

Chapter 1

The Chindits

Introduction

The decisive campaign of the long land war against the Japanese in Burma in World War II was the Battle of Imphal-Kohima. For 100 days, from March through June 1944, the troops of the Fourteenth Army under Lieutenant General William Slim met their bitter Japanese enemies in a convulsive struggle for control of the eastern gates to India. Ultimately, this British multi-race army defeated the Japanese attack and began the slow task of clearing the invaders from northern and southern Burma. While this great battle was being contested, another war, smaller in scale but no less fierce, was being fought 200 miles in the Japanese rear. Here, over 20,000 specially trained jungle soldiers attempted to weaken the Japanese Army by delivering a knockout blow to its unprotected "guts." Three thousand of these troops were American volunteers, officially known as the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) and popularly known as "Merrill's Marauders" (although they referred to themselves as "Galahad"). The other larger part of this extraordinary collection of fighting men was the Chindits, also known as the Special Force.

Essentially, Galahad and the Chindits were light infantry jungle troops organized and trained for guerrilla-style interdiction against Japanese lines of communication. During the campaign in Burma, circumstance and misuse forced these units into the conventional roles of positional defense and direct assaults against strong enemy fortifications. Galahad and the Chindits also operated at the operational level of war in that their deployment into Burma and their tactical objectives contributed directly to the attainment of strategic goals. In fact, the Chindit War, as it is called by British military historian Brigadier Shelford Bidwell, is one of the best examples in recent history of light infantry forces employed at the operational level of war.

The record of the Chindit War is one of high drama, involving both exhilarating triumph and bewildering tragedy. Galahad, for example, gave Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell his most notable success—the capture of the Myitkyina airfield; and yet his forces were ruined and destroyed in the process. Each of the five British Chindit brigades deployed in Burma suffered casualties of from 50 to 95 percent of its original force. In one case, the 111th Infantry Brigade stumbled out of its last engagement with only 118 men of its original 3,000 fit for further service.

A close study of Galahad and the Chindits is of high value because their operations form classic examples of light infantry tactics in close jungle terrain, deep in the enemy's rear. Moreover, a study of these forces demonstrates

that light forces can be used at the operational level of war. Chindit operations also show how guerrilla and conventional tactics can be effectively mixed to achieve significant tactical objectives. Finally, the history of the Chindit War reveals the costs and dangers of misusing light forces in roles or situations for which they are not suited.

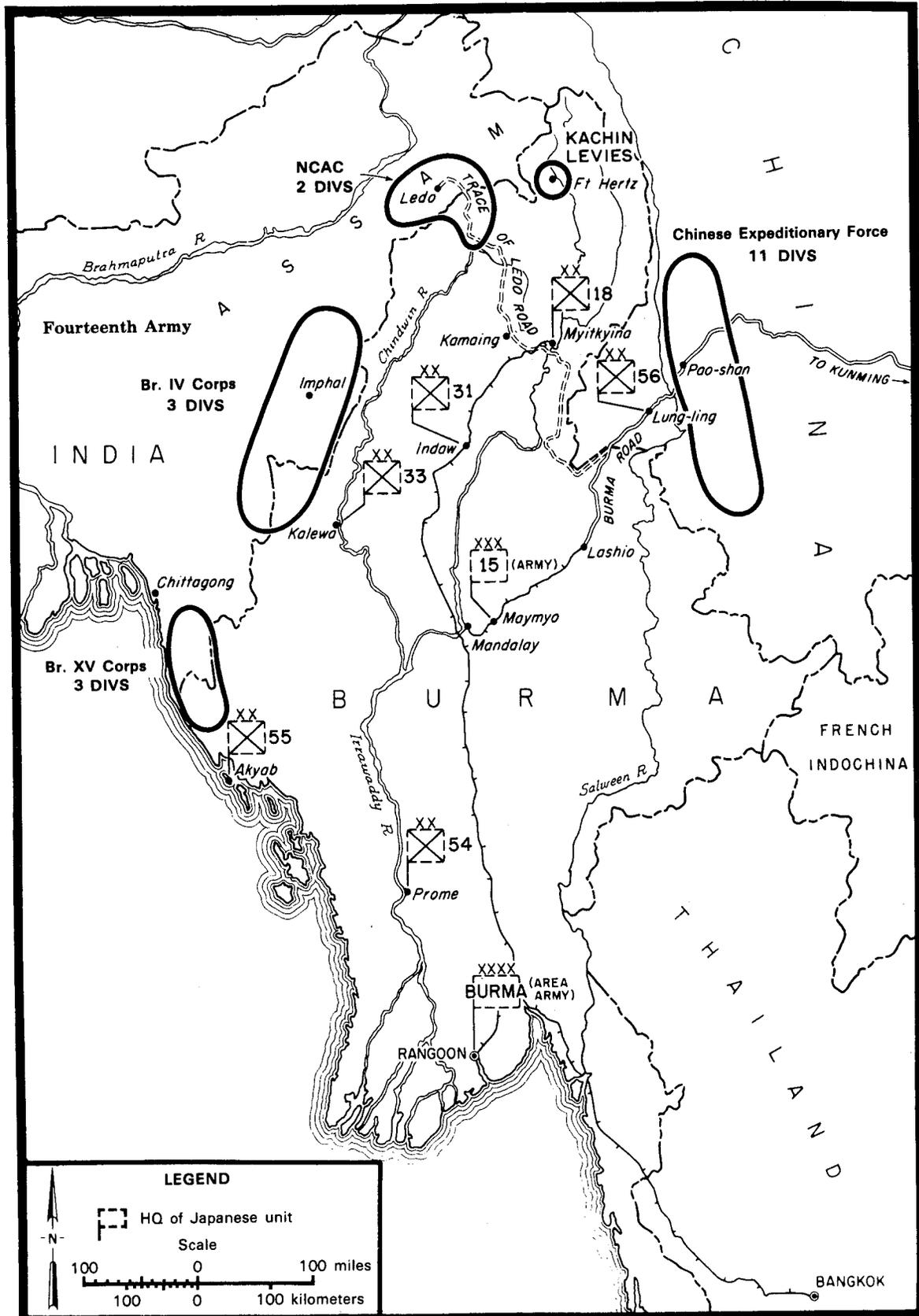
This study begins with a background section providing an overview of the land theater, including a description of the strategies and dispositions of the opposing forces in the spring of 1944. The nature of the participation of the Chindits and Galahad in the Burma campaign of 1944 is depicted. Then, the study describes the organization and training of the Chindits, their basic operational concept, Chindit tactics in their several variants, Chindit logistics, leadership and morale, and costs and problems. The study concludes with a brief assessment of the results achieved by the Chindits and an analysis of the lessons of their operations that remain relevant today.

