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A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

BRIGADIER

J. F. BOWERMAN

A concise biography of Brigadier John Francis BOWERMAN, C.B.E., K.P.M., who served in the British Army from 1914 until 1918. He transferred to the British Indian Army in 1918 and served until 1946. He is most notable for his service with the Burma Military Police.

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A Concise Biography of Brigadier J. F. BOWERMAN

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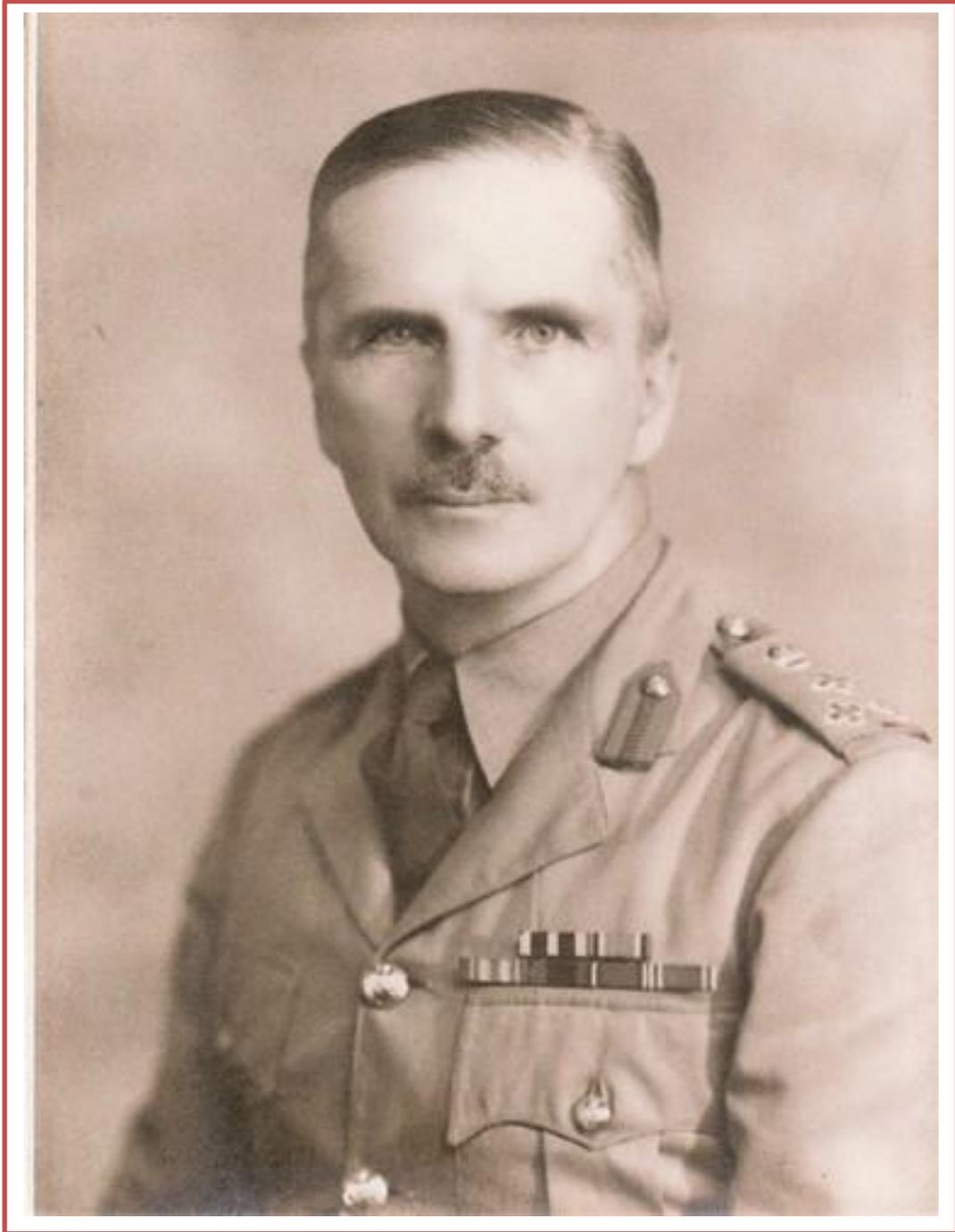
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Brigadier John Francis BOWERMAN, C.B.E., K.P.M.



Introduction

Brigadier John BOWERMAN, who was born and grew up in Devon, became an officer in the British Indian Army, having originally enlisted in the ranks during the Great War and who served from 1918 until 1946. During the Second World War, he commanded the Burma Frontier Force during the invasion of 1942, and in 1944, he was an area commander in northern Burma working alongside the American and Chinese Forces.

Early Life and Career

John Francis BOWERMAN was born on 28 November 1893 in the town of Cullompton, Devon.¹ His father was John BOWERMAN, who came from the village of Silverton further down the valley of the River Clyst in Devon, where his mother originated. John followed the family trade and became a draper and gentleman's outfitter. He also lists his occupation as furniture, so it is assumed he used his skills to produce furniture for homes and businesses. The BOWERMAN's established their business at 124, Fore Street, in the market town of Cullompton.²

John entered the family business and in 1893, he married Florence Catherine WALL, who came from Chard in Somerset and was ten years his junior. John Francis was their first child, born in the same year as their marriage. A brother for John, Arthur, was born two years later, then came two sisters Kathleen and Florence, and then in 1901 another brother Horace.³ By 1901, the family were living at 132, Fore Street, Cullompton; with John now aged forty-two years, Florence thirty-two years, John Francis aged seven years, Arthur five years, Kathleen aged four years, Florence aged two years and Horace aged just four months. The family had two female domestic servants living with them, and a female boarder who worked as a milliner.⁴

John Francis was educated at the Queen Elizabeth's School in Crediton, Devon. At this period, the school was a grammar school serving the town of Crediton and nearby communities. The school was unusual in that, as a state school, it provided boarding facilities at the school, and it is possible that John boarded in order to save the journey to and from Cullompton each day. After he left school, John moved to Manchester, and boarded at 58, Barton Street, Moss Side, Manchester, where in the 1911 Census he lived with thirty-two-year old Thomas Alan WHITING and twenty-four-year old Harold BENNETT. Now aged seventeen years, John was following the family trade as an Apprentice Wholesale Draper.⁵

¹ Date of birth – *The Half Yearly Army List February 1947* (U.K., H.M.S.O., 1947) p.53 – Place of birth *1911 Census* via www.Ancestry.co.uk

