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Unconventional Warfare at the Operational Level  
The Chindits in Burma in World War II

by

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## ABSTRACT

UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL - THE CHINDITS IN BURMA IN WORLD WAR II by MAJ Michael W. McKeeman, USA, 49 pages.

The challenge modern strategists face concerns preparing for two disparate types of war. One war is conventional and employs forces in familiar ways. The other, more likely war is unconventional in that forces will fight behind enemy lines, relying on tenuous lines of communications. In both cases, the strategist must define the desired outcome, the resources available to achieve that outcome, and the ways to employ those resources. Whether conventional or unconventional, modern warfare requires operational design to blend the ways and means to achieve the end. This monograph draws together operational art and unconventional warfare.

At the outset, this monograph reviews operational art and operational planning using the familiar framework of METT-T (mission, enemy, troops available, terrain, and time). With that construct, this paper analyzes these interdependent elements of operational planning and how they differ from the tactical level. Recognizing that these elements are not all-inclusive, this paper turns to common, underlying operational factors - intelligence, sustainment, and leadership - which play crucial roles at the operational level.

Next, this monograph turns to the Chindits operation in Burma in 1944. After reviewing the strategic setting, this analysis examines the Chindits operation using the same analytical framework. The result is a useful comparison of the Chindits operation and operational art.

The study of the Chindits operation yields several significant conclusions for future consideration. First, training proves itself as a combat multiplier for both the tactical unit and the operational level staff. Second, military operations will always be driven and resourced by political decisions. Finally, as a way to employ means to achieve a strategic end, unconventional warfare blends well into operational art.

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"No commander can plan or make decisions with any degree of assumed firmness without comparable firmness and a clear-cut decision from the next higher level. History records that this has been too much to expect in the past, and, nations and human beings being what they are, the future can hold no prospect for improvement."/1

GEN Jacob L. Devers, Armed Forces  
Staff College, 8 October 1947

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary military strategists face a formidable challenge. They must prepare for two distinctly different wars. The one with which the United States is comfortable mobilizes, deploys, chases, and then crushes the opposition with relative speed. The war which is more problematic requires fewer forces, less lethality, more finesse, and more time. In both cases, the strategist must grapple with a national strategy and how the military fits into that strategy. In the first type of war, the strategist can turn to the soldier, loosely describe parameters for employment of forces, and then allow the soldier to revel in the excitement of his profession and calling.

Recent history suggests that the second type of war is far more likely than the first. Since 1945, the smaller, more confined war has evolved as predominant. Of the almost 150 conflicts in the world since 1945, over 90 percent have been fought in the developing regions of Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. About half of these conflicts have dealt with internal matters.<sup>2</sup> Although the United States has participated in relatively few of these conflicts, the clear conclusions remain that the United States' next war will

probably be limited in scope and objectives and will demand unconventional means to achieve its strategic end. That is the type of conflict which so easily clouds the American vision of war.

In the second war, the strategist is a player. He must balance the desired end with the means and ways available to win. He must assuage politicians and diplomats. He must somehow define the national strategy in terms which the soldier can translate into military objectives. He must finally be able to delineate what the armed forces must do and cannot do to achieve the ultimate, strategic goal. Such is the nature of the strategist's challenge.

To prepare for a most uncomfortable war is the sum and substance of the strategist's and soldier's challenge. To aid in that preparation this monograph intends to link the more probable type of war with operational design. To that end, this paper will review operational art, consider a historical example of the use of unconventional means to achieve a strategic end, the Chindits campaign in Burma during World War II, and assess the relevance of unconventional warfare to operational art. Finally, this paper will draw several conclusions surrounding operational art within the contemporary military environment.

## OPERATIONAL ART

The Army's capstone doctrinal manual, FM 100-5, Operations, defines operational art as:

"...the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or theater of operations through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns and major operations."/4

Because strategic goals focus the use of military forces, the establishment of those goals deserves consideration. GEN Devers' quotation at the beginning of this monograph suggests that firm, clear-cut guidance from senior headquarters is essential to planning; he pessimistically predicted in 1947, however, that strategic guidance in the future did not promise greater clarity and firmness. If distinct guidance and clarity of purpose are necessary to translate strategy into military objectives, why is that translation so difficult? The answer begins with the fact that strategy itself is difficult to describe. The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, JCS Pub 1, defines national strategy as:

"The art and science of developing and using political, economic, and psychological powers of a nation, together with its armed forces, during peace and war, to secure national objectives."/5

JCS Pub 1 further defines military strategy in terms of the use<sup>6</sup> or threatened use of force to secure national objectives.

Thus, military objectives in the context of strategic goals must necessarily mesh with a variety of complex political, economic, and social issues. To those national issues add similar

concerns of Allied nations and the problem of defining a clear direction becomes even greater.<sup>7</sup> Finally, however, strategic goals and variables of the United States as well as her Allies change frequently and sometimes dramatically. Therefore, although a national strategy may not be affected, the more specific goals of that strategy may indeed change and in turn affect subordinate goals and objectives.<sup>8</sup>

Ideally, the variety of diplomatic and political tensions will be resolved at the national level so that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Command Authority can issue clear and carefully defined guidance to theater commanders.<sup>9</sup> In practice, the operational commander finds himself with vague, nebulous, and possibly contradictory guidance which, once issued, is difficult to adjust.<sup>10</sup> To help resolve or prevent the operational commander from finding himself in that unenviable position, two actions are required.

First, the operational commander must join the strategists in developing national strategy. Martin Blumenson acknowledges that national policy is a civilian responsibility, but in carrying out that responsibility, the highest civilian leadership must actively consult with the military as "experts in the employment of armed force."<sup>11</sup> The military should ask questions as well as offer answers surrounding three key aspects of a military operation designed to achieve a strategic goal -- the desired end, the constraints on ways, and the available

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means. Even these issues are fraught with questions and controversies in their own right, but they demand resolution so that the operational commander can frame his military campaign.

