

# STILWELL, Joseph

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1883–1946 *U.S. Officer in China*

**General Joseph Stilwell, known as “Vinegar Joe” to his soldiers, spent much of his Army career in Asia. As a young officer he briefly visited Shanghai and Hong Kong in 1911. After World War I he requested to be assigned to China. Because of his language skills he was accepted by the Nationalist Chinese, and was made Chief of Staff to Chiang Kai-shek. He became the senior U.S. military officer in China during World War II.**

**G**eneral Joseph Stilwell was the senior U.S. military officer operating in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater during World War II. He is best remembered for extending the Burma Road, a 1,800-kilometer supply route, which originated in Ledo, India, went through Burma (now Myanmar), and ended in Kunming in Yunnan Province.

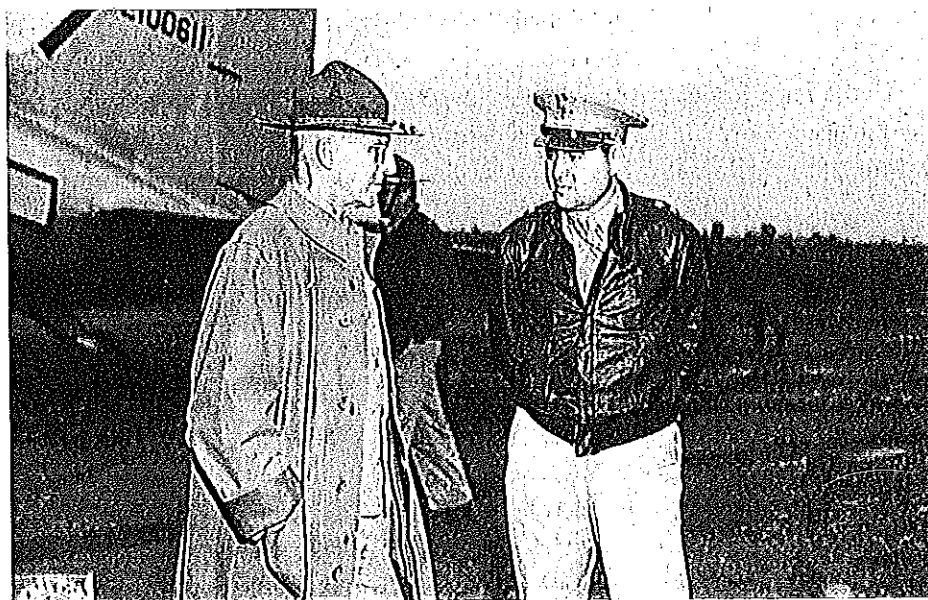
Joseph Warren Stilwell was born in 1883 in Palatka, Florida, and was accepted into the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1900. He was commissioned as an infantry officer in 1904 and sent to the Philippines, recently acquired from Spain during the Spanish-American War, for a short tour of duty. While on this assignment Stilwell travelled to Japan and China. When he returned to the United States, he taught English, Spanish, French, and history at West Point.

By 1917 the United States had become involved in

World War I, and Stilwell was sent to France as a liaison officer. After World War I, Stilwell briefly returned to the United States before being sent to China from 1920 to 1923. He went back to China in 1926 and stayed for three more years. When he returned to the United States in 1929, he was stationed in Fort Benning, Georgia, where he was given his nickname “Vinegar Joe” because of his tendency to let a soldier know that he had done something wrong.

In 1935 Stilwell returned to China for his third tour of duty. As the military commander at the U.S. embassy in Peking (now Beijing) from 1935 to 1939, he became fluent in the Chinese language and very knowledgeable about Chinese customs and culture. He was in China in 1937, when Japan first invaded the country. Despite his expertise on China, he had lagged behind his fellow officers and expected to be retired from the Army upon his return to the U.S. However, during his return he learned that he had been selected for promotion to the rank of brigadier general and assigned a brigade command at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Stilwell's use of the 3rd Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division in military exercises, in which he used tactics he had seen by the Japanese in China and which Germany would use in Europe, embarrassed senior generals. He was rewarded with promotion to the rank of major general and given command of the Seventh Infantry Division at Camp (later Fort) Ord, California.

