Multi-Man Publishing's

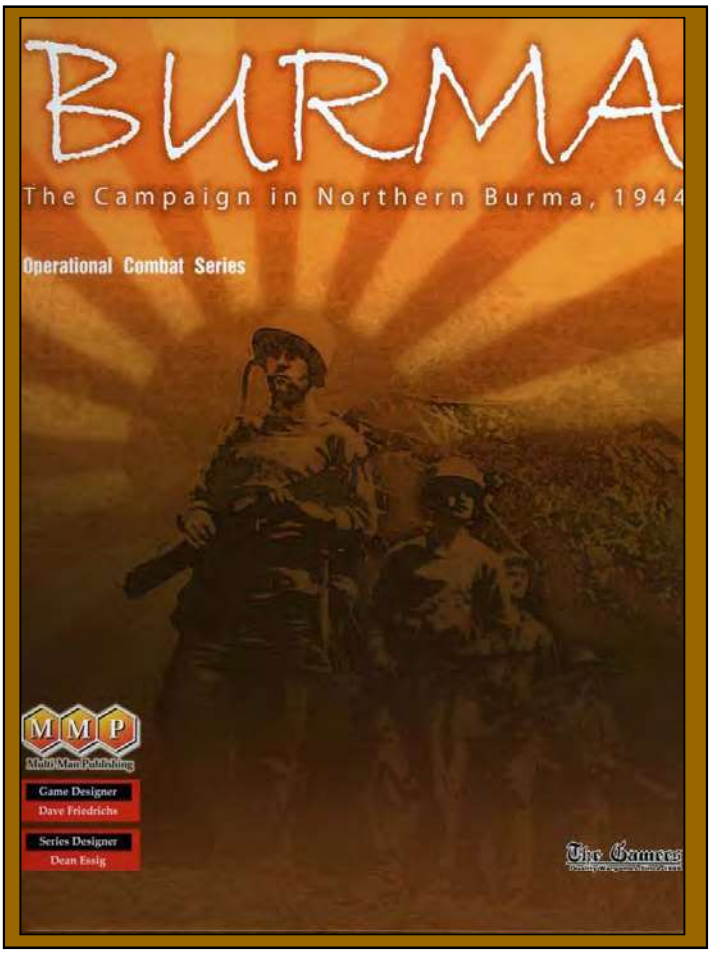
Burma

Published in 2008 · Designed by Dave Friedrichs

reviewed by **Patrick Collins**

The Gamers' (now Multi-Man Publishing's) Operational Combat Series has long focused on Europe and North Africa, with only two titles in Asia. One of those is now back in print, *Burma*, designed by Dave Friedrichs.

