Tracing the History of Stilwell Road in Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract—D.Nath in his article analyze Stilwell Road as a passage of migration of people, culture and religion. Thus, emphasizing more on the historical importance on the communication phenomena all through the ages.[1] And Sarah Hillary in her book describe how the railways in Assam came into being with the introduction of the process of colonial administration[2] but neglected the Stilwell Road which was also the outcome of the colonial rule. The Stilwell Road lies in the strategically geopolitical important region of Upper Assam, Pangsu pass of Arunachal Pradesh, Hukoong valley of Burma to Kumming region of China. Thus, this paper will provide insights on the passage of Stilwell Road which was political economical important to the British Empire and the outbreak of Second World War due to its calculative reputation, Chinese and American military engineers proposed to construct "jeep road" from Pangsu Pass to Kumming of China and named on its Supervisor General Joseph Warren Stilwell. This paper is divided into three parts, firstly discussing on the importance of Pangsu Pass to Hukong Valley route to British Empire, secondly focusing on the history of Ledo Road construction and last part is conclusion.

Keywords: Americans Engineers, Chinese, Colonial Empire, Political Economy, Second World War, Stilwell Road

I. INTRODUCTION

During the construction of the Road, there was a total of 1,133 American fatalities in the area commanded from Ledo. Of this number, 261 were from Engineer units. Among the 624 Americans killed in combat were 130 Engineer soldiers; among the 63 dead of typhus, 8 were Engineers. Road accidents claimed 44 lives, drownings 53, and malaria only 11. Finally, 173 Americans lost their lives in aircraft accidents in Ledo to Patkai Hills. The question remained: what was the significance of this route or region? The expenditure of more than eleven hundred lives and perhaps $150,000,000 plus the efforts of a force that eventually exceeded seventeen thousand Engineers.

The trade route of colonial Tirap frontier from Patkai hills and then connect Hookong valley of Burma to Kumming of China. And this paper traces the history of Stillwell routes focusing on the significance of the region in the political economy of British colonialism and the American or allied forces contribution of monumental road construction that imprint in the Second World War. In 1879 colonial officials explore the trade routed from Assam to Burma and Eastern China through Patkai Range. Therefore, thorough surveyed of Tirap frontier of Arunachal Pradesh were conducted additional reason given for the extension of surveyed eastward would be no matter of difficulty as far as Irrawardy of Burma. The Nongyang Valley and Lakes, the continuation of the Patkai, together with routes, and the proposed routes towards the Yangtse Kyang, via Patkai, Hukong, and Shoemai Nuk etc.

The history of stillwell road began with the colonial survey of Patkai Hills. Colonial official S.O.B. Ridsdale in his letter to S.E. Seal, advised that "Chief Commissioner might recommend to carry out this survey, but I should rather be inclined to allow extra officials exploration to take place in the first instance, and follow up with a government party afterwards."[3]

S.E.Seal started the journey and he mentioned in his reports the importance of the Patkai hills of Arunachal Pradesh, which can be directly connect to Burma and China and the available forest and mineral resources that attracted the attention of the British Officials. From starting the journey Mr. Seal note down all the colonial interest region, and thus in this paper too only the geographical location which grabbed attention of the officials were highlighted. Mr. seal started his journey from Jaipur to Kerim Pani and the Nemshik, kyahs or opium eater was also found in the villages of Namshik and rubber plants were also of great attraction of the surveyors. Hunt elephant and sell ivory to inter-tribes or Hukong side. Returning to the later left to Makum side, encamped at Insa and then to move toward Tirapmuk which was known for Coalfields. And they went on to Uten

on the old bed of the Dehing called Kerim Pani. Later turned upto Namrup or Namphuk to Namchik discovered huge rock, Nahar, Hulong and Mehahi the trees were of 100 feet height and beautifully straight.

