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The Forgotten Chindits – 23 British Infantry Brigade

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ABSTRACT

In March 1944 Japan launched its Operation U Go offensive which resulted in the well documented battles of Kohima and Imphal in north east India. At the same time 23 British Infantry Brigade was finalising Long Range Penetration training before participation in Operation Thursday, the second Chindit campaign that was already underway in north eastern Burma. That plan was changed, and the brigade was diverted to operate in the mountainous Naga Hills to protect the eastern flank of Kohima and disrupt Japanese supply lines from Burma. Much has been written about Burma, Kohima, Imphal and the two Chindit operations, but surprisingly little on the activities of 23 British Infantry Brigade in 1944. This article seeks to redress some of that imbalance by considering: how the brigade prepared for the Long Range Penetration role; how it operated in the Naga Hills; how those operations differed to Operation Thursday; and finally, if this was an effective use of the brigade.

Introduction

Japanese forces invaded British controlled Burma in January 1942 and by June had steadily driven the defeated British forces to the north east border of what was then British controlled India. In broad terms, a military stalemate followed until early 1944. This was despite an unsuccessful 1943 British offensive in the Arakan Division of Burma, the present day Rakhine State area of Myanmar, and a British Long Range Penetration operation into north eastern Burma that was launched from the Imphal Plain of north east India in February 1943.¹ Japanese and British forces remained in contact with each other in the Arakan Division and to the south of the Imphal Plain from 1942 to 1944 where fighting continued in both areas for the control of local hills and roads. Meanwhile, Britain was building up forces to defend India and retake Burma. However, the Japanese pre-empted matters by launching a diversionary Arakan

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¹The place names used in this article are those in use at the time.

offensive, Operation Ha Go, followed by their primary offensive, Operation U Go, towards Imphal and Kohima.

The 70 British Infantry Division, of which 23 British Infantry Brigade was a part, arrived in India in March 1942 and was then held in reserve to the east of Calcutta until September 1943 when it was ordered to convert to the Long Range Penetration (LRP) role. The division, and the brigade then became a part of the Special Force that is generally referred to as the Chindits. Much has been written about the two Chindit campaigns of 1943 and 1944, but remarkably little about 23 British Infantry Brigade as it did not in the end take part in Operation Thursday, the 1944 Chindit campaign. Instead, in March 1944, the brigade was given two principal tasks: firstly to secure Kohima's eastern flank, where British forces were surrounded by the Japanese; and secondly to cut the Japanese Fifteenth Army's supply lines from Burma. Robert Lyman's excellent work on the 1944 Japanese U Go offensive has a chapter on 23 Brigade's operations in the Naga Hills and there are some insightful references within Raymond Callahan's work on the battles of Imphal and Kohima, but these appear to be all that exists in the historiography apart from personal memoirs, a few lines in regimental histories, and an occasional reference in works having their main focus on the Kohima, Imphal, and Chindit campaigns.² What began as a brief enquiry into the brigade's Naga Hills operations has shown that more scholarly work is needed to record, and honour the memory of the men of 23 British Infantry Brigade – the forgotten Chindits.

The term British has been used throughout this article for what at the time were British Empire forces in India and Burma. These forces were made up from: the British Army in India, an all-British force with officers and other ranks (BORS); the Indian Army which had British and a few Indian officers, but Indian and Nepali other ranks; and British-officered troops from other parts of the British Empire, most notably West and East Africa. Most of the divisions and brigades that fought in India and Burma were mixed formations of British, Indian, Gurkha, and West and East African battalions but by far the numerical majority came from the Indian Army. 70 British Infantry Division, of which 23 British Infantry Brigade was a part, was an exception as it remained an all-British division.

Long Range Penetration

A brief overview of the Long Range Penetration (LRP) role is useful here. Although it will be shown that 23 British Infantry Brigade operated in the Naga Hills in ways that differed to LRP as applied on the contemporaneous Operation Thursday, both shared

²Robert Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory – The Invasion of India 1944*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2011), chap. 8; Raymond Callahan, *Triumph at Kohima-Imphal*, (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas, 2017), pp. 119-120 & p. 173 footnote 31.

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the same Special Force Chindit, ethos and training. The Chindits were the brainchild of Orde Wingate, an unconventional warrior by any standard, of whom it was said, 'In the army he had been a difficult and abrasive colleague, who had inspired deep loathing and resentment, and at the same time, respect, loyalty and devotion.'³ Wingate first came to the notice of Archibald Wavell in 1940 when he was General Officer Commanding Palestine and Trans-Jordan. At that time Wingate was running counter insurgency gangs, the Special Night Squads, against Arab insurgents. By late 1941 Wavell had become Commander-in-Chief (CinC) Middle East and Wingate was involved in the use of irregular Abyssinian forces against the Italian colonial regime. Wavell became CinC India in late 1941 and in 1942 at a time of widespread defeat in the Far East was keen to do something to raise morale and take the offensive,

'Wavell signalled Middle East, and asked for officers, who had run the Abyssinian Patriot Forces to come to INDIA and do something. Several volunteered including one Lt. Col. Wingate. When the others heard he was coming they withdrew their names.'⁴

This extract comes from the notes for a recently discovered post-war lecture given by the officer who took over command of the Chindits after Wingate's death in 1943. It provides an interesting commentary on Wingate and the opinions of some of his fellow officers in Abyssinia. A more recent assessment of Wingate describes him even less charitably 'as a charismatic zealot, without much other skill as a commander, whose ability to inspire others with his faith allowed him to waste precious manpower on schemes of dubious military value'.⁵ Nevertheless, the politically astute Wingate used Wavell, who by mid 1943 was Viceroy of India, and head of the Imperial Administration, to further his proposals for LRP.

While Wingate's plans for LRP in Burma had their roots in the unconventional warfare techniques he had employed in pre-war Palestine, and refined with Gideon Force in Abyssinia, he cannot be credited with inventing LRP. The idea of weakening an enemy by striking behind his lines is as old as time and can be found throughout the history

³David Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits – Redressing the Balance*, (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1994), p. 9.

⁴UK National Archive (hereinafter TNA) CAB 106/171, Lecture Notes on Chindits by Major General Lentaigne, 1946, p. 2. This file provides considerable information and new insights on the Chindits as a whole, and does not seem to have been used by scholars before.

⁵Daniel Todman, *Britain's War – A New World 1942-1947*, (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 340. For a balanced summary of the 'Chindit controversy' see Callahan, *Triumph at Imphal-Kohima*, Appendix C - Note on Chindit Historiography.

of warfare.⁶ LRP as understood in the context of the Second World War had its origins in late 1940 with the Long Range Desert Group that operated deep behind enemy lines in North Africa in an independent reconnaissance and raiding role against Axis infrastructure. What Wingate did do that was new was combine his own experience, the role of the Long Range Desert Group, and his appreciation of the capability of modern air transport to formulate his proposals for LRP in Burma in 1943 and 1944.

Wingate arrived in India in February 1942 and Wavell employed him to apply unconventional warfare techniques against the Japanese who at that time were pushing British forces out of Burma. In 1943 this became Operation Longcloth, the first Chindit campaign. With Wavell's support Wingate then went on to win over Churchill, and with his backing, convince the Joint Chiefs of Staff to support a second Chindit campaign, the much larger Operation Thursday of 1944.

So, what was LRP? When British forces first came into contact with the Japanese in Malaya and Burma in 1941 and 1942 they frequently found themselves either outflanked or with a well defended Japanese roadblock behind them that prevented further manoeuvre or withdrawal. Operation Longcloth was in some ways designed to mimic the Japanese approach, but on a larger scale. Wingate's plan was for a force to establish itself in a position deep in Japanese held Burma where they would disrupt Japanese lines of communication and supply in support of a planned 1943 British offensive. That offensive was called off, but Wingate pressed for the operation to go ahead anyway with the objective of destroying roads, railway lines and bridges in occupied Burma. The damage caused was quickly repaired, and with over 30% of the 3,000 strong force either killed, wounded or missing, and some 600 of the survivors unfit for future service, the benefits gained for the price paid remain controversial to this day.⁷

By late 1943, the story of Britain's war against Japan was one of consistent failure following defeat in Malaya, the loss of Singapore, expulsion from most of Burma and

⁶Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits*, provides a hagiographic description of Wingate & his career.

⁷Perhaps the best four works on the controversy are: Martin Sambrook, *Lions in the Jungle*, (Place not given: Chindwin Publishing, 2019), this is based on a University of Buckingham M.Res. thesis; Michael Calvert, *Chindits*, (London: Pan, 1973); Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits*; and Callahan, *Triumph at Imphal-Kohima*. For Operation Longcloth casualties see, Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, (London: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 157, where from 3,000 men of 77 Brigade who went into Burma only 2,182 survived, 450 were killed with the remainder missing or died in captivity - a loss rate of 30%.

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the failure of the 1943 British Arakan offensive. Against this bleak backdrop, and despite Operation Longcloth's questionable results, a political opportunity was taken to portray Operation Longcloth's apparent successes as an example of British aggression and innovation at a time when the United States and China were shouldering most of the burden of fighting Japan in terms of manpower and resources deployed. At a May 1943 press conference, held immediately after Wingate had returned from Burma, he said, 'I am quite satisfied with the results. The expedition was a complete success.'⁸ Wingate then built on that by then sending two officers, who had taken part in the operation, to lecture in the U.K. and the U.S.A.⁹ An enthusiastic British press went much further: Reuters with, 'The British Ghost Army'; and the Daily Mail with, 'Clive of Burma'.¹⁰ But many in the hierarchy of the Indian Army and the Imperial Administration not only disagreed, but disliked the press hyperbole. A post-war comment, 'Never have so many marched so far for so little' is representative of that viewpoint and some see it as present also in the tone of the post-war official history. This was edited by Woodburn Kirby, a Delhi staff officer that Wingate disliked and who had suggested after Operation Longcloth that Wingate should be sacked.¹¹ Nevertheless, the politically astute Wingate used the publicity, his considerable advocacy skills, and Wavell's patronage to argue for a second and much larger scale LRP operation. This became Operation Thursday which began in February 1944, the objective was to underpin a Chinese offensive from north eastern Burma to reopen a part of the Burma Road, a supply line to China cut by the Japanese in 1942.¹²

We see in all of these examples Wingate's unconventional and politically opportunistic approach to waging war, indeed General William "Bill" Slim, who commanded British forces in northern India in 1943 and 1944 saw Wingate as becoming ever more expansive and unrealistic in his views with the passage of time.¹³

⁸Louis Allen, *Burma – the Longest War*, (London: J. M. Dent, 1986), p. 146.

⁹TNA CAB 106/171, p. 4; Lentaigne notes that privately Wingate's own report said, 'the Burma Rifles were first class, his British troops generally useless and his Gurkhas worse than useless.'

¹⁰Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, (London: Vintage, 2011), p. 158.

¹¹*Ibid.*, in turn citing a 1952 regimental history of the 2 King Edward VII's Own Goorkha Rifles.

¹²TNA CAB 106/171 pp. 7-8 where Lentaigne notes that XIV Army had set the objective for Wingate as support to Chinese forces coming south; while Wingate's own orders to his command differed from that in many important ways. After Wingate's death and his taking command, Lentaigne refocused on the XIV Army objective.

