Right: Robert Callow wearing the green beret that all British commandos are entitled to wear

INTERVIEW WITH DR ROBERT CALLOW

FAR EAST COMMANDO

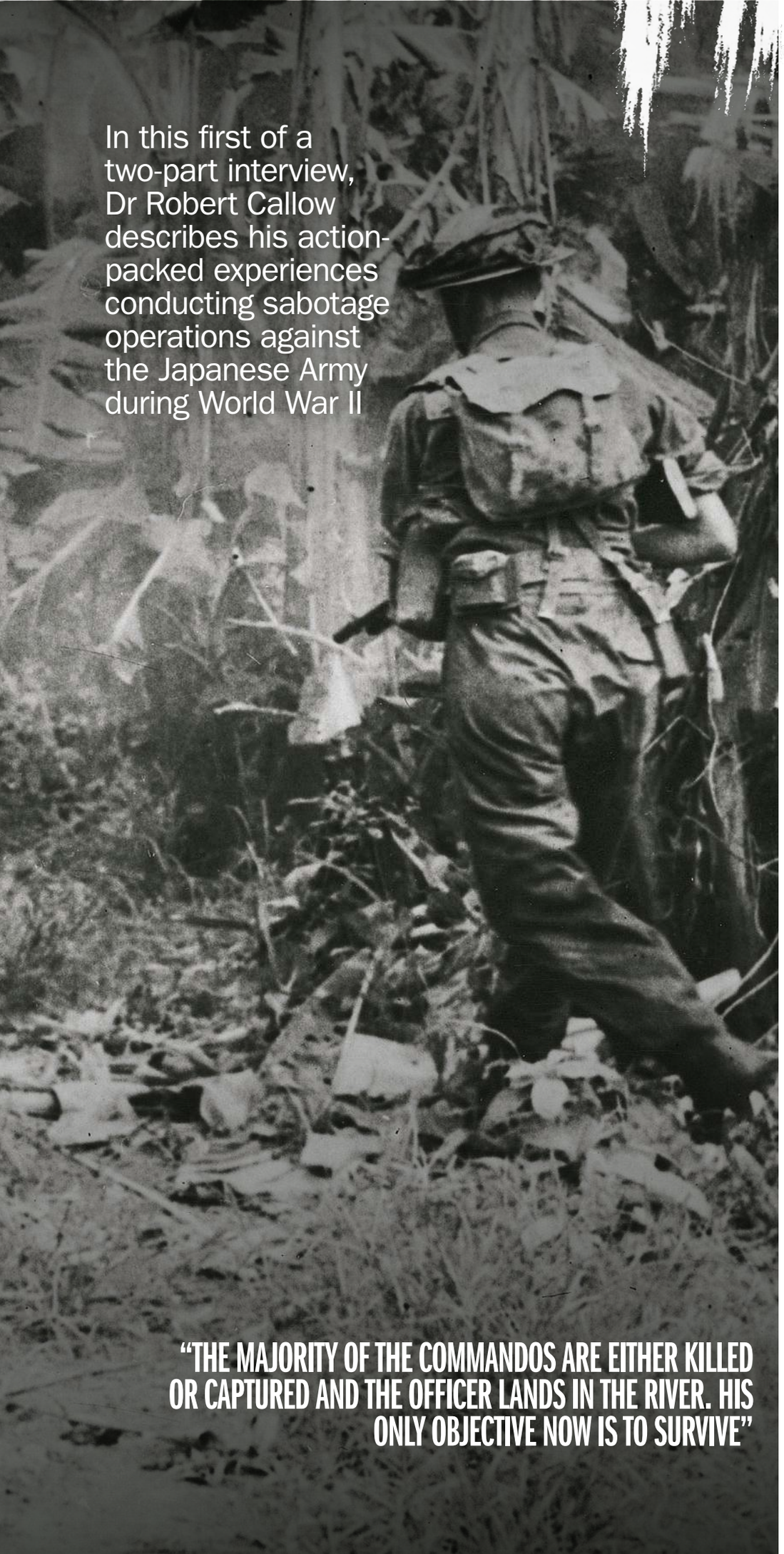
PART I

WORDS TOM GARNER

THE BRIDGES NEAR THE RIVER KWAI

British soldiers investigate a jungle clearing in Burma with bayonets poised. Callow recalled, "If there was a leaf that looked wrong it alerted you."

In this first of a two-part interview, Dr Robert Callow describes his action-packed experiences conducting sabotage operations against the Japanese Army during World War II



"THE MAJORITY OF THE COMMANDOS ARE EITHER KILLED OR CAPTURED AND THE OFFICER LANDS IN THE RIVER. HIS ONLY OBJECTIVE NOW IS TO SURVIVE"

It is dawn over a Burmese river in late 1943. Above the misty water an aircraft flies overhead containing six British commandos. Among their number is a young lieutenant who is about to go on his first mission to wreak destruction behind enemy lines. Although he is still in his teens, the officer is already a skilled professional, and he is strapped up with various demolition bombs. Nevertheless, when he jumps from the plane, events spiral out of control. The commandos have been spotted and enemy machine guns fire into the sky, creating deadly tracers that resemble hosepipe jets. The majority of the commandos are either killed or captured and the officer lands in the river. His only objective now is to survive.

The officer in question is Second Lieutenant Robert Callow, an expert in explosives and languages who would subsequently survive to become a prolific saboteur against the Japanese in Burma. As a commando in Force 136, Inter-Services Liaison Department, Callow spent almost a year fighting behind enemy lines destroying bridges, transport columns and communication lines, but his military career took him far beyond the jungles of Burma. Callow also fought in China and Malaya and witnessed the brutal partition of India, among other dramatic events. He would go on to be awarded a doctorate in neurophysics and is still, in his 90s, a consultant for the British government. The following two instalments tell his extraordinary story.

Languages and explosives

Born in 1925, Callow volunteered to join the British Army aged only 17 in 1942. "My father served in the Boer War and was at the Battle of Spion Kop, but he had been gassed twice in World War I and died in 1938. Before he died he told me, 'When you get in [the armed forces] don't join the PBI ['Poor Bloody Infantry'], get into your own regiment.' Therefore, when I was '18' – I was actually 17 and three-quarters – I volunteered for the Royal Engineers where I started out as a sapper."

Before he volunteered, Callow had been a bright pupil at King Henry VIII Grammar School in Coventry where he excelled at languages. "There were two streams there – languages and science – but they put me into languages without asking me. I consequently learnt French, German, Spanish and Old Greek and that dictated my future."

Callow's military career would largely be based around his linguistic skills, but his training as a sapper was literally both constructive and destructive as he discovered another skill. "The Royal Engineers are the

ones that build bridges and blow them up again! I did six months in basic training, which included building Bailey bridges and carrying heavy loads. I was six-feet [1.83-metres] tall then and very well built. The Bailey bridge had two panels, with each one weighing 660 pounds [300 kilograms] and six men had to put it up. We also trained in a place called 'Hungry Hill' where they taught us how to use explosives, which is my speciality."

Working with explosives came naturally. "I found I had a talent for it. There are cutting and expanding explosives. We learned how to use each one of these. Mercury fulminate is the fastest explosive. Nitro-glycerine is fast but Mercury fulminate is the one that starts off all the other explosives. Amatol is a slow explosive that expands whereas nitro-glycerine cuts through steel and it could cut you in half."

Callow was made a lance corporal and he was posted to Scotland, where he became an explosives instructor at a Command Operation School. He then returned to England for assault and pre-airborne exercises. Callow remembered his airborne training as hair-raising. "We first learned how to drop off the back of moving lorries and rolling over. Then we went out of a barrage balloon, and that was the worst drop, from about 900 feet (275 metres), because you could see the dogs on the ground. Normally, we would drop from about 2,000 feet (600 metres) but that's the thing: when you jump from about 2,000 feet you've got time to sort yourself out!"

Callow became a qualified paratrooper, and his unique skills led to him being sent for officer training and a distant deployment. "When I had finished they wondered what to do with me, so they sent me to the War Office selection board. They sent me to a cadet training unit and I finished as a second lieutenant. By that time I already knew languages and explosives so they said, 'All right: languages, explosives, bridges… out to India!' They sent me to India by sea, and while we were on the ship (it took six weeks to get to Bombay) we had to learn Urdu. With languages it's all about having a musical ear and I'm good at picking up accents."

"YOU HAD TO LEARN ALL THESE THINGS BECAUSE THAT WAS WHAT SPECIAL FORCES WAS ALL ABOUT. IT TOOK THEM TWO YEARS TO TEACH ME ALL THAT I HAD TO KNOW BEFORE I STARTED FIGHTING"

Urdu was the first of many Asian languages that Callow would eventually learn for the army. In what was still colonial India at the time, "There are about 12 main Indian dialects and one odd one, which is Tamil. Tamil is 14,000 years old and related to bushman languages such as the Australian aborigines, so it is a difficult one."

Callow discovered that many Indian languages had their roots in a legendary warrior from antiquity. "The languages in northern India are based on Sanskrit and ultimately Farsi. That was taken into India by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. He started the languages in northern India and all of them are related to it. There are about seven of those, and although I'm not fluent in them I know enough to get by."

