MacArthur, Stilwell, and Special Operations in the War against Japan

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To begin a study of American theater-level organization and conduct of special operations in the war with Japan, one can consider two images. First, picture native stevedores at a port in the occupied Philippines unloading, under cover of darkness, crates of cigarettes, matches, chewing gum, candy bars, sewing kits, and pencils from a huge cargo submarine, each item bearing the inscription "I shall return" over a facsimile of the signature of General Douglas MacArthur. Then imagine Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell at lunch with members of his personal staff in the dining room of the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi, India when, at an adjacent table, an officer of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) stands up and opens his bush jacket. Five pigeons, freed from confinement, rush into the air and disappear through an open window in the ceiling. The general leaps from his chair, but, after a momentary glare at the perpetrator, resumes his seat and his meal without further ado.[1] The two vignettes say much about MacArthur, Stilwell, and their respective approaches to special operations in the Southwest Pacific and China-Burma-India theaters. MacArthur appears in his role, both bestowed and self-manufactured, as symbol of resistance, spiritual leader, and redeemer of the Philippine nation in its hour of need. Stilwell comes across as the hard-boiled pragmatist who could tolerate a band of free-spirited eccentrics as long as they produced results. In the context of an Army which had given little prewar thought to what we today call special operations, each commander had to make his own way in a largely unfamiliar field with little if any guidance from doctrine on the place of special operations in theater organization and strategy. Considering the contributions which special operations made in the two theaters, they did quite well.

The Aristocrat and the Doughboy

The suave, charismatic MacArthur seemed uniquely qualified to direct special operations in the Southwest Pacific theater (SWPA). Imaginative, widely read, with a quick, flexible intellect, he sensed the importance of spiritual and moral, as opposed to material, factors in warfare, and he knew from history and his father's own experiences in the Philippines how effective a force of guerrillas could be. Even for an American Army officer, his extensive experience and close ties with the Filipines were unusual. He had lived much of his life in the islands, adopting them as his home, and he had long been involved in the task of creating a national identity for the Philippines, notably through his service as field marshal of the fledgling Philippine army in the years before the war. He had a keen sense for Filipino politics and had established close friendships with Filipino leaders, particularly Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon, the godfather of MacArthur's son and contributor of a $500,000 nest egg to his former field marshal's bank account. These considerable ties of emotion and self interest were sealed by MacArthur's genuine and deep sense of obligation to those he had left behind on Bataan and Corregidor and his near obsessive need to remove the blot of those defeats from his record.[2] In most respects, Stilwell was about as different from MacArthur as can be imagined. In contrast with MacArthur's aloofness, urbane grace, and aristocratic paternalism, Vinegar Joe prided himself on his candor, lack of polish or pretension, and identification with the common soldier. Having served extensively in China during the interwar years, he knew the country and could speak Chinese fluently, but his tendency to let people know what he thought of them ill-suited him for a post with such strong diplomatic overtones. Yet, the abrasive exterior concealed a keen intelligence, a willingness to innovate, and, like MacArthur, an unusually great sensitivity to Asiatic cultures. His acid was balanced by a human kindness and an ironic sense of humor which could tolerate the mavericks often found in the special operations community. Like MacArthur, Stilwell had a score to settle. For a man who had despised the Japanese since a visit to Japan in the 1920s, defeat in the Burma campaign of early 1942 must have been a bitter pill to swallow. He was, therefore, inclined to be open-minded toward anyone who could help him avenge that defeat and
From the time he assumed command of US Army forces in the Far East in July 1941, MacArthur displayed both an interest in special operations and a desire to keep independent practitioners out of his theater. Early in his tenure, he maneuvered to cut Philippine High Commissioner Francis B. Sayre out of war preparations, and he would manage to limit the Department of the Interior's role in Philippine affairs for the rest of the war. Similarly, he and his staff blocked all attempts by William J. Donovan's OSS to gain a foothold in the theater until the closing days of the conflict. Brigadier General Charles A. Willoughby, SWPA's vain and domineering intelligence chief, later claimed that MacArthur, in the midst of a shooting war, could not afford to wait for the new OSS to establish itself in the theater, but the explanation does not ring entirely true. MacArthur and his staff were apparently suspicious of semi-autonomous agencies with a separate chain of command back to Washington, and they also believed themselves to be quite capable of handling special operations in the Philippines without any help from the OSS.

