

# CHENNAULT PAPERS



## AFTER THURSDAY

Air Commandos Deliver the Killing Blow  
to Japanese Occupation in Burma

Ryan S. Collins





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**Figure 1. Japanese forces enter Rangoon, Burma. Cover *Shashin Shuho* Magazine, 1 April 1942.**

*Secondary Cover Page  
(SCP)*

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RYAN S. COLLINS

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Cover Photo: 2nd Air Commando Group, P-51 Mustang, China–Burma–India Theater

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*This work is dedicated to those who have made it possible. To my family, the American Airmen, the Air Commandos of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. To each of you: the readers, researchers, and all veterans, your service to the United States of America has provided us with the freedom to pursue our dreams*

*Just a changing sea of colour  
Surging up and flowing down;  
And pagodas shining golden, night and noon;  
And a sun-burst-tinted throng  
Of young priests that move along  
Under sun-burst-hued umbrellas through the town.  
That's Rangoon.*

—Ella Wheeler Wilcox  
“Rangoon”

*Air Commando is a way of thinking and not a branch of the Air Force.*

—Col John R. Alison, 1st Air Commando Group, 10 April 1944

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*Photo gallery follows page 61*

## **Preface**

This work is a synopsis of the involvement of the 1st and 2nd Air Commando Groups alongside other Allied forces from May 1944 to May 1945 in the Pacific Campaign of World War II. I include a macro-level overview of events, which affected the Air Commando Groups and the Japanese occupation of Rangoon, Burma, to aid the reader's understanding of the context of the various operations. The exploits of the Air Commandos before this time are covered extensively and featured in the work *Operation Thursday: Birth of the Air Commandos* by Mr. Herbert A. Mason Jr., SSgt Randy G. Bergeron, and TSgt James A. Renfrow Jr., USAFR, as well as other fine works. This work will not duplicate that outstanding effort but rather seek to build upon a solid foundation. The achievements of General Wingate and his Chindits on Operations Longcloth and Thursday are the stuff of legend and are found detailed in numerous authoritative works. This research is a primer on the subject and is crafted for quick access and ease of use by current and future service members, researchers, enthusiasts, genealogists, and academics.

This study is not intended to be all-inclusive, nor does the author intend for this work to be the sole reference utilized during future research. There are numerous skirmishes, battles, operations, and events not included in this work. Inclusion of such detail, while fascinating, would bog the casual reader down and lessen the relevance to today's warfighter. Acronyms have also been avoided to prevent confusion. This is an overview that hopes to take readers from step zero to step one and lead to a deeper understanding of the general picture or spark a desire for further exploration or both. Further research is highly encouraged and one of the valuable tools a bibliography provides. As the old proverb relates, a picture can say a thousand words, and this effort is both image and narrative focused. It is our hope that current and future readers will share the appreciation I felt when encountering the Air Commando story for the first time and that future researchers will contemplate this study, follow its source documents, discover additional material, and expand the legendary narrative of the Air Commando Groups or their progeny. Possessing an understanding of the sacrifices made to ensure our freedom will in turn make us better service members and, above all, will make us better citizens.

Regarding primary source documents, which comprise the bulk of this work, military unit histories written by members of the United States Army Air Forces provide an invaluable snapshot of the respective organization's monthly activities. These documents, however, cannot be construed to include all facets of operational reality. The unit histories vary in quality and may lack input from key players or listings of assigned personnel and equip-

ment. These histories rarely contain analysis and instead focus on fact documentation as the writer and commander believed them to be true. The author has made every effort to remain objective in assessing these documents, and the reader should be advised that such reports were generated in theater during a time of war and often by personnel who possessed no formal training. This work attempts to portray an accurate picture through combining the monthly histories, secondary sources, and photographic sources of each unit. Secondary and tertiary sources, when utilized, stem from published works.

Note: This work utilizes period location names such as Burma and so forth for ease of transcription and clarity.

## Acknowledgments

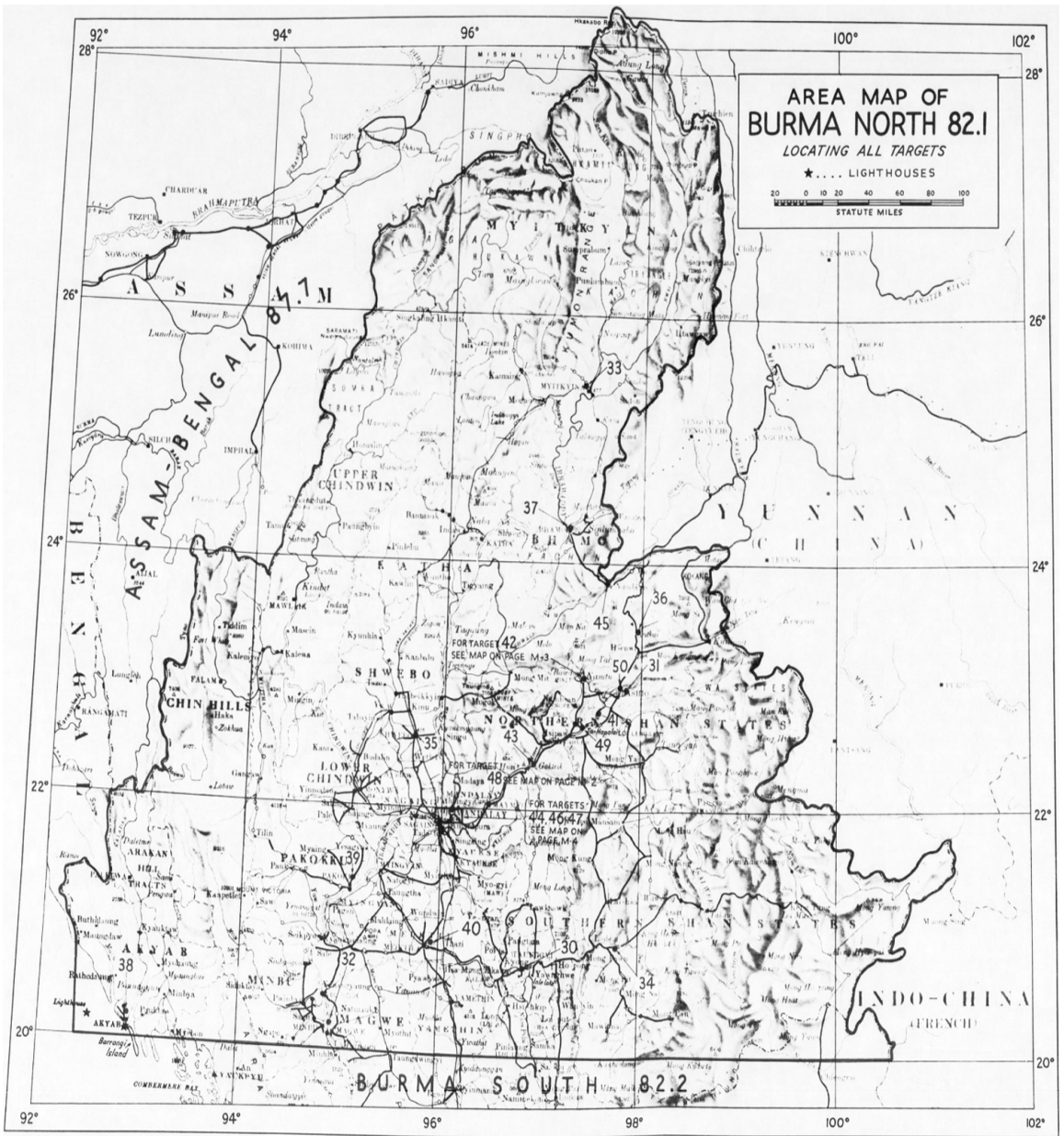
The skills and impetus to complete this research were gained through meticulous training and encouragement from a few of the greatest Airmen in the United States Air Force. From the moment I embarked on this journey, I received assistance at every turn. It could not have been accomplished without the following individuals in no assigned order: Mr. Timothy M. Brown, Mr. Paul E. Witt, Mr. James E. Gildea, Mr. Todd W. Schroeder, Mrs. Sharon L. Blalock, Mr. Herbert A. Mason Jr., Lt Col John G. Denson Jr. (Retired), Lt Col Mark W. Widener, CMSgt Kathryn A. Massie (Retired), Mrs. Ashley R. Armes, TSgt Patrick D. Beagle (Retired), Mr. Scott D. Gaitly, MSgt Johnny Baker (Retired), Maj William A. March, CD, RCAF, Mr. William S. Chase, Ms. Mary Sanichas, Mr. Charles B. Foster Jr., Lt Col Robert W. Johnson, 628 ABW/HC, Mr. Charles E. Newell, Mr. Christopher M. Rumley, Mr. James T. D'Angina, Mr. William K. Alexander, Mr. Paul F. Armentrout III, Mr. William M. Landau, MSgt Victoria M. Errett, Dr. Charles F. O'Connell Jr., Mr. Leean-der Morris Jr., Lt Col Bruce P. Barnes, RCAF, Ms. Tammy T. Horton, Mr. Stewart J. Camp, SMSgt George E. Mayfield III (Retired), MSgt Vincente M. Valasquez, Col John P. Ditter, Dr. Gregory W. Ball, Mr. Russ Beers, Mr. Patrick T. Cooper, Mr. Michael A. Raynor, The Air Commando Association, all my friends who are too numerous to mention at: 89 AS, 39 ABW, 633 ABW, 192 WG, 735 SCOG, and AFSOC. And you, the reader.

## **Abstract**

This work is a synopsis of 1st and 2nd Air Commando Groups' action alongside other Allied forces from May 1944 to May 1945 in the Pacific Campaign of World War II. A macro-level overview of events, which affected the Air Commando Groups, or the Japanese occupation of Rangoon, Burma, is included to aid the reader in understanding the context of the various operations. This work is pictorial as well as written to provide a visual of the conflict and enhance the narrative beyond statistics and facts.

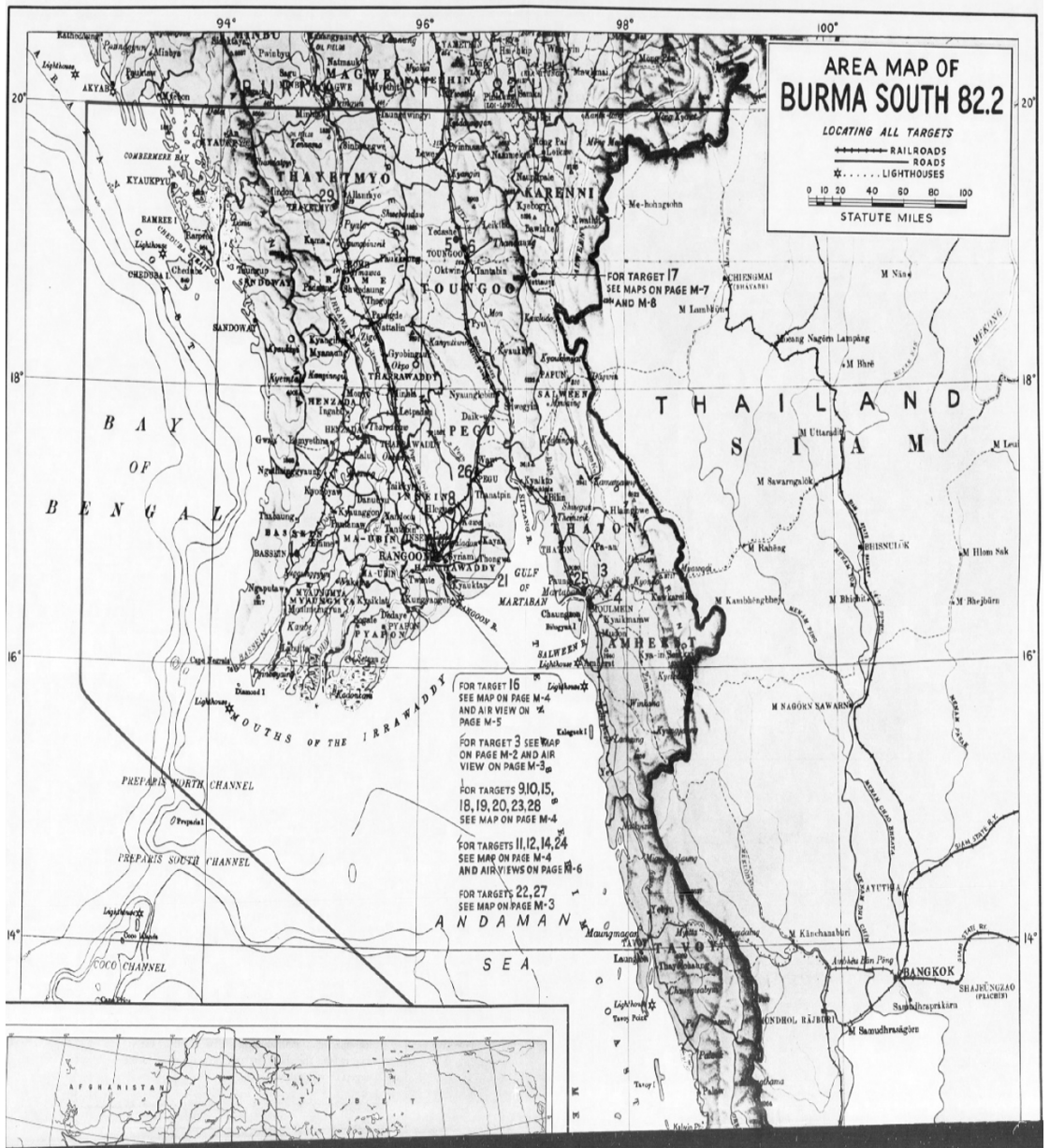
“After Thursday” is an in-depth view of the groups and the squadrons which comprised the Air Commando units. Special attention was paid not only to the flying squadrons, but also the many units that enabled the personnel assigned to fly and complete their missions. The enlisted side of operations was included for a more comprehensive picture.

The work discusses multiple lesser-known operations as well as minor assistance provided to friendly forces and novel uses of technology used to achieve victory in the theater. The assumption that the conflict in Burma ended at the completion of Operation Thursday and the belief that victory was a forgone conclusion proved false. One can only win a conflict when the enemy accepts that it has lost. Thus the account of the events “After Thursday.”



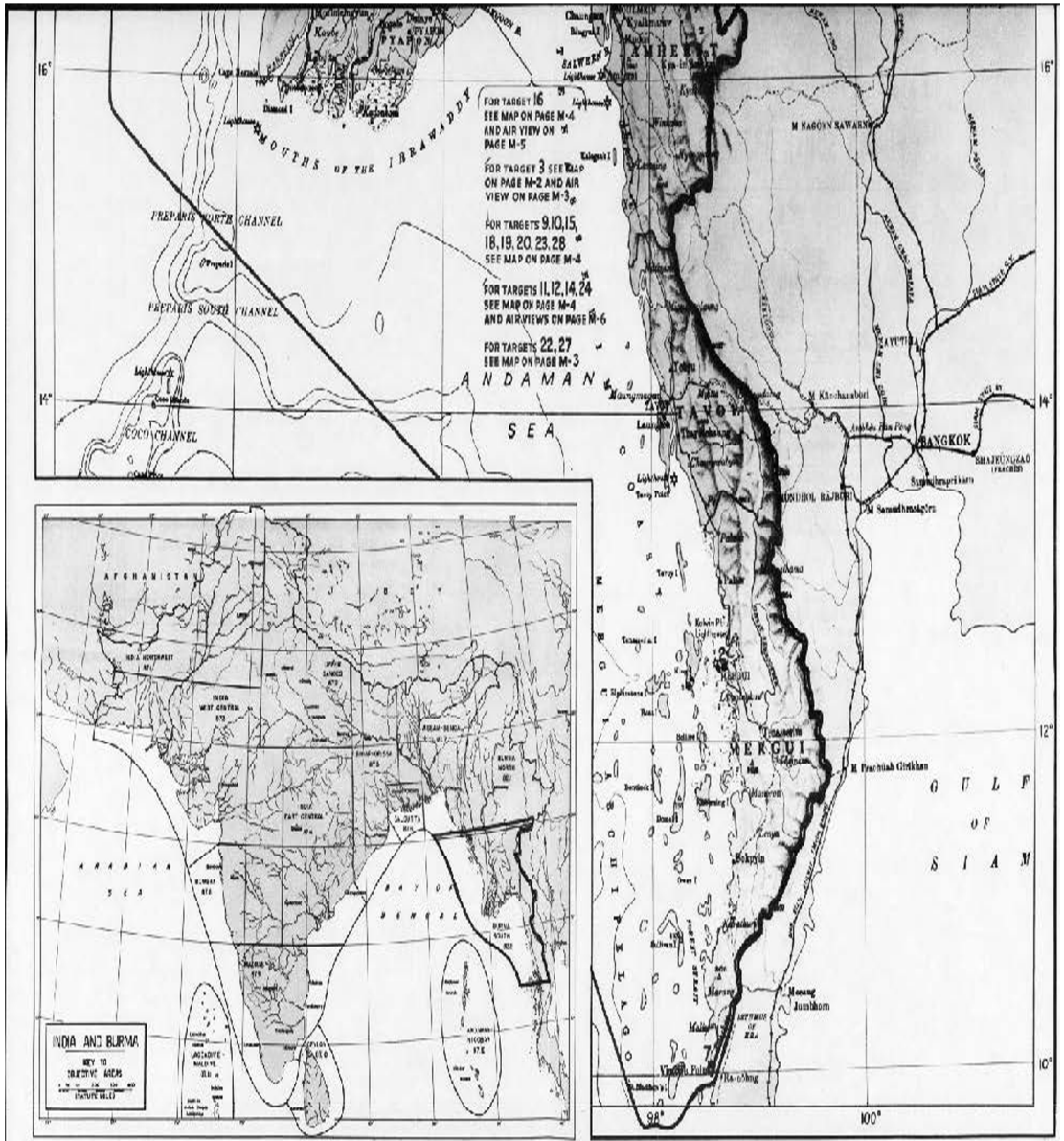
US Signal Corp Photo Air Objective Folder 82.1 Burma North Area, p 7., AFHRA

**Figure 2. Northern Burma map**



US Signal Corp Photo. Air Objective Folder 82.2 Burma South Area, p 3, AFHRA.

**Figure 3. Southern Burma map part 1**



US Signal Corps Photo. Air Objective Folder 82.2 Burma South Area, p 4, AFHRA

Figure 4. Southern Burma map part 2

## The End of Thursday



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Figure 5. British Chindit's formation badge

*I hold it to be true that Fortune is the arbiter of one half of our actions,  
but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less.*

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

A small blue tinted paper made its way to the desk of Col Philip G. Cochran, Commander of the 1st Air Commando Group. The general was missing or dead! Brig Gen George S. Stratemeyer, Tenth Air Force Commander, himself sent the dispatch stating, “Regret to inform you Wingate missing believed killed

in air crash 24 Mar 1944.”<sup>1</sup> Colonel Cochran already knew this; he had been waiting at the 1st Air Commando Group Headquarters, expecting General Wingate at the Lalaghat, India, airstrip for a meeting. The general was late and grew later by the minute. Colonel Cochran signaled the last known position of the general to Imphal Airstrip, India, who promptly notified the colonel of the general’s departure. Shortly thereafter, Air Commando C-47 pilot Richard Benjamin notified the command that he witnessed an explosion in the hills while on the way to the Broadway Airstrip. Benjamin marked the spot, and the colonel feared the worst. Confirmation of these fears occurred in the morning.<sup>2</sup> The colonel stated, “That was the demise of Wingate. Naturally, it was a terrible blow to us. It was a terrible loss as a vibrant, valiant person, but militarily it struck a blow.”<sup>3</sup> In a later report the colonel lamented, “our mission was to support Wingate.”<sup>4</sup> Several days later, a joint team from the British Graves Commission and the American Graves Headquarters in Calcutta, India, discovered the remains of General Wingate and the crew.<sup>5</sup>

On 5 March 1944, Operation Thursday ushered in a new concept of warfare, longrange penetration through an air invasion. The operation had been the brainchild of General Wingate, building on his irregular warfare concepts that both intrigued and revolted many traditional officers and Commander of the United States Army Air Force, Gen Henry H. “Hap” Arnold. General Arnold chose Col Philip Cochran and Lt Col John R. Alison to lead the expedition and gave them carte blanche to select their personnel and equipment. The operation consisted of using C-47 Skytrains to tow a crack force under the command of Wingate into Burma using 15 seat CG-4A Waco troop carrier gliders behind enemy lines in Burma, then to provide fighter, bomber, and rescue support ad hoc. The operation succeeded in its objective of halting the Japanese and keeping both China and India in the war through enabling the reestablishment of land routes. Brigadier General Wingate’s mixed British, British Colonial, West African, and Indian task force, the Chindits, wreaked havoc behind enemy lines and contributed to the failure of enemy plans during their Imphal operations, causing the enemy to abandon northern Burma. A total of 9,052 personnel made the trip to Broadway Airstrip along with 175 horses and 1,283 mules. Transported behind enemy lines in gliders towed by C-47 Skytrains, the Chindits struck without warning and vanished into the jungle. According to one report, the Chindits “softened enemy elements and confused the Japanese concerning Allied plans.”<sup>6</sup> The Air Commandos of Operation Thursday eliminated 20 percent of all enemy offensive aircraft during their initial campaign.

Lt Samuel V. Wilson, a member of the Office of Strategic Services and the 5307th Composite Unit, otherwise referred to as Merrill’s Marauders (a United States Army unit designed for clandestine jungle operations), described General

Wingate as “a brilliant man, but also a very strange man—very strange, moody, difficult to predict. . . . He was not quite as flamboyant as Patton [Lt Gen George C. Patton], but as Messianic.”<sup>7</sup> The circumstances of General Wingate’s untimely death, when his B-25 Mitchell Bomber 43-4242 crashed into a mountain killing all on board, placed the success of Operation Thursday into great jeopardy. Greed, desperation, and arrogance compelled those who felt slighted by General Wingate’s operation to claim their vengeance. The unit had been General Wingate’s brainchild, and although a fine officer and fellow Chindit succeeded Wingate, Brig Gen Walter David Alexander “Joe” Lentagine did not share the same zeal or belief in the concept of long-range penetration first espoused by Wingate at the 1943 “Quadrant” Conference in Quebec, Canada.<sup>8</sup> In all fairness, how could any man be expected to replace the incomprehensible and incomparable General Wingate?

News of Wingate’s death remained suppressed until the command could smooth out the intricacies involved in the new command structure. However, when the release occurred it came as a massive shock to the men supporting the British, Indian, Gurkha, and West African Special Operations Forces from the air. The 1st Air Commando Group had excelled in delivering the Chindit forces across the beautiful, but deadly, natural barrier that separated India and Burma, known as the Arakan or Rakhine Mountains and behind enemy lines. The mountain range extended from Cape Negrais, Burma, to Manipur, India, totaling 600 miles of steep terrain making a quick foray into the jungle impossible. The Air Commandos also gained air superiority, conducting air resupply and establishing rough air bases with the assistance of the 900th Airborne Engineers, Aviation. These forces terrorized and engaged Japanese forces all in the name of protecting Gen Joseph W. Stilwell Jr.’s Ledo Road and keeping both China and India free from occupation.

