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# *THE FARTHEST FRONT: AMERICANS IN THE CHINA-BURMA-INDIA THEATER IN WORLD WAR II, 1941-1945*

BRIEF SUMMARY

In 1971 Barbara W. Tuchman published *Stilwell and the American Experience in China* 1911-1945. The book soon became a bestseller and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Despite its title, the book’s discussion of the “American experience” was largely confined to a narrative and analysis of General Joseph Stilwell’s tour of duty as the top U.S. commander in the China Burma India Theater during World War II. Stilwell also served as Chief of Staff to Chinese premier Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, administrator of Lend -Lease and sometimes commanded Chinese troops as well.

The American General frequently clashed with Chiang over questions of strategy and military policy as well as with British commanders in India and Southeast Asia and with General Claire Lee Chennault, founder of the Flying Tigers and commander of the U.S. 14th Air Force in China. The quarrels among these strong and tenacious personalities frequently drew in the top leaders in Washington and London as well.

Here too there were conflicts, American leaders had high hopes for the role that China might play in defeating Japan and in any case, believed that China must be kept in the war at all costs, if for no other reason than to tie down the thousands of Japanese troops there and to refute the Japanese propaganda line that this was a conflict to “free” Asia. The British, on the other hand, held a much lower opinion of China’s importance and were mainly concerned with safeguarding India and winning back their colonies in Southeast Asia from the Japanese.

Given that situation, it is not surprising that much of Tuchman’s book, as well as the more recent well-regarded book, *Forgotten Ally:China’s World War II* by Rana Mittar is concerned with issues of policy and strategy among and between the wartime allies Britain, China and The United States.

One would have little awareness from reading either of these influential works that over 250,000 American men and women served in Burma, China and India from 1942 to 1945. Indeed, in the U.S. the American experience in China, India and Southeast Asia during World War II has largely vanished from popular memory. The single exception is “The Flying Tigers”,the famous fighter group formed by General Chenault that achieved spectacular successes in air combat against the Japanese over China and Burma and whose hold on the popular American memory has never wavered. They have been the subject of at least three movies, a video game and a number of novels. It seems likely that the number of English language books written about the Flying Tigers exceeds the combined total of books written about all other aspects of the Second World War in China

Yet the five squadrons of the Flying Tigers (after July 1942 the 23rd Fighter Group) even with their support personnel constituted only a fraction of the quarter million American GIs in the China-Burma-India Theater. Many thousands of others worked as nurses, mechanics, road builders, aviators, combat infantrymen, engineers, clerks, military trainers and advisors and in a dozen or more other military occupations and specialties. The majority of Americans, over 70 per cent, served in India and Burma rather than China, while some served in all three countries. To these thousands of GIs the “American experience” in CBI was far different and far more varied than those of the generals, diplomats, statesmen and politicians discussed in the standard books about the U.S. and China during World War II.   
 The successful Japanese conquest of Burma in March and April of 1942 meant that China, all of whose ports were already in Japanese hands, was effectively cut off from any supplies by land as well. For the great majority of Americans in the China -Burma-India theater this meant that most of their efforts, whatever their specific jobs or missions, would be devoted to the task of supplying China by air and reopening land communications through Burma.

The front lines of the CBI Theater were some ten to twelve thousand miles from the closest points of the United States. For Americans it was the most distant front of the Second World War. The shortest sea voyages generally took over seventy days. For most it was not a comfortable journey. Virginia C. Allen’s detachment of Red Cross volunteer women boarded their ship at San Pedro California at night. The ship sailed immediately into a Pacific storm. “It was quite a storm, and we weren’t prepared. We hadn’t been told anything about storms. We hadn’t been told anything about ships. Everything was crashing into everything else….The best we could do was stay in our bunks. We tied ourselves in with sheets.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The American GIs who made that long journey came from a society in which the average 18-year-old had never traveled more than a hundred miles from their hometown. One war correspondent observed that for the American soldier sent to Asia, there was nothing “in his whole background, his American environment, his education, his army training to prepare him for what he found. He came from a life of gadgets and movies, schools, mass production, cars, jukeboxes, radios and corner drug stores.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He found himself abruptly plunged into an environment of extreme poverty, human degradation. incomprehensible languages, customs and practices. “The next day we explored Bombay,”recalled Lt. Beatrice Smith, an Army nurse from Indiana. “The conditions the people were living under were frightening. So many malnourished people and children with distended stomachs. Many running up to us begging. Being brought up in America I had never seen anything like this.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

