

U.S. Army barge, powered by outboard motors, crosses Irrawaddy River near Tiggyiang, Burma, with Soldiers, ammunition, and truck, December 30, 1944 (U.S. Army/William Lentz)



Echoes of the Past

The Burma Campaign and Future Operational Design in the Indo-Pacific Region

By Shane Williams, John Green, Richard Kovsky, and Edwin Sumantha

When you go home, Tell them of us and say, For your tomorrow, We gave our today.

—War Memorial at Kohima

Lieutenant Colonel Shane Williams, USAF, is the Executive Officer of U.S. Transportation Command J3, Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. Captain John Green, USN, is the U.S. Special Operations Command J8 Lead Assessment Director, Tampa, Florida. Colonel Richard Kovsky, USAF, is Chief of the Open Skies Department at the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. Colonel Edwin Sumantha, Indonesian Army, is the Staff Director of the Indonesian Army Command and General Staff College.

The literature, personal accounts, and films documenting World War II over the past 80 years have generally overlooked a pivotal chapter of that conflict: the 1942–1945 Burma



Scouting detachment of armed Burmese patriot fighters, accompanied by two American Soldiers, cautiously wades through jungle stream in Northern Burma, circa 1944 (Chronicle/Alamy)

campaign. The few accounts that exist describe this “forgotten war” as one of the most remote, demanding, lengthy, and heroic struggles of the war.¹ They tell stories of overcoming catastrophe to reach triumph, replete with leadership failures and successes, innovations in warfare and operational art, and astonishing endurance and courage. These stories offer poignant lessons for the U.S. joint force today. The interaction of technology, readiness, and tactical concepts in Burma provides inferences for the contemporary relationships among these factors. These inferences lead to implications for joint force operational design. Future Indo-Pacific battlefields require operational designs that stress proficiency over mass and firepower, emphasize maneuver and sustainment in contested environments, and leverage allies and partners against monolithic opponents. Joint force leaders must actively practice operational art and continually adapt these designs to recover quickly from losses and capitalize on

success. Despite the passage of time, the Burma campaign provides penetrating insights into how the joint force may prevail in a contemporary conflict in the Indo-Pacific region.

This article is organized into three parts. First, a historical narrative of the Burma campaign highlights the struggles of 1942–1943, then details the second Arakan operation, the second Chindit operation, the battle of Imphal-Kohima, and the final Allied operation to retake Burma. Second, inferences are drawn from the historical narrative applied to modern warfare. Finally, implications for future joint force operational design in the Indo-Pacific derive from these inferences, indicating lessons contemporary joint force commanders and staffs can learn from the Burma campaign.

The Campaign

1942–1943. In his stirring account of the Burma campaign, Field Marshal Viscount William Slim described Burma as “some of the world’s worst country, breeding

the world’s worst diseases, and having for half the year at least the world’s worst climate.”² Natural barriers prohibited access to Burma, except by sea and mountain passes. Dense, malarial jungle and impenetrable elephant grass dominated the landscape. Mountain ranges of over 10,000 feet edged the country in a crescent moon, isolating it from India and China. Within Burma, the ranges extended north to south with steep-sided valleys where deep, swift rivers carved their way to swampy deltas and alluvial coastal plains in the south. From June through October, the monsoon season brought heavy rainfall that turned these rivers into torrents and made roads and trails a quagmire.³ Even in the dry season, few passable roads existed, and they and the nation’s limited railways followed the topography’s north-south orientation to converge on the port and capital of Rangoon.⁴ Overall, Burma’s forbidding geography would haunt the Allies as the Japanese commenced their invasion of the country in January 1942.

