

The US China Mission in the Second World War and the Development of Air Transport System in Assam: A Study in the China Burma India (CBI) Theatre

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Abstract:

The World War II has a distinct link with the development of airways and air facilities in Assam. The initial years of the WWII witnessed great Japanese aggression and successful occupation of Rangoon and capture of Burma Road in 1942. This incident necessitated alternative supply route between British India and south west China. China was resisting against Japanese aggression during that time. US had been supporting China against Japanese aggression with loans, lend-lease aid, military advisers etc. After the Japanese occupation of Burma and subsequent blockage of war supply line to China the US applied one alternative strategy for supply war material to China crossing the high-altitude Himalayas through air lift which was famously known as the Hump Lift. This China Mission to keep the supply chain alive through Hump Lift was started from 1942 to 1945. Assam was used by the United States Air Force as an air base for supplies because it was safe and near to China. Hence the region witnessed some drastic changes in the transport network. The paper aims to study this particular issue i.e., the impact of Second World War on the development of air transport facilities in Assam.

Key Words: Second World War, US China Mission, Hump Lift, Assam Airfields

1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of colonial rule in Assam during early 19th century was a very important landmark in the British Indian Empire. The border of Assam then touched eastern Himalaya and thereby had a geographical link with China and Burma. The state being full of rivers, jungle and with strong feudal structure of government under the Ahoms was once almost impenetrable to the outsiders during the whole medieval period. However, the First Anglo Burmese War of 1824-26 provided the British an opportunity to occupy the land not only for geo political ventures but also to establish an enclave economy there. Tea was discovered and produced commercially with great success which brought global identity and investment to the land. Oil and coal were extracted and these developed as industries by the beginning of the 20th century. To facilitate the industries huge money was invested to develop waterways right from the second half and

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railways from last quarter of the 19th century. The state of Assam in spite of being secluded geographically soon transformed into a global hub of modern economy.

In case of transport and communication the region started to be connected with Calcutta by waterways through streamers from the very beginning of the colonial rule but regularly from 1861. Railway lines were established in 1881 and these two ways well connected the tea, coal and oil fields of Assam. Roadways were also developed but only to connect the river ports and railway stations. Similarly, there was no urgency in establishing air connectivity with Assam as it was not feasible for the British colonial government who were interested only on extracting wealth.

The development of air ways or air transportation in Assam has a long history. The first ever an airplane landed in Gymkhana grounds of Jorhat district of Assam in 1928. The owner and the pilot of the plane came to Jorhat on request of A.C. Tunstel, then Director of the Tocklai Experimental Station to take his wife to Calcutta for treatment (*Power Punch*, n.d.). However, the earliest named aerodrome or airfield was in **Barnagar** of Barpeta district. The airfield was built at Kamar Char under the British rule but later allegedly set on fire by freedom fighters before the World War II to prevent the landing of the British army in Assam (*Tourism Plans for Airport Site*, n.d.). However major development did not occur in Assam up to the beginning of the World war II and the taking of interest in China affairs by the United States of America. The World War II has a distinct link to the development of airways and air facilities in Assam. The initial years of the WW II witnessed great Japanese aggression and successful occupation of Rangoon and capture of Burma Road in 1942. This incident necessitated alternative supply route between British India and south west China. China was resisting against Japanese aggression during that time (Hasnu, 2017). Assam was used as the base for air supplies by the USAF as it was safe and near to China. Hence the region witnessed some drastic changes in the transport network. The paper aims to study this particular issue i.e., the impact of Second World War on the development of air transport facilities in Assam.

1.1 Objectives

1. To discuss the importance of Assam as a geo political strategic point in the China Burma India Theater
2. The role of the United States of America and the British Indian government to develop various airfields in Assam to facilitate the “Hump Lift” during the Second World War



1.2 Methodology

The historical method of enquiry has been used to analyse the data collected from various sources. The sources are duly acknowledged in the paper. AI assistance like Grok AI and ChatGPT are taken in order to arrange the sources only. No AI tool is used to analyse and interpret data.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 The Chinese eye on Assam

