

Today some of USAF's Air Commandos are in Southeast Asia, training South Vietnamese to fight guerrilla warfare. This modern 1st Air Commando Group is in the tradition of a World War II unit which, in March 1944, took part in a daring airborne operation that landed some 10,000 of Gen. Orde Wingate's Chindit Raiders far behind Japanese lines in central Burma. The first 1st Air Commandos were led by Col. Phil Cochran, immortalized by cartoonist Milton Caniff as "Flip Corkin." Here James Warner Bellah, a well known military writer who was himself a member of the Burma invasion team, tells the story of that operation and discusses . . .

The Air Commando Tradition

By James Warner Bellah

AT THE Quebec Conference, in August 1943, General "Hap" Arnold came up with the original concept of air commando units for use in Burma. Today the lineal military descendants of these units—after a nineteen-year period of deactivation—are operating again in the jungles of Vietnam and are training for their work—on a worldwide capability basis—at the Special Air Warfare Center, Eglin AFB, Fla. There were 523 men in the original 1st Air Commandos—all volunteers who left the US by air late in 1943. Commanded by Col. Philip G. Cochran, they were equipped with P-51 fighters and B-25 attack bombers for the traditional missions of air superiority, interdiction, close support, and reconnaissance. They also flew a variety of transports for supply and evacuation of wounded, and gliders for assault. A flight of six helicopters was the first rotary-wing aircraft to see combat in any theater of operations. Altogether, more than 280 assault aircraft were maintained and operated by fewer than 600 assigned personnel.

The word *commando* carries the suggestion of loose discipline, of heroic individuality, of action, of highly irregular military operations. It suggests the quintessence of what the French call *cran* which is, translated inadequately, "guts."

But the actual ingredients of successful commando operations were in 1944, and are today:

- Deeply instilled discipline and motivation.
- Individuality of action, but closely coordinated with the over-all political or battle plan.
- Irregular troop operations carefully tailored to the over-all mission and controlled strategically by higher authority.
- Guts, of course, but guts that derive from thorough training, a knowledge of one's job, and a dedication to the dictum that "in war there is no substitute for victory."

Had an unbriefed officer penetrated into the area of the first 1st Air Commandos near Hailakandi in Assam, west of the Burmese border, in the winter of 1943, he would have found what appeared to be a pirate crew moiling about the place in apparent indiscipline both person and arms.

The actual moiling, on one occasion, was reaction to

one of Col. Phil Cochran's written orders posted on the Headquarters bulletin board, requiring that the beards come off. The final official paragraph read: "Not that I give a damn, but they look like hell to the visiting brass."

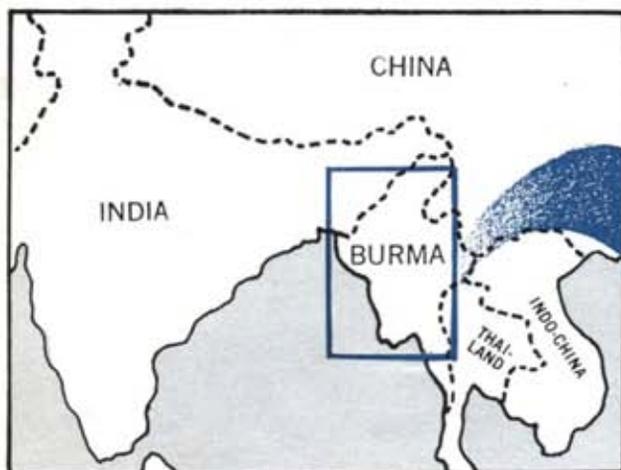
Note well the phrase "apparent indiscipline." As an infantry officer lately out of the unarguably crack 1st Infantry Division, the first thing that became strikingly obvious to me was that, whereas there were no Tables of Organization and Equipment set up for the 1st Air Commandos, no Fort Benning training available to them, and no official template of procedure laid down for retreading them from air-combat to ground-combat personnel, these men had nevertheless brought an American native instinct and an almost unbelievable personal ingenuity to the mission.

