

Back to Burma

Stilwell's army has returned to the jungles where the Japs gave him a "hell of a beating" two years ago.



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WITH LT. GEN. STILWELL'S FORCES IN NORTHERN BURMA—"I claim we got a hell of a beating. We got run out of Burma and it is humiliating as hell. I think we should find out what caused it and go back and retake it."

In May 1942 Lt. Gen. Joseph Warren Stilwell made that frank statement after leading a tired, battered band of 103 officers, men and nurses on a 20-day march into India—refugees from the Allied rout in Burma.

Today Stilwell is back in Burma, leading the Chinese-American force driving into the Mogaung Valley, first move in the new Allied offensive in the Far East.

The general's personal guard is S/Sgt. Paul Gish of Wadsworth, Ohio, one of five enlisted men who walked west with Stilwell in 1942 and the only one who is back here walking east with him in 1944.

Stilwell's return to Burma is the result of two years of careful preparation, in which two major projects were developed. One was a Chinese-American training center in India, where U. S. Army officers and picked cadres of enlisted men taught Chinese soldiers the use of American tactics and equipment. The other was the Ledo Road, a supply route from India by which Allied troops moving into northern Burma could be equipped and provisioned. Both of these projects, criticized as impractical, are paying off big dividends today.

Since they began their drive in November 1943, the U. S.-trained Chinese forces have taken part in more than 30 actions and killed more than 2,000 men of Japan's crack 18th Division, victors at Singapore. The Chinese troops have been beaten back only three times, and each time they wiped out the reversal later on.

The most impressive engagement to date is the victory at the Patzi Hka (River), a dinky little stream in northern Burma whose banks are the graveyard for 325 Japs killed there on Jan. 25. Cornered near the foothills of the Wantuk Mountains, only a few of the enemy escaped across the lone trail to Taipha-Ga.

In the Patzi Hka action, one Chinese soldier charged a Jap machine-gun nest that was delaying his unit's advance. Although wounded, he dove into the emplacement and attacked the Jap crew in hand-to-hand fighting. A Jap soldier stuck him with a bayonet, but he was still on his feet and fighting when other Chinese soldiers arrived and helped him silence the gun.

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Another Chinese soldier jumped in an enemy dugout, pulled the pin in his hand grenade and blew himself and three Japs to bits. Still another Chinese fighter, wounded and sent back to a U.S. field hospital, wrote a letter to his father in China, apologizing for having allowed himself to be injured and vowing to return to action as soon as possible.

The advance scouts for Stilwell's troops are Yanks and Burmese natives. The Americans, all volunteers, replaced British personnel in the scouting force a few months ago. They work principally in enemy territory, cutting their own trails through the dense woods to avoid roving Jap patrols.

Lone British hold-over in the scouts is Lt. Col. J. R. Wilson, former Assam tea planter who remained to supervise the transition and now directs the force together with Capt. William Cummings. Cummings, a U. S. Army officer from Newton Center, Mass., was born in Burma, where his father was an American Baptist missionary, and he has spent most of his life here.

Ranking noncom in the scouts is T/Sgt. Joseph Stahl of New Brunswick, N. J., who has learned a lot of jungle secrets—how to build a bamboo lean-to with a banana-leaf roof or how to get drinking water from a bamboo tree. His squad includes S/Sgt. Martin C. Thrailkill of Dallas, Tex.; Cpl. Kenneth Miller of Kansas City, Kans.; Pfc. Edgar Buck of Johnstown, Pa., and Pfc. Howard Van Ardsdale of New York City.

Van Ardsdale is an American who was working in the Far East when the war began, fought in the British Army at Singapore and in the Arakan, was later commissioned and then resigned his lieutenancy to join the U. S. scouts.

Van Arsdale and the other Yank scouts have learned how to use the *dah*, favorite weapon of the natives—a long-bladed knife used to lop off the heads of Jap stragglers on Burma's narrow jungle trails. The tribesmen wear colorful turbans, knee-length skirts known as *longyis* and no shoes. They sling the *dahs* over their bare backs in carved wooden scabbards hung from the left shoulder. They are also expert marksmen with rifles or shotguns.

One of the scout officers, Capt. Peter K. Lutken of Jackson, Miss., went on a mission by himself. Circling around a retreating Jap force moving south down the Hukwang Valley, he reached the new camp site before the enemy, reconnoitered their installations and headed back into the jungles through the enemy lines to report to the advancing Chinese forces. Before he left, he pinned a profane note as an unmistakable calling card on a tree in the center of the enemy camp.

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