

The End Run of Galahad: The Battle of Myitkyina

by Kenneth Finlayson



Men of the 5307th move through the jungle on their march into Burma.

A critical component of the Allied plan in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater focused on the taking of the Burmese town of Myitkyina (Mitch-in-a), whose airfield was considered vital to the continued supply of the Chinese forces supporting the Allied fight against the Japanese. The seizure of Myitkyina would greatly shorten the aerial supply route and free up the use of the Ledo Road, then under construction. With the clearing of the Mogaung Valley in the spring of 1944, General Joseph (“Vinegar Joe”) Stilwell had accomplished half of his campaign plan. The other half was the seizure of Myitkyina. To accomplish this part of the campaign, Stilwell directed that Brigadier General Frank Merrill use his 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) named Galahad, to spearhead the attack across the rugged Kumon Range. Stilwell called his plan End Run, and it resulted in the end of Galahad as an effective fighting force.¹

Galahad, commonly referred to as Merrill’s Marauders, was the United States Army’s first long-range penetration unit in the CBI. First entering combat on 24 February 1944, the original strength of the unit was 2750 men. By April, after virtually continuous combat operations in the brutal jungle conditions of Burma, the three battalions of Galahad were down to 1400 men when the approach march on Myitkyina began on the 28th. By the time Myitkyina fell on 3 August, barely 200 of the original Galahad force remained combat effective, the unit having evaporated in the face of combat losses and disease. The battle of Myitkyina marked the end of the Marauders as the unit disbanded on 10 August 1944.²

Prior to embarking on the movement to Myitkyina, the unit was recovering following the bitter battle around Nphum Ga. The 2nd Battalion in particular suffered heavy casualties when surrounded and isolated for thirteen days—it held on in the face of determined Japanese assaults until relieved. The Galahad force lost fifty-two killed and three hundred-two wounded as well as having three hundred seventy-seven evacuated with

various diseases. For the men of Galahad, the fresh food and new clothes they received after the battle could not overcome the fact that the unit was rapidly deteriorating under the strain of near constant combat and illnesses. Malaria, dysentery, mite typhus and the steady erosion of the men's stamina caused by non-stop marching and fighting on inadequate, airdropped rations drained the force. By the end of April, Galahad was rapidly approaching combat ineffectiveness.³

