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The Aerial Invasion of Burma

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With Illustrations from U. S. Army Air Forces Official Photographs

IN 1943 the late Major General Orde C. Wingate led a daring campaign against the Japanese in Burma.*

He proved that Allied ground troops could operate behind the enemy's lines, cutting off his supply system and upsetting his schedule. General Wingate marched fast and struck hard. The enemy, never knowing where he was going to strike next, was completely thrown off balance. Indeed, this British general's behind-the-lines operations in Burma brought to mind the brilliant cavalry maneuvers of Nathan Bedford Forrest in our own Civil War (page 144).

In 1944 General Wingate wished to lead another expedition into Burma on a larger scale. Previously he had had to leave some of his sick and wounded behind his swiftly moving columns, but in 1944 he wanted to fly all of them to safety.

We promised we would do that—and more.

We visualized an Air Commando Force, the first in military history. Large numbers of Allied ground troops would be conveyed by aircraft deep into Burma and, once there, they would be wholly supplied by air. General Wingate believed that, while the Japanese were excellent jungle fighters, well-trained Allied troops could defeat them at their own game, provided they were mobile, in sufficient force, and exploited the military value of surprise.

We would not only evacuate all wounded by air; we would also replace them with fresh combat troops. Furthermore, none of the soldiers would have to make long marches through tough jungle to get inside Burma. They could start fighting in top physical con-

dition. In the same project, the AAF would gain airbases from which we could fight the Japanese at closer quarters and relieve the threat to our aerial life line to China over the Hump.

Obviously, the men to lead this unprecedented project had to be aggressive, imaginative, and endowed with organizational talent of a high order.

The Original of "Terry and the Pirates"

To AAF headquarters in Washington came two young men who were strongly recommended.

One was a 34-year-old fighter pilot who had shown remarkable leadership in North Africa, Col. Philip G. Cochran, of Erie, Pennsylvania. In my office Cochran still wore his Natal leather boots with the trouser tops stuffed in. In North Africa he had originally headed a unit of replacement pilots, but before anyone was aware of it he had them up at the front fighting as a unit. Later he commanded a squadron of fighter pilots who were frequently so far ahead of our other forces that it was humorously remarked that they were fighting a war of their own (page 131).

At the time, I did not know that Cochran was the original of the character Flip Corkin in the comic strip "Terry and the Pirates," but he sounded like a good man for the job.

The other man was Col. John R. Alison, who had been an outstanding fighter pilot with the 14th Air Force in China and had also

* See "Burma: Where India and China Meet," by John LeRoy Christian, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, October, 1943.



Prelude to Wingate's Raid: Bombers Blast Wuntho, Jap Burma Base on the Mandalay-Myitkyina Railroad

In March, 1944, the enemy was threatening Allied airfields in India. British Maj. Gen. Orde Charles Wingate's forces and the U. S. First Air Commandos delivered a lightning counterblow at the Jap rear in Burma. Gliders and planes flew in engineers, troops, supplies, mules, bulldozers—in fact, everything needed, landing them in a jungle clearing called "Broadway" (page 132).

fought the enemy from England, Russia, and the Middle East. He was short, slender, and self-possessed. He knew his business (p. 142).

I told both of them that they were going to Burma. Cochran immediately protested that he wanted to go "where there was some fighting." I informed him that he would get all the combat he wanted. I explained the unprecedented mission and ordered them to carry it out. "To hell with the paper work," I added. "Go out and fight."

Perhaps my last words constituted a personal whim, for systematic organization work is necessary in modern war, and I knew they could do it.

Cochran, as commander, and Alison, as deputy, established their first headquarters in a Washington, D. C., hotel room in August, 1943. Their initial task was to select men to help them. They then flew to England to

coordinate plans with the British. General Wingate was enthusiastic and said heartily, "We are going in this time to stay."

The aircraft Cochran and Alison selected for the mission were: transports and gliders to move troops, equipment, and supplies; light liaison, or "grasshopper-type" planes to evacuate the wounded; fighters; and medium bombers.

The glider pilots were selected volunteers. Liaison-plane pilots were chosen for ability to repair as well as fly ships. An exhaustive training program was begun in America and concluded in India. Everything to be transported by glider was loaded and unloaded endlessly. Army pack mules became accustomed to bamboo stalls in the gliders.

