

***BASED ON EXTRACTS FROM THE REGIMENTAL WAR CHRONICLE OF THE
OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY VOL3 1942/1944***

**SIXTH BATTALION
FROM JUNE TO 31st DECEMBER, 1942**

Extract from the intelligence officer's diary

"June 17. Glasgow. The Regiment embarked in the Empire Pride, a cargo-carrying ship converted into a troopship. Accommodation was very limited, and more than 2,500 troops were carried. The only other complete regiment on board was the 98th (Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry) Army Field Regiment, R. A. The trip was uneventful, and on the 2nd July we arrived at Freetown, still not knowing our ultimate destination. Sixteen days later we docked at Capetown and a few days' shore leave was a refreshing change from the monotony of the trip and everyone made the most of it. Much could be written about those few days in Capetown. The hospitality was second to none and we enjoyed ourselves to the full. "On the 21st July we sailed on for a destination which by now appeared definitely to be India, especially since the 98th Field Regiment had had orders to disembark at Capetown. This was a great blow to us all, for strong friendships had been formed and we were all set to co-operate had we gone into action together. On the 9th August, the same day as the arrest and imprisonment of Gandhi and his associates, the Regiment arrived in Bombay after a journey of some 14,000 miles. Owing to civil disturbances in Bombay there was a curfew in force and the hours of shore leave were limited. So this was India, the end of the journey."

The intelligence officer's diary goes on: "12th August the Regiment started, in two trains, for Attur, near Salem, in the Madras Presidency. We arrived on the 16th August, twenty-eight hours late. The camp, which had not been laid out, was five miles south-east of Attur on a sandy waste at the foot of some hills."

Note by the Commanding Officer

"As the formation to which the Regiment was destined to go was not yet formed, no blame for the lack of administrative facilities can be attached to division or brigade. Even those who had some knowledge of the inefficiency of the Indian administration were totally unprepared for such a lamentable display of incompetence on the part of the authorities responsible for the Regiment's reception. The climate in the Madras Presidency at this time of year is unhealthy even for seasoned troops in reasonably good accommodation, being extremely hot in the day and usually having some rain at night. The effect of this may be imagined when unseasoned troops are crowded sixteen to 180-lb. tents, when there are no cooking facilities except those which had yet to be unpacked from the train, no latrines until they had been dug with tools also still to be unpacked from the train, and virtually no shade. But this is not the end. The official allotment of tentage with which the Regiment was provided gave cover for approximately only 60 per cent., the remainder having to find what shelter they could under scattered palm trees and cactus bushes. In time, however, a great deal of hard work on the part of officers and men began to ease the situation."

The Regiment became part of the 74th Indian Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brigadier J. E. Hirst, the other two battalions being the 14th/10th Baluch Regiment and the 8th/ 19th Hyderabad Regiment. The brigade, together with the 51st and 53rd Indian Infantry Brigades, made up the 25th Indian Division, commanded by Major-General H. L. Davies, C.B.E.,D.S.O.,M.C.

Note by the Commanding Officer

"At this time the threat of a Japanese invasion of Southern India was a real one. Therefore the division, though still in an embryonic state, and by no means up to establishment in divisional troops, was given an operational role. This role was part of the bigger scheme for the defence of Southern India which arranged for the holding of certain key communication centres and vital areas by the limited forces on the spot. These were to be the pivots of resistance from which mobile forces outside the area could base a counter-offensive.

"The area allotted to the division was the important railway junction of Trichinopoly, with bridges over the Cauvery and Coleroon Rivers. Various reconnaissances of the area were carried out, and defence plans drawn up. In the meantime, the building up to its full establishment as a mechanized division and intensive training continued.

"For this purpose the 27th Field Regiment and 93rd Field Company, Indian Engineers, were affiliated to the brigade and subsequently became part of the brigade group. Major Gamier (commanding the 24th Field Battery) and Major Binney (commanding the 93rd Field Company), with their respective commands, became our constant companions, and a solid basis for future co-operation was formed."

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE 25TH INDIAN DIVISION ON FORMATION IN AUGUST, 1942

Commanding: Major-General H. L. Davies, C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.
Divisional Headquarters: Salem.

Divisional Troops

Reconnaissance Regiment: Jodphur Lancers.
Royal Artillery: 27th Field Regiment, R.A.
Engineers: three field companies, I.E.
Three field ambulances, I.A.M.C.
Three general purposes transport companies, R.I. A.S.C.
Three ordnance field workshops, I.E.M.E.

51st Indian Infantry Brigade (Kolar Goldfields)

Commander: Brigadier L. V. C. Hawkes.
8th Bn. The York and Lancaster Regiment.
17th/5th Mahratta Light Infantry.
16th/ 10th Baluch Regiment.

53rd Indian Infantry Brigade (Trichinopoly)

Commander: Brigadier S. F. Irwin.
9th Bn. The York and Lancaster Regiment.
2nd/2nd Punjab Regiment.
9th/9th Jat Regiment.

74th Indian Infantry Brigade (Attur)

Commander: Brigadier J. E. Hirst.
6th Bn. The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.
14th/ 10th Baluch Regiment.
8th/ 19th Hyderabad Regiment.

Extract from the intelligence officer's diary September.

After this unfortunate start we did not take long to settle down in our new surroundings and began the job of getting acclimatized and attuning ourselves to strange conditions.

"We now had to concentrate our attentions and training towards a new enemy—the Japanese. In effect, jungle warfare was to take the place of para patrols. Small parties were sent on two to three-day treks into the neighbouring hills to gain experience in bivouacking and knowing the country.

"On the 1st September our motor transport began to arrive. If India had done nothing else for us so far, it had at least been responsible for new transport. There were, however, no carriers yet.
"Battle drill, we discovered, was quite a novelty out here, and we were called upon to give demonstrations to other troops in the brigade.

October.

At the end of the month the first brigade exercise was held, during which the Regiment marched some sixty miles and, considering the heat, stood up to it well.

November.

Training continued. Sniping from trees and guerrilla warfare, at which the Japanese is so efficient, were practised, and the whole Regiment took part in a field firing exercise in conjunction with the 24th Field Battery. The divisional commander afterwards congratulated us on a very effective display of tactics and fire power.

"As an experiment the Regiment was issued with Indian rations for a day during the month to accustom the men to food which they might have to eat in an emergency. The canteen, which was now in full swing, was closed to prevent cheating. Although the general opinion seemed to be that the food was a trifle 'hot,' the test was not an unqualified success."

"For the first few months the delivery of mail was far from good. Apart from sea mail, which took three months, the only other means of communication with the United Kingdom was air mail, which was only flown the last lap home from West Africa, or airgraph, which took three weeks to one month. This state of affairs improved slowly, particularly after the innovation of the air letter-card.

During November the defence of Southern India was strengthened by the formation of XXXIII Indian Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General A. F. B. Christison, C.B., M.C., with headquarters at Jelarpet. Besides the 25th Indian Division, the corps contained the 19th Indian Division, stationed in the Madras area. Also attached for training purposes was the 251st Indian Tank Brigade. The corps undertook its first big exercise, "Minx," in December, when the 74th Indian Infantry Brigade acted a skeleton enemy "landing" on the coast north of Madras.

Regimental flashes on topees (a white horn on a scarlet diamond) as worn by the 43rd and 52nd were introduced.

Every effort was made to make Christmas, 1942, as big a success as possible for the men. The president of the regimental institutes managed to procure a liberal quantity of beer, and the men's dinners were really worthy of the occasion.

