



AMERICA'S REAL EXPENDABLES

Deep in the Burmese jungle during WWII, this guerrilla force fought not just the enemy, but disease and exhaustion. Only a few survived unscathed

WORDS GAVIN MORTIMER

In May 1942, Major General Joseph Stilwell emerged from the Burmese jungle exuding, in the words of one war correspondent, "...the wrath of God and cursing like a fallen angel." Two months earlier, the 59-year-old American general had been sent by President Franklin Roosevelt to Rangoon, as head of a small force of 440 military personnel. His mission was to train the Chinese army to fight the Japanese.

Stilwell was confident that the 3 million Chinese soldiers and their British allies had the capacity to counterattack the Japanese from their strongholds in central Burma. Neither the British nor the Chinese shared Stilwell's belief, and as the Japanese advanced, crushing all before them, the Americans were forced into a desperate retreat north towards India.

After a brutal 225-kilometre trek, Stilwell and his men reached India. He was suffering from jaundice and had lost 11 kilograms, but anger and shame had driven him on and out of the clutches of the enemy. "I claim we got a hell of a beating," Stilwell raged to reporters on 24 May. "We got run out of Burma and it's humiliating as hell. I think we ought to find out what caused it, go back and retake it."

By the end of 1942, the Japanese had pushed right up into the north of Burma, seizing the important airstrip at Myitkyina, and Prime Minister Winston Churchill feared for the future of India, the jewel of the British Empire. The

Americans were more concerned with the fate of China, an ally it viewed as indispensable in the long run if Japan were to be beaten.

But how best to fight back in Burma? That was the question that gnawed at Churchill throughout the dark months of early 1943. Then in May, a 61-page report fell into his lap. It was written by Brigadier Orde Wingate who had just led 2,000 of his men out of the Burmese jungle after a primitive guerrilla campaign against the Japanese. The material damage inflicted on their enemy had been small, but Wingate and his 77th Brigade – better known as the Chindits – had jolted the Japanese out of their complacency by demonstrating that the British soldier could also fight well in the jungle.

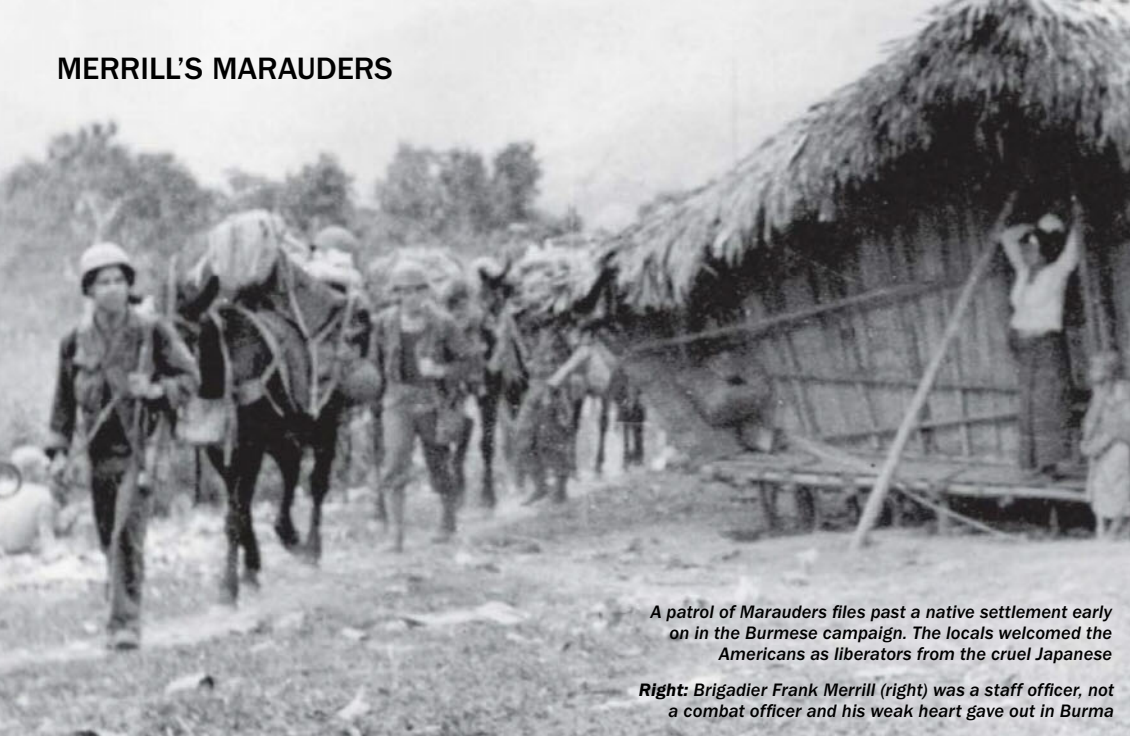
Churchill regarded Wingate as, "a man of genius and audacity," and he took him to the Quebec Conference in August 1943. Addressing President Roosevelt and the American chiefs of staff, Wingate explained that, "...long-range penetration affords greater opportunity of mystifying and misleading the enemy than any other form of warfare." Wingate described how a body of well-trained men could operate as guerrilla fighters deep inside the jungle provided they had air support; so impressed was Roosevelt that he authorised the deployment of American ground troops in Burma for the first time.

