

OVER the HILLS and FAR AWAY:

The MARS Task Force, the Ultimate Model for Long Range Penetration Warfare

By Troy J. Sacquety





One of the great military engineering projects, the Ledo Road bypassed the Japanese controlled part of the Burma Road, to permit the delivery of supplies to besieged China.

The China-Burma-India Theater (CBI) is almost forgotten in WWII history. However, the Theater—especially operations in Burma—is still very relevant for ARSOF. The several special operations legacy units that served there provided lessons that remain current. Because of the difficult operating environment all U.S. ground combat forces slated for Burma were uniquely organized and specifically mission-oriented. Two of these units, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Detachment 101 and the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional), more commonly known as Merrill's Marauders, have received considerable recognition for their accomplishments. However, another Army special operations legacy unit, the 5332nd Brigade (Provisional), known as the MARS Task Force, has not. This article "introduces" that unit to *Veritas* readers with a brief overview of its organizational structure, subordinate units, and campaign history. But, why were Long Range Penetration Groups (LRPG) needed in Burma?

A Unique Mission

From the outset, Burma presented a challenge for the United States Army. The British were in charge of operations in the country because it was their former colony. In north Burma, the U.S.-led Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC) had a small force of mostly Chinese troops. These were nominally under American control. Burma was one of the most difficult geographical environments in WWII and a lack of resources plagued operations. NCAC had to clear the area so that it could build a bypass—the Ledo Road—from Ledo, India to the portion of the Burma Road not controlled by the Japanese. Otherwise, all supplies into China had to arrive by air. Secondly, the Allies wanted to keep the bulk of the Japanese ground forces engaged in mainland Asia because the main advance against Tokyo was across the Pacific islands. To keep the bulk of the Japanese Army fixed, the Nationalist Chinese Army had to have desperately needed supplies to constitute a viable threat.

Although the effort was insufficient, the air bridge from India to Kunming, China supplied vital resources until the Ledo Road was complete. Japanese fighter aircraft based at Myitkyina, Burma were a major threat for Allied cargo planes flying the "Hump" route. This forced the unarmed aircraft to fly a longer and more dangerous course. Clearing higher passes in the Himalayas and the additional distance meant that aircraft carried less cargo. To secure the trace of the Ledo Road and make the Hump flights more effective, Myitkyina had to be taken from the Japanese. It was for this reason that the U.S. Army formed the GALAHAD Force [nicknamed Merrill's Marauders after their commander Brigadier General (BG) Franklin D. Merrill], the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional).

The 3,000-man Marauders started their penetration campaign in February 1944 and by late May, secured Myitkyina's airfield. Three grueling months in the Burmese jungle, numerous sharp engagements, and disease—typhus, malaria, and dysentery—considerably reduced the strength of the LRPG. They were not strong enough to capture the city of Myitkyina by themselves and the attached Chinese units did not help. Even though the Marauders were already spent, they remained Lieutenant General (LTG) Joseph W. Stilwell's only American ground combat force in NCAC. Politically, he could not withdraw the unit to rest and refit. As American replacements arrived in theater, LTG Stilwell committed them, and others hastily scraped together from in-theater personnel to the siege of Myitkyina.

Replacements, often poorly trained for the mission, were derisively dubbed "New GALAHAD" by the dwindling veterans, even as they changed the image of the Marauders. But, they kept an American presence on the battlefield. The new arrivals quickly became combat veterans as the Allied noose was tightened



China-Burma-India SSI



MARS Task Force Patch



Merrill's Marauders Patch



Chindit Patch

around Myitkyina. Even so, by the time the city fell in early August, the Marauders (old and new GALAHAD) were combat-ineffective. The remainder, still fit, became the core for the newly activated 475th Infantry Regiment (Long Range Penetration, Special). NCAC created the 3,100-man unit on 5 August 1944 at Myitkyina and relocated it to nearby Camp Robert W. Landis for combat training on the banks of the Irrawaddy River ten miles north of Myitkyina.[1] Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) William L. Osborne, a former Marauder and veteran of the 1941-42 Philippines campaign, took command of the regiment, a part of the lineage of the 75th Ranger Regiment.[2] The 475th Infantry was just one of the major components that made up the second LRPG created specifically for service in Burma, the MARS Task Force.

The MARS Task Force

NCAC activated the 5332nd Brigade (Provisional), the MARS Task Force, on 26 July 1944 under the command of BG Thomas A. Arms.[3] After a motor vehicle accident, he was replaced by BG John P. Willey on 31 October 1944.[4] The second component for the 5332nd, the 124th Cavalry Regiment (Special), a federalized Texas National Guard unit of 2,700 men, arrived at Ramgarh, India in late August 1944. As one of the last horse cavalry units, the 124th was formed in 1929 and saw extensive service patrolling the Texas-Mexico Border and maintaining order in the Texas oilfields. After Executive Order No. 8594 federalized the unit on 18 November 1940, it moved to Fort Bliss, TX. The 124th continued to patrol the Mexican Border until April 1944 (Mexico did not declare war on the Axis Powers until May 1942). The U.S. Army sent the unit to Fort Riley, KS, and ordered it to dismount. Mules replaced horses because only they had the mobility needed for Burma.[5] Despite being cavalry without horses, the unit retained "squadrons" instead of battalions and "troops" instead of companies. After the fall of Myitkyina, the unit moved to Camp Landis, Burma to join elements of the 475th Infantry.[6]

The 1st Chinese Regiment (Separate), commanded by Colonel Lin Kuan-hsiang, was to be the third combat component of the MARS Task Force. Like the 124th Cavalry, it had been schooled in LRPG tactics at the Ramgarh Training Center.[7] Although assigned on paper to the MARS Task Force, in reality, it was the NCAC reserve and never fought with the 5332nd.[8] Thus, the MARS Task Force organized as a brigade with two combat teams. However, unlike the 5307th, the 5332nd was made self-sufficient with attached supporting units. The largest of these were two mule pack field artillery battalions (FAB) of approximately 460 men each; the 612th and 613th FAB (Pack). They were a natural choice for MARS and among the few artillery formations designed from the start to be part of an Army Special Operations unit. *(Article continues on page 6)*



The MARS Task Force trained at Camp Robert W. Landis before setting out on combat operations in late 1944.

