

## **Floyd Hart and the Ledo Road**

The Colebrook Historical Society has acquired the Army uniform of Floyd Hart, better known to his many friends as simply “Buster”. Buster will continue to be missed for as long as his surviving friends and relatives are around.

Diabetes robbed him of his eyesight some time before his death, but his spirits and cheerfulness never faltered. He maintained 100 blueberry bushes alongside his Bunnell Street home, which was just the most visible aspect of a man with a love of gardening, and the green thumb to go along with it.

His WWII uniform, campaign ribbons with battle stars and other artifacts were donated to the society in the name of his survivors by his nephews Louis Jasmin and Floyd “Skip” Jespersen.

Buster, like so many of the men and women who have represented Colebrook in the U. S. military, was involved in campaigns and performed deeds which never came to the attention of most of the residents of town until after he passed on. He, along with another Colebrook resident, Aldo Godenzi, as well as three Winsted men, spent the war building and maintaining the Ledo Road. This road, as well as the Burma Road, was one of the key elements in maintaining the military capabilities of the beleaguered Chinese army, forced away from the coastal areas and into the all but unreachable interior of the Asian continent by the forces of Imperial Japan in a campaign that had begun in 1937 and by 1940 had a strangle hold on the millions of Chinese trapped in the interior. To the north was the Japanese puppet state of Manchuko and Russia’s Siberia; along the western boundary were high mountains and deserts; to the southwest lay the Himalayas, the world’s highest mountain range; east of these lay more high mountains and the jungles of Southeast Asia.

The British, who governed India and Burma, were able to blunt the Japanese military thrust to break through to the Bay of Bengal, surrounded by rich agricultural lands and ports on the Indian Ocean. They completed the 681-mile Burma Road in December 1938. This stretched north and east from Mandalay, Burma to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. Kunming was, and is, the chief city of southwest China. During WWII, it was of great importance as a transportation center, American air base and Chinese military headquarters. It was frequently bombed by the Japanese throughout the entire war.

Japanese forces were able to capture Mandalay along with the southern portion of the Burma Road. While this surface route was unavailable, the air arms of the British and American armed forces flew the essential supplies over the Himalayan Mountains into China by means of DC-3’s in an operation known as “Flying the Hump”. Two Colebrook men had central roles in this operation: Fred Strampach was a flying instructor and Wyllys Winter Smith was one of the pilots.

With the Burma Road compromised, a second route was begun in December of 1942, at the northeastern Indian town of Ledo, near the northern end of the fertile Plains of Assam. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers worked without pause under great difficulties both physical and military from the end of 1942 until January 1945, for a total of 1,044 torturous miles. This was done through some of the most difficult acreage on the face of the Earth. The men who constructed this road used such terms as “up”, “down”, “over” and “around”. The world for them was much more vertical than

horizontal; the only level objects they saw were rivers, and they had to be bridged, much of the time while under enemy fire. Upon completion, it was officially named The Stilwell Road, after the commanding officer of the American forces, General Joseph Stilwell, affectionately known as “Vinegar Joe” by his men.

We are honored to be entrusted with this uniform, remembering that it symbolizes the freedoms that were so hard-fought for in such unlikely places as northern Burma and southwest China.

The locations identified on the accompanying map were chosen for the following reasons:

Hukawng Valley - Fierce fighting 1943-44.

Maingkwan – Taken from the Japanese March 4 1944.

Kamaing – Taken from the Japanese June 18 1944.

Mogaung – Fighting from April – June 1944.

Myitkyna – 262 miles from Ledo, the headwaters for small steamers on the Irrawaddy River. Captured by Japan April 1942; after severe fighting, retaken August 1944.

Bhamo – Headwaters of navigation; lost to Japan April 1942, retaken with heavy fighting October through December 1944.

Namhkam – Held by Japan 1942 – 1945. Retaken January 15 1945 by Chinese forces.

Wanting – A frontier town located at the elevation of 3,200 feet. Retaken from Japan on January 17-18 1945.

Lungling – Taken by Japan in May 1942, made into an air force base, recaptured November 1944.

Kunming – Provincial capital, most important city in southwest China.

Mandalay - District capital, trade center with rail and steamer connections. Occupied by the Japanese May 1942 – March 1945.

Ledo Branch railhead of the Bengal-Assam railroad and starting point of the military road popularly known as the Ledo Road during its construction.

Don’t overlook the elevations shown on the map. This is some of the most torturous acreage on the face of the Earth. .

The Colebrook Historical Society is honored to be entrusted with Buster Hart’s uniform, and we all benefit from the freedoms that were so hard-fought for in such unlikely places as southwest China in the 1940s.

