accurately trails, were absent in the interior of the country. Except for a road that ran south and east down the Kabaw Valley and Chin Hills to the town of Kalewa on the Chidwin River, east-west movement anywhere else in Burma had to be made by foot or pack animals over jungle trails.¹⁴

Climate and disease were important considerations when conducting military operations in Burma. Heavy rains fell over the country during the rainy season. Average annual rainfalls ranged from 71 inches in the North to 188 inches in the South. The coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal received heavier rainfall with the Arakan Yoma in southwestern Burma averaging about 200 inches. Diseases were as serious an obstacle as the climate and terrain. Malaria, typhus and dysentery were the most common health hazards experienced.¹⁵

ALLIED STRATEGY

Allied strategy in the China, Burma, India (CBI) theater was based on keeping China in the war against Japan, thereby containing large Japanese forces that might be used elsewhere in the Pacific. Similarly, American planners hoped that Chinese air bases could eventually be used for the bombardment of Japan. They also hoped that the large Chinese manpower pool could be trained, equipped and used in a final offensive to bring about the defeat of the Japanese Army.¹⁶

This entire strategy was based on the availability of the Burma Road for transportation of lend-lease equipment to China. With the completion of the Japanese conquest of Burma, all plans based on the Burma Road were rendered obsolete.¹⁷

Allied planners therefore began to devise strategies that would keep China in the war and drive the Japanese from Burma. To accomplish this, Chinese and British leaders argued for an amphibious assault to recapture Rangoon, while the Americans insisted that the best way to keep China in the war and Japanese forces committed to fighting in Burma was to conduct a ground campaign in northern Burma.¹⁸

Eventually plans were developed for a series of amphibious assault along the coast of Burma. The liberation of Rangoon was the final objective. Simultaneously, Allied plans envisioned a land campaign into Burma from three directions. The American-led Chinese would attack in north Burma supported by a Chinese attack across the Salween down the Burma Road and a link-up in the vicinity of Mandalay. The British on the other hand, were to attack from Imphal in eastern India and eventually join with the Chinese as they drove south to capture Rangoon. The idea of a major offensive on this scale was abandoned because of a lack of amphibious shipping, an inadequate logistics base and insufficiently trained ground forces.¹⁹

Realizing these shortcomings, American and British commanders in the autumn of 1942 agreed to split the responsibility for the re-conquest of Burma. The British would have responsibility for the Imphal and Arakan fronts while the

Americans accepted responsibility for the northern front. This included the construction of a road from Ledo on the Indian frontier through Myitkyina in north-central Burma. The Ledo road as it was known, was to join the Burma Road near Wanting on the China-Burma border.²⁰

In the China, Burma, India theater, Allied and Japanese campaign planning was decentralized at Army or Corps level. Campaign approval, on the other hand, was centralized at theater or national levels due mainly to resource considerations for operations in other theaters and operational areas. Generally, planners envisioned campaigns on a larger and more ambitious scale than those that were actually executed. The major limiting factors were terrain, adequate forces, logistics and the harsh environment in which the each campaign was fought.

The remainder of this paper will describe the campaigns fought in Burma by Allied and Japanese forces (FIG. 2). Where possible, this paper will follow this chronological sequence. It should be noted that some campaigns were fought simultaneously, even though they were independent operations.

Figure 2

Major Campaigns and Operations in Burma

Japanese Conquest of Burma	January - May 1942
First Arakan Campaign	December 1942 - May 1943
First Wingate Expedition (Operation Longcloth)	February - April 1943
Second Arakan and 'HA-GO' Campaigns	January - March 1944

North Burma Campaign	October 1943 - March 1945
Second Wingate Expedition	March - August 1944
Japanese 'U-GO' Campaign	March - May 1944
Allied Re-Conquest of Burma	June 1944 - April 1945

THE FIRST ARAKAN CAMPAIGN

Long before the Allied retreat of 1942 was over, General Archibald Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief of British forces in India, had begun planning a counterattack for the fall dry season. The British desperately need a victory to bolster their morale and gain confidence in their ability to fight the Japanese. A lack of amphibious ships and adequate forces prevented him from engaging the Japanese on the scale outlined in the Allied strategy. Instead he settled for a ground campaign in the Arakan Yoma, down the Mayu Peninsula to the island and town of Akyab. He felt that the use of the airfield at Akyab could provide air cover for a land campaign into central Burma or for an amphibious assault on Rangoon.²¹

The British offensive in the Arakan began in December 1942. Two British-led Indian divisions attacked down the rugged Mayu Peninsula and initially met with little resistance. Only two Japanese battalions defended Akyab and a swift advance on the part of the Allies would have brought success. By the end of December, the advance had taken the Allied divisions to within ten miles of the island of Akyab. At this point, the advance was halted for two weeks to bring up supplies. This delay allowed the

