

# CENTRAL BURMA



**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. To commemorate the nation's 50th anniversary of World War II, the U.S. Army has published a variety of materials to help educate Americans about that momentous experience. These works 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 George L. MacGarrigle. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

JOHN W. MOUNTCASTLE  
Brigadier General, USA  
Chief of Military History

# Central Burma

29 January–15 July 1945

At the beginning of 1945, less than eight months remained before the final surrender of Japan. Those eight months, however, were to see some of the bitterest fighting of the war. Although the final outcome was no longer in doubt, when and how the conflict would end remained unclear. The American naval blockade of Japan, combined with a growing air offensive, was placing a serious strain on Japan's economy. Yet any invasion of the Japanese home islands would most likely be drawn out and extremely costly in lives. There was also the danger that even with the capture of the home islands the war might not end, but continue interminably on the Asian mainland, where large numbers of Japanese troops occupied Korea, Manchuria, and the richest and most populous areas of China.

While American forces in the Pacific had been making dramatic progress since early 1942, the Allied effort in the China-Burma-India theater had bogged down in a morass of conflicting national objectives. The hope Americans held in the early stages of the war, that Chinese manpower and bases would play a vital role in the defeat of Japan, was unrealized. Americans sought to achieve great aims on the Asian mainland at small cost, looking to the British in India and the Chinese, with their vast reservoirs of manpower, to carry the main burden of the ground conflict. Neither proved capable of exerting the effort the Americans had hoped.

## *Strategic Setting*

Early in 1942 Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell arrived in the Far East to command American forces in what became the China-Burma-India theater and to serve as chief of staff and principal adviser to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, the political and military leader of Nationalist China. Stilwell's mission was to improve the efficiency of Chiang's army, which had been fighting the Japanese since 1937, and to keep China in the war. But the Japanese conquest of Burma later in 1942 cut the last overland supply route to China and frustrated Stilwell's plans. The flow of supplies to Chiang's armies thereafter depended on a long and difficult airlift over the high peaks of the Himalayas from northeast India to the main logistical base at Kunming in southwestern China.

Stilwell thought, as did the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the first order of business was to retake Burma and reopen the land supply line to China. To realize that goal, he undertook the equipping and training of Chinese troops in India, the “X Force,” that eventually would grow to five divisions. In the meantime, he sought to concentrate an even larger force in southwest China, the “Y Force” of twenty-five Chinese divisions. If both X and Y Forces could be given offensive capabilities, a joint operation between them could squeeze the Japanese out of northern Burma and reopen the land line to Kunming.

Stilwell’s hopes for the northern Burma offensive were part of a larger Allied plan for the reconquest of Burma. Although the overall design was approved by the U.S. and British Combined Chiefs of Staff at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, the limited resources available to the theater discouraged immediate action. Moreover, Maj. Gen. Claire L. Chennault of “Flying Tigers” fame, then commanding the recently formed U.S. Fourteenth Air Force in China, urged that the “Hump” air line should be used to support his air force, rather than to supply Chinese ground forces. At the TRIDENT Conference in May 1943, U.S. and British leaders approved a new plan that stressed Chennault’s air operations while agreeing to conduct a limited ground offensive in central and northern Burma, which would include the construction of a new road from India to join with the trace of the old Burma Road inside China.

Logistic difficulties in India, however, delayed the opening of any land offensive and kept the Hump airlift well below target figures. The land line ran from the Indian port of Calcutta 400 miles northeast to the British front near Imphal and then extended another 200 miles north to the Chinese X Force near Ledo. Lack of trained manpower and construction supplies delayed completion of the new supply route, the so-called Ledo Road, which extended on into Burma. Until the initial sections of the Ledo Road were completed, both air and ground operations against the Japanese in northern Burma were severely handicapped.

Undaunted, Stilwell pushed two Chinese X Force divisions from Ledo toward Myitkyina, some 175 miles to the southeast, in October 1943. The advance was to be part of a larger offensive planned for early 1944 with the British Fourteenth Army attacking east from Imphal in India and the Chinese Y Force attacking west astride the old Burma Road toward the China-Burma border, all under the overall direction of Vice Adm. Lord Louis Mountbatten heading the new Southeast Asia Command.

Anticipating the Allied offensive, the *Japanese Burma Area Army* commander, Lt. Gen. Masakazu Kawabe, struck first. In March 1944





he launched a major offensive into India with his *15th Army* of about 100,000 veteran troops, while a newly organized *33d Army* attempted to check both Stilwell's advance and that of the Chinese Y Force, which had begun moving forward astride the Burma Road toward the Burmese border. The Japanese attacks initially met with great success, forcing Lt. Gen. William J. Slim to postpone his own plans in a desperate defense of the Indian frontier. However, by July Kawabe's forces were severely overextended and generally exhausted, allowing the Allies to retake the initiative on all fronts.

Slim's offensive now began in earnest, and it continued throughout the rainy season, ultimately resulting in the destruction of the *Japanese 15th Army* and the reconquest of central Burma. But even before his forces had begun driving east, Stilwell's attack produced results. Spearheading his attack was a recently formed American unit led by Brig. Gen. Frank A. Merrill and known as Merrill's Marauders. Moving in advance of the cautious X Force Chinese divisions, Merrill's Marauders, code-named GALAHAD, had managed to seize their main objective, the airfield at Myitkyina in northern Burma. However, Japanese troops clung to portions of the town itself, and the American troops, their effectiveness worn away by battle casualties, disease, and fatigue, were unable to root them out until August.

