

“We Took a Hell of a Beating”

General “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell in Burma

GORDON BROWNE

In the early days of World War II, the United States government was faced with the difficult problem of finding someone to send into the China-Burma theater, someone who could deal with the complex social and political aspects of that area and who could also put together a military command that would successfully fight the Japanese. This thankless task was given to a Chinese-speaking brigadier general named Joseph W. Stilwell. This 60-year-old general knew the difficulty that would face an American commander who was caught between the colonialist British Army of India/Burma and the nationalist (actually ineffective fascist) Chinese government forces under the inept dictatorship of Chiang Kai-shek.

There were a couple of problems in assigning Joe Stilwell to this position. He was only a one-star general and to be equal in rank with the British and Chinese officers in the area, he was quickly promoted two grades, making him a lieutenant general. Besides the promotion, however, there was the fact that Stilwell got his nickname, “Vinegar Joe”, from his rather caustic and extremely cynical personality. He had the habit of saying what he thought, which in the political world of the Far East, was not a very wise policy.

He was constitutionally incapable of remaining silent when confronted with either a political fool or a military buffoon, and it was this characteristic that probably found him only a brigadier general at the beginning of the war. It was suggested that he was a misanthrope, but his disgust with humans did not encompass all of mankind—it was generally directed at those in authority who seemed to revel in their ignorance and pomposity. Stilwell was different from most of the high-ranking American military officers, and even those close to him had to admit they never completely understood the man and considered him at times a strangely elusive character who never really showed all of himself to anyone.

Lieutenant General Stilwell, along with his small staff, flew out of Florida in early February 1942. Due to war conditions, it took two weeks to get from the United States to India. In the Indian capitol, Stilwell had lengthy conferences with the British, who expressed their extreme dislike and

distrust of the Chinese. Then he flew on to China for discussions with the Chinese, who expressed their hatred and suspicion of the British. By this time the Japanese invasion of Burma was well under way.

Chiang Kai-shek informed General Stilwell that he was now the overall commander of all the Chinese armies still fighting in Burma. This was done to assure the U.S. government that the Chinese were serious in their commitment to fight the Japanese. Historically, Stilwell was the first non-Chinese ever given command of Chinese forces. When he finally arrived in Burma on 11 March to take command, the Japanese Army had already taken the port city of Rangoon and was moving quickly northward up country toward the city of Mandalay (see map).

The man who was expected to bring a coherence to the coordination between the Chinese and the British armed forces informed the British commanders that he, Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell, would henceforth be commanding the Chinese armies in Burma at the instruction of Chiang Kai-shek. He announced that his immediate intention was to attack the Japanese as soon as possible and hold the line in Burma so that the land route between India and China, known as the Burma Road, would remain open to supply the Chinese in their continuing fight against the Japanese.

Unknown to Stilwell, shortly after he had left the British headquarters, the commander of the Chinese 5th Army came in and informed the British headquarters staff that General Stilwell was not the new commander of the Chinese forces but only thought he was. The Chinese general informed the British that the Chinese wanted to keep the Americans in the war and the only way to do this was to give them a few commands on paper.

The military situation was quickly deteriorating. The numerous defeats the British had suffered at the hands of the Japanese throughout the Pacific rim had thrown their command into disarray, and the idea of defending Burma became less a question of how to save it than of why they should. Burma was the most poorly run colony of the British Empire, and the native population had become extremely hostile.

Unlike colonial India, the infrastructure that had been imposed on Burmese came in the form of high-ranking British officials backed up by Indian civil servants who took most of the administrative and the management jobs of actually running the country, shunting the Burmese population aside into a situation that was very close to slavery.

Along with this British political problem was the fact that the Chinese were exceedingly reluctant to place their army in any sort of danger. From Chiang Kai-shek down through his general officer ranks, the feeling was that they had already done enough over the past four and a half years fighting the Japanese, and it was time for the Americans and the British to take on the task. When General Stilwell gave an order to one of the Chinese generals under his command to move forward and engage the Japanese, nothing happened. Excuses were made, delay followed delay, and nothing moved.

