

Allied Long Range Penetration Groups for Burma:

The Chindits, the Marauders, and the MARS Task Force.

by Troy J. Sacquety

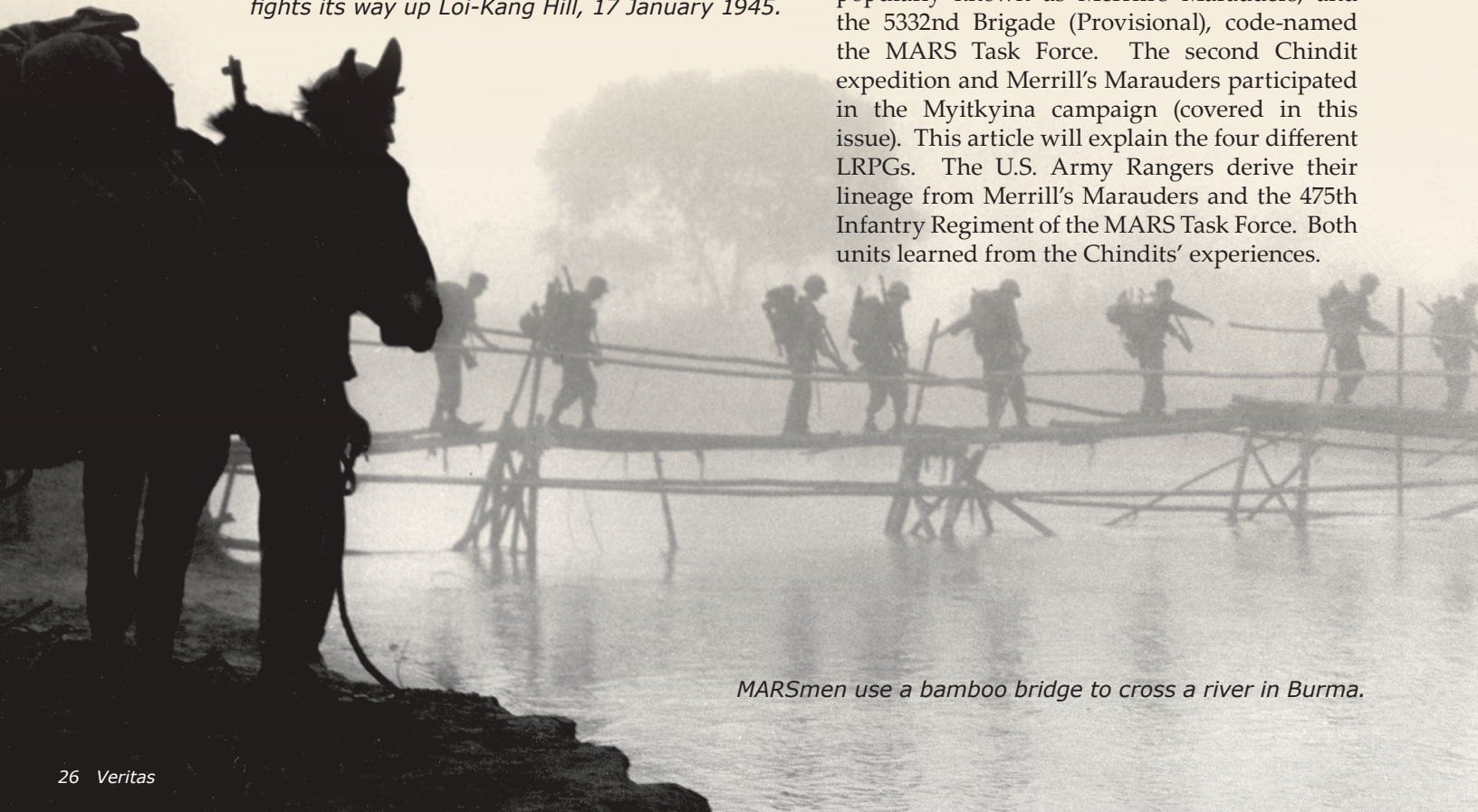


The L RPGs in Burma relied on aerial resupply and pack mules.