It was once said of the young United States that it must be easy to make armies of our youth because Americans all seemed to be born part soldier. True or not, at Hailakandi it became apparent at first sight that the science of tactics is merely an extension of common horse sense and that knowledge of the doctrine of firepower and maneuver must be innate in every man who volunteers himself as table stakes in the gamble of combat. It was a combination of horse sense and instinct that produced the 1st Air Commandos.

Compared to the counterinsurgency missions of today's Air Commandos, the initial mission of the first Air Commandos was not too politically oriented. As was Winston Churchill, who took Maj. Gen. Orde Wingate, leader of the Chindit Raiders, with him to the Quebec Conference, General Arnold was impressed by the capabilities of Long Range Penetration Groups (LRPG), as Wingate's forces were officially designated. It must be flatly stated, however, that very few other high-ranking general officers, American or British, were impressed at all.

The year before, Wingate's command had penetrated deeply on foot with mule transport into Japanese-held Burma with limited successes that were almost invalidated by severe morale problems due to the long lines of what scant communications there were. As a result, the militarily conservative position

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By late 1943 the Japanese-held strong positions along the Burma-India border, threatened to cut through to the Assam railway. In a bold countermove, Orde Wingate's Long Range Penetration Group was readied for landings far behind enemy lines. The operation of March 1944 was spearheaded by Col. Phil Cochran's 1st Air Commandos who conducted the glider-borne invasion from Lalaghat-Hailakandi to "Broadway" in Burma.



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was to brush Wingate off entirely for the 1944 campaign—as a long-shot risk.

However, General Arnold, an early believer in the theory of coordinated three-dimensional war, proposed in 1943 at Quebec to airlift Wingate's LRPCs comparatively close to their ultimate 1944 ground objectives—to obviate the savage hardship of the long walk in—and to allocate gliders and Air Force personnel to carry out the lift and to airdrop supplies. In addition, he anticipated the possibility of ground combat action on the part of some of the Air Force personnel because of expected aircraft losses, so in a memorandum for action the 1st Air Commandos were activated.

The Burma situation in the winter of 1943-44 was:

Gen. Joseph Stilwell's two American-retrained Chinese divisions, reinforced by Merrill's Marauders—the only American ground combat force in the entire theater—had been, since the fall of '43, fighting down into the Hukawng valley on the extreme eastern limits of the Burma front. The effort, in the mountainous Arakan sector, on the extreme western limit of the 900-mile "front"—made up entirely of British and Indian troops then under British Lt. Gen. William J. "Bill" Slim, Fourteenth Army Commander—was more or less stalemated.

Late in 1943 the Japanese began to move north massively against the center—the British-held Imphal area in Assam—offering an ultimate threat to the beefed-up east-west tea railroad that runs the length of Assam and connects Chabua and Dimapur with Comilla. A Japanese breakthrough to the railroad north of Imphal

—which was eventually accomplished but only with a small, spent force—would have denied Stilwell the only ground supply route he had and, except for airlift, would have cut his throat. It would have drastically affected the Hump-lift to China and cut General Chennault's and Chiang Kai-shek's throats as well.

So, with the Wingate airlift trained and ready, it was decided that Wingate's LRPCs, now in division strength, together with the 1st Air Commandos, would be thrown in by air between Stilwell's Hukawng valley push and the right flank of the Japanese attack against the Allied center—to operate, on the ground against the Japanese rear and flanks and slow the enemy attack.

Seven months of arduous preparation for the LRPC airlift and for the concomitant 1st Air Commando mission ended with takeoff on March 5, 1944, from sod strips at Hailakandi and Lalaghat. The mission was to go 170 miles deep into Burma over 8,000-foot mountains, by moonlight only, with no paratroop jump ahead of us and no fighter escort—and seize and hold a jungle clearing in the Bhamo-Indaw area designated as "Broadway."

This initial 400-man task force of Brigadier Calvert's Indian 77th Brigade of Wingate's command was glider-borne entirely and in double tow. With it rode the 900th US Army Field Unit (Airborne Combat Engineers), complete with miniature bulldozers and mules (needed to sleep through the flight)—and the 1st Air Commandos. They were to make on "Broadway."