¹³William Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, (London: Pan, 1999), pp. 216-220 where Slim records Wingate proposing LRP as the optimal way to defeat the Japanese, with conventional forces holding the front until LRP collapsed it from the rear; and McLynn, *The Burma*

Operation Thursday took place between February and August 1944, in the Mogaung-Indaw-Myitkyina area of north east Burma and has been well documented elsewhere. What is worth highlighting was the use of some 17,000 LRP trained men, deployed in columns of approximately 300 to 400, that either marched in, or were flown in by gliders and United States Army Air Force transport aircraft. Four major strongholds were built, and these became substantial installations with airstrips large enough to land transport aircraft such as the Douglas C-47 Dakota and Curtis C-46 Commando, and in the case of the Broadway stronghold, six Supermarine Spitfire fighters, a radar installation, anti-aircraft guns, 25-pounder field artillery, and a substantial garrison.¹⁴ Supplies could be flown in, or air dropped to a stronghold or to the columns when on the move. The columns also built light aircraft strips to evacuate their wounded back to the strongholds and then India. Light aircraft were also used to deliver orders and send back captured documents, prisoners etc. The strongholds were used as secure bases from which the columns could fan out to disrupt Japanese supplies and communications, and by concentrating a number of columns, carry out attacks on Japanese held towns and transport hubs in support of the Chinese offensive. Sadly, Operation Thursday's objectives were altered as it went along. The operation against Japanese infrastructure became secondary to frontal attacks on fortified towns such as Myitkyina for which the columns were not properly equipped. Heavy losses were incurred and Operation Thursday is subject to the same enduring controversy as Operation Longcloth.¹⁵

For LRP operations the officers and men were trained to undertake long marches in jungle, cross small rivers, build small bridges, carry out demolition, patrolling and ambushes, with columns concentrating for a major attack, and all with a 65 pound pack plus a personal weapon, grenades, ammunition and water. The men travelled comparatively light in equipment, if not in weight carried terms, and were supported only by their mules and by air dropped food and supplies.

The men could physically carry only five days rations and ready use ammunition so the importance of regular supply drops, and the weakness of that lifeline in the Naga Hills became apparent when the monsoon hampered drops from early May onwards. A Chindit column would have been an unusual sight, typically half a mile long it

Campaign, p. 274 with Wingate suggesting a 100,000 strong LRP force that would march from Burma across Indo-China. Both are examples of Wingate's unconventional ideas, and feed into the Chindit myths and controversy.

¹⁴Woodburn Kirby (Ed.), *History of the Second World War, The War Against Japan Volume III*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1962), p. 205.

¹⁵<https://chindits.wordpress.com/2011/04/16/the-chindits-in-photographs/> contains images from both Chindit operations. Accessed 2 April 2020.

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progressed in absolute silence, even the mules had been silenced by having their vocal chords cut, there were only whispers at the nightly bivouac, and often no fires to heat water and food. The columns' mules carried radio sets, medical equipment, 3-inch mortars, Vickers machine guns, flamethrowers and some small anti-tank weapons.



Figure 1: By Sergeant Arthur Sampson – a 23 Brigade Chindit.¹⁶

The war diaries for 23 British Infantry Brigade as an LRP formation show it having nine columns, plus a Rear Headquarters that remained in India. There were eight fighting columns each of 300 to 400 men; and a field headquarters (HQ) column with a stronghold guard force and additional specialists such as Royal Engineers, and Royal Signals. A typical Special Force column had an infantry company of four platoons armed with rifles and light machine guns, a heavy weapons platoon, a commando platoon for demolitions and booby traps, a reconnaissance platoon with a section of Burma Rifles, and attached Royal Air Force, Royal Engineers, Royal Signals and Royal Army Medical Corps personnel.

¹⁶Alf Sampson, *Bless 'em all*, (London: ISO Publications, 1990), p. 110. Sergeant Sampson, originally 1 Essex, was a commercial illustrator before the war, and served in 23 Brigade's HQ Intelligence Section - Column 32.

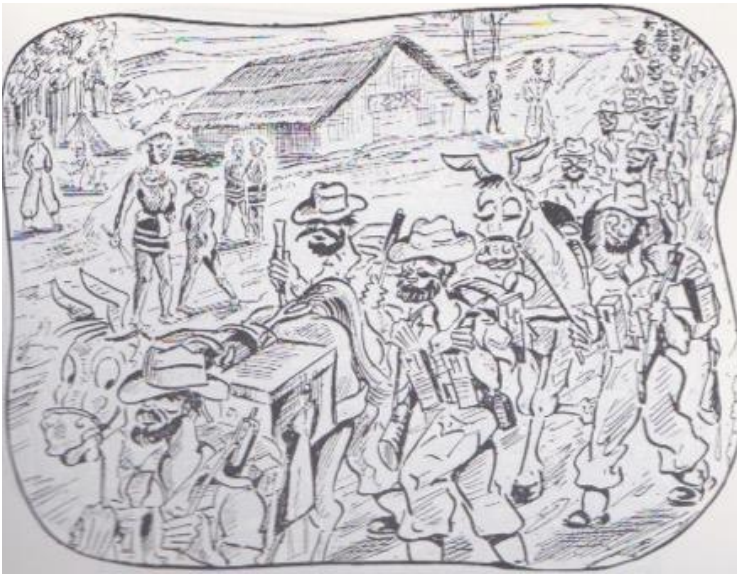


Figure 2: Column 32 leaves Grimsby II for Ukhrul.¹⁷

Elsewhere in Burma, the British had by 1944 learnt not to retreat when surrounded or outflanked by the Japanese. Instead a fortified box was created and all within it would fight on while supported by air dropped supplies and Royal Air Force (RAF) fighter bombers. The February 1944 Battle of the Admin Box in the Arakan Division was an example of this successful new tactic. It was applied again at Kohima and Imphal.¹⁸

Implicit to the new LRP and Box tactics were British and American air supremacy and the availability of large fleets of transport aircraft; two things notably absent in Malaya and Burma in 1941 and 1942. Most of the air transport employed in the China-India-Burma theatre was provided by the United States Army Air Force. Once again, 23 Brigade was an exception as it relied on three RAF Squadrons for re-supply in the Naga Hills and on RAF fighter bombers for air support. Only the light aircraft were provided by the United States Army Air Force.

¹⁷Sampson, *Bless 'em all*, p. 133.

¹⁸James Holland, *Burma* 44, (London: Penguin, 2016) is one of many sources including Louis Allen, Frank McLynn, and William Slim, all of which are referenced below.

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23 British Infantry Brigade

The brigade was formed in September 1939 from regular British Army units, known as the (Suez) Canal Brigade, and based there to protect it. The brigade subsequently became a part of 70 British Infantry Division and fought in Iraq, Syria, at Tobruk and in Operation Crusader in 1941. In early 1942 it arrived in India and at the time of its 1943/4 LRP training and operations the brigade's order of battle was:

- 1 Battalion The Essex Regiment
- 4 Battalion The Border Regiment
- 2 Battalion The Duke of Wellington's Regiment
- 60 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery
- 12 Field Company, Royal Engineers
- Royal Signals Squadron

The 2 Duke of Wellington's Regiment was the exception; it joined 23 Brigade in October 1943 following the long fighting retreat from Burma of 1942 and subsequent rebuilding. A more detailed description of these units can be found in Appendix 1.

By any measure 70 British Infantry Division was experienced. In August 1942 Slim observed, 'It was one of the best British formations I have met, with a magnificent battle-hardened spirit gained in the Middle East.'¹⁹

23 British Infantry Brigade Activities in India 1942-1943

Japan invaded Burma in December 1941 and in early March 1942 70 Division was ordered to proceed to Rangoon, but by 9 March Japanese troops were already there, and the division was instead diverted to India. The brigade arrived in Bombay on 10 March and moved overland by rail, and by road for the guns, to Khunti, an established garrison town to the west of Calcutta.²⁰ By the time the brigade arrived there in April it was clear that Burma would be lost, so 70 Division was held in reserve against an invasion of India.

The brigade's war diaries for 1942 and 1943 show an emphasis on conventional infantry and gunner training, increasing equipment levels, and some jungle training at Saugor in India's Central Provinces. The infantry units also provided detachments to assist the police in dealing with civil unrest at the time of the Quit India campaign and the 1943 Bengal Famine.²¹

¹⁹Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 141.

²⁰Jack Bartlett & John Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, (Sleaford: Richard Kay, 2000), p. 202.

²¹The UK National Archive (TNA), WO 172/869, 1 Essex War Diary 1942, entries for 14 October & 29 November; and TNA, WO 172/858, 2 Duke of Wellington's 93

By late 1943, and after initial selection of the men for the LRP role, the brigade slightly exceeded what would be the normal establishment for a British infantry brigade. The data shown in Table 1 below excludes attached Medical Officers, Chaplains, a Royal Signals detachment, and a sizeable Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) detachment that remained with the rear headquarters in India.

Unit	Officers	Other Ranks
1 Essex Regiment	37	789
2 Duke of Wellington's Regiment	39	806
4 Border Regiment	37	898
60 Regiment, Royal Artillery	40	591
12 Field Company, Royal Engineers	7	248
Totals	160	3332

Table 1: Manpower returns, end 1943 - after LRP selection.

After the defeat of the 1943 British Arakan offensive, the Japanese counter-attacked there and elements of 23 Brigade were quickly deployed there from reserve in India to the Bawli Bazaar area as a backstop against breakthrough. The units involved were 1 Essex, 4 Border, and 1 South Staffordshire - a part of 23 Brigade at that time. Apart from air attack, none of the units had any contact with the enemy, and when the Japanese counter-attack petered out in the monsoon they returned to India in June 1943.²²

Despite Slim's opinion of August 1942 that the brigade had a 'fine fighting spirit gained in the Middle East', the November 1942 reminiscence of one gunner is very different in tone, 'The weeks and months dragged on All we were doing was playing soldiers.'²³

Announcement of Long Range Penetration Role

All decisions related to the creation of the Special Force were made in London, Delhi and at the August 1943 Quebec Conference. There is no record in the war diaries of

War Diary 1942, entry for 19 September 1942; and TNA, WO 172/852, 4 Borders War Diary 1942: multiple entries between September and year end.

²²TNA, WO 172/2500, 4 Border War Diary 1943, from April to end June; and TNA, WO 172/2074, 23 Brigade Rear HQ War Diary 1943.

²³Jack Bartlett & John Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, (Sleaford: Richard Kay, 2000), p. 207.

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70 British Infantry Division, or of 23 Infantry Brigade, of their ever having been consulted in that process. It seems 70 Division was ordered to convert to the LRP role without any say in the decision. An example perhaps of Wingate's influence at higher levels.