By the time Myitkyina in northern Burma was secured and the British advance through central Burma well advanced, Allied success in the Pacific had greatly diminished the importance of both the Burma and the China theaters of operations. The subsequent successful invasion of the Philippines promised a surer and faster route to Japan than through the Asian mainland. Although American hopes for at least a major air campaign against Japan from the Chinese mainland never completely faded, the continued difficulties in supplying such an effort, and the series of Japanese ground offensives in 1944 that overran most of the newly constructed American airfields in central China, made such projections extremely unlikely. In fact, the last U.S. heavy bombers left China in January 1945, eventually ending up on Saipan, about 1,500 miles south of Tokyo, where the major American strategic bombing offensive against the Japanese home islands was being mounted.

Meanwhile, throughout the summer of 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had been urging Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek to place all of his U.S.-supported armies under the command of General Stilwell. Chiang, not unexpectedly, refused and asked for Stilwell's recall, a request that the president honored. In October 1944, Maj. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer replaced Stilwell as chief of staff to Chiang and com-

mander of American forces in the China theater. At the same time, a separate theater in India and Burma was created with Lt. Gen. Daniel I. Sultan, formerly Stilwell's deputy, as its commanding general. In China the command issue was dropped, and the American strategy became simply one of trying to realize at least something from previous investments without additional commitments. In Burma, however, the Allied counteroffensive continued, despite the greatly diminished strategic importance of this remote subtheater.

### *Operations*

During the second half of 1944, the Japanese retreat in Burma continued unabated, with only rearguard actions punctuating an otherwise steady withdrawal. In October the *Japanese Imperial High Command* in Tokyo changed the *Burma Area Army's* mission from preventing the resumption of Allied land communications from India to China to holding southern Burma. Although concerned that the Allies might move through Burma to attack Thailand and Malaya, Tokyo indicated that the *Burma Area Army* should not count on receiving additional forces. It would have to make do with its existing strength, which in November 1944 was about 100,000 combat troops with 60,000 more troops in the rear area.

To hold southern Burma, General Hoyotaro Kimura, who had replaced Kawabe as the commander of the *Burma Area Army*, chose to make a determined stand along a generally east-west line about 350–430 miles north of Rangoon. The *28th Army* held the western part of the line near the coastal town of Akyab. The remnants of the *15th Army* covered the center around Mandalay, along the Irrawaddy River, about 250 miles southeast of Imphal. The *33d Army* protected the eastern flank near the town of Lashio about 130 miles northeast of Mandalay and 170 miles south of Myitkyina. Kimura decided not to defend farther north, reasoning that the Allies' supply problems would become more difficult as they advanced southward, while his own logistical difficulties would lessen as he drew nearer his rear bases.

While the *Burma Area Army* prepared its defenses, Mountbatten again reorganized the Southeast Asia Command for the final campaign to retake Burma. Lt. Gen. Sir Oliver Leese, who formerly commanded the British Eighth Army in Italy, became the overall commander of Allied land forces. In addition, Leese would exercise direct command of the newly formed Eleventh Army Group, comprising Slim's Fourteenth Army and the independent British 15 Corps. He would also coordinate operations conducted by Sultan's Northern

Combat Area Command and all units from the Chinese Y Force, now known as the Chinese Expeditionary Force, that crossed into Burma from China.

The Allied plan to recapture Burma, called Operation CAPITAL, called for the Fourteenth Army to strike southeast to the Irrawaddy River and capture Mandalay, while the 15 Corps contained Japanese forces along the coast in southwest Burma. Meanwhile in northern Burma, the Northern Combat Area Command and the Chinese Expeditionary Force, after reopening the land route between India and China, were to advance through Lashio on to Mandalay by mid-February, the peak of the dry season. Were additional troops to be made available, Mountbatten would use them to launch a sea and airborne assault on Rangoon (Operation DRACULA). If they were not forthcoming, then the Fourteenth Army would have to continue its attack south to take the Burmese capital before the start of the rainy season in May.

At the beginning of 1945, Sultan's Northern Combat Area Command, in addition to administrative and supply organizations, contained several large combat units. These included the American trained and equipped 30th, 38th, and 50th Chinese Divisions; the British 36th Division, on loan from the Fourteenth Army; and the recently activated American 5332d Brigade (Provisional), a long range penetration unit.

The 5332d Brigade, also known as the MARS Task Force, had three regiments. One contained the survivors of Merrill's Marauders, which had been reorganized, brought up to strength with replacements from the United States, and redesignated the 475th Infantry Regiment. Another was the 124th Cavalry Regiment, a dismounted former National Guard unit from Texas functioning as infantry. The third, considered to be an elite unit, was the U.S.-trained and -equipped 1st Chinese Regiment (Separate).

Against increasing resistance from the *Japanese 33d Army*, Sultan's forces moved south from Myitkyina with the British 36th Division to the west, the Chinese 50th Division in the center, and the 30th and 38th Chinese Divisions along with the MARS Task Force on the east. At the same time, the Chinese Expeditionary Force drove west toward the town of Wanting on the China-Burma border. Although the *33d Army's* defensive positions along the border separated the two converging forces, the Japanese were greatly outnumbered and no match for Sultan's men. By late January the *Japanese 33d Army* was forced back, Wanting was captured, and the land route to China was restored to Allied control.





