



Imperial Military Transportation in British Asia: Burma 1941–1942

by Michael W. Charney.

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Railroads have played a major role in strategic logistics and force movement in large conflicts since the mid-nineteenth century and increasingly thereafter for operational and tactical movement in many wars, even after the advent of trucks and threats from air attack.

From December 1941 into early May 1942, rail was pivotal in attempts by British Commonwealth, Chinese, and US forces to defend the (then) British colony of Burma (present-day Myanmar) against invasion by Japan after its conquest of Britain’s colonies of Malaya and Singapore. In *Imperial Military Transportation in British Asia*, historian Michael Charney (School of Oriental and African Studies, Univ. of London) argues that the Japanese might have triumphed earlier and more completely if a resourceful and resolute band of hastily militarized railway men led by a senior British military railway officer had not kept the trains running after the railway’s civilian leader threw up his hands on 24 February 1942.

By 1885 Britain had extinguished Burmese self-rule and established the country as a colony. Besides its products of rice, timber, and minerals, Burma offered a potentially valuable backdoor to China’s rugged Yunan Province just to the northeast. Capitalizing on this opening would require investments by European (especially British) interests seeking quick returns with little concern for Burma’s long-run needs or development.

Burma’s railway system suffered from chronic low investment, as did much else there and in other colonies. Following World War I, Britain was burdened with debt, and the markets for colonial products sagged badly. When the Great Depression hit hard, no money was to be found for anything.

British India officials continued to worry about possible Russian incursions from the northwest. And, too, Britain was still making efforts to strengthen Singapore as the bastion of its far eastern empire. Positioned between these two anchors, Burma seemed to need little defense against anyone but its own restive inhabitants. Supposedly impregnable Singapore guarded the seaward approaches, while the colony’s land frontiers were sealed by steep mountain ranges covered in dense vegetation. Until 1941, Burma’s defense priority was officially rated below that of Britain’s Caribbean islands.

Although officials in Britain and India were slow to appreciate it, the outbreak of war between Japan and China in mid-1937 would bring major changes to the strategic situation. Japan’s sea power blocked China’s access to matériel and supplies via its east coast seaports. The Chinese responded by moving to open a back door via Burma. Lacking modern road-building machines and materials, Chinese engineers exploited abundant local labor working with traditional tools and available materials to push a road over a hundred miles through some of the world’s most forbidding terrain. The resulting primitive but passable route between Kunming in Yunan and the Burma border linked to a road to Lashio built by the Burmese colonial administration. By late 1938, trucks were carrying cargo between the Burmese Railways Lashio terminus and Kunming over

what gained fame as the “Burma Road.”¹ Mired in a much more difficult struggle than they had envisioned, the Japanese resolved to sever this route which allowed cargoes offloaded at Burma’s seaport-capital of Rangoon (present-day Yangon) to be shipped up country to Lashio and thence by road into China’s interior.

After putting up token resistance, Thailand had surrendered to and allied with Japan in December 1941, thus avoiding an unwinnable struggle and gaining aid in pursuing its own territorial ambitions. The Japanese used Thai bases to bomb and invade Burma even before Singapore fell in February 1942. The initial invasion began in the far south, where Japanese forces crossed from Thailand. The war began in earnest with Japan’s bombing of Rangoon in December 1941. These attacks killed or injured thousands of civilians; huge numbers of workers fled the city, paralyzing most economic activity, including that of the railways. Advancing rapidly from the south, Japanese troops cut off and finally captured the city.

Nothing substantial had been done to put Burma on a war footing prior to the Japanese attacks. Finally, in January 1942, with everything collapsing for want of labor, the colony’s Chief Railway Commissioner (CRC) proposed militarizing the Burma Railways (BR) under his direction. But even then the colony’s administration resisted such a move.

On 17 January, a military Director of Transportation (DoT) was at last decreed, with Col. Francis John Biddulph (1896–c. 1977), Royal Engineers, in charge. It took him several weeks to reach his new post; in the meantime, the organization began operations under a subordinate officer. Or at least attempted to do so against the colonial administration’s dogged opposition. The CRC, preferring to head a militarized BR in a general’s uniform, was loath to hand it over to outsiders. All was for the best in this best of all possible railways, or at least as good as could be, he assured the DoT.