Following successful campaigns in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, the Japanese invaded Burma from Thailand. Winning successive battles at Moulmein and the Sittang Bridge, they advanced swiftly to siege Rangoon.⁵ The capital fell in early March, initiating the longest retreat in Britain's military history.⁶ With reinforcements and materiel flowing in through the port at Rangoon, the Japanese offensive steadily gained momentum. The combination of rugged terrain, narrow egress routes packed with refugees, and the Japanese tactic of outflanking and establishing rear-sector roadblocks disrupted the Allies' capacity to feed, supply, and maneuver their forces.⁷ Despite Chinese reinforcements and attempts at a counteroffensive, the Allied retreat continued. Toungoo, Mandalay, Myitkyina, and Akyab fell in rapid succession.⁸ By the end of May, the exhausted, emaciated, and defeated Allied forces reached sanctuary in India when monsoon rains finally halted the Japanese advance.⁹ In 4 months of campaigning, the Japanese had completed their conquest of Burma.

Spurred to raise morale and satisfy political pressures, the Allies launched the first Arakan operation in December 1942.¹⁰ Traversing rugged terrain in a narrow front—"like fighting a modern war along stone-age tracks"—the Allied advance made initial successes before stalling at formidable Japanese bunker complexes.¹¹ Repeated Allied assaults led only to heavy casualties. In April, a Japanese counteroffensive outflanked the Allied positions, and their collapse over the next month was, as Slim wrote, "too much like 1942 over again."¹² The Allies once more retreated to their Indian sanctuary in embarrassing failure as the monsoon rains fell.¹³ As this lamentable scene in the Arakan ended, however, a glimmer of hope materialized with the first Chindit operation.

The Chindits, a diverse force involving British, Gurkha, Burmese, and African units, had spent the previous 3 months penetrating 200 miles into Japanese-occupied Burma.¹⁴ Supplied only by air—their commander Brigadier General Orde Wingate had articulated,

"The vulnerable artery is the line of communication winding through the jungle . . . [to] bring in the goods, like Father Christmas, down the chimney"—the long-range penetration group (LRPG) snaked its way through Burma's treacherous topography, harassing Japanese rear areas and communications.¹⁵ The Chindits successfully cut the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway before attempting to cross the Irrawaddy River to sever the Mandalay-Lashio railway. The combination of exhaustion, disease, overextended air supply, and Japanese attacks forced Wingate to abandon this objective and exfiltrate back to India. Losses were heavy: a third of the force failed to return, and with no means of extracting the wounded, many were left in the jungle to die or be captured.¹⁶ The operation was controversial, delivering no tangible military gains in return for the losses suffered. Yet the audacity and endurance of the Chindits, meeting the Japanese in jungle warfare deep inside their lines, was perceived as a moral victory that inspired Allied forces in India and distracted from the failures in Arakan.¹⁷

For the rest of the 1943 monsoon season, the Allies redressed deficiencies. The command structure reorganized under the newly formed South East Asian Command, appointing Slim as commander of the new XIV Army deployed along a 700-mile front from China to the Bay of Bengal.¹⁸ Changes in command led to a reorientation of strategic, operational, and tactical thinking. Profiting from experience, training expanded to reinforce jungle warfare and mobility, exchanging heavy equipment and motor transport for mule and foot.¹⁹ An offensive mindset ran paramount: Slim emphasized that isolated units would not retreat but stand fast, relying on air supply for sustainment.²⁰ Slim recounted, "We planned the whole of our strategy of this campaign on air supply. There was no main operational plan made in the XIV Army which was not based on air supply."²¹ With the monsoons easing, the Allies showed confidence they had confronted the problems that plagued their earlier defeats and enacted their plan for the reconquest of Burma.

The Second Arakan Operation. In January 1944, the Allied forces commenced their second operation into Arakan, seeking to seize the Maungdaw-Buthidaung Road and destroy the Golden Fortress, a seemingly impregnable web of fortified, interlocking Japanese bunkers and tunnels. Met with fierce resistance, the Allied advance stalled.²² The Japanese opened their counteroffensive in early February, and its speed and magnitude surprised the Allies.²³ Slashing into the rear and then surrounding the 7th Indian Division, the Japanese anticipated a large-scale Allied retreat. Instead, the 7th Indian Division entrenched within the "Admin Box," a 1,200-yard-square semi-fortified position named for a mishmash of buildings, fuel dumps, and arsenals serving as corps headquarters.²⁴

