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A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

MAJOR GENERAL G. W. SYMES

A concise biography of Major General George William SYMES, C.B., M.C.*, an officer in the British Army between 1915 and 1949. During the Second World War, he commanded a Division in the Middle East, and later he was instrumental in the training of Special Force (The Chindits)
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A Concise Biography of Major General G. W. SYMES

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Major General George William SYMES, C.B., M.C.*, *p.s.c.*



Major General George William SYMES, C.B., M.C.*, *p.s.c.* was an officer in the British Army who served in the Great War and Second World War. During the Great War he was awarded two gallantry medals serving in France, Belgium and Italy. During the Second World War, he served as a brigade commander in the United Kingdom, divisional commander in India and district commander in Burma without any significant distinction through unfortunate circumstances.

His greatest achievement is one rarely acknowledged, welding the 3rd Indian Division (Special Force), otherwise known as the Chindits, into an efficient and effective fighting force in just four months. He was never destined to command any aspect of Special Force in the forthcoming Operation 'Thursday', as he was effectively sacked and sent back to the U.K.. Ironically, he returned to South-East Asia in 1944 as a District Commander.

Early Life

George William SYMES was born at Minterne Magna, Dorset, on 12 January 1896. He was the eldest son of George and Eliza SYMES, his father being a Sergeant Major in the Royal Artillery. He was educated at Bridport Secondary School in Dorset. After leaving school, with the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, SYMES enlisted in the British Army.

The First World War

Now aged nineteen years of age, he was granted a war service commission in the Durham Light Infantry as a Second Lieutenant on 14 June 1915. He was seconded to the Machine Gun Corps on 22 February 1916, and was sent to France and Belgium, where he arrived on 2 March 1916. SYMES was awarded the Military Cross in early 1916 for capturing twenty German soldiers in a communications trench by himself. The citation appeared in the Edinburgh Gazette on 27 November 1916, and it stated:

Temp. 2nd Lt. George William Symes, M.Gun Corps.

For conspicuous gallantry in action. He advanced along a communication trench and single-handedly captured 20 of the enemy. Later, he fought his guns with great courage and skill, and carried out a valuable reconnaissance.

He was promoted to the rank of Temporary Lieutenant on the 1 November 1916. On 21 June 1917, SYMES was granted a regular commission in the York and Lancaster Regiment in the rank of Second Lieutenant, with the service number of 9517. His seniority on the Army List dated from 14 March 1916. He was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant on 1 July 1917 (his seniority dating from 1 January 1917). On 12 November 1917, SYMES travelled from France to Italy to see out the rest of the war on the Italian Front. He remained seconded to the Machine Gun Corps, being awarded a Bar to the Military Cross on 1 January 1918. On 3 April 1918, he was promoted to the rank of Acting Captain whilst second-in-command of a company in the Machine Gun Corps. Then, on 5 July 1918, he was appointed as an Adjutant in the Machine Gun Corps, retaining the rank of Acting Captain.

His next appointment came on 8 November 1918 when he left the role as Adjutant and was promoted Acting Major whilst commanding a company in the Machine Gun Corps. SYMES relinquished the rank of Acting Major on 1 April 1919, and he reverted to his substantive rank of Lieutenant.

Between the Wars

SYMES was restored to the establishment on 1 April 1921 and promoted to the rank of Captain on 25 September 1923. His promotion was ante-dated to 1 January 1923 in the London Gazette dated 16 November of that year. SYMES was appointed as an Adjutant on 7 December 1926, a post he held until 6 December 1929.

On 21 January 1931, SYMES was seconded as a student to the Staff College, Camberley. His promotion to the rank of Brevet Major was effective from 1 January 1932. On the successful completion of the Staff Course, SYMES was appointed a General Staff Officer (Class CC) at the School of Artillery on 15 January 1933.