The journey continued from Namchik travelled to Tikhak village over a low hill such huge immense trees were found officials the moved towards Nampong river and stopped near Nunki Muk where Tiger were abundance. Ascending toward Patkai hills and had great look of hills, valley and lake Digam Bum and Nongyang Lake both flat and larger. They started regular path to Hukong paddled out on the Nongyang. Mr. Peal successful journey gives addition reason for the extension of the surveyed eastward would be a matter of no great difficulties as far as the Irrawaddy.

In the report of Mr.Seal he also mentioned the opinion of Lieutenant Carlton, who had also experience on this region "what a pity there is no means of communication between Assam and Yunnan. A good land route and there are no natural obstacles of any consequences to prevent from it, would afford an outlet for British Merchandise into the very heart of China". In 1869, Mr. H.L.Senkins also viewed that "crossed the Patkai near the site of the old route and demonstrated that the obstacles of any moment were of a political and a physical nature".[4] Through these statement it can be clearly state that the region called in today scenario Tinsukia district of Upper Assam, Changlang, Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh was always in the eyes of the colonial interest. However, they successfully established railways till Lekhanpani for commercial benefit.

Going back to the survey of Mr. Seal, the first day of march from Jaipur to Dhodur Ali with the Dihing river, formerly a place of considerable importance, and likely to set up large steamers can reach it from the Brahmaputra in the rains, and small ones during the eight months of the year. Coal, Petroleum and Timber are also to be found in the large quantities. It is also the point at which a route from Burmah would practically emerge, government has also wisely reserved large tract of forest.[5]

Surveyed Officer reached Bisa or Makum, a village on the left bank celebrated for its fort, a native officer and 20 police stationed in charge. Maltese cross walls of 4thick and 50 high, looped-holed in three stories was built by the late general David Reid who had long experience on this frontier, *pucca* work in Eastern Arunachal Pradesh. At Bisa or Makum not far off there are valuable beds of coal upto 20 and even 30 feet thick; there are also petroleum springs. The higher ranges bordering the basin of the Tirap running behind as at Rangatu, 3500 feet. Beyond these again lies the hills near Yungphi and Jugli, ang the Patkai at the distance of 5000 and 6000 feet rising to 8000 feet.

Not only the forest and mineral resources of the region were interest of the British now even there blacksmith was in great demand, the Dehing *Daos* claims are double what they were in 1870s, which is generally attributed to Government purchasing indiscriminately. The discovery of the actual route where it crossed the Patkai in olden times is not very difficult, its locality is known, and exploration was all that was necessary. There are reasons for presuming that this old route was in use as the "Doibat" in 592 AD. By the earliest Shan from Mojong.[6] This exploration of the route of Patkai were always the interest of the East India Company and the British Empire because of the potential economic benefit for the rule.

After a century, this commercially exploited route came into the picture again as the story of the Ledo Road, in which General Stilwell was the chief of Army Ground Forces back in the States, Stilwell himself called the leitmotiv[7] of Second World War effort in Asia. After all, the Road project both symbolized and ultimately assisted in achieving the objective which brought the American military presence to mainland Asia in the first place the Engineer soldier's achievements in completing history's toughest road job and greatest military pipeline system. As Lend Lease was given to China, therefore Washington became concerned with two major steps in its execution. First, it was necessary to improve ways and means of getting war materials into China. That meant road, particularly. Second, to ensure the recipients effective use of equipment, the War Department detailed Brigadier General John Magruder to take a small delegation of American specialists to Chungking in the summer of 1941 to administer the Lend Lease program shaping up for China. As a result, only one successful exploration was carried out, across northern Burma by way of Fort Hertz to the Upper Assamese village of Ledo. Naturally, the director of this particular survey, Yuen Mung hung, favored construction along the Ledo route- Chaukan Pass- Fort Hertz- Chungtien. Moreover, this road would connect the interior of China with river, rail, and highway terminals at Ledo. The project of aiding China quickly boiled down to developing the Burma Road and the rail and river communications between the Burmese port of Rangoon and

the gateways to Yunnan. While Magruder's assistants consulted with British authorities in Burma about the plans for improving the Rangoon to Lashio railway and developing a barge line up the Irrawaddy River, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers assigned Major John E. Ausland, a railway construction expert, to Magruder's mission as an adviser to Chinese officials planning construction of a Yunnan-Burma railroad.[8]