The man chosen to lead the force, provisionally designated the 1688th Casual



A Marauder patrol stands over a dead Japanese soldier after a skirmish on a jungle trail, flanked by high elephant grass





A patrol of Marauders files past a native settlement early on in the Burmese campaign. The locals welcomed the Americans as liberators from the cruel Japanese

Right: Brigadier Frank Merrill (right) was a staff officer, not a combat officer and his weak heart gave out in Burma



Detachment, was Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Hunter, who was instructed to select 3,000 men for a 'dangerous and hazardous' mission. The first man recruited was Lieutenant Gordon Mereness, a logistics officer whose job was to assemble a mountain of equipment within one month. The second soldier was 20-year-old Lieutenant Sam Wilson. He had first encountered Hunter at the infantry school at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he employed his precocious military skills as an instructor. "He was a tough, no-nonsense, hard-bitten man of few words, and yet at the same time he had a cutting dry humour," recalls Wilson, who himself was idealistic and highly intelligent.

Hunter was a decisive man with an ability to size up a person in a moment. This quality allowed him to select the men within the one-month time frame. "The [selection] process itself was very rapid and rather haphazard," says Wilson. "They were looking for action-orientated, strong men who were willing to face high-risk situations and it was a rapid process of selecting or denying membership."

The force sailed from San Francisco on 21 September, stopping en route to India at the Pacific Island of New Caledonia, where they took on board a further 700 soldiers, all veterans of the Pacific War. The six-

week voyage to Bombay allowed Wilson the opportunity to train his soldiers and get a glimpse of who each of them was. "These were men who were gamblers," he reflects. "They were willing to risk, and were trying to improve either physically or psychologically, the position in which they found themselves, and from which they volunteered."

The training was intensive. "There was daily physical exercise," remembers Wilson. "We also held little classes in weapons assembly, sighting-in rifles and other little drills, and also did whatever we could do by assisting with tactical training: setting up hypothetical situations and having the troops talk their way through various little tactical problems. We kept our minds alive to how to function effectively when in combat."

One of the first visitors to their training camp in Deolali was Orde Wingate. Even by the standards of the British officer class, Wingate was an eccentric, but he held the Americans

rapt as he explained that, "...the best defence in the jungle is to seek out the enemy and attack him, and thus impose your will on him."

Wilson considered Wingate "truly brilliant and totally creative," in evolving a concept that came to be known as insurgent warfare. That this was possible was down to the elasticity of Wingate's mind and the endurance of his Chindits. "We trained with the British and they were a really tough crew," says Wilson. "I learned from their attitude. They were cocky and they had frightening stories to tell and they would sometimes try to frighten us with their stories, but I didn't question the veracity of their tales. If anything, the reality was worse."

The Americans organised their force along the Chindits's line, dividing the 3,000 soldiers into three battalions and then sub-dividing the battalions into two combat teams (the Chindits called them columns), so that there were six combat teams in total, each composed of approximately 16 officers and 460 men.

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GENERAL SAM

ONE OF THE MOST DISTINGUISHED SOLDIERS IN US MILITARY HISTORY, SAM WILSON WAS A SPECIAL FORCES PIONEER AND CIA OPERATIVE

Sam Wilson's military career began with a lie in 1940, when he added two years to his age to enlist as an 18-year-old in the National Guard. But in the 37 years that followed, Wilson's path was straight and true until the day he retired as a lieutenant general in 1977. He first saw combat when fighting the Japanese in Burma as a member of Merrill's Marauders. After the end of World War II, Wilson entered the US Army's Foreign Area Specialist Training Program, becoming fluent in Russian. Assigned to Europe with the State Department, Wilson worked in military intelligence in the Soviet Union while acting as an interpreter in Berlin, Potsdam and Vienna.

