

BURMA, 1942



The U.S. Army Campaigns
of World War II

Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. During the next several years, the U.S. Army will participate in the nation's 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II. The commemoration will include the publication of various materials to help educate Americans about that war. The works produced will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

World War II was waged on land, on sea, and in the air over several diverse theaters of operation for approximately six years. The following essay is one of a series of campaign studies highlighting those struggles that, with their accompanying suggestions for further reading, are designed to introduce you to one of the Army's significant military feats from that war.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Clayton R. Newell. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

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Burma, 1942

7 December 1941-26 May 1942

On 8 December 1941, after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States declared war on Japan and became an active participant in World War II. For some months prior to that attack, however, the United States had been supporting China's war against Japan with money and materiel. Pearl Harbor formally brought America into World War II, but it was an earlier American commitment to China that drew the United States Army into the Burma Campaign of 1942.

Japan had invaded China in 1937, gradually isolating it from the rest of the world except for two tenuous supply lines: a narrow-gauge railway originating in Haiphong, French Indochina; and the Burma Road, an improved gravel highway linking Lashio in British Burma to Kunming in China. Along these routes traveled the materiel that made it possible for Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese government to resist the Japanese offensives into the interior.

In 1940 Japan took advantage of the German invasion of France to cut both supply lines to China. In June, with France focused on the war in Europe, Japanese warships moved into French Indochina and closed the railroad from Haiphong. A month later, threatening war if its demands were not met, Japan secured an agreement from the hard-pressed British government to close the Burma Road to war materiel temporarily.

The Burma Road reopened in October 1940, literally the sole lifeline to China. By late 1941 the United States was shipping lend-lease materiel by sea to the Burmese port of Rangoon, where it was transferred to railroad cars for the trip to Lashio in northern Burma and finally carried by truck over the 712-mile-long Burma Road to Kunming. Over this narrow highway, trucks carried munitions and materiel to supply the Chinese Army, whose continuing strength in turn forced the Japanese to keep considerable numbers of ground forces stationed in China. Consequently, Japanese strategists decided to cut the Burma lifeline, gain complete control of China, and free their forces for use elsewhere in the Pacific.

Strategic Setting

Burma, a country slightly smaller in area than the state of Texas, lies imbedded in the underbelly of the Asian landmass between India and China. Along the northern, eastern, and western borders of Burma



are high mountains. The Himalayas to the north reach altitudes of 19,000 feet. The western mountains between Burma and India, forming the Burma-Java Arc, have pinnacles as high as 12,000 feet. On the east the Shan Plateau, between Burma and China, features relatively modest peaks of less than 9,000 feet. The Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea mark the southern boundary; on the southeast, Burma shares an extended border with Thailand. The central part of the country consists of north-south belts of fertile plains, river valleys, and deltas. Rainfall is heavy throughout the year. The Irrawaddy River and its major tributary, the Chindwin, drain the western portions of the country, and the Salween and Sittang Rivers drain the regions in the east.

The geography of Burma had isolated it from India and China, its larger and more populous neighbors. The high, rugged mountain ranges discouraged trade and travel. This lack of contact had shaped Burma into a country distinctly different from either of those larger neighbors, who in turn had little interest in Burma given the natural barriers to invasion. Japan's dramatic 1941 bid for dominance in the Far East, however, caused both India and China and their Western patrons, Great Britain and the United States, respectively, to focus attention on Burma.

At one time the British had attempted to govern Burma as a province of India, but the artificial mixing of the two cultures proved unworkable. In 1937 Burma had become a separate colony with a largely autonomous government. Its still-dependent status dissatisfied many of the more politically aware Burmese, who formed a vocal minority political party favoring complete independence from Britain. When a number of the leaders of this movement visited Tokyo in the years before 1941, Japanese government officials had expressed sympathy with their efforts to attain independence. Burma, however, was still very much a permanent possession in the eyes of Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who clearly had no intention of presiding over the dissolution of the British Empire. Churchill saw the *status quo ante helium* as a primary British war aim, with both India and Burma remaining colonies as they had been since 1941.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt had a different vision for postwar Asia. Roosevelt believed that the European empires in the Far East were archaic and that their colonies would soon be independent countries. He also wanted China treated as an equal Allied partner in the war against Japan in the hope that it would develop into a great power friendly to the West. On a more immediate and practical note, keeping China in the war would also keep a large contingent of Japanese ground forces occupied on the Asian mainland, out of the way of American operations in the Pacific.

