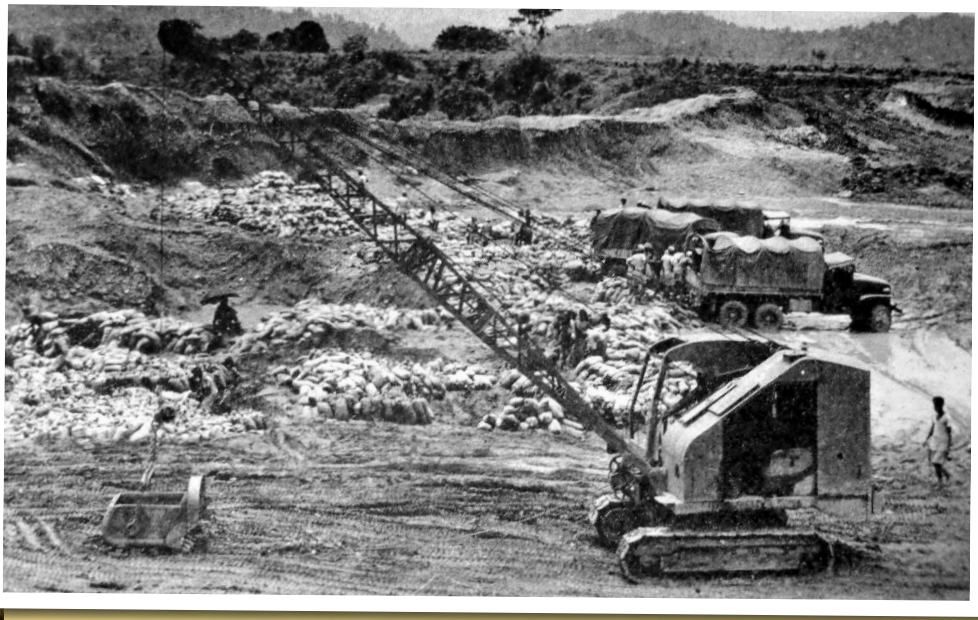
MUD, SWEAT AND GEARS

Alain Henry de Frahan, who led two expeditions with a WW2 Jeep on the Stilwell Road, recounts what the American 1880th Engineer Aviation Battalion achieved

Caterpillar D8 of Company C at work on the Ledo Road near Loglai, in the Patkai range (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

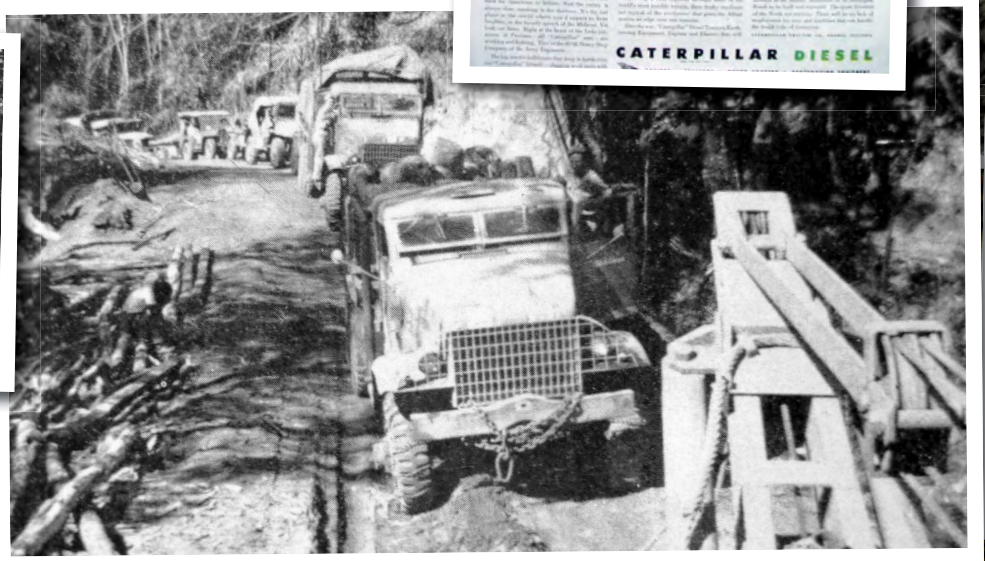
Due to the extreme difficulties faced by the engineers tasked to build a road through the jungles, rivers, swamps and mountains of India, Burma and China, the story and illustration of their exploits is of a particular interest for collectors of military vehicles.

