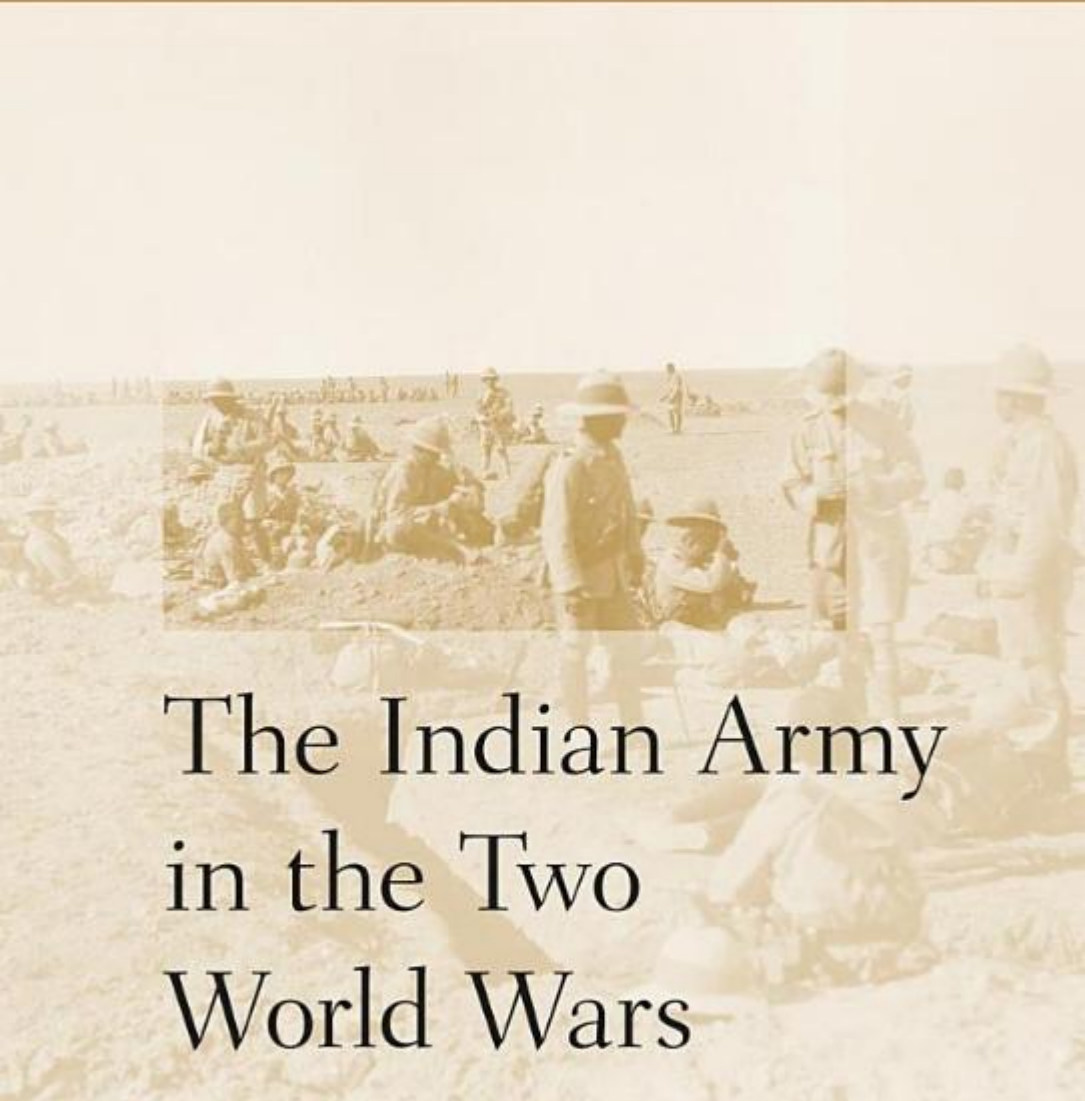


HISTORY OF WARFARE ♦ VOLUME 70



The Indian Army in the Two World Wars

Edited by Kaushik Roy

BRILL

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PREFACE

One day in the summer of 2009, after working in the British Library, while strolling in the streets of central London, the idea of editing a volume on the Indian Army during the two World Wars suddenly hit me. I immediately entered into the nearest net surfing booth and sent off an e mail to Mr. Julian Deahl about whether he will be interested in a volume on the Indian Army. Despite being ill, he responded positively within twenty-four hours. Next, in a seminar at the Imperial War Museum when I discussed the idea with Profs. Hew Strachan, Dennis Showalter and Michael Neiberg, all of them encouraged me. Initially, I was anxious whether I will get adequate number of contributors for the project. Beyond my wildest imagination, across several continents both established and young scholars agreed to contribute essays. The result is the present volume.

The 10,000 words long Introduction by the editor does not merely summarize the essays but attempts to introduce the essays within the historiographical matrix. The different methodologies of research and the various dimensions of the Indian Army in the two World Wars are discussed in details. The Introduction also points out the future avenues of research. The seventeen essays based on primary sources deal with the military, political, social and cultural dimensions of the Indian Army during the two world wars. The exhaustive bibliography will aid both the specialists as well as newcomers.

