Allen, John Interview pt 1 8-7-95

[Speaker 2]
Testing, one, two, three. This is a tape with Mr. John Allen at 4043 Leland Lane. The date is May 5, 1993.

Mr. Allen, are you a doctor? No. All right.

When did you join the service?

[Speaker 1]
I joined the service the 15th of May, 1941.

[Speaker 2]
Well, that was almost exactly, let's see, 50, 52 years.

[Speaker 1]
Fifty-two years ago, in just a few days. And I went in expecting to serve one year. I figured I'd be drafted with the low order number I had, and my boss and I decided that I should just volunteer and serve that year.

So I went in and was sent to put in the headquarters detachment at Fort Barrancas, Florida, in Pensacola, which was a Coast Artillery Station there, as we said, to protect the Navy. And I had a very nice time being an enlisted man there. It was a country club of the Army.

Only one thing, there were only 22 or 23 of us on the whole post who weren't regular Army. And they told us when we got there, they said, expect no promotions. You're not going to get anything but a lot of hard work.

You're going to do all of the things that we don't want to do. And it turned out to be that way. And we were given various assignments.

One day I got a call to go to the base surgeon's office, and I thought, what in the world have I done that the base surgeon would want to see me? Well, I had an uncle whose name was the same as mine, who had been a regular Army doctor since before the Spanish-American War. And the base surgeon, believe it or not, was a man who had served with him as a field surgeon in the Filipino insurrection in the Philippine Islands and had volunteered to go back on active duty.

And he saw my name on something and called me in to talk about it and asked when I was going to apply for officer candidate school, and I told him I had no intention of doing it. And he said, well, we'll talk about that later. Well, very shortly, he gave me an assignment there to help him straighten out a mess in a medical supply warehouse, something I knew absolutely nothing about, but it didn't last long, and war was declared, and I went to officer candidate school and went from there to Fort Benning, Georgia, where I was assigned to a truck regiment that performed tactical transportation for the infantry school.

That was in September of 1942, and in December of that year, we were headed overseas, and we went to California, to the Los Angeles area, and after two or three weeks, we finally left the port, I think, on the 19th of January, 1943, and 43 days later, we got to Bombay on a

long trip on one of the ships we had liberated from Mussolini that had been renamed the Monticello. It was the old Conte Grande, and it had beautiful oil paintings in the stairwells that hadn't been completely converted to a troop ship, but I was up with all of the low-ranking second lieutenants in what had been the promenade deck. They'd been boarded in with green lumber before we left, and by the time we got south of Australia, well, really south of Tasmania, the cold air was coming through the cracks in those planks, and we nearly froze to death.

Nobody would tell us where we were going or what we were doing, but after we left the port of Fremantle in southwestern Australia, we knew we must be headed for India when we started NOAA. We were supposed to go to Calcutta. Meantime, the Japs blockaded Calcutta, so we had to go up the west side of India and landed at Bombay.

And I was very disappointed that I didn't get shore leave there. I was given a work detail. Everybody else was at this posh British officer's mess with liveryed servants standing behind you, you know, living the life of Riley.

Well, I was on K rations or C rations, and I think I was the only officer in the regiment who didn't have dysentery when we got on the train to go across India, so it turned out pretty well. But I remember how shocked I was at the abject poverty in Bombay. I had no idea.

You'd read about it, but when you saw it, the hundreds of thousands of people who had no home but the street, they lived and died in there, and the British were apparently totally indifferent about it. They were so callous, they'd kick them out of the way and hit them with their riding crops they carried, and were very abusive. But on our trip across India, that was interesting.

It would have been better if we had any idea of the places we were going through, but we saw an awful lot of desert. And one place we stopped, I did get to see the Bengal Lancers on parade by accident, and that was a nice experience. And when we got to Calcutta, now have I sang too much here?

When we got to Calcutta, that was my first real sign of the war. There were barrage balloons everywhere. But one other thing I noticed in Australia, the only people you saw were the very old and the very young.

Everyone else was off to war. The bartenders in the hotel were two gray-haired old ladies who looked like they were probably great-great-grandmothers. And we had to change trains a time or two because the British, as part of their policy, keeping the Indians from mounting a successful offensive against them, would change the gauge of the trains from time to time.

And we wound up on narrow gauge. And the place I think called Pandu, north of Calcutta, we had to get on paddle-wheel steamboats for three days on the Brahmaputra River. And the crews of the steamboats were all Muslims.

And we had a little Hindu medic with us that the Indian Army required to accompany all people in those days. And he was so frightened that we put him in a little place, about four by four, a little lattice enclosure. I don't know what it was for, but anyway, he stayed there for the whole trip.

