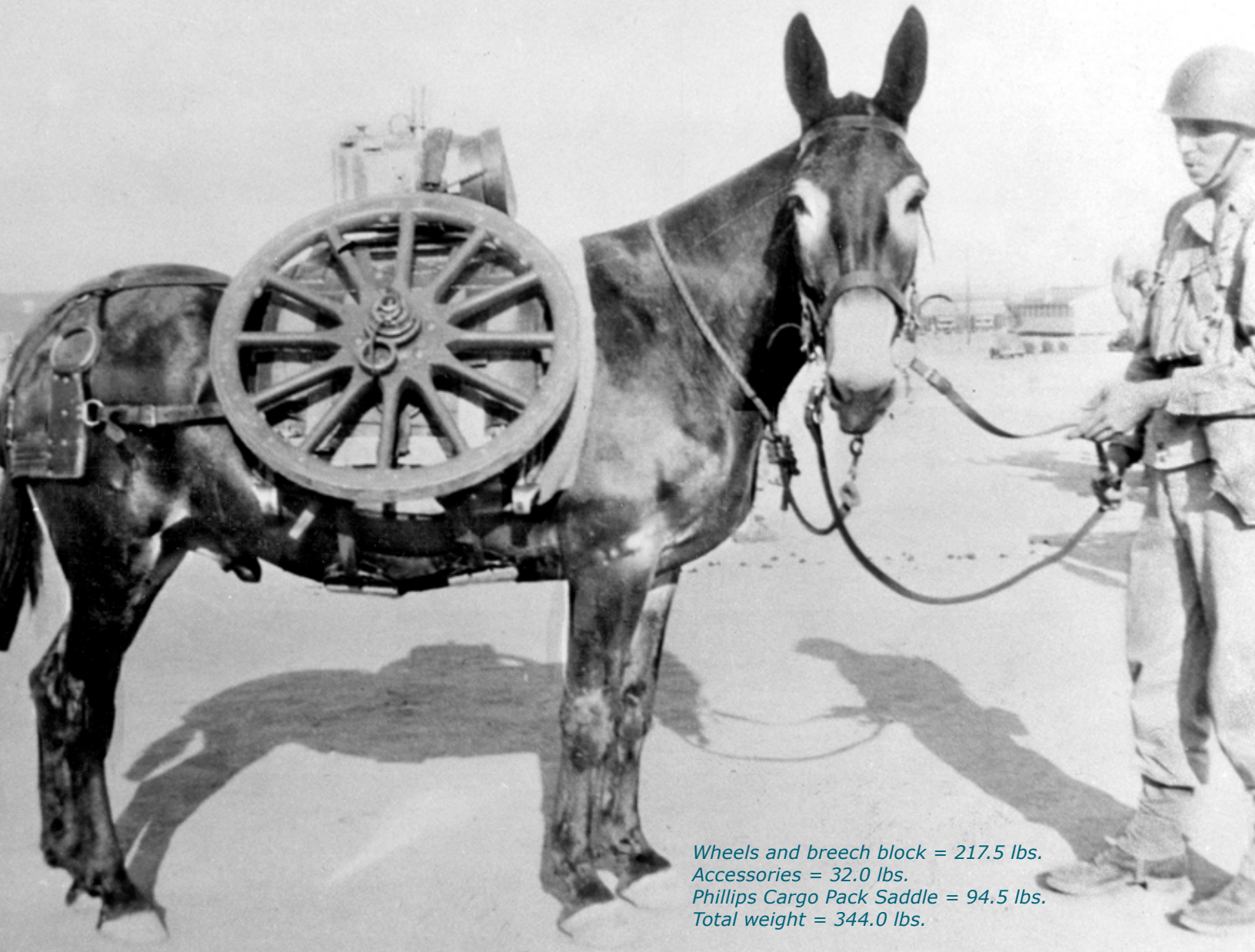


*Howitzer tube with muzzle and breech covers,
lifting bar = 229.0 lbs.
Total weight = 339.5 lbs.*

