Retreat from Burma: 11 December 1941–20 May 1942

Burma has 1,200 miles of coastline, running from the frontier of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to Victoria Point at the southern end of the Tenasserim Peninsula.¹ The country is 1,200 miles from north to south and at its broadest measures some 575 miles. Burma’s western frontier was with British-India and its northern frontier with China. To the east and south-east of Burma are Indo-China and Siam (Thailand). The four principal rivers in Burma are the Chindwin (600 miles long), the Irrawaddy (1,300 miles long), the Sittang (350 miles long) and the Salween (650 miles long).² The main rivers, the Irrawaddy and the Salween flow south. Between them runs the comparatively smaller Sittang. The Chindwin, which is the principal tributary of the Irrawaddy, flows through the thinly-populated forests and mountains bordering Assam and then turns south-east to join its parent river below Mandalay.³ Burma is a hilly country and the mountain ranges run from north to south. The vegetation varied from thick tropical forest in the north to thin scrubs in the drier region of south-central Burma. This was because rainfall varied from 200 inches in the north to less than 40 inches annually in the south.⁴ Jungle-covered high mountains separate Burma from India in the west, China in the north and Siam (Thailand) in the east. Burma’s central region is mostly surrounded by jungle-covered mountain barriers. The Chin Hills rise to about 10,000 feet. To the west, is the coastal strip at the Arakan. And in the south, the coastal fringe of Tenasserim points towards Malaya. Burma’s topography comprises dense jungles, swampy coastal plains and a dry triangular region (Mandalay-Magwe-Toungoo) in central Burma. From mid-May to mid-October, the south-west Monsoon turns the whole region into swamps and marshes. The climate is good between October and March. Malaria was common and the jungle was filled with wildlife.⁵ A point to be noted is that Burma, with 261,610 square

4 Majumdar, Administration of the Burma Campaign, p. 8.
5 Air Commodore Henry Probert, The Forgotten Air Force: The Royal Air Force in the War against Japan 1941–45 (London/Washington: Brassey’s, 1995), p. 82; Atholl Sutherland
miles, had only 3,760 miles of metalled and 6,770 miles of unmetalled roads and only 2,059 miles of railway.

In this regard, Burma was somewhat similar to Malaya. The main railway lines were Rangoon-Pegu-Mandalay, Rangoon-Letpadan and Rangoon-Pegu-Martaban-Moulmein. The important trunk roads were as follows: (i) Rangoon-Myitkyina via Mandalay and Bhamo (926 miles); (ii) Pegu-Moulmein-Tavoy-Mergui (482 miles); (iii) Meiktila-Taunggyi-Kentung-Thailand border (150 miles); (iv) Hsenwi-Munlong-China border (67 miles); (v) Mogaung-Maingkwan-Assam border (280 miles); (vi) Mandalay-Shwebo-Kalewa-Tamu (318 miles) and (vii) Prome-Taungup (110 miles). However, the principal rivers of Burma were navigable and a significant volume of inland traffic was carried along them.

Burma provided 37 per cent of the world’s rice output. And about 60 per cent of Burma’s rice was exported, mostly to British-India. Ethnologists claim that there are 135 different language groups inside Burma. The present government acknowledges 67 different languages and eight races in Myanmar. In 1931, the population of Burma was 17 million. Of them, 10 million were Burmans, four million Karens, one and a half million Shans, one million Indians and the rest belonged to various small ethnic communities. The Burmans lived mostly in central and southern Burma. The Shan States in north-east Burma were divided into several semi-autonomous principalities which were ruled by the hereditary rajas. The Hill Territories comprised some 40 per cent of Burma and remained under British control. There were 20,000 Eurasians ( Anglo-Burmans and others of mixed blood). The Indians worked in the Rangoon docks, functioned as tram drivers, refuse collectors, conductors, labourers, sweepers and office managers. In 1931, the Chinese numbered over 300,000.


S.N. Prasad, K.D. Bhargava and P.N. Khera, The Reconquest of Burma, vol. 1, June 1942–June 1944, Bisheshwar Prasad (General Editor), Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45 (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, India & Pakistan, Calcutta: Distributed by Orient Longmans, 1958), p. 2. B.N. Majumdar says that the total mileage of railways was roughly 2,667 miles and of that, with the exception of 206 miles, they were metre gauge and single track. Majumdar, Administration of the Burma Campaign, pp. 14–15.

Majumdar, Administration of the Burma Campaign, pp. 11, 14.

Warren, Burma 1942, p. 5.


Warren, Burma 1942, pp. 4, 6, 8.