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The Cross of Sacrifice
Imphal War Cemetery
With the poppy wreaths laid in memory of
Major Hugh WALKER and Major 'Sandy' LAMBERT

A CONCISE BIOGRAPHY OF:

LIEUTENANT J. McC. YOUNG

A concise biography of Lieutenant John McCulloch YOUNG, who served in the British Army between 1939 and 1944, and was killed in action at Kharasom in Assam, India, in March 1944, in an act of selfless bravery

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A Concise Biography of Lieutenant John McCulloch YOUNG

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Lieutenant John McCulloch YOUNG



Above – John McCulloch YOUNG wearing the uniform of a Second Lieutenant in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlands.

Below – The Regimental collar badges of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

Author's Collection



Introduction

Lieutenant John McCulloch YOUNG was a young officer who, in March 1944, found himself commanding a company of the Assam Regiment, in an isolated defensive box at Kharasom, in Assam. What he did not know at the time was this 'box' lay on the route of two Japanese battalions making for Kohima. Under YOUNG's cool and determined leadership, this company held up the advance of these two Japanese battalions for four days, obeying his orders to 'Fight to the last man and last round.' When his men were exhausted and close to defeat, he ordered them to leave and make their way back to Kohima, but he stayed with the wounded men and fought until his death in compliance with his orders. The nature of his actions in an isolated location meant that there were no British witnesses to record the events, so he was not awarded a gallantry medal.

His story is testament to the nature of many young men of that period, who found themselves brought by the determination of fate, to make critical decisions in wartime, and thereby demonstrate that intangible issue of leadership in a crisis.

Early Life and Commission

John McCulloch YOUNG was born in Glasgow in August 1919. He was the son of Stephen and Margaret YOUNG and John had two brothers and a sister all living at Jedburgh Gardens, Glasgow G20, in the west of the city. He attended Hillhead High School in Glasgow, and on leaving school, he worked as a clerk in the city.

In the spring of 1939, aged nineteen years, YOUNG enlisted as a Private in the Glasgow Highlanders, a Territorial Army battalion of the Highland Light Infantry (City of Glasgow Regiment). He rose quickly through the non-commissioned ranks, and by the end of 1940, he was a Serjeant, and an instructor in the battalion.

In early 1941, YOUNG was offered an Emergency Commission in the British Army, and on 4 March 1941, YOUNG was commissioned in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in the rank of Second Lieutenant, with the service number 175591. On being commissioned, YOUNG attended various courses covering signalling and infantry tactics. In May 1942, YOUNG found himself in command of a draft of men bound for India. On his arrival in Bombay in July, he was posted to the Assam Regiment and became the Adjutant of the new battalion. On 4 September 1942, he was promoted to the rank of War Substantive Lieutenant. YOUNG attended further courses in India, after which, the commanding officer made him the commanding officer of 'A' Company.

The Assam Regiment

The Assam Regiment was raised in Shillong, Assam with effect from 15 June 1941, at the request of the government of the Assam region of India. The Assam Rifles provided a cadre for the new regiment, with the majority of viceroy commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers transferring from the Assam Rifles into the new Assam Regiment. The soldiers were recruited from within Assam, with many of them being young men aged between eighteen and twenty-one years.¹ The regiment recruited Hindus, Christian and non-faith tribesmen from across the region, but did not recruit Muslims.

A Regular Indian Army officer, AI/27 Lieutenant Colonel William Felix BROWN (known to his colleagues as 'Bruno' BROWN) commanded the battalion from January 1942 onwards. Born in Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire, on 29 January 1899, BROWN attended the Quetta Cadet College from where he commissioned on the Unattached List for the Indian Army on 31 August 1918. Admitted to the Indian Army on 4 September 1918, he served in the Third Afghan War in 1919, in north-west Persia in 1920, and in Waziristan in 1921. He joined the 2nd Bn. 8th Punjab Regiment on 31 August 1923 and was promoted to the rank of Captain.

Captain BROWN was Mentioned in Despatches in 1924 for his services in Waziristan, and he promoted to the rank of Major in August 1936. Major BROWN joined the new Assam Regiment on its formation. He became the second-in-command of the new 1st Battalion in June 1941, being promoted to Acting Lieutenant Colonel on 3 January 1942 to become the battalion's commandant. BROWN led his newly formed battalion out onto the Burma – India border, which was held thinly after the retreat of the Burma Army back into India in May 1942. For his leadership, BROWN was made an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) on 16 December 1943.

The officers for the new battalion generally came from the Assam Rifles and were a mixture of British and British Indian Army officers. Most were commissioned after the outbreak of the Second World War and were not pre-war regular soldiers.

¹ The Assam region of 1941 had now been subdivided into Nagaland, Manipur State, Mizoram, and Tripura, as well as the current Assam Region.

The officers in the battalion at the beginning of March 1944 were:

Commandant	– AI/27 Lieutenant Colonel William Felix BROWN, O.B.E., Indian Army
Second-in-Command	– IA/120 Major Reginald Higginson LOWE, Indian Army
Adjutant	– 149503 Captain Michael Gilbert WILLIAMSON
Quarter-Master	– Lieutenant David Elwyn LLOYD-JONES, Indian Army
H.Q. Company	– EC/6602 Major Albert Irwin CALISTAN, Indian Army
M/T Platoon	– Lieutenant Donald ELWELL
‘A’ Company	– 175591 Lieutenant John McCulloch YOUNG ²
‘B’ Company	– 38623 Major Geoffrey Blake THURGOOD
‘C’ Company	– Major Sidiman RAI, Indian Army
‘D’ Company	– EC/1826 Major James ASKEW, Indian Army

The second-in-command was IA/120 Major Reginald Higginson LOWE, who was also a pre-war Regular Indian Army officer. Born on 1 October 1901, he commissioned on the Unattached List for the Indian Army on 14 July 1921, joining the 2nd Bn. 9th Jat Regiment. Promoted to the rank of Major on 1 August 1938, he joined this battalion shortly after it was raised.

