

The Chindits in Burma - The Forgotten War

Preface

British involvement in World War 2 was not only immense, committed and integral to the eventual outcome, but was also widespread in its geography. Britain fought in one way or another in every major theatre of war, including France, Italy and Britain itself, the Pacific, Atlantic and Mediterranean, the Far East, Middle East and Africa: the list goes on. And so, when discussing British involvement in the Second World War there are many topics to choose from. So many, in fact, that many battlefields and those that fought upon them have already been largely forgotten.

One of those is the British campaign in Burma (present day Myanmar) against the Japanese invasion. From the start of 1942 until the end of the war in August of 1945, Allied forces fought against the Japanese in an attempt to first, halt the Japanese invasion and protect the British colony of India, and second, push them out of South East Asia. However, the fierce fighting in this area has received limited attention, resulting in it being named the 'Forgotten War'. But for this essay I have chosen to focus on even lesser-known events within this forgotten campaign - Operation Longcloth, Operation Thursday and the missions of the Long Range Penetration Group - otherwise known as the Chindits.

These operations have often been characterized as a poor military investment by authors such as General William Slim and Woodburn Kirby, who often seem to have more against the Chindit's founder than the Chindits themselves. This has led to unbalanced narratives, and in this essay, I will seek to rectify this to a certain extent, in spite of the limited scope of truly comprehensive information that I have access too. In addition, considering the extraordinary nature of the Chindits, I feel they have received too little attention, with far more historical analysis focused on the events in Europe or on other special forces such as the SAS. This essay will attempt to contribute towards rectifying this disparity as well.

I will first outline the Chindits and the campaign in general, before going through their operation, victories and losses, and finally, and most importantly, evaluate whether the Chindits were in fact a success. Their success will be judged by whether or not they were truly important to the campaign in Burma, or whether they consumed valuable resources that could have been better allocated. It must be noted that I lacked access to primary sources and so was unable to form a comprehensive view of the exact way the campaign played out. Therefore, I have not gone into extreme detail in terms of order of battle, units involved, and other specifics and instead focused more on the debate about whether or not the Chindits were successful. In addition, I will examine the life and character of Orde Wingate, the founder of the Chindits.

The Burma Campaign

After the invasion by Japanese forces in January of 1942, the poorly prepared and under-equipped British divisions were continually pushed back, despite desperate resistance. Soon, Rangoon was taken, and the main land supply route to China was lost - a huge accomplishment for Japan, who had isolated one of their main opponents, and a huge loss for the Allies, who had been divided, stopping the flow of important equipment, particularly from the US and Lend Lease. The Japanese army, well suited to offensive warfare, continually outflanked Allied defensive positions, until the British found themselves retreating out of Burma, all the way to India.

After constant defeats and retreating, morale throughout the Allied armies was cripplingly low. Many were now convinced of Japanese 'invincibility' in Jungle warfare, after counterattacks failed. In addition, the nature of the Burma campaign, with its harsh terrain and the prevalence of diseases such as malaria, worsened the situation further. In addition, the Burma campaign found its title as the 'Forgotten War' applied not just to our attention to it now, but also to the priorities of allied leaders and commanders. With Nazi Germany and Europe the priority for the British in particular, and the USA occupied with the Japanese further east, Allied forces in Burma found themselves deprioritised for new equipment, high quality men and commanders, and logistical support. This certainly did not put India Command in the best position as the Japanese occupied Burma and prepared to invade India, expanding their Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

The Chindits: An Origin Story

The Chindits, fundamentally Major Orde Wingate's creation, have their roots in Ethiopia, May 1940. It was here that Wingate was put in command of Gideon force, a small irregular fighting unit that disrupted Italian lines of communication and supply. The success of this unit, and Wingate's experience in the Middle East, led to the formation of Wingate's peculiar military ideas. And so, when invited to India by his former commander in the Middle East, General Archibald Wavell, to help form a plan to spearhead the reconquest of Burma, he proposed the then unique idea of long range penetration units. These would be deployed to damage the enemy's supply lines and communication far behind the frontlines, where supposedly the enemy would least suspect attack and, in theory, be at their most vulnerable. Wingate himself used the analogy of boxing - the blow struck upon the fists of an enemy will do damage, but the same blow struck behind the fist, against a kidney or the midriff, will do far more harm (Wo 203/5216).