The rest of us had to burn our straw mattresses because they were infested with bedbugs, so we had to sleep standing up, stretched out on deck. But it was a difference. We got to see the river and the crocodiles and all that sort of thing.

[Speaker 2]
What river was this?

[Speaker 1]
It was the Brahmaputra. The Brahmaputra. And we, I think, got off there at a place called Gahati.

I'm sure it was Gahati. And then we went to Margarita, which was the actual end of the rail line at that time. And across the little river, the Tarap River from there, was Lido, which became America's headquarters for the Northern Combat Area Command in that part of the world.

And it was only about 30 miles or so from the Burma border. But I remember going up after we got on the train at Gahati. My roommate was a good friend, even after the war, and all during the war, Wales Wallace from Columbiana, Alabama.

And the battalion commander came through the train telling us the Japs were just on the other side of that range of hills. Well, it turned out he didn't know what he was talking about, but we believed him. And Wales told me, he said, Johnny, I'm going to load my gun.

So we put a little compartment on the train. But we got there just as, got to a place north of Lido called Lakapani, just as the monsoon rain started in earnest. And everybody nearly floated away that night.

Mass confusion. We were the truck regiment that had gone over there to haul supplies on the Lido Road. Well, none of the Lido Road had been built.

They had made an effort at building it up to the Burma border, but it was impassable a lot of the time. And our officers were, senior officers were more interested in their own comfort than they were in the men. And I could see nothing but confusion and probably getting in trouble from doing some back talk there if I didn't get out of that situation.

So when somebody asked for people to volunteer for a special assignment, I held up my hand. I knew I shouldn't, but I did. Well, about a week later, I was walking into Burma to join the first combat troops that had gone back after the British pulled out.

And they were part of the Chinese 38th Division, part of one battalion of them.

[Speaker 2]
When was this?

[Speaker 1]
This was in 1943, and I left about the last of March and got there about the first of April. I knew absolutely nothing about what I was supposed to do except that the American

government had made a decision that the Chinese could not be relied upon to handle their own supplies. They wasted them, they stole them, they did everything with them.

And I remember how disillusioned I was. I'd read all the stuff in Life magazine about the Christian general and Chiang Kai-shek and the madame and how great they were. So we were going to take over the supply operations, and I was told that I was going to this little native village that Chinese troops would pass through from time to time and establish a little supply warehouse there, and I would get the natives to build bamboo buildings for it.

We'd get most of our supplies by either pack mule or by porters, and we might get a few things by airdropping. Well, that turned out to be wrong, too. We got everything by airdropping, but didn't know it at the time.

What I also didn't know was that I had a little delay in starting out, and that was because the Japs had moved in and were trying to take the place that I was to go to. And, well, they didn't have communications. They should have known, but they didn't.

And I'd been told there wouldn't be any Japs within 100 miles of where I was going, and that really wouldn't be much to do, that I'd just get very bored. But I left with 75 porters. There were no roads, no towns, no nothing out there.

And I thought they knew the way to go and were familiar with the area, and the man in charge of them, an Indian of some variety named Benjamin. But they were of the Garra tribe, which was from the southern part of Assam, and they were as scared as I was in that country. Dense jungle everywhere you went.

[Speaker 2]
Were you by yourself?

[Speaker 1]
I had seven enlisted men with me. I had seven enlisted men with me, and they were black boys from the regiment I'd been with, and if I had looked the world over, I don't think I could have gotten seven men who were better equipped for that type of thing than they were. I got to select them, and they were very, very fine people, and we had no problem with that.

But we passed one setup similar to what I thought I was going to have the first day out, and there was a little swinging bamboo bridge across the river there, and I thought, well, this is going to be nice. But when we got to the next one, it was nothing but dark, swift water, jungle right down to the edge, and I finally said to the leader of the porters, I said, don't you think it's time somebody started figuring out how to get across this river? I'll never forget what he said.

He said, Sahib, you are the leader. You must show the way. But I hadn't figured on being that kind of a leader.

If I stepped off in that river, that I was going to be devoured by every kind of bombardment in the world, but I did, and it was about up to here, and I pulled the line over, and we eventually got everybody across. But it never got any better on the whole trip, raining all day, every day. About the fourth day out, we heard the unmistakable sound of combat.

We heard mortar fire, and the whole distance I was going to travel was less than 100 miles, but it was just you had to cut trail lots of times, and very difficult walking. And this trail I was using was known as the refugee trail. It's where a large part of the people who made it out of Burma came out, and many thousands died.