The Adjutant, Captain Michael WILLIAMSON, commissioned in The Manchester Regiment on 21 September 1940 in the rank of Second Lieutenant. He was promoted to the rank of War Substantive Lieutenant on 21 March 1942, and WILLIAMSON was Mentioned in Despatches in recognition of his gallant and distinguished services during the First Arakan Campaign. Albert Irwin CALISTAN was born in 1919 at West Ham, in the east end of London. After leaving school he worked as a shop assistant until he volunteered for Army service with the outbreak of the Second World War. He enlisted in a Guards regiment, and saw active service in France and Belgium in May 1940. CALISTAN received his commission in March 1942, and sailed from the U.K. to join the Indian Army, joining the Assam Regiment on its formation.

Lieutenant LLOYD-JONES joined the British Army on 23 July 1941, being sent to an Officer Cadet Training Unit at Bulford in Wiltshire. Having failed to secure a posting the Sudan Defence Force, LLOYD-JONES put his name down for the Indian Army whilst still under training. He moved to Sandhurst to continue his training, and on 10 March 1942, he was informed he had been accepted for the Indian Army. Having passed out from Sandhurst, he left the U.K. on 16 May. On his arrival in India, he was posted to the Officers’ Training School at Mhow, where one of his requirements was to learn Urdu, the language of the Indian Army. He passed an in September, was posted to the Assam Regiment. Two months later, he was sent on a course to learn how to become a company commander at the Infantry School at Saugor, where he also qualified as a small arms instructor. In April 1943, he was injured in an explosion during a battle course and took about a month to recover.

² The Commonwealth War Graves Commission gives his rank at date of death as Lieutenant, yet the History of the Assam Regiment written by a fellow officer, Peter STEYN, describes him in the rank of Captain. It is assumed that he was granted the Local rank of Captain on becoming a company commander.

Following a period of leave, LLOYD-JONES rejoined his battalion where he was given command of 'D' Company, after which he was made the battalion's Quarter-Master on 23 November 1943. More courses followed, this time in animal transport and animal management at Lansdowne.

Major 38623 Geoffrey Blake THURGOOD was commissioned in the King's Own Scottish Borderers in the rank of Second Lieutenant on 12 December 1939, on a Regular Army Emergency Commission, serving with the 9th Battalion of the regiment. He was promoted to the rank of War Substantive Lieutenant on 12 June 1941, eighteen months after commissioning, and then to the rank of Temporary Captain on 21 August 1941. At the time of the battle of Kohima, he was thirty-four years old and had been an Army officer for just four and half years.

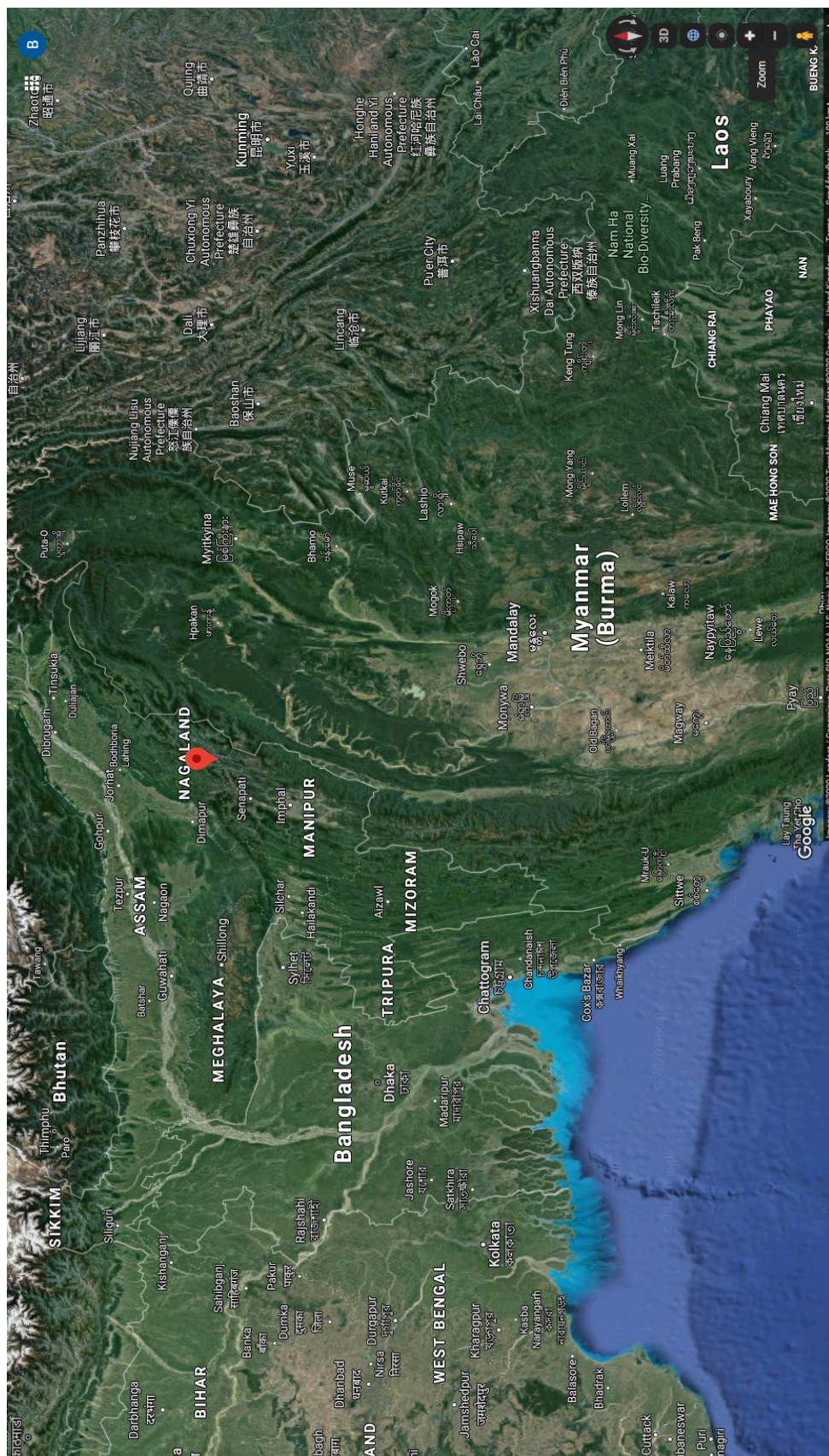
The Battalion Deploys to Kohima

After a period patrolling the Kabaw valley and the India – Burma border, the 1st Bn. The Assam Regiment was granted a rest period followed by some training in the valley of the River Brahmatputra. IV Corps issued orders on 18 February to Lieutenant Colonel BROWN for him to take his battalion to Kohima to patrol and gather intelligence on the increased activity by Japanese forces in the area noted by 'V' Force and other local people.³ The battalion travelled to Dimapur, from where it was conveyed in vehicles up to Kohima. The battalion arrived at Kohima on 22 February, and Lieutenant Colonel BROWN also took command of a company from the 1st Bn. The Burma Regiment under Major GILES based in Kohima.

