

## "Rise of Special Operations: China-Burma Theater"

General Johnny Alison

15 September 2009

**Moderator:** I want to welcome everybody here today. My name is Doug Burkey, and I'm the head of Government Relations for the Air Force Association. Sitting with me is General John Alison, and General Alison is an absolutely incredible individual. The history surrounding him that he has participated in is phenomenal. Yet one of the most remarkable things about him is that when you chat with him on a daily basis, his main concern is about what's happening today and what's going to happen tomorrow. He even trolls the halls of Capitol Hill with me and occasionally talks about air power with staffers and members even, and helps shape the debate for today and tomorrow.

A little background on General Alison. When he first joined the Air Corps, Curtis LeMay was a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant when John Alison was a 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant down at Langley. He did date one of General Spott's daughters at Langley, definitely a high-risk assignment. [Laughter]. Probably made Air Commandos look like nothing.

When World War II began, prior to U.S. involvement, General Alison was an air attaché over in London while the Battle of Britain was going on. He was in Moscow, again as an air attaché, when the Germans had Moscow surrounded. So, some very unique history there.

After that he, through circuitous involvement, he did some lend-lease work down in Iraq and Iran. From there, he went over to China and became an Ace, and he was Commander of the 75<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron and the Flying Tigers there.

From there, he took over the Air Commandos. After the war, he was in the Truman administration. He was the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Aeronautics, and he will tell you that while he didn't fly with the Wright Brothers, he did know Orville and he was at the funeral in Dayton. So John has certainly known quite a few wonderful individuals.

To start off the Air Commando story, like most of John's stories, it's a bit unusual. While we always think

about the jungles in Burma, this story actually began in Andy Devine's beach house in Malibu, California. So, over to you, General Alison.

**General Alison:** Well, I have been lucky. I've had some of the great assignments in the United States Air Force, and the Air Commando one was maybe one of the most exciting.

Our Air Force is just a great organization, simply because we've got a hell of a lot of great people who have manned it and made it what it is today. And I was very fortunate to get into the Air Force at exactly the right time, so I knew most of the people who really moved this organization to where it became such an outstanding instrument of our national security. It's a long story, and we're limited on time so I have to watch myself.

Langley Field was a great institution. We had two wings. We had the fighter wing and the bomber wing, and LeMay ended up commanding the bomber wing.

If you read his biography and you read the history of World War II, particularly what went on over the skies of Europe, you'll really understand what a great man Curtis LeMay was. But he didn't talk about it.

As a matter of fact, getting him to talk sometimes was difficult. My wife used to say when we'd go to dinner parties, please don't seat me next to Curt -- [Laughter] -- because I can't talk to him. He wasn't great on small talk, but when it came to understanding the defense of the United States and the resources that we had to apply to that defense, very few people were equal to General Curtis LeMay. So I grew up in that environment; absolutely a delightful personal experience.

I didn't know everybody in the Air Force because even though it was a small Air Force, it was growing so rapidly we were turning one group into two and two groups into four and four into eight and starting with really nothing and building a great Air Force.

I got pulled out of the cycle and sent to England to be an observer of the Battle of Britain; this, of course, was tremendously exciting. Hub Zemke; well I don't know if any of you knew Hub because we're all getting older, but Hub was one of the great group commanders of World War II.

We went together, we went by boat from New York to Lisbon and then by KLM from Lisbon to London, and arrived in

London the night of the biggest air raid of World War II. We didn't know what was happening, and the RAF team that picked us up and had the responsibility for entertaining us that first night said, "Oh, come in out of the blitz," like come in out of the rain, and they took us from the train station where we had come from the airport where we landed.

They took us to the Dorchester Hotel, and being from a small town in the United States I had never seen a hotel quite like this. We pulled up to the front door, and it was just dark. We couldn't see anything except sand bags and sand. And I thought, gee, this is pretty shabby. We went through, the blackout was on, and it was dark. We went through these revolving doors into this beautiful lighted lobby.

There were English ladies in their evening clothes getting ready to go to dinner, and I said if this is war, it ain't bad. [Laughter]. The RAF team that they sent to entertain us that evening was compiled of both male and female pilots, and we went to the lounge, had dinner, danced, and listened to antiaircraft guns in Hyde Park go off all night long. And we never seemed to be in any danger. We were in the -- like the Brits said, come in out of the rain.

We went to bed about 12:00 o'clock and about 3:00 in the morning, the biggest racket I've ever heard. Just bang. And Hub sat up right on his side of the room in bed and he said, John, what in the world was that. And I said, well Hub, it sounded like every antiaircraft gun in Hyde Park has gone off at the same time.