² *1891 Census* via www.Ancestry.co.uk

³ *1901 Census* via www.Ancestry.co.uk

⁴ *1901 Census* via www.Ancestry.co.uk

⁵ *1911 Census* via www.Ancestry.co.uk

The outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 changed the direction of John's life, as it did for so many people. At the age of twenty-one years, BOWERMAN enlisted in the ranks and served for one-hundred and thirty-seven days before he commissioned in The Prince of Wales's Own (West Yorkshire Regiment) on 26 January 1915 as a Temporary Second Lieutenant. He was wounded whilst fighting against the Turkish Forces and was promoted to the rank of Temporary Lieutenant on 1 August 1916. With effect from 22 November 1916, BOWERMAN transferred with a large number of fellow officers to the Machine Gun Corps on its formation, and he was granted a commission with the rank of Lieutenant. He served in Mesopotamia (an area now mainly contained within the modern country of Iraq) between 18 September 1916 and 31 May 1917. BOWERMAN served with the Marri Field Force on the North-West Frontier of India from 20 February to 25 March 1918, during which operation he was wounded.

BOWERMAN applied to transfer to the Indian Army, and was appointed to the Indian Army on probation on 29 November 1918. He was granted the rank of Lieutenant and was attached to the 1st Bn. 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis. On 16 December 1918, he was promoted to the rank of Acting Captain whilst commanding a company in the 1st/129th Baluchis. In 1919, he saw active service in Afghanistan, being made an Acting Major, He relinquished that rank on 15 December 1919. In late 1919, BOWERMAN was stationed in Zhob area, and served in Waziristan in the period from 1921 to 1923. In 1922, the 129th Baluchis became the 4th (Duke of Connaught's Own) Battalion, 10th Baluch Regiment, with BOWERMAN being given the service number IA/204. On 13 March 1925, his promotion to the rank of Captain was ante-dated to 20 October 1919, thereby improving his seniority on the Regimental List.

The Burma Military Police

In the 1920's, the modern country of Myanmar was called Burma, and was a province of British India. As such, it had a para-military police force called the Burma Military Police (B.M.P.). Most of the men in the B.M.P. were Indians or Gurkhas, but about a quarter of the strength were Karens from the south-eastern areas of Burma. The Indians were recruited from the Punjab, with the favoured classes being Pathans, Garwhalis, Punjabi Mussalmans, Kumaonis and Dogras all from northern India. The Gurkhas were recruited from the independent kingdom of Nepal between India and Tibet. Men who served with the B.M.P. became eligible for a pension on completion of fifteen years' service.

Non-Indians were recruited first into the B.M.P. in 1909, with men coming from the Chin, Kachin and Karen ethnic groups. Over time, the largest non-Indian group became the Karens, a mixed ethnic group of peoples who lived generally on the Burma – Thailand border area, although many also lived in the Irrawaddy delta region. They were originally Buddhists, but missionaries had converted many to Christianity and the British authorities favoured them due to their loyalty to the Crown and preparedness to serve the Colonial Government.

The role of the Burma Military Police was to maintain internal security in Burma, supported by the small British Army presence in the country. The B.M.P. was organised into nine battalions, each of which had a small number of British officers seconded from the Indian Army. The B.M.P. was raised in 1886 by the British authorities to replace battalions from the Indian Army that were then garrisoning the newly annexed provinces of Upper Burma, one of the factors involved in this decision being to reduce costs. It was intended from the outset that the B.M.P. was to be a quasi-military force, with its objectives of:

- Frontier watch and ward duties;
- Dealing with minor insurrections amongst the local populations;
- Guarding key economic and financial assets;
- Guarding and transportation of long-term prisoners.

In 1906, the strength of the B.M.P. stood at three-thousand, one-hundred and thirty-two men, divided into twenty-eight different companies. At this time, 80% of the force were Gurkhas, but this percentage dropped when local tribesmen started to be recruited from 1909 onwards. The Inspector-General for Police had three deputies, one for the civil police, a Lieutenant Colonel who headed the Burma Military Police, and deputy responsible for clothing and supplies.

BOWERMAN joined the Burma Military Police in 1926 with his appointment as an Assistant Commandant. This coincided with the expansion of the Myitkyina Battalion of the B.M.P. (by far the largest unit in the force) into two separate units, the Eastern and Western Myitkyina Battalions, therefore, BOWERMAN's secondment may be linked with this event. He clearly made an impact as with about one year's service, he received the award of the King's Police Medal on 31 December 1927, in recognition of his service as Assistant Commandant with the Burma Military Police. BOWERMAN returned to his regiment with his appointment as Adjutant of the 4th Bn. 10th Baluch Regiment on 24 August 1929. His commanding officer described his performance in this role as '*magnificent*', however, BOWERMAN returned to Burma to take up the role as officiating battalion commander on 1 April 1931. Two months later, on 14 June he became a liaison officer before a key appointment as Personal Assistant to the Deputy Inspector-General of Police for Burma, which he took up on 6 December 1931. The Deputy Inspector-General was an Army officer of the rank of Lieutenant Colonel who commanded the Burma Military Police, reporting to the Inspector-General for Police for Burma.

In this role, BOWERMAN was described as: '*loyal, temperate, popular and a fine athlete and good polo player,*' which gives an idea of the character required of officers in the Burma Military Police of this period. BOWERMAN left his role as personal assistant on 31 March 1933, but shortly afterwards he was promoted to the rank of Major, which took effect on 20 October 1933. He assumed command of the Western Myitkyina Battalion of the B.M.P. in northern Burma. In his Annual Confidential Report of 1936, the Deputy Inspector-General, Lieutenant Colonel LETHBRIDGE, reported on BOWERMAN describing him as: '*one of the most efficient commandants in the Burma Military Police with great enthusiasm, ability and tact*'.



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Map 1 – Burma circa 1940.