The orders given to Lieutenant Colonel BROWN included establishing forward defensive bases or boxes at the village of Jessami on the track leading across the border, with a further box some eighteen miles further on at Kharasom. On the evening of 22 February, the District Commissioner hosted a reception for the officers of the Assam Regiment at his bungalow in Kohima. BROWN ordered his officers to wear battle dress to reinforce the nature of their deployment and the possible threat to Kohima and its locality. This turned out to be the last occasion that many of the officers saw each other.

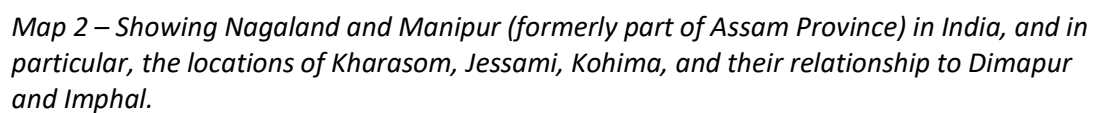
On the morning of 23 February, Captain YOUNG set off with 'A' Company towards Kharasom, taking with him a detachment of 3" mortars. Lorries carried them for the first ten miles, but the troops had to march from there on. The rest of the battalion followed the next day, catching up with 'A' Company at Jessami. As the rest of the battalion arrived at Jessami, YOUNG took 'A' Company onto Kharasom where they arrived on 28 February.

³ 'V' Force was a group of Army personnel, many pre-war civilians from Burma and India, who operated behind enemy lines to collect intelligence.



Map 1 – Showing Nagaland and Manipur (formerly part of Assam Province) in India, and its relationship to Burma and Bengal.

Courtesy of: Google maps (under Licence)



{ 9 }

On arrival at Kharasom, Captain YOUNG selected an area just to the north of the village in which to form his defensive box. The location chosen was a small bamboo and scrub covered hill, which gave a good view of the track to Kohima, a track leading to Ukhrul and the surrounding area. A water supply nearby was an important factor in the choice of position, although it could not be included within the defended perimeter. The men of 'A' Company started digging in immediately and preparing the defences. Water, rations, and ammunition were all stockpiled in the defensive box in anticipation of an attack. All was ready by 5 March.

Evidence of enhanced Japanese military activity continued to be reported to Headquarters IV Corps. Elements of the Japanese 33rd Division crossed the River Chindwin on 6 March, and by 12 March, it became clear that a significant force was across the Chindwin. The General Officer Commanding IV Corps, Lieutenant General Geoffry SCOONES, decided to use his reserve division, the 23rd Indian Division, to reinforce the 17th Indian Division as it fell back from Tiddim. The 20th Indian Division began to pull back to the Shenam Pass, and SCOONES sent the 50th Indian Parachute Brigade to Shangshak to form a defensive box there. In fact, three Japanese divisions, the 15th, 31st and 33rd, were advancing on Imphal and Kohima, intending to capture Imphal plain and the British base at Dimapur which held large stocks of supplies.

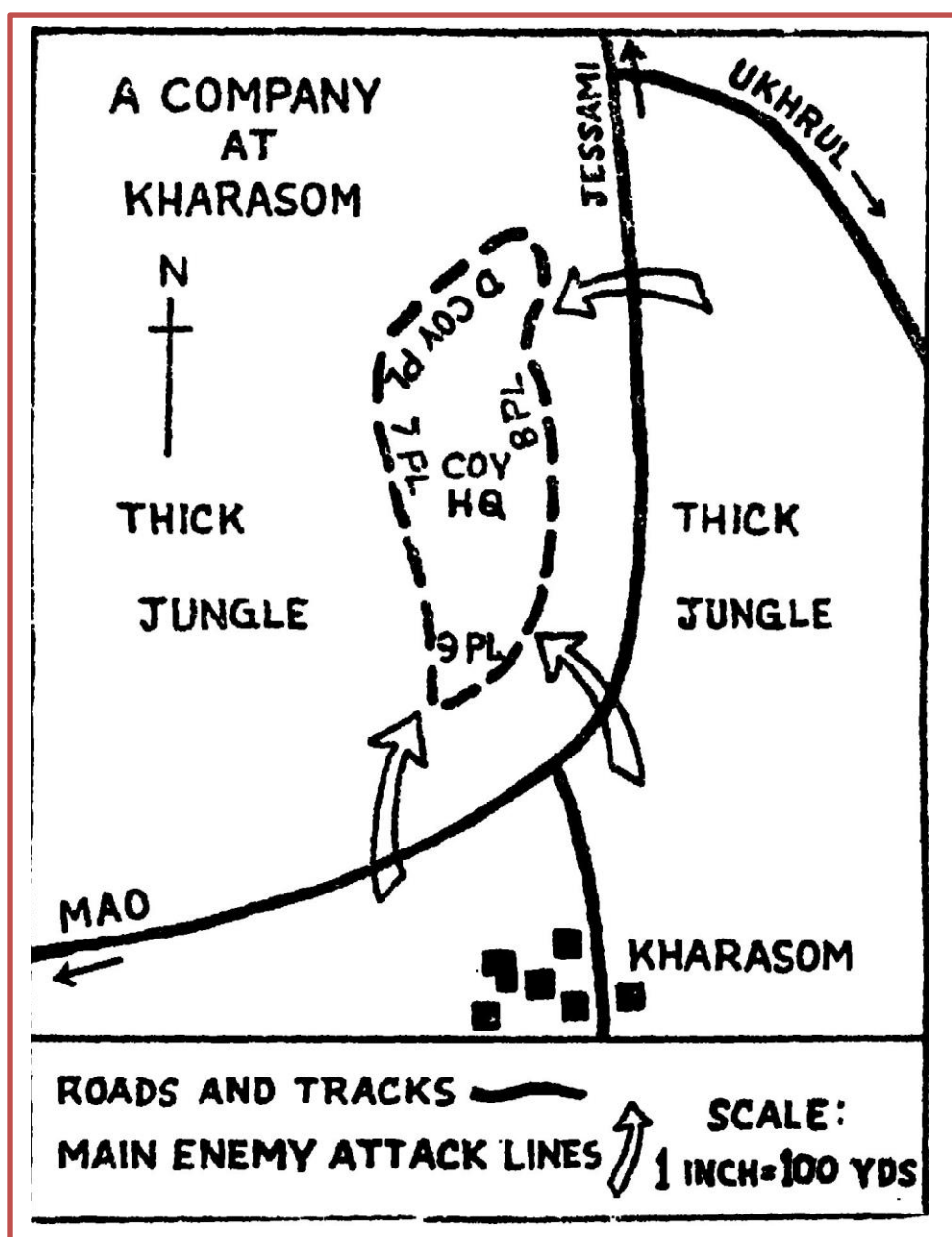
The Japanese 31st Division advanced in three columns, the Left Raiding Column making for Sangshak and Ukhrul to cut the Kohima to Imphal road, the Right Raiding Column headed for Jessami, with the main Central Raiding Column heading for Kohima via Kharasom. At Somra, the Central Raiding Column split, with the bulk of the column heading north to Jessami with the 1st Bn. 138th Regiment carrying on in an easterly direction to Kharasom. 'V' Force units provided intelligence on the movements of the Japanese forces, with contact being made with patrols from the 1st Bn. The Assam Regiment in the area.