On his return to the USA, he became a director of instruction at the US Army Special Warfare School, and

he was subsequently posted to Vietnam as a civilian working with USAID, based at the embassy in Saigon.

His other notable achievements include a spell as a special forces group commander, one of the creators of the US Army's Delta Force (for which he drew on the experience and expertise of the British Special Air Service), assistant division commander for operations in the 82nd Airborne Division, chief defence attaché at the US embassy in Moscow and finishing his service as the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and deputy director of the CIA. Now 93, General Sam, as he is affectionately known, lives in his native Virginia and is one of the most admired and respected figures in US military history.

Right: Sam Wilson at a veterans' reunion in 2013



THE BURMA CAMPAIGN

THE JAPANESE BELIEVED BURMA BELONGED TO THEM AFTER ROUTING THE BRITISH IN 1941-42. BUT IN 1944, WINGATE'S CHINDITS AND MERRILL'S MARAUDERS HEADED INTO THE JUNGLE AND EMBARKED ON A BRUTAL CAMPAIGN OF GUERRILLA WAR



MERRILL'S MARAUDERS

The three battalions were trained to operate as a self-contained unit, comprising a heavy weapons platoon, a rifle company, an intelligence and reconnaissance (I&R) platoon, a communications platoon and a pioneer and demolitions detachment. The equipment was carried by the men or on one of their 700 mules; beasts of burden capable of carrying 90 kilograms and content to eat only bamboo.

No job would be more hazardous than intelligence and reconnaissance, in effect scouting ahead of the main force to feel out the Japanese. Wilson was handed command of 1st Battalion's I&R platoon and Lieutenant Logan Weston the 3rd Battalion's. "Weston interviewed his candidates individually, prayed with them and found men of faith who were willing to risk their life," says Wilson. "I went to the guardhouse and had the sergeant of the guard call them out in one rank."

Wilson walked down the line of miscreants, shaking the hands of each one. "Then I stepped back and told them what I was about and what I needed. I told them that it will be very dangerous but we would have a front row seat, so to speak, on what was going on."

Wilson asked those interested to take three steps forward. A handful advanced. "Weston and I came at it from opposite ends of the spectrum," reflects Wilson. "But we found men who regarded the business of losing their lives lightly, who were tougher than the tough that we had in the unit as whole."

From Deolali, the 1688th Detachment moved to Deogarh in Bengal Province, where they spent hours on the firing range with Browning Automatic Rifles, semi-automatic M1 Garands, Thompson sub-machine guns and the carbine. The idea, said Hunter, was, "...that when the chips were down, they could employ them collectively to create a sledge-hammer effect to crush the heretofore 'Banzai' charge."

On 4 January 1944, Hunter was replaced as commanding officer by Brigadier General Frank D Merrill and the 1688th Detachment was reconstituted as the 5307th Composite Regiment (Provisional). The men didn't much care what they were called, but the demotion of the highly respected Hunter to second in command was hard to fathom. His replacement, the malleable Frank Merrill, was a friend of Stilwell's, yet he was physically frail with a weak heart and poor eyesight. "Hunter and Merrill were classmates at West Point in 1929," explains Wilson. "Merrill was a brilliant staff officer with creative ideas and Hunter was the executive executor of ideas, the man of action."

On 7 February, the Americans – reduced through illness and accidents to 2,600 men – marched into Burma. They were unrecognisable from the ragtag collection of volunteers who had stepped ashore at Bombay three months earlier. A war correspondent watching them train in India had dubbed them "Merrill's Marauders" and the moniker stuck. The men liked it, as they did their uniform of dark green cotton and rubber-soled canvas boots. The packs they carried on their backs weighed between 18 and 22 kilograms and included their K-rations, which provided the soldier with a daily intake of barely 3,000 calories. The communications platoons carried the combination SCR-284 transmitter and receiver radio and also the SCR-300, a portable radio transceiver worn on a mounted backpack and better known as a 'Walkie-Talkie'.