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The Air Commandos' leader, Col. Philip G. Cochran, right, talks things over with his Deputy, Col. John R. Alison, in India before the mission.



Indian troops march to their glider transport as the 1st Air Commando force prepares for the airborne invasion of Burma. Thirty-two of the sixty-seven gliders reached "Broadway," carrying 539 men and 65,972 pounds of equipment.

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way" a leveled dirt power-strip for the rest of Wingate's force to begin landing on the next night, March 6.

The task force accomplished its glider-borne mission. It seized and held. It made the strip, which twenty-four hours later was to be 5,000 feet long and 300 feet wide. Thirteen hours after work began Brig. Gen. William D. Old's troop carrier aircraft, led by the General himself, thundered in on "Broadway," landed nose to tail in impenetrable clouds of choking brown dust, taxied around, and took off empty in heavier traffic density than had ever been known before on any airstrip at any time anywhere in the world. By the light of a full moon, C-47s came in or took off in opposite directions on the single strip all night long at the rate of one landing or takeoff every three minutes. In a few nights, an entire division, travel fresh, was laid across the Japanese rear.

Col. John Alison directed that traffic from a "tower" improvised from a wrecked glider. I was in temporary command of fifty miscellaneous riflemen—Air Commandos, Gurkhas, King's Liverpool—as ground security. Over the years since, whenever the subject has come up John Alison shakes his head with his eyes closed and breathes, "Wasn't *that* a night!"

Whatever—the operation stands today in history as the first bleeding of the first 1st Air Commandos and the most successful combat glider lift of World War II. Approximately ten platoons of infantry, their gear and equipment to make an airdrome—thirty-two of the original sixty-seven gliders—hit the air-head deep in enemy territory in three and one-half elapsed hours the first night. In all 9,052 troops, 1,359 pack animals, and 254 tons of supply made the trip in airplanes before the week was out.

With the directive to organize and train those 1st

Air Commandos, the phrase "in addition to their other duties" should have been added, for these men were to be the air and ground crews of the Wingate troop-lift, his air planners, his close-air support, and his air superiority, so that there was a staggering load of "other duties." Strictly speaking, all of Colonel Cochran's command at Hailakandi were Air Commandos.

One supposes that Benning-trained instructors could have been requested from Ramgar, in northeastern India, where Stilwell's 22d and 38th Chinese Divisions were retrained—but they were not. The Commandos trained themselves. For the irregular jungle fighting they expected to face, those kids instinctively buddied up two by two, one to move ahead and one to cover—in their self-imposed drill schedules. From the two-group, they worked in multiples of two up to a unit of eight—the old infantry squad of the jungle fighting in the Philippines and Cuba sixty odd years ago.

With these two-man, or at least *four*-man groups, they provided themselves with aimed fire and covering fire—or more properly speaking "get-away" fire. In a low-priority theater of operations, where everything was in short supply, they had accumulated from somewhere a surprising number of carbines—surprising, because the level of carbine supply at Margherita in northeastern Assam in February 1944 stood at two.

From somewhere they had gathered a respectable armament of caliber .30 air-cooled infantry machine guns. Some Commandos scorned the tripods, however, and braised on handmade A-frames to hold the barrels four inches off the ground like BARs. They went very light on the caliber .45 tommy gun because of its short range relative to its heavy weight but improvised a hip-firing capability with the caliber .30 machine guns, slinging them from the shoulder with a segment of canvas ammo belt.



In first 24 hours at Broadway bulldozers carved out an airstrip 300 by 5,000 feet, and by week's end 9,052 men, 1,359 pack animals, and 254 tons of gear had landed.

On that first wild night at Broadway, from left, Maj. William H. Taylor, Jr., Colonel Scott, Colonel Alison, and British Army's Brigadier Calvert.

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The men carried their .45 automatics in shoulder or chest holsters—but more as a status symbol than as an offensive weapon. The murderous and highly assorted Gurkha kukris, folding seat-cushion machetes, and bench-made Bowie knives they all provided themselves with make much less noise and are about as effective at close range.