For the next 18 days, the battle ebbed and flowed. Despite ferocious hand-to-hand fighting and raining artillery fire, the Japanese could make no impression against the stubborn Allied defense.²⁵ Although the defenders were supplied with only 2 days' rations when the Japanese attacked, the flat, open ground proved perfect for air supply. C-47 Dakotas braved intense antiaircraft fire for a total of 714 sorties, dropping 2,300 tons of critical relief supplies.²⁶ Allied veterans of the battle would recall, "We only managed because the [Royal Air Force] and Yanks came with their transport planes and dropped ammo to us on parachutes. Barrels of rum, and grub too—same old bully and beans, but it was more than the Japs had."²⁷ Ironically, starvation loomed for the attackers, supplied with only 10 days of rations. The arrival of Allied reserves struck the victorious blow, and the Japanese withdrew, with 5,000 of their original 8,000 dead.²⁸

With the Japanese decisively defeated, the Allied forces regrouped and advanced on their original objectives. By May, the Allies had captured the Golden Fortress and secured an unequivocal victory.²⁹ The second Arakan operation, as Slim declared, "was not of great magnitude, but it was, nevertheless . . . the turning-point of the Burma campaign."³⁰

The Second Chindit Operation. The second Chindit operation commenced concurrently with the series of battles in

Arakan. Codenamed Operation *Thursday* and the brainchild of Wingate, the plan aimed to infiltrate more than 150 miles behind enemy lines to support Allied operations on the Ledo Road, interdict Japanese supply lines, and damage their defenses in northern Burma.³¹ At Wingate's disposal were the equivalent of two divisions of LRPGs, trained explicitly for austere jungle warfare from experiences garnered during the first Chindit operation, and the No. 1 Air Commando Group, a specially trained U.S. Army Air Forces unit of 500 aircraft including supply planes, troop carriers, towed gliders, bombers, helicopters, and fighters. In early February, a single brigade began its trek across challenging terrain into Burma. On March 5, 1944, the main assault began—not by ground but by air, ferried by glider.³²

That night, an armada of C-47s with gliders in tow launched from the airfield at Hailakandi to two landing areas, code-named Broadway and Choringhee. The Chindits experienced no Japanese opposition and secured both landing areas by morning.³³ In the next 6 days, 579 C-47 sorties landed, offloading 9,000 men, 1,300 animals, and 250 tons of stores without loss.³⁴ Wingate now had 12,000 men “inserted in the enemy's guts,” and the operation proceeded toward its objectives.³⁵

Overall, the second Chindit operation proved as controversial as the first. On March 24, Wingate died in a plane crash en route to Imphal, leaving a vacuum of leadership and vision. Subordinated under General Joseph Stilwell, the Chindits spent the following months attempting to capture impregnable Japanese defenses until they were evacuated on the verge of collapse in July. Casualties had soared, and no vital objectives had been met. Though an epic of courage and endurance, the operation became irrelevant to the decisive battles around Imphal and Kohima.³⁶

The Battle of Imphal-Kohima. In early March 1944, the Japanese launched a large-scale offensive into India. By March 29, the Japanese thrust had swiftly surrounded the 150,000-member IV Corps near Imphal and Kohima, severing overland routes for reinforcement or

supply.³⁷ The difference between success and failure depended on air supply.

The Allies anchored their defenses on the 600-square-mile Imphal plain around six airstrips.³⁸ Granted his urgent appeal to divert air transports flying “the Hump”—the trans-Himalaya air supply route from India to China—Slim began the process of reinforcing IV Corps. Within 3 weeks, and 758 sorties later, the entire 5th Indian Division had flown in to bolster defenses.³⁹ With the direct Japanese blow parried, Slim now shifted attention to the supply of Imphal-Kohima.