At Kharasom, Captain YOUNG received updates from local Naga people, 'V' Force and from his own patrols. He decided to pull back some of the more isolated patrols and received some reinforcement with the arrival of a platoon from 'D' Company at Kharasom, however, all he could do was wait. On 24 March, three officers with some men from 'V' Force and the Assam Rifles arrived at Kharasom from the direction of the River Chindwin. They were in a bad way and needed to rest, so two days later, having recovered they made for Kohima.

Lieutenant Colonel BROWN received a visit from the Kohima Garrison's Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Peter MOUNTSTEPHEN, with a patrol he was leading. BROWN briefed MOUNTSTEPHEN on the intelligence he was receipt of, and explained the disposition of his troops. The Headquarters, 1st Bn. The Assam Regiment and three companies were dug in at Jessami, 'A' Company of the regiment was located at Kharasom with a platoon from 'D' Company and some mortars in support, and the company from the 1st Bn. The Burma Regiment was located at a village called Phek about five miles back along the track towards Kohima. Colonel RICHARDS, the recently appointed Garrison Commander at Kohima visited Jessami on 26 March to meet with Lieutenant Colonel BROWN. He reiterated the orders given to BROWN to 'Fight to the last man and last round.'

Monday 27 March 1944

At Kharasom, 'A' Company were sited on a small hill, shaped like the figure 0. At the southern end of the position, 9 Platoon faced towards the village and overlooked the junction between the two tracks to Jessami and to Ukhrul. 8 Platoon faced east, with 7 Platoon guarding the western sector looking down the slope towards the Laniya River. The platoon from 'D' Company was situated in the top of the position facing north. The headquarters and the mortars were situated in the centre of the position, which extended for about one-hundred and fifty metres from top to bottom. Barbed wire extended around the perimeter, with trip wires and some booby traps.



Map 3 – The dispositions of 'A' Company, 1 Bn. The Assam Regiment at Kharasom.

Taken from: STEYN, The Assam Regiment

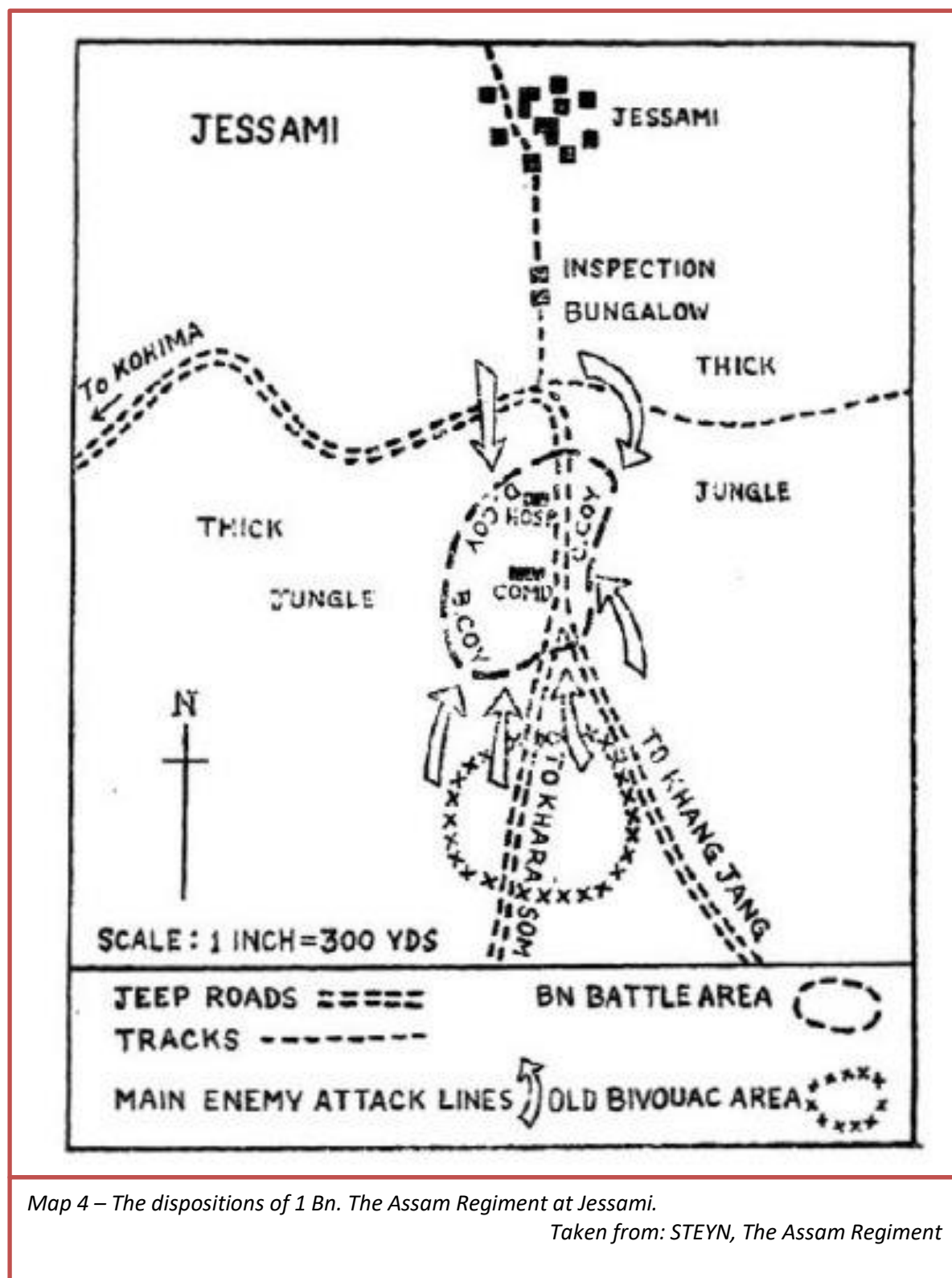
The first Japanese troops from the 1st Bn. 138th Regiment reached Kharasom on 27^h March. The first Japanese soldiers did not appear to realise that 'A' Company were dug in on the hill, so they walked along the track towards Kharasom village. This allowed the men of 'A' Company to fire on them on their flanks as they walked along the track. The rifles and Bren guns soon caught several of the Japanese soldiers who fell dead or injured on the track, but others managed to escape into the jungle. YOUNG reported this contact to Lieutenant Colonel BROWN, but his telephone line was then cut. The Japanese then launched an attack which lasted until 10.00 hours, but soon realised that the Assam soldiers were well dug in and prepared to fight off their attackers. This did not prevent the Japanese making two further attacks during the day. During those first attacks, YOUNG lost his second-in-command who was killed by a mortar bomb. Thirty-one-year-old 17105/IO Subadar Karindra Nath RAJBONGSHI was a pre-war Viceroy Commissioned Officer, so he was an experienced soldier. A married man, he came from Hapapara, Goalpara in Assam, so had probably served with the Assam Rifles prior to joining the Assam Regiment. Also killed in those first skirmishes was twenty-nine-year-old 141 Havildar Zachhinga LUSHAI. Both are commemorated on Face 53 of the Rangoon Memorial in the Tauckyan War Cemetery, Myanmar.