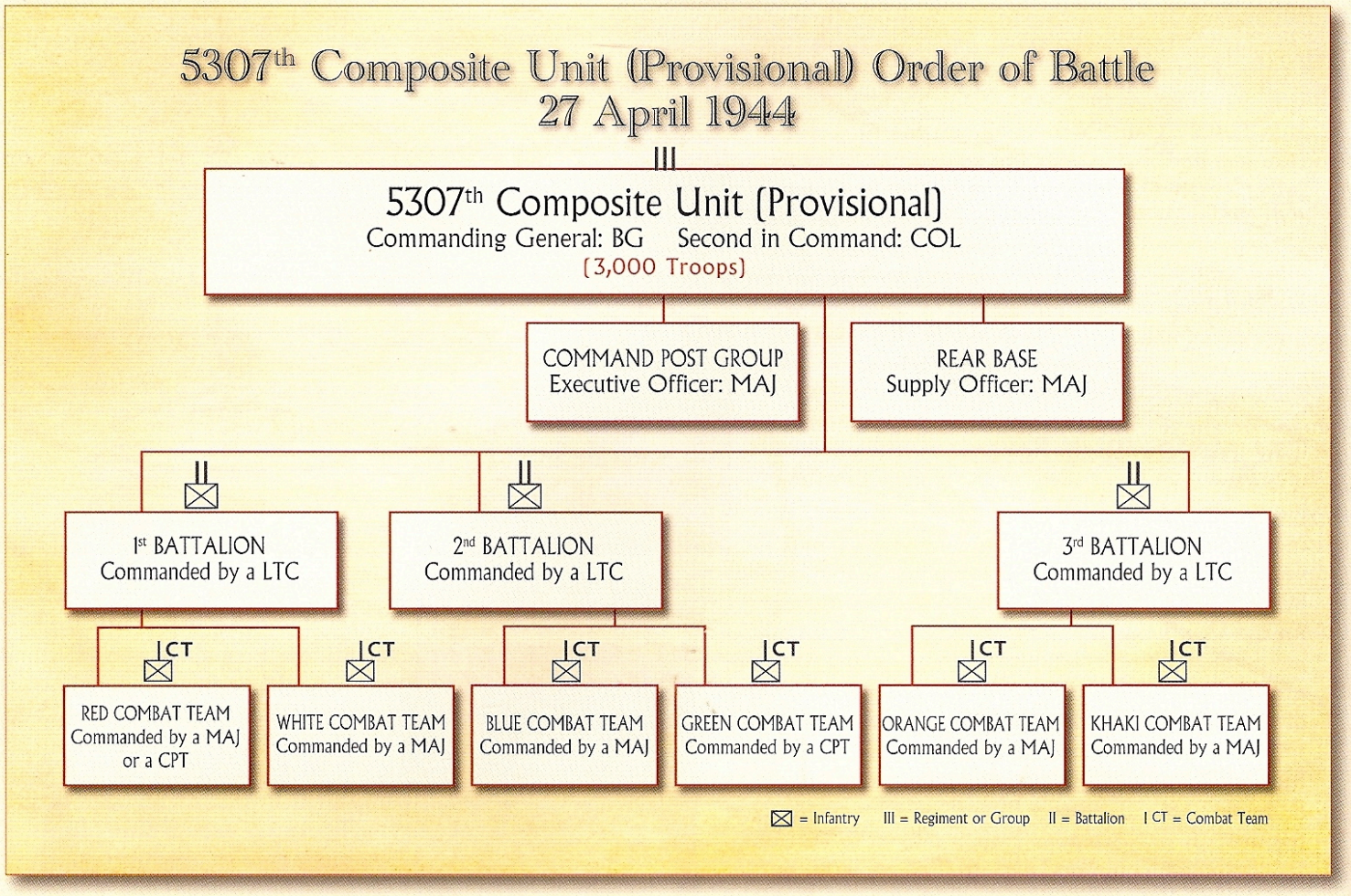


Brigadier General John P. Willey commanded the MARS Task Force in the field.



The 124th Cavalry was a Texas National Guard unit in Federal Service. Although replacements thinned the ranks, a large percentage of the men were Texans.

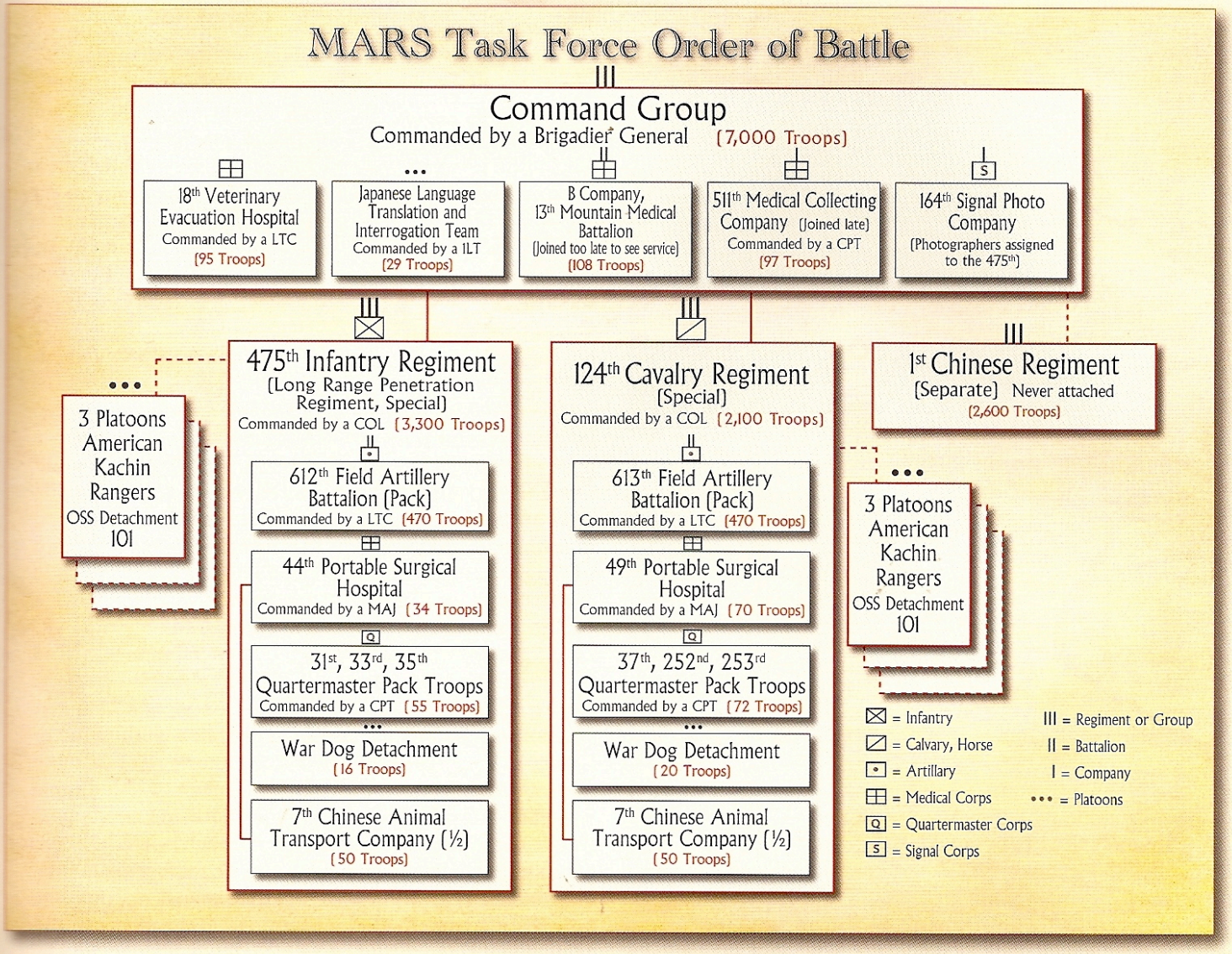
GALAHAD and the MARS Task Force:
Two Vastly Different LRPGs for Burma



The U.S. Army modeled GALAHAD, the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional), after a British LRPG dubbed the "Chindits." In mid-1942 British Major General Orde C. Wingate formed the Chindits to operate deep within Japanese held-territory. The British followed the first Chindit operation in early 1943 with a second in 1944 that coincided with NCAC's push for Myitkyina. It was in that push that Merrill's Marauders got "bloodied" in combat. Originally conceived to serve as the American component of MG Wingate's Chindit command, the 5307th organized along British lines; three light battalions, each subdivided into two color-designated combat teams.[1] Like the Chindits, the entire force ranged well ahead of Allied lines and received resupply by airdrop alone. Entering the field as an independent unit, however, the Marauders' organization proved unsatisfactory and the first American LRPG encountered a steep learning curve. The absence of artillery and the lack of coordination with local guerrillas were most noteworthy. Both became necessities when the Japanese surrounded the 2nd Battalion at Nhpum Ga in April 1944.

With no organic artillery the Marauders were outgunned by the Japanese until aircraft dropped two 75mm M1 pack howitzers to the 2nd Battalion. Improvised crews, made up of Marauders who had served with the 98th Field Artillery Battalion (Pack) on New Guinea, manned the guns. The two howitzers helped counter the Japanese artillery at Nhpum Ga, and provided much needed artillery support during the two month siege of Myitkyina.

Another shortcoming was the Marauders' lack of coordination with the local guerrillas. Kachin tribesmen organized and armed by Detachment 101 of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) were a significant combat force in the Marauder area of operations. Although BG Merrill knew about Detachment 101, he did not capitalize on their talents.[2] It would be the acting commander, Colonel Charles N. Hunter, who praised the Kachins and credited them with "saving over two-thirds of Merrill's forces." They warned the unsuspecting American force of the Japanese counterattack that created the siege of Nphum Ga. Afterwards, the Kachins became an integral part of the Marauders.[3] Other problems plagued the Marauders.



Drastic rates of death and incapacitation from disease were unanticipated. Mobile medical facilities would have helped as would have additional veterinary care for their mules. The lessons of the Marauders were integrated into the MARS Task Force structure. The unit "was able to profit by the experience of Wingate's Raiders [Chindits] and Merrill's Marauders in Burma jungle operations."[4]

As the second LRPG created for Burma, the 5332nd Brigade (Provisional) did not resemble the Marauders, even though it was a successor unit. MARS addressed in duplicate the deficiencies in GALAHAD's organization. Both regimental combat teams had organic field artillery, medical, and quartermaster units, and three platoons of Kachins detailed from the OSS to serve as an intelligence and reconnaissance force.[5] The headquarters controlled veterinary, additional medical, and a small element capable of interrogating Japanese prisoners and translating captured documents. These were not the only differences.

Size wise, the MARS Task Force, of nearly 7,000 men was twice as big as the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional) of 3,000 men.[6] Had the 1st Chinese Regiment (Separate) ever joined the unit, the MARS Task Force would have been the size of a light division. Using the lessons learned from the Marauders, the MARS Task Force was designed to be the model of an ideal LRPG for Burma, with artillery, support, and medical facilities integral to all maneuver elements.