In addition to Indian and European languages, Callow also became fluent in Malay and can also speak Cantonese and Arabic. However, the military idea behind learning languages was not purely for linguistics. "The reason I learned all these languages is that we had to know the culture of the people, particularly so that we would not offend them. You also had to know their religions, history and customs. You had to learn all these things because that was what Special Forces was all about. It took them two years to teach me all that I had to know before I started fighting."

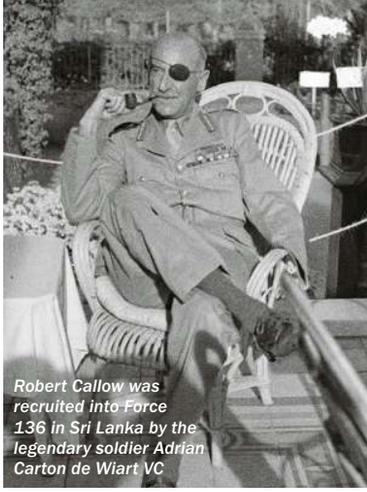
The Burma Campaign

When Callow arrived in India the Allies were only just beginning to turn the tide of the war in the Far East. In 1941 Imperial Japan had launched lightning attacks to expand Japanese territories in the Pacific region and vast swathes of European colonies had fallen. Hong Kong and Indochina had capitulated with ease, while the British suffered its worst defeat during World War II when they lost the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. 80,000 Allied personnel were taken

An Allied patrol crosses a stream in northern Burma, March 1944. The troop consists British, American and local Kachin fighters

An aerial shot of a railway bridge being destroyed with explosives over a river. Callow would use nitro-glycerine to blow up enemy bridges

A view of the Burmese jungle from the tail of an aircraft during WWII. Callow was parachuted into dense landscapes such as this



Robert Callow was recruited into Force 136 in Sri Lanka by the legendary soldier Adrian Carton de Wiart VC

prisoner, but the situation deteriorated further when the Japanese overran the Dutch East Indies and captured many island bases in the western Pacific. The security of both Australia and India was threatened, and the Japanese invaded Burma in early 1942.

The Japanese advance into Burma had two goals: to prevent military aid from travelling overland on the Burma Road into nationalist China, and to place their forces at the door of the Indian border. It was believed that the near presence of the Japanese army would spark an insurrection against the British Raj, and thousands of captured Indian soldiers from Singapore had already been recruited by a Bengali nationalist to form an 'Indian National Army' to fight the British.

The invasion of Burma began well for the Japanese and Rangoon was captured, which deprived the Chinese of their only easily accessible supply base. Meanwhile, the British Burma Corps retreated under a scorched-earth policy until May 1942, when a tense stalemate lasted until the end of the year. In 1943 Lord Louis Mountbatten became the supreme allied commander of South East Asia Command, but the Allied resurgence in Burma was largely thanks to Lieutenant General William Slim and Brigadier Orde Wingate.

Wingate had created special operations units known as 'Chindits' to perform long-range raids against Japanese troops, facilities and communication lines. The Chindits initially incurred heavy losses, but their courage and endurance proved that British forces could take on the Japanese in the Burmese jungle. Elsewhere, Slim became the commander of 14th Army, imbued it with a new spirit and encouraged the soldiers to hold firm against Japanese attacks while they were supplied from the air.

When the Japanese attempted to strike Assam and the Arakan 14th Army stood firm, and fierce battles raged, with both sides fighting for every inch of ground. Nevertheless, the Japanese were now outnumbered and with American and Chinese Nationalist forces entering Burma from the north the tide began to turn in the Allies' favour. It was into this bitterly fought and harsh campaign that Second Lieutenant Robert Callow would be parachuted as a commando.

"THE CHINDITS INITIALLY INCURRED HEAVY LOSSES, BUT THEIR COURAGE AND ENDURANCE PROVED THAT BRITISH FORCES COULD TAKE ON THE JAPANESE"

Force 136

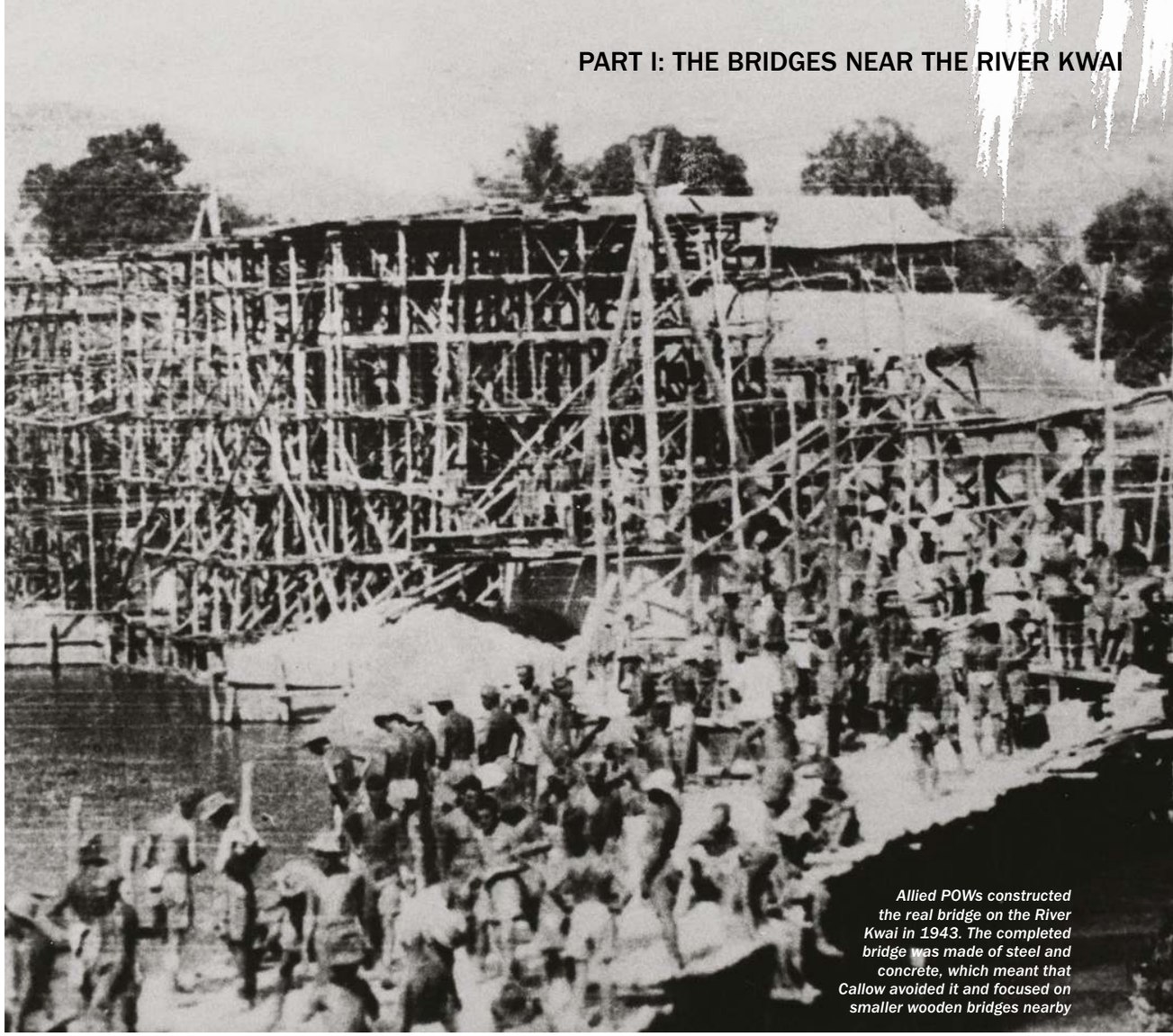
Upon his arrival in India, Callow expanded his training to include paramedic skills for jungle warfare, "There are no hospitals in the jungle so I had to do a nine-month course in Madras Medical College, learning how to do amputations. They wouldn't let me practice on real people so I could only do it on cadavers. I also practised giving painkillers, stitching wounds, giving anaesthetic and, if need be, if a man was going to die or be captured then we would give him morphine."

During his paramedic training Callow was recruited into a British Special Forces unit known as 'Force 136', which formed part of the 'Inter-Services Liaison Department' (ISLD). The ISLD was the same organisation as the more famous 'Special Operations Executive' (SOE) that had been formed in 1940 to carry out sabotage and subversive operations behind enemy lines in occupied Europe. Once the war with Japan had begun it was decided to adapt the SOE in the Far East, and the ISLD acquired its deliberately bland name to provide operational cover.

The ISLD established its headquarters in India, and the code name Force 136 was used for commando sections being formed in French Indochina, Malaya, Siam and Burma. Force 136 was allocated its own RAF squadron for airborne missions, and all recruits were volunteers who either had knowledge of the country, previous experience in Europe or a

Lieutenant Robert Callow (code-named 'Longshanks') in Ceylon during his commando service, August 1944. The badge above his right lapel pocket proved that he had earned his 'wings' as a paratrooper

Two British soldiers patrol through the ruins of Bahe in central Burma during the campaign of 1944-45



Allied POWs constructed the real bridge on the River Kwai in 1943. The completed bridge was made of steel and concrete, which meant that Callow avoided it and focused on smaller wooden bridges nearby

useful area of expertise. With his skills in explosives and languages Callow was an ideal choice, and he was personally selected in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) by Major General Adrian Carton de Wiart VC.