While China's leader, Chiang Kai-shek was greatly enamored of Yuen's proposed "Fort Hertz Road" in 1942, Dr. Tseng Yang-fu, director-general of the Yunnan-Burma Railway project. and others on the ground in Burma began promoting another route. British civil affairs officers at Myitkyina and in the remote Hukawng Valley spoke in glowing terms of an old dirt path running from Myitkyina through the Mogaung and Hukawng valleys to the Naga village of Shingbwiyang, on the eastern edge of the Patkai Mountains lining the border with India. While on a state visit to New Delhi in early February, Chiang discussed the Hukawng Valley route with British engineers and came to the conclusion that it would traverse less forbidding terrain and be more quickly completed than Yuen's more northerly trail.

Royal Engineer forces in Assam started building a truck road from Ledo toward Fort Hertz and also a "jeep road" running from Ledo through Pangsau Pass toward the Hukawn and Mogaung valleys. For his part, Chiang "washed out" the Yunnan-Burma railroad and ordered Tseng's forces onto the road job in Burma with the least possible delay. On February 2, General George C. Marshall, U.S. Army chief of staff, named Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell to command U.S. Army forces and projects in China, Burma, and India. Direct talks with Chinese officials at the same time produced an agreement that Stilwell would "command" Chinese armies fighting beside the British in defense of Burma.

In company with a party of British officers headed by the British IV Corps Engineer, the Americans looked over warehouses, tea sheds, and repair shops around Ledo, Tinsukia, and Lekhapani with the purpose of determining their availability and usefulness for American use. The report recommended that the Ledo Base be built up along the metergauge railway from Tinsukia to Lekhapani. At Ledo on December 15, 1942, Raymonp A. Wheeler, Deputy Supreme Commander, South East Asia Command, gave the new command to Colonel Arrowsmith, the central figure who had initiated the American works in Upper Assam. with the construction of the Ledo Road and with logistical support of the "Chinese Army in India." By early 1943, 90 per cent of the American engineering resources in CBI were under Arrowsmith's jurisdiction. Major Hirshfield, base engineer, plunged into the awesome task of turning a coal mining village into a military base. Working through British liaison engineers and civil affairs officers, he succeeded in clearing for American use a number of houses, tea sheds, and entire estates to house the Military Police, Medical, Ordnance, Quartermaster, Signal, and other units that would move in to support troops in the field and Engineers on the Road. With the labor available, Hirshfield instituted a program of warehouse construction destined within two years to expand Ledo's meager facilities by more than 1,500,000 square feet. By the spring of 1943, the area from Margherita to Lekhapani was alive with activity and dotted with American installations.

When Major Robert A. Hirshfield, and James W. Sloat, from base engineer needed lumber, Services of Supply took over the saw mill operated at Margherita by the Assam Rail Road and Trading Company. The cost of such transactions was to be deducted after the war from Lend Lease accounts accumulated during the war by British forces in India. Lieutenant Samuel E. Melsheimer's Company E, 45th Engineers, was the first Engineer unit to reach Ledo. Accompanied by the 2d Battalion's commander, Captain John E. Moyer, Jr., Company E unloaded on December 9-10. Moving out to Jagun, ten miles northeast of Ledo, Melsheimer's men began building themselves a camp and clearing a larger area along the Burhi Dihing River in anticipation of the arrival of the rest of the regiment. Assigned to the Tenth Air Force and concentrated at Chabua, this battalion was the only force available to provide the airfield construction and maintenance essential to the crucial supply and defense missions of the Army Air Forces in India.