When Wilson first marched into Burma, it was with what he described as, "...a strong sense of adventure and excitement, and there was also a feeling of some confidence, because I was beginning to do on the ground the things

"AS I GOT ABOUT HALFWAY ACROSS THE GLADE, THE JAPANESE SOLDIERS HIDING ALONG THE RIVER BANK OPENED UP ON ME. THEY SHOT THE CANTEEN OFF MY BELT, RIDDLED MY PACK AND MY HELMET WAS KNOCKED OFF AS I HIT GROUND"



Marauders exchange greetings with the Chinese 1st Provisional Tank Group after their arrival at Walawbum



I had been teaching for more than a year at infantry school."

There was no "feeling of foreboding" as he and the rest of the Marauders assembled at Ningbyen on 22 February. Despite the fact that the Chindits told Wilson that the Japanese fighting soldier, "was tough, capable and skilful," the Americans considered themselves tougher and better-equipped.

The Marauders' first mission was to drive 7,000 Japanese soldiers of the elite 18th Division out of the Hukawng Valley, something two Chinese divisions had been unable to do for several weeks. The plan was for the Chinese to launch a fresh attack on the main Japanese position at the village of Walawbum, while the Marauders swung round the east of the Japanese flank, cutting their way through the jungle and establishing blocks on the Kamaing Road, south of Walawbum, thereby preventing the enemy from withdrawing south.

The instruction issued to Sam Wilson and his 48 men of the 1st Battalion's I&R platoon was to head south and reconnoitre a series of villages to the east. The trails down which they probed were surrounded by foliage so dense they had to walk in single file, five metres between each man, while overhead the undergrowth on either side of the trail joined to create a tunnel effect, blocking out the Sun's rays and reducing further the scouts' visibility. "We were moving along a trail when we came to a kind of open glade," recalls Wilson. One of his

men spotted a horse across the glade, so Wilson decided to investigate. "As I got about halfway across the glade, the Japanese soldiers hiding along the river bank opened up on me. They shot the canteen off my belt, riddled my pack and my helmet was knocked off as I hit the ground."

Wilson's composure was only momentarily ruffled. Looking up he saw a Japanese officer mounting his horse. "I opened my full-bore carbine on him, all 15 rounds," he recalls. "I hit him with the first round but kept pumping rounds into him as he was sliding off the horse." Then out of the corner of his eye, Wilson spotted something coming towards him. It was an enemy grenade. "It landed about half a metre from my right shoulder. I flicked it away, then it went off and I temporarily blanked out from the concussion. As I came to, I became aware of a Japanese soldier running at me with his bayonet. I turned to fire at him and suddenly realised that I had emptied my magazine of bullets at the horseman."

The screaming Japanese was now only moments away, the tip of his bayonet aimed at the helpless American's chest. Wilson heard three quick cracks. "He practically fell on top of me," he says. From a distance of 35 metres, Sergeant Clarence Branscomb had put three rounds into the chest of the soldier. "Everything just happened in very, very rapid motion," reflects Wilson. "But I

THE SIEGE OF NHPUM GA

DUG IN ON A HILLTOP DEEP IN THE BURMESE JUNGLE, THE MARAUDERS FOUGHT OFF REPEATED BANZAI ATTACKS DURING 12 BLOODY DAYS THAT LEFT 400 JAPANESE AND 52 MARAUDERS DEAD

Nhpum Ga didn't add up to much. Consisting of four or five bashas [bamboo houses] in a clearing 365 metres long and 225 metres wide surrounded by dense jungle. Nearly 920 metres above sea level, the village was a junction on the main trail running north to south, and was situated on a precipitous ridge above slopes covered in thick bamboo and large hardwood trees.

That made Nhpum Ga the ideal spot to block the Japanese counter-attack north until the Chinese 38th Division arrived. Lieutenant Colonel George McGee had 900 men under his command, and although the Japanese soon cut them off from ground resupply, the 2nd Battalion was regularly resupplied by air. However, despite fresh supplies of ammunition, food and water, the Marauders were subjected to continual enemy fire, either from one of two Japanese artillery guns or the snipers positioned in the dense undergrowth. Before long, the rotting corpses of men and mules created a nauseous aroma that hung like a blanket over the village. Men began to go down with dysentery but there was no other choice than to stay where they were in their fox-holes

The first major assault on Nhpum Ga was launched on 30 March and for the next 11 days, the Japanese kept up their attacks. After one Banzai charge, the Americans counted 54 dead Japanese but the strain was taking its toll. McGee noted that most of his men wore "a hopeless look of despair."