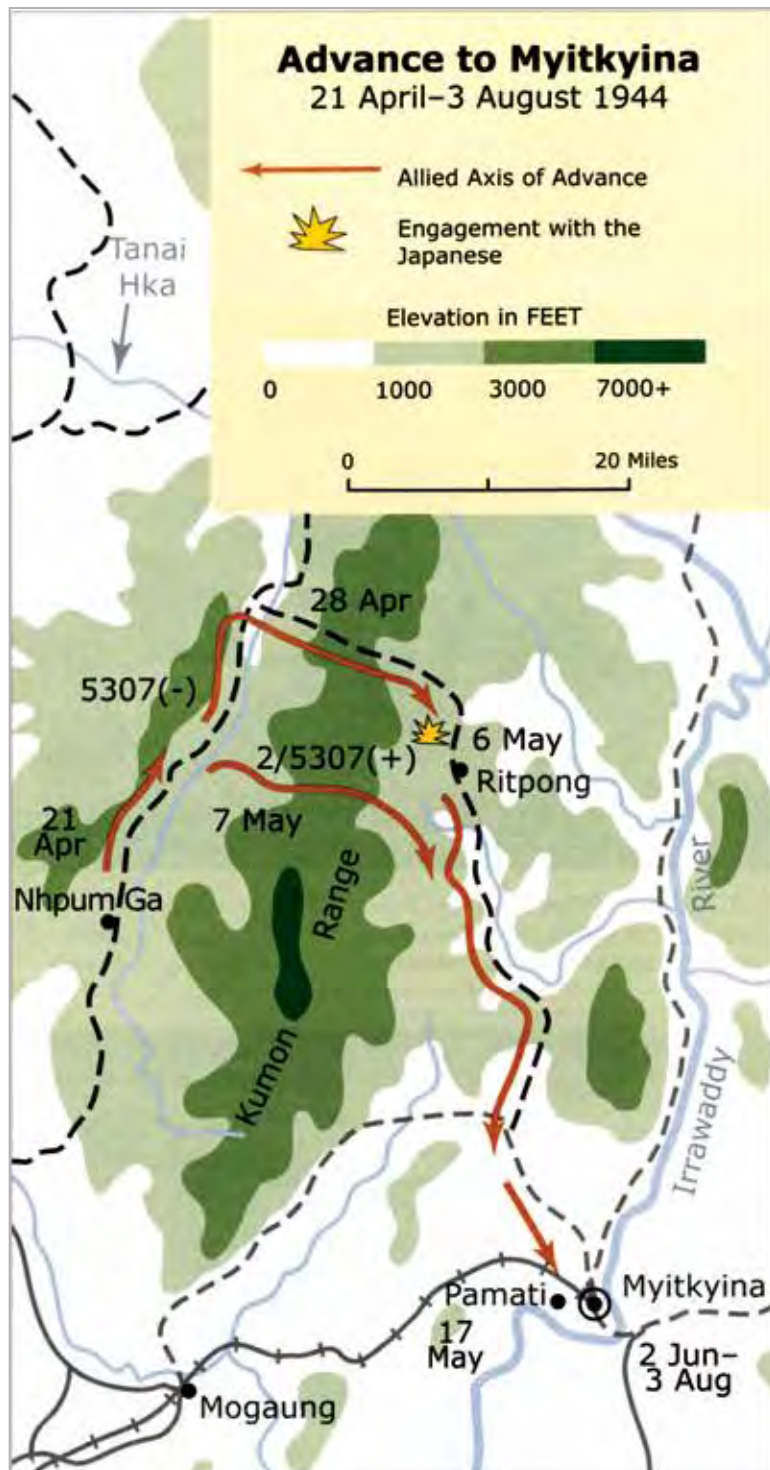
Despite this, Stilwell was forced to push Galahad into the forefront as the only American unit available to lead the attack on Myitkyina. Under considerable pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to seize Myitkyina before the spring monsoon season, Stilwell could not leave the task to his Chinese regiments alone. He recognized the poor condition of Galahad, but promised Merrill that the unit would be evacuated "if everything worked out as expected."⁴

With the thought of relief to sustain them, the Galahad force moved out on the 65-mile march over the crest of the 7,000-foot Kumon Mountains. Merrill divided his forces into three combat teams. H Force under Colonel Charles N. Hunter consisted of the 1st Battalion of Galahad, the 150th Regiment, 50th Chinese Division, the 3rd Company of the Animal Transport Regiment and a battery of the 22nd Division artillery. Colonel Henry L. Kinnison led K Force with the 3rd Battalion of Galahad and the 88th Regiment of the 30th Chinese Division. The M Force under Lieutenant Colonel George A. McGee, Jr consisted of the 2nd Battalion of Galahad and 300 Kachin tribesmen trained by the OSS Detachment 101 under Colonel Ray Peers.⁵

The unit moved out on 28 April with K Force leading, followed two days later by the H Force. H and K Forces crossed the Kumon via the 6100-foot Naura Hyet Pass, then moved south to the village of Ritpong where the plan called for the columns to diverge and move on Myitkyina by separate routes. M Force moved on a more southerly axis screening the main force as it moved south toward the objective.⁶

The K Force march over the pass was grueling with twenty of the heavily laden mules slipping and falling off the steep, narrow trail. Approaching Ritpong, Kinnison surrounded the village and the Chinese regiment successfully attacked and overran the Japanese defenses. The village fell on the 9th of April. During this time, H force passed through and headed for Myitkyina. The M Force, hacking its way through dense jungle, repulsed one set of Japanese skirmishers along its route. Despite the loss of half of their mules, M force kept up the pace and stayed within two days march of H and K forces. When a strong Japanese force near the village of Tingkrakawng held up the K Force, Merrill directed H Force to by-pass the fighting and for K Force to break contract and follow. It was during this time that Colonel Kinnison contracted the deadly mite typhus. He was evacuated, but died as a result of the disease.⁷

The H Force continued to push south and soon reached



The advance of the 5307th was along a two-pronged route that crossed the spine of the Kumon Range and then paralleled the Irrawaddy River south to Myitkyina.

the outskirts of Myitkyina. On 17 May, Colonel Hunter boldly attacked the airfield located on the northwest side of the town. The Japanese were caught by surprise as the 150th Regiment rushed across the airfield while the Galahad personnel seized the nearby ferry terminal at Pamati. Soon the airfield was under Allied control and the roughly 700 Japanese were bottled up in the town. With the airfield secured, the Galahad force looked forward to their promised evacuation, but unfortunately, it was not to be.