Tuesday 28 March 1944

On 28 March, the garrison at Kharasom began to face repeated attacks by the Japanese on their defended positions. The attacks started at 05.00 hours, and lasted until 11.00 hours. The main axis of attack was from the south-west and south-east of the box. All were repulsed, with the Japanese sustaining about forty-five men killed, including two officers. YOUNG's men managed to obtain identification papers from two of the deceased Japanese soldiers, that YOUNG gave to two young sepoy to carry through to Kohima, which they did successfully.

The Japanese troops tended to use the same tactics of a series of charges against the prepared positions, led by a sword waving officer and with the men armed with rifles, bayonets and grenades. Each time, the men of the Assam Regiment held their fire and then struck as the Japanese reached the wire around the perimeter. From 18.45 hours onwards, the defensive box was subjected to heavy grenade attacks, following by an assault that managed to penetrate the perimeter. YOUNG ordered a swift counter-attack that managed to eject the Japanese within the perimeter.

On the same day, the first Japanese troops from the Central Raiding Column reached Jessami. The Jessami position was similar to that at Kharasom, being situated to the south of the village covering the junctions of the tracks that converged on the village. 'B' Company covered the southern sector, 'C' Company the eastern and 'D' Company the northern and western sides. The first party of twenty-five Japanese soldiers arrived at Jessami at about 08.55 hours, and stopped to consult a map. They were engaged by a patrol from the Assam Regiment and suffered several casualties. During the day, more Japanese troops arrived to commence repeated charges against the defended perimeter. Each time they failed to break in and ended up with all their attacks being repulsed with heavy losses to the Japanese.



Wednesday 29 March 1944

29 March brought with a change of decision regarding the objectives of the 1st Bn. The Assam Regiment. A meeting was held between Major General RANKING, General Officer Commanding 202 Lines of Communication Area at Dimapur, Brigadier WARREN commanding 161st Indian Infantry Brigade, and Colonel RICHARDS the Garrison Commander at Kohima. The meeting took place at Kohima. They agreed that the orders given to Lieutenant Colonel BROWN that amounted in effect to holding Jessami and Kharasom to the last man, were no longer appropriate, and should be amended. RANKING agreed that the three garrisons at Kharasom, Jessami and Phek should be withdrawn back to Kohima after the night of 31 March/1 April. The message was to be conveyed to BROWN by an aeroplane and dropped on the position held by the Assamese troops.

Meanwhile, Captain YOUNG and his men faced a day of another series of Japanese charges against their defensive positions. These new attacks on this day were more determined and thrown against the northern sector, supported by heavy and light machine gun fire. After that assault failed, more attacks were launched on the south-east and south-west sectors again. Two Japanese soldiers managed to get into the defensive box but were cut down inside the perimeter. Even between the attacks, the men of the Assam Regiment could not relax as their position was subject to continual sniping from the Japanese. The same applied at Jessami, with wave after wave of men thrown against the prepared defences. The casualties suffered by the Japanese were mounting up, literally against the barbed wire perimeter, but Lieutenant Colonel BROWN's battalion had not yet suffered a serious casualty. Following a major attack in the morning, the afternoon was quieter, allowing the Assamese troops that chance to brew some tea and eat some food.

Thursday 30 March 1944

By Thursday, 30 March, the Japanese had brought up some artillery and mortars which they deployed on high ground above the Jessami position. As soon as they were in place, they commenced bombarding the positions of the Assam Regiment. Lieutenant Colonel BROWN ordered his 2" and 3" mortars to reply, and he also used them to break up groups of Japanese soldiers forming up for an attack. The numbers of Japanese soldiers arriving at Jessami grew steadily and men from the Right Raiding Column and Central Raiding Column converged on the village. The forces now arranged against the approximately seven-hundred men of the Assam Regiment were now two battalions of the 138th Regiment (the 2nd and 3rd Battalions), the entire 124th Regiment, and two battalions of artillery belonging to the 31st Mountain Regiment.