Aptly named Operation *Stamina*, the air campaign delivered 540 tons of supplies to IV Corps per day.⁴⁰ Over the next 3 months, 404 C-47s transported more than 14 million pounds of rations, 835,000 gallons of fuel, 2.6 million pounds of grain for the pack animals, 12,000 bags of mail, and 43 million cigarettes to the beleaguered Allies.⁴¹ Concurrently, the transports airlifted more than 42,000 noncombatants and 13,000 casualties.⁴² As a result, air supply turned the grim battle of attrition in favor of the Allies.

The fighting around Imphal and Kohima had devolved into a rerun of the Western Front during World War I. Both sides dug in behind bunkers and trenches and fought for every knoll, ridge, and hill.⁴³ Foreseeing a quick rout, the Japanese had commenced their offensive with only 20 days of supplies. With resupply and reinforcement nonexistent, they survived by hunting or capturing Allied airdrops, and the return of the torrential monsoon rains compounded their misery. By July, the ill-equipped and starving Japanese force withdrew across the Burma border in defeat.⁴⁴

The battle of Imphal-Kohima proved an Allied tour de force. Of the 84,000 Japanese who began their offensive, 53,000 became casualties; in contrast, the Allies lost 24,000.⁴⁵ Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the South East Asian Command Supreme Commander, would write, “It is the most important defeat the Japs have ever suffered in their military career.”⁴⁶ As the monsoon rains subsided, the Allies launched their own offensive to finish the war in Burma.

To Rangoon. The great thrust, code-named Operation *Extended Capital*, began in January 1945. Now refitted with mechanized transports and armor, XIV Army slashed its way across the Shwebo Plain of central Burma. With the Japanese entrenched in and around the city of Mandalay, the Allies made a secret dash for Meiktila, the “beating heart” of the Japanese supply effort in Burma and the gateway to Rangoon.⁴⁷

The Allies advanced 200 miles in 20 days, constructing airfields at 50-mile intervals to land supplies and evacuate wounded.⁴⁸ Slim hid his true objective of Meiktila from the Japanese through elaborate deceptions, and he detached a diversionary force to Mandalay to fix the Japanese in place. Convinced by the ruse, the Japanese withdrew forces from the other Burma fronts to reinforce their positions around Mandalay. By the end of February, XIV Army had crossed the Irrawaddy River and clandestinely encircled the Japanese.⁴⁹

Meiktila fell in 4 days, and the Japanese immediately launched a counteroffensive to retake it by siege. Allied reinforcements, however, arrived by air transport to deflect the attack. With the Japanese distracted at Meiktila, Slim ordered the advance on Mandalay. A fierce siege commenced, and the Japanese capitulated on March 20, 1945. Subsequently, the Japanese ceased their attack on Meiktila and withdrew south.⁵⁰ All eyes were now on Rangoon. Slim had only 30 days before the monsoon rains fell and 300 miles to traverse—speed was of the essence.⁵¹

Sprinting across the countryside as a blitzkrieg, XIV Army surged south. The closer it came to Rangoon, the more important was air supply: air transport provided 90 percent of XIV Army's supplies by April.⁵² Slim's rapid success placed a significant stress on air supply, and payloads decreased with each additional mile as cargo weight was traded for fuel.⁵³ Fortunately, a separate Allied offensive on the Arakan peninsula paralleled Slim's advance into central Burma. By February, the Allies had conquered the peninsula and its offshore islands via land and amphibious assaults. By the end of



Bombs cascade from bomb bay doors of B-29 Superfortresses during raid on Japanese supply depots near Mingaladon Airfield, February 28, 1945 (U.S. Army Signal Corps/Library of Congress)

March, they had completed the construction of airfields that brought Rangoon within easy range.⁵⁴

Early monsoon rains, however, beset XIV Army's lunge south. The possibility of conducting a siege in these conditions led Slim to accept Operation *Dracula*.⁵⁵ On May 1, an 800-member brigade parachuted into the outskirts of Rangoon, clearing the approach for an amphibious assault that occupied the city the following day. There was no resistance; the Japanese had already evacuated.⁵⁶ Overwhelmed by torrential downpours, XIV Army halted 41 miles from Rangoon that same day.⁵⁷ The campaign to reconquer Burma had come to an anticlimactic yet triumphant conclusion.

