

This site is dedicated to the Men and Ladies of the

# BURMA STAR ASSOCIATION

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## Uncommon Misery:

### The 1944-45 Burma Campaign

“War is hell,” General William T Sherman caustically answered when asked to comment on the “glory” of war. The Allied soldiers who grappled with the Japanese in WWII, from the streaming jungles of New Guinea to the razor sharp coral of Tarawa, would quickly agree. But those who fought in Burma would quickly disagree - they were *in* hell.

For the uninitiated, the word “Burma” conjures exotic images of Buddhist shrines, intricate brasswork, water buffaloes, and exotically beautiful women. It’s an attractive image, but the reality is the men who fought in Burma were up against one of the world’s worst climates and some of its most forbidding terrain. They had to scale jagged mountains, hack their way through almost impenetrable jungle, cross swiftly flowing rivers, and pass over dusty plains where temperatures ranged as high as 130 degrees F. Some units had to cut their way through knife-like elephant grass. Others, using “roads”, found their way blocked by mounds of debris pushed up by the Japanese. In the mountains the roads were sometimes so narrow tanks had to creep along with half their tracks hanging over the edge.

In places it rained as much as 15 inches a day, miring soldiers up to their calves in porridge-thick mud. Swarms of black flies drove men to frenzy. After heavy rains trees and bushes became so heavily laden with blood-sucking leeches that one officer described the foliage as looking like a “wheat field waving in the wind”. Vicious, biting, stinging, rapacious insects - from mosquitoes to mites to ticks - descended on the fleshy bounty the warring armies provided them.

Soldiers suffered from malaria, dengue fever, cholera, scabies, yaws, scrub typhus and dysentery. At one point casualties from tropical illness outnumbered those from combat wounds by a ratio of 14:1, with malaria accounting for 90 per cent of the cases.

The character of the Japanese enemy greatly compounded the problem for the Allies - those fanatical fighters almost

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always preferred death to capture. One Japanese sniper, dubbed "little Willie" by the British troops he engaged, fired from a hole in a tree for three weeks, picking off eight officers, despite frantic efforts to get him with mortar and small arms fire. He eventually slipped away unscathed. In another documented incident, Japanese infantry attacked British tanks with nothing more than swords.

Charles Ogburn Jr, a lieutenant with Merrill's Marauders, described his time in Burma as the "worst experience I have ever been through. It was so incomparably the worst that I could hardly believe in it for the rest of my life at all. In a letter to his wife, Gen Joseph Stilwell described the situation as: "Rain, rain, rain. Mud, mud, mud, typhus, malaria, dysentery, exhaustion, rotting feet, body sores."

### **The Climate**

Burma has its rainy season from May to September - the Monsoon. This is rain with a vengeance; in some places as much as 375 inches of rain falls in 12 weeks. It came down so hard at times, that as one veteran put it: "You literally couldn't see your hand in front of your face? The Monsoon turned valleys into lakes; rivers rose 30 feet in a single night; and trails became swathes of ankle'-deep - -mud. Frequently during a downpour the bodies of - *properly* buried fallen soldiers would rise to the surface. The effect of the rain and mud on operations was profound. Flying over the northern part of Burma during the Monsoon season, the Supreme Allied Commander in Southeast Asia, Adm Lord Louis Mountbatten, peered out of the window of his plane and asked what river was below. "That's not a river", answered the American pilot, "it's the Ledo Road". Overland travel slowed to little more than a mile an hour on foot. Units often became isolated. One British officer found it necessary to be ferried by raft from his tent to the camp mess hall a few yards away.

### **The Jungle**

Though the monsoon certainly presented some nightmarish problems, it was not the worst of Burma's tortures. The rain was cool, and the men liked to take off their shirts and let the water run over their insect bites and sores. The really bad part came after the rain stopped. In the sweltering jungle, the temperature climbed steadily every day and the humidity grew to be overpowering. Fungi and bacteria multiplied, breeding rot and disease. Even healthy soldiers found breathing difficult, and sleep became almost impossible. Bamboo groves were in places so thick units were dominated by elephant grass, usually at least as tall as a man.

"You never knew from one moment to the next when

you'd run into the Japanese," wrote Ogburn. Soldiers lived in constant agonising anticipation of a sniper's bullet, and were so jittery an entire battery of artillery might be called in to eliminate a solitary sniper.

The terrors of the jungle left indelible marks on the men in Burma. Many came down with "jungle happiness". When they returned to civilian life they found themselves ill at ease around crowds and bright lights and sometimes even their family and friends.

### **Disease**

The men not only had to contend with Burma's physical obstacles, but its abundant microscopic life as well. The jungles of Burma are host to virtually every tropical disease known in the world. Living and fighting in the mud and water, American, Chinese and Japanese came down with trench foot, jungle rot an ailment called Naga Sores - painful ulcers that sometimes ate through to the bone.

By far the most common and deadliest sickness was malaria. It is caused by a single-celled organism called *Plasmodium* (there are four varieties) and is transmitted from person to person by mosquitoes. The disease causes fever, chills, sweats and swelling of the spleen and liver and kills up to 20 per cent of its victims. The patient is prostrated for days or weeks at a time. Malaria swept through all the units engaged on both sides. At one point the British were evacuating 120 men per day due to malaria, compared to ten due to wounds.

Scrub typhus - a mite-borne variant of louse-borne typhus was prevalent as well. Occurring in epidemic fashion, the disease causes a pneumonia-like illness and fever of about 14 days duration.

During the 44-45 campaign, the British 14th Army suffered some 5,400 cases of scrub typhus, of which about 10 per cent ended in death. At the same time, US forces suffered 6,685 cases, of which 243 were fatal. But overall Allied losses to this disease were actually lower than had been expected because of the liberal use of DDT. The rate of illness and death among the insecticide-less Japanese is unknown, but must have been higher.

During the siege of Myitkyina, 80 per cent of US forces there had dysentery. Some cases were so acute the men cut their pant-seats open to be able to relieve themselves instantly. Between 75-100 Maruders were evacuated out daily. Under pressure to keep men in the line, medical officers refused to evacuate any man who had not run a fever of 102 degrees for three consecutive days and had not passed a review board of doctors certifying his illness.

Manpower shortages became so acute that those still on their feet had to serve long stretches without respite, some finally falling from sheer exhaustion. At the same time, Stilwell's staff began placing enormous pressure on rear area hospitals to return all sick and wounded capable of bearing arms. Convalescents were dragooned and shipped back to the fighting over the objections of the doctors. On one occasion angry physicians literally chased after such a truck convoy bound for the front, forcing it to turn back.

Another group of convalescents shipped back to Myitkyina were found to be in such poor shape on arrival that they had to be immediately turned round and re-evacuated.

Conditions at the hospitals, when the men could get there, were almost as bad as those at the front. The convalescent camp at Margherita, in Assam, was located in a pasture described by its inmates as a "pest-hole". The bamboo buildings were collapsing from the ravages of insects. Wards were overcrowded and had dirt floors. In the wet months, when the rains would stop temporarily, according to Ogburn, "It was like the inside of a tea-kettle".

Burma has been called the "forgotten theatre" of World War II. But those who fought there would never forget the hell it was.

David Tschanz

*This article from an unknown source was sent to the Countess Mountbatten by a US Burma Star, William Houpt 1st American Branch.*