During the morning, the first attempt was made to drop the message to BROWN, but the container was not seen to land so was not found. Another attempt was made that afternoon, with the container dropping outside the perimeter to be retrieved by the Japanese, who therefore knew the contents of the message from Colonel RICHARDS even though its intended recipient did not.

At Kharasom, that Thursday was the third day of unceasing attacks by the Japanese against the defensive box. There was no dawn attack as there had been on the last two days, but from 11.30 hours, a large number of additional Japanese soldiers were seen arriving at the village. These were the men of the 3rd Battalion, 58th Regiment, who had detached from the Left Raiding Column to move northwards. Captain YOUNG now faced a dilemma, as far as he was concerned, his orders were to hold out at Kharasom until ordered otherwise. He had not received any orders subsequently to the contrary, so the previous order still stood. YOUNG realised that his young soldiers had fought bravely but were now facing massive odds of just one company of about one-hundred and twenty men against two Japanese battalions. Just twenty-four years old, YOUNG was by himself and out of contact with his battalion headquarters, there being no working radio available to him, and the landline was cut. His second-in-command was dead and the casualties amongst his young soldiers were mounting steadily. They were exhausted, and increasingly hungry and thirsty, and in addition, ammunition was running low.

Captain Jock YOUNG made his decision. He would order his men to retire from Kharasom that night, but he would stay in obedience to his orders and fight to the end. As darkness fell, the Japanese made one more assault on the men of 'A' Company, which they repulsed even though the Japanese were now using mortars in support of their attacks. Then YOUNG gave the order, and the men fit enough to walk filed out of the perimeter to make for Kohima, but the seriously wounded remained in the perimeter. A young sepoy who was wounded decided to stay with his commanding officer, with YOUNG last being seen stacking hand grenades around his bunker and the sepoy arming himself with a Bren gun. The men split into various groups and made their way through the jungle to Kohima, with fifty-six men making back to Kohima where they relayed their stories to Colonel RICHARDS and his staff.

Friday 31 March 1944

At Jessami, Lieutenant Colonel BROWN was still unaware of the revised order to withdraw back to Kohima. One of his officers who had been at Phekekedzumi (usually called 'Phek') Lieutenant John Narborough CORLETT, who was known as 'Jim', agreed to take the message to him personally.⁴ Armed with just his revolver and taking his orderly with him, CORLETT walked from Phek to Jessami to deliver his message. He arrived at the perimeter at about 22.00 hours on 31 March, and it took a lot of shouting before CORLETT could convince the defenders who he was, but this was not before some shots had been fired at him. Jim CORLETT was subsequently awarded the Military Cross, with his citation giving a good indication of his actions that led to the award.

⁴ CORLETT held the rank of War Substantive Lieutenant and his service number was 184203. His mother regiment was the Reconnaissance Corps.

It was written by the Commander of the Kohima Garrison, Colonel RICHARDS, and states:

When this officer's battalion had been invested at Jessami with no other orders that to hold on it became necessary to send orders for it to withdraw. The battalion wireless had been damaged and various attempts by runner and by air had failed to get the message through.

Lieutenant CORLETT, who had previously come with a patrol from Jessami to Phekedzumi, volunteered to deliver the message although he knew not only that this would entail passing through the enemy's lines but also that any movement at night near his own box would be fired on.

The battalion dispositions had been changed since he had left Jessami, and in the old battalion, he found himself among the enemy. He however continued in his attempts and succeeded in locating the Garrison and delivering his message. He thereby saved the Garrison from destruction and brought a much needed accession of strength to the Kohima Garrison.

On the day after his arrival in Jessami (1 Apr 44) and before the evacuation he behaved with great gallantry manning a L.M.G. himself when all the men of the Sub-Section had become casualties, and going himself for more ammunition under heavy and continuous fire.

Later at Jail Hill in Kohima on 5 Apr 1944 he helped in manning a three inch mortar which could give the effective support to the forward troops only from a position which was in full view of the enemy. He continued to do this until the entire crew had been put out of action and he himself had been wounded three times.

Throughout this period this officer displayed courage, resourcefulness and leadership of the highest order and by his complete disregard of personal safety he gave a magnificent example to us all.

As the Japanese now knew the orders for the Assam Regiment, they made determined efforts to overcome the defenders of Jessami on the morning of 1 April. Sheer weight of numbers and the determined nature of the Japanese attackers had to have an effect, and on more than one occasion, the defensive perimeter was breached, with savage hand-to-hand fighting resulting. The Japanese, however, failed to capitalise on their success, and the defenders managed to expel them and reseal the perimeter.

By 17.00 hours, Lieutenant Colonel BROWN realised that the defenders, no matter how gallant and determined they may be, could not hold onto the defensive box for much longer. A breach had been made in the perimeter and one bunker had been overrun. Now in possession of the revised orders from Brigadier WARREN and Colonel RICHARDS, BROWN accepted that the battalion had achieved as much as could be expected and that withdrawal back to Kohima was now sensible.

BROWN gave his orders that the battalion split into various groups and make their own way back to Kohima. The men on the western side left first, with the defensive box collapsing in as the other sectors withdrew. At the command post, important documents were destroyed with Lieutenant Colonel BROWN and his staff leaving Jessami at about midnight. In total, about two-hundred and sixty men made it back to Kohima safely over the next few days. Others melted away into the jungle returning to their villages or joining 'V' Force.

The Battalion Regroups at Kohima

With the fate of Lieutenant YOUNG unknown, the survivors from the 1st Bn. The Assam Regiment were gathered together by Lieutenant Colonel BROWN. Major THURGOOD was found to be missing, with reports that he had been taken prisoner, and that he was last seen being escorted by four Japanese soldiers with his boots removed, his feet cut and bleeding, and a noose around his neck. His body was never recovered, so he is commemorated on Face 10 of the Rangoon Memorial in Taukkyan War Cemetery along with other soldiers from his parent regiment.