Although Great Britain and the United States were pursuing the same strategic goal of ultimately defeating Japan, they disagreed about Burma's role in attaining that goal. Their leaders agreed that Burma should be defended against the Japanese, but their motives differed. For the British, Burma provided a convenient barrier between India, the "crown jewel" of their empire, and China with its Japanese military occupation. The Americans saw Burma as the life-line that could provide China the means to throw off the shackles of Japanese occupation and become a viable member of the international community.

Despite the Allies' determination to hold Burma, their plans for the defense of the region were incomplete. The Burmese were not consulted and had little reason to fight the Japanese. More significantly, neither Britain nor the United States was prepared to commit significant forces to save the area. Japanese leaders, in contrast, were prepared to do more and viewed Burma as critical to their overall strategy for the war. The occupation of Burma would protect gains already secured in the southwest Pacific, set the stage for a possible invasion of India that conceivably could link up with a German drive out of the Middle East, and once and for all close the Allied supply line along the Burma Road into China.

Operations

Less than a week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese planes took off from captured bases in Thailand and opened the invasion of Burma by bombing the Tavoy airdrome, a forward British outpost on the Andaman Sea south of Rangoon. The next day, 12 December 1941, small Japanese units began the ground offensive by infiltrating into Burma. Not having prepared for war, Imperial British forces in Burma lacked even such rudimentary necessities as an adequate military intelligence staff. Although a civil defense commissioner had been appointed in November 1941, the British had not made contingency arrangements, such as military control of the railroads and the inland waterways. The only British forces in Burma were a heterogeneous mixture of Burmese, British, and Indian units known as the Army in Burma. Their air support consisted of some sixteen obsolete Royal Air Force (RAF) fighters.

The only American combat force even remotely available at the onset of the fighting was the fledgling American Volunteer Group (AVG). Organized by retired Army Air Forces Col. Claire L. Chennault, with the approval of both the Chinese and American governments, the AVG was preparing to provide air support to the Chinese Army against the Japanese in China. The AVG had begun training during the summer of 1941 in Burma to be out of range of Japanese air raids until ready for combat.

Chennault had hoped to employ his three squadrons of fighter aircraft, after thorough training, as a single unit in China, but the outbreak of war in the Pacific and subsequent Japanese invasion of Burma quickly changed his priorities. In response to a British request for support on 12 December, one squadron of the AVG moved from the training base in Toungoo to Mingaladon, near Rangoon, to help protect the capital city





P-43s being serviced at afield in China. (National Archives)

and its port facilities. The two remaining squadrons deployed to China to protect Chinese cities and patrol the Burma Road.

When Japan began operations in Burma, the United States recognized that the British would need assistance. The American Military Mission to China (AMMISCA), under Brig. Gen. John Magruder, had been in Chungking since September 1941 to coordinate, among other things, American lend-lease aid for China. On 16 December the War Department gave Magruder authority to transfer lend-lease materiel awaiting transportation in the port of Rangoon from Chinese to British control. The transfer, however, was subject to Chinese approval since, in accordance with lend-lease agreements, title for the materiel had been technically transferred to China when it left the United States.

Shortly after the War Department authorized the transfer, the responsible American officer in Rangoon, Lt. Col. Joseph J. Twitty, came under considerable pressure to release some of the weapons and equipment without waiting for Chinese approval. He responded by asking the government of Burma to impound and safeguard the materiel in Rangoon. He ostensibly made this request to ensure that the materiel was not moved elsewhere until Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the ruler of Nationalist China, approved the transfer to the British. Not unexpectedly, the Chinese swiftly objected to the transfer. With little love for the British or their colonial objectives, the Chinese

government quickly labeled the arrangement “illegal confiscation.” Because the most valuable materiel affected was a cargo of munitions on board the *Tulsa*, an American ship anchored in Rangoon harbor, the controversy became known as the *Tulsa* incident.

