



The ambitious offensive that drove the Japanese from Arakan – the amphibious landing at Myebon – was a deadly learning curve for the newly formed 3 Commando Brigade, the first combined operation for armed forces of British India and the first phase in an offensive which led to the bloody defence of Hill 170, writes **James Hoare**.

BLACK MUD & GREEN BERETS

Burma Commando: Part I

A great sodden strip of mangroves and malaria following the coast down the eastern boundary of the Bay of Bengal, the Arakan was the key to taking occupied Burma. Driven in humiliation from this verdant hinterland in May 1942, a tentative British offensive to retake it between December 1942 and May 1943 had been viciously rebuffed by the Japanese 15th Army.

The sprawling patchwork of islands and peninsulas, each separated by unpredictable tidal waterways (called chaungs) and sundered from the claustrophobic jungle interior by the foreboding ridge of the Arakan Mountains, was a landscape that suited the Japanese way of war far more than it did the British. Japanese soldiers were resilient and resourceful, travelling lightly and attacking swiftly. They made use of the landscape to conceal their numbers, their intent, their snipers and their ambushes. They fought on their own terms from shadowy dugouts or through flanking manoeuvres, and willingly endured hunger and hardship because they had known only victory. ►

LEFT: A BAND OF NO.5 COMMANDO MEN IN THE ARAKAN WITH CAPTURED YOSEGAKI HINOMARU (GOOD LUCK FLAG), KATANA AND NAMBU PISTOL. SGT JOHN SKIPPER SITS BENEATH THE RISING SUN (COURTESY MARK SKIPPER)





On the other hand, the motley mixture of Indian, African, Nepalese and white British and Dominion servicemen – a true army of the King-Emperor – were demoralised, under-resourced and thinly spread. Plus nothing in their training would have prepared them for the scrabble for survival under the decaying light of the jungle canopy.

ABOVE: A RARE IMAGE OF COMMANDOS IN SLOUCH HATS (POSSIBLY TO PRESERVE OPERATIONAL SECURITY). PTE JOHN STRAIN, 1 CDO IS FIRST LEFT. (COURTESY DAN STRAIN)

RIGHT: BRITISH AND INDIAN TROOPS LAND ON AKYAB ISLAND, DECEMBER 1944. (NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM)

OPPOSITE: THE DOG TAGS BELONGING TO PTE THOMAS HALL, 1 CDO, WITH A COMFORTING PHOTOGRAPH OF HALL AND HIS INFANT DAUGHTER. (COURTESY DARREN LITTLE)

The Chindits – properly known as Long Range Penetration Groups – contributed little material benefit to the war effort. However, in a period of ugly retreat, they proved that a lightly equipped troop of self-sufficient jungle specialists could succeed in using the Japanese tactics of speed, mobility and terror against them. Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, installed as Supreme Allied Commander of South East Asia Command (SEAC) in late 1943, noted that, by 1944, “the whole army was Chindit-minded”.

In this, Mountbatten was ahead of the curve. As a naval man and an early evangelist for combined operations, he had been instrumental in the wholesale conversion of several divisions of Royal Marines into commandos, recognising

that their specialist training in amphibious operations made them a fertile source of special forces, largely untouched by the war to date. After a failed overland offensive in Arakan, an amphibious operation was the best opportunity to wrongfoot the Japanese.

Welcome to the Jungle

The 3rd Special Service Brigade – later renamed 3 Commando Brigade out of distaste for the initials ‘SS’ – consisted of the army’s No.1 Commando and No.5 Commando, who had already seen action in North Africa, and the newer No.42 (Royal Marine) and No.44 (Royal Marine) Commandos. They would distinguish themselves as the only commando brigade to serve in the Far East and the victors in what was later regarded as the fiercest fight of the struggle in Burma, the Battle of Hill 170.

Given rudimentary jungle warfare training on the long voyage from Liverpool – which saw them issued with Australian-style slouch hats, quickly discarded in favour of their hard-earned green berets – No.5 and No.44 arrived in India at the end of 1943 and blooded themselves in Operation Screwdriver. Following two amphibious landings on the northern Arakan, on March 11 (Screwdriver I) and 14 (Screwdriver II), 1944, the commandos pushed inland and into the Japanese rear to support an offensive on Buthidaung and Razabil.



Here they gained the experience that no instructor could have prepared them for: the suffocating darkness and pungent rot of the jungle, the leeches that slid noiselessly through the eyelets of their boots and, finally, the Japanese themselves, who came crashing suddenly from the silence like screaming death.

By mid-1944, the situation in Burma had finally begun to shift, if not towards the Allies, then certainly against the Japanese. A march on India had been stopped in its tracks at the Battle of Kohima (April 4-June 22, 1944) and the Battle of Imphal (March 8-July 3, 1944). These were the largest

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defeats yet inflicted on the battle-hardened Imperial Japanese Army. From Kohima and Imphal, British IV Corps and Indian XXXIII Corps had begun an offensive in the north of Burma, while Indian XV Corps was to follow, pushing south through Arakan.

No.1 and No.42 Commandos finally arrived at the end of 1944. With a new CO in Brigadier Campbell Richard Hardy DSO (who led No.46 (Royal Marine) Commando in Normandy) they were given a taste of bloody amphibious landings on Ramree Island, remembered primarily for the enduring myth that the Japanese garrison was massacred by saltwater crocodiles. They also landed at Elizabeth Island at the southern end of Arakan. Operation Screwdriver and the raids on Ramree and Elizabeth earned three Military Crosses and four Military Medals for 3 Commando, but more vital was the insight they gained into how their quarry fought.

“The opinion I formed of the Japanese soldier was that he was a very good soldier,” Captain Richard Acton of 44 Commando told the Imperial War Museum (IWM). “He could manage very well on very very little. I don’t believe the average British soldier would manage anything like as well with the same poor-quality services and equipment as the Japanese did, because by this time the Japanese were very poorly supplied in Burma. The Burma

Campaign was coming to its logical conclusion and they were living off the land.”