Callow recalled, "Adrian Carton de Wiart actually selected us in Ceylon and we were chosen for our skills. Mine were explosives, languages and paramedics. Carton de Wiart interviewed us when I was in the medical college and took one of us who each had different skills. He introduced us all and then recommended us."

Carton de Wiart was a legend of the British Army who, among other things, had fought in the Boer War and won a Victoria Cross at the Battle of the Somme. By the end of World War I he had been wounded eight times, including the loss of an eye and a hand. Even during World War II he had been captured and held prisoner by the Italians and made five escape attempts before he was repatriated in 1943. Nevertheless, Callow knew comparatively little about the heavily scarred man who wore an eye-patch and selected him for commando service. "I only met him very briefly but he was quite a character, and I didn't realise quite how important he was at the time."

Once he was selected to serve in Force 136, Callow joined small teams that would be flown into enemy-occupied Burma to carry out acts of sabotage against Japanese forces behind enemy lines. The nature of Force 136's work

"CALLOW JOINED SMALL TEAMS THAT WOULD BE FLOWN INTO ENEMY-OCCUPIED BURMA TO CARRY OUT ACTS OF SABOTAGE AGAINST JAPANESE FORCES BEHIND ENEMY LINES"

was so secretive that Callow didn't even know the names of his colleagues. "We didn't know each other, but we had to adapt to each other. One was an artilleryman and another in signals so each one was busy with his three skills, which in my case were explosives, languages and paramedics. The only man I knew there was 'Geordie' because we were both in the OCTU [Officer Cadet Training Unit] but I didn't know his full name because we didn't use real names. We used pseudonyms, and mine was 'Longshanks'. You couldn't use your real name because if you were captured and tortured by the Japanese you couldn't give away any other information about other people."

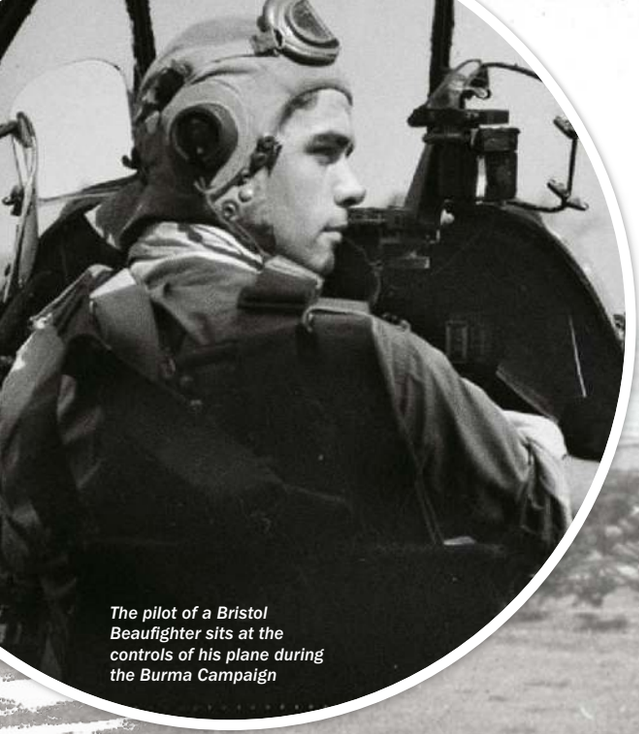
Baptism of fire

After months of training, Callow was ready to begin active operations in late 1943. His first mission was to be airdropped over the River Tenasserim in southeast Burma to blow up Japanese machine gun towers at a large prisoner of war camp. Flying in a long-range B-24 Liberator, Callow was part of a six-man team, and he was the last to jump. "We were flying in overnight. We had a major in charge of us, and I had the explosives in a kitbag and was going to jump last, which is what I did."

Despite all his training, chance meant that the mission went wrong immediately. "It was just before dawn when we arrived and the major jumped, but he jumped too soon. He landed on the west side of the river, and I jumped too. Nobody wanted to be near me with all the explosives but there was a mist on the river. I don't think it was deliberate but there was a Japanese patrol on the ground on the east side and they saw us coming down. They couldn't see me because I was above the mist of the cloud but the major landed and was seen."

Once Callow's commanding officer had been spotted chaos ensued. "The Japanese all fired and I could see their tracers. It was like a white hosepipe of fire coming up and it hit Geordie. He got blown in half because he had detonators and high explosives around his waist and they were triggered. His legs fell away and that was the last time I saw Geordie. I had to write to his parents afterwards and say that I'd seen him die and that he'd died painlessly."

Under this level of fire the mission was over before it had begun, and Callow now had to focus on survival by hiding from the enemy. "I

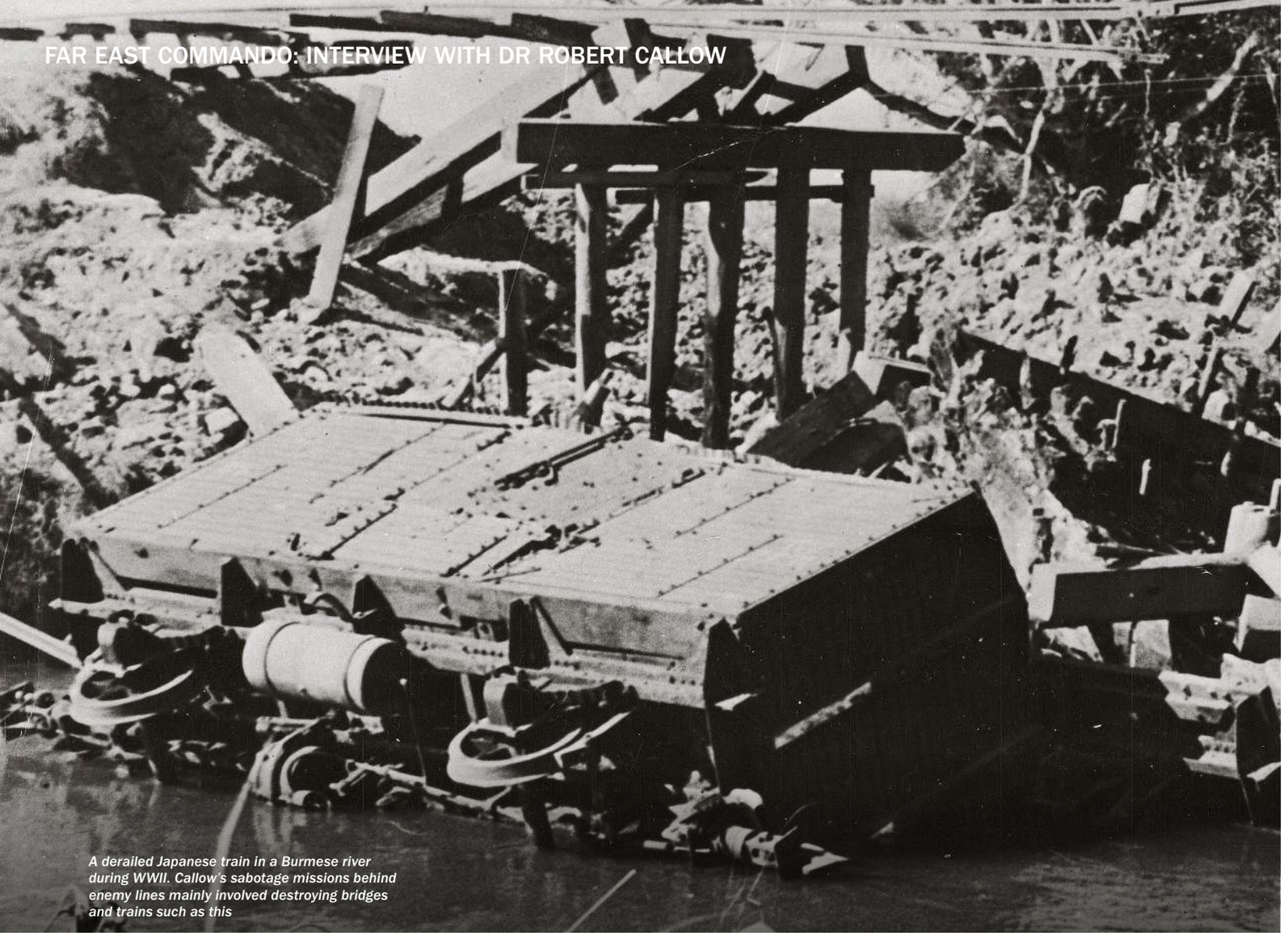


The pilot of a Bristol Beaufighter sits at the controls of his plane during the Burma Campaign

As well as ground commando attacks; Japanese railways in Burma were also attacked by Allied aircraft. This photograph depicts the aftermath of a strafing attack by an RAF Bristol Beaufighter in December 1944

"CALLOW AND THE MAJOR WERE THE ONLY MEMBERS OF THE SIX-MAN TEAM TO SURVIVE. GEORDIE HAD BEEN KILLED DURING THE DROP AND THE OTHER THREE WERE CAPTURED AND EXECUTED"

***Right:** A Bristol Beaufighter is loaded with a rocket for an attack on targets in Burma, including bridges and trains*



A derailed Japanese train in a Burmese river during WWII. Callow's sabotage missions behind enemy lines mainly involved destroying bridges and trains such as this

went into the river, struck my chute, got rid of my explosives and landed in the mist. I swam ashore and realised that the Japanese would be all over looking for me, so I used my knife to dig into the bank like *The Wind in the Willows*! I made a hole and stayed there for days because the Japanese were looking for me up above before I came out."