At Kohima, Lieutenant Colonel BROWN reorganised the survivors. Colonel RICHARDS gave them the area known as G.P.T. Ridge to defend, but they were forced back gradually into the perimeter. BROWN gave Major CALISTAN command of a company of men drawn from the Assam Regiment and Assam Rifles. This company was deployed on the tennis courts on 15 April to relieve 'B' Company of the 4th Bn. The Royal West Kents. This company fought tenaciously on the tennis courts until relieved on 19 April. They repulsed several attacks, launching local counter attacks where necessary to snuff out any incursions. It was during one of these incidents that nineteen-year-old, Sepoy 1778 Wellington MASSAR, performed an act of gallantry that led to the award of the Indian Distinguished Service Medal. His citation reads:

Throughout the battle at Jessami between 28th March and 1st April, this sepoy, a No. 1 on an L.M.G. showed courage and determination of the highest order. In spite of repeated attacks on his post by ever increasing numbers of the enemy supported by mortar fire and infantry gun, he remained cool and steady, maintaining a very accurate fire which took a heavy toll of the attackers. When his L.M.G. had stoppages, he continued [the] hold the attackers at bay with rifle and grenades. When the withdrawal was ordered on the night of the 1/2 April he was the last man to leave his sector.

At Kohima, on the 15th April 44 during a grenade raid on a Jap bunker, the sepoy was again No. 1 on an L.M.G. whose task was to cover the grenadiers up to the bunker and then cover their withdrawal when they had completed their task. During the attack his gun had a stoppage thus allowing the Japanese to get their heads up and fire to be returned. In spite of his left leg (which he has now lost) being hit and smashed by this fire, he corrected the stoppage in time to cover the withdrawal of the grenadiers.

This was courage and devotion to duty of the highest order.

Another account of this incident explains how MASSAR climbed onto a table in order to provide better covering fire for his colleagues, but this left him in an exposed position. When he was hit, he rolled off the table, but got back on to continue to provide fire support to the grenade party. Wellington MASSAR was taken for treatment that involved the amputation of his leg and kept in hospital. Sadly, gangrene set in and he died on 18 May 1944. He is now buried in Grave 7.G.21. of the Imphal War Cemetery. He was a member of the Khasi tribe or people, an indigenous ethnic group from the Assam region of north-east India. The Khasi are unusual as they follow a matriarchal system of descent and inheritance.

Major CALISTAN was awarded the Military Cross for his gallantry at Jessami and Kohima, his citation stating:

Between 28 March 44 and 2 April at Jessami this Officer's Coy was heavily attacked by the enemy. In spite of wave after wave of Japanese attacks, this officer by his magnificent example of cool courage and confidence and constant inspiration to his men succeeded in maintaining intact his perimeter. On 2nd April 44 when this perimeter was evacuated, this officer succeeded by his skilful leadership and determination in extricating the majority of his company and leading them safely to Kohima.

During the siege of Kohima this officer continued to display the same cool courage, initiative and cool leadership, especially in defence of the O.C.s Bungalow area, whereby he inflicted much heavier casualties on the enemy than he himself suffered, gained ground and maintained a very important and difficult sector of the defence intact.

Major CALISTAN married an American nurse in India, so after the war he went to live with her in the United States. He divorced his first wife in the early 1960's but later remarried, having one son and one daughter from his first marriage and one daughter from his second. He worked as an insurance executive and died in the U.S.A. in 1979.

Of the other key officers in the battalion at the time of the battles at Jessami and Kharasom, EC/1498 Captain Peter Austen Leadley BROWN died on Thursday, 6 April 1944. The thirty-two-year-old came from Kokstad, Cape Province, South Africa, and he is buried in Grave 4.H.10., of the Kohima War Cemetery. EC/1826 Major James ASKEW was killed by a sniper near the Garrison Headquarters on 14 April 1944, and he is now commemorated on Face 53 of the Rangoon Memorial at Taukkyan War Cemetery. He was the son of Harry Richards and Betsy Edith ASKEW, of Gainsborough, Lincolnshire.

Lieutenant Colonel BROWN survived the siege of Kohima, being awarded the Distinguished Service Order on 22 June 1944. He was killed in action on 4 January 1945, aged forty-five years. He is buried in Grave 25.C.8. of the Taukkyan War Cemetery in Myanmar. His successor was Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad Akyab KHAN, later to be the President of Pakistan. The Quarter-Master, Lieutenant LLOYD-JONES was promoted to the rank of Captain in mid-April and was also recommended for the award of the Military Cross. He survived the war and returned to his native Wales.

The Fate of Lieutenant YOUNG and Remembrance

The fate of Lieutenant YOUNG was finally resolved after the Siege and Battle for Kohima was over and the Japanese driven from the area. The District Commissioner, Charles PAWSEY, set out to visit the communities affected by the Japanese invasion in July and August 1944. When he reached Kharasom, the villagers related the events of the end of March. On the morning of 31 March, the villagers heard the sound of gunfire and explosions for some minutes, and then, silence. The Japanese had taken the position held by 'A' Company, killing Lieutenant YOUNG in the process, however, they recognised his courage and selfless dedication in holding this position to the last man, so, they shaved his head as a mark of respect and gave him a military funeral in the manner in which they honoured their own distinguished fallen. Towards the end of the war, the body of Lieutenant YOUNG was exhumed and brought to Kohima, where he now lies in Grave 19.B.21. of the Kohima War Cemetery.

The Scottish Military Research Group undertook some research on John McCulloch YOUNG and arranged for a memorial plaque to be placed on the pavement outside of his former home at 7, Jedburgh Gardens, Kelvinside, Glasgow. The Lord Provost of Glasgow, Bob WINTER, unveiled the plaque on 31 March 2011, on the sixty-seventh anniversary of the YOUNG's sacrifice, far away from Glasgow in a place that most Glaswegians have probably never heard of.



Above – The grave of Lieutenant John McCulloch YOUNG at the Kohima War Cemetery in Nagaland, India.

Taken by the Author (2014)

Below left and right – The plaque outside of 7, Jedburgh Gardens, Kelvinside, Glasgow, and the tenement at that address where John YOUNG and his family lived.