MacArthur's expertise in special operations was belied by his initial performance. Before the outbreak of the war, he had given some thought to guerrilla warfare by Filipino reservists and had taken steps to organize an underground intelligence service among Filipino officials and American residents of the islands, but these plans amounted to very little. MacArthur overestimated both the time available before the Japanese attack and the ability of his force to halt the enemy on the beaches, and he did not want to dampen Filipino morale by premature preparations for guerrilla warfare. When the Japanese broke through his beach defenses, forcing a withdrawal into Bataan, MacArthur improvised as best he could, organizing an intelligence net based in Manila, sending officers behind Japanese lines to organize resistance, and accelerating preparations for guerrilla operations in Mindanao and the other southern islands. Evacuated to Australia, he hoped to direct guerrilla warfare from his theater headquarters there. Unfortunately for his plans, the War Department designated Lieutenant General Jonathan M. Wainwright as the commander of all American troops in the Philippines, and, when Wainwright surrendered in May 1942, he ordered all units under his command to follow suit, uprooting most of the seeds sown by MacArthur. Not until late 1942 did a largely spontaneous guerrilla movement finally contact MacArthur in Australia.

Whereas MacArthur was interested in special operations from the beginning, Stilwell had to be sold on such activities. An orthodox soldier and admirer of infantry, he initially dismissed guerrilla warfare and sabotage as "illegal action" and wanted to concentrate on building a powerful Chinese army. Nevertheless, the potential for special operations in his China-Burma-India theater (CBI) drew the kind of entrepreneurs that MacArthur had kept out of the Philippines. When Commander Milton S. Miles arrived in May 1942 with vague orders from the Navy Department to undertake operations which would do maximum possible damage to the enemy, Stilwell, eager to hit back at the Japanese in some way, gave him free and exclusive control over special operations in CBI. Two months later, Major Carl Eifler, an old acquaintance from Stilwell's interwar service on the Mexican border, appeared in Chungking at the head of an OSS mission that Stilwell had initially rejected. The CBI commander sent him to Burma, as much to keep him clear of Miles in China as for any other reason. Over time, Stilwell's estimation of special operations rose, partly due to his close relationship with Eifler and partly out of fascination with the Kachin natives among whom Eifler's OSS Detachment 101 worked, but mostly because of the valuable intelligence which Eifler's men were providing by early 1943.

Command and Control

Both Stilwell and MacArthur dealt directly with their special operations chiefs but at different levels of involvement. While MacArthur left many details of Philippine affairs in the hands of his chief of staff, Lieutenant General Richard K. Sutherland, he insisted on personally interviewing escaped prisoners and returning agents from the islands and otherwise kept in close touch with developments through Colonel Courtney A. Whitney, whom Sutherland brought into the theater in May 1943 to take charge of the Philippine Regional Section. A former lawyer and acquaintance of MacArthur in prewar Manila, Whitney has acquired a reputation as a sycophant who, according to Paul Rogers, "simply mirrored what he thought was the true MacArthur." Attempting to pacify an aggrieved guerrilla leader, Whitney wrote:

In my own case when recommendations I have made have been partially or wholly disapproved, despite my conviction that I was right in the first instance, I have always sought to find the soundness in his
[MacArthur's] decision and I have never failed to do so. This results in a wholehearted acceptance of adverse decisions and much happier resulting service. I think that once you realize that it is General MacArthur and he alone who defines all Philippine policies and makes the decisions upon questions emanating from the Islands you too will find the way to see in his decisions, however contrary to your views, constructive soundness. By that I do not mean that we are a bunch of "yes" men around the General in these matters--to the contrary we are as independent as a bunch of "hogs on ice." But ours is the pick and shovel work in the orientation of policy for his consideration--his the final word.[8]

