The U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II

# Operation THURSDAY

## Birth of the Air Commandos

Herbert A. Mason, Jr.
SSgt. Randy G. Bergeron
TSgt. James A. Renfrow, Jr., USAFR

Air Force History and Museums Program

1994

# Report Documentation Page

*Form Approved*
*OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. REPORT DATE<br>**1994** | 2. REPORT TYPE | 3. DATES COVERED<br>**00-00-1994 to 00-00-1994** |
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE<br>**Operation Thursday. Birth of the Air Commandos** | | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER |
| | | 5b. GRANT NUMBER |
| | | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER |
| 6. AUTHOR(S) | | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER |
| | | 5e. TASK NUMBER |
| | | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)<br>**Air Force Historical Studies Office,AF/HO,1190 Air Force Pentagon,Washington,DC,20330-1190** | | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) | | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) |
| | | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) |
| 12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT<br>**Approved for public release; distribution unlimited** | | |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES | | |
| 14. ABSTRACT<br>**see report** | | |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS | | |

| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: | | | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. REPORT<br>**unclassified** | b. ABSTRACT<br>**unclassified** | c. THIS PAGE<br>**unclassified** | | **48** | |

**Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)**
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

# Operation THURSDAY

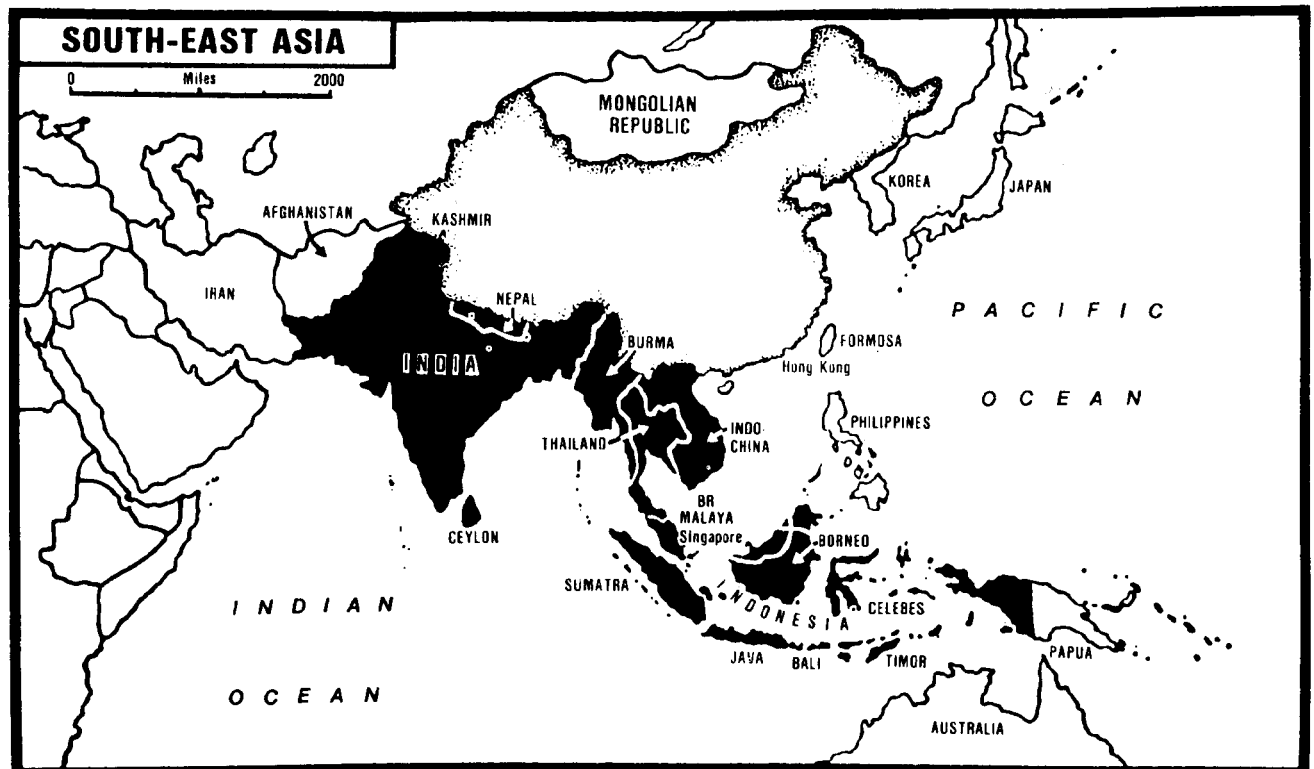
A bold, unconventional use of American air power to support British ground troops in Burma, Operation THURSDAY marked a critical development in the history of modern warfare. On March 5–6, 1944, the Allies conducted an air invasion of Burma, in an attempt to push back the Japanese in the China-Burma-India Theater and reestablish the land route between India and China. U.S. airmen formed a special operations unit—the 1st Air Commando Group—to transport troops to jungle locations and resupply them, often in the line of fire. The remarkable success of this operation lives on, fifty years later, among the elite 1st Air Commando Group—a force committed to meeting the challenge of unconventional warfare any time, any place, anywhere.

## A Continent at War

After Pearl Harbor—the devastating blow against the U.S. Fleet in Hawaii—Imperial Japanese forces quickly overran much of the Far East. Guam, Hong Kong, Malaya, the Philippines, Thailand, Wake Island, French Indochina, and the Dutch East Indies all succumbed to the Japanese onslaught. Meanwhile, American forces were busy preparing for a protracted war on two fronts, and the British were struggling against Hitler's aggressive air campaign. With the Allies thus diverted, Japan's rapid conquests gave the resource-poor nation access to the rubber, oil, tin, rice and other raw materials needed to fuel the Imperial war machine.

Allied hopes for stopping the enemy advance in Asia were pinned on Burma, a country of jungles and mountain ranges strategically located between India and China. By 1941 the Japanese had nearly cut China off from the rest of the world. The meager Chinese resistance was being supplied via the Burma Road that extended from India through Burma to the town of Kunming, China. If Japanese forces could occupy Burma, they could seal off China, and release their troops for other operations on the continent. Burma would then become a staging area into India, the "jewel of the British empire." Burma itself was valuable as "rice bowl" capable of producing eight million tons of rice per year—food badly needed by the already overextended Imperial Army. In the grand strategy, a Japanese-controlled Burma would also shield the newly organized Far East Territories from the Allied advance.

Burma's terrain and climate limited the military operations of both the invaders and defenders. Steep mountain ranges and river valleys alternated north and south. Only few trails through the hills connected Burma with India and Thailand, and most commerce went through the port of Rangoon, on the Irrawaddy delta. Monsoon rains created logistical nightmares. Annual rainfall varied from 200 inches in the Rangoon area, to 100 inches in the hills, and up to 45 inches in the northcentral "dry" zone. Military forces avoided the monsoon rains (mid-May to late Oc-




**Southeast Asia, ca 1942**

tober), restricting their operations to the dry season. In the tropical climate, malaria and other diseases could also bring operations to a standstill.

## "A Hell of a Beating"

Japan began the invasion of Burma on December 23, 1941, with air raids on Rangoon. Seventy days later, on February 15, 1942, Imperial forces captured Singapore, and the occupation of Thailand soon left Burma vulnerable to attack from either sea or land. The Allies planned to defend Burma with two British infantry battalions, two Indian infantry brigades, eight battalions of Burma Rifles, four mountain artillery batteries, and the equivalent of six battalions of the Burma Frontier Force. Unfortunately, the defenders had little training and lacked modern artillery, communications equipment, and antiaircraft weapons. Only one squadron of Brewster Buffaloes provided air support.

Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek dispatched the Chinese 5th and 6th Armies into China, under the command of American Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell. It was too little too late. Allied forces were no match for Lt. Gen. Skojir Iida's battle-hardened 15th Army. While the Allies were road bound, the Japanese used the jungle to their advantage. They infiltrated the Allied lines in small parties, set up road blocks, and harassed the retreating Allied troops. (The Chinese Communists used the same tactics against the Americans later in Korea.)

Unprepared for the swift Japanese advance, British Maj. Gen. William T. Slim retreated back to India with some twelve thousand men. Though the evacuation from Burma ended officially in mid-May 1942, nearly thirteen thousand Allied troops did not make it through the Chin Hills to Imphal, India, until the end of the month. When asked about the retreat, General Stilwell admitted, ". . .we got a hell of a beating."