Interestingly Slim had no part in these decisions either. By 1943 Slim was in command of Fourteenth army which had been separated from 33 Corps in India and of which 70 Division and 23 Brigade remained a part. His noted, 'I was not, therefore consulted on the change; had I been, I would have opposed it as strongly as I could. I was convinced – and nothing I saw subsequently caused me to change my mind – that a battle-trying, experienced, well-knit British Division, like the 70th, would have more effect against the Japanese than a special force twice its size.'²⁴

An announcement of the role change was made on 7 September 1943 and only seven months later on 16 March 1944 the brigade was in action in the Naga Hills.²⁵

The LRP announcement was not however universally popular. The gunners of 60 Regiment Royal Artillery (60RA) were told their regiment was going to be broken up and the men distributed to the three infantry battalions. Jack Bartlett, a gunner, wrote, 'There was anger and resentment. We were proud of being gunners and of our battle hardened experience; yet this – and we ourselves – seemed to count for nothing, just tossed away to turn us into foot soldiers.'²⁶ It was a view shared by 60RA's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Peel, a regular Royal Artillery officer, who had been in command since 1924. Peel objected strenuously to the role change, but then found himself abruptly transferred out to command a regular gunner unit. Peel was replaced by Lieutenant-Colonel H. G. (Mike) de Jacobi du Vallon, an LRP specialist, who did at least arrange for the gunners to remain together as Columns 60 and 88.²⁷

2 Duke of Wellington's (2DoW) joined 23 Brigade on 10 October 1943. In August 1943 it had been ordered to move full time to internal security duties but this was an unpopular order at many levels within the battalion.²⁸ The commanding officer lobbied Delhi, and in a letter to Auchinleck, then CinC India, wrote, 'Both I, personally, and the whole Battalion have a large score to settle with the Japs, some 10 officers killed and 200 B.O.Rs killed and missing. The Battalion fought well in Burma.'²⁹ This time the

²⁴Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p.216.

²⁵TNA, WO 172/2074, 23 Brigade Rear HQ War Diary 1943, entry for 7 September.

²⁶Bartlett & Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, p. 218.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 220.

²⁸TNA, WO 172/2506, 2 Duke of Wellington's War Diary 1943, entry for 10 January 1943.

²⁹*Ibid.*, entry for 23 August 1943. B.O.R. is an acronym for British Other Ranks.

lobbying worked, and the battalion replaced the 1 South Staffordshires who moved across to 77 Indian Infantry Brigade to take part in Operation Thursday.

23 Brigade was commanded by Brigadier Lancelot Perowne who arrived in November 1943 after service in Europe commanding two anti-aircraft brigades, and two years with the Army Commandos from 1940 to 1942.³⁰ He replaced Brigadier P. C. Marindin who went on to command the Lushio Brigade, a part of the irregular V-Force active in occupied Burma and the Naga Hills.

Special Force Selection, Training & Armament

Reading the war diaries for the period the brigade was held in reserve in India, the training seems appropriate for a conventional British infantry brigade but this would change dramatically. During September 1943 a selection process determined who could take part: firstly, all men older than 40 were transferred out of the brigade; every remaining man then had a medical; and if not fully fit was transferred out. This winnowing continued throughout training with those unable to meet the physical demands of the LRP role transferred out. Although, and interestingly, the brigade's Operations Report notes that Medical Boards had resisted the brigade's rejection of some men, who in the brigade medical officer's view should never have taken part in LRP operations.³¹

Wingate expressed a strong preference to use British troops for LRP operations; with some arguing he did so to avoid the complex dietary requirements of Indian Army units - one source noting that 14 Army had 30 different ration scales; and others saying Wingate was expressing a distinctly racial bias.³² Operation Thursday saw the deployment of British, Gurkha and West African troops and did not therefore conform to his preferences, but 23 British Infantry Brigade was an all British formation, and apart from a small number of men from the Assam Rifles, conformed to Wingate's preferences, or prejudices.

³⁰Very little has been found on Perowne's early service record and even his 2-year period with the Army Commandos might be incorrect. He did pull together and command ad hoc forces in France in 1940 as a part of 'Beauman Division'.

³¹TNA, WO 172/4397, War Diary of 23 Brigade Rear HQ: Operations Report (hereinafter Operations Report), Medical section.

³²Another area of Chindit contention, but see Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits*, Chapter 3 for Wingate's 1938 period support for the Zionist cause, an example of his strong views, and p. 77 for his view that British troops were the best suited to LRP; and Kate Imy, *Faithful Fighters, Identity and Power in the British Indian Army*, (Stanford Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2019), Chapter 4 - for a detailed background to Indian Army dietary issues; and David Smurthwaite (Ed.), *Forgotten War*, (London: National Army Museum, 1992), p. 132.

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Over the next few months there were further movements of men between the battalions and columns to balance the numbers out at 300-400 men per column, and some inward drafts were also received. Notably, the under-strength gunners of 60 and 88 Columns received 112 men from 4 Border Regiment.³³ 60 RA also saw the transfer out of specialist artillery officers and senior ranks.

Each of the nine columns had a detachment of 3 RAF sergeants to operate the 1086 ground to air communication sets used to call in air drops and air support from RAF fighter bombers. An RAF pilot also joined each column to provide expertise for the selection of drop zones, light aircraft airstrips, and the longer strips that columns expected to build as a part of a 'stronghold'.³⁴ Detachments of Assam Rifles joined just before the columns went into action and provided a field headquarters protection force, scouts, translators and local intelligence skills. Each column had its own Medical Officer, a Royal Engineers platoon and a Royal Signals detachment to communicate with the brigade's field headquarters – Column 32. The brigade's Rear Headquarters and REME detachment remained in India with the brigade's motor transport.³⁵

After the LRP announcement the tempo of training changed immediately, indeed dramatically, with daily physical training at 5am. By October the brigade had moved back to Saugor and the jungle, where 10 mile road marches quickly built up to 35 miles over 2 days in the jungle. This led up to a series of exercises in early 1944: Promised Land, Essence, Orange, and Torch.³⁶ Beginning in January, Promised Land had a 7 day 86 mile approach march through jungle, supported by mules and air drops; Essence, over 5 days followed, with columns concentrating to build a stronghold and airstrip, and then carry out a defence; Orange lasted a fortnight; and finally Torch a multi-column exercise that included concentrating the brigade to capture an enemy airstrip after a 20 mile night approach.³⁷ This series of exercises completed on 11 March by which time Operation Thursday had been underway in north east Burma for four weeks.³⁸ The brigade was then expecting a further three months of LRP training in Assam before being flown in to a new operational area at Pakokku in Burma, some 200 miles distant from the main elements of Operation Thursday.³⁹

³³TNA, WO 172/4647, 60 RA War Diary 1944, entry for 9 January 1944.

³⁴W. A. Wilcox, *Chindit Column 76*, (London: Longmans, 1945), Introduction.

³⁵Bartlett & Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, p. 221.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

³⁷TNA, WO 172/4397, 23 Brigade Rear HQ War Diary 1944, entries January - March.

³⁸Useful background information on Operation Longcloth can be found in <http://thechinditsociety.org.uk/operation-longcloth> Accessed 11 January 2020.

³⁹Bartlett & Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, p. 233; and Operations Report: Introductory section.

For 60RA the LRP role was a real shock; they not only had given up their cherished 25 pounder guns but had to improve their proficiency as infantry and learn how to use 3-inch mortars and the Vickers machine guns that went with the columns by mule. The columns also had flamethrowers, referred to as 'lifebuoys' from the shape of the fluid tank, with some reports noting they had been issued only two weeks before the operation, how awkward they were to load on to the mules, and how poorly they were constructed. In one attack two flamethrower operators were quickly killed in what were described as 'disastrous circumstances', after using up the ten second capacity fuel tank.⁴⁰ The columns also had access to PIAT's, a cumbersome infantry anti-tank weapon, but these were never used.⁴¹ It is thought that the 60RA columns' flamethrowers and PIATs were left behind after the initial stage of operations in the Naga Hills when Columns 60 and 88 went ahead with porters instead of mules. Another column noted that it never fired its Vickers machine guns. Interestingly, the Border Regiment columns used two 3.7" howitzers in support of attacks on Japanese occupied villages although there is no record of this weapon ever being standard issue to LRP columns. This was a type of howitzer in widespread use within the Indian Army and in mountain gun form could be broken down for transport by mules. It seems likely these guns were borrowed from the 25 Mountain Regiment Indian Artillery, a part of 33 Indian Infantry Brigade, that had taken over responsibility for the security of Mariani and the railway after 23 Brigade moved on and into the Naga Hills.

The 60RA manpower returns for April 1944 show it having a strength of 35 officers and 821 other ranks including 112 men transferred in from 4 Border, some ex REME from its gunner period, plus 8 RAF, 2 Padres, 2 Royal Army Medical Corps, and an unspecified number of Assam Rifles. By March 1944, a once conventional British infantry brigade had been transformed.

A Change of Plan

While the brigade was readying itself for Operation Thursday, the Japanese Burma Area Army was preparing for Operation Ha Go, a diversionary attack in the Arakan Division of Burma, and their primary Operation U Go, a major offensive into India via Imphal. British intelligence knew the attacks were coming but did not know precisely when and where they would fall.⁴² This is not the place to describe Operations Ha Go and U Go in detail as others have already, and very capably, done so.⁴³ On 29 March

⁴⁰Operations Report: Special Weapons section.

⁴¹Bartlett & Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, p. 239.

⁴²Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, pp. 289-90.

⁴³See in particular Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory* and Callahan, *Triumph at Imphal-Kohima*. These books provide a full analysis of U Go; and in Lyman's Chapter 6 an excellent section on 23 Brigade; see also Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, a very readable

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the Japanese cut the road from Dimapur to Imphal, the road the British relied on to supply units in the Imphal Plain and further south. The Japanese had opened up a route for themselves to the British supply dumps at Dimapur but surprisingly did not immediately exploit that opportunity. Instead, a small British force at Kohima, just 46 miles from Dimapur, was surrounded on 4 April by a Japanese division. It was not just the place and timing that came as an operational surprise, it was the size of the Japanese force that had reached Kohima using roads and tracks from Burma. The Japanese had chosen to travel quickly by travelling light and in expectation of living off captured British supplies as they had done in 1941 and 1942. This was a strategy the men of Japan's Burma Area Army would rue when the British denied such supplies to them.⁴⁴

The brigade's war diary records that on 8 March 1944 it was released to Slim's direct command from Wingate's Special Force. Slim wanted the brigade to protect the railway to Ledo and the eastern flank of Dimapur, Kohima and Imphal.⁴⁵ It was not however an uncontested decision. Unsurprisingly, Wingate was incensed that any part of 'his' Special Force should be handed over to another commander – even to Slim who was nominally his superior. But Slim argued with his superiors that the anticipated U Go events demanded he be given additional forces, and it was Slim and not Wingate that won that debate.⁴⁶ Once again the 70 Division and 23 Brigade's Rear Headquarters War Diaries carry no information on that decision process. The brigade diary shows that by 29 March it had completed Exercise Torch and was moving by train to a new LRP training area near Lalaghat in Assam when it was 'deflected for operations' in the Kohima-Dimapur area.⁴⁷ By 1 April the brigade was on its way to Mariani, all training had been cancelled and within two weeks it was operating in the Naga Hills.

The Naga Hills

As a place to operate this was unlike anything the brigade had either been trained for or seen before. The brigade's war diary describes them as a 'tumbled mass of jungle covered hills rising sheer out of the Plains to an average height of 4-6000 feet. Geologically the terrain resembled nothing more than a crumpled starched table-cloth though the "grain" of the country lies generally North & South.'⁴⁸

memoir from the British side of fighting the Japanese in Burma and India, McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, and Allen, *Burma – The Longest War 1941-1945*.