In India there were work-filled months of final preparations. Visitors to our installations were confounded by the lack of "rank."

THIS MAN WITH 5 OTHER AIRCRAFT—SHOT US UP
ON THE PERIMETER OF BLACKPOOL BLOCK—



"Flip Corkin" Comes to Life as Col. Philip G. Cochran, USAAF

The adventures of the popular comic-strip character in "Terry and the Pirates" are based on the real-life exploits of the leader of the First Air Commandos. Here at his India base headquarters, he buckles on his parachute before taking off for Burma. One of the war's most brilliant and likable air officers, the 34-year-old colonel came to General Arnold's attention as commander of a fighter squadron in Tunisia (page 129).

Morale was high, and there was little paper work. The men said, simply, "If Phil or John says we do it, then, by God, we do it!"

Officers and men, hot, dusty, and bearded, lined up together at the chow lines, ate quickly, and went back to work. They sweated shoulder to shoulder unloading freight cars. For security reasons native help was kept to a minimum. At one base the headquarters was a bamboo hut, and the men slept at night on hard charpoys, or native cots.

There were many obstacles.

At first, some cooperating Allied units were not sure that the AAF could do what it promised; so Cochran and Alison put on demonstrations and proved their points. At one base, until it could get equipment, Cochran's photographic section developed its photos at night, using water from a near-by well and posting a sentry so that no wandering jeep's headlights would spoil the print.

The Gurkha troops had never seen gliders before. They went through their training doggedly, but finally said, "We aren't afraid to go; we aren't afraid to fight. But we thought we ought to tell you—those 'planes' don't have any motors!"

The battle plan was as follows:

The C-47 transports would tow the heavy gliders carrying General Wingate's troops and equipment to the areas he had selected in north-central Burma.* He would indicate the areas; the AAF would pick specific places where our gliders could land. The first troops to land would guard the fields while Airborne Engineers built an airstrip with airborne bulldozers, scrapers, and other engineering equipment. C-47 transports could then land with antiaircraft guns and other field equipment,

* See "Manipur—Where Japan Struck at India," NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, June, 1944, for map showing north-central Burma in detail.



In One Day Engineers Turn Broadway into a Bustling Airfield

By evening of the first day nearly 100 C-47's landed with thousands of troops. This end of the field needed little leveling, but the other was badly rutted. Glider-landed bulldozer and carryall in background easily filled big holes.

1ST BATTALION THE KINGS (L'POOL) REGT

so that any Japs attacking in force could be held off. Our fighter planes could also use the field for aerial patrol and offensive operations.

Cooperating with the AAF in this project were a British Army unit under Lt. Gen. W. J. Slim, the Indian forces under General Wingate, the tactical air force under Air Marshal Sir John Baldwin, and the Troop Carrier Command under Brig. Gen. William D. Old, of the U. S. Army.

All would work together.

At the time, Lt. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell was pushing down in northern Burma with Chinese-American forces. The Japs were threatening our airbases in India, just over the Burma border to the west. The Chinese were holding mountain positions against the Japanese in east Burma. If General Wingate could establish his men *behind* the Japanese in north-central Burma and cut their various supply lines, the Japs would be put in a difficult position regarding Allied attacks on three of their Burma fronts.

The Fighting Begins

In February, 1944, the fighting began. Fighters and medium bombers flew into Jap-held Burma, blowing up bridges, destroying

warehouses, supply centers, and supply trains.

General Wingate had indicated two areas where he wanted troops set down. Cochran and Alison had surveyed the areas in their fighters; then photo-reconnaissance planes mapped the areas thoroughly. The two open places were picked to set the gliders down in, nicknamed "Broadway" and "Piccadilly" to suggest the joint effort of the two nations. Once decided on, planes did not fly over these places again, to allay Jap suspicion.

D Day arrived.

The Japs had been repeatedly bombed and strafed. The weather was suitable. But on D Day Colonel Cochran, on a hunch, ordered a last-minute photo-reconnaissance of Broadway and Piccadilly to make sure that both fields were clear. The year before, a C-47 had made a landing at Piccadilly to pick up some of Wingate's wounded; so the Japs might expect landings there. Their espionage must have warned them that something was up.