I've heard estimates that ran all the way from 6,000 to 25,000, but every time you bothered to park the vegetation on the side, there were just skeleton after skeleton. There were thousands of them, and that's really the only signpost we had, was to follow those skeletons. And just before you got to the crest of one of the numerous mountains you crossed, you would find lots of them, and then at the stream crossings you'd find where lots of them died.

And the British had dropped supplies to them, and they apparently were, long the last, were too weak to even pick them up, and you'd see rotted piles of stuff there. This was less than a year since they had come out. So it was a grisly sort of thing to see.

Well, at the fourth night out, Sergeant Wells and I were sleeping in a little hut that the British had built for people using the trail, and it leaked bad, and they all had thatched roofs. And we were sleeping on our packs from the porters. The next morning, 50 of the 75 porters had disappeared.

We never knew what happened to them. They never got home. And if things hadn't moved pretty rapidly and other more important things come up, I can imagine what a second lieutenant would have had to go through explaining why he lost 50 out of 75 men.

But they were frightened by the sound of combat, and I found out later they'd been under contract that they would not be in any combat situation. And the next to the last day, we finally got some level ground, and, oh, boy, I was glad to see that level ground. And in that part of the world, it's inhabited by the Naga tribesmen, and they are very primitive, and they practice a type of slash-and-burn agriculture on the mountainsides where their villages are.

And after 2 or 3 or 4 years, well, the fertility of the soil is exhausted, and they abandon that and clear more. And then when they clear all the land around them, they move to another hilltop. And those old fields have grown up largely in either bamboo or wild raspberries, which are delicious, incidentally, and bananas, but the bananas don't fruit, and when they rarely do, they have seeds in them besides a buckshot.

But we were going through this pile of bamboo, and the water was about 6 or 8 inches deep on the trail, and we'd been told to watch out for two things that we should watch out for. There wouldn't be any Japs, but we might see some gorillas, and the other was ponji pits that the Japs might have dug and put sharpened stakes in. Well, I felt myself going into a deep hole, and I thoroughly expected there to be a stake going through me, but I crawled out, and everyone else had stopped.

I guess they heard me scream, but anyway. I went in several other holes, and when we finally got through, there were elephant tracks, which I, of course, thought might have been wild elephants, but they turned out to belong to the head man from the Kachin tribe who had had to evacuate Burma, and he was a very good friend of mine later on. He died not too long after that, but his son became my head man.

I couldn't have gotten by without him, but we didn't know that. We made camp on the banks of a little river called the Nam-Yung River. Every river we crossed, even though the names were different, meant something loosely translated like the river of death.

They were fond of that term. But they were Shan names, and the Shans were all from the south. I never could figure out why, but I guess it's because they probably traded through that area.

But anyway, that night we found a Chinese sergeant who was coming back from a little place I was to go to called Tagap Ga, T-A-G-A-P, and G-A Ga meant village. And this Chinese sergeant had made sketches of what had happened, and he told me that an American general was out there and that the Japs had tried to get him when he was on the way out, and they were still fighting. Well, before I left, I'm getting a little ahead of myself, I'd been given three instructions.

One of them was to find General Wheeler, who was the commander of everything in that area, General Wheeler. They said he had gone out there, was out there somewhere to see about building an airfield someplace south of where I was supposed to go, a place called Shimbawang, and that the Japs had attacked him when he was going out there. But I'd been told to find him.

They said he's out there somewhere, and when you find him, tell him to come back right away. Well, I didn't have a picture of General Wheeler, had no idea what he looked like or anything else. And they said Dr. Gordon Seagrave, who was a native of Burma, a missionary doctor, he did get his training in this country, said he's out there somewhere too, and find him and tell him to stay where you are until we tell him to move. And the third instruction, they called me in another room with nothing in there but a table and gave me a code word to send in case I thought the Chinese might be about to change sides. Well, that shocked me immensely, and I was so impressed, though, with the man that briefed me on how to live in the jungle. Nearly everything he told me was wrong, and I found out when I got back that he'd been there two weeks longer than I had and didn't know any more than I did, or maybe less.

But anyway, I was very impressionable, and I did get some good advice on medical supplies and things like that from an old China hand that gave me the right medicines and things to take with me. But that night, we didn't sleep much. We could still hear heavy firing, and it was about six miles up the mountain, another little river to cross, and the Chinese had come down with a few soldiers, came with them, and they had taken a little raft that was there back on the other side.

So the next morning, I was on the bank of the river early trying to get my shoes on. My feet were a little sore, and never could get any combat boots or jungle boots the whole time we were over there. For that matter, we had a hard time finding clothes.

