



ALAMY XI, GETTY XI, IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS XI, REX/SHUTTERSTOCK XI

MERRILL'S MARAUDERS

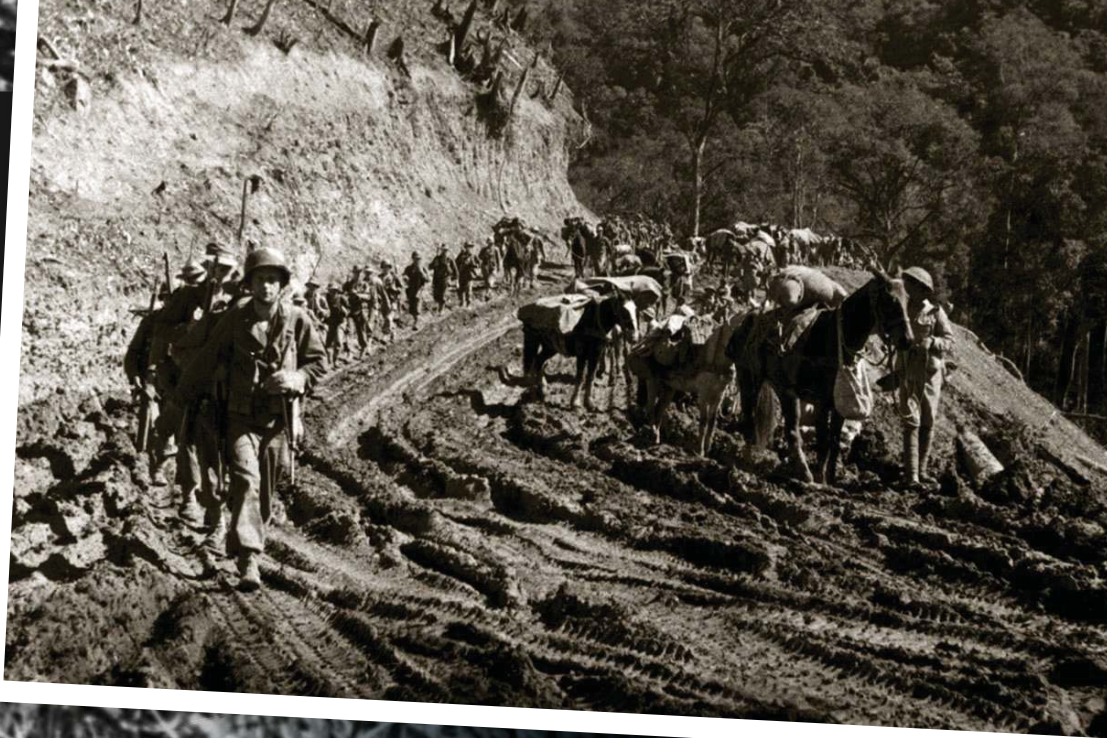
Pat Kinsella meets an extraordinary unit of military misfits sent on an against-all-odds World War II mission deep behind enemy lines



WORN WITH PRIDE
The sun on the unit's insignia commemorates its companion, the Chinese Expeditionary Force; the lightning bolt signifies the swiftness of their strikes; and the star signifies the Star of Burma.

FAR FROM HOME

MAIN: Merrill's
Marauders patrol a
Burmese jungle. They
were the first US
ground troops on the
Asian mainland RIGHT:
Troops on the Ledo
Road to China, built
under the direction
of General Stilwell



**“The most beat
upon, and yet the
most unrewarded
regiment-sized unit
in World War II”**

Colonel Charles Hunter on the 5307th Unit



In the latter stages of World War II, amid intense fighting in South East Asia, a special squadron of rapidly assembled warriors was assigned a highly unusual, extremely dangerous mission. Trained and quickly blooded in jungle-based guerrilla warfare, the provisional 5307th Unit operated under the codename Galahad. But they became better known as Merrill's Marauders, after their first officer.

The composite, highly irregular unit was comprised entirely of volunteers from other regiments, including men released from military stockades – *Dirty Dozen* style. Numbering nearly 3,000, they were arguably the biggest bunch of military misfits ever assembled, but in 1944, after three months of intensive training, the Marauders spent five months hacking through miles of dense and dangerous jungle to fight five major engagements and 32 separate skirmishes against well-armed, numerically superior and hyper-committed Imperial Japanese combat forces.