Transports, gliders, pilots, troops—all were ready for the great adventure of March 5, 1944.

The first take-off was set for 5:40 p.m. At 5:15 the last-minute photos of Broadway and Piccadilly were rushed from the laboratory.



Aerial Locomotive Hauls a Troop-filled "Flying Boxcar" into Burma

Sailing 400 feet behind a Douglas Skytrain (C-47), the glider ferries reinforcements for General Wingate's columns far behind enemy lines. At 8,000 feet it easily crosses the Chin Hills, which form a natural barrier between Allies and Japs. Question mark on tail is the unofficial squadron insignia.



British Troops, Armed to the Teeth, Board an American Glider Bound for Broadway

Carrying enough ammunition and rations for several days, these Tommies were well fortified against Japs and hunger in case the glider cast off before reaching its objective. Several craft made forced landings, obliging soldiers to fight through jungle to the new airstrip. Rough air over the mountains caused towlines to foul.

Cochran's hunch had been a good one. The Japs had dragged huge tree trunks all over the open space at Piccadilly and very possibly had mined it as well! No glider could possibly land. However, Broadway was clear, and although the Japs might purposely have left it that way to draw us into an ambush, it was decided to land all gliders at Broadway.

D Day would stand.

The first C-47 took off at 6:12 p.m., towing two heavily loaded heavy gliders. Others followed. From a green tea-garden valley they rose in wide sweeping circles to gain altitude, for they had to cross a range of 7,200-foot mountain peaks.

The gliders carried cargoes of resolute men, armed with Tommy guns, carbines, rifles, pistols, and hand grenades. The men knew that, because of the distance and the heavy loads, the gliders would have to land at Broadway. They could not be towed home, even if the Japs disrupted our plans.

There was no turning back.

The sun was going down, and its golden tints were gradually swallowed up in the jungle haze below. The men settled down in cramped positions for the 200-mile flight to their destination—and their fate. As Cochran had told his men, "Tonight you are going to find out if you've got a soul. Nothing you've ever done, or nothing you are going to do counts now. Only the next few hours. Good luck."

Mule Makes a High-altitude Kick

Some of the gliders held heavy bulldozers, tractors, jeeps, and pack mules. Most of the mules rode calmly enough, except one which kicked a hole in the side of his glider at an altitude of 8,000 feet. This must have been the highest mule kick ever recorded! But to the muleteers it was no joke.

As the gliders crossed the Burma frontier the moon came out, but there was too much



British and Gurkha Wounded Are Swiftly Flown to Base Hospitals in India

Huge aerial ambulances, like this Curtiss Commando, operated a shuttle service, carrying in fresh troops and bringing out wounded. Gurkhas, fearless north-Indian fighters, were hesitant at first about entering gliders. One of them whispered to his British captain, "These planes don't have any motors!" (page 131).

air turbulence over the mountains for the men to appreciate it. Some of the heavily loaded gliders were in trouble because of the rough air. The night had to be clear for the operation; the moonlight would reveal the aircraft to any Jap fighters who might be waiting for them. There was an enemy airfield close by.

The pilots and passengers anxiously searched the sky, but no Japs appeared. As they neared their destination, each man checked his firearms.

They were now over Broadway; it was time to cut loose.

Colonel Alison was one of the first to land. He was signaled in by the crew of the pathfinder which landed under the hand of Maj. William H. Taylor. The big craft came down out of the darkness to the jungle glade that was Broadway.