Kaushik Roy
Kolkata, 2011

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Gajendra Singh is currently completing a PhD titled 'Between Self and Soldier: Testimony, Dissent and being a Sepoy during the two World Wars' at the University of Edinburgh. His interest lies in the issues

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WAR IN BURMA, 1942–1945: THE 7/10TH BALUCH EXPERIENCE

Daniel Marston

The Second World War was a period of unprecedented expansion for the Indian Army. Between 1939 and 1945, the army expanded from 200,000 to more than 2.5 million men and officers, even though conscription was never imposed. The army's rapid expansion in response to the needs of the war raised questions concerning the quality of troops and officers. The army had a number of teething troubles as it grew in strength and experience, but it was always able to point with pride to its ability to learn from mistakes and adapt to conditions. By the beginning of 1944, the Indian Army had reached a level of performance characterized by consistent and reliable professionalism in an impressive variety of types and theaters of warfare.¹

In May 1945, leading elements of the 17th² and 26th Indian divisions met north of Rangoon. The Indian Army³ had inflicted the worst land defeat that the IJA had ever suffered, and the victory in Burma was its last and greatest victory. How did they achieve this victory? This essay will consider the reform of the larger army through the experiences of one battalion—the 7/10th Baluch Regiment of the 17th Indian Division—during the Burma Campaign and its efforts at reform throughout the war.

¹ Daniel P. Marston *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport CT.: 2003); Tim Moreman, *The Jungle, the Japanese and the British Commonwealth Armies at War 1941–1945: Fighting Methods, Doctrine and Training for Jungle Warfare* (London: 2005).

² Most of the brigades mentioned in this essay were part of the 17th Indian Division at some point in the war.

³ The term Indian Army throughout this article to refer to all Indian, British, Burmese, and West and East African units serving in India and Burma.

*17th Indian Division (7/10th Baluch) in the First Burma Campaign:
1941–1942*

The 7/10th Baluch's experience in the Second World War was representative of that of the larger Indian Army. It was a war raised battalion and, along with many others, suffered many of the growing pains that accompanied the army's rapid expansion. The lack of basic training, officer training and experience affected the performance of most Indian Army units in 1941, especially those earmarked for duties in the Far East.

The 7/10th Baluch arrived in Rangoon on 16 January 1942 as part of the 46th Indian Brigade,⁴ 17th Indian Division. The battalion, as was typical at that time and place, was filled with half-trained officers and men who were barely prepared for a desert war, let alone jungle conditions.⁵ The commander of B Company (composed of Punjabi Muslims), Second-Lieutenant (later Brigadier) John Randle, remembered a conversation at the docks at Rangoon where the commanding officer of the battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Dyer, asked a senior staff officer what they should do about training. The staff officer replied "training—you can't do any training because it is all bloody jungle."⁶ Most of the units and staff deployed to Burma considered it a backwater, and one that the Japanese were unlikely to attack; but that if they did, they had no answer to offer of how to deal with tactics that might be deployed against them in the jungle.

The staff officers' opinions notwithstanding, the battalion was not discouraged from attempting to gain some familiarity with jungle operations, and the unit war diary documents this process. On 18 January, the entry reads: "all companies practised formations and intercommunication in thick jungle."⁷ The diary also comments on patrols being sent out as the unit moved south towards the Salween River, and that with more vehicles, the patrols became more mobile, which indicates that some of the patrolling was being done by road.⁸ An officer with C Company,⁹ Second-Lieutenant C.R.L. Coubrough,

⁴ The last remaining original brigade of the 17th Indian Division. WO 172/928 January 1942, PRO, TNA.

⁵ Interview with Brigadier John Randle, 10/4/2000.

⁶ Interview with John Randle, 10/4/2000.

⁷ WO 172/928 January 1942, PRO, TNA.

⁸ WO 172/928 21–26/1/1942, PRO, TNA.

⁹ Commanded by Sri Kanth Korla (Indian Commissioned Officer).

reforms made within the division can be found in the June 1942 war diary. Training Instruction No. 1 for the 17th Indian Division appears in the Appendix, and it begins with two important sentences: "...the division has acquired considerable practical experience of fighting against the Jap and many lessons have been learned from their methods which can be adopted by us.... [N]ow is the time to train and practice these new methods and to drive in the good lessons before they are forgotten."³⁷

The 17th had suffered heavy losses and had to be replenished with new recruits. Cowan noted that the cadre of officers and men who had seen action would stiffen the intake of men with instructions, demonstrations and practical experience. Patrolling, gathering information and denial of information to the enemy would be paramount to future operations. Most importantly for the last point, specific orders would be given for men to maintain fire discipline in the jungle.³⁸

It was necessary for the men to be given the opportunity to get used to the jungle environment, and to use it to their advantage. They had to be confident enough in their surroundings to disperse when fired upon. To do this, units practised establishing base camps on 3 day outings in the jungle. Small unit patrols pushed further out into the jungle from these base camps to gather information and harass the enemy. Units were taught to establish base camps on hills, enabling the patrols to gain control of the valleys.³⁹

The 17th Division distributed Training Instruction No. 2 on 24 June 1942. This requested that all veteran officers and men, before going on leave, relay their experiences and observations of battle to new men coming into their units via lectures and written notes. In this document, Cowan also described his plan to form his 3 brigades into 3 different forces: the 16th Indian Brigade to act as shock troops supported by tanks; the 48th Indian Brigade to serve as jungle shock troops; and the 63rd Indian Brigade to act as combined operations and river shock troops.⁴⁰ Although this structure did not last for more than a few weeks, one part of the plan did survive and was in use until the end of the war:⁴¹ the establishment of a commando platoon in each infantry

³⁷ WO 172/475, 4 June 1942, PRO, TNA.

³⁸ WO 172/475, 4 June 1942.

³⁹ WO 172/475, 4 June 1942.