On 1 November 1934, he transferred from the School of Artillery to become the Brigade Major, 14th Infantry Brigade. This brigade was based at Catterick, but it was deployed to Palestine in 1936. This was due to the increased violence between the Arab and Jewish communities, and the Brigade was deployed on internal security duties. SYMES relinquished role as Brigade Major on 15 January 1937.

On 6 September 1937, Brevet Major SYMES was seconded for service on the staff in India as a General Staff Officer, 2nd Grade. He served in the Bombay District as the senior staff officer in the District, an equivalent formation to an infantry Brigade. He was promoted to the rank of Major on 1 August 1938 under the reforms of the Army announced by Mr HORE-BELISHA, the Minister of War, which reduced the ages of retirement of Army officers, thereby creating a large number of vacancies that were filled on that Bank Holiday Monday. SYMES was promoted to the rank of Brevet Lieutenant Colonel on 1 January 1939.

The Second World War

SYMES left India on 6 April 1940 and returned to the United Kingdom. On 13 April 1940, he was promoted to the rank of Acting Lieutenant Colonel and appointed a General Staff Officer, 1st Grade. After three months in the acting rank, the promotion was made Temporary.

On 30 November 1940, and now forty-four years of age, SYMES was promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier and Acting Colonel, and he assumed command of the 8th Infantry Brigade.¹ This brigade was part of the 3rd Infantry Division, and it was based in the United Kingdom, having been evacuated from Dunkirk earlier that year. Stationed in Southern England, the brigade deployed on counter invasion roles. SYMES remained in this role until 27 June 1941, when he transferred to become the Brigadier General Staff, Eastern Command. This appointment was that of the senior staff officer in the Command, and as such it was a busy and demanding role.

SYMES was promoted to the rank of Temporary Brigadier, (and Temporary Colonel and War Substantive Lieutenant Colonel on 30 May 1941, and to the substantive rank of Colonel on 1 January 1942. Shortly afterwards, on 11 February 1942, SYMES was promoted to the rank of Acting Major General and, on 18 February, he assumed command of the 70th Infantry Division. The history of this formation dates back to 1938 and the creation of the 7th Infantry Division in Palestine. In 1939, this division was redesignated the 6th Infantry Division, and on 10 October 1941, it became the 70th Infantry Division. SYMES replaced Major General R. MacK. SCOBIE, who had commanded the division during the siege of Tobruk, and who was transferring to become the Deputy Adjutant-General of Middle East Command. When SYMES assumed command, the division was stationed in Syria. Within a couple of days of taking command, SYMES had to manage the division's move from Syria, through Egypt, to embark for India.

¹ Joslen – 'Orders of Battle Second World War' gives the date of SYMES assuming command of the brigade as 27 November 1940. This date is taken from the Army List.

The division arrived in India on 10 March 1942 and was stationed within Eastern Army's area. On 11 February 1943, after the usual twelve months in the acting rank, SYMES was promoted to the rank of Temporary Major General.

3rd Indian Division (Special Force)

In 1943, plans were developed for the deployment of a Long-Range Penetration (L.R.P.) formation into Burma to attack and disrupt the Japanese lines of communication. These plans translated into the creation of Special Force, under the command of Major General Orde WINGATE. The plan was for a force of six brigades to form Special Force, but only two long range penetration brigades then existed. WINGATE insisted that a high proportion of the units had to be British, so the Chiefs of Staff directed the Commander-in-Chief in India to have the 70th Infantry Division subsumed into Special Force. The division moved down into the Southern Army, where on 6 September 1943, it started reorganising for the L.R.P. role. Major General SYMES formally handed over command of the units in his division to Major General WINGATE on 23 October 1943, and he became the Deputy General Officer Commanding of Special Force. The 70th Infantry Division officially disbanded with effect from 24 November 1943.