Japanese time to bring up their 55th Division into blocking positions which stopped any further Allied advance. Over the next several months both sides brought reinforcements into the battle but neither side made much progress.²²

While these forces were engaged, the Japanese sent a battalion across the Arakan Yoma to the flank and rear of the Allied formations. The British considered the terrain and dense jungle of the Arakan Yoma and the Mayu Peninsula as a natural barrier and impossible for such a movement of troops. They were completely taken by surprise.²³

Once the battalion had taken its position in the British rear, the 55th Division took the offensive. Repeatedly flanking the road-bound Indian divisions, the Japanese cut their lines of supply and isolated them from reinforcements. These tactics, the same ones that served the Japanese so well in their conquest of Burma earlier in the year, had once again proved successful.²⁴

Faced with having their lines of communication severed, the British withdrew their 14th and 26th Divisions back to where they had started. The first Arakan campaign ended in May 1943 with both Allied divisions weakened by 2500 killed and wounded and many more sick and no tactical or operational gains.²⁵

OPERATION LONGCLOTH

Simultaneous with the operation in the Arakan, Operation Longcloth or the first Wingate expedition took place. The idea for the operation was conceived by Brigadier Orde C. Wingate

based on his experiences in irregular warfare in Palestine and Ethiopia. The operation involved infiltrating 3000 men, supplied by air, into Burma to destroy bridges and supply depots and to create havoc in the lightly defended Japanese rear area.²⁶

Wingate understood the advantage that air delivered supplies would give him. Instead of his forces being dependent on roads and susceptible to flanking movements and blocking formations, Wingate's units could move and hide in the jungle and fight at a time and place of their choosing. Furthermore, air re-supply enabled his forces, if surrounded, to stay and fight it out or break out and escape into the jungle.²⁷

The mission given Wingate's expeditionary brigade was to demolish railway lines between Mandalay and Myitkyina at several points and thereby cut supply lines to the two Japanese divisions in northern Burma. If circumstances permitted, they were to cut the railway between Mandalay and Lashio as well.²⁸

To accomplish this mission, Wingate broke his brigade into a Southern And a Northern Group. The smaller of the two groups, Southern Group, was to act as a diversion while the Northern Group with Wingate was to carry out the demolitions. To insure the deception was complete, the commander of the Southern Group, Major Jeffery Lockett wore the rank of a brigadier general during the operation. ²⁹

The operation began on 13 February 1943. After marching through 250 miles of occupied enemy territory, the Northern Group crossed the Chidwin River and carried out demolitions on the Mandalay-Myitkyina railroad. Despite this early success,

Wingate's men began to suffer from malaria and exhaustion from the long march and evasion of the Japanese. Instead of turning back, however, Wingate moved his forces east across the Irrawaddy River evading the pursuing Japanese and hoping to take advantage of any opportunity to damage the railroad to Lashio.³⁰

The monsoon season was fast approaching. With his forces nearly beyond the effective supply range of the aircraft supporting him from bases in Assam province in India, Wingate was forced to split his forces into smaller groups and leave Burma. One party went east to Yunnan province in China and another made its way north to Fort Hertz. The remainder of the brigade went west across the Chidwin River and infiltrated back to India.³¹

Operation Longcloth ended with thirty percent casualties. Operationally, Wingate's successes during the expedition were few. Although damage was done to the Mandalay-Myitkyina railroad, Allied bombers could have had the same effect more economically and at a less cost of lives. Furthermore, the Japanese were able to make repairs to the railroad very quickly. The success of Wingate's expedition then, was not directly related to material destroyed or enemy soldiers killed, but rather the effect it had on planning for future operations. For example, it proved that a force of men trained in jungle craft and tactics could fight in the jungle independent of land lines of communication.³²

Wingate's venture across the Chidwin and Naga Hills into Burma had a profound effect on the Japanese as well. It demonstrated to them that military formations could move over terrain heretofore thought impossible to cross. The Japanese

would call on this experience in their attempted invasion of India later on in the war.³³

JAPANESE PLANS FOR THE INVASION OF INDIA

Soon after the Allied defeat in Burma, the Japanese began the development of a plan to invade India. Operation 21, as it was called was developed in the summer of 1942, involved sending two divisions into India through northern Burma. They were to be supported by a two division attack through central Burma to capture Imphal. A fifth division was to attack along the coast to take the port city of Chittagong on the Bay of Bengal. The plan was abandoned when it was determined that lines of communication and forces were inadequate to continue the campaign into India.³⁴

The idea to invade India was again surfaced by Lieutenant General Mutaguchi, Commander of the Japanese 15th Army, shortly after Wingate's expedition returned to India in the spring of 1943. Mutaguchi realized he would be soon faced with an Allied ground offensive all along the Indian and Chinese borders unless he took action to prevent it.³⁵

