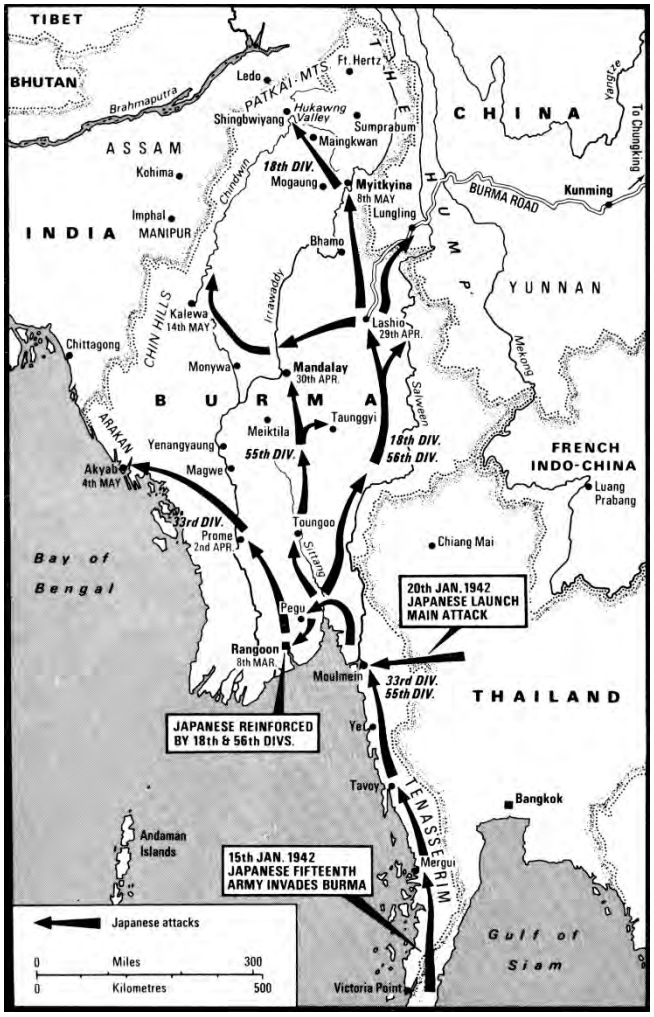
The Retreat through Burma - David Gray

The retreat through Burma in May 1942 was the longest fighting withdrawal in British history. A desperate 1,000-mile flight after the fall of Rangoon and Mandalay, by approximately 45,000 British troops, as well as Commonwealth, Chinese, and Burmese forces, along with civilians, from Japanese invaders, culminating in survivors reaching India just as the monsoon broke. Facing starvation, disease, and horrific terrain after losing Rangoon and most equipment, it was a humiliating but ultimately vital escape that kept an army intact.



Following the fall of Rangoon in March 1942, Japanese forces rapidly pushed north, forcing the Allied defenders into a chaotic retreat. Troops and refugees endured appalling conditions, including thick jungle, primitive roads, relentless heat, and constant Japanese harassment, all while carrying wounded and fleeing starvation.

On May 1, Japanese forces captured Monywa, a critical river port on the Chindwin River, nearly cutting off the Allied line of retreat. The British evacuated Akyab on May 4, and by May 15, the first British troops finally crossed the Indian border. Under Generals Alexander and Slim, the Burma Corps conducted the fighting withdrawal, losing most equipment but preventing a complete rout. The first troops reached Imphal, India, around May 15, 1942, just as the monsoon arrived, turning the muddy tracks into quagmires and halting the immediate Japanese pursuit but creating dire conditions of mud, disease, and starvation for the exhausted arrivals.

Torrential monsoon rains began around May 12, which halted the Japanese pursuit but turned the Allied retreat into a nightmare.

The British suffered roughly 30,000 casualties, while Chinese losses were estimated to be much higher, with some sources citing over 40,000 dead, with some units attempting desperate, often fatal, treks through remote mountains to reach India.

US General Joseph Stilwell, refusing to fly out, led a diverse party of 114 people on a gruelling 20-day march from Burma to Imphal, India, arriving on May 20.

General Stilwell famously summarized the disaster upon reaching India: *"I claim we got a hell of a beating... we got run out of Burma and it is humiliating as hell."*.

By mid-May, Japan held total control over Burma, effectively cutting off the Burma Road, China's last remaining land-based supply route.

Despite the crushing defeat, the retreat, which could be looked at as the '**Dunkirk of the Far East**,' saved the core of the British Army, allowing them to fight again, with commanders Alexander and Slim proving their leadership. The retreat was a devastating experience, marked by immense suffering, but it preserved a fighting force and set the stage for the eventual Allied counter-offensive, though it remains a painful memory of loss and endurance.

On May 20, 1942, the following article by L. Marsland Gander, appeared in the Daily Telegraph:

'**BURMA TROOPS BURN THEIR TANKS – AND MARCH ON**

Gen. Alexander's Burma army is virtually relieved, although the bulk of the fighting troops are still in Burma. He was not invested by the enemy, but by the great jungle-covered mountain barriers between Burma ad Assam. His relief was not effected in the traditional way of forced marches. Skirling pipes, cavalry, or even modern tank charges. This time the Navy played no part.

It was accomplished by month of hard work by sappers, tea planters, and naked coolies, whose slogan has been: "The road must go through!" And now supplies and reinforcements can reach him.

This is no Dunkirk, and yet we must pay for Dunkirk weather so that they withdrawal to predetermined positions may be completed before the monsoon rains make the new roads impossible. At present a fine spell after the recent rains is a great stroke of fortune, and every movement of our troops is going according to plan.