Of Mules

The 612th and 613th Battalions (Pack)

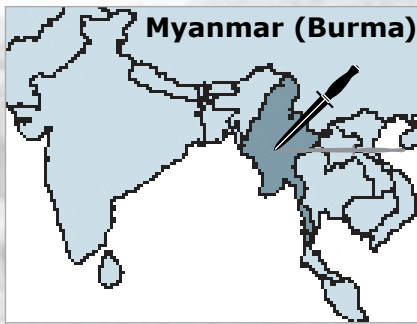
by Cherilyn A. Walley



*Wheels and breech block = 217.5 lbs.
Accessories = 32.0 lbs.
Phillips Cargo Pack Saddle = 94.5 lbs.
Total weight = 344.0 lbs.*

At Muskogee, OK: "One morning, several days after our arrival, we were marched down to a railroad siding, located near the camp entrance. A group of sergeants and a few officers were there to greet us. (If you could call it a greeting.) They were standing by a long line of cattle cars parked on the rail siding. Coming from inside these cars was a lot of banging and strange, unfamiliar sounds. We were all standing there looking at one another, wondering, "what is going on?" Needless to say, we soon found out. Then men who had arrived before us were handing each of us a piece of rope, about six feet long. This rope had a snap fastener attached to one end of it. It didn't take us very long to become familiar with this item, called a halter shank."—Ken Laabs (B/612)

and Men: Field Artillery in Burma



Bottom sleigh with recoil mechanism, one lifting bar, two oil cans, one oil carrier = 224.6 lbs.
Total weight = 330.7 lbs.

WHEN MARS Task Force was formed in November 1944 to combat the Japanese in Burma, it comprised not only infantry and quartermaster troops, but also the 612th and 613th Field Artillery Battalions (Pack). It had been noted that the Merrill's Marauders could have used considerably more firepower during their campaign, so when the 5332nd Brigade (Provisional) formed, it took along 75mm Pack Howitzers and the men and mules needed to transport and fire them.

In organizing pack artillery units, the Army carefully selected both men and mules for height (minimums 5'10" and 14¾ hands respectively) and sturdiness (not dead and one thousand pounds respectively). By the time the 612th and 613th arrived in Burma, all members had been thoroughly trained—the men in mule packing and the mules in . . . walking. The men were intimately familiar with the strengths and foibles of their four-legged companions, and the mules had developed a reasonable tolerance for the men—especially around feeding time.

By the end of the task force's trek, men and mules had walked hundreds of miles, crossing streams and rivers (one particular stream almost fifty times in one day), climbing and descending mountains, hacking through jungle undergrowth, and slogging through rice paddies. They had routed the Japanese and reopened the supply line to China. Though often forgotten in the trek's recounting, the mountain artillery boys, their 75mm Pack Howitzers, and their trusty mules were key to the entire campaign's success. Here are a few glimpses of what it was like to be in the pack artillery in Burma.



Rear trail, trail hand spike, axle, sight = 248.0 lbs.
Total weight = 341.9 lbs.



Cradle, top sleigh, one lifting bar = 228.5 lbs.
Total weight = 334.6 lbs.



The 75mm Pack Howitzer was designed to be disassembled and packed on seven mules. Phillips cargo pack saddles were customized to carry each gun component, with braces and straps designed for maximum stability and minimum maintenance. Weight and size restrictions required iron wheels to be used instead of the rubber tires used in stateside training.



Front trail and one lifting bar = 243.0 lbs.
Total weight = 341.9 lbs.

Cannoneers could assemble or disassemble the gun in five minutes, mule to firing position. "To load this small Howitzer, the mules who carried a piece of the gun were placed in a circle around the gun. There were seven mules for the job. As the mule handler received his portion of the gun he would move clear, and when the wheels were placed on the last mule, the gun was ready to be moved to its next firing position."—Ken Laabs (B/612)



Pioneer kit: tools, picket line, ropes = 144.5 lbs.
Total weight = 239.0 lbs.