Courtesy of: The Burma Star Association website

In 1937, Burma was granted separation from British India, although it remained part of the British Empire. Six of the battalions of the B.M.P. reformed into the Burma Frontier Force at this time, with three battalions remaining in the B.M.P.. The three battalions were the 1st Rangoon Battalion, the 2nd Rangoon Battalion and the Mandalay Battalion. The strength of the B.M.P. reduced from 12,076 in 1936 to just 4,301 in 1937. This comprised the following ethnic groups:

- Gurkhas = 991
- Karens = 963
- Burmans = 705
- Kumaonis = 596
- Punjabis = 537
- Sikhs = 456
- Hindustanis = 53

The Punjabis and Hindustanis were Muslims, the Sikhs were of the Sikh religion, and the Gurkha and Kuamonis were Hindus. The Eastern and Western Myitkyina Battalions were merged into one, with BOWERMAN retaining command of the newly combined unit. He was highly thought of, with his annual confidential report stating:

Too old for Staff College. Outstanding. Fit for D.I.G. in due course. Is easily the most capable officer of his rank in the Military Police. He has been thoroughly tested in the field, as a Staff Officer & Commandant, and has specialised knowledge that should be of great value to the local Government in the future. Very popular, good at all games, a fine rider. Temperate.

In addition, BOWERMAN was awarded the MacGREGOR's Memorial Medal for his services with the Burma Military Police.

Burma Frontier Force

The Burma Frontier Force was a separate, although linked force, which was formed following the separation of Burma from India. The B.F.F. was commanded by an officer of the rank of Brigadier who held the appointment of Inspector-General. The headquarters was small, consisting of a Staff Officer, one Assistant Staff Officer and some clerks. It was separate from the Burma Army, and a civil force under the Defence Department, Government of Burma. Apart from arms and ammunition, the rest of the equipment was provided for by the Superintendent of Police. From 1 April 1937, the officers for the Burma Rifles, the Burma Frontier Force and Burma Military Police were British service officers who completed a tour of four years, extendable to five. All the officers were at the disposal of the General Officer Commanding Burma, who decided to which of the three forces they would be appointed. Officers posted to the B.F.F. and B.M.P. served as Commandants and Assistant Commandants. In addition, there were Governor's Commissioned Officers (G.C.O.s), which were the equivalent of the Viceroy Commissioned Officers in the Indian Army.

The soldiers signed on for three years, but they could serve for up to fifteen years as a Private, and eighteen years if a non-commissioned officer, and twenty years as a G.C.O.. From 1937 onwards, following the separation of Burma from British India, it was increasingly difficult to recruit men from India or Nepal, so Burmese were recruited into the service for the first time.

There were riots and strikes in Rangoon in 1938 which tested the B.F.F. and B.M.P., with law and order eventually being restored. In September 1939, the B.F.F. numbered about 7,800 men, of whom about 2,000 were indigenous to Burma. There was also a Signals Section, and Equitation School, a Remount Depot, a Government Stud Farm, and early in the war, a Motor Transport Unit. In November 1940, a new battalion was formed, called the Kokine Battalion, to guard airfields. The 7th (Burma Police) Battalion, The Burma Rifles, and the 8th (Frontier Force) Battalion, The Burma Rifles, were formed in late 1940, with many Sikh and Punjabi Mussalman soldiers.

There were six battalions, comprising Gurkha and Indian soldiers. They were:

- Southern Shan States Battalion – Taunggyi,
- Northern Shan States Battalion – Lashio,
- Myitkyina Battalion – Myitkyina,
- Bhamo Battalion – Bhamo,
- Chin Hills Battalion – Falam,
- Reserve Battalion – Pyawbwe.

BOWERMAN was appointed to command the Southern Shan States Battalion, which was based in the Burmese town of Taunggyi, which is the capital of the Southern Shan States. The Shan States cover the hills and mountains in eastern central Burma, to the border with Thailand. On 20 October 1941, BOWERMAN was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, but it is not known whether this coincided with his appointment to command this battalion of the Burma Frontier Force.⁶ Each battalion was composed of a Headquarters Wing, a Training Company, and a varying number of Rifle Companies. Each Rifle Company had three platoons and a Company H.Q.. There was one Lewis gun issued per company, and no mortars or anti-tank guns.

The Second World War

The outbreak of the Second World War on 3 September 1939 affected Europe and did not have an immediate or significant effect on India, Burma or Malaya. There was long-standing tension in South-East Asia, in particular, between Japan and China. The two countries had fought a war in 1894 and 1895, in which China was defeated and forced to cede Taiwan to Japan, and to accept the independence of Korea. Korea was occupied by Japan in 1910 and subjected to a brutal regime from the Japanese.

⁶ It is likely that BOWERMAN was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel at the time of his appointment to command the Southern Shan States Battalion, but there is no evidence to confirm this.

The Republic of China came into being in 1912 following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, but unifying the large country with its various warlords was difficult. The Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang, sought to gain control over the north of China in an offensive during 1926 to 1928, and conflict arose in 1928 in the Jinan incident, where the Japanese put a block on further Chinese advances. There was also conflict between the Soviet Union and China in 1929 which raised tensions further, and also exposed the weaknesses of the Chinese National Governments armed forces. The Communist Party of China became stronger and now fought openly against the Nationalist government. This was fuelled by the Shanghai massacre of 1927. Japan invaded Manchuria in September 1931 and gained control of that territory under the name of Manchukuo.

On 7 July 1937, Chinese and Japanese troops exchanged fire at the Marco Polo Bridge, near Beijing, and this soon developed into full-scale conflict. The Japanese captured Beijing and its port city of Tianjin by the end of August 1937. On 12 August 1937, the Chinese Nationalist Army commenced a siege of the Japanese area of the Shanghai International Settlement. They attacked the Japanese enclave, but in doing so also bombed other nations settlements, causing about 3,000 civilian deaths. The Japanese eventually overcame the Chinese Nationalist blockade, and then advanced on the capital of the Nationalist Government, Nanjing. This led to the Nanjing massacre, although the number of Chinese civilians who died is not known, many were executed. The war between China and Japan dragged on, with the United States of America openly supporting the Chinese Nationalist government. Sanctions were imposed on Japan, which it can be argued drove the Japanese government to launch its attack on American, British and Dutch colonies in South-East Asia in December 1941, and thereby making the Second World War truly a global conflict.

On 5 April 1942, BOWERMAN was promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier (and Acting Colonel) upon his appointment as the Chief Liaison Officer to the 6th Chinese Army in Burma. This Chinese Army was one of three divisional strength formations of the Chinese Army deployed into northern Burma following the Japanese invasion in January 1942. The 6th Chinese Army comprised three divisions, the 49th, 55th and 93rd Chinese Divisions and moved into Burma from the Shan States. It is likely that as BOWERMAN was serving in the Southern Shan States at the time, he was simply the right person, in the right location at the right time for this role.