So all of a sudden, I see a motley-looking crew of people coming down a steep bank on the other side of the river. Some of them had uniforms on and parts of uniforms, and I thought, well, I'll get as many as I can, and I was armed with a Tommy gun, a good one, but I'd never shot it. So I started taking up slack on the trigger.

By that time, I didn't care for anything. I was totally exhausted. I was worn out and been afraid the whole time I was going to get snake bit or something like that but anyway, all of a sudden, there in my sights is what looked to me like an old man, obviously an American, wearing of all things a wool uniform and a blue denim fatigue hat and about a three- or four- or five-day-growth beard.

Well, I don't know what I did, but I yelled over and asked, Are you Seagrave? And he said, No, I'm Wheeler. Who are you?

Well, the thought that I'd almost shot the commanding general was overpowering, but he asked me who I was, and I told him I was Lieutenant Allen, and I was so excited that he said, And where are you from, Lieutenant? Meaning what headquarters and so forth. I said, I'm from Tennessee, sir.

And he laughed about that for the rest of the war. I understand. But anyway, he was surprised that we had not encountered any Japanese and wanted to know which trails we took when there was an alternate and how we came in and so forth.

We talked for, I guess, about an hour and a half. Very pleasant person to talk to. I never saw him again, but I had many people repeat to me several times.

I said, Well, what he didn't know was that he almost got shot because it was very, about as far as me at the middle of the road across that little river. Couldn't have missed him at the time. But anyway, that was my, another boo-boo I didn't make.

[Speaker 2]
And they had told you to find him.

[Speaker 1]
Find him and tell him to come home.

[Speaker 2]
Tell him to come home.

[Speaker 1]
And I didn't know that, but General Boatner had relieved him and still well at a point, Boatner to relieve him from that particular job. He was still in charge of all services, supply operations. But Boatner had taken over the Northern Combat Area Command.

[Speaker 2]
So you told him that, but then you never saw him again.

[Speaker 1]
Never saw him again. I didn't tell him why. I didn't know why.

I just told him that orders were for him to get home as quickly as he could, get back as quickly as he could. Well, when I got up to Tagap, I had a hard time getting past the Chinese sentry. And if you've never tried to get past the Chinese sentry, when you know not one word of Chinese, you just don't do it.

But anyway, finally I convinced him to send someone. And I had an identification in Chinese. Tell them who I was and what I was for.

Well, finally, a good sight appeared. It was a man who had gone out with General Wheeler, a redheaded Italian named Sidney Sacerdote, an artillery major and a liaison officer with the Chinese. And he spoke some Chinese and came up and got me into the headquarters.

And the British had already built me a little house to stay in and so forth. And then I went up and met with the Chinese and told them why I was there, and that immediately made them mad. Sid tried to explain to them in Chinese that it was really true.

But anyway, I didn't get off too well with the Chinese. And then I went to see, found that Dr. Seagrave was already there. And he with his native girls, the nurses, had set up a little hospital unit.

And when I told him the orders I had for him, he looked over his glass and said, I take my orders from Stilwell. Just as if...

[Speaker 2]
And what were the orders you had for him?

[Speaker 1]
To tell him to stay put where I was, to stay with me until they told him to go somewhere else. He did not like that. But anyway, we were never the best of friends, but he kept us alive because he was familiar with medical conditions out there.

It turned out that this place I went to, the little place called The Gap, was determined to be the place where they would assemble to mount the offensive when they went to retake Burma that fall. And we were very busy and they determined that they would use that as an experiment and some other to mine, but with not much going on, to see whether or not it would be practical to supply the advance of the invasion of Burma by airdropping. They did, and they had to use a C-47 aircraft for the most part with the door off and it was a little primitive, but parachutes weren't too good.

They were made out of Union cotton, but we got enough stuff to get by. And the things we learned from that, that operation enabled them to do it a little better and that became the way that that thing was supplied. The Chinese were very suspicious of us, and what I did know was that these things that had happened like the Americans taking over supplies, when you read some of General Boatner's comments like those I just read, what I experienced was nothing to the experience that Stilwell and Boatner were having with them.

I don't think they intended to tolerate any interference with them, but finally a Shanghai Sheik must have realized that he was going to either accept American command or he wouldn't have any support at all. But we did not have very good luck with the Chinese at first. Now the little combat operation they had there, I never did find out how many people were involved on the Japanese side.

The Chinese would show me some equipment they'd captured, not much. I asked Colonel Seagrave about casualties, and I don't remember the exact numbers, but something like this. He said, well, today I killed six and they killed eight or something like that, sort of jesting.

But the number of people involved was always a great mystery. Well, that was true of every other contact we had with them. You could not get good intelligence from the Chinese.