The impact of Air Commando operations from conception as Project 9 to May 1944 cannot be overstated. The stalled Imperial Japanese efforts to invade India ushered in new concepts in warfare and contributed to the liberation of Burma. However, the story did not end with the return of Col Philip G. Cochran to America on 28 March 1944, nor did it end when Gen Arnold detailed Col John R. Alison to brief Gen Dwight D. Eisenhower’s staff on use of gliders during Operation Thursday on 1 April 1944.<sup>9</sup> The first chapter of Air Commando history had ended, but a new one was to be written over the skies and in the jungles of Burma and beyond. On 20 May 1944, Col Clinton Burbridge Gaty assumed command of the 1st Air Commando Group.<sup>10</sup> With the death of General Wingate, Operation Thursday effectively ended. This is the story of what happened after Thursday.

## **The Fall of Rangoon**

In early January 1942, intelligence reported that two divisions of the Imperial Japanese Army had been massing near the border of Burma. The Premier of Burma, Mr. U Saw, came under arrest in London, England, when the Allies discovered that he had designs to turn Burma over to Japan in a traitorous move.<sup>11</sup> The situation in Burma turned from bleak to desperate despite the best efforts of the Allied leaders. In Rangoon, the British colonial capital of Burma fell victim to Imperial Japanese aggression on 9 March 1942. The Japanese conquest of Burma not only granted the “Sons of Heaven” a conduit to India and China but also gave them access to enough lead and aluminum to supply the ever gluttonous Imperial Japanese war machine with the strategic raw materials necessary to continue their efforts.<sup>12</sup> “Sons of Heaven” was a term derived from the ancient warrior code of Bushido. The term reflected the superiority of the Japanese warrior and attributed such success to the divine. The Japanese War Research Institute had studied stockpiling of critical resources since 1940, and Burma was a primary target.<sup>13</sup> In 1943 Japan met its need in refined copper and aluminum, met 70 percent of its goal of 13,000 metric tons of magnesium, and 74 percent its zinc goal. How could the island nation lacking sufficient ores do this? One report suggested, “the Bawdwin mine, near Lashio, Upper Shan States, Burma, is the single target of importance in the nonferrous metals exoducing [*sic*] [extracting] industries.”<sup>14</sup> Other external locations utilized for ore extraction by Japan included Manchuria, Formosa, and Korea; however, removal of the Burma mine would further strain supplies, and Japan’s only alternative was salvaging scrap metals. Smelting operations occurred largely in Japan proper; thus, disruption to the mines and seaborne routes would place a strain on the Japanese war effort.<sup>15</sup> Rangoon itself proved to be a lynchpin in conquering the state as the port permitted convenient resupply and reinforcement.<sup>16</sup> British forces held complete control of Burma since 1886; however, the days of a massive British military force were long gone. The day after Japan invaded Burma, renowned Burmese author Theippan Maung Wa penned in his wartime diary, “[o]ur land has suffered a blow worse than it has ever known. Our great city of Rangoon is now only ashes.”<sup>17</sup>

Japan sought to unite all of Asia into a cohesive union, the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.<sup>18</sup> Opinions differed, but the Burmese were to learn that they had no choice but to join this union. The combined Burmese, Indian, and British forces under command of Gen Thomas J. Hutton were simply not prepared to resist a full-scale invasion of Rangoon. Gen William J. Slim stated, “no higher authority, civil or military, had expected an invasion of Burma.”<sup>19</sup> The garrison force was small, improperly equipped, and inexperienced. In a similar

fashion to Nazi (National Socialist German Workers Party) Operation *Fall Gelb* (Operation Yellow), where German forces utilized their Blitzkrieg doctrine to overrun the soft, relatively undefended territory of Belgium, Japanese forces had attacked and overwhelmed the strategic point of Rangoon with little resistance. Gen Harold R. L. G. Alexander, for his role, received command of all Indian and British forces in the city at Rangoon's bleakest hour and with nothing to do but organize an escape.<sup>20</sup>



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 50659A.C

**Figure 6. Foreground left to right: Col John R. Alison, Brig Gen Orde Charles Wingate, Col Philip G. Cochran, Hailakandi, Assam, India.**

Emergency dispatches from Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and American President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Prime Minister of Australia John Joseph Ambrose Curtin arrived on 20 February 1942. The Allied leaders pleaded for the prime minister to divert two homeward bound Australian divisions, which happened to be near the Netherlands East Indies, to Rangoon. These soldiers were the only hope of reinforcing the capital city; however, Prime Minister Curtin feared an invasion of Java and flatly refused the request.<sup>21</sup> Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt handled therejection diplomatically if in a somewhat cold manner. The leaders understood the Australian plight. From the moment Rangoon fell, the British concocted plans to recapture the port city and keep them on the table at the highest levels of Allied command.

At the Arcadia Conference on 10 January 1942, the British called for the liberation of Rangoon, along with a route to China; however, British forces found themselves scattered in pockets across the Burmese countryside, leading to a defensive mindset. The Allies considered Rangoon a vital link in the supply chain to prevent the defeat of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and China by the Japanese. The conference came too late, and the British expected a natural barrier to prevent enemy forces from breaking through for an attack.<sup>22</sup> Japanese planners, however, were undaunted by the sprawling jungle. Indeed, by the time of his appointment, General Alexander had already found that the Japanese forces had taken the blown Sittang Bridge position, leaving little doubt that Rangoon would fall.<sup>23</sup> General Slim recounted, “in horror they saw the broken bridge; it was hopeless.”<sup>24</sup>

The British were finished in Rangoon, but General Alexander and the 17th Indian Infantry Division still managed to escape and destroy a large portion of the dock installations. As the 33rd Division of the Imperial Japanese Army entered the city, the final British ships sailed from the harbor.<sup>25</sup> No more would the colorful umbrellas beloved to Rudyard Kipling meander through the city, nor could the once happy Burmese go freely in their city. The Japanese flooded into the city from the west, pausing only briefly to take a triumphant photograph in front of the main government building, brandishing samurai swords and flags. Prime Minister Churchill lamented, “[t]he loss of Rangoon meant the loss of Burma.”<sup>26</sup>

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phant photograph in front of the main government building, brandishing samurai swords and flags. Prime Minister Churchill lamented, “[t]he loss of Rangoon meant the loss of Burma.”<sup>28</sup>



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives of the United States. "Title Page Missing--Japanese Troops. Crossing Bombed Out Bridge," Roll 1, Target 18, Photo No 32

**Figure 7. Imperial Japanese forces on the move**

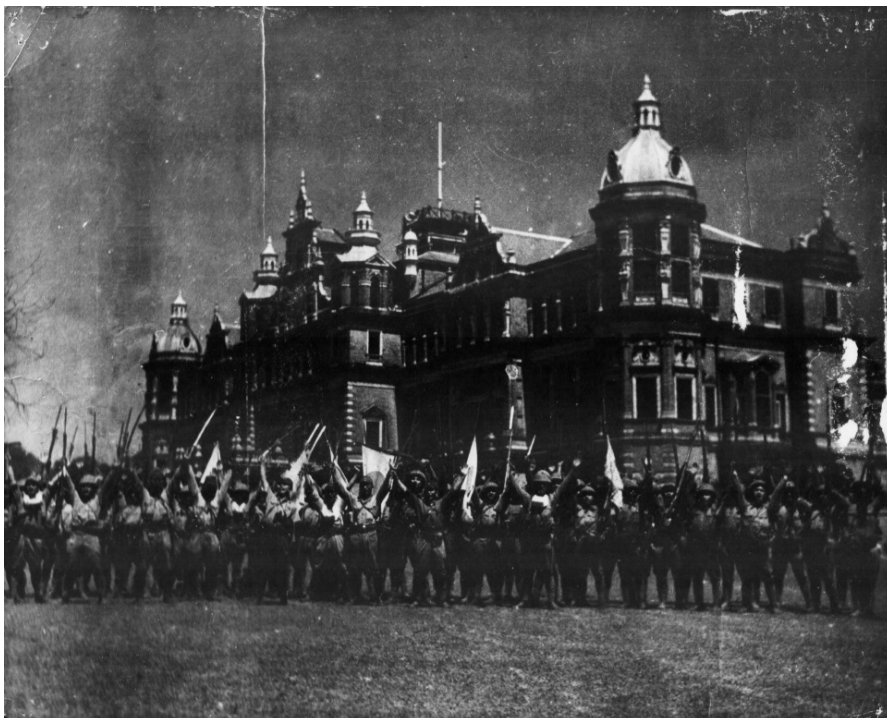
### **Allied Air Response 1942–1944**

*At em boys, Give er the gun!*

—Robert Crawford, “Off We Go into the Wild Blue Yonder”  
(Army Air Force Song)

The Allies quickly responded to Japanese aggression. A series of bombing missions commenced on 3 April 1942, and that pressure held over the re-

maining dry season. The dry season in Burma begins in November and often carries on until June; however, Rangoon tended to see the heaviest rainfall throughout the country, complicating sortie generation efforts even during the dry season.<sup>29</sup>



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives., Roll 1, Target 34, 8 Mar [1942].

### **Figure 8. Rangoon occupation, 1942**

Heavy bombers, including B-17s, pounded the Rangoon infrastructure. The docks were a prime target, but enemy fighters soon entered the arena, further complicating matters. By 4 June 1942, the Allies claimed eight missions against the city, starting multiple fires and harassing shipping in the Burma theater.<sup>30</sup>

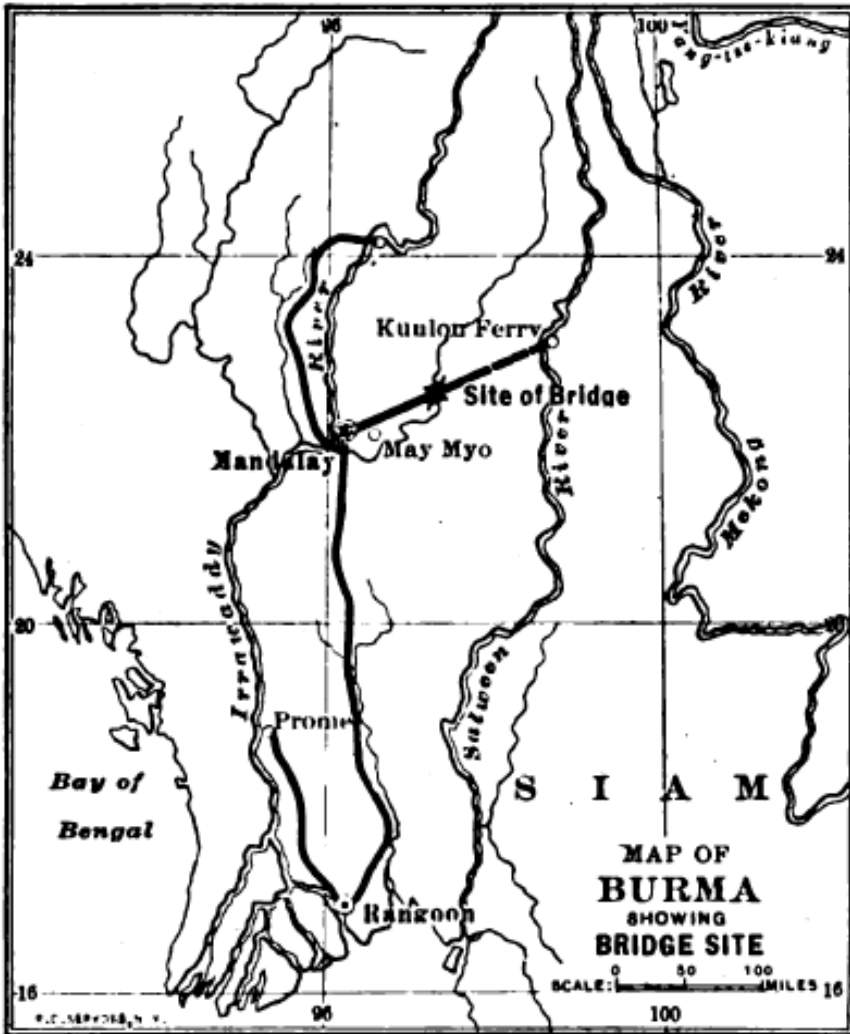
The monsoon served as a protective shield for the Japanese in Rangoon, but November brought its renewed warmth and provided a new bombing season for the Allies. On 5 November 1942, raids began for a second time. This time the window of opportunity closed at the end of April 1943; however, lulls in the storm were exploited, and stand-alone raids occurred on

31 July and 16 August and 7 and 8 September. Heavy bombers, now joined by B-24 Liberators and P40 Warhawks, began the offensive with renewed vigor. Again, the port of Rangoon served as a primary target, taking major structural damage, and feeling the impact of aerial mines (detailed below). Railroads, bridges, and shipping vessels were damaged, and the exploitation of targets of opportunity occurred.<sup>31</sup>



Burma South Area, p 13, AFHRA.

Figure 9. US Signal Corps photo, Air Objective Folder 82.2

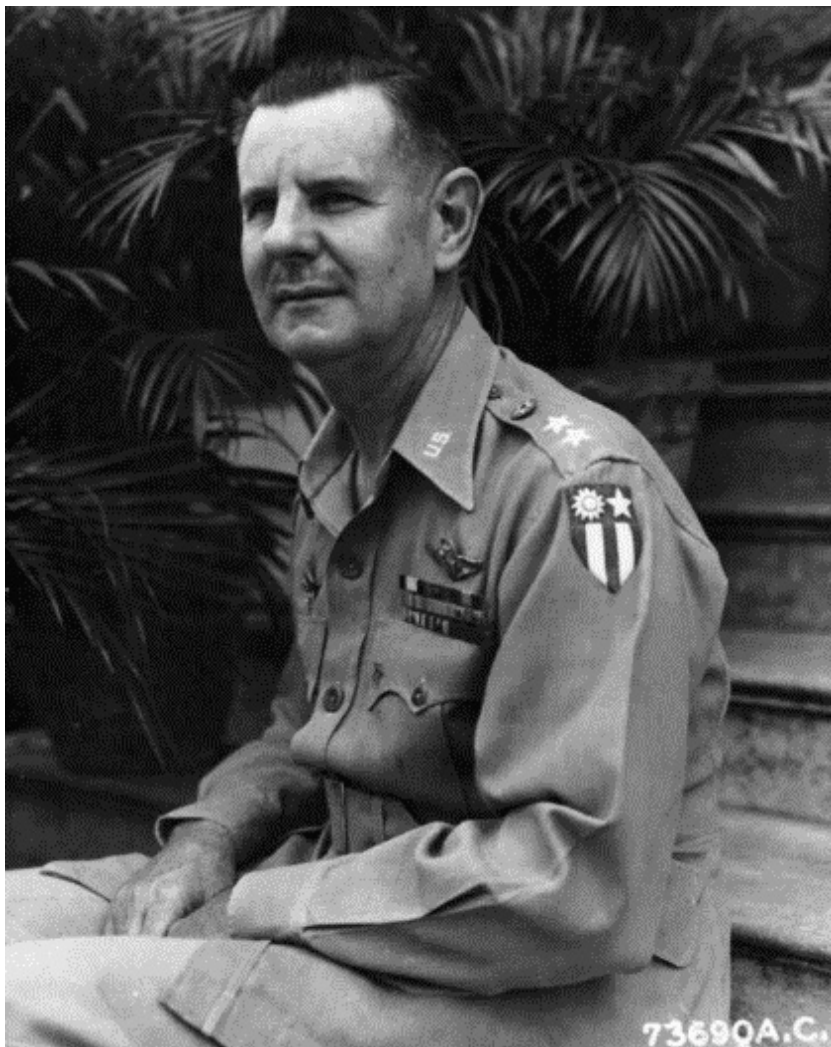


*The Worlds Work: Volume II May 1901 to October 1901: A History of Our Time.* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1901).  
 BookReaderImages.php (344x488) (archive.org)

**Figure 10.** Location of Gokteik Viaduct (Bridge) is shown. Site of bridge is Allied target area.

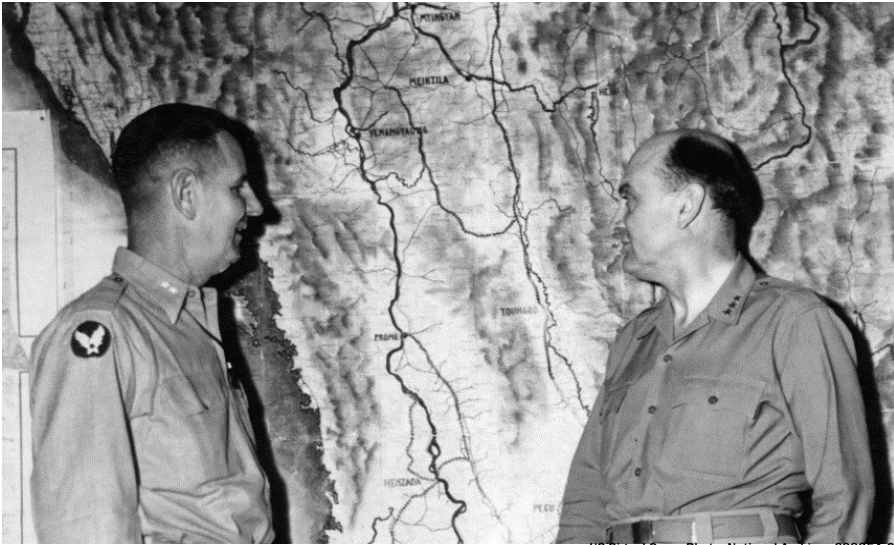
The target area expanded to include Mingaladon, Maymyo, Kentung Shaduzup, Meza, Naba, Mandalay, Taihpa Ga, Yupbang Ga, Mahlwagon, Lonkin, and other areas of northern Burma. In the north, the Gokteik viaduct became a target. Standing as the highest bridge/railway trestle in Burma, the viaduct

connected Maymyo (now Pyin Oo Lwin), the British colonial summer capital, with the town of Lashio, the seat of civil affairs for the northern Shan states. Each town fell to the Japanese in 1942. On 8 September 1943, B-25 Mitchell bombers scored five direct hits at the base of the viaduct, yet the structure remained usable, a testament to the engineering of Sir Arthur Rendel, the structure's designer and to the Pennsylvania steel used to construct it.<sup>32</sup>



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 73690A.C

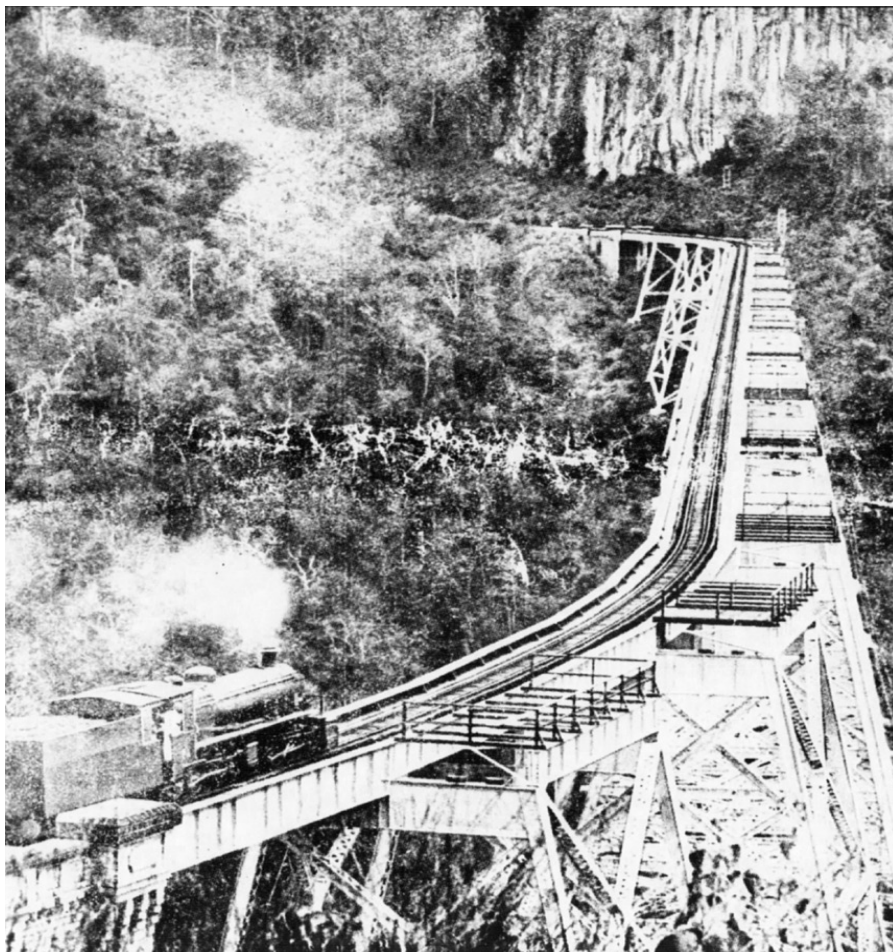
Figure 11. Maj Gen George E. Stratemeyer



**Figure 12. Left, Maj Gen George E. Stratemeyer, Eastern Air Command and right, Lt Gen Ira C. Eaker, Mediterranean Allied Air Forces Commander, discuss operations in Burma, 16 April 1945.**

On 15 December 1943, Eastern Air Command stood up as a combined Allied Air Force command. Squadrons of the Indian Air Force and the 435th and 436th Squadrons of the Royal Canadian Air Force were attached to this new iteration of the alliance. Maj Gen (later Lt Gen) George E. Stratemeyer, Commander of Eastern Air Command and officially air advisor to Gen Joseph “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell, summarized the Japanese as a “resourceful, able and wily enemy [who] must be blasted from the skies in days to come. His lines of communication must be obliterated, his shipping destroyed, his will to resist crushed.”<sup>33</sup> The general further advised his command, “there is no time for distrust or suspicion. . . . We must establish in Asia a record of Allied air victory of which we can all be proud in the years to come. Let us write it now in the skies of Burma.”<sup>34</sup> The men of Eastern Air Command and indeed all men assigned to the China–Burma–India Theater took these words to heart.

## Operations Low, Low Andy, and Low Andy 2



US Signal Corps Photo, Air Objective Folder 82.1 Burma North Area, p 16, AFHRA,

Figure 13. A train traverses the Gokteik viaduct.

In a letter dated 13 January 1943, Col Harold B. Wright notified the Commander of Tenth Air Force, Maj Gen Clayton Lawrence Bissell, of his belief that the best way to further the war effort would be to damage the economy of Japan. To do this, with resources at their disposal, the colonel proposed dropping magnetic mines, which were available in Ceylon, into

the Rangoon River. These mines contained a 630-pound explosive charge, that, when detonated, could sink a merchant vessel with ease. Sinking a single ship would cause a chain reaction, blocking the harbor and closing the port. While minesweepers and salvage crews labored to clear the harbor, the resulting congestion would make the remaining shipping vulnerable to attack. In addition to the immediate benefit, to rebuild or refit a ship requires steel. Japan did not possess steel in sufficient quantities to sustain significant damage, and by choking the harbor, the forces in Burma would be starved for gasoline.<sup>35</sup> Opinions on the effectiveness of mines in South East Asia varied. When the Fourteenth Air Force mined the Yangtze River, Maj Gen Claire Chennault proclaimed, “[t]he aerial mine has done more to stop the Japanese drive north from Canton than any other weapon.”<sup>36</sup> Opposing this view, Lt Gen George Kenney was noted for having “a poor opinion of mining.”<sup>37</sup>

The mines held special countermeasures to prevent a minesweeper from detecting their presence and were capable of delays by allowing a vessel to “trip” the mines as many as 12 times before detonation. An additional benefit was the magnetic nature of the mine itself. Wooden ships sailed by native Burmese citizens could not activate the explosive device. The B-24 Liberator lent itself very well to laying the mines, and it required minimal modification.