BOWERMAN's role was to liaise between the headquarters of the 6th Chinese Army and the Headquarters, The Army in Burma, commanded by General Sir Harold ALEXANDER. This latter headquarters commanded all the army formations deployed into Burma, including Burma Corps and the Chinese forces deployed into the Burma. The Chinese had been at war with Japan since July 1937, however, in 1942 their army was still poorly equipped and poorly trained. The 6th Chinese Army had only a limited involvement in the Burma campaign of 1942, being forced to withdraw back into China as the Japanese 56th Division advanced towards Lashio. BOWERMAN's role was only required for one month between 5 April and 4 May 1942.

With the outbreak of hostilities in Burma, the Inspector-General was made the commander of the Central Area, a line of communication area covering central Burma, in November 1941. The headquarters for this area was located in Yenangyaung. The Inspector-General, Brigadier (Temporary) Francis Arthur Guy. ROUGHTON, C.B.E., p.s.c., was caught up in the intense fighting in Yenangyaung and central Burma in April 1942, and he was evacuated across the Pin Chaung under the care of the 1st Burma Division. He collapsed due to heat exhaustion, and he was taken to Mandalay, on a hospital launch, where he died on 21 April 1942

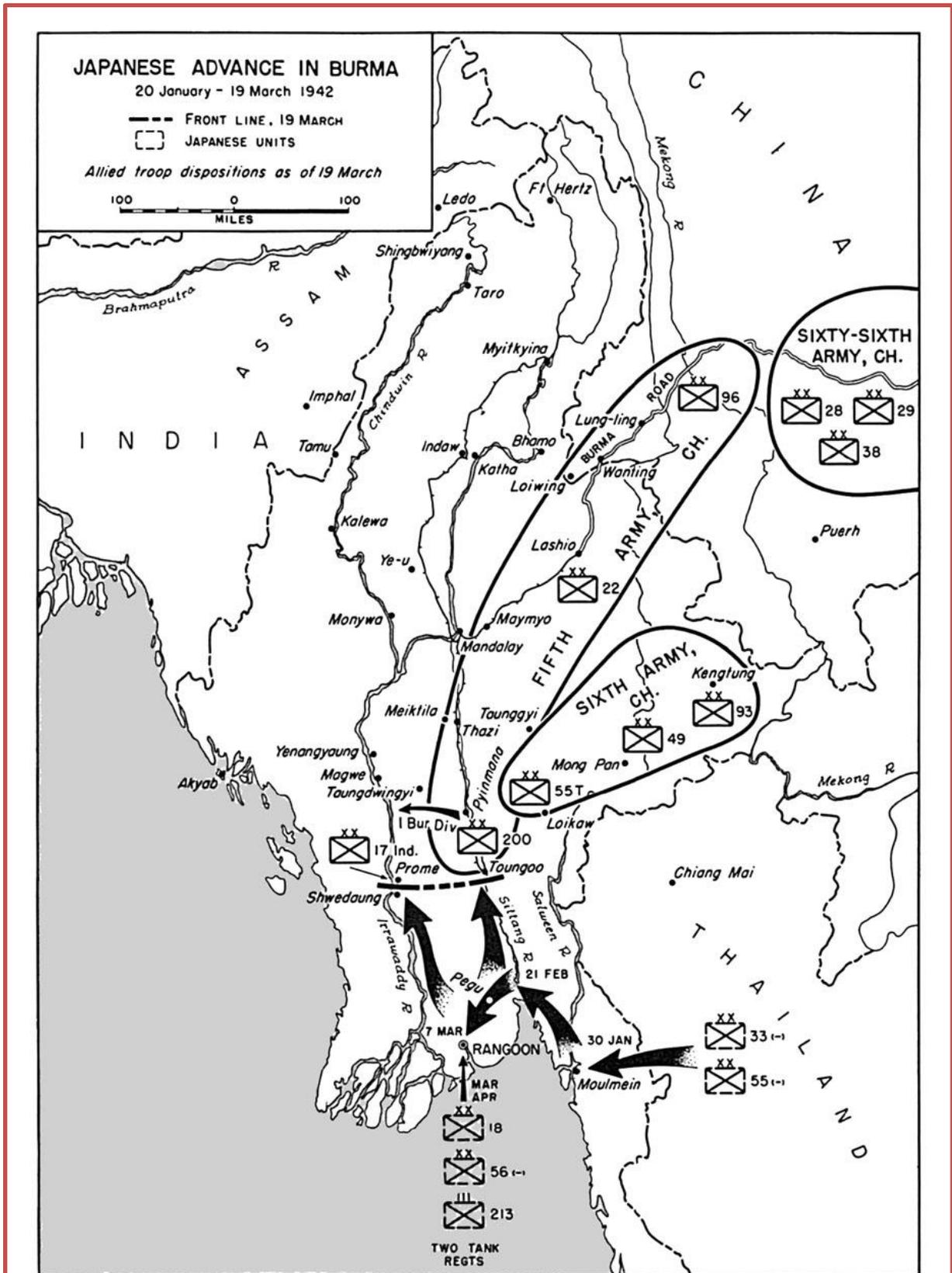
On 4 May 1942, Brigadier BOWERMAN assumed command of the Burma Frontier Force and Burma Military Police with the role of Inspector-General to replace Brigadier ROUGHTON. He was in Myitkyina when he assumed command, and he was accompanied by the senior Staff Officer, Burma Frontier Force, Major (Temporary Lieutenant Colonel) H.M. Day, and they escaped Burma and reached India by the Hukawng Valley route. On their arrival in Assam, they were immediately flown to G.H.Q. India in Delhi, to obtain orders as to the future of the Frontier Force and Military Police.

The B.M.P. had been placed under the control of the Inspector-General, B.F.F. in April 1942. Orders were received that all members of both Forces were to be sent to Hoshiarpur, Punjab, where a Reception Depot was to be formed. From 15 June 1942, drafts began arriving at Hoshiarpur where a Force Headquarters and Headquarters of each Battalion were opened. As they arrived the men were registered, given advances of pay, replacement clothing and sent to their homes on war leave. During the period June to December 1942 approximately 10,000 all ranks passed through Hoshiarpur. On return from leave, the men were sorted out and medically graded. Those found suitable for further service were eventually drafted to Battalions of the Burma Regiment which was formed from B.F.F. and B.M.P. personnel on 1 October 1942.