The 2nd Battalion, 475th Infantry, MARS Task Force, fights its way up Loi-Kang Hill, 17 January 1945.

Although an under-resourced theater in WWII, Burma was blessed with a plethora of special operations units. One military example was the Long Range Penetration Group (LRPG) that harassed enemy forces and interdicted supply lines behind enemy lines. The LRPG was a British concept that was also adopted by the Americans. The British and Americans each had two separate LRPGs in the Burma Campaign. The British had the first and second Chindits, while the Americans had the 5307th Composite Group (Provisional), the GALAHAD Task Force, popularly known as Merrill's Marauders, and the 5332nd Brigade (Provisional), code-named the MARS Task Force. The second Chindit expedition and Merrill's Marauders participated in the Myitkyina campaign (covered in this issue). This article will explain the four different LRPGs. The U.S. Army Rangers derive their lineage from Merrill's Marauders and the 475th Infantry Regiment of the MARS Task Force. Both units learned from the Chindits' experiences.



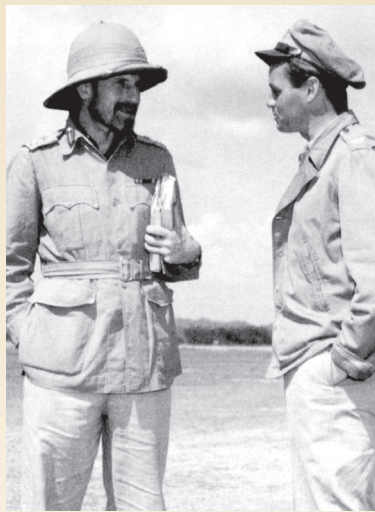
MARSmen use a bamboo bridge to cross a river in Burma.



BG James "Mad Mike" Calvert (with slung Enfield SMLE rifle) gestures as LTC Shaw (with U.S. M1 carbine) looks on.



Chindit Patch



MG Orde C. Wingate (L) formed and led the Chindits until his death in a plane crash near Imphal on 24 March 1944. His death threw the Chindit command into confusion. On the right is LTC Phillip G. Cochran of the 1st Air Commando.



Chindits lay explosives on a rail line in Japanese-occupied Burma. A key mission for the Chindits was to destroy enemy lines of communication.

February 1943 (Operation LONGCLOTH). For almost two months, seven separate Chindit columns harassed Japanese forces and interdicted supply lines south of Myitkyina. In late March, Wingate ordered the columns to break into small groups and make their way back into India. Though the Chindits lost a third of their men, LONGCLOTH raised British morale. The behind the lines operation demonstrated that a large long-range force could be wholly supported by air and that the average British soldier was equal to the Japanese in the jungle. The Chindit success prompted the American military to form similar units. During the August 1943 QUADRANT Conference of Allied leaders in Quebec, Canada, the U.S. agreed to form GALAHAD. The U.S. also committed to form the 1st Air Commando to operate in conjunction with the second Chindit operation.

Wingate returned from Quebec to train a second expedition that he dubbed the "Special Force," or "Long Range Penetration Group." Although officially known as the 3rd Indian Infantry Division, the unit retained the Chindit name. Five of its six brigades went into Burma; one was withheld to help blunt the Japanese U-GO offensive into India. The second Chindit force entered Burma in two phases. Brigadier General Bernard E. Fergusson and the 16th Infantry Brigade (3,000 men) began walking into Burma on 5 February 1944. They had a 360-mile march to Indaw, their rally point. The initial contingent of the main Chindit body, commanded by BG James "Mad Mike" Calvert, flew by gliders to a landing strip south of Myitkyina code-named BROADWAY, during the night of 5 March as part of Operation THURSDAY. Nearly 9,250 Chindits were eventually landed deep behind enemy lines by the 1st Air Commando, a specially-created United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) unit, with fighters, light bombers, transports, liaison aircraft, gliders and helicopters. Lieutenant Colonels John R. Alison and Philip G. Cochran formed the unit to resupply the Chindits and to evacuate their wounded and sick.