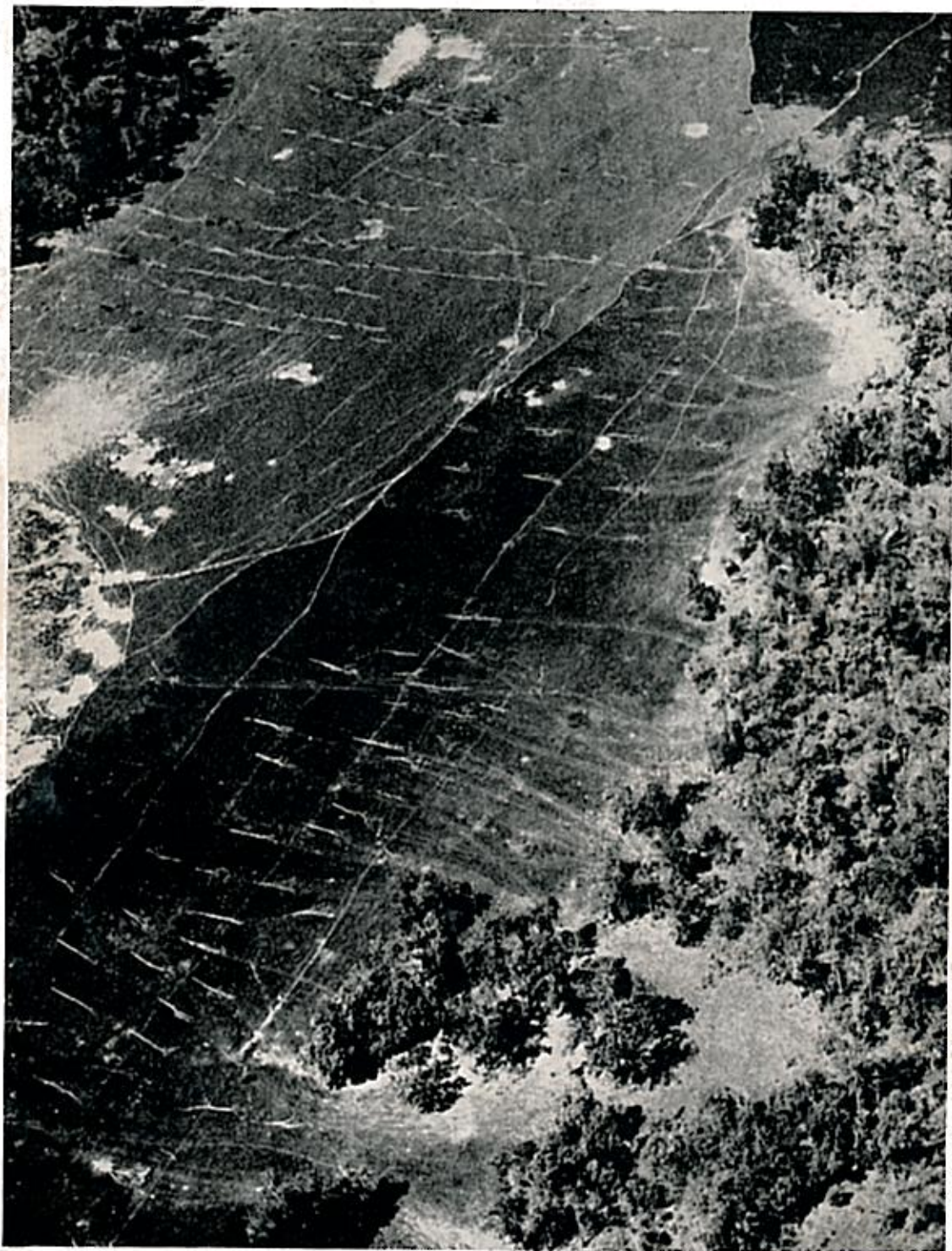
Unfortunately, the field had numerous ruts and holes covered with high grass which had not shown up in aerial photographs. Teak-

wood had once been cut in the neighborhood, and the logs had been dragged by elephants over the ground when it was wet and soft.

Some of the gliders had their undercarriages torn off and landed hard on their skids. Some were wrecked. As soon as possible, a new landing strip was marked out with flare pots to avoid the crashed gliders. Landing a glider at night under ideal conditions is difficult, but here conditions were at their worst.

The first ground troops to land immediately fanned out to scout Japanese opposition. Photographs had showed that there were two places where the Japanese might mount machine guns. The first glider crews to hit the dirt went on the dead run to these two points—but no enemy machine guns were there. A green flare was sent up to indicate to gliders still in the air that the first ones to land were not being fired on.

There was no opposition. We had taken the Japs completely by surprise!