In spite of its name, the unit spent the majority of its time building the Stilwell Road rather than working on USAAF airfields. As a reminder the Stilwell Road is formed by the Ledo Road, built in 1943-45 by the US Engineers from Ledo (Assam, NE India) to Mu Se (Burma-China border), and the Chinese part of the Old Burma Road, built in 1937 by the British and the Chinese between Lashio (end of the Rangoon-Lashio railway) and Kunming (Yunnan, S-W China) to supply Chiang Kai-shek's army.



Coolies recruited from tea gardens fill a million sandbags at the Harvey pit for the airport and the Makum Junction Road (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

Illustration from the book published by the 1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).



Above: Gravel laid down by a GMC CCKW 353 dump truck (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion). Top: Shooting the Ledo airstrip with asphalt was a sordid task under the boiling rays of the sun (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion). Top right: One of the advertisements published by Caterpillar during the war to pay homage to the Ledo Road builders, referring to its HQ in Peoria, Illinois (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

Above: Heavy convoy with M1 Heavy Wrecker, White 666 prime movers, Dodges and Jeeps on the Ledo Road while under construction (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

FROM USA TO BURMA

The 1880th Engineer Aviation Battalion was created on 1 March 1943 at Geiger Field, Spokane, Washington State. The unit started modestly: 37 enlisted men and three officers, but quickly grew to reach the battalion level of 762 trained specialists.

On 26 March 1944 the Battalion left Geiger Field by the East Coast and crossed the Atlantic, entered the Mediterranean where it stopped at Oran (Algeria, then under control of the Free French Forces), Naples (Italy), Port Said (Egypt), passed through the Suez Canal, and stopped in Aden (Yemen). Their journey ended at Bombay on the western coast of India on 12 May 1944. However, it was far from the assigned destination and the battalion started a long, slow and difficult journey by railway to Calcutta, on the eastern coast of India, and finally to the Assam province, in the far north east of India.

"All available men, including administrative personnel, were rushed to the road, day and night, to keep it open."

WORK BEGINS IN BURMA

The Battalion received its orders from the Base Headquarters in Calcutta on 29 May 1944. A part of the unit (companies A, B and C) was sent to the Margherita-Ledo area, while the other was sent to Myitkyina, in Northern Burma, an area inhabited by the Kachins, an ethnic group that supplied thousands of men to Detachment 101 of the OSS, the precursor of the CIA.

The first job of the Ledo-based group was to maintain a 40-mile section of the Ledo Road, carry out the enlargement and maintenance of the Ledo airfield as well as of numerous access roads, and undertake about 20 construction projects of various types. Due to the monsoon season, most culverts had been washed out. All available men, including

Above: Caterpillar D7 bogged down at mile point 46. Two bulldozers will be necessary to get it out of the deep mud (US NARA). Left: A Caterpillar D4 is unloaded from a GMC CCKW 353 (US NARA).

Above: Three Caterpillar D7s at work at mile point 284 (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion). RIght: International TD towing a GMC on the Ledo Road (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

Above: A Caterpillar D7 of Co A, 1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion, is coming to the rescue of a Jeep bogged down between Makum Junction and Digboi (US NARA).

Above: International TD 18 pulling a scraper at work between Makum Junction and Digboi, Assam (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

administrative personnel, were rushed to the road, day and night, to keep it open and the three companies were sometimes relocated to react in emergency to various needs. Native local labourers were hired from the Indian Tea Association and handpicked tons of gravel that were freighted to the worst spots. Logs, sandbags, bamboo and the like were used to keep the road from sinking out of sight.

By mid-July 1944, the road was reopened to traffic and in September that year, thanks to C Company, more of the Ledo Road had been completed.

