BURMA TRAILS

By WALTER J. KAHLER

Burma has been much in the news during the last two years, and many good articles and books have been written about this country. Yet we believe that our author has something new to contribute on the subject, as he himself has traveled, on foot and by mule, through Burma and her borderlands. Although these journeys were made before the outbreak of the Greater East Asia War and probably much has changed since then, Walter Kahler's story nevertheless gives a vivid picture of the very trails over which engagements of historic importance are now being fought. His account shows how great the hardships must be for the men who have to fight there and how enormous the geographical obstacles facing the Allies in their plan to reconquer Burma.

The photographs were taken by the author.—K.M.

When studying the geography of Asia on a map, we observe that almost all the large mountain ranges run from west to east. East of the Bay of Bengal, however, the Asiatic continent looks as if in prehistoric times a colossal pressure had acted from two sides on the mass of the mainland, forcing out one portion toward the south. The general west-east orientation of the mountains is suddenly interrupted here by wooded mountain chains and deep river valleys all running in a north-south direction.

Embracing the modern countries of Burma, Yunnan, Thailand, French Indo-China, and Malai, this geographical appendix acts in its upper part like a wedge—which it also resembles—thrust between India and China by the dynamic forces of nature. At the same time, this wedge also represents the great divide of peoples separating the Indo-Aryan from the Mongol-Chinese races. The link between these two is provided by Burma.

MOUNTAINOUS FRONTIERS

Burma comprises an area of about 600,000 square kilometers of which the two Shan States occupy one quarter. To the north, west, and east, Burma is bounded by high mountains; to the south by the Indian Ocean. At its greatest extent its width measures 1,000 kilometers. Its length stretches across eighteen latitudes, and it possesses a coast line of 2,000 kilometers which is continued from Moulmein southward to the Isthmus of Kra in the form of a narrow coastal strip. Another narrow coastal strip north of Cape Negrais is separated from the rump of the mainland by the Arakan Yomas range.

The coast and the delta of the Irrawaddy are surrounded by a belt of mangroves and notched by the deep incisions of fiordlike bays with innumerable islands, both large and small, lying just off the coast. Akyab, the only harbor north of Rangoon, is situated on one of the northernmost islands.

Near the Assam border, the Arakan mountain range turns northeastward and then continues as the Lushai and Chin Mountains across the Manipur upland to the Naga and Patkai Hills. With its peaks attaining a height of more than 3,000 meters and its malaria-infested valleys, this long mountain range presents a wild, sparsely inhabited region covered with almost impenetrable jungles and dense bamboo forests, thus forming a natural border between Burma and the Indian provinces of Assam and Bengal.

Like the Arakan Yomas range, the Yunnan mountains in the east form a natural barrier against China. These
equally long mountain chains, which in the north reach heights of over 6,000 meters with passes at altitudes between 4,000 and 4,800 meters, gradually become lower toward the south. In central Burma they turn into the 1,000-meter-high Shan plateau and then continue as far as Tenasserim.

Between the Arakan Mountains and the Shan plateau lies the most fertile part of the whole country, the area irrigated by the Irrawaddy River—whose sources are in the Namkiu Mountains, the northernmost border mountains of Burma—and its principal tributary, the Chindwin River. Up to the opening of the railway in 1877, the Irrawaddy was Burma’s chief traffic artery. Practically all the products of the country were transported on this river, as it can be navigated by steamboats even during the dry season as far as Bhamo, the starting place of the overland route to Kunming, 1,500 kilometers north of Rangoon. During the rainy season it is even possible to reach a point 250 kilometers farther up at the confluence of the Mali and Nmai-kha Rivers. The Chindwin is navigable as far as Homalin, 500 kilometers distant from the point of its confluence with the Irrawaddy. The Salween River, on the other hand, although much longer, is navigable by steamer only for 140 kilometers above Moulmein on account of its many falls and rapids.

**PLENTY OF RAIN**

Burma lies within the range of the tropical monsoon winds and thus has three different seasons. The cool, dry, and most pleasant season lasts from November till February. It is followed by the three equally dry but very hot months of March, April, and May. The change from dry north winds to the rain-bearing southwest monsoon which blows from the Indian Ocean generally begins toward the end of May with a series of thunderstorms.