He reasoned that a Japanese offensive to take the large Allied supply depot at Imphal in Assam province, would prevent the Allies from launching their attack. If successful it also would cut the lines of communication to the Allied air bases and the Chinese forces which they supported in northern Burma and in China.³⁶

Mutaguchi's plan was patterned after Operation 21 and involved two offensive operations. The main attack named 'U-GO', would be made by the Fifteenth Army against Imphal. A supporting attack, 'HA-GO', was designed to draw enemy units away from the Fifteenth Army. It was to be launched by one division in the Arakan just prior to the main attack on Imphal. Both plans relied on speed and surprise. The quick capture of enemy supplies was critical to the success of the plan since Japanese forces would be carrying only twenty days of supplies with them.³⁷

After careful study and war-gaming, Mutaguchi's plan was approved by the Japanese Imperial Headquarters on 31 December 1943. Tojo gave his approval to the plan on 7 January 1944 despite reservations over the lack of Japanese air power and adequate supply arrangements for the offensive. It was risky business but the Japanese believed they would be successful, especially since Wingate had proven it possible by traversing the same terrain over which the Japanese Army would travel.³⁸

Simultaneous to the planning done by the Japanese, plans for an Allied invasion of Burma were unfolding. Although planned independently, both campaigns would be executed in the early months of 1944. As the Japanese 15th Army infiltrated across the Chindwin River and Chin Hills to execute their 'HA-GO' and 'U-GO' plans, the Allies were gradually moving eastward and establishing supply and operating bases along the India-Burma frontier. In January 1944 both Armies would come into contact and engage in a series of battles that would ultimately determine the outcome of the war in Burma.

THE SECOND ARAKAN CAMPAIGN

Ever since the war began in Burma, the Allies had been making progress improving the supply route from Calcutta to northeastern India. Adequate supplies had been moved up and stockpiled at Imphal so that by the fall of 1943 offensive ground operations were once again possible.³⁹

Plans for the second Arakan campaign, January-March 1944, were patterned after the disastrous 1943 campaign except that more forces were to be used. Once again the airfield at Akyab was the objective. Likewise, amphibious resources were unavailable to conduct an amphibious assault. Therefore a ground offensive plan of action devised by the British Fourteenth Army was approved for implementation.⁴⁰

The Fourteenth Army plan called for an advance of the XV Corps down the Mayu Peninsula with the 5th Indian Division on the west and the 7th Indian Division on the east side of the Peninsula. The 81st West African Division was to move south down the Kaladan Valley to the East of the 7th Division. They were to block any attempt to flank the Allied advance as the Japanese had done in 1943. The 26th Indian Division was held in XV Corps reserve and two other divisions were available in Fourteenth Army reserve if needed. 7th Division was to be supplied by road, 5th Division by river and 81st Division by air.⁴¹

The campaign began in January 1944 and Allied units met with little opposition at first. On 1 February, 7th Division had

advanced to the Maungdaw-Buthidaung Road, about halfway down the Mayu Peninsula. Here they encountered stiff opposition from the 55th Japanese Division. The 55th Division was conducting the initial phase of the Japanese offensive in the Arakan, HA-GO' when the two units came into contact with each other.⁴²

Fourteenth Army and XV Corps, expecting an attack against the 7th Division flank, sent a brigade of the 5th Division east across the Mayu Peninsula to reinforce 7th Division. Meanwhile, the Japanese managed to send two brigades around the eastern flank of the 7th Division and hit them from the rear overrunning the 7th Division Headquarters in the process.⁴³

7th Division with the brigade of the 5th Division withdrew within a fortified logistics base known as the "Administration Box" and were told to hold fast and fight. The "Administration Box" was established as a forward operating base for Allied advances into Burma. Contained within this fortification were the ammunition stores, rations, fuel and other necessary supplies and services, including a field hospital, required by the Allies. The key to the Allied success or failure was their ability to resupply their forces within the "Administration Box". To accomplish this, the Allies gained local air superiority and flew resupply missions into the Allied fortification.

The Japanese, on the other hand, were forced to rely on the supplies they carried with them through the jungle and those they captured from the Allies. Despite several initial successes by the Japanese, the 7th Division, supplies by air, was able to repulse each of the Japanese attacks. After several days of

intense fighting, the Japanese, unable to capture Allied supplies or be supplied by air, began to run short of supplies, rations and ammunition they had carried with them through the jungle.