Brigadier BOWERMAN wrote to Captain John BRAUND, who had worked in Burma before the war, and had become an officer in the Burma Frontier Force, as BRAUND had decided to remain in Burma in the Haka Hills, where he was now commanding a company of Levies. BOWERMAN said in his letter to BRAUND:

I was very glad to hear that you have gone back into the Hills with a party of men to do as much as possible to harass the Jap, as it showed spirit which I am afraid has often been lacking during the show in Burma. Most people's only desire was to get out of the country as quickly as possible and they were headed for India, few if any stopped unless they were compelled to do so. I shall be delighted to hear of your exploits whenever you have time to put them in a report.

This letter was very warmly received by its recipient, and it provides an indication of BOWERMAN's attitude towards the loss of Burma, and his consideration towards those men under his command.



Map 2 – The initial Japanese advance into Burma, showing the location of the 6th Chinese Army.

Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, the Burma Army had one infantry regiment that recruited within the country. Entitled The Burma Rifles, it had separated from the Indian Army establishment in April 1937. At the time of the Japanese invasion in early 1942, the regiment had grown to some ten battalions. The battalions of the regiment suffered heavily in the retreat from Burma in May 1942, with several fading away due to desertions and illness. Despite having limited effect overall on the campaign, some of the battalions had fought well.

The Headquarters of the Army in Burma closed on 20 May 1942, but was reconstituted as Headquarters of Burma Army on 27 May 1942. The new General Officer Commanding was Major General H. H. RICH, who took up his appointment on 9 September 1942. The headquarters were located at Simla. The new Burma Regiment commenced forming on 1 October 1942, and on the same date two new brigade headquarters were raised. Considerable difficulty was experienced during this period of reorganisation owing to very few senior British Officers being present, to the large amount of sickness among both officers and men and to the difficulty in obtaining arms and equipment with which to begin training. Initially six infantry battalions were raised, with a mounted infantry and a training battalion also planned, all organised into two administrative brigades. Each was intended to command three infantry battalions of the Burma Regiment, together with one garrison battalion. BOWERMAN was appointed as the commanding officer of the 2nd Burma Brigade, which was backdated to 5 May 1942, and he retained his rank of Acting Brigadier. He was promoted to the rank of Temporary Brigadier six months later on 5 October.

Various plans for the deployment of the brigades and units of the Burma Regiment were discussed, with the main use of the brigade being seen as lines of communication sub-areas in Burma as that country was liberated. In June 1943, it was agreed that all the units of the Burma Army would be brought under control of the G.H.Q. India, pending the liberation of Burma and restoration of a government in the country. The Headquarters Burma Army was disbanded by 1 November 1943; with the 2nd Burma Brigade disbanding on the same date.

In 1943, the Northern Combat Area Command (N.C.A.C.) was formed under the command of the American Lieutenant General Joseph STILWELL. On 1 February 1944, BOWERMAN assumed command of the Kachin Levies and other troops in the Fort Hertz Area near Myitkyina under the N.C.A.C.. As an area commander, BOWERMAN retained his rank of Temporary Brigadier. On 16 May 1944, Brigadier BOWERMAN was flown out of Fort Hertz suffering from Typhus. He was sent to India for treatment and recuperation, and eventually returned to Northern Burma. The role changed from being an operational command to restoration of civil affairs in the Kachin state. Due to this, BOWERMAN's command transferred to the 505 District under 12th Army on 16 May 1945. BOWERMAN was now attached to the Civil Affairs Staff (Burma), but continued to hold the rank of Temporary Brigadier.

His continued successful work in the north-east of Burma was recognised. On 1 September 1945, a citation for the award of the Commander of the Order of the British Empire was completed by Brigadier DONNISON, the Deputy Director of Civil Affairs at Headquarters, 505 District in Burma.

The citation read:

During the period under review, 16 May – 15 Aug, this officer performed consistently good work in maintaining liaison with NCAC and in connection with the restoration of civil administration in the north-eastern areas of Burma.

He also displayed tact and initiative of high order, and considerable personal courage in the handling of problems arising along the Sino-Burmese frontier. This officer has performed consistently good work during many preceding periods of review.

Major General SNELLING, the General Officer Commanding 505 District endorsed this recommendation on 6 September, followed on 18 September 1945 by Lieutenant General Montagu STOPFORD, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of 12th Army. The award of the C.B.E. was published in the London Gazette on 6 June 1946. In addition, he was Mentioned in Dispatches for his services in Burma on 19 September 1946 following his retirement.

Retirement and Family Life

Brigadier BOWERMAN retired from the Indian Army on 14 July 1946 with the Honorary rank of Brigadier, his substantive rank being Lieutenant Colonel. He married Mary Monica Faed McMILLAN on 28 December 1931, in Rangoon, Burma, when he was aged thirty-eight years. Mary had been born on 8 February 1899, so was aged thirty-two years when she married. They had one daughter together. John BOWERMAN died on 18 December 1983 at the age of ninety years. At the time of his death, he was living at 'Tanglewood', Abberton Field, Hassocks Road, Hurstpierpoint, Sussex. His wife died on 29 August 1989, and at the time of her death, she was living at 'Silverdale', Silverdale Road, Burgess Hill, West Sussex.

Appendix 'A'

Report on the B.F.F. 1939-1942

By Brig J. F. Bowerman

Notes on the Burma Frontier Force 1939 to 1942

FOREWARD

Prior to the war with Japan the Burma Frontier Force and Burma Military Police had earned a well-deserved reputation for the part they had frequently played in settling internal disorders in Burma as well as watch and ward duties on the Burma Frontier. Their work in the past has been completely forgotten and their credit has sunk considerably through no great fault of the men themselves. If the two Forces are to be of real use again considerable changes will be necessary in their organization, but another great factor in restoring their morale must be an understanding of the difficulties they have had to contend with during the past two years.

2. Position prior to the outbreak of war with Germany

(i) Strength. In September 1939 there were six battalions in the Burma Frontier Force and three in the Military Police; the B.F.F. Battalions being Myitkyina, Bhamo, Northern Shan States, Southern Shan States, Chin Hills and Reserve; the Military Police units Mandalay, 1st Rangoon and 2nd Rangoon.

(ii) Terms of service and recruitment. Men joining both Forces signed on for three years in the first instance, but this was extendable and large numbers were permitted to serve until they had qualified for pension, which in the case of sepoys, began at fifteen years, N.C.Os eighteen years, G.C.Os twenty years. The result of this system was that the average age was considerably higher than in regular units.