Callow was in a perilous situation and had to implement the skills his training and natural resourcefulness had equipped him with. "There was nothing you could do, and you had to use your brain. I had my rations for two days, but then when I thought it was safe in the mist I'd swim out and get terrapins. They were terrible to eat raw and you couldn't cook, so I was sucking the juice out of them."

After several days hiding in the river bank Callow made his escape. "After a few days I decided that the Japanese had stopped looking for me so I came out, found the track and started going westwards towards the coast. I then heard some people coming and so I hid and got my knife ready to kill, but in fact it was my major bringing two of the special forces who didn't belong to us: an Australian and an American from the SOE and OSS [Office of Strategic Services]. They were teak planters and were living there on a plantation, but the Japanese never got to them. They took us out and it was about 40 miles [64 kilometres]."

Callow and the major were the only members of the original six-man team to survive. Geordie had been killed during the drop and the other three were captured and executed.

"WE WAITED UNTIL THE TRAIN WAS GOING OVER AND THE LOCOMOTIVE, DRIVER, TRUCKS AND EVERYTHING ELSE WOULD GO DOWN WITH THE BRIDGE BECAUSE THEY WERE ALL CARRYING THE AMMUNITION"

Blowing up bridges

Callow's first mission had been a horrific experience, but he went to on to carry out many covert operations against the Japanese in Burma. Often working with Indian troops, he was tasked with disrupting Japanese communication lines and supply chains by blowing up bridges in the jungle. "They didn't have any external supplies like food or medical supplies except ammunition so we would make sure they would run out by bringing down the wooden bridges."

Destroying bridges was a routine operation and although Callow's thoughts on these dangerous missions are understated, the odds were alarming. "All we did was hide in the jungle, prepare some explosives on a railway and waited for a train to come along and blow it. There were 134,000 Japanese in Burma compared to around 100,000 of us [British] but I didn't know that at the time.

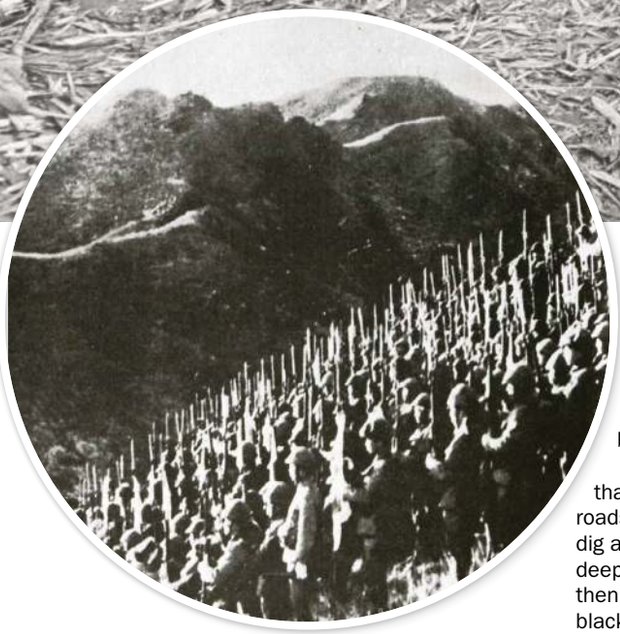
Callow remembered that blowing up Japanese bridges required specific explosives and delicate timing: "We mostly used nitro-glycerine on the bridges, which would make a cutting explosion. We would put it onto the wooden supports and once it was detonated it would take the supports away from the train. We waited until the train was going over and the locomotive, driver, trucks and everything else would go down with the bridge because they were all carrying the ammunition."

Operations like this would later be immortalised in the 1957 film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* but Callow is scathing about its historical accuracy: "The film was a load of rubbish because we would blow up all the little wooden ones. The real bridge on the River Kwai was a big steel and concrete structure and the Americans nearly blew themselves up bombing it from 1,000 feet [305 metres]. Groups of six people would blow up the wooden bridges around it, and that's what we were doing by dropping the trains full of ammunition into the water and blowing them up. We couldn't blow up a big steel, concrete bridge like that."

Force 136's attacks against enemy bridges was prolific and Callow lost count of how

"REMARKABLY THE MINES THAT HE HELPED TO PLANT WOULD LATER SEVERELY WOUND HIM AFTER THE WAR"

British troops at a base in the Burmese jungle. Note that the soldiers wear trousers and not shorts to prevent being bitten by deadly lice



***Above:** Soldiers of the Japanese 15th Army on the border of Burma during the invasion of 1942*

many he destroyed. "I couldn't put an approximate number on how many bridges we blew up, it was a case of whenever we could we did. We hid from the enemy in the jungle, and if we came across any bridge then we hid there, came out at night, put out the explosives, blew it and then got the hell out."

Callow's expertise in explosives meant that he was also adept at creating craters on roads against travelling enemy convoys. "You'd dig and bore a hole about 12 feet [3.7 metres] deep, put some amatol in at the bottom and then blow it to form a chamber. Then you put black powder in that, place a fuse in there (both safety and electric) and when you're ready you choose your time to blow it up. Depending on what you were doing you could make craters for blowing up roads instantly. Otherwise we'd wait until there was some transport coming and you blew it up then."

Despite the dangerous nature of his work Callow never had many feelings about successful operations. "It was just the sense of a job well done, we didn't have any emotions about it. We were just glad to be out of it and alive."

In addition to his sabotage operations, Callow played a part sinking German U-boats en route to Japan after a mission. "They sent us a flying boat from Calcutta. When we got to the coast the American and the Australian had recruited the local pirates to spy on the Japanese. The pirates found that German U-boats were coming down through the Straits of Malacca. They had

EXTREME JUNGLE RATIONS

DURING THE BURMA CAMPAIGN ROBERT CALLOW HAD TO RELY ON UNUSUAL SOURCES OF FOOD TO STAY NOURISHED WHILE ON MISSIONS

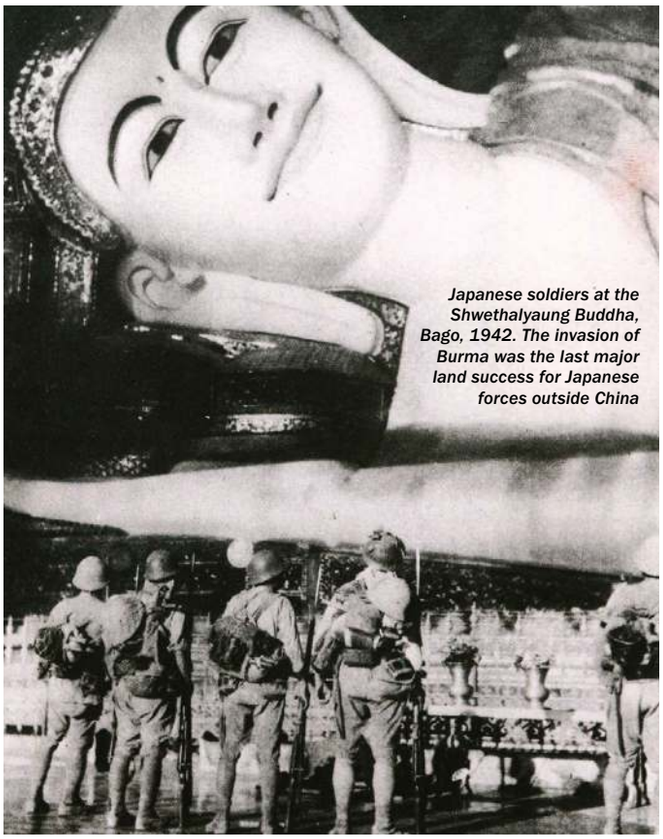
The Burma Campaign was noted for the development of frequent airdrops to supply Allied soldiers while on active service. Robert Callow's men primarily received drops of rice, but cooking conditions were extremely primitive. "Our troops were Indian so we also cooked chapattis on our steel helmets. If you took the lining out of a steel helmet and put it over a wood fire you could fry a chapatti on top of it. But of course you couldn't do that when there was any of the enemy there."

Callow also frequently had to find alternative sources of food behind enemy lines. "The Japanese ate the local food and lived off the jungle, which we also had to do in the end. We mostly ate rats: not the sewer rats though, these are jungle rats. The rats used to run along the palm trees and eat the palm oil so we ate them because their flesh was very tasty. Also, the snakes used to go up after the rats so we caught the snakes as well."