Meanwhile, the 26th Indian Division began moving from the north trapping the Japanese between them and the 7th Division fighting in the "Administration Box". The battle ended in March 1944 with the destruction of two brigades of the 55th Division. Shattered, hungry and defeated, the survivors of the 55th Division retreated back into central Burma.⁴⁴

Although the Japanese had tied up three Allied Divisions for three months they had failed in preventing reinforcements reaching the battle of Imphal which began according to Japanese plans in March. The Allies were able to airlift the 7th and 5th Divisions to that battle by the middle of April. Thus, the 'HA-GO' offensive ended without achieving its goal of drawing forces away from the main attack of the Japanese 15th Army which had infiltrated into eastern India from central Burma and was now engaged at Imphal. Additionally, the Japanese lost the use of the 55th Division in the process.⁴⁵

THE NORTH BURMA CAMPAIGN

The construction of an all weather road from Ledo in northeastern India through northern Burma to join with the Burma Road near Wanting China had been the primary focus of the Allied strategy in Burma. It was felt that this road would provide the

land line of communication lost to the Japanese when they conquered Burma and cut off the Burma Road.⁴⁶

American engineers took over the construction of the Ledo Road from the British in 1942 and had progressed part of the way into Japanese controlled Burma. The successful completion of the road however depended on two things; the skill of American engineers and the clearing of the Japanese forces that were positioned in the Hukawang Valley, the route through which the road was to travel.⁴⁷

In the fall of 1943, General Stilwell directed that the Chinese 22d and 38th Divisions advance down the Hukawang Valley to clear Japanese forces that stood in the way of road construction. His ultimate objective for them was the capture of the airfields at Myitkyina. Advancing as far as Yupbang Ga on the upper waters of the Chidwin River, the 38th Division was surrounded and engaged by the 18th Japanese Division. A fierce battle ensued and the 38th Division was close to being destroyed when, in 1944, reinforcements arrived and the Japanese were cleared from the area.⁴⁸

Assisted by the Merrill's Marauders and supplied by air, the Chinese divisions continued to move down the valley. Infiltrating through the jungle to the Japanese rear, the Marauders would form roadblocks on the enemy's supply lines and hold them while the Chinese advanced. These tactics, the same ones used by the Japanese, proved successful in preventing reinforcements from reaching the battle. Consequently, the Japanese were either destroyed or were forced to retreat through the jungle.⁴⁹

Despite heavy losses the Marauders and the two Chinese divisions were making progress. The 18th Japanese Division was reduced to half strength and was incapable of holding the advancing Allied forces. On 16 June the Chinese linked up with the second Wingate expedition's 77th Infantry Brigade at Kamaing.⁵⁰

The Marauders, reinforced with Chinese and native Kachin guerrillas, traversed the 6000 foot Kuman Mountains and on 17 May captured the Myitkyina South Airfield. Using siege tactics, the Chinese fought a bitter battle with the Japanese for 76 days. They were finally able to capture the town of Myitkyina on 3 August 1944. The Allied objective had been accomplished but at a cost of over 6500 casualties, most of them Chinese.⁵¹

From here Allied Forces, reinforced by the British 36th Division, three Chinese divisions and 4000 fresh troops from the United States launched their final offensive in October 1944. Their mission was to drive the remaining Japanese forces out of the Burma-China border areas so that a link-up of the Ledo and Burma Roads could be accomplished. This final operation took place along three axes of advance. The objective was the airfield and railroad terminal at Lashio, 150 miles south of Myitkyina.⁵²

The British 36th Division in the west advanced south along the railroad that ran from Mogaung to Indaw, capturing that city on 10 December 1944. Here the Division headed east to Katha and then southeast to Mogak which it occupied on 19 March 1945.⁵³

The formation in the center axis was the Chinese VI Army. It consisted of three divisions which moved south along the same

railroad traversed by the 36th Division. At Mawlu it attacked east and then south and captured Hsipaw on 16 March 1945. Here after having two of its divisions flown back to help clear the Japanese from western China, the 50th Chinese Division of the VI Army made contact with the 36th Division and the Chinese First Army to the east.⁵⁴

In the east the First Army drove south from Myitkyina and captured Lashio on 17 March 1945. Here after more than 17 months of hard fighting, the north Burma campaign ended. The Japanese had suffered great loss of life and had been cleared from northern Burma. After more than three years a land line of communication had finally been reopened between India and China. Supported by the Ledo-Burma Road and the airfields in eastern Burma, Allied forces could now finish driving the Japanese from Burma and western China.⁵⁵

THE SECOND WINGATE EXPEDITION

The Second Wingate Expedition or Operation Thursday was the brainstorm of the same man who had planned and led the first penetration into Burma in 1943, Major General Orde C. Wingate. The operation was originally conceived to be a supporting attack for Stilwell's offensive operations in northern Burma. As it turned out, however, Wingate's forces accomplished more than just blocking Japanese forces trying to reach the battle against Stilwell's Chinese divisions. His deep penetration had the added

benefit of occupying Japanese units that could have been used to reinforce the Fifteenth Japanese Army fighting the Allied Army at Imphal. Lastly, it increased the difficulties of supply for the Japanese units in western Burma.⁵⁶