In 1937 the separation of Burma from India brought changes in the system of recruitment which were not to the advantage of Burma. Up to 1937, Gurkhas had been enlisted through the Army, the type obtained being chiefly from Eastern Nepal, and below average of that in Gurkha units and the Assam Rifles. All Sikhs were Jats, P.Ms [Punjabi Mussalman (Muslims)] came mainly from the trans-Jhelum areas, both these classes comparing favourably with enlistments on regular units. From 1937 the quota of Gurkhas was cut down considerably by India, which resulted in a big increase in the recruitment of a poorer type born and bred in Burma. The enlistment of Jat Sikhs was also greatly restricted and other classes insisted on, while P.Ms, although not cut down, had to be enlisted from fresh districts in the Cis-Jhelum area. This resulted in a falling off in the general standard of recruits in the two Forces.

(iii) Organization. Each Bn. had a H.Q. wing, Training Coy, and a varying number of Rifles Companies. Companies consisted of three platoons and a Company H.Q. platoon, but automatic weapons were restricted to one Lewis gun per company, and there were no mortars in the Force.

British officers were few in number, each battalion having a commandant with one or two Assistant Commandants at H.Q.; Assistant Commandants were also allotted to certain selected outposts and appointments.

(iv) Duties. The duties of the B.F.F. were “watch and ward” along the frontier, provision of escorts and guards to Civil Departments, and reinforcing the Burma Military Police (B.M.P.) for internal security duties. The B.M.P. were to all intents and purposes armed civil police and had detachments at the Headquarters of all Districts in Burma proper which were always under the command of Civil Police officers.

At the time of the outbreak of war there were large numbers of the Frontier Force in Rangoon which had been there since an outbreak of riots and strikes in 1938. The result was that it had been impossible in many cases for battalions to carry out normal reliefs of outposts with the result that the efficiency of the Force had suffered considerably.

3. Interim period between outbreak of war with Germany and outbreak of war with Japan.

(i) Formation of Kokine Bn. At the end of 1939 a number of aerodromes were under construction in Burma and detachments had to be found for their protection. These were at first found from different battalions in the Force, but in 1940, the Kokine Bn was formed to carry out these specialised duties.

(ii) Formation of 7th and 8th Burif. At the end of 1940, the 8th Bn. The Burma Rifles was formed from British officers of the B.F.F., and specially selected Sikhs and P.Ms who had volunteered for active service anywhere. Similarly, the B.M.P. did their share by producing a large number of men for the newly raised 7th Bn. The Burma Rifles.

(iii) Formation of Frontier Forces (F.Fs). In 1941 it was decided to raise units from within the Force to carry out specific tasks on the frontier. These units were formed from columns provided by different battalion, each of which was to be capable of functioning independently. The role of these units was that of harassing and delaying the advance of an enemy, until such time as he could be engaged by the regular troops, who would be brought up from the rear. Columns were placed under young officers, most of whom were straight from cadet training units, and the units were commanded by selected senior Assistant Commandants with inadequate H.Q. staffs which included only one British officer who tried to combine the duties of Adjutant and Quarter-Master – an impossible task under service conditions. Normal F.F. fire power was increased by allotting one light machine gun per platoon, five Thompson sub machine guns, and one mortar per column, but it was still far below that of regular units or of the enemy. To add to the difficulties the units did not get their new weapons until after war with Japan had broken out, and they were called upon to use them in action before they had had time to learn to handle them efficiently.

(iv) Effect of raising new units. The formation of these new battalions and F.Fs caused a very considerable lowering of efficiency in battalions as all regular Assistant Commandants were posted to them as were the best of the G.C.Os, N.C.Os and men in the Force.

The result was that Battalion H.Qs found themselves reduced to the status of depots, with many of the men unfit or re-enlisted pensioners, and usually one brand new Assistant Commandant and a Commandant to supervise the training of recruits and H.Q. duties.

4. Effect of the war with Japan.

(i) Control of the Force. Shortly before the end of 1941, F.F. units in the Southern Shan States and Tenasserim were placed under operational control of the Army, and they became subject to the Burma Army Act. Army scales of rations and clothing were sanctioned for them, but for all other purposes they remained under I.G.B.F.F. [Inspector General, Burma Frontier Force]. At a later date, the whole of the Force was put under the G.O.C. for operational purposes. The varieties of systems in different areas was a decided disadvantage and it would have been infinitely better if the whole Force had been placed under the Army immediately the war broke out with Japan. The position in the B.M.P. was different and they continued as before until April [1942], they were then put under the G.O.C. for operations and merged into the B.F.F. for other purposes. The I.G.B.F.F., who in peace time was head of the Force, was appointed to the charge of Central Area during January 1942. Withdrawals in Lower Burma increased the importance of this office, and it soon became almost impossible for one officer to carry out the dual role. The transfer of F.F.H.Q. to Myitkyina, and the retention of Central Area H.Q. in Yenangyaung completely divorced the I.G. from the Frontier Force, and it was very obvious that a separate officer was required to supervise its administration. Nothing was done to rectify this, and HQs of Battalions found it impossible to get decisions on many important problems with which they were confronted, and were left to carry on to the best of their ability often completely out of touch with what was going on in Burma itself.

(ii) Effect on Battalions.

(a) Kokine Bn. This Bn was charged with the protection of landing grounds and was the first one to come into contact with the Japanese. The garrison at Victoria Point was very soon withdrawn as it was in a completely isolated position. Garrisons at Mergui, Tavoy and Moulmein were in turn forced to leave their posts as the Japanese advanced northwards through Tenasserim. Some of these men did well, others badly, but apart from the morale in Tenasserim being of an all-round low level, the departure of the unarmed R.A.F. staffs from threatened landing grounds unquestionably had a demoralising effect on troops who had no British Officers commanding them. The garrisons of the landing grounds for the most part found their way back to the HQ of their battalion in Rangoon, but numbers of the indigenous classes deserted to their homes.

After Tenasserim had been occupied by the Japs, the Kokine Bn HQ remained at Rangoon carrying out duties in the city until evacuation was decided on, the battalion then left for India by sea and eventually ended up in Assam where it is at present engaged in Line of Communication duties.

(b) Southern Shan States Bn. This battalion had five of its active Companies in F.Fs and the two remaining ones on landing grounds at Heho and Namsang. Guards and escort duties at HQ were carried out by a garrison coy of ex-service men, recruited from local pensioners plus details left behind, and the training coy also functioned at HQ in Taunggyi.