**SIXTH BATTALION FROM
1st JANUARY TO 30th JUNE, 1943**

The chief event in January was the watermanship camp, run by the 25th Indian Division at Bhavani. This was a great success and the Regiment learnt many useful lessons in the crossing of water obstacles by improvised means. In addition, it provided a change from the usual routine of training.

From the Regimental Diary

"February, 1943

"The month has been well used for training by the Regiment. There has been a marked absence of rain, and the temperature has risen considerably, but this has not deterred the troops from playing plenty of games, particularly hockey and basketball.

"April, 1943

"Close season started. All ranks instructed in the Morse code. Signal, mortar, carrier, M.T. and stretcher-bearer classes carried out to tram reserves for these jobs.

"Battle inoculation course for the whole Regiment, each platoon going through three days of exercises and assault courses."

At this point we might digress for a moment from the day-today chronicling of events. The end of April, 1943, saw the end of a period in the life of the Regiment and the division. The danger of a Japanese invasion of Southern India was growing less, and thought was being applied to more offensive operations than defending the area against an assault. At the end of Exercise "Trump" the corps commander had told us that we were booked to fight in an Eastern theatre in a largely forested area and that training in the future would have to include much jungle warfare. The division would have to go on to a new jungle warfare establishment, but quite what that would be no one was prepared to say. The only immediate effect was the taking away of all three-ton lorries and half of the carriers from No. 4 Platoon. From time to time various modifications were made in our establishment until the final solution was produced in September, 1943.

Exercise "Trump" had been designed to test the 25th Indian Division. It was the first big exercise the division had been through, and it emerged successfully. The exercise also marked the end of the Regiment's first period of training in India. Seven months' training had been completed: the men were acclimatized, fit and healthy. It now had to concentrate on jungle warfare and start again at the beginning with individual and section training and study the various problems that fighting in close country was going to produce.

A word about our life at Attur. Slowly but surely the camp had been transformed from a piece of sandy waste to a more civilized habitation. Huts had taken the place of many of the tents, though they had to be put up at private expense, and in preparation for the hot weather approaching, use was made of every available bit of shade. Most of the officers had their own huts by this time, some sharing, others preferring to remain single. A few even had their own private bathroom with concrete floors, sluices and a sump pit.

To give the men a change, a very useful little hill station had been discovered called Yercaud, near Salem. This was 4,000 feet high, and a platoon was sent up for a time for weekly periods. As there was a small rifle range available up there, training could continue.

Life was not all work and no play. The band was a very great asset and proved very popular among both our men and the rest of the brigade. The men were often asked over to the 14th/ 10th Baluch Regiment, where they were given opportunities of getting to know the Indian troops, and also given exhibitions of the Cuttacks' sword dancing and large feasts of curry. The Regiment played many games—soccer, hockey and, for the more elderly 30-year-olds particularly, basketball was very popular and caught on as the regular pastime.

RECORD OF THE 6TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY
JULY 1942-JUNE 1944

The cinema was a great boon and helped to pass what otherwise might have been long and dreary evenings when not on training. Our divisional commander was very keen on leave, and the men went away about once in three months, either to the British leave camp at Bangalore or in private billets at Wellington and Ootacamund in the Nilgiris, though the expense was rather prohibitive for the married private soldier. The officers found Ootacamund a good spot. Hunting, shooting and fishing were all available in due season, and there was a golf course and plenty of gaiety in the evenings.

Being the only British regiment in the brigade, we found that we were, rather naturally, the centre of local entertaining, and the officers' mess, as far as local conditions allowed, was kept up to Regimental standards.

Thus, through the first eight months in India, as well as training hard for war, the Regiment had time to amuse itself and stave off the boredom and staleness which are so apt to reduce efficiency and morale. At the end of April, then, it took its first of many headlong dives into the jungle and began to learn how to fight in a different kind of country.

FROM THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER'S DIARY

"In the last days of April the Regiment temporarily left Attur for a jungle camp at Gerhatti, where it remained until the 16th May. During this first period in the jungle much valuable experience was gained. Training consisted at first of the elementary type, finding the way by compass, use of the sun and stars, individual cooking, and the blazing of trails. Later, experiments in transporting mortars through the undergrowth, treks into the jungle and inter-company exercises became part of the programme."

Soon after the Regiment's return to Attur a commemoration service and march past in honour of the Allied victory in Tunisia were held. At the service the address was given by the Reverend J. A. C. Dakin, C.F., who had just come to the Regiment.

In June experiments were carried out in the loading and performance of a jeep which was in future to be the platoon vehicle on our new scale of transport. "Fog" (or "one long slog"), a long and even more ambitious exercise than "Trump," occupied the Regiment for a large part of the month. The main object of the exercise was to practise troops in the co-operation with tanks and the R.A.F. and also to practise the new transport scale. (This latter was rather difficult to carry out, as we had not yet received our new scale of transport.)

Altogether, the Regiment marched more than 110 miles and at the corps commander's conference after the exercise gained two mentions for outstanding work. "Fog" finished on the 1st July and by the 6th July the Regiment had moved to Conjeeveram, one of the holy towns of Southern India, some forty-five miles from Madras, and therefore considerably nearer than was Attur. The new camp, however, had been unoccupied except for natives for some months and was in a very bad state of repair. Very strict anti-malarial precautions had to be taken and each company had an officer and a special squad appointed to deal with this menace.

SIXTH BATTALION
FROM 1st JULY TO 31st DECEMBER 1943

The brigade commander very soon ordered a reconnaissance to be carried out with the intention of moving the whole brigade out of these unhealthy and uncongenial surroundings and into a cooler and more suitable area for living and for continuing our jungle training. Accordingly, apart from the necessary rear parties left to swelter in the humidity of Conjeeveram, the brigade left for the area of Komattiyur and Alangayam, some 120 miles south-west. Living under canvas and in certainly much cooler climatic conditions, the Regiment soon settled down to more company and individual jungle training. Other forms of training were instruction in the handling and firing of the 2-pounder and 6-pounder anti-tank guns placed at our disposal by a neighbouring battery and close liaison with the 3rd Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers), who were affiliated to the brigade for training and sent various officers and N.C.Os. to us on attachment while we were in the jungle.

to go to other jobs.

The order of battle on the 31st July, 1943, was:

Strength.—Officers, 26; warrant officers class 1,1; warrant officers class II, 5; colour-Serjeants, 6; Serjeants, 26; corporals, 62; privates, 624; total, 750.

From the 19th to the 31st August the Regiment was engaged on Exercise "Trump II." Unlike the previous exercise, the 74th Indian Infantry Brigade had a defensive role which allowed the Regiment to spend four days in preparation. Slit trenches and fox-holes were dug, mines laid, wire erected, really formidable road-blocks and bunkers constructed, and great attention was paid to camouflage.- Good observation posts were found and with the excellent patrolling of the forward companies much information about the enemy was gained.