The Japanese never engaged unless they had the element of surprise, refusing obvious ambushes if the risk was too great and often allowing the commandos to land unmolested. They planted snipers in the trees, who would wait for a patrol to pass before shooting into the rear, ►





but their weapons were poor quality and the Japanese soldier was, on the whole, a lousy marksman.

Finally, the men experienced the horrific character of the war in the Far East. They heard their opponents call out in English from the undergrowth and make 'friendly' radio transmissions to gauge the commandos' whereabouts. They witnessed their wounded comrades being dragged into rice paddies and dumped in the open as bait – giving the commandos no choice but to leave them

ABOVE: ROYAL INDIAN NAVAL PERSONNEL ON A LANDING CRAFT DURING COMBINED OPERATIONS OFF MYEBON, JANUARY 1945. (IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS)

OPPOSITE: A MAP OF THE PRINCIPAL ROYAL INDIAN NAVY OPERATIONS IN THE ARAKAN. THE FIRST IS THE BLOODLESS LANDING AT AKYAB, THE SECOND IS MYEBON AND THE FOURTH IS KANGAW AND HILL 170. (VIA AUTHOR)

to die – and saw Burmese villages where the Japanese had murdered and mutilated the residents for no reason.

The Cruel Mud of Myebon

Lieutenant-General Sir Philip Christison, commander of the Indian XV Corps of Britain's Fourteenth Army, was unwilling to ease the pressure on the Japanese in Arakan.

The bloodless capture of the airfields on Akyab Island (Operation Talon, January 3-11, 1945) offered the formula for Operation Passport, the coming attack on Myebon Peninsula and push inland to the vital hub of Kangaw. Following the shock and awe of a combined naval and air bombardment, the commandos were to blaze ahead before turning over their hard-fought positions to the 26th Indian Infantry Division. But while the enemy had melted away at Akyab – obligingly gifting

the Allies an all-weather strip from which the RAF could menace Rangoon – this next amphibious assault from 3 Commando Brigade would force Japanese 28th Army to fight for survival.

With the rest of XV Corps driving down the Arakan overland, Brigadier Hardy's beret-clad buccaneers were tasked with landing on the southern tip of the Myebon Peninsula under the watchful batteries of two sloops of the Royal Indian Navy, HMINS *Narbada* and HMINS *Jumna*. The peninsula commanded the two principal waterways, Kiyatsin River and Daingbong Chaung, which could be used by the Japanese as line of rapid retreat or reinforcement from their inland fastness.

Once Myebon had been swept clean of resistance, the commandos would be forced to make another amphibious landing, albeit a riverine one, and occupy three

strategically vital hills codenamed 'Brighton', 'Milford' and 'Pinner'. These overlooked the road through the mountains at the village of Kangaw. This was the enemy's only direct escape route into the Burmese interior and the commandos were the anvil against which the hammer of XV Corps would flatten the Japanese.

“...this next amphibious assault from 3 Commando Brigade would force Japanese 28th Army to fight for survival”

In the early hours of January 10, 1945, Brigadier Hardy went out in a motor launch to recon the landing site. He noticed a number of sharpened bamboo stakes lurking just beneath the water at low tide, wicked hazards for any unwary landing craft. The following night No.1 COPP (the Combined Operations Pilotage Party, a specialist unit entrusted with surveying landing sites and covertly clearing them of obstacles) paddled softly towards the beach in canoes to open up a 25-yard gap in the row of spikes. The dark waters were alive with Japanese patrols and Burmese fishermen in dugout canoes, so when one canoe collided with a Japanese sentry, the 'COPPists' held their nerve, stayed silent and kept moving. They placed delayed charges on the stakes and slid away.

On January 12, as the first wave of landing craft crashed through the surf towards the beach codenamed Charlie Green, the charges detonated, shattering the stakes and clearing the approach. The Japanese defenders in the nearby village of Agnu were subject to an overwhelming bombardment by the RIN sloops and their RN escorts. As the commandos gripped their rifles and tommy guns, jaws set and eyes fixed firmly forward, fighter-bombers of No.224 Group, RAF Far East Command, streaked overhead to rip up the black sand with strafing fire and rain munitions on suspected strongpoints.

Mud, Mud and More Mud

Shielded by a smokescreen, the bootnecks of 42 Commando were first ashore, advancing into the teeth of the Japanese artillery – six well-sited 75mm guns, two 37mm guns and one captured 2Pdr – that inflicted horrific casualties. Also waiting for them were mines that had been strewn