### Port of Rangoon

The port of Rangoon enabled the Japanese to transport between 30,000 and 50,000 tons of cargo and fuel into or from Burma weekly. General Bissell queried Colonel Wright regarding other ports in Burma; however, they did not lend themselves to mining as adequately as the Rangoon River because of low traffic or depths. At depths of less than 30 feet, the mine could be damaged by impact or dig itself into the riverbed when dropped. Port Blair presented a different problem; it possessed two entrances, one a mile wide; thus, none of



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 74506A.C.

Figure 14. Maj Gen Clayton Lawrence Bissell

these other ports received endorsement. The general saw the value of mining the river, and on 27 January 1943, he drafted a letter to FM Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief India, and requested the expeditious shipment of 50 mines and technical personnel. However, the letter on file remained unsigned with a note card stating "To be held for a few days" attached to it, but the commander's intent was clear. Project Low came into existence.<sup>38</sup>

On 13 February 1943, Air Headquarters, Bengal, India, requisitioned a pilot experienced in laying aerial mines with a report no later than date of 18 February 1943 to instruct and brief crews on proper procedures. By 21 March 1943, with the senior British intelligence officers appalled to be out of the loop before Bissell received an apparent endorsement, the officers responded with a concurrence that other ports should not be mined; however, the mines for Rangoon and Bangkok Harbor were on order and estimated to arrive by 24 March 1943.<sup>39</sup>

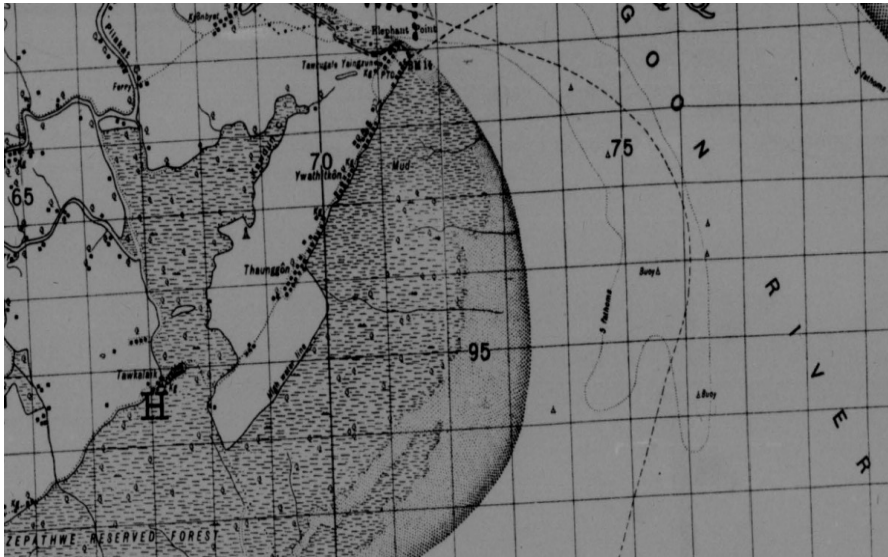
Royal Air Force Group Capt J. B. Luard, Eastern Air Command, forwarded a British intelligence request that a psychological operations mission be attached to Operation Low on 19 February 1943. Considerations were also made for reconstruction of the Sittang Bridge and possible airstrikes in Thailand (*Siam*). The impetus for adding the propaganda component stemmed from D. C. Glass, Esq., a propaganda officer attached to Far Eastern Bureau. Japanese forces actively recruited Burmese laborers to assist in building the Thai-Burma Railway. The Burmese did not realize that the conditions on the project would be worse for them than the prisoners of war assigned to the "Death Railway." Leaflet drops and radio transmissions were proposed; however, the road was deemed "a useful drain on Japan's supply of steel and on her resources in other respects, including technical personnel."<sup>40</sup> The Allied prisoners of war were badly mistreated, and many did not survive; however, a level of medical care was available through Army doctors. Japan sought completion of the railway by August 1943, and as the deadline approached, the brutality matched the pace. In total, approximately 60,000 Allied prisoners worked on the railway alongside 270,000 Asian laborers. The legacy of these captives stands preserved at the Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum, Kanchanaburi, Thailand.<sup>41</sup> The prisoners themselves coined the very names such as "Hellfire Pass" and "Death Railway."

## Results

On the eve of 22 February 1943, 10 B-24 Liberators executed Operation Low and dropped 40 magnetic mines into the Rangoon River above Elephant Point,

Burma. A few malfunctions occurred, but 39 active mines now lined the river. In simultaneous action, six Liberators of the 436th Bomb Squadron (Heavy) dropped their explosive payload onto Japanese positions and two from the Royal Air Force patrolled the city skies. In a letter dated 20 March 1943, Colonel Wright stated, “the ‘LOW’ project forced the enemy to deny himself the use of the port of Rangoon at least from February 27 until March 3, and probably longer.”<sup>42</sup> Colonel Wright, bolstered by the success of Project Low, further recommended to General Bissell that the Rangoon River should “be mined heavily.”<sup>43</sup> An additional 50 mines were requisitioned on 6 March for use in small batches at varied intervals.

On 8 November 1943, the Low operations continued with Operation Low Andy as Tenth Air Force dropped 30 magnetic steel mines in the Rangoon River; four days later, they added 24 more. Four more mines fell from B-24s on 13 November; however, poor visibility precluded any assurance that they reached the river.<sup>44</sup> The Allies ensured that Rangoon was not open for business via sea, in large part thanks to Colonel Wright.<sup>45</sup> The end result of closing the ports of Rangoon, Bangkok, and even Saigon projected to “reduce the rations for slightly more than half the Japanese people to a level slightly below the starvation diet of the German people during the last war [WWI] and of the inhabitants of Leningrad [USSR] in the present war.”<sup>46</sup> Successful mining operations such as Operations Low and Low Andy figured into the war planning, which culminated in the aerial mining of Japanese waters under Operation Starvation that began on 27 March 1945 and lasted until 14 August 1945.<sup>47</sup> As in any war, the opinion of the enemy is often more valuable than the assessment of damage by the home team. Captain Kyugo Tamura, Minesweeping Officer, Imperial Japanese Army, stated, “I think you probably could have shortened the war by beginning earlier.”<sup>48</sup>



10th Air Force Report Project LOW, LOW ANDY, LOW ANDY II (Mining Rangoon River). (Excerpt from this source), AFHRA.

**Figure 15. Cropped Map of Rangoon River with mine markings near Elephant Point, Burma.**



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 67392A.C.

**Figure 16. A 7th Bomb Group, Consolidated, B24 Liberator on route to Rangoon from Pandaveswar Air Base, India, 1943.**

## The “Quebec” Conferences

### “Quadrant” 1943 and “Octagon” 1944

The first Quebec Conference was a highly secret military conference held between the British, Canadian, and United States governments. From 14 to 24 August 1943 (“Quadrant”) and a year later from 12 to 16 September 1944 (“Octagon”), Allied leaders met in Quebec, Canada, to plan vital operations including the D-Day landings in Normandy. British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill reversed course and sought a greater British presence in the Pacific Theater. Prior attempts to engage the British in the Pacific had been rebuffed because of the immediate threat to Great Britain posed by Nazi Germany. President Franklin D. Roosevelt acquiesced to the prime minister and allowed the British navy greater involvement in the Pacific. Prime Minister Churchill mentioned General Wingate by name and stated that reallocation of forces in Yunnan, China, the province bordering Burma, might interfere with the stream of supplies flowing to the Chinese Nationalists, but that “[t]his would be an instance in which the delivery of supplies to China would be temporarily but justifiably interfered with.”<sup>49</sup>

### Agreements

Leaders reached numerous agreements during the conferences, including the proposed occupation zones in Germany and future operations. One such operation proved to be a thorn in Churchill’s side, namely the recapture of Rangoon. At the “Quadrant” Conference, retaking the city was eliminated from war plans in 1943 and 1944; however, the desire for its recapture had not dwindled. In 1943, President Roosevelt related that “General Wingate had informed him that the capture of Rangoon would not cut the Japanese line of communications since they were now largely supplied overland from French-Indochina and Thailand.”<sup>50</sup> Unwilling to abandon Rangoon completely, the prime minister read an operations plan aloud for retaking the city at the 1944 “Octagon” Conference.<sup>51</sup> The United States Chiefs of Staff further offered that the naval task force envisioned by the prime minister depended “to a considerable extent on the end of the war in Europe”<sup>52</sup> as well as the capture of Rangoon. The Allies deemed the plan feasible for releasing British personnel from the European theater to accomplish the mission. Prime Minister Churchill recommended that the British deploy six British divisions. This feat of transportation could not be undertaken until the defeat of Germany was sealed. Furthermore, the entire operation hinged on the monsoon season. Delays that could push the endeavor into terrible weather precluded advance allocation of resources. Thus, the operation would be shelved

until logistics and perfect conditions could be met. The code name assigned to this operation was “Dracula.”<sup>53</sup> Despite the postponement of Operation Dracula, the Allied forces continued their relentless assault in Burma.

### Operation Eruption

*Go, therefore, to meet the foe with two objects before you, either victory or death. For men animated by such a spirit must always overcome their adversaries.*

—Scipio Africanus, Battle of Zama



Air Objective Folder 82.2 Burma South Area, p 17, AFHRA.

Figure 17. Air Objective Folder 82.2 Burma South Area

The United States Army Air Force meant business in Operation Eruption. In addition to the Air Commando raids, Eastern Air Command planned, and along with Strategic Air Force (not to be confused with Strategic Air Force Europe), executed a daring harassment raid on Rangoon from 3 to 4 November 1944. Here the Allied forces unleashed a new nightmare upon the Imperial Japanese Army in Burma. Forty-nine newly introduced B-29 Superfortress bombers along with 28 B-24 Liberators, and 156 P-47 Thunderbolts (affectionately referred to as Jugs) and P-38 Lightning fighters heaped destruction on the marshalling yards, locomotive repair facilities, and the nearby airfields of Rangoon. One Superfortress and three P-47s were lost in the raids. The B-29s had been kept clandestine by Twentieth Air Forces for their main mission, Operation Matterhorn, which began on 5 June 1944, but that attack had struck Bangkok, Thailand, and the raids on Burma were authorized deviations.

On the first day of Operation Eruption, the 5th Fighter Squadron Commando of the 1st Air Commando Group launched 20 P-47s bound for Mingaladon with one aborting before takeoff. The group arrived above their target at 1030. Eleven P-47s climbed into stacks to provide air cover while eight dove into strafing patterns. A lone Japanese Kawasaki Ki-61 *Hien* “flying swallow,” or “Tony,” as the Allied forces referred to them, was present on the runway. No claims to its destruction were made; overall the mission proved anticlimactic. Why waste good gasoline just because of a rather unproductive mission?<sup>54</sup>

The Air Commandos took a slight detour and strafed the runway at Akyab Island for good measure. One Air Commando “Jug” received flak damage. The 6th Fighter Squadron Commando of the 1st Air Commando Group launched 17 P-47s to bring force to Zayatkwın and Hmwabi; three of these 17 aborted, and one of those crashed on takeoff; however, the Air Commandos arrived over their targets at 1030 and blasted the airfields. Four Japanese Nakajima Ki-43 *Hayabusa*, Allied reporting name “Oscar,” were intercepted by the Jugs in the stacks over Zayatkwın and two Oscars sustained damage before the group peeled away.<sup>55</sup> The Air Commandos managed to destroy one Mitsubishi Ki-21 Medium Bomber *Kyūnana-shiki jūbakugekiki*, reporting name “Sally,” on the ground and damaged four others.<sup>56</sup>

Day two brought 19 P-47s of the 5th Fighter Squadron Commando to Zayatkwın and Hmwabi airstrips. The Air Commandos caught a Ki-43 in the revetments of Zayatkwın, filling it full of .50-caliber ammunition while the other Jugs shredded the hangars and support facilities. Four Air Commandos attacked the airstrip at Hmwabi. Unexpectedly, two enemy Oscars appeared at 4,000 feet to engage the Jugs. One aggressively pulled behind an Air Commando, primed for the kill, but the Air Commando wingmen closed and peppered the Japanese flyer before his rounds found their mark. Flames erupted from the Oscar as it

descended into a rice paddy. The lone remaining Oscar escaped damaged, but one P-47 sustained flak damage. Next, the 6th Fighter Squadron Commando launched 12 P-47s for a strafing mission on Mingaladon Airfield. The Air Commandos found no prey in sight. The third flight strafed eight hangars and a blockhouse when they noticed small arms fire and made their way to Hmwabi airstrip, where they found themselves too late for any action.

The P-47s returned from their mission unscathed to their Air Commando base at Cox's Bazar, India; however, the enemy eluded their sights completely that day.<sup>57</sup> Operation Eruption leveled the Mahlwagon roundhouse and the Rangoon marshalling yards and wrecked the Insein train facilities. Four enemy aircraft smoldered in flames on the ground, five sustained damage, and 12 hits were unconfirmed.<sup>58</sup>

For the Imperial Japanese in Rangoon, the punishment proved relentless. On 14 December 1944, the mighty B-29s again turned their attention to the city. This time the bombers carried newly modified 500-pound bombs utilizing a modern innovation, Composition B. This mixture combined two types of explosives, Trinitrotoluene (TNT) and the expensive, less common, Cyclonite or RDX, first used for medical purposes, received attention and development as an explosive before World War II and slowly replaced dynamite as the standard munition filling in 1941. Picatinny Arsenal, New Jersey, had tested RDX in 1929, and this testing cemented the reputation of the compound, which required stabilization using beeswax or later a synthetic compound. Doctor James Phinney Baxter III advised that, "RDX is too sensitive to be used alone . . . all the bees in the world would not produce enough beeswax to desensitize the huge quantities of it now desired."<sup>59</sup> The volatility of this new mixture alarmed the crews, but on they flew. One ship in the low element position fell victim to antiaircraft fire, causing the new mixture to ignite and the number three engine to tear completely away. The crew who survived, though some were badly injured, managed to escape only to be captured and interned in the Insein Prison. Two more Superfortresses fell that day, with one eliminating 753 Imperial Japanese soldiers on board a transport train in their crash. On 20 December, Maj Gen Curtis E. Lemay ordered his bombers to target the Rama VI bridge in Bangkok, Thailand, a 1,500-foot steel railway bridge spanning the Chao Phraya River, a vital lifeline into Burma for the Imperial Japanese. The Superfortresses proved up to the task and blasted the bridge out of commission. This cost the enemy supplies, time, manpower, and fuel to repair the logistical artery. General Arnold put it this way in a 27 December 1944 message to Eastern Air Command: "Sincerely hope that your Christmas present to the enemy will be a continuation of this same outstanding treatment which can only point an early disintegration of the [Japanese] in your part

of the world.” The bombers expanded their field of play but kept Rangoon on watch as the nightmare continued for the Japanese.<sup>60</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 66313A.C.

**Figure 18. B-29 Superfortress Eddie Allen of the 40th Bomb Group, 20th Bomber Command approaches Rangoon, Burma, 3 November 1944, Operation Eruption.**



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 60188A.C.

**Figure 19. Rama VI bridge in Bangkok, Thailand, a 1,500-foot steel railway bridge spanning the Chao Phraya River**



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 56314A.C.

**Figure 20. Rama VI Bridge in Bangkok, Thailand, as B-29 Superfortress bombs obliterate it.**

### **Operation Grubworm**

As mentioned in the “Arcadia” Conference of 10 January 1942, keeping China in the war against Japan had been a top priority for the Allies since the beginning of conflict. Japanese forces occupied large swaths of China west and south of Manchuria, and the position of Chaing Kai Shek stood as tenuous at best. The Troop Carrier Squadrons of the Air Commando Groups rose to the challenge. In November 1944, the initial assignments of Maj Richard Edwards, Commander 317th Troop Carrier Squadron, led the Air Commandos to fly Chinese Nationalist soldiers from Nam Sin, Burma, to Kunming, China, capital of Yunnan province, and transport asphalt to Myitkyina, Burma, for use in constructing the Ledo-Burma Road under the leadership of Gen Joseph Stilwell.<sup>61</sup> As they were new to flying the “Hump,” the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron lost two C-47s on the first day over the dangerous mountain range. Inaccurate preflight briefings contained misinformation and bore responsibility for the tragic beginning.<sup>62</sup>

The Japanese were advancing south toward Kweiyang, China, in December 1944, fresh off a conquest of Kweilin. Air Commandos of the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron sprang into action. Gaining Kweiyang would place the Japanese in

a prime strategic position to drive on to Kunming and Chungking, both terminal points along the Burma Road. This scenario could not be allowed if the Allies wanted to keep China in the war. By 6 January 1945, the Air Commandos and six other transport squadrons moved an entire Chinese division to hold back the enemy. Other missions, such as flying supplies to forward airstrips, continued simultaneously.<sup>63</sup> By January 1945, the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron had flown 1,182 hours averaging 38 hours a day across the squadron.<sup>64</sup> Together, the 317th and 319th Troop Carrier Squadrons received a commendation from General Stremeyer for their efforts. The general emphasized the haste with which the mission was constructed, stating, “[a]lthough the project was initiated hurriedly and without extensive preparation, personnel involved performed their duties with the utmost efficiency and by their concerted effort achieved complete success. . . . [H]igh morale was highly instrumental to the success of their missions which were accomplished with a perfect operational record.”<sup>65</sup>



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives A-72738A.C.

**Figure 21. Chinese Nationalists and US forces load mules onto a C-47 of the 319th Troop Carrier Squadron bound for transport from Myitkyina, Burma, over the “Hump” into China, 13 December 1944.**



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives A35866

**Figure 22. 28 January 1945, 319th Troop Carrier Squadron refueling in the morning mist at Tingkawka-Sakan, Burma. Metal pipes stowed inside are bound for China.**

### **Ghost Flight**

*Black shadows thrown by the moonlight seeming full of a silent mystery of their own. Not a thing seemed to be stirring, but all to be grim and fixed as death or fate.*

—Mina Harker  
Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Like phantoms materializing from the ether, a small cadre of B-25H Mitchell bombers sporting an unusually pale paint scheme arrived at Asansol, India, taking the Air Commandos by surprise: “There is no indication of why or how they came into being or where they came from.”<sup>66</sup> These medium bombers began nighttime raids over central Burma on 25 November, pumping lead from their single 75-millimeter nose cannon as well as the four fixed, forward-firing sub-machine guns in the nose. The aircraft sported four additional fixed sub-machine guns in forward-firing cheek blisters as well as two more in the manned, dorsal turret. For additional firepower, the Mitchell also held one submachine gun each in a pair of new waist positions and a final pair in the new tail gunner’s

position. The Mitchell sported two Wright R-2600-13 air-cooled, radial engines. What these mysterious bombers forfeited by carrying the 75-millimeter cannon instead of the eight .5-inch machine guns in the nose was more than made up for by the 75-millimeter cannon's deadly effectiveness against ground targets. To spot obscured targets at night, the B-25s utilized M-8 flares dropped from 1,500 feet in the air. This distance typically allowed the bombers two passes on the target before the flare burned out. The wily Air Commandos quickly devised a plan to use the B-25s alongside their P-47s. When the B-25s hunted at night and were returning to home station, the bombers directed their fellow airmen onto high valued targets spotted by the bombers. Soon the synthesis of night and day became standard operating procedure. During the first week of combat, these night bombers destroyed five trains and many transports. This trend continued until 5 December 1944.<sup>67</sup>



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 72684A

**Figure 23. 1st Air Commando Group B-25H Night Intruders at Chittagong, India, 23 January 1945.**

On 23 December 1944, the bombers returned to the fray and Eastern Air Command formally assigned the seven B-25H Mitchell aircraft to the 1st Air Commando Group. These “Night Intruders” based on Chittagong Airbase ravaged Japanese supply lines and disrupted communications. Operations included nightly sweeps of enemy territory, but the realities of the China–Burma–India Theater proved to be a limiting factor. A shortage of pilots and aircrews prevented full plan implementation. To counter the operational difficulties at hand, the Night Intruders expanded their range.<sup>68</sup>

Enemy activity increased as their range of movement decreased. Large convoys and motorized transports under general blackout conditions in and around Chauk-Myingyan and Meiktila were top enemy priorities. The adversary, forced to change tactics due to the Night Intruders, altered their plans. The Japanese eliminated the use of tracer ammunition and the Imperial Army used high-powered spotlights directed at the low flying Mitchell bombers to focus small arms fire; antiaircraft fire met with limited success. The B-25s were not an island unto themselves. When heavy resistance occurred, Air Commando P-47 fighters based at Fenny Airfield received notification and scrambled immediately to conduct raids.<sup>69</sup>



US Signal Corps Photo National Archives 54354A.C.

**Figure 24. Left, Maj Gen George Edward Stratemeyer greets right, Col Clinton B. Gaty, commander, 1st Air Commando Group at Lalaghat, India, 1944.**

By the end of 1944, the Night Intruders had eliminated 19 locomotives and decimated rolling stock and motorized transport.<sup>70</sup> The bombers even located and shredded Japanese riverboats. The Night Intruders flew 33 missions over 10 nights, losing only one aircraft to enemy fire. Motorized transports and rolling stock formed the bulk of the B-25's targets, with 72 motorized transports destroyed and 138 damaged. Forty-one convoys of rolling stock vanished and 131 received damage under the hail of fragmentary bombs, incen-

diaries, 75-millimeter cannon, and 50-caliber ammunition. Other targets included river boats, with 21 destroyed, and 54 damaged, and trains, with 11 destroyed and 13 damaged. One oil dump fell victim to Air Commando Mitchells, and 14 towns harboring the enemy were bombed 16 times. The short operation concluded on 4 January 1945. The Night Intruders returned to Asansol, India, when the full moon appeared and robbed the Air Commandos of their cover.<sup>71</sup> These phantom bombers made one final appearance as a provisional fighter group was standing up. The group was to receive a detachment of Night Intruders from the 1st Air Commando Group. Whether this proposed fighter group received its B-25 detachment or not is an enigma.