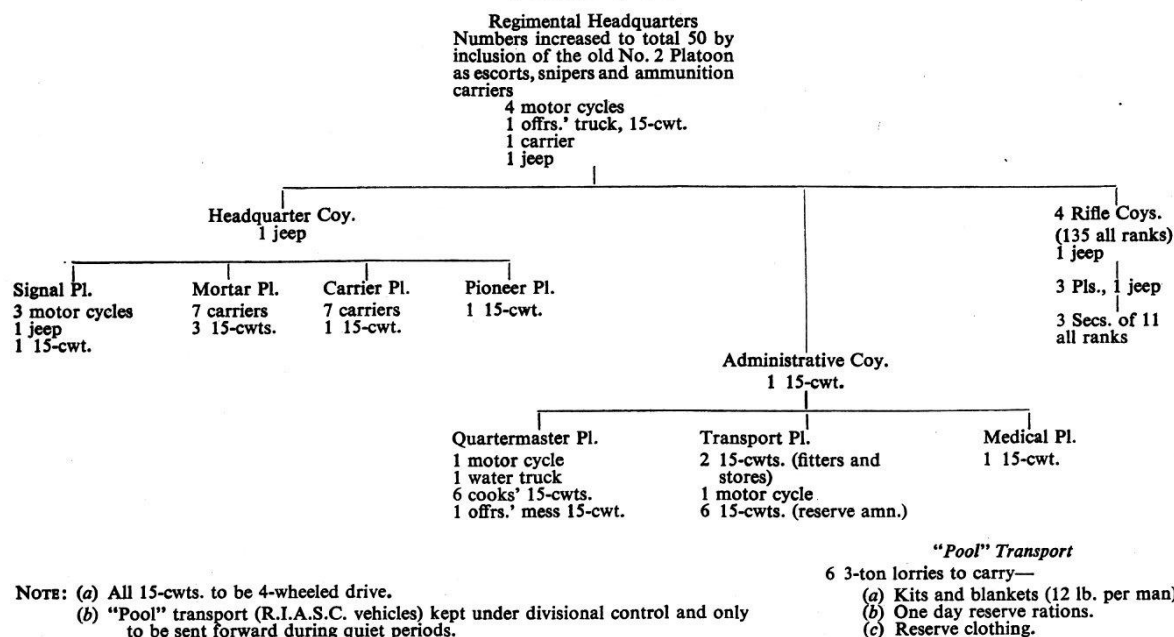
The beginning of September brought us the sad news, long expected, that the colonel was leaving us to take up an appointment as second-in-command of the 4th Brigade in the British 2nd Division. By the 10th September he had said his farewells, and handed over to his successor, Lieutenant-Colonel P. F. Metcalfe. Two days later the Regiment left the jungle for the heat of the plains and returned to Conjeeveram.

At this juncture the role and organization of the division underwent a change. The Japanese threat to Madras was no longer the very real one that it had been in 1942 and the division was relieved of its operational role and concentrated entirely on training. It had become obvious to all that the normal mechanical transport establishment of a division would not work in jungle country, where presumably the 25th Division would eventually operate. Accordingly, while in the Madras area, the division began to change over on to a new jungle warfare establishment. The brigades had already done a considerable amount of research and experiment with jungle warfare up to company level, but no higher than that. The division was due to go to a new jungle area in the middle of November to study and practise as a division on the new jungle warfare establishment.

The Regiment's establishment also was slightly altered, the main changes being: H.Q. Company was split, the mechanical transport, stretcher-bearers and quartermaster and his men being taken out to form a new administrative company! No. 4 Platoon was reduced to two sections of carriers and No. 2 Platoon was abolished, the men becoming escorts and snipers in Regimental headquarters. Rifle companies' numbers were increased to 140 all ranks. Transport was also altered. Rifle companies were to have four jeeps only; and nothing bigger than a 15-cwt. truck with a four-wheeled drive was to be included in the Regimental transport. In addition, as there were insufficient reinforcements in India to keep British battalions up to strength with four rifle companies, one company had to be disbanded. C Company was disbanded and became reinforcement company. It was, however, reformed in November. Accordingly, on arrival at Conjeeveram, the Regiment began to form on its new establishment and to make use of the facilities of a standing camp before departing once more for the jungle in two months' time.

NOTES ON THE NEW ORGANIZATION

ESTABLISHMENT OF REGIMENT WITH VEHICLES ON NEW JUNGLE WARFARE SCALE,
 OCTOBER, 1943



(a) The substitution of jeeps for 15-cwts. in rifle companies and the general reduction of the amount of transport in the Regiment necessitated much more being carried on the man. The conditions of country and climate might easily make it necessary for the Regiment to have to operate with no transport at all at times. Therefore two loads of equipment were so worked out—man-pack and jeep—that the Regiment could change from one to the other with as little trouble as possible. The results of experiments were finally produced according to the tables that follow.

(b) All ranks carried the pack on the back, and not the haversack, at all times.

(c) Officers carried rifles and men's pattern equipment. This was a result of experience gained by other formations in Burma, when many officers had been picked off by Japanese snipers in the jungle by being conspicuous by wearing different equipment from the men. The revolvers were given to the stretcher-bearers instead.

(d) The number of Thompson sub-machine guns in the Regiment was increased to ninety, but the numbers in rifle sections remained at one.

The ammunition was very heavy to carry and expenditure high. Therefore they were given to transport drivers and not to riflemen.

(e) Much time and trouble was spent in working out the new organization, both at Conjeeveram and, later, at Teppakadu in a more practical form. The sum total and results of the research are embodied in the notes that follow.

RECORD OF THE 6TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY
JULY 1942-JUNE 1944

THE REGIMENT MOVING ON A MAN-PACK BASIS

1. Introduction

The Regiment should be able to move completely devoid of vehicles for a minimum period of seventy-two hours and extending to about five days.

2. Replenishment

Ammunition and rations carried to be sufficient for five days.

3. Rations

Assuming that the rations would be in some compressed or dehydrated form, it is reckoned that five days' worth will weigh about 5 lb. 6 ozs.

4. Ammunition

(a) Officers carry twenty rounds of .303, everyone else carries at least fifty rounds, and where possible 100 or 150 rounds.

(b) Brens carry eight magazines, which can be refilled from the bandoliers—the ammunition being carried on the other men of the section.

(c) Where possible, Thompson sub-machine guns to have 200 rounds, but when high expenditure is not expected 100 rounds are considered adequate.

(d) Grenades and 2-inch mortar ammunition are given high priority; 3-inch mortars—two detachments only—are given eighteen rounds, of which six are smoke.

(e) Reserve.—A small number of hand grenades and 2-inch mortar signal bombs are carried in Regimental headquarters. No other reserve is carried, as each rifle section has approximately 1,100 rounds of S.A.A. on a basis of one N.C.O. and seven men per section.

5. Loads

Loads have been divided into:

(a) Domestic load—all items to keep a man warm and fed.

(b) Useful load—additional items carried on the man, i.e., weapons and ammunition.

(c) Working load—total of domestic and useful loads.

(d) Maximum load—the maximum load, except for one or two specialists, arrived at is 54 lb. Every effort is made not to exceed this.

(e) The principle is that every man in the Regiment carries a domestic load of 21 lb., the other loads being built up on this standard.

(f) - Examples of loads carried:

Person	Domestic load	Useful load	Working load
Rifle coy. officer	Belt, braces, pouches, water bottle, pack and haversack, mess tin, towel, soap, 2 prs. socks, holdall, housewife, mosquito cream, rations, cardigan, mosquito net, gas cape, log line, water sterilizing tablets— 21 lb.	Rifle, bayonet, 20 rds. .303, map case, watch and whistle, officers' haversack, binoculars, compass, note book and pencil, pointers staff, 1 gren. hand — 19 lb.	40 lb.
No. 1 Bren Gunner	As above — 21 lb.	Bren and 4 magazines of 28 rds.— 33 lb.	54 lb.
Rifleman in section	As above — 21 lb.	Rifle, bayonet, 150 rds. .303, 3 gren. hand 36, entrenching tool or matchett or other cutting tool — 21 lb.	48 lb.