We didn't realize it, but we'd taken a straddle. Two bombs fell short of the hotel. Two bombs fell over. The last one fell in Grosvenor Square near our Embassy, and when we walked to the Embassy the next morning to report for duty, there was dust and dirt everywhere and broken glass and the American Embassy had broken windows. I didn't know what had happened, but I said, we don't take very good care of our property. [Laughter].

That was the first air raid. No damage except that -- well, the reason there was no damage, the luxury hotels were all in the West End of London. This raid was a morale raid. They wanted to get at the workers so they hit the East End of town, and we got shaken up pretty badly but well really, not badly at all. As far as I know, no one was killed in the West End, or at least no one that we knew about. And life went on. But when we had an opportunity to see the damage in the East End, it was pretty serious and that's

what the Germans were after; breaking the morale of the British people.

The next day, of course, we reported to the RAF and because the Brits were so anxious to have the United States come into the war, they overdid themselves with their hospitality. We could fly any of their airplanes. I flew the Spitfire, I flew the Hurricane, and we had all kinds of little airplanes to fly around for transportation. We didn't have to walk anywhere.

One of the favorite ones that I used quite often was the Lysander, which was a short takeoff and landing airplane used for observation. And it was really short takeoff and landing and kind of a -- well, all airplanes are a delight to fly and this airplane was no exception.

I could actually go -- When the fog was down, they had the anti-aircraft balloons and they were up in the fog, in the clouds, and the cables came down, but you could, there were no cables over the highways so you could follow the highways and be reasonably safe. So I could fly, in a Lysander I could fly right into London, make a right turn at the big gasometer, and there's the airport right ahead of you.

This was all very exciting because -- It was exciting because the stakes were awful high and you begin to consider them. But both Zemke and I would like to have flown with the RAF across the Channel and over France, and, of course, the RAF invited us.

Before we left, there was tremendous antiwar sentiment in the United States. First of all, we didn't want to spend the money because we weren't going to war. And everybody said, the antiwar element in the population -- and it was tremendously strong -- said, why do we, why are we going to spend all this money to buy these airplanes and give these airplanes away and we're not going to go to war?

Well it turned out that buying the airplanes was the right thing to do. As a matter of fact, it would have been better if we could have invested more in the technology before the war, but this wasn't to be.

But it was a pleasure. The British people just really extended themselves to us and we got to see a very exciting drama which was going on as the Germans tried to force Great Britain out of the war there in those early years. And thanks to the Spitfire and the Hurricane, the Germans

couldn't do it. And Lord, it sure helps to have the best airplanes in your flying inventory.

In my opinion, the money spent in ensuring that the American Force and the Navy and our allies have the best equipment so that when we go to war we can make it a short war. Long wars get to be terribly expensive; not only expensive but you lose a lot of good friends.

The tour in England was just great, and I was out -- On the weekend we didn't have much to do so I was out visiting one of our Eagle squadrons. If you remember, the Eagle squadrons were Americans who had volunteered to fight for Great Britain. I got a telephone call from the Embassy on a Sunday afternoon saying we want you to come in; we need to talk to you. And I said, about what? And they said, when you get here we'll tell you.

So I got in a taxi and drove into London and reported to the Ambassador at the Embassy and I said, Sir, I'm here; what are we going to do? And he said, you're going to Moscow tonight. And I said, Sir, I don't have any winter clothes. And he said, well you're not going to be there very long. [Laughter]. And of course, that's a standard answer. I was just there until the rest of the war but -- [Laughter].

I found out that President Roosevelt was sending Harry Hopkins, his right-hand man in the White House, and General McNardie, one of our very competent senior officers in the Army Air Corps. And I found out after I was briefed that we were going to go there and try and find out what the Russians needed to stop the Germans, what we could give them. So this started a fascinating odyssey.

We left London by train, and I was very impressed with the British train; it didn't have to stop at the water tanks to take on water. It scooped it up from a trough under the tracks, and we went nonstop from London to, I think, [Invergordon], where we caught a Catalina flying boat and we took off from Scotland, northern Scotland, and flew north to Spitzbergen and then we turned south and flew into Russia.

It was a long and dull trip and the Catalina wasn't very comfortable -- not nearly as comfortable as a fighter airplane. It was a long and dull flight but exciting, because there was always the possibility the Germans might have intercepted us. And a PBY made about a hundred knots, and it would have been very easy to bring us down.

We landed in the harbor at Archangel, because we were establishing Archangel as a delivery point for our aircraft and the first aircraft to be delivered to the Russians were going to be the P-40. And Zemke was on the water with the airplanes. He wasn't in England when all this started, and we started delivering P-40s.