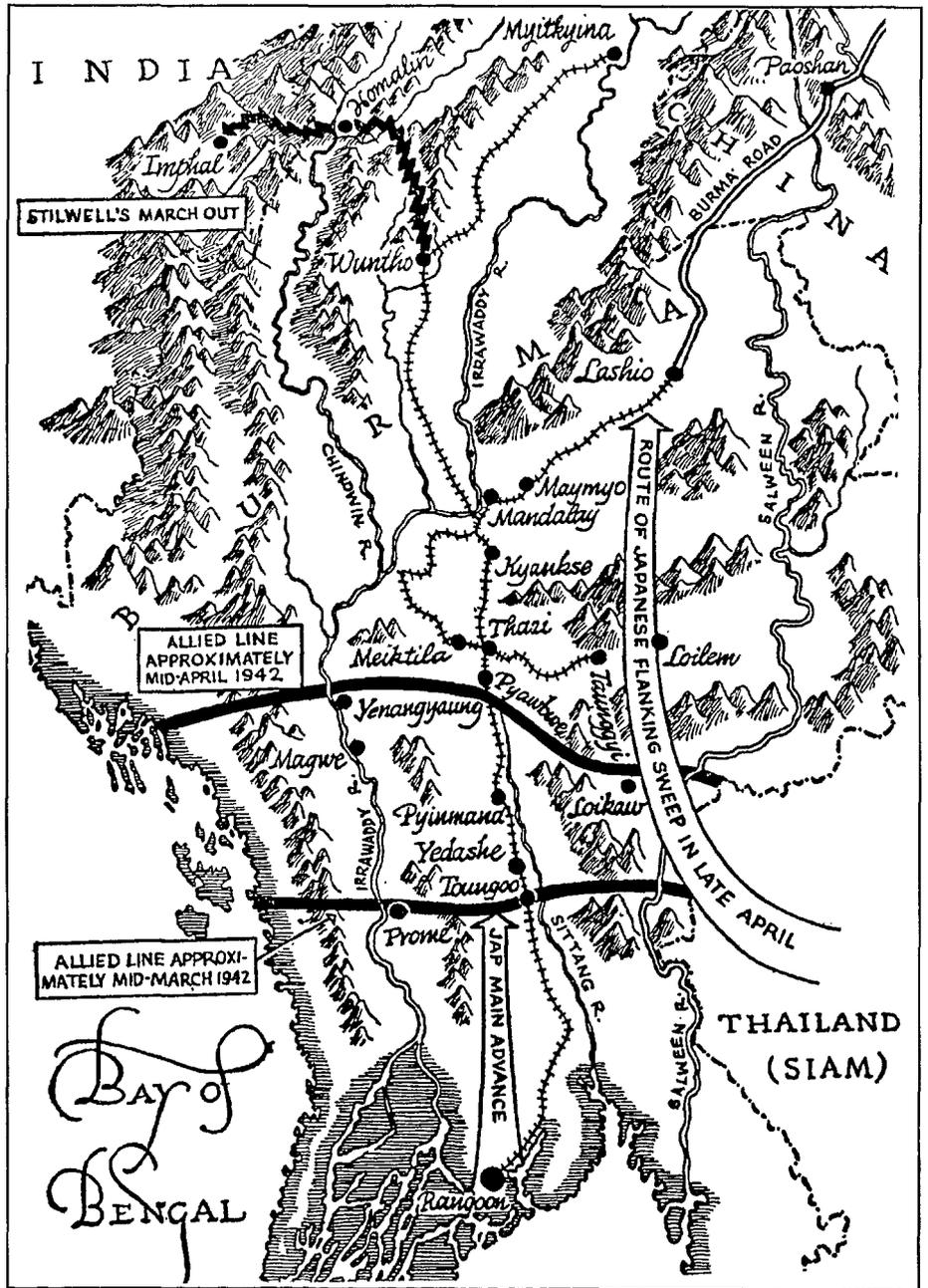
Stilwell wrote in his diary, "The Chinese commanders are up and down, highly optimistic one minute, in the depths of gloom the next. I can't shoot them. I can't relieve them. And just talking to them does no good. So the upshot is that I am the stooge who does the dirty work and takes the rap." To one newspaper reporter, he pointed out that he was supposed to be in command of all the Chinese troops in Burma, "You don't know what that means?" he asked the man, "I don't either!"

Amid this confusion, the Japanese opened a three-pronged offensive up the two river valleys and behind the mountain range that separated Burma from Thailand. The British were defending the valley closest to India on the Irrawaddy River, leaving the Central Valley that straddled the Sittang River to the Chinese army. Within the Burmese population a Fifth Column had sprung up and was assisting the Japanese in their attacks on the allied command. The Japanese had taken advantage of the anti-British, anti-colonial sentiment by propagandizing the Burmese with the motto "Asia for the Asians." Using back trails and dirt roads, the Burmese led the Japanese around and into the rear of both the British and the Chinese forces, creating havoc.