US Signal Corps Photo National Archives 72682A.C

**Figure 25. Ordnance personnel assemble bomb clusters for an Air Commando B-25, Chittagong, India, 23 January 1945.**

As the air war raged so did the ground battle. In late January 1945, the 164th, 165th, and 166th Liaison Squadrons of the 1st Air Commando Group continued their primary missions of medical evacuation and medical supply transportation. The group received reports of sporadic Japanese activity dur-

ing nighttime raids. These so called “jitter” parties sought to strike fear into US personnel during their long nights in the jungle. Pockets of Japanese soldiers separated from their assigned units and attempted to disguise themselves as Burmese nationals to return to their units. Japanese artillery maintained its objective, actively pounding ground forces and airstrips east of the Irrawaddy River and the Saigaing Hills region. The artillery barrages could not stem the tide. “Most villages and former [Japanese] positions in this area [Pyinchaung] were found evacuated . . . [yet,] . . . [p]revious reports of exaggerated [Japanese] numbers in this area have now been substantiated.”<sup>72</sup> These small pockets were left to man defensive positions and slow the advance of General Slim’s downward thrust into Burma.<sup>73</sup>

## Thunderbolt

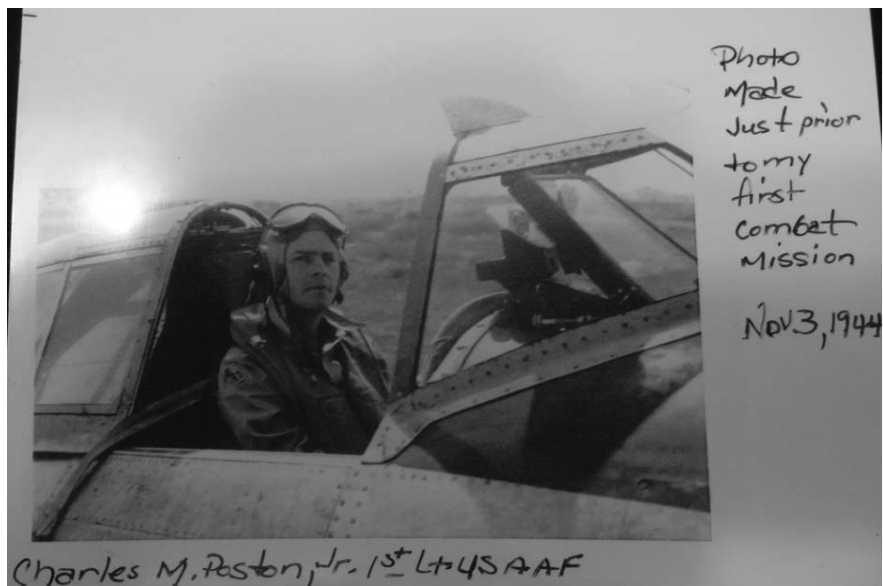


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**Figure 26. 6th Fighter Squadron Commando, unit photograph**

The Air Commando Groups lost their autonomy in the China–Burma–India Theater on 1 March 1945 when Maj Gen George H. Stratemeyer approved a transfer of all operational control of commando fighter squadrons to the Commanding General, Combat Cargo Task Forces.<sup>74</sup> The bruised and battered A-Model P-51s maintained their integrity, but replacement C-models could arrive any day. Maj Roland R. Lynn of the 5th Fighter Squadron, Commando, relayed, “[t]hey offered me two squadrons of P-47s and all the replacements I needed if I’d trade those for the 51Cs, because they wanted to send those to China. . . . Also they advised me that if you cracked up one of those P-51Cs you’re not going to get any replacements.”<sup>75</sup> Therefore, the 1st Air Commando Group traded in their banged-up P-51A aircraft in early spring 1944 in exchange for Republic P-47D Thunderbolts, a tried-and-true, close air support and bomber-escort specialist. 2nd Lts Benton Hall Jr., Rudy Melichar, and Franklin “Frank” J. “Curly” Misfeldt

ferried the P-47s from Karachi, India (now Pakistan) Misfeldt stated, “[t]hey’d been sitting there I don’t know how long in Karachi. You had to sweep about an inch and a half of sand off the wings and the canopy.”<sup>76</sup> The “Jug” sported eight .50-caliber machine guns and could hold 2,500 pounds of conventional munitions or rockets. The capable P-47D could achieve 433 miles per hour by virtue of its single Pratt and Whitney R2800 2,430 horsepower engine.<sup>77</sup>



Courtesy of Charles Poston and Warbirds Unlimited Foundation, "Honor Roll, Warbirds Unlimited Salutes Charles Poston," 4 Mar 2008

### Figure 27. 1st Lt Charles M. Poston Jr., 6th Fighter Squadron Commando

1st Lts Charles Poston, William J. Hemphill, Lloyd H. James, Earl B. Price, and William E. Raynolds made their way from Karachi to Asansol, India, ferrying Jugs and reported to Capt Younger A. Pitts Jr. The former Mustang pilots felt some contrition about their new aircraft. Lieutenant Poston recalled, “The longest runway at Asansol was 4,800 feet which is pretty short for the ‘Jug’. Those ex-P-51 pilots were not at all enthusiastic about having to fly P-47s, and frankly, the airplane was not as pretty as the P-51. Plus, they found the P-47 control pressures a lot heavier than the P-51. We had a saying back at Venice that ‘if you want a pretty picture of yourself with an airplane for your sweetie, make it with a P-51. But if you want to be alive to tell about it, make the plane a P-47.’”<sup>78</sup>

Major Lynn explained that as new pilots arrived to replace departures, the Air Commandos also acquired a P-40 Warhawk squadron to perform alert

duties for B-29 Superfortress units while waiting for the Jugs to provide full replacement of the Mustangs. During this period, the accident rate spiked with pilots operating three airframes at one time. Alert duty ended abruptly with the return to full manning and because of safety concerns. The old reliable P-40 would not play a vital role for the Air Commandos.<sup>79</sup>



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**Figure 28. P-47s of the 1st Air Commando Group lift off on an unknown mission.**

The 5th and 6th Fighter Squadron Commando of the 1st Air Commando Group, based at Cox's Bazar, India, provided fighter support to IV Corps between 10 February and 12 March 1945. Over this period, the Fifth and Sixth flew 213 missions.<sup>80</sup> The following verbatim excerpts summarize these activities:

Mission #115,

Four P-47s launched at 0701L. Conducted ten strafing runs over target at 0747. Two additional attacks against positions on a plateau and in buildings. Tanks moved in and fighters moved out at 0815.<sup>81</sup>

Mission #116,

Requested to dive bomb enemy concentration by IV Corps. Over target at 1430L Target area completely covered by 14 bombs in pinpointed area . . . Demolished four buildings and started two orange-colored fires.<sup>82</sup>

Mission #121,

24 P-47s from the 5th Fighter Squadron Commando, one P-47 from the 6th Fighter Squadron Commando linked with four B-25s to eliminate anti-aircraft and Japanese positions near Chauk-Myingyan airstrip. Forty-two 500-pound bombs eliminated anti-aircraft fire.

Two more 500 pounders hit an oil pumping station causing a steam explosion spreading fire and sending plumes of black smoke into the sky. A staff car attempted escape, but it burned too when P-47s strafed the vehicle 1,500 yards away from the mission target. The Mitchell bombers released 72 fragmentation clusters showering the target area. One P-47 sustained minor damage as an explosive round found its mark in the cowling and wing. Japanese forces standing on top of a building attempted to target a B-25 with small arms fire until an escorting P-47 eliminated the position. All aircraft returned to their base at 1200.<sup>83</sup>

Mission #128,

Four P-47s blasted three locomotives in brick sheds. Spotted damaged stock and the fuselage of several Japanese aircraft.<sup>84</sup>

Mission #129,

Nine P-47s dispatched at 0650L. Three Jugs bombed the Marshalling yards at Thazi. Three trains and 12 oil-filled boxcars destroyed. Three P-47s fell under attack from behind by five Oscars and one Lily (Kawasaki Ki-48). The tail P-47 sustained damage to its right-wing tip.<sup>85</sup> The Air Commandos had no remaining ammunition, thus utilized their powerful R-2800 engine to outrun the aggressors.<sup>86</sup>



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 50711A.C

**Figure 29. 5th Fighter Squadron Commando at Lalaghat, India**

Mission #143,

Four P-47s from the 5th Fighter Squadron Commando and four P-47s from the 6th Fighter Squadron Commando rendezvous with eight P-51 Mustangs and four B-25 Mitchell bombers over a field near Kanye village. Mitchell bombers attacked four enemy

supply trains while the fighters concentrated on Japanese positions in the village onto bunkers and trenches surrounding the area.<sup>87</sup>

Mission #212-213,

Four P-47s guarded Meiktila from enemy air interdiction and engaged Japanese gun emplacements along Nyaunggan road. One artillery position was bombed and another ceased operation. Five artillery pieces remained in operation for the time being. On return to base, one P-47 sustained a crippling hit. The Jug belched smoke and crash landed behind the Japanese battle line. The Air Commandos “[o]bserved [the] pilot get out, beat out flames, disrobe to shorts and . . . [start] . . . walking away from [Japanese] lines.”<sup>88</sup>



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**Figure 30. 2nd Lt Fred Houston Stevens, 5th Fighter Squadron Commando**

A second P-47 landed at Meiktila Airstrip where the pilot changed planes and took off in a Vultee L-5 Sentinel, returning to the fray, where he located the downed Air Commando! Dropping a first aid kit to the downed and burned pilot, the L-5 returned for fuel in Allied territory. Once refueled the L-5 pilot took to the air to direct a tank commander who pushed but could not break through to perform the rescue by another route. Japanese forces stopped a convoy of armored cars attempting rescue.<sup>89</sup>

The Air Commandos returned to the battle right away with new orders to finish off the artillery north of Meiktila. 4,800 rounds of ammunition and two solid hits from munitions inflicted great damage to the Sons of Heaven. An L-5 reported that he made visual contact with the downed pilot and that the Japanese were a half mile away from his position, but recovery proved impossible. The pilot remained missing in action despite the gallant attempts for his recovery.<sup>90</sup>



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Figure 31. 6th Fighter Squadron Commando, 1st Air Commando Group, Engineering Flight

The mission reports demonstrate the interconnected nature of air operations and their role in medical extraction and close air support, with three key observations noted. First, no single airframe can accomplish the mission alone. Second, training is invaluable; few Air Commando munitions missed their target, and the same was true for other munitions. Third, the Air Commandos, and indeed all Allied forces, received authorization to engage the enemy when and where they found them, indicating the benefits of a continual on-scene commander.<sup>91</sup>

## Operation Scorch

*A fire goeth before him, and burneth up his enemies round about.*

—Psalms 97:3



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### Figure 32. 2nd Air Commando Group, P-51 Mustang, China-Burma-India Theater

Operation SCORCH consisted of two main points:

1. Bolster General Slim's forces in the effort to capture Meiktila with troop insertion, rescue, fighter, and close air support.
2. Harass enemy targets at any opportunity.

In support of the British Multivite Operations, a British-led advance on the city of Meiktila, the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron began transporting personnel and equipment of the 327th Airdrome Squadron, 1st and 2nd Fighter Squadrons Commando, to Cox's Bazar, on 4 February 1945.<sup>92</sup> The 2nd Air Commando Group fighter squadrons all arrived at Cox's Bazar on 12 February 1945. The group's first combat mission occurred when the Mustangs received direction to incinerate enemy positions along the Irrawaddy River at Pakkokugyun. Col Arthur R. DeBolt and Lt Col Levi R. Chase led this mission. Both fighter squadrons supported Irrawaddy Bridgehead operations in the coming days, and success brought more opportunity. By 4 March 1945, the group had amassed 560 fighter sorties, and "the use of napalm predominated in most of the attacks."<sup>93</sup>



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**Figure 33. Col Arthur R. DeBolt, commander, 2nd Air Commando Group.**



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 72654A.C.

**Figure 34. A 319th Troop Carrier Squadron C-47 traverses mountainous terrain on route to Meiktila, Burma.**

Finally, the enemy succumbed to the fire, and the final battle for the city began. The 2nd Air Commando Group's P-51s provided close air support and an aerial deterrent for Royal Air Force and fellow Air Commando C-47s funneling in soldiers at the battle of Meiktila. The nature of the operation called for 500-pound bombs and 110-gallon napalm canisters.<sup>94</sup> The Commander of IV Corps, British Gen Frank W. Messervy, stated, "I am confident that with your help, this Corps will not only successfully complete the present operation, but will go on hunting and killing the [Imperial Japanese soldiers] till they've had it in Burma and beyond."<sup>95</sup>

To satiate the Air Commando lust to engage the enemy, the fighter squadrons began to take their fiery payload farther afield, accepting various missions as they arose and bringing the war to Japanese-controlled airfields in Thailand. On 15 March 1945, the Air Commandos, referring to themselves as Chase's Circus after their Group Commander, Lt Col Levi R. Chase, joined the assault on Don Muang Airfield near Bangkok. Forty Mustangs screamed over the airfield where they found over 100 fighter and bomber aircraft sitting

on the field. They were easy prey. The Air Commandos delighted in their catch and made numerous passes on the helpless Oscars and Mitsubishi Ki-46 Type 100 Command Reconnaissance Aircraft, Allied code name Dinah. The enemy scrambled and tried to get airborne. A few managed to do so, a testament to their dedication, but shortly, two single engine Ki-43 fighters and one Dinah succumbed to bursts from the cunning Air Commandos and dropped from the sky. Four more Oscars met their complete demise on the ground and six sustained severe damage. Thirteen, and possibly four more, Dinahs received the killing blow on the ground and 12 were severely damaged. The Air Commandos moved on to the supporting structures and left them in flames before heading 1,600 miles back to Cox's Bazar. This sortie set a single engine record for the longest distance flown in a fighter-bomber sweep to that date in the World War II era.<sup>96</sup>

On 1 April 1945, Easter Sunday, the Air Commandos of the 1st Fighter Squadron Commando, 2nd Air Commando Group, took off at 0830 for a "sunrise service" the enemy would never forget. The Commandos of the self-proclaimed Highpockets Squadron believed that the Japanese forces would relax knowing that the Allies would be attending church that day.<sup>97</sup> Mingaladon Airfield, a machine shop, and the Japanese barracks north of Rangoon took overwhelming damage from conventional munitions and napalm. Ever the opportunists, the Air Commandos kept turning their fiery attention toward Japanese soft targets in Thailand.<sup>98</sup> Highly strategic airfields at "BanTakli [Takhli, North of Bangkok], Chiengnai, Koke Katheim, Khega, Nakon Pathom [sic], Nakon [sic] Sawan, and Phre" fell victim to the Air Commando Mustangs. <sup>99</sup> Indeed the raid on Nakhon Pathom, near French Indochina, resulted in the reduction to smoldering rubble of all structures, both temporary installations and permanent buildings.<sup>100</sup> Some of these installations saw use in later wars after, reconstruction.

In a bold move, the 1st and 2nd Fighter Squadron Commando returned to Don Muang Airfield on 7 April 1945. Unprepared for a second attack and still reeling from the Easter surprise, the Japanese lost 29 more aircraft. The second raid eliminated 19 Dinahs and 11 Oscars.<sup>101</sup>



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**Figure 35. Captain Reilly, Lt Col Levi R. Chase, and Staff Sergeant Post**

The next napalm mission targeted Loikaw in Central Burma. One unfortunate pilot, Bert Lutton, experienced an in-flight emergency and had no choice

but to guide himself down approximately 40 miles southeast of Cox's Bazar. If maneuvering his P-51 Mustang down to a safe landing was not a feat unto itself, Lutton found himself in the middle of a minefield. The report states that "he calmly stepped clear of the area."<sup>102</sup> After Lutton was shot down, Col Robert W. Hall assumed command of the 1st Air Commando Group on 7 April 1945. His tenure began with a blaze.<sup>103</sup>



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**Figure 36. 2nd Lt Bert Lutton was shot down and seen walking away from aircraft.**

Sadly, on a third return trip to Don Muang Airfield, 9 April 1945, one P51 sustained severe damage from enemy fire. 1st Lt Thomas F. Pakenham and 2nd Lt Robert H. Grace noted that Capt Albert Abraham managed to parachute to safety and circled the area. Soon the pair witnessed him land and begin to pack his parachute, but despite his verified position, the captain remained missing in action.<sup>104</sup> The veteran officer soon found himself a prisoner.



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**Figure 37. Capt Albert Abraham was shot down and taken prisoner.**

Disintegrating railway bridges became second nature to the Air Commandos, as did escort and napalm missions. Between 12 April and 14 April alone, the 1st Fighter Squadron Commando bombed, strafed, and burned to cinders the occupied village of Kyauktainggan. The Air Commandos neutralized anywhere from 1,500 to 2,000 Japanese soldiers. On 20 April, one Mustang, piloted by 1st Lt Herman G. “Doc” Lyons, was hit by flak near the Rangoon River and limped off to crash near Bassein, Burma. The Air Commandos mourned their loss but held out hope for their comrade, and more raids on Thailand ensued on 24 April, leaving an enemy occupied airfield in ashes.<sup>105</sup> Robert Eason of the 1st Fighter Squadron recounted that “Doc” Lyons “was hidden over night by the natives, but they were afraid of reprisal . . . so they turned him in [to the Japanese] . . . they took him . . . beat him . . . and he was beheaded.”<sup>106</sup> “Doc” Lyons was memorialized one year later in the Manila American Cemetery, Republic of the Philippines, and declared killed in action on 21 April 1946.<sup>107</sup>



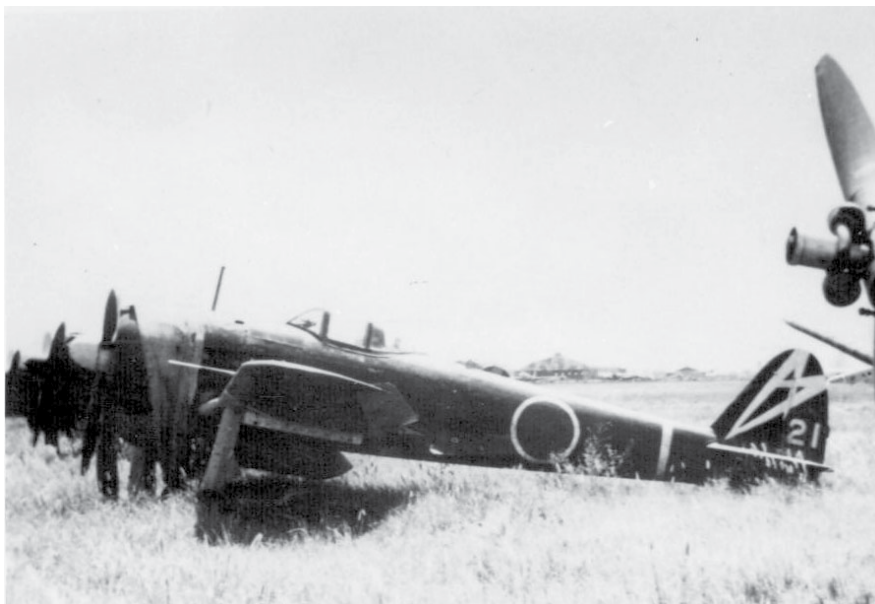
Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive, Carlton D. Ferrby Collection.

**Figure 38. 2nd Lt Herman G. "Doc" Lyons, 1st Commando pilot, was shot down, captured, and later killed by his captors.**



Used by permission, NNAM.1996.488.159.055, Robert Lawson Photograph Collection; National Naval Aviation Museum, Pensacola, Florida.

**Figure 39. An abandoned Nakajima Ki-43 "Oscar" pictured at an unidentified airfield.**



Used by permission, NNAM.1996.488.159.055, Robert Lawson Photograph Collection; National Naval Aviation Museum, Pensacola, Florida.

**Figure 40. Nakajima Ki-43 “Oscar” fighter pictured with other aircraft at an unidentified airfield.**

Good fortune seemed to follow the Air Commandos and often filtered through the group and down to individuals as well. Capt Julian Gilliam managed to land his smoking P-51 at Hmawbi Airstrip on 28 April 1945. The canopy of his Mustang sustained a direct hit from an explosive shell, leaving Captain Gilliam bruised and bloody. The captain had sustained three direct hits near Hmawbi during his tenure in the China–Burma–India. He possessed no evidence yet suspected that a particular Japanese gunner had his number. Captain Gilliam stated, “[t]he little b\*\*\*\*\* gets better every day.”<sup>108</sup>

The scorching of Japanese targets culminated on 29 April 1945 when a retreat to Moulmein was thwarted by the superiority of the commando fighter squadrons. The Japanese forces attempted to retreat in mass, but P-51s shredded “tankettes, trains, locomotives, AA [AntiAircraft] guns, cars and trucks. . . . When the British ground troops arrived the next day, they found hundreds of vehicles abandoned.”<sup>109</sup> The living hastened away, but the Japanese lost not only their logistics and weaponry but also their only fuel dump.<sup>110</sup> In 2006, Capt Robert Eason stated, “going in machine gunning, dropping napalm and bombing ahead of

them. . . . If you call war fun, that was fun. It was really fun going in strafing. We'd go in right on the deck and strafe and see them running."<sup>111</sup>

Three F-6Ds (P-51s modified to perform photographic-reconnaissance) and two P-51Ds were lost over enemy territory while eight P-51s and three F-6Ds transferred to other units. Squadron end strength on 30 April stood at 13 standard D models, three P-51Ks and 10 F-6Ds.<sup>112</sup> In all, April proved to be a blistering hot month in Burma as the rising sun of the Japanese empire began to set.



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**Figure 41. Capt Julian Gilliam, severely wounded in battle, managed to land his heavily damaged P-51.**



Used by permission, NNAM.1996.488.159.055, Robert Lawson Photograph Collection; National Naval Aviation Museum, Pensacola, Florida.

**Figure 42. The wreckage of a Nakajima Ki-43 "Oscar" pictured at an unidentified airfield.**

## **Operations Capital/Extended Capital**

**The forgotten army leaves a lasting impression.** With a distinctive Red and Black Shield representing the combined British (Red) and Indian (Black) armies, the emblem of the 14th British Army tells a meaningful story. Lt Gen Sir William Slim designed the emblem to incorporate the two gargantuan armies and reflect the downward thrust into Southern Burma. The Forgotten Army amalgamated in November of 1943 and bore the brunt of the Japanese assault into northern Burma.<sup>113</sup> back to the formation Looking of the unit.

**The line of battle.** General Slim and his men held a line of battle stretching across the borders of China and India all the way to the Bay of Bengal.<sup>114</sup> Operation Capital began and the white sword of the 14th Army began to push forward.

Operation Capital consisted of four main points:<sup>115</sup>

1. 14th Army would advance and capture Mandalay.
2. Chinese forces were to advance to the Thabeikkyin-Mogok-Lashio line with close air support provided by American forces.
3. XV Corps under Lt Gen Sir Alexander Frank Philip Christison would secure forward positions and protect vital airfields with support of the Royal Air Force.

4. A joint land, air, and sea operation would seize Rangoon before the monsoon season.



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**Figure 43. British 14th Army Formation Badge**

### **Meiktila**

In early February, General Slim's Fourteenth Army and the 17th Indian Division, "The Black Cat Division," prepared to embed their sword into Meiktila, Burma, with no reservations. The city served as the "administrative centre of the Japanese main front, a nodal point of their communications and the focus of several airfields."<sup>116</sup> On 27 February 1945, the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron supported the 99th Indian Infantry Brigade, landing them at Thabutkon forward airstrip and releasing their fury onto Meiktila under mortar fire; Japanese forces utilized three- to four-inch mortars with phosphorous shells and 75-millimeter artillery. The brigade belonged to the 17th Indian Infantry Division at that time. This was an extremely hazardous and exhausting task, many pilots making as many as three round trips daily from Palel to Meiktila.<sup>117</sup>

A less pressing matter arose as the Royal Air Force attempted to bring the Air Commandos under their purview. On 23 February 1945, Wing Commander S. H. Wisdom, Royal Air Force, had suggested that the 1st Air Commando Group be renamed to the 1st Provisional Group under Combat Cargo Task Force among other requests. Chief of Intelligence, Group Captain A. T. Richardson, Royal Air Force, concurred with the name change yet had reservations about including the Air Commandos in the Combat Cargo Group. Somehow contacting the USAAF had slipped the minds of the personnel assigned to the joint task force, as this distraction filtered through the command. On 25 February, Lt Col Wilkes D. Kelly responded, "I disagree on the change of name of this section. The name Air Commando means something in this theater and it seems to me that the name should be retained rather than substitute the more prosaic appellation of 1st Ft. Gp. (Prov). Technically speaking, the Air Commandos are part of the Combat Cargo Task Force and are 'loaned' out as the occasion demands. I suggest that this section remain as is."<sup>118</sup> In other words, hands off. The mighty thrust of the Fourteenth Army's sword, the air superiority of the Air Commandos, and the tenacity of the 17th Infantry Division could not be denied. Meiktila proved to be the last layer of armor in the Japanese defense. From that moment, the enemy remained in full retreat.<sup>119</sup>



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**Figure 44. Left to right: Lieutenant Colonel Suggs, Combat Cargo Task Force; Wing Commander S. H. Wisdom, RAF; Maj William B. Hawkins; and unknown**



US Signal Corps Photo, National Archives 50971A.C.