*Japanese truck and tankette trapped by crater blown in the Burma Road by MARS demolition men. (National Archives)*

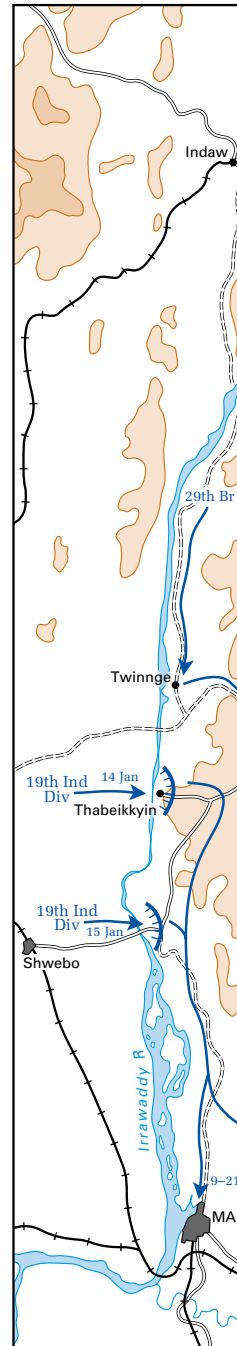
Accompanied by press and public relations personnel, engineers, and military police, the first convoy pushed off for China from Ledo on 12 January 1945. After being delayed by fighting en route, the vehicles rolled triumphantly into Kunming on 4 February. The opening of the Ledo-Burma Road, soon to be redesignated the “Stilwell Road” by Chiang Kai-shek, forged the last link in the chain of land communications between Calcutta and Kunming, a distance of more than 2,000 miles. By July, gasoline also would be pumped through a pipeline constructed from Ledo to Kunming, 928 miles away, paralleling the Stilwell Road.

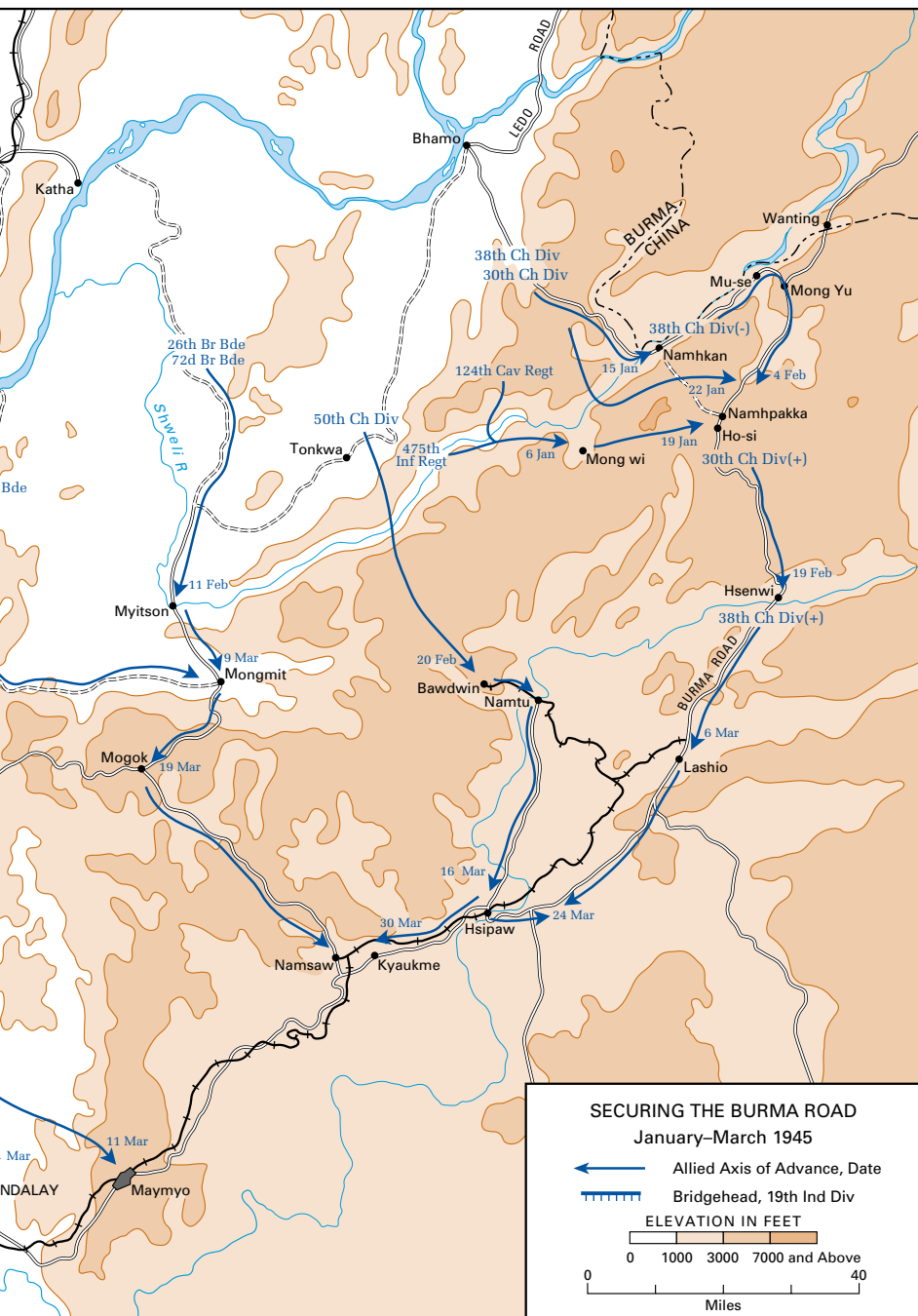
Sultan next considered how to deal with the Japanese forces in north central Burma, who were still near enough to disrupt road traf-