The climate along the coasts of Tenasserim and Arakan and in the Irrawaddy Delta is almost uniformly humid and hot throughout the year, the average temperature being between 27° and 30° centigrade, and there is little change in temperature between day and night. Mosquitoes and malaria are most prevalent in this area. The precipitation in these districts is four times heavier than in the northern parts and five times heavier than in the central dry zone. Thus the annual average of precipitation is only 85 centimeters in Mandalay, while it is 254 centimeters in Rangoon, and as much as 512 centimeters in Arakan.

The farther an area is removed from the modifying influence of the ocean climate, the greater becomes the difference of temperature between day and night, the greatest extremes in temperature being registered in the densely wooded districts in the north of Burma. In Maymyo, on the Shan plateau at an altitude of 1,200 meters, night frost is a common occurrence in the months of January and February.

During the rainy season from June to October the Irrawaddy overflows its banks, inundating hundreds of square kilometers of land and covering the soil with a new layer of fertilizing alluvial clay. Owing to the heavy downpours, the rise of water in the river is so great that at Prome, 340 kilometers from the sea, the difference between the highest and lowest water levels amounts to 15 meters. The fields on both sides of the river are flooded for 17 to 20 kilometers during high water.

On account of the obstructive nature of its border areas, Burma has remained practically isolated from her neighbors. Her rivers, roads, and railway lines (total length: 3,400 kilometers) are all in the central part of the country and run almost without exception from north to south. Up to the outbreak of the war, the only roads connecting Burma with her neighbors were in a primitive condition. With the sole exception of the road through the Southern Shan States to Thailand, they consisted of jungle trails crossing the wilderness of the border regions. These trails are unsuitable for any kind of vehicular traffic and often become impassable during the rainy season.
THE MANIPUR TRAIL

An oppressive heat hung over the sun-scorched plain of Bengal when my train left Calcutta. With their rice fields and grasslands, some of which were still flooded after the last downpours and only here and there dotted with clumps of bamboo and palmyra palms, the river valleys of the Ganges, Atrai, and Brahmaputra offered little variation in scenery.

At Gauhati I crossed the Brahmaputra by ferry; thence a bus line took me via Shillong and Sylhet to Karimgamj, which lies on another railway line. This trip through the Khasi and Jainta Hills as well as the train journey to Dimapur possess great scenic charm. Following acute and often dangerous hairpin curves, the road led over heights and through deep valleys, pine forests yielding to bamboo groves and to tropical jungles out of which reared the green feathery crowns of tree ferns and the slender stems of betel palms. We passed over innumerable bridges thrown across cataracts, roaring torrents, and deep ravines. At the same time an agreeable coolness replaced the oppressive damp heat broiling in the plains of Bengal in October, the last monsoon month.

The province of Assam is the tea garden of India. Here, apart from Darjeeling, the best quality of Indian tea is grown in the extensive plantations of the Brahmaputra valley. Cotton, rice, and jute are also grown.

From Dimapur a narrow one-way road leads via Kohima, the first village in the Naga Hills, to Imphal, the capital of Manipur. The Nagas are a tribe of primitive independent natives, and in the remoter parts of the rugged upland where they have not yet come under control they still pass their time with tribal feuds and head-hunting, their favorite hobby. High palisades enclose their solitary villages, which are almost always situated on the summit of some mountain whence the inhabitants can readily detect the approach of an enemy and go to the defense of their village.
It is due to the rather unsettled conditions still prevailing in this district that every foreigner desiring to enter Manipur had to obtain a special permit from the British Resident at Imphal. A notice, "not to enter into or touch any living-house in Manipur," posted up in the Dak bungalow, illustrates the situation.

At Imphal the motor road came to an end, and I had to hire guides and porters for the next lap of the journey. This proved rather difficult at first. While I needed only two men for my luggage, the porters would only travel in fours for fear of wild animals and hostile Naga tribes. For the same reasons they were unwilling to accompany me farther than five days' traveling.

For the first two days the journey took us through fields and marshland, then the path led steeply uphill and down following a cutting which had been made for the telephone line. I did not envy the coolies who were hauling along my tent, camped, typewriter, kitchen utensils, and provisions by means of a strap over the forehead and a yoke across the shoulders; but they were quite cheerful for all that.

