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Article Title: The Toughest Road in the World

Full Citation: Tillman Durdin, "The Toughest Road in the World," *Nebraska History* 25 (1944): 113-117

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1944ToughestRoad.pdf>

Date: 9/14/2017

Article Summary: The Ledo Road, a supply route between India and China, crossed jungles and mountain ranges. Construction crews struggled with malaria and monsoon rains as they accomplished one of the biggest road-building jobs in history. (This article is a condensed version of an New York Times Magazine account published March 19, 1944.)

Scroll Down for complete article.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Louis A Pick, Perley Lewis

Place Names: Naga Hills, India and Burma; Hukawng Valley, Burma

Keywords: Ledo Road, American Army Engineers

Photographs / Images: Charles A Roberts, Lincoln

The Toughest Road in The World

BY TILLMAN DURDIN

American Army Engineers here on the Ledo Road say it is the toughest road-building job they have ever known or heard of, any time or anywhere. And these are the men who directed construction work on the Alaskan and Pan-American Highways.

The Ledo Road represents the conquest of some of the thickest, wettest jungles in Asia. It has been pushed across four rugged mountain ranges rising to heights of 3,000 to 5,000 feet. In crossing these ranges, popularly called the Naga Hills, the road crawls a length of more than a hundred miles.

Construction of the Ledo Road has meant a triumph over malignant malaria and over monsoon rains so heavy they swamp and wash out permanent flatland highways, to say nothing of mountain roads. One hundred inches of rain falls over the Naga Hills each year, most of it in the few summer months. In June last year sixteen inches of rain fell in eleven days.

Yet in spite of "insuperable" difficulties the Ledo Road has been built. Today the road is delivering military supplies into the Hukawng Valley. It is making an important contribution to a military campaign while it is being pushed rapidly forward.

The Ledo Road is mainly an American achievement. The over-all directions and nearly all the equipment are American, while American Army engineering troops predominate among military personnel working on the project. A hard-working Chinese engineering detachment has made a big contribution to the road, and many Asiatic civilian laborers have had a share in its building.

Remarkable feats of construction have marked almost every mile. Hills have been a serious obstacle and the jungles have been a worse one. Towering hardwood trees and a tangle of subsidiary vegetation — strangler vines, bamboo, elephant grass, banana palms — have had to be cleared every yard of the way.

When construction started fourteen months ago little machinery was available. The engineers could count altogether fifteen rock crushers, five steam shovels, fifty trucks and a few small bulldozers. The rock crushers were without auxiliary equipment and chutes had to be improvised out of bamboo and roofing iron. For personnel there were several American engineering units, most of them Negro; the Chinese engineering detachment, and several thousand Asiatic laborers without tools.

These were meager resources with which to start one of the biggest road-building jobs in history, but Col. John Arrowsmith, then in charge, and his men set to work and between December 1942 and the rains of the following spring had built thirty-five miles of road.

Last year's monsoons brought the blackest days in the history of the Ledo Road. Downpours washed out parts of the highway and some sections became impassable to all vehicles except bulldozers. One group of Americans up ahead of the completed road were completely cut off. Many of them were stricken with malaria and had to be evacuated by "cat" tractors. Others who made a grueling march out of the woods had to have their shoes cut from their feet when they arrived.

Only fourteen miles of road were completed during the 1943 monsoon. It became customary in those days for one headquarters to call up another and ask, "How much road did you lose today?" Last November found the highway just little more than half way through the Naga Hills. Then Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell asked Col. Louis A. Pick, commander of Construction and Supply Services in Northeast Assam and North Burma area, to rush the road through to Hukawng Valley.

Colonel Pick, a husky, hard driving, soft-spoken veteran Army engineer with a long record of accomplishing impossible jobs, said he could do it. Many were skeptical, for he had to drive the road over two mountain ranges and through a solid barrier of jungle.

The colonel sent advance crews out over the jungle trail with bulldozers and set them working backward and forward at several different points on the route to the Hukawng. Gasoline, culvert pipe; food, clothing and Diesel fuel were dropped to them from planes. Porters were employed to carry supplies from the dropping-fields to work stations.

Meanwhile, with reinforcements and additional equipment Colonel Pick pressed construction ahead from the old road. Two days after Christmas the road was through to its designated goal and traffic began to roll from Assam to Northern Burma.

One engineering unit that has worked on the Ledo Road almost continually since it was started, recently built an airdrome under Japanese artillery fire in the Hukawng Valley. This unit is under the command of Maj. Perley Lewis, until a few years ago a contractor in Phoenix, Arizona.

One of the most remarkable things about the Road is that it has been used while being built. Motor vehicles began to move as soon as the first bulldozer path was cut. While traffic flows both ways, the work of widening, straightening, grading, filling, bridging and culverting goes on twenty-four hours a day. Light for night work is provided by Diesel oil set ablaze in drums.