Endnotes

1 *Merrill's Marauders* (Washington D.C: Military Intelligence Division, U.S. War Department, 1945), 12-13; Charlton Ogburn, Jr., *The Marauders* (New York: Harper, 1959), 15.

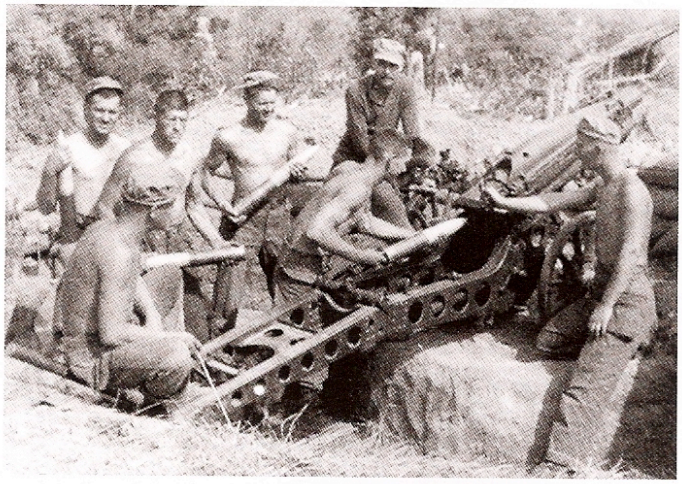
2 For more on the OSS Detachment 101 role in the Myitkyina Campaign, see "A Special Forces Model: Detachment 101 in the Myitkyina Campaign Part I" *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History* 4 (1): 30-47 (2008); and "A Special Forces Model: Detachment 101 in the Myitkyina Campaign Part II" *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History* 4 (3): 38-53 (2008).

3 "KNOTHEAD GROUP," [March-May 1944], F 48, B 38, E 190, RG 226, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD; Anonymous, *Merrill's Marauders* (Washington DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1990), 96-97.

4 LTC Ralph E. Baird, "Narrative History – 5332d Brigade (Prov), copies provided by the USAJFKSWCS Archive and the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

5 John Randolph, *MARSmen in Burma* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri-Columbia, 1990), 33-40.

6 Numerical breakdown of the MARS Task Force, provided by the Mr. Randall Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.



An M1 75 mm pack howitzer with its 613th FAB crew.



The Field Artillery received its ammunition in clover-arranged tubes of three, that were packed three to a mule. Each gun had at least a basic load of twenty-seven rounds at all times.

Activated at Camp Gruber, OK, on 17 December 1943 and filled by personnel from nine different U.S. Army posts, the 612th Field Artillery (Pack) trained at Camp Carson, CO, before it shipped out for Bombay, India.[9] There, on 26 August 1944, one of the artillerymen commented on the crowded waterfront and wrote, "If all of India is like this I know I am not going to like it."[10] He did not have much time to find out. Elements of the 612th reached Camp Landis on 19 September, but the rest trickled in through early November. On 12 November LTC Severn T. Wallis assumed command and the 612th was attached to the 475th Infantry Regiment shortly afterwards.[11]

The 613th FA had also been activated at Camp Gruber, OK on the same date, under the command of LTC James F. Donovan.[12] With personnel from Fort Bragg, NC, and Camp Carson, CO, the 613th trained at Camp Carson before following its sister unit across the Pacific. It arrived in India on 23 November and six days later was engaged in jungle training at Camp Landis, Burma and attached to the 124th Cavalry.[13]

The organization of the 612th and 613th FABs was identical. Each battalion had four batteries; A, B, C, and Headquarters and Service (H/S). The firing batteries, A, B, and C, had four 75 mm pack howitzers each. A single firing battery supported a battalion in the 475th or a squadron in the 124th. The firing batteries had a Detail and Service Section and four Gun Sections, led by a Sergeant. Corporals served as gunners and there were five Private First Class cannoneers in each howitzer crew. Cannoneers had specific jobs: the #1 man assisted the Gunner with elevation and fired the howitzer (pulled the lanyard); #2 man loaded and unloaded the gun, #3 and #4 men set the fuse and proper charge for range, and #5

1st Section, C Battery, 612th Field Artillery fires at Japanese positions near the Burma Road, 19 January 1945. Standing at left is SGT George Hasse, while (L to R) PFCs John Elliot and Stan Eddy kneel at the gun trail.





Unlike Merrill's Marauders, each regiment in the MARS Task Force and the 5332nd Brigade Headquarters had attached mobile medical units. The 44th Portable Surgical Hospital seen above supported the 475th Infantry Regiment.

man adjusted the direction of fire by moving the trail of the howitzer to the correct compass azimuth. Ten other privates served as mule drivers that packed/unloaded the guns and ammunition.[14] Muleskinner Corporal Phillip Sparn, C Battery, 613th FAB, recalled that "we took care of that mule better than we did ourselves."[15]

In addition to artillery, a host of smaller units were attached. Critical to the 5332nd were the Army Quartermaster Mule Teams. By providing additional pack support beyond those mules supporting each regiment and FAB, the Quartermaster units increased the quantity of supplies that the MARS Task Force carried, allowing it to conduct independent operations longer. Initially, mules were a novelty to many of the soldiers, although that quickly changed. One muleskinner, SGT Ernie Mutch, said "When it comes to eatin' and sleeping with 'em, I lose my affection damn fast."[16] Despite some dissatisfaction associated with the mules, they proved invaluable in Burma. The MARS brigade-wide standard of one mule leader per animal meant that the mule trains moved very efficiently, if a bit unwieldy and slowly. The 3,000 mules in the 5332th—all shipped from the United States—made the Task Force largely self-sufficient.[17]

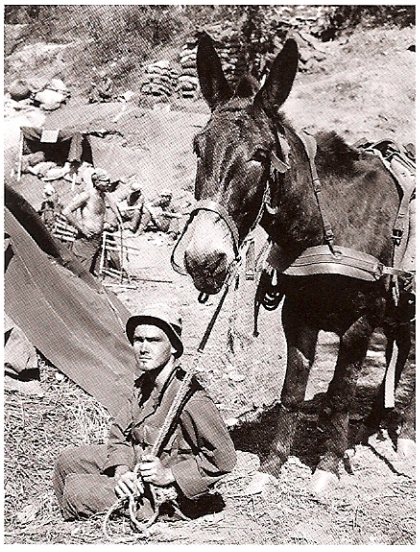
Smaller units had specific functions. Each regiment had a section of "war dogs." Twenty enlisted men and nineteen dogs were attached to the 124th and sixteen men and dogs to the 475th.[18] Each regiment had a mobile medical facility assigned to take care of the sick and wounded while deep in Japanese territory. The Task Force headquarters controlled veterinary and other medical units, as well as photographers and *Nisei* translators. Civil Affairs tasks, such as paying cash for war damaged crops, were handled by Captain Terrance Carroll, a British officer from NCAC headquarters.[19] The



The MARS Task Force had sections of "war dogs" assigned to both the 475th Infantry Regiment and the 124th Cavalry Regiment.

After the USAAF dropped supplies to the MARS Task Force, the soldiers then had to repack the material onto the mules. Special harnesses helped distribute the loads on the mule's back to prevent injury and fatigue.





Private First Class James L. Miller, L Company, 3rd Battalion, 475th Infantry, rests with his mule prior to climbing a steep grade on 10 February 1945. Carrying the majority of the unit's supplies, mules were critical to MARS Task Force operations.



Civil Affairs officer British Captain Terence Carroll, assigned to NCAC, pays local villagers for war damage caused by the MARS Task Force.



Japanese-American *Nisei* assisted the MARS Task Force by translating captured documents or interrogating prisoners. Although assigned to the command group, they served in each of the two regiments.



10th Army Air Force SSI

only outside support came from the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) 10th Air Force.

Since the Japanese lost air superiority over Burma after Myitkyina, this enabled the MARS Task Force to exploit its LRPG capabilities to the utmost. NCAC supplied the MARSmen by air dropping food and ammunition by parachute every three days.[20] In addition to aerial resupply, the USAAF also evacuated the sick and wounded of MARS. The unit would not simply leave their casualties behind as the British had in their 1943 Chindit operation. Light liaison aircraft like the Stinson L-1 Vigilant and the Stinson L-5 Sentinel performed medical evacuations. Although small and limited to one or two wounded at a time, their ability to take off and land on short improvised runways made them ideal. Sick and injured had only to stay in the field until a suitable landing site was found. A critical support element for MARS came from the indigenous population.



Once a place was found on which to land a light plane, wounded and sick soldiers were evacuated by air to hospitals in the rear.

MARSmen had to reduce obstacles on potential landing strips while on the march so that wounded or sick soldiers could be evacuated. Here, local roofing material followed by earth, was used to cover a trench.