**Burning Bamboo**

On both sides of the road rose impenetrable green walls of jungle and high bamboo forests. Only occasionally did we come upon a few huts or a Naga village fortified with palings. Apart from the howling of the monkeys doing gymnastics in the tree tops far away and the irritating humming of the mosquitoes at night, we saw and heard little of the wild animals, the tigers, pythons, cobras, and wild elephants, lurking in the thickets and whose droppings in some places covered the road.

Dagobas overgrown with creepers and *poongties* in robes of ochre-yellow told that we were entering the country of Buddhhas and pagodas. Graceful Burmese women with their hair piled high and adorned with flowers, with thin blouses and colored *longuies* (a kind of sarong), and sucking at maize-leaf cheroots as thick as a thumb, were squatting on the verandas of their huts, which are made of plaited bamboo and rest on high stilts because of the floods during the rainy season.

In Tamu, on the Manipur Burma border, I paid off the porters (1 rupee per man per day) and hired new ones for the next lap. A party of eight people attached itself to me carrying baskets full of dried maize leaves for the domestic cigarette industry. Our goal was Sittaung, four days' trek away, on the banks of the "Ningthi" as the Manipurs call the Chindwin River.

We had left the high mountain ranges behind us, but the jungle on both sides of the narrow path was as dense as ever. The hot rays of the tropical sun and the dry weather had parched the woods to such an extent that there was a crackling underfoot at every step we took. For two days we had been noticing a thin blue haze in the distance ahead. Gradually we approached this spot—a whole forest of bamboo was aflame, or rather, it was not so much burning as smoldering. Mighty tree trunks lay across the road, glowing and partly charred. There was a crackling in the bushes all around, and wherever we looked there were small tongues of fire; but the air was so still that no real conflagration could occur. although the slightest breeze would have sufficed to turn the whole forest into a sea of flames. Our path pointed right through the middle of this. Our faces were burning, the smoke irritated our lungs. But this did not seem to bother the coolies, who marched on calmly without seeming to be aware of any danger. They understood the situation better than I. Only one of them stopped to make a "counter-fire." He lit a few candles which he had apparently brought along for this very purpose, placed them at the foot of a tree that had not caught fire yet. knelt down before them to utter some prayers to an unknown deity, and then went on.

Sittaung consists only of a few bamboo huts and a Dak bungalow where British officials spent the night when on inspection trips. A steamer of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company took me 140 kilometers
further north to Homalin. From there another eight days' trek with coolies brought me to Katha, a railway terminus and steamboat station on the upper Irrawaddy.

**THE ROAD TO THAILAND**

Since olden times Burma's relations with Thailand have been more lively than with any other of her neighbors, especially as the Thailanders are racially related to the Shans. The shortest road, and the one offering the least technical difficulties, would start from the mouth of the Tenasserim River or from Mergui, particularly so as the mountains grow higher northward. Two or three hundred years ago Mergui, then still belonging to Siam, was the most frequently used western approach to this country; but of this old road nothing remains today but a neglected jungle path, as it has been very little used for a long time.

Attention has of late been turned more to the area between Moulmein on the Gulf of Martaban and Pitsanulok with a view to connecting Burma and Thailand by a railway line. Years ago I covered this route, too, on foot when Indian merchants were almost the only ones to use the path. From a spot 72 kilometers from Moulmein by steamer, a road on which motorcars can travel leads to Kawkereit at the foot of the Dawna range and thence with many windings over the wooded mountain ridge, which is about 900 meters high, to Myawaddy (90 kilometers), a village on the border between Burma and Thailand. In Myawaddy, luggage and provisions were loaded onto ponies. Several small rivers and two mountain ridges covered with bamboo thickets and high beautiful jungles separate Myawaddy from Raheng (80 kilometers), which is generally reached in four to five days. These two ridges together with the Dawna range are obstacles which offer technical difficulties to the construction of a railway.

The jungle path is in places rather narrow and frequently leads steeply up and down hill. Wild elephants are not uncommon in this district. However, between Mehtor, 16 kilometers before Raheng is reached, and Pitsanulok, the next station on the Thailand railway, the country is again as flat as a table, thus offering no obstacles to the construction of a railway.

During the dry season traveling was no hardship. From time to time we passed a few native huts, but it was hardly ever possible to procure any provisions in these places. Those who have both the wish and the time to get to know this country can take a boat from Raheng down the Menam River to Paknampo, a four- to five-days' journey, and proceed from there either to the old capital Ayudhya or down to Bangkok.