fic moving into China, as well as to threaten the flank and rear of British forces now driving into central Burma. Believing that a threat to the Japanese supply line, the old Burma Road which ran from the Chinese border south to Lashio and Mandalay, would result in Japanese withdrawal, Sultan ordered Brig. Gen. John P. Willey, the MARS Task Force commander, into action. He wanted the MARS force, less the 1st Chinese Regiment, which was held in reserve, to move overland around the Japanese defenses and cut the road near the village of Ho-si, about thirty miles south of Wanting. Willey's projected route was suitable for resupply by air, long recognized as the key to success while operating behind enemy lines, but the overall plan had disadvantages. In the objective area, the Burma Road was not easily severed, since it was beyond machine gun range from the ridge paralleling the road on the west and secondary roads existed in the hills to the east, providing the enemy with an alternative line of communication. Nevertheless, Willey's troops executed their part of the operation, reaching the vicinity of the Burma Road on 17 January.

While Willey's MARS soldiers took up position, Sultan pushed the battle-hardened Chinese against the *Japanese 33d Army's 56th Division*, which was holding defensive positions south of Wanting. The Chinese 38th Division moved southeast, astride the old Burma road, while the Chinese 30th Division struck out across country, swinging south and east toward the road about ten miles north of Ho-si. Farther south and west, the Chinese 50th and the British 36th Divisions continued moving south toward the road between Lashio and Mandalay, an area held by the *33d Army's 18th Division*.

The *56th Division's* commander, Lt. Gen. Yuzo Matsuyama, recognized his perilous situation. Obviously the immediate threat came from the north and northwest. But should Sultan's command, which Matsuyama placed at 6 divisions, be seconded by the entire Chinese Expeditionary Force of 14 divisions crossing into Burma from the east, his 20,000 men would be vastly outnumbered. When a large air drop of supplies came in for the MARS Force, the Japanese mistakenly thought that an airborne force was being landed. Convinced that he would





soon be cut off, Matsuyama informed the 33d Army's commander, Lt. Gen. Masaki Honda, that his situation was critical and that he planned to destroy the bulk of his ammunition and abandon his present positions.

Honda, however, viewed Matsuyama's situation differently. He instructed Matsuyama to defend in place until casualties and ammunition could be evacuated. Then he sent two motor transport companies, about forty vehicles loaded with gasoline, to join the 56th Division and assist in its final withdrawal. Encouraged by additional supplies, Matsuyama evacuated most of his casualties and several tons of ammunition before parts of the Chinese 30th and 38th Divisions blocked passage on the road north of Ho-si on 29 January. That night a sudden and violent *banzai* charge against the roadblock quickly overran the Chinese position. When the Chinese made no move to reestablish the block, Matsuyama began a retreat after dark on the 31st, almost in front of Chinese and American forces massed west of that section of the Burma Road. The move was both delicate and risky, but Japanese troops successfully completed their withdrawal by 4 February.

At this juncture, Allied inaction was puzzling. Willey had positioned his two largely untried American regiments near Ho-si. There, rather than occupy a blocking position squarely astride the Burma Road and risk taking heavy casualties, he limited his effort mainly to interdicting the road with artillery and mortar fire. His infantrymen had dug in along a ridge about a mile and a half west of the road, with the 124th Cavalry Regiment to the north and the 475th Infantry Regiment to the south. Since arriving in the area on 17 January, they had experienced several small engagements with enemy forces and had managed to disrupt traffic on the road to their east, although the Japanese fuel convoy had managed to reach Matsuyama's troops to the north. In fact, Willey's men remained unaware that Japanese forces were withdrawing from the area using the trails and roads east of the main highway.

On 2 February, the 124th Cavalry attacked what was thought to be a Japanese battalion entrenched on the high ground near the village of Hpa-pen, about a mile and a quarter northeast of the regiment's fox-holes. Willey believed that the capture of this position would make it easier for the 124th to stop Japanese traffic along the Burma Road. Unknown to the Americans, however, the Japanese eastern bypass around the Burma Road in front of the position of the MARS Task Force began near Hpa-pen and was strongly defended.