Shortly after Wingate died in a plane crash near Imphal, India, (24 March 1944) LTG William J. Slim, the British 14th Army commander, transferred the Chindit force to LTG Joseph W. Stilwell. They were to cut the Japanese supply lines to Myitkyina from the south. Once in Burma, however, the Chindits met stiff resistance from the Japanese and suffered heavy losses. But, they prevented enemy forces from reinforcing Myitkyina. By the time the Chindits were withdrawn to India in August 1944, they had suffered 1,400 killed and 2,500 wounded. Over half of the remainder had to be hospitalized because of illness or exhaustion. The force was disbanded in February 1945.¹

The Chindits: Named after the *Chinthe*, a mythical lion-like creature depicted by the statues that guard Buddhist temple gates in Burma, the Chindits were the brainchild of the experienced, but unorthodox and controversial British Major General Orde C. Wingate. He created the Special Night Squads, a joint British-Jewish force of irregulars that operated against Arab insurgents in Palestine from 1936-38. He also formed and advised the Gideon Force against the Italians in Ethiopia in 1940-41. It was composed of forces loyal to Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1942 General Earl Wavell, Commander-in-Chief in India, brought Wingate to train the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade to operate behind the lines in Burma. Wingate led the 3,000-man Chindits into Burma in

The Marauders: Code-named GALAHAD, the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional), popularly known by the nickname Merrill's Marauders, was led by Brigadier General Franklin D. Merrill. The unit was formed from Army volunteers, combat veterans from Guadalcanal and New Guinea, experienced jungle fighters from the Caribbean Defense Command, and soldiers from the continental United States. It was a light infantry force, like today's Ranger Battalions, with machineguns, mortars, and 75mm pack howitzers.² Mules carried ammunition and food supplies, as they did for the Chindits. Their airdropped supplies came from the 10th USAAF.

The 5307th was essentially a regiment (about 3,000 personnel) with three battalions, each broken into two combat teams designated by a color. The 1st Battalion, led by LTC William L. Osborne, had the "Red" and "White" Combat Teams. The 2nd Battalion, under LTC George A. McGee, Jr., had the "Blue" and "Green" Combat Teams. The 3rd Battalion, of LTC Charles E. Beach, had the "Orange" and "Khaki" Combat Teams. Disease and combat severely attrited the battalions as they maneuvered behind enemy lines. By the time they captured the Myitkyina airfield on 17 May 1944, they were down to fifty percent strength. Many of the combat veterans in the Marauders had been under the impression that after ninety days in the field, the LRPG would be withdrawn. However, when the Chinese failed to capture the city of Myitkyina, LTG Stilwell had to retain his only American conventional ground force. By the end of May, the Marauders were evacuating seventy-five to one hundred men daily for diseases. Stilwell admitted in his diary on 30 May that "GALAHAD is just shot."³ The Marauders, like the Chindits, were one of his few reliable units and Stilwell used them long after they had ceased to be operationally effective.

Some 2,600 mostly green replacements with minimal training—derisively dubbed "New GALAHAD" by



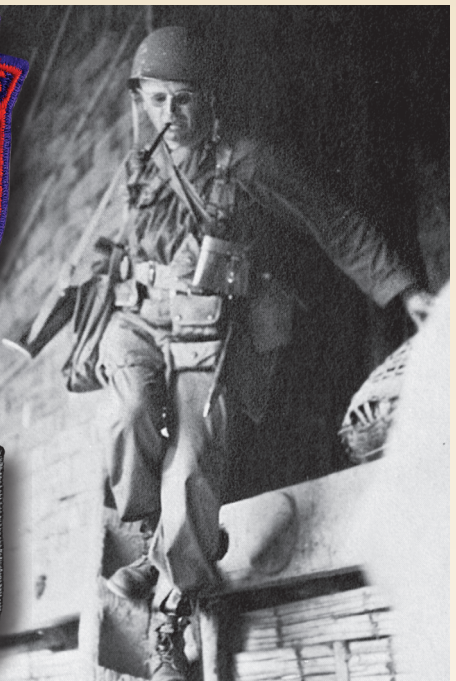
Marauders taking a well earned break in a drainage ditch on the side of a mountain. Behind them are some of the mules used to transport their supplies.