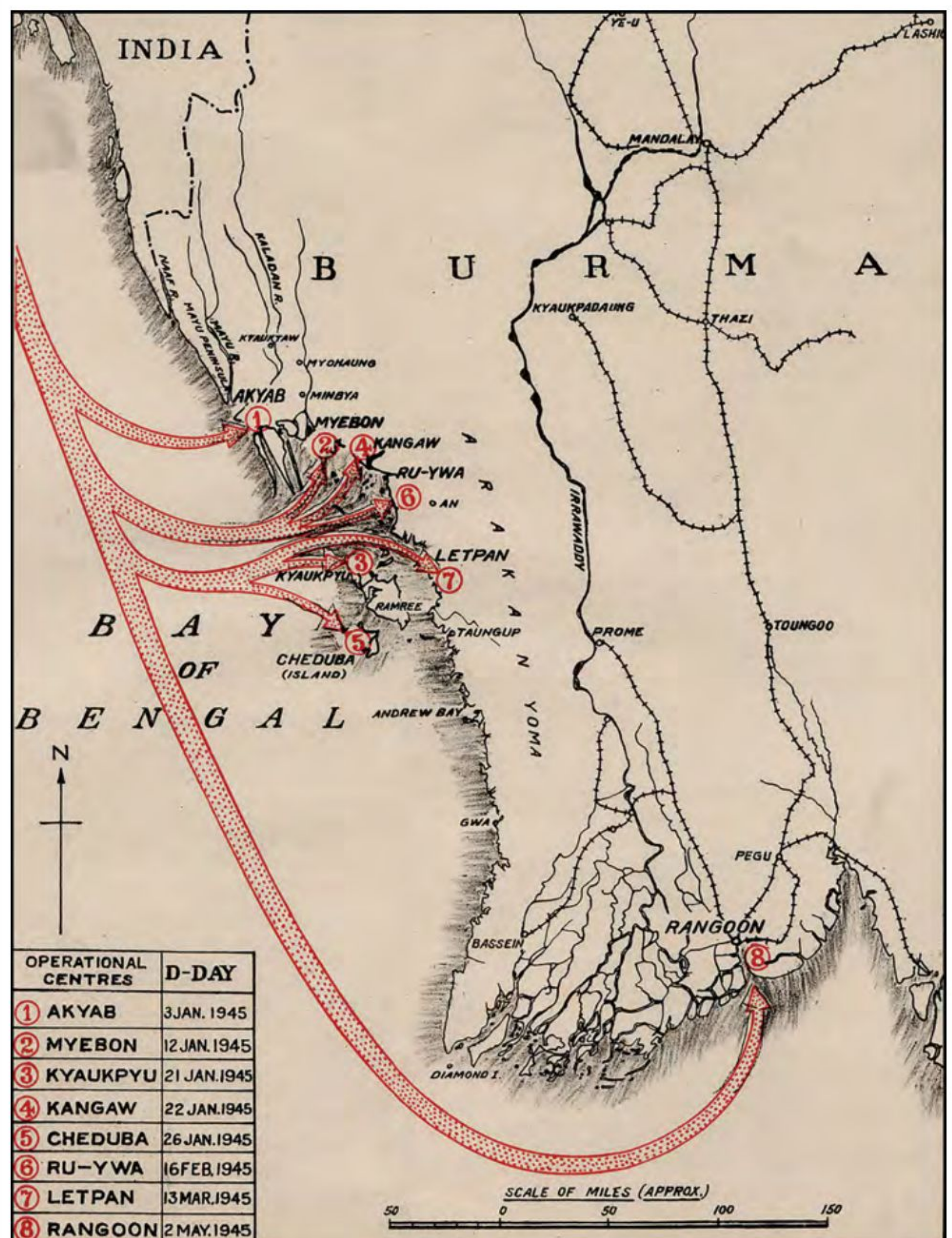
across the beach and were of a design yet to be encountered by the British: the Small Model Mine Model 1, designated 'JE' by the Americans. Sgt Alexander Pirie of No.3 Royal Marine Engineer Commando earned the Military Medal for his cool-headed work disarming them.

Among the first wave was 42 Commando sergeant Frank Allison from Kingston upon Hull. He recorded his wartime experience in suitably broad tones for the IWM: “As we were approaching where we were to get off the landing craft there was such a bang. It were [sic] a 2Pdr gun and it took the chap's head off in this row in front of me. Jed Allen, who was sat on my left, all of a sudden put his hands to his face. 'I've been hit,' he said. I looked round and there was blood coming from between his fingers, but he hadn't been hit – this chap who'd had his head blown off in front of us, a lot of the

blood and that had hit Jed in the face.”

The casualties also included the RIN beachmaster responsible for organising the landing, Lieutenant-Commander Raymond Kettle, whose craft hit one of the JE mines wedged into the mud. Sgt Pirie, who briefly took over to guide 5 Commando to shore, later told his son, Bill: “I went over to the landing craft and amongst all the mess was the beach master, his legs were both blown off below the knees and he was dead meat.”

As 42 and 5 Commandos cleared the bunkers and gun emplacements of whatever defenders had survived the barrage, the men of the third and fourth wave found the tide was going out. Each successive boat was dropping its men increasingly further from the beach. “Our beach reconnaissance boy hadn't realised that what was ▶



underneath the tide was thick, glutinous mud," remembered Captain Richard Acton of 44 Commando. "We jumped out of our landing craft into mud up to our armpits and above. Hours and hours and hours of plodding through this mud, and you can imagine what it was like, the chaps who had a 100lbs weight on them being pitched into this mud."

RAMC Captain R W F Richardson, the medical officer attached to 44 Commando, wrote in his unpublished account of the campaign: "In vain we tried to keep essential equipment dry and stand upright. Officers, TSMs and even the RSM were seen sprawling in the mud which managed to deprive some of us of our boots and socks. Some fellows stuck fast and had to be lifted up by people who had returned empty-handed from the beach. Mortars, Brens, airborne stretchers, resuscitation boxes, all went under again and again."



"While Japanese mortar shells fell into the mud behind them like big fat belligerent raindrops"

"Men formed disorderly scrums which somehow hung together and reeled towards the beach. The scrum was an efficient method of locomotion under those conditions provided that not more than one man lost his balance at any one moment. Some scrums collapsed wholesale and took some minutes to emerge from the mud. The last man out was a naked subaltern plastered with mud."

No.1 Commando enjoyed a slight advantage. They jealously guarded their US-issue M1 Garand semi-automatic rifles, retained from the North Africa campaign. According to Pte Jack Stain – via his grandson, Dan – a benefit less well-publicised than their greater rate of fire was that, with fewer moving parts, the Garand did a better job of resisting the ravages of mud and saltwater than the bolt-action Lee-Enfield No.4.

Sergeant John Webber – known as 'Jan' due to his Somerset burr – described 5 Commando helping 44 Commando ashore, dragging them out by webbing and rifle straps. While Japanese mortar shells fell into the mud behind them like big fat belligerent raindrops and failed to detonate,





Webber sorted himself out: “There was a shell hole full of water,” he told the IWM. “I can remember taking off all the clothes, getting in this shell hole, washing all the mud off myself, washing all the mud off my clothes, spreading them out in the sun and after half an hour or so to dry, putting them back on again, and sit down and start cleaning my weapons so they were serviceable.”