These special forces would be small enough to avoid larger enemy formations and stay hidden in the thick, jungle terrain, while being large enough to inflict heavy damage when required.

This proposal was presented by Wingate to the Joint Planning Staff in Delhi, who supported his ideas. This encouraged Wingate, who after struggling with British authorities, India Command, and many other Generals who doubted his theories were a worthwhile use of resources, finally saw his ideas accepted. This resulted in the formation of the new 77th Indian Brigade, under his command, in June 1940. With the name 'Chindits' originating from the 'Chinthe', the lions that guard the temples in Burma, Wingate's brigade was complete (Sykes). The strange and interesting story of the Chindits had begun.

Preparation

In preparation for the first Chindit expedition Wingate had plenty of tasks to flesh out his new idea and prepare it for actual combat. Firstly, the theory of these long range penetration units had to be further developed. These units would operate in small columns of about 300 men each, carrying as many supplies as possible with them, using both mules and the men themselves. It was theorized that these columns would be able to relocate quickly far behind enemy lines, hiding from larger enemy forces and attacking vulnerable points. Perhaps two of the most important technologies that allowed the Chindit operations to take place at all were air supply and the wireless telegraph. Making use of regular air drops that would be received at constantly changing locations would theoretically allow these units to operate indefinitely, while wireless communication would allow them to coordinate these air drops and their movements with a central command or offensive. These two technologies combined to enable an extraordinary force - a small, light and mobile but hard-hitting unit that could operate effectively for a long period of time behind enemy lines. In the jungles of Burma, it was the perfect special forces unit.

Secondly, Wingate found himself vulnerable to the nature of the campaign in Burma, as described earlier, with deficiencies in supply and higher quality manpower. In particular, he found himself with a relatively small number of untrained troops unprepared for the hardships he was intending to put them through. Therefore, Wingate's training was vigorous. It began with the commanders of the columns. They were to be personally supervised by Wingate, who would ensure that they were executing his ideas to his satisfaction. They would train for every conceivable situation and were to understand how to carry out every possible mission. In keeping with Wingate's unusual character, he trained these commanders not using miniatures on a table, but instead inside 400 yard sand pits, with landscapes dug to scale. With the recruits, key components of the Chindit operations, such as ambushes, reconnaissance, patrols, air supply and signals were all planned meticulously (Rolo). To prepare his troops for the long marches, Wingate carried out a gruelling 200 mile march over 4 days while carrying full equipment – every soldier had to be able to push themselves to the limits of human endurance, as Wingate knew that this expedition would certainly do just that. (Rolo 1946:35) The high level

of training put upon the Chindits by Wingate reflects the extraordinary nature of the situation in which he intended to put them.

The Chindits in Action: Operation Longcloth

The first action of the Chindits was planned to take place alongside a major offensive by Allied forces in North Burma, which would help turn the tide of the Japanese advance. However, when this was cancelled, Wavell informed Wingate that any expedition by the Chindits would have no strategic justification, as there would be no major troop movement that they would be aiding, while the Japanese would have time to simply repair any damage it caused. However, Wingate, determined as ever, convinced Wavell to continue with the operation on the grounds that it would prove the Chindit theory and help improve the faltering morale of the British troops in Burma. Worn down by retreat after retreat and convinced of the 'invincibility' of Japanese troops in the jungle, India Command was looking for a victory, however small, to turn things around. Therefore, after some wrangling with his command, Wingate prevailed, and the expedition was approved.

And so, on the 8th February 1943, 3,000 Chindits, separated into their small, mobile columns, began their advance. Firstly, their objective was to cross the Chindwin River, infiltrating the Japanese frontlines. Then, they were to advance towards the Mandalay-Myitkyina railway, which they would cut, and the Irrawaddy River. After a diversionary attack to the South with a portion of the Chindit force, the main advance began to the east. (Wo 231/13) With the diversion successful, the Chindits' training and small size enabled them to slip through towards their objectives mostly undetected. Soon they had cut one of the largest routes of supply for the Japanese in more than 70 places, with successful demolitions across 100 miles of the railway. In addition, they had confused the Japanese, diverting their troops and distracting them. (Sykes)

