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Abstract

World War II spawned a rich variety of tactical innovations as both Axis and Allied armies tried to develop tactics appropriate to the environment in which they were deployed and the capabilities of the enemy they engaged. The disabling of an adversary's army by attacking his flanks and penetrating deeply into his rear is as old as the history of warfare. In Burma however, the Imperial Japanese Army synthesized the flank attack with jungle warfare, using the jungle as a base from which to attack and bewilder the British Indian forces and quickly neutralize its capacity for resistance. The article provides a brief overview of the key engagements of the campaign and situates the stupor of the British Commonwealth forces in the imperial defence establishment's complete lack of preparedness for war. Most histories of the collapse of British imperial possessions in South East Asia are teleological social histories, in which a dysfunctional empire is predictably overwhelmed by another in steep ascent to the zenith of its power. This article is an audit of military failure and investigates the British defeat in terms of more narrowly military factors like tactics, weaponry, morale and general ship. It also recognizes the contribution of the Nationalist Chinese army, familiar to students of the history of the Second World War only as a metaphor for corruption, military mismanagement and failure.

Keywords: campaign, linear, tactics, training, open warfare, flanks, infiltration, Burma Corps, objective, reconnaissance, intelligence, generals.

Introduction: The campaign in Burma marked the nadir of British military fortunes in the Second World War. In a campaign lasting barely five months the Imperial Japanese Army vanquished British Commonwealth and Chinese forces with little ceremony, driving them back across the length of Burma.¹ The remnants of the Burma Army trickled back into India while the Chinese divisions scuttled across the

¹ The term British Commonwealth forces refer to all forces fighting in defence of the British Empire in World War II. In Burma these were the Indian Army (often referred to as the British Indian Army to distinguish it from the Indian National Army) and a handful of British Army battalions stationed in Burma.

Sino-Burmese frontier. Despite their limited and poor equipment and complete absence of logistics the Chinese divisions fared better in combat against Japanese formations. As the British and Indian troops retreated to India carrying with them tales of the ferocity, ruthlessness and competence of the Japanese soldiers, the patently inadequate forces deployed on the Indo-Burmese border awaited with trepidation the anticipated Japanese thrust into India.

This article analyses the reasons for the debacle and situates the defeat in the complete lack of preparedness for war in the British possessions in South East Asia. I have offered a broad overview of the campaign rather than a detailed description of every engagement between the British Commonwealth forces and the Imperial Japanese Army. This article argues that the Allied defeat was due to the adoption of linear defensive tactics against a free flowing, fast moving enemy. The British Commonwealth forces were mechanized and road bound. They were outflanked by the Japanese whenever they tried to hold a defensive line across the breadth of the country with their Chinese allies. An army that tried to fight a textbook campaign was ruthlessly outfought by one whose training emphasized improvisation, daring and the seizure of opportunities whenever they presented themselves.

That the Japanese defeated the British in Burma because they were better trained in jungle warfare became one of the staples of postwar military historiography. Raymond Callahan has dismantled this myth.³ Neither the British nor the Japanese had trained for jungle warfare but as Daniel Marston points out, superior training had endowed the soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army with a better sense of which tactics would be effective in the jungle.⁴ The Indian Army was undertrained, underequipped and underfunded and had never been exposed to combined arms warfare. After the outbreak of

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²Raymond Callahan, "The Jungle, the Japanese and the Sepoy," paper presented at the New Military History of South Asia Conference, Cambridge, 15-17 July, 1997.

³Daniel Marston "Lost and found in thejungle: The Indian and British Army jungle warfare doctrines for Burma, 1943-45, and the Malayan Emergency, 1948-60," in Hew Strachan (ed) *Big Wars and Small Wars The British Army And The Lessons Of War In The 20th Century*, Oxford, Routledge, 2006, p 85-86.

the war it trained intensively for open warfare in the desert. The Government of India was a bureaucratic pachyderm which was slow to limber up for the challenges of war. Indian soldiers paid a high price for the complacency and the complete lack of professionalism of India Command.