Inferences for Joint Force Operations in the Indo-Pacific Region

Allied and Japanese experiences during the 1942–1945 Burma campaign are rich in data from which to draw infer-

ences for future joint force operations in the Indo-Pacific region. The 80-year time span since those events qualifies the premises drawn from them: the character of warfare and its technology have changed. Air mobility and aerial resupply methods, emergent during the Burma campaign, continue as standard practices among all modern militaries. Long-range insertion and resupply of special operations forces (SOF), also pioneered during this campaign, are available to any military with the right troops, aircraft, and training.

Since the early innovations of Burma, the technologies to perform these methods of war are far more advanced, as are the countermeasures to oppose them. Transport aircraft have longer ranges and payloads than C-47 Dakotas and C-46 Commandos. Supplies can be airdropped in large quantities and with high precision. Modern rotary and tilt-rotor aircraft provide vertical air transport options. Unlike Wingate's Chindits, modern

special operations units are purpose-built and equipped to fight and survive in harsh environments. Conversely, the integrated air defenses that characterize advanced threat environments are deadly to aircraft and any troops they transport. Sensor networks that cue these defenses can easily detect all but stealth assets, and large ground formations are difficult to conceal. The means to destroy these forces once detected are orders of magnitude more rapid, precise, and lethal than in the 1940s. The Burma campaign differs markedly from modern campaigning in that the former relied explicitly on air mobility and the air supply of troops, whereas the latter must exist in advanced threat environments where the ability to perform these functions is highly contested.

Even with these caveats, the relevance of the Burma experience and its insights for modern joint force operations are striking. Though in a different adversarial configuration, the primary belligerents in Burma—the United States, United

Kingdom, China, and Japan—would likely face each other in a significant conflict in the Indo-Pacific and indeed are engaged in competition today. The Burma campaign occurred near China's border; a contemporary conflict in this same theater is plausible, and the physical terrain is virtually unchanged. The balancing effects of Allied mass versus Japanese proficiency seen in Burma might be reversed in a modern Indo-Pacific conflict, where U.S. warfighting proficiency would meet the mass of China's People's Liberation Army. The force-multiplier effect of partner forces, from international allies to local tribes, was crucial then, and it remains so. The functions of maneuver and resupply remain no less decisive, though the threats that oppose them are more intense.

One solution to a contested air environment is to fight for local air superiority at the time and place of necessity. In 1942, Japan had air superiority in

Burma. By 1943, however, the Allies had regained this advantage, and it proved critical at Imphal-Kohima.⁵⁸ Slim's XIV Army capitalized on its ability to move troops and supplies in and casualties out, sustaining its forces to outlast a determined Japanese assault.⁵⁹ In a contemporary conflict in the Indo-Pacific, the United States and its allies would be likely to operate in a persistently contested air environment. Air supremacy across the theater is unrealistic. Joint forces would need to fight for air superiority when and where needed and exploit temporary and local advantages.

Another solution to contested air is to fight through it despite the risk. During the second Arakan operation, Japanese antiaircraft fire and fighter opposition around the Admin Box proved so intense that resupply aircraft turned back. Brigadier General William Old rallied his airmen by personally flying an

aircraft to supply the Box.⁶⁰ Where air superiority cannot be achieved today, the joint force may employ remotely piloted, autonomous, and "attritable" aircraft to maneuver and supply ground troops. In cases where manned aircraft must be used and military necessity outweighs risk, the joint force must be prepared to face and recover from painful losses.

The Japanese army masterfully employed a simple countermeasure when facing overwhelming air superiority: they dug. Their underground bunkers and tunnels at Kohima withstood direct hits from artillery and fighter-bombers. Japanese infantry had to be blasted out of their bunkers at close range by tanks or buried alive when tanks drove over them.⁶¹ Simplistic as it may appear, modern joint forces can survive by digging in against superior firepower, including modern precision and standoff fires, and can expect adversaries to do the same.