From the beginning of February [1942] there was only one officer present at HQ of the bn, this being an ABRO [Army in Burma Reserve of Officers] subaltern with less than one year's service who spoke practically no Hindustani or Burmese. At the end of April, Taunggyi was evacuated. The garrison coy was disbanded and HQ of the battalion consisting of about 150 IORs and 100 recruits marched out through Lawksawk picking up the Heho landing ground detachment on the way. The party reached the Hsipaw – Maymyo road to find the Japs had already pushed up to Lashio along it. They then marched over the hills through Mogok towards Myitkyina where F.F.H.Q. were thought to be. On arrival at Katha, it was found that the Japs had already been there and gone up to Bhamo by river on the previous day. As there were considerable difficulties in getting food and a large body with recruits would draw attention, it was decided to divide the formation into smaller groups under GCOs and to send these by different paths to the Hukawng Valley, and on to India. It is estimated that the men marched at least 800 miles before they reached their destination with no supply arrangements made for the major part of the journey.

(c) Northern Shan States Bn. This battalion found a company for the landing ground at Lashio and had garrisons in the Wa States, and outposts at Kutkai and Kyuhkok. There were also details at Lashio as well as recruits. The command of the battalion had changed three times in six months, and on April 25, the Commandant who had been in charge for less than a month had one inexperienced Assistant Commandant with him who was in a very indifferent state of health and had to be evacuated to Myitkyina on 1 May. The rapid Japanese advance from Loilem had caught Lashio unprepared for evacuation. A limited amount of Motor Transport was available. Troops belonging to S.S.S. Area H.Q. and evacuees were passing through from Taunggyi and Maymyo while large quantities of M.T. from the 5th Chinese Army were hurrying through on their way back to China. Positions were taken up by the battalion to cover the southern approach to Lashio and a company was posted north of the town to cover any withdrawal from Lashio and to prevent the town from being cut off.

During 25 April, Japanese recce planes attacked the aerodrome and F.F. lines on two occasions and C.E.F.H.Q. [Chinese Expeditionary Force H.Q.] decided to withdraw towards China, preparation being made by the Chinese to blow the bridges north of Lashio. The R.A.F. and supply units also carried out the destruction of stores and equipment. In the evening firing broke out at several points south of Lashio and a considerable number of men were unable to stand the strain and deserted from their posts making northwards. The B.C. marched out with the balance at dark and moved northwards, collecting stragglers as far as possible until the Shweli bridge was reached. Orders were given to him to delay the enemy as far as possible at this bridge, and to destroy it before retiring. Both he and the majority of men with him were cut off at the bridge and stragglers with no B.O. to take charge of them pushed northwards until they reached Assam. Indigenous garrisons stationed in the Wa States remained in Burma, but the remainder, with the Assistant Commandant in charge, made their way to India with extreme difficulty.

(d) Bhamo Bn. Bhamo Bn HQ consisted merely of a depot with a staff for training all Kachin recruits for the Force. The battalion was commanded by an officer who had been recalled for duty from pension in 1939, and who was unfit for active service. With him were two Assistant Commandants who had been placed on the S.U.L. [Supernumerary Unemployed List] for some years and then recalled for duty. One of these was unable to march. On 2 May, the last evacuation ship to leave Bhamo was sent down. The arrival of evacuees and stragglers with consequent rumours and stories caused a number of desertions in the battalion, some of which were Indian, but most from indigenous classes who wanted to go to their homes. On the morning of 3 May, an officer in a lorry reached Bhamo and reported that he had been fired at and chased by Jap M.T. which had crossed the Shweli bridge and the Japs might be in Bhamo at any minute. As far as can be ascertained the Commandant issued orders that all ranks were to get to India in small groups in the best possible way they could. Since then he and his senior Assistant Commandant have not been heard of. The men themselves moved off in small detachments under GCOs and NCOs in different directions, some to the railway at Mogaung, others to Myitkyina.

(e) Myitkyina Bn. Myitkyina Battalion had been turned into a holding battalion for the Frontier Force. It contained men from all battalions of the Force, and part of the Rangoon Bn which had marched 500 miles to Meiktila fighting a considerable part of the way joined it shortly before the final evacuation came. Nearly all the Indian families in the Frontier Force, totalling about 2,000 women and children with accompanying escorts had also been collected, and at the end of April, it had been found almost impossible to get them off as there was no transport of any description available for them. At the beginning of May, the families took matters into their own hands and began to move off, some to neighbouring Gurkha villages, but the majority on foot to Assam. On 4 May, the battalion had a Commandant and one Assistant Commandant plus two officers of the Rangoon Bn who were in charge of their own men; in addition the F.F. W/T group arrived with its own British Officers and another brand new Assistant Commandant reported for duty on 2 May. The state of affairs in Myitkyina itself was chaotic, large numbers of civilians had arrived hoping to fly away. Hospital cases for air evacuation were also there. Stragglers of the Frontier Force, M.P. and most of the regular and B.A.F. units in Burma were passing through the town while many fit civilians were also arriving to walk to India. The Myitkyina Bn had placed two detachments on the east bank of the Irrawaddy and had posts at Sadon, Sumprabum and Putao. From Myitkyina itself, desertions were taking place amongst locally enlisted Gurkhas, and others and these were impossible to check. A collecting post was established north of the town, but it did not function well. On 6 May heavy air raids took place on the aerodrome and part of the town and the place evacuated the following day. The W/T group marched out under its own officers and the balance of Bn HQ under the Commandant acted as a covering force to evacuees using the Sumprabum road. En-route to Sumprabum, the Commandant broke a leg and had to be carried to Putao from where he was evacuated by plane. The detachment of Kachins at Sumprabum was placed under the O.C. Levies, but the sight of masses of people moving to India proved too much for the men, and they decided to go to their homes. The post at Sadon made its own way to India, the detachment at PUTAO was flown out with the Commandant.

(f) Reserve Bn. This, as its name implies, was the reserve to the Force but it also contained the W/T and M.T. centres as well as the Government Stud Farm and Remount Depot. At the end of 1941, it had few reserves, but was mainly engaged in training M.T. drivers for the Army. The H.Q. of the Bn. was moved to Shwebo in February, and guards and escorts were found for a variety of Line of Communication duties. Many of them could not be contacted when the battalion marched out to India in April, most of them, however, got out by a variety of routes under their own NCOs.

(g) Chin Hills Bn. Used throughout the Chin Hills and is still functioning there.