Logs and Ditches Blocked This Clearing at Piccadilly; so Yanks Landed at Broadway

Last-minute reconnaissance of the two fields showed Piccadilly unusable for glider landings. As Broadway was untouched, the whole force landed there, completely surprising the enemy. The names were suggested by the British-United States joint operation (page 132). During the weeks of preliminary bombing, planes deliberately avoided these clearings to allay Jap suspicion.



Two Gliders Tangle in Night Landings

Landing gear of the glider to left was crippled by logs or ruts. Before runway flares could be changed, two more "whisper ships" came down to land. The first saw the cripple in the faint moonlight and swerved in time. The second smashed head-on. Here, on the morning after, survivors survey the wreckage before starting to clear Broadway for transports to land.

A second wave of gliders, on their way to Broadway, were recalled to their bases by radio. With no opposition, they were not needed immediately.

One glider in the first wave, which contained a bulldozer, missed the landing area and slashed off both of its wings between two trees. The bulldozer had been lashed in the glider so that its first forward movement would lift the nose of the glider. It was a happy thought, for the bulldozer, torn loose from its fittings, kept right on going. It threw the glider nose up, pitching the pilot and co-pilot into the air. They landed unharmed, save for a broken thumb.

Gliders Bring in Bulldozers

Three undamaged bulldozers were enough to start building, with the first morning light, an airstrip on which our C-47 transports could land later with more troops and antiaircraft guns. The Japs might attack any minute. That first morning there was a burial of the 23 men who had been killed in glider crashes.

A Burmese chaplain read the service, while overhead circled Allied planes, alert for any Zeros (page 147).

The Airborne Engineers filled in Broadway's holes and ruts and leveled off the humps. By evening the airfield was ready, and nearly a hundred C-47 transports of the Troop Carrier Command flew in and landed with thousands of armed men, enough to stand off any force the Japs could bring to bear upon them in that area.

In any large military operation there are bound to be mishaps. A few gliders were released before they reached Broadway because of their heavy loads, air turbulence over the mountains, or the poor visibility met in descending. Some landed in friendly territory.

Most of the crews landing in enemy territory escaped to safety. One medical officer, a glider pilot, and co-pilot, with 15 native troops, walked 85 miles to Broadway in ten days. Out of food at one point, they tossed a hand grenade into a pond and killed 60 fish. There was a soldier hero in one crew whose