⁴⁴Kazuo Tamayama & John Nunneley, *Tales by Japanese Soldiers*, (London: Cassell, 2001), pp. 196-211, account by Staff Sergeant Yasumasa Nishiji.

⁴⁵Kirby *The War Against Japan, Volume III*, p. 183

⁴⁶Robert Lyman, *Slim – Master of War*, (London: Robinson, 2004), p. 187.

⁴⁷Operations Report: Introductory section.

⁴⁸Operations Report: Terrain, Climate & Inhabitants section.

The Naga Hills lie to the east of Kohima as shown in Figure 3 below. The term hills is something of a misnomer as they are a series of sharp ridges and deep valleys containing fast flowing rivers and large streams; the area is also covered in dense jungle and subject to high rainfall. The ridgelines lie at anywhere between 2,000 to 6,000 feet altitude, so a typical day's march might only be a few lateral miles but could involve a 4,000 foot descent and a similar climb to the village on the next ridge by means of a single file track. The Naga people built their villages on ridges, perhaps as 'reminders of not-so-distant headhunting days when every village was a castle and height its best friend.'⁴⁹ By 1944 inter-tribal fighting and head hunting had been suppressed under the influence of Christian Missionaries and British District Commissioners, nevertheless the Naga communities remained isolated from India, isolated from modern life and dependent on traditional subsistence farming.⁵⁰ The Operations Report notes

The Nagas themselves displayed throughout this phase the most unswerving loyalty and could be trusted thoroughly as guides and informers. ... Had the inhabitants, or any portion of them, been actively hostile it would have been almost impossible.⁵¹

A recently published doctoral thesis by Khrienuo Ltu on the wartime experience of the Naga peoples reinforces the Operations Report which was written immediately after the campaign.⁵² At that time the British colonial administration operated in a paternalistic and fairly 'hands off' manner in the Naga Hills but throughout the campaign was diligent in paying for Naga guides, labour and food in Indian silver rupees. On occasion rice was also air dropped to Naga villages stripped of food by the Japanese. Khrienuo Ltu's thesis brings out the considerable harm that war brought to the Naga peoples.

The literature contains numerous examples of Japanese troops treating the Nagas badly. An RAF officer, Flight Lieutenant Wilcox, attached to Column 76 (2 DoW) wrote,

The Japanese had already cornered all but a few of the pigs, rice and fowl. This afterwards proved the case in every village we occupied. ... We were shown

⁴⁹Wilcox, *Chindit Column*, p. 15.

⁵⁰Khrienuo Ltu, *World War II in North East India*, (Norway: Barkweaver, 2019), Chapter 4.1.

⁵¹Operations Report: Terrain, Climate & Inhabitants section.

⁵²Khrienuo Ltu, *World War II in North East India*, (Norway: Barkweaver, 2019). This provides remarkable insight into the Kohima and Imphal battles from a purely Naga perspective.

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letters, in bad English, in which the enemy had demanded – tins of rice and pigs or we burn the village down and shoot you.⁵³

Unlike the British the Japanese either expropriated food or paid for it with worthless paper notes. The Japanese abduction and rape of Naga women was reportedly common.⁵⁴

During the final stage of the brigade's operations around Ukhrul other tribes became more prevalent, such as the Tungkhuls and Khukis. These were seen by the British as being less cooperative than the Naga to the north. In one case an ambush in the process of being set by an Essex column was itself ambushed – with the war diary observing it had been betrayed to the Japanese.⁵⁵

Operational Timeline: 3 April to 9 August 1944

It remains difficult to develop a complete and reliable operational timeline for each column. The war diaries were written on a brigade and battalion basis, rather than on a column basis, so gaps and inconsistencies exist.⁵⁶ What is seen in broad terms is described below, and a more detailed chronology, albeit incomplete and probably containing some errors, can be found in Appendix 2. 23 Brigade's operations can be divided into five distinct phases with Figure 3 indicating the principal locations of interest.

The brigade's initial task was the defence of Mariani and a section of the Ledo railway line between Jamulgiri and Nazira. This phase lasted from 3 April to 20 April 1944 when 33 Indian Infantry Brigade took over responsibility for security of the railway. The first column arrived at Mariani on 3 April and the remainder were in place by 10 April. A stronghold, Norwich, was built in a Reserved Forest Area to the north of Mariani.⁵⁷ Norwich was connected to Mariani and Jorhat by road and connected by a track to Mokokchung and Wokha that a 1500 strong Naga labour force later upgraded and extended to Phakekedzumi for use by jeeps.

⁵³Wilcox, *Chindit Column*, p. 15.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 67-69.

⁵⁵Operations Report: Introductory section.

⁵⁶Secondary source material exists that might allow completion of this work, but discrepancies exist with the primary sources and call the secondary sources into doubt as they were often written many years later.

⁵⁷ <https://www.burmastar.org.uk/stories/60-and-80-column-chindits-1944/>. Accessed

11 January 2020.



Figure 3: 23 Brigade Operations Area – Not to scale – approx.: 1 mile/mm⁵⁸

Surprisingly, it is difficult to know exactly where the brigade's strongholds were located, perhaps because they proved to be of much less importance to the brigade than was the case for Operation Thursday where whole brigades and large volumes of supplies, including field artillery, were flown into airstrips big enough for transport aircraft operations. The mountainous Naga Hills precluded the building of such large airstrips. Neither were the strongholds used as defended bases from which columns

⁵⁸The base map for Figure 3 was traced from a reproduction contained within the TNA Operations Report but the original is small, is in poor condition, not to scale, and is barely legible. It has therefore been modified by the author to provide an approximate and relative location for the principal areas and places of interest. The place names used in this article and Figure 3 conform with the Operations Report spellings; other spellings exist in other sources.

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could dominate a surrounding area. A reminiscence by Thomas Joesbury of Column 60 indicates that Norwich was built by the two 60RA columns (60 and 88), and it seems likely they also built the other two strongholds as these two columns' movements are closely associated with the movement of Column 32, the brigade's field HQ.

The second activity was described as 'The Approach March' and began at Norwich with the columns progressively setting off after April 7 for what Jack Bartlett of 60RA called, 'a rather long walk'.⁵⁹ The third activity followed, from about 15 April to 5 June, was described as 'The Conclusion of the Approach' or 'The Period of Ambushes' in 'The Initial Operating Area' as shown in Figure 3. Here there were a large number of small unit actions at or near to Wokha, Phakekrima, Nerhema, Phakekedzumi, Jessami and Meluri, where a second stronghold, Grimsby, was built.

The Japanese began withdrawing from Kohima on 4 June after which the brigade received new orders for a fourth activity, 'The Pursuit', which lasted from 5 June to the end of July. The Pursuit eventually saw all columns move south over a distance of some 100 miles to concentrate in the Ukhrul area. The brigade was ordered to follow, harass and destroy the remnants of Japanese forces retreating from Kohima. The four Border and Duke of Wellington columns were however retained in the Kohima area for two weeks to prevent any Japanese slipping away to the east before being released to move south to Ukhrul. The Border, Duke of Wellington and HQ columns followed more southerly routes from their positions towards Ukhrul, whereas the four Essex and 60RA columns left on a more demanding south easterly route from Phakekedzumi and Jessami through the Somra Tracts towards Fort Keary and Ukhrul. The brigade's first column arrived in the Ukhrul area on 24 June, three weeks after the Japanese began their retreat from Kohima.

The fifth, and final activity, in late July, was 'The Withdrawal' which followed the columns making contact with British forces moving out from Kohima and Imphal towards the Chindwin River.

The individual memoirs from Bartlett and Wilcox provide insight into the physical demands of operating in the Naga Hills and both accounts are at times deeply moving.⁶⁰ Both memoirs point to the recurring themes of the men's increasing physical weakness, tiredness, sickness, hunger when supply drops failed; and the constant support of the Naga people whose villages the columns used for bivouacs and on occasion fortified.

⁵⁹Bartlett & Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, p. 236.

⁶⁰Ibid., and Wilcox, *Chindit Column*.

The brigade's Rear HQ war diary refers to the calling up from the Norwich stronghold of two 3.7" howitzers for use by the Border Regiment's 55 Column and the 'brigade field headquarters defence force', probably 60RA and Assam Rifles. These guns were used in unsuccessful assaults on Phakekedzumi and Nerhema where the well dug in Japanese could not be overcome.⁶¹ There is a further mention of these guns at the Border Column's crossing of the Laniye River at the beginning of the Pursuit, and they were used again near Ukhrul in the closing stage of Pursuit operations.

Attacks were made on dug in Japanese positions at the Naga villages of Phakekrama, Phakekedzumi, Jessami and Nerhema. These were all unsuccessful despite being carried out by one or two columns, and at Nerhema and Phakekedzumi several times with 3.7" artillery and air support from RAF fighter-bombers. The war diaries otherwise record a continuous set of small-scale actions involving patrols, ambushes, and the laying of booby traps on tracks and paths used by the Japanese and JIFS.⁶²

With little flat land in the Naga Hills the Operation Thursday practice of building airstrips for light aircraft and the clearing of drop zones for large transport aircraft was abandoned. Unlike the main Chindit operations that relied on American transport aircraft 23 Brigade was supported by the RAF's 117, 194 and 216 Squadrons. These carried out 560 successful supply drops and lost three aircraft and crews over the drop zones. A total of 782 sorties were allocated from which 161 were aborted over the drop zones and 61 aborted elsewhere for technical reasons. The average supply drop was 6,500 pounds/sortie with an average of 8 sorties/day for an overall success rate of 70% delivered. Most supply drops were made directly on to the villages where material could be retrieved by the men, and Naga villagers who prized the parachutes and packing material. An undisclosed number of civilians and troops were killed during air drops as most supplies were free dropped, or at best dropped using smaller, cheaper, and less effective 'parajutes'. Over 31,000 parachutes and 'parajutes' were used.⁶³ It was very difficult for the RAF pilots to locate the drop zones in poor weather and under complete cloud cover during the monsoon period, and even more so during the Pursuit Phase when the columns were moving along deep valley bottoms. The usual practice of marking the drop zones with smoke from small bonfires on the hilltops proved ineffective in both bad weather and in the valleys, so towards the end of the campaign plans were underway to introduce radar beacons. War Diary data shows that in June and July, during the Pursuit Phase, the drops were about 40 to 50%

⁶¹ Operations Report: Introductory section.

⁶² The terms JIFS, Japanese Indian Forces, or INA, Indian National Army refer to former British Indian Army soldiers captured by the Japanese and then recruited to fight on the Japanese side. Two brigades of the INA took part in Operation U Go.

⁶³ Operations Report: RAF Support section.

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successful; with the two 60RA columns reporting having run out of all rations for four days before receiving a partial air drop on 5 July.

The men suffered from very poor nutrition, partly because of the monotony of the American supplied K-ration packs and partly because these were never intended to be a source of long term nutrition.⁶⁴ During the seven week Pursuit Phase, much of the route was in areas with few or no villages, and, as noted, with the men often in the valley bottoms and under clouds, the air drops became less frequent and at times impossible. This greatly exacerbated the poor nutrition issue.⁶⁵ Some 'comfort packs' of jam and bread, as well as British C-rations were dropped but in general the men had no option but make do with K-rations. With the poor diet, and sickness progressively taking hold, the columns had by now all amalgamated on a battalion basis. In general a 'Recce Platoon' or 'Commando Platoon' made up of the fitter men and Naga guides went ahead and the remainder of the column silently followed behind to the next bivouac.