The second action required to assist the operational commander in developing his plans in a difficult, changing environment is a statement of strategic intent. The constant dynamics and the inherent lack of clarity at the national and strategic level demand that the strategic and operational commanders clearly understand at least the intent of the undertaking.<sup>13</sup> The specifics of intent are difficult to describe, but without a mutual understanding between the strategic and operational commanders, any military operation will be aimless and "in the extreme, risk outright defeat."<sup>14</sup>

The outcome of blending this multitude of variables at the international, national, and strategic levels must eventually be strategic guidance for the operational commander. The guidance should, as specifically as possible, describe the strategic intent, allocate forces, identify the enemy, describe geographical restrictions, and impose time demands. In addition, the guidance should address what must be done and what cannot be done (constraints and restraints). In that context,<sup>15</sup> the operational commander can formulate a plan.

## OPERATIONAL PLANNING

To identify common elements of operational planning which were applied to the Chindits operation in Burma, this monograph will analyze the mission, enemy, troops available, terrain, and time (METT-T) at the operational level of war. For ease of analysis and comparison, this paper will consider these elements separately; in fact, they are tightly interrelated -- changes in one will almost surely affect the others. These elements, however, are not all inclusive. Accordingly, this paper will include three additional factors which demand separate consideration because of their impact on a campaign or operation. Intelligence, sustainment, and leadership all take on greater importance at the operational level of war, and thus they deserve to be addressed individually.

### Mission

Translating strategic guidance into an operational level mission statement is the operational commander's most crucial and most difficult responsibility. The significance of this responsibility and the criticality of the resultant mission statement cannot be overemphasized. All derivative military operations focus on a strategic objective whose accomplishment is essential to strategic victory. <sup>16</sup> How well the operational commander and his staff describe the strategic objective may well determine the subordinate commander's understanding of the

major operation. Clearly, understanding the operation is a prerequisite to successful accomplishment of the strategic goal.

Based on the strategic guidance and intent from higher authorities, the operational commander begins his mission analysis. Because a myriad of factors impact on this analysis, the commander must firmly establish his vision of the campaign and his expectations of how its major operations or phases should be fashioned. <sup>17</sup> The commander's vision and

expectations are essential for his planning staff so that sequential operations and a general direction for planning may be developed. With those factors in mind, the staff determines what military objectives are necessary to achieve the strategic goal. Inherent to that analysis is a consideration of the desired ends in light of available ways and means. <sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the objectives must comply with strategic restraints and constraints. The objectives must be attainable with forces available, achievable in a reasonable period of time, and incur the least possible cost in lives, property, and material. <sup>19</sup> In the process of developing military objectives, means actually help to define ends.

The procedural outcome is the military objective. Ideally, the attack or threatened attack of an objective will unbalance "the enemy's entire structure, producing a cascading deterioration in cohesion and effectiveness which may result in complete failure, and which will invariably leave the force

vulnerable to further damage." <sup>20</sup> Defeating the enemy's "center of gravity," however, lends itself to substantial controversy. While the above description of center of gravity is generally accepted, some argue that translating the definition into a military operation entails little more than assessing the position of the largest enemy concentration and then massing combat power on that objective. Others suggest that while the defeat of the enemy force will be the final outcome, direct confrontation is rarely necessary and is extraordinarily costly. The point is that jeopardizing the enemy's center of gravity undermines his position on the battlefield. The actual destruction of the enemy at the operational level may not be necessary. GEN Glenn K. Otis, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Army Europe suggests:

"At the operational level...your goal is not to kill the enemy, but to provide opportunities for the commander at the tactical level to kill the enemy. Your operational objective is to put the enemy in harm's way."/21

Much as strategic intent compensates for a lack of clarity in guidance while providing significant flexibility to the operational commander, the theater commander's intent also acknowledges that immutable guidance is impossible and that initiative and flexibility are essential to accomplishing the mission. <sup>22</sup> Thus, while the commander's intent is separate from the mission statement, it is nevertheless an essential element of information and guidance for subordinate commanders.

## Enemy

At the operational level of war, the specter of enemy forces must be viewed from a broad perspective. The enemy is far more than those forces aggregated on the battlefield. The enemy includes opposing alliances with possible fissures in their solidarity; leaders with their various strengths and weaknesses; doctrine and organizations which are brought to bear on the battlefield; national will of opposing nations which may be vulnerable to exploitation; and finally, technology and processes which can be deceived but which also must be respected. <sup>23</sup> Of particular importance is an understanding and appreciation for the enemy's large-scale capabilities to neutralize friendly advantages. The United States' technology, for example, has been an acknowledged combat multiplier for several years. Counter-technology measures, however, such as jamming, can negate that assumed advantage thereby exposing <sup>24</sup> fire, maneuver, and protection to enemy attack. The key point is that the enemy is not static and understanding how to defeat the enemy demands far more than a sterile portrayal of threat artillery ranges or tank weapons systems. At the operational level, the enemy is as much a composite of training, doctrine, equipment, leadership, and national resolve as are friendly forces. Consequently, major operations and campaigns must target strategic objectives rather than just the enemy forces arrayed on the battlefield.

## Troops Available

The operational commander's mission drives the echelon, type, and command structure of available forces. Clearly, those forces must be sufficient to achieve the strategic objectives which the operational, strategic, and national authorities have defined. Consequently, the size and nature of an operational level force cannot be predicated exclusively on a specific level of command. <sup>25</sup> To achieve strategic goals, available forces may include Allies and sister services as well as a variety of Army forces. The maturity level of the theater of operations' infrastructure will determine the extent of host nation support. The geographic distance from logistics bases will also influence the nature and amount of support required for the combat forces. Levels of training, quality of equipment and leadership preparation all blend together to comprise the troops available. Just as the enemy forces at the operational level surpassed those postured on the battlefield, friendly forces also extend from beyond the forward line of troops (FLOT) through and above Allied nations' lines of communications to ports or bases and finally to home station where political, societal, and economic support reside.

