



# Sepoys against the Rising Sun

The Indian Army in Far East  
and South-East Asia, 1941–45

*Kaushik Roy*

BRILL

Sepoys against the Rising Sun

# History of Warfare

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Cover illustration: The Arakan Campaign January 1943 - May 1945: Sikhs of the 7th Indian Division at an observation post in the Ngakyedua Pass area during the fierce fighting which followed the Japanese offensive launched on 6 February 1944. © Imperial War Museums (IND 2994).

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*In memory of my mother who left in great pain  
without complaining once*





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## Preface

My interest as regards World War II in general and especially the Japanese attack on South-East Asia goes back to my childhood experience. During my childhood days, I used to wait eagerly for my father to tell me stories about how the Japanese moved silently in the jungles of Malaya and how the British surrendered at Singapore in 1942. I went with my father to see the film *Tora Tora Tora*. I consider this film to be of greater historical value than the recent Hollywood blockbuster *Pearl Harbour* which focuses on the politically correct man-woman relationship rather than portraying the dynamics of war. Back then, I used to buy Commando comics from second-hand book stalls in Kolkata (Calcutta) and devour them. All these sustained my interest in World War II till I started researching the topic after entering Jawaharlal Nehru University in the early 1990s. During my undergraduate and postgraduate days, I fed on an unbalanced academic diet of military history by scholars like Basil Liddell-Hart, J.F.C. Fuller, Michael Howard, etc. When I started my research career, I concentrated on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial armies of South Asia. Now, at the middle of my academic career, I find myself pulled more towards the 'blood, death and disaster' of the two World Wars. Several visits to South-East Asia in the new millennium further sustained my interest in this project. In recent times, the economic rise of China and India has generated lot of attention in the Western media. It is time for all the nations which have been hitherto marginalized by the Eurocentric approach to history to retrieve their past, especially their military experience. Picking up an academic volume on combat in South-East Asia during World War II, one would get the idea that only the British were fighting the 'wicked' Japanese. And in the context of World War II, the trend in Hollywood is to portray the good Americans saving the world from the biggest evil, Nazism, and a secondary evil, Nipponese/Japanese militarism. The Australians, Africans, Chinese and Indians appear as shadows in these approaches. The present volume is a humble attempt to correct this historiographical slip as regards the combat experiences of the Indian Army in South-East Asia during World War II. In this volume, the terms Allied and Commonwealth have been used interchangeably. However, I have refrained from the jingoistic nationalism and national hagiography which characterize many current historical works. The present trend of increasing interest as regards World War II in Asia will make the volume more acceptable to the Western audience. In recent years, many place-names have changed.

However, I have continued to use the old names/spellings with which Western readers are more familiar.

*Kaushik Roy*

Kolkata 2015

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In 2012, Brill published a volume on the Indian Army in the two World Wars edited by myself. While editing that volume, I realized that the Indian Army deserves a separate volume on World War II, especially focused on South-East Asia, which was its own theatre of combat in a sense. I am indebted to Professor Peter Stanley for providing me with documents from the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. I thank Dr Gavin Rand of Greenwich University for supplying several documents from the Gurkha Museum, Winchester, UK. Dr. Narender Yadav was of the great help in allowing me to access the files at the Ministry of Defence Historical Section, New Delhi. I am grateful to Professor Scott Gates of the Peace Research Institute Oslo for funding my several trips to London in the last five years. I would extend my gratitude towards my PhD scholar Moumita who helped me with my research work and Mr Julian Deahl of Brill for showing interest in this project. Finally, my special thanks go to Ms Marcella Mulder for her patience as I continued to delay the delivery date of this book. Lastly, I will not thank 'her' because it will not be enough and she understands.

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# List of Abbreviations

AA	Anti-Aircraft
ABDACOM	American, British, Dutch and Australian Command
ADG	Adjutant General
ADS	Advance Dressing Station
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
AHQ	Army Headquarters
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ALFSEA	Allied Land Forces South-East Asia
AMF	Australian Military Force
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
ARO	Assistant Recruiting Officer
AT	Animal Transport
AVG	American Volunteer Group
AWM	Australian War Memorial, Canberra
AWOL	Absent Without Leave
BAA	Burma Area Army
BAF	Burma Auxiliary Force
BFF	Burma Frontier Force
BGS	Brigade General Staff
BIA	Burma Independence Army
BL	British Library, London
BNA	Burma National Army
BOR	British Other Rank
BSTE	Basic and Specialist Training Establishment
CAS	Close Air Support
CGS	Chief of General Staff
CIGS	Chief of Imperial General Staff
CO	Commanding Officer
COAS	Chief of Army Staff
COIN	counter-insurgency
COS	Chief of Staff
COSC	Chief of Staff Committee
DAAG	Deputy Assistant Adjutant General
DCGS	Deputy Chief of General Staff
DMT	Director of Military Training
DQMG	Deputy Quarter Master General
ECO	Emergency Commissioned Officer

EDT	External Defence Troop
FEBA	Forward Edge of the Battle Area
FFR	Frontier Force Rifles/Regiment
GHQ	General Headquarters
GHQI	General Headquarters India
GO	Gurkha Officer
GOC	General Officer Commanding
Goi	Government of British-India
GOR	Gurkha Other Rank
GR	Gurkha Rifles/Regiment
GS	General Staff
HKSRA	Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery
HMG	Heavy Machine Gun
KMT	Kuomintang
IAOC	Indian Army Ordnance Corps
ICO	Indian Commissioned Officer
IECO	Indian Emergency Commissioned Officer
IEME	Indian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
IGHQ	Imperial General Headquarters
IJA	Imperial Japanese Army
IJN	Imperial Japanese Navy
INA	Indian National Army
IOR	India Office Records
IS	Internal Security
ISF	Indian States Forces
IST	Imperial Service Troops/Indian States Forces
IWM	Imperial War Museum, London
JAAF	Japanese Army Air Force
JIF	Japanese trained Indian Force, i.e. the British name for INA
KCIO	King's Commissioned Indian Officer
KCO	King's Commissioned Officer
KIA	Killed in Action
KOYLI	King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry
LMG	Light Machine Gun
LoC	Line of Communication
LRP	Long Range Penetration
LRPB	Long Range Penetration Brigade
MDS	Medical Dressing Station
MG	Machine Gun
MMG	Medium Machine Gun

MODHS	Ministry of Defence Historical Section, New Delhi
M.S.	Milestone
MT	Motor Transport
NAI	National Archives of India, New Delhi
NAM	National Army Museum, London
NCAC	Northern Combat Area Command
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi
OCTU	Officer Cadre Training Unit
OODA	Observe, Orient, Decide and Attack
OP	Observation Post
OR	Other Rank (not officer), i.e. private/ <i>jawan</i> /sepoy
ORBAT	Order of Battle
OTS	Officer Training School
PBF	Patriotic Burma Force
PIAT	Projector Infantry Anti-Tank
POL	Petrol, Oil and Lubricants
POW	Prisoner of War
PRO	Public Records Office, Kew London, now known as The National Archives (TNA)
QMG	Quarter Master General
RA	Royal Artillery
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAC	Royal Armoured Corps
RAF	Royal Air Force
RE	Royal Engineer
RGR	Royal Gurkha Rifles
RIAF	Royal Indian Air Force
RIASC	Royal Indian Army Service Corps
RIN	Royal Indian Navy
RN	Royal Navy
RO	Recruiting Officer
R/T	Radio Telephone
SAA	Small Arms Ammunition
SACSEA	Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia
SEAC	South-East Asia Command
SPG	Self-propelled Gun
SWPA	South West Pacific Area
TA	Territorial Army
USAAF	United States Army Air Force

USAF	United States Air Force
VCO	Viceroy's Commissioned Officer. After 1947, they are known as Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO).
WIA	Wounded in Action

# Glossary

<i>Atta</i>	Wheat flour
<i>Auftragstaktik</i>	Decentralized mission oriented command system of the German armed forces
<i>Basha</i>	Traditional Burmese hut
<i>Bhisti</i>	Indian water carrier
<i>Blitzkrieg</i>	Lightning war
<i>Bunds</i>	Raised earthen banks prepared along the paddy fields to keep out water
<i>Bushido</i>	Martial spirit of the Japanese soldier
<i>Chapati</i>	Baked flour bread consumed by the Indians (especially by the Punjabis and the north Indians)
<i>Chaung</i>	Tidal river or creek or a narrow shallow stream
<i>Generalfeldmarschall</i>	German Field Marshal
Hurribomber	Hurricane aircraft adapted for ground attack
<i>Jawan</i>	Indian private, previously known as sepoy
<i>Khalsa</i>	Sikh theocratic brotherhood
<i>Kukri</i>	Curved knife used by the Gurkhas
<i>Luftwaffe</i>	German air force during World War II
<i>Nala/Nullah</i>	Dry shallow stream
<i>Ostfront</i>	Germany's Eastern Front (Russian theatre)
<i>Pugri</i>	Headgear made of folded cloth
<i>Raj</i>	Literal meaning 'realm'; the term stood for British Government in India, i.e. Government of India (GoI)
<i>Sampan</i>	Local boat used in Burma
Sepoy	Indian private. They are also called <i>jawan</i> (literal meaning 'young person')
<i>Siladar</i>	Camel Company. The personnel were asked to press into military service their own camels and were paid for it
<i>Wehrmacht</i>	German armed forces during World War II

# Introduction

In World War II, the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) suffered one of its greatest defeats in Burma. Both in Malaya (now Malaysia) and Burma, the bulk of the British Commonwealth forces comprised Indian units. Few people know that by 1944, about 70 per cent of the Allied ground personnel in Burma was composed of soldiers of the Indian Army. The Indian Army consisted of British-led Indian units, British-officered units of the Indian princely states and the British units attached to the Government of India (GoI). This volume assesses the combat/military/battlefield effectiveness of the Indian Army against the IJA during World War II. Between 1941 and 1945, the Indian Army fought against the IJA in several theatres stretching from Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore to Burma.

Combat power depended on the two crucial techniques of adaptation to new conditions and adopting original techniques. Adaptation and adoption also involved the rejection as well as substantial modification of old/traditional formats by the concerned military machines. Williamson Murray writes that war is a complex interactive duel between two opponents. It is a phenomenon of indeterminate length which allows opportunity to the contestants to adapt to the enemy's strategy, operations and tactical approach. Murray continues that in history most of the military organizations prepared for the wrong war because they failed to recognize and adapt to the changing conditions of warfare as well as to the new tactical, operational, strategic and political challenges.<sup>1</sup> In Murray's framework, strategy dominates and tactics are ultimately subordinated to a higher strategic direction.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, this volume concentrates on tactical-operational spheres. The rationale is that faulty tactics might result in failure by a military organization to implement even a brilliant strategic plan.

Battlefield/combat effectiveness is studied here on the basis of the capability of the Indian Army to adapt to the Japanese methods of warfare by adopting several measures in the inter-related fields of tactics, technology and logistics. Logistics in our format includes mobilization of military manpower, provision of weapons, supply of all non-combat necessary materials (equipment, food and medicine) and the maintenance of discipline. Logistics influences

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1 Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1.

2 Williamson Murray, 'History and the Future', in Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy, and Military Effectiveness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 33.

discipline and morale, and these in turn, to a great extent, shape battlefield effectiveness. Morale could be defined as the collective and individual fighting spirit ('the will to war') of the personnel of the military formation. Discipline is the willingness of the military personnel to abide by rules and regulations and obey orders of the superior officers. Discipline, to a great extent, is shaped by morale which in turn is influenced by factors related to the supply of arms, munitions, clothes and food to the soldiers. Tactics is the product of technology, training, equipment, discipline and partly morale. A comparative analysis with the armies of the other powers is a strongpoint of this volume.

This monograph argues that the initial defeats of the Indian Army, till 1943, were due to a combination of morale and material factors. The wrong training, substandard equipment and difficulties of expanding the army due to the operation of the Martial Race theory as regards recruitment and racial discrimination of the Indian commissioned officers, and many such factors bedevilled the Indian military organization. From 1944 onwards, the Indian Army exhibited a high learning curve, not only due to the introduction of new tactical principles and an innovative training regimen but also due to rapid expansion in the supply infrastructure of the South-East Asia Command (SEAC) and India Command. Better weapons, realistic training and the expansion of the logistical base enhanced morale and thus raised battlefield performance of the Indian Army. Though this volume concentrates on the period between 1941 and 1945, some attention will be given to the inter-war period in order to show the changes and continuities experienced by the Indian military organization in wartime.

The topic of the Indian Army's combat effectiveness against the IJA is an under-researched area. Hitherto, whatever few studies have been made are based almost exclusively on the private papers of the British officers who commanded the Indian soldiers. Such an angle is important but gives the story from the British side. An attempt is made here to highlight the experiences and activities of the non-British participants which on balance will provide a holistic picture. The multi-volume *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War* has not yet been used extensively by scholars. These volumes provide substantial data as regards the actions of different Indian regiments and battalions. Since most of the Indian rank and file was illiterate, they have left us with no written records. However, the Indian and Pakistani officers (both commissioned as well as the Viceroy's Commissioned Officers/vcos) and the regimental historians have documented their experiences. These publications are not well known within India, let alone the Western world. Based on hitherto unused sources (memoirs of the Indian officers and contemporary government publications, files at the Ministry of Defence

Historical Section/MODHS, New Delhi) along with archival sources from the India Office Records (IOR; also known as Oriental and India Office Collection/OIOC), British Library (BL), National Army Museum (NAM), Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, and Public Records Office (PRO), Kew, UK, this volume offers a fresh perspective by focusing on the role of Indian soldiers and Indian officers who fought the IJA. The methodological approach integrates organizational analysis of the army as an institution with the social context and cultural mores. Further, this monograph analyzes logistical support and non-material factors like the 'Martial Race tradition' in understanding the combat motivation of the Indian soldiers. Focusing on the tactics used, technology deployed and logistical support available, the combat performance of the Indian Army is assessed. This volume devotes much space to the previously unknown battles in the Arakan. The wide range of sources (including British and Indian archival materials plus memoirs of the British and Indian officers) utilized in this study portray how the Indian Army was attempting to overcome its tactical-technological shortcomings between 1939 and 1942. Further, this monograph analyzes the mechanisms which enabled the Indian Army from late 1943 onwards to initiate tactical innovations which in turn raised the combat effectiveness of the organization.

This book notes the connection between the Indian Army's experience in hill fighting/Small War in the North-West Frontier with light artillery and animal-based logistical support before 1939 and jungle warfare in South-East Asia during World War II. This is an example of what can be termed as 'interconnected history'. In addition, jungle fighting in Malaya and the Arakan will be contrasted with jungle fighting in the South-West Pacific Area (SWPA). The Indian Army fought side-by-side with the African, Australian, Canadian and British units in the various theatres from Hong Kong to Burma. While assessing the military effectiveness of the Indian units, comparisons and contrasts are also made with the units of the other armies which participated in these campaigns. So, the 'comparative history' approach is also followed in this volume. The point to be noted is that despite the use of artillery and aircraft in large numbers from 1944 onwards, combat in South-East Asia remained infantry-oriented with a strong focus on small unit tactics. This was a strongpoint of the Indian Army before 1939 and remains so even today. To a great extent, jungle warfare at the tactical level has many similarities with counter-insurgency (COIN) operations undertaken by the British Army in Malaya after 1945 and by the Indian Army in North-East India in the post-1947 era. The volume, by providing an analytical narrative account, focuses on the colonial (Indian) Army's battlefield contribution within the overall ambit of the British imperial war effort against Japan during World War II. Several tables describe the



organizational structures of the Indian Army at different moments of time in different theatres. Finally, an exhaustive bibliography given at the end will help students as well as prospective researchers.

There are several semi-academic and popular works dealing with the retreat and reconquest of Burma. For instance, narrative histories like Frank McLynn's *The Burma Campaign* portray the functioning of the Allied High Command in the China-Burma-India theatre<sup>3</sup> and Fergal Keane's book dealing with the Siege of Kohima concentrates mostly on the activities of a particular British regiment.<sup>4</sup> The latter is a sort of 'old blood and guts' history. Till now there is no academic monograph which covers the Indian Army's confrontation with the IJA in all the theatres. However, the following academic works cited in the paragraphs below deal with certain aspects of the Indian Army on the Burma front in particular and South-East Asia in general.

C. Bayly and Tim Harper's monograph is a good social and political history of the British Empire's confrontation with Japan in South-East Asia but does not deal with military organization, tactics and technology.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Anirudh Deshpande's PhD, which later became a monograph, overlooks the actual performance of the Indian Army in the battlefields. Deshpande's book emphasizes that inadequate financial resources on part of the *Raj* kept the Indian Army as a sort of quasi-rebellious 'coolie corps' with low combat value.<sup>6</sup> As far as the recruitment of the Indian Army during World War II is concerned, F.W. Perry's comparative study<sup>7</sup> devotes half a chapter to this. Perry's chapter gives a solid statistical account of the Indian units raised during wartime but does not take into account imperial ideologies of race, social and economic conditions of the subcontinent. This volume gives attention to such issues. As regards the tactical-training aspects, there are certain works, like Daniel Marston's monograph on the Indian Army, which discuss the tactical aspects of the regenerated Indian Army. Marston focuses on some of the elite units, like the 12 Phoenix battalions. Marston, unlike Deshpande, rightly argues that it is erroneous to state that the Indian Army was a conservative organization unable to reform

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3 Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign: Disaster into Triumph, 1942–45* (London: Bodley Head, 2010).

4 Fergal Keane, *Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944, The Epic Story of the Last Great Stand of Empire* (London: Harper, 2010).

5 C. Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–45* (London: Penguin, 2004).

6 Anirudh Deshpande, *British Military Policy in India, 1900–1945: Colonial Constraints and Declining Power* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005).

7 F.W. Perry, *The Commonwealth Armies: Manpower and Organization in the Two World Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

itself for meeting the demands of World War II. True, before 1939 the Indian Army was unprepared, both organizationally and technically, for fighting a global war. The net result was the early defeats till 1943. Social and organizational reforms (though Marston focuses mostly on the latter aspect, especially training) enabled transformation of the Indian military organization by late 1944. Marston concludes, by making a case study of the above-mentioned 12 battalions, that the theory and praxis of conducting successful jungle warfare was in place by the time of the Imphal-Kohima Campaign.<sup>8</sup> Marston's latest book shows that the Indian Army retained its tactical and organizational flexibility even after the end of World War II when it had to deal with COIN duties both inside and outside India.<sup>9</sup>

However, the present monograph attempts to evaluate the overall performance of the Indian Army against the IJA. Besides analyzing the theory of training introduced from 1943 onwards, the focus of the present volume also remains how in the jungle and plains of Burma the new concepts of training were played out. In addition to Marston, T.R. Moreman's monograph<sup>10</sup> highlights the theoretical aspects of training in the British units of the Indian Army. Moreman assumes that whatever was published in the training pamphlets was implemented by the army. Most of the sepoys, NCOs and the VCOs, were illiterate and semi-literate. Training pamphlets were definitely important for the British officers. I intend to find out what happened at the grass-roots level by analyzing the activities of the Indian regiments and battalions in the battlefields. Pradeep P. Barua's *The State at War in South Asia* is a general survey of the evolution of warfare in India from ancient to recent times. Barua devotes Chapter 8 to the Indian Army's battlefield experience in World War II. He rightly claims that the Indian Army exhibited a high learning curve. But only pages 150–51 are devoted to the Burma Front.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, there is always scope for further work. Barua's published PhD<sup>12</sup> focuses on the Indianization of the officer corps (an extension of the work of Stephen P. Cohen which charts the

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8 Daniel Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

9 Daniel Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

10 T.R. Moreman, *The Jungle, the Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War 1941–45: Fighting Methods, Doctrine and Training for Jungle Warfare* (London: Frank Cass, 2005).

11 Pradeep P. Barua, *The State at War in South Asia* (Lincoln/ London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

12 Pradeep P. Barua, *Gentlemen of the Raj: The Indian Army Officer Corps, 1817–1949* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1999).

professionalization of the Indian Army's officer corps<sup>13</sup>) and tangentially touches on the combat effectiveness of the Indian Army in South-East Asia. The links between the Indianization of the commissioned officer corps and battlefield performance are noted in this volume.

This volume concentrates on all the theatres of South-East Asia in which the Indian Army fought between 1941 and 1945. Further, it also deals with combat motivation (i.e. morale). And this brings about other debates in the field. It is debatable whether battlefield realities rather than ethnic identities shaped morale and combat effectiveness of the colonial forces. It is necessary to integrate the importance of the nature of firefight in shaping the morale of the combatants. However, the importance of the Martial Race theory and welfare incentives offered to the soldiers and their families in strengthening their morale and hence, combat effectiveness, needs to be discussed. An attempt is made to compare and contrast the morale of the Indian soldiery during the two World Wars. As regards logistics, Graham Dunlop's monograph is the latest. Dunlop's treatment of the administrative aspects of the logistical infrastructure which sustained the British and Indian forces in Burma from 1943 onwards is excellent. Dunlop shows that at times operational plans were shaped by the requirements of sustaining supply for the advancing 14th Army.<sup>14</sup> However, there is still space for further research to highlight the links between the rising combat effectiveness of the units and the betterment of the logistical scenario in India during 1944.

Murray writes that military organizations also change in peacetime, which is known as innovation.<sup>15</sup> Chapter 1 gives an idea of the organization and functions of the Indian Army before the onset of World War II and tries to trace the trajectory of adaptations/innovations if any. While the Government of India (GoI) wanted the Indian Army to guard the North-West Frontier and to engage in internal policing, London demanded that the Indian Army function as an imperial reserve (at least to a limited extent) for strengthening British defence in the overseas theatres against the rising Axis threat. Along with the polar opposite policies, financial stringency was also responsible for the initial mess in the military establishment of India. Thanks to the vast demographic resources of the sub-continent and the operation of an underdeveloped economy, there was no shortage of recruits. Even without resorting to conscription,

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13 Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (1971, reprint, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991).

14 Graham Dunlop, *Military Economics, Culture and Logistics of the Burma Campaign, 1942–45* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009).

15 Murray, *Military Adaptation in War*, p. 2.

more than two million men joined as combatants. By late 1942, the Indian Army had become the largest volunteer army in the world. The British could be choosy about which communities were to be tapped because of the availability of the vast manpower pool. They stuck to the recruitment of the 'martial races'. The Martial Race theory was a double-edged sword. While on one hand, clan and caste feelings generated internal cohesion, on the other hand, rapid expansion was impossible. This was because men of particular clans and tribes hailing from particular localities were required to fill up particular companies of the different regiments. During 1941–42, the GoI, faced with the rising Axis threat, tried to expand the Indian Army very quickly. This resulted in a mixture of different communities within the same units which caused loss of cohesion among the units and contributed towards the inefficient performance of the Indian units in the initial stages of war against Japan. In addition, the lack of trained VCOS from the same clans and castes lowered the morale and hence combat worthiness of the Indian units. Chapters 2 and 3 throw light on these aspects. Comparative stability in 1943 and intensive recruitment allowed the General Headquarters India (GHQI)/India Command to rectify the defects in the recruitment pattern.

Racial discrimination by the British officers and the Tommies, and inequalities in the pay of the Indian officers and the rank and file, i.e. the sepoys vis-à-vis their British counterparts, demoralized the Indian soldiers, especially in Malaya and Singapore. Further, Japanese and Indian nationalist propaganda resulted in the breakdown of morale of the Indian soldiers stationed in Hong Kong in 1941 and in Malaya during 1941–42. Superior tactics displayed by the highly motivated IJA soldiers overwhelmed the half-trained and inadequately-equipped Indian soldiers repeatedly in Hong Kong, Malaya-Singapore, Borneo and Burma during 1942 and in the first half of 1943. These successive defeats, as portrayed in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5, further demoralized the Indian troops.

Chapter 2 not only notes how the Indian regiments deployed in Hong Kong engaged in combat with the Japanese invaders but also compares and contrasts the Indian units' performance with the British and Canadian units stationed there. One of the limitations of the Allied forces stationed on this island was that they put their faith in static linear defence, which was penetrated and outflanked by the Japanese infantry units. Chapter 3 portrays the retreat of the Allied forces from Jitra to Johore and the reasons behind this debacle. General Percival and Gordon Bennett's claim that the Indian units were especially bad and mostly responsible for the disaster in Malaya is erroneous. This chapter argues that the Indian units' performance was on a par with that of the British and the Australians. Ironically, the terrain and climate of Malaya should have suited the Indian units. Fighting in the humid swampy

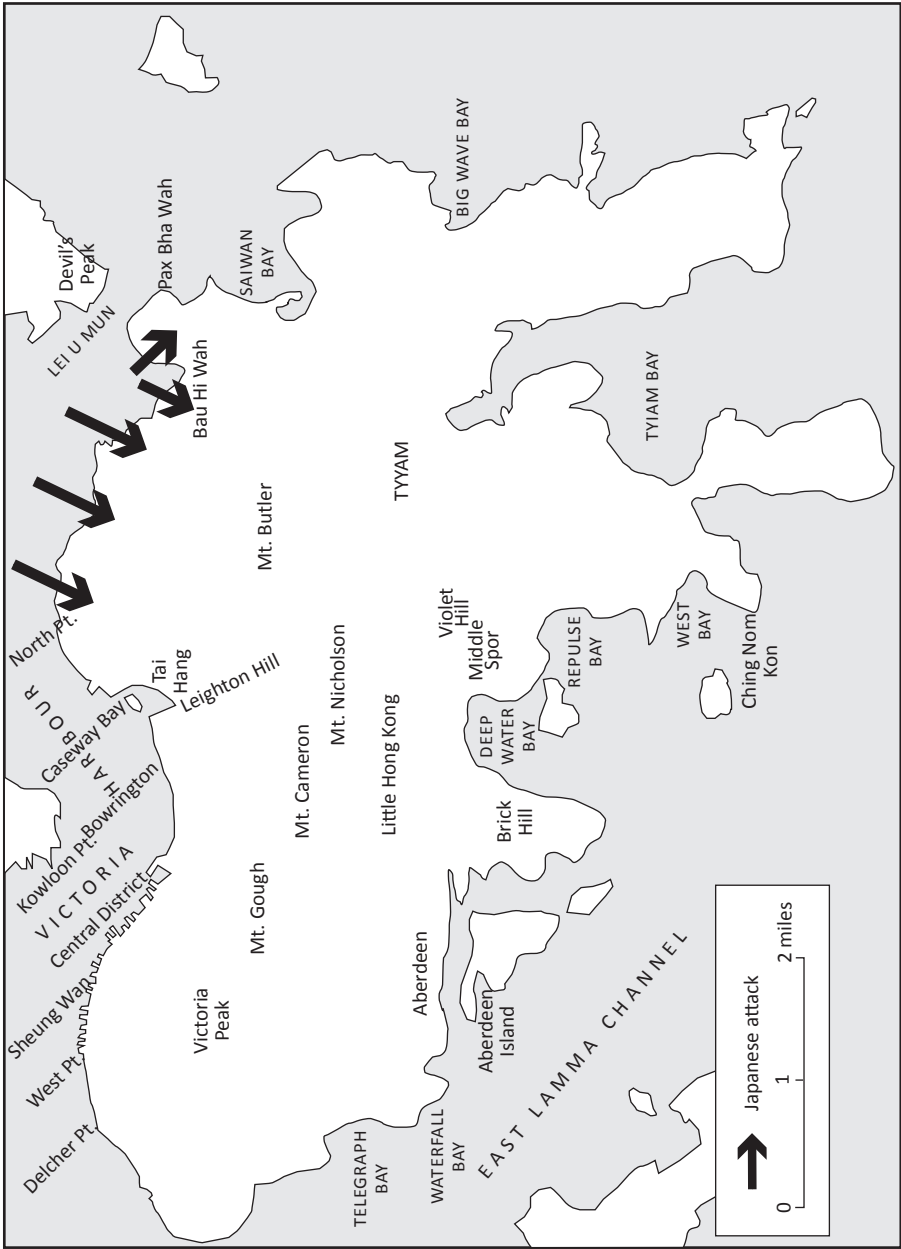
jungle-covered landscape had been a strongpoint for the Indian Army before 1939. However, the veteran Indian units remained deployed in the North-West Frontier, Iraq and North and East Africa. The 'green units' partly trained for 'Desert Warfare' with heavy artillery and lorries were deployed in Malaya. And these unwieldy Indian units were outmanoeuvred by the fast-moving and lightly-equipped Japanese units. In Chapter 4, the spotlight shifts from the swampy jungle-covered creeks of Malaya to Singapore Island. It is analyzed why the Indian units failed even in 'positional warfare', which it had conducted before 1939. One of the limitations of the Indian Army was inadequate cooperation and coordination between artillery and infantry. Both the British and Indian units failed in maintaining a cohesive defensive front against the advancing IJA. The retreat, as Chapter 6 portrays, continued from Rangoon to Assam. The concerns of this volume are not strategy and generalship. Hence, the focus remains at the battalion and regimental levels. A long 'running retreat' against a qualitatively superior foe was a new experience for the Indian Army. Nevertheless, it speaks volumes for the regimental cohesion, due to which the Indian Army did not fall apart. Despite humiliation and casualties, the Indian regiments retained a cadre of hardened VCOS, NCOS and sepoy, who two years later constituted the backbone of a regenerated Indian Army.

The formation of the Japanese-sponsored Indian National Army in late 1942 was a serious challenge to the British to retain loyalty of the troops. The sepoy/*jawans* were 'quasi-mercenaries'. Hence, creature comforts were important to them. Vast expansion in the supply infrastructure from late 1943 onwards resulted in the betterment of the material environment of the Indian military establishment. General, later Field-Marshal, Claude Auchinleck was able to eliminate the discriminatory regulations which were hitherto directed against the Indian troops. Better pension facilities and gratuities prevented desertions. Improved rations and medical arrangements also improved the health of the troops deployed in Burma. Further, in order to keep the soldiers happy, special provisions were initiated for the soldiers' families in Punjab. All these measures, along with a reinvigorated training regimen, as Chapter 7 shows, enhanced the morale and tactical aptitude of the sepoy, and thus prepared them for the successful confrontation with the IJA from 1944 onwards.

From the jungles of the Arakan to the mountainous regions around Imphal and Kohima, the Indian Army implemented new techniques of warfare which it had learnt since late 1943. Construction of defensive 'boxes', the use of heavy artillery in positional battles and aggressive small unit patrolling, are three examples. And the new techniques of warfare blunted the Japanese *U GO* and *HA GO* offensives. Chapters 8 and 9 analyze the victories of the sepoy against the 'Rising Sun' in the jungles of Burma during 1944. A new age had dawned on

the Indian Army by early 1945. Not only in 'positional warfare' but also in mobile warfare, both in the jungles as well as in the sultry plains of central Burma, the Indian Army had an edge over the much vaunted IJA. The Indian Army was learning, as well as implementing combined arms operations. The sepoys, as Chapter 10 shows, learnt to coordinate their attacks with 'Hurribombers', Grants, Stuarts, Shermans and heavy artillery. Chapters 7 to 10 also make the highly controversial point that, from late 1944 onwards, the Indian units performed better than the British units. The Conclusion sums up the experience of the Indian Army. The tactical legacies of World War II (especially positional battle and small unit actions), as well as the recruitment pattern, continue to shape the Indian and Pakistan armies even now. Now, let us have a glance at the evolution of the Indian Army before the war with Japan broke out in 1941.

Maps

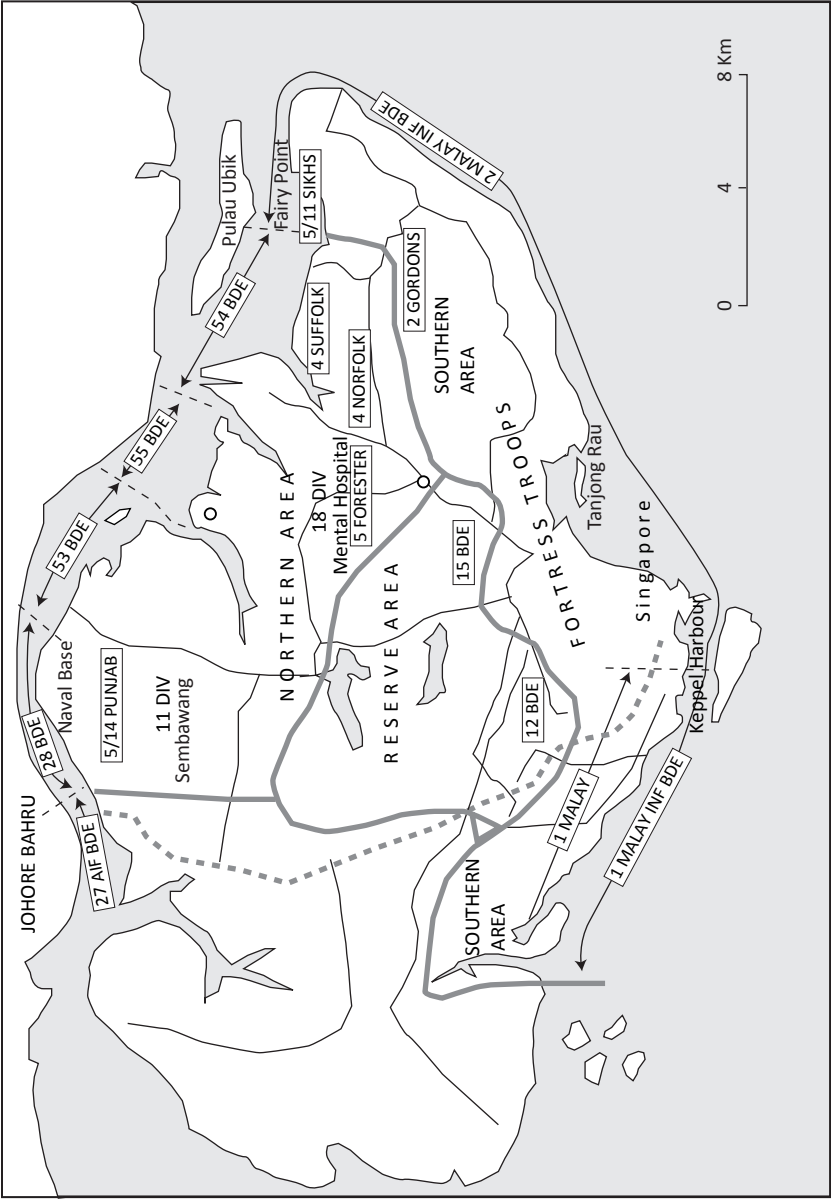


MAP 1 Hong Kong Island, 16–25 December 1941



MAP 2      *Malaya, 1941-42*

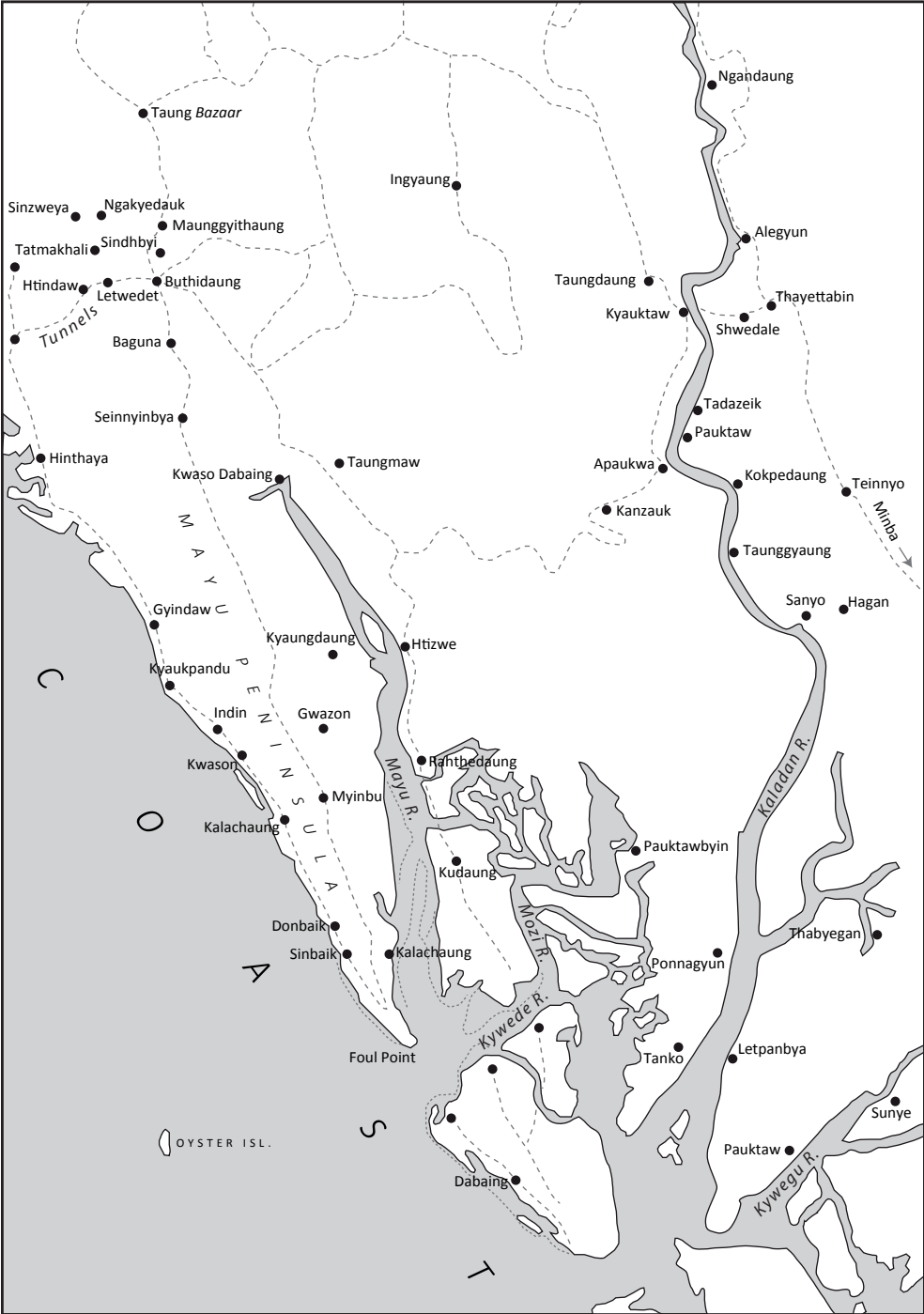




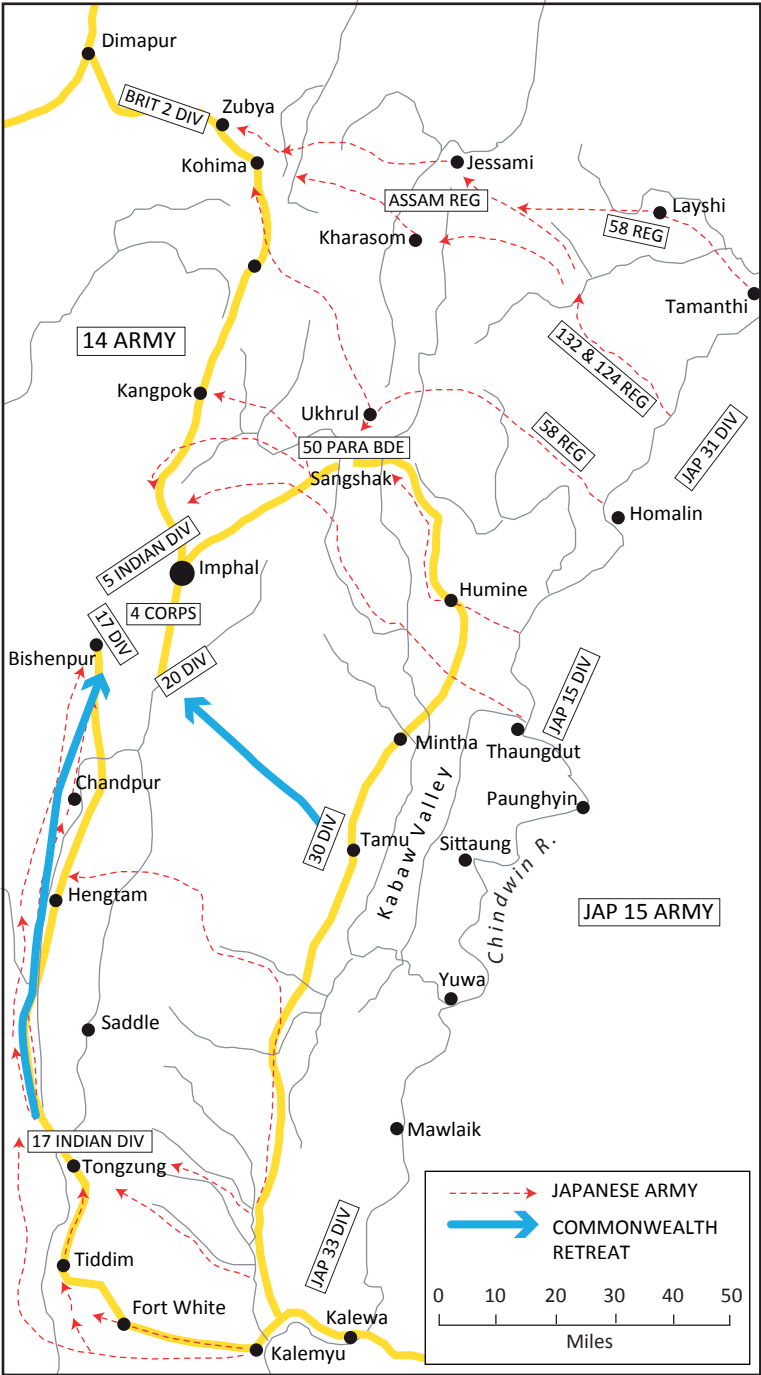
MAP 3 Singapore, 4 February 1942



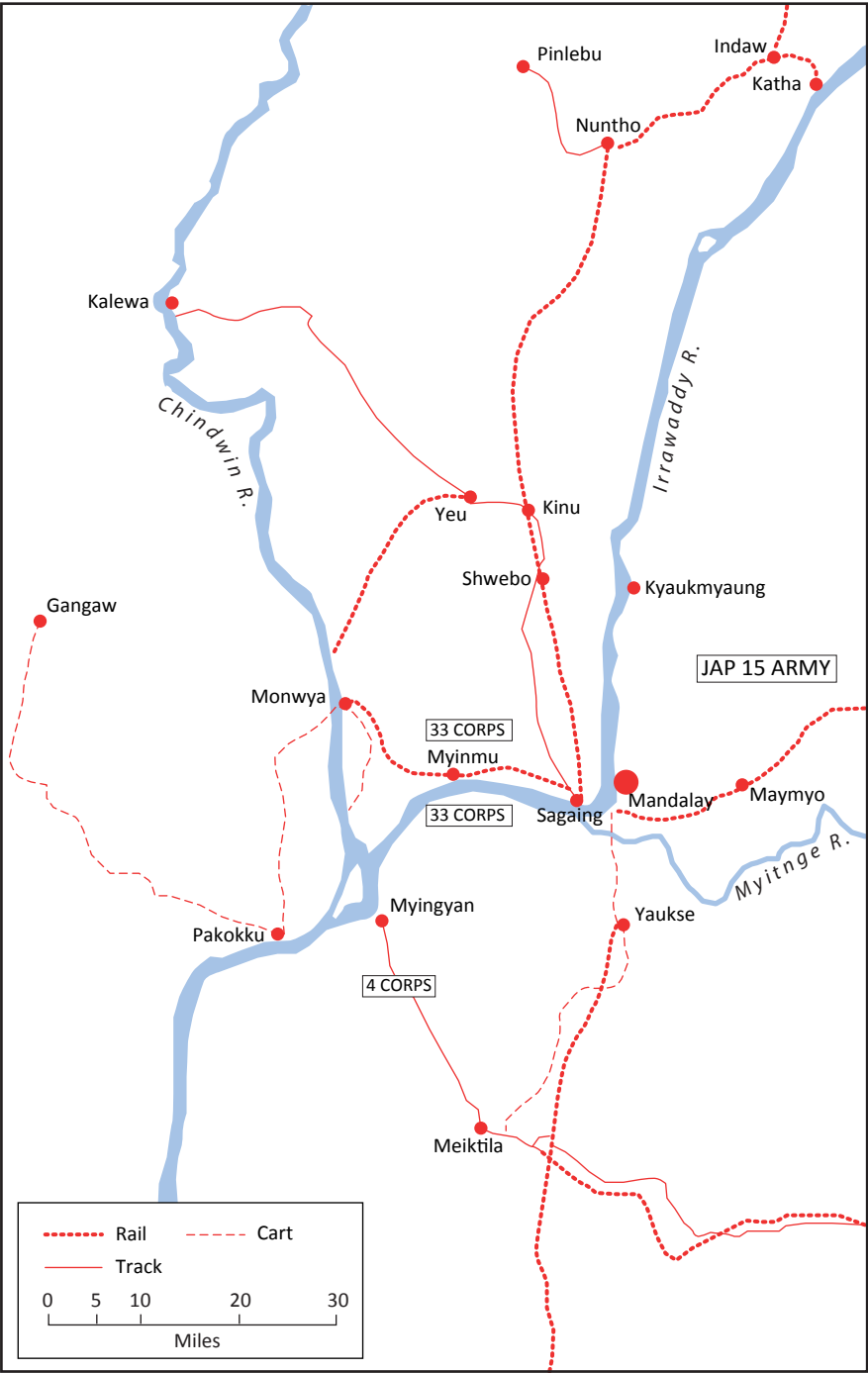
MAP 4      *Japanese Empire, December 1942*



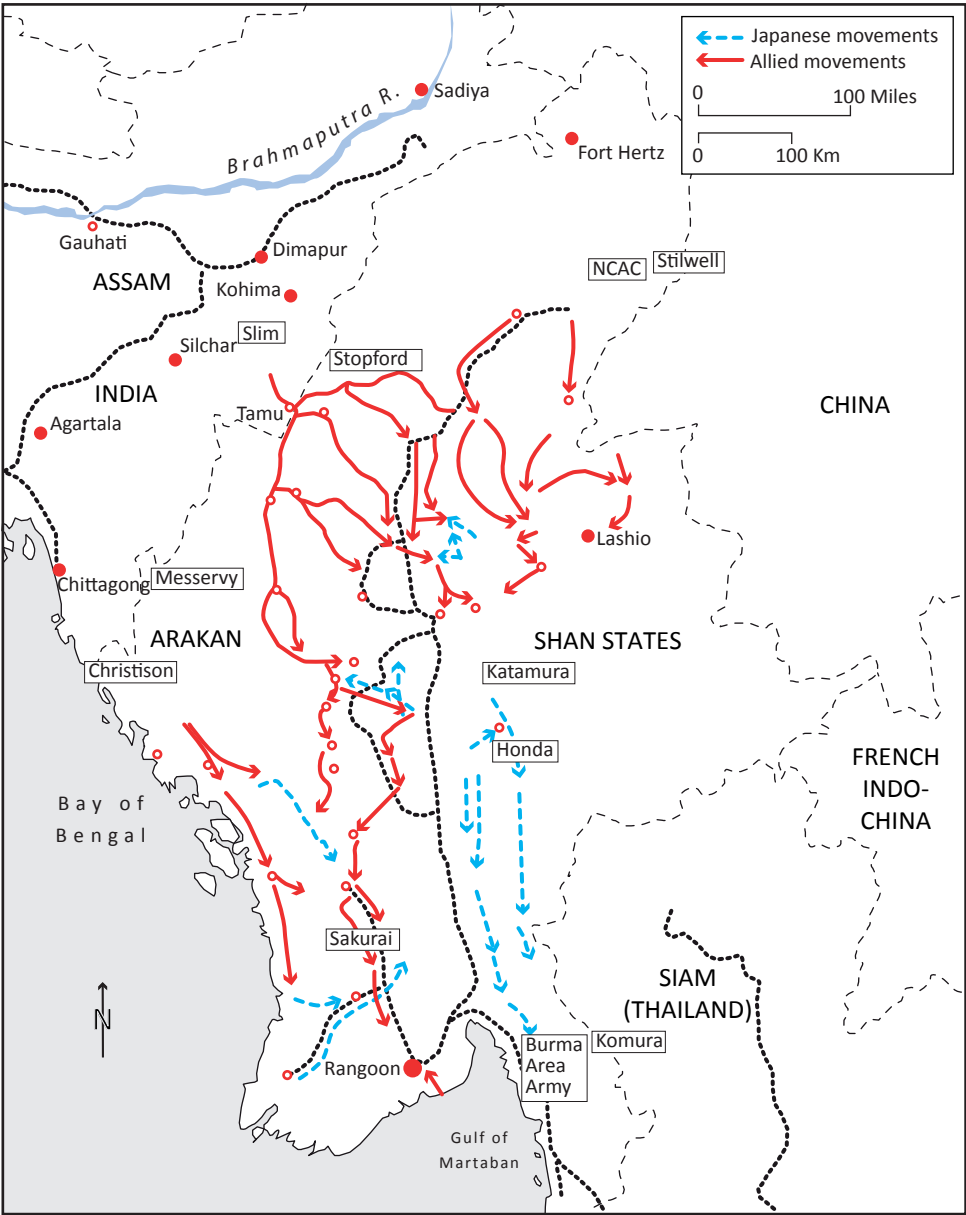
MAP 5 *Arakan*



MAP 6 U GO Offensive, March-April 1944



MAP 7 *Central Burma, late 1944*



MAP 8 *Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL, May 1944–August 1945*

# The Indian Army before the Far Eastern War

## Introduction

This chapter examines the evolution of the organization and doctrine of the Indian Army till the beginning of the Far Eastern War in December 1941. An attempt is made to compare and contrast the organizational framework and combat experience of the Indian Army with the other Commonwealth armies (especially the British Army) and also its opponent, the IJA. The similarities and dissimilarities in the administrative structure and combat experience of the Indian Army before 1941 with the British Army (to an extent the parent organization of the colonial Indian Army) and the IJA are highlighted. This chapter shows the interrelated problems regarding expansion and modernization which the Indian Army faced in the initial period of World War II. During World War I, the Indian Army conducted several big conventional campaigns. But in the interwar era, the Indian Army was geared for constabulary duties and conducting unconventional warfare in an atmosphere of financial crunch. However, all this changed from 1939 onwards when the Indian Army had to prepare again for fighting another big conventional war.

## Recruitment and Expansion of the Indian Army

The Indian Army comprised regular regiments in which the Indians served as privates and VCOS, but all the commissioned officers were British. Every battalion had 20 VCOS who performed the duties of the company officers and platoon commanders.<sup>1</sup> The VCOS were ranked below the youngest British commissioned officers but constituted a crucial link between the Indian other ranks (ORs) and the white officer corps. Most of the VCOS had good conduct records and were promoted on the basis of seniority. So, besides administering

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<sup>1</sup> Chandar S. Sundaram, 'Grudging Concessions: The Officer Corps and its Indianization, 1817–1940', in Daniel P. Marston and Chandar S. Sundaram (eds.), *A Military History of India and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2007), p. 88. Besides the VCOS, each Indian infantry battalion had 12 British officers and 742 NCOS and sepoy/s/jawans. Daniel Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 37.

the regiments and leading the small units in actions, the substantial number of VCO posts in each unit also provided a mechanism for the British leadership to reward long service by the loyal *jawans*. Some of the regiments in the late 1930s designated as Indianizing units had comprised junior Indian commissioned officers. In addition, many rulers of the princely states also maintained their private armies. It is to be noted that one-third of the Indian subcontinent was under the rule of the princes. Selected units of the princely armies, which were partially trained and equipped by the GoI, were known as Imperial Service Troops (ISTs). They were later renamed as Indian States Forces (ISF). The GoI used them for both internal policing and frontier wars and garrisoning overseas territories. The ISTs were used extensively during World War I. Just before the beginning of the Great War, the Indian Army comprised 2,300 British officers and 159,000 VCOs, sepoy and sowars. In addition, some 68,000 British troops were deployed in India. Together, they were known as the Army in India.<sup>2</sup>

The British soldiers of the home army, i.e. the British Army, were stationed in India till 1947 for several reasons. First, the British soldiers functioned as a deterrent to prevent any large-scale mutiny by the Indian soldiery in the style of the 1857 Uprising. Second, the British soldiers stationed in India were paid from the Indian revenues. Thus, the government in Britain was able to maintain a substantial chunk of British soldiery free of cost. Third, the British officers believed that the British troops were more combat effective than the Indian soldiers. Hence, in the case of external invasion (Russia and Afghanistan before 1914), the sepoys needed to be stiffened by deploying the British troops among them. Last, in the event of a large-scale anti-British uprising among the Indians, the Indian soldiers might join the rebels. And in such a scenario, the British troops were to function as the *Raj's* last line of defence. Between 1914 and 1918, 877,068 combatants were recruited from India.<sup>3</sup> In World War I, the Indian Army suffered some 60,000 killed in action (KIA).<sup>4</sup>

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2 David Omissi, 'The Indian Army in the First World War, 1914–18', in Marston and Sundaram (eds.), *A Military History of India and South Asia*, p. 74.

3 Kaushik Roy, 'The Construction of Martial Race Culture in British-India and its Legacies in Post-Colonial South Asia', in H.S. Vasudevan (Editor-in-Chief) and Kausik Bandopadhyay (Issue Editor), *Asia Annual 2008: Understanding Popular Culture* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2010), p. 250.

4 Pradeep P. Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernisation in Later Colonial India* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1999), p. 37.



On 1 November 1918, there were 13 Indian divisions in Palestine and Mesopotamia.<sup>5</sup> From 1914 till September 1920 (including the Third Afghan War of 1919), the total casualties suffered by the Army in India numbered 130,074 men (61,041 KIA, the rest wounded and missing).<sup>6</sup> By contrast, in World War I, about 600,000 British soldiers had died.<sup>7</sup> In 1921, the population of India was 319 million.<sup>8</sup> In 1922, the strength of the Indian Army was 144,617. In 1923, the Army in India consisted of 75,924 personnel of the British Army, 128,901 personnel of the Indian Army and the total came to about 204,825 men. And between 1938 and 1939, the Indian Army numbered 121,155 men.<sup>9</sup>

While the Indian Army under British tutelage came into existence in the 1740s, the IJA was born in December 1870 and comprised 10,000 men drawn from the Satsuma, Choshu and Tosa regional clans. The Army General Staff was established in 1878 and this body had the right of audience with the Emperor. In 1882, the Emperor became the Supreme Commander of Japan's armed forces. The first conscription was introduced in 1873. However, this measure exempted the wealthy, civil servants, medical students and eldest sons of families. Only 3 per cent of the total population who were fit to serve in the army was drafted. In December 1926, a conscription law was passed in the Japanese *Diet*. This made all the Japanese males aged over 20 years eligible for two years' service in the army (or three years in the navy) with a further four to five years in the reserve and ten more years of sub-reserve training.<sup>10</sup> By the early 1920s, the term *kogun* (imperial army) became more common than *koku-gun* (national army) in a deliberate attempt by the senior army leadership to link the army directly with the monarchy.<sup>11</sup>

5 Omissi, 'The Indian Army in the First World War, 1914–18', in Marston and Sundaram (eds.), *A Military History of India and South Asia*, p. 85.

6 *India's Contribution to the Great War* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Govt. Printing, 1923), p. 177.

7 David Fraser, *And We shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (1983, reprint, London: Cassell, 2002), p. 5.

8 Keith Jeffery, 'An English Barrack in the Oriental Seas'? India in the Aftermath of the First World War', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1981), p. 382.

9 Report of the Expert Committee on the Defence of India, 1938–39, p. 32, CAB 24/287, PRO, Kew, Surrey, UK; *The Army in India and its Evolution including an Account of the Establishment of the Royal Air Force in India* (1924, New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1985), p. 220.

10 Saki Dockrill, 'Hirohito, the Emperor's Army and Pearl Harbour', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1992), pp. 321–22.

11 Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009), p. 161.

One of the problems regarding the quick expansion of the Indian Army was ideological. Recruitment doctrine was shaped by the Martial Race ideology/theory. Scholars differ regarding the timing and factors behind the origin of this ideology. Gavin Rand asserts that the 1857 Uprising constituted a crucial moment in the emergence of this ideology.<sup>12</sup> In the pre-1857 era, comments David Omissi, the British relied on the category of caste in order to recruit selected communities to the army. However, the 1857 Mutiny of the Bengal Army resulted in the policy of categorizing the diverse communities of India by race instead of caste.<sup>13</sup> This was a typical case of policy shift or innovation in the field of recruitment by the British-Indian Army as a result of lessons learnt from the experience of the 1857 Uprising. In accordance with the Martial Race theory, only selected communities within the sub-continent who were dubbed as 'martial races' due to biological and cultural reasons were considered capable of bearing arms. Rand emphasizes: 'the martial races were constituted not as a bulwark of British power but as a further explanation of, and justification for, India's subjugation'.<sup>14</sup> Heather Streets agrees and says that the martial race stereotypes were fictitious and consciously constructed by the imperial elites for practical political ends.<sup>15</sup> Cynthia H. Enloe writes that generally a martial race occupies a geographically distinct territory at the regional periphery of the state. And the imperial elites used them against the dissident lowland population.<sup>16</sup>

From late nineteenth century, the Martial Race theory shaped the recruitment policy. The theory was partly the product of an anthropological quest by the British civilian and military officers. They engaged in ethnology; the study of racial physiognomy, not to be confused with ethnography, which means the study of social customs.<sup>17</sup> The nineteenth-century Victorians believed in a hierarchy of races and that racial characteristics could be passed on genetically

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12 Gavin Rand, "Martial Races" and "Imperial Subjects": Violence and Governance in Colonial India, 1857–1914, *European Review of History*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2006), p. 11.

13 David Omissi, "Martial Races": Ethnicity and Security in Colonial India, 1858–1939, *War & Society*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1991), pp. 6–7.

14 Rand, "Martial Races" and "Imperial Subjects": Violence and Governance in Colonial India, 1857–1914, p. 15.

15 Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 10.

16 Cynthia H. Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in Divided Societies* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1980), p. 26.

17 Mary Des Chene, 'Military Ethnology in British India', *South Asia Research*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1999), pp. 121–22.

from one generation to another.<sup>18</sup> They believed that warrior instincts were characteristics of some blood types.<sup>19</sup> Mary Des Chene claims that martiality for the British was an attribute of race because it is passed down through the blood lines. In addition, social milieu also shaped the martial characteristics of the races.<sup>20</sup>

The father figure of the Martial Race theory was Lord Roberts (the Commander-in-Chief of the Army in India, 1885–93). Roberts argued that the people inhabiting west and south India lacked courage and possessed inferior physiques.<sup>21</sup> He believed that the fighting races of the subcontinent were the Sikhs, Gurkhas, Dogras, Rajputs and Pathans.<sup>22</sup> The wheat-eating small peasants (owning 60 acres of land and four bullocks each on average) and communities inhabiting cold frontier regions were considered martial. The British looked down upon the Eurasians as being imbued with the worst characteristics of both the European and Indian ‘races’.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the Eurasians were not recruited to the army except as drummers in the regiments. The most disloyal and unmartial elements within India in British eyes were the ‘babus, pleaders and the students’.<sup>24</sup> This was partly because these communities had challenged the *Raj* from the beginning of the twentieth century by initiating mass demonstrations and party politics.

Philip Constable asserts that the Martial Race theory was not merely an ‘Orientalist’ invention by the British officers for strategic recruitment and hegemonic control but also the product of the incorporation of an indigenous social differentiation of *Kshatriya* (traditional Hindu warrior caste) identity.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Omissi claims that the issue was not merely about whom the British

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18 Lionel Caplan, ‘“Bravest of the Brave”: Representations of “The Gurkha” in British Military Writings’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1991), p. 581.

19 Streets, *Martial Races*, p. 8.

20 Chene, ‘Military Ethnology in British India’, pp. 132–33.

21 Roberts to Stewart, 30 June 1882, in Brian Robson (ed.), *Roberts in India: The Military Papers of Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, 1876–1893* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993), p. 256.

22 Roberts to Kitchener, 1904, 11/36, Roberts to the Secretary of State, 12 Sept. 1897, Kitchener Papers, Reel No. 2, M/F, NAI, New Delhi.

23 Gregory Martin, ‘The Influence of Racial Attitudes on British Policy towards India during the First World War’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1986), p. 98.

24 George Hamilton to Viceroy Elgin, 16 Sept. 1897, No. 139, Reel No. 2, Hamilton Papers, M/F, NAI.

25 Philip Constable, ‘The Marginalization of a *Dalit* Martial Race in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Western India’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2001), p. 443.

selected but also who agreed to serve in the British-led Indian Army. So, those communities who possessed inherent warrior instincts joined the Indian Army. This proved that the Martial Race theory was not merely a figment of the British imagination.<sup>26</sup> Enloe rightly claims that the recruitment policies of the imperial powers in the colonies were generally ethnically restrictive because recruitment was guided by the fact of political reliability and martial capabilities of the different communities inhabiting the colonies.<sup>27</sup> Ashley Jackson states that the evolution of British-India's military also influenced the construction of colonial armies in Africa, where racial gradation and identification of martial races also became a familiar practice.<sup>28</sup>

By 1893, 44 per cent of the Indian Army comprised recruits from the 'martial races'. In 1914, the share of the martial races rose to 75 per cent.<sup>29</sup> Both before and after World War I, the British continued to believe that only a tiny proportion of India's total population could be made into soldiers.<sup>30</sup> Edmund Candler, writing in 1919, noted: 'The war has proved that all men are brave, that the humblest follower is capable of sacrifice and devotion; that the Afridi, who is outwardly the nearest thing to an impersonation of Mars, yields nothing in courage to the Madrassi Christian of the Sappers and Miners.'<sup>31</sup> However, Candler was an exception. The reorganization of the Indian Army in 1922 was not based on wartime experience but on the pre-World War I Martial Race theory. From 1922 onwards, the Punjabi Muslims emerged as the single dominant community. The Sikhs passed to the third position. The army closed its ranks to the Brahmins from Uttar Pradesh and most of the Madrassis were demobilized.<sup>32</sup> While the Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh provided 20,382 recruits during World War I, none were recruited in the 1930s. The 1st Brahmin Regiment which was retained had only one Garhwali Brahmin company.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Omissi, 'Martial Races': Ethnicity and Security in Colonial India: 1858–1939', p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Cynthia H. Enloe, 'Ethnicity in the Evolution of Asia's Armed Bureaucracies', in DeWitt C. Ellinwood and Cynthia H. Enloe (eds.), *Ethnicity and the Military in Asia* (New Brunswick/London: Transaction Books, 1981), pp. 4–5.

<sup>28</sup> Ashley Jackson, 'The Evolution and Use of British Imperial Military Formations', in Alan Jeffreys and Patrick Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47: Experience and Development* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, 'Influence of Racial Attitudes on British Policy towards India during the First World War', p. 105.

<sup>31</sup> Edmund Candler, *The Sepoy* (London: John Murray, 1919), pp. 1–2.

<sup>32</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri, 'The Martial Races of India', Part III, *Modern Review*, vol. XLIX, no. 289 (1931), p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri, 'The Martial Races of India', Part IV, *Modern Review*, vol. XLIX, no. 290 (1931), p. 219.

One of the 'martial races' adored by the British officials were the Jat cultivators. Besides recruitment of the Jats from eastern Punjab and the Delhi-Agra region (now Haryana), those Jat peasants who had embraced Sikhism (the British considered it a martial religion) from central Punjab were favoured. Major A.E. Barstow of 2nd Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment noted in 1928: 'The position of the Jat Sikh, however, is considerably higher than that of his Hindu confrere. This may be attributed partly to the fact that he is a soldier as well as an agriculturist, and partly to the freedom and boldness which he has inherited from the traditions of the *Khalsa*'.<sup>34</sup> Barstow in his book *The Sikhs: An Ethnology* published in 1928 noted:

The typical Jat Sikh is faithful and true to his employer, seldom shows insubordination, and with a good deal of self-esteem has a higher standard of honour than is common amongst most Orientals.... He requires a strong hand, and punishment, when it is meted out, should not err on the side of leniency, but should savour rather of the principle of full weight, if seldom as opposed to that of lightly and often; this latter method approximates too closely to pin pricks thus causing a feeling of discontent in his mind.<sup>35</sup>

The general belief of the British officers was that peasants make good soldiers, hence, most of the martial races were of peasant stock. Brigadier-General C.G. Bruce, writing in 1928, claimed that the greater number of the peasantry of Nepal belonged to the military clans.<sup>36</sup>

In 1930, the Indian Army comprised 155,000 men. Of them, 50 per cent came from Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province. By the end of World War I, Punjab provided more than 40 per cent of the recruits for the combatant branches of the Indian Army. Another 25 per cent came from Nepal, Garhwal and Kumaun. While Punjab provided 86,000 men, Nepal provided another 19,000 and Uttar Pradesh (including Garhwal and Kumaun) supplied 16,500 personnel. Rajputana and Bombay Presidency provided 7,000 soldiers each. The North-West Frontier Province sent 5,600 men.<sup>37</sup> Between 1919 and 1930, the

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34 A.E. Barstow, *The Sikhs: An Ethnology* (1928, reprint, Low Price Publications, 1993), pp. 153–54.

35 Ibid., *Sikhs*, p. 153.

36 W. Brook Northey and C.J. Morris, *The Gurkhas* (1927, reprint, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1987), Foreword, p. xxvii.

37 Nirad C. Chaudhuri, 'The Martial Races of India', Part 1, *Modern Review*, vol. XLVIII, no. 283 (1930), pp. 43–44; Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, p. 14.

percentage of Punjab and North-West Frontier Province recruits rose from 46 to 58.5 per cent. The percentage from Nepal, Garhwal and Kumaun rose from 14.8 to 22 per cent for the same period. And the percentage supplied by north India declined from 25 to 11. The decline in percentage for south India for the same period was from 12 to 5.5.<sup>38</sup> George MacMunn, who served as the Quarter-Master General (QMG) responsible for recruiting, published his book titled *The Martial Races of India* in 1931.<sup>39</sup> It became a sort of unofficial guide for the British officers associated with recruitment to the Indian Army.

Exclusion of certain communities on political grounds and due to the influence of traditional recruitment policies was common in certain metropolitan armies also. For instance, the Bolshevik Army in 1926 recruited mainly Russians (64.8 per cent) and Ukrainians (17.4 per cent) but not Armenians, Georgians, Jews and Muslims like the Tatars, Turks and Bashkirs of Central Asia. This was because the Bolshevik regime doubted the loyalty of these groups. Further, these Muslim communities were not recruited to the Czarist Army in large numbers and neither were they very eager to serve in the Red Army.<sup>40</sup>

The IJA authorities, like the Indian Army's officers, believed that the rural recruits made better soldiers and that the recruits from cities like Tokyo and Osaka suffered from low morale, lax discipline and improper attitudes.<sup>41</sup> Both the Indian Army and the IJA drew the recruits from the countryside.<sup>42</sup> About 80 per cent of the soldiers of the IJA came from fishing and farming communities. The social composition of IJA's officer corps changed with time. In 1877, all except three of the 158 officers who graduated from the First Class of the Military Academy were of Samurai descent. In 1907, less than 50 per cent of the officers were Samurai. And in 1931, the descendants of Samurai comprised only 15 per cent of the officers. By the mid-1930s, half of the officer corps came from urban areas.<sup>43</sup>

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38 Nirad C. Chaudhuri, 'The Martial Races of India', Part II, *Modern Review*, vol. XLVIII, no. 285 (1930), p. 296.

39 Rand, "Martial Races" and "Imperial Subjects": Violence and Governance in Colonial India', p. 8.

40 Ellen Jones, *Red Army and Society: A Sociology of the Soviet Military* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), pp. 183–84.

41 Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, p. 160.

42 S.C.M. Paine, *The Wars for Asia: 1911–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 41.

43 Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 168, 178.

The Martial Race theory, in the view of Heather Streets, was not merely an instrument of colonial control but also operated in the British Army. For instance, the Scottish Highlanders were regarded as a martial race, like the Sikhs and the Gurkhas. In fact, Candler emphasized that the Gurkhas had the nerve of a Highlander. Streets continues that the military elites used the Martial Race theory to manage global imperial politics.<sup>44</sup> The British media popularized the racial and gendered constructs of the savage martiality of certain communities in the guise of the Martial Race theory. In her language, the Martial Race stereotype represented the idealized version of masculinity.<sup>45</sup>

General (later Field-Marshal), Commander-in-Chief of India Claude Auchinleck challenged the Martial Race theory. On 17 March 1941, Auchinleck wrote to Leo Amery (Secretary of State for India):

As regards recruitment for the rank and file, I have no doubt at all that, apart from any political considerations, we must broaden our basis and this was already in hand before I arrived. I propose to continue and hasten this process. There is plenty of good untouched material which we can and should use. Politically too it is, I think, essential to meet to an appreciable extent the almost universal demand for general recruitment and to give the process proper publicity.<sup>46</sup>

However, Auchinleck was only one voice among many. And despite his drive, energy and interest for the Indian Army he was only partially successful. This was not because all the others who believed in the outdated Martial Race theory were conservative in their outlook. William Arthur writes that in the 1930s the Martial Race discourse was considered a modernist one. During the first half of the twentieth century, race-based recruitment was not considered unpalatable or antithetical to modernity. Rather, race-based recruitment ensured the operational effectiveness of the Indian Army till that date. World War II resulted in the expansion of the Indian Army and especially its technical branches. This in turn required recruitment of Indians from different backgrounds, from urban regions. The Martial Race theory was not totally rejected, theoretically or practically, but underwent amalgamation and modulation.<sup>47</sup>

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44 Streets, *Martial Races*, p. 1; Candler, *Sepoy*, p. 18.

45 Streets, *Martial Races*, pp. 2, 12.

46 Auchinleck to L. Amery, p. 3, Para 6, 17 March 1941, Auchinleck Papers, MUL 132, John Rylands Library, Manchester University, Manchester, UK.

47 William Arthur, 'The Martial Episteme: Re-thinking Theories of Martial Race and the Modernization of the British Indian Army during the Second World War', in Rob Johnson



And for the combatants recruited from the rural areas, idealized masculinity and the perceived culture of martial races strengthened their 'will to war'.

Tim Carew, a British soldier who fought in Burma in 1944, asserts in his book on the fall of Hong Kong:

The regular soldier of the nineteen thirties, that mean spirited period in British history when the country floundered in torpid apathy against a background of mass unemployment and hunger marches, joined the Army for economic, alcoholic, amatory but rarely patriotic reasons.... He enlisted, in fact, because he was out of work and the problem of the next square meal was becoming increasingly pressing. A few youthful romantics enlisted because they were attracted by a recruiting poster .... If a recruit was eighteen years old and fit he was in for seven years.<sup>48</sup>

Carew in his book *The Longest Retreat* more or less repeats the same observation about the British soldiers' combat motivation.<sup>49</sup>

At the beginning of World War II, there was great enthusiasm among the rural Indian elites in providing recruits for the Indian Army. On 28 September 1939, the Indian Civil Service Collector of Aligarh reported:

Since the outbreak of the war I have received numerous offers of help from the residents of this district. Most of the zamindars, both big and small, have personally called on me and expressed their readiness to help in whatever manner their help is required, while some have also written to me expressing their readiness to help me with men and money. I have of course accepted all their offers with gratitude, and have told them that as soon as an opportunity offers itself, I shall request them to render their help. Prominent among those who have written to me are the Nawab Sahib of Chhatari, Kunwar Sultan Singh of Lakhnau, Rao Sahib Sheodhyan Singh of Pisawah, Kunwar Rohini Raman Dhawaj Prasad Singh of Beswan and several others.<sup>50</sup>

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(ed.), *The British Indian Army: Virtue and Necessity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 153–65.

48 Tim Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong* (1961, reprinted Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1990), p. 15.

49 Tim Carew, *The Longest Retreat: The Burma Campaign 1942* (1969, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1989), p. 17.

50 Extract from a Letter dated 28 Sept. 1939, from Mr A.T. Naqvi, ICS Collector of Aligarh, L/WS/1/136, IOR, BL, London.



Let us analyze the military manpower mobilization by the *Raj* from a micro-perspective. We will concentrate on the 'martial' communities who formed the backbone of the British-Indian Army. The anthropologist Lionel Caplan, by focusing on the imperial discourse on the Gurkhas, asserts that though the Gurkha martial capability was portrayed in a romantic manner the politics of power was very much there. The 'childlike Gurkhas' were portrayed as subordinate and dependent on the British officers.<sup>51</sup> The British literature on the Gurkhas portrays the latter as having both elements of the gentlemanly characteristics of the British officers as well as being perpetually juvenile and requiring a strong controlling hand.<sup>52</sup> Enloe claims: 'By making military vocations an integral part of a group's sense of its own ethnicity, the central state elites hope not only to make the military recruiter's task easier, but to wed ethnicity to state allegiance. The consequence for the group targeted to be a "martial race" is often an increased sense of ethnic cohesion bought at the price of growing vulnerability to state manipulation.'<sup>53</sup> Enloe coins the term 'Gurkha Syndrome' to refer to the state fostering of ethnicity.<sup>54</sup> To an extent Enloe's statement holds water. For instance, in the nineteenth century, the war cry of the Gurkhas became '*Maro Sangin Gorkhali ki jai*'.<sup>55</sup>

The term Gorkha/Goorkha (later Gurkha) was actually a construction of the British. The term originally referred to a small state in the Kathmandu Valley. The ruler of this state, during the late eighteenth century, unified Nepal. The subjects of this kingdom, who were an amalgam of Mongolian hill tribes; Newars, Rajputs, Brahmins and other menial clans, were called Gorkhalis after their patron saint Gorakh Nath. The British used the term Gurkhas to refer to the conglomeration of military races found mostly in central Nepal and in parts of west and east Nepal.<sup>56</sup> During the mid-nineteenth century, the British obtained recruits from Kumaun and Garhwal and they were categorized as Gurkhas.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the Gurkhas were never a homogeneous category. Linguistic

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51 Caplan, "Bravest of the Brave": Representations of "The Gurkha" in British Military Writings', p. 573.

52 Lionel Caplan, *Warrior Gentleman: "Gurkhas" in the Western Imagination* (Providence, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), p. 25.

53 Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers*, p. 25.

54 Ibid., p. 26.

55 My translation is 'Kill the enemies, victory goes to the Gurkhas'. The regimental history's translation is 'lay in the bayonet, Gorkhas forever'. Colonel L.W. Shakespear, *History of the 2nd King Edward's Own Goorkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles)* (Aldershot: Gale and Polden, 1912), p. 23.

56 Brook Northey and Morris, *Gurkhas*, Foreword, pp. xv–xvi.

57 Shakespear, *Sirmoor Rifles*, pp. 67, 73.

and cultural boundaries divided the men from Nepal who joined the Indian Army.<sup>58</sup>

The British believed that the best Gurkhas came from central Nepal (Magars and Gurungs). They used to join the army of the *Khalsa* ruler Ranjit Singh. Since they went to Lahore for enlistment, they were known as *lahures*. And even in the second decade of the twentieth century, the men from central Nepal who came to join the Gurkha regiments were known as *lahures*.<sup>59</sup> W. Brook Northey and Major C.J. Morris published a Handbook on the Gurkhas in 1927. They discussed the practicability of recruiting Gurkhas from eastern Nepal in order to meet the increased demand in case of any emergencies.<sup>60</sup> Major C.J. Morris of the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Gurkha Regiment (GR) in his handbook titled *The Gurkhas* published in 1933 and reprinted in 1936, under the influence of the exclusion principle enunciated by the Martial Race theory, emphasized that menial tribes like the Agri (miners), Bhar (musicians, their women functioned as prostitutes), Chepang (boatmen), Chunara (carpenters), Damai (tailors), Gain (bards), Lohar (blacksmiths), Pipa (khalsasis), etc. should never be recruited to the combatant branch.<sup>61</sup> The British officers believed that recruitment of such occupational groups with low standing would reduce the status of the coercive apparatus of the *Raj* in the colonial society.

The 7th and the 10th GRs acquired recruits from Ghoom Recruiting Depot at Darjeeling (now in northern part of West Bengal). This recruiting depot tapped the Gurkhas from eastern Nepal. The rest of the GRs acquired men from the Kunraghat (Gorakhpur) Depot. The latter depot acquired men from western Nepal. In peacetime, recruiting at Kunraghat ceased during the hot season but continued at Ghoom. At Kunraghat Recruiting Depot the Recruiting Officer (RO) moved to Ghoom during the summers and the Assistant Recruiting Officer (ARO) stayed back. An officer from the 7th or 10th GR was detailed for duty at Ghoom.<sup>62</sup> Each GR provided a Gurkha officer, a recruiting party and a proportion of depot duty men for their respective depots. When recruiting ended, the recruiting parties returned to their units but the Gurkha officers and the depot duty men remained at the depots. They dealt with the pensioners who started to arrive from the hills during December. The Record Office,

58 Caplan, *Warrior Gentleman*, p. 52.

59 Brook Northey and Morris, *Gurkhas*, Foreword, p. xxix; Caplan, *Warrior Gentleman*, p. 33.

60 Brook Northey and Morris, *Gurkhas*, pp. viii, 272.

61 Major C.J. Morris, *The Gurkhas: An Ethnology* (1936, reprint, New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993), pp. 126–27.

62 H.R.K. Gibbs, 'Gurkha Recruiting during the World War 1939–45', p. 1, RCTG-III, Gurkha Museum, Winchester, UK.

which was supported by a clerical staff and operated under the ARO, looked at these issues. The ARO visited the civil treasuries at Gonda and Bahraich where several pensioners reported for pensions and also visited the railhead at Nautanwa where a re-employed Gurkha officer resided whose job was to aid the crowd of recruits who came down from the hills during the dry months. In 1939, Lieutenant-Colonel G.C. Strahan (who was from the 6th GR) was the RO for the Gurkhas. Major R.G. Leonard of the 5th Royal GR was ARO. Major H.R.K. Gibbs of the 6th GR arrived in November 1940 and in February 1941 took over as Adjutant and QMG from Major Leonard. At the same time, the latter took over command of the 1st Battalion of the 10th GR. Major A. Mercer of the 7th GR was in charge of the Ghoom Depot.<sup>63</sup>

From 1886 onwards, the Bengal and North-Western Railway cooperated with the Gurkha recruiting depots in moving the recruits. And this cooperation between the civilian and military agencies of the *Raj* aided the massive manpower mobilization during the later period of the war. In early 1941, it was decided that the Gurkha Brigade should be expanded and the normal peacetime recruiting procedures needed to be overhauled. At the end of 1941, the Gurkha Brigade was doubled to 40 battalions. Shortly afterwards, two garrison battalions (25th and 26th GRs) and a number of duty platoons were also raised. Recruiting was carried out by the paid recruiters who were pensioners and worked under re-employed Gurkha officers who were given the title of Extra ARO. This step was necessary because British officers were required to officer the expanding Indian Army. Also, British officers were becoming casualties due to the onset of war with Germany and Italy. To fill in the vacancies caused by the shortages of British officers and expansion of the armed forces, senior qualified Gurkha officers were given emergency commissions as captains. The first two Gurkha Emergency Commissioned Officers (ECOs) to join were Shibaprasad Rai, Subedar-Major of 3rd GR and Chandiprashad who was previously the Head Clerk of 2nd GR. Another two retired officers were subedar-majors, Dalbir Chand of the 5th Royal GR and Narbir Gurung of the 3rd GR. Dalbir was made an Honorary Captain and Narbir was made a Lieutenant and appointed as Senior Emergency ARO.<sup>64</sup>

Generally, the Thakurs and the Chhetris among the Gurkhas (they were Brahmins) went to the 9th GR. Recruitment was carried out for each regimental centre by the ex-soldiers of their own regiments. At the Ghoom Recruiting Depot the recruits brought in by the paid recruiters were distributed between

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63 Ibid., p. 1.

64 Ibid., pp. 1–2.

the 7th and 10th Gurkha regimental centres.<sup>65</sup> H.R.K. Gibbs wrote: 'Where a recruit expressed a strong desire to go to a particular regiment owing to family connections, the necessary transfer was effected there and then'.<sup>66</sup> This resulted in the generation of 'mate/buddy feeling' within the regiments and provided internal cohesion to the units in the midst of a firefight. On 4 July 1940, the GoI sanctioned the raising of nine Gurkha rifles battalions by 1 October 1940.<sup>67</sup> The annual average demand for the Gurkhas during the 1930s was only 2,350 men.<sup>68</sup> Table 1.1 shows the rise in demand due to the onset of World War II. The Indian military authorities partly adapted to the rising demands of the martial races by expanding the administrative infrastructure. For instance, the Laheria Sarai Recruiting Depot was set up to meet the increasing demands for Gurkhas generated by this time.

Now, let us turn the focus to another 'martial' community, i.e. the Punjabi Muslims. In 1940, 43,291 Muslims were recruited from Punjab.<sup>69</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel J.M. Wikeley who served in the 17th Cavalry and then worked as a recruiting officer for the Punjabi Muslims noted in the Handbook on that particular 'martial race' published in 1915:

The term Punjabi Musalman roughly describes those Muhammadan classes and tribes which are to be found in that portion of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province which lies between the Indus and Sutlej rivers to the south of the main Himalayan Range. The recruiting area for this class includes the Hazara District, portions of Jammu and Poonch (Kashmir territory) and the Hill tracts of the Rawalpindi District. The term does not denote ethnographical classification; it is more a form of military nomenclature originated by recruiting requirements. Punjabi Musalmans may be classed under four main heads: (i) Rajputs (ii) Jats (iii) Gujars (iv) Foreign tribes who claimed to be neither of the first three groups.<sup>70</sup>

65 Ibid., p. 2.

66 Ibid., p. 3.

67 Extract from Letter no. B/61666/II, AG's Branch, Simla, 4 July 1940, L/WS/1/394, IOR, BL, London.

68 Morris, *Gurkhas*, p. 133.

69 Tan Tai Yong, 'Mobilization, Militarization and "Mal-Contentment": Punjab and the Second World War', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2002), fn 34, p. 144.

70 J.M. Wikeley, *Punjabi Musalmans* (1915, reprint, New Delhi: Manohar, 1991), p. 1.

TABLE 1.1 *Gurkha recruitment from 1939 to 1942*

Numbers brought in	1939–40	1940–41	1941–42
Kunraghat Recruiting Depot	1,958	23,773	17,086
Ghoom Recruiting Depot	1,016	3,832	7,002
Laheria Sarai Recruiting Depot		3,402+830*	3,646+769*
Total	2,974	31,837	28,503
Recruit boys	66	673	530
Paid recruiters		800	1,500

\*Reservists and reenlisted pensioners

Source: H.R.K. Gibbs, 'Gurkha Recruiting during the World War, 1939–1945', RCTG-III, Gurkha Museum Winchester, UK.

Wikeley continued that 'In the Punjabi Musalman recruiting area there are many types of the race, distinguished from one another by their moral and physical characteristics'.<sup>71</sup> Wikeley poured favour on those Rajputs who inhabited Punjab and accepted Islam in medieval era and became Punjabi Muslims. He noted though that most of the Rajputs of north India were Aryans and many who inhabited west Punjab had descended from the Huns and the Scythians. These Central Asian nomadic warriors settled in India and fought against the Buddhists. As a reward, they were given Rajput status by the grateful Brahmins. Among these Rajputs, those who failed to follow the social customs properly were downgraded to Jats. Later these Rajputs and Jats accepted Islam and became Punjabi Muslims.<sup>72</sup> Likewise, the Dogras recruited from eastern Punjab and the hills of Jammu and Kashmir were actually Rajputs who inhabited the mountainous regions of the above-mentioned provinces.<sup>73</sup>

At the end of 1941, recruiting for all the three services was coordinated under the Adjutant General's Branch at the General Headquarters. This was a managerial innovation on the part of the Indian Army's administrative branch to mobilize larger numbers of recruits in order to meet the increasing demands due to the onset of World War II. From a macro-perspective, the recruitment of the Indian Army could be divided into three phases. The first phase lasted from September 1939 (Nazi attack on Poland) till April 1940 (the era of Phoney War).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 2–3.

<sup>73</sup> John Gaylor, *Sons of John Company: The Indian and Pakistan Armies, 1903–91* (1992, reprint, New Delhi: Lancer, 1993), p. 188.

During this period, the London government did not authorize rapid expansion of the Indian Army. Britain believed that the war would be confined to West Europe and in such a conflict there would not be much of a role for the Indian Army. The second phase of recruitment extended from May 1940 to December 1943, witnessing break-neck expansion of the Indian Army. Repeated defeat of the British forces in Europe, Africa and Asia by Germany in Europe and North Africa, and by Japan in the Far East and South-East Asia forced the London Government to authorize rapid expansion of the Indian Army. The third phase, continuing from January 1944 till September 1945, did not witness any further raising of units in the Indian Army but saw massive recruitment to maintain the newly raised formations at required levels to offset the haemorrhage resulting from continuous warfare.<sup>74</sup>

In September 1939, the Army in India consisted of 237,000 men and of them, only 4,000 were serving overseas. On 1 April 1940, there were 277,648 personnel in the Army in India and of them 23,581 men were deployed overseas. In March 1940, 2,198 non-technical personnel were recruited. In July, the figure rose to 20,009. The average monthly intake then was around 17,000 personnel. Between May and December 1940, the strength of the Army in India increased by more than 165,000 men. The total size of the Army in India amounted to 417,704.<sup>75</sup> In early 1940, two Indian divisions (the 4th and 5th) were deployed overseas. Between the summer of 1940 and the summer of 1941, six new divisions (the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th) were raised. By the end of 1941, five Indian divisions were forming (the 14th, 17th, 19th, 20th, and 34th), along with one armoured division (the 32nd).<sup>76</sup> In 1941, the Indian Army numbered 865,200 men, and the bulk of them were from Punjab.<sup>77</sup>

The inadequate number of commissioned Indian officers remained the most serious problem for the expanding Indian Army. The commissioned officer corps constituted the brain of the army and the British loathed the idea of losing control over the commissioned officer cadre. For several years the British stalled Indianization of the Indian Army's officer cadre on various spurious racial grounds. Moreover, university-educated, urban middle-class Indians who wanted to join the Indian Army's officer cadre were considered disloyal

74 Nandan Prasad, *Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organisation 1939–45*, Bisheshwar Prasad (ed.), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939–45* (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence Government of India, 1956), p. 53.

75 Ibid., pp. 54, 56, 61.

76 Daniel P. Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport, Connecticut/London: Praeger, 2003), p. 42.

77 Yong, 'Mobilization, Militarization and "Mal-Contentment": Punjab and the Second World War', p. 140.

and as posing a challenge to British authority in contrast to the illiterate sons of peasants who joined the Indian Army as sepoys. The Imperial Cadet Corps (ICC) was started in 1901 by Lord Curzon (Viceroy of India) to allow the Indians a limited sort of commission in the officer cadre. However, the ICC officers were placed in the ISF or in the princely armies and not in the Indian Army. This scheme collapsed just before World War I. By 1930, only 77 King's Commissioned Indian Officers (KCIOs) had been commissioned and, of them, 68 were serving in the Indian Army.<sup>78</sup> The small number of Indian officers who went to Sandhurst faced racial abuse.<sup>79</sup> The low number of Indian commissioned officers was due to the lack of enthusiasm among the urban Indian middle class. They were not willing to join the segregated units which were marked for Indianization, with a lower wage compared to the British commissioned officers. Further, the Indian commissioned officers were denied the power to command the British troops. In fact, many British cadets were reluctant to face the prospect of coming under the command of the Indian officers. The *Raj* took some tentative measures to adapt the military organization to the changing circumstances. In 1935, steps were taken to Indianize field artillery units. In 1938, the Indian Commissioned Officers (ICOs) got the power to command the British officers in the Indian land forces who were of a rank equivalent to or below their own, based on seniority. However, the ICOs did not have the power of punishment over British other ranks (BORS). Most of the commissioned Indian officers were sons of vcos and some came from the Indian Civil Service (ICS) families. The latter group was politically conscious and aware of nationalist politics.<sup>80</sup> During World War II, as the Indian Army massively expanded, large numbers of British officers were not available because they were required to meet the demands of the expanding British Army and to replace war casualties in both the British and Indian armies. The result was forced Indianization of the Indian Army's officer cadre under the pressure of Total War.

The quantum of expansion of the IJA dwarfed the Indian Army. In 1937, the IJA had 354,000 regulars and 595,000 in the reserves. The total came to about 950,000 men. In 1938, there were 615,400 regulars and 514,600 in the reserves. The total was 1,130,000 men. Next year, the total was 1,240,000 (844,400 regulars

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78 Sundaram, 'Grudging Concessions: The Officer Corps and its Indianization, 1817–1940', in Marston and Sundaram (eds.), *A Military History of India and South Asia*, p. 98; Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, fn 87, pp. 23–24.

79 Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernisation in Later Colonial India*, pp. 95–100; Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, p. 25.

80 Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, p. 26, 32–33.



and 395,600 reserves). And in 1940, the regulars numbered 965,700, reserves 384,300 and the total came to about 1,350,000 men.<sup>81</sup>

### Combat Experience and Modernization of the Indian Army

Anirudh Deshpande, focusing on the twin aspects of 'limited' Indianization and inadequate financial resources at the disposal of the *Raj*, asserts that the third decade of the twentieth century represented an era of 'arrested' development (the phrase is borrowed from Clive Dewey who has written that colonial India's economy was a case of 'arrested' growth).<sup>82</sup> The battlefield experience of the Indian Army is totally neglected by Deshpande. Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* claims that money is important for waging war effectively. However, combat effectiveness of the Indian Army was also shaped by the geopolitical requirements of the *Raj* and the doctrine propounded by the military establishment. This section shows that, unlike for the IJA, preparing and fighting a big conventional war was an aberration for the Indian Army. Before and after World War I, the Indian Army was geared for imperial policing both inside and outside the subcontinent. In 1914, the Indian Army was caught unprepared and had to make a transition from conducting Small War to 'Total War'. In 1940 too, the Indian Army had to make a tortuous transition from preparing for irregular warfare to conducting large-scale industrial conventional warfare. In contrast, the IJA had gained experience of conducting large-scale conventional sweeps in China before the onset of the Pacific War in December 1941. This section will deal with the military landscape during the first decade of the twentieth century.

In 1905, Lord Kitchener (Commander-in-Chief of India from 1902 till 1909) established the Staff College at Deolali, which later moved to Quetta.<sup>83</sup> In the immediate aftermath of World War I, Britain pressurized the GoI to station Indian troops all over the British Empire, especially in the Far East and the Middle East. However, the GoI refused on the grounds that the principal function of the Indian Army was British-India's defence and not to act as an imperial reserve. Britain asked India to station some 40 infantry battalions in Mesopotamia (Iraq). In 1919, the GoI refused to spend about 40 per cent of

81 Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, p. 199.

82 Anirudh Deshpande, *British Military Policy in India, 1900–1945: Colonial Constraints and Declining Power* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), pp. 21–29.

83 Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernisation in Later Colonial India*, p. 10.



India's revenue on policing Iraq.<sup>84</sup> In 1920, 123,500 Indian soldiers, in contrast to only 47,000 British troops, were deployed in Mesopotamia, north-west Persia, Constantinople, Egypt and Palestine.<sup>85</sup>

In 1920, more than 40 per cent of the GoI's budget went to the military.<sup>86</sup> In 1921, of the 252,000 British troops from Britain, 65,501 personnel (including Aden Garrison) were maintained at the expense of the GoI.<sup>87</sup> In 1925, the GoI cut the defence budget from 61.5 million pounds sterling to 42 million pounds sterling. This resulted in the reduction of the Indian Army from 159,000 to 140,000 men, and another 18,000 British troops were withdrawn from the sub-continent.<sup>88</sup> In 1927–28, the military budget of British-India was about Rs 550 million and the GoI had no more money to provide for the modernization of the Indian Army. In 1930–31, the military budget was only 542 million and the next year it decreased to Rs 519 million. During 1932–33, the annual military expenditure stood at Rs 466.5 million. The total cost of maintaining the armed forces came to about Rs 480 million. Hence, there was no scope for making any capital expenditure for technologically upgrading the forces.<sup>89</sup> Not only India, but Britain too was suffering from budget cuts, especially in the military sphere. As a result, the size of the British Army between 1923 and 1932 fell from 231,000 to 207,000 men.<sup>90</sup>

After World War I, the Indian Army mainly fought Unconventional/Small War in the North-West Frontier. In fact, the Third Afghan War (1919) in many ways was similar to a North-West Frontier Campaign. On 4 May 1919, the Afghan troops crossed the frontier at Bagh near the Khyber Pass. By 20 May, the Afghan advance at Bagh was contained by the 1st Division at Landi Kotal.<sup>91</sup> For fighting the North-West Frontier tribes, light infantry skills were necessary, like

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84 Elisabeth Mariko Leake, 'British India versus the British Empire: The Indian Army and an impasse in Imperial Defence, circa 1919–39', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2014), pp. 301–4.

85 *India's Services in the War*, 2 vols. (1922, reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993), vol. 1, *General*, p. 30.

86 John Gallagher and Anil Seal, 'Britain and India between the Wars', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3 (1981), p. 401.

87 Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernisation in Later Colonial India*, pp. 123–24.

88 Leake, 'British India versus the British Empire: The Indian Army and an impasse in Imperial Defence, circa 1919–39', p. 305.

89 Deshpande, *British Military Policy in India*, p. 124.

90 Field Marshal Lord Carver, *Britain's Army in the Twentieth Century* (1998, reprint, London: Pan Books in association with the Imperial War Museum, 1999), p. 157.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

skirmishing, marksmanship, self-reliance and fieldcraft. Controlling the flanking high ground and dominating the surrounding terrain by fire was required. Outlying piquets and detachments of platoon for the protection of the infantry columns by crowning the heights on either side of the route of march were some of the tactical characteristics of conducting Small War in the tribal mountainous territory.<sup>92</sup> These characteristics were also necessary for the jungle warfare which unfolded in Malaya and Burma during 1941–44.

The British regiments generally served for six to ten years as tours of duty in India. When they were deployed here they were paid by the GoI and came under the operational control of the British-Indian military establishment. The British units stationed in India also participated in the Small War along the North-West Frontier, especially in the Waziristan region. Combat in this region demonstrated that tactics for conventional warfare were inappropriate and specialized training was required for fighting in the tribal territory.<sup>93</sup> In July 1935, an expedition was launched against the Mohmands north of the Khyber Pass. Two brigades were involved. While one brigade was commanded by Claude Auchinleck, the other was under Harold Alexander (later Field-Marshal Earl Alexander of Tunis). Auchinleck being the senior, was in overall command. In 1937, against the *Faqir* of Ipi (d. 1960) in Waziristan, more than 30,000 soldiers of the Army in India were deployed.<sup>94</sup>

Patrick Rose asserts that North-West Frontier operations encouraged the development of a sort of decentralized, mission-oriented command system (somewhat equivalent to the German *Auftragstaktik*) in the Indian Army. In contrast, the British Army encouraged the top-down tight command system. Both the commissioned (including the VCOS) and non-commissioned officers of the Indian Army were encouraged to display initiative, imagination and independence of judgement. Rather than giving detailed and continuous higher directions, the unit commanders were encouraged to solve the immediate tactical problems facing them. But the British Army prized obedience over initiative. Rose notes that, ironically, the presence of illiterate sepoys discouraged the routine of generating large amount of detailed written orders from the company and smaller formations. Rotation of the British units in and out

92 Tim Moreman, “‘The Greatest Training Ground in the World’: The Army in India and the North-West Frontier, 1901–47”, in Marston and Sundaram (eds.), *A Military History of India and South Asia*, pp. 54–55.

93 T.R. Moreman, “‘Small Wars’ and ‘Imperial Policing’: The British Army and the Theory and Practice of Colonial Warfare in the British Empire, 1919–39”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996), pp. 112, 114.

94 Carver, *Britain's Army in the Twentieth Century*, p. 150.

of India somewhat hampered the development of specialized frontier combat skills among them. However, the Indian units became expert in concealed movements, sudden ambushes, etc. due to continuous service along the Indus frontier. However, Rose warns that decentralization of command is not synonymous with relinquishing effective control over the subordinate units. Coherent and constant top-down guidance, if not control, was required of the higher levels of command. In this respect, the Indian Army's command culture fell short of requirements. The Indian Army employed *ad hoc* higher level tactical organization for controlling major operations. On the contrary, what was required was a formal executive command structure.<sup>95</sup> Again, in peacetime, the highest formation in the Indian Army was a brigade which consisted of a brigade headquarters, three infantry battalions and one cavalry regiment.<sup>96</sup> The Indian Army lacked the training and experience to manoeuvre in big formations and did not possess a modern staff, both of which would be required for waging the next great conventional war which started in 1939.

The use of large numbers of troops for internal security duties also somewhat hampered the units' training for conventional operations. For instance, in 1921, 28 British battalions and 21 Indian battalions were engaged in internal security.<sup>97</sup> Between 1922 and 1927, there were 112 big communal riots within India which required the deployment of the Army in India.<sup>98</sup> 'Aid to civil' duties partly obstructed modernization and mechanization of the Army in India's units.

In the post-World War I era, like the Indian and British armies, the IJA also felt the pressure of a shrinking budget. Between 1921 and 1923, military appropriations dropped from 49 per cent to 30 per cent of Japan's national expenditure. In 1921, the IJA had 21 divisions. In 1924, the army minister was able to initiate a reduction.<sup>99</sup> In 1925, the IJA had 17 divisions.<sup>100</sup> The IJA officers reasoned that the lack of roads and absence of heavy load-bearing bridges in China and north-east Asia (their possible theatres of operation) would restrict the mobility of tanks. Further, Japan's not so well developed heavy industrial

95 Patrick Rose, 'Indian Army Command Culture and the North West Frontier, 1919–1939', in Jeffreys and Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47*, pp. 31–55.

96 Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, p. 42.

97 Jeffery, '“An English Barrack in the Oriental Seas”? India in the Aftermath of the First World War', p. 383.

98 Lieutenant-General S.L. Menezes, *Fidelity & Honour: The Indian Army from the Seventeenth to the Twenty-First Century* (New Delhi: Viking, 1993), pp. 329–30.

99 Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun*, pp. 133–34.

100 Alvin D. Coox, 'Effects of Attrition on National War Efforts: The Japanese Army Experience in China, 1937–38', *Military Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1968), p. 58.

base made it difficult to manufacture heavy tanks in large numbers and the narrow gauge railways also made it difficult to transport them.<sup>101</sup> Edward J. Drea asserts that the 'Traditionalists' within the IJA argued that Japan had no chance in a long attritional war but could win decisively in a short conflict. They emphasized spiritual force (*Bushido*) and non-material factors for overcoming the deficiency in the quality and quantity of weapons. The Traditionalists demanded a big army with low technology geared for a short war and focused on the supremacy of morale, infantry and bayonet fighting. In contrast, for combat purpose, the 'Revisionists' demanded a high-technology, smaller army. They argued that the army should prepare for a long war and emphasized material factors and especially firepower and combined arms operations. The 1928 *Infantry Manual* absorbed the German infiltration tactics (of 1918). However, instead of combined arms warfare, the Japanese manual focused overtly on the infantry and emphasized that victory would be due to a combination of morale and material factors.<sup>102</sup>

Before World War II, the IJA fought in China and against the USSR. Under the terms of the Boxer Protocol of 1901, Japan maintained a garrison in China to guard its embassy and protect the Japanese officials. This force was known as the China Garrison Army and was commanded by Lieutenant-General Kanichiro Tashiro. Tashiro commanded this army till 11 July 1937. The force comprised one infantry brigade, one field artillery regiment and one tank unit. Units of this force were stationed at Tienching, near Peiping and along the Peiping-Linghai Railway.<sup>103</sup>

S.C.M. Paine states that between 1912 and 1928, there were more than 1,300 Chinese warlords. Each of them had a personal army and a territorial base.<sup>104</sup> The premier warlord on the Chinese side was Chiang Kai-Shek who had studied in Moscow and, in the 1920s, the Soviet Union trained his officers and armed his troops. By 1927, Chiang's force had reached Nanking and the next year they reached the outskirts of Beijing/Peking. In 1928, Japanese troops entered Tsinan and killed approximately 3,500 of Chiang Kai-Shek's troops.<sup>105</sup> The Russians established the Whampoa Military Academy at Guangzhou in 1928.<sup>106</sup>

101 Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, pp. 148–49.

102 Ibid., pp. 151, 153, 158.

103 *Japanese Monograph No. 70, China Area Operations Record July 1937–November 1941* (Revised Edition, Prepared by Headquarters United States Army, Japan and Distributed by the Office of the Chief of Military History Department of the Army), p. 1.

104 Paine, *The Wars for Asia: 1911–1949*, p. 18.

105 Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun*, pp. 141–42.

106 Paine, *The Wars for Asia: 1911–1949*, p. 23.

In the post-World War I era, like the Indian Army and the IJA, the British Army also did not escape completely from the after-effects of reduced military expenditure. The Ten Years Rule which the British Cabinet agreed to in 1919 stated that for the next ten years the British Army would not conduct any major war on the European continent.<sup>107</sup> And this influenced the services' budgets, organizations and doctrines. In 1918, J.F.C. Fuller produced Plan 1919 for a force of 5,000 tanks which would operate in the battlefield almost autonomously. Fuller partly derived his ideas from a paper titled 'A Tank Army' written in November 1916 by Major Martel, a Royal Engineer (RE) at Tank Corps Headquarters. Fuller emphasized that the tank fleet should target the hostile command, control and communications network. Once the enemy's nervous system was dislocated, all resistance, claimed Fuller, would collapse. With the benefit of hindsight, one could argue that if Fuller's plan had been accepted by the London Government then the IJA would just have walked over the British units in South-East Asia in 1941–42. Field-Marshal Lord Carver in his monograph dealing with the history of the British Army writes that there was strong resistance to the abolition of the cavalry. In 1922, the three Household Cavalry regiments were reduced to two. And the 28 cavalry regiments were reduced to 19 by amalgamations. In 1923, the Tank Corps was given the title 'Royal'. It became a permanent part of the British Army with four battalions and 10 armoured car companies (for deployment overseas).<sup>108</sup> In 1927, Field-Marshal Douglas Haig argued for equipping the cavalry units with anti-tank weapons, armoured cars and small tanks.<sup>109</sup> In 1928, two of the cavalry regiments (the 11th Hussars and 12th Lancers) shed their mounts for armoured cars.

The British Army, asserts David French, took the decision to mechanize the regular cavalry only in the mid-1930s not merely due to the lack of adequate funds but also because satisfactory armoured fighting vehicles (AFVs) were not available earlier. The absence of adequate funds for research and development also somewhat hampered the evolution of combat-worthy AFVs earlier.<sup>110</sup> Besides the lack of adequate finance, the absence of a proper doctrine on the part of the British Army also hampered the modernization and mechanization of the force. The British Army, likely due to the absence of clear political guidance, could not decide between 'continental commitment' and imperial defence. Again, within the defence budget the focus was on development of

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107 Fraser, *And We shall Shock Them*, p. 11.

108 Carver, *Britain's Army in the Twentieth Century*, p. 154.

109 David French, 'The Mechanization of the British Cavalry between the World Wars', *War in History*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2003), p. 305.

110 Ibid., pp. 298–99.

fighter defence and AA guns. On the other hand, within the British Army, the institution could not decide about the proper role and function of the tanks. In 1934, Montgomery-Massingberd decided to form a Mobile Division. It took shape only in 1937. Initially, for eight months, it was commanded by Major-General A.F. Alanbrooke, a horse gunner. Due to pressure from General Hugh Elles (Master-General of Ordnance, 1934–37), a tank was manufactured for infantry support. The Matilda, which was a development of the Mark I and II, produced in 1939, was heavily armoured with a 2-pounder cannon and a machine gun (MG).<sup>111</sup>

In the mid-1930s, while a Japanese division had between 24,000 to 28,000 men, a Nationalist infantry division of Chiang Kai-Shek had about 11,000 personnel.<sup>112</sup> Chiang Kai-Shek's most senior military advisor was General Alexander von Falkenhausen.<sup>113</sup> The campaign between Japan and Nationalist China which occurred between 28 January and 5 May 1932 was known as the First Shanghai Incident by the Japanese. Out of 150,000 Japanese soldiers deployed, military operations in Manchuria and Shanghai cost the Japanese 3,000 KIA, 5,000 wounded in action (WIA) and 2,500 casualties due to frostbite. About three-quarters of the Japanese casualties occurred in Shanghai. The Chinese suffered 14,326 military casualties and 6,080 civilian deaths. In addition, 2,000 civilians were wounded and 10,400 went missing.<sup>114</sup>

The 29th Chinese Army in north China was commanded by Sung Che-yuan, a warlord from the Hopeh and Chahar provinces. This army comprised four divisions, two independent brigades, two cavalry divisions and one cavalry brigade. The Japanese argued that on the night of 7 July 1937 the Chinese troops fired on a Japanese unit on night manoeuvres near Lukouchiao (Marco Polo Bridge). On 25 July, the 38th Chinese Division of the 29th Chinese Army launched a sudden attack against a Japanese signal unit which was repairing the telephone lines near Langfang Station on the Peiping-Linghai Railway. An infantry company of the China Garrison Army defended the station throughout the night but suffered heavy casualties. On 26 July, an infantry battalion of the China Garrison Army which was moving towards Peiping with the ostensible reason of protecting the Japanese people within the walled city was attacked by the Chinese troops as the former were passing through the Kuangan Gate. The Japanese troops suffered heavy casualties. At that stage

111 Carver, *Britain's Army in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 158, 161–62.

112 Paine, *The Wars for Asia: 1911–1949*, p. xvi.

113 Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun*, p. 210.

114 Paine, *The Wars for Asia: 1911–1949*, p. 18.

Tokyo agreed with the China Garrison Army Commander that the Chinese troops should be driven out of Peiping and Tienching.<sup>115</sup>

On 28 July 1937, the China Garrison Army, supported by one emergency mobilized division, two mixed brigades (one was mechanized) and one air group, attacked the Nationalist Chinese forces. By 30 July, the Chinese were defeated at Peiping and Tienching and were retreating south of Yungting Ho. As Chiang Kai-Shek's forces moved into southern Hopeh Province, Tokyo mobilized the 5th, 6th and 10th divisions, along with the Provisional Air Group, and sent them to China to strengthen the China Garrison Army. On 15 August, the Chinese Government issued a general mobilization order. On the same day, Tokyo sent the Shanghai Expeditionary Army to reinforce the Japanese military presence in the Shanghai area. In late August, the Shanghai Expeditionary Army, comprising the 3rd and 11th divisions and commanded by General Iwane Matsui, landed in central China. And the North China Area Army which included the 1st and 2nd armies under General Hisaichi Terauchi (later he would command the IJA's Southern Army in South-East Asia) arrived in north China. On 31 August 1937, the China Garrison Army was integrated into the North China Area Army and the Commander of the former became the Commander of the 1st Army.<sup>116</sup>

In 1937, the IJA expanded to 24 divisions and of them, 16 were sent to China.<sup>117</sup> Between 13 August and 12 November 1937, the Nationalist Chinese Army and the IJA fought at Shanghai. The Chinese forces suffered some 187,200 casualties (including 70 per cent of the young officers). The IJA lost 9,115 KIA and 31,257 WIA. In 1937, the IJA had 600,000 soldiers in China. In that year Japan suffered around 100,000 casualties in China.<sup>118</sup> By 1939, the IJA had 25 infantry divisions (one million men) in China.<sup>119</sup> At the beginning of 1940, Japan had 850,000 troops in China.<sup>120</sup>

The Japanese expansion in Korea, China and especially Manchuria brought the country into confrontation with Soviet Russia. In 1905, Japanese dominance in Korea became pronounced. In early 1918, Japan deployed about 70,000

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115 *Japanese Monograph No. 70, China Area Operations Record July 1937–November 1941*, pp. 1–3.

116 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.

117 Coox, 'Effects of Attrition on National War Efforts: The Japanese Army Experience in China, 1937–38', p. 58.

118 Paine, *The Wars for Asia: 1911–1949*, pp. 128–29, 131–33; Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, p. 197

119 Edward J. Drea, *Nomonhan: Japanese-Soviet Tactical Combat, 1939* (1981, reprint, Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), p. 13.

120 Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, p. 209.



soldiers in Siberia.<sup>121</sup> A year later the Kwantung Army came into existence. At that time, it comprised 10,000 men.<sup>122</sup> In 1922, the Chinese warlord Chang Tso-Lin gained control of Manchuria.<sup>123</sup> By the end of the decade, the Zhang clan ruled Manchuria. Zhang Xueliang commanded 170,000 troops before the Japanese invasion. Of these troops, 50,000 were in Liaoning and 120,000 men were deployed south of the Great Wall. The warlord Wan Fuling commanded 30,000 soldiers in Heilongjiang, Zhang Zuoxiang had 50,000 men in Jilin and Tang Yulin had 15,000 soldiers in Rehe (Jehol). On 17 February 1933, the IJA, with 20,000 soldiers, invaded Rehe (the southernmost province of Manchuria). Almost a month later, on 3 March, the capital Chengde fell to the Japanese.<sup>124</sup>

In 1931, the IJA occupied Manchuria and it met the Red Army across a land border which stretched for 3,000 miles. In 1932, the USSR maintained eight divisions and 200 aircraft in the Soviet Far East. In 1936, the Soviets signed a mutual assistance treaty with Outer Mongolia.<sup>125</sup> By 1936, USSR had increased its force level to 20 divisions and 1,200 aircraft. Two years later it had 24 divisions (450,000 troops) and 2,000 aircraft. The Japanese Kwantung (Kanto) Army had eight divisions (200,000 personnel) and 230 aircraft.<sup>126</sup>

During July–August 1938, a confrontation occurred between the IJA and the Red Army at the frontier of Japanese-occupied north-east Korea (south-east of Manchuko) and the Soviet Maritime Province near Posyet Bay. The Japanese called it the Changkufeng Incident after the hillock lying within Manchuria, and the Russians called it Lake Khasan affair after the small lake at the east of the hillock. On 29 July, the patrols between the two armies clashed at Shachaofeng (Bezmyannaya). Later the next day, the Japanese launched a battalion-strength pre-emptive infantry attack. By dawn of 31 July the Russian garrison was driven out of the hill. During the next ten days, the Soviets launched attacks with air and ground units. The IJA, to prevent escalation, did not use tanks and aircraft. On 6–7 August, the Soviets used about 200 tanks and 220 aircraft (including four-engine heavy bombers). While the 19th Japanese Infantry Division (10,000 men) sent some 7,300 soldiers, the Russians had about 22,000 men at the front (the 32nd and 40th Rifle divisions). The 92nd Rifle Division constructed pillbox positions at Barabash Sector. Shtern's (Chief of Staff Far Eastern Military District) 39th Rifle Corps directed the fighting.

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121 Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun*, pp. 123, 128.

122 Drea, *Nomonhan*, p. 12.

123 Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun*, p. 125.

124 Paine, *The Wars for Asia: 1911–1949*, pp. 26, 34.

125 Drea, *Nomonhan*, p. 1.

126 Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, p. 201.



Colonel A.P. Panfilov commanded the 2nd Mechanized Brigade of the 39th Corps.<sup>127</sup>

In the summer of 1939, at Nomonhan/Khalkin Gol, the Red Army used more than 1,000 tanks to overwhelm the infantry-centric IJA by double envelopment. The battle was fought between the Halha River (Soviet name Khalkin Gol) and the village named Nomonhan. The Japanese advance started on 14 May 1939. By 3 July, the Japanese drive on the west bank of Halha River stalled. General Zhukov employed his 11th Tank Brigade (minus one battalion), 7th Motorized Armoured Brigade and the 24th Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 36th Motorized Rifle Division (including 186 tanks and 266 armoured cars) against the Japanese forces on the west bank. Zhukov sent the armour unsupported by his infantry. The Russian infantry was still far behind and Zhukov was unwilling to delay the attack. This was because the Japanese were threatening his artillery on the west bank of the river. With their 37-mm anti-tank guns and Molotov Cocktails they were able to destroy 120 Soviet tanks and armoured cars. The Japanese losses amounted to several hundred troops killed and wounded. During the next two days the Japanese withdrew to the east bank of the Halha. Between 7 and 22 July, on a four-kilometre-wide front that stretched from the Holsten River to north of Hill 733, intense combat between the Red Army and the IJA units occurred. Between May and 25 July, the IJA suffered more than 5,000 casualties.<sup>128</sup>

In early August, while Zhukov built up his force for the great push, the Soviets launched battalion-sized assaults and Soviet artillery dominated the battlefield. Zhukov launched his offensive along a 30-kilometre-wide front. Zhukov concentrated two rifle divisions, two cavalry divisions, a motorized rifle division, a machine-gun brigade, two tank brigades and two motorized armoured brigades against two Japanese infantry divisions. While the Soviets had 57,000 soldiers, the Japanese had only 30,000 troops. In addition, the Soviets deployed 498 tanks and 346 armoured cars. The 7th Motorized Armoured Brigade and the 601st Rifle Regiment stormed Hill 721 but failed. However, the Soviets gained success at the Southern Front where 320 tanks, an armoured car brigade and an infantry division overwhelmed the Japanese left flank and the Russians drove towards Nomonhan. After four days of bitter fighting, the Japanese defence at Hill 721 cracked and the 23rd Japanese Division was encircled. On 16 September, a ceasefire was declared. In four

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<sup>127</sup> Alvin D. Coox, 'The Lake Khasan Affair of 1938: Overview and Lessons', *Soviet Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1973), pp. 51–52.

<sup>128</sup> Drea, *Nomonhan*, pp. ix, 3–4, 7.

months of combat, the IJA lost over 17,000 (including 8,440 KIA) and Soviet casualties were about 9,284 men.<sup>129</sup>

The basic problems which hampered modernization of the Indian Army were lack of money and demands for imperial policing. John Gallagher and Anil Seal argue in an article that the *Raj* depended on collaboration with powerful indigenous intermediaries. In return for acceptance of British rule, the local intermediaries had control over the distribution of resources. The *Raj* could not afford to tax India heavily for fear of alienating the local collaborators.<sup>130</sup> One could argue that rather than under-taxation, the poor agrarian economy of India also forced the GoI to accept an inelastic defence budget.