After a twenty minute artillery and mortar preparation, the 2d Squadron of the 124th Cavalry moved out at 0620 toward Hpa-pen



*Marsmen on Loi-kang Ridge.* (National Archives)

with Troops E and F abreast and Troop G in the rear. As Troop F moved up a rough trail, its commander, 1st Lt. Jack L. Knight, was well out in front. When two Japanese suddenly appeared, Knight killed them both. Crossing the hill to the reverse slope, the troop commander found a cluster of Japanese emplacements. Calling up his men, he led them in a successful grenade attack on the enemy fortifications. When the Japanese, who seemed to have been surprised, steadied and began inflicting heavy casualties, Knight kept his attack organized and under control. Although half blinded by grenade fragments, bleeding heavily, and having seen his brother Curtis shot down while running to his aid, Knight fought on until he was killed leading an attack on a Japanese emplacement. For this action, Lieutenant Knight received the Medal of Honor posthumously, the only Medal of Honor awarded in the China-Burma-India theater during World War II.

With resistance heavy on Troop F's front and with Troop E fighting off strong counterattacks, the squadron commander committed his



reserve, Troop G, in midmorning. Advancing through the first line of Japanese bunkers, the reserve troop momentarily paused to direct artillery fire on a second enemy defense line to its front and then charged forward to carry the final Japanese position on the hill. When the fighting ended, the Americans held the high ground close to the road and reported killing over two hundred of the enemy. The 2d Squadron also had incurred many losses. Twenty-two of its soldiers were dead and another eighty-eight had to be evacuated on litters because of wounds.

The next day, the 475th Infantry, still positioned south of the cavalry regiment, attacked a Japanese position on a ridge near the village of Loi-kang about a mile west of the Burma Road. While the 2d Battalion moved north to fix the Japanese in position, the 1st Battalion, preceded by an extensive artillery and mortar barrage, struck from the south, eventually clearing that portion of the ridge of all enemy defenders at a cost of 2 killed and 15 wounded.

But by this time, most of the Japanese had escaped to the south. During the next few days, patrol actions and artillery exchanges with the Japanese rear guard and stragglers grew fewer. By 10 February when Chinese forces arrived in the MARS area in strength, seeking to regain contact with the *Japanese 56th Division*, the enemy had long since passed through and was fifty miles away regrouping at Lashio.

To the west, General Sultan's 50th Chinese and 36th British Divisions continued moving south toward the Burma Road between Lashio and Mandalay. In early February, the British came up against strong resistance from the *Japanese 33d Army's 18th Division*. Fighting continued until 25 February when the *18th Division* was ordered to move south to reinforce the *15th Army* defending against General Slim's Fourteenth Army, which was closing in on Mandalay to the west. By the end of March, both the 50th Chinese and 36th British Divisions had reached the Burma Road east of Mandalay, where the 36th Division came under Slim's Fourteenth Army control.

While Sultan was clearing the Japanese from the northern stretch of the Burma Road, Slim's Fourteenth Army had continued to push the Japanese back in the center. The British 33 Corps advanced southeastward until meeting stubborn resistance north of Mandalay in late January. Meanwhile, the British 4 Corps had slipped south undetected, and by 19 February had established a bridgehead on the Irrawaddy River about one hundred miles south of Mandalay. From there an armored column, completely supplied by air, smashed its way sixty miles eastward to capture the critical town of Meiktila and its cluster of eight airstrips. The drive to the east continued another