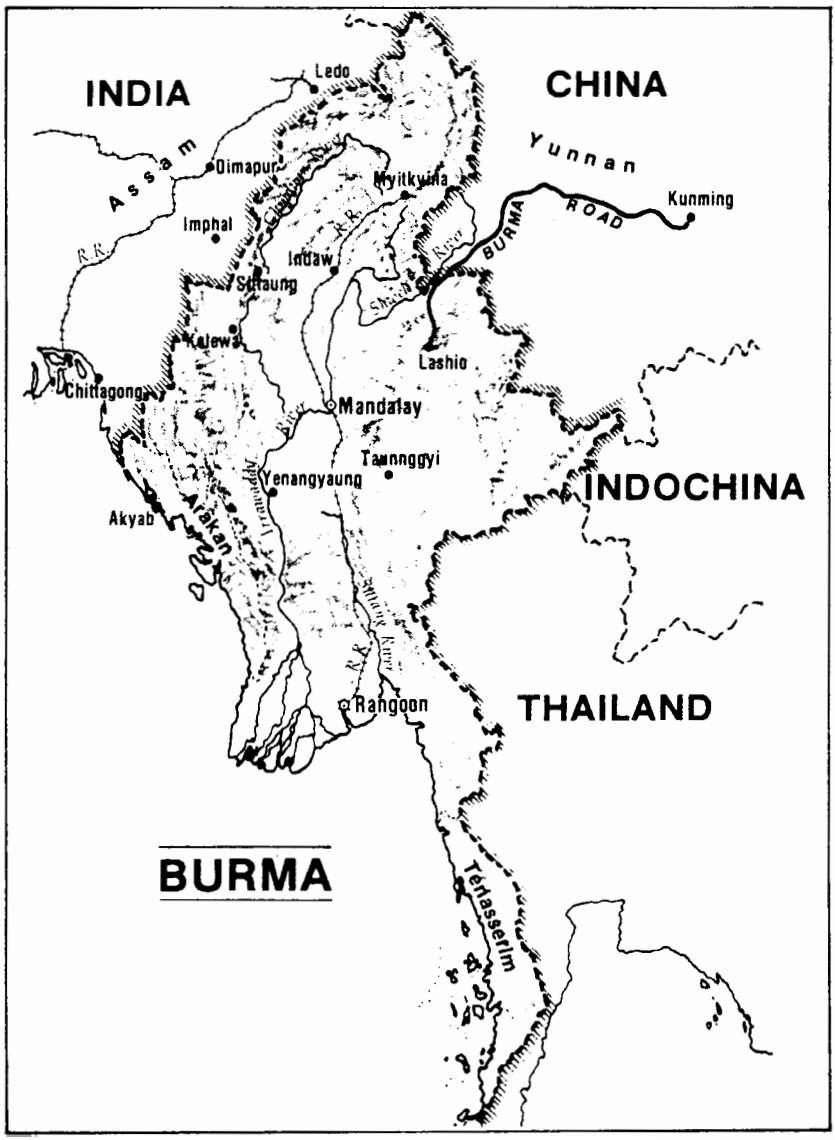
## The Allies Take the Initiative

The fall of Burma in the spring of 1942 cut the Burma Road and left China practically isolated. Allied leaders feared that shortages of matériel might force the Chiang Kai-Shek's forces out of the war, so they moved quickly to establish an air link. The U.S. Army Air Forces inaugurated an air transport system to fly essential supplies from bases in northeastern India over the Himalayas (the so-called "Hump") to Kunming, China, about 650 miles to the east. American airmen flew Curtiss C–46s, Douglas C–47s, Douglas C–54s, and Consolidated-Vultee C–87s at altitudes up to 21,000 feet, over the world's highest mountain range.

At that time, the only American combat force in China was Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault's U.S. Chinese Air Task Force (later the Fourteenth Air Force). Prior to the U.S. entry into the war, these fighter pilots had flown under the auspices of the American Volunteer Group—the famous "Flying Tigers."

With Japanese troops poised to snatch India from the British and knock China out of the war, Allied commanders had to devise a strategy to reopen the land route between India and China. The American Tenth Air Force began operating from India in March 1942, and by the end of the year engineers were constructing a highway into northern Burma. Meanwhile, General Stilwell reorganized and equipped his Chinese troops, which had retreated into India.

On March 19 British Brig. Gen. Orde C. Wingate, a specialist in irregular warfare, arrived in India. Wingate immediately reconnoitered the Burmese front and studied Japanese tactics and training. Rejecting the possibility of a frontal attack against such a well-fortified enemy, the general championed the use of long-range penetration columns. Such a force would use hit-and-run tactics behind the Japanese lines, striking railroads, river boats, and bridges to stop the flow of supplies from Rangoon and Mandalay to the enemy's front lines. Though India's command staff was not enthusiastic, British General Archibald Wavell, familiar with Wingate's guerrilla operations against the Italians in Libya


INDIA
CHINA
Ledo
Assam
Dimapur
Myitkyina
Yunnan
Kunming
BURMA ROAD
Imphal
R.R.
Indaw
Sittaung
Kalewa
Lashio
Chittagong
Mandalay
Taunnggyi
Yenangyaung
INDOCHINA
Akyab
Arakan
Rangoon
THAILAND
BURMA
Tenasserim

and the Arabs in Palestine, told him to proceed. Thus, during the next dry season, in early 1943, Wingate led his men on a series of raids against enemy rail and road networks north of Mandalay.

## The "Chindits" in Operation LONGCLOTH

The long-range penetration (LRP) columns were formed from different British units within India, representing a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Wingate put his forces through rigorous jungle training, which prepared them to march great distances, engage the enemy in hit-and-run raids, locate and destroy transportation lines, and use the jungle as cover to evade the Japanese. His commandos became known as "Chindits," from the Burmese word *Chinthe*—mythological dragon-like statues that guarded the beast-god temples and shrines in Burma.

Nearly three thousand men crossed into Burma during Operation Longcloth, which lasted from February 8 until early June 1943. Accompanying the Chindits was a Royal Air Force officer who prepared the troops to receive the first resupply air drops on February 24. A few days later, however, two of the three LRP columns were ambushed and had to return to India. The 77th Indian Brigade carried on, and by March 6 it had destroyed more than seventy-five sections of the Mandalay-Myitkyina railroad, a key supply line to the northern front. The 77th also attempted to cross the Irrawaddy River to cut the Mandalay-Lashia rail lines.

Unfortunately, British air support did not live up to Wingate's expectations. Moving about at night, the LRP columns were very difficult to locate, and resupply missions were ineffective. Even more detrimental to the men's morale, casualties could not be evacuated from the jungle. The nearest friendly forces were back in India, across a mountain range. Wounded soldiers had to be left with their weapons and some rations—and a very slim chance of survival. Nor could combat losses be easily replaced. Eventually, the combination of enemy pressure, lack of supplies, casualties, and exhaustion forced Wingate to break his columns into small parties. The Chindits reached the shelter of 4th Corps

in India on the night of March 27. Of the original 3,000 men, 883 did not return.

Despite the severe losses, Operation LONGCLOTH was a psychological victory for the Allies. General Wingate had tested his long range penetration concept in the field, marking the first time the Allies had taken the war to the Japanese in the jungle. When the *London Times* released the story on May 21, the publicity made Wingate the champion of Burma in the eyes of the beleaguered British public. General Slim characterized Wingate as "a strange, excitable, moody creature, but he had a fire in him. He could ignite other men." Although the enemy repaired most of the damage to the rail lines with days, Wingate was determined to try again. If a reliable way could be found to resupply the troops and evacuate the wounded, he reasoned, the Chindits could inflict serious damage on the enemy during the next dry season.

By the summer of 1943, Allied commanders were considering their options in the CBI theater. General Stilwell's forces were pushing south into Burma, and General Chiang Kai Shek's troops were fighting in the east. Yet, the Japanese still posed a threat to India. Little did the Allies know that the enemy was planning an attack against Imphal, India, codenamed U-Go, for the next dry season.

## Support from Churchill and Roosevelt

In May 1943 the Allied combined chiefs of staff affirmed their support of General Chennault's Tenth Air Force in China and also decided to continue General Stilwell's effort to open the Ledo Road, the critical land route from India to China. The Allied heads of state and key military commanders met in late August at the Quadrant Conference in Quebec, Canada, to chart future courses of action. At Prime Minister Churchill's request, General Wingate reported on his long range penetration concept and its limited success in Burma. The British commander also stressed the need to solve the problems of resupply and evacuation of the wounded.

President Roosevelt's goal in the China-Burma-India Theater called for keeping China in the war, while Churchill wanted to regain lost Southeast Asian territories and save India. After weighing the options, the Allied leaders agreed that the best way to aid China was to continue flying supplies over the "Hump" from India. In addition, General Wingate could plan a new offensive into northern Burma, supported this time by American air power. The new LRP force would consist of British imperial reserves and three thousand American ground troops.

Wingate's goal would be to interdict enemy supply lines and remove the pressure on Stilwell's Chinese forces. The Allies thought that these two complimentary efforts would force the Japanese out of Burma and reduce the likelihood of an attack on India. If totally successful, Allied operations would drive the enemy out of northern Burma and reopen the Ledo Road. Immediately after the conference, President Roosevelt directed General Henry H. (Hap) Arnold, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces, to solve Wingate's resupply and evacuation problems. Specifically, the British commander asked for sixteen C–47s for airdrop missions, one bomber squadron per ground unit for close air support, plus a "light plane force" to evacuate the wounded.

## The First Aerial Invasion

Having heard General Wingate's presentation at the Quadrant Conference, General Arnold understood the importance of resupply and evacuation to the British ground troops. He also foresaw an opportunity to stage an invasion by air—the first ever attempted in military history. The British plan called for establishing Allied air bases behind enemy lines. General Arnold envisioned a special air unit that would operate for about ninety days during the dry season. U.S. planes would transport General Wingate's forces into northern Burma, landing in a jungle clearing and holding it long enough to build an airstrip. Regular transport planes would bring in the rest of the troops to create a

stronghold from which to attack the Japanese lines of communication and supply routes. If successful, the air operation would demonstrate the flexibility of air power in modern warfare.

The AAF Commander sought uniquely qualified leaders to oversee the experimental operation. One of the officers he interviewed was Lt. Col. Philip G. Cochran, a seasoned fighter pilot with aerial victories in North Africa. Well known for his initiative and imaginative use of air power, Cochran had experience with a variety of aircraft under different operational situations. Early in the war, he had arrived in North Africa with a group of inexperienced P–40 Warhawk pilots. Soon the unit was operating at the forward edge of the theater, seeking out German targets and developing new tactics against the enemy. Within six months, Cochran had downed two German fighters. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with two clusters, a Silver Star, and several other combat decorations. During his interview, Cochran told Arnold that he was not interested in going to the Asian jungles with "little" airplanes in a resupply and evacuation role. However, he did recommend Lt. Col. John Alison, his roommate while he was stationed at Mitchell Field, Wisconsin, and Langley Field, Virginia.

Colonel Alison had served in China with the Fourteenth Air Force and had flown P–40s against the Japanese with great success. A fighter ace with seven aerial victories to his credit, he was also well respected for his leadership and strong organizational skills. He had first-hand knowledge of Japanese equipment and tactics in the CBI Theater, plus a great deal of foreign experience from his work with the Lend-Lease programs in England, Russia and the Middle East. When Arnold interviewed him, Alison echoed his friend's response: he preferred to return to combat as a fighter pilot and had no interest in Wingate's campaign.