In 1938, the London Government appointed the Expert Committee under the chairmanship of Lord Chatfield for assessing the defence requirements of British-India. The members of this committee included E.J. Strohmer, B. Sergison-Brooke, C.L. Courtney and Claude Auchinleck. This committee submitted its report in 1939. Previously, the Indian Army, for functional purposes was divided into Field Army, Covering Troops and Internal Security Troops. The Expert Committee introduced the following new categories in their places: Frontier Defence Troops, Internal Security Troops, Coast Defence Troops and the General Reserve.<sup>131</sup>

The Expert Committee was mostly concerned with the North-West Frontier and the probable threat posed to British-India by Afghanistan. It was decided to take the stance of strategic defence rather than a large-scale offensive operation against Afghanistan. Strategic defence required holding the town of Peshawar, which was the capital of North-West Frontier Province. This town guarded the approach from the Khyber Pass. Besides the threat from Afghanistan, the British strategic managers feared that Peshawar might be threatened by the Afridis across the Khajuri Plain and also by the Mohmands who inhabited the region between the Swat and Kabul Rivers. For defending the Peshawar District, it was decided to station 13 Indian infantry battalions, three British infantry battalions, two field companies of sappers and miners, one medium artillery battery, one mountain artillery regiment, one field artillery regiment and one Indian armoured cavalry regiment. Besides the Peshawar District, the other important strategic district to be held along the North-West Frontier was the Kohat District. The two vital points in this district were Kohat and Thal. The former had an aerodrome. The forces laid down for the Kohat District were as follows: 10 Indian infantry battalions, one ISF infantry battal-

129 Ibid., pp. 9, 11.

130 Gallagher and Anil Seal, 'Britain and India between the Wars', pp. 389–91.

131 Report of the Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938–39, p. 62.

ion, one British infantry battalion, one field company sappers and miners, three mountain artillery batteries, two troops of field artillery and one Indian cavalry armoured regiment. In the Waziristan District, the important points to be defended were Razmak, Wana, Bannu, Mir Ali and Manzai. The garrison there comprised 20 Indian infantry battalions, one ISF infantry battalion, three British infantry battalions, three field companies sappers and miners, seven mountain artillery batteries, one medium artillery battery, two troops of field artillery and one Indian armoured cavalry regiment.<sup>132</sup>

The Expert Committee completely neglected the fact that in the near future, the Indian Army might have to face the IJA in South-East Asia. Further, the committee was hamstrung by lack of money. Hence, the Expert Committee was thinking about reduction rather than expansion of the Indian Army. The Committee noted that the following British units were to be withdrawn from India: one cavalry regiment, three Royal Horse Artillery batteries, one field artillery regiment, one medium artillery regiment and two infantry battalions. Further, three Indian cavalry regiments, four companies of sappers and miners and 14 Indian infantry battalions were to be disbanded. The imperial strategic managers displayed a high degree of shortsightedness as regards India's probable role for overseas imperial defence in the near future. The Expert Committee noted that the Army in India should set aside some units which would be designated as External Defence Troops (EDTs) for overseas imperial defence. The EDTs were to be better equipped than the ordinary Indian units. The EDTs were to comprise one British cavalry regiment, three British infantry regiments and seven Indian infantry regiments. So, the requirements of EDTs were considered lower than the defence requirements of the North-West Frontier. In the course of World War II, the size of the Indian Army would exceed the two million mark in order to meet the demands of overseas requirements. In 1938–39, India's defence expenditure was Rs 46.15 crores (34,612,500 pounds sterling). The Expert Committee duly noted that its recommendation for limited modernization would cost some 30 million pounds sterling. But the GoI lacked the money. It was hoped that the UK would provide a loan of 20 million pounds sterling in 1939 to the GoI.<sup>133</sup>

In May 1940, the General Staff in India submitted Plan A to the Secretary of State for India. In accordance with this plan, the Army in India would aid Afghanistan in the event of a Soviet attack on the country. This task would require one armoured division (one armoured and two motor brigades) and five infantry divisions. British-India calculated that this was the maximum war

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., Appendix 1, pp. 67–71.

<sup>133</sup> Report of the Expert Committee on the Defence of India 1938–39, pp. 56, 62, 65.

effort that could be sustained by the country and even this Field Force would be ready only in the spring of 1941. Further, completion of this Field Force required the allocation of dollars for buying mechanical transport from the USA. On 21 May 1940, the Commander-in-Chief of India accepted that expansion of the Indian Army would necessitate 'milking' of the existing units and this was bound to reduce their combat effectiveness for the time being. Further, it was calculated that war wastage of personnel might extend to 66 per cent of the strength thrown into battle. It was decided to hold 33 per cent of the strength in readiness as replacement.<sup>134</sup>

Initially, the demands on the Indian Army for overseas service were slow and incremental. On 25 June 1940, the Chiefs of Staff Committee consisting of C.L.N. Newall, John Dill and Vice-Chief of Naval Staff T.S.V. Philipps noted: 'India could make one brigade available now and increase this force to one division in September. These troops are at present earmarked for service in Iraq or Iran. The situation in the Middle East may develop rapidly and Indian troops are not only closer to that scene of action, but better adapted than Australians for service in most parts of Africa'.<sup>135</sup>

On 4 July 1940, the Secretary of State for India Leo S. Amery wrote to Viceroy of India Lord Linlithgow:

I entirely agreed with your strong letter to Cassels about expansion regardless of having everything in the way of equipment available. I remember urging this again and again upon the War Office people at the beginning of this war and being told that it was futile to call for men ahead of the equipment. Now they are raising hundreds of thousands ahead of any equipment except rifles at the most, many armed with shot-guns, who would have been infinitely better whether for marching or digging or shooting if they had nine months' training.<sup>136</sup>

On 9 July 1940, the Commander-in-Chief of India directed the formation of the 31st Armoured Division under Plan A. Three months later he ordered the raising of the second armoured division.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Nandan Prasad, *Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organisation 1939-45*, pp. 57-59.

<sup>135</sup> War Cabinet, Immediate Measures required in the Far East, Report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 25 June 1940, p. 1, CAB 66/9/2, PRO.

<sup>136</sup> From Leo S. Amery, London, No. 27, 26 June 1940, Linlithgow Collection, MSS.EUR.F125/9, Acc No. 1063, M/F, NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>137</sup> Nandan Prasad, *Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organisation 1939-45*, p. 60.

On 23 July 1940, Leo Amery communicated to Linlithgow: 'We got Auchinleck as he is the best suited person for expanding the Indian Army. He is better than Gort and Ironside'.<sup>138</sup> History later proved that in this regard Amery was 100 per cent correct. On 16 August 1940, Amery wrote to Linlithgow: 'According to the War Office estimate in May, India should be able to supply 12–14 divisions. But, I agree with you that at maximum India would raise, equip and supply one million men'.<sup>139</sup> In October 1940, Major-General T.J. Hutton, Deputy Chief of the General Staff (who would later command the forces in Burma against the IJA's rapid advance in early 1942) was sent to Britain to explain the Indian Army's expansion programme and request equipment to sustain it. He requested arms, ammunition and British officers. At the end of November, Britain agreed to provide 10 per cent of the monthly production of arms and ammunition (except anti-tank guns). However, this quota was a rough approximation, dependent on actual deliveries which were fluctuating due to German air raids (as part of the *Blitz*) in Britain. The London Government responded by noting that the required British personnel would be sent as soon as shipping was available.<sup>140</sup>

### Conclusion

While the IJA depended on conscription, the Indian Army relied on volunteer soldiering. In contrast to the Indian Army, the IJA maintained a large reserve, even in peacetime. Hence, the IJA was capable of manifold expansion and absorption of large numbers of casualties during wartime in a fairly smooth manner. Two of the biggest mistakes on the part of the British GoI were to prevent entry of the university-educated Indian urban middle class into the commissioned officer corps ranks before 1939 and the refusal to adapt the Martial Race theory to have a large reserve in peacetime. This prevented quick and effective expansion of the Indian Army during World War II. Both the IJA and the Indian Army had extensive combat experience before the onset of World War II. The IJA had confronted Soviet cavalry in large numbers at Nomonhan. Though the Soviets used cavalry against the Germans; neither the Commonwealth armies nor the IJA deployed cavalry during World War II in the Asia-Pacific region. The IJA was engaged in large-scale conventional

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<sup>138</sup> From Leo S. Amery, London, 23 July 1940, Linlithgow Collection.

<sup>139</sup> From Leo S. Amery, No. 29, 16 Aug. 1940, Linlithgow Collection.

<sup>140</sup> Nandan Prasad, *Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organisation 1939–45*, pp. 60–61.

combat in China before the beginning of the Pacific War and the Indian Army was mostly engaged in Small War along the North-West Frontier. Similarly, the British Army was also engaged in colonial policing in the interwar period. Despite the Indian Army being a master of fighting Small War (it had several similarities with the jungle war which would unfold in the near future), due to rapid expansion, initially it could not fight effectively against the IJA. The IJA was not considered effective by the Western powers because of its defeat at the hands of the Russian Army at Nomonhan and the Chinese quagmire. The Western democracies greatly underrated the Red Army and underestimated the combat potential of the Nationalist Chinese Army. Hence, the IJA was considered much lower in the scale of combat effectiveness by the West. But the latter were in for a shock when the IJA's *Blitzkrieg* in the Asia-Pacific region began from late December 1941 onwards.

## Fall of Hong Kong: 8 December–26 December 1941

### Pre-war British Hong Kong

Hong Kong Island stretches for 32 square miles, with a length of 11 miles and width of three miles. The British occupied the island in 1841 when it was ceded by China in the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. The Convention of Peking in 1860 gave the Kowloon Peninsula to Britain. And in 1898, the UK leased these territories from China for 99 years. The leased territories stretched from Kowloon to the line of Sham Chun River, about 17 miles to the north. Including the adjacent islands, the total area came to about 400 square miles. The Kowloon Peninsula had wharves, docks, etc. On Hong Kong Island, the ground rises steeply from the sea and culminates in a peak about 1,800 feet above sea level. The Victoria Port is on a narrow strip of flat land along the western part of the northern shore. A motor road running along the shore encircles the island with branch roads leading to Stanley Peninsula, Cape D'Aguilar and Big Wave Bay. Another road traverses the centre of the island, from north to south, crossing the main ridge at Wong Nei Chop Gap. Apart from these roads, there are steep narrow tracks impassable by motor transport. Most of the inhabitants of the colony were Chinese and were British subjects by birth. After 1937, due to Japanese military operations in China, large numbers of Chinese refugees drifted to the leased territories and the island. So much so that in late 1941, the population numbered one and three-quarter million people. The climate of Hong Kong (the island is situated below the Tropic of Cancer) is sub-tropical with summer and winter monsoons. Between May and October, the temperature is quite high.<sup>1</sup>

During the late 1930s, as the Japanese expanded into coastal China, Hong Kong assumed increasing importance for the Nipponese. Hong Kong is about 90 miles south of Canton. About 60 per cent of China's arms were imported

1 Tim Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong* (1961, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1990), pp. 11–12. The British official history and George S. MacDonell's memoirs state that the island comprises an area of 29 square miles. Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby with Captain C.T. Addis, Colonel J.F. Meiklejohn (succeeded by Brigadier M.R. Roberts), Colonel G.T. Wards and Air Vice-Marshal N.L. Desoer, *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, *History of the Second World War* (1961, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1989), pp. 107–8; George S. MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story, 1939–1945: From the Fall of Hong Kong to the Defeat of Japan* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2002), p. 65.

through the port of Hong Kong.<sup>2</sup> After the fall of Canton when the railway was cut, the junks in Hong Kong smuggled war materials to Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist China. Tokyo calculated that the junks were transporting as much as 6,000 tons of war materials to the interior of China every month. Further, capture of Hong Kong would provide a safe anchorage for Japanese shipping.<sup>3</sup> This chapter shows that all the components of the Commonwealth forces, including the Indian Army, failed to adapt to the novel ground war techniques introduced by the IJA in Hong Kong.

### The Commonwealth Forces and its Opponent

Tim Carew describes the conditions of service among the British soldiers in Hong Kong during the 1930s:

Between the two World Wars the British soldiers in Hong Kong had never had it so good. A weekly wage of fourteen shillings a week would appear to preclude the possibility of sustained employment for a private soldier ten thousand miles from home. But the food was free and plentiful; beer in the wet canteen was two pence per pint and only 5½ d. in the down town hotels. One shilling and three pence per week purchased the services of a servant.<sup>4</sup>

It goes without saying that the British soldiers in Hong Kong spent their pay on three items: drinking, women and gambling.<sup>5</sup> As we will see in the later part of this section, even just before the onset of the Japanese invasion in December 1941, the morale of the British soldiers had not improved much.

John R. Harris, a Second Lieutenant of the Royal Engineer (RE) stationed in Hong Kong, concurs with the view expressed by Tim Carew. Harris wrote in his memoirs:

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2 K.D. Bhargava and K.N.V. Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*; Bisheshwar Prasad (ed.), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War: 1939–45*, (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, India & Pakistan, New Delhi: Distributed by Orient Longman, 1960), p. 13; MacDonell, *One Soldier's Story*, p. 65.

3 *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941–45: Hostage to Fortune*, Memories of John R. Harris, edited by Oliver Lindsay (2005, reprint, Gloucestershire: Spellmount, 2007), p. 48.

4 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 16.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 55.



Those who did not take soldiering too seriously in Hong Kong took comfort from the views expressed by Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham who was appointed to the new post of Commander-in-Chief, Far East, stationed at Singapore.... He addressed us all, painting a picture that the Japanese fighting qualities were greatly inferior to ours. Having seen the 'dirty uniforms' worn by the Japanese troops, he confidently announced that they were 'sub-human specimens' and that he could not 'believe they would form an intelligent fighting force.'<sup>6</sup>

But Britain's Chiefs of Staff Committee was not that sure about the security of Hong Kong. On 25 June 1940, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (which consisted of C.L.N. Newall, John Dill and T.S.V. Phillips, Vice-Chief of Naval Staff) observed:

We should retain our present garrison at Hong Kong to fight it out if war comes. The presence of large numbers of British women and children at Hong Kong would be a serious embarrassment and since evacuation might not be possible in the event of a sudden Japanese attack we recommend that they should be moved now, either to the Philippine Islands or to Australia. We do not think that the Japanese would interpret this step as a sign of weakness, rather the reverse.<sup>7</sup>

In October 1940, Major-General Arthur E. Grasett, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) Hong Kong suggested that the island's garrison should be increased from four to five battalions. He held a low opinion of the Japanese combat capability and over-estimated the defensive capability of the island. In January 1941, Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, the Commander-in-Chief Far East (17 October 1940–27 December 1941) suggested to London that he be allowed to raise the strength of the Hong Kong garrison first to five and then to six battalions, taking one battalion out from Malaya.<sup>8</sup> Brooke-Popham visited Hong Kong twice: once in December 1940 and again in April 1941. Brooke-Popham's plan was to provision Hong Kong with military stores and food for a period of 130 days in order to withstand a probable Japanese siege of

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6 *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941–45: Hostage to Fortune*, pp. 40–41.

7 Report by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Immediate Measures required in the Far East, War Cabinet, 25 June 1940, p. 9, CAB 66/9/2, PRO, Kew Surrey, UK.

8 Christopher M. Bell, "'Our most exposed Outpost': Hong Kong and British Far Eastern Strategy, 1921–1941", *Journal of Military History*, vol. 60, no. 1 (1996), pp. 76–77.

the island.<sup>9</sup> In general, the British Air Chief-Marshall radiated confidence. He noted:

The ARP organization in Hong Kong was good, and some 12,000 ARP workers of one sort or another had been enrolled before war broke out. In addition, tunnels were made into the granite hills behind the town of Victoria; these provided admirable shelters which should have been proof against any type of bomb. The limitation here was the number of pneumatic drills that could be obtained to enable the necessary blasting to be carried out.<sup>10</sup>

In October 1941, Brooke-Popham assured the Australian Government that Hong Kong and the Philippines comprised a pincer which would be brought into operation if Japan decided to move south.<sup>11</sup> Brooke-Popham spelled out his strategic rationale in the following words:

As regards the Philippines, according to the information available in Singapore, it was doubtful, at any rate up to the middle of 1941, whether the Americans intended to defend the islands, or whether they did not. It is therefore possible, that had we demilitarized Hong Kong, or announced our intention of not defending it, the Americans might have adopted a similar policy with regard to the Philippines. In this case, they might have ceased to take direct interest in the Far East, and confined themselves to the Eastern half of the Pacific. Should this supposition be correct, then the attempted defence of Hong Kong was justified for this reason alone.<sup>12</sup>

Brooke-Popham's statement shows that as regards strategic planning there was inadequate coordination between the senior military leaders of the USA and UK. Further, the British military officers failed to comprehend that the Japanese were capable of launching simultaneous amphibious attacks on several far away targets.<sup>13</sup>

9 Despatch on the Far East, by Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, Commander-in-Chief, Far East, 17 Oct. 1940–27 Dec. 1941, 25 June 1942, pp. 6, 15, CAB 66/28/33, PRO. Brooke-Popham submitted the report on 28 May 1942.

10 Ibid., p. 16.

11 Bell, "Our most exposed Outpost": Hong Kong and British Far Eastern Strategy, 1921–1941', p. 79.

12 Despatch on the Far East, by Brooke-Popham, p. 15.

13 Kent Federowich, "Cocked Hats and Swords and Small, Little Garrisons": Britain, Canada and the Fall of Hong Kong, 1941', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2003), p. 156.

From September 1941, Major-General C.M. Maltby was the GOC in Hong Kong. He had seen service in the Persian Gulf, Egypt, Salonika, Mesopotamia and in India's North-West Frontier.<sup>14</sup> The objective of the defence of the colony was initially limited. The aim of defence was to deny the use of the harbour to the Japanese rather than retaining it with the object of its use later by the Royal Navy (RN). Hence, the initial plan was to defend the Island of Hong Kong only. However, the arrival of two Canadian battalions on 16 November 1941 encouraged Maltby to partly alter his plan of defence. He placed one brigade, with a proportion of mobile artillery, on the mainland to defend a defensive position known as the Gin Drinkers Line. It was hoped that the defence of the Gin Drinkers Line would prevent Japanese shelling of the northern portion of the island initially and it would also buy some time for the defenders to prepare the demolition of the docks, power houses and wharves effectively.<sup>15</sup>

Brooke-Popham later commented that proper defence of the Gin Drinkers Line required two full divisions. However, he noted in a contradictory manner: 'With the arrival of... two Canadian battalions, three could be put into the Gin Drinkers line, and a far stronger resistance could be put up, not merely because of the increased strength, but because casualties would not cripple the subsequent defence of Hong Kong Island'.<sup>16</sup> It is true that without defending the Gin Drinkers Line, the Kai Tak airport would prove useless.<sup>17</sup> But when the Japanese attack came, they quickly acquired air superiority and the Kai Tak airport, without substantial number of British aircraft, proved to be useless as regards defence of the Hong Kong Island. It would probably have been better for Maltby to concentrate all the available Commonwealth ground troops within the island. Brooke-Popham further noted: 'A great deal of work had been done in preparing the island for defence, and the construction and concealment of pillboxes and obstacles showed much originality and initiative'.<sup>18</sup> However, eventually, such static obstacles proved inadequate against the Japanese thrust.

During October–November 1940, the 5th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment (under Lieutenant-Colonel Rawlinson) and the 2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment came from India. Two Canadian battalions, without

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<sup>14</sup> Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Major-General C.M. Maltby, 'Operations in Hong Kong from 8 to 25 December 1941', *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 27 January 1948, No. 38190, p. 699.

<sup>16</sup> Despatch on the Far East, by Brooke-Popham, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

their mechanized transport, arrived on this island in November 1941. In addition, there were two British battalions. They were the 2nd Royal Scots and 1st Middlesex (Machine-Gun Battalion). The 1st Middlesex (Duke of Cambridge's Own) was composed of regular soldiers and this regiment was nicknamed 'The Diehards'. The men were from London, especially from localities like Stepney, Shoreditch, Bow, Hackney, Poplar, etc. Most of the men had a background of poverty and malnutrition.<sup>19</sup> The Royal Scots traditionally recruited the 'Lowland Scots' from Edinburgh and the Lothians. By 1941, the personnel of this unit had been away from home for too long. Worse, the best senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were sent back to Britain and their replacements were of low quality.<sup>20</sup> The Royal Scots was also heavily 'milked' losing 10 experienced officers and receiving territorial and Emergency Commissioned Officers (ECOs), many of whom had taken up their appointments just before the war started. This battalion was left with only four officers who possessed regular commissions. The Royal Scots suffered heavily from malaria. In fact, at one time, about 110 personnel of this unit were treated for this disease.<sup>21</sup> Only Field-Marshal 'Bill' Slim's radical measures during 1944 in Burma would eradicate malaria's adverse effect from the Allied ranks.

The Indian battalions were inadequately equipped. Only with the outbreak of the war, were they given mortars and ammunition. They underwent no training, especially in the use of mortars as a platoon weapon.<sup>22</sup> The two Indian battalions received between 150 and 180 partially-trained recruits as replacements in order to offset the losses suffered due to repeated 'milkings'.<sup>23</sup>

According to Brigadier C. Wallis, during the battle in the mainland, the Indian soldiers first practised with mortars. Further, both the Indian battalions, like the Royal Scots, had been weakened by repeated milkings. The morale of the Royal Scots was low. And the Canadians lacked training, especially in small arms and signalling, though the two units had a sprinkling of veterans.<sup>24</sup> The two Canadian battalions were the Winnipeg Grenadiers and Royal Rifles of Canada. Before being dispatched suddenly to Hong Kong, they were rotting as garrison guards in the West Indies and Newfoundland. They were only trained for basic internal security duties.<sup>25</sup> Kent Federowich asserts that the

19 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, pp. 15, 33; Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, pp. 18-19.

20 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 20.

21 *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941-45: Hostage to Fortune*, p. 61.

22 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, p. 19.

23 *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941-45: Hostage to Fortune*, p. 61.

24 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, p. 15.

25 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 22.

reinforcement of Hong Kong at the last moment by two battalions was more due to psychological than military reasons. The British objective was to assure Chiang Kai-Shek of the London Government's commitment to China and to fight Japan if necessary.<sup>26</sup> British prestige played an important role (as in the case of Singapore) in the deployment of troops.

The Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Force comprised conscripted British residents in the colony. Conscription was introduced in 1940 when the shadow of war spread along East Asia. The personnel were businessmen, bankers, engineers, custom officials, PWD officials, etc. Many clerks and dockyard labourers also joined this force. Besides the British, Chinese, Scandinavians, Russians and Portuguese who resided in British Hong Kong also joined this force and their ages varied from 19 to 65 years.<sup>27</sup> The strength of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Force varied from 2,200 (all ranks) to 94 officers and 1,566 other ranks.<sup>28</sup>

The Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery (HKSRA) was a regular unit raised to provide mobile, coastal and anti-aircraft (AA) defences in Singapore and Hong Kong. The HKSRA was commanded by British officers and comprised Sikhs and Punjabi Muslims recruited in India under a special agreement with the Army Headquarters India. This formation's loyalty was somewhat shaken even before the war. The Sikh sepoys of this formation (the 20th Heavy Battery of the 12th HKSRA), along with the 2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment, protested in December 1940 when they were ordered to wear steel helmets instead of *pugris*. *Pugris* for them had a religious symbolism. Despite the fact that the steel helmets compared to the *pugris* offered better protection against bullets and shell fragments, the Sikhs, out of their religious fervour, favoured the latter. In order to wear the steel helmets, the Sikhs would have to cut their hair which was considered unmanly and anti-religious. It is to be noted that recruitment was restricted to *keshdhari* (unshorn) Sikhs who had been baptized into the *Khalsa*. In September 1939, it was decided that the Mark I steel helmet would be the standard equipment of the *jawans*. When in October 1940, the 2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment landed at Hong Kong, the Sikhs of the HKSRA jeered at the Sikh company of the former regiment for carrying steel helmets. On 19 December, 83 Sikhs of the 20th Heavy Battery displayed collective insubordination. On 22 December, the Sikh sepoys of the

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26 Federowich, "Cocked Hats and Swords and Small, Little Garrisons": Britain, Canada and the Fall of Hong Kong, 1941', p. 155.

27 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 22; *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941-45: Hostage to Fortune*, p. 69.

28 Phillip Bruce, *Second to None: The Story of the Hong Kong Volunteers* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 220.

Hong Kong Rifles refused to handle the crates which contained the steel helmets. The Sikhs of the two batteries of the 5th AA Regiment of HKSRA also refused food. On 28 December, General Grasett panicked and believed that about 800 Sikhs of his command might stage a mutiny. On 17 January 1941, court martial proceedings started against 83 Sikh artillerymen. British investigations found out that the Sikh expatriate community in Hong Kong was imbued with Indian nationalism. In fact, anti-British propaganda spilled from the Sikh diaspora in Hong Kong to the Sikh troops on that island. Several Sikh policemen of the Hong Kong police and some Sikh priests were involved in carrying out 'seditious' anti-British propaganda among the troops. The British surmised that the Axis powers were probably involved in this incident.<sup>29</sup>

The total strength of the Commonwealth force in Hong Kong on the eve of Japanese attack was 14,454 soldiers. Of them, there were 3,652 British, 2,428 local colonial troops, 2,254 Indian regulars, 2,112 personnel of the Auxiliary Defence Units, 2,000 (rough estimate) men of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps, 1,972 Canadian and 136 personnel in the Nursing Detachment.<sup>30</sup> Many Indians were in the irregular formations. For air support, at Kai Tak airport in Hong Kong, the British had three obsolete Vickers Wildebeeste torpedo bombers with a maximum speed of 100 miles per hour and two Supermarine Walrus amphibious aircraft. Worse, there was a lack of torpedoes for the torpedo bombers.<sup>31</sup> For defence against seaborne attacks, there were 29 guns. Of these guns, eight were 9.2-inch, 15 were 6-inch (including three on the Stonecutter Island), two 4.7-inch and four were 4-inch. They were manned by the 8th and 12th Coast regiments. However, the coastline of Hong Kong offered many possible landing points.<sup>32</sup> There was a shortage of 3-inch mortar ammunition which arrived only in November. Only 70 rounds per battalion was made available which was adequate for five minutes' intense bombardment. The battalions lacked time to practise with mortars.<sup>33</sup> Inadequate training with mortars and the small supply of mortar ammunition would haunt the British and Indian troops in Malaya also. The Commonwealth force defending Hong

29 Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* (London/New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 176–77; Chandar S. Sundaram, 'Seditious Letters and Steel Helmets: Disaffection among Indian Troops in Singapore and Hong Kong, 1940–41, and the Formation of the Indian National Army', in Kaushik Roy (ed.), *War and Society in Colonial India: 1807–1945* (2006, reprint, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 140–49.

30 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 20.

31 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, pp. 18, 50.

32 Kirby et. al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 109.

33 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 37.

Kong suffered from the absence of air support, naval support, paucity of AA guns and lack of regular military transport driven by disciplined drivers.<sup>34</sup> On 5 December, three Japanese divisions, numbering about 60,000 men, concentrated only eight miles from the British frontier.<sup>35</sup> The Japanese photo reconnaissance aircraft from Canton took air photographs of the Kai Tak airport and Sham Shui Po barracks.<sup>36</sup> On 7 December, forward observation posts of the 2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment reported massing of Japanese soldiers north of Fanling.<sup>37</sup>

On 6 November 1941, the Imperial General Headquarters ordered the Commander-in-Chief of the China Expeditionary Army, in cooperation with the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), to prepare to attack Hong Kong with a force whose core would be the 38th Japanese Division of the 23rd Japanese Army. While the Hong Kong Operation unfolded, the rest of the 23rd Japanese Army was ordered to prevent any interference from the Chinese units stationed north of it. The Japanese strategy was to attack the Kowloon Peninsula and Hong Kong Island from the mainland of China. The invasion force, along with air attack, was to advance across the boundary near Shenchuanhsu, occupy Taimaoshan Mountain and press forward. Then the hostile defensive positions near Jubilee Reservoir were to be destroyed and the advance was to be continued to the southern tip of the Kowloon Peninsula. To support the main invasion force, a small sea advance unit was to operate near Tsingì Isle. Depending on the battle situation, troops might be landed to the west of Mount Maonshan in order to attack the Commonwealth troops' right flank. After the capture of the Kowloon Peninsula, the Japanese troops were to attack Hong Kong Island. British military installations on the small islands like Tsingì, Stonecutter, etc. were to be destroyed before launching the principal operation against Hong Kong. While attacking Hong Kong, the Japanese troops planned first to land on the northern beach and then expand their area of operation. In order to create a diversion among the Commonwealth troops, it was planned to stage a demonstration movement which would make the enemy believe that the main Japanese landings would be on the southern beach.<sup>38</sup> Deception was an important constituent of Japanese planning both at Hong Kong and Singapore.

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34 Maltby, 'Operations in Hong Kong from 8 to 25 December 1941', p. 700.

35 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 37.

36 *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941–45: Hostage to Fortune*, p. 9.

37 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 40.

38 *Japanese Monograph No. 71, Army Operations in China December 1941–December 1943* (Prepared by Headquarters, USAFFE and Eighth US Army [Rear], Distributed by Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army), pp. 27–28.



Japanese intelligence did not underestimate the Commonwealth defence preparation in Hong Kong. In early December, most of the British-Indian troops who had been stationed on the Sheungshui Plain were withdrawn to strengthen the main defensive positions in Hong Kong. The Japanese estimated that there were about 10,000 British and Indian troops and 10 aircraft in Hong Kong. According to Japanese intelligence, the main defence line of Kowloon Peninsula consisted of several lines of pillbox positions which stretched from Hakwaichung south-west of the Jubilee Reservoir to Hill 225, through Tate's Cairn to the Hebe Hill. The Japanese assumed that on Hong Kong Island there were guns of various calibres mounted to cover the shoreline, which in turn was heavily protected by trenches and obstacles. In addition, concluded the Japanese, lines of pillbox positions were constructed in depth. However, the principal headache of the IJA just before the onset of the Hong Kong Operation remained the Nationalist Chinese Army. The 4th War Sector Chinese Army with a force of about 10 divisions threatened the northern battleline of the 23rd Japanese Army.<sup>39</sup> The Commonwealth troops waited with trepidation for the Japanese attack. Maltby ordered the blowing up of the demolitions four hours before the 38th Japanese Division started its attack. The 38th Japanese Division had battle-hardened troops who had fought in China and the division's artillery was reinforced in excess of its normal establishment.<sup>40</sup>

### The Battle

On 8 December 1941, the Japanese attacked Kowloon with 80 aircraft, two divisions (with another one in reserve) and substantial corps artillery.<sup>41</sup> At 0800 hours, 12 bombers escorted by 36 Japanese fighters bombed the Kai Tak airport

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39 Ibid., pp. 21–22.

40 *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941–45: Hostage to Fortune*, pp. 70, 83.

41 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 69. The 38th Japanese Division comprised the following units: one reinforced infantry regiment, one independent mountain artillery regiment, one heavy field artillery regiment, one heavy field artillery battalion, one mortar battalion and one artillery intelligence regiment and two independent anti-tank gun battalions. The siege units comprised of artillery headquarters, one heavy artillery regiment of 24-cm howitzers, one heavy artillery battalion of 15-cm cannon and one independent mortar battalion. In addition, there were two general purpose independent engineer regiments and one landing and shipping independent engineer regiment. The signal unit command regiment comprised one company and one platoon. There were four motor transport companies. The air units consisted of one reconnais-



and the Sham Shui Po barracks. Within a few minutes all the RAF machines were damaged or destroyed, including eight civilian aircraft.<sup>42</sup> The Japanese advanced in two groups. The western group under Major-General Ito comprised the 228th and 230th regiments and three mountain artillery battalions. The eastern group comprised the 229th Japanese Regiment. The Japanese plan was to throw their main weight on the western end of the Gin Drinkers Line between Jubilee Reservoir and Gin Drinkers Bay. Hence, their western group was stronger.<sup>43</sup> On 8–9 December, the Japanese exerted heavy pressure along the Taipo Road and threatened the left flank of the Gin Drinkers Line. About 200 yards south of the Jubilee Reservoir, sited on the north-western end of the Smugglers Ridge was the Shing Mun Redoubt. This redoubt was tactically important because it dominated the other defended localities further west and contained a forward observation post. It consisted of five pillboxes linked by fire trenches and tunnels surrounded by barbed wire and covered some 12 acres of rocky hillside. On 9 December, a nocturnal attack through difficult terrain by the Japanese was able to capture the Shing Mun Redoubt held by a platoon of the Royal Scots.<sup>44</sup> Colonel Doi commanding the 228th Japanese Regiment after a reconnaissance during the late afternoon of 9 December decided to launch an immediate assault without waiting for orders from higher authorities. Doi ordered the 3rd Battalion of the 228th Regiment to start a surprise attack with the 2nd Battalion of the 228th Regiment in support. The two leading Japanese companies, wearing rubber soled canvas shoes, cleared gaps in the wire and assaulted the position around 11 PM. With the fall of Shing Mun Ridge, the Commonwealth defensive position on the Smugglers Ridge was weakened. On 10 December, Brigadier Wallis ordered the CO of the Royal Scots to launch a counter-attack against the Japanese with the Rajput company on his left flank. However, the British battalion commander refused, claiming that the Japanese were strongly entrenched and the terrain was difficult and exposed.<sup>45</sup>

In the region between the Shing Mun Redoubt and Wong Uk, the 2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment was deployed. The Japanese advanced along the hill tracks north of Needle Hill and also along the valleys running up

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sance squadron, one fighter squadron and one air regiment (light bomber). *Japanese Monograph No. 71*, p. 29.

42 Bruce, *Second to None*, p. 221.

43 Kirby et. al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 119.

44 Despatch on the Far East, by Brooke-Popham, p. 47; Kirby et. al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 121.

45 Kirby et. al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, pp. 121–22.

from Tide Cove. On 10 December 1941, the position occupied by the 2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment was heavily shelled from gun positions along the Taipo Road. The Japanese gun positions were outside the MG range of the Indian battalion. Many forward pillboxes at Wong Uk were directly hit and were completely destroyed. A company of the above-mentioned Indian battalion suffered very heavily during the shelling of the pillboxes. It is likely that the information given by the local collaborators made Japanese shelling extremely accurate.<sup>46</sup>

On the mainland at the dawn of 11 December, the Japanese launched an attack on the left flank of the 2nd Royal Scots preceded by heavy mortar fire. In response, the Royal Scots retreated in disorder towards the Pencil Factory and exposed the junction of the Castle Peak and Taipo Road. This jeopardized the position of the troops (the 2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment and one company of the 5th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment) at the Taipo Road. One company of the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the Bren Carriers manned by the Hong Kong Volunteers from the Kai Tak airport moved into position to cover the gap. The B Company of 2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment, which was withdrawing, engaged the Japanese with small arms and 3-inch mortars.<sup>47</sup> On 11 December, after the two left companies of the Royal Scots at Kowloon had been driven in and the reserves, which included the Winnipeg Grenadiers, failed to halt the Japanese onslaught, it was decided to withdraw from the mainland except the Devil's Peak. The withdrawal, including howitzers, armoured cars and mechanical transport, was more or less successful. During the night of 12/13 December, the troops were withdrawn from the Devil's Peak.<sup>48</sup>

On 14 December, Japanese shelling of the island increased. And they used the Devil's Peak as a point of observation.<sup>49</sup> Hong Kong Island was divided into two brigade commands: East and West. The East Brigade under Brigadier Wallis included the 5th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment on the north shore waterfront from Pak Sha Wan to Causeway Bay. Two companies were in shore defence, two in local reserve, one south of Tai Koo and one at Tai Hang village. Two companies of the 1st Middlesex occupied the pillboxes from Sai Wan Bay to West Bay. The 1st Middlesex was directly under Fortress Headquarters for defensive purposes but the detachments manning pillboxes were under the operational command of the battalions in whose areas they were

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46 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, p. 28.

47 Ibid., pp. 29-30.

48 Despatch on the Far East, by Brooke-Popham, p. 48.

49 Ibid., p. 48.

located. The Royal Rifles of Canada were in charge of the southern seaward defences from the D'Aguilar Peak area north through Obelisk Hill and then southwards to Stone Hill and Stanley village with a reserve company further north covering the Lye Mun Gap. Two companies of the Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Corps were in reserve. The mobile artillery (four 6-inch, four 4.5-inch and three 3.7-inch howitzers) were deployed in support of the north-east sector. The beach defence on either side of the isthmus at Stanley and Tai Tam Bay were strengthened by two 18-pounders. In addition, there were five AA guns in that area.<sup>50</sup>

On 18 December, the north face of the island was subjected to severe bombardment by artillery, mortars and dive bombers. After dusk, the Japanese landed at Quarry Bay and across the Lei U Munn in the north-eastern part of the island. On 19 December, the Japanese infiltrated over the hill to the Wong Nei Cheong and Tytam Gaps with pack artillery and mortars. The Commonwealth artillery from the Collinson and D'Aguilar areas (east and south-east of the island) was withdrawn to Stanley (south of the island). However, heavy guns and equipment had to be destroyed. Maltby's defensive line then ran from Stanley Mound northwards. Stanley Mound was held by one Canadian battalion, two Indian infantry companies and some artillery and MGS. On the afternoon of 19 December, a counter-attack was launched to regain Mount Parker and Mount Butler. However, Japanese shelling, lack of communications among the Commonwealth troops and exhaustion, resulted in the failure of the counter-attack.<sup>51</sup>

The 5th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment fought well on the mainland and their repulse of the Japanese attack on the Devil's Peak was commendable. The full force of the Japanese assault on the island initially fell on this unit. After suffering horrendous casualties (all the British officers and most of the VCOS), the unit was overrun. It is to be noted that once the British officers and the VCOS became casualties, then the illiterate *jawans* could not tackle the fluid battle scenario. One must note that the 2nd Royal Scots also did not perform that well. The Japanese were able to surprise them and capture the Shing Mun Redoubt and the Golden Hill position. The loss of these two defensive positions forced a hasty withdrawal.<sup>52</sup>

Due to a bad command decision, ammunition for 2-inch mortars was delivered to the Commonwealth troops only a week after the Japanese attack.<sup>53</sup> In

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50 Kirby et. al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, pp. 127–28.

51 Despatch on the Far East, by Brooke-Popham, pp. 48–49.

52 Maltby, 'Operations in Hong Kong from 8 to 25 December 1941', p. 701.

53 Carew, *Fall of Hong Kong*, p. 37.

fact, the Rajputs received their new 3-inch mortars only after their deployment. Further, the Royal Scots Battalion was issued with only 90 anti-personnel mines which were too few to build up a robust defence line.<sup>54</sup> So, lack of adequate training with weapons substantially reduced the combat effectiveness of the Allied troops. The Japanese tactics involved pushing a strong body of troops up the nearest hill and along the flank and rear of a defending force. The defending Commonwealth units found that their line of retreat was blocked. The Japanese troops displayed a high standard of night training and launched nocturnal attacks. Moreover, due to their extraordinary cross-country capability and aid from local guides (especially Chinese guides drawn from Tsun Wan Wai village), the Japanese were able to mount attacks across difficult country quickly and efficiently.<sup>55</sup> Maltby commented about the stealthy attacks of the Japanese: 'All were provided with rubber soled boots that made movement very silent, systematically they used the smallest of paths and avoided all the more obvious lines of advance, and their patrols were very boldly handled'.<sup>56</sup> The Japanese troops were lightly equipped and were fit to undertake long marches.<sup>57</sup> And Japanese commanders like Colonel Doi exhibited 'creative disobedience'. The Japanese would display all these traits in their later campaigns in Malaya and Burma.

By 25 December, the island was as good as lost. In Maltby's own words:

I asked Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart, the Officer Commanding 1st Middlesex Regiment, how much longer in his considered opinion the men could hold the line now occupied. He replied 'one hour'. The Commodore agreed with my conclusion. At 1515 hours I advised HE The Governor and C-in-C that no further useful military resistance was possible and then I ordered all the Commanding Officers to break off the fighting and to capitulate to the nearest Japanese Commander, as and when the enemy advanced and opportunity offered.<sup>58</sup>

In the evening of Christmas Day 1941, Governor Mark Young, accompanied by Maltby, travelled to the Peninsula Hotel and surrendered unconditionally to the Japanese commanders.<sup>59</sup>

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54 *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941–45: Hostage to Fortune*, p. 61.

55 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, pp. 24, 26–27.

56 Maltby, 'Operations in Hong Kong from 8 to 25 December 1941', p. 700.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 700.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 724.

59 Bruce, *Second to None*, pp. 215–16.

TABLE 2.1 *Losses among Indian units in combat in Hong Kong*

Unit	Killed or died of wounds	Missing	Wounded	Total strength
8th Coast Royal Artillery Regiment		1	4	283
12th Coast Royal Artillery Regiment	3		3	187
5th Anti-Aircraft Royal Artillery Regiment	24	80	15	332
1st Hong Kong Regiment HKSRA	144	45	103	830
965th Royal Artillery Defensive Battery	2		4	86
5th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment	150	109	186	875
2nd Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment	52	69	156	932
RIASC			1	13
Hong Kong Mule Corps	1	5	5	250
IMD and IHC		2		55
Total	376	311	477	3,893

*Note:* Total Battle Casualties = 1,164; equivalent to 30 per cent of the total strength.

*Source:* Major-General C.M. Maltby, 'Operations in Hong Kong from 8 to 25 December 1941', *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 27 January 1948, No. 38190, p. 725.

The Japanese lost eight aircraft in their air operation over Hong Kong. Japanese aerial bombing depressed the defenders and Maltby commented that their bombing was quite accurate. According to Maltby, in total, the Commonwealth forces probably suffered some 2,300 casualties. For a breakdown of the casualties among the different Indian units, refer to Table 2.1. Japanese losses, ranged from 1,995 to 9,000 wounded.<sup>60</sup> For the Japanese losses, Maltby's figure of 9,000 was an example of overestimation of enemy casualties. The Japanese casualties varied from 2,754 (including 2,400 infantry) to more than 4,400 men. The British official history estimates that the battle casualties

<sup>60</sup> Maltby, 'Operations in Hong Kong from 8 to 25 December 1941', pp. 700, 725.

of the Commonwealth forces up to 25 December 1941 were about 4,440. Combat and capitulation together numbered 11,848 combatants.<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion

On Christmas Day 1941, the Allied forces in Hong Kong surrendered to the Japanese. The actual surrender occurred at 0230 hours on 26 December when Major Harland returned with orders in writing. Wallis then ordered the white flag to be hoisted and issued a general ceasefire.<sup>62</sup> The Commonwealth defeat in Hong Kong was inevitable. The defence of the Gin Drinkers Line, even with three battalions, if not two divisions, could not have stopped but at least would have delayed the Japanese considerably. However, the Commonwealth troops failed in this task. Bad leadership and low quality of troops made it quick and cheap for the Japanese. One thing which came out in the above account was that the Indian troops (despite the fact that the morale and discipline levels of some of the units was below average) fought no less well than their Commonwealth 'brothers'. In fact, the Canadian units probably fought worse than the British and Indian units. And the IJA's infantry tactics were superb. The Commonwealth troops' scattered positions of static defence were overrun quite easily by the IJA. Against certain static defended localities, the IJA concentrated superior artillery, mortar and MG fire and then Japanese infantry rushed these defended positions. And the nimble IJA bypassed certain other defensive localities. Overall, the Commonwealth forces were outgunned, out-fought and outmanoeuvred in Hong Kong.

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61 Kirby et. al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 150. According to one historian, some 3,300 Indian soldiers surrendered at Hong Kong. Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, p. 173.

62 *The Battle for Hong Kong 1941-45: Hostage to Fortune*, p. 143.

## Disaster in Malaya: 8 December 1941–31 January 1942

I do not accept the customary theory that with the balance of opposing forces in South-East Asia as it was in 1941, an immediate and overwhelming British defeat was inevitable, or that the said defeat was inexplicable.... I could not help seeing that not only Churchill but his commanders in the Far East relied too much on propaganda and even more on 'deterrence'.

SIR ANDREW GILCHRIST<sup>1</sup>



Along with Hong Kong, the Japanese struck at the British colony of Malaya. The Japanese objective was to advance through Malaya and then to threaten the much vaunted British naval base in the Far East: Singapore. Unlike Hong Kong, the Commonwealth garrison in Malaya was actually reinforced. Further, the defenders had lots of geographical space to manoeuvre and conduct strategic retreat in order to possibly delay and wear out the Japanese invaders. This chapter details the disastrous defeat of the Indian troops in Malaya in comparison with the British and Australian Imperial Force (AIF) soldiers and the reasons behind the speedy Commonwealth collapse.

Malaya was divided into the Federated Malaya States, Straits Settlements and Unfederated Malaya States (including Brunei).<sup>2</sup> Malaya produced over half of the world's tin and 40 per cent of its rubber.<sup>3</sup> In 1939, Malaya's output of tin was estimated at about 10,000 tons.<sup>4</sup> Most of the rubber tappers were Indians and the tin miners were Chinese. Malaya was the British Empire's prin-

1 Andrew Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941: The Fall of a Fighting Empire* (London: Robert Hale, 1992), pp. 14–15.

2 K.D. Bhargava and K.N.V. Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, Bisheshwar Prasad (ed.), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War: 1939–45* (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence Government of India, 1960), p. 85.

3 Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall? Churchill and the Impregnable Fortress* (2004, reprint, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), p. 14.

4 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 85.

principal dollar earner. Rubber and tin were sold to the USA in return for dollars.<sup>5</sup> The total population of Malaya was about five million. In late 1938, there were about 743,555 Indians (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) and 2,220,244 Chinese in British Malaya. The Malays numbered 2,210,867 people.<sup>6</sup> Railway track maintenance was done with Tamil labourers and the ports were served by Chinese and Indian coolies.<sup>7</sup> The British civilians in Malaya were rubber planters and tin mine managers. Further, there were many British bankers, shipping managers, insurance agents, civil servants and hotel owners in Singapore.<sup>8</sup>

A brief account of the topographical features of the theatre is necessary in order to understand how geography interacted with the techniques of combat. The Malay Peninsula lies between the Strait of Malacca on the west and the South China Sea on the east. It is roughly 400 miles long from north to south and varies in width from 200 miles at its widest part to about 60 miles at its narrowest. On the north it joins the Isthmus of Kra. Singapore Island lies at its southern extremity and is separated from the mainland by the narrow Strait of Johore. A jungle-covered mountain range runs down the centre of the peninsula, rising to about 7,000 feet in the north and dropping to some 3,000 feet at its southern end. It is flanked on either side by the coastal plain and is fringed on the west coast by mudflats and mangrove forest. In the east there are broad curving sandy beaches except at the mouth of the rivers, which were mangrove areas. The plains were intersected by several streams that rose in the central range. Some of the streams combined to form swift rivers which flowed into the sea and created obstructions for quick north to south movements. The heavy rainfall and dense tropical vegetation caused bad drainage. So, near the rivers, large jungle swamps were present. Jungle creepers in the swamps made passage through them almost impossible.<sup>9</sup> Large areas were under rubber plantation and the tightly-packed rubber trees added to problems of clear visibility.<sup>10</sup> The West Coast Road was the main trunk road. It ran from the border of Thailand to Singapore. The principal network of roads on the east coast was

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5 Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, pp. 15, 48.

6 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 82; Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941*, p. 23.

7 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 86.

8 Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941*, p. 22.

9 Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby with Capt. C.T. Addis, Colonel J.F. Meiklejohn (succeeded by Brigadier M.R. Roberts), Colonel G.T. Wards and Air Vice-Marshal N.L. Desoer, *History of the Second World War, The War against Japan*, vol. 1 (1957, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1989), p. 153.

10 Brigadier Jasbir Singh, *Combat Diary: An Illustrated History of Operations conducted by 4th Battalion, the Kumaon Regiment, 1788 to 1974* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2010), p. 92.



located at Kelantan which was connected southwards to Kuala Trengganu. There was no continuous road from Kota Bahru/Bharu to Singapore.<sup>11</sup>

Heavy rainfall occurs throughout the year. It varies from 50 inches in the comparatively drier regions to about 260 inches in the central mountains. Malaya is affected by two monsoons annually: from June to September by the south-west and from November to March by the north-east. The former affects the West Coast and the Strait of Malacca. The latter sweeps across the South China Sea and sets up gales and swells along the East Coast of Malaya. Violent tropical thunderstorms occur especially in the late afternoon. The climate is hot, humid and enervating.<sup>12</sup> Besides Malaya's natural resources, the defence of the Singapore naval base, in turn, required the defence of Malaya. The strategic importance of Singapore is discussed in the next chapter. The strategic scenario for the British in Malaya worsened when on 25 September 1940 the Japanese occupied the northern portion of Indo-China.<sup>13</sup> The strategic priorities of Great Britain in early 1941 were as follows: demands for home defence, the Battle of the Atlantic, conflict in the Mediterranean and the probability of war in the Middle East, plus the issue of supplying Russia with war materials.<sup>14</sup> Reinforcements for the Far East came last. However, the monsoon and the underdeveloped East Coast of Malaya were considered as serious obstacles to any Japanese landing operations in Malaya. The British planners calculated that the difficult terrain and bad communications within the Malaya States would slow down the Japanese advance.

### Commonwealth and Japanese Forces in Malaya

Despite Malaya being a strategic backwater, a considerable number of ground units were deployed under the Malaya Command just before the Japanese invasion. Table 3.1 gives an overview of the forces available to Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival (GOC Malaya) for conducting the land war in Malaya. The 31 Australian, British, Indian and Malaya battalions were the equivalent of three and a half divisions. These battalions were organized in three divisions: 9th and 11th Indian, and 8th Australian; each of two brigades. In addition, there

11 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 88.

12 Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 154.

13 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 97.

14 Raymond Callahan, 'Churchill and Singapore', in Brian Farrell and Sandy Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On: The Fall of Singapore Revisited* (Singapore: Academic Publishing, 2003), p. 160.

were two reserve brigade groups, two fortress brigades for Singapore Island and a battalion garrisoning Penang.<sup>15</sup>

Andrew Gilchrist, a British civil servant stationed in Malaya, asserts:

the British civilians did not spend all their leisure time in social pursuits. Many were liable to conscription for part-time duties up to the age of fifty-five, and in fact they helped to provide the officers and staffs for the Volunteers... in Malaya, of whom there were nearly 30,000 (approximate figures: British 5,000, Indians 4,000, Chinese 5,000 Malays 16,000).... they served very useful purposes on line-of-communications and similar duties, releasing other troops for battle; and in the end many of them fought, not without honour.<sup>16</sup>

The 9th and 11th Indian divisions came under the 3rd Indian Corps which was commanded by Lieutenant-General Lewis Heath. The 9th Indian Infantry Division located at Kuala Lumpur had the 8th Infantry Brigade at Kota Bahru and 22nd Infantry Brigade at Kuantan. The 11th Indian Infantry Division at Sungei Patani had the 6th and 15th infantry brigades along the Malaya-Thailand border. The 3rd Corps HQ was at Kuala Lumpur. The two reserve brigades were the 28th Infantry Brigade (Corps Reserve) at Ipoh and the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade (Malaya Command Reserve) at Port Dickson.<sup>17</sup>

On 18 February 1941, the 22nd Australian Brigade reached Singapore. The 8th Australian Division, while completing preliminary training in Australia, like the Indian formations, focused on preparing for combat operations in the Middle East. So, after coming to Malaya, training had to start from a scratch due to the different conditions. In the densely vegetated region with few roads, the role of long-range weapons and mechanical transport was limited.<sup>18</sup> One could argue that the Commonwealth troops in Malaya failed to unlearn the lessons of desert warfare in tropical conditions (unlearning past lessons at times is an example of adaptation) and failed to adopt the required tactical techniques for fighting effectively in the different ecological landscape.

Alan Jeffreys rightly states that there was no established conventional doctrine of jungle warfare for the Commonwealth units to draw upon when deployed in the jungles of Malaya. There were some publications of doubtful

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<sup>15</sup> Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 163.

<sup>16</sup> Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>17</sup> Singh, *Combat Diary*, pp. 93–94.

<sup>18</sup> A.B. Lodge, *The Fall of General Gordon Bennett* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 36, 49–50.

value about imperial policing on the North-East Frontier of India and East Africa during World War I.<sup>19</sup> The troops stationed in Malaya and Singapore did not focus on jungle training but on beach defence. There was no common tactical doctrine and most of the commanding officers of the units accepted uncritically the Malaya Command's assumption that the jungles and the swamps were impassable. What was required of the men was jungle patrolling by small teams in order to familiarize the troops with the jungle environment. Fieldcraft and its specialist variant junglecraft, which comprised an essential element for training in jungle warfare, required six months of gruelling training according to British officers. But time was one thing which was not available to the Malaya Command. British historian T.R. Moreman asserts that innovative jungle training was practised by the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and it had a 'trickle down' effect on the Indian formations of the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>20</sup> However, such influence is not visible from the regimental histories of the Indian units.

During August–September 1939, the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade, named Force EMU, commanded by Brigadier Archie Paris, sailed from India and landed at Singapore.<sup>21</sup> It had the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment and 5th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment. The 4th Battalion of the Kumaon Regiment under Lieutenant-Colonel Douglas Stuart linked up with the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade at Madras. This brigade landed at Singapore on 8 August 1939. Only the 5th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment was sent to Penang and the rest of the units were stationed at Singapore.<sup>22</sup>

The 2nd Battalion of the 8th Baluch Regiment disembarked at Singapore on 11 November 1940. This unit's camp was fixed along the Singapore-Changi Road, set up amidst the rubber plantation. The battalion history notes that the stay in this camp was depressing due to the absence of sunlight within the plantation and continuous rainfall. During the stay, it was decided that the battalion would be given Bren carriers. Lieutenant H.D. Harvey-Kelly and 40 sepoy were detailed to do a six week carrier course along with the Loyals and

19 Alan Jeffreys, 'The Indian Army in the Malayan Campaign, 1941–42', in Rob Johnson (ed.), *The British Indian Army: Virtue and Necessity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 179–80.

20 T.R. Moreman, *The Jungle, the Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War 1941–45: Fighting Methods, Doctrine and Training for Jungle Warfare* (London/New York: Frank Cass, 2005), pp. 13, 15–17.

21 Ibid., p. 12.

22 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 116; Singh, *Combat Diary*, pp. 90–91.

the Gordons in Singapore. As will be seen later, the addition of Bren carriers to the units deployed in Malaya would make the battalion tied to the roads and thus put them in a disadvantageous position against Japanese encircling and outflanking tactics through the jungles. A draft of 50 VCOs and NCOs were selected for return to India in order to aid the raising of new battalions. On 28 November 1940, this battalion moved upcountry. The 2nd Baluch was stationed in Kelantan. The camps comprised of *attap/atap* huts (wooden walls, concrete floors and plaited palm leaf roofs). In December 1940, the 2nd Baluch Battalion under the 8th Infantry Brigade was engaged in reconnaissance and training. The focus was on motor transport (MT) driving and training because the roads were bad, and use of 2-inch and 3-inch mortars for beach defence. The first part of the training would prove useless in the near future. However, training as regards the second aspect was also adversely affected because trained officers and men again returned to India to comprise the core of new battalions which were raised. Moreover, the battalion was divided into four parts, which negatively affected command, discipline and training.<sup>23</sup>

On 10 February 1941, Army Headquarters (AHQ) India ordered more Indian formations from Quetta to Malaya. The Headquarters of the 21st Indian Infantry Brigade and the 4th Battalion of the 13th FFR, 2nd Battalion of the 4th GR and 2nd Battalion of the 10th GR were ordered to move from Quetta to Poona (Pune) by 15 February 1941. The 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade Headquarters with the 1st Battalion of 12th Frontier Force Rifles (FFR), 2nd Battalion of the 12th FFR and 5th Battalion of the 22nd Sikh Regiment were ordered to move from Secunderabad to Quetta by 25 February 1941. Between 15 and 17 March 1941, the units moved from Quetta to Bombay (now Mumbai) and then sailed for Malaya. After an uneventful sea voyage, the formations reached Singapore. On 28 March, these units were sent to Kuala Lumpur. The 8th Infantry Brigade came under command of the 9th Indian Division. On 29/30 March 1941, the 9th Division assumed responsibility for the following area: the region north of the State of Johore and Kuantan.<sup>24</sup>

The motivation of at least some of the Indian units had reached rock bottom due to political developments in India. The *Raj* was becoming unpopular, especially among the politically conscious university-educated urban middle

23 Lieut.Col. J. Firth, History of the 2nd/10th Baluch in Malayan Campaign, p. 2, 1973–06–121, NAM, London.

24 War Diary of the 9th Indian Division, Part 1, Intelligence Summary, 553/5/22, Copy of AHQ Secret Cipher No. 1111/SD4, 1 Feb. 1941, Copy of a Cipher Telegram No. 1229/SD4 dt. 5 Feb. 1941, AWM, Canberra. I am indebted to Professor Peter Stanley for providing this document.

class. And most of the Indian commissioned officers, especially in the Indianizing units, were from this class. Even among the illiterate sepoys and the partially literate VCOS, there was a 'trickle down' effect. They believed that if Britain was fighting to protect democracy and freedom against the Fascist powers, then India must also have freedom, which in turn would enable the people of the sub-continent to develop their economic prospects. Captain Mohan Singh commanded the MG Company in the 1st Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment. His regiment left Bombay on 9 March 1941 for Penang. He writes in his memoirs:

Not a single soldier was keen for service overseas. India, at that time, did not appear to be threatened with an invasion. There was not the slightest doubt that we were being exploited by the British for their own ends. This war was not our war. Not a single Indian was consulted before plunging the entire nation into this horrible conflagration. There was a Central Legislative Assembly, there were provincial Governments, but they were conveniently ignored and the Viceroy, the British potentate in India, had declared war in the name of the people and princes of India. We all knew that the real leaders of the country had been thrown into prisons, but despite these bitter feelings and mental reservations we went silently to our doom. We were not frightened of death, it was our conscience that was pricking; in this duality we tried to be cheerfully outward.<sup>25</sup>

'Milking' negatively affected the Indian units in Malaya, as in Hong Kong. Since new units were raised quickly in India, the 4th Battalion 19th Hyderabad Regiment was ordered to repatriate its experienced troops. These soldiers went to Egypt. The 19th Hyderabad's Regimental Centre at Agra sent to Singapore raw recruits and old reservists. This in turn seriously reduced the battle worthiness of the regiment. Most of the time of the 4th Battalion 19th Hyderabad Regiment was spent on giving basic training to the raw recruits. Worse, these recruits not only lacked any sort of training but came from India without rifles, steel helmets and other basic equipment. The overall state of equipment of the 4th Battalion 19th Hyderabad Regiment was appalling. More than half of the rifles were of pre-1918 vintage. These weapons had been used in Persia and East Africa during World War I.<sup>26</sup>

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25 General Mohan Singh, *Soldiers' contribution to Indian Independence* (New Delhi: Army Educational Stores, 1974), pp. 45–46.

26 Singh, *Combat Diary*, p. 91.

The 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment left Quetta on 1 April 1939 for Singapore. It was part of the 22nd Brigade. From Singapore, the unit left for Ipoh. The Vickers Berthier Gun, a replacement for the Lewis Gun and the Sten (Browning) Gun along with wireless set Number 31, 2-inch and 3-inch mortars were issued then for the first time to the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment. However, no anti-tank mines were issued to the unit.<sup>27</sup> Alan Warren writes that in general the issue of anti-tank defence was neglected by the officers in Malaya Command because of the absence of a British tank force in the colony. Warren opines that the presence of a British tank unit in Malaya might have focused the commanders' attention on that important issue.<sup>28</sup>

The hardware at the disposal of the other units was possibly slightly better than those in the hands of the Indians but was woeful indeed. The British officers concluded that tanks could not be used in the Malayan terrain. Hence, no tanks were included in the Allied order of battle (ORBAT). The infantry divisions were given some anti-tank mines but they were kept in reserve and only a few were ever issued to the units. Some of the infantry battalions were given a few carriers, which were lightly armoured tracked vehicles with an open top. Some old Lanchester armoured cars were available and they were replaced by Mormon-Harrington armoured cars.<sup>29</sup>

Some units and selected British commanders were indeed exceptional but they were few and far between. One such unit was the 4th Battalion Kumaon Rifles. The 4th Battalion Kumaon Regiment had wooden hutments in Tyersal Park in Singapore. The Raffles College Ground was used for individual training.<sup>30</sup> The regimental history notes:

Lieutenant-Colonel Douglas Stuart... CO was convinced that fighting would be conducted in the jungles. Thus, he commenced reconnaissance and training almost immediately on arrival at Singapore. Training was conducted at Johore, Kota Tingi, Mersing and Cameron Highlands. Sriganesh and others worked hard to make proper arrangements for the frequent moves. The unit even marched for more than 100 miles along the eastern coast to Singapore. The staff officers were immersed in work to

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27 Lieutenant-General Harbakhsh Singh, *In the Line of Duty: A Soldier Remembers* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2000), pp. 86, 88, 91.

28 Alan Warren, 'The Indian Army and the Fall of Singapore', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 272.

29 Singh, *Combat Diary*, p. 93.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 92.

establish the unit in an environment that was completely different from the easy ways of Secunderabad.<sup>31</sup>

Jeffreys notes that at least some British officers of the Indian Army took jungle warfare seriously. In October 1940, Military Training Pamphlet No. 9 titled *Notes on Forest Warfare* was published. It was authored by Colonel Tucker DMT and then dispatched to Malaya. This training manual emphasized the use of the forest rather than roads in jungle country.<sup>32</sup> But the problem was in the quickly expanding Indian units suffering from a high rate of 'milking' which were short of experienced VCOS, NCOS and long-serving regular British officers. Further, the battalions were inadequately armed. These units filled with recently inducted drafts lacked time for initiating basic essential training, not to mention specialist training. The sorry state of 5th Battalion of 11th Sikh Regiment is noted by its two regimental historians in the following words:

Before their departure for Malaya in April 1941, the 5/11 Sikhs had been milked thoroughly for new raisings and 450 recruits as also 6 British officers (ECOS), unable to speak Urdu essential to communicate with the troops, had joined a few days prior to embarkation. It therefore became essential to carry out training to turn such large number of recruits into real soldiers and their officers able to communicate. This could not be carried out as since the arrival of the unit at Kuantan, emphasis had been laid on preparation of defences. Repeated requests were turned down by the headquarters who insisted on the first priority being preparation of defences. In October, the battalion lost even more handpicked officers, NCOS and men who returned to India to raise another MG battalion.... NCOS were new and thus comparatively weak.<sup>33</sup>

The 28th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 6th Indian Division comprised the 2nd Battalion of the 1st GR, 2nd Battalion of the 2nd GR and 2nd Battalion of the 9th GR. This division was formed at Secunderabad between late March and early

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31 Quotation from Singh, *Combat Diary*, p. 94. Captain S.M. Srinagesh was Adjutant and Captain Azam Khan was Quartermaster. Srinagesh was later replaced with Captain M.G. Gilani. This unit, like the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment, was an Indianizing unit. See p. 90.

32 Jeffreys, 'The Indian Army in the Malayan Campaign, 1941–42', in Johnson (ed.), *The British Indian Army*, p. 181.

33 Major-General Prem K. Khanna and Pushpinder Singh Chopra, *Portrait of Courage: Century of the 5th Battalion the Sikh Regiment* (New Delhi: Military Studies Convention, 2001), p. 157.



April 1941 and was trained for the Middle East. By early August, the units had completed platoon, company and battalion training and the brigade group had conducted three days' continuous MT exercise. The brigade was mobilized and equipped with 3-inch mortars and Tommy Guns before leaving Secunderabad. But there were only 18 Bren Guns and one 2-inch mortar per battalion. Additionally, there were no anti-tank rifles. The 3-inch mortar detachments fired 12 rounds as a demonstration before leaving and each section command to which the Tommy Guns were issued fired only 24 rounds. Only 50 per cent of the rifle sections in the platoons were trained in firing the Bren Guns.<sup>34</sup>

Not all the British COs were sitting idle. In April 1941, the GOC 9th Division, accompanied by Colonel J.B. Coates (General Staff Officer 1), Major R. de P. Gauvain (Deputy Assistant Adjutant-General), Second Lieutenant J.H. Howe and his ADC Second Lieutenant A.M.I. Austen decided to tour the formations under his command. On the first day of April 1941, the party decided to travel by rail from Kuala Lumpur to Kuantan in order to visit the 8th Infantry Brigade. On 15 April 1941, the GOC 9th Indian Division, along with Lieutenant-Colonel W.A. Trott (Quarter Master General) and Second Lieutenant Austen, left Kuala Lumpur and arrived at Penang on 15 April. Then the party visited Patani and on 16 April met the 22nd Indian Brigade and returned to Kuala Lumpur on 17 April. The GOC 9th Division was attempting to get a feel for the situation and trying to sum up the state of preparedness of the units under his command and the task before him. On 18 April 1941, the GOC 9th Division and his party left Kuala Lumpur and arrived at Singapore on 19 and left the city on 20 April and reached Kuala Lumpur on 21 April.<sup>35</sup>

The brigade group (the 23rd Indian Infantry Brigade, 155th Field Regiment and the 36th Field Ambulance) was concentrated at Ipoh. The brigade was placed in the 3rd Indian Corps reserve, 11th Indian Division for operation and 9th Indian Division for training and the LoC Brigade for administration. The 3rd Indian Corps reported to Malaya Command at Singapore. In the first 10 days after arrival, while the troops were settling into the camp and huts, the brigade was visited by the GOCs and the staffs of the above-mentioned formations.<sup>36</sup>

In early September 1941, Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival GOC Malaya paid the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade a visit. He gave the officers a lecture on the

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34 Brigadier W. Carpendale, Report on Operations of 11 Indian Division in Kedah and Perak, p. 1, L/WS/1/952, 10R, BL, London.

35 War Diary of the 9th Indian Division, Part 1, Appendix 11, dt. 1 April 1941, Appendix 13, dt. 14 April 1941, Appendix 18, dt. 17 April 1941.

36 Carpendale, Report on Operations of 11 Indian Division in Kedah and Perak, p. 1.



defence of Malaya. He emphasized that any seaborne invasion of Malaya was impossible and that the Japanese would be unable to bring their troop transports down to the South China Sea due to the presence of Allied air units in the Philippines, Borneo, Java, Sumatra and on the east coast of Malaya itself. The ground defence, according to Percival, was also strong. The AIF division was at Mersing, the 22nd Brigade at Kuantan and the 8th Brigade at Kota Bahru. Percival believed that these areas were the only possible landing places. Further, due to the onset of the monsoon, any landings between December and March were considered almost impossible. In the event the Japanese violated the neutrality of Thailand, the Commonwealth units in Malaya would advance to Singora and deny the port and aerodrome there to the them.<sup>37</sup> Percival could not have been more wrong in his estimate of the Commonwealth defence and Japanese aggressiveness. He could be faulted to an extent for not realizing that within days of invasion, aerial and naval superiority would be gained by the Japanese. During the initial phase of the Malayan Campaign, Percival can only be accused partly (due to joint responsibility with the British High Command at London) for not initiating Operation MATADOR when the Japanese actually started landing.

In early April 1941, the GOC 9th Indian Division, in consultation with brigadiers Key and Painter, issued from Kuala Lumpur a lengthy memorandum about the nature of training to be initiated by the 8th and 22nd Infantry Brigades. What is interesting is that special emphasis was placed by the 9th Infantry Division's training memorandum on how to counter probable Japanese chemical warfare techniques. The 9th Indian Infantry Division's command assumed that both the Japanese air force and the IJA would conduct chemical warfare. It was feared that the Japanese air force, in addition to dropping high explosive bombs, could carry out an aerial spray of poisonous chemicals (including mustard gas). In the event of chemical bombing, the training orders noted that the soldiers should attempt to avoid it by concealment and dispersing. Also, gas detectors were to be provided to the AA defensive posts. This was a typical case of the Indian Army adapting for the wrong war and hence adopting unnecessary techniques. For AA fire, it was noted that provisions should be made for LMGs. It was calculated that fire from LMGs and rifles on Japanese aircraft flying below 1,500 feet for ground strafing would be effective. It was noted that special care should be taken to protect the British officers' mess and the barracks of the British soldiers.<sup>38</sup> Such a racial bias obviously did not bode well for the motivation of the division's personnel, especially

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37 Ibid., pp. 1–2.

38 War Diary of the 9th Indian Division, Part 1, Appendices 19 & 20, pp. 38–39.

when the bulk of them were actually Indians. In the 9th Indian Division's Training Instructions Number 1 of 1941 (which was partly derived from Malaya Command Training Instructions of 1941 and Divisional Headquarters Standing Orders) special emphasis was placed on the communications aspects.

Nevertheless, some officers concentrated on the job at hand. Brigadier W. Carpendale, Commanding Officer (CO) of the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade, noted: 'I asked if unit representatives could be sent to a jungle Warfare School. Was informed that such a School did not exist, and that it was not proposed to start one'.<sup>39</sup> Next, Carpendale requested the issue of practice ammunition to continue training of the Bren Gunners, 3- and 2-inch mortar detachments, tracer ammunition for AA guns and .45 for Tommy Guns. Due to the ammunition situation in Malaya, Carpendale could only get the requested items in October 1941. However, tracer ammunition was never received. Hence, no AA gun training could be carried out. After a fortnight, unit representatives were sent off for a week's attachment to units of the 11th Indian Division (the 6th and 15th Infantry Brigades) at Sungei Patani and Tanjong Pau.<sup>40</sup>

In Carpendale's own words:

Very little was learnt by them, as most units were engaged in digging on the JITRA position. One party was shown a demonstration of 'cutting' through forest. All we had available in the way of notes on jungle warfare was a pamphlet produced by the MALAYA COMD. This did not give many real hints on minor tactics, and as far as I can remember, only generalized.... STEWART, unfortunately was ill at the time and was not available. I was also informed that all his ideas were not agreed with, and that the 28 Bde. were expected to produce some ideas of their own in due course for the benefit of the Corps. In fact, we were to carry on under our own steam.<sup>41</sup>

However, Carpendale, being a resourceful commander, attempted to initiate some training on his own. He carried out a detailed reconnaissance of the surrounding region with the commanding officers of the three battalions in order to modify the training regimen to suit the physical environment of Malaya. They found out that there was only one road and that it was impossible to get the vehicles or the carriers out of the road into the rubber plantation except by the plantation roads, of which there were several. In general, on either side of

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39 Carpendale, Report on Operations of 11 Indian Division in Kedah and Perak, p. 1.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

the road were ditches full of water. Northwards to Taiping, there were paddy fields on either side of the road and tin mining areas south of Ipoh. Overall, vehicular movement off the road was extremely limited if not impossible.<sup>42</sup>

Carpendale realized that the thick jungle country could only be traversed by the infantry cutting its way through the forest whenever necessary. And the infantry could move through the rubber plantation and the paddy fields on both sides of the road. So, while the MT would move along the road, the countryside on either side of the road should be dominated by the infantry moving with confidence. This training was emphasized during the platoon training period which operated for a month during September 1941. The company training lasted till the early part of November when all field training had to cease due to the 12th Infantry Brigade exercise.<sup>43</sup> So, Carpendale had hit upon the right training procedure but there was not adequate time for the troops to absorb it.

About the training regulations, Carpendale noted:

We found that the formations of platoons and companies as laid down in section training and the various GHQ (India) pamphlets and training memos (Battle Drill), were perfectly suitable, except that intervals and distances had to be reduced to visibility distance, which in rubber was from 50–80 yards, in scrub less, in thick forest single file and in paddy normal. The 'patrol' formation for a section was found to be the most suitable for forward sections as the section was divided into three groups, and file for rear sections. The extended line was never used as we found that with sections at full war establishment it was too difficult for the section commander to control. It was most noticeable that in the early stages the tendency was for men to 'bunch' when in rubber or forest. This may have been due to suddenly having to work in semi-darkness. By putting an 'enemy' up against troops in such country, it was brought home to them that they were liable to attack from any direction, and at very close range, and that it was vital to remain dispersed with scouts out at visibility distance in all directions to avoid being surprised.<sup>44</sup>

One can conclude that though the Indian formations had no specific jungle training regulations at their disposal, resourceful commanders were ready to improvise, if necessary. And, the general training regulations issued by GHQ

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42 Ibid., p. 2.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

India were suited to conducting Small War. The war which unfolded in Malaya from 7 December 1941 onwards had several similarities with the Small War which the Indian Army had conducted for more than a century along the North-West Frontier. The problem with the Indian units in Malaya in late 1941 was that they were not adequately trained even in the basic principles of Small War because of the rapid expansion of the Indian Army. This resulted in the presence of raw recruits in the ranks and outflow of experienced personnel, NCOs and VCOs due to the necessity of forming cadres for raising new units.

The 11th Infantry Division rated the IJA as somewhere in between the Italian and Afghan armies.<sup>45</sup> H. Gordon Bennett, commanding officer (CO) of the 8th Australian Division, assumed that the Japanese soldiers would not be well trained.<sup>46</sup> Colonel Masanobu Tsuji wrote in his account: 'Prior to the outbreak of war in the Pacific, I was a staff officer of the Imperial General Headquarters, and at the end of 1940 was assigned to prepare plans for operations in Malaya. Just before the actual commencement of hostilities there, we carried out maneuvers in tropical warfare in southern Indochina'.<sup>47</sup> Despite Tsuji's assertion, the small period of training for conducting tropical warfare did not make the IJA specialists in jungle warfare. John A. English asserts that the IJA was as much concerned with conducting cold weather operations in Manchuria as it was with assaulting beaches in the tropical regions of Asia-Pacific region. He continues that the divisions earmarked for invading Malaya had previously fought only in the cold climate of Manchuria.<sup>48</sup> We could argue that the Japanese soldiers in general were veterans of many campaigns and capable of adapting to different ecological conditions by adopting new tactical procedures.

In general, the training and equipment of the IJA were well suited for close-quarter combat in a 'closed' country like Malaya. The Japanese infantry was trained well to use their bayonets. The IJA's infantry was equipped with the 6.8-mm Ariska 38 Mauser five shot type. When the campaign started, the IJA was in the process of replacing the above-mentioned infantry rifle with the 1919 Model which fired a 7.7-mm cartridge. But this process was not completed.<sup>49</sup>

45 Moreman, *The Jungle, the Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War*, p. 22.

46 Lodge, *The Fall of General Gordon Bennett*, p. 50.

47 Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective: The Capture of Singapore, 1942*, ed. by H.V. Howe, tr. by Margaret E. Lake (1997, reprint, Gloucestershire: Spellmount, 2007), p. xvii.

48 John A. English, *On Infantry* (1981, reprint, New York: Praeger, 1984), pp. 156–57.

49 Lieutenant-Colonel Paul W. Thompson, 'The Jap Army in Action: The Fight for Malaya', in Thompson, Lieutenant-Colonel Harold Doud, Lieutenant John Scofield et. al., *How the Jap Army Fights* (1942, reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1943). Information under Photo 11.

The regular bullet used in the rifle and in light and heavy machine guns was a 6.5-mm pointed Spitzer type nickel steel coated lead projectile which caused a small wound.<sup>50</sup> In general, the Japanese infantry, compared to the Commonwealth infantry, carried a larger proportion of grenade dischargers and submachine guns. Most of the riflemen had grenade dischargers (also known as knee mortars) which provided organic fire support to the small units.<sup>51</sup> The Japanese used Heavy Grenade Thrower Model 89. The rate of fire was 10 shots per minute when operated by a single soldier and 20 shots per minute when operated by two men.<sup>52</sup>

The Japanese infantry had the Nambu light machine gun (LMG) Model 92 which was a gas-operated air-cooled hopper-fed gun with a bipod support fixed permanently to the piece near the muzzle. At times, a tripod was also fixed (the legs of the bipod were folded back to the barrel) and then the gun could be raised four feet from the ground. The tripod had both elevating and traversing devices and the gun could be used against low-flying slow aircraft. At least some of the Japanese infantry used the Heavy Machine Gun Model 92 (1932). The Japanese used four types of mortars. The 90-mm Model 94 Mortar was most common. Its maximum range was 4,155 yards and minimum range was 612 yards.<sup>53</sup>

For heavy fire support, the Japanese infantry had the 70-mm Infantry Battalion Rifled Gun Model 92. It was really effective between 300 to 1,500 yards. High explosive, shrapnel and smoke shells were fired. The rate of fire was 10 rounds per minute.<sup>54</sup> The ammunition boxes were carried on shoulder packs which left the arms free for negotiating difficult terrain and allowed greater freedom of action under fire. Thus, the advance elements even when they were held in check by hostile soldiers had access to an ammunition supply. This was also true for the water supply to the advance elements as the soldiers had large canteens full of water strapped to their backs. Again, most of the Japanese soldiers landed in north Malaya without adequate rations but got aid from the Fifth Columnists. Actually, a Japanese infantry soldier was almost self-sufficient as regards food supply. Each man carried one day's emergency supply

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50 *Notes on Japanese Warfare on the Malayan Front, Information Bulletin No. 6*, Military Intelligence Division, War Department, Washington DC, 9 Jan. 1942, p. 3.

51 Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore: 1940–42* (2005, reprint, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2006), p. 137.

52 *Notes on Japanese Warfare on the Malayan Front, Information Bulletin No. 6*, p. 3.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6.

54 Thompson, 'The Jap Army in Action: The Fight for Malaya', in Thompson, *et. al.*, *How the Jap Army Fights*, Information under Photo 111; *Notes on Japanese Warfare on the Malayan Front, Information Bulletin No. 6*, pp. 6–7.

and five days' supply of rice. The Japanese were able to live off the rich land of Malaya.<sup>55</sup> But they faced enormous difficulties in supplying themselves in 1944 when warfare became attritional due to the hardening of the Commonwealth defence as a result of better equipped and trained troops, and the jungle country of the Arakan and New Guinea were not as easily exploitable for supplies as China or Malaya.

The Japanese invasion force was led by Lieutenant-General 'Tiger' Tomoyuki Yamashita. He was appointed CO of the 25th Japanese Army on 6 November 1941. Colonel Masanobu Tsuji (Chief of Operations and Planning Staff of the 25th Army during the Malayan Campaign) in his memoirs wrote:

Up to this time Lieutenant-General Iida had put heart and soul into the work of preparation under the impression that he would be given command of the military operations in Malaya. However, when General Yamashita was appointed to the position, Iida was appointed Commander of the 15th Army and ordered to attack Burma. In the sweltering heat of Saigon, for two months he had studied the map of Malaya, planning a campaign there.... It appears that in the selection of personnel General Iida was not as highly regarded by Army Headquarters as was General Yamashita but his capacity for generalship was certainly not inferior.<sup>56</sup>

In the course of the Malayan Campaign, Yamashita would prove that the trust placed in him by the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters was indeed not misplaced. About the other important commander involved in the Malayan Campaign, Tsuji wrote that Suzuki, the Chief of Staff, was a man of great talent who had been top of his classes from the Cadet School to the Military College. He was a bright cheerful person, who harmonized well with tens of thousands of people. He was well informed in the conduct of business.<sup>57</sup>

Table 3.3 provides detail about the Japanese forces involved in their Southern advance. Each Japanese army comprised roughly three to four divisions. So, a Japanese army was equivalent to an Australian, American, British and German corps. The Imperial Guards Division was called the Prince's Forces and was concentrated in the environs of Saigon. The CO of this division was Lieutenant-General Nishimura. The Chief of Staff, Colonel Imai, was previously the

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55 *Notes on Japanese Warfare on the Malayan Front, Information Bulletin No. 6*, p. 8; English, *On Infantry*, p. 157.

56 Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective*, pp. 25, 27.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Instructor in Military Tactics at the Army College. The conscripts for this division were selected from all parts of Japan. Most of the recruits to this division were around six feet tall and few, if any, wore glasses.<sup>58</sup> So, physically, they were the best. However, the division had not seen any active service since the Russo-Japanese War and concentrated on ceremonial duties. Additionally, the staff officers had a tendency to disobey their superior, the Army Commander.<sup>59</sup> Colonel Tsuji wrote about the much vaunted Imperial Guards Division:

When they were allotted to the 5th Army, the Army Commander indicated to the divisional commander that his troops required more training, which however was undertaken in such a half-hearted manner that Army Headquarters staff was doubtful whether the division would be able to stand up to its important task. The officers in charge of each detachment in the division nevertheless reported that their troops were up to fighting standards. The best battalion of the division appeared to be that led by Major Hidesaburo Take-no-Uchi. He was one of the few intimates among my many classmates at Ichigaya Military College.<sup>60</sup>

The IJA's 5th Division was a specialist formation. It had concentrated on amphibious operations and had conducted war in China since 1937. And the 18th Japanese Division was a veteran unit strengthened with extra allotments of light artillery and combat engineers for bridging and allowing the formation to move through difficult terrain.<sup>61</sup>

The Japanese in Malaya, as in Hong Kong, wore light uniforms: cotton shorts and rubber-soled shoes. Their cross-country mobility was remarkable.<sup>62</sup> The Japanese infantry soldiers also wore rubber belts which could be inflated for crossing the rivers.<sup>63</sup> Their rifle companies were experts in infiltration and flanking movements off the roads. The predominance of light calibre easily-handled weapons, plus the Japanese soldiers' light equipment, fitness and simplicity of rations and their capacity for long marches, etc. all enabled them to move through the jungle and conduct repeatedly wide outflanking 'hooks' against the heavily-laden road-bound Commonwealth troops. Japanese

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58 Carl Bridge, 'The Malayan Campaign, 1941–42, in International Perspective', in Nick Smart (ed.), *The Second World War* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), p. 99.

59 Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective*, pp. 23–24.

60 Ibid., p. 24.

61 Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*, pp. 135–36.

62 Ian Morrison, *Malayan Postscript* (London: Faber and Faber, Mcmxliii), p. 78.

63 *Notes on Japanese Warfare on the Malayan Front, Information Bulletin No. 6*, p. 3.



topographical knowledge regarding Malaya, as in the case of Hong Kong, was excellent and up to date.<sup>64</sup> The British Official History suggests that there were few civilian Japanese in pre-war Malaya. Some were businessmen and others were barbers and photographers. The businessmen owned rubber estates and mines. They were allowed to operate a direct service of freight ships from Malaya to Japan. Thus they had an intimate knowledge of the coastline. A number of executives in such plantations were serving and retired Japanese armed forces officers, and they organized an espionage service and were aware of all the defensive works constructed in Malaya.<sup>65</sup>

The 25th Japanese Army was supported by the 3rd Air Corps with some 612 aircraft.<sup>66</sup> Table 3.2 provides an idea of the air assets available to Percival for defending the air space of Malaya and Singapore. The single-seater Buffalo was no match against the Japanese fighters. While the rate of climb of the Zero fighter to 13,000 feet was 4.3 minutes, for the Buffalo it was about 6.1 minutes. At 10,000 feet, the speed of the Japanese naval fighter Zero was 315 miles per hour, while the Buffalo achieved a maximum of 270. At 20,000 feet, the Zero cruised at 295 and the Buffalo's maximum was less than 292. The Vildebeeste aircraft was considered obsolete.<sup>67</sup> The Japanese pilots were enterprising and skilful and their high-level bombing was good. The Hurricanes arrived too late and in insufficient numbers to win back air superiority.<sup>68</sup>

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64 Report by Major H.P. Thomas, Operations in Malaya and Singapore, 30 May 1942, p. 4, CAB 66/26/44, PRO, Kew, UK; English, *On Infantry*, p. 157.

65 Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 156. The local Japanese population in pre-war Malaya numbered 6,000. Clifford Kinvig, 'General Percival and the Fall of Singapore', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 245.

66 Hisayuki Yokoyama, 'Air Operational Leadership in the Southern Front: Imperial Army Aviation's trial to be an "air force" in the Malaya offensive air operation', in Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War: 1941-45* (Oxon: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 141. There were 459 Japanese Army planes and 158 Japanese Navy planes. Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective*, p. 28. According to the official history of the Southern Army, the 3rd Air Group deployed in French Indo-China before the war had 430 aircraft. *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 9.

67 Despatch on the Far East, by Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, 8 Sept. 1942, Appendices M and O, pp. 71-72, CAB 66/28/33, PRO, Kew, UK.

68 Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, p. 7.



TABLE 3.1 *Strength of the Commonwealth ground force in Malaya on 7 December 1941*

Branch/Infantry battalions	Number	Remarks
British	6	Including 1 Machine-Gun Battalion
Indian	18	
Australian	6	
Malay	1	
Total	31	
Volunteer Battalions	10	
Johore Military Force Battalion	1	
Indian States Force Battalion	5	
Artillery		
Field Regiment	7	5 of 24 guns and 2 of 16 guns
Mountain Regiment	1	24 guns
Anti-Tank Regiment	2	1 of 48 guns and 1 of 36 guns
Anti-Tank Battery	2	1 of 8 Breda Guns and 1 of 6 2-pounders
Total Strength		
Regular		
Indian	37,191	
British	19,391	
Australian	15,279	
Miscellaneous non-Indian Asian Troops	4,482	
Total	76,343	
Volunteers		
Asians (excluding Indians)	7,395	
British	2,430	
Indian	727	
Total	10,552	
Grand Total	86,895	Royal Engineers, Mechanical Transport, Signals and Ancillary Units are excluded

*Note:* Including LOC troops and administrative personnel, total number of soldiers available to GOC Malaya numbered to 138,000 men.

*Source:* Despatch on the Far East, by Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, 8 Sept. 1942, Appendix G, Summary of Strength of Army in Malaya, 7 December 1942, p. 67, CAB 66/28/33, PRO, Kew, UK; Andrew Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941: The Fall of a Fighting Empire* (London: Robert Hale, 1992), p. 63.

TABLE 3.2 *Strength and disposition of the RAF and RAAF at Malaya on 7 December 1941*

Aerodrome	Squadron number	Type	Strength	Remarks
Alor Star	62	Blenheim I (B)	11	
Sungei Patani	21	Buffalo Blenheim I (F)	12	
	RAAF No. 27		12	
Kota Bahru	1	Hudson	12	
	RAAF No. 36	Vildebeeste	6	
Gong Kedah	100	Vildebeeste	6	
Kuantan	60	Blenheim I (B)	8	
	8	Hudson	8	
	RAAF 36	Vildebeeste	6	
Tengah	34	Blenheim IV	16	
Kallang	243	Buffalo	32	
	488			
Sembawang	8	Hudson	4	
	RAAF No. 453	Buffalo	16	
Seletar	105	Vildebeeste	6	No. 51 is a maintenance unit. Another maintenance unit No. 153 was at Kuala Lumpur Total= 158 (Frontline Strength excluding the maintenance units) Reserve Aircraft  28 were out of action due to engine trouble  Total Reserve Aircraft= 88
	205	Catalina	3	
	51			
		Blenheim I and IV	15	
		Buffalo	52	
		Hudson	7	
		Vildebeeste	12	
		Catalina	2	

*Source:* Despatch on the Far East, by Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, 8 Sept. 1942, Appendix M, pp. 70–1, CAB 66/28/33, PRO, Kew, UK.

TABLE 3.3 *Organization of the Imperial Japanese Army during the Malayan Campaign*

Name of the unit	Strength of the unit	Commander of the unit	Remarks
25th Army	60,000	Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita	Yamashita's superior was Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Army Field-Marshal Count Terauchi
Imperial Guards Division	13,000	Lieutenant-General Takuro Nishimura	
5th Division	16,000	Lieutenant-General Takuro Matsui	
18th Division	13,000	Lieutenant-General Renya Mutaguchi	
56th Division			Transferred to 15th Army for the Burma Campaign
3rd Tank Brigade	80 Tanks		In addition, 40 armoured cars were also available
Artillery			
Independent Quick Firing Guns	44 Guns		
Independent Mountain Guns Regiment	24 Guns		
Heavy Field Guns	2 Regiments		One regiment had 48 15-cm howitzers and another regiment had 16 10-cm guns.
Anti-Aircraft Guns Detachment	68 Guns		
Engineers	9 Companies		
Railway Detachments	4 Regiments		
Army Communication Corps	4 Telegraph and Telephone Companies and 8 Wireless Platoons		
Close Quarter Attack troops	2 Battalions		24 Mortars
Bridging Train	3 Companies		In addition, there were 3 Companies of River Crossing troops

Source: Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective: The Capture of Singapore, 1942*, ed. by H.V. Howe, tr. by Margaret E. Lake (1997, reprint, Gloucestershire: Spellmount, 2007), pp. 27–8.

### Japanese Advance and Commonwealth Retreat

In this hour of trial the General Officer Commanding calls upon all ranks of Malaya Command for a determined and sustained effort to safeguard Malaya and the adjoining British territories. The eyes of the Empire are upon us. Our whole position in the Far East is at stake. The struggle may be long and grim but let all resolve to stand fast come what may and to prove ourselves worthy of the great trust which has been placed in us.

Special Order of the Day dated 10 December 1941, issued by Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival<sup>69</sup>

Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn divide the Malayan Campaign into three phases. Phase I involved the battle for north Malaya which lasted from 8 December 1941 to 18 December 1941. Phase II involved the battle for central Malaya which lasted from 23 December 1941 to 8 January 1942. And finally, the battle for south Malaya comprised Phase III which lasted from 4 to 18 February 1942.<sup>70</sup> The reality was much messier.

Robert Brooke-Popham failed to take a limited risk and initiate MATADOR (the British-Indian troops advancing to Singora and preparing a defensive line there)<sup>71</sup> when the Japanese ships were sighted on 6 December. At this point in time, the British military high command in Malaya was confused. The Japanese ships were steaming west towards the Gulf of Siam. But whether their objective was Cambodia or Siam or Malaya was not clear. When on late 7 December it became clear that the Japanese were aiming to invade Malaya, Brooke-Popham considered that it was already too late to launch MATADOR.<sup>72</sup> Andrew Gilchrist claims that if MATADOR had been launched then the situation could have been saved.<sup>73</sup> As regards this issue, the jury is still undecided.

69 Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', *Second Supplement to the London Gazette*, 20 Feb. 1948, No. 38215, p. 1273.

70 Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, pp. xxi–xxii.

71 The plan was that the 11th Indian Division would advance across the border to hold the Singora area and fight defensively on the Patani-Kroh route. This would allow the defenders to block the main road from Singora via the Haad Yai junction into Kedah and the secondary road from Patani via Yala to Kroh in north Perak. Such limited offensive actions, assumed the proponents of MATADOR plan, would block the Japanese around Singora. Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 107.

72 Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, pp. 54–55.

73 Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941*, pp. 119, 129.

The Japanese landed at Kota Bahru in North-East Kelantan on the night of 6/7 December 1941.<sup>74</sup> At about 2345 hours on 7 December 1941, the beach defence troops on Badang and Sabak beaches reported ships anchoring off the coast. When the beach defence artillery opened fire, the Japanese ships started shelling. At 0025 hours on 8 December, the Japanese troops started landing at the junction of Badang and Sabak beaches. By 0100 hours, the pillboxes manned by the 3rd Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment were captured. The 2nd Battalion of the 12th FFR (less one company which was west of the Kelantan River) and 73rd Field Battery were ordered up from Chong Dong with orders to prevent any infiltration towards the aerodrome and initiate immediate counter-attacks.<sup>75</sup>

The coastal area was intersected by creeks and streams and there were extensive swamps and stretches of jungle.<sup>76</sup> On the east coast of Malaya, an elaborate system of beach defence was constructed in the Kota Bahru area and in Kuantan. But the 8th and the 22nd Indian brigades lacked the strength both to man all the pillboxes and provide adequate reserves for launching a timely counter-attack. In general, the 8th Indian Infantry Brigade was in charge of defending six beaches, each about five miles in length, and a river front of 10 miles plus three aerodromes. The 2nd Baluch in the 8th Brigade was in charge of the coastal sector from the River Besut to the River Kenassin. This battalion was in charge of holding 18 miles of defence. The central sector of the Baluch defence line was wooded and swampy. Though pillboxes and dugouts were constructed, they could not all be occupied permanently because of inadequate manpower. Next to it was the 3rd Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment which held the region from the Kenassian River to Kelantan. The Commonwealth ground forces were assured that Japanese landings would be broken up by air action.<sup>77</sup> However, when Japanese landings occurred, the RAF was absent.

On Sunday, 7 December, the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade was placed at two hours' notice to move. An order was also received in the afternoon that Jitra was to be occupied.<sup>78</sup> Overall, the 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade was in charge of watching two long beaches and an aerodrome in the Kuantan area.<sup>79</sup> The

74 Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, p. 5.

75 Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1268.

76 Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, p. 5.

77 Ibid., p. 3; Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, p. 110; Firth, *History of the 2nd/10th Baluch in Malayan Campaign*, p. 3.

78 Carpendale, *Report on Operations of 11 Indian Division in Kedah and Perak*, p. 9.

79 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, p. 110.

22nd Indian Infantry Brigade had two Indian infantry battalions for this purpose. The 2nd Battalion of the 18th Royal Gurkha Rifles (RGR) was tasked to defend 10 miles of beach frontage, extending from the mouth of the Kuantan River in the south to the mouth of the Balok River in the north. Further, the unit was ordered to construct pillboxes, wire and anti-tank obstacles in the area under its command. The 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikhs was ordered to defend the approach to the Kuantan and Soi Rivers, including the ferry and the road approach to Pekan with two companies. One company provided ground and AA defence to the aerodrome. Two platoons were held in reserve. The battalion was further ordered that it might have to deal with airborne landings or incursions on the LOCs from the Pahang River in the south up to the jungle tracks in the north. The unit also had to prepare itself to launch counter-attacks.<sup>80</sup> Due to the shortage of Bren Guns, the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment continued to use Lewis Guns (mounted in twins on a tripod) for AA defence. But the weapon stopped after the first burst.<sup>81</sup>

The CO of the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment was Lieutenant-Colonel John Parkins. The physically short officer (five feet three inches in height) had combat experience in the North-West Frontier of India and proved to be a good leader of the men. Limited training in jungle warfare was carried out because the emphasis was on the construction of fixed defence works. This was a tactical mistake made by the higher military authorities. Instead of fixed ground defences, the focus should have been on carrying out manoeuvres by small parties in the jungle country. In this sphere, the Commonwealth troops proved deficient vis-à-vis the IJA's infantry which bypassed the fixed defences and repeatedly outflanked the defensive units by moving across them through the jungle country. However, this Indian battalion was physically fit.<sup>82</sup> Harbakhsh Singh, who was the CO of the Manjha Sikh Company of this unit, noted in his memoirs: 'The emphasis was on physical fitness and it is my firm belief that physical fitness of a soldier contributes 90 per cent to his military efficiency'.<sup>83</sup> And about the not so useful fixed defence, Harbakhsh Singh said:

Wherever we were in Malaya, whether on the march, or in camp, because of Japanese air supremacy, the digging of slit-trenches against air attacks was the order of the day. But we faced two handicaps nearer the coast-line: the slit trenches used to fill up with water when the tide rose; and

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80 Khanna and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 156.

81 Singh, *In the Line of Duty*, p. 91.

82 Khanna and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage*, pp. 156–57.

83 Singh, *In the Line of Duty*, p. 85.

secondly, they were a trap for the ever so common snakes in the tropics. We knew from experience, that good ninety percent of the snakes were non-poisonous, but the fear of them was universal. Whenever there were enemy air raids, the men would rush to their trenches where many would get bitten by snakes.<sup>84</sup>

T.R. Moreman notes that in general the men had an exaggerated fear of jungle flora and fauna — snakes, monkeys and wild tigers. Tropical diseases, too, emerged as a major problem. What was required was a lengthy period of acclimatization, so that the soldiers could learn the jungle know-how, which involved finding potable water, making shelters from local materials, tracking and making booby traps.<sup>85</sup> The Commonwealth troops would acquire these skills after rigorous training only in late 1944.

On 7 December 1941, the dispositions of the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment was as follows: B Company with mortars and MG detachments held the Taj Line and the Balat Bridge; C Company with one MG Section covered the ferry and river junction defences, the headquarters of the C Company at M.S. 3.5 on Kuantut-Jeruntut Road and one platoon formed a bridgehead on the east bank. The C Company also established observation posts along the Balat River. Thus, A Company with MG Section, two 18-pounders and one carrier Section provided protection to the aerodrome; Headquarters Company near M.S. 6.5 beside the rubber plantation; and D Company was in reserve.<sup>86</sup>

On 8 December, the commander of the Kelantan Front moved up his reserve unit: the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR with some anti-tank guns from Peringat. At 1030 hours, the 2nd Battalion of the 12th FFR (less two companies) was ordered to counter-attack from the south and the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR from the north. However, thick waterlogged countryside and almost impassable creeks behind the beaches created problems for the counter-attacking troops. And the counter-attack came to a halt at 1700 hours. Worse, at about 1630 hours, the RAF Station Commander decided that Kota Bahru aerodrome was no longer fit to operate aircraft and obtained permission from the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) Far East to evacuate the aerodrome. The Commonwealth ground forces were denied the support of any air cover against the marauding Japanese air force. By 1900 hours, more Japanese ships were reported at Sabang Beach and the Japanese started to infiltrate along the beaches in the Kota Bahru area. The commander of the Kelantan Force decided

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84 Ibid., p. 89.

85 Moreman, *The Jungle, the Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War*, pp. 13–4.

86 Khanna and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 157.

to withdraw to a line east of Kota Bahru. That night was dark with heavy rain-fall. In the ensuing confusion, the command system broke down and part of the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR was left behind.<sup>87</sup>

One British officer named Major H.P. Thomas noted:

The landing at Kota Bahru on night the 6/7th December, under the conditions prevailing at the time, indicated a thorough mastery of this type of operation. It is doubtful whether any staff but the Japanese would have considered feasible an attempt at this season of the year and in the face of highly organized beach defences. Their losses were very roughly estimated at 1,500 killed. No Japanese planes appeared until the forenoon of the 8th December, while our Hudsons and Buffaloes attacked and burnt out two transports and destroyed many landing craft. Once ashore in strength, it was only a matter of hours before they succeeded in worming their way to the rear of the beach defences.<sup>88</sup>

Overboldness on part of the Japanese did pay them dividends in this case. The Takumi Detached Force of the 18th Division which successfully conducted the assault landing at Kota Bahru at 0130 hours on 8 December did, however, suffer heavy casualties.<sup>89</sup> 8 December was an eventful day. In the 3rd Indian Corps area, the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to move forward from Ipoh and Taiping to Alor Star aerodrome and this brigade came under the CO of the 11th Indian Division.<sup>90</sup> Defence of north Malaya was the basic objective of the 11th Indian Division.

Brigadier W. Carpendale noted the Clausewitzian 'fog' and 'friction' clouded the already creaking Malaya Command even at the beginning of the battle:

On Monday 8 December about midday we heard that Singapore had been bombed and that the Japanese were attacking Kota Bahru. By 1400 hours I had received no orders so rang up Corps HQ at Kuala Lumpur and was answered by Brigadier... Smith the DQMG, who was surprised to hear that we were still at Ipoh. After a few minutes delay he stated that written

87 Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', pp. 1269–70.

88 Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, p. 5.

89 Akashi Yoji, 'General Yamashita Tomoyuki: Commander of the Twenty-Fifth Army', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 191.

90 Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1270.



orders were on the way by special D/R but that I should start moving at once. As we had heard nothing about the bombing of Alor Star aerodrome, which had also taken place, nor the enemy landing at Singora, and still being in Corps reserve, I asked which direction I was to move. I thought we might be moved to the East Coast, as the 5th Field Regiment and our anti-tank battery had moved there. I was told to move north, and was also informed that trains were waiting at Ipoh railway station for the marching parties of 1st and 2nd Gurkhas, and at Taiping for the 9th Gurkhas.<sup>91</sup>

The original aim was that the KROHCOL (a column which operated on the Kroh-Patani Road) under Lieutenant-Colonel H.D. Moorhead should comprise the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment and 5th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment from Penang, one company of sappers and miners, one field ambulance and the 10th Mountain Battery from the North Kedah. The 5th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment moved up to Kroh (a small town on the Malayan side of the border) on 8 December leaving a company at Penang. The responsibility for the Kroh Front on 8 December was delegated by the commander of the 3rd Indian Corps to the commander of the 11th Indian Division. At 1330 hours on 8 December, the commander of KROHCOL was ordered to occupy the Ledge position some 40 miles beyond the frontier. The Ledge was a position on the road which ran from Patani, a small Thai port south of Singora. The road continued to west Malaya. At the Ledge, the road was cut from steep hillside and the Commonwealth troops hoped that it could be blocked by well-placed explosives. It was hoped that the Thais would display benevolent neutrality. However, optimism among the British officers vanished as soon as the vanguard of the KROHCOL moved across the frontiers at 1500 hrs. They were engaged by Thais armed with light automatics, Japanese rifles and snipers. To add to this, roadblocks delayed the column. By nightfall, the column had advanced only three miles.<sup>92</sup>

As an alternative to MATADOR, there was another plan for a much more limited offensive action. This plan was named as Operation SANDWICH. It involved a forward move by road of the 6th Indian Infantry Brigade and 1st Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment to Singora for destroying the port facilities in the latter place. Then, this force would retreat to Jitra, carrying out demolitions along

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91 Carpendale, Report on Operations of 11 Indian Division in Kedah and Perak, p. 9.

92 Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1269; Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, pp. 43–44.

the route.<sup>93</sup> On the North Kedah Front, a mechanized column comprising two companies and the carriers of 1st Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment with some anti-tank guns and engineers crossed the Thai frontier at 1730 hours on 8 December. Their aim was Singora (Songkhla) to harass and delay the Japanese. Singora was an east coast Thai port with a gentle sloping beach. It had an airfield surrounded by rice fields.<sup>94</sup> An armoured train with a detachment of the 2nd Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment and some engineers advanced into Thailand from Padang Besar in Perlis. The Singora column reached Ban Sadao at dusk, some 10 miles north of the frontier. There, it halted and took position north of the village. At about 2130 hours, it confronted a Japanese mechanized column headed by tanks and moving in close formation with headlights on. The two leading tanks were knocked out by anti-tank guns but then the Japanese infantry swarmed around and started an enveloping movement. Then, the Singora Column was withdrawn through Kampong Imam and destroyed three bridges during its retreat. The armoured train party reached Klong Gnea in Thailand and destroyed a large bridge before withdrawing to Padang Besar.<sup>95</sup> Overall, the senior British officers wasted time and assets in launching pinprick attacks across the Thai frontier when things were heating up along the beaches on the east coast of north Malaya.

By the evening of 8 December, the Japanese 5th Division had completed its concentration in the Singora-Patani area. The 5th Division's order was to advance rapidly southwards to the line of the Perak River. This division started moving south by two roads: Singora to Alor Star and Patani to Kroh. The 9th Infantry Brigade, supported by a tank battalion and a battalion of field artillery, moved down the Alor Star Road with orders to destroy the Commonwealth force at Jitra. The 42nd Infantry Regiment with two companies of light tanks and a battery of field artillery moved by the Kroh Road with the objective of cutting the communications of the Allied units north of the Perak River.<sup>96</sup>

Kuantan was a small port on the east coast of Malaya some two hundred miles from Singapore. There was a recently constructed airfield at Kuantan<sup>97</sup> where there were 10 Hudsons, eight Blenheims, two Vildebeestes and a Swordfish biplane. The ground staff arrived on 4 December. Table 3.4 shows the various types and number of aircraft available to the Commonwealth

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93 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, p. 108.

94 Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, p. 42.

95 Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1269.

96 Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 203.

97 Morrison, *Malayan Postscript*, p. 65.

Command between 7 and 24 December in Malaya. On 9 December, at 1100 hours, the Japanese attacked the airport twice with 27 planes each time. The RAF was caught on the ground. Three aircraft were destroyed and five were damaged. The young soldiers of A Company of the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment fought on uselessly with their LMGs and small arms for two hours against the Japanese aerial raiders.<sup>98</sup>

On the Singora Road, the advance of the Japanese column was delayed by the engagement at Ban Sadao and due to demolished bridges. At 0430 hours on 10 December, the Japanese reached the region north of Changlun. The 1st Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment with some artillery and engineers took a position behind a stream south of the Changlun Cross Road. Early on the morning of 10 December, the Japanese made contact with the forward detachments of 1st Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment which comprised the third battalion of the 15th Indian Brigade. The Punjabis retreated southwards. The 15th Indian Brigade's commander, Brigadier Garrett, was ordered by the divisional commander, Major-General D.M. Murray-Lyon (GOC 11th Indian Division), to hold the Japanese north of Asun at least till the morning of 11/12 December. The 2nd Battalion of the 1st GR (less one company) was detached from the 28th Brigade and given to the 15th Indian Brigade. This battalion took over the Asun position and the Punjabis were concentrated forward.<sup>99</sup>

On the morning of 12 December 1941, the Japanese attacked British-Indian units on the Thai border in Kedah. The region between Kedah and Penang was thickly covered with jungle. A wide strip across the coast contained rice fields. Further inland, the undulating country was given to rubber cultivation. The terrain was not suited for mechanized, road-bound units. However, the region along the west coast of Malaya had more well-developed communications compared to the jungle-covered east coast.<sup>100</sup>

On the Kedah Front, the plan for the defence of the Jitra position was to hold it with two brigades forward: the 15th Indian Infantry Brigade on the right and the 6th Indian Infantry Brigade on the left. Of the two forward battalions of the 15th Indian Infantry Brigade, the 2nd Battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment took up an extended position from the hills on the right flank to the main road. On this unit's left was deployed the 1st Leicesters who covered both the main and the Perlis Road. West of the Leicesters, was placed the 2nd East Surreys which happened to be the right battalion of the 6th Indian Infantry Brigade.

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98 Khanna and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage*, pp. 158–59.

99 Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1271; Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 204.

100 Morrison, *Malayan Postscript*, p. 66.

TABLE 3.4 *Operationally serviceable allied aircraft in Malaya from 7 to 24 December 1941*

Type of aircraft	7 Dec.	12 Dec.	17 Dec.	19 Dec.	22 Dec.	24 Dec.
Bombers and Torpedo Bombers	59	45	59	58	49	61
Fighters	72	53	58	53	45	50
Reconnaissance	24	7	12	11	12	13
Flying Boats	3	3	4	4	3	3
Total	158	108	133	126	109	127

*Source:* Despatch on the Far East, by Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, 8 Sept. 1942, Appendix N, p. 72, CAB 66/28/33, PRO, Kew, UK.

The East Surreys covered the wooded Pisang salient forward of the Alor Changlih Canal. On their left, the 2nd Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment covered the region from the railway to the sea. It had permanent positions on the railway and the coast and patrolled the paddy fields and the marsh which intervened between the railway and the coast. The outpost position of the 6th Brigade at Kampong Imam was held by the reserve 1st Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment (less two companies). The 28th Indian Infantry Brigade (less one battalion) was supposed to become divisional reserve on arrival at the Alor Star aerodrome region. The divisional artillery consisted of two batteries of the 155th Field Regiment. Each battery had eight 4.5-inch howitzers. In addition, the 22nd Mountain Regiment (less one battery in Kelantan) and the 80th Anti-Tank Regiment (less one battery in Kelantan) with 16 Bofors plus the 137th Field Regiment (24 25-pounders) comprised the divisional artillery. So it packed a powerful punch. The 3rd Indian Cavalry on paper was the divisional reconnaissance regiment. But it had arrived recently without its armoured vehicles. Moreover, this regiment had only recently handed over its horses. It consisted of three squadrons of dismounted men who were mostly recruits with little training. This regiment had few trained drivers and was armed after arrival in Malaya with a few unarmoured trucks.<sup>101</sup>

The Jitra defensive position was not completed before the Japanese attacked on 11 December. Most of the defensive posts became waterlogged after a week's

<sup>101</sup> Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1270.

heavy rain. The rain also adversely affected demolitions.<sup>102</sup> The Jitra position was selected to protect the Kedah State, the granary of Malaya. The Japanese took advantage of the jungle on the right flank of the imperial defensive position. The enemy, by cutting a passage through the thick foliage, again exploded one of the erroneous ideas of the British that it was impossible to move through the jungle-covered countryside.<sup>103</sup> On 13 December 1941, the Commonwealth troops evacuated Jitra.

The Japanese infantry continued to implement their hitherto successful standard tactics against the sepoys. On the morning of 15 December, a Japanese infantry detachment made a frontal attack on the 3rd Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment and pinned them to that position. Simultaneously, another Japanese detachment of about 200 personnel moved south along a jungle track through Bukit Pachat. This party moved towards Ismail Bridge through a track which was one and a half miles away from the main road. The British officers erroneously assumed that the region west of the main road was too thick with vegetation to deploy troops. At 1300 hours, due to Japanese outflanking moves, it was decided that the brigade's outposts should be withdrawn south of the Ismail Bridge. The withdrawal of the 8th Brigade over the bridge started at 1400 hours. By nightfall, the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR was north of the 3rd Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment south of the bridge. The 2nd Battalion of the 10th Baluch Regiment covered the Ismail Bridge and the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment covered the demolished railway bridge over the River Nal. Finally, the 2nd Battalion of the 12th FFR was astride the main road about one mile north of Ismail Bridge. The brigade headquarters was on the roadside some 50 yards from the Ismail Bridge. The night was wet and the troops had no cover. The shivering troops were forced to lie down in the long, wet jungly grass.<sup>104</sup>

At about 0800 hours on 16 December 1941, the 2nd Battalion of the 12th FFR was withdrawn over the Ismail Bridge. Then, this bridge was destroyed by the sappers. The 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment was withdrawn from Kelantan that evening. The A, B, C and D companies of the 2nd Baluch guarded the destroyed railway bridge over the Kelantan River. The D Company of the 2nd Baluch linked up with 2nd Battalion of the 12th FFR on the bank of Kelantan River. This river, along with the road and railway, offered the Japanese a line of advance towards Kuala Krai. When the Japanese attempted to cross the Nal River in the evening, they were driven back by the 3rd Battalion of the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 1270–71.

<sup>103</sup> Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Firth, *History of the 2nd/10th Baluch in Malayan Campaign*, pp. 11–12.

17th Dogras. Since the Japanese continued to land reinforcements along the west coast of Malaya, the 8th Brigade had no option except to withdraw from Kelantan. To have remained in Kelantan would have meant dependence upon the single-track railway to Kuala Lipis and this could have been cut easily by the Japanese infiltrating parties.<sup>105</sup>

17 December proved to be a quiet day for the 8th Brigade. On 18 December, the Japanese attacked across the main road and infiltrated between the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR and the 3rd Battalion of the 17th Dogras. Some of the Japanese soldiers climbed the trees and threw grenades on the Bren carriers as they passed under the trees. Four carriers of the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR were destroyed. The Japanese showed more skill in using the jungle and tree climbing would become part of training of the Commonwealth soldiers only in 1944. During the afternoon, the 2nd Baluch were ordered to deploy along 41.5 MS in order to provide depth to the position along the main road. In the late afternoon, the 2nd Battalion of the 12th FFR and 3rd Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment broke off contact with the Japanese and marched to Krai. The 272nd Battery (comprising of 4.5-inch howitzers) also left for Krai. The 2nd Battalion of the 12th FFR entrained for Kuantan where they were to join the 22nd Brigade. During the night, the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR was positioned on the right of the 2nd Baluch. The dark night, however, proved to be quiet.<sup>106</sup>

By 20 December, Kelantan was evacuated and the 8th Brigade was withdrawn.<sup>107</sup> On 20 December 1941, the 11th Division withdrew to the Perak River.<sup>108</sup> Percival had to disperse his force throughout the coast of Malaya. He provided the reason for this dispersal: 'On the east coast they had complete liberty of action. I thought a combined sea and air attack against Kuantan was likely, and I could not disregard the possibility of an attack against the east coast of Johore or even against Singapore Island itself. There was also the possibility of an air-borne attack directed against our aerodromes'.<sup>109</sup>

On the east coast, General Yamashita planned that two battalions of the 55th Japanese Infantry Regiment should make a surprise landing at Kuantan around 28 December in order to capture the airfield. On 23 December, Yamashita postponed the operation because he feared that the RAF at Johore and Singapore was not yet reduced sufficiently. The 56th Japanese Infantry

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>107</sup> Khanna and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 160.

<sup>108</sup> Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, p. 5.

<sup>109</sup> Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival, *The War in Malaya* (1949, reprint, Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1957), p. 191.

Regiment after occupying Kuala Krai on 19 December moved along the coast and made contact with lead elements of the 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade north of Kuantan on 23 December. On 26 December 1941, Churchill, then at the White House, suffered a mild heart attack.<sup>110</sup> Whether the disaster unfolding in Malaya had a role in the British Prime Minister's deteriorating heart condition remains unknown.

On 30 December, the 55th Japanese Infantry Regiment was ordered to follow the 56th Japanese Infantry Regiment down the coast towards Kuantan. On 30 December, Percival left Singapore for Kuala Lumpur by road. Percival spent the night with Lewis Heath at Kuala Lumpur and the next day went to the headquarters of the 11th Indian Division at Tapah. The latter place is about 100 miles from Kuala Lumpur. North of the Slim River, Heath and Percival met Stewart, commander of the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade. At Tapah, Percival met Brigadier Paris. Percival was full of praise for him and noted that as usual he was calm and confident, two essential characteristics for a capable military leader, especially during adversity.<sup>111</sup> Percival replaced Murray-Lyon with Paris as CO of the 11th Indian Division. And Paris' position was given to Lieutenant-Colonel I. McA. Stewart.

Percival's operational plan was as follows:

I had calculated that, if we were to prevent the Japanese getting the use of the Central Malaya aerodromes before the mid-January convoy arrived, we must hold him north of the Kuala Kubu road junction until at least 14 January. That would give Paris a depth of seventy miles in which to maneuver during the next fortnight. This he thought he could do without much difficulty, so he was instructed to hold on to the Kampar position for as long as possible and in any case not to fall back behind the Kuala Kubu road junction before 14 January without permission.<sup>112</sup>

But the Japanese threw a spanner in the works.

On 1 January, patrols of the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment reported that west of its position the Kuantan River was fordable. It was realized that the Japanese could cross the river at several possible positions and could cut the road to the rear of the brigade headquarters.<sup>113</sup> Percival had written in his book, which was published after the end of World War II, that no sooner had

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110 Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, p. 78.

111 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, pp. 191–93.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

113 Khanna and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 161.



this decision been taken than a telephone message came through from corps headquarters to the effect that air reconnaissance had reported some small steamers with barges in tow moving south down the Perak Coast that morning. There was a small garrison at Telok Anson and south of that the responsibility for coast defence rested, under the 3rd Indian Corps, with Brigadier R.G. Moir, CO of the LOC area.<sup>114</sup>

On 1 January 1942, the 3rd Cavalry (less one squadron) was transferred from the 11th Division. This unit, along with the 3rd Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment and 73rd Field Battery from the 8th Brigade, was placed under Brigadier Moir. Moir was ordered to prevent Japanese landings at Kuala Selangor. He decided that the best delaying position on the trunk road was two miles north of Tanjong Malim. On 2 January, Percival left for Raub, the headquarters of the 9th Indian Division. The distance from Raub to Kuantan by road is about 150 miles. Major-General A.E. Barstow (GOC 9th Indian Division) had ordered Brigadier G.W.A. Painter, CO of the Kuantan Force, to hold the aerodrome there till 5 January. Barstow at that time was not aware of the convoy bringing reinforcements to Singapore. Percival calculated that the airport must be held till 10 January to prevent the Japanese from using it to interfere with the convoy bound to arrive at Singapore by mid-January.<sup>115</sup> The GOC Malaya's strategy at that time is described by Percival himself in the following words:

Our task was still to defend the Naval Base, and our general strategy of holding the enemy for as long as we could at arm's length from Singapore to enable reinforcements to be brought in had been confirmed by higher authority. We now knew that we might expect to receive an Indian infantry brigade with attached troops during the first few days of January and the whole of the 18th British Division.... In this convoy also were coming fifty Hurricane fighters in crates with their crews. In them lay our first hope of regaining some sort of air superiority.... If the enemy could, before its arrival, be in a position to operate his aircraft from the aerodromes in Central Malaya, especially those at Kuantan and Kuala Lumpur, the scale of that attack would be greatly increased. I felt that we ought to do everything in our power to prevent him doing this, and therein lay the key to our strategy at that stage of the campaign. The convoy was due to reach Singapore about 13–15 January.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 193.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.