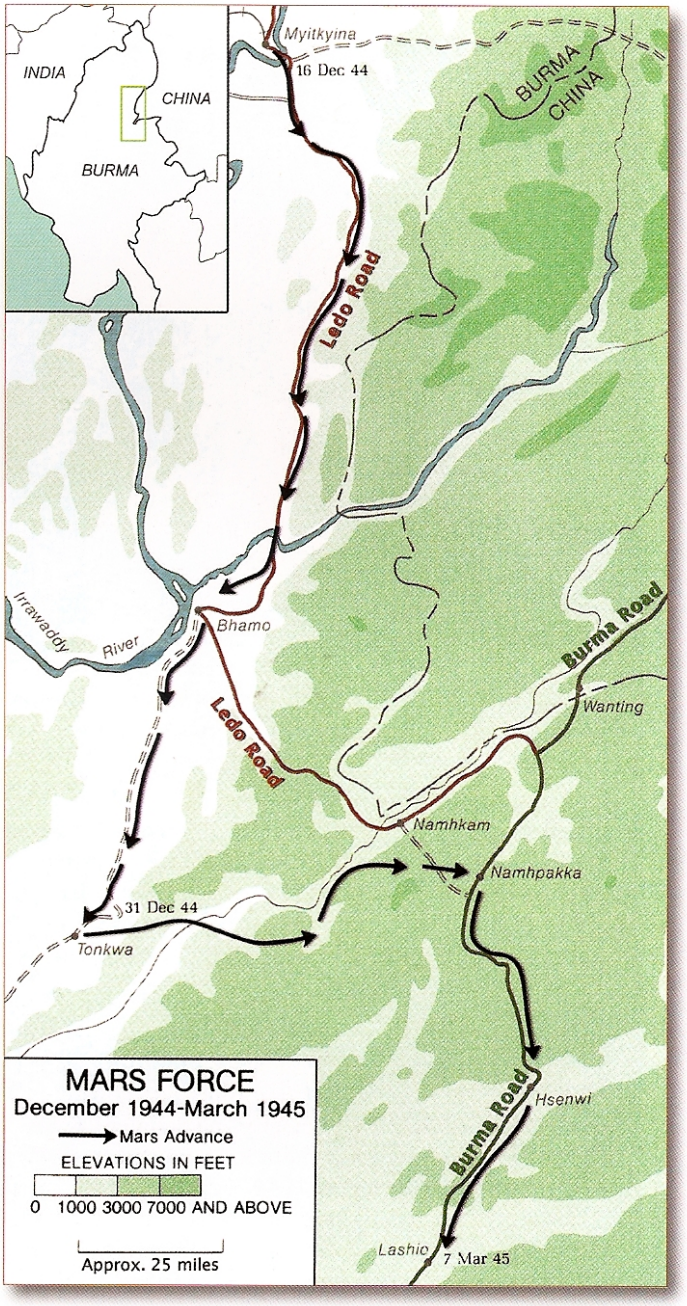
Casualty evacuation by air was not foolproof as shown by this wreckage of an L-5 near Namhkam, Burma on 20 January 1945. Uneven and improvised landing fields claimed many aircraft.



Although the majority of wounded were evacuated safely once airborne, not all were. Four men had to be rescued from this overloaded L-1.



The Kachin tribesmen of OSS Detachment 101 (Jingpaw Rangers) provided valuable service to the MARS Task Force. They scouted ahead of the main body, identifying drop zones and warning of enemy forces.

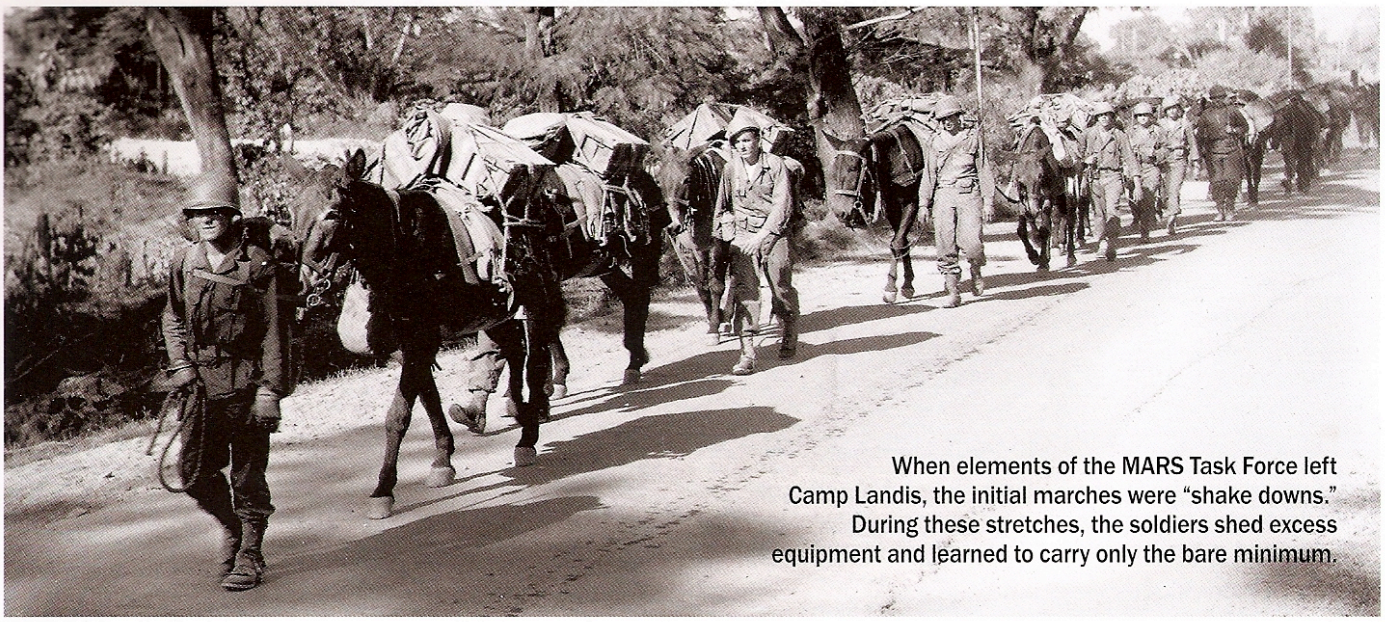


Route of the MARS Task Force in Burma, December 1944-March 1945.



Detachment 101 Patch

Although not assigned or attached, three platoons of OSS Detachment 101-led Kachin tribesmen acted as intelligence and reconnaissance scouts for each regiment. Originally created for intelligence collection and sabotage in Japanese-controlled Burma, Detachment 101 expanded its capability to conduct guerrilla warfare. With recruits primarily from the Kachin tribes of north Burma, the OSS had a distinct advantage over the Japanese and ambushes were invariably deadly. In addition, the unit supplied tactical intelligence to the USAAF for bombing missions. The Kachins scouted at least a day ahead of the MARS main body. In doing so, they located Japanese troop concentrations, drop zones, and medical evacuation strips.



When elements of the MARS Task Force left Camp Landis, the initial marches were "shake downs." During these stretches, the soldiers shed excess equipment and learned to carry only the bare minimum.



Private Charles H. Pelsor, E Company, 2nd Battalion, 475th Infantry, fires a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) at Japanese near Tonkwa on 15 December 1944.



Corporal Tony S. Damiano shows Private Joseph P. Knoapack Christmas stockings he received in a package from home, 20 December 1944, Tonkwa, Burma.

With these elements assigned and attached, the MARS Task Force was combat-ready after a relatively short training period. The 475th Infantry began moving south into Japanese-controlled Burma in late November 1944. The 124th Cavalry followed them out of Camp Landis in mid-December. On these early marches soldiers shed excess equipment and learned to carry only what was needed to live in the field, though special things were occasionally hidden in a mule load. The MARS Task Force campaign consisted of three phases: first, the march from Camp Landis to the first combat at Tonkwa; second, the mission to cut the Burma Road; and third, the movement to serve as instructors in the Chinese Combat Command.