The Russians built us an airport on an Arctic bog because we were right on the Arctic Circle. And although it was October, I think, it wasn't very cold. It wasn't uncomfortable because the Gulf Stream warms that part of Europe.

The Russians built a timber runway across an Arctic bog. They cut trees galore, and they cut trees down and they would lay them over -- they cut drainage canals, then they would lay these logs down, and then over the logs they put a timber runway. And it was just beautiful; just like landing on your living room floor. And all the labor was done by prison labor.

We lived in railroad cars that had been liberated. They put us in Latvian cars that had been liberated from Latvia when the Russians moved into there, and we delivered the first order of P-40s.

But we had trouble. Somehow or another in the climate or the way the airplanes had been modified, we began to strip the gears in the engine and in the auxiliary gear drive in the rear. The fuel pump is on that drive and when those gears went you were sitting there with no fuel and over an Arctic forest, and you either jumped out or rode it in.

The Russian commander that received the airplanes was a hero of the Soviet Union and a very decent fellow and also very knowledgeable. He had fought in Finland. He'd fought in Spain, and he'd fought in China.

I particularly was interested in how the Japanese were doing. He said don't underrate them. And he pulled up his pants leg and about half of his calf was gone. And he said that the Japanese commander at, I forget the name of the town in China over which they were fighting, had challenged him to air combat and the Japanese were flying a low-wing monoplane, fixed gear, and the Russian was flying a biplane with a lot of wings and wires. Of course, the Japanese airplane just outperformed him.

He said, I would wait until the Japanese pilot would start firing. He said, there was no way I could avoid him.

He made pass after pass, and he said, when he started to fire I would look at his airplane and when I saw the flash of the machine gun, he said, I would snap-roll this biplane and of course then it would slow down and the Japanese airplane would pass by. And he said, finally what saved me, he ran out of ammunition. [Laughter].

And the reason I tell you this story, when I finally got to China I told General Chennault that I had met this Russian pilot who had had -- I think it was over Nanking. And Chennault said, I was on the ground and I saw it, and he said he had a terrible wound in his leg, and he said the Russian rather probably pulled up his pants leg, and sure enough, there he had lost a great deal, lost part of the muscle in his foot. But he was a great guy. Little did I know that sooner or later I would be flying for Chennault.

But when the Germans marched into Russia, they got to the city of Moscow and I could sit in the American Embassy and listen to the German guns banging away all day long. And we expected Moscow to fall. Everyone expected it. And I wouldn't be surprised if not only the Germans but the Russians themselves thought they were going to lose Moscow.

I had an opportunity after the war to talk to two German commanders who were on the Moscow front, high-ranking commanders, and I said, what happened to you? And they said, well, you remember the rains in October and November and then you remember the deep freeze in December. They said we couldn't start our airplanes. And that's true. The Russian airlines didn't fly when it was below minus 30.

When I left Russia, I had to wait three days for the temperature to rise to minus 30 before the airlines could get out of Moscow. Anyway, I'm rambling on with this odyssey too long.

I was assigned to the Russian Embassy, I mean the American Embassy in Moscow. It was purely a staff position because the Russians would not let us see anything, and they wouldn't tell us anything, and we'd get wires from Washington: Give us this information. And we'd wire back that the Russians were not going to give us the information. And Washington would say we have the assurance of the highest authorities that this information is available to you; all you have to do is ask for it. Well, all you had to do was ask for it, and that's the last you ever heard about it. [Laughter].

It got so bad that General Marshall got upset and he sent a special emissary to Moscow, and he arrived without

announcement and walked in and said, I represent General Marshall, which he did, and he said, I want to find out what the problem is. We were all pretty low ranking and, of course as a very junior officer I was way down in the ranks and the military attaché was a lieutenant colonel. He told General Marshall's representative. He said, the Russians are never going to give you this information that you want.

And our representative said, well, we have the highest assurances and he said, I was sent here from London, and he said, before I left I met with Ambassador Maisky, who was the Russian mission head in London, and I've been told that all of this information we want is available; all we have to do is ask for it.

Our military attaché said, I don't think you're going to get it. And of course we never did. The Russians were just running us around in circles.

So I'd been trying -- I wasn't doing anything. I was just air attaché to the Soviet Union sitting in the Embassy enjoying the good food and the beautiful facility in which we lived. And I was very anxious to get out.