(g) Specialist platoons and others have the useful load altered according to weapons and equipment carried.

RECORD OF THE 6TH BATTALION OXFORDSHIRE & BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY
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6. Porters

To help specialist platoons in carrying extra and heavy equipment, additional porters are provided by rifle companies.

7. Notes on platoons and companies

(a) Signal platoon.—Eight miles of cable and eight No. 48 sets are carried. This requires thirty-four porters.

(b) Mortar platoon.—Efforts were made to carry two detachments, but later practice found this impossible owing to the weight of the mortars and ammunition and the numbers of porters required. Therefore on a man-pack basis, the 3-inch mortars were left behind.

(c) Pioneer platoon.—Carry tools, explosives and booby-trap equipment.

(d) Medical platoon.—Divided into headquarters and four stretcher-bearer teams of four men each, with an extra fifth man as relief and porter.

(e) Rifle companies.—Officers and orderlies are equipped as lightly as possible. As many people as possible carry S.A.A. and grenades as a pool, which includes company and Regimental reserves.

8. Clothing

If each man carried a groundsheet and blanket the maximum load would be increased to 61 lb. Therefore they have been omitted and are carried only if weather conditions are exceptional.

For some time we had been giving serious thought to the subject of how to move through jungle impassable to wheeled transport and yet to be self-contained for forty-eight hours or more. There was a twelve-hour discussion on the subject at which we made up our minds on how it was to be done, and on the 31st October the Regiment paraded in man-pack order for the divisional commander. He made many pertinent suggestions and we felt that we had the matter taped. The weights were higher than we had ever carried before, but we became accustomed to them.

On the 11th November we used the 52nd's battle honour "Nonne Bosschen" as an excuse to have a holiday. The whole day was given over to competitions of different kinds and after lunch several guests, civilians as well as members of other regiments hi the brigade, came to the gymkhana.

On the 17th November we left for our new jungle camp at Teppakadu, on the boundary of Madras Presidency and Mysore State, between Mysore itself and Ootacamund. As a matter of interest, the route followed by the Regiment from Conjeeveram to Teppakadu was as follows: Vellore, Vanyambadi, Ibbalur, the outskirts of Bangalore, Seringapatam, Mysore, Nanjangud and Teppakadu. Thus for at least part of the way the Regiment followed the same road as the 52nd when campaigning against Tippoo Sahib at the end of the eighteenth century.

It was a lovely bit of country, the camp being in a teak forest which had been a game sanctuary in normal times. The climate for India was good, as we were 3,000 feet up out of the sticky Madras heat and needed a couple of blankets at night. The journey took three days by road. The advanced party had put in some fine work, especially in making tracks over a hilly site sodden by rain. When the Regiment arrived our first job was to build huts of bamboo thatched with elephant grass, and within a week most of the Regiment were housed in huts of their own building with home-made beds to sleep in. The band and the cinema had been taken with us, and on the 28th November the first cinema show took place in a forest clearing near the camp. The screen was stretched between two teak trees and the audience sat on the ground. Films were shown every night when the Regiment was in camp, and a tiger used to prowl through the auditorium after the show and frighten the operator to death. C Company was reformed and the Regiment returned to its proper establishment of four rifle companies. By the beginning of December all hut building had been finished; and jungle training began in earnest and continued until the end of January.

From the Regimental Diary

"September, 1943

"7th.—Lieutenant-Colonel R. H. Doyne addressed all ranks and bade them farewell before leaving to take new appointment as second-in-command, 4th Infantry Brigade.

"10th.—Major P. F. Metcalfe promoted lieutenant-colonel and appointed to command the Regiment. Lieutenant-Colonel R. H. Doyne departed.

"December, 1943—Teppakadu

"General.—The beginning of the month marked the end of the period given to the erection of huts in the jungle camp and generally settling in. Jungle training began and the first few days were taken up with reconnaissances and digging positions for Exercise 'Malabar,' which began on the 6th December.

On the 16th December platoon training began, six platoons at a time being on Exercise 'Liberty' while the others practised ambushing, digging foxholes, booby-traps, compass work and navigation charts.

The order of battle on the 30th November, 1943, was:

Strength.—Officers, 26; warrant officers class I, 1; warrant officers class II, 7; colour-serjeants, 6; Serjeants, 29; corporals, 68; privates, 690; total, 827.

SIXTH BATTALION
FROM 1st JANUARY TO 31st MAY, 1944
From the Regimental Diary

"January, 1944

"General.—The beginning of the month saw preparations made for the Regiment's participation in the intensive brigade and divisional training during the latter half of the month. Exercises were held to practise the Regiment in contact drill in the jungle, the careful plotting of enemy bunker and foxhole positions and a march through the jungle on a man-pack basis. The arrival of our new transport, jeeps and Dodge 15 cwts. with four-wheeled drive, caused a reallocation of vehicles and great attention was paid to the question of the loads they would carry.

"It was with regret that the Regiment left its jungle camp at Teppakadu on the 11th, for during the brief stay all ranks had enjoyed the cooler weather, the novelty of living in home-made bamboo huts, and the new and interesting training. On the 12th began Exercise 'Contact III' designed to practise the brigade in locating and assaulting a bunker position. The Regiment's part was that of assault battalion, and after some successful patrolling on the night of the 13th we moved on the 14th on a man-pack basis through the jungle round the flank of the enemy and were in a favourable position for the assault when the "Stand fast" was sounded.

"On the 17th the divisional Exercise "Wynaad" began, and in the two days' interval all ranks devoted themselves to the business of cleaning both themselves and their clothes. Again on 'Wynaad' we formed part of the assault brigade and for the first few days were engaged in patrolling, reconnoitring tracks for jeeps in the rear of the enemy, and constructing them. Finally the brigade moved round on a flank to within three miles of the enemy's bunker positions, a 2,000-yard jeep track was constructed, and on the morning of the 23rd a preliminary brigade attack was made to surround the enemy entirely. At this point the exercise ended, and two days later a continuation was made in Exercise 'Wynaad II' to test the movement of the division down a single-track road and the consequent road protection duties.

"Having marched to the village of Gudular the exercise ended on the 28th and the remainder of the month was spent in that area. Shooting took place on a hastily constructed range and short leave was granted to a limited number of men to Ootacamund.

"3rd.—Regimental Exercise No. 2 to teach the deployment drill in advance to contact.

"4th.—By early morning a fair idea had been obtained of the enemy's bunker positions, and this part of the exercise was ended, the Regiment then assuming the role of the assault battalion. The Regiment marched back two miles, formed a box,>(*Modern tactical disposition in thick country, similar to the old square of Peninsular days.) and rested during the day before Regimental Exercise No. 3—to carry out an attack by the rear battalion of the brigade moving round the flank of the enemy.

"5th.—0500 hrs. the Regiment moved on a man-pack basis through the jungle. The drill was good, but progress was slow and it took until 1100 hrs. to cover the three miles. Much praise to those who handled the compasses—intelligence officers and the officer commanding C Company—for directing the Regiment to an exact pin-point after seven hours' marching through thick jungle. Then, 400 yards from the enemy, a box was formed and an attack made. The Regiment then marched back to camp.