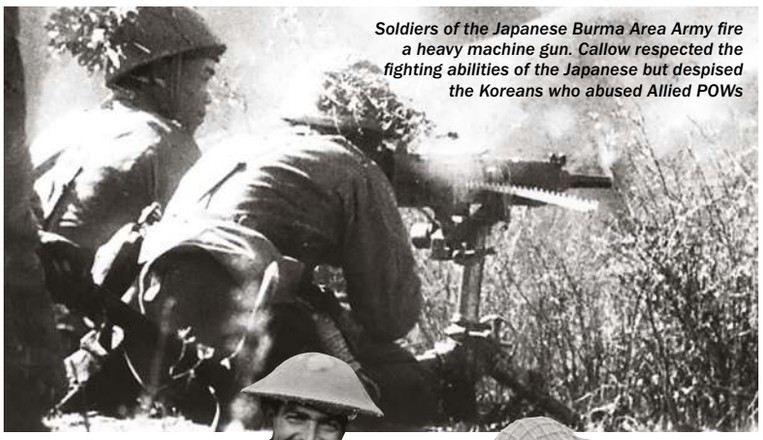
In these severe circumstances Callow was not picky. "I had no favourite between snake and rat, they were all the same: it was like choosing between fish. There were certain things that you couldn't eat like turtles' heads but we would eat anything." However, some animals remained unappealing. "Monkeys' paws were the worst because they were like babies' hands. It was like eating your own hand."

"THE JUNGLE WAS A PARTICULARLY HARSH ENVIRONMENT TO FIGHT IN, BUT CALLOW FELT THAT HIS TRAINING HAD ADEQUATELY PREPARED HIM"

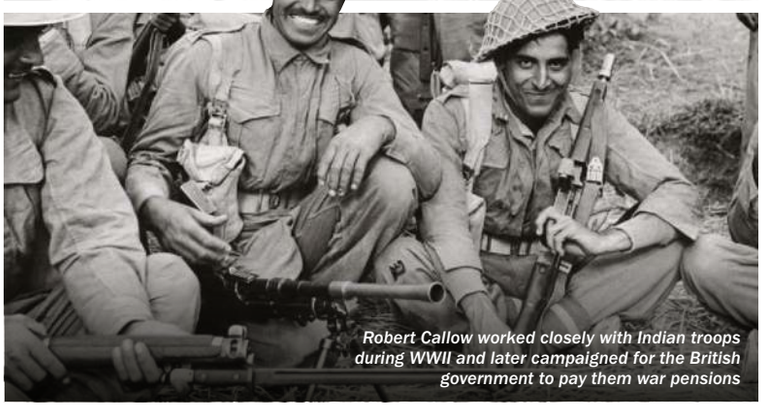
An Allied soldier hides in the Burmese jungle. For commandos such as Callow the dense jungle provided ideal cover to hide from the Japanese during sabotage missions



Japanese soldiers at the Shwethalyaung Buddha, Bago, 1942. The invasion of Burma was the last major land success for Japanese forces outside China



Soldiers of the Japanese Burma Area Army fire a heavy machine gun. Callow respected the fighting abilities of the Japanese but despised the Koreans who abused Allied POWs



Robert Callow worked closely with Indian troops during WWII and later campaigned for the British government to pay them war pensions

German engineers in them who had invented the V1 and V2 rockets and they were sending them on to Japan to carry on [the war]. The Germans realised that things were going badly for them by this time and they were building up Japan with all these things. This was late 1944 and they were doing this already."

This vital piece of intelligence had to be relayed to Allied authorities and Callow made one of the calls. "The pirates reported this to the American and Australian and they then told me. I got onto our radioman in Ceylon and he went in to get mines planted near an island off Malaysia to stop them. We sunk about 12 U-boats afterwards." Callow maintains that his role during this incident was "wheels within wheels" but remarkably the mines that he helped to plant would later severely wound him after the war.

Jungle warfare

The jungle was a particularly harsh environment to fight in, but Callow felt that his training had adequately prepared him for operating there. "It had taken a long time going out on the ship to India and by the time I got into the jungle, that was about nine months later, so we had quite a bit of time to adapt."

Nevertheless, conditions were harsh. "It rained all the time. Humidity was often 100 per cent and you'd sleep on the mud. We wore trousers because it was wet as hell and if you wore shorts you could be bitten by deadly lice." Callow would find that the experience of commando operations was ultimately dehumanising. "You have no choice and it's all excitement. You're like an animal and you're living like one. If there was a leaf that looked wrong it alerted you, if you heard a sound that was not right you were up and awake and ready to fight."

Even 70 years later Callow's training can still cause problems. "It becomes a snag. I was in hospital a few weeks ago when they did my leg in an operation. Afterwards, I had a nightmare and pulled the hair and ears of one of the nurses because I thought I was being attacked. It never leaves you, and this is dangerous. I felt terrible and was really apologetic to the nurse, but they'd seen lots like me. I didn't know that instinct was still there, but it's survival."

Despite the ferocious nature of the campaign and contrary to what many other Allied soldiers felt, Callow did not hate the Japanese. "I respected them because they were very good soldiers. They were killers of course and we would kill them, which we did. Out of 134,000 there were only 25,000 left afterwards."

Instead, Callow held the Koreans who served in the Japanese forces with contempt. "The Japanese had Korea as their subsidiary. They put the Korean women into brothels for the Japanese soldiers and they made the men into prisoner of war guards. The men I mostly blew up were Koreans. They were not fighting men, and that's why I had no compunction about killing them, because of the way they treated POWs and everyone else – they ill-treated everybody. It's also why the Japanese ill-treated the Koreans – they didn't trust them."

The brutality of the Japanese forces during World War II is well known and Callow vividly remembered the human cost of the Burma Campaign. "We had one in four casualties. We lost 26,000 men and there were 100,000 of us. There were also 330,000 Indians and they also lost one man in four, which is about 86,000, and then the bloody War Office wouldn't give them any pensions! But we made the [British] government pay them eventually."

Far away from the Burmese jungle events were changing rapidly. On 8 May 1945 Nazi Germany unconditionally surrendered to the Allies in Europe, but VE Day had no effect on the war in the Far East because the Japanese refused to surrender. Consequently, the bloodshed continued in Burma. Callow recalled, "Churchill declared VE Day in Europe in May 1945 but we lost 4,000 men between May and August." In fact, Robert Callow's experiences in Burma were only the beginning of a unique military career.

IN PART II...

Robert Callow recalls blowing up a mountain, running a camp for Japanese prisoners, surviving a sea mine explosion and meeting Chairman Mao's right-hand man. Issue 51 is on sale 25 January 2018. Visit MyFavouriteMagazines.com to subscribe and save money on the cover price!

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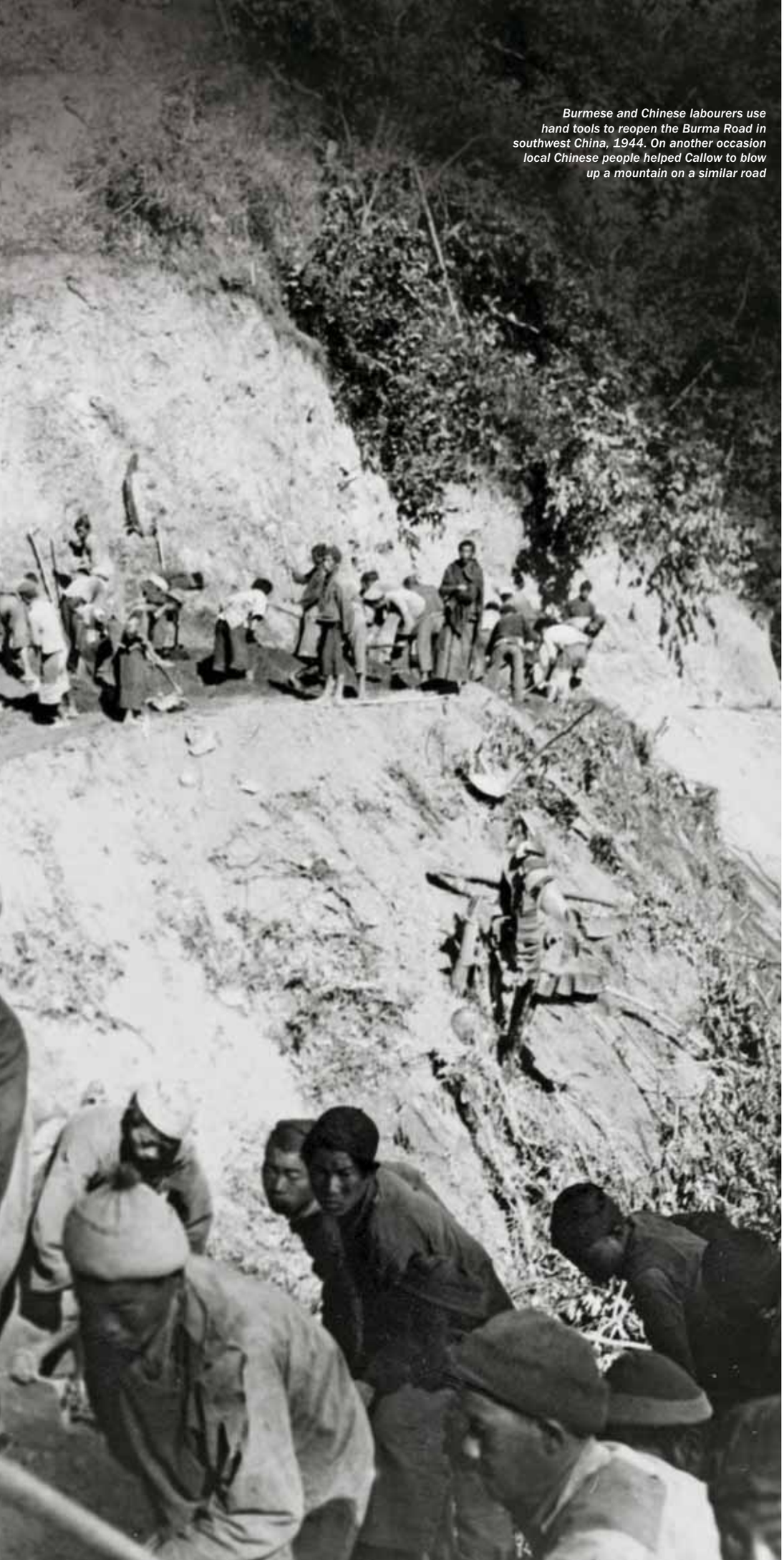
INTERVIEW WITH DR ROBERT CALLOW