On the night of 4/5 January, Paris was ordered to move the 15th Brigade (less 3rd Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment) from Sungkai to Tanjong Malim, the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment to Rawang and the rest of the 11th Division to hold an intermediate position in the Trolak-Slim River area covering the probable river crossings.<sup>117</sup>

At 0300 hours on 7 January 1942, the Japanese initiated heavy artillery fire. In the moonlit night, 10 light Japanese tanks moved across the road. The light tanks were followed by 20 armoured cars and a few medium tanks. The Battle of Slim River had started.<sup>118</sup> On 7 January, General (later Field-Marshal) Viscount Wavell arrived at Singapore by air and, after some discussion, left for Java on 11 January. General Henry Pownall, who had replaced Robert Brooke-Popham (on 27 December), became Wavell's Chief of Staff when American, British, Dutch, Australian Command (ABDACOM) was established on 15 January 1942. Air-Vice Marshal P.C. Maltby arrived as Pownall's Chief of Staff. On 12 January, Maltby became Deputy AOC and Air Chief Marshal Richard Peirse came from Britain to command the Allied air forces. Percival noted that all such high-level reshuffling had an unsettling effect on the Commonwealth troops.<sup>119</sup>

About 66 Hurricanes arrived in Singapore from the much desired convoy. But they were too few and came too late to win back air superiority for the Commonwealth.<sup>120</sup> The Japanese Guards Division occupied the town of Malacca on 14 January. General Nishimura concluded that instead of allowing his men any rest, if he could capture the Muar-Batu Pahat area, it would aid the Japanese force on the trunk road and would raise further the prestige of his division. So he pushed forward the 4th Guards Regiment less one battalion on the right and the 5th Guards Regiment on the left. The former was to occupy the attention of the forces holding Muar town and the latter to make an upstream crossing of the river at night and attack the town from the east. The 4th Guards Regiment was then to make for Batu Pahat along the coast road and the 5th Guards Regiment to advance along the inland road to Yong Peng. And the other battalion of the 4th Guards Regiment was to go by sea down the

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117 Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, pp. 272–73.

118 Singh, *Combat Diary*, p. 112.

119 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, pp. 188–89; Michael Dockrill, 'British Leadership in Air Operations: Malaya and Burma', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, p. 124.

120 Dockrill, 'British Leadership in Air Operations: Malaya and Burma', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, p. 124.

coast, land between Batu Pahat and Rengit and to sever the British LoCs from Batu Pahat down the coast road.<sup>121</sup>

On 15 January 1942, the encounter at Gemas ended. Barstow urged Bennett to prepare lines of retreat. However, Bennett refused to prepare for retreat and believed that what happened to Gemas could be repeated at Batu Anam where he believed the Japanese would attack next. At Bennett's urging on 15 and 16 January, the Australian aircraft and six Glenn Martin bombers manned by the Dutch airmen stationed at Sembawang on Singapore Island attacked Japanese traffic north of Tampin where the trunk road struck inland to Gemas.<sup>122</sup>

On 16 January, the Japanese made contact with the 45th Indian Brigade positioned on the left flank of WESTFORCE in the Muar area in the Johore State of Malaya. Two battalions of the 45th were deployed at Bennett's instruction along the Sungei Muar's winding course. One of these units was the 4th Battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment, which had a company each at Grisek, Panchor and Jorak and fighting patrols north of the river. The other unit was the 7th Battalion of the 6th Rajputana Rifles, which covered the region between Jorak and the mouth of the river. The average visibility in this region was a maximum 30 yards. And their position was surrounded by rubber estates, mangrove swamps, and thick scrub jungle. This unit had two companies north of the river. The river was 400 yards wide and there was no bridge between the forward and rear companies of the 7th Rajputana Rifles. The 7th Rajput Battalion had about 170 soldiers with 12 to 18 months' service and about 600 sepoy with seven to 12 months' service. The two above-mentioned battalions covered 15 and nine miles of the front respectively. The 5th Battalion of the 18th Royal Garhwal was placed in reserve at Bakri with a company forward at Simpang Jeram on the inland road from Muar and a detachment south of Parit Jawa where another road came in from the coast to Bakri. For fire support, the 45th Indian Brigade was allotted the 65th Australian Battery (under Major W.W. Julius) of the 2nd Battalion of the 15th Field Regiment. The 45th Indian Brigade was going to be hit by the much vaunted Japanese Imperial Guards Division.<sup>123</sup>

The principal crossing of the Muar River from the network of roads in Malacca was near the river mouth by ferry to the township of Muar. The banks of the river were covered with jungle. The disposition of two companies of the Rajputana Rifles on the far side of the river was part of Bennett's policy of fol-

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121 Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust, Australia in the War of 1939-45*, Series One, Army, vol. 4 (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957), p. 224.

122 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 223.

123 Ibid., p. 222; 7th Rajputana Rifles, p. 1, 1977-09-62, NAM, London.

lowing an aggressive defence and his plan, if possible, to ambush the advancing Japanese. The Australian official historian Lionel Wigmore asserts that the Rajputana Rifles was a raw inexperienced unit. Wigmore's assertion is partly true. Before embarking for Malaya, this unit had trained to fight in the dry, treeless terrain of the Middle East. However, the dispositions of the unit were also faulty. It had to cover a region some 14 miles wide with a depth of about five to six miles. Worse, the communication network within the unit was also weak. There was only one telephone line to one company. The unit attempted to maintain communications within the unit by sending officers from battalion headquarters to company officers on trucks. Not only was the region was not well served by roads but the trucks were painted in bright Western Desert colours instead of the dark green which suited the terrain of Malaya. Hence, instead of being camouflaged, these trucks were sitting ducks for Japanese aircraft flying overhead. On 16 January, the Rajput company east of Muar was attacked. A Japanese company reached Muar town from the eastern direction and overwhelmed the battalion headquarters. Both the Rajput companies north of the Muar River were lost. Actually, Bennett's disposition of the two Rajput companies on the north bank of river without additional fire and infantry support was erroneous. During the night of 16 January, remnants of the 7th Battalion of the 6th Rajputana Rifles (two British officers and 320 sepoys) withdrew down the coast to Parit Jawa and then to Bakri.<sup>124</sup>

Not only the 'inexperienced' Indian troops but the 'battle-hardened' Australians were also frequently ambushed by the wily Japanese. The gunners under Lieutenant R. McLeod on their way with the guns to support the advance headquarters of the 5th Battalion of the 18th Royal Garhwal Regiment at Simpang Jeram were ambushed early on 16 January. The Garhwalis were attacked on the same day at about 1100 hours and soon retreated within a rubber plantation. In close-quarter combat with hand grenades and bayonets, the Japanese again demonstrated their mastery and at 1300 hours the Garhwalis started retreating again. The 4th Battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment was not attacked but when they saw that the Japanese had crossed the Muar River, the commander of the Jat unit withdrew his forward companies and concentrated them on the road from Panchor to Muar. Bakri, the headquarters of the 45th Indian Brigade only 30 miles from the trunk road at Yong Peng, was threatened. Late on 16 January, it was reported that the Japanese had landed south-west of the town of Batu Pahat and were moving inland. They posed a threat to the rear of the 45th Indian Brigade and also to the communications of the WESTFORCE. Nishimura's plan was working with clocklike precision. By 17

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<sup>124</sup> Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 222–24; 7th Rajputana Rifles, pp. 1–2, 17.

January, the Japanese 5th Guards Regiment had completed its crossing of the Muar River.<sup>125</sup>

On 17 January, the Japanese infantry advanced east from Gemas and they heavily shelled the A and C companies of the 2nd Baluch. As the news came that the Japanese had crossed the Muar River, the Commonwealth troops had to retreat along the west coast to prevent being outflanked. During the night, the Baluch sent patrols down the Jementeh Road towards the 12th Brigade's position. On 18 January, at 1600 hours, the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR under Lieutenant-Colonel Gilbert engaged Japanese cyclists and light tanks along the main road. At 2000 hours, the Japanese sent detachments behind the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR's position. The Australian troops withdrew without informing their Indian counterparts. And this left the 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR completely exposed to enemy onslaught. Inter-battalion cooperation was breaking down within the brigade and coordination among different elements of a brigade was more or less absent. We will see in the next chapter that this symptom would be exhibited during combat in Singapore also. Brigadier Lay ordered a withdrawal. But Lay failed to communicate his order to Gilbert. By 0100 hours 19 January, the Baluch withdrew to Buloh Kasap. The 1st Battalion of the 13th FFR was able to disengage only at 0400 hours on 19 January 1942. During the retreat, one company lost their way in the dark.<sup>126</sup>

Meanwhile on the east coast, Japanese patrols were met north of Endau. Actually, the 2nd Battalion of the 19th Regiment of the 22nd Australian Brigade, under Lieutenant-Colonel C.G.W. Anderson, first made contact with Japanese patrols at 1100 hours on 14 January. It was a warning sign of an impending Japanese attack on the Australian 22nd Brigade in the Mersing area. Because of the rising danger in the Muar area, on the evening of 16 January, Bennett decided to send his reserve 2nd Battalion of the 29th Regiment (less one company and a platoon) under Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Robertson to bolster the Muar position. Bennett also provided this battalion with a troop of the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Australian Anti-Tank Regiment.<sup>127</sup>

From 27 January onwards, the force in Malaya started retreating towards the causeway. Hack and Blackburn note that had the Japanese not diverted some of the aircraft from the Malaya theatre to Borneo, the retreat of the Allied units would have turned into a rout. The Australian officers' attitude at this point was bitter towards their fellow imperial partners. The last unit to cross over from Malaya to Singapore was Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart's 2nd Argyll and

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125 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 224–25.

126 Firth, *History of the 2nd/10th Baluch in Malayan Campaign*, p. 23.

127 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 225.

Sutherland Highlanders, who marched across the causeway with bagpipers playing. The causeway was blown at 0800 hours on 31 January.<sup>128</sup>

### Reasons behind the Commonwealth Military Failure

Events in Malaya, when they become to be known, will make very sad reading and the Indian Army will not feel very proud of itself when facts become known.

GENERAL STAFF INDIA, *New Delhi*, 16 January 1942<sup>129</sup>

Carl Bridge writes that on 15 February 1942, after about 70 days of fighting along the length of the Malaya Peninsula and Singapore, a Commonwealth force of 130,000 was defeated by some 60,000 Japanese soldiers.<sup>130</sup> Actually, the Japanese used three infantry divisions instead of the four available to the 25th Army for the invasion of Malaya. So, some 45,000 IJA soldiers took part in the Malaya Operation. The Malaya Campaign must be put in a proper perspective. Just before the outbreak of the Pacific War, the size of the Kwantung Army was raised from 400,000 to 700,000 men. The Japanese won cheaply in Malaya. About 3,500 Japanese soldiers died during the Malayan Campaign.<sup>131</sup> The total casualties of the Commonwealth troops (dead and wounded excluding POWs) came to roughly 8,000 persons.<sup>132</sup> The collapse in Singapore is explained in the next chapter. Here, we will confine ourselves to the reasons behind the decisive defeat of the British and Indian forces on the mainland of Malaya. The naval and air superiority enjoyed by the Japanese armed forces in the Far East, especially after the attack at Pearl Harbour and the sinking of the *PRINCE OF WALES* and the *REPULSE* off the coast of Siam, probably made the Commonwealth defeat in Malaya inevitable. But the issue is why the Commonwealth troops were defeated by the IJA so easily and cheaply.

Carl Bridge notes in an article: 'There was undeniably a strong racist tendency to underestimate the Japanese. Europeans were thought to rule the world out of some innate superiority. One Australian soldier... recalls an

128 Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, pp. 77, 79.

129 DSD to R.M. Lockhart, New Delhi, 16 Jan. 1942, L/WS/1/74, IOR, BL, London.

130 Carl Bridge, 'Crisis of Command: Major-General Gordon Bennett and British Military Effectiveness in the Malayan Campaign, 1941–42', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, p. 64.

131 Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective*, pp. xix, 12.

132 Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941*, p. 63.

intelligence officer briefing him on arrival on the island that the Japanese were “very small and very myopic” with “aeroplanes made from old kettles and kitchen utensils”, inferior copies of Western originals.<sup>133</sup>

Harbakhsh Singh noted: ‘Many British and Commonwealth generals visited us, and gave talks in which they mostly derided the Japanese soldiers as bandy-legged and with poor eye-sight who daren’t attack the British’.<sup>134</sup> The 7th Battalion of the Rajputana Rifles just before the Battle of Muar was told that the Japanese soldiers were like dacoits and clever gangsters, and that they were ill-equipped, lacked specialized jungle training, and wore civilian clothes and used it as a decoy to infiltrate the Commonwealth defensive positions. Lacking military skill, the Japanese infantry made lots of noise both vocally and with firecrackers which sounded like MGs. Rather, the Japanese depended on deception. All of these lessons proved to be erroneous during confrontations with the Japanese Imperial Guards Division.<sup>135</sup>

Both sides underestimated their enemies. Percival, GOC Malaya Command, underestimated the mobility and effectiveness of the Japanese troops. He considered the Japanese as the ‘Italians of the East’.<sup>136</sup> He believed the thick jungles of Malaya and difficult terrain and their long LoCs (more than 700 miles) in the case of the advance from Siam through Malaya made a rapid Japanese advance across Malaya towards Singapore impossible. He assumed that Singapore could only be attacked from the sea, for which the island seemed to be well prepared. This strand of thought was present among other Allied commanders stationed in the Far East besides Percival.

The Southern Army, however, did not substantially underestimate the number of troops available to the British Empire in Malaya. Their intelligence agencies calculated that the combined volunteer force numbered 20,000 and the regular force numbered about 80,000 troops. The breakdown of the regular force in the Japanese calculation was as follows: 30,000 British troops, between 30,000 and 35,000 Indian soldiers, somewhere between 20,000 to 30,000 Australian personnel and the rest were a small number of Malays.<sup>137</sup> Nevertheless, the Japanese field commander Yamashita grossly underestimated the number of Commonwealth troops available for the defence of Malaya. Yamashita estimated that Percival had about 50,000 troops for defending

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133 Bridge, ‘The Malayan Campaign, 1941–42 in International Perspective’, in Smart (ed.), *The Second World War*, p. 97.

134 Singh, *In the Line of Duty*, pp. 93–94.

135 7th Rajputana Rifles, p. 2.

136 Singh, *Combat Diary*, pp. 92–93.

137 *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 9.

Singapore and Malaya. On 24 December 1941, when the lead elements of the Japanese invasion force had only reached the Perak River, Yamashita was confident of defeating the Commonwealth forces in Malaya. Yamashita concluded that he did not require any additional troops. He informed Lieutenant-General Aoki Shigemasa (Vice-Chief of Staff of the Southern Army) that the 56th Japanese Division (which was then assembling in Japan and considered as the strike force for the Singapore Operation), was not required in Malaya.<sup>138</sup> Colonel Tsuji accepted in his memoirs: 'The original enemy forces turned out to be far stronger than we had judged at first'.<sup>139</sup>

Still, the Japanese were able to gain victory, unlike the Commonwealth troops. One reason was the superior generalship on the Japanese side. Kyoichi Tachikawa writes that Yamashita's warm-hearted personality worked well to motivate his men. There was scope for tension within the Japanese military command during the Malaya invasion but he was able to overcome that possibility. Yamashita knew his two divisional commanders, Mutaguchi and Lieutenant-General Takuro Matsui, very well. However, he did not know much about Lieutenant-General Takuma Nishimura, CO of the Imperial Guards Division. Nishimura several times disobeyed Yamashita's orders.<sup>140</sup> Tsuji was regarded as an eccentric and many senior officers were wary of dealing with him. But Yamashita appreciated Tsuji's planning capabilities and was ready to utilize him.<sup>141</sup> Overall, the Japanese command system during the Malayan Campaign, despite some strain, functioned properly.

Friction was more or less common in all the command systems, especially during wartime. Within the Commonwealth command system, there were also clashes of personality. For instance, Percival was on bad terms with Lieutenant-General Lewis Heath, CO of the 3rd Indian Corps.<sup>142</sup> Heath was more senior than Percival but in Malaya the former was subordinate to the latter. This was because Percival was appointed by the London Government and Heath by the GoI.<sup>143</sup>

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138 Kyoichi Tachikawa, 'General Yamashita and his Style of Leadership', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, p. 79.

139 Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective*, p. 27.

140 Tachikawa, 'General Yamashita and his Style of Leadership', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, p. 81.

141 Yoji, 'General Yamashita Tomoyuki: Commander of the Twenty-Fifth Army', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 205.

142 Callahan, 'Churchill and Singapore', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 171.

143 Warren, 'The Indian Army and the Fall of Singapore', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 272.



Let us see how the Australian officers viewed the British and Indian units and their officers. Colonel J.R. Broadbent, the QMG of the 8th Australian Division, noted on 28 January 1942:

9th Indian Division under Barlow has been under us and Henry Gordon Bennett is responsible for putting fire into them to such an extent that they are again a fair fighting force and have done well. The Indian I am afraid has been a failure partly due to lack of training and damp climate, the rain makes him very miserable, but mainly because he has been badly led. British officers with them including many brigadiers have no offensive or fighting spirit. Corps under Heath is very weak and seems to have a large number of highly qualified p.s.c.'s. whose one idea is to reconnoiter positions in rear and leave the poor fighting soldier alone. Henry Gordon Bennett must be given very great credit for the fight he has put up. Percival is not a Commander and defers to Heath but now accepts many suggestions put up by Henry Gordon Bennett. A strong commander has been lacking and our final withdrawal to the island will need a lot of luck as the planning has been too pathetic.... he (Henry Gordon Bennett) keeps the offensive spirit going in spite of everything.<sup>144</sup>

Broadbent succumbed to climatological theories (like the Orientalists and the advocates of the Martial Race theory) in order to explain the 'ineffectiveness' of the Indian soldiers. Even the modern historian T.R. Moreman falls into the same 'climatological' trap. Moreman writes that the high heat and humidity of Malaya quickly exhausted the physically unfit men.<sup>145</sup> The British were from a cold region. Most of the Indian troops, like the Madrassis from the Madras Presidency, north Indians (Rajputs, Ahirs, etc) and Sikhs from central Punjab, were from warm climes. Moreover, the Madras Presidency's climate is also humid. So, the Indian troops, unlike the West Europeans, were actually more suited for operating in Malaya's humid climate with high rainfall. During the last days of January 1942, both the Indians and the British were probably more exhausted than the relatively fresh Australians. This was because the Australians had just started fighting when the Japanese moved into south Malaya, while the British and Indians had been at the receiving end of continuous drubbings at the hands of the Nipponese from the beginning of the Malaya Campaign on 7/8 December 1941. Moreover, Broadbent's praise for his HGB

<sup>144</sup> Letter to Major-General S.T. Rowell from Colonel J.R. Broadbent, 28 Jan. 1942, Gordon Bennett Papers. () mine. PR90/111, AWM.

<sup>145</sup> Moreman, *The Jungle, the Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War*, p. 13.



(Henry Gordon Bennett) came a bit too early. Had Broadbent known that when the fall of 'fortress Singapore' became imminent in the near future, the 'Superman' spewing fire would desert his 'dear' Aussies and escape from the island, the former would probably have never penned these lines. Percival, with all his shortcomings, did not desert like Gordon Bennett.

Major-General H. Gordon Bennett provided several explanations as regards the debacle in Malaya. He asserted, like Broadbent, that the blame was due mostly to the Indian troops, who suffered from low morale. This was because 'Eastern races are less able to withstand modern war'. This was a typical racist explanation which was popularized among the British officers from the late nineteenth century in the guise of the Martial Race theory. Besides the racial factor, Bennett also pointed out certain other organizational and material factors for the Commonwealth failure against the Japanese. Bennett brought the British officers under his critical gaze too. The sepoys suffered from homesickness and lack of entertainment. Moreover, the British officers failed to build up the troops' morale. For most of the time, the Indian soldiers were quartered in the rubber plantations and they never saw the sunlight. He claimed that many British commanders and senior officers were imbued with 'retreat complex' and a spirit of resignation prevailed among them. This depressing spirit seeped down among the junior officers who also showed lack of spirit. The net result was that the slightest Japanese opposition resulted in withdrawals without launching any local counter-attacks. Bennett pointed out the low level of staff work, especially in the 3rd Indian Corps. Besides this Indian formation, Bennett also pointed out the poor quality of the British 18th Division.<sup>146</sup>

Both Bennett and Broadbent accused the senior and mid-level British officers of lack of leadership qualities. The morale of the British soldiers became somewhat fragile during the course of the campaign as they came to believe that the Malaysians had turned against them. Actually, some Malaysians were working with the Japanese.<sup>147</sup> Distrust of the 'natives' was common among the British throughout their Asian Empire. The British also suspected that many Chinese were working with the Japanese on Hong Kong Island. And as we will see, distrust of the Burmans also made the British anxious during the retreat from Burma.

More than half of the total inland area of Malaya was covered with dense primeval jungle ranging from big trees to a thick undergrowth of bamboo, tropical creepers, and tree ferns. On the west coast of Malaya and in Johore, the

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146 Telegram from CGS Australia to War Office, The Malayan Campaign, War Cabinet, 4 April 1942, pp. 1-2, CAB 66/23/25, PRO, Kew, UK.

147 Morrison, *Malayan Postscript*, p. 78.

jungle was cleared and the land cultivated. However, the eastern plain was underdeveloped. Coconut, oil palms (near the coast), rice fields (in the north), rubber plantations (in the south), tapioca and vegetables were cultivated. Tin mining occurred in many areas. Where cultivation was abandoned, a dense jungle, including elephant grass of about five to six feet, grew up.<sup>148</sup>

The greatest failure of the British troops in Bennett's format was their inadequate training in jungle fighting and conducting patrols.<sup>149</sup> Bennett elaborates:

1. In 1918 British method attacking position pound it heavily with artillery until opposition reduced, then advance under artillery barrage. Since 1939 this method obsolete, yet large conservative element officers adhered to such obsolete methods. Repeatedly commanders adhered to rigid methods of defence.
2. Beach defence systems provided long thin line of posts along beach without depth with vulnerable flanks whereas modern perimeter system of defence on shorter flank much more effective.<sup>150</sup>

Bennett correctly noted the following characteristics of Japanese tactics: infiltration and outflanking; avoiding frontal attack and search for soft spots; small parties penetrated and then coalesced into large bodies behind the line causing withdrawal of the imperial troops; use of trickery, i.e. noise in order to induce fear among the imperial troops, etc. To conclude, Bennett noted that while the Japanese adapted their tactics in accordance with the local circumstances; the British commanders adhered to rule books and emphasized barrack square training.<sup>151</sup>

Besides Gordon Bennett's report another Australian report was generated by Colonel J.R. Broadbent. Broadbent penned this report on 28 January 1942 while he was in the midst of a rubber plantation somewhere 20 miles north of Johore Bahru. We are not enriched by Bennett as to in what ways the Australian soldiers were better than their British and Indian comrades. Unlike Bennett, Broadbent pointed out the inadequacies of both the Australian and other imperial troops. Broadbent expounded on the inadequate organization of the Commonwealth troops in the following words:

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<sup>148</sup> Kirby et. al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 153.

<sup>149</sup> Telegram from CGS Australia to War Office, The Malayan Campaign, War Cabinet, 4 April 1942, p. 2.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

The organization of the whole of the forces for this country is punk and reflects very badly on the Staff College mind that has never risen above paper warfare as far as this theatre is concerned. Enormous HQs are built up and so clogged things that nothing can function.... Diversity of types and size of ammunition makes supply difficult which means more transport on the roads. Everything is so mobile that at times nothing can move. Infantry has forgotten that they have to march and if the Japs had been or become aggressive at night.... The Indian divisions have more transport than us and their drivers are frightful. The destruction of vehicles by our own action I should say is higher than by enemy action. Transport companies well controlled and a minimum of unit vehicles is the answer.<sup>152</sup>

About the Australian troops, Broadbent noted:

The Jap has almost complete air superiority and has been bombing and machine-gunning our forward areas with absolute immunity. The effect on morale is very considerable.... Anderson's (2/19) Battalion was cut up and when he got back we gave him a free hand to reorganize.... More rifle fire power and less impedimenta. Battalion transport reduced to 27 vehicles, carriers halved. There are very few opportunities for their actual use. Expenditure of ammunition has been light, too much dependence has been placed on automatic weapons and many of the infantry reinforcements have not fired more than a few rounds. The individual must have complete confidence in his ability to shoot.... The Thompson gun is a great favourite, but it demands too great an ammunition supply as it is used as a sniping weapon (Japs climb trees and shoot down). Anti-tank guns are getting great results but we have lost a few as the tractors get knocked and they cannot be withdrawn. We have given A/Tk battery a couple of carriers for use in the final withdrawal.... The soldier is carrying too much for this climate and has in cases discarded practically all equipment except ammunition carriers (pouches). We have withdrawn all gas equipment. There are many cases of infantry wading through marshes waist high and above all extra weight produces a fatigue which is too great to be neglected.<sup>153</sup>

Unlike Bennett, Broadbent accepted the inadequate tactics of the Australian infantry in close-quarter combat and provided the following correctives:

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<sup>152</sup> Letter to Rowell from Broadbent, 28 Jan. 1942, Gordon Bennett Papers, p. 1.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Main points are infantry must be infantry and forget wheels, they must be able to shoot straight and quickly, musketry seems to have been sadly neglected. Confidence in the bayonet. There have been a good many chances of using it and our people seem to have more confidence there than the firing of rifle. .... Leadership is as always all important, passing of orders by word of mouth laterally and front to rear. Mortar fire has been directed in this way. 3-inch mortar is most accurate but too much effort in transport. The rifle company with complete freedom of movement is still the most effective formation. The Jap streams down the road on bicycles and is easily ambushed, but he then goes to the ground and sends out flanking movements which have to be countered by wide patrols, they work round rear. He is all the time trying to cut units off and has been very successful. We have been so tied by our transport and ineffective personnel.<sup>154</sup>

The above issues discussed by Broadbent were also applicable in case of the British and Indian troops.

About the unsuitable ration of the Australian troops, Broadbent asserted:

The emergency ration is totally unsuitable and does not help the tired man who is cut off. I am experimenting with a ration of raisins, sugar, chocolate and a tablespoon full of rice done up in a cigarette (50) tin and soldered. I am trying to get 500 done up. But, I suggest that this be taken up with vigor. Exhaustion here is very great and sugar is the greatest requirement. The tin of beef is too heavy and the biscuit is generally sodden and mildewed if it has not been discarded. When the troops are cut off they may have to make very great physical demands on themselves to rejoin and the lighter the emergency ration the more likely they are to retain it and the more good it will do if it is sustaining.<sup>155</sup>

The modern historian Brian P. Farrell repeats several of the points raised by Bennett more than 60 years earlier. Farrell claims that the battle tactics and doctrine of the British Army were completely unsuited to the nature of the land war which occurred in Malaya. The battle was fought efficiently by the IJA at the lowest level of command. But in the British Army, colonels, and not the section commanders, made the crucial decisions. The orthodox British defensive technique was to hold a line of fixed positions in a static defence relying

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., pp. 1–2.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., pp. 1–2.

on the firepower of the dug-in troops and their MGs. They would fix the enemy and the attacking enemy would be finished off by supporting artillery fire. Rigid control required senior officers closely directing the battle rather than the sergeants operating independently with their small units in the bushes. Further, the British Army doctrine required preserving the LoCs from being cut by flanking or encirclement. In 1941, air supply on a large scale was not possible and this meant giving up the defensive position and retreating. And the British troops continued to retreat till Singapore. Farrell continues that the 11th Indian Division was trained to fight 1918-style Western Front battles. The troops were expected to hold a line with a front and a rear, and the supply connection between the two had to be maintained. Their mental map was static defensive warfare.<sup>156</sup> In other words, conventional static defence by the British and Indian troops proved to be easy meat for the unorthodox techniques followed by the nimble Japanese.

Major H.P. Thomas of the Indian Army (he commanded the Mixed Reinforcement Camp at Singapore and his report was backed by General Wavell) rebutted Gordon Bennett's charges point by point. He noted that while the Indian formations fought all the way in Malaya, the AIF started fighting only at Johore. In fact, the casualties suffered by the AIF in the mainland did not exceed 300 men. It is true that the British 18th Division was somewhat hampered by a lack of jungle training and the personnel were unacclimatized to Malaya's weather. Again, the beach defence was thin. This was because an adequate number of troops to establish beach defence in depth throughout the east coast of Malaya was not available.<sup>157</sup> For fighting in the jungle-covered terrain, Bennett and Broadbent rightly pointed out that a large number of wheeled vehicles was a burden. However, anti-tank guns were required in the forward posts and seven Bren carriers per battalion were more than sufficient. Further, the 3-inch mortar was a useful infantry weapon.<sup>158</sup> Larger numbers of such mortars should have been given to the Commonwealth infantry. It had proved to be a useful close fire support weapon for the infantry even in Hong Kong.

Not all the Indian drivers were hopeless. The regimental history of the 5th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment notes that the drivers of this unit were well trained.<sup>159</sup> This is not to say that everything was well with the Indian units. Besides inadequate training due to the rapid expansion of the Indian Army

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<sup>156</sup> Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore*, pp. 131, 134.

<sup>157</sup> Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, Appendix A, p. 20.

<sup>158</sup> Telegram from CGS Australia to War Office, The Malayan Campaign, War Cabinet, 4 April 1942, p. 2.

<sup>159</sup> Khanna and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage*, p. 157.

from 1941 onwards and the absence of proper equipment, there were several problems specific to the 'brown' soldiers of the *Raj*. Even trained Indian units which had combat experience in the North-West Frontier failed to inculcate a jungle-friendly attitude. Harbakhsh Singh said in his autobiography that the patrols were afraid of certain areas which they believed were dominated by King Cobras and some of them were supposed to be 35 feet long. Moreover, the men were also afraid of pythons, which were found in the jungles of Malaya.<sup>160</sup> One historian estimates that on average each of the Indian battalions deployed in Malaya lost 240 experienced officers, NCOs and specialist troops due to the emergency expansion of the Indian Army and received in exchange raw recruits. For instance, just before the Japanese onslaught in Malaya, the 2nd Baluch had only eight British and Indian commissioned officers. About 50 per cent of the VCOs and the NCOs were withdrawn from this battalion to India for purposes of expansion. But for close-country operations and for small unit training in bush warfare, experienced junior officers were required.<sup>161</sup>

Racial discrimination alienated many Indian soldiers and officers and lowered their morale. Harbakhsh Singh wrote that the strict colour bar in Malaya was very disturbing. The clubs, swimming pools, buses, railway carriages, etc. were for exclusive use of the white men.<sup>162</sup> Harbakhsh wrote about one such incident in his autobiography:

Just about a month before the war started in Malaya, the Raja of Perak, the Malayan State in which we were lodged for the defence of the Peninsula, invited the British officers in Kuantan for the drinks and dinner party to Perak, the capital of his State.... The Raja of Perak extended the invitation to the British officers, and British nurses only. But we being an Indianised battalion, had Indians also holding the same position and status (which, I can understand, was perhaps, not known to the local Raja) as the British officers and we expected our Commanding Officer — Lt Col Parkins — to insist that we also be invited to this party or else, we expected him to refuse the invitation.... On the contrary, Parkins accepted the Raja's invitation and took all the British officers with him to the party.... We had always felt that Parkins was a bit of an imperialist, but never thought him anti-Indian.<sup>163</sup>

160 Singh, *In the Line of Duty*, p. 90.

161 Kinvig, 'General Percival and the Fall of Singapore', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 244; Firth, *History of the 2nd/10th Baluch in Malayan Campaign*, pp. 6, 8.

162 Singh, *In the Line of Duty*, p. 91.

163 *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93.

The Japanese agents were also working to alienate the sepoys from the sahibs. Major Fujiwara Iwaichi arrived in Thailand on 1 October 1941 following a report sent by Colonel Tamura Hiroshi (Japanese Military Attaché in Bangkok) to Tokyo claiming that nascent Indian nationalism in Thailand and Malaya could be utilized for Japan's advantage.<sup>164</sup> The Japanese made wide use of propaganda leaflets, which were dropped from the aircraft.<sup>165</sup> Japan's propaganda war, directed especially towards the Indian troops, had an effect on the defeated and demoralized Indian troops who were continuously retreating from the beginning of the campaign. One Sikh commissioned officer noted in his memoirs:

A volcano was about to erupt. The quake changed the mercenary role and the lava came out dark and ignoble. The Japanese were dropping a large number of leaflets, expressing their war aims in pithy slogans, assuring the coloured races of their immediate liberation and beseeching them to join hands in that mighty undertaking. They were appealing to the honour, dignity and self-respect of all Asians in general, and Indians in particular: 'Asia for the Asians'; 'Kick out the white-devils from the East'; and 'India for the Indians', were some of the propaganda professions. In a normal situation, no one would have given any serious heed to the shibboleths of the invading hordes, but at that moment their effect on me was tremendous. I felt as if they were voicing my inner feelings.<sup>166</sup>

In contrast, at that time, the British had nothing to offer except political repression in India and empty slogans. Captain Mohan Singh wrote:

In contrast to the Japanese propaganda, the British had not given even an empty promise to grant us complete freedom after the war. Their slogans 'Fight for the liberty of mankind'; 'Democracy in danger' etc., sounded quite hollow and meaningless. If the British were not prepared to free us, what right they had to ask us to fight for them, when their own freedom was being threatened? If at all, we Indians were to fight, I silently argued with myself, we should fight for our own freedom. We had no moral reason to fight for the British till they proved their bona-fides by freeing us first.<sup>167</sup>

<sup>164</sup> Sibylla Jane Flower, 'Allied Prisoners of War: The Malayan Campaign, 1941–42', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 209.

<sup>165</sup> *Notes on Japanese Warfare on the Malayan Front, Information Bulletin No. 6*, p. 8.

<sup>166</sup> Singh, *Soldiers' contribution to Indian Independence*, pp. 65–66.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.



In January 1942, about 10,000 Indian POWs captured after combat in north Malaya were taken to Kuala Lumpur and separated from their British officers. They were first encouraged and later coerced to join the Indian National Army (INA).<sup>168</sup> One case can be cited here. Captain Mohan Singh, a Sikh, was in charge of the MG Company in the 1st Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment. His unit had fought at Jitra and many personnel were captured along with him. Some Indians also deserted from their retreating units. On 17/18 December 1941, Yamashita sent for Mohan Singh and told him that the Indian officers were duty bound to join Japan in order to liberate Asia for the Asians. Mohan Singh agreed to set up the INA, which would fight for a free India. On 31 December 1941, Yamashita issued an order that all Indian POWs captured by the Japanese were to be handed over to Mohan Singh. Major Fujiwara (later Lieutenant-General) also got in touch with Mohan Singh and assured him that Japan had no ulterior design on India. The 1st Battalion of the INA was commanded by Captain Fateh Khan Malik. Fateh Khan was from the 9th Jat Regiment. And Mohan Singh was promoted to the rank of General, an unthinkable fact in the British-Indian Army's command structure.<sup>169</sup>

Alienation of the sepoys from the sahibs was also possible because the personalized bond between the soldiers and their British officers were not as strong as in the traditional Indian Army. The newly inducted British officers in the newly raised and expanded Indian units were 'strangers' to their men. Worse, these officers did not know the vernacular language of the sepoys/*jawans*. Urdu was the lingua franca in the Indian Army. In order to establish a bond with the soldiers, it was necessary for the British officers to have knowledge of the soldiers' own languages. For instance, in order to effectively command Pathan companies, knowledge of Pashtu/Pushtu was required of the junior British officers commanding such units. And for the Gurkha units, knowledge of Gorkhali was a must. Failure to communicate with the troops, especially when a firefight was going on in the battlefield, certainly reduced cohesion within the Indian units. In fact, Percival warned in a dispatch to both the War Office and the Commander-in-Chief India that most of the British officers were unfit for fighting duties.<sup>170</sup> The General Staff in India accused the War Office in Great Britain of sending the wrong type of officers, while at the

168 Flower, 'Allied Prisoners of War: The Malayan Campaign, 1941–42', in Farrell and Hunter (eds.), *Sixty Years On*, p. 215.

169 Singh, *Soldiers' contribution to Indian Independence*, pp. 77, 80–81.

170 From GOC Malaya to the War Office, C-in-C India, 28885, cipher 25/1, p. 69, L/ws/1/645, 10R, BL.



same time pressurizing New Delhi to raise more and more units.<sup>171</sup> On 16 January 1942, the General Staff of India noted:

The fact that certain Indian troops have not put up a good show in Malaya, when the testing time came, is due undoubtedly to the rapid expansion and the policy of milking units at frequent intervals. We started all wrong, we made promises we could not fulfill, and we have been let down every time by HMG.... On top of all this we have had to find some 7,000 reinforcements for Malaya.... From the infantry point of view, therefore the position is not a pleasant one.... We are still going to be very seriously down on all equipment at the end of 1942.... We require... wireless equipment, cable and other signal equipment which we were getting from Australia and which Australia now refuses to supply; I should add to that, bridging equipment, barbed wire, Dannert wire, steel helmets and belts and components of the Vickers Machine Gun Mark I.<sup>172</sup>

Andrew Gilchrist, who was a senior staff member of the British Embassy at Bangkok from 1939 to 1942, noted in his autobiography that the Indian Army was an excellent fighting force, and that many of its units had a military tradition going back for a hundred years or more. If the Indian Army had been represented in Malaya by some of the units which distinguished themselves in the Middle East, the campaign would certainly have taken a different turn. But when in 1940–41 there was an enormous expansion of the Indian Army, the Middle East had priority for all the best formations, so that only (in effect) raw recruits were left for Malaya, officered not by long-serving British officers who had almost gone 'native' but by 'callous young men from England' who for the most part knew nothing about Indian customs and traditions and spoke no Indian languages.<sup>173</sup> So Bennett's point about weak/inefficient British officers to an extent could be substantiated. But whether the Australian officers were paragons of battle or not is yet to be established.

Lack of air support proved to be an important shortcoming for the Allied war effort in the Far East. Qualitative and quantitative inferiority in Allied air assets enabled the Japanese to rule the skies and they were able to make land-fall at ease in areas and at times of their own choosing due to their command

<sup>171</sup> DSD to R.M. Lockhart, New Delhi, 16 Jan. 1942, p. 2, L/WS/1/74, IOR, BL.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., pp. 2, 5.

<sup>173</sup> Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941*, p. 24.

over the sea.<sup>174</sup> In general, all the Commonwealth commanders (including Percival, Major H.P. Thomas, Brooke-Popham and Bennett) agreed that the performance of the Japanese aircraft and their pilots, especially as regards high-level bombing, came as a surprise to them.<sup>175</sup> Hack and Blackburn assert that Japanese air superiority sapped the morale of the defenders. Japanese air supremacy also gave an edge to their commanders in intelligence collection.<sup>176</sup> Hisayuki Yokoyama notes that the Imperial Japanese Army Aviation's doctrine was to gain control of the air by aerial exterminating actions, then 'considered' support for the ground forces and finally strategic bombardment. The aerial extermination action meant complete destruction of the enemy aircraft in the air and also on the ground at their airfields. This meant offensive counter-air operations.<sup>177</sup> The Japanese bombers attacked the aerodromes while the fighters drew the RAF fighters into combat. The bombers flew some distance back from their fighters and waited till the RAF fighters, due to lack of fuel, were forced to land. Then, the Japanese bombers attacked before the RAF fighters had time to refuel and take to the air again. The RAF fighters were thus unable to intercept the Japanese bombers. This problem would have been alleviated if the RAF had lots of fighters, which unfortunately they lacked. When the leader of the Japanese bomber formation signalled then all the planes in the formation released their bombs simultaneously. And strafing of the airports was carried out by the Japanese fighters.<sup>178</sup>

Further, the British had no tanks to counter those of the Japanese. At times, the appearance of Japanese tanks definitely created a sense of psychological despair among the Commonwealth troops. However, more than the Japanese tanks, the Japanese infantry posed a greater threat to the Commonwealth force. This happened because the Japanese tanks in quality and as regards their handling were not *panzers*. And Malaya, unlike France or south Russia, was not a tank country. Moreover, the Commonwealth troops' anti-tank guns, if the crews were properly trained, were more than adequate to destroy the small and light Japanese tanks. However, against the innovative tactics of the daring Japanese infantry, the Commonwealth infantry at this stage of the war

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<sup>174</sup> Telegram from CGS Australia to War Office, The Malayan Campaign, War Cabinet, 4 April 1942, 4 April 1942, p. 2.

<sup>175</sup> Percival, 'Operations of Malay Command from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1269.

<sup>176</sup> Hack and Blackburn, *Did Singapore have to Fall?*, p. 79.

<sup>177</sup> Yokoyama, 'Air Operational Leadership in the Southern Front: Imperial Army Aviation's trial to be an "air force" in the Malaya offensive air operation', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, pp. 134–35.

<sup>178</sup> *Notes on Japanese Warfare on the Malayan Front*, Information Bulletin No. 6, p. 2.

had no answer. Here, one finds a similarity with Small War where instead of mechanized technology, men on foot posed a far greater danger.

Poor morale of the imperial soldiers along with inferior tactics, use of light tanks plus the aerial superiority of the Japanese created a dangerous scenario for the Commonwealth troops. Carl Bridge, a modern historian, writes that Yamashita would probe the British position, seek to pin the main force with artillery, mortar and air attack and then send in a number of outflanking forces. Once one of these outflanking forces got behind the British lines, the British withdrew.<sup>179</sup> Major H.P. Thomas of the Indian Army at General A.P. Wavell's order drew up a report on Japanese tactics which was submitted on 30 May 1942. Thomas noted: 'Briefly, it consisted in locating the areas held and the flanks by drawing fire, working round or through small parties, threatening the road—the vital feature—and causing confusion by shooting from unexpected directions'.<sup>180</sup> One Indian officer also notes in the same tone about the Japanese tactics: '... they also made full use of small infiltrations behind the lines, so as to interdict (maintenance) convoys. They would fire from flanking trees, at night, along a one-road approach, thereby creating, generally, the impression among their opponents that they had been cut-off from behind'.<sup>181</sup>

Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby's team, while writing the British Official History of the War in the Far East in the aftermath of World War II, noted:

To troops unused to it, the jungle is apt to be terrifying and to produce physical and emotional stresses which have to be felt to be appreciated; rubber too, with its gloom, dampness and sound deadening effect, gives them a feeling of isolation and tends to lower their morale. The only antidote to jungle fear... is to give troops the opportunity of learning sufficient jungle lore to enable them to regard the jungle as a friend rather than an enemy, or at least as a neutral, and to teach them how to operate efficiently in the restricted visibility of the rubber plantations. If troops are to acquit themselves well in this type of country not only must they undergo very intensive training, but it must be designed to acclimatize them to the conditions in which they will have to live and fight, to teach them to withstand the heat and the frequent downpours of rain, to show them how to overcome the obstacles which swamps and rivers present,

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<sup>179</sup> Bridge, 'Crisis of Command: Major-General Gordon Bennett and British Military Effectiveness in the Malayan Campaign, 1941–42', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>180</sup> Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, p. 5.

<sup>181</sup> Singh, *In the Line of Duty*, p. 96.

and how to move off the roads through jungle and rubber alike, to develop junior leadership and to produce and practice tactics suitable to the terrain.<sup>182</sup>

Long before Kirby and his team, H.P. Thomas noted the inadequate training of the British and Indian troops in the following words:

The first of the basic causes for our weakness in training was the failure to realize in time that, to fight successfully in Malaya, troops must undergo a highly specialized form of training. The minimum period suggested by one authority for this training was 6 months, the concurrent acclimatization of the man being of course, almost as important as the lessons themselves. Even allowing that exigencies of the war as a whole would permit of only half this period being made available, could we have met the situation? The ideal would have been to maintain in Malaya, say, four or five infantry divisions for a period long enough to allow of maximum efficiency being reached and short enough to avoid staleness. Alternatively, a smaller force could have been maintained in the country, while intended reinforcements were being trained for jungle warfare on the most suitable terrain available in India.<sup>183</sup>

Thomas was speaking two years too early. And Percival was no fool. Even before Thomas' report was submitted, the GOC Malaya Command realized that the tactical training of the Commonwealth troops was grossly wrong. As the campaign unfolded, the GOC Malaya realized the importance of training in jungle warfare for his troops. On 15 January 1942, Percival informed the War Office and Commander-in-Chief India: 'To teach all concerned elements of tactics peculiar to Malaya have followed new units... Jungle Warfare Training Team'. On 25 January 1942 the War Office approved Percival's scheme for establishing a Jungle Warfare Training Team at Malaya.<sup>184</sup> However, in the last week of January 1941, such training could not, however, be carried out as the defeated and dispirited Commonwealth troops retreated towards the southern tip of Malaya with the Japanese in hot pursuit. Meanwhile, Percival's efforts at retraining his troops were academic as all hell broke loose on the Commonwealth troops at 'Fortress' Singapore.

<sup>182</sup> Kirby et. al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 1, p. 164.

<sup>183</sup> Report by Major H.P. Thomas, 30 May 1942, p. 13.

<sup>184</sup> From GOC Malaya to the War Office, C-in-C India, 28428 cipher 14/1, 15 Jan. 1942, War Office to GOC Malaya, 66278 cipher SD3 23/1, pp. 68, 70, L/WS/1/645, IOR, BL.

## Conclusion

Gilchrist's claim that weakness of the top leadership resulted in the failure of the Commonwealth troops at Malaya<sup>185</sup> is only partly true; the Commonwealth troops themselves were 'soft' indeed. Close-quarter combat between the infantries in the jungle terrain (including nocturnal combat) set the format for ground combat in Malaya. And this would hold true, as Chapter 5 will show, for Burma as well. The Australian, British and Indian officers, agreed that Japanese air superiority resulted in the lowering of morale of the defenders. In 1944 in France and Burma both the German and Japanese troops fought doggedly in the face of Allied air superiority. Battle-hardened and well-motivated troops could indeed go on fighting even when the hostile party enjoyed air superiority. But the Commonwealth troops in Malaya in 1941 were raw, untrained and inexperienced. Bennett and some of the Indian officers, like Harbakhsh Singh, and modern historians like Farrell rightly point out the British commanders' insistence on constructing fixed ground defences which were outflanked and bypassed by the nimble Japanese infantry. Some British officers, like Carpendale and Stewart, had hit upon the right training regimen. But there was neither the time nor the proper infrastructure for training the troops intensively in such techniques. The Malaya Command had failed to establish an all Malaya Training Command system. Hence there were sporadic *ad hoc* attempts by formation commanders to train their troops as quickly as possible. In the event of battle against the hardened IJA, such *ad hoc*ism fell short of the demands of the time. The reality was that with raw troops at their disposal, the British officers did not have much of an option. Our account of combat in north, central and south Malaya shows that in mobile battles in the jungle country, the Commonwealth troops were hopelessly outclassed and outmanoeuvred by the foot and bicycle mobile Japanese. Additionally, the Commonwealth commanders with raw, untrained, not so well-motivated, dispirited troops failed to hold the river crossings (Muar, Slim, etc.) repeatedly against the dynamic and aggressive Japanese soldiers infused with a high combat spirit.

To sum up, the Commonwealth armies failed to adapt themselves to the jungle *blitzkrieg* of the IJA. The disastrous Malaya Campaign was the curtain raiser to the greater humiliation at the surrender of Singapore. Mud slinging at each other and trying to assess who was worse, the 'Aussies'/'diggers', the 'Tommies' or the 'sepoys/jawans', are of no use. It can be concluded that all the Commonwealth troops; Australians, British and Indians, displayed equal levels of proficiency. And this level of proficiency fell far short of the cold

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<sup>185</sup> Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941*, p. 161.

professionalism of the IJA. The IJA then was at the height of its power. Its tactical brilliance, operational audacity and strategic masterstrokes became a model for others to emulate. Inadequate tactics, training and doctrine of the Commonwealth troops as they retreated to the Causeway and fell back to the island would continue to haunt them during the Siege of Singapore. And this is the subject of the next chapter.

# The Siege of Singapore: 4 February–15 February 1942

## Introduction

In Lord Fisher's view, the five keys which locked up the world for Britain were as follows: Singapore, the Cape of Good Hope, Alexandria, Gibraltar and Dover. The centre of gravity of the British Empire, besides the mother country, i.e. Britain, writes James Neidpath, lay east of Suez, especially in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean was a British lake till 1939 because the three 'keys' to that ocean—the Cape, Aden and Singapore were in British hands. Egypt and the Middle East were important because they guarded the route to the Indian Ocean. Further, a strong British naval presence in Singapore was considered necessary to keep Australia and New Zealand within the imperial orbit. These two dominions were threatened by the rise of Japan from the first decade of the twentieth century. Japan became Britain's principal commercial rival in the Far East from World War I onwards. Lastly, Singapore was also the gateway to the Pacific, as it was on the shortest possible route from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.<sup>1</sup>

Singapore was bought from the Sultan of Johore in 1819 by Stamford Raffles on behalf of the East India Company. In the course of a century, this almost uninhabited island was transformed into one of the greatest transit ports.<sup>2</sup> The Singapore naval base was first conceived in 1919 and was endorsed by the British Cabinet in 1921. The Admiralty intended to use the naval base constructed at Singapore to provide the essential docking and repair facilities for a British fleet operating in eastern waters. However, due to the great distance separating Singapore from Japan, the former was considered an unsatisfactory base for waging offensive operations against Tokyo. At that time, the Admiralty's best bet was to use Hong Kong as a base for conducting offensive operations against Japan. Christopher M. Bell asserts that till 1931, the Admiralty favoured Hong Kong over Singapore as a base for waging offensive naval operations against Japan. The change of view about Hong Kong's usefulness as an advanced

1 James Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire, 1919–41* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 2, 6, 9, 13, 38.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

base for naval operations occurred after 1931 and was due to rising Japanese power in China. Additionally, Britain could not maintain a garrison of 40,000 men, deemed essential to defend Hong Kong against a possible Japanese assault.<sup>3</sup>

However, Singapore was a naval base without a fleet. From the 1920s, the British politicians and the Admiralty decided that the size of the fleet that could be sent from Britain to the Far East was to be shaped by European strategic considerations. By 1925, Britain assessed that in the event of any Japanese threat to Singapore, the fleet should be sent to the Far East immediately.<sup>4</sup> During the 1920s, Britain possessed a significant margin of naval superiority over its rivals. So, at that time it was possible to maintain a large fleet in the Far East while still dominating European waters. However, the triple threats posed by Germany and Italy in Europe and Japan in the Far East changed the strategic scenario in the 1930s. By the mid-1930s, the problem facing the British planners was not whether Britain could send a fleet to the Far East but whether London could dispatch an adequate number of ships for either an offensive or a defensive strategy. As long as Britain had an ally (i.e. France in the 1930s), London assumed that it could conduct offensive naval operations either in Europe or Asia.<sup>5</sup> Lewis Heath, who commanded the 3rd Indian Corps under Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival during the Malaya-Singapore Campaign, emphasized in his private papers that by 1934 it was quite clear to the British planners that in the event of a World War with the Axis powers, London would be unable to send a fleet for securing the Far East.<sup>6</sup>

The time period for the British fleet to come to Singapore from the UK kept increasing, from 70 days in 1937 to 90 days in early 1939 and to 180 days by 3 September 1939.<sup>7</sup> In 1940, after the fall of France and entry of Italy into World War II on the side of Nazi Germany, it became clear that only a token naval force from Britain could be dispatched to Singapore. And on 10 December 1941, this token naval force was sent to the bottom of the sea by Japanese aircraft.<sup>8</sup>

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3 Christopher M. Bell, 'The "Singapore Strategy" and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the Dispatch of Force Z', *English Historical Review*, vol. 116, no. 467 (2001), p. 610; Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire*, p. 36.

4 Ong Chit Chung, 'Major-General William Dobbie and the Defence of Malaya, 1935–38', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1986), pp. 282–83.

5 Bell, 'The "Singapore Strategy" and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the Dispatch of Force Z', p. 607.

6 Note on the Malayan Campaign by LMH, p. 1, Heath Papers, LMH 5, P 441, Imperial War Museum (IWM), London.

7 Andrew Gilchrist, *Malaya 1941: The Fall of a Fighting Empire* (London: Robert Hale, 1992), p. 21.

8 Neidpath, *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire*, pp. 213–21.



Singapore is an oblong-shaped small island 27 miles in length and 13 miles wide. The island, in size and shape, is similar to the Isle of Wight, and is less than one mile away from the tip of the southern shore of the Malaya Peninsula. The island is mainly flat with no natural defensive features.<sup>9</sup> Bataan, the epicentre of American resistance in the Philippines, at its narrowest point is a peninsula 14 miles wide.<sup>10</sup> And at Bataan, the Americans, unlike the British imperial troops, were able to contain the Japanese troops for quite a long period. Singapore Island is separated from the mainland of Malaya by the Straits of Johore across which the only permanent communication (railway and a road) was the Causeway with a length of 1,100 yards. The Straits west of the Causeway are narrower, varying in width from 600 to 2,000 yards and navigable for small to medium draught vessels. East of the Causeway, the Straits are wider, varying in width from 1,100 to 5,000 yards and navigable for big vessels as far as the naval base.<sup>11</sup> The great naval base was located on the north-east side of the island.<sup>12</sup>

In the middle of the Straits at its widest point is Pulau Ubin Island. This island lies north-east of Singapore Island. Its length is four and a half miles and its width is one and a half miles. To the east of the island is the mouth of the Johore River. At the mouth of the river is Pulau Tekong Island. A few miles east of Tekong is Pengerang Hill at the southern tip of Johore mainland. South of Singapore Island and separated from it by the waters of Keppel Harbour are the islands of Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani. Three miles further south-west is Pulau Bukum, where the Asiatic Petroleum Company's main reserves of naval fuel, petrol and lubricating oils were located. The town of Singapore is situated on the south of the island, covering six miles along the water front with a depth of one and a half miles. Immediately north of the town was an extensive residential area which covered several square miles of territory. The docks area

9 Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore: 1940–42* (2005, reprint, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2006), p. 28. Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival in *The War in Malaya* (1949, reprint, Bombay/Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1957), p. 255.

10 David Bergami, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy* (1971, reprint, London: Panther Books, 1972), p. 882.

11 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 255; K.D. Bhargava and K.N.V. Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, in Bisheshwar Prasad (ed.), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War: 1939–45* (New Delhi: Combined Inter-Services Historical Section India and Pakistan, Distributed by Orient Longman, 1960), p. 301.

12 Ian Morrison, *Malayan Postscript* (London: Faber and Faber, Mcmxlii), p. 12.

was in the western part of the town. The population of Singapore was 550,000, but by January 1942 had increased to about a million.<sup>13</sup>

The principal roads radiated from Singapore in all directions. The main road was the Bukit Timah Road which went to the mainland across the Causeway. The southern half of the Bukit Timah Road was a double-track one with a canal in between. The railway line after crossing the Johore Causeway ran from north to south along the centre of Singapore Island and connected the Singapore city and port. The significant hills are in the west part of the island. The Bukit Timah Hills are three miles north of Bukit Timah village and the Pasir Panjang Ridge, four miles in length, runs from Pasir Panjang village on the south coast to the western outskirts of Singapore town. Except for the built-up areas, Singapore Island, like Malaya, was thickly covered by rubber and other plantations. On the north and western coasts there were extensive mangrove swamps. The swamps were of recent origins due to extensive irrigation works. There were many creeks (only a few were navigable) in the western coastline. The eastern and southern coastlines from Changi to Pasir Panjang were less broken with little mangrove and had many sandy beaches. In the centre of the island were located the MacRitchie Peirce and Seletar Reservoirs and the municipal catchment area. To the north, the Naval Base Reservation covered a large tract of the region.<sup>14</sup>

### Organization of the Defence

Singapore neither at this or any time was in the proper sense of the word a Fortress.

LEWIS HEATH<sup>15</sup>

Singapore's fixed defences were weak. The Coast Defence Armament consisted of 29 guns, varying from 15-inch to 6-inch calibres. These guns were distributed in batteries of two to three over a frontage of more than 30 miles stretching from Pengerang on the eastern side of the channel of entry to the naval base up

13 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 255. The civilian population just before the invasion fluctuated between 800,000 and one million. Of the civilian population, only 8,000 were Europeans, 20,000 Malays, 20,000 Indians and the rest Chinese. Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, pp. 301-2.

14 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 257; Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, p. 302.

15 Note on the Malayan Campaign by LMH, p. 2, Heath Papers, LMH 5.

to the western end of Singapore Island. These were designed to deter an enemy attack from the direction of the Singapore Straits towards the eastern part of the island. Most of the heavy guns in the island had little high explosive ammunition.<sup>16</sup> The flat trajectory of these guns made them unsuitable for counter-battery work. Aerial observation for firing was not possible in view of Japanese air superiority.<sup>17</sup> Due to the humid climate, Percival did not plant large numbers of landmines earlier, fearing that they would become duds because of heavy rate of corrosion.<sup>18</sup> About the lack of defensive preparedness, Percival noted:

In the western part of the island the Rivers Kranji and Jurong both rise in the central group of hills and flow respectively north and south. Between the sources of these two rivers is only a comparatively narrow neck of land which was the natural place for a switch line to oppose a landing on the western shores of the island. Here the ground had been cleared though no actual defences were constructed until after the outbreak of the war with Japan.<sup>19</sup>

Percival's frank statement was backed by an account written by the commandant of the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment. As regards the state of affairs on 25 January 1942, Lieutenant-Colonel G. Clough, who commanded the above-mentioned unit, penned the following words:

At this stage it was apparent even to the most ignorant, that something more must be done to put the Island into a greater state of defence. Not a strand of wire had been laid on the Northern Sector from the Jurong River to Changi nor had a trench been dug nor any gun position reconnoitred. Even the north side of the Naval Base was inadequately defended. To those tired troops arriving on the Island this was an astounding situation. All the defences were facing south, though it was possible to lay some (I think two) of the 15-inch guns on Johore.... Although the stores were

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<sup>16</sup> Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 257; Note on the Malayan Campaign by LMH, p. 2, Heath Papers, LMH 5.

<sup>17</sup> Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, p. 304.

<sup>18</sup> Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 258.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

full of wire, sandbags and tools, and although the island was full of Chinese labour, there was always difficulty in getting anything quickly.<sup>20</sup>

One wonders why Percival did not take drastic measures to improve the defences on the northern side of Singapore Island. The naval base at Seletar on the northern shore of Singapore Island and the eastern arm of the Johore Strait, which is the main approach to the naval base, were within the ranges of small arms fire from the mainland of Peninsular Malaya. It would have been erroneous to have constructed defences only on the shores of that island, which would have allowed the enemy to bomb, shell and machine-gun the naval base at will. It would have been good to have had defensive posts along the northern shore of the island in addition to those upcountry, but noted Percival, finances prohibited the action.<sup>21</sup>

Percival was only providing half of the truth. Traditionally, for the Allied high command, an enemy naval armada was supposed to pose the main threat to the Singapore naval base. Neither Percival nor the British high command considered that the Japanese would be able to overrun southern Malaya from the north. So, in the absence of dense and fixed defensive structures, Percival had to depend on his dispirited and demoralized troops, who had already been defeated in mainland Malaya, in order to check the onslaught of the supremely professional, hyper-aggressive Japanese infantry advancing from Johore. In contrast to Percival at Malaya-Singapore, from 15 December 1941 onwards, Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines started moving ammunition and food into the 400 square miles at the tip of Bataan, which is a small peninsula that jutted south from the middle of the western coast of Luzon and the northern half of Manila Bay. Bataan controlled the landward approaches to Corregidor which is an island that bristled with concrete tunnels and heavy guns built to defend the entrance to Manila Harbour.<sup>22</sup>

Percival's ground force comprised 38 infantry battalions. Of them, 17 were Indian, 13 British, six Australian and two Malayan. In addition, there were three MG battalions (two British and one Australian), nine artillery regiments, three anti-tank regiments and 152 AA guns.<sup>23</sup> Percival's policy was forward defence. It

20 A History of the 4/19th Hyderabad Regiment after the Slim Battle up to Capitulation, by Commandant of the 4/19th Hyderabad Regiment, Changi POW Camp, Dec. 1943, p. 1, MISC/707/H, MODHS, New Delhi.

21 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 259; Note on the Malayan Campaign by LMH, p. 1, Heath Papers, LMH 5.

22 Bergami, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy*, p. 878.

23 Peter Thompson, *The Battle for Singapore: The True Story of the Greatest Catastrophe of World War II* (2005, reprint, London: Piatkus, 2013), p. 373.

meant attempting to defeat the enemy on the beaches. He had to guard about 80 miles of coastline and divided Singapore Island for defensive purposes into several areas. The Northern Area had the 3rd Corps which included the 18th British and 11th Indian divisions. It extended from the Causeway eastwards to Changi (exclusive of Changi and Yan Kit villages, Pierce Reservoir and Woodlands designated as Point 135 but inclusive of Paya Lebar village). The disposition of the troops was as follows: at the right of the Northern Area was the 18th British Division with the 54th Infantry Brigade on the right and 55th Infantry Brigade on the left. At the left was deployed the 11th Indian Division with the 15th Indian Infantry Brigade on the right, 8th Indian Infantry Brigade in the centre and 28th Indian Infantry Brigade on the left.<sup>24</sup> The 28th Indian Infantry Brigade was responsible for some 6,000 yards of sea front between the Dockyard at the east end of the naval base and the Causeway. This brigade comprised the 5th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment and 2nd Battalion of the 2nd GR, along with the Manchesters. The 2nd Battalion of the 9th GR of this brigade was at Sembawang Aerodrome about three miles south of the Dockyard. The 2nd Battalion of the 2nd GR's left flank linked with the 2nd/30th Battalion of the 27th Australian Brigade of the 8th Australian Division.<sup>25</sup>

The Western Area was under the 8th Australian Division, supported by the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade. The operational responsibility of the Western Area extended from the Causeway round the West Coast to Sungei Jurong inclusive of the Woodlands (Point 135), Bukit Timah village, Kampong Sungei Jurong, and Tanjong Balai. The disposition of the troops was as follows: the 27th Australian Brigade (less one battalion) on the right, the 22nd Australian Brigade in the centre and the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade on the left. The 44th Indian Infantry Brigade was raised in Poona (Pune) during July 1941 and comprised the 6th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment, 7th Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment and 6th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment. These battalions were raised in the autumn of 1940. The brigade had trained for deployment in Iraq. The three battalions lacked adequate numbers of Bren Guns and anti-tank weapons.<sup>26</sup>

General H. Gordon Bennett wrote in his memoirs about the nature of defence on 5 January 1942:

<sup>24</sup> Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, pp. 303, 307–9.

<sup>25</sup> Brigadier E.V.R. Bellers, *The History of the 1st King George V's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Malaun Regiment)*, vol. 2, 1920–1947 (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1956), pp. 128–29.

<sup>26</sup> Account of Brigadier G.C. Ballantine Commander of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 1, 1973–09–2, NAM, London.

I accompanied General Percival on a tour to the 44th Indian Brigade headquarters and then on the south coast to a hill from which could be seen the terrain for miles, laid out like a carpet.... From our high hill we could see to our left the position held by one company of a Punjab regiment, while some two miles or so to the right was the next company's position. In between was a mangrove swamp. This gap between the companies was quite a mile and a half in extent. General Percival again expressed his serious concern at the thinness of the defence.<sup>27</sup>

One battalion of the 27th Australian Infantry Brigade with a MG company and detachments from administrative and reinforcement units was in reserve. The Southern Area included Singapore Fortress. This area had the 1st and 2nd Malaya Infantry Brigades, Straits Settlements Volunteer Force and Fixed Defence Units. The Southern Area's operational responsibility extended from Sungei Jurong till Changi along the southern coast. The 1st Malaya Infantry Brigade was positioned on the right, the Straits Settlement Volunteer Force at the centre (Singapore City) and the 2nd Malaya Infantry Brigade on the left (including the Pengerang area and Tekong Island). The 12th Indian Infantry Brigade was in Command Reserve.<sup>28</sup>

Almost all the troops were spread evenly to cover Singapore Island's 70 mile circumference, with only a small reserve for emergencies. Percival had deployed most of his formations for static defence. He kept a few of the under-strength, under-equipped and inadequately-trained formations for mobile reserve. Attempts to hold linear defence lines along the water obstacles had failed in France in 1940<sup>29</sup> and in Malaya during December 1941 and January 1942. Rather, he should have maintained a light screen at the beaches and kept the bulk of his troops in the rear, which should have been used for counter-attack when the Japanese landings occurred.

When the battle for mainland Malaya ended, the Indian units were not in good shape. After the disastrous Battle of the Slim River fought on 8 January 1942, the battered 12th Indian Infantry Brigade was withdrawn to Tyerstell Park in Singapore. Of the formations in this brigade, the Argyles/Argylls under Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart had two intact companies. The 5th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment had only one company (Punjabi Muslims) left. It was

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27 General H. Gordon Bennett, *The Fall of Singapore* (reprint, New Delhi: Natraj, 1990), p. 141.

28 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 309.

29 David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919–1945* (2000, reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 196; Thompson, *The Battle for Singapore*, p. 387.

led by one Sikh commissioned officer. In the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment, many officers, like Lieutenant-Colonel Wilson-Haffenden, Major A.D. Brown, Captain Mehta (an Indian) and Lieutenant Darling, became casualties. For convenience as regards reorganization and refitting, the 5th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment was attached to the 4th Battalion of the 19th Regiment under the command of Captain Phadnis, and Captain Jalani acted as Adjutant.<sup>30</sup>

On 21 January, Major Clough arrived from the 3rd Corps Headquarters and took over command of the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment. Major Emsden Lambert took over command of the 5th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment. On 25 January, Major Stapleton and 400 young soldiers arrived from India as drafts for the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment. These men were inexperienced and some of them had served for only one year. A skeleton signal section was raised. Two gunners and two Vickers Guns were available and one or two LMGs could be manned. There were no trained crews available for the mortars. Each man had, however, a rifle and some ammunition. The 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment was allotted the task of preparing defensive positions in front of the Causeway. The Argyles were kept in Tyersall Park to do training.<sup>31</sup>

The CO of the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment noted in his account:

Every day we moved out by lorry to the CAUSEWAY to dig and wire. Positions were dug, road blocks laid, long grass cleared by Chinese coolies, and flame thrower pits prepared. Behind us a bulldozer worked on a tank trap trench. We did what we could in the short time available and connected up the defences around the CAUSEWAY to the NAVAL BASE to the east. This work continued for about seven days, yet there still remained an undefended gap of several miles from the CAUSEWAY ... west of the Jurong River. It was not until the mainland was evacuated that any attempt was made to prepare this gap.<sup>32</sup>

On 31 January 1942, the Causeway was blown.<sup>33</sup> Singapore could depend for its defence on some of the scratch units which were raised by a few energetic

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30 A History of the 4/19th Hyderabad Regiment after the Slim Battle up to Capitulation, Dec. 1943, p. 1.

31 Ibid., p. 1.

32 Ibid., p. 2.

33 Jasbir Singh, *Escape from Singapore* (New Delhi: Lancer, 2010), p. 42.



officers who had come to the island after being wounded in combat in the mainland. Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. Cumming was one such officer. He took discharge from the Convalescent Depot at Changi and reported for duty at No. 7 Mixed Reinforcement Camp on Braddel Road. He went to the Headquarters of Malaya Command for orders to join his original battalion, the 2nd Sikhs. After three days he came to know that the Causeway was blown and the 22nd Brigade was sacrificed to save Singapore. The next day, Cumming visited the No. 3 Mixed Reinforcement Camp and found that four officers (Geoff Hawkins who was in temporary command of the 2nd Sikhs, Milly Brunner, Taffy Williams and Boy Campbell) of the 22nd had succeeded in escaping from Malaya.<sup>34</sup>

On 4 February 1942, the Corps Commander called Cumming and ordered him to raise a battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment from a newly arrived draft of 300 men at one of the Mixed Reinforcement Camps and from the remnants of the 2nd and 4th battalions of the Jat Regiment. Cumming reported to the divisional headquarters and asked Major-General Billy Key about reorganizing the 2nd Sikhs. Key responded that only if Cumming could raise 600 men would it be a possibility. A draft of 400 men arrived on 4 February from India. Cumming managed to get many but failed to reach the magic figure of 600 men. He then turned his attention to the Jats. Captain Eric Holmes and Lieutenant Canute Larson came over from the 2nd Sikhs. Bill Hislop was appointed as Adjutant and Frank Rose as Quarter-Master. The unit was organized in the following manner: A Company (Jats) under Captain A.G. Khan, B Company (Punjabi Muslims) under Captain Sanford, C Company (Jats) under Lieutenant Sell, D Company (Rajput Muslims/Ranghars) under Captain Watson and Headquarters (mixed) was under Lieutenant Larson. Thus, the unit acquired the character of being a class company battalion. By the evening of 6 February, the battalion consisted of 16 British officers and 605 VCOs and privates. They were issued clothing and some equipment but the equipment wasn't enough. There were only four 3-inch mortars and only six trained personnel could man them. On 7 February, the Corps Commander, Lieutenant-General Lewis Heath, inspected the battalion and said that the men would be fully equipped within 10 days but must be ready for action within a week. Cumming noted that there was a deficiency in boots, steel helmets, Bren Guns, Tommy Guns, Bren Gun Carriers, 2-inch mortars, medical equipment, signals equipment, trucks and motorcycles.<sup>35</sup>

The brigade commander and his staff carried out an inspection of the battalion on 8 February and promised to correct the deficiencies as regards

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34 Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. Cumming, 'The Fall of Singapore', p. 1, L/WS/1/952, IOR, BL, London.

35 Ibid., pp. 1–2.



equipment, and intensive training started. The deficiencies regarding equipment were never corrected. The camp of the battalion was situated three miles from Singapore City on the Serangoon Road behind the Bidadari Christian Cemetery. Being waterlogged, it was impossible to dig slit trenches more than six inches deep without striking water in the camp. Many trenches were dug among the *atap* huts. In addition to this Jat battalion, there was the composite battalion of the Leicester-Surreys and, a quarter of a mile away, the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment. The brigade headquarters was at a small park 600 yards up on a side road.<sup>36</sup>

After the Japanese invasion, MacArthur concentrated some 80,000 of his soldiers in the northern Philippine island of Luzon.<sup>37</sup> Singapore's garrison numbered about 100,000 men.<sup>38</sup> Singapore had four aerodromes. Of them, three — Tengah, Sembawang and Seletar — were exposed to Japanese artillery fire from the Malaya mainland. On 1 February 1942, Singapore received 48 Hurricanes. In addition, there were eight Hurricanes and eight Buffaloes at Kallang airport. The ammunition stock was considerable. Pistols and Thompson sub-machine guns had 12 days' stock, .55 anti-tank rifles had 23 days' stock, grenades and mortars for 45 days and artillery ammunition for 90 days. According to one calculation, as regards food supply, three months' meat and four months' flour were available on Singapore Island.<sup>39</sup> The issue was whether Singapore would be able to conduct a prolonged defence against the imminent Japanese invasion.

Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. Cumming vividly portrayed the atmosphere of Singapore in the following words:

Singapore in the latter half of January and February 1942 was showing signs of war fever. The pendulum had made a belated swing over from almost complete complacency to the opposite extreme. The wail of a siren sent the whole population scampering wildly into air raid shelters. Banks, businesses, shops, offices, everything shut down till the 'All Clear' sounded, quite regardless of the direction taken by enemy planes. Later on some of the bigger firms, Robinsons and Littles of Raffles Place posted 'Roof Watchers' and business as usual was carried on until enemy planes were reported overhead. As January merged into February and with Jap

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Bergami, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy*, p. 878.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Warren, *Britain's Greatest Defeat: Singapore 1942* (2002, reprint, London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 208.

<sup>39</sup> Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, pp. 304, 308.

forces already on the island of Singapore it became increasingly difficult to get casual meals at Raffles Hotel or Adelphi. Cyrano's Restaurant was the first to shut down though it had struggled gamely on for some days after receiving a direct hit from a heavy bomb. The destruction of the Naval Base in the North and the dense pall of billowing smoke pouring over the Island from burning oil tanks, for day after day seemed to foreshadow grimmer days ahead.<sup>40</sup>

### Retreat from the Beaches

After 12 January 1942, the Japanese 3rd Air Group, which was cooperating with the 25th Japanese Army and the 15th Japanese Army along with the naval air units, concentrated on attacking Singapore. However, in the Japanese assessment, these attacks were not very successful as several Allied aircraft escaped to Sumatra where they remained active. During the latter part of January, the Japanese Southern Army calculated that the Commonwealth air force (including the planes at Sumatra) had about 200 aircraft. However, the Japanese deemed that the situation on the ground was more favourable. The fighting in Johore in late January, the Japanese assessed, had almost destroyed the 9th and 11th Indian divisions, along with the 45th Independent Indian Infantry Brigade plus the 8th Australian Division.<sup>41</sup>

In the morning of 8 February, the Garhwal Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Smith joined the 8th Indian Brigade and occupied the high ground north of MS 13 on the Mandai Road, thus forming a defensive flank behind the 28th Indian Infantry Brigade. In the afternoon, the Japanese bombardment increased in intensity. Most of the shelling was focused on the 27th Australian Brigade of the 8th Australian Division rather than the 11th Indian Division. Most of the guns of the 27th Australian Brigade and its communication systems were put out of order. From the pattern of shelling, Percival, Heath and Gordon Bennett should have understood that the Japanese were going to land along the area held by the 8th Australian Division. But the only deployment which occurred in the afternoon was that the B Company of the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd GR took up positions at the 11th Division's observation post at

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<sup>40</sup> Cumming, 'The Fall of Singapore', p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, pp. 13–15.

Mandai.<sup>42</sup> One could say that the Commonwealth command system was sluggish and unresponsive to the rapidly changing operational-strategic scenario.

During the night of 8 February, the Japanese landed on the west of the Kranji River. The terrain on the edge of the water was an extensive mangrove swamp with muddy creeks. On the first day of the assault landing at Singapore Island at the sector held by the Australians, some 5,000 Japanese soldiers were able to land. Brigadier Taylor commanded the 22nd AIF Brigade which held a front of about 16,000 yards. Taylor had dispersed two battalions along the coast and one battalion was held as mobile reserve.<sup>43</sup> Bennett noted that Taylor appeared somewhat shaken.<sup>44</sup> The IJA personnel followed their hitherto successful tactics of infiltration and deep penetration behind the enemy lines. The Japanese detachments had some personnel with compasses strapped to their arms and started to infiltrate through the gaps in the defensive line towards Ama Keng village in order to cut off the defenders in the forward areas.<sup>45</sup>

By early morning on 9 February, Bennett's headquarters received news that both the 2nd/18th Australian Battalion and 2nd/20th Australian Battalion had been overrun. Later, the news came that one company of the 2nd/19th Australian Battalion under Captain Cousins was holding out against the Japanese between the aerodrome and S. Berih.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, Brigadier Taylor organized a stop line stretching from the northern end of the airfield to Choa Chu Kang village. A company of the 2nd/19th Australian Battalion was at this village. The 2nd/29th Australian Battalion was at the northern end of the airfield and the Jhind Battalion (an IST unit) was placed on its left.<sup>47</sup> On 8 February, the Jhind Infantry was guarding the Tengah airfield. It came under the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>48</sup> At about 0830 hours on 9 February, after receiving the morning situation report which noted that the Northern Area was not attacked, Percival ordered his only reserve, the 12th Indian Brigade to move to

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42 Colonel A.M. Harrison, 11th Indian Division in Malaya, Chs. 24–25, p. 496, CAB 106/58, PRO, Kew, Surrey, UK.

43 Report on the Fall of Singapore, G.W. Seabridge, Colombo, 28 Feb. 1942, p. 6, CAB 66/24/7, PRO, Kew; A History of the 4/19th Hyderabad Regiment after the Slim Battle up to Capitulation, Dec. 1943, p. 3; Bellers, *The Malaun Regiment*, vol. 2, p. 131.

44 Bennett, *The Fall of Singapore*, p. 145.

45 Percival's Comments on the First Draft of Official History of the Second World War, The War against Japan, vol. 1, Part 2, p. 600, DS 02305/1(123), Percival Papers, P 22, IWM, London.

46 Bennett, *The Fall of Singapore*, p. 147.

47 Percival Papers, P 22, p. 602, DS 02305/1(125).

48 *Indelible Reminiscences: Memoirs of Major-General Gurbakhsh Singh*, Compiled by Mrs Sudesh Gurbakhsh Singh (New Delhi: Lancer, 2013), p. 57.

Keat Hong where it would come under the command of the Western Area.<sup>49</sup> On the morning of 9 February, the 12th Brigade was ordered to Bukit Panjang village to support the 22nd AIF Brigade. The 12th Brigade's two battalions: the Argylls/Argyles and the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment proceeded by MT and moved to the west of the village and north of the road which went to Tengah airport. Brigadier Paris took up position at the northern end of the Jurong Line (astride the Choa Chu Kang Road at M.S. 12.5) with the Argylls on the right and the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment on the left. The Japanese aircraft bombed and machine-gunned Bukit Panjang and Japanese artillery also opened up on this place. The sepoy took positions along the rubber trees. But there was no time to dig trenches.<sup>50</sup>

On 9 February around 0700 hours, the Jat Battalion was scattered among the huts and was getting ready to conduct training in the open ground at the front. At 1000 hours, suddenly, three violent explosions occurred near the battalion office where the CO and his staff were discussing the training programme and equipment deficiencies. Two British officers and three Indian officers were wounded, along with several privates of the Leicester-Surrey Battalion. Either by luck or due to information supplied by the fifth columnists, the Japanese had shelled the brigade headquarters. The Jat Battalion moved two and a half miles out to a copse near Chuan village. In the evening, the 15th Brigade got orders to march to the Bukit Timah Road near the Race Course and the 9th Jats was placed in corps reserve.<sup>51</sup> From 1000 hours on the morning of 9 February, Tengah airfield was under attack by the advancing Japanese troops. The Jhind Infantry continued to hold them till they were surrounded on all sides. Communications with the brigade headquarters were severed. The Jhind Battalion realized that no reinforcements would reach them. Moreover, the Australians had retreated without notifying them. In the evening of the same day, the Jhind Infantry retreated towards the Jurong Line.<sup>52</sup>

During the late afternoon, 9 February, Percival visited the headquarters of the Western Area and met Bennett. Both agreed that the 27th AIF Brigade would continue to hold the Causeway Sector and that the 44th Indian Brigade was to withdraw from its position along the coast and occupy the southern part of the Jurong Line at M.S. 12 on the Jurong Road. The 44th Indian Brigade

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49 Percival Papers, P 22, p. 602.

50 A History of the 4/19th Hyderabad Regiment after the Slim Battle up to Capitulation, Dec. 1943, p. 3; Percival Papers, P 22, p. 602.

51 Cumming, 'The Fall of Singapore', p. 2.

52 *Indelible Reminiscences*, pp. 59–60.

was covering the south-west coast of Singapore Island. It was not engaged by IJA infantry but had been thoroughly shelled and the Pasir Laba 6-inch battery had been put out of action by the Japanese aircraft. The plan was that the 12th Brigade and the reinforced 22nd AIF Brigade were to occupy the northern part of the Jurong Line in contact with the 44th Indian Brigade. Percival had already ordered the 3rd Corps to place the 15th Brigade in Command Reserve and be ready to move in one hour's notice. Then, Percival ordered the 15th Brigade to move to the Racecourse on the Bukit Timah Road where it was to come under the Western Area and guard the food, petrol and ammunition dumps in the Bukit Timah area.<sup>53</sup> During the discussion with Bennett, the possibility of using the 44th Indian Brigade as a counter-attack force against the Japanese's right flank was discussed but then dismissed as impractical. The British official historian (i.e. Kirby and his team), famous for his volumes titled *The War against Japan*, offers no explanation as regards the dismissal of the idea of launching a counter-offensive in the first volume.<sup>54</sup> True, the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade was weak. But, a sudden counter-attack on the small parties of the IJA infantry, who were just coming ashore and were unsure of the strength of defence on the island, would have unsettled the Japanese landing, at least temporarily. It was definitely a better plan than waiting for the Japanese attack to develop and being shelled and bombed till then.

Bennett wrote in his memoirs that in the afternoon on 9 February, while he was meeting Percival, news came that the 22nd AIF Brigade had been driven back to a line between the River Kranji and the River Jurong. Bennett rang Taylor, who according to the former's account, appeared confused. Bennett claimed that due to the withdrawal of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, the 22nd AIF Brigade had to be withdrawn.<sup>55</sup> The 6th/15th Indian Brigade under Colonel Coates was placed under Bennett's command in the afternoon of 9 February 1942. In the evening of the same day, Bennett ordered this brigade to take up a position on the right of the 44th Indian Brigade. During the night of 9/10 February, the Japanese patrols clashed with the defending forces near the Bulim Line. The 2nd/29th Australian Battalion was ordered to extend the 12th Brigade's line astride the Choa Chu Kang Road and link up with the Special Reserve Battalion in its position north of West Bukit Timah. Major Merrett, whose force comprised the remnants of the 2nd/19th Battalion and 2nd/20th

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53 Percival Papers, P 22, p. 605, DS 02305/1(128).

54 Ibid., see the fn.

55 Bennett, *The Fall of Singapore*, p. 148.

Battalion, received the order to withdraw to Keat Hong village. And the 2nd/18th Battalion was ordered to go into reserve in the same locality.<sup>56</sup>

However, Percival ordered the destruction of the oil depots at Kranji and Woodlands during the night of 9 February. The 11th Indian Division was ordered to assist the Royal Navy (RN) in destroying the stores and equipment in the naval base. The black billowing smoke and red flashes of the burning depots further undermined the willpower of the Commonwealth defenders. By night-fall of 9 February, the Japanese 5th and 18th divisions were firmly established on the island and were engaged in consolidating their positions and bringing reserves and supplies from the mainland.<sup>57</sup>

At midnight (9/10 February), the corps headquarters ordered the 9th Jat Battalion to move immediately by MT within an hour to rejoin the 15th Brigade at Bukit Timah. By 0400 hours, the MT had arrived. The battalion moved along the Jurong Road. The brigade headquarters was established in a deep dugout in DeSouza Avenue, about a mile from Bukit Timah. The Jats advanced three miles along the Jurong Road and then deployed in a hilly area to support the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Regiment and Leicester-Surreys deployed along the road a mile forward. South of the 15th Brigade was the 44th Indian Brigade.<sup>58</sup>

The withdrawal from the Causeway started at 0400 hours on 10 February. With the evacuation of the Causeway, the trunk road was abandoned and the Japanese were able to consolidate their landings unopposed. A gap of about 4,000 yards appeared between the 27th Brigade and the left flank of the 11th Indian Division. The voluntary retreat of the 27th Brigade, which exposed the left flank of the 11th Indian Division, came to the latter's knowledge only at about 0630 hours on 10 February. Key asked the Western Area to reoccupy the undefended trunk road but was told that Australian troops were not available for this task.<sup>59</sup> Inadequate staff work resulted in bad communication among the various formations in the different defensive zones. This in turn prevented the establishment of a coherent defensive line. The withdrawal of a unit from a particular command zone without informing the commander of the neighbouring command zone resulted in the creation of gaps in the defensive line which were open to deep penetration and exploitation by the Japanese troops. To close the gap, the troops in the neighbouring command zone had to

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56 Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust, Australia in the War of 1939–45*, Series One, Army, vol. 4 (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1957), p. 335.

57 Percival Papers, P 22, pp. 605–6.

58 Cumming, 'The Fall of Singapore', p. 2.

59 Percival Papers, P 22, p. 611, DS 02305/1(134).

withdraw voluntarily. Continuous disparate withdrawals resulted in the giving up of the defensive line without much of a fight being offered to the invaders.

Brigadier G.C. Ballantine, CO of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, noted on 10 February: 'Between 0800 and 1000 hrs I walked along the front of both brigades. There were no Australians on right. The whole position was a poor one... forward posts were badly sited and each platoon most extended and out of control. Inter-communication, except by runner, was nil'.<sup>60</sup> On the morning of 10 February, Japanese reconnaissance planes appeared. From 0800 hours till dusk, the Commonwealth positions along the Jurong Road were bombed by Japanese aircraft. Repeatedly, the Japanese medium bombers, often in a formation of 27 aircraft, came and bombed. Dive bombers bombed and machine-gunned the road and the surrounding region. The 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment was also bombed heavily and suffered numerous casualties. This further lowered the morale and combat effectiveness of this unit. Just after midday, the 9th Jat Battalion was ordered to take a position astride the road a mile further back.<sup>61</sup>

In the morning of 10 February, asserts Kirby, Bennett's objective was to hold the Jurong Line. The 22nd AIF Brigade's order was to hold Bulim till 0600 hours and then to retreat and take over the central sector of the Jurong Line between the 12th and 44th Indian Infantry Brigades. Bennett slightly altered the 44th Indian Brigade's original orders and informed it to occupy a position from the Jurong Road southwards, with its left in touch with the 1st Malaya Brigade at Kampong Jawa.<sup>62</sup>

At 1250 hours on 10 February, Percival's provisional plan for creating a defensive arc around Singapore was issued as a secret and personal instruction to senior commanders and the staff officers. In accordance with this plan, the northern arc was to be occupied by the 3rd Indian Corps (the 11th Indian and 18th British divisions) commanded by General Heath. Bennett's responsibility was the Western Sector and General Simmons' was to cover the Southern Sector. Bennett's defensive front was to extend from north-east to west of Bukit Timah village to about 750 yards west of the junction of the Reformatory and Ayer Raja roads (roughly 1,500 yards of Pasir Panjang village). Within the AIF sector, the new positions were to be occupied by the 27th Brigade on the right

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60 Account of Brigadier G.C. Ballantine Commander of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 9.

61 Cumming, 'The Fall of Singapore', p. 3; Singh, *Escape from Singapore*, p. 43.

62 Percival Papers, P 22, p. 612, DS02305/1(135).



of the Bukit Timah Road (trunk road near Bukit Timah village) and the 22nd Brigade on its left. The 44th Indian Brigade was to be placed in reserve.<sup>63</sup>

The 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, which was supposed to be Major-General Gordon Bennett's reserve, was fighting on the left flank of the 15th Indian Infantry Brigade throughout the morning of 10 February. Later that afternoon, several stragglers from the 44th Indian Brigade and the Australian Brigade started filtering through the rear. Many of these were halted and deployed to thicken the Jat Battalion's position. By 1750 hours, Japanese patrols appeared and infiltrated behind the Commonwealth line. Then, they started firing behind the left rear of the Jat position. D Company under Captain Watson was ordered to advance to clear the Japanese. A conference was held at 2100 hours at DeSouza Avenue where it was decided that the troops should recover all the lost ground and close the gap between the Kranji and Jurong Rivers.<sup>64</sup>

On 10 February 1942, General Wavell visited Singapore and, with Percival, went to see Bennett at the latter's headquarters. While the meeting was in progress, Japanese bombers arrived. However, the generals were unhurt. Wavell and Percival then visited Heath and then General Key whose headquarters was at the north of Nee Soon near the Seletar Reservoir. On the same day, Percival ordered the formation of TOMFORCE under Lieutenant-Colonel L.C. Thomas. This contingent comprised different units from the various brigades of the 18th British Division: the 4th Norfolks from the 54th Brigade, 1st Battalion of the 5th Sherwood Regiment from the 55th Brigade and a battery of the 85th Tank Regiment. Wavell and Percival returned to see Bennett in the afternoon of 10 February. The latter informed the two that the condition of the troops west of Bukit Timah village was not known and that the Kranji-Jurong Line was lost. Bennett had lost control over the deteriorating situation. When Wavell visited the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade's headquarters behind Bukit Timah Hill, the liaison officer from the Jhind Battalion was present. He told Wavell that the Jhind Infantry was occupying the Bukit Panjong Hill. Wavell congratulated him and said that reinforcements should be sent soon to secure the position on the left of the Bukit Panjong Hill. As the Japanese pushed forward from Bulim, the 2nd/29th Australian Battalion and the Argyles under Stewart retreated along Choa Chu Kang Road to Keat Hong village. When the Japanese tanks and elements of the 5th Japanese Division advanced towards Bukit Panjang, Brigadier Paris of the 12th Indian Brigade found that his patrols could not make contact with the 27th Brigade on his right. Breakdown of communications among the

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63 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 336–37.

64 Cumming, 'The Fall of Singapore', p. 3; Harrison, 11th Indian Division in Malaya, Chs. 24–25, p. 514.



various brigades whose COs retreated on their own without informing either their superior officers or the COs of the neighbouring friendly formations further undermined Commonwealth defence. Continuous incoherent retreat by the scattered under-strength formations demoralized the troops. The Commonwealth troops panicked when they saw Japanese tanks followed by Japanese infantry rumbling down the road. Paris decided to place the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment on the Choa Chu Kang Road between Bukit Panjang village and Keat Hong village. He also placed three companies of the 2nd/29th Australian Battalion covering the junction of the two above-mentioned roads and the Argyles in the south. Paris at this stage refused to believe the news that the Japanese were attacking with tanks.<sup>65</sup>

By this time, tank units of the 25th Japanese Army had advanced from the east of the wooden bridge of the Johore Channel, while the main Japanese force had attacked from the district to the west.<sup>66</sup> In the afternoon of 10 February, in the frontline of the 44th Indian Brigade, the 6th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment was on the Jurong Road, the 6th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment was further south in touch with the 2nd Malaya Battalion and the 7th Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment was in reserve in the rear. In the frontline of the 6th/15th Brigade, the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment was on the right flank and the Jat Battalion was in reserve.<sup>67</sup>

At 2230 hours, the following orders for counter-attack were issued: in Phase One, the 9th Jats and 16th Punjab would occupy the high ridge west of the road Bukit Timah-Bukit Panjang. In Phase Two, an attack would start at 0600 hours to seize the high ground around north-south grid line 72, and the 9th Jats' objective was Hill 220. In Phase Three, there would be a westward advance to north-south grid line 70. Artillery support would be available only during Phase Three. No air support would be available. The 15th Brigade (including the 9th Jats) would have the 12th Brigade on its right and 44th Brigade and the Australians on its left.<sup>68</sup> The counter-attack should have been launched in the early morning of 9 February when the Japanese were just coming ashore. By 10/11 February, it was too late to change the situation.

By midnight of 10/11 February, in accordance with Phase One, B and C companies of the 9th Jats under Captains Sanford and Sell occupied the high ridge. However, no contact was established with A Company (minus one platoon

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65 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, pp. 338–39; Harrison, 11th Indian Division in Malaya, Chs. 24–25, pp. 513–14; *Indelible Reminiscences*, pp. 61–62.

66 *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 18.

67 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 340.

68 Cumming, 'The Fall of Singapore', p. 3.

which was guarding the battalion headquarters) under Captain Khan which had retreated to Bukit Timah village. The D company was cut off by the Japanese who had infiltrated through the Australians' positions. The 3rd Battalion of the 16th Regiment was also heavily attacked by the Japanese.<sup>69</sup> During the night of 10/11 February, while the 5th Japanese Division attacked on the north side of Chua Chu Kang Road, the 18th Japanese Division attacked on the south side with the Bukit Timah Hill as the objective.<sup>70</sup> By early morning of 11 February it was clear that Gordon Bennett's counter-offensive in the west of the Singapore was in shambles. The 15th Indian Infantry Brigade was on the start line alone and completely isolated astride the Jurong Road at M.S. 9. There was no sign of the 12th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 22nd AIF Brigade. Bennett had lost control over the three brigades. Worse, the brigadier of the 15th Indian Infantry Brigade also lost control over his battalions. For instance, the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Punjabis was out of touch with the Jat Battalion on its right.<sup>71</sup> Command confusion and inept leadership (both by Gordon Bennett and the brigade commanders) resulted in only the Jat Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. Cumming reaching its objective which was a wooded hill some eight miles north-west of Singapore City.<sup>72</sup>

At 0830 hours on 11 February, a Japanese aircraft dropped Yamashita's message for the Singapore Garrison to surrender.<sup>73</sup> 11 February was the 'Black Day' of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade. For the first time, this brigade faced full-scale Japanese attack. And the young, untrained, badly-equipped sepoy led by inexperienced British officers and VCOs melted away against the glare of the 'Rising Sun'. Most of the personnel were recruits of 17–18 years of age who were barely trained with rifles. They had never seen a tank before. And most of the formations lacked trained NCOs, VCOs and British officers who could speak Urdu. In the morning of 11 February, the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was holding a position at the junction of the Reformatory and Ulu Pandan Roads. The Ulu Pandan Road joined the Reformatory Road at M.S. 9.5. And the Reformatory Road ran from Pasir Panjang on the coast to Bukit Timah village. The ration strength of this brigade came to about 600 men in the three following units: 6th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment and 6th Battalion of the 14th Punjab

69 Ibid., p. 3.

70 Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective: The Capture of Singapore, 1942*, ed. by H.V. Howe, tr. by Margaret E. Lake (1997, reprint, Gloucestershire: Spellmount, 2007), pp. 187, 189.

71 Harrison, 11th Indian Division in Malaya, Chs. 24–25, p. 513.

72 Bellers, *The Malaun Regiment*, vol. 2, p. 133.

73 Harrison, 11th Indian Division in Malaya, Chs. 24–25, p. 514.

Regiment and one company of the 7th Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment. The 6th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment lost 150 men. Overall, the brigade on this day lost four British officers and 300 sepoy due to savage Japanese counter-attacks.<sup>74</sup> On 11 February, the Japanese finally captured Bukit Timah village. During the night of 11/12 February, the 11th Indian Division was ordered to withdraw to a line running from north of Nee Soon to Simpang village in order to protect the left flank of the 18th British Division.<sup>75</sup>

Alan Warren writes that on 12 February as the outgunned and outnumbered 25th Japanese Army was consolidating its hold on Bukit Timah village, the invaders were suffering from serious shortages of munitions. However, the Commonwealth commanders were unaware of the difficulties faced by the Japanese.<sup>76</sup> On 12 February, the 5th Japanese Division attacked along the reservoir area.<sup>77</sup> According to one report, on 12 February (Thursday), Bennett reached the conclusion that Singapore could hold out no longer. Bennett had a pessimistic view of the defence scenario as early as 8 February.<sup>78</sup> Early on 12 February, the 11th Indian Division was ordered to withdraw to east of Singapore. The withdrawal was to start at noon. By the end of the day, the defence line included the outskirts of Singapore City. The Commonwealth front was reduced to the shape of a semi-circular perimeter with a radius of four miles. Within this constricted space, about 80,000 demoralized and defeated troops were crammed. The units were mixed and all this resulted in confusion and chaos. Worse, almost one million civilians were also within this constricted zone. Due to continuous shelling and bombing by the Japanese artillery, mortars and bombers, several fires raged within the city which could not be extinguished due to lack of water supply.<sup>79</sup>

Next day, the 53rd Brigade held the region around the Braddell Road which ran from MacRitchie Reservoir eastwards to Woodleigh. The 11th Indian Division was on the right of the 18th British Division astride the Serangoon Road south of Payar Lebar. The 5th Battalion of the 14th Punjab was under the 8th Brigade at Payar Lebar. The 28th Brigade was deployed between Payar Lebar and Singapore City. On 13 February, the senior Commonwealth commanders met for a conference at Percival's Fort Canning Headquarters. Heath

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74 Account of Brigadier G.C. Ballantine Commander of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 12; Harrison, 11th Indian Division in Malaya, Chs. 24–25, p. 514; Thompson, *The Battle for Singapore*, p. 373.

75 Bellers, *The Malaun Regiment*, vol. 2, p. 133.

76 Warren, *Britain's Greatest Defeat*, p. 253.

77 Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective*, p. 193.

78 Report on the Fall of Singapore, Seabridge, 28 Feb. 1942, p. 1.

79 Bellers, *The Malaun Regiment*, vol. 2, p. 134; *Indelible Reminiscences*, p. 70.

and Bennett agreed that further resistance to the Japanese would be hopeless. During the night of 13/14 February, the Japanese infiltrated through the 2nd Cambridgeshires (left battalion of the 53rd Brigade) east of Thompson village. On the dawn of 14 February, the Japanese attacked Hill 105 at the eastern tip of MacRitchie Reservoir. On the same day, the 2nd Battalion of the 10th Baluch Regiment deserted and the Japanese attacked the 1st Malaya Brigade. In the afternoon of 14 February, the Japanese captured the Alexandra Military Hospital.<sup>80</sup>

15 February proved to be a defining day for both the Japanese and the Commonwealth troops. The IJA's supply situation was in serious crisis. Colonel Tsuji said in his memoirs: 'After roughly a week's fighting since we crossed the Johore Strait, the ammunition accumulated for the assault on Singapore Island was nearly exhausted. We had barely a hundred rounds per gun left for our field guns, and less for our heavy guns. With this small ammunition supply it was impossible to keep down enemy fire by counter-battery operations.'<sup>81</sup>

Though the Japanese were winning, they did not realize that they were so close to victory. A Japanese staff officer noted on 15 February 1942 in his autobiography:

During the day on the 5th Division front, the battle had raged as violently as in the Keppel Barracks area. Our front line had only been able to advance to the southern end of the reservoir. The troops had never before under such heavy shellfire, from which the trenches afforded very little shelter. The division had attacked from the main road sector supported by the full strength of the 'Tiger Cub' Tank Brigade, but the troops were finally brought to a standstill at half past three in the afternoon. Then suddenly, ahead of the most forward troops, who were renewing their assault along the central highway, there appeared a large white flag.<sup>82</sup>

On 15 February ('Black Friday') at 1810 hours, Percival signed the unconditional surrender document at Yamashita's headquarters. After signature of the unconditional surrender, a ceasefire order was clamped on the Commonwealth units in the evening of 15 February 1942. The Commonwealth units were to stay in their positions while the Japanese troops had the right to resort to firing at the sight of the slightest movement on the part of the former.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Warren, *Britain's Greatest Defeat*, pp. 258–61; Bellers, *The Malayan Regiment*, vol. 2, p. 137.

<sup>81</sup> Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective*, p. 195.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>83</sup> *Indelible Reminiscences*, pp. 73, 76.

A bizarre incident occurred in the Jhind Infantry, which was an ISF unit. In the evening of 15 February, after the news of surrender, while the officers were drinking champagne and the sepoys scotch whisky, at 2300 hours a subedar-major approached Gurbakhsh Singh. The former said that the men desired that those who had died in the trenches recently, instead of being buried, should be cremated on a funeral pyre in the traditional Hindu style. Gurbakhsh Singh replied that lighting a fire might get the attention of the Japanese. The subedar-major said that the funeral pyre would be lighted beside a burning train and hence the Japanese would not notice it. A huge pyre with logs was built up and then doused with petrol. When Jemadar Hari Singh threw a match, the pyre burst into flames and he was also burnt accidentally. Why the officers allowed this incident to occur is still a mystery. It is probable that, with the campaign over and unconditional surrender order in force, the commissioned officers had lost authority over the sepoys. The soldiers felt that the campaign had gone disastrously partly due to the bad leadership of the officers. And the sepoys believed that these officers had no moral right to command them. In the evening of 15 February, the officers were probably afraid that if they did not accommodate the cultural sensibilities of the drunk and defeated sepoys, then incidents of 'fragging' might occur. Most of the weapons were dumped into the sea. Only a few stray rifles were kept in the trenches to avoid any suspicion on part of the Japanese. On 17 February, the IJA soldiers marched past the Jhind Infantry into the city.<sup>84</sup>

### Assessment

The almost complete demoralization of the defending troops; the striking lack of any offensive spirit; the widespread acceptance of the view that the Battle for Singapore was a forlorn hope; and in isolated cases, an actual refusal to fight.

G.W. SEABRIDGE, *28 February 1942*<sup>85</sup>

In Singapore, Percival's troops can be classified into two categories. The first category comprised troops who were already defeated and demoralized due to the continuous withdrawal in the Malayan Peninsula. Moreover, the morale of the Indian troops was creaking due to Japanese propaganda. The second

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 76–79.

<sup>85</sup> Report on the Fall of Singapore, Seabridge, 28 Feb. 1942, p. 2, Seabridge's report was taken very seriously by the Director of Naval Intelligence and the First Lord of the Admiralty.

category of troops comprised recent drafts (especially the Indians and the Australians) who were inadequately trained and not fully equipped. Moreover, panic and demoralization spread from the first category of troops to the second category of soldiers. Now, let us analyze the views of some of the military officers regarding the debacle at Singapore.

Bennett in his memoirs wrote that Singapore fell because it was undermanned.<sup>86</sup> This statement is completely erroneous. According to one estimate, between 60,000 to 73,000 Commonwealth combat soldiers surrendered at Singapore.<sup>87</sup> Colonel Masanobu Tsuji estimated that from the crossing of the Johore Strait till the surrender of Percival at Singapore, the Japanese suffered 1,714 officers and men KIA, and another 3,378 officers and men were WIA. The total casualties came to about 5,092 men. The same Japanese staff officer claims that about 100,000 Commonwealth soldiers (50,000 of them Asians) surrendered to the Japanese. In addition, the Japanese captured 65,000 rifles and other small arms, 2,500 MGs and 200 armoured cars.<sup>88</sup> Peter Thompson writes that Percival had 70,000 combatants and 15,000 non-combatants at Singapore.<sup>89</sup> David Bergami states that in Malaya and Singapore, Percival commanded some 137,000 soldiers. In the Philippines, MacArthur had 112,500 soldiers (11,000 US regulars, 4,000 US inexperienced reinforcements, 12,000 Filipino Scouts and 82,000 Filipino reservists). This Filipino-American force was destroyed by the Japanese in 21 weeks. Lieutenant-General Honma/Homma Masaharu in the Philippines commanded some 74,000 Japanese soldiers.<sup>90</sup> As a point of comparison, in November 1942, at El Alamein, the Italian-German forces suffered some 60,000 casualties. And in May 1943, 250,000 Italian and German soldiers surrendered to the Allied forces at Tunisia.<sup>91</sup>

The question that comes to mind is, why did Singapore surrender so easily. Singapore's big guns proved to be a flop show. The armour piercing shells fired by the naval guns of the island were almost useless. The effect of such shells on mobile targets on land was limited because they buried themselves deep into

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86 Bennett, *The Fall of Singapore*, p. 140.

87 Report on the Fall of Singapore, Seabridge, 28 Feb. 1942, p. 6.

88 Tsuji, *Japan's Greatest Victory, Britain's Worst Defeat from the Japanese Perspective*, pp. 202–3. The figures regarding the capture of Commonwealth prisoners and various types of arms given by Tsuji make one suspicious. It is likely that he just reported the rough average.

89 Thompson, *The Battle for Singapore*, p.373.

90 Bergami, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy*, pp. 867, 879.

91 David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 283.

the ground before exploding. Again, the observation of fire was difficult as the topography was unfavourable for ground observation. And in the face of Japanese aerial superiority, air observation was impossible at that time.<sup>92</sup>

There was no shortage of supplies. So a long drawn struggle could have been carried out. There was abundant water, food, petrol and ammunition for both the soldiers as well as the civilians. One report by the Editor of *Straits Times* named G.W. Seabridge, who was in Singapore from 1928 onwards and left for Batavia on 11 February 1942, noted:

Singapore's food situation was very good. We had been told to expect a state of siege and had prepared for it; rationing was on a very modest scale, and as late as the first week in February restrictions on the sale of flour and a few other commodities were lifted and people encouraged to make purchases because stocks were too heavy. Sufficient food was available to feed people of all communities on an extremely adequate scale for an absolute minimum of four months, and very probably for six months. Water had not been rationed up to the 10th February and the Municipal Authorities were satisfied that they could carry on without the Gunong Pulai supply unless a phenomenal draught occurred.... There were several reservoirs on the island, some of them close to the town and two, at least, in the town itself. Good water is to be found at almost any point on the island at a depth of from 8 to 20 feet.... Petrol rationing was not severe and additional rations were easily available. Pulau Sambo, Pulau Sebrarang and Pulau Bukom... were stocked to capacity. These stocks were destroyed on or after the 12th February.<sup>93</sup>

The onus for effective mobilization of such resources and to initiate a denial scheme during the retreat definitely falls on Percival's shoulders. Seabridge noted: 'The scorched earth policy was feeble.... Demolition by the Services was on a scale which indicated a lack of appreciation of the efficiency of the Japanese engineering corps. The enemy's engineers were superb. Our idea seemed to be to keep the damage to the minimum, so that there would be less to repair when we went back.'<sup>94</sup> In addition to the lackadaisical leadership of Percival, contempt for the Japanese also played an important role in the not so efficient Commonwealth response.

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<sup>92</sup> Percival, *The War in Malaya*, pp. 257–58.

<sup>93</sup> Report on the Fall of Singapore, Seabridge, 28 Feb. 1942, pp. 1–2.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.



H. Gordon Bennett himself noted both the intrinsic weaknesses of Singapore and limitations of Percival's generalship. Bennett writes:

Singapore's strength depended on a powerful fleet, which needed as a 'must' adequate air protection. Singapore was a naval base. It was not a fortress.... The Japanese were well aware of the lack of defences on the northern side of the island and they were in a hurry to land before any defences could be prepared. For its defence, Singapore needed more than guns to keep away an enemy fleet and troop transports. It needed complete control of the air...<sup>95</sup>

Both Bennett and Heath, as we have seen earlier, agreed that Singapore was not a fortress in the true sense of the term. By using this term, both are avoiding responsibilities for the defeat at Singapore. Bennett noted that the limitations of Singapore's defence were further compounded by Percival's mistake in strengthening the eastern side of the island rather than the vulnerable Western Sector where the Japanese landed and the 8th Australian Division defended.<sup>96</sup>

The British CO of the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment expressed reservations regarding Percival's selection of subordinates. For instance, Brigadier Paris, CO of the 12th Brigade, was given the task of preparing defensive positions in Singapore. Why he was chosen remained a mystery. Someone from the Headquarters Singapore Fortress which controlled the permanent garrison in the island should have been selected. Or somebody from the Headquarters Malaya Command should have been given the task of coordinating the construction of defensive positions in Singapore. Paris, due to his appointment over the heads of several incumbents, faced difficulties in ordering them to construct defensive positions with vigour and efficiency.<sup>97</sup> Personal animosity among the various British commanders further hamstrung Singapore's defence.

Seabridge was caustic about Bennett and his Australian troops, over-generous about the British troops (at least some units) and moderate in his assessment of the Indian troops. He wrote about the Indian soldiers:

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<sup>95</sup> H. Gordon Bennett, 'The Conquest of Malaya, Review of Singapore, the Japanese Version by Masanobu Tsuji', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, vol. 2, no. 3 (Oct. 1961), p. 97.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>97</sup> A History of the 4/19th Hyderabad Regiment after the Slim Battle up to Capitulation, Dec. 1943, p. 1.



Many fought magnificently; some were disappointing; some gave themselves up to the enemy distressingly readily. Here the Japanese propagandists were at their brilliant. By means of radio and pamphlets dropped from aircraft, they flogged the point that they were fighting only the white man; that the British were putting Asiatic troops in the front-line as cannon fodder, while the white soldiers remained sulking in the background. They promised that any Asiatic soldier who gave himself up would go unharmed and there is evidence that the promise was kept.... Captured Indian soldiers were deprived of their arms and uniforms, given ... shorts and a handful of rice and allowed to go free.<sup>98</sup>

We have seen earlier that this Japanese propaganda war against the Indian soldiers also occurred during the campaign in Malaya. The CO of the 4th Battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment sitting in Changi POW Camp penned in December 1943:

The morale of the troops was extremely low. The numbers of sick were excessive, the common complaint being skin infection picked up in the jungle. Most of the equipment had been lost.... The sight of the tired and worn out soldiers had a bad effect. The impression they created on the new arrivals was one of despair and futility. It was hoped that a month would be available to refit and train up the new men, but so rapid was the retirement of the forces on the main land that a bare three days was obtained.<sup>99</sup>

To a great extent, this observation applies also for the other Indian formations which fought in Singapore. The fresh troops which arrived from India were indeed untrained and lacked adequate numbers of VCOS. Experienced VCOS were required for command and control of platoons, companies and the sections, and especially for maintaining combat effectiveness at the level of minor tactics. Especially dispersed fighting by small detachments required an experienced block of VCOS and NCOS in each battalion. Unfortunately, they were missing. To give an example, about 45 per cent of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade's personnel comprised of raw recruits who lacked even basic training. And each battalion of the brigade lost about 20 per cent of its experienced

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98 Report on the Fall of Singapore, Seabridge, 28 Feb. 1942, pp. 2–3.

99 Ibid., p. 1.

VCs even before reaching Singapore.<sup>100</sup> Inadequate training and the absence of veteran VCs and NCOs prevented the Indian units (applicable for the other Commonwealth formations also) from successfully countering the swarming tactics of the IJA. Lieutenant-Colonel Gurbakhsh Singh (brother of Harbakhsh Singh whom we had met in the earlier chapter), CO of the Jhind Infantry, describes the Japanese infantry's minor tactics in Singapore (as they had practised in Malaya) in the following words:

... the Japanese, as always, seemed to be everywhere—in front, behind, on either side, infiltrating swiftly behind disorganized pockets of our troops, cut off from their colleagues. Carefully avoiding any frontal attack they sought out the gaps... and pushed through behind them and attacked from the rear. Swarming through the close, intricate country, each Japanese party was led by an officer...<sup>101</sup>

Worse, the Commonwealth infantry lacked adequate numbers of anti-tank rifles and proper training to use them. The Japanese deployed 170 light and medium tanks against which the Commonwealth infantry had no answer.<sup>102</sup> The net result was that a 'tank fever' spread among the Australian, British and Indian soldiers which further lowered their morale and combat effectiveness.

About the AIF, Seabridge asserts:

There were desertions. Men seen in Singapore town on the 9th and 10th February were heard to boast that they had come 'Down the line' because they were fed up with being plastered! When the *ss Empire Star* arrived at Batavia on the 14th February several Australian deserters were taken ashore under armed guard. There have been allegations that men who fought valiantly in North Johore during the daylight hours walked back to a nearby township at night to buy beer! There were cases of looting and rape.<sup>103</sup>

A member of the Johore State Council emphasized that compared to the British and Indian troops, the Australian soldiery was notorious as far as rape

100 Account of Brigadier G.C. Ballantine Commander of the 44th Indian Infantry Brigade, p. 2.

101 *Indelible Reminiscences*, p. 60.

102 Note on the Malayan Campaign by LMH, Part 2, pp. 2, 6, Heath Papers, LMH 5.

103 Report on the Fall of Singapore, Seabridge, 28 Feb. 1942, p. 2

was concerned.<sup>104</sup> In contrast to the indiscipline of the defeated Australian troops, after the fall of Warsaw on 18 January 1945 to the Red Army, in the 9th German Army drumhead courts martial and summary executions became frequent. Several German soldiers were hung from poles with placards hanging from the necks bearing words like 'coward' and 'deserter'.<sup>105</sup> About the British troops, Seabridge was effusive of praise. He notes in his report: 'Of the British troops, the Argyles were magnificent.... The East Surreys and the Leicesters are said to have done very well in the North; the Gordons, who were not put into the line until late in the battle, were adequate, and the same applies to the Loyals'.<sup>106</sup> Seabridge either was ignorant or suffering from racial bias. Some Indian units, like the Jats and the Jhind Infantry, fought as well as those selected British units mentioned in Seabridge's report.

The resistance at Bataan was more prolonged than in Singapore because MacArthur realized that with only 26,500 trained soldiers and some 86,000 inexperienced personnel, he could not defend the 115,00 square miles of the 2,000 islands in the Philippine Archipelago. So from the very first he concentrated on the northern large island of Luzon. However, in the end even MacArthur could not save Bataan. Hence, if Percival instead of defending the Malaya mainland, had concentrated on the defence of Singapore and the Johore Causeway, the agony of Singapore Island would have been prolonged. But without air and sea support, Singapore in the end was bound to fall into Yamashita's lap.

## Conclusion

Different people (officials, generals and scholars) based on their nationalities offered biased views on the Commonwealth troops' combat performance. Overall, all the Commonwealth troops more or less fared badly. Combat at Singapore occurred on the beaches and in the creeks, swamps and bush-covered mainland, which partly resembled the jungle-covered terrain in Malaya. No fighting occurred inside the built-up areas. Therefore, combat in Singapore was a sort of jungle war rather than urban fighting. The failure of the Commonwealth troops was to a great extent the product of systemic shortcomings in the British imperial military system. Percival was more the victim

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104 Ibid., p. 2.

105 Samuel W. Mitcham Jr., *Hitler's Field Marshals and their Battles* (London: Grafton, 1988), p. 351.

106 Report on the Fall of Singapore, Seabridge, 28 Feb. 1942, p. 3.

of the cruel context than a foolish villain. The Japanese had gained air superiority but their air force was already on the point of being overstretched with no great reserves behind them. Further, resistance by the Allied troops might have resulted in the Japanese feeling the strain of war in the air. Percival's initial dispositions were faulty. However, Percival and his subordinate commanders' failure to move the troops and launch a counter-attack on the morning of 9 February 1942 once the Japanese were ashore and also the Commonwealth ground units' failure to launch local counter-attacks against the advancing Japanese, were telling indeed. But it is questionable whether the demoralized, defeated and inadequately trained Commonwealth troops of Percival would have been able to launch an effective counter-attack to make any significant difference to the evolving ground situation. Some of the Australian and Indian battalions (for instance, the Baluchis) were beyond redemption. Moving the troops around, even a short distance, when the Japanese had gained aerial ascendancy was a difficulty. The staff of the Commonwealth commanders was not that efficient. The staff officers failed even to maintain contact with the neighbouring formations. On the very day when the Japanese landed, all communications between various units in the zone of the 8th Australian Division was cut. The situation got worse from 9 February onwards. Hence, one doubts whether in the chaotic scenario, Percival, Heath and Bennett would have been able to coordinate large numbers of men for launching the counter-attack. What is shameful is that even the brigade commanders lost control over the units in their brigades. Tsuji in his memoirs might be overdrawing the picture of Japanese logistical difficulties in mid-February 1942, but further resistance by Percival's troops in the urban jungle of Singapore town would have slowed down the Japanese advance in Sumatra and Burma. However, Singapore was bound to fall to the Japanese in 1942.