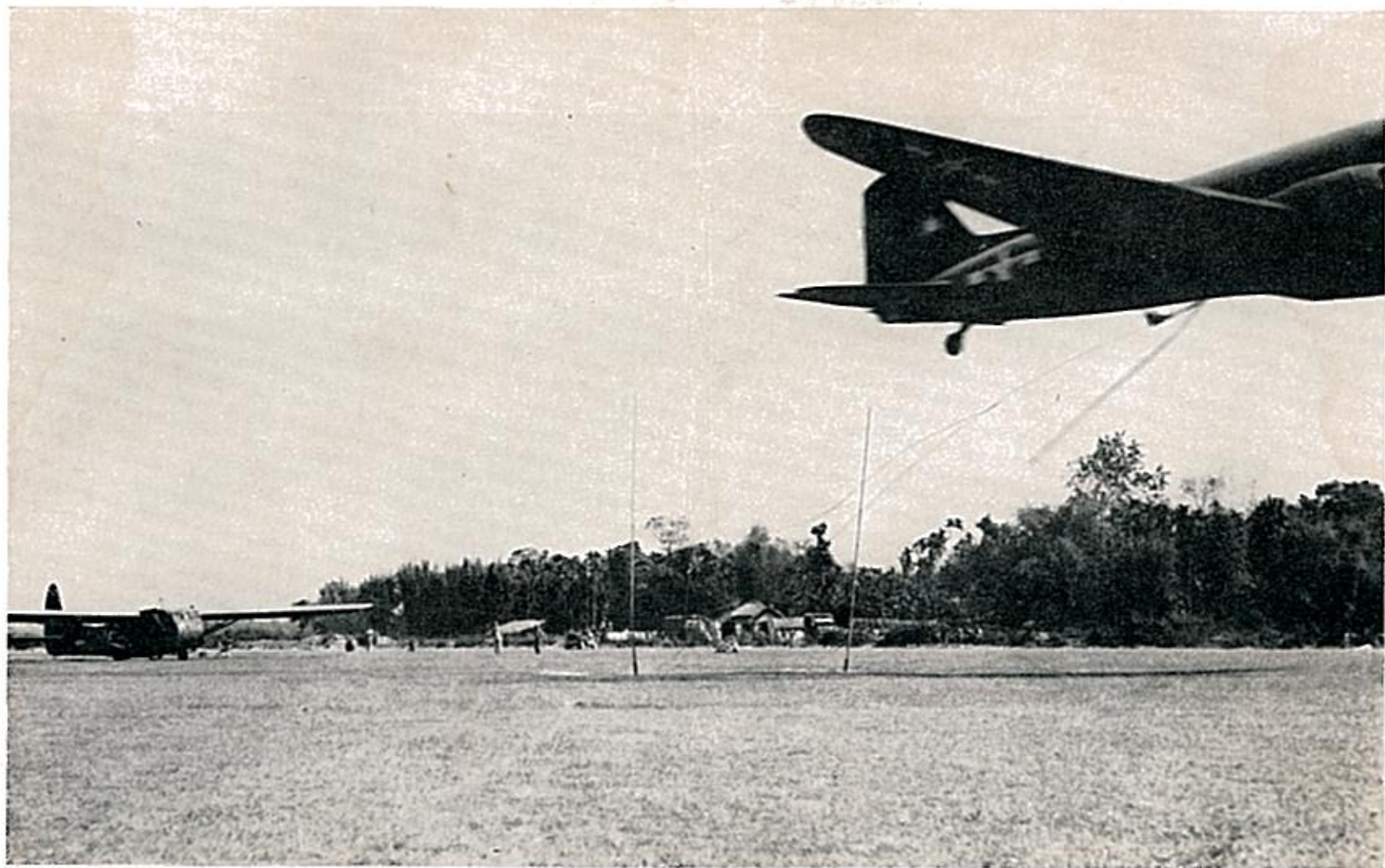
Mustang Fighters Buzz the Home Strip as They Return without Loss from Action in Burma

In training school they would have been "washed out" for circling low over the field before landing, but in the field, regulations and rank are minimized. These swift planes were Wingate's artillery. They blasted paths for ground troops, strafed enemy columns, and provided air cover against Zeros. They shot down Jap planes at a ratio of ten to one, getting 34 in one day.



Pointing to Broadway, a Jungle Clearing Mapped on Bed Sheets, Colonel Cochran Gives His Men Their Final Briefing

They are to take off at dusk, each transport towing two gliders, and fly 200 miles into Burma. The gliders cut loose over Broadway and landed in the dark. Troops fanned out to hold off any Jap attackers. At dawn engineers started the airstrip for powered planes. The map partly hidden by "Flip Corkin" is of Piccadilly, unused rendezvous (pages 131, 136). White areas are clearings surrounded by dark-colored jungle. The hazards of landing gliders on a never-before-used field prompted the Colonel's final remark—"Tonight you are going to find out if you've got a soul!"



Snatching a Loaded Glider Off the Ground, a C-47 Roars Across the Blue—Lalaghat, India