The senior Chinese representative in Rangoon, General Yu Fei-peng, a cousin of the generalissimo, became the focal point of the affair. Colonel Twitty apparently convinced him that the materiel really had been impounded to safeguard it. Nevertheless, the Chinese authorities in Burma requested the establishment of a committee of experts from China, Britain, and the United States to determine the appropriate disposition of specific items of equipment. This suggestion was acted upon immediately, and by the time Magruder’s headquarters in Chungking learned of the committee’s existence, it was already busy deciding what to keep in Burma for British use and what to send on to China.

Magruder hoped to settle the question of providing Chinese lend-lease materiel to the British at a 23 December conference in Chungking, on the assumption that the Chinese had concurred with the actions already taken in Rangoon. Like many Americans, however, Magruder had much to learn about internal Chinese politico-military affairs. On Christmas Day, when the question of the sequestered materiel finally arose, Magruder was startled to hear the Chinese charge that the British had stolen Nationalist lend-lease stocks in Rangoon with American assistance. The generalissimo had decided that the seizure of the *Tulsa* cargo amounted to an unfriendly act and that *all* lend-lease materiel at Rangoon should therefore be given to the British or returned to the Americans. All Chinese personnel in Burma would return to China and all cooperation between China and Britain would cease.

Magruder immediately made conciliatory gestures to both the British and the Chinese in the hope of preventing an impending Allied rift. He gained an audience with the generalissimo and found him in a friendly mood. After listening to Magruder’s assurances that all was well with the lend-lease program, the generalissimo announced that he had already approved the initial list of British requests for materiel. He also sanctioned the joint American, British, and Chinese allocation committee in Rangoon and suggested that it continue its work. In an apparent face-saving gesture for the *Tulsa* incident, the generalissimo insisted that Magruder replace Colonel Twitty. Magruder acquiesced, and eventually large amounts of lend-lease weapons and equipment, originally earmarked for Nationalist China, went to the British for use in the defense of Burma. The affair, however, typified the problems Americans would face when dealing with the mercurial Chiang Kai-shek.

The international tensions existing among the nations defending Burma would, in fact, bedevil the entire campaign. Abrupt changes of mind by Chiang Kai-shek, such as his apparent reversal on the Chinese lend-lease policy, were a constant source of irritation for American and British officers who could never be sure when they had a real decision from him. The *Tulsa* incident also emphasized the differences between the British and American policies regarding China. The British were fighting for the future of their empire in the Far East and had little concern for China. The Americans, sensitive about their treatment of China in the past, sought to make it a more equal member of the Alliance.

Other problems originated with the British, who were jealous of their imperial prerogatives. The Chinese were willing, even anxious, to provide troops to assist in the defense of Burma. The generalissimo offered two armies with the proviso that they would operate in designated areas under Chinese command and would not be committed to battle piecemeal. Reluctant at first to permit large Chinese forces to operate in Burma, the British agreed to accept only one division of Chinese troops. Field Marshal Sir Archibald P. Wavell, British commander in chief in India, believed the Japanese offensive in Burma was overextended and would only end in failure; Chinese forces were not required for victory. Accepting the use of one Chinese division, he judged, was an adequate response to the generalissimo's offer.

Although the British were lukewarm about Chinese participation in the defense of Burma, the Americans embraced the idea. When the Chinese threat of stopping cooperation with Britain after the *Tulsa* incident had reached the Allied Arcadia Conference in Washington, D.C., the Americans reacted with alarm, fearing China might actually elect to withdraw from the war. This fear was exacerbated by the continuing string of Japanese successes in the Pacific (Hong Kong had surrendered on Christmas Day and Manila was declared an open city the next day).

Roosevelt, a long-time China booster, convinced Churchill to appease the generalissimo by inviting him to serve as supreme commander of Allied forces in a separate China theater. The offer was somewhat hollow, since there had never been any plan to put British or American forces into China and there would be no Chinese participation in the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff. Nevertheless, the generalissimo accepted the offer and even requested an American officer to head the Allied staff.

After some discussion, the War Department nominated Maj. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell to the Chinese government to be the Allied chief of staff. Stilwell's numerous tours on the Asian mainland had made him

extremely knowledgeable about the Chinese Army. However, he was somewhat less than enthusiastic about the position, since he had already been tentatively selected to command the Allied invasion of North Africa. When Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall informed him of his new posting on 23 January 1942, a disappointed Stilwell simply replied, "I'll go where I'm sent."