And they would use each one of those little engagements as an excuse for ordering more supplies. They would exhaust their ammunition and while you knew they could not have fired as many rounds as they said they did, why, you went ahead and replaced it anyhow. So that nine months turned out to be a really unusual experience.

Now I'm sure you ought to have some questions and I'm getting ahead here.

[Speaker 2]
That's all right. I'd rather have you just talk and then we'll catch up on anything I need to know.

[Speaker 1]
So we had very primitive living conditions. We had to cook, my men and I had to cook on an open fire. The whole time we had practically no cooking utensils, but the refugees had discarded a lot of stuff along, so we'd just hunt through the bones and find pans and pots and so forth.

Two of those boys were excellent cooks. They could cook anything over an open fire. And my place became the mess hall for all the transient officers that ever came through and they all seemed well supplied, well pleased with what had happened there as far as getting something to eat.

[Speaker 2]
And I need to interrupt you because I need...

[Speaker 1]
Testing.

[Speaker 2]
All right.

[Speaker 1]
One thing about that operation at Dagap, it never got dull. The help that we had had there to build the necessary structures out of bamboo and to pick up the supplies that might be dropped by the airplanes and to form the necessary labor were the same tribe of Garrick porters that brought me in there. And when there was fighting in the area, they all demanded to be withdrawn.

So they and all the British pulled out except one former missionary, a very fine man, Lieutenant Dave Darlington, who was a civil affairs officer of some kind, and a Major Needham. I never found out what Needham's duties were and I don't think he knew either. I think he was officially a civil affairs officer of some kind.

It was a very fine man who was a native of Burma, at least a long time resident of Burma, Colonel J.R. Wilson. He was a captain when I first got there and later on they promoted him to Lieutenant Colonel. And he was in charge of what was called the V Force, which was a British intelligence unit using mainly native people to get information on Japanese activities.

We were faced with a problem of getting labor that we needed there. We were told not to use the Chinese and I guess that was good advice. And there were several Naga villages surrounding this place.

There might be just a few houses in each one, I think five within a 15 mile radius. All of them spoken in different language. Most all of the men spoke a language called Ching Paul, which was the language of the Kachins who were our best allies in Burma.

Of all the Burmese people they were the only ones that we could totally rely on except the Koreans, but we had no Koreans in that area. And most of the Naga men did speak Ching Paul, so we at least had a common language with them. So I began to try to learn a little bit of Ching Paul.

I was puzzled by the fact that I couldn't learn Chinese, couldn't speak Chinese, and I found out since that time that I have a hearing problem. After a certain decibel level I don't hear. So I wish between the tones and the tonal, all the Chinese language, all the dialects are tonal, and I could not, so I would make a fool of myself most of the time when I tried to speak Chinese, which was a great handicap.

But I did pick up a little Ching Paul, not much. But with these scattered Naga villages we could not police them, and we didn't want the Japs going in there. A lot of this area was very near some that had been marked unadministered and unexplored, and nobody really knew where the Japs were.

We didn't know where they were. We had a hard time finding out. But they were fortunately at the end of their supply line, so mostly we were just having patrol contact with them.

So someone came up with a good idea of bringing all of the Nagas in to this central point and let them build a village there and work for us. Well, some of those chieftains or headmen were pretty smart, and they said, Well, if we go to work for you and have to leave our villages and can't tend our gardens and can't grow our poppies, incidentally they were all mildly addicted to opium, what will we do for rice and poppies when your war is over and it's too late for us to plant and harvest a crop? So the deal was made with them that if they would come to work with us, that when we no longer needed them, we would continue to supply them with opium and with food and necessities until they could harvest another crop.

I was relieved there by a lieutenant colonel along about Christmas time, just before Christmas, and the first thing he did was to go back on that order. And some of those nagas somehow located an obscure first lieutenant that I finally got promoted to, and I finally got hold of General Boatner and we got that order reversed and I had one hell of a party with them just over the Burma border and I'd stolen a truck of beer that they'd never had before.

[Speaker 2]

They'd never had beer before.

[Speaker 1]
Well, they made their own rice beer, but it was just like, just fermented rice about the consistency of buttermilk. But anyway, and I got them a good supply of opium and maybe a little more and we had a great time. But I had, was almost AWOL, I guess I was AWOL, but I stayed with them about a week.

We had, and I hated to leave those folks. They were nice people. And we got along fine with them and my enlisted men, they had an immediate rapport with them and they got along fine too.

It, we had lots of problems with dropping the supplies. Mainly the Chinese would want to run out on the small area that we could drop on and hold out their arms and they were being killed by falling parachutes even because even with a parachute on it, everything worked. It was dropping about 18 feet a second when it hit and it weighed about 150 pounds.