MARS Enters the Field

The march south from Camp Landis on 17 November ended at Tonkwa for the 475th, supported by the 612th FAB. They had been ordered by NCAC to help the Chinese envelop Tonkwa. From 12 to 24 December, the 612th FAB assisted the 475th by firing approximately 2500 shells on enemy positions.[21] The 475th was first "bloodied" at Tonkwa. Private First Class Richard W. Hale, who experienced a *banzai* charge, said, "The [Japanese] made a mistake by preceding their attack with a ten-minute artillery barrage, so we were more than ready for them . . . The charging Japanese ran into a firestorm of .30 caliber bullets. I do not know how many of the 220 Japanese dead at Tonkwa we killed that night, but they broke off that action and never tried it again against our portion of the perimeter."[22] After helping to weaken the Japanese hold on Tonkwa, the Chinese 50th Division managed to occupy the town during the British drive in Central Burma. This forced the enemy to retreat south, ceding the area to the Allies.[23] After Tonkwa, the MARS Task Force was ordered to intercept retreating Japanese forces by cutting the Burma Road near Nampakka, Burma, close to where the Ledo Road intersected it. It was also the site of a large enemy ammunition dump. For Phase Two, the

475th joined the 124th, which had left Camp Landis on 16 December 1944 headed for Nampakka.

Cutting the Burma Road deep in enemy-held territory was critical for several reasons. First, it hindered Japanese lines of communication to their forces north of the block, forcing the enemy to retreat, freeing all convoys traveling the now completed Ledo Road from Japanese interference. Second, NCAC hoped to goad reluctant Chinese forces into action by placing an American force deep inside Japanese territory—an attempt to embarrass them into resuming the offensive. Third, securing the area lessened the Japanese threat to the rear of British forces in the west who were driving south into Central Burma. During the Second Phase, the MARS Task Force validated its mission as a long range penetration unit.



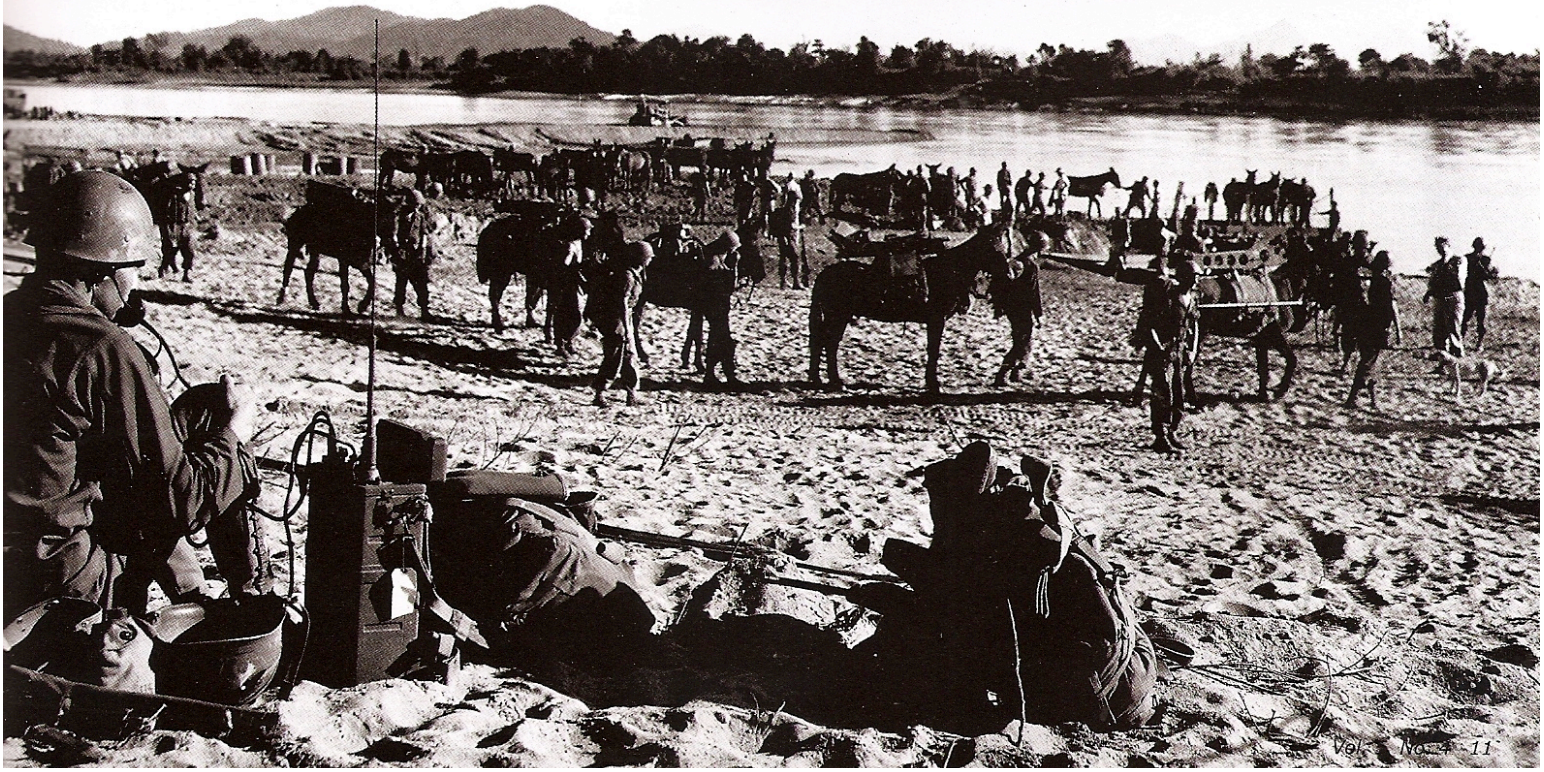
This photograph shows the terrain that the MARS Task Force traversed in order to reach the Burma Road. It took a whole day for a single battalion to pass any given point.

All resupply came by air because the route of march traversed some of the most difficult terrain in the world. The official U.S. Army history stated, "The men would peer ahead and look out across



Because they were plentiful, MARSmen used parachutes to make life as comfortable as possible. This soldier uses a silk parachute as a foxhole liner.

Once the MARS Task Force entered enemy territory, its only link for outside assistance was by radio.

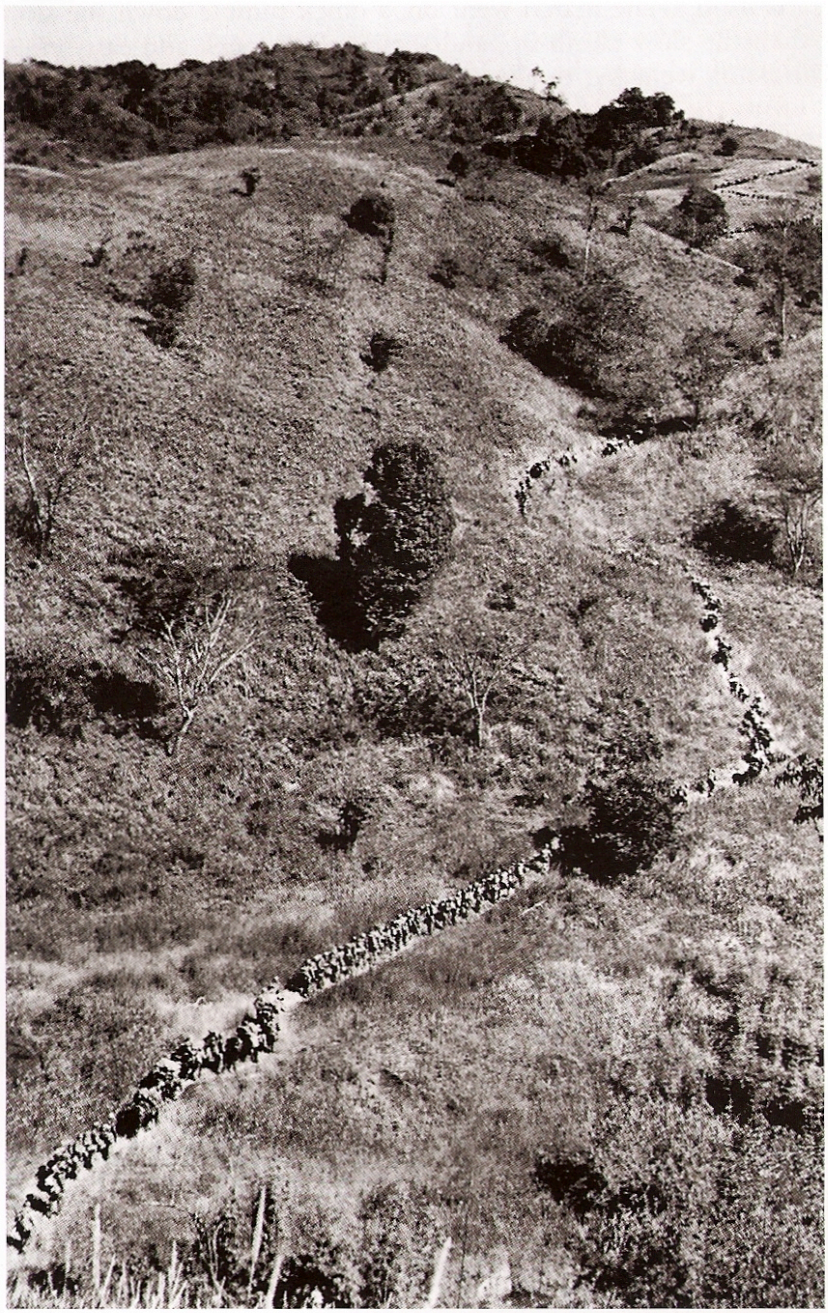




MARSmen cross the swollen Shweli River on 2 March 1945. Soon after, heavy rains threatened to sweep the "bridge" away. Mules were unpacked and led across one at a time while the men carried the supplies.