Burma existed in the large strategic vacuum between India and Singapore, the key node of British power in South East Asia. The theatre was controlled by the American, British, Dutch and Australian Command (ABDA), established to coordinate the Allied war effort in Malaya, the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines islands. ABDA's headquarters at Java was 2000 miles from Rangoon and General Archibald Wavell, its commander, later blamed the fall of Burma on his inability to give the defence of Burma the concentrated attention it deserved. The Burma Army was tasked with defending Burma from invasion. Commanded by General Tom Hutton, it had only two divisions under it: 17th Indian, commanded by Lieutenant General Jackie Smyth and the 1st Burma, commanded by Major General Bruce Scott. Neither had undergone any collective training. The 17th Indian had been heavily milked to provide cadres for the formations raised during the war. The Burma Division consisted of the 1st and 2nd Burma Brigades and the 13th Indian Brigade. With the exception of a single British battalion, the Burma brigades consisted, of poorly trained and inexperienced Burma Rifles battalions. As the Middle Eastern theatre had higher priority, the formations that were eventually shipped out to South East Asia from India were often not given basic weapons like mortars and 2 and 3 inch Bren guns in sufficient time for troops to familiarize themselves with them. As a result they failed to achieve a high standard of training even for open warfare.⁵

Japanese invasion and the fall of Moulmein: The Japanese offensive into southern Burma from Thailand in January 1942 fell on two weak and untried brigades, the 16th Indian and the 2nd Burma Brigade, spread across more than six hundred miles of jungle. The 55th and 33rd Japanese Divisions made short work of both units. The 16th Indian Brigade disintegrated and the 2nd Burma Brigade, forced back on Moulmein, retreated when its perimeter was infiltrated by

⁴Ibid, p 86.

Japanese troops. Japanese tactics remained unchanged throughout the campaign. They pinned down British Commonwealth units with frontal attacks and followed up with deep thrusts and roadblocks in their rear. Commonwealth units lost most of their heavy equipment when they tried to break through the Japanese cordon. The Japanese outflanking attacks were almost always shallow hooks through the jungle, but the British Commonwealth units lacked enough tactical intelligence and reconnaissance units to locate the attacking Japanese prongs and devise appropriate countermeasures. One of the few Indian Army battalions which responded to these converging Japanese attacks with a tactical innovation was the 7/10 Baluch at Pa-an.⁶ The battalion, attacked on the 8th of February 1942 by the 215 Regiment of the crack 33rd Japanese Division, deployed in a circular defence and withstood punishing assaults for three days while inflicting more than five hundred casualties on the attackers.⁷ The battalion retreated from Pa-an under intense aerial and artillery bombardment after losing seventy five percent of its strength. The circular defence pioneered by the 7/10th Baluch became the lynchpin of British infantry tactics fighting Japanese forces later in the war, but there was no scope for analysing failure and reviewing tactics in the welter of defeat and chaos of the first Burma campaign.

Disaster at the Sittang bridge and the evacuation of Rangoon: While the Japanese 55th Division engaged Commonwealth units in frontal attacks the 33rd Division swept around the rear and drove straight for the bridge over the river Sittang in an effort to bag the entire 17th Indian Division. The latter were immediately pulled back into a perimeter at Mokpalin, which was heavily attacked by the Japanese. While the Divisional Headquarters, the 1/4 Gurkhas of the 48th Infantry Brigade and the fragments of a few battalions crossed over, the division lost contact with the 16th and 46th Brigades which

⁵ In the numbering of battalions the first number indicates the battalion, the second the regiment to which it belongs. Thus the 7/10 Baluch was the 7th battalion of the 10th Baluch Regiment.

⁶ *History of 17 Indian Division*, p 4.

were embroiled in heavy fighting well short of the bridge.⁸ When the divisional commander, General Jackie Smyth gave orders to blow up at the bridge at 0400 hours on the 23rd of February both brigades were trapped on the eastern side. The division also lost fourteen guns, four 18 pounders and most of its divisional transport and ceased to exist as a cohesive fighting formation.⁹ The prospects of holding Rangoon vanished and for the rest of the campaign the Allied forces were condemned to a fighting retreat.

Even as the battle of Sittang raged important changes took place in the British command. General Tom Hutton was replaced as commander of the Burma Army by General Harold Alexander and was demoted to his Chief of Staff. A new corps, Burma Corps was formed under General William Slim to conduct day to day operations. General Jackie Smyth was replaced as commander of the 17th Indian Division by his Chief of Staff, General D.T. "Punch" Cowan. Wavell, who consistently underestimated the combat ability of Japanese troops and thought that Hutton's conduct of the campaign had been too defeatist, urged Alexander to counterattack and defend Rangoon. Hutton and the responsible air and naval commanders, advised a retreat covered by the tanks of the 7th Armoured Brigade and the evacuation of Rangoon. Till the Battle of the Sittang river Japanese infiltrations had taken place on a comparatively narrow front. In the open country of Pegu the British Commonwealth forces were in danger of being strangled as multiple strands of Japanese infiltration closed in on the British like the tentacles of an octopus. Hutton lacked confidence in the ability of the 17th Division to prevent the Japanese infiltrating in the open country west of the Sittang river and cutting the Rangoon-Prome road. Alexander tried to implement Wavell's directive but only succeeded in pushing the newly arrived 63rd Brigade and the 48th Brigade into the maw of Japanese ambushes. He changed his mind, evacuated Rangoon and nearly lost his entire army during the retreat from the city.