Stilwell's misgivings proved well founded. His specific command authority was vague from the beginning. Prior to his appointment, the War Department had received Chinese approval for Stilwell to command the Chinese forces sent to Burma, or at least to have "executive control" over them. But executive control would turn out to be a rather vaguely defined term that would lead to considerable confusion and much rancor between Stilwell and the Chinese.

Stilwell's assignment orders designated him "Chief of Staff to the Supreme Commander of the Chinese Theater." When he reported to the Chinese theater, his orders designated him "Commanding General of the United States Forces in the Chinese Theater of Operations, Burma, and India." The orders did not address the specific duties implicit in these positions, especially his relationship with British theater commands. Nevertheless, with the prospect of commanding Chinese forces in Burma, Stilwell planned to organize his staff along the lines of a corps headquarters. Before his departure for the Far East, he had received the approval of the War Department to designate his headquarters, to include any U.S. forces that might join him, the United States Task Force in China.

Even as Stilwell assembled his staff in Washington and began the long journey to the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater of Operations, the situation in Burma was deteriorating rapidly. After a round of meetings in Washington, which included President Roosevelt, the secretary of war, and various Chinese diplomats, Stilwell and his staff left Florida on 13 February 1942, appropriately enough a Friday.

As the party traveled to the Far East, accomplishing the twelve-day trip in a series of plane rides through the Caribbean to South America, over to Africa, and across the Middle East, Japanese successes in the CBI theater continued to mount. Singapore surrendered with 80,000 troops on 15 February; eight days later the British-Indian brigades in Burma were crushed in the Battle of the Sittang Bridge, a defeat that effectively left the path to Rangoon open to the Japanese advance. On 25 February, the Australian-British-Dutch-American Command (ABDACOM), the Allied command established on 15 January to defend the region, was dissolved in the face of continued Japanese pressure. Although Stilwell was assigned duties in China,



Japanese troops firing a heavy machine gun. (National Archives)

events in Burma thus dominated his first months as Chiang Kai-shek's Allied chief of staff.

With Rangoon threatened, Magruder ordered the destruction of all lend-lease stocks in an effort to deny them to the invading Japanese. As the Japanese approached, there had been frantic activity to move as much materiel as possible north to the Burma Road, but it was still necessary to destroy more than 900 trucks in various stages of assembly, 5,000 tires, 1,000 blankets and sheets, and more than a ton of miscellaneous items. Magruder transferred much materiel to the British forces, including 300 British-made Bren guns with 3 million rounds of ammunition, 1,000 machine guns with 180,000 rounds of ammunition, 260 jeeps, 683 trucks, and 100 field telephones. In spite of the destruction and transfer to the British, however, over 19,000 tons of lend-lease materiel remained in Rangoon when it fell to the Japanese on 8 March.

As Stilwell prepared for his new assignment, the 10th U.S. Air Force was activated in Ohio and slated for deployment to the CBI



Crew chief indicates a P-40 pilot's scores. (National Archives)

Theater of Operations. The 10th was to be based in India with the mission of supporting China. Maj. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton, an airman experienced in fighting the Japanese in the Netherlands East Indies, assumed command of the new air force when it arrived in India in early March 1942. Although the 10th Air Force was assigned to the CBI to support the Chinese, the Japanese offensive in Burma meant that Brereton's bombers would be supporting the interests of two major Allies, China and Great Britain.

About the only good news in Burma in early March was that Chinese troops were soon expected to enter the defensive campaign. Chiang Kai-shek had agreed that Stilwell would command Chinese forces sent to Burma, and in the press of the military emergency, Chiang Kai-shek and the British had even come to an agreement on the use of these forces. During February, the 5th and 6th Chinese Armies, each with three divisions, slowly began moving into Burma. The 5th was the stronger of the two, with three divisions at full strength, one of which

was mechanized. The 6th, however, was generally considered a second-rate outfit, with all three of its divisions understrength.

The movement of the two Chinese armies into Burma proved arduous. Troop transport was scarce, and the Chinese Army had little or no internal logistical support system. Moreover, the Chinese senior officers, their army and division commanders, customarily responded only to orders directly from Chungking. Chiang Kai-shek waited until 1 March to allow 5th Army units to begin moving into Burma. There, the British were able to provide some logistical support, but not unexpectedly, they found Chinese commanders difficult to deal with.

