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Book Review: Skies of Thunder: The Deadly World War II Mission over the Roof of the World

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Eager to return home from a brutal war, a C-54 full of servicemembers crashed in India on November 3, 1945. The resulting 45 deaths represented one of the costliest accidents of the countless sorties flown in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater. This tragic loss of life after the war’s end epitomizes the arguably wasted effort of US and British campaigns in this theater. Caroline Alexander’s *Skies of Thunder: The Deadly World War II Mission over the Roof of the World* brings this and other historical examples to life beautifully in her enthralling narrative of Airpower and Landpower in the CBI Theater.

A Rhodes Scholar and the recipient of a PhD from Columbia University, Alexander is a *New York Times* best-selling author of nonfiction. Her academic pedigree is evident in her well-documented footnotes and the thoughtful analysis that runs throughout the work, enlivening her evocative narrative.

The book focuses on four aspects of the CBI Theater: 1) the Allies’ overarching strategic interest in this area during World War II, especially in trying to keep the Japanese bogged down in China; 2) the Airpower bridge from India to China over the infamous so-called “Hump” of the Himalayas; 3) the land bridge the Allies sought to establish by constructing a road connecting Burma to China;
and 4) the land campaign fought between the Allies and the Japanese in Burma. The Hump dominates the first half of the book, whereas the land bridge and land campaign occupy the second half.

If there is a critique of this book, it is in the seemingly sudden shift in the argument. Alexander never explicitly states a thesis, but the dominating theme of at least the first half of the book is that the Hump pilots’ true enemy was the weather and that “no aircraft then existing could reliably overfly” the “Hump” (2, 234–35). Her introduction of Lieutenant General William H. Tunner’s management overhaul in September 1943—albeit very late in the book—suggests, however, that laissez-faire leadership bedeviled the airmen flying the missions before his arrival and needed significant improvement.

On the other hand, her abrupt thematic transition reinforces the larger subtext of perhaps the real argument she wants to make—that the substantial effort to provide an air and ground bridge to China was a tragic waste of resources and lives. Alexander may be correct, but this view may be a bit teleological in that we know how the story turned out.

Had the war taken a different course or dragged on, the CBI Theater may have played a more significant role—though perhaps Alexander is correct that the corruption undermining the arduous transfer of gasoline and other supplies across the Hump by air and road would never have amounted to more than it did.

Alexander’s eye for beguiling human and geographical detail brings the CBI Theater to life while casting a critical eye on the human frailties of her research subjects. The result is a fresh narrative that pulls readers into the challenges and complexities of this enormous theater of vast jungle and mountain at the end of the world.

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