The importance of Assam as one airbase was first realized by China as early as 1930s. China had to face serious military checks due to the rise of Japanese imperialism in South Asia and Indo-China (Hasnu, 2017). Chinese airlines were formed in the initiative of Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese National Civil Aviation Co-operation (CNAC) was formed (Hasnu, 2017). China was very interested to establish air network with Sadiya of Assam and sent a proposal to the Government of British India in 1940 (Hasnu, 2017). The aim of this proposal was not clear but as stated by the Chinese government it was purely a commercial and civil in nature. After initial doubts and debates one consensus was arrived and the Anglo Chinese Air Agreement was signed in 1941. The US involvement in the situation keeping in view of Japanese intension to control the "Greater East Asia" further favoured the agreement with China. The Japanese aggression in the region, the Chinese reaction to it and The British government aim to support China against Japan resulted in CNAC planes landed in the airfield of Dinjan of Assam establishing a triangular connection between Chungking and Calcutta via Dinjan (Hasnu, 2017).

2.2 The American Mission to China

The US interests in China affair based on mainly three issues; firstly, to protect trade and investment it had in Asia; secondly, to secure the Open Door Policy or the equal trade access in China and lastly, to ensure missionary activities. The Japanese aggression during 1930s was a direct threat to American interests in Asia and more particularly in China. Therefore, US had been supporting China against Japanese aggression with loans, lend-lease aid, military advisers etc. This was the root cause of US China Mission and anti-Japanese policy during the World War II.

Established in August 27, 1941, the American Mission to China was known as AMMISCA. The aim of this mission was to facilitate lend-lease aid to China. It was a part of American effort in Asia from 1941 to 1946. The US Army Forces in China, Burmese and India Theater were originally planned as a task force to support China. They were largely based on India. Only a small fraction of US strength was in China itself. The two



portions of US forces stationed in India and China were separated by the Japanese occupied Burma. The aim of the US forces was to keep the connectivity alive with the other portion of the force and at the same time also to improve the combat efficiency of the Chinese army. On March 1942, headquarters American Forces China Burma and India (HQ AAF CBI) were established in Chungking, China with Major General J.W. Stilwell as commanding general of all US Army forces in China. A second AAF CBI headquarter was established in New Delhi, India on June 25, 1942(Records of U.S. Army Operational, Tactical, and Support Organizations (World War II and Thereafter), 1917).

The growing Japanese imperialism and the continental military expedition from September 1931 with the attacks on Mukden and Manchuria of China resulted in the Chino-Japanese conflict and subsequent involvement of European powers. The Chinese were in back foot and fell back into interior due to Japanese possession of the lines of communication, seaports and key cities of China including the capital Nanking(Romanus, Charles F. & Sunderland, Riley, 1987). At this juncture, Chinese government had no alternative but to seek help from the friendly European countries. But war situation in Europe, which developed after September 1939 ended the last hope of China of getting arms or technical assistance from the European powers. Therefore, China approached to United States for help which had been sympathetic towards it from the beginning of the China Japan conflict.

Moreover, the war situation was drastically changed with the German aggression in Europe. Unprecedented military expedition and violation of human rights were witnessed. The magnitude of war escalated when Italy joined Germany by the end of 1940. Probability of Japanese occupation of French, British and Dutch possession in Asia increased with an alarming scale(Romanus, Charles F. & Sunderland,Riley, 1987). On 19 December, 1940 Roosevelt, the President of US hence approved military aid for China and asked the state, War, Navy and Treasury departments to find ways of implementing a programme (Romanus, Charles F. & Sunderland,Riley, 1987).

2.3 Assam as the air base of USAF

During 1942-43, there were two lines of communication between strategic base in India and two corps fighting at the tactical level. First the 'Northern Line' from Calcutta to North East Assam via the river Brahmaputra and second 'Southern Line' from Calcutta to Chittagong through East Bengal. The northern line gained importance in China Mission due to various matters(Air Force History Index, 1987).

Assam was situated in the eastern most part of India and closest to the territory of China. After the Japanese occupation of Burma in 1942 and cut off the Burma Road, China became isolated from the rest of the world



via southern routes. In this situation Assam was the only accessible point for US and the British to establish direct aerial routes to Kunming and other Chinese airbases. Moreover, it was situated far away from the Japanese air bases in South East Asia and thus was less vulnerable for enemy airstrike. The Purvanchal hill range (Patkai-Naga-Manipur-Mizo) or the eastern extension of the Himalayan system posed as a natural barrier for any Japanese infantry attack. Due to this geopolitical advantage, Assam was chosen for USAF 'China Mission'.