Meanwhile, after spending almost a week in India learning what he could from the British (“nobody but the quartermaster knew anything at all,” he wrote in his diary during the visit), Stilwell finally arrived in Chungking on 4 March and opened the Headquarters, American Army Forces, China, Burma, and India. With this action, Magruder and AMMISCA in China, as well as Brereton and the 10th Air Force in India, came under Stilwell’s command. However, Chennault’s AVG, which had not yet integrated into the U.S. Army, remained independent. Two days later, just before the fall of Rangoon, Chiang Kai-shek met with his new Allied chief of staff.

When they met on 6 March, Chiang Kai-shek expressed his concern about the overall command in Burma and the state of Sino-British relations. He informed Stilwell that he had already “told those [Chinese] army commanders [in Burma] not to take orders from anybody but you and to wait until you came.” If the British tried to give orders to his commanders, they would simply return home. The generalissimo went on to express his dissatisfaction with British command in Burma and surprised Stilwell by suggesting that Stilwell take overall Allied command of the entire theater of operations. Following the meeting, the Chinese government sent to Washington a strong message to that effect.

Although this turn of events apparently took everyone by surprise, it fell into a larger pattern. Chiang Kai-shek’s mercurial temperament was well known, and the basis of the general animosity between the Chinese and the British had been laid centuries before Stilwell’s arrival in the theater. In the case of Burma, British generals held the supreme Allied command there by imperial prerogative and not through any international agreement. In discussions which China, Britain, and the United States held in December 1941, no mention had been made of changing the existing command relationships in Burma. Yet the commitment of major Chinese forces to the theater would challenge and strain the existing command arrangements.



Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek with General Stilwell. (National Archives)

The British leaders reacted strongly to the Chinese proposal. While welcoming the two Chinese armies to Burma, they were not pleased with the proposal of Stilwell's commanding them. General Sir Harold R. L. G. Alexander, then commanding the British forces in Burma, had fully expected to control any Chinese troops committed to defense of the region. The fact that Stilwell had no established staff also disturbed the British since they had already prepared a liaison system with Chinese forces that would extend as far down as the division headquarters. Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek each appealed to President Roosevelt to see his side of the matter and take appropriate action. Roosevelt and Marshall answered both pleas in similar fashion, suggesting that the problem be resolved in Burma by the parties involved. They assured the British and the Chinese that Stilwell was a resourceful officer who could work well under any command arrangement.

While his superiors struggled to resolve these matters, Stilwell himself was still in Chungking, learning, to his dismay, that there would be a few restrictions on his command in Burma. From 6–11 March Stilwell had several discussions with the generalissimo regarding the defense of Burma and the future role of the Chinese forces. Stilwell wanted to take the offensive and had already begun to develop plans for recapturing Rangoon. He believed that a bold course of action might reveal Japanese weaknesses in Burma. The generalissimo, however, had other ideas, advocating caution and insisting that the Chinese forces remain on the defensive. He made it clear that the 5th and 6th Armies were not to attack the Japanese unless provoked; he also established specific geographical limitations on the deployment of those forces. Finally, he reiterated his distrust of British motives and his insistence that Chinese forces remain independent of British command. China, he explained, had no interest in sustaining the British Empire, and would fight in Burma only long enough to keep the supply line open.

Throughout the spring of 1942, continued Japanese successes in Burma made an Allied offensive in the region extremely unlikely. Following the fall of Rangoon in early March, the Allies prepared to defend the two valley routes leading north along the Irrawaddy and Sittang Rivers into the heart of Burma. While the British forces concentrated at Prome along the Irrawaddy, Chinese divisions focused on Toungoo along the Sittang.

General Alexander, now designated Allied commander in chief in Burma, organized these forces into the equivalent of two corps, with Lt. Gen. William J. Slim commanding the British Burma Corps at Prome and Stilwell commanding the Chinese Expeditionary Force at Toungoo. Stilwell secured the cooperation of the 5th and 6th Army



"On the Edge of the Jungle" by J Milford Zornes. (Army Art Collection)

commanders, both of whom agreed that holding at Toungoo was the key to defending northern Burma. They resolved to remain there as long as the British stayed at Prome. But British intelligence was weak, and unknown to Burma's Allied defenders, the Japanese were steadily increasing their forces in the country and had developed plans which would soon outflank these defenses.

