

The Turn of the Tide in Burma, 1944



by Julian Thompson

In the first half of 1944, 'Bill' Slim's Forgotten Fourteenth Army defeated the hitherto invincible Japanese in three great battles, in the Arakan on Burma's western frontier, and at Kohima and Imphal in Assam.



A rifleman of the 3rd/2nd Gurkha Rifles in the Arakan

Towards the end of 1944 the emaciated remnants of General Mutaguchi's Japanese Fifteenth Army reeled back across the Chindwin River into Burma. As they waited to cross, the RAF machine-gunned and bombed them. No sooner had the aircraft pulled away than the vultures piled in to feast on the heaps of corpses. Utterly crushed and reduced to a rabble, it was the greatest disaster the Japanese Army had ever experienced.

Of the 85,000 Japanese who marched into Assam that March, half died in battle, a further 20,000 died of malaria, dysentery

and starvation on the retreat to the Chindwin. Only about 100 prisoners were taken; the most senior officer captured alive was a captain. Slim commented that no army could have equalled them for courage and hardihood.

The Japanese retreat to the Chindwin marked the end of three victories by Lieutenant General (as he was then) 'Bill' Slim's Fourteenth Army, one of the most multiracial armies in history. Although we refer to the British in this account, by far the greatest number of soldiers belonged to the Indian Army, the largest all-volunteer army the world has ever known; in Burma alone there were some 340,000 of them.

It included men from every caste and race: Sikhs, Dogras, Pathans, Madrassis, Rajputs, Assamese, Kumaonis, Punjabis, Garhwalis, Nagas, and Gurkhas. There were around 100,000 British and 65,000 Chinese. Some 10,000 Americans took part, mostly in the 47 USAAF squadrons (there were 51 British and Commonwealth squadrons). In the Fourteenth Army, which took a perverse pride in calling itself 'forgotten', the 90,000 Africans in three magnificent divisions and one independent brigade, are the least remembered

The Arakan

The campaign in the Arakan began in November 1943, when Lieutenant General Christison's 15th Corps advanced to capture the Maungdaw-Buthidang Road. To avoid advancing on a narrow front, a tactic that had proved so disastrous against the Japanese in the past, a dirt road was built to link up with the Kalapanzin River over the Ngakyedauk pass, nicknamed by British soldiers the 'Okeydoke'.

Christison was progressing well, when Lieutenant General Sakurai's Japanese Twenty-eighth Army mounted a counter-offensive, aimed at pushing the British back in to India and following up with an invasion of Bengal. The Japanese employed their familiar tactic of infiltrating behind British lines. In the past the British had retreated in



A sergeant of 81st West African Division

the face of these tactics, now, thanks to overwhelming air power, and air re-supply in particular, they stayed put and fought it out; so in effect the Japanese were themselves cut off. The battle of the 7th Division Admin Box that lasted 26 days and cost the British 3506 casualties, was an outstanding example.

All the while, the 81st West African (WA) Division had been advancing down the Kaladan Valley on a man-pack and mule basis – again only possible because of air supply. They inflicted a number of defeats on the Japanese. But, by mid March the Japanese offensive in Assam had begun, and Christison, ordered to send reinforcements to take part in the battle there, closed down operations in the Kaladan Valley. Months of very hard fighting were still required on the main axis to reduce the Razabil fortress, including the tunnels, before seizing the key terrain of Point 551, which marked the end of the 1944 campaign in the Arakan.

This was the first place in the Burma war that the British had won a battle on the same spot as they had previously lost one. Slim remarked that the British, Indian and African soldiers had smashed the 'legend of Japanese invincibility in the jungle, so long fostered by so many who should have known better'.

Fighting in Assam

Assam, where the Kohima and Imphal battles were fought, is one of the wettest places on Earth. Sand flies, ticks, mosquitoes and leeches torment men and animals.

Dengue, scrub typhus, malaria, cholera, scabies, yaws, sprue and dysentery are endemic. The monsoon from mid-May to early September turns streams into rivers and jungle paths into glutinous swamps.

The fighting in Assam consisted of numerous engagements lasting five months, over a 12,000 square mile arena in the forested hills of Assam, and the marshy, open paddy of the Imphal Plain. Bitter battles for key tracks and roads, and a myriad features with names such as 'Jail Hill', 'Scraggy', and 'Nippon Hill', ebbed to and fro. The outcome often rested on the efforts of small bodies of men, and even individuals.

The chinagraph pencilled arrows at higher formation headquarters, 'marched' effortlessly across talc-covered maps, while swiftly drawn circles depicted defensive positions. On the ground these arrows more often than not consisted of small groups of sweaty, stinking, hungry, men, often wracked with malaria, weighed down with weapons and equipment, dragging their exhausted bodies up steep slippery slopes to take yet another objective at the point of the bayonet. The neat circles in reality consisted of an assortment of weapon pits in which men, ate, defecated, slept if they were lucky, and often died, enduring wounds, mortar and artillery fire, beating off 'Banzai' screaming Japanese with showers of grenades, and firing their weapons until the barrels were red hot.

Slim alerted to the Japanese attack on Imphal, withdrew Lieutenant General Scoones's 4th Corps to meet the enemy on ground of his own choosing. The attack on

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