With the interviews over, General Arnold recalled Cochran and Alison. Overruling their objections, he decided to make them co-commanders, with wide-ranging authority to get the job done. The AAF Commander assured the two officers that his plans called for much more than using light aircraft for evacu-

ation and resupply. He described an "aerial invasion" of Burma, sustained by the air transport of fresh troops. Colonels Cochran and Alison would report directly to him, and their Top Secret operation, dubbed "Project 9," would have the highest possible priority for recruiting men and procuring matériel. General Arnold outlined the broad objectives of the project, but left the formal plan up to Cochran and Alison. The co-commanders began the operation with nothing more than Arnold's instruction: "To hell with the paperwork, go out and fight!"

## The Birth of Project 9

Obviously, such an ambitious operation would require careful planning and innovative thinking. Cochran and Alison decided against a co-command; Cochran, senior to Alison by a few months, became the Project 9 commander, and Alison his deputy. After setting up a temporary office at a Washington hotel, the two split responsibilities. Alison began to recruit people and gather equipment and supplies. Meanwhile, Cochran flew to London to meet General Wingate and British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the new Supreme Allied Commander Southeast Asia Command as of November 16, 1943. Wingate told Cochran that during Operation Longcloth, he had used an Royal Air Force liaison officer to vector in planes to airdrop supplies. With this possibility in mind, Cochran began to formulate some ideas of his own. Back in the United States, the commander and his deputy brainstormed for new ways to support Wingate's LRP concept and expand the overall effort. The basic objective was to stage an air invasion by ground troops, thus avoiding the enormous physical toll of weeks of marching in the jungle. As General Arnold had directed: "I want them to be flown in this time."

Next Cochran and Alison considered the twin problems of evacuation and troop replacement. They agreed that the light planes already requested by General Wingate could be used to transport the wounded and provide fresh troops, but they wanted to study other alternatives. Also, once the troops were inserted, could AAF aircraft give the long range penetration force more

firepower? The combat pilots reasoned that if General Wingate could vector in a plane for a cargo drop, he could do the same with a fighter or bomber. Since the Chindits traveled light, without artillery or heavy ordnance, they would appreciate the close air support.

During their first raid the Chindits had used pack mules to carry in their equipment and supplies. Since it was not feasible to parachute mules into the jungle, the two planners turned to large cargo gliders. Experts told them that each glider could transport over 4,000 pounds and one C–47 could tow two gliders, plus carry cargo for an airdrop delivery. The more Cochran and Alison learned about gliders, the more they were convinced that engine-less aircraft should be a key part of the task force.

In the fall of 1943, the Project 9 commanders briefed their basic organizational and operational plan to General Arnold, despite their concern that their approach might be deemed too unconventional. Arnold did not throw them out of his office, as they had feared. After studying the plan, he asked Maj. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, an Air Staff officer, to review it. General Vandenberg called the plan "ingenious," and the AAF Commander quickly approved it, setting Project 9 in motion.

## Assembling a Volunteer Force

Colonel Alison had already laid the groundwork for recruiting the highest caliber people. Before the war, the AAF had been quite small, so the two commanders knew most of the experienced pilots and senior enlisted men. Cochran later recalled that "we were allowed to bring in from anywhere—if we knew a man's name, we'd send for him." Project 9 would be kept to a minimum size—less than six hundred men. (A conventional unit normally required two thousand.) The objective was to build a lean, self-sufficient force capable of sustaining operations for up to ninety days with a small logistical tail. Most recruits possessed more than one skill. For example, the light plane force consisted of enlisted pilots who were also qualified mechanics, prepared to repairs their planes if they were forced down in the

jungle. Except for Cochran and Alison, all of the 523 men (87 officers and 436 enlistees) were volunteers. Alison later recalled:

> I went to a training center and talked to everyone together. I told them I needed volunteers for a very dangerous job. I would not tell what the mission was, where they were going, only that it would be very hazardous. We had to turn good people away.

The two leaders decided that gliders would carry in a large assault force. These men would then secure a landing zone, and with the help of airborne engineers, would prepare a landing strip to receive C–47s carrying the bulk of the assault force with all its equipment and supplies. Project 9 was organized along functional lines. The headquarters section included Cochran and Alison, plus a liaison officer with General Wingate's headquarters. Flying operations would consist of three elements: an airlift force with gliders and transport aircraft; an assault force for attack and air support; and a light plane force for evacuation and replacement. Given the global requirements of World War II, organizations often competed for scarce resources. Fortunately, Project 9 enjoyed a top priority, and General Arnold's influence guaranteed that it would receive all the assets required.

## The Best Aircraft for the Mission

To transport Wingate's forces across the rugged mountains into Burma, the choice was obvious. The C–47 Skytrain could carry heavy loads over long distances and operate from relatively short, unimproved landing strips. It could also tow two large cargo gliders. The UC–64 Norseman, having made its reputation in the Canadian wilderness, was selected to handle smaller loads and general utility work. A large cargo glider, the Waco CG–4A, would transport the Chindits on the initial wave of the assault. Since there were not enough qualified glider pilots

**North American P-51 Mustangs, the Pentagon's choice for Project 9, after their arrival in India.**

for the operation, some extra TG–5 glider trainers were procured to prepare additional pilots.

The C–47 section of the transport force would be commanded by Maj. William T. Cherry, Jr., with Capt. Jacob B. Sartz as his deputy. Leading the light cargo section would be Lt. Col. Clinton B. Gaty, an engineer from Wright Field, Ohio, and Capt. Edward Wagner, his deputy. Capt. William H. Taylor, Jr., commander of the glider section, handpicked all the glider pilots from Bowman Field, Kentucky. Taylor's deputy was 1st Lt. Vincent Rose.

For close air support of ground operations, Project 9 considered several fighters and bombers. At first, planners requested P–38 Lightnings, then P–47 Thunderbolts. Pentagon officials substituted North American's P–51A Mustang, which was available from the United States. Though unsuitable for high-altitude operations, the Mustang was an excellent choice for dive bombing and strafing. The low-altitude bomber would be the North American B–25H, an attack version modified with eight .50 caliber machine guns and a 75mm cannon, all forward firing and

**B-25 Mitchells in flight over Burma.**

mounted in the nose. Maj. Grant Mahoney, a fighter ace in the Pacific, became the fighter section commander. Both Mahoney and his deputy, Maj. Robert T. Smith, had flown with Alison in China's American Volunteer Group. Maj. Robert L. Petit, a Silver Star recipient, replaced Smith when the unit arrived in India.

Besides its role in evacuation, the light plane force also would be used for liaison and for delivering small loads to the front lines. Maj. Andrew P. Rebori was named commander of the liaison section, and he chose Capt. Everett F. Smith as his deputy. Rebori decided to use the L–1 Vigilant as an air ambulance because it could carry up to three stretchers and take off from runways as short as 500 feet. However, not enough L–1s could be found, so Rebori augmented the Vigilants the newer L–5 Senti-

nel. Unfortunately, the L–5 could seat only one evacuee and needed 900 feet for takeoff. Both aircraft could be operated from crude airstrips in jungle clearings.

Meanwhile Cochran and Alison heard about a new vertical lift aircraft being tested Wright Field, Ohio, and they set out to investigate. This was the first "helicopter"—a Sikorsky YR–4. The project manager, a friend of Alison's, objected to sending a highly classified prototype of unknown capability to Burma. Alison convinced him after promising to furnish field data on the YR–4's performance. Thus, three helicopters from the AAF and three from the Navy became part of the light plane force.

General Arnold had agreed to send Project 9 to the CBI Theater as the AAF component of a joint task force. As such, the organization would operate independent of the existing theater command structure and manage its own supplies. Though assigned administratively to Tenth Air Force, Project 9 would be committed exclusively to General Wingate.

The AAF Commander approved the new organization and manpower requirement on September 13, 1943, and forwarded it to General of the Army George C. Marshall. The only major change to Cochran and Alison's plan was the substitution of the P–51A for the P–47 fighter. In less than thirty days, two men had assembled a combat unit totaling 348 aircraft and 523 men.

**Air Power for Project 9**

| | |
|---|---|
| Troop gliders (CG–4A) | 150 |
| Light planes (L–1/L–5) | 100 |
| Fighters (P–51A) | 30 |
| Training gliders (TG–5) | 25 |
| Large transports (C–47) | 13 |
| Small transports (UC–64) | 12 |
| Bombers (B–25H) | 12 |
| Helicopters (YR–4) | 6 |
| Total | 348 |

## Specialized Training and Equipment

On the first of October the Project 9 team began to gather in North Carolina. Its requirements lists was highly unusual for a deploying force: fighters and gliders based at Seymour-Johnson Field, and light planes at Raleigh-Durham. The unit assembled the latest, most innovative equipment, some of it still under development. The team would transport a new mobile hospital—the first of its kind. Experimental rockets under development at Wright-Patterson had been ordered for the P–51s. The C–47 transports would be equipped with latest glider towing reels which allowed airborne planes to "snatch" gliders off the ground. In fact, the Army only had one prototype "towing reel," so the Project 9 team fabricated its own. Also, Major Rebori of the light plane section personally modified some bomb racks so that parachute packs could be mounted on the wings of the light planes.

Meanwhile, Cochran and Alison convinced the Army to issue Thompson submachine guns, carbines and .45 automatic pistols to every man in the unit. The men were also authorized to wear airborne troop uniforms, since they needed many pockets to carry items. Marine Corps boots were issued, rather than standard Army ground soldier footwear.

With only a few weeks for training and indoctrination, the pilots concentrated on familiarizing themselves with their aircraft and tactics. The fighter pilots tried out the P–51As with their Allison engines. Two C–47 tugs borrowed from the 436th and 439th Troop Carrier Squadrons allowed transport pilots to practice airborne glider pickups—single, double, and automatic tow—at night. The emphasis was on double tow for maximum airlift capability.