"I was just a muleskinner. I led a mule most of the time. I was responsible for it. Always had to be sure the load on the mule was right. In the Army, if you had an animal, and you let that animal get a big bloody mass, they could just about court martial you. So we had to be careful. When we would come in from a march, we'd take the mules first and water them. We'd feed them. We'd get them taken care of, and then we'd take care of ourselves." —Gilbert McNeill (C/613)

"Some days a march would go on for fifteen to twenty-five miles, even after dark if the commander thought it was necessary. . . each battery had to set up their picket lines. At times the bamboo and other jungle undergrowth was very thick; we had to cut this out of our way with out machetes in order to make room for the mules and ourselves, so that we were off the trail." —Ken Laabs (B/612)

"Picture a dirt trail soaked with days of tropical downpour over which hundreds of men and mules traveled one behind the other and then down and down over a rather steep incline. It was pure mud. Men had to try to keep the mule from going too fast to prevent mules with their heavy loads from going tail over head down the slimy trail." —Alton Knutson (B/613)

"As we were going up hills, we would hold the tails of the mules ahead of us and get pulled up. The sergeants would always come by and say 'let go of those tails.' 'Yes, Sergeant.' We'd let go, and as soon as he was by, we'd pick them up again." —Bob Illson (B/612)

"En route to present location, [the] battalion encountered on many occasions almost impassable terrain. Many times paths had to be constructed so as to allow the traffic of animals. Animals and loads were lost. Gun loads that had been so lost had to be retrieved under very difficult circumstances, and much time was spent doing so. The battalion marched long into the night and were finally forced to rest in place to await daybreak, since the repairs of such impediments were impossible in darkness. The battalion rested from 0430 to 0615, then continued on to present location." —16–17 January 1945, 612th FA Battalion Daily Journal



"Our tube mule fell over the side of the mountain. So [the] Sergeant came by and said 'Colvin, you take four men and go down and see what's happened, and bring that tube back up.' It was a tube mule, and we had to have the tube anyway. So I picked out three or four men and we went down there. And the mule was still laying down. We took the tube off the mule and left the saddle on him, and he got up. So I told one guy to 'take that mule back up on the trail.' So he took off. We had the two lifting bars, and we put one at each end. There were four of us, and we started back up the mountain with that tube. Well, we were within about a hundred yards of the trail when we just couldn't go any further. So we hollered up there where they had ropes. They threw the ropes down, we hooked them on the tube, and they would pull while we would push. So we finally got back up on the trail, got the tube back on the mule, and started off." —Randall Colvin (C/612)

Gun crews became close on the march through Burma. Each man knew his job and performed it quickly and professionally. Gun crew from C Battery, 613th Field Artillery Battalion (Pack), Burma, 1945 (at right): Edgar Bayless, Carl Dolwise, Emery Pustejovsky, Robert Molina, Carl Harper, Leon Polley, Georgae Haefele, Harry Scheer, Edward Jenulevies/ Jenelvicz, Mike Kardrac, Alphonse Stefanovich.



"Day after day the trail became more difficult. When we were not wet with sweat, we would be wet from rain. . . . Many a G.I. ended the day coming into the encampment at night hanging onto the tail of the mule ahead of him." —Alton Knutson (B/613)



"A mule could go with that load anywhere that you could go without getting on your knees." —R.V. Woods (B/613)

Sources

The information, photos, and quotations for this essay came from the following sources. Many thanks to the men (and mules) of the Mountain Artillery Association, especially those named below.

1. Ken E. Laabs, "MARS Task Force, 612th Field Artillery Battalion (Pk)," unpublished manuscript, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
2. Alton Knutson, "He Took My Hand: Memories of a Minnesota Farm Boy," unpublished manuscript, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
3. 612th FA Battalion Daily Journal, copy in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
4. Interviews with Randall Colvin, Bob Illson, Gilbert McNeill, and R.V. Woods, conducted by Dr. Cheryl A. Walley, copies in USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
5. Photos provided by Bob Mills, Randall Colvin, R.V. Woods, and the National Archives.