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BURMA COMMAND (HISTORY & PERSONNEL)

A concise history of Burma Command, a higher level formation of the British Army in existence from 1930 until 1942. It was reformed in late 1945 (see XXXIII Indian Corps). It saw operational service in the First Burma Campaign of early 1942. In addition, known details of the key appointments held in this period are included.

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A Concise History of Burma Command (History & Personnel)

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Burma Command

Burma Command was a pre-war formation that covered the country of Burma. Post the Great War, the Burma Independent District was a second-class district under India Command. It was a Major General's appointment. The 20th Burma Rifles was one of the twenty regiments in the Indian Army at this time, seeing service throughout India. In Burma, there were two British Army infantry battalions, together with some Indian Army units.

In April 1937, Burma was granted independence from India, becoming a semi-autonomous country reporting direct to the Colonel Office. Burma Command separated from the Indian Army at this time, with the Burma Rifles also becoming a separate regiment. The two British Army battalions remained in Burma.

On 18 November 1940, the three independent commands came under the newly established Far East Command based in Singapore, and the R.A.F. Far East Command incorporated into the new command. The Royal Navy, however, remained independent. Far East Command comprised:

- Malaya Command,
- Burma Command,
- British Forces in China,
- R.A.F. Far East Command.

For a short period, Burma Command came under the A.B.D.A. Command. The first reinforcements to be sent to Burma was the 16th Indian Infantry Brigade, which arrived at Rangoon on 30 November 1941. Japanese troops first entered Burmese territory on 12 December 1941, four days after they had invaded Malaya and entered the Second World War. The initial Japanese incursion was at the extreme south of the country at Victoria Point. The main threat to southern Burma was seen as coming from Thailand, nominally an independent and neutral country, but one supporting Japan. On the same day (12 December), the British Chiefs of Staff agreed for Burma Command to be transferred from Far East Command to India Command. It was agreed, in addition, for the 18th Infantry Division (then located at South Africa en-route to the Middle East) to be diverted to Burma. The 17th Indian Infantry Division was also due to be sent to the Middle East (Iraq), but it was agreed for this formation to be diverted to Burma.

General WAVELL, the Commander-in-Chief of India Command, visited Rangoon and met with Lieutenant General McLEOD. As a consequence of his visit, he decided to replace McLEOD with Lieutenant General HUTTON, his Chief of Staff at Army Headquarters in India. In addition, he agreed to send two African brigades and the 14th Indian Infantry Division to Burma as soon as possible.

HUTTON arrived in Rangoon on 27 December 1941, and he replaced McLEOD with immediate effect. The Japanese Army invaded Burma through the Chin Hills from Thailand on 20 January 1942. The replacement of HUTTON came about as a result of a telegram sent by the Viceroy of India, Lord LINLITHGOW, to London on 18 February 1942, in which he raised concerns about the events in Burma. Two days later, HUTTON sent a cable to WAVELL and the Chiefs of Staff raising the possibility of a collapse of the defences at the Sittang Bridge, and having to evacuate Rangoon.

On 21 February, WAVELL sent a cable to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (C.I.G.S.) in London recommending the replacement of HUTTON by General ALEXANDER, then the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Southern Command in the U.K.. The C.I.G.S. had similar thoughts, and the decision taken to effect the change in command. HUTTON was informed on 22 February, but was asked to stay on as Chief of Staff to the Army in Burma, a new title for Burma Command. On the same date, A.B.D.A. Command was dissolved, so The Army in Burma returned to India Command for operational and administrative purposes.

General Sir Harold ALEXANDER arrived in Rangoon on 5 March 1942, with the title as the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Army in Burma. He assumed command of both the British forces deployed in Burma, and the Chinese forces entering Burma from the north-east in support of the British. At the time, there were three British formations deployed in Burma, namely the:

- 1st Burma Infantry Division,
- 17th Indian Infantry Division,
- 7th Armoured Brigade.

In addition to these formations, a Lines of Communication Area was established in Rangoon, under the command of Major General A. V. K. WAKELY. The L.o.C. Area comprised:

- Rangoon Garrison,
- Central Burma Sub-Area (Pyawbwe),
- Upper Burma Sub-Area (Mandalay).

The Headquarters, Army in Burma relinquished command of all units and formations on 20 May 1942, and it was disbanded. On 27 May 1942, a new headquarters was formed as Headquarters Burma Army, with Major General H. H. RICH as the General Officer Commanding with effect from 9 September 1942. This purpose of this headquarters was to administer all the units of the former Burma Army, in particular the Burma Rifles. The new headquarters was based at Simla.

General Officer Commanding

1st April 1937 – 20th January 1939

Major General W. L. O. TWISS, C.B., C.B.E., M.C.