Any further resistance in Singapore City by Percival in the style of German generals like *Generalfeldmarschall* Walther Model in the Ruhr or *Generalfeldmarschall* Ferdinand Schoerner at Silesia, would have merely prolonged the agony of the civilian population. The Americans surrounded the Ruhr on 1 April 1945. On 17 April, with medical supplies exhausted, Model disbanded his army and on 21 April shot himself. Singapore could not and did not become like the Silesian town Breslau which with its garrison of 35,000 soldiers and 250,000 civilians was surrounded by the Soviets on 16 February 1945 and fell only on 7 May 1945.<sup>107</sup> Such 'last man last bullet' types of stand-fast orders issued by Hitler and implemented to a great extent by the *Wehrmacht* did not change the trajectory of war but will go down in history as brutal but supremely

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107 Mitcham Jr., *Hitler's Field Marshals and their Battles*, pp. 328–29, 351.

professional operational-tactical stances. In contrast, the behaviour of Percival, Heath and Bennett though seems superficially 'humane' are examples of extremely unprofessional military leadership. The Commonwealth armies melted like snow under the glare of the 'Rising Sun' in Malaya-Singapore. Despite Tsuji's highly sensational counter-factual claim, the issue was already decided when the IJA moved towards the Johore Straits. Had MacArthur attempted to conduct a fighting retreat against the Japanese throughout the Philippines as Percival attempted, then the former's force would have melted away like the latter. If, like the over-hyped MacArthur, Percival had been able to vacate Malaya against the wishes of Churchill and the War Cabinet in London and defended only the Johore Causeway and Singapore Island then it would have been a sort of Bataan and Corregidor. Percival had the option of offering a stout defence, at least for some more days, within the city of Singapore. In such positional battles, the raw, untrained and under-equipped Indian soldiers, backed up by resolute British officers, fighting under the tunnels and heaps of rubble could have taken a toll on the IJA's infantry. But with battle-hardened ground troops, heavy artillery and aerial superiority, Yamashita would have overwhelmed the defenders of Singapore, just as Homma did in the Philippines. The overall issue was never in doubt. With his capture by the Japanese, Percival's career came to an end. However, Percival's superior, Wavell would go on being defeated repeatedly by the Japanese armed forces, as the next chapters will show. Still, somewhat strangely, Wavell emerged not only with his reputation intact but also received promotion from Churchill, who did not suffer fools gladly. Wavell, the one-eyed intellectual general, despite his headmaster-like appearance, was a shrewd political general indeed. The next chapter details the defeat of the Commonwealth troops in another theatre controlled by Wavell.

# Collapse in Sarawak and Borneo: 16 December 1941–3 April 1942

## Introduction

Borneo commanded a vital position within the East Indies Archipelago. It covered the approaches to Singapore and Malaya along the South China Sea. In addition, control of Borneo's coastline was necessary for the Japanese in order to continue their drive towards Java, Australia and New Guinea. Kuching, Victoria (Labuan Island) and Sandakan (British North Borneo) were good harbours. In the many rivers and inlets which intersected the coastline, seaplane and submarine anchorages were available. Moreover, Borneo is rich in natural resources like oil and minerals like diamond, mercury, copper, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The greater part of Borneo was under the Dutch. British Borneo comprised the two states of British North Borneo and Sarawak. Brunei was a small indigenous state under British protection and Labuan an island which was a Crown Colony situated at the entrance of Brunei Bay. The British and Dutch Borneo covered an area of roughly 289,000 square miles. And the state of Sarawak occupied an area of about 50,000 square miles along the north-west coast. Most of the coastal area in Borneo was swampy and malarious. In places, the coast was fringed with Casurina trees and there were mangrove forests (as in Malaya) near the mouths of some rivers. The towns and seaports were few in number and found at the mouths of the rivers. Inland, the country is mountainous and was covered with swamps, rivers and jungles. The jungle was dense and prolific. The principal mountain range varies in height from 4,000 to 10,000 feet and runs in the south-westerly direction. The principal road from Kuching was in an easterly direction to Pending and connected Matang and Serian. Another road went in a westerly direction and connected Bau and Krokong.<sup>2</sup>

1 Lieutenant-Colonel B.L. Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre, Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939–45* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section India & Pakistan: 1964), p. 18.

2 K.D. Bhargava and K.N.V. Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, Bisheshwar Prasad (ed.), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War: 1939–45* (New Delhi: Ministry of Defence Government of India, 1960), pp. 361, 364–65; Lionel Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust, Australia in the War of 1939–45*, Series One, *Army*, vol. 4 (Canberra: Australian

There were no railways in Sarawak. The main rivers are the Rejam and the Baram. Some of the other rivers have rapids in their upper reaches. The oil fields, which were worked by the Sarawak Oil Fields Limited, were in two groups—one at Miri in Sarawak, a short distance from the coast up the Miri River and the other at Seria in Brunei, close to the seashore. From the oil field at Miri, the oil was pumped to the refinery at Lutong on the coast. From the Seria Oil Field, oil was pumped through pipelines to the Lutong refinery.<sup>3</sup> The only regular unit in Sarawak was the 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment.

### Defensive Preparations

In a conference held in Singapore in October 1940, it was estimated that a minimum of one brigade of regular troops was required to hold British Borneo.<sup>4</sup> However, when the war broke out, instead of one brigade, only a regular battalion would be in place. The 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment arrived in November 1940 from Singapore. This unit was composed of Sikhs, Jats, Punjabi Muslims and Pathans. C Company was sent to the Miri-Kuching area in December.<sup>5</sup> The rest of the 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment went to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, in May 1941. The objective was to defend this centre near the south-western extremity of the state because of the airfield located seven miles south of the town. The Dutch airfield, known as Singkawang II, was located 60 miles to the south-west. In Sarawak, the other forces included a local Volunteer Corps, a Coastal Marine Service, the armed police, and the Sarawak Rangers (indigenous troops). Together these units, along with the Punjabi formation, were known as SAFOR and commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel C.M. Lane (b. 1899).<sup>6</sup>

In August 1941, the application of a partial denial scheme had reduced the oil output by 70 per cent.<sup>7</sup> The coastline between Miri and Kuching was low and

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War Memorial, 1957), p. 179; Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, p. 18.

3 Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival, *The War in Malaya* (1949, reprint, Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1957), pp. 165–66; Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 361.

4 Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, pp. 20–21.

5 Compton Mackenzie, *Eastern Epic*, vol. 1, *September 1939–March 1943* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), pp. 265, 267; Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, pp. 367–68; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 179.

6 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 180.

7 Ibid., p. 179.

flat. The Miri-Seria area extends for about 40 miles in length.<sup>8</sup> The two official Indian historians in their monograph dealing with the Campaign in South-East Asia wrote: 'A static defence, without depth, of a limited area, imperfectly prepared, could hardly withstand the attacks of a hostile force supreme in the air and numerically superior in all other respects. Such a defence could not last for more than a few days'.<sup>9</sup> When the Japanese attacked, concrete pillboxes and dugouts were yet to be completed, and anti-tank and shrapnel mines were not sown. There were only a few slit trenches surrounded by a double belt of barbed wire.<sup>10</sup>

### The Invasion

In the morning of 8 December 1941, Major Slatter of the 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment and the officer commanding troops at Miri and Seria received orders for the demolition of the oil fields.<sup>11</sup> On 13 December, the Miri Detachment after completing its task left for Kuching in HMS LIPIS.<sup>12</sup> On the same day, a Japanese convoy escorted by cruisers, destroyers and two seaplane tenders (for reconnaissance) left Camranh Bay (Indo-China). This convoy carried the Japanese 35th Infantry Brigade Headquarters, the 124th Regiment from the 18th Division and the 2nd Yokosuka Naval Landing Force. The convoy anchored off Miri a little before midnight on 15 December.<sup>13</sup>

On 16 December 1941 at 0330 hours, Japanese troops of the Kawaguchi Detachment landed at Seria. From there, the Japanese soldiers proceeded by road to Belait and then went to Danau on 22 December. On 17 December, the Japanese landed at Lutong and Baram Point. On 19 December, the Japanese aircraft bombed and machine-gunned Kuching town. About 100 civilians became casualties.<sup>14</sup> The Dutch bombers paid several visits to the Japanese convoy on 17, 18 and 19 December. A destroyer and some landing craft were

8 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, pp. 361, 367.

9 Ibid., p. 374.

10 Ibid., p. 374.

11 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 166.

12 Lieutenant-General A.E. Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', *Second Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 38215, 26 Feb. 1948, p. 1283.

13 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 180.

14 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 168; Despatch on the Far East, by Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, 8 Sept. 1942, p. 50, CAB 66/28/33, PRO, Kew, UK; *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 12.



sunk.<sup>15</sup> On 22 December, SAFOR was positioned as follows: A Company (less one platoon at Bukit Siol) at Pending, B Company at the north-east perimeter of the airport, C Company (less one platoon) at Matang Road, D Company at the southern perimeter of the aerodrome and E Company covering the south-west perimeter defence. The Battalion Headquarter was at Batu Lintang Camp.<sup>16</sup>

On the evening of 23 December two Japanese cruisers and seven transports arrived at the mouth of the River Santubong near Kuching. The convoy during its journey was attacked by the submarines of the Royal Dutch Navy who claimed to have sunk or disabled three transports and one tanker. On the evening of 24 December, the Japanese ships near Kuching were attacked by a small force of Blenheim bombers. In the night, a Dutch submarine sank a Japanese destroyer (SAGIRI) before being itself sunk by a depth charge.<sup>17</sup> The Japanese troops of the Kawaguchi Detachment started landing at night. On the morning of 24 December, Japanese transports were found anchored at Santubong Bay by the patrols. And the Japanese landing crafts were making for the Santubong River. Initially, the Japanese landed at Lintang on the bank of the Santubong River. Fighting broke out at Pending and then the defenders concentrated near the aerodrome. Many Japanese troops were dressed in the uniforms of the British and Sarawak police uniforms, which fooled the Indian troops several times.<sup>18</sup>

By 0900 hours, the demolitions were completed and A Company in accordance with the plan withdrew to Kuching airport.<sup>19</sup> A.E. Percival, GOC Malaya had written: 'At 1305 hrs. 24th December I received a wireless message from OC Troops Sarawak and Brunei to the effect that, as the aerodrome was no longer required by our Air Force, he presumed that he was at liberty to withdraw his force into Dutch West Borneo. I replied to the effect that he should fight the enemy for as long as possible, and that subsequently he should act in the best interest of West Borneo as a whole, withdrawing if necessary into Dutch territory'.<sup>20</sup> At 1100 hours on 24 December, the Japanese gunboats approached

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15 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 180.

16 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941-42*, pp. 377-78.

17 Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1283; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 180.

18 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 171; Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1283; *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 12.

19 Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, p. 24.

20 Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1283.

Lintang and Bintawa. The 18-pounder guns and 3-inch mortars opened fire and sank four Japanese crafts. However, the gun positions were soon surrounded and eliminated by the Japanese troops.<sup>21</sup> Static defensive positions proved to be easy prey for the nimble Japanese infantry who moved into the rear and attacked at the flanks. At the cost of seven transports, the Japanese were able to capture Kuching city by 1630 hours on 24 December.<sup>22</sup> The occupation of Kuching threatened to cut off the troops at Pending and Siol. So the troops in these areas were instructed to fall back to the area near Kuching airport. The troops retreating from Siol were ambushed and all except three were either killed or captured.<sup>23</sup> This debacle was due to bad reconnaissance on the part of the Indian troops.

Sharp fighting occurred near the aerodrome till 25 December 1941. Then, contact was broken off and the aim was to trek through 50 miles of uncharted jungle territory to reach Dutch West Borneo. All wheeled transport was abandoned.<sup>24</sup> The Indian battalion lost four British officers and 229 privates as a result of combat at Sarawak.<sup>25</sup>

The retreating force reached Sanggau on 29 December and at that place it came under the command of the local Dutch officer. About 750 Dutch Borneo troops were available for the defence of the airfield and the surrounding area. Arrangements were made by Headquarters Malaya Command to drop supplies and ammunition on the Sinkawang airport for this force.<sup>26</sup> The 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment was allotted the task of the defence of the Siloeas-Sanggau area. By this time, the Japanese had landed about 3,000 to 4,000 troops at Kuching and were busy repairing the Bau Road.<sup>27</sup> On 3 January 1942, the Japanese occupied the undefended small island of Labuan. On 6 January, they entered Jesselton by rail from Beaufort. Japanese control over the west coast area at this point was complete.<sup>28</sup> On 7 January 1942, the Japanese came at the Sarawak-Dutch West Borneo Frontier. From 7 to 18 January, fighting occurred in the region between the Sarawak-Dutch West Borneo Frontier and Sanggau.

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21 Bhargava and Sastri, *Campaigns in South-East Asia: 1941–42*, p. 380.

22 Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 181.

23 Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, p. 24.

24 Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1283.

25 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 172.

26 Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1283; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 181.

27 Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 173.

28 Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1284.

During this fighting, the 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment, lost another 150 personnel. Until 18 January, the 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment was able to prevent the Japanese from capturing the important airfield at Singkawang 11.<sup>29</sup> On 19 January 1942, a 600-strong Japanese force arrived at Sandakan, in British North Borneo.<sup>30</sup>

On 27 January, the Japanese attacked an Indian outpost at Segundai and captured it easily. The next day, while one Japanese detachment launched a strong attack at the Sanggau road head, another column simultaneously moved southwards to outflank the airport. In response, the Indian troops were withdrawn to Ledo (not to be confused with Ledo on the China-Burma-India theatre). Two platoons of B Company were wiped out during this retreat.<sup>31</sup> The point to be noted is that the Japanese infantry was using the same tactics as it had perfected in Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore.

The Japanese landing on the west coast of Borneo occurred at Permangkat on the night of 27/28 January 1942. On 28 January, the Japanese troops were at Penrang Pass. Meanwhile, the 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment fought a rearguard action at Ngabang/Nyabang on 29 January 1942 and then retreated to Sanggau on the Kopeas River. By 3 February, the sepoys had reached Nangapinoh and were divided into two columns (East and West) for further retreat. The East Column was to make for Sampit in the centre of the south coast and the other column, known as the West Column, for Pankalang Boen, some 120 miles further to the west. The distance between Kuching and Sampit was about 800 miles. The objective was to march to the south coast in order to escape to Java. The Japanese attack on Singkawang developed on 26 January 1942.<sup>32</sup>

The two Indian columns started their journey on 3 and 5 February respectively over wild undeveloped regions. However, the Sampit Column found that the town was under Japanese occupation. The Sampit Column then turned away and marched through dense jungle and met the West Column.<sup>33</sup> By this time, at the end of March, the men of this unit were completely exhausted. The 2nd Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment surrendered to the Japanese on 3 April 1942.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Percival, *The War in Malaya*, pp. 173–74.

<sup>30</sup> Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', p. 1284.

<sup>31</sup> Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>33</sup> Percival, *The War in Malaya*, pp. 173–74; Percival, 'Operations of Malaya Command, from 8 December 1941 to 15 February 1942', pp. 1283–84; Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 181.

<sup>34</sup> Percival, *The War in Malaya*, p. 174. The Australian Official History states that the troops surrendered on 9 March 1942. Wigmore, *The Japanese Thrust*, p. 181.

## Conclusion

Brooke-Popham opines that the Sarawak Rangers proved to be ineffective but the Punjabi unit under the circumstances had fought well.<sup>35</sup> Brooke-Popham is very liberal about the military effectiveness of the Indian troops, at least in this context. The British objectives in Sarawak, as in Malaya, were to deny the use of aerodromes to the Japanese for as long as possible. Both in Malaya and in Sarawak, the Commonwealth ground forces were handicapped by the fact that they had to protect several airfields without any Commonwealth aircraft. And the Japanese, enjoying aerial and naval superiority could land anywhere along the Malayan/East Indies Archipelago. But static ground defences of selected positions in Hong Kong, Malaya and Sarawak were either outflanked or bypassed by the mobile Japanese troops on foot who showed a flair for negotiating the most difficult terrain. And occasionally, the Indian troops bumped into carefully prepared ambushes due to their bad road discipline and absence of thorough reconnaissance of the probable routes in advance. The campaign at Sarawak, like that of Malaya but on a smaller scale, was characterized by superiority in Japanese movement of troops during the night and in jungle fighting.

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35 Despatch on the Far East, by Brooke-Popham, 8 Sept. 1942, p. 50.

## Retreat from Burma: 11 December 1941–20 May 1942

Burma has 1,200 miles of coastline, running from the frontier of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to Victoria Point at the southern end of the Tenasserim Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> The country is 1,200 miles from north to south and at its broadest measures some 575 miles. Burma's western frontier was with British-India and its northern frontier with China. To the east and south-east of Burma are Indo-China and Siam (Thailand). The four principal rivers in Burma are the Chindwin (600 miles long), the Irrawaddy (1,300 miles long), the Sittang (350 miles long) and the Salween (650 miles long).<sup>2</sup> The main rivers, the Irrawaddy and the Salween flow south. Between them runs the comparatively smaller Sittang. The Chindwin, which is the principal tributary of the Irrawaddy, flows through the thinly-populated forests and mountains bordering Assam and then turns south-east to join its parent river below Mandalay.<sup>3</sup> Burma is a hilly country and the mountain ranges run from north to south. The vegetation varied from thick tropical forest in the north to thin scrubs in the drier region of south-central Burma. This was because rainfall varied from 200 inches in the north to less than 40 inches annually in the south.<sup>4</sup> Jungle-covered high mountains separate Burma from India in the west, China in the north and Siam (Thailand) in the east. Burma's central region is mostly surrounded by jungle-covered mountain barriers. The Chin Hills rise to about 10,000 feet. To the west, is the coastal strip at the Arakan. And in the south, the coastal fringe of Tenasserim points towards Malaya. Burma's topography comprises dense jungles, swampy coastal plains and a dry triangular region (Mandalay-Magwe-Toungoo) in central Burma. From mid-May to mid-October, the south-west Monsoon turns the whole region into swamps and marshes. The climate is good between October and March. Malaria was common and the jungle was filled with wildlife.<sup>5</sup> A point to be noted is that Burma, with 261,610 square

1 Alan Warren, *Burma 1942* (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 9.

2 Tim Carew, *The Longest Retreat: The Burma Campaign 1942* (1969, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1989), p. 10; Major B.N. Majumdar, *Administration of the Burma Campaign: 1941–45* (Delhi: Clifton and Co., 1952), pp. 7–8, 11.

3 Colonel E.C.V. Foucar, "The First Burma Campaign-I," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, vol. LXXV, no. 318 (1945), p. 60.

4 Majumdar, *Administration of the Burma Campaign*, p. 8.

5 Air Commodore Henry Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force: The Royal Air Force in the War against Japan 1941–45* (London/Washington: Brassey's, 1995), p. 82; Atholl Sutherland

miles, had only 3,760 miles of metalled and 6,770 miles of unmetalled roads and only 2,059 miles of railway.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, Burma was somewhat similar to Malaya. The main railway lines were Rangoon-Pegu-Mandalay, Rangoon-Letpadan and Rangoon-Pegu-Martaban-Moulmein. The important trunk roads were as follows: (i) Rangoon-Myitkyina via Mandalay and Bhamo (926 miles); (ii) Pegu-Moulmein-Tavoy-Mergui (482 miles); (iii) Meiktila-Taunggyi-Kentung-Thailand border (150 miles); (iv) Hsenwi-Munlong-China border (67 miles); (v) Mogaung-Maingkwan-Assam border (280 miles); (vi) Mandalay-Shwebo-Kalewa-Tamu (318 miles) and (vii) Prome-Taungup (110 miles). However, the principal rivers of Burma were navigable and a significant volume of inland traffic was carried along them.<sup>7</sup>

Burma provided 37 per cent of the world's rice output. And about 60 per cent of Burma's rice was exported, mostly to British-India.<sup>8</sup> Ethnologists claim that there are 135 different language groups inside Burma. The present government acknowledges 67 different languages and eight races in Myanmar.<sup>9</sup> In 1931, the population of Burma was 17 million. Of them, 10 million were Burmans, four million Karens, one and a half million Shans, one million Indians and the rest belonged to various small ethnic communities. The Burmans lived mostly in central and southern Burma. The Shan States in north-east Burma were divided into several semi-autonomous principalities which were ruled by the hereditary *rajās*. The Hill Territories comprised some 40 per cent of Burma and remained under British control.<sup>10</sup> There were 20,000 Eurasians (Anglo-Burmans and others of mixed blood). The Indians worked in the Rangoon docks, functioned as tram drivers, refuse collectors, conductors, labourers, sweepers and office managers. In 1931, the Chinese numbered over 300,000.

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Brown and William Rodney, 'Burma Banzai: The Air War in Burma through Japanese Eyes', *Canadian Military History*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2002), p. 55, <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol11/iss2/6>, accessed on 30 Aug. 2013.

6 S.N. Prasad, K.D. Bhargava and P.N. Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 1, June 1942–June 1944, Bisheshwar Prasad (General Editor), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, India & Pakistan, Calcutta: Distributed by Orient Longmans, 1958), p. 2. B.N. Majumdar says that the total mileage of railways was roughly 2,667 miles and of that, with the exception of 206 miles, they were metre gauge and single track. Majumdar, *Administration of the Burma Campaign*, pp. 14–15.

7 Majumdar, *Administration of the Burma Campaign*, pp. 11, 14.

8 Warren, *Burma 1942*, p. 5.

9 Donovan Webster, *The Burma Road: The Epic Story of the China-Burma-India Theatre in World War II* (2003, reprint, New York: Perennial, 2004), p. 50.

10 Warren, *Burma 1942*, pp. 4, 6, 8.

After 1937, there were Cantonese and Fukienese traders in Rangoon, and tin miners in Tenasserim. Burma's indigenous inhabitants numbered 15 million. Besides the Burmese, the other ethnic groups were the Shans in the east, Chins in the west, Kachins in the north and Karens in the south.<sup>11</sup>

Japan's principal objective was to sever the Burma Road. It was a 715-mile-long two-lane track. During 1937 and 1938, some 200,000 Chinese labourers constructed it. Paved with cobbles, the winding Burma Road traversed steep mountain valleys, rice paddies and bridges over the Mekong and Salween Rivers. The Burma Road, for supplying Nationalist China, was opened in early 1939. It ran from the railhead at Lashio city in Burma to Kunming in south-west China. At Lashio in north-east Burma, the road met the railway which ran through Mandalay to Rangoon. Between Lashio and Mandalay, the railway line crossed the half-mile-wide Gokteik Gorge.<sup>12</sup> This chapter narrates the continuous victories of the IJA in south and central Burma during the first half of 1942. And the factors behind the Commonwealth troops' dismal performance are also analyzed. Since north Burma came under the operational control of General Stilwell's Chinese force, that region will not be dealt with in much detail.

### Commonwealth Units in Burma and their Japanese Opponent before the Invasion

In November 1940, General Headquarters Far East was opened at Singapore and Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham was made Commander-in-Chief Far East. He was made responsible for Burma, Borneo, Hong Kong and Malaya. Though operationally Burma was put under Far East Command, for administrative and supply reasons Burma was attached to the India Command.<sup>13</sup>

Before the war, only two British battalions were deployed in Burma. The 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI) was at the hill station at Maymyo and Mandalay and the 1st Gloucestershire at Mingaladon and Rangoon. These two battalions consisted of regular soldiers.<sup>14</sup> For close-quarter combat against the Japanese, hand grenades and Thompson sub-machine guns were useful. However, very few personnel of these two units were trained in throwing live

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<sup>11</sup> Carew, *The Longest Retreat*, pp. 13–15.

<sup>12</sup> Warren, *Burma 1942*, p. 17; Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, p. 83; Webster, *The Burma Road*, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Warren, *Burma 1942*, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Carew, *The Longest Retreat*, p. 19.



hand grenades. At the time of Pearl Harbour, the Gloucesters had only a dozen hand grenades. Every battalion had a Bren Gun carrier platoon but no carriers. They had 40 pack mules each but no saddler. Ammunition for 3-inch mortars, as in Malaya, was extremely low. Further, there was no supply of 2-inch mortars, wireless sets, field telephones or steel helmets. It is to be noted that combat in Hong Kong and Malaya had proved the extreme usefulness of the 3-inch mortars in providing close fire support to the infantry. Though these two battalions had Tommy Guns (Thompson Sub-Machine Guns), ammunition was scarce. Each unit had only 90 rounds of ammunition (equivalent to one hour of hard fighting). There was a shortage of entrenching tools also. Each battalion had 96 shovels and 48 picks of the heavy regulation pattern. But there was no satisfactory mechanism for carrying them. The shovels and the picks were lost early in the campaign and were never replaced.<sup>15</sup>

The core of the Burma Army was composed of the Burma Rifles Regiment. The Burma Rifles had four battalions in 1939. Each battalion had four rifle companies: two of Karens and one each of Chins and Kachins. Thus, the Burmese units were a sort of ethnic mix, like the Indian units. Since the British considered the Burmans to be of dubious loyalty, few Burmans were included in the Burma Army. Just before the outbreak of war, the Burma Rifles was increased to 12 battalions. The Burma Frontier Force (BFF) was a sort of military police.<sup>16</sup> While the Burma Rifles' training was incomplete, the BFF suffered due to a lack of officers. The BFF was trained for aid to civil duties rather than for regular soldiering.<sup>17</sup> Actually, the Burma Military Police was converted into the BFF. In July 1941, the 1st Burma Division was raised at Toungoo.<sup>18</sup> In 1941, the Burmans constituted only 19 per cent of the regular army of Burma. About 37 per cent of the troops of the Burma Army were Indians and the rest were from the different ethnic groups which inhabited the hilly regions of Burma.<sup>19</sup> Karl Hack and Tobias Rettig note that every imperial power feared that the main population

15 Carew, *The Longest Retreat*, pp. 20–21.

16 Warren, *Burma 1942*, p. 19; Carew, *The Longest Retreat*, p. 21.

17 General Archibald Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', including the reports by Lieutenant-General T.J. Hutton and General Harold R.L.G. Alexander, *Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 38228, 11 March 1948, Report by Lieutenant-General T.J. Hutton on Operations in Burma from 27 December 1941 to 5 March 1942, p. 1676.

18 Major-General Rafiuddin Ahmed, *History of the Baloch Regiment: 1939–56* (2000, reprint, Uckfield, East Sussex: The Naval and Military Press, 2005), p. 53.

19 Robert H. Taylor, 'Colonial Forces in British Burma: A National Army Postponed', in Karl Hack and Tobias Rettig (eds.), *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 197.



it ruled: Burmans, Javanese, Malays, Vietnamese, etc. might prove to be unreliable. Hence, each colonial power constructed 'knowledge' about its populations and the 'martial' qualities of some of the marginal groups in a way designed to underpin imperial control over the colonies. Basically, the Martial Race theory was a sophisticated version of the 'divide and rule' policy that generated plural armies to rule over plural societies. In the 1930s, the Burmans comprised 75 per cent of the populace of Burma but they comprised only 12 per cent of the indigenous forces.<sup>20</sup> The British were afraid that if the Burmans were recruited in large numbers then they might rebel. The best way to establish imperial control over central Burma, assumed the British, was to rely mainly on troops of Indian origin and men recruited from the hilly frontier regions of Burma.<sup>21</sup>

As early as November 1941, General (later Field-Marshal) Archibald Wavell had requested some African troops to garrison Ceylon and Burma from the Chief of Imperial General Staff (CIGS). After the fall of Gondar and collapse of the Italians in East Africa, the London Government decided that troops could be detached from that theatre for the Far East. Wavell was assured by the CIGS that two African brigades would be made available to him and the first one would reach Burma by the end of January 1942.<sup>22</sup>

In 1941, Britain decided to strengthen the garrison at Burma. The 13th Indian Infantry Brigade arrived in April 1941 and the 16th Indian Infantry Brigade came in December 1941.<sup>23</sup> In December 1941, the Burma Army Command was established at Rangoon.<sup>24</sup> The 16th Indian Infantry Brigade comprised of the 4th Battalion of the 12th FFR (this battalion was also known as 4th Sikhs as in the nineteenth century this unit was raised from the disbanded Sikh regiments of the *Khalsa* Army), 1st Battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment and 1st Battalion of the 7th GR. In June 1941, the 4th Sikhs was deployed in Waziristan. After the end of the Upper Tochi Operation in August, this unit was in Dumdil for a month and then returned to Wah where it became part of the 16th Indian Infantry Brigade. On 1 November 1941, the 4th Sikhs received mobilization orders. And Brigadier Jones took over command of the 16th Indian Infantry Brigade. On 1 December, the 4th Sikhs left Wah and after moving through Pindi, Amritsar,

20 Karl Hack and Tobias Rettig, 'Imperial Systems of Power, Colonial Forces and the makings of Modern Southeast Asia', in Hack and Rettig (eds.), *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia*, pp. 11–12.

21 Taylor, 'Colonial Forces in British Burma', in Hack and Rettig (eds.), *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia*, p. 198.

22 Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', p. 1668.

23 Operations in Burma, War Staff, India Office, London, 7 May 1942, L/ws/1/706, IOR, BL, London.

24 Ahmed, *History of the Baloch Regiment: 1939–56*, p. 53.

Ambala, Bareilly, Lucknow, Benaras, Patna and Asansol, finally reached Calcutta. The officers present with this unit were Lieutenant-Colonel Edward, Major Sangster, Captains I.A.J. Edwards-Stuart, Wallace, Rahman and Sam Manekshaw (who was the Chief of Army Staff of India during the 1971 India-Pakistan War). This unit was an Indianizing unit. The second lieutenants were Atta Mohammed, Boyd, Warshaw, Bowerman, Stewart and Hunter. On 6 December, the 4th Sikhs sailed in S.S. KAROA. On 9 December, the ship neared the Rangoon River.<sup>25</sup> The 4th Sikhs was initially lodged in the Rangoon Jail. Major-General Donald Macleod, GOC Burma, paid a visit to this unit. Macleod was an Indian cavalry officer and had served with the Guides in the North-West Frontier. At that time, aged sixty, he was nearing retirement. On the evening of 10 December, this unit left for Mandalay in two trains, where they stayed for three weeks.<sup>26</sup> As regards training during this period, Captain Edwards-Stuart notes: 'Training in jungle warfare was carried out in rather a half-hearted manner, owing to very little direction being given on the subject. We were to pay the cost of this later.'<sup>27</sup> The 7th Battalion of the 10th Baluch (known as Baloch in the post-1947 era) arrived in Rangoon on 16 January 1942. A senior staff officer told the CO of this unit that no training could be carried out in the jungle.<sup>28</sup>

The assumption was that the troops could not move and fight within the jungle and training could only be carried out in the wide open ground for conducting mass attacks in open country/plain. Most of the British commanders in Burma made the same mistake, like their counterparts in Malaya, i.e. in not training their units for intensive close-quarter jungle combat. The net result was that the Commonwealth forces in Burma, as in Malaya, had to pay a very heavy price when they confronted the IJA in these two countries. The 3rd Indian Light AA Battery was raised in September 1941 in Karachi. Most of the gunners were Punjabi Muslims. This battery's training was not complete when it embarked in Calcutta at the end of December 1941 for Rangoon. As an *ad hoc* measure, 20 British NCOs experienced in AA artillery were posted in this battery. Lieutenant-Colonel C.H.T. MacFetridge commanded the battery. It comprised of three troops (four Bofors Guns each) which operated independently.<sup>29</sup>

25 Lieutenant-Colonel I.A.J. Edwards-Stuart, With the 4th Sikhs in Burma, 1941-42, A Personal Account, p. 1, NAM 7711-232, London.

26 Ibid., p. 2; Carew, *The Longest Retreat*, p. 17.

27 Edwards-Stuart, With the 4th Sikhs in Burma, 1941-42, p. 2.

28 Daniel P. Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport, Connecticut/London: Praeger, 2003), p. 63.

29 Lieutenant-Colonel C.H.T. MacFetridge, The Battle of Shwegyin, 10 May 1942, p. 1, MSS EUR D1196/2, 10R, BL, London.

For details of the Commonwealth troops deployed in Burma, refer to tables 6.1 and 6.2. Just before the invasion, the Japanese Southern Army estimated that there were 2,000 Chinese, 2,600 Burmese, 3,000 British and 8,000 Indian troops. However, the Japanese were not sure. The Southern Army noted that in total there might be between 37,000 and 39,000 Commonwealth troops in Burma. It assumed that the British might deploy 12 bombers and 48 fighters in Burma. The Japanese intelligence noted that the principal British aircraft to be encountered in Burma would be the Blenheims.<sup>30</sup> Actually, just before the Japanese invasion of Burma, there was only one Blenheim bomber squadron in the country, which in turn was borrowed from India. In addition, there was one Brewster Buffalo fighter squadron.<sup>31</sup> Lack of spares, tools and inadequate organization for repairing and salvaging the aircraft hampered the Commonwealth air effort. Inadequate radar defence equipment was another debilitating factor for the RAF in Burma.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, not all was black for the Allies in the air. A.D. Harvey in an article asserts that unlike in Malaya, in Burma, the Allies had fighter pilots who digested the tactical principles of confronting light and more manoeuvrable Japanese planes.<sup>33</sup>

Lieutenant-General Shojiro Iida, then aged 54 years, Commander of the 15th Japanese Army was in charge of the invasion force. Iida had commanded the 4th Regiment of the Imperial Guards Division in China. This army had two divisions: the 33rd and the 55th and another, the 56th Division, was held in reserve in Japan until shipping became available. The initial objective of the 15th Army was to prevent interference by the Commonwealth units in Burma with the 25th Japanese Army's LoC, stretching from Siam to Malaya. Then, the 15th Japanese Army was to capture the airfields in Tenasserim. The 55th Japanese Division from Raheng/Rahen would capture Moulmein and the 33rd Japanese Division would seize the crossings over the River Salween near Pa-an. Both divisions would then capture Rangoon. The plan to capture the whole of Burma was issued later. The 33rd Japanese Division was raised from a mountainous region north-west of Tokyo. It was sent to China in 1939 and participated in combat operations. Each battalion of this division had four rifle companies and a medium machine-gun (MMG) company. The 55th Japanese Division, which came from Shikoku, like all the divisions raised during and after 1940 had three rifle companies and an MMG company in each battalion. The 55th

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30 *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, B. Burma Area.

31 Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', p. 1668.

32 Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, p. 85.

33 A.D. Harvey, 'Army Air Force and Navy Air Force: Japanese Aviation and the Opening Phase of the War in the Far East', *War in History*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1999), p. 194.

TABLE 6.1 *ORBAT of the Commonwealth Force in Burma just before the Japanese attack*

Formation	Breakdown	Remarks
1st Burma Division		It comprised of Maymyo Brigade, Tenasserim Brigade and 13th Indian Infantry Brigade
Maymyo Brigade	2nd KOYLI, 1st Burma Rifles, 6th Burma Rifles, 7th Burma Rifles, 12th Mountain Battery, 56th Field Company (Sappers and Miners)	
Tenasserim Brigade	2nd Burma Rifles, 4th Burma Rifles, 5th Burma Rifles, 8th Burma Rifles, 2nd Mountain Battery, 1st Section Field Company	
13th Indian Infantry Brigade	5th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment, 2nd Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment, 1st Battalion of the 18th Royal Garhwal Rifles, 23rd Mountain Battery, 5th Field Battery Royal Artillery	
Rangoon Brigade	1st Gloucesters, 3rd Burma Rifles, Coast Defence Battery	
16th Indian Infantry Brigade	1st Battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment, 4th Battalion of the 12th FFR, 1st Battalion of the 7th GR, 5th Mountain Battery, Headquarter 27th Mountain Regiment, 50th Field Company (Sappers and Miners)	
Burma Frontier Force	Bhama/Bhamo Battalion, Chin Hills Battalion, Myitkyina Battalion, Northern Shan States Battalion, Southern Shan States Battalion, Kokine Battalion, Reserve Battalion	
Garrison Companies	1st 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Garrison Companies	
Burma Rifles (Territorials)	1 1th Burma Rifles, 12th Burma Rifles, 13th Southern Shan States Battalion Burma Rifles, 14th Burma Rifles	14th Burma Rifles was forming
Burma Auxiliary Force	Rangoon Battalion, Upper Burma Battalion, Burma Railway Battalion, Tenasserim Battalion, 1 Anti-Aircraft Regiment	The Anti-Aircraft Regiment was forming
Burma Rifles	9th and 10th Battalions	These two battalions was forming

TABLE 6.1 *Cont.*

Formation	Breakdown	Remarks
Field Company		Forming
Armed Police	3 Battalions	

*Source:* Despatch on the Far East, by Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, Commander-in-Chief Far East, 17 Oct. 1940–27 December 1941, 25 June 1942, pp. 68–9, CAB 66/28/33, PRO, Kew, UK.

TABLE 6.2 *Strength of the Commonwealth Army in Burma on 7 December 1941*

Branch	Number	Remarks
Infantry		
British	2 Battalions	
Indian	6 Battalions	
Burma Rifles (Regular)	8 Battalions	4 of these were just formed
Burma Rifles (Territorial)	4 Battalions	
Garrison Company	5 Battalions	
Burma Auxiliary Force	4 Battalion	
Burma Frontier Force	6 Battalion + 1 Reserve Battalion	
Artillery		
Indian Mountain Battery	3	
Burma Auxiliary Force	1 Field Battery	18-pounders
Burma Frontier Force		5 Mobile Detachments

*Note:* The 18-pounder Field Battery had only four guns.  
*Source:* Despatch on the Far East, by Air Chief Marshal Robert Brooke-Popham, Commander-in-Chief Far East, 17 Oct. 1940–27 December 1941, 25 June 1942, p. 69, CAB 66/28/33, PRO, Kew, UK; General Archibald Wavell, ‘Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942’, *Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 38228, 11 March 1948, p. 1668.

and 56th Japanese divisions were raised in the summer of 1940 in cadre form. In September 1941, the 55th Japanese Division was mobilized, reservists were called up and it was brought to full strength in early October. Training immediately started for landing across the beaches. The advantage of the Japanese divisions over the Indian and Burmese divisions was that the men were from the same background and spoke the same language. The 33rd Japanese Division

came by sea from China and reached Bangkok on 10 January 1942. This division had only two regiments. Its 213th Japanese Infantry Regiment and two mountain guns were left in China because of lack of shipping. From Bangkok, the 33rd Japanese Division moved by rail and truck to Rahen.<sup>34</sup> Generally, at this stage the IJA's division did not use brigade groups. Each infantry division comprised three regiments, each of three battalions.<sup>35</sup>

The 5th Air Division (the Japanese called Air Divisions *Hikoshidan*) was allotted to Burma. It was commanded by Lieutenant-General Hideyoshi Obata. His primary task was to destroy the opposing American and British air forces and his secondary mission was to provide support to the ground units. The 5th Air Division had two groups: the 4th Dan and 10th Dan. The 10th Dan had 37 fighters, 28 light bombers, 24 transport aircraft and nine long-range reconnaissance aircraft. On 22 January 1942, the 3rd Dan was transferred from the Philippines and it had 24 fighters, 28 light bombers and 28 heavy bombers. During the big air raids on Rangoon on 23 and 25 December, the 3rd Air Division allotted to Malaya also took part. Both the 3rd and the 5th Air Divisions were under Lieutenant-General Sakaguchi, the Deputy Chief of Staff of General Count Terauchi commanding the Southern Army.<sup>36</sup> Overall, the Japanese started the invasion of Burma with some 180 aircraft.<sup>37</sup> In Burma, the Japanese used two types of fighters: the Oscar of the IJA and the Zero of the IJN. Oscar was the American code name for the Nakajima Ki 43 Hayabusa single-seater fighter of various marks. The 5th Air Division was equipped mainly with Oscars. The Zero (Mitsubishi A6M Reisen) had greater range and more manoeuvrability than a Hurricane.<sup>38</sup> The range of Mark I Hurricane was 135 miles. Use of long-range tanks were not practicable because they were not self-sealing. Such tanks could only be lashed up with the aircraft, which in turn made the latter unwieldy in a dogfight. The IJN's O fighters' operational range was 500 miles and the Army 97 bombers' operational radius of action with 1.5 ton of bomb load each came to about 700 miles.<sup>39</sup> The Japanese also used Ki 27

34 Ian Lyall Grant and Kazuo Tamayama, *Burma 1942: Both Sides tell the Story of a Savage Jungle War* (Chichester, West Sussex: Zampi Press, 1999), pp. 46–49.

35 *Japanese Military Forces*, 120/DM1/3/GSI(t) (Military Intelligence Directorate, General Headquarters, India, March 1942, reprint, n.d., Uckfield: Naval & Military Press Ltd.), p. 9.

36 Grant and Tamayama, *Burma 1942*, p. 48; Michael Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign 1941–45* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2006), p. 31.

37 Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, p. 86.

38 Grant and Tamayama, *Burma 1942*, p. 55; Brown and Rodney, 'Burma Banzai: The Air War in Burma through Japanese Eyes', pp. 53, 55.

39 Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, pp. 85–86.

Sally heavy bombers and KI 30 Ann light bombers, which were escorted by Nakajima KI 27 Nate fighters.<sup>40</sup>

### The Long Retreat

The Commonwealth forces conducted their long retreat from Moulmein on Salween to Shwegyin on the bank of the Chindwin as the Japanese invasion of Burma unfolded. The Japanese invasion of Burma started on 11 December 1941. The Japanese crossed the frontier from Taplee and Namchoot and occupied Marang village.<sup>41</sup> The 55th Japanese Division with two regiments advanced towards Moulmein from the south through the Three Pagoda Pass, Dawna Hills and Kawkareik.<sup>42</sup> At Moulmein, the 17th Indian Division under Major-General J.G. Smyth comprised the 46th Indian Infantry Brigade under Brigadier Roger Ekin, the 5th and 12th mountain batteries and four Bofors from the 3rd Indian Light AA Battery. The mountain batteries were equipped with mule-borne 3.7-inch howitzers which were capable of throwing 19.5-pound shells and had an effective range of 6,000 yards. The 16th Indian Infantry Brigade under Brigadier J.K. Jones was deployed at Kawkareik.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, the British Government was taking some emergency measures to strengthen and streamline Burma's defence. On 12 December 1941, Wavell received a missive from Prime Minister Winston Churchill that Burma had been placed under the Commander-in-Chief of India. Wavell was promised the 18th British Division, which was then moving towards the Middle East, for the defence of Burma and India. Wavell was also released from the obligation to send the 17th Indian Division to Iraq. The British Prime Minister further promised Wavell anti-tank and AA guns. In addition, Wavell was assured that four fighter squadrons would be transferred from the Middle East to India. At the same time, Wavell was ordered to send six Blenheim IV squadrons from India to Burma. Wavell immediately ordered the leading brigade of the 17th

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<sup>40</sup> Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Bisheshwar Prasad (ed.), *The Retreat from Burma: 1941–42*, B. Prasad (General Editor), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45, Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, India & Pakistan, Calcutta: Distributed by Orient Longmans, 1954, reprint, 1959), p. 65.

<sup>42</sup> Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941–45* (1984, reprint, London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> Jon Latimer, *Burma: The Forgotten War* (2004, reprint, London: John Murray, 2005), pp. 47, 50.



Indian Division, which was on the point of embarking for Iraq, to be diverted to Burma.<sup>44</sup>

On 23 December, a large fleet of Japanese aircraft (87 bombers supported by 34 Type 97 fighters) from the airfields in Thailand and Indo-China flew over the Gulf of Martaban towards Rangoon and the Mingaladon airfield. Many of the bombers were twin engine KI 21 Mitsubishis each carrying a 2,200 pound bomb load. The Mingaladon airfield was 15 miles north of Rangoon. Mingaladon airfield hosted the RAF's No. 67 Squadron (the pilots were New Zealanders) equipped with Buffalo fighters. And there were two fighter squadrons equipped with P 40B Tomahawks. The latter squadrons belonged to the American Volunteer Group (AVG) raised to aid Nationalist China against Japan.<sup>45</sup> The AVG was officially created on 1 August 1941 with the American Claire Lee Chennault as Group Commander. The group had three pursuit plane squadrons under it which meant 125 aircraft, and of them, over 100 were P 40 fighters. The AVG fought the Japanese at Kunming, Rangoon and Guilin. The AVG was disbanded on 4 July 1942 and the personnel were absorbed into the 23rd Pursuit Group of the 10th USAAF.<sup>46</sup>

On 27 December 1941, Lieutenant-General T.J. Hutton arrived at Rangoon and assumed command, thus replacing Lieutenant-General D.K. Macleod. Hutton's Brigadier General Staff (BGS) was Brigadier H.L. Davies. At the time of Hutton's arrival, one regiment of the 93rd Chinese Division, named Force Trellis, was advancing towards the southern Shan States with the aim of taking over the defence of the Mekong River, west of the road Kengtung-Mongpayak. Its headquarters was to be at Mongyawng. The rest of the division was located at Puerh in China and the British administration in Burma was responsible for supplying it with rice. The other formations of the 6th Chinese Army (which included the 49th and the 55th Chinese divisions) were stationed near Paoshan. The 5th Chinese Army was on the Yunnan-Kweichow Border. The 49th Chinese Division was on the point of moving towards Wanting.<sup>47</sup>

On 4 January 1942, the 4th Sikhs were ordered to move to Tennasserim. At that time there were the 13th and 16th Indian Infantry Brigades and 1st and 2nd Burma Brigades in Burma. The 13th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 1st Burma

44 Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', p. 1668.

45 Warren, *Burma 1942*, pp. viii–ix; Grant and Tamayama, *Burma 1942*, p. 54.

46 Zhang Baijia, 'China's Quest for Foreign Military Aid', tr. by Shuxi Yin, in Mark Peattie, Edward Drea and Hans Van de Ven (eds.), *The Battle for China: Essays on the Military History of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 300.

47 Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', Report by Hutton on Operations in Burma from 27 December 1941 to 5 March 1942, pp. 1675–77.



Brigade were in the southern Shan States and the 16th Indian Infantry Brigade was at Kawkareik. The 2nd Burma Brigade covered Moulmein, Tavoy and Mergui.<sup>48</sup> A junior British officer attached with the 4th Sikhs describes the battle scene in the following words: 'We left Mandalay early on 7 January and arrived at Martaban before dawn the following day. As this place was bombed a few days previously chaos reigned and we took a whole day to get across the Salween to Moulmein'.<sup>49</sup> On arrival, the 4th Sikhs were ordered to join the 2nd Burma Brigade commanded by Brigadier Bourke. The rest of the 16th Indian Infantry Brigade, with a battalion of the Burma Rifles, went off to Kawkareik. Besides the 4th Sikhs, the other units in the 2nd Burma Brigade were the 7th and 8th Burma Rifles in Moulmein, and the 3rd and 6th Burma Rifles in Tavoy and Mergui.<sup>50</sup>

The 4th Sikhs' journey was described by one of its British Captains, I.A.J. Edwards-Stuart, as follows: 'In the night of 9 January we left for Ye where we arrived early next morning. I was given command of D Company with Bill Hunter as company officer. At Ye there was absolute chaos. Only *sampans* were available for crossing the river and only a few were present. Each *saman* can carry only eight men. It took two days to get the battalion across the river'.<sup>51</sup> On 11 January 1942, Edwards-Stuart went with the D Company to Kaleinaung, about 100 miles further south. On 12 January, the 4th Sikhs received reports that the Japanese were advancing along the road to Tavoy. The next day, 13 January, Wallace arrived with the B Company and Major Sangster took over command of the detachment. Meanwhile, this unit conducted extensive patrolling towards the Thai border. On 17 January, Edwards-Stuart took a patrol to Tavoy and contacted the Area Commander, Colonel Cotton.<sup>52</sup>

The rugged jungle-covered mountains forward of the unbridged Salween was considered as an impassable barrier by the Commonwealth high command. The only motor road from Thailand crossed the frontier at Tachilek in Kengtung and, traversing the southern Shan States, joined the main Rangoon-Mandalay Road at Meiktila.<sup>53</sup> The 3rd Battalion Group of the 112th Regiment, which numbered some 1,500 men and was commanded by Major Oki, had left Bangkok on 3 January to attack Tavoy. They first went by train to Kanchanbari where they were aided by the Burma Independence Army (BIA). The BIA was

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48 Edwards-Stuart, *With the 4th Sikhs in Burma*, 1941–42, p. 2.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., pp. 2–3.

51 Ibid., p. 3.

52 Ibid.

53 Foucar, 'The First Burma Campaign-I', p. 59.

under General Aung Sang and his Japanese interlocutor was Colonel Keiji Suzuki.<sup>54</sup> Then, the Japanese travelled by motor boats up the River Kwai to Wanpo. From there they moved on foot through the steep and jungle-covered Tenasserim Ridge which separated Thailand from Burma. Each soldier carried seven days' ration plus either 120 rounds of ammunition or a mountain artillery shell weighing 14 pounds, in addition to their normal kit. Besides horses brought from Japan, local oxen and elephants provided by the Thai Army were used to carry the heavy weapons and additional ammunition. The engineers cleared a path through the jungle. While many horses and oxen were lost, the Japanese soldiers were tormented by leeches. By 13 January, the Japanese column was beginning to run out of food. However, they were able to cross the crest of the Ridge on 14 January and then the going became easier. On 15 January, the Japanese came before Myitta village where a motor road led through a smaller range to Tavoy some 34 miles away.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, the Commonwealth forces in Burma were getting some half-trained reinforcements. In January 1942, the 17th Indian Division's 46th Indian Infantry Brigade reached Burma (the 44th and 45th were diverted to Malaya). The other two brigades assigned to this division were the 48th and 63rd. The 7th Battalion of the 10th Baluch Regiment came under the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>56</sup>

Tavoy was a town with some 30,000 inhabitants. It was defended by the 6th Burma Rifles. This was a newly raised battalion. This unit was reinforced by two companies of the 3rd Burma Rifles who arrived by boat from Mergui. The 6th Burma Rifles had an outpost of two platoons at Myitta and a two company position astride the road on the crest of a ridge behind them, supported by a third company. On 16 January 1942, the outpost retired and the retreating Burma Rifles spread exaggerated rumours. The three forward companies of the Burma Rifles, instead of retreating to the next defensive position at Wagon, made for Moulmein. The Japanese advance continued during both day and night. In Tavoy, then, there was one company of 6th Burma Rifles, two companies of 3rd Burma Rifles, a detachment from the Kokine Battalion of the BFF and a detachment from the Tenasserim Battalion of the Burma Auxiliary Force (BAF). At 9 AM on 19 January 1942, the Japanese attacked the airfield at Tavoy. On 19 January, Tavoy fell and the Japanese captured the British codes. The remnants of the force under Colonel Cotton withdrew up the road and were picked up by the 4th Battalion of the 12th FFR. At 3 PM on 19 January, the Japanese occupied Tavoy. In capturing Tavoy, the Japanese casualties numbered 23 KIA

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54 Webster, *The Burma Road*, p. 48.

55 Grant and Tamayama, *Burma 1942*, p. 52.

56 Ahmed, *History of the Baloch Regiment: 1939-56*, pp. 53-54.

and 40 WIA. A BIA detachment set up an autonomous administration and started recruiting more personnel for the organization.<sup>57</sup> Thus, by 19 January 1942, the Commonwealth air units in Burma lost the airfields of Mergui and Tavoy. Victoria Point had been lost earlier.<sup>58</sup> It meant the RAF's capacity to provide ground support or to prevent interference by the Japanese aircraft on the retreating Commonwealth ground units was diminishing with time. On 20 January, to prevent being bypassed and cut off by the advancing Japanese troops, the detachment of the 4th Sikhs withdrew from Kaleinaung and rejoined its parent battalion. On 22 January, the 4th Sikhs were withdrawn to Moulmein.<sup>59</sup>

The 55th Japanese Division, which was under the Command of the 15th Japanese Army, concentrated near Rahen at the beginning of January 1942. The 33rd Japanese Division landed at Banya and also concentrated near Rahen. One part of the 55th Japanese Division, which had previously fought in the Tenasserim district, captured Tavoy on 19 January. From 20 January, the principal elements of the 55th Japanese Division crossed the Siam-Burma border and arrived at Moulmein on 30 January. During the later part of January 1942, the Japanese intelligence source confirmed the arrival of the 17th Indian Division in Burma. The Japanese noted that their main ground opponents were going to be, besides the 17th Indian Division, the 13th Indian Independent Infantry Brigade and the 1st Burma Division. In addition, the 5th and 6th Chinese armies were to be encountered in Burma. According to Japanese calculations, two Chinese divisions would be able to enter Burma in the near future. However, it would take more than two months for the Chinese to concentrate the whole force of eight divisions near Mandalay. The Japanese Southern Army noted that although the British air units in Burma had suffered casualties during late December 1941, due to reinforcements received, the strength remained at about 50 aircraft in late January 1942.<sup>60</sup> To make matters worse for the Commonwealth ground units, in late January 1942, the outclassed Buffaloes were withdrawn. The AVG's average strength declined to 15 serviceable Tomahawks. On 30 January, the airfield at Moulmein was lost.<sup>61</sup>

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57 Grant and Tamayama, *Burma 1942*, pp. 52–53.

58 Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, p. 86.

59 Edwards-Stuart, *With the 4th Sikhs in Burma, 1941–42*, pp. 3–4. According to the Baloch regimental history, the Japanese captured Tavoy airfield on 15 January 1942. Ahmed, *History of the Baloch Regiment: 1939–56*, p. 56.

60 *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, The Enemy Situation as known in the latter part of January, p. 13.

61 Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, pp. 85–86.

The 17th Indian Division retreating from Moulmein took a defensive position on the Bilin River, which runs north to south. On the right (west) bank of the river was a road. A dense bamboo jungle about 400 yards wide ran for a mile from the river to the road. The Japanese infantry, supported by mortars, dug into the jungle. The 17th Indian Division with mountain guns and mortars attacked the Japanese who in turn launched a night attack supported by mortars, grenades and tracers.<sup>62</sup>

On 1 February 1942, No. 1 Squadron of the IAF, equipped with 12 Westland Lysanders, arrived at Toungoo. The Indian pilots were given the worst form of aircraft available in the arsenal of the British Empire. The Westland Lysanders were slow monoplanes used for army cooperation and reconnaissance.<sup>63</sup> On the same date, the 16th Brigade was ordered to hold a wide stretch of ground from Martaban to Paan/Pa-an. When the Japanese attempted to infiltrate through the south and east of Martaban, the 7th Baluch was ordered to resist. Very soon, the 16th Brigade Headquarters lost all contact with the Baluch unit. The Japanese were always probing all around the flanks of the Commonwealth defence and attempting to infiltrate. On 2 February at 1645 hours, the 1st Jat Regiment reported that seven boats, each carrying about 50 Japanese soldiers equipped with automatics and grenades, were landing at Kawkamikyun Island (east of Martaban). The 5th Mountain Battery started shelling the Japanese landing party. However, the effect of the bombardment was not that great, probably due to the lack of heavier metals and inadequate range of the guns. One hour later, the RAF made an appearance and bombed Kawkamikyun and it proved effective. At 12 noon, the 1st Battalion of the 7th GR was heavily shelled by the Japanese. The Gurkhas responded with mortar fire. Rumours spread that the Japanese were crossing the Salween at Dagwin. On 5 February 1942, the RAF bombed Pa-an and the Japanese headquarters was hit. This somewhat disheartened the Japanese. The appearance of friendly aircraft, however, greatly heartened the 1st Battalion of the 7th GR.<sup>64</sup>

On 8 February, the distribution of the various units of the 46th Brigade was as follows: the 7th Baluch at Pa-an, 5th Dogras at Duyinzeik, 3rd Battalion of the 7th GR along with one company of the KOYLI at Martaban and the KOYLI

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62 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, Operations in Burma, p. 2, L/WS/1/706.

63 Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, p. 36.

64 War Diary of 17th Infantry Division, Feb.–May 1942, File No. 601/254/WD/Pt 1A, MODHS, New Delhi, 1, 2 & 5 Feb. 1942. This document is unpaginated and the information is organized under various headings.

(minus one platoon) at Thaton.<sup>65</sup> On the same day, the 7th Battalion of the 10th Baluch Regiment occupied the paddy field north of Kuzeik village. The paddy fields were surrounded by dense jungle. The battalion was given a section of mountain artillery and assured support from the 5th Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment stationed at Duyinzeik (15 miles to the north-west of Kuzeik) in the event of a heavy Japanese attack. The Baluch lacked barbed wire to construct defensive posts. They had to maintain scattered outposts along the Salween River as far as Pagat in the south and Mikayin in the north.<sup>66</sup> Second Lieutenant John Randle wrote in his memoirs: 'All our organization, training and transportation scales were designed for a war in open desert country.... against the Germans or Italians either in the Western Desert... or Iran'.<sup>67</sup> The CO of the 17th Indian Division had written: 'I was responsible for the defence of Tenasserim from Mergui in the south to Papun in the north.... The area was about 800 miles long.... The long thin strip of Tenasserim with the sea to the west and Thailand to the east... very vulnerable it was to enemy columns striking from the east. As soon as any of these, however small, entered Tenasserim, they were automatically astride our communications'.<sup>68</sup> The British officers (both senior and junior) were thinking of constructing a linear defence and spread the Indian troops thinly all along the front.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the Indian battalions were strong nowhere. Instead of distributing the troops in penny packets, a mobile column should have been created behind a light screen of troops. The small static outposts were either easily overwhelmed by the IJA (rapid marching and bold concentration enabled the Japanese to enjoy numerical superiority at their point of choosing) or bypassed by them.

On 9 February 1942, the 15th Japanese Army was ordered to destroy the Commonwealth units engaged in operation against it and to advance towards Rangoon covering as much land in the north as possible. In the near future, the 15th Army was to prepare to attack Mandalay. The 55th Japanese Division crossed the Salween River near Moormen and the 33rd Japanese Division crossed the same river further north and advanced in the north-west direc-

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65 War Diary of 17th Infantry Division, 8 Feb.

66 Ahmed, *History of the Baloch Regiment: 1939–56*, p. 58.

67 John Randle, *Battle Tales from Burma* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2004), p. 1.

68 J.G.S., 'The Start of the War in Burma', *Journal of the United Service Institution in India*, vol. LXXII (Jan.–Oct. 1942), p. 202.

69 The attempts to construct and defend a linear defensive line along a water obstacle had already failed in France in 1940. David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919–1945* (2000, reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 196.

tion.<sup>70</sup> The 46th Brigade Headquarters lost communications with the 3rd Battalion of the 7th GR at Martaban and the 7th Battalion of the 10th Baluch at Pa-an.<sup>71</sup> Due to the operation of a top-down command set-up in which the subordinate formation commanders were dependent on detailed orders laid down by those higher up, loss of communication due to the 'fog' of battle created a disastrous scenario for this Indian brigade. The subordinate commanders were just not trained to operate independently and display initiative.<sup>72</sup>

On 10 February, the 2nd Battalion of the 215th Japanese Infantry Regiment crossed the Salween River at Kuzeik and confronted the 7th Battalion of the 10th Baluch Regiment. The Baluch battalion's patrol base in Myainggale was destroyed on 10–11 February. An attack by 27 Japanese dive bombers on the morning of 11 February further demoralized the Baluchis. Lieutenant-Colonel Dyer of the Baluchis sent a patrol to warn the 5th Dogras. However, no reinforcements reached Kuzeik. On the same day, the Japanese launched a nocturnal attack and the Baluchis fell back.<sup>73</sup> Inadequate communications and the absence of basic training prevented cooperation of the 5th Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment with the Baluchis. At the Battle of Kuzeik-Pa-an, the 7th Battalion of the 10th Baluch Regiment lost 229 personnel (including the CO 'Jerry' Dyer) KIA. The remnants of this battalion fell back to Thaton.<sup>74</sup> By 15 February, only 15 Hurricanes were serviceable.<sup>75</sup>

On 22 February 1942, the Battle of Sittang River started. On 22–23 February, disaster befell the Commonwealth troops at the Sittang River. The 17th Indian Division, retreating towards the river, found that units of the 33rd Japanese Division had moved across its flanks and cut off the leading brigade, which was across the river from the rest of the division. The two brigades east of the river tried to break through to the Sittang railway bridge. The divisional commander panicked. He reasoned that the bridge could not be held and the Japanese force would sweep over it into Rangoon. The bridgehead on the east bank was held by the 3rd Burma Rifles, a battalion which was on the point of disintegrating. At 7.30 in the morning, the Japanese attacked the eastern bridgehead at

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70 *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 18.

71 War Diary of 17th Infantry Division, 9 Feb. 1942.

72 This was a problem even with the British Army units in Europe during and after Dunkirk. For a detailed discussion of this issue see French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, pp. 189, 192, 194, 198–99.

73 Latimer, *Burma: The Forgotten War*, pp. 54–55. Ahmed, *History of the Baloch Regiment: 1939–56*, p. 58. The Baloch regimental history notes that the final withdrawal of the Baluchis from Kuzeik/Pa-an occurred on 12 February 1942. See pp. 59–60 of Ahmed's book.

74 Randle, *Battle Tales from Burma*, pp. 13, 15.

75 Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, p. 85.

Sittang. The divisional commander blew up the bridge, leaving the two brigades on the eastern side of the 600-yards-wide river. By late 24 February, of the eight battalions that had been cut off, some 2,000 officers and men, without proper clothing and boots and with only 550 rifles, 10 Bren Guns and 12 Tommy Guns between them, reached the west bank of the Sittang.<sup>76</sup> After the Sittang Bridge was blown, the 17th Indian Division retreated towards Rangoon and the Japanese filtered through the jungles on the north and north-west.<sup>77</sup>

On 26 February, the GOC Burma summed up the military strength at his disposal. In Upper Burma there were 4,000 British and 20,000 non-British (mostly Indian) troops. In Lower Burma, there were 8,000 British and 30,000 non-British soldiers. Available supplies in Upper Burma could sustain the British personnel for 50 days and the non-British troops for 75 days. In Lower Burma, supplies were available for 50 days for both the British and non-British troops. If an Australian division (which was promised by the London Government) was added to the ORBAT then the stocks of supplies in Lower Burma for the British troops would be reduced to 14 days.<sup>78</sup> The GOC Burma was not very enthusiastic about having an Australian division as a reserve both for logistical reasons and in terms of combat effectiveness. For jungle fighting, he regarded the Indian soldiers as better than the Australians. The GOC Burma noted: 'Indian troops can no doubt live on the country but with some degree of hardship. This is also the case as regards limited number of British troops but is really not practicable for a whole Australian division.'<sup>79</sup>

By 26 February, the Japanese noted that they had destroyed the hostile forces along the Sittang River. They started crossing the river on 27 February with the objective of advancing towards Rangoon. After crossing the Sittang River on 27 February, the 55th Japanese Division attacked Toungoo and the 33rd Japanese Division concentrated on Prome. On 3 March, the 55th Japanese Division encountered the 200th Chinese Division at Toungoo.<sup>80</sup> Toungoo, in the Sittang River Valley, is roughly 120 miles north of Rangoon.<sup>81</sup>

76 Field-Marshal Viscount Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (1956, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1981), p. 26; Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941-45*, p. 1; 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p. 3; Majumdar, *Administration of the Burma Campaign*, p. 25. Michael Pearson writes that the bridge was blown at 0500 hrs on 23 February. Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, p. 39.

77 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p. 4.

78 From GOC Burma to C-in-C India, Cypher Telegram, 26 Feb. 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

79 Ibid.

80 *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, pp. 18, 20.

81 Webster, *The Burma Road*, p. 47.



The GOC Burma's outlook was pessimistic (or realistic; depending on one's perspective). He noted that the Burman civilian population was collaborating with the Japanese, and the onset of the monsoon would affect the Commonwealth troops more badly than the Japanese.<sup>82</sup> However, the Commander-in-Chief India had some good news for the GOC Burma. On 1 March 1942, the GOC Burma was informed that in accordance with Wavell's order, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade and 1st Indian Field Regiment would now proceed towards Rangoon. The GOC Burma was finally getting the Indian troops which he had asked for. Tables 6.1 and 6.2 show that the bulk of the troops in Burma were indeed Indians. Whether they would be able to make a difference in jungle fighting was yet to be seen.

On 2 March 1942, General Archibald Wavell visited the troops in Pegu. His assessment was that the troops were somewhat disorganized and short of equipment after the Sittang River Battle but morale of the soldiers was not that bad.<sup>83</sup> On 3 March 1942, Wavell sent the following memorandum to the COS:

Rangoon should be held as long as possible and at least in order to allow 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade and other reinforcements immediately to be landed. Even if Rangoon has to be evacuated all possible troops will be required in order to establish line across lower Irrawaddy Valley to cover aerodromes in Central Burma and to join up with the Chinese in Shan States. To put troops in from the north will be slow and difficult and we should get in maximum while we can still hold Rangoon. This policy involves risk of losing 63rd Brigade and of having troops in south cut off but it seems to me only chance of keeping war going in Burma.<sup>84</sup>

Due to the successful unfolding of the operation for the Japanese in the Malay-Singapore region, the 15th Japanese Army was poised to receive reinforcements in order to increase its hitting power before the onset of the monsoon. On 4 March, the IGHQ decided to reinforce the 15th Japanese Army with the 18th and 56th Japanese divisions from the 25th Japanese Army.<sup>85</sup>

On 4 March 1942, General (later Field-Marshal) H. Alexander arrived at DumDum Airport in Calcutta. He met Wavell commanding ABDACOM. After the dissolution of ABDACOM, Wavell would become the Commander-in-Chief of India in early March 1942 (7 March 1942–19 June 1943). Before heading

82 From GOC Burma to C-in-C India, Cypher Telegram, 26 Feb. 1942.

83 Wavell to the War Office, Telegram, 5 March 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

84 Wavell to COS, Telegram, 1 March 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

85 *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 20.



ABDACOM, Wavell was the Commander-in-Chief of India (July 1941–16 January 1942).<sup>86</sup> Defence of Rangoon, the city with a populace of half a million (three-fifths were Indians) was of great importance for Wavell.<sup>87</sup> This was partly because there were no roads from India across the north-east mountain ranges which connected the valleys of the Chindwin, Irrawaddy and Sittang Rivers. But through the port and airfield of Rangoon and the forward airfield at Tenasserim (which by this time was already lost), supplies and RAF cover could be provided to the Commonwealth forces in Burma.<sup>88</sup> Rangoon, the capital of Burma, lay on the north bank of the broad muddy Irrawaddy River, some 25 miles inland.<sup>89</sup> Wavell emphasized to Alexander:

The retention of Rangoon was a matter of vital importance to our position in the Far East, and every effort must be made to hold it. If, however, that was not possible the force must not be allowed to be cut off and destroyed but must be withdrawn from the Rangoon area for the defence of Upper Burma. This must be held as long as possible in order to safeguard the oilfields at Yenangyaung, keep contact with the Chinese and protect the construction of the road from Assam to Burma.<sup>90</sup>

Between 3 and 4 March, Wavell had concluded that Rangoon might be lost as a worst case scenario. But, Wavell was confident about holding on to central and north Burma. The oil wells at Yenangyaung on the banks of the Irrawaddy and the wolfram mines at Mawchi in the Karen Hills (which produced a third of the world's wolfram) and tin at Tenasserim were vital to the Allied war economy.<sup>91</sup> The oilfield at Yenangyaung produced 250 million gallons of oil annually. The oil was taken by a pipe to a refinery near Syriam, which was on the Irrawaddy River to the south-east of Rangoon. Most of British-India's oil came from here.<sup>92</sup>

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86 Despatch by General H.R.L.G. Alexander, GOC Army in Burma covering the period from 5 March 1942 to 20 May 1942, 16 June 1942, p. 1, CAB 106/103, PRO, Kew, UK.

87 T.L. Hughes, *What Happened in Burma* (Holborn: Brittain Publishing House, n.d.), excerpts from p. 6, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

88 Ahmed, *History of the Baloch Regiment: 1939–56*, p. 53.

89 Warren, *Burma 1942*, p. vii.

90 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 1. The decision to construct the Ledo Road was taken in February 1942. This road from Ledo in Assam connected with the Burma Road and ran through a jungle-clad rainforest which received almost 150 inches of rainfall during the three summer months. Webster, *The Burma Road*, pp. 58–59.

91 Allen, *Burma: The Longest War*, p. 7.

92 Warren, *Burma 1942*, p. 6.

After the conference with Wavell, Alexander flew to Magwe in the evening. On the morning of 5 March he flew to Rangoon and arrived at the Army Headquarters in the afternoon. At that time, Lieutenant-General Hutton (Chief of the General Staff, Burma Army) was away at the front. The situation was indeed critical. The 17th Indian Division was a collection of newly collected brigades from other formations. The units were trained and equipped for desert warfare. Its transport was mechanical and the division was incapable of operating in a roadless zone. The 17th Indian Division's battalions were heavily 'milked'. Many of the personnel were not trained even in the basic minor tactics. And just before deployment in Burma, this division was converted to MT when it ought to have been animal transport (AT). The 1st Burma Division mainly consisted of Burmese units, which had no regimental tradition to fall back upon. The 1st Burma Division comprised the 1st and 2nd Burma Brigades, the 13th Indian Brigade and the 27th Mountain Artillery. Its artillery was below the normal establishment. Its anti-tank battery included Austrian 77-mm guns which were captured in 1918. These guns were without dial sights and the available ammunition stock was merely 120 rounds per gun.<sup>93</sup>

The 17th Indian Division was holding Pegu-Hlegu. While the 16th Indian Infantry Brigade was at Hlegu, the 48th Infantry Brigade and the 7th Armoured Brigade was also in Pegu. The 16th Indian Infantry Brigade comprised the 1st Battalion of the 7th GR and 4th Burma Rifles. About 400 men of the latter unit were afflicted with malaria. And this brigade had only one wireless set, which was carried on a lorry.<sup>94</sup> Inadequate number of wireless sets prevented rapid communication among the different sub-units within this brigade which in turn reduced its combat effectiveness.

Alexander set off for Hlegu, the Headquarters of the 17th Indian Division, where he met Hutton and Major-General 'Punch' Cowan. Hutton's staff explained to Alexander that the two infantry brigades were weak and disorganized. The only silver lining was that the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade, which had just disembarked, was at Hlawga, some 16 miles north of Rangoon. However, this brigade's transport was still on the cargo ship.<sup>95</sup>

The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was not in good shape. The commander of this brigade, who took charge in July 1941, noted:

We had been selected to take to the air and I did a lot of endurance work, tree, rope and house climbing, jumping into a net, which I got from a

93 J.G.S., 'The Start of the War in Burma', pp. 200–1; Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, pp. 24–25.

94 Allen, *Burma: The Longest War*, p. 27.

95 Latimer, *Burma: The Forgotten War*, p. 22.

traveling circus, and such like unorthodox training which indirectly helped no end when we got to Burma.... By 1 December we were concentrated into a brigade down south and began to train for Middle East to be ready for service in July. Matters were not made easy by the dispatch of 250 men on war leave which removed 10 GOs and 80 per cent of the NCOS.... We left at the end of January in the following condition: Mules and chargers arrived at the day before we entrained, there being about double the number we had ever had before. Their saddlery was brand new and had not been fitted.... A draft of 160 recruits arrived two days before we entrained.... Many men had not yet fired their weapons... We received the equipment the night before we entrained and it was still unpacked.<sup>96</sup>

Only after coming to Burma did the brigade concentrate in a jungle east of Rangoon and practise jungle patrolling.<sup>97</sup>

Things looked black for the British commanders as far as the Burman military personnel were concerned. Their desertion had reached crisis proportions. In fact, the deserters were organized by the Japanese as the Free Burma Army/ Burma Independence Army, just as the Indian deserters were organized as the Indian National Army (INA) by the Japanese in Malaya-Singapore. On 6 March 1942, the British high command in Burma decided that the Burman deserters, if caught, should face summary courts martial and if death sentences were awarded then they must be carried out. Further, it was ordered that those Burman personnel whose loyalty had been tampered with should be evacuated to India where they should undergo rigorous long-term imprisonment.<sup>98</sup>

The 1st Burma Division handed over the defence of the southern Shan States to the 6th Chinese Army. Then, the 1st Burma Division deployed the 13th Infantry Brigade at Mawchi, 1st Burma Brigade at Pyu and the 2nd Burma Brigade at Nyaunglebin. However, there was a gap of some 40 miles between the forward elements of the 1st Burma Division and the 17th Indian Division. The Japanese had already infiltrated in Waw and in the villages north and north-east of Pegu. The Japanese columns were also infiltrating between Pegu and Nyaunglebin across the Sittang River. These forces entered the Pegu Yomas, the jungle-covered mountainous region north and north-west of Pegu.<sup>99</sup>

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96 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, L/ws/1/706.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

98 From Advanced Headquarter in Burma to C-in-C India, 6 March 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

99 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 1.

Hutton informed Alexander of the necessity of issuing orders for immediate evacuation of Rangoon. However, Alexander demurred. He believed that immediate evacuation of Rangoon was not necessary, not, at least, at this stage. Alexander wanted a union of the 17th Indian Division and the 1st Burma Division in order to prevent further infiltration of the Japanese into the Arakan Yomas. The Arakan Yomas consisted of jungle-clad hills with razor shaped ridges and precipitous slopes.<sup>100</sup>

Alexander wanted the 17th Indian Division to launch local counter-attacks at Waw in order to relieve enemy pressure at the front. He ordered the 2nd Infantry Brigade of the 1st Burma Division to advance south from Nyaunglebin to join up with the 17th Indian Division. A limited offensive was carried out on 5 March by the 17th Indian Division and part of the armoured brigade from Pegu. From the wooded country which bordered on Pegu in the west, the Japanese launched attacks and captured part of the town. On 6 March, the 17th Indian Division launched another attack but failed to eject the Japanese from Pegu. The battle was fought in the gardens, jungles and suburbs. By this time the Commonwealth units near Rangoon were coming under threat due to the wider encircling attacks by the Japanese. The road from Rangoon south-west of Pegu was cut on 6 March. Alexander ordered the 63rd Infantry Brigade to be put under the direct command of the CO of the 17th Indian Division. A counter-attack by the above-mentioned infantry brigade on 6 March to open the road failed. The troops cut off in Pegu comprised the 7th Hussars, 1st West Yorks, 1st Cameronians and 48th Infantry Brigade. Moreover, Alexander received reports that Japanese columns were moving through Paunggyi (30 miles north of Hlegu) in a south-westerly direction and also into the mouth of the Rangoon River near the Syriam refineries.<sup>101</sup>

On 6 March, the Japanese deployed several small tanks along the Sittang front. Each tank was manned by two personnel, had two MGs and weighed between three and four tons. Alexander estimated that the Japanese could now maintain two divisions beyond Sittang through local impressments and captured MT.<sup>102</sup>

Within only 24 hours of meeting with Hutton, Alexander changed his mind about holding Rangoon. Late on 6 March, Alexander decided to evacuate Rangoon after destroying the Syriam refineries and withdraw north along the Irrawaddy. The Irrawaddy is 1,300 miles long and some three miles wide in

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100 Ibid., p. 2; Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 22.

101 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 2; 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p. 4.

102 From GOC Burma to C-in-C India, Telegram, 6 March 1942, L/ws/1/706.

parts and navigable from the sea till Bhamo, a distance of 800 miles. On the morning of 7 March, the Army Headquarters, administrative units and troops not engaged in covering the demolitions in the Rangoon area withdrew across the Prome Road. After passing the Taukkyan road junction, these units ran into a Japanese roadblock. An attempt by the Gloucesters and the 2nd Battalion of the 13th FFR and some tanks of the 7th Hussars throughout the day to clear the roadblock failed. Further, the force in Pegu remained surrounded.<sup>103</sup>

On 7 March, the force in Pegu was ordered to cut its way out and it was ultimately successful. In the morning of 7 March, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade retreated over the bridge on the River Pegu and then it was blown up. The Japanese soldiers, armed with LMGs, attacked from the wooded areas on both sides of the road and pandemonium broke out. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade launched a counter-attack on the wood with grenades and then made a bayonet charge. The roadblock was cleared with grenades, bayonets and the soldiers firing Bren Guns and Tommy Guns from their hips. In response, the Japanese brought two MMGs and a pack gun. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade retreated but had to leave behind the vehicles with shattered radiators. The brigade formed a large hollow square as a defensive measure (somewhat in the eighteenth-century army style) and retreated in the south-west direction across the open paddy fields. At 1300 hours, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade reached Hlegu and found that the bridge across the tidal creek was blown. The sappers repaired the bridge and the grateful soldiers found that on the other side lorries were waiting for them.<sup>104</sup>

The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was concentrated near Hlegu and it was decided to use it to attack the roadblock north of Taukkyan with armour and artillery support on 8 March. The roadblock was cleared and to contain the Japanese snipers, the 16th Indian Infantry Brigade was used to guard the route. As the Commonwealth troops withdrew, the Japanese on their left flank concentrated on entering Rangoon from the north-west.<sup>105</sup> Thus, one could argue that the Japanese in their very eagerness to enter Rangoon failed to strengthen the roadblock and wipe out the retreating troops of the British Empire. The rag-tag troops under Alexander escaped to fight another day. Hence, the Japanese won a partial and not a complete victory at Rangoon. It could be said that the Burma Army was saved due to failure on part of the IJA to surround it and destroy the withdrawing forces rather than due to the fighting abilities of the Commonwealth troops or command decisions of the British generals.

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103 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, pp. 2–3; Allen, *Burma: The Longest War*, p. 7.

104 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p. 5.

105 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 3.

On the night of 8 March, the 17th Indian Division was concentrated in the Taukkyan area. The next day, the retreat north of Taukkyan continued. Rangoon fell to the Japanese on 8/9 March. Then the Japanese prepared to advance towards central Burma.<sup>106</sup> By 11 March, Alexander had deployed the 17th Indian Division along Henzada-Sanywe Ferry-Thonze-Thonze Chaung. Alexander realized that he was playing a losing hand. After the fall of Rangoon, large-scale reinforcements would not be available. Due to the absence of a proper road to India, Alexander's force could only be maintained from India with great difficulty. Along the Assam-Burma border, due to the south-west monsoon, from the middle of May till the middle of September, military movements on land almost ceased and air operations also became dangerous. Further, the Commonwealth had few air assets to supply the troops. The roadless malarial belt on both sides of the Chindwin River and the low clouds hampered mobility both on the ground and in the air. West of the Chindwin is the Chin Hills. The Chindwin was navigable for 300 miles of its course up to Tamanthi. The forest-covered ridges receive heavy rainfall. West of the Chin Hills is Nagaland in north-east India. The bad state of communications in this region along the Burma border made the situation worse. The narrow-gauge railway to Assam was hampered by ferries over the Brahmaputra River. From the railhead, the Manipur Road ran through difficult hills for 150 miles and the road was susceptible to landslides during the rainy season. Further, the loss of Rangoon airfield with its early warning system meant that the RAF would not be able to aid the ground force in Burma in a significant manner. Conversely, for the Japanese, the capture of Rangoon Port meant that now their supply situation was eased. Instead of supporting their troops through the difficult mountainous road across Thailand, the Japanese could now move troops and supplies with ease through Rangoon.<sup>107</sup>

When Rangoon fell, the Eastern Fleet had one modernized battleship. And it was not in a position to check Japanese naval forces in the Bay of Bengal and in the waters around Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The Japanese air-naval units, if they wanted, were in a position to destroy Trincomalee.<sup>108</sup>

106 Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 27; *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 20.

107 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, pp. 3–4; General Archibald Wavell, *Speaking Generally: Broadcasts, Orders and Addresses in Time of War (1939–43)* (London: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 131, 155; Latimer, *Burma: The Forgotten War*, p. 12; Prasad, Bhargava and Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 1, p. 2.

108 Field-Marshal Viscount Wavell, 'Operations in Eastern Theatre, based on India, from March 1942 to December 31, 1942', *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 18 Sept. 1946, No. 37728, p. 4663.

After the failure to hold Rangoon, Alexander's objective was to hold Upper Burma if possible. On 11 March, the 1st Burma Rifles and 5th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment of the 1st Burma Division attacked the villages of Shwegyin and Madouk. However, such local tactical successes did not alter the overall strategic scenario. Soon, the 1st Burma Division (minus 13th Infantry Brigade) was withdrawn to the area north of Kanyutkwin. To strengthen the position in the Irrawaddy Valley, the 1st Burma Division was taken from the Toungoo front into the Irrawaddy Valley. The 5th Chinese Army took up position in the Toungoo region.<sup>109</sup>

Compared to Alexander, in Wavell's eyes, the prospect was more pessimistic. This was probably because Wavell had experience of fighting and being defeated by the Japanese and Alexander was a newcomer in the theatre. Wavell wrote:

On the 7th March, just before the fall of Rangoon, I cabled to the Chiefs of Staff a short appreciation. I expressed grave doubts of my ability to hold Burma, and anticipated a subsequent attack by the Japanese on N.E. India. I considered at this time that an undue proportion of our very inadequate land and air resources in the East was being allocated to the defence of Ceylon.... a complete British division in North-East India would have been a most valuable reserve and would have done something to restore shaken public morale. The War Cabinet ruled, however, that the defence of the naval bases in Ceylon must have priority, and confirmed the diversion thither of the 16th Brigade of the 70th Division.<sup>110</sup>

Meanwhile, the 17th Indian Division was ordered to withdraw to the Prome area. Detachments of tanks and lorry-borne infantry were ordered to patrol southwards along the Prome-Rangoon Road to delay the Japanese. On 12 March, Alexander set up his headquarters at Maymyo. On 14 March, Alexander met General Stilwell (nicknamed Vinegar Joe) who commanded the 5th and 6th Chinese armies. Both agreed that the British-Indian and the Chinese troops should cooperate to contain the Japanese in central Burma. Alexander requested a corps commander. India Command sent him Lieutenant-General (later Field-Marshal) W.J. Slim. He arrived on 19 March and took over command of the corps. Two years later, Slim would force the IJA to retreat in the

109 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 4; Prasad, Bhargava and Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 1, p. 1.

110 Wavell, 'Operations in Eastern Theatre, based on India, from March 1942 to December 31, 1942', pp. 4663–64.



same region. Slim had fought in World War I at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia. He later commanded the 7th GR. After the outbreak of World War II, he commanded a brigade in Eritrea and later the 10th Indian Division in Persia. Slim, the corps commander, Cowan of the 17th Indian Division and Major-General Bruce Scott of the 1st Burma Division were all from the 1st Battalion of the 6th GR. The 'Gurkha' lobby of the Indian Army would dominate the land war in Burma even in 1945. On 24 March, with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek's assent, Alexander acquired control over the Chinese force in Burma.<sup>111</sup>

Meanwhile, Japanese strength both on the ground and in the air in Burma were increasing. By mid-March 1942, the Japanese redeployed air units from Malaya and they had some 360 aircraft operating over Burma.<sup>112</sup> On 18 March, the 7th and 12th Japanese Air Brigades of the 3rd Japanese Air Group were added to the 5th Japanese Air Group. Their order was to cooperate with the advance of the 15th Japanese Army.<sup>113</sup> The heavy Japanese air raids on Magwe destroyed most of the aircraft of two fighter squadrons and one light bomber squadron allotted to Upper Burma. The remnants of these air units were withdrawn to India to reform. The airfields in east India were underdeveloped and the air warning system was in a rudimentary shape. For the defence of Calcutta, there was one fighter squadron (eight Mohawks).<sup>114</sup> Thus, the available Commonwealth ground units in Upper Burma and east India had no counter to the rampaging Japanese aerial units.

After the Sittang disaster, the 17th Indian Division was not fully re-equipped and reorganized. Table 6.5 gives an idea of the rate of wastage of weapons and equipment during the retreat from Burma. The 1st Burma Division's (which was relieved by the 200th Chinese Division) retreat towards the Irrawaddy region started in the night of 21/22 March. The 7th Armoured Brigade of Brigadier Anstice in Tamagauk was in corps reserve. On 24 March, the Japanese made a surprise attack on the aerodrome north of Toungoo. The rear echelon of the 1st Burma Division, including the 23rd Mountain Battery and Frontier Force columns, was engaged. The next day, the newly formed Burma Corps (BURCORPS) issued orders for the concentration of the corps along Allanmyo-Prome. The 1st Burma Division was in Kyaupka-Daung-Allanmyo-Thayetmyo, and the

111 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 5; Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, pp. 34–35; John Shipster, *Mist on the Rice-Fields: A Soldier's Story of the Burma Campaign and the Korean War* (2000, reprint, Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2002), p. 32.

112 Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, p. 86. According to one author, by mid-March 1942, the Japanese had 260 aircraft in Burma. Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, p. 47.

113 *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, p. 21.

114 Wavell, 'Operations in Eastern Theatre, based on India, from March 1942 to December 31, 1942', p. 4663.



17th Indian Division was in Wettigan-Prome-Shwedaung-Sinde.<sup>115</sup> The 56th Japanese Division was transported from Kyushu and landed in Rangoon on 26 March. After landing, this division moved towards Toungoo. The 18th Japanese Division prepared to advance from south Malaya.<sup>116</sup>

The B Company of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade, while withdrawing from Pegu, was rushed by the Japanese and suffered some 50 per cent killed and wounded. The brigade retreated to Prome but had no chance to refit. Their armament and MT was reduced by half to equip other units in a desperate measure. On 28 March, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade went into divisional reserve in the rear of Prome.<sup>117</sup>

Prome is a city on the left (east) bank of the Irrawaddy. It is at the top of a gorge 10 miles long where the river forces its way through a jungle-clad region. The Rangoon Road went south along the river bank and then turned south-east to run five miles through the hills till it reached the paddy plains and the railway at Paungde. From here the road and railway ran side by side southwards. It was planned that two brigades would hold the city of Prome and the armoured brigade, with five motorized British infantry battalions, was to go south to Paungde to force the Japanese to retreat northwards into the plains. One battalion, with a squadron of tanks, was to go down to the Siminzei area along the railway line. It was hoped that between the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade and the mechanized column, a killing field for the Japanese could be organized. On 30 March, it was clear that the mechanized column had failed to clear Paungde and had withdrawn northwards along the road. In the evening, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to retreat. The mechanized force in the course of its withdrawal had to encounter a series of roadblocks at Schwedaung, where they lost heavily.<sup>118</sup> The strategic situation was indeed dangerous for the British Empire on the Burma-India frontier. Throughout March 1942 there was not a single fully trained division in India.<sup>119</sup>

By 1 April, the 1st Burma Division was very short of artillery. And it could muster only one carrier platoon instead of one per battalion. Desertion was quite heavy amongst this division's Burman personnel. Many Burmans actually deserted with their rifles. On 1 April, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade held the Prome-Paungdale Road. The Japanese, and the Burmese working with

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<sup>115</sup> Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 6.

<sup>116</sup> *Japanese Monograph No. 24, History of the Southern Army*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>117</sup> 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p. 6.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Wavell, 'Operations in Eastern Theatre based on India, from March 1942 to December 31, 1942', p. 4670.

them, crossed the river from the west bank in local boats and established road-blocks at the rear of the Commonwealth mechanized force.<sup>120</sup> The 17th Indian Division disposed of three brigades. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was in Allanmyo, the 48th was in Hmawza and the 16th Brigade in Tamagauk.<sup>121</sup>

At 0100 hours on 2 April, a Japanese column advanced from Paungdale. At 0300 hours, the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to retreat to the Mandalay Road where the rest of the 17th Indian Division's (under 'Punch' Cowan) units were also retreating. As the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade retreated through the hot and dry zone of teak forest, the Japanese did not follow them. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade retreated to Kokkogaw Harbour and then the Japanese launched an attack. A troop of 25-pounders had to fire over their sights to hold the perimeter.<sup>122</sup>

On 3 April, Wavell summed up the fighting efficiency of the British and Indian troops in Burma in the following words: 'British troops fighting very well but are weak in numbers. Some Indian units shaken and not very reliable, remaining Burmese units of little fighting value'.<sup>123</sup> Wavell assumed that the Japanese would make a turning movement east of Prome with advance on the west bank of the Irrawaddy. Wavell ordered concentration of troops north of Prome for launching counter-attacks to stop the Japanese temporarily and to withdraw to the area south of Magwe-Taungyh.<sup>124</sup>

On 5 April, the Japanese carrier-borne aircraft attacked Colombo and on 9 April Trincomalee was attacked. The port of Chittagong was closed out of fear that the Japanese forces might attack and occupy it.<sup>125</sup> On the same day, Alexander complained to Wavell that the complete lack of air support had adversely affected the morale of the troops under his command.<sup>126</sup> The Governor of Burma, four days earlier, had sent a telegram to the Secretary of State for Burma saying that the continued Japanese air activity and absence of the RAF resulted in the desertion of substantial numbers of Indian and British

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120 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p. 6; Note to be included in CGS Reply to General Lockhart, 5 July 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

121 Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, pp. 56–57.

122 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, pp. 7–8.

123 From C-in-C India to the War Office, Telegram, 3 April 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

124 Ibid.

125 Wavell, 'Operations in Eastern Theatre based on India from March 1942 to December 31, 1942', pp. 4664, 4666.

126 From GOC Burma to C-in-C India, Telegram, 5 April 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

soldiers. This reflects the low morale in the imperial forces.<sup>127</sup> The worsening morale of the troops reached the highest echelons of the British command from the bottom up. Alexander informed Wavell, who in turn told the Chief of Staff (COS) in a telegram dated 13 April 1942: 'Morale of troops including many British units reported very poor owing to weak strengths, complete enemy command of air and no prospect of reinforcements or relief. Troops with certain exceptions did not fight well at Prome'.<sup>128</sup> These two instances challenge Wavell's statement that the British troops were fighting better than the sepoys. Probably, the feeling that the Burmans were joining the Japanese further weakened the morale of the British and Indian troops. In April 1942, according to one estimate, some 4,000 Burmans actively supported the Japanese. By May, the BIA had reached 30,000 men.<sup>129</sup>

Hutton went on a special mission to GHQ India and returned to Burma on 18 April. In April 1942, Hutton was replaced by Major-General Winterton as Chief of Staff of the Burma Army. On the night of 18/19 April, the 55th Chinese Division, which covered the Mawchi-Loikaw-Taunggyi Road, was destroyed south of Loikaw. On 21 April, BURCORPS ordered the 38th Chinese Division to concentrate at Kyaukpadaung, the 1st Burma Division to be ready to move to Taungtha and the 17th Indian Division to withdraw from Taungdwingyi and Natmauk to north-west and west of Meiktila at Mahlaing and Zayetkon. On 21 April, the 7th Armoured Brigade was ordered to Meiktila. General Lou took over command of the Chinese force at Pyawbwe region and General Tu moved the 200th Chinese Division to Kalaw.<sup>130</sup>

On 25 April, BURCORPS was spread along Chauk-Kyaukpadaung-Thabyegon-Meiktila. The 38th Chinese Division was to the east of Kyatkon. The 1st Burma Division was in reserve in Taungtha-Myingyan and the 2nd Burma Brigade was on the west bank of the Irrawaddy alongside Yenangyat. At Pyawbwe south of Meiktila, the 22nd Chinese Division was encircled by the Japanese forces. On 25 April, the 7th Queen's Hussars, which was operating on the road between Meiktila and Pyawbwe, confronted three Cruiser Class Japanese tanks about one mile north of Pyawbwe. In response, a troop of tanks was sent and some 13 miles south of Meiktila, a Japanese motorized column was encountered. At point blank range, several Japanese lorries were destroyed. As darkness fell, the British tanks withdrew. April 25 was an eventful day. On the same date,

127 From Governor of Burma to Secy. of State for Burma, Telegram, 1 April 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

128 General Wavell to COS, Telegram, 13 April 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

129 Hughes, *What Happened in Burma*, excerpts from p. 21, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

130 Prasad (ed.), *The Retreat from Burma: 1941-42*, pp. 304-6.

TABLE 6.3 ORBAT in Burma on 6 April 1942

Division	Brigade	Battalion	Remarks
17th Indian Division			Divisional Troops: 1st Glosters, 5th/17th Dogras, 8th Burma Rifles
	16th Indian Infantry Brigade	2nd DWR, 1st/9th Jat, 7th/10th Baluch, 4th/12th FFR	
	48th Infantry Brigade	1st Cameronians, 1st/3rd GR, 2nd/5th RGR, 1st/4th GR, 1st/7th GR, 3rd/7th GR	
	63rd Indian Infantry Brigade	1st Inniskilling Fusiliers, 1st/11th Sikhs, 2nd/13th FFR, 1st/10th GR	
1st Burma Division	1st Burma Brigade	2nd/7th Rajput, 1st Burma Rifles, 2nd Burma Rifles, 5th Burma Rifles	
	2nd Burma Brigade	5th/1st Rajput, 7th Burma Rifles	
	13th Infantry Brigade	1st/18th Royal Garhwal Rifles	
	7th Armoured Brigade	7th Horse, 2nd RTR, 1st West Yorks	
			Line of Communica- tion Troops: 2nd KOYLI

Source: ORBAT, Burma, 6 April 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706, IOR, BL, London.

evacuation of the units and installations from Maymyo started. On the night of 25/26 April, Alexander decided to withdraw north of Mandalay. Mandalay was the second largest city in Burma with a population of over 100,000 and the nodal point of communications in Upper Burma. Along the Meiktila-Mandalay

TABLE 6.4 *Strength of General Alexander's force in Burma in early April 1942*

Army	KCOS	BORS	VCOS	Indian other ranks	Governor's troops	Burmese other ranks
British Army	317	5,979				
Indian Army	728	457	626	21,708		
Burma Army	627	952		409	371	11,940
Burma Auxiliary Force	148	3,815				
Burma Territorial Force	56				89	3,885
Burma Frontier Force	58			11,655	285	
Total	1,834	11,203	626	33,772	745	15,825

Source: From Wavell to GOC Burma, Telegram, 6 April 1942, Operations in Burma, L/WS/1/706, IOR, BL, London.

axis, the BURCORPS took over the rearguard from the Chinese in order to cover the withdrawal of the 22nd and 96th Chinese divisions north of Meiktila.<sup>131</sup>

The 38th Chinese Division was ordered to withdraw by the Pupaywa-Taungtha Road to Tada-U, south-west of the Ava Bridge. This movement was covered by the 1st Burma Division, which in turn fell back to the Sameikkon Ferry. And the 17th Indian Division was ordered to withdraw to Ondaw across the Ava Bridge. It was decided to establish strong lay back positions at Myittha (south of Kyaukse) and at Kyaukse.<sup>132</sup> On 26 April, Alexander moved his headquarters to Shwebo.<sup>133</sup> On 29 April 1942, the Japanese captured Lashio and cut the Burma Road.<sup>134</sup> The IJA had achieved its primary objective in Burma.

The Japanese aircraft bombed and machine-gunned the retreating units. Many mules of the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade became casualties. Worse, the soldiers' lost their cooking pots for the third time during their retreat. The tired Indian soldiers somehow cooked in the kerosene oil tin cans and used corrugated iron sheets taken from the villagers for making *chapatis*. Meanwhile,

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., pp. 308, 310.  
<sup>132</sup> Prasad (ed.), *The Retreat from Burma: 1941–42*, p. 310; Prasad, Bhargava and Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 1, p. 2.  
<sup>133</sup> Prasad (ed.), *The Retreat from Burma: 1941–42*, p. 308.  
<sup>134</sup> Webster, *The Burma Road*, p. 37.

several Japanese units bypassed the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade and attacked the 1st Burma Division on their right (west) in the Yenangyaung oilfield area. So, the 17th Indian Division again started retreating. The 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade took up a rearguard position at Kyaukse to cover the withdrawal of the other units of the 17th Indian Division across the Irrawaddy by the Ava Bridge.<sup>135</sup> On 30 April at Kyaukse, the 18th Japanese Division attacked the 48th Brigade. The Japanese as usual carried out outflanking movements.<sup>136</sup>

The Bofors AA Guns performed well. Each infantry battalion during the retreat had three 2-inch mortars and one 3-inch mortar with 36 rounds.<sup>137</sup> See Table 6.6 for an idea of the average monthly rate of expenditure of ammunition of various weapons. The anti-gas equipment's authorized life was face-pieces 10 months, containers and haversacks five months each.<sup>138</sup> Table 6.5 shows the wastage of weapons suffered by the retreating troops.

Major-General Reginald Savory was appointed CO of the 23rd Indian Division in April 1942. One brigade of this division, comprising half-trained British, Gurkhas and other Indian troops, was deployed at Manipur. The brigade comprised the 1st Battalion of the Seaforth Highlanders, 7th Battalion of the 14th Punjabis, 1st Assam Rifles and the Patiala State Infantry. However, the units lacked tanks, anti-tank mines, adequate artillery, sandbags and barbed wire.<sup>139</sup>

On 2 May 1942, Wavell warned the CIGS:

Alexander's force is very (repeat very) tired and disorganized, and except for the armoured brigade its morale is doubtful.... Whatever forces reaches Kalewa will have little fighting value, and must be withdrawn to rest and reorganize. Alexander has asked for 1st Brigade now... to be hurried to Kalewa, but I have refused. It is my only (repeat only) force to hold road and I cannot (repeat not) afford to lose it.... Have told Alexander he must keep Japs off Kalewa himself. I am moving to Assam 4th Corps Headquarters, one brigade 14th Division from Comilla... 23rd Division from Ranchi, which will probably take at least four weeks due to poor railways in North-East India.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>135</sup> 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p. 9.

<sup>136</sup> Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 92.

<sup>137</sup> 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, pp. 11–12.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, Annexure C.

<sup>139</sup> Carew, *The Longest Retreat*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>140</sup> From Wavell to CIGS, Cypher Telegram, 2 May 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

TABLE 6.5 *Average monthly wastage rate of weapons during the retreat from Burma in 1942*

Weapons	Wastage per month
LMGs	4%
HMGs	5%
MMGs	4%
Rifles	4%
Anti-Tank Rifles	6%
Anti-Tank 2-pounder Guns	15%
25-pounders	3%
3-inch Mortars	4%
40-mm Bofors	.5%
40-mm Bofors AA Guns	.5%
3.7-inch AA Guns	.25%
Wireless Set No. 9	5%
Wireless Set No. 108	5%
Other models of Wireless Sets	5%

*Source:* 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, Annexure C, L/WS/1/706, IOR, BL, London.

TABLE 6.6 *Authorized monthly rate of expenditure of ammunition*

Weapons	Authorized monthly rate of expenditure of Ammunition
25-pounder Gun	787 Rounds per Gun
2-pounder	150 rounds per Gun
3.7-inch Howitzer	337 Rounds per Gun
3.7-inch AA Gun	330 Rounds per Gun
Medium Machine Gun for Anti-Aircraft Purpose	240 Rounds per Gun
SAA .303	4,156,000 Rounds per Division
SAA .45 CMT	600 Rounds per Carbine
SAA .55 Anti-Tank	90 Rounds per Boy's Rifle
Cartridges for Signaling	66 Rounds per Pistol
3-inch Mortar Bomb	780 Rounds per Mortar
2-inch Mortar Bomb	300 Rounds per Mortar
AFVs 37-mm	120 Rounds per Gun
AFVs .30 Browning	9,000 Rounds per Tank

*Source:* 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, Annexure C, L/WS/1/706, IOR, BL, London.

Wavell moved 'heaven and earth' to strengthen his defence with the slender resources at his disposal. He moved a brigade headquarters and one battalion from the Calcutta Division to Aijal south of Silchar. This battalion was replaced with one drawn from those deployed for internal security duty. Wavell calculated that the Japanese had five divisions in Burma and to defend the 600 miles long Assam-Bengal border with slender numbers of untrained troops for him was indeed very difficult.<sup>141</sup>

On 10 May 1942, the retreating Burma Army fought its last battle, known as the Battle of Shwegyin, with the IJA. The battle was fought on the banks of the Chindwin River. The troops were extremely tired on reaching Shwegyin. From the jetty at Shwegyin, six river steamers, each capable of carrying 600 men conveyed men, animals, a few guns and vehicles to Kalewa, some 12 miles upstream. When the Japanese started bombing, the steamers operated during the night. And during the daytime, the steamers were hidden close to the bank of the river covered by jungle-clad cliffs. The track in the Shwegyin *Chaung* for 10 miles to the east was covered with troops, animals, guns, tanks and vehicles all waiting eagerly to get into the jetties.<sup>142</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel MacFetridge, Commander of the 3rd Indian Light AA Battery, noted in his unpublished account:

I had two weeks earlier on my own initiative reconnoitered in a jeep the entire route from Ye-U to Shwegyin, and been taken aback by the very difficult going on a mere track through dense teak jungle, particularly in the Shwegyin Chaung, which I assessed as 'barely possible' for my guns. I was so concerned at the prospect that this was to be the sole route for two divisions and an armoured brigade, as well as for my guns that I reported my reconnaissance to Brigadier Welchman at Corps Headquarters.... I was taken to be interviewed by General Slim... who was keenly interested. Much was achieved by the engineers.<sup>143</sup>

Between 6 and 7 May 1942, four Bofors Guns of this battery arrived at the Shwegyin Basin. Lieutenant F.D. Webber, the Troop Commander, deployed three guns by the side of the track in a field artillery role and one gun was placed some 300 yards away from them in an AA role. The Japanese at Shwegyin comprised the Araki Force. It was composed of the 33rd Japanese Divisional Headquarters, 213th Japanese Infantry Regiment, and a mountain artillery

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> MacFetridge, *The Battle of Shwegyin*, 10 May 1942, p. 2.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.



battalion (16 guns) under Sakurai. The 213th Japanese Infantry Regiment comprised of three battalions each with 800 personnel. On 5 May, Sakurai was ordered to eliminate all the retreating Commonwealth soldiers so that none could reach India. This force had sailed across the Chindwin in 40 vessels and landed south of Shwegyin during the night of 9 May. At the dawn of 10 May, the 1st Battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment, under Lieutenant-Colonel B.R. Godley, which had taken positions at the cliffs overlooking the ferry and at the south of the jetty was attacked. This unit was below strength and had only two weak companies at its disposal. The 7th GR (which was a composite unit comprising the survivors of the 1st and 3rd battalions of the 7th GR), under Lieutenant-Colonel W.R.B. Williams, advanced to support the Jats. The Bofors Guns of the 3rd Indian Light AA Battery provided fire support to the Gurkhas as they scrambled up the cliffs to attack a ridge east of the basin where the Japanese infantry had established themselves. A Japanese detachment which threatened the headquarters of the 1st Battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment in the basin was driven out by the Jat and Gurkha counter-attack. Individual Jat soldiers ran up to the Bofors Guns and indicated the targets. Meanwhile, the No. 1 Bofors Gun was actually engaging a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft. At 2 PM, the 7th GR attacked the knoll from where the Japanese were pouring mortar fire on the troops massed at Shwegyin Basin. Though a Japanese mortar was destroyed, the Gurkha attack failed. Meanwhile, the 17th Indian Division Headquarters was two miles outside the basin in the Shwegyin *Chaung*. Gunfire from the Shwegyin Basin alerted the headquarters. The divisional headquarters ordered Brigadier Ronnie Cameron to protect the Shwegyin Basin and the Shwegyin *Chaung* with the 2nd Battalion of the 5th GR and the 48th Infantry Brigade. Cameron ordered the 2nd Battalion of the 5th GR to protect the *chaung*. Lieutenant-Colonel W.D.A. Lentaigne, commanding the under strength 1st Battalion of the 4th GR, was ordered to clear the Japanese from the basin. Meanwhile, the Japanese were advancing across the *nala* which connected the Shwegyin Basin with the Shwegyin *Chaung*. However, due to confusion, the 2nd Battalion of the 5th GR was late. So, in desperation Cameron ordered Lentaigne to piquet the hills around the *nala* and the basin. With the aid of mortar fire, the B and C companies of the 1st Battalion of 4th GR drove off the Japanese from the cliffs.<sup>144</sup>

In the afternoon of 10 May, it was decided to abandon the ferry and destroy all the stores and equipment and to retreat north along the goat track. The rearguard was provided by the 1st Battalion of the 4th GR. The divisional commander, Major-General Cowan, himself gave the order for withdrawal. The

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., pp. 3–5, 8.

withdrawal began at 7.55 PM. A 20 minutes barrage by the three Bofors kept the Japanese passive and allowed the withdrawal of the 1st Battalion of the 9th GR and the 7th GR to retreat with only one casualty. MacFettridge ordered the guns to be disabled and informed the gunners that they had to retreat roughly another 100 miles to reach India.<sup>145</sup> Again in MacFettridge's own words:

I led the party of about twenty-five out of the Basin and was very thankful to be met by Cameron, commanding 2/5 GR and acting as Brigade Commander, who guided my party to the footpath leading north. Lentaigne, whose battalion (1/4 GR) guarded the entrances to the Basin and to this footpath.... My party was just ahead of Lentaigne's battalion, and the embarkation with them on a steamer was wonderfully orderly.<sup>146</sup>

The pitch darkness of the night was shattered by the blazing of the ammunition dumps and the burning lorries. Some 4,000 troops were concentrated in the *nala*. A few Japanese with automatics could have massacred the retreating troops. The Araki Force during the Battle of Shwegyin fought on 10 May suffered more than one hundred casualties.<sup>147</sup>

After Rangoon, the Japanese again 'missed the bus' at Shwegyin. The failure of the Japanese to trap the Commonwealth units was due to several reasons. First, the IJA should have sent a stronger detachment. Second, the Araki Force did not conduct a thorough reconnaissance before bumping into the retreating Commonwealth units. Third, the Araki Force did not get substantial close air support from the Japanese air force, which by that time was dominating the sky over Burma. Fourth, the Gurkha unit and the field artillery units fought well in a set piece confrontation, i.e. in defending a particular defensive strongpoint. Resolute static defence of a particular strongpoint was one of the strengths of the Indian Army. Last, the Araki Force did not send small outflanking parties who could have exploited the terrain in the night to get behind the Commonwealth units. On 10 May, the Araki Force failed to destroy the retreating Burma Army units at Shwegyin also because of good leadership, better guns and resolute infantry defence on part of the Indian troops. The Gurkha battalions which drove the Japanese from the cliffs had experience of conducting piqueting in the North-West Frontier.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., pp. 5–7.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., pp. 7–8.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

The wounded and prisoners who were left behind were brutally tortured by the Japanese. For instance, on 21 July 1942, Rifleman Rangi Singh of the 7th Burma Rifles was able to cross over to the British-Indian line. Rangi Singh, who had three years' military service behind him, claimed that the men captured from his regiment on 11 May 1942 (when it was commanded by Major Cook) were bayoneted three times by the Japanese soldiers.<sup>149</sup>

On 15 May 1942, the 17th Indian Division reached Kalewa. By the end of May, the 17th Indian Division had reached Imphal. In the last five months, it had retreated over 1,000 miles from Moulmein to Imphal and 25 per cent of its personnel were down with malaria.<sup>150</sup> Among the Indian infantry brigades, probably the 48th Gurkha Brigade came out best during the retreat. There was a saying in the Burma Army: 'If 48th (the Gurkha Brigade) is on the job, then all is well'. The tanks, gunners and even British infantry during the retreat tried to stick it out with the Gurkha Brigade. Alexander called this brigade: 'stud ducks in the puddle'. In the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade, discipline had deteriorated, except in the 1st Battalion of the 4th GR commanded by Joe Lentaigne. Its casualties numbered one British officer killed, seven British officers wounded, three Gurkha Officers (GO) killed, three wounded, 40 Gurkha other ranks (ORS) killed, 114 wounded and 185 missing (dead and POWs).<sup>151</sup> The casualties of this battalion can be taken as the microcosm of the losses suffered by other Indian infantry battalions in the five months of the retreat from Burma. On 20 May 1942, the withdrawal of the Burma Army under Harold Alexander to Assam frontier was completed.<sup>152</sup>

### Assessment

Major-General Rafiuddin Ahmed, a Pakistan Army officer and historian of the Baloch Regiment (which after the 1947 Partition went to the Pakistan Army), takes a generous view of the Commonwealth troops and its commanders' performance in Burma during the 1942 Campaign. He writes: 'The campaign began with similar British naivety but it corrected itself soon after the initial reverses. The British commanders, wiser from the Malayan disaster, managed to conduct a long and arduous retreat into India, fighting skilful defensive rearguard

<sup>149</sup> GHQ India, GS Branch, New Delhi, 21 July 1942, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

<sup>150</sup> Prasad, Bhargava and Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 1, pp. 13, 54.

<sup>151</sup> 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p.12.

<sup>152</sup> Wavell, 'Operations in Eastern Theater based on India, from March 1942 to December 31, 1942', p. 4665.

battles against powerful pincer attacks supported by the strong Japanese air force'.<sup>153</sup>

In the previous section, we have seen no evidence that the Commonwealth commanders in Burma implemented any 'lessons learnt' from the disastrous Malayan Campaign. The same tactics which the IJA implemented in Hong Kong and Malaya also paid dividends in the 1942 Burma Campaign. And the Japanese air force in Burma, as in Malaya and Singapore, demoralized the half-trained Commonwealth troops rather than causing any devastating losses to the retreating Commonwealth ground units.

As regards Rafiuddin Ahmed's other point that the British commanders displayed some tactical and operational skill in conducting more than 1,000 miles of retreat across Burma,<sup>154</sup> this is also questionable. Yamashita failed to trap the much maligned Percival's army in the mainland of Malaya. As Percival's rag-tag force crossed the Johore Causeway, neither the infiltrating Japanese infantry, who conducted wide flanking moves, nor the Japanese Army Air Force (JAAF) were able to destroy them. Only when Percival's force was cooped up on Singapore Island with no chance of sea evacuation (air evacuation was impossible for such a large force and there was no land connection), did Percival surrender. Slim and Alexander were lucky that after the fall of Rangoon, despite bad communications, the battered Burma Army/BURCORPS could retreat overland to north-east India. The Burma Army only had to retreat faster than the rate of advance of the Japanese although it also had to avoid the successive tricky and dangerous roadblocks established by the Japanese along the route of retreat. Moreover, the IJA in Burma, unlike in Malaya, had to keep an eye open for a possible Chinese counter-stroke along the Shan States and north Burma. The principal objective of the Japanese in Malaya was to capture Singapore. Since Percival's force was cooped up there, surrender of the Commonwealth forces came as an additional bonus. However, in Burma the main strategic objectives of the Japanese were first to capture Rangoon to prevent Britain from reinforcing Burma and then to cut the Burma Road rather than to pursue and destroy the worn out Burma Army retreating towards north-east India.

Captain I.A.J. Edwards-Stuart (later Lieutenant-Colonel) of the 4th Sikhs (4th Battalion of the 12th FFR) was very wrong when he noted on 20 May 1942: 'The campaign was now over and considering that it had been a continuous withdrawal of about 1,200 miles morale was exceedingly high. On the whole after the battle of Rangoon Burma Army had given a good account of themselves

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<sup>153</sup> Ahmed, *History of the Baloch Regiment: 1939–56*, p. 52.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

whenever they had met the Japanese and it was only lack of supplies, communications and troops that led to this withdrawal.<sup>155</sup> Actually, the morale of the British and Indian troops was quite low just after withdrawing to India. The IJA did not enjoy numerical superiority over the Commonwealth troops in Burma. However, the IJA was able to achieve local superiority through quick marching and better tactics due to superior training and was able to outmanoeuvre the Burma Army repeatedly. The Burma Army just saved itself from total destruction by withdrawing to India.

Two Indian Army personnel's accounts reflect the low spirit of the Indian formations. As the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade reached Manipur, after withdrawing along the Assam-Burma border, one officer jotted down his harrowing experience in the following words:

These last marches were in many ways the worst. There was little water, long distances, steep gradients and at the end Monsoon rain which converted the earth track into a slippery slide very difficult to climb with the modern nail-less boots. The whole route was fouled by refugees and stinking corpses every few yards made breathing almost impossible.<sup>156</sup>

Captain T.A. Wainwright, who was with the 2nd Indian Anti-Tank Regiment, noted down his experience of the retreat:

Months later came the order to evacuate Burma.... suppose it was any worse than Dunkirk — but it was very different. The total distance we had to cover was 310 miles on foot, yet there were thousands of poor Indian evacuees who had walked nearly 900 miles under most appalling conditions. Dysentery, cholera, malaria, black water fever victims were scattered all along the track we were obliged to take (over the Naga Hills into Assam) —some dying, others already dead, and nobody able to pause for their burial. Shortage of food, and shortage of water also accounted for hundreds whilst almost daily dive bombing en route achieved considerable success (from the Japanese point of view). Anyhow, after about three weeks we struggled into India, a very sick and dejected crowd of fellows.... Almost to a man we had contracted dysentery or malaria, and the hospitals were almost unable to cope with the influx.<sup>157</sup>

<sup>155</sup> Edwards-Stuart, *With the 4th Sikhs in Burma, 1941–42*, p. 14.

<sup>156</sup> 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade Operations in Burma, 24 July 1942, p. 11.

<sup>157</sup> From Captain T.A. Wainwright, 2nd Indian Anti-Tank Regiment, Secunderabad, to Mrs. B. O'Neill, Cork, Eire, 2 Sept. 1942, Transit Mail, Operations in Burma, L/ws/1/706.

Tim Carew writes that the Burma Army when it retreated back to India had filthy, bearded and ragged men in the last stage of exhaustion. Only a few had uniforms and these were tattered and dirty.<sup>158</sup> Due to inadequate provost services and canteen facilities and continuous retreat, the discipline and morale of the majority of Burma Army troops were badly shaken.<sup>159</sup>

Wavell noted: 'On the 3rd July I had to report that I could see no prospect of mounting an expedition against Lower Burma before January 1943; and early in September the GOC-in-C, Eastern Army, informed me that he would be unable to begin operations from Assam before the 1st of March 1943'.<sup>160</sup> Luckily for the British Empire, the Japanese also went on a strategic defensive along the Burma-India frontier. What would have happened had the IJA, IJN and the Japanese aerial units continued to focus their attention on the Bay of Bengal and north-east India is one of history's significant ifs and buts. However, the Japanese Grand Strategy shifted its attention to the Pacific, especially Midway Island. Douglas Ford writes that inadequate IJA-IJN cooperation blocked the only possible strategy which probably could have given Japan victory. And that strategy involved attacking the British possessions in the Indian Ocean and the severance of London's connection with India and the Middle East oil reservoir. A Japanese advance in the western Indian Ocean might have resulted in a link-up with Rommel's *Afrika Korps*. While the IJN supported this plan, the IJA was against it. Thus, inter-service rivalry doomed Japan's prospect for strategic victory.<sup>161</sup> Even with the Japanese going on a strategic defensive in Burma, it would take the British and Indian units almost two years of hard training and massive material superiority to give a bloody nose to the IJA. Here is a look back at the reasons behind the disaster which unfolded in Burma in the first half of 1942.