During the same period, mud swamped the Ledo airfield, challenging the engineers' ingenuity. So, A and B companies were moved to help solve the nightmare but also enlarge and improve the entire airfield. By November Ledo had become a very busy place with transport, liaison and fighter aircraft buzzing all around.

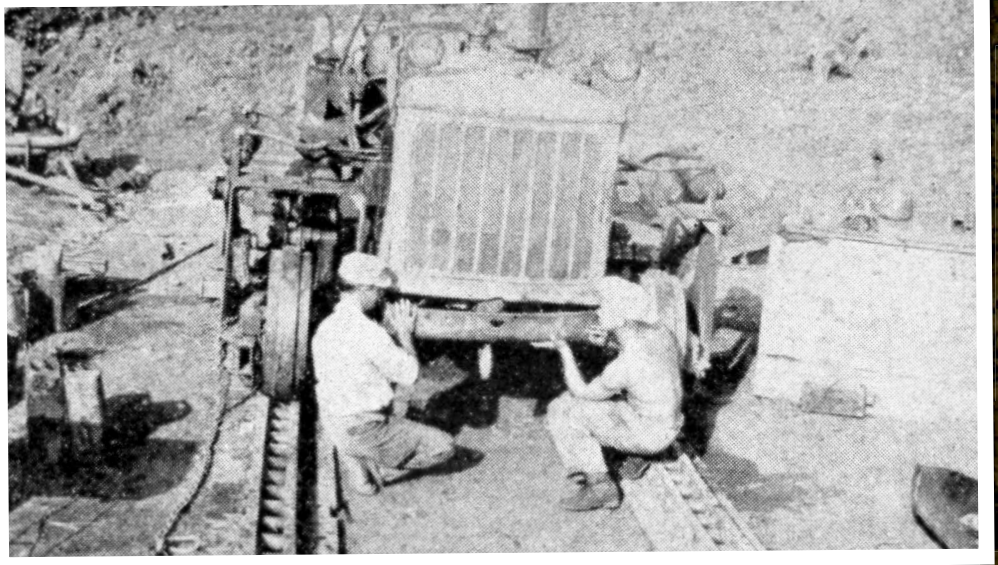
With the Myitkyina sector needing various engineering works, a survey party of the battalion left in September 1944 to determine where to construct an exceptionally long floating bridge across the wide Irrawaddy River.

In late October 1944, the rest of the 1880th Battalion moved into Burma.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN…

On October 28, B Company drove to the village of Warazup (mile point 189) near a landing strip used mainly by the American 1st Air Commando Group commanded by Colonel Philip Cochran. The other companies drove further with each tasked to build, repair, and enlarge road sections, including innumerable culverts, as well as build some causeways and bridges. Driving heavy equipment on such muddy soil was an exhausting challenge: Ward LaFrance and Kenworth wreckers, White 666 and Corbitt 50SD6 prime movers towing trailers loaded with graders, Caterpillar D4 or D7 bulldozers were not toys for green horns!

Right: GMC CCKW 353 bogged down on the Ledo Road turned into a quagmire (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).



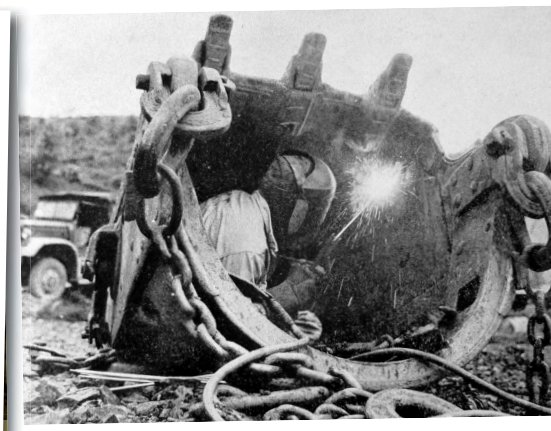
Above: Caterpillar D8 sunk in the mud (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).
Right: Mechanics work continuously to repair equipment; here an International TD 18 (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

The burning sun and a thin dust of the dry season started to replace the rain and mud of the wet season. Everywhere along the road the local people marveled at the modern American equipment and labour saving devices that enabled them to build the road with such speed.