At the beginning of March, the Japanese already had four divisions in Burma, twice the number the Allies had estimated. The Japanese planned to surround and annihilate the Allied forces in central Burma near Mandalay by moving three of their divisions north along separate axes of advance. One division would advance along the Irrawaddy Valley through Prome and Yenangyanug; another would drive up the Rangoon-Mandalay Road in the Sittang Valley through Meiktila; and a third would move east to the vicinity of Taunggyi and head north toward Lashio. The fourth division would remain in reserve in the Sittang Valley where it could react to assist any of the three advancing divisions if needed.

While the Allied ground forces prepared their defensive plans, what little friendly air support existed in Burma was for all intents eliminated from the theater. The fall of Rangoon had limited the RAF and AVG to Magwe, an airfield located in the Irrawaddy Valley about halfway between Rangoon and Mandalay. On 21 March the RAF conducted a successful raid on an airfield near Rangoon, destroying a number of Japanese aircraft on the ground with the loss of only one RAF Hurricane.

But the Japanese had increased their air strength in the theater during March. On the day following the British strike, the Japanese conducted a massive raid on the inadequately protected Magwe airfield and destroyed many of the Allied aircraft on the ground. To prevent further losses, the RAF moved its planes west to Akyab on the coast and the AVG went north to Lashio and Loiwing. Further raids followed, ultimately forcing the Allied air forces completely out of Burma. Without opposition in the air, the Japanese enjoyed virtually unlimited air reconnaissance which, when coupled with a growing number of sympathetic Burmese on the ground, provided them with detailed information on Allied troop dispositions and movements.

A Japanese offensive begun in early March rapidly achieved success. However, the Chinese 200th Division held at Toungoo for twelve days against repeated Japanese assaults. Their stand represented the longest defensive action of any Allied force in the campaign. Even so, another major Allied withdrawal was inevitable.

Meanwhile, the Toungoo battle revealed the problems involved in Stilwell's commanding the Chinese forces in Burma. When he ordered the Chinese 22d Division south to relieve the 200th, for example, he received little response except excuses from the division commander. Despite Kai-shek's assurances to the contrary, Stilwell had not been given the "Kwan-fang" (seal or chop) as commander in chief in Burma; he had only been named chief of staff. The Chinese commanders, therefore, refused to carry out orders from Stilwell until they had been cleared with the generalissimo, who persisted in his habit of constantly changing his mind. The subsequent withdrawal of the 200th Division exposed the Burma Corps at Prome to Japanese attack. As a result, by the end of March the Allies were retreating north with the British and Chinese blaming each other for the repeated reverses.

Any hope for holding central Burma required increased air power in the theater. The most readily available sources were the 10th Air Force in India and the AVG in China. Brereton had assumed command

