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Field Marshal Lord Slim

London, England

April 24, 1961

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Interview with Field Marshal Lord Slim in London April 24, 1961 by Forrest C. Pogue.

(He was square-jawed, tall, with mustache. Likeable. Very straightforward).

Marshall and Mountbatten kept Stilwell on after SEAC established despite opposition in China. I liked Stilwell very much. Said it was a pity about the publication of the Stilwell Papers. Old Joe was blowing off steam part of the time. He blew off to me like Hell about Dickie Mountbatten. Stilwell was then under me and I was under Mountbatten. Once I remember Mountbatten sent me an order. Stilwell was vituperative. He called Dickie every name he could think of. Then he dropped his head and said "I can't help liking the SOB."

Didn't think Stilwell unscrupulous. Would believe Stilwell if he said that something was true. He wouldn't accept his judgments on Chennault, Chiang Kai-shek or U. S. Chiefs.

Stilwell and I met just before the retreat in Burma--just before Rangoon fell. Alexander had come out to Burma. He commanded Stilwell and me. Unfortunate arrangement for Alexander. I thought I should get to know Stilwell. He didn't like the British. Bad experience with British in China before the war. Thought they were Lah-de-dah.

Stilwell was a sensitive man. If he thought somebody rude, it hurt him and he clicked.

I went across and saw him. Obviously he was very suspicious. He paid us all the compliment of being very clever. He was summing me up--I was tougher looking than now (Slim was dressed in morning cloths--striped trousers). He said my motto is "Buyer beware." Fair enough--any bloody thing he could get out of me was fair enough. I thought OK if I was ass enough to give him anything?") We both got a good hiding in the Burma fighting. He had a more difficult job than I. It was not a lot for either of us to be proud of.

If you are having the pants beaten off you twice a day and running away, you get to know the chap (alongside of you). I think he felt I wasn't too bad for a Limey.

We had only one row--very amusing. When his Chinese broke and streamed back, he asked me to cover his rear while he tried to rally them. I was in rather a bad spot but did send 17th Division and some tanks and said I would try to stay. One of the Chinese generals came to me and said I am trying to get my fellows away. They were rushing all trains (a Chinese bolt is a good bolt). I sent a couple of companies to protect the trains. Stilwell's staff was sitting on the station platform instead of helping (his staff was full of family). He got cross and sent me a stinking letter. I sent a stinking one back. We got along better. By that time I discovered how to deal with Joe. He was really two people. (Wingate not the same--like Lawrence). One was a nice old man--a good tactical soldier--when by himself. We could sit and have an amiable talk. All quiet and friendly and pleasant. If you opened a door and an American or Britisher walked in, he changed. He was now tough Vinegar Joe--the fighting general. A little tough.

Another little act. He refused to go under General Giffard. Dickie had power to sack Stilwell; Marshall gave him that. Stilwell said I will serve under Slim. He came under my command. So I had to give him orders.

I used to fly over and meet Stilwell. He always met me. But wouldn't salute. I didn't mind. We would go back and discuss matters. Then would have lunch and make no reference to talk. He would come to see me off. He would come down with me to jeep. Then back (to his staff), hat at a slouch, he told them "I told that Limey what to do."

Very good tactical soldier. As a soldier would have been splendid up to division or corps command. Had to lead men himself. When he got into big things he was not terribly sound. Had a narrow mind. Combination of intensity and blinkers made him very good.

He had an idea of building a road to China. British and U. S. differed. Both wanted to keep China in the fight. Americans reckoned the way to keep China in was to build the road.-2000 miles. Our idea was to re-conquer Burma--was a short line then from Rangoon.

To Americans it looked like trying to re-conquer empire we had deservedly lost. Burma was best bet however. You had to carry so much the longer way.

Old Joe wanted 40 Chinese divisions and march across China to the China Sea. China wanted everything for the Air Force. Japanese overran airfields.

Americans divided into three groups--(1) Chennault's lot, (2) Stilwell, and (3) people with Mountbatten's lot. Thinks Stilwell's military ideas better than Chennault's. Allies suffered a lot because of divisions. Legend of Flying Tigers very good. Those fliers had practice. They were the only Americans who really had practice.

Stilwell very naughty in the way he talked about Chiang Kai-shek. Extraordinary to see a man's Chief of Staff calling him "Peanut." I was no great admirer of Chiang Kai-shek. However, Stilwell and I were the only two foreigners CKS allowed to command Chinese troops. This was always astonishing to me.

I much rather have had Stilwell with the Chinese than anyone else I know. CKS didn't like tall poppies. Stilwell kept things in his own hands. Had some good men. But unless he did things not much got done.

Not good on administration. Don't think he took a great interest in it. I liked Joe and in many ways admired him. He was fighting in Burma at the age of 61. Took a tough man for that. I never knew what he thought. He sent me a nice letter at the end. However, hard to get away from the fact that he didn't like Limeys.

I didn't know a great deal about Marshall during the war. Only afterwards. I met him when I went over to Washington when I was CIGS. Talked NATO matters with him. I reckoned that he was a great man. Thinks that Marshall had one of the characteristics of a great man--thinks he has met only three or four great men--great simplicity which is a mark of a great man. They can combine this with a certain political cunning.

General comments--There are all kinds of Allies--Russians, Chinese, Arabs, and nearly all the Europeans. All Allies are bloody nuisances. Only one thing worse than having Allies and that is having none. If you must have Allies, have Americans because they stick to the end.

Doesn't like fact that any general in the Armed forces in the U. S. can be sent for by Congress and the members can badger him with questions.

Madame Chiang Kai-shek wielded undue influence on U S policy. Never knew how much was Madame and how much Chiang Kai-shek.

Doesn't think that the Archangel Gabriel could have handled the Chinese situation (own view). There was not enough political grip on Chiang Kai-shek. He only lasted because the U. S. backed him. While Americans were paying the piper, they didn't call the tune. When they wanted to call the tune it was too late. American councils were always divided.

Chiang Kai-shek didn't like tall poppies. Sun Li-jen was the best of the Chinese generals. Every time Sun became to come up, CKS sent him off on a mission. He sent him off after the war. Then got him back in an important position and suddenly imprisoned him.

Says Americans were trusting, simple chaps--when dealing with Chinese. Says most dishonest politicians he met were members of Indian National Congress.

Wedemeyer was strange. Too German. However, was always helpful with me. He sent me certain British staff officers and American staff officers. He selected the Americans. They were very good men. Stilwell wouldn't use my staff officers.

Marshall was a man of integrity. You will never convince me that he wasn't a great man.