Colonel Biddulph arrived on 27 January. Though one of Britain’s great experts on railroading in wartime and a former commandant of the Royal Engineers’ main railroad training center at Longmoor, he fully acknowledged the critical importance of understanding the local situation and planned to rely on the BR people for it. Impossible, the CRC insisted: only someone with Local Knowledge would do, and hang the military expertise. Biddulph tried to coax the civilians to cooperate and allow him to do his job while the civilian railway’s operations were collapsing in the south in the face of the Japanese advance and coming to a halt under bombing in Rangoon. On 24 February 1942, the CRC, William H. Chance, determined that the end had come:

In the midst of a campaign in which the defenders would clearly have to depend on the BR, he declared, “the railways are finished and not another train can run.” The railways south of Toungoo had ceased to operate, except for several suburban and local trains run by officers and subordinate staff in the dock areas of Rangoon, as all staff had been evacuated or fled.... Chance’s disposition was probably reinforced by the fact that on 24–25 February the Japanese renewed an intensive air assault on Rangoon with 150 bombers and fighters, which, along with the military reversals ..., encouraged the image that the Burma defence was now playing its end-game. (79–80)

This would have meant immediate and complete calamity: in a land with scarcely any motor transport, the army would need constant support by rail. Finally, facing prompt death or captivity for themselves and every non-native in the colony, the authorities allowed Biddulph to take over and militarize just the southern portion of the BR, leaving the rest to civil administration.

1. See Patrick Fitzgerald, “The Yunnan-Burma Road,” *Geographical Journal* 95 (1940) 161–71, and Pei-ying Tan, *The Building of the Burma Road* (NY: Whittlesey House, 1945).

By then, all hope of stopping the Japanese had vanished. The remnants of the Commonwealth forces and a substantial Chinese contingent tried to save the vital supply line through Burma, but were outmatched and forced back to the north. Japanese bombers roamed without air opposition, concentrating on railway targets. Europeans, Eurasians, and Indians fled in terror of how the Japanese might treat them. Charney conveys a clinically vivid impression of the horrific shambles of the flight. Yet Biddulph's militarized railway men managed to keep trains running to resupply the retreating defenders, evacuate them when necessary, and carry many refugees to safety.²

Northern Burma was a cul-de-sac. Two difficult roads led into the Chinese interior but only nearly impassible trails reached northeastern India. Some refugees reached India by air, others by foot after extremely arduous and hazardous treks; many perished or were captured.

Once in India, Biddulph worked feverishly to ensure that the lessons of Burma were understood and applied. Top civilians who had escaped from Burma, with little else to do, turned their energies to exculpating themselves, often at Biddulph's expense. They outranked him and could twist the facts to support their case. This even though, without his efforts, they would never have made it to safety. Lacking high-level support, Biddulph was shuffled to other assignments and never received proper recognition. Historians of the campaign mention the railways only to condemn their failings.

All the relevant documentation had been lost in the defeat, or so it seemed. But Charney tracked down Biddulph's grandson and learned he was in possession of an ancient leather document case. Unopened since the older man's death, it contained Biddulph's papers and many other documents otherwise lost to history. Charney has used them and extant collateral records to painstakingly construct the history he presents here. But he goes far beyond the story of the Burma campaign and Biddulph's part in it. He clarifies how and why the British Army developed its special doctrine for railways under military control and the prominent role Biddulph played in its development and propagation. And he explains in addition why the civilian railway leaders so bitterly opposed militarization at a time when it was so patently necessary. *Imperial Military Transportation in British Asia* deserves the keen attention of anyone interested in Burma in the Second World War or colonial history and organizational politics more broadly.

The book has its flaws. Charney assumes more familiarity with Burma than many readers will possess. Sketch maps of the railway network give no sense of scale and omit some geographical features mentioned in the text. Military actions are often not described clearly enough. Some of the book's main characters are not truly brought to life; readers get few details (and no photos) to give a sense of their characters or subsequent careers. This will limit the book's appeal.

This is unfortunate, since the book is more significant than it might appear from its brevity and apparent narrow focus. It deserves to be a widely read classic for its penetrating analyses of why civilian authorities resisted change so vehemently even in the face of overwhelming threats. Beneath its seemingly dry surface, Michael Charney tells a marvelous story of steadfast and inventive men who paved the way for ultimate triumph, though heaven fell and Earth's foundations trembled.

2. See, further, Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2006) 387–94; Clayton R. Newell, *Burma, 1942: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II* (Washington: US Army Ctr of Military History, 1995), available online; S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War against Japan, vol. 2: India's Most Dangerous Hour* (London: HMSO, 1958) 1–220; and Christopher A. Bayly and Tim N. Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2005) 1–207.