⁷War Diary of HQ17th Infantry Division, Volume No. 1 A; File No: 601/254/WD/Pt 1 A, Period February - May 1942, MICROGRAM D/166/635 SIMLA.

⁸*History of the 17th Division* p 8. Bisheshwar Prasad (ed) *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War The Retreat From Burma 1941-1942*, Combined Inter-Services Historical Section (India and Pakistan) p 182.

The retreat from Rangoon and the Chinese intervention: The loss of Rangoon pushed the British irrevocably on the defensive. They were cut off from reinforcements and supplies while the Japanese could obtain both at will. But grim tidings from the front were finally punctuated by some good news when General Chiang Kai Shek agreed to deploy Nationalist Chinese troops for the defence of Burma. As General Slim pointed out, of all the Allied forces fighting the Japanese only the Chinese had defeated the Japanese, even if only in a single engagement.¹⁰ The Chinese Generalissimo laid down a raft of conditions; the Chinese forces must not be committed piecemeal or mixed with British forces, must be allotted separate areas of operations, supply and lines of communication, must not be deployed south of Toungoo and then only in a strictly defensive posture.¹¹ In command of Chinese Nationalist forces was General Joseph Stilwell, whose acerbity and complete contempt for all things British was tempered by a grudging respect for General Slim. Luckily for allied command and control the one British general with whom Stilwell got on well was Slim, with whom he established a harmonious working relationship that proved an immense help in the campaign. With Chinese troops in the theatre Slim and Alexander planned an active mobile defence from defensive lines across the Irrawaddy valley. The Sittang Valley, on the other side of the jungle clad Yomas, would be the responsibility of the Chinese.

The first line chosen by the British High Command was the Prome Toungoo line with the Chinese 200 Division under General Tai-En Lan, the only mechanized unit in the Chinese army, deployed at Toungoo. This line was quickly rolled up when the Japanese 55th Division isolated the 200 Division at Toungoo and a British armoured counterattack at Paungde, a village thirty miles south of Prome, was snared in Japanese anti tank defences. The other Chinese divisions ignored Stilwell's orders to go to the assistance of the 200 Div. The battle for Toungoo was a stark illustration of Chiang's unwillingness

⁹Field Marshal Viscount William Slim *Defeat Into Victory*, Pan Macmillan, London, 2009, p 23. This was a reference to the battle of Changsha in China.

¹⁰Alan K. Lathrop "The Employment of Chinese Nationalist Troops in the First Burma Campaign" in *Journal of South East Asian Studies* Volume 12 No. 2 September 1981, p 407, 410.

to support his most effective units and the complete lack of coordination between Chinese and British Commonwealth forces. British plans of holding a continuous front between the Irrawaddy and Sittang rivers evaporated and Burcorps was ordered to fall back on the Taungdwingyi-Magwe line and defend the oil wells of northern Burma. Burcorps was hemorrhaging with soldiers of the 1st Burma Division deserting to their homes. Using unfrequented tracks and dry stream beds columns of Japanese troops, often travelling on native carts and disguised as Burmese civilians, were infiltrating through the gaps between the two divisions towards the oilfields at Yenangyaung.¹¹ The British requested the Chinese to take over the eastern end of the line at Taungdwingyi. Though Stilwell ordered General Tu Yu ming, commander of the Chinese V Army, to relieve the British with a division, like many of his earlier orders this order was not complied with. By the morning of the 14th of April it was evident that the Magwe-Taungdwingyi line had collapsed. An exhausted and thirsty 1st Burma Division retreated towards the oil wells at Yenangyaung. A day later Yenangyaung was evacuated, the oil wells were destroyed and the 1st Burma Division disintegrated trying to break out of Yenangyaung.¹²

The withdrawal of the Chinese and the final phase of the retreat

The fall of Yenangyaung snapped the last tenuous threads of trust between the allies. The British were exasperated at having to support Chinese forces starved of logistical services and supplies. The Chinese thought that they were being asked to pull British chestnuts out of the fire. In effect the Chinese and the British had been fighting two different campaigns for separate objectives: the British to hold the Irrawaddy and Chindwin river valleys and the Chinese to retain control of the Shan states. But Stilwell's contempt for the British was punctured by the swift collapse of the Chinese armies in the Shan states and the retreat of the remnants to China. As the Burma Army was driven northwards up the Chindwin towards India the spirit of the combat units actually improved while the non combatants lost all semblance of discipline and degenerated into a demoralized, disorderly mob.¹³ With the Japanese prowling up the Chindwin the forward echelons of the Burma Army watched the river while its

rearguard was positioned to hold off any attempts by the Japanese to engage it and thus disrupt the retreat. 17th Division retreated through Kaduma and Pyingaing to Shwegyin, where it embarked on steamers for Kalewa. The last fifteen

¹¹ History of 17th Indian Division, p 14

¹² Louis Allen *Burma: the Longest War 1941-1945*, London, J.M.Dent and Sons Ltd., 1984, p 69.