When Colonel Townsend Griffiss, Griffiss Air Force Base, said I have to go back to Washington and really tell them what the problem is, I'd been asking the general staff at Washington to replace me, to send me back. I had left an active combat unit in the United States, and I wanted to get back with it. And I'd asked them to send me back.

There was no way. The Russians said, we have to have an air observer in Moscow and you're it.

So when I told General Griffiss, I didn't expect him to say he would help me get out of Russia, but I said, take me with you. And he said, you can go. And I said, Sir, Washington won't give me orders. And he said, you don't need them. [Laughter]. And I said, why don't I need them? And he said, well General Marshall sent me here to solve this problem and he said I had the authority to take whatever action necessary, but I'm going to get to the bottom of it. He said, I've got to go back to Washington to tell them, and you're going to go with me.

So here I finally had a chance to get back to my combat unit, which I'd left over a year earlier, and I was just absolutely delighted. General Griffiss and I left; we had to wait three days for the temperature to warm up to minus 30 before we could leave, but we finally got out and we go to Tehran.

And when we got to Tehran, Colonel Griffiss had second thoughts. He said, John, let's just do it this way. He said, you're now out of Russia. You wait here in Tehran -- [laughter] -- and I'll be in London in two days and I have a direct phone with General Marshall and you'll have your orders and you meet me in London. I said, well I would feel a lot better doing it that way.

So he left and headed for London and I never heard from him. [Laughter]. It wasn't a laughing matter. [Laughter].

He was on a transport; I think it was a B-24 that had been altered to carry passengers, and when he entered the airspace around London he was misidentified, shot down by Spitfires, and everybody aboard was lost. So I was just doubly lucky that I didn't get on that airplane. And I didn't hear from him for -- Well, I didn't hear from him, of course, because he was dead. But when I left Colonel Griffiss I said I'm not going to stay here in Tehran where they'd put me up in a hotel -- one of the things about living, sometimes it wasn't comfortable, but a hotel that had no toilets. And I was anxious to get out of Tehran.

We had been losing so many ships coming into the Arctic ports that a decision had been reached to arm Russia on a rather massive scale. So they set up a new logistics line through the Med, down the Suez, up the Persian Gulf and then by railroad into Russia. But it took tremendous, it's hard to imagine the amount of work that this entailed. First of all, we had to build new ports, and we had to complete the -- the railroad didn't run from all the way from Europe to Persia.

So we had a tremendous engineering staff to build a railroad, to build the warehouses, to build the airports, and to build the ports that were necessary to move this enormous amount of supplies, which we were sending to the Russians. And so I got involved in that.

I reported into the Logistics Mission which was in Basra, because I didn't have any place to go. And I said when I reported to the deputy commander, I said, I'm an American officer and I'm probably going to be in this area for maybe two weeks. Would you put me up?

This senior officer looked at me and he said -- I'm in civilian clothes -- and he said, are you really an Air Corps officer? And I said, yes, Sir, I am, and I showed him my ID and he said, draw a uniform. And I worked for him, I guess, for six months or longer.

Just to show you how unprepared and unplanned things were, I'd been at the Logistics Mission maybe two or three days when a couple of twin-engine bombers flew overhead and landed at the airport across town. I got in a jeep and I drove out there and there was an elderly pilot, at least I thought he was. [Laughter]. He was a retired Pan Am captain, and standing in front of this B-25.

And I drove up to him and I said, can I help you? He pulled out a memorandum receipt and he said, sign for this airplane. [Laughter]. And I said, what do you mean sign for the airplane? He said, I was told to deliver this airplane to the Army Air Corps right here in Basra, Iraq. And I said, Sir, there is no Army Air Corps here. And he said you're an Army Air Corps officer, aren't you? [Laughter]. And I said, yes, Sir. And he said, you either sign for the airplane or I'm going to fly it back to California, he says, because I get paid by the hour. [Laughter].

So I called the Logistics Mission and I talked to the Deputy Chief and told him what had happened. And I said, have you heard of any airplanes being delivered here for us to turn over to the Russians? He says, not a word.

We had no spare parts; nothing. He just laughed, and he said, John, sign for the airplane and we'll straighten it out, which we did. And the Pan Am pilot said, there are hundreds more behind me. [Laughter]. And actually, there were. [Laughter]. And the mission in Basra that was supposed to support all of this transfer had received no word whatsoever that this was going to happen to them.

And so we started, and we really delivered billions of dollars worth of B-25s to the Russians that at first we

didn't know whether they were supposed to go there or not. But things just happened, and it was an exciting piece of duty.

The Persians had no airplanes, and we were operating from their main airport, and they looked at these B-25s and boy, what great airplanes they were.