The engineers hacked their way through marshes and jungle, re-aligned the snaky pre-existing trail if any, moved thousands of cubic yards of dirt, built timber trestles and Bailey bridges, and laid thousands of feet of steel culvert.

EN ROUTE TO CHINA

In June 1945, the Battalion started to leave Burma for China. A 600-vehicle convoy wound its way along the Ledo Road and then the 'old' Burma Road. This was a very impressive sight. The journey took several weeks to reach the Yunnan and Kweichow provinces, their newly assigned operational areas. With the exception of a few mechanics, cooks and night guards, virtually every man of the Battalion, including medics and clerks, became a driver or heavy equipment operator. The heavy equipment convoy needed a month to cover the distance lighter vehicles did in two weeks. The various hairpin bends in the mountainous Bhamo-Namkham stretch

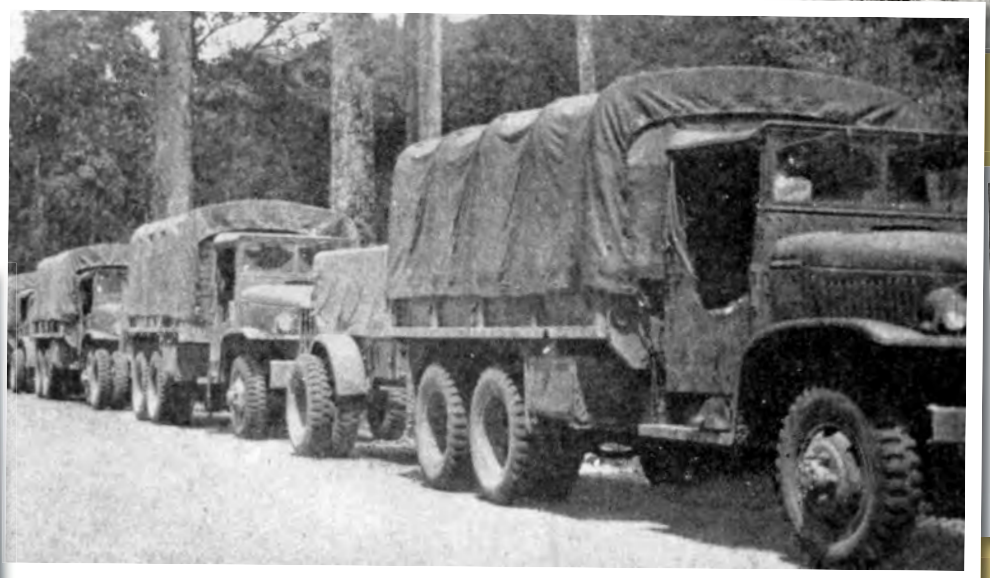


Above: Repair work included welding on shovels (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).
Left: A Caterpillar D7 of 1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion, flown in pieces to Myitkyina by Curtiss C-46 Commandos is being reassembled (US NARA).

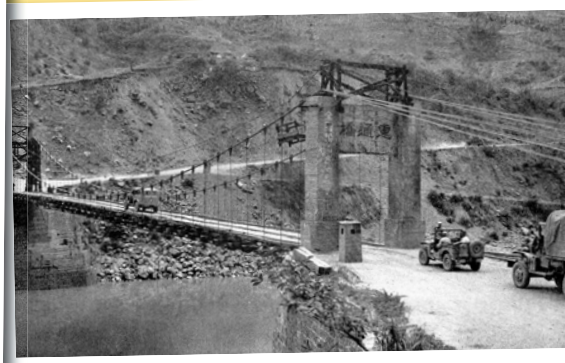
Right: Caterpillar D4 of the 1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion at work near Myitkyina (US NARA).
Below: Caterpillar D4 of Co A clearing mud near Myitkyina (US NARA).

Above: A Diamond T 972 tipper and a GMC CCKW 353 combine their power to manoeuvre a trailer loaded with a grader near Bhamo, an often exhausting skill imposed on the drivers (US NARA).

Above: A Diamond T 972 that slid off the road is being recovered by a Ward LaFrance or Kenworth M1 and a Diamond T 969 wrecker (US NARA).