**Figure 45. *Left*, The late Maj Gen Orde Charles Wingate and *right*, Lt Col Clinton B. Gaty scan the sky at Chowinghee Field, Burma.**

At 0908, 26 February 1945, Col Clinton B. Gaty lifted off in his P-47 Thunderbolt 42-28145, "Stewie II," for a routine patrol-bombing mission to the Mahlaing area. Oddly, the colonel did not include a wingman. Maj Roland R. Lynn recalled, "I was the last guy to see him. I put him in his airplane and tried to talk him out of going."<sup>120</sup> Gaty had no contact with fellow Air Commandos who began to raise the alarm, and at 1030 1st Lt Joe Setnor reported a lone Jug with Air Commando markings circling over Mahlaing. Reports of Japanese activity poured in when four Oscar's appeared near Meiktila and accosted a group of P-47s at 1110. The radio remained silent.

On the evening of 26 February, all area air and ground units began searching for the missing colonel. One B-25, two P-47s and four P-51s prowled the stretch from Meiktila and Mahlaing to the Irrawaddy River and Sinthe. Dejectedly, they returned with no luck.<sup>121</sup>

The following day, nearly the entire 1st Air Commando Group began searching for Colonel Gaty. Vultee L-5s, B-25s, P-47s, and an entire squadron from the 221st Group, Royal Air Force, combined forces to locate the commander, but to no avail. No sign of Colonel Gaty could be found, and the 1st Air Commando Group was without a commander until a replacement could arrive.<sup>122</sup> Meanwhile, the Army kept rolling along and Meiktila's capture loomed ahead.

The 99th Indian Infantry Brigade (assigned to the 17th Indian Infantry Division) met its objective, and the now-surrounded city found itself besieged on 28 February. General Stratemeyer was singularly impressed with this feat of cargo aviation and sent word of his admiration to the commanding general of the United States Army Air Forces, Gen Henry H. "Hap" Arnold.<sup>123</sup> The Air Commandos continued to support the battle with fuel and ammunition.



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 72827A.C.

**Figure 46. 1st Air Commando, 319th Troop Carrier Squadron, C-47 exterior with wounded Indian and British soldiers loading up, 17 March 1945, Meiktila, Burma.**

Japanese artillery realized the importance of air resupply and keyed in on the Air Commandos at every opportunity. The enemy fired from their embedded positions on hilltops surrounding the city. Remarkably, not one Air Commando received a single injury. From 15 to 18 March 1945, the troop carrier personnel supported the airlift of additional reinforcements from the 99th Indian Infantry Brigade and provided war readiness supplies until Meiktila lay in Allied hands. The lift accomplished, the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron returned to Kalaikunda, India.<sup>124</sup>

General Slim advised General Stratemeyer to contact Arnold and detail the successful insertion. The entire Combat Cargo Task Force received a letter of commendation dated 7 March 1945.<sup>125</sup>

Stratemeyer stated, "Fighter, bombers, transport, and light aircraft, have been employed magnificently."<sup>126</sup> The 99th Indian Infantry Brigade itself wrote a report: "Speed was the essence of the whole operation and speed was certainly attained by your boys. . . . There was no holding you back once you started on the job and we in IV Corps all realize what a really good show you have put up and what an important part you have played in giving the [Imperial Japanese Army] a real knock out blow at Meiktila."<sup>127</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 73533A.C.

**Figure 47. Left, Maj Gen George E. Stratemeyer speaks with Lord Louis Mountbatten in India, April 1945.**

On 18 April, Adm Lord Louis Mountbatten, Commander South East Asia Command, personally visited the airstrip at Meiktila West at great personal risk. The regional commander knew his men needed the boost to morale that his visit would bestow. Lord Mountbatten stated, "I don't think I have ever seen such activity on any strip as at Meiktila West. As I went glider after glider came in with the Air Commandos Aviation Construction Battalion [900th Airborne Engineers Aviation] ready to fly on to make up the forward airfields."<sup>128</sup> This unit encountered stiff resistance defeating the Imperial Japanese 15th Army at the battle of Meiktila south of Mandalay.<sup>129</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 23227A.C.

**Figure 48. General of the Air Force, Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, visionary creator of the Air Commando concept, ca. 1943**

After visiting the battlefield, Lord Mountbatten made haste to Kyaukpyu Airstrip at the northern most point of Ramree Island, Burma. A meeting with senior officers discussing invasion plans for Rangoon occurred, and upon its conclusion, the commander proceeded to Akyab Airstrip.<sup>130</sup> All pieces on the proverbial chessboard were moving into position.

### **Myitkyina to Mandalay**

*Occupation of Myitkyina will enable us immediately to increase the air-lift to China.*

—President Roosevelt to Prime Minister Churchill, 25 February 1944



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives A36028.

**Figure 49. Pfc James N. Buttrick, 1st Air Commando Group public relations specialist, discusses the occupation of Mandalay with a priest and his parishioners, 17 March 1945.**

Imperial Japanese forces had occupied Myitkyina on 8 May 1942 despite the best efforts of General Stilwell, who at that point witnessed the departure of the Chinese armies he depended on to conduct an effective counterattack. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was not willing to sacrifice his forces for Burma. The Chinese, General Stilwell, and his men evacuated to India to regroup and enter

a new phase in the war, the war to keep China from collapsing.<sup>131</sup> Two years later, the tide was turning. Allied forces had taken Meiktila and now captured Myitkyina's primary airfield. The Troop Carrier squadrons began landings on their new field as soon as the ground forces secured it.<sup>132</sup> The enemy grew desperate and realized that the only hope for victory lay in attack, believing "the way of the Samurai is one of immediacy, and it is best to dash in headlong."<sup>133</sup> Japanese Lieutenant General Masakazu Kawabe launched a new portion of his "defense of Burma" plan, an offensive named Operation U-GO, which had begun on 3 February 1945, with the 15th Army under the leadership of Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi, in a three-pronged assault.<sup>134</sup>

The enemy put up a stiff resistance in Myitkyina and barricaded themselves within the town. Close quarters fighting mixed with aerial support. Pilots utilized a gridded map and constant contact with command-and-control elements to ensure that friendly forces remained safe. Pilots based at Myitkyina during the battle possessed extensive familiarity with the territory; thus, command took the risk of allowing "danger close" missions.<sup>135</sup> "Danger close" can be defined as missions when the Allies gave targets to pilots as close as 25 yards to friendly forces, often at the request of those friendly forces, and often resulting in friendly casualties. Discipline and training resulted in a zero casualty rate during such high-risk maneuvers. Barracks and bunkers fell victim to steel from above, freeing British Chindits, Chinese, American, Indian, and Gurkha positions. The Chindits of Morris Force were "well prepared for air attacks in battle areas."<sup>136</sup> For the personnel assigned to the task force, possessing an air liaison officer to communicate and direct the fighters above enabled working together with the 1st Air Commando Group. This controlled form of combat rendered heavily camouflaged positions vulnerable. What remained hidden from the air was now visible, as personnel on terra firma could direct aerial attack. With practice, close communications between the air and ground became second nature.

The innovation of air liaison officers certainly assisted ground forces in destroying the enemy; however, these forces could only go as far as the landscape permitted. The joint task force encountered resistance coming from treacherous caves embedded within the side of cliffs and other hard to reach places. The Japanese army had prepared to face the onslaught well; however, their planning did not account for the ingenuity of the Air Commandos. To counter the Japanese tactics, Maj Robert L. Petit brought a tool he had experience with from other Pacific engagements. As Maj Walter V. Radovich, Deputy Commander, 1st Air Commando Bomber Section, and Olin B. Carter, 6th Fighter Squadron, recalled, the Japanese "had a habit of being in caves, sometimes up on a hillside. There's no way you can lob bombs in there. So, our armorers rigged Navy depth charges which are blunt ended. They rigged a nose-cone [*sic*] on it and hung a fin



Operation U-Go spawned a suboperation called Operation Ha-Go that led to the Battle of Admin Box.<sup>138</sup> The 31st, 33rd, and 15th Divisions of the Imperial Japanese Army as well as 7,000 seditious members of the Indian National Army who had joined the Japanese participated in the offensive. The 15th Army pushed in toward Assam, India, and delayed General Slim's offensive, but the overextended force quickly succumbed to exhaustion. This action triggered the battle of Kohima. Over a two-week period, a garrison inside the city repelled the Japanese siege with the aid of air resupply. By July, the Indian perimeter resolidified, and General Kawase's force found itself repelled.<sup>139</sup> Three divisions of the Imperial Japanese Army retreated to Mandalay but met defeat as the 33rd Corps advanced. General Slim's 14th Army plowed ahead, often delayed, but the juggernaut would not break.<sup>140</sup> Meiktila, Mandalay, and Myitkyina all fell to the Allies, the U-Go and Ha-Go Operations collapsed, and the path south lay ahead.<sup>141</sup>

On 26 March 1945, Lord Mountbatten relayed a dispatch from Prime Minister Churchill to the 1st and 2nd Air Commando Groups, under the umbrella of the Combat Cargo Task Force, for their valiant efforts. Prime Minister Churchill stated, "I send you and your gallant army my hearty congratulations on the recapture and liberations of Mandalay. This important success is due in part to the very heavy fighting last year at Imphal and Kohima and for the rest to the audacious and vigorous movements of the British, Gurkha, Indian, and African troops under your command, constantly supported and sustained by the untiring efforts of the British and American Combat and Transport Air Forces in the north."<sup>142</sup>

### A Captive Audience

*Treat the American airmen as criminals and not as prisoners of war.*

—Captain Motozo, Officer in Charge, Rangoon Prison

*When I think what they have been doing to our prisoners it makes me sick.*

—Admiral, Lord Louis Mountbatten

The spires of beautiful pagodas reached toward the heavens while underneath a stark contrast became grim reality. When the Imperial Japanese Army enveloped Rangoon, not only did they gain its harbor, warehouses, and manufacturing facilities, but they also gained an infamous set of structures. Rows

of concrete and steel formed cellblocks into a circular compound resembling the hub, spokes, and rim of a wheel. Surrounded by rows of razor wire, the facade of Insein Prison cast a menacing shadow on the beauty of Rangoon. As recently as 2014, Insein Prison had been described as “a descent into a hellish netherworld of torture, corruption, and abysmal living conditions.”<sup>143</sup> The Japanese immediately put Insein to use as a detention center for Allied prisoners of war, and nothing regarding the past reputation of Insein changed during their tenure as administrators.

When Rangoon fell in 1942, the British and Indian forces unable to escape were the first military personnel detained by the Japanese as prisoners of war in Rangoon. Allied forces interned in Rangoon included Chinese, Indian, Australian, British, and American personnel. Treatment varied according to nationality. Australian Flight Officer E. W. M. Trigwell arrived in Rangoon in 1944 and stated that “he himself suffered no ill-effects from his period of detention.”<sup>144</sup> Contrasting this assessment of prisoner treatment was the British and American experience in Rangoon. Lt Cdr K. B. Brotchie later retold the horrors he witnessed in a memorandum dated 23 June 1945 to the Director of Intelligence, Headquarters Southeast Asia Command.<sup>145</sup>

Lieutenant Commander Brotchie reported a prisoner of war who attempted to escape being “Forced to drink a bucket of water . . . strung up and hit across the belly until the water gushed forth from his mouth, nose and ears.”<sup>146</sup> This form of torture is most commonly referred to as the “Water Cure” and dates to the Renaissance. Other forms of torture included beatings, inserting objects under prisoner fingernails, immobilization, malnourishment, pouring cold water over sick prisoners, severe medical neglect, and burning genitalia.<sup>147</sup> When B-29 pilot Lionel Coffin refused to divulge information to his captors, the Japanese punished him by forcing him into a “small cage outside in the sun where he could neither sit nor stand erect . . . for three days without food or water . . . he refused to crack.”<sup>148</sup>

Every day, the prisoners assembled in formation and reported to their captors; on special days, these formations descended into brutality. Lt Billy T. Davis recounted, “Last New Years [*sic*] the Japanese . . . beat us with clubs made like pick handles.”<sup>149</sup>

The Japanese often took the personal effects of prisoners and berated them using information gathered from such items. The commandant of Rangoon Jail assaulted senior British officer Brig Clive D. Hobson in front of other prisoners as a method of demoralization. The inmates did manage to extract a tiny form of retribution. “The camp commandant . . . had a large, yellow tomcat. . . . One day the cat made the mistake of taking a stroll through the compound. That night . . . [the prisoners] . . . all had a taste of meat with their

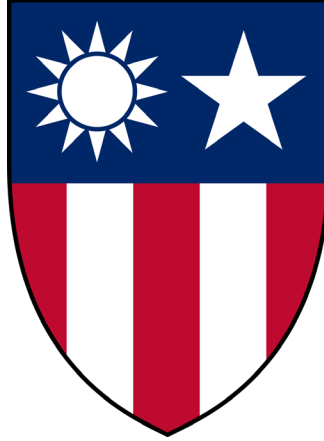
rice.”<sup>150</sup> Truly a hellish pit, yet more forgiving than the plight of prisoners assigned to toil along the Burma/Siam Railway, Rangoon became a deplorable nightmare for those interned.<sup>151</sup>



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive.

Figure 51. Cell Block Five, Insein Prison, Rangoon

## Photo Gallery



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive

### **China-Burma-India Theater emblem**



The Institute of Heraldry, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal (army.mil)

### **Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, Obverse view**



Used by permission, Air Mobility Command Museum 2002-3242-0001-

**1st Combat Cargo Patch**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive

**First Air Commando Group unofficial emblem**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive

**First Air Commando Group unofficial emblem**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive

**319th Troop Carrier Squadron unofficial emblem**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive

**5th and 6th Fighter Squadron Commando unofficial emblem**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive

**2nd Air Commando Group unofficial emblem , used as a tactical symbol on the on the tails of the unit's aircraft.**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive

### **2nd Air Commando Group unofficial emblem**



Headquarters USAF, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1982, p 15. Used under Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0. Image of the patch can be found at [Combat squadrons of the Air Force in World War II : United States](#).  
USAF Historical Division : [Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

### **2nd Fighter Squadron Commando official emblem**



317th Airlift Squadron (AFRC) Lineage and Honors Statement, 5 Jun 2009, AFHRA.

**Modern emblem, 317th Airlift Squadron (AFRC). Re-designated from 317th Troop Carrier Squadron.**



1st Special Operations Wing Lineage and Honors Statement, 8 Feb 2010, AFHRA.

**Modern emblem, 1st Special Operations Wing (AF-SOC) redesignated from 1st Air Commando Group.**



319th Special Operations Squadron (AFSOC) Lineage and Honors Statement, 18 Oct 201, AFHRA.

**Modern emblem, 319th Special Operations Squadron (AFSOC) redesignated from 319th Troop Carrier Squadron.**



352d Special Operations Wing Lineage and Honors Statement, 30 Nov 2016, AFHRA.

**Modern emblem, 352nd Special Operations Wing (AFSOC) redesignated from 2nd Air Commando Group.**



1 Helicopter Squadron (AFDW), Lineage, Assignments, Components, Stations, and Honors through Oct 2010, 20 Dec 2010, AFHRA.

**Modern emblem, 1st Helicopter Squadron (AFDW).  
1st Fighter Squadron Commando, reconstituted, and  
consolidated (19 Sep 1985) with the 1st Helicopter  
Squadron, which was constituted on 9 May 1969, acti-  
vated on 1 July 1969.**



72 Operations Support Squadron (AFMC), Lineage and Honors Statement, 10 Jun 2010, AFHRA.

**Modern emblem, 72nd Operations Support Squadron  
(AFMC) redesignated from 72nd Airdrome Squadron.**



6th Special Operations Squadron (AFSOC), Lineage, Assignments, Components, Stations, and Honors through 7 Aug 2007, 19 Dec 200, AFHRA.7

**Modern emblem, 6th Special Operations Squadron (AFSOC) redesignated from 6th Fighter Squadron Commando.**



Used by permission, Stuart J. Camp, AFSOC/PA, to Ryan S. Collins, AFSOC/HO, "Chindit Vase," AFSOC ERM, 16 Mar 2017.

**Left, front. Right, rear. Chindit Vase presented to the No. 1 Air Commando U.S.A.A.F. (accepted by 1st Special Operations Wing) by the Chindits Old Comrades Association to mark the occasion of the Silver Jubilee, of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, 7 Jun 1977. Displayed at Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command, Hurlburt Field, Florida.**

## **Amalgamated Airlift: April 1945**

*Without supplies neither a general nor a soldier is good for anything.*

—Clearchus of Sparta, 401 BC

*The mission of airlift is combat airlift — the delivery of what is needed, where it is needed, when it is needed.*

—Lt Col Charles E. Miller, USAF

Based at Palel Airstrip, India, the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron ferried supplies to the XXXIII, IV, and XV Corps at forward airstrips. These missions provided critical fuel, rations, ammunition, and sundry supplies to keep the Army rolling. On 9 April 1945, the squadron relocated to newly acquired Meiktila Airstrip. The 319th Troop Carrier Squadron helped their Commando brethren settle in the next day. From this point forward, the Air Commando groups were linked by more than just theater and concept of operations. The two troop carrier squadrons linked together under the umbrella of the 1st Combat Cargo Task Force. Gliders were towed from Lalaghat, India, to Palal Airstrip in anticipation of ground support operations. The troop carrier squadrons returned to Meiktila awaiting orders to transport the glider force; however, a change in plans brought them back to Kalaikunda, India. Operation Gumption had begun.

## **Downward Thrust**

On 18 March 1945, General Slim had issued an operating instruction to his soldiers. Its main intention was crystal clear: “the capture of Rangoon at all costs and as soon as possible before the monsoon.”<sup>152</sup> A number of proposals went into crafting the operation to retake Rangoon. Ultimately, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia Command, Lord Louis Mountbatten selected two. The first operation plan, “Y,” called for the 14th Army under General Slim along with the Chinese from Maymyo to move southward to break enemy defenses and liberate the city of Rangoon, house to house if necessary. The next proposed operation plan, “Z,” called for a dual amphibious and airborne operation. Combining the two plans worried General Slim; his forces were stretched thin and airlift and support capabilities remained busy transporting vital supplies for his soldiers and the Chinese.<sup>153</sup>

## Operation Gumption

Operation Gumption consisted of two main points:

1. Provide operational training and equipment preparation to retake the city of Rangoon.
2. Culminate training with a real-world exercise.



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive, Carlton D. Ferriby Collection.

Figure 52. Exercise Muffin

### **Special Task Force**

Col Robert W. Hall assumed command of the 1st Air Commando group in April 1945, just in time to receive a trial by fire in one of the highest visibility missions in the China–Burma–India theater.<sup>154</sup> From 14 April to 26 April 1945, the combined might of the united troop carrier squadrons along with an added detachment of combat cargo planes prepared for a special mission. The troop carrier squadrons arrived at Kalaikunda, India, for two weeks of intense airdrop training.<sup>155</sup> Col A. L. McCullough and Maj Frank O. Hay received the task of training the special task force with the initial assistance of Col W. B. Whitacre.<sup>156</sup> Gurkha Paratroopers assembled at Hailakandi airfield on 18 April to meet their delivery crews. Armorers of the 435th and 436th Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force, set about reconfiguring the Air Commando C-47s, working at an exhausting pace to meet a two-week deadline to install the special airdrop hard

points necessary to drop the equipment containers. For paratrooper expedience, each type of supply received a specific parachute. Red parachutes indicated ammunition, orange contained medical supplies, and black meant communications equipment.<sup>157</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 73155A.C.

**Figure 53. Royal Canadian Air Force personnel perform C-47 paracargo installation.**

By day and night, the Combat Cargo Task Force C-47s flew in formation, dropped paracargo, simulated paratrooper missions, and conducted live drops with the same Gurkha paratroopers who were to take part in the operation. But training for some Air Commandos fell victim to a real-world mission on 21 April. The remaining crews kept practicing, and on 26 April with the mission, a trip to Lewe I Airstrip finished, the task force training culminated in a drop of personnel during Exercise Muffin, designed to mimic the forthcoming operation.<sup>158</sup> Operation Gumption included a gargantuan ground force element to take Rangoon with 14th Army. The Combat Cargo Task Force conducted the resupply effort simultaneously with their own invasion plan.<sup>159</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, Archives 67527A.C

**Figure 54. 319th Troop Carrier Squadron C-47s at Lalaghat, India**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 62727A. C.

**Figure 55. 319th Troop Carrier Squadron personnel conduct mission preparation.**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 57019A.C.