Not everything went perfectly, however. Several columns had been ambushed and the survivors subsequently forced to return to India. (Sykes) Not only that, but things got far worse after the decision to cross the Irrawaddy River and head even further east. Wingate found that his forces were now trapped in terrain that they were not suited for. It was more open here, making it harder to stay undetected. This area was at the limit of the air drops from which the Chindits relied on for supply. There were also more roads, allowing the Japanese to move forces into positions from which they could surround any Chindit columns. Finally, there was a lack of water which was needed to sustain the Chindits. (Wo 231/13) These problems eventually resulted in Wingate being forced to order the entire force back to India, as the columns began to suffer from supply and water shortages, and frequent ambushes. And so, from April to June, the surviving columns found their way back across the Chindwin River and to India. The Operation was over.

Operation Thursday

With Operation Longcloth proving the viability of the Chindit strategy and the value of such a force, Wingate began planning another expedition for early 1944. (Wo 203/4620) This was to involve a much larger Chindit force, using much the same tactics with perhaps two main differences - the use of air transport to bring in the troops and fortified 'strongholds' which would serve as bases of operation behind enemy lines. This would allow Wingate to transport quickly large numbers of troops far behind the frontline, with no need for the tiring and risky infiltration past the Japanese lines and all the way to their objectives. Instead, they could be inserted straight into planned locations that were far from enemy interference, confusing the Japanese with the speed of the operation and forcing them to commit large troop formations. After all, with the help of patrols, mines and traps the dense jungle gave the defender a great advantage, meaning these fortified locations would be very hard for the enemy to locate and move troops to attack, never mind actually destroy.

Once again, Wingate's Chindits were to be used alongside a major offensive, involving Chinese forces and two entire Corps advancing in the North and South. However, this plan required the Chinese to help secure the Ledo Road, who would only commit their forces if an amphibious operation was planned to stop Japanese reinforcements from controlling the Bay of Bengal (Kirby). With all available landing craft transferred to Europe in preparation for Operation Overlord, this simply could not happen, so yet again the Chindits found themselves trained and prepared for an expedition to aid an offensive that would never materialise (Kirby). And yet again, they would be sent in anyway.

This time, however, the objective was to aid American General Joseph Stillwell's advance to secure the Ledo Road (Wo 203/5215), and so on the 5th March the first gliders set off. They landed a predesignated clearing codenamed 'Broadway', that had been scouted through aerial reconnaissance. This open area turned out to be rougher than expected, causing many gliders to crash. The wreckage concerned Michael Calvert, the commander of the 77th Brigade, who sent a codeword to Wingate meaning the gliders should return home. This resulted in confusion, meaning some gliders were recalled, and others landed early in enemy territory (Wo 203/4610). Despite this sounding like a failure, it was not a huge blow, it would luckily serve to throw the Japanese off, causing them to hugely expand the area they were searching in and fail to find Broadway early.

By the next day, another codeword was sent and once the bulldozers that had been flown in had cleared the area allowing transport aircraft to land, the main Chindit force was flown in. Over 4 nights 335 Dakota transport aircraft landed at Broadway, followed by another 125 aircraft landing at another hastily prepared airstrip codenamed Chowringhee, after the planned 'Piccadilly' airstrip was found to be obstructed (Kirby). It was a huge success, with 12,000 Chindits landed far behind

enemy lines, with a secure base of operations and an enemy none the wiser. Not only that, but the succession of unplanned deceptions continued. The forces landed at Chowringhee were eventually ordered to leave and join up at Broadway, as the unplanned airstrip at Chowringhee, being unplanned, was not easily defensible. For three days after they left, the Japanese bombed and attacked the vacant airstrip, leaving them confused and ignorant of Broadway and the Chindits true location (Wo 203/4620).

It was now that the Chindits showed their true potential. The Allies were not the only ones planning an offensive in Burma for 1944, and three days after the first Chindit landings the Japanese launched a full-scale invasion of India. The Japanese generals lacked knowledge of the full scale of the Chindit operation and assumed their garrisons could take care of the situation. For them this would be a costly mistake. Over the following months, the numerous Chindit columns engaged in a multitude of hugely successful operations across Burma. Sabotage of communications, supply routes and key infrastructure, ambushes, attacks and theft of important documents took place all across their area of operation, and soon the effects of this could be felt by the Japanese frontline units. Their advance, which was nearing Imphal and key Allied supply bases, suddenly became bogged down, as their commanders became isolated, communications were lost, and transfer of key supplies stopped (Wo 203/4610). The Chindits destroyed huge supply dumps, especially of food supplies and fuel, with figures such as 8,000 gallons at Indaw and 15,000 in the Tatwin region (Wo 203/4610) also stopped all available air support the Japanese had in the area from supporting their main offensive by forcing it to attack them, which caused little damage (Rossetto).