2.04 Construction of Air fields in Assam

The USAF after arrival in India started to construct various facilities for their use and being the major corps belonged to air units, the prime requirements were the airfields. By August 1942 USAF had begun working on the Agra Air Depot and fields at Chabua, Gaya, Chakulia, Nawadih and Gushkara(Weidenburner, 2025). There was a probable fear of Japanese air attack soon and as preparatory measure, constructions of airfield were initiated to the end of 1942. The construction of Assam airfields received top priorities because of growing necessity of 'Hump Lift' to China. In addition, airfields were to be used by USAF as port for V.L.R bombers. The then British Indian government paid first priority to construct Assam Airfields as 'Priority Group XX' and gave precedence over all other defense works(Weidenburner, 2025).

The airfield construction programme begun in 1942. The process was completed by April 1944(Kirby, 1961). In Assam ten all weather airfields were constructed and allotted to Air Transport Command (ATC) which operated the air ferry to China. These airfields were Sookerating, Dinjan, Chabua, Mohanbari, Moran, Nazira, Jorhat, Golaghat, Tezpur and Missamari(Kirby, 1961). In addition to the above airfields Dergaon , Sadiya, Rupshi airfields were also constructed as auxiliary airfields. Dergaon is located a few miles west of Jorhat, and the airfield assisted the air traffic of Jorhat. However now a days there is no existence of it. Sadiya airfield is the extreme north-eastern airfield in Assam. It was once the hub of east-west 'Able' transport route. It was closed in September 1945. Nowadays there is no remains of it. Rupshi Airport was used between 1943 to 1945 as transshipment facility in Assam for Western Terminus of transport routes 'Able' and 'Easy' into and returning from China. It was also the home of 10th Air Force 308th Bombardment group in July 1945. Now it is used as a commercial airfield for regional airline(Air Force History Index, 1987).

During the winter months of 1942-43 the India China Wing operated its China bound transports from three airfields of Assam- Chabua, Sokerating and Mohanbari(Craven & Cate, n.d.). Chabua airfield was built in 1939 in an area belonged to Hazelbank Tea plantations. In April, 1942 the USAAF started building a 6000-foot hard surface runway. In September 1942, it became ready for fully operational. During the war, Chabua



served as a major supply point for hump operation. The airfield worked as a layover stop of the ATC Karachi to Kunming air transport route. This air field was inactivated on 25 Dec. 1945('Airfield Identification', n.d.). However, it was reactivated by Indian Air Force after Chinese attack in 1962 and still it has been working as important air base.

Mohanbari as an airfield was constructed in 1942 in order to carryout hump lift to China as part of US strategic assistance towards China against Japanese aggression. Initially this airbase was known as Lahoal Air Force base(Camp & Watson, 1999). After Independence, Mohanbari emerged as one important airbase of Assam connecting north east India especially in case of air logistics.

Sookerating air field was first opened 1942-43. But due to bad weather the airfield was temporarily abandoned for India-China ferry(Craven & Cate, n.d.). It was reopened in 1944 as a sub-field of Chabua. This was used by ATC to transport goods. This was closed on 25 November 1945(Air Force History Index, 1987)

Dinjan was another airfield near Sadiya which was used by the India – China ferry Command during 1942. It was handed over to CNAC to operate during that time(Craven & Cate, n.d.). It was primarily was the base for 10th Air Force on route Able(Air Force History Index, 1987).

Jorhat air field was built in mid-April of 1943 to accommodate a squadron of 25 C-47 planes (Craven & Cate, n.d.).It acted also as the supporting ground to air field of Chabua. However it became inactive on June 15, 1946. But later on, it emerged as an Air force station of India and civil airport.

The Golaghat air field is situated in middle Assam valley was used by ATC an auxiliary for Chabua on transport route 'Easy'. It became inactivated on March 1945. Missamari airfield was constructed during the war time was situated on route 'Able'. It was abandoned in October 1945. It is now one important military base of India. Moran was another airfield which was also used as sub-base of Chabua. Constructed in 1943 it was the landing and takeoff base on Able route. It became inactivated on March, 1945(Air Force History Index, 1987). Borjhar was one of the oldest airfields constructed in 1942 in the adjacent area of Guwahati for war purpose(Air Force History Index, 1987). Now it is an international airport of Assam.

