

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection  
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Dean Rusk interviewed by Thomas J. Schoenbaum  
circa 1985

DEAN RUSK: We had these big truck-trailer combinations prepared in the United States to be used on the Burma Road, but in fact we didn't use them because by the time we got the Burma Road open the old DC-4, C-54 aircraft had begun to come in. And one DC-4 could do the work of sixty truck-trailer combinations because a DC-4 could fly from Assam into Kunming in about an hour and a half, run several missions a day, and go over the mountains, whereas a truck-trailer would take about three weeks on the road absorbing all that gasoline and taking all that time. So, again the Burma Road was somewhat like the Al-Can highway. We built it in case we needed it. You see, the basic rationale for that was that even if [Douglas] MacArthur and [Chester William] Nimitz were successful in coming across the Pacific and getting the Japanese main islands to surrender, there were two to three million Japanese soldiers in China, and we did not know that they would surrender. And there might be a substantial amount of fighting in China even after the surrender of Japan proper. And so a back door land route to China was potentially a very important thing.

You see when the Japanese cut the Burma Road, we went to extraordinary efforts to find an alternative land route to China because we did want to keep China in the war. I remember flying over parts of Afghanistan, surreptitiously and illegally; I remember flying over Nepal and just scouring the place. Sometimes this led to rather ridiculous results. Madame Chiang Kai-shek [Mei-ling Soong] came to Washington once during that period and called on President [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt. And after her visit, we over in the War Department got a note from President Roosevelt saying, "Madame Chiang Kai-shek has told me that she would supply an unlimited number of Chinese to provide a coolie train across the mountains. Organize it." And we took a quick look at it and sent a note back to the President saying, "Mr. President, in that terrain and those distances, each one of these coolies would have to eat more than three times his own load. Therefore, this is not feasible." And he wrote back a little note saying, "Drop them their food by aircraft." And we had to send a message back to him saying, "Mr. President, if we had the planes to drop them their food, we would have the planes to take the stuff into China to begin with."

SCHOENBAUM: Who signed those messages? [Joseph W.] Stilwell?

DEAN RUSK: I remember I helped prepare them. No, these were from the War Department. They went eventually out of General [George Catlett] Marshall's office. Because it didn't take much to make those calculations--so that was one of those--but we had our troubles with Washington. I could tell, as Chief of War Plans, that we were going to be coming into Burma from the north and that we would eventually get on to the northern ends of some narrow-gauge rail lines up there where we wouldn't have any rolling stock. Rolling stocking was down in Rangoon and other places which were occupied by the Japanese. So I sent a message back to the Joint Chiefs requesting them to prepare some airborne, small railway engines to pull rolling stock on those railways from the north. And they just sent back and pooh-poohed the idea, you

see. Well, in fact there was nothing we needed more, and we had to improvise some locomotives by converting jeeps into small locomotives to pull a few cars at a time.

I remember we had in Burma a signal company of carrier pigeons and that was very useful in that kind of terrain. One day the Chinese troops got into the pigeon coops and made pigeon stew out of all the pigeons. So I sent back a telegram to the Joint Chiefs saying, "Request complete pigeon replacement for signal company so-and-so and so-and-so." Back came a reply saying, "Request denied. The assumption of the Tables of Organization is that the pigeons will furnish their own replacements." I hadn't told them that the Chinese troops had eaten the damn pigeons.

SCHOENBAUM: Sounds like you had a variety of tasks--everything from planning the road to supplies and--

DEAN RUSK: Well there were a lot of special problems we dealt with. For example, every seven years out in Burma the bamboo dies. It is just a seven-year cycle. And that results in a thick mat on the jungle floor. And that becomes, therefore, heavily infested with rats carrying infested lice. And [Frank Dow] Merrill's Marauders once camped on one of these canopies and a good many of the men came down with typhus. So we had to improvise a treatment for typhus and managed to do pretty well with it by treating them at the Twentieth General Hospital up in Assam with strong air conditioning. And we stripped everything in the air-conditioning units anybody had anywhere else and put them up there and brought most of them through it. But there were patterns of action that we had to overcome. For example, on the rail line between Calcutta and Assam, it was narrow gauge and the rail line was--When the engineer got the train near his home village he would stop it and visit with his villagers for several hours and then get back and continue the train. Well, when they would cross a river, there would be a barge, and they would draw the barge up alongside a kind of a dock, put these cars one at a time, crosswise along the barge, instead of running the rails the other way on the barge, backing one end of it up to the bank, and taking on all of these cars at one time. They had ordinary garden hose size hoses at water tanks to rewater the engines instead of eight to ten inch pipes that would really water it in just a few minutes. So we quadrupled, at least, the carrying capacity of that railway, but that kind of thing you were dealing with all the time. Lots of details of that sort.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you ever have a temptation to join Merrill's Marauders? That must have been interesting: the organization of that brigade. That was the one time that the Americans did go into combat directly and were very successful in Burma.