Light plane pilots also trained by towing TG–4 gliders. The L–1 was obsolete and the L–5 was new to the AAF, so most of the "flying sergeants" lacked this specialized experience. They concentrated on short field landings and takeoffs (500 to 600 feet) with fully loaded aircraft and also practiced low level flying at 100 feet or lower.

## Airmen Bound for India

The original Project 9 embarkment date was set for December 15, 1943, but it was soon moved up to the first part of November, though scheduled training had to be curtailed. Project 9 had a transportation priority high enough to bump generals. The team flew from Miami, Florida, to Karachi, India (now Pakistan) hopping from Puerto Rico, to Trinidad, British Guiana, Brazil, Ascension Island, Gold Coast, Nigeria, Angola, Egyptian Sudan, Aden, and Masira Island. Colonel Cochran left Miami on November 3 and arrived with a small advance party in western India on the 13th.

Aircraft and supplies were transported by sea (with the exception of the unit's C–47s). P–51s could be loaded on carrier decks, but gliders, light aircraft, and helicopters had to be disassembled and crated before loading. Except for the gliders, all the aircraft were headed for Karachi, where they would be reassembled and flown to their operating bases. The sealift effort was a notable success, considering the war raging in the Pacific.

Colonel Cochran soon arranged to use the dirigible hangar at Karachi Airport for the reassembly work—a rather large undertaking. The troops pitched in with the "can do" spirit that became characteristic of the Project 9 team throughout Operation THURSDAY.

Until he arrived in India, Cochran did not fully realize the vital importance of having a separate supply system. The demands of the war in Europe did not leave much materièl for the CBI Theater. Envious eyes noticed the wealth of supplies earmarked for Project 9, and some conventional force commanders tried to take what they thought was rightfully theirs. When this was denied, existing units in theater soon realized that the special operation had top priority from the highest level.

Upon their arrival, Cochran and Alison established bases for field training and eventual full-scale operation. The British had already constructed two primitive bases—Lalaghat and Hailakandi—twelve miles apart in the Assam Hill region, 100 miles west of the India-Burma border. The Project 9 force

moved to the bases in January 1944. Both were laid out on flattened rice patty fields, and bamboo huts were quickly constructed for living and work space. The transports and gliders were stationed at Lalaghat because it had a 6,000 by 300-foot runway, while the headquarters, fighters, and bombers went to Hailakandi. The light plane force was equally divided between the two locations.

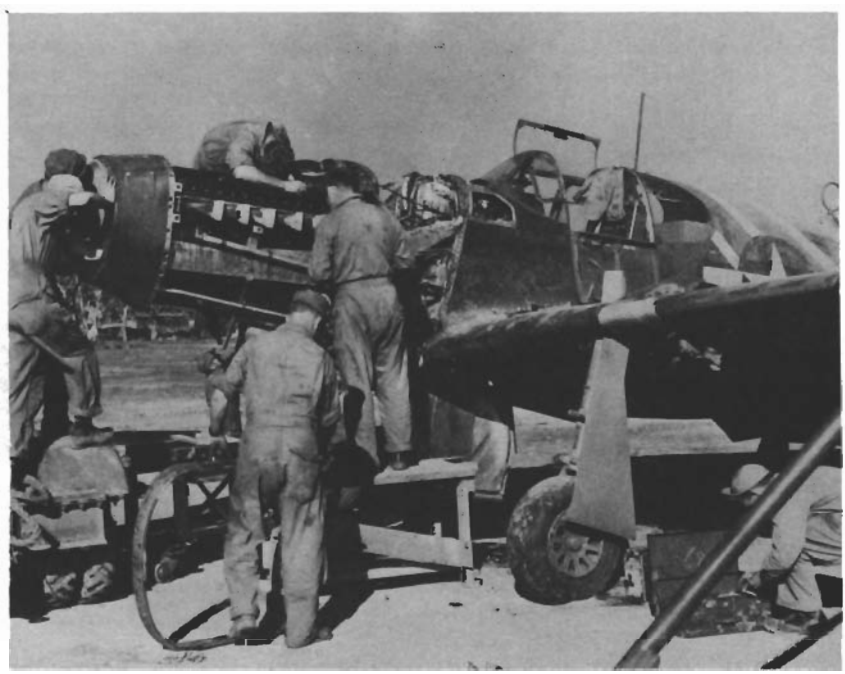
A spirit of cooperation and high morale reigned as the troops prepared for the operation. If either commander asked them to do something, then it must be important to the mission, and it would get done. Rank was not a factor, as officers and enlisted worked side-by-side, and standards of military discipline and appearance sometimes became lax. When some high-ranking visitors from other units within the theater brought this to Cochran and Alison's attention, Cochran issued a simple memo to all personnel in a casual, non-threatening manner, stating that the beards would have to go. Soon the men painted five white stripes on each Project 9 aircraft. When asked who had directed this action, Alison replied, "I really don't know; the men just did it on their own."

Like other units new to the Pacific Theater, Project 9 had difficulty deciphering the command structure. Chinese Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was the Supreme Allied Commander, China, while British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten was the Supreme Allied Commander, Burma-India. Project 9 found itself superimposed upon the theater as a wholly separate, completely autonomous unit, with only an administrative and supply relationship to the theater's Tenth Air Force command structure. Some responsibilities within the CBI Theater were delineated as China only, or Burma-India only, or Southeast Asia only (which included Burma but not China or India). In fact, the command structure was so politically saturated that unit commanders needed all the diplomacy they could muster.

At first the theater leadership attempted to bring Project 9 under its direct control by putting pressure on Admiral Mountbatten. The Supreme Allied Commander told Cochran that good arguments were being made to integrate Project 9 into the theater

**Right: Lord Mountbatten is greeted by Col. Philip Cochran, upon the commander's arrival at Hailakandi, India.**

**Below: Mechanics assemble a P-51, which bears on its fuselage the identifying stripes of the 1st Air Commando Force.**



command. So, at the meeting, Cochran presented a letter General Arnold had addressed to "Dicky," Admiral Mountbatten's nickname. Then, Cochran presented a second letter from General Marshall, which backed General Arnold's position that Project 9 should remain autonomous. The AAF Commander had also instructed Cochran to report directly to him by cable and not to use the normal military chain of command. Even though the theater commanders did not like this arrangement, they bowed to authority. And for their part, Cochran and Alison used tact and good will to develop good working relationships with support organizations as Project 9 progressed toward operational readiness.

## Final Preparations

Operational training and theater indoctrination began at the end of December and continued throughout January. Glider pilots in particular had to complete training that had been delayed by the accelerated departure date. The Skytrain pilots now practiced towing fully manned troop gliders, perfecting their ability to snatch a glider off the ground. Transporting the LRP's pack mules proved a difficult training exercise. Getting the mules, especially the more stubborn ones, to walk into the gliders without damaging them tried the men's patience. Having already lost two helicopters, the unit also began test its four remaining ones under jungle conditions.

During the transition to operational status, Project 9 was officially redesignated the 5318th Provisional Air Unit (PAU). The 5318th's P–51A pilots were experienced and combat tested, but most had not yet fought the Japanese. In the days that followed, the fighter pilots had many opportunities to range into enemy-occupied territory and look for targets. Indeed, the best way to season the flyers and orient them to the territory was to fly over Burma, where they would have many chances to challenge Japanese aircrews. Plus any targets attacked would help soften up the enemy forces before the invasion. With this in mind, Colo-

nel Cochran led five P–51s in the unit's first combat mission on February 3.

The 5318th PAU received twelve B–25Hs from the Tenth Air Force in early February. Flown by a single pilot, the H-model had forward guns, with the gunsight mounted in front of the pilot and a trigger on the control wheel. Since this was essentially the same gunsight set-up that a fighter pilot used in air-to-air gunnery, Cochran decided to man the bombers with fighter pilots as much as possible. This helped make up for the shortage of experienced bomber crews. As a result, most of the assault pilots flew both the P–51 and the B–25, depending on the type of mission. A pilot could fly a morning mission in the P–51 and an afternoon mission in the B–25. The bomber entered combat on February 12, with an attack on a warehouse. Meanwhile, the "green" bomber crews were used primarily to pilot the UC–64s of the light cargo section.

These initial combat operations were not without cost. Two P–51s and one B–25 were lost, besides some valuable equipment. Such losses were expected in such hazardous operations involving new tactics. From February 3 until March 4, the 5318th PAU crews flew fifty-four fighter/bomber missions, attacking Japanese lines of communication, and railroad bridges, while improving their air-to-ground proficiency. Meanwhile, the unit's final section arrived—the 900th Airborne Engineering Company. Equipped with air transportable tractors, road graders, and bulldozers, the engineers were prepared to build landing strips behind enemy lines.

