COCHRAN'S COMMANDOS: THE 1st AIR COMMANDO GROUP

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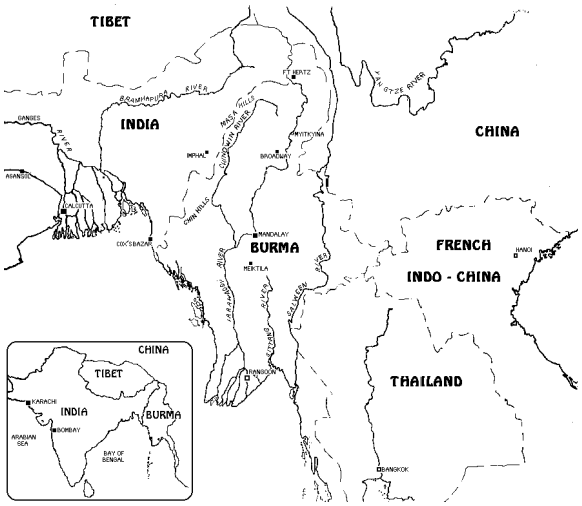
In the war against the Japanese in the Pacific and Asia, the United States and its allies found themselves facing an elusive enemy in an inhospitable climate and terrain. It was clear that the traditional forces of front line troops, fighter aircraft and heavy bombers could not be depended upon to defeat this enemy. Instead, this became a war to control critical communications and supply routes. The objective was to isolate the enemy, sometimes literally starving him by closing off his food, ammunition, and equipment supplies.

From the need to have a "small force capable of doing many things well and responding at a moment's notice", Project 9 was conceived by U.S. Army Air Force Commander General H.H. "Hap" Arnold. Arnold selected two fighter pilots to head Project 9 in May 1943. Colonels Philip Cochran and John Alison were given the highest priority to requisition men, aircraft, and equipment to form a unit that would include light aircraft for casualty evacuation, transport aircraft for fuel, food, and ammunition, and fighters to engage the enemy in the air or strafe and bomb him on the ground. [1] The two colonels selected C-47 transports, CG-4A cargo gliders, TG-5 training gliders, UC-64 "bush" planes, and L-1 and L-5 light planes. They wanted P-38 Lightnings to fill the fighter role, but the P-38s were not available. They asked for P-47 Thunderbolts, but this request was also denied. Finally, Cochran and Alison were forced to settle for underpowered and tired P-51A Mustangs.

The Mustangs were pulled from bases in Florida and all the L-1s in the U.S. were requisitioned for Project 9. The men and equipment began to assemble at Seymour-Johnson Field in North Carolina on 1 October 1943. The unit was kept lean to make it air transportable. It included 87 officers and 436 enlisted men, including pilots, maintenance, medical, supply, communications, intelligence, and engineering sections. [2]

The unit operated in strict secrecy, unable to tell anyone who they were or what their mission was. Knowledge of Project 9's mission was on a "need to know" basis only and most unit members had no idea where they were going or what exactly they would do when they got there. When asked about what they were doing and where they were going, unit members would shrug their shoulders. As a result, the unit had adopted an unofficial patch, a black question mark on a white circle.[3]

At Seymour-Johnson, the unit began to requisition specialized equipment: a mobile field hospital, experimental rocket tubes, the latest glider towing equipment, and four very unique aircraft, the YR-4B helicopter. On 1 November, the unit began to embark for the China-Burma-India theater. The C-47s were ferried over while the Mustangs were deck loaded on aircraft carriers. The gliders and light planes were disassembled and crated. On 13 November, Colonel Cochran and the first of Project 9's personnel began to arrive in Karachi, India. From there, they would support British Major General Orde Wingate's Long Range Penetration Forces, better known as Wingate's Raiders or the Chindits.



By 24 November, Colonel Cochran had met with British Admiral Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander for the Southeast Asia Command and his deputy, U.S. Army Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell. Wingate's long range penetration plans were reviewed at that meeting. Two brigades of Wingate's Chindits would march into Burma, one from the north and another from the west. A third brigade would be airlifted into China and march back across the Salween River to complete the three pronged attack. Because sufficient airlift was not available to move such a large force and then resupply it from the air, Wingate's plans were in danger of being abandoned.

Colonel Cochran and his small unit was an unknown factor, but Lord Mountbatten knew that Cochran's unit was dedicated to support General Wingate's operations, by direct order of General Arnold. Cochran was asked to explain what his small unit could do for Wingate.