Meanwhile, an attempt to land armour – half a troop of lend-lease Shermans Vs of the 19th King George V’s Own Lancers – was instantly stymied when the first tank off the landing craft bellyflopped into the mire. After trundling forward a few feet with water flooding in through the driver’s hatch, it advanced no further. As a result, the two remaining tanks had to be put ashore to the immediate west of the beach, where the terrain beneath their tracks was more stable. The trade-off was that, despite being only a few hundred yards away from their original landing point, the terrain ahead of them was impassable. It took the combined efforts of 3 RME and their Indian counterparts, 63rd Field Company, 2nd Queen Victoria’s

Own Madras Sappers & Miners, blasting rock and laying down a causeway, to link the two positions.

The landing, although successful, flirted with catastrophe. Had the Japanese chosen to make their last stand while the commandos blundered through thick mud and the sappers contrived a way to bring the armour into the fray, Myebon might have been remembered in the same broken breath as Dieppe.

Every Rose Has Its Thorn

Only when the tanks had successfully manoeuvred their way alongside 5 Commando were they ready to participate in the taking of ‘Rose’, a high hill held by enemy machine gunners. The assault began at first light on January 13.

Softened up by airstrikes, Rose was soon cleared of the enemy and the commandos moved up the rugged eastern side of the peninsula, passing through the eerily quiet village of Myebon and into a cluster of smaller hills riddled with Japanese defenders. Pte Vic Ralph, 1 Commando, told the IWM: “For about a week we were fighting up the peninsula taking the

Japanese off one side of a hill one after another. They were very well dug-in, but they didn’t put up an awful lot of resistance, which was most unusual.”

Perhaps their morale had been dealt a blow by some of the less than impressive codenames assigned to Myebon’s key features. At Cabbage, the next hill in the chain, Lt-Col Halford David Fellowes, the dictionary definition of a gung-ho commando colonel, led No.42 from the front. Despite being wounded, he stood tall and only allowed himself to be dragged to safety when success looked secure. He shouted cheerily as he was carried away: “Carry on lads, I’ll be back!” This, as well as his dash during the landing itself, saw him awarded the Distinguished Service Order. ►

OPPOSITE TOP: MEN OF 5 CDO TAKE A MOMENT AT MYEBON. FROM THE COLLECTION OF CPT JOHN BOWYER, SEATED SECOND RIGHT. (COURTESY PAUL GORDON)

ABOVE: A COMMANDO OFFICER CONFERS WITH BURMESE SOLDIERS IN THE ARAKAN. (NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM)

FAR LEFT: A BEACHMASTER GUIDES CRAFT ONTO THE BEACH AT MYEBON, AHEAD OF THE PUSH TO KANGAW. (VIA AUTHOR)



By January 16, Myebon was in Allied hands at a cost of only four dead and 38 wounded. During the closing stages of the action, a medical orderly attached to 42 Commando, L/Cpl Henry Snow, RAMC, was awarded the Military Medal. After Snow's commanding officer was wounded by a Japanese machine gun, he attempted to rally the stretcher party, before a round ripped

through his own arm. Bleeding heavily, he refused morphine and the order to evacuate until all the wounded had been recovered.

It was likely during this same encounter – or one nearby – that the stalwart Sgt Allison described 42 Commando's final engagement that day, near to the Kantha Bridge at the northernmost tip of the peninsula: "On the right-hand side of Myebon it were [sic] hills, on the left-hand side it were paddy fields. Myebon was connected to the mainland by a small footbridge... Two sections of the troop was ordered to go across the paddy field and cut this footbridge off. I was one of the section.

"We got half-way across the middle of the paddy field and then a hidden machine gun opened up on us. We dropped in the mud. All of a sudden, 'Tommy' Atkins, who was a TSM, in front of me – all I can see is as far as my hand – he said 'Frank, I've been hit.' So I said, 'Can you move, Tommy?' 'He says 'Yes', and I saw him wriggling about it. Next thing, a friend of mine, a sergeant to my right, he shouted the same thing – he'd been hit.

"They could see what was happening from the hill and they ordered smokescreens. Eventually, it quietened down and TSM [William] Pickerill told me to take my section to kill any Japanese that were going over the bridge. No one crossed that bridge, no one whatsoever. We all got together, Pickerill and his section, and we marched down and there was the enemy machine gun and the Japanese sat behind it, dead as a dodo."

The author would like to extend his special thanks to Lucy Betteridge-Dyson, in memory of her late grandfather, Captain Edwin A R 'Ted' Syms, No.44 (Royal Marine) Commando. ●

In Next Month's Issue

Burma Commando Part II: Ten Hours on Hill 170, will appear in *Britain at War* issue 154, on sale January 30, 2020. To make sure you don't miss out, turn to page 16-17 for our exclusive subscription offer.

ABOVE: THE MEN OF 1 CDO GATHER FOR A GROUP PHOTO AT THEIR CAMP IN INDIA. (COURTESY OF DAN STRAIN)

BELOW: VETERANS OF 3 COMMANDO BRIGADE REVISIT THE SITE OF THE AKYAB LANDING ON THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CAMPAIGN IN MARCH 2005. (COURTESY OF LUCY BETTERIDGE-DYSON)



Regarded as the fiercest fight in the struggle for the Burma, even by those who fought at Kohima and Imphal, the battle waged by 3 Commando Brigade is the forgotten turning point of an overlooked campaign, writes **James Hoare**.

BLACK MUD & GREEN BERETS

Burma Commando: Part II

Having flirted with disaster during the amphibious assault on the swamplands of the Arakan on the eastern boundary of the Bay of Bengal in January 1945, Allied commandos overcame the challenges posed by the treacherous terrain and the entrenched Japanese to continue their efforts to retake the Myebon Peninsula. Little did they suspect that a greater ordeal awaited them further inland.

While the 74th Indian Infantry Brigade established a beachhead on the far side of Kantha Bridge, 3 Commando Brigade returned to the beach for their second amphibious operation in as many weeks. Although the target hills at Kangaw were no more than seven or eight miles away,

the 'direct' route would mean crossing a number of chaungs – unpredictable inland waterways – each a likely spot for an ambush. That sort of grind was better left to the footsloggers of the 74th.