Stilwell determined, for strategic reasons, that he

could not pull Galahad out of the line when the airfield fell. The Chinese regiments had sustained heavy casualties in the fighting with few evacuations for illness and needed the presence of American troops to sustain the coalition. Galahad was the only available American



LTG Joseph Stilwell and BG Frank Merrill prior to the assault on Myitkyina. Stilwell was forced to employ the 5307th and in doing so finished the Marauders as a viable force.



Kachins trained and led by COL Ray Peers OSS Detachment 101 acted as scouts and guides for the move on Myitkyina.

unit in the theater. The strength of the Japanese force in the town was growing daily as forces streamed into Myitkyina through the porous Allied lines, further reinforcing Stilwell's decision to keep Galahad in the fight. The loss of Galahad would have sundered the Allied coalition and led to the loss of the critical airfield.

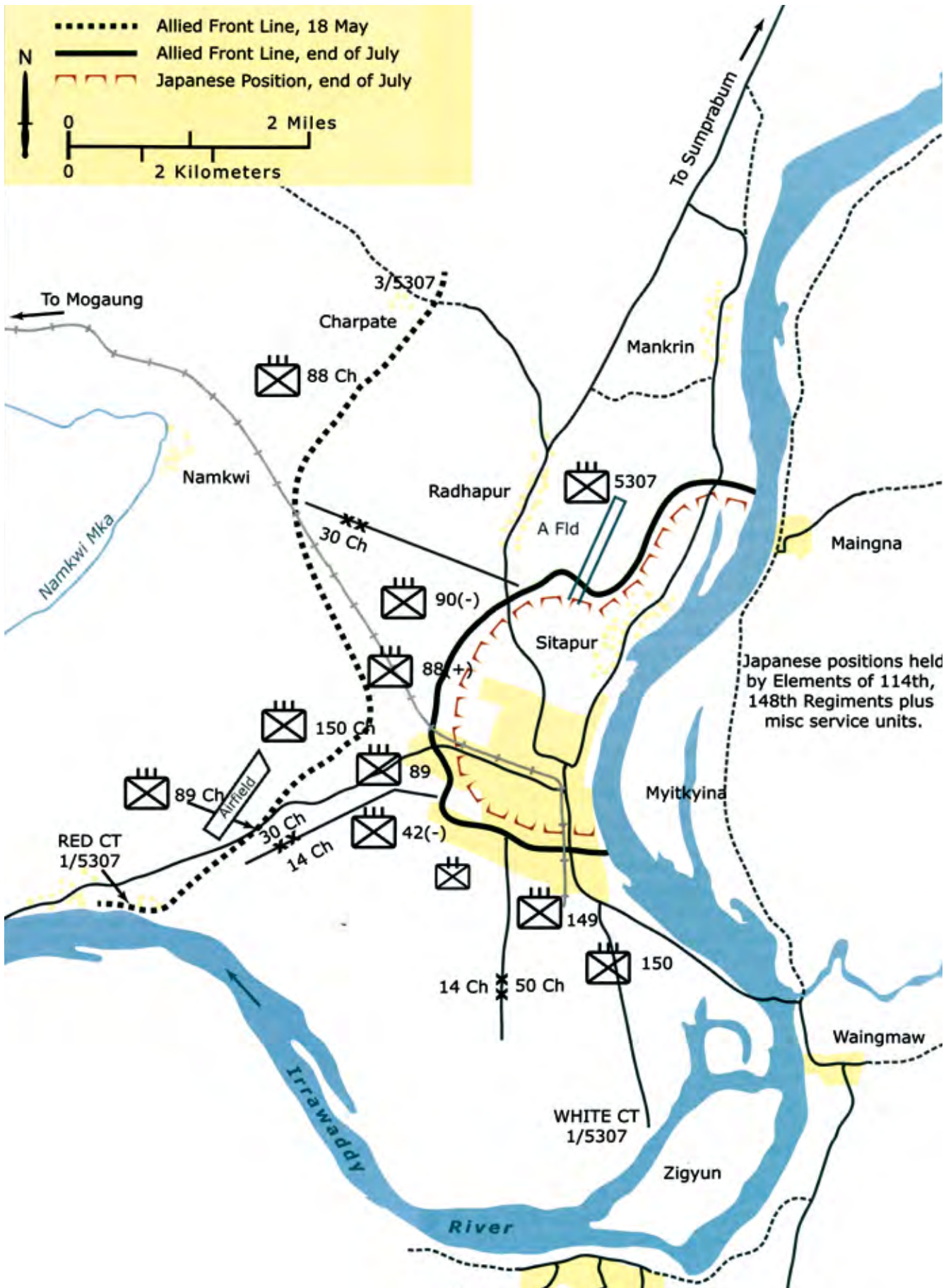
The battle for the town became a grinding siege with both sides suffering heavily from the constant fighting along the perimeter and the ever-increasing toll of medical problems. By late May, the Second Battalion was down to 12 effectives with the Third battalion little better off. Only the First battalion retained any real strength, about 200 men. Two engineer battalions were pulled off of their duties constructing the Ledo Road and flown in to serve as infantrymen. In early June, 2,500 replacements, the scorings of the units in the rear area in India and returnees from prior Galahad evacuees were flown in to rebuild the force. The "old Galahad" hands were grouped together into the First Battalion and the "new Galahad" arrivals were used to form two new Second and Third Battalions. Throughout the summer the battle to take the town raged on.