Chindits commander General Orde Wingate (wearing pith helmet) briefs members of 1st Air Commando, U.S. Army Air Force, in Burma, circa 1944 (PA Images/Alamy)

Moreover, many operations in Burma depended on physical stamina. Despite the prevalence of airpower, artillery, and heavy weapons, battles were often fought in hand-to-hand combat with swords and bayonets.⁶² Wingate's Chindits trained for months to patrol on foot at great distances, requiring extraordinary physical endurance.⁶³ Clearing Japanese bunkers around Imphal-Kohima relied on bayonet attacks as much as tanks.⁶⁴ Advanced technology cannot replace, but must complement, courage and physical strength at the individual level, with implications for joint force training and readiness.

Though the Chindit operations met with mixed tactical success, they presented operational dilemmas that forced the Japanese to contend with formations deep inside their lines. The joint force can employ special operations to similarly "expand the competitive space" in competition and achieve strategic surprise in conflict. Conventional forces operating at standoff ranges are likely to rely on SOF to stand in to perform functions including reconnaissance, terminal guidance, and battle damage assessments. Like the Chindits, they will need mobility and sustainment to bring supplies in and casualties out. The joint force must improve existing capabilities to maneuver small teams and supply them at long range, inside the weapons engagement zones of advanced threats. Noting the importance of river crossings and the use of frogmen and a special boat unit to reconnoiter the far bank of the Irrawaddy, future campaigns in the Indo-Pacific region will require undersea, surface, and riverine mobility to move and supply special operations and other stand-in forces in the littorals and inland waterways.⁶⁵

Implications for Future Operational Design

Beyond the tactical, readiness, and capability inferences drawn from Burma, there are significant implications for joint force operational design. First, the Burma campaign involved asymmetries of firepower on the Allied side and proficiency on the Japanese side, which could counterbalance each

other depending on degrees of advantage and contextual factors. Second, the Allies' use of diverse forces and capabilities proved an advantage against a homogeneous and cohesive adversary. Third, although they sometimes plodded at the tactical level, the Allies were agile and creative in the art of campaigning. Finally, successful maneuver and sustainment were decisive to the Allied campaign.

The superior proficiency of the Japanese infantry was remarkable. During the first Arakan campaign, the Allies had control of the skies, superior firepower, and numerical superiority. The Japanese, nevertheless, used carefully constructed bunkers to halt their advance and outmaneuvered Allied forces with infiltration tactics, night attacks, and jungle warfare.⁶⁶ The Allied victory in the second Arakan operation dispelled the myth of Japanese invincibility, but the fact of Japan's infantry advantage remained. At Imphal-Kohima, Japanese forces surrounded XIV Army and held on for 4 months in the face of overwhelming firepower despite debilitating infighting among senior commanders.⁶⁷ Acknowledging this asymmetry, Slim urged his superiors to improve the proficiency of British forces and the Allies. Wingate's Bush Warfare School took a step in this direction by training the Chindits to be physically tough and tactically proficient in jungle warfare.⁶⁸ Given the pace at which the People's Republic of China has modernized and built up its forces, the joint force and its allies cannot rely on superior firepower, mass, or qualitative technological advantages. To account for this situation, operational design should endeavor to widen advantages in proficiency and leadership to neutralize opponent strengths in mass and technology.

Furthermore, the Allied force in Burma consisted of British, Indian, Burmese, American, Chinese, and other forces, including local tribal partners. Although the Japanese founded the Indian National Army and Burmese National Army, their accomplishments were limited.⁶⁹ In contrast, XIV Army leveraged the diversity within its force

and built partnerships with local tribes.⁷⁰ Similarly, the joint force of today is increasingly diverse. U.S. alliances and partnerships offer comparative advantages that authoritarian competitors cannot approach. Future operational designs should build on these relationships and leverage them as a qualitative edge for competition and campaigning in the Indo-Pacific region.