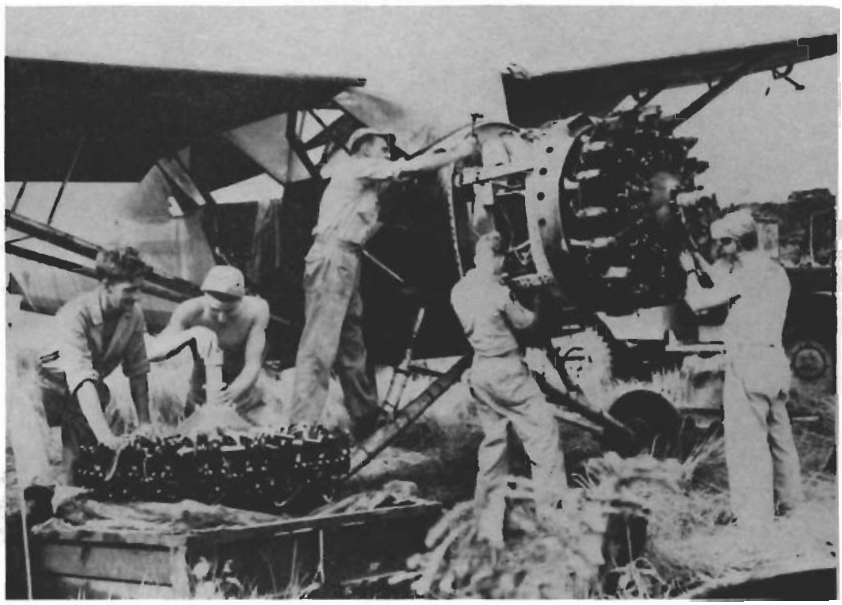
In February the light planes were divided into four detachments and deployed to forward locations in India. "A" squadron went to Ledo to support Wingate's 16th Brigade; "B" squadron went to Taro for General Stilwell; "C" left for Tamu in anticipation of the invasion of Burma; and "D" departed to support Allied troops on the Arakan front. There, along the India-Burma border, appeared an opportunity for the light plane force to demonstrate its capability. Within three weeks, about ten light planes from four squadrons evacuated about seven hundred sick and wounded British troops from the Arakan front, flying them

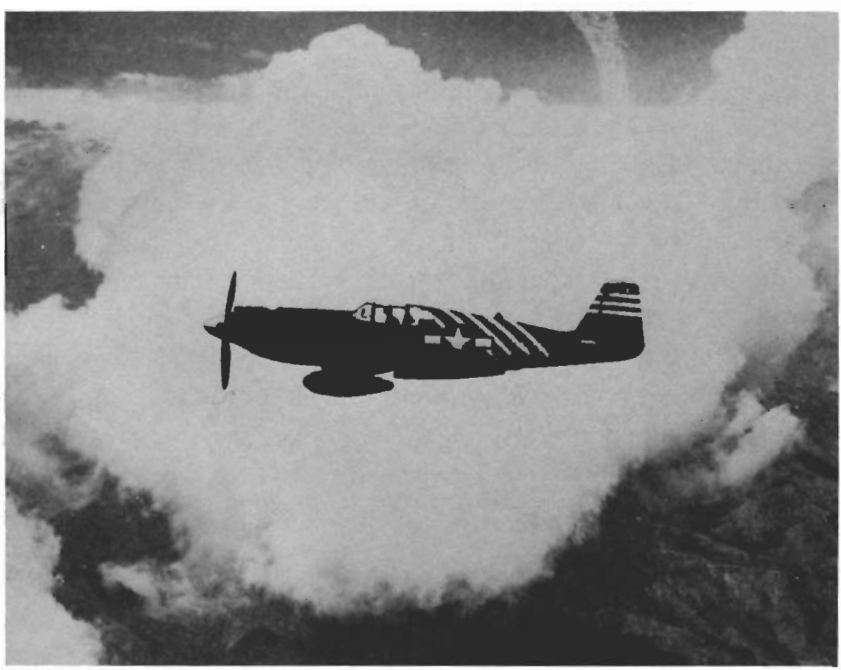
**Scenes from the CBI:**

**Above: A Douglas C-47 tow plane snatches a CG-4 glider off the ground at Asansol, India. This technique proved to be extremely delicate, even for experienced pilots.**

**Opposite, top: 1st Commando mechanics change an engine at Myitkyina, Burma.**

**Opposite, below: Colonel Cochran's P-51 Mustang, in flight over Burma.**





at tree top level to a rear airfield, where they were transferred to C–47s and evacuated to India. The operation marked one of the first significant uses of light planes in a military role.

For its part, the transport force conducted operational glider training to prepare for the type of nighttime, heavy lift glider tows that would be required during the invasion. Combat configured Chindits boarded CG–4s, to be towed by C–47s in both single and double tows. As the aircrews gained experience in towing operations, the Chindits developed confidence in this method of transportation. Despite the risks and a few accidents, the training objectives were met, and the methods proved sound. One new nighttime tactic involved a C–47 "snatching" a fully loaded glider from the ground from 20 feet altitude. The Skytrain pulled a cable, held in place by a boom, with a hook attachment at the end. This was used to snag the glider tow rope, which was prepositioned in a frame approximately 12 feet above the ground. To witness the method first-hand, General Wingate insisted on being aboard the first glider snatched off the ground.

Early 1944 brought two opportunities to put gliders into operation. First, a British patrol needed to be inserted behind Japanese lines. The glider made it to the objective with all personnel were safe. However, the aircraft was damaged, forcing the crew to walk back to India. Then, on February 29, British forces needed river crossing equipment. Two gliders carrying folding boats, outboard engines, and gasoline landed on a sand bar in the Chindwin River. A C–47 crew flew by and "snatched" the empty gliders off the sand bar, returning them to Lalaghat.

Having worked out new tactics in the theater, the 5318th PAU now faced its ultimate challenge—the air invasion of northern Burma.

## Operation THURSDAY Dawns

Even before Cochran and Alison arrived in theater, the first phases of the Allied invasion to retake Burma were already over. In October 1943, as part of a coordinated effort to take back the

Burma Road, two Chinese divisions under General Stilwell began a march against Japanese forces in northern Burma. By February, Stilwell's divisions were pushing deeper into Burma, with reinforcements from a specially trained infantry unit commanded by U.S. Army General Frank Merrill. Officially known as the 5307th Provisional Unit, the infantrymen soon became famous for their exploits and were christened "Merrill's Marauders" by the press.

A joint operational order from Admiral Mountbatten to General Wingate and Colonel Cochran directed how each commander would conduct his part of the operation. The aerial invasion would occur behind Japanese lines, in a location not occupied by enemy forces. One brigade of long range penetration forces would march in, and the remaining two brigades would be flown in by the 5318th PAU. Once on the ground, the brigades would secure and hold the landing zone against any enemy forces. Meanwhile, field engineers from the initial glider assault would build a runway for C–47 aircraft, which would fly in the remaining troops. The landing zone would be converted into a base of operations from which the Chindits would move into the jungle in pursuit of their objectives. The stronghold would be resupplied and casualties evacuated by 5318th PAU aircraft.

Although the plan appeared fairly straightforward, success would hinge on the ground and air units becoming a cohesive force. Fortunately, the British troops and the American flyers had learned to work as an effective team. The British attitude toward the Americans was best described by one of the Chindit commanders. After a glider training accident that incurred both British and American casualties, the American glider commander expressed concern that the British would not have confidence flying in the gliders again. The British commander sent a note in reply: "Please be assured that we will go with your boys any place, any time, anywhere."

American General George Stratemeyer, Commander, Eastern Air Command, and British General Slim issued a joint directive to General Wingate and Colonel Cochran on February 4. Their forces were to accomplish three objectives:

(1) Assist the advance of General Stilwell's forces to take Myitkyina by cutting the communication of the Japanese 18th Division, harassing its rear and preventing reinforcement.

(2) Create a favorable situation for Chinese forces crossing the Sobreen River into Burma.

(3) Inflict damage and confusion on the enemy in northern Burma.

The tactical plan for positioning Wingate's troops behind Japanese lines involved establishing four assembly points in uninhabited areas. Each site had to have enough flat ground to build airstrips plus access to water. The locations selected were centered on Rail Indaw: Aberdeen, 27 miles northwest; Broadway, 35 miles east-northeast; Piccadilly, 40 miles northeast; and Chowringhee, 35 miles east. The key site was Broadway, located midway between Myitkyina and Bhame. Piccadilly was 40 miles from Broadway. Two of the jungle clearings were named for famous streets in London and New York; Chowringhee was a main thoroughfare in Calcutta.

In the first wave, the 16th Brigade began walking from Ledo to Aberdeen on February 8. The 77th Brigade would be flown in, one-half going to Broadway and the other to Piccadilly. The 111th Brigade would be air landed at Chowringhee, while the 14th, 23d and 3d West African Brigades were held in reserve.

The invasion date was set: March 5, 1944. General Wingate released the operational order on February 29. C–47s of the 5318 PAU would tow forty gliders to Broadway (24-45 N 96-45 E) and another forty to Piccadilly (24-29 N 96-43 E). Eight pathfinder gliders were scheduled to depart at 1700 hours and reach the objective area, 160 miles behind Japanese lines, after dark. The main body would depart forty minutes later at one-minute intervals between tow planes. British General Michael Calvert would lead the 77th Brigade, and Brig. Gen. W. D. Lentaigne's 111th Brigade would be air landed three days later. Seven Air Force units would provide aircraft and crews—the 5318th PAU; the 27th and 315th Troop Carrier Squadrons from the Army Air

**Air Commando leaders:**

**Major Walter V. Radovich, Lt. Col. Arvid Olson, Col. John R. Alison, Lt. Col. Ralph T. Smith and Col. Philip Cochran (*left to right*) pose beside Colonel Smith's North American B-25 "Barbie III" at Hailakandi, India.**

Forces; and the 31st, 62d, 117th, and 194th Squadrons from the Royal Air Force. Operation THURSDAY would last one week, from March 5 to 12.