From his command post at Hsamshingyang, 6.5 kilometres to the north, Colonel Hunter tried desperately to lift the siege but the density of the jungle made it hard to advance up the hillside without incurring heavy casualties. What none of the Americans knew was the state of the Japanese forces after nearly two weeks of heavy fighting. With no resupply from the air, they were reduced to cannibalism. On 9 April – Easter Sunday – the siege was finally lifted as the bedraggled Japanese melted away at the approach of the Chinese 38th Division. They left behind 400 of their dead. The Marauders in Nhpum Ga had lost 52 dead and 163 were wounded.

Below: Members of the 3rd Battalion man a Browning heavy machine gun during the fighting to save their buddies trapped at Nhpum Ga



The Marauders' mules were invaluable in transporting the soldiers' equipment through the jungle





Men of the 1st Battalion, taken at Naubam, in April 1944. Sam Wilson is second row, crouching behind the soldier wearing the cloth cap



“WITH SNAKES, TIGERS, MOSQUITOES AND BLOOD-SUCKING LEECHES, NOT TO MENTION A FANATICAL JAPANESE FOE, THE MARAUDERS’ CASUALTY RATE WAS INDEED AS PREDICTED”

MERRILL'S MARAUDERS

realised how stupid I had been, so I posted security and then pulled the men in close together and had them facing me. I then critiqued what had happened to show them the mistakes I had made and the mistakes they had made.”

Wilson's platoon pushed on and they soon entered the village of Tanja Ga, a typical Burmese dwelling of bamboo huts in a clearing surrounded by jungle. There were fresh prints on the trail, the distinctive hobnailed imprints of Japanese boots, but after a scout of the surrounding area, Wilson was confident they had got beyond the right flank of the Japanese. The information had to be relayed to Merrill as a matter of urgency, but 35 kilometres separated them from HQ, putting them outside the range of their portable SCR-300s radios.

There was no alternative but for Wilson and Branscomb to saddle up the platoon's two horses and deliver the message in person. Other than a nocturnal encounter with fighting two big cats – leopards or tigers, in Wilson's estimation – the pair gave the message to Merrill on 27 February. He was elated, as was Stilwell, who ordered the Marauders to close on Walawbum “as quickly as possible,” while the main Chinese force advanced south. Before the Marauders executed their orders, they radioed in a resupply, “...using a large sand bar around which the river curved to the west, as a drop zone.”

In Wilson's view, air supply was, “...one of the three or four major contributory factors to the ultimate success of our campaign.” It wasn't just the deliverance of rations and ammunition,

but also the small and agile L-4 liaison planes, which in the hands of a skilled pilot could land on a sand bar and evacuate a badly wounded soldier. “That was vital and contributed immeasurably to our morale,” reflects Wilson. “And also the ability to deliver the munitions of war, including food, to us in tight circumstances was simply phenomenal. Our lifeline literally hung in mid-air.”

Once resupplied, the Marauders pushed on through 65 kilometres of dense jungle towards Walawbum. The battle was joined on the banks of the Numpyek River, when the 56th Infantry regiment launched a wave of frontal assaults on the well-entrenched 3rd Battalion on the far side. “It was shooting fish in a barrel,” recalled one Marauder. When the Japanese finally withdrew, the river was red with the blood of 800 of their dead. American casualties amounted to eight dead and 37 wounded. Nonetheless, the delight of the Americans was tempered by the knowledge that the bulk of the Japanese 18th Division had been allowed to escape because of the hesitant Chinese advance.

The pursuit, therefore, continued from the Hukawng Valley into the Mogaung Valley, 30 kilometres south, where the Japanese had established their new frontline among a series of low hills at the head of the northern end of the valley with the village of Jambu Bum at their command post.

Wilson's 1st Battalion, which had been frustrated bystanders during the battle for Walawbum, was assigned the lead role. They had instructions to head south along a jungle



Above: Hsamshingyang, seen here from a supply aircraft, was Colonel Hunter's HQ as he directed the operation to raise the siege at Nhpum Ga

trail and establish a block near the village of Shaduzup, 16 kilometres south of the enemy position at Jambu Bum, so that when the Chinese 22nd Division attacked there would be no retreat for the Japanese.