**Figure 56. A 317th Troop Carrier Squadron C-47 pulls an Air Commando CG-4 glider containing Airborne Reserves and equipment for the Battle of Meiktila.**

### **A Copybook Job**

The 317th Troop Carrier Squadron gliders snapped into action. Skytrains with exclamation point punctuation marks proudly stenciled on their tail fins snatched their matching CG-4 gliders at 0900 and cruised through Burma on route to the Lewe I Airstrip, near Pynmana, Burma. Two landing strips were outlined, causing some confusion that resulted in a few hard landings. Lt Albert Mott, glider pilot and assistant squadron intelligence officer, recounted, “The mission was an absolute tactical success as all personnel and equipment landed without loss or injury. . . . From the time we landed until 2100 there were skirmishes on the edge of the field.”<sup>160</sup> The next morning eight fighter planes provided close air support and stood ready for air interdiction duty. Capt Watson A. Sudduth, Lieutenant Mott, and other personnel in their vicinity began watching the fighters zip and dive through the sky, but the lead seemed to be having a problem. The fighter landed, but flames were spreading fast. Lieutenant Mott explained that “the slugs had started hitting the gliders

and for the first time we were aware that we were under fire. Captain Sudduth and I hit the dirt and dug foxholes with our noses.”<sup>161</sup>

### **Combat Force Support**

*There's little glamour surrounding the work of an airdrome squadron. Like the blocking back on a football team, the airdrome squadron does most of the “dirty work” while the ball carrier gets all the glory.*

—2nd Lt Naseeb M. Malouf

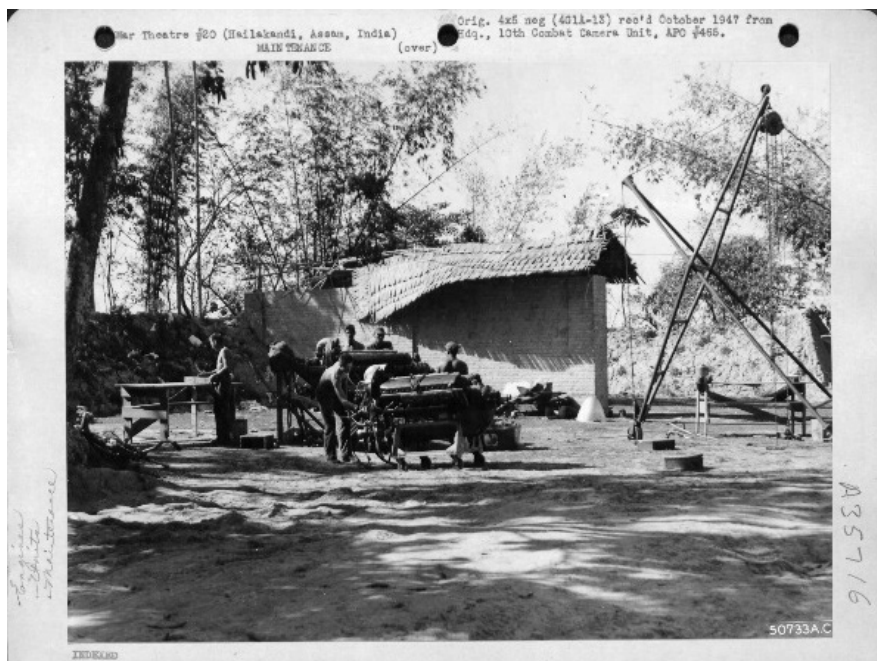
*If it hadn't been for our crew chiefs, there are many of us who wouldn't be alive today.*

—Olin B. Carter, 6th Fighter Squadron, 1st Air Commando Group



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 72823A

**Figure 57. 2nd Air Commando Control Tower and Communications Section set up equipment at Thabutkan Airfield.**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 50733A.C.

**Figure 58. 1st Air Commando Group Engine Repair Shop, Hailakandi, India**

There is no airpower without ground power, a common refrain among modern Airmen, but it was just as true for the warriors of yesterday. By spring 1945, the Axis powers had weakened substantially. Nazi Germany was well on its way to capitulation, and while Imperial Japan struggled on, the country's ability to continue the war could not be sustained. Burma remained under occupation, yet air superiority belonged to the Allies, and the Fourteenth Army continued to squeeze the Japanese. March proved to be a busy month for the 326th Aerodrome Squadron. Engineering personnel performed field maintenance to keep aircraft in service. Hard-broke aircraft would have to be taken out of commission and sent to one of the depot level maintenance centers in India if the mechanics could not repair damaged components or patch holes in the field. Administrative personnel, civil engineers, and logisticians rounded out the unit. Squadron commander Maj Peter Skaliy and his men knew that something big was coming and felt confident that they were entering the final phase of their involvement in the China–Burma–India Theater.<sup>162</sup>

No relief could be found for the men assigned to the 328th Airdrome Squadron under Maj John H. Goodwin. The 328th had laid “thousands of yards of

concrete”preventing the base from washing away during monsoon season.<sup>163</sup> April arrived as usual in Kalaikunda, India, but the men took notice when Canadians, British, Gurkhas, and Air Commandos arrived and began accelerating operations as well as conducting paratrooper training. The 328th Airdrome Squadron historical officer stated, “[T]he field looked like a homing ground for C-47s, the old work horse of the Army Air Forces.”<sup>164</sup> The Indian heat arrived, but the men occupied their free time with two baseball games and the ever-present thoughts of home. Rather than setting up shop at Kalaikunda, freshly promoted First Lieutenant Malouf and a cadre of his communications personnel went to Akyab Island to install a radio station for liaison operations. As suddenly as the new faces arrived, they disappeared. The 328th Airdrome Squadron personnel had no idea how important it had been for them to support their personnel and aircraft. At the time, they had no official “need-to-know,” but they were soon lauded for their contributions to Air Commando success.<sup>165</sup>

## **Maintenance**

At Kalaikunda, the joint environment contributed to a phenomenal rainbow maintenance concept. The rear echelons of the maintenance groups, supply sections, personnel, airfreight terminal, and communications combined forces to act as a common group in theater.<sup>166</sup> The 327th Airdrome Squadron supply section stated, “Supply activities have been coordinated into a Consolidated Supply. A system of handling all articles consigned for air lift has been instituted. All items to be shipped between bases, particularly Cox’s Bazar and Kalaikunda, is an additional function of this new and very important Consolidated Supply.”<sup>167</sup> This novel approach closely mirrored modern doctrine and demonstrated the selfless service of the enlisted men of the Air Commando Group. Capt Anthony J. Shank led the maintenance group, Capt William H. Warren led supply and the airfreight terminal flights, and Capt Richard S. McQuay oversaw the personnel section including military pay and allowances.<sup>168</sup>

The 2nd Air Commando Group’s personnel section managed and dispersed \$113,186.75 in April alone, without counting the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron and 342nd Airdrome Squadron, whose data remains unavailable. Financial acumen served as just another skillset brought to the theater by the Air Commandos. The communications sections cast their net over an area equal to 160,000 square miles. This radio network linked Air Commandos together in real time and enhanced combat operations and vital logistics with each other as well as decision makers. A staggering number of coded five-word messages received translation by the communications section. At its peak in March 1945, the communications section handled 380,548 messages.<sup>169</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 72845A.C

**Figure 59. Maj John C. Sanichas; remaining personnel, unknown crewmembers**

Capt William H. Warren personally acted when a debilitating hailstorm and typhoon severely damaged 117 aircraft on 12 March 1945. The captain flew across Burma and India stopping to scavenge parts at every opportunity. Lacking a method to pull and resource parts in a component-starved theater, Captain Warren's actions single-handedly allowed the 2nd Air Commando Group to recover and regain full operational capability.<sup>170</sup>

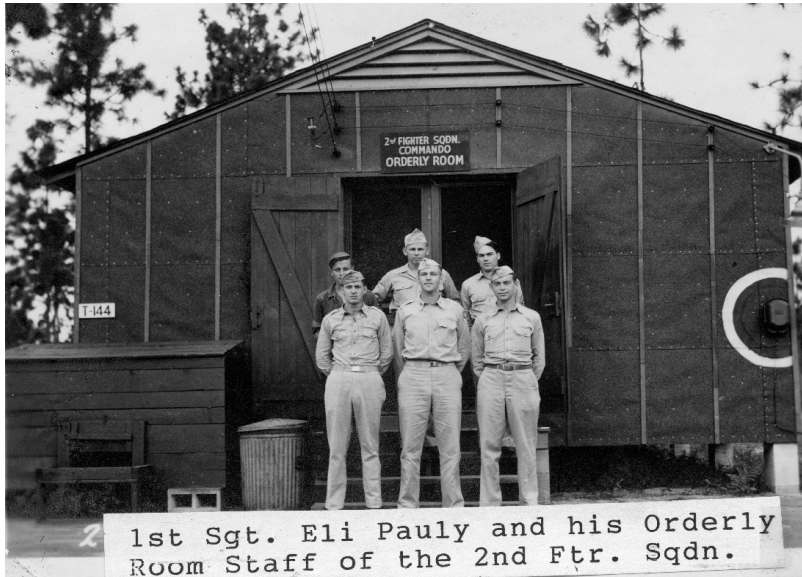
The Combat Cargo Task Force formed a provisional group staff to retake the city of Rangoon. Operation Dracula began to take life. Maj Neil I. Holm became the operation commander with the following personnel named by surname only: Deputy Commanders, Majors Austin and Edwards; A-1 (Manpower, Personnel and Services) Lieutenant Bennett and Assistant A-1 Lieutenant Moore; and A-2 (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) Captain McKee. An old hand of the 1st Air Commando Group, Maj John C. Sanichas, now served as the Combat Cargo Task Force A-3 (Operations)

with Captain Tyrell as Assistant A-3. Lieutenant Evans served as the Operations Communications Officer, Captain Culp as the Chief Navigator, and Captain Iseman became the A-4 (Logistics). Major Jennett served as engineering officer with Sudska as his assistant. Major Richmond became the liaison officer, and Flight Lieutenant Tiratsoo became the officer in charge of aircraft modification.<sup>171</sup>



Used by permission, Russ Beers to Ryan S. Collins, AFSOC/HO, "RE: SSgt George Beers, Photo DadP-47," AFSOC ERM, 11 Mar 2017.

**Figure 60. SSgt George Beers inside the cockpit of a P-47 Thunderbolt, 1st Air Commando Group, crew chief assigned to 2nd Lt L. F. Mullins.**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive, Carlton D. Ferriby Collection. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) visual information does not imply or constitute DOD endorsement.

**Figure 61. SSgt Eli Pauly and his orderly room staff**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive, Carlton D. Ferriby Collection.

**Figure 62. Crew chiefs of the 2nd Fighter Squadron**

### Hailstorm Damage

After a hailstorm on 12 March 1945, the 340th Airdrome Squadron, 2nd Air Commando Group, repaired facilities damaged by wind and rain at Kalaikunda, India, and forward operating base Myitche, Burma, while the 327th Airdrome Squadron maintained the force and Mustangs at Cox's Bazar. On 1 May 1945, the 342nd Airdrome Squadron, 2nd Air Commando Group, based at Palel Airstrip, India, and under command of Maj Ford R. Nelson sent mechanics to Akyab Airstrip from Kalaikunda, India.<sup>172</sup> The mechanics of the 342nd Airdrome Squadron were charged with ensuring 100 percent mission capability on C-47s bound for a special mission to prepare for Operation Dracula.<sup>173</sup>



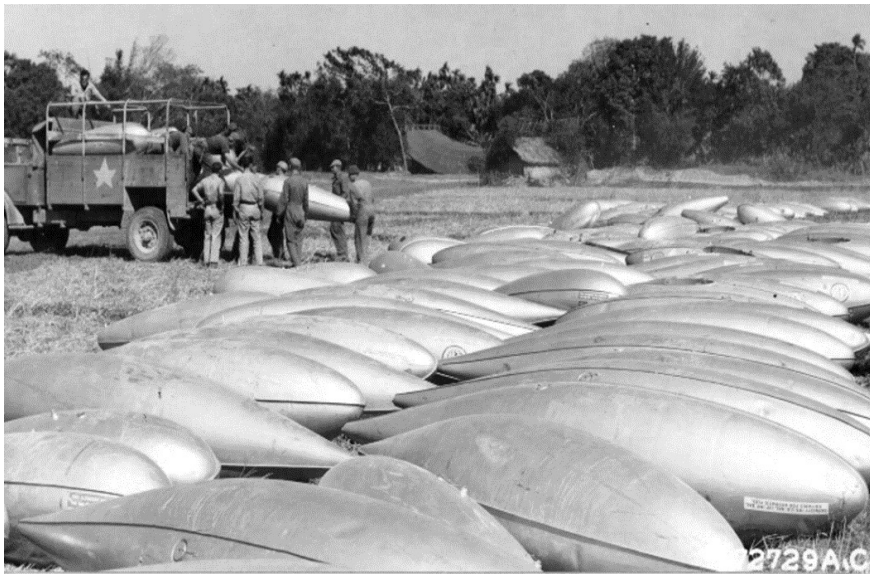
Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive, Carlton D. Ferriby Collection.

**Figure 63. Storm damage to L-5 Sentinel aircraft. (Note 2nd Air Commando Lightning Bolt on side.)**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive, Carlton D. Ferrby Collection.

**Figure 64. Storm damage to Kalaikunda, India, structure**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 72729A.C.

**Figure 65. Personnel of the 1st Air Commando Group unload external fuel tanks for tank farm storage in India, 5 February 1945.**

Men from the 500th Service Squadron performed salvage recovery operations and depot level work on bent and mangled airframes in the theater. These amazing back shop personnel could repair everything from aircraft fuel systems to turret plexiglass. The squadron performed logistics, carpentry, medical support, and even welded oxygen cylinders.<sup>174</sup> The 72nd Airdrome Squadron found itself attached to the 1st Air Commando Group at Asansol, India, in January 1945 to support the tactical unit. This outfit sent its personnel where needed with personnel detached and assigned to the 326th Airdrome Squadron, 5th Fighter Squadron Commando, 319th Troop Carrier Squadron, 164th Liaison Squadron Commando, 165th Liaison Squadron Commando, and the 285th Medical Dispensary Aviation, and some personnel were pulled to fill in at the group level. The engineering section demonstrated their skill by “patching . . . 36 holes in a P-47 in one night.”<sup>175</sup>

### Medical Support

*We are right on top of disease in the war against Japan. . . . We have conquered disease. The Japanese have not.*

—Admiral, Lord Louis Mountbatten

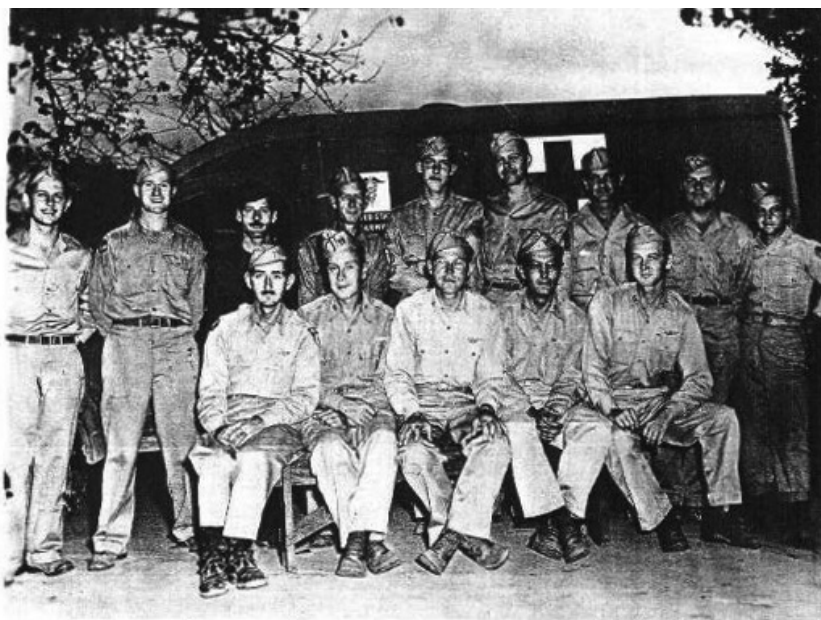
*I was never sick except when we had dysentery from eating those chickens or where we didn't get the pots too clean or something. And that was quite an event when you had dysentery and you had to sit in that airplane, and there was nothing you could do about it.*

—Maj Roland Lynn, Commander, 5th Fighter Squadron, Commando

Minor illness proved to be all too common in the China–Burma–India Theater. The primary ailments were malaria, dysentery, pappataci fever (sandfly fever), diarrhea, typhus, and dental problems largely brought about by sanitation practices and unsanitary food preparation techniques.<sup>176</sup> Because of the nature of warfare, disparate injuries were expected to occur at any time.

On 17 March 1944, malaria control officers joined the 1st Air Commando Group, perhaps just in time to avert disaster. In March, the group lost 15 personnel to the disease costing the unit 110 man-days. Maj Robert C. Paige stated, “From a Military as well as Medical point of view this disease is of number one importance in India.”<sup>177</sup> The medical personnel sprang into action, recommending that double netting cover all windows and doors as well as the installation of Hessian cloth (burlap) ceilings to ward off the

hungry insects. Biweekly insecticide spraying and application of ParisGreen or oil to stagnant water began. It is impossible to quantify the impact such preventative measures had on the health of personnel; however, the absence of a debilitating pandemic is a testament to the actions of the Air Commando medical personnel.<sup>178</sup>



STANDING: S/Sgt. Chalupa, S/Sgt. Kendrigan, T/Sgt. LaFortune, T/Sgt. McClain, T/Sgt. Schmidt, T/Sgt. Palmatier, T/Sgt. Wach, S/Sgt. Brenner, Sgt. Nance.  
SITTING: Capt. Enloe, Capt. Tulloch, Maj. Page, Capt. Murphy, Capt. Reierson.

The Medical History of Project #9: 5318th Provisional Air Unit, 5318th Air Unit Special—Now Officially Known as The First Air Commando Force: 18, September 1943 to 30, April 1944, AFHRA.

**Figure 66. 1st Air Commando Group, medical personnel**

With the end of Operation Thursday and the constant cycling of unit members that occurred, two formal medical units entered the fray. The 285th Medical Dispensary Aviation Squadron was assigned to the 1st Air Commando Group and the 236th Medical Dispensary Aviation Squadron joined the 2nd Air Commando Group. In the original Air Commando concept, the medical section had been attached versus assigned; the new verbiage folded the medical personnel into the Air Commando concept in a more perfect fashion. This

called for a proverbial jack-of-all-trades at each position. Not merely a static medical clinic, the 285th and 236th Medical Dispensary Aviation squadrons dispatched their personnel to forward areas conducting x-ray, dental, and other primary medical care as possible under austere conditions. This included two assigned surgeons rotated to the front lines of battle where they held their posts until relieved. Each liaison and fighter squadron gained one of the most qualified enlisted men of the dispensary squadrons to run their local clinics and keep air commandos in the fight. Neither unit possessed a medical administrative corps officer to handle pharmaceutical, logistical, morale, historian, training, or administrative additional duties that came with the title. In short order, the dispensary squadrons soon transfigured the effective, yet hodgepodge and reactive, medical service into a neat, clean, and orderly affair; through discipline and cut-training (training in another related, but divergent field) personnel learned to handle the responsibilities of at least one additional position and the workload of two men.<sup>179</sup>

Malaria remained enemy number one for the medics. Squadron commander Capt Padin Richlin visited the mosquito control area in Orlando, Florida, for training posthaste.<sup>180</sup> November found the unit departing Camp Anza, California, for the China–Burma–India Theater.<sup>181</sup> Burma itself proved to be an inhospitable climate. Lt William Diebold of Air Transport Command titled his account of his time in the China–Burma–India Theater *Hell is so Green*.<sup>182</sup> The dispensary arrived at Kalaikunda, India, on 15 December and set to work opening the clinic. Seven days later, an outbreak of dysentery rocked the group so badly that the dispensary sought additional beds from area hospitals. Most patients recovered within 36 hours, and the medical staff set about improving sanitation and manned the crash ambulance when time permitted. But a larger facility was needed.<sup>183</sup>

By September 1944, the 285th Medical Dispensary found the answer to their space problem and began converting a timeworn British mess hall into a sick bay. In January 1945, TSgt Karl K. Schmidt received promotion to second lieutenant to fill the vacant Medical Administrative Corps officer position. First Lt Peter A. Georgelos delivered the 236th Medical Dispensary's supplies and sorely needed equipment to gain full operational capability.<sup>184</sup> When Kaliakunda suffered under the gargantuan storm in March 1945, the 236th Medical Dispensary provided refuge and treatment even through the lack of electrical light. "Many feet of suturing material was used together with a few pints of Merthiolate [to clean wounds]. The 317th pilots gave invaluable aid . . . [and] the Chaplain and Red Cross representative came upon the scene with hot coffee."<sup>185</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 67655A.C

**Figure 67. A member of the 1st Air Commando Group receives dental care at an outdoor clinic, Hailakandi, India.**

In March 1945, the 285th dispensary dentist, in true efficient nature, retrieved and began utilizing a seat pulled from a wrecked aircraft, claiming it to be “far superior to the regular issued dental one.”<sup>186</sup> By May 1945, the dental clinic of the 236th plotted to unleash a dreadful terror on the Air Commandos: “If it can persuade Group Communications, [the dental clinic] will have a power-driven drill much to the horror of the patients.”<sup>187</sup>

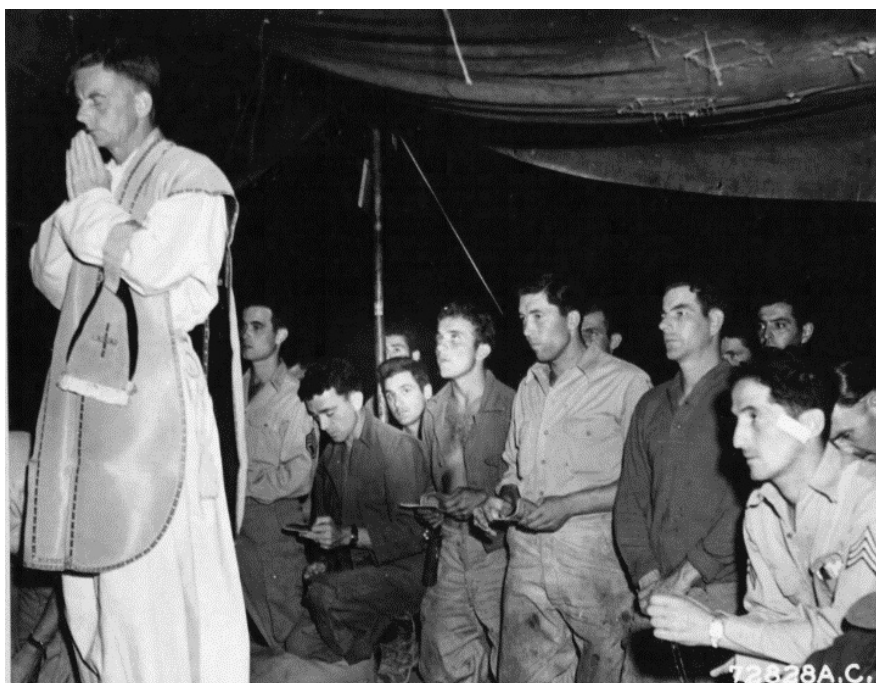
If the Air Commandos needed other assistance, they had another resource to turn to short of evacuation: their chaplains. Battle fatigue (now often referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder) and even moral injury (a psychological trauma that does not fit within the guidelines of post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by transgression of deeply held moral and ethical beliefs) did not enter any formalized medical doctrine during the Second World War, but such effects could be devastating to the unit and the individual service

member. Many found and continued to find solace and a renewed energy by turning toward a higher spiritual power.

### The Fighting Spirit

*The soldier's heart, the soldier's spirit, the soldier's soul are everything. Unless the soldier's soul sustains him, he cannot be relied upon and will fail himself and his commander and his country in the end.*

—Gen George C. Marshall



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 72828A.C.

**Figure 68. A Roman Catholic chaplain of the 1st Air Commando Group celebrates Mass, 6 March 1945, Shwebo, Burma.**



Used by permission, AFSOC/HO Archive, Carlton D. Ferriby.

**Figure 69. Capt Edwin R. Kimbrough, 2nd Air Commando Group, chaplain**

Chaplains held a long presence in Burma even before the Second World War. Catholic and Protestant missions, schools, and religious institutions formed a vibrant part of the Burmese landscape. The Imperial Japanese invasion shattered the faith-based framework during their foray into Burma. In Mandalay, one such institution, the Order of Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, found themselves and their charges imprisoned inside the orphanage they tended. Royal Air Force Chaplain Tim Sweeney stated, “The [Japanese] not only refused to allow them a single ration of rice but also made it a serious offense for anybody to attempt to give or sell them food. Despite these threatened penalties, . . . a few Burmese Christians managed to smuggle in enough food and supplies to keep them alive.”<sup>188</sup> Officers from Eastern Air Command ensured that the liberated orphanage received immediate food stockpiles and established a reserve fund to carry the orphanage through the post-liberation of Mandalay.<sup>189</sup>

The chaplains often found themselves acting as intercessors to resolve personal disputes, bearers of bad news, as visitors to the ill, administrators of last rites, and bereavement counselors. Despite being on constant alert and duty, the Air Commandos attended church services when possible. For instance, 319th Troop Carrier Squadron C-47 pilot Ray Roberts noted in his personal diary for 1944 his attendance at multiple chapel services at the various air-strips he visited. The fighting spirit imbued in the Air Commandos in the China–Burma–India Theater cannot be overstated even if the activities of these brave men remain underdocumented.<sup>190</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 61273A.C.