**THE ROAD THROUGH THE SHAN STATES**

The only road which has for years carried motor traffic between Burma and Thailand is the road through the Shan States and Kengtung, which was recently ceded to Thailand. At Meiktila, 530 kilometers north of Rangoon, this road branches off from the great traffic artery to Mandalay, climbs the Shan plateau with many windings, and leads over Yaungwe to Taungyi, the capital of the Southern Shan States situated 1,560 meters above sea level. From here the road describes a large curve northward; it touches Loilem, crosses the Salween River by means of the ferry at Takaw, and then turns southward again via Kengtung and Chiengrai until, at Lampang, it meets the Thailand railway line to Bangkok.

Some sections of this road are quite good, but others are very difficult as, for example, that part where the road becomes very narrow in traversing the mountains before Kengtung. Steep climbs and precipitous drops combined with many exceedingly sharp curves demand the utmost care in driving. During the rainy season this part of the road becomes almost impassable. The scenery, however, with its roaring streams and waterfalls, its deep ravines and precipitous rocks, is very attractive in its rugged wildness.

As a route of transportation between the two capitals of Burma and Thailand
this road cannot be taken into consideration on account of the great distances involved—Meiktila/Lampang: 1,130 kilometers, and thence to Bangkok another 1,200 kilometers—which would make such transports too expensive.

CONNECTIONS WITH CHINA

Behind Hsiakwan the broad 2,000-meter-high Yunnan plateau verges westward upon the rugged upland of Tsangshan, whose 4,000-meter-high ridges are cleft by deep valleys. Apart from the Shweli, two of the largest rivers of Asia, the Salween and the Mekong, have carved their way here through narrow and sometimes vertical gorges, causing differences in elevation which amount to 2,000 meters at some places. Thus the Mekong valley lies 1,200 meters above sea level while that of the Salween River is only 650 meters above sea level at those points where the Mekong and the Salween are spanned by the Kungkwo and Huitung bridges, the mountain ranges flanking them reaching a height of 2,600 meters. These great differences in elevation as well as the steep, almost vertical banks present the greatest difficulties in the way of the construction of a road which would, moreover, be endangered by landslides occurring during the rainy season.

The inaccessible nature of the terrain and the ensuing lack of routes of communication account for the whole district between Bhamo and Talifu not having been opened up yet industrially or culturally. The rugged, in part densely wooded mountains, and the valleys, which are hot and malaria-ridden during the rainy season, are inhabited by the Shans and several primitive mountain tribes such as the Lisus, Lolos, and Kachins, all of them, with the exception of the Shans, belonging to the Burmese-Tibetan race. Among these the Kachins are notorious for their frequent armed robberies. The Chinese population in this part of Yunnan province is confined principally to the larger and high-lying settlements.

The area north of the Burma Road is particularly interesting from a zoological point of view, for in this wild hilly country there are some species of animals, specimens of which are but rarely found in museums and even more rarely in zoological gardens. Among them there is the legendary beishang, or bamboo bear, a harmless animal keeping chiefly to bamboo jungles and feeding exclusively on the leaves of this plant. Then there is the takin, a species of wild cow in which the zoological characteristics of buffalo, sheep, goat, and antelope are found combined. It lives in rhododendron thickets at altitudes up to 5,000 meters. Apart from bear, leopard, wolf, and wild boar, there are also blue sheep, musk ox, ghoral—a species of mountain goat—and some rare species of deer such as wapiti and sambar.

A BURMA ROAD

For many centuries a caravan route has existed between Bhamo and Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in western China, on which the prized goods of China were transported as long ago as in the days of the Silk Road. Marco Polo, who traveled over it six hundred years ago, also tells of this ancient trade route. During the Ming dynasty the road is said to have been further improved; later, however, traffic was interrupted for many years owing to domestic unrest, the presence of robbers, and finally the great Mohammedan Rebellion, which lasted sixteen years before it was quelled in 1872. As a consequence, and apart from a few sections of the old cobblestone road which have been preserved to this day, the caravan route fell more and more into ruin.