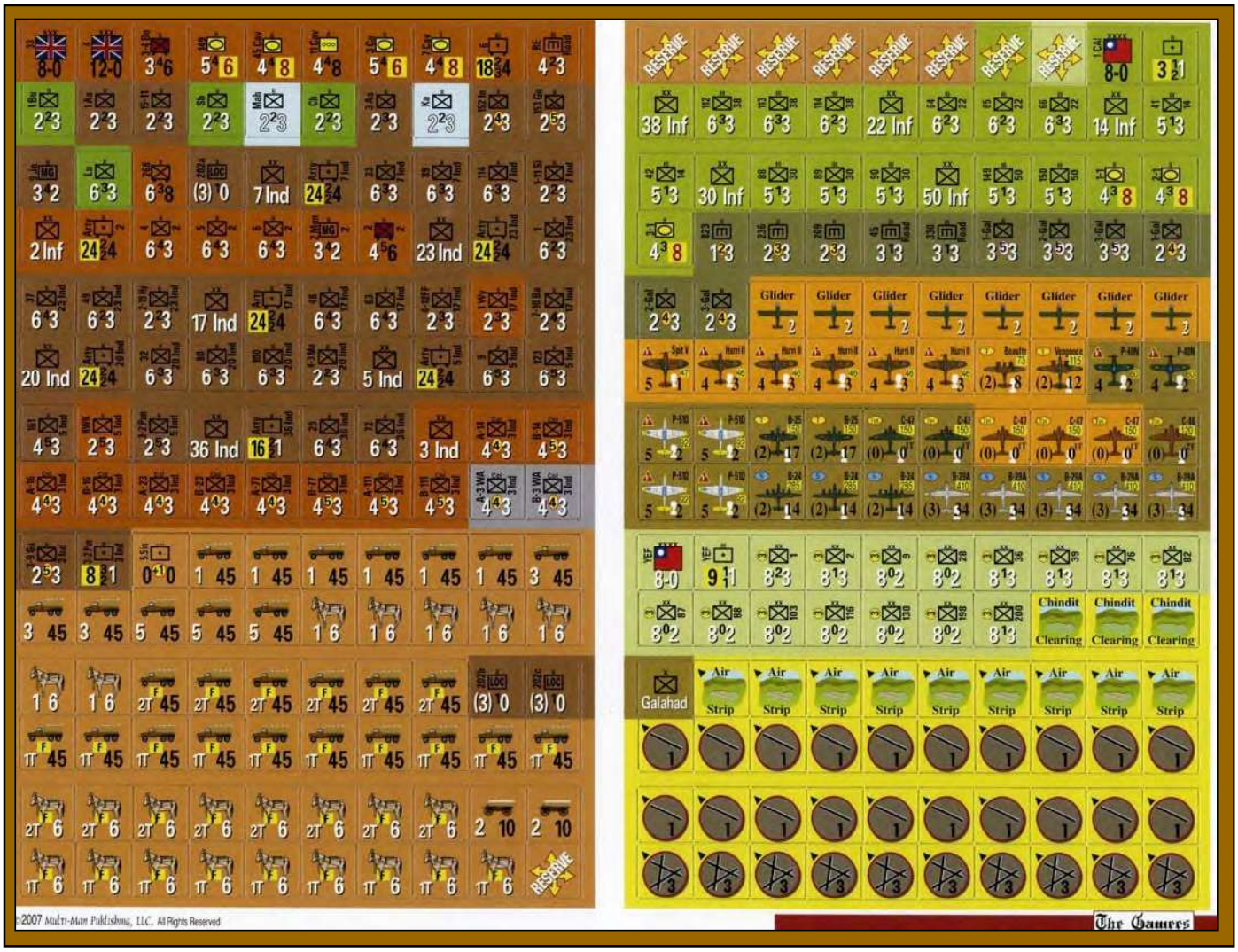
The game covers the 1944 campaign to open the Burma road. The Japanese attacked to move into India, while the Chinese trained by Gen. Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell moved down from Northern Burma to open the Burma Road. The terrain that both moved and fought in ranged from bad to horrendous. The constant rains and jungle diseases combined to make supply and combat extremely difficult. In the end, the Japanese did not enter India, and the capture of Myitkyina by the Allies not only opened the Burma Road, but allowed the Allied Transport Command to fly a better route to China, vastly increasing the tonnage delivered. Sadly the Nationalist government sat on that supply, preferring to keep it for use in the Chinese civil war that was expected after Japan was defeated.



Burma is a straight reprint, but all errata are included from the first one. There are two 21" x 34" maps. Mandalay is at the bottom center of the map, Myitkynia at the right center edge of the top map. Dimapur is on the opposite map edge, Imphal below it. The two major rivers, the Irrawaddy and Chindwin flow from top to bottom. It's very rough county, with jungle, rough, and mountain covering 95% (at least!) of the map except near Mandalay. There you get swamp. The counters are standard Operational Combat Series style, the Japanese player getting the Japanese Army, Indian National Army, and air. The Allies get British units, Indian Units, Nepalese Units, West African units, Burmese units, US Army units, Royal Air Force, US Army Air Force and two flavors of Nationalist Chinese.