The issue is why the Burma Army folded so easily and quickly. Different British commanders who fought the IJA in the dark days of 1941–42 analyzed the reasons for the Japanese victory. Wavell pointed out the combination of the following factors for the fall of Burma: politics, climate, under-estimation of the enemy, over-estimation of the natural strength of the frontiers and complacency of many years due to the absence of any external threat to the country.

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158 Carew, *The Longest Retreat*, p. 5.

159 Majumdar, *Administration of the Burma Campaign*, p. 30.

160 Wavell, 'Operations in Eastern Theatre, based on India, from March 1942 to December 31, 1942', p. 4669.

161 Douglas Ford, 'Strategic Culture, Intelligence Assessment, and the Conduct of the Pacific War: The British-Indian and Imperial Japanese Armies in Comparison, 1941–45', *War in History*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2007), p. 80.

Wavell also laid partial responsibility for the defeat on to the Burmans. He noted that the Burmans were good as guerrillas/irregulars, but had neither any tradition nor inclination for regular soldiering. Wavell was on the right track when he noted that the Burma Army lacked a long-standing military tradition. The Burma Army came into existence only in 1937 when Burma was separated from India.<sup>162</sup> A long-standing regimental tradition was indeed vital for the British and Indian units in sharpening their combat effectiveness. Weak regimental tradition sapped the willpower of the Burmans and, as a result, from the action at Bilin onwards, desertions occurred among the Burmese units.<sup>163</sup>

Confusion in the higher level of the command structure from the very first bedevilled the defence of Burma. In November 1940, when the Far East Command was set up with headquarters at Singapore, Burma for operational purposes came under this new command, while for administrative purposes it remained under the War Office.<sup>164</sup> Wavell emphasized:

Though the administration of Burma was the responsibility of the War Office, it was obvious that, if Japan entered the war, it would be quite impossible for Burma's requirements to be met in time from the United Kingdom; and since any failure in Burma would endanger India, it was essential for the India Command, in spite of its own grave shortages, to put the defence of Burma on a reasonable basis.... The cardinal mistake seems to me, however, to have been in placing Burma in the Far East Command instead of under India. Except as a subsidiary air base, Burma hardly entered into the strategical plans of the Far East Command, which was concerned with the defence of Hong Kong and Malaya; whereas for India Burma was a vital bulwark.<sup>165</sup>

Wavell had written: 'I cabled to the CIGS on 11th November 1941, again recommending the transfer of Burma to the Indian Command. I understand that my recommendation was supported by the Governor of Burma.'<sup>166</sup> Only on 15 December 1941 did the defence of Burma become the responsibility of the Commander-in-Chief in India.<sup>167</sup> On 30 December 1941, Burma was removed from GHQ India's control and became the responsibility of ABDACOM. On 21 February 1942, when ABDACOM was dissolving under the pressure of the

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<sup>162</sup> Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', p. 1668.

<sup>163</sup> Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, p. 60.

<sup>164</sup> Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', p. 1667.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1668.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1667.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*



Japanese *Blitzkrieg*, Burma again came under GHQ India.<sup>168</sup> Hutton had written that immediately after assuming command on 27 December 1941, he understood the necessity of a corps headquarters. However, it was only formed after the fall of Rangoon<sup>169</sup> when the Burma Army was under Alexander, then a corps commander, i.e. Slim, was appointed. The treatment of Burma like an orphan child due to confusion among the higher echelons of the British political and military leadership had an adverse effect on the country's defence preparations.

Henry Probert claims that the construction of airfields in Burma had been defective because they were originally constructed by the Burma Public Works Department with a view to providing aerial support in defence of Singapore. The airfields were placed too far forward in the Sittang Valley, where no radar warning was possible. However, if Burma had been placed from the beginning under India Command rather than the Far East Command, then the airfields would have been constructed in west and central Burma. India Command would have considered Burma as the shield for defence of East India. The ideal positioning of the airfields would have been in the Irrawaddy and Chindwin valleys, and the radar units should have been further east.<sup>170</sup> The Commonwealth forces lacked a fighter which could take on the Japanese interceptors. The best which the RAF could deploy was the Hurricane, which with its eight machine guns was suitable for ground support rather than for dog fights. Its rate of climb was slower than the nimble Japanese fighters.<sup>171</sup> Harvey claims that the Japanese gained air superiority over the skies of Burma quite late in the campaign, only on 21 March with the bombing of Magwe. Only after the bombing of Magwe, the RAF pulled out of Burma. At that time, the Commonwealth ground units were 150 miles north of Rangoon fighting a rearguard battle. Harvey concludes that the effect of the Japanese air force on its opponents was mostly psychological. Japanese air superiority had a negative effect on the morale of the soldiers and civilians of British Empire in Asia. This in turn accelerated the folding up of the Commonwealth ground forces which in turn adversely shaped the dynamics of the land battle.<sup>172</sup>

Tactical shortcomings of the Commonwealth troops were another factor. General Alexander in his report submitted to the GHQ India dated 16 June 1942

168 Majumdar, *Administration of the Burma Campaign*, pp. 18–19.

169 Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', Report by Hutton on Operations in Burma from 27 December 1941 to 5 March 1942, p. 1675.

170 Probert, *The Forgotten Air Force*, p. 83.

171 Ibid., p. 36.

172 Harvey, 'Army Air Force and Navy Air Force: Japanese Aviation and the Opening Phase of the War in the Far East', pp. 196, 203.



tried to chisel out the factors behind the humiliation of his force in Burma. Alexander noted:

I was impressed by the apparent ease with which the Japanese were able to outflank our forces by moving through thick jungle country, whereas our troops were tied to the roads. The reason for this was that the Japanese were organized, equipped and trained for the type of country over which they fought whereas our troops were not.... The Imperial forces were almost completely mechanized down to unit transport which made movement off the few roads almost impossible. As the campaign progressed units supplemented their motor transport by the local purchase and requisition of bullock carts. This form of transport, however, is too slow and cumbersome for tactical use in the jungle where pack transport or porters are really required. The technique of jungle fighting... was virtually non-existent in my force. Success in this type of fighting depends largely on the ability of the parties to find their way through the jungle and to keep touch with one another. It demands a knowledge of all types of signaling by visual and by sound and also requires a high scale of low powered wireless sets.... It demands also training to eliminate the sense of loneliness which so often saps the morale of those who are not used to it.<sup>173</sup>

A somewhat similar observation was made by 'Bill' Slim after being defeated in Burma. He noted in his memoirs:

The Japanese were obviously able to move for several days at a time through jungle that we had regarded as impenetrable. This was not only because they had local Burman guides, but they travelled lighter than we did and lived much more off the country. Nearly all our transport was mechanical, and this stretched our columns for miles along a single road through the jungle, vulnerable everywhere from air and ground.... It made us fight on a narrow front, while the enemy, moved wide through the jungle, encircled us and placed a force behind us across the only road.<sup>174</sup>

When the Commonwealth troops moved through the jungle they made lot of noise, which gave away their position to the Japanese. Moving silently through

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<sup>173</sup> Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 30.

<sup>174</sup> Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 39.

the jungle was a technique perfected by the sepoys and the Tommies only in late 1943. Both at Bilin and at the Slim River, the Commonwealth troops relied on a thin crust of linear defence. The Japanese easily outflanked the static defensive posts by exploiting the terrain. Moreover, during the retreat, the Commonwealth troops were not trained to dig slit trenches in order to escape strafing and bombing by the marauding Japanese aircraft.<sup>175</sup>

A detailed report prepared by the Military Intelligence Directorate, General Headquarters India in March 1942 rightly noted the combat experience gained by the Japanese troops due to their continuous campaigning in China during the previous 10 years gave the IJA an edge over its hastily recruited, inexperienced Commonwealth opponent.<sup>176</sup> Facing defeats one after another, GHQ India accepted superior the Japanese tactics in the following words: 'Japanese skill in major tactics is indisputable, and the present war has already provided numerous examples of large scale operations, boldly planned, and carried through to a successful conclusion in the face of great natural obstacles'.<sup>177</sup> The Japanese infantry was better adapted to operating in difficult terrain and hence proved to be more mobile than the Commonwealth units who failed to adapt to the physical landscape of Burma. The lightly-equipped Japanese infantry deliberately operated in the difficult terrain where the Commonwealth troops could not bring into play their heavy artillery and tanks. As a result, the Japanese units had been able to continuously move around the flanks of the Commonwealth units and cut off the latter's LoCs by setting up roadblocks. Lieutenant-Colonel G.T. Wheeler of the Indian Army rightly noted in an article published in the service journal just after the conclusion of the Burma Campaign that the Japanese infantry displayed a capacity for extreme boldness, long marching, launching nocturnal attacks and close-quarter combat. The Indian troops needed to be trained in all these techniques before taking on the Japanese successfully.<sup>178</sup> Daniel Marston opines that the well-trained Japanese troops became veterans of jungle warfare in the course of the campaign, unlike the Commonwealth soldiers who even with their transports proved to be immobile in the difficult terrain of Burma. And the half-trained Indian soldiers were in need of basic training and also specialist training for conducting jungle warfare.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, pp. 63–64.

<sup>176</sup> *Japanese Military Forces*, p. 5.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>178</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel G.T. Wheeler, 'Burma: A New Technique of Warfare', *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, vol. LXXII (Jan.–Oct. 1942), p. 227.

<sup>179</sup> Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, p. 73.

To a great extent, the dispersed small unit actions which characterized the Indian Army's Small War along the North-West Frontier was similar to the jungle war. Wheeler had written:

In fighting the elusive Japanese it is the platoon, or even the section that counts most of all. The Japanese attack boldly in small parties; when these meet resistance they do not rush forward to their death, they withdraw, often hurriedly, and reappear elsewhere, usually on the flank or rear of the defenders.... It is the very junior leader who has to be intelligent—and quick. It goes further than that, for a high degree of confidence within each section and between each section is required.<sup>180</sup>

The Indian Army failed to conduct its traditional Small War in the jungles of Burma due to heavy 'milking' which adversely affected its combat effectiveness. The intrinsic weaknesses of the Commonwealth forces were also noted by various commanders. Every month some 60,000 voluntary recruits were enlisted for the Indian Army.<sup>181</sup> The continuous rapid expansion of the Indian Army resulted in a reduction in experienced senior NCOs, VCOS and Indian officers for officering new units. This in turn reduced the combat effectiveness of the old units and the raw units lacked combat experience against a tough enemy like the IJA.

Hutton wrote about the Burma Rifles:

This force was in the process of expansion, a process which greatly accentuated its former weaknesses. Consisting of four different races, Chins, Kachins, Karens and Burmese, speaking different languages which few of the officers understood, it was of very limited value in serious warfare. The G.C.Os. and N.C.Os. were all very junior and inexperienced, some of the former having only two years' service. The language commonly used in the Army was Hindustani which was a foreign language to all the personnel, including of course the officers.<sup>182</sup>

Hutton noted that not the best officer material which was attracted for service in the Burma Rifles. Most of the officers were actually ECOS who were

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<sup>180</sup> Wheeler, 'Burma: A New Technique of Warfare', p. 224.

<sup>181</sup> Wavell, 'Operations in Eastern Theatre based on India from March 1942 to December 31, 1942', p. 4668.

<sup>182</sup> Wavell, 'Operations in Burma from 15 December 1941 to 20 May 1942', Report by Hutton on Operations in Burma from 27 December 1941 to 5 March 1942, p. 1675.

members of the big firms. They knew the local languages with a smattering of Hindustani and had some knowledge of the local terrain. Hence, the Burma Rifles proved of limited value for reconnaissance and patrolling the jungles but were not suited for regular battles. Further, most of the personnel deserted. The same happened with the sappers and miners, and the Army Service Corps too, which mostly comprised Burmans and Karens.<sup>183</sup> This was understandable. As the Japanese advanced, they deserted to look after their families in the regions overrun by the enemy and to negotiate a new deal with their new masters instead of serving the old masters who were retreating and leaving Burma.

The 46th Indian Infantry Brigade, which arrived in Burma at the end of January, disappointed Hutton. This unit comprised young troops who were destined for Iraq, where they were supposed to complete their training. Further, this unit had no experience of jungle warfare. The 48th Indian Infantry Brigade comprised six Indian battalions which were withdrawn from the North-West Frontier and was equipped on a lower scale compared to the units destined to be part of EDTs. This unit, consisting mostly of the Gurkhas, arrived in Burma on 1 February. Of the three Indian infantry brigades, Hutton assessed the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade as the best, some of the battalions of the 46th Indian Infantry Brigade were adequate and the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade (General Hartley also concurred) required a further period of training before being deployed in the battlefield. The two East African brigades did not materialize. Nevertheless, Hutton was full of praise for the 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regiment and the 1st West Yorkshire Regiment.<sup>184</sup> One wonders if it was imperial prejudice on his part. It is likely that the combat effectiveness of the British and Indian units was more or less on a par in Burma during 1942.

### Conclusion

It is strange that the British failed to understand why indeed the 'natives' of Malaya and Burma would support the Commonwealth war effort. The British officials and politicians were under the mistaken assumption that Britain was carrying the 'white man's burden' and that the indigenous populace ought to be supportive and loyal to the British for 'civilizing' them. Actually, there was no love lost between the indigenous people and their white imperial overlords. The issue is not why the Malaysians and the Burmans supported the Japanese. Rather, the issue for the historians is why at all any 'natives' fought for the

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 1677.

British. The Indian soldiers fought better than the Burmans because the Indian units had a stronger and longer regimental tradition (which was built upon caste-clan affinity) to fall back on. Moreover, the British and Indian soldiers' families, unlike the Burman soldiers' families, were not threatened by the Japanese invasion. Generally, the top-level British commanders (Wavell, Alexander and Hutton) asserted that the British units were best, the Indians came in second and the Burmans at the bottom. At times, the Gurkhas, who were regarded as the elite of the Indian Army (likely the Gurkha units due to their excellent Public Relations attracted a better lot of British officers) were regarded on the same level as the British units. However, the British officers attached with the non-Gurkha Indian units confirmed that the Indian units fought as well as the British formations.

To a great extent, the campaign in Burma was an extension of the jungle campaign by the IJA in Malaya. There were certain similarities as regards combat against the Japanese by the Commonwealth forces in both Malaya and Burma. Japanese air superiority degraded the morale of the Commonwealth troops in both of these theatres. The Indian units in Burma, as in Malaya, suffered from the wrong training for the wrong war, i.e. they were trained for combat in the Middle East but actually deployed in jungle terrain. In fact, the Indian units were not given basic training, not to mention specialized training. Again, the Indian units suffered from excessive milking due to the rapid expansion of the Indian Army. Too much milking also reduced the combat effectiveness of the Indian Army during both the Malaya and the Burma campaigns. Air superiority, treachery by the Burmans, superior training and bold tactical moves gave victory to the Japanese during their advance from Moulmein to Kalewa during the first five months of 1942. Brian Bond rightly states that wide turning movements or 'hooks' through the jungle to set up roadblocks across the Commonwealth troops' LoCs succeeded repeatedly, which in turn generated an inferiority complex among the British and Indian soldiers.<sup>185</sup> The same tactic paid dividends to the IJA in Malaya also. Till December 1943, the Japanese exhibited their tactical skill in offensive fighting. However, as the next chapter shows, thorough, innovative training in late 1943 and early 1944 enabled the British and Indian units to come up with new a tactical formula which proved effective in mid-1944.

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<sup>185</sup> Brian Bond, 'The Army Level of Command: General Sir William Slim and Fourteenth Army in Burma', in Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War: 1941-45* (Oxon: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 43.

## Reorganizing and Retraining the Indian Army: May 1942–February 1944

In late 1942, the Japanese went on a strategic defensive along the Burma-India border. Meanwhile, the India Command digested the lessons of defeat. Over the next two years, the India Command re-equipped, retrained and reorganized its military establishment. This bore fruit from March 1944 onwards in the Arakan and Imphal-Kohima campaigns. In this chapter, it will be seen how a ‘new’ British-Indian Army emerged out of the shambles of defeat. The first section deals with the British high command’s analysis of the reasons for defeat and the inadequacies of the training regimen. The second section charts the innovative training mechanism and the attendant military reorganization. The third section focuses on the external (especially Australian) influence in shaping the training regimen of the Indian Army. The fourth section notes the provision of hardware (weapons, ammunition and transportation) in order to increase the battlefield effectiveness of the Indian units against the Japanese ground units. And the last section gives a general overview of the reorganization of the command and logistical apparatus of the Commonwealth forces.

### Lessons of Defeat

The IJA used only 11 divisions during their 1941–42 South-East Asia operations and overcame the numerically superior Allied armies. Douglas Ford says that the IJA units equipped with light infantry weapons (rifles, hand grenades and mortars) displayed mastery in implementing outflanking moves against the hostile forces. Till then, the Americans concentrated on conducting a combined arms battle and emphasized the use of mechanized units which relegated the infantry to a secondary role. The IJA’s focus on infantry struck the American officers as backward.<sup>1</sup> However, the shock of defeat at the hands of the Japanese forced the US Army commanders to restructure its training regimen. This applies partly for the British and Indian armies’ commanders as

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1 Douglas Ford, ‘Dismantling the “Lesser Men” and “Supermen” Myths: US Intelligence on the Imperial Japanese Army after the Fall of Philippines, Winter 1942 to Spring 1943’, *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2009), pp. 545, 547.

well. In the sections below, it will be seen that the Commonwealth units initiated a new training format in the aftermath of their defeat by the Japanese. This new training structure focused on the infantry.

At the beginning of World War II, both the German and the Commonwealth commanders loathed forest fighting. In contrast, the individual soldiers and junior commanders of the Soviet Red Army preferred combat in the forest. In the IJA, both the commanders and the privates were comfortable with combat within the forest.<sup>2</sup> John Cross who fought in Burma with a GR notes that before 1939, the British and Indian military establishments regarded jungle warfare and bush warfare as more or less synonymous. The assumption was that combat in the forest and bush did not require any novel tactical concepts. However, all this changed with the onset of war with Japan.<sup>3</sup> Cross defines jungle warfare in the following words: '... when phases of war, tactics, training, logistical support and administration have to be modified because of trees'.<sup>4</sup> He observes that almost every Commonwealth unit which served in Malaya had fatalities from falling trees and branches. He categorizes the jungle into three classes: primary, secondary and coastal. Primary Jungle for him is natural vegetation which is in its original state and has not been touched by mankind. In such jungle, visibility is limited to 20–30 yards. The foliage is thin on top of the hills and extremely dense in the valleys. Occasionally blocked streams create an almost impassable swamp. Tracks are not shown on the map and a cutting blade is required for making a bivouac after clearing the undergrowth. Flash floods make the dry creeks dangerous.<sup>5</sup>

The GHQ Jungle Warfare School at Shimoga which was set up in the spring of 1943 offered a different classification of the jungle. This institution had in mind the jungle of Malaya and Burma where the Commonwealth troops had operated. From the perspective of the soldier, the jungle was divided into Dense, Thick and Thin. Dense Jungles were so thick that a man on foot could not advance without cutting his way through. In a Thick Jungle, a man could move with the aid of his stick but without cutting. And in a Thin Jungle, one could move quite fast without any cuts or bruises, or any damage to one's clothes. The GHQ Jungle Warfare School at Shimoga also categorized the following types of jungle on the basis of operative principles of the army plus the

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2 Jesse W. Miller, Jr., 'Forest Fighting on the Eastern Front in World War II', *Geographical Review*, vol. 62, no. 2 (1972), p. 186.

3 J.P. Cross, *Jungle Warfare: Experiences and Encounters* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2008), p. 5.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 17.



nature of the vegetation: bamboo, trees, forest, palm and scrub. The Bamboo Jungle consisted of bamboo trees with undergrowth which might be prickly. The bamboo clumps on average were 10 yards in circumference and were spaced out. The Tree Jungle might consist of rubber trees or evergreen forest. Forest comprised trees without undergrowth. However, dead teak leaves on the ground occasionally made movement difficult. The Palm Jungle comprised palm trees with undergrowth. And Scrub Jungle consisted of bushes, undergrowth and small trees (scattered trees with trunks over six inches in diameter). Kunai grass grew in the coastal districts to a height of four to eight inches. A combination of all these might be encountered in a Scrub Jungle. The Scrub Jungle was further sub-classified into several types. Low Scrub comprised bushes up to five feet, so that standing men could see beyond them. The Medium Scrub grew up to an average height of seven feet. And High Scrub was over seven feet, so much so that even the tank commander was unable to see over the top.<sup>6</sup>

Commanders who fought the IJA, and the historians following them, have argued that the initial defeat of the Commonwealth troops was because the former were trained for desert warfare which proved to be unsuitable in the swampy and marshy terrain of South-East Asia. This is a half truth. In fact, certain common principles operated both as regards training for conducting warfare in the dry zone/open plain terrain and for combat in the wet jungle terrain. Take, for instance, the fact that the standard German doctrinal practice during World War II was to avoid frontal assaults and infiltration between and around the flanks of defended localities.<sup>7</sup> While the Germans implemented these principles with the aid of *panzers* and lorried infantry in France, the Western Desert and in Russia, the IJA implemented these principles with the aid of bicycle-borne and marching infantry.

Though jungle fighting required the acquisition of special skills; the tactical principles of jungle warfare also had several commonalities with the tactical principles of modern war. For instance, the *Wehrmacht* faced difficulties in forest fighting in Central Russia. Limited observation, combat at close quarters and difficulty of controlling the troops were characteristics of forest combat. The forest proved difficult for the German armoured infantry. Wheeled personnel carriers became useless in the roadless forest and the armoured infantry equipped with heavy weapons and lots of equipment, unused to long marches,

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6 W.H. Alston, *My Days and Age, Memoirs*, GHQ Jungle Warfare School Shimoga, Classification and Types of Jungle, p. 2, 7304-1-2, NAM, London.

7 David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919-1945* (2000, reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 195.



failed to stand up to forest operations.<sup>8</sup> The same problems were faced by the Commonwealth forces during 1941–43 in Malaya and Burma. However, tactical and operational flexibility and good training saw the Germans through in Russia at least till 1943. In fact from 1943 onwards jungle training of the Commonwealth forces emphasized that the characteristics of the jungle were the lack of visibility on the ground and from the air, and obstruction to cross-country movement of vehicles. The Commonwealth forces, in order to conduct jungle warfare successfully, had to exploit the above-mentioned characteristics in their entirety, just as the Japanese had done before. It was duly noted that the Commonwealth infantry must learn to live under the ‘hard’ conditions of the jungle. The jungle was not to be considered as impenetrable. It was to be drilled into the mind of the soldiers that the front was not a linear one which extended from point A to point B. When the concept of a linear front was done away with then the troops should never look over their shoulders and should not be afraid that they were surrounded by the Japanese.<sup>9</sup>

Field-Marshal Alexander noted that jungle fighting required the infantry to be trained in the tactics of manoeuvring in small parties under the cover of the fire of their own weapons. And this tactical principal was essential, noted Alexander, for fighting a modern war with the infantry. But in this sphere also, the Commonwealth troops fell short of the adequate level.<sup>10</sup>

For instance, Archibald Wavell wrote the foreword in the training Memorandum Number 11, which was issued in September 1941 (before the beginning of the Japanese *Blitzkrieg*). In it he detailed the experience of the Army of India in the Middle East and in East Africa. Wavell, who was the Commander-in-Chief Middle East between 1939 and 1941, noted that in the mountains of Eritrea and Abyssinia, the infantry remained the queen of the battle. Also in Damascus and on the Syrian Coast to Beirut, the infantry played the principal role. Even in the open country of the Western Desert, the infantry was indispensable for both offence and defence. Wavell continued that the new weapons like tanks, dive bombers and the parachutists (probably referring to German use of paratroops in the Crete) were used by the hostile power to shake the nerve of the infantry. But the infantry which remained unperturbed and used the terrain and their weapons skilfully was successful in engaging such weapons of the enemy effectively. Wavell emphasized steady discipline, good

8 Miller, Jr., ‘Forest Fighting on the Eastern Front in World War II’, p. 189.

9 Alston, *My Days and Age*, Memoirs, GHQ Jungle Warfare School Shimoga, Classification and Types of Jungle; see also p. 2.

10 Despatch by General H.R.L.G. Alexander, GOC Army in Burma covering the period from 5 March 1942 to 20 May 1942, 16 June 1942, p. 30, CAB 106/103, PRO, Kew, UK.

fieldcraft, skill in the use of weapons, physical hardness and fitness as the basic essentials of every soldier.<sup>11</sup> Wavell, in another earlier memorandum issued in September 1940 for the Indian troops taking part in COMPASS OPERATION against the Italians in Libya, emphasized that the infantry must be well versed in thorough reconnaissance, marching and manoeuvring, and should be capable of maintaining mobility even during the night either to surround the enemy or to pursue them. The IJA used exactly these techniques in Malaya and Burma and the Commonwealth troops in these two theatres were not trained in these tactical formats. Further, Wavell noted that the enemy air force (he was referring to the Italian air force in North Africa but it can also be applied in the case of the Japanese air force in the Far East) even when they had gained air superiority would use dive bombers. But the effect of such bombing was more psychological than material. And well-trained troops capable of exploiting the terrain should be able to keep their nerve even after such harassing enemy bombardment.<sup>12</sup>

In the Indian Army Training Memorandum issued in January 1942, it was emphasized:

Should any body of our troops be cut off from their remainder there must be no thought of surrender; it is easy for resolute men in this enclosed country to make their way back to their comrades by paths and tracks or across country. In thick and difficult country attack is the best defence. Troops must never hesitate to take the offensive on every possible occasion. The enemy will be found to yield quickly before the onslaught of determined men.<sup>13</sup>

The point to be noted is that like Wavell, even Alexander in his despatch to GHQ India, dated 16 June 1942, agreed that offence was the best defence. Both agreed that offensive operations, even by small aggressive parties, functioned as a tonic for the morale.<sup>14</sup> Wavell, in his instructions issued to the troops fighting in Malaya, noted that the soldiers should continue to fight even if their flanks were turned and the enemy went behind them. He rightly emphasized that these enemy parties were usually small and lightly equipped and depended

11 General Archibald Wavell, *Speaking Generally: Broadcasts, Orders and Addresses in Time of War (1939–43)* (London: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 45–46.

12 Note to General Wilson by General A.P. Wavell, Para 6,7&8, GHQME, 21 Sept. 1940, Auchinleck Papers, MUL121, Manchester University Library, Manchester, UK.

13 Wavell, *Speaking Generally*, p. 54.

14 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 31; Wavell, *Speaking Generally*, p. 77.

on bluff. Such weak enemy parties must be attacked wherever they were found.<sup>15</sup> Slim also noted that the Japanese had turned roadblocks into a perfect art.<sup>16</sup> Though the Japanese followed more or less same tactics during the Burma Campaign in 1942–43, the Commonwealth troops failed to implement the antidote elaborated by Wavell.

On 10 April 1942, Wavell noted that the Indian troops fought badly in Malaya and Burma because they were trained for warfare in the open country of Iraq and the Western Desert, and were only partly trained. He continued that Malaya, with its thick jungles, many rivers and streams, and few roads, presented an unusual theatre of war for the Indian troops.<sup>17</sup> The physical geography of Malaya to a great extent was similar to that of Burma. Further, the terrain and climate hampered the operational effectiveness of not only the Indian but also the British troops. However, the truth is that even in the different terrain, troops well versed in basic training would have performed well and could have adapted to the changing physical landscape. Both Alexander and Wavell also focused on the aerial superiority of the Japanese to explain the Commonwealth armies' dismal ground performance.<sup>18</sup> Slim noted in his autobiography that though the Japanese air force actually inflicted minimal casualties on the ground troops, the British and Indian soldiers were demoralized by the fact that the Japanese ruled the skies.<sup>19</sup> However, till 1942, the Red Army fought tenaciously when the *Luftwaffe* enjoyed air supremacy over the skies of Soviet Union. Actually, proper training enabled the ground troops to fight well without air support.

Wavell noted that the Japanese soldiers were superior to the British and Indian troops in tactical skill and fighting spirit. Tactical skill was the product of training and fighting spirit. The latter, emphasized Wavell, was the result of mental outlook.<sup>20</sup> Tough training, indoctrination and small unit leadership sustained unit cohesion among the Japanese. Some of the Japanese conscripts (especially the sons of veterans) fought to uphold family honour, others to survive, and most because of 'buddy' feelings. Edward J. Drea writes that vertical solidarity between junior leaders (lieutenants and senior sergeants) and the conscripts played a more important role in combat motivation in the IJA com-

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15 Wavell, *Speaking Generally*, p. 55.

16 Field-Marshal Viscount Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (1956, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1981), p. 39.

17 Wavell, *Speaking Generally*, pp. 114–15.

18 Despatch by Alexander, 16 June 1942, p. 32; Wavell, *Speaking Generally*, p. 115.

19 Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 51.

20 Wavell, *Speaking Generally*, p. 71.

pared to the Western armies.<sup>21</sup> Fighting spirit or the 'will to combat' to a great extent depended on discipline and material incentives. Instead, Wavell emphasized the supposed 'national' character. He continued that it was necessary to deceive and outwit the enemy. And for this, cunning was required. And the British lacked this trait in their character.<sup>22</sup>

General George J. Giffard, who commanded the 11th Army Group in India against the Japanese during late 1943 and early 1944, provided a more balanced view about the strengths and weaknesses of the Japanese soldiers without resorting to racial explanations. He noted:

The Japanese soldier is fanatically brave when ordered to succeed or die, yet he is liable to panic when surprised or in doubt. His planning is bold yet he is at a loss if plans go wrong.... He takes infinite pains to conceal his positions and then nullifies the result by talking in them at night. An expert in the use of ground and in silent movement, yet his patrol work is frequently bad. Although bold at infiltrating into, and then rushing a position from an unexpected direction, he becomes easily nonplussed by determined resistance. He is good at laying fixed lines of fire and skilful in the use of snipers, yet he is a bad shot.<sup>23</sup>

The generals had partly diagnosed the problem. Now, the task before them was to set up an elaborate training machinery to train the troops in the new tactical procedures so that they did not panic when they next confronted the Nipponese troops in the jungles and swamps of Burma.

### Training Infrastructure in India

David French writes that to a certain extent the British Army failed to learn the lessons from its defeat at the hands of the *Wehrmacht* in 1940 because it did not train hard and the institution lacked a single doctrinal centre able to disseminate the same lessons to the whole army. The result was that the British Army pursued a series of decentralized training programmes which did not reflect a consistent battle doctrine. Alan Brooke was partly responsible for

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<sup>21</sup> Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009), p. 258.

<sup>22</sup> Wavell, *Speaking Generally*, p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> General George J. Giffard, Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944, *Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 39171, 13 March 1951, p. 1351.

transforming the training regime of the Home Forces to become tougher and more realistic.<sup>24</sup> As regards the Indian Army, as this section will show, under Field-Marshal Claude Auchinleck's guidance, training became more tough and realistic. Further, Auchinleck, along with some like-minded officers, initiated certain organizational changes which replaced decentralized regimental training with a more centralized infrastructure.

Cross notes that the better the soldiers are trained, the higher is their morale.<sup>25</sup> The British officers of the Home Army believed that fostering high morale created an offensive spirit among the troops.<sup>26</sup> Timothy Harrison Place writes that realistic training improves morale.<sup>27</sup> Most of the credit for retraining the British and Indian units during the second half of 1943 is due to Auchinleck, especially in his second tenure as Commander-in-Chief India (first tenure 27 January 1941–4 July 1941; second tenure 20 June 1943–August 1947). Even after the formation of the South-East Asia Command (SEAC) in late 1943, Auchinleck retained under his command the India Base and all the training formations and several Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) squadrons (especially those guarding the North-West Frontier).<sup>28</sup> Not only were new techniques of training introduced but the period of training was lengthened too. Further, new institutions for training were also set up. All this had positive multiplier effects on morale and combat skill.

An attempt was made to replace the older officers with younger officers in the combat units. On 10 June 1942, the Secretary of State for India Leo Amery informed Viceroy Lord Linlithgow that officers above 45 should be used to train and lead pioneer and labour units. Older men, both ex-military and civilians, were to be used for commanding labour and pioneer units.<sup>29</sup> And this measure would release younger officers for commanding frontline combat units.

Some beginnings for the establishment of the training infrastructure had already started during the 'dark' days of 1942 on the initiative of the GoI and GHQ India. On 8 August 1942, A.R. Serrallier, Additional Undersecretary to the

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24 French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 184.

25 Cross, *Jungle Warfare*, p. 21.

26 French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 190.

27 Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940–1944: From Dunkirk to D-Day* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), p. 62.

28 Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia, 1943–46, by Rear Admiral The Viscount Mountbatten of Burma, p. 9, L/MIL/17/5/4271, IOR, BL, London.

29 Private Letter from Amery to Linlithgow, 10 June 1942, No. 20984, New Units raised in India since the outbreak of the War, L/ws/1/394, IOR, BL, London.

GoI informed the CGS that the government had sanctioned the formation of a Headquarters Special Training Brigade at Ranchi. Its personnel were a commander of a brigadier rank, a brigade major, a staff captain, a sub-conductor, two sergeants and some civilian clerks.<sup>30</sup> It was at least a modest beginning for greater things to come in the near future.

After the failure of the Arakan Operation in mid-1943, the syllabus for instruction at the Tactical School was revised to cover jungle warfare rather than desert warfare.<sup>31</sup> In September 1943, the fourth edition of Military Training Pamphlet No. 9 (India), named *The Jungle Book*, was published. It emphasized the importance of jungle craft, physical fitness, good marksmanship and decentralized control as necessary attributes for conducting jungle warfare successfully.<sup>32</sup>

On 7 June 1943, the General Staff (GS) Branch recommended the formation of training divisions. Each infantry regiment of the Indian Army would be represented by a battalion in one of the training divisions, with the exception of the Bombay Grenadiers and the Madras Regiment as they would share a composite battalion to be known as Bombay/Madras Training Battalion. The Dogra Regiment and the Garhwali Rifles similarly would share a composite battalion to be known as the Dogra/Garhwali Training Battalion. These composite battalions were to be formed by withdrawing holding battalions from the training centres. The Director of Military Training (DMT) was to arrange for recruits to be trained for reconnaissance battalions, MG battalions and special battalions in the training divisions in a specialist wing. There would be four Gurkha training battalions formed from Gurkha holding battalions withdrawn from the Gurkha Training Centres. One of the training divisions was to be the 14th Indian Infantry Division, which would comprise the 47th, 55th and 109th Infantry Brigades. It would have the following battalions: the 10 LF, 13th Kings, 25th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment, 6th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment, 15th Maratha, 14th Rajputana Rifles, 9th Rajput, 15th Baluch, 14th Sikhs and 7th FFR. The second training division would comprise a new battalion of the 8th Punjab Infantry, a battalion of the 9th Jat Regiment, a battalion of the 12th FFR, a battalion of the 14th Punjab, a battalion of the 15th Punjab, a

30 To the CGS from A.R. Serrallier, Additional Undersecretary to the GOI, 8 Aug. 1942, New Units raised in India since the outbreak of the War, L/ws/1/394.

31 Field-Marshal Claude Auchinleck, Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943, by Commander-in-Chief of India, *Second Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 38274, 29 April 1948, p. 2666.

32 Alan Jeffreys, "Training the Indian Army, 1939–45", in Alan Jeffreys and Patrick Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47: Experience and Development* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), p. 83.

battalion of the 16th Punjab, a new battalion of the 19th Hyderabad Regiment, Dogra/Garhwali Training Battalion, Bombay/Madras Training Battalion, two composite Gurkha battalions and two British battalions.<sup>33</sup>

It was decided that in the infantry battalion, there would not be any higher collective training than company training. All trained infantry recruits on completion of training in regimental centres would pass through a training division and would not go back to the regimental centres after their two months in the training division. The objective was that the drafts from the training divisions, with a proportion of the NCOs, should go directly to the units and not through reinforcement camps. It was decided to form one reserve Indian anti-tank regiment by conversion of the 16th Punjab Anti-Tank Regiment. It was to comprise a headquarters, a holding battalion and three training battalions. It was planned that they could be at Chindwara by 15 July and might be ready to receive recruits from 15 August 1943 onwards.<sup>34</sup>

On 8 June 1943, the Deputy Chief of General Staff (DCGS) informed Major-General Rob Lockhart about the necessity to enable post-recruit training to be carried out for the men joining the service units.<sup>35</sup> The DCGS's letter to Lockhart noted:

Our plan is to withdraw the 14th Indian Division from the order of Battle and move it to CHINDWARA which is a good area for jungle training. Possibly only one or two of the battalions of the 14th Division will remain with it as a Training Division since, as you know, it is necessary to form it from battalions from elsewhere which belong to the regiments in which the personnel situation is acute. The number of months' additional training which we consider necessary has not yet been fixed but it seems likely that it will be three months although the DMT would like to have four months. To allow the three months training it will be necessary to form two training divisions by taking 16 battalions away from the Field Army. The withdrawal of these battalions would probably just enable the Adjutant-General to find the necessary personnel in the form of reinforcements for the remainder. The rate of wastage for infantry is 2–2.5 per cent.<sup>36</sup>

33 Training Divisions, GS Branch, 7 June 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India, L/ws/1/1364, IOR, BL, London.

34 Training Divisions, GS Branch, Para 8&10(b), 7 June 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

35 Extract from Letter from DCGS(SD) to Major-General Lockhart, 8 June 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

36 Ibid.



The Infantry Committee sat from 1 to 14 June 1943. Major-General R. Richardson and Major A.R. Kemsley were the Chairman and the Secretary, respectively. Four major-generals named C.W. Toovey, R.D. Inskip, J.M.L. Grover and H.L. Davies, and two brigadiers named A.V. Hammond and W.B. Thomas, were the members. They analyzed the problems facing the Indian and British infantry on the basis of Burma and the Arakan operations. The committee also suggested measures for raising the combat effectiveness of the British and Indian infantry.<sup>37</sup>

The Infantry Committee noted that the basic problems facing the infantry were battle fatigue, inadequate training, lack of proper training mechanism and, finally, disease. The committee emphasized the absence of collective training formations. Such an organization required to be set up before launching any further operations. Further, prolonged periods of contact with the enemy, including much hard fighting without relief and replacement of casualties, resulted in over-exhaustion of the troops. Sudden influxes of inadequately-trained recruits in large numbers in the under-strength and exhausted formations resulted in problems of their absorption and the result was a drop in combat effectiveness and morale. Finally, the high incidence of malaria casualties and delay in return of such casualties to their units also harmed the military effectiveness of the units. The Infantry Committee summed up the problems facing British and Indian infantry to the following points: inadequate basic and collective training, absence of experienced leadership, failure to relieve troops on a timely basis from the Forward Edge of the Battle Area (FEBA), absence of a collective machinery for providing trained reinforcements and, finally, the requirements of the Army in India fighting in different terrain: the desert and mountains of North Africa and the jungles of Burma.<sup>38</sup> Both the GS Branch of India Command and the Infantry Committee agreed regarding the establishment of training divisions and later this step was implemented.

The Infantry Committee noted that morale was the product of the physical and mental conditions of the soldiers. In order to tackle this issue, the committee also emphasized the issue of the status of the infantry arm within the military service and the need for education. The committee emphasized that the status of infantry had fallen low. Due to the glamour and higher pay attached to the armoured corps, artillery and engineers, educated and intelligent recruits tended to join these branches. And in the case of combat against the IJA, the infantry ought to enjoy the predominant position. The infantry

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37 Report of the Infantry Committee, Part I, Para 3, L/WS/1/1371, IOR, BL, London.

38 Ibid., pp. 1–2.



must be considered as a highly-technical arm and it should get the pick of the intelligent educated recruits and first grade leaders. It was noted that the standard of education among the Indian infantry battalions was terrible and in the British battalions was unsatisfactory. Unless the infantry acquired educated recruits, the committee warned, there would be shortages of junior leaders, instructors and technicians.<sup>39</sup> Towards the end of World War I, the British Army relied on the massive use of heavy artillery for its breakthrough battles in the Western Front. Further, the stunning success of German *panzer* divisions during 1939–41 resulted in the spread of an erroneous feeling within the British establishment that the infantry played a secondary role in modern battles. However, the German military doctrine emphasized the supreme importance of infantry in conducting battles.<sup>40</sup>

The committee emphasized the required transformation of the infantry into an elite arm in the following words:

The Infantry soldier under present conditions has not only to be a master of the art of specialized infantry tactics calling for very great skill in Jungle craft, Field craft, and mastery of weapons, but he is also in many ways as technical in the handling of weapons, as is the man in the so called Technical Arms. The Infantry soldier deals with Tracked Carriers, MT of all varieties, several types of heavy and light LMGs, and his normal Platoon weapons, and in addition has to use specialized weapons such as 3-inch Mortar, and, in some cases the 2-pdr A/Tk Gun. The Signal equipment of Infantry Signal Platoon now includes complicated wireless equipment. It is evident, therefore, that a considerable proportion of educated men must be included in every infantry battalion if a reasonable degree of efficiency is to be attained.<sup>41</sup>

However, about 82 per cent of the enlisted infantry was illiterate and 18 per cent possessed only low standards of education. The Infantry Committee recommended that the basic pay of both the British and the Indian personnel in the infantry should be raised in order to attract better-educated recruits into the infantry branch. Besides increasing pay, in order to encourage better personnel to join the officer corps and also to motivate the junior officers, the committee recommended that in each British battalion an additional major's

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 2, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 42.

<sup>41</sup> Report of the Infantry Committee, p. 4.

post should be created.<sup>42</sup> By December 1943, it was decided that the second in command of the battalion and three to four rifle company commanders ought to be officers of the ranks of majors. The number of majors in an infantry battalion was to be increased because of the intense combat pressure under which the rifle company command had to operate. Further, it was realized that the increase in the number of majors would also raise the promotion prospects of the line infantry officers, which would function as a tonic for strengthening morale and combat effectiveness.<sup>43</sup>

Two years before the setting up of the Infantry Committee, Auchinleck was aware of the problems of the Indian commissioned officer corps. In a letter dated 17 March 1941, Auchinleck informed the Secretary of State for India Leo Amery:

I am not too happy about our system for the recruitment of Indians for emergency commissions. We are getting some quite good stuff, but I feel we are losing many of the best of them.... Of one thing I am quite sure—we can no longer afford to differentiate between Englishmen and Indians in the matter of pay etc. when both are doing the same job side by side.<sup>44</sup>

However, the anomalies regarding the lower pay of the Indian officers compared to the British officers and the lack of power of the Indian officers over the British other ranks (BORS) and British officers lower in rank were yet to be removed. Despite the influx of British cadets from Britain, the vacancies in the officer corps of the Indian Army remained and they could only be filled up by recruiting good quality Indian officers. Auchinleck warned that it was necessary to remove these discriminations in order to fill up the officer vacancies of the expanding Indian Army.<sup>45</sup>

However, the Infantry Committee's principal focus remained on the limitations of the training of the infantry and methods to be followed to develop them. As regards the British infantry, the Committee duly noted:

British drafts may be found direct from the UK or by milking IS battalions. In the case of drafts from Home, the men suffer from the handicap of a long sea voyage and possibly from a considerable period spent in a reinforcement camp. The training, discipline and toughness of the average

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42 Ibid., pp. 4–5.

43 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 25, L/WS/1/778, IOR, BL, London.

44 Auchinleck to Leo Amery, 17 March 1941, p. 4, Auchinleck Papers, MUL 132.

45 Ibid.

draft is usually of a low standard when the time comes to join its unit. The committee would draw attention to the need for arrangements to allow for a proper acclimatization, toughening and refreshing of basic training under jungle warfare conditions of all drafts arriving in India.... As regards drafts from IS battalions it is understood that these battalions will only be called upon to produce drafts in exceptional circumstances. Nevertheless, the basic training of such drafts during the recent operations in Arakan was found to be deficient primarily owing to shortage of weapons and equipment in IS battalions, and the lack of jungle warfare and collective training through the obligations of IS duties. In all cases, therefore, British drafts joining their units up to date have been found lacking in basic training.<sup>46</sup>

The situation was probably worse for the British recruits compared to the Indian recruits. This was because most of the British recruits, unlike the sepoys, were townsmen with little instinct in fieldcraft, which was common among those raised in the countryside well versed in stalking wild animals. Further, most of the recent entrants to the British officer corps were from a lower social background from towns. And they were unversed in sports and lacked knowledge of fieldcraft.<sup>47</sup> The same cannot be said of the Indian NCOs and the VCOs, who were mostly promoted from the ranks or small landowners sons.

As regards the dismal situation of the Indian Training Centres (ITC), the Infantry Committee laid down that rapid over-expansion of the infantry resulted in some of the ITCs having to support from 12 to 14 active battalions. The adequate control of the basic training of such a large number of recruits had become impossible. Moreover, the training centres were expected to teach the recruits Morse, map reading and aircraft recognition, in addition to training in all types of weapons, including two types of LMG, two types of rifle, Tommy Guns, anti-tank rifles, discharger cups, bombs, different types of grenades and mines. The net result was a rushed programme. In the words of the committee, as a result of such a shallow, hurried programme, the recruit became 'jack of all arms and master of none'.<sup>48</sup> The net effect of the recommendations of the Infantry Committee was that regimental training centres were supplemented by higher, collective formations for training. And the

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46 Report of the Infantry Committee, pp. 5–6.

47 Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 45.

48 Report of the Infantry Committee, p. 6.

focus was on better basic training followed by specialized jungle warfare training.<sup>49</sup>

On 15 June 1943, in another letter to Lockhart, the DCGS wrote:

The Infantry Committee, which sat under the chairmanship of Richardson, has just completed its labours.... Of course, as you probably realize, the root trouble of our difficulties is the size of the army we are trying to produce. Everything of material, officers and personnel, is a matter which has to be dealt with from a priority aspect which means that the butter is extremely thin.<sup>50</sup>

On 15 June 1943, GHQ India selected the following headquarters to form the first training division at Chindwara: Headquarters 14th Indian Division, Headquarters 47th Indian Infantry Brigade, Headquarters 55th Indian Infantry Brigade and Headquarters 109th Indian Infantry Brigade. The following eight infantry battalions were selected to join the training division: 25th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment, 6th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment, 15th Maratha, 14th Rajputana Rifles, 9th Rajput, 15th Baluch, 14th Sikhs and 7th FFR. See Table 7.1 for the details about the movement of these units. The issue of the inclusion of Gurkha and British infantry in the first infantry division was then still under consideration.<sup>51</sup>

On 19 June 1943, Auchinleck informed the War Office that experience in the Arakan proved that Indian recruits required a longer period of training including a period in a jungle warfare training area. The best method for supervising and organizing this training was the provision of training formations complete with commander and staff. The proposed period of extension was three months made up of one extra month in the training centre and two months in the training formation. To ensure a flow of trained reinforcements, it was necessary to find trained personnel and those were to come from existing battalions in the order of battle. The flow of pre-war classes through infantry training centres was not sufficient to maintain the number of infantry battalions of those classes now in the army. This necessitated the withdrawal of two

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49 Alan Jeffreys, 'The Officer Corps and the Training of the Indian Army with Special Reference to Lieutenant-General Francis Tuker', in Kaushik Roy (ed.), *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars* (Leiden/Boston: E.J. Brill, 2012), p. 295.

50 Extract from DCGS(SD) India, letter to General Lockhart, 15 June 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

51 GHQ India, GS Branch, New Delhi, No. 17949/SD4, 15 June 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

TABLE 7.1 *Redeployment for releasing eight Indian infantry battalions to join the Training Division at Chindwara in June 1943*

Unit	From	To
25th Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment	Bangalore	Chindwara
26th Dogra	Amritsar	Ambala
26th Rajputana Rifle	Ambala	Tamluk
6th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment	Tamluk	Chindwara
4th Gurkha Rifles	Bannu	Kolar Gold Field
9th Jat	Kolar Gold Field	Fort Sandeman
15th Maratha	Fort Sandeman	Chindwara
16th Frontier Force Rifles	Naushera	Wana
14th Rajputana Rifles	Wana	Chindwara
26th Madras	Dehu Road	Dhanbad
15th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment	Dhanbad	Aijal
9th Rajput	Aijal	Chindwara
9th Hyderabad	Batrasi	Razmak
15th Baluch	Razmak	Chindwara
8th Rajputana Rifles	Ranchi	Naushera
14th Sikh	Malakand	Chindwara
7th Frontier Force Rifles	Hyderabad (Sind)	Chindwara

*Source:* Moves to be carried out in order to release Eight Indian Infantry Battalions to join the Training Division at Chindwara, 15 June 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India, L/WS/1/1364, IOR, BL, London.

infantry divisions from the order of battle. The 14th Indian Infantry Division constituted the nucleus of the organization of the first training division and the 26th Indian Infantry Division was provisionally earmarked as the second training division. Since the latter was in the Arakan it was not available till later in 1943. Except for one or two possible cases, the formation of the training division involved no disbandment. The battalions retained their identity but the bulk of the personnel were used as reinforcements.<sup>52</sup>

On 26 June 1943, the War Office sent the following telegram to Auchinleck:

<sup>52</sup> From C-in-C India to War Office, 19 June 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

We can give sound basic training to British reinforcements for India leaving you to give final training in jungle warfare in your training divisions. If you wish any special points stressed during basic training inform us. Uneconomical attempt at jungle training and without officers with recent battle experience is useless. We could give some training in wood fighting if you desire though this at the expense of fuller basic training.<sup>53</sup>

On 1 July 1943, the Director of Staff Duties (DSD), an officer of the rank of major-general, issued a memorandum which stated that Auchinleck had proposed that the 14th and 26th Indian Divisions should become training divisions. This was geared to produce a better trained but slightly smaller army. These training divisions were to include British units so that British soldiers taking part in jungle warfare could receive the best training.<sup>54</sup>

On 24 July 1943, the CIGS issued a memorandum which emphasized extending the period of recruits' training and improving the standard of recruits entering the Indian Army. Auchinleck told the CIGS that the inclusion of the British units in the new training formation was also under consideration. The Delhi Committee recommended the inclusion of two British battalions in each of the two Indian infantry training divisions or a British brigade in each of these divisions. The CIGS further stated in the memorandum that Auchinleck must be asked to confirm that adequate facilities for the training of British reinforcements would be included in these two Indian training divisions. Moreover, it must be noted that the training facilities for the British units would have to be capable of expansion to meet the requirements of reinforcements for the British formations in the front.<sup>55</sup>

On 29 July 1943, the War Cabinet's COSC accepted that the Commonwealth infantry was under-trained and under-equipped compared to the IJA soldiers in Burma. The COSC, which comprised the Vice Chief of Naval Staff E.N. Syfret, Vice Chief of Imperial General Staff E. Nye and Vice Chief of Staff D.C.S. Evill, noted:

Experience in Arakan has shown that the period of training in jungle warfare for Indian infantry recruits should be extended by one month at

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53 From the War Office to the C-in-C India, Cipher Telegram No. 93189, 26 June 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

54 Memorandum by Major-General, Director of Staff Duties, India Office, War Staff, 5404(SD2), 1 July 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

55 War Cabinet Chiefs of Staff Committee, Conversion of 14th & 26th Indian infantry divisions into training formations, COS(43)210, 24 July 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

training centres and two months in a formation. The provision of trained personnel to supervise and organize this training must come from existing battalions in the order of battle, and this requirement can best be met by providing training formations complete with commanders and staff.... We therefore recommend that excluding the training divisions and the equivalent divisions above (4), the revised order of target for the order of battle of the offensive Indian Army be fixed at twelve infantry divisions and two armoured divisions plus complete ancillary troops for all these formations.<sup>56</sup>

Auchinleck proposed thorough training for both the British and Indian infantry units. At Ahmadnagar, a new special Officer Cadre Training Unit (OCTU) for the Indian Armoured Corps was set up. A second jungle warfare school was opened at Shimoga in Mysore State in order to train the instructors (both British and Indian) in the techniques of living and fighting in the jungle. The Jungle Warfare Training Centre at Raiwala, which was originally designed to give the recruits training in jungle warfare, was not required anymore because jungle training divisions were set up for this purpose. Hence, the Raiwala School was used for giving specialized training and all three battalions of the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade were trained in this centre. The 14th Indian Division at Chindwara and the 39th Indian Division at Saharanpur were converted into jungle training divisions. Each Indian infantry regiment had its training battalion in one or other of these divisions.<sup>57</sup>

On 7 August 1943, Auchinleck in a telegram to the War Office noted:

... necessity for training British reinforcements in jungle warfare, propose to form British infantry training brigade of four battalions. This brigade will not form part of the Indian Training Division but located in a separate area capable of expansion should future plans demand jungle training for reinforcements of further British battalions or formations. Proposal involves raising new brigade head quarter. Effect on British manpower will be considerable reduction as only permanent training staff will be included in training battalion establishment. Remainder will be available for drafting as reinforcements. In effect also order of battle India will be reduced by four effective British battalions. Battalions

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<sup>56</sup> War Cabinet Chiefs of Staff Committee, Secret COS(43)215, 29 July 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

<sup>57</sup> Auchinleck, Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943, 29 April 1948, p. 2667.

selected 12th Foresters, 20th Royal Fusiliers, 7th Leicesters, 7th South Lancashire Regiment, who will be placed on special establishment now being drafted. Selection not ideal from record group aspect but best possible from battalions available without withdrawing units from field formations. Battalions will retain their identity.<sup>58</sup>

On 27 August 1943, Auchinleck informed the War Office:

39th Indian Light Division selected to form nucleus of 2nd Training Division instead of 26th Indian Division and re-designated as 39th Indian Division on 1 August. 39th Indian Division concentrates in the Roorkee area during September.... 26th Indian Division not finally selected as engaged in operations from Arakan and essential that both training divisions ready commence intake of recruits from October and output trained reinforcements from 1 January.... Units of 3rd Brigade formed by formations of training units out of certain infantry training centres. Brigade Head Quarter is a fresh commitment.<sup>59</sup>

The decision to convert the 14th Indian Division and the 39th Indian Light Division to training roles was accepted by the War Office on 5 September 1943 in response to Auchinleck's recommendation on 19 June 1943.<sup>60</sup>

On 1 September 1943, the GOC Meerut told the War Office: 'In drafting establishment of new British infantry training brigade am assuming that percentage of reinforcements coming to India will be trained specialists suitable proportion be signallers 4 per cent mortar men, 4 per cent drivers, IC 8 per cent. Confirm that trained specialists will be included in each infantry draft'.<sup>61</sup>

In the case of British reinforcements it was necessary not only to give basic training to many of the infantry personnel who lacked it on arrival from the United Kingdom but also to give them training in jungle warfare methods. Hence, the 13th Battalion of the Sherwood Foresters was temporarily converted into a basic training unit and stationed at Jubbulpur. In addition, for jungle training of the British troops, the 52nd Infantry Brigade was formed at Budni in Bhopal State. It comprised the 20th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, 7th

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58 From C-in-C India to the War Office, Cipher Telegram, No. 64530, 7 Aug. 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

59 From C-in-C India to the War Office, 27 Aug. 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

60 From War Office to C-in-C India, 5 Sept. 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.

61 From GOC Meerut to War Office, 1 Sept. 1943, Formation of Training Divisions in India.



Battalion of the South Lancashire Regiment, and 12th Battalion of the Sherwood Foresters. In this brigade, the British reinforcements did two months' training in the forest before going to active battalions.<sup>62</sup> The Forester's Battalion's role was to provide the basic training of the reinforcement drafts prior to their dispatch to the Training Brigade. This was considered necessary due to the arrival in India of certain drafts which had not reached a requisite standard even in basic training.<sup>63</sup>

The basic training period for the infantry recruits was considered as too short. It was decided to increase the period of training to 11 months. Of these 11 months, nine were to be spent in basic training at regimental centres and two in special jungle training divisions. The period of mechanical transport training for the recruits was raised from 14 to 20 weeks and then to 24 weeks. It was ensured that the recruits should have obtained at least 120 hours' training in driving before being assigned to active MT units. The training carried out in the reinforcement camps on the LoCs was also improved with the aid of the active divisions, which depended on these camps for reinforcements. These divisions were able to provide instructors, and a considerable increase in equipment was also made available.<sup>64</sup>

In December 1943, the Director of Infantry noted:

It has been decided to start a series of Infantry Liaison Letters. The object of these letters is as follows:

- (a) To give the infantry short accounts of recent operations from which they can draw their own conclusions.
- (b) To keep them in touch with current developments in organization, weapons and equipment....
- (c) These letters will be issued down to brigadiers' commands and it is hoped that they will either be circulated or that the information in them will be passed on in some other way.

The issue of these letters was intended to be at least monthly. It was hoped that the recipients of these letters would write to the Director of Infantry with any

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62 Auchinleck, *Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943*, 29 April 1948, p. 2667.

63 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, Para 13, 17 Feb. 1944, L/WS/1/778.

64 Auchinleck, *Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943*, 29 April 1948, p. 2667.

suggestions for their improvement and with any questions on subjects that came within the scope of the directorate.<sup>65</sup>

In Burma, the Japanese forces were stretched along a front of 700 miles.<sup>66</sup> In June 1943, the Commonwealth troops were in contact with the IJA on four fronts in Burma: the Arakan, Chin Hills, Chindwin and in north Burma. During this period, the Commonwealth troops used the technique of sending out patrols not only to gain information about the enemy dispositions but also to accustom the troops to work in the jungle and build up the morale and confidence of the troops.<sup>67</sup>

Timothy Harrison Place notes that as regards the training of the British Army fighting the Axis forces in west Europe, extensive patrolling was the common feature of major exercises and probably constituted the most valuable part of training. This was because patrolling skills taught the soldiers to depend upon their fieldcraft skills to avoid detection and to rely on their weapons to get out of trouble if the enemy detected them.<sup>68</sup> Auchinleck emphasized the need for constant patrolling and the organization of carefully planned raids and ambushes so that the troops acquired moral superiority and the myth of Japanese 'jungle supermen' was broken.<sup>69</sup> Frontal attacks on Japanese defensive positions were rarely successful and resulted in heavy casualties. The alternative effective tactic was to manoeuvre for surprising the Japanese. A frontal attack would engage Japanese attention while the main attack was to be launched from the flanks and rear. This in return required deep patrolling in order to gain knowledge of the terrain and layout of the Japanese defensive positions.<sup>70</sup> In the operational area, all the infantry companies were given patrolling tasks which provided valuable training. A party of 10 men from a company under a havildar-major (a VCO), including the company havildar and a lance-naik (Indian NCO), was attached to a patrol from a British battalion in

65 From the Major-General Director of Infantry, Infantry Directorate, GHQ, India, New Delhi 1943, Secret, No. 23291/Infantry, L/ws/1/778.

66 Air Chief Marshal R.E.C. Peirse, 'Air Operations in South-East Asia, 16 November 1943 to 31 May 1944', *Third Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 39173, 13 March 1951, p. 1382.

67 Auchinleck, Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943, 29 April 1948, p. 2657.

68 Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, pp. 38–39.

69 James Butler (ed.), *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series*, Major-General Woodburn Kirby with Captain C.T. Addis, Brigadier M.R. Roberts, Colonel G.T. Wards and Air Vice-Marshal N.L. Desoer, *The War against Japan*, vol. 3, *The Decisive Battles* (London: HMSO, 1961), p. 33.

70 Daniel P. Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport, Connecticut/London: Praeger, 2003), p. 178.

order to gain experience. Sometimes a battalion sent out four of its rifle companies for patrol duties and each company was separated from the other by a day's march. The carriers and the motor transports were kept 50 miles back. The pioneer platoon was trained by the divisional Royal Engineer (RE).<sup>71</sup>

At the Jungle Warfare School at Shimoga set up in the spring of 1943, the focus of training was on conducting jungle patrolling. First and most important, the troops were made to understand that the Japanese were not invincible in jungle warfare. And second, the troops were told that they must not assume that the Burmans were anti-Japanese. The troops were ordered to learn and understand bird calls, animal calls, booby traps, footprints, methods of cooking, making shelters and rope making inside the jungle. Further, they were to look for signs from analyzing broken twigs and fallen leaves. It was emphasized that a bad patrol moves carelessly on the tracks with weapons not ready. The patrol should not make noises and should not unnecessarily pull the branches, bushes, etc. A patrol should move silently (as much as possible) through the jungle without moving bushes and branches.<sup>72</sup> In New Guinea, 'green' American soldiers during the night were shocked by strange animal sounds, the cracking of rotting wood, moisture dripping from the trees in darkness. The soldiers felt that they were in a nightmare country with Japanese all around them.<sup>73</sup> The newcomers at Shimoga were trained in the principle: 'Don't get rough with the jungle.'<sup>74</sup> The soldiers had to learn the boot and shoe marks of Commonwealth soldiers as well as those of the Japanese. Further, the soldiers were trained to understand the prints left by bare feet. They learnt to cook using three stones and forked sticks. They were trained to make fire with tin, sand and petrol. For cooking food, containers were made from bamboo. The soldiers were taught to light fire without matches by rubbing together bamboo strips. Once the food was cooked, all the traces of cooking were to be hidden and no litter was to be left behind which would enable the Japanese patrols to track them. The scouts were ordered not to move together, rather they were to cover each other while patrolling. The leader of the patrol was not to make himself conspicuous and an obvious target for the Japanese. The Japanese snipers always aimed first for the officer of the patrol. Rather, to avoid making

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71 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 25.

72 Alston, *My Days and Age, Memoirs*, GHQ Jungle Warfare School Shimoga, Classification and Types of Jungle, Movement in Jungle, The Jungle Lane, pp. 1, 3.

73 Stephen R. Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War: The 1944 New Guinea Campaign* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 32.

74 Alston, *My Days and Age, Memoirs*, GHQ Jungle Warfare School Shimoga, Movement in Jungle, p. 3.

noise and also to make himself invisible to the Japanese, the leader was trained to give orders through ingenious methods like picking up a leaf with his right hand, adjusting his helmet with his left hand, etc. The patrol was instructed to move during both day and night. The principle was that, despite lack of visibility and the need to ensure control over a group, a jungle will hold up and disorganize only the clumsy, ignorant and untrained.<sup>75</sup> The focus of training was on tracking. Table 7.4 gives an idea of the equipment carried by long-distance patrols.

The Director of Combined Operations (India) remained under the Commander-in-Chief India. Rear Admiral E.H. Maund was appointed as Director and he arrived in India on 16 October 1943. There was one combined training centre (for training in amphibious operation) on the west coast of India, near Bombay. It was decided to complete training of quite a number of troops in amphibious operations by December 1944. Hence, a second centre was considered necessary, and a training centre at Cocanada on the east coast of India was opened. The Cocanada Training Centre was developed to provide wet-shod training for an assault brigade group and a beach group together with their quota of divisional, corps and army troops and their RN and RAF components.<sup>76</sup>

The following extract from Army Group Training Letter Number 2 noted: 'All experience goes to show that the standard of shooting in a unit varies directly with the interest displayed by officers and the standard they are able to set'.<sup>77</sup> The war in Burma for most of the time was a platoon commander's war in which minor tactics played a very important role. Junior leadership was also very important. Maintaining fire discipline in such cases was essential as lack of it resulted not only in wasteful expenditure of ammunition but also gave away the position of the small patrols to the enemy snipers and observers.<sup>78</sup> The combat effectiveness of the army at the FEBA depended on the platoon and section commanders. In February 1944, there were two centres for training the NCOs and the potential VCOs. These were the 15th Battalion of the 8th

75 Ibid., pp. 3–4.

76 Auchinleck, Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943, 29 April 1948, p. 2668.

77 Infantry Liaison Letter Number 2, Para 5, L/ws/1/778.

78 Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, pp. 172–73. Place defines minor tactics as those tactics which involved units lower than a division. At the beginning of the Second World War, the British officers believed that minor tactics involved only single arms tactics, i.e. tactical methods of the infantry. Later during the war, when cooperation between infantry, artillery and tanks became necessary, the concept needed to be re-evaluated. Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 4.

TABLE 7.2 *Distribution of Infantry Liaison Letters to different formations in February 1944*

Formation/Unit	Serial number of copies distributed
SEAC HQ (For 11th Army Group)	73
Southern Army	74–108
North Western Army	109–133
Eastern Command	134–158
Central Command	159–194
Staff College Quetta	195–197
Tactical School Poona	198
Infantry School Saugor	199
Jungle Warfare School Sevoke	200
Jungle Warfare School Shimoga	201
Jungle Warfare School Raiwala	202
Army School of Frontier Warfare Kakul	203
Indian Military Academy Dehra Dun	204
Officer Training School Bangalore	205
Officer Training School Belgaum	206
Officer Training School Mhow	207
Parachute Troops Training Centre	208
14th Indian Division	245–54
39th Indian Division	255–264
52nd Infantry Brigade	265–268
13th Foresters	270
15th Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment	271
8th Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment	272
3rd Battalion of the 3rd Madras Regiment	273
GHQ Base Reinforcement Camp Deolali	274
Director of Infantry War Office London	299
Military Secretary India Office	300
Australian Liaison Mission	304
File and Spares	308–406

*Note:* Some copies like the numbers between 209 and 244, 269, 275 and 298, etc were obviously lost.

*Source:* Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, Distribution of Infantry Liaison Letter, 17 Feb. 1944, L/WS/1/778, IOR, BL, London.

Punjab Regiment at Jhansi and the 8th Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment at Faizabad. The Director of Infantry during a visit at Faizabad found that only 25 per cent of the vacancies for the course of potential VCOs had been taken up. He emphasized that any havildar who had attended the courses in these two schools would be a better VCO. So, all the infantry battalions were strongly advised to make use of every vacancy. The course offered in these two schools was actually an Officer Training School (OTS) course and lasted for four months.<sup>79</sup>

The higher command took seriously the task of adapting training in accordance with the new lessons learnt. The senior officers displayed concern that the distribution of the Infantry Liaison Letters to the lower formations was slow. To widen the scale of distribution in order to cover all the formations, it was decided that GHQ India would distribute these letters directly to the lower formations.<sup>80</sup> Table 7.2 below gives an idea of the distribution of the Infantry Liaison Letters to different units in February 1944.

### External Influence

The India Command's training regimen tried to learn from the combat against the Japanese in New Guinea. Let us have a brief glance at the fighting there. New Guinea was important to the Japanese for adding defensive depth to the their position in the Netherlands' East Indies and also to protect their great air-sea base at Rabaul on New Britain Island. The initial Japanese landings in New Guinea occurred at Lae and Salamaua in early March 1942. In order to sever communications between Australia and the United States, the Japanese decided to capture the Southern Solomons and Port Moresby. Japanese troop convoys detached for Port Moresby sailed from Rabaul on 4 May 1942 but were recalled after the Battle of the Coral Sea fought on 7–8 May. The Japanese then attempted an overland advance to Port Moresby. The Japanese started to move inland from Lae. On 15 May, Blamey sent reinforcements to Port Moresby. At that time, the garrison numbered two militia brigades and some aircraft and artillery. MacArthur's slow attempt to move forces northwards to Buna on the coast to establish an airfield was preempted by the Japanese. The Japanese landed about 13,000 soldiers in the Buna-Gona area in Papua's north coast on 21–22 July and in a week moved inland and captured Kokoda. The Australian

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79 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, Para 2, 17 Feb. 1944.

80 Ibid., Para 14, p. 3.

units there started retreating towards Port Moresby.<sup>81</sup> A Japanese attempt to outflank the Australian defence at Milne Bay was defeated in late August. However, the Japanese maintained pressure on the Australian defence along the Kokoda Track.<sup>82</sup>

By mid-September, the Japanese were within 40 miles of Port Moresby.<sup>83</sup> On 23 September, Blamey took command of the forces in Port Moresby.<sup>84</sup> In 1942, the Australian troops were better trained compared to the American soldiers in New Guinea. New Guinea's landscape in many ways was similar to that of Malaya and Burma. The mountains were jagged and almost impassable and around the coast the jungle-ridden swamps were full of tall Kunai grass and reptiles of various size and shape. Behind the green-carpeted mountains of New Guinea lurked dangerous wildlife. Big lizards, birds, poisonous snakes, leeches, ants, flies, cockroaches, centipedes, scorpions, wasps and mosquitoes proved tiresome for the soldiers. Malaria, dengue, dysentery and scrub typhus were common. To top this off, there were torrential downpours. When it was not raining, the scorching sun and high humidity made life almost unbearable for the combatants. New Guinea, like Malaya and Burma, was deficient in roads, ports and airfields.<sup>85</sup>

The nature of terrain in New Guinea demanded that operational control be invested at the brigade and battalion levels. At these levels, tactical control was of great importance. By November 1942, the Japanese were pushed back along the Kokoda Track. And the Australians started attacking the Japanese positions along the Buna-Gona area. Elements of the 32nd American Division also took part in this operation. The Japanese defences consisted of pillboxes and as usual the Japanese resisted to the death. Fighting continued till January 1943 when the Japanese survivors were evacuated by sea or broke out overland. Of the 20,000 Japanese engaged in Papua, 13,000 died due to combat and disease. The Americans suffered some 3,000 casualties and the Australians suffered 2,165 KIA and 3,533 WIA.<sup>86</sup>

The 9th Australian Division, which was in North Africa, was recalled in January 1943 and then retrained and re-equipped for jungle warfare in New

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81 Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 175–77; Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War*, p. 11.

82 Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, p. 177.

83 Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War*, p. 11.

84 Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, p. 177.

85 Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War*, pp. 11, 31–32.

86 Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, p. 178. Stephen R. Taafee in *MacArthur's Jungle War*, p. 11 writes that storming Buna, Gona and Sanananda resulted in over 8,000 casualties for the Australian and American troops.

Guinea. Lae fell on 16 September 1943. The 9th Australian Division advanced along the northern coast from Finschhafen. Combat in the Huon Peninsula continued till April 1944. Though the Japanese position in eastern New Guinea was broken, they established a defensive line along Aitape-Wewak.<sup>87</sup>

General Blamey offered to accept up to 50 junior officers of all arms from India to visit Australia for six months in order to study the method of jungle warfare training and to enable them to visit the units and formations in operational areas in New Guinea. These officers completed a one month course at the Jungle Warfare School at Kanungra in New Guinea.<sup>88</sup> In 1943, 50 officers from the India Command were sent to Australia and New Guinea where they were attached to the combatant units of the Australian Army for three months. The objective was to gain practical experience in modern methods of jungle fighting against the Japanese. On their return, these officers were to function as instructors at the various schools of GHQ India in order to disseminate their knowledge. The rest would return to their units and pass on the information gained by them to other personnel in their respective formations.<sup>89</sup>

Brigadier Lloyd of the Australian Military Force (AMF) had commanded a brigade across the Owen Stanley Ridge and then became Commandant of the Australian Tactical School for six months. He was loaned to India for a period of six months for purposes of liaison and lecturing to the formations in India on training and military operations in New Guinea. Besides the 14th Army, he also visited all the armies and commands in India and lectured units, formations and training commands on the Japanese tactics, and nature of training required against them. He visited the Southern Army, the 25th Indian Division's exercise, the Jungle Warfare School at Shimoga and the Tactical School. Then, he lectured the officers of GHQ India and visited the Central Command and the North-Western Army. Brigadier Lloyd after a six months lecture tour in India returned to Australia.<sup>90</sup>

Fire control in combat was emphasized. The Australian forces in New Guinea used single-shot Bren Guns for deception purposes. Initially, they fired at a slow rate and then quickened up when the Japanese were lulled into a sense of false security. Unnecessary automatic fire was not allowed.<sup>91</sup> In order

87 Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, pp. 180, 182.

88 Correspondence, Liaison Letters from DMT India to DMT War, Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, p. 27, L/WS/1/1302, IOR, BL.

89 Auchinleck, Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943, 29 April 1948, p. 2667; Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, p. 27.

90 Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, Para 2, pp. 13, 27.

91 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 4.



to inculcate a higher degree of accuracy and better ammunition control, which were considered essential in successful jungle fighting, greater stress was laid on quick and accurate snap shooting and less on rapid fire.<sup>92</sup> For training the soldiers, large amounts of ammunition became available. The soldiers were trained in accurate shooting skills and battle inoculation. Firing from the shoulder was found to be more accurate than firing from the hip. But soldiers in actual combat conditions, in order to fire quickly at the enemy, very often fired from their hips.<sup>93</sup>

It was noted that there was a tendency among the troops during training to fire too soon without observing first carefully. So, it was emphasized that during training, there should be a pause after the word observe was given and then targets would appear or, if possible, they should wait for the noise made by the hostile elements, before any firing was allowed. The battle drill sequence therefore ought to be: cover—observe—listen—pause till targets appears or sounds are heard—fire.<sup>94</sup> Differences of opinion existed as regards the utility of cold steel for close-quarter combat in the jungle. Australian soldiers in Malaya carried bayonets but they discarded them in New Guinea. J.P. Cross claims that it put the Australians at a disadvantage in hand-to-hand fighting with the Japanese.<sup>95</sup> Place, in the context of the British Army's training against the Germans in France during World War II, writes that British training literature claimed that the Germans fled or surrendered when faced with cold steel. Several British officers believed that numerous successful bayonet charges had resulted in many German casualties.<sup>96</sup> As regards combat in Burma during World War II, the jury is still out.

For rushing a Japanese defensive position, the British and Indian infantry developed the tactic of storming the hostile positions and this technique was given the name of '*Blitz*' (not to be confused with the *Blitz* of the Battle of Britain). In a jungle, when attacking the Japanese position, for covering the last few yards after the artillery fire was lifted, the Commonwealth infantry used the *Blitz* technique. However, it caused numerous casualties from the Japanese snipers perched in the trees. So, the *Blitz* parties included one man with a rifle and one with a LMG and they were given the task of counter-sniper duties. Their duty was to watch and shoot the snipers in the trees. The Japanese

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92 Auchinleck, Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943, 29 April 1948, p. 2667.

93 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 5, Para 2, L/ws/1/778.

94 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 2, Para 4 (b).

95 Cross, *Jungle Warfare*, p. 51.

96 Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 35.

snipers developed the skill of killing the British officers. In response, on 1 December 1943, the British officers were ordered to carry rifles and camouflage their faces.<sup>97</sup>

By January 1944, after examining the recent operations, GHQ India concluded that the use of medium machine guns (MMGs) was useful for an anti-sniper role. And during the advance in an assault operation, the assaulting infantry was covered by the fire of the supporting arms and especially by overhead fire from MGs, which swept the trees over the heads of the infantry as the latter advanced. Such tactics were found to be effective, even in the recent fighting in South-West Pacific Area (SWPA). Many officers of the Indian Army demanded the return of MMGs to the infantry battalions. Some even wanted this weapon in lieu of the Bren Carriers.<sup>98</sup> To an extent, the above-mentioned assault tactic was a derivative of the age-old fire and movement principle. When the enemy's fire made frontal assault costly then friendly fire was brought upon the hostiles forcing the latter to take cover and thus neutralizing them for the time being. This in turn allowed the infantry to advance and liquidate the hostile position.<sup>99</sup>

The troops in New Guinea were comfortable with the following weapons: rifles and bayonets, Bren LMG, 2-inch high explosive mortars, 3-inch high explosive mortars and the Number 36 Grenade which could be thrown by hand as well as from the rifle. The rifle grenades were used extensively in the SWPA, especially when, due to the density of foliage, it was not possible to find or clear adequate gaps for mortar positions. Further, rifle grenades provided quick support to sections which were isolated in the jungle from platoon support.<sup>100</sup> The Infantry Liaison Letter Number 2 of the Indian Army noted that the LMG magazines were normally distributed throughout the section for the purpose of easy carriage. The place for them when shooting started was with the guns. During training, rifle groups when applying battle drills often moved to the flank carrying the LMG magazines with them. Either there should be a system or drill for the rapid passing of the magazines to the Bren Guns or when contact with the enemy was imminent then the magazines should be carried to the rear of the section in a sandbag as was done in New Guinea. The Infantry Liaison Letter emphasized that getting the magazines to the gun was an important factor and till now was neglected in training. The Infantry Liaison Letter

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97 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 4, Incidents from Recent Operations Chin Hills and Chindwin, 1 Dec. 1943.

98 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 2, Incidents from Recent Operations, 1 Jan. 1944.

99 For a slightly different interpretation see Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 40.

100 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 2, South-West Pacific, Para 3.

Number 2 laid down that one of the important duties of a unit commander when giving his orders was to decide what types of arms and ammunition would not be carried. Until this was done, a lot of useless material was carried, which caused much fatigue, delay and wastage of manpower.<sup>101</sup>

Besides the SWPA, GHQ India also tried to absorb lessons of war fighting from the regions where the Allied forces were fighting Italian and German troops. In January 1944, the Infantry Liaison Letter emphasized the following extract about the importance of battle drill which had been circulated among the Allied troops fighting in North Africa:

The teaching of battle-drills undoubtedly proved to be of the greatest value in instilling dash and determination.... Battle-drill training aims at teaching the basic 'strokes'.... The drills must be intelligently applied in accordance with the ground and the particular tactical situation. There were many occasions when unnecessary casualties resulted from poor leadership because junior leaders followed blindly a set drill and failed to apply it with common sense.<sup>102</sup>

The battle drills codified the existing tactical doctrine.<sup>103</sup> The Infantry Liaison Letter Number 2 noted that battle drill must be the servant and not the master. The battle drill's greatest value was to train the troops to react offensively when surprised or when coming suddenly into contact with the enemy. Overall, battle drills involved basic tactics which were capable of modification and development.<sup>104</sup> At the sub-unit level, battle drills minimized the necessity for issuing detailed orders,<sup>105</sup> which was difficult if not impossible under the stressful and fluid battle conditions.

There were certain similarities between Small War conducted by the British-Indian troops in the North-West Frontier and the jungle war conducted by the American and Australian soldiers in New Guinea. To give an example, the Australian units during their advance from Templeton Crossing to Buna followed the practice of the British and Indian troops in the Indus frontier in bringing each and every wounded member of their force.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., Para 2 (b), 4 (c).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., Para 4 (a).

<sup>103</sup> Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 55.

<sup>104</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 2, Para 4 (a).

<sup>105</sup> Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 63.

<sup>106</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 7.

## Hardware and Transportation

During the Japanese invasion of the Philippines, the American personnel, being equipped with a limited number of hand grenades (most of them duds), were overwhelmed by the IJA's superiority in the use of hand grenades, trench mortars and machine guns.<sup>107</sup> More or less the same was the case during the Japanese invasion of South-East Asia in 1941–42. All these factors were taken into account by the India Command from mid-1943 onwards. For combat in the jungle, the infantry required light, handy mortars, as well as mortars with a longer range. For increasing the organic firepower of the Indian infantry, 3-inch mortars were assigned to the Indian infantry battalions. The 3-inch mortars were improved by strengthening the base plate, which in turn raised the maximum range of such mortars from 1,600 yards to 2,750 yards. In addition, the 2-inch mortars were lightened by fixing a bowed plate to the base of the barrel in place of the base plate. This modification resulted in the reduction of the weight of the mortar to 11 pounds.<sup>108</sup>

One artillery regiment in each division was reorganized as a jungle field regiment and equipped with 3.7-inch howitzers and 3-inch mortars to provide artillery support to the infantry where the 25-pounder guns could not be used. As a point of comparison, Australia manufactured a short 25-pounder gun for use in the jungle terrain in New Guinea. Then vehicles with less mobility than the four wheel drive 15 cwt. trucks were eliminated. Further, the total number of trucks in each division was reduced to a minimum.<sup>109</sup> These two measures were taken keeping in view the comparatively roadless jungle-covered swamps and mountains which characterized the physical landscape of Burma. See Table 7.6 for the transport allowed to a British battalion.<sup>110</sup>

A Commonwealth battalion (less the carrier platoon) was given 52 mules for transport. The twelve rifle platoons had two mules each and the headquarters company had 28 mules. All the weapons, except the 3-inch mortars, were carried by the troops. The headquarters company's 28 mules were used mainly by the mortar platoon. In the mortar platoon each of the six mules carried a 3-inch mortar. And each of the remaining 18 mules carried 12 rounds of 3-inch mortar ammunition. Thus, the total rounds carried were 216. This meant 36 rounds per mortar. In addition, these mules also carried telephone cables and

107 Ford, 'Dismantling the "Lesser Men" and "Supermen" Myths: US Intelligence on the Imperial Japanese Army after the Fall of Philippines, Winter 1942 to Spring 1943', p. 551.

108 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 10 & 12.

109 Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 3, p. 40.

110 Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, p. 181.

shovels. In the pioneer platoon, three mules carried the entrenching tools. In each rifle platoon, one mule carried 1,200 rounds of Small Arms Ammunition (SAA) packed in 48 magazines. And the second mule carried 600 rounds of SAA in 24 magazines on one side and 24 rounds of 2-inch mortar ammunition on the other side. Each man armed with a rifle carried 25 extra rounds of SAA as company reserve and one grenade. For each LMG, 600 rounds of SAA (in 24 magazines) were carried on mules. The platoon headquarters carried 12 rounds of 2-inch mortar ammunition. The orderly and the batman carried two rounds each. The medical equipment was carried by the stretcher bearers in specially-fitted packs. All the cooks, *bhistis* and sweepers were available as battalion reserve porters.<sup>111</sup>

An attempt was made to free the carriage of the 3-inch mortars from dependence on mules. Each mortar was divided into mortar, base plate and tripod. The strain of carrying the 3-inch mortar over long distances, it was found out, was much reduced when the Everest Carrier Man Pack was used.<sup>112</sup> The American-made 3-inch mortar bomb's range was short of the British ammunition by about 100 yards at 1,600 yards range. To avoid confusion, it was ordered that the two types of ammunition should not be mixed up during storage and supply to the troops.<sup>113</sup> By March 1944, all the units of the 14th Army had 3-inch mortars with strengthened base plates. It was planned to equip all the units within India with 3-inch mortars by September 1944. The soldiers were trained to take care in selecting the ground carefully while deploying the mortars. On sandy and spongy ground, a sandbag was placed at the rear of the base plate to prevent overstraining of the recoil spring. One defect of the 2-inch mortar bomb was that they exuded smoke which tended to give away the position of the mortar.<sup>114</sup>

For causing casualties among the Japanese troops who moved with impunity in the jungle, the Commonwealth infantry was trained to plant mines. The India Command had small stocks of Hong Kong Pineapple Mines. But these were complicated weapons and could be handled only by the sappers and not by the infantry. Hence, the Anti-Personnel Mine No. 3 was put into production. Every infantry battalion was given 72 such mines. When these were exhausted, each unit was given another 144 mines in addition as the second line reinforcement. The weight of each such mine was two pounds four ounces. It had a cylindrical, segmented body and the height was 61/4-inch and diameter 25/8-

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<sup>111</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Appendix B.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix C.

<sup>113</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, p. 3.

<sup>114</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 5, Para 6, p. 2, Para 8, p. 3, 21 March 1944.

inch. Each mine was filled with four ounces of TNT. These mines were trip or pressure operated. For causing greater impact, occasionally 12 mines and two coils of trip wire were packed in wooden boxes and then buried under the ground. At times, a small mortar was attached to the base containing a small gunpowder charge, which on being fired pushed the mine three to four feet in the air where the detonation took place.<sup>115</sup>

By mid-1943, the Number 63 Grenade was considered obsolete in Britain. These grenades proved to be dangerous for the users. Hence, its production was stopped. The stocks in India were destroyed. Then steps were taken to import in adequate numbers grenades of a modified design which was safer for the user. The number of discharger cups for throwing grenades at the enemy was increased from 24 to 36 per infantry battalion.<sup>116</sup>

On 20 March 1944, at the Chin Hills, two Japanese platoons (50 men each) which were 200 yards from each other were ambushed by Indian troops equipped with grenades.<sup>117</sup> From overseas theatres, the troops complained that some failures occurred with the Number 36 Grenades due to the striking mechanism, which failed to operate after release of the lever. This was caused by wax drying hard around the head of the striker. The soldiers were warned that the wax had to be cleared from the body, central sleeve, striker and the spring, and the striker should be placed straight.<sup>118</sup>

The Number 36 Grenades were also liable to malfunction if they got wet. It was decided to adopt the Number 77 Smoke Grenades for use in the infantry battalions. India Command asked for further supplies of such grenades. It was a percussion grenade fitted with a fuze and white phosphorous. Its weight was 13.5 oz and it emitted smoke for 45 seconds. Two such grenades thrown in front of a section screened their advance from the watchful eyes of the enemy soldiers. Each infantry battalion was given 162 of these grenades and another 216 in the second line.<sup>119</sup>

The Japanese made booby traps with captured Number 36 Grenades. The booby trapped area covered a region 100 yards wide and 200 yards long, and was generally located along high and narrow mountain ridges in thick jungle. Within that area, there were between 100 to 200 booby traps laid. The grenades were put inside tin cans or on the fork of the trees. A portion of the side of the can was cut away. A hole was made on the remaining end of the can through

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<sup>115</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 14.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, Para 16 & 17.

<sup>117</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 5, Para 1.

<sup>118</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, p. 3.

<sup>119</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 5, Para 11, p. 3.

which the trip wire was attached. The safety pin was removed but the release handle was held down so that the grenade would not fire. The grenade was then inserted into the cut out tin can so that the release handle was held inside the remaining circular portion of the can. The grenade and the tin can were held together and placed on the ground. The grenade remained safe until the trip wire was disturbed. When a pull was exerted on the trip wire, the tin can was pulled away from the grenade. The grenade, being relatively heavy, remained in place. Then, the handle was released and the grenade detonated. In the tree fork variation of the grenade booby trap, the grenade was placed between the limbs of a tree. When the trip wire was disturbed, the grenade fell from the tree and detonated. Ordinary telephone cable was used as trip wire. When attacking infantry moved through the heavy undergrowth, a pull here or there on a creeper exploded a grenade. Careful scrutiny of the dense foliage was required in order to detect and then deactivate the booby traps. A detached booby trap was neutralized by grasping the grenade firmly and holding the release handle down and inserting a small nail in the safety pin hole.<sup>120</sup>

The Anti-Tank Boys Rifle (0.55-inch) was replaced with Projector Infantry Anti-Tank (PIAT) in the course of 1943. The latter was a spring-loaded hollow charge bomb thrower. Its length was 39 inches and it weighed about 34.5 pounds. The weight of the projectile was two pounds 10 ounces. The PIAT, with an effective range of 150 yards, proved effective in Sicily, especially against the pillboxes and the German Mark III tanks and the captured French R-35 tanks which were used by the *Wehrmacht*. India Command rightly assumed that the Japanese had no heavier tanks than these models. So, PIAT would prove effective against the Nipponese 'tin cans'. Sometimes, the PIAT projectile failed to detonate when used against the bunkers. For this, experimentation with graze fuse was conducted, but it was accepted in December 1943 that it would take some time to supply the frontline units with these new fuses. Three projectiles were packed in a package for carrying which weighed roughly about 10 pounds. About six projectiles were provided with the gun, 12 were held as unit reserve and another six for the second line. It was decided that the battalion should have a pool of PIATs and they would be used when required.<sup>121</sup> For the details regarding distribution of PIATs to the various types of infantry battalions see Table 7.3

The design and manufacture of the Owen Sub-Machine Gun was a great success story of the Australian military. The Australian military historian

120 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, pp. 4–5.

121 Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 15; Place, *Military Training in the British Army*, p. 41.



TABLE 7.3 *Infantry battalion scales for PIAT in December 1943*

Unit	Number
British Light Infantry Battalion	4
Indian Light Infantry Battalion	4
Indian Reconnaissance Battalion	4
Infantry Battalion (British or Indian) A & MT	9
Infantry Battalion (British or Indian) MT	9
Motor Battalion	11
Lorried Infantry Battalion	11
Indian Machine-Gun Battalion	15
British Divisional Support Light Battalion	17
British Assault Battalion	25

Source: Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Incidents from Recent Operations Chin Hills and Chindwin, 1 Dec. 1943, Para 15, L/WS/1/778, IOR, BL, London.

Jeffrey Grey asserts that it was better than the Sten Gun.<sup>122</sup> The Commonwealth soldiers were ordered to take care to keep the Bren Guns out of water especially in the sandy beach or during rough weather.<sup>123</sup> It was decided that the Sten Machine Gun, originally produced in the UK, could be mass produced in order to offset the shortages of rifles in all the theatres. So, in India also, especially in the case of ancillary units, machine carbines were issued in place of rifles. Due to the shortage of 9-mm ammunition, Sten Machine Guns were not issued to the units which operated forward of the divisional headquarters. So, these units retained Thompson Machine Carbines. For maintenance reasons, it was unreasonable to maintain two types of machine carbines in the same unit. The War Office's long-term policy as regards the Indian Army was that the Thompson Machine Carbines would gradually be replaced with Sten Guns. It was intended that the Sten Gun would become the infantry company weapon. It was decreed that Sten Guns with silencers would be used for night patrolling. Samples were obtained for trial in India. A sling was required for carrying the Sten in a position of readiness from the shoulder. This was demanded by the troops from the FEBA. It was decided that the sling should be about 55 inches.

<sup>122</sup> Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, p. 181.

<sup>123</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 5, Para 9, p. 3.



The MK III Sten required a small hole to be bored in the breech causing the top side of the carbine to take the loop of the sling.<sup>124</sup>

To increase the firepower at the disposal of the infantry, Indian MG battalions were set up. Each MG battalion comprised a battalion headquarters which controlled an administrative platoon and three companies. Each company had under its command two mortar platoons and two MMG platoons. Each mortar platoon had four 4.2-inch mortars and each MMG platoon had four MMGs. The total strength of an Indian MG battalion came to about 665 Indian other ranks, 20 VCOs and 14 British officers. The scale of transport for each such battalion was as follows: nine bicycles, 17 motorcycles, one car/station wagon, 34 jeeps, one 15 cwt. water truck and 51 15 cwt. trucks.<sup>125</sup> The three Indian MG battalions were equipped with 3-inch mortars but the 11th Sikh MG Battalion had 4.2-inch mortars. For raising the mobility and firepower of the Indian Army's units, trailers fitted to take 4.2-inch mortar ammunition were imported.<sup>126</sup>

After fighting the Japanese in late 1943, the India Command drilled among the troops the necessity to dig for defending themselves against a Japanese counter-attack.<sup>127</sup> The Infantry Liaison Letter Number 1 in December 1943 emphasized:

This war has demonstrated the importance of quick and effective 'digging in'. Our digging is perhaps not as good as that some of our enemies. This is in part due to the tools provided. Good digging is impossible without an adequate supply of tools. Our picks and shovels are heavy and the number which can be carried is thus relatively small. A light shovel (copied from an American pattern) weighed about 1 pound 15 oz, and length is 2 feet 6— inches is under design. If it is proved successful by the men, it will be issued to the infantry battalion, at the rate of one per two men. It is carried hung on the back by a small attachment.<sup>128</sup>

In December 1943, each rifle platoon was given three picks and two shovels. The company headquarters carried one pick and one shovel.<sup>129</sup> The Allies were

<sup>124</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, p. 2.

<sup>125</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Appendix D.

<sup>126</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, p. 2.

<sup>127</sup> S.N. Prasad, K.D. Bhargava and P.N. Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 1, June 1942–June 1944, Bisheshwar Prasad (General Editor), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, India & Pakistan, Calcutta: Distributed by Orient Longmans, 1958), p. 84.

<sup>128</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 20.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix B.

TABLE 7.4 *Scale of equipment taken on Long Distance Patrols operating near the Chindwin in late 1943*

Items	Remarks
Groundsheets	
Non-Cooked Rations	4 days ration was carried comfortably by pack animals but anything over 7 days was bulky and then rations were taken on a reduced scale for a patrol which lasted between 7 and 10 days.
Mosquito Nets	1 for 2 men
Jersey	
Mess Tins	
Bedding	
Towels	
Soaps	
Grenades	2 per man
Small Arms Ammunition	50 Rounds per man
Light Machine-Gun	1 Magazine per man
Biscuit Tins	It was cut down to one-third of its size and blackened for boiling tea (one per section)
Blanket	One blanket for 2 men was necessary especially when patrolling on the hills during winter
Dress	Caps, Shirts, Vests, Trousers, Gaiters, Boots (Occasionally Sandshoes)

*Source:* Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Incidents from Recent Operations Chin Hills and Chindwin, 1 Dec. 1943, Appendix A, L/ws/1/778, IOR, BL, London.

TABLE 7.5 *Scale of Demolition Stores for British and Indian Pioneer Platoons in February 1944*

Nature of Stores	Remarks
Explosives	
Explosives 808 in 4 oz. cartridges	For general use/assault, preparing 50 pounds charge
Primers	100 in 10 tins
Cordite	500 feet (1 Reel)
Instantaneous Fuze	For 36 Grenades
Safety Fuze	2 Tins
No. 27 Detonators	4 Tins

TABLE 7.5    *Cont.*

Nature of Stores	Remarks
Electric Detonators	10
Trip Wire	200 Yards
Trap Wire	200 Yards
Booby Trap Pull Mechanism	10
Percussion Ignitors	20
Non-Explosives	
Cordage 2-inch	
Sledge Hammer (Weight 7 pound)	4
Incendiary Hand Grenade	20
Mule Box	6

*Source:* Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, Appendix B, p. 6, 17 Feb. 1944, L/WS/1/778, IOR, BL, London.

TABLE 7.6    *Scale of transport in a British infantry battalion in February 1944*

Transport item	Number	Remarks
Trucks	23	
3 Ton Lorries	17	
Carriers	15	Wheeled or Tracked depending on the Terrain
Bicycles	12	
Motor Cycles	9	
Jeeps	2	
Station Wagon	1	
Water Tank Truck	1	
		Strength of the Privates was reduced from 684 to 637. Since, the number of riflemen were reduced by 47, the scale of rifle ammunition was reduced by 4,230 rounds

*Source:* Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, Appendix A, p. 5, 17 Feb. 1944, L/WS/1/778, IOR, BL, London.

willing to learn from the enemy. In January 1944, for purposes of digging, a light shovel with a detachable handle, weighing about one pound and three ounces and which was an adaptation of the Japanese shovel, was issued to the troops.<sup>130</sup> The Indian Army was exhibiting a high learning curve, even borrowing and adopting the best techniques and technologies (both lethal and non-lethal) from its opponent.

In September 1943, it was decided that the number of signallers in each infantry division must be raised.<sup>131</sup> For signalling in the jungle, the soldiers were trained in the use of coloured smoke and flares. Coloured smoke was produced from the small hand generators which indicated forward troops' position to friendly aircraft. Steps were taken to manufacture these hand generators in India so that all the units could be equipped with them. Then, coloured smoke projectiles were also used by the infantry, which were fired from the 3-inch mortars in order to indicate hostile targets. However, due to difficulties over the design of the smoke projectiles, stocks were inadequate. A red magnesium flare was also used for indication of the troops' position, especially during the night, and this was put into production.<sup>132</sup>

The soldiers (even the artillery personnel) were trained to climb trees with the aid of toggle ropes in order to make them 'jungle savvy'. The equipment needed was one toggle rope per two and a half to three feet of the tree to be climbed. The toggle rope was six feet long with an eye spliced at one end and a wooden toggle spliced at the other end. The eye end of the rope was passed round the tree as high up as the climber could reach and the toggle end was passed through the eye. The noose, so formed, was pulled tight. The toggle was then passed between the noose and the tree. The climber then stood on the free loop and fixed the next toggle rope as high up the tree as he could reach. To make a seat for observation purposes, two ropes were required, one to sit on and the other round the observer's back. These ropes were also fixed on the tree in the same way.<sup>133</sup>

Foot rot and malaria made many soldiers ineffective in the jungle environment. The India Command also copied the strict anti-malarial and foot discipline of the Australian and American troops fighting the Japanese in the jungles of the Pacific Islands. After trial and error, the Australian and American troops in New Guinea concluded that boots were the best form of footwear in

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<sup>130</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 5, Para 13, p. 4, 21 March 1944, L/WS/1/778.

<sup>131</sup> From War Office to C-in-C, Simla, 15 Sept. 1943, Formation of the Training Divisions in India.

<sup>132</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 19.

<sup>133</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 4, Method of Tree climbing with Toggle Ropes.

the jungle under all circumstances. Gym shoes were carried for short patrols only. Foot inspection was carried out every evening by the platoon and section commanders. Many soldiers carried a tin of talcum powder. To avoid mosquito bites, shorts were not allowed but slacks were worn. For all the troops in the operational area, two pairs of boots were authorized. In December 1943, the second pair was sanctioned only during the monsoon for the troops deployed east of the Brahmaputra River.<sup>134</sup> On 24–25 November 1944, SEAC conducted a study in Burma for training purposes.<sup>135</sup> Brigadier I.M. Stewart asserted that in Burma, sickness (malaria and dysentery) for the Commonwealth troops was more dangerous than the Japanese.<sup>136</sup>

### Organization for Victory

During late 1943, it was planned to prepare the India Base for training and equipping 25 divisions. After the Quebec Conference, the British COS ordered General Claude Auchinleck to prepare India as a base for 20 divisions and as a transit base for five more. Of these divisions, two tank brigades, seven Indian and three Chinese divisions, two Long Range Penetration brigades, one brigade of the Burma Army and one parachute brigade were to be used for operations in Burma. One brigade was to be used for the defence of Ceylon. And eight amphibious divisions, two airborne divisions, one armoured and one infantry divisions were to constitute the expeditionary force. In addition, 67 battalions were earmarked for the internal security of India and another 57 battalions plus four armoured regiments for the defence of the North-West Frontier. Further, India had to function as a base for 154 RAF squadrons and 30 shore-based fleet air arm squadrons.<sup>137</sup>

With the formation of the SEAC, the Commander-in-Chief India was absolved of the responsibility for conducting operations. On 15 October 1943, the Eastern Army was abolished. The 14th Army, under the command of General Slim, was formed and took up operational responsibility and security of Assam and Bengal east of Meghna. The 14th Army came under the 11th Army

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<sup>134</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 1, Para 5, 6 & 23.

<sup>135</sup> From Brigadier M.B. Dowse, Jan. 1945, Training, Study Period on Burma, L/WS/1/777, IOR, BL, London.

<sup>136</sup> Brigadier I.M. Stewart, Short Description of Indo-Burma Country and Main Characteristics of Fighting, Appendix C, p. 19, L/WS/1/777.

<sup>137</sup> Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 3, p. 27; Mountbatten, Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia, 1943–46, p. 9.

TABLE 7.7 *Japanese ground units in Burma in November 1943*

Region	Unit	Remarks
Arakan	55th Division less one regiment, 213th Regiment of the 33rd Division, 2nd Battalion of the 214th Regiment (less one company) of the 33rd Division. 54th Division was in the coastal area south of Akyab	Till October 1943, there were four Japanese divisions in Burma. On 15 November a fifth Japanese division arrived. According to one estimate, by end November, the IJA had six divisions in Burma. In addition, the 15th Division was moving overland from Thailand to join the Japanese 15th Army in Burma
Chin Hills and Arakan Yomas	33rd Division less detachments in the Arakan	
Mawlaik	One division less one regiment	
Hukawang, Myitkyna, Laukhaung and Htawgaw	18th Division	Also known as the Northern Combat Area Command
Salween	56th Division	

*Source:* Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943, by Field-Marshal Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief of India, *Second Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 38274, 29 April 1948, pp. 2662–663; James Butler (ed.), *History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series*, Major-General Woodburn Kirby with Captain C.T. Addis, Brigadier M.R. Roberts, Colonel G.T. Wards and Air Vice-Marshal N.L. Desoer, *The War against Japan*, vol. 3, *The Decisive Battles* (London: HMSO, 1961), pp. 43–44.

Group (in Delhi) of General George J. Giffard (October 1943–November 1944) who in turn was subordinated to the SEAC. Eastern Command India was revived and General Mayne in charge of it became responsible for the internal security of Bihar, Orissa and Bengal, west of Meghna.<sup>138</sup>

Louis Mountbatten, a cousin of King George VI and the youngest Vice-Admiral in the RN, aged 42, was appointed as the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia (SACSEA) in August 1943, with Lieutenant-General Joseph W. Stilwell as his deputy.<sup>139</sup> On 7 October 1943, Mountbatten reached Delhi with

<sup>138</sup> Kirby et.al., *The War against Japan*, vol. 3, p. 40.

<sup>139</sup> Saki Dockrill, 'Britain's Grand Strategy and Anglo-American Leadership in the War against Japan', in Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War: 1941–45* (Oxon: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 20.

five staff officers. Mountbatten visited the headquarters of the 4th Corps at Chittagong, and at Barrackpur met Lieutenant-General W.J. Slira, who was the officiating CO of the Eastern Army in succession to Lieutenant-General Irwin. Later, Slira was replaced by General William 'Bill' Slim. Lieutenant-General Henry Pownwall was recalled from his position as Commander-in-Chief Persia and Iraq Command and became Chief of Staff in the SEAC. Lieutenant-General Stilwell became Mountbatten's deputy in South-East Asia. Stilwell commanded the China-Burma-India (CBI) theatre, or more precisely, operations in north-east Burma. And this theatre was also known as the Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC). Mountbatten set up his headquarters at Ceylon (Kandy) on 15 April 1944.<sup>140</sup>

The Commonwealth soldiers did not have to pass the litmus test of fighting the enemy successfully in an environment of aerial inferiority. Rather, the Commonwealth troops proved to be lucky, as from late 1943, the balance in air power shifted significantly in favour of the Allies. On 16 November 1943, Air Chief Marshal Richard Peirse became the Allied Air Commander in Chief, South-East Asia. He had at his disposal the RAF India Command and 10th United States Army Air Force (USAAF). For integrated operational control of the air units in Assam and Bengal, a new headquarters was set up under the American officer Major-General G.E. Stratemeyer. This new headquarters, designated as the Eastern Air Command, was located initially at Delhi.<sup>141</sup>

The Tactical Air Force was commanded by Air Marshal John Baldwin and a Strategic Air Force under the American officer Brigadier-General Howard C. Davidson of the USSAF. On 15 December 1943, the RAF and the USAAF transport units were merged into a single organization named the Troop Carrier Command, which came under the USAAF officer Brigadier General D. Old. The RAF and the American photographic reconnaissance units were also incorporated into one command which was named the Photographic Reconnaissance Force. An RAF officer, Wing Commander S.G. Wise, was appointed as Air Commander of this unit.<sup>142</sup>

Peirse noted his tasks in the following manner:

- (a) To conduct a strategic air offensive in conformity with the general plan to destroy the enemy air forces and installations, selected rail, road and river communications, and depots and maintenance facilities.

<sup>140</sup> Mountbatten, Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia, 1943–46, pp. 3–7.

<sup>141</sup> Peirse, Air Operations in South-East Asia, 16 November 1943 to 31 May 1944, p. 1381.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1381–82.

- (b) To ensure the air defence of the US Air Transport Command airfields in North-East India and to provide for the defence against air attack of Calcutta and adjacent areas.
- (c) To provide support for the operations of the 14th Army.
- (d) To provide support for the Chinese-American forces under command of General J.W. Stilwell which were operating from bases in the Ledo area.
- (e) To support the operations of Long Range Penetration forces, and
- (f) To conduct photographic reconnaissance and survey.<sup>143</sup>

Since the bases and LoCs for the Japanese forces in Burma stretched for 900 miles from Bangkok to Myitkyina, they offered rich targets for the strategic air force of the Allies. Peirse planned to employ his strategic bomber force in the following order of priority: enemy-occupied airfields and installations, shipping, railways, oil installations in Burma and over suitable targets in Bangkok. However, due to the pressure of the ground war, considerable numbers of the bombers would be diverted in the near future against tactical targets in support of the Commonwealth ground units. In addition to carrying supplies for the army units, casualty evacuation also became an important task of the air force.<sup>144</sup>

Besides managerial organization, qualitative and quantitative improvements of the Allied air force enabled them to win aerial superiority gradually over Burma. In November 1943, the Japanese had some 250 aircraft which were deployed in the airfields at Heho, Anisakan, Rangoon and Chiangmai. Some of the aircraft were also deployed in bases in Thailand and in the Netherlands' East Indies.<sup>145</sup>

The 14th Army, which became the principal Commonwealth combat organization deployed against the IJA in Burma, included the 4th Corps and the 15th Indian Corps. The 4th Corps under Lieutenant-General G.A.P. Scoones comprised the 17th Indian Light Division, 20th Indian Division and 23rd Indian Division. Lieutenant-General A.F.P. Christison's 15th Indian Corps included the 5th Indian Division, 7th Indian Division, 26th Indian Division (4th Brigade joined only in February 1944) and the 81st West African Division (less the 3rd Brigade which was allotted to Special Force). In addition, the Ceylon Command under Lieutenant-General H.E. de R. Wetherall included the 11th East African Division, 99th Indian Infantry Brigade and a Royal Marine Group.

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143 Ibid., p. 1382.

144 Ibid., pp. 1382–83.

145 Ibid., p. 1382.



Lieutenant-General M.G.N. Stopford was in command of the 33rd Corps. It included the 2nd British Division, 25th Indian Division, 36th Indian Division (it included two British brigades and some Indian troops, but was called Indian for deception reasons), 3rd Indian Division (cover name for Orde Wingate's Special Force), 50th Indian Tank Brigade and 3rd Special Service Brigade. Wingate's Special Force consisted of six Long Range Penetration Brigades (LRPB): 14th, 16th, 23rd British Infantry Brigades, 77th and 111th Indian Infantry Brigades and 3rd West African Infantry Brigade. The two Indian infantry brigades had only Gurkha units.<sup>146</sup>

All the recruiting organizations of the three fighting services were amalgamated under the control of one directorate in the Adjutant-General's Branch at GHQ. This took effect on 1 January 1942. The Adjutant-General was to coordinate the recruiting effort and to prevent competitive recruitment and further economize on the overheads. The intake for October 1941 was 50,000. The Indian Army registered massive expansion during 1942. In July 1942, the enlistment figure reached 75,000 men. In 1942, technical (including clerical) recruitment rose from 9,000 to 16,000 personnel per month.<sup>147</sup> In November 1941, the AMF numbered 288,100. In August 1942, its size increased to 525,678 and in August 1943, it numbered 542,570.<sup>148</sup> In 1942, the Indian Army reached the two million mark. The average monthly intake in 1943 was 13,665, which in 1944 declined to 7,785. However, both in 1943 and 1944 the problem remained with getting educated personnel, especially in the clerical department. And the shortage of Indian officers continued to affect further expansion of the commissioned officer cadre of the Indian Army.<sup>149</sup> In July 1943, the monthly intake in the OTS for IECOS was only 160.<sup>150</sup>

Besides slow Indianization of the Indian Army officer corps, the other problem was morale of the sepoys. Racist discrimination often resulted in affrays among the American, British and Indian soldiers. Indiscipline among the American soldiers bewildered the sepoys. And the BORS lacked confidence in the sepoys' fighting capabilities. Due to language problems, misunderstandings were common. The VCOs and the IORS complained that they were mistreated by the white troops while travelling. From mid-1943 onwards,

146 Giffard, *Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944*, pp. 1349–50.

147 *India's Part in the Third Year of War* (New Delhi: Govt. of India, n.d.), pp. 1–2, 9, 12.

148 Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, p. 150.

149 *India's Part in the Fifth Year of War* (New Delhi: GoI, n.d.), p. 7.

150 Lieutenant-Colonel Gautam Sharma, *Nationalisation of the Indian Army: 1885–1947* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1996), p. 178.

parties of American soldiers were occasionally invited to certain Indian formations in order to establish amity of feelings and confidence between them. 'Get together' programmes were also initiated between the British and Indian troops.<sup>151</sup> Pradeep P. Barua writes that only during the war when large numbers of working-class Britons entered the officer corps, did a good working relationship come into existence between them and their fellow commissioned Indian officers.<sup>152</sup> Morale was the product of both tangible and non-tangible incentives. Like the British troops, the Indian troops' morale also soared when they received medals.<sup>153</sup> At the basic level, morale is also dependent on food, pay, leave, drinks, mail and even possibly female company (for the British soldiers).<sup>154</sup> In February 1943, a terrible famine occurred in Bihar and Bengal. Rice-eating south Indian troops (Madrassis) had to be issued with *atta*, which they disliked. *Atta*, however, was the principal diet item of the troops recruited from north India and north-west India. In the hot humid climate of north-east India and Burma, *atta* got infested with pests and deteriorated quite quickly. Reconditioning by sun drying and sieving failed to restore the original flavour.<sup>155</sup> Both British and Indian troops complained bitterly, even in 1944, about the conditions of travel from the fronts back to the bases for the purposes of rest and recuperation.<sup>156</sup> The poor conditions of transit camps at Delhi and Kolkata were also criticized by the soldiers.<sup>157</sup>

Logistical support was also vital for maintaining morale. When the war started, the Animal Transport Branch of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps (RIASC) comprised 36 mule companies, the Zhob Local Camel Transport Unit, the Hong Kong Mule Corps, two animal transport training companies (mule) and headquarters animal transport depot. The *siladar* camel companies comprised 10 troops each. The animal transport was geared for supporting the

151 Morale Reports India and SEAC 15 July–15 Oct. 1943, Part II Indian Troops, Para 7(b), p. 12, L/WS/2/71, IOR, BL, London.

152 Pradeep P. Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernisation in Later Colonial India* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1999), p. 104.

153 Morale Reports India and SEAC 15 July–15 Oct. 1943, Part II Indian Troops, Para 8, p. 12.

154 Cross, *Jungle Warfare*, p. 49.

155 Brigadier V.J. Moharir, *History of the Army Service Corps (1939–46)* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers in association with the Directorate of Supplies and Transport, Army Headquarters, New Delhi, 1979), pp. 5–6, 24.

156 Secret India Command Inter-Service Morale Summary No. 2 for the period Aug.–Oct. 1944, Para 5, L/WS/2/71.

157 Report on the Morale of British, Indian and Colonial Troops of Allied Land Forces South East Asia for the months of Aug., Sept., and Oct. 1944, Part II, Indian Troops, Para 9 (d), p. 15, L/WS/2/71.

troops who fought along the North-West Frontier. The animal transport department became especially important for providing logistical support to the troops fighting in the jungle. It was found out that the mule was the ideal transport animal both for pack and draught in all climatic conditions and terrain. Ponies suffered greater saddle injuries. And the donkey was considered obstinate. For operations in Assam and in the Arakan, the brigades in the FEBA were given two animal transport companies each due to their extremely long LoCs. In 1938, the Indian Army had only 4,300 vehicles. It was planned to increase the fleet to 7,500 vehicles in 1939. Orders were placed in the UK for the supply of vehicles at the rate of 600 vehicles per month starting from May 1940. But the supply was not forthcoming. In 1941, some orders for vehicles were placed with the USA.<sup>158</sup> In 1942, the Indian Army possessed some 50,000 vehicles.<sup>159</sup> Jeep companies were raised in 1943 for the maintenance of the light divisions. However, the jeeps lacked trailers. This was a gross wastage of their motor power as a jeep could carry little in its body. As part of LEND LEASE, Ford three-ton lorries were received from the USA. However, the fan belts of these lorries broke very easily. Due to increased requirements for drivers, men from south India were recruited in the transport companies starting from February 1941. However, south Indian VCOS and NCOS of South Indian Class Transport Company were filled up only in mid-1943. The officer cadre of the RIASC in October 1939 comprised about 20 Indian officers and most of them were King's Commissioned Indian Officers (KCIOs). The most senior Indian was Major Mohammed Akbar Khan.<sup>160</sup> The officers for the RIASC spent three months at the OTS followed by three months at the RIASC School at Chaklala.<sup>161</sup> From June 1940 onwards, emergency commissions were offered in the Indian Army Ordnance Corps (IAOC) and the Indian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (IEME) to British and Indian civilians. The upper age limit was raised to 40 years in order to meet the shortages of officers. The large number of drop outs and rejects from the OTS went to the officer corps of the RIASC and the IAOC.<sup>162</sup>

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158 Moharir, *History of the Army Service Corps (1939–46)*, pp. 86–87, 91, 94, 97–98.

159 *India's Part in the Third Year of War*, p. 18.

160 Moharir, *History of the Army Service Corps (1939–46)*, pp. 16, 103–4.

161 Jeffreys, 'The Officer Corps and the Training of the Indian Army with Special Reference to Lieutenant-General Francis Tuker', in Roy (ed.), *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars*, p. 293.

162 Sharma, *Nationalisation of the Indian Army*, pp. 175, 178.

## Conclusion

One could argue that the 'raw' Commonwealth units were not trained properly in the tactical principles of modern warfare, not to mention jungle warfare, till early 1943. In the case of the Indian Army, this was partly due to rapid expansion and the non-availability of proper equipment. From mid-1943, training of the Commonwealth units intensified. India Command and especially the Commander-in-Chief of India, Claude Auchinleck, took radical steps in revitalizing the training regimen. In fact, it could be argued that by late 1943, after the acceptance of the recommendations of the Infantry Committee, the training procedures of the British and the Indian infantry regiments in India was better than that of the United Kingdom. From late 1943 onwards there were some innovations in the 'minor' tactics of the infantry. Then, the Commonwealth infantry acquired new and modified weapons on a greater scale. Besides better lethal technologies, picks, shovels and mules played a vital role in revitalizing the effectiveness of the British-Indian infantry. Further, both the Japanese and the Allied high command decided to strengthen the Burma front. This would result in increasingly lethal combat from March 1944 onwards.

Based on his experiences between November 1943 and June 1944, General Giffard made the following observation about the Japanese troops: '... although his discipline and training are good, the Japanese soldier has shown himself lacking in initiative and self-reliance when his leaders have been killed and he is faced with the unexpected. The very fact that surrender has now made its appearance, though on a very small scale, in an army where such a thing was undreamt of, is not without significance'.<sup>163</sup> The tough fighting in 1944 and 1945, which resulted in the disintegration of the myth of the Japanese 'jungle supermen' is the subject of the next three chapters.

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<sup>163</sup> Giffard, *Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944*, p. 1352.

## Jungle War in the Arakan: 1942–1945

### Introduction

Most of the publications dealing with World War II in South-East Asia focus on the Allied retreat from Rangoon and then the Japanese defeat in Imphal-Kohima. Here, special attention is given to the Arakan theatre, which is under-researched, and also to the fact that this campaign was fought mostly by Indian troops. The first two sections of this chapter describe the story of the failure of the British and Indian units against the IJA. Further, these very failures of the Indian Army in the Arakan Campaign sparked a reorganization of the training system, which is discussed in the previous chapter. The reorganized and retrained Indian Army in turn had far-reaching significance in the later part of the ground war in South-East Asia. The third, fourth and fifth sections of this chapter show how the ‘new’ Indian Army, due to its better training and the superior material resources at its disposal, was able to transform the scenario in the Arakan from one of defeat to stalemate, and finally to victory.