Whitney was apparently responsible for the decision to create, in SWPA propaganda, a cult around MacArthur and his pledge to return, a campaign which, however effective in some quarters, led some guerrillas to adopt the derisive motto, "We Remained!" Still, the Colonel did possess a keen, if rather conservative and paternalistic, sense for Philippine issues, and, more important, he enjoyed the ear of his commander.[9]

The emergence of Whitney's Philippine Regional Section (PRS) ignited a turf battle within MacArthur's theater headquarters. Before Whitney arrived, special operations in SWPA, including the work of the PRS, came under the Allied Intelligence Bureau (AIB), an inter-Allied agency which operated under the coordination of Willoughby's intelligence section (G-2). As the activities of the PRS in establishing Filipino agent nets and supporting guerrillas expanded during the spring of 1943, however, the section achieved a semi-independent status, under which Whitney reported directly to MacArthur and Sutherland, although he continued to coordinate his activities through G-2 and relied heavily on the AIB for support. The PRS's status irritated Willoughby, who, in late February 1944, recommended that Philippine activities be split among the staff sections. As Allied forces neared the islands in late May, Sutherland acted, assigning intelligence tasks to G-2, supply to G-4, and direction of guerrillas to the G-3 Operations subsection; but instead of assigning Whitney to G-2 as Willoughby had hoped, he detailed the bulk of the PRS and its chief to G-3 Operations. Despite petty sniping from G-2 over such matters as PRS's waste of maps and poor standards for dispatches, Whitney's stature with MacArthur continued to grow, to the point that by war's end he had become MacArthur's chief confidant.[10]

Compared to MacArthur, Stilwell took a more detached approach to special operations, working directly with Miles and Eifler when necessary but giving them an almost entirely free hand. In theory, the intelligence section of Stilwell's rear headquarters echelon in New Delhi supervised Detachment 101's operations, but in practice Eifler often dealt directly with Stilwell. Eifler would be waiting at the airstrip when Stilwell's plane, dubbed "Uncle Joe's Chariot," made one of its periodic stops in Detachment 101's area. More often than not, Stilwell would notice the burly colonel, call out, "Buffalo Bill! Come on over!" and then introduce Eifler to senior officers as the "Army's number one thug." Eifler would take the opportunity to report, answer questions, and make requests. On at least one occasion, Stilwell intervened to provide Eifler with an advance when his OSS superiors in Washington were not forthcoming with needed funds. Once the 1944 campaign in North Burma began, Detachment 101 came directly under Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC), Stilwell's tactical headquarters, and its activities were controlled by Stilwell in person.[11]

Detachment 101 was fortunate to have direct access to Stilwell, for the special operations chain of command in the CBI theater was a nightmare. At the Navy Department's insistence, Miles had a separate chain of command back to Washington, although Stilwell supposedly had complete authority over Miles where "necessary." To avoid jurisdictional clashes with Miles, Donovan agreed to designate him as the OSS Strategic Services Officer (SSO) for the theater, but the arrangement did not work well. Miles was determined to remain independent of OSS, which, in turn, increasingly saw him as a tool of the Chinese and an obstacle to their plans for an espionage net in China free of foreign control. At first, Stilwell got along well with Miles and backed those activities which he thought might prove productive, but he came to regard Miles as a loose cannon when the latter attempted to expand his sphere by sending liaison officers to the 14th Air Force and Lord Louis Mountbatten's new Southeast Asia Command. After a visit to the theater in late 1943, Donovan removed Miles as OSS's theater chief, relieved an exhausted Eifler, and extensively reorganized OSS in the theater. Colonel John Coughlin became the new SSO, reporting directly to Stilwell and possessing supervisory authority over Detachment 101, now under Colonel W. R. Peers.[12]