Stilwell moved back up through Burma along with the Chinese forces as the situation worsened. The British, losing their desire to fight in Burma, were showing signs of getting ready to retreat into India. The final blow came when the Japanese attacked the Chinese 55th Division guarding the eastern flank facing Thailand. One moment there was a Chinese army division and the next

moment there was none. Stilwell told Captain Fred Eldridge, his public relations officer, "That is the . . . damndest thing I ever saw. Last night I had a division and today there isn't any." Under heavy attack by the Japanese, the division simply broke up. The officers fled, and the peasant Chinese soldiers left the front in twos and threes and headed back toward China.

At the same time, the Japanese Army quickly went north, got in behind the retreating allies, and closed off the Burma Road. A cargo plane was flown in specifically to take General Stilwell, along with the members of his staff, out of Burma to India. But the idea of flying out of Burma in defeat was something that Stilwell couldn't accept. During the previous months, the British had suffered numerous defeats at the hands of the Japanese, and the Americans had taken a severe beating at Pearl Harbor, on Wake Island, and in the Philippines, but Stilwell had not yet been given a chance to



fight the Japanese, and he had no intention of turning tail and running away. It was not part of his character.

Fully aware of the fact that Chiang Kai-shek was sending secret communiqués to the Chinese commanders telling them not to follow his orders, Stilwell felt that he couldn't be blamed for something that wasn't under his control. He was a three-star general in command of an army that didn't listen to him. He gave commands that no one followed, and now it was being suggested that he jump on an airplane, abandon his command, and escape into India. Turning away from the plane, he sent a message to the world at large that Vinegar Joe Stilwell, the American commander of the China-Burma front, was still in command and was still fighting. He wasn't going to let the Japanese run him out. To the Chinese, his decision to stay with the troops was a simple gesture known as *saving face*.

Two Americans had joined the group that remained standing with General Stilwell as the last plane took off for India. One was the Burmese-born, American Baptist missionary surgeon, Dr. Gordon Seagrave. The son of missionary parents, he was a man of great energy, strong religious faith, and dedication to the practice of medicine among the Burmese people. Like Stilwell, he had a sharp, rough-edged personality that created great difficulty for him in dealing with the British colonial government officials.

Dr. Seagrave had established a hospital in the mountainous Shan State of northeastern Burma and trained the local native girls as nurses, while giving medical care to anyone who came through the doors. Much to Seagrave's surprise, Stilwell immediately accepted him into his military organization, including all of his native Shan and Chin nurses and the group of seven young British Quakers who were working with him as a volunteer ambulance unit.

The second unusual American to stay was 32-year-old Jack Belden. A Brooklyn-born Colgate University honors graduate who, facing America's great depression, had shipped out in the early 1930s and ended up jumping ship in China where he wandered about doing various jobs, such as bartending and teaching English, while he learned to read and write Chinese. Eventually, he worked his way into the newspaper business and ended up as the correspondent for the United Press International. In this capacity he covered the Japanese invasion of the Chinese mainland where he first met and became friends with Stilwell. Belden was described as something of a romantic and idealist who was moody, driven, and alternately cheerful and despondent. He was one of those strange Americans who wandered about the Far East and were considered eccentric characters.

Later, when Colonel Stilwell returned to China as a lieutenant general, Jack Belden joined him and went down into Burma with him as the newly appointed correspondent for *Time* magazine. In his book, *Retreat With Stilwell*, Belden said he woke up one morning and found that he was the only journalist left in Burma. All the others had flown out. When he was offered a seat on the last plane, he decided that he had better stay with General Stilwell and quickly wrote the last press communiqué to come out of the Burma war zone: "This is probably my last message. I'm staying with General

Stilwell and his small command. The Japanese are driving with incredible speed, swinging wide of both our east and west flanks and somehow we have to get the Chinese troops out of this closing-in trap. In writing this I hear an American transport plane circling, ready to land. Must go. Goodbye."