The swampy jungle-covered mountainous tract in west Burma bordering on East Bengal is the Arakan region. The Arakan is a narrow strip of country running along the eastern seaboard of the Bay of Bengal. It stretches from the Naf estuary on the southern borders of Chittagong to within 90 miles of Cape Negrais. On the east it is bounded by the Arakan Yoma, which separates it from the Irrawaddy Valley. Along its northern border, the Arakan’s greatest breadth is about one hundred miles, gradually diminishing towards the south as it is flanked by the Arakan Yoma till in the extreme south it tapers to a narrow strip about 15 miles wide. The Arakan comprises jungle-covered hills which run down to a narrow coastal strip of paddy fields and mangrove swamps. The hills and the coastal strip are intersected by hundreds of *chaungs* and tidal creeks, often many miles long. Most of them were unfordable and offered few landing points. The whole region is highly malarial.<sup>1</sup>

The terrain of the Arakan can be divided into four parts. The coastal sector lies between the Bay of Bengal and the foothills of the Mayu Range. It is two

1 Lieutenant-Colonel N.N. Madan, *The Arakan Operations: 1942–1945*, Bisheshwar Prasad (General Editor), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45, Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section India & Pakistan, Calcutta: 1954), pp. 7–8.

miles wide at the northern part of the Mayu Peninsula but narrows to a few hundred yards between Donbaik and Foul Point. This strip is intersected by numerous swamps and tidal *chaungs*, which in turn made deployment of large numbers of ground troops difficult, if not impossible. The Mayu Peninsula is shaped like a bony finger down the Arakan Coast, 90 miles from the coastal port of Maungdaw to Foul Point, which is separated from Akyab Island by the estuary of the Mayu River. Along the centre of the Mayu Peninsula runs the Mayu Range. The Mayu Range, with foothills on either side, rises to a height of 2,000 feet and forms the spine of the Mayu Peninsula. Its jungle-covered slopes are steep and rocky and obstruct movement in either direction. The Mayu Valley consists of flat paddy fields and swampy areas and is intersected by tidal *chaungs* and dominated by the hills of the Mayu Range. The Kaladan Valley is somewhat similar to the Mayu Valley and lies some 30 miles east of it. Thus, the Arakan is a part of Burma between the Arakan Yoma and the Bay of Bengal. The main hill ranges are the Arakan Yoma and the Mayu Range. Some of the peaks of the Arakan Yoma rise to over 10,000 feet and the highest one is Mount Victoria. Both these ranges are covered by bamboo forest which creates obstacles to physical mobility.<sup>2</sup>

The three rivers in the Arakan are the Naf, Mayu and Kaladan. The Naf originates at Tumburu and enters the Bay of Bengal just south of Teknaf village. Many *chaungs* flow into the river from the eastern direction and the most important is the Tat *Chaung* near Maungdaw village and the Pruma *Chaung* which flows by Bawli *Bazaar*. The Mayu River is on the east side of the Mayu Peninsula and rises near Panzai *Bazaar*, and before entering the Bay of Bengal flows between Foul Point and Akyab Island. North of the Shambank *Chaung*, five miles south of Buthidaung, the Mayu River's name changes to the Kalapanzin. At Buthidaung, the Mayu Valley stretches for some 10 miles in width. The Kalapanzin River from north-west of Fort White flows into the Bay of Bengal just south of Akyab Island. Further inland is the Kaladan River, which also enters the sea at Akyab. These rivers flowing from north to south, along with many of their *chaungs*, were navigable by the local boats and shallow draught vessels, including steamers. These waterways constituted valuable LoCs for both the Commonwealth and Japanese troops. However, these rivers, along with their tributary *chaungs*, are tidal and subject to excessive flooding during the monsoon. So, their courses and depths change with time and create obstacles for smooth sailing. During May to September, when the monsoon comes, average rainfall gets to as much as 200 inches. This renders the whole

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2 Ibid., p. 8; Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (2004, reprint, London: Robinson, 2005), p. 72.

region impassable for foot and wheeled traffic.<sup>3</sup> The monsoon starts in May–June and lasts till September–October. During this period, the paddy fields go under three to four feet of water. The dry season begins from November when the *bunds* in the paddy fields are high enough (as in Mesopotamia during World War I) to obstruct vehicular traffic.<sup>4</sup>

When the Japanese entered Burma during the first half of 1942, they established air-land control over the Arakan. The Commonwealth troops' attempt to regain the initiative in the Arakan in 1943, known as the First Arakan Campaign, was a complete failure. However, the limited Japanese offensive in the Arakan during the first half of the next year (1944) came to a halt against the reorganized and retrained Commonwealth units with superior logistical and firepower support. By this time, the latter force had been able to evolve effective tactical countermeasures to the vaunted Japanese techniques of jungle warfare which had hitherto been successful. So, analysis of the battles in the Arakan is important for understanding tactical innovations in the Indian Army from 1944 onwards. Here is a look back to 1942 when the Japanese first entered the Arakan.

### Defeat in the Arakan: February 1942–16 October 1942

At the end of February 1942, the Japanese had absolute control over the Bay of Bengal and the skies of Burma. Between Chittagong and Brahmaputra the area was held by the Tripura State Force. The India Command was afraid that a Japanese landing might occur in Ceylon. Hence, all the available force could not be sent to East Bengal and the Arakan. These two regions were under Eastern Command, which was later renamed as the Eastern Army. The Eastern Command shifted its operational headquarters from Naini Tal in the United Province to Ranchi in Bihar in order to be closer to the front. At that time, it was decided that if the Japanese advanced in strength towards East Bengal then Chittagong would be evacuated. So much so, that the 14th Indian Division was ordered to send a detachment of sappers in order to be prepared to blow up the oil installations and the docks of the Chittagong Port in the event that a Japanese advance materialized. The civil government was ordered to implement a denial policy in such a scenario. Under this scheme, all forms of transport, including the local boats, would be evacuated north of Feni River

<sup>3</sup> Madan, *The Arakan Operations: 1942–1945*, pp. 8, 10; Lyman, *Slim, Master of War*, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> John Shipster, *Mist on the Rice Fields: A Soldier's Story of the Burma Campaign and the Korean War* (2000, Barnsley, S. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2002), p. 29.



and all civilian bicycles would be taken over by the government in order to prevent another probable Malaya style 'Japanese *Blitzkrieg*'. The point to be noted is that in the roadless swampy jungle terrain of Malaya, the Japanese troops had acquired mobility by using bicycles. By March 1942, the Eastern Command took the decision that the 14th Indian Division would fight the Japanese north of Feni, and the troops in Chittagong were placed under this division's control. The division's rear boundary extended from Bahadurabad Ghat in Brahmaputra up to the mouth of the Meghna River.<sup>5</sup> It would play an important role in the upcoming Arakan Operation.

The 14th Indian Division was raised at Quetta in Baluchistan during 1941 under Major-General H.H. Rich. Initially, it was raised as a mechanized division with a higher scale of MT with the objective of deploying it either in Persia and Iraq or against the Italians and the Germans in the North African desert. This division was fully mobilized at Quetta and Sibi in January 1942. At that time, there was not a single animal in this division. However, the outbreak of war with the Japanese changed the composition of the division. In February 1942, this division was sent to Ranchi. One brigade of this division was ordered to join the 10th Division. And the rest of the brigades of the 14th Indian Division were given to the 23rd Indian Division. The latter division at that time was given a mobile role to protect the east coast of India south of Calcutta. Later, this division was sent to Imphal. The 14th Indian Division was given the 47th, 49th and 69th Indian Infantry Brigades and the division was ordered to Rangoon. However, only the 69th Infantry Brigade was sent to Rangoon. The condition of the 14th Indian Division in early 1942 reflected the confused situation of the India Command. A division which in January 1942 was 100 per cent mobilized and ready to deploy in a few months was reduced to a shambles. Its divisional headquarters was mechanized while the 47th and 49th Indian Infantry Brigades were on a mixed Animal Transport (AT) and MT scale.<sup>6</sup>

In March 1942, Major-General W.L. Lloyd took over command from Major-General H.H. Rich. The 47th and 49th Indian Infantry Brigades were ordered to East Bengal. The divisional command and G1 (Major-General D.F.S. Warren) moved to Agartala with a small headquarters. By the middle of April, the 14th Indian Division was concentrated in East Bengal. Since this region lacked good roads, this division had left its heavy vehicles behind. River ferries and meter gauge railways were the only available transport assets available in East Bengal. No communication by roads north of Comilla was possible and everything had

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5 The Arakan Campaign, Narrative Report of Brigadier G. Creffield, p. 2, CAB 106/175, PRO, Kew, Surrey, UK.

6 Ibid., pp. 2–4.



to come by rail. There was a fair-weather road connecting Comilla, Feni and Chittagong up to the north bank of the Karnafuli River. From the south bank of the Karnafuli River up to Dohazari only a single track existed. A metalled road ran south from Dohazari for 10 miles. Beyond this point, the track was suitable only for pack transport. On this track from Comilla, three rivers (the Feni, Karnafuli and Sankno) had to be crossed and there were no bridges for vehicular traffic and no rail bridge across Sankno. From Chandpur to Laksam, there was only a narrow path which could be traversed only by a light car, and even that only with difficulty. All movements from Chandpur had to be by rail. The roads became impassable for 48 hours after a heavy downpour. Despite improvements, during the monsoon, these roads were usable on average for five to 10 days per month. It rained heavily during April 1942. However, there was a steamer service between Chittagong and Cox *Bazaar* throughout the year. There was also a steamer service on the Naf River. When the 14th Indian Division arrived there was no steamer service south of Cox *Bazaar*. The only airfields in existence east of Brahmaputra were a fair-weather strip on the Fatenga Peninsula near Chittagong and a small fair-weather strip at Cox *Bazaar*.<sup>7</sup>

The 14th Indian Division was widely dispersed. Major-General Wilfred Lloyd's plan was to place the main strength along the principal lines of approach from Chittagong and the coast south of the Meghna River. With this aim, he deployed the 47th Indian Infantry Brigade with the task of protecting Feni area and the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade for the protection of Noakhali-Laksam-Chandpur. Besides guarding the important points, both the brigades were ordered to keep a mobile column in existence for offensive purposes. The 49th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to keep one battalion in the Laksam area which was not to be used without the divisional commander's permission. A defensive divisional box was created in the Mynamatti area at the north end of the low range of hills between Comilla and Laksam. This was the beginning of a new tactical measure which would reach its full development only in early 1944 during the Imphal Campaign. This 'box'-based defensive tactical format was somewhat similar to what General Claude Auchinleck initiated in the Western Desert during 1941–42. The infantry, with heavy guns, were to form boxes to offer resistance to the advancing Axis columns. And while the boxes surrounded with wires and mines wore out the hostile assaulting force, the latter were to be counter-attacked by relieving mobile columns. More than 75 per cent of the defensive areas occupied along the Arakan-south-east Bengal border were paddy fields, and miles of *bunds* for communication and defensive

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7 Ibid., pp. 4–5.

purposes were built, with a huge expenditure of labour. The civil labour under the general supervision of the troops built the defensive positions in order to withstand the monsoon conditions. As a result of these preoccupations, there was little time for training and absolutely no training was undertaken for combat in jungle conditions. However, the troops at least learned to construct defensive earthworks, row the local boats and swim with full equipment. There was no separate LoC east of Brahmaputra between the division and the army. For operations south of Chittagong, Lloyd had to expand his LoCs. The principal tasks were the planning and building of roads, bridges, converting rail bridges into road-rail bridges, selection of the area for depots and construction of LoC depots, etc. Lloyd concluded that two divisions were required for defending the Arakan. Hence, adequate LoCs for the maintenance of two divisions were considered necessary. Further, Lloyd also had to prepare for evacuation of the civilian population from the densely populated theatre and the appropriation of local boats and bicycles as part of the denial policy in the event that the Japanese decided to advance.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the pressure of the Japanese air force and the threat of a possible land attack, the British imperial troops pulled out of Akyab in the early hours of 4 May 1942 and the Japanese occupied this town on the same day. At that time, in north-east India, the India Command had nine poorly-equipped squadrons and a photo reconnaissance unit equipped with Hurricanes and Mitchells. Due to the possible Japanese threat to Ceylon, most of the air reserves were rushed to that island. By the middle of June 1942, in Ceylon, there were three fighter squadrons, one Blenheim Squadron, two Catalina Squadrons and a half squadron of Beauforts. The Japanese air force made a few sporadic raids on Chittagong and the Japanese ground units advanced up the Kaladan Valley towards Kyauktaw.<sup>9</sup>

By mid-May 1942, India Command had anticipated that the Japanese might land behind Calcutta and seize the city and also the industrial areas of Asansol and Tatanagar. To prevent such a scenario, the 15th Indian Corps, with its headquarters at Barrackpur, was given the task of protecting the coast of

8 Ibid., pp. 5–6; Roger Parkinson, *The Auk: Auchinleck, Victor at Alamein* (London: Granada, 1977), pp. 177–78, 183. Niall Barr was scathing about the formation of static defensive boxes by the 8th Army in the Western Desert. However, these boxes substantially slowed down the operational tempo of *Panzerarmee Afrika*. And in Burma, the defensive boxes established by the Commonwealth troops were heavily supported and sustained by ground attack and transport aircraft. Further, the IJA, unlike the *Wehrmacht*, lacked heavy armour. Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), pp. 50–51.

9 The Arakan Campaign, Notes on the Arakan Situation, May–December 1942, pp. 31–32, CAB 106/175.

Bengal and Orissa. The 14th and 26th Indian Divisions were assigned to this corps. The 70th Indian Division (less one brigade group) at Ranchi constituted the corps reserve.<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of May 1942, Lloyd was ordered to send the 49th Indian Infantry Brigade to Imphal. Only the 47th Indian Infantry Brigade remained for operations in the Arakan. The calculated risk was taken on the assumption that no Japanese amphibious operation could take place till the end of the monsoon. Since the 47th Indian Infantry Brigade had to be dispersed to guard a wider area, no training was possible. This would have a negative impact on the unit's combat capacity later on. However, the 14th Indian Infantry Division opened several jungle schools where whole platoons were sent for training. The personnel of the Tripura Rifles taught jungle craft in these schools. Further, long-distance reconnaissance parties were sent out in the 4th Corps area and the 47th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to send out long-distance patrols south of Chittagong in order to train the men in travelling light and living hard in the jungle.<sup>11</sup>

In July 1942, while the 14th Indian Division was deployed in East Bengal, the 26th Indian Division protected the Calcutta area. The gap between these two divisions was filled by the Sunderban Flotilla, which operated in Meghna, Ganga and in the Sunderban Delta. Until July 1942, the India Command's policy was to evacuate Chittagong if the town was attacked by the Japanese. At that time, the Japanese air force in Burma comprised more than 100 aircraft, including 16+ fighters, eight light bombers, more than eight medium and heavy bombers, eight fighter-bombers and 58 miscellaneous aircraft.<sup>12</sup> In July 1942, the Eastern Army Commander Lieutenant-General N.M.S. Irwin told Slim that he wanted to take personal control of the Arakan Operation. Slim was ordered to train the 15th Corps in Ranchi. The Army Commander himself took over command of the 14th and 26th Divisions in the Arakan and Wavell also accepted this convoluted command arrangement. The absence of a corps headquarters would debilitate the Commonwealth military operation in the Arakan during the coming offensive.<sup>13</sup> Raymond Callahan writes that Wavell accepted Noel Irwin's clumsy command structure, which was designed to keep Slim away from an important operational role. This was because both Wavell and Irwin, being British Army officers, attempted to sideline Slim, an Indian Army officer. The tension between the British officers of the British Army and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 32–33.

<sup>11</sup> The Arakan Campaign, Narrative Report of Creffield, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> The Arakan Campaign, Notes on the Arakan Situation, May–December 1942, pp. 33–34.

<sup>13</sup> Lyman, *Slim, Master of War*, p. 74.

the British officers of the Indian Army, comments Callahan, was a characteristic feature of the Burma Campaign.<sup>14</sup>

During August 1942, the 14th Indian Division was ordered to fight for Chittagong in the case of a Japanese attack. The 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade under Brigadier Hammond was sent to Chittagong from Imphal. This was one of the original brigades which constituted the 14th Indian Infantry Division when it was raised in Quetta. This brigade had a bad time in north Assam as its personnel suffered from sickness and the unit was not fully equipped. It received the 10th LF Battalion which had come from Britain. In the middle of September 1942, this division was ordered to move south of Chittagong to gain contact with the Japanese. The 55th Indian Infantry Brigade (part of the 7th Indian Division) from Attock was sent to the 14th Indian Division. The 55th Indian Infantry Brigade took up the task of defending Chittagong and freed the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade, which moved south of Chittagong. By this time the monsoon was ending and since the Japanese had control over the Bay of Bengal, the India Command feared a possible Japanese landing north of Chittagong. In September 1942, it was estimated that there were 3,000 Japanese troops of the 213th Regiment of the 33rd Division in north Arakan. This regiment's 2nd Battalion was in Rathedaung, 3rd Battalion in Donbaik and the rest of the elements in the Akyab area.<sup>15</sup>

### The First Arakan Offensive

On 17 October 1942, an operational instruction was issued by the Eastern Army Headquarters detailing the objectives of operation during the cold weather of 1942–43.<sup>16</sup> The operational instruction noted the objective of bringing the IJA to battle and especially destroying the Japanese air force. With this objective in mind, Wavell detailed: 'Akyab shall be captured and control re-established in Upper Arakan. Our position in the Chin Hills shall be strengthened. Control shall be established up to include the River Chindwin by the early occupation of Kalewa and about Sittaung whence to carry out raids on the Japanese line of

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14 Raymond Callahan, 'The Prime Minister and the Indian Army's Last War', in Kaushik Roy (ed.), *The Indian Army in the Two World Wars* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 324–25.

15 The Arakan Campaign, Narrative Report of Creffield, p. 6; Notes on the Arakan Situation, May–December 1942, p. 35.

16 The Arakan Campaign, Narrative Report of Creffield, p. 6; Notes on the Arakan Situation, May–December 1942, p. 35.

communications'.<sup>17</sup> Akyab Island had an airfield which gave the former its strategic value. In the event that this airfield was captured, the Commonwealth air force could bomb Rangoon, some 330 miles away, and also the IJA's LoCs in central Burma. Further, the loss of Akyab would prevent the Japanese air force from bombing the industrial area around Calcutta.<sup>18</sup>

On 18 October 1942, Wavell explained that due to the low capacity of railways and river ferries in Assam, high rate of sickness among the troops and diversion of aircraft, troops and equipment destined originally for India to the Middle East, a large-scale offensive operation in north Burma would not be possible till 1 March 1943. Reconquest of the Arakan Coast was considered vital for establishing air superiority over the Irrawaddy Delta.<sup>19</sup> The thrust of Wavell's instruction was that the principal operational theatre would be the Arakan. In 1942, all the possible landing points in the Arakan were defended by the Japanese and there was not a single beach in the hundred-mile stretch of coast from Akyab to Taungup. The *chaungs* constituted the only means of access to the hinterland.<sup>20</sup>

Wavell planned an amphibious assault on Akyab, which would be coordinated with an advance on land from south of Chittagong. His plan was that the 6th and 29th British brigades would launch an amphibious assault on Akyab and the 14th Indian Division would advance from Chittagong towards the Mayu Peninsula. Simultaneously, the 4th Corps would move into the Chin Hills and then to Chindwin around Kalewa and a direct advance to Sittaung. The 4th Corps was to operate east and north of the track Haka-Lungleh and the 14th Indian Division in the southern direction of the Arakan Hill tracts along the Demagiri-Lungleh track. The 14th Indian Division was reinforced by three battalions under Headquarters 88th Infantry Brigade for protection of the LoCs, and by Headquarters 55th Infantry Brigade and supporting arms for creating a third brigade group. It was planned that by 1 December 1942, one brigade group would be in Rathedaung-Buthidaung-Maungdaw. Another brigade group would be in Tumbru-Cox *Bazaar* while one more brigade group would

<sup>17</sup> The Arakan Campaign, Appendix 1, Eastern Army Operation Instruction No 15, 17 Oct. 1942, p. 39, CAB 106/175.

<sup>18</sup> Lyman, *Slim, Master of War*, p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> S.N. Prasad, K.D. Bhargava and P.N. Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 1, June 1942–June 1944, Bishsewar Prasad (ed.), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939–45* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section India & Pakistan, 1958, Distributed by Orient Longmans), pp. 18, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Madan, *The Arakan Operations: 1942–1945*, pp. 7–8.

be protecting Chittagong.<sup>21</sup> And by 1 November a brigade would be in Ramu-Ukhia-Tumbru. As regards the protection of LoCs, one battalion was stationed at Comilla, another battalion at Laksham and Chandpur and another battalion in Feni. By 15 November, one battalion of a brigade was to be stationed in Maungdaw. By 25 November, a brigade group was to be in Buthidaung-Maungdaw-Tumbru and another brigade group in Cox *Bazaar*-Ramu-Ukhia.<sup>22</sup>

The 4th Corps was ordered to send the 17th Light Division into the Chin Hills and one brigade group of the 23rd Indian Division along the Sittaung-Tamu area.<sup>23</sup> The 23rd Indian Division was formed in January 1942 with the object of protecting the coast of Bengal and Orissa. The personnel of this division had very little training.<sup>24</sup> It was planned that by 15 December, one battalion would be in Tiddim-Fort White and by 15 January 1943, one brigade group would reach Falam. By 15 February, it was hoped, one brigade group would be in Kalewa, and another brigade group in Sittaung and Tamu. By 1 April 1943, the 17th Division was supposed to be in the Chin Hills and near the Chindwin.<sup>25</sup>

Wavell emphasized the logistical infrastructure of the upcoming operation. It was decided to develop the Imphal Road up to Pael. A fair-weather road was to be completed, connecting Chittagong-Tumbru by 1 December 1942. The road connecting Imphal-Tiddim-Kalewa needed to be improved. A road was to be built connecting Pael-Tamu-Sittaung. And finally, another road was to be built connecting Golaghat with the Manipur base.<sup>26</sup> The Imphal-Tiddim jeep road was to be completed by 1 December, the fair-weather motor road by 1 January 1943 and the all-weather motor road by 1 March 1943. Similarly, by 1 December, the Tiddim-Kalewa jeep road was ordered to be ready, the fair-weather motor transport road by 1 January and the all-weather motor transport road was to be completed by 1 April 1943. The Pael-Tamu motor transport fair-weather road was to be completed under Wavell's order by 1 December 1942 and it would be transformed into an all-weather road by 1 January 1943. The Tamu-Sittaung jeep road was planned to be completed by 1 January and would then be upgraded to a motor transport fair-weather road by 1 March and by 1 April 1943,

21 The Arakan Campaign, Appendix I, Eastern Army Operation Instruction No 15, 17 Oct. 1942, pp. 39–40; Lyman, *Slim, Master of War*, p. 81.

22 The Arakan Campaign, Appendix A, p. 44, CAB 106/175.

23 The Arakan Campaign, Appendix I, Eastern Army Operation Instruction No 15, 17 Oct. 1942, p. 40.

24 Prasad, Bhargava and Khera, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 1, p. 44.

25 The Arakan Campaign, Appendix B, p. 45, CAB 106/175.

26 The Arakan Campaign, Appendix I, Eastern Army Operation Instruction No 15, 17 Oct. 1942, p. 41.

it was supposed to be converted into an all-weather road.<sup>27</sup> By 1 December 1942, a fair-weather road was to be constructed between Chittagong and Ramu to Tumbru. And by 1 January 1943, an all-weather motor transport road was to be constructed from Chittagong to Ramu. The fair-weather road from Ramu to Tumbru was to be converted into an all-weather motor transport road by 1 March. The Tumbru-Maungdaw motor transport fair-weather road was to be constructed by 1 February and it was planned that this road was to be converted to an all-weather road by 1 March. Finally, by 1 March 1943, a fair-weather road was to be constructed between Buthidaung and Rathedaung and before the monsoon this road was to be converted into an all-weather motor transport road.<sup>28</sup>

In order to protect the invasion force and its logistical infrastructure from marauding Japanese air units, Wavell ordered that 12 light AA guns should be deployed at Chittagong and eight light AA guns for protecting the airstrip at Palel. Active defence should be pursued, noted Wavell, in the Lushai Hills. This should be based on active patrolling and carefully sited roadblocks on tracks needed to be set up. The LoC in the Chin Hills was based on packs of porters. The 39th Light Division was stationed in Shillong as an army reserve. It was to be administered and trained by the 4th Corps.<sup>29</sup>

The first move in the Arakan occurred with the dispatch of one company of the 1st Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment to Maungdaw, which the V Force reported as clear of the Japanese. A bigger detachment was not sent due to inadequate logistical facilities. The passage down the Naf River was totally dependent on the impressment of the local civilians. Soon a company of the 1st Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment moved to Maungdaw. Since Maungdaw had jetties, this small port was used by the river steamers which sailed from Tumbru. Tumbru is at the head of the Naf River, some 20 miles north of Maungdaw. It was decided to use Maungdaw and Buthidaung for operations in the southern direction up to Foul Point (southern tip of the Mayu Peninsula). Indian patrols reached Buthidaung on 15 October. The Japanese soon moved to Buthidaung in launches, of which one sank. On 24 October 1942, the Japanese landed eight miles south of Buthidaung. The Indian troops retreated from Buthidaung and Maungdaw to Bawli Bazaar via Teknaf.<sup>30</sup> At the

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<sup>27</sup> The Arakan Campaign, Appendix B, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> The Arakan Campaign, Appendix A, p. 44.

<sup>29</sup> The Arakan Campaign, Appendix 1, Eastern Army Operation Instruction No 15, 17 Oct. 1942, pp. 42–43.

<sup>30</sup> The Arakan Campaign, Narrative Report of Creffield, p. 7; Notes on the Arakan Situation, May–December 1942, p. 36; Madan, *The Arakan Operations: 1942–1945*, p. 27; Lyman, *Slim, Master of War*, p. 81.



end of September 1942, there were only two battalions of the 33rd Japanese Division present in Akyab. One battalion was sent to Buthidaung and Maungdaw in late October.<sup>31</sup> The CO of the 14th Indian Division decided to strengthen Bawli *Bazaar* with the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, in October 1942, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade moved the bulk of its personnel to Cox *Bazaar* through the river/sea route. This transfer of troops was very slow because the ships available were very small (250–300 tons) with a carrying capacity of 200 personnel each. The ships sailed within two miles of the coast and then the men were transferred on small boats. The divisional engineers started constructing a road with the aid of local labour from Domahari to Ramu to Cox *Bazaar* for the pack animals, light carts and light vehicles.<sup>33</sup>

On 30 October 1942, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade opened its Advanced Headquarters at Ukhia and a platoon of the 1st Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment was pushed to Goppe *Bazaar*.<sup>34</sup> The Japanese decided to hold the line Maungdaw-Buthidaung-Letwedet (a village on the eastern side of the Mayu Range, north of the Maungdaw-Buthidaung Road).<sup>35</sup> During November 1942, Brigadier Hammond started his advance to Ramu and Ukhia from Cox *Bazaar*. Though there was no Japanese opposition, the advance was slow due to the difficult physical geography. Logistics depended on the porters. Very often the troops had to go on half rations due to lack of supplies. Between Cox *Bazaar* and Ukhia, the tracks were often below several feet of water and the coolies had to move through water and mud.<sup>36</sup>

By the middle of November 1942, it became clear to the India Command that necessary landing crafts could not be concentrated for a sea assault on Akyab during the winter of 1942/1943 due to the Allied operation at Madagascar. It was decided that the 14th Indian Division should advance along the Arakan Coast to Foul Point and then launch an assault on Akyab. By this time, the availability of air assets had somewhat improved. The aircraft available to the Allies for operations in Arakan-Assam comprised 10 short-range fighter squadrons, four light bomber squadrons, one medium bomber squadron, one GR landplane squadron, one photo-reconnaissance unit, half a squadron of heavy bombers and half a squadron of long-range fighters. In addition, the 10th USAAF

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31 Lyman, *Slim, Master of War*, p. 83.

32 Madan, *The Arakan Operations: 1942–1945*, p. 28.

33 The Arakan Campaign, Narrative Report of Creffield, p. 8.

34 Madan, *The Arakan Operations: 1942–1945*, p. 29.

35 The Arakan Campaign, Notes on the Arakan Situation, May–December 1942, p. 37.

36 The Arakan Campaign, Narrative Report of Creffield, p. 8.



had the following serviceable crafts: two Fortresses, 18 Liberators, 23 Mitchells, three Lightnings, 67 Kittihawks and one Douglas (Transport). However, there were no all-weather airfields in the Arakan or East Bengal. There were fair-weather strips at Chittagong, Dinjan, Tezpur, Agartala and Feni.<sup>37</sup>

For riverine logistical support, the 14th Indian Division relied on the 2000th Flotilla operating from Chittagong. The 2000th Flotilla's Headquarters consisted of a flagship equipped with two AA guns and one LMG, four tenders, two tugs, 12 flats and six creek steamers. Each of the two squadron headquarters had a flagship of similar armaments. Each squadron had three divisions and each division comprised four ships. The armament of each ship included two AA guns and three LMGs and a two-pounder anti-tank gun. In addition, there were four motor launches with W/T for communication purpose. There were 25 sailing sloops each of 50–70 tons capacity.<sup>38</sup>

By mid-November 1942, it became apparent to Wavell that the amphibious assault craft would not be available to him. So, the focus remained on overland advance by the Commonwealth ground units in the Arakan. On 19 November, Irwin ordered Lloyd to seize Foul Point by 15 January 1943 so that the 6th British Brigade (under Brigadier R.V.C. Cavendish, originally from the 2nd British Division) could launch an assault on Akyab across the Mayu River. Lloyd was also ordered the capture of Rathedaung village to prevent the Japanese from using the Mayu River. Lloyd planned to attack the Maungdaw-Buthidaung area on 2 December with four battalions.<sup>39</sup> In December 1942, the 123rd Indian Infantry Brigade with the addition of the 1st Rajput was ready to advance on Maungdaw and Buthidaung. The forwardmost position of the Indian troops was Taung *Bazaar*. According to British intelligence, the Japanese had one battalion dispersed between Manugdaw and Buthidaung. The principal Japanese defensive position was Razabil village. Irwin decided to halt the advance till the remainder of the 47th Indian Infantry Brigade could be brought up and the tracks to Goppe *Bazaar* and Taung *Bazaar* were made fit for at least mules.<sup>40</sup> On 16 and 17 December, the lead elements of the 14th Indian Division entered Maungdaw and Bithudaung after the Japanese evacuated these two places. The 47th and 123rd Indian Infantry Brigades advanced east of the Mayu River towards Rathedaung and down the coast towards Foul Point. On 27 December, the 10th Lancashire Fusiliers entered Rathedaung. On 27 December 1942, the 47th Indian Infantry Brigade occupied Indin on the Mayu Peninsula. The 2nd

37 The Arakan Campaign, Notes on the Arakan Situation, May–December 1942, pp. 37–38.

38 The Arakan Campaign, Appendix I&F, pp. 42, 48, CAB 106/175.

39 Lyman, *Slim, Master of War*, pp. 81–83.

40 The Arakan Campaign, Narrative Report of Creffield, p. 8.

Battalion of the 231st Japanese Regiment withdrew from their forward positions at Buthidaung-Maungdaw. The Japanese at this stage were conducting a deliberate tactical withdrawal. By the end of December 1942, Sinoh was occupied but Japanese resistance strengthened at Rathedaung. The Japanese high command started transferring the 55th Japanese Division from central Burma to the Arakan. And the Miyakazi Force (part of the 33rd Japanese Division in the Arakan) constructed defensive positions at Akyab, in the Donbaik-Laungchaung area on the Mayu Peninsula and at Rathedaung on the eastern side of the Mayu River. The 5th Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment and the 1st Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment were in Indin and Sinoh. On 31 December 1942, the 1st Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment repulsed several Japanese attacks on Sinoh.<sup>41</sup>

The overall situation in January–February 1943 was that the 14th Indian Division was attempting to push down the Mayu Peninsula towards its tip to Foul Point in order to be in striking distance of Akyab Island. Since the Mayu Peninsula had a range of almost inaccessible hills running down its length, the 14th Division had to split its force; part of it deployed in the east up to Rathedaung and the rest in the west near the coastal village of Donbaik.<sup>42</sup>

On 11 January 1943, the 1st Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment (less one company) concentrated in the Sangan *Chaung* area. The 47th Indian Infantry Brigade established its headquarters at Kodingauk. On the same day, the MMG Company of 9th Jat Regiment arrived at Shinkhali. On 18 January 1943, the 1st Inniskillings and 1st Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment, supported by two batteries of field artillery, one mountain battery and four carriers, attacked the Japanese positions north of Donbaik village. The Japanese troops armed with mortars and MMGs held the *chaungs* and foothills north of Donbaik. Japanese automatic fire and the snipers swept the open ground and the foothills and stopped the two-battalion attack. By 20 January, the B and D companies of the 1st Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment were without rations and ammunition and the personnel were dispersed in the hills and the jungles. On 30 January, the 55th Indian Infantry Brigade with half a squadron of the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC) Regiment (eight Valentine tanks) launched a frontal attack at

41 The Arakan Campaign, Notes on the Arakan Situation, May–December 1942, p. 38; Madan, *The Arakan Operations: 1942–1945*, pp. 34–35; Tim Moreman, “Debunking the Bunker”: From Donbaik to Razabil, January 1943–March 1944’, in Alan Jeffreys and Patrick Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47: Experience and Development* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 109–10.

42 John Prendergast, *Prender's Progress: A Soldier in India, 1931–47* (London: Cassell, 1979), p. 170.

Donbaik. The 1st Battalion of the 17th Dogra Regiment and the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment were in the lead. On 1 February, four Japanese companies with two 75-mm regimental guns, three anti-tank guns, several 37-mm guns, five 90-mm mortars and a captured British two-pounder met the Commonwealth attack. The Japanese troops were liberally supplied with automatic weapons and especially with MMGs. They made excellent use of the protection of the small *nalas* in positioning their mortars and MGs. On the banks of *chaungs* they constructed protected dugouts which even the British 25-pounders failed to destroy.<sup>43</sup> At Guadalcanal and New Guinea also, the Japanese frequently established their defensive positions along low jungle-covered ground.<sup>44</sup>

Major John Prendergast joined the 1st Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment (25th Punjabis, which was part of the 123rd Brigade) in the Arakan during February 1943.<sup>45</sup> He describes the Japanese defensive positions in detail:

Their construction of very strong bunkers with small, concealed apertures and the fact that they were prepared to die in them. These bunkers were in many cases sited on the reverse slope, so they were not readily discovered by tanks or other assailants. Moreover, each bunker lay in an inter-supporting pattern so that should one bunker be subject to winking out by grenade or flame thrower, one or more supporting ones would shoot the attacker to ribbons off the assailed bunker.<sup>46</sup>

Each bunker comprised five to 25 men, each armed with rifles, LMGs and MMGs. A narrow aperture or firing slit (three feet long and six inches in width) enabled the garrison to fire from inside the bunker, and a strongly constructed

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43 Madan, *The Arakan Operations: 1942–1945*, pp. 36, 39–41.

44 Douglas Ford, 'US Assessments of Japanese Ground Warfare Tactics and the Army's Campaigns in the Pacific Theatres, 1943–45: Lessons Learned and Methods Applies', *War in History*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2009), p. 336.

45 Prendergast, *Prender's Progress*, pp. 169, 173. The 25th Punjabis was part of the 123rd Brigade of the 14th Division. A brief history of the unit is necessary to avoid confusion. The Lahore Regiment became the 17th Bengal Native Infantry Regiment in 1861 and was re-designated as 25th Punjabis in 1903. This unit comprised Jats from Punjab, United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh), Rajputana, central India, Pathans from the North-West Frontier Province and the Tribal territory across the border of British-India, Punjabi Muslims from west Punjab and Sikhs from central Punjab. In 1922, the 25th Punjabis was renamed as the 15th Punjab Regiment. John Gaylor, *Sons of John Company: The Indian and Pakistan Armies 1903–1991* (1992, reprint, New Delhi: Lancer, 1993), pp. 182–83.

46 Prendergast, *Prender's Progress*, p. 172.

small escape hatch or door which opened into a crawl trench provided access to the bunker for resupply and reinforcements. At times, underground tunnels and narrow communication trenches were also dug which interconnected the bunkers so that the defenders could shift resources and human assets in order to beat off hostile attacks. The bunkers were camouflaged skilfully with vegetation and exploited the terrain for cover.<sup>47</sup>

Several similarities could be traced between combat in Papua in late 1942 and in the Arakan during 1942–44. The landscape of Papua, like that of the Arakan, was underdeveloped in terms of modern infrastructure, and deadly tropical diseases were rampant. The Japanese defensive positions in the difficult terrain of Papua consisted of fortified bunkers, blockhouses, trenches and weapons pits. The Japanese made good use of the landscape to maximize their defensive potential. Around the Buna area the Japanese used the swamps to channel Allied attacks along restricted areas where the former could bring in their defensive firepower. The Japanese defensive positions at the beachhead area in Papua were so well camouflaged that the Allied troops could not locate them till they were right on top of them. The Japanese pillboxes, camouflaged with coconut palm trees and well dug, were defended to the last man. Some of the pillboxes had steel and concrete tops. Each pillbox was positioned to provide supporting fire to the others in the area. The Australians used Stuart tanks to crush the pillboxes with difficulty.<sup>48</sup> The American soldiers also found the Japanese bunkers in New Guinea tough nuts to crack in 1944. The Japanese bunkers consisted of logs of coconut trees and the roof was covered with earth and vines. Small arms fire by the infantry made no impression on them. And since the bunkers rose very little above the level of the swamps and ground, the 25-pounder artillery pieces had no effect on them. The superbly camouflaged Japanese bunkers had interlocking fields of fire and were defended by troops equipped with mortars and MGs.<sup>49</sup>

Prendergast explained the inadequate British-Indian attack techniques against the Japanese bunkers in his memoirs. When a wave of infantry cleared the crest, whatever the skills in junior leadership, there was an inevitable pause—to locate the small, well-concealed apertures of bunkers, hard to see in

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47 Moreman, “Debunking the Bunker”: From Donbaik to Razabil, January 1943–March 1944’, in Jeffreys and Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47*, p. 111.

48 Peter J. Dean, ‘Anzacs and Yanks: US and Australian Operations at the Beachhead Battles’, in Peter J. Dean (ed.), *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 218, 220, 233.

49 Stephen R. Taaffe, *MacArthur’s Jungle War: The 1944 New Guinea Campaign* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 113.

the dust and smoke. The attacker then momentarily became a static target in enfilade—the perfect target for well-sited Japanese MGs. Then, the Japanese called down their artillery and mortar fire precisely upon their own positions, knowing well that they were relatively safe down within the bunkers, but that the attacking hostile infantry was outside and exposed to deadly blows.<sup>50</sup> At Buna, the US 32nd Division suffered heavy losses in its attempt to destroy the Japanese bunkers by launching frontal assaults.<sup>51</sup>

Prendergast offers both the limitations of British-Indian tactics as well as possible remedies, especially as regards the action at Donbaik. Donbaik showed that the available air bombing (even with medium bombs) could not crack these bunkers. Tanks were used in too small numbers. If there are only a few tanks, they can be quickly picked off one by one. A large number of tanks kept the anti-tank gunner looking several ways at once and by the time he had in his confusion ranged on one, another supporting tank may have seen the flash of the anti-tank gun and engaged his weapon in a second. Hence, the use of more tanks resulted in fewer casualties. These lessons were well-learned later in the war and with mounting air superiority, heavier air bombs were used with delayed-action fuses. This meant that the bombs had time to bury themselves deep into the bunker or make a hole in its roof before exploding, whereas an instantaneous fuse, bursting on impact merely raked the top of the bunker.<sup>52</sup>

Grenades and flame throwers were also very effective in attacking the Japanese in their dugouts in New Guinea. However, in mid-1943, the British and Indian units in the Arakan did not have flame throwers.<sup>53</sup> Overall, the British officers found out that the Japanese defences did not allow an easy advance. Enemy troops skilfully utilized the natural features of the jungle to strengthen their defensive positions. Defensive positions on the hilltops were selected to provide the maximum fields of fire, and positions concealed under thick vegetation were designed to avoid detection. Bunkers were constructed with teakwood and mud to minimize the effects of heavy bombardment. Moreover, Japanese soldiers launched effective counter-attacks and defended their positions literally to the last man, last bullet.<sup>54</sup> Douglas Ford rightly states

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50 Prendergast, *Prender's Progress*, p. 173.

51 Ford, 'US Assessments of Japanese Ground Warfare Tactics and the Army's Campaigns in the Pacific Theatres, 1943–45: Lessons Learned and Methods Applied', p. 338.

52 Prendergast, *Prender's Progress*, p. 173.

53 Ibid., p. 172; Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War*, p. 113.

54 Douglas Ford, 'Strategic Culture, Intelligence Assessment, and the Conduct of the Pacific War: The British-Indian and Imperial Japanese Armies in Comparison, 1941–45', *War in History*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2007), p. 90.

that in the spring of 1943, the dominant opinion in the British-Indian Army was that the Japanese soldier was a superior fighter in the jungle terrain. But this view of the Japanese superman was disappearing among the Australian and US armies because they had achieved victories against the IJA.<sup>55</sup> If anything, the dismal performance of the Commonwealth units in the First Arakan Campaign further strengthened the myth of Japanese superman.

The 25th Punjabis' failed attack on the Japanese defensive position in Temple Hill opposite Rathedaung had left the unit demoralized. The sight of dead Punjabis hanging on the wire in front of the Japanese position for two full weeks had sucked the spirit out of the battalion. The battalion commander took note of the deteriorating situation and initiated several steps. Morale had been high until this abortive attack and the long inactivity afterwards, seeing dead comrades on the Japanese wire a hundred yards away, somewhat demoralized the sepoys. The battalion commander attempted to counter the ever present boredom by examining air photographs with the mortar officer. He carried out harassing fire with 3-inch mortars along tracks used by the Japanese, which were shown on the photos, and ordered continued firing which was believed to be bad for the Japanese morale.<sup>56</sup> With ample stocks of ammunition and growing air superiority, the British commanders could afford such tactics. However, the British and Indian units in the Burma-India theatre were yet to come up with effective techniques to grapple with the IJA on the ground successfully.

Battle conditions for the soldiers were seldom good. A glimpse of the soldiers' conditions in the Arakan is offered by the lines jotted by Prendergast in his memoirs. In the monsoon the men were always wet. Though the air was not very cold, the heat was always humid, even in the dry season. Added to this was the almost certain threat of malaria and the ever present threat of dysentery and scrub typhus. There was a type of mud sore that was difficult to eradicate and was always a menace in those conditions of sweat, marsh and moisture. Effective medical counter-measures aided the British and Indian troops. Prendergast noted that only due to the superhuman efforts of the medical service were malaria and scrub typhus suppressed. Dysentery was controlled by devising ingenious spring lids over latrine holes along a wooden platform

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55 Douglas Ford, "A Conquerable Yet Resilient Foe": British Perceptions of the Imperial Japanese Army's Tactics on the India-Burma Front, September 1942 to Summer 1944', *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2003), p. 65.

56 Prendergast, *Prender's Progress*, pp. 173–74.

which, together with spraying, cut down flies and the spread of the disease.<sup>57</sup> It must be noted that the Japanese medical service was in a worse state.

On 6 May 1943, the Japanese established a roadblock on the Maungdaw-Buthidaung Road near Letwedet about four miles from Buthidaung. This was the same old Japanese tactic which they had followed in Malaya and in their advance towards Rangoon and central Burma in the first half of 1942. An attempt by the 35th Brigade (especially by the 8th Battalion of the 13th FFR) failed to clear the roadblock. The British-Indian troops' response to the Japanese roadblock was also similar to the pattern established earlier. It was decided to withdraw all the troops (55th Brigade) east of the roadblock to Taung *Bazaar*.<sup>58</sup> The British-Indian troops, however, would react differently to Japanese roadblocks only in early 1944.

The British and Indian troops at that time were deployed in the following fashion. Senyinbya was the headquarters of the 55th Brigade. The 2nd Battalion of the 1st Punjab, 2nd Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment, 6th Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment, 1st Battalion of the 18th Punjab (less two companies) Regiment and one MG company were in this region. South-west of Senyinbya, was the 7th Battalion of the 15th Punjab less two companies. Between Senyinbya and Buthidaung were one regiment (less one company) and a MG company. The headquarters of the 36th Brigade was at Buthidaung. The 8th Battalion of the 13th FFR was near the East Tunnel and the 5th Battalion of 16th Punjab Regiment was on the Mayu Ridge south of the Tunnel. The 1st Dogras was at Taung *Bazaar* and the 12th FFR's MG Battalion was at Maungdaw. The headquarters of the 71st Brigade was in the Tunnels. The 9th Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment and two companies of the 7th Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment were also in the Tunnels. At Lambaung was the headquarters of the 4th Brigade. The 3rd Battalion of the 9th GR and 8th Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment were also in this region.<sup>59</sup>

The 55th Brigade moved to Maungdaw and lost about 80 vehicles. One brigade of the 70th Division had concentrated at Chittagong and it was sent to Bawli *Bazaar*. A second brigade of the 70th Division was ordered forward to Cox *Bazaar*, which was in chaos at that time. This place was functioning as a recently established base for the British-Indian campaign geared to recapture Akyab from the Japanese. Cox *Bazaar* was connected with Bawli *Bazaar* by a dirt road with many flimsy bridges. The frequent marching of troops and

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57 Ibid., p. 175.

58 The Arakan Campaign, Extract of a Letter sent to Major-General Lloyd, 23 May 1943, p. 25, CAB 106/175.

59 Ibid., pp. 25–26.



passage of three-ton lorries covered the road with knee-deep mud. The 14th Battalion of the 12th FFR joined the 26th Indian Division and relieved the 2nd Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment. On 13 May, Maungdaw was evacuated. On 15 May 1943, the Japanese entered Maungdaw. Three battalions of the 47th Brigade were destroyed in the course of the above-mentioned failed operation.<sup>60</sup>

However, all was not black for the Indian Army. Even when defeated by numerically inferior, skilled IJA troops, individual battalions were learning lessons after making mistakes. In May 1943, the 3rd Battalion of the 9th GR was deployed at Gyndaw. It was connected with Bawli *Bazaar* by a coastal road. At Gyndaw, the battalion was split up into various companies which were positioned at the head of a valley, where a small stream left the hill tracks for the narrow coastal plain under a road bridge. The battalion was ordered to hold this region till the units further south who were retreating passed through Gyndaw. Scott Leathart commanded the B Company which was dug on the south bank of the Gyndaw stream amidst thick jungle. Fields of fire were cleared and the position was protected with wire. However, this position was surrounded by hills which were not occupied. If the Japanese infantry occupied these hillocks then this position would become untenable. The withdrawal of the defeated British troops further demoralized the Gurkha battalion. During the night, the 3rd Battalion of the 9th GR was ordered to withdraw. The night was moonless but filled with cries of jackals, lizards and other animals. Even the British officers were afraid of moving through the dark, dense jungle. Worse, the Japanese came in the darkness and imitated English voices. They cried out 'Hello Johnnie' and 'Ayo Gurkhali'. The nervous Gurkhas replied by firing their Brens. When the shots were fired then the attendant flashes gave away the position of the defenders in the camp. Some 5,000 rounds were fired by the battalion but none hit the Japanese. The Japanese soldiers then surrounded the camp, imitated the sounds of the birds and animals, and occasionally shot at the defenders. Suddenly, it was all quiet again. The Japanese jitter attack had completely unnerved the battalion. Finally, the battalion withdrew in the moonless night and complete pandemonium broke out. Men started shouting, running hither and thither. All contact was lost. An attack by a small Japanese party at this juncture would have wiped out this battalion. Not only the Gurkhas, but their British officers also had no jungle warfare training. In fact, just before coming to the Arakan, Scott Leathart had

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60 The Arakan Campaign, Extract of a Letter sent to Major-General Lloyd, 23 May 1943, pp. 26–27; Scott Leathart, *With the Gurkhas: India, Burma, Singapore, Malaya, Indonesia, 1940–1959* (Edinburgh/Durham: Pentland Press, 1996), p. 68.



done an MT Course at Ahmadnagar which, according to him, proved completely useless for jungle fighting where troops marched instead of being carried in trucks and armoured cars. When dawn broke, the battalion, after losing 20 men, reached the brigade headquarters at Alythengaw.<sup>61</sup>

Leathart of the 3rd Battalion of the 9th GR noted in his autobiography: 'But important lessons were learnt.... Never again did the higher command order a whole battalion in extended order to move across open ground in the dark when the enemy was known to be around, and never again were we put in a position so hopelessly impossible to defend.'<sup>62</sup> In order to raise the morale of the troops, the Gurkhas were ordered to conduct harassing patrols against the Japanese during the monsoon period. And in June 1943, Leathart was sent on a Camouflage Course (which was apt for jungle combat) in Shillong.<sup>63</sup>

After the withdrawal from Maungdaw, the different units were deployed as follows. The 71st Brigade was in the Teknaf Peninsula. The 6th Brigade was in Tumbru. At Bawli *Bazaar* was the 36th Brigade. The 23rd Brigade of the 70th Division was in the region north of Bawli *Bazaar* and the foot of the Goppe *Bazaar* track. The 55th Brigade was between Shabe *Bazaar* and Fakir *Bazaar*. And finally, the 4th Brigade was dispersed between Taung *Bazaar*, Goppe *Bazaar* and in the north up to the Kalapanzin Valley.<sup>64</sup>

### Stalemate

H.P. Willmott writes that between November 1942 and May 1943 (the First Arakan Offensive), two Commonwealth divisions were outfought and defeated by two Japanese regiments.<sup>65</sup> On 14 April 1943, after assessing the failed Arakan Campaign, Wavell noted that the Japanese outdid the British and Indian troops in jungle warfare. The Japanese ability to move in the night was admirable. They travelled lightly and hence were less dependent on their LoCs, unlike the Commonwealth soldiers. In equipment, training, discipline and mobility, the Japanese had an edge over their British-Indian opponents. Wavell accepted that, despite getting support from the RAF, the British-Indian troops had failed due to the above-mentioned factors. Wavell squared his account with his racial

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61 Leathart, *With the Gurkhas*, pp. 65–70.

62 Ibid., p. 71.

63 Ibid., pp. 71–72.

64 The Arakan Campaign, Extract of a Letter sent to Major-General Lloyd, 23 May 1943, p. 26.

65 H.P. Willmott, *The Second World War in the Far East* (1999, reprint, London: Cassell, 2000), p. 148.

bias. The Japanese had the 'cunning of the savage' and this quality, he emphasized, the British-Indian troops lacked.<sup>66</sup> Ford notes that conventional tactics which relied on sheer firepower were inadequate to destroy the tricky Japanese defensive positions. What was required was greater emphasis on creating a synergy between the infantry and other supporting arms. In other words, rather than brute force, a combined arms tactics was required.<sup>67</sup> And the Commonwealth units in the Burma-India border were not prepared to implement such tactics in mid-1943.

Wavell, while summing up the failed operation, accepted responsibility in the following words:

Arakan was a most unfavourable theatre, into which I should certainly not have made a deep land advance on any scale had sea transport been available. I also realized that the troops available had little opportunity of training in jungle warfare. I hoped, however, that, if the advance in Arakan could proceed rapidly, it would be difficult for the Japanese to reinforce in time; and considered it was better to take the risks involved than to remain inactive on this front during the winter (of 1942–43).<sup>68</sup>

Wavell (Commander-in-Chief of India), however, did not mention the convoluted command structure in the Arakan which involved Lloyd and Irwin (Army Commander) but cut off Slim as the corps commander and was also partly responsible for the debacle of the First Arakan Offensive. This convoluted command structure was partly Wavell's doing. It ought to be noted that during the first phase of retreat from Burma in early 1942, the absence of a corps commander was noted. The result was chaotic retreat. And during the second phase of the long retreat, a corps commander (Slim) was appointed. Then, the retreat became more orderly. For this structural deficiency regarding the issue of having a corps commander, the British-Indian military system was partly responsible.

Robert Lyman argues that Slim had a better plan up his sleeve. Instead of launching repeated attacks by massed battalions of the 14th Indian Division as had happened in Donbaik (where for 50 days the mutually supporting Japanese

66 General Archibald Wavell, *Speaking Generally: Broadcasts, Orders and Addresses in Time of War (1939–43)* (London: Macmillan, 1946), p. 162.

67 Ford, "A Conquerable Yet Resilient Foe": British Perceptions of the Imperial Japanese Army's Tactics on the India-Burma Front, September 1942 to Summer 1944', p. 66.

68 The Arakan Campaign, Extract from Wavell's Second Despatch from India Command: March–Dec. 1942, Operation for the Capture of Akyab, p. 49, CAB 106/175.

bunkers stalled the frontal attack by the sepoys), Slim could have provided victory. Slim's recipe was not frontal attack on a narrow front but attacks that followed the 'hooks'. While the enemy's attention was to be held by applying pressure at his front, the real punch had to come at his flank and rear. And for launching flank and rear attacks at the Japanese defensive system, the Commonwealth troops had to move through the so-called impenetrable jungle. Lyman continues that both Wavell and Irwin were obsessed with capturing ground rather than destroying the enemy. Their concepts resulted in the 14th Indian Division becoming overstretched along the elongated Mayu Peninsula with an extended LoC in difficult country which was easily cut by Japanese outflanking and encircling moves.<sup>69</sup>

It is time to shift attention from great commanders to the instrument at their disposal, i.e. the armed forces which they commanded. Slim deserves credit for laying out a well thought out tactical plan to tackle the network of Japanese bunkers which were basically pillboxes with lots of natural materials added to exploit the physical landscape. Frankly, it is questionable whether Slim (had he been in command) could have gained victory over the IJA during the First Arakan Offensive. Slim might have understood the folly of infantry attacking frontally on the well entrenched Japanese defensive positions much earlier than Lloyd and Irwin and probably would have called off the offensive. However, the Commonwealth troops during late 1942 and early 1943 were not ready to undertake flanking moves against the enemy in difficult terrain and to stand and fight when they themselves were being outflanked and communications with their rear were cut. The Indian and British soldiers were yet to learn to infiltrate through the jungle with élan and confidence. And while moving through the jungle when their LoCs were cut, they required to be supplied. This would become possible only with further training and the availability of aerial supply. These two techniques would be available to the British generals only in early 1944 when the Second Arakan Offensive launched by the British collided with the HA GO offensive of the Japanese. Then, the results would be different. As regards Lyman's second point, capturing essential ground was at times vital. Just as Wavell and Irwin thought that capturing and holding Donbaik and Rathedaung were essential, in early 1944, Slim also rightly considered holding on to Imphal and Kohima. But, in early 1944, Slim had several advantages which were denied to Wavell and Irwin in 1942/1943. Aerial

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69 Robert Lyman, 'The Art of Manoeuvre at the Operational Level of War: Lieutenant-General W.J. Slim and Fourteenth Army, 1944–45', in Gary Sheffield and Geoffrey Till (eds.), *The Challenges of High Command: The British Experience* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 93–95.

superiority, availability of aerial supply and air transportation of ground troops, better trained troops, greater firepower (tanks and artillery) and numerical superiority at the point of contact, etc. were the elements which Slim, unlike Wavell and Irwin, possessed in 1944. Further, the pursuit and destruction of the retreating Japanese forces became possible with the availability of tanks, self-propelled guns, field artillery, fighters, fighter-bombers, dive bombers, transport aircraft. Even then destruction of the defeated and demoralized BAA equipped with light weapons and without any armour and aircraft was possible only in the plains of central Burma and not in the jungle-covered terrain of the Arakan.

The beginning of the monsoon in May 1943 found the forward troops of the 26th Indian Division confronting the Japanese forces along the Muangdaw-Buthidaung Line. The troops of this division carried on aggressive patrolling. The 26th Indian Division took up the following defensive line: Taung *Bazaar*-Goppe *Bazaar*-Pruma Chung-Nhila-Mathabhanga. The 55th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 6th and 23rd British Infantry Brigades were withdrawn to Chittagong.<sup>70</sup> During June 1943, after the evacuation from Buthidaung and Maungdaw (as part of the retirement from the Mayu Peninsula), the 26th Indian Division covered Cox *Bazaar*. While one infantry brigade covered the coastal region from Teknaf Nhila to Bawli *Bazaar*, another infantry brigade held the region further inland from Taung *Bazaar* to Goppe *Bazaar*. The Japanese took up positions covering Maungdaw-Buthidaung. And then the monsoon broke.<sup>71</sup>

On 14 and 17 August, a 26th Indian Division post at Ngakyedauk Pass was engaged by the Japanese. In the first week of September, the patrols of the 26th Indian Division came under heavy MMG and mortar fire from the area between Ngakyedauk and Awlanbyin on the Ngakyedauk *Chaung*. During August 1943, the Japanese established a defensive line stretching from Razabil to Sannyinweywa. The Japanese had constructed strong bunkers, roofed dugouts and communication trenches along this line. The Japanese also strengthened their presence on the Spine of the Mayu Range north of the Maungdaw-Buthidaung Road.<sup>72</sup>

70 Lieutenant-Colonel B.L. Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre, Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939-45* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section India & Pakistan: 1964), p. 202.

71 Field-Marshal Claude Auchinleck, Operations in the Indo-Burma Theatre based on India from 21 June 1943 to 15 November 1943, by Commander-in-Chief of India, 29 April 1948, *Second Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 38274, p. 2657.

72 Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, pp. 202-3.

Constant patrolling activities put a lot of strain on the 26th Indian Division. So it was sent for rest and the 7th Indian Division took its place. The 7th Indian Division was under Major-General F.W. Messervy (CO from 30 July 1943 till 7 December 1944). Messervy had joined the Hodson's Horse, an elite cavalry regiment of the Indian Army. He had also served on the Western Front during World War I and took part in General Allenby's great cavalry sweep from Palestine to Turkey in 1918. Messervy also acted as an instructor at the Indian Staff College at Quetta and took command of the 7th Indian Division in the summer of 1943 at Ranchi.<sup>73</sup>

On 30 July 1943, the 7th Indian Division disposed the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade (under Brigadier M.R. Roberts) in the Kalapanzin Valley and the 89th Brigade (under Brigadier J.C. Martin) was west of the Mayu Range. By 25 August 1943, the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade took over the Ngakyedauk Pass-Goppe *Bazaar-Taung Bazaar* area. By the end of September, the 114th Indian Infantry Brigade was on the east side of the Mayu Range and the 89th Brigade was on the coastal plain on the west. The 4th Battalion of the 8th GR was 10 miles south of Bawli and the 7th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment was in the Bawli area and on the summit of the Goppe Pass. Relief of the 26th Indian Division was completed only in October 1943.<sup>74</sup>

Medical arrangements for the Commonwealth troops were improving at this stage. The Advanced Dressing Stations (ADSS) of the 66th Indian Field Ambulance were in the Wabyin area and also in Bawli. The ADSS of the 44th Indian Field Ambulance were in Nhila, Goppe *Bazaar* and in Tumbru *Ghat*. The ADS of the 54th Indian Field Ambulance was in Taung *Bazaar*. The 1st Indian Bearer Company established its headquarters at Goppe Pass and attached its two platoons with the 54th Indian Field Ambulance and one platoon with the 66th Indian Field Ambulance. The casualties were carried to ADSS by stretcher bearers and to Medical Dressing Stations (MDSS) by ambulance cars and jeeps. From Tumbru *Ghat* and Bawli North, they were moved by *sampans* and hospital ships to the 8th Indian Casualty Clearing Station and 9th British Casualty Clearing Station at Rumkhapalong.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, the American medical service in New Guinea improved in the course of 1944 and that of the IJA which was initially almost non-existent got worse. The US troops unlike the Japanese soldiers enjoyed the benefits of penicillin against bacteria,

<sup>73</sup> Shipster, *Mist on the Rice Fields*, pp. 32–33.

<sup>74</sup> Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, p. 203.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203–4.

sulfa drugs to combat infections, and blood transfusion. So, many of the wounded American soldiers, unlike their Japanese counterparts, survived.<sup>76</sup>

In September 1943, the 7th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment took up defensive positions in the foothills of the Mayu Range. This battalion formed part of the 89th Infantry Brigade which comprised the 2nd Battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers and the 4th Battalion of the 8th GR.<sup>77</sup> John Shipster, a young officer aged 22 of the 7th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment noted in his memoirs:

Morale was good, but there were no officers with any operational experience and we knew very little about our potential enemy. Generally speaking we were inadequately trained in jungle warfare.... The Japanese harassed our position at night, making us retaliate with small arms fire and mortars, but in the morning there were frequently no dead Japanese. Our CO, Robin Rouse, issued strict orders that this lack of fire discipline was to cease and I passed on his orders.<sup>78</sup>

In New Guinea also, the night belonged to the Japanese infantry while the American soldiers huddled around their foxholes feeling uneasy. And the American soldiers suffered from inadequate fire discipline, which resulted in casualties due to friendly fire. In New Georgia and the Solomons, a quarter of all the Americans killed were victims of friendly fire. At Bougainville the figure was 16 per cent.<sup>79</sup>

By the end of 1943, the 14th Army planned another limited incursion in the Arakan. On 1 November 1943, Headquarters 15th Indian Corps under Lieutenant-General A.F.P. Christison (16 November 1943–30 September 1945) assumed command of operations in the Arakan south of Chittagong. This corps had the 5th and 7th Indian Divisions along with the 81st West African Division. The 5th and 7th Indian Divisions were now trained for operating in the jungle environment. These two divisions planned to advance down the Mayu Range. The plan was to capture Maungdaw and Buthidaung and also the road network between these two towns. The 5th Indian Division was to advance along the western side of the Mayu Range and the 7th Indian Division along the eastern side. The 81st West African Division was to operate further east in order to protect the flank of the 7th Indian Division from any Japanese columns which might

<sup>76</sup> Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War*, p. 114.

<sup>77</sup> Shipster, *Mist on the Rice-Fields*, p. 29.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>79</sup> Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War*, pp. 112, 114.

attempt to attack the rear of the sepoys along the eastern side of Mayu. In the previous fighting in the Arakan, the Japanese exploited the weak Commonwealth left flank and after breaking through this flank disrupted the principal forces east of Kalapanzin and the Mayu Peninsula. To prevent such an occurrence in the future, the 81st West African Division was placed in the Kaladan Valley. Its duty was to protect the flank of the main force (the 5th and 7th Indian Divisions), to make a diversion and to draw as many IJA assets as possible from the route of main attack and to threaten the flank of the Japanese in the Mayu Valley. The 81st West African Division started concentrating in Chiranga south of Dohazari in early December 1943. The two Indian divisions were ordered to build roads to sustain their supply and geared to stand and fight in defensive boxes rather than to retreat in the event of any Japanese attack. On 9 November, the 5th Indian Division under Major-General H.R. Briggs took over the front west of the Mayu Range from the 7th Indian Division which was then concentrated in the Kalapanzin Valley east of the Mayu Range. The brigades of the 5th and the 7th Indian Divisions slowly but steadily infiltrated forward and by mid-November 1943 were in contact with the Japanese outposts on the line from Zeganbyin to the point where the Ngakyedauk *Chaung* joins the Kalapanzin River four miles south of Taung *Bazaar*. Until a motor road was constructed across the Ngakyedauk Pass, the 7th Indian Division was supplied by pack mules across the Goppe Pass and *sampans* down the Kalapanzin River.<sup>80</sup> The 15th Indian Corps, along with the 4th and 33rd Corps, came under the 14th Army which reported to the 11th Army Group. And the latter army group was under SEAC.

Though the First Arakan Campaign was a failure for India Command, the Japanese remained anxious due to the strengthening of the British and Indian units, especially in September 1943. In the Akyab Sector, in west Burma, the British-Indian 5th and 7th Divisions were disposed in depth along the Buthidaung-Maungdaw Front. The Japanese assumed that these two divisions during an emergency could be backed up by two to three additional divisions. The Japanese were also concerned by the rise in the number of British and

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80 James Butler (ed.), *History of the Second World War United Kingdom Military Series*, Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby with Captain C.D. Addis, Brigadier M.R. Roberts, Colonel G.T. Wards and Air Vice-Marshal N.L. Desoer, *The War against Japan*, vol. 3, *The Decisive Battles* (London: HMSO, 1961), pp. 40–41; Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, pp. 204–5; Daniel Marston, 'Learning from Defeat: The Burma Campaign', in Daniel Marston (ed.), *The Pacific War: From Pearl Harbour to Hiroshima* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010), pp. 107–8.



Indian vessels in Chittagong Harbour and on the Naf River. They believed that the British were planning an amphibious attack on Akyab.<sup>81</sup>

In November 1943, the Spitfires were deployed in Bengal for the first time. The 615 and 617 squadrons were based in Chittagong to protect the vital port and also to cover the Arakan. Within one month, the Spitfires destroyed four Japanese photographic reconnaissance aircraft (Dinahs). Previously, the Dinah's range, speed and height had enabled them to fly with impunity over the Allied forward bases and the Hurricanes were unable to catch them. The Japanese reacted by sending out fighter sweeps in order to test the Spitfires and whittle down Spitfire strength. However, by the end of December, the Japanese lost 22 aircraft, another 33 were damaged, and the Allied loss was only 13 aircraft. The greatest air battle occurred on the last day of the 1943. On that day, No. 136 Squadron destroyed 12 and damaged 11 when a mixed force of Japanese fighters and bombers attempted to attack the light naval force along the Arakan Coast. The Japanese carried out one strategic attack when on 5 December 1943, 60 bombers and fighters (including some naval aircraft) in two waves bombed Calcutta. The Japanese lost two aircraft and another five were damaged. The three and a half squadrons of Hurricane fighters (including half a squadron of night fighters) which were defending the area lost five aircraft and another six were damaged.<sup>82</sup> Michael Dockrill rightly states that the aerial fight over Chittagong on 31 December 1943 and along the Arakan Coast on 15 January 1944 established the supremacy of the Spitfires over the Japanese Zeros.<sup>83</sup> However, supremacy in land engagement was yet to follow.

### HA GO Operation

As early as 7 August 1943, the Southern Army had directed the BAA to start preparing for an offensive against eastern India. As a diversionary operation to the main U GO (Imphal Operation), the BAA planned the HA GO Operation to be launched in the Arakan. HA GO was to be launched by the 55th Japanese

81 *Japanese Monograph No. 132, Burma Operations Record 28th Army Operations in Akyab Area* (1952, Prepared by HQ USAFFE and Eighth US Army [Rear], Distributed by the Office of the Chief of Military History Department of the Army, reprint, 1958), p. 1.

82 Air Chief Marshal R.E.C. Peirse, 'Air Operations in South-East Asia, 16 November 1943 to 31 May 1944, *Third Supplement to the London Gazette*, 13 March 1951, No. 39173, p. 1383.

83 Michael Dockrill, 'British Leadership in Air Operations: Malaya and Burma', in Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War: 1941-45* (Oxon: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 128.



Division, two to three weeks prior to the start of the U GO Operation.<sup>84</sup> The objective of HA GO was to engage and pin down as many Commonwealth units as possible and to draw the reserve from the principal theatre of operation along Imphal-Kohima. One INA battalion was also used in the Arakan Campaign. If the Japanese units were able to reach Chittagong then the INA was to encourage desertion among the Indian units and incite rebellion in the countryside.<sup>85</sup>

In November 1943, Lieutenant-General Hanaya was appointed as CO of the 55th Japanese Division. At that time, this division was disposed of as follows: 55th Infantry Group Headquarters and 143rd Infantry Regiment at Maungdaw-Buthidaung Front; 112th Infantry Regiment (less one battalion) in the west coast of Burma (from Donbaik to the mouth of the Naf River); 55th Reconnaissance Regiment and 1st Battalion of the 112th Infantry Regiment in the Akyab area; and finally 1st Battalion of the 213th Infantry Regiment in the Kala-dan River region.<sup>86</sup>

By late November 1943, the 15th Corps with the 7th Indian Division and the 36th Brigade of the 26th Indian Division plus the 81st West African Division held a line from Teknaf to Taung *Bazaar*. The Commonwealth troops were opposed by the 55th Japanese Division which had its headquarters at Akyab. Its 143rd Regiment held the line from Maungdaw to Buthidaung and the 112th and 213th Regiments were held in reserve at the rear.<sup>87</sup>

On the night of 30 November/1 December 1943, troops of the 7th Indian Division started a two pronged advance southwards east of the Mayu Range. The 33rd Brigade columns crossed the Ngakyedauk *Chaung* and occupied the area from Ngakyedauk village to the ridge about 1.5 miles north-west of Sinohbyin village. By 3 December, it had extended its area of operation to the hills overlooking Maungyithaung and Sinohbyin. The 89th Brigade pushed forward down Tatmin *Chaung* and established forward positions on the hills south of the *chaung*, one mile west of Tatmingyaungywa. However, both the Indian divisions were under orders not to get engaged in serious fighting with the Japanese.<sup>88</sup> At the end of December 1943, the 5th Indian Division held the

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84 *Japanese Monograph No. 132*, pp. 2–3.

85 Major-General Mohammad Zaman Kiani, *Memoirs: India's Freedom Struggle and the Great INA* (New Delhi: Reliance Publishing, 1994), p. 88.

86 *Japanese Monograph No. 132*, p. 3.

87 General George J. Giffard, Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944, *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 13 March 1951, No. 39171, p. 1350.

88 Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, p. 205.

area from the sea to the crest of the Mayu Peninsula and the 7th Indian Division moved into the Kalapanzin Valley.<sup>89</sup>

The 161st Brigade commanded by Brigadier Hughes was deployed in the Arakan. This brigade was part of the 5th Indian Division under Major-General Briggs. One unit of the 161st Brigade was the 4th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment, which carried desert sand in its shoes. On 30 October 1942, this battalion embarked from Bombay for Egypt. At Meena Camp in the suburbs of Cairo, this battalion carried out some training which, though not specific for jungle warfare, did aid them later when it was deployed in the Arakan. A.A.K. Niazi, who became a Lieutenant-General and Commander of the East Pakistan force in 1971, joined the 4th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment after passing out of Officer Training School (OTS) Bangalore on 8 March 1942. The Rajput regiment's training centre was Fatehgarh. Niazi had fought in the Western Desert. He wrote about the training in the Meena Camp in the following words: 'Before being dispatched to our respective units, the officers and men were given extensive weapons training.... The training culminated with battle inoculation, simulated attacks by troops using live ammunition, supported by artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire. I commanded the attacking company during battle inoculation as a Second Lieutenant'.<sup>90</sup> The 4th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment (and also the 5th Indian Division) served in the Middle East and then returned to Fatehgarh. From Fatehgarh, it moved to Chas, a small town near Ranchi. Here the division undertook some specific jungle training before moving to Burma. The 161st Indian Brigade moved to Teknaf Peninsula and at Nihala it underwent intensive jungle training.<sup>91</sup>

Meanwhile, the 5th Indian Division also launched an attack on the night of 30/31 December 1943. The 161st Brigade moved to the high ground to the north-east of Bakkagona about five miles to the north of Razabil. The next morning this brigade attacked a strong defensive position of the Japanese (Point 124). The attack was held up by LMG fire from the Japanese bunkers. By 4 January 1944, sappers completed a jeep track from Zeganbyin to Nawrondaung which made possible the rapid evacuation of casualties. All the attempts to reduce Point 124 by launching frontal assaults failed. However, by 8 January, Point 124 was completely surrounded by the Indian troops. Then, Point 141 north of

89 Giffard, *Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944*, p. 1353.

90 Lieutenant-General A.A.K. Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan* (1998, reprint, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Razabil was also completely encircled by the sepoys. On 9 January, the 5th Indian Division pushed on towards Maungdaw and occupied it.<sup>92</sup>

Early in January 1944, Giffard ordered the CO of the 14th Army, Lieutenant-General W.J. Slim, to secure the mouth of the Naf River and Maungdaw-Buthidaung. On 15 January 1944, the disposition of the 15th Indian Corps under Lieutenant-General Christison was as follows. The 5th Indian Division held the Maungdaw-Magyi *Chaung-Rehkat Chaung* line with a brigade in reserve west of the Mayu Range. The 7th Indian Division had a brigade in the hills north and north-east of Htindaw. One brigade held the line from Tatmakhali to Sinohbyin and the forwardmost troops of this brigade were at Letwedet *Chaung*. One brigade held the Kyaukit massif-Pyinshe-Windwin and a detachment was at Saingdin *Chaung*. The 81st West African Division held Daletme-Satpaung area in the Kaladan Valley. The 5th Indian Division was supported by one regiment of tanks. And each division had a battery of medium artillery in support.<sup>93</sup> This time the Commonwealth troops were not only better trained but had greater firepower (both static and mobile) at their disposal along with air cover over their heads. Worse for the IJA, due to its loss of aerial reconnaissance, it would fight half-blind. All these would have serious repercussions on the much vaunted IJA's military effectiveness.

The Japanese had turned the whole region around the Tunnels into a strong defensive position. In this region, the road runs through the highest portion of the Mayu Range between Maungdaw and Buthidaung, and it was converted into a strongly defended region with two strong points: Razabil on the west and Letwedet on the east. The plan was that the 5th Indian Division would take Razabil and the 7th Indian Division Buthidaung. The 81st West African Division was to advance down the Kaladan River and capture Kyauktaw and then cut the Kanzauk-Htizwe Road, which was the Japanese troops' principal lateral LoC between the Kaladan and Kalapanzin valleys.<sup>94</sup>

The Japanese started bringing in reinforcements for their forthcoming Arakan Operation from both within and outside Burma. A contingent which comprised the 144th Infantry Regiment, the 1st Battalion of the 55th Mountain Artillery Regiment and one engineer company which had been resting at Rabaul after participating in the New Guinea Campaign as the South Sea Detachment, reverted to the 55th Japanese Division's control and started arriving in Burma between December 1943 and January 1944. Further, the 11th

92 Raina (ed.), *Medical Services: Campaigns in the Eastern Theatre*, pp. 206–7.

93 Giffard, *Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November 1943 to 22 June 1944*, p. 1353.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 1353.

Infantry Regiment (less the 2nd and 3rd battalions) and the 2nd Battalion of the 54th Field Artillery Regiment were transferred from the 54th Japanese Division in mid-January to strengthen Akyab for the upcoming HA GO Operation.<sup>95</sup>

Hanaya's plan was that an attack should be launched against the British-Indian force's base of operation at Bawli *Bazaar*. The principal objective was to destroy the 7th Indian Division in the region east of Mayu Range with a pincer movement launched simultaneously from north and south. After that, by relocating the main weight of the 55th Japanese Division near Ngangyaung, the 5th Indian Division would be crushed in the Maungdaw region west of the Mayu Range. This phase of the HA GO Operation was known among the Japanese commanders as the Northern Arakan Operation, different from the subsequent Kaladan Operation.<sup>96</sup>

The Japanese were reshuffling their command structure in Burma. The naval bombardment of Ramree Island in December 1943 further strengthened the conviction of the Japanese high command in Burma that an Allied operation was forthcoming in the Arakan in the near future. Since the BAA's main concern was to prepare for the Imphal Operation, a strong defensive force was required to hold south-west Burma. So, on 15 January 1944, the 28th Japanese Army was activated and Lieutenant-General Shozo Sakurai was appointed as the commander. Shozo Sakurai, during the 1942 Burma Campaign, was the CO of the 33rd Japanese Division. Major-General Hideo Iwakuro from Sumatra became the 28th Japanese Army's Chief of Staff. In order to keep the formation of the 28th Japanese Army a secret, the code name Saku Group was used.<sup>97</sup>

The 28th Japanese Army had under its control the 11th Shipping Engineer Regiment which, besides the headquarters, had three companies and one material depot. Major-General Gisaburo Suzuki commanded the 11th Shipping Group. It had 1,105 men and the following vessels: 85 large landing barges, 54 small landing barges, 47 motored *sampans*, two armoured boats, 10 fishing boats, one messenger boat and one speed boat. The 11th Shipping Group was stationed at Taungup and its main supply depot was at Prome.<sup>98</sup>

The zone of responsibility of the 28th Japanese Army in south-west Burma stretched from Rangoon to Maungdaw along the west coast of Burma stretching inland to the Arakan and Pegu mountains. The 28th Japanese Army was also responsible for guarding the 400 miles of coastline, with many islands,

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95 *Japanese Monograph No. 132*, p. 5.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

97 *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

98 *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

along the Bay of Bengal. And this region was vulnerable to British-Indian sea-borne/amphibious attacks. The Japanese hoped that the Arakan Mountains would provide them protection against any British-Indian attack from the north-east. The 28th Japanese Army's duty also included guarding the Irrawaddy Delta which was one of the greatest rice producing regions of the world. At the time of activation, only along a 50-mile strip from Maungdaw to Thayettabin, the 28th Japanese Army faced the British-Indian units. The 55th Japanese Division was deployed north of Akyab with the main strength along the Mayu Peninsula and some units in the Kaladan River Basin, as described above. The 54th Japanese Division from late 1943 was assigned the duty of protection of the coastal strip from Ruywa to the mouths of the Irrawaddy River. Meanwhile, the 2nd Japanese Division was coming from Malaya and it was hoped that by the end of February 1944, it would be in south-west Burma.<sup>99</sup>

While the Japanese were preparing for an offensive operation, they also took care to strengthen their defensive positions along certain points in the Arakan. However, the Japanese faced severe difficulties in constructing defensive positions due to the worsening wartime scenario. The official Japanese record notes:

One of the highest priority projects on the Army's agenda was the construction of defence positions and no effort was spared in rushing them to completion. As neither cement nor steel were available locally or through supply channels, defence positions consisted primarily of crude earthworks. Since there was no radar and only limited assistance could be expected from naval and air units, the army was forced to rely on sentries posted along the coast for production of intelligence on enemy activities and movements.<sup>100</sup>

On 4 February, the Japanese launched their HA GO Offensive, which aimed to infiltrate, encircle and destroy the Commonwealth troops in the Arakan.<sup>101</sup> The INA was organized as guerrilla units and equipped with light weapons. They were geared to play a subversive role in order to undermine the loyalty bonds of the British-Indian Army. For instance, the Indian officers of the Bahadur

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99 Ibid., p. 10.

100 Ibid., p. 12.

101 Dockrill, 'British Leadership in Air Operations: Malaya and Burma', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War: 1941–45*, p. 128.

Group (INA) would encourage the sepoys in the night through loudspeakers to desert and join the INA-Japanese side.<sup>102</sup>

On 11 March 1944, Buthidaung was captured from the Sakurai Group/Force. Intense combat occurred between 9 and 12 March and then Razabil fell to the Commonwealth troops.<sup>103</sup> The 161st Brigade participated in the capture of Buthidaung, especially the Tunnels. Buthidaung town was surrounded by low hills and thick jungle. During the monsoons, landslides normally blocked the roads. To negotiate the hilly terrain, there were two railway tunnels, about a hundred yards from each other and approximately one thousand yards from the town. The tunnels, if destroyed or held by the enemy, could contain the Commonwealth advance towards Buthidaung or further onwards. Brigadier Warren of the 161st Brigade formed a guerrilla company by pooling guerrilla platoons of the 4th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment, 1st Battalion of the 1st Punjabi Regiment and the Royal West Kents. Niazi commanded the guerrilla company. First, he captured the Right Tunnel and the Japanese suffered 10 casualties. Next, the Left Tunnel was captured after killing seven Japanese. The rest of the Japanese fled. On Niazi's side, two were KIA and eight were WIA. Niazi was recommended for a Distinguished Service Order (DSO).<sup>104</sup> It is clear from the above-mentioned action that by this time, Japanese morale was flagging, at least in some units, and the Commonwealth forces had specialized assault units for performing special tasks. The days of the Japanese supermen were over.

On 11 April 1944, the 53rd Brigade under Brigadier Coldstream was deployed in the Tunnels area. And the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment took positions in the Eastern Tunnel. Vigorous Japanese night patrolling and sniping harassed the Punjabis. The 25th Division's main area of operation during the rest of 1944 was the Mayu Peninsula. This peninsula is bounded in the west by the Naf River and in the east by the Kalapanzin River. And through the centre of the Mayu Peninsula runs the Mayu Range. The 25th Division was ordered to establish a firm base in the Maungdaw-Razabil area, establish a mobile reserve, occupy the positions captured by the 26th and 36th Divisions on the ridge called the Spine and to patrol vigorously in the foothills south of the Tunnels Road.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Kiani, *Memoirs*, pp. 91, 109.

<sup>103</sup> Lyman, *Slim, Master of War*, pp. 160–61.

<sup>104</sup> Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>105</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Geoffrey Betham and Major H.V.R. Geary, *The Golden Galley: The Story of the Second Punjab Regiment 1761–1947* (n.d., reprint, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1975), pp. 165–66.

The Tunnels Road, after winding through the steep jungle-clad hills of the Mayu Range, took a northerly direction through the West and East Tunnels and then turned eastwards. About a mile along the eastern direction was the Wembley Ridge. South of Wembley and running north and south parallel to the road through the Tunnels lay another ridge whose highest point was Point 551. The road ran below the commanding height of this ridge. From Wembley, a narrow ridge fell away slightly at first and then rose steeply towards Point 551. The western face of Point 551 fell precipitously for the first 400 feet but the eastern slope was gradual. This ridge had two heights: North Castle and South Castle, about 150 yards apart. From the dip between them, the ascent to South Castle was steep. On the eastern slope and below the level of the main ridge, were three small hillocks named as Bun, Scone and Cake. Repeated bombardments had broken up and honeycombed the ground. And there was no vegetation cover on the ridge for the infantry. When the rain fell the trenches collapsed. Point 551 dominated the Tunnels Road. And capture of this point was the objective of 25th Division during late April and early May 1944.<sup>106</sup>

Wembley and North Castle were captured on 3 May 1944 but South Castle continued to be held by the Japanese suicide troops. The construction of a mule track to Wembley also started to ease the supply situation. On 4 May, a battalion reconnaissance party moved up with the aid of pioneers and mule transport. On 5 May, the D Company under Major T.O.L. Llewellyn took over the Wembley position. Early on 6 May, A Company under Major I.A.H. More occupied North Castle and Bun. Then, Major More ordered Number 1 Platoon under Subedar Ibrahim Khan with artillery support to clear South Castle.<sup>107</sup>

The platoon advanced over open ground under heavy Japanese fire. It was held up at the escarpment of the South Castle. The Japanese threw a large number of hand grenades, which wounded the subedar and many others. Lance-Naik Muhammad Yakub killed three Japanese, silenced a MG and brought away a wounded sepoy under heavy fire. Such dispersed small unit actions were similar to the Small War in which the Indian Army was proficient before 1939. Displays of heroism and bravery by the JCOs in small unit actions was a tradition well established in the Indian Army, even before 1939. Major More then advanced with Number 2 Platoon under Jemadar Muhammad Khan. Muhammad Khan died in action. The operation cost A Company nine KIA and 27 WIA. The attack on South Castle failed because the assaulting troops had no cover in the terrain and it involved a steep climb up to the summit. Holding the peaks, the Japanese had a clear observation and a wide field of fire.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., pp. 166–67.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 167.



During the night of 6/7 May 1944, the Japanese launched attacks to dislodge the A Company from Point 551 but failed in their attempt. Early on 7 May, D Company from Wembley took over A Company's position and later in the same day, a platoon from Major Windsor's B Company reinforced D Company.<sup>108</sup>

On 7 May, the Japanese brought heavy artillery and mortar fire on Point 551, Wembley and the tracks leading up to them. Except for the northern slopes of North Castle, the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment's positions on Point 551 were within the range of Japanese MG and snipers fire. The nearest Japanese position was only 50 yards away. On this day, Major J.D. Montagu and five personnel were WIA. On 8 May, Captain I.F. Nicholson commanding D Company was wounded. On the evening of 8 May and on the night of 8/9 May, the Japanese launched several attacks which, however, were repulsed.<sup>109</sup> Though the Japanese troops had a lot of fire in them and were launching ferocious but limited counter-attacks, their overall grand design in the Arakan by this time had failed.

In the morning of 9 May, the 14th Battalion of the Baluch Regiment assaulted South Castle but it was a failure. The Baluch battalion suffered 23 casualties. On that day, the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment suffered five KIA and 28 WIA. On 11 May, the Japanese launched a daylight attack on North Castle but it was beaten off.<sup>110</sup> The detailed account of the above-mentioned action by some small units in one corner of Burma, which itself was a sideshow in the wider Asia-Pacific front, shows that significant casualties were suffered by the battalions and regiments. This needs to be compared with the modern-day US-NATO operation in Afghanistan. In the present scenario, if a battalion aided by a lot of air-ground firepower and ultra-modern paraphernalia suffer some five to 10 casualties against the Taliban equipped with light weapons, there is lots of media coverage and massive political fallout with mountains of print describing such actions.

In the evening of 19 May, Lieutenant Muhammad Nawaz with B Company relieved A Company on North Castle. When this relief measure was in progress, the Japanese subjected the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment's left forward position to heavy bombardment. Then, the Japanese launched an attack on North Castle. A Company withdrew to Wembley under covering fire from the artillery. An immediate counter-attack against the Japanese incursion was ordered. B Company advanced on North Castle under covering fire of artillery and mortar. When they came within 20 yards of North Castle, the Japanese

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 169.



opened up with their MGs. The C Company was sent as reinforcement and the Japanese positions were attacked with hand grenades. After throwing the hand grenades, the C and D companies led a bayonet charge. Some 15 Japanese soldiers were bayoneted and the rest fled away from North Castle.<sup>111</sup>

About one of the principal reasons for the failure of HA GO, the official Japanese version rightly records: 'In the past, the Japanese had won victories merely by surrounding the enemy but now the enemy had adopted a new tactic of establishing a strong perimeter defence which, when supported by air supply, enabled them to withstand Japanese encircling tactics'.<sup>112</sup> One major-general of the INA wrote in his memoirs that British aerial supremacy in the skies of India-Burma was a crucial factor behind Japanese defeat. He wrote that no longer did the relatively light Japanese columns, defying all the principles of logistics, fighting heroically and cutting off or surrounding enemy troops, succeed in achieving their objectives as they had done so effectively in Malaya and in Burma during 1942.<sup>113</sup>

Major-General Mohammad Zaman Kiani of the INA noted:

The British, by this time, had developed a new concept of fighting which provided an effective antidote to the Japanese tactics of infiltration and out-flanking movements. The new concept was the establishment of a 'box' formation by the isolated troops fighting and defending themselves from all directions, as in a fortress. Previously, virtually throughout history, when a force was cut off from outside help and was besieged, its position became very precarious, and more often than not, because of the morale factor and the dwindling supplies, it would have to succumb if no relief arrived in time. It was not so any longer. If a besieged garrison could be supplied or reinforced by air, it could be changed into a spring-board for successful offensive action against the besieging army.<sup>114</sup>

A Lieutenant-Colonel named Burhan-ud-Din, Commander of the 2nd ss Group (INA), observed that the Japanese soldiers were suffering from the paucity of weapons and inadequate supply of ammunition.<sup>115</sup> *Bushido* had been defeated by better training and *Materialschlacht*.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., pp. 170–71.

<sup>112</sup> *Japanese Monograph No. 132*, p. 24.

<sup>113</sup> Kiani, *Memoirs*, p. 91.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., pp. 88, 91.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

### Japanese Retreat in the Arakan

In the third week of June 1944, the monsoon came in full fury and washed away the tracks. The Allied combatants had to deal with malaria and leeches in addition to hostile enemy soldiers.<sup>116</sup> Malaria was also a serious problem for the American soldiers in the SWPA. In February 1943, 23 out of every 1,000 soldiers were in hospital with malaria at any given time. DDT and atabrine pills were used to combat malaria. In March 1944, only 2 per 1,000 SWPA personnel were in hospital with malaria at any given time. The incidence of malaria declined further in April 1944.<sup>117</sup>

On 22 June 1944, the 25th Indian Division was deployed along the Maungdaw-Tunnels Area. And the 26th Indian Division was deployed in the following manner: one brigade covered Bawli *Bazaar*, Goppe *Bazaar* and Taung *Bazaar*; another brigade covered Taungbro and Tumburu; and the third brigade was at Cox *Bazaar*. The divisional headquarters and one brigade of the 81st West African Division was at Chiringa. Another brigade took up position along the Chiringa-Singpa track. Some detachments were deployed along the Sangu River.<sup>118</sup> One example of such a detachment should be given. In late August 1943, the 3rd Battalion of the 9th GR (under 26th Indian Division) was at Taung *Bazaar*. Patrols were regularly launched to keep tabs on the Japanese movements, to assess their strength and intention. The patrols covered paths and streams and frequently a few Japanese scalps were collected. This is an example of the 'barbarization' of war on part of the sepoys, which also reflected their growing hatred (hence strengthening of combat effectiveness) of the Japanese. Some patrols, which lasted for only 24 hours, also set up ambushes and claimed a few Japanese lives.<sup>119</sup> All these made the Indian troops eager for further combat against their enemy.

The Sakurai Detachment held the front line from the coast across the Mayu Range and Mayu River to the Arakan Yomas with three infantry battalions (the 2nd Battalion of the 112th Regiment, 1st Battalion of the 143rd Regiment and 3rd Battalion of the 144th Regiment) and the Kaladan Valley with the 55th

116 P.N. Khera and S.N. Prasad, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 2, June 1944–August 1945, Bisheshwar Prasad (General Editor), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section India & Pakistan: Calcutta, 1959, Distributed by Orient Longmans), p. 12; Shipster, *Mist on the Rice-Fields*, p. 53.

117 Taaffe, *MacArthur's Jungle War*, p. 117.

118 Giffard, Operations in Assam and Burma from 23rd June 1944 to 12th November 1944, p. 1713.

119 Leathart, *With the Gurkhas*, p. 77.

Reconnaissance Regiment. The latter was reinforced by one company of the 2nd Battalion of the 143rd Regiment.<sup>120</sup>

On 14 October 1944, Major-General G.N. Wood of the Dorset Regiment arrived at Maungdaw and took over command of the 25th Indian Division. As Brigadier General Staff (BGS) of the 33rd Corps, the new GOC had taken part in the Kohima Operation. The 53rd Brigade had spent the whole of the monsoon in the Tunnels area where patrolling was most intense. It was relieved by the 51st Brigade and the process was completed by 22 October. Brigadier T.H. Angus who had commanded the 51st Brigade for about 20 months was replaced by Brigadier R.A. Hutton of the 3rd Battalion of the 2nd GR. The 51st Indian Infantry Brigade had three Indian battalions, each under an Indian commissioned officer. It was the Indian Army's first such brigade. The divisional headquarters moved to Razabil and the 74th Brigade was deployed further south into the coastal plain.<sup>121</sup>

In mid-October, the 15th Corps under Christison held the forward line along Godsura-Tunnels-Ngakyedauk-Taung and Goppe *Bazaars*-Mowdak. The 25th Indian Division under Major-General G.N. Wood, based at Maungdaw, held the sector between Godsura near the coast to the Ngakyedauk Pass. The 26th Indian Division, under Lomax, was in reserve in the Ukhia region. But one of its brigades was at Taung and Goppe *Bazaars* and a detachment was at Ngofewngrowa watching the track from Kaladan to Ukhia. The 81st West African Division, under Major-General F.J. Loftus-Tottenham, was based at Chiringa and its forward detachments were at Mowdok. The 82nd West African Division, under Bruce at Ranchi, was on the point of moving to Chiringa. Similarly, the 50th Indian Tank Brigade, under Brigadier G.H.N. Todd, was moving out of Ranchi. The 3rd Commando Brigade, under Brigadier G.R. Hardy, was at Ramu. And the 22nd East African Brigade, under Brigadier R.J. Johnstone in Ceylon, was earmarked to join the 15th Corps. The Arakan Coastal Force comprised the 55th and 56th RIN, 49th (South Africa) and 59th (Burma) flotillas, each of seven to eight motor launches, HMS KEDAH (a depot ship) and two small tankers.<sup>122</sup>

Early in October 1944, the 55th Japanese Division withdrew from the Arakan. Then, Giffard, CO of the 11th Army Group, thought that the four Commonwealth

<sup>120</sup> James Butler (ed.), *History of the Second World War*, United Kingdom Military Series, Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby with Brigadier M.R. Roberts, Colonel G.T. Wards and Air Vice-Marshal N.L. Desoer, *The War against Japan*, vol. 4, *The Reconquest of Burma* (London: HMSO, 1965), p. 135.

<sup>121</sup> The Arakan Campaign of the 25th Indian Division, p. 25, MODHS, New Delhi.

<sup>122</sup> Kirby et.al., *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 4, pp. 135–36.

divisions could go on an offensive in the Arakan. Christison was ordered to prepare plans to throw the Japanese out of north Arakan including Akyab. Slim demanded that airfields should be established south of Akyab for the forthcoming CAPITAL Operation.<sup>123</sup> On 3 November 1944, at a conference held at Corps Headquarters, Christison outlined the following objectives. The Japanese were to be cleared out of the Arakan. Akyab and Kyaukpyu were to be captured to provide air bases for supporting the 14th Army's race to Rangoon. The forces available for gaining these objectives were the 25th and 26th Indian Divisions and the 81st and 82nd West African Divisions. In support were the 50th Indian Tank Brigade, 3rd Commando Brigade (for assault landing) and 22nd East African Brigade. The 81st West African Division was to continue its advance in the Kaladan Valley by advancing from Paletwa to Myohaung. The 82nd West African Division was to capture Buthidaung, cross the Kalapanzin River, advance south to Htizwe and cross the Kaladan Hills to Kanzaung and then take over the advance of the 81st West African Division southwards from Myohaung. The 25th Indian Division was to clear the Mayu Peninsula and Mayu Valley with east flank protection from the 82nd West African Division with the aim of seizing Foul Point and Kudaung Island. The 26th Indian Infantry Division, with the 3rd Commando Brigade, was to make a seaborne assault on Akyab and then to advance north-east through the *chuang* region to Minbya. By December 1944, the 15th Corps objective was to capture the Arakan, including the islands of Akyab and Ramree, through a series of overland and amphibious operations. The D-Day of the Mayu Advance was fixed as 12 December 1944 and 16 February 1945 for the assault of Akyab.<sup>124</sup>

During November 1944, the 74th Brigade concentrated in the coastal plain and focused on training. The emphasis was on individual and unit training. The training of the MT drivers was carried out. The drivers were trained to drive at night without headlights in convoy formation. Night signs for direction of traffic were evolved. *Chaungs* and crossings were located and studied.<sup>125</sup>

By mid-November 1944, Corps intelligence had no idea about the exact strength of the Japanese in the Mayu Peninsula. So, the GOC ordered a series of coordinated and widespread patrols in order to obtain information about Japanese dispositions. The 74th Brigade was allotted the region west of the Mayu Range. And the 51st Brigade, with the 9th Y&L under its command, took over the Spine and the regions east of it towards Seinnynbya and Buthidaung.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>124</sup> Marston, 'Learning from Defeat: The Burma Campaign', in Marston (ed.), *The Pacific War*, p. 113; The Arakan Campaign of the 25th Indian Division, pp. 25–26.

<sup>125</sup> The Arakan Campaign of the 25th Indian Division, p. 30.

The 51st Brigade launched some patrols with the aim of capturing or killing some Japanese soldiers in order to acquire information about identifying their units. In one such raid, a company of the 16th Baluch under Major M. Usman made a dash to capture Office (a hill about a mile east of Hill 1267). In this assault, due to a display of outstanding courage, sepoy Bhandari Ram earned the first Victoria Cross of the 25th Indian Division. In order to dominate the road to Buthidaung and the Htindaw Bowl, the 8th Hyderabad, under Lieutenant-Colonel Thimmayya, captured an important feature named POLAND and it was consolidated. These patrols were able to bring in some 30 dead Japanese. Besides aiding with the identification of the Japanese units, such aggressive raids also raised the morale of the troops long engaged in static warfare.<sup>126</sup>

The 82nd West African Division concentrated at Razabil. The corps engineers then completed the task of constructing an alternative route through the Tunnels defile to permit traffic to operate in both directions simultaneously. The Htindaw Bowl was reconnoitred and a plan was made for concentration of the infantry, artillery, tanks and administrative installations in this small region. The task of covering this concentration fell on to the 51st Brigade. For the first few miles of their advance both the 53rd Brigade and the 1st Nigerian Brigade had to follow the same route which passed through the Japanese-held hill named INBAUK. It was considered necessary to capture this hill feature in order to enable the sappers to develop the track for supplying the two brigades. On 3 December 1944, the 9th Y&L under Lieutenant-Colonel F.J. Piggott, which was under the 51st Brigade, captured INBAUK.<sup>127</sup>

At this point in time, the 7th Indian Anti-Tank Regiment, under Lieutenant-Colonel P.G.P. Bradshaw of the RA, rejoined the 25th Indian Division. It was left behind in India when the 25th Indian Division sailed for the Arakan. The anti-tank regiment had three batteries equipped with 3-inch mortars and 6-pounder anti-tank guns. The batteries were to be deployed for defending the strong points. One battery was allotted to the 53rd Brigade, another battery for defence of the divisional headquarters and another was kept under 51st Brigade for defence of Maungdaw Keep.<sup>128</sup>

During the next few days, the 51st Brigade assisted the 82nd West African Division in its task. The 51st Brigade was well acquainted with the country and provided facilities to the African division's officers and men to join their patrols. Thus, the African soldiers and the officers gained frontline experience

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. 30–31.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

as well as topographical information. Both the 51st Brigade and the African division also cooperated in capturing certain features along the road to Buthidaung. The 16th Baluch, under Lieutenant-Colonel L.P. Sen, captured Hill 142 and two features named JAGS and UDDERS.<sup>129</sup>

On 11 December, Brigadier Scott, CO of the 53rd Brigade, who had been unwell for some days, succumbed at last to illness. He had planned the waterborne advance of the brigade down the Kalapanzin River. The senior battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Lauder, was unfit due to a leg injury. He was in charge of transporting the boat flotilla to Buthidaung and then launching it. As a result, Brigadier Hutton was placed in temporary command of the 53rd Brigade. And in place of Hutton, Lieutenant-Colonel Thimmayya of the 8th Hyderabad was given command of the 51st Indian Brigade. However, Hutton was not familiar with the complicated planning of the waterborne advance of the 53rd Brigade.<sup>130</sup>

Meanwhile, the 28th Japanese Army, in response to increasing Commonwealth military pressure on both the Mayu and Kaladan fronts, ordered the 54th Japanese Division to form the Matsui Detachment under Major-General T. Koba. This detachment comprised the 11th Regiment (less 2nd Battalion), 3rd Battalion of the 154th Regiment and an artillery battalion. This detachment, along with the 55th Reconnaissance Regiment, was ordered to defend Kaladan. The Sakurai Detachment was to defend the Mayu region. The 1st Battalion of the 11th Japanese Regiment was in Akyab. Koba, with two battalions, moved to Kaladan and attacked the 81st West African Division in Timma on 15 December 1944. The 53rd Brigade, under Brigadier A.G. O'C Scott, moved down the east side of the Mayu Range and on 18 December 1944 encountered Japanese resistance at Seinnynbya. Japanese opposition increased when the brigade neared Hparabyin on 20 December.<sup>131</sup>

By the beginning of 1945, the jungle war in the Arakan had taken on an amphibious character. The British plan to attack Akyab (named TALON) was advanced to 20 January 1945. The attack was to be carried out by the 26th Indian Division, 3rd Commando Brigade, and a regiment of the 50th Indian Tank Brigade, aided by saturation bombing by the RAF and bombardment by the RN. On 23 December, a battalion of the 74th Brigade, which had moved rapidly down the beaches by forced marches, reached Donbaik. On 26 December, the Sakurai Detachment started withdrawing with the objective of rejoining the 55th Japanese Division at Prome. By 31 December 1944, the

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>131</sup> Kirby et al., *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 4, pp. 138–39.

Sakurai Detachment, covered by the Matsui Detachment, had concentrated south of Myohaug. On 31 December, Koba ordered the 1st Battalion of the 11th Regiment to evacuate Akyab and withdraw to Ponnagyun. From there, this unit was to withdraw north of Myohaug.<sup>132</sup> Thus, the fighting at Akyab ended with a whimper and not with a big bang.

The landing at Myebon was, however, opposed. The Japanese fired from six 75-mm guns, two 37-mm guns and one 2-pounder gun. The Japanese artillery firing was able to sink one LCA and one LCM. The two Royal Indian Navy (RIN) sloops, named *NARMADA* and *JAMUNA*, were able to shoot down two to three Japanese aircraft. The landing was covered by 4-inch guns of the RIN sloops and RN ships. The Japanese motor launches were armed with .5 armour piercing MGs, searchlights and 37-mm guns. In total, five Japanese motor supply craft, two petrol supply lighters and one barge were sunk. In fact on D+3, Lord Mountbatten himself visited Myebon and was impressed by the craft handling qualities displayed by the RIN's landing craft crews.<sup>133</sup>

The capture of Akyab and the Myebon Peninsula to a great extent were possible due to the amphibious operation by the RIN along the Arakan Coast.<sup>134</sup> On 15 January 1945, General Oliver Leese wrote to Vice-Admiral Godfrey: 'Craft handling and general efficiency of the Indian Landing Craft crews during the Akyab Operations are matters for congratulation. 15th Corps are delighted and are looking forward to another combined effort'.<sup>135</sup> General Auchinleck wrote to Godfrey: 'I am delighted to receive reports of the splendid work done by the Royal Indian Navy in the recent combined operations on the Arakan Coast culminating in the capture of Akyab and Myebon Peninsula'.<sup>136</sup>

Further successful amphibious operations followed during the second half of January 1945. Captain E.W. Bush of the RN was put at the disposal of Major-General C.E.N. Lomax (CO of the 26th Indian Division) for occupying Ramree Island. The 15th Corps was ordered to capture the airfield at Ramree Island in order to support the 14th Army's advance to Rangoon. On 21 January, the 4th and 71st Indian Infantry Brigades landed after a preliminary bombardment by the RAF and the RN. These two infantry brigades met only minimal Japanese opposition. The Japanese had their main defensive position for guarding the

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 138–41.

<sup>133</sup> Naval Headquarter New Delhi, 7 Feb. 1945, *Burma-Assam Operations*, pp. 122–23, L/WS/1/1511, IOR, BL, London

<sup>134</sup> Memorandum of Congratulatory Message, Naval Headquarter New Delhi, 7 Feb. 1945, p. 122, L/WS/1/1511.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>136</sup> Naval Headquarter New Delhi, 7 Feb. 1945, *Burma-Assam Operations*, p. 123, L/WS/1/1511.



beaches near Thames point. So, the landing of the sepoys at Kyaukpyu surprised them. The 71st Indian Infantry Brigade advanced southwards along the West Coast Road. Gunfire from destroyers and sloops supported the advance of this brigade. However, on 26 January, the advance of the sepoys stalled due to opposition by a strong Japanese detachment which had entrenched itself on the south bank of Yan Bauk *Chaung*. Thanks to aerial and naval superiority, the Commonwealth troops could land anywhere in order to outflank the Japanese defences. On 1 February, a company of the 8th Battalion of the 13th FFR landed at the southern tip of Ramree Island under cover of air and naval bombardment. And the 4th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered south towards the Yan Bauk *Chaung* area. By 7 February, outflanking moves by the 71st Indian Infantry Brigade forced the Japanese to withdraw from the south bank of Yan Bauk *Chaung*. This allowed the 4th Indian Infantry Brigade to cross the *chaung* without much difficulty and to pursue vigorously the retreating Japanese.<sup>137</sup> It is interesting to note that the IJA, a past master in making outflanking moves, was now beaten at its own game by the Indian Army. The student had finally overtaken its erstwhile master in making simultaneous outflanking moves. The Japanese were defeated and on the run. Now, they were going to be annihilated.

The 36th Indian Infantry Brigade moved north from Kyaukmmaw and occupied the southern exits of the Taraung *Chaung* and Kalebon. This closed the exit routes for the Japanese retreating from Sane and the southern part of Ramree Island through Mingaung *Chaung*. The RAF strafed the Japanese, who attempted to escape in the local boats. The hapless Japanese were driven into the mangrove swamps. The mangrove swamps with all their attendant horrors (which included hordes of vicious insects and reptiles like crocodiles, snakes, lizards and flies), with miles of deep black mud and devoid of food and potable water, resulted in the death of the Japanese soldiers. Of the 1,500 Japanese soldiers on Ramree Island, some 1,200 became casualties. However, only 20 became POWs.<sup>138</sup> The rest were able to escape. The low number of POWs show that though the Japanese were defeated, their spirit was not yet broken.

Though the victorious march of the Commonwealth troops continued in the Arakan, the non-Indian formations suffered from manpower problems. On 24 January 1945, the Commander-in-Chief of India informed the War Office in London that the 81st West African Division had two infantry brigades. The brigades required personnel, especially trained men, in order to sustain high morale. Further, the division needed one more brigade. He emphasized that

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137 Vice-Admiral Arthur Power, Naval Operations in Ramree Island Area 19th January to 22nd February 1945, *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 23 April 1948, No. 38269, pp. 2581–83.

138 *Ibid.*, pp. 2583–84.



the 3rd West African Brigade should be included in this division as soon as possible.<sup>139</sup>

### Conclusion

In the Arakan, during 1942–43, the British and Indian troops were again out-thought, outmanoeuvred and outfought by a numerically inferior lightly equipped Japanese force. Nevertheless, the defeat in the Arakan was not as disastrous as the previous defeat in south and central Burma in 1942. The British and Indian troops did not panic and engage in a headlong retreat. When obstructed in their advance, they stalled and then retreated methodically. This was because of some training (its beginnings could be traced back in the 14th Indian Division in mid-1942) and the increasing availability of air assets. However, the harsh reality was that, despite possessing numerical superiority and a logistical network (far better than what the IJA had in the Arakan), Wavell's troops were defeated. The Commonwealth failure in the First Arakan Offensive proved that material superiority alone is not enough. Material superiority needed to be blended with well-thought-out tactical concepts and realistic training. The campaign in the Arakan witnessed innovation in Japanese tactics. Up to December 1942, the Japanese exhibited their tactical skill in offensive fighting. In early 1943, in certain regions in the Arakan, the Japanese were on a tactical defensive and blunted the attacks of the British-Indian troops. In the next phase, the IJA went on to attack the British-Indian soldiers. Until late 1943, the British and Indian soldiers and their commanders had no answer to the offensive and defensive tactics practised by the Japanese in the Arakan in particular and in Burma in general.

However, from late 1943 onwards, as this chapter has shown, the Commonwealth forces, by adopting certain new techniques, adapted to Japanese thrusts. The new tactical format involved the establishment of defensive boxes supported by field artillery. The boxes in turn were sustained by a riverine (small craft), ground (mules, jeeps and lorries) and aerial supply system. The new tactical techniques involved the use of flamethrowers, tanks and ground support aircraft for supporting the advance of the infantry and the use of artillery, tanks and fragmentation bombs for blasting the Japanese bunkers. Aggressive patrolling to harass the Japanese and also to gain information about their strength and for reconnaissance of the ground was another technique

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<sup>139</sup> From Commander-in-Chief India to the War Office, Telegram, 24 Jan. 1945, No. 008346, p. 151, L/ws/1/1511.

pursued by the sepoy. By early 1945, the sepoy were beating the Nipponese in making outflanking moves and cutting the latter's LoCs and rear communications. And by this time, the Indian infantry had learnt to cooperate with aircraft and naval craft while engaging the hostile ground forces. The adoption of new techniques was possible due to better training of the infantry, well-thought-out concepts and the availability of larger amounts of material resources (both lethal like arms, artillery, aircraft, tanks, munitions and non-lethal like medicine, jeeps, etc.). The new tactical procedures of the Indian Army were used to contain the Japanese thrust in the Arakan in early 1944 and then to pursue the retreating Japanese. The transformed Indian Army's new tactical format was then applied successfully against the main Japanese advance in the Imphal-Kohima region and also during the race for Rangoon, the subject of the next two chapters.

## Imphal and Kohima: March–July 1944

### Introduction

In early January 1944, IGHQ ordered the 15th Japanese Army's three divisions to destroy the Commonwealth forces near Imphal and occupy strategic points along the Burma-India border. Simultaneously, the 33rd Japanese Army (three divisions) was to drive the Chinese out of north-east Burma. The 28th Japanese Army (with two divisions and one division in reserve) was to attack on the Akyab front in order to draw the Allied reserve from Imphal. The Japanese objective was not conquest of India (except certain border points) but to hamper the Allied preparations for re-conquest of Burma. The 5th Japanese Air Division was already weakened due to continuous transfer of aircraft to New Guinea and the Philippines. And many engineer units, which were required to build and repair roads and bridges, were also transferred to New Guinea.<sup>1</sup> As the IJA geared up for its last offensive along the Burma-India border, the Commonwealth troops' battlefield effectiveness registered a slow and steady rise due to better hardware and training. This is the subject of the first section. The second section describes in a narrative framework combat in the Imphal-Kohima sectors. The focus is both on big and small scattered actions, which together constituted the dynamics of combat in Burma. Due attention is given to the terrain to highlight the relationship between tactics and geography. The third section puts the military operations of Burma in 1944 within a broader perspective.

### Training, Equipment and Force Structure

GHQ India emphasized the setting up of the training infrastructure to train the recruits entering the 14th Army. In mid-1944, the Kitchener College at Nowgong was reconstituted as a Pre-Cadet School along the lines of HFTC Dunbar. The Tactical Training Centre was set up at Dehra Dun. It absorbed the Tactical School, the Platoon Commanders and Battle Schools. It taught common tactical doctrine based on lessons learnt and experience gained by the 14th Army in

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<sup>1</sup> Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009), pp. 236–37.

Burma, Assam and the AIF in the South-West Pacific. An officer from the Australian Army was lent to the staff of the Tactical Training Centre. The Tactical Training Centre had headquarters and comprised a Senior Tactical School, Junior Tactical School and Battle School. The latter had a Rifle Platoon Wing, Mortar Platoon Wing and Armoured Fighting Vehicle (AFV) Wing. The first course of the Battle School started on 15 May 1944 and terminated on 10 June of the same year. The Senior Tactical School opened on 26 June 1944. The Tactical School at Poona was closed and the entire establishment was absorbed into the new Tactical Training Centre. In June 1944, the Jungle Warfare School at Sevoke was closed and the entire establishment was transferred to the 14th Army School at Shillong.<sup>2</sup>

W. Murray notes that friction, horror and the chaos of combat made it difficult for a military organization to draw clear and unambiguous lessons from combat which could then be turned into coherent training programmes for those who were exposed at the FEBA.<sup>3</sup> The Indian Army had certain lessons to learn and simultaneously certain lessons to unlearn. The training curriculum was continuously updated to reflect the changing nature of combat. Adaptation to new combat conditions also required unlearning some of the past lessons taught to a military organization. On the transfer of the Platoon Commanders School and the Battle Course from the Infantry School in Saugor (in central India) to the new Tactical Training Centre, the syllabus was revised. For the programme of 1944–45, several courses that were followed during 1943–44 were omitted. The courses that were omitted were as follows: Platoon Commanders Course, Battle Course, Battle Inoculation Course, 2-pdr. Anti-Tank Course, 4.2-inch Mortar Course and the Carrier Course.<sup>4</sup> The recruits for the Indian artillery were trained at Mehgaon near Jubbulpore.<sup>5</sup> The ISF's mountain artillery recruits were trained at Ambala. A JOSH team visited the princely states to advise on the inculcation of aggressive spirit among the infantry of the ISF. The ISF officers were also taught fieldcraft and minor tactics and selected officers were sent to the Tactical School courses.<sup>6</sup>

2 Correspondence, Liaison Letters from DMT India to DMT War Office, Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, pp. 4–6, L/WS/1/1302, IOR, BL, London.

3 Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 120.

4 Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, p. 5.

5 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Appendix 6, p. 15, L/WS/1/441, IOR, BL.

6 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 19 May 1944, Indian States Forces, Appendix 14, p. 97, L/WS/1/441.

The average monthly recruitment of the Indian technical ORs between September 1943 and June 1944 came to roughly 7,785.<sup>7</sup> GHQ India noted that the educational standard of Indian Infantry NCOs sent to the Army Signal School to undergo training had deteriorated. As a result, the number of students obtaining Q2 qualifications had declined. In response, the Indian Infantry Syllabus at the Army Signal School had been revised and instructions concentrated on the following essentials: wireless, line and visual signalling. Individual instruction of students was emphasized. In 1944, a new publication entitled *Battle Bulletin* was issued to the Army in India which contained accounts of operations in eastern India's frontier for the troops who were under training. This publication was especially aimed at the junior leaders.<sup>8</sup> In mid-1944, the Military Training Pamphlet No. 8 (India) Part v, dealing with supply by air to the army, and Part vi, dealing with air transported formations, were rewritten in the light of the experience of the great advance made on the ground. Thus, we see a dialectical relationship between the theory and praxis of warfare. The syllabus was being made realistic to aid the officers in actual battle.<sup>9</sup> Two exercises, named TORCH and ORANGE, were carried out in February 1944 by the 14th and 23rd Indian Infantry Brigades of Special Force in order to assess the concentration of assault troops and attacks on defended localities by Long Range Penetration (LRP) units. Amphibious and jungle training were carried out at Poona/Pune, Bombay, Ahmadnagar, Coimbatore and Coconada.<sup>10</sup>

From 1 April 1944, the SEAC took over the responsibility of the welfare of the British troops, but the welfare of the Indian troops remained the responsibility of GHQ India<sup>11</sup> (probably because the latter organization had knowledge of the customs of the different communities of the subcontinent). The authorities paid much attention to the motivation of the military personnel. A British journalist named Fergal Keane in his account of the combat at Kohima writes that the young men did not join the 4th Battalion of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment with any illusions of gaining glory. He continues that this observation applies in general for the new generation of young men who joined the British Army during World War II.<sup>12</sup> Arthur Campbell, the

7 *India's Part in the Sixth Year of War* (New Delhi: GoI, n.d.), p. 63.

8 Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, pp. 5, 27.

9 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 19 May 1944, Airborne Troops, Appendix 12, p. 94, L/WS/1/441.

10 Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, pp. 5, 27.

11 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Welfare and Morale, Appendix 21, p. 40, L/WS/1/441.

12 Fergal Keane, *Road of Bones: The Siege of Kohima 1944, The Epic Story of the Last Great Stand of Empire* (London: Harper, 2010), p. 60.