"7th.—Demonstration by D Company on various methods of loading jeeps. Decided that one blanket per man and one mosquito-net for two men to be carried on platoon jeeps."

"February, 1944

"On the 2nd February the Regiment began its journey away from the jungle towards a more civilized part of India. The journey was made by alternate marching and riding in transport—through Mysore, Seringapatam and Bangalore—and it was not until the 8th that we arrived at our camp at Vadigenhalli, some twenty-eight miles from Bangalore. Here we had a camp totally different from that occupied in the jungle. Rows of uniform huts, the roads marked out with whitewashed stones, a large and well-stocked canteen and our own cinema again. The Regiment was pleased at the prospect of a chance to clean up.

"The rest of the month was largely spent in preparing for another exercise, but many were sceptical about it being merely an exercise. All kit and equipment was overhauled and the kit of each company was inspected by the commanding officer. On the 28th the Regiment was inspected by the divisional commander, who said that he was impressed by the soldierly bearing of the men and added that all ranks looked very fit and tough."

ORDER OF BATTLE, MARCH, 1944, ON GOING TO BURMA

Note.—The Regiment left for active operations in Burma nine officers under establishment.

Strength.—Officers, 23; warrant officers class 1,1; warrant officers class II, 7; colour-serjeants, 6; Serjeants, 29; corporals, 63; privates, 666; total, 795.

25TH INDIAN DIVISION, MARCH, 1944, ON GOING TO BURMA

Divisional Commander: Major-General H. L. Davies, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C.

Divisional Troops

Divisional Defence Battalion: 8th/ 19th Hyderabad Regiment. Royal Artillery:
8th Field Regiment, R.A.

27th (Jungle) Field Regiment, R.A.

5th Indian Field Regiment, I.A.

7th Indian Combined Anti-Aircraft and Anti-Tank Regiment, I.A. Engineers:

Three field companies, I.E.

Bridging section, I.E.

Three field ambulances, I.A.M.C.

Three general purposes transport companies, R.I.A.S.C.

Three field workshop companies, I.E.M.E.

51st Indian Infantry Brigade

Commander: Brigadier T. H. Angus.

8th Battalion The York and Lancaster Regiment.

17th/5th Mahratta Light Infantry.

16th/ 10th Baluch Regiment

53rd Indian Infantry Brigade

Commander: Brigadier G. A. P. Coldstream.

9th Battalion The York and Lancaster Regiment.

2nd/2nd Punjab Regiment.

4th/ 18th Royal Garhwal Rifles.

74th Indian Infantry Brigade

Commander: Brigadier J. E. Hirst.

6th Battalion The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

3rd/2nd Gurkha Rifles.

14th/ 10th Baluch Regiment.

THE ARAKAN THEATRE

Before plunging into the day-to-day narrative of the regiment's life in the Arakan theatre of Burma it is necessary to give some description of the country and the whys and wherefores of the campaign. Names of places and formations and distances mean nothing to the average reader unless he has some idea of this amazingly primitive country.

1. Lie of the land

In order that the following events in Arakan, and the subsequent narrative of the part played by the 6th Battalion, should become clearer to the reader, the geography of this part of the country calls for detailed description.

Northern Arakan is a mountainous district, the hills forming long, narrow ranges running parallel to the coast. This narrative in its earlier stages is chiefly concerned with the most westerly of these, known as the Mayu Range or Spine, so called because it forms the backbone of the Mayu Peninsula. It attains its greatest breadth and height in the north, where the crest exceeds 2,000 feet above sea-level; thence it runs in a south-south-easterly direction, gradually narrowing and losing height, for a distance of some eighty miles, until it ends in the sea at Foul Point, separated from Akyab Island by a narrow strait.

Throughout its length the Spine forms a knife-edged ridge seldom more than a few yards wide at the crest, from which the sides fall away precipitously on either hand. The vegetation at about 1,000 feet is mixed forest with a preponderance of large trees and moderate undergrowth. A path ran along the top, but away from it movement was almost impossible owing to the precipitous slopes. In most places trees restricted the view, but here and there exposed summits, such as Hill 1619, north of the Tunnels, afforded a panorama in every direction limited only by the horizon. Positions on the Spine, therefore, were always valuable as artillery observation posts. Furthermore, they were rendered almost impregnable by the difficulty of access.

The lower slopes of the range, which were less precipitous, were covered by dense bamboo jungle through which movement was impossible unless paths were cut. On either side of the Spine they merged into the foot-hills which covered an area extending up to a hundred miles from the foot of the main range. The foothills consisted of very much smaller features, which rarely exceeded 200 feet in height. Though in some places they consisted of a shapeless maze of hill and valley, they showed a general tendency to form subsidiary ridges parallel to the main ridge which they also resembled in their general structure, for the crests were again of the knife-edged variety, and the lower slopes were no less steep. Between the main blocks of the foot-hills there were wider, open valleys which in peace time had been cultivated, though at the time of the campaign they were overgrown by coarse, long grass. The higher ground was covered with low scrub which was in many places as impenetrable as a bramble thicket (though fortunately less prickly); in other parts there was elephant grass or thick bamboo.

The sub-soil of the foot-hills was firm sand in which digging was easy. Magnificent defensive positions could therefore be prepared. One of their peculiarities was that the range of small-arms fire was generally either point-blank or above 300 yards. The intervening country was rendered dead ground by the steepness of the jungle-clad slopes, but could be effectively covered by grenades rolled down from the parapets of slit trenches sited near the summit.

Beyond the foot-hills on either side of the range there was a level plain. The plain on the east carried the Kalapanzin River, which changes its name to the Mayu River in its lower reaches. Here it becomes an arm of the sea and constitutes the eastern boundary of the Mayu Peninsula.

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The western or coastal plain demands a more detailed description, for there the 6th Battalion saw much of its action. The plain is about four miles wide in the north of the peninsula and maintains this breadth for over half its length; but at Alethang-yaw it narrows appreciably, and in the southern sector, between Kyaukpandu and Foul Point, only a few hundred yards separate the foot-hills from the sea. The plain is level and entirely devoted to the cultivation of paddy. This crop grows under water during the monsoon and in order to regulate surface drainage the land is broken up into a series of square fields, each of about an acre's extent, being separated from their neighbours by low banks or bunds. Here and there, on ground only slightly raised above the general level, are small clumps of trees, each sheltering a village. The villages are reached and interconnected by narrow footpaths running along the top of the paddy bunds; for bullock-carts are not used by the villagers in this district and consequently there are no roads apart from those made by Europeans for their own purposes. The main channels of communication are the chaungs or tidal creeks which everywhere intersect the plain. Every villager owns a sampan or canoe, and these craft provide the normal means of transport in this part of Arakan. The chaungs both divide and link up the countryside; for while they afford numberless obstacles to the movement of men, mules and vehicles, they are the highways of water-borne traffic. Indeed, during the monsoon rains, when all overland routes are rendered impassable, they are the sole means of communication between place and place.

To the west of the Mayu Peninsula there runs a lower and shorter replica called the Teknaf Peninsula. In itself it owed its military importance to the presence of various medical installations, which could there be established well forward with reasonable security and in amenable surroundings. But indirectly the Teknaf Peninsula exerted a far-reaching influence on the strategy of the campaign; for it gave perfect shelter to the arm of the sea separating it from the mainland, and this, the Naf River, constituted the principal highway of British communications. The Naf is over a mile wide and forty miles long. Its waters are sufficiently deep to allow the entry of supply ships of up to 6,000 tons' draught. The whole administrative plan depended on the navigability of this waterway.