The examples of heroism in the fight to take Myitkyina were many. Private Howard T. Smith, his platoon stalled in front of a Japanese bunker and his platoon leader dead, single-handedly assaulted the position and silenced it with grenades. Tech Sergeant Richard E. Roe of the New Galahad force crawled forward and grenaded a Japanese machine gun raking his unit, at the cost of his own life. Private Willard J.D. Lilly and Master Sergeant Charles Ward beat back a Japanese attack with machine gun and rifle fire and saved a platoon from an ambush. Sergeant Fred Coleman of the 236th Engineers threw himself on a Japanese grenade to save two of his comrades. He and the others mentioned received the Distinguished Service Cross or Silver Star for their heroic actions.⁸

Ultimately, the sustained Allied pressure and the deteriorating condition of the Japanese forces won the day. Incrementally, the Americans and Chinese punched into the Japanese perimeter and by the end of July, the siege was nearly at an end. General Mizukami, commanding the Japanese troops committed suicide on 1 August and on the night of 2 August, the Japanese began to float their wounded on rafts down the Irrawaddy River. Under the cover of darkness, the Japanese began to slip out of town. An Allied push on 3 August secured Myitkyina by afternoon with 187 Japanese taken prisoner.⁹

The end of the battle eliminated Galahad as a viable force. The men brought in to fill the ranks became the 475th Infantry Regiment of the newly formed Mars Task Force. The "Old Galahad" hands were virtually gone. Samuel V. Wilson, the reconnaissance platoon leader for First Battalion, noted that on 10 August "there were about 100 combat effectives left in the field, and 99 of them were not very effective." When Wilson himself was finally evacuated, he had a wound in his right leg, malaria, amoebic dysentery and typhus. In the hospital, "there were six in the typhus ward with me when I came in. I'm the only one who survived and the rest just had clean cases of typhus."¹⁰

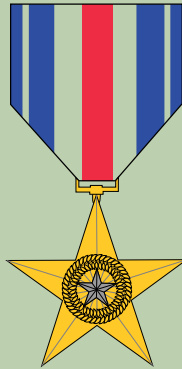
The seizure of the airfield at Myitkyina was the final battle for Galahad. The payoff came with the Allies ability to move supplies from India into China, which rose steadily to a peak of 25,454 tons in July 1944. The capture



Myitkyina was the critical transportation center at the southern end of the Marauder's area of operations. The capture of Myitkyina would greatly simplify the supply route from India into China.