With a collection of humanity that looked less like a military command than an international parade, Stilwell headed north in a column of army trucks and jeeps. There were 28 Americans in the group, mostly staff officers, a few sergeants, and one Army doctor. The second American doctor was Gordon Seagrave, who had with him his 19 native nurses and the British Quaker ambulance unit. Then there were the Malayan and Burmese cooks, native mechanics and porters, and a collection of Indians and Anglo-Indians (including an American missionary), a president of a Burmese agricultural college who spoke a number of the native dialects, a collection of 13 British army officers, a squad of 16 Chinese soldiers who were General Stilwell's personal body guard, along with a mixed group of civilians and Jack Belden.

There were about 100 people in the column traveling in an array of military trucks, jeeps, and sedans loaded with ammunition, supplies, and personal effects. They started north

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with the intent of keeping ahead of the encircling Japanese and in front of the retreating Chinese army, which was followed by a mass of desperate refugees.

The attitude among the American officers in the column was decidedly mixed. Those close to Stilwell, who had served under him, had great confidence in the man, but the others thought he had lost control of the situation and was going to get them killed or captured by the advancing Japanese. This second group talked and plotted among themselves and came up with the idea of abandoning all of the civilians in the column, including Seagrave's nurses, and striking out on their own for India.

Major Frank Merrill, who would later become famous as the commander of Merrill's Marauders, approached Jack Belden, who was resting under a tree beside the sleeping General Stilwell. Merrill quietly told Belden about the plan being put together by the American officers to abandon the civilians and strike out on their own into India. It is difficult to understand just why Merrill would approach Belden, a civilian, to tell him about the plot, except for the fact that it was well known that Belden was thought to be a close friend of Stilwell from their China days. Major Merrill probably thought twice about approaching the "old man" directly and felt that Belden could act as some sort of intermediary. After the major explained the situation, Belden told him that he didn't think Stilwell would buy the idea and suggested that Merrill forget about it.



General Stilwell leads his column, followed by his two aides. He set a pace of 115 steps a minute. Unknown to most, he had been a long-distance runner and in China had participated in a number of long marches that helped keep him in top physical condition.

Merrill was right in thinking that Belden was close to the “old man” and knew exactly how he would react. During the Japanese-Chinese conflict in the 1930s, Belden had been one of the free-lance reporters working for the international news services when then-Colonel Stilwell was the American military attaché who was responsible for reporting on the Japanese military for the United States Army. Stilwell had traveled to the front a number of times with the young reporter and readily admitted that Belden’s news reports on the war were his major source of information on what was happening in the Far East.

While Stilwell slept, rumors began to spread through the camp among the native workers, the Chinese guards, the British soldiers, and Seagrave’s nurses. It was being said that the Americans were going to take all of the jeeps and the food and break away, leaving everyone else behind. There were angry discussions and confusion among the members of the column. It all dissipated when at 0300 the general awoke and ordered the column to move out.

In time, the group reached the end of the passable roads. The trucks and other vehicles had to be abandoned. Stilwell

gathered his motley command together and informed them that they were going to march out of Burma through the jungle and over the mountains into India. He explained to them that they would have to cover 14 miles a day to stay ahead of the Japanese. There were also the hordes of refugees coming up behind them, along with the defeated Chinese soldiers heading the same direction. He reminded them that the monsoon rains would start in 10 to 12 days and they had to be out of Burma by that time or they might be stranded. With that he instructed them to throw away anything that wasn’t essential.

A Chinese pack train appeared from nowhere with 20 tiny mules and two drivers; they were immediately hired along with 60 local Burmese to carry the packs and bedrolls. Then Stilwell radioed to headquarters in India that they were getting ready to walk out. The message read, “I’m with a party of one hundred, including Headquarters, Seagrave’s surgical unit and strays. We are armed, have food and a map. Last message for a while. Cheerio, Stilwell.” Then he had the 200-pound radio destroyed.

Stilwell, with a Thompson submachinegun slung over his

shoulder and his watch in hand, moved off at 115 steps a minute into the jungle. Stilwell, normally skinny with gray showing in his hair and the oldest officer in the column, set a grueling pace through the jungle heat. Unknown to most, the general had been a long-distance runner for most of his military life, and during his time in China had participated in a number of arduous long marches that helped keep him in top physical condition. The same could not be said of most of the other American officers who were following behind him into the jungle.