In the absence of light aircraft strips United States Army Air Force light aircraft were used to snatch messages and captured documents from strings stretched between pairs of tall bamboo poles. Orders, maps and rupees were also free dropped to the columns in arrow-like bamboo containers. A total of six light aircraft strips were built including three at the strongholds at Norwich, Grimsby and Grimsby II.

With so few light aircraft strips, and with an unexplained June suspension of all light aircraft flying, there were long journeys back to Grimsby and Grimsby II for most of the sick and wounded who were carried on litters by relays of Naga porters before being flown back to the light aircraft base at Jorhat.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Julian Thompson, *Forgotten Voices of Burma*, (London: Ebury Press, 2009), p. 181, where Major Whyte, R.A.M.C., of Operation Thursday, notes a K-ration day pack contained 4,000 calories whereas the men needed more than 6,000 calories per day. K-rations were intended for use by airborne troops, tank crews and others, but only for short durations.

⁶⁵Operations Report: Medical section.

⁶⁶Bartlett & Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, p. 247.

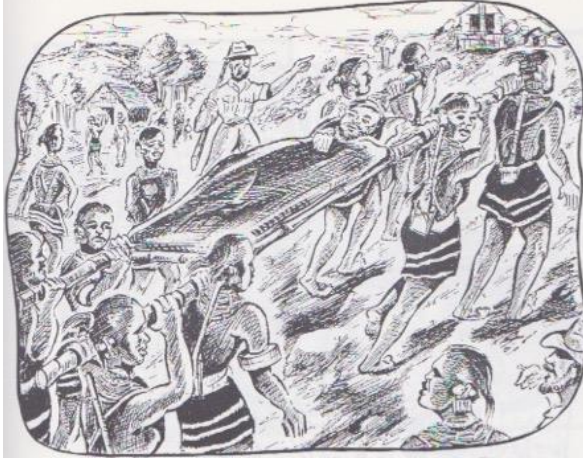


Figure 4: Evacuation of wounded by Naga Porters.⁶⁷

The war diaries record the four Essex and Royal Artillery columns moving over single file tracks once they left Phakekedzumi, and as they went southeast the terrain became higher, the tracks narrower, less common, more overgrown, steeper and more precipitate in terms of drops to one side. The tracks also provided perfect cover for ambushes which pressed on the minds of the leading platoons. By this time these columns were reliant on Naga porters as the mules had been left behind.

From reading the war diaries the minor importance of the strongholds is apparent. Norwich was garrisoned, by the Assam Regiment and Assam Rifles after the brigade's field HQ, Column 32, left for Grimsby. Unlike Operation Thursday, which built four large strongholds, 23 Brigade's strongholds can at best be seen as stepping-stones and temporary halts on the brigade's long march to the south. Further research work on the chronology of events in Appendix 2 would undoubtedly yield more insight.⁶⁸

Post-Operations Events

The poor physical state of the men after the operation is a universal theme in many individual memoirs, and in general it took two to three months of rehabilitation before

⁶⁷Sampson, *Bless 'em all*, p. 123.

⁶⁸Unless otherwise stated these dates and events are from the following: TNA, WO 172/4878 1 Essex 1944; TNA WO 172/4876, 2 Duke of Wellington's War Diary 1944; TNA, WO 172/4868, 4 Border War Diary 1944; TNA, WO 172/4647, 60 Royal Artillery War Diary 1944; TNA, WO 172/4401, Royal Signals War Diary 1944; and the Operations Report.

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any of the units were fit enough to undertake even light infantry training.⁶⁹ Global events overtook plans to use the brigade in Malaya in a future LRP or Airlanding role. By late 1944 many of the men, who by then had four or more years of overseas service, were eligible for repatriation. So many men from 60RA were repatriated in late 1944 that those left behind were transferred to 2 Queens Own Royal Regiment, by then under the command of 60RA's former commander, Lt. Col. du Vallon. For a similarly depleted 2DoW there would be a 1945 return to Burma but in a lines of communication and internal security role in the Rangoon area.

Analysis

A description has been given of the conversion of what had been a conventional British Infantry Brigade to the LRP role, and from that it is obvious we are not dealing here with what we would today call Special Forces, such as the wartime Army Commandos, or the Parachute Regiment, elite units made up of selected volunteers drawn from other formations. Undoubtedly the quality of the brigade was lifted during the 1943/4 LRP selection and training process and by the winnowing out of men who could not meet the expected standards for LRP, but that is a far cry from 23 Brigade becoming an elite formation, despite its presence within the Special Force.

The brigade covered a great distance over tracks in the Naga Hills and the best measure of what the columns went through can be found in a post-war Essex regimental history⁷⁰:

Column 44: 337 miles covered, 62,900 feet up & 60,700 feet down.

Column 56: 341 miles covered, 65,400 feet up & 62,900 feet down.

Highest point reached: 8,500 feet – near Somra.

Killed in action:	2 officers and 32 other ranks
Died of wounds:	5
Died of sickness on route:	6
Died in hospital:	2
Wounded evacuated:	3 officers and 28 other ranks.

⁶⁹TNA, WO 172/4868, 4 Border War Diary 1944, entry for 1 October.

⁷⁰T. A. Martin, *The Essex Regiment 1929-1950*, (Chelmsford: Essex Regiment Association, 1952), p. 120. With thanks to the Prince Consort Library, Army Information Service, for access to this monograph.

Casualties	Officers	Other Ranks	Total
Killed	5	69	74
Missing	0	5	5
Wounded	13	75	88
Evacuated Sick	10	262	272
Totals	28	411	439

Table 2: 23 Brigade Casualty Data.⁷¹

Total killed, wounded & missing: 167 - approximately 5% of brigade.

Evacuated sick: 272 - approximately 8% of brigade.

It has not been possible to correlate from the war diary material the various reports of what were a large number of small actions to determine which columns were the most effective in killing Japanese, nor do the war diaries allow any confirmation of the brigade's claim to have killed 854 Japanese, an exchange ratio of about 11:1.⁷²

Compared to Operation Longcloth's 30% killed, wounded and missing, and Operation Thursday's 27%, the figures for 23 Brigade are significantly lower at 5%. This reduction reflects the evacuation of sick and wounded by air or by Naga porters and jeep passable tracks back to nearby British controlled areas. The Chindits of Operation Longcloth had no such opportunity and were simply left behind. On Operation Thursday many sick and wounded were flown out although some British wounded were shot by their own side rather than allow them to become prisoners.⁷³

Like their fellow Chindits from Operations Longcloth and Thursday, 23 Brigade was a spent force by the end of July 1944.⁷⁴ The Brigade's Operations Report laments the fact that it was never able to get to grips with and kill the enemy on a large scale; particularly during 'The Pursuit' when moving towards and operating around Ukhrul. This is a remark deserving analysis. Firstly, the repulses at Nerhema and Phakekedzumi by well dug in Japanese bring into question whether the brigade's lightly armed men

⁷¹Operations Report: Medical Section - for data in Table 2.

⁷²Ibid.: Conclusions section.

⁷³John Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay*, (London: Cassell, 2012), p. 259.

⁷⁴McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, p. 360, for Operation Thursday, where from about 17,000 men who went in 1,034 were killed or missing and 2,572 were wounded, a loss rate of 27%.

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could ever have succeeded in large scale attacks on dug in Japanese troops when it took tanks and field artillery for regular infantry to achieve that at Kohima.⁷⁵ Secondly, the brigade arrived in the Ukhrul area from 24 June onwards, with two of the war diaries reporting columns having passed through 'The Valley of Death' near Somra where the track was knee deep in mud, abandoned weapons, dead Japanese, dead mules, and even skeletons dating from 1942. These entries show that the bulk of the Japanese survivors from Kohima had already passed by and is consistent with the Japanese beginning their retreat from Kohima on 4 June. By the time the columns arrived in the Fort Keary – Ukhrul area only Japanese and JIF stragglers remained.

Sickness is noted in the war diaries and in the personal accounts from Wilcox and Bartlett, so it is no surprise that 10 officers and 262 other ranks were evacuated. The brigade medical officer borrowed 5 jeep ambulances from another British brigade and these proved vital in the absence of airstrips. Most of the wounded were carried back on litters by Naga porters to jeep passable roads at Mokokchung, Wokha and Phakekedzumi. In total 75% of the brigade experienced severe diarrhoea and stomach cramps, the so called Naga Hills Tummy, the cause of which was unknown at the time, but was later identified as the presence in Naga Hills' water of magnesium sulphate - more commonly known as the laxative Epsom Salts.⁷⁶ Malaria was not a problem to begin with but as the men became weaker cases increased. There were also some cases of tick-borne typhus, which in a few cases were fatal; in general, these were more prevalent in the Border and Duke of Wellington columns retained in the Kohima area before their release to The Pursuit, a period when they operated in an area where many dead Japanese and mules lay by the tracks. The insanitary nature of all the villages is recorded in the personal accounts,

We stayed overnight at Kuluzu Bagwema. I tried to sleep in a stuffy corner of the hut, but as usual the fleas, combined with pain of sores now appearing all over my body, were successful in keeping me awake.⁷⁷

As noted earlier the reliance on K-rations resulted in a monotonous diet which was not balanced from a long-term nutrition or palatability perspective. The ration packs could not easily, or regularly, be supplemented by other ration types, although some fresh food supplements and British C-rations were supplied by air. Buying fresh food from the Nagas on any scale was never possible as they were subsistence farmers and had been subject to Japanese depredation. The result was everyone lost a lot of weight, with reports of 14 to 28 pounds (6 to 12 kilos) as normal.⁷⁸

⁷⁵Robert Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, Chapter 7.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 169.

⁷⁷Wilcox, *Chindit Column*, p. 99.

⁷⁸Operations Report: Medical section.

The Royal Engineers attached to the columns cleared and prepared the six light aircraft strips, each some 300 yards long by 35 yards wide, and they opened up and maintained over 200 miles of jeep passable roads. To do this they recruited and supervised a 1500 strong Naga labour force paid for in Indian silver rupees. They also built a number of small bridges and carried out various demolition works. Most notably they laid numerous booby traps for the column's ambushes, with one of the engineer officers killed setting a booby trap.⁷⁹ The DoW and Brigade HQ engineer platoons were involved in building a temporary bridge over the Laniye River to the south of Phakekedzumi and Jessami where an existing structure, and the initial temporary repair, were carried away by flood water. Boats and wire were then air dropped to allow the remainder of the columns to ferry across.

Perhaps most telling of all are consistent post-operation reports of the men needing 'blanket treatment' of up to a month to physically recuperate on clean water and a balanced diet. Even so around 50% of the men still felt too weak to take up an offer of 28 days local leave.

A brigade of some 3,300 very fit, strong men began operations in early April, but by late July was a spent force – something it shared with the men of Operations Longcloth and Thursday.

Conclusions

With a summary of the brigade's LRP selection and training process, armament, logistics and operations we now have a basis for answering the question was this an effective use of the brigade?