It's been suggested that the top brass regarded Unit Galahad as a gaggle of inglorious expendables, but the search for volunteers to take part in a near-suicide mission was never sugarcoated. One surviving soldier recalls being openly told the unit was expected to suffer an 85-90 per cent casualty rate.

Always outnumbered, perpetually poorly supplied, constantly ill-informed and rarely well-supported, their weapons were stealth, speed, surprise and accuracy. Amid all the adversity they faced, an extraordinary *esprit de corps* evolved between the ostensibly disparate men. But their losses were huge.

MISSION IMPROBABLE

Japan's 1942 conquest of Burma instantly caused the Allies enormous problems. The Burma Road – a vital umbilicus between India and China – slammed shut, raising the grim possibility that China could be forced out of the war.

At a powwow in Quebec, President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill and Supreme Allied Commander Mountbatten discussed the dilemma. Influenced by the presence and ideas of eccentric British military strategist Major-General Orde Wingate – who headed an unorthodox deep-penetration special forces group called the Chindits, attacking infrastructure behind enemy lines instead of entering headlong into battle – the leaders decided that the US needed a similar commando group to disrupt Japanese supply routes and communications in Burma.

A request for volunteers for an extremely hazardous mission recruited 2,997 men, whose only common denominator was a willingness to fight filthy against horrendous odds in dreadful conditions to get a nasty job done. Every US state was represented, along with a spectrum of soldiers from different social and ethnic backgrounds, from East-Coast Harvard graduates to streetwise convicts, Sioux Indians,

THE MAIN PLAYERS



FRANK MERRILL

One of the USA's youngest generals since the Civil War, Merrill was inexperienced in combat and in-field man management until given command of the Marauders by Stilwell. He survived two heart attacks during the campaign and missed much of the key action.



JOSEPH STILWELL

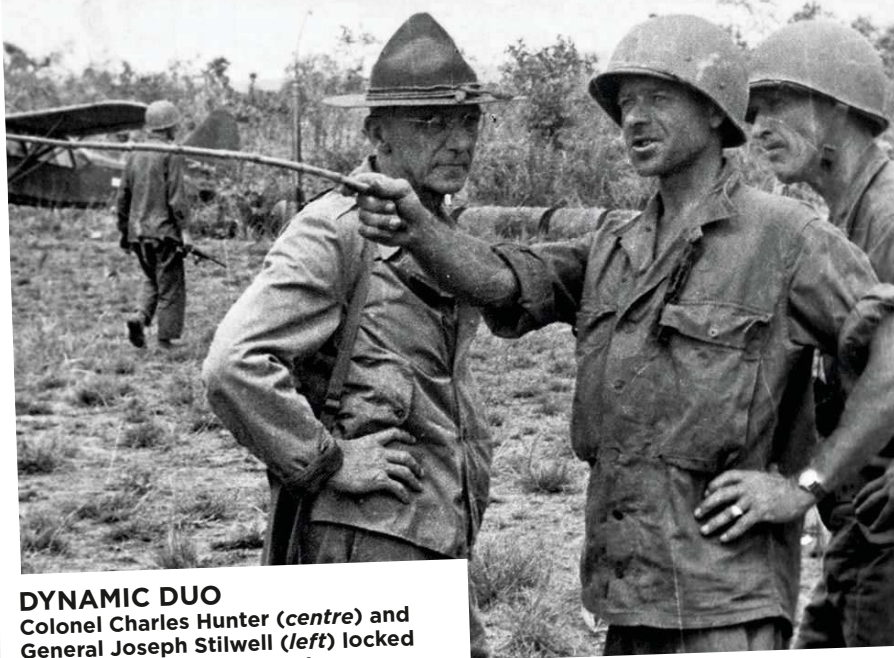
Not-so-affectionately known as Vinegar Joe, Stilwell was Chief-of-Staff to China's president General Chiang Kai-shek and commanding general of all US forces in China, Burma and India during World War II. His decision to send hospitalised Marauders back into action at Myitkyina was deeply unpopular.

CHARLES N HUNTER

Hunter was first-choice commanding officer of the 5307th Unit Galahad, until being demoted to Chief-of-Staff by Stilwell. He resumed leadership during the Marauders' most important actions, when Merrill was forced to retire with heart problems.