Within the purview of troops available, the term "unconventional warfare" requires brief consideration. Troops available at the operational level constitute both the means and ways to achieve a strategic goal. JCS\_Pub\_1 describes the essential elements of unconventional warfare. First, unconventional warfare includes military operations conducted behind enemy lines. Second, the operations are "...low visibility, covert or clandestine." Third, indigenous personnel are essential to the operation. Finally, external resources support the operation. <sup>26</sup> These elements of unconventional warfare will become self evident in the Chindits operation. Importantly, however, the Chindits operation (1944) pre-dates the JCS definition of unconventional warfare (1986). Consequently, one could reasonably presume that campaigns like the Chindits operation - if not that operation itself - contributed to the research required to develop the JCS definition.

#### Terrain and Time

At the operational level, terrain and time are inextricably linked. Terrain or space is important only because it impacts on the time required to achieve an end - tactical, operational, or strategic. Concurrently, the operational commander must look beyond the terrain and time limitations of the present in order to project his vision into the future whose conditions he intends to influence. Consequently, he must appreciate the

constraints -- both terrain and time -- of the present while he looks ahead to the strategic goals of his campaign. <sup>27</sup> By necessity, the operational commander and his subordinates recognize the importance of forested areas and hilltops; but, in greater depth, the operational commander looks toward road and rail networks, urban development, port facilities, mountain <sup>28</sup> ranges, and deserts, among others.

Perhaps of equal importance, space and time influence Allied resolve. Host nation support will likely wane as combat operations decimate the citizen's homeland with no specific time limitation in view. The greater the depth of the battlefield, the greater the sacrifices of the non-combatants; and the higher the intensity of conflict, the higher the toll taken. Thus, as terrain and time influence the operational commander's campaign plan, they also impact his capability to execute and sustain his combat effort.

In summary, mission, enemy, troops, terrain, and time are key elements of analysis in operational level planning. Although discussed individually, these five elements blend together to form the sum and substance of a campaign plan. Three underlying factors - intelligence, sustainment, and leadership - significantly impact each of the key operational elements. Consequently, these factors deserve separate consideration.

## Intelligence

At the operational level, military intelligence takes on a far deeper dimension than at the tactical level. The essential function of operational intelligence is analysis and planning based on a theater area evaluation; operational planning demands enemy information in both breadth and depth. The operational level staff must ferret out detailed intelligence surrounding the enemy's political, sociological, and psychological status as well as his military capability. Analysis of enemy activities must consider the enemy's intent over time as opposed to near-term enemy capabilities. Specifically, at the operational level, intelligence assets must focus on discerning the enemy's center of gravity and his ability to move, sustain, or change that center.

Intelligence requirements at the operational level place unique demands on technology and on staff officers. Staff work must be impeccable. Friendly and enemy courses of action must be formulated, analyzed, and compared; reasoned, accurate predictions result. Above the tactical level these predictions can affect an entire campaign or major operation. Based on the intelligence gathering talents and analysis of his staff, the commander will dedicate scarce combat resources to mass for decision or to economize for delay. Major operations and campaigns rely heavily on what the enemy intends. Because combat resources are always limited, the information and

analysis which drive decisions must produce the highest possible  
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payoff. In that regard, intelligence at the operational  
level is clearly a combat multiplier.

#### Sustainment

In operational sustainment, two truths remain self  
evident. First, operational commanders characteristically take  
risks in sustaining operations. Because operational sustainment  
is normally more complex and larger than tactical sustainment,  
it requires greater detailed planning and is inherently more  
vulnerable to the unforeseen frictions of war. Weather,  
terrain, systemic breakdowns, and enemy interdiction can all  
interfere with long lines of support and logistical bases.  
Cumulative effects undermine large operations which adversely  
affect a campaign. Although those outcomes must be considered,  
the operational commander and his staff cannot allow friction to  
paralyze their planning. Instead, they acknowledge problems  
and plan to compensate, accepting risk in sustainment. By  
definition, sustainment planners forecast with uncertain vision  
of the future and then resource accordingly. As circumstances  
with units in contact change, future planning changes and the  
need for sustainment must adapt. Thus, operational level  
32  
commanders almost always accept logistical risk.

The second -- and more disconcerting -- self-evident truth  
about operational sustainment is that its overall effect on

combat operations is hotly contested. On one hand, Michael Howard argues that in the Civil War, the North's ability to field and sustain a larger, better equipped army than the South "proved to be of the greatest importance" to the North's ultimate victory.<sup>33</sup> Edward Luttwak agrees suggesting that "overall supply dictated the rate of advance, while its distribution would set the vectors of the advancing front" in the Allied effort in France, 1944.<sup>34</sup> Luttwak further contends that at the operational level, the important decisions in the Allied campaign were "primarily of a logistic character" and that these were "the key decisions at the level of theater strategy."<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, Martin Van Creveld concludes that Allied logistical planning was so inaccurate in Europe in World War II that it was almost always disregarded and "it was the willingness...to override the plans, to improvise and take risks, that determined the outcome."<sup>36</sup> Van Creveld matter of factly suggests that sustainment planning will always be wrong because calculations are based on ideal combinations of trucks, railway nets, etc., which are never achieved and because national, strategic, and/or allied changes in political requirements will render calculation, preparation, and plans "worthless."<sup>37</sup>

Based on these two self-evident truths -- that the operational commander frequently takes logistical risks and

logistical planning is inherently inaccurate because of operational and strategic changes -- one may conclude that detailed logistical planning and preparation are fragile, but crucial, at the operational level because the magnitude of the operational commander's risk must somehow be assessed.

Recognizing that the commander will seldom have all the combat power he wants at the decisive time and place, he will likewise not have the logistical support to sustain his forces at that same point of decision. Consequently, as he economizes combat forces, he will also economize sustainment capability. The risks taken are clearly parallel.