Starting at the strategic level, a respected writer on such matters, the late Colin S. Gray, observed on Burma that, 'The war there is a tale of great courage on both sides, of the mutual difficulty of surviving nature as well as the enemy, and of the eventual achievement of military competence by British and Indian troops, well led by General William J. Slim ... (but) the campaign ultimately had no strategic significance for the war as a whole.'⁸⁰

Perhaps this is true in Grand Strategic terms but Britain nevertheless had good reasons to defend India and regain its lost Asian colonies. Between 1940 and the late 1943 opening up of the Mediterranean to through shipping, the only route from the United Kingdom to British forces in the Middle East was around the Cape of Good Hope,

⁷⁹Operations Report: Engineers section.

⁸⁰Colin S Gray, *War Peace and International Relations*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 203.

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into the Indian Ocean and onward to Egypt. Indeed, it was the security of the Indian Ocean that allowed 23 Brigade to move safely to Egypt in 1941 and again to India in 1942.⁸¹ But Japan's 'Naval Operation C' of April 1942 proved over a period of just 11 days the vulnerability of Britain's Indian Ocean supply lines. Keeping the Japanese Navy out of the Indian Ocean, and keeping Japanese land forces contained in Burma and out of India, were important British strategic priorities; albeit ones lying below the Battle of the Atlantic, and campaigns in North West Europe and the Mediterranean. Gray also observes that after the 1942 Battle of Midway the U.S.A. knew that the road to victory and Tokyo lay through the Pacific and not through China with its requirement for supply via India and the Burma Road.⁸² However, given the strategic importance to Britain of Indian Ocean access, this discounting of the Burma theatre is problematic. A deep subtext would always bedevil Anglo-American cooperation in Burma. For the U.S.A. China was always the priority; for the British it was India, and both sides regarded Burma as a kind of subculture to their own predilections and aspirations.⁸³ The 1944 destruction of Japanese forces at Imphal and Kohima secured India from invasion and with Japan on the ropes in the Pacific there was no compelling strategic case to retake Burma; apart that is from restoring the prestige of an already failing imperial power. Gray sums it up nicely with, 'As Stalin waged war in 1944-5 with eyes fixed firmly on the post-war order, so too did Britain in Asia in the same period.'⁸⁴

The brigade's operations in 1944 did have strategic relevance. Nevertheless, one cannot help thinking that a quality brigade like this would have been better employed in a conventional role in India and Burma in 1944/5, or better still in North West Europe where Britain faced a severe manpower crisis after the Normandy Landings. If this view is accepted for 23 British Infantry Brigade then breaking up 70 British Infantry Division for Operation Thursday was even more strategically misguided.

Next we can consider the operational level and will begin with the question – was 23 Brigade's operation in the Naga Hills really necessary? Firstly, the British did need to know if the Japanese were infiltrating men and supplies through the Naga Hills to Kohima and Imphal, but arguably that knowledge could have been provided by Naga scouts that the British had already recruited and armed as a network of intelligence gatherers, Force V and others, that have not been discussed in this paper. A counter argument is that the brigade's multiple small scale actions in the Naga Hills in April, May and early June alerted the Japanese to the presence of British forces and

⁸¹Andrew Boyd, *The Royal Navy in Eastern Waters Linchpin of Victory 1935-1942*, (Barnsley: Seaforth, 2017) provides an excellent overview of the Indian Ocean's importance.

⁸²Gray, *War Peace and International Relations*, p. 204.

⁸³McLynn, *The Burma Campaign*, p.19.

⁸⁴Gray, *War Peace and International Relations*, p. 204.

discouraged any flanking attacks on say Mariani, the railway, and more importantly Kohima. By late April the Japanese were desperately foraging for food after the failure of their strategy to live off captured British supplies. The brigade's presence in the hills undoubtedly curtailed those efforts but never did entirely cut the Japanese supply lines from Burma - some supplies of ammunition and food did reach Kohima.

Secondly, if the brigade had been spared the rigours of the initial phases of operations in the Naga Hills it could have been inserted later, say at the end of May, as a stronger, fresher force to the south of Kohima and Imphal to interdict the initial stages of the Japanese retreat. As it was, only parts of a by then weakened brigade arrived in the Ukhrul area in late June, three weeks after the Japanese had begun their retreat from Kohima, and when only stragglers remained. On balance, and with much hindsight, the initial three phases of operations seem justified, but the Pursuit much less so in terms of results gained for the price paid. In reality the final actions around Ukhrul in late June and July came too late to deliver a significant operational effect.

Thirdly, and remaining at the operational level, the brigade's operations in the Naga Hills were not an LRP operation. The brigade did not take up a position deep behind enemy lines, and neither was it deployed to support an offensive. Indeed, the reverse applies, 23 Brigade's operations were defensive in nature until 'The Pursuit' at the end.

What is incontestable is the brigade's suitability for the tasks given to it as a result of its equipment, LRP training, and as the veterans recall, its Chindit spirit. Arguably an Indian Army infantry brigade familiar with mountain warfare, such as the Gurkhas, could have carried out the early operations. However, at this point, the Gurkhas were neither equipped nor trained for long duration independent operations of this nature.⁸⁵ Unlike Operation Thursday, 23 Brigade did not operationally depend on large strongholds and airstrips for transport aircraft and reinforcement by air, indeed the fragility of air supply in the Naga Hills quickly became apparent when the monsoon broke in May. Light aircraft operations were helpful but in reality contributed little real value when only a few sick and wounded were evacuated that way.⁸⁶ The construction of more than 200 miles of jeep passable roads did much more to ease the travails of the sick and wounded and again shows that 23 Brigade's penetration was never deep in the manner of Operations Longcloth and Thursday.

In common with the mainstream Chindit columns the brigade's effectiveness as a fighting unit decreased over the four months it marched and fought in the Naga Hills. Chindit operations in general were not intended to last more than ninety days so by late July the terrain, poor rations, infrequent air drops, sickness, and the dispersed

⁸⁵Gurkha units did take part in Operation Thursday but were not a part of 23 Brigade.

⁸⁶Wilcox, *Chindit Column*, p. 61.

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nature of the columns meant the brigade could not successfully take on the Japanese in anything but small-scale actions.

Balancing what was achieved against how hard it was for the men, it seems that LRP was a poor use of what had previously been a fine conventional fighting force. Conventional formations such as 17 Indian Division were in contact with the Japanese for longer, had numerous tough encounters, survived, and continued to fight on. That was beyond the capability of 23 Brigade by August 1944.

There is no basis for claiming that Operation Thursday was weakened by the diversion of 23 Brigade to the Naga Hills. It is true that the initial plan was for 23 Brigade to be held in reserve for the later stages of Operation Thursday but that plan was later changed for the brigade to operate independently around Pakokku, some 200 miles south of Operation Thursday's area of operations!⁸⁷ More contentious are claims that Operation Thursday diverted substantial Japanese forces, and perhaps as much as one and a half divisions, away from Kohima and Imphal that might otherwise have overwhelmed the British defence.⁸⁸ This exaggerated claim ignores the fact that if there had not been an Operation Thursday then 70 Division and the other Chindit formations would instead all have been available to support British forces at Kohima and Imphal. But now we are entering into the contentious debate on the effectiveness of Operation Thursday and LRP as a whole. However, we can conclude here that diverting 23 Brigade to the Naga Hills did not damage Operation Thursday.

Finally, and at the tactical level, we have seen that 23 Brigade's operations in the Naga Hills consisted of long marches, patrols, ambushes, setting booby traps, holding villages and tracks, denying supplies, gathering intelligence etc. On only three occasions did the brigade attempt to overcome well dug in Japanese positions defended by fifty to a hundred Japanese and on all three occasions failed despite the use of two columns, two 3.7" guns, and RAF fighter bomber support. The topography of the hills prevented the massing of columns and the attacks on Japanese defended villages were further constrained to very small fronts by the narrow ridges and access tracks. Without heavier artillery and tank support even small groups of well dug in Japanese proved to be immovable.

So, there was both a strategic and an operational purpose for 23 Brigade's time in the Naga Hills. The brigade was also an obvious choice for the operation even though many aspects of it were not LRP as we understand it from Operations Longcloth and Thursday. Tactically the brigade operated well and did so in difficult circumstances, in

⁸⁷Kirby, *The War Against Japan, Volume III*, p. 184.

⁸⁸See Rooney, *Wingate and the Chindits*, p. 247, where it is claimed one and a half Japanese divisions were diverted from Kohima and Imphal by Operation Thursday.

accordance with training and orders, and at a great cost to the health of the men involved. It was a costly expenditure in men for the advantages gained.

Finally, can we provide any fresh contribution to the controversial Chindit debate?

The author 'Jack' Masters who commanded III Brigade during the final stages of Operation Thursday, closed his 1960 autobiography by saying:

But now sixteen years have passed and perhaps this is the place to look back with the same far, high view that we used before entering Burma. The course of the campaign confirmed that the original expansion of the Chindits was a mistake. War demands a return for value, and after a certain point we could not give that return by our special tactics.... During this time no-one knew quite what the Force as a whole was supposed to be achieving.⁸⁹

Masters made two points. Firstly, and unlike Operation Thursday, the three objectives for 23 British Infantry Brigade in the Naga Hills were clear and consistent: to secure the flank of British forces at Kohima; to interdict Japanese supply lines; and to harass the Japanese retreat. Secondly, Masters questions the military value of LRP as championed by Wingate in 1943 and 1944. This a theme that Slim addressed in 1955 with his views on special and specialised forces in general:

We employed most of them in Burma, and some, notably the Chindits, gave splendid examples of courage and hardihood. Yet I came firmly to the conclusion that such formations, trained, equipped, and mentally adjusted for one kind of operation only, were wasteful. They did not give, militarily, a worthwhile return for the resources in men, material and time they absorbed.⁹⁰

Despite 23 British Infantry Brigade's efforts, successes and sacrifice, Masters and Slim were right.

⁸⁹Masters, *The Road Past Mandalay*, p. 286.

⁹⁰Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, p. 546.

Appendix I – 23 British Infantry Brigade 1943/4

*1 Battalion The Essex Regiment – Columns 44 & 56.*⁹¹

This regular British Army battalion moved from the Canal Zone to the Sudan in early 1940 as a part of 10 Indian Infantry Brigade under the command of Brigadier William Slim. He was not best pleased at having lost a Punjabi Battalion he had trained in India and which 1 Essex had replaced. In November 1940 1 Essex took part in the brigade's operations against Italian forces occupying an old fort at Gallabat on the Sudan-Abyssinia border.⁹² The Italians used their local air superiority to the full and with smoke in artillery barrages, there were erroneous reports of gas, and without respirators some fled. Much of what happened remains unclear, perhaps deliberately so. The Essex war diary and the official history agree that during the initial attack the advanced elements of 1 Essex were caught out on rocky ground where no shelter could be found, they were badly mauled by the fort's defenders, and grass fires. The official history simply records Slim recognising the hopelessness of the situation and deciding to withdraw the brigade from Gallabat.⁹³ Stewart is less complimentary in saying that this was one of only two instances in the Second World War where British officers lost control of British troops in battle, the other was before the fall of Singapore.⁹⁴ A post-war analysis of Gallabat can be found in 1 Essex's 1940 war diary and notes that from a strength of 760 men before the action it had 48 in hospital, 240 sick with malaria and further casualties of 68 killed, wounded and missing in the Gallabat action.⁹⁵ In a later and further example of selective reporting and discretion an Essex Regimental history from 1950 is virtually silent on the Gallabat action.⁹⁶ Slim was similarly discreet when he used the term 'a British battalion' rather than naming 1 Essex in his memoir, and neither does Slim mention his sacking of the battalion's commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Paxton. That sacking laid the seeds for another Essex officer, Lieutenant General Noel Irwin, later 4 Corps commander, and reportedly a good friend of Paxton, attempting to sack Slim in 1942, and again in 1943 by blaming Slim for the failure of his own Arakan offensive.⁹⁷ The battalion quickly put the Sudan behind it and went on to acquit itself well against insurgent forces in Iraq in

⁹¹The Special Force Column Numbers are shown as Column xx to aid later reference.