**Figure 70. A chaplain leads the members of the 1st Air Commando Group as they pay their final respects to a fallen comrade near Ondal, India.**

The logistical nightmare that occurred in the China–Burma–India Theater was only compounded for the chaplain’s program. “In the CBI, only one chaplain had a complete chaplain’s kit in late 1942, and even as late as 1944, not all chaplains had been supplied with portable typewriters.”<sup>191</sup> This lack of equipment coupled with field conditions and an inability of the supply chain to keep pace with highly mobile forces could account for sparse documentation. What the chaplains lacked in supplies, they compensated for with inventiveness. Chaplains fashioned communion cups from spent ammunition or bam-

boo, created altar furnishings from wrecked aircraft, obtained portable altars, and leveraged the skills of their flock to craft necessary items.<sup>192</sup>

### **Operation Gumption Resumes**

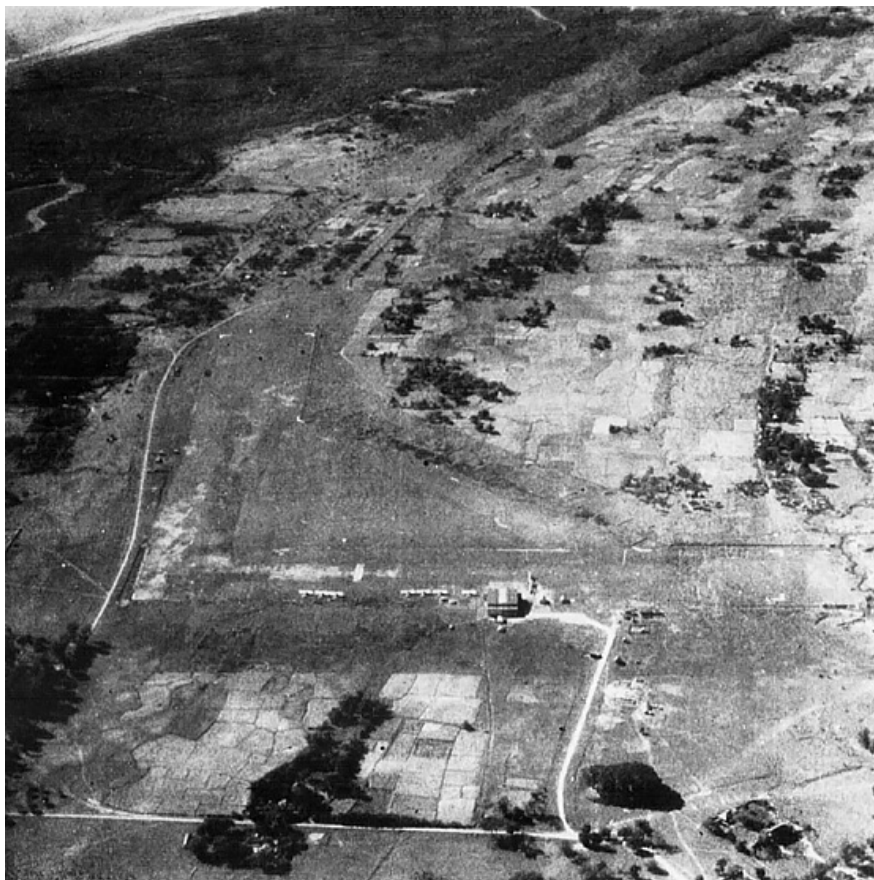
The Japanese Air Force had taken a pounding in Burma from 1944 on, but the cat and mouse game was not over. During the third week of April 1945, enemy activity suddenly increased. To slow the advance of General Slim's forces southward, the enemy brought 12 additional fighters north. This allowed the Japanese time to retreat to Thailand. Allied air raids commenced immediately.<sup>193</sup>

On the morning of 29 April 1945, the Air Commandos loaded 20 Gurkha paratroopers, a Royal Canadian Air Force Jumpmaster, and all the crewmen and equipment their C-47s could hold and departed for Akyab Aerodrome near Sittwe, Burma. Operation Romulus began the liberation of Akyab Island by training personnel and preparing aircraft based in Chittagong, India, for combat. The defenders could not withstand the onslaught, and the last enemy forces were routed on 3 January 1945 in Operation Talon.

Akyab Island served the Air Commandos well as a forward operating base. Allied forces envisioned utilizing Akyab Island as a launch pad for reconnaissance aircraft and both fighter and bomber sorties. No enemy aircraft responded when the 26th Division landed, leaving the P-47s to engage beach defenses and British Spitfires to range and engage the enemy at will.<sup>194</sup>

Moving toward the next step in liberating Burma, the Allies implemented Operation Novel, hopping islands to cut the escape route of a Japanese force engaging the Allied 81st West African Division near the Kaldan River, Burma. The West African division advanced south in the direction of Myebon, Burma, but had been pinned down. Again, no enemy aircraft appeared; however, Allied forces dropped 122 tons of munitions on Japanese positions. Lastly, in Operation Matador, the Allies, under command of British Army Maj Gen Cyril E. N. Lomax, eliminated nearly 50 percent of all Japanese forces on neighboring Ramree Island from 21 January to 17 February 1945. Around 1,000 enemy survivors fled through a mangrove swamp; here they found themselves hunted yet again but in a more primeval manner. In addition to patrols by coalition forces, dehydration, mosquitos, and other insects stalked them. Naturalist Bruce Stanley Wright participated in the battle and recalled, "The scattered rifle shots in the pitch black swamp punctured by the screams of wounded men crushed in the jaws of huge reptiles, and the blurred worrying sound of spinning crocodiles made a cacophony of hell that has rarely been duplicated on earth."<sup>195</sup> With teeth on the ground and in the sky, the

enemy clearly had nowhere to run and only half escaped the mangroves. Air dominance for these operations came courtesy of the 224th Group RAF (Royal Air Force), Far Eastern Air Forces and to a lesser extent Strategic Air Force as well as the 40th and 641st Photo Reconnaissance Squadrons.<sup>196</sup>



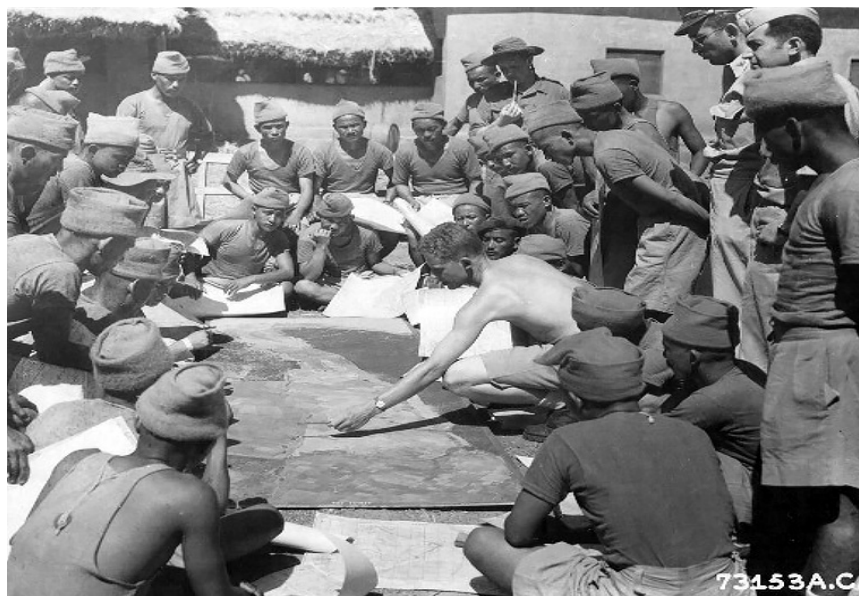
US Signal Corps photo, Air Objective Folder 82.1 Burma North Area, p 17, AFHRA.

**Figure 71. West-northwest view of Akyab Airstrip, 1937**

On 26 April 1945, the 17th Infantry Division commanded by British Maj Gen David Tennant Cowan relieved the 5th Division advancing on the city of Pegu, Burma. By this time, the Japanese forces of Maj Gen Hideji Matsui were committing themselves to fight to the death. The enemy created roadside bombs from salvaged munitions, slowing the advance of the Allied forces.

The Air Commandos under the umbrella of 1st and 4th Combat Cargo Task Force were called upon to provide air resupply to 17th Indian Infantry Division in their effort to capture Pegu. This effort is now known as Operation Freeborn. In nearby Paygale, Burma, the advancing forces of the 17th, which now needed resupply, neutralized 200 Japanese personnel. Pegu city itself proved extremely difficult to clear because of the numerous booby traps set by the enemy. The battle for that city raged until 30 April 1945, when the surviving pockets of Japanese resistance collapsed, and Maj Gen Hideji Matsui received orders from Gen Heitaro Kimura, Japanese Commander in Chief Burma, to return and defend Rangoon. Weather took a turn for the worse as the monsoon season began, and the Japanese were on the run. Total cargo transported by the Allies equaled 150.83 tons of equipment and 1,749 personnel by 3 May 1945.<sup>197</sup>

The newly appointed commander of the 1st Combat Cargo Task Force, Brig Gen Frank W. Evans, arrived on station 30 April, where he attended myriad briefings required before embarking on the unit's latest operational objective. The assigned target: Japanese forces within the city of Rangoon.<sup>198</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 73153A.C.

**Figure 72. Maj O. J. Kerr briefs 1st and 2nd Air Commando Group members and 2nd Gurkha Parachute Battalion, 50th Parachute Brigade personnel on Rangoon assault procedures at Kalaikunda, India, 1 May 1945.**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives A-62725A.C.

**Figure 73. Gurkha Paratroopers and a Royal Canadian Air Force jumpmaster prepare to depart India bound for Akyab Island.**

### **The Question? Moreover, the Answer!**

Col A. L. McCullough, the deputy chief of staff of the Combat Cargo Task Force, alongside Lt Col Neil I. Holm, the commanding officer of the 319th Troop Carrier Squadron, assumed command of the 1st Provisional Troop Carrier Group. American airpower, British ingenuity, and both Gurkha and Indian steel would be the final answer to the Japanese occupation of Burma.<sup>199</sup> By 2 May 1945, Japan had no aircraft based in Burma and only maintained 50 in Thailand with the majority within potential striking distance stationed in French Indochina. In total 255 Japanese aircraft remained within the Far East, leaving the Allied forces free to pounce on their objective with minimal risk.<sup>200</sup>

On 3 May 1945, the Allies were ready to conduct a weather reconnaissance flight, drop homing beacons, and insert an advance party of scouts. The

weather was ominous. An overcast sky had moved in, and lightning beckoned in the distance. Rounded projecting heads of cumulus clouds were stacked over each other at 25,000 feet.<sup>201</sup> Meteorological reports predicted improvement, but to make sure, two C-47 pathfinders lifted off at 0230 to mark the drop zone and insert an advance party of 56 personnel. Colonel McCullough piloted Air Commando C-47 #645 *Gravel Gertie* with Capt Richard Braswell as copilot. Skytrain #840, belonged strictly to the Combat Cargo Task Force.<sup>202</sup> This pathfinder flight would be able to signal the other aircraft far behind if trouble occurred.



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 73159A.C.

**Figure 74. Captain Culp, chief navigator, conducts operations briefing at Akyab Airstrip, Burma, 1 May 1945.**

## **Operation Dracula**

*Listen to them—children of the night. What music they make!*

—Count Dracula  
Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Operation Dracula consisted of four main points:

1. Achieve aerial dominance and insert the paratrooper task force and visual control post teams.
2. Insert the amphibious landing force at Elephant Point.
3. Liberate prisoners of war.

4. Crush any opposition and retake the strategic city.



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives +57336A.C.

**Figure 75. Gurkha Paratroopers, under Maj Gen George E. Stratemeyer's Eastern Air Command, board a C-47 of the 1st Air Commando Group embarking on route to Rangoon, Burma, for Operation Dracula.**

No negative signals from the pathfinder team were received, and the remaining C-47s started their twin 1,200 horsepower Pratt & Whitney R-1830 radial engines. They turned over slowly, whined in protest, and then sputtered to life on the steel-planked runway at Akyab Airfield. Black plumes of smoke shot toward the ground and dissipated into the darkness revealing the moment each engine sprung to life.<sup>203</sup> Rain began to pelt the olive drab war machines. In total, 12 Skyraiders of the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron, 14 C-47s of the 319th Troop Carrier Squadron, and 10 C-47s of the 2nd and 4th Combat Cargo Squadrons were selected for the mission. Each of the cargo aircraft could carry 28 personnel and three crewmembers. The Royal Canadian Air Force jumpmasters checked each of their Gurkha paratroopers, and everyone

climbed onboard. At the witching hour of 0300, 38 C-47s joined the advance party. Counting the pathfinders, 40 transports made their way toward Rangoon through the darkness, lightning, and rain along with one PBY Catalina included to perform air to sea rescue in case of an emergency.<sup>204</sup>

### Lightning from Above?

*This vampire . . . can, within his range, direct the elements: the storm, the fog, the thunder; he can command all the meaner things.*

—Professor Van Helsing  
Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Minute by minute, the monsoon storms loomed ever larger. An accurate forecast could be the difference between success and total mission failure. The dropping of a parachutist could not be safely completed in adverse conditions. The 2nd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron, Guskhara, India, temporarily based at Akyab Air Strip, Burma, reported sea and swell as well as wind barometer conditions over the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea throughout Operation Dracula. Four consecutive days of weather collection from F-5E (modified Lockheed P-38 Lightning) night sorties had already occurred to gather pre-storm warning data, which provided an excellent forecast of the route to Rangoon.

The Air Commandos required constant weather analysis to mitigate the rainy season's threat, and the 2nd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron launched a specially equipped B-25 to accompany the reinforcements of the Combat Cargo Task Force on Operation Dracula to provide real time meteorological analysis. "While in flight the crew was able to observe the drop, as well as the grounded chutes from the first drop."<sup>205</sup> Adm Sir Arthur John Power took this data and utilized it to great effect. Fear of the monsoon season brought weather to the forefront of operational planning and the 2nd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron delivered magnificently. Regional Control Officer, Headquarters 10th Weather Squadron, Tenth Air Force commented that the results of Operation Dracula "more than justify the vision which conceived the activation of the 2nd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron and are a tribute to the officers and men who comprise its personnel."<sup>206</sup>



Figure 76. 2nd Weather Reconnaissance Squadron emblem



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Figure 77. Elephant Point. Aerial view of defense points indicated by poorly camouflaged circular embankments, which appear to be bomb craters.

## Dracula Arise!

*There is nothing so capable of success as that which the enemy believes you cannot attempt.*

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War, Fourth Book*

To combat any man-made threats to mission accomplishment, the 2nd Air Commando Group launched 18 Mustangs from their base at Cox's Bazar to provide fighter escort to the lumbering Skytrains and provide close air support. The C-47s had reported gloomy weather initially, but conditions deteriorated quickly. The fighter escort encountered severe weather, forcing nine P-51s to return to Cox's Bazar; only half the force made it through. The P-40 Warhawks of the American Volunteer Group who had tangled with Japanese Oscar fighters over Rangoon just three years before were among those who did get through. Fighter escorts joined the lumbering Skytrains on their journey to Elephant Point at Ngyak Bay by homing in on the signal from a short-range radio navigation system known as a "Eureka Beacon."<sup>207</sup> As they entered Japanese-controlled airspace, the Air Commandos wondered if they would encounter a similar situation to what they had experienced previously in the air over Rangoon.<sup>208</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives +A-57336A.C.

**Figure 78. 317th Troop Carrier Squadron, 2nd Air Commando Group, C-47s release paratroopers over Elephant Point.**





US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 73163A.C.

**Figure 80. Gurkha paratroopers drift towards Elephant Point.**

The early wave of paratroopers included a special package, an early predecessor of combat control teams. Referred to as visual control post teams, these elite forces had embedded themselves into the paratroopers. These teams contained individual air liaison officers with the ability to relay instant operational data to commanders utilizing an AN/TRS-7 radio for multiple targets at once. Their efforts resulted in the Allies sparing three villages without enemy troops that had been previously marked for bombing to neutralize Japanese targets. The visual control post teams also carried a new technology to the battlefield for its first use: fluorescent panels. The panels provided improved capabilities, such as illumination of drop zones, arranging ground to air communications, and denoting battle lines.<sup>211</sup> The team marked the drop zone with both colored smoke and these fluorescent panels forming the shape of a giant letter “T.” The Army Air Force Evaluation Board stated, “The dropping of Visual Control Post teams with paratroopers is practical and they should be used in all joint operations. Visual Control Post teams should control all aircraft operating in the immediate area to avoid needless bombing.”<sup>212</sup>

Paratroopers wasted no time setting up another Eureka Beacon to assist follow on forces when they arrived.<sup>213</sup>

The 1st Air Commando Group's P-47s attacked two Japanese field artillery guns in the Rangoon estuary at Elephant Point. Direct hits on both positions knocked the artillery pieces out of commission. The Jugs destroyed huts in villages remaining under enemy control and attacked small boats as the targets presented themselves.<sup>214</sup>

The third round of paratroopers arrived in 10 C-47s of all elements, led by Major Holm again, at 1530 along with fighter support and additional weaponry including explosives, hand grenades, ammunition, signal equipment, and medical supplies.<sup>215</sup> The elite forces prepared to assault hardened positions at Elephant Point as the Jugs and Mustangs roved in stacks searching for enemy fighters. The Gurkhas made their way west encountering no resistance but spotted a Japanese patrol. The visual control post team called for air support that arrived in the form of a B-24 Liberator, knocking out the Japanese forces, but stray bombs killed 15 of the paratroopers from the company headquarters and left another 30 wounded.<sup>216</sup>

Above the fray, the 1st and 2nd Fighter Squadrons, Commando, of the 2nd Air Commando Group provided air interdiction support to the amphibious landing force. Restless and unwilling to loiter, "the P-51s emblazoned with the black lightning bolts of the 2d Air Commando Group snarled over the city [of Rangoon]."<sup>217</sup> The Allies suspected that enemy anti-aircraft artillery, one heavy and around six light, would engage the task force; however, the aerial artillery threat proved to be unfounded.<sup>218</sup>



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**Figure 81. Paratroopers landing near Rangoon, just as the monsoon broke.**

Heavy rain set in, saturating the ground forces as they crept forward to engage the enemy. The paratroopers were charged with eliminating all guns that threatened the waiting Allied naval invasion force. Few Japanese forces remained in the bunkers protecting Rangoon, but those that were present had been left behind, as General Slim feared, to be a suicide squad. When the Gurkhas were spotted, a blaze of machine gun fire erupted along with small arms fire. As demonstrated in other locations throughout the Pacific Theater, bunkers were no match for flamethrowers. Bunker QQ 709983 proved to be a difficult nest to eradicate. Mosquito bombers of the 910th Wing RAF had struck the position so effectively that cannon fire had entered the small opening, yet resistance did not stop. Gurkha flamethrowers had sprayed their incendiary into the opening, but a few survivors battled on until they too succumbed to the flames or oxygen deprived environment.<sup>219</sup>



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives. 57419A.C.

### **Figure 82. 319th Troop Carrier Squadron, 1st Air Commando Group, Paradrop Operation Dracula**

The visual control post team called for another airstrike and specifically requested the Mustangs of the 2nd Air Commando Unit. Two P-51s broke away from their C-47 escort duties and targeted the bunker. When the Air Commandos had finished, Gurkha flamethrowers again approached the smoldering hole, charring its contents one more time. Nothing inside Bunker QQ 709983 remained to trouble the paratroopers again.<sup>220</sup>

The Air Commandos observed several enemy combatants aboard a small boat in a likely attempt to escape the carnage, but the opportunistic Air Commandos dived in and devastated it. Once the last bullet landed and enemy positions rang silent, save for the crackle of fire, the paratroopers launched a flare into the night sky to notify the Allies above and at sea of their victory. A small party of Japanese hopelessly attempted a night raid as the paratroopers

and visual control post team bedded down for the night, but the raid had no impact. When the morning sun rose, the paratroopers seized a tower, which stood at the pinnacle of Elephant Point, and promptly hoisted the British Union Jack flag. The paratroopers and the visual control post team received additional supplies and remained on location for four days until the city fell, although scattered pockets of Japanese soldiers fought on. For instance, Squadron Leader T. S. Tull, Group "A" of Force 136 (Force 136 was a cover name for the British Special Operations Executive), reported that he joined a patrol on 8 May 1945, which located and neutralized four enemy soldiers.<sup>221</sup>



Used by permission, Ryan S. Collins, AFSOC/HO, photo, "319th Troop Carrier Squadron emblem," Air Commando Display, Air Force Armament Museum, Eglin AFB, FL, 10 April 2017.