Dispositions and Strategy

The dispositions of the antagonists in Burma in March 1944 are shown on map 1. In the north, Stilwell's U.S.-trained First Chinese Army of the 22d and 38th Divisions was opposed by Lieutenant General Tanaka's 18th (Chrysanthemum) Division, a crack outfit with extensive jungle experience and many battle honors. East of Myitkyina (pronounced Mitchinah), Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese divisions, never very aggressive, were held in check by the Japanese 56th Division. On either side of the mighty Chindwin River, the mixed British-Indian IV Corps of the Fourteenth Army defended against Lieutenant General Mutaguchi's Fifteenth Army, composed of three large infantry divisions. Farther south, in the province of Arakan, the British XV Corps faced the Japanese 55th Division.

In the far north, an Allied headquarters at Fort Hertz coordinated the activities of a fair-size force of Kachin levies—a jungle guerrilla force operating in a decentralized mode under Office of Strategic Services (OSS) leadership against the rear elements and garrisons of the 18th Division.¹ This huge land theater encompassed some 35,000 square miles of some of the most difficult terrain for warfare in the world.

The Quebec Conference of August 1943 between the leaders of the United States and Great Britain established the Allied strategy for Burma in 1944. The strategy envisioned the reconquest of northern Burma by Chinese and American forces under Stilwell's Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC). Stilwell hoped to force the Japanese 18th Division out of its positions in the Hukawng and Mogaung valleys, ultimately pushing through to Myitkyina, drawing the Ledo road behind him. Stilwell also hoped that Chiang's divisions in Yunnan province east of Myitkyina would conduct their own offensive from the opposite direction. Once a land link to China was restored and the Ledo-Yunnan road completed, China would then become the main theater for the final defeat of the Japanese Army. More or less simultaneously with Stilwell's advance in North Burma, General Slim's Fourteenth Army intended to initiate its own major offensive from the central front in Assam against the bulk of the Japanese Army in Burma.



Source: Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 120.
 Map 1. Disposition of forces, Burma, March 1944

In addition to developing the strategy described above, the Quebec Conference authorized the creation of one American and six British brigades to be employed in Burma as long-range penetration groups (LRPG). Under the command of British Major General Orde C. Wingate, these groups were to interdict the Japanese rear in order to support the three contemplated Allied offensives. In 1943, Wingate had already organized, trained, and led one LRPG, the 77th Infantry Brigade, in extended operations in Japanese-held territory.

This force had infiltrated deep into the enemy rear on foot and, over the course of several weeks, blew railway bridges, mounted ambushes, destroyed supply dumps, and conducted other similarly disruptive activities—slipping into the safety of the jungle after each attack. But forced by a determined Japanese response to exfiltrate to their own lines, the 77th Brigade suffered debilitating casualties. Fully one-third of the 3,000-member force was lost outright, while the majority of the survivors were found unfit for further service due to disease, injury, exhaustion, or malnutrition.²

While it must be acknowledged that the military value of this expedition was quite low, especially considering the terrible casualties incurred, Chindit I (the first British operation) provided an undeniable psychological boost to the British and Indian formations that had been driven so rudely and rapidly out of Burma in 1942.³ The expedition restored their confidence. Wingate had proven that the Japanese were not invincible, that they could be defeated at their own game—jungle fighting. Moreover, he had demonstrated that a sizable force could be maintained behind enemy lines and could be effective under the right circumstances. The major flaw in the expedition was that the operations of the 77th Brigade were not conducted in concert with a simultaneous attack by the main armies.

Chindit II (the second major British operation) was to be somewhat of a repetition of Chindit I, with four notable differences. First, Chindit II obviously was being mounted on a much larger scale, magnified by a factor of seven to one. Second, unlike Chindit I, Wingate's long-range penetration in 1944 was to be coordinated to complement and contribute directly to the advance of the main Allied armies by cutting Japanese lines of communication in the three directions described earlier. Third, in 1944, Wingate's brigades were to be supported by a dedicated air force, the No. 1 Air Commando. Finally, due to the combination of factors above, the tactics employed by the Chindits in 1944 were to be altered, producing a blend of guerrilla and conventional tactics. These last innovations, however, were not always understood or appreciated by Wingate's subordinate commanders.