On January 22, a vulnerable 50-vessel convoy motored up a chaung towards 'Thames Beach', from where the Commandos could seize the target hills of 'Brighton' – later known by its elevation as Hill 170 – 'Milford' and 'Pinner'. After that, 51st Indian Infantry Brigade would push on to secure the hills on the other side of the road (or, perhaps, 'north of the border'): 'Duns', 'Berwick', 'Perth' and 'Melrose'. The 51st was known as the 'All Indian Brigade' as its three battalions were led by Indians, and one of them, Lieutenant-Colonel Kodandera Subayya Thimayya, had taken temporary command of the brigade in a first for the British Indian Army. ►

RIGHT: INDIAN NAVY LANDING CRAFT FERRY MEN UPRIVER IN THE ARAKAN. (TOPFOTO)







Thimayya's first encounter with Brigadier Campbell Hardy and his second, Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Young, had occurred the previous night when he found the 3 Commando Brigade HQ consisted entirely of the two of them sitting on a blanket, chatting over a bottle of whiskey. Thimayya introduced himself crisply and asked for his orders. Hardy replied: "Orders? There are no orders. We push off at six. You tag along after us at about nine."

With no preliminary bombardment, they were counting on surprise to protect them. Three Sherman Vs of the 19th King George V's Own Lancers squatted sullenly aboard landing craft, as did a bulldozer and the equipment of No.3 Royal Marine Engineer

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Commando. The field guns of the 33rd Indian Mountain Artillery were operating in the chaungs of the Arakan, not far from where their counterparts in the 18th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, would lay down a barrage when needed. Additional infantry came from the 8/19th Hyderabad Regiment, advancing ahead of the 51st with Lt-Col Thimayya.

As the most experienced, 1 Commando were first ashore at 13:00hrs, advancing under a smokescreen. Unlike Myebon, the beach at Kangaw was undefended, with only panicked shellfire falling among landing craft from Japanese guns hidden in

the hills. It was impossible to dig into the sodden swamp, leaving the Commandos no choice but to consolidate their position through aggression and advance immediately on 'Brighton'. Using barges as ugly flat firing platforms, the artillery poured shells over the Commandos' heads, as did the sloops HMINS *Jumna* and *Narbada*.

The southern face of the 700-yard ridge of 'Brighton', the infamous Hill 170, was swiftly taken, but holding it would be another matter. For Pte Victor Ralph of 1 Commando, speaking to the Imperial War Museum, his abiding memory wasn't one of triumph: "Halfway up the hill was a young Burmese girl – 17 or 18 years old – and her baby – only a month old, I would say – laying in a pool of blood with her stomach torn out. And the thought occurred to me: was it our shelling that did that, or when we were attacking and the Japs mortared us? Then it occurred to me it didn't matter very much. She was in her homeland and here were two foreign powers fighting, and she and her baby had died because of that."

ABOVE: THE BANKS OF THAMES BEACH. (AKG IMAGES)

OPPOSITE TOP: A SILVER BUGLE ISSUED WITH THE VC TO THE NEXT OF KIN OF LT GEORGE ARTHUR KNOWLAND. (INTERNATIONAL MILITARY ANTIQUES)

OPPOSITE: COMMANDOS ADVANCE ON HILL 170. NOTE THE TWO BREN GUNNERS, CENTRE. (AUTHOR)

Hill Hopping to Pinner

As 1 Commando dug in on the slopes of Hill 170, No.5 Commando moved up and No.42 (Royal Marine) Commando secured the flanks. The last to land, under the cover of darkness, was No.44 (Royal Marine) Commando, which took 170's smaller neighbour, 'Milford'. No.1 formed a 'commando box', a formation unique to the Burma campaign and designed to neutralise the sudden encirclements that had become the Imperial Japanese Army's *modus operandi*. The box was a tight, tripwire-lined defensive square or triangle, protected at the 'corners' by overlapping machine guns, with the defenders entrenched on the sides. It was usually no more than 100 yards in diameter, and the reserves, wounded and HQ were dug in at the centre.

At first light and under a curtain of shellfire, 1 Commando made their way across the Japanese dead to secure the ridge. At around the same time, a troop from No.44 crept gingerly towards 'Pinner', which was tucked right against the vital road at Kangaw village. Despite its near-identical elevation, this hard ledge was significantly smaller than Hill 170, but was covered with thick foliage. It was deserted, but, at 20:00hrs on January 23, the eerie silence was shattered by Japanese mortars, proof that every movement was being watched by the hungry men who for the best part of two years had made this dank wetland their hunting ground.

Captain Richard Acton, 44RM, told the IWM: "The Japanese method of night

attacks make the enemy reveal themselves, either by firing or by noise. It became quite tedious as they started trying to taunt you into giving away your position. The defence mechanism for this was a few grenades. We threw a lot of grenades at the shouting and screaming Japanese, and some of them were wounded and started all sorts of screaming and yelling. And they started to retaliate."

Unable to dig anything more substantial than shallow depressions on the gnarly hilltop, 44 Commando were dangerously exposed. Lt-Col Young claimed, to his frustration, that the Marines had been reluctant to make use of pre-existing Japanese trenches on the basis that the enemy would know precisely where they were.

Sergeant John 'Jan' Webber recalled: "They had the equivalent of a 25Pdr gun on the hill opposite and they started shelling. No sooner had we heard the explosion of the firing, then the shell exploded amongst us or went through the top of us. Of course, there was very heavy tree cover and they just plastered us with this bombardment,

which was tearing through the trees, shredding them into sharp bits of wood, the splinters coming down on us.

"Corporal Fleming [...] was killed very close to me. Another of my corporals was injured and I remember lifting him out of his slit trench and taking him down the back of the hill. Putting him on my shoulders was like putting on a coat because he'd been hit by all this wood shrapnel."