DEAN RUSK: Well, General Stilwell had pressed the American Chiefs for two divisions to be assigned out there: two infantry divisions. But they weren't willing to do that because of the requirements in Europe and the Pacific. But they finally allowed them to organize this Merrill's brigade which was drawn from volunteers from the other theaters, generally with the idea that they would go through one campaign and then they could go home: that kind of thing. So we had a rather motley group in Merrill's brigade drawn from different theatres.

SCHOENBAUM: You were organizing that?

DEAN RUSK: Merrill himself did the most of that and he supervised their training in India before they went up to Burma. But since that was the only ground combat force that Stilwell had, he probably used them beyond the limits of any particular unit because he was trying so hard to get so much out of what he had that the fellows in the brigade had a pretty tough time.

SCHOENBAUM: They did very well.

DEAN RUSK: Well, they played a key role in the seizure of Myitkyina which was a key part in opening the Burma Road.

SCHOENBAUM: As you pointed out, that was a heroic exploit; but it ultimately went for naught.

DEAN RUSK: Well, it turned out not to have been critically important because--Well when the first DC-4, the old C-54 aircraft, arrived out there, I thought I had never seen so magnificent a plane. I thought that was a plane to end all planes: four engines, could fly above the mountains, carry a lot of cargo. Now it is just a fly speck of a plane, but in those days it was really something. I am convinced myself that if we had had a fleet of C-54s out there, say a year earlier, that our supplies into China could have been such that maybe Chiang Kai-shek would not have lost the mainland to the Communists at the end of the war.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you ever tell that to anyone after the takeover?

DEAN RUSK: No, not really, because what might have been is not really--But then toward the end General Stilwell, in early '45 I think it was, General Stilwell was relieved and the China-Burma-India theatre was split in two. The China end was put under the command of General Al [Albert Coady] Wedemeyer, and the India-Burma command was put under General Dan [Daniel Isom] Sultan. And that worked out pretty well because the frictions among the British, Chiang Kai-shek, the American commander of the combined theatre were pretty considerable. There was utter confusion out there because of politics in the actual command arrangements. General Stilwell wore several hats simultaneously. He was the commander of the U.S. forces in that area; he was Deputy Southeast Asia Commander under Lord Louis Mountbatten; he was Chief of Staff to Chiang Kai-shek for the Chinese theatre. And so he wore these three hats. And there were times when people would get these three hats mixed up. But despite some of the things that have been published about relations between Stilwell and Mountbatten, they actually liked each other personally because each one assessed that the other one wanted to fight even though circumstances did not permit them to do all that much fighting.

SCHOENBAUM: They had a lot of meetings?

DEAN RUSK: Oh, they saw each other frequently. Stilwell was down at Ceylon or Mountbatten was up in Assam visiting the American forces. On one occasion Lord Louis Mountbatten visited an American headquarters company. It was kind of a snap inspection, and the fellows had been instructed that when he came up that they would advance one step, salute smartly, and give their name and their job. Well, there was one fellow who was working in a machine shop who had not been briefed on all this and so he was there in his fatigues and had grease all over him. And Lord

Mountbatten came in, he just looked at him and said "Hi" or something like that, you see. And Mountbatten said, "What is your name?" and the man told him. Mountbatten said, "Where are you from?" He said, "I am from Texas." Mountbatten said, "Well, I have run across a lot of Texans out here." The man said, "That's why we are doing so well." Lord Louis used to enjoy that kind of thing.

SCHOENBAUM: Did you continue to see some of the people? Are there some people who you were in India with who are still alive?

DEAN RUSK: I have run across a number of them. As a matter of fact, [Robert F.] Bob Seedlock, who was a colonel and sort of deputy engineer on the Burma Road, was in this office just two days ago bringing along a friend from the mainland of China, a fellow who had been his assistant on the Burma Road--Chinese--and who had stayed in China. But just to illustrate the variety of the problems we had, General Stilwell used to say that when Chinese forces came into Burma they brought their boundary stones in their knapsacks. The Chinese have long had a claim to northern Burma. And so at the end of the war when the time came to get the Chinese back to China, in order to avoid that kind of problem we flew them all home by plane, over the hump. And that was to try to avoid any kind of attempt by the Chinese to seize and retain upper Burma. And that worked out pretty well.

Those were interesting times. My job out there was at least fifty percent political. In June 1945, instead of being sent back to the China-Burma-India theatre as I had expected to go, I was ordered to the Operations Division [OPD] of the General Staff in Washington. And I was told when I got back there that they had sent a cable out to the CBI theatre saying, "We would like to know the name of the officer who has been writing General Stilwell's cables." And they sent in my name, and therefore I was assigned to this OPD. The role that accident, happenstance, chance plays is really quite extraordinary.

SCHOENBAUM: So, you wrote many of his cables from '43 to '45.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah.

SCHOENBAUM: Well that's interesting because these are reprinted in a series. There's a seven-volume series of--

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