Even if special operations agencies could straighten out the chain of command within the theaters, they still faced difficulties in securing cooperation from the more conventional services, which could be counted on to view their unorthodox enterprises with skepticism. Since those agencies were not self-sufficient, they had to rely at least partly
Informal working relationships and salesmanship could ease many problems of cooperation between special operations agencies and the services, but they could not always overcome differences among allies separated by politics and culture. In SWPA, the AIB had originally been created in July 1942 to bring under one roof several mainly-Australian organizations involved in intelligence collection, sabotage, and propaganda. An Australian "controller" provided loose coordination under the overall direction of MacArthur's headquarters. Unfortunately, national, philosophical, and personal differences within the AIB caused it to pull in different directions, resulting in its reorganization in early 1943 along the lines of Australian, Dutch, and American spheres of interest, rather than function. From the viewpoint of MacArthur's headquarters, AIB's "intermittent mania for complete independence" and tendency to go off on "semi-political" tangents from the main focus of the theater, the drive to the Philippines, provided a constant irritant. MacArthur's grant of semi-independent status to the PRS, like his designation of Sixth Army as Alamo Force, probably represented a tactic to remove Philippine affairs, in which he possessed both a national and personal interest, from any control by the Australian-dominated AIB.[14]

In CBI, Stilwell had to work not only with the Chinese, but also with the British, sovereign in India and prewar rulers of Burma. Miles may have been correct in his insistence that it was impossible to conduct special operations in China without going through the Chinese government, but that did not make dealing with the byzantine, corrupt Chinese bureaucracy any easier. As for the British bureaucracy in India, it had its own misgivings about special operations and vigorously opposed the establishment of an independent American intelligence net in India. With regard to OSS operations in Burma, it expressed much more tolerance, but OSS Detachment 101's relations with its British allies were often turbulent, particularly when Special Operations Executive/India infringed on what Eifler considered his turf. Into this picture came Lord Mountbatten's new Southeast Asia Command, an Allied headquarters established by the Combined Chiefs of Staff in late 1943 to infuse new vigor into the war in Burma. For the 1944 offensive into Burma, the Allies envisioned an expanded role for Major General Orde C. Wingate's long-range penetration groups, which would include a new American contingent code-named Galahad. The prospect of the only American combat unit in the theater serving under a British general was enough to arouse every Anglophobic instinct in Stilwell, and when Wingate stated that he could not use Galahad before April 1944, Stilwell prevailed on Mountbatten to transfer Galahad to his control.[15]

Roles and Missions

Along with complications of command and control, MacArthur and Stilwell faced the problem of defining new concepts in a field that had received little attention in the prewar Army. Within SWPA there existed several differing views on the proper role and capabilities of guerrillas. In March 1943, MacArthur, in accord with Quezon's wishes, directed the guerrillas to "lie low" and focus on organization and intelligence. The order seemed sensible at the time and undoubtedly spared many Filipinos from reprisals, but it created problems for guerrilla commanders who found it hard to remain idle in the face of popular demand for action against a brutal occupation. When Whitney arrived in May 1943, he pushed for more aggressive exploitation of the guerrilla potential by forming a battle detachment in every area and arming every guerrilla by the time of liberation. More often than not, his views prevailed, due to MacArthur's emotional commitment to the guerrillas, and the PRS expanded its supply effort into the islands. By the eve of the invasion of Leyte in October 1944, however, SWPA and Sixth Army still took care to list combat intelligence as the primary mission for guerrillas and warned against their use in attacks on fixed positions. Significantly, the guerrillas on Leyte would come under Sixth Army's intelligence section during the invasion.[16]
Within the CBI theater, considerable debate existed over the proper role of long-range penetration groups. The Army guide to these units, taken almost entirely from Wingate's report, stated that they consisted of separate, self-contained columns which, supplied by air and directed by radio from a group headquarters, would operate independently for as long as three months deep in enemy territory. The main point of dispute seems to have been whether these columns would operate more or less independently against Japanese communications or in closer coordination with units in contact with the principal Japanese forces. The orthodox Stilwell took the latter point of view, envisioning Galahad as a kind of strategic cavalry conducting envelopments around the Japanese flank while his Chinese divisions advanced on the enemy front. Whatever his view of Galahad's eventual mission, however, he seems to have viewed this "tough-looking lot" first and foremost as a model, the American combat unit he had long been seeking to show the Chinese how to fight. It is interesting in this regard that the commanders of Galahad, while they noted differences in training and organization between their unit and other American formations, seem to have viewed themselves more as conventional infantrymen than as a special force.[17]