(h) B.M.P. The Rangoon Battalions found garrisons at Headquarters of Districts along the coastline from Victoria Point to Akyab, and in Burma up to a line drawn slightly north of Toungoo and Prome. The H.Q. of the battalions was in Rangoon, and from December to February, the men went through a period of considerable strain due to the constant alerts which forced them to take cover in trenches, and being called upon to assist in maintaining order in the city. The posts in the Tenasserim Area withdrew as the Japanese advanced and most of the men came in to the Headquarters in Rangoon. The whole of the Military Police in Rangoon were ordered to march to Prome at the time the city was evacuated and, although only in reality armed Police, and very indifferently armed at that, combined with regular units on a number of occasions in beating off Japanese attacks. At Prome, a very active part was taken in the defence of the town and the whole force of M.P. eventually found itself alone with the Japanese on three sides. The M.P. escaped northwards and once more joined up with the retreat to the north. At Allammye the M.P. split up into two parts. Approximately half under the Commandant of the 1 Rangoon Bn remained with 17 Division, and eventually withdrew up the Chindwin River, from where it marched to India. The other part under B.C., 2 Rangoon Battalion marched to Meiktila and went by lorry and train to Myitkyina. Ten days after its arrival there the march to India began. The fate of all the posts in the Delta and Arakan areas is not known, as owing to the breakdown of the P.& T. as well as steamer services, it was never possible to get any news through to them. Some of the men joined at Prome, others got away over the Arakan Yomas to the coast from where some reached India by sea. Nothing, however, has been heard of many of the men in these Districts. The two Rangoon Bns experienced great difficulty over transport and supplies as to begin with they were no one's responsibility.

(i) Mandalay Bn. This battalion had its H.Q. at Mandalay and posts stretching from Thayetmyo to Katha. The task of the controlling these from H.Q. under active service conditions was therefore quite impossible. a H.Q. remained at Mandalay and saw the town gradually destroyed by bombing attacks. During these raids assistance of all descriptions had to be given and law and order maintained. Escorts and guards at different points were also provided, and when the time for withdrawal came, numbers of these were lost and had to find their way out as best they could. Many of the Burmans in the battalion deserted, but some remained faithful to their posts until the bn marched to India.

(j) F.Fs. At the commencement of the war with Japan there were five F.Fs. F.Fs. 1 to 4 were approximately the same strength as regular units. F.F. 5 had only one company. F.F. 2 was stationed in Mergui and Tavoy where it had a definite role to perform. The others had their own particular tasks on the Siamese border in the Southern Shan States for which they were admirably fitted. F.Fs 1, 3, 4 and 5 remained on the Siam frontier up to mid-February, but were not used as much as they might have been. F.Fs 4 and 5 had successful brushes with Thai troops and inflicted considerable casualties on them with little loss to themselves. The arrival of Chinese troops in the Shan States in February brought about the transfer of all British troops into Burma and the F.Fs moved down with them. In Burma itself they were used in a variety of ways, sometimes for the protection of aerodromes, and on many other occasions in the role of regular troops, but in the latter they were severely handicapped by the shortage of British Officers and their lack of automatic weapons and mortars. Many of these F.Fs did exceedingly good work in March during the withdrawal and suffered considerable casualties in officers. During the very last stages of the operations in Burma it was proposed to reduce the size of all these F.Fs to two columns each as the larger ones were unwieldy; this proposal was only carried into effect in one or two cases.

5. Conclusions.

(i) It appears reasonable to conclude that much of the B.F.F. was greatly misused in Burma.

In the first instance when 8th Bn. The Burma Rifles was formed it was not possible to raise additional regular battalions because the Force had not the officers to go with them and there was a general shortage of British Officers throughout Burma. The decision to raise F.Fs with only a small establishment of automatic weapons and mortars was the best that could be made under the circumstances as weapons too were as scarce in Burma as British Officers. The unsound point in forming these units was that they should function only in certain areas and should be equipped for their own particular tasks. This greatly restricted their general usefulness and complications were caused by the scales of equipment which were different from those in the Army as well as varying among the F.Fs themselves.

Although the F.Fs had absorbed a very large proportion of the fit men in the Frontier Force, many of them had been hurriedly thrown together and had received very little training as units. The training they had received, and their deficiencies in armament as well as British Officers, had not fitted them for use as front line or shock troops, but on many occasions they found themselves used in this capacity against an enemy far better equipped and armed than themselves. The fact too that they belonged to a different Force and were not in an ordinary Army establishment increased their difficulties. In spite of all these handicaps there were many occasions on which these F.Fs did excellent work, and most of the British Officers who were with them, overcame language difficulties and lack of training in an amazing way.

(ii) In the Headquarters of several battalions there was a great deal of disorganization when the retreat to Myitkyina and from there to India took place. This was mainly due to the absence of British Officers, and to the fact that Battalion H.Qs contained practically no organized bodies of fighting troops with reasonable equipment, but were made up of a very large proportion of unfit men who had either been used continually on guard or escort duties or were employed as clerks, pioneers and on other sedentary duties.

(iii) A factor which had a very considerable effect on the morale of the men in the B.F.F. was the large number of families still left in Burma at the end of April. Families in Rangoon were got away by sea and those of two other battalions were moved out by the Tamu route. Those from Taunggyi, Lashio and Bhamo were mostly moved to Myitkyina and there were at least 1,200 there at the end of April. Many of the men on service had no idea where their families had gone, numbers of those who remained at different Bn H.Qs went off to ensure that their families got away safely. It was therefore inevitable that men in this category could not give of their best on service. Most of the families have made their way without any transport to India, many of them suffering casualties and severe hardships on the way. There are large numbers of men now in India who have not heard of their wives, and many wives who have lost their husbands.

(iv) On arrival in India practically all the men were in a very indifferent state of health and numbers of them were suffering from mental strain caused by the privations they had undergone. Many of them had covered enormous distances having to live as best they could on the way, and it was a common occurrence to find parties who had had nothing to eat for several days. In addition, all ranks had lost the whole of their personal belongings, large numbers had received no pay for some time, and had lost savings invested in the Post Offices in Burma, all too had lost a good deal of their self-respect due to the state of the only uniform they had in their possession.

These different factors were often not fully realized by those who had dealings with the men on their arrival in India. Since reaching Hoshiarpur the behaviour of all ranks has been excellent and it is hoped that they will return from leave very much fitter than when they left for their homes. The first necessity for the men on return from leave is to get fitted out with adequate clothing and equipment, and their accounts which are very confused must be settled. It will then be possible to get all ranks fit and hard and trained as useful members of the Burma Army.

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