



## *Rails of War: Supplying the Americans and Their Allies in China-Burma-India* by Steven James Hantzis.

Lincoln, NB: Potomac Books 2017. Pp. xiii, 199. ISBN 978-1-61234-853-7.

Review by Steven K. Bailey, Central Michigan University (baile1sk@cmich.edu).

*Rails of War* concerns the 721st Railway Operating Battalion (ROB), a US Army unit that ran the rail lines in India that supplied Allied forces in Burma (present-day Myanmar) in 1944-45. The few authors who have written about the logistics of the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater of World War II have focused on the construction of the sinuous Burma and Ledo roads or the airlifting of war material from India to China via the treacherous mountain-studded flight path known as “the Hump.” By concentrating on American railroad operations in India, *Rails of War* clarifies the role of rear-echelon support troops in the massive logistical effort required to supply Allied forces fighting the Japanese in Burma.

Author Steven Hantzis’s father (then) S.Sgt. James Harry Hantzis was deployed to the 721st, a specialized unit of self-proclaimed “railbirds,” from 1943 to the end of the war. Steven Hantzis is himself a third-generation railroad man, who worked for twelve years as a brakeman-conductor for Conrail. That background and conversations over many years with his father and other railbirds qualify him to describe the operations of the 721st through the eyes of a veteran railroader.

Hantzis is not a professional historian, and he gives himself “authorial license” to reconstruct scenes and dialogue in an engaging narrative. Military historians will disapprove, but general readers and railroad aficionados—the book’s target audience—will appreciate the reconstructed conversations between the soldiers as well as the quick-paced narrative and humorous moments in this vivid account of life in a railway battalion.

This succinct volume is enhanced by six maps, an index, and twenty-four black-and-white photos, many taken from the author’s personal collection. Hantzis devotes twenty-five of his book’s forty-two chapters to the history and operations of the 721st and its four brother units in India. Another five chapters recount the experiences of the author’s father while in the 721st. A dozen chapters concentrate on the failed Japanese attempt to take Imphal and Kohima in spring 1944, the bloody contest for the northern Burmese town of Myitkyina in summer 1944, and the Allied counteroffensive that led to the reoccupation of Mandalay and Rangoon (present-day Yangon) in 1945.

The 721st fell under the command of the US Army’s Military Railway Service, which operated wartime rail networks in Europe and Iran as well as India. Many of the battalion’s men, as in all rail battalions, had worked for civilian railroads before the war. These “American soldier railroaders” were support troops operating in a rear area. But their work could be hazardous, and 160 men in rail battalions in India saw combat while operating improvised “jeep trains” on the line that ran into Myitkyina.

The railroad battalions rebuilt, maintained, and operated the 700-mile Bengal and Assam Railroad in British India. American Army port battalions unloaded war supplies from freighters at Calcutta (present-day Kolkata) and sent them northward by broad-gauge rail to Parbatipur, where they were transshipped to the meter-gauge trains operated by the ROB. These in turn trundled

east along the Bengal and Assam Railroad to the end of the line at Ledo, whence they reached the front lines by other forms of transport.

Starting in early 1944, the ROBs began to speed up the transport of war material to the Burma front. In August 1944, for example, the 721st moved 60,000 railcars in 930 trains, averaging 66 cars in length. In December 1944 alone, the monthly totals were higher yet—over a thousand trains. Cargo tonnage mattered more than speed: the 721st's trains moved at a sedate average speed of eleven mph.

The true strong points of the book, however, are its almost lyrical writing style and its author's deep railroad expertise. The following passage is typical.

The shop crafts repaired air brakes, worked in drop pits, set valves, washed out boilers, ran water tests, lubricated everything in sight, and packed journal boxes. The car repair platoon worked on wheel trucks and couplers and replaced brass bushings on axle journals. The wreck crew worked with the steam crane and railed wayward equipment. The operating crafts switched cars, kicked cuts into sidings, learned to work a manifest, and practiced driving doubleheaders—two engines and tenders coupled together. (3)

Some readers may stumble over the train jargon, but most will value Steven Hantzis's powerfully evocative portrait of life on an Army-run railroad.

*Rails of War* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of American rear-area support units and logistical efforts in the CBI Theater. Scholars will object to its reconstructed scenes and dialogue or its unoriginal accounts of military campaigns in Burma. But general readers will enjoy this brisk account of how the US Army's railway battalions kept the trains moving across the Indian countryside to help ensure the Allied victory in Burma.