During the initial stages of the drive down the Hukawng Valley in February and March 1944, Stilwell took precautions against misuse of Galahad. For the command of Galahad, he chose Brigadier General Frank D. Merrill, an old intimate and former theater G-3 who had already been involved in planning the campaign. Throughout the campaign, Stilwell stayed in close touch with Merrill, often planning operations with him. In late February, following his concept of long-range penetration groups, Stilwell sent Galahad on a march around the Japanese right flank to cut the enemy's line of retreat at Walawbum while the Chinese attacked in front. At the same time, he ordered Merrill to avoid unnecessary heavy combat. Galahad carried out its mission, but the glacial pace of the Chinese advance left Merrill's 3000 lightly armed troops exposed to a riposte by the Japanese 18th Division, forcing the Americans to evacuate their roadblocks. After the battle, Stilwell told Merrill that he would never again leave one of his few American combat units in such an exposed position. For the next envelopment to Shaduzup and Inkanbahtawng, Merrill arranged for two Chinese regiments to follow and take over the roadblocks, leaving Galahad free to use its light, mobile battalions to best advantage.[18]

Much as Stilwell and Merrill would have liked to spare Galahad from prolonged line duty, circumstances and coalition politics intervened. When a Japanese force threatened to outflank Galahad's own envelopment toward Inkanbahtawng, Stilwell's staff, in his absence, ordered Merrill to establish a blocking position. At Nhpum Ga, Merrill's 2d Battalion stopped the Japanese but at a heavy cost in dead and wounded. Although Galahad desperately needed rest and reorganization, Stilwell was eager to capture the key airstrip at Myitkyina before the monsoon season. Believing that Galahad was his only reliable unit, Stilwell ordered Merrill to strike for the airfield. Revived by promises of a long rest upon completion of the mission and reinforced by Chinese troops and Kachins, Galahad drove over the rugged Kumon range and captured the airstrip in a surprise attack on 17 May. At that point, Galahad could reasonably have expected relief, but Stilwell could not afford to rest his Americans while other nationalities who were equally exhausted continued to fight. Nor could Stilwell get reinforcements from other sectors of the Allied front. Thus, Galahad stayed in line, desperately throwing ill-trained fillers into the ranks to replace veterans evacuated with wounds and disease, with disastrous results for unit morale. Only a fraction of the unit remained by the fall of Myitkyina on 3 August 1944.[19]

**Contributions to Victory**

Galahad’s tragic fate obscured a generally good record for special operations in the CBI theater. True, special operations in China, Indochina, and Thailand did not really get under way until the last months of the war. In Burma, however, the effort that Stilwell authorized in 1942 paid off handsomely. OSS Detachment 101 provided much essential information, including, by Peers’ estimate, up to 90 percent of Northern Combat Area Command’s intelligence in the 1944 offensive. Its Kachin confederates also guided and screened columns, helped downed fliers to escape, and provided a potent guerrilla army. Galahad’s sacrifice made possible the capture of Myitkyina, greatly easing the aerial transport of supplies over the Hump and making it possible for the Ledo Road from India to link up with the North Burma road system on its way to a final junction with the old Burma Road. If Stilwell thought about it at the time of his relief in October 1944, he could have taken considerable pride in CBI’s performance of special operations during his tenure.[20]