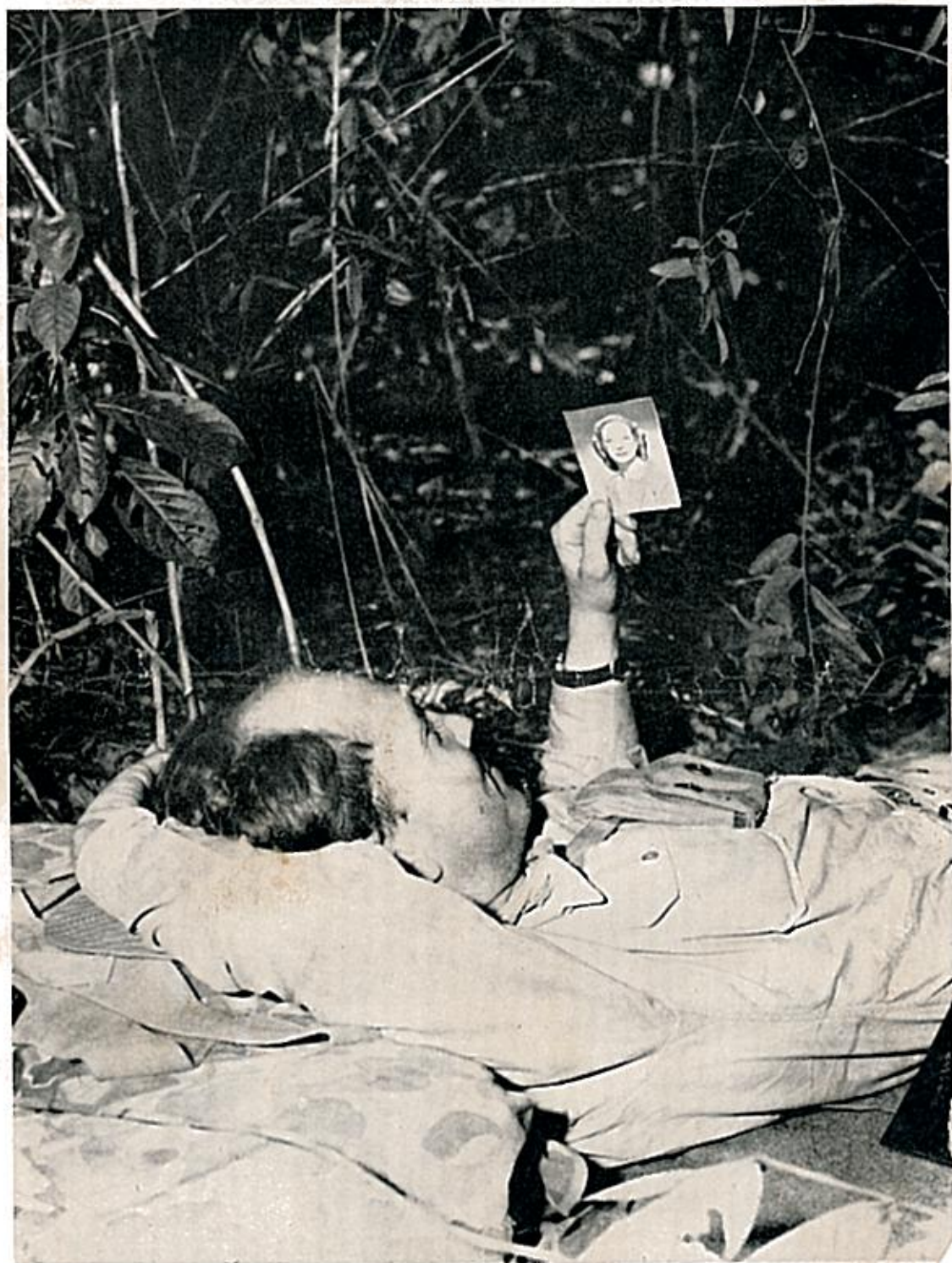
Only way to recover a glider in a small area is by this pick-up system. A nylon towline attached to the glider is looped over two poles. From the towplane extends a nylon leader, to which is fastened a hook. The other end of the rope is connected with a steel cable reeled on a drum in the plane. This drum has a braking device. Here the plane, traveling about 100 miles an hour, has hooked the loop. The elastic nylon will stretch, overcome the inertia of the glider, and gently pull it into flight. The strain would break the nylon were it not for the cable, which plays out gradually, like a fisherman's reel and line, and helps absorb the shock.



Pioneers in Aerial Warfare: These Glider Pilots Spearheaded the Air Invasion of Burma and Paved the Way for Ground Troops

On them depended the success of the whole operation. They had to carry in and land the Air Commandos who would build the airstrip, even if it swarmed with Japs and was jammed with obstructions. Capt. Vincent Rose and Maj. William Taylor (front row center); Flight Officer Jackie Coogan, former movie star, at right.

↑ PILOT OF GLIDER I FLEW IN.



The Prettiest Pin-up Girl in the World: His Wife

Col. John R. Alison, Cochran's deputy and field commander of the Broadway glider operation, relaxes after the first day's work. In 13 hours his men built a complete, modern airport in the jungle, 200 miles behind enemy lines. Mosquitoes were absent for several days after the landings. When the malaria-carrying parasite appeared, the men slept under protecting nets.