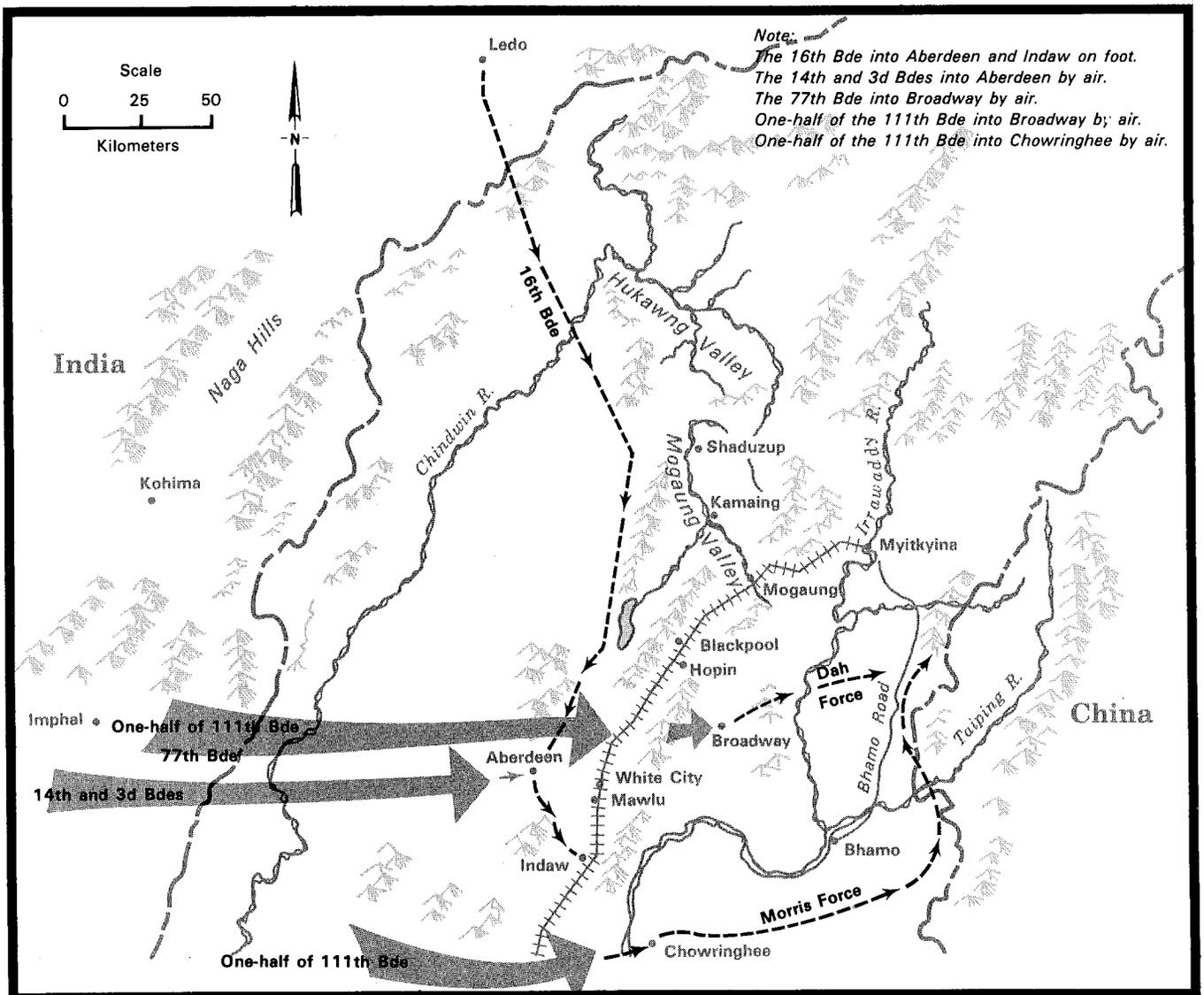
Basic Plan of Operation

On 4 February 1944, General Slim issued a directive to Wingate ordering the Special Force (i.e., the Chindits) to march and fly into the Indaw-Railway valley area to accomplish the following missions:

- (1) Help the advance of Stilwell's force on Myitkyina by cutting the communications of the Japanese 18th Division, harassing its rear and preventing its reinforcement.
- (2) Create a favorable situation for the Yunnan Chinese to cross the Salween River and enter Burma.
- (3) Inflict the greatest possible damage and confusion on the enemy in North Burma.⁴

It should be noted that these missions differed slightly from the strategy laid down in 1943 in that they did not include a specific directive to cut the lines of communication to the Japanese forces on the central front in the west. The thrust of Wingate's mission was to support Stilwell's advance down the Hukawng and Mogaung valleys and thence to Myitkyina.

Wingate's plan to fulfill Slim's directive was called Operation Thursday (see map 2). It provided for the secret insertion of three brigades deep into the enemy's rear—one by foot and two by air. The 16th Brigade, under Brigadier Fergusson, marched into Burma from just south of Ledo. Crossing the Chindwin River by glider-delivered assault boats, the brigade trekked 450 miles to a site known as Aberdeen, 27 miles northwest of Indaw, where it established a stronghold or permanent, defended base. From there, the 16th was to proceed to capture the Indaw airfields and destroy the defending Japanese garrison.



Map 2. Operation Thursday

As part of the operation, the 77th and the 111th Brigades flew by glider and C-47 to two landing zones—Broadway and Chowringhee—located east and northeast of Indaw. The 77th split its forces at that point, leaving one attached battalion to garrison its landing zone and stronghold (Broadway) and sending another called the Morris Force to interdict the Bhamo-Myitkyina road and Irrawaddy River—the main supply routes to the 56th Division. The main force of the brigade marched west and established a block on the Mandalay-Myitkyina railroad at White City. However, the 111th was initially delayed in its flight to the Chowringhee landing zone. It crossed the Irrawaddy River, also by glider-delivered assault boats, before moving west to harass Japanese rear elements in the area west of Indaw. The 111th also sent one column of one battalion to join the Morris Force.⁵ Later in the campaign, the 111th established a block at Hopin on the Mandalay-Myitkyina railroad.

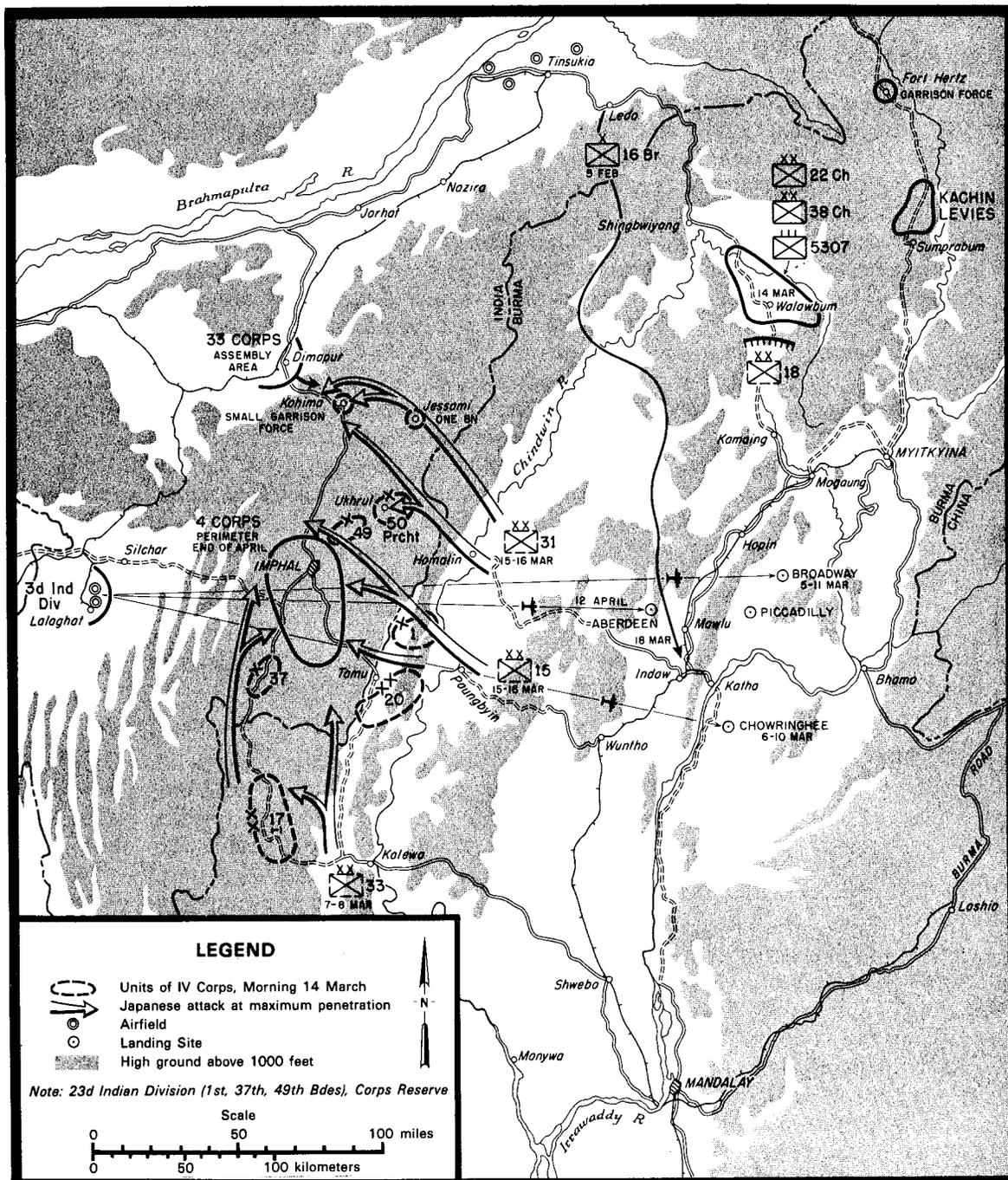
Meanwhile, Wingate held the 14th, 3d, and 23d Brigades in reserve to reinforce success and to relieve the first three deployed brigades when they became exhausted, needed assistance, or lost their effectiveness. Technically, Operation Thursday covered only the deployment and the initial objectives of the Special Force. Wingate retained authority to modify the objectives of his brigades depending on how the situation developed. Wingate also intended to withdraw his Chindits after ninety days of rear-area operations and before the monsoon season arrived in June. Chindit I had proven that operations of the type undertaken by the Chindits should not extend past ninety days. After that time, units in the enemy's rear lost their effectiveness.⁶