One important reason to get Burma is for Operational Combat Series 4.0 rules. These are usable by all previous Operational Combat Series games. As usual, Dean Essig has aggressively improved an already very good system. There is even a summary of the changes in the back, along with impact on play. Here are the largest changes:

- **Mode**: Strategic mode units can only stop where they are in trace supply. Replacement units can be in any mode except combat, cannot rebuild unless in Move mode.
- **Zones of Control**: Out of supply units do not have zones of control. Only combat mode units have them.
- **Headquarters**: They can be disorganized, and count as any other unit for barrages. Its combat and movement values are affected by being disorganized, but not draw/throw or engineer activities. Headquarters can do most of their engineering tasks within two hexes of their location.
- **Movement**: Movement allowances are never rounded. Ever. Units need not be attack capable to enter empty enemy villages and cities.
- **Combat**: Units over running and units going the same path but not overrunning must move separately. Multi-step units have their attack strength cut by fifty percent when they lose their first step. When they have lost fifty per-



cent of their steps their defense strength is cut by fifty percent. (This is no change)

- **Barrages**: Artillery is one per unit in defense, not one for all artillery units. Interdiction and attacks on rail are now combined into train busting.. The no spotter shift on the barrage table is now three. A single division in a hex counts for three regimental equivalents for density modifiers.
- **Supply**: There is a breakout rule similar to the one in *Guderian's Blitzkrieg II*. Supply points on organic trucks can be used via headquarters. Extenders now ignore barrage attacks and collapse when overrun. Extenders cannot be created in a hex where they would be out of supply.
- **Engineers**: Only one level of hedgehog can be built in a turn. No terrain restrictions on air base construction.
- **Air**: Airplanes move and execute their missions at once. Flak table is completely changed. Air combat is revised also. Air refit can occur in all weather.

New optional rules:

- **Divisional Lines**: If you have three or fewer hexes between two combat mode divisions, any enemy moving between them must attack both units in the current phase or next combat segment.
- **Attacking an Empty Hex**: You can attack an empty hex. You pay supply, and attack into the hex. No exploit is possible. I would not expect many experienced Operational Combat Series players to want to use this one!
- **Reactive Artillery**: Artillery in combat or move mode may fire in the reaction phase, even without a reserve marker.
- **Anti-Raider**: A rule to stop single small units from cutting supply.

Of course, another good reason is the game itself. It has a learning scenario, and five short scenarios. The short ones range from nine to twenty-four turns long. The first lets players experience (and learn)

flying in the Chindits, and covers their first action in March 1944. The next one is Operation U-Go, when the Japanese attacked Imphal. Merrill's Marauders is the longest of the short ones, but has few counters. It focuses on the Ledo road. Sato's Dilemma has the Japanese under British pressure. At that key time, the Japanese commander was ordered to send one third of his units away! Naturally he chose not to. The last one shows the British counter attack when the Japanese advance to Imphal was stopped.

One of the reasons to play wargames, is to try alternatives that the commanders chose not to, or overlooked. Two of the short scenarios allow that at key points. The campaign games do also, while letting the player chose where to begin the action. The second campaign scenario lets players try the historical campaign, from the time action started. The third one is shorter, but comes at a key point of the campaign, with much of the action yet to come. The first one lets players start a little early, and see if they want to try jumping off sooner, (but with less preparation done).

In any Operational Combat Series game, the game specific rules generate a lot of the flavor. The key ones here deal with fuel, and Japanese supply. Units that need fuel must get it as one token per unit. No headquarters fueling, no divisional fueling - One token per unit. On the other hand, Japanese units may evade being out of trace supply if they can forage successfully. This rule lets the Japanese player choose between step losses, or being marked out of supply if he rolls step losses on the attrition table. As keeping units in trace supply is difficult in the bad terrain, this helps the Japanese player a lot. The Chindits can also make use of this rule, in part. They can avoid being out of supply, but if they do go out of supply, they cannot use this rule to go back into supply, as the Japanese can.

The Japanese also use a variable replacement table, but this table only allows the Japanese player to recover dead units. There is a very good chance that no units will be obtained this way, but over time the player should get a decent amount. Whether they come when they are needed, is another story.....

