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Bellefonte Native Fights Through the Jungles of Burma with Merrill's Marauders

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



William Ellwood “Boomer” Woomer (b. 1919 – d. 1995) of Bellefonte entered the U.S. Army in April 1941. He trained at Fort Benning, Georgia and was appointed Second Lieutenant in December 1942. In January 1943, Lieutenant Woomer left the United States and was sent first to Australia, then to New Guinea and on to India where he was assigned to the 5307th Composite Unit, Company K as a Company Commander and Mortar Chief.

Known informally as Merrill's Marauders after their leader, Brigadier General Frank Merrill, the nearly 3000-man unit was established in August 1943. President Franklin Roosevelt and other Allied leaders met at the Quebec Conference and determined that a long-range penetration mission into Burma was necessary to infiltrate and destroy Japanese supply and communication lines and reopen land routes into China.

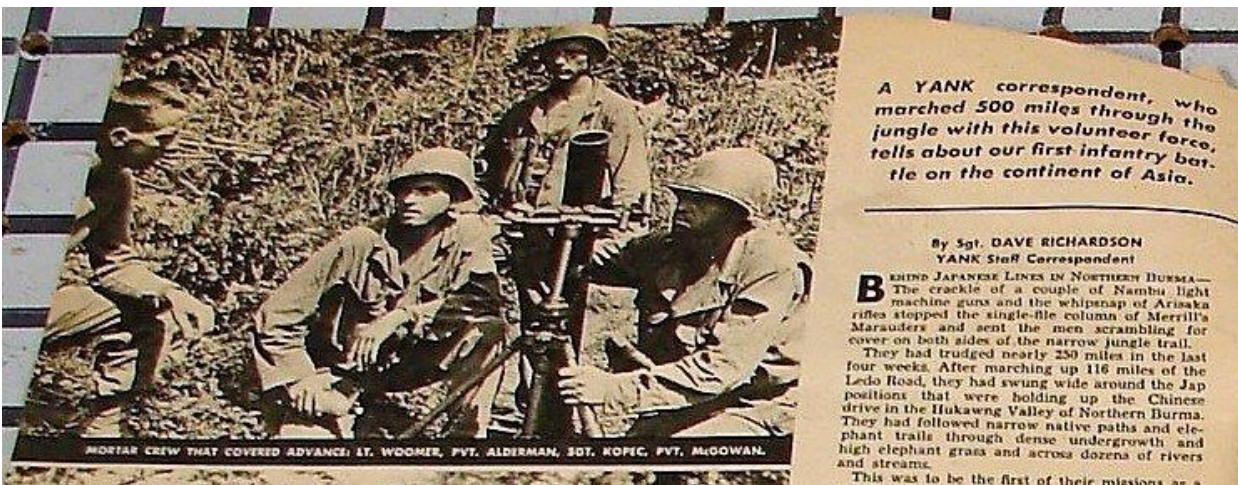
Woomer and the other Marauders spent a brief six months training in the jungles of central India before marching up the Ledo Road and over the outlying ranges of the Himalayan mountains into Burma. There, six

combat teams navigated some of the harshest jungle conditions of World War II. Outnumbered and plagued by hunger and disease, they engaged with the veteran Japanese 18th Division more than 32 times, including five major battles at Walawbum, Shaduzup, Inkangahtawng, Nhpum Ga, and culminating in August, 1944 with the capture of the airfield at Myitkina – the only all-weather airfield in northern Burma.



On April 5, 1944, during the battle at Walawbum in, Lt. Woomer earned a Bronze Star for meritorious service. With “utter disregard for his own personal safety [Lt. Woomer] worked his way up a mountainside within 25 yards of two enemy machine gun positions. From this point he directed mortar fire effectively on the enemy strongpoint. Lt. Woomer did not leave his dangerous position which was within the bursting radius of the shells until the enemy was wiped out.”.

The daring exploits of Merrill’s Marauders were featured in an issue of Yank Magazine, published June 9, 1944. The article features a photograph of Lieutenant Woomer and his mortar crew, and details the harsh, hazardous conditions under which the unit operated.



By the time the unit disbanded a week after Myitkina fell, only 130 combat-effective officers and men (out of the original 2,997) remained. Of the 2,750 to enter Burma, only two were left alive who had never been hospitalized with wounds or major illness. For their heroic actions, Merrill's Marauders were awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation. The Marauders also have the extremely rare distinction of having every member of the unit receive the Bronze Star.