

12-1992

Thompson Document 01: An Introduction to the Henrietta Thompson Collection

Henrietta Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/henrietta_thompson_papers

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thompson, Henrietta, "Thompson Document 01: An Introduction to the Henrietta Thompson Collection" (1992). *Henrietta Thompson Papers*. 10.
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/henrietta_thompson_papers/10

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Henrietta Thompson Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Henrietta Thompson Collection Introduction:

This collection, which consists mainly of files of correspondence and cassette tapes of interviews, describes the escape from Burma--now Myanmar--to India in May of 1942 led by American General Joseph Stilwell. Henrietta Thompson's interviewees include American and British military, the "FAU boys" (the Friends Ambulance Unit of English conscientious objectors) a surgeon, a group of Burmese nurses, a Chinese and an American war-correspondent, and a mechanic who later became a powerful Burmese general. All of them "walked out" from--or, in other words, fled--Burma with Stilwell by traveling through the jungle. A mobile surgical unit and several groups of Westerners left Mandalay by truck three days before the Japanese and Burma Independence Army arrived on April 27. Because the terrain was such that they were forced to abandon their trucks in Nanantun, General Stilwell proposed that the groups join together, and over the next thirteen days they walked approximately two hundred miles through the jungle, west from Nanantun, across the Uyu River and over the Naga hills to Litan. The collection also includes a few photographs and souvenirs given to Thompson by her interviewees, a note which was mysteriously slipped into her hand as she arrived in Burma, as well as the copious letters by which Thompson located her interviewees and arranged these interviews, which were conducted in twenty countries in the early nineteen-seventies. As a whole, the Henrietta Thompson Collection at Fogler Library provides a uniquely detailed view of the confused exit of soldiers and civilians fleeing what was to become the British colony most completely destroyed during WWII.

Thompson, who modestly described herself as “playing detective,” by her seemingly indefatigable persistence, and because of a kindliness of spirit evident in her interviews and letters, managed between 1971 and 1973 to track down forty-three of the 114 people who had thirty years before been a part of the Walkout. Thompson herself had no direct connection to this event when she hit upon it as a subject of years of close study (during the early seventies, and then again while writing her masters thesis for the University of Maine); she describes her inspiration to undertake this project while reading Barbara Tuchman’s *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*, which touches on the Walkout: “That number 114 seemed to jump at me from the page,” she remembers. “How did all these people happen to be with General Stilwell? What became of them?” Thompson’s treatment of the history of the Walkout is perhaps most successful in its ability to maintain her original sense of fascination with the individual characters and histories of the participants.

As Thompson acknowledges, these participants are only a tiny percentage of the refugees who were forced to escape Burma on foot. It seems clear that the story of these particular 114 people has been the subject of closer attention in the West than other “Walkouts” because the group was composed mostly of Westerners, and was led by General Stilwell. Stilwell had been sent to Burma in 1942, when it seemed likely that the British would lose control of their eighteen-year-old colony, with the idea that he would fight the invading Japanese troops with Chiang Kai-shek’s troops, but instead, he fled Burma, crossing the Naga Hills two months later. Stilwell was considered a hero of war-time Burma because two years after the walkout, led Chinese troops back into Burma to retake the northern city Myitkyina from the Japanese. As the participants recall in Thompson’s interviews, even though they followed Stilwell on foot (he

refused to be flown out), their circumstances had the enormous advantage over that of Burmese and Indian refugees in that they received air-dropped provisions, were met by aid points set up by the British once they crossed into India, and, by virtue of being introduced by the British government in India, were offered the hospitality of tribes in the Naga Hills. The other refugees often didn't fare so well--in fact they were forced off of boats and barred from planes by British troops to make way for the retreating British Army. Hundreds of thousands of refugee families seeking to flee the country were traveling north, both Burmese from the south whose cities had been seized or bombed and Indians who had been living in Burma and now feared persecution in Burma's quickly transforming political climate. Stilwell's walk was seen by many of his British and American contemporaries as a noble sacrifice--walking out as the rest of the country was forced to do, and the special treatment his band received (which probably saved their lives), and the reason why the fleeing Indians and Burmese were not better aided by their colonial governments, was a largely untreated subject in British documents of the time. For many of the participants Thompson interviewed, Burma was still quite unfamiliar when they left, but for some, it was a homeland left behind to nearly total destruction by the battles between the allies and the Japanese under Renya Mutaguchi in 1944.

Research materials compiled by Henrietta Thompson, who used the interviews for her thesis submitted to Maine's history department in 1992, were deposited with Fogler Library Special Collections in [year]. The collection became the focus of an East Asian History MA candidate's internship in the Spring of 2018, and selected items were scanned and made available in this digital collection. These items are drawn from ten participants who seemed to

have left behind materials and stories of particular interest. Among the participants of the Walkout, the nurses from Burma emerge as particular heroines. Though one or several (depending on the account) of the American soldiers questioned whether the nurses should be allowed on the walk, the young nurses forgave this and walked barefoot for nearly all of the two hundred and fifty miles, and from the accounts of their fellow walkers, we know they lifted the spirits of the party by singing hymns and spirituals, and they tended to the many sick members of the party, including, as Nurse Lulu remembers, the very soldier who had been most opposed to their joining the walk. One seventeen-year-old Burmese nurse, Than Shwe, walked the distance with a colostomy bag, and she remembers: "I was hauled down the stream on the first day on an air mattress," she recalls. "But only for one day. I walked thereafter, full of spirits." Letters, notes and corresponding sections from Thompson's thesis have been drawn out to highlight certain participants. For more information on the digitized items available here or additional materials in Henrietta Thompson's papers, contact Special Collections, Raymond H. Fogler Library.