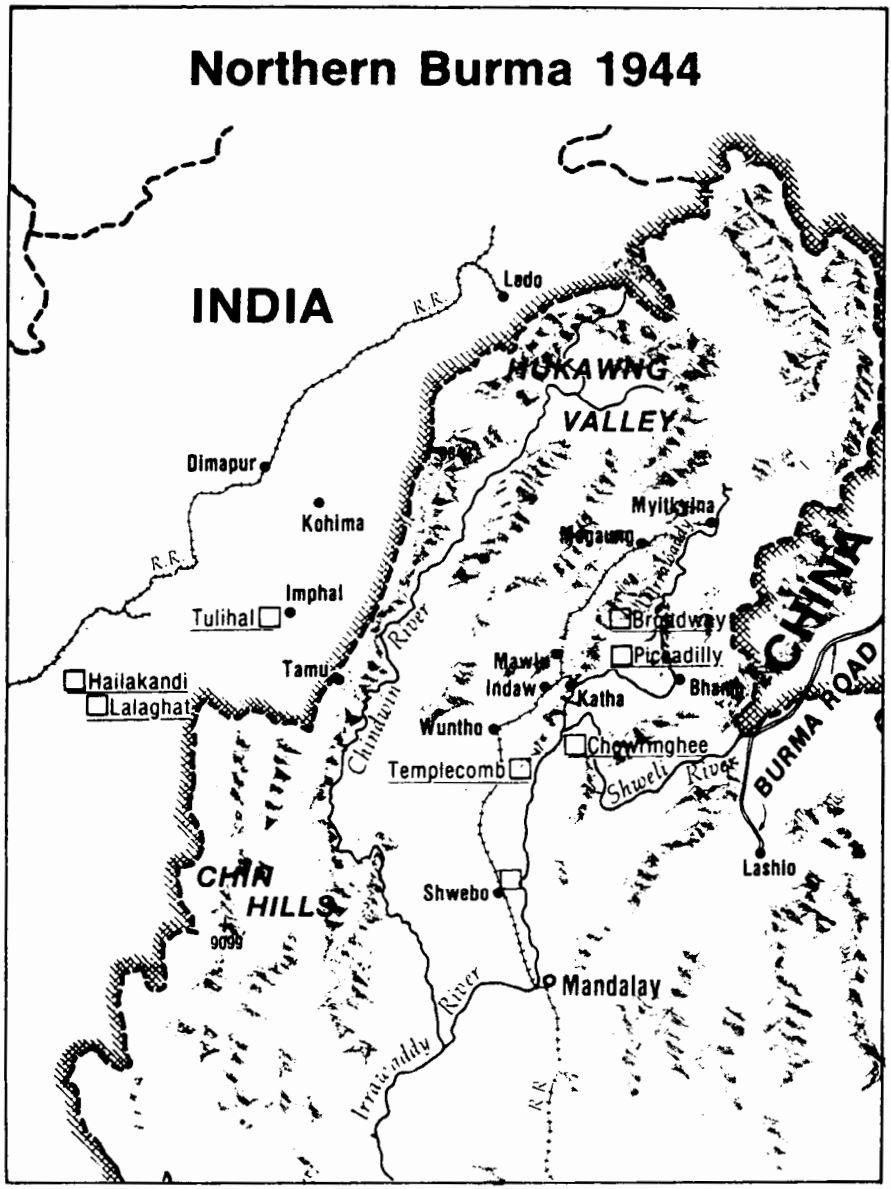
Using intelligence photographs taken by unit aircraft, General Wingate and Colonel Cochran considered potential sites for landing gliders. On the afternoon of March 5, Cochran dispatched a B–25 on a photo reconnaissance mission to check the fields at Broadway and Piccadilly one last time. Previously, pilots avoided flying over the landing sites for fear of drawing Japanese attention to them. It had been about two weeks since the fields were last photographed. Shortly before the scheduled takeoff time, a new photograph arrived and clearly showed the field at Piccadilly to be covered with large logs. The photograph of Broadway showed it was still clear. General Wingate worried that the enemy had discovered both landing zones, but had obstructed Piccadilly to force the landings to occur at Broadway, where an ambush would be waiting.

Admiral Mountbatten, General Wingate, and Colonels Cochran and Alison discussed the situation. If this were a Japanese action, what did it mean? Was there an ambush at Broadway? If the Japanese had not discovered Broadway, were they just trying to eliminate the Piccadilly as a landing site? Or had they discovered Broadway but not had the time to block it? Perhaps the logs were put there by local Burmese teak loggers. After considering every possible explanation, the leaders decided that even if the Japanese had purposely logged Piccadilly, they probably did not have an ambush waiting at Broadway, even if they had discovered it. The invasion would go ahead as planned, except all eighty gliders would now go into Broadway. Prior to the mission, Colonel Cochran told the assembled British-American force: "Nothing you've ever done, nothing you're ever going to do, counts now. Only the next few hours. Tonight you are going to find your souls."

## The Gliders Lift Off

After a seventy-minute delay to consider the alternatives, the takeoffs began. The first heavily loaded gliders, in double tow, lifted off behind C–47s at 1812 hours. The Skytrains, more commonly referred to as "Gooneybirds" climbed to 8,000 feet to clear the Chin Hills mountain range that separated India from Burma. Shortly after takeoff, it became apparent to both the transport and glider pilots that the CG–4s were severely overloaded. Colonel Cochran had authorized some overload, as he was convinced that the gliders were capable of higher than flight manual loads. The C–47s were laboring under the strain of the two heavy gliders and had to use maximum power to climb to altitude. Also, air turbulence over the mountains further compounded the flight control problems caused by the overweight gliders. The C–47s and CG–4s had their exterior lights extinguished to minimize visibility to the enemy. In the hazy sky, this made the mission even more difficult, particularly for the inexperienced glider pilots. Colonel Cochran instructed the pilots to fly the low tow position. This meant the transport would be slightly above the level of the glider and the horizon and be visible against the moonlit sky. The low tow position was a more difficult technique to fly and required more skill from the glider pilot. All these factors combined to make the operation even more hazardous.

It was especially difficult for the glider pilots to hold a steady position behind the C–47s. When a glider moved out of position the tow rope would give slack, and occasionally, with too much slack, the tow rope would become entangled with the other glider. Keeping the tow ropes tight and the gliders steady caused considerable strain on the rope and on the attachment point to the glider. Also, if the glider pilot took up the slack too quickly, the tow rope would break or pull the attachment out of the glider. Shortly after the first takeoffs, four C–47s returned without their gliders, and the pilots informed Colonel Cochran about the difficult conditions. Surmising that the gliders were probably overloaded, Cochran broke radio silence to direct pilots to




**Operation THURSDAY sites**

turn on position lights and to assume the high tow position, if possible. These steps would help the glider pilot hold position and keep the tow ropes tight. In all, seventeen gliders had broken loose from tow.

The first gliders to arrive over the landing area—one of them piloted by Colonel Alison—contained the assault team. One at a time, the gliders cut loose from their tow planes to begin the powerless descent into the darkened clearing. The pilots had to use their judgment as to where to start the final descent into Broadway. Once released, they were committed to land, no matter what happened.

Colonel Alison and the assault force landed in fairly good condition at approximately 2200 hours. The clearing at Broadway looked quite different from the aerial photos. Tall grass hid a variety of obstructions: deep ruts where natives had dragged trees; holes that had been wallowed out by animals; tree stumps; and other debris. Broadway was anything but smooth.

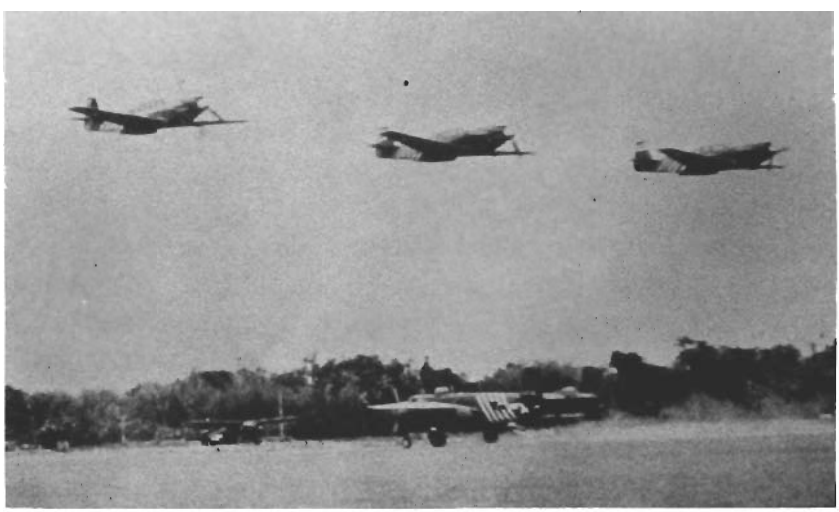
Able to secure the perimeter without enemy opposition, Alison's group set up a lighting system to assist the main glider force, due to arrive shortly. A single light posted at a calculated location would mark the spot where the gliders should cut loose from the tow planes. The landing area itself was lit with smudge pots. If the gliders detached at the correct spot, they would all land in the right place.

Unfortunately, the problems created by darkness started to compound. The heavy gliders had to be flown at a relatively high air speed during their approach to keep from stalling. Also, the light used to mark the tow rope break-off point could not be placed far enough away from the landing zone due to the dense jungle. Thus, approaches and landings became unpredictable. Some gliders missed the landing zone entirely and crashed in the jungle. Some CG–4s landing at Broadway hit the ruts, holes, stumps, and other obstructions and had their landing gear ripped off. Once on the ground, the troops tried to push the gliders out of the way of the approaching aircraft, but they could not move the them fast enough. Landing gliders began to hit those already on the ground, until there were wrecked aircraft all over Broad-

way. Colonel Alison had the lighting system moved to direct the landings to the most favorable position. Above all, without radio communication, the assault force had no way of warning pilot of the hazards which awaited.

Two radio sets were brought in the first night, but one was on a glider that landed short, and the other was damaged, though eventually repaired. Strict radio silence was observed except for two code words transmitted back to India. The code word for success was "Pork Sausage" and the one for disaster was "Soya Link" (an artificial sausage made from soybean and greatly disliked by British troops). When the radio was partially repaired, Colonel Alison was able to transmit "Soya Link" back to General Wingate and Colonel Cochran. "Soya Link" was interpreted to mean that the force was under attack, so Cochran recalled the remaining gliders en route. The recall was successful, except for one tow plane. It continued on to Broadway and released its two gliders, leading Alison to assume that the code word did not get back to the main operating base in India.