However, after this Operation Thursday deteriorated. Firstly, a planned attack on Indaw and its bases failed. This was because the troops were tired after marching to their objective and had to attack without proper knowledge of the terrain. This led to a split up and divided attack force, and when the commander of the attack found that a division, he had been promised to reinforce him was in fact moving away from him he was forced to abandon all gains. Continued successes were still enjoyed, with effective blocks established over major Japanese supply routes in the form of new fortified locations, such as 'White City' and 'Aberdeen'. However, things would now firmly take a turn for the worst.

It all began with Orde Wingate's death in a plane crash. The loss of Wingate, being a hugely important figure in ensuring the Chindits were used properly and effectively, would be devastating for the force. His successors would fail to understand the nature of the Chindits, and this failure would lead to large numbers of unnecessary casualties and would result in its eventual disbandment (Rossetto).

Firstly, command was handed to Walter Lentaigne, considered to be the most suitable commander in the Chindits by General Slim, the commander of the 14th

Army which dominated British operations in Burma. Lentaigne, however, would prove to come into conflict with the Chindit commanders who were close to Wingate, especially since he was a more traditional officer while they were far more unconventional. In addition, he would order the abandoning of Broadway and White City, strong and secure bases that had held position for months. He then ordered the Chindit forces to move north, where they established a new base called 'Blackpool'. Blackpool was flawed, however, being established close to the Japanese frontlines where stronger and better equipped troops could easily attack the lightly equipped Chindits. As a result, this base was also abandoned, with a part of the Chindit force being evacuated (Kirby).

Secondly, all remaining Chindit forces would be put under the command of General Stillwell. Stillwell would fundamentally mishandle the Chindits, and partly because of being fed false information by his staff would order tired, underfed and diseased Chindit brigades to repeatedly engage Japanese forces of greater size and in prepared defensive positions, particularly at Maingna and Myitkyina. (Calvert) He had little idea of what the situation was like within these brigades, and this would result in far higher casualty rates than before. For example, Morris Force would be told to attack a position 'regardless of the consequences' after taking 50% casualties and would soon be reduced to only 25 men fit for duty by the 21st of July. (Calvert) Malaria and malnutrition were rampant, and despite the situation being reported to Stillwell's HQ he refused to believe it and would continue to send them into combat against Japanese frontline troops. Eventually, the last Chindit brigades would be ground down to mere company size, with very few of the remaining soldiers still being fit for active duty. The last Chindit would be finally evacuated from Burma on the 27th August, 1944.

The Chindits: An effective special forces?

With the end of Operation Thursday came an end of a truly extraordinary special forces group. The Chindits operated in a particularly unorthodox manner using unproven methods, yet not only managed many notable achievements but would continue to operate for a surprisingly long time, aiding Allied operations across Burma. But as is the question with all Special Forces - are they worth it? Are they actually effective? Or are they a distraction, a small force that uses a disproportionate number of resources while accomplishing little? That is the core question with the Chindits, a question that has been debated by many people ever since the Chindits ended operations, and even while they were operating. To answer this question, we must first define an effective special force. These forces, in World War 2 particularly, were set up to harm the enemy and their ability to fight. It was a way of restricting the enemy's ability on the frontlines, by conducting operations that would harm their troops in many ways. Fundamentally, it was another way of trying to achieve strategic victory in a campaign. And so, for this essay, if the Chindits did indeed play a direct role in the eventual victory in Burma, then they were successful.

The strategic value of the Chindits shall be our first focus. Operation Longcloth had a surprising effect on the Japanese and the Burmese front as a whole. At this point the 14th Army was now holding its ground but was in no position to push the Japanese back, and needed them to start an offensive. In fact, that was General Slim's plan - to draw the enemy into an attack, defeat them, and then begin a counter-offensive (Slim). However, he soon found that he could not force the enemy to attack him. On the other hand, this would be something that Operation Longcloth would prove to be able to achieve. According to interrogations of Japanese commanders they would learn from Wingate's first expedition that this dense jungle would be 'difficult to defend' and that it would be better to start an offensive. This offensive, Operation U-Go, therefore caused by the Chindits, would then be beaten back, laying the groundwork for the retaking of Burma. On these grounds it can already be concluded that the Chindits directly contributed to the eventual victory and so are already a successful special force. However, it does not stop there.