#### Leadership

Operational level leadership is unique because it blends a demand for strategic vision with a need for tactical competence. As discussed earlier, the operational commander joins his superiors in formulating strategic goals which he will achieve using his subordinate forces. In designing the strategic goals, the commander must articulate his vision to strategic and national authorities. Once the strategic intent and goals are defined, the operational commander must then translate those goals into military objectives based on the ends, means, and ways available to him.

National and strategic goals are characteristically broad. Consequently, the operational commander must frame an intent to pass on to his subordinates which will clarify his vision

without unnecessarily restricting the tactical options of his subordinate commanders. His key and overwhelming responsibility is to infuse a "single-minded focus on the sequence of actions necessary to expose and destroy (the enemy's center of gravity)."<sup>38</sup> That infusion is a function of the commander's will -- imposing his will on the enemy and instilling his will in his staff and subordinate commanders.<sup>39</sup>

Another critical characteristic of the operational leader is his acceptance of risk. Risk taking is not simply a desirable attribute; it is a prerequisite for operational success. The operational commander's strategic guidance will not be totally clear; intelligence gathering systems can glean and analyze a finite amount of information; friendly forces will seldom exceed those necessary for the mission; sustainment assets will not support all elements of the force simultaneously; and friction will inevitably raise its ugly head. Thus, difficult choices must be made and courses of action must be selected and executed. Accepting risk is an inherent part of decisionmaking. At the operational level, the commander recognizes the need for risk and then communicates his rationale and intent to his subordinates.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, risk taking is a fundamental of operational leadership.

With this theoretical construct in mind, this monograph will turn to the Chindits in Burma during World War II as a historical example of unconventional war at the operational

level. Rather than recapitulate specific events of the Chindits' campaign, the intent is to provide a strategic overview followed by the same elements of analysis presented in the previous section -- mission, enemy, troops, terrain and time. Additionally, this section will assess the impact of intelligence, sustainment, and leadership in the accomplishment of strategic objectives in the Chindits' campaign. Again, although each factor will be addressed separately, all the elements interact -- some with greater influence than others -- to produce a valuable analysis of the operational level of war fought with unconventional forces.

#### The Chindits in Burma - STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

The official history of the United States Army in World War II labelled the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater, "the second front and the secondary war."<sup>41</sup> Relegating the CBI theater to a secondary status certainly affected the amount of time and energy dedicated to resourcing and planning for that theater of operations. The Army staff -- looking first at northern Europe, then southern Europe and the Mediterranean, then the Pacific, and then CBI -- balanced resources meticulously and were extraordinarily "watchful" as they assessed requirements in Burma.<sup>42</sup>

Actually, the Army staff's caution was understandable. Overall, the war was going well in late 1943. Bombing Germany

from Britain appeared successful; the German submarine advantage of 1941, 1942, and early 1943 had been neutralized; and the build up of men and material for a mass channel invasion was proceeding steadily. Mussolini had been deposed; the Salerno landing in September secured southern Italy for the Allies. The Russians had decisively halted the German summer offensive. By the end of 1943, the Russians would expel the last German from the Motherland forever. Finally, in the Pacific, Americans and Australians had joined forces to break Japan's grip on the islands of the Southwest Pacific. Despite these advances worldwide, much bitter fighting loomed ahead. Nevertheless, the Army staff sensed victory in Europe and hesitated to commit more forces than absolutely necessary in the CBI theater. <sup>43</sup>

At two strategic conferences in 1943 (TRIDENT in May and QUADRANT in August) the Allies formulated strategic goals for the CBI theater:

"1. To carry out operations for the capture of Upper Burma in order to improve the air route and establish overland communications with China.

2. To continue to build up and increase the air routes and air supplies to China, and the development of air facilities with a view to:

- a. Keeping China in the war.
- b. Intensifying operations against the Japanese.
- c. Maintaining increased U.S. and Chinese Air Forces in China. <sup>44</sup>
- d. Equipping Chinese ground forces."

At a third conference, SEXTANT, in November 1943, the means to achieve these ends in the CBI theater changed substantially.

United States aid to China became contingent on Chinese efforts

to break the Japanese blockade of China. Because Chiang Kai-shek claimed he was unable to free China, U.S. aid was not forthcoming. The British withdrew landing craft from the theater. Finally, the War Department suggested that the CBI theater should focus on supporting the Allied effort in the Pacific.<sup>45</sup> Thus, Burma's strategic importance rested on its geographic position to base aircraft to attack Japan and to link India with China. Reconquest of all of Burma and the concomitant use of U.S. combat troops, other than a long-range penetration group (LRPG),<sup>46</sup> were considered unnecessary.

The QUADRANT conference authorized the long-range penetration groups to fight in Burma. One American brigade, Galahad, commanded by BG Frank D. Merrill, joined six British brigades, Chindits, commanded by MG Orde C. Wingate. These unconventional forces were designed, equipped, and trained for deep interdiction of enemy lines of communication and quick attacks of soft targets.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, as 1943 ended, the Allied strategy in the CBI theater took shape. LTG Joseph Stilwell's Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC) would conquer northern Burma and secure air and land lines of communication to China. LTG William Slim would support Stilwell's offensive by diverting Japan's attention toward central Burma. The theater could expect little or no additional manpower; ground forces already in theater would bear the brunt of the operation.

## Mission

Based on Allied strategic guidance, Stilwell derived an operational mission to capture the Myitkyina airfields in northern Burma. Securing those airfields would protect air transports en route to China from India. With the Japanese in control of the airfields, U.S. aircraft were diverted far north around the highest peaks of the Himalayas (the Hump) and then south to China. The long diversion decreased payload and increased fuel consumption in a theater whose economy of assets was particularly critical. A second important reason to secure the Myitkyina airfields was to protect the U.S. engineers who were completing the Ledo Road near the airfields. The Ledo Road promised to open a ground link for all-weather travel and a gasoline pipeline between India and China. Thus, Stilwell translated his strategic guidance into an operational mission.