The thunder of the barrage – the heaviest poured onto a single target since Singapore in December 1941, claimed Captain R W F Richardson, the RAMC medical officer for 44RM – was replaced by the shrieks of the charge and the crack of rifle fire. The Japanese attacked headlong, with the Brens at each ►



RIGHT: 25PDR GUNS ON A 'Z' CRAFT, DELIBERATELY BEACHED AT MYEBON TO SUPPORT TROOPS INLAND. (IWM)

BELOW: 'PINNER' IN 2005, DURING 3 CDO'S RETURN TO MARK THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY. (LUCY BETTERIDGE-DYSON)

corner of the box chattering away, tearing them to shreds in unforgiving arcs. Many veterans of 'Pinner' confessed they hadn't even seen the enemy, instead they fired towards the crashing of movement and long shadows cast in the glow of detonating munitions.

The Japanese then tried to infiltrate the sides. Richardson continued: "Several times they tried to get into our outer defences, but in spite of 80 casualties, they failed to take a single one of them. The only intruder was a large porcupine which, badly shaken, staggered into a trench alongside the RSM [regimental sergeant major], leaving a few of its quills in that regimental hide, before he managed to expel it."

With a taunt in English of "Don't worry, we'll be back in the morning", the offensive stopped at 03:00 on January 24 and stillness closed in on the smouldering moonscape of 'Pinner'. True to those mocking words, the bombardment fluttered back into life just before sunrise to cover the withdrawal of the Japanese infantry and the extraction of their wounded. At daybreak, Lt-Col Thimayya took two companies of Hyderabad to secure 'Pinner'. He recalled: "The scene on that hilltop in the misty dawn was horrible beyond description. Dismembered bodies were everywhere. My men and I had to step over arms, legs, heads and unrecognisable parts of human anatomy." No.44 Commando suffered some 20 dead and more than 40 wounded, but the worst was yet to come.

Private, Put the Kettle On

Back on Hill 170, the Commandos were adjusting to life under a steady bombardment. If an army typically marches on its stomach, the British and Commonwealth armies marched on their teapots. Pte Desmond Crowden, 5 Commando, remembered: "I went down the side of the hill to make tea – not the bad side [of the hill] – and got some water out of a bomb hole. I found a native body inside – he'd been killed in the bombing – and [I] arranged for somebody to remove him."

"[I] got the water out of the bomb hole," Crowden continued, "took it back and we had little blocks of fuel which we lit, and that would heat up the mess tin. So [I] heated the water up, put the tea in, went to drink it and found that it was saltwater. I could have cried. I emptied it out and used the water out of my water bottle, which was quite precious."

By January 25, the concentration of enemy artillery aimed at Hill 170 was formidable. Sergeant Frank Allison, 42RM, described the sound of a Type 92 10cm cannon being brought up by truck, a 105mm morning call that became so routine as to bruise the nerves of even the most hardened Marine:

"The tank powered straight into it with a clang and bounced into the water in seconds, while the landing craft shot back in the opposite direction like a great steel tiddly-wink"





"Every morning at dawn we could hear a lorry pull up on our left and it would shell us until daybreak. Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump..."

At its most intense, 182 shells were counted falling in the space of 30 minutes. Even the unflappable Lt-Col Young found his patience tested when he was issued that rarest of blessings – a fresh battledress – only for shrapnel to hit his leg and bloody the trousers minutes later.

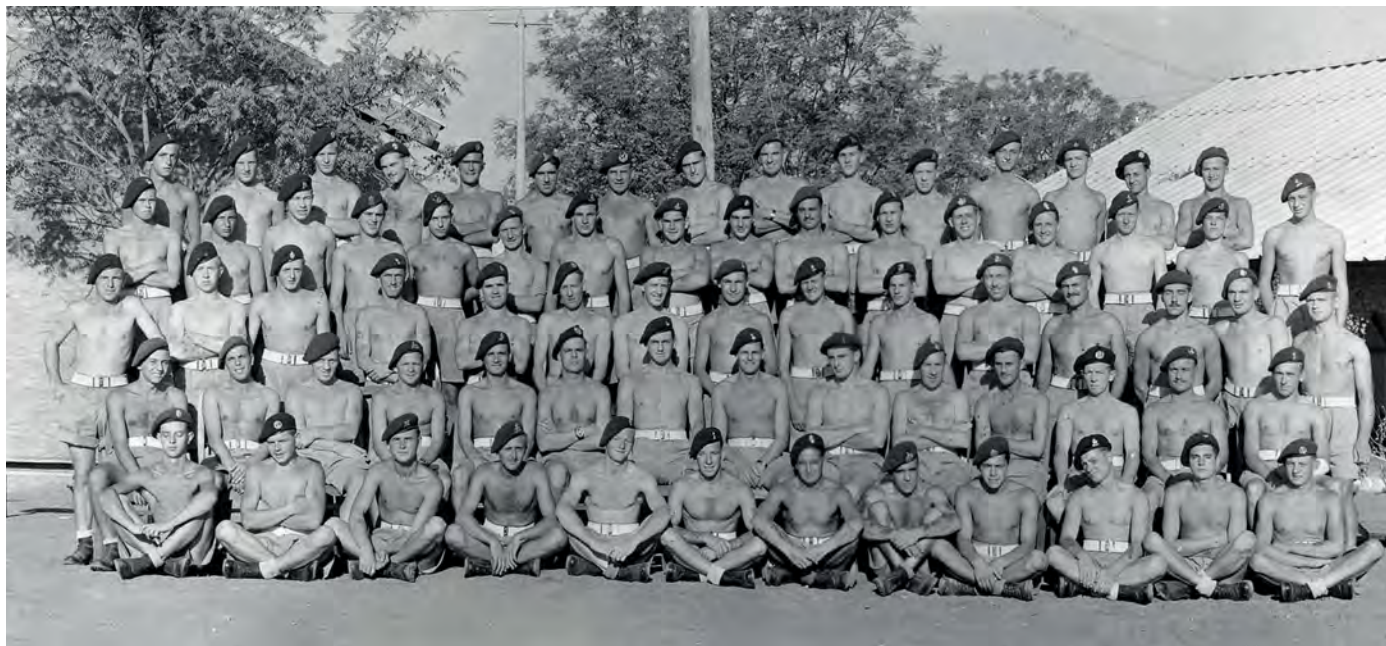
The rest of the 51st began to arrive towards the end of January 25, with the war-raised 16/10th Baluch Regiment moving up to reinforce 'Pinner'. The next day, they were joined by 2/2nd Punjab Regiment, pre-war veterans of the mountainous tribal conflicts in the North West Frontier. Brigadier Reginald Anthony 'Reggie' Hutton took command of the All