It has already been stated that communications by land in the Mayu Peninsula were meagre in the extreme. Before the war there was only one paved road in existence. This connected the creek-steamer port of Maungdaw on the eastern bank of the Naf River with Buthidaung, which was the administrative centre and rice port of the Kalapanzin valley. The road had originally been constructed as a railway, but at this time was paved with brick and was in fairly good condition. It traversed the Mayu range by the easiest of its passes, piercing the highest col by means of two short tunnels, which feature importantly in local strategy.

All other roads were unpaved and it was quite out of the question to use them at all for vehicular traffic during the monsoon rains. The Arakan all-weather road, constructed for the purposes of the campaign, had its southern terminus at Bawli, in the north of the peninsula, and there the principal fair-weather road began. This ran the whole length of the Mayu range at its western foot, being known as the military road. The road crossed innumerable chaungs which were well enough bridged in the British section; but farther south most of them were cut or in disrepair, for the Japanese used the road little, being almost entirely deficient of motor transport.

Next in importance was the route communicating with the Kalapanzin valley across the Ngakyedauk Pass. Though capable of taking tanks during the dry season, it became impassable even to pedestrians during the rains. The third road claiming special mention was called the P.W.D.*(*Public Works Department.) road. This ran parallel to the military road, but nearer to the sea, branching south from the Maungdaw—Buthidaung road at Kanyindan. Numerous other subsidiary tracks appeared as military necessity determined; for in the dry season little work was necessary to make temporary roads over the paddy fields.

Village life continued much as usual throughout the campaign except in the immediate battle area. Most of the villages were situated in the coastal plain and the inhabitants, though subject to certain restrictions, were allowed to continue to occupy their homes and carry out their customary vocations of agriculture and fishing.

No description of Arakan would be complete without mention of the monsoon, which completely alters the aspect of the countryside. During the hot weather work in the fields is at a standstill. The whole landscape is brown and torrid. Huge clouds of dust pursue each vehicle as it makes its way along the crumbling roads. The temperature rises to above 100 degrees and humidity is high, sapping men's energy and making even small exertions a hardship. The afternoon sea breeze does little to relieve the heat, and at night, when the wind has dropped, the air seems even more stagnant and intolerable than at noonday.

The rains begin at the end of May. They bring welcome relief from the brunt of the heat, and new verdure clothes the countryside. There is no dust. But the whole country is quickly turned into a quagmire. Rain falls day and night without intermission. Even within the shelter of buildings damp pervades everything, mildew grows on books and boots overnight, and mustiness permeates the atmosphere. All military activity on a large scale is at a standstill. Essential patrols can only be conducted with difficulty and discomfort. On the other hand, life in the villages is one of renewed activity. The flooded paddy fields bear their harvest and the work of this one season provides the population with their sustenance for a whole year.

The rains slacken in September and military operations once more become possible, but with what discomfort is known to our men. By the end of October the monsoon is finally over and the cold season begins. The days are sunny but not too hot, and by night the temperature falls low enough to call for two blankets (if the men were lucky enough to have them). On the whole, it is a healthy, bracing season. Malaria and other tropical diseases are at their lowest incidence. It is not until December that the land is sufficiently well drained for vehicles to move freely across country, which event marks the opening of the campaigning season. Towards the end of March the cool weather merges once more into the hot, and so the cycle of seasons is renewed.

2. The Role of the 25th Indian Division

Communication by land between Burma and India is a difficult matter. A great mountain range runs along its western frontier from the north of the country to the sea. The only part of Burma which lies on the western side of this barrier is the district round Akyab which was surrendered to the Japanese with the rest of the country when the British retreated in 1942. Arakan is the gateway from Burma to India—though the converse is not true, for the mountains between Akyab and the Irrawaddy plain are traversed by few and difficult passes. By yielding Akyab to the Japanese we had placed in their hands a base from which they could best launch an offensive against India.

In 1943, therefore, operations were staged to recover this important objective. The forces employed were wholly inadequate and the result was defeat, as the men of the 6th Battalion saw for themselves two years later when they advanced to Donbaik, where derelict tanks and abandoned equipment still bore witness to the speed of our withdrawal. In 1943 the threat to India through Arakan remained unbroken.

In the following year XV Indian Corps, under General Christison, initiated a second offensive, this time with ampler resources and more limited objectives. The intention was to kill as many Japanese as possible. The occupation of new territory was of secondary importance, but was not to be neglected if circumstances were favourable. The corps plan was for an advance on a two-divisional front, the 5th Indian Division being on the west and the 7th Indian Division on the east of the Mayu range. At the same time two brigades of the 81st West African Division were creating a diversion by an operation in the Kaladan valley, which lies beyond mountain ranges some forty miles farther east.

All was going well with the main advance, and both divisions were already fighting on the line of the Maungdaw—Buthidaung road when the Japanese commander launched his counter-offensive in February, 1944. He passed a strong force through and round the left flank of the 7th Division and established it in the Ngakyedauk Pass, thus effectively cutting the land communications of the British division.

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He hoped that disorderly retreat and rout would ensue; but the events of 1943 were not repeated. Our men formed themselves into compact boxes which were maintained with supplies dropped by the R. A.F. until reinforcements from Chittagong (26th Indian Division) had reopened the Ngakyedauk Pass. The situation was further stabilized by the arrival of the 36th Division, which had been concentrating in Chittagong with a view to a sea-borne assault on Akyab, should the tactical situation permit.

Arakan had now all the soldiers it needed, but the situation was modified by the development of events elsewhere. It was apparent that the enemy was staging a major offensive against the British IV Corps, which was based on Imphal, nearly 300 miles farther north. The indications were that this was his main effort, while his thrust in Arakan had been a diversion, timed so as to draw British reserves away from the vital theatre of operations. General Slim, commanding the Fourteenth Army, therefore began to look for reinforcements for the IV Corps front.

At this time the 25th Indian Division became available for an active role. It might have been expected that the division would have been allotted to the Imphal front to meet the impending threat, but this course was not adopted. The reason was that the 25th Division had been raised and trained wholly on a mechanical transport basis, but General Slim felt that a division equipped with animal transport was essential in the roadless terrain around Imphal. Furthermore, the 25th Division was as yet untried in battle, and a more experienced division was to be preferred in view of the stiff fighting which undoubtedly lay ahead. Therefore he determined to withdraw the 5th Indian Division from Arakan and to replace it on that front by the 25th Indian Division.

The new division began to arrive in the middle of March and found a tactical situation as follows. The Japanese offensive had proved to them a costly failure. They were now back in their old positions and once more on the defensive. Fighting was in progress for the possession of the Maungdaw—Buthidaung road, of which the Japanese still held the mountainous section in the neighbourhood of the Tunnels, midway between the two villages. On the west of the range the 5th Indian Division had captured the Japanese strong-point at Razabil in their last action before being flown north to Imphal. On the eastern side the 7th Division were being relieved by the 26th Division in order that they might rest after the strenuous fighting they had recently experienced. The 36th Division were holding a firm base at the western end of the Ngakyedauk and were operating on the Mayu Spine in order to clear the Japanese from the Tunnels area.