Wingate's plan was patterned after his first expedition except that it differed in two respects. First, his ground force would be larger. Known as the 3d Indian Division, it consisted of five brigades instead of the one brigade available to him on his first expedition. Four of the five brigades, none of which were Indian, would ultimately take part in the invasion. The Japanese attack on Imphal necessitated one brigade being used there. Of the four remaining brigades, one would march in along the Ledo Road and provide a screen for Stilwell's Chinese divisions. The other three brigades were to be flown in by glider or landed by plane once airfields were secured.⁵⁷

The second major difference in this expedition was the use of dedicated air assets in support of the operation. General Henry H. Arnold, Commanding General Allied Air Forces, liked Wingate's idea. He agreed to provide a small task force of aircraft and personnel known as First Air Commando Group. It was commanded by Colonel Philip G. Cochran and proved to be pivotal in supplying ground forces in the execution of Wingate's plan.⁵⁸

Planning for the expedition was hampered by the widely separated Allied ground and air headquarters and the Japanese attack against Imphal. Wingate planned to use airfields near Imphal to launch his operation. With their loss airfields deeper inside India had to be used.⁵⁹

Three clearings in the north-central Burma jungle known as Chowringhee, Broadway and Picadilly were to be used to land Wingate's brigades. Unfortunately, last minute aerial photographic reconnaissance revealed that the Japanese or local natives had felled trees across the Picadilly clearing. Therefore all aircraft had to be diverted to Chowringhee and Broadway. The flights commenced on 5 March and continued until 12 March. Casualties for this phase of the operation were considerable. A total of 120 men were killed or injured mainly due to airplane crashes on rougher than expected landing strips.⁶⁰

Even while Wingate's forces were being landed, ground operations against the Japanese got underway. Landing within 25 miles of Indaw on the Mandalay-Myitkyina railroad, two brigades soon linked-up with the brigade that marched in from Ledo.⁶¹

One brigade established a strongly fortified block across the railroad near Mawlu and held in place for more than six weeks. During this time the Japanese threw 17 battalions against them and in the process suffered heavy casualties. Meanwhile the other two brigades established airfields nearby. On 23 March 1944, the fourth of Wingate's brigades landed on one of these airfields and together with the Ledo brigade launched an attack against the Japanese held airfield at Indaw. The attack failed. One brigade broke contact and marched north to link-up with Stilwell's forces while the other brigade was evacuated by air and eventually was replaced by a West African brigade. On the night of 24 March 1944, Wingate was killed when his B25 crashed

into the side of a mountain. He was replaced by Brigadier W.D.A. Lentaigne who had formerly commanded one of Wingate's brigades.⁶²

Throughout the remainder of the summer of 1944, the three remaining brigades fought the Japanese and disrupted his supply lines in and around Myitkyina and Mandalay. In August a beleaguered and exhausted 3d Indian Division departed Burma. Operation Thursday had ended. Their contributions to Stilwell's effort in northern Burma is hard to measure and has been discredited by many historians. The fact remains that Japanese writings concerning the operation indicate that their supply lines were affected. Likewise, units that could have been brought into the Imphal battle had to be used to protect the rear area from Wingate's forces.⁶³

THE SIEGE OF IMPHAL

As Stilwell and Wingate were launching their campaigns in northern Burma, the Japanese launched their offensive 'U-GO' along the central Burma front. The operation began in early March 1944 despite the failure of the 55th Japanese Division to accomplish its mission during the 'HA-GO' operation in the Arakan (January-March 1944).

The Japanese failed to understand that Allied forces supplied by air would stand and fight. As a result the 55th Division was rendered combat ineffective and was unable to prevent Allied divisions from joining the fight at Imphal. Had

the Japanese paid closer attention to the plight of the 55th Division, they might have delayed their campaign at Imphal.⁶⁴

The town of Imphal lies on the Imphal plain in Manipur Province in northeastern India. It was the location of a major Allied supply depot. By 1944, the British had completed an all weather road that ran north through the town of Kohima to Dimapur where the road intersected the railroad coming north from Calcutta. From Imphal two roads of poorer quality ran to the South. One road entered the Kabaw Valley after crossing the Chin Hills and ran as far as Kawela on the Chidwin River. It was trafficable during the dry season but not for large military formations. Another road worked its way down the Chin Hills to Tiddim and then east to join the road through the Kabaw Valley and on to Kalewa. The British planned on using both roads for an eventual offensive into Burma.⁶⁵