By this time now, I'd gotten two pilots from the states to help me, two junior pilots; and I'd gotten 40 mechanics from the Douglas Company. How these arrived, I don't know, but anyway there they were and I was very happy to see them and we really set up an operation. And we were operating from the main airport at Tehran.

Because the Persians had no airplanes, they all wanted to fly in the B-25s. So we started by letting the Persian mechanics -- they would load up that B-25, some of them so heavy that they put so many Persian mechanics in the back end that the front wheels would be off the ground and you couldn't taxi.

But the Persians just thought this was great, and so they came to me and said, would you fly the Chief of the Air Force? I said, I'd be delighted to fly the Chief of the Persian Air Force. So I put him in the left-hand seat, told him he was the pilot. I said, the airplane just flies itself; go ahead. So he flew the airplane; he just thought that was great.

He came and he said, would you take the Minister of Defense for a ride? I said I'd be delighted to take the Minister of Defense for a ride. [Laughter]. So I took the Minister of Defense, and I gave him a tour of his country.

And when he landed he said, would you take the Shah for a ride? [Laughter]. And I said I'd be delighted to take the Shah for a ride. [Laughter]. And then it hit the fan.

The State Department found out because I was going to take the Shah for a ride -- [laughter] -- and they had a fit. And they said to me, suppose you -- Well first of all I did not understand or know the diplomatic protocol, and I did not know that I was not supposed to be talking to the Shah. [Laughter]. And the State Department said to me, we

understand you are dealing with the head of this government. And I said, no sir, I am not dealing with it, they're dealing with me. [Laughter].

Well that kind of threw a monkey wrench in for a minute, but anyway I apologized. I told them I was sorry, that I did not understand protocol, that this was all very new to me and that -- I said I would be very relieved -- to the State Department -- if you would take -- I said the Shah wants to go for a ride. He wants to fly a B-25, and I said, I can do that, but I understand now that I have no authority whatsoever and I understand it's contrary to practice.

So I said, you make all the arrangements. So they said they would, and the day before I was to take the Shah for a ride I got a one-line wire from the Pentagon, because the headquarters of the Air Force had now moved into the Pentagon. And it had just one line. It said, "Report to China," signed Arnold.

So I didn't wait; I left right that moment. I'd been stuck there in Basra so long, I was so glad to get out that I got in this B-25, I flew to Basra, I bought a ticket on BOAC and a short time later I reported to General Chennault for a very exciting tour with a really a great soldier and in a theatre where the top brass were haggling with one another.

Stilwell and Chennault didn't see eye to eye, but my tour in the Far East with the Chinese was very rewarding. I got shot down twice, and I survived a midair collision, and with the help of the Lord, I guess, I came back to the United States and was immediately given a brand new fighter group to train and take to England. And I'm going to leave it right there, because the story goes on forever.

**Moderator:** Why don't you do a little bit more, because it focuses on Special Operations? [Laughter]. Why don't you take us a little bit into Burma?

**General Alison:** Oh, well I took command of the group, which was stationed at the field just north of San Francisco, right across the Bay. Hamilton. What a delightful, beautiful spot. And I was really in high cotton. I thought this is the way for a fighter pilot to advance in the world.

I had several friends who were friends of the movie people, and they'd invited us down to Malibu. I happened to be out at Andy Devine's house, where his wife was an expert on making some kind of drink that they concocted, which was deadly. [Laughter].

We were just having a wonderful time, and the phone rang and it was 4<sup>th</sup> Air Force, downtown San Francisco. They said, we want to see you. And I said, well when? Because I didn't want to leave right then. [Laughter]. But they said, right now. And they said, put your drink down - - [laughter] -- get in the car, and come over to our headquarters at San Francisco, and I did.

I got there and I said, Sir, what now? And they said, here's your ticket, you're going to Washington. And I said, what for? And they said, well, we don't know but you've got to go to Washington. So that night I got in, I guess it was United Airlines, I can't remember, in their DC-3 and flew to Washington and walked into General Arnold's office the next morning.

And my friend Phil Cochran was sitting out in the lobby and I said, Phil, what are you doing here? He said, John, I don't know. He said, what are you doing here? [Laughter]. And I said, I don't know.

Well anyway, it was a short time. We went in to see General Arnold, and he told us the story of this British General Ward Wingate. An unusual man. Personally, an eccentric. He had attempted suicide, I think twice, and was frustrated because he didn't die. [Laughter]. But he had a tremendous reputation as a guerilla fighter and he'd actually put Haile Selassie back on the throne in Ethiopia.