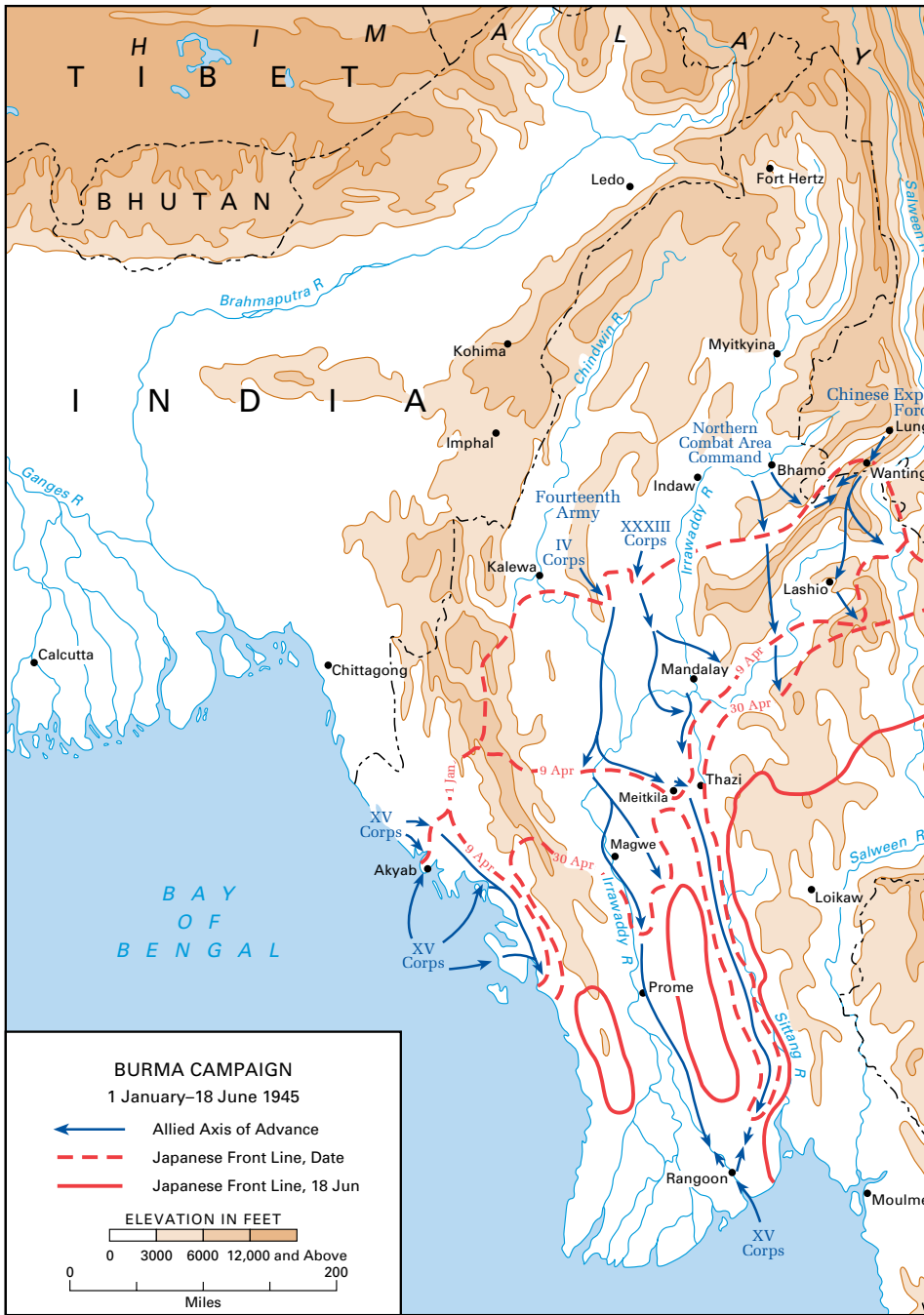


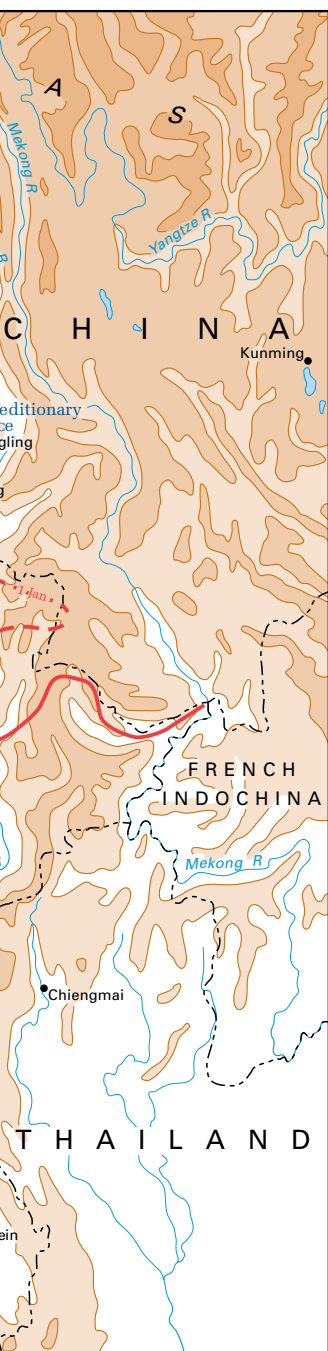
twenty miles to the town of Thazi on the Mandalay-Rangoon railway, thereby cutting off some 30,000 Japanese troops to the north from their supplies and their best route of escape. The fighting around Meiktila and Thazi grew more severe as the *Japanese Burma Area Army* shifted troops from the Mandalay front southward and also rushed up reinforcements from southern Burma in an effort to reopen the route.

With the battered *Japanese 15th Army* fully occupied with the threat to its rear, the British 33 Corps resumed its advance on Mandalay, which it reached late on 7 March. However, because of stubborn Japanese resistance, the city was not cleared for two more weeks. The 33 Corps then continued its push southward until encountering enemy resistance from the hastily summoned *Japanese 33d Army*, about eighteen miles north of Thazi. Despite substantial losses, the enemy was able to hold open an escape gap until the end of March. Even so, a considerable number of Japanese troops were trapped when the corridor finally closed.

By the time that Mandalay fell, combat in Burma for the MARS Task Force, the Chinese Expeditionary Army, and the X Force had come to an end. In March the Chinese in Burma began to return to their homeland, and the MARS Task Force soon followed. General Wedemeyer, who had replaced Stilwell as the American commander in China, hoped to rebuild the Chinese armies using the Chinese divisions from Burma as a nucleus and the Marsmen as trainers and advisers. Using the revitalized Chinese units, he planned to fight his way to the coast by the fall of 1945. As for General Sultan in Burma, with all his regular combat units gone by June, he became concerned primarily with logistical support for the China theater. His only ground combat force available to continue the fight against the Japanese was Detachment 101 of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).

Formed in 1942, Detachment 101 supported Stilwell's, and later Sultan's, Northern Combat Area Command as an intelligence-gathering unit and as an organization for assisting in the return of downed Allied airmen to friendly lines. By the spring of 1945, however, Detachment 101, commanded by Col. William R. Peers, had organized a large partisan force behind enemy lines in northern and central Burma. Reaching a peak strength of over 10,000 native Burmese Kachin tribesmen and American volunteers, the detachment operated as mobile battalions screening the advance of British and Chinese forces moving on Mandalay and Lashio. Completely supported by air, they employed mainly hit-and-run tactics and avoided pitched battles against better trained troops.