Above: Convoy of the 1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion en-route to China. Notice the twin-wheels on the Ben-Hur 1-ton trailers (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).



Above: A Dodge WC-53 Carryall is crossing the splendid suspension bridge over the Salween River, followed by a Jeep and a GMC (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

proved a nightmare to negotiate. Some trailers loaded with bulldozers slipped off the side of the road, imposing considerable work with other bulldozers and heavy trucks tasked to recover them. Consequently, a Caterpillar D7 was instructed to drive in front of the convoy to widen the track and enable the following vehicles to pass.

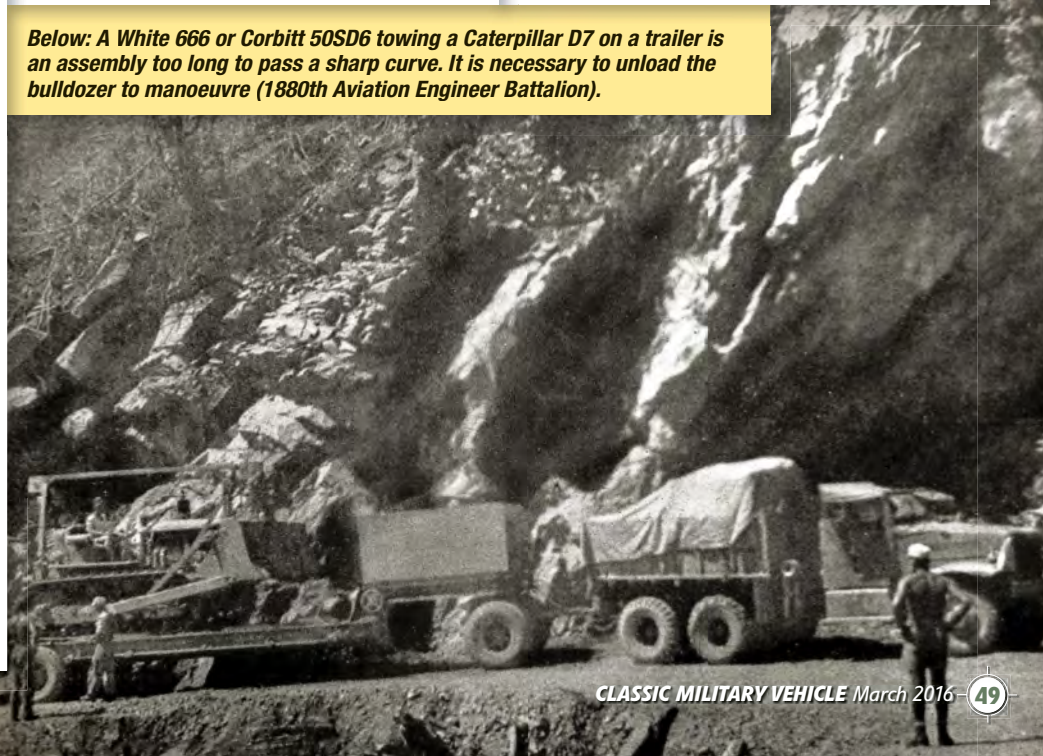
After Namkham, the flat countryside made it easier for the convoy to progress. The more hilly Mu Se-Mong Yu area (Burma-China border) marked the junction between the Ledo Road and the old Burma Road at MP (mile point) 740, before the Chinese village of Wanting.

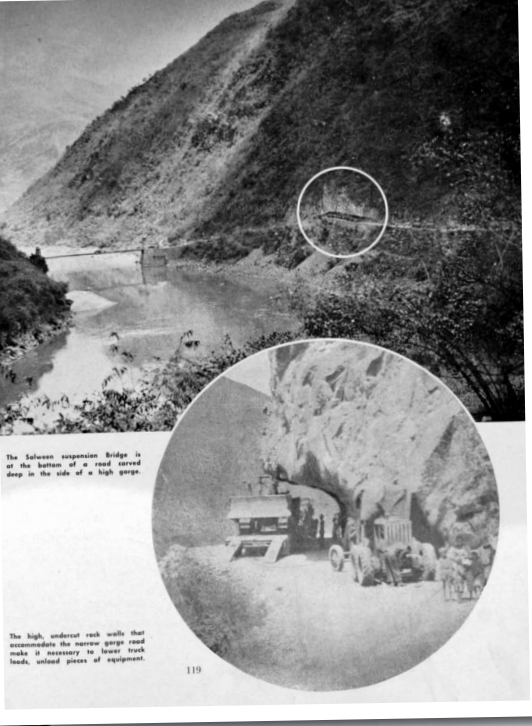
After their arrival, a section of the group was flown back to Burma to bring another 100 GMCs to China.