Thomas, Back to Mandaley

Major General Orde C. Wingate and his successor Brigadier W. D. A. "Joe" Lentaigne

Operation Thursday had been underway only a short time when several important events took place. First, the Allied offensive on the central front was delayed by an attack from the Japanese (see map 3). As a result, Chindit operations were not enhanced as expected by a simultaneous advance of the Fourteenth Army. However, Stilwell's offensive in the north continued as planned. The second event was Wingate's death in a plane crash before the end of March. His successor, Brigadier Lentaigne, did not possess Wingate's



Source: Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 173.

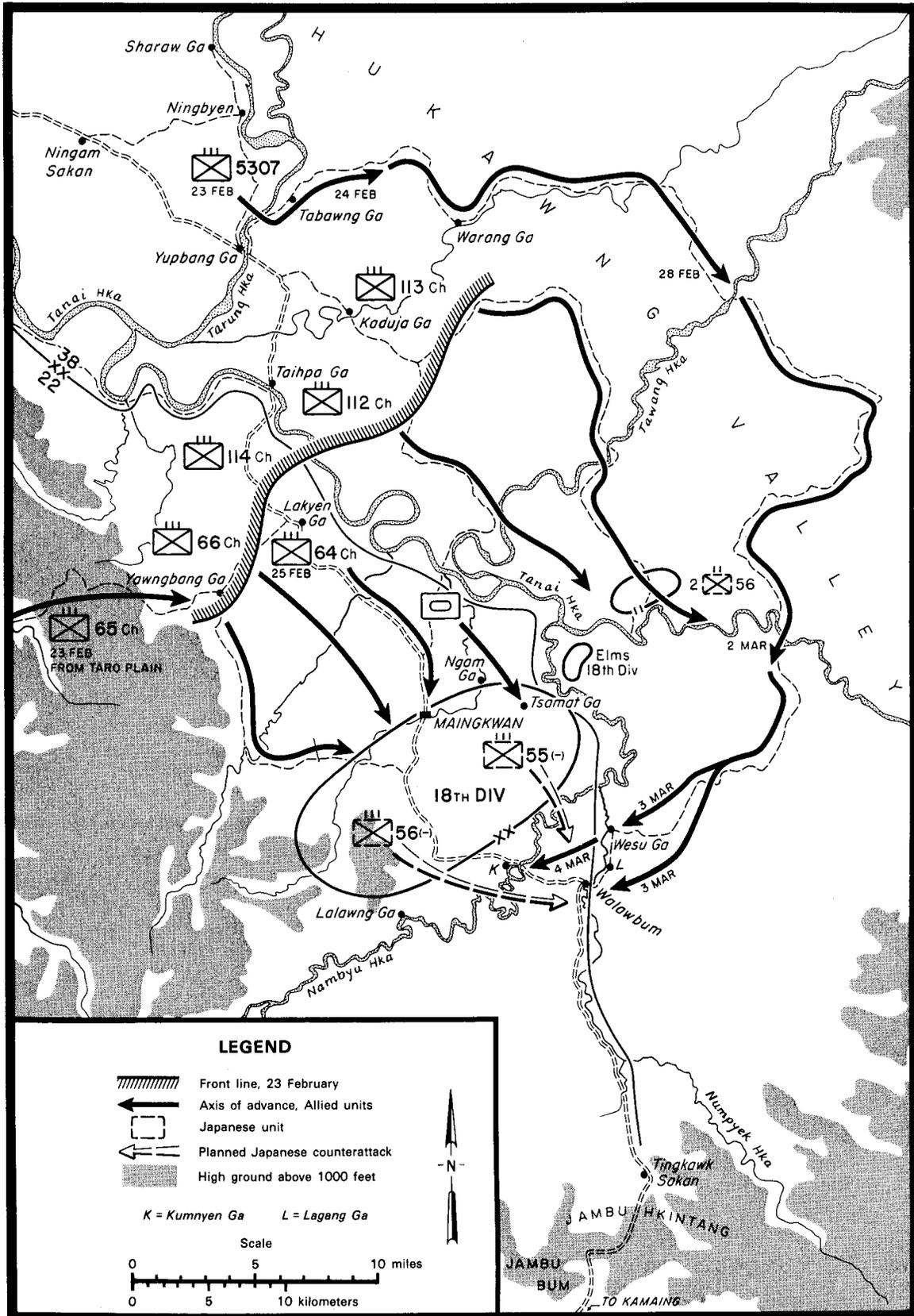
Map 3. Japanese offensive at Imphal, March-April 1944

vision or imagination. Wingate's death, coupled with the Japanese offensive, led to lessened efficiency in the use of the Chindit brigades. For instance, once it was clear that the decisive campaign in Burma was occurring at Imphal, rather than in the north, the Chindits should have been diverted in that direction, not to the north.

Operation Thursday did not include Galahad. Although initially intended to be under Wingate's command, Galahad passed to Stilwell, instead, on the basis of his adamant personal request to Lord Mountbatten, the theater commander.