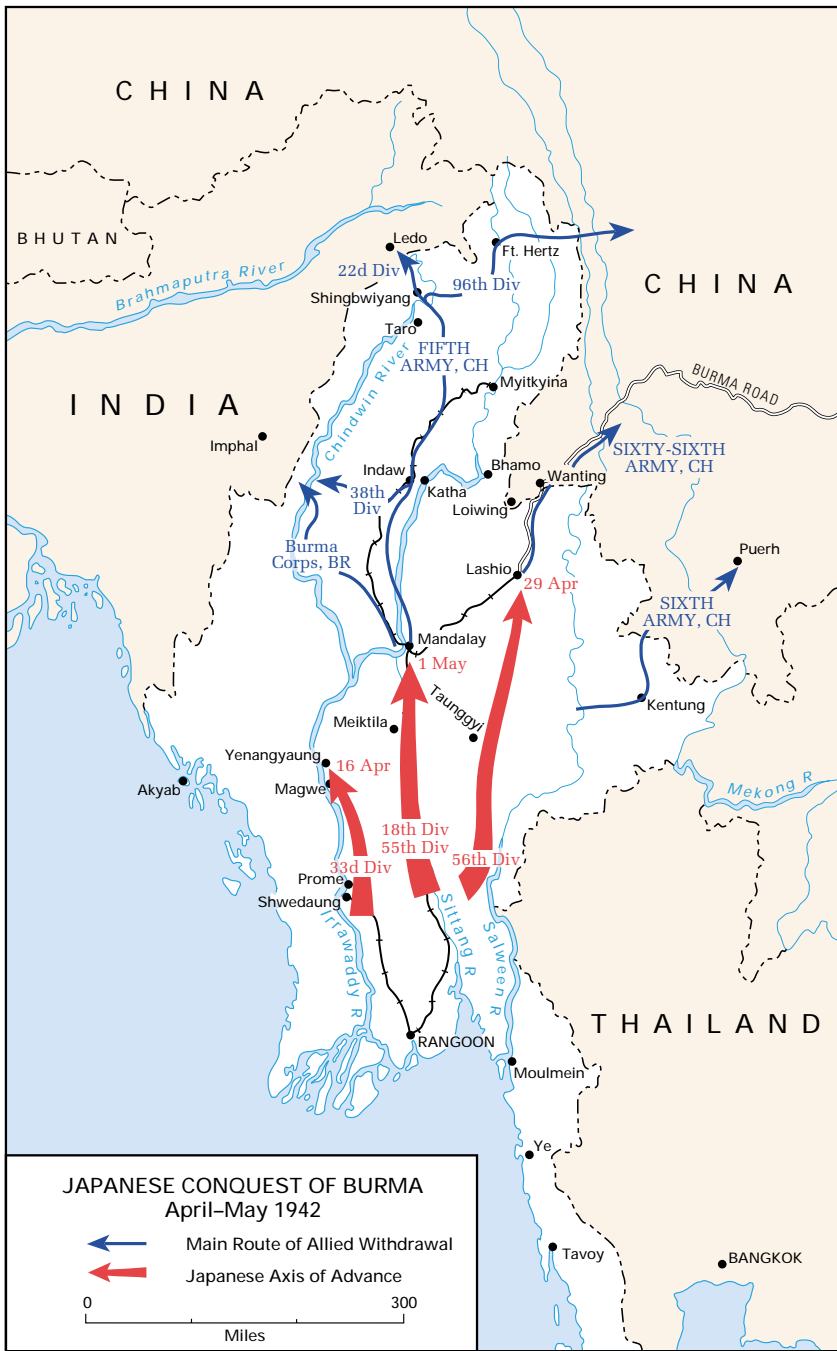
of the 10th Air Force on 5 March, but it remained largely a paper organization. During a 24 March meeting with Stilwell at Magwe, the air corps general estimated that his command would not be ready for combat until 1 May. Stilwell accepted that estimate, and Brereton returned to his headquarters in Delhi.

A few days later, a puzzled Stilwell learned of two bombing raids which the 10th Air Force conducted on 2 April against Japanese shipping: one at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands and a second at Rangoon. Neither had been coordinated with Stilwell's headquarters which Brereton supposedly supported. Brereton, however, had found himself caught between conflicting requirements and had authorized the 2 April missions to support the British in India on direct orders from Washington. After Brereton explained the problem to Stilwell, the matter was closed. On 15 April the War Department extinguished any further hope of air support for the Burma Campaign from the 10th Air Force. In accordance with British desires, the 10th would concentrate its efforts on defending India.

In the meantime, even though the AVG had been forced from Burma in March, Chennault attempted to keep up the fight from Loiwing, just inside China. During April the group flew patrol and reconnaissance missions over the Chinese lines in Burma, but their efforts were too small to be significant. Moreover, the volunteer pilots of the AVG regarded the Burma missions as needless and unappreciated risks. By the end of April, even this effort came to a halt as continued Japanese pressure forced the AVG deeper into China.

Finally, a desperate scheme to give the AVG a longer-range bombing capability came to naught. On 18 April, Lt. Col. James Doolittle's raiders bombed the city of Tokyo, the first offensive action the Allies conducted against the Japanese homeland. The bombers had been launched from aircraft carriers in the Pacific with the intention of flying them to China and attaching them to the AVG after striking Japan. Unfortunately, a longer than anticipated flight, poor communications, and inclement weather contributed to the loss of all sixteen planes that conducted the raid.