As it turned out, it was indeed fortunate for Major General WINGATE that with the 70th Infantry Division he gained an experienced and competent divisional headquarters staff. Most of these men were retained within the Headquarters Special Force to provide continuity with units, but with some additional personnel so that the headquarters resembled that of a small corps headquarters rather than a divisional one. The divisional command team included Brigadier Derek TULLOCH as Brigadier General Staff and Brigadier Neville MARKS as the Deputy Adjutant and Quarter-Master-General (D.A.Q.M.G.) of Special Force. TULLOCH had known WINGATE since their days together at Woolwich, with MARKS being a well-respected officer from the 3rd Gurkha Rifles. However, it was the relationship between SYMES and WINGATE that proved to be key in the development of Special Force into an efficient fighting formation in such a short time.

SYMES had to adapt to the role of Deputy Commander of Special Force, changing from being the General Officer Commanding to that of a deputy working to a charismatic and idiosyncratic commander who led through the force of his personality. Most of the staff of Special Force who had been previously members of staff of the 70th Infantry Division still had loyalty to Major General SYMES. Many deferred to the experienced SYMES as opposed to Brigadier TULLOCH, who was newly promoted and inexperienced in a staff role. Once the staff saw that SYMES was himself working with WINGATE, and embracing his radical philosophy of warfare, they did the same. In fact, SYMES started the work in preparing the new Special Force, also known as the 3rd Indian Division, before WINGATE returned to India after attending the Quebec Conference.

In their first meeting, WINGATE asked SYMES if he had any faith in his methods of long-range penetration, to which SYMES replied bluntly, *"If I hadn't, I wouldn't be meeting you today"*.² SYMES was not under illusion about WINGATE's personality, describing him as *"fanatical, ruthless, supremely self-confident, a master of duplicity, arrogant, argumentative, untidy, unorthodox,"* going on to add that the magnitude of his plan in conception and detail was amazing.³ SYMES realised that WINGATE was a 'doer' or activist. What he lacked was administrative and organisational knowledge, and this is what SYMES provided in copious amounts.

SYMES learnt to handle WINGATE's obvious impatience and ill-temper, and often ended up sorting out problems WINGATE had created. He found that he got on well with Neville MARKS, the D.A. & Q.M.G. and chief administrative officer, who was clever, astute, and professional. He did not get on so well with Brigadier TULLOCH, who was a close confidant of WINGATE and had been selected by him to be his chief of staff. However, he and TULLOCH managed to work together, with SYMES concentrating on the organisation and training of Special Force (the latter being the responsibility of Colonel H. T. ALEXANDER), whilst TULLOCH deal with the overall operational planning issues.

The scale of what the Headquarters of Special Force achieved between November 1943 and March 1944 was considerable. All the units brought together in the six-brigade formation had to be trained and equipped for their new role. Liaison with the U.S. and Royal Air Force was essential to devise the loading tables and schedules necessary to get the troops into Burma and behind the Japanese lines. When WINGATE was ill with typhoid fever, it was SYMES who assumed command and ensured the momentum was maintained.

WINGATE launched Operation 'Thursday' which saw four of the brigades flown into central Burma beginning on 11 March; with one walking in Burma to reach Indaw, whilst the sixth was deployed in the battle for Imphal. The deployment of Special Force had only just begun, with only one battle occurring at Indaw, when a momentous event overtook Special Force. On 24 March 1944, WINGATE's plane flew into a hillside near Imphal, and he was killed outright. His sudden death left a problem for Lieutenant General SLIM the commander of 14th Army, who should replace WINGATE?

It appears that WINGATE had told more than one person that they had been selected to command Special Force in the event of his death. SLIM consulted TULLOCH, who ruled himself out because of his lack of command experience. This left for consideration SYMES and two of the brigade commanders, Brigadiers CALVERT (of 77th Indian Brigade and an original chindit) and LENTAIGNE who was commanding 111th Indian Brigade.

The decision of SLIM to consult Brigadier TULLOCH instead of Major General SYMES about the replacement for WINGATE was unusual. As second-in-command, SYMES would have expected to be consulted, but SLIM spoke with TULLOCH instead.

² See BIDWELL page 56 – which itself is taken from personal correspondence between Major General SYMES and the author, BIDWELL, in preparation of his book.