If a mule lost its footing and went over the side of the trail, the unfortunate muleskinner was duty-bound to retrieve the animal if it were still alive, or to salvage the load if not.



When on the march, the MARS Task Force columns stretched for several miles. Because the trails were often narrow, the 7,000 men and 3,000 mules had to travel single-file.

the valleys to where lay row on row of hills, like the waves of a frozen sea."[24] Marching up the steep mountains and back down into the valleys was so exhausting that at times one or two minutes of climbing was followed by five minutes of rest. One particularly hard day the Task Force only managed to march three and a half miles.[25] Trails were so narrow and precipitous that fully-loaded mules occasionally toppled over the side. When that occurred, MARSmen climbed down to collect the lost supplies, and bring the mule back to the column if it was alive, or to shoot it on the spot if it was too injured to do so. Fortunately, few mules were lost. The intermittent rain plagued the 124th and its attached units because they were following the 475th column. Trails became mud slides. At the Shweli River, the trail down was so steep and muddy that it was nicknamed the "Shweli Slide" because once you started down it "there was no stopping until we hit the bottom," recalled John Randolph, who chronicled the campaign in *MARSmen in Burma.*[26]

"We crossed some of the roughest country in the world, and after seventeen days of marching, we arrived at the Burma Road," wrote one 612th FAB soldier in his diary.[27] Still, they managed to surprise the Japanese 4th Regiment on 17 January 1945. Then, in a scene reminiscent of the Battle of Gettysburg during the American Civil War some eighty years before, both sides rushed to secure the high ground. Unbeknownst to the MARS Task Force, the Japanese had nearly 11,500 men in the area (the entire 56th Division, the 168th and 4th Regiments, and the regimental-sized Yamakazi Detachment).[28] Outside combat

assistance for MARS came from American airpower. Fortunately, the Japanese were intent on withdrawing their forces south to fight the British at Mandalay. Putting a noose on the Burma Road was a serious problem.

The MARS Task Force secured elevated positions looking down on the Burma Road, but, the Japanese managed to keep the Americans from cutting the roadbed. The Americans could only block the road temporarily with artillery fire and occasional ambushes. Fierce Japanese opposition limited maneuver. It became a knockdown fight for control of the heights overlooking the road, with the MARS Task Force also forced to protect the rear area drop and evacuation zones.

On 17 January, the 475th had captured its first positions. This permitted the 612th Field Artillery to interdict enemy traffic with its pack howitzers, forcing the Japanese units to use the road only at night. By the next day, the Japanese had recovered. From positions overlooking the Americans, observers called in larger caliber artillery to reach the drop zones. It took several days before pack howitzers firing at maximum range and the USAAF reduced the threat. Blockage of the Burma Road was having an effect.

On 21 January, MARS Task Force patrols encountered the Chinese 114th Regiment, which had begun to push south. For the next week, the MARS Task Force patrolled on the west side of the road and tried to interdict Japanese traffic with artillery fire. With their forces in full retreat along the Burma Road and adjacent trails, the Japanese goal became to prevent the Task Force and nearby Chinese from cutting off their escape. Both regiments of the 5332nd were hard pressed. The 2nd Battalion, 475th Infantry struggled to seize Loi-Kang hill and the village on top. It took two battalions to push the enemy off the hill. The 124th Cavalry faced similar obstacles.

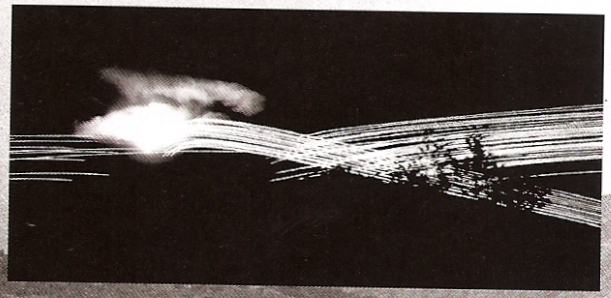
(Article continues on page 15)



Soldiers of the 475th Infantry attempt to capture Loi-Kang hill on 17 January 1945. Stubborn Japanese resistance prevented their success until much later.



An observer from the 612th FAB calls in artillery on Japanese positions along the Burma Road, 19 January 1945.



The MARS Task Force's positions overlooking the Burma Road forced the Japanese to use it only at night. Then, the Americans placed machine-gun and artillery fire on the road to harass the enemy and prevent them from using the road in the dark.

Directed by MARS Task Force observers, the USAAF bombs Japanese positions near the Burma Road. The road is seen in the middle foreground.

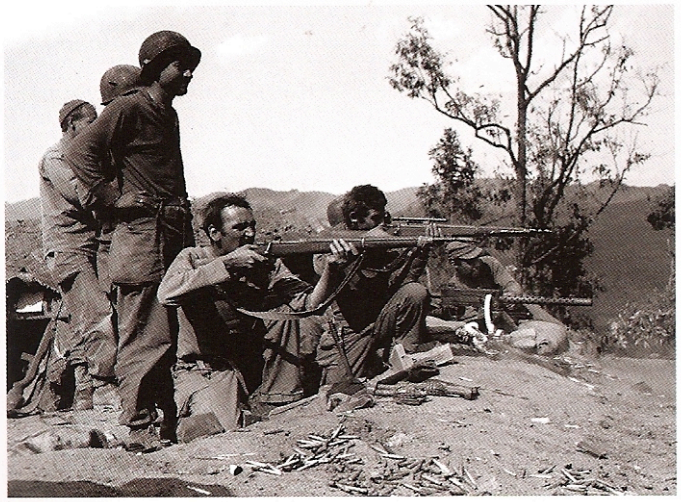
1LT Jack L. Knight



First Lieutenant (1LT) Jack L. Knight was the Commander of F Troop, 2nd Squadron, 124th Cavalry Regiment. On 2 February 1945, 1LT Knight received orders to attack the right side of a Japanese-held ridge north of Loi-Kang.[29] The intent was to gain a closer ridge from which the 124th could more easily interdict Japanese traffic retreating down the Burma Road. The attack was fierce; all officers in F Troop were either killed or wounded.[30] 1LT Knight's heroic actions were particularly valorous, based on his Medal of Honor citation.

"On 2 February 1945, near Loi-Kang, Burma, First Lieutenant Jack Llewellyn Knight, 124th Cavalry Regiment, MARS Task Force, led his cavalry troop against heavy concentrations of enemy mortar, artillery, and small arms fire. After taking the troop's objective and while making preparations for a defense, he discovered a nest of Japanese pillboxes and foxholes to the right front. Preceding his men by at least 10 feet, he immediately led an attack. Single-handedly, he knocked out two enemy pillboxes and killed the occupants of several foxholes. While attempting to knock out a third pillbox, he was struck and blinded by an enemy grenade. Although unable to see, he rallied his troops and continued forward in the assault on the remaining pillboxes. Before the task was completed, he fell mortally wounded. First Lieutenant Knight's gallantry and intrepidity were responsible for the successful elimination of most of the [Japanese] positions and served as an inspiration to the officers and men of his troop."[31] When 1LT Knight was killed, Second Lieutenant (2 LT) Leo C. Tynan, his artillery observer from the 613th FAB, took command of F Troop when he discerned that all other officers were wounded or dead. For his gallantry during the attack, 2LT Tynan was awarded the Silver Star.[32]

COL William L. Osborne, the 124th Cavalry commander, commented: "In over four years of combat I have seen many officers fight and die for their country, but the actions of Lieutenant Knight in leading his troop against a strong enemy will always remain as the finest example of American courage, valor, and leadership of any officer I have had under my command. It is officers of Lieutenant Knight's caliber, and troops that follow that kind of leadership, who are winning the war—not colonels and generals."[33] The British head of the South East Asia Command—which oversaw NCAC in theater—Lord Louis Mountbatten, proclaimed on 18 February 1945 that the hill that F troop had captured would be declared "Knight's Hill."[34] 1LT Knight from Garner, TX, was the only ground combat soldier to receive the Medal of Honor in the CBI. He was also the only soldier from an ARSOF legacy unit to do so in WWII.



