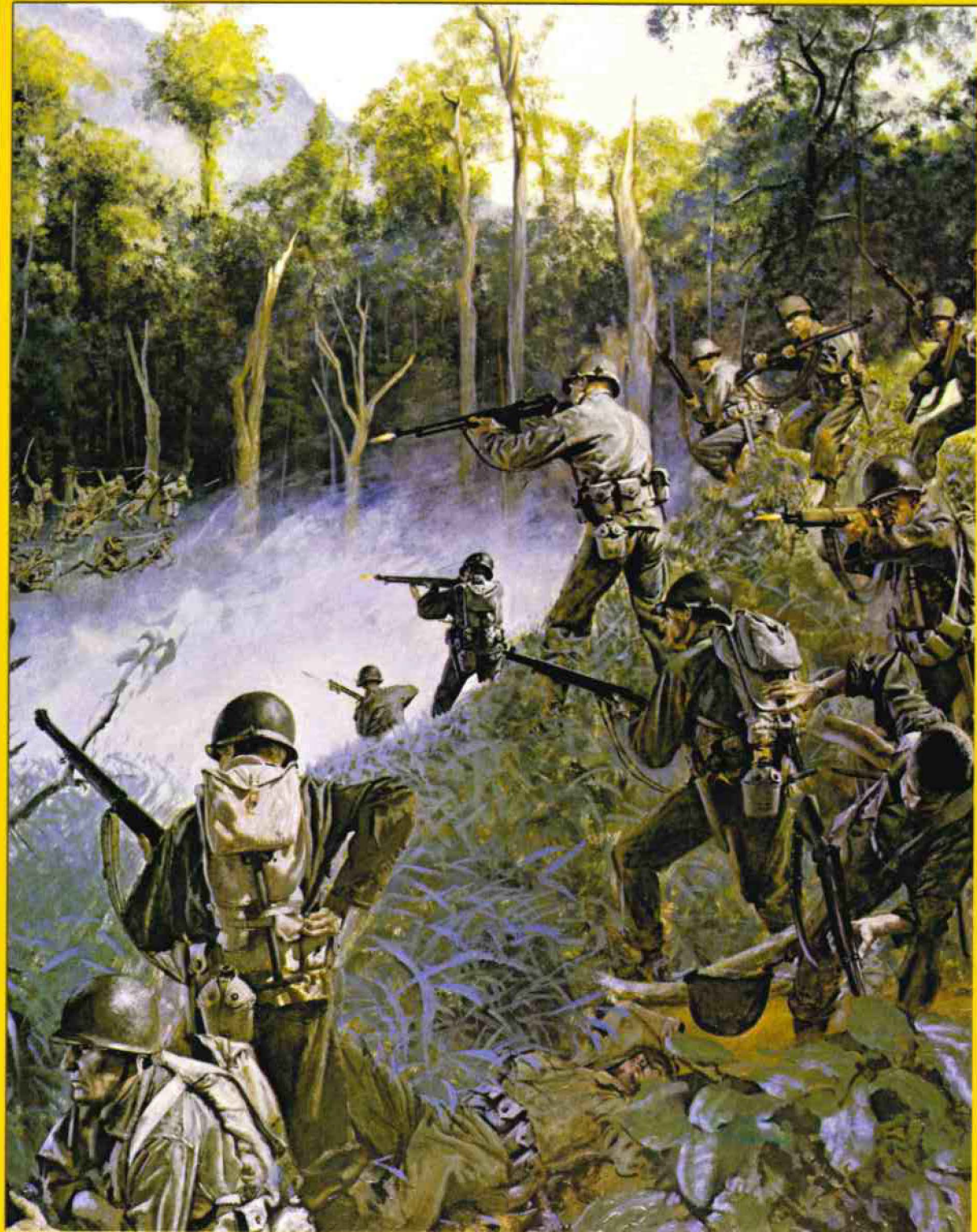


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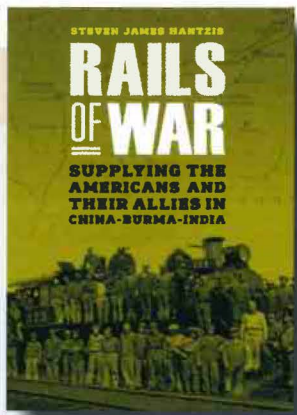