A teeming, varied life flourishes along that road. It has fostered a strange community, and the isolation and loneliness, the satisfaction of progress in a grueling task, and the dark, pressing nearness of the jungle have impressed upon this community many common interests and emotions. . . . Chinese are constantly working along the road, driving trucks and building bridges. They display an incurable cheerfulness and salute Americans with infectious grins.

A movie performance on the Ledo Road is one of the world's unique scenes. The screen is set up under trees at the foot of a slope and the audience that sprawls on the ground or sits on logs in a close-packed group up the side of the hill is made up of white and Negro Americans, half-naked Naga tribesmen, Kachins in their bright-colored loongyis or skirts, the little Nepalese in their grimy jodhpur-like trousers, Chinese, Indians, refugee Burmese, and perhaps a passing British officer or two.

The men who build this road camp beside their jobs, hacking away jungle undergrowths to set up little clusters of tents and bamboo bashas under tall trees. One American unit has made camp more than seventy times in moving along as the road progressed. Americans have met few of the dangerous animals they were warned against when first sent to the Naga Hills. Most have seen nothing more predatory than a barking deer or curious gibbons. Naga headhunters have turned out to be aloof but friendly and helpful when encountered.

After the mountains and the jungle, malaria has been the third great obstacle for these road builders. Strict anti-malaria discipline for individuals has been supplied. Trousers tucked into boot tops, no rolled-up sleeves, sleeping under mosquito nets, are some of the vigorously enforced rules here.

Colonel Pick has practically lived with the Ledo during the last few months, and to him goes much of the credit for pushing the highway through. He is constantly up and down the road, devising construction short-cuts here, clearing up a machinery spare-parts shortage there, urging them on to new efforts everywhere.

The road's veterans now see their jungle highway paying off in concrete results. For them and everyone on the road, this is a tonic to morale. The highway is beginning to help support the military campaign that is driving the enemy back.

From the first there has been a school of thought that maintained the Ledo Road was impracticable — that the tremendous expenditure of money, materials and effort might better be applied elsewhere against the Japanese. But against this point of view have stood those who placed the re-establishment of land communications with China high on the list of imperative war jobs; who believed that stubborn, determined endeavor could drive the road into China from India — even across the formidable Naga Hills.

The Ledo is now "over the hump" and the hill country has been conquered. Its builders and backers have achieved one of the engineering masterpieces of the war. Another "impossible" thing has been done. Already completed roads, some of them all-weather routes, span much of the several hundred miles of territory (mostly valley lands) that lie between the present head of this highway and roads in China proper. Construction is going to be easier and quicker from now on.

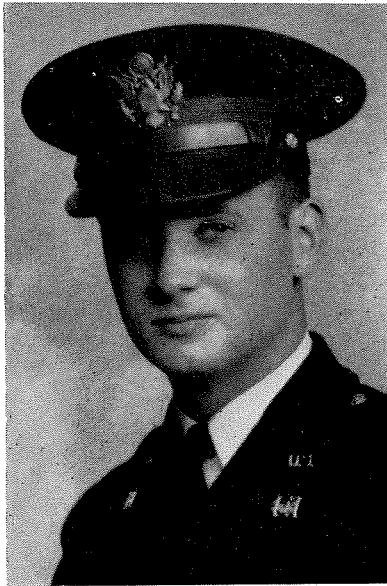
History will eventually write a verdict on the Ledo Road. Meanwhile, it unrolls farther and farther toward China, a spectacular monument to engineering skill, dogged persistence and soldierly hardihood. And week by week the road is becoming a bigger factor in the strategy of the war in Asia.

The Ledo Road, becoming increasingly prominent in the war news, brings to the mind of many Nebraskans the name of Major Perley M. Lewis. None who knew him, or knew his record, can be surprised to

read that this mighty road is "a spectacular monument to engineering skill and dogged persistence."

Like Colonel Pick (now brigadier general) who was placed in charge, Major Lewis has been recognized as an engineering genius ever since his graduation, and the two make an invincible team. It took him just twenty months to achieve his captaincy; since that day in April 1942 he has risen to the rank of major. In those three years (approximately) he handled many heavy assignments such as that of construction engineer for quartermaster's depots in Philadelphia, Alaska, Wyoming, Fort Omaha, Kansas City (finished a month ahead of schedule); the Lincoln Air Base, seventy days ahead; the Sioux Ordnance Depot at Sidney, Nebraska, also completed ahead of schedule in 1942.

In November of that year Captain Lewis was transferred to Florida, then to Virginia, then to the Missouri River Division at Omaha; then to the Wright Field Engineer District in Ohio, but returned to Omaha in July 1943, again serving under Colonel Pick who was Division Engineer there. A month later, however, he was reassigned to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, preparatory to going overseas where the two began to work these miracles in the China-Burma-India theater of operation. But always they give full credit to all who worked with them. Quoting a characteristic phrase of Major Lewis, "We did it together, and we're proud of it!"—*Editor.*



CAPTAIN CHARLES A. ROBERTS
of Lincoln, serving in 45th Engineers Regiment, who won his bars
by work on the Ledo Road