General Slim also translated the strategic guidance into operational missions as he issued the following directive to Wingate:

1. Helping the advance of Stilwell's Ledo force to Myitkyina by cutting the communications of the Japanese 18th Division (defending at Myitkyina), harassing its rear, and preventing its reinforcement.
2. Creating a favorable situation for the Yunan Chinese forces to cross the Salween and enter Burma (from the north).
3. Inflicting the greatest possible damage and confusion on the enemy in North Burma."/49

The clear intent was to support Stilwell's advance from the north to take Myitkyina, the decisive point of the operation.

Wingate, in turn, formulated a tactical plan to insert three Chindit brigades into the enemy's rear. One brigade marched 450 grueling miles to establish a stronghold from where future operations could be launched. The other two brigades flew by glider from India deep into Burma to block and isolate Japanese forces supplying and supporting Myitkyina.

Unfortunately, two significant events affected the Chindit operation. First, a pre-emptive Japanese attack prevented the remainder of Slim's Fourteenth Army from advancing across central Burma. Second, Wingate died in a plane crash in March 1944. Brigadier Lentaigne, Wingate's successor, lacked Wingate's leadership and emotional commitment to the Chindits which had been developed through comradeship and training. Thus, the Chindit operation began precariously.

The actual mission of the Chindits was to contribute to the achievement of an operational objective -- the capture of the Myitkyina airfields. The Chindits intended to isolate the enemy forces occupying Myitkyina and to divert enemy attention from Stilwell's forces who were to capture the airfields and secure land lines of communications. Wingate and then Lentaigne planned and executed an unconventional operation to bypass enemy resistance and to strike at key vulnerabilities which would affect the operation's decisive point.

Whether or not the enemy division occupying Myitkyina was the Japanese center of gravity is doubtful. The Japanese attack

on Imphal had equal strategic significance, but entailed far greater forces. The loss of Imphal would have prevented the Allies from achieving their strategic objective and would have set back the CBI theater effort substantially. <sup>50</sup> Thus, in the CBI theater the center of gravity was the enemy concentration at Imphal.

Importantly, however, the Chindits operation affected the Japanese effort at Imphal. To deal with the Chindit penetration, the Japanese diverted two battalions of two divisions from Imphal. Additionally, the Chindits caused the Japanese to commit its general reserve which was intended to reinforce the army at Imphal. Finally, the Japanese dedicated a substantial part of an air division to fight the Chindits, again detracting from support to Imphal. Not only did the Chindits isolate and consequently render useless the Japanese 18th Division at Myitkyina, it also affected the decisive battle at Imphal; its effect on the Japanese center of gravity clearly helped to achieve an operational objective and ultimately a strategic goal. <sup>51</sup>

#### Enemy

Japan's fundamental goal in World War II was to be "...strong enough to become the unchallenged leader of Asia." <sup>52</sup> That aspiration took root in the 1920's and early 1930's as the military in Japan gained strength and the government weakened. Japanese nationalism begot regional

expansionism which begot military domination which in turn begot the need for greater economic resources. These general intentions took form in 1936 when the Japanese government officially declared a policy for the acquisition of China, expansion into southeast Asia, and neutralization of Russia's threat to the north. Actually, the government phrased these goals carefully, avoiding possible references to military action; but, at the same time, there was no doubt that military operations would be required and that the "Great Powers" <sup>53</sup> certainly obstructed Japan's expansion.

Despite the grandiose appearance of these strategic goals, "...Japan planned to fight a war of limited objectives and, having gained what it wanted, expected to negotiate for a favorable peace." <sup>54</sup> Japan's "limited objectives" included a substantial piece of the world including all of the Pacific from the Kiwi Islands to New Guinea and much of Southeast Asia. Explicitly, Japan intended to expand her economic base thereby strengthening her capability to arm herself and then intimidate her Asian neighbors into submission or militarily crush <sup>55</sup> them.

Initially, Japan was interested only in securing the southern tip of Burma and the small islands to the south in order to establish air bases from which defensive operations to the west and south could be launched and whose position would help isolate China. She considered stretching northward, but

had no reason to plan for that contingency. Ironically, the Allies need for lines of communication between India and China through northern Burma diverted Japan's attention from Burma's southern tip. Japan understandably concluded that Allied occupation of northern Burma would threaten her ability to isolate China. Consequently, those fragile Allied links across northern Burma required interdiction.

Thus, Japan entered the Allied CBI theater almost at the Allies' behest. At the operational level, Burma was significant to the opposing forces because of her strategic position in facilitating future operations and her logistical and geographical influence on achieving strategic goals. Despite that strategic significance, however, both forces considered Burma to be a tertiary theater at best.

To execute major operations in pursuit of strategic goals, individual, tactical battles had to be fought and it was here that the Japanese soldier demonstrated an initial superiority. The ideal jungle fighter, the Japanese soldier blended fearlessness and ferocity with mobile skill and finesse to bypass or avoid strongpoints, encircle the Allied enemy, and then isolate him from his support base thereby offering him the choice of attrition or annihilation by attack from two directions. When the Japanese soldier was fixed in a position, he would characteristically allow the enemy to penetrate and then call for artillery on his own position

thereby demonstrating his extraordinary will and undermining the enemy's confidence just at the enemy's point of expected victory.<sup>58</sup> In addition, as Japanese forces withdrew, they frequently used refugees and civilians for protection. Consequently, they could melt into the population with ease much to the Allies' consternation.<sup>59</sup> Clearly, the Japanese soldiers had perfected the art of jungle warfare; in fact, they formed the model for Wingate's Chindits.<sup>60</sup>

Exploitable weaknesses accompanied these considerable tactical strengths. Because of the Japanese unrelenting will to win, once their forces were committed to battle, then little else mattered. Reserves joined the battle early, usually with decisive results.<sup>61</sup> Slim and Wingate exploited that tendency in the Chindit operation by causing the Japanese to commit precious general reserve forces toward the Chindits in Central Burma instead of toward Imphal in the north. A second weakness focuses on the rigidity of Japanese tactical leadership. As the Allied forces improved their tactical prowess and began to impose Japanese-style tactics on the Japanese themselves, the leaders became confused and unable to adapt.<sup>62</sup> They were presented with a situation entirely alien to their experiences and their tactical reactions did not fare well.