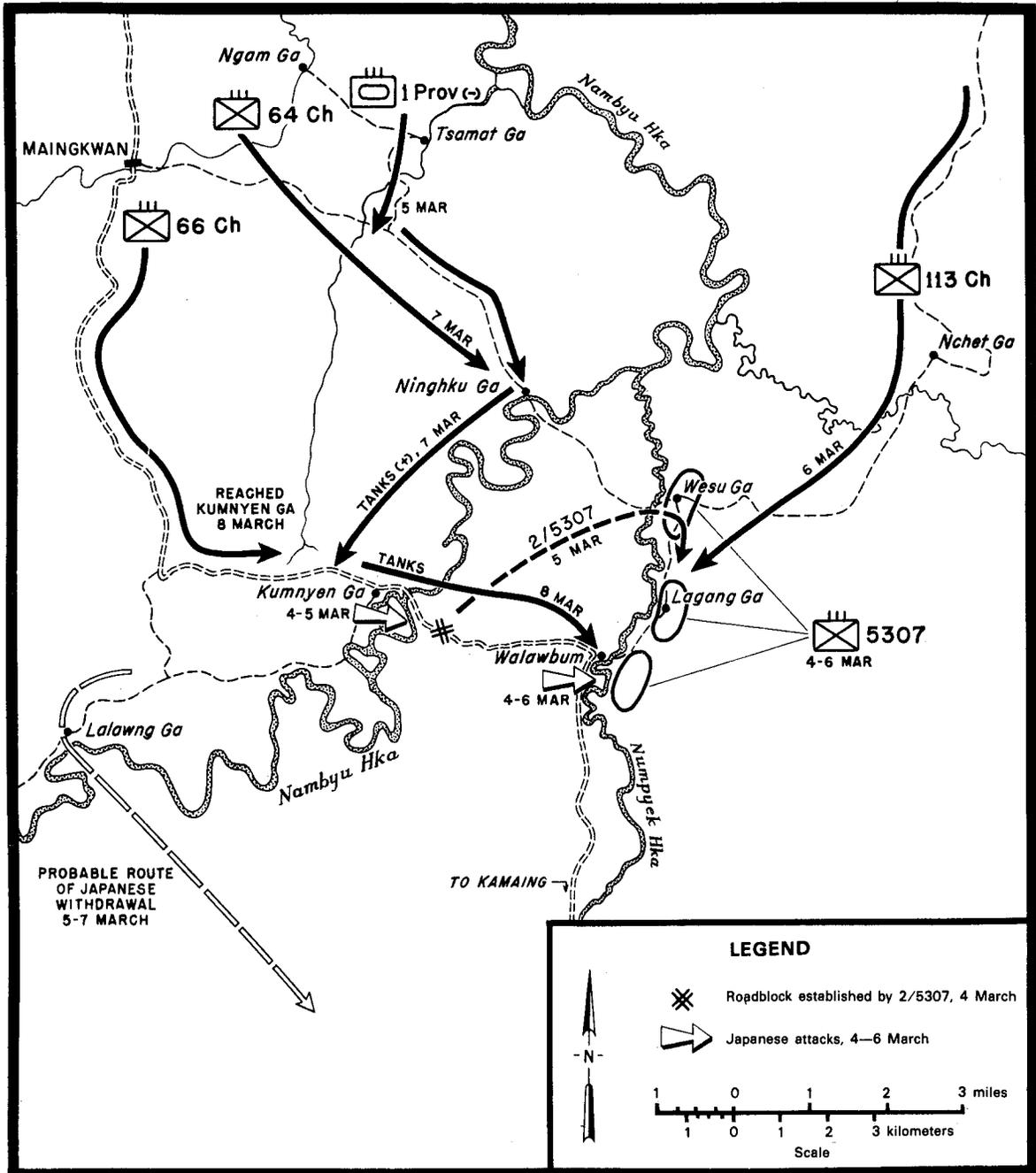
Stilwell's plan for Galahad had a slightly different cast than Wingate's. As part of Stilwell's plan, Galahad's objectives were not to be as deep as those of the Special Force (at least initially) and were to be more closely coordinated with advances by Stilwell's First Chinese Army. In essence, Stilwell directed Galahad to conduct a series of deep envelopment operations, wherein the 5307th would march secretly around the right flank of the Japanese and establish blocks directly athwart the single main road in the enemy's rear, but close enough to the forward defenders to be a short-term threat. The plan called for the first blocks to be established at Walawbum in the Hukawng valley (see maps 4 and 5) and the second blocks to be near Shaduzup in the Mogaung valley (see map 6). The third mission of Galahad was to be a surprise attack on the airfield at Myitkyina (see map 7). In all three cases, once Galahad was in position, Stilwell intended to push his Chinese divisions hard against the Japanese, forcing them to divide their attention between his two forces. At the same time as Galahad and the First Chinese Army played this game of hammer and anvil, Stilwell and Slim hoped that the operations of the Special Force would severely degrade Tanaka's ability to sustain his hard-pressed force. During the operation, Galahad was officially under the command of Brigadier General Frank K. Merrill, an old Stilwell hand. Actually, Colonel Charles N. Hunter, the deputy commander, usually directed Galahad in the field due to Merrill's poor health. Indeed, Merrill was evacuated three times during the campaign because of his weak heart.

The area where Galahad and the Chindits operated was a mosaic of rugged hills, saw-toothed ridges, high mountains, and noxious valleys, traversed by many small and large rivers bordered by thick tropical jungle. Few paths and trails existed, and maps often proved unreliable. The jungle included stands of bamboo so thick that a tunnel, instead of a path, had to be hacked out for the columns to pass through. Due to the numerous rivers, the Chindits made hundreds of river crossings, emerging from the water invariably speckled with leeches. During monsoon season, the area became almost impassable. Low ground became inundated and mountain sides so muddy and greasy that men had to crawl up over steps that were laboriously hacked out. The high humidity, constant rain, and high temperatures fostered heat prostration. Moreover, the mosquitos and mites infesting the area carried the germs of malaria and scrub typhus. Operating in this terrain required the highest levels of physical endurance and mental toughness, and every day spent on the march was torture.