ORDE WINGATE

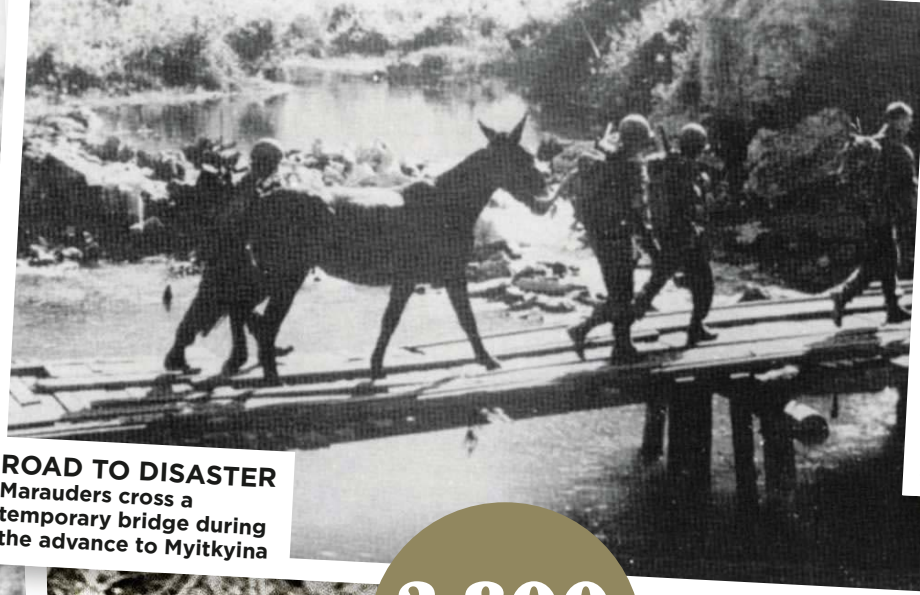
Senior British army officer and unorthodox military theorist, who pioneered deep-penetration guerrilla operations, initially with the Gideon Force in Ethiopia, then with the Chindits in Burma. He supplied inspiration and initial training for the Marauders.



DYNAMIC DUO
Colonel Charles Hunter (centre) and General Joseph Stilwell (left) locked horns throughout the mission



SITTING ON A POWDER KEG
Soldiers await orders to fire



ROAD TO DISASTER
Marauders cross a temporary bridge during the advance to Myitkyina



FAST SUPPER
K-rations were intended to be for emergencies only, but they became part of the daily diet

3,800

Number of Japanese killed in combat at Myitkyina



African-Americans and – crucially – 14 Nisei (second-generation Japanese immigrants), who spoke the language of the enemy fluently.

Labelled Unit 5307 and placed under the experienced command of Colonel Charles Newton Hunter, they assembled in Bombay in October 1943 and began training with Wingate, rehearsing jungle manoeuvres against British forces freshly returned from Burma and practising marksmanship with handheld weapons, from pistols to Tommy guns.

However, when American General Joseph Stilwell – commanding general of all US forces in China, Burma and India – discovered that the unit was operating under Wingate, he was furious, and personally persuaded Mountbatten to relinquish the reigns to him.

On 1 January 1944, Stilwell took command and instantly demoted Hunter to Chief-of-Staff, replacing him with one of his own protégés, West Point graduate Colonel Frank Merrill, who'd been a career desk soldier and had zero combat record or in-field experience of commanding men. Despite the disquiet this caused, the unit's training continued, and when a writer for *Life* magazine saw the men in mock action, he gave them the sticky nickname 'Merrill's Marauders'.

In January 1944, the Marauders began a month-long journey to Ledo, followed by a tough 100-mile march across the Patkai region of the sub-Himalayas, heading south and east along the route of the Ledo Road. On 24 February, they entered the Burmese jungle and began pushing behind Japanese lines.

During deep-penetration operations, everything has to be carried, and each of Galahad's three battalions had horses and mules to assist with the hauling of supplies. But the jungle was unforgiving to men and equines alike, and mortal danger lurked everywhere. Reconnaissance and intelligence platoons led the way, scouting trails and engaging the enemy when encountered. The first

MORAL SUPPORT
Burmese Kachins, whose homes had been burned by the Japanese, insisted on marching with the unit

fatal firefight happened the day after the unit set foot on Burmese soil, and three days later, Merrill finally told his men why they were here. Their first objective was to enforce a roadblock on the main road to North Burma, near the village of Walawbum, to stop supplies getting through to frontline Japanese troops fighting the Chinese. After a brief engagement, during which the Marauders used their chief weapon of surprise to good effect on the numerically stronger Japanese forces, the block was successfully established. However, they soon struck back, sending in the big guns from the dreaded Japanese 18th Division. Already outnumbered two to one, the Americans were now facing big-ordnance artillery bombardment.