⁴⁰ WO 172/475, 24 June 1942.

⁴¹ Interview with Captain Murtough, 17/6/2000. He commanded the commando

battalion, made up of men who had been hand picked to serve under one commander. The final orders for 24 June indicated that all officers were to read the Cameron Report, AITM and the Malaya Report.⁴²

Seven training instructions were written for the 17th Indian Division between June and December 1942; these were used as the basis for various exercises in the field. The 17th had the added benefit of Japanese troops stationed in the area as a training tool. As units were sent out to encounter the nearby enemy troops, a constant assessment of tactics could be undertaken and sent back to the various HQs for further analysis and dissemination to other units.⁴³ The brother division of the 17th, the 23rd Indian Division, participated in these training exercises; its commander, Major-General Reginald Savory,⁴⁴ was a friend of Cowan's from when the 2 men had served among the first instructors at DehraDun in 1932/33. In late July, the 23rd Division participated in a war game to study Japanese infiltration tactics.⁴⁵

The Aftermath: Assessment and Reform in India Command

Defeats in the Malaya and Burma campaigns convinced the Indian Army that new tactics and training were required. Over the course of 1942 and 1943, the army set out to develop and implement the necessary reforms, with varying levels of success. The following section examines the process of tactical reform,⁴⁶ including the role of GHQ India in developing and implementing tactical reform procedures, primarily through the dissemination of the AITM and the creation of the MTP (no. 9); and the experiences of the 7/10th Baluch as a unit at the forefront of tactical reforms. The section will be presented in chronological order, to highlight how the reforms moved forward.

platoon of the 4/12th Frontier Force Rifle for most of the war. The commando platoon drew from all 4 companies. It was a mixed platoon.

⁴² WO 172/475, 24 June 1942.

⁴³ WO 172/475, June-December 1942.

⁴⁴ Savory became the Director of Infantry, India in mid-1943, partly as a result of his experiences with the 23rd Indian Division and his knowledge of jungle warfare tactics.

⁴⁵ Lieutenant-General. Reginald Savory Papers, TS Diary (July), 7603-93, NAM, London.

⁴⁶ The principal focus is on the tactical doctrines envisioned for infantry and tank units. While artillery fulfilled an important supporting role, due to space limitations it cannot be discussed in depth.

The British commanders⁴⁷ involved in the First Burma Campaign set out almost immediately to learn from their defeats.⁴⁸ Others also recognized the need for tactical reform, and units throughout India Command began to explore new ways of operating in the jungle. The principal method of disseminating the new tactics being developed was the Army in India Training Memoranda (AITM)⁴⁹ and the various training pamphlets published by GHQ India.⁵⁰

The AITM No. 14 of February 1942 was the first to present jungle warfare tactics, in the context of a discussion of the fighting in Malaya. Field-Marshal A. Wavell published his notes on the Malaya Campaign,⁵¹ focusing principally on the problems that the British/Indian troops encountered against the tactics employed by the Japanese. His main argument was that it was necessary for troops to move off the roads and travel overland. He also discussed the concept of re-supplying ground troops from the air, an idea that later became a cornerstone of jungle tactics. He noted that it would be necessary, of course, to establish air superiority in order for this to work effectively. Other points raised included the necessity for rigid fire discipline in order

⁴⁷ Such as Lieutenant-General Slim and Major-General Cowan.

⁴⁸ British and Indian Army officers and men who had escaped from the Malaya Campaign were also actively sought for their experiences and ideas. For an interesting account that deals with problems of fighting in the jungle, see Angus Rose, *Who Dies Fighting* (London: 1994). Angus Rose was sought after for his thoughts on and experiences of the Malaya Campaign.

⁴⁹ It should be noted that the AITM also had to discuss all methods of training, since Indian troops were serving in the Middle East as well as in the jungle. However, by 1944, the AITM focused overwhelmingly on jungle warfare training issues.

⁵⁰ The number of pamphlets and AITM that were actually published was not large, because GHQ anticipated that the pamphlets would be sent to the divisional HQs, and from there distributed to the various brigade HQs and so on, down to battalion HQs. Upon receiving these, commanders from the divisional level down generally would read the material with other officers and draw up inter-unit orders covering the most important points which had been raised. However, the lessons provided were not universally applied. The practice of dissemination became widespread from the middle of 1943; before that, depending upon the commanders, some units were given materials that had been developed by their own divisional staff. While GHQ India began producing these pamphlets early in 1942, and set up training schools, there was apparently no system in place to ensure that the new tactics were being implemented. The end results of the divide between direction and action were the orders given to the 14th Indian Division to undertake the First Arakan Offensive, even though it was unprepared to do so. There had simply been no time to incorporate the changes in tactics and structural reforms into the division's operations before action was required.

⁵¹ Wavell had been commander of the Allied British Dutch and American (ABDA) Command and then C-in-CI by March 1942.

They were under the impression that only 3 Japanese divisions were in Burma, when in reality there were 5.