The Japanese launched their attack along three axes. The 31st Division crossed the Chidwin River and defeated a British airborne regiment near Ukhrul. From here they infiltrated through the mountains to the northwest and attacked Kohima where they placed a roadblock across the Imphal-Kohima-Dimapur Road. The 15th Division crossed the Chidwin and moved west through the mountains. Attacking Imphal from the east, they placed a roadblock across the Imphal-Kohima Road just north of Imphal. Finally, the 33d Division attacked along the Tiddim Road up the Kabaw Valley and into the Imphal Plain from the south. By the beginning of April the Japanese had successfully encircled Imphal and Kohima and had blocked the major road joining the towns.⁶⁶

Despite their success however, the Japanese had failed to capture the supply depots at Imphal and Dimapur. Furthermore, they failed to secure the major railroad terminal at Dimapur.⁶⁷

These failures doomed their attack for two reasons. First, the Japanese relied on the capture of Allied supplies to sustain their forces. Secondly, the capture of the rail terminal at Dimapur would have placed at risk Stilwell's forces in northern Burma and the Allied air supply route into China. Nevertheless, the Japanese succeeded in the isolation of about 170,000 men at Imphal and delayed the Allied offensive for several months.⁶⁸

The British IV Corps, consisting of three divisions, an airborne brigade (minus) and a brigade of Chin Hill natives under British leadership, was located in the Imphal area when the Japanese offensive began. Realizing that they were out-flanked and in danger of being destroyed, the Corps withdrew into point defensive positions around Imphal and Kohima. Both independent brigades were committed in the process, leaving the Corps without a reserve. Cut off except by air the situation became desperate by the end of March.⁶⁹

Stilwell was afraid that his lifeline from Calcutta was about to be cut. Therefore, he offered General Slim, Commander Fourteenth Army, a Chinese division to help with containing the Japanese. Slim declined Stilwell's offer. Instead he flew in the 5th and 7th Divisions from the Arakan front to reinforce the IV Corps in the Imphal and Dimapur area. The landing of forces near Dimapur proved to be the decisive maneuver of the campaign because they arrived just as the 31st Japanese Division was

launching its attack against Kohima. These reinforcements managed to hold off the Japanese long enough for General Slim to bring up XXXIII Corps from India and insert it in defense of Dimapur.⁷⁰

Here the 31st Division commander, General Soto made two mistakes that probably cost the Japanese the campaign in India. First he elected to use siege tactics to take Kohima instead of bypassing it for the more strategic prize at Dimapur. Had he taken it, the outcome would have been different because it would have cut off supplies going to Stilwell and it would have prevented reinforcements and supplies from reaching Imphal.⁷¹

Another thing the Japanese had incorrectly calculated was their capability to re-supply their own forces. Although they controlled the major land lines of communication between Imphal and Kohima, they did not possess the towns and the supply depots located near them. Similarly, the Japanese were unable to be supplied by air because of Allied air superiority in and around Imphal. Although the Japanese were cognizant of the value air delivered supplies would mean to the 'U-GO' operation, they were unable to deliver them to their soldiers. Therefore, the Japanese forces north of Imphal and those surrounding Kohima were unable to be supplied except for the meager supplies brought in through the jungle trails.⁷²

The Allies, conversely, were supplied by air and retained access to the vast supplies stored at Imphal and Kohima. This situation soon had a devastating effect on the Japanese units. For example, General Soto withdrew his division from around Kohima in late May because his men had exhausted their rations.

He simply refused to continue the fight until his soldiers were fed and resupplied.⁷³

The arrival of XXXIII Corps at Dimapur significantly increased the combat force ratio in favor of the Allies. The combination of air superiority and increased ground combat power sealed the fate of the Japanese at Imphal. By the end of June, Japanese units were critically short of supplies and had suffered heavy casualties. The allies who had previously been in a strong point defense, broke out of their defensive positions and took the offense.⁷⁴

As XXXIII Corps advanced south along the Imphal-Kohima-Dimapur Road, the IV Corps defending Imphal sent its 5th Division north to linkup with XXXIII Corps and clear the road between Imphal and Kohima. The 33d Japanese Division attempted a series of counterattacks but was unsuccessful in stopping the Allies. After losing nearly two-thirds of its strength, the 33d Division retreated east toward the Chidwin River. On 22 June lead elements of the XXXIII Corps and 5th Division met and the first overland supply convoy since the end of March was sent to Imphal down the Imphal-Kohima Road.⁷⁵

ALLIED RE-CONQUEST OF BURMA

The Japanese failure to capture Imphal and the loss of northern Burma marked the beginning of the end for their Army in Burma. The pendulum of battle had swung in favor of the Allies and they took the offense. By the end of July, the Japanese Army

had been cleared from the Imphal Plain and was retreating toward the Chidwin River.