Japanese successes on the ground and in the air continued throughout the month of April. As the Allied forces fell back along the Irrawaddy and Sittang Valleys into central Burma, the third prong of the Japanese offensive toward Lashio became apparent. With their forces concentrated in the river valleys, the Allies could do little about the Japanese thrust in the northeast. Lashio fell on 29 April, completing the Japanese blockade of China by closing the Burma Road. With Lashio in Japanese hands, the defense of Burma became untenable and





General Stilwell marches out of Burma, May 1942. (National Archives)

Stilwell ordered an emergency evacuation. Part of the Chinese force managed to withdraw east into China, but three divisions headed west into India. Determined to begin a renewed defensive effort, Stilwell sent part of his staff ahead to prepare training bases in India.

On 6 May Stilwell sent a last message, ordered his radios and vehicles destroyed, and headed west on foot into the jungle. With him were 114 people, including what was left of his own staff, a group of nurses, a Chinese general with his personal bodyguards, a number of British commandos, a collection of mechanics, a few civilians, and a newspaperman. Leading by personal example, Stilwell guided the mixed group into India, arriving there on 15 May without losing a single member of the party.

Several days later, on 26 May, the campaign ended with barely a whimper as the last of the Allied forces slipped out of Burma. Stilwell's assessment was brief and to the point: "I claim we got a hell of a beating. We got run out of Burma and it is humiliating as hell. I think we ought to find out why it happened and go back and retake it."



Officers resting en route to India. (National Archives)

Analysis

The loss of Burma was a serious blow to the Allies. It completed the blockade of China, and without Allied aid, China's ability to oppose the Japanese invasion was extremely limited. Militarily, the Allied failure in Burma can be attributed to unpreparedness on the part of the British to meet the Japanese invasion and the failure of the Chinese to assist wholeheartedly in the defense.

In the larger picture, however, the conflicting goals of the countries involved made the loss of Burma almost inevitable. Neither the defenders nor the invaders saw Burma as anything other than a country to be exploited. To Britain, Burma was simply a colony and a useful buffer between China and India; to China, Burma was the lifeline for national survival; to the United States, Burma was the key to keeping China in the war against Japan, which in turn would keep large numbers of Japanese tied up on the Asian mainland and away from American operations in the Pacific. The wishes of the local population remained unaddressed and local resources therefore remained untapped.

The Japanese had a tremendous advantage from the beginning of the campaign. The invading forces were under a single command with one goal, the capture of Burma. Their unity of purpose and unity of command were complemented by the commitment of adequate resources to accomplish the agreed-upon task. Japanese air superiority gave their ground forces significant advantages, not the least of which was using air reconnaissance to confirm Allied troop dispositions and denying the same information to their opponents. However, had their leaders found such actions necessary and compatible with their overall designs, the Japanese might have further exploited the support available from Burmese citizens anxious to escape so many decades of British rule.

For the Allies, the CBI theater would remain low on their priority list throughout the war. In this economy-of-force theater, the Allies conducted limited operations to occupy Japanese attention. That role, however, did not restrict Allied forces to purely defensive operations. Immediately after the humiliation in Burma, Stilwell and Allied planners began preparations for their next campaign, drawing on the lessons they had learned from the 1942 disaster. Allied strategy during the next phase of the war in the CBI theater would center on recapturing enough of Burma to reestablish a supply line into China. However, continued problems with inter-Allied cooperation, among other factors, would make it a very costly campaign.

BURMA 1941–1942

Further Readings

The Army's 1942 Burma Campaign has no single source for further reading, although there is a good bit of information in the U.S. and British official histories of World War II. Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Stilwell's Mission to China* (1953), remains the most valuable volume in the U.S. Army in World War II series. Other useful volumes in this series include Richard M. Leighton and Robert W. Coakley, *Global Logistics and Strategy: 1940–1943* (1955), and Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare: 1941–1942* (1986). Volume I in the Army Air Forces in World War II series, edited by Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, *Plans and Early Operations: January 1939 to August 1942* (1949), is also helpful. Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby, *India's Most Dangerous Hour* (1958), outlines the British perspective of the Burma Campaign in Volume II of the War Against Japan series. Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–45* (1971), provides an in-depth look at the most prominent American in the campaign.

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Cover: *General Stilwell's party hikes from Burma to India.*
(National Archives)