He was a controversial person; very, very eccentric and always in trouble with higher headquarters. He didn't hesitate to put his superiors on written notice that he didn't like what they were doing. [Laughter]. It was no wonder he was not popular with the British Army.

But Wavell was a personal friend, and actually, Wingate was a very effective soldier. He was a fierce warrior himself, and he was a cousin of Lawrence of Arabia. And he wanted to be -- At this time he had done one tour in Burma and, I think he wanted to be Wingate of Burma.

And so he had, I guess General Wavell -- I don't know what went on up at the higher levels, but he organized this campaign, a guerrilla campaign, which turned out to be quite effective but also lost a lot of people. One of his

problems was that in Burma, the Japanese couldn't move very rapidly, but neither could we. And because he had no way to really move through the jungle and over the mountains and hills, he began to lose people, and this, of course, upset him.

Wingate was a -- I'm not going to say a strange character, but he was a character and he was also a personal friend of Mr. Churchill. So he went to Churchill and he told Churchill that he couldn't do another campaign in Burma because he had to leave his wounded.

If a man was ambulatory, they could take him with them, but if the man was not ambulatory they just had to leave him, and leave him with provisions and a gun, to the tender mercies of the Japanese who later would pick him up. And he just said, I can't do this anymore; my men just can't take it.

And he said, I've asked the RAF for air evacuation capability, and the RAF can't do it; they don't have the equipment or personnel. And he said, I'm in hopes that --to Mr. Churchill -- that you can talk to the Americans and get them to provide the air assets that I need to move my wounded.

So Churchill took him to the Quebec Conference, on the Queen Mary yet, and he told his sad story about having to leave his wounded to the tender mercies of the Japanese and how he would like to have air assets to save his wounded. So Churchill apparently told his story to President Roosevelt. Roosevelt got together with his military leaders, and before you knew it the Americans were now going to do this.

I didn't know anything about it until I got to Washington. That's when General Arnold pulled Phil and me in and he said, we've got to do this and the Air Force has got to provide the facilities and organize it and he said, one of you boys has got to do it; which one of you is it going to be?

Well Phil and I were very close personal friends; we had flown together and it was a great opportunity, but I said to General Arnold, I don't want to do it. I said, you've given me the best assignment in the United States Air Force. You've made me a group commander. I'm now training my group. I'm just getting my first airplanes and I'm headed for England and the battle over the continent.

And I don't know. It must have -- Phil Cochran was an unusual guy. He was a guy that every soldier liked. We were in the same squadron before the war and all the enlisted men called him, they said, he's our boy. But he was a very popular and unusual and a talented young man.

So Phil turned to General Arnold and said, General Arnold, he really doesn't mean that. [Laughter]. And I said, General Arnold, I really do mean that. [Laughter]. And General Arnold just laughed and it ended up that both of us went. [Laughter].

And Arnold was under the wrong impression that I was the ranking officer. So he said, John, you're the ranking officer; you'll be the commander. I said, no Sir, Phil ranks me, I think by a month. And he said, well then, you'll be co-commanders. And we started as a co-command, but co-commands, you can't explain to people what a co-command is. [Laughter].

So I said, Phil look, let's straighten this out; you're the commander, I'm your deputy, let's get this job done. So we started from there and we did it. And we didn't have any special vision. We didn't even know what we had to work with.

I'd never seen a glider, and I don't think Phil had either. We had our option. We could have anything that the Air Force had. We could have paratroopers, and Phil had seen some helicopters, and he wanted -- he thought we ought to -- helicopters were the real, well light planes and helicopters were a great asset.

We started out to organize this thing, and we got volunteers from everywhere. And we wouldn't tell anybody what we were going to do, which made it even more attractive. [Laughter]. Everybody wanted to go with this air commander.

As a matter of fact, there were so many questions that the transport squadron, their insignia was a great big question mark just above the tail of the airplane. When people said, what are you going to do, they'd point to the question mark on the tail of the airplane. [Laughter].

But Phil had seen the helicopters, and he said, you know, that's just the ticket. So he went to Wright Field and talked to the program manager and said that he wanted helicopters for this mission. And of course the program manager said, you can't have them; he just turned him down cold.

So Phil had to go on a trip to England, so he said to me just before he left, he said, John, get the helicopters. Well I happened to know the program manager, and he was a good guy. And I called him and I said, look, let's work this out. And he said, John, the airplanes are just not fit for this kind of -- They're just not ready.

And I said, well, you know, we were not ready for war when we went to war. And I said, that's the story of this whole experience. I said, we make it work.