On the bonus side, Japanese units pay one token for ten counters, when they use on map supply instead of trace. They can also use water buffaloes as moving supply points. Of course these are for trace replacement only, but still, supply points are always quite valuable in Operational Combat Series. Of course the Japanese player may use a banzai attack. He may do so as an overrun, or a regular attack. The benefit is that the shift for surprise is the action rating of the lead attacking unit! The bad news is this works for attacker or defender surprise, and any unit destroyed is gone permanently. Any large Japanese attacks (of six or more counters) also suffer a minus one action rating.

The Japanese player may also build a level one hedgehog in a hex where he simply doesn't move for one turn. No supply points are needed for this! Level one is as far as it can go. No level two or higher hedgehogs may be build by the Japanese player in this game. The allies do not benefit or suffer from this rule.

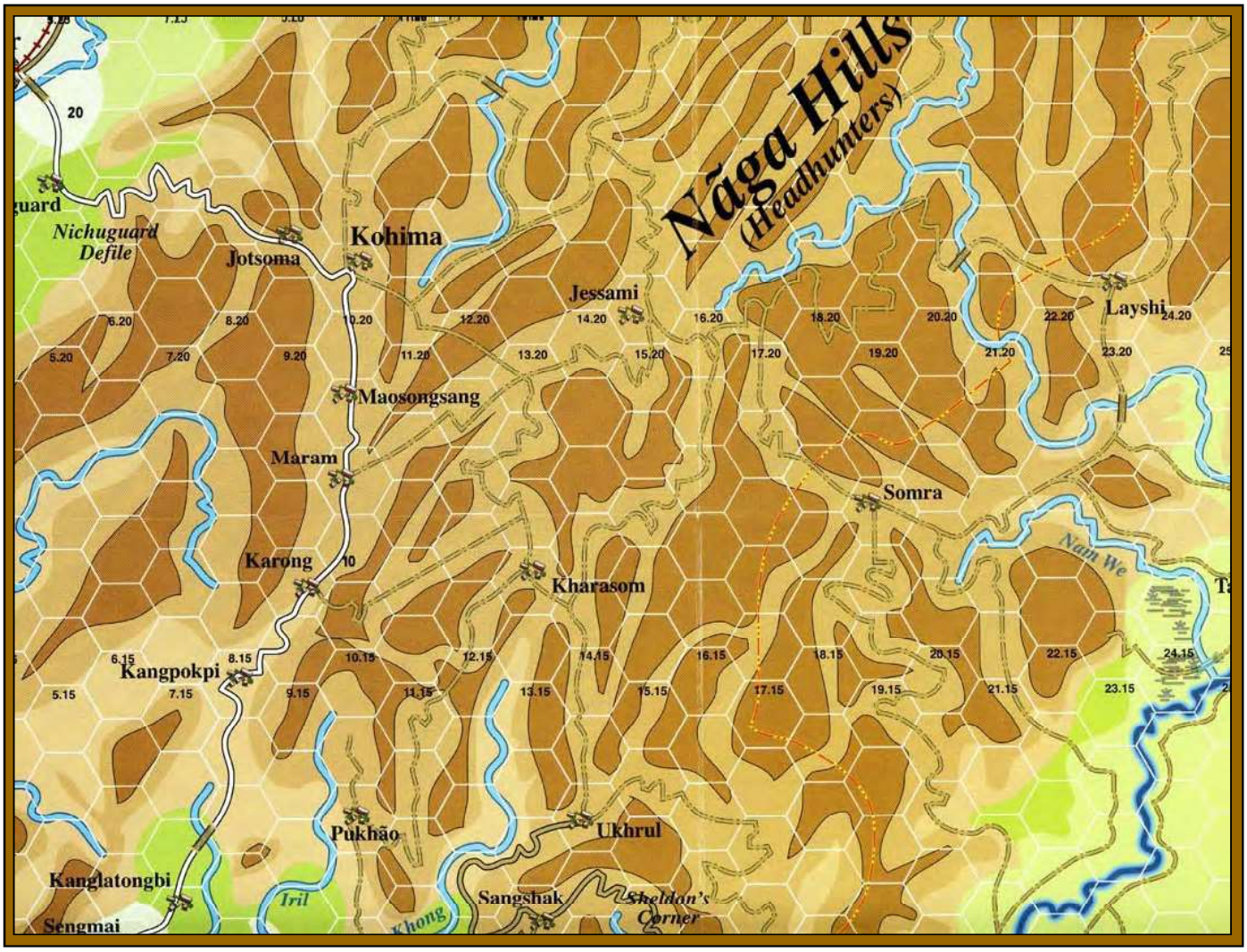
The Allied player cannot use U.S. and U.K. units in the same attack, or stack together. British units may draw from any source, ignoring divisional designation. The Allies may also divert supply from the Hump (flying to China over the Himalayas) - this gives the Japanese player victory points, though.