This pamphlet also presented two other concepts that were destined to become as important to tactical development as the previously noted air supply and fire discipline. First: no linear defence was to be employed; instead, all-round defence would be used, with a mobile reserve to attack any penetrations into the defended areas. Second: units of all areas and services of the army needed to learn infantry tactics and to be able to fight as infantry in the jungle.⁵⁶ The final AITM of 1942 provided additional information from Burma and then from Assam region. The principal theme was that every soldier must be trained to take part in battle;⁵⁷ everyone had to be involved in the fighting, from commanders down to privates, in order to provide defensive positions with mutual fire support.⁵⁸

Even previous to the establishment of an official organizational structure to devise and implement reforms, in June 1943, reform was underway at different levels throughout India Command, but there was no consistent application of new tactics or processes. Furthermore, there had not yet been any redevelopment of basic training and reinforcement procedure for units in the field. GHQ India had recognized the need for development of new tactics and training procedures, and had produced and disseminated these through the AITM and MTPs. This was an excellent first step, but at this early stage each unit was left to its own devices as to what to do with the information, so implementation of the suggestions was piecemeal. The Indian Army's initial attempts to reform were frustrated by manpower demands for both internal security duties and the Middle East theatre. Internal security issues, in particular, interfered with the Indian Army's plans. Newly formed units were given minimal basic training before being sent out to contend with the insurrectionist activity spurred on by the Quit India Movement of August 1942. The failure of the Cripps Mission and the Quit India Movement fall outside the scope of this essay, but both of these did influence the conduct of the war. It is estimated that as many as 60 infantry battalions were called out on internal

⁵⁶ AITM No. 15 March/April 1942, pp. 3–4.

⁵⁷ AITM No. 16–17, July and September 1942, NAM.

⁵⁸ The formal beginning of the 'box' defensive positions, a staple of all later fighting in the war.

security duties⁵⁹ in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa as trouble flared up.⁶⁰ The India Command also had to contend with the fact that new units were created and then shifted from one command formation to another in response to differing requirements. Many units and formations stationed in eastern India, including the 14th Indian Division, suffered from malaria problems,⁶¹ which further curtailed proper training of units and higher formations during 1942.⁶² The performance of the 14th Indian Division in the First Arakan Offensive demonstrates the difficulties of this transition period.

The Indian Army's second defeat in the First Arakan Offensive of late 1942–spring 1943 was what finally convinced military leaders⁶³ to formally establish a centrally controlled tactical training programme in jungle warfare, as well as creating a clear division between basic training and specialized jungle warfare training for reinforcements in Burma. As a result of the Infantry Committee's recommendations, the 14th and 39th Indian divisions were organized as jungle warfare training divisions. As noted in the *Jungle Book* (Military Pamphlet No. 9), September 1943, "...in principle there is nothing new in jungle warfare, but the environment of the jungle is new to many of our troops. Special training is therefore necessary to accustom them to jungle conditions and to teach them jungle methods."⁶⁴ Initiatives and practices relevant to training, operational lessons, and constant performance assessment began to permeate the whole of the Indian Army from mid-1943. The army's war making apparatus in the Far East was also reorganized. South East Asia Command was created in August 1943 under the command of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten; 14th Army was the land component, led by General 'Bill' Slim, while General

⁵⁹ Judith Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (Oxford: 1994), 314.

⁶⁰ Additionally, railway sabotage delayed delivery of desperately needed supplies.

⁶¹ Malaria was a problem throughout the Burma Campaign, but by 1943, the numbers of men affected had begun to drop. This happened as a result of measures for structured regimens for prevention and treatment, including the introduction of drugs (principally penicillin and mepacrine) and the establishment of Malaria Forward Treatment Units near the front lines.

⁶² Correspondence with Dr. Moreman.

⁶³ The Infantry Committee, India, was established to decide how to move forward with formalizing jungle warfare training. This resulted in the establishment of the 14th and 39th training divisions. This is discussed in more detail below.

⁶⁴ *Jungle Book*, Military Training Pamphlet No. 9 (India) September 1943 (Private copy of Captain P. Davis, 4/8th Gurkhas).

The A Company, under the command of Major Martin, was sent to Pt. 5846⁸⁵ on the Bishenpur-Silchar road,⁸⁶ while the rest of the battalion dug in along the 'Catfish Box' and sent out patrols to engage any Japanese units that might have slipped onto the plain. The battalion also took the opportunity to re-organize and to incorporate the new company.⁸⁷

In mid-May, the 7/10th Baluch moved to the 17th Divisional Box at Chingphu, north of Bishenpur, in response to increased Japanese pressure on the entrance to the Imphal Plain from the Bishenpur region. The battalion began to dig in immediately upon arrival, in its capacity as protection for the divisional HQ. A series of patrols was sent out around the area as reports arrived of Japanese forces coming from the west, and a major clash ensued on 20 May involving one platoon on a ridge overlooking the divisional area. This force managed to hold out for more than 8 hours and successfully held up a major Japanese group. On 25 May, the battalion was ordered to carry out an attack on Pt. 2926, 'Red Hill Pimple'. That evening,⁸⁸ 3 companies- A, B and C respectively, moved to their jumping off positions, which included the ridge itself, without being heard or noticed by the Japanese. The A and C companies were to attack the Japanese bunker positions from the ridge,⁸⁹ while B Company was tasked with seizing the village on the west side of ridge.⁹⁰ At 0430 hours on 26 May, the attack went in. The first Japanese positions were destroyed, but a second layer of bunkers held up both attacks. The attackers dug in for fear of a Japanese counter-attack, and after a day of holding areas of the ridge and village, withdrew to the divisional HQ box, after the Japanese pulled back

⁸⁵ The company carried out a series of ambushes against the Japanese moves on Bishenpur. The patrol base was able to hold on through a series of Japanese attacks, and at different times during the month's stay, was supported by units of 3/8th Gurkhas. On 5 May it was relieved by B Company, and A Company returned to the 'Catfish Box' for reorganization to a 4 platoon company. WO 172/4972, 8 April-5 May 1944, PRO, TNA; Interviews with Majors Martin, 12 January 2000 and Bruin, 1 March 2000.