In summary, the Japanese devised a military strategy in accordance with a national goal. To implement that strategy, the Japanese described operational goals and then translated

those goals to military objectives. Academically, their planning was deliberate and sound. Unfortunately -- for the Japanese -- their final objectives, although limited, stretched beyond their grasp; the ends exceeded the ways and means.

#### Troops Available

In the CBI theater, the command structure was convoluted and confusing. Surprisingly, the results were not fatal to the operation. The Supreme Allies Command of the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC) was Vice Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. Stilwell served as his deputy. Stilwell also served as one of Mountbatten's subordinate commanders, Commanding General, Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC). During the Chindit operation timeframe, the NCAC was under the temporary operational control of the Fourteenth Army, commanded by Slim. Slim, however, was subordinate to General Sir George Giffard, Commander-in-Chief, Eleventh Army Group, within Mountbatten's theater. Thus, Stilwell found himself subordinate to Mountbatten (which he accepted), subordinate to Giffard (whom he ignored), and subordinate to Slim, "...for whom he had the greatest faith and respect." <sup>63</sup> Stilwell also served in a variety of positions in support of the Chinese Army and Chiang Kai-shek. Those positions offered great challenges to Stilwell and they further substantiate the twisted command structure, but they are not specifically germane to the Chindit operation. Finally, Stilwell served as the Commanding General of the U.S.

Air Force in theater. In this unique position -- an Army general in charge of the only U.S. air assets in theater -- Stilwell found himself between the JCS and subordinate air force generals. Once again, the dynamics of the difficult command structure taxed Stilwell. The official United States history best describes the command apparatus:

"Creation of SEAC meant there were now three geographic theaters and one operational, representing the interests of three nations and the three services, all operating in the same area. SEAC was an Anglo-American command which included Burma, Ceylon, Sumatra, and Malaya, but not India. India was under India Command (Auchinleck), with responsibilities toward the Middle East; where Indian divisions were fighting, as well as to the Far East. In China was the Generalissimo's China Theater. The American operational theater, CBI, operated in all three geographic areas. It was not subordinate to SEAC."/64

Partly because of the extraordinary complexity of the command and support relations within the theater Air Force, Generals Marshall and Arnold approved an improvised Air Force organization, No. 1 Air Commando, to support Chindit operations. The unit included liaison aircraft, helicopters, light bombers, fighters, gliders, and transports all organized and equipped to support the Chindit's deployment and sustainment. <sup>65</sup> Stilwell objected to the allocation of American air assets to support British ground forces. He argued that the Air Force should support the American infantry although U.S. forces only numbered about 3000 volunteers. Nevertheless, the support went to the Chindits and had a striking, positive impact. <sup>66</sup>

Unconventional ground forces -- the six infantry brigades of the British Chindits under Wingate and the one American infantry brigade, Galahad -- formed the substance of the means to achieve operational ends in support of a strategic goal. Lightly equipped and armed, the forces struck deep by air or by forced march to attack Japanese lines of communication. Wingate trained the Chindits mercilessly. So stressful were the physical demands that one brigade commander asserted that no one under the age of thirty-five should be assigned to the unit.<sup>67</sup> The Chindits ignored injury, illness, weather, and terrain. Wingate emphasized tactical skills. He tailored his training to the jungle in which map reading and land navigation loomed most important and most difficult. Not only were these skills essential to movement through forbidding terrain but they were also critical to requests for supply drops and for air support. Wingate may have originated the first "Tactical Exercises Without Troops" (TEWT) in which he ordered huge sand pits constructed and then landscaped to scale as a precise model of an area of operations. After the model was painstakingly built, Wingate grilled his leaders on every conceivable situation -- enemy attack while in bivouac or on the road, dispersion, ambushes, use of mortars, and machine guns, and so on. He justified such meticulous preparation by explaining:

"Before a leader can discharge a task successfully, he must picture that task being discharged. Every operation must be seen as a whole. By that I mean it must be seen pictorially as a problem in time and space. The chief difference between a good and a bad leader is that a good leader has an accurate imagination."/68

When the Chindits finished their training, they exuded confidence and competence.

In sum, in spite of a severely flawed command structure, a creative, unorthodox Air Force contingent, and incredible battlefield stresses, the Chindits caused effects in the theater of operations which contributed substantially to the campaign and enabled the operation to achieve its strategic goal.

#### Terrain and Time

As some of the most formidable terrain in the world, the Burma jungle and environment offered both challenge and opportunity. Tropical rain forest, thick underbrush, razor-sharp elephant grass, and bamboo clumps all challenged the Chindits. In fact, chopping through elephant grass resembled tunneling more than clearing. The forests provided little sustenance but offered three varieties of leeches, poisonous black flies, and malaria-infected mosquitoes. <sup>69</sup> Burma averaged two hundred inches of rain annually which flooded rivers and almost torpedoed military operations. <sup>70</sup> In essence, only herculean effort allowed survival, let alone military victory.

The unrelenting terrain's opportunity hinged on achieving surprise and deception by moving through or by-passing seemingly impenetrable terrain to attack vulnerable points. The Chindits therefore gained time by capitalizing on the opportunity of rugged terrain.

For example, Stilwell ordered Galahad to secure the Myitkyina airfield immediately after an eleven-week defensive operation and a road march through 450 miles of difficult terrain. Advancing another 65 miles through jungles and then crossing mountains which were so treacherous that the Japanese chose not to defend them, Galahad launched a surprise attack and quickly seized the airfield.