Intelligence Officer of the 4th Battalion of the Royal West Kent Regiment, noted that in the case of this territorial unit, combat motivation, especially under the stress of battle, depended on the CO's handling of the situation. As regards leadership in the sectional level, Campbell writes that a lance-corporal's section comprised eight men. And the lance-corporal had to take care of the men under him; he had to provide them with clothing, food and ammunition so that they could fight.<sup>13</sup>

In case of the sepoys, their loyalty was directed towards their units and not to the Viceroy of the British King Emperor.<sup>14</sup> The Indian soldiers considered the increase in proficiency pay as inadequate, and its late implementation caused further uncertainty among the sepoys. They would have preferred an increase in basic pay. Inadequate leave, high prices of basic commodities in their villages, etc. caused anxiety among the sepoys.<sup>15</sup> It is likely that 'Bill' Slim's charisma somewhat motivated the sepoys. Correlli Barnett and Duncan Anderson write that Slim displayed humanity, humour and firmness in sharpening and strengthening the sepoys' will to combat. Slim had the linguistic skills to converse with the Gurkhas in Gorkhali, in Pushtu with the Pathans and with the other sepoys in Urdu, the Indian Army's *lingua franca*.<sup>16</sup>

How did the individuals in the Commonwealth force perceive their Japanese opponent? As regards their opponents, the IJA's soldiers, Campbell, the Intelligence Officer of the Royal West Kent (who had fought at Alamein in 1942 and in the Arakan in 1943 and later at Kohima in 1944) noted in his memoirs:

All were incredibly tough, well disciplined, well trained. None had any fear of death. Both soldiers and leaders, when given orders, would carry them out to the last letter, even though the battle situation might require a change of action. I discovered that these brave men were frightened of only two things, the man immediately senior to them and capture.<sup>17</sup>

13 Arthur Campbell, *The Siege: A Story from Kohima* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956), pp. 20, 25.

14 Keane, *Road of Bones*, p. 87.

15 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Welfare and Morale, Appendix 21, p. 40.

16 Correlli Barnett, 'Field-Marshal Lord Slim and the Burma Campaign', in Richard Cobbold (ed.), *The World Reshaped*, vol. 2, *Fifty Years after the War in Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 3, 7; Duncan Anderson, 'The Very Model of a Modern Manoeuvrist General: William Slim and the Exercise of High Command in Burma', in Gary Sheffield and Geoffrey Till (eds.), *The Challenges of High Command: The British Experience* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 77.

17 Campbell, *The Siege*, p. 19.

Campbell accused the Japanese soldiers of tactical inflexibility but congratulated them on their bravery. The Japanese soldiers' bravery was also appreciated by the Indian officers. Sukhwant Singh, a company commander in the 14th Battalion of the 13th FFR had encountered the Japanese at Imphal. He noted in his autobiography: 'The Japanese fought most fanatically; he was undoubtedly the toughest individual fighter in the World. Such cold courage has seldom been seen in the history of mankind'.<sup>18</sup> The Japanese officers did not value the lives of their own soldiers in fighting to the death. Similarly, they showed contempt for the lives of their foes. This factor to a great extent explains the brutality of the Japanese towards their Commonwealth opponents. Eric Bergerud claims that the astounding physical courage shown by the Japanese soldiers was mostly voluntary and came from the inside. Death in battle for a Japanese soldier was portrayed as an honour to the family and a transcendent act on the part of the individual. Surrender was a disgrace to the soldier and his family. Some elements of coercion and deliberate misinformation (a sort of propaganda) were also involved. The Japanese soldiers were told by their officers that their enemy would butcher them if they were caught. Bergerud writes that it is not clear how many Japanese soldiers actually believed this propaganda by their officers.<sup>19</sup> However, there seems to be some element of truth in such Japanese propaganda. Lance-Corporal John Harman, son of an engineer, was drafted to the Royal West Kents during the war. He considered the Japanese to be 'wild beasts' and killing them was a fair game.<sup>20</sup>

Between October 1943 and May 1944, 8,322 British soldiers were sent home and some 8,789 replacements were received. All of them had completed five years' service before being repatriated home as per the requirements of the PYTHON Scheme.<sup>21</sup> Between January and May 1944, the demands for British recruits in the 14th Army were 6,234 men, and 6,577 men were received in the same period. The extra 343 men filled up the demands for June 1944. The 14th Army was maintained with four months' normal wastage (24 per cent) in the front. All the jungle-trained men were used up in filling the ranks of the 14th Army. As regards Indian manpower, the problem was not an overall shortage of manpower but the exact types of communities required in the ethnically

18 Brigadier Sukhwant Singh, *Three Decades of Indian Army Life* (Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1967), p. 94.

19 Eric Bergerud, *Touched with Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific* (1996, reprint, New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 130–31.

20 Campbell, *The Siege*, pp. 23, 25.

21 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Repatriation and POWs, Appendix 22, p. 42, L/WS/1/441.

diverse Indian regiments. The net result was that some communities were over-represented at the expense of other communities. This ethnic mix up had an adverse effect on the combat ethos of the Indian infantry battalions.<sup>22</sup>

However, the Indian soldiers believed in victory in the near future. The Axis defeat in Italy and the good performance of the 4th Indian Division (nicknamed the Ball of Fire Division) had raised the confidence of all the sepoys. In 1940, the 4th Indian Division under General Wavell participated in the victory march against the Italians in Cyrenaica. Then, it again took part in the victorious campaign against the Italian Army in Ethiopia. In mid-1941, the same division from Palestine occupied Vichy Syria. The 4th Indian Division came back to Africa and fought against *Generalfeldmarschal* Erwin Rommel's *Afrika Korps* till the latter's final surrender in Tunisia in mid-1943. However, the famine in Bengal during 1943 had caused sympathy and empathy for the sufferings of their countrymen. And the Indian soldiers contributed to the relief funds.<sup>23</sup>

The Indian Army experienced gradual specialization and modernization. The IEME branch came into existence on 1 May 1943. By the end of 1944, this branch comprised 2,500 officers and 70,000 Indian ORs. Between April and November 1944, the IEME inspected and repaired more than 3,100 vehicles, 3,000 armaments and small arms, and 2,700 instruments of the 20th Indian Division.<sup>24</sup> From 31 December 1943 to June 1944, the holdings of vehicles and lorries under GHQ India (including SEAC) rose from 117,200 and 125,500 to 147,000 and 155,800 (an almost 25 per cent increase) respectively.<sup>25</sup>

Despite motorization and massive use of air supply, mules remained the principal carriers of the 14th Army, and even the IJA, in Burma. The Indian Army's mountain batteries' light guns were dismantled and then carried on the back of the mules. A mule was a crossbreed of horse and donkey with greater intelligence and endurance than either. The mules used to bray in the jungles, which alerted the Japanese patrols. So, the 14th Army cut the vocal chords of

22 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Infantry, Appendix 9, p. 22, L/WS/1/441.

23 Morale Reports, India and SEAC 15 July–15 Oct. 1943, Part II, Indian Troops, Para 1, p. 9, L/WS/2/71, 10R, BL; Daniel P. Marston, 'A Force Transformed: The Indian Army and the Second World War', in Daniel P. Marston and Chandar S. Sundaram (eds.), *A Military History of India and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), pp. 103–05, 108.

24 *India's Part in the Sixth Year of War*, pp. 26–27.

25 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, IEME Workshop, Appendix 11, p. 26, L/WS/1/441.



these unfortunate beasts.<sup>26</sup> Between March and July 1944, 464 mules, 467 ponies and 653 bullocks were acquired from India for the 14th Army. However, this did not fill the required demand. During the same period, 800 horses were brought from Australia, 2,581 ponies, mules and donkeys were purchased from South Africa and 1,230 mules were obtained from the USA as part of the LEND LEASE Agreement. An order for another 9,000 ponies, mules and donkeys was placed with Australia.<sup>27</sup> Orders were placed for 12 hands mules from Abyssinia. In South Africa, an order was placed for the purchase of 20,000 mules and donkeys and 3,000 ponies between February and April 1944. Attempts were also made to purchase ponies from Afghanistan.<sup>28</sup> The use of animals was not unique to jungle warfare in Burma. Animals were used for transportation purposes not only in underdeveloped Burma but also on the Eastern Front. The point to be noted is that even the *Wehrmacht* while conducting *Blitzkrieg* was heavily dependent on horse transport in the Eastern Front. The *Wehrmacht* during Operation BARBAROSSA took 625,000 horses as well as 600,000 motor vehicles. During Operation BLAU, the 6th German Army's artillery and medical units were mostly dependent on horses. In late October 1942, between Don Bend and Stalingrad on the bank of the Volga, the 6th German Army had some 150,000 horses, as well as a number of oxen and camels.<sup>29</sup> The *Wehrmacht* was not an exception as regards the military use of animals in the European theatre of war. In late 1942, south of Stalingrad, the 4th and 13th Soviet mechanized corps plus the 4th Soviet Cavalry Corps had about 160,000 soldiers, 550 guns 430 tanks and more than 10,000 horses.<sup>30</sup>

The 11th Army Group of General George Giffard based at Delhi came under the SACSEA at Kandy. The 14th Army under Lieutenant-General (later Field-Marshal) Bill Slim at Comilla controlled the 15th Corps under Christison in the Arakan, 4th Corps under Lieutenant-General G.A.P. Scoones at Imphal, and 33rd Corps under Lieutenant-General M.G.N. Stopford at Dimapur. The Special Force under Wingate and the NCAC of Stilwell were autonomous of the 14th

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26 Keane, *Road of Bones*, pp. 92–93; Max Hastings, *Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944–45* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 90.

27 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Animals, Appendix 16, p. 33, L/WS/1/441.

28 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 19 May 1944, Animals, Appendix 16, pp. 101–2, L/WS/1/441.

29 Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad, The Fateful Siege: 1942–43* (1998, reprint, London/New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 209; Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941–45* (2005, reprint, London: Hodder, 2007), p. 26.

30 Beevor, *Stalingrad*, p. 227.

Army.<sup>31</sup> The 4th and the 33rd Corps under Scoones and Stopford respectively were on the Imphal-Kohima Front. The 4th Corps comprised the 17th Indian Light Division, 5th, 20th and the 23rd Indian Divisions plus the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade. The 33rd Corps comprised the 7th Indian Division, 2nd British Division, 268th Indian Lorried Infantry Brigade and 23rd LRP Brigade.<sup>32</sup> An Indian lorried infantry battalion comprised a battalion headquarters, a headquarters company, support company of anti-tank group (eight 6-pounders) and a MMG group (eight guns), three rifle companies each of three rifle platoons and one 3-inch mortar section.<sup>33</sup>

The 17th Indian Division was commanded by Major-General 'Punch' Cowan from early 1942 onwards. Major-General Douglas Gracey's 20th Indian Division (32nd, 80th and 100th brigades) was raised in 1942 and arrived in Manipur in November 1943. Its task was to guard the Chindwin. The 23rd Indian Infantry Division, comprising some 10,000 men in the 1st, 37th and 49th brigades, guarded Imphal from 1942 onwards. This division was commanded by the 41-year-old Major-General Ouvry Roberts. Major-General Roberts was CO of the 23rd Indian Division from August 1943 till March 1945. It was supported by the 254th Tank Brigade which was equipped with the American-built Stuart (the British called them Honey) light tanks of the 7th Indian Light Cavalry and 60 Lee Grants (US-built) of the 3rd Carabiniers (The Prince of Wales's Dragoon Guards).<sup>34</sup> For close cooperation with the infantry, armoured brigades were formed. Hence, the 44th Indian Armoured Division was broken up. The 255th Indian Armoured Brigade became an independent unit for operation with infantry divisions.<sup>35</sup> Table 9.1 shows the various types of tanks and armoured cars at the disposal of GHQ India which were used for equipping the armoured units of the 14th Army. Against them, the Japanese used 37-mm and 47-mm anti-tank guns. The latter weighed less than a ton and fired a shell weighing about three pounds. It was able to knock out medium tanks like the Lees.<sup>36</sup>

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31 Major-General Ian Lyall Grant, *Burma, The Turning Point: The Seven Battles on the Tiddim Road which Turned the Tide of the Burma War* (1993, reprint, South Yorkshire: Leo Cooper, 2003), p. 228.

32 General George J. Giffard, 'Operations in Assam and Burma from 23rd June 1944 to 12th November 1944', *Supplement to the London Gazette*, No. 39187, 30 March 1951, p. 1713.

33 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, March 1944, Infantry, p. 34, L/WS/1/4411.

34 Robert Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory: The Invasion of India 1944* (South Yorkshire: Praetorian Press, 2011), pp. 5–7.

35 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 19 May 1944, Appendices 3 & 4, pp. 64, 66, L/WS/1/441.

36 Grant, *Burma, The Turning Point*, p. 236.

TABLE 9.1 *Tanks and armoured cars in India in March 1944*

Type of vehicles	Number
<i>Tanks</i>	
Stuarts	843
Lees	458
Valentines	366
Shermans	211
Grants	136
Bridge laying Tanks	82
Scorpions	12
<i>Armoured Cars</i>	
Humbers I, II and III	319
Humbers IV	136
Indian MK III	295
General Motors	293
Daimler 2-pdr	193
Daimler 3-inch howitzer	1
South African Armoured Car	138

Source: To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, March 1944, Appendix 3, p. 144, L/WS/1/441, IOR, BL, London.

The Burma Area Army (BAA) under Masakazu Kawabe (b. 1886) in Rangoon came under the Southern Army Headquarters of Count Terauchi. Kawabe assumed command of the BAA in March 1943. The BAA controlled the 28th Japanese Army under Sakurai in the Arakan and south Burma, the 15th Japanese Army under Lieutenant-General Renya Mutaguchi (b. Oct. 1888) in the Central Front and the 33rd Japanese Army under Honda in north Burma. Mutaguchi assumed command of the 15th Japanese Army around the same time as Kawabe, his superior. The 33rd Japanese Army was formed on 8 April 1944 to relieve the 15th Japanese Army of the task of dealing with the Chindits and operations in north Burma. Mutaguchi, the principal architect of the U GO Offensive, had led the 18th Japanese Division during the invasion of Malaya in 1942. His inspired leadership earned a congratulatory message from General Yamashita, the ‘Tiger of Malaya’.<sup>37</sup> The 15th Japanese Army comprised the 15th

37 Ibid., p. 229; Keane, *Road of Bones*, p. 106; A.J. Barker, *The March on Delhi* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 271–72.

Japanese Division under Lieutenant-General Masafumi Yamauchi (b. 1892, d. 6 Aug. 1944), 31st Japanese Division under Kotoku/Kotoku Sato (b. March 1893, d. March 1958) and the 33rd Japanese Division under Motozo Yanagida (b. Jan 1893). The 33rd Japanese Division had the 213th Japanese Infantry Regiment under Miyawaki, the 214th Japanese Regiment under Sakuma, the 215th Japanese Infantry Regiment under Sasahara and a mountain artillery regiment.<sup>38</sup>

A Japanese division was commanded by a lieutenant-general but had a major-general as the infantry group commander. The latter was the second in command and had his separate staff and was occasionally given command of independent missions. The 31st Japanese Infantry Division's Infantry Group Commander was Miyazaki and the 33rd Japanese Division's Infantry Group Commander was Yamamoto. The infantry regiment was commanded by a colonel. In each regiment, there were three battalions numbered 1, 2 and 3. Rifle companies were numbered throughout each regiment from 1 to 12. A Japanese infantry regiment, besides three battalions, also had a regimental headquarters. The regimental headquarters included command and staff (15), intelligence company (155 persons with eight radios and telephones), ammunition platoon (60 men), cavalry platoon (30 men and 30 horses), infantry artillery company (154 men with two 75-mm guns) and medical platoon (50). The total strength came to about 558 personnel. A Japanese infantry battalion comprised a battalion headquarters of 80 men, four infantry companies and one MG company. The MG company included 180 men with two 70-mm guns and eight MMGs. Each infantry company had 150 men with six LMGs and six grenade dischargers. The total personnel strength of the battalion came to about 860.<sup>39</sup>

The mountain and field artillery regiments of the IJA had three battalions, each with 12 guns (but six in the case of the Imphal-Kohima Campaign). Due to the difficult terrain which the 15th Japanese Army had to cover, the number of guns carried by each infantry division was reduced. This reduction in organic firepower of the Japanese infantry division later had an adverse effect on the IJA's infantry's capability to destroy the defensive 'boxes' of the Commonwealth infantry. The mountain guns were pack transported and the field and medium guns were towed by tractors. The counter to the Japanese mountain gun was the British 3.7-inch howitzer which fired a 20-pound shell and had an elevation of up to 75 degrees. The maximum elevation of the Japanese mountain gun was only 40 degrees, which was a handicap in the steep, mountainous Imphal-Kohima region. The Japanese 105-mm Field Gun Model 92 fired a heavier shell

38 Grant, *Burma, The Turning Point*, pp. 229, 234; Barker, *The March on Delhi*, pp. 272–76.

39 Grant, *Burma, The Turning Point*, pp. 229, 234–35.

for a longer range compared to a British 25-pounder. But the Japanese gun was less mobile and its angle of elevation smaller than its British counterpart. The Japanese 150-mm Medium Howitzer Model 96 was inferior compared to the British 5.5-inch gun as the latter was more mobile and had a better range. The Japanese also used 250-mm (9.8-inch) Spigot Mortars. Each weighed 900 pounds and threw a 674 pound shell with a range of 800 yards and had a great blast effect. It was used in the Chin Hills and in the Imphal Plain. Sometimes, they were carried on the back of elephants.<sup>40</sup>

All the Commonwealth divisions were equipped with their full complement of artillery. In the 23rd, 25th and 26th Indian Divisions, the anti-tank regiments' conversion into AA regiments was not complete. In each of these regiments two anti-tank batteries were to be converted into light AA batteries. Until this conversion was complete, the demands for anti-aircraft requirements were to be met from non-divisional light AA artillery. The 1st and 8th Indian Field Regiments were earmarked to join the 4th and 15th Corps by February 1944. Each of the corps was assigned one medium field artillery regiment for use especially against the Japanese bunkers. In fact, GHQ India was considering deployment of more medium artillery for the destruction of Japanese field defences. The 18th Field Artillery Regiment was armed with 105-mm SPGs. And the 123rd Field Regiment was equipped with 25-pounders. Eight field artillery regiments were converted into jungle field artillery regiments. In 1943, the decision was taken to establish jungle field artillery regiments. Each such regiment was to comprise two batteries: one equipped with eight 3.7-inch howitzers and the other with 16 3-inch mortars. The conversion of four of them (the 28th, 114th, 139th and 160th) was completed by December 1943. The conversion of the remaining four was completed by February 1944. The jungle field artillery regiments were equipped with 25-pounders, South African 3.7-inch howitzers and mortars. The principal shortage of the field artillery regiments was 3.7-inch howitzers. There was also a shortage of trailers for these howitzers. The mortar batteries of the 21st and 29th Light Mounted Regiments were not yet fully trained for war. There was a shortage of signallers and mule drivers in the Indian Mountain Artillery regiments.<sup>41</sup>

The planning for the Imphal-Kohima Operation could be traced back to 1943. On 7 August 1943, the Southern Army issued an order to the BAA: 'The BAA will complete preparations for a counteroffensive... to offset a possible large

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 235–36.

<sup>41</sup> To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, March 1944, Artillery, pp. 16–18, L/ws/1/441; *History of the Regiment of Artillery Indian Army* (Dehra Dun: Palit & Dutt Publishers in association with the Director of Artillery Army Headquarters New Delhi, 1971), p. 64.

scale enemy offensive'.<sup>42</sup> The BAA was ordered to move into the western Chindwin area, destroy the hostile elements in the Imphal region and establish a strong defence. The operation was supposed to start in early 1944 with some seven Japanese divisions in Burma. In actuality, only three to four divisions participated in the Imphal-Kohima Operation. The Southern Army feared that the Commonwealth forces might launch an offensive before the projected Japanese invasion of Imphal.<sup>43</sup> So, for the Japanese, the Imphal-Kohima Operation was offensive on a tactical-operational level but defensive in nature on a strategic level.

From 22 to 26 December 1943, the 15th Japanese Army held a conference to discuss the possibility of launching the U GO Operation and developed detailed missions for each division which would participate by means of a war game. Lieutenant-General Naka, Chief of Staff of the BAA, and Lieutenant-General Ayabe, Vice-Chief of Staff of the Southern Army, also attended the conference. General Ayabe concluded that both from strategic and tactical points of view it was essential for the defence of Burma to hold a line around Kohima and the high ground west of Imphal. And though there was some risk (certainly an understatement) in conducting U GO, it ought to be taken. Field-Marshal Count Terauchi, Commander of the Southern Army, accepted the views of Ayabe and in early January sent him to Tokyo to get the sanction of the IGHQ for the proposed offensive.<sup>44</sup> The IGHQ did not waste much time. On 7 January 1944, it agreed to the proposed offensive. On 15 January 1944, the Southern Army ordered the BAA to proceed with the offensive. On 19 January 1944, the BAA issued the following order: 'To destroy the enemy at Imphal and establish strong defensive positions covering Kohima and Imphal before the coming of the rainy season'.<sup>45</sup>

On 25 January 1944, the 15th Japanese Army Commander, Mutaguchi, summoned the chiefs of staff of the divisions under his command to a conference. It was decided that the Chindwin River should be crossed with motor and rowing boats, bamboo rafts, etc. The 31st Japanese Division, under Kotuku Sato, was ordered to cross the Chindwin River at several points. One element of the 31st Japanese Division would cross the river near Tamanthi and the main force near Homalin. Then, the 31st Japanese Division was to cross the 8,000-feet-high mountain and the humid jungle valleys and finally reach Kohima, all within 20

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42 *Japanese Monograph No. 134, Burma Operations Record, 15th Army Operations in Imphal Area and Withdrawal to Northern Burma, Revised Edition* (1957, reprint, Books Express Publishing, 2011), p. 37.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 37–38.

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

days. Each Japanese soldier was given a ration of 25 kg rice and some salt till they could capture British supplies.<sup>46</sup> According to the 15th Japanese Army's order issued on 11 February, the 31st Japanese Division was to move through Fort Keary and Layshi. A powerful element of this division was to strike at Kohima along the Ukhrul-Kohima Road. This division, after capturing Kohima, was to cut off enemy reinforcements expected from Dimpaur and thus cover the flank and rear of the 15th Japanese Division whose objective was to capture Imphal. The 15th Japanese Division was to start the offensive between Homalin and Sittaung. The main force of the 15th Japanese Division was to cross in the vicinity of Paungbyin. This division was to move into the mountainous region north-west of the Imphal Plain and then rush to the region west of Imphal. At that time, a part of the division would be used to cut the Kohima-Imphal Road and the Bishenpur-Silchar Road. The 33rd Japanese Division was to launch an offensive along the Tiddim-Moirang and Tamu-Palel roads. The 33rd Japanese Division was to advance through the edge of the Chin Hills west of Kalembo and near Yazagyo in the Kabaw Valley. While Imphal would be attacked by the 15th Japanese Division from the north, the 33rd Japanese Division would attack from the south. On D+7, the 33rd Japanese Division was to start its offensive drive towards Imphal along the road connecting Fort White, Tonzang, Churachandpur, Bishenpur and Imphal. A strong detachment with heavy field artillery, tanks and anti-tank guns was to rush through the Kabaw Valley and advance towards Tamu. The capture of Imphal was to be completed by mid-April. Then, a defensive line was to be completed along the mountain ranges east of Dimapur, Silchar and the Chin Hills. Generally, the rainy season lasted from the middle of May to the end of September and reached its peak during July and August when all the rivers overflowed and vehicular traffic became impossible. It was expected that due to bad weather the Commonwealth forces would be able to launch only sporadic air attacks and not any large-scale ground attacks in May. And thus the Japanese defensive line would hold. A Japanese attack before March 1944, the 15th Japanese Army Commander argued, would enable the Commonwealth forces to launch a massive counter-attack before the onset of the rainy season.<sup>47</sup> Hence, the Japanese concluded that the best option for them was to start the offensive only in the second half of March.

In addition to the three above-mentioned Japanese divisions, the BAA for the U GO Operation also used the 1st INA Division which comprised some 10,000 Indian personnel. This division comprised headquarters, four guerrilla

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46 Keane, *Road of Bones*, p. 148; *Japanese Monograph No. 134*, p. 79.

47 *Japanese Monograph No. 134*, pp. 80–83.



regiments, an engineer company, a MT company, etc. The guerrilla regiments' personnel were armed with captured British weapons and dressed like the sepoy of the Indian Army. A huge chunk of the INA personnel were Indian civilians from Burma whose training was not complete. However, the core of the INA comprised erstwhile Sikh and Punjabi Muslim POWs.<sup>48</sup> Several armies in World War II used such auxiliary 'vassal' armies. For instance, in mid-November 1942, the 6th German Army at Stalingrad *Kessel* counted 51,700 *Hiwis* (Russian volunteers).<sup>49</sup> It was planned to advance the 1st INA Infantry Regiment to Haka and Falam to feign an attack on Aijal. This move was calculated to fool the Commonwealth commanders into thinking that the Japanese objective was to attack Chittagong. Troop movements were carried out in the hours of darkness and maximum concealment was achieved by dispersion and utilizing the cover provided by the dense jungle.<sup>50</sup>

### Japanese Defeat in Imphal and Kohima: March–July 1944

The Imphal Plain is a flat alluvial basin some 2,500 feet above the sea level. From north to south, it is about 40 miles and from east to west some 20 miles. The plain is surrounded by jungle-covered hills. Imphal was badly connected with the surrounding regions. A single-track road which was some 138 miles long connected the Dimapur Base in the Brahmaputra Valley with Imphal. It was developed into a twin-track metalled road in early 1943. By jeep it took seven hours to travel from Dimapur to Imphal. However, the road was subject to regular mudslides and during the monsoon was frequently closed to traffic while repair work was being undertaken. A mule track over the mountains from Silchar in Assam also went to Imphal. Imphal was not a very defensible position. The low-lying areas around Imphal were prone to flooding during rainfall, causing a rise in the water table and flooding of the trenches.<sup>51</sup>

While Imphal at that time was considered very unhealthy, Kohima in contrast was considered quite healthy. There were no swamplands around Kohima.<sup>52</sup> It lies at the summit of a pass at an altitude of 4,700 feet, while the

48 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Appendix 2, p. 8, L/WS/1/441; War Diary of the 20th Indian Division, Intelligence Summary No. 6, 0800 hrs 20 May 1944, The Jap LoC, Para 29, File No. 601/25D/WP/Part 2, MODHS, New Delhi.

49 Beevor, *Stalingrad*, p. 281.

50 *Japanese Monograph No. 134*, p. 85.

51 Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, pp. 1–2, 4.

52 Keane, *Road of Bones*, p. 32.



surrounding hills reach a height of between 8,000 and 10,000 feet. This pass was the only practicable highway between Assam, Imphal Plain in Manipur and the Chindwin River in Burma. Precipitous slopes and dense sub-tropical forest at the lower altitudes made the pass difficult to approach except along the established tracks.<sup>53</sup> Kohima controlled the road to the Commonwealth troops' supply base at Dimapur.<sup>54</sup> In early 1944, Imphal was the scene of Scoone's headquarters. The Imphal Plain was studded with several supply dumps, hospitals, workshops and airfields.<sup>55</sup>

The 48th and 63rd brigades of the 17th Indian Division were positioned south of Imphal. In November 1943, this division's units had reached Tiddim, which was 164 miles south of Imphal in the Chin Hills. Tiddim was connected with Imphal by a road which for quite a long stretch remained a donkey track. At the southern end of Tiddim was the 'Chocolate Staircase' which rose to about 3,000 feet for seven miles.<sup>56</sup>

Gracey's 20th Indian Division was at 60 miles south-east of Imphal at Tamu. From Imphal, a metalled road went to Palel, which had an airfield. Palel was 25 miles from Imphal. From Palel, the road rose to the Shenam Mountain (6,000 feet), which separates the Imphal Plain from the Kabaw Valley. From the Shenam Saddle, the road ran to Nippon Hill, three and a half miles further east. From Nippon Hill to Tamu was another 25 miles by road. A jeep took six hours to travel from Imphal to Tamu. During the monsoon rain, landslides closed the road for about 24 hours.<sup>57</sup>

The 4th Corps with the 17th Indian Light Division and the 20th and 23rd Indian Divisions defended the Imphal-Tiddim region of the Central Front. The 20th Indian Division under Gracey was relieved by the 11th East African Division in Ceylon. The former moved to Ranchi and then to the 4th Corps area. In the 4th Corps area, it relieved the 23rd Indian Division under Major-General Roberts. The 23rd Indian Division concentrated in Imphal and became the 4th Corps' reserve. The 20th Indian Division's 100th Brigade disposed a battalion at Bombi and the rest of the brigade was in the Kabaw Valley south of Tamu. The 80th Brigade was along the Yu River east and north-east of Tamu.

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53 James Butler (ed.), *History of the Second World War United Kingdom Military Series*, Major-General S. Woodburn Kirby with Captain C.D. Addis, Brigadier M.R. Roberts, Colonel G.T. Wards and Air Vice-Marshal N.L. Desoer, *The War against Japan*, vol. 3, *The Decisive Battles* (London: HMSO, 1961), p. 299.

54 John Shipster, *Mist on the Rice Fields: A Soldier's Story of the Burma Campaign and the Korean War* (2000, Barnsley, S. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2002), p. 53.

55 Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, p. 5.

56 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

The move into the Kabaw Valley was not opposed by the Japanese who continued to hold the line along Yazagyo-Mawlik.<sup>58</sup>

The Japanese advance started on 4 March but Slim expected that it would start rolling on 15 March.<sup>59</sup> Geoffrey Evans writes that on 13 March, Scoones was convinced that the Japanese invasion had begun and ordered Cowan to withdraw to Imphal. Scoones ordered Roberts to send a brigade of the 23rd Division down the Tiddim Road to help the withdrawal of the 17th Division.<sup>60</sup> The failure of the Allied higher command to order the retreat of the 17th Indian Division in a timely fashion resulted in a crisis. Robert Lyman, an ardent Slim supporter, asserts that 'Bill' realized the necessity of 17th Indian Division's requirement for withdrawal earlier but did not press the issue because he deferred to the divisional commander. This was because Slim followed *Auftragstaktik* which was necessary due to the long distances over which his 14th Army was spread out and the bad communications network in the region of its deployment. Correlli Barnett is rightly harsh on Slim and asserts that instead of ordering his forward divisions back in good time in order to fight his defensive battle at Imphal Plain, Slim left the issue of withdrawal to his corps commander, Scoones. And Scoones left the issue to his divisional commander, Cowan, who was dilatory in ordering the 17th Indian Division to move back.<sup>61</sup>

Cowan, of course, could be partly defended because he lacked the overall view of the operational scenario. With the advantage of hindsight, one could say that Slim should have communicated the 'big' picture much more thoroughly to his divisional commanders through the corps commander and ought to have left the actual timing and modus operandi of the retreat of the three divisions to the divisional COS. Slim generously accepts his role in messing up the withdrawal order in his autobiography. The British Army's command system was yet to absorb the full implications of the smooth functioning of *Auftragstaktik*. The jury is still out as regards the issue of how far Slim himself

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58 Kirby, *et.al.*, *The Decisive Battles*, p. 41.

59 Brian Bond, 'The Army Level of Command: General Sir William Slim and Fourteenth Army in Burma', in Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War: 1941-45* (Oxon: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 47-48. The exact date for the beginning of U GO Offensive remains debatable. Daniel Marston writes that it started on 9 March. Marston, 'A Force Transformed: The Indian Army and the Second World War', in Marston and Sundaram (eds.), *A Military History of India and South Asia*, p. 117.

60 Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (1969, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1977), p. 153.

61 Barnett, 'Field-Marshal Lord Slim and the Burma Campaign', in Cobbold (ed.), *The World Reshaped*, vol. 2, pp. 10-11.

or his divisional commander were responsible for this crisis. Great generals make mistakes. However, the important thing is how quickly they are able to see through it and rectify the mistake as the 'fog of war' descends on the battlefield. At this stage, Mutaguchi had an advantage over Slim. Whether Slim with the well-trained and well-equipped sepoy and Tommies under his command would be able to check and then pursue the aggressive and nimble Japanese remained to be seen.

During the night of 13 March, the 37th Brigade of the 23rd Indian Division was hastily withdrawn from a training exercise and thrown into battle. This battle in history is known as the Battle of Tiddim Road. The aim was that the newly inducted 37th Infantry Brigade would exert pressure on the Japanese troops who were preventing the retreat of the 17th Indian Division. When the order for moving the 37th Infantry Brigade into the battlefield came, its headquarters was scattered. The 3rd Battalion of the 5th RGR was training to launch a morning attack. And a company of the 3rd Battalion of the 10th GR provided a company as enemy in the training exercise and numerous NCOs and officers as umpires. After receiving the order, the units concentrated in darkness and the officers studied maps of the Tiddim Road. The men started gathering stores, ammunition, rations and equipment before moving on.<sup>62</sup>

On 14 March, the 3rd Battalion of the 10th GR advanced. This unit was ordered to check the Japanese penetration near M.S. 100 in order to enable the 17th Division to continue its withdrawal. On the same day, Brigadier H.V. Collingridge (CO of the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade from March 1942 till June 1944) met Roberts, CO of the 23rd Indian Division for gathering further information about enemy strength and their possible moves. Roberts told Collingridge that the 9th Jat, a MG Battalion and a lot of administrative troops were engaged in confused fighting between M.S. 102 and 109. Roberts informed Collingridge that the immediate order for the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade was to reach M.S. 82 and push on from there further forward in order to link up with the retreating 17th Indian Division. Roberts was not sure whether the Japanese were present or not at M.S. 82. And if the IJA units had even reached M.S. 82, it was not clear to him whether they were present in strength or there were merely some detached units at that point.<sup>63</sup>

When Collingridge reached M.S. 82, he found that the Japanese were not present in large numbers. However, the scenario was not at all bright. The Commonwealth administrative units were strewn across two miles along the

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62 Lieutenant-Colonel A.J.F. Doulton, *The Fighting Cock: Being the History of the 23rd Indian Division, 1942–1947* (1950, reprint, Uckfield: Naval & Military Press, n.d.), p. 83.

63 Doulton, *The Fighting Cock*, pp. 83–84.

road and the administrative personnel were moving along like a mob. Moreover, they were spreading the rumour that a Japanese attack was imminent. As darkness fell, Collingridge waited for the rest of his brigade to move in. The flow of reinforcements stopped due to the extremely bad condition of the road. The lorries had trouble in negotiating the loose surface and steep gradient. Further, the gun tractors of the 6th Battery of the 3rd Indian Field Artillery got stuck in the mud and further obstructed the traffic.<sup>64</sup>

Only at 2000 hours did the 3rd Battalion of the 10th GR appear in strength at M.S. 82 after an uncomfortable journey of 110 miles in tightly-packed lorries. The 3rd Battalion of the 5th RGR was 20 miles further back at M.S. 62. Meanwhile, Roberts informed Collingridge that a company of the Jats was hard-pressed at M.S. 100 and the former had to be relieved at all costs. Collingridge decided that in the morning he would send the 3rd Battalion of the 5th RGR (less one company which was functioning as the escort of A Squadron of the 7th Cavalry) and one troop of tanks to relieve the Jats.<sup>65</sup>

A platoon of the 3rd Battalion of the 10th GR was sent off at the dawn of 15 March in order to make a reconnaissance of the battle area. Later, Lieutenant-Colonel J.F. Marindin, the CO of the 3rd Battalion of the 5th RGR appeared and took command. This unit's rear headquarters was established at M.S. 98 and protected by three tanks. At that time, the Japanese attacked. Leaving a platoon of the D Company to hold off the attack, Marindin moved forward to relieve the Jats on the east of the road. When he found the Jats, the latter were at the last gasp. Their ammunition was running low and the perimeter was buckling. It was 1730 hours and an hour of daylight remained to evict the Japanese. The B Company geared up for launching an attack. A quarter of an hour later, the leading platoon assaulted in a westerly direction across the road. The infantry attack was covered by the Jat machine-gunners. Infantry advance under MG support was something which the Indian infantry had learnt in late 1914 in Flanders when they had launched assaults against the German-held trenches. Half of the Gurkha platoon was wiped out by Japanese MG fire and grenades. The survivors were pinned down. The company commander led from the front. Leading from the front by junior officers in order to motivate the sepoys to fight and die in the battlefield was an established tradition in the Indian Army. Despite the loss suffered by the Gurkha platoon, the company commander ordered the second platoon to attack. This time the attack was

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64 Ibid., p. 84.

65 Ibid., pp. 84–85.

successful and the Japanese left, leaving behind 15 dead. Then, the A Company's Gurkhas attacked and the Japanese fled. The perimeter was restored.<sup>66</sup>

Lieutenant-Colonel Marindin ordered a troop of tanks from rear headquarters to assist in a further attack the next day. The three tanks had moved forward for a mile when the leading tank was stopped by a roadblock. The Japanese opened fire on the armoured column and the escorting infantry was annihilated. The infantry ought to have taken more care while advancing along the road to avoid marching into the ambush zone. The Indian Army was yet to learn rigorous infantry-tank cooperation. As the first tank failed to clear the roadblock, the troop commander decided to return to the base. However, he made a mistake and his tank fell into a ditch. One tank went back to the rear headquarters. As the rear headquarters was under attack, it could not detach any further infantry escort for the armoured column. Meanwhile, the Japanese launched mortar attacks on the two tanks which destroyed their tracks. Of these two immobilized tanks, one was still able to fire. The crews of the tank which was firing heard voices outside and thought it was Gurkhali. So, the crews opened the hatch. Instead of finding Gurkhas, the crews were stunned to find Japanese soldiers peering down on them. The Japanese soldiers threw a grenade before the hatch could be closed. The crews then tried to abandon the tanks. All were picked up by the Japanese except one who was able to escape and recount the harrowing tale of the tanks.<sup>67</sup> It was evident that the ham-handed approach by the crews was responsible for the tanks getting bogged down. However, without trained infantry escort parties capable of communicating and thus coordinating their fire and movement with the tanks in difficult terrain against tenacious and ferocious Japanese infantry attacks, the Commonwealth forces did not have much of a chance. It is, however, doubtful whether even Hitler's *panzers* supported by motorized infantry could have done anything better in the roadless hilly and swampy jungles of Burma. In the next chapter, it will be seen that during the advance to Meiktila, the Commonwealth infantry was able to cooperate efficiently with the tanks.

Meanwhile, the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade was getting some reinforcements. A squadron of tanks arrived in the evening of 15 March. As usual, the Japanese launched nocturnal attacks on 15/16 March. The attack on the 37th

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66 Ibid., p. 85; George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 220–27; Kaushik Roy, *Brown Warriors of the Raj: Recruitment and the Mechanics of Command in the Sepoy Army, 1859–1913* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008), pp. 190–222.

67 Doulton, *The Fighting Cock*, pp. 86–87.

Brigade Headquarters lasted for three hours. However, the 3rd Battalion of the 5th RGR and the 3rd Battalion of the 10th GR were able to hold off the attacks by dint of rapid shooting. The 5th Battalion of the 6th Rajputana Rifles reached M.S. 82 at 0700 hours on 16 March. However, the brigade was running short of supplies as the units had started originally with three days ration only. An attempt to send a supply column was held up by a Japanese roadblock. Later, the 4th Company of the 3rd Battalion of the 10th RGR, supported by tanks, was able to clear the roadblock.<sup>68</sup> The above-mentioned brigade-level action shows that the Japanese roadblocks (as in Malaya) still menaced the Indian Army's supply lines. However, joint infantry-tank cooperation could overcome the roadblocks with much expenditure of time, energy and blood. Overall, the 37th Indian Infantry Brigade, by slowing up the Japanese advance, not only allowed the 17th Indian Division to escape from the rapidly closing Nipponese jaws but also disturbed the tight Japanese timetable. The escape of the 17th Indian Division was also possible because the Allied fighter-bombers blasted the Japanese roadblocks and the Dakotas supplied the retreating sepoys with all essentials. By 18 March, as the Japanese neared the outskirts of Ukhrul, only one battalion of the 50th Parachute Brigade had arrived. On 26 March, the 50th Parachute Brigade retreated from Ukhrul near Sangshak to Imphal.<sup>69</sup> But they had been able to seriously delay the Japanese advance. On 29 March, the Japanese cut the Imphal-Dimapur Road at MS 107.<sup>70</sup> The crisis point for Slim had arrived. If the Japanese now moved towards almost undefended Dimapur, the main supply depot for Imphal-Kohima would be gone.

On 2 April 1944, Stopford (Commander of the 33rd Corps) assumed operational command of all the troops in Assam and the Surma Valley. Slim ordered him to check Japanese infiltration in this region and also in the Lushai Valley. Further, Stopford was to keep open the LOC of the 4th Corps between Dimapur and Kohima. Stopford's overall task was to stop and destroy all the Japanese force west of the Chindwin. Stopford expected to have the 2nd British Division, the 33rd and the 161st brigades from the Arakan, and the 23rd LRP Brigade along with the Lushai Brigade. Stopford feared that the Japanese could attack Kohima on 3 April and by 11 April the Japanese might move into the Dhansiri Valley and threaten Dimapur.<sup>71</sup>

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68 Ibid., p. 87.

69 Evans, *Slim as Military Commander*, pp. 156, 169; *Wings of the Phoenix: The Official Story of the Air War in Burma* (1949, reprint, Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), p. 72.

70 *Wings of the Phoenix*, p. 72.

71 Kirby et.al., *The Decisive Battles*, p. 297.

The Japanese objective was to advance from the Chindwin River across the Naga Hills, a distance of about 110 miles and occupy Kohima. The 31st Japanese Division under Lieutenant-General Sato was given this task. Most of its supplies were carried on foot and mules. The Japanese requisitioned available livestock along their line of march. Each soldier carried about 15 days' ration, which included rice and tinned fish. The Japanese hoped to capture the supply depots at Kohima.<sup>72</sup> On 28 March at Jessami, the 124th Japanese Regiment encountered the 1st Assam Regiment.<sup>73</sup>

Kohima is on a ridge that ran alongside and at times astride the main road for a distance of about three miles. From north to south, the main features were Naga Village, the Treasury and Government Offices, the District Commissioner's Bungalow, the Tennis Court, the Hospital, the Field Supply Depot (FSD), the Jail, Garage and the Workshops. In addition, there was limited barrack accommodation available for the military personnel. At that time, the garrison at Kohima comprised the 4th Battalion of Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment and a battalion of the 1st Assam Rifles Regiment.<sup>74</sup> The 4th Battalion of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment's officers were sons of lawyers, stockbrokers, wealthy farmers and teachers. The rank and file came from factory workers, farm labourers, apprentice tradesmen and some aspirant working-class boys who had the ambition for acquiring white collar jobs or even university education.<sup>75</sup> Some examples of the officers of the 4th Battalion of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment need to be given. Tommy Kenyon, aged 33, commanding the A Company, was a volunteer citizen soldier for many years before the war. John Winstanley, the B Company Commander, was a 26-year-old medical student. Harry Smith, commanding the Support Company, was a schoolmaster.<sup>76</sup> Arthur Campbell, Fergal Keane and David Rooney (but not A.J. Barker) claim that the 4th Battalion of the Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment comprised the backbone of defence at Kohima.<sup>77</sup> Their accounts at times tend to 'degenerate' into traditional 'blood and guts' regimental history writing. The 4th Battalion of the Royal West Kent Regiment had taken part in combat in the Arakan as part of the 5th Indian Division. On 29 March 1944, this battalion was flown to Dimapur and on 30 March reached

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72 Shipster, *Mist on the Rice Fields*, pp. 53–54.

73 David Rooney, *Burma Victory: Imphal, Kohima and the Chindit Issue, March 1944 to May 1945* (London: Arms and Armour, 1992), p. 75.

74 Shipster, *Mist on the Rice Fields*, pp. 53–54; Keane, *Road of Bones*, p. 58.

75 Keane, *Road of Bones*, p. 60.

76 Campbell, *The Siege*, pp. 36–37.

77 *Ibid.*, p. vii; Keane, *Road of Bones*, Rooney, *Burma Victory*, pp. 71–106; Barker, *The March on Delhi*.



Kohima. Lieutenant-Colonel John Laverty, the CO of the Royal West Kents, was an Irish regular officer.<sup>78</sup> Initially, the garrison at Kohima, under Brigadier Warren, comprised 1,500 soldiers backed by some 1,000 Indian non-combatants.<sup>79</sup> The Kohima Garrison Headquarters was dug deep in the bunkers with trenches running near the District Commissioner's Bungalow.<sup>80</sup>

Stopford ordered Major-General Ranking (Area/Garrison Commander) to consider the defence of Dimapur as the first priority and the defence of Kohima as the second. Ranking, in response, ordered Warren, commanding the 161st Brigade (4th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment, 1st Battalion of the 1st Punjabis and the Royal West Kent Regiment), to move his troops from Kohima to Nichugard Pass at the southern approaches of Dimapur. Rooney claims that Slim was against moving the 161st Brigade from Kohima to Dimapur but bowed to Stopford's decision.<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, one regiment of the 15th Japanese Division was in the Sangshak area and a battalion of the 33rd Japanese Division was on the Tamu Road. The 58th Infantry Regiment of the 31st Japanese Division was ordered to cut the Imphal Road near Mao. Sato's task was to capture Kohima to prevent help reaching Imphal from the Assam Valley by way of the Imphal Road but he had not been authorized to enter the Assam Valley. The 138th Japanese Infantry Regiment in the Jessami-Kharasom area was given the region north of Kohima as its objective. Moving behind the 138th was the 124th Japanese Infantry Regiment, which was Sato's divisional reserve.<sup>82</sup>

On 3 April 1944, the first Japanese unit reached Kohima. On the same day, the Assam Regiment and the Assam Rifles, with some 250 personnel, reached Kohima.<sup>83</sup> According to Barker, on 3 April, the Kohima Garrison comprised the 1st Assam Regiment, seven platoons of the 3rd Assam Rifles, the Shere Regiment (on loan from the Nepal Army), two Gurkha companies, one company of the 5th Burma Regiment, one company of the 1st Garrison Battalion Burma Regiment, two platoons of the 5th Battalion of the 27th Maratha Light Infantry,

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<sup>78</sup> Rooney, *Burma Victory*, pp. 71–72.

<sup>79</sup> Russell Miller, *Uncle Bill: The Authorized Biography of Field Marshal Viscount Slim* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013), p. 293. Arthur Campbell in his *The Siege* p. vii writes that at Kohima there were some 2,000 Indian personnel of the administrative branch who were classified as non-combatants.

<sup>80</sup> Campbell, *The Siege*, p. 53.

<sup>81</sup> Rooney, *Burma Victory*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>82</sup> Kirby, *et.al.*, *The Decisive Battles*, pp. 297–98; Evans, *Slim as Military Commander*, p. 167.

<sup>83</sup> Rooney, *Burma Victory*, p. 75.



detachments of V Force, 200 BORS from reinforcement camps plus one 25-pounder. In total, there were some 2,500 personnel.<sup>84</sup>

Geoffrey Evans, in his biography of Slim, asserts that 4 April 1944 was the turning point of the battle when Slim gained the upper hand against the Japanese. If the Japanese had moved into Dimapur before 2 April when the first elements of the British 2nd Division started arriving, then the trajectory of the battle (but not the war) might have been different.<sup>85</sup> Leslie Edwards, in his book entitled *Kohima* (which to date remains the most detailed account of the siege and its subsequent relief), writes that 5 April was the turning point of the battle. Miyazaki, the CO of the 31st Division Infantry Group, thought that the 3rd Battalion of the 58th Japanese Regiment had seized the Garrison Hill by nightfall. Hence, he ordered this battalion to move forward to occupy Cheshwema on the Merema Track. Miyazaki himself later admitted that it was the biggest mistake of his career. If the battalion had not left Kohima on that date then the Kohima Ridge might have fallen to the Japanese.<sup>86</sup> The whole concept of 'turning point', as well as the precise date when the Imphal-Kohima Operation turned against the Japanese, is open to debate. However, one thing is clear. The Japanese still had lot of fire remaining within them. And slowly but steadily, they inched forward against the Kohima garrison. On 5 April, the Royal West Kents were ordered to return to Kohima. Initially, when the Royal West Kents arrived in Bombay after their victory over the *Afrika Korps* at El Alamein, they were contemptuous of the Japanese fighting ability. However, their sojourn in the Arakan for six months, starting from October 1943, taught them respect for the Japanese infantry's fighting capabilities.<sup>87</sup>

On 5 April, the Japanese started infiltrating along the western end of the GPT Ridge and started sniping from the Aradura Spur. The Japanese placed four 75-mm guns at the Workshop Ridge (two kilometres further south and across the other side of the Dimapur/Imphal Road) and fired over open sights at the GPT Ridge, which was defended by a platoon of the Assam Regiment and a Gurkha company. The GPT Ridge was lost and then the Japanese turned their attention to Jail Hill.<sup>88</sup>

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84 Barker, *The March on Delhi*, pp. 265–66.

85 Evans, *Slim as Military Commander*, pp. 158, 166.

86 Leslie Edwards, *Kohima, The Furthest Battle: The Story of the Japanese Invasion of India in 1944 and the 'British-Indian Thermopylae'* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: History Press, 2009), p. 115.

87 Campbell, *The Siege*, pp. vii, 18–19.

88 Edwards, *Kohima, The Furthest Battle*, pp. 108–9.

The 58th Japanese Infantry Regiment moved towards the Aradura Spur and drove back the Manipur State troops. Further, the Kohima Garrison Commander, Colonel H.U. Richards (appointed on 22 March by Scoones), was not on good terms with Warren, who was the CO of the 161st Brigade.<sup>89</sup> Personal animosity among the British field commanders rather adversely affected the strength of Commonwealth defence. However, thanks to the availability of air transportation, the Imphal-Kohima Sector got reinforcements, which in turn eased the situation for the Allies somewhat. The 161st Brigade of the 5th Indian Division was flown from the Arakan to Dimapur in March 1944 and immediately pushed towards Kohima.<sup>90</sup> This sort of rapid aerial transportation of Commonwealth troops was not taken into account by Mutaguchi while planning the Imphal-Kohima Operation.

The Kohima garrison, however, had enough troubles of its own. The primary one was inadequate water supply. Water was piped into Kohima from a stream some two miles away in the Rifle Range Area west of the GPT Ridge. This water supply line was disrupted by the Japanese. Further, medical support and supplies were in somewhat short supply due to the increasing number of wounded personnel.<sup>91</sup> On 6 April, the Japanese attacked and occupied Jail Hill. The counter-attack by the Assam Regiment failed. The occupation of Jail Hill allowed the Japanese to dominate the General Purpose Transport (GPT) Ridge and the Field Supply Depot (FSD). On the same day, the 1st Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment, 4th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment and 24th Indian Mountain Regiment of the 161st Brigade reached Jotsoma. Warren established a defensive box at Jotsoma from where a good observation of the Kohima Ridge was available. The guns were established on a reverse slope, which provided firepower support to the Kohima Garrison.<sup>92</sup> S.P.P. Thorat, an Indian commissioned officer, was ordered to join the 4th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment, which was a component of the 114th Brigade of the 7th Indian Division. It was trying to clear the Japanese from the Naga Hills. However, because of the Japanese threat to the Dimapur-Imphal Road, Thorat was obliged to wait in the Reinforcement Camp in Dimapur till it was reasonably safe for the convoys to reach Kohima.<sup>93</sup>

89 Rooney, *Burma Victory*, p. 76; Evans, *Slim as Military Commander*, p. 165.

90 Lieutenant-General S.P.P. Thorat, *From Reveille to Retreat* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1986), p. 53.

91 Edwards, *Kohima, The Furthest Battle*, p. 114.

92 Rooney, *Burma Victory*, pp. 76–77; Michael Lowry, *Fighting through to Kohima: A Memoir of War in India and Burma* (2003, reprint, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2008), p. 207.

93 Thorat, *From Reveille to Retreat*, p. 53.

On 8 April, the 138th Japanese Infantry Regiment had moved to the north of Kohima and cut the Dimapur-Kohima Road at Zubza (M.S. 36) which resulted in the severance of communication between the Kohima Garrison and the 161st Brigade at Jotsoma. By this time, the Royal West Kents had dug inside the Kohima perimeter. Sometimes, the distance between the Japanese trenches and the trenches occupied by the Indian and British soldiers was only 10 to 15 yards. On 10 April, Grover ordered Brigadier Hawkins and the 5th Brigade (Worcesters, Dorsets and Cameron Highlanders) to advance from Zubza towards Kohima.<sup>94</sup>

The 2nd British Division, which was on the move from Dimapur, destroyed the Japanese roadblocks and on 15 April established contact with the 161st Brigade. The stubborn Japanese would make some more minimal gains against the Kohima Garrison but given their rickety supply situation, lack of reinforcements and absence of air support, their game was up. 15 April was probably the turning point as far as Kohima was concerned. On 17–18 April, the defenders of Kohima lost the Detail Issue Store and the Kuki Picket to the Japanese who were fighting doggedly. At this stage of the campaign, even if the Japanese were able to capture Kohima, they would not be able to hold it for long due to the gradual advance of the 2nd British division. Nevertheless, the Japanese soldiers offered great resistance when the newly arrived Commonwealth reinforcements tried to push them out of their dugouts. A series of ‘mini Verduns’ occurred among the scattered Japanese trenches and dugouts across the mountainous ridge of Kohima. On 4 May, crossfire from cleverly positioned Japanese MGs prevented elements of the 2nd British Division from capturing the FSD. Japanese fieldcraft was by all means masterly. As in the Arakan, the IJA soldiers in Imphal cleverly camouflaged their bunkers and slit trenches. Further, many bunkers were sited on the reverse slope. The Japanese soldiers set up MGs both in the flanks and in depth behind their fortified positions. And the Japanese soldiers’ interlocking fire made it suicidal for the Commonwealth infantry to approach them. Hence, these bunkers could not be destroyed easily by artillery and mortar fire. When the British and Indian big guns fired on them, the Japanese lay low. And once the artillery fire stopped, then the Japanese came out and harassed the Commonwealth soldiers with small arms. It required a direct hit on each Japanese bunker. Grant tanks were used to destroy the bunkers. While the main gun of the tank shelled a bunker, the Browning automatics sprayed bullets among the Japanese defenders who attempted to flee the bunker. In addition, Hurribombers bombarded the

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94     Rooney, *Burma Victory*, pp. 77–78, 80; Lowry, *Fighting through to Kohima*, p. 231.

Japanese defensive positions.<sup>95</sup> The Japanese infantry had no real antidote to the Allied tanks and aircraft. Superior ground and aerial firepower finally enabled the Commonwealth troops to destroy the Japanese. However, it was a time-consuming and bloody process.

By 16 May, the 14th Punjab had cleared Potsangbam (along the Tiddim Road) and inflicted some 300 casualties on the Japanese and captured five of their guns and two Spigot mortars. By 20 May, the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade had driven away the 33rd Japanese Mountain Artillery Regiment and 6th Company of the 154th Japanese Regiment from Moirang village. By this time, Mutaguchi realized that Imphal would not fall to his force like a ripe plum. His plan that the IJA should quickly capture the Allied supply dumps at Imphal and survive on the captured rations (as was the case of Japanese Malayan *Blitzkrieg* depending on captured Churchill rations) was unravelling. Mutaguchi took some half measures in order to provide minimum supplies to his embattled troops scattered in detachments of various strength all along the jungle-clad hills and villages around Imphal. For bringing supplies across the Chindwin, the Japanese used local ferries. However, the Commonwealth aircraft attacked these 'native' boats vigorously. The Japanese made an attempt to use the Sittaung-Tamu-Palel and the Tiddim Road as their LoCs to Imphal. By 20 May, the Japanese had been able to construct a road capable of taking three-ton vehicles on the east bank of the Chindwin from Sittaung to Kundaw. The road from Sittaung to Gandamagyaung was repaired. By 28 May, the section of the road from Tamu to Kyauksedi was also repaired. A few *bashas* were also constructed for their supply personnel along the roads. However, these flimsy Japanese roads were soon washed away by monsoon rainfall. As the tracks became waterlogged, the Japanese failed to build diversions. To add to their woes, the Commonwealth air forces carried out air reconnaissance and then blasted the already overburdened Japanese supply tracks. The Tiddim Road was heavily bombed by the Commonwealth strategic air force.<sup>96</sup> The Japanese lost the race in the building up of the logistical infrastructure due to lack of air superiority, lack of materials (cement, bulldozers, adequate trained manpower including sappers and engineers) and inadequate attention by Mutaguchi.

The Japanese were down but not out. They made desperate local attacks to break in to Imphal and to hold on to the environs of Kohima. During 20–21 May, at the Tenugopal Sector (south-east of Imphal), the Japanese were exhausted and could only launch attacks by jitter parties. At this stage of the

95 Lowry, *Fighting through to Kohima*, pp. 208–9, 214, 222, 233, 242, 245.

96 War Diary of the 20th Indian Division, Intelligence Summary No. 6, 0800 hrs 20 May 1944, The Jap LoC, Para 1–7, 16.

war, the Japanese jitter parties' effect on the well-trained and well-equipped British and Indian soldiers was negligible. On 21 May, the 1st Battalion of the 214th Japanese Regiment moved south of the Silchar Track, crossed the Tiddim Road at Ningthoukhong, moved north and attacked the Commonwealth troops who had defensively organized themselves into the Bishenpur Box. The Japanese lacked the strength to attack the box from the west side of the Tiddim Road. The Japanese attack failed against the box formation. Some 160 Japanese were killed in this action. Close-quarter combat in the trenches constructed on top of the spurs of the hills broke out. Between 23 and 24 May, the 7th Baluch and the 9th FFR counter-attacked the half-starved Japanese and the latter withdrew from Bishenpur and Buri *Bazaar* village. The advanced state of decomposition of the bodies of the IJA soldiers prevented an accurate body count of Japanese casualties.<sup>97</sup>

Towards the end of May, the battered 33rd Japanese Division was capable of launching attacks of limited strength along the Imphal-Bishenpur Sector. One could pose a counterfactual scenario. What would possibly have happened if the Japanese had bypassed the Bishenpur Box and advanced directly towards Imphal? However, the Japanese dared not bypass the well-defended Bishenpur Box astride their flimsy LoC while advancing towards Imphal. A possible option for the Japanese would have been to establish a roadblock north of Bishenpur and launch jitter parties to distract the garrison of the Bishenpur Box. And taking advantage of it, the Japanese could have moved a large part of their troops along the Tiddim Road to the west of Bishenpur and attack Imphal from the western direction.<sup>98</sup> It was not that the Japanese commanders were foolish to launch only frontal attacks. At this stage, the Japanese lacked the logistical wherewithal to move large number of troops across the mountains over great distances. Such moves would have been observed by Allied reconnaissance aircraft and their fighter-bombers (Hurribombers and Vengeances)<sup>99</sup> would have licked the hell out of the Japanese detachments. Moreover, Japanese roadblocks north of Bishenpur would not have worked. The Commonwealth infantry-tank combination, working in tandem with heavy artillery and fighter-bomber swoops, would have destroyed such Japanese roadblocks. 1944 Burma was different from 1942.

Serious pressure between Naga village and the Aradura Spur continued to be exerted till 18 May by the 124th and 138th Japanese Regiments. North of Imphal, the 15th Japanese Division was also seriously weakened due to food

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97 Ibid., Para 10, 19, 21, 26.

98 Ibid., The Jap LoC, Para 32.

99 *Wings of the Phoenix*, p. 79.

and ammunition shortages by the end of May 1944. It was not in a position to launch a serious offensive along the west of the Iril Valley. However, the Japanese attempted to deny the Commonwealth troops the use of the main Kohima Road.<sup>100</sup> The original role of the 7th Battalion of the 2nd Punjab Regiment was to act as a reserve. In mid-May 1944, this battalion, under Lieutenant-Colonel Mainprize-King, was ordered to send a company to Kohima to reinforce the 4th Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment which had taken heavy casualties.<sup>101</sup> After the Japanese were cleared out of Kohima, Thorat wrote in his memoirs about this town in the following words: '... it was in a shambles. The roads were cut up by hundreds of craters and shell-holes, almost all the buildings were destroyed or damaged, and the stench of rotting flesh pervaded the entire area.'<sup>102</sup>

On 8 June 1944, the SACSEA Mountbatten issued a directive which had three parts. The first part demanded that on the Chindwin Front communication must be re-established on the Dimapur-Kohima-Imphal Road by mid-July at the latest. Next, the Japanese force in the region stretching from Dimapur-Kohima-Imphal Plain-Yuma-Tamanthi should be cleared. And after that the troops should be prepared to advance across the Chindwin in the Yuwa-Tamanthi area after the monsoon.<sup>103</sup>

The road south from Tamu down the Kabaw Valley was actually a sea of mud. The mud varied from six to 18 inches in depth. At some places, corduroy roads had to be built for the jeeps and 30-cwt. 6x6 lorries to pass. A 6x6 lorry is one in which the power can be transferred to all six wheels. The Sittaung track from Palel to the Chindwin River was passable for jeeps and 4x4 vehicles till the Yu River. A 4x4 lorry was a four wheeled vehicle and all the four wheels could be driven by the engine. Then, there was a ferry and beyond it, pack and porter transport was possible. Since a large amount of blasting was required, it was considered impossible to use bulldozers for clearing a track. The Tiddim Road was worse than the Kabaw Valley Road. The former road was commanded on either side by scrub-covered hills up to 8,000 feet high on either side. The vehicles used to skid on the muddy track.<sup>104</sup> In the third week of June 1944, the monsoon came in full fury. The rainfall averaged about 16 inches per month in the Kabaw Valley and Naga Hills around Ukhrul. The tracks were washed away.

100 War Diary of the 20th Indian Division, Intelligence Summary No. 6, 0800 hrs 20 May 1944, The Jap LoC, Para 30, 34.

101 Shipster, *Mist on the Rice Fields*, p. 51.

102 Thorat, *From Reveille to Retreat*, p. 54.

103 Giffard, 'Operations in Assam and Burma from 23rd June 1944 to 12th November 1944', p. 1712.

104 *Ibid.*, pp. 1712–13.

The Commonwealth combatants had to deal with malaria and leeches besides hostile enemy soldiers. In addition to dangerous mosquitoes, the Naga Hills were also dangerous for typhus and jungle sores.<sup>105</sup>

On 20 June, Major-General John Grover's 2nd British Division reached M.S. 85. It had started its push down the road from Kohima on 4 June against the fierce Japanese resistance offered by Sato's rearguard commanded by Major-General Miyazaki. In the evening of 21 June 1944, the leading troops of the 6th Brigade, commanded by Smith, reached M.S. 103. Only eight miles separated the 2nd British Division from the 5th Indian Division.<sup>106</sup> On 22 June, the 5th Indian Division of the 4th Corps from the north of Imphal attacked the Japanese along the road to Kohima. After clearing Kanglatobi, it reached M.S. 109, where it made contact with the 2nd British Division of the 33rd Corps driving down from the north. At noon, at M.S. 109, the lead troops of the 2nd British Division (of 33rd Corps) met the forward troops of the 5th Indian Division (under 4th Corps). The Imphal-Kohima Road was finally opened.<sup>107</sup> Around 22 June, the attack of the 5th Indian Division from Imphal towards Kohima was held off by three Japanese battalions, which were deployed in the hills east of the road. Another group of five Japanese battalions which tried to reach Imphal along the Litan Road and the Iril River Valley was obstructed by the 20th Indian Division. This Japanese contingent then took a position along the Imphal-Ukhrul track.<sup>108</sup>

After the Japanese siege at Kohima was broken, Thorat was posted to the 9th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment as second in command. It was part of the 20th Indian Division, which was combating the Japanese in the plains of Kohima. He flew in a cargo plane to Manipur and then to Imphal while the latter town's siege was still going on. In order to reduce the pressure on air supply, a large number of 'unwanted' personnel were sent out of Imphal along the Silchar and Haflong tracks. The 9th Battalion of the 14th Punjab Regiment of the 20th Indian Division was protecting the Silchar track. This battalion escorted the refugees. The Japanese subjected this road to long-range artillery fire and mortar shells. Though it did not do much damage, the road was full of

105 Bisheshwar Prasad (General Editor), *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939–45*, P.N. Khera and S.N. Prasad, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 2, *June 1944–August 1945* (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section[India & Pakistan]: Calcutta, 1959, Distributed by Orient Longmans), p. 12; Shipster, *Mist on the Rice Fields*, p. 53.

106 Lieutenant-General Geoffrey Evans and Antony Brett-James, *Imphal: A Flower on Lofty Heights* (London: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 324–25.

107 Giffard, 'Operations in Assam and Burma from 23rd June 1944 to 12th November 1944', pp. 171, 173.

108 Khera and Prasad, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 2, p. 13.



shell-holes and every tree was denuded of its branches. Though posted as second in command of the battalion, Thorat, in order to get a feel for the battlefield, requested his CO for command of a forward company. It was duly given to him and he engaged in several small skirmishes with the Japanese infantry. When his CO was evacuated to Imphal with dysentery (which was rampant in the battle zone), Thorat replaced him. The Japanese held a hill which was a maximum of two miles from Thorat's forward position. In order to reconnoitre the Japanese defensive position, Thorat and his orderly, dressed as stragglers, organized a two-man reconnaissance party. They carried four days' dry ration and were armed with a Sten Gun and a *kukri*. In the evening, they slipped out and in darkness attempted to move towards the Japanese-held hill. Thorat's orderly was ordered that if either of them were captured then the other person was not to attempt to save them. Rather, if captured by the Japanese they were to pretend to be INA personnel. In the starlit night, Thorat was able to note two section posts of the enemy. After having a biscuit and water at midnight, they continued their probing and during the dawn hid in the jungle. In the morning, it started raining. Thorat was able to locate some of the Japanese sentry posts and a cookhouse. Thorat's two-man reconnaissance patrol was more daring than the nature of patrolling laid out in the Jungle Warfare School at Shimoga which we discussed in an earlier chapter. Equipped with the knowledge of the Japanese disposition of sentries, Thorat a few days later mounted an attack and the Japanese were evicted with considerable casualties. Then, he ordered his men to 'dig in' to the hill.<sup>109</sup>

On 22 June, the 4th Corps' 17th Indian Light Division, with one brigade of the 20th Indian Division, attacked the 33rd Japanese Division in the Bishenpur area south of Imphal. Two battalions and one mountain battery cut the Japanese LoC about M.S. 33 on the Imphal-Tiddim Road by making a wide turning movement from the east and then drove north about four miles south of Bishenpur. This bold attack on the rear of the Japanese confused them.<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, the 20th Indian Division carried out a twin attack with its 80th and 100th Indian Infantry Brigades near Ukhrul. The 100th Indian Infantry Brigade was near the Ukhrul Road and the 80th Indian Infantry Brigade conducted a long sweep and held the upper reaches of the Iril River near Chawai. Simultaneously, the 23rd LRPB reached the hills north of Ukhrul.<sup>111</sup>

On 22 June, the 20th Indian Division of the 4th Corps engaged the Japanese in the Ukhrul Sector, with one brigade in the area 16 miles west of the village

109 Thorat, *From Reveille to Retreat*, pp. 54–57.

110 Giffard, 'Operations in Assam and Burma from 23rd June 1944 to 12th November 1944', p. 1713.

111 Khera and Prasad, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 2, p. 14.



along the Japanese LoC and another brigade on the Imphal-Ukhrul Road which cleared the Nipponese from M.S. 17. The two battalions of the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade were in action south of the Ukhrul Road east of Wangjing. On the same day, the 23rd Indian Division engaged the Japanese some three miles east and south-east of Palel. The 7th Indian Division of the 33rd Corps on 22 June was ordered to move east of Ukhrul. The 2nd British Division and the 268th Indian Lorried Brigade were responsible for the protection of the Kohima-Imphal Road south and north of M.S. 79 respectively. The 23rd LRPB cleared the tracks leading down to Ukhrul from the north and cut the Japanese routes to the east.<sup>112</sup>

The 2nd British Division's 4th Infantry Brigade held the Dimapur-Imphal Road along Karong. The 5th and 6th Infantry Brigades also held stretches of this road. The 114th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 7th Indian Division was at Kohima. The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade, which originally formed part of the 5th Indian Division, was ordered to move to Imphal. It reverted to the command of the 5th Indian Division and concentrated at Imphal by 26 June 1944. The 89th Indian Infantry Brigade was sent from Imphal and then rejoined its parent division, the 7th Indian Division, by 27 June.<sup>113</sup>

The 21st Indian Division, comprising the 268th Indian Lorried Infantry Brigade and 45th Cavalry, was given the task of maintaining patrols along the track from Kohima to Jessami and Kharasom and of protecting the road from Kohima to Maram. And the 2nd British Division was given the task of mopping up the Japanese troops on both sides of the hills along the Kohima-Imphal Road from Maram to the boundary of the 4th Corps. From the north-west, the 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 7th Indian Division was ordered to advance on 27 June towards Ukhrul via Oinam and Tallin. The 89th Indian Infantry Brigade was to advance from Kangpokpi in the eastern direction to Chawai and Khunthak and attack Ukhrul. The 80th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 20th Indian Division was already in the Chawai area.<sup>114</sup>

The 33rd Indian Infantry Brigade of the 7th Indian Division was ordered to form a column and advance across the country to Ukhrul from the north-west. The 7th Indian Division was also made responsible for the protection of the road from Kohima to Maram. The 23rd LRPB was to cover the eastern flank and the 20th Indian Division was to attack from the south along the road. On 27 June, the 89th Brigade came under command of the 7th Indian Division and

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112 Giffard, 'Operations in Assam and Burma from 23rd June 1944 to 12th November 1944', p. 1713.

113 Khera and Prasad, *The Reconquest of Burma*, vol. 2, p. 14.

114 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 14–15.

the 161st Brigade passed from its control to the 5th Indian Division. It was decided that both these brigades should have AT only due to the difficult terrain in which they had to operate. By midnight of 27/28 June, the 33rd Brigade, with 1,400 mules, reached Purul. The 1st Queens remained at Purul and the rest of the brigade advanced to Oinam. The Japanese resistance was negligible. The country ahead was too broken for moving even the mountain artillery. Hence, the 25th Mountain Artillery Regiment was sent back from Purul. On 29 June 1944, the 4th Battalion of the 8th GR reached Mollen and the 1st Battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment reached Luinem. On 30 June 1944, the 20th Indian Division, commanded by Major-General D.D. Gracey, came under the 33rd Corps. But its 32nd Indian Infantry Brigade remained under the 4th Corps. However, in compensation, the 152nd and 153rd Parachute battalions and a MMG company of the 50th Parachute Brigade were placed under the 20th Indian Division.<sup>115</sup>

On 8 July, Mutaguchi accepted defeat and decided that withdrawal was a necessity.<sup>116</sup> The 33rd Japanese Division, compared to the 15th and 31st Japanese Divisions, was able to conduct a tolerably 'ordered' retreat. This was because the 33rd Japanese Division had the 'luxury' of withdrawing through the Tiddim-Tamu Road. In comparison, the other two Japanese divisions had to retreat through tracks along the jungle-covered mountains.<sup>117</sup> In late July, the 31st Japanese Division assembled in the vicinity of Thaungdut. However, the disintegration of military discipline due to lack of supply prevented this division from conducting delaying actions along the Thaungdut-Humine Line. The 31st Japanese Division was then ordered back to Sittaung. Sato was replaced and on 2 August 1944, Lieutenant-General Tsuchitaro Kawada arrived at Intabaung and took command of the division. The flank and rear of the 15th Japanese Division were exposed to Commonwealth attacks. The 15th Japanese Division moved south-east to the Kabaw Valley and some units retreated along the road connecting Ukhrlu, Sangshak and Humine. The other units of this division retreated through the steep mountain trail which ran west of the road. Bypassing pursuing Commonwealth units, this division somehow reached Thaungdut in early August.<sup>118</sup>

The Japanese 'misadventure' was over. The Japanese retreat became a sort of 'jungle pathway towards hell', somewhat like the Kokoda Track in New Guinea. Lieutenant-General Geoffrey Evans (who commanded the 5th and later the 7th

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., pp. 18–20, 27.

<sup>116</sup> Miller, *Uncle Bill*, p. 308.

<sup>117</sup> Evans and Brett-James, *Imphal*, pp. 328–29.

<sup>118</sup> *Japanese Monograph No. 134*, pp. 157–58.

Indian divisions in Burma) and Antony Brett-James (CO of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade Signals at Imphal) in their account noted: 'In one hospital, consisting of a few dilapidated *bashas* hidden in thick jungle, dead Japanese sat up or lay on improvised beds, their bones clean after the red ants had completed their gruesome work'.<sup>119</sup> The few Japanese prisoners who were taken were half naked and suffered from malaria, dysentery and beriberi. Malnutrition further weakened resistance to disease. During the monsoon, there was an increase in scrub typhus which required careful nursing, an option which was not available to the IJA's soldiers. The climate varied from intense cold on the summit of mountains to hot and steamy valleys. And torrential rain during the monsoon further made the climate troublesome.<sup>120</sup> All this further added to the discomfort of the patients.

### Assessment

The Imphal-Kohima Campaign represented new elements of warfare in the context of World War II, especially in relation to the South-East Asian theatre. The scale of air supply and air evacuation, direct air support given by the tactical air force to the embattled Commonwealth ground forces and assistance given by the strategic air force in impeding Japanese reinforcements were innovative elements which altered the tactical-operational picture. At times, the strategic air force also intervened in the tactical sphere. However, the latter type of intervention's effectiveness can be questioned. The strategic air force, though, performed certain important duties like photographic reconnaissance, air transportation of elements of ground forces (especially by the American Air Transport Command) and airborne forces, air evacuation of casualties and non-important personnel, air defence of the India Base (Calcutta and the other adjoining regions had airfields which the tactical and strategic air forces used), strategic air offensive against transportation and maintenance facilities of the IJA, etc. The strategic air force gave sterling service in disrupting Japanese supplies by attacking the Rangoon port, railway tracks leading from Rangoon to Meiktila and also coastal shipping which were geared for supplying the Japanese units.<sup>121</sup> By early 1944, most of the large-scale movement of Japanese supplies occurred during the night. And during daylight a complex

<sup>119</sup> Evans and Brett-James, *Imphal*, p. 332.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 329–30, 332.

<sup>121</sup> Brief Review by the Directorate of Staff Duties of the Air Aspects of the Despatch by General George Giffard on the Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November to 22 June 1944, pp. 2, 4–5, Burma Campaign, CAB, DEFE 2/654, PRO, Kew, Surrey, UK.

set of camouflage was adopted to keep away the Commonwealth aircraft.<sup>122</sup> All these measures delayed and reduced the volume of supplies which reached the Japanese frontline units.

Slim deserves credit for closely cooperating with Baldwin's 3rd Tactical Air Force and Brigadier-General Old's Troops Carrier Command. Anderson asserts that Slim established an air-land headquarters which to a great extent goes to explain the intimate cooperation and coordination between the 14th Army and the air forces under the SEAC.<sup>123</sup> In fact, Slim can be categorized as an air-minded general who realized the opportunity to utilize air power in furthering his operational aim. During the interwar era, Slim tinkered with the issue of supplying troops along the North-West Frontier with aircraft.<sup>124</sup> One could say that the use of aircraft for supplying the garrison at Imphal and transporting troops and evacuating the casualties resulted in a higher tempo and enabled him to get inside the observe—orient—decide—act (OODA) loop of Mutaguchi's command.

Air supply allowed the Indian soldiers to prevent rapid Japanese advance. In February 1944, the 7th Indian Division was entirely surrounded near Buthidaung but it did not retire because it was supplied by air. The greatest achievement of air transportation was the transfer of the 5th Indian Division at the end of March 1944 and two brigades of the 7th Indian Division to the 4th Corps' front in May 1944.<sup>125</sup> On 14 March, Slim requested Mountbatten to make air transport available for bringing the 5th Division from the Arakan to Imphal. There were six airfields around Imphal, all within a 30 by 20 miles area of the Imphal Valley. At the beginning of March, there were six fighter and fighter-bomber squadrons to protect the battle space at Imphal. The fly in of the division was completed between 19 to 29 March. If, instead of using air transportation, the 5th Indian Division had come to Imphal from Razabil in the Arakan on foot and by lorry, it would have taken a month.<sup>126</sup> The air transportation of the 50th

122 Michael Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign: December 1941– August 1945* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2006), p. 133.

123 Anderson, 'The Very Model of a Modern Manoeuvrist General: William Slim and the Exercise of High Command in Burma', in Sheffield and Till (eds.), *The Challenges of High Command*, p. 81.

124 Robert Lyman, 'The Art of Manoeuvre at the Operational Level of War: Lieutenant-General W.J. Slim and Fourteenth Army, 1944–45', in Sheffield and Till (eds.), *The Challenges of High Command*, p. 91.

125 Brief Review by the Directorate of Staff Duties of the Air Aspects of the Despatch by General George Giffard on the Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November to 22 June 1944, pp. 2–3.

126 Evans, *Slim as Military Commander*, pp. 156–57; *Wings of the Phoenix*, pp. 71, 73–74.

Parachute Brigade (less one battalion) from India to Kohima in early March 1944 certainly blunted Sato's thrust.<sup>127</sup>

The use of air supply and air transportation of troops was new to the Burma theatre but was an established feature in other fronts of World War II. Before Imphal-Kohima, other armies also attempted air supply when encircled by hostile forces. One example which comes to mind is the case of air supply by the *Luftwaffe* to the besieged 6th German Army of *Generalfeldmarschall* Von Paulus in Stalingrad. In late November 1942 when the 6th German Army was in the Stalingrad *Kessel*, it demanded 700 tons of supply per day. *Reichsmarschall* Herman Goering ordered that the *Luftwaffe* must provide 500 tons per day. The *Luftwaffe*'s transport officers pointed out that a maximum of 350 tons could be delivered per day. Even this figure did not make any allowance for bad weather, probable enemy action, etc. The *Luftwaffe* high command did not take into account the fact that many of the airfields were within reach of Soviet artillery. General von Richthofen argued that six airfields with big runways were required within Stalingrad *Kessel*. In actuality, there was only one such airfield available. Further, there were several days with zero visibility. During many days, the temperature was so low that the aircraft's engines could not be started even after lighting a fire underneath them. Moreover, the Soviet night bombers proved to be a threat to the *Luftwaffe*. The *Luftwaffe* used the Junker/Ju-52 (carrying capacity of each aircraft was two tons) and the Heinkel 111 (carrying capacity was less than the Ju-52). Later the Ju-86 (training aircraft) was also used. The best day for the *Luftwaffe* was 19 December 1942 when 154 aircraft landed with 289 tons. But such days were rare.<sup>128</sup> As a point of comparison, between 16 April and 22 June 1944, some 13,155 tons of supplies were flown in for the beleaguered Imphal garrison.<sup>129</sup> Evans estimates that between 18 April and 30 June 1944, some 12,500 reinforcements and 19,000 tons of supplies were flown into Imphal.<sup>130</sup> On 23 December 1942, Major-General Vasily Mikhailovich Badanov's 24th Soviet Tank Corps attacked the German airfield at Tatsinskaya. About 72 aircraft were lost (mostly Ju-52s) which represented 10 per cent of the *Luftwaffe*'s total transport fleet. As the *Luftwaffe* had to operate from airfields further away from Stalingrad *Kessel*, Goering's high command in desperation

127 Brief Review by the Directorate of Staff Duties of the Air Aspects of the Despatch by General George Giffard on the Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November to 22 June 1944, p. 3.

128 Beevor, *Stalingrad*, pp. 270, 280–81, 301, 334.

129 Brief Review by the Directorate of Staff Duties of the Air Aspects of the Despatch by General George Giffard on the Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November to 22 June 1944, p. 6.

130 Evans, *Slim as Military Commander*, p. 162.

used Focke Wulf 200 Condors and Ju-290s each of which was able to carry six tons and 10 tons load respectively. However, these aircraft lacked the solidity of the tri-motor Ju-52.<sup>131</sup>

In contrast, the Commonwealth air forces had a better variety of transport aircraft in large numbers. Further, the British and American air forces enjoyed total air superiority over the battle space of Imphal-Kohima. The Japanese fighters were characterized by their failure to interdict the Commonwealth cargo aircraft. Larger numbers of better aircraft and sophisticated aerial tactics enabled the Allied air force to wrest air superiority during the campaign which continued from December 1943 till March 1944. Early in 1944, long-range American fighters like Lightnings (P-38s) and Mustangs (P-51s) attacked the Japanese airfields and destroyed many Japanese aircraft before they could get airborne. During March–April 1944, in north Burma, the American air force destroyed more than one hundred Japanese aircraft on the ground and over 76 in aerial combat.<sup>132</sup>

The workhorses of the Commonwealth air forces were the C-46s and the C-47s. At Imphal-Kohima, the SEAC used the American-built C-46 Commandos and the Dakotas.<sup>133</sup> The Douglas C-47 Dakota was able to carry 6,000 lbs (2,722 kg) or 28 fully-armed paratroopers or 18 stretchers and a medical team of three persons. Its maximum speed was 230 miles per hour (370 km/hour) at 8,500 feet. Its service ceiling was 23,200 feet (7,071 meters) and its range was 2,125 miles (3,420 km). The C-46 Commando had a heavier load capacity compared to the Douglas Dakota. The C-46 was able to carry 7,500 lbs (3,402 kg) or 40 fully-equipped troops or 33 stretchers. Its maximum speed was 270 miles per hour (436 km/hour) and its service ceiling was 22,000 feet (6,706 meters). Its range was 1,800 miles (2,897 km).<sup>134</sup> Due to the absence of Japanese fighters and long-range anti-aircraft guns in the hands of IJA soldiers, only two Dakotas and one Wellington were lost during the 80 days when Imphal was under siege.<sup>135</sup> As regards air transportation, one of the lessons learnt was that in the Far East there was a need for a standard infantry division which could be transported easily by rail, sea, MT and air.<sup>136</sup> We will see in the next chapter that this was perfected in the aftermath of the victory at Imphal and Kohima and used

<sup>131</sup> Beevor, *Stalingrad*, pp. 300–1, 334–35.

<sup>132</sup> *Wings of the Phoenix*, p. 79.

<sup>133</sup> Campbell, *The Siege*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>134</sup> Pearson, *The Burma Air Campaign*, pp. 182–83.

<sup>135</sup> *Wings of the Phoenix*, p. 80.

<sup>136</sup> Brief Review by the Directorate of Staff Duties of the Air Aspects of the Despatch by General George Giffard on the Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November to 22 June 1944, p. 4.

to great effect during the thrust at the Japanese jugular at Meiktila in early 1945.

Giffard rightly noted in his official report:

I have no hesitation in saying that neither in offence nor defence could the Army have achieved the success it did, had it not been for the casualties inflicted on the enemy, and the disruption in forward areas of both their land and water communications by the Eastern Air Command. Further, the effect on the morale of our troops by the obvious evidence of our air superiority has been most inspiring. Conversely, its disheartening effect on the enemy is evidenced by the statements of prisoners and from captured documents.<sup>137</sup>

In a nutshell, secure and steady air supply resulting from air superiority enabled the Commonwealth forces to operate in regions which were previously considered inaccessible, and enabled them to hold and defend their forward positions even when their land-based LoCs were cut by the nimble lightly-equipped, fast-moving Japanese infantry.<sup>138</sup> The British official history of the air war in Burma, entitled *Wings of the Phoenix*, rightly concludes that in the mountainous jungle-covered terrain of Burma, there were virtually no land-based LoCs. The Allies succeeded because air power enabled them to manoeuvre far more quickly than the Japanese and to feed their advanced troops far better than the IJA.<sup>139</sup>

The Imphal-Kohima Operation must be put into a wider perspective. Table 9.2 shows that during January to July 1944, somewhere between 400,000 and 500,000 British and Indian soldiers were fighting the Japanese in Burma. If we add the African units then we will get another 55,000 soldiers during the above-mentioned period. Of these soldiers, a big proportion, organized in two corps (4th and 33rd), were engaged in the Imphal-Kohima Operation from March to July 1944. Mutaguchi threw three divisions at Imphal-Kohima and later one more division was used. Another two Japanese divisions were in the Arakan conducting a subsidiary campaign, plus two divisions in north Burma fighting the Americans and the Chinese. Slim had a maximum of seven to eight divisions under his command. As a point of comparison, the *Wehrmacht* started Operation BLAU with more than 50 divisions. The Germans had more than 200 divisions in the Eastern Front during 1942 to 1944. By 30 November 1942, as the Soviet Operation URANUS unfolded, 22 *Wehrmacht* divisions (330,000 men)

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., pp. 2–3.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> *Wings of the Phoenix*, p. 69.



were encircled in Stalingrad. In total, the Soviets mobilized the South-Western, Don, Stalingrad fronts (equivalent to armies) and the Volga Flotilla with some 1,143,500 men, 894 tanks, 13,451 artillery pieces and 1,115 aircraft against the Axis forces in Stalingrad.<sup>140</sup>

Combat casualties in Burma, as Table 9.2 displays, peaked during April-June 1944, which meant that the fighting was intense during these three months. The Japanese invasion had started in early March and the Japanese were retreating by July 1944. One curious fact is that the British officers of the British Army in Burma suffered more casualties than the British officers of the Indian Army. There can be two views on this. The first is that the British officers of the British Army displayed a more heroic command in order to motivate the conscripts, while the sepoy, being volunteers from traditional 'martial' communities, did not require such a heroic display of command from the sahibs. The second is that it is likely that the British officers of the British Army were less trained than their long-serving counterparts in the Indian Army. For the pre-1939 era, the Indian officers graduating from the Indian Military Academy were considered better trained than the British officers trained at Sandhurst.<sup>141</sup> Further research is necessary to answer this question.

As usual, the estimates regarding casualties vary. Giffard asserted that the Imphal-Kohima Operation resulted in the destruction of five IJA divisions and some 50,000 to 60,000 Japanese soldiers dead.<sup>142</sup> Two British military officers estimate that the 15th Japanese Army suffered some 30,000 casualties from all causes while advancing and fighting around Imphal and Kohima, and another 20,000 personnel were lost during the retreat to the Chindwin.<sup>143</sup> A British journalist noted that of the 84,000 personnel of the 15th Japanese Army which invaded India, half of them were killed, or died due to disease and starvation. Sato's 31st Japanese Division started the campaign with 15,000 personnel. Of them, half never returned and those who came back were seriously impaired for further operation.<sup>144</sup> Barker notes that of the 85,000 personnel of the 15th Japanese Army, 53,000 became casualties. Of them, some 30,000 (roughly 35 per cent of the whole army) were KIA.<sup>145</sup> A. Beevor calculates that sickness

140 David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), pp. 108, 134, 283.

141 Alan Jeffreys, 'Training the Indian Army, 1939-45', in Alan Jeffreys and Patrick Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939-47: Experience and Development* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), p. 74.

142 Giffard, 'Operations in Assam and Burma from 23rd June 1944 to 12th November 1944', p. 1711.

143 Evans and Brett-James, *Imphal*, p. 336.

144 Keane, *Road of Bones*, p. xvii.

145 Barker, *The March on Delhi*, p. 250.



(typhus and paratyphus due to reduced rations and cumulative battle stress) was responsible for 55 per cent of the deaths of the especially young soldiers (age group 17–22) in the 6th German Army in late 1942. According to one Japanese scholar's calculation, the IJA's 15th and the 33rd divisions suffered 13,376 casualties in the Imphal Operation. Some 7,500 wounded Japanese died soon after June 1944.<sup>146</sup>

The Japanese plan of using the INA/JIFs to initiate large-scale mutiny among the sepoys in the Imphal-Kohima Front failed. We do not have any precise official casualty figures for the INA which was deployed in Manipur. Barker estimates that of the 6,000 INA personnel who set out for Imphal, only 2,600 returned. And of them, 2,000 had to be hospitalized. Some 1,500 died of disease and starvation, 400 were KIA and 800 surrendered. About 715 personnel deserted and were reported missing in action.<sup>147</sup> On 9 August 1944, the CGS India informed the CIGS at London about the INA: 'They suffered very heavy casualties and were ultimately withdrawn. They did not, however, surrender in such large numbers as we had hoped, but the Japanese do not appear to have much confidence in this force'.<sup>148</sup>

In the Kohima Sector, according to Keane, the Commonwealth forces suffered 4,000 KIA and WIA, and the majority were from the 2nd British Division.<sup>149</sup> Two British officers who fought in Burma against the Japanese noted in their book on Imphal that British and Indian casualties of the Imphal garrison from all causes came to about 13,000.<sup>150</sup> Major-General Ian Lyall Grant, in his account of the Tiddim Battles, writes that in the Tiddim Road (Tiddim-Kalemyo Road), from November 1943 to November 1944, the Commonwealth battle casualties came to about 6,740. Of them, the 17th Division suffered some 4,134 casualties. The total Commonwealth battle casualties in the Imphal Operation was about 13,523, and Imphal-Kohima combined came to about 17,587.<sup>151</sup> Barker notes that British, Indian and Gurkha casualties amounted to 16,700 personnel. Overall, some 250,000 men were employed in the Imphal-Kohima Operation.<sup>152</sup>

146 Kenichi Arakawa, 'Japanese War Leadership in the Burma Theatre: The Imphal Operation', in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, p. 119; Beevor, *Stalingrad*, p. 211.

147 Barker, *The March on Delhi*, p. 226.

148 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, p. 1, L/WS/1/441.

149 Keane, *Road of Bones*, p. 387.

150 Evans and Brett-James, *Imphal*, p. 336.

151 Grant, *Burma, The Turning Point*, p. 243. Lyall Grant, being an ex-officer of the *Raj*, suffers from the imperial hangover. He includes Indian and other non-British casualties within the umbrella term British.

152 Barker, *The March on Delhi*, p. 250.

TABLE 9.2 *Monthly average of strength of forces employed and battle casualties of the British and Indian armies in Burma in 1944*

Month	Army	Strength		Casualties	
		Officers	ORS	Officers	ORS
January	British Army	2,810	54,524	28	386
	Indian Army	6,660	327,039	23	685
February	British Army	2,906	54,916	80	751
	Indian Army	7,753	345,750	27	1,735
March	British Army	3,263	61,830	97	1,120
	Indian Army	9,193	379,000	58	2,169
April	British Army	4,109	78,441	163	1,817
	Indian Army	10,053	408,634	128	5,261
May	British Army	4,515	85,927	238	3,250
	Indian Army	10,231	413,132	77	3,214
June	British Army	4,204	77,895	152	1,732
	Indian Army	10,345	414,265	107	4,047
July	British Army	3,864	72,086	42	683
	Indian Army	10,144	407,620	34	1,769

Source: Burma-Assam Operation, Annexure A, 14 Feb. 1945, pp. 139–40, L/WS/1/1511, IOR, BL, London.

Table 9.3 shows the combat casualties of the Allied forces in Burma during late 1943 to late 1944. Non-combat casualties are not included in this table. Again, one can argue that due to excellent medical facilities on the Allied side (especially compared to the IJA's medical and evacuation infrastructure), one can overlook the deficiency in our data set. Table 9.4 refers to the evacuation of serious casualties from the 14th Army Sector to India. Larger numbers of less serious casualties were evacuated from the FEBA to the rear but the figures are not included in this table. For instance, between 16 April and 22 June 1944, some 10,000 casualties were evacuated from Imphal. The total number of casualties evacuated by air during the first six months of 1944 numbered over 24,000.<sup>153</sup> It can be speculated that casualties before March 1943 must be

<sup>153</sup> Brief Review by the Directorate of Staff Duties of the Air Aspects of the Despatch by General George Giffard on the Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November to 22 June 1944, p. 6. Evans writes that between 18 April and 30 June 1944, 13,000 casualties

negligible. Taking into account both tables 9.2 and 9.3, one can argue that most of the casualties occurred during March–July 1944 when fighting erupted along the Imphal-Kohima Sector. For simplicity's sake, it can be argued that the Commonwealth casualties during the five months of the U GO Operation came to about 50,000 personnel. And the brunt of the fighting was borne by the 14th Army, whose composition was more than 70 per cent Indian. The 14th Army comprised units of the Indian Army and British Army, as well as African forces. The Indian Army comprised British officers and Indian personnel who suffered 0.8 per cent and 41.6 per cent of the total casualties respectively during the above-mentioned period. The Chinese Army, about which all the American and British historians have only negative remarks, suffered 26.7 per cent of all the casualties. The British Army suffered some 23.9 per cent of the total casualties. The East and West African Armies were like the Indian Army. The ORs were Africans who were led by the sahibs. In the East African Army, the British personnel suffered 0.1 per cent casualties and the Africans 1.3 per cent of the total casualties in Burma. In the West African Army, only four British personnel were casualties but the African personnel of this force suffered 2.6 per cent of the total casualties in Burma. Let us also consider the American ground forces in north Burma about whom many books have been written, especially about their over-hyped officer Joseph W. Stilwell. Between 16 November 1943 and 22 June 1944 (when the Manipur-Imphal Road was reopened after the Japanese defeat at Kohima), the American-Chinese forces under Stilwell drove out the Japanese forces from north of Kamaing, Mogaung and Myitkyina.<sup>154</sup> The white component (US Army units) of his force suffered some 2.4 per cent casualties.<sup>155</sup> Table 9.2 shows that proportionately the British troops suffered more casualties than the Indian soldiers. Barker notes that in terms of physical endurance, Gurkhas were better than other Indian soldiers. And the Indian troops in general had better physical endurance than the British soldiers in Burma's environment. Further, the jungle craft of the Indians was better than that of their British counterparts.<sup>156</sup> This, to an extent, explains the proportionally greater casualties on the part of the Tommies. To an extent, on the Allied side, Indian blood stemmed the tide. Next came the Chinese contribution and

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and 43,000 non-combatants were flown back from Imphal to the interior of India. Evans, *Slim as Military Commander*, p. 162.

- 154 Brief Review by the Directorate of Staff Duties of the Air Aspects of the Despatch by General George Giffard on the Operations in Burma and North-East India from 16 November to 22 June 1944, p. 2.
- 155 Battle Casualties of Imperial Forces in Burma from 15 Oct. 1943–30. Nov. 1944, Burma-Assam Operation, p. 138, L/WS/1/1511, IOR, BL.
- 156 Barker, *The March on Delhi*, p. 251.

only then the British. After that came the Africans and only then the Americans. On the other side, the only casualties were the Japanese themselves. To an extent, Burma can be termed as an 'Indian theatre' within the Asian War. It is time for the Indians and the Chinese to retrieve their history of World War II.

Operation RING, which led to the destruction of Paulus' 6th German Army, resulted in 147,000 KIA, 90,000 POW, and the Soviets suffered half a million casualties. Like the IJA, the Red Army's medical infrastructure was primitive and at times even non-existent. Between 19 November 1942 and 2 February 1943, at Stalingrad, the Soviets suffered 154,870 battle casualties but 330,865 casualties were due to bad sanitary discipline of the soldiers and absence of proper medical facilities in the Red Army.<sup>157</sup>

The Imphal-Kohima Operation in terms of the scale of casualties may not be compared with the gigantic killing matches which occurred in the Eastern Front but can be profitably compared with some of the Pacific battles which occurred between the IJA and the US forces. At New Guinea, Japanese losses numbered some 12,000 men. At Guadalcanal, some 31,358 Japanese had landed since the early summer of 1942. About, 10,665 were evacuated later in February 1943. Probably 12,507 Japanese personnel were KIA. The total Japanese deaths from all causes varied between 20,800 and 21,138 personnel.<sup>158</sup> The US invasion of Saipan started on 15 June 1944. By the end of July 1944, the 30,000-strong Japanese garrison was almost wiped out, but the Americans also suffered some 14,000 casualties. However, several Pacific battles were bigger in scale and intensity than the Imphal-Kohima Operation. In late October 1944, some 174,000 men of the 6th American Army moved towards Leyte. In the Philippines, Japan lost some 9,000 aircraft and there were 320,000 casualties, including 7,000 surrenders.<sup>159</sup>

The animals (mules, donkeys, horses and elephants) were next in importance to the men for combat in Burma. More detailed accounts of the casualties suffered amongst the animals harnessed by the 14th Army are needed. The swamps and mud became death traps for the mules.<sup>160</sup> From 1 January 1944 to 31 May 1944, 7,735 casualties (of them 2,749 were battle casualties and the rest due to disease etc.) occurred among the animals. The monthly wastage rate was 6.6 per cent in the case of horses and 5.5 per cent for the mules.<sup>161</sup> In the

<sup>157</sup> Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, pp. 141–42.

<sup>158</sup> William Bruce Johnson, *The Pacific Campaign in World War II: From Pearl Harbour to Guadalcanal* (2006, reprint, London/New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 285–86.

<sup>159</sup> Meirion and Susie Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun: The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Japanese Army* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 431–33, 435, 437.

<sup>160</sup> Evans and Brett-James, *Imphal*, p. 330.

<sup>161</sup> To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Animals, Appendix 16, p. 33.

TABLE 9.3 *Battle casualties of the Allied Forces in Burma from 15 October 1943 to 30 November 1944*

	Army			Total
	14th Army	Special Forces	NCAC	
Killed	8,970	1,032	4,982	14,984
Wounded	25,090	2,305	12,535	39,930
Missing	2,662	441	134	3,273
Total	36,722	3,778	17,651	58,151

Source: Battle Casualties of Imperial Forces in Burma from 15 Oct. 1943–30. Nov. 1944, Burma-Assam Operation, pp. 138–39, L/WS/1/1511, IOR, BL, London.

TABLE 9.4 *Evacuation of casualties from the 14th Army to India from 2 April 1944–23 June 1944*

Mode of Evacuation	Nationality of troops evacuated			Total
	British troops	Indian troops	West African troops	
River Steamer	3,576	8,127	137	11,840
Hospital Ship	3,564	6,028	706	10,298
Aircraft	672	2,811	72	3,555

Source: To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Evacuation of Casualties, Appendix 1, p. 6, L/WS/1/441, IOR, BL, London.

winter of 1944, the 14th Army had 147 elephants across the Chindwin under Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Williams. They were especially required for bridge building. Many elephants used by the Japanese became casualties due to the RAF's action. Between 1942 and 1945, about 4,000 elephants died in Burma.<sup>162</sup>

It would be historically erroneous to over-emphasize Imphal-Kohima at the cost of marginalizing the military operations in China during 1944. In early May 1944, the 20th Chinese Army Group (16 divisions) in Yunnan (Kunming), known as the Y Force, crossed the Salween River about 100 miles east of Myitkyina and attempted to open the Burma Road from the north-east by forcing back the 56th Japanese Division from Longling. The ultimate aim of the 20th Chinese Army Group was to link up with the X Force in Bhamo.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>162</sup> Hastings, *Nemesis*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>163</sup> Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*, p. 244.

The ICHI GO (Number One) offensive undertaken by the China Expeditionary Army between mid-April 1944 and early February 1945 was the largest military operation in the IJA's history. Approximately 20 divisions (some 500,000 soldiers), which meant almost 80 per cent of the China Expeditionary Force's troops supported by 800 tanks, 1,500 artillery guns, 240 aircraft and 15,500 vehicles, aimed to destroy the American B-29 air bases in China and to open an overland route from Pusan in Korea to Indo-China. However, many of the Japanese units brought from Manchuria to central China were poorly equipped and several units suffered from a shortage of rifles. As a result, many of them used discarded Chinese weapons.<sup>164</sup>

Unlike the KMT force, the Commonwealth forces, as we have seen, earlier enjoyed air superiority in Burma. Air supply and air transportation allowed Imphal to be reinforced and to sustain the garrison. However, the Commonwealth ground troops in close-quarter combat first required to withstand and second to push back the IJA. This became possible due to improved and realistic training, tactics and procedures (TTP), as developed by the Commonwealth troops. The Commonwealth troops in the Imphal-Kohima Sector established defensive boxes as in the Arakan. The box system comprised trenches, bunkers and artillery. These boxes were able to hold out against the frontal attacks by the lightly-equipped Japanese infantry and jitter parties.<sup>165</sup>

One Indian infantry officer stationed in New Guinea noted: '... the local rating of the Jap lies somewhere between a scared animal of dirty habits and a wop who can run backwards a trifle faster than our new cobelligerents.'<sup>166</sup> This attitude developed due to Japanese stalemate at New Guinea from late 1942 onwards. On 13 February, the 18th Japanese Army Headquarters ordered the withdrawal of the Japanese detachment from Wau in New Guinea. On 26 February 1943, the Japanese withdrew from Wau to Mubo.<sup>167</sup> The British and Indian officers in the Burma Front were not that confident of the inferiority of the Japanese soldiers in 1943. However, from early 1944, the sepoys gained confidence vis-à-vis their Japanese opponent. The Indian soldiers learnt that dense vegetation, which limited vision, made conventional tactics redundant. Under good junior leaders, the sepoys learnt the skill of infiltration and encirclement. They understood that even if they were outflanked and their rear was cut, the battle was not lost. All-round defence of a position became essential. Every

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>165</sup> *Wings of the Phoenix*, p. 77.

<sup>166</sup> Infantry Liaison Letter No. 5, Para 1, 21 March 1944, L/WS/1/778, IOR, BL.

<sup>167</sup> Phillip Bradley, *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942-1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 232, 240.

soldier when under fire from a Japanese mortar or artillery learnt to dig a trench some 30 inches deep and six feet long.<sup>168</sup> Graham Dunlop writes that in the summer of 1944, the British and the Indian soldiers learned how to stand and fight supplied by air when cut off by the classic Japanese outflanking movement and allowed mobile reserves to destroy the attacking Japanese forces and break the encirclement.<sup>169</sup> At the ground level, combat often involved a party of five to six Commonwealth soldiers attempting to destroy a Japanese fox hole.<sup>170</sup> This was possible due to air supply and better training of the infantry. Lieutenant-Colonel A.J.F. Doulton, the historian of the 23rd Indian Division, rightly noted: ‘... the fighting in the Imphal battle where the close country prevented the deployment of large bodies of troops and made many an action a company affair where the determination and courage of each individual turned the scale.’<sup>171</sup> Similarly, in Wau also, most of the actions involved platoons and companies of Australian soldiers against the Japanese.<sup>172</sup> So, even in the Age of Total War, many actions were similar to the Small War which the Army in India fought along the North-West Frontier before 1939 for the last one century. To an extent, this observation also applies for the Australian forces in New Guinea.

## Conclusion

U GO was a comparatively smaller affair compared to Operations SATURN, URANUS and BAGRATION etc., which unfolded in the Eastern Front between 1942 and 1944. Even in mid-1944, the IJA had more troops in China and a larger number of aircraft in the Philippines compared to Burma. And ICHI GO was a bigger operation than U GO. However, in terms of air supply and air transportation, Imphal-Kohima can be ranked as a world-class campaign. The Commonwealth air bridge to Imphal-Kohima was better than the *Luftwaffe*’s flimsy air bridge to Stalingrad *Kessel*. This was due to several factors. The RAF and the USAAF had larger numbers of heavier transportation aircraft in the Far East compared to the *Luftwaffe* on the *Ostfront*. Second, unlike the *Luftwaffe*,

<sup>168</sup> Hastings, *Nemesis*, p. 83.

<sup>169</sup> Graham Dunlop, ‘British Tactical Command and Leadership in the Burma Campaign: 1941–45’, in Bond and Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War*, p. 99.

<sup>170</sup> Lowry, *Fighting through to Kohima*, p. 243.

<sup>171</sup> Doulton, *The Fighting Cock*, p. 86.

<sup>172</sup> Bradley, *The Battle for Wau*, pp. 191–209.



the RAF and the USAAF gained air superiority over the zone of operations. And unlike Soviet AA guns and fighters, Japanese deployment of these two weapons along the Burma-India Front was negligible. Even with air supply and air transportation, the Battle of Imphal-Kohima was in doubt. Thanks to air supply and air reinforcement, Imphal was secured. But could the IJA soldiers be defeated and destroyed? This issue depended on the combat capacity of the ground troops. Better equipment, thorough training and realistic tactics enabled the Commonwealth ground forces to turn back the IJA personnel from the jungle-clad valleys and mountains around Imphal-Kohima.

Mid-1944 was payback time for the Japanese, both in the SWPA and Burma. The hunter had become the hunted. As the Japanese had done in Malaya and Burma in 1942, by mid-1944, the Indian troops were conducting encircling movements at the rear of the Japanese. The 'student' had finally defeated the 'master'. The Japanese intelligence agencies completely failed to provide a true picture of the Commonwealth formations waiting for them in the Arakan and Assam. The Japanese commanders believed that their foes remained like the British-Indian formations they had encountered in Malaya and Burma during 1942. The lackadaisical performance of the Commonwealth formations in the Arakan in 1943, as explained in the earlier chapter further strengthened the conviction of the Japanese commanders. So, when U GO was implemented, the lightly-equipped Japanese infantry failed to overcome the retrained and reorganized British and especially Indian infantry. Further, the Japanese commanders never understood that air power gave unprecedented mobility and firepower to the Commonwealth ground forces. Superior air mobility of the IJA's enemies became a pattern throughout the Asia-Pacific theatre. The air lift of the 17th Australian Brigade by the USAAF's troop carriers to a great extent resulted in the failure of the Japanese to capture Wau during January 1943.<sup>173</sup> A similar process of air transportation of Commonwealth ground troops occurred about almost a year later at Imphal. The traditional Japanese tactics of establishing roadblocks, which succeeded against untrained raw troops in 1942-43, failed against the trained British and Indian infantry who further relied on air supply and also on aerial firepower. As regards the scale and scope of air supply, the Imphal-Kohima Operation could be classified as one of the greatest air-land battles (if this term can be used at all in the context of World War II) fought anywhere in World War II. The Japanese infantry lacked airpower and heavy artillery to blast the defensive positions (boxes) of the Commonwealth ground forces. And the IJA also lacked adequate numbers of AA and anti-tank guns to cope with Allied armour and aircraft. Last, operating on a logistical

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 241.



shoestring when the monsoon came in mid-1944, the much vaunted Japanese invasion collapsed.

Two debates as regards Imphal-Kohima have resurfaced in recent times. First, if the 17th Indian Division had been cut off by the Japanese due to Slim and his divisional commander's failure to order its retreat earlier, what might have happened? Nothing much would have changed. Even if this Indian division had been wiped out (highly unlikely due to its high state of training and availability of air supply), the 11th Army Group could have transferred further divisions by rail, road and air and stabilized the situation. Second, the debate as to whether Sato, CO of the 31st Japanese Infantry Division, was a fool or not by not going for Dimapur. In April 1944, Dimapur was guarded by 500 combatants and there were 45,000 non-combatants working in the depots.<sup>174</sup> Who was to be blamed—Sato or Kawabe? Field-Marshal Slim and Arthur Campbell delivered negative judgements about General Sato.<sup>175</sup> Keane makes a heroic attempt to rehabilitate Sato by arguing that he was a sensitive, gifted commander who cared about the soldiers under his command but was let down by the overbearing, narrow-minded Japanese military leadership in Burma. In recent times, Kawabe to a lesser extent and Mutaguchi to a greater extent have been emerging as the villains on Japanese side.<sup>176</sup> One thing is clear, Sato failed to display 'creative disobedience' in the mould of 'heaven born warriors' as *Generalfeldmarschall* Erwin Rommel had done repeatedly in the Western Desert by disobeying the German high command's decision to keep up the momentum against the enemy by exploiting opportunities as they emerged. Even if Sato had captured Dimapur, the Japanese would not have won the war. In such a scenario, in 1945, the Commonwealth forces would have been fighting and pushing back the Japanese in north-east India rather than in central Burma across the Irrawaddy. Geoffrey Evans and Antony Brett-James, in their monograph on Imphal, say that such a scenario would have resulted in the plummeting of morale of the 14th Army. True, but their argument that capture of Imphal-Kohima by the Japanese would have seriously imperilled the security of India is questionable.<sup>177</sup> Such a scenario would not have drastically altered the trajectory of World War II in Asia because even a victorious 15th Japanese Army would have lacked the manpower and logistical reach (even after capturing Dimapur) to move deep inside India.

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<sup>174</sup> Miller, *Uncle Bill*, p. 293; Evans, *Slim as Military Commander*, p. 157.

<sup>175</sup> Campbell, *The Siege*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>176</sup> Barker, *The March on Delhi*, p. 248; Keane, *Road of Bones*.

<sup>177</sup> Evans and Brett-James, *Imphal*, pp. 337–38.

## Endgame in Burma: August 1944–15 August 1945

### Introduction

The dominant view is that after the Japanese defeat at Imphal and Kohima, the IJA as a potent combat instrument was finished and what followed was a mopping up operation by the victorious Commonwealth air-land forces. The reality was a bit more complex. The post-Imphal-Kohima period could be subdivided into three interrelated phases: the battles for Mandalay, and Meiktila and the race for Rangoon. The Japanese commanders named this struggle as the Battle of the Irrawaddy. As the British commanders prepared to pursue and defeat the retreating IJA in the aftermath of Imphal-Kohima, the former took stock of the military effectiveness of the forces at their disposal and their opponents. The first section of this chapter analyzes the combat effectiveness of the Commonwealth forces and its opponent. And the next two sections portray the nature of combat in central and south Burma. The last section, in order to put things in a global perspective, attempts an assessment of the scope and intensity of the Mandalay-Meiktila-Rangoon Campaign in comparison with the gargantuan battles of the *Ostfront*.

### Combat Effectiveness of the British and Indian Armies

Williamson Murray writes that during war there is little time to understand the behaviour of the interactive, adaptive opponent. However, feedback from combat results can suggest some necessary adaptations only if the proper lessons are identified and then learnt.<sup>1</sup> The Commonwealth military organization attempted to initiate the above-mentioned process. In November 1944, Brigadier I.E.M. Stewart assessed the Japanese strengths and weaknesses in the following words: 'It still requires a considerable superiority in men to take on the Jap in close country. He is outstanding in defence and in attack by maneuver, but poor in assault.'<sup>2</sup> Japanese doctrine emphasized the overcoming of the

1 Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 2.

2 Brigadier I.M. Stewart, Short Description of Indo-Burma Country and Main Characteristics of Fighting, Appendix C, p. 20, L/WS/1/777, IOR, BL, London.

weight of hostile firepower through 'spirit'. The Japanese attempt to offset the material superiority of the Allied side was their willingness to fight and die. The warrior codes of *Bushido* and *Senshi* did not tolerate survival from a losing battle.<sup>3</sup> Stewart warned that for this reason, the Commonwealth troops should always fight in circumstances where they could bring forward their material resources and the need for manpower was kept at a minimum. If possible, attacks by manoeuvre should be undertaken and direct assault were to be avoided because the Japanese were at their best in defending strong points. The manoeuvre attack involved principles which in many cases were similar to those used by the IJA at Malaya and Burma during the heady days of 1942. Stewart noted that the object of manoeuvre attack was to induce the Japanese to attack the Commonwealth troops on ground of the latter's choosing. This could be done by seizing, if possible without fighting, some features of Japanese communications or places of tactical importance. The objective was always to move to the high ground. It could be done by marching round their defensive positions or infiltrating through or just flying over the top (the last option was not available to the Commonwealth forces in 1942). This would force the Nipponese to counter-attack in order to drive off the Commonwealth troops. The Japanese were bound to counter-attack with an ineffective fire plan due to inadequate artillery at their disposal.<sup>4</sup> As will be seen later, Slim at Meiktila did exactly that. And the IJA also responded by launching frontal attacks with inadequate heavy artillery.

During the attack, noted Stewart, tanks should be used, as tank fire for close support of infantry was vital. A sort of combined arms approach involving tanks, engineers and infantry paid dividends.<sup>5</sup> This was actually practised during the dash to Meiktila. From June 1944, dive bombing demonstrations to study the effect of dive bombing attacks on fortified positions were carried out. The targets were indicated to the aircraft involved by a combination of R/T and mortar smoke bombs. This method was considered most effective. Mortar smoke bombs proved very effective also in attacking entrenched German positions along the mountainous terrain of Italy. However, the operation of wireless sets by the regimental signallers and especially the Indian recruits (probably

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3 William Bruce Johnson, *The Pacific Campaign in World War II: From Pearl Harbour to Guadalcanal* (2006, reprint, London/New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 286; Tarak Barkawi, 'Peoples, Homelands, and Wars? Ethnicity, the Military, and Battle among British Imperial Forces in the War against Japan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2004), p. 151.

4 Stewart, Appendix C, pp. 20–22.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

due to their agricultural background and lack of education) left much to be desired.<sup>6</sup>

The focus on a combined arms approach was not to underrate the importance of the infantry, which remained the queen of the battlefield. Stewart emphasized that all personnel in the non-infantry branches should also be trained as infantry because infantry in requisite numbers could not be detached for local protection of the personnel of other branches. Stewart emphasized that it would be erroneous to think that the shape of the battle would be determined by Commonwealth initiative. He warned that the Japanese would never be inactive but would always launch local counter-attacks against the flanks and rear of the Allied troops. Sudden offensives against the LoCs of Allied troops might also be undertaken by the Japanese. Enemy attacks against LoCs were no longer regarded dangerous by the Commonwealth units due to the availability of air supply. Stewart recommended tight perimeter defence against possible Japanese infiltration. The perimeter defence should be tighter than those in European fighting. About one-third of the troops should be kept outside the perimeter. Supply and non-combatants, including rear echelon elements, should be kept within the administrative boxes.<sup>7</sup> So, Stewart was reiterating the importance of box formations, which had proved successful against Japanese infantry attacks in the Arakan and in Imphal, and would again be practised in defending Meiktila against Japanese counter-attacks.

Stewart noted that in close country, control over the dispersed groups of soldiers was extremely difficult. So, training should concentrate on patrolling, attack by manoeuvre (which involved reconnaissance and approach by ground, air and water), improvised river crossing and quick perimeter defence. The soldiers should be psychologically prepared for the fact that there would be no fixed front line (a far cry from British tactical thinking in Malaya in 1942) and that even if their communications were cut then with the aid of air supply the troops should be able to conduct aggressive operations. Also, the men should be acclimatized to the terrain and climate of Burma. Battle drill was considered essential for strengthening the soldiers' efficiency, both physically and psychologically. As regards minor tactics, the Burma Study Team noted the following important points: defence of OPs and gun positions, use of a minimum number of vehicles and marching as much as possible (a reminder of the disaster at Malaya), close shooting, extensive use of 3-inch mortars, use of air

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6 Correspondence, Liaison Letters from DMT India to DMT War Office, Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, pp. 3, 5, L/WS/1/302, IOR, BL.

7 Stewart, Appendix C, pp. 21–22.

transport and waterproofing of equipment.<sup>8</sup> Many of these techniques were successfully implemented while crossing the Irrawaddy and attacking Mandalay and Meiktila. In the context of the campaign at Wau during 1942–43, Phillip Bradley writes that the jungle-covered, mountainous terrain, with several creeks and streams, in New Guinea channelled movement along narrow supply tracks and limited deployments in the frontline to company-sized units for most of the time. Bradley continues that in such circumstances, the most successful troops were those who were able to adapt and operate through the terrain around the undefended flanks of the enemy.<sup>9</sup> This observation to a great extent was applicable in the case of Burma also.