⁸⁶ WO 172/4972, 4-8 April 1944, PRO, TNA; Interviews with Brigadier Randle, 10 April 2000, Majors Martin, 12 January 2000 and Bruin, 1 March 2000.

⁸⁷ WO 172/4972, 8-30 April 1944.

⁸⁸ The attack was sent in on the first evening of the monsoon.

⁸⁹ WO 172/4972, 25 May 1944.

⁹⁰ B Company's attack was supported by 3 tanks from the 3rd Carabineers (Grants/Lees). Interview with Major MacLean, commander of B Company, 22 March 2000.

clearly surpassed its performance in the 1942 campaign, and this was testimony to the fact that it had learned and applied the lessons of 1942.

Post Operation U-Go: 1944

Each battalion and regiment from the fighting in 1944 that was withdrawn from the line and sent into reserve took with it not only a wealth of knowledge based upon the personal experiences of the officers and men, but also records that documented and made accessible that knowledge. Each battalion and regiment carried out some level of retraining during the autumn of 1944 and winter 1944/45 before returning into battle. All the units were by this point capable of jungle fighting, airmobile and amphibious operations⁹⁵ if necessary, and during this period many units received their first sizeable installments of reinforcements, both men and officers, from the training divisions.⁹⁶ In interviews, most officers noted that this group of reinforcements was of a considerably higher calibre than if they had come straight from the regimental centre, although more training was still required.⁹⁷

The 17th Indian Division was ordered to proceed to Ranchi on 23 July 1944. There it was scheduled to meet up with the 99th Indian Brigade, which would form the third brigade of the division. It was to adopt the new organizational structure of 14th Army divisions.⁹⁸ The 7/10th Baluch began the retraining process in earnest in mid-July 1944, when it was put into reserve and ordered to Imphal. As the unit was shifting back, the HQ held a conference on 27 July to discuss recent operations and ways to deal with issues that had arisen. The battalion also outfitted itself to follow an ordinary infantry battalion organization that had been selected at 14th Army HQ. Battalion HQ drew up and distributed training instructions⁹⁹ while in Ranchi, highlighting the

⁹⁵ Only the units of the 26th Indian Division received formal amphibious training. When the strategic situation changed in the autumn of 1944, both the 17th and 5th Indian divisions were reorganized once more.

⁹⁶ There were numerous delays in the establishment of a training battalion for the 3rd Madras Regiment, and eventually the regimental training centre decided to set up its own jungle warfare training ground. Interview with Major Barton, 5 July 2000, 4/3rd Madras.

⁹⁷ Interviews with officers.

⁹⁸ L/WS/1/1511, 26 July 1944, IOR, BL, London.

⁹⁹ There were 3 of these, all extremely detailed documents, highlighting the lessons

need for better patrolling activities and wire placement.¹⁰⁰ Feedback on the lessons presented was sought from officers and VCOs.¹⁰¹ The battalion carried out individual training and then higher level battalion exercises during August and September. In November, the battalion was earmarked to serve in the 63rd Indian Brigade,¹⁰² and continued with inter-brigade exercises.¹⁰³

In mid-December 1944, the 17th Indian Division received orders to proceed to Imphal. When the division arrived in early January, it adopted a new divisional structure. This came about as a result of the changing strategic conditions in the advance into Burma, which caused the 14th Army to adopt a new divisional structure for both the 17th and 5th Indian divisions. Two of the 3 brigades became completely motorized, using jeeps and 15-cwt trucks. The third brigade became air portable. The scale of ammunition was drastically reduced and the units were expected to be completely mobile.¹⁰⁴ News of this development did not reach units until they were in Imphal. On 22 January, all the units that were to be motorized were given jeeps and trucks and instructed to give up all animal transport. The 48th and 63rd Indian brigades were among those chosen for the motorized role, and 7/10th Baluch was required to send men on driving courses and learn the specific aspects of loading and unloading materiel and men with motorized transport. Units were given just short of one month of training before being ordered forward into Burma, but 7/10th Baluch managed time to carry out further tank/infantry co-operation training with the 255th Armoured Brigade.¹⁰⁵ Officers from 7/10th Baluch noted that even in training men for the motorized role, jungle tactics were still evident, especially the use of boxes, planning for air re-supply, and

of the recent fighting and ways to train the men in revised tactics. Correspondence with Colonel Maling.

¹⁰⁰ WO 172/4972, July–October 1944, PRO, TNA.

¹⁰¹ Interviews with Brigadier Randle, 10 April 2000 and Major MacLean, 22 March 2000. Brigadier Randle set up his own company school for his VCOs, developing the lessons based upon his experiences of the fighting in Assam.

¹⁰² It was no longer the reconnaissance battalion for the division, having been replaced by the 6/9th Jat Regiment.

¹⁰³ WO 172/4972, August–November 1944.

¹⁰⁴ WO 172/6986 (17th Indian), January 1945, PRO, TNA; General Sir William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London: 1956), 321.