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In a second example, two Chindit brigades followed American engineers deep into the Japanese rear to an airstrip, nicknamed Broadway, about fifty miles northeast of Indaw. Without the enemy's knowledge, the Chindits inserted 9250 soldiers and 25-pounder artillery support. The Chindits then established a stronghold, nicknamed White City, and cut off the Japanese 18th Division which literally withered away.

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Classifying terrain or time as "operational" poses a difficult challenge. As discussed earlier, terrain and time are only relevant when they affect the operational outcome of a campaign. A relatively small piece of terrain which is densely forested, mountainous, and marshy -- like northern Burma -- can have operational impact because of the delay required to traverse it and the difficulty in seizing and holding it against a skilled adversary. When forces are trained to survive and fight in an inhospitable climate, however, they can take advantage of the assumed impossibility of crossing terrain quickly to achieve surprise. Thus, terrain and time are closely

related to the mission, enemy, and troops available and must be analyzed in terms of the effects achieved.

### Intelligence

As discussed earlier, intelligence at the operational level largely depends on the intelligence gathering assets at higher levels. The Chindit campaign stands as a historical exception to that rule. Slim recognized that the CBI theater lacked a preponderance of resources in comparison to other theaters. As a matter of fact, he claimed:

"We never made up for the lack of methodically collected intelligence or the intelligence organization which should have been available to us when the war began." /73

More specifically, Slim lacked critical operational level intelligence about the Japanese disposition of reserves and extensive background information concerning opposing commanders. The knowledge of Japanese commanders he did collect was mostly based on his observations of them in battle. <sup>74</sup>

Slim characterized his intelligence situation as "...probably our greatest single handicap." <sup>75</sup>

To fill the void of intelligence gathering assets, Slim founded the "Yomas Intelligence Service" which recruited and trained British and Burmese civilians, working in Burma, to penetrate enemy lines and pass intelligence secretly back to Slim. Although a creative solution to the tactical intelligence

problem, Slim noted that the civilians, when inserted, needed time to build intelligence nets, had no means of transmitting or carrying information other than by foot or occasionally by pony, and were not interested in moving with Slim's forces thereby leaving their homes. Nevertheless, when time permitted, the civilians provided good, local intelligence.<sup>76</sup>

Stilwell fared no better in the intelligence arena. Sharing Slim's dearth of operational level intelligence, Stilwell discovered that his tactical intelligence suffered from inaccuracy. For example, as Galahad prepared to take the Myitkyina airfield, intelligence reported the enemy strength to be 300. Just before launching the operation, the intelligence report upped its estimate to 500.<sup>77</sup> In fact, when Galahad attacked, it faced a 700-man enemy force which was reinforced to a total of 3500 men.<sup>78</sup> Fortunately, the Japanese over-estimated Galahad's strength and therefore positioned sick and weak soldiers in the defense.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, the Allied forces were able to take advantage of a mutual intelligence failure.

Both Stilwell and Slim lacked the assets which make intelligence at the operational level a combat multiplier. Lacking timely, deep intelligence, lacking strategic assets to glean possible enemy long range plans or intentions, lacking air reconnaissance information due to the nature of the environs, and lacking qualified officers to read and analyze the scant

enemy documents which the forces collected from prisoners and casualties, Slim said:

"We were like a blind boxer trying to strike an unseen opponent and to parry blows we did not know were coming until they hit us. It was a nasty feeling."/80

#### Sustainment

Sustainment operations in the CBI theater validate the conclusion reached earlier that sustainment planning is often ignored and consequently almost always at risk. As a reminder, the CBI theater exemplified strategic economy of force. The fact that other theaters enjoyed greater logistical support adversely affected the Chinese participation in Burma. Chiang Kai-shek offered empty promises to support combat operations, but he also knew that sustainment for the battle would be scarce. Consequently, he did not actually intend to fight until he saw evidence of the sustainment and the American government withheld sustainment pending Chiang's employment of combat troops. Thus, the relatively low status of the CBI theater undermined that coalition.

Viewing the CBI as a strategic economy of force theater, Allied planners tried to accrue the greatest strategic benefit at the lowest possible cost. BG Claire Chennault, American air advisor to Chiang Kai-shek, suggested in late 1943 that Allied efforts concentrate on the air power required to neutralize Japanese shipping lanes and the Japanese-held coastal cities of China. To counter the Allied air interdiction effort,

Chennault contended that the Japanese would launch fighters with which Chennault's forces could deal quite handily. With the Japanese air force in theater destroyed and with the Japanese shipping lanes effectively interdicted, Chennault concluded that an attack on Japan would be easier and would require less support bases to sustain. Seeing clearly the impact of Chennault's plan on his ground forces, Stilwell responded that any air attack from China to Japan would require ground bases in China which would accordingly need sustainment from India through and over Burma. Consequently, ground forces must occupy airfields, protect the Ledo Road engineers, and secure the ground over which the proposed pipeline would extend. Chennault boldly claimed that he would achieve his strategic goal with the means and ways available to him -- ground forces were not necessary. The President, the British, and Chiang all liked Chennault's plan, but they apparently had some reservations because it was not totally adopted. Instead, the War Department supported Stilwell but placated the politicians by giving Chennault some of what he requested. The result was dilution of resources available to Stilwell in a theater already strapped for sustainment.<sup>82</sup> The action clearly manifests taking an operational level sustainment risk.

Within the strategic and operational sustainment context, the Chindit operation proceeded. Fortunately, Generals Marshall and Arnold had dedicated air assets specifically to sustain both

the British and the Americans. Without that air resupply capability, the operation would have assuredly failed and the strategic objectives would have been jeopardized.

#### Leadership

The operational leader translates strategic guidance into military objectives, formulates his vision of the operation based on strategic intent, articulates his vision through his intent, and then executes the mission by imbuing his will in his staff and subordinate commanders. The Chindit campaign illustrates both a good and a bad example of how the commander accepts risk as he instills his will on his command.