The men improvised their own packs—which for the most part were their coverall pockets. They went as heavy as possible on ammunition—heavy on concentrated survival foods, atabrine, and sulfa. And all men had water-purifying pocket bags and tablets. The jungle is no place at all for the tin hat, and there was only one old regulation US Army campaign hat in the whole theater, and that was never very far from General Stilwell's own head. So for the most part those 1st Air Commandos wore the green GI fatigue peaked cap—or its tan counterpart made by natives from old khaki issue shirts—or the Montauk-billed "baseball" cap. There were a few heavy felt, chin-strapped, and puggreed Gurkha campaign hats in the crowd, begged, borrowed, or stolen; and one or two side-brim-up Australian hats, relics of last leave in Calcutta—so that their silhouettes did not look too unlike the "Vietnam-hatted" 1st Air Commandos of today.

The mission of the 1st Air Commandos who landed in the "Broadway" operation was threefold. Once on the ground they were to support the British and Gurkha LRPC ground action of seizing, holding, and establishing an airhead. Their secondary mission, as expensively trained air personnel, was to get away, if airlift was denied them, and on foot, through several hundreds of miles of jungle and over saw-toothed mountains, to make their way back to their base at Hailakandi. The tertiary mission, subtended by the secondary, was to "prosecute the war against Japan

with any method at their disposal" en route the getaway.

Little need be said herein about the detachment of 1st Air Commandos who reached "Broadway" under Colonel Alison that first night of the action (March 5, 1944) because the official citations cover them with historic gallantry. Many of these men were still fighting for retention of that improvised airstrip weeks later when the Japanese held the northern fringe of the jungle, and C-47s were taking off through mortar and sometimes automatic weapons fire that could not entirely be beaten down by the holding forces. But the Commando groups in gliders that through mishap broke their tow ropes and came down prematurely were largely responsible for the continued success of the element of surprise. Surprise was so complete that nine days elapsed before the Japanese shifted reserves and brought ground forces to pressure "Broadway."

When I was able to get through to General Wingate a few days after the initial landings, his red beard was bristling with triumph as he gnawed on his customary raw onion. "Look at the operations map! When the Japs heard us go over on March 5 and 6 we *hoped* they thought we were on deep bombing missions—but now they are absolutely positive we are harassing glider-borne raiding parties and nothing more!" Any intelligence officer worth his salt would have confirmed the Japanese estimate, for with the luck of war all of the accidentally cut-off gliders had landed almost in a geometric pattern along the flank and rear of the Japanese effort—as if it had been carefully planned that way.

Wingate's one ardent wish then was that the Air Commandos and the LRPC detachments in those off-target gliders would keep hacking at the Japs, and

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they did keep hacking—all the long foot-slogging way back to Hailakandi. There wasn't one group that failed to inflict maximum damage as opportunity offered. On the defensive by virtue of their primary mission to get back after destruction of their aircraft, they nevertheless shifted to the offensive whenever it was indicated. They hit and ran. A handful of spit-and-vinegar men, widely separated from their base and the rest of their own forces, they carried on the war in their own horse-sense fashion and continued the illusion of a raid, by sheer instinct, until the troop and supply levels were substantially built up on "Broadway."

Wingate died (on March 25 in the crash of a B-25 en route to Imphal from "Broadway") and a great many of the 1st Air Commandos died without knowing what this informal unit accomplished. Few official histories give them mention, but the record is there, the tradi-

tion is established, and the military lineage down to the 1st Air Commando Group of today is legitimate.

It should be a source of supreme satisfaction that today's 1st Air Commando Group is, in effect, a free-world combat force on active service in the cold war by virtue of a declared Communist intent and a presidential mission—and that the development of its modern templates of training long antedate Mao Tse-tung's published work on guerrilla warfare and Che Guevara's bald-faced rehash of it.