¹⁰⁵ WO 172/7736, January–February 1945 and WO 172/7729, January–February 1945, PRO, TNA.

organizing foot patrols.¹⁰⁶ The divisional GOC, Major-General Cowan, noted: "...all round defence is just as important out of the jungle as it is in it...our basic training [jungle warfare] has stood the test now we have to adapt it to the new situation."¹⁰⁷

Operations Capital And Extended Capital: 1944-1945

By late November 1944, the 14th Army had established bridgeheads across the Chindwin in two locations. The 11th East African Division had seized Kalewa and sent a brigade across the Chindwin to establish a formal beachhead, and the 268th Indian Brigade had established a bridgehead in the Sittaung region.¹⁰⁸ Slim's original operational plan was named 'Capital'. His main intention was to destroy the remnants of the Japanese Burma Army, consisting of 10 divisions of infantry and 2 mixed independent brigades.¹⁰⁹ Four of these divisions had been badly mauled during the campaigns in 1944, and the Japanese High Command in Tokyo sent reinforcements during the autumn. On average, each division, which numbered between 5,000 and 10,000 men in total, received 2,000 reinforcements. The Japanese Commander in Burma, Lieutenant-General Hyotaro Kimura, decided that the army would attempt to hold a defensive line along the Irrawaddy River, from Lashio to the Monglong Mountains to the north-east of Mandalay, with other units in reserve south of the Irrawaddy. The northern sector of the Irrawaddy River front was at Madaya, north of Mandalay, and stretching as far south as Pagan.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Interviews with Brigadier Randle, 10 April 2000, Majors Martin, 12 January 2000, MacLean, 22 March 2000 and Barrett, 12 August 2000 and Captains Murtough, 17 June 2000 and King, 13 March 2000. The commando platoons from both the 7/10th Baluch and 4/12th FFR were to be used in patrolling to determine if a given area was suitable for tanks.

¹⁰⁷ Training Instruction, 23 January 1945. Also noted: "[this] will form the basis for training from now on in our present location and forward. It is not comprehensive and many gaps are left for brigade and battalion commanders to fill in." WO 172/6986 (17th Indian Division), PRO, TNA.

¹⁰⁸ At the end of the Imphal-Tamu-Sittaung road that had originally been built by the 20th Indian Division before U-GO.

¹⁰⁹ The 2nd, 15th, 18th, 31st, 33rd, 49th, 53rd, 54th, 55th and 56th Divisions.

¹¹⁰ S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War against Japan*, vol. 4, *The Reconquest of Burma* (London: 1965), 391-2.

Operation Capital envisioned a Japanese defensive position on the Shwebo Plain.¹¹¹ Slim anticipated sending the 4th¹¹² and 33rd corps¹¹³ onto the Plain, and hoped for a major decisive battle with Kimura. The lines of communication for the 14th Army would become stretched at this point, as Dimapur was 400 hundred miles to the rear and the roads down to the Chindwin bridgeheads were of poor quality. There were only 150 miles of all weather roads; the rest were fair weather only. The supply system relied on a mixture of road transport and aircraft.

The offensive began on 3 December 1944. The 20th Indian Division crossed the Chindwin 30 miles north of Kalewa, followed by the 19th Indian Division the next day, at Sittaung. Meanwhile, the 33rd Corps shifted troops of the 20th Indian and 2nd British divisions over the Chindwin from various positions north and south of Kalewa.¹¹⁴ By mid December the 19th Indian Division had moved nearly 50 miles towards the Irrawaddy River. The Japanese offered some resistance, but Slim became increasingly convinced that the Japanese had left only rearguard units on the Shwebo Plain and had shifted their main efforts to defence of the Irrawaddy River area. On 16 December, Brigadier Lethbridge sent a telegram to Army Land Forces South East Asia (ALFSEA),¹¹⁵ informing them that Capital was being scrapped and a new plan was to be issued.¹¹⁶

The revised plan had a new name, 'Extended Capital', but its overall goal remained the destruction of the Japanese Burma Army. Since the 19th Indian Division was the only 4th Corps formation on the eastern side of the Chindwin, Slim proposed to shift all units of 4th Corps to the south and to reassign the 19th Indian Division to the command of 33rd Corps. The 33rd Corps, with the 19th Division would proceed across the Shwebo Plain and close up to the Irrawaddy River. The 19th Division would cross the Irrawaddy River north of

¹¹¹ An open plain between the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers.

¹¹² Under the command of Lieutenant-General Frank Messervy: 19th and 7th Indian Divisions, plus the 255th Armoured Brigade.

¹¹³ Under the command of Lieutenant-General Stopford: 2nd British and 20th Indian Divisions, supported by 254th Armoured Brigade and 268th Indian Brigade.

¹¹⁴ Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 321–2.

¹¹⁵ This was originally 11th Army Group, renamed in November 1944. General Giffard was replaced and succeeded by Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese. The 15th Corps was placed under direct command of ALFSEA, with 14th Army to comprise only 4th and 33rd corps.

¹¹⁶ Kirby, *The War against Japan*, vol. 4, *The Reconquest of Burma*, 163–4.

Mandalay and attack south towards the city. This was intended to deceive the Japanese High Command into thinking that the 4th Corps was still north of Mandalay and that 33rd Corps was in the south. In the meantime, 33rd Corps would cross the Irrawaddy River south of Mandalay and encircle the city. The Japanese High Command, it was hoped, would then throw most of its forces into destroying the 19th Division and the rest of the 33rd Corps bridgeheads north and south of the city. In the meantime, 4th Corps¹¹⁷ would have moved south of Kalewa and crossed the Irrawaddy River near Nyaungu. The Japanese would be surprised by the arrival of 4th Corps so far south,¹¹⁸ and 4th Corps, with motorized and tank units, would then push towards the valuable supply area in and around Meiktila¹¹⁹ and seize it. This would force Lieutenant-General Kimura to commit most of his reserves to attempting to dislodge the 4th Corps.¹²⁰ As Slim noted:

If we took Meiktila while Kimura was deeply engaged along the Irrawaddy about Mandalay, he would be compelled to detach large forces to clear his vital communications. This should give me not only the major battle I desired, but the chance to repeat our hammer and anvil tactics: XXXIII Corps the hammer from the north against the anvil of IV Corps at Meiktila and the Japanese between.¹²¹

After all units of the 33rd and 4th corps had met up and destroyed the Japanese forces in and around Mandalay and Meiktila, they would make a dash towards Rangoon, hoping only to come across a disorganized Japanese force.