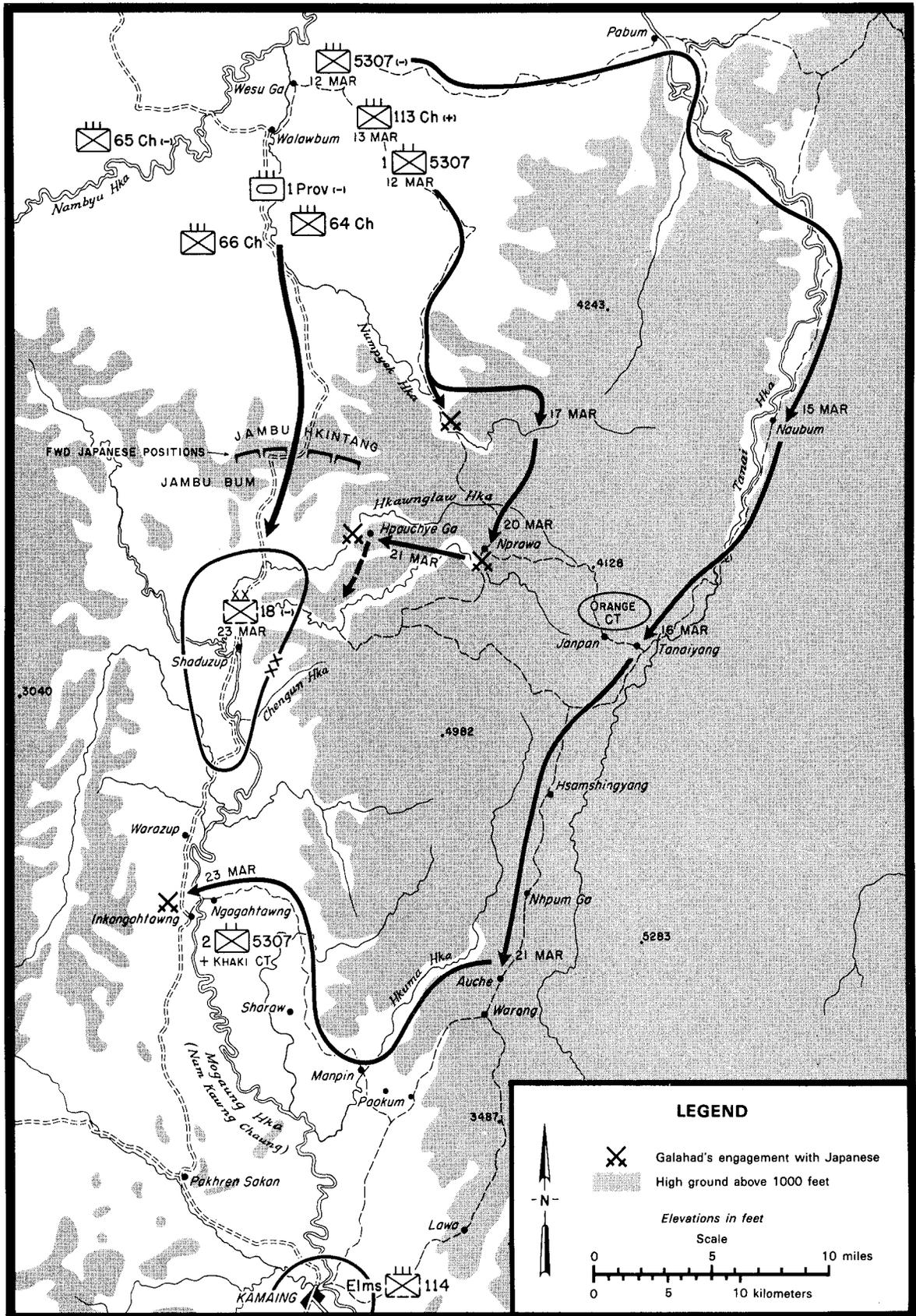
Source: Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 144.

Map 4. Galahad's advance to Walawbum, 23 February—4 March 1944

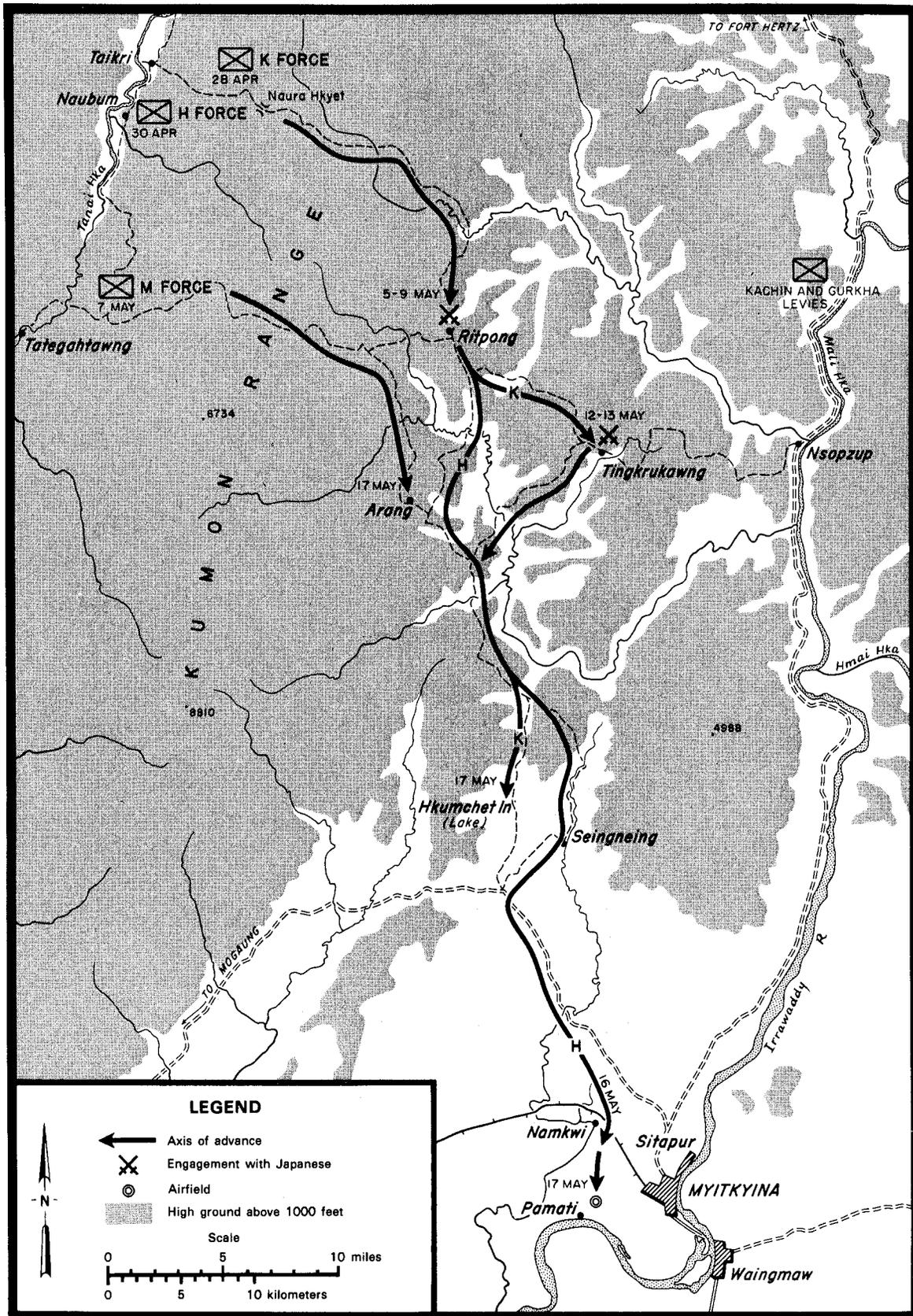


Source: Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 151.

Map 5. The fight at Walawbum, 4-8 March 1944



Source: Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 179.
 Map 6. Galahad at Inkangahtawng, 12-23 March 1944



Source: Romanus and Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems*, 224.

