American Out to End Burma Road Bottleneck

Californian Named by Gen. Chiang to Put Supply Route Vital to China's Struggle on a Smooth-Running Basis

(First of a Series on Burma Road.)

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KUNMING, Southwest China (via Clipper).—It is one thing for the United States to promise war materials to China. It is quite another problem to deliver them.

More than 50,000 tons of supplies, mostly American, are heaped at Rangoon and Lashio, in Burma, awaiting transport over the Burma Road to China. More thousands of tons are en route to Burma in American ships and still more thousands have been promised.

President Roosevelt's pledge of increased material assistance to China cannot be realized until the bottleneck of the Burma Road is eliminated. The American Government knows this; the Chinese government knows it. With encouragement from both sides, plans are moving fast to double the highway's capacity. Today, for the first time, the Burma Road has an American "manager," who intends to make immediate, far-reaching reforms.

Bottleneck a Scandal.

I have just traversed those 716 miles of twisting mountain road between Lashio, Burma, and this highway terminus high on China's southwestern plateau. I can appreciate now the tremendous difficulties confronting John Earl Baker, the stubborn-jawed Californian who has been delegated by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek to put this all-important supply route on a smoth-running basis.

Friends of Mr. Baker, whose success or failure as inspector-general of the Burma Road will depend on how much real power the Chinese are willing to grant him over their own people, believe that if he is to get results quickly he must be made the "czar" of the highway. Mr. Baker's aim is to double traffic over the Burma Road within a year's time. But to do so he says he must have authority.

The Burma Road bottleneck has been a scandal in China for the past couple of years. The highway's inefficiency is attributable partly to shortage of transport, lack of gasoline and the three-month "closure" of the route by British order—conditions quite beyond Chinese control. But less easy to excuse were such other factors as bureaucratic obstructionism, profiteering, jealousies among various trucking lines, inadequate maintenance and traffic control and last, but not least, the chauffeur problem.

"Impossible" Is Achieved.

This is not to detract from the remarkable achievement of the Chinese in designing and building this difficult highway in record time, without benefit of machinery of any kind. Able and lowly paid engineers and technical men have done what many said was impossible, by keeping the highway open and operating in the face of torrential rains and Japanese bombings. As fast as the Japanese have destroyed bridges, the Chinese have erected new ones. Because of the well directed efforts of an army of laborers, composed mostly of women and children, traffic was interrupted for a total of only five days during the last rainy season. It is hoped that this record can be equaled or bettered during the present monsoons, which are just beginning.

In the month of April, the Burma road carried a heavier load of materials than in any month of its two and a half year history. More than 15,000 tons of goods were checked across the Burma border into China. However, only 7,000 tons arrived in Kunming, at the road's end. The remainder was cached in various fuel and ammunition dumps along the way. These figures include the gasoline carried by the trucks for their round-trip inland and, therefore, have to be discounted somewhat.

Paving Work Begins.

This represents an encouraging improvement in the road's efficiency, but it is far from being adequate to reduce the growing mountains of materials which American ships are unloading at Rangoon. Mr. Baker, who took office May 1, told me that he wants to build up the highway's load to 30,000 tons monthly, which he reckons is just about the road's maximum capacity. That's a lot more than the French railway from Indo-China was carrying before the Japanese closed it, but it is still not enough to meet China's needs.

To accomplish his aim in quick time, Mr. Baker intends to pave at least a third of the highway's length—the section that is subject to heaviest traffic and most washouts. This work has already begun. To get the most use out of the limited number of trucks available, Mr. Baker proposes to bring all vehicles, government and private, under a centralized official control, and to work present time more than 3,000 trucks are plying the Burma Road, but others, ordered in the United States, are on the way.

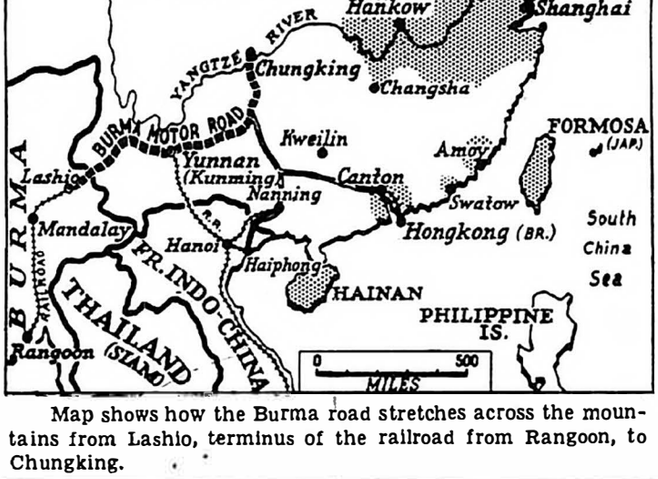
Mr. Baker would give priority to war materials (private merchandise often gets through first under the present system). He thinks taxes and tolls should be consolidated at one place instead of being collected at four or five points along the highway as they are now. One of the biggest jobs, he says, will be to curb the corrupt practices of Chinese truck drivers. Another difficult task will be to cut through some of the official red tape in which the affairs of the Burma Road are entangled.

These projected reforms will arouse a lot of objections from interested parties, and it is still too early to tell whether one man—especially a foreigner—can put them over. No doubt American and British pressure in Chungking had something to do with Mr. Baker's appointment, though it is not officially admitted. As more than 50 per cent of the materials moving over the Burma Road are of Amerthem night as well as day. At the ican origin, it is natural that the United States should be concerned over the highway's operating efficiency.

Mr. Baker is one of a commission of five, including also three Chinese and a representative from Burma (not yet appointed). If he is not hamstrung, Mr. Baker will get things done.

A convoy of trucks speeding across the mountainous Burma road with supplies for the Chinese Army. Most of the trucks are American made.

John Earl Baker, American manager of the road.



Map shows how the Burma road stretches across the mountains from Lashio, terminus of the railroad from Rangoon, to Chungking.

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