At dawn glider wreckage could be seen all over Broadway. Of the thirty-seven CG–4s that had landed, only three were in-



**Final preparations for Operation THURSDAY at an airfield in India: P-51s fly past a taxiing B-25 Mitchell.**

**Having made a hazardous night landing at Broadway (note the two collided gliders in background), the Air Commando glider force awaited daylight to begin work on the airstrip.**

tact and flyable. The rest had varying amounts of damage, but were all repairable. Amazingly, casualties were low. Twenty-four men were killed, mostly in two gliders that crashed into the jungle. Four more fatalities were attributed to landings at Broadway itself. The injured list was also mercifully short, with just over thirty requiring evacuation.

By mid-morning on March 6, there was still no Japanese opposition, so Alison and the British commanders decided to communicate openly by radio with the home base. It was then that General Wingate and Colonel Cochran realized that there had not been an attack. Although most of the gliders were wrecked, the force had been successfully inserted with relatively few casualties. Wingate's mood changed from despair to elation. Light planes were soon dispatched to return the seriously wounded to India. General Wingate's staff estimated 539 people, three mules, and 29,972 pounds of supplies had been delivered to

Broadway. Alison noted some minor discrepancies. While directing the glider landings and running from one smudge pot to another, the colonel had been offered the use of a horse smuggled in on a Waco glider. The Chindits themselves had overloaded the gliders, remembering the shortages they had experienced in the 1943 raid.

The next order of business was the construction of the landing strip so that the C–47s could bring in the rest of the long range penetration force. Unfortunately, the commander of the engineering unit had been killed, leaving an inexperienced second lieutenant in charge. When Colonel Alison asked him how long it would take to clear the wreckage and build a suitable airstrip, the young lieutenant replied, "If I have it done by this afternoon, will that be too late?" The engineers borrowed every available man to accomplish the feat. Colonel Alison advised the headquarters that the air strip would be ready to receive C–47s that night and suggested starting with a limited number of sorties. Much to Alison's surprise, some 100 sorties were flown into Broadway that second night, at the rate of about ten an hour—all this on a lighted airstrip built within one day. The remaining casualties were airlifted back to India by the returning C–47s.

The success thus far could be attributed in part to the element of surprise. Ironically, the premature release of gliders along the route from India had created an unplanned diversion. Several of these gliders came down near the Japanese headquarters in Burma, convincing the enemy that the whole operation was a British commando attack against the headquarters. Two gliders landed near the Japanese 15th and 31st Divisional Headquarters, and three gliders landed near the Regimental Headquarters. This diverted the enemy from the main landing area for over a week. Meanwhile, from one of these crash sites, a medical officer, two pilots, and fifteen Chindits walked eighty-five miles in ten days to reach Broadway.

Operation THURSDAY was programmed to continue for six days after "D" day. This would allow enough time to insert the 77th and 111th Brigades of the British LRP force into the Burmese interior. With Broadway fully operational and fortified,

the decision was made to open a second landing site, substituting for Piccadilly. Soon, a suitable field was located a few miles south of Broadway and a glider assault, much smaller and less stressful than "D" day, began. Only one glider crashed, but unfortunately it contained the bulldozer for building the C–47 landing strip. A bulldozer from Broadway was loaded aboard a glider and flown into the new site, named Chowringhee, so that the airstrip could be built without further delay.

After Chowringhee was finished (and still no sign of the Japanese), General Wingate visited both sites. He was impressed by Broadway, but expressed concern over Chowringhee's position, possibly too close to the enemy. Thus he terminated the operation there, considering Broadway capable of handling the additional activity. As it turned out, the Japanese had found the Chowringhee site and attacked it the day after it was abandoned. The enemy had yet to discover the major location to the north.

While the transport force inserted Wingate's LRP force, the assault force sought targets of opportunity. They softened enemy elements and confused the Japanese concerning Allied plans. On March 8, Cochran learned that the enemy was gathering aircraft in the Shwebo area of central Burma and apparently preparing to attack India again. Twenty-one fighters of the 5318th PAU, each armed with a single 500-pound bomb, swept over the enemy airfield at Anisakan. At first the 5318th pilots counted seventeen fighters on the ground. Later they found sixty more enemy planes, including fighters, bombers, transports, and trainers, in the process of landing or already on the ground. The Mustangs destroyed twenty-seven fighters, seven bombers, and one transport on the ground and another fighter in the air, for a total of thirty-five aircraft. Before the P–51s returned to Hailakandi, the bomber section was ordered to prepare for launch. Less than an hour after landing, pilots who had just participated in the fighter sweep, were now flying B–25Hs back to the enemy airfields. The twelve bombers destroyed another twelve aircraft on the ground with fragmentation and incendiary bombs. The attack left the enemy airfields ablaze, with buildings, gasoline trucks, and an oil storage depot on fire. In one

day, the 5318th PAU assault force destroyed forty-eight enemy aircraft. This accounted for more than forty percent of all Japanese aircraft destroyed by the Allies in the China-Burma-India Theater by March 1944.

The following table shows the numbers of men, animals, and equipment airlifted during Operation THURSDAY:

| Location | Troops | Horses | Mules | Supplies (lbs) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Broadway | 7,023 | 132 | 994 | 444,218 |
| Chowringhee | 2,029 | 43 | 289 | 64,865 |
| Total | 9,052 | 175 | 1,283 | 509,083 |

Of this total, the 5318th PAU carried 2,083 troops, 16 horses, 136 mules, and 104,681 pounds of supplies. In all, the unit launched 80 gliders—63 to Broadway and 17 to Chowringhee—with 971 troops being sent to the two strips via gliders. The 579 C–47 sorties included aircraft from both the Troop Carrier Command and RAF flights.

## Ongoing Support

After six days and nights, Operation THURSDAY officially ended as planned on March 11, 1944. In less than one week, two British LRP units had been inserted deep behind enemy lines without Japanese knowledge or interference. This marked the beginning of the Chindits' campaign to disrupt Japanese lines of communication and supply. It also signaled the start of the support role for the the 5318th PAU, particularly its efforts to sustain the Chindits against enemy forces.

On March 13, two days after the conclusion of Operation THURSDAY, Japanese fighters found Broadway and tried to dislodge the air commandos. The enemy made daily attacks, but did little damage, and casualties were low. Colonel Claude Rome and his Chindit garrison troops also repulsed a Japanese ground assault. Fortunately, the airfield was never seriously

threatened and proved secure enough to eventually include maintenance shops and a hospital.

The 5318th had prepared itself well for its evacuation role. Wherever General Wingate's forces went, the light plane force quickly picked up the wounded, even from the crudest of "airstrips" in daylight, and transported them back to India. The evacuation efforts were a total success, earning the 5318th the highest possible praise from the British troops.

Colonels Cochran and Alison had gone to great lengths to bring the first helicopters from Wright Field, Ohio, to India. They envisioned the vertical lift capability as the answer to the most difficult evacuation situations, where the terrain prevented building any airstrip, no matter how crude. Unfortunately, the helicopters did not perform as well as has been hoped. Of the six YR–4s, one was lost on the C–47 flight to India, and a second crashed on a training mission. Nevertheless, Lieutenant Carter Harman made aviation history when he flew the first helicopter combat rescue mission into Burma. A light plane evacuating three wounded men, had to make a forced landing in Japanese-controlled territory. The L–1 pilot and passengers hid in the surrounding hills. Lieutenant Harman left for Burma on April 21, but because the YR–4's engine tended to overheat, he flew by stages to a jungle landing zone called Aberdeen, arriving on the 23rd. The rescue itself was dramatic: the Japanese had found the downed aircraft and were looking for the pilot and passengers, so they had to be constantly on the move. Lieutenant Harman made contact on the 24th, but he had to bring the men out one at a time because of the YR–4's limited lift capability and its underpowered engine. Finally, Harman was able to extract the downed troops from the hills and position them on a sand bar in a nearby river, where an L–1 was waiting to fly them back to India. The helicopter pilot continued to fly rescue missions from Aberdeen until May 4, when the Japanese began bombing the strip. In a total of twenty-three combat sorties, the prototype helicopters succeeded in rescuing eighteen commandos, who otherwise would not have been saved—thereby proving the value of the rotary wing concept.

***Above*: A 1st Commando C-47 enroute to Meiktila, Burma, from Palel, India, transported reserve troops for the seventeen divisions on the ground. *Below*: British "Chindit" commandos load mules on a C-47 Skytrain.**

Keeping the ever-mobile Chindits resupplied with rations, ammunition, and other necessities required a substantial effort. The aerial transport method depended on the situation and location of the unit. Sometimes the troops could build a landing strip suitable for a light plane or even a C–47. If not, the transport would be a glider which could be left behind if necessary. Other situations called for night airdrops. A few light planes were modified to carry supply bundles under their wings, which could be released over the LRP position. The air commandos found that often the most effective way to drop non-fragile cargo close to the target was simply to push the goods out the aircraft door while the plane was on or near the ground, without actually landing. The aircrews usually determined the delivery method by coordinating with constantly moving Chindits via common radio frequency. An RAF liaison officer on the ground talked directly to the incoming pilot, using familiar terms to describe what the pilot could expect. Simple recognition signals were worked out because codes proved to be too complicated and inefficient.

In their close air support role, the air commandos employed a new form of "aerial artillery"—the first rockets used in combat. Colonels Cochran and Alison had brought into theater a new rocket under development at Wright Field, Ohio. With an explosive charge in its nose, the rocket was meant to be fitted into a tube and carried under an aircraft wing. Unfortunately, the engineers at Wright Field had not yet built the tube. So Cochran and Alison found a machine shop in town and had the rocket tubes fabricated before shipping the weapon to India. Once installed on P–51s, the rockets were used in strafing runs against enemy ground targets. This close air support was successful because of the coordination between the American pilots in the air and the British forces which directed the strikes from the ground. Soon these air attacks became so accurate that the Chindits would call in "aerial artillery" where the target was very close to friendly positions.