Vehicles can travel on this road up to Nantabet, 27 kilometers from Bhamo, and even 20 kilometers further in the dry season. Then luggage and provisions must be put on mules. For the first three days the road led over ridges and through beautiful tropical forests with giant rhododendron trees, magnolia trees, and tree ferns and extending almost as far as Manhsien, the first Chinese village. After that the brown mountains, deforested, are only covered with low scrub. Groups of Kachins armed with swords and guns, and betel-chewing Shan women with high
A bamboo bridge over a jungle river on the Assam Burma trail between Imphal and Tanou

A mule caravan on the old mountain trail from Blamo in Burma to Yunnan

The gateways and houses of a Na village are adorned with carved wood buffaloes, as these animals are held sacred by the Nagas. The village gates are sometimes also decorated with human skulls, indicating that the Nagas, or at least were, head hunters.

TRAILS TO BURMA

A Kashmir rifle regiment crossing the Zep La glacier on its way to Little Tibet
Along the Burma Road

Yangpe village, a day's trek from Hsakwan, at the foot of the Kachin range. This is only one of the many steep, snow-covered mountain ranges that have to be crossed between Yunnan and Burma.

The swaying rope bridges which formerly spanned the foaming waters of the Salween and Mekong Rivers have been replaced by new steel constructions for the Burma Road.

Mule caravans carry these pyramid-shaped blocks of salt from hot-off mines to Paoshan in Yunnan. Red and black stamps on the blocks represent taxes paid en route.

Noon day rest on the old Burma trail. The Chinese mule drivers accompanying the caravans through the bandit infested mountains of western Yunnan are heavily armed. Note the pack-saddles resting on the ground.

The town of Yungchang (now called Paoshan) where Marco Polo spent a night. The woman on the right is drying Chinese "spaghetti."
blue turbans around their heads, came to meet us or were resting at the wayside.

The villages, protected by high walls against raids, consisted mostly of a single long street paved with irregular stones. The inns in these villages were rather primitive, generally surrounding a courtyard for the pack animals faced by a few windowless rooms for the mule drivers and guests. Simple wooden benches covered with straw mats—generally infested with vermin—served as sleeping accommodation. The food, however, was tasty and good.

The journey through the valleys of the Taiping and Namti Rivers led through rice fields that had been harvested, and it was made without difficulty. At the end of seven days we reached the first large town, Tengyueh, which is a passport and customs station for the caravan traffic between Yunnan and Burma. At the same time it is a market town for rural products from the neighborhood.

Beyond Tengyueh we encountered the most difficult part of the journey. Wooded ridges with passes between 2,000 and 3,000 meters high are separated by the deep valleys of the Shweli, Salween, and Mekong Rivers, which are spanned by suspension bridges. These rugged mountains with their many folds, their brushwood, and the many twists and turns obstructing the view, naturally offer welcome hiding places to bandits and robbers.

"You should only travel with a large caravan," I was advised by the customs official, a Dane, who had kindly put me up as his guest till an opportunity should arise for continuing the journey. "Only a fortnight ago one of my customs men was shot by the wild Kachins, and only three weeks before that, between Talifu and Kunming, two trucks were attacked and robbed and the passengers killed."

**MULE CARAVAN**

A fortnight after this cheerful introduction, the expected opportunity arrived. A caravan of 110 mules for Talifu was being assembled. The Dane concluded a written contract with the leader of the caravan by which the latter undertook to put at my disposal a pack mule, a boy, and food, for three pieces of silver a day and take me safely to Hsiakwan.

The marching system of my caravan, which transported bales of cotton, has always remained a mystery to me. Sometimes we started in utter darkness at three a.m., sometimes at eight, and sometimes not until eleven in the morning. We covered about two and a half miles an hour and made a daily average of fifteen to twenty miles according to the distance of the place we wished to reach before nightfall.

After five hours of marching there was usually a period of rest. The loads were taken from the animals and arranged in long rows. The mules rolled in the dust and then strolled around, while the dogs crept under the merchandise and guarded the luggage. The drivers lay down in the grass to sleep with their round caps pulled over their faces. Those coolies who had marching sores usually came to me to be treated; for, like all natives, they, too, probably took every white man for a doctor. Tincture of iodine serves excellently as it leaves a visible stain and burns in the wound.

The Chinese pack saddle, which allows the quick unloading and loading of the animals during intervals of rest, is a very practical invention. It consists of two wooden structures which fit exactly into each other. The saddle frame is strapped to the mule; the other part, to which the loads are attached, can be lifted off.

