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Thompson Document 06: Henrietta Thompson's Summary of Jack Belden's Activities Before the Walkout

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With emotions somewhat between the insouciance of Private Short and the concern felt by Colonel Dorn, Jack Belden was enjoying a sense of relief, ~~af~~ an ADVENTURE about to begin. For the present he had no more responsibilities than did Private Short but on the other hand, like Dorn, he had had a lot of experience and he did know quite a lot.

For the past nine years, ever since he had graduated from college, he had been living in China. America during the depression years had been too much for him - the breadlines, the soup-kitchens, the brokers suddenly wiped out and selling apples on the streets - and he had gone to sea on a freighter. He had jumped ship in Hong Kong and had spent the next few years knocking around all over China. He had taught himself the language, he had given himself nightmares from all those characters on flash cards. He had taken any kind of job he could get in a country where the poverty and misery were worse than anything he had ever experienced at home. And he had come to love the Chinese people, to identify with the poor and homeless who were not unlike himself.

When the Japanese invaded China in 1937 Belden ^{by then} was working for a newspaper and had followed the Chinese armies around. He had met both Stilwell and Dorn in those days; they were attached to the American military mission in Hankow and Belden had made several trips into the interior with the General. He had developed a rather close relationship with Stilwell; Belden, like Stilwell, was irreverent and neither of them liked top brass. And Belden, being a civilian, had no military axe to grind. He had a great admiration for Stilwell and felt that though he was ~~not~~ a military man, he was broadly educated, that he was a simple man who wanted to help people who were suffering; he believed in humanity and the

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coming of a better world and he had the dogged determination to carry out his objectives. And Belden shared the General's faith in the common Chinese soldier when properly fed, trained and equipped.

So it was quite natural that after Pearl Harbor occurred and Stilwell received his assignment to Burma, Belden should ask to be allowed to go to Burma and cover the campaign. By now he was a string correspondent for Time and Life magazines, who readily gave him permission and so Belden followed the General to Burma.

Wearing a white linen suit, buckskin shoes and carrying a type-writer, he arrived in Burma early in March. He rapidly discarded his whites, was assigned a jeep and for two months had been all over the front covering the fighting.

One day he had suddenly realized that he was the only correspondent left in Burma; the others had all made their way out before everything collapsed. Belden himself was several times nearly trapped ~~himself~~ but managed to be with General Stilwell's party when they finally pulled out. He had ^{even} helped destroy the official papers at the last headquarters ^{in Shwebo} and so it had come as no surprise to Belden when Stilwell and the British command had made the decision on April 30 to withdraw while they could still save some part of the fighting forces. ^{and 51} Shortly thereafter, just a week ago in fact, a plane had been sent in to take the General out. He had refused to go. ^{Gen Stilwell} He had asked Belden if he wanted to fly out but when Belden had heard that the General was not going ~~to~~, he elected to stay too.

He had for a moment been tempted to escape from all the blood and crap of the past two months, but when the time came, he didn't go. It was a spur of the moment decision for him, it was

based on his past life, the nine previous years in China. He was interested in the sequence of things, he wanted to see it through to the end and now he found that he was looking forward to it.

No one knew for sure how far they were going to have to walk, or what was going to happen but ^{Belden} he wasn't particularly worried at the prospect, he had walked hundreds of miles in China.

And here was General Stilwell, fifty-nine years old and he hadn't flown out when he could have either. He had chosen to go out with a comparatively small group and on foot. He had been criticized a lot for staying in Burma when he could have flown out even before that last minute plane came in for him; he was criticized by some of those who were forced to stay with him, one of whom had said, "Come on, Joe; let's quit and go home." They claimed he couldn't really do anything effective by leading out a small group of nobodies, no armies, no nothing. It meant nothing from a military standpoint; ^{they thought} he could have done much more back in Delhi, contacting Washington, Chiang Kaishek, Wavell and so on.

But there were a couple of reasons why he had done this. One was that the Japanese were already throwing out these ideological bombs into Burma saying, "Asia for the Asiatics" and if the General had flown out, there would have been terrible propaganda about his deserting his troops, even though of course he didn't have any troops any more.

And then the General had hoped that he could get somewhere where he could have established a post, the monsoon rains would have bogged down the Japanese and Stilwell would have had some time to train the Chinese troops and later try to drive the Japanese out. This is what Belden had seen happen over and over again in China. But there did not seem to be any chance of that here.