One of the best examples of the air commandos' support of the LRP units took place on a hill near Mawlu. Often the Chindits would cut Japanese lines of communication by blocking

roads and rail lines at vital locations. Mawlu was one such crossroads of enemy traffic. The LRP force held the location against considerable enemy opposition with the help of all the forces—assault, light plane, and transport—of the 5318th PAU. The resupply effort alone required so many airdrops that Mawlu was nicknamed "White City" for the many parachutes hanging from trees. White City soon became a major Chindit stronghold. Airstrips were built for light planes to evacuate the sick and wounded and eventually for C–47 resupply missions. Meanwhile, the aerial assault force pounded enemy positions with aerial artillery, enabling the British to hold their ground and establish a defendable perimeter.

In addition to rescue, close air support, evacuation, and resupply missions, the air commandos also provided current battlefield intelligence. Pilots photographed enemy activity and debriefed what they had observed. Together, these photographs and aerial observations formed an extensive picture of great benefit to the ground forces.

Another byproduct of the aerial traffic was the ability to transport American and British commanders to and from Broadway and other strongholds. When an aircraft brought in supplies and replacements, it often carried one or more of the commanders, who would meet with field commanders and discuss strategy for upcoming operations. Toward the end of March, the Allies suffered a tremendous loss when General Wingate was killed in an aircraft accident. He had flown to the front in a B–25H on March 23 to observe operations and confer with his brigade commanders. The next day Wingate proceeded to Broadway, where he boarded another B–25 for return to his headquarters in India. After an intermediate stop, the aircraft headed west and the bomber inexplicably ran into the side of a hill. The explosion killed everyone on board. General Slim chose Brigadier General Lentaigne as General Wingate's successor.

Also in March, on a happier occasion, the 5318th PAU became the 1st Air Commando Group. The team brought to Burma by Colonels Cochran and Alison had its official name bestowed by the man who had the vision to create it. The "provisional" na-

ture of the unit's name had made it more difficult to get supplies and support within the theater. General Arnold himself frequently referred to men of the 5318th as "air commandos," just as the British called their special forces "commandos." Also, the AAF Commander thought that an air force supporting a commando unit in the jungles of Burma should properly be called "Air Commandos"—the first and only such unit.

## Aerial Invasion: A Proven Concept

From late March until the start of the monsoon season in May, the Air Commandos continued to provide air support from airfields 150 miles behind enemy lines. For the first time, air power had served as the backbone of an invasion, allowing the Chindits to control choke points along the Japanese supply and communications lines. Though the rains and mud forced the Allies to pull back into northern Burma, the Japanese operation had been seriously impaired by the joint operations of the Chindits and the Air Commandos. General Arnold's concept of the LRP force operating well behind enemy lines with the support of dedicated air units, as envisioned by General Arnold, had proven its worth.

Several factors contributed to the initial successes. First, the commandos chose to invade behind enemy lines in a location where the Japanese had no presence at all. Also, the enemy had no knowledge of the upcoming operation. Most of Operation Thursday was conducted at night, with was a lower probability of being discovered. On the other hand, the darkness and haze on the first night did cause difficulties in making the initial assault into Broadway.

British commanders were quick to praise the support they received from the Air Commandos as well as from the American and British C–47 units in the theater. These units helped bridge the gap caused by the shortfall in airlift during the operation. The thirteen C–47s belonging to the 5318th PAU were not enough to fully support the Chindits' airlift requirements, so other Skytrain units were called in.

Under the leadership of Colonels Cochran and Alison, the 5318th PAU accumulated an impressive set of statistics by March 1944. The C–47s had inserted over 450,000 pounds of supplies, and the CG–4A Waco gliders had carried an additional 310,000 pounds. Between 1,200 and 1,500 casualties were evacuated by the light plane force. The assault force had destroyed fifty aircraft, twenty-nine trucks, forty-eight pieces of rolling stock, thirty-eight warehouses, fifty-five buildings, eight bridges, seven ammunition sites, and four locomotives. For the first time, the Allies had established air superiority over Burma. Of the 117 planes lost by the Japanese in March, the 1st Air Commando Group accounted for 42.7 percent. April 1944 was another good month. The Japanese lost 107 aircraft in the CBI Theater, 32.7 percent credited to the 1st Air Commandos.

Also contributing to the Air Commandos' success were their initiative, their innovative spirit, and their emphasis on performance, not paperwork. how little bureaucracy or any form of unnecessary paperwork was encountered. From its inception, the unit had been guided by General Arnold's insistence on brief reports. Neither Colonel Cochran nor Alison saw any need for much record keeping or bureaucracy and thus carried a small administrative staff. This management style produced an organization where people tended to communicate directly to get the job done.

As the 1st Air Commando Group pulled out of Burma, those who had served their second combat tour were rotated home for reassignment. On March 28 General Arnold summoned Colonel Alison back to the United States to help establish more Air Commando units. Alison departed on April 1 for Washington D.C., by way of England, where he briefed General Dwight D. Eisenhower's European Theater staff on Operation Thursday. Meanwhile, the rest of the Air Commandos regrouped in India and continued to support the troops still fighting in Burma.

The 16th Brigade returned to India in early May after showing signs of strain from jungle warfare. General Slim, who had officially accepted operational control of the 3d Indian Division on May 17, 1944, moved the 111th, 14th, and 3d West African

Brigades north toward Mogaung. After showering Broadway, Aberdeen, and White City with land mines, the Chindits evacuated their strongholds and began moving north. The Air Commandos saw their last action on May 19, when their P–51 pilots shot down two Japanese fighters and a bomber. Meanwhile, the monsoon rains turned the bases at Hailakandi and Lalayhat into quagmires. Resigned that he had done all he could, Colonel Cochran ordered the Air Commandos back to Asansol, an abandoned British airfield in central India. The last UC–64 took off from Hailakandi's grass strip on May 23. From Asansol, the original cadre of Air Commandos began to go their separate ways. Turning over the 1st ACG to Colonel Clinton Gaty, Cochran soon departed for Washington D.C., and eventually joined Eisenhower's European staff.

## Lessons Learned

Thanks to General Arnold's forward thinking, Cochran and Alison's leadership, the hard work of the Air Commandos, many lessons were learned during this experiment in air power. In the initial assaults, weight proved critical to successful glider operations. The extra equipment accompanying each man needed to be carefully controlled. The experience at Broadway clearly demonstrated that attempting to double tow with heavily loaded gliders, at night without lights, would tax the pilots. Add to this the problem of air turbulence and operations became almost impossible. Given enough time, a full scale trial glider operation would have been valuable prior to attempting an actual operation. Futher, had better intelligence shown that glider assault would be unopposed, the initial landings could have been conducted in daylight, and many of the problems would have been avoided.

Bringing the rotary wing prototype to the jungles of Burma did provide valuable information and further the development of the modern helicopter. Yet the prototype's limitations warned of the dangers of taking new technology into the field too soon.

The dilemma involved weighing the advantages to be gained against the risk of unproven technology.

Also critical to operational success were the interrelationships and the political environment within the theater of operations. The autonomy that General Arnold granted to the Air Commandos was accepted by the theater AAF commanders, including General Stratemeyer, once they understood the mission. General Stilwell was the one American commander who always opposed this arrangement, however, he was powerless to redirect Operation Thursday. On the British side, theater commanders soon recognized that General Wingate was in great favor with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Admiral Mountbatten. Had General Wingate and Colonel Cochran lacked high-level support, Operation Thursday probably would never have occurred. Or the mission might have failed if its aircraft had been absorbed into other organizations.

Perhaps the overriding lesson of Operation Thursday is the need for flexibility. Cochran's men never knew where, when, or what they would be called upon to do. Yet they responded changing needs and situations with a "can do" attitude. Flexibility became an Air Commando trademark.

## A New Dimension for Air Power

In creating the Air Commandos, General Arnold recognized a rare opportunity to push American air power into a new dimension. Almost everything the Air Commandos did was an important "First":

FIRST air unit designed to support a ground unit

FIRST composite air unit

FIRST air unit employed with total autonomy

FIRST aerial invasion into enemy territory

FIRST nighttime heavy glider assault landing

FIRST night combat glider recovery

FIRST glider airlift of large animals

FIRST major employment of light airplanes in combat

FIRST air unit to employ helicopters

FIRST rescue by combat helicopter

FIRST firing of rockets from aircraft in combat.

For a three-month operation over the jungle, the unit's achievements are still impressive. The P–51s flew 1,482 combat sorties in support of the Chindits, while the B–25s flew 422 combat sorties. Yet, air losses totalled only five P–51s and one B–25. The assault force was responsible for the destruction of approximately 20 percent of all Japanese fighters and bombers in Burma. The transport force experienced no air losses while delivering some 2.5 million pounds of cargo primarily at night into crude airstrips. The only C–47 loss was due to a night ground collision with a water buffalo during landing on the Broadway strip. The gliders had an 85 percent loss rate, mostly during the first night at Broadway. Flying about 7,500 combat sorties, the light planes evacuated 2,200 personnel. About forty L–1s and L–5s (and five pilots) were lost due to the rugged conditions, but none were downed by enemy fire.

America's first Air Commandos demonstrated that air power could support unconventional warfare. Operation THURSDAY would have direct implication for future operations requiring the insertion of a combat force deep into enemy territory, to be supported by air and moved to other locations. With General Arnold's foresight and Cochran and Alison's exceptional leadership, American air power proved that it could be ready and willing to meet any challenge, any place, any time, anywhere.

☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1995 — 386-670/32075

During the 1943–44 dry season, the 1st Air Commando Group made a significant contribution to stopping the Japanese offensive in the China-Burma-India Theater. After the war, Japan's defeated Imperial Army generals noted with dismay:

> The penetration of the airborne force into northern Burma caused the failure of the Army plan to complete the Imphal Operation . . . the airborne raiding force . . . eventually became one of the reasons for the total abandonment of northern Burma.