The Salween River gorge, however impressive, did not put the drivers in serious trouble. But the splendid suspension bridge recently rebuilt by the engineers was cause for concern: its theoretical 10-ton capacity was questioned by the drivers of the heavy convoy. As a precaution, the bulldozers and graders were unloaded and drove across first. Even the heavy trailers were pulled empty by GMCs instead of their usual Corbitt or White 6x6 prime movers. The power shovels were taken across in two parts: the crawler assembly on one trailer, the cab and engine assembly on another, both being reassembled and reloaded on the other end of the bridge.

Another serious difficulty was caused by the necessity of passing underneath a low-ceiling section bored through the rock. That day the heavy convoy completed only five miles.

Below: A White 666 or Corbitt 50SD6 towing a Caterpillar D7 on a trailer is an assembly too long to pass a sharp curve. It is necessary to unload the bulldozer to manoeuvre (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).





Above and left: Passing underneath a low-ceiling passage bored through the rock demanded the unloading of each equipment from their trailers (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

Several incidents and accidents, sometimes spectacular, occurred but thankfully none of them caused any fatalities.

All the convoys stopped in Paoshan, before the Mekong River and when they arrived the ancient walled city was congested with Chinese refugees and American troops.

On 10 June 1945, the advance party and the four company units reached Kunming, the end of the Stilwell Road (and of the old Burma Road).

A fundamental reorganisation of the chain of command of the Service of Supply (SOS) forces in China was implemented and the theatre of operation was divided into several sections, with a base section (BS) commander in charge of all activities in each section.

The 1880th Engineer Aviation Battalion was assigned to BS 2 covering an area east of Kunming, near Nanning where they had 100 miles of road to maintain, widen and improve, a colossal task for which Chinese coolies were hired in assistance, and two Chinese engineer regiments assigned as reinforcement.

BEWARE HITCH-HIKERS!

On the narrow, sharply winding and dusty roads, the American drivers feared the Chinese drivers who were convinced that their half of the road was the middle half and did not hesitate to back up their conviction with a sub machine gun. That was when they were not causing spectacular accidents in which Chinese drivers rolled off the road and completely demolished their trucks.

"Some trailers loaded with bulldozers slipped off the side of the road..."

Many Chinese soldiers found it easy to hitchhike on the US trucks. Undisciplined and trigger-happy ones waved guns instead of thumbs and did not hesitate to fire when American drivers refused to stop. Luckily, no engineers were hit, and the Chinese gained a reputation as being poor shots.

LAST OPERATIONS

The workload on the 100-mile stretch was such that the battalion's force was stretched to the limit. Companies were broken down into platoons and platoons into small working squads. On top of that, the rainy season started, making the work even more difficult and sometimes dangerous.

Following a revision of the base section boundaries in mid-July 1945, the battalion was reassigned to BS 3 and lost the assistance of the two Chinese engineer regiments. From the unit's diary, it appears that, since the battalion left Burma and until V-J-Day (15 August 1945), it would have spent three quarters of its time in movements and camp setting, and only one quarter in actual work on the road.

After the Japanese surrender (15 August 1945, signed on 2 September aboard USS Missouri), discussions with the Chinese government started about the transfer of the road maintenance to the Chinese engineers. Hence, by 26 September the 1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion was declared surplus to the China theatre of operation (CBI had been previously split into China and Burma-India).