Courtesy of: The Scottish Military Research Group



Epilogue

The actions of the 1st Bn. The Assam Regiment in holding the outposts of Jessami and Kharasom can be argued to have imposed delays on the Japanese 31st Division reaching the key location of Kohima that proved to be significant in its defence. The four days that the Japanese spent in overcoming the defensive boxes at the two locations allowed the British 14th Army to determine the proper nature of the threat developing against Kohima and Dimapur, and to arrange the deployment of the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade and the 2nd Infantry Division to Kohima. The defence of Kohima during the siege and the subsequent clearance of the Kohima area by the 2nd Infantry Division and 7th Indian Division prevented the important base of Dimapur being captured and allowed the relief of the siege of Imphal.

This delay was due in no small part to the tactical skills, ability and command leadership of men such as John YOUNG. He was not a professional soldier, but he demonstrated sound military judgement when the time came. The standard of bravery and leadership exhibited by twenty-four-year-old Lieutenant YOUNG must rank as one of the highest by an officer in the British Army during the Second World War. It is probable that he would have known the likely consequences of his decision to remain behind having ordered his surviving soldiers to escape and make their way back to British lines, yet he made that decision selflessly with a sense of duty. As only the enemy witnessed his final moments, he was not awarded any gallantry decoration, however, the Japanese who did witness his bravery accorded him a military funeral worthy of a great warrior.

His actions bring into focus the awards of gallantry medals to members of the British armed services. Were the actions of Lieutenant YOUNG worthy of recognition? It is accepted that this was probably the last thing on his mind in March 1944 in the village of Kharasom, but that it probably the case with most recipients of any gallantry award. He was a British officer, and he had been ordered to defend that location 'to the last man', and it was his duty to carry that out.

In the British Army, the gallantry awards that can be given posthumously are limited to the Victoria Cross and being Mentioned in Despatches. The Victoria Cross is awarded for 'most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy'. The act or acts that led to the recommendation has to be witnessed by three other soldiers, usually officers. There is only one example of an award of the Victoria Cross resulting from the evidence of a German U-boat crew off West Africa. The first Victoria Crosses awarded to a soldier posthumously were on 8 August 1902.

It appears that there was no consideration of a citation for an award, even when the circumstances of his death became known. There was no Mention in Despatches for Lieutenant YOUNG, let alone any possibility of the award of the Victoria Cross. Fortunately, the exploits of John McCulloch YOUNG are now recognised in his home city of Glasgow, a fitting tribute to an extraordinary man.

Appendix 'A'

Lieutenant Colonel William Felix BROWN		
D.S.O., O.B.E.		1899 – 1945
29 January 1899	Born. Son of William and Kate BROWN from Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire. Educated at the Quetta Cadet College, India.	
31 August 1918	Commissioned on the Unattached List for the Indian Army.	
4 September 1918	Admitted to the Indian Army as a Temporary Second Lieutenant.	
1919	Served in the Third Afghan War.	
15 January 1919	Promoted Temporary Lieutenant.	
31 August 1919	Promoted Lieutenant.	
1920	Served in North West Persia.	
1921	Served in Waziristan.	
31 August 1923	Promoted Captain, 2 nd Bn. 8 th Punjab Regiment (IA/27).	
1923 – 1924	Served in Waziristan – Wana.	
18 November 1924	M.I.D. for services in Waziristan.	
31 August 1936	Promoted Major.	
March 1941	Joined the 1 st Bn. The Assam Regiment. Second-in-command.	
3 January 1942	Promoted Acting Lieutenant Colonel.	
03/01/42 – 04/01/45	Commanding Officer, 1 st Bn. The Assam Regiment. As Acting Lieutenant Colonel.	
3 April 1942	Promoted Temporary Lieutenant Colonel.	
16 December 1943	<p>Awarded the O.B.E.. Citation:</p> <p><i>For the first 3 months after the Burma Army withdrew from Burma, Lt. Col BROWN with his Battalion was holding the Outpost Line along the Burma Frontier North and South of Tamu, with patrols operating as far forward as the Chindwin. It was a most trying time – morale was at a low ebb as a result of the withdrawal from Burma, refugees in the last stages of exhaustion were coming through in hundreds, communications were precarious, rations were short and difficult to get out to forward troops and weather conditions could hardly have been worse. In spite of all these difficulties, Col. BROWN by his resourcefulness, determination and unfailing cheerfulness inspired his men to carry on and thereby enabled a constant watch to be kept on the Kebaw valley.</i></p> <p><i>On more than one occasion, Lt. Col. BROWN personally led successful raiding parties to round up villages harbouring enemy agents.</i></p> <p><i>His initiative, determination and devotion to duty were of a high order.</i></p> <p>Recommended 01/02/43 by Brigadier ?? Commander 1st Indian Infantry Brigade. Recommended by Major General SAVORY, G.O.C. 23rd Indian Division on 3 Feb 43 and by Lieutenant General SCOONES, G.O.C. IV Corps on 21.2.43. Approved by Lieutenant General IRWIN, G.O.C.-in-C. Eastern Army 22 Mar 1943.</p>	

22 June 1944	<p>Awarded the D.S.O.. Citation:</p> <p><i>Lieut Colonel BROWN's battalion occupied positions at the villages of Jessami and Kharason, some sixty miles East of Kohima, in order to prevent the enemy's advance from that direction.</i></p> <p><i>On 28 March, the enemy attacked in force; these attacks continued daily and though unsupported, Lt-Col. BROWN continued to fight his battalion with no thought of withdrawal, thereby imposing many valuable days of delay on Japanese forces advancing on Kohima.</i></p> <p><i>Many attempts by air and runner to order Lt.-Col. BROWN's battalion to withdraw failed; eventually, an officer of the Assam Regt succeeded in getting through the Japanese lines with orders to withdraw.</i></p> <p><i>Lt.-Col BROWN by his resourcefulness, succeeded in extricating his battalion and in leading a large portion of it through successive Japanese ambushes to concentrate at Kohima and continue the fight.</i></p> <p><i>Throughout the whole of these operations this officer's leadership, initiative, courage and unfailing cheerfulness in adversity instilled in all ranks under his command a high spirit and devotion to duty for which no praise can be too great.</i></p> <p>Recommended by Colonel H. U. RICHARDS, Commander Kohima Garrison on 20th April 1944.</p>
4 January 1945	Killed in action aged 45 years. Buried in Grave 25. C. 8., Taukkyan War Cemetery.
	Married Isabel Eileen BROWN.

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