20th January 1939 – 27th December 1941

Major General Donald Keith McLEOD, C.B., D.S.O., Indian Army, *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*¹

27th December 1941 – 5th March 1942

Lieutenant General Thomas Jacomb HUTTON, C.B., M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Army in Burma

5th March 1942 – 20th May 1942

Lieutenant General the Honourable Sir Harold George Leofric ALEXANDER, K.C.B., C.S.I., D.S.O., M.C., Col 3/2 Punjab R., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

Chief of Staff

5th March 1941 – 3rd April 1942

Lieutenant General Thomas Jacomb HUTTON, C.B., M.C., *i.d.c.*, *p.s.c.*

Major General, General Staff

1st April 1942 – 20th May 1942 (16th June 1942)

Major General (Acting) Thomas John Willoughby WINTERTON, O.B.E., *p.s.c.*

Brigadier General Staff – (B.G.S.)

1st September 1941 – 18th March 1942 (To BurCorps)

Brigadier (Acting) Henry Lowrie DAVIES, O.B.E., R.Garh.R, *p.s.c.*

19th March 1942 – 29th June 1942 (Died on Active Service)

Brigadier (Acting) Norman Royce UPTON, D.S.O., O.B.E., Essex R., *p.s.c.*

General Staff Officer 1st Grade

3rd December 1940 – 1942

Lieutenant Colonel (Acting) Norman Royce UPTON, M.B.E., Essex Regiment, *p.s.c.*

General Staff Officer 3rd Grade

16th April 1939 – 1940/1

Major M. V. WRIGHT, 10 Baluch R. *p.s.c.*

11th July 1939 – 1940/1

Captain G. D. UPSON, 2 Punjab R., *p.s.c.*

¹ Promoted Lieutenant General on 1 April 1941. Knighted K.C.I.E. on 1 January 1942 after leaving post. Retired on 30 March 1942.

Colonel in charge of Administration

19th April 1939 – 2nd November 1940

Colonel Eric Norman GODDARD, M.V.O., O.B.E., M.C.*, Indian Army, *p.s.c.*

15th October 1940 – 1942

Colonel (Acting) J. C. MARTIN, C.B.E., M.C., Indian Army, *p.s.c.*

Chief Administration Officer

13th January 1942 – 20th May 1942

Brigadier (Temporary) Eric Norman GODDARD, M.V.O., O.B.E., M.C.*, Indian Army, *p.s.c.*

Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General

7th December 1939 – 1940/1

Major B. RUFFELL, Burma Rifles, *p.s.c.*

Staff Captain

7th December 1937 – 1940/1

Major R. G. R. OXLEY, K.R.R.C.

Staff Captain (Additional)

21st November 1937 – 1940/1

Captain R. G. R. CHILTON, Gloster R.

Commander Royal Engineers

12th July 1939 – 28th October 1941

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Copley SWIFT, M.C., R.E.

Chief Engineer – (C.Eng.)

29th October 1941 – 20th May 1942

Brigadier (Acting) Charles Copley SWIFT, M.C., R.E.

Chief Signal Officer

18th May 1939 – 20th May 1942 (22nd October 1942)

Major William Oswald BOWEN, O.B.E., A.M.I.E.E., R. Signals²

Director of Supplies and Transport

11th July 1939 – 1942

Lieutenant Colonel R. E. HUNT, R.I.A.S.C.

² Promoted Acting Lieutenant Colonel in post on 1 April 1941, Acting Colonel on 12 July 1941 and Acting Brigadier on 15 December 1941.

Deputy Assistant Director of Supplies and Transport

1st April 1937 – 1940/1

Major H. G. BELL, R.I.A.S.C.

Director of Transportation

27th January 1942 – 20th May 1942

Colonel (Temporary) Francis John BIDDULPH, M.C., R.E.

Director of Medical Services

1st March 1938 – May 1940

Colonel H. G. MONTEITH, D.S.O., O.B.E.

11th May 1940 – 22nd May 1941

Colonel Alexander Gordon BIGGAM, O.B.E., M.D., F.R.C.P., K.H.P.

22nd July 1941 – 20th May 1942

Brigadier (Acting) E. C. LANG, D.S.O., M.B.

Deputy Assistant Director of Hygiene

29th October 1937 – 1940/1

Major H. A. FERGUSON, M.B., R.A.M.C.

Deputy Assistant Director of Pathology

8th February 1939 – 1940/1

Major W. F. LANE, M.B., R.A.M.C.

Director of Army Veterinary Services

21st October 1937 – 1940/1

Major J. SOUTHALL, R.A.V.C.

Command Education Officer

@ 1940

Major J. H. LOWE, A.E.C.

Brigade Commanders

29th October 1937 – 1940/1

Brigadier (Temporary) G. St. G. ROBINSON, D.S.O., M.C., *p.s.c.*

@1940

Brigadier (Local) J. B. SCOTT, M.C., 8 G.R.

Brigade Majors

5th February 1938 – 1940/1

Major H. A. B. BRUNO, M.B.E., King's Own R., *p.s.c.*

6th November 1939 – 1942

Major H. L. WYNDHAM, 8 Punjab R., *p.s.c.*

6th July 1940 – 1942

Major H. V. WRIGHT, 10 Baluch R., *p.s.c.*

1st August 1941 – 1942

Major (Temporary) R. C. H. BELLERS, Midd'x R., (*s.c.*)

Staff Captain

6th November 1937 – 1940/1

Major R. H. H. SCOTT, 14 Punjab R., *p.s.c.*

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