By this time the monsoon was too close for the initiation of any major British offensive and the corps commander therefore evolved a long-term policy for the conclusion of the season's campaign. His plan was to establish the monsoon line on the axis of the Maungdaw—Buthidaung road and activity before the rains was to be confined to the capture and consolidation of the ground which it was intended subsequently to hold. The task of clearing the enemy from the Tunnels and the surrounding heights fell to the 36th and 26th Divisions. The newly won ground was to be taken over and held by the 25th Division, which was chosen to remain forward during the monsoon. The other two divisions were to withdraw as soon as their task had been accomplished.

While the Tunnels were being cleared the 25th Division was to hold a firm base in the Maungdaw area and to assist the other two divisions by offensive patrols and small-scale operations with a limited objective.

The plan was, in effect, to maintain a beach-head in hostile territory throughout the monsoon. All maintenance was to be by water, using the sheltered route provided by the Naf River, for once the rains began all communications by land with the beach-head would be rendered impassable. The Tunnels pass and the road it carried was the only feature of main tactical importance in the Mayu Peninsula.

Its possession was vital to enable an offensive to be launched during the following season sufficiently early for decisive results to be obtained; and, having spent a whole campaign on its capture, the corps commander was not inclined lightly to surrender it once more to the enemy.

The 25th Division therefore received the somewhat surprising orders to dig themselves well in and to make themselves at home; for it was intended that they should remain for a period of not less than nine months.

3. V Force

In Arakan the civilian population were not moved away from their homes except in the areas where fighting was in progress, or which were occupied by our own troops. The Japanese mixed more freely with civilians than our men, for they billeted themselves on the villagers in all except the most forward areas. These circumstances make it clear that there was important intelligence to be derived from civilian sources.

In order to exploit this in a way capable of producing reliable or at any rate assessable information, V Force was brought into being. It might be described as a body of irregulars with a low-grade secret-service role. The rank and file were recruited from among the more adventurous young men in the villages. They were equipped with rifles and bayonets, but not with uniforms. Instead they were given passes and an arm-band bearing the V symbol. Their officers were British, specially seconded for this work, usually after training in intelligence duties. These were helped by a small number of soldiers, both British and Indian, mainly for purposes of administration and discipline. The officers did not require to know Arakanese or Urdu, for they usually worked through interpreters.

The force was organized into a series of detachments which were located at different points in the front line, on occasions even residing in no-man's-land. They reported direct to their headquarters (under a lieutenant-colonel), which were situated with corps headquarters, with copies to division and to any lower formation directly concerned. Their information was chiefly obtained by patrols consisting of one or two men. Being dressed in civilian clothes (and going unarmed to escape attention), these patrols were able to penetrate deep into enemy territory, beyond the range of our own reconnaissance. Officers only accompanied missions of exceptional importance. Their normal task was to brief the scouts and interrogate them on their return. Their work was complicated by the fact that the rank and file could not read maps and the pin-pointing of the information they brought back was somewhat hazardous. Much use was made of aerial verticals and obliques, and some of the scouts became quite skilful in tracing the route they had taken hi air photographs.

The information obtained by V Force was of a varied nature. The most important was that concerning the movement of troops, and sometimes early intelligence could be obtained of concentrations or reliefs. There was an undoubted tendency for the observer to over-estimate the number of men he had seen, and it therefore became normal to reduce his numbers drastically in interpretation, though the danger of this practice was proved more than once hi the event. The location of Japanese dumps of food and ammunition was also reported and these were subjected to artillery or aerial bombardment when the target appeared worthwhile. Sometimes the scouts would even join the civilian working parties constructing these dumps for the enemy. They also reported the situation of his monsoon quarters and his communications to our forward troops. One interesting source of information came from public meetings which were from time to time held by Japanese commanders.

The object of the meetings was to disseminate propaganda, but the speaker often discussed the war situation on the immediate front with astonishing frankness, and the views he expressed about the British were always entertaining, if of no serious import.

An entirely different task performed by V Force was the rescue of airmen who had made forced landings behind the Japanese lines. Several such rescues were successfully accomplished, often at great danger to the V Force men concerned.

South of Akyab V Force continued to operate, but its work was of less value, for the scouts were working in unfamiliar country and the information they produced was meagre.

The highest testimony which can be paid to this cheerful and enterprising body comes from the Japanese themselves. In captured documents they express the view that British intelligence was almost omniscient owing to the scope and activity of our V Force patrols.

4. "Jiffs" and the Indian National Army

In Arakan our men encountered an Indian as well as a Japanese enemy. The reason is as follows. When Singapore fell, large numbers of Indian soldiers fell into Japanese hands, and the enemy tried to enrol these men in a combatant force for use against the British. The organization found a political leader in Subdha Chandra Bose, an Indian "patriot" who was a fugitive from British justice. He and his immediate supporters toured the prison camps lecturing to the inmates. All forms of persuasion were used to induce them to join the new movement. They were told that the Japanese had come as liberators and not as conquerors; that the British were a decadent race; and that by joining the Indian National Army, as the organization was called, the prisoners would soon be able to return to their native land, where they would be welcomed as the apostles of a new order. Only a small proportion of the Indians were imposed upon by these specious arguments. Most remained steadfast in their traditional loyalty. The latter were therefore subjected to discriminatory treatment and even torture to induce them to join; but even so only about one-quarter would consent to side with the Japanese. To their number must be added recruits from the Indian civilians resident in those parts of Asia which had been overrun by the Japanese; and later on, when the Indian National Army was already in being, freshly taken Indian prisoners of war were given the option of immediate enlistment in that body, advice which many accepted, for it gave them opportunities for desertion and return to the British lines— indeed, this course was at one time recommended to them by G.H.Q. (I.).

The renegade recruit would join either of two organizations— the Indian National Army (I.N.A.) or the Japanese-inspired fifth column (J.I.F.C., or "Jiffs" as they were commonly called, the term often being extended erroneously to include the members of the I.N.A.).

On political grounds Bose was anxious that the I.N.A. should be a self-sufficient force of all arms. His propaganda spoke of divisions, but it is doubtful whether they ever existed except on paper. The largest formation encountered in the field was the brigade, notably the Bose and Gandhi Brigades, which were used in Central Burma. Organization, arms and equipment were on the Indian Army pattern. The officers were Indians who had generally received exaggerated promotion from their former Indian Army rank. Captured documents show that the brigades were not popular with the Japanese, who distrusted their fighting ability. At any rate, they were reluctant to commit them; and we hear of complaints on the Indian side that the I.N.A. was not being allowed to take its full share in the Burmese campaign.

A system of employment preferred by the Japanese was to include a proportion of Indian troops in their own ranks. It was in these circumstances that they were encountered by our men in Arakan, where no I.N.A. unit was ever identified as operating in an independent role. The Japanese section— always bigger than our own—was still further amplified by the addition of an equal number of I.N.A. men. These normally carried their own arms of British origin, including a Bren, with the result that each section had two automatic weapons—an advantage which speaks for itself.

The mixed organization carried several advantages. It meant that Indians were always available to carry out the deceptive tactics so much favoured by the enemy, such as the impersonation of British patrols and the shouting of orders in Urdu. Further, the Japanese were able to keep a close watch on the I.N.A. men to prevent their desertion; but even so several managed from time to time to make their way over to the British lines, where they were treated as normal prisoners of war.

When the 25th Division first came into Arakan the Japanese 55th Division was short of men after its heavy defeat in the Ngakyedauk Pass and the I.N.A. was extensively employed in the Mayu range. After the advent of the monsoon most appear to have been withdrawn, for they were seldom encountered, except on the coastal plain, where the 6th Battalion principally operated. Our intelligence estimated that the strength of the I.N.A. in Arakan amounted to one battalion.