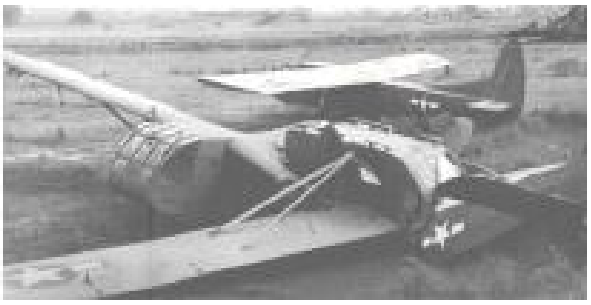
Cochran told the Allied commanders that it was not necessary to move Wingate's third brigade into China. Cochran's men and aircraft could move the Chindits from India right into Burma and the heart of Japanese territory. When asked if he could accomplish this feat in two weeks time, Cochran replied that he could move them all in one week or less!

Lord Mountbatten then called Cochran the

"first ray of sunshine we have seen in this theater for some time."

Cochran wasted no time preparing to follow through on his claim. He cabled Colonel Alison, who was still in the U.S., for additional CG-4A gliders to support the mission. The gliders were shipped out the next day. [4]

On 29 November 1943, Project 9 was redesignated as the 5318th Provisional Air Unit, gaining a real name for the first time. More men and equipment began to arrive in India. Over the next three weeks, the light planes and gliders were reassembled. Both officers and enlisted men joined in the effort to rebuild the aircraft. The P-51As arrived aboard the aircraft carrier, heavily corroded and storm damaged from the crossing. They were unflyable and had to be repaired. Cochran sent out a priority request for spares.



By Christmas Eve, Colonel Alison had arrived in India and he and Cochran surveyed airfields from which to operate. Until now, they had operated as co-commanders, but had decided that the joint command was too awkward. Cochran assumed command with Alison as his deputy.

The two officers decided that the gliders and C-47s would operate from an airfield at Lalaghat and the fighters and light planes from a field at Hailakandi. The fields were only a few miles apart in the Assam region of Northeast India.

Training with Wingate's Chindits began on 29 December. Gliders carrying 400 troops landed on a mud field in India to demonstrate the gliders' capabilities. When several gliders became stuck in the mud and could not be moved, they were snatched out of the mud by low flying C-47s.

As part of the demonstration, mules were transported by glider. Wingate's men relied heavily upon the beasts to move their supplies and equipment through the jungles. To prevent the animals' braying from betraying their position to the Japanese, the Chindits performed a "brayectomy" on the mules by cutting their vocal cords.

To prevent the mules from damaging the gliders, their legs were hobbled and the glider floors reinforced. Their heads were tied down to keep their long ears out of the control cables. They were placed in a sling-like device to further restrain them and their handlers were given orders to kill them if they became unmanageable. Surprisingly, the mules adapted easily to flying, even banking with the aircraft in turns.

To further demonstrate to capabilities of the 5318th Provisional Air Unit, a dogfight was

staged between a P-51 Mustang and an L-5 light plane. The L-5, although much slower, could turn tighter than the Mustang and out-maneuver the fighter. The Mustang's gun cameras proved that the light plane had stayed safely out of the fighter's kill envelope. [5]

In January 1944, General Wingate appealed to Colonel Cochran for additional air support when it became clear that the Royal Air Force bomber force in the area would not be able to support his Chindits. Cochran requested twelve B-25H Mitchell bombers for his composite force. The B-25H was an ideal aircraft for close air support with six fifty caliber machine guns and a 75 millimeter cannon in its nose. Cochran's request for the bombers came back approved on 21 January and the B-25s were diverted from other units in the Pacific theater.

In February 1944, the 5318th Provisional Air Unit became the "No. 1 Air Commando Force" and began combat operations. The phrase "Air Commando" was coined by Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. Mountbatten, known to the troops as "Lord Louie", had become quite impressed with Colonel Cochran and his troops.

The light planes, the L-1s and L-5s, had been divided into four different unnumbered squadrons in February. Two squadrons were operating from forward locations in support of General Wingate at Ledo and General Stilwell at Taro. A third squadron was deployed to Tamu and the fourth to the Arakan front. The planes from the fourth squadron supported British troops who had been boxed in by the Japanese and who had few options other than surrender. The troops were ordered to hold on and the light planes from the fourth squadron flew in mail and newspapers to the British, brought in replacements, and evacuated over 700 wounded out of the combat zone. Flying at treetop level, the daring light plane pilots, mostly enlisted men, kept up the British spirits with their resupply efforts. The British kept slugging away at the Japanese and had broken the siege by the end of the month.

Training with the C-47 and glider force continued in February. Morale fell to an all-time low after a glider accident killed three Americans and four British troops. To show support for Cochran and his Air Commandos, the commander of the British 3rd Indian Division sent this note to Colonels Cochran and Alison: "Please be assured that we will go with your boys any time, any place, anywhere." That phrase, "any time, any place, anywhere" captured the spirit of the fledgling Air Commandos and began a motto that survived the years.

