



Stilwell the Patriot: Vinegar Joe, the Brits and Chiang Kai-Shek by David Rooney, Greenhill Books 2005 £19.99, ISBN: 1 85367 632 2

Review by Charles Messenger

In British eyes Stilwell tends to be remembered as a vehement Anglophobe who succeeded in rubbing up the wrong way almost everyone who came into his path. As such, he is regarded as one of the most controversial of US generals. He has been the subject of an in-depth biography by Barbara Tuchman and while David Rooney does provide the essential background to Vinegar Joe's life he is more concerned to examine the role that Stilwell played in what the Americans termed the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre.

By the time that the USA entered the war Stilwell's experience and knowledge of China was second to none and it is hardly surprising that in January 1942 he was selected to be chief of staff to Chiang Kai-Shek and commander of American Forces in the CBI theatre. David Rooney gives a vivid description of the vipers' nest in which Stilwell found himself - the deviousness of the Chinese leader and his court, the corruption of the armed forces, over which the warlords still held much sway, and the influence of Claire Chennault (of Flying Tiger fame) who believed that airpower would solve everything, and that back in Washington DC only George C Marshall was prepared to give Stilwell unqualified support. On top of this he was to experience the ignominy of the 1942 retreat from Burma, which served to reinforce his impression, gained thirty years before from a visit to Hong Kong, of the foppishness of the British officer. Indeed, only with Slim and later Mountbatten (in spite of his 'curly eyelashes') did Stilwell establish a rapport.

The remainder of 1942 and the whole of 1943 were a period of increasing frustration for Stilwell. He was convinced that the Chinese soldier, if properly led and equipped, was the equal of any and set out to prove this at the training centre at Ramgarh in Bengal and this in spite of British discomfort at the presence of these troops in an India seething in unrest as the independence movement became ever more vocal. Stilwell's ultimate objective was to create a modern 100 division Chinese Army which could reopen the Burma Road and drive the Japanese out of China, a dream that never became reality. Rooney brings out his subject's exasperation well. Peanut's (as Stilwell nicknamed Chiang Kai-Shek) constant threats of withdrawing from the war if he did not receive more supplies and Stilwell's well founded suspicion that he mainly wanted these to crush Mao Zedong's communist forces rather than pursue the war against Japan were but one problem. The seeming British reluctance to fight was another. Overshadowing both was the fact that as the British Fourteenth Army in Burma, the Forgotten Army so CBI was the forgotten theatre, which came a poor third after Europe and the Pacific.

Given the obstacles put in his way, Stilwell's advance up the Ledo Road and his galvanisation of Yoke Force to begin to advance from Yunnan into Burma was a remarkable achievement. But the former also provoked some of the major controversies surrounding his name. His ruthless treatment of his own long range penetration force, Merrill's Marauders, and insistence that the Chindits, clearly exhausted after four months' continuous operations,



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should be used against Myitkyina rather than the fresh British 36th Division were inexcusable, as Rooney accepts.

In the end, Peanut's scheming, which intensified after Stilwell insisted that he ally himself with Mao against the Japanese, led to Vinegar Joe's removal before he could witness the reopening of the Burma Road. His downfall lay in his blunt and forceful character. Yet, without these attributes it is difficult to imagine that Stilwell or anyone else in his position could have achieved what he did. David Rooney is to be much congratulated on this lucid, very fair, and eminently readable account which well deserves a place on BCMH members' bookshelves.



Hoover Institution Archives

Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek (left) with General Joseph Stilwell at Maymo, Burma, April 1942.