¹¹⁷ Including the 17th Indian Division.

¹¹⁸ Radio contact between units of the 4th Corps was to be kept to a minimum. If they came upon large Japanese forces, they were to go around them and allow the 28th East African Brigade to deal with them. The Japanese were to think that a unit of brigade size only was operating on the western side of the Irrawaddy so far south. Interviews with officers of 1/11th Sikh and 4/8th Gurkhas.

¹¹⁹ This was the main administration area for both the Japanese 15th and 33rd armies. There were 5 airfields, major road and railway connections and a supply depot.

¹²⁰ Lieutenant-General Kimura noted in an interrogation report that he had no intention of fighting a major battle on the Shwebo Plain, planning instead to hold a line along the Irrawaddy River. SEATIC WO 106/5897, PRO, TNA; Kirby, *The War against Japan*, vol. 4, *The Reconquest of Burma*, 165–7.

¹²¹ Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 327.

Meiktila: 1945

The 17th Indian Division¹²² was stationed in Imphal at the end of January 1945. The various units of the division carried out training as lorry and air-transport battalions.¹²³ On 5 February, the 17th was ordered south towards Nyaungu on the Irrawaddy River. It reached its destination on 17 February and was given 2 hours' notice to move across the Irrawaddy River into the 7th Indian Division beachhead. The divisional plan was to strike out south of the bridgehead and seize Pyinbin, then move northeast and seize Taungtha with the 48th Brigade. Meanwhile, the 63rd infantry and 255th armoured brigades were to move south of Taungtha and seize Mahlaing. The airstrip at Thabutkon was to be seized by the 63rd and 48th brigades so that the 99th Indian Brigade could be flown in. The 48th Brigade was to move south to Thabutkon and prepare for attack on Meiktila. At that point, the division would be within 8 miles of Meiktila, having covered a distance of about 85 miles from the bridgehead.¹²⁴

The 7/10th Baluch¹²⁵ was part of the 63rd Indian Brigade. The battalion had been successful in deploying ambush parties ahead of the main advance towards Meiktila during late February. The 17th Indian Divisional GOC, Major-General Cowan, decided on a bold policy for the defence of Meiktila. His land communications lines had been cut, and supplies arrived both by air drop and air landings. To deal with the potential for a Japanese counter-offensive¹²⁶ against his division, Cowan adopted an offensively oriented plan to defend Meiktila. He set out to destroy the Japanese units as they assembled for attacks, proving once again his adaptability to a new situation.¹²⁷ Cowan set up 6 major

¹²² Under the command of Major-General Cowan, who had commanded the division since the fighting north of Rangoon in March 1942.

¹²³ The 48th and 63rd Indian brigades moved south as lorry transported infantry. The 99th Indian Brigade was to be air transported into Meiktila to support the rest of the division.

¹²⁴ Kirby, *The War against Japan*, vol. 4, *The Reconquest of Burma*, 267.

¹²⁵ The battalion was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Wright until 22 March, when command was given to Lieutenant-Colonel D.S. Dutt, an ICO.

¹²⁶ The Japanese troops earmarked to destroy the 17th Indian Division far outnumbered the British/Indian garrison.

¹²⁷ Cowan was one of the main architects of jungle warfare training after the suffering defeats of 1942. He realized that a different approach to the defence of Meiktila was needed, and adapted and combined some of the main principles of jungle and open style warfare.

'harbours' around the town, from which mobile strike formations of combined tank/infantry units (columns)¹²⁸ could seek out and destroy the Japanese forces building up nearby. Each harbour had a company sized unit supported by medium machine guns and mortars as protection forces when the mobile unit moved out. Static defences¹²⁹ were created around the Meiktila airstrip east of the town and inside the town itself.¹³⁰ On 28 February, the battalion had moved across on foot to set up roadblocks on the Kyaukpadaung-Meiktila road, establishing defensive boxes on both sides of the road and sending out patrols to the surrounding area to locate and clear Japanese positions. From 1–3 March, D Company held the roadblock as the rest of the battalion made sweeps, in co-operation with A Squadron of 5th Probyn's Horse, around the road south-west of Meiktila. Over the course of the next few days, they killed approximately 150 Japanese,¹³¹ and themselves lost 10 killed and 49 wounded.¹³² Each night the companies created boxes and prepared for a Japanese counterattack, as well as sending out numerous foot patrols to contact the enemy.¹³³

The battalion was engaged in normal foot patrolling for the first few weeks of March in the area to the west of Meiktila. There were 3 patrol bases set up at Oknebok, Letpankagaw and Mezalibin.¹³⁴ Both reconnaissance and fighting patrols were launched in the area to locate and disrupt any Japanese movements.¹³⁵ As Japanese troops amassed north along the Pindale Road, the battalion was shifted to the area north of Meiktila. On 11 March it carried out its second major combined tank/infantry 'column' attack.¹³⁶ The C and D companies were ordered to destroy any Japanese 5 miles up the road. D Company moved north riding on the tanks, and was shot at within minutes. The C Company moved north to support the attack, coming in on the right flank. After

¹²⁸ The 4/12th Frontier Force Rifle, 7/10th Baluch and 5th Probyn's took part.

