

This Day in History... January 28, 1945

Burma Road Reopens

On January 28, 1945, the Burma Road, linking Burma with the southwest of China, was reopened.

The Burma Road was originally built between 1937 and 1938, during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The 717-mile mountain road was constructed by some 200,000 Burmese and Chinese laborers to allow the transport of supplies from British-held Burma to China.

Under diplomatic pressure from the Japanese, the British closed down the Burma Road for three months beginning in July 1940. Then, in January 1942, the Japanese launched an attack on Burma to capture the port city of Rangoon and cut off China's supply line. Rangoon was taken by the Japanese on March 7; they then proceeded to drive the British and Chinese forces out of the country.

With the road closed, the Allies had to fly their supplies in to China by air, which was no small feat. At the time, the members of the US Army Air Forces weren't trained or equipped to move cargo – and there weren't any airfields in the China Burma India Theater. Plus, the pilots would have to fly over the Himalayan Mountains, which was dangerous as they had few reliable charts and little to no radio navigation help or weather information.

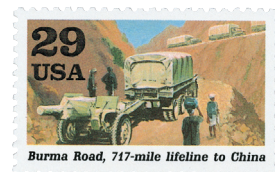
Over time the American pilots overcame these obstacles and got the "India-China Ferry" up and running by April 1942. By the end of the war, these pilots delivered about 650,000 tons of material to China. But that delivery came at a cost – 1,659 men killed or missing and 594 lost aircraft. They were later awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for their efforts and sacrifices.

While the airlift was crucial, the Allies still had to fight to regain Burma. The weather and terrain made operations more difficult. Monsoon season lasted for about half of the year, and troops in the field had little protection from the rains. The tropical climate led to outbreaks of malaria and dysentery. The mountains and jungles caused additional complications when resupplying the forces.

The tide began to turn toward the end of 1943. There was greater use of air power for transporting troops and supplies, and bombing of Japanese strongholds increased as well. British, Chinese, and US forces were trained to fight in small mobile units that disrupted Japanese communications and supply routes.

Meanwhile, the Allies began working on a new plan to bring supplies to the Chinese – the Ledo Road. The new road began at Ledo (Assam, India) and ran to Mong-Yu, where it connected to the existing Burma Road. Construction of the road was overseen by American Army General Joseph Stilwell, who the road was eventually named after. Stilwell estimated that 65,000 tons of supplies could be transported over the road every month once it was completed.

For over two years, some 15,000 American soldiers and 35,000 local workers constructed the Ledo Road. By late 1944, the Ledo Road connected to the Burma Road, though some sections had to be repaired because of damage caused by monsoons. Then, on January 28, 1945, the first Allied supply trucks reached China via the Ledo-Burma Road. Over the next six months, they transported 129,000 tons of supplies to China. The Allies then successfully removed the Japanese from Rangoon in July 1945.



Burma Road stamp from the 1941: a World at War stamp sheet



Stilwell stamp from the Distinguished Americans Series

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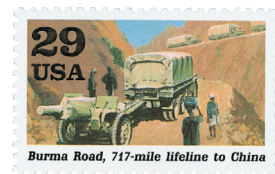
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