³ BIDWELL Shelford, *The Chindit War*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1979

It appears that this was because TULLOCH was more closely associated with the concept of long-range penetration, had served with the Chindits for a longer period, and was close to WINGATE. TULLOCH ruled SYMES out of contention because he had not commanded a column and felt this was a necessary condition for the new General Officer Commanding Special Force.

TULLOCH recommended Brigadier LENTAIGNE to assume command of Special Force, with SLIM endorsing this view and making the decision to appoint LENTAIGNE, who flew out on 30 March to take over the formation. TULLOCH was left with the difficult job of telling SYMES of the decision, and not surprisingly, SYMES was furious at being passed over, blaming SLIM and TULLOCH for this situation.

SYMES went to see General George GIFFARD, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the 11th Army Group. GIFFARD was sympathetic towards SYMES, who noted in his diary that he had said to GIFFARD, *'I didn't like the way it was done, there was a lot of evasive action and I told GIFFARD so.'*⁴

GIFFARD would not overrule SLIM's decision but wrote to the Chief of the General Staff in London making it clear that the fact the SYMES had been passed over was purely down to the unique nature of the appointment and not a reflection on his command ability. SYMES made a formal protest to Field Marshal Alan BROOKE, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and when informed the decision was not going to be over-ruled, he asked to be relieved as Deputy Commander of Special Force.

The position that SYMES now found himself was untenable. He was forty-seven years of age and had twenty-eight years' service, but, his chance of operational command on active service had gone. SYMES left Special Force in April 1944, ironically he was replaced as deputy commander by Brigadier D. D. C. TULLOCH, who SYMES did not value as a senior officer.⁵

North-West Europe

SYMES relinquished the rank of Temporary Major General and reverted to his substantive rank of Colonel. He travelled back to the United Kingdom where he had an interview with General Alan BROOKE on 13 April 1944 to discuss Special Force and the situation in Burma.

SYMES was appointed the Deputy General Officer Commanding Lines of Communication Troops for the 21st Army Group, being re-granted the rank of Temporary Brigadier on 20 May 1944 on taking up his new appointment. He served in Normandy after the invasion on 6 June 1944, later being Mentioned in Dispatches on 10 May 1945 for his services in N.W. Europe.

⁴ ALLEN pages 350 and 351.

⁵ ALLEN page 351.

Back to South-East Asia

In November 1944, despite the controversy of his departure, SYMES was posted back to South-East Asia where he was appointed the General Officer Commanding, Lines of Communication Command in Burma on 15 November. He was re-granted the rank of Temporary Major General on 3 December.

This was a new command formed at Comilla to manage the increasing area of Burma under Allied control. He had under command the:

- 202 Lines of Communication Area,
- 404 Lines of Communication Area,
- 505 District.

On 18 February 1945, SYMES was promoted to the substantive rank of Major General, with his seniority dating from 5 July 1944. On 1 June 1945, the Lines of Communication Command was redesignated as South Burma District, with the 505 District becoming the North Burma District on the same day.

SYMES established his headquarters at Rangoon, taking command of the No. 1 Area (Brigadier L. J. WOODHOUSE) at Rangoon. He remained as the General Officer Commanding South Burma District until early 1946. In the period of 29 October until 8 December 1945, he was promoted Acting Lieutenant General as General Officer Commanding Burma Command in the absence of Lieutenant General STOPFORD. On 17 January 1946, SYMES was awarded the honour of Companion of the Order of the Bath (C.B.) for services in Burma. He was Mentioned in Dispatches for his services in Burma on 19 September 1946.

Post Second World War

On relinquishing the command of the South Burma District, SYMES travelled back to the United Kingdom. On his return to the U.K. in early 1946, he was appointed the General Officer Commanding, South-West Area, with his headquarters at Salisbury. In addition, he was appointed the Colonel of the York and Lancaster Regiment on 20 March 1946. The Territorial Army was reconstituted in the United Kingdom in April 1947, and after its distinguished war record, the 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division was reformed in the South-West Area with SYMES assuming the joint command of the division and area.