The gliders and C-47s were seeing combat as well in February 1944. They moved a British patrol east of the Chindwin River and carried two folding boats, outboard motors, and gasoline to another group of Chindits who needed help in crossing the

Chindwin. The first glider was burned by its crew after it was severely damaged during landing, but two others were snatched by C-47 tugs and returned to their base at Lalaghat. Gliders were "snatched" by stretching tow cables on poles ahead of the glider. Low flying C-47s would hook the tow cables and literally yank the gliders into the air. In this manner, the gliders could land in and be recovered from clearings too small for the C-47s. [6]

The P-51 Mustangs saw their first combat in February, flying 54 missions between 3 February and 4 March. Their targets were Japanese lines of communications. The B-25Hs entered combat on 12 March, concentrating on road and railway bridges, warehouses, trucks, trains, and river barges.

In the meantime, the Air Commandos were the subject of some in-fighting among the Southeast Asia Command. Various attempts were made to absorb the men and their aircraft and materiel into other units. In early January 1944, General Stilwell was thwarted in his attempt to "draft" the Air Commandos for his own use when Colonel Cochran produced a letter from General Arnold that clarified Arnold's position on the unit. Other units continued to try to "redirect" the resources of the Air Commandos. Finally, a letter from General Arnold to Lord Mountbatten ended the problem. In that letter, Arnold stated that he had intended that the Air Commandos solely support General Wingate's operations. That was the reason he had created the unit and that was what they would do.

On 5 March 1944, Operation THURSDAY began. It was the spearhead of the 2nd Chindit Campaign and the beginning of the Allied invasion of Burma. On 6 March, 30 C-47s took off from Lalaghat, towing 60 CG-4A gliders. They were bound for a jungle clearing code named "Broadway". Four gliders crashed after takeoff, two were cut loose over Lalaghat, and two more were released early when their C-47 experienced problems. Nine more were lost east of the Chindwin River when tow ropes began to snap as the C-47s began their descent. The gliders had been overloaded by about 1500 pounds each for the assault.

The trip back to Lalaghat was difficult for the crews of the nine downed gliders. While crossing the Chindwin River, Corporal Estil I. Neinaber drowned silently after being swept away in the strong current. Neinaber, a non-swimmer, died rather than call for help and alert nearby Japanese patrols. All but two of the nine crews eventually reached safety either back in India or by reaching the assault forces landed at Broadway.

At Broadway, the gliders were having more problems. Colonel Alison, aboard the third glider into Broadway, had taken charge of the situation on the ground. The gliders' overweight conditions led to higher than expected approach speeds. Their landings were haphazard and dangerous and the clearing at Broadway was not as suitable for glider operations as aerial photos had indicated. When the gliders landed on the rough ground, their landing gear was ripped off, making it impossible to move them out of the way of the next wave of gliders. Two gliders crashed into the jungle, killing all on board. Compounding Alison's problems on the ground, the assault force's only radio was damaged during landing.

The C-47s returned to Lalaghat and started out with a second wave of gliders for Broadway. The double tow used for the first assault wave was abandoned by Colonel Cochran. [7]

While the second wave was enroute, Alison

managed to transmit a single coded message back to Cochran. It meant "Trouble - send no more gliders!" Cochran, unable to make further contact with Alison, assumed that the

assault force at Broadway was under attack. Cochran ordered a recall and all but one of the C-47s returned to Lalaghat with gliders in tow.

Back at Broadway, the single glider that missed the recall was cut loose over the clearing. As Alison watched, the glider overshot the clearing and crashed into the trees beyond. The glider's cargo, a small bulldozer, broke loose in the crash. Alison was certain that everyone aboard was dead.

The design of the CG-4A glider allowed the nose, including the pilot compartment, to swing up for loading and unloading of bulky and wheeled equipment. The nose was rigged for rapid unloading of equipment - when a wheeled vehicle was driven forward, the nose would swing up automatically. To

Colonel Alison's surprise, the bulldozer aboard the glider had broken its moorings in the crash, and rolled forward, raising the pilot compartment. The crew escaped with only the pilot's thumb broken when the nose slammed shut behind the bulldozer, and even the bulldozer wasn't damaged!

When dawn finally broke over Broadway on 6 March, 37 gliders had made it to Broadway of the 63 that had been launched. Only three of those 37 were still flyable and twenty four men were dead. The 1st Air Commandos had moved 539 troops, 3 mules, and almost 30,000 pounds of supplies into Broadway. They had moved a total payload of 221,648 pounds into the jungle clearing.

