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BOOK REVIEW

March or die: the story of Wingate's Chindits
by Philip D. Chinnery

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Britain, in times of need, has produced military leaders who used existing weapons in unconventional ways. One such was Orde Wingate. This book about Wingate is a recent donation to the Ursula Davidson Library. After a brief description of Wingate’s earlier unconventional warfare experience in Palestine and Abyssinia, the book describes his unconventional operations in Burma in 1943 and 1944, including the raising, training and operations of 77th Indian Infantry Brigade (the first Chindit brigade), and the formation of 3rd Indian Infantry Division (Special Force).

In the background is the slow thinking, sluggish Indian Staff Corps, languishing in their messes, while trying to stop or hinder Wingate’s direct actions against Japanese forces. An Indian staff officer recalled Major Mike Calvert from a raiding operation to rebuke him for damaging the property of the Burmah Oil Company – if it had not been destroyed, it would have fallen into Japanese hands. The Burmese people are portrayed as a diversified mixture of tribal groupings, whose loyalty ranged from heroic support of the British, to treacherous betrayal of Wingate’s men.

The author based the book on existing records and oral recollections of survivors. A clear picture of Wingate does not emerge, as opinions of him varied from inspired heroic leader to a ‘jack man’. The reader is allowed to draw his/her own conclusion.

Most of the time in Burma, the Chindit moved in ‘columns’. A column was about a half-battalion-sized force which moved on foot, with mules and horses for carrying heavier loads. Each column had a Royal Air Force detachment to coordinate aerial resupply and close aerial support. A column could be ordered to break up into dispersal groups of about platoon size to evade the Japanese. Communication were especially vulnerable to the Japanese lines of communication.

The discipline applied to the Chindits was effective, but would appal modern legal officers and civil libertarians. Punishments ranged from reducing a commissioned officer to the ranks, to floggings. The book mentions in passing the ‘mercy killings’ of British wounded, without commenting on the moral and legal questions.

The book emphasises the lazy logistics system of the Japanese Army, which depended on the capture of enemy supply dumps, especially for rations. When they were halted in contact with the enemy, the Japanese lines of communication were especially vulnerable to the marauding Chindit columns.

For the resources committed, what did the Chindits achieve? There is no use of any Japanese records in this book to show the effects of the Chindit operations on the Japanese campaign in Burma. The book’s title succinctly summarises the only survival option for members of the Chindit columns; and it contains a comprehensive bibliography. Its maps, however, are too small and show the routes taken by multiple columns on the one map, which is confusing. While it provides many tales of Chindit operations, it does not bring together the history of the Chindits. This task may be impossible due to the multiple small-scale operations of the many columns. The desperate conditions in Burma prevented many records being kept.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in unorthodox leaders, in jungle warfare, in operations in Burma, and/or in aerial support in a tropical environment.

John Hitchen