Map 7. Galahad advances to Myitkyina, 28 April—17 May 1944

Organization

Wingate's Chindits, the men who were to enter this menacing environment, were known under several names, but the most commonly used title in 1944 was the Special Force. The 77th Infantry Brigade, employed in Chindit I, was retained for Chindit II. The 77th also provided many of the cadres for the expansion of the new Special Force into six brigades. The 111th and the 3d West African Brigades were organized separately as components of the Special Force, but the 70th Indian Infantry Division, a regular line unit, was broken up into three separate Chindit brigades—the 16th, 14th, and 23d—much to the distress of the old Indian Army bureaucracy. These six brigades were organized with four battalions each, as shown in figure 1. Each battalion was further divided into two columns commanded by the battalion commander and his second in command, respectively, for tactical operations in the jungle (see figure 1).

The Chindits were not elites; they were perfectly ordinary soldiers from perfectly ordinary battalions assigned to Wingate to be prepared for extraordinary tasks. Only 5 percent of this Special Force were volunteers.⁷ Wingate, himself the most unorthodox of British officers, did not believe that a special kind of soldier was required for long-range penetration. Wingate believed that adept jungle fighters could be developed out of any unit through good leadership and training. Speaking about the first Chindit expedition, he declared:

What was it that made these ordinary troops, born and bred for the most part to factories and workshops, capable of feats that would not have disgraced Commandos? The answer is that given imagination and individuality in sufficient quantities, the necessary minimum of training will always produce junior leaders and men capable of beating the unimaginative and stereotyped soldiers of the Axis.⁸

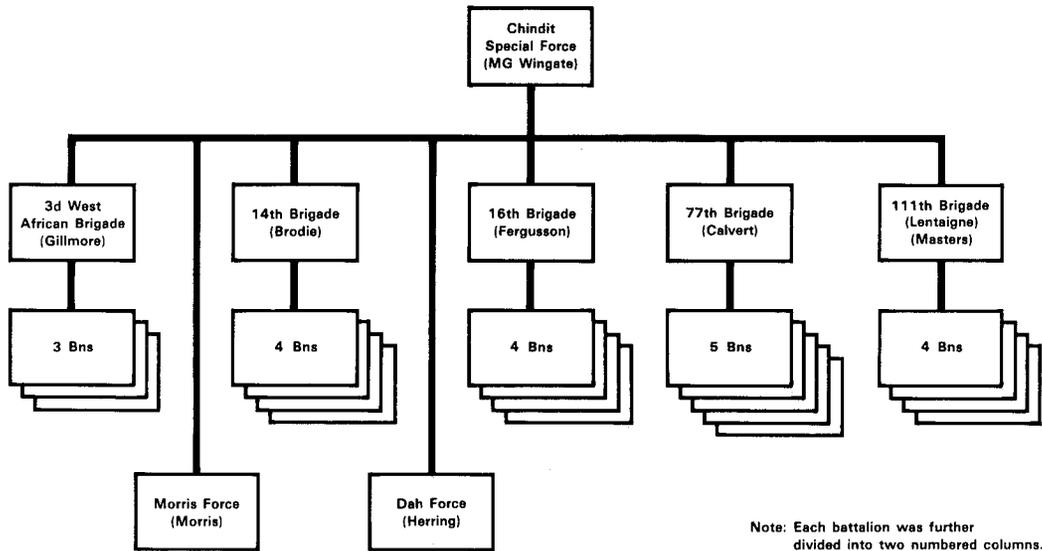


Figure 1. Chindit organization

It is noteworthy that one of the original (1943) Chindit battalions was the 13th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment, a battalion of older men brought up in the urban manufacturing city of Liverpool. Despite their apparent unsuitability for jungle warfare, this battalion fought creditably, although they suffered a higher ratio of casualties than the other two original Chindit battalions.⁹ Similarly, during Chindit II, the many other regular-line infantry battalions (the South Staffords, the Cameronians, the Leicesters, etc.), the Nigerian battalions, and the artillery and armored-car reconnaissance units that were converted into Chindit infantry, all showed a remarkable ability to adapt to the unusual, unorthodox requirements of the jungle. The key to their success was good, hard, relevant training. In fact, these diverse units were converted to Chindit infantry in just twenty weeks.¹⁰

The American Chindit brigade, Galahad, began forming shortly after the Quebec Conference in 1943. Eventually given the awkward (and hated) name of the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional), this brigade comprised 950 men from various Pacific commands, 950 men from the Caribbean Command, and the remainder from stateside units. All were volunteers, and most had actual combat experience or training in jungle warfare. The men were organized into the 1st, 2d, and 3d Battalions and further subdivided, like the Special Force brigades, into two columns, which the Americans, however, chose to call combat teams (see figure 2 and table 1).

As noted earlier, Galahad was composed entirely of volunteers—men who signed on for an undefined mission of hazards and danger. However, these volunteers were unscreened and were not elite soldiers. They formed a wonderful mix of different types: dedicated professional soldiers, authors, intellectuals, criminals, students, and others.¹¹ If there were any unifying

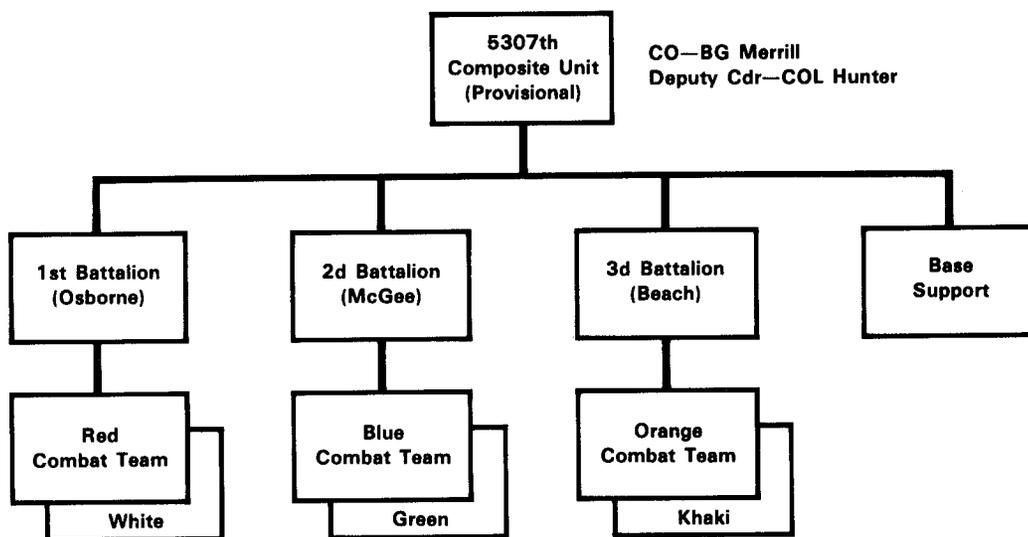


Figure 2. Organization of Galahad

characteristics, perhaps they were a common tactical background in jungle combat or training in jungle warfare and a wanderlust and desire for adventure and danger. The War Department had predicted an 85 percent casualty rate for Galahad before the unit was even formed for the operation.¹² Truly, the volunteers who knew this fact beforehand had undaunted spirits. In any event, the recruitment of the 5307th proceeded, and 3,000 men were quickly assembled and transported to India for organization and training as long-range penetration battalions.