I said, I'm at the point now when I've been told to get the helicopters and I want them, and I have the priority. And the program manager at Wright Field said, no you don't; you can't have them. He said, you'll get them over my dead body. So I looked at him and I laughed and I said, lie down. [Laughter]. And of course I did have the priority. I got the helicopters. [Laughter and applause].

He was right. They certainly weren't ready. [Laughter]. But we did use them, and I think we pulled 24 guys out of holes in the jungle that it would have been very difficult to get them without the helicopters.

Well it was obvious that this helicopter was going to be a great instrument in the future, and it looks as though it's turning out to be. Because, when you see this airplane that turns its wing up and can go fast and take a lot of people --

The side that has the mobility -- Our great advantage in Burma was we could move. We could go anywhere, because our light planes, we could get down in 300 feet, and we had high-lift devices.

Our biggest boosters were our doctors. They'd never had this kind of capability before. We'd have a man wounded, and the soldiers would scrape out 300 feet in a rice paddy. We'd go in, then pick up the wounded man, take him back to our base where we were landing C-47s in the jungle, transfer him to that airplane, and that night we would have him in a general hospital in India.

The doctors had never had that capability before. They had to depend on ambulances. This was not Air Commando; this was just regular fighting. The roads are so terrible in wartime, to put a wounded man in an ambulance and try and move him somewhere fast, you're going to kill him. So the doctors were such boosters of 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando because they had never had that kind of capability before.

So mobility is just a wonderful thing in war, and it was certainly obvious. I had never flown a C-47. I'd never flown a glider. But the night when we took off with the gliders, I was back there on the end of that rope wishing I was somewhere else. [Laughter]. But it was an exciting night.

**Moderator:** Can you talk a little bit about the invasion night and what went on then?

**General Alison:** Well, the night -- We were going to two bases, which we envisioned from the photographs in Burma. And there were two areas that were relatively clear of trees. And for morale purposes we named one of the landing areas "Broadway" and the other one, we named it after the big street, "Piccadilly", in London.

Just before dark, we sent a reconnaissance out and took pictures of the landing areas. Wingate and Cochran didn't want us flying anywhere near to the landing areas because they felt that this would alert the Japanese and then landing at night and having to fight at the same time would be very difficult. So they wanted to keep this all very secret. But right at the last minute, Phil changed their minds. As a matter of fact, he didn't even ask them. He sent a reconnaissance out, and Piccadilly was completely blocked by logs.

We thought that the Japanese had been alerted and through their intelligence had found out that we were going to make these landings. And it would have been just -- If we'd flown in there and started hitting those logs and had to fight at the same time, it would have been a tremendous disaster.

So we bypassed Piccadilly and Phil said, well let's put all of the gliders into one airport, which was difficult. And Phil passed it on to the troops. He said, fellows, we've got a better plan; the Japanese have boxed up Piccadilly so we're going to all go to a better airport, and we did.

Sometimes I just wonder how it happened. But we were able to land our -- Well, first we put the gliders in and we had the airborne engineers had developed little bulldozers and scrapers and graders and earth-moving machines, which were a tremendous help, particularly after you'd been out there on that line with a spade.

To have one of these little bulldozers, and we had quite a few of them, and we brought them in in the gliders, and the gliders ran into each other when we landed. Because you try and separate them, but at night it's difficult and nobody's on the ground, and we had a lot of crashes. One glider running into another one after they were on the ground. I think we lost 25 men in the landings as a result of gliders running together. But we got in a real fighting force.

It's hard to plan everything correctly, but we had a signal. If things were going well, the signal was "pork sausage". The Brits had to eat synthetic sausage made out of soy meal, and so soy link was something they didn't like at all. The code word for disaster was "soy link" and the code for success was "pork sausage". [Laughter].

Everything was pandemonium. These gliders were running together on the ground, and you couldn't run very far. My legs finally just gave out. I was one of the first gliders to land, and I was very lucky. My glider didn't hit a stump or a ditch or anything. I landed and before I could stop -- I had one of the lead combat teams in the glider, they were out and they covered that landing area just -- the Brits were very, very impressive.

But we had a number of these gliders that ran together, and at night it's difficult and you can't really unscramble things. And we tried. There is a radio inversion that occurs over that part of Burma every night, so we couldn't talk back, but we wanted to stop.

We had enough people on the ground. We got enough people in. We didn't need anymore, and we wanted to stop them. And we didn't have any way of getting in touch the airplanes back in India, with the headquarters in India.

Finally somebody, just in desperation, with these airplanes running together and then you're trying to pull kids out of the wreckage, you get kind of desperate. Somebody put out the word "soy link", which was disaster. And that word got back to Wingate and Cochran, and oh boy, were they depressed.