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After the capture of Akyab the I.N. A. was no longer met in the fighting line.

It is interesting to record that the I.N.A. aroused the utmost animosity among our own Indian troops, who hated them even more intensely than the Japanese and killed them ruthlessly whenever opportunity offered.

The J.I.F.C. was trained for espionage and subversive activity, chiefly in areas well behind the front line, and consequently were not much in evidence in the battle area. Possibly members were used for close-range reconnaissance behind our lines, for it would be easy for them to associate with our working parties recruited from the civil population, some of whose number came daily from behind the Japanese lines.

MARCH, APRIL, MAY, 1944

In March the Regiment's career in India came to an end, and began again in an even more unpleasant climate—Burma. That this was to be our final destination had for some time been fairly obvious to most of us; where else would our intensive jungle training lead us but to Burma? And having spent February in bringing ourselves, our equipment, vehicles and weapons up to the highest possible standard of polish and efficiency; having shed our excess baggage (swollen to surprising proportions after eighteen months' gradual accumulation) and our beloved band (which had been an unfailing source of amusement to ourselves and amazement to our neighbours); when our char wallahs, dhursies, nappies and moochis left us overnight in a sad and protesting host—it was evident that Exercise "Snark," the name with which authority sought to lull our suspicions, was something more than an ordinary move or exercise and probably entailed hunting creatures far from mythical.

The advanced party left towards the end of February. On the 4th March the vehicles of the mortar and carrier platoons, accompanied by their respective officers, departed on their long and circuitous journey, and on the 13th the rest of the Regiment, after a short train ride, bade farewell to India's coral strand disembarking at Chittagong on the 18th.

We had, I think, been expecting to be flung into immediate battle against the Japanese. At any rate, things were very different from what we had imagined. The Regiment's first job, in which we relieved a battalion of the South Wales Borderers on the 19th, was the defence of XV Indian Corps administrative box in the back areas, some twenty miles from the fighting front proper. The area which we took over was a deserted village (Bawli Bazaar) in varying stages of decay; honeycombed with a system of underground defences which we at once set about improving. On the day of our arrival C Company, dispatched to guard a pass over the great hill range on our left flank (this range had been the scene of desperate and successful fighting in February), were surprised to find that the marching-out state included three manacled Jiffs (Japanese Imperial Free Force*—Indians who have backed the wrong horse), whom they promptly escorted to the civil affairs section.

Bawli Bazaar was situated near the banks of a pleasant tidal chaung in which officers and men spent many of their leisure hours bathing. Although most of our work was connected with improving our positions, we also carried out a certain amount of training, chiefly route marches, and firing on a range. At this time, too, we were first introduced to that indispensable adjunct of soldiering, the mule. The men showed a quick grasp of the different methods by which various loads should be tied.

The commanding officer instituted a daily gathering of officers (known as morning prayers) at which Captain Scott-Batey explained the latest situation reports, pointing out the different scenes of battle on a composite map of this particular front. This information was passed on to the men during the day. Morning prayers became a regular feature of each day's programme. After the news, the business of the day was discussed, an admirable method of keeping down bumf.

One thing which surprised us all was the informality of life near the front line. We found that we were allowed to smoke in vehicles and to wear cowboy hats instead of topees or steel helmets.

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As Ordnance refused to sanction an issue of these, and competition in scrounging them was very keen, some truly remarkable models have appeared. We were also allowed to work all day long stripped to the waist, with the result that most of us are now blackened to the colour of old Chippendale.

A double rum issue twice a week was found to be one of the best uplifters of the human spirit ever devised by the medical services and sanctioned by a commanding officer. This has been followed by three bottles of beer a month and a bottle of Canadian whisky for officers and warrant officers. May the good Lord protect our lines of communication.

On the 31st we moved about fifteen miles down the range to take over a position in the foot-hills at Renkat Chaung, the Regiment's role being counter-attack and the protection of two gunner units.

Here we began to live a truly underground existence, with hard work on slit and communication trenches, section positions, command posts and sleeping quarters, besides an elaborate arrangement of booby-traps and alarm bells. Guard duty on our large perimeter came round almost every night. No Japanese, however, came our way, although we heard many battles within a few miles of us, and although our neighbouring gunners kept us awake at night, firing salvo after salvo into the enemy positions. B and D Companies were given the job of occupying important features farther into the range, hills scarred and battered by the artillery shells of previous battles. Reconnaissance and fighting patrols were sent out by day, but produced no results.

Our supreme commander, Lord Louis Mountbatten, visited the front. On the 10th April all available officers and fifty-six N.C.Os. and men were presented to him in a small wood in the foot-hills. We were tremendously impressed by his confidence, humour and friendliness, and by what he had to tell us. We came away feeling that we had never before been addressed by anyone quite like him and that his remarkable talents were just what were needed for the colossal undertaking before us all.

On the 14th the Regiment moved again, southwards and still closer to the range, to the west flank of the British-held line. Our primary roles were counter-attack and defence of the division and brigade headquarters. It is now the end of May and we are still here. Subject to the obvious possibilities, we shall remain here throughout the monsoon.

We found that our area was a village, Kanyindan, even more deserted and devastated than the first one. A vast amount of work has been needed to make it habitable. Now on the site of it a new village has sprung up, our monsoon quarters built by native labour. These are bamboo huts roofed with tarpaulins and known as bashas. We have moved out of our holes in the ground and now occupy them in comparative comfort. Command posts, mortar pits and ammunition dumps as strong and solid (we hope) as a medieval fortress have been built by the men with great thoroughness and much labour. Patrols and ambushes go on as before, so our days and nights are pretty full.

On the 25th April we were delighted to receive a draft of eight new officers.

We have also had about sixty reinforcements, who have settled down and have made the Regiment their home, though they have come from several different regiments.

Towards the end of April the brigade commander spoke to all officers, warrant officers and Serjeants on the situation as it then was and discussed the possibility of a Japanese counter-attack before the rains. He emphasized the point that he did not want us to feel disappointed at what must seem to us very like inactivity when most of the battalions with whom we had grown up were engaged in operations close at hand.

Any disappointment which we had felt was quickly allayed, for on the night of the 5th/6th May the Regiment, less A and B Companies, supported by mortars and carriers, tanks and artillery, was sent on a raid against a Japanese-held village—Thaygonbaung—some distance away.

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This was the Regiment's first operation of war. Looking back on it, we realize that it represents only a very small milestone on the road that leads to Tokyo, but at the time it seemed to us a very big thing. Its object, to destroy the enemy and his stores in Thaygonbaung, was achieved so far as was humanly possible, and the casualties which we inflicted on the Japanese were in the ratio of at least four to one. The whole operation is best summed up in the words of the commanding officer: "Team work was excellent. There were many courageous acts and everyone behaved with the greatest coolness."

When it was all over we received a message of congratulation from the corps commander and a visit from our G.O.C., which put the greatest heart into everyone. Not that we needed cheering up. We are now confidently awaiting the next call, eager to bring our reputation up to the level of that of the 7th Battalion in Italy.

Since the 6th May the only excitement has been the capture, by Lieutenant Pope's platoon, of two enemy mules. On examination these were found to be quite worthless and are shortly to be turned loose.

One thing is certain on this most unorthodox front: the Japanese is on the downward path, and he knows it.

Burma: The Maungdaw Base