Most common trees in the Nampong and Namchick was the hollong tree a towering, white barked hardwood which was logged by forestry outfits and used in the construction of bridges and Army installations from Ledo to Wanting(China). The terrain between Ledo and Shingbwiyang made the first leg of the road. Generally speaking, this section of the Road was to follow a northeasterly course from Ledo along the Tirap River bottoms and then swing eastward and up into the Patkai. After clearing Pangsau Pass somewhere beyond Mile Point 40, the Road was to descend gradually along the eastern slopes of the Patkais

toward the Tarung River bend near Tagap Ga. From here it would lead over Chinglow Hill and down into Shingbwiyang, the enemy's advanced base at the edge of the Hukawng. During the first construction season, it was generally believed at Ledo that the distance to Shingbwiyang would be 120 miles, which ultimately proved to be around 15 miles too much. A couple of surveys had been made in the 1920's for a projected Hukawng Valley Railway to connect Assam with the Burma Railways at Mogaung. A roadbed for a railroad extended a few miles out of Ledo, but the fact that the route crossed the Namchik and Namphuk rivers at locations where these streams were widest and their low banks particularly subject to inundation led Sloat, with Arrowsmith's concurrence, to rule most of the railway alignment out of consideration. This survey, largely guess work where the Shingbwiyang- Ledo sector was concerned, called for a road up the Namphuk to its confluence with the Namgoi, thence up and across the Namgoi to Pangsau Pass, where it joined the Refugee Trail. Sloat decided after a conference with Wheeler and Arrowsmith that the route would be governed mainly by the location of the best possible crossings of the Namgoi, Namchik, and Nampong rivers. This meant that the road would leave the railway alignment at Jagun to go east- ward through Pangtong toward the south (or left) bank of the Namchik. Crossing that stream at Namchik village, the road would pass the: villages of Namgoi Sakan and Nampong Sakan and then cross the Nampong. gravel pits at Jagun and Pangtong also were opened.

Receiving the rest of the equipment in early January, the 823d Engineer Aviation Battalion, was able to speed its march toward the Patkais. The leading bulldozer, passing MP 15 on December 31, moved toward Pangsau Pass at an average speed of three quarters of a mile a day. Working around the clock, the 823d on January 26 pushed up to MP 34.5, a spot on the bank of the Nampong known ever after as "Hellgate," the point from which the ascent to the Pass really begins. Then, an artist of Tate's battalion put up a painted sign in the Pass to tell future visitors: "welcome to Burma. this way to Tokyo"

At first, the Road forces had to use wooden box-culverts for most minor drainage structures. These were fashioned from local timber, because metal culvert pipe could not be secured in quantity during 1943. the Hamilton bridge would still be standing. A temporary timber trestle, erected upstream by the Americans, collapsed and was swept away. The wreckage of the timber bridge struck the temporary bents under the steel bridge with sufficient force to carry them with it. Unsupported, the new span fell into the Namgoi just as Wheeler came on the scene with Sloat, Hirshfield, and several other officers. The first March rain washed these culverts out, for they proved too small to handle the run off. To remedy matters, Sloat instructed the roth Chinese Engineers to put up a timber bridge over the creek. For the time being, however, the Chinese had to go forward to help the Road Gang chop a corridor through the Burmese jungle. The Chinese were to build most of the combat bridges on the Road, using roughhewn timber. They performed the work with a thoroughness and tenacity that won the hearty praises of their American comrades. The route between Ledo and Namchik generally followed the alignment of the Hukawng Valley Rail road project abandoned in the 1920's. Beyond Namchik, con- struction would probably continue southeastward toward Pangsau Pass along a route between Namgoi and Nampong to save as much bridging as possible. The Road had to be kept open, and Pick and Green decided that the most expeditious way to do so was to construct a timber causeway over the area.

Logistical burdens on the Ledo Base fell into two categories: first, supplying food and ammunition to the Chinese troops beyond the Patkai; second, supplying food, fuels, and equipment to troops and laborers building the Road. Supplying the Road forces with fuels was a problem more of distribution than of availability, for there was never a theater wide shortage. Staple foods available in India and fresh perishables flown in from China were usually in fair supply but deficient in vitamins. This caused a lessening in the weight and stamina of the Americans, which surely had its effect upon the Road's progress also. Colonel John M. Tamraz, summed up his impressions of what lay ahead "that it is going to be extremely difficult to continue operations here after April 15, when the monsoon season begins in earnest…. I believe the sick rate among the laborers will be from 75% to 100%. Amongst Chinese troops in all probability the rate will be over 50% and in American troops between 10% and 20%".