That's pretty bad, but they dropped rice about 250 pounds, 60 pounds at a time without parachutes and sometimes those bags would stick together. And if you don't think you can put one Chinese soldier inside one World War I type helmet, why, you should have been over there because it would happen. And I would catch a hail from General Boatner every time that happened and how was I to keep them out?

So that was one of the things and then language difficulties were always blamed on everything and at times we used 18 languages on that little spot. Fortunately, I had some more very good luck. The OSS, which was the forerunner of the CIA, had a small team there.

At that time there were no Americans on it. It was commanded by a very fine Chinese that I knew only by the name of Skittles. He was actually a native of Burma.

Well, he came to Burma when he was one year old. And he was a civil engineer and had been working on the Yunnan Rangoon Railroad when the war broke out when the Japs came into Burma. And he volunteered to assist the Americans.

He spoke at that time at least 10 languages. He's now in the States and has been here about 12 or 13 years and he called me one day on the phone. And he said, I'll bet you don't know who this is.

And I said, well, it can't be, but it sure as hell sounds like my old buddy named Skittles. And he says, how did you know who I was? I said, if you knew how good your voice sounded the day you kept the Chinese from killing me, you know, I'd never forget you.

Well, we would have such violent misunderstandings over the most trivial things. You could just name anything and they would send several guards down with Tommy guns to march me up to the headquarters and berate me and they were getting very, very bad about it. And well, several times you'd be shot at by a sentry when there was no excuse for it.

And I think I would have had a bad accident that day, but Skittles walked in and talked him out of it. And I had to ask him his name. His name is Harry Hingshun, which is not really a Chinese name.

It's one that he adopted because that was the name of his father's business in Rangoon. Well, he made a very effective head of that unit, which at that time had one little British boy in it and eight or ten people of various nationalities. But they sort of took me under their wing and while I never joined the OSS, I had to work very closely with them and I now belong to the association and enjoy visiting with them.

The next man to command that was a man who became quite famous. He was an old regular army first sergeant who had been given a direct commission of, and was a first lieutenant then, Vincent Curl, better known as Knothead. And he was the best man with weapons that I ever saw, with maybe one exception.

He later became a colonel over there and was in charge of the behind the lines operation and this OSS unit worked with the Kachin people who were excellent jungle fighters and gave them lots of training there. Later, the V Force, Silwell realized that they were just duplicating what the OSS did so he merged the two units together, but that was after I had left. But between what Wilson and the OSS boys told me, I was able to cope with the situation.

Otherwise, I would not have been. And some people we had with other places didn't have anyone like that to help them. And with all of that polyglot of languages, unless you had someone, you were in bad shape.

I also had the son of the Kachin chieftain there who was named Kalu Manong. He died with tuberculosis while there, but his son Peter, Kalu Yam, he was my right-hand man and handled all of my relations with the Nagas and with the Kachins. And one of the big duties was giving them their ration of opium.

We gave them enough for two pipes a day, which was all they smoked. It never seemed to adversely affect them. In fact, the better workers were those who did smoke.

Very few of them didn't. And Dr. Seagrave said that those hills tribesmen who used opium from their own little poppy fields lived about 20 or 25 percent longer than the others that they had developed some resistance to dysentery. And it's not very nice, but the Kachins also had to have hot peppers, very hot chili peppers.

Well, we ran out of chili peppers one day and they came to me and said, if you don't get chili peppers for us, you're going to die. And I said, well, how can chili peppers keep you from dying? They liked to joke.

And they said, well, that it kept them from having dysentery. And if they didn't have the chili peppers, they would die of dysentery. And I said, well, how in the hell can chili peppers keep you from having dysentery?

And he said, that was what they called me, a chief of head men. He said, you eat our chilies in the morning and you're afraid to go. So it was a little, you'd get a few laughs along, but that was pretty true.

So finally we got some chili peppers, but the opium supply was arranged for us by the OSS through the government of India, British government in India. One time I was about to run out of opium and I didn't know what in the world I would do because it just was a real problem. And right at the last minute I got some.

It had been raining for about three weeks and we were about out of everything because planes couldn't see us and they couldn't drop to us. And I got this supply of opium and I didn't know it, but an old buddy of mine was wrapping, in charge of sending us supplies back at the airport. And every block of this opium was in little square blocks and each block weighed one seer, which was about a kilo.

It was the weight of twenty tolas and a tola was the weight of one silver rupee. So we used the coins for weight. Every block of opium was wrapped in an issue of Collier's Magazine and opened to the article in there telling what a terrible thing the Japs were doing by giving opium to the conquered people of Burma.