If GIs found the social conditions in the theater strange and upsetting they faced far greater challenges from the weather and terrain in which they had to carry out their day to day missions. Captain John Walker Russell, a C-47 pilot based at a primitive airfield in Assam remembered “almost constant rain…heat, mud and giant mosquitos….The humidity was such that any leather item not worn for a day would be coated with a green mold. We were told to shake our boots upside down to be sure that a very poisonous small green snake didn’t spend the night sleeping in there.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Airmen like Captain Russell in the Tenth Air Force’s Air Transport Command were tasked with flying supplies some five hundred miles from eastern India into Kunming China across ‘the Hump” a spur of the Himalayas with twelve-to-twenty-thousand-foot peaks, heavy cloud formations and rapidly changing weather. The air crews flew at 15,000 feet in unreliable C-47s, ill-adapted for high altitude flying. Army war correspondent Frank Bolden next to a C-47 cargo door that had been improperly reattached after being removed for servicing. “While we were bucking the air pockets at well over 18,000 feet the air pressure blew in the ill-fastened door and it struck me on the noggin. The ensuing suction was so great that it carried the door and everything else that wasn’t tied down right out through the opening and down to the depths.My parachute pack was all that saved me from taking that non-stop flight…. The bulk of the pack was sufficient to form a wedge between the frames and I was able to brace myself against being pulled out until help arrived…The brutally cold air poured through the open portal as we had no way of closing it. Upon arrival at our destination it was discovered that among the correspondents one had a frozen foot and I had three discolored toes.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Because of fuel leaks and inadequate ventilation, the early C-47 models on the Hump run were airborne fire traps. “At one point one in five exploded in flight.”[[6]](#footnote-6) During three years of flying the Hump the Army Air Forces lost 468 planes.

The alternate way to reach China was by road and from 1942 to 1945 thousands of U.S. Army engineers were employed building a road from the small eastern Indian village of Ledo through Burma to the city of Kunming in Southwest China, a distance of almost 1100 miles. The first two thirds of the road had to be built through what an American engineer officer described as “probably the most difficult terrain encountered in any military campaign in this war… mountainous terrain, canyon sections along narrow streams…vegetation cover constituting some of the most impenetrable jungle growth on the face of the earth.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Beginning in early 1944 the hard work of building the road was supplemented by the even harder task of fighting the Japanese. In February of that year reequipped and retrained Chinese forces under Stilwell’s command along with Merril’s Marauders, a two battalion American long range penetration force and a similar British force called “Chindits” opened an offensive to clear the Japanese from north Burma and capture the key transportation hub of Myitkyina.

If diversity is a desirable quality in organizations, then the Allied forces in CBI constituted an optimum combination. An Army official historian described “ the scene in headquarters and supply depots and out along the Stilwell [Ledo] Road….In a base area for example one might see at the door of a building the jaunty little Gurkha watchman with his small frame, Mongolian features, ready smile, broad brimmed hat turned up at one side and the deadly broad bladed knife of a Gurkha tribesman at his side. In the corridor the visitor was sure to see, squatting sadly and patiently, a black-skinned sweeper…..Behind the typewriters there would be slim Anglo-, Indian girls, brown-skinned, large-eyed.,often fiercely British in speech and custom. The clerks were sophisticated young Hindus of the commercial castes. Sometimes college graduates, almost always great students of the cinema, fond of debating politics…” [[8]](#footnote-8)

Employed on the Ledo Road were two American engineer units, the larger of which, the 45th Engineer Regiment was an African-American unit of the still segregated U.S. Army. There were also detachments of Chinese infantry and engineers, Royal Engineer survey teams and large numbers of Indian laborers “The contract laborers had no common tongue and shared few customs which meant it was necessary to serve a most varied diet. These people included Mahrattas, Madrasis, [sic] Bengalis, Hindu and Muslim Punjabis…Nepalis and Gurkhas….The labor force on the Stilwell Road were an anthropologist’s dream but a mess sergeant’s nightmare.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Throughout the China-Burma-India theater American were obliged to co-operate and work with men and women from regions and communities they had encountered, if at all, only in geography books. Somehow, co-operation was usually achieved, the mission progressed. Yet there was little affection or respect between groups. “It was pretty rare that anybody understood anybody else along the North Burma front.” wrote *Newsweek* correspondent Harold Isaacs. ”The social and racial tangle was thicker and more impenetrable than the jungle undergrowth. Friction smoked between American whites and blacks, between Americans and British and between everybody and the Chinese.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