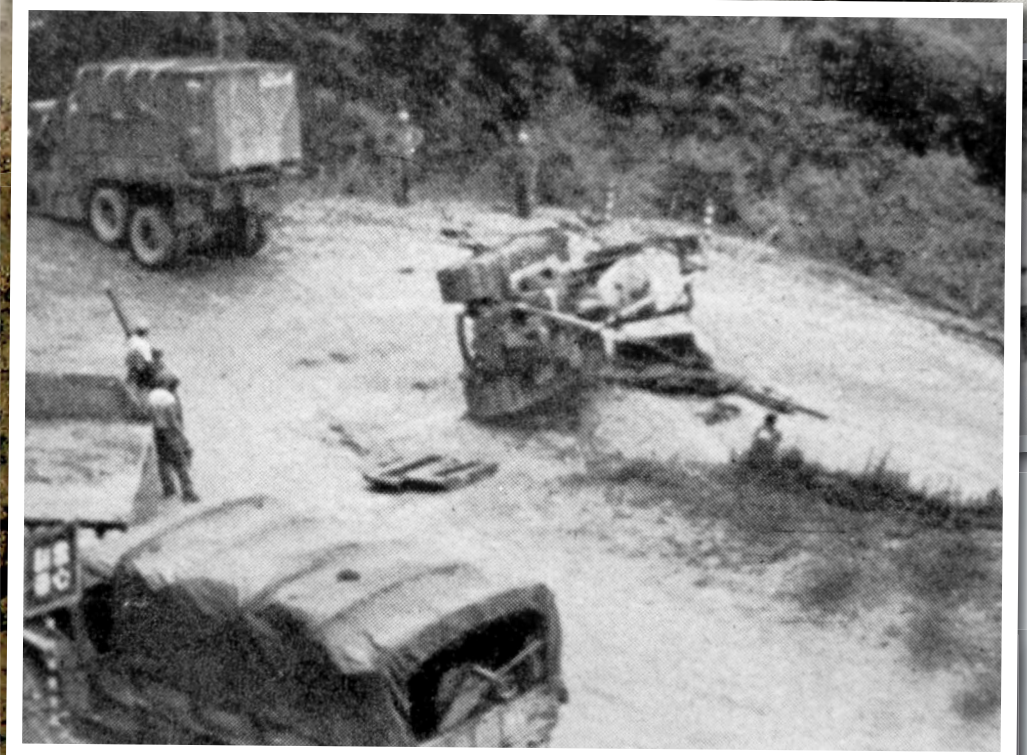
BACK TO AMERICA

On 30 September 1945 the battalion started to move toward Chanyi, 100 miles east of

Below: Shovel cranes were transported in two assemblies and then reassembled at destination (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

Above and right: A GMC demolished by its Chinese driver is being recovered by the Americans using the winches of their Studebaker US6-U3 and GMC CCKW 353 (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).

Above, right, below and below right: Example of an accident that occurred sometimes, here near Yang-Pi, China. A Caterpillar D4 has been tipped off on a sharp curve (1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion).



Kunming. After numerous inspections of personnel records and US Army property accountability, it then moved to Luliang air base, 60 miles south of Changyi. On 12 October the first planeload of the battalion boarded Douglas C-54 Skymasters. Two days later the entire outfit had been ferried over the 1000 miles to Barrackpore air base, near Calcutta. On 16 November, after new inspections and other administrative delays, it was trucked to the port of Calcutta and boarded USS Marine Panther which accommodated 2513 troops under the care of the Army Transport Service.

The boat reached Ceylon on 21 November, sailed on to the Red Sea and Suez Canal, Gibraltar and the Atlantic, finally docking at New York on 19 December 1945. This put an end to the 33-month existence of the 1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion.

Source: Situation CBI, The Story of the 1880th Aviation Engineer Battalion in World War II, March 1943-December 1945. Produced by the Battalion (no date). Pictures from the official Battalion book and US NARA, collection of Alain Henry de Frahan.

Right: Calcutta, 26 September 1945. Buyers examine Caterpillar D4s in the yard of the 3100th Quartermasters Salvage and Repair Company. Surplus equipment at military installations is prepared for sale by the Army-Navy Liquidation Commission (US NARA).