FAR EAST COMMANDO

PART II: COMMUNISTS, PRISONERS AND PARTITION

In this final dramatic instalment Dr Callow recalls blowing up a mountain, fighting with communist guerrillas, running a POW camp and witnessing the bloody birth of modern India



Burmese and Chinese labourers use hand tools to reopen the Burma Road in southwest China, 1944. On another occasion local Chinese people helped Callow to blow up a mountain on a similar road

WORDS **TOM GARNER**

There were mass celebrations in Britain when Nazi Germany unconditionally surrendered on 8 May 1945. To many it was a huge sigh of relief that the war in Europe had ended after years of death and destruction on a scale that even dwarfed World War I. Nevertheless, World War II was not actually over, and the nightmarish conflict against Japan continued in the Far East for months afterwards. To British soldiers like Robert Callow, who were still vigorously fighting the Japanese, VE Day meant very little in what remained an extremely bloody war: “Churchill declared VE Day in Europe in May 1945 but we lost 4,000 men between May and August.”

At that point Callow had only just turned 20, but he was already an experienced explosives expert and polyglot who had been destroying Japanese bridges behind enemy lines in Burma between 1943-44. Callow was a Royal Engineer who fought as a commando in Force 136, Inter-Services Liaison Department but his initial Burmese experiences were only the beginning of an adventurous military career. Callow witnessed momentous events in China, Malaya and India by the end of the 1940s and met several giants of Asian history along the way.

Blowing up mountains

Now a captain, Callow left Burma a few months before VE Day and went into China with other members of Force 136. Their task was to assist Chinese forces and prevent the retreating Japanese army from escaping from Burma through the country. In preparation for this, Callow detonated a large explosion in September 1944 near Lashio. “When the Japanese were trying to get out back into China towards the end of the war I blew up and brought down a mountainside on a convoy of five lorries driven by Koreans.”

Although Lashio sat in Burma, it had a significant Chinese population, and the mountain was strategically positioned over a road towards China. Callow and his men worked with the local population. “We used the local Chinese with their packhorses to carry the bulk of the slow explosives and fill the top caves with them. The road was on the hillside and there were support piers below us so I used the nitro-glycerine to blow up the piers.”

When everything was prepared Callow waited for the enemy convoy to pass below. "I was positioned away from it all and as soon as I heard the explosives detonate at the top I then blew the bottom, and that brought down the convoy sitting on the road. They started sliding down the hill, but then the mountain also came down and took away a whole hillside of about 1,000 feet (300 metres). All of the convoy went down and it only took a few seconds… the mountain [fell] on top of them. It all went in one go and we said, 'Hooray, it's Bonfire Night!'"

Callow respected the Japanese as soldiers but grew to despise the Koreans fighting alongside the Japanese, who were often responsible for abusing Allied POWs. Although he didn't usually think much about his operational successes he was pleased with this particular mission: "I was delighted with this one because they were Koreans, who were the real sods. The Japanese didn't trust them and the Koreans were the ones doing all the atrocities on our POWs so we had no compunction about killing them. In fact the only man I personally killed was a Korean when we went into a camp to try and steal food, and I bayoneted him."

"THE KOREANS WERE THE ONES DOING ALL THE ATROCITIES ON OUR POWS SO WE HAD NO COMPUNCTION ABOUT KILLING THEM. IN FACT THE ONLY MAN I PERSONALLY KILLED WAS A KOREAN WHEN WE WENT INTO A CAMP TO TRY AND STEAL FOOD, AND I BAYONETED HIM"

Blowing up the mountain resulted in the destruction of five lorries and the deaths of 25 enemy soldiers, but Callow remained unmoved by the casualties: "There was no feeling about it because you don't know them and it's war."

Adventures in China

By late 1944 Callow had parachuted into China itself, and he was promoted in order to successfully liaise with the Chinese. "When we got into China the Chinese would talk down to a captain so we all became majors." Callow had arrived in a country that was not just ravaged by the Japanese but also deeply politically divided between the ruling republican Nationalists and Communist revolutionaries.

Callow later realised that the British assistance was actually a cynical manoeuvre from the prime minister. "The Japanese had to get over to the east of China because their troops were coming from Manchuria and trying to join up. Churchill sent one lot of us to Chongqing to the Nationalists' headquarters, who were then in power and were the ones who eventually fought Mao [Zedong]. They were the big shots, but Churchill was a louse because he sent 300 men to assist the Nationalists but also men to help the Communists. It was really sinister, and he did it all to eject the Japanese."

Such is Callow's antipathy towards Churchill's actions in the Far East that he has deliberately delayed publishing his memoirs. "My books

Robert Callow (second row, seated, third from left) with 430 Field Company, Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners shortly after the Morib landings in Malaya, 1945

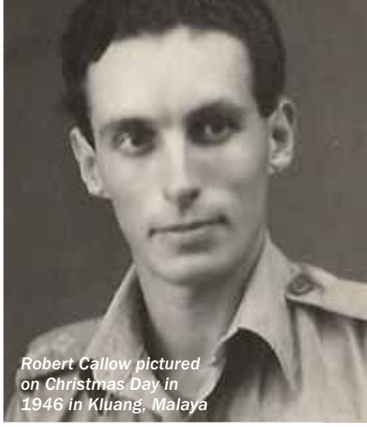
***Left:** Allied leaders including Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill meet at the Cairo Conference, November 1943. Of the pictured historical figures Callow met Chiang Kai-shek (front row, far left), Louis Mountbatten (back row, second from right) and Adrian Carton de Wiart (back row, far right)*

***Right:** Callow will publish his memoirs in 2021 to coincide with the release of unpublished government documents to show "what a louse" Winston Churchill was with regard to his Far East policies during WWII*

Wrecked buildings after communal riots in Amritsar, 1947. Although it is the Sikh capital, 50 per cent of the city's population was Muslim, and fighting broke out over whether Amritsar should be incorporated into India or Pakistan

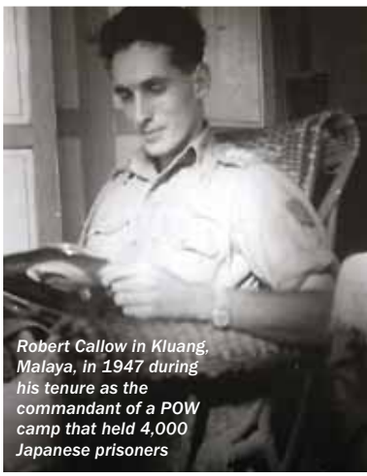
"CALLOW HAD ARRIVED IN A COUNTRY THAT WAS NOT JUST RAVAGED BY THE JAPANESE BUT ALSO DEEPLY POLITICALLY DIVIDED BETWEEN THE RULING REPUBLICAN NATIONALISTS AND COMMUNIST REVOLUTIONARIES"

Japanese prisoners of war in Guam, 15 August 1945. As the commandant of a POW camp at Kluang, Callow had to refer to the prisoners as "surrendered personnel" in order to make them work



Robert Callow pictured on Christmas Day in 1946 in Kluang, Malaya

***Above:** The flag of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). Callow worked closely with the MPAJA and served as Chin Peng's demolition man*



Robert Callow in Kluang, Malaya, in 1947 during his tenure as the commandant of a POW camp that held 4,000 Japanese prisoners

are coming out in 2021 at the same time that Churchill's papers are being published, and they will show that he was playing dirty and betting on both horses. I didn't know anything about this at the time and it's only since that I've been able to put it all together. He was a bastard really, but he was a politician. My father used to say, 'Shoot all the politicians!' and he was right."

Callow remained in China until February 1945. During that time he met Yee-Wai, the woman who would become his wife. Yee-Wai came from a prominent Nationalist family with military connections. "I met my second wife briefly in China because her uncle was Lieutenant General Auyang Sik-Baag who was in command of the Chinese KMT (Kuomintang) Nationalist Seventh Army. I had learnt some Cantonese because we were in that area so I could speak to her politely, but to the Chinese I was a 'bloody foreigner' so I wasn't encouraged to mix with her."