Indians. With great difficulty – even by the standards of their laborious earlier landing at Myebon – three Shermans of 19th Lancers disembarked on January 26. The tanks were significantly heavier than the trucks that the LCM (Landing Craft, Mechanised) typically ferried so, once the ramp opened, water flooded in at such a rate that the vessel risked being swamped. This was solved by using the tank to 'open' the ramp by force. The tank powered straight into it with a clang and bounced into the water in seconds, while the landing craft shot back in the opposite direction like a great steel tiddlywink.

After dark on January 27, two companies of the 8/19th Hyderabads crossed the chaung and climbed the slope of 'Duns', but were turned back by a line of bunkers bristling with guns. The attack on 'Perth'

was also called off. On 'Melrose', the Baluchs had only marginally more success, managing to bite into a chunk of the hill despite the constant waves of attackers attempting to shift them. Finally, the next morning, the grizzled Punjabis were ordered to make a second attempt on 'Melrose', attacking from the sides.

Their CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Shankarrao Pandurang Pati Thorat, offered his version of events in a 1969 issue of the Indian armed forces journal, *Sainik Samachar*: "What happened can best be described as a mad rush up the hill. In places, it was so precipitous that we had to climb on all fours. but the scramble continued till we reached the enemy trenches. Then the men went crazy with the lust to kill and yelling and cursing, pounced on the enemy [...] Men were ►



shot at point-blank range; they were stabbed and slashed by bayonets and many a skull was cracked by a rifle butt."

When the dust cleared, Thorat ordered the men to dig in, expecting a counter-attack within minutes. The Punjabs spent a nerve-shredding night in their slit trenches atop the hill.

The Battle of Hill 170

At approximately 06:00 on January 31, just as the Commandos were due to hand over their positions to the All-Indian Brigade, an immense preliminary bombardment opened up. In its ruinous wake the Japanese poured through the heavily wooded northern end of the ridge and in among No.4 Troop of 1 Commando.

In the eye of the storm, 22-year-old Lieutenant George Arthur Knowland led 24 men of 4 Troop, fighting (and dying) his way to the award of the Victoria Cross. His citation relates: "He moved about from trench to trench distributing ammunition and firing his rifle and throwing grenades at the enemy, often from completely exposed positions."

When his Bren team was wounded, Knowland sent a runner back to request another and took up the gun himself until they arrived. He stood atop the trench to get a better view, pumping round after round at the Japanese. Later in the battle, he even fired a 2in mortar

'from the hip', a dangerous manoeuvre that involved resting it against a tree. Still on his feet as incoming fire churned up the mud around him, he switched to small arms, but his luck would only hold out so long. The citation continues: "Snatching up the Tommy gun of a casualty, he sprayed the enemy and was mortally wounded stemming this assault, though not before

he had killed and wounded many of the enemy."

"Men behave in that fashion for two reasons," Pte Ralph told the IWM. "He was either very stupid or very brave. I can, and I must, assume he was the latter. To put that in perspective, there was a private – I shan't mention names – who prior to us going into action was bragging he was going to



ABOVE: MEN OF 5 CDO ON THE PARADE GROUND AT POONA, INDIA IN EITHER 1944 OR 1945. (PAUL GORDON)

RIGHT: HMIS NARBADA IN DAINGBON CHAUNG, SHE PROVIDED FIRE SUPPORT AND MEDICAL CARE.



win the VC, but when it came to it, he stuck himself behind a tree and didn't move."

On the western side of 170, the mud-caked tanks also came under attack. The Shermans roared into life and raked the attackers with machine guns, just as a troop of Japanese engineers hurled themselves forward, brandishing Shitotsukurai (Piercing Thunderbolt) – magnetic mines on the end of bamboo poles. Later called 'lunge mines', using these close-quarter weapons would often result in the attacker's death – a sign not just of the fanaticism of the Imperial Japanese Army, but of their increasing desperation as the war turned against them. Sergeant Alexander Pirie, No.3 Royal Marine Engineer Commando, later told his son, Bill: "You could watch them running round all day with dynamite strapped to them, it didn't get them very

"He was either very stupid or very brave. I can, and I must, assume that he was the latter"

far, and at the end, there were so many dead we just buried them with a bulldozer." One tank was set alight by a detonation, which buckled the tank's blackened frame and its crew were burned alive. A second was incapacitated, but the survivor crawled uphill, its 75mm gun blazing.

The Japanese proved to be as much a psychological threat as a physical one. In his account, Captain Richardson described

shouts of "Cease fire!", "Help!", "Come and get me out!" and "I am wounded!" from an enemy who, frighteningly, sometimes called out to British officers by name. He described seeing the carcasses of two mules whose hooves had been fitted with rubber and their tongues cut out so they could be used to bring up machine guns and mortars in perfect silence. Among the dead were Japanese soldiers wearing stolen green berets – perhaps taken from British positions. Pte Ralph recalled a moment of dedication that stuck with him, a distorted honour code the young commando simply couldn't fathom: "A Japanese was left by himself after an aborted attack and he was likely to be taken prisoner. He took out one of his grenades, he was lying face down, and he put it under his stomach and blew himself to pieces."