The divisional artillery of the 17th Indian Division comprised the 21st Indian Mountain Regiment. By 15 January 1945, this unit was concentrated at Wanjing in the Imphal Plain. It then participated in a training programme named DANTE. It involved a demonstration of the full firepower of the division in a set-piece attack. About 48 field guns, 12 mountain guns, 72 mortars and 36 MMGs fired concentrations on the order of the CRA to support a brigade-sized attack. Then, the division concentrated on studying the dry belt of Burma where it planned to fight its future battles. Air photographs, maps and voluminous lectures and notes were prepared by those who knew central Burma to update the soldiers and their officers who were preparing to move from the Irrawaddy to the Shan Hills. Mobility and surprise were accepted as the key principles for fighting battles in the near future.<sup>10</sup>

In early November 1944, the training requirements of the M9A1 and M11A1 grenades were submitted. These types of grenades were new to the troops of the 14th Army. Hence, adequate training was considered essential. Operational experience convinced the senior officers of the need for more robust and reliable man pack flamethrowers. The GHQ India demanded larger numbers of better flamethrowers for the pursuit operation which was to start from January 1945. Another problem was the flamethrower fuel, which had to be imported from the UK because of inadequate production of aluminium stearate (one of the crucial components of the flamethrower fuel) in India. On 19 November 1944, GHQ India demanded the following equipment for the forthcoming operations: 2.5 million hand grenades and 1.2 million rifles with grenade

8 Ibid., p. 22; Appendix E, Artillery Notes, L/ws/1/777.

9 Phillip Bradley, *The Battle for Wau: New Guinea's Frontline 1942–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 242.

10 17th Indian Division Operation, Irrawaddy-Rangoon, Feb.–May 1945, p. 5, CAB 106/31, PRO, Kew, Surrey, UK.

dischargers.<sup>11</sup> In November 1944, the target production of 3.7-inch howitzer shells was 26,000 rounds per month.<sup>12</sup>

The GHQ India continued to experiment and manufacture new weapons for raising the combat effectiveness of the troops. Flashless cordite for the 25-pounder guns and 3.7-inch howitzers was in the process of being developed. Being flashless, this cordite was cooler and reduced barrel wear and tear by half. The flashless cordite was obtained from reworked cordite and the flash was imperceptible in daylight. An attempt was made to manufacture lightened rifles. The UK Pattern No. 5 MK1 and the Canadian Long Branch Lightened No. 4 were examined. The UK Pattern was favoured and 200 were ordered for further trials with the troops. The indigenously manufactured No. 1 Rifle was lightened and fitted with a new type of flash eliminator, which at the same time was a launcher for the American MgA1 Grenade. The Bren LMG was modified to reduce its weight. And trials from the Infantry School at Saugor showed that this modification did not adversely affect the weapon's performance up to 400 yards.<sup>13</sup>

Camouflage of the troops for adapting to the terrain was emphasized. John Cross joined the 1st GR in 1945. He noted:

In 1941, during the retreat in Malaya, wearing khaki-coloured uniforms and heavy hobnailed boots, British troops also carried greatcoats, steel helmets and respirators in addition to packs, haversacks, groundsheets and blankets. By the time I joined my Gurkha battalion in Burma, everything that could be green was. I was particularly impressed by green towels, green underwear and green toilet paper.<sup>14</sup>

Initially, in New Guinea, the Australian soldiers also carried lots of extra equipment. Soon, they discarded the steel helmets, respirators, etc.<sup>15</sup>

The organization of a standard infantry division was as follows. The strength of a rifle platoon (including battalion headquarters platoon) was fixed at one officer and 40 ORs. The scale of 2-inch mortars was reduced from 12 to four and

11 From ARMINDIA to War Office, Air Mail, 3 Nov. 1944, p. 190; From ARMINDIA to TROOPERS, 5 Nov. 1944, Fast AIRMAIL, 10306/M01, p. 180; From ARMINDIA to TROOPERS, Fast Air Mail, 19 Nov. 1944, p. 170; Burma-Assam Operations, L/WS/1/1511, IOR, BL.

12 To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India 9 Aug. 1944, Ordnance, Appendix 11, p. 25, L/WS/1/441, IOR, BL.

13 Ibid., p. 25.

14 J.P. Cross, *Jungle Warfare: Experiences and Encounters* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2008), p. 51.

15 Ibid., p. 51.

allotted only to the headquarters of the rifle company. The M9AI Grenade replaced the anti-tank rifle and was allotted on the scale of one per rifle platoon headquarters. Machine carbines were increased from 90 to 136. The infantry division's MG battalion comprised four companies each of 12 and not 16 MMGs. The 4.2-inch mortar was not included in the new establishment. Each company had three platoons. Transport of the MG battalion comprised 60 jeeps with trailers. It was decided to provide the reconnaissance battalion of a division with a more generous supply of wireless sets. Each infantry battalion's transport was fixed at 41 mules and 12 jeeps. All the mule drivers and jeep drivers were infantry personnel as the RIASC personnel were not available even for the British battalions, which were facing a manpower crunch. The motorized division's transport company consisted of one three-ton four by four vehicle and one jeep. The carrier company had three jeeps and one platoon carrier. Trailers were provided for 50 per cent of the three-ton trucks and 100 per cent of the jeeps. The reconnaissance battalion had jeeps but was also trained to operate on foot. The strength of an infantry battalion was 847 all ranks. Each division had one field regiment of 3.7-inch howitzers drawn by jeeps.<sup>16</sup> In February 1945, the organization of a standard Indian division comprised 25 to 30 per cent British personnel. In general, there was one British battalion in each brigade and one British field regiment in the divisional artillery. The divisional signals also had a small proportion of British personnel. At times, due to a lack of British reinforcements, the infantry brigades were fully Indian.<sup>17</sup>

The principal Indian divisions which participated in this campaign will now be discussed at length. The 19th Indian Division (nicknamed the Dagger Division) of Major-General T. Wynford Rees played the important role of capturing Mandalay and unfurling the Union Jack at Fort Dufferin. The 19th Indian Division, along with the 25th Indian Division, was raised in late 1941 with the original objective of defending south India against the Japanese in 1942. The first CO of the 19th Indian Division was Brigadier J.G. Smyth, whose wife devised the 'Dagger' divisional emblem. This division comprised the 62nd, 64th and 98th Indian Infantry Brigades. Each of the brigades had a British battalion and a Gurkha battalion. The 62nd and the 64th Indian Infantry Brigades had the 4th Battalion of the 6th GR and 1st Battalion of the 6th GR, as well as other units. The 6th GR was General Slim's regiment. And the 98th Indian Infantry

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16 From Commander-in-Chief India to War Office, Telegram 3 July 1944, No. 97742, p. 250, L/WS/1/1511; To the CIGS London from GS Branch GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, Infantry Organization, Appendix 9, p. 21, L/WS/1/441.

17 Lieutenant-Colonel Rutherford, AA and QMG, Feb. 1945, WS 33609, L/WS/1/777.



Brigade had the 4th Battalion of the 4th GR. Generally, each Indian infantry brigade comprised three battalions and one of the battalions was British. For instance, the 62nd Indian Infantry Brigade comprised the 2nd Battalion of the Welsh Regiment, 3rd Battalion of the 6th Rajputana Rifles and 4th Battalion of the 6th GR. The 7th Cavalry (and from 1 April 1945 the 8th Cavalry) comprised the divisional cavalry. Besides British anti-tank gunners, the division had Madras and Bombay sappers and miners.<sup>18</sup>

The other important division which played a vital role in the central Burma operation was the 17th Indian Division. The 99th Indian Infantry Brigade joined the 17th Indian Division with 6th Battalion of the 15th Punjab Regiment, 1st Sikh Light Infantry, 8th Battalion of the 8th Punjab Regiment and 17th Rajput. The 17th Indian Division became GHQ Reserve in July 1944 after it completed its training at Ranchi. Due to the shortage of Gurkhali-speaking British officers, the 1st Battalion of the 4th GR from the 63rd Indian Infantry Brigade and 2nd Battalion of the 5th RGR from 48th Indian Infantry Brigade were withdrawn and sent to the North-West Army for North-West Frontier defence. The 7th Baluch remained with the division as the reconnaissance battalion. Numerous personnel of the 1st Battalion of the 7th GR and the 1st Battalion of the 10th GR went for leave. New drafts started joining at Ranchi.<sup>19</sup>

The 6th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment was part of the 17th Indian Division, which was part of the 4th Corps. The 17th Indian Division's shoulder flash was the Black Cat, which was worn by all the ranks as part of the identity formation process. A distinct identity provided spirit to the personnel of that formation. The 17th Indian Division comprised the 48th, 63rd and the 99th Indian Infantry Brigades. The 6th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment was the divisional reconnaissance battalion. The above-mentioned battalion's total establishment of trained drivers was 24. This battalion had 12 15 cwt Chevrolets, one water tank mounted on a 15 cwt Ford chassis and two jeeps. Besides the official drivers, some NCOs, VCOS and officers knew how to drive.<sup>20</sup>

Between 1 September and 7 October 1944, the 17th Indian Division was withdrawn from the 14th Army and its position was taken over by the 19th Indian Division. The 17th Indian Division was ordered to train intensively for jungle

18 *Dagger Division: Story of the 19th Indian Division* (Bombay: War Department, GoI, n.d.), ORBAT, pp. 3, 5, 7–8.

19 Appendix A 17th Indian Division, Provisional Leave Programme, 10 Oct. 1944, p. 239, Burma-Assam Operations, L/ws/1/1511.

20 Stuart Ottowell, *'Chhe-Saat': Memoir of an Officer of the 6th/7th Rajput Regiment* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008), pp. 62–65.

warfare at Ranchi.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the 14th Army during June 1944 emphasized that the recruits should receive intensive training as regards jungle warfare.<sup>22</sup> Both the 14th Army and GHQ India thought that a series of hard slogging battles between the IJA and the Commonwealth armies would occur between the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy. Actually, in the aftermath of their defeat at Imphal-Kohima, the IJA retreated to the eastern bank of the Irrawaddy and this Indian division fought in the dry plain of central Burma in 1945. During the dash from Meiktila and Mandalay towards Rangoon, in contrast to Brigadier Stewart's stricture, the 14th Army's units were lavishly re-equipped with motorized units. This was because then the campaign became mobile instead of being a quasi-static jungle warfare one. And the sepoys were able to adapt quickly to the landscape of central Burma.

However, the reorganized British and Indian armies were facing some problems. As regards equipment, there was a shortage of multi-barrel smoke projectors.<sup>23</sup> In a telegram dated 16 August 1944, the War Office in London warned the Commander-in-Chief of India of 'Our inability to meet requirements for additional British infantry due to commitments in NW Europe and scope of PYTHON'.<sup>24</sup> All the great powers were indeed suffering from the strains of shortages of military manpower. By 1945, the Soviet rifle division's ration strength was 11,700 men but it often had less than half that number present for duty.<sup>25</sup>

There was no shortage of Indian recruits for the combatant branches. In fact, during 1944–45, the rejection rate of the recruits for the Indian Army was 22.85 per cent.<sup>26</sup> Though Indian recruits, both for the technical and combatant branches, were flowing smoothly into the Indian Army, the inadequate number of British personnel hampered the expansion and maintenance of certain specialist Indian formations. By the end of 1944, the Indian Signal Corps numbered some 59,135 personnel. Recruitment of the non-technical Indian personnel rose from the average monthly figure of 25,304 in 1944 to 27,723 in

21 GHQ India, GS Branch, N. Delhi, To NW Army, Southern Army and Eastern Command, 26 July 1944, p. 237, L/WS/1/1511.

22 Liaison Letter No. 14, 15 June 1944, p. 3.

23 GHQ India, New Delhi, 25 June 1945, Confidential No 6829/2/MT3(a), L/WS/1/781, IOR, BL.

24 From War Office to Commander-in-Chief India 16 Aug. 1944, Telegram No. 68594, p. 382, L/WS/1/1511.

25 David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 278.

26 Anirudh Deshpande, 'Hopes and Disillusionment: Recruitment, Demobilisation and the Emergence of Discontent in the Indian Armed Forces after the Second World War', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1996), p. 207.

1945. And in the technical branch, the average monthly recruitment of Indian personnel between September 1944 and June 1945 was 7,197.<sup>27</sup> On 24 January 1945, the Commander-in-Chief of India informed the War Office in a telegram:

All available British manpower required complete and maintain units already in operations, shortage British reinforcements and effect PYTHON are making formation, 1st Airborne Division matter of great difficulty. Special Force limited by organization and training to one role. In this role it sustains high rate of wastage. In many cases this reached 90 per cent of strength for 6 months ops.<sup>28</sup>

The Indian Airborne division required one para brigade group. The existing 50th Para Brigade had one Indian and two Gurkha battalions. GHQ India decided that it was desirable that each para brigade should have at least one British battalion besides two Gurkha/Indian battalions. The 2nd Kings Own allotted to the 14th Indian Air Landing Brigade was badly affected due to the PYTHON scheme. Hence, this battalion was exchanged with the 6th Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment. British battalions in the Special Force, noted the Commander-in-Chief of India, could be used to complete the formation of the Indian para battalion. The Special Force in January 1945 comprised eight regular and one TA British infantry battalions.<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that the Indian and Gurkha units' combat effectiveness was equal to, if not better than, the British units, the high command still followed such a racially discriminatory policy due to past racial prejudice and also to prevent any possible anti-British mutiny in an all-Indian formation. Such an attitude hampered the expansion and modernization of the Indian Army.

Besides hardware and training, combat effectiveness also depended on non-tangible aspects like discipline and morale which were also partly linked with tangible aspects. Field-Marshal Slim wrote about the Japanese soldier fighting in Burma in late 1944: 'The individual Japanese soldier remained the most formidable fighting insect in history'.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the use of animal imagery by Slim, this statement shows that the military effectiveness of the Japanese troops was very high. Even when the Japanese soldiers were exhausted and

27 *India's Part in the Sixth Year of War* (New Delhi: GoI, n.d.), pp. 22–23, 63.

28 From Commander-in-Chief India to the War Office, Telegram, 24 Jan. 1945, No. 008346, p. 151, L/WS/1/1511.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 151–52.

30 Campaign of the Fourteenth Army 1944–45, p. 3, Serial No. 7-A, MODHS, R.K. Puram, New Delhi. From internal evidence it is clear that this unpublished account is penned by Slim.

hungry, they were fanatical. One British RA officer noted that even in hopeless situations, the Japanese soldiers never gave up but went to battle to die in an almost suicidal manner for their Emperor.<sup>31</sup>

Stephen Hart writes that in 1944, Britain was suffering from war weariness. The civilians found it tough to endure the German V weapon's onslaught. He makes a case study of Bernard Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Normandy in mid-1944. He writes that the morale of the British Army was more fragile relative to the *Wehrmacht's* high and resilient morale. This was partly because the British Army, at this stage, was a mass-conscripted civilian force with a sprinkling of the tiny peacetime cadre. The personnel came from a society with no particularly strong martial tradition and so they lacked the fanaticism and willingness to risk death which characterized the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>32</sup> This characteristic of the *Wehrmacht* could be applied to a greater extent to the IJA. In the case of the Indian Army, the bulk of the combatants came from traditional warrior communities (dubbed as martial classes). Further, they volunteered for imperial (if not national) military service. The Japanese soldiers' 'will to war' was also the product of a harsh training regime, inhuman discipline and the extensive indoctrination of the junior officers, which played an important role in inculcation of offensive spirit among the personnel.<sup>33</sup>

Several fault lines appeared in the morale of the British soldiers. Most British personnel considered the war against Japan as of secondary importance. Service in India and Burma was unpopular with the British troops. However, some British personnel adjusted to the reality in the Far East. Success in the European theatre had aroused universal enthusiasm among the British personnel. News of victories over the Axis forces resulted in high confidence and the fighting spirit was indeed high.<sup>34</sup> Further, the recent victory at Imphal-Kohima also raised the morale of the British soldiers in India and at the SEAC.<sup>35</sup>

But the British soldiers lacked faith in the good intentions of the senior political authorities (including the GoI and the London Government).<sup>36</sup> The

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31 William Pennington, *Pick up your Parrots and Monkeys and Fall in Facing the Boat* (London: Cassell, 2003), pp. 361–62.

32 Stephen Hart, 'Montgomery, Morale, Casualty Conservation and "Colossal Cracks": 21st Army Group's Operational Technique in North-West Europe, 1944–45', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996), pp. 135–37.

33 Barkawi, 'Peoples, Homelands, and Wars? Ethnicity, the Military, and Battle among British Imperial Forces in the War against Japan', p. 151.

34 Secret India Command, Inter-Service Morale Summary for the period Aug.–Oct. 1944, Para 2, L/WS/2/71, IOR, BL.

35 Army in India Morale Report for three months ended 31 Oct. 1944, British Troops, Para 1, p. 1, L/WS/2/71.

36 *Ibid.*, Para 2(b), p. 2.

British Army personnel considered the requirements of five years' service for repatriation as too high.<sup>37</sup> The BORS blamed lengthy overseas service for the infidelity of their wives. On an average, in every company, every sixth married man had family troubles. The English newspapers spoke of a record number of 10,000 divorces in 1943, and 3,000 illegitimate birth in Salisbury Hospital in the same year. Such news further heightened the anxiety of the troops about their wives' possible sexual behaviour during their absence from home.<sup>38</sup> Pilfering from parcels sent from the UK and the delay in internal mail also irritated the British troops. The British troops also considered the recent increase in pay as inadequate, especially when compared with the earnings of the civilians in the UK. Both the British and Indian troops complained about the high price of living and the difficulty of saving anything from their pay.<sup>39</sup> The 'Tommies' disliked the soya ration and envied the American troops' ration. Lack of publicity for the British forces in comparison to that given to the American troops also irritated the former. The authorities took steps to improve working relations between the British and American soldiers. Further, most of the British troops were also anxious about post-war resettlement plans.<sup>40</sup>

British officers attached with the Indian units, especially those who were married and had families in the UK, resented the fact that they were granted leave for only two months. Travelling was time-consuming, difficult and expensive. There were problems of late return due to the difficulties of rail transportation. Both the British and Indian troops complained about the lack of accommodation, filthy compartments, lack of feeding arrangements and long delays at the main railway junctions like Calcutta and Delhi.<sup>41</sup>

Anirudh Deshpande's assertion that the Indian soldiery was influenced by turbulent anti-colonial nationalist politics<sup>42</sup> cannot be sustained. To an extent, the Indian soldiers remained 'apolitical'. Rather, the tangible incentives of military service and the welfare of their families motivated the Indian soldiers.

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37 To the CIGS War Office from CGS India New Delhi, 9 Aug. 1944, p. 2, L/WS/1/441.

38 Army in India Morale Report for three months ended 31 Oct. 1944, British Troops, Para 4, p. 3.

39 Secret India Command, Inter-Service Morale Summary for the period Aug.–Oct. 1944, Para 6&7.

40 To the CIGS War Office from GS Branch GHQ India New Delhi, 9 Aug. 1944, Welfare and Morale, Appendix 21, p. 40, L/WS/1/441; Secret India Command, Inter-Service Morale Summary for the period Aug.–Oct. 1944, Para 2.

41 Report on the Morale of British, Indian, and Colonial Troops of ALFSEA for the months of Aug., Sept., and Oct. 1944, Part II, Indian Troops, Miscellaneous, p. 14, L/WS/2/71.

42 Deshpande, 'Hopes and Disillusionment: Recruitment, Demobilisation and the Emergence of Discontent in the Indian Armed Forces after the Second World War', pp. 175, 181.

Daniel Marston notes that the traditional attractions of *esprit de corps*, family and village connections and a comparatively 'high' (in the context of rural India) regular salary enticed many men to join the Indian Army during the war.<sup>43</sup> The sepoys displayed little interest in the M.K. Gandhi-M. Jinnah talk and its ultimate failure. The possibility of remaining in the services after the war (unlike the British troops who expected demobilization after the war) attracted lot of recruits in the Indian Army.<sup>44</sup> The fighting spirit of the Indian troops was high and the anti-Jap feeling was growing. However, inadequate leave, high prices of basic commodities in the villages, rationing problems and victimization of their wives in their absence in the villages, were some of the anxieties of the Indian troops.<sup>45</sup> The sepoys' complained that the local civilian officials always attempted to make a profit at the expense of the soldiers' families, especially in the absence of the male members at the front. Not only did the family members (mostly wives or old mothers and fathers) have to travel a long distance to get rations from the ration shops, but also the officials cheated on the amount of rations that was due to the soldiers' families. Further, most of the sepoys were from the cultivating families. Due to the presence of the male members at the front, the family land remained fallow. This not only reduced the individual family's collective income, but unscrupulous locals took advantage of the situation and pursued litigation. This was especially problematic for the soldiers' families as most of their female members who remained back in the villages were illiterate. Worse, the postal service's officials charged a certain percentage while delivering money orders sent by the soldiers from the front back to their families in the villages.<sup>46</sup> The Indian personnel expected that in view of the extremely high prices of foodstuffs, the government should provide assistance in supplying food to their families.<sup>47</sup> The Indian soldier remained a family man. A report dated 31 October 1944 noted: 'It is still evident, however, that the sepoy's main interest is in the welfare of his family and his village. The usefulness of his service in the army can in fact be said to depend

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43 Daniel P. Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport, Connecticut/London: Praeger, 2003), p. 235.

44 Secret India Command, Inter-Service Morale Summary for the period Aug.–Oct. 1944, Para 3–4.

45 To the CIGS War Office from CGS India, New Delhi, GHQ India, 9 Aug. 1944, p. 2.

46 Army in India Morale Report for the three months ended 31 Oct. 1944, Part II, Indian Troops, General, Para 4 (a) & (c), p. 55, L/WS/2/71.

47 Secret India Command, Inter-Service Morale Summary for the period Aug.–Oct. 1944, Para 8.

on the extent to which he considers that his own personal problems are receiving attention'.<sup>48</sup>

It was noted that the IECOs were not very enthusiastic about their service in the Indian Army. The ICOS complained about low pay and the lack of a family allowance. They expected a pay equivalent to that of the British officers. The deduction of a certain sum from their pay due to the maintenance of servants was a source of complaint.<sup>49</sup> Among the VCOs, there was a feeling that their pay had not increased commensurately with the pay rise of other ranks and the increase in the cost of living.<sup>50</sup> Marston and Tarak Barkawi write that the British ECOS were able to establish a better working relationship with the Indian Army because the latter had no preconceived notion about India and the Indians. This was because the British ECOS from the middle-class families had little direct experience of empire and had far less prejudice than the traditional regular British officer corps.<sup>51</sup>

Discipline was a component of morale. Good discipline generally means good morale. One part of discipline was the issue of desertion. Marston notes that desertions of the Indian soldiers during 1942–43 in Burma were the product of the poor morale of the Indian Army, which was a function of its tactical inability to deal effectively with the Japanese jungle tactics. The desertions were not due to rising political awareness of the Indian soldiers to fight for an independent India.<sup>52</sup> Desertion among the Indian soldiers increased during August, September and October 1944. However, most of the deserters were technical personnel. They had joined with the assumption that the war would be over quickly and that after the war they would get more lucrative jobs in the civilian sphere compared to the less educated demobilized Indian ORs from the combatant branches. Cases of desertion and re-enlistment under false names were numerous. Among the combatant branch personnel, overstaying of leave (AWOL) was the most common disciplinary offence. It was in most cases caused by their desire to set family affairs right rather than any deliberate

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48 Army in India Morale Report for the three months ended 31 Oct. 1944, Part II, Indian Troops, General, Para 1.

49 Ibid., Para 2 & 5.

50 Report on the Morale of British, Indian, and Colonial Troops of ALFSEA for the months of Aug., Sept., and Oct. 1944, Part II Discipline, Indian Troops, Para 70 (b).

51 Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, p. 233; Tarak Barkawi, 'Culture and Combat in the Colonies: The Indian Army in the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2006), p. 334.

52 Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, p. 235.



attempt to avoid service in the unit.<sup>53</sup> In the 21st Army Group of Bernard Montgomery in Normandy during mid-1944, desertions among the frontline infantry were due to battle stress. Death of a close friend or family problems like serious illness of a close relative, inadequate training or transfer to a new unit with a consequent lack of identification were the root causes behind desertions and going AWOL.<sup>54</sup>

However, overall, the disciplinary tenor of the Indian Army remained good. For instance, between May and July 1944, the monthly average number of court martial trials (excluding summary courts martial) per 1,000 officers and VCOS/ORs of the Indian Army personnel under India Command were 0.56 and 0.13 respectively. For August to October 1944, the percentages were 0.85 and 0.12. Between May and July 1944, the monthly average of courts martial (excluding summary courts martial) per 1,000 of the British officers and BORS under India Command were 0.52 and 1.04 respectively, and for August to October 1944, 0.59 and 1.01.<sup>55</sup> Thus, one can conclude that the Indian ORs were better behaved than the BORS. In the 21st Army Group of Montgomery, court martial convictions (mostly due to desertions and troops going AWOL) were 0.077 per 100 men in May 1944 and it rose to 0.189 per 100 men in August 1944.<sup>56</sup> One can conclude that the figures were higher in case of the 21st Army Group compared to the India Command because the former suffered more casualties compared to the latter organization. One can say that in most of the circumstances, the drop in morale was proportional to the increasing lethality of warfare.

Discipline and morale also depended on the quality of rations. Tinned fish was not appreciated by the Indian soldiers. Fish was not part of the diet of the north Indian and Punjabi soldiers. The reduction of the meat ration from six ounces to two ounces was not liked by the troops. It is to be noted that meat comprised an important element of the diet of the Punjabis, Pathans and Gurkhas. Tinned milk was also not appreciated by the sepoys as the milk was neither fresh nor sweetened. The troops complained about the quality of rice and *atta* given to them. The Indian soldiers liked V, Neptune and London brand cigarettes, which they got only occasionally instead of *bidis* (tobacco wrapped

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53 Army in India Morale Report for the three months ended 31 Oct. 1944, Part II, Indian Troops, General Opinions (b).

54 David French, "Tommy is no Soldier": The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June–August 1944, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996), p. 159.

55 Army in India Morale Report for the three months ended 31 Oct. 1944, Part I, British Troops, 3(a), Part II, Indian Troops, General, Discipline, Para 3.

56 French, "Tommy is no Soldier": The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June–August 1944, p. 158.

in palm leaves).<sup>57</sup> The British troops complained that the canteen service run by the contractors was characterized by high prices, poor quality of goods and unavailability of certain commodities.<sup>58</sup>

Morale was also linked with entertainment. Concert parties and film shows were demanded by the Indian soldiers. Again, the authorities realized the importance of qualitative and quantitative improvements of the film shows which were held for the Indian troops.<sup>59</sup> The British troops complained that the films shown in the cinemas run by the contractors were bad. Live entertainment and tours of professional football teams were very popular amongst the Tommies.<sup>60</sup>

The authorities aimed to strengthen the morale of the Indian troops by emphasizing publicity. One report stated: 'Publicity continues slowly to broaden the sepoy's outlook towards the war as a whole.... Germany now being with her back to the wall is that the Indian soldier is becoming more aware that the Japanese are the real enemies of his country'.<sup>61</sup> Propaganda made the Commonwealth soldiers aware of the fact that after Italy and Germany, Japan, the third and last Axis power must be defeated. It was noted that those Indian soldiers who had seen active operations in Burma and Italy had returned to India confident of their ability to defeat the enemy wherever they should meet him and were eager to go into action. Those who were yet to see action were encouraged by successes won by other units of their corps and regiments and were generally keen to emulate them. However, units detailed for the North-West Frontier and internal security duties found it more difficult to maintain enthusiasm and expected more interesting employment.<sup>62</sup> The Japanese were also aware of the importance of publicity in undermining the loyalty of the enemy soldiers. However, Japanese propaganda broadcasts had no significant effect on the sepoys at this stage of the war.<sup>63</sup>

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57 Report on the Morale of British, Indian, and Colonial Troops of ALFSEA for the months of Aug., Sept., and Oct. 1944, Part II Discipline, Indian Troops, Para 6(b).

58 Army in India Morale Report for the three months ended 31 Oct. 1944, Part I, British troops, Para 6(d), p. 5.

59 Report on the Morale of British, Indian, and Colonial Troops of ALFSEA for the months of Aug., Sept., and Oct. 1944, Part II, Indian Troops, Welfare and Entertainment, Para 6.

60 Army in India Morale Report for the three months ended 31 Oct. 1944, Part I, British Troops, Para 6 b & c, p. 4.

61 Ibid., Part II, Indian Troops, General, Para 1.

62 Ibid., Part II, General, Para 1.

63 Report on the Morale of British, Indian, and Colonial Troops of ALFSEA for the months of Aug., Sept., and Oct. 1944, Part II Discipline, Indian Troops, Miscellaneous, Publicity, Para 9.

## Planning and Deployments of the Commonwealth and Japanese Armies

Graham Dunlop writes that the British were generally more at ease with the environment of the dry central plain of Burma, where their superiority in air power, armour, artillery and mechanized transport were used with greater effect. In this region, their capability to manoeuvre, outflank Japanese defence and sever their LoCs and concentrate overwhelming combat power at the decisive point, almost at will, won the campaign.<sup>64</sup> But before that, the 14th Army had to make a smooth transition. Field-Marshal Slim wrote:

For two years Fourteenth Army formations had fought in jungles and amongst hills. They were now about to break out into open country, largely flat, with unobstructed view, and in parts almost desert like. Not only would the laborious tactics of jungle have to be replaced by speed, mechanization, and mobility, but commanders and troops would have to adjust their mentality to the changed conditions.<sup>65</sup>

In order to adapt to the conditions of open warfare in the plains, the military organization had to adopt certain new techniques. How the campaign unfolded in reality, is discussed below.

By the end of August 1944, General Kawabe was replaced by General Heitaro/Hyotaro Kimura as commander of the BAA.<sup>66</sup> His Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Shinichi Tanaka, was responsible for day-to-day operations and was known as a person of steely determination.<sup>67</sup> Initially, Slim believed that Kimura would be a hard-headed general who would fight obstinately in the region between the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy. And this, Slim hoped, would enable him to destroy the Japanese ground forces in a great decisive battle in the Shwebo Plain by employing fast-moving armoured and mechanized units supported by infantry.<sup>68</sup> Kimura decided that any attempt to

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64 Graham Dunlop, 'British Tactical Command and Leadership in the Burma Campaign: 1941–45', in Brian Bond and Kyoichi Tachikawa (eds.), *British and Japanese Military Leadership in the Far Eastern War: 1941–45* (Oxon: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 103.

65 Campaign of the Fourteenth Army 1944–45, p. 6.

66 David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (1983, reprint, London: Cassell, 2002), p. 364.

67 Russell Miller, *Uncle Bill: The Authorized Biography of Field Marshal Viscount Slim* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013), pp. 330–31.

68 Michael Pearson, *Endgame Burma: Slim's Masterstroke at Meiktila* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2010), p. 23.

defend the Chindwin River would be futile. So, the IJA fell back to the Irrawaddy River.<sup>69</sup> Kimura's objective was to allow the Commonwealth forces to move deep into Burma, where their LoCs would be extended, while his own LoC would remain short. And as Slim's force attempted to cross the Irrawaddy, he would smash them using the 15th and 33rd Japanese armies.<sup>70</sup> This was a brilliant move by Kimura which made Slim's strategic-operational plan of destroying the IJA before the Irrawaddy obsolete. However, Slim also showed flexibility and revised his operational plan to keep Kimura on the back foot.

In September 1944, Kimura's BAA had three Japanese armies to defend the country of 240,000 square miles.<sup>71</sup> Kimura's defensive line ran along the Kachin Hills, north of Lashio through Mongmit to Mandalay. The 33rd Japanese Army under General Masaki Honda, with two divisions (the 18th and 56th), was in north Burma. The 33rd Japanese Army was fighting the American-Chinese force and the Chinese Salween Army. The 2nd Japanese Division was lent to this army temporarily but then went to the general reserve. The 15th Japanese Army, under General Shihachi Katamura (who had replaced Mutaguchi) with four divisions (the 15th, 31st, 33rd, and 53rd), defended Mandalay down south to Pakokku. A strong reserve was kept at Meiktila. Behind the 15th Japanese Army were the Monglong Mountains, behind which emerged the Shan Plateau. The 28th Japanese Army, comprising two divisions (the 54th and 55th) and two independent brigades under Lieutenant-General Sakurai, defended the oil-fields of Yenangyaung, the Irrawaddy Delta and the Arakan. The 49th Japanese Division was just arriving in south Burma. In total, the BAA was composed of 10 divisions and two independent mixed brigades.<sup>72</sup> In addition, the BAA had one tank regiment, two INA divisions and seven battalions of the BNA. Each INA division had about 6,000 soldiers. The INA and BNA troops were lightly equipped. The INA's objective was to undermine the loyalty of the sepoys. The combat value of the INA and the BNA was below standard. In addition, the loyalty of the BNA was questionable. Further, most of the Japanese divisions were under strength. In September 1944, there were probably some 80,000 combatant Japanese soldiers in Burma, backed up by 100,000 LoC troops. The latter's combat value was much inferior compared to the combatants. The average

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69 *Dagger Division*, p. 10.

70 Max Hastings, *Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944–45* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 345.

71 Robert Lyman, *The Generals: From Defeat to Victory, Leadership in Asia 1941–45* (London: Constable, 2008), p. 322.

72 Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*, p. 365; Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 23; Lyman, *The Generals*, p. 317; Campaign of the Fourteenth Army 1944–45, p. 2.

monthly replacements of Japanese combat soldiers deployed in Burma numbered 7,000.<sup>73</sup>

Plan KAN 2 was formulated by the 28th Japanese Army Headquarters for operations which might occur in the north-east part of the 28th Army zone. During early October 1944, in the Minbu District the garrison consisted of the 153rd Infantry Regiment (less 1st Battalion) of the 49th Japanese Division, known as the KATSU Force, and was transferred from the 15th to the 28th Japanese Army's control. At a conference held in Rangoon in November 1944, the Yenangyaung area was placed under the 28th Japanese Army. In accordance with the KAN Operation Plan, the oilfields area of Yenangyaung and Chauk and some key points on the right bank of the Irrawaddy in the vicinity of Seikpyu were to be defended by the KATSU Force. On 17 December 1944, a new formation known as the 72nd Independent Mixed Brigade was formed to assist in the defence of Yenangyaung. It was given the code name KANETSU and placed under the 28th Japanese Army. The KANETSU Force, under Major-General Tsunoro Yamamoto, included the 187th and 188th Infantry Battalions from the 53rd Japanese Division, the 542nd and 543rd Infantry Battalions from the 61st Japanese Infantry Regiment, 72nd Independent Mixed Battalion Artillery Unit, 72nd Independent Mixed Battalion Engineer Unit and 72nd Independent Mixed Battalion Signal Unit and lastly Headquarters 72nd Independent Mixed Brigade (from Headquarters 33rd Japanese Division Infantry Group). Tsunoro Yamamoto had experience of fighting at Imphal. He had actually led the column which advanced towards Imphal through the Kabaw Valley and Tamu. In January 1945, the 72nd Independent Mixed Brigade, however, numbered only 850 men and officers.<sup>74</sup>

Towards the end of 1944, Japanese intelligence speculated that a Commonwealth landing on a large scale might take place in the southern part of French Indo-China. Hence, the Southern Army Commander decided to transfer the 2nd Japanese Division from BAA to the Phnompenh area on the Mekong River. Japanese intelligence was not aware that the SEAC lacked an adequate number of landing craft and aircraft carriers to conduct such an amphibious operation. So, when the BAA ought to have been reinforced, especially in its Central Front (central Burma), in fact the opposite was happening. The units of the 2nd Japanese Division started moving from Toungoo on 27 January 1945. At this time, the 33rd Japanese Army had stopped the advance of the Chinese Yunnan armies near Namhpakka and Wanting on the Burma-China border.

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73 Campaign of the Fourteenth Army 1944–45, Information on the map after p. 2. See also p. 3.

74 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, C 517750, pp. 709–10, CAB 44/203, PRO, Kew, Surrey.

The Southern Army also decided to transfer almost the entire 5th Japanese Air Division from Burma to Indo-China.<sup>75</sup>

Kimura was badly served by the Japanese air units. In September 1944, there were only 80 Japanese aircraft in Burma. Until October 1944, the Japanese had some 450 operational aircraft in South-East Asia. Of them, some 150 (70 per cent among them fighters) were earmarked for use in Burma and Thailand. The rest were disposed in Malaya and Sumatra and comprised mainly float-planes and bombers which were required for shipping escorts, anti-submarine duties and defence of the Sumatra oilfields. When MacArthur invaded the Philippines, then some 100 aircraft were withdrawn by the Japanese from South-East Asia.<sup>76</sup> In contrast, the Commonwealth forces had massive numbers of high quality aircraft at their disposal. Hurricanes, Spitfires, Lightnings and later Thunderbolts and Mustangs gained air supremacy (not merely air superiority) over the skies of Burma.<sup>77</sup>

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth command was also reorganized. In August 1944, the NCAC was separated from Slim's command of the 14th Army. The rear area of the 14th Army was constituted as a LoC Command directly under the 11th Army Group. The 15th Corps in the Arakan was also separated from Slim's 14th Army. The NCAC had one British and three Chinese divisions. Slim expected that Kimura would keep one and a half divisions in the Arakan. And he could throw five Japanese divisions, one tank regiment and 40,000 LoC troops at the 14th Army. The 14th Army comprised the 2nd, 5th, 7th, 17th, 19th and 20th Divisions, the 268th Brigade and the 28th East African Brigade, and the 254th and 255th Tank Brigades.<sup>78</sup>

Early in November, General Giffard gave up command of the 11th Army Group. Its title changed to the Allied Land Force South-East Asia (ALFSEA) and Oliver Leese (who had commanded the 8th Army in Italy) took over command.<sup>79</sup> Slim's objective was to capture Mandalay with the 33rd Corps, under Lieutenant-General Montague Stopford. And while the Japanese forces concentrated to defend Mandalay, the 4th Corps under Lieutenant-General Frank Messervy was to cross the Irrawaddy further south and attack Meiktila

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75 Ibid., p. 711.

76 Air Chief Marshal Keith Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', *Third Supplement to the London Gazette*, 6 April 1951, No. 39196, p. 1969; Campaign of the Fourteenth Army 1944–45, Information on the map after p. 2.

77 Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', p. 1970.

78 Campaign of the Fourteenth Army 1944–45, pp. 3–4.

79 Ibid., p. 3.

(Operation EXTENDED CAPITAL). Meiktila was the major supply depot and communications centre of the Japanese in central Burma. With its five airfields and attendant ammunition dumps, hospitals and other depots, it sustained the 15th and 33rd Japanese Armies. All the Japanese reinforcements, supplies and arms and munitions came by ship to Rangoon and then through road and rail networks were pushed north to Meiktila. The 4th Corps was directed to capture Meiktila, which would deny the Japanese rations, ammunition and the facilities of a big field hospital.<sup>80</sup> The 4th Corps comprised Geoffrey Evan's 7th and 'Punch' Cowan's 17th Indian Divisions, 255th Indian Tank Brigade (equipped with Sherman tanks), the Lushai Brigade and the 28th East African Brigade. And the 33rd Corps included the 2nd British, 10th and 20th Indian Divisions, the 254th Tank Brigade (equipped with Lee-Grant and Stuart tanks) and the 268th Brigade.<sup>81</sup> In Slim's framework, the 33rd Corps at Mandalay would function as the anvil and the 4th Corps at Meiktila as the hammer to crush the Japanese ground forces in between them. Slim explained this new plan to Messervy and Stopford on 18 December and issued the plan on 19 December 1944.<sup>82</sup> Manoeuvre warfare requires the application of two forces: the holding force and the manoeuvre force.<sup>83</sup> In this case, the 33rd Corps comprised the holding force while the 4th corps comprised the manoeuvre force. The line of advance between the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy opposite Mandalay was through evergreen, jungle-clad mountain ranges, and through the Mu and Maze Rivers and numerous steep-sided *chaungs*.<sup>84</sup>

On 26 November 1944, Richard Peirse relinquished command of the Allied Air Forces in South-East Asia and then temporary command was assumed by Air Marshal Guy Garrod. During August–September 1944, the Hurribombers proved most effective in providing close support in jungle country especially in driving the Japanese troops from the Tiddim Road. The Japanese evacuated Tiddim on 18 October 1944. Kalemmyo fell to the advancing Commonwealth units on 15 November. On 2 December 1944, Kalewa was captured by the Commonwealth units.<sup>85</sup> The jungle warfare phase had ended and the battle for plains of central Burma was about to begin.

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80 Ottowell, 'Chhe-Saat', p. 61; Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 24.

81 Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 26; Lyman, *The Generals*, p. 327.

82 Lyman, *The Generals*, p. 321.

83 J.J.A. Wallace, 'Manoeuvre Theory in Operations Other than War', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996), p. 210.

84 *Dagger Division*, p. 11.

85 Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', pp. 1965, 1968.



The 4th Corps crossed the Chindwin near the region of Tamu and then moved south to Pakkoku.<sup>86</sup> In November 1944, the 19th Indian Division on boats and rafts, with more than a thousand vehicles and the guns, moved across the Chindwin at Sittaung in two columns. General Rees split his division into two columns. One column was ordered to capture the road junction of Pinlebu and the second column was to link up with the 36th British Division. On 16 December 1944, Pinlebu was captured.<sup>87</sup> It was an important communication centre as the motorable road from Thauungdut on the Chindwin to Wuntho passed through this city. The second column reached Banmauk on 18 December 1944 and linked up with patrols of the Royal Scots Fusiliers of the 36th British Division.<sup>88</sup> The 36th Division had captured Hopin on 7 September and by 10 December 1944 reached the vicinity of Indaw.<sup>89</sup> On 19 December, the 36th British Division established itself at the eastern bank of the Irrawaddy at Katha to the north of Thabeikkyin.<sup>90</sup> The NCAC of Stilwell (and later Lieutenant-General Sultan) was thus linked with the Central Front of Slim. On 8 December 1944, command of the 4th Corps was taken over by Messervy.<sup>91</sup> The 4th Corps captured Wuntho on 20 December 1944.<sup>92</sup>

On 6 January 1945, the GOC of the 19th Indian Infantry Division informed his subordinate commanders that if Japanese activity was noted along the east bank of the Irrawaddy, then air support would be available. Further, the units were to arm heavily with PIAT, 25-pounders and 3.7-inch guns. On 8 January 1945, the 1st Assam was ordered to move in MT to Myothitvia Kongyi and report to the 64th Brigade, who would use additional units to block the enemy escape routes to the east and south from Shwebo. On the same day, the 11th Sikhs' MG Battalion was ordered to move one company in MT to Kongyi. This unit was placed under the 62nd Brigade. And the MG Battalion, less two companies, was ordered to move through Kin-U and was to come under the command of the 98th Brigade.<sup>93</sup>

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86 Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 28.

87 *Dagger Division*, p. 11. Fraser in *And We Shall Shock Them*, p. 367 states that Pinlebu was captured by the 19th Division on 14 December 1944.

88 *Dagger Division*, p. 12.

89 Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', p. 1968.

90 Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 34.

91 Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*, p. 368.

92 Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', p. 1968.

93 War Diary of the 19th Indian Infantry Division, Entry for 8 Jan. 1945, Verbal Orders by the GOC Major-General Rees, 6 Jan. 1945, Appendix A, p. 13, MODHS, R.K. Puram, New Delhi.

Around this time, Kimura was convinced that the main Commonwealth attack would come towards Mandalay.<sup>94</sup> In a conference held between 7 and 9 January 1945, the Japanese generals attempted to evaluate the threat which was developing along the front of the 15th Japanese Army in central Burma. The Japanese military leadership took stock of how and where to fight the expected 'Irrawaddy Battle'. On 5 January, the Japanese lost the railhead at Ye-U and Shwebo on 7 January. Gangaw was lost by the Japanese on 12 January 1945. The 55th Japanese Division arrived in Burma in October 1944. By the end of January 1945, the Sakura Detachment rejoined this division. The 143rd Japanese Infantry Regiment (less 1st Battalion) guarded the coast from Sandoway to Gwa, and the 144th Japanese Infantry Regiment was deployed along the Pagoda Point and the Irrawaddy Delta Zone. The 55th Mountain Artillery Regiment (less 1st Battalion) guarded Thabaung, Kyungon and Pantanaw.<sup>95</sup>

The disposition of the KANTESU and KATSU forces in late January 1945 was as follows: the 2nd Battalion of the 153rd Infantry Regiment (less one company), 188th Independent Infantry Battalion and one company of the 35th Field AA Battalion defended Chauk, the 542nd Independent Infantry Battalion was at Seikpyu, one company of the 2nd Battalion of the 153rd Japanese Infantry Regiment was at Lanywa, and the 3rd Battalion of the 153rd Japanese Infantry Regiment was at Saw. Yenangyaung was defended by the Headquarters of the 72nd Independent Mixed Brigade, 187th Independent Infantry Battalion, 543rd Independent Infantry Battalion, brigade artillery, signals and engineer units plus the 35th Field AA Battalion (less one company).<sup>96</sup>

Table 10.1 shows the minimal casualties suffered by the Commonwealth forces during their advance up to the banks of the Irrawaddy after crossing the Chindwin. This reflected the fact that the IJA was conducting only delaying and harassing tactics against the advancing British, Indian and American troops. Would this change in the near future?

### Mandalay-Meiktila and the Race for Rangoon

Successful adaptation by a military organization, writes Murray, is dependent on an honest and intelligent study of the past.<sup>97</sup> Adaptation to new conditions of warfare requires acknowledgement of past mistakes and rectification of

94 Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 34.

95 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, pp. 711, 713–14.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 710.

97 Murray, *Military Adaptation in War*, p. 5.

TABLE 10.1 *Burma battle casualties: 1 December 1944–13 January 1945*

Name of the Army	Officers			Other Ranks			Total
	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Killed	Wounded	Missing	
14th Army	16	34	1	125	494	38	
15th Indian Corps	4	18		117	330	8	
NCAC	1		1	3	11	4	
Total Casualties of the Indian Army							289
Grand Total							1,205

Source: Burma Battle Casualties, 20 Jan. 1945, WS 27314/244, p. 151, L/WS/1/1511, IOR, BL, London.

defects, plus the absorption of new lessons to a great extent in order to adapt to new conditions. This process is the product of an open mind, which results in a flexible approach. This came out clearly in the order issued by Rees, GOC 19th Indian Division, dated 13 January 1945. The Special Order of the Day issued by him to all the ranks follows:

We have had occasions when we did well, and we have also made our mistakes. We are acquiring more and more battle experience against JAPS fighting us from ground and air. Let us profit from our experience and graft it on to all the training we have gone through. Become the canny fighters that I want you to be, while keeping up the fighting ascendancy you have established over the JAPS. You have now mauled two different Japanese divisions we have come across, and shown quite clearly that you are very definitely on top of them.<sup>98</sup>

On 14 January 1945, the 19th Indian Division established the bridgehead on the right bank of the Irrawaddy at Thabeikkyin and the next day at Kyaukmyaung. The latter place was 45 miles north of Mandalay. The Battle of Kyaukmyaung lasted for 20 days. British, Gurkha and Indian battalions fought hard to capture and retain defensive positions like Pearl Hill, Minban Taung, etc.<sup>99</sup> The defence

<sup>98</sup> War Diary of the 19th Indian Division, Special Order of the Day by Major-General Rees to all the ranks, 13 Jan. 1945, Appendix B, p. 14.

<sup>99</sup> *Dagger Division*, pp. 3–4; Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 33.

of Kyaukmyaung cost the Japanese 2,000 KIA.<sup>100</sup> On 22 January 1945, the Japanese were driven out of Monywa.<sup>101</sup> On 24 January 1945, the Commander-in-Chief of India told the War Office: 'Infantry in normal formations having proper artillery and other support are defeating Japs and sustain far fewer casualties'.<sup>102</sup> On 28 January, the 4th Brigade attacked Kyaukse and captured the town with air support on 4 February.<sup>103</sup> The 15th Japanese Army's counter-offensive against the Commonwealth bridgeheads at Singu on the bank of the Irrawaddy (north of Mandalay) failed towards the end of January.<sup>104</sup>

On 3 February 1945, the 6th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment reached Palel.<sup>105</sup> Then, the battalion made for Pauk and crossed the Irrawaddy. On 27 January, the Japanese had lost Pauk. The 6th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Infantry Battalion was 'married' with Probyn's Horse (5th Lancers) which was equipped with Sherman tanks.<sup>106</sup> In the words of a company officer: 'We practiced the "drill" of climbing onto and dropping off the Shermans and trying the impossible, namely communicating with the individual tank commanders through their outside telephones affixed to the right rear track guard'.<sup>107</sup> This was an improvement compared to the lackadaisical cooperation between the sepoys of the 3rd Battalion of the 10th GR and the tanks during mid-March 1944. The 3rd Battalion of the 214th Japanese Brigade was well dug into the high ground of the Kanhla crossroads about eight miles from Pakokku. They were dislodged by the 114th Brigade on 10 February 1945.<sup>108</sup> On 12 February 1945, the 33rd Corps crossed the Irrawaddy at Ngazun. This resulted in Kimura deploying the bulk of his force to defend Mandalay. Slim's objective now was to push another corps across the Irrawaddy 50 miles to the south-west at Pakokku and then push it in the eastern direction towards the Japanese jugular at Meiktila, the vital road junction behind Kimura's front. This would allow Slim to sever the Japanese formations' LoCs.<sup>109</sup> The 7th Indian Division crossed the Irrawaddy between Pakokku and Nyaungu on 13 February 1945.<sup>110</sup> Seikpyu was 40 miles

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<sup>100</sup> *Dagger Division*, p. 5.

<sup>101</sup> 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 711.

<sup>102</sup> From Commander-in-Chief to the War Office, 24 Jan. 1945, Telegram, p. 151.

<sup>103</sup> Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 38.

<sup>104</sup> 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 711.

<sup>105</sup> Ottowell, 'Chhe-Saat', p. 66.

<sup>106</sup> 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 711; Ottowell, 'Chhe-Saat', p. 66.

<sup>107</sup> Ottowell, 'Chhe-Saat', p. 66.

<sup>108</sup> Pearson, *Endgame Burma*, p. 37.

<sup>109</sup> Hastings, *Nemesis*, p. 346.

<sup>110</sup> Graham Dunlop, 'The Re-capture of Rangoon, 1945: The Last and Greatest Victory of the British Indian Army', in Alan Jeffreys and Patrick Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47: Experience and Development* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), p. 143.

downstream from Pakokku. The 542nd Infantry Battalion of the KANETSU Force was able to ward off an attack by the Commonwealth force (an East African Brigade) on 8 February. On 14 February, the KATSU Force sent from Yenangyaung launched a counter-attack at Seikpyu. The Commonwealth force was temporarily pushed back beyond Gwebin.<sup>111</sup> On 14 February 1945, the 7th Indian Division cleared the actual crossing site at Nyaungu, south of Pakokku.<sup>112</sup> Nyaungu was halfway between Seikpyu and Pakokku. On 15 February, this place was defended by the weak 2nd INA Division. The Irrawaddy here was three-quarters of a mile wide. From Nyaungu, good roads led south-west, south and east. The INA soon melted away and the counter-attack by the 2nd Battalion of the 153rd Japanese Infantry Regiment of the KATSU Force failed against the Commonwealth bridgehead at Nyaungu. On 21 February, a Commonwealth mechanized force moved from the bridgehead towards Meiktila.<sup>113</sup> Kimura was caught completely off guard. Slim was able to practise military deception on such a large scale because of the complete absence of Japanese aerial reconnaissance. And Kimura lacked transport in adequate quantities to redeploy units against the Commonwealth thrust at Meiktila quickly. Not only did Kimura's units arrive at Meiktila in dribs and drabs, but they also lacked heavy weapons to crush the rapidly building Commonwealth force at there.<sup>114</sup>

The tactically important Mount Popa was in the 15th Japanese Army zone. It is an extinct volcano and rises to about 5,000 feet, hence is suited for defence. Towards the end of January 1945, the construction of defences started in this zone. The BAA became interested in defending this zone on 2 February 1945. Two engineer companies and some INA personnel, plus the KANJO Force, were involved in constructing defensive works. Even at this stage, the Japanese military command in Burma feared that the Commonwealth troops might conduct an amphibious operation along the south-west coast of Burma. Hence, the 28th Japanese Army was not relieved of its role of guarding the coastline of Burma. On 15 February, the BAA decided that the boundary between the 15th and 28th Japanese Armies along the Irrawaddy would be through the Pakokku-Letpabya region. The KANJO Force was commanded by Colonel Furuya, CO of the 112th Japanese Infantry Regiment. In early February, it was formed from the 55th Japanese Division. It arrived at Mount Popa on 22 February 1945. This detachment comprised the 112th Japanese Infantry Regiment (less 3rd Battalion), 1st

111 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 715; Hastings, *Nemesis*, pp. 350–51.

112 Ottowell, 'Chhe-Saat', p. 64.

113 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 715.

114 Hastings, *Nemesis*, p. 346.

Battalion of 5th Heavy Field Artillery Regiment (less Number 2 Battery), one platoon of the 3rd Heavy Field Artillery Regiment and a detachment of the 55th Transport Regiment. The 2nd INA Division west of Mount Popa was put under KANJO Force.<sup>115</sup>

The 48th Brigade, with a screen of armoured cars, moved to Kamyé. It was a town about nine miles west of Taingtha. The 1st Indian Field Regiment dispersed a Japanese party who tried to oppose the advance. The 63rd Brigade moved south to Seiktein and then advanced towards Weiaung. In the night of 23/24 February 1945, the 63rd Brigade was at Eywa, a village three miles south of Weiaung. The Japanese, with a few 75-mm guns, attempted to obstruct the advance of this brigade. The 129th Field Regiment provided continuous fire support when this brigade was on the move. A classic combination of infantry, artillery and armour was proving potent against the fanatical but disorganized Japanese opposition. Fire and movement became the cardinal principles of combat for the 17th Indian Division. By 24 February, the stage was set for an attack on Taungtha from both the western and southern directions. The 1st Indian Field Regiment and the 247th Medium Battery moved in the early morning on the west bank of the *chaung*. The Sindewa *Chaung* was 1,000 yards wide was dry and sandy. But the sappers worked all through the night of 23/24 February and made it fit for the passage of wheeled vehicles. At 0900 hours on 24 February, an air strike occurred. Then, the artillery started firing heavy explosive shells. The Japanese made an unsuccessful last stand on the north edge of Taungtha.<sup>116</sup>

On 23 February 1945, Lieutenant-General S. Tanaka, the Chief of Staff of the BAA, held a conference of divisional and staff officers at Meiktila to decide how to conduct the 'Irrawaddy Battle'. Lieutenant-General T. Numada, Chief of Staff Southern Army also attended. The conference decided that the principal offensive attack was to be launched by the 15th Japanese Army from Sagaing towards Myinmu. Simultaneously, a secondary attack should be launched from Myingyan to Myinmu. It was decided that these two attacks should be launched on 10 March with the 15th, 18th, 31st, 33rd, and 53rd Japanese Divisions plus the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 16th Japanese Infantry Regiment. However, the Japanese plans were overthrown by rapidly changing events. While this conference was being held at Meiktila, the Japanese commanders came to know that a strong mechanized column from Nyaungu had moved east and reached the airfield west of Meiktila on 26 February. The planned Japanese offensive was

<sup>115</sup> 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, pp. 711–13, 716.

<sup>116</sup> 17th Indian Division Operation, Irrawaddy-Rangoon, Feb.–May 1945, p. 7.

cancelled.<sup>117</sup> One could argue that Slim's 4th Corps had got inside the Japanese military leadership's decision-making cycle.

On 26 February, the Commonwealth tanks and the 17th Indian Division's infantry went through Mahlaing, supported by the fire from 1st and 2nd batteries of the 1st Indian Field Regiment. One battery of the 129th Field Regiment attacked the airfield with self-propelled guns (SPGs), tanks and infantry. The Japanese infantry had no counter to the Commonwealth tanks. On 27 February, the tanks were replenished with POL from an airdrop. Around midday, the fly in of the 99th Brigade started. The armoured cars of the 63rd Brigade, while probing forward, bumped into a Japanese roadblock at Mile 8.5. The position was dug and wired up to 150 yards on either side of the road and the bridge was blown. Mines were planted in the *chaung* and the minefields were covered with LMGs and MMGs supported by 75-mm guns and snipers. The 63rd Brigade and the 5th Horse, with artillery support from the 129th Field Regiment, attacked the Japanese roadblock twice. A forward artillery officer accompanied the attacking parties. During the first attack, the Commonwealth troops established a roadblock behind the Japanese rear. It was a sophisticated tactic indeed and the hunters were being fenced in for being hunted gradually. The second attack on the Japanese roadblock was conducted by an infantry battalion. About 90 Japanese died in these two attacks and two of their 75-mm guns were captured. During the night, the 63rd Brigade took position five miles from Meiktila and sent 'commando patrols' in order to get information about the Japanese positions inside the town. The patrols reported that the Japanese were burning their dumps.<sup>118</sup> The unpublished 17th Indian Division's divisional history notes: '... viewed from a distance north of the town... large fires with black columns of smoke pillared skywards'.<sup>119</sup>

The Japanese defence was crumbling, but at times and in certain places they were still desperate. For instance at Oyin village, the Japanese snipers tied themselves to the branches of the trees. As a result, they went on firing even when they were wounded. The Shermans used canister rounds to blow away both the snipers and the trees.<sup>120</sup> Between 28 February and 1 March 1945, the 48th Brigade attacked Meiktila from the north and the 63rd Brigade from the south of the town. Intense combat broke out with the fanatical Japanese troops.<sup>121</sup> The divisional history of the 17th Indian Division records: 'The Jap

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117 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 717.

118 17th Indian Division Operation, Irrawaddy-Rangoon, Feb.–May 1945, p. 8.

119 Ibid., p. 8.

120 Ottowell, 'Chhe-Saat', p. 68.

121 17th Indian Division Operation, Irrawaddy-Rangoon, Feb.–May 1945, p. 9.



fought fanatically, dying where he fought without evacuating any of his positions. Many were buried in bunkers destroyed by tanks, air and artillery; gun crews died in the act of firing their guns'.<sup>122</sup> The Japanese commander in the Meiktila region was Major-General Kasuya. He had at his disposal 12,000 troops, 1,500 base troops and hospital patients inside the city. Even patients who were regarded fit to carry a rifle were pressed into battle.<sup>123</sup> As a point of comparison, the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen* ss had about 45,000 regular soldiers and 40,000 *volkssturm* inside Berlin.<sup>124</sup> The 63rd Brigade threatened Meiktila from the west and the 48th Brigade moved to the north-east of the town. And the 255th Tank Brigade with two infantry battalions and a self propelled 25-pounder battery moved to the east of Meiktila.<sup>125</sup> The Battle of Meiktila lasted from 28 February to 5 March 1945. On 3 March, the Japanese military leadership in Burma accepted that they had lost Meiktila. On 5 March as Meiktila was cleared, the 6th Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment was ordered to defend Point 799 and part of the administrative box.<sup>126</sup> On 8 March, the Chinese troops occupied Lashio and the Japanese retreated to the Shan States.<sup>127</sup>

As early as 26 February 1945, the 28th Japanese Army's commander ordered the 54th Japanese Division to move the KOBIA Detachment east of the Arakan Mountains. This detachment, comprising the 1st and 2nd battalions of the 154th Japanese Infantry Regiment and 1st Battalion of the 54th Field Artillery Regiment, left Kolan for Minbu where it came under KANETSU Command. On 10 March, Yamamoto organized the KANETSU Group into three columns. The 188th Japanese Infantry Battalion, which formed the Right Column, was ordered to move from Gwegyo through Tetma to Nyaungu. The 542nd Japanese Infantry Battalion, which formed the Central Column, was to move from Chauk to Nyaungu. And the Left Column, which had the KATSU Force (2nd and 3rd battalions of the 153rd Japanese Infantry Regiment) was to advance along the west bank of the Irrawaddy through Myitche to Pakokku. Operation KAN 2 was in the offing. The 543rd Japanese Infantry Battalion was ordered to hold the Chauk-Seikpyu area and the KANJO Force (1st and 2nd battalions of the 112th

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Lyman, *The Generals*, p. 328.

<sup>124</sup> Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941–45* (2005, reprint, London: Hodder, 2007), p. 392.

<sup>125</sup> Lyman, *The Generals*, pp. 328–29.

<sup>126</sup> Ottowell, 'Chhe-Saat', pp. 69–74; 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 717.

<sup>127</sup> Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', p. 1969.

Japanese Regiment) to remain in the Mount Popa area. The left flank was to be protected by the 187th Japanese Infantry Battalion at Kawton, 18 miles west of Seikpyu. On 12 March, the Japanese lost Maymyo. On 17 March, the three columns reached the line Milaungbya-Letse. Then, at Milaungbya, the 542nd Japanese Infantry Battalion was annihilated by combined attacks of Commonwealth infantry supported by tanks and aircraft. The above-mentioned Japanese battalion had only 10 survivors. The KOBA Force (1st and 2nd battalions of the 154th Japanese Infantry Regiment) arrived in Kolan from Minbu on 11 March and was then ordered by Yamamoto to Letse to help the Left Column. The KOBA Force was also ordered to destroy the Commonwealth bridgehead at Pagan. On 18 March, the KOBA Force surprised the Commonwealth units. On the night of 19/20 March, the KOBA Force launched an attack on the Commonwealth administrative box near Letse. However, Commonwealth air, artillery and tank firepower defeated the Japanese counter-attack. The Japanese attack against Nyaungu had failed.<sup>128</sup> Thus, it is seen that at this stage, the British and Indian troops followed a mix of offensive-defensive tactical formats within the overall plan of launching an offensive against the Japanese at the operational level. While the bases of the Commonwealth armies were protected by adopting the box formation against desperate Japanese infantry attacks, Commonwealth pursuit columns consisting of infantry, tanks and mobile artillery conducted deep penetration and infiltrated behind the enemy rear guards.

In the Prome and Tharrawaddy districts, the Japanese feared a hostile airborne landing. Hence, a special force known as SHIN-I was formed from the 55th Japanese Division in late January 1945. This force comprised the 55th Reconnaissance Regiment (less one company), 1st Battalion of the 143rd Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion of the 55th Mountain Artillery (less one battery), one platoon of the 3rd Heavy Field Artillery Regiment, one platoon of the 55th Engineer Regiment and a detachment of the 55th Transport Regiment. Colonel Sugiyama, CO of the 55th Reconnaissance Regiment, was appointed force commander and in early March 1945 took over the defence of Allanmyo from the KANETSU Force. On 14 March, the Advance Headquarters of the 28th Japanese Army moved from Taikkyi to Allanmyo.<sup>129</sup>

On the 15th Japanese Army's front, the Commonwealth breakthrough at Nyaungu and the capture of Meiktila was a serious blow to the Japanese defence. There was a danger that the whole 15th Japanese Army might collapse after 3 March 1945. The 33rd Japanese Army in north-east Burma, having lost

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128 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, pp. 718–20.

129 Ibid., pp. 713, 718.

two divisions due to reshuffling, was having great problems in holding on to its defensive zone with only the 56th Japanese Division. On 14 March, the desperate Kimura ordered another reshuffle of his weak and inadequate forces. The 33rd Japanese Army Commander was ordered to take command of the 18th, 49th and 53rd Divisions, the SAKURA Detachment (214th Japanese Infantry Regiment) and most of the available artillery, and recapture Meiktila. The 15th Japanese Army commander, with the 15th, 31st and 33rd Japanese Divisions, was to conduct a holding operation in coordination with the projected 33rd Japanese Army counter-offensive. The 56th Japanese Division was ordered to protect the Japanese right flank on the Shan Plateau. However, the 33rd Japanese Army's counter-offensive failed.<sup>130</sup> This was partly because of the air transportation of Commonwealth troops. On 17 March, at Slim's order, the 5th Indian Division was air transported to Meiktila.<sup>131</sup> As in Imphal, air power again allowed Slim to concentrate superior forces at decisive points at a rate with which the Japanese just could not compete.

By 21 March, due to the deteriorating situation at Meiktila, the 28th Japanese Army commander ordered Yamamoto to counter-attack the Commonwealth troops flooding into Meiktila. Yamamoto decided to use the KANJO Force (the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 112th Japanese Infantry Regiment) to attack Pyinbin and the KOBAYASHI Detachment (1st and 2nd Battalions of the 154th Japanese Infantry Regiment) to attack Seiktein. Major-General Cowan, GOC of the 17th Indian Division set up six 'boxes' ('harbours') around Meiktila town. From these harbours, mobile strike formations (combined infantry-tank columns) were launched to seek out and destroy the Japanese parties gearing up to counter-attack Meiktila. When a strike column was launched, each harbour was protected by a company-sized unit supported by mortars and MMGs.<sup>132</sup> By 29 March 1945, the Japanese counter-attack against Meiktila was thrown back with heavy casualties to the attackers.<sup>133</sup>

Meanwhile, defeat stared the Japanese in the face north of Meiktila. Mandalay was a city with 400,000 inhabitants, spread over more than four miles. Most of the population had fled by this time. The two strong points in Mandalay were Mandalay Hill and Fort Dufferin. Fort Dufferin covered an area of about 2,000 square yards. Its massive 30-foot-wide and 20-foot-high walls

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 720.

<sup>131</sup> Lyman, *The Generals*, pp. 329–30.

<sup>132</sup> Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, p. 193.

<sup>133</sup> Lyman, *The Generals*, p. 330.

were surrounded by a 75-yards-wide moat.<sup>134</sup> Mandalay Hill was 760 feet high.<sup>135</sup> On 11 March, the Commonwealth troops engaged in combat with the Japanese in the houses and the pagodas of Mandalay. The 19th Indian Division captured Mandalay in the night of 19/20 March 1945.<sup>136</sup> Superior field artillery (especially 25 pounders and 105-mm guns), plus CAS by the fighter-bombers, destroyed the 6,000-strong Japanese garrison of Mandalay which was ferociously engaged in close-quarter combat.<sup>137</sup> Myingyan was captured by the Commonwealth forces on 22 March and Kyaukse on 31 March.<sup>138</sup> Between February and March 1945, at Meiktila, the Commonwealth forces suffered 8,099 casualties (including 835 KIA). The Commonwealth casualty figure for Mandalay was 10,096 (including 1,472 KIA).<sup>139</sup> In taking the city of Berlin, Zhukov's 1st Belorussian Army Group (908,000 men) and Konev's 2nd Belorussian Army Group (551,000 men) suffered some 38,000 and 28,000 casualties respectively.<sup>140</sup>

After the loss of Mandalay and Meiktila, the Japanese defensive line along the River Irrawaddy crumbled and the road to Rangoon was now wide open. Once Meiktila fell, Slim ordered his two corps southwards towards Rangoon. The 33rd Corps on the right was to advance along the Irrawaddy Valley through Prome and Henzada, and the 4th Corps (2nd British Division and the 20th Division) on the left by the railway route to Sittang Valley through Toungoo and Pegu.<sup>141</sup>

The KANJO Force attacked in the Pyinbin area from 28 March to 4 April. The KOBA Detachment crossed the Irrawaddy near Chauk on 23 March and concentrated near Kyaukpadaung on 25 March. It then advanced on 4 April and encountered a Commonwealth brigade accompanied by 40 tanks which was approaching Legyi from the direction of Welaung on the Kyaukpadaung-Seiktein Road north of Mount Popa. The Japanese detachment lacked anti-tank

134 Ibid., p. 331; Colonel L.J.L. Hill, "The Forgotten Army" and the Capture of Mandalay 8–20 March 1945, in Richard Cobbold (ed.), *The World Reshaped*, vol. 2, *Fifty Years after the War in Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 18.

135 Miller, *Uncle Bill*, p. 348.

136 Dunlop, 'The Re-capture of Rangoon, 1945: The Last and Greatest Victory of the British Indian Army', in Jeffreys and Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47*, p. 142; Hastings, *Nemesis*, p. 354.

137 Hill, "The Forgotten Army" and the Capture of Mandalay 8–20 March 1945, in Cobbold (ed.), *The World Reshaped*, vol. 2, p. 22.

138 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 720.

139 Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War* (1984, reprint, London: Phoenix Press, 2002), p. 638.

140 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, pp. 390, 393.

141 Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*, p. 374.

guns and fell back. Near Legyi, the 1st Battalion of the 154th Japanese Infantry Regiment found itself surrounded, partly because the INA battalion on its right surrendered. On 9 April, the KOBA Detachment was withdrawn from the Mount Popa area and sent across the Irrawaddy to relieve the 187th Japanese Infantry Battalion in the Sidoktaya-Salin-Thaywa area.<sup>142</sup>

The KANJO Force was ordered to defend Mount Popa and the KATSU Force Chauk. Mount Popa, being 5,000 feet high, offered a good target for the Commonwealth air force, which dominated the sky over Burma. And the defending Japanese units lacked air cover and AA guns. Kyaukpadaung due east of Chauk, being at the centre of a network of roads north to Seiktein, east to Meiktila and south to Yenangyaung, was vital for the Japanese defence. Kyaukpadaung was also the terminus of a branch railway line from Pyinmana on the main Rangoon line. This town fell to the Commonwealth units on 13 April. The KANETSU Group (187th, 188th, 542nd and 543rd Japanese battalions) was ordered to defend the Yenangyaung-Gwegyo area. All the Japanese units were below strength and the troops were in dire need of rest and recuperation due to continuous fighting and moving for several weeks. On 14 April, the Japanese lost Gwegyo and on 18 April Chauk and Seikpyu.<sup>143</sup> On 18 April, the 33rd Corps occupied Magwe.<sup>144</sup>

In early March 1945, the BAA commander ordered the main body of the 55th Japanese Division to move to Pyinmana and then to Toungoo to prepare defensive works on the Toungoo-Rangoon Road at the order of the 33rd Japanese Army. The advance party, comprising the 3rd Battalion of the 144th Japanese Infantry Regiment with some engineers and anti-tank personnel, moved by MT to Toungoo in the third week of March. The remaining units were divided into three columns: Right, Centre and Left. The Right Column (1st and 2nd battalions of the 144th Japanese Infantry Regiment) moved by water transport from Bassein through Rangoon to Dabein. The Centre Column was divided into two echelons. The main units of the 1st Echelon of the Centre Column comprised the 3rd Battalion of the 112th Japanese Infantry Regiment and 2nd Battalion of the 55th Japanese Mountain Artillery Regiment and one AA gun company. Both the echelons moved by rail and road through Letpadan-Taikkyi-Paunggyi to Pegu. The Left Column moved by rail and road through Letpadan and Paungde to Toungoo.<sup>145</sup>

<sup>142</sup> 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, p. 722.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 723.

<sup>144</sup> Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', p. 1969.

<sup>145</sup> 28th Army Operations, KAN 2 & 3: Dec. 1944–April 1945, pp. 720–21.

Toungoo airfield fell on 22 April 1945. On 29 April, the 17th Indian Division attacked Pegu. By 1 May, the Japanese were cleared from Pegu and the British and Indian troops started bridging the Pegu River. On 2 May, the monsoon broke and all large-scale land campaigns in Burma for the year 1945 ceased.<sup>146</sup> Captain William Pennington, an RA Officer of the 2nd British Division, noted in his memoirs: 'We had raced south from Meiktila, although running low on supplies and being serviced by airdrops; so strong was our desire to be there for the final battle that we sacrificed food for ammunition'.<sup>147</sup> However, Rangoon fell not to the 4th Corps but to the 15th Corps when a Gurkha battalion was parachuted to Elephant Point on 2 May 1945. The next day, the 26th Indian Division, as part of the amphibious operation named DRACULA, took the city.<sup>148</sup> Rangoon city was occupied by the Commonwealth forces on 3 May 1945.<sup>149</sup> Fighting around Rangoon stopped on 5 May.<sup>150</sup> On 6 May, the 1st Battalion of the 7th GR of the 48th Indian Infantry Brigade joined forces with the 1st Lincolns (which had landed as part of Operation DRACULA) some 27 miles north of Rangoon.<sup>151</sup> One can say that Rangoon fell not with a bang but a whimper.

### Assessment

One British RA officer noted in his autobiography that some Gurkhas executed the wounded Japanese soldiers. They were repaying the previous inhuman treatment of the Japanese towards the Commonwealth forces. The Japanese medical facilities were almost non-existent and whatever was present was destroyed by bombings and the ravages of war. The Japanese wounded were left to die as the Commonwealth medical infrastructure was busy treating their own wounded soldiers.<sup>152</sup> Most of the Japanese soldiers suffered from acute beriberi due to the lack of Vitamin B in their diets.<sup>153</sup> In some cases, the Japanese soldiers subsisted on monkey and dog meat.<sup>154</sup> By March 1945, the

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146 Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them*, p. 375.

147 Pennington, *Pick up your Parrots and Monkeys and Fall in Facing the Boat*, p. 365.

148 Ibid., pp. 365–66.

149 Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', p. 1965.

150 Pennington, *Pick up your Parrots and Monkeys and Fall in Facing the Boat*, p. 366.

151 Miller, *Uncle Bill*, p. 355.

152 Pennington, *Pick up your Parrots and Monkeys and Fall in Facing the Boat*, pp. 360, 366.

153 Miller, *Uncle Bill*, p. 318.

154 Hastings, *Nemesis*, p. 348.

Japanese soldiers were all mixed up and became stragglers. They were without food, artillery, fuel and supplies and were cut down in large numbers in the Henzada area and in their attempt to cross the Sittang River.<sup>155</sup> In the summer of 1945, Sakurai's 28th Japanese Army in the Pegu Yomas numbered 30,872 men. During the breakout, the Japanese suffered about 50 per cent losses.<sup>156</sup>

The population of Burma in 1945 was 17 million. Of them, some 66 per cent were Burmese. About 100,000 were Indians and 150,000 Chinese. The Japanese raised the BIA like the INA in late 1942. The BIA included Bamar tribes who were the principal volunteers. The Kachins and the Chins who formed a disproportionate share of the Burmese units under British rule did not join the BIA. The leadership was provided by the *thakins*, who were trained in Japan. Ba Maw (aged 48) was given nominal power to administer Burma under Japanese supervision. On 1 August 1943, the Japanese granted Burma nominal independence with Ba Maw as head of state.<sup>157</sup> In mid-1945, some 1,508 PBF (the new name of the BIA) personnel with 561 firearms surrendered to the SEAC military administration.<sup>158</sup> Like the INA, the BIA had no military value for the Japanese but had huge political implications for post-World War II Asia.

The Indian Army deserves praise for adapting to fight in changing conditions, from the thick jungles and steep hills of north Burma to the flat paddy fields of central Burma, during the first half of 1945. The Indian Army's battalions, writes Marston, implemented new tactics like the formation of 'boxes', aggressive reconnaissance, launching fighting patrols, infiltration attacks and the establishment of roadblocks. Both battalion- and company-sized 'box' formations were set up and from these 'boxes' attack parties were launched to break up Japanese counter-attacks. When Japanese defensive positions were heavily manned, the Indian battalions attempted to infiltrate with heavy supporting weapons, and at times with tanks.<sup>159</sup> This effective tactical format, which became standard, is described in the unpublished history of the 17th Indian Division in the following words: 'Artillery and tanks would blitz a village offering opposition, in would go tanks and infantry destroying a dazed enemy and then on to the next one, the field battery stepping up or leapfrogging as occasion demanded'.<sup>160</sup> Successful forays against the enemy were character-

155 Pennington, *Pick up your Parrots and Monkeys and Fall in Facing the Boat*, p. 361.

156 Allen, *Burma*, p. 640.

157 Pennington, *Pick up your Parrots and Monkeys and Fall in Facing the Boat*, p. 357; Major Waterfield, Note on Burma, p. 72, L/WS/1/1511.

158 From Secy. of State for Burma to Governor of Burma, Rangoon, 24 Oct. 1945, Telegram, B 3481/45, p. 73, L/WS/1/1511.

159 Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, pp. 181, 184, 190, 195.

160 17th Indian Division Operation, Irrawaddy-Rangoon, Feb.–May 1945, p. 7.



ized by the support given by the SPGs to the armoured brigades which in turn provided back-up fire to the assaulting infantry. Communications through wireless and line worked well and W/T drill improved. Protection of the gun boxes against Japanese gun-busting parties required close cooperation with the artillery. The 5.5-inch guns and the 7.2-inch howitzers proved of immense value in disrupting Japanese infantry attacks. Some batteries during the siege of Meiktila also got good results by using the technique of flash spotters. Finally, the Air Observation Officers were invaluable in providing timely fire-power strike.<sup>161</sup>

Further, the Commonwealth units had aircraft which provided data about the Japanese troop movements, while the IJA due to lack of air cover was fighting blindly. Additionally, Slim's force had at its disposal aerial artillery which provided heavy and accurate firepower in 'real' time. The Japanese were completely outclassed, outmanoeuvred and outgunned in the air. In May 1945, they had only 250 aircraft in South-East Asia and of them some 100 were stationed in Malay and Sumatra. But they were irrelevant for shaping the dynamics of battle which unfolded in Burma because of their small numbers and due to the vast distance that separated them from the battlefield. In actuality, to avoid destruction, these few remaining Japanese aircraft were withdrawn from Burma. Between 1 June 1944 and 2 May 1945 in Burma, about 165 Japanese aircraft were destroyed on the ground and in the air with another 47 probable, and 152 aircraft were damaged in aerial combat. Air Chief Marshal Keith Park, who assumed command of the Allied Air Forces in South-East Asia on 23 February 1945, claimed that besides being in a numerically disadvantageous position, the Japanese aircraft followed a faulty tactical policy. Instead of frittering away their effort in infrequent low-level attacks against forward Commonwealth troops, the Japanese fighters should have concentrated against the Allied supply aircraft like the Dakotas and the Commandos. The rapidly advancing Commonwealth troops were heavily dependent on the cargo carriers. In May 1945, there were nine British and 16 American transport squadrons involved. Fighter escorts were not always available to these supply aircraft and the latter would have proved easy meat to the Japanese fighters.<sup>162</sup> Thanks to Commonwealth supremacy in air power, the tide turned against the IJA.

Nevertheless, serious cracks were appearing in the morale of especially the British elements within the Commonwealth forces. One could argue that war weariness had finally spread among the British soldiers stationed in Burma

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161 Ibid., p. 4.

162 Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', pp. 1969–71.

and India during late 1944 and early 1945. The British soldiers were growing impatient and wanted to go home at all cost. In contrast, the sepoys (who were volunteers, unlike the British conscripts) were happy to exchange an uncertain future in civilian life for 'lucrative' military service.<sup>163</sup> It is to be noted that military service in the Indian Army had always been long-term.

The recruits sent by the ALFSEA were deficient in weapons training.<sup>164</sup> The SEAC expressed anxiety about the level of training among the British combatant soldiers. The British infantry's fieldcraft skills were considered below standard. Besides handling small arms, the British infantry considered all other forms of training unnecessary. In the parade grounds, some British soldiers were skilled marksmen. But, in the FEBA, their use of fire on the targets was less than satisfactory. Their training in grenade throwing was considered elementary. Further, the 'Tommies' also lacked knowledge about setting up heavy infantry support weapons. Among the Indian NCOS, map reading was unsatisfactory due to their low educational standard.<sup>165</sup> The United Kingdom was asked to furnish staff for one RAC Training regiment to train the crews of the tanks. About nine weeks of tactical training were required for the crews to be trained in the Churchills and Shermans. Trained British troops required specialist training before being deployed on the Burma Front. Moreover, experienced instructors who had seen service in Burma were hard to come by for the BSTE due to combat requirements in the field. At the BSTE, the British reinforcements went for a minimum of three weeks' training. The BSTE was capable of handling only 4,800 infantry recruits in every three weeks.<sup>166</sup> Not only declining standards but an acute shortage of British troops caused anxiety among the Commonwealth military authorities.

Comparisons with the Eastern Front battles will put things in perspective. According to one British journalist's estimate, some 305,000 Japanese soldiers fought in Burma in 1945.<sup>167</sup> Table 10.2 shows that the Commonwealth had more than double that number of troops in Burma. In August 1944, when Operation BAGRATION and Operation OVERLORD were in full swing, 2.1 million German soldiers were on the Eastern Front and one million in France.<sup>168</sup> Three Soviet

163 General Training Directive, GHQ India, New Delhi, Secret, No. 8810/48/MT 1(a), 28 Aug. 1945, L/WS/2/71.

164 Major-General Bateman to CGS, No. 6829/2/MT 3(a), 25 June 1945, L/WS/2/71.

165 SEAC, Reinforcements, No. 13317/GT, 13 June 1945, L/WS/2/71.

166 British Reinforcement Training in India, 12 March 1945; From Commander-in-Chief of India to War Office, 30 May 1945, Cipher Telegram, No. 046442; From Commander-in-Chief of India to the War Office, 2 June 1945, Cipher Telegram, No. 032305, L/WS/1/781.

167 Miller, *Uncle Bill*, p. 355.

168 Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, p. 283.

army groups participated in the Berlin Operation during mid-April-early May 1945. They included 2.5 million men, 6,250 tanks, 7,500 aircraft and 41,600 guns and mortars. The Soviet formations numbered 171 divisions and 21 mobile corps. The Soviets were opposed by the 9th German Army (14 divisions with 344 field guns, 400 AA guns and 512 tanks), 3rd *Panzer* Army (11 divisions and 242 tanks) and the 12th German Army (seven divisions) activated on 21 April 1945. Overall Soviet losses during the Berlin Operation, which lasted over three weeks, included 917 aircraft, 2,000 tanks and 2,108 guns and mortars plus 78,000 troops.<sup>169</sup> The crossing of the Irrawaddy and the Mandalay-Meiktila battles in 1945 resulted in 12,913 casualties among the Japanese and of them, some 6,513 died. During the breakout Battle of Sittaung, the IJA suffered another 16,919 casualties (including 1,401 POWs). From January to August 1945, the IJA in Burma suffered 106,144 casualties and the Commonwealth force during the same period suffered 71,244 casualties.<sup>170</sup> Between January and April 1945, during operations in East Prussia, the Red Army suffered 126,000 casualties. Between February and April 1945, the Soviets in East Pomerania suffered another 53,000 casualties. The Soviets fought numerous other campaigns on the Eastern Front between January and May, like Lake Balaton, Upper Silesia, Vienna and Prague, which caused more casualties in addition to those listed above.<sup>171</sup>

Mandalay-Meiktila will be compared with a Soviet campaign in Asia, i.e. the Soviet-Japanese War in Manchuria, in this section. By the summer of 1944, the Kwangtung Army in Manchuria had shifted from a strategic offensive to a strategic defensive. The best units were withdrawn in the Pacific theatre and some of the garrison divisions had been sent to China. On 9 August 1945, the Soviets attacked the Japanese at Manchuria. The roads were poor in this region. The distance from the northern tip of Manchuria to the Yellow Sea is almost the same as the distance from Normandy to Minsk. The 6th Guards Tank Army comprised 25 armoured and 44 motorized rifle battalions with 1,019 tanks and SPGs. In three days it covered 450 km. Its lead element was the 9th Guards Mechanized Corps whose LEND LEASE-supplied Sherman tanks broke down along the swampy passes of the Great Khingan Mountains. During the 9–20 August 1945 manoeuvre-oriented Manchurian Campaign, the Soviets suffered 12,031 KIA and 24,425 WIA.<sup>172</sup>

169 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, pp. 390, 392.

170 Allen, *Burma*, pp. 638, 643.

171 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 316.

172 Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, pp. 277–81.

TABLE 10.2 *Allied troops in Burma in August 1945*

Nationality and branch	Numbers
<i>Ground Troops</i>	
Indians	700,000
British	175,000
West Africans	77,000
East Africans	48,000
Americans	18,000
<i>Air Force</i>	
RAF	50,000
USAF	23,000
RIAF	10,000

Source: Telegram, From GOI War Department to Secy. of State for India, 19 Aug. 1945, Burma-Assam Operations, L/WS/1/1511, IOR, BL, London.

Conclusion

Towards the end of 1944, as the disorganized and defeated Japanese ground units, which were outgunned and outnumbered, attempted to defend the Irrawaddy River, they came up with mixed units named after individual commanders. The growing British manpower problem resulted in further ‘Indianization’ of the Burma theatre which was dominated by vast numbers of sepoys during the war. Despite some minor holdups, in contrast to the previous campaigns in the Arakan (1943–44) and Imphal-Kohima (1944), the campaign in 1945 can be characterized as a war of movement rather than a war of position. The traditional cliché is that defence is three times stronger than offence. At times this statement may be true but certainly not always! The Japanese, being on a strategic defensive, were not sure about which region of Burma would be attacked by the Commonwealth formations. As a result, they had to spread their ground forces throughout the country: along the coastline and all along the Irrawaddy. And the Japanese feared airborne landings and amphibious landings, as well as attacks by mechanized ground forces all along these regions. Hence, unlike the Commonwealth forces, the Japanese had spread their forces everywhere and as a result was strong nowhere. The Japanese dilemma was further exacerbated by the fact that their few reconnaissance aircraft could not fly due to the absence of fighter cover. During the

Commonwealth advance in central Burma, infantry-tank-artillery cooperation became a feature. In the post-Stalingrad era, the Supreme Headquarters of the Soviet Armed Forces (STAVKA) ordered the formation of new tank armies whose multiple corps were able to conduct joint operations to great depths against the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>173</sup> Unlike on the Russo-German Front, large bodies of infantry did not cooperate with hundreds of tanks. Rather, at the company level, small infantry units closely and efficiently cooperated with small numbers of tanks. These were the characteristics of the later phase of the Burma Campaign which differentiated it from the campaigns on the Eastern Front or France. Robert Lyman rightly states that the Japanese at this stage of the war had no effective counter to the 14th Army's use of armour and all arms tactics.<sup>174</sup> Besides this factor, air power also played an important role in accelerating the disintegration of the IJA. Air Chief Marshal Keith Park rightly emphasized: 'This achievement has been made possible by air power, which not merely took an intimate share in the ground attack, but also isolated the enemy's forces in the field'.<sup>175</sup> The tactical and operational mobility of the IJA was seriously hampered by the British and American air power. Continuous harassment of the IJA due to the CAS provided by the RAF increased the battle fatigue of the Japanese soldiers and also prevented them from consolidating any defensive positions. Conversely, air power provided firepower support and mobility to the Commonwealth ground forces.<sup>176</sup>

Was a Japanese defeat at the Battle of Irrawaddy inevitable? Probably not! There are potentially lots of 'ifs'. If Kimura could have held out a bit longer or if he had realized that one of the prime objectives of the 14th Army was Meiktila and not only Mandalay, or if Slim's deceptive measures of moving the 4th Corps towards Meiktila had been found out by Japanese intelligence, or if the US Chiefs of Staff had agreed to Chiang Kai-Shek's request and ordered the transfer of air units from Burma to China before 1 June 1945,<sup>177</sup> then the

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>174</sup> Lyman, *The Generals*, p. 329.

<sup>175</sup> Park, 'Air Operations in South East Asia from 1st June 1944 to the Occupation of Rangoon, 2nd May 1945', p. 1965.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 1966.

<sup>177</sup> On 23 February 1945, Chiang Kai-Shek demanded the redeployment of all the American and Chinese forces in the NCAC to China and that the American transport squadrons should fly them out. Such a development would not only have increased the supply problem of Slim's force but would have allowed Kimura to turn Honda's full force against Meiktila. However, due to requests by Mountbatten and the British Chiefs of Staff, the US Chiefs of Staff agreed to retain the air units till the capture of Rangoon or 1 June 1945, whichever was earlier. Lyman, *The Generals*, p. 328.

Commonwealth troops would not have been able to reach Rangoon before the onset of the monsoon. Stranded halfway throughout the length and breadth of central Burma and bereft of air supply and air support due to tropical showers, things would have been messy for Slim. Further, the British component of the 14th Army was showing signs of battle fatigue and the flow of manpower reinforcements from Britain was drying up. In the winter of 1945, the 14th Army would not have been in a position to conduct attritional warfare.

However, such a second degree of counterfactual scenarios would not have altered the course of World War II. The IJA was being defeated by the partly transformed Indian Army. Between February and April 1945, the Indian Army was able to unlearn the lessons of jungle warfare and quickly adapt to the dry plains of central Burma by adopting certain new tactical procedures. The Japanese air force and the IJN were defeated and almost destroyed at the Leyte Gulf. The grand finale came when an atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 and another on Nagasaki on 9 August. Meanwhile, on 8 August 1945, Soviet Russia declared war against Japan. Emperor Hirohito requested his subjects to bear the unbearable and the formal surrender declaration was announced on 15 August.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Pennington, *Pick up your Parrots and Monkeys and Fall in Facing the Boat*, pp. 364, 366.

# Conclusion

The combat/military effectiveness of an army can be described as the capability of that institution to sustain itself in the battlefield against hostile forces and to inflict casualties on the opponent by adapting to changing conditions and adopting certain techniques. Combat effectiveness depends on several factors, like recruitment, the combat motivation/loyalty mechanism (an amalgam of morale and discipline), tactical procedures, the training system, the hardware at the disposal of the military machine, the logistical infrastructure, etc. Let us evaluate these elements in the Indian Army, especially for the period between 1941 and 1945.

First, let us analyze the combat contribution of the Indian Army. Winston Churchill and Orde Wingate both had a very low opinion of the Indian Army.<sup>1</sup> How far their assessments hold water needs to be evaluated. British India covered 1,630,000 square miles. As a point of comparison, the European part of the USSR extended over 2,110,000 square miles with another 6,460,000 square miles in Asia. In September 1939, Germany had a population of 80 million, the USSR 171 million, Italy 43 million<sup>2</sup> and Japan 100 million.<sup>3</sup> The Indian Army was not only the largest volunteer force but also the biggest colonial force. But its size pales in comparison with the armies raised by the first class powers during World War II. Malnourishment in the rural sector, political demands (the British could not dare to impose conscription in India for fear of adverse political repercussions) and imperial prejudice (the Martial Race theory) prevented massive expansion of the Indian Army. During World War II, India, from a population of roughly 350 million, raised a 2.5 million-strong armed forces whose total casualties came to about 179,935 (including 24,438 KIA, 64,354 WIA, 11,574 missing and 79,489 POWs).<sup>4</sup> So the expansion of the Indian Army during the era of Total War was not total. About 4,000 Indian soldiers were captured at

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1 Raymond Callahan, 'Did Winston Matter? Churchill and the Indian Army, 1940–45', in Alan Jeffreys and Patrick Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47: Experience and Development* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), p. 65.

2 Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941–45* (2005, reprint, London: Hodder Arnold, 2007), p. 45.

3 Geoffrey Evans, *Slim as Military Commander* (1969, reprint, Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1977), p. 153.

4 Pradeep Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernization in Later Colonial India* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1999), p. 137. Lieutenant-General S.L. Menezes writes that the strength of the Indian Army during World War II consisted of two million men and another half a million non-combatants. See his *Fidelity & Honour: The Indian Army from the Seventeenth to the Twenty-First Century* (New Delhi: Viking, 1993), p. 367.



Hong Kong. Another 32,000 Indian soldiers became POWs in Singapore. In addition, some 11,000 Indian troops became casualties during the Malaya-Singapore Campaign.<sup>5</sup> The total casualties suffered by the Indian Army in World War II were less than the casualties suffered by the Red Army and the *Wehrmacht* in a single decisive campaign. For instance, the Red Army's losses during Operation BARBAROSSA and the *Wehrmacht's* casualties during Operation BLAU exceeded the total number of casualties suffered by the Indian Army on all the fronts between 1939 and 1945. The Soviet military losses during World War II came to about 10 million (including 3 million POWs). British and American military losses were about 350,000 and 300,000 respectively.<sup>6</sup>

The Indian Army dominated the Burma theatre by its sheer numbers. The biggest service/branch of the Indian armed forces was the Indian Army. And the bulk of the Indian Army personnel were in the 14th Army, which at its height comprised some one million men, and of them about 700,000 were Indians. When the war ended there were some 13,000 IECOs and some of them had experienced command at brigade and battalion levels.<sup>7</sup> By 1945, there were 7,546 Indian officers in the combat arms. Including the medical services, the total number of Indian officers came to about 16,000.<sup>8</sup>

Between 1941 and 1943, around 75 per cent of the German land and air units were deployed on the Eastern Front. During 1942, only six German divisions were in North Africa.<sup>9</sup> In World War II, only four British infantry divisions fought in South-East Asia: the 18th surrendered at Singapore, the 70th was used as Special Force under Orde Wingate, the 2nd was at Kohima and, finally, the 36th was under the SEAC.<sup>10</sup> Some 303,501 Japanese soldiers served in Burma between 1941 and 1945 and of them, 118,352 returned to Japan after the war. About 185,149 Japanese died in Burma and 241,000 were killed by US bombing raids in Japan. Louis Allen estimates that British and Commonwealth casualties in Burma numbered 73,909. Of them, 38,803 casualties (or 52.6 per cent of

5 *India's Part in the Third Year of War* (New Delhi: GoI, n.d.), p. 1.

6 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, p. 404.

7 Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernization in Later Colonial India*, pp. 138, 149, 152.

8 Daniel P. Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport, Connecticut/London: Praeger, 2003), p. 227. According to another count, at the end of the Second World War, there were 32,750 British officers and some 14,000 Indian officers in the Indian Army. Menezes, *Fidelity & Honour*, p. 367.

9 David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 149.

10 Callahan, 'Did Winston Matter? Churchill and the Indian Army, 1940–45', in Jeffreys and Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47*, p. 63.

the casualties) were sepoys. Some 14,326 British and Commonwealth soldiers were killed in Burma and of them 6,599 Indians (46 per cent of the total) died.<sup>11</sup> Hence, in terms of expansion and casualties suffered by the Indian Army in the course of World War II, it can be concluded that in comparison to the armies of the first class powers (like the US Army, Red Army, IJA and the *Wehrmacht*), the former's experience was limited and not total.

In the new millennium, several scholars are arguing that 'Bill' Slim introduced manoeuvre warfare in Burma. They claim that during 1944–45, the 14th Army (the Indian units comprised 70 per cent of this army) conducted manoeuvre warfare against the IJA. Manoeuvre warfare is the opposite of attritional warfare. The attritional approach is characterized by the application of superior firepower, concentration of force and little mobility once battle is joined. Manoeuvre warfare, characterized by a non-attritional approach, attempts to overcome the enemy through physical and mental manoeuvres. One of the characteristics of manoeuvre warfare is acting faster than the enemy can react. This results in the raising of the tempo of battle. Tempo is the rate or rhythm of activity relative to the enemy. High tempo is achieved by crafting a fast decision-action cycle known as the OODA loop: observe, orient, decide and act, faster than the enemy in order to get inside his decision-making cycle. This in turn requires decentralized command, which makes high tempo possible. A decentralized command system takes advantage of the fluid and chaotic battlefield. In contrast, a force waging attritional warfare has a centrally controlled highly structured hierarchical command system.<sup>12</sup> J.J.A. Wallace writes that manoeuvre warfare theory is similar to Captain Basil Liddell-Hart's indirect approach. However, not merely geographical indirectness but also psychological indirectness is required to upset the enemy's balance. A combination of speed and surprise results in the disintegration of the cohesion of the enemy.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Lyman goes on to argue that Slim was influenced by Liddell-Hart's indirect approach and Slim's handling of operations foreshadowed the birth of manoeuvre warfare. For Slim, it was not the physical destruction of the enemy forces but the breaking of his will to fight which was the principal objective. Further, Slim pushed for a combined air-land-sea power operational format to

11 Louis Allen, *Burma: The Longest War, 1941–45* (1984, reprint, London: Phoenix Press, 2002), pp. 640, 642.

12 John Kiszely, 'The British Army and Approaches to Warfare since 1945', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996), pp. 179–81.

13 J.J.A. Wallace, 'Manoeuvre Theory in Operations Other than War', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996), pp. 208–9.

overwhelm the enemy. So, for Lyman, these principles are the characteristics of modern warfare. It would be ahistorical to agree with Lyman and Russell Miller that Slim introduced modern warfare, especially the doctrine of manoeuvre warfare in Burma between 1943 and 1945.<sup>14</sup> What the principles of modern warfare are and when they were first introduced is still a matter of lively debate among historians and political scientists. While some historians claim that the Western Front during World War I experienced the emergence of modern warfare, others have traced the genesis of modern warfare back to the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>15</sup>

Except during the dash to Rangoon in April 1945, war in Burma remained an infantry-oriented combat. Of course, from late 1943, fighters, fighter-bombers, and long-range heavy bombers made their debut in Burma. Nevertheless, they remained auxiliaries to the men carrying rifles, semi-automatics, automatics and mortars. Field artillery and tanks were used in penny packets to support sections, platoons and companies attempting to negotiate difficult terrain infested with hostile infantry. The Commonwealth infantry and IJA engaged in close-quarter combat from their trenches and bunkers. In many ways, the war in Burma was an attritional infantry combat supported by some paraphernalia (tools of war) used for conducting manoeuvre warfare in the Western Desert, West Europe and the *Ostfront*. Hence, the war in Burma was not a new sort of war, i.e. manoeuvre war conducted by a completely transformed Indian Army but rather in many ways was a continuation of Small War and the slogging infantry-oriented confrontations of World War I fought by a partially modified Indian Army.

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14 Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (2004, reprint, London: Robinson, 2005). See especially pp. 2, 254. Russell Miller, *Uncle Bill: The Authorized Biography of Field Marshal Viscount Slim* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2013), p. 356.

15 Stephen Biddle in *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004) asserts that modern war emerged on the Western Front during 1917. In contrast, Major-General J.F.C. Fuller in his *The Conduct of War 1789–1961* (1961, reprint, London: Methuen & Co., 1979) and David A. Bell in *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007) claim that the seeds of modern war could be traced back to the French Revolution. Industrial Revolution and mass nationalism transformed modern war into Total War by early twentieth century. Several edited volumes by Roger Chickering, Stig Forster and others published from Cambridge deal with this transformation and the utility of the heuristic device of Total War. See especially Roger Chickering, Stig Forster, and Bernd Greiner (eds.), *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937–1945* (Cambridge: German Historical Institute Washington DC and Cambridge University Press, 2005).

It is not worth writing history without making conjectures. The Japanese did not realize how close they had come to total victory in mid-1942. Accepting that the Japanese forces were operating at the end of their long LoCs, the logistical conditions of the British-Indian forces were still worse. The military supply scenario in Assam was horrendous. The Chinese were withdrawing in north Burma and were in no position to stage an offensive. While the Japanese were flushed with victory and had high morale, the British and Indian soldiers were under-equipped and under-trained. Worse, continuous defeats in Malaya and Burma had sapped their morale. To add to it, the Japanese ruled the skies of Burma. One more push and the rag-tag military force of Wavell could have disintegrated completely. Due to social and economic reasons, India was seething with anti-British sentiment. Soon, it burst forth as the Quit India Movement under the Indian National Congress. The GoI crushed the movement with the aid of 56 battalions drawn from the Indian Army. A Japanese military victory within India, with an IJN thrust along the undefended Indian Ocean and the nationalist movement occurring simultaneously, would have spelt doom for the *Raj*. It is difficult to be sure whether it would have been possible for the British and the Americans to stage a comeback in South-East Asia without the Indian base at their disposal. May 1942 was probably the Axis power's finest hour. It was one of the probable turning points of history when history refused to turn. At that crucial juncture, the IJA went on a strategic defensive in Burma and the IJN sailed towards Midway Island to meet its watery grave in the Central Pacific. The Japanese would gamble on an advance into India in early 1944 but it was almost two years too late.

During 1943 and 1944, Japanese tactics atrophied to an extent. There was no advancement beyond the outflanking movements, infiltrations and 'hooks' which the IJA had implemented in the jungles and creeks of Malaya and Burma during 1942. Massive success in 1942 and even in 1943 did not stimulate the IJA commanders to innovate at the tactical field. In contrast, from late 1943 onwards, the Indian and British troops experienced almost a 'renaissance' in the fields of tactics (construction of defensive boxes, aggressive patrolling, launching of pursuit columns comprising tanks, infantry and mobile guns, cooperation with the air arm for aerial supply and aerial transportation, etc.) and training (advanced basic training, specialized jungle training and combined arms training involving integration of infantry, tanks, artillery and air power). Faced with the aggressive tactical culture of the Indian Army, the IJA resorted to the construction of static defensive system based on cleverly camouflaged bunkers. However, the British and Indian infantry, equipped with flamethrowers, mortars, MGs and supported by tanks, artillery and fighter-bombers, were able to destroy the Japanese bunkers and pillboxes slowly but

steadily in the Arakan and in Imphal-Kohima. Besides providing firepower support, the aircraft acted as the 'aerial eyes' of the ground forces and provided rapid mobility through air transportation and sustenance in difficult terrain through aerial supply. Overall, from early 1944 onwards, the IJA faced a partly 'new' Commonwealth army in Burma, supported by material superiority especially in aircraft, tanks, field artillery and logistics.

Daniel Marston claims that the pace setter in tactical reforms in the Indian Army was GHQ India. Auchinleck (as Commander-in-Chief of India from late June 1943) supported the process of tactical reformation.<sup>16</sup> In May 1943, at Tunisia during the Battle of Medjerda, the British units refused to launch a night attack. According to Francis Tuka, CO of the 4th Indian Division, launching nocturnal attacks was a standard procedure of the Indian units.<sup>17</sup> The 4th Indian Division was probably the only division in the 8th Army with experience in mountain fighting.<sup>18</sup> By late 1944, the Indian elements in the 14th Army had gained mountain warfare experience as well as the confidence to blunt Japanese nocturnal attacks. Barua notes that in the Western Desert under Auchinleck, the Indian Army learnt an offensive-defensive infantry-artillery doctrine.<sup>19</sup> During the dash to Rangoon after the Battle of Meiktila in late March 1945, the Indian Army displayed infantry-artillery-tank combined arms doctrine. Tuka notes that in North Africa, 'Monty' practised a tight grip over his subordinate officers.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the Indian Army was comfortable with senior officers allowing the initiative to the junior and mid-level officers. In fact, in Burma, Slim practised a sort of *Auftragstaktik*. Giving some leeway to the junior officers was also part of the pre-1939 Indian Army's command culture. During combat in the North-West Frontier, decentralized command had to be practised in order to allow junior officers to command the dispersed columns and picquets. The decentralized mission-oriented command system was systematized from 1943 onwards in Burma. The decentralized command culture also aided with controlling the troops dispersed in the jungles of Burma with poor communications.

Both the Germans and the Russians emphasized hate propaganda to motivate their soldiers and mobilize the civilians. German propaganda spoke of the

16 Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, pp. 217, 219.

17 Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernization in Later Colonial India*, p. 143.

18 Chris Mann, 'The Battle of Wadi Akarit, 6 April 1943: 4th Indian Division and its Place in 8th Army', in Jeffreys and Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47*, p. 92.

19 Barua, *The Army Officer Corps and Military Modernization in Later Colonial India*, p. 148.

20 Mann, 'The Battle of Wadi Akarit, 6 April 1943: 4th Indian Division and its Place in 8th Army', in Jeffreys and Rose (eds.), *The Indian Army, 1939–47*, pp. 106–8.

barbaric Bolshevik threat to Germany in particular and to Europe in general. Soviet propaganda focused on the barbaric German policy towards the Slavs. Fear of Bolshevism, writes Evan Mawdsley, kept the Germans fighting stiffly in the Eastern Front from 1944 onwards. If Omer Bartov is to be believed, heavy combat casualties in the Eastern Front resulted in the shattering of primary groups within the German military units. A high dose of political propaganda kept the German soldiers going in the harsh battlefield conditions of Russia.<sup>21</sup> On 28 July 1942, the STAVKA issued the order: '*Ni Shagu Nazad*' (Not a step back) just when Operation BLAU was unfolding.

The IJA did not require such stiffening orders. It was always like that from the very beginning of World War II.<sup>22</sup> Face slapping was the daily disciplining routine in the IJA. The IJA's officers shared every hardship with their men. During the evening, officers and men met together and discussed news from home. Many IJA regiments, like the Indian Army regiments, recruited men from the same districts. The IJA was good as regards vaccination and there was little small pox. And all the Japanese soldiers carried quinine. However, the surgery practice was crude. During the later part of the war, the IJA's medical infrastructure collapsed, however, its personnel continued fighting. Percival noted that the basic foundation of the Japanese soldiers' courage was their high sense of patriotism.<sup>23</sup> A.J. Barker emphasizes the *Bushido* spirit of the Japanese soldiers. The basis of *Bushido* was the *Samurai* code of conduct which emphasized do or die and death before dishonour. The code of military conduct did not accept surrender, which was considered ignominious. The only honourable option open to the Japanese soldier during defeat was to fight to the death or to die while launching a suicidal charge. Desertion gave a bad name to the soldiers' families. The greatest honour for a Japanese soldier was to die for his Emperor.<sup>24</sup> Edward J. Drea, on the other hand, rather than focusing on *Bushido*, asserts that the IJA utilized the traditional family values of Japanese society. The IJA became the extension of the pre-war Japanese family with all the trappings of respect for hierarchy and group identification. Japanese officers and NCOs served as surrogate parents. The company commander became a strict father, the NCO a loving mother and the lieutenant a

21 Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, pp. 399, 406; Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941–45, German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare* (1985, reprint, Hampshire/New York: Palgrave, 2001).

22 Glantz and House, *When Titans Clashed*, p. 121.

23 Allen, *Burma*, pp. 599–611.

24 A.J. Barker, *The March on Delhi* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 71–72.



relative. The second year's conscripts became an elder brother to the 'rookie' recruit.<sup>25</sup> Now, what about the sepoys' 'will to combat'?

Anirudh Deshpande emphasizes the shifts in the loyalty mechanism among the sepoys. He writes that while the sepoys drawn from the martial classes until 1942 fought due to their innate soldiering/warrior ethos, the sepoys drawn from the non-martial classes after 1942 were pure and simple mercenaries. The latter group fought for material benefits. Deshpande asserts that the non-martial communities were politically more conscious and they lacked the soldiering ethos of the traditional martial communities. Such a distinction is simplistic. Men do not fight and die for money alone. Deshpande's assertion that the sense of loyalty of the *jawans* was transformed during World War II due to the inclusion of the non-martial classes is a bit overstated. Further, his claim that the Indian Army suffered from a high rate of desertion from 1942 onwards<sup>26</sup> is also unsubstantiated. There were some desertions from the recruit camps, but the rate of desertion among the Indian units in the frontline remained very low. Of course, there were some stresses and strains when certain war-time economic measures of the *Raj* generated grievances among the cultivators of the Punjab and the Sikh soldiery. However, there was no large-scale mutiny and no links between the grievances of the civil society and the sepoys at least till August 1945.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the expansion of the welfare net for the sepoys and their families from 1943 onwards enabled the British high command not only to retain but to strengthen the loyalty bonds between the sepoys and their officers.

Marston asserts that the political loyalty of the Indian Army during World War II was never threatened. However, this does not mean that individual soldiers and officers lacked political opinions or sympathies with the nationalist movement.<sup>28</sup> Marston is partly right here. Recruits from the 'non-martial' communities joined the army in order to acquire social mobility. But this logic also

25 Edward J. Drea, "Trained in the Hardest School", in Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (1998, reprint, Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), pp. 75–90.

26 Anirudh Deshpande, *British Military Policy in India, 1900–1945: Colonial Constraints and Declining Power* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005), pp. 150–54.

27 Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849–1947* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), pp. 281–309; Kaushik Roy, 'Military Loyalty in the Colonial Context: A Case Study of the Indian Army during World War II', *Journal of Military History*, vol. 73, no. 2 (2009), pp. 497–529; Kaushik Roy, 'Discipline and Morale of the African, British and Indian Army Units in Burma and India during World War II: July 1943 to August 1945', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 6 (2010), pp. 1255–82.

28 Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes*, p. 235.



applies for the recruits from the so-called martial communities. Bill Slim considered that quick surrender rather than combat was the only contribution of the INA.<sup>29</sup> Slim had no understanding of politics in South Asia. When the soldiers were demobilized in 1946 without adequate economic incentives, they turned against the *Raj* and the INA provided a symbolic focus for an alternative loyalty for the Indian soldiery.

Overall, during both World Wars, the combat motivation of the sepoys remained more or less same in the Indian Army. Hence, we can argue that the Indian Army was partially and not totally transformed during the latter half of World War II. Regardless of shifts in the recruitment, the combat branches of the Indian Army were dominated by the 'martial races' during both the World Wars. Most of the sepoys were long-term volunteers who came from the rural areas and were small farmers. They joined the army for material benefits for their families and upward social mobility. Regimental pride fostered by ethnic ties played an important part in keeping intact the sections and platoons during firefight in the battlefields.<sup>30</sup> The same logic more or less applies for the sepoys from the non-martial communities. Politics was not really important for the illiterate and semi-literate sepoys. However, during the war, when India Command and the SEAC had crafted a substantial welfare mechanism for the Indian soldiery, the latter remained loyal to their British masters. Good rations for the frontline troops, medical facilities for the wounded sepoys, postal facilities, provision of uniforms, etc. were essential for the Indian quasi-mercenary soldiers during both the World Wars.<sup>31</sup> *Kshatradharma* (loyalty to the military paymaster) somewhat strengthened the loyalty mechanism of the sepoys.<sup>32</sup> And the middle-class urban Indian ECOS were also able to gel with the British controlled military machine, thanks to the training and regimental ethos between 1939 and 1945. Tarak Barkawi rightly notes that not nationalism or

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29 Miller, *Uncle Bill*, p. 343.

30 As regards the domination of the martial races in the combatant branches of the Indian Army during the First World War, see Kaushik Roy, 'Race and Recruitment in the Indian Army: 1880–1918', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2013), pp. 1310–1347. For the use of primordial ties (ethnic, clan, caste and village bonds) in the construction of regiments of the Indian Army, a process which started in the post-1857 Mutiny era, see Kaushik Roy, 'The Construction of Regiments in the Indian Army: 1859–1913', *War in History*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2001), pp. 127–48.

31 For World War I, see George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 281–98.

32 Kaushik Roy, *Hinduism and the Ethics of Warfare in South Asia: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

racial ideology but intense training and development of new tactics enabled the Indian Army to hold its ground against the IJA.<sup>33</sup>

It is to be noted that when the Indian Army was forced to expand rapidly in the midst of overseas deployment and rising battle casualties during 1941 and 1942, the regiments' ethnic composition got disturbed. And this in turn reduced the combat cohesion of the sepoy regiments, resulting in lower combat effectiveness of these units during the disastrous Malaya-Singapore-Burma campaigns. Japanese inactivity along the Burma-India Front from June 1942 till February 1944 enabled the Indian Army to systematize its expansion programme and absorb the new lessons learnt from the disastrous Malaya-Burma Campaign of 1941–42 through a reinvigorated training regimen. However, in the aftermath of World War II, the welfare bureaucracy of the *Raj* was dismantled. And unlike in 1919, after the end of the Great War, in 1946, due to the changing political landscape and economic difficulties of the British Empire, the *Raj* was not in a position to provide the demobilized sepoys and their families with various incentives like land grants in the canal colonies in Punjab, jobs in the rural administration, provision of essential commodities at a subsidized rate, etc. The net result was that the demobilized sepoys and the traditional 'martial' communities which provided the bulk of the recruits turned against their erstwhile white master.<sup>34</sup> But that remains a separate story altogether.

During World War II, in the primitive environment of Burma, the combat motivation of the Indian soldiers (despite them being quasi-mercenaries) was stronger than that of the British soldiers (despite the latter being members of a national army). Two British authors write that combat in Burma placed extra strain on the British soldiers because the physical environment was more primitive compared to 'civilization' as it existed in West Europe. Not only did they have to fight for a long period in the mountainous jungle environment, worse they had no opportunity to see and talk to white women.<sup>35</sup> Both in New Guinea during 1942–43 and in Burma during the same period, casualties due to

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33 Tarak Barkawi, 'Culture and Combat in the Colonies: The Indian Army in the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2006), p. 329.

34 Deshpande, *British Military Policy in India*, pp. 162–72. Rajit K. Mazunder in *The Indian Army and the Making of Punjab* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) shows the elaborate political-patronage network constructed by the *Raj* kept the rural society of Punjab (the principal recruiting ground of the Indian Army) satisfied at least till 1945.

35 Lieutenant-General Geoffrey Evans and Antony-Brett James, *Imphal: A Flower on Lofty Heights* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 337.

tropical disease exceeded battle casualties.<sup>36</sup> The sepoys who came from a resource-poor rural background were better adapted to meet the demands of combat in the jungle and hill conditions of Burma (thanks also to the pre-1939 training and combat experience of the sepoys in Small War along the North-West Frontier) compared to their British counterparts.

Thus, the Indian Army at the end of 1945 was partly new and partly old. In terms of recruitment, combat motivation/loyalty mechanism, logistics and several aspects of the tactical procedures, there was a lot of continuity from the pre-World War II era. The Indian Army in 1945 can be categorized as a force partly transformed. To conclude, in terms of size and the number of casualties suffered by the Indian Army, it remained small fry vis-à-vis the *Wehrmacht*, the US Army and the Red Army. It is unknown whether in the absence of national ideology and brute disciplinary methods, the Indian Army would have held its own in face of the massive bloodletting which Hitler's and Stalin's armies suffered on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1945. The Indian Army was lucky to meet the IJA which remained, in the end, a light infantry force. And even then, for the IJA, Burma compared to China was a secondary theatre. The issue of the beginnings of modern/manoeuvre warfare in 1944–45 Burma is again an unwanted debate. This debate is more the product of tussle between the 'Easterners' (those who emphasized the importance of Far East/British Empire for Britain and advocates of Slim) versus the 'Westerners' (those who focused on the importance of Western Front against Germany and supporters of 'Monty') within the British Army and its historians. Slim's dash to Meiktila and then to Rangoon in the first half of 1945 were smaller affairs in terms of number of tanks and self propelled artillery used compared to Guderian's race for Moscow during August–September 1941 and Zhukov's march to Berlin in mid 1945. Rather, the war in Burma in several ways was similar to the traditional infantry-centric Small War at which the Indian Army had always excelled. Aggressive patrolling, guarding the heights, protecting the convoys from ambush, laying ambush and booby traps, fighting roadblocks, use of animal transport and mountain artillery, sniping, etc. are some of the chief characteristics of both the Small War and the Burma War. Elements of continuity between some aspects of 'Small War' in South Asia with 'Jungle Warfare' in the age of Total War in South-East Asia can be discerned.<sup>37</sup>

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36 Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 179.

37 For this aspect of continuity, see Kaushik Roy, *The Army in British India: From Colonial Warfare to Total War, 1857–1947* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Significant elements of change were introduced by the GoI and GHQ India in the British-Indian military organization engaged in the Burma War during 1943–44. Large-scale aerial supply and aerial transportation of ground troops and mules, close air support for the infantry, etc. were definitely new techniques introduced by the SEAC and India Command. Despite novel technological changes to a great extent, the Indian Army fought as an infantry-oriented force supported by light artillery and mules both in the North-West Frontier and Burma. What mattered in the end was that the Indian Army displayed a high learning curve under trying conditions and achieved victory. Superior technology, tactics and training plus material superiority in the end resulted in the defeat of the soldiers of the country of the 'Rising Sun' at the hands of Commonwealth soldiers in general and the sepoys in particular.

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