Although he was a Nationalist, Auyang put his country above politics and was active in assisting his rivals to eject the Japanese with Callow's assistance. "He gave ammunition to communist guerrillas against the Japanese. I know he did that because we would supply them and bring them in."

Because of Callow's connections with Auyang, he was briefly brought into contact with Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Nationalist Republic of China. However, Callow does not place great emphasis on meeting him. "Chiang Kai-shek was the boss of the KMT and they were all at the same military academy together. I met him through Auyang, but I didn't speak to him because I was in my early 20s of course and only very junior."

Conversely, Callow also became acquainted with Zhou Enlai who later became Mao Zedong's deputy and the first premier of Communist China after the revolution. "After I'd been with Auyang Sik-Baag I was sent on to Chaozhou. Churchill had sent about 300 men to Chongqing with the [Nationalist] government but I went to Zhou Enlai, who was actually a Communist. So Churchill was sending us to both the Communists and the Nationalists."

"THEY WERE GOING TO LEAVE THIS WOMAN IN THE JUNGLE, BUT I INSISTED ON TAKING HER WITH ME AND I DRAGGED HER ON A FRAME MADE OF TWO STICKS"

Callow recalled Zhou as an intelligent, urbane character: "He was a very good man, although he couldn't speak Cantonese and I couldn't speak Mandarin so we used to communicate in French. He'd been in Belgium and had a French-speaking girlfriend so that's how we communicated. Mao was absolutely crazy for him, but I never met Mao thank God!"

Fighting in Malaya

Callow left China in February 1945 and briefly returned to England before he was redeployed to the Far East between April and May. His destination this time was Malaya, which was then under Japanese occupation. Callow's experiences with communists in China led him to Chin Peng, the leader of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). As the future leader of the Malayan Communist Party, Chin would subsequently lead the guerrilla insurgency against the British during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60), but during World War II he actively cooperated with them to eject the Japanese.

Fluent in Malay, Callow knew Chin well. "MI6 told him that I was with the communists [in China] and that was the reason why I was sent there. He was from Grik, which is in northern Kedah with aboriginal people in the jungle, and I was dealing with everything in that area to help the Malayan people defeat the Japanese army.

Indian soldiers walk through the debris of a building during unrest in Amritsar following the partition of India, August 1947. Callow remembered being "horrified" by what he saw in the city

That's what Force 136 was about so I was sent up to that area and I knew him personally. He was a straightforward communist."

Callow's explosives expertise and Burmese experience proved useful to Chin. "It was the same as in Burma: I was Chin's demolition man to blow up bridges and to contact Ceylon on long-range radios. He was the leader of groups of about 12 people in the jungle so I was in one of the groups. All of the guerrillas knew me because I spoke the languages and I was 'one of them'. That's the reason I trained to know their languages and customs, because I lived like them. I was also useful to them because I knew everything and everybody."

The MPAJA's fight against the Japanese was all-consuming and many women served alongside the men, including one that Callow saved from death. "They had women couriers and when one of them caught pneumonia they wanted to leave her. They were going to leave this woman in the jungle, but I insisted on taking her with me, and I dragged her on a frame made of two sticks."

Callow later returned to Malaya in 1953 during the Malayan Emergency in a civilian capacity working with the Public Works Department. As a former comrade of Chin, his safety from the communist guerrilla campaign was assured. "Nobody touched me because I'd fought with the communists against the Japanese and knew Chin Peng. I didn't see him during the Emergency but his family were still in Grik and I built a rest house there."

"CALLOW HAS HAD TO REMAIN APOLITICAL: 'I'M NOT A COMMUNIST, I'M WITH EVERYBODY BECAUSE OTHERWISE I'D BE DEAD!'"

Far from being considered an enemy, Callow was regarded as an adopted Malayan. "I told the people in MI6 who were responsible for field work that I was going and they would tell the communists. To them I was an old friend and you don't kick or kill your old friends." However, due to his work with nationalist and communist forces during World War II Callow has had to remain apolitical: "I'm not a communist, I'm with everybody because otherwise I'd be dead!"

By the time VJ Day was declared on 15 August 1945 Callow was still in Malaya but was about to be deployed to Japan. "When the Japanese surrendered we were waiting to go back to India to get on a ship to take us to Japan. Thank God it never happened because the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had occurred. Consequently, had the war continued we would have been sent to Japan and I wouldn't be talking to you now."

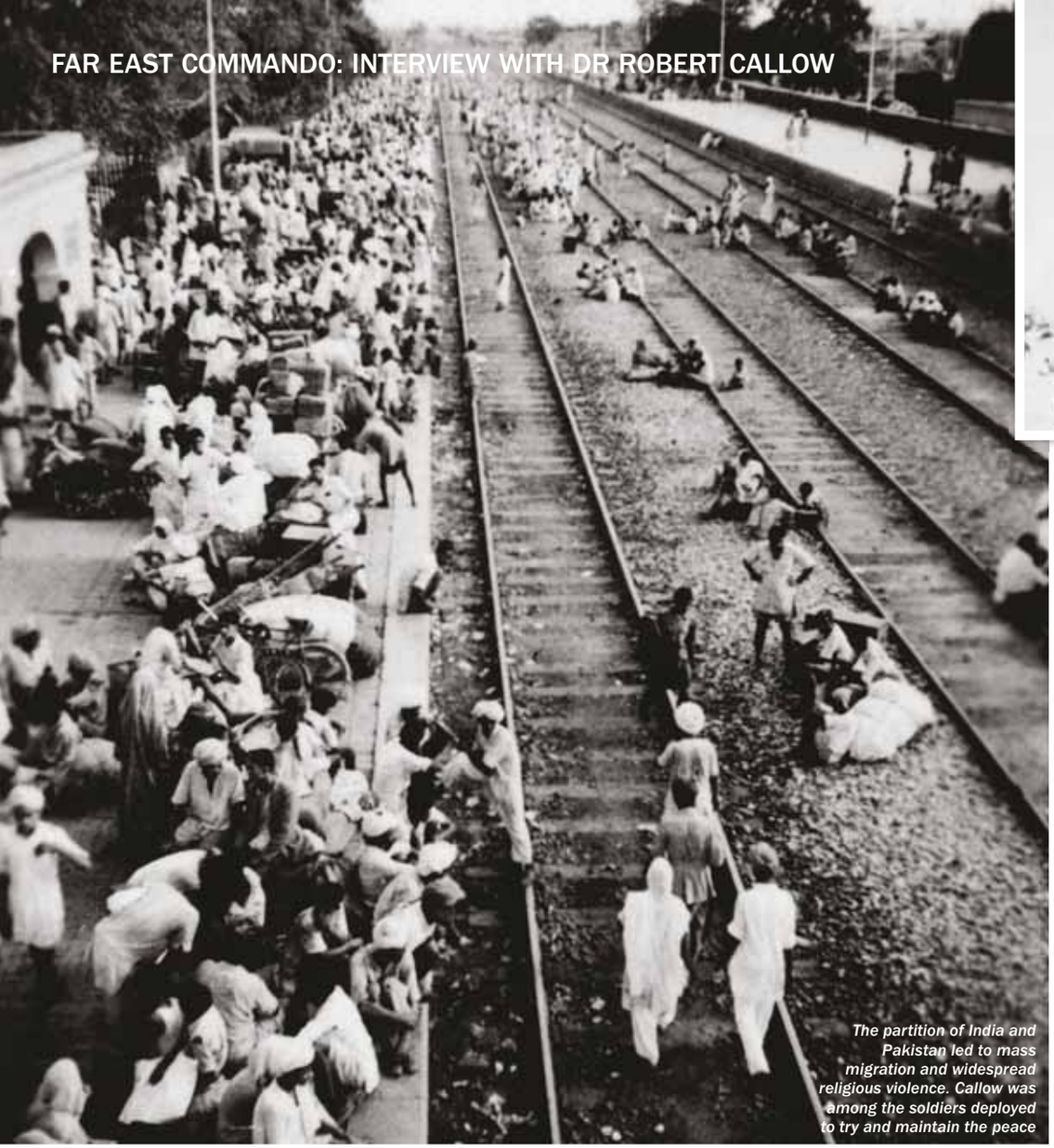
Nevertheless, Callow was not sent home and was instead transferred from combat duties to an altogether different task: guarding Japanese prisoners of war.

"Surrendered personnel"

Callow was by now seconded to the Queen Victoria's Own Madras Sappers and Miners in the Indian army, which was a regiment made up of Tamil soldiers. Callow has fond memories of the Tamils, describing them as "very good indeed, with a delightful sense of humour." Nonetheless, the task he and his men faced was daunting. Japanese soldiers were famous for not surrendering to Allied soldiers, but those that did needed careful management.

Despite only being in his early 20s Callow became a commandant of a POW camp that guarded 4,000 Japanese prisoners at Kluang in the Malayan province of Johor. In order to make the prisoners work Callow had to be delicate about their status. "We didn't call them Japanese 'prisoners of war': we said they were 'surrendered personnel.'"