Everything had gone to pieces, whereas really it hadn't. We were on the ground, and we'd already started building an airport. We got the bulldozers out and guys with spades. But it looked miserable because gliders had run together, and you had big piles of machines, and it did, it looked terrible.

But as Mike Calvert, the leader, and a great combat leader, one of Wingate's hand-to-hand fighters -- Mike said to me, he said, John, everything looks worse when it's dark. He said, let's wait until the morning before we say anything. [Laughter].

And sure enough, the morning came and things didn't look quite so dark. But I looked at all that wreckage out on -- We had a detachment of airborne engineers, and the leader of the detachment was an engineer captain and he was killed in the landings. So I said, well, what's his second in command? They brought me this skinny-looking little lieutenant, and we looked out over that area where the gliders were scattered from one end to the other and we still had people trying to line up the wounded.

I asked this little engineer, I looked at him and I looked out and it looked so bad to me, I said, Lieutenant, do you think you can make an airport here? He looked out over it and he turned back to me and he said, Sir, if I have it done by this afternoon will that be all right? [Laughter].

**Moderator:** Sir, we're going to have to wrap it up, we're at the end.

**General Alison:** Oh, okay. Well, anyway, we were on the ground and pretty soon -- Well, the second night we had a runway. We were bringing in mules. We were bringing in people. We were bringing in guns. And we had an operation really going, and there was nothing the Japanese could do to stop it.

It took them -- First of all, there was a stream right off the -- It took us two days to find that stream, the jungle was so thick. But it also took the Japanese a long time to get things done.

I think the next night -- I don't know how big the fighting force was but Mike Calvert, the British leader who was a famous hand-to-hand fighter -- and when you looked at him, you didn't want to get engaged with him. He was a tough guy, but he was a real student of warfare. And he took, I think he had about 700 men out, and he was on his way to the first roadblock, which was -- It took three or days to get to simply because you had to go through the jungle

But he got down to the railroad and a railroad trestle, and the first thing the Brits did -- the Japanese had a detachment defending the trestle. The British killed every

one of them. The first time I had seen a battlefield. You're up in an airplane, and everything smells good and it looks nice, but when you're down there where guys have gone at it hand to hand, it was really something to behold.

But they dropped the bridge and the main railroad from northern Burma down to southern Burma; another train never passed there for the entire war. Of course, that helped tremendously when you took away the mobility of the opposing force.

But we kept building up our force, and Wingate was in and out of Burma all the time. I flew him personally because I didn't want anything to happen to him. But this one day, I got two radio messages that stopped me. One of our senior pilots, and a good pilot. He actually was a B-24 commander, was flying the B-25--and he went in to pick up Wingate and bring him out. It was at night and he was headed back for our headquarters.

I was actually on the ground waiting for him when one of our transports called and said, I just saw an explosion on the face of the mountain, and do we have any airplanes in a certain quadrant. Well I knew what the quadrants were, and I immediately said, oh my God, that's where the B-25 is supposed to be. And it was. And we lost Wingate.

And that took a lot of spark away from this particular engagement, because the British Army didn't like Wingate. He was not conventional. He was eccentric. A funny man, and the British Army never got behind him really, and so Wingate was gone.

I had received -- I was in Burma, way deep with the British, when I got this message from Phil that said, come out tonight because I want to see you. And the only transportation I had was a damaged C-47 which the Brits wouldn't fly out because they said it was too dangerous.

I flew it out that night, and I landed and I was anxious to know what message I had. And Phil came and he said, John, you had one message when I sent for you. He said, you now have two. And I said, well, who are they from? And he said, well, the first one is signed Arnold; the second one is signed Eisenhower.

And Eisenhower -- They were just getting ready to cross the Channel and they were going to use gliders and of course they were very anxious to know what our experience had been, and we had a lot of experience. But I went to London and I visited with the RAF and I visited with General Eisenhower,

whom I had not met before but I found to be just absolutely a delightful senior officer. He couldn't have been nicer really to a second lieutenant, and I found out that I had to go back to Washington.

They had decided that they would use gliders to invade the Philippines, and I was to go and be the planner for General George Kenny on the invasion, and thank goodness it didn't, we didn't -- I went by battleship, not glider. [Laughter]. That too was exciting. We were hit by kamikazes.

**Moderator:** Sir, we're about ten over, so we're going to have to wrap it up here. I hate to do it.

**General Alison:** I talk too much.

**Moderator:** No, this was great. [Applause]. Thank you very much. [Applause]. Thank you so much. [Applause].

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