¹³ William Slim, p 99. As the commander of Burma Army Alexander was responsible for the administration of rear areas and a professional execution of the scorched earth policy. As Crops commander Slim was responsible for the combatant units. For John Keegan the contrast between the complete collapse of discipline amongst non combatant troops and the resolute demeanour of the frontline troops testifies to the difference in leadership qualities between Alexander and Slim. See John Keegan, *Churchill's Generals* London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991, p 309.

hundred yards of the road to the pier ran through the Basin, a flat horseshoe shaped space about a thousand yards wide surrounded on three sides by a steep cliffs about two hundred yards high. The Basin was pounded by the Japanese. British armour and artillery took a heavy toll of attacking troops killing more than 170 Japanese soldiers. British troops who had been taken prisoner at the Sittang and escaped during this engagement reported that the Japanese, shaken by the intensity of this barrage, had pulled out during the night.¹⁴

The road to Imphal lay through the malaria infested Kabaw valley and Tamu. By pooling its resources and by using its limited transport to ferry troops in batches Burma Army succeeded in reaching India before the monsoon broke. On arrival at Imphal it had only ten twenty five pounder guns, four anti-tank guns, fourteen 3.7" mountain guns, about fifty lorries and thirty jeeps. On 20 May Burma Army was dissolved and IV Corps assumed operational command of all of its troops. The Indian soldiers were housed in camps around Imphal while the Karen, Kachin and Chin soldiers who had served in the Burma Rifles were discharged with three months' pay, a rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition.¹⁵

Conclusion: The British Commonwealth forces were decisively out fought and out generalled in the Burma campaign. Burma Corps lost most of its equipment and retreated to India with only 74 of the 150 guns it possessed. It suffered nearly three times as many

casualties as the Japanese.¹⁶ ¹² The key difference between the Japanese and the British Commonwealth forces was that the Japanese invaded Burma with a clear objective while the latter never received a clear directive from the British authorities. The Commonwealth military effort fell between two stools – preserving the Burma Army and denying the Japanese territory. The Indian Army had trained for the wrong war and there was nothing in its training and background that would have enabled them to come up with the appropriate response to the Japanese onslaught – composite groups of all arms operating from circular defences and engaging the Japanese in fluid, mobile warfare. The total lack of reconnaissance and intelligence precluded counterattacks against the Japanese. Tactical and operational inadequacies were magnified by hesitant generalship. Japanese generalship was bold, swift to seize opportunities and relentless in the exploitation of breakthroughs. British generalship was conservative, distributing forces in penny packets in a vain attempt to hold on to territory. British generals were not always on the same page. The theatre commander, General Archibald Wavell wanted the British Commonwealth forces to adopt a more aggressive posture and strike back at the Japanese with mobile armoured spearheads. General Tom Hutton adopted a more cautious, defensive approach, correctly foreseeing that his troops lacked the mobility and training to take the Japanese on in cross country warfare. After the destruction of the 17th Indian Division at the Sittang bridge and the fall of Rangoon the outcome of the campaign was no longer in doubt. The Chinese reinforcements were more than cancelled out by the Japanese formations that reached the theatre through Rangoon port. For the rest of the campaign the British Commonwealth forces never

¹⁴ History of 17th Indian Division, p 19

¹⁵ Bisheshwar Prasad, p 347

¹⁶ British Commonwealth casualties were 1499 killed, 2595 wounded and 9369 missing. The Japanese captured 4918 prisoners. A subtraction of this number from the figure for missing leaves 4451 unaccounted for. These include the Burmese personnel of the Burma Rifles who deserted to their homes and the dead who were abandoned on the battlefield. The Japanese reported 2431 dead. In the absence of a precise tally of the Japanese wounded the best estimate is 4500. See Alan Warren *Burma 1942 The Road from Rangoon to Mandalay*, London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011, p 231-232.

succeeded in forming a front long enough and strong enough to halt the Japanese from turning their flanks.

The loss of Burma capped a series of ignominious defeats at the hands of a race that had been regarded as racially inferior. It was a savage indictment of imperial ennui and of an army which believed that the indissoluble bond between the British officer and the Indian jawan would compensate for the lack of training and modern weapons. Like the fall of Malaya and Singapore it is best described as “a very British disaster.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Chris Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, London, Penguin, 2005, p 106.

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