Master Sergeant Charles Ward: Silver Star at Myitkyina

COMBAT in the jungles of Burma pitted the Allied forces under Lord Louis Mountbatten against the veteran Japanese soldiers of Lieutenant General Masaki Honda's 33rd Army. In vicious no-holds-barred fighting no quarter was asked nor given. Some of the most ferocious fighting occurred between 18 May and 3 August 1944, during the siege of the town of Myitkyina. It was for actions in this battle that Master Sergeant (MSG) Charles Ward was awarded the Silver Star.



MSG Charles Ward was a heavy weapons platoon sergeant in the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional), the Galahad Task Force. Called Merrill's Marauders by the American newspapers after the unit's commander Brigadier General Frank D. Merrill, the 5307th was a long-range penetration column modeled after the British "Chindits" led by Orde Wingate. Having been in virtually continuous combat operations since February 1944, by the time the 5307th reached Myitkyina in May 1944, the unit was on its literal last legs. Casualties and disease had reduced the force to 1,400 effectives from the original 2,997, with nearly every man suffering some tropical disease.¹² Soon after reaching Myitkyina, during the week of 13 June, MSG Ward earned his Silver Star.

Moving to place his weapons platoon in a position to support E Company, 2nd Battalion, Ward spotted a unit of Japanese soldiers moving into position to ambush the Americans. With his section sergeant, Willard J. D. Lilly, Ward rushed forward with a .30 caliber machine gun to engage the enemy. At that moment, an enemy machine gun opened fire on them and Lilly and Ward had to deploy their gun immediately, with no chance to dig in. As they returned fire, a horde of Japanese rushed their position in a "Banzai" charge. Ward fired at them with his rifle as Lilly opened up with the machine gun. The two men beat back the onrushing Japanese and continued to fire into the



retreating enemy. Over two hundred Japanese fell in front of their position. As MSG Ward said, "We set a whole lot of suns that day."¹³ As the fire slackened, a Japanese sniper hit Ward in the helmet and knocked him out. When he awoke, he walked back to the aid station. He was in the line the next day. Both Ward and Lilly were decorated for their heroic actions, by General Stilwell personally pinning Ward's Silver Star on his uniform. Ward's action is a microcosm of the bitter fighting that characterized the siege of Myitkyina.

of Myitkyina became the springboard for the Allied drive into Burma and the end of the isolation of China. For the men of Galahad, the trials of their brief, and bitter campaign reached the limits of human endurance. As Lieutenant General (retired) Sam Wilson expressed it: "The Marauders became very much a chip-on-their-shoulder outfit."¹¹ ♣

Kenneth Finlayson has been the USAJFKSWCS Command Historian since 2000. He earned his PhD from the University of Maine, and is a retired Army officer. Current research interests include Army special operations during the Korean War, special operations aviation, and World War II special operations units.

Endnotes

- 1 Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems: The United States Army in World War II, China-Burma-India Theater*, (Washington D.C., Center of Military History, 1987), 223.
- 2 Gary J. Bjorge, *Merrill's Marauders: Combined Operations in Northern Burma in 1944*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS, Combat Studies Institute, 1966), 3.
- 3 Bjorge, *Merrill's Marauders*, 31.
- 4 Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 223.
- 5 Lieutenant General Samuel V. Wilson, interview by Dr. John Partin, 11 July 1988, MacDill Air Force Base, FL, transcript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 224.
- 7 Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 226.
- 8 Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 247.
- 9 Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 253.
- 10 Lieutenant General Samuel V. Wilson, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe and Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 1 January 2002, Fort Bragg, NC, tape and transcript, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 11 Wilson interview, 19 January 2002.
- 12 Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *The United States Army in World War II: China-Burma-India Theater: Stilwell's Command Problems* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1987), 245.
- 13 Charles Ward, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, Fort Bragg, NC, 4 February 2004, tape recording, USASOC History Office Files, Fort Bragg, NC.