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

By mid-morning, Brigadier Hardy had moved up to assess the situation. Low on ammunition, 1 Commando had lost a number of forward positions, so he ordered 42RM into the fray to retake them with support from the last operational tank. Cpl Robert West was one of them, telling IWM: "I took the section as far as we could and then we just jumped into dugouts and whatnot. There was a bit of a battle, like, but ►



TOP: THE MEDALS OF PTE JACK STRAIN, NO.1 COMMANDO, INCLUDING THE BURMA STAR. (DAN STRAIN)

LEFT: INDIAN INFANTRY CROSS A CHAUNG IN A LVT-2 DURING THE LATER OPERATION TO CLEAR THE HILLS.



we managed to hold 'em until I got the order to withdraw.

"I said 'One at a time, fall back and we'll give you covering fire.' [I] was getting back over when something whizzed through my leg. Then I felt something hit me in the buttock and I hit the floor. Marine Corbett, good friend of mine, he ran down, he pulled me back, he put me into a dugout and leaned me against the side with me [sic] Tommy gun. Next thing, he was back with two Gurkha men with a stretcher."

Against overwhelming numbers, the Commandos' superior firepower was all that was separating them from defeat, like the late Lt Knowland, NCOs ensured that the Brens seldom fell silent. The M1 Garand's rate of fire proved its worth against overwhelming numbers too, but the rifle had to be emptied for

"The Commandos put up a devastating fire, but the Japanese still came on. Then the Commandos, yelling wildly, charged down the hill to fight the Japanese hand-to-hand..."

convenient reloading. Manually ejecting a half-empty en-bloc clip or topping one up with individual rounds was fiddly – 1 Commando's Pte Jack Strain told his grandson, Dan, that they used to fire their last rounds into the floor, automatically ejecting the clip.

Over on 'Pinner', the 51st Indians watched in awe. "I saw Japanese officers pointing out the way, with swords, to their men," Lt-Col Thimayya told his biographer. "The Commandos put up a devastating fire, but the Japanese still came on. Then the Commandos, yelling wildly, charged

down the hill to fight the Japanese hand-to-hand... Finally, I saw the Japanese massing for another assault, and I could not resist. I ordered our mortars to open up on the closely grouped enemy. It was pure slaughter."

At 15:00hrs, Hardy ordered that no further attacks be mounted against the enemy positions. These sorties had cost the brigade dearly, but they had taken their toll on the Japanese too. The weight of fire was easing, so 5 Commando – anxious to play their part – used the lull to begin replacing the exhausted 1 Commando. In the sweltering sun of late afternoon, the buzzing of the flies was joined by the murmur of P-47 Thunderbolts, which scattered the jungle with their terrible payload. After hours of frenzied bloodshed, this was the killing blow and, under the smothering shroud of night, the Japanese began to withdraw.

Unable to sleep, Lt-Col Young wandered up to the front in the early hours of February 1 and conferred with Major Robin Stuart, who had temporarily assumed command of 5 Commando. By now, three troops of 44RM were also on hand and Stuart had a relatively fresh force at his disposal. Young recalled: "I said 'How're

ABOVE: ALLIED TROOPS CLAMBER UP A ROUGH, PRECIPITOUS HILLSIDE IN THE ARAKAN. (KEYSTONE/GETTY)

OPPOSITE TOP: THE PROVOST SECTION OF 44RM IN 1946. CAPT TED SYMS IS IN THE FRONT ROW IN A BERET. (LUCY BETTERIDGE-DYSON)

OPPOSITE: 60 YEARS ON TED SYMS AND JAN WEBBER RETURNED TO 'PINNAR'. (LUCY BETTERIDGE-DYSON)



you getting on?’ and he said ‘I think the Japanese have gone – if we give them another shove, that’ll be the end of it.’ I said, ‘Well, Campbell Hardy’s given orders there aren’t to be any more counter-attacks – we’ve done six already, but if you want to go ahead I’ll support you.’ He gave them another shove and they were all dead.”

“Just Enough Death in Them to Croak”

As day broke, Young surveyed the damage: “You couldn’t stand on the floor without treading on a dead or dying Japanese. I’ve never seen people lying so thick on the ground in my life. Nothing like it, ever. They had gashes in them, you know where it says in *Macbeth* ‘twenty trenched gashes on his head, the least a death to

nature’ or something like that? All great wounds. There were three or four still alive, but they had just enough death in them to croak.”

Close to 450 Japanese dead were counted around Hill 170. Of 3 Commando Brigade, 45 of its number had been killed and 90 wounded, half these losses borne by 1 Commando. Its commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Ken Trevor, received the Distinguished Service Order for his role, while Brigadier Hardy secured his third DSO. January 31 alone earned the brigade four Military Crosses, two Distinguished Conduct Medals, and 13 Military Medals, while the wider campaign for Myebon and Kangaw added a further six MMs and one DSO to the valorous tally. A more exclusive award, however, was presented by Hardy to Lt-Col Thimmaya: a green beret with

a neatly typed note which read: “We cannot buy anything here but we would like you to accept this as a token of our great admiration for the bravery and achievement of your battalion.”

Over the next eight days, the hills around Kangaw would be purged, bunker by bunker. But for 3 Commando, the battle was over. “Eventually we shoved off and we got a letter from the corps commander saying it was the decisive battle of the Arakan,” reflected Lt-Col Young. “Of course, it’s quite forgotten now. Nobody knows what happened in Burma.”

Ten years later, HRH the Duke of Edinburgh joined his uncle, Lord Mountbatten, onstage at the Royal Albert Hall for the 1955 Burma Reunion. With a conspiratorial smile, he addressed the veterans seated before him: “Despite a certain amount of neglect, despite a certain lack of interest, and despite the fact others seemed to have attracted the limelight and glamour, you fought in Burma as if the world depended on it. And make no mistake, a very great portion of the world did depend on you.”

Those words could have been meant for the ears of 3 Commando Brigade alone.

The author would like to extend his special thanks to Lucy Betteridge-Dyson, in memory of her late grandfather, Captain Edwin A.R. ‘Ted’ Syms, No.44 (Royal Marine) Commando. ●