Merrill's Marauders Patch



Ranger Regimental Flash



BG Franklin Merrill was the commanding officer and namesake of Merrill's Marauders.



Marauders fire their 75mm pack howitzer to support infantry at Myitkyina on 27 July 1944. The spent shell casings in the foreground are from the previous nine-hours of shelling.

the "old" Marauders—were flown in to fill out the unit. They too suffered heavy casualties. By the time Myitkyina fell in early August 1944, the "new" Marauder battalions were company-size. The 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) was inactivated on 10 August 1944. Many of the veterans were transferred to the 475th Infantry Regiment, in the MARS Task Force. Although not organized nor trained as Rangers in WWII, the Marauders became a legacy unit of the 75th Ranger Regiment. The colored stripes in the 75th Ranger beret flash represent the six Marauder combat teams.

The MARS Task Force: The 5332nd Brigade (Provisional) was activated on 26 July 1944 as the second American LRPG created for service in Burma. Brigadier General John P. Willey took command when BG Thomas S. Arms was injured in an automobile accident in October 1944. Like the Marauders and the second Chindit operation, the MARS Task Force fought under the American-led Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC). Although the unit was designed to be an American-Chinese composite division, it never operated with the Chinese infantry regiment. Instead, the MARS Task Force was composed of the 475th Infantry Regiment (Long Range Penetration Regiment, Special), and the 124th Cavalry Regiment (Special) of the Texas National Guard. Each had medical units, an attached Field Artillery Battalion (Pack), and quartermaster troops for support. In all, the MARS Task Force had some 5,000



The MARS Task Force moves along Loi-Kang Hill, 28 January 1945. In the upper left, a C-47 cargo aircraft flying below the MARSmen shows how the term "hills" was an understatement in Burma.



MARS Task Force Patch



75th Ranger Regimental DUI



PVT Charles H. Pelsor of E Company, 2nd Battalion, 475th Infantry Regiment fires his BAR at retreating Japanese forces caught out in the open near Tonkwa, Burma, on 15 December 1944.



A MARS Task Force crew uses its 4.2" mortar to shell Japanese positions along the Burma Road, January-February 1944.

troops. They were simply known as "MARSmen" when they entered the field in late 1944.

As with the Marauders and Chindits, supplies for the MARS Task Force were airdropped and packed by mules. Under the overall direction of the new theater commander, LTG Daniel I. Sultan, the MARS Task Force was to operate in conjunction with Chinese units. Its mission was to drive the Japanese from north Burma and to help clear a land route to China. The MARSmen fought along the trace of the Ledo Road—an overland bypass route being built to help supply China—and along the Burma Road, which was the pre-war land route that the Japanese still had under their control. The MARS Task Force fought in Burma until March 1945. By then, NCAC had cleared its area of operations. The MARSmen were then sent to China to support the American effort to train Chinese troops.

A MARSman of note was 1LT Jack L. Knight. As the commanding officer of F Troop, 2nd Squadron, 124th Cavalry, he led an attack on a Japanese-occupied hill near Hpa-pen on 2 February 1945. Despite being wounded several times, LT Knight single-handedly knocked out five Japanese fighting bunkers. He was killed while attacking a sixth. His was the only Medal of Honor awarded in the China-Burma-India Theater for ground action. Most significantly, it was the only Medal of Honor awarded to a special operations soldier in World War II.⁴

Endnotes

- 1 See Michael Calvert, *Chindits: Long Range Penetration* (New York: Ballantine, 1973) and Shelford Bidwell, *The Chindit War: Stilwell, Wingate, and the Campaign in Burma: 1944* (New York: Macmillan, 1980)
- 2 Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *United States Army in World War II: China-Burma-India Theater: Stilwell's Command Problems* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1987), 35.
- 3 Joseph W. Stilwell, *The Stilwell Papers* (New York: William Sloane, 1948), 301.
- 4 For more on the MARS Task Force, see John Randolph, *MARSmen in Burma* (Houston, TX: Gulf, 1946). For more on the Marauders, see *Merrill's Marauders* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1990).