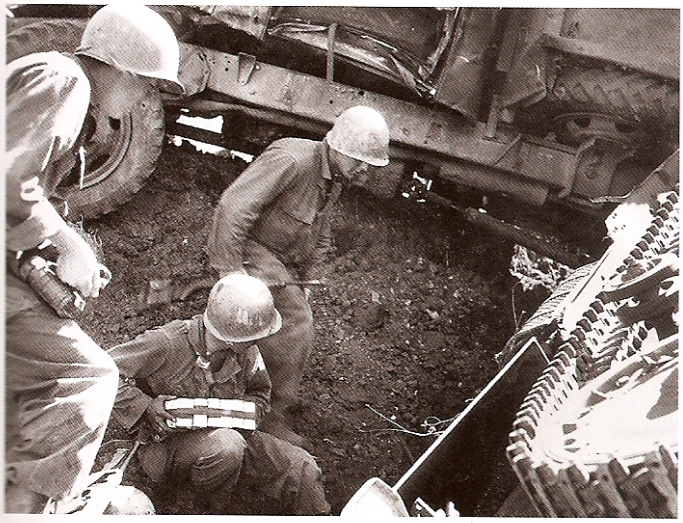
MARSmen snipe at Japanese positions near the Burma Road. The Mars Task Force was issued "light-gathering" night scopes called "sniperscopes" and "snooperscopes" to improve night marksmanship.



MARSmen move into an assembly area on 18 January 1945 before launching another attack on the Japanese.



A 4.2 inch mortar crew fires on Japanese positions. Like the 75 mm pack howitzers, the 4.2 inch mortars were mule-packed.



To prevent the Japanese from recovering their stranded vehicles during the night, patrols used explosive charges to destroy the enemy equipment.

The Japanese hold was finally broken on 9 February. One MARSman later said, "They really gave us the works, but we were better."[35] The MARS Task Force lost 115 killed in action and 938 wounded, but the unit had validated LRPG operations.[36] Unfortunately, this battle was to be its last.

Events in north Burma rapidly turned in NCAC's favor. With the upper reaches of the Burma Road in Allied hands, the Japanese could no longer hold north of Lashio. The rapid advance of NCAC's Chinese divisions after the British breakthrough forced the Japanese to withdraw even further south. Isolated Japanese elements concentrated in the eastern Shan States. NCAC tasked OSS Detachment 101 to harass these forces and prevent them from escaping to reinforce enemy units in Thailand.[37] With no combat mission remaining for the MARS Task Force in Burma, the unit was ordered to China to advise and train the Nationalist Chinese Army; its third phase of activity.

From March to May 1945, elements of the MARS Task Force were flown to China, but the mules were transported overland in seven groups. In two of the groups, the mules caught surra, an insect-born parasitic blood disease. They, and those in another group that ran out of water during the trip, were destroyed. Some 2,000 mules were turned over to the Chinese Army pack artillery units and 1,000 were lost en route.[38]

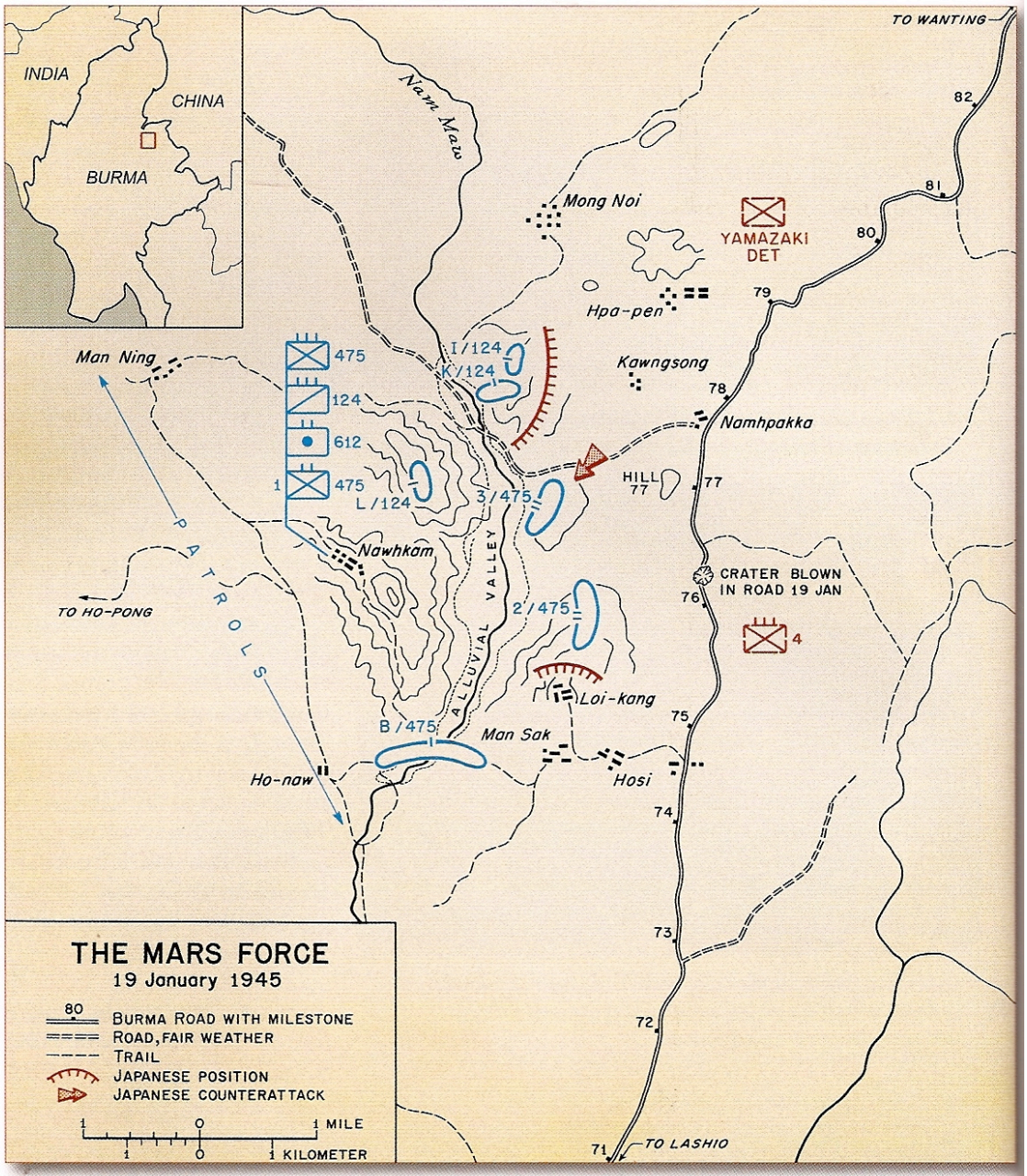
In China, most troops served as training cadre in the Chinese Combat Command. Each component had specific training responsibilities, for instance the Field

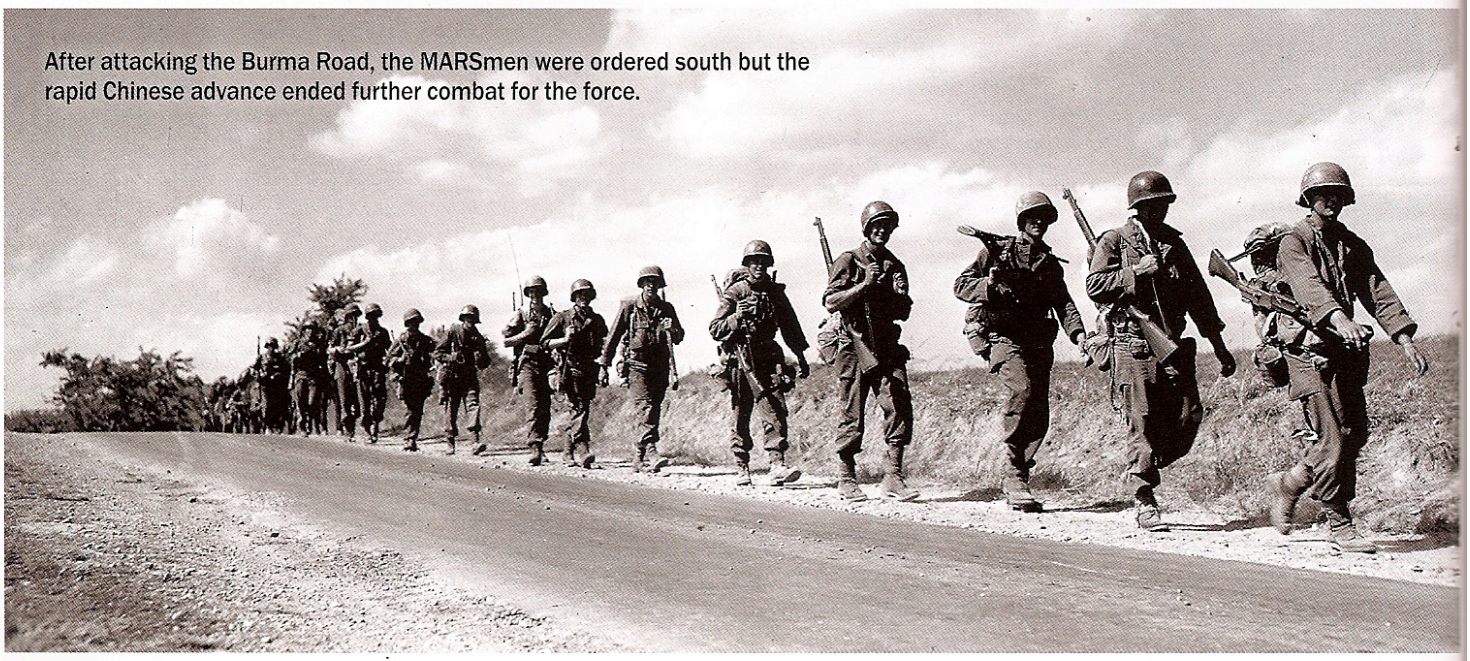
(Article continues on page 17)