After a rocky start, the investment of MacArthur and his staff in the Filipino guerrillas likewise paid off to a large
degree. Although often plagued by internal rivalries and, despite SWPA's efforts, lack of resources, the guerrillas still performed valuable services in guiding American units, harassing Japanese movements, assisting downed pilots, guarding captured areas, and eliminating bypassed enemy detachments, thereby releasing American troops for other duties. Guerrilla reports, though often exaggerated and unreliable, still represented the single most important source of intelligence for American forces. Volckmann's North Luzon guerrillas actually approached Whitney's dream of a guerrilla army. As for the Filipinos themselves, the guerrilla experience left several troubling issues to resolve after the war, but it also provided a people with a badly needed sense of national pride on the eve of full independence in 1946.[21]

MacArthur and Stilwell were different men who took different approaches to special operations in their respective theaters. MacArthur's was based on a romantic vision, drawn from history and legend, of a people's war against brutal oppressors. The SWPA commander turned to special operations early, developed an extensive support organization, and closely supervised its work. Stilwell's approach was more cautious and pragmatic, judging special operations entrepreneurs by their results. Although he permitted direct access and made sure that the special operators obtained their share of resources, he generally adopted a hands-off tack, giving each entrepreneur a mission and letting him carry it out without much interference. Yet, for all their differences, the two commanders shared some basic traits. Both, by the late spring of 1942, were driven men, eager to avenge recent defeats and ready to adopt almost any means to achieve victory over a despised enemy. Thus, while both were basically orthodox soldiers who relied on the big battalions, both were ready to turn to special operations to aid conventional forces. Because of their support, special operations forces were able to make significant contributions to victory in the war against Japan.

NOTES

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6. Eifler, a 250-pound mountain of a man who "seldom spoke more softly than a loud roar" would soon become a legend. Lieutenant General William R. "Ray" Peers, who succeeded Eifler as head of OSS Detachment 101, recalled that when he met Eifler, his new boss "took a stiletto type dagger and drove it a good two to three inches into the top of his desk. He looked pleased." See Dunlop, Behind Japanese Lines, pp. 69, 79. When questioned by the author about some of the stories in circulation, Eifler responded, "Well, there's the legend of Carl Eifler and there's the real Carl Eifler," but he readily admitted that Peers' story was true.


10. The repeated changes in high-level supervision of special operations in the Philippines contributed to wasteful duplication as PRS installed its own American-dominated intelligence nets, leaving the old Filipino-dominated G-2/AIB nets to atrophy; see "Intelligence Activities in the Philippines," I: 23, 27, 30; Jesus A. Villamor, They Never Surrendered: A True Story of Resistance in World War II (Quezon City, Philippines: Vera-Reyes, 1982), pp. 219, 243. See also "Intelligence Activities in the Philippines," I: 7-11, 29-34, 58; General Headquarters, Far East Command, Military Intelligence Section, General Staff, "Operations of the Allied Intelligence Bureau, GHQ, SWPA," 3 vols., CMH Library, I: 1, 4-8, 58; Rogers, The Good Years, p. 247; Whitney to Chief, G-3 Operations Division, GHQ, SWPA, 16 June 1944, Willoughby to G-3, 14 June 1944 and 25 May 1944, Folder 7, Memorandums to and from G-3, 1944-1945, Box 4, Whitney Papers; Willoughby to Sutherland, 20 May 1944, Folder 7 Whitney, Courtney--Personal Correspondence, 1940-1944, Box 8, Whitney Papers; G-2 to G-3, 25 May 1944, Folder 10, Philippine Regional Section Reactivation, Box 5, Whitney Papers; Whitney to Controller, AIB, 29 May 1943, Folder 1, Operations 1943,
Box 63, Whitney Papers; James, *Years of MacArthur*, II: 510.


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