Detachment 101 operations were scheduled to end after regular troops secured the Burma Road south of Lashio. Although the Kachin guerrillas, many hundreds of miles from home, were told that their work would be finished then and that they could return to their homes, when the time actually arrived, the situation had changed. The movement to China of the Chinese and American ground forces in Burma left the guerrillas as the only effective fighting force available to Sultan. Fifteen hundred Kachins volunteered to remain, and Peers was able to recruit an additional 1,500 Karen, Ghurka, Shan, Chinese, and a few Burmese volunteers. Dividing his 3,000-man partisan force into four battalions, he assigned operational sectors that extended from the Burma Road into southeast Burma for roughly 100 miles. Starting in April and extending into July 1945, Peers' guerrilla units drove about 10,000 Japanese troops from this region. During that period all of the battalions saw heavy fighting. While most of the Japanese encountered were tired and poorly equipped, they habitually fought to the last man when pinned down. The partisans killed over 1,200 of the enemy at a cost of 300 of their own.

Overall, during Detachment 101's tenure in Burma, its forces eliminated over 5,000 Japanese troops, assisted in rescuing over 300 downed Allied airmen, derailed 9 trains, blew up 56 bridges, destroyed 252 vehicles, and eliminated numerous dumps and other enemy installations. For Detachment 101's superb performance, it was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation. However, it played only a minor supporting role in the final, but decisive battle between the British Fourteenth Army and the bulk of the *Japanese Burma Area Army*.

The battle for Burma entered its final stage on 9 April 1945 when the Fourteenth Army launched a two-pronged drive south down the Irrawaddy River, and the Sittang River, which



*American officers of Detachment 101 with General Sultan at an advanced ranger base in Burma, June 1945. Colonel Peers, detachment commander, is third from left. (National Archives)*

flows parallel to the Irrawaddy about one hundred miles to the east. Led by armored columns that punched through thin crusts of resistance and bypassed more strongly held areas, the swift advance was convincing evidence that the enemy had spent himself in the Mandalay-Meiktila area and was incapable of defending lower Burma.

Allied tanks, trucks, and guns poured south along the highway to Rangoon, covering 124 miles in a week. In the valley of the Irrawaddy River, strong resistance near Prome, about 150 miles north of Rangoon, temporarily delayed the advance as the enemy battled desperately to hold open an escape route for its troops west of the river. The evacuation of Rangoon had already begun, and by the end of April, no appreciable enemy force remained in that city.

On 2 May, within a few hours after paratroopers had been dropped, amphibious forces of the British 15 Corps landed at the mouth of the Rangoon River. Meeting only a small enemy rear guard, the troops proceeded up the river to Rangoon on the following day. On 6 May, the 15 Corps linked up with advance elements of the

Fourteenth Army twenty miles north of the city. Heavy rains, precursors of the monsoon, flooded streams and retarded the remainder of General Slim's forces advancing down the Irrawaddy corridor. Nearly another two weeks passed before the bulk of the Fourteenth Army could join with the 15 Corps, northwest of Rangoon.

By then, Japanese forces in Burma were split into three groups: one division from the *28th Army* still remained west of the Irrawaddy; the rest of the *28th Army* was in the hills between the Irrawaddy and Sittang Rivers; and a third group, composed of remnants of the *15th* and *33d Armies*, was generally east of the Sittang River. The remaining months of the war saw repeated and violent attacks by the Japanese in the two pockets west of the Sittang to open an escape route to the east. The arrival of the monsoon in Burma and the desperate attempts of the surrounded Japanese forces to break through the British cordons prevented any large-scale British advance east of the Sittang. By 18 June, the Japanese pockets had shrunk, and by August, the *Japanese 28th Army* had ceased to exist. During the fifteen-month period of the Japanese Imphal campaign and the Allied counteroffensive, 97,000 enemy dead had been counted. The fighting on the main front in Burma ended when Japan surrendered to the Allies in August. But for several weeks afterward, isolated groups of the enemy, unaware of the cessation of hostilities, continued to give battle. The formal capitulation of all Japanese armed forces in southeastern Asia, including those in Burma, finally took place at Singapore on 12 September 1945.

### *Analysis*

The final campaign for clearing Japanese invaders from Burma was well under way by the start of 1945 with a desperate enemy grudgingly giving ground before a more powerful Allied force composed of units the majority of which were Chinese and Indian veterans. Their Japanese opponent, still a formidable challenge, was a ruthless and bold soldier who obediently fought and marched until he died or killed himself.

From the retreat at Imphal until the end of the war in Burma, the number of Japanese killed was far greater than those in the Allied ranks. This was not necessarily because of battlefield casualties—thought to be roughly equal—but stemmed from how battle and non-battle casualties, especially from malaria and dysentery, were handled by both sides. In the Allied camp, such casualties were generally well cared for and evacuated to a medical facility as rapidly as possible. In

contrast, most of the Japanese soldiers who were wounded or ill died from exhaustion, exposure, and lack of medical care.

For the Allied side, special deep penetration units often proved far less effective than the rather sensational accounts provided by journalists would have the general public believe. Merrill's Marauders, while a proud unit with brave men that achieved some success, took huge casualties. Willey's MARS Task Force, the less engaged of the two conventional deep penetration units, did no better. After three months behind enemy lines, each of these special units was reduced to half-strength or less, with little hope of replacement or respite. Conventional forces, even those in heavy combat, suffered considerably fewer losses and benefited from more secure supply lines; after the same three month period, most remained combat effective.