The Marauders soon encountered Japanese skirmishing parties along the trail, and as casualties began to mount, Wilson was ordered to strike off the trail and blaze a path through uncharted bamboo jungle in order to get behind the Japanese undetected. “That was incredibly difficult,” reflects Wilson, whose men would sometimes cover 1.5 kilometres in three hours. “We had to chop off bamboo at ground level and about 1.5 metres up from the

“I WOKE ONE DAY WITH MY MIND SUDDENLY CLEAR AND REALISED I WAS ALONE ON THE WARD. THE OTHERS HAD DIED ONE BY ONE”

Marauders kneel in prayer for their deliverance after the savage siege at Nhpum Ga had been lifted on Easter Sunday 1944



VOLUNTEERS & VETERANS

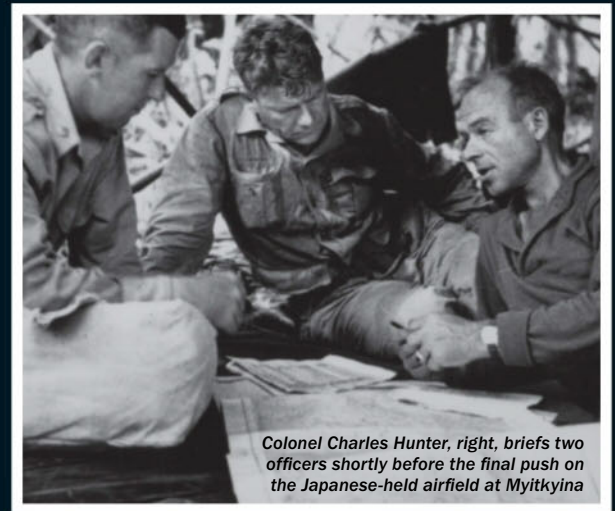
IN AUGUST 1943, A CALL WENT OUT FOR VOLUNTEERS FOR A 'DANGEROUS AND HAZARDOUS MISSION'. THOUSANDS APPLIED AND THOSE CHOSEN SOON LEARNED THEY WERE CONSIDERED EXPENDABLE

The officer initially selected to command the 3,000-strong force was Lieutenant Colonel Charles Hunter, who had experience of jungle training in the Philippines and Panama. Given a month to raise his force for the mission, codenamed 'Galahad', Hunter contacted infantry depots and training schools throughout the States in his quest for volunteers who were told they, "...would suffer approximately 85 per cent casualties." Those who answered the call were unblooded in battle but eager for action, such as Bob Passanisi, the only soldier in his signal company of 245 men to volunteer.

Once assembled in San Francisco, the men underwent a basic medical and were then interviewed by Hunter and either accepted or rejected. Due to time constraints, there was no physical fitness testing but Hunter, a shrewd and experienced officer, was an astute judge of character and few men were returned to unit (RTUd).

Having selected two thirds of his men, Hunter took on board a further 950 at New Caledonia en route to India. These men were veterans of the Pacific War and had fought on islands such as Guadalcanal and Vella Lavella, and although battle-hardened, they had been weakened by malaria and poor diet.

These veterans were therefore often the first to succumb to the brutal interior of the Burmese jungle, where extremes of heat and cold combine with the thick, rotting vegetation to provide a deadly incubator for diseases such as malaria, scrub typhus and amoebic dysentery. With snakes, tigers, mosquitoes and blood-sucking leeches, not to mention a fanatical Japanese foe, the Marauders' casualty rate was indeed as predicted.



Colonel Charles Hunter, right, briefs two officers shortly before the final push on the Japanese-held airfield at Myitkyina

"THOSE WHO ANSWERED THE CALL WERE UNBLOODED IN BATTLE BUT EAGER FOR ACTION"

ground, so that in effect we were tunnelling through this thick bamboo. And we weren't on flat ground, we were actually moving up a hill. It was one of the most exhausting experiences I've ever been through."

But their endeavour was rewarded when, on March 27, they emerged from the bamboo forest and saw before them the muddy waters of the 15-metre-wide Mogaung river. Wilson could hear the dull thud of axes from the other side of the river so, taking sergeant Perlee Tintary with him, he struck out for the far bank to investigate. "About halfway across the river, I heard hissing noises behind me," says Wilson. "I looked round and the boys were giving me the double-time signal and pointing to the far bank. So we went tearing across the remaining stretch of water, clambered up the bank and crawled into the weeds just as a Japanese patrol came by. As they passed, I was wondering would they notice the stream of water we'd left behind but they just kept going."