Play is very much affected by weather. In most of the terrain, you can't overrun, since most of the map terrain is prohibited to track and truck movement points unless on a road. The Allies have most of the armor, so that hurts them far more. The Allies do rule the skies, and in clear weather often have a fair amount of air attack available. These are not the logistical burden that air is, say, in *DAK*, so the Allied player can be rather lavish in using it. Moving supplies is as big a burden here as in any Operational Combat Series game.

Anything using truck movement points to move take eight points to move on a track. There are a lot of tracks on the map, in the mountain areas. Not so many roads. Lower down, the roads are more plentiful, but there are often tracks to one side or another, more useful to the Japanese player than to the Allies.

The ability of the Japanese player to stay in trace supply via forage will be one of his key weapons in this game. Via the forage rule, he can often stay in supply where he would normally be out of trace supply. This allows him to block trace for the Allies player. Given that one token in this game can supply ten Japanese units for trace, you can imagine a situation where an Allied player who ignores a mule and three small units suddenly finds his trace blocked in three places, for several turns!

Of course, the Japanese player then has some hard choices. Do I use that five action rated unit (which has a very good chance of foraging successfully) for blocking, or for attacking? In general the Japanese player has decent quality units, in his infantry. His armor on the other hand is rated a two, which gives Allied armor an advantage in quality of crew as well as equipment. Japanese armor was inadequate against early war tanks, so when the Grant (long ob-



solete in the West) arrived the Japanese were are a severe disadvantage. While BT-5s had terrorized the Japanese in 1939, they had no clue what awaited them in Manchuria in 1945. They were properly afraid, and when the Soviets unleashed their finely honed armored operational skills, the results were devastating. You should not expect much of a chance for that in *Burma.* Only a few hexes around Imphal and somewhat more around Mandalay are open. For the Japanese player, if you are fighting there, you have failed badly before.

As for competitive gaming, this is a good choice. Both sides attack and defend across the course of the game, sometimes both at the same time. While you might think with two maps unit density is not going to be an issue, a lot of the action will take place in the mountainous area on the way to Imphal. Expect lots of stacks there. But there is also action along the Ledo road, and deep behind the lines, thanks to Chindits. The Allied player will get a thorough grounding in air rules, with all the barrage and supply missions he will need to fly. Be sure to understand that a lot of supply missions will be flown. Not only the Chindits, but Imphal will need regular supply point service. He will need to ensure he is in supply, and fights the Japanese on his terms. Use air power when the weather is good, and make your progress before the rains come.

For the Japanese player, infiltrating to the rear to cut supply at the right time, followed by an attack on the out of supply units is the key to victory. You have little armor, and your artillery is much weaker than your opponents. Use the river to supply your forces and the tracks to cut his supply. You can forage when you need to, but don't depend on it for trivial tasks. Operational Combat Series rewards good planning, but the Japanese player needs to take it to the next level. The Allied player has more room to recover from mistakes. The Japanese player needs to infiltrate and surround his opponent, deep into his rear areas. And remember, sometimes the threat of blocking is worse than actually doing so. Both sides need to force your opponent to attack. The jungle is an enemy, but he can be put to use by the defender much more easily than the attacker.