# ON POINT

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## ***Rails Of War: Supplying The Americans and Their Allies in China-Burma-India***

By Steven James Hantzis. Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2017. Maps. Photographs. Bibliography. Notes. Index. Pp. vii, 199. \$29.95.

**D**uring World War II, the United States manned, trained, and equipped a force that engaged in global combat. Supplying this mighty effort demanded efficient means of transportation to deliver the products of American industry to the fighting forces. One of the least known transportation organizations created to supply the tools of war were the Army's three Military Railway Service (MRS) units. These units operated rail networks in Iran, Europe, and India. In *Rails of War*, Steven James Hantzis describes in detail rail operating units assigned to the 3d MRS. Based in India, the 721st Railway Operation Battalion contributed to the success enjoyed by the Allies in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater. An expert on rail operations, Hantzis employs his own personal experiences as a brakeman-conductor along with recollections of his father's service in the battalion and the memories of members of the unit to present a well-written account of World War II rail operations.

As detailed in the text, each railway operating battalion had four companies. A headquarters company provided signaling, dispatching, and supplies to the three organic companies. Company A handled the maintenance of tracks, Company B maintained the rolling stock, and Company C operated the assigned trains. Torn from their predictable working-class lives, the men of the 721st trained for war then journeyed 15,000 miles to Bengal, India, to do the impossible: build, maintain, and manage seven hundred miles

of track through the most inhospitable environment imaginable.

In describing the area of operation, Hantzis relates that "The 721st Railway Operating Battalion was like the first runner in a great relay race to defeat the Japanese," as it handed material off to other battalions further down the line. The task of "transshipping" cargo involved the arduous off-loading of all items from a broad-gauge track to a train on a narrower track. This work was performed by native workers who did not possess the same sense of urgency displayed by their American supervisors. The frustration of slower than anticipated assistance was exacerbated by the appalling weather conditions of the area. The monsoon that periodically swept in from the Indian Ocean matched the difficulty of maintaining a rail system that was almost hopelessly outdated.

Yet, the men of the 721st and their companion battalions routinely performed operational miracles. Hantzis describes innovations to the existing system, such as improved railroad beds, installation of floodlights, renovation of train brake systems, and construction of better and more useful rail cars that greatly improved soldiers' efforts. Employing his command of rail operations, Hantzis clearly and systematically explains the complex procedures involved in moving a string of railcars. Fascinating segments such as these are supplemented by well-written summarizations of war related events.

While an oft-overlooked theater of

war, military operations in CBI involved close combat with the occupying Japanese forces. The Fourteenth British Army, under the command of Lieutenant General Sir William Slim, fought several major engagements to clear the southern portion of Burma, while American and Chinese forces, under the command of Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell, sought to expel the Japanese from northern Burma. The actions of the famous Merrill's Marauders are adequately addressed by the narrative. Likewise, the difficult construction of linking the Ledo road network to the existing Burma Road are covered in detail. Hantzis superbly weaves these combat actions into his discussion of rail operations.

The men of the 721st Railway Operating Battalion ceased operations in October 1945. All rail operations were then turned over to the Indian government. "The Americans," Hantzis writes, "were leaving behind a vastly improved railroad, a modern communications system, and tons of new equipment, some of it in use to this very day." This is an enviable record of achievement worthy of recognition.

This is an excellent recounting which should appeal to, and enlighten, readers interested in expanding their knowledge of events in the CBI Theater. Most impressive are Hantzis's in-depth knowledge of rail operations and their contribution to the overall war effort.

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