Brigadier General William E. R. Covell, congratulated Lieutenant General Lewis A. Pick on April 26, 1945, hailing the Road as the "greatest military highway ever undertaken." Covell assured Pick that the Ledo Road would "stand forever as a monument to the unstinting labor, courage, determination, and ingenuity of both the living and those who gave their lives in

this remarkable accomplishment." The Civil Government of Assam was establishing a custom house near Pangsau Pass to serve as an inspection and control office regulating our military convoys bound for China. However, a British brigadier shortly blew in from Delhi and started "checking every tree we cut from the jungles . . . to be sure they were entered on [Reverse Lend Lease] books." General Headquater, India had more brigadiers than worthwhile jobs for them to do. To sum up, this note, the system which formed a part of the Ledo-to-Kunming line of communications consisted of one six-inch line and two four inchers. One 4 inch line connected Tinsukia with the Kunming, Chanyi area, while the other reached only to Bhamo. The six-inch line linked Myitkyina and Tinsukia. Backing up these lines were two 6 inch lines, one reaching from Assam to Calcutta, the other to Chittagong. The total mileage of lines in China, Burma and India was about 3,300, far and away the greatest military pipe-line system ever built.

On September 12, Colonel Welling notified the Lend Lease officials that the total cost of the Road to the United States and its allies was about $148,910,000. The following is a summary of the cost figures as given by India-Burma Theater and broken down into major categories: U.S. Troop Labor Materials and Supplies Equipment, Fuels, Repairs Overhead $31,766,000 33,912,000 51,956,000 19,424,000 $137,058,000 respectively. To this cost, however, must be added the Reverse Lend-Lease costs borne by British and Chinese agencies and chargeable to Lend Lease accounts: Chinese Troop Labor Indian Military, Civilian Labor $ 2,410,000 9,442,000 $11,852,000 respectively.

II. CONCLUSION

To conclude the above discussion, Stillwell Road inscribed with the Chinese characters "Sung Li Che Lou" meaning the road to victory[9]. The contribution of the road in the war is not studied in this paper but future research can be done. However, the impression of this route to the British empire was for their political economy and to the American and Chinese engineers were reflected for the military logistic such as the transportation of War weapons and material to Chinese soldier. Since the early nineteenth century, significance of the route was at attention of Empire due to its available mineral and forest resources and strategic geopolitical location. Therefore, British government in India, Chinese knowledge of the location and the Japanese threats thus the Americans Engineers came into the history of Stilwell Road construction.

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[1] D.Nath, "A Stilwell Road: A Historical Retrospect" to check details see Rakhe Bhattacharya and Binoda K.Mishra (ed.), "*A Journey Through the Stilwell Road*", Anshah Publishing House, Kolkata, 2011, pp. 21-45.
[2] Sarah Hilaly, *The Railways in Assam 1885-1947*, Pilgrims Publishing, Varanasi, 2007, p.1.
[3] File no. 87J of 1879, Assam Secretariat, General Department, Exploration of Trade Route from Assam in the Direction of Burma and Eastern China and Mr. Seal's Visit to the Nongyang Lake Across the Patkai Range, Pp. 3-13.
[4] File no. 87J of 1879, *Op.cit*.,
[5] File No. 20J, 1880 Assam Secrateriat, General Department, *Exploration of Trade route From Assam in the Direction of China*, pp. 4-23.
[6]File no. 87J of 1879, Assam Secretariat, *Op.cit*.,
[7] Leitmotiv a phrase or other feature that is repeated often in a work of art and talks about something important about. Word meaning taken from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/leitmotiv
[8]Leslie Anders, *The Ledo Road General Joseph W. Stilwell Highway to China*, University of Oklahoma press, Norman, 1965. Pp.1-55.
[9] Leslie Anders, *Ibid*.,