**Figure 83. 319th Troop Carrier Squadron emblem**

### **Heart of Oak (Force “W”)**

*Come, Cheer up my lads, 'tis to glory we steer,  
To add something more to this wonderful year;  
To honor we call you, not press you like slaves,  
For who are so free as the sons of the waves?  
Heart of oak are our ships,  
Heart of oak are our men,  
We always are ready—Steady, boys, Steady—  
We'll fight and we'll conquer again and again.*

—David Garrick, *Heart of Oak*, 1759

At 0400, 2 May, with the landing zone secure and the skies friendly, the East Indies Fleet under flag officer B. C. S. Martin of the Royal Navy launched landing craft bearing components of the 26th Indian Division. Admiral Arthur John Power had made the naval fleet ready and assault ships were prepared beginning on 7 April 1945 and divided into six convoys. Eight assault ships made ready: *HMS Largs*, *HMS Waveney*, *HMS Nith*, *HMS Silvio*, *HMS Persimmon*, *HMS Genroy*, *HMS Prince Albert*, and the *S. S. Rarpetta*, a minor landing craft depot ship.<sup>222</sup> The naval mission held responsibility to carry, escort, and provide bombardment. *HMS Largs* served as the headquarters vessel. Projected resistance included any number of enemy forces present in Southern Burma, up to 41,000 Imperial Japanese Army personnel, an estimated 20 Oscars and 20 Kawasaki Ki-48s (Souhatu Keibaku, Allied code name Lily) with the 50 possible fighters from Thailand in a worst-case scenario.<sup>223</sup> Operation Bishop consisted of a large assault force under command of Vice Adm H. T. C. Walker assigned to protect the convoys as they made their way to Rangoon. The colossal convoy took the liberty of bombarding airfields and destroying a radio station on Car Nicobar Island. The airfields of Port Blair were next, and the naval force split, some continuing to Rangoon, and the others returning to give Port Blair another pounding.<sup>224</sup>

From his position onboard *HMS Largs*, Maj Gen H. M. Chambers, commander, 26th Infantry Division, 15th Corps, dispatched his forces to land on both sides of the Rangoon River and near the village of Kayuktan. These forces slogged through the mud and unloaded artillery to support the full-scale invasion and establishment of an airstrip. The heaviest pieces mired in

the mud ashore owing to the torrential rains that had turned the banks of the river into a swamp. Two battalions of Gurkha Rifles landed in the city on the north bank of the river. This advance did not play out in typical fashion. When the infantry arrived, the East and West banks of the Rangoon River were “lined by thousands of local inhabitants who indicated in all possible ways that they welcomed their deliverance from Japanese dominance.”<sup>225</sup>

Commodore G. N. Oliver in HMS *Royalist* directed air cover. HMS *Phoebe* directed fighter close air support during the landing. Its antiaircraft artillery saw no action, but the ship directed the launch of four Supermarine Seafires of the 273rd Squadron to conduct strafing runs.<sup>226</sup> HMS *Hunter*, an Attack-class aircraft carrier, capable of launching fighter planes, completed 61 deck landings during the assault on Rangoon over five consecutive days and averaged 19.6 sorties per day.<sup>227</sup> Cargo supplies for the invasion came from HMS *Ethiopian*.<sup>228</sup> The carrier force consisted of HMS *Hunter*, *Stalker*, *Khedive*, and *Emperor*.<sup>229</sup> Destroyers included HMS, “*Saumerez*, *Venus*, *Virago* and *Vigilant* as escort.”<sup>230</sup> Nothing would be left to chance. The airpower projected by the Royal Navy alone consisted of 18 Grumman F6F Hellcats of the Royal Navy Fleet Arm in HMS *Emperor* and HMS *Khedive*, 24 Supermarine Seafires in HMS *Stalker* along with 23 Supermarine Seafires in HMS *Hunter*.<sup>231</sup>

The carrier aircraft force flew sorties as weather permitted with 20 sorties on 30 April to soften the city defenses, 32 on 1 May, and 82 sorties flown on 2 May all over Rangoon. Twenty-eight additional fighter-bomber sorties flew as air cover on the off chance that Japanese fighters decided to make an appearance. By 4 May 1945, the fleet aircraft flew another 16 sorties until all ships received orders to disengage and proceed to Victoria Point.<sup>232</sup>

The British forces were not the only ones tackling Japanese forces around Rangoon. P-47s of the 1st Air Commando Group, P-51s of the 2nd Air Commando Group, and P-38s from the 493rd (Bombardment) Squadron (Heavy) provided cover over the skies of Rangoon until 9 May 1945.<sup>233</sup> The Air Commandos shared the clouds with multiple Royal Air Force partners, including 224 Group flying Beaufighters from Kyaukpyu Airstrip, Mosquito bombers, Hawker Hurricanes, Spitfires, P-47s and more Mustangs as well as 221 Group, which brought more P-47s and Mosquito bombers to the fight. The USAAF’s 12th Bomb Group (Medium) supplied B-25s while Strategic Air Force included B-24 Liberators.<sup>234</sup> In truth, the amount of airpower over the city of Rangoon might have been overkill, yet hindsight is always clear, and it is more desirable to hold a surplus than to run a deficit. If a bombing mission needed to be cancelled, personnel were warned that “once these aircraft [are] airborne it is unlikely that the attacks can be called off.”<sup>235</sup> Additionally, the doctrine of airpower circumvents traditional strategy. Col Phillip S. Mellinger noted that “the concept of of-

fensive air power obviates the need for a tactical reserve. . . . Air battles occur and end so quickly that except in very limited circumstances . . . air commanders should . . . commit all available aircraft to combat operations.”<sup>236</sup> Certainly, Operation Dracula met this advanced principle.



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**Figure 84. On 2 May 1945, landing craft unloads 15th Indian Infantry Corps artillery and supplies at Elephant Point.**

### **Bombs Off Target?**

The Japanese may have abandoned Rangoon along with a portion of the prisoners inside Insein Prison, but the “Sons of Heaven” wanted an insurance policy. Hiding behind the veil of improved treatment, the Japanese plotted their escape into Thailand. By late April, the captives finally received some of the Red Cross packages that previously arrived during their internment. New clothing arrived in the form of Japanese Army surplus and an odd pair of rubber shoes

with the big toe separated from the rest of the shoe sole. Lastly and more suspiciously, the prison doctor determined the fitness level of each captive.<sup>237</sup>

True to form, the misgivings of the prisoners proved to be true. The Japanese assigned those designated as “Well” to haul supplies and march with them away from Rangoon. Dressed as Japanese soldiers, the prisoners knew that they would be targets of any Allied aircraft or patrol that they happened to encounter. Expendable and inhumanly treated, the captives marched.<sup>238</sup> One captured P-38 Lightning pilot, Lt John T. Whitescarver stated, “We left Rangoon on the night of the 27th and walked about 15 miles. Most of the men were barefoot and were forced to carry the . . . equipment. We got a handful of rice to eat that night. . . . We hid in the woods in the daytime, and the night of the 29th we were forced to march another 20 miles. We marched through Pegu which was a ghost town from our bombings, and [enemy] soldiers were planting dynamite charges on the bridge when we went past.”<sup>239</sup>

Former Rangoon prisoner of war (POW) Nick Oglesby recounted two rare moments of humanity along the march when captor and captive struck an accord. First, “I remember someone asking one of our Japanese guards, a fairly chubby, moon-faced short man with those Coke-bottle-bottom glasses, when we were going to stop to rest. He mopped his brow and said, ‘Soon, I hope!’ with such feeling that we all chuckled.”<sup>240</sup> Second, when a friendly and somewhat overweight prison guard affectionately referred to as “Willie” began to fall out—and falling out meant certain death for the captives and perhaps the Japanese as well—the prisoners on their own accord “lifted him up and put him on top of a cart we were pulling. And for a while, one of our people actually carried his gun until it was pointed out that if a Japanese soldier saw him carrying the gun, he would no doubt be killed. The gun was passed back up to Willie.”<sup>241</sup> The captive had become the savior of the captor in at least one instance on the way to Thailand.<sup>242</sup>

The sick or lucky awoke in the Rangoon Jail, but no guards made their rounds and silence hung heavy in the air. Soon, some POWs made their way through the compound. Not a single Japanese soldier was in sight. The jail had been abandoned but not without a friendly farewell message. The Japanese garrison left two letters to their former captives. Hung on the gates to the city, the first read as follows:

To the whole of the captured persons of Rangoon *Gaol*. According to the *Nippon* military order, we hereby give you liberty and admit to leave this place at your own will. Regarding food and other materials kept in this compound, we give you permission to consume them as far as your necessity and concernment. We hope that we shall have an opportunity to meet you again at the battlefields of somewhere. We shall continue our war effort eternally in order to get emancipation of all Asiatic races.<sup>243</sup>

Letter two read: “Gentlemen—Probably you have come here opening the gate. We have gone, keeping your prisoner safely with Nipponese knightship [*sic*]. Afterwards we may meet again at the front somewhere. Then let us fight bravely each other.”<sup>244</sup>

Toting 400 emaciated prisoners of war around Burma proved to be a slight drag on speed, and the Japanese wanted to enter Thailand as quickly as possible. To their credit, once the detained personnel had served their purpose, the Japanese released the captives by handing over control to Senior British Officer Clive Hobson in a Burmese village. The former prisoners of war attempted to contact Allied aircraft as they flew near, but the Americans did not suspect prisoner contact from a village and thus disregarded it. Four British Hawker Hurricanes flown by Royal Indian Air Force pilots spotted the signals and were able to report the incident when they landed, yet in a cruel twist of fate, an unknown party advised the pilots that what they witnessed was a Japanese ruse. The pilots received instruction to return and target the area. They complied with this order.<sup>245</sup>

POW Nick Oglesby recounted the events of 29 April 1945:<sup>246</sup>

When I heard the sound of machine gun fire, I knew we were being attacked. I dove behind a huge tree which was next to the Brigadier’s [Brigadier Clive Hobson] *basha* (hut). The bullets slammed into the tree and also hit the Brigadier killing him instantly. Bombs were crashing into the village, and I decided this was no place to hang around. So after the first wave passed, I made a dash across an open field for a bomb crater that I had remembered seeing when we came to the village that morning. I got part of the way across the field when the fighters came around for the second pass. There was no place to hide so I just lay flat on the ground and waited for the worst to happen. A line of bullets plowed up the dirt no more than a foot away from my head. After this pass was over, I did manage to get into the bomb crater which by now was full of guys and in fact several came in on top of me which was quite comforting. The Hurricanes made four passes and when they were gone, we drifted back into the village. We found out that, incredibly, the only person who was killed in the raid was Brigadier Hobson. A number of people were wounded by bomb fragments, but he was the only fatality. . . . Brigadier [Hobson] had been captured in Singapore early in 1942, had endured over three years of Japanese imprisonment and now he had been killed by his own people, a few hours after liberation.<sup>247</sup>

The loss of Brigadier Hobson can never be placed in adequate words, especially after reflecting on his service as senior British officer in the Rangoon prison. Replacing the brigadier as senior officer fell to Lt Col Douglas Gilbert, captured while assigned as a liaison officer to the Chinese Nationalist Army. Lieutenant Colonel Gilbert ordered a retreat and reorganization in another small village. The Burmese allowed the prisoners safe harbor for the night, but a small number of enemy soldiers still resided within the village, increasing tension.



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 7500A.C.

**Figure 85. A Combat Cargo Task Force C-47 performs prisoner extraction at Rangoon, Burma.**

When the two sides met, the Japanese simply fled; however, as a British and Gurkha rescue party arrived around 1200, a firefight erupted. In total, 23 Japanese soldiers had bivouacked with their former captives and 23 Japanese soldiers fell in the fields surrounding the village under the noonday sun. British trucks poured in and extracted the men to a forward airstrip where Eastern Air Command C-47s transported the former detainees to friendly territory. One such C-47 was piloted by Flying Officer Bob O'Brien of the 436th Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force.<sup>248</sup>

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US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 57369A.C.

Figure 86. Left, Rescued POW Lt Col Douglas G. Gilbert escorted by Lt Col James F. Fisackerly (Flight Surgeon).



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 75003A.C

**Figure 87. A prisoner of war released from captivity in Rangoon stares into the distance while stirring his coffee.**

### **The Sun Sets on Rangoon**

Back in the embattled city of Rangoon, on 3 May 1945, a lone Mosquito aircraft zoomed over Rangoon searching for remaining Japanese positions. Wing Commander A. E. Saunders noted that enemy activity was nonexistent

and that a message had been painted in English atop two of the long buildings that formed the spokes of Rangoon Prison's wheel shape.<sup>249</sup> The commander took a bold move and landed his aircraft despite the threat of a trap. Saunders made his way through the airfield debris and came up to the jail where he saw the text written. The senior British officer (after Brigadier Hobson's force marched away) L. V. Hudson of the Royal Australian Air Force greeted Wing Commander Saunders and heartily handed over command of his garrison to the pilot. Therefore, when Rangoon fell, the first change of command was conducted between the Allied forces themselves and the city was surrendered from one ally to another.<sup>250</sup> No finer, nor stranger, ending to Operation Dracula could have been planned.



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**Figure 88. Insein Prison with communications written by prisoners of war on two buildings**

In a letter on 7 May 1945, Major General Stratemeyer congratulated and commended every member of the 1st and 2nd Air Commando Groups, “without whose efforts the victory in Burma could not have been achieved.”<sup>251</sup> Gen Sir Oliver Leese, Commander in Chief Allied Land Forces, stated, “On the capture of Rangoon I would like to thank you and your staff for their magnificent co-operation. . . . Without such close teamwork between our respective Staffs, we could never have achieved these successes. . . . A special word of congratulations to the 1st and 2d Air Commandos for their great work.”<sup>252</sup> In a letter dated the same day, General Slim reiterated, “[t]his operation is in every sense an outstanding achievement. The speed and precision with which the operation [Dracula], was executed, the absence of casualties, and the sustained rate at which the aircraft operated is worthy of the highest praise.”<sup>253</sup>

Many Japanese responsible for the cruelty and deaths of prisoners in Rangoon Prison received the death penalty in the coming months.<sup>254</sup> Burmese civilians who attempted to aid Allied captives, such as Mr. Ko Maung Mating, received certificates of appreciation personally signed by Lord Mountbatten.<sup>255</sup> The admiral himself arrived in Rangoon on 14 June 1945. A rainstorm subsided and the sun came forth. Lord Mountbatten lamented the situation of the government house with its furniture stolen and “hideous” condition. The following day, all personnel assembled for a grand parade. The sun shone brightly, and Lord Mountbatten made his way to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. A cadre fired off their volleys in a 17-gun salute to welcome the admiral. The monsoon rain kindly held off during his address to the Allies and people of Burma, but such luck could not last forever. Lord Mountbatten thought it fitting that an expedition, which began in the rain, should end the same.<sup>256</sup>

On 24 October 1945, army Gen Heitaro Kimura, Japanese commander in chief, Burma, was transported back to Rangoon to formalize the official surrender of the Japanese in Burma.<sup>257</sup> On 14 May 1946, General Kimura stood trial at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal. General Kimura had originally received his appointment to Burma on 30 August 1944.<sup>258</sup> Despite his short tenure, for his lack of immediate policy change regarding the treatment of prisoners of war in Rangoon and along the Thai-Burma Railway, General Kimura was sentenced to be hanged on 23 December 1948 with his ashes scattered at sea.<sup>259</sup>



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**Figure 89. Japanese General Heitaro Kimura in bow posture and senior staff officers surrendering their swords to Gen Sir Montagu Stopford, 12th Army Commander at Judson College, Rangoon, Buma, 24 October 1945.**

**Impact of 1st and 2nd Air Commando Groups  
on the Second World War**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 62647A.C.

**Figure 90. Lt Gen R. A. Wheeler, Adm Lord Louis Mountbatten, and Lt Gen Daniel I. Sultan attend a Victory Day Parade in Rangoon, Burma, 17 June 1945.**

From 11 February to 10 March 1945, the 2nd Air Commando Fighter Squadrons flew 606 combat missions, including 2,664 sorties.<sup>260</sup> The Japanese never regained air superiority in Burma and were unable to compensate for their disadvantage in numbers and inability to replace losses. On 12 May 1945, the 2nd Fighter Squadron Commando departed Cox's Bazar, India.<sup>261</sup> The group's commander, Colonel DeBolt, received orders back to the United States and bid a fond farewell to his fellow Air Commandos on 15 May 1945.<sup>262</sup> Freshly promoted Col Alfred J. Ball Jr. assumed command on the same day.<sup>263</sup> Administrative control of the 2nd Air Commando Group passed to Tenth Air Force on 10 June 1945.<sup>264</sup> On 1 July 1945, the 1st Air Commando Group found itself transferred again. This time the unit fell under the Tenth Air Force, assigned to the China Theater.<sup>265</sup> The 99th Indian Infantry Brigade did not forget the assistance the Air Commandos provided to them. Long after their insertion at Meiktila, Brig G. L. Tarver lauded the Air Commandos for their operational prowess; however, the brigadier also commended the Air Commandos on another quality, one that may have been partially responsible for their success on the battlefield. The brigadier stated that his portion of the operation "could never have been done without the co-operation of all of you [the Air Commandos]. Throughout my troops have been treated with the greatest courtesy, which is very much appreciated."<sup>266</sup> By such actions, the quiet professionals of yesterday charted the course for the Airmen of today and tomorrow.

The seizure of Rangoon forced a stake into the heart of Japanese occupation of Burma. The Strategic Bombing Survey stated, "Japanese logistics in Burma and China were disrupted. China was kept in the war."<sup>267</sup> Expectedly, for the detainees held in Insein Prison, the capture of Rangoon meant life itself. Military historian Michael F. Dillely stated, "Of what are considered the minor airborne operations of World War II, Operation Dracula is thought by some military experts to be one of the finest examples of the economical and effective use of paratroopers."<sup>268</sup> The campaign in Burma cost the enemy roughly 150,000 Japanese soldiers.<sup>269</sup>

A true joint effort, taken with the right planning, at the right place, the right time, with the right equipment and the right people, Operation Dracula can be lauded for audacity, courage, and overwhelming demonstration of the Allied will to win. The operation consisted of three cumulative parts. First, the southern advance of 14th Army; second, the air components (air assault and close air support); and third, a sizable naval assault force (minesweeping, carrier, and amphibious landing) capability. Had the Imperial Japanese forces chosen to remain in the city, the chess pieces surrounding them would have almost certainly decapitated their king in short order. Essentially, the Allied forces would have boxed the Japanese force in with no hope of escape.



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Figure 91. Maj Alfred J. Ball, Captain Kimbrough, Col Arthur R. DeBolt, ca. 1945

Indeed, the operation stands prominently as an example of a well-planned and superbly executed mission. The strategy offered two alternatives to the Imperial Japanese Army in Rangoon, surrender or be forcibly vanquished. Regardless of choice, Japanese control of Burma had effectively ceased. Perhaps the greatest limiting factor haunting Operation Dracula has been that the personnel involved were so skilled and motivated that the task appeared easy. The truth of the operation was that it required extreme precision from its air, land, and sea components, along with perfect harmony between the services and six coalition partners.

Success in such operations can be its own worst enemy. When World War II ended, the need for such disciplined and unconventional forces seemed to diminish and the capability quickly eroded. An alliance between the armed forces of Great Britain, Australia, Canada, the United States, India, the Nepalese Gurkhas, and a potential lasting alliance with the Burmese fell by the wayside. Current scholars such as Adam B. Lowther and Rajaswari Pillai Rajagopalan envision an era of airpower diplomacy, a “soft-power capability having sufficient force behind it such that other nations view it as more than just empty words.”<sup>270</sup> India could benefit greatly from such an alliance, as could other countries. Thirty-five years passed, and the role of unconventional air forces rose in peaks and plummeted into dark valleys until the tragedy of Operation Eagle Claw, also known as Operation Rice Bowl, claimed the lives of eight servicemen in a daring rescue mission to free 52 United States embassy staff members being held in Tehran, Iran. It is my desire that the lessons first learned in Burma remain etched into the decision-making process of today’s armed forces.

Some units who participated in Operation Dracula remained operational as of the date of publication of this study while others remained inactive, waiting for necessity to call. The continued service of these organizations is a testament to their necessity and flexibility. The pride of having participated in the Burma campaign felt by the men and women who continue to serve under the banner of these units is often reflected in the heraldry of the unit. The 435th Transport and Rescue Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force traces its lineage to the 435th Squadron. The 436th Transport Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force traces its lineage to the 436th Squadron. Each of these squadrons displays their connection to the China–Burma–India theater proudly on their respective squadron badges. The 435th Transport and Rescue Squadron badge features a Chinthe over the motto *Certi provehendi* (Determined on delivery). The 436th Transport Squadron features an elephant on its insignia over the motto *Onus Portamus* (We carry the load).<sup>271</sup> Both squadrons provide preeminent airlift capability to Canada, National Atlantic Treaty Organization partners, and allies around the world.



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**Figure 92. 435 Transport and Rescue Squadron badge, Royal Canadian Air Force**



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**Figure 93. 436 Transport Squadron badge, Royal Canadian Air Force**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 59647A.C.

**Figure 94. 1st Air Commando Group P-47 armorers in India. In cockpit Sgt Jack M. Kubler, on box Sgt Anton Hrna, kneeling on wing Lt William S. Teranova, and Cpl Robert W. Bowers.**

Today the 1st and 2nd Air Commando Groups live on in the form of the 1st Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Florida, and the 352nd Special Operations Wing, RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom.<sup>272</sup> The 1st Special Operations Wing emblem bears the motto “Any Time, Any Place,” a message reflecting the confidence that the British had in them.<sup>273</sup> The mission of the 1st Special Operations Wing “is unconventional warfare: counterterrorism, combat search and rescue, personnel recovery, psychological operations, ‘deep battlefield’ resupply, interdiction and close air support . . . including aerospace surface interface, agile combat support, combat aviation advisory operations, information operations, personnel recovery/recovery operations, precision aerospace fires, psychological operations dissemination, specialized aerospace mobility, and specialized aerial refueling.”<sup>274</sup> “The 352nd Special Operations Wing is United States European Command’s Air Component for special operations; . . . the 352nd Special Operations Wing conducts infiltration, and exfiltration of special operations forces in denied territory under night and

adverse weather conditions in support of: counterterrorism operations, direct action, special reconnaissance, counterproliferation, unconventional warfare, military information support operations, and personnel recovery.<sup>275</sup> The 72nd Airdrome Squadron is still supporting the warfighter as the 72nd Operations Support Squadron in Air Force Material Command.<sup>276</sup>

The 1st Fighter Squadron, Commando, traded its Mustangs for rotors and now serves as the 1st Helicopter Squadron providing high profile airlift in Washington, DC.<sup>277</sup> The 317th Airlift Squadron found a home at Charleston AFB, South Carolina, where it continues the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron's airlift mission.<sup>278</sup> The 319th Special Operations Squadron and 6th Special Operations Squadron, Hurlburt Field, Florida, continue the Air Commando tradition from their 319th Troop Carrier Squadron and 6th Fighter Squadron, Commando, progenitors.<sup>279</sup> Each of these elite units stands at the forefront of America's conflicts wherever freedom has been jeopardized. The visionary Gen Henry H. "Hap" Arnold also established the 3rd Air Commando Group which took part in the liberation of the Philippine Islands and the air offensive against Japan during the Second World War,<sup>280</sup> but that is another story for another day . . .

. . . after Thursday.



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 55845A.C.

**Figure 95. 2nd Lt L. F. Mullins, 1st Air Commando Group, prepares to pilot his P-47 on a strafing run over Burma.**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 72653A.C.

**Figure 96. 1st and 2nd Air Commando Group C-47s prepare to depart Palel, India, for Meiktila, Burma. Clearly Visible C-47 (Little Brown Jug).**



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**Figure 97. 2nd Air Commando Group, Communications Tent, Kalaikunda, India**



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Figure 98. Lt Carlton D. Ferriby, 2nd Air Commando Group, 2nd Fighter Squadron Commando, Photo Officer



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**Figure 99. 1st Lt L. J. Donner in front of his P-51D, Tombstone Jake. (Note the emblem of the 2nd Fighter Squadron Commando).**



US Signal Corps photo, National Archives 72694A.C.

**Figure 100. A toast to the host: Air Commandos celebrate their first anniversary at Asansol, India, 9 November 1944.**



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**Figure 101. Lt Bonnie J. Mayer**



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**Figure 102. Rangoon Government Building post liberation 1945**



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**Figure 103. Rangoon after liberation**

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## Abbreviations

AAF	Army Air Force
ACG	Air Commando Group
AFB	Air Force Base
AFHRA	Air Force Historical Research Agency
AFDW	Air Force District of Washington
AFMC	Air Force Materiel Command
AFRC	Air Force Reserve Command
AFSOC	Air Force Special Operations Command
AT	Air Transport
CBI	China–Burma–India Theater
HMS	Her/His Majesty’s Ship
HQ	Headquarters
LOW	launch on warning
MACR	Missing Air Crew Report
POW	prisoner of war
RAF	Royal Air Force
RDX	Research Department Explosive/Royal Demolition Explosive
TNT	trinitrotoluene (explosive)
TS	top secret
US	United States
USAAF	United States Army Air Forces
USAF	United States Air Force

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