Stilwell demonstrated his excellent command of troop movements during the training of his division, and particularly of new recruits and reserve officers at Fort Ord, leading to his appointment as commanding general



11 October 1944. General Joseph W. Stilwell talking with Major General Curtis E. LeMay of the 20th Bomber command, at a B-29 base. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

of the III Army Corps (later changed to the IIIrd Armored Corps headquartered at the Presidio of Monterey, California.

When the United States entered the war in the Pacific in 1941, General Stilwell went to Asia, but instead of commanding troops, he was sent to the CBI theater to establish an American military force and to assist Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, head of China's Nationalist

(Guomindang) forces, as his chief of staff. Stilwell had been selected by Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall and Secretary of War Henry Stinson because of his expertise on China. Chiang respected Stilwell because of his ability to speak Chinese, and Stilwell's expertise in China was a major asset that allowed him to get involved quickly with operations in the CBI, when he arrived in February 1942.



Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek with Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell, Commanding General, China Expeditionary Forces, on the day following a Japanese bombing attack [the Doolittle Raid], Maymyo, Burma (Myanmar) 1942. US NATIONAL ARCHIVES.

## Retreat and a New Road

By that time Japanese forces were making huge strides in taking over China. Singapore and Burma had already been invaded by Japanese forces. General Stilwell was able to persuade Chiang to give him control of some Chinese forces to help push back the Japanese. Stilwell was not the highest Allied officer in the CBI theater; British General Harold Alexander, Allied commander in Burma, was the superior ranking officer. From March to May of 1942, Stilwell tried to help Allied forces in Burma, but Allied command problems and strategic moves by the Japanese caused Allied forces to retreat. Most British forces retreated to India, while some Chinese forces went back to China. Rather than evacuating by aircraft, General Stilwell retreated on foot with his men. Chiang was irritated by the Chinese losses and blamed Stilwell for these, causing a rift in their relationship that would only worsen as the war went on.

As soon as Stilwell arrived in India, his main focus was on how to retake Burma from the Japanese forces. His plan was to connect the Burma Road with China so that more supplies could be moved into China from Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar). When the Japanese took control of southern Burma, a new proposal was made. General Stilwell's operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frank D. Merrill, recommended building a road from Ledo, India, to Burma, connecting with the old Burma Road, which had been built in 1937–1938, to provide a land supply route from India to China and Burma for support of the Allied soldiers who were fighting in the north Burma region. The connection of the road from Ledo, India, through northern Burma, would permit shipment of supplies to Kunming, China.

In late 1944, barely two years after Stilwell accepted responsibility for building the Ledo Road (which later came to be known as the Stilwell Road), the route was connected to the Burma Road. The first convoy reached Kunming on 4 February 1945.

## Air and Ground Fighting

To establish air superiority to protect the Burma Road and to drive Japanese forces out of Burma, a plan for capturing the Japanese-controlled city of Myitkyina in Burma was

developed. This win would allow Allied airplanes under the command of Claire Chennault, the commander of an American volunteer group, the Flying Tigers, to use the runway there to attack the Japanese and provide a strategic area from which to launch new offenses.

The ground offensive against the Japanese also continued. Frank Merrill, now brigadier general, took command of the 5307th Composite Regiment, a group that came to be known as Merrill's Marauders. This group attacked the Japanese Eighteenth Division in February 1944, enabling Stilwell to gain control of Burma's Hukawng Valley.

Before and during the ground and air offensives against the Japanese, General Stilwell had to deal with the political battles with Chiang Kai-shek, who was fighting Mao Zedong's Communist forces as well as the Japanese, in addition to contending with disagreements among the Allied forces, especially the British, who had issues other than Burma as priorities.

Although the completion of the road from Ledo to Kunming and the success of the air route pushed the Japanese occupation of China to the east, the war came to an end with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. General Stilwell was present at the signing of the Japanese surrender aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on 2 September 1945.

Postwar geopolitics kept General Stilwell from full recognition. His animosity toward Chiang Kai-shek led to statements that were seen as pro-Communist, and he returned to the United States after the Japanese surrender, in charge of the Western Defense Command in San Francisco, the same post he had held at the outbreak of the war. Just over a year later, on 12 October 1946, General Stilwell died from stomach cancer.

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## Further Reading:

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