The interval over, the coolies uttered a peculiar cry in answer to which the mules returned to their places of their own accord and willingly submitted to the loading. Two men lifted up the structure with the luggage, the mule passing underneath with lowered head, and the luggage saddle was placed in the grooves of the pack saddle. Whenever an animal had gone astray in the mountains, the dogs went after it and drove it back to the camp. Things ran with surprising smoothness, and within a very short time the caravan was on its way again. It was headed by two leading mules with bells. They also carried a triangular red flag
with the sign of the caravan and large green tassels of hair, a good charm for driving evil spirits from the road.

Each driver had five or six mules under his care. They were all of them strong, tough animals carrying their loads of 70 kilograms day after day over the difficult mountain paths.

PASSES AND CANYONS

Whenever we camped at night in the open, the pieces of luggage were arranged in a quadrangle around the camp like a rampart. All the drivers were armed with guns of a somewhat old-fashioned design, and these were stood up in pyramids within reach near the camp fire. Meanwhile Fang, the cook, had prepared the meal; these one-course menus, though lacking in variety, were very nourishing, consisting usually of cabbage or turnip soup and rice with a big piece of bacon for each. After the meal we all remained squatting around the fire for a last pipe, then rolled ourselves into our blankets and went to sleep. There was no need to keep watch, for the dogs were fierce and barked at the least suspicious noise.

Three kilometers beyond Tengyueh the old paved road reaches the foot of the mountains and scales the heights in many windings. Occasionally, the narrow path follows the slope of the mountains, but for the most part it goes up hill and down dale.

The setting sun was pouring its fiery red glow on the bare hill chains when we made camp on the west bank of the Shweli River, intending to cross the latter early the next morning and continue our march over the Kaolikan range, which separates the Shweli and Salween river valleys. The pass is at a height of 2,700 meters, while the Hweitung bridge spans the foaming indigo waters of the Salween 2,000 meters lower down. The Chinese call the valley of this river the "valley of death," saying that evil spirits dwell in it; they probably mean malaria, which claims many victims in the hot humid valleys during the rainy season.

The path led in a steep zigzag up the other bank of the river, then through a wooded ravine, and then over several ridges until, on the fifth day, just before Yungchang, we reached a broad valley, whose fertile rice fields supplied more than forty villages with food. The whole valley gave an impression of rural prosperity. Clumsy water buffaloes were wallowing in the rice fields, black pigs of every size were grunting in the streets of the villages and in the fields, while flocks of geese and ducks were dispporting themselves in the ditches.

Marco Polo relates that around 1277 a great battle was fought there between the Chinese and the Burmese, in which twelve thousand Tartar horsemen gained a decisive victory over the forces of the Burmese, which were five times larger and had two thousand war elephants.

A pony caravan entered Yungchang in front of us bringing large blocks of grayish-white salt bearing the red stamps of the Salt Gabelle. They came from the salt mines eleven days' journey away.

Yungchang, now generally known as Paoshan, is with its 30,000 inhabitants the only town in the valley. Like all settlements in this district, it is also surrounded by a high stone wall whose gates are closed every evening at dusk. The inhabitants have undoubtedly intermarried with the Shans and other races, for they are darker than the pure Chinese.

In contrast to the Salween, the Mekong is a muddy, slow-flowing river. The sides of the high mountains which confine its bed into a narrow canyon drop away almost vertically.

Stretched out in a long chain, the pack animals followed each other down into the valley, one by one crossing the narrow bridge, which was guarded by soldiers, and laboriously scrambled up the steep zigzag path on the opposite bank. The journey continued through rugged, sparsely populated uplands with wooded ridges as far as the eye could see. The mountain ranges shifted one behind the other like pieces of scenery on the stage. On their slopes grew pine woods and rhododendron, whose red blossoms stood out in brilliant relief against the dark green foliage. Above this, the peaks stood shining in their new snow.
Presently we reached another height of more than 2,600 meters. At night the temperature dropped below zero. The cotton bales froze to the ground, and the blankets in which we slept were as hard as a board in the morning. Mist and rime had drawn a white sheet over the landscape and made the slopes and mountains glitter in the light of the winter sun.

Charred remnants of beams and houses bore witness to the activities of the bandits who some years ago ravaged the villages and who still make the district unsafe. For this reason our caravan marched in military formation with vanguard, main column, and rearguard.