Once this important distinction was made Callow found that the Japanese were able workers. "We could make them work. We couldn't make 'prisoners of war' work but



The partition of India and Pakistan led to mass migration and widespread religious violence. Callow was among the soldiers deployed to try and maintain the peace

***Above:** Lord Louis Mountbatten, the supreme Allied commander of South East Asia Command. Callow, who briefly met him, believed that Mountbatten withdrew the British too hastily from India during his tenure as the last viceroy*

we could with 'surrendered personnel'. They surrendered because the emperor had ordered them to so therefore we could make them work. They had to obey their officers and he [the emperor] was the head officer. I was building camps with the Japanese and they were very good. You gave them an order and it would be completely carried out. They must obey you so therefore they had to obey me."

However, disease was rampant, with many prisoners contracting the unfortunately named Japanese encephalitis. "When I was in charge of the Japanese a lot of them had got Japanese encephalitis – which they had brought to Burma – and they fell down quickly. You get bitten by a mosquito that has bitten animals that have encephalitis. 60 per cent of people die of it and 40 per cent survive. The disease causes your thalamus in your brain to misinterpret, and it doesn't know which is up and down so therefore you fall over."

Callow would also contract the same disease a few years later. "I was in Malaysia in the 1950s and six of us were bitten with encephalitis. I knew about it from before, but I didn't realise this was going to be my part in it. Like chicken pox, it stays in your bloodstream. If I stand up I will fall backwards and that's why I was in hospital recently having surgery because I collapse. I've had it for years."

"OUR BOAT HAD SOFT EXPLOSIVES ON IT AND THEY WENT 'WOMPH!' IN A BIG FLAME THAT KILLED THE JAPANESE AND BLEW ME OFF THE BRIDGE STRAIGHT INTO THE SEA"

Away from the risk of disease Callow was still vulnerable to the detritus of conflict, and while he was commandant he fell foul of sea mines that he had actually helped to lay during the war. "I was in north Malaya and we still had all our explosives on RMAF Butterworth Airfield. Since I was into explosives I was told to take them and dump them in the sea, which I did. We had a little low boat of about 50 feet (15 metres) and I was on the bridge at the back stripped to the waist. I had six Japanese prisoners loading at the front and we hit one of those mines."

The result was immediate destruction. "Our boat had soft explosives on it and they went 'Womph!' in a big flame that killed the Japanese and blew me off the bridge straight into the sea. We were about 400 yards (365 metres) from the shore at Jerejak Island." Callow credits his lone survival to the sea he landed in. "Being blown into the sea was actually the best thing to happen because the sea water saved me, but I've still got a scar on my back. I was picked up and taken to the military hospital, and for six months they threw buckets of salt water over me to keep the salt in on the burns. It was almost the death of me, but that's life."

Callow ran the Kluang POW camp between 1945-47, but in 1947 his regiment was deployed to the Indian subcontinent to stem the carnage in partitioned India.

Bloodshed in Amritsar

The former British Raj had gained its independence from Britain in mid August 1947, but the country had been divided into the two independent dominion states of India and Pakistan. The new artificial border known as the 'Radcliffe Line' ran through the provinces of Bengal and the Punjab and separated the majority Hindu and Muslim populations from each other. But the hasty partition was a disaster, triggering mass riots and migrations.

Around 14-16 million people were displaced as Muslims headed towards Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs travelled to India, with many

British soldiers of the Wiltshire Regiment leave Amritsar's police headquarters to go on a peacekeeping patrol. Callow would have gone on similar patrols with the Madras Sappers

travelling on foot. Religious tensions were also exposed as mass killings from opposing communities became rampant. It is estimated that between 200,000 and 2 million people were killed during the partition, and up to 100,000 women were raped or abducted. It was into this scene of mass horror that Callow and the Madras Sappers were sent to the Sikh capital of Amritsar in the Punjab.

Amritsar was the scene of some of the worst violence during partition. The full figures will never be known, but Sikhs killed at least 3,000 Muslims in one day in September 1947. As part of the Indian army, Callow and the Madras Sappers were sent to the city to stem the bloodshed. "They sent us because I was with the Tamils and we had to try and stop some of the killing."

Callow recalled that the deployment of Tamil soldiers for anti-riot duties was a deliberate move amid the religious tension. "All the other [regiments] were either exclusively Muslim, Hindu or Christian etc. but the Tamils were a mixture of religions. They also had nothing to do with the northern Indians so therefore they were treated more or less as neutral."

While he was in Amritsar, Callow witnessed some horrendous scenes. "We had nothing to do with either the Muslims or the others and we had to stop the killing. The women were

"AMRITSAR WAS THE SCENE OF SOME OF THE WORST VIOLENCE DURING PARTITION. THE FULL FIGURES WILL NEVER BE KNOWN, BUT SIKHS KILLED AT LEAST 3,000 MUSLIMS IN ONE DAY IN SEPTEMBER 1947. AS PART OF THE INDIAN ARMY, CALLOW AND THE MADRAS SAPPERS WERE SENT TO THE CITY TO STEM THE BLOODSHED"

CALLOW'S ACQUAINTANCES

DURING THE 1940S ROBERT CALLOW MET AND EVEN FOUGHT WITH SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL FIGURES, INCLUDING SEVERAL WHO HAD A GREAT IMPACT ON 20TH-CENTURY ASIAN HISTORY

ADRIAN CARTON DE WIART (1880-1963)

Carton de Wiart, an eye-patch wearing, one-handed, Belgian-born British Army officer, personally selected Callow for commando service. Carton de Wiart fought in three major conflicts across six decades and won a Victoria Cross during the Battle of the Somme. Although he was wounded eight times in World War I alone, he once said that "war was in my blood".

CHIANG KAI-SHEK (1887-1975)

Chiang was the powerful head of the Nationalist government of China from 1928-49, who reunified the country in the inter-war period as well as ostensibly leading it through World War II. However, Chiang was defeated during the Communist Revolution between 1946-49. Chiang fled with the remnants of his government and founded the state of Taiwan, which is still officially known as the 'Republic of China'.

CHIN PENG (1924-2013)

An ethnically Chinese, Malayan communist guerrilla leader, Chin fought with the British during World War II and subsequently against them during the Malayan Emergency. The British managed to defeat him and he fled to Thailand, although he later waged another unsuccessful campaign against independent Malaysia. Throughout all this he led the Malayan Communist Party from 1947-89.

WILLIAM SLIM (1891-1970)

As the commander of the British 14th Army, Slim turned back an attempted Japanese invasion of India before defeating its armies in Burma. Callow remembered him as a "soldier's soldier who didn't call a 'spade a spade' but a 'bloody shovel'!"

ZHOU ENLAI (1898-1976)

The first premier of the People's Republic of China played a major role in the Chinese Communist Revolution and was second only to Mao Zedong in importance between 1949-76. Unlike Mao, Zhou was renowned for his charm and diplomatic skills, which most famously bore fruit in the historic meeting between Mao and American President Richard Nixon in 1972.

Burnt out and ruined buildings in the Katra Jaimal Singh area of Amritsar, March 1947

***Above:** Dr Callow with the lord mayor of Coventry, Ram Lakha in 2005. Callow is the only surviving member of the city's branch of the Burma Star Association*

"CALLOW BELIEVED THAT THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CARNAGE ULTIMATELY RESTS WITH THE LAST BRITISH VICEROY'S DECISION TO MAKE A HASTY WITHDRAWAL FROM INDIA"

throwing themselves into the wells because the Muslims were raping them. Our troops would go towards the rioters with bayonets fixed and when they saw that we were neither Muslim nor Hindu they backed off. We were not dealing with soldiers but civilians, and I was doing this for about two months. We were horrified at what was going on."

Callow believed that the responsibility for the carnage ultimately rests with the last British viceroy's decision to make a hasty withdrawal from India: "It was Mountbatten's idea to do it. When Malaya got its independence it took ten years, but he did it in two to three months."

Callow finally returned to Britain later that year, but the reception was underwhelming. "It was actually very disappointing when I came home in 1947. It was a rainy day, nobody came to the docks to see us, there were no flags and nobody wanted to know. The war had been over for two years, but it ultimately didn't matter because we were home."

"Still in the army"

Callow went on to lead an adventurous life after his wartime experiences and spent decades living in the Far East before permanently returning to England. He eventually married Yee-Wai and, among other achievements, he obtained a doctorate in neurophysics, became the dean of the engineering faculty at Hong Kong University and also helped to set up the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) in the same territory.

Throughout this time Callow worked for the Ministry of Overseas Development, where his linguistic skills led him to advise, among other people, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, who he described as "very nice indeed, very modest".

Remarkably, Dr Callow has never been demobilised and is still active as a consultant for the British government. "I'm still in the army, and it never lets you go, but it's only 70 years service! I've had several cases to look into the question of neurophysics in helicopter or tank drivers for example. The ministry pays my pension but they will me ring me up and tell me what they want because my doctorate deals with the response to physical stress."

Dr Robert Callow has led, by any measure, an extraordinary life, but when asked about how he survived so many dangerous wartime experiences his answer is simple: "Bloody-mindedness… and pure chance."

Images: Alamy, Getty