⁹²William Slim, *Unofficial History* (London: Cassell, 1959), Chapter VI contains a detailed narrative of the action at Gallabat.

⁹³I. S. O. Playfair, *History of the Second World War – The Mediterranean and The Middle East, Volume 1*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1954), p. 398; and TNA, WO 169/287, 1 Essex War Diary for 1940; a report dated January 1947 has retrospectively been added to this diary.

⁹⁴Andrew Stewart, *The First Victory*, (London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 114.

⁹⁵Martin, *The Essex Regiment*, p. 34.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 34-38..

⁹⁷Russell Miller, *Uncle Bill* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2013), p. 205.

1941, and then against Vichy French forces in Lebanon and Syria, a complimentary letter from Slim can be found in the Essex's war diary for this later period. The battalion went into Tobruk by sea in October 1941, and from there broke out, losing a further 130 men, in fierce fighting around Ed Duda as a part of Operation Crusader.⁹⁸

2 Battalion The Duke of Wellington's Regiment – Columns 33 & 76.

This regular Army battalion was at Peshawar in India in 1942 when the Japanese invaded Burma. It had a strength of 32 officers and 785 other ranks. The unit war diaries for February to end March 1942 were destroyed in the retreat from Burma but short retrospective summaries were added later and note that it arrived in Rangoon on 14 February 1942, and was in action on 22 February when attached to 46 Brigade and 17 Indian Infantry Division. Elements of the battalion defended the Sittang River Bridge before that was demolished on 23 February which left many of its own men and most of its equipment on the wrong side. The battalion subsequently took part in 17 Indian Division's fighting withdrawal to Imphal, arriving there on 21 May 1942. Shortly afterwards the unit's reported strength was just 6 officers and 188 other ranks, it had also lost all of its transport and heavy equipment.⁹⁹ The rebuilt Duke of Wellington's battalion joined 23 Brigade on 19 October 1943.¹⁰⁰

4 Battalion The Border Regiment – Columns 34 & 55.

This was a Territorial Army unit that mobilised to France in October 1939. As a part of 25 Brigade it undertook line of communication duties and fought in the retreat from France before being evacuated from Dunkirk, Cherbourg and Le Havre in June 1940. After a period of recovery in the UK 4 Border deployed to Egypt, arriving there in time to take part in the 1941 campaign against Vichy French forces in Syria and Lebanon. Like 1 Essex it was shipped into Tobruk in late 1941 and then took part in heavy fighting around El Adem as a part of Operation Crusader.¹⁰¹

60 Field Regiment Royal Artillery – Columns 60 & 88.

This was a Territorial Army regiment, founded in 1922, and based in the North Midlands. The regiment's headquarters and one battery of four 18 pounder field guns were based at Nottingham and similar batteries were based at Leicester, Lincoln and Grimsby.¹⁰² Deployed to France in January 1940 it fought in the retreat from Belgium

⁹⁸TNA, WO 169/1717, 1 Essex War Diary, 1941.

⁹⁹TNA, WO 172/858, 2 Duke of Wellington's War Diary, 1942.

¹⁰⁰TNA, WO 172/2074 23 Brigade Rear HQ War Diary, 1943.

¹⁰¹Phillip Shears, *The Story of the Border Regiment*, (London: Nisbet, 1948), pp. 56-62; Douglas Sutherland, *Tried & Valiant – the story of the Border Regiment 1702-1959*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1972), pp. 193-7. With thanks to the Prince Consort Library, Army Information Service, Aldershot, for access to these monographs.

¹⁰²Bartlett & Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, p.4.

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to Dunkirk where some of the regiment organised their own evacuation by commandeering a damaged coaster, the Bullfinch, that they repaired and sailed from the beach until taken under tow to the UK.¹⁰³ By January 1941 the regiment was equipped with 25 pounders and was on route to join 23 Brigade in Egypt. Arriving there in May 1941 it had a strength of 31 officers and 494 other ranks and took part in 23 Brigade's campaign against insurgents in Iraq and then Vichy French forces in Syria and Lebanon. The regiment then joined 7 Support Group, an ad hoc mobile formation of artillery and infantry attached to 7 Armoured Division. In December 1941 it took part in fierce fighting at Sidi Rezegh after which it had a strength of just 20 officers and 350 other ranks and one remaining battery of guns. The commanding officer of 7 Support Group was awarded a Victoria Cross for his leadership and bravery at Sidi Rezegh.

12 Field Company Royal Engineers.

Confusingly some of the brigade's 1943 war diaries refer to the formation of a ninth column, of Royal Engineers, but this never came to pass. Instead 70 Division's 12 Field Company was broken up.¹⁰⁴ A platoon was a part of the brigade's field HQ, Column 32, and was based at various strongholds during column operations. A small rear element remained with 23 Brigade's Rear HQ that never left India. Each of the eight fighting columns had a Royal Engineers Officer and an average of eighteen sappers that were normally deployed ahead in the Commando or Reconnaissance Platoon.

23 Brigade Field Headquarters - Column 32.

This was the brigade's field headquarters together with elements, for most of the time, of Column 60 from 60RA which, with some Assam Rifles men, acted as the HQ defence force. The war diaries are of little help in determining the exact composition of the HQ column. Sergeant Alf Sampson's book and sketches provide a rich seam of material.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³Ibid., chap. 8.

¹⁰⁴TNA, WO 172/2686, Burma 1943, 12 Field Company RE War Diary: November 1943.

¹⁰⁵Sampson, *Bless 'em all*.

Appendix 2 – Timeline of Events

Unless otherwise stated the dates below are taken from the 23 Brigade Rear HQ War Diary, the Operations Report and the unit War Diaries. It should be noted that inconsistencies exist here and in the original primary source material.

23 Brigade Field HQ: Column 32 & Dates of major events.

29 March: Japanese forces cut the Imphal to Dimapur road.¹⁰⁶

3 April: first 23 Brigade column arrives at Mariani to defend railway.

4 April: Japanese forces arrive at Kohima, fighting there begins, British forces are quickly isolated and besieged.¹⁰⁷

7 April: Start of 'The Approach March' as Column 34, 1 Essex (1E), leaves Norwich for Mokokchung, and then onwards to Mangazumi and Wokha. Initial rise of 2300 feet.

10 April: remaining eight columns at Mariani/Norwich.

20 April: a relieving force from 161 Infantry Brigade makes contact with besieged forces at Kohima. Bitter fighting continues there until early June.¹⁰⁸

20 April: 33 Indian Infantry Brigade take over responsibility for railway & Mariani.

22 April: Column 32 (HQ) begins move forward to Mokokchung.

26/27 April: the monsoon begins, very heavy rainfall in the Naga Hills from then on.

29 April: Column 32 at Mokokchung.

2 May: Corps asks 23 Brigade to remain in current positions until Kohima area cleared of Japanese.

6 May: 4 platoons of Assam Rifles join Column 32 at Wokha.

8 May: Wokha road destroyed by landslide.

18 May: Column 32 leaves for Khuzami.

¹⁰⁶Lyman, *Japan's Last Bid for Victory*, p. 77.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, p. 102.

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- 23 May: L1 light aircraft crashes at Grimsby.
- 24 May: Column 32 (HQ) moves southeast from Mokokchung towards Phakekedzumi.
- 24 May: Column 32 (HQ) sends 2 platoons to join Column 55 (I Essex) for attack on Phakekedzumi.
- 27 May: HQ platoon patrol kills 2 for 2 missing who return later.
- 28 May: 3 HQ platoons seconded to 4B for attacks on Phakekedzumi.
- 29 May: Assam Rifle subedar drowned.
- 31 May: Column 32 (HQ) calls for 2 x 3.7" howitzers to be brought up from Jorhat for Phakekedzumi attacks.
- 4 June: Japanese forces at Kohima begin to withdraw.¹⁰⁹
- 5 June: HQ forward platoons reach, occupy Phakekedzumi.
- 6 June: Royal Signals (field HQ) note numerous ear and skin infections; unhappy at having to handle signals traffic for other, non LRP, brigades in area.
- 7 June: Corps orders 'maximum effort all columns to close on Ukhrul' to harass and destroy retreating Japanese – beginning of The Pursuit.
- 10 June: Naga tribesmen bring in 4 wounded Japanese prisoners.
- 14 June: Command conference at Phakekedzumi.
- 19 June: Dakota Y194 crashes on supply drop.
- 22 June: Brigade field HQ and remaining men leave Grimsby to join columns moving south towards Ukhrul, approximately 100 miles away. 60/88 and I Essex columns leave mules and some equipment behind, replaced by Naga porters.¹¹⁰
- 24 June: Column 32 (HQ) begins to arrive at Jessami.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p.215.

¹¹⁰Bartlett & Benson, *All the King's Enemies*, chap.31. This does not square with the War Diary and Operations Report, one of many inconsistencies in all sources.

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2 July: Column 32 at Paowi – western route to south and Ukhurul.

5 July: ordered to pull out after reaching Ukhurul.

9 July: Column 32 (HQ) mules carrying 3.7” guns and rations attacked twice.

10 July: 2 prisoners taken to Ukhurul.

11 July: Column 32 (HQ) now all at Ukhurul, patrols in action until July 21.

19 July: RAF film unit arrives, 13 Japanese killed, 3 prisoners.

21 July: 1 killed 4 prisoners taken.

22 July: Column 32 (HQ) at Imphal.

27 July: Column 32 (HQ) at Dimapur for return to India.

8/9 August: Wavell and Gifford address the men.

22-31 August: Royal Signals (HQ) – all columns arriving Bangalore for ‘blanket treatment’, most 24 Royal Signals men still in hospital.

3 September: Royal Signals (HQ) – 28 local leave passes issued but only 50% of men feel well enough to take them and go.

6 September: 23 Brigade at Jhansi, Brigadier Lentaigne, Special Force commander addresses brigade, ‘You will all be home for Christmas 1944.’¹¹¹

1 Essex: Columns 44 & 56

7 April: Start of ‘The Approach March’ as Column 34 leaves Mariana/Norwich for Mokochung, and then onwards to Mangazumi and Wokha. Initial rise of 2300 feet.

16 April: Column 44 in contact with 50 Japanese near Phakekrima, 10 killed for 1 own killed and 1 own taken prisoner who despite being very badly treated and bayoneted, escapes and returns.¹¹²

¹¹¹TNA, WO 172/4401, 23 Brigade Royal Signals War Diary. Reflecting a policy that men with four or more years overseas service would be repatriated.