However, the Japanese – who now knew they were under attack, but thought they were fighting Chinese troops with basic single-shot rifles, instead of Americans with automatic weaponry – underestimated their enemy and suffered huge losses. One of the Japanese-speaking Marauders tapped into a telecommunication line and learned the location of a large ammunition dump, which was then knocked out from the air.

Although down to their very last bullets by the end of the encounter, Unit 5307 defied the odds to rout the Japanese, who suffered 800 deaths compared to just eight American fatalities. Even more importantly, the victory shattered the myth of the undefeatable 18th, seriously injuring Japanese morale.

SIEGE OF MAGGOT HILL
Just three days later, after a supply drop, Stilwell split the unit up and sent the Marauders back into action. First battalion went south from Walawbum, towards Shaduzup, on a 50-mile march through the southeastern end of the Hukawng Valley, cutting through dense jungle full of enemy soldiers and becoming involved in up to 20 skirmishes. Reaching Shaduzup, they discovered a Japanese camp on the far side of the river, and slaughtered them in a surprise attack. Meanwhile, Second and Third battalions had gone east and south, fighting their way through the villages of Hsamshingyang and Nhpum Ga to Inkangahtawng, where they established a road block.

However, intelligence revealed that a massive Japanese force was closing in, threatening to cut the Americans off completely, and a retreat

GEOGRAPHY

After intensive training in India, the **Marauders' mission began with a long, unsupported march into Burma (Myanmar). Often they were forced to fight and hack their way through dense jungle with machetes. Tropical diseases, dangers and irritations - including snakebites, dysentery, typhus and leaches - plagued the Marauders throughout their five-month deployment in Burma.**

1 31 OCTOBER 1943 - JANUARY 1944 Central India

After arriving in Bombay (modern Mumbai), volunteers of Unit Galahad undergo three months of intensive tropical jungle combat training, first in Deolali then in Deogarh, Madhya Pradesh.

2 JANUARY - FEBRUARY Central-northeast India

The majority of the Marauders (minus a contingent of 247 men, who remain in India as support personnel) spend one month travelling 1,000 miles by rail and boat from the training area to Ledo in Assam, India, the start point of a new supply road then still under construction. They arrive on 7 February.

3 9-21 FEBRUARY Northeast India - Burma (Myanmar)

From Ledo they continue on foot for another 100 miles, travelling roughly ten miles a day through the peaks and passes of the Patkai Bum region, to arrive in Ningbyen, Burma between 19-21 February. By 24 February, they are well behind enemy lines.

4 4-9 MARCH Walawbum, Burma

The Marauders' first major engagement sees them establish a roadblock on the main road to North Burma. They then defend their position and defeat Japan's much-feared 18th Division, despite being outnumbered two to one.

5 12 MARCH Kachin, Burma

Once casualties have been airlifted out and the Unit resupplied by brave pilots of little Piper Cub planes, the Unit's three divisions split up. The First Battalion heads south towards Shaduzup, where they engage the Japanese in a battle, while the Second and Third Battalions march east and south, through Hsamshingyang and Nhpum Ga, to set up a road block in Inkangahtawng.