So there I am with about 10 or 15 or more kilos of opium wrapped in that article. I guess they tried to make me feel bad, but I didn't feel bad about it. The people were only mildly addicted.

They'd smoke a pipe in the morning and one at night. But now if you ever let them have one at noon, which they could do, well then that's where you spent the night because they would not go on beyond that. We had patrol activity, contact with the Japs.

About a week or 10 days after I got to this place, my friend Major Sackerdotty left and I was all on my own. We had a hand-operated radio. That is, you had to turn a crank to send.

You had batteries to receive. It was not too good. It was called a V-100.

And sometimes you could get out and sometimes you couldn't. And I know we'd move a tent all around. And we had two white boys there, sergeants, both sergeants, as they operated the radio for us.

And one of them was named Sergeant Wells and the other one, Sergeant Fargo, which I thought was most unusual. You'd find two sergeants named Wells and Fargo. They were both fine boys and they were there the whole time I was until right at the last.

So we had good radio service. The OSS had their own radio, which they used. And I think the British had one that they tried to keep us from knowing about.

The British were not very cooperative. General Wilson was a fine man, but the British themselves were very arrogant and tried to give you the impression that they were doing us a favor by letting us be over. And they were very critical of everything we did.

And I don't know, they were not very nice people. Individually, Lieutenant Darlington there and Colonel Wilson were just very fine people. I enjoyed them very much.

And some of the people with Seagrave later on, one of the doctors, Dr. Gurney, was a very fine person. And just individually you found people you liked, but their policy was just... I don't know how the Indians let them stay there as long as they did.

They abused them. They mistreated them. You'd find an Indian officer, a graduate of Sandhurst, who would be treated like dirt by a British corporal.

Just an impossible situation. I don't know how it lasted as long as it did. But we didn't have too much contact with them.

We had some. We had all sorts of units that came through this place. One was a South African unit when the war started in earnest and it was composed of, I think, every race, creed, and color that had ever visited the Dark Continent.

And I think they gave a pretty good account of themselves. We had no American combat troops while I was at this particular station. Later on, we had the Merrill's Marauders that came in and were taken over by the Mars Task Force.

But at that time, we had only engineer and quartermaster and signal corps and medical services as fire people there. And we had to rely on the Chinese for all combat activity. So even though you recognized their limitations and knew how difficult it was going to deal with them, as General Stilwell once said when he heard some of his men fussing about how sorry the Chinese were, he supposedly said, Now, gentlemen, no one knows any better than I do just what a problem they are, words to that effect.

But they're all we have. And we've got to do the best we can with them. And you let me do the fussing and cussing and you get out there and do your job.

I personally thought Stilwell was the best man they could possibly have had for that job. And all of us who knew him, and although I had not seen a lot of him, you felt like you knew him intimately. We actually cried when we heard he'd been relieved.

We thought it was such a terrible thing to relieve one man who knew what the score was. But a lot of those things I found out since the war, while I was out there, it was a new surprise every day because you didn't get any advice on what to do. Sometimes our supplies would be very inadequate.

We never actually ran out, but we came very near it several times. One time it rained for three weeks and we thought we were going to be out. Later on they started me stockpiling stuff for the, to be used by the engineers and others constructing the Lido Road.

We were on the, what was supposed to be the route the Lido Road would take to connect Sam with China, with the old Burma Road. But the time I was out there, the only engineer officer I had ever seen out there was General Wheeler. Nobody had driven a state, nobody had said this is the way the road's going, but we all thought, and I don't remember who told me, but that the only way it could go was to follow that refugee trail, the one that was littered with skeletons.

So I was told to locate places where supplies could be dropped along that route. And you'd go out and clear a small area. I would only take one old naga and his boy with me because I figured if I took a lot of troops it would just attract the attention of the Japs.

I was very fortunate I never did see them and we would hack out a place big enough to put out a panel and then I had a real problem to take that British map and try to figure out what the coordinates were because it was a little hard to tell where you were. You didn't have any definite landmarks you could look at and all I had was a compass and a hand level. But somehow I got them right and I'd send the young boy back to the nearest radio with the coordinates and they would radio the Air Force back at the air base in Assam.

And then we would hide the next day. Well, as soon as we cleared the place we'd hide because we didn't want anybody to know where we were. And we would wait and see if the plane would come over and drop something on that spot.

It always felt real good when you saw them coming right toward it and dropping on the spot but a lot of times we waited until the next day before we went down to see what was there because nobody knew where the Japanese were. Our intelligence wasn't that good. Fortunately, I never had any trouble.