¹¹²TNA, WO 172/4787, 1 Essex War Diary, entry for 15 April.

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18-25 April: both columns in Phakekrima area in continuous contact with dug in Japanese at village. Numerous attacks, all fail. 1 own killed 25 wounded. RAF attack village on 24 & 25.

28 April: Essex columns occupy Phakekrima, enemy gone.

28 April: Essex column finds one of own, captured, bayoneted, wounded.

1 May: Essex Columns attack Japanese patrols and a party of 100 with mules south of Phakekrima, 30+ Japanese killed for 2 own wounded.

2 May: moving towards Kohima.

3 May: Essex Columns own drop zone attacked by 24 Japanese 6 wounded for 3 own wounded.

5 May: Essex Columns ambush small Japanese patrol, 4 killed for 4 own wounded.

6 May: 1 mile south and east of Kohima.

12 May: at Nerhema, under enemy probing attacks for next 3 days.

15 to 21 May: dilatory attacks on both Essex columns in Nerhema area, all beaten off. Active patrolling underway.

19 May: Essex Columns attack Nerhema after Direct Air Support (DAS) by RAF, broke into, but could not overcome Japanese defences. 1 killed own and 1 wounded.

20 May: booby traps taking a toll of Japanese on tracks, killed 7+.

22 May: further attack on Nerhema called off after probing attack beaten off.

23 May: Essex Columns attack Nerhema again, break into Japanese position but then repulsed by counter- attack, 1 own killed and 4 missing. Nearby patrols kill 1.

24 May; Essex Columns attack Nerhema again, broke in again and held, this time, but position not fully cleared of enemy.

27 May: Nerhema attack called off.

28 - 30 May: Essex Columns note enemy at Nerhema, and in surrounding area seem to be withdrawing.

1 June: ambush kills 1 of 3 Japanese.

5 June: ordered south from Gariphema.

10 June: Essex Columns begin to arrive Phakekedzumi.

12 June: leave for Jessami begin to arrive from 13 June.

16 June: Columns 44 & 56 move to Phakekedzumi/Grimsby, then follow Columns 60 & 88 (60RA) on way to Ukhrul via Fort Keary. 'We had been sodden for weeks, were covered with mud, and we stank. Hollow-eyed, wasted, hungry, and yet incapable of eating more than a minute meal, we talked of nothing else but food.' And earlier, 'many were marching with temperatures and tick typhus had begun to break out.'¹¹³

22 June: Somra area and 'Valley of Death.' A post war memoir notes the track, 'at Tusom Khulen near to Point 7946 (8500 feet) was very steep and slippery, and along the ridge the track was knee deep in mud and the jungle very wet. Skeletons and decomposing bodies of Jap troops were to be seen all along the route. Progress was very slow. Known to all ranks as Death Valley.'¹¹⁴ This date is inconsistent with War Diary, should be earlier.

24/26 June: Four Essex and 60RA Columns begin arriving in Fort-Keary area to start operations against Japanese forces from Kohima.

29/30 June: mortared retreating Japanese 20+ killed?

14 July: contact made with 33 Indian Infantry Brigade.

24 July: Essex columns arrive Dimapur.

2 Duke of Wellingtons: Columns 33 & 76

10 April: Column 76 leaves Norwich for Mokokchung.

11 April: Column 76 arrives Mokokchung and then moves on to Wokha.

13 April: Column 33 on way to Wokha makes contact with party of 50 Japanese, withdraws to protect brigade HQ.

¹¹³Martin, *The Essex Regiment*, p. 118.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, p.98.

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15-22 April: Columns 33 & 76 in Wokha & nearby, Japanese have gone.

26 April: Column 33 has 26 own killed or missing during an unsuccessful attack on a prepared Japanese ridgeline position and bunkers at Phakekrima. Ten Japanese killed, RAF air support called up before second attack, but Japanese positions found abandoned on 28 April.¹¹⁵

28 April: light aircraft pick up 1 DoW wounded from Grimsby.

1 May: Columns 33 & 76 in Tseminyu area, no Japanese found but further JIFS surrender. Begin move towards Kohima flank.

6/7 May: Columns 33 & 76 ambush Japanese & JIF patrol near Gariphema, 12 killed, and useful maps obtained, no losses. Ongoing contacts south of Nerhema 5 killed for 2 wounded.

10 May: occupy positions south of Nerhema having killed 12.

17 May: Column 33 & 76 bivouac area attacked by 50 Japanese with artillery, decision made to break out towards Khesami, 3 own killed and 2 wounded for 17 Japanese killed. Weather very bad, mules and men falling off tracks, 3-inch mortars fell down hillsides but recovered. Notes of increasing 'K-rationitis' – severe diarrhoea and cramps – with many men sick.¹¹⁶

22 – 28 May: Columns 33 & 76 in continuous patrol and ambush actions around Chozumi and Khesima. Direct air support attack on Chozumi aborted. 30+ enemy killed in ambushes.

30 May: under enemy attack all day, 18 enemy killed 4 wounded for own losses of 3 killed and 2 wounded. Withdrew at night.

31 May: enemy bunker part destroyed.

1 June: Columns move to Theprezumi to assist 33 Column with attack on up to 200 Japanese, but by 5 June Japanese had gone.

2 June: held up by enemy bunkers, 1 killed for 1 own killed.

3 – 11 June: ambushes set and encountered on road. Killed 4 on 4 June.

¹¹⁵TNA, WO 172/4878; and Wilcox, *Chindit Column*, pp. 72-74.

¹¹⁶TNA, WO 172/4876, War Diary for 2 Duke of Wellington's 1944, entry for 17 May.

11 June: 4B & 2DoW Columns move west towards Kohima area to block Japanese exfiltration through hills.

20 June: 4B & 2DoW Columns released to move south from Jessami towards Ukhrul. No actions until 1 July when 6 enemy killed in ambush.

4 July: 2DoW Columns blocking Ukhrul-Kamjong road to Chindwin.

11/12 July: 2DoW ambush Japanese stragglers, 3 killed for 1 own killed. Many dead Japanese and dead mules in area.

16 July: 2DoW columns at Ukhrul.

21/22 July: 2DoW columns at Dimapur.

4 Border: Columns 34 & 55

14 April: Columns 34 & 55 leave Mariani/Norwich for Mokokchung.

18 April: first skirmish with enemy, killed 16 for 1 own wounded.

20 April: Columns 34 and 35 at Mokokchung on way to Phakekrima ambush 20 Japanese, killing 12 with 3 wounded prisoners taken; 3 own wounded.

1 May: Both Columns at Phakekedzumi, kill 30 in attack on dug in Japanese, and 4 more in an ambush nearby but fail to take village. 2 own killed 5 wounded.

4 May: Recce Platoon ambush kills 6.

8 May: ambush kills 4 of 7, no loss.

9 May: Columns 34 & 55 complete light airstrip at Grimsby, Naga reports of 150 Japanese in area.

10 May: RAF direct air support attack on own troops – no casualties.

12 May: attacked by enemy 1 own killed and 1 wounded.

18/19 May: Columns 34 & 55 use 3 inch mortars on Chozumi and later ambush Japanese patrol, 17 killed for no loss.

21 May: Columns ambush Japanese at Sakrabama where 7 killed.

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25 May: ambush kills 3 for no loss.

1 June: Columns at Thetsemi, mortar attack dug in enemy position kill 9, but no major assault made.

3 June: attack on Japanese roadblock unsuccessful, 1 own killed 2 wounded.

4 June: Chozumi bombed by 12 RAF fighter bombers.

5 June: 24 RAF aircraft attack Phakekedzumi, position occupied for no loss.

11 June: 4B & 2DoW Columns move west towards Kohima area to block Japanese exfiltration through hills. Five other columns including 1E and 60RA begin march by different south easterly routes for Pursuit operations against Japanese retreating from Kohima.

12 June: Columns in Gariphema area, ambushed by enemy, 1 own wounded, various ambushes and small actions over next ten days, 20+ enemy killed.

17 June: Columns at Thetsema, ambushed and killed 16 with 4 wounded for no own loss. 3.7" guns in use against Evening Hills position.

19 June: Gariphema clear of enemy.

20 June: 4B & 2DoW Columns released to move south towards Ukhurul.

21 June: 4B Columns make contact with 1/1 Punjabi from Kohima.

24 Jun: 4B Columns leave for Paowi, 16 Japanese killed in ambush, another ambush kills further 2.

27 June: patrol kills 7 near Paowi.

29/30 June: further 4B ambushes kill 14 of enemy.

3 to 10 July: numerous 4B ambushes on road, estimate 215 enemy killed; most in poor physical condition.

5/6 July: uses 3.7" guns on enemy party of 500 near Ukhurul, unknown number killed (?), shelled by enemy 4 own killed, 3 wounded.

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7 – 13 July: continuous ambushes and patrol actions, killed 9 enemy.

12 July: 4B Columns kills 4 enemy on road, now able to evacuate own wounded out by road to Ukhrul.

15 July: Columns at and around Ukhrul, no further actions.

19 July: at Dimapur.

60 Royal Artillery: Columns 60 & 88

21 & 22 April: Columns 60 & 88 leave Norwich for Mokokchung.

28 April: Columns 60 & 88 leave Mokokchung for Khuzami.

17 May: Columns 60 & 88 attack Jessami, 18 killed for 1 own wounded.

17 May: Columns 60 & 88 attack Japanese at Jessami and Khanjang, kill 19 for 1 own wounded, capture a large amount of Japanese supplies and documents. Continue to operate and fight in this area for some weeks.

22 May: 2 ambushes kills 21 for 5 own wounded. 1 prisoner handed over to Nagas to take back to HQ.

27 May: ambush, fails.

30 May: tracks blocked around Jessami.

31 May: at Grimsby under enemy attack, 3 own killed, 1 wounded.

1 June: Recce platoon kills 3 but then attacked by 40+.

2 June: Recce platoon's way ahead blocked by bunkers.

5 June: Column 60 ambush 'spoiled by Nagas.' – but not a Naga area.

6 June: Columns 60 and 88 leave HQ/Phakekedzumi/Grimsby for Fort Keary and on to Ukhrul; daily ambushes and patrol actions follow until arrival at Fort Keary.

10 June: unsuccessful attack on Kharasom Kuki, 1 own killed 5 wounded.

17 June: direct air support bombs own troops at Kharasom Kuki, no radio comms, so could stop it.

THE FORGOTTEN CHINDITS - 23 BRITISH INFANTRY BRIGADE

23 June: Columns 60 & 88 report, 'Eight hours taken to pass through 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death' near Soma where very deep mud on track is full of dead Japanese, dead mules, and skeletons'. Soma is between Phakekedzumi and Fort Keary.

28 June: Columns 60 & 88 begin to arrive Fort Keary.

1 July: Columns 60 & 88 run out of rations in bad weather, buys local bullock, next drop received 5 July but only partially successful.

9 July: Recce patrol in action, kills 3, captures 2 INA.

July 13 – 17: Quieter, patrols out but few contacts.

14 July: Columns 60/88 merged, ambushes enemy several times, kill 17, no loss.

17 July: final patrol action near to Ukhrul kills 1 Japanese.

25 July: Columns 60 & 88 at Dimapur.