During this Japanese offensive that the Chindits helped to create, Wingate's forces from Operation Thursday would help turn the tide by forcing the commitment of a force larger than their own by the Japanese. This successful diversion of forces, especially the entire 53rd Division has been well supported by James Thorp in his Dissertation on this very topic, who calculates that the Chindits diverted a force at least 60% larger than their own (roughly 8,000 more men). (Thorp) Renya Mutaguchi, the commander of the Japanese forces during Operation U-Go said that 'one regiment... would have turned the scales' (Calvert). These figures therefore show that this diversion was not only successful, but perhaps even critical to the Allied victory against the Japanese offensive.

Secondly, there is the material value of the Chindits. Many critics of the Chindits and Wingate complain about how he took large numbers of men from other units and harmed the ability of the frontline troops to fight by taking their resources. Upon inspection, it has been found that these statements hold no ground. In fact, although the Chindits did indeed take units from the 14th Army, such as the 70th Division, these units would be well utilised and would be a worthwhile investment. As previously stated, they drew off larger forces than themselves. In addition to this, their frequent ambushes and attacks throughout Burma resulted in very positive casualty ratios, with sources stating numbers in the regions of 5000 to 10,000 enemy casualties for 1000 to 1500 of their own. (Calvert) In addition, the material sabotage of supply dumps, such as the one at Indaw and other locations, resulted in a multitude of problems for the Japanese. Shortages of ammunition and fuel became a problem during the fighting, but most importantly when retreating from their U-Go Offensive the Japanese suffered large numbers of losses from diseases and malnutrition. (TNA) This can be attributed to multiple factors, including the difficulties transporting supplies over the terrain, but also the fact that the principle Japanese supply dumps for food and medicines were destroyed by Chindit operations. These

casualties would help drive home the defeat in the wake of the failed offensive, allowing for a more successful Allied campaign to retake Burma. Once again, the Chindits have directly contributed to the Allied victory, and by doing so proved themselves an effective special force.

In addition to these direct contributions, there are others too. Operation Longcloth has been said, even by Chindit critics such as General Slim, to have had a key role in improving the morale of British troops after the repeated defeats of 1942 (Slim). Effects such as this cannot be easily measured, but it can certainly be argued that the Chindits were particularly important in dispelling the myth of Japanese invincibility and preparing Allied troops for the turning of the tide in Burma.

The Chindits also proved the potential for many things. Technologies such as air supply were relatively new, and the way the Chindits used them to totally supply their units would be used by many other units in Burma, particularly during the defence of Kohima and Imphal against the U-go offensive. Even the whole premise of a long range penetration group would be taken and used in other forms, such as by the Americans with Merrill's Marauders.

However, the Chindits were not without faults. Mistakes such as insufficient rations, especially in the first expedition would result in unnecessarily large casualty rates. Despite the Chindit's successes, tactical errors still occurred. For example, crossing the Irrawaddy River in Operation Longcloth would lead to most of that expedition's casualties for little gain. In Operation Thursday, the failure to capture Indaw was a tactical error, and then, after Wingate's death, casualty figures began to rack up as a result of the unit's horrific misuse by Stillwell and extended period in the field.

But overall, it can be argued with confidence that the Chindits were a success. They certainly and directly contributed to the overall campaign victory, aiding the frontline units, proving themselves a worthwhile investment in both men and material. With this and more the faults of the Chindits are overshadowed, and the Second World War's largest special force can be proven to have been perhaps its most successful too.

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It must be noted that due to the nature of the situation in which this essay was written, access to many of the primary sources on the topic was limited. Therefore, this essay could not have been written without the free access to several additional resources written in a similar style to mine, that come to their own conclusions using the same information. For that free access I am deeply grateful, as with it not only

was I able to further spread knowledge about these relatively unknown events, but also, I was able to enjoy learning about this unusual and complex topic myself - I hope you will too.