Slim clearly understood that his Army would support Stilwell's drive from the north to Myitkyina. He also knew that the Chindits' deep penetration to seize Myitkyina constituted a great risk -- both to the Chindits because of the difficulty of the penetration and to the entire campaign if Myitkyina remained in Japanese control. At the same time, however, Slim recognized that the risks must not paralyze the commander; for that paralysis, born of self-doubt and fear of failure, would most assuredly undermine the operation and act as a barrier to the imposition of his will on his own forces. Sensitive to the importance of his command intent and how he instills his will in his command, Slim wrote his intent himself because:

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"... (The commander's intent) is the one overriding expression of will by which everything in the order and every action by every commander and soldier in the Army must be dominated." /84

Stilwell, on the other hand, seemed to ignore risk at Myitkyina. Prior to the march on Myitkyina, Galahad had endured a 450-mile forced march and eleven weeks of virtually constant conflict in a defensive position at Nhpum Ga. When Stilwell ordered Galahad to move sixty-five more miles through dense jungles and over treacherous mountains, he was clearly accepting a risk in order to achieve operational surprise at the Myitkyina airfield. Because of the remarkable training and ability of the soldiers and because of the Japanese's surprise, Galahad succeeded. The deliberate defense at Nhpum Ga and the grueling march and attack at Myitkyina, however, rendered Galahad ineffective; Stilwell had overextended Galahad.

Stilwell seemed to impose his will on his subordinates rather than instill confidence and imbue his intent. Many writers have noted the apparent disdain with which Stilwell viewed the Chindits -- including Galahad. The unfortunate consequence amounted to misuse of the Chindit forces who succeeded because of their superior physical conditioning, tactical training, and inspiring leadership.

In summary, Slim understood his role as an operational leader as he assessed his capabilities, accepted risk, and infused his will on his command. Stilwell's technique appeared somewhat different; he remained unconvinced of the Chindits' value and applied command pressure to validate his view. In this specific operation, although the Chindits succeeded, operational leadership faltered.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Chindit campaign in Burma exemplifies the realistic challenges characteristic of unconventional war at the operational level. The means and ways available to the theater directly influenced the ends sought. Because the CBI theater was considered less important strategically than Europe or the Pacific, the Allies dedicated fewer resources to achieve strategic ends. Thus, instead of recapturing all of Burma, the means available constrained the strategic goals to those in northern Burma.

The same priority allocated scarce intelligence resources to the theater which demanded a creative solution to the need for enemy information and which focused most intelligence gathering assets toward tactical intelligence. Consequently, intelligence gleaned from prisoners or trained agents offered little with regard to operational questions about the Japanese longer range intentions and capabilities.

Terrain and time proved interrelated and demonstrated their relation to surprise. Successful, quick movement through terrain regarded as impossible to traverse surprised the Japanese. Similarly, deep penetration in the enemy's rear against lightly protected lines of communication facilitated the capture of strategic objectives. Consequently, even in a comparatively small theater of operations, operational maneuver which takes advantage of terrain can provide opportunities for surprise.

Sustainment and leadership found themselves intermingled in the Chindit campaign. Stilwell overextended the Chindits without allowing a regenerative pause which decimated the force beyond its ability to continue. In the same theater, however, Stilwell vigorously argued against Chennault's plan for air operations exclusively which probably affected Generals Marshall and Arnold's decision to tailor an air commando unit to deploy and sustain the Chindits. Ironically, Stilwell fought and won the battle for resources with the strategists, but then extended his own forces beyond their capability.

Fitting the Chindit campaign into an operational art construct yields several implications for future planning. First and foremost, intense, high quality training at the tactical level and by operational staffs can be a combat multiplier. The incredibly demanding training which Wingate devised for the Chindits enabled them to far surpass the enemy's expectations of such a small force in such difficult terrain. Because the Chindits were tactically competent and confident, they would execute virtually impossible missions to achieve operational and strategic goals. Thus, the Chindits did more with less because they were superbly trained and conditioned soldiers.

Much as tactical units must be expertly proficient, operational staffs must also skillfully acquire, collect, analyze, recommend, and execute with speed and confidence. The

essence of staff actions at the operational level is the integration of the mission, enemy, troops, terrain, and time with the ways and means available to achieve the strategic ends. Colonel L.D. Holder, Director of the School of Advanced Military Studies, best summarizes the requirement:

"Officers trained in operational-level skills must be able to understand strategic priorities, requirements, and limitations as well as the nature and limitations of tactics. They also must be familiar with the unique set of considerations that apply solely to the conduct of campaigns and represent the heart of operational art."/87

The second implication for the future surrounds the need to recognize that the military will seldom be employed to achieve uniquely military objectives. So many factors external to the military affect planning for the use and sustainment of armed forces that senior operational commanders and staff officers must be intimately involved with national policy decisions and the formulation of strategic guidance and intent. Martin Blumenson notes that the military cannot isolate itself from social, economic, and intellectual forces which affect the military's employment. "To understand the clash of arms, we need to understand the large context within which it takes place."<sup>88</sup>

The final implication for the future suggests that unconventional warfare will probably characterize most future conflicts; conventional warfare is not obsolete, but it will also not be the only type of battle. The creative and original

application of military force is therefore a prerequisite to achieving strategic ends with limited ways and means. Planning and preparing for a blend of conventional and unconventional war, General Bruce Palmer, Jr. concludes, "...will tap the considerable talents that are available to the United States..." and will demand a long-term commitment to dedicating the right resources ...that will ensure continuity of cohesive effort."<sup>89</sup>

Unconventional warfare, therefore, is nothing more than a way to use a means to achieve an end -- strategic, operational, and tactical. While unique at the tactical end of the spectrum, unconventional warfare fits into the operational art because it demands the same elusive clarity of purpose which General Devers sought in his lecture at the Armed Forces Staff College forty-one years ago.

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