The declared Communist intent lies in Chairman Khrushchev's report, late in 1960, to the Conference of Communist Parties in Moscow wherein he declared that communism would fully support all "wars of national liberation." Translated into plain language this means that wherever the Soviets detect the unrest of self-determinism in any underdeveloped area of the

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Colonel Cochran's Deputy in the 1st Air Commando operation in Burma in 1944 was Col. John R. Alison, now a Vice President of the Northrop Corporation, who had these comments to make on Mr. Bellah's article.—THE EDITORS

At a time when American military activity in Vietnam has stimulated extensive comment in the press on modern guerrilla warfare, it is appropriate that an unusual experiment in this type of war during World War II should be the subject of an article in *AIR FORCE Magazine*. I was the Deputy Commander of the 1st Air Commando Group and Senior Air Force Officer participating in the assault landings with General Wingate's Commando-trained infantrymen far behind the enemy lines in central Burma. Lt. Col. James Warner Bellah, a veteran of World Wars I and II, flew as a member of the assault team in the glider which I piloted on the night of March 5, 1944. Colonel Bellah in civilian life is an outstanding writer and military historian. In this article he has concentrated on only one phase of the campaign. His rolling style makes interesting reading, and in particular I like his comments concerning motivation and objectives.

During and since World War II, our military have won all of their battles, but now more people live under dictatorship than did when we took up arms to extend man's freedom against the dictators. At the beginning of World War II I had no real understanding of the totalitarian systems we were fighting against—nor of the one we found ourselves allied with. As a lieutenant in the AAF my lack of understanding was perhaps of little importance, but unfortunately many of our leaders also lacked this understanding.

What happens to the world from now on is in the hands of another generation. If this generation fails in its understanding of the fundamentals that motivate both ourselves and our enemy, fails to grasp in their hearts those intangible matters of the spirit so well expressed here by Colonel Bellah, another generation in spite of its military superiority will fail in the battle for freedom.

Colonel Bellah in this article does not attempt to describe the full mission of the 1st Commando

Group. In addition to executing airborne assaults, the unit fought for days before these landings to establish air superiority over the battlefields; to interdict the landing areas; and, once General Wingate's infantry were at the enemy's rear, to support them with aerial firepower in their assaults on key enemy installations. Several days prior to the landing, the effectiveness of the Japanese Air Force in Burma was broken when more than 100 aircraft were destroyed on the ground by Air Commando P-51s and B-25s in a surprise attack. General Wingate had 10,000 first-line infantrymen deep in the heart of enemy territory. These men were supplied daily by C-47s of the American and British Troop Carrier Commands. Their mail was brought in by litter-carrying lightplanes of the Air Commando Group which evacuated wounded from the battlefields.

This unique organization didn't just happen. It was a deliberate and successful attempt on the part of General Arnold to pioneer a new type of warfare, replacing two-dimensional movement of the front-line fighting man with the three-dimensional mobility of airpower. In the same part of the world where Communists now are waging their "wars of liberation," he proved that an army with three-dimensional mobility is superior to one that is confined to two dimensions of movement. Guerrilla warfare is a war of movement where space is traded for time. It is most effective where terrain is rugged and surface means of movement are limited. Airplanes have a way of reducing space to manageable proportions. Our knowledge of air mobility and our capability to implement this knowledge give us a decided advantage for the struggle ahead.

In spite of this capability we cannot prevail without a determination founded on knowledge of our enemy and his objectives. Colonel Bellah has done us a service by dramatically describing the spirit and motivation necessary to win in this new arena of international power politics.

world, they will infiltrate, divert the native aims, and make every effort to coerce self-determinism into communism, even if it means creating civil war.

Underdeveloped areas occupy much more than half of the world, so that the Communist intent covers a broad field. Walt W. Rostow, Chairman of the Policy Planning Council of the Department of State, defines that field and the conditions that make it a rich target for the Communist intent as follows: "What is happening throughout Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia is this: Old societies are changing their ways in order to create and maintain a national personality on the world scene and to bring to their peoples the benefits modern technology can offer. This process is truly revolutionary. It touches every aspect of the traditional life—economic, social, and political. The introduction of modern technology brings about not merely new methods of production but a new style of family life, new links between the villages and the cities, the beginnings of national politics, and a new relationship to the world outside."