In late 1948, SYMES relinquished command of the South-West Area and the 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division. He retired from the British Army on 9 April 1949, aged fifty-four years. SYMES and his wife left the United Kingdom to settle in South Australia. He lived in Adelaide, serving as Private Secretary to Governors of South Australia between 1956 and 1964. He was also the Honorary Colonel of the Adelaide Rifles between 1958 and 1960.

Family Life

SYMES had married Katherine Bellairs LUCAS at the St. John's Anglican Church in Colaba, Bombay on 11 December 1939. She came from South Australia, which probably influenced their decision to settle in Adelaide following his retirement. Katherine died in 1961, and SYMES remarried on 30 March 1967. His second wife was Kathleen Cavenagh Champion de CRESPIGNY (nee CUDMORE) and they married at St. Peter's Church of England, Box Hill in Melbourne. George SYMES had no children from either marriage. The couple lived at 81, The Esplanade, Tennyson, South Australia.

SYMES was a staunch Anglican Christian, and he was a member of the synod and the diocesan council. He was also president of the Cottage Homes, a charitable institution between 1952 and 1972; and President of the Royal Geographical Society of Australia between 1954 and 1957. He was a founder of the National Trust of South Australia in 1956, and a director of Santos Ltd between 1954 and 1978. George SYMES died in the St. Andrews Presbyterian Hospital, Adelaide on 26 August 1980, aged eighty-four years. He was buried at Centennial Park, Adelaide.

Major General George William SYMES

C.B., M.C.*, p.s.c.	1896 – 1980
12 January 1896	Born in Minterne Magna, Dorset. Eldest son of George and Eliza SYMES. Father Sergeant Major, Royal Artillery. Educated at Bridport Grammar School, Dorset.
1914	Enlisted in the Army (Durham Light Infantry?)
14 June 1915	Commissioned in the Durham Light Infantry (war service commission) as Temporary Second Lieutenant.
22/02/16 – 31/10/16	Seconded to the Machine Gun Corps.
Aug 1914 – Nov 1918	Served in the Great War. France and Belgium 23/02/16 – 11/11/17; Italy 12/11/17 – 04/11/18.
1916	Awarded the M.C. for capturing twenty Germans in a communication trench. Citation: <i>Temp. 2nd Lt. George William Symes, M.Gun Corps.</i> <i>For conspicuous gallantry in action. He advanced along a communication trench and single-handedly captured 20 of the enemy. Later, he fought his guns with great courage and skill, and carried out a valuable reconnaissance.</i>
1 November 1916	Promoted Temporary Lieutenant.
21 June 1917	Second Lieutenant, York and Lancaster Regiment (Regular Army) from Temporary Lieutenant (seniority from 14 March 1916) (9517).
1 July 1917	Promoted Lieutenant (seniority from 31 January 1917).
1 January 1918	Awarded a Bar to the Military Cross as Acting Lieutenant (Second Lieutenant) attached to the Machine Gun Corps.
3 April 1918	Acting Captain whilst second in command of a company.
05/07/18 – 07/11/18	Adjutant, retaining the rank of Acting Captain, Machine Gun Corps.
08/11/18 – 01/04/19	Acting Major whilst commanding a company, Machine Gun Corps.
1 April 1921	Restored to the establishment.
25 September 1923	Promoted Captain.
16 November 1923	Promotion to Captain ante-dated to 1 January 1923.
07/12/26 – 06/12/29	Adjutant. As Captain.
21 January 1931	Student, Staff College.
1931 – 1932	Staff College, Camberley, p.s.c.
1 January 1932	Promoted Brevet Major.
17 February 1932	Restored to the establishment.
15/01/33 – 01/11/34	G.S.O. (Class CC), School of Artillery. As Brevet Major.
01/11/34 – 14/01/37	Brigade Major, 14 th Infantry Brigade. As Brevet Major.
5 February 1937	Restored to the establishment.
6 September 1937	Seconded for service on the Staff in India.
06/09/37 – 06/04/40	G.S.O. 2, India. As Brevet Major.