Allied units operating in Japanese rear areas doubtless were a significant concern to Japanese commanders. Yet for them, a more difficult problem was the seemingly ever-present guerrilla fighters of Detachment 101 that continually harassed them. Native to the jungle environment of northern and central Burma, the Kachins were ideally suited to play the role of partisan fighters behind enemy lines. When operating in small units and refusing decisive combat, they almost always were successful, but less so when placed in conventional battalion formations, even though they habitually avoided any type of positional warfare.

The building of what became known as the Stilwell Road was undoubtedly a remarkable achievement, involving the toil of thousands of engineers and laborers constructing a road through thick jungle valleys and over steep mountain ranges under most adverse conditions. During 1945, when existing trails between Myitkyina and the old Burma Road made the road work less arduous, perhaps the most spectacular feature of the construction of the road from an engineering perspective was the erection of a number of bridges, particularly those over the Irrawaddy and Shweli Rivers. Yet no sooner had the Stilwell Road reached completion than deliveries over it were overshadowed by the Hump airlift. Moreover, after the pipeline to Kunming was placed in operation, deliveries through it exceeded those carried over the road. Nor was the Stilwell Road to be in use for long. Nine months after its opening on 1 November 1945, the road was abandoned.

Regardless, within the confines of its mission and the resources available, the Stilwell Road made a valuable contribution to the war in northern and central Burma and materially improved intra-China transportation. Yet in the end, the extremely rugged terrain of both Burma and southern China made airlift more significant than land





*“Moon Over Burma,” by Howard Baer. (Army Art Collection)*

transportation. For example, during the Japanese three-month siege of Imphal in early 1944, British troops and about 40,000 noncombatants had been supplied entirely by air. Planes had brought in 61,000 reinforcements and 28,000 tons of supplies. This history-making airlift operation, much larger than any undertaken before, provided the formula for future success in Burma. Other major aviation accomplishments included delivering over 30,000 troops and 5,000 animals to Stilwell’s forces in central Burma, far behind enemy lines, and maintaining them for several months; and transporting over 75,000 Allied troops, including two fresh Chinese divisions from the Y Force in China, and almost 100,000 tons of supplies, into the Allied-held airfield near Myitkyina over a five month period. Finally in the spring of 1945, aerial resupply played a decisive role in General Slim’s British Fourteenth Army attack on Meikila and its follow-on advance toward Rangoon.

Whether using the Hump air corridor to supply Chennault’s Fourteenth Air Force in China, or flying vital supplies to OSS Detachment 101’s scattered guerrilla units, air supply was critical to the Allied campaign in Burma. Such means were the only way that

logistical problems caused by the difficult terrain and the lack of good roads and navigable waterways could be solved. Without a reliable air supply system, Allied operations in Burma could not have been successful.

Despite the classic victory won by the British Fourteenth Army and the epic construction of the Stilwell Road in Burma, the successful campaigns by MacArthur and Nimitz in the Pacific relegated Burma, the link between India and China, to a position of little strategic importance for completing the triumph over Japan. Like the Aleutian Islands in the north Pacific during the early years of the war, the CBI theater initially appeared to offer a possible shortcut to Tokyo. But, like the Aleutians, the Asian mainland became a road to nowhere, and the truly decisive battles of the war against Japan were fought elsewhere. However, the resources that Japan invested in the Asian mainland, from the heavily guarded border with the Soviet Union in Manchuria to the remote frontiers of the Indian subcontinent in the far south, fully justified the relatively small American and British military resources applied here and the burden which thereby fell on a relatively few charged with keeping their foes as occupied as possible in this inhospitable region of the world.



# CENTRAL BURMA 1945

## Further Readings

For those who wish to study the Central Burma Campaign in more detail, Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sutherland, *Time Runs Out in CBI* (1959), in the U.S. Army in World War II series, tells the Army's story from the recall of General Stilwell in October 1944 to V-J Day, dealing with problems at all levels from platoon to theater, from tactics to diplomacy. Volume 5 of the Army Air Forces in World War II series, edited by Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate, *The Pacific—Matterhorn to Nagasaki, June 1944–August 1945* (1953) is helpful for the Air Force view. See John H. Randolph, *Marsmen in Burma* (1946), on the MARS Task Force; William R. Peers and Dean Brelis, *Behind the Burma Road: The Story of America's Most Successful Guerrilla Force* (1963), on OSS Detachment 101, and David W. Hogan, Jr., *U.S. Army Special Operations in World War II* (1992), for a general coverage of Special Operations. For the British perspective, see Volume 4, *The Reconquest of Burma* (1965), and Volume 5, *The Surrender of Japan* (1969), edited by Maj. Gen. S. Woodburn S. Kirby in the British official War in the Pacific series. Finally, *Defeat into Victory* (1956) by Field Marshall Sir William J. Slim, is a classic memoir by one of Britain's finest generals who led the British Fourteenth Army during the campaign.

CMH Pub 72–37

Cover: *Mule skimmers and pack animals of the MARS Task Force plod through the hills toward the Burma Road, January 1945.*  
(National Archives)