A reconnaissance flight over Broadway relieved Colonel Cochran's fear that the assault force had come under attack and soon eight L-1s and six L-5s arrived to evacuate the injured. In the meantime, Colonel Alison's men began to turn the rugged jungle clearing into a real airfield. By nightfall, they had carved a 4700 foot long runway from the jungle. More men and supplies began to arrive aboard C-47s.

The next day, 7 March, the Air Commandos began another glider assault, this time on a clearing code named Chowringhee. Between the two assaults Cochran's commandos and Troop Carrier Command moved more than 9,000 troops, 175 horses, nearly 1,300 mules, and half a million pounds of supplies. They had established two airfields and landed a large force of Allied troops 200 miles behind enemy lines.

The Air Commandos continued to support Wingate's Chindits. The light planes, the L-1s and L-5s, would evacuate wounded while the C-47s and UC-64s would drop supplies to the furtive Chindits. The Chindits would gather their supplies and melt back into the jungle to harass the Japanese. [8]

Another way the Air Commandos supported Wingate's Raiders involved an unauthorized modification to the P-51As. One end of a 450 foot cable was attached to the left

under-wing bomb rack and the other end to the right bomb rack. A weight was attached to the center of this cable and it was dragged along behind the Mustang in flight. By diving on Japanese telephone and telegraph lines, the Mustang could snare the enemy's communications lines and literally rip them out. Usually, the wires just snapped, but occasionally, the Mustangs uprooted telephone poles, dragging them behind for miles before jettisoning the cables.

In March, the Air Commandos were credited with another first when Lieutenant Carter Harman flew his fragile Sikorsky YR-4B helicopter from Hailakandi, India and over a 5,000 foot mountain range to rescue three wounded Chindit troops and a light plane pilot stranded behind Japanese lines in the Burma jungle. Because the prototype helicopter had a limited range, extra fuel tanks were strapped to the fuselage over the cockpit, and because of overheating problems with the engine, the trip took three days. One at a time, the four evacuees were flown out in the two seat chopper. They were transported to a larger clearing where a waiting plane took them to a hospital in the rear. The helicopter continued to operate from the Broadway base until Colonel Cochran recalled Lieutenant Harman and his machine to keep it from falling into Japanese hands.

By the end of March 1944, the Allies had established air superiority over the Japanese. The Japanese had lost 117 aircraft in the China-Burma-India Theater; 42.7 percent of those losses were credited to the newly renamed 1st Air Commando Group, flying only one squadron of tired, underpowered fighters and twelve bombers.

In April, the figures were again impressive. Records indicate the Japanese lost 107 planes; the Air Commandos were responsible for 32.78 percent of those losses. In May, the rains forced the Air Commandos from their dirt and grass strips. General Wingate had died in the crash of an Air Commando B-25H in March and this had resulted in a change in strategies in the China-Burma-India theater. A more conventional approach to the Japanese was taken by Wingate's successor and the hit and run tactics of the Chindits were abandoned. The Air Commandos continued to operate in the theater throughout the rest of the war, providing close air support, aerial resupply, and medical evacuation for ground forces.

The bomber force was eliminated in May and the P-51s were traded for P-47 Thunderbolts. The 1st Air Commandos pulled back to Asansol, India and were reorganized as well. The fighter section became the 5th and 6th Fighter Squadrons (Commando), the light plane section became the 164th, 165th, and 166th Liaison Squadrons (Commando) and the C-47 and glider sections were merged to form the 319th Troop Carrier Squadron (Commando). This ended the informal structure of the Air Commandos and officially established the 1st Air Commando Group.[9]

The war ended in August 1945, and the 1st Air Commandos returned to the United States in early November 1945. On 3 November, the 1st Air Commando Group was inactivated and on 8 October 1948, the unit was disbanded with full honors, including a Distinguished Unit Citation for combat action in India and Burma from

March to May 1944.

The Air Commandos were a vision of the future of warfare as seen by General "Hap" Arnold. Arnold's unorthodox strategy created a self-sufficient combat organization which saw a number of combat firsts: the first successful use of rockets on aircraft against ground targets, the first use of a helicopter in combat, as well as the first helicopter combat rescue, the first air-transportable mobile hospital, and the first airborne forward air controllers. The 1st Air Commando Group was especially adapted for unconventional warfare and served as a model for the Air Force Special Operations Force established in the 1960s. The 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, Florida today is a direct descendant of the 1st Air Commando Group. The wing proudly adopted as its motto the phrase "ANY TIME, ANY PLACE". [10]

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1 History of the World War II Air Commandos, Dallas, TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1989, p. 4.
2 Ibid., p. 5 - 23.
3 Interview with Clay McCutcheon, Air Force Special Operations Command History Office.
4 World War II Air Commandos, p. 5 - 23.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.