On the ninth day after leaving Paoshan the path squeezed through a narrow gorge along a river flowing from the Erhai Lake. Soon afterwards we reached Hsiakwan on the shores of this blue lake.

Being the terminus of the bus lines from Talifu and Kunming and also on account of the caravan traffic to Burma, Likiang, and Tibet, Hsiakwan was the liveliest town along this important thoroughfare. From here Kunming, 400 kilometers distant, could be reached by bus in two days with one night’s stopover in Tsuyung.

This was the course of the Burma Road when I traveled over it shortly before the outbreak of the war. Here, too, the war has brought changes, for meanwhile the new motor road has been built which reduces the strenuous three-weeks’ journey to Hsiakwan to four days.

**The New Motor Road to Chungking**

As early as 1886, when Upper Burma had been annexed by England and a branch of the north-south railway was extended from Mandalay to Lashio, an extension of this line across the Salween ferry at Kunglong to Talifu, the town of the marble quarries, was planned. British engineers had also drawn up plans to link up Bhamo with Kunming by a vehicular road. However, these plans never materialized. Perhaps the technical difficulties appeared too formidable at that time, or the profitableness of the project too uncertain; and perhaps the British did not wish to provide roads which might be used to move up hostile troops. It was only the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese incident and the Japanese blockade of the Chinese coast which caused China’s westernmost province to be wrested from oblivion and moved into the limelight of politics, for via this province and Burma lay Chungking’s last access to the ocean.

As usual, England tried to turn this opportunity to her own advantage. She offered China liberal loans for the construction of the motor road to Burma, thus hoping to kill two birds with one stone. By large deliveries of arms and ammunition she intended to strengthening Chiang Kai-shek’s resistance; this would impede the expansion of Japan’s power, which she considered dangerous to herself, and enable her to do good business at the same time.

Strangely enough, it was not the route via Bhamo, which had been in use for centuries, which was chosen for the new road, but Lashio in the Northern Shan States which was selected as the starting point. This new road does not converge upon the old road from Bhamo until just before Paoshan.

Lashio is linked with Mandalay (280 kilometers distant) by a railway as well as by a motor road. The railway crosses some exceedingly deep ravines that are spanned by a gigantic steel viaduct which, with its 750 meters’ length and 273 meters’ height, is one of the highest in the world. From Lashio there was already an extension of the road via Kutkai to Namkham and Bhamo, and another branch led from Kutkai via Hosi to Wanting, the first Chinese village on the other side of the border. From this point, the new road was built to Hsiakwan.

It was no easy feat to cut into the precipitous mountain sides a road which would stand up to the traffic of heavy trucks. Almost inconceivable obstacles had to be surmounted, for the soil of this region consists partly of granite-like rock and partly of limestone, red sandstone, loose slate, or soft loam. The
foundation of the road had to be solid enough to withstand the heavy downpours discharged every year over the Yunnan mountains from May to October. These downpours frequently cause landslides which block the road for days, especially between Chefang and Lungling. They necessitate a constant supervision of the road. In addition there are swarms of mosquitoes, malaria, and the damp, hot, and enervating climate to contend with.

The advance of the Japanese in the south had sent hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring into the provinces of Szechuan and Yunnan who provided welcome labor for the construction of the road. Many thousands of them—sometimes nearly 200,000, i.e., 560 men per mile—worked day and night like slaves at this road which, with the Yunnan railway and the Nanning road cut off, was to become the most important route of access to Chungking-China. The work was done with the most primitive tools. The coolies carried away the earth in small baskets, rocks were broken up with the simplest of tools, and heavy rollers were dragged along by hand.

In spite of all this, the 500 kilometers from Wanting to Hsiakwan were completed in eighteen months; and from December 1938 until the occupation of Burma by the Imperial Japanese Army in the spring of 1942, hundreds of trucks piled with arms and ammunition passed along this road and on via Kunming and Kweiyang to Chungking, a distance which, traveling 240 kilometers a day, could be covered in a week.

