



# From Ledo to Leeches: The 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional)

by Cherilyn A. Walley

**T**HE story of the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional)—Galahad, or Merrill’s Marauders—is well known. Patterned after Major General Orde C. Wingate’s Chindits, Lieutenant General Joseph “Vinegar Joe” D. Stilwell’s American long-range penetration unit made one of the deepest disembodied incursions into enemy territory in U.S. military history. The Marauders—so dubbed by a newspaper reporter who named the increasingly ragtag group after their commander, Brigadier General Frank Merrill—trudged over eight hundred miles through the jungles of Burma in an effort to divert the Japanese while Stilwell and his Chinese X Force moved in for the kill. By the time the 5307th was inactivated on 10 August 1944, after four months of marching and six of fighting, it had captured its objective, Myitkyina in Burma, but had lost more than a thousand men to war and disease, with nobody com-



pletely escaping the latter. The story of the Marauders’ march into leech-infested glory has been told by veterans, written about by historians and novelists, and even acted out by movie stars. The men who were chosen or volunteered to fight in the jungles of Burma against the Japanese (with their larger-than-life reputation for jungle fighting) were brave, yes, but they were also “regular Joes”—soldiers struggling to survive in an environment made hostile by more than the enemy. What follow are photographs highlighting various aspects of the campaign, some well known and others less so. Three pages in a magazine cannot begin to touch on the full story of the Merrill’s Marauders, but it is a start.

*Thanks go to the Merrill’s Marauders Association for allowing the USASOC History Office to scan valuable photographs in their possession.*

*The Marauders had to cross and recross streams and rivers throughout their campaign, most notably the unpredictable Irrawaddy River. This photo of Corporal Phil Morrissey (center) and his companions was taken by Yank reporter Dave Richardson, who accompanied the Marauders the entire way through Burma. The intact state of the soldiers’ uniforms in the picture indicate that the photograph was taken early in the campaign. Each man was issued only one uniform, and because of the heat, many soldiers discarded jackets early.*





*After two months of hiking and fighting, the Marauders of 1st Battalion took time to rest and celebrate Easter on 9 April 1944. This was Father Thomas J. Barrett's first opportunity to say Mass in three months.*



*The first part of the 5307th's march followed the newly constructed Ledo Road. While the graded surface helped for a while, the soldiers still had to contend with steep slopes and mud. Soon enough, the soldiers decided that any resting place was a good resting place, even a drainage ditch on the side of a mountain. The attached quartermaster companies packed equipment, rations, and ammunition on sturdy Missouri mules, which could follow almost anywhere a man could walk or crawl, and did not mind a rest stop, either.*

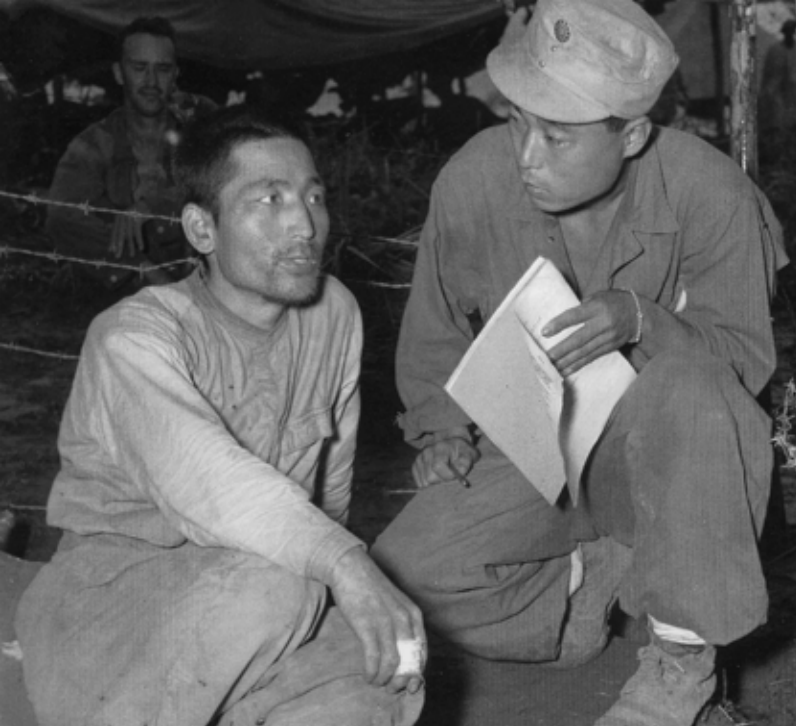


*Indigenous Kachins served as guides for the Marauder combat teams through the unfamiliar and unmapped territories of Burma. These mountain tribesmen were looked down on by the lowland Burmese, but fiercely resisted the Japanese invasion.*



*When the 5307th started out on their campaign in February of 1944, they followed the Ledo Road from Assam, India, into Burma. As shown here, the Marauders occasionally marched side-by-side with allied Chinese troops under Lieutenant General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell's command. Conditions in Burma varied from uncomfortable to downright miserable. The soldiers waded rivers, slogged through mud, hacked bamboo, trudged through elephant grass, crawled up mountains, and stumbled down slopes. The temperature ranged from hot to hotter, inspiring many a Marauder to discard his jacket and blanket the first day on the trail. Many also swapped their hot, heavy combat helmets for the comfort of cloth hats.*





Each of the 5307th's six combat teams had an assigned Nisei (second generation Japanese-American) interpreter for intelligence purposes. In this August 1944 photograph, Technical Sergeant Ed Mitsukado interrogates a Japanese prisoner being held at Myitkyina. The soldier had been found floating down the Irrawaddy River on a raft after the Americans prevailed at the Battle of Myitkyina. All of the Nisei assigned to the 5307th not only had native language proficiency, but many had trained at the Military Intelligence Service Language School in Minnesota. Even with experience and training in the Japanese language, many Nisei had difficulty communicating with captured soldiers having different dialects.



This 29 April 1944 photograph shows the Marauders of Khaki Combat Team picking up a three-day supply of 'K' rations as they set out on yet another leg of their march through Burma. The daily K ration, divided into three meals, contained three thousand calories compressed into the most compact form possible. Ration staples included the four ounce U.S. Army field ration D (a dense bar consisting of chocolate, skim milk powder, sugar, oat flour, cocoa fat, vitamins C and B, and artificial flavoring), a small can of chopped ham and egg or a can of processed cheese, a K-1 biscuit, sugar cubes, and coffee or bullion powder. Meant only for survival situations, the K ration was not an adequate diet for men marching through the jungle, but was better than what they ate when the K rations ran out—nothing.



While the adventures and glory of K-9 units in the Pacific Theater were well publicized, those of their brothers in the China-Burma-India Theater have largely been forgotten, though the men and dogs were just as deserving. This K-9 detachment joined the Marauders during the two-month battle for Myitkyina, Burma. Front row, left to right: Corporal Peter E. Erdman, Technical Sergeant 5 Robert E. Cross, Technical Sergeant 5 Del. B. Armstrong, Technical Sergeant 5 William Irving, Corporal Jesse Cowan. Back row, left to right: Technical Sergeant 5 Gerald G. Weston, Technical Sergeant 5 Walter A. Geesler, Technical Sergeant 5 Joseph A. Balak, Private Russell P. Miszner, Technical Sergeant 5 Garland Clark, Corporal Kenneth W. Remen.