Joint force operational design should also emulate the Allies' superior use of operational art in Burma. The Japanese fought well but hardly campaigned. Rather, they sought to aggregate small victories into large ones and repeated standard tactics even when those tactics stopped working. Their leadership at the operational level was feckless and failed to adapt to the changing conditions of battle.⁷¹ In contrast, the Allies overcame comparative disadvantages in training and proficiency with superior operational art. Innovations in air resupply, air mobility, and commando raiding followed from the creativity and adaptability of Mountbatten, Slim, and Wingate. If contemporary joint force commanders and staffs practice equally inspired operational art, emergent designs could prove decisive to competition and campaigning.

The Allies' innovative use of operational maneuver was critical to their success in Burma and is equally critical to contemporary operational design. In Operation *Thursday*, the Chindits maneuvered above and penetrated well inside Japanese lines through the air domain, revealing the offensive potential of the Allies and instigating the disastrous Japanese assault on Imphal-Kohima.⁷² The blitzkrieg tactics of XIV Army in Operation *Extended Capital*, sweeping southward through central Burma toward Rangoon, denied the enemy options in time and space and exploited Japanese vulnerabilities at the operational level. Future operational designs in the Indo-Pacific can reprise these approaches. Future battlefields will contest theater access and maneuver. Operational design must incorporate new methods and technologies that remove barriers and facilitate actions through multiple domains simultaneously. Maneuvers executed



British infantrymen fire mortar bombs during Battle of Imphal in region around city of Imphal, in Northeast India, circa March–July 1944 (De Luan/Alamy)

with simultaneity and depth through cross-domain operations will dislocate the enemy and outpace its capacity to respond. Future operational designs can control the initiative by incorporating creative schemes of maneuver that sustain momentum throughout the operation, exploiting comparative temporal advantages that deny the enemy options.

Arguably, the Burma campaign was the singular World War II operation that required, not merely benefited from, sustainment and its capacity to alter the geometry of the battlefield. The historian David W. Hogan, Jr., notes, “The [Burma] theater lay at the end of long lines of communications extending halfway around the world from Britain to the United States. That, and strategic priorities, resulted in shortages of nearly every item of supply.”⁷³ Slim’s ability to extend the operational reach of XIV Army through air supply represented a strategic shift that nullified Japanese tactical advantages. Absent their innovations in logistics and sustainment by air,

the Chindit operations would never have launched, the second Arakan operation would have echoed the disasters of the first, Imphal-Kohima would have fallen to the Japanese, and the march to Rangoon would have stalled in quagmire.⁷⁴ Future operational designs must place sustainment at the forefront of their concepts and methods. Joint force planners must envision sustainment as the lead enabler for strategic, operational, and tactical reach in the long-range battlefields of the Indo-Pacific. If future operational designs postulate unrealistic and unsustainable approaches, they will not succeed in leveraging the full warfighting potential of the joint force.

Conclusion

The Burma campaign was a series of reversals in fortune. The Japanese triumph in 1942 devolved into the most significant defeat in Japanese army history in 1945, and the British tragedy of 1942 evolved into the decisive victory in 1945. The campaign was

also a war of extremes. The belligerents operated in a theater as remote from Japan as from Britain. Battles were waged in impenetrable jungles, on steep mountainsides, and across raging rivers and scorching alluvial plains. Hand-to-hand combat existed alongside the airlift of whole divisions. Gliders inserted LRPGs into Burma’s jungles while soldiers marched through sheets of monsoon rain. Trench warfare gave way to blitzkrieg.

Although the details of the longest campaign of World War II are historically unique, the inferences gained concerning the relationships among technology, readiness, and operational and tactical capabilities are relevant today. The Burma experience reaffirms the aphorism that local air superiority is a prerequisite for any modern joint force operation. Despite the risk inherent in operating on future battlefields, joint force commanders and their staffs must acknowledge and recover from realistic and painful losses. As in Burma then and

in the Indo-Pacific today, innovations in technology and methods can deliver qualitative advantages. One solution for survivability is subterranean defenses against superior firepower. Another is presenting operational dilemmas to the enemy that “expand the competitive space.” Furthermore, morale and physical elements proved critical in delivering an Allied victory in Burma. Modern technology cannot substitute for, but must supplement, courage and physical strength at the individual level.