THE ROAD VIA TIBET

It was a disastrous blow to Chungking when the conquest of Burma by the Japanese in 1942 made the Burma Road useless. The Allies could only hope to persuade Chungking to continue the war against Japan if they supplied it with arms. After the closure of the Burma Road, only the air route from India or the difficult road via Tibet remained open for this purpose. The quantities that can be brought across by air do not meet the requirements by a long way. As for the route via Tibet, the road leads from India via Darjeeling, Gangtok (in Sikkim), and Gyantse to Lhasa, a distance of about 1,300 Chinese li, and from Lhasa eastward via Lhari, Chamdo, Batang/Litang to Tatsienlu—5,140 li. Counting 2½ li to a kilometer, this amounts to a total of 2,576 kilometers. From Tatsienlu via Chengtu to Chungking it is another 500 kilometers. From Tatsienlu one caravan trail leads southward to Talifu and another to Kunming.

The condition of the route via Tibet stands in glaring contrast to the well-laid-out motor road from Burma. It can be used only by pack animals, since it is impassable for vehicles. The country through which this lonely trail leads abounds in swamps, lakes, and high mountain ranges whose glacier-covered peaks are from 5,000 to 6,000 meters high. Numerous streams as well as the large rivers Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong, and Yangtze—which at some places are only 65 kilometers apart—must be crossed on the way from Darjeeling to China; the bridges—where such exist at all—are suspension affairs made of plaited reeds.

Now through bogland, now high up along vertical rock walls with foaming torrents roaring in the canyon far below, then over passes where the frozen snow makes the way slippery, and again over swaying rope bridges across deep gorges and ravines, and through densely wooded lonely terrain made unsafe by the presence of robbers—in and out and through all this winds the narrow mountain path toward the border area of western China. The unaccustomed rarefied air puts a strain on breathing and heart. In winter when the passes are snowed up, and in spring when the streams rise and turn into rushing torrents and avalanches choke up the road, this journey involves enormous hardships, if indeed it can be attempted at all. Hence it is not surprising that one of the most important war aims of the Allies is the reconquest of Burma and the reopening of the Burma Road.
Twice the Allies have made an attempt to reconquer Burma. In the winter of 1942/43 they reached the district of Akyab at the end of December, only to be thrown back to their initial positions on the border by a forceful counterattack by the Japanese. The second time, in the winter of 1943/44, they did not even get as far as they had during the previous winter; for in the first half of February they suffered a series of setbacks in a Japanese counteroffensive.

It must be borne in mind that the season most favorable for any kind of undertaking is the months from November to February, when the climate is dry and the heat has not yet grown too intense. With the onset of the rains in June, the season for military operations is terminated, as the few existing roads become impassable and many districts are flooded; moreover, the damp hot climate, the mosquitoes, and malaria intensify the difficulties.

The mountain ranges covered with dense jungles prohibit the effective application of motorized units and large troop concentrations. It is hard even for planes to participate successfully in the fighting, there being neither open plains nor any large settlements where they might be effectively employed. The lack of means of transport for the bringing up of reserves and heavy arms also counts among the greatest difficulties to be surmounted during a campaign. The terrain demands real jungle warfare, in which the Japanese have so far proved themselves greater experts than their opponents.

Thus there remains only the route across the Bay of Bengal for any large-scale Allied undertaking. Such an undertaking, however, has been made extremely difficult by the loss of Malaya and Singapore as well as of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands off the Burmese coast. The Allies have realized this, and for this reason England has recently dispatched a number of warships to Colombo, her chief naval base in the Indian Ocean.

The British Command may have intended that, simultaneously with its large-scale attack upon Burma, a Chinese attempt to reconquer the Burma Road should take place. At any rate, the Chungking troops in the Kaolikan Mountains were reinforced. Moreover, there was still mule-caravan traffic being carried on between Paoshan on the Burma Road, which was still in Chungking hands, and Fort Hertz, an Anglo-American air base in North Burma.

Having occupied the towns of Tengyueh and Luling, in May 1943, thereby cutting off the two ends of the Burma Road, the Japanese forces decided in October to make a three-pronged attack against the Chungking troops in the Kaolikan Mountains. On October 14, Japanese Headquarters announced the capture of Pienma, 140 kilometers to the north of Luling; on the following day a locality 80 kilometers east of Luling was occupied, and by the end of October it was reported that the Japanese had reached the Salween (also known as the Nukiang River) at all important crossings.

By having occupied the western bank of the Salween, the steep canyon walls of which drop sheer down almost a thousand meters, the Japanese troops cut off the Chungking 28th and 36th Divisions and made all further caravan traffic to North Burma impossible. They also held an excellent defense line against any possible attack from Yunnan.