Wilson and Tintary moved forward on a reconnaissance, gauging the strength of the Japanese bivouac and reporting back to HQ. Early the next morning, the 1st Battalion attacked, killing an estimated 300 Japanese.

Elsewhere, however, Merrill's decision to separate the three battalions had left the 2nd Battalion dangerously isolated. Surrounded by a large Japanese force near the village of Inkangahtawng, they repelled 16 Banzai attacks before radioing in a flight of P-51 fighters to check the enemy advance and allow them the opportunity to pull back across the river. But the Japanese gave chase, pursuing the 2nd Battalion along a narrow ridgeline on top of which was the village of Nhpum Ga.

The battalion's commander, Lieutenant Colonel George McGee, considered it a suitable place to make a stand. Meanwhile, the stress of the past few days was too much to bear for Merrill. He suffered a mild heart attack on 28 March and was evacuated, replaced as

commander by Hunter, who set up his HQ at Hsamshingyang, six kilometres to the north of Nhpum Ga, where 2nd Battalion was besieged.

The siege was finally lifted on 9 April – Easter Sunday – two days after the 1st Battalion had arrived after an epic 50-kilometre march across tortuous terrain over five days. A quarter of the 800 men had been ravaged by amoebic dysentery. In the days that followed, Hunter ordered the Marauders to assemble on the airstrip cut into a rice paddy. "He had us form up by squads and platoons and companies, and we were marched up and down the rice paddy undergoing close quarter drills," explains Wilson. "It was a genius-like move on Hunter's part, although it upset people badly because they just wanted to crawl off somewhere and lie in the sun, but we were an elite military unit and Hunter was trying to snap us back into shape as a coherent force."

That should have been it for the Marauders. They had been promised leave in India once the Japanese forces had been driven out of Mogaung Valley but now Stilwell reneged on that promise, ordering them to seize the strategically important airfield at Myitkyina. That entailed a 32-kilometre backtrack north and then a 110-kilometre march over the 1,860-metre Naura Hkyat Pass in the Kumon mountains. Yet the trail hadn't been used for a decade, during which time it had become infested with pythons and huge blood-sucking leeches. It was a route that would have tested even the fittest soldier, let alone ones that had been weakened by disease and exhaustion. Wilson says there was a "dull anger" when informed of their new mission. "By that time we were down to one third of our force. Our uniform was in tatters, we were breaking out of combat boots and we were having difficulty holding ourselves together."

But they did, by dint of courage, endurance, determination and above all, an iron camaraderie that held them tight amid the

heavy rain that made every step up the muddy, treacherous mountain trail an ordeal. "It was bone-racking hard to get to our feet the next morning, eat something cold and start out again," says Wilson. "We were blindly staggering forward, like a drunk staggering out of a bar, and there was some anger, some bitterness, some resentment. The favourite saying when someone would complain was 'well, you volunteered for this'."

By the time they came down the other side of the mountains, Wilson was so tormented by dysentery that he had cut the seat out of his combat trousers to make life easier. So had many more Marauders, but still they advanced, taking Myitkyina airstrip on 17 May. Wilson was evacuated a few days later suffering from dysentery, malaria and the often-fatal mite typhus. "There were six of us in the typhus ward in India," he says. "I woke one day with my mind suddenly clear and realised I was alone on the ward. The others had died one by one."

Although Myitkyina airstrip was swiftly captured, indecision by Stilwell gave the Japanese the chance to pour reinforcements into the town, three kilometres to the east, and it wasn't until 3 August that it was finally captured. Of the 2,600 Marauders who had marched into Burma just six months earlier, 93 of them had been killed in combat, 30 had died from disease, 301 were wounded or missing and 1,970 had been hospitalised with disease. Only 206 of the original unit had come through Burma unscathed.

Wilson, who was awarded two silver and one bronze star for his gallantry and leadership in Burma, is one of 27 remaining Marauders. Asked how he kept going when he was sick and worn out, he replies: "I found I had one ability, I could put one foot in front of the other, I could take the next step. And what's a step? You put one foot forward and then the next, and then the next, and that is all that required. You just have to take the next step."