Although it was the height of the wet monsoon season, the Fourteenth Army continued to press the attack. Supplied by air, the British turned the Japanese tactics of infiltrating, flanking movements and roadblocks on them. Now it was the Japanese who were forced to protect their rear and the lines of communication that supported them.⁷⁶

In early August, XXXIII Corps had replaced IV Corps in the pursuit of the enemy. (IV Corps had withdrawn to India to plan and train for operations across the Chidwin). The 11th East African Division of XXXIII Corps advanced down the Kabaw Valley and took Sittaung in early September. The 5th Division continued the pursuit of the 33d Japanese Division down the Tiddim Road. On 15 November lead elements of the 11th Division captured Kalembo on the west bank of the Chidwin. Meanwhile, 5th Division was gaining momentum as well. After capturing Tiddim in October, the Division closed with the 11th Division at Kalembo in mid-November.⁷⁷

IV Corps, after a brief stay in India took control of the British advance near Kalembo and crossed the Chidwin River on 19 November. XXXIII Corps captured Kalewa on the Chidwin, erected a Bailey bridge and its 20th Indian Division crossed the river in early December. By mid-December then, major elements of the Fourteenth Army had crossed the Chidwin River and began their advance to the east. At about this time, the 36th British Division was fighting its way southward down the Mandalay-

Myitkyina Railroad and made contact with IV Corps on 11 December.⁷⁸

After XXXIII Corps crossed the Chidwin, they moved against the Japanese north and west of Mandalay. It was soon evident to General Slim that the Japanese were engaged in a delaying action. He decided to use a maneuver that would force the Japanese into a decisive battle. He ordered XXXIII Corps with attached IV Corps units that had crossed the Chidwin, to continue to place pressure on the Japanese. Meanwhile, he sent IV Corps with divisions just arrived from Imphal, south down the Myittka valley. After crossing the Irrawaddy south of Mandalay, the IV Corps advanced toward Meiktila.⁷⁹

The Japanese felt the main effort was coming from XXXIII Corps north and west of Mandalay. Therefore, they ordered nine and one half divisions into the Mandalay-Meiktila area. Here in late February 1945, the Japanese attempted to wipe out the Allied units west of Mandalay and their bridgeheads south of the Irrawaddy. With the Japanese concentrated near Mandalay, IV Corps quickly advanced to the east and captured Meiktila on 4 March. This maneuver, designed by Slim, cut the lines of communication to the Japanese divisions in the Mandalay area. The Japanese made several counterattacks in the Mandalay and Meiktila area in an attempt to reestablish their communications lines. The Allies repulsed each counterattack at great loss of life to the Japanese. By the end of March, Mandalay and Meiktila were finally in Allied hands and the main strength of the Japanese Army in Burma had been defeated.⁸⁰

CONCLUSION

The Japanese defeat at Mandalay and Meiktila made it possible for an advance by the Fourteenth Army on Rangoon. Supported by an attack of the British XV Corps through the Arakan, the Fourteenth Army began clearing the remaining Japanese forces occupying positions north of Rangoon. Pressured from the North and West, the Japanese were quickly routed and withdrew their formations back into Thailand. By the end of April, Rangoon was in Allied hands. It had taken the Allies over three years of campaigning to recapture Burma. The terrain, climate and enemy had been formidable opponents.

LESSONS LEARNED

A brief description of the lessons from the campaigns in Burma will, perhaps help the reader formulate conclusions useful in planning future operations in this country. The campaigns in Burma were fought in a theater without mature internal lines of communication. Absent adequate road and rail systems operations in Burma were dependent on maintaining what lines of communications did exist. A discussion of these efforts from a strategic, operational and tactical perspective is presented below.

Strategic

Allied strategy was based on keeping China in the war against Japan. Japan understood this and invaded Burma to complete the isolation of China. While they succeeded in slowing the flow of supplies to China, they never completely cut them off. Japan was never able to stop the flow of lend-lease material to China by air. Their failure to continue their attack into India allowed the Allies an opportunity to establish air bases there and provide the flow of material to China. The Japanese had another opportunity later in the war to stop the flow by air and isolate Allied units in northern Burma. Their failure to capture Dimapur in 1944 was a error that cost them the war in Burma.

The Allied strategy was flawed from the start. The Allies were not prepared to defend all of Burma. Only the Japanese failure to carry their 1942 campaign into India allowed the Allies the time to build air bases and begin the airlift into China. The Allies had inadequate forces in Burma to defend all of the Burma Road. They had failed to adequately prepare the country for an invasion. The transportation infrastructure was unsatisfactory for military operations.

