Joseph Warren Stilwell Biography

Joseph Warren Stilwell

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Biography

Joseph Warren Stilwell (1883-1946) was the Army officer in charge of U.S. affairs in China during World War II.

Joseph Stilwell was born on March 19, 1883, at Palatka, Fla. He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1914. During World War I he served with the IV Corps in combat intelligence, winning the Distinguished Service Medal.

In 1919 Stilwell was appointed to study Chinese at the University of California, Berkeley. The following year he sailed for the first of three tours of duty in China. After 1935 he served as military attaché to the Chinese government. Stilwell's work as a tactician and trainer impressed his superiors in Washington.

Following the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the U.S. War Department, to sustain and strengthen Chinese resistance to the Japanese invaders, ordered Stilwell to improve the Chinese army as chief of staff to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, take command of all United States forces in the China-Burma-India theater, and direct all Chinese forces in Burma (now Myanmar). In April 1942, however, the Japanese defeated Stilwell's forces in Burma and cut off the Burma Road, a Chinese supply line. When the road was finally reopened in 1945, it was named after Stilwell.

Known as "Vinegar Joe" because of his integrity, his refusal to ingratiate himself with others, and the demands he placed on those around him, Stilwell despised Chiang Kai-shek and made no effort to conceal it. He recoiled at the administrative paralysis in the wartime Chinese capital. Three times, directly and indirectly, Chiang sought Stilwell's recall. In 1944 Stilwell was to command all Chinese forces, but Chiang managed through President Franklin Roosevelt to force Stilwell's removal from China. Stilwell warned the American government against the Chinese central government, placing more faith in the more efficient Chinese Communists at Yenan. At the time of his death at San Francisco, Calif., on Oct. 12, 1946, Stilwell commanded the 6th Army.