After blowing a large crater in the Burma Road on 19 January 1945, a MARS Task Force patrol returns in daylight to inspect the night's "catch" of two tankettes and a truck.



On 17 January 1945, the MARS Task Force surprised the enemy by marching deep into their territory and attacking the Burma Road. This map shows the positions of the two opposing forces on 19 January 1945. The surprised Japanese quickly recovered and fiercely defended the hills to the east of the road, preventing the MARS Task Force from cutting it. The best the MARS Task Force could do was interdict it with artillery fire and occasional patrols. There was a stalemate for two weeks until the Japanese retreated under pressure from Chinese forces in the north. This was the last combat mission of the LRPG.





After attacking the Burma Road, the MARSmen were ordered south but the rapid Chinese advance ended further combat for the force.

Artillery soldiers trained the Chinese on 75 mm and 105 mm howitzers. It was a mission for which they had not trained, but fortunately, it did not last long. On 11 June 1945 the MARS Task Force was disbanded, and on 1 July 1945 both the 475th Infantry and 124th Cavalry and their attached units followed suit.

Although technically not a Ranger unit, the MARS Task Force is part of the lineage of the U.S. Army Ranger Regiment, validating several operational concepts.[39] The MARS model of an LRPG in Burma, proved how vital attached artillery and indigenous units were. It also reinforced the Marauder and OSS proven use of air evacuation for wounded and sick soldiers and that mules still had a role in an age of mechanized combat. With these central concepts the MARS Task Force had the combat power to drive deep into enemy-occupied territory to break the Japanese hold on the northern stretches of the Burma Road. Yet, the MARS Task Force remains somewhat forgotten. This article is a primer on the organization and service of that LRPG. Future articles will explore the special training and combat operations of the MARS Task Force in depth.

Thank you to the MARS Task Force Mountain Artillery Association for helping with this article, in particular, Mr. Randall Colvin and LTC (ret) Willard B. Woodruff. Thanks go as well to my colleagues Earl J. Moniz and Ms. Laura Goddard for acquiring and preparing the photographs for publication.

Troy J. Sacquety earned an MA from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and his PhD in Military History from Texas A&M University. Prior to joining the USASOC History Office staff he worked several years for the Central Intelligence Agency. Current research interests include Army and Office of Strategic Services (OSS) special operations during World War II, and Special Operations units in Vietnam.

Endnotes

1 Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI* (Washington DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1999), 94.

2 COL Osborne fell ill after his campaigning with the Marauders and was replaced by COL Ernest F. Easterbrook. He later returned to the MARS Task Force in early January 1945 to replace COL Thomas J. Heavey as commander of the 124th Cavalry.

3 Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI*, 90.

4 Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI*, 95.

5 John Randolph, *Marsmen in Burma* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, Columbia, 1990), 5, 11-15.

6 Robert W. Landis was the first member of Merrill's Marauders to be killed in action.

7 Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI*, 90.

8 LTC Ralph E. Baird, "Narrative History – 5332d Brigade (Prov)," copies provided by the USAJFKSWCS Archives and the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

9 MARS Task Force Artillery Association, "History of the 612th Field Artillery Battalion (PK), Copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. It was filled out with officers and enlisted men from Camp Carson, CO, Fort Sill, OK, Camp Butner, NC, Fort Bragg, NC, Fort Meade, MD, Camp Shelby, MS, Fort Sheridan, IL, Fort Riley, KS, and Camp Roberts, CA.

10 Hiram Vance Boone, "S.S. Cyrus W. Field," copy provided by Mr. Randall Colvin, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

11 Randy Colvin, "The Saga of Two GIs," copy provided to the USASOC History Office, the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

12 "Some Highlights in the Unit History of the 613th FA Bn," copy provided by Mr. Randall Colvin, the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

13 "From the Official Log of the 613th F.A. Battalion (PACK)," copy provided by Mr. Randall Colvin, the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

14 Randy Colvin, "Mountain Artillery Assn 612th & 613th Field Artillery Battalion (PK), September 1998, copy provided to the USASOC History Office, the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

15 Phillip Sparn, interview by Dr. Troy J. Sacquety, 3 September 2009, Washington D.C, notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.



The USAAF started flying the men of MARS to China in March 1945 to serve as trainers in the Chinese Combat Command.



Chinese Training Command Patch

The MARS Task Force patch became the model for the 75th Ranger Regiment Distinctive Unit Insignia (DUI).

16 SGT John McDowell, "Mules, Vets of Burma, China Bound," *CBI Roundup*, 9 August 1945, copy provided to the USASOC History Office by Mr. Randy Colvin, the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

17 Baird, "Narrative History – 5332d Brigade (Prov)."

18 Randolph, *Marsmen in Burma*, 37.

19 Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI*, 214.

20 George W. Patrick, interview by Dr. Troy J. Sacquety, 23 April 2008, Fort Bragg, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. For more on air resupply in Burma, see "Wings Over Burma: Air Support in the Burma Campaign," *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History* 4 (2): 16-29 (2008).

21 "Combat History of the 612th Field Artillery Battalion (Pack) North and Central Burma Campaigns 18 November, 1944-18 April, 1945," [May 1945], copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

22 Richard W. Hale, "The MARS Task Force in Burma: A Personal Memoir," http://www.americanveteranscenter.org/?page_id=1654, accessed 27 October 2009.

23 Baird, "Narrative History – 5332d Brigade (Prov)."

24 Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI*, 187.

25 Baird, "Narrative History – 5332d Brigade (Prov)."

26 Randolph, *Marsmen in Burma*, 120.

27 John R. Delong, "C BTRY 612th," Copy provided by Randall Colvin, the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

28 Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI*, 190.

29 MAJ George B. Jordan, "The Operations of 2d Squadron, 124th Cavalry Regiment Special in the Battle of Knight's Hill, 29 January -2 February 1945 (Personal Experience of a Squadron Commander)," Advanced Infantry Officers Course Paper, 1948-1949, Fort Benning, GA, copy in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

30 Jordan, "The Operations of 2d Squadron, 124th Cavalry Regiment Special in the Battle of Knight's Hill."

31 Charles Briscoe, "Lieutenant Jack L. Knight; MARS Task Force MOH Winner," *Special Warfare*, February 2004, 38-41.

32 Bill Knight, *Knight's Hill: The Story of a Family in War* (Victoria, BC, Canada: Trafford, 2004), 273.

33 "Jack L. Knight Medal of Honor Winner," *The Burman News*, December 2005, 2-3.

34 Jordan, "The Operations of 2d Squadron, 124th Cavalry Regiment Special in the Battle of Knight's Hill."

35 Delong, "C BTRY 612th."

36 Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Time Runs Out in the CBI*, 213.

37 OSS Detachment 101 received a Presidential Unit Citation for its role in this final campaign.

38 Randall Colvin, "The Move of Mules from Burma to China, 1945," Copy provided by Mr. Randall Colvin, the Mr. Randy Colvin collection, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; SGT John McDowell, "Mules, Vets of Burma, China Bound," *India-Burma Theater Roundup*, 9 August 1945.

39 "Special Troops Battalion 75th Ranger Regiment Lineage," http://www.history.army.mil/html/forcestruc/lineages/branches/inf/0075ra-sptpsbn.htm, accessed 23 September 2009.