These inferences drawn from the Burma campaign can lead to significant implications for joint force operational design. The asymmetries of Allied firepower vis-à-vis Japanese proficiency counterbalanced each other throughout the campaign. The rate at which the People’s Republic of China has modernized its military dictates that the joint force cannot solely rely on superior firepower as a comparative advantage. Operational design should account for this aspect and seek to widen U.S. advantages in proficiency and leadership. Moreover, the diverse makeup of the Allied force in Burma delivered an advantage unavailable to a homogeneous adversary. Future operational designs should build on the joint force’s relationships with allies and like-minded partners, leveraging them as a qualitative edge in the Indo-Pacific region. Joint force operational design should also emulate the Allies’ superior use of operational art in Burma. Finally, the Burma campaign demonstrated the comparative advantage gained by maneuver and sustainment. The Allies’ ability to combine strategic and operational ends with logistical means determined tactical, operational, and strategic effectiveness. Future joint force operational designs must seize the initiative through timely maneuvers in multiple domains. These designs must also prioritize sustainment as a vital function to negate the tyranny of distance inherent in the Indo-Pacific theater. Ultimately, the Burma campaign of World War II provided a kaleidoscope of inferences for the contemporary joint force that color implications for future operational designs in the Indo-Pacific. JFQ

Notes

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- ⁷ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 29; Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign: Disaster Into Triumph, 1942–45* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 109.
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- ⁹ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 111–112.
- ¹⁰ McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 98.
- ¹¹ Allen, *Burma*, 97; Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 100–101.
- ¹² Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 160.
- ¹³ Callahan, *Burma*, 62–63.
- ¹⁴ McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 88; Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 162.
- ¹⁵ Colin Higgs, *Wingate’s Men: The Chindit Operations: Special Forces in Burma* (Barnsley, Yorkshire, UK: Frontline Books, 2019), 4.
- ¹⁶ Allen, *Burma*, 123, 143.
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- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ²¹ Gerald Astor, *The Jungle War: Mavericks, Marauders, and Madmen in the China-Burma-India Theater of World War II* (Hoboken, NJ: J. Wiley & Sons, 2004), 6.
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- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.
- ³⁰ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 246.

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- ³² Lowell Thomas, *Back to Mandalay* (London: F. Muller, 1962), 14–19.
- ³³ McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 281.
- ³⁴ Sheldford Bidwell, *The Chindit War: Stilwell, Wingate, and the Campaign in Burma, 1944* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 110.
- ³⁵ McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 283.
- ³⁶ Callahan, *Burma*, 138–139.
- ³⁷ Allen, *Burma*, 244.
- ³⁸ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 293.
- ³⁹ Norman Franks, *The Air Battle of Imphal* (London: Kimber, 1985), 37.
- ⁴⁰ Allen, *Burma*, 244.
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- ⁴³ McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 307.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 326.
- ⁴⁵ Callahan, *Burma*, 137; McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 323.
- ⁴⁶ McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 323.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 415.
- ⁴⁸ S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, vol. IV, *The Reconquest of Burma* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1965), 186; Allen, *Burma*, 403–405.
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- ⁵⁰ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 454; Callahan, *Burma*, 157–159; McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 159.
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- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 217; Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (London: Constable, 2004), 248.
- ⁵³ United Kingdom Air Ministry, *Wings of the Phoenix: The Official Story of the Air War in Burma* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1949), 118.
- ⁵⁴ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 458–464; Callahan, *Burma*, 159.
- ⁵⁵ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, 481.
- ⁵⁶ McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, 443.
- ⁵⁷ Callahan, *Burma*, 160.
- ⁵⁸ Allen, *Burma*, 154.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 242–244.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 257, 272.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 215.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 257–258.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 417.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 97–98.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 307–308.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 114, 123.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 226–227.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 147, 213, 230.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 297.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 150.
- ⁷³ Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, x.
- ⁷⁴ Taylor, *Air Supply in the Burma Campaigns*, 148.