200 Mile Drive to Burma

To reach Burma I motored 200 miles along the Manipur road, from Dimapur to Tamu with a 30-year-old Indian Army major, without whose determined driving and tactful way with army pickets it would have been impossible to get through.

To obtain an idea of our journey think of the road from Lynton to Lynmouth, in Devonshire, twisting through a greener and more spacious Switzerland; imagine meeting on hairpin bends and one-in-three gradients great bulldozer scrapers and endless processions of three-ton, six-wheeler lorries. Many times, we were squeezed between a lorry and the cliff, apparently stuck for good. But always somehow, we butted our way through.

I arrived, begrimed, unshaven and weary, the car had no number plates left, door handles had been wrenched off, every mudguard was battered. How dangerous is this road even now is shown by the number of lorries which plunge over the sides into the valleys below.

Propaganda Raids

It was from Kohima that we saw how ignorant the timid population in a land of rumours is affected by Japanese propaganda air raids. The day before, a small formation of enemy bombers and fighter had made an ineffectual five-minute raid on a small town bombing the bazaar area and machine-gunning cars. By London blitz standards it was a feeble effort, but it caused a few casualties. The result was that we encountered thousands of refugees in the road carrying all their possessions in bundles.

We saw pathetic sights such as a mother burdened with two small children staggering along, an aged father, supporting a son collapsing from exhaustion. Comic relief was afforded by an elephant that suddenly rounded a corner and bore down on us with stately tread carrying a refugee whose luggage include two umbrellas and an ancient rifle.

It was an eerie experience driving through that bombed town. A dead bullock lay crumpled in a queer praying attitude at the roadside, a few insignificant craters by the roadside, a burnt-out lorry, a car riddled with machine-gun bullets. The most remarkable section of the road is that lying 6,000 feet up between Palel and Tamu, which climbs on the Letha hills. It was cut out of red mountain soil by sappers in the incredible space of two months. Their tenacity, skill and courage in hacking out those innumerable dizzy hairpins, fighting against time, is one of the wars most prodigious feats.

We spent the night on a hilltop on straw in a bamboo hut known as a basha, and then in the dawn set off to face the worst stretch of the journey against long convoys of lorries, chiefly carrying lightly wounded and sick. These men of many regiments, Inniskillings, Duke of Wellingtons, Cameronians, Gurkhas, Jats, Dogras and Sikhs, were in unbelievably good heart, though tired and dirty.

Traffic Jams

At the many traffic jams that took place on the road where it perched on the stupendous cliffs, we met nothing but good temper, patience, cheerful and stoical resignation on the part of the badly wounded. An R.A.O.C. captain, who had another officer, grey-faced, suffering from the dreaded blackwater fever [a severe, rare complication of malaria] in the back of his car, grinned delightedly when we told him we had recently come from civilised Calcutta. He looked fit and well and was dressed as of for the parade ground, but he told us he had been evacuating since June, having started from Bangkok in Siam. “The first things I want,” he said, “are a glass of beer and a steak with chips.”

The first party of troops marching towards India whom we met was a Burma Rifles unit with an officer in front. To a grey-bearded Sikh, plodding patiently up the hill, carrying his rifle and water bottle, we called “Shabas” in encouragement. Then on a hairpin bend with a sheer drop of thousands of feet on one side of the road we came across a tractor pulling a 25-pounder gun. After much manoeuvring one wheel of the gun slipped over the cliff edge. “Go on,” yelled and R.A. officer. Slowly the [gun] tractor pulled the gun back on to the road and forced on to negotiate 100 similar bends. The gun had already been hauled 800 miles. Spares were obtained by cannibalising wrecked vehicles.

The last 36 miles to Tamu took six hours of exhausting, risky driving. I dare not think what the effect of heavy rain on that surface will be. In mosquito-plagued, malarious and dusty Tamu, we were in Burma at last. We applied for petrol to a jovial supply officer, who greeted me, "hullo, war correspondent. I thought you had all gone back What's the news?" These men of the Burma Army were like so many Robinson Crusoes who had been cut off from the outside world for months. But they seemed well supplied with most things. After providing petrol the officer incredibly added, "Want any cigarettes?"

Pyre of Worn-Out Tanks

Later, by the courtesy of Maj.-Gen. Winterton, Gen. Alexander's chief of staff, I went in a jeep to met officers and men of an armoured brigade, who, after making a blazing pyre of their worn-out tanks west of Chindwin, had marched along the jungle trail from Kalewa carrying their Bren, Tommy guns and small arms. As yellow as their Japanese opponents in the dust of the road, they trudged along gamely, almost invisible in the cloud of dust through their tramping feet. When not too exhausted they even sang old war songs.

This road blazed from a goat track in a few days by bulldozers is inches thick in dust. Heavy rains will make it a quagmire, bogging vehicles which in a 100 a day are withdrawing our troops and so outwitting the enemy by their speed. In view of the condition this road is likely to be in later, when the monsoon breaks, it is quite possible the Japanese may not cross the Chindwin owing to the immense difficulties of maintain communications along it.

I spoke to men from Middlesbrough, Swansea, Manchester and Woolwich. They were full of confidence and in good heart, though happy to be within reach of India after three days of forced marching.

Never Defeated

"We were never defeated," said a young officer of the Royal Tank Regiment. "Whenever we met the Japanese on equal terms they had the worst of it, and made off." A 20-year-old corporal of the 7th Hussars – he came from South Wales – provided confirmation from a recent experience. "We were in Laager at Monywa," he said, "when during the night two enemy tanks came on us suddenly. I thought they were our tanks returning from patrol, and only scrambled into my own tank just in time. There was a short, sharp action during which we scored 30 hits on one of the tanks. The chattering inside it was like a monkey house. Our shots went right through its armour and out the other side. Although damaged, the enemy tanks managed to turn round and withdraw."'