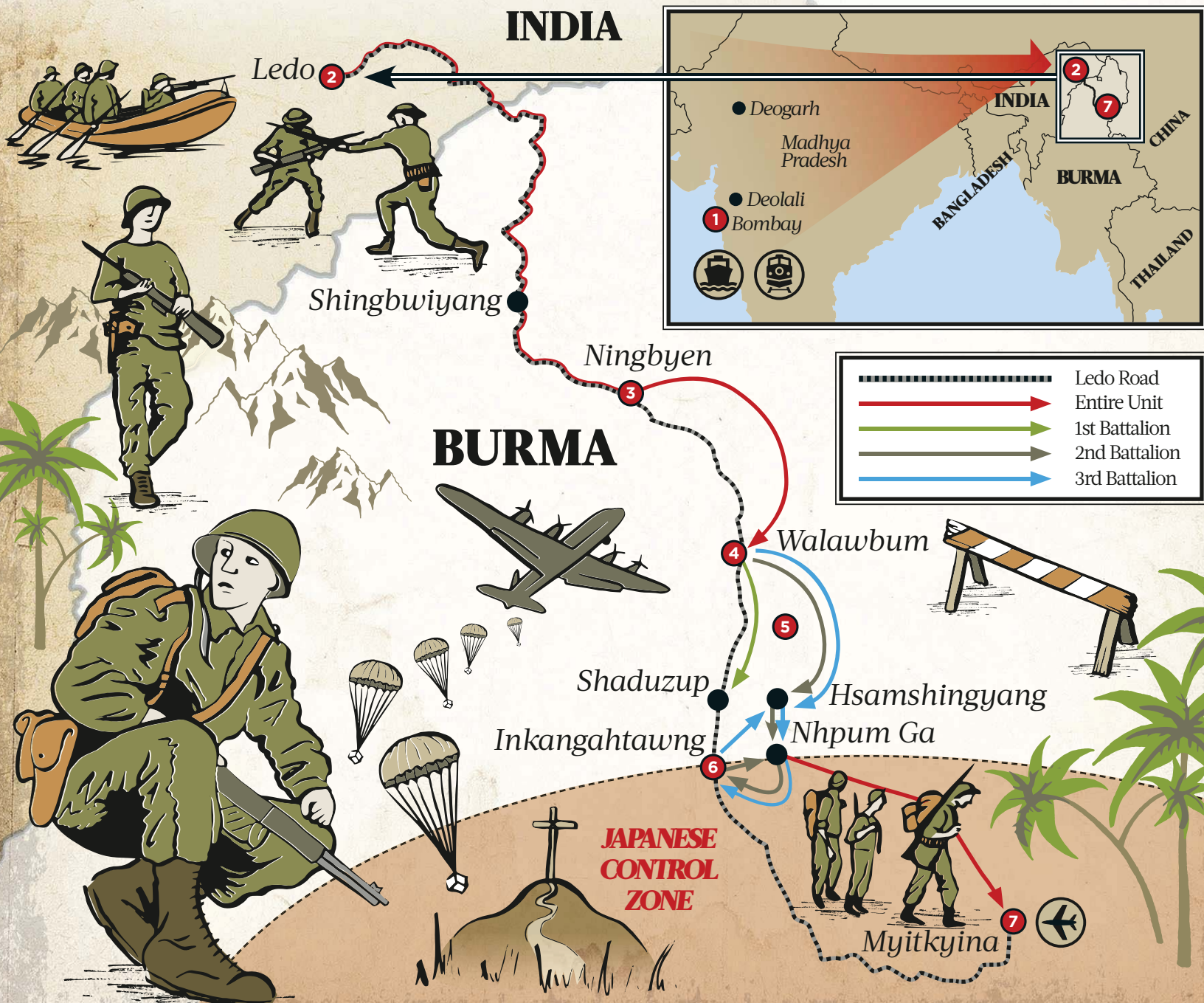
6 28 MARCH-9 APRIL Maggot Hill, Nhpum Ga

Forced into a retreat, the Third Battalion hikes to Hsamshingyang, where they engage the enemy, while the Second Battalion is surrounded and besieged on a body-strewn bump in Nhpum Ga, nicknamed Maggot Hill. Other divisions help rout the Japanese.



7 17 MAY-AUGUST Myitkyina

Having marched for ten days through monstrous monsoon conditions, along a 65-mile mountain trail across the Kumon Range, suffering greatly from disease and malnutrition, the much-depleted Marauders fight their final series of battles. The airfield at Myitkyina is quickly taken, but it's not until 3 August that the city is secured, with the help of Chinese and British forces.





THE BITTER END
FAR LEFT: Troops fire a 75mm pack howitzer at Myitkyina. CENTRE: Marauders take aim at a Japanese plane that has come up to attack Myitkyina airfield. NEAR LEFT: Stilwell decorates the mission's survivors.

to Nhpum Ga was ordered. To keep the escape route open, a platoon under Lieutenant Logan Weston doggedly defended the road from the south, holding what transpired to be an entire regiment at bay for three days and four nights. Third Battalion then headed to Hsamshingyang, while Second Battalion continued to Nhpum Ga, where 800 Marauders prepared to prevent the Japanese forces advancing any further north.

Before this happened, Colonel Merrill suffered a heart attack and when he was evacuated, Colonel Hunter resumed leadership of the unit in the field. He faced enormous problems, with growing casualties caused more by disease and poor diet than anything the enemy were inflicting upon them. That, though, was about to change.

On 31 March, Japanese forces surrounded the beleaguered battalion, trapping them in Nhpum Ga. They grimly nicknamed the place Maggot Hill, because it was covered in the corpses of Japanese soldiers and horses, putrefying and crawling with the larvae of bluebottle flies. The Japanese guarded the only water source, and the Marauders had little to eat or drink for a week. An attempt to retake the waterhole ended in a tragic incident when several soldiers were killed by friendly fire.