Tezpur in the northern bank of the River Brahmaputra was constructed by British Royal Indian Air Force during the WWII in 1942. It was used as sub airfield of Chabua on Route 'Able' from Rupshi to Ipin of China(Air Force History Index, 1987). After the war it was converted into an air force base in 1959.

The following table will well indicate the above discussion:

Table 1: Year wise construction of air fields in Assam

Sl. No	Name of the Air Field	Area	Year of Construction
1	Chabua	Chabua, Upper Assam	1942
2	Tezpur	Tezpur, North Bank, Assam	1942
3	Sookerating	North East of Upper Assam	1942 (upgraded in 1944)
4	Rupshi	Dhuburi	1943
5	Mohanbari	Dibrugarh	1942
6	Jorhat	Rowraiah	1943
7	Sadiya	Sadiya	-
8	Dinjan	Near Sadiya, East Upper Assam	1941-42
9	Moran	Sivasagar, Upper Assam	1943
10	Missamari	Sonitpur, North bank, Assam	-
11	Dergaon	Golaghat	-
12	Nazira	Sivasagar	-
13	Golaghat	Golaghat	-
14	Borjhar	Guwahati	1942

2.05 The Hump Lift Statistics

The Hump lift continued from 1942 to 1945 via airfields of Assam. The route ran from the Assam the eastern most state of British India Empire to Kunming of China. It was one of the most dangerous air routes through high snowy mountain range of Himalayas facing many times very treacherous winds. Yet from December 1942 to 1945 it continued to supply lakhs tons of goods to China. Hump operation cost the lives of 800 flyers but kept China alive in the war against Japan(*The 'Hump': Lifeline to China*, n.d.). Flights over the Hump began in April 1942 however actual lift over was started from Dec. 1, 1942. The following table represents the month wise supply of goods to China from 1942(*The 'Hump': Lifeline to China*, n.d.).

Table 2: Month Wise Hump Lift Record (1942-1945)

Month and Year	Amount of Goods in tons
December, 1942	1,227
January , 1943	1,263
February , 1943	2,855
March , 1943	2,278
April , 1943	1,010
May , 1943	2,334
June , 1943	2,382
July , 1943	3,451
Aug, 1944	23,675
September, 1944	22,314
October, 1944	24,715
November, 1944	27,500
December, 1944	31,935
July , 1945 (peak)	71,000

3. Conclusion

The China Mission resulted in the development of supporting infrastructure in Assam. The allied forces tried to improve the “Northern Line” of communication in order to maintain uninterrupted supply chain to China. To that end The US military engineers, British Indian Agencies and local administrative authorities carried out a programme of infrastructural development to support the Hump airlift and construction of



Ledo Road, the alternative way to airlift. The following works were to be completed as war emergency by October, 1944 (Kirby, 1961).

1. Doubling the Lumding-Dimapur railway (meter gauge)
2. Provision of a railhead for Chabua area.
3. Construction of 22 towing craft and 88 river flats
4. Completion of the Assam Access Road from Siliguri to Bongaigaon.
5. Conversion of the 2 ft 6 in railway line from Jorhat to Mariani to meter gauge.

In addition, construction of Ledo Road, later renamed as the Stilwell Road was another major infrastructural development of the war time. The road of 1,072 miles length was started to construct in December 1942 and completed in 1945. This is one very good line of communication from Assam to China. To sustain the Hump, lift necessary arrangement were done by constructing fuel depots, storage, cantonments, hospitals etc. To facilitate the war necessity radio stations and meteorology and navigation systems were built in Assam. Thus, the Second World War made Assam a focal point of CBI theatre and transformed its transport and infrastructure to a greater extent. The US China Mission greatly developed the air transportation of Assam to which the colonial government did not pay much attention earlier. The eastern border of British India became open to the east connecting China and Burma through air and roadways. The air connectivity between Assam and the rest of the world thus began due to the wartime emergency efforts of American and British engineers. The aviation facilities introduced during the war time continued to shape Assam's development for decades.

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