Operational

Campaigns in Burma were fought over control of the enemy's lines of communication. Because terrain was a handicap to each

Army, the movement of supplies and reinforcements was difficult. Campaigns were targeted at exploiting this weakness. Initially, the Japanese understood that the Allies were road bound so their attacks were designed to deny them access to the roads. The Allied use of air eventually allowed them to gain air superiority and provided them the flexibility to operate independent of roads. As the war progressed, the Japanese air force became less a threat to Allied operations and as a result, the Japanese became more dependent on roads and the Allies less so for supplies and reinforcements. As an example, the Allies were able to influence the action more quickly than the Japanese such as during the second Arakan and Imphal campaigns. Using air, the Allies reacted faster in terms of moving reinforcements to counter Japanese threats to Imphal and Dimapur.

Tactical

Infiltration, roadblocks and flanking movements were tactics used by each Army. At first the Japanese were more skilled and their resourcefulness at small unit level benefitted them greatly during their initial drive into Burma. As the war progressed, the tactics employed by the Japanese became less effective.

The second Arakan campaign was the turning point for the Allies. During this campaign, there was less reliance on roads for resupply. Confident that they could be reinforced and supplied by air, the Allies no longer fought on the Japanese

terms. Instead they developed forward operating bases and air delivery techniques that allowed them to operate independent of land lines of communication. This technique was used again during operations in northern Burma and the Fourteenth Army drive to the Chidwin in 1944.

SUMMARY

The campaigns of Burma illustrate the necessity to maintain secure lines of communications at the strategic, operational and tactical levels of war. Disruptions at any level have an impact on the outcome of the campaign and the overall strategy to win the war. Over time, the Allies learned that the use of air to move supplies and reinforcements was crucial to preventing disruptions to their lines of communications in Burma.

In contrast, the Japanese tended to downgrade the importance of logistics and secure lines of communications. Instead, they favored operational and tactical surprise. Consequently, sustaining their forces was accomplished by living off of the land or off of captured supplies. In a country virtually void of a transportation infrastructure, this attitude toward logistics and secure lines of communication eventually led to the Japanese defeat in Burma.

ENDNOTES

1. Joe G. Taylor, Air Supply in the Burma Campaign, p.4.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Fred Eldridge, Wrath in Burma, p. 125.
5. Taylor, p. 3.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. S. Woodburn Kirby, The War Against Japan, Vol. 3: The Decisive Battles, p. 17.
9. Ibid.
10. William J. Slim, Field Marshall, Defeat into Victory, p. 142.
11. Louis Allen, Burma, The Longest War 1941-45, pp. 7-9.
12. Ibid., p. 7.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p.8.
15. Ibid.
16. Taylor, p. 4.
17. Ibid., p. 5.
18. Ibid., p. 6.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 5.
21. Allen, p. 93.
22. Ibid., pp. 95-97.
23. Ibid., pp. 100-101.

24. Ibid., pp. 108-110.
25. Ibid., p. 112.
26. Taylor, p. 14.
27. Allen, p. 120.
28. Taylor, p. 14.
29. Allen, p. 127.
30. Ibid., pp. 127-131.
31. Ibid., p. 137.
32. Ibid., p. 147.
33. Ibid., pp. 147-148.
34. Ibid., pp. 150-152.
35. Ibid., p. 154.
36. Ibid.
37. Kirby, pp. 78-79.
38. Allen, pp. 159-166.
39. Kirby, pp. pp. 23-24.
40. Ibid., pp. 116-117.
41. "Burma, A Miracle in Military Achievement", Southeast Asia Command Newsletter, p. 6.
42. Taylor, p. 55.
43. Slim, pp. 200-203.
44. Ibid., pp. 207-211.
45. Taylor, p. 58.
46. Leslie Anders, The Ledo Road, p. 22.
47. Taylor, pp. 17-18.
48. C. M. Buchanan and John R. McDowell, Stilwell Road, p.

49. Taylor, pp. 18-19.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., pp. 25-29.
52. Ibid., p. 30.
53. Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, Time Runs Out In CBI, p. 105-106.
54. Taylor, p. 33.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 73.
57. Sheldford Bidwell, The Chindit War, pp. 46-47 and pp. 78-79.
58. Ibid.
59. Taylor, pp. 65-67.
60. Bidwell, pp. 104-110.
61. Ibid., pp. 138-139.
62. Taylor, p. 70.
63. Ibid., p. 73.
64. Kirby, p. 199.
65. Taylor, p. 74.
66. Kirby, p. 190.
67. Taylor, p. 75.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., p. 77.
71. Slim, p. 266.
72. Allen, pp. 288-289.
73. Ibid.

74. Slim, pp. 283-284.
75. Allen, pp. 294-296.
76. Slim, pp. 300-302.
77. Ibid., p. 322.
78. Ibid., pp. 323-327.
79. Taylor, p. 99.
80. Ibid., p. 100.

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