¹²⁹ The 1st Sikh Light Infantry was initially part of this strategy.

¹³⁰ Kirby, *The War against Japan*, vol. 4, *The Reconquest of Burma*, 286.

¹³¹ It was during one of the sweeps on 2 March that Naik Fazal Din of 7/10th Baluch won a posthumous VC.

¹³² WO 172/7729, February–3 March 1944, WO 172/7347 (Probyn's), 1–3 March PRO, TNA.

¹³³ Interviews with Brigadier Randle, 10 April 2000, Major Maclean, 22 March 2000, Captain Bruin, 1 March 2000 and Lieutenant King, 13 March 2000.

¹³⁴ WO 172/7729, 3–11 March 1944.

¹³⁵ Interview with Major Randle, 10 April 2000.

¹³⁶ It had operated with A Squadron, 5th Probyn's, on 1–3 March when moving into Meiktila from the west.

a few hours of fighting, the Japanese were forced to pull back, having lost 50 killed, compared to only one killed and 4 wounded for the 7/10th Baluch. For the next week, the battalion set up patrol bases and operated alongside tanks in various sweep operations, as well as carrying out more local foot patrols in the area north of Meiktila.¹³⁷ As with earlier operations, the battalion built up and reinforced its box formations each day and carried out daily patrols.¹³⁸

The 7/10th participated in several tank/infantry sweeps during the last week of March. The most successful was carried out over the course of two days, 27–28 March, when the battalion¹³⁹ had been moved north-west to deal with the last Japanese defenders near Mindawagan Lake. The battalion attacked a Japanese position in and around Hill 850. The C Company, supported by tanks, was sent in to seize the position. The rest of the battalion moved up to consolidate the hill before a Japanese counter-attack could be launched, digging in on the position. The Japanese, having lost over 100 killed, failed to attack. The 7/10th Baluch, by contrast, lost 4 killed and 17 wounded.¹⁴⁰ The Japanese began to fall back from Meiktila in the north as a road link was established with the 5th Indian Division.

The 7/10th Baluch were successful in operating as lorry transported infantry in the approach to Meiktila. This unit set up boxes each evening, with constant patrols sent out to locate and destroy any enemy troops in the area.¹⁴¹ It had not been overrun or surprised during the advance. The 7/10th Baluch effectively established roadblocks and set up ambushes on foot in the south-western region of Meiktila. The battalion adopted infiltration tactics when Japanese defences proved too strong to attack frontally. The 7/10th Baluch adapted effectively to the changing situations of the battlefield during the approach to and defence of Meiktila. Mounted patrols and attacks with tank support were successfully carried out. These actions demonstrated the lessons learned in the 1944 campaign when dealing with strong Japanese positions: infiltrate and, if possible, have heavy supporting weapons such as tanks available.

¹³⁷ WO 172/7729, 10–23 March 1945.

¹³⁸ Interviews with Majors Randle, 10 April 2000 and Maclean, 22 March 2000, and Captain Bruin 1 March 2000.

¹³⁹ Less B Company.

¹⁴⁰ WO 172/7729, 24–30 March 1945, PRO, TNA.

¹⁴¹ Interviews with officers of the 4/12th Frontier Force Rifle and 7/10th Baluch.

The performance of all Indian and British Army units in the fighting around Meiktila can best be summarized in a telling statement by the enemy. Lieutenant-General Hanaya of the Japanese 33rd Division noted that, "...since 29th February allied tanks thrust [sic] deep into our positions everyday.... [I]n this fighting the co-operation among allied infantry, artillery, and tanks was made admirably."¹⁴²

Between 27 and 30 March, the 17th Indian Division made contact with the 5th Indian Division from the Taungtha-Mahlaing Road, and with the 20th Indian Division to the north-east. Having established communication, the 3 divisions turned their attention to destroying remnants of the Japanese forces north of Meiktila. Mandalay was in British hands by this point, and the formal link between Mandalay and Meiktila was made on 30 March. The Japanese were rapidly pulling back from their defeats in the Mandalay-Meiktila regions, and Slim realized that an all out race for Rangoon was in the offing. Slim knew that he had to capture the port before the monsoon broke, in order to avoid the problems of getting sufficient supplies forward by air during the rains. He issued orders for the 5th and 17th Indian divisions to make a dash down the main Mandalay-Rangoon Road and seize Rangoon,¹⁴³ followed by the 19th Indian Division, which was to follow in support and try to keep the road open. The 7th and 20th Indian divisions were sent down both banks of the Irrawaddy River to search out any Japanese trying to escape. The 2nd British Division¹⁴⁴ was pulled back, due to a lack of adequate supplies for all formations stationed in central Burma.¹⁴⁵

With the area firmly under British and Indian control, the race to Rangoon began. The 14th Army's professionalism was demonstrated as its units quickly adapted to new conditions; some units executed open style and mechanized warfare, while others reverted to jungle tactics, as the Japanese were systematically destroyed along the banks of the Irrawaddy and the road to Rangoon. Rangoon fell to an amphibious assault on 3 May, ending the war in Burma for all intents and

¹⁴² "Story of the Japanese 33rd Division" by Lieutenant-General Hanaya (GOC), Evans Papers, IWM.

¹⁴³ If the road was cut by Japanese troops, divisions would be supplied exclusively by air.

¹⁴⁴ It was also withdrawn because of the problems of trying to reinforce British battalions in the theatre. At this point, many Indian divisions also lost their British battalions due to lack of reinforcements.

¹⁴⁵ Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 395-403.