And then one day a full colonel comes in, a Colonel Green. I try to get away from names too much but his I don't mind mentioning. And he berated me, he busted me, said I had everything in the wrong place, the road wasn't going to go that way.

And I said, well, Colonel, you're the first engineer to be out here. Nobody's driven a stake anywhere. Well, he went out by himself which he was about to do.

We found him a week later with a badly infected leg. He cut his leg on a piece of bamboo or something. Next time I heard of him he commanded a labor battalion on the docks at Calcutta.

Excuse me, I've got to drink a wine. You have to realize that there were no roads and no towns. This little place at the gap had been the site of a Naga village at one time but no more.

It was really just a spot on the map. All that remained there to show that it might have been a village was the central post from an old house that was soon destroyed by falling bags of rice.

[Speaker 2]
When we were not recording that you were traveling by foot. What about mules? I thought they used a lot of mules.

[Speaker 1]
The only way we had to travel was by foot. They had expected to send pack trains out. They started several of them out during the monsoon.

One got there with one mule and the Chinese ate him. During the monsoon it was very hard for horses to negotiate that trip. The Chinese units that were there when I first got there was

part of one battalion of the 114th Infantry Regiment which was part of the 38th Chinese Division.

That division was commanded by General Sun Lijian who was a graduate of VMI and had done graduate work at Princeton. He was a very arrogant man but he was also in my opinion a very fine officer and very well trained and a good division commander. His division had covered the British retreat out of Burma and he had about 50% casualties.

He was very bitter at the British. He hated them intensely. Now he did come out with horses one time but he killed a good many of them on the way out but he rode into camp on a horse at least.

I remember one night when he was berating the British who were sitting around the fire even though this was in Burma we were at about around 3,000 feet elevation and it got quite cool at night and we had open dirt boxes in our houses that you build fires in and the smoke went out through the thatched roofs. All the houses were built of bamboo. And of course being brash and quick to say things I might regret later I noticed that all of his fine uniforms he was wearing had British uniform buttons on them and I said well General if you hate the British how can you stand to see the lion and the unicorn on all your buttons?

The next morning I understood his tailor stayed up all night sewing cloth over all the buttons on his uniforms. But he was a very good officer. Later on we had there all of the 114th Regiment commanded by a very fine Chinese Colonel Lee Hung who was a very scholarly gentleman I don't know how good a soldier he was.

The 112th was commanded by Colonel Chen I don't have a first name for him. And he was a good commander but he was a little harder to get along with. He was rather high tempered and we had some even though we wound up friends we had some pretty rough sessions over just minor things about little supply issues that they didn't get.

Things that should have been so trivial they wouldn't cause any trouble at all. We also had in the area a Chinese Combat Engineer Regiment which was a large regiment commanded by General Lee Hung. And when that regiment came in my good friend Major Nevin Wetzel came in he was a reserve officer whose number fell out of the slot when they needed a good demolition engineer to go over before Pearl Harbor as part of the American military mission to China to help build expand the railroad from Rangoon to Lashio up on the China border so they could move more supplies into China through Rangoon and over the Burma Road on into China. Well of course he was caught in Rangoon when the Japs came in and he and a few others over the objections of the British destroyed what supplies they could to keep the Japs from getting them. The British said they didn't want to destroy anything they wanted to be there when they got back.

In fact they didn't even destroy their port facilities. There was one general motors plant there with an assembly plant with a thousand trucks and crates and Nevin said he was glad they did get to destroy them. So he was the advisor for this combat engineer regiment which was building a short stretch of road about 16 miles that started nowhere and ended at nowhere but it made access for the road equipment much more convenient when they finally got in there.

He was very good in telling me about how to get along with the Chinese. He had lots of trouble himself and he tried to help me avoid it and we got to be very good friends. When the advance started into Burma they decided I was unfit for further combat and I was sent back for light duty and Nevin went forward and I heard he was killed the next day and he heard the same news about me.

In 1976 I went to the first reunion of the China Burma Indian Veterans Association and I just heard about it in Atlanta. I was surprised and pleased just dumbfounded to see the last name on there Nevin Wetzel from Salt Lake City and I told my wife who was still living there and I said it can't be two Nevin Wetzels from Salt Lake City who were in the CBI and then I couldn't find him. He and his wife were visiting friends.

It was the last day before we got together and we had several long happy visits together after that before he died and that was just one of the good things that happened by joining that China Burma Indian Veterans Association. But he was very helpful to me there and I enjoyed having his company and his advice. When they began the real build up and had decided that's where they were going to start the invasion of Burma, Colonel Wilson called me in one day and said he had gotten word that a very high ranking American officer was coming out to take command.

We didn't know who he was.

[Speaker 2]
I'm going to hit you.