All of the Chindit units were extremely light, being armed solely with small arms (rifles, pistols, light and medium machine guns) and light mortars. Once static blocks or strongholds were established, heavier weapons (40-mm antiaircraft guns, two-pounder antitank (AT) guns, 75-mm howitzers) were flown in for support. When on the march, however, the Chindits carried only what could be man- or mule-packed.

As a participant in the Quebec Conference, the U.S. Army Air Force commander, General "Hap" Arnold, wanted to provide the best possible support to Wingate. Accordingly, he directed the establishment of the No. 1 Air Commando under the command of Colonels Philip Cochran and J. R. Alison. Considered by some to be the most remarkable air fleet of the war, the No. 1 Air Commando comprised 13 C-47 Dakota cargo planes, 12 C-46 transports, 12 B-25 Mitchell bombers, 30 P-51 Mustang fighter-bombers, 100 light planes, 6 helicopters, and 225 Waco gliders.¹³ The Air Commando was a temporary organization, however. It was scheduled to dissolve after ninety days, the time required to support the Special Force. The support of the Air Commando to the Special Force was essential; they could not have survived without it.

Table 1. Battalion Composition

| | Battalion Headquarters | Combat Teams | | Total |
|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------|-------|-------|
| | | No. 1 | No. 2 | |
| Officers | 3 | 16 | 16 | 35 |
| Enlisted men | 13 | 456 | 459 | 928 |
| Aggregate | 16 | 472 | 475 | 963 |
| Animals (horses and mules) | 3 | 68 | 68 | 139 |
| Carbines | 6 | 86 | 89 | 181 |
| Machine guns, heavy | | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Machine guns, light | | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Machine guns, sub | 2 | 52 | 48 | 102 |
| Mortars, 60-mm | | 4 | 6 | 10 |
| Mortars, 81-mm | | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| Pistols* | | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Rifles, Browning automatic | | 27 | 27 | 54 |
| Rifles, M-1 | 8 | 306 | 310 | 624 |
| Rockets | | 3 | 3 | 6 |

*NOTE: By the end of the campaign, many soldiers had acquired pistols as personal close-defense weapons of last resort.

Training

Under the eyes of Wingate and his surviving commanders from Chindit I, both Galahad and the Special Force underwent the same kind of training regimen. There were two primary themes to the Chindit training. The first was physical endurance. One Chindit described the training program as a trial by ordeal.¹⁴ The pace, duration, and intensity of the training were all designed to create and maintain an ultra-high level of stress and physical demands. Wingate's intent was to cut the deadwood early, to make the officers and men prove their ability to suffer and endure. One of the most celebrated Chindit commanders, Brigadier Michael Calvert, noted that three or four of his older commanders dropped out quickly, too old and unfit for the hardships. (They still, nonetheless, lent a helpful hand in the training.) Another brigade commander, John Masters, stated that no one over the age of thirty-five should have been permitted to remain in the organization; the physical stress simply was beyond their capability.¹⁵ The Chindits were loaded with huge seventy-pound packs and marched unmercifully through man-killing jungle terrain.¹⁶ No consideration was given to sickness, minor injury, heat, or weather. Placed on light rations and given little water, the men were pushed beyond the limits they thought they could endure. Such an approach was absolutely necessary. Without it, Chindit casualties would undoubtedly have been higher and effectiveness lower. On finishing their training, the Chindits were given time to recuperate and recover their strength before initiating actual operations. Regenerated, the Chindits crossed into Burma with high morale and supreme confidence.

The second theme of the training was "jungle craft"—a regimen through which Galahad and the Special Force received expert-level training in all the vital skills needed to operate behind the enemy's lines in trackless jungle. This included map reading, jungle navigation, scouting, patrolling, marksmanship, river crossings, watermanship, column marching, infiltration, night operations, terrain appreciation, squad, platoon, and company tactics, covering of tracks, evasion, and defensive operations. In particular, the men developed expert-level skills in map reading and land navigation.¹⁷ Soldiers also trained for hand-to-hand and bayonet combat. In addition, Major General Wingate and Colonel Charles N. Hunter insisted on extensive cross-training: within Galahad, every soldier fired every weapon in the unit; platoon leaders and NCOs trained in artillery and mortar observation and in the use of the unit radios.¹⁸ Should a machine gunner, mortarman, radio operator, or forward observer become a casualty, some other soldier was ready to take his place. Hunter placed his emphasis on platoon tactics, believing that in the jungle, every contact or operation eventually was decided on the basis of the effectiveness of the platoon. The Chindits also focused on individual decision making and initiative.

During the course of the training period, the Chindits also developed painstaking standing operating procedures (SOPs) for operations they frequently performed. Thus, SOPs covered such activities as performing river crossings, preparing landing zones for airdrops, establishing temporary harbors, initiating immediate actions on enemy contact, and establishing trail blocks.¹⁹ Units



Kickers preparing to drop supplies in North Burma

had to be capable of executing these SOPs with clockwork precision and a minimum of orders. A few well-chosen words were sufficient to initiate a whole series of integrated actions based on individual tasks and teamwork.

Furthermore, units that planned to conduct specific kinds of operations received extra training in necessary skills. Thus, the two battalions of the 77th Brigade earmarked to establish a semipermanent block at White City spent fourteen days learning how to dig in deeply, establish overhead cover, emplace wire and minefields, and similar tasks.

The reconnaissance platoons also received a great deal of emphasis. Both Galahad and the Special Force used their best men in these units to provide critical functions regarding intelligence, warning, and surprise. The reconnaissance platoons were the elites of the Chindits, and they needed to be. Each Special Force column included a platoon from the Burma Rifles as their reconnaissance platoon. Calvert believed the Burma Rifles to be the best fighting unit in the Empire. Composed of men formerly residing in prewar Burma, the Burma Rifles knew the terrain, the people, and how to survive in the jungle better than any other regular battalion in the theater. Brave and devoted, the Burma Rifles possessed jungle skills that were exceeded only by the tribal Kachin levies who operated as guerrillas in the far north.

Another area that required special training was the handling of the pack teams. Because the Chindits depended so completely on their mules and horses to carry their heavy radios, ammunition, rations, and other vital supplies, it