This book, while not neglecting military operations, questions and quarrels about Allied strategy and policy and the colorful personalities involved in these debates, will give primary attention first, to the lived experiences of ordinary Americans in China India and Burma as well as their impact on the peoples and societies with whom they voluntarily and involuntarily interacted. Since the completion of Romanus and Sunderland’s three volumes sixty years ago, many new archival sources, have become available. Yet few others have attempted to examine the conduct of operations in that area of the war, and even fewer have approached the story primarily from the point of view of the participants.

It is now possible, utilizing the work of historians of wartime China such as Chiang Ju-Ti, Edward Drea, Hara Takeshi, Mark Peattie, Jay Taylor, and Hans van de Vin as well as historians of World War II India like Yasmin Khan[[11]](#footnote-11) and Srinath Raghavan[[12]](#footnote-12) to present a much more balanced and comprehensive account of the war from the perspective of Indians and Chinese as well as the British and Americans in addition to providing a more complete examination of their interaction. The last twenty years have seen a large increase in memoirs and first hand accounts from the World War II generation including those who served in CBI. In the United States, repositories such as the Library of Congress Veterans History Project and The U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center’s “Veteran’s Survey” now contain a large number of oral histories and other types of reminiscences. There are also a number of on-line veteran’s sites devoted to CBI such as cbi-theater.com. These resources make it possible to tell the CBI story from a large number of perspectives not previously available.

Books about World War II continue to be popular with the reading public. However many seem to examine the same subjects over and over again. On the other hand, the war in China and India is one of the least known subjects. It seems likely that a well presented history of this aspect of the Second World War, based on archival sources, as well as the most recent scholarship, ought to be of equal or greater interest to the general reader than the ninth or tenth book about the Battle of Midway or the D-Day Landing

THE AUTHOR

Ronald H. Spector is Professor of History and International Relations Emeritus at George Washington University. He served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam and is a Lieutenant Colonel Retired in the Marine Corps Reserve. Spector has been the Omar Bradley Visiting Professor of Military History at the U.S. Army War College and Class of 1957 Distinguished Visiting Chair in Naval History at the U.S. Naval Academy. In 2011 he was awarded the Samuel Elliott Morison Prize for Lifetime Achievement by the Society for Military History. He is the author of eight books, seven of which are still in print.

His most recent book, *A Continent Erupts: Decolonization, Civil War and Massacre in Postwar Asia 1945-1955,* was an “editors choice”of the *New York Times Book Review.* His earlier books include *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War With Japan,* which received the Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt Prize in Naval History, *At War at Sea: Sailors and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century* that was awarded the 2001 Best Book Award by the Society for Military History and *In the Ruins of Empire: The Japanese Surrender and the Battle for Postwar Asia* which was also a *New York Times Book Review* “editor’s choice” selection”.

Spector’s books have been translated into French, Hungarian, Japanese, Turkish and Vietnamese.

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2. Harold R. Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia,* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1967) p.8 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Where the Dawn Comes Up Like Thunder: The CBI Memoir of Lt. Beatrice K. Smith,” [www.cbi-theater.com](http://www.cbi-theater.com), accessed October 6, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Into the Wildest Blue Yonder: Memoirs of John Walker Russell---CBI Theater of World War II” [www.cbi-theater.com](http://www.cbi-theater.com), accessed October 6, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Frank Bolden, “A Rough Trip Over the Hump”, Frank E. Bolden Papers, Box 2 folder 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John C. McManus, *Fire and Fortitude: The U.S. Army in the Pacific War 1941-1943 (,*New York: Dutton Caliber 2019) p.489; Barbara Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911-1945 (*New York: MacMillan; 1971) p.309 CBI Hump Pilots Association,“CBI Order of Battle: Lineages and History: Flying the Hump” cbi-theater.com, accessed 10/21/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quoted in McManus op.cit.p.49 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *The United States Army in World War II: China-Burma-India Theater: Vol III: Time Runs Out in CBI* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History 1959) pp.299-300. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid p.300. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Isaacs, *No Peace For Asia,* p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yasmin Khan, *India At War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* ( New York: Oxford University Press 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Srinath Raghavan, *India’s War: World War and the Making of Modern South Asia* (New York: Basic Books 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)