1 August 1938	Promoted Major (Hore-Belisha's reforms)
1 January 1939	Promoted Brevet Lieutenant Colonel.
13 April 1940	Promoted Acting Lieutenant Colonel.
13/04/40 – 29/11/40	G.S.O. 1. As Acting Lieutenant Colonel.
13 July 1940	Promoted Temporary Lieutenant Colonel.
30 November 1940	Promoted Acting Brigadier and Acting Colonel.
30/11/40 – 26/06/41	Commanding Officer 8 th Infantry Brigade, 3 rd Infantry Division.
27/11/40 in Joslen	As Acting Brigadier. United Kingdom.
30 May 1941	Promoted Temporary Brigadier, Temporary Colonel and W/S Lieutenant Colonel.
27/06/41 – 10/02/42	Brigadier General Staff, Eastern Command. As Temporary Brigadier. U.K.
1 January 1942	Promoted Colonel.
11 February 1942	Promoted Acting Major General.
18/02/42 – 24/11/43	General Officer Commanding 70 th Infantry Division. On promotion to Major General, M.C. Syria – Egypt – India.
11 February 1943	Promoted Temporary Major General.
Nov 1943 – Apr 1944	Deputy Commander Special Force, India. As Temporary Major General.
11 April 1944	Relinquished rank as Temporary Major General and reverted to rank of Colonel.
20 May 1944	Re-granted the rank of Temporary Brigadier.
20/05/44 – 03/11/44	Deputy General Officer Commanding Lines of Communication, 21 st Army Group, North-West Europe. As Temporary Brigadier.
3 December 1944	Re-granted rank as Temporary Major General.
15/11/44 – 01/06/45	General Officer Commanding Lines of Communications, Burma, South-East Asia Command. As Temporary Major General. 15 th November 1944 in Loyalty and Honour 3 rd December 1944 in the Army List.
18 February 1945	Promoted Major General (seniority from 5 July 1944).
10 May 1945	M.I.D. for Services in North-West Europe.
01/06/45 – 28/10/45	District Officer Commanding South Burma District. As Major General. (In Army List, Commander until 29 October 1945, only District Commander AFTER G.O.C. 12 th Army.)
29/10/45 – 08/12/45	Officiating G.O.C. 12 th Army. As Acting Lieutenant General. Burma.
09/12/45 – 31/12/45	District Officer Commanding South Burma District. As Major General.
17 January 1946	Awarded the C.B. for Services in Burma.
20 March 1946	Colonel, The York and Lancaster Regiment.
19 September 1946	M.I.D. for services in Burma as Major General.
01/01/46 – 21/12/48	District Officer Commanding South-West District As Major General. Taunton, U.K.
1 January 1947	Appointed General Officer Commanding, 43 rd (Wessex) Infantry Brigade, T.A., Taunton.
01/01/47 – 21/12/48	General Officer Commanding 43 rd Infantry Division, T.A.

	As Major General. Taunton, United Kingdom. (Replaced by Major General C. F. C. COLEMAN)
9 April 1949	Retired.
1954	Founded the National Trust of South Australia. Vice-President 1965.
1954 – 1957	President, South Australia Branch, R.G.S.A.
1955 – 1978	Director, Santos Limited. Receptions historical research and golf.
1956 – 1964	Private Secretary to the Governor of South Australia.
1958 – 1960	Honorary Colonel of The Adelaide Rifles.
26 August 1980	Died at Adelaide, South Australia. Aged 84 years. Interred at Centennial Park, Adelaide. Lived at 81, The Esplanade, Tennyson, South Australia. Club: Adelaide.
	Married (1) Katherine Bellairs, LUCAS at Bombay on 11 December 1939. Died 1961. Married (2) Kathleen Champion de CRESPIGNY at Melbourne, Australia on 30 March 1967. No children.

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