"That Doesn't Look Like a Barn!" Says Long Ears, Balking at His First Plane Ride

Even airborne soldiers need pack mules. In specially prepared bamboo stalls, six mules were carried in this transport plane, three in gliders. After practicing at the India base, the mules usually became accustomed to air travel. One kicked a hole in the side of a glider at 8,000 feet—highest mule kick ever recorded (page 134).



A Tenuous Thread in the Jap Life Line Is Snapped by American Medium Bombers

The original railroad bridge (foreground) at Meza had been knocked out earlier. This raid destroyed the temporary wooden bridge beyond it. Smoke from bomb bursts fills the narrow canyon. Air Commandos began disrupting communication lines and bombing Jap airfields in Burma 1½ months before the glider landings.

was abandoned. The next day the Japanese bombed it.

In addition to establishing Broadway and other behind-the-line fields, the First Air Commando unit carried on the air side of Wingate's operations. A special task was to parachute needed equipment for river crossings to columns on the march.

In one such drop the Americans added precious cigarettes and extra food with a note saying that they "wanted to do more than lip service" for their Allies. The British commander thanked them and apologized that he had no typewriter in the jungle to phrase a formal reply.

B-25 medium bombers aided Wingate's ground forces by dropping parachute fragmentation bombs on enemy troops and working out unique techniques for supporting ground troops in this theater.

Asked by the ground forces to break a telephone line between two Jap-held towns, a P-51 did so by diving through the wire at five different places. However, most operations were more extensive.

On one occasion a British unit was on a hill two miles from a Japanese-held town. The enemy had machine guns and field guns and was using them very effectively. The British called for air support.

Smoke Indicated Targets

The British would indicate with smoke the targets they wanted bombed, and then tell our bombers and fighters in the air just where the target was in reference to that smoke. The bombers worked from low levels without bomb sights. The fighters would follow, and dive-bomb.



A Burmese Chaplain Reads Final Rites over 15 Allied Dead

The airmen died in a glider crash. The native chaplain, attached to the British forces, added one more nationality. Gurkhas, West Africans, Indians, Burmese, English, and Americans made up the striking force.

The conversation went something like this:
Ground Forces: "Do you see that building with the red roof in the center of the town?"
Air: "Yes, we see it."
Ground: "Will you get it for us?"
Air: "O. K."

Lessons Learned of Glider Operation

The B-25, or fighter-bomber, would either bomb the building or hit it with 75-mm. cannon. The Japanese nest destroyed, the Allied forces would go on to the next, until the town was stormed and captured.

At this writing, it is too early to estimate the military significance of this operation, except to say that its successful execution gave



Jap Guerrillas Got in a "Sneak Punch" at Night against Cochran's Plane "Sports"

The enemy apparently did not discover Broadway until eight days after it was built. Then they sent 20 fighters over the field (page 143). This plane, however, was damaged on the ground sometime later. "Squads of Jap infantry practically lived with us," Colonel Alison said. "They hid in the jungle by day and infiltrated at night to cripple equipment and steal food."

a terrific lift to all Allied operations in the China-Burma-India theater. Many lessons were learned that will be valuable in the future. The able General Wingate was killed in March of this year in an airplane crash, but his good work continues.

Supplies Come by Air

At this writing, we have aerial superiority in this part of Burma. By proper use of air power, the Japanese are denied freedom of movement. Every day by air, Allied troops are being supplied by the Troop Carrier Command with food, ammunition, and replacements.

One Japanese railroad line has been severed, and two main lines of supply cut off. The Japs now operate small supply boats on the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers at night and hide them from our fighter planes by day.

They do the same with their motor trucks on the roads.

Red Tape Avoided

That the mission was carried out despite many uncertainties and obstacles is a tribute to the cooperation of all British and American units taking part in it.

Colonels Cochran and Alison carried out their orders: they went to Burma to fight, and did not concentrate on the paper work that some officers confuse with winning a campaign. A statistician assigned to them at a later date was reported to be on the verge of despair.

It would appear clear that new weapons of war have not lessened the value of personal leadership; indeed, science has increased the effectiveness of the imaginative military man and made his operations more decisive.