One Communist method of exploiting this vast area of truly revolutionary change is to use guerrilla infiltration to accomplish sectional defection within the broad scope of self-determinism. They create the condition known in international law as insurgency, and through the violence of insurgency to create factional disharmony.

Two years ago the Administration directed that the unconventional warfare capabilities of the United States be rapidly expanded. In effect, it was a presidential mission, as a result of which the 1st Air Commando Group came into being with the primary mission of counterinsurgency (COIN).

The group is a combat force but its over-all battle plan is primarily political. Where insurgency has been created by the Communist intent, the Group's detachments go in to arm, train, indoctrinate, and fight beside the emerging nationals so that a counterinsurgency effort will be formed and become strong enough to put down the Communist-inspired insurgency.

Therefore an Air Commando becomes a very complicated tool of freedom. A member of the 1st Air Commando Group must be a soldier and an airman of the highest degree of training for his basic job of fighting. He must be an instructor equipped to teach across the natural barrier of language. He must be a man of highly developed personal integrity, for the confidence he must inspire, initially as a stranger and continuously as a comrade in arms, is inspired best by the example he sets.

He must, in the fundamentals, be an empiric diplomat for there is seldom pure black or pure white in the facts of insurgency or counterinsurgency. There are only degrees of civilian conviction and degrees of alignment with indicated efforts. Therefore, as a diplomat, an Air Commando must be able to shift with the shifting sands, to exploit strength and opportunity, to retire and regroup when his own force is weak. Regardless of his personal rank in the Air Force, he must be a competent commander of irregular, sketchily disciplined forces—the hardest type of command to

exercise successfully—and he must be able to discover and train leaders.

He must have both the courage of the commonplace and the courage of the crisis—that continuing level of courage that is a basic part of all self-respecting men's character—for it often is a part of his job that he die, and that the manner of his death and the place of his body's burial will be forever known only to God.

Finally, and the most incongruous condition of all, he is *not* fighting entirely for the United States, but for the free world which is a conglomerate all-inclusive definition at best, and he is not fighting for the American way of life, but rather for the local living that will slowly develop from the self-determinism of the people of whatever country he serves in, if it is not distorted, coerced, and seduced by the Communists. He is counterfighting the eternal rabid force that hopes to spread the political slavery of communism across the world. Never before in history has an American soldier had such a multilateral mission.

It may well be that the cold war will be ultimately won by these men, that through their efforts the holocaust may be averted. In places where counterinsurgency efforts have been indicated in the past, the area of political evolution was limited by local boundaries, and the areas were not so proximate to the Communist heartland as to represent strategic necessity, so that the threat of escalation was minimized. Therefore no State Department stops were applied.

Farsighted officers of all three services hold that a period of guerrilla warfare is upon the world and that properly implemented it may well be the "warm" war that will ultimately obviate a hot one.

Whatever the outcome, it is rather satisfying to know that the method is not as new to the Air Force as is the present necessity, by a quarter of a century. And that it is not new to American instinct and common horse sense by the almost two centuries now that carry the American tradition back to Col. Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox" of the Revolutionary War, and his original sixteen partisans of whom the British Lord Cornwallis wrote: "He so wrought the minds of the people that there was scarcely an inhabitant between the Santee and the Pedee that was not in arms against us." And to that other American partisan leader of the Revolution, Col. Thomas Sumter, "The Gamecock," of whom Cornwallis wrote: "He certainly has been our greatest plague in this country."—END

The author, James Warner Bellah, is a retired Army colonel who served in the RAF in World War I and who, in 1944, was attached to the 1st Air Commandos in Burma. A prolific and well known writer, his World War II "This Platoon Will . . ." became almost a field manual for junior infantry officers, and his monograph on reconnaissance is still the basis for lectures on scouting and patrolling at West Point. Mr. Bellah is, in civil life, the author of some twenty books, most of them set against historical backgrounds. The latest one is a definitive history, Soldiers' Battle—Gettysburg. Of this book, historian Allan Nevins writes, "One of the most vigorous, accurate, and exciting narratives of Gettysburg in print. Mr. Bellah unites the talents of a sound historian and a gifted novelist."