At noon on the first day 51-year-old Colonel William Holcombe, who had not been well for some time, collapsed. The column came to a halt while arrangements were made to have Holcombe carried at the end of the column, along with one of Seagrave's nurses who had recently had surgery. They were being carried on makeshift stretchers by the Quakers from the ambulance unit. The column started up again. An hour later, 39-year-old Major Frank Merrill passed out from heat stroke and a possible heart condition, and was added to the group at the end of the column. He was unconscious and irrational, and there was some question whether he would survive. Because the trail followed along side stream, the Quaker Friends and the nurses were able to acquire two inflatable mattresses that belonged to the Americans and used them to drag the sick through the stream.

Then two more American officers passed out from sunstroke. Captain Tommy Lee and Major Felix Nowakowski collapsed, unconscious, and were placed with the others who were being dragged and carried along at the end of the column. Stilwell couldn't believe that these strapping young Americans were in such bad shape. In his diary entry for that day he wrote, "Christ but we are a poor lot." He reduced the weight of the packs they were carrying to ten pounds for fear that more of the Americans would fall by the wayside.

Dr. Seagrave's 16 tiny nurses ministered to and helped in carrying the sick Americans while singing Christian hymns such as "Onward Christian Soldiers." Nothing was said about the fact that these were some of the same American officers who had proposed abandoning the nurses for fear they would slow down the escape into India. By the second day, Colonel Holcombe, Major Merrill, and Captain Lee were back on their feet, but Major Nowakowski was still unable to walk. Stilwell was disgusted with them. Addressing Colonel Williams, the army doctor who was in his early fifties, Stilwell demanded to know, "Dammit, Williams, you and I can stand it. We're both older than any of them. Why can't they take it?"

At one of the ten-minute rest stops, the general was shown a bedroll that had been found on the back of one of the tiny mules in the pack train. In place of the bare essentials, the pack contained a mattress, an overcoat, suits, a dinner jacket, dress shirts, a collection of personal effects and an assortment of colorful ties. Stilwell kicked the bedroll and all of the clothing into the stream. Because everyone had been carrying heavy backpacks with only essential materials, it was inconceivable that an American officer had decided to keep his dress clothing. Fuming, Stilwell turned to Jack Belden, who just happened to be sitting beside him, and in-

structed the newspaper correspondent to find out who owned the bedroll and inform him immediately. The General stalked off toward the front of the column, leaving Belden to sort out the matter.

For Belden, who wasn't even in the Army, this order to find the culprit was incomprehensible. Jack turned to the public relations officer, Captain Fred Eldridge, and said, "How in the hell am I going to find out who this belongs to?" Eldridge hesitated and then sheepishly admitted it was his, and was later severely reprimanded by Stilwell.

As if Stilwell was not having enough trouble with all that was going on around him, a British Colonel came up to him

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as he sat with a group of the Americans, including Jack Belden, on the side of the three-foot wide path eating their meager noon meal. The colonel said in all seriousness, "I don't want to criticize you General, but in the British army things would be done differently. The higher rank officers and the other military ranks would eat in separate messes." There is no record that Stilwell responded to the British Colonel but one can easily imagine what he was thinking.

On the third day, the column reached the Uyu River, a tributary that flowed 60 miles west to join the Chindwin River at the city of Homalin east of the mountain range that separated Burma from India. The mule train was sent off downriver with a U.S. officer and the Chinese troops as the rest of the column set to work building rafts.

Seagrave's nurses went about gathering the large leaves and rattan that would be cut into twine. They built the framework to erect shelters on the rafts to shield the rafters from the intense sun. As the work was being completed, Stilwell noted in his diary that the nurses were "always willing" to work, and then added that at the same time "we have a couple of [allied] gentlemen who can't be bothered to work."

Each small raft was made of double layers of bamboo poles bound together with the rattan twine. Then three small rafts were lashed together creating one large 81-foot vessel with a sun shelter on each section. Four such rafts were built.

A small advance party on one of the small rafts pushed off ahead of the others with four American officers acting as scouts. Food was bought from the locals—mostly chickens, eggs, and rice—and the four large rafts pushed off downstream. The Americans with General Stilwell were on the first, followed by the British, then Dr. Seagrave and the nurses on the third with the few Anglo-Indian women. Taking advantage of his civilian status, Jack Belden hitched a ride on the Seagrave raft and spent his time acting the part of

a reporter, gathering stories from those nurses who could speak English. The fourth raft contained the mess with all of the food and the remaining men, mostly Anglo-Indians, Indians, and some Chinese, and Captain Fred Eldridge.