On the eighth day of the siege, while eavesdropping near an enemy camp, Nisei soldier Roy Matsumoto learned that a Banzai attack was planned for the following morning. The Marauders were ready, and the Japanese suffered huge losses as they charged at the screaming machine guns. From their position at Hsamshingyang, Third Battalion attempted to relieve the pressure on their comrades by launching attacks on the Japanese. On 2 April, two 75mm pack howitzers were airdropped in

to the Marauders, giving them artillery power to punch even harder, and four days later First Battalion arrived. Despite having endured a four-day march from Shadzup, with almost no food, they too joined the fray.

By 9 April, the siege was broken and the Japanese routed again. The toll had been heavy, however, and the Marauders' force was half of its original strength, with just 1,400 men still standing, many of them ravaged by disease and malnutrition. Worse still, they were ordered back into battle almost immediately.

2

Number of Marauders who finished the mission alive and who had never been hospitalised

MYITKYINA MADNESS

Having recovered from his heart problem, Merrill resumed command and on 17 April, he and Stilwell planned an assault on the all-weather airstrip at Myitkyina, from where Japanese fighter planes were attacking Allied C-47 Skytrains flying supplies from India, across 'The Hump' (the Himalayas) to China.

The depleted Marauder ranks were reinforced with the addition of Chinese troops and the crucial support of the Burmese Kachins, a local tribe with huge knowledge of the terrain and a deep-seated hatred of the Japanese invaders.

Motivating his men with second-hand promises from Stilwell about immediate evacuation upon the completion of their mission, Merrill marched the Marauders through a monsoon for ten days, along a 65-mile mountain trail across the Kumon Range. In the mud, horses slipped and fell to their deaths, taking valuable supplies with them, and men were beasted by leeches. Dozens died from typhus, and their ability to fight disease and

fatigue was retarded by their diet, consisting of the infamously unpopular 'K-ration'.

These stingy packets of tasteless, low-calorie food were originally intended for emergency use only – for pilots shot down behind enemy lines – not to sustain fighting, marching men, and many of the Marauders had serious malnutrition before reaching Myitkyina. Merrill then suffered a second heart attack and was once again evacuated, with Hunter stepping up to take command.

Despite all this, well-planned attacks on Japanese soldiers in surrounding villages dragged the attention of the enemy away from Myitkyina, and on 17 May, Hunter's battalion took the airport in a surprise offensive.

But the promised relief didn't arrive, and the evacuations didn't begin, and soon a few hundred residual Japanese troops in Myitkyina swelled to around 4,000. Counter attacks were waged against the Marauders, whose numbers were now down to around 600, and an attempt to employ Chinese battalions to take the pressure off the Americans at the airfield ended in another friendly fire fiasco.

British Chindits and Chinese troops joined the fighting, but Stilwell, swirling in a political fog, refused to evacuate the 5307. Against Hunter's wishes, he even sent injured Marauders back into action from the hospitals where they had been recovering – a decision that seriously tarnished his reputation. More Americans were sent in, but they were engineers, not combat troops, and their effectiveness was minimal. The situation worsened still further when an Allied aerial attack accidentally dropped bombs on the American-held area, killing and wounding 119 men. Still the Marauders held out, and even staged offensive attacks on the Japanese positions, until 2,900 fresh troops finally arrived from India.

On 3 August 1944, Myitkyina fell. A week later the 5307th Unit was disbanded, with just 130 men still standing from the original 2,750 who had entered Burma five months earlier. ○

GET HOOKED

WATCH

Merrill's Marauders – Based on a book written by Charlton Ogburn Jr, a communications officer who served with the 5307th, this 1962 film stars Jeff Chandler as Merrill.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

By taking Myitkyina, the Marauders helped open the Ledo Road and vastly reduced the capability of the Japanese to attack Allied planes flying over the Himalayas with vital supplies for Chinese troops. Just days after the conclusion of the Battle of Myitkyina on 3 August 1944, the surviving members of the 5307th Composite Unit were absorbed into the 475th Infantry. A decade later, the 475th Infantry morphed into the

75th Infantry, which in turn became 75th Ranger Regiment, now the only ranger regiment in the US Army, whose soldiers still sport the colours and shoulder pads worn by Merrill's Marauders. In 1966, the 5307th was recognised with the Presidential Unit Citation for extraordinary heroism in action, and every single Marauder was awarded the Bronze Star for heroic or meritorious service.