The mood immediately changed from the painful drudgery of the jungle trail to the perfect quiet relaxation of floating on a tropical jungle river. Seagrave noted that it was so hot the men took off all of their clothes with the exception of the underpants (boxer shorts), and the native women removed everything except the light skirts known as "longi," which they tied under their armpits. Those who got hot would slip into the river for a quick swim. "If we weren't swimming," Seagrave wrote, "we were sleeping."

An hour before sunset they pulled in to the shore and, for the first time since they started the retreat, had a meal in which everyone was fully satisfied. The "big chow," as Stilwell called it, included tea, cooked chicken, and rice, with green tomatoes and jungle vegetables. The nurses had gathered wild weeds from the jungle that were cooked up and tasted, as one American noted, like spinach with the vinegar already added.

Once dinner was over, Stilwell ordered his command back onto the rafts despite murmured objections. They pushed off into the current of the river in complete darkness. Around midnight the moon came up. Fred Eldridge later described in somewhat romantic terms what the trip on the river at night seemed to him: "The moon made the black jungle with its enormous trees on either side a thing of shadowy, dramatic magic with the soft, silvery river flowing through it."

During the second day on the river, a bomber roared in overhead, and for a moment they expected to be attacked as the plane banked and turned back toward them. Someone spotted the English insignia on the wings as the plane came down the river a hundred feet off the water and started dropping supplies. A cheer rose from the rafts as everyone, including Stilwell, jumped into the water and raced for the supplies. At that moment local natives rushed out of the jungle and were able to take a few bundles before anyone could get to them. The general with one of the sacks over his shoulder, wearing nothing but his boxer shorts and his campaign hat, proudly walked back to his raft with his bundle.

The plane was a clear indication that the outside world knew they were there and had some concern for their well being.

At dawn on the third day there was a heavy tropical shower. This was not a good sign. The monsoon rains were not due for a week. As the sky cleared, the mountains that separated Burma from India came into view in the distance. By late morning they floated into the city of Homalin. There was no one waiting for them. The advance party had scouted out the town, but there was neither colonial British representation nor, luckily, any sign of the Japanese. The stores were shuttered and the local population remained out of sight. It was noted that the British Commissioner had gone upriver in his launch. Stilwell wrote in his diary, "I bet he's beaten it. Telephone office shut. Suspicious."

The next day, the morning of May 13, after eight days they

faced the serious problem of crossing the Chindwin River to the safety on the other side and the mountains beyond. As the column moved out across the flat river plain leading to the river's edge, someone joked that General Stilwell reminded him a lot of Moses leading his people toward the Red Sea. No one laughed. The problem was that the Chindwin River was not the Red Sea, and it showed no sign that it could be parted.

As the column approached the river's edge, several native dugouts came paddling upstream as if summoned by some higher power, and were immediately put into service ferrying the column to the other side.

Once across, they started up the mountains. The three days of floating down the river had helped. They were rested. The climbing was difficult but not impossible. No sooner had they started up the steep mountain paths than the monsoon rains began, and climbing became extremely difficult. The trails were slippery and people repeatedly lost their footing. They were sick and tired and wanted the ordeal to be over.

In the late afternoon of the second day, exactly ten days from the start of their ordeal, they were met by a British civil servant who had with him the food supplies necessary to carry them the rest of the way into India. They had made it out, just as Stilwell said they would. Feeling safe at last, the people in the column began to change in attitude. As Jack Belden unhappily pointed out, "Before we were sort of homogeneous. A polyglot group hanging together to outwit fate. But once the outside world came in, almost everybody separated back into his or her past. That is the colonels became colonels again, the British became British, the Americans became Americans etc."

During one of the rest stops as they moved back into India, they were sitting by the side of the trail resting. General Stilwell turned to Jack Belden and in confidence told him that an American colonel had come to him with a list of names that he felt should receive medals and decorations for the retreat out of Burma. Silent for a moment, Stilwell finally stated that he just could not believe it and added, "They were just walking out trying to save their own lives and they wanted decorations."

In *Time Magazine*, Belden later wrote, "The iron-haired, grim, skeleton-thin Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell walked into India with a tommy gun on his shoulder at the head of a polyglot party of weary, hungry, sick American, British, and Chinese army officers, some enlisted men, Burmese nurses, Nagger, Chin, and Shan tribesmen and a devil's brew of Indian and Malayan mechanics, railway men, cooks, cipher